

2026 Career Optimism Index®

AI IS QUIETLY PUTTING POWER BACK IN WORKERS' HANDS

While today's workforce appears to be staying put, a quiet shift is underway. AI is helping workers build confidence, develop skills and prepare for future career moves – potentially away from their current employer. The sixth annual survey, fielded between January 21 and February 6, 2026, among more than 5,000 U.S. adults and 1,000 employers, provides a comprehensive evaluation of U.S. career perceptions.

Workers are staying put... for now

Workforce stability today is being driven by caution, not complacency.

Low turnover and job stability

Ongoing economic and technological uncertainty

Workers are holding onto current roles



Beneath the surface, workers are gaining ground

While today's workforce appears to be staying put, a quiet shift is underway. AI is helping workers build confidence, develop skills and prepare for future career moves – potentially away from their current employer.

63% of workers overall feel positive about available opportunities

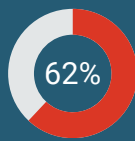
75% of AI-knowledgeable workers feel optimistic

50% of workers feel more confident pivoting into a new role because of AI

50% of workers are learning AI skills independently

Employers are struggling to keep pace

Workforce acceleration is creating new expectations for employers—and retention risks.



62% of employers say employees are developing AI skills faster than organizations can adapt



47% of workers feel their employer could do more to incorporate AI



48% of employers are concerned about retaining AI-skilled talent

Structured support for AI-enabled growth strengthens retention

Organizations that provide clear direction and support for AI adoption are better positioned to retain talent and sustain engagement.

87% job satisfaction when employers have a clear AI strategy (vs. 72%)

89% career optimism with a clear AI plan (vs. 75%)

Without clarity, growing confidence can lead workers to look elsewhere.

How employers can stay ahead of the shift

Supporting workforce growth in the age of AI requires moving from experimentation to intentional workforce strategy.

1

Define AI career pathways
Provide clear direction for growth in an AI-enabled workplace

2

Assess skills and capabilities
Build systems to understand and develop workforce skills

3

Expand AI training and tools
Offer accessible learning, tools and structured enablement

4

Develop AI-ready leaders
Equip managers to guide and support evolving teams

THE WORKFORCE MAY APPEAR STABLE — BUT A NEW WAVE OF MOBILITY IS ALREADY BUILDING BENEATH THE SURFACE.



Visit the Career Institute website to read the full report.

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