Autonomy and Competitive Edge: Mentorship as a Solution

Louise Underdahl, Ph.D.

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The University of Phoenix *Career Optimism Index*® was first conducted among workers in 2021; employers were added in 2022. The report includes year-over-year tracking data for both audiences, where applicable. Research objectives included examining American workers' sense of optimism about their careers in the context of workplace, economic, and societal trends and challenges. The study includes additional insights from employers to provide comparison between the workforce and those who hire, train, and retain them. The 20-minute online survey included:

- Workforce: 5,005 United States (U.S.) nationally representative adults, age 18+, who either currently work or wish to be working (MOE ±1.39%),

- Employers: 500 United States (U.S.) employers who are influential or play a critical role in hiring and workplace decisions within a range of departments, company sizes, and industries (MOE ±4.38%), and

- Workforce and employer fieldwork was conducted between December 17, 2024 – January 13, 2025.

The 2025 report reflects analysis of the workforce audience of 5,005 US adults and includes year-over-year shifts for tracked questions. There are several demographic and psychographic data callouts to help readers understand the differences between various types of workers among the broader audience. The report also includes data for 500 employers. There are several callouts for demographic differences throughout the report; additional demographic data are available upon request. Research highlights included:

- American workers are facing a crisis of autonomy and record-high burnout

- Career control is critical to reducing burnout and ensuring workforce resilience

- Skilling is one of the most effective solutions

□ Most employers prefer hiring externally over upskilling and empowering their existing workforce

□ Training can close the skills gap and restore worker autonomy

This white paper describes factors contributing to workers' crisis of autonomy, employer initiatives to strengthen autonomy, and mentorship as a strategy to enhance competitive edge.
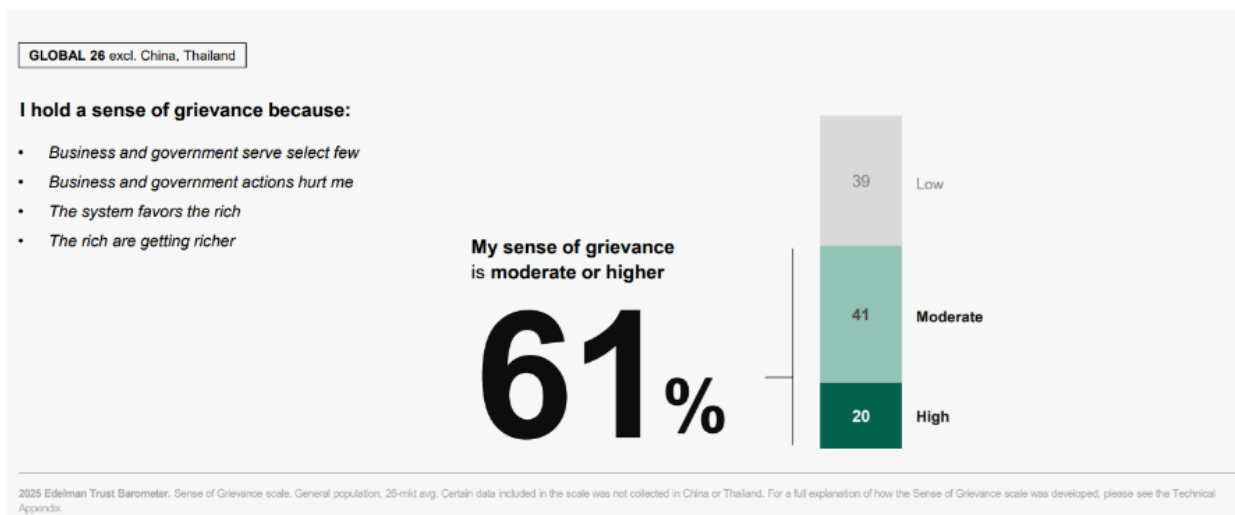
A Crisis of Autonomy

In a global survey of 28 countries and 33,000 respondents conducted October 25 through November 16, 2024, 61% of respondents reported a moderate or high sense of grievance (Edelman, 2025), validating the prevalence of low institutional trust (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

Sense of Grievance

Note: Adapted from 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer, slide 17.

In the United States, survey respondents reflected similar lack of institutional trust, with the *2025 Career Optimism Index®* indicating 51% of workers feel burned out at work because they lack autonomy and control over their professional future (see Figure 2).
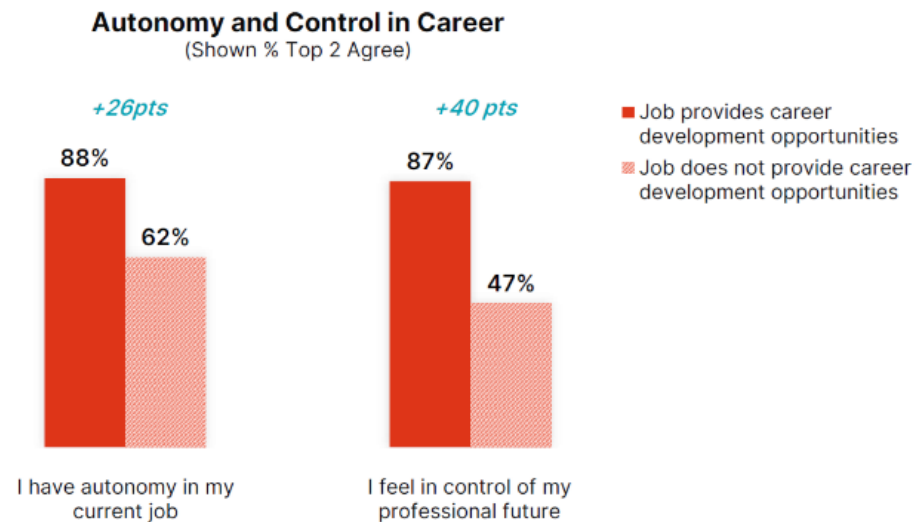
Figure 2

Lack of Control Linked to Burnout
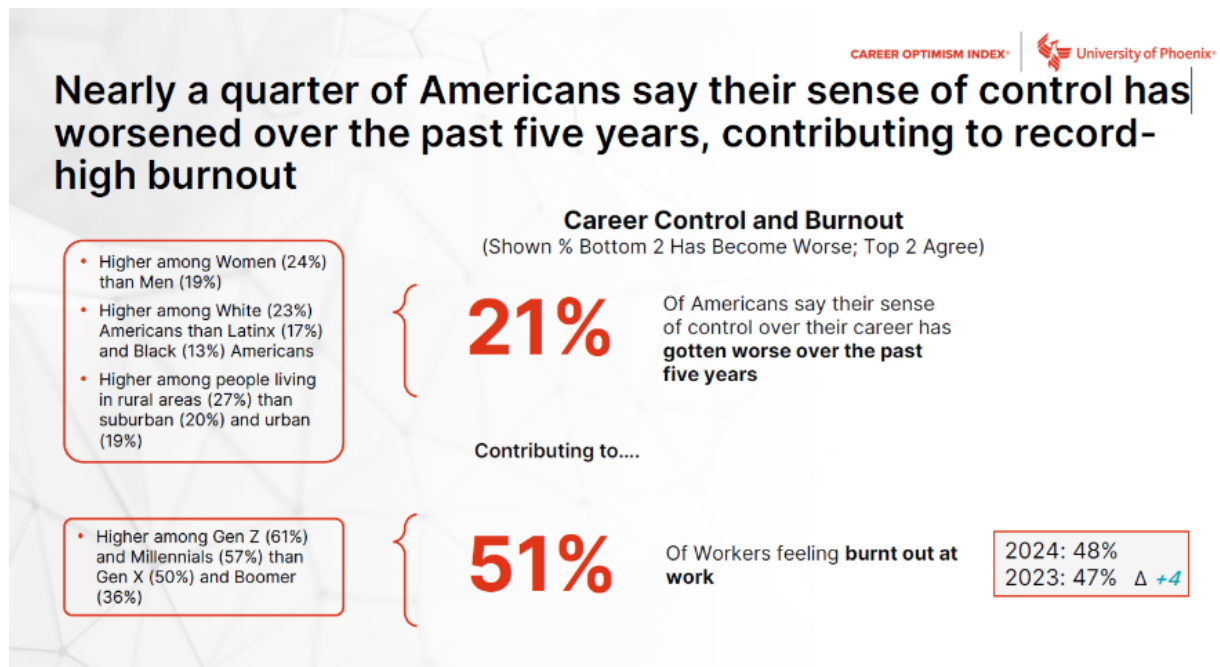
Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 13.

Data suggested that providing career development opportunities may strengthen workers' autonomy (88%) and sense of control over their professional future (87%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Autonomy and Control Linked to Career Development Opportunities

Employers can restore workers' sense of control by focusing on career development opportunities within the workplace

Autonomy and Control in Career
(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 20.

Additional benefits of strengthening workers' autonomy and sense of control over their professional future may include increased engagement (43%), motivation (66%), and adaptability (92%) to a constantly changing workplace environment (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Autonomy Linked to Engagement, Motivation, and Adaptability

2025 Career Optimism Index® results linked American workers' autonomy and sense of career control to upskilling (90% - 92%) and reskilling (90% - 91%) opportunities (see Figure 5).
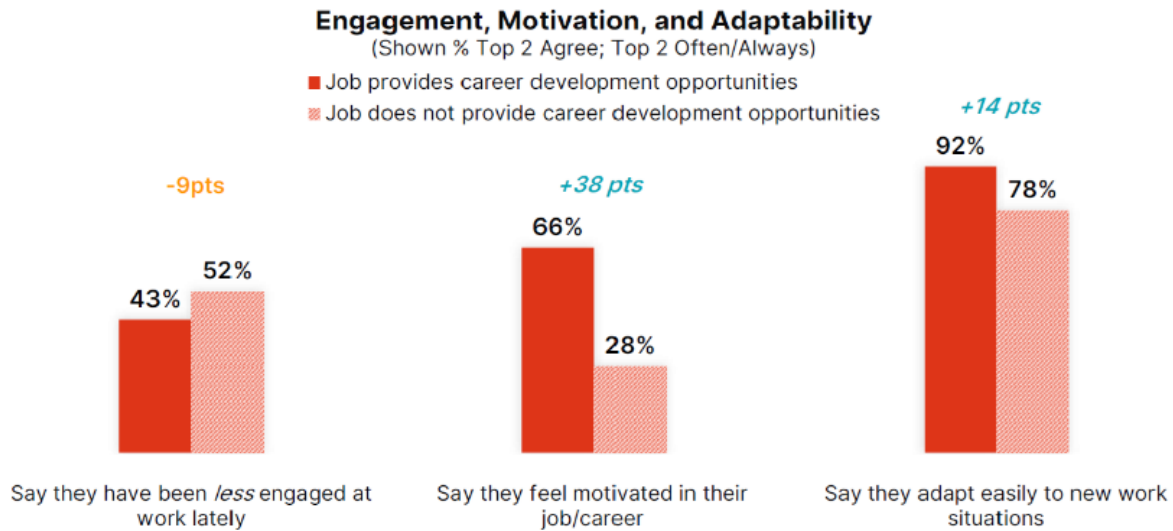
Figure 5

Autonomy Linked to Upskilling and Reskilling
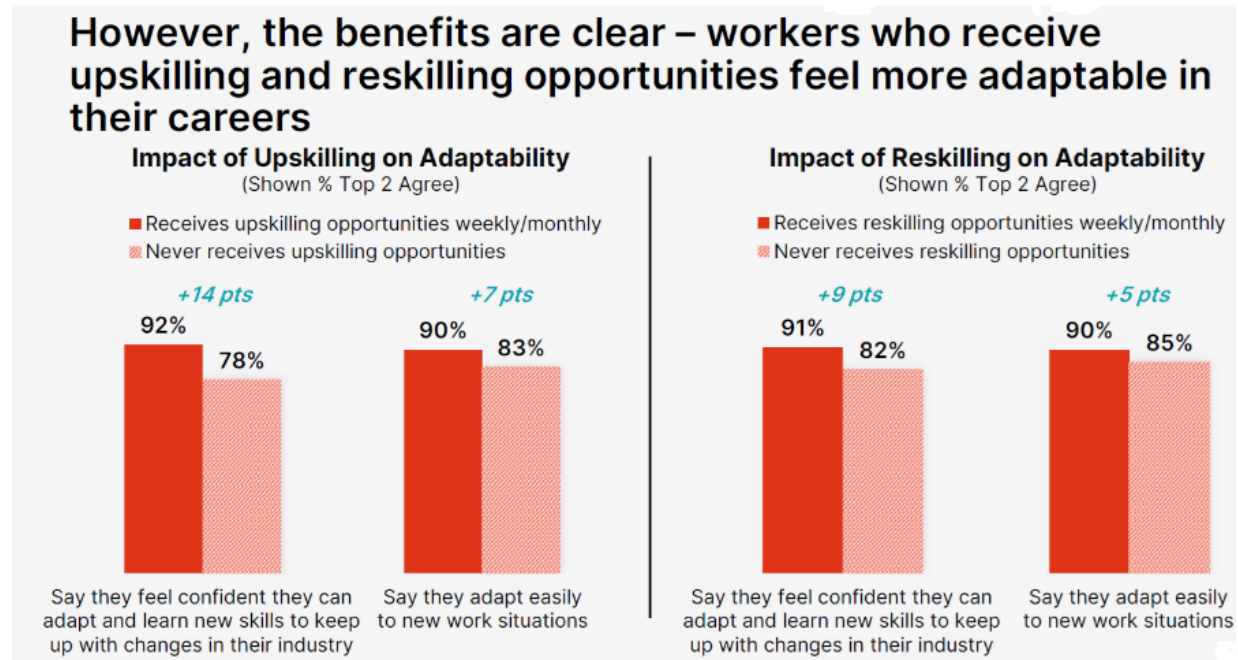
Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 27.

As a further indication of positive mindset toward career growth opportunities, 71% of American workers reported a need to improve their skillset to advance in their career and 86% are actively seeking ways to expand their skillsets (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Workers Seek to Increase Skills

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 30.

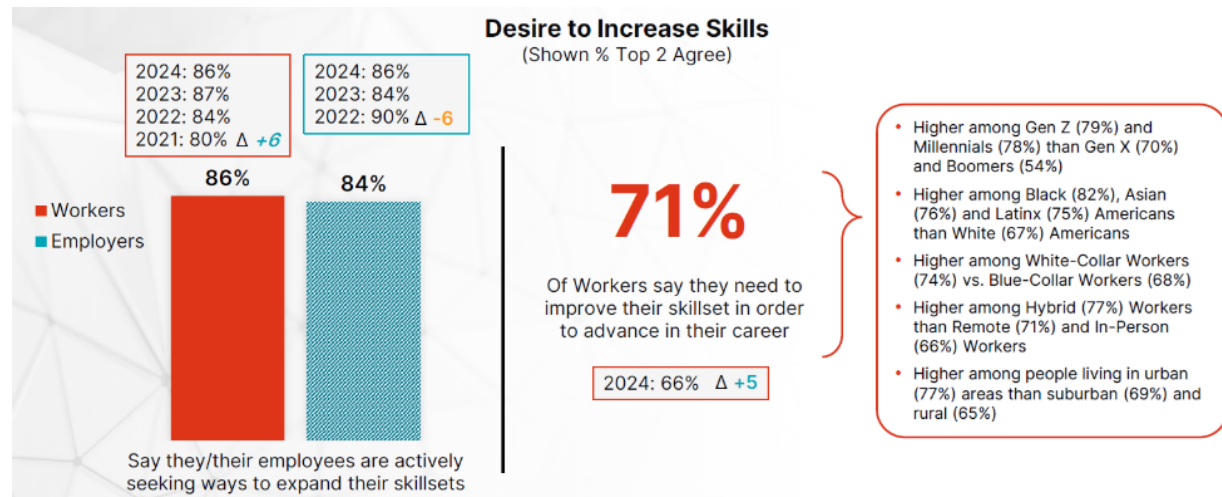Although workers seek to increase their skills, access to training opportunities is limited; consequently, 62% reported they need support with learning new skills, 56% reported they need support with finding education/training programs, and 43% reported they lack access to skills development opportunities. Comparative annual survey data validated the "lack of support/access" situation has been steadily increasing during the past 3-4 years (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

Workers Report Lack of Support/Access to Training Opportunities

Need Support Learning New Skills
(Shown % Top 2 Need Any Support)

62%

Of Americans say they need support in learning new skills

2024: 61%
2023: 62%
2022: 58% Δ +4

Need Support Finding Education / Training Programs
(Shown % Top 2 Need Any Support)

56%

Of Americans say they need support seeking out education or training programs that will get them ahead in their chosen field

Lack of Access to Skills Development
(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

43%

Employers agree with 46% saying their employees lack access to these opportunities

Of Americans say they do not have access to opportunities to develop the skills they need to advance in their career
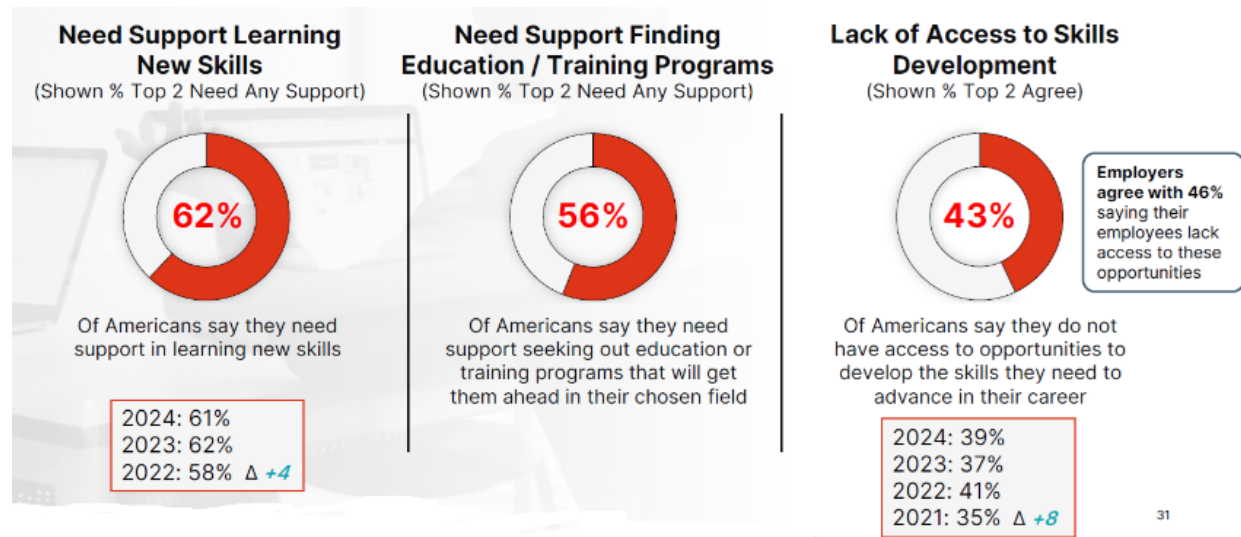
2024: 39%
2023: 37%
2022: 41%
2021: 35% Δ +8

31

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 31.

Challenges associated with lack of support and access to training opportunities are accentuated for younger generations and Black/Latinx Americans. Using Gen Z as an example, 72% reported they need support with learning new skills, 67% reported they need support with finding education/training programs, and 51% reported they lack access to skills development opportunities (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Younger Generations and Black/Latinx Report Lack of Support/Access to Training Opportunities

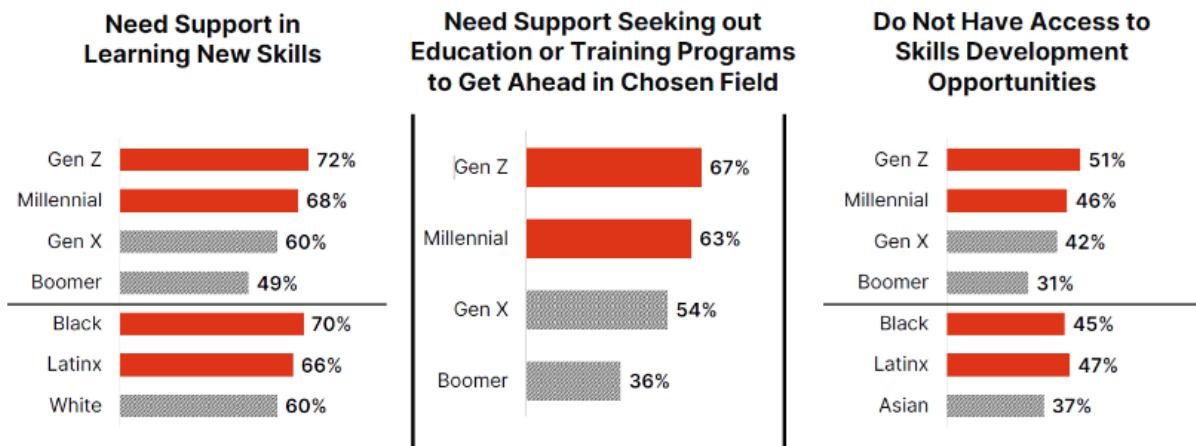
Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 32.

To recapitulate, American workers are facing a crisis of autonomy and record-high burnout. Promoting a sense of control over one's professional future and career is an effective approach to reducing burnout and ensuring workforce resilience. Upskilling, reskilling, and learning new skills strengthen workers' autonomy, engagement, motivation, and adaptability and capacity to contribute to organizational agility, defined as the ability to detect change and respond appropriately (Felipe et al., 2016; Jamal et al., 2025).

Employers' Response and Competitive Edge

Career Optimism Index® 2025 results suggested that employers may restore workers' sense of control over their professional future by providing career development opportunities within the workplace:

- Workers are 52% more likely to experience burnout when they feel they are not progressing in their careers at the right pace (67% vs. 44%).

- Workers are less likely to feel disengaged (43% vs. 52%) and are significantly more motivated (+38pts) and adaptable (+14pts) in their careers if they feel their current job provides them with opportunities for career development.

Nevertheless, *Career Optimism Index® 2025* data suggested that many employers continue to prioritize external hiring over internal workforce investment, despite workers' interest in training opportunities and career development:

- 43% of workers report a lack of access to necessary training—an 8-point increase since 2021 (see Figure 7).

- 60% of employers prefer hiring new employees over training current staff, despite research indicating the significant cost of turnover, and the proven impact of talent development on retention rates and profitability (see Figure 9).

- 86% of workers are actively seeking skill development opportunities, yet employer investment in reskilling and upskilling has declined by 13 and 10 points, respectively, since 2022 (see Figure 10).

Figure 9

60% of Employers Favor External Hires

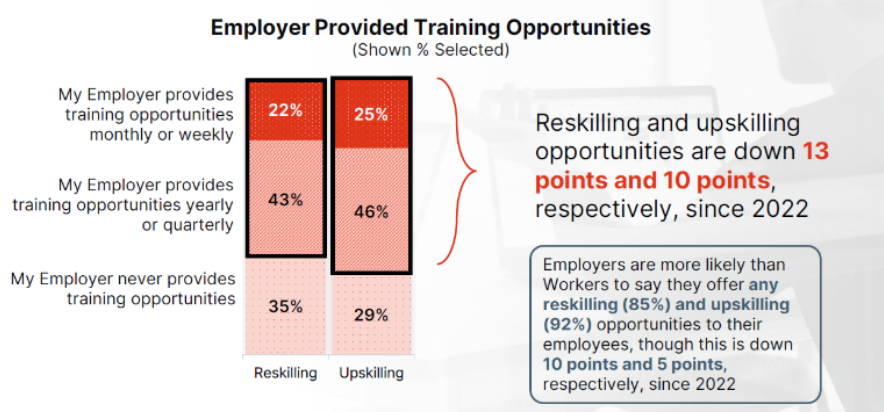Employers often favor external hires over developing their existing employees—overlooking a vital opportunity

60%
Of Employers say they would rather hire someone new than train existing employees when looking for talent with specific skills

Despite research[1] indicating the **significant cost of turnover** and the proven impact[2] of **talent development on retention** rates and profitability.
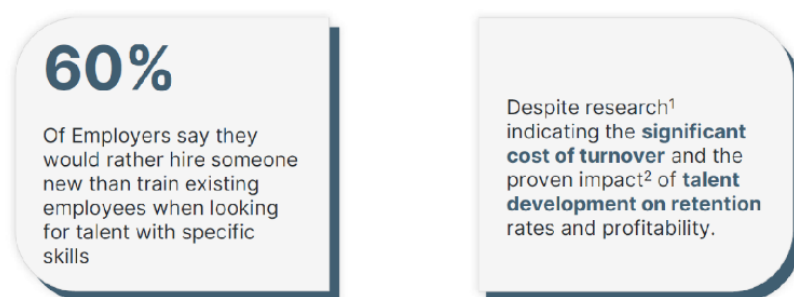
[1] Gallup, *42% of Employee Turnover Is Preventable but Often Ignored.*
[2] Gallup, *Improve Work Performance With a Focus on Employee Development.*

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 26.

Figure 10

Declining Employer Investment in Reskilling and Upskilling

Despite clear benefits and rising demand, Employers are pulling back on reskilling and upskilling efforts

Employer Provided Training Opportunities
(Shown % Selected)

My Employer provides training opportunities monthly or weekly — Reskilling 22%, Upskilling 25%

My Employer provides training opportunities yearly or quarterly — Reskilling 43%, Upskilling 46%

My Employer never provides training opportunities — Reskilling 35%, Upskilling 29%

Reskilling and upskilling opportunities are down **13 points and 10 points**, respectively, since 2022

Employers are more likely than Workers to say they offer **any reskilling (85%) and upskilling (92%)** opportunities to their employees, though this is down **10 points and 5 points**, respectively, since 2022

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 28.
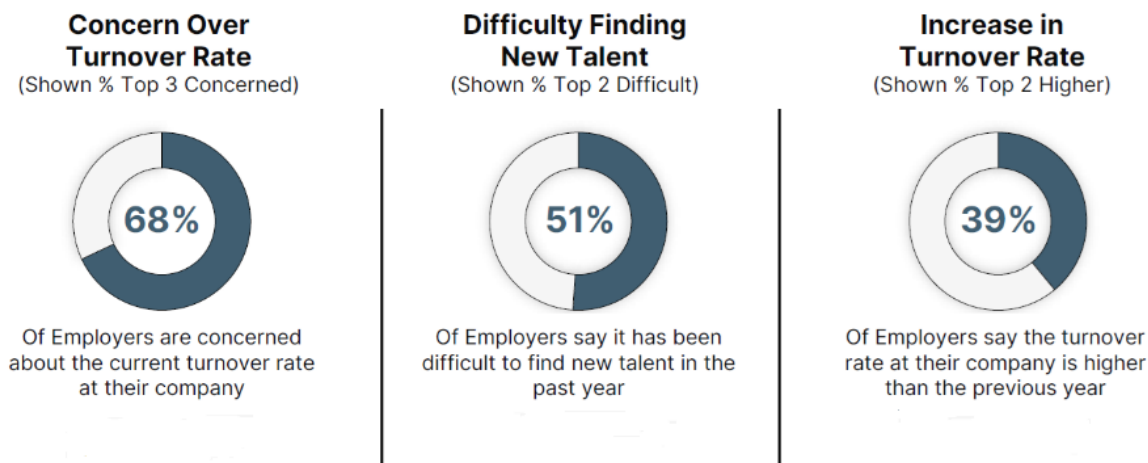
Employers' rationale for reducing training opportunities included not enough time for employee training (26%), not enough money for learning and development (25%), easier to hire a new person who already has the skills (24%), and lack of time/resources for hands-on training program (23%). Figure 11 presents complete results. Yet employers continue to report persistent recruitment and retention challenges (see Figure 12).

Figure 11

Employers' Barriers to Investing in Skills Development

Employers' Reasons for Not Investing in Reskilling or Upskilling
(Shown % Selected, Showing Top 10 Most Selected)

Not enough time for employee training	26%
Not enough money in the budget for learning and development	25%
It is easier to hire a new person that already has those skills	24%
Lack of time/resources for hands-on training program	23%
Limited employee interest in participating	23%
Need to identify and understand what skills gaps exist	23%
Not applicable, my company invests in reskilling/upskilling	22%
Takes too long to implement a company-wide learning and development program	21%
Lack of strategy around the skills that will make our company successful in the future	19%
Lack of alignment on what learning and development programs should look like at our company	18%

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 33.

Figure 12

Persistent Recruitment and Retention Challenges

At the same time, hiring and retaining workers remains a persistent challenge for Employers

Concern Over Turnover Rate
(Shown % Top 3 Concerned)

68%

Of Employers are concerned about the current turnover rate at their company

Difficulty Finding New Talent
(Shown % Top 2 Difficult)

51%

Of Employers say it has been difficult to find new talent in the past year

Increase in Turnover Rate
(Shown % Top 2 Higher)

39%

Of Employers say the turnover rate at their company is higher than the previous year

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 29.

Looking forward to the next five years (from 2025 to 2030), employers will either empower their workforce through AI-driven upskilling or risk losing talent, productivity, and competitive advantage. With declining internal development opportunities, *Career Optimism Index® 2025* data validate American workers' interest in embracing AI tools and training to expedite career advancement and enhance work engagement.

☐ 56% say AI accelerates skill development and 79% say it helps close knowledge gaps (see Figure 13).

☐ Workers who use AI see gains in autonomy (+12pts), resilience (+5pts), and adaptability (+5pts) compared to non-users (see Figure 14).

☐ AI improves productivity (89%) and work-life balance (81%), which bolster mental

health (see Figure 15).

☐ Those who feel they are progressing in their career at the right pace report lower

levels of burnout (44% vs. 67% - see Figure 16).
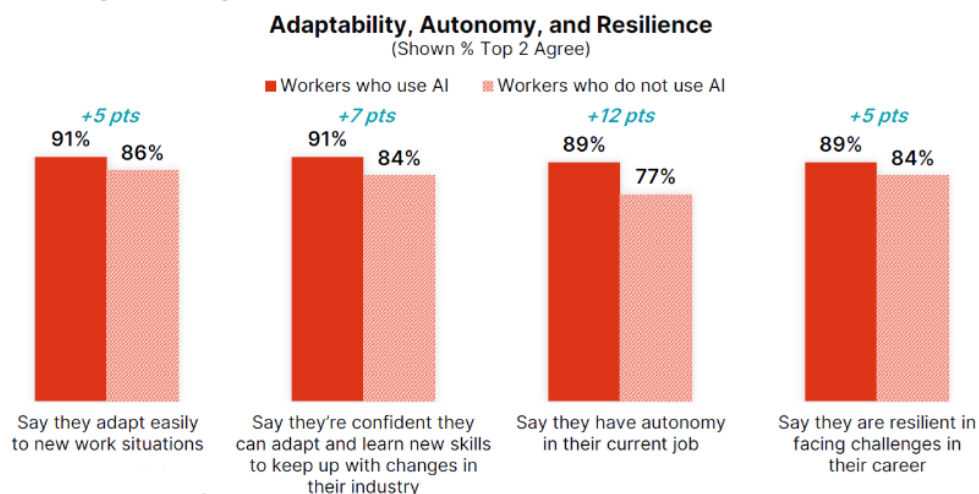
Figure 13

AI Helps Employers Close the Skills Gap
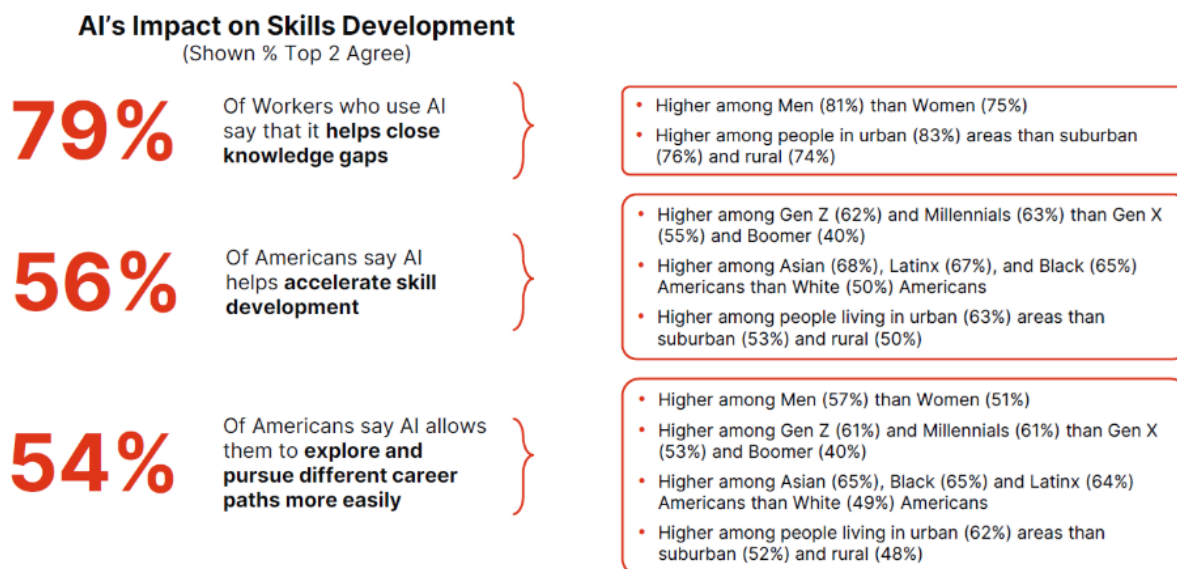
Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 36.

Figure 14

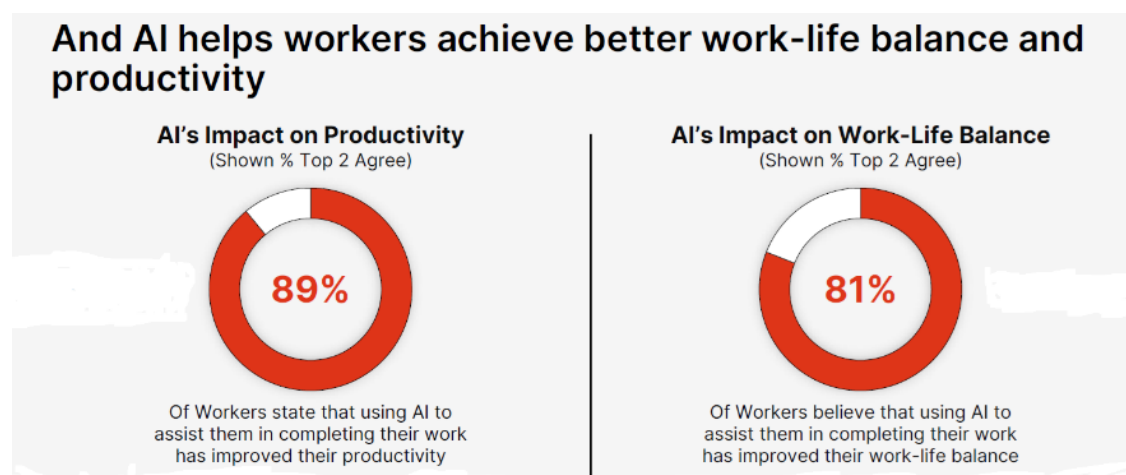*AI Adoption Linked to Autonomy, Resilience, and Adaptability*

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 38.

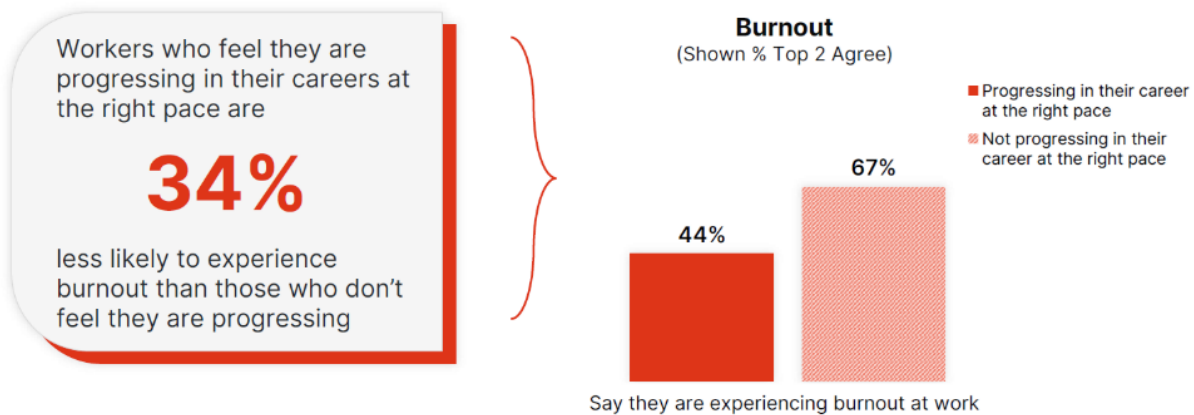**Figure 15**

AI Linked to Work-Life Balance and Productivity

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 40.

Figure 16

Progressing in Career Linked to Lower Levels of Burnout

When workers can progress in their careers at their desired pace, they are less prone to burnout

Workers who feel they are progressing in their careers at the right pace are

34%

less likely to experience burnout than those who don't feel they are progressing

Burnout
(Shown % Top 2 Agree)

■ Progressing in their career at the right pace
▧ Not progressing in their career at the right pace

67%

44%

Say they are experiencing burnout at work

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 23.

Employers also recognize the potential of AI to enhance human capital and institutional productivity (see Figure 19):

- 68% of employers say knowledge of how to use AI is valuable for their employees' careers.

- 61% say they would prioritize hiring job candidates with AI training or experience, even if the candidate doesn't have the traditional skills for a role.

- 34% say they currently offer their employees training on how to use AI in their career.

- 30% say they are going to offer AI training to their employees soon.

To recapitulate, *Career Optimism Index® 2025* data indicated that employers' response to American workers' crisis of autonomy and record-high burnout has been to:
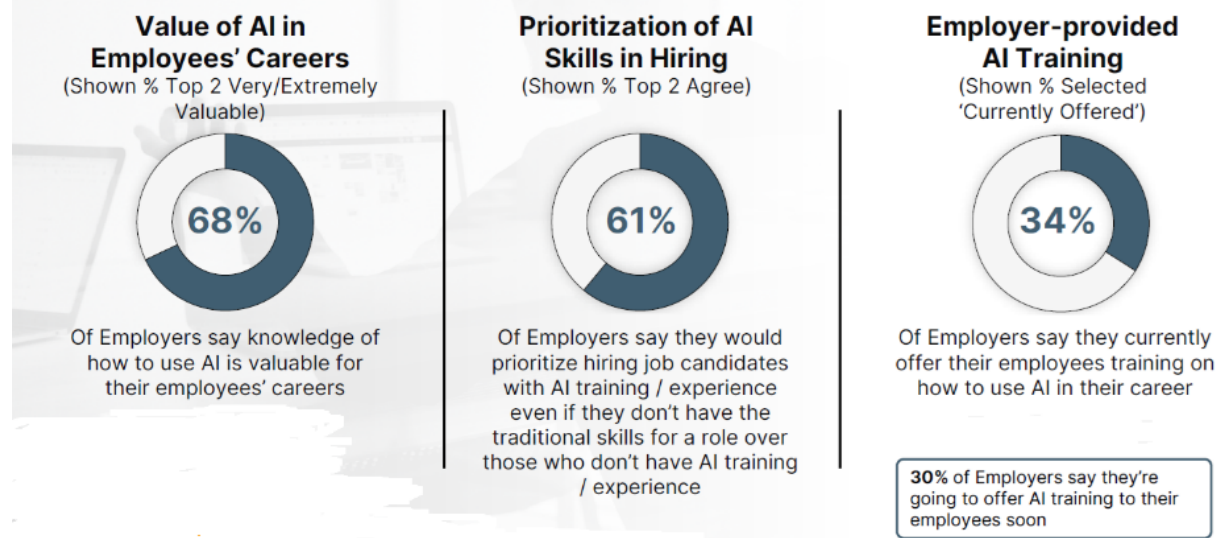
☐   Reduce employer provided training opportunities (see Figure 10),

☐   Favor external hires (see Figure 9), and

☐   Offer AI training to employees "soon" (see Figure 17).

Skills are both the solution and the business imperative according to the *Career Optimism Index® 2025* survey.

Figure 17

Employers Recognize Potential of AI

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 41.

While exploring AI tools and training to expedite career advancement and improve work engagement is one possibility, there are other paths to achieving competitive edge: Consider mentorship.

Mentorship As a Solution

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) traces the term, "mentorship," to 1848 and offers a timely example sentence describing implications of the Baby Boomer retirement wave: "Leaders need to be thinking about the impact this will have on the workforce, including loss of institutional knowledge, huge leadership gaps, succession pressures and mentorship gaps" (*Forbes* Expert Panel®, 2025, para. 5). Viewing mentorship as a solution for workers seeking to achieve competitive edge builds upon the work of educational psychologists Vygotsky and Bruner, who both validated mentorship in the learning process. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) suggested individuals learn more with guidance from a more knowledgeable person. Bruner elaborated on scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976) and the "novice-to-expert" model (Bruner, 1985) to suggest that support provided by mentors can help individuals achieve more than they could independently.

The *2024 Career Optimism Index*® (University of Phoenix, 2024) confirmed workers value mentorship opportunities:

- ☐ Workers are more likely to feel like they do not have the ability to advance in their career at their current job when their company does not provide a mentorship program (49% - slide 9).

- ☐ Workers feel more stagnant when they do not receive career support from their employers; 49% report their employers do not provide mentorship programs (slide 44).

    ◻   Workers are interested in receiving Internal mentorship and apprenticeship programs to provide on-the-job learning (slide 60).

    ◻   Career optimism depends on employer actions, such as promoting mentorship in the workplace (slide 63).

While the concept of mentorship as a strategy for success has been validated (Andrews et al., 2025; Chernosky & Juarez, 2025; Holly, 2025; Jones & Wendt, 2025; Koretzky, 2025; Kram, 1985; Marincola Smith et al., 2025; O'Brien & Woody, 2025; Osman & Vaidya, 2024; Pires, 2025; Savick et al., 2025), execution of mentorship is the differentiator. Mentoring success is predicated on the mentor's ability to positively influence changes in the mentee (Hryshchenko et al., 2025). Significant factors include creating and maintaining mentor/mentee trust, complemented by strengthening communication skills to accurately identify and mediate mentee vulnerabilities (Hryshchenko et al., 2025). Both group and individual mentoring have potential for success, depending upon organizational context; recommendations for moving forward include consistency of theoretical and practical ideas, adapting best practices, using phased-in implementation, including all stakeholders, and monitoring progress to identify opportunities for improvement (Hryshchenko et al., 2025).

Mentorship Models

Mentorship programs are intrinsic to success in academic endeavors, government funding, and professional career development. Students are encouraged to utilize mentoring maps, such the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity tool used to develop a diverse network of advisors and mentors (Martins & Faciola, 2025). Advantages of structured mentoring include improved student satisfaction and reduced attrition rates in graduate programs (Curtin et al., 2016). Mentoring support programs help graduate students develop competencies

required in subsequent careers and prevent organizational culture shock for students transitioning to nonacademic environments (Sinche et al., 2017; Skakni et al., 2021). Transferable skills include project management, effective time management, teamwork, leadership and management abilities, and career planning (Martins & Faciola, 2025, p. 3016; Sinche et al., 2017).

With research linking effective mentoring to successful scientific studies, federal agencies, including the National Institutes of Health (2025) National Science Foundation (NSF) (Palmer, 2024), and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2025), have implemented mandatory mentoring plans in grant proposals and annual reports. As delineated in the USDA's Agricultural Food and Research Initiative (2025), mentoring plans are required because "mentoring is essential in developing the next generation of food and agriculture scientists and professionals" (USDA, 2025, para. 1). In 2024, the NSF initiated an expanded mentoring requirement to increase support for scientific research because: "We know that mentorship is the single-most important factor that predicts whether students will be able to successfully complete their degree" (Palmer, 2024, para. 3)

Organizational benefits of mentoring are promoted by the Small Business Administration (2025) to strengthen entrepreneurial business development and sustainability. The Veterans Health Administration's clinical research infrastructure includes multi-site clinical trial locations which leveraged the Network of Dedicated Enrollment Sites (NODES) mentorship model to improve onboarding and performance (Johnson et al., 2025). Factors contributing to successful integration of participating research sites into a clinical research network, achievement of stated goals, and improved performance included:

- Meeting frequency.
- Knowledgeable mentors.

- ☐ Prompt responses to questions.

- ☐ Check-in's with mentor outside of scheduled meetings.

- ☐ Open communication, using email, phone, text, and Microsoft Teams®.

- ☐ Mentor/mentee site visits.

- ☐ Collaborative structure of the mentorship model, such as regular virtual meetings over Microsoft Teams® (Johnson et al., 2025, p. 4).

The research site mentorship approach is being adapted for use in other settings such university-based research networks. In a study of approximately 800 entrepreneurs (Rechter & Avnimelech, 2025), results demonstrated that having a personal mentor led to significantly greater progress. In addition to the reciprocal benefits of mentorship, Mehmood et al. (2025) suggest structured mentorship programs strengthen leadership competence and resilience, thereby promoting organizational agility.

Although leadership acknowledges the relevance of AI adoption in organizational settings, training and support mechanisms are often rudimentary. Using accounting as an example, financial managers tasked with transitioning into AI integration report a need for implementation support and continuous learning mechanisms to reduce uncertainty and operationalize AI tools successfully (Gojkovic, 2025). In a study of 566 accountants and finance officers handling and reporting financial data, results suggested AI and internal control systems mediate relevance, accuracy, variability, and timeliness of financial data reporting (Johri, 2025). These results further support the importance of formal training, periodic refresher sessions, and instructional clarity to strengthen user efficacy.

Emphasizing the importance of formulating best practices and establishing basic AI capability, Dunn (2025) advocates partnerships between organizations and universities to

develop generative AI alternatives to ChatGPT. As an example, the Air Force has collaborated with Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Microsoft and other companies to launch an AI Center of Excellence. Employer concerns about Shadow AI, defined as employees using the AI without institutional approval (Dunn, 2025), are legitimate: "The risks associated with Shadow AI, such as unintended consequences, privacy breaches, and ethical dilemmas, cannot be ignored" (Catherine et al., 2025, p. 65).

Three Steps Employers Can Take

First, employers can evaluate barriers to mentorship, defined as why employers do not invest in reskilling or upskilling (see Table 1). For purposes of this white paper, employers' reasons for not reskilling or upskilling are grouped into the following three categories: Time, money, and clarity.

Table 1

Why Employers Do Not Invest in Reskilling or Upskilling

Percentage	Reason
26%	Not enough time
25%	Not enough money
24%	Prefer candidates who already have the skills
23%	Lack of time/resources for hands-on training programs
23%	Limited employee interest
23%	Unclear on specific skills gap

Percentage	Reason
21%	Takes too long to implement company-wide program
19%	Unclear strategy on filling skills gap
18%	Unclear vision for company-wide training and development program

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2025: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers – April 2025, slide 33.

Second, employers can identify solutions that minimize time and cost, while maximizing clarity. For example, start small: Offer micro-mentorship opportunities within project teams to normalize both giving and receiving feedback across the organizational chart (C. Kingman, personal communication, July 7, 2025). As another example, build upon existing resources such as the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER), which offers 23 curricula, such as *Entering Mentoring*, to cover a wide range of disciplines and careers (CIMER, 2025). Another resource, the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD), provides a mentor map tool to streamline identifying an appropriate mentor network (NCFDD, 2025). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) is another possible resource; NACE's Mentor Program "can be a career-changing experience for both the mentor and the mentee" (NACE, 2025, para. 1). NACE members receive exclusive access to Qooper, NACE's user-friendly, state-of-the-art mentoring platform. Users are able to match with others based on common goals and interests, association type, and geographic region. Qooper consolidates resources and guidance for mentoring relationships, including goals, productivity tips, expectations and ice breakers, plus monthly steps to be sure users are getting the most out of

their experience. Criteria for serving as mentors include significant experience in the field, expertise in leadership, communication skills, strategic decision making, organizational skills, and resource management, and the ability to provide insights into the profession to guide the mentee. Criteria for serving as mentee include those new to the career services or university relation and recruiting fields, those who would like to develop a richer business acumen, or those changing fields.

Third, in the spirit of "offering AI training to employees soon" (see Figure 19) and avoiding Shadow AI, employers may consider integrating AI tools to enhance and personalize mentoring. Human resource representatives may partner AI-savvy mentors with mentees, consider transformational, transactional, and strategic mentorship approaches to strengthening human-AI interactions, and leverage AI for career development (Lin & Chen, 2025). Organizational policies should support development of proficient mentors, aligned with Vgotsky's More Knowledgeable Other, defined as an individual who possesses a higher level of understanding or skill than the learner regarding a specific task, concept, or process (Vgotsky, 1978). This can facilitate development of human-AI collaboration.

Mentorship benefits both institutions and individuals by generating enhanced career satisfaction, personal learning, perceived marketability, and employee retention (Dhaenens et al., 2025). The authors expressed their views succinctly:

> Collective approaches to mentoring can help provide new employees with a diverse range of knowledge needed to perform as full organizational members and contribute more quickly. In creating a culture that comprehensively fosters mentoring, employees have an opportunity to develop marketable skills and make meaningful career progress.
> (Dhaenens et al., 2025, p. 25)

Conclusion

As presented in the *2025 Career Optimism Index*®, workers confirmed enhancing skills promotes control over career development and resilience. Since employers are concerned about turnover and difficulty in finding new talent, mentorship is an actionable and win-win strategy to enhance competitive edge. This white paper contributes to existing literature on leveraging mentorship to increase workers' sense of autonomy and employers' ability to retain talent and promote productivity.

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