



Reclaiming Control: Autonomy as the Key to Workforce Resilience and Career Optimism

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Introduction

The goal of this white paper is to examine a new dimension of the American workforce data provided by the University of Phoenix *Career Optimism Index*. For the past three years, I have looked at how workers cope with deteriorating mental health, disconnect between employee and employer perception of mental health resources, and resilience, while still retaining career optimism during tough economic and political times. The 2023 paper studied the mental health issues during and after the Pandemic, and the 2024 paper studied psychological resilience and the role of organizations during adversity (Johnson, 2023; Johnson 2024). From the new data available from the latest Optimism Index, I believe that the issues workers face continue to grow. Workplace issues have progressed to a new predicament, a lack of independence. Some 21% of employees feel that their autonomy or control in the workplace has been declining, and more than half (51%) say they are experiencing burn out. This is the highest level of burnout that has been found since the beginning of the career optimism reports. While 76% of employees stated that they used optimism to get through the year, optimism does not take the place of job satisfaction (University of Phoenix, 2025). As one of the key aspects of impact and control in one's career, autonomy is the topic that this year's white paper focuses on, exploring if it is the missing link in continuing to achieve workforce resilience.

The Crisis of Autonomy

The Career Optimism report paints a fairly grim picture of the American workforce autonomy crisis. As many as 1 in 5 workers in the US (21%) believe that their ability to control their professional fate has worsened over the last five years. This drop directly contributes to record levels of burnout that now impact over half the American workforce (51% and growing). The Outlook Index's findings highlight this as the biggest burnout rate since tracking began. Refocusing work on the fundamental issue of autonomy is critical.

Interestingly, the desire for autonomy varies across different segments of the workforce. According to the 2025 report women are more likely to report a loss of control in their work lives (24%) compared to men (19%). Geographic differences are also notable, with rural workers reporting the highest sense of lost control (27%), followed by those in suburban (20%) and urban areas (19%). Burnout levels show a generational divide as well: Gen Z (61%) and Millennials (57%) experience significantly higher burnout than Gen X (50%) and Baby Boomers (36%). These trends suggest that younger workers, women, and individuals in rural areas are disproportionately affected by the psychological toll of declining autonomy.

Autonomy in the Conservation of Resources Framework

Autonomy is key to worker satisfaction and a positive outlook. To grasp why autonomy is so important, it is helpful to frame it using the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. Hobfoll (1989) suggested that people seek to obtain, hold on to, and save valued resources. Stress is experienced when there is a threat of a loss of resources, actual loss of resources, or failure to meet the demands of resources, while resilience and growth are experienced when resources are gained and sustained.

Tangible resources include money, time, and materials. Intangible resources include skills, social support, and self-efficacy, which Bandura (1984) said is a major factor in resilience. In today's workplace, autonomy, that feeling of having control over career decisions, the speed of learning new skills, and choices about one's work life, is also a major resource. Autonomy lets people shape what happens today and in the future. It helps them make sense of their actions and find meaning in their work.

Loss of autonomy is detrimental to the worker who may become stressed, burned out, and less agile. COR Theory suggests that the outcomes of loss of autonomy are increased stress and emotional exhaustion. In the same way, when people are given opportunities to develop skills, attend training and are allowed to make decisions, the strengthened autonomy leads to resource gains and increased momentum (Bardoel & Drago, 2021; Hobfoll, 1989). These gains reinforce motivation, foster engagement, and promote resilience and optimism.

The *Career Optimism Index 2025* illustrates this principle in action. Workers who perceive autonomy in their jobs are far more likely to report engagement, motivation, and adaptability compared to those who do not. For example, 91% of workers who feel they have autonomy adapt easily to new work situations, compared to just 75% of those who lack autonomy. Similarly, workers with autonomy are 34 points more likely to feel motivated in their careers (University of Phoenix, 2025). These findings confirm autonomy's role as not merely an organizational perk but a vital protective factor for mental health and a driver of resilience.

In short, autonomy is best understood as a foundational resource within the COR framework. Its presence buffers against burnout, its loss accelerates stress, and its restoration is essential for cultivating a workforce that is both resilient and optimistic about the future.

Hope vs. Autonomy: Coping or Thriving?

The paradox captured in *The Career Optimism Index 2025* highlights that even as employees suffer record levels of burnout, they also tend towards being very hopeful. Three-quarters (76%): reported they ‘had to rely on hope to get through their past 12 months, and this has increased since 2021, indicating hope serves as a crucial coping mechanism during challenging times. While this enables workers, in the short term, to get through tough situations, boundless hope risks inaction and thus a waiting game, allowing other people to set the parameters for the future. Workers would like to believe that change is inevitable, but in the absence of the ability to do something constructive in that situation, hope can lead to discontent and disappointment.

The ability to act autonomously energizes hope and moves it from being passive to thriving. Workers can build their own hope-filled trajectories. They may experience hope filled with agency that goes beyond just getting by for another year. There is control, sense, direction, and confidence cultivated to thrive and not just survive.

The data show the difference clearly. Workers who feel in control of their professional future are significantly less likely to experience burnout (45% vs. 70%) and more likely to remain motivated and adaptable (University of Phoenix, 2025). Hope may get workers through the day or year, but autonomy gives them the tools to envision and build the future they have hoped for. In this way, autonomy turns hope from a coping mechanism into a pathway for resilience and optimism. This aligns with self-determination theory, which identifies autonomy as a basic psychological need and shows that when autonomy is thwarted, workers experience greater burnout and disengagement (Deci et al., 2017).

Skill-Building and AI as Restorers of Autonomy

One of the clearest ways to restore autonomy is through access to meaningful skill-building opportunities. Workers consistently express a strong desire to grow; in 2025, 86% of Americans reported actively seeking ways to expand their skillsets, and 71% said they need to improve their skills in order to advance their careers. Yet nearly half (43%) said they lack access to the training opportunities they need, a figure that has climbed eight points since 2021 (University of Phoenix, 2025). This mismatch leaves workers feeling stalled, frustrated, and disconnected from their own career trajectories.

For younger generations, the need is even greater. Gen Z (79%) and Millennials (78%) are significantly more likely than Gen X (70%) and Boomers

(54%) to believe they must improve their skillsets to progress. Without access to growth opportunities, these groups that are already reporting the highest levels of burnout face heightened risks to mental health, engagement, and optimism.

Amid this gap, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a surprising ally in restoring autonomy. Far from replacing workers, the 2025 Index shows that AI can function as a psychological and practical resource in the following specific ways::

- **Autonomy:** Workers using AI report a 12-point increase in feeling autonomy in their jobs.
- **Resilience and Adaptability:** AI users are more likely to say they are resilient (+5 points) and confident in their ability to adapt and learn new skills (+7 points).
- **Optimism:** AI adoption is associated with an 11-point increase in optimism about the future of one's career.
- **Reduced Burnout:** AI users were 25 points more likely to report improvements in burnout compared to non-users.

AI also supports practical aspects of work-life balance: 89% of workers using AI reported increased productivity, and 81% reported a better work-life balance. These improvements reduce strain, freeing up time and energy for personal and professional renewal.

In this sense, skill-building and AI function as twin pathways to autonomy. Traditional training programs equip workers with the tools to grow within their careers, while AI accelerates skill acquisition and boosts confidence. Together, they transform the workplace from a site of control loss into one of empowerment, reducing burnout and reinforcing resilience.

The Employer–Employee Disconnect

Although workers are clear about their desire for growth and autonomy, employer practices often fall short of meeting these needs. *The Career Optimism Index 2025* reveals that 60% of employers prefer hiring externally rather than training existing staff for roles requiring new skills. This approach overlooks a vital opportunity: internal skill development not only addresses skill gaps but also strengthens engagement, loyalty, and career optimism.

At the same time, employer investment in reskilling and upskilling has declined since 2022, dropping 13 and 10 points, respectively. While 85% of employers say they offer reskilling and 92% say they offer upskilling, many workers report these opportunities are infrequent or inaccessible. The discrepancy is stark: 43% of workers say they lack access to necessary training, even as

employers overestimate their own offerings.

The costs of this disconnect are measurable. Workers who feel they are not progressing in their careers at the right pace are 52% more likely to experience burnout (67% vs. 44%). Lack of career development also correlates with disengagement, declining motivation, and reduced adaptability, all of which weaken organizational resilience.

This mismatch contributes to persistent challenges for employers themselves. Nearly seven in ten employers (68%) report concern over high turnover, and more than half (51%) say finding new talent has been difficult in the past year. By failing to prioritize internal development, organizations inadvertently fuel the very problems they seek to solve: burnout, turnover, and talent shortages. In short, workers view autonomy and growth opportunities as essential, while many employers continue to treat them as optional. This disconnect not only undermines employee well-being but also threatens organizational competitiveness. Bridging this gap requires reframing autonomy as a shared resource—one that benefits both workers and employers when it is cultivated, rather than neglected.

Recommendations for Restoring Autonomy

For Employers

1. Prioritize internal development over external hiring
Invest in reskilling and upskilling programs that provide employees with clear, accessible pathways for advancement. Internal development not only reduces turnover but also fosters loyalty and confidence.
2. Embed autonomy into career pathways
Give workers more influence over how and when they pursue growth. This includes flexible training schedules, transparent promotion criteria, and opportunities to take on stretch projects that build skills.
3. Leverage AI as an empowerment tool
Rather than positioning AI as a replacement, train employees to use AI tools to accelerate their learning, productivity, and problem-solving. Employers who provide AI training signal investment in workers' long-term adaptability.
4. Address equity gaps in autonomy
Pay attention to populations disproportionately affected by autonomy loss—women, younger generations, and rural workers. Tailor

interventions to ensure equitable access to career development and decision-making opportunities.

For Workers

1. Adopt a continuous learning mindset

Seek out formal and informal opportunities to build new skills, even when employer-sponsored options are limited. Online platforms, certifications, and microlearning can supplement organizational resources.

2. Leverage AI to expand control

Use AI tools to enhance productivity, close knowledge gaps, and explore new career paths. Workers who adopt AI report higher autonomy, resilience, and optimism—demonstrating its value as a self-directed resource.

3. Build resource caravans

Strengthen not just skills but also social and professional networks. Relationships with mentors, peers, and industry groups can provide support, open opportunities, and amplify resilience during times of uncertainty.

4. Practice career self-advocacy

Take an active role in conversations about career development. Request feedback, ask about growth opportunities, and communicate long-term career goals to supervisors and mentors.

Restoring autonomy requires a partnership between workers and employers. Organizations must create environments where autonomy is possible, while workers must take intentional steps to claim and cultivate it. Together, these efforts can transform autonomy from a scarce resource into a shared foundation for resilience, optimism, and sustainable success.

Conclusion

The *Career Optimism Index 2025* underscores a sobering truth: American workers are experiencing a crisis of autonomy. As control over career trajectories declines, burnout has reached record highs, particularly among younger generations and vulnerable groups. Hope, while sustaining, is no longer enough. Without meaningful opportunities to shape their careers, workers face cycles of stress, disengagement, and diminished optimism.

Yet the same report also offers a path forward. Autonomy—when supported

through skill-building, career development, and AI adoption—emerges as a critical resource that protects mental health, enhances resilience, and restores optimism. Workers who feel in control of their professional future are more engaged, motivated, and adaptable, while organizations that invest in autonomy-building reap the benefits of retention, productivity, and competitive advantage.

This white paper extends the conversation begun in earlier years in my white papers: from the need for mental health support from employers and resilience in times of scarcity, to autonomy as the essential foundation for thriving in today's evolving workplace. The lesson is clear: resilience is not built on hope alone, but on the resources that enable workers to act with confidence and agency.

The future of work depends on shifting from hope as coping to autonomy as thriving. By reclaiming control as a shared priority, workers and employers can together create an environment where careers are not only sustainable but also fulfilling and forward-looking. Autonomy is no longer optional. It is the cornerstone of resilience and career optimism in the years ahead.

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