

# WORKING LEARNER INDEX

Study Examines Motivations of U.S. Workers Seeking  
Education Benefits While on the Job



# AUTOMATION CHANGES THE FACE OF THE LABOR MARKET

---

As automation, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and other advances transform nearly every facet of the labor market, workers are going back to school by the millions. (More than 14 million, by one count.<sup>1</sup>)

In the **Working Learner Index**, **Bright Horizons**<sup>®</sup>, publisher of the Modern Family Index, undertook an unprecedented survey of more than 30,000 workers who are already learning on the job. The findings provide a window into the lives, aspirations, and goals of a highly engaged subset of employees who are looking for credentials with a longer shelf life.

According to the Working Learner Index, workers understand that change is coming: **nearly 90% believe automation will impact their industry and transform jobs.**

The results suggest that workers understand the importance of up-skilling - and deeply value employers' commitments to supporting it.

## Among the topline findings:

- ▶ **An overwhelming majority (84%)** of respondents believe the skills or degree earned through their employer helped to prepare them for the future of work.
- ▶ **82%** said their continued education, made possible by an employer's tuition reimbursement program, made them more effective employees.
- ▶ **64%** said the program made them "happier at work."
- ▶ **More than half (52%)** said their employer's tuition reimbursement program is among the best benefits offered at work.
- ▶ **Three-quarters (76%)** said a tuition reimbursement program would make them more likely to remain at their organization.
- ▶ **81%** said it would make them more likely to recommend working there to a friend.





---

Asked to rank all benefits – regardless of whether they’re actually offered at work – employees ranked education benefits far above wellness benefits like gym memberships. More significantly, **they ranked education benefits above paid family leave, and even life or disability insurance.** Only retirement savings programs and paid sick or vacation time ranked more highly.

The research uncovered mixed and potentially conflicting views about the future of work. The majority (56%) of company vice presidents report being somewhat or very concerned about the impact of automation. But just 44% of frontline employees said they were concerned about automation, which may reflect the growth of frontline workers who see themselves as relatively immune to technological changes.

And the youngest workers – Generation Z employees who have entered the workforce in the past few years – are the least likely to be “very concerned” or even “somewhat concerned” about the impact of automation on their industry or job function.

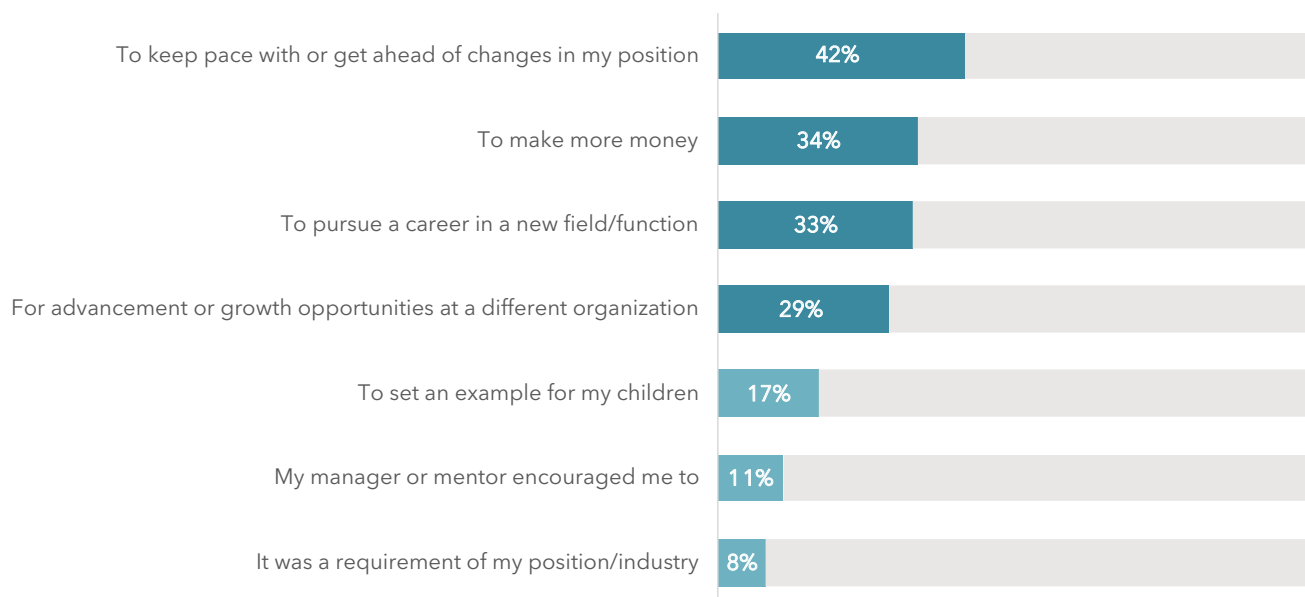
Ironically, this may be because these young workers, born after 1995, are already seeking education on the job, offering them a measure of perceived security in the face of ever-changing demands and technologies.

# MOTIVATIONS OF WORKERS HEADING BACK TO THE CLASSROOM

Among workers pursuing more education, there's already a firm belief that their workplace is changing. Asked to select their top three reasons for pursuing more education or training, the most prevalent answer (42%) was that they wanted to "keep pace with or get ahead of changes in my position." This beat out all other reasons, including advancement, opportunities at another organization and even earning more money at work.

## The Reasons Most Commonly Given for Pursuing Additional Education/Training

Respondents were asked to select their top three choices.



**The overwhelming majority (84%)** of respondents said the skills or degree earned through their employer helped to prepare them for the future of work. Among frontline and entry-level employees, the figure was nearly as high (81%).



# WORKERS (REALLY) VALUE LEARNING

---

Among respondents, **82% said their continued education, made possible by an employer's tuition reimbursement program, made them more effective employees.** Nearly as many – 78% – said they feel more fulfilled because of their employer's tuition reimbursement program.

And **more than six in ten workers (64%) said the support made them "happier at work."**

More than half (52%) said their employer's tuition reimbursement program is among the best benefits offered at work. Nearly one in five (19%) called it the best benefit offered.

Asked to rank the three non-traditional benefits that are most important – regardless of whether they're actually offered at work – employees ranked education benefits (65%) far above wellness benefits like gym memberships (17%).

More significantly, they ranked education benefits above workplace training (21%), paid family leave (25%), and even life or disability insurance (11%).

**Only retirement savings programs (80%) and paid sick or vacation time (70%) ranked more highly.**

Nearly half (49%) said they **would not have pursued education** if their employers did not offer tuition assistance.

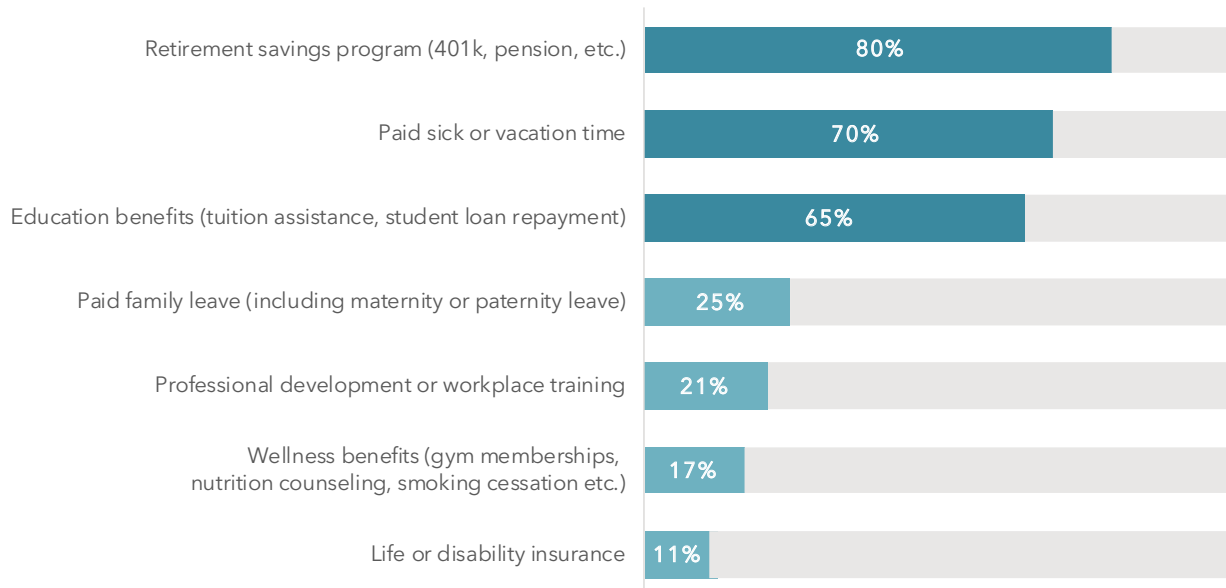
**Among parents, 70%** said their family has benefited as a result of the skills or degree they acquired while using their employer's tuition reimbursement program.

**Younger workers value the programs as well:** 41% of Gen Z employees believe their tuition reimbursement program is the single best benefit offered by their employer. **And 80% say it is among the top three voluntary benefits.**



# The Most Desired Voluntary Benefits Available to Employees

Respondents were asked to select their top three choices.



## RETENTION VALUE



**Three-quarters (76%)** of employees said a tuition reimbursement program would make them more likely to remain at their organization.



81% are more likely to recommend the organization because of tuition assistance. **88% of Gen Z respondents agree.**

# IMPACT OF STUDENT LOAN DEBT ON EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION

---

Education benefits are particularly important in encouraging financially risk-averse individuals to up-skill, the survey found.

Of individuals who do not have existing student loan debt, **nearly 60% said that their employer's education benefits led them to seek additional education** – and that they wouldn't have pursued their program without it.

These findings suggest that anxiety about the future of work – and an estimated \$1.5 billion in outstanding student debt – are driving demand for education benefits such as tuition reimbursement, up-skilling, and student loan repayment.



## MOUNTING COSTS (AND DEBT) LIMIT PARTICIPATION

---

For workers of all ages, keeping pace with or getting ahead of changes in a job – more so than increased earning potential – was the top reason to pursue education while working.

But financial concerns still remain; **about half of survey respondents reported having some student loan debt, and 49% were able to pursue education only because their employer offered tuition reimbursement.**





Survey respondents identified **“offering fully online classes and coursework”** as their most **important factor** when choosing a school program.



## PROGRAMS WITH GREATEST VALUE TO EMPLOYEES

---

Like automation, online learning is here to stay in the workplace. In fact, **4 out of 5 participants do some learning online**, and more than half (53%) are enrolled in coursework which is entirely online.

Online learning is more important for older workers: nearly half of Baby Boomers (48%) and Generation Xers (48%) said offering these classes was the most important factor. It is also key to working parents, nearly 48% of whom named this as the most important factor.

---

Likewise, workers see the value of accelerated degree paths: **55% reported that the “time commitment” was the biggest challenge they faced while pursuing a degree or certification** using their employer’s tuition assistance program. As such, many see the value of competency-based and self-paced learning options. These are often delivered online, which may be driving adoption of online programs.



While balancing school and work is a challenge, working learners manage that balance for less time than the typical student: **over half of respondents (57%) who earned a bachelor’s degree said they did so in less than four years – including 14% who completed it in under two years.**



This may be because these students are unlocking the value of prior credits, obtaining credits from on-the-job training, or finding other ways of translating their experiences into academic credentials, often through the help of education advisors provided through employer-sponsored tuition assistance programs.



## THE IMPACT FOR EMPLOYERS

---

Employers face huge challenges ahead as they struggle to keep workers agile – not to mention loyal – in an age when automation nips at their heels.

The Working Learner Index findings suggest that **workers' anxiety about the future of work is driving** – and will continue to drive – unprecedented interest in benefits such as **tuition reimbursement, up-skilling, and student loan repayment**. For the youngest members of the workforce, as the findings note, education and training now outrank paid/sick vacation leave and retirement benefits. More broadly, for millions who carry student debt, the data strongly suggest that an employer's education benefits could be the key factor in their seeking out additional education.

## Methodology

The Working Learner Index was an online survey, fielded July - August 2019. Respondents were U.S. employees who have participated in their employer's tuition assistance program within the past 2 years. 31,880 respondents participated. Data was weighted based on industry to reflect US market breakdown as reported by The Bureau of Labor Statistics.

## About Bright Horizons

Bright Horizons is trusted by families around the world to provide care and education for their children. Operating approximately 1,100 child care centers, Bright Horizons cares for approximately 120,000 children annually in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada and India. Used by more than 1,100 of the world's best employers across industries, Bright Horizons back-up child and elder care, tuition program management, education advising, and student loan repayment programs support employees through every life and career stage, and help people succeed at work and at home. For more information, go to [www.brighthorizons.com](http://www.brighthorizons.com).

---

1 Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Michelle Melton, Eric W. Price, Learning While Earning: The New Normal



**CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE**

617-673-8000 | [newsroom@brighthorizons.com](mailto:newsroom@brighthorizons.com)  
[brighthorizons.com](http://brighthorizons.com) | Follow us @BrightHorizons