

Reskilling: Radical or Realistic?

Insights from Middle-Skill Workers

The idea of “radical reskilling” has become increasingly popular in today’s digital and rapidly changing economy. As the country recovers from the pandemic, proposals abound to help displaced workers learn the emerging skills that many employers demand—in ways that will change their career paths entirely.

But do these new models actually align with the priorities – and aspirations – of workers themselves?

In spring 2021, Penn Foster conducted a survey of 1,000 middle-skill workers designed to better understand the opportunities – and challenges – that they anticipate as the economy recovers. We learned that the bold ideas that often seem to generate the most media coverage aren’t always the ones that resonate most with working learners—many of whom prioritize stability, on-the-job learning, and long-term potential.

1 Middle-skill jobs faced some challenges during the pandemic, but middle-skill workers remain optimistic about the future.

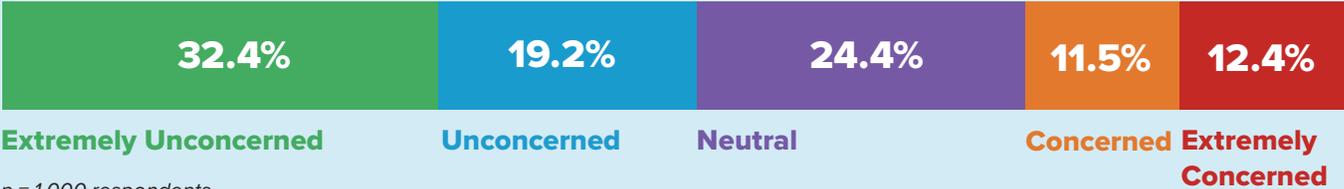
More middle-workers (more than 40%) have **lost wages due to COVID-19** than the **population as a whole**.

That said, a majority of respondents (nearly 60%) **haven’t experienced any wage loss** over the past year — suggesting that most middle-skill jobs have been resilient even amidst the pandemic.

In addition, most middle-skill workers are **unconcerned about losing their jobs** in the next 6 months.

Nearly half of middle-skill workers (47%) say they are extremely **unlikely to change jobs**. A majority (more than 60%) are either “unlikely” or “extremely unlikely.”

To what extent are you concerned about finding or keeping a job in the next 6 months?



n = 1,000 respondents

2 For workers who do want to change jobs, it's about both short- and long-term happiness.

Better pay is the most common reason respondents cite when asked why they might want to switch jobs.

If you were to switch jobs in the next 6 months, which of the following would be the most likely reason?



But respondents cite **long-term stability** as the most important part of choosing a new career, especially for those with only a high school diploma or some college.

If you were considering a new career, which of the following would be most important in choosing that career?



**High number of jobs available in that field 7.8%, Other 3.3%*

3 When it comes to changing jobs, middle-skill workers want an experience that's as frictionless as possible.

Most respondents in search of a new job are looking in the **field in which they already work**.

When it comes to training, more than half of respondents think **learning new skills on-the-job** is the most important thing they'd need after switching jobs (compared to getting a degree or certificate).

Respondents also report that they are **more likely to seek training online** versus in-person.

If you were to switch jobs, do you think you would need any of the following?



But they often face information and access gaps.

The **need for training** and the **cost of training** are the factors most likely to keep people from looking for new jobs.

Survey respondents report that they're **most likely to use Google** when figuring out how to get a new job.

Middle-skill workers also expect that any new job will require **job-specific skills** (40% of respondents) or **hard skills** (30%). Only one in five workers think they'd need to boost their soft skills to enter a new career — though research suggests that many employers in a range of industries **want soft skills**.

If you were to switch jobs in the next 6 months, which of the following would be the most likely reason?



*Other 7%

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

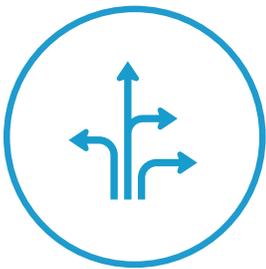


The majority of middle-skill workers report that they don't want to totally change occupations. And they don't want to start from scratch.

Rather, stability is a priority. That means workers look for incremental skills to help in a new role, they prioritize wages and long-term potential for advancement, and they want to learn new skills on the job or in the flow of work.

What does that mean for employers? Simply put, it's harder to bring new talent into your industry than it is to support and train the people you already have. To retain workers, provide a **clear path to long-term stability that includes on-the-job training**.

WHAT'S NEXT?



Building a more resilient workforce depends on squaring workers' aspirations – e.g., the desire for frictionless career pathways – with the needs for new skills and the accelerating pace of technological change.

That means designing training programs that meet those aspirations: job-aligned, available where and when learners need them, and designed to help workers progress along specific career pathways.

In short, reskilling doesn't need to be radical. It needs to be realistic.

METHODOLOGY

Penn Foster surveyed 1000 middle-skill workers, defined as individuals working in full-time positions that do not require a four-year college degree, in spring 2021.