



Clarity on Career Advancement: Transforming Optimism into Results

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Workers do not have clarity on opportunities for advancement in their current role.

– 2024 Career Optimism Index®

There is no clarity in the ownership for reskilling.

– Lalchandani, 2024b

Introduction

The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® was created to examine American – workers’ sense of optimism about their careers in the context of workplace, economic, and societal trends and challenges. It includes additional insights from employers to provide comparison between the workforce and those who hire, train, and retain them. The report was first conducted among workers in 2021; employers were added in 2022. Year-over-year tracking data for both audiences are included, where applicable.

The Index® provides a current snapshot of career optimism in the United States and the top 20 designated market areas (DMAs); fieldwork associated with the 20-minute online survey was conducted between December 5, 2023 – January 13, 2024 (inclusive of DMAs):

- 5,000 United States (U.S.) nationally representative adults, age 18+ who either currently work or wish to be working.
- 501 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.

The 2024 report reflects analysis of the workforce audience of 5,000 U.S. adults and includes year-over-year shifts for tracked questions. Throughout the report, there are several demographic and psychographic data call-outs to clarify differences between various types of workers among the broader audience. Advanced statistical analysis and econometric modeling to determine the bottom-line impacts of investing in career optimism for both workers and employers are

integrated into the report. To understand the value of their optimism, survey data were linked to third party data to model the financial benefits of increasing career optimism.

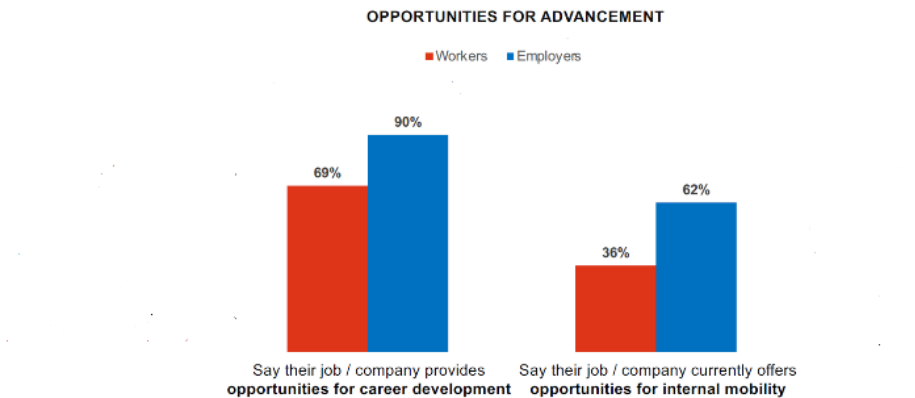
Connecting Clarity to Value

Although 90% of U.S. employers stated their company provides opportunities for career development, only 69% of American workers agreed (Index[®], 2024, slide 29). While 62% of U.S. employers indicated their company offers opportunities for internal mobility, only 38% of American workers concur (Index[®], 2024, slide 29). See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Workers Do Not Have Clarity on Opportunities for Advancement

WORKERS DO NOT HAVE CLARITY ON OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT IN THEIR CURRENT ROLE



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 29.

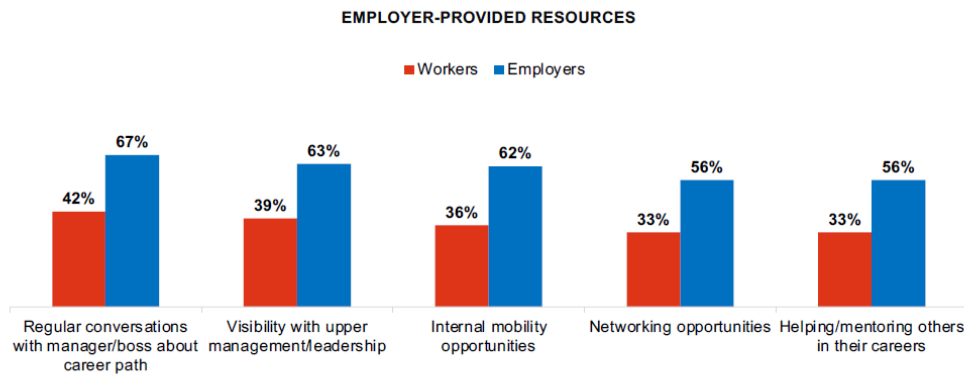
Although workers highly value career advancement opportunities, the majority of American workers indicated their employers do not provide career development resources. In contrast, between 56% and 67% of employer respondents validated employer-provided resources, including regular conversations about career path with

manager, visibility with upper management leadership, internal mobility opportunities, networking opportunities, and mentoring others in their careers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Large Gaps Between Worker and Employer Perceptions on Career Support

LARGE GAPS EXIST BETWEEN WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS WHEN IT COMES TO PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT SUPPORT



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 53.

Disparities between worker and employer perceptions on career development resources represent opportunities for improvement. Intangible investment, defined as reskilling and retraining human capital, can generate 80 percent more stakeholder value (Hazan, 2021; Lalchandani, 2024a). Leveraging clarity on career advancement and reskilling opportunities creates business value, accelerates growth, and builds competitive edge (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). This white paper describes actionable initiatives for organizations to transform optimism into results.

Context

The World Economic Forum (2023) estimated that 50% of all employees will need reskilling by 2025. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Skills

Outlook (2024) identified the following foundational digital transition skills:

- Information processing skills (e.g. literacy, numeracy and digital literacy)
- Socio-emotional and communication skills
- Metacognitive skills

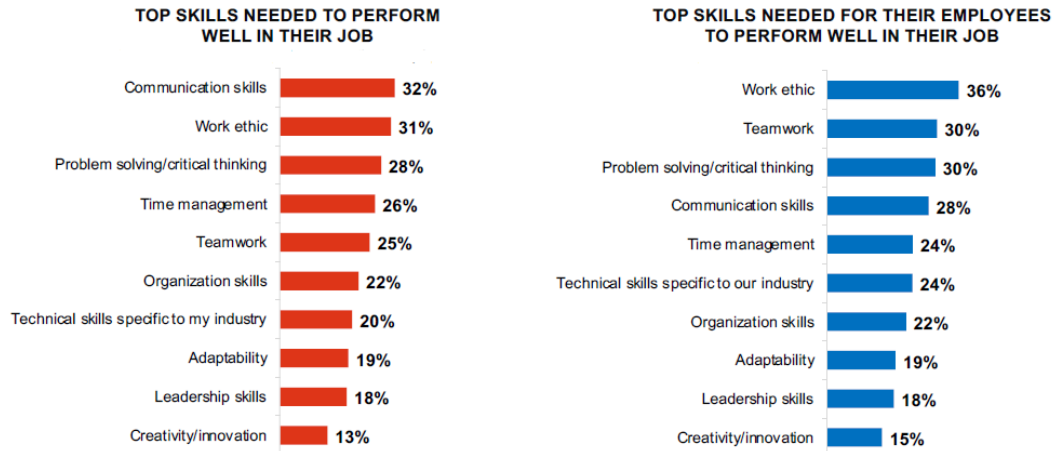
Both American workers and U.S. employers concur on the importance of the following 10 “soft skills” (see Figure 3), ranked by employers in the following order (Index[®], 2024, slide 34):

1. Work ethic
2. Teamwork
3. Problem solving/critical thinking
4. Communication skills
5. Time management
6. Technical skills specific to our industry
7. Organizational skills
8. Adaptability
9. Leadership skills
10. Creativity/innovation

Figure 3

Top Ten Soft Skills Need to Perform Well

WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS ALIKE ARE ALIGNED ON THE SOFT SKILLS NEEDED TO PERFORM WELL IN THEIR JOBS



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 34.

American workers embrace lifelong continuous learning, with 74% confirming the need to learn new skills to remain competitive, 66% recognizing the need to improve their skillset to advance, and 49% indicating the need to learn new skills to continue in their current job (Index®, 2024, slide 32). See Figure 4.

Figure 4

A Need to Continue Skilling to Support Career Advancement

**THEY SEE A NEED TO CONTINUE SKILLING THAT WILL SUPPORT
THEIR FUTURE CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

SKILLING

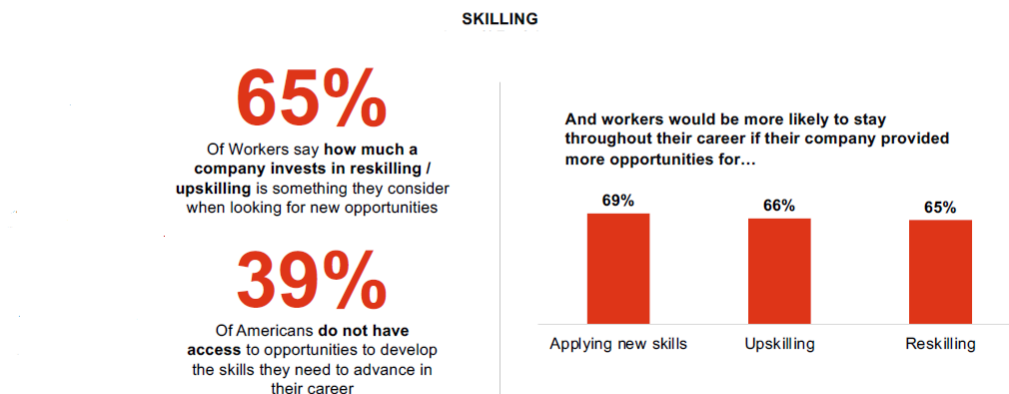


Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 32.

Employer investment in skilling is highly valued, with approximately 2/3 of American workers indicating they would be more likely to stay throughout their career if their employer provided more opportunities for applying new skills (69%), upskilling (66%), and reskilling (65%) opportunities (Index[®], 2024, slide 35). See Figure 5.

Figure 5

Employer Investment in Skilling

EMPLOYER INVESTMENT IN SKILLING IS HIGHLY VALUED AMONG WORKERS AND COULD INCREASE TALENT RETENTION


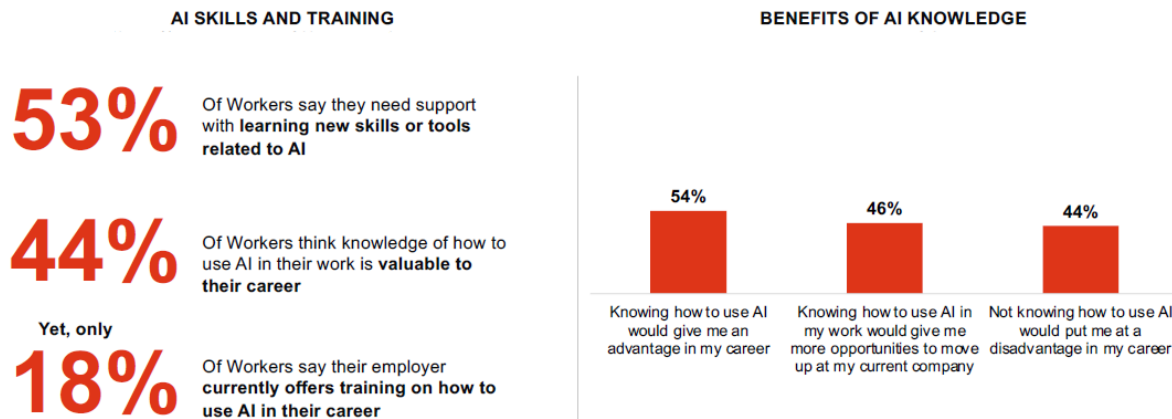
Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 35.

Workers enthusiastically endorse the value of learning how to use artificial intelligence (AI) in the context of their work environment with 54% reporting that understanding how to use AI would give them an advantage in their career (Index[®], 2024, slide 40). Yet, only 18% of workers indicated their employer currently offered career-related training on how to use AI (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Workers Feel Training on Using AI Would Help

WORKERS FEEL TRAINING ON USING AI WOULD HELP DRIVE THEIR CAREERS, BUT THEY ARE NOT RECEIVING THAT SUPPORT YET



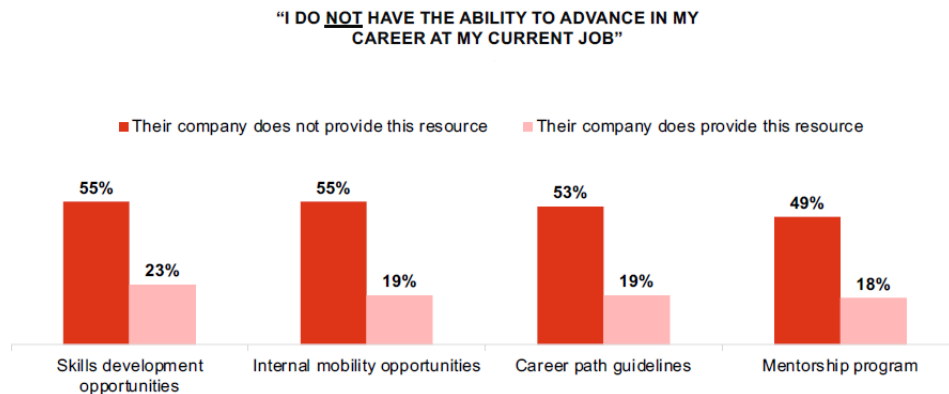
Note: Adapted from *The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers*, slide 40.

Over 50% of American workers described “feeling more stagnant” when they do not receive career support from their employers, in the form of skills development, internal mobility, career path guidance, and/or mentorship (Index®, 2024, slide 44). See Figure 7.

Figure 7

Workers Feel Stagnant When Do Not Receive Career Support from Their Employers

WORKERS FEEL MORE STAGNANT WHEN THEY DO NOT RECEIVE CAREER SUPPORT FROM THEIR EMPLOYERS



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 44.

Over 50% of Americans need support identifying job options that match their skills (53%) and setting career goals (51%), creating an exceptional opportunity for employers interested in igniting workers' engagement, commitment, and retention (Index[®], 2024, slide 52; Lyons & Bandura, 2024). See Figure 8. Again, this is good news as it represents an opportunity for employers to connect with internal talent receptive to advancing in their career at their current job. Organizations that adapt talent management strategies to sustain workforce competency through upskilling and reskilling initiatives leverage existing talent pool, enhance employee satisfaction and retention, and achieve cost savings by reducing reliance on external hiring (Kallidukkil & Jayaraj, 2024).

Figure 8

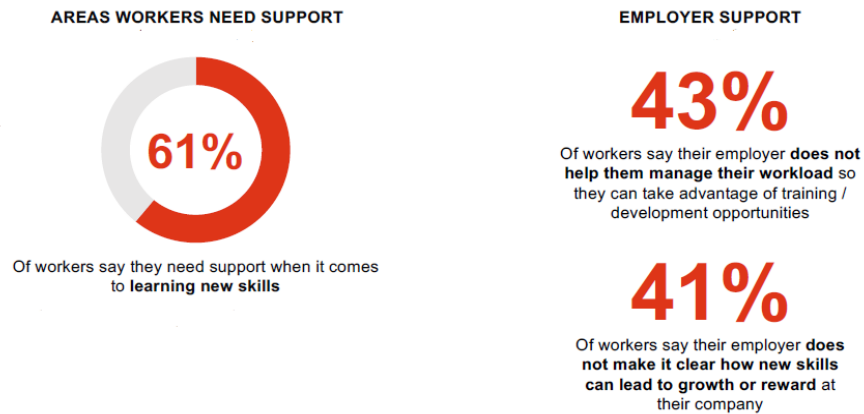
Many Americans Need Support with Setting Career Goals

MANY AMERICANS FEEL THEY NEED SUPPORT WITH FINDING THE PERFECT JOB AND SETTING CAREER GOALS



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 52.

In addition to seeking support with career decisions, 61% of American workers indicate they need support to learn new skills, with support defined as managing their workload so they can utilize training and development opportunities and clarifying how new skills can lead to growth or reward at their company (Index[®], 2024, slide 61). See Figure 9. In addition to managing workload, employers should explain the connection between learning specific new skills and their employees' career advancement.

Figure 9*Workers Need Support with Learning Skills***HOWEVER, WORKERS STILL NEED SUPPORT WITH LEARNING THE SKILLS THEY NEED**

Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 61.

Depending on context, strategies encompass on-the-job and case-based training (Sachan et al., 2024), complemented by basing upskilling and reskilling initiatives on the following factors (Kallidukkil & Jayaraj, 2024):

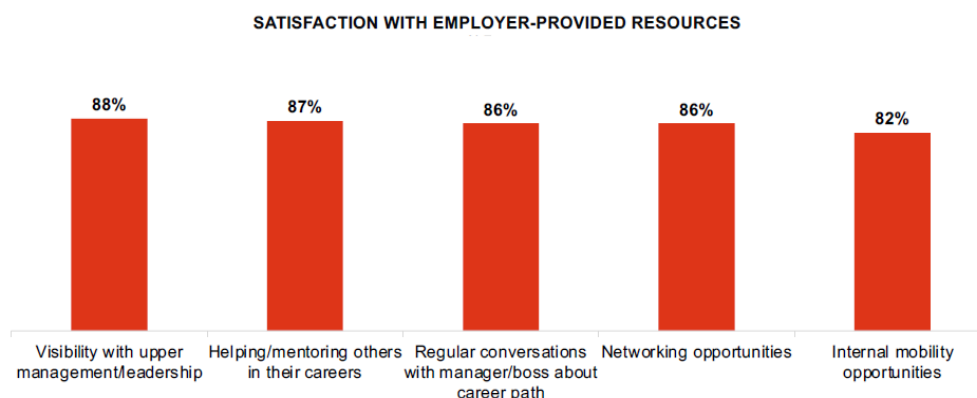
Rank	Factor
1	Leadership support and organizational culture
2	Changing job roles and requirements
3	Industry trends and market demand
4	Skills gap analysis
5	Employee development and retention
6	Business strategy and objectives
7	Technological advancements
8	Learning methodologies and resources

Evidence reflecting employee satisfaction with employer-provided resources further confirms American workers' inclination to stay throughout their career if their employer provided opportunities to apply new skills, upskill, and reskill (Index[®], 2024, slide 35). With 82-88% of workers "highly satisfied" with employer-provided resources, including visibility with upper management/leadership, helping/mentoring others in their careers, regular conversations with the manager/boss about their career path, networking opportunities, and internal mobility opportunities (Index[®], 2024, slide 55), the solution to employers' talent retention challenges is clear. See Figure 10.

Figure 10

Employee Satisfaction with Employer-Provided Resources

**WHEN EMPLOYEES ARE AWARE OF AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITIES,
THEY ARE HIGHLY SATISFIED WITH THEM**



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 55.

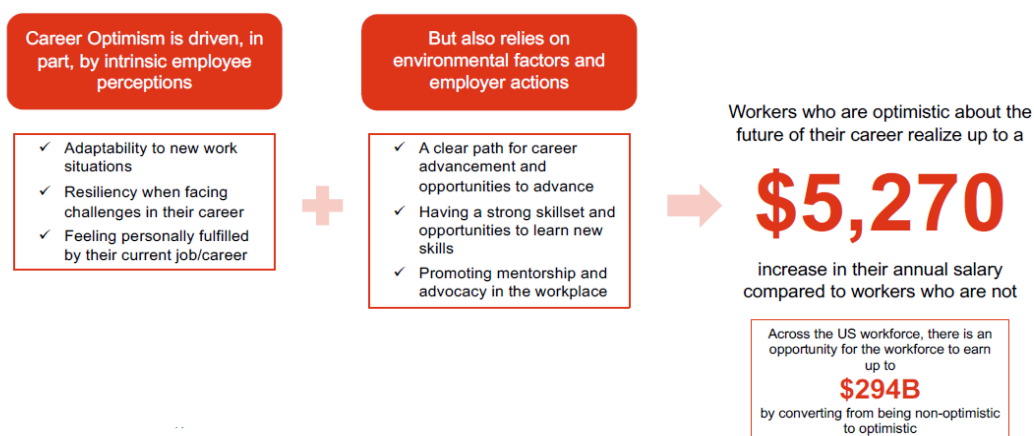
Employer action, defined as clarifying career advancement pathways, opportunities to learn new skills, and promoting mentorship and advocacy in the workplace, drives workers' career optimism and generates up to a \$5,270 annual salary increase (Index[®], 2024, slide 63). See Figure 11. Sociotechnical systems theory suggests a positive relationship between

productivity and human fulfillment, satisfaction and commitment. Strategic soft skill training contributes to individual and institutional performance (Chuang, 2024).

Figure 11

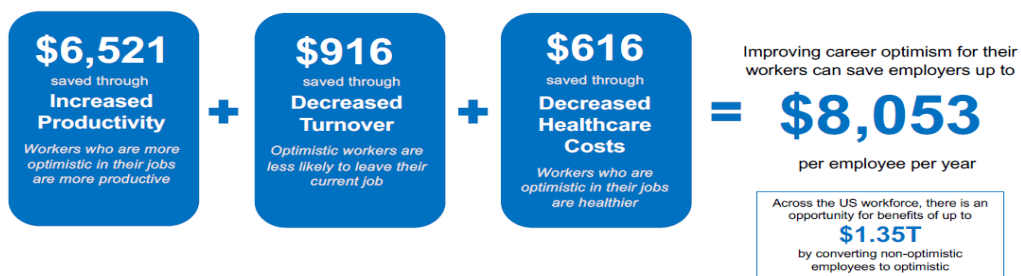
Employer Investment in Career Optimism Increases Workers' Annual Salary

WORKERS ARE ABLE TO INCREASE THEIR ANNUAL SALARY WHEN EMPLOYERS INVEST IN BOOSTING CAREER OPTIMISM



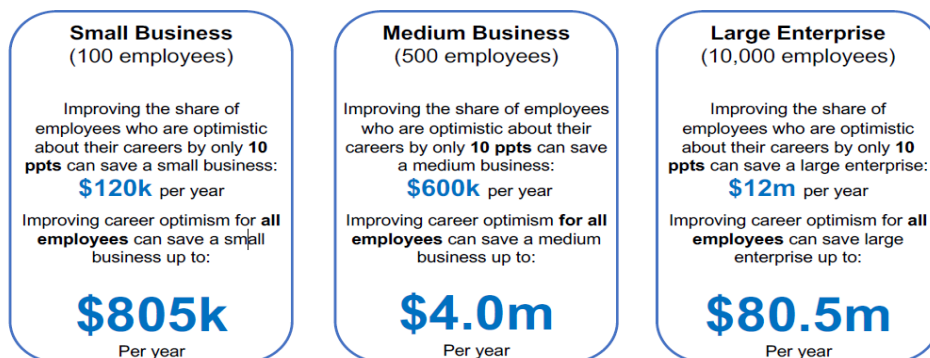
Note: Adapted from *The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers*, slide 63.

Reflecting on the power of people, Vittorio Cretella, Procter & Gamble's CIO, observed: "Invest in people — your teams, your peers, your bosses — because technology alone does not change things; people do" (Olavsrud, 2022).

Figure 12*Employer Investment in Career Optimism Benefits Their Bottom Line***WHEN EMPLOYERS INVEST IN CAREER OPTIMISM AMONG WORKERS, IT BENEFITS THEIR BOTTOM LINE IN MULTIPLE WAYS**

Note: Adapted from *The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers*, slide 64.

Building on the momentum of increased career optimism, consider how “deliberately developmental organizations” create “an everyone culture” through a simple equation: Better ME + Better YOU = Better US (Kegan & Lahey, 2016, p. 20). See Figure 13.

Figure 13*All Businesses Can Benefit***ALL BUSINESSES CAN BENEFIT FROM IMPROVING CAREER OPTIMISM**

Note: Adapted from *The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index® 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers*, slide 65.

Lack of Clarity

As technology transitions workers' experience from industrial to digital paradigms (George, 2024), the traditional psychological contract predicated on hard work and loyalty leading to career advancement has been superseded by metrics associated with competency, performance, flexibility, and results (Pillans, 2024; Van der Heijden, 2002). Ability to adjust rapidly to change and master new expertise promotes individuals' career sustainability, as depicted in the "dynamic process model of flexpertise" (Frie et al., 2024). Other researchers have focused on age diversity and generational issues, positing a PORTAL (Progression, Off-Loading, Relevance, Teachings, Advice, and Legacy) framework to optimize synergies between individuals at all career-stages (North, 2024).

Challenges associated with reskilling and upskilling include balancing training programs with evolving skills needs (Mahdia, 2024; Rangarajan & Rubasree, 2024), use of the non-linear best-worst method (BWM) and the Fuzzy BWM to discern the most effective training and development modules (Sachan et al., 2024), and leveraging AI to customize training for individual employee's interests and skill levels (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Literature reviews cited the importance of experiential learning pathways and use of upskilling to bridge the digital divide, advocating for inclusive and accessible learning opportunities; recommendations included adopting flexible learning models, fostering industry-academia partnerships, and emphasizing the development of both technical and soft skills (Ajayi & Udeh, 2024). Organizational benefits of upskilling and reskilling include utilizing existing human capital and reducing external recruitment and hiring costs, complemented by enhanced employee satisfaction, morale, and engagement (Kallidukkil & Jayaraj, 2024).

Consider the “five new paradigms” on reskilling delineated by Harvard Business Review’s team (Tamayo et al., 2023) as a first step in the process:

1. Reskilling is a strategic imperative
2. Reskilling is the responsibility of every leader and manager
3. Reskilling is a change-management initiative
4. Employees want to reskill—when it makes sense
5. Reskilling takes a village

Lack of clarity emerges as a recurring theme: “There is a lot of uncertainty surrounding what skills are needed, and how skills requirements will change, which reinforces the need for countries to form a perspective on what skills will be most in demand in the future” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024, p. 3).

The psychology of doing nothing and theory of career inaction provide a conceptual framework for understanding how “lack of clarity” paralyzes: “People are less likely to act sufficiently on a desired change in their career when the desired alternative is vague compared to when the desired alternative has been crystallized” (Verbruggen & DeVos, 2020, p. 382). When American workers “do not have clarity on opportunities for advancement in their current role” (Index[®], 2024, slide 29), they are less likely to act because the desired alternative is vague. When employers report “there is no clarity in the ownership for reskilling” (Lalchandani, 2024b, p. 76), they are less likely to act because the desired alternative is vague.

Clarity on career advancement is a win/win opportunity for workers and employers: 89-90% of American workers feel even more optimistic when their employer (Figure 14):

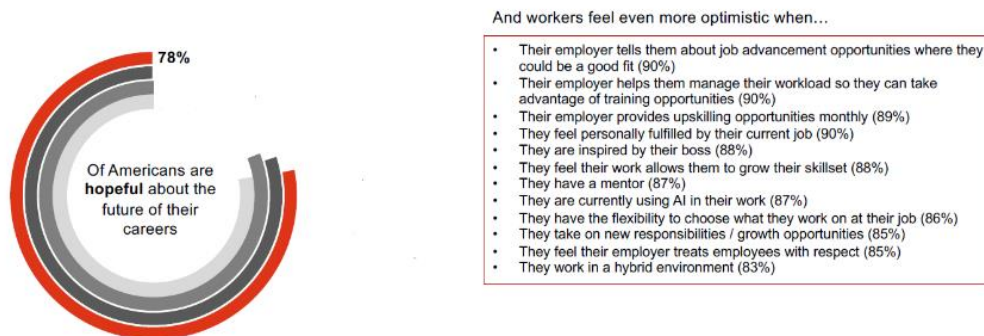
- Tells them about job advancement opportunities where they could be a good fit

- Helps them manage their workload so they can take advantage of training opportunities
- Provides upskilling opportunities monthly (Index[®], 2024, slide 46)

Figure 14

Workers Feel Even More Optimistic When

MANY AMERICANS REMAIN HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THEIR CAREERS



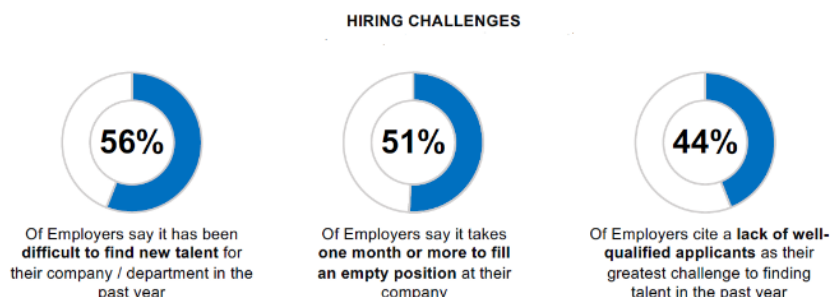
Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 46.

Employers continue to struggle to find the “perfect” candidate (see Figure 15):

Figure 15

Employers Struggle to Find “Perfect” Candidate

**YET, EMPLOYERS ARE STRUGGLING TO FIND THE “PERFECT”
CANDIDATE THAT FITS EVERYTHING THEY ARE LOOKING FOR**



Note: Adapted from The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index[®] 2024: Survey of U.S. Workers + Employers, slide 27.

The solution? Provide clarity on career advancement opportunities. By personalizing opportunities for workers to advance internally, employers have the opportunity to develop the dynamic talent they need from within monthly (Index[®], 2024, slide 10).

Actionable Strategies

What Employees Can Do

Communicate: Workers committed to career development and advancement can take the initiative by asking a supervisor or HR representative about organization-specific employer-provided career advancement resources. Since 90% of employers report their organization provides opportunities for advancement (Index[®], 2024, slide 29), such resources may exist.

Create a personal development plan, have career conversations with one’s supervisor(s), seek projects that will provide experiential “hands on” practice, request feedback on their performance, participate in multidisciplinary networks (Van der Heijden, 2002). Mahdia (2024, p. 523) observed:

Higher motivation and a commitment to learning can also lead employees to take personal responsibility for their own learning. With the abundance of resources available for self-directed learning, employees can take control and be proactive in their continuous development of expertise. This can be as simple as undertaking small learning tasks in their daily work, right through to taking leave to study full time. Self-directed learning is a key part of maintaining the knowledge worker and is crucial for the success of tertiary educated professionals in the ever more competitive job market.

What Employers Can Do

Communicate: Since 90% of employers report their organization provides opportunities for advancement (Index[®], 2024, slide 29) but only 69% of workers say their job offers opportunities for advancement, this is an opportunity for improvement in communication. Next, consider how to operationalize upskilling and reskilling processes. Asserting that “skills are the new currency,” Lalchandani (2024, p. 1) provides lucid and logical insights on how to clarify and optimize upskilling and reskilling:

If skills are not aligned with the broader purpose of the individual or if they are not immediately required for their current role, we will see dissonance. This is why when you invite employees for learning courses that are not related to their current or future role, you see resistance from employees to join, resulting in poor engagement.... Active learning through assignments and projects that are aligned with individual interests and have a key aspect of applying the skills is the most effective skill-building method. When people are clearer and more aware of why they are learning a skill and how it will help, they will create avenues to acquire the knowledge and skills, find opportunities to apply the skills, and seek feedback. This is the aspect that is missing from the majority of the

reskilling programs today. It takes time to develop skills; as I have mentioned earlier, it is a marathon, not a sprint.

To expedite skill development, employers could consider partnering with Generation, an independent nonprofit founded by McKinsey & Company in 2014, based on a survey of 150 employment programs across 15,000 employers, educators, and young people (Lalchandani, 2024b). As described in Generation's "About Us" section:

We transform education-to-employment systems to prepare, place, and support people into life-changing careers that would otherwise be inaccessible. We have a methodology that we can serve hundreds of thousands—and eventually millions—of people of all ages who are unemployed, underemployed, or need to learn new skills. Our program creates real business value for employers and lasting career impact for participants. (Generation, 2024)

Employers need to resolve two key challenges to reskilling (Lalchandani, 2024b, p. 70):

1. Skill-building interventions are not creating the right impact, as reflected in disengaged learners, lack of focus on future skills, and ineffective design.
2. It is unclear who owns the responsibility of skill building. In many organizations, there is no clarity in the ownership for reskilling.

The solution? Create a human-centered, sustainable, and scalable ecosystem approach to reskilling. Kegan and Lahey's (2016) deliberately developmental organizations are differentiated by building their culture to support development of all their people. In an "everyone culture," employees work on themselves and, in turn, helping others grow. Using the Next Jump organization as an example, their philosophy is Better ME + Better YOU = Better US, "reskilling

humanity” is their call to action, and “no firing policy” is one of their “reinvention of company culture and management culture” (Lalchandani, 2024b, p. 64; Charli.e., 2023; Next Jump, 2024).

What Educators Can Do

Effective pedagogy is foundational to promoting employability and adaptability of students and graduates, so defining what works is crucial. Higher education institutions need to integrate practical, skill-oriented courses that align with Industry 5.0 requirements into existing curricula (Sachan et al., 2024). Research on indispensable skills for human employees in the “Age of Robots and AI” identified the following exclusively “human skills” (Chuang, 2024):

- Problem-solving
- Judgment
- Sensorimotor
- Intuition
- Collaborating
- Relationship-building
- Creativity
- Social Sensitivity
- Physical flexibility

Using Chuang (2024) further validated the importance of creating a support system and a strong sense of belonging, as prerequisites to social sensitivity, collaboration skill development, and decision-making, citing 20th-century education policy:

Education must reverse its priorities; instead of training ‘human computers’ whose capacities for memorizing, analyzing and calculating are exceeded and largely made redundant by computers, we should concentrate on developing distinctively human skills:

manual, artistic, affective, interpersonal and moral skills and the ability to ask unexpected questions, to make sense of things and to reject nonsense even when it is logically coherent. (Bertrand, 1998, p. 165)

Consequently, pedagogy is transitioning from college readiness to career-readiness by emphasizing collaboration, communication, problem-solving, resilience, and critical thinking. Since employers value creativity, innovation, and critical thinking, educators are fostering these attributes (Marku, 2024). Education systems should synthesize technical proficiency with the adaptable, innovative, growth mindset compatible with continuous lifelong learning (Dweck, 2006; Marku, 2024).

As an example of a higher education institution creating a career-centric learning experience, consider the University of Phoenix digital badging initiative (see Figure 14):

Since 2021, the University has issued over 380,000 badges for single or combinations of skills obtained in select undergraduate, graduate, and professional development courses. The University wants students who are beginning their academic journey to have tangible evidence, feel empowered by their progress, and comfortable sharing those career-relevant skills early in their education journey. Students use their proprietary learner dashboard to track their skills and can claim any related digital badges using a University of Phoenix specific portal to the Credly platform, to display skills across multiple platforms including resumes, social media, and digital platforms, as proof of learning for potential employers, current employers, and colleagues. (Billings et al., 2023, p. 12).

Figure 14*Digital Badges*

Note: Adapted from *About Digital Badges* (University of Phoenix, 2024).

Insights from student surveys and focus groups garnered some of the following insights that have informed that development:

76% understood professional benefit

64% believe badging will help with advancing careers

68% worked harder in course because of the ability to earn a badge

75% believe it will be easier to communicate their skills to potential employer

73% are eager to start next course because of badges

81% have a strong desire to complete their program because of badges

27% want to share badge, but don't know how

11% won't share because no need for it in their current position (Billings et al., 2023, p.

13)

Conclusion

As presented in the 2024 Career Optimism Index, when U.S. employers clarify career advancement pathways and opportunities to learn new skills, American workers' career optimism and intention to stay soar. Satisfied workers who are willing to stay with their current employer are the solution to employers' talent management challenges. The next steps, defined as operationalizing reskilling and upskilling processes, can be achieved through partnerships and creating a human-centered, sustainable, and scalable ecosystem approach. This white paper contributes to the literature on leveraging career advancement to generate results.

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