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Express Employment Professionals
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“Blue collar workers have always been the backbone of the Canadian economy, and the COVID-19 pandemic provided a stark reminder for anyone who had forgotten that. These hard-working individuals keep the country running with leadership that has earned them renewed respect in the eyes of Canadians. And as the economy recovers, blue collar job prospects are more numerous and lucrative than at any time in recent history. Take blue collar workers’ word for it—now is the time to pursue one of these careers.”

– Bill Stoller, Chairman and CEO, Express Employment International



Blue Collar Canada

The COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent economic disruption, and recovery have led to big changes for Canada's blue collar workforce: they are more respected and appreciated, and even more in-demand than before the pandemic.

But what do blue collar workers themselves think about it all? Do they feel confident about their future, anxious about their safety, or uncertain about future technologies?

A new survey from The Harris Poll, commissioned by Express Employment Professionals, answers those questions and more, building on a similar 2018 survey¹ of blue collar workers, to paint a fuller picture of the blue collar workforce in Canada.

The findings are clear:

- Blue collar workers remain optimistic about the future.
- They feel more respected and appreciated than in the past.
- They are proud of the work they do, and the majority like the work they do.
- They encourage others to pursue similar careers.
- While they have concerns, the vast majority are not worried about losing their jobs or being replaced by automation.

Express Employment Professionals franchise owners—experts on their local economies—add their own insights to the survey findings. As they report, wages are soaring for blue collar workers, opportunities are abundant, and automation could actually create more jobs.

Welcome to Blue Collar Canada, where the future looks bright.

DEFINING “BLUE COLLAR”

For purposes of this paper, the definition of “blue collar workers” is the same as that used in the Express survey: employees who perform manual labour and work in agriculture, automotive services, construction, maintenance, manufacturing, transportation, or utilities.²

Other news sources, reports, and media accounts cited may rely on a slightly different definition or use the terms “working class” and “blue collar” interchangeably.

SURVEY DETAILS

The survey was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals between Sept. 28 and Oct. 13, 2021, among 2,065 Canadian adults ages 18+ who are employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed. Data were weighted where necessary by age, gender, education, region, household income, household size, and marital status to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. This sample of employees includes 191 blue collar workers that were weighted individually.



Changing Perceptions, Greater Appreciation

The COVID-19 pandemic put the spotlight on blue collar workers—the men and women who kept shelves stocked, continued making deliveries, produced essential products, and more.

In fact, when asked how views of blue collar jobs changed during the pandemic, many Canadian employees shared encouraging sentiments about essential work and skilled trades:

“I think people are now realizing how essential blue collar jobs are to both society as a whole and business.”

– Female, age 37, white collar

“People realize how absolutely necessary these jobs are and give the people doing them more respect.”

– Male, age 58, grey collar

“In many cases, blue collar jobs are on the frontline. I think/hope society recognized how critical they are and how easy it is to take them for granted.”

– Male, age 29, white collar

“With the increase of new builds in Canada, skilled trades are in such high demand that anyone with that knowledge is seen as an asset.”

– Female, age 39, white collar

“We now have opened our eyes to truly see how essential and valuable they are.”

– Male, age 58, white collar

Nevertheless, blue collar workers still face a long-standing stigma, as two-thirds say society generally looks down on blue collar workers (65%). To this point, blue collar workers are more likely than those in white collar roles to say workers in their field receive less respect than other fields (34% vs. 20%). But, nearly 3 in 5 blue collar workers in Canada (57%)—and 68% of white collar employees—agree having a blue collar job is respected more now than it was 10 years ago.

The historic time altered perceptions of their industries.

Two-thirds of blue collar workers

65%

believe the COVID-19 pandemic changed how people view blue collar jobs.

68%

of white collar workers agree with this sentiment.



“During the pandemic, Canadians quickly learned the complexity behind many products and services we often take for granted. People came to realize that conveniences are often available to us as the result of hard-working blue collar workers who made sacrifices. I think that the general public has a greater respect for blue collar jobs, having seen how quickly the slightest disruption can wreak havoc in our lives.”

– Shane DeCoste, Express franchise owner, Halifax, Nova Scotia



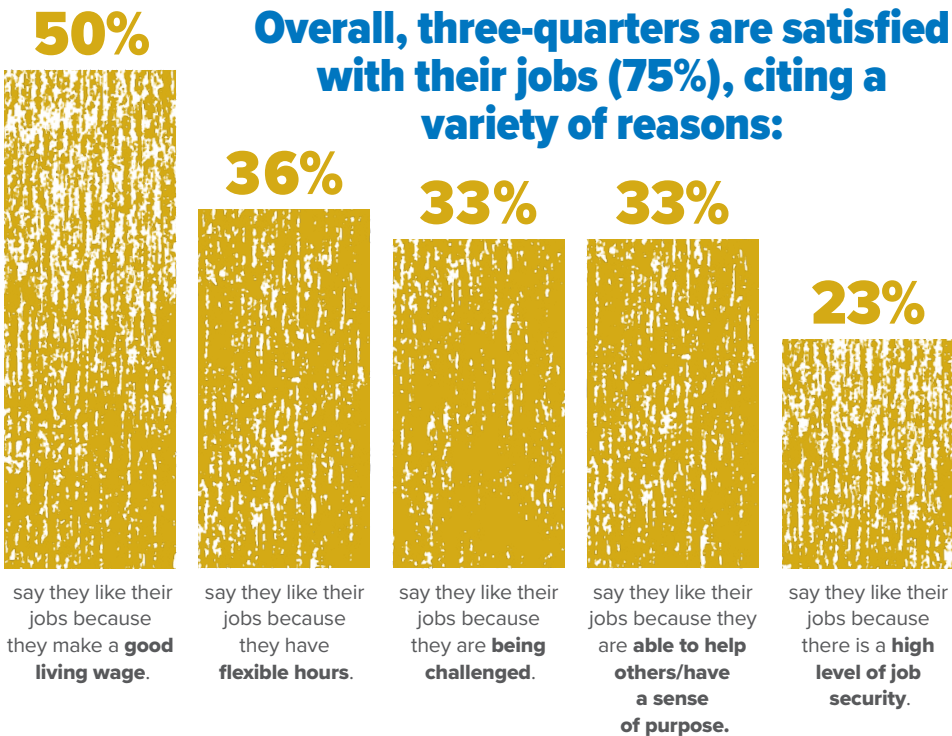
“Canadians have seen how integral blue collar workers are to our supply chain and recognize that, throughout the pandemic, they have continued to show up to work every day, without the opportunity to do their jobs from home.”

– Bruce Hein, Express franchise owner, Sarnia, Ontario

Meaningful Work

Regardless of how they feel others view them, the vast majority of blue collar workers (83%) say they are proud of the work they do. When asked to describe how they currently feel at their jobs, a large majority (78%) use positive words—such as confident (48%), knowledgeable (46%), and valued (42%).

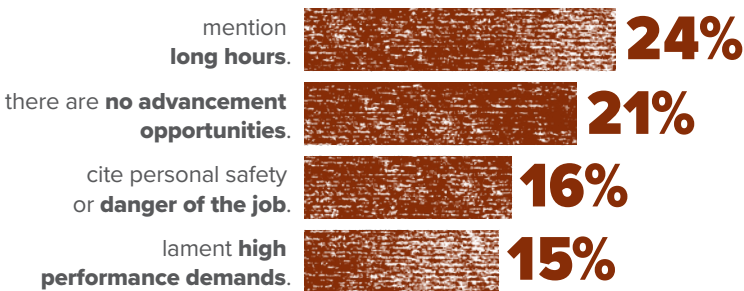
When it comes to getting a job, most blue collar workers (69%) say it's easy to find a job in their field currently and a third (33%) believe there will be more jobs available in their field in the next 10 years, up from 31% in 2018.



72% of white collar workers agree there is a good career in their line of work.

More than two-thirds of blue collar workers in Canada (68%) say there is a good career path in their line of work, the same percentage as the 2018 survey.

Although blue collar workers are generally positive about their work, some have concerns:



The pandemic may have made blue collar workers feel more appreciated, but it has also added new stresses and pressures to their jobs—especially as they feel the effects of a strained labour force.

Nearly two-thirds of blue collar workers (62%) say their work-life balance has been impacted by the current labour shortage. Close to one-third of blue collar workers (29%) say they have a heavier workload due to staff shortages.

Blue Seeing Green: A Hot Job Market

Employers are desperate for blue collar talent and, as a result, many blue collar workers are cashing in as companies compete for employees who are in short supply.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, several organizations were already sounding the alarm about the shortage of blue collar workers.³ It is a shortage that has persisted even after—and in some cases because of—the disruptions of the pandemic.⁴

According to the latest data from Statistics Canada, there were 874,700 vacant jobs at the beginning of November, up 72% (+366,100) compared with the fourth quarter of 2019. Blue collar industries have some of the highest number of job vacancies in the country. In transportation and warehousing, job vacancies reached an all-time high of 51,500 in November, while in construction there were 67,800 job vacancies in November, more than twice as many as in the fourth quarter of 2019.⁵

Labour shortages have resulted in increased wages in blue collar industries. A majority of blue collar workers surveyed (61%) received a pay increase in the past year, up from 55% in 2018. More than half (56%) believe they will receive a pay increase this year, up from 51% in 2018.

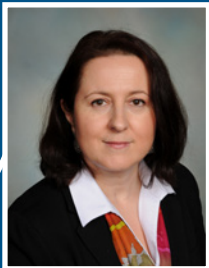
More than one-quarter (28%) of those who received an increase at their current job received one of 5% or more. In addition, 37% were given increased responsibilities, and 24% received a promotion in the past year.

According to Statistics Canada, construction trades helpers and labourers had the largest percent increase in pay in the third quarter of 2021, while jobs in the manufacturing sector, warehousing and transportation, among others, also experienced significant increases in wages.⁶



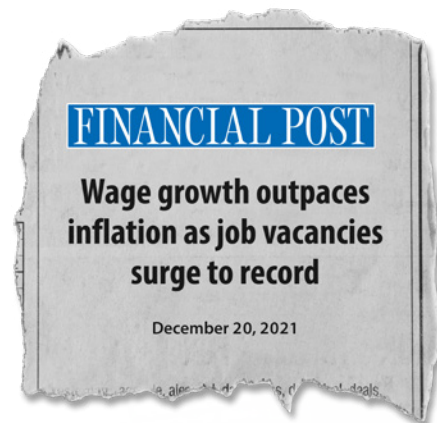
“Wages in the Halifax market have gradually increased as labour demands increased for blue collar workers, but more quickly in the last 6-8 months. We’re seeing increases of 7-10% in blue collar wages versus a year ago depending on the industry segment. We have seen some employers adding creative elements as benefits including increased vacation allocations, signing bonuses, and perks like transportation allowances.”

– Shane DeCoste, Express franchise owner, Halifax, Nova Scotia



“We have seen an increase in wages for blue collar workers due to the tight market conditions and the competition for talent. Companies that have not kept up with market wages have found it difficult to attract and retain talent.”

– Tash Damjanovic, Express franchise owner, Toronto and Woodbridge, Ontario



“Jobs vacancies surged to a record in the third quarter, and wage growth exceeded inflation in about half of the occupations that Statistics Canada tracks.”

TORONTO STAR

December 7, 2021

Canadian workers see hottest wage growth in years, with pay for new employees soaring 10% in 24 months

Total Number of Job Vacancies



508,590 912,580

Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0356-01 Job vacancies and average offered hourly wage by occupation (broad occupational category), quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035601>

Express Franchise Owners on the Blue Collar Job Market



“We have seen demand for blue collar jobs far outpace available supply. Companies are having to compete for workers in this segment, and those with lengthy hiring processes are losing out. We have been able to place most blue collar workers within just a few days in this market.”

– **Tash Damjanovic**,
Express franchise owner,
Toronto and Woodbridge, Ontario



“Demand for blue collar workers has increased, mainly due to increased demand in the industries they work in. Some industries that blue collar workers support have demand far outpacing pre-pandemic levels so even more staff is required to deliver on client deadlines.”

– **Shane DeCoste**,
Express franchise owner,
Halifax, Nova Scotia



“There was high demand for blue collar workers before the pandemic and there is high demand now. The demand will continue to rise the longer we go where businesses are unable to meet their current or growth needs.”

– **Brent Pollington**,
Express franchise owner,
Vancouver, British Columbia



“Due to COVID-19 and people leaving the workforce, there most certainly is a need to fill a large number of blue collar positions, which remains challenging.”

– **Bruce Hein**,
Express franchise owner,
Sarnia, Ontario

It's not just wages that are increasing in blue collar industries, so are training opportunities. As job vacancies increase, more employers are willing to provide training to prospective employees who may not yet have quite the right skills. This makes these jobs even more attractive, particularly for those who don't currently possess a specialized degree or certification, because they can land no-cost training and a quality job with good pay at the same time.

According to Shane DeCoste, Express franchise owner in Halifax, Nova Scotia: “Employers are more willing to train than ever before. The shortage of qualified talent has forced employers to become nimble at training and developing core staff in house, on the job, and often through investment in formal training.”

But Bruce Hein, Express franchise owner in Halifax, Nova Scotia, says that while more companies are providing training, many still haven't realized the benefits yet: “More companies are looking to train and bring in apprentices to meet today's and tomorrow's demand, however there are more employers who should consider providing training opportunities to ensure they aren't missing out on good employees and that their positions aren't sitting vacant any longer than necessary.”

Outlook: Career and Country

Looking beyond the present moment, the majority of blue collar workers are positive about the future, although the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns have disrupted their jobs and impacted some of their positive outlook. Two thirds of blue collar workers (64%) express optimism about the future, though that is down from 2018 (76%).

64% of blue collar workers express optimism about the future

Most still say they can make ends meet (75% in 2021 and 77% in 2018), remain confident that they will be able to reach their lifestyle goals (64% and 72%, respectively), and are satisfied with the lifestyle that they have (59% and 58%, respectively).

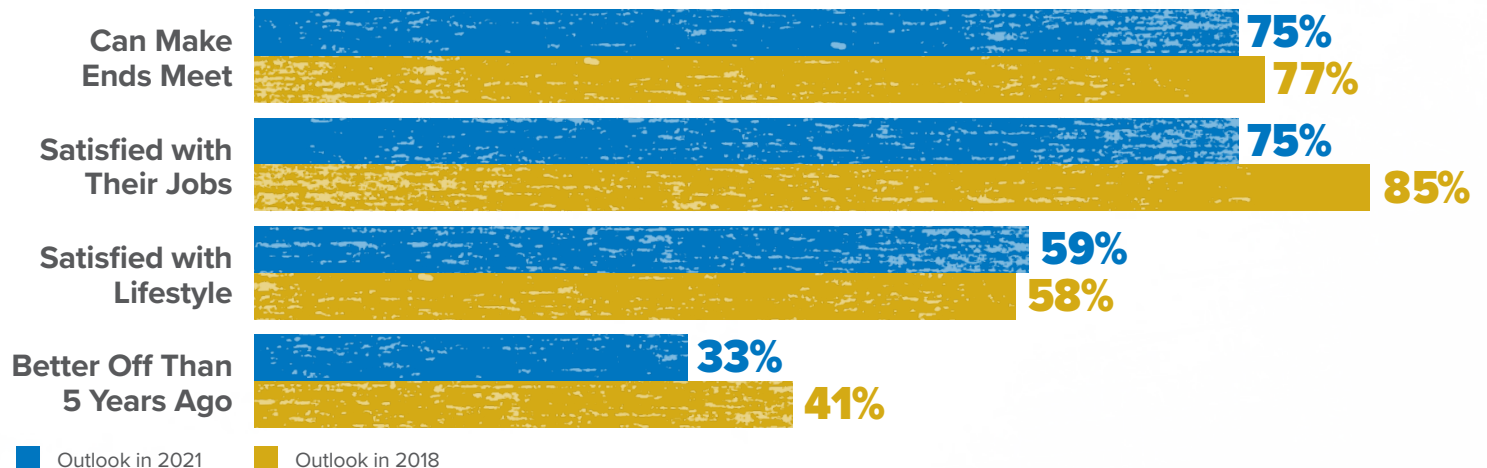
Despite some dampening of their optimism, few blue collar workers are worried about losing their job in the future (only 12%).

One-third say they are better off now than they were five years ago (33%), compared to 41% in 2018, a notable finding considering the effects of the pandemic. Indeed, the vast majority (75%) are satisfied with their jobs.

75% are satisfied with their jobs

The one issue that does seem to be a big concern for blue collar workers is retirement, with 71% of blue collar workers saying they are worried about saving enough for their retirement. Fortunately, the proportion of blue collar workers who say they are putting money aside for retirement has increased (45% in 2021 and 31% in 2018).

Blue Collar Workers: Outlook in 2021 compared to 2018



Who's Doing What

On average, Canadian blue collar workers have been working for 24 years and have spent 10 years in their current jobs. They work on average 40 hours per week, with 12% working 50 or more hours per week.

**AVERAGE
40 HOURS
PER WEEK**



Avg. career length



Avg. current job tenure



say using technology is a significant part of the job



are members of a labour union



75% are paid hourly

What's the biggest misconception about blue collar jobs?



“That most blue collar positions are low paying, which is certainly not true. Depending on the role, blue collar jobs can often pay more than white collar positions.”

– **Bruce Hein**,
Express franchise owner,
Sarnia, Ontario



“In not fully understanding blue collar opportunities, people sometimes look down on these jobs. It's time for all Canadians to realize blue collar jobs are filled with great job security and growth opportunity.”

– **Brent Pollington**,
Express franchise owner,
Vancouver, British Columbia



“The biggest misconception about blue collar jobs is that there is little upward career mobility. Since there is a shortage of skilled workers, companies are spending more time and money investing in training staff, which can open up excellent career opportunities.”

– **Tash Damjanovic**,
Express franchise owner,
Toronto and Woodbridge, Ontario



“The required amount of knowledge, training in, and use of technology and innovation is not something most people are aware of when it comes to the skills necessary for blue collar jobs.”

– **Jessica Culo**,
Express franchise owner,
Edmonton, Alberta



Automation and the Future of Blue Collar Work

Just as there are misconceptions about the state of blue collar workers today, there are misconceptions about what the future for blue collar work will look like.

Contrary to those who discount the long-term opportunities in the field, nearly three-quarters (68%) of blue collar workers believe there is a good career path in their line of work, and 72% believe more young adults should pursue careers in their field.

Nevertheless, 71% say they wish they had more exposure to the world of work when they were in school, and 71% say they would've had more opportunities available to them if they had gone to college/university.

More than 1 in 3 (33%) believe there will be more jobs available in their field in the next 10 years, up from 2018 (31%). Just 23% believe there will be fewer jobs available.

One commonly heard view about blue collar careers is that they will be displaced by increased automation, but that is hardly a concern among blue collar workers. Only 12% worry about losing their jobs in the near future, and just 7% are concerned about being replaced by automation.

Automation will certainly create change, but it won't erase the need for blue collar talent. In fact, it presents an opportunity that could result in the creation of more jobs in some blue collar industries.



“While it is inevitable that some blue collar jobs will be impacted by automation, I don’t see it as a major cause for concern. It’s unlikely that jobs in the trades, such as a plumber, electrician, or mechanic, will be fully replaced by automation any time soon. And where automation does take on a bigger role, we will need blue collar workers to build, maintain, and repair this equipment.”

– Bruce Hein, Express franchise owner, Sarnia, Ontario



“This sector is poised for a transformation with the use of technology. Automation is going to help companies and employees in blue collar industries be more productive, which will lead to increased job satisfaction and will also create new job opportunities that will be more aligned with what the workforce wants to do, and expects to do, coming out of high school or post-secondary. I predict in the long-run, this will have a positive impact on retention.”

– Jessica Culo, Express franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta



“Automation will eventually impact most jobs that exist today and will create a need for roles we haven’t seen yet. But basic digital literacy is already important in the blue collar jobs that exist today, as we are seeing that even many entry level roles require the use of some form of technology, be it a hand held digital tool, or a digital interface.”

– Tash Damjanovic, Express franchise owner, Toronto and Woodbridge, Ontario

The Path Ahead

The pandemic has led many to rethink what blue collar work means for the country and the career opportunities it presents. But too many are still quick to dismiss these jobs and the people who do them.

So much of what was true in 2018 when Express released its first report on the State of Blue Collar Canada remains true today:

Blue collar jobs are some of the most in-demand, unfilled positions right now. Economic growth will depend on the country's ability to fill those jobs, which in turn, could depend on whether people view them as good opportunities.

If society perpetuates negative attitudes about blue collar work, people of all generations will be less likely to pursue those jobs. That would mean essential services could be harder to come by as jobs go unfilled. It could also mean that young people will miss out on good job opportunities and instead take on significant debt on the assumption that a white collar job requiring a college degree is only the way forward.

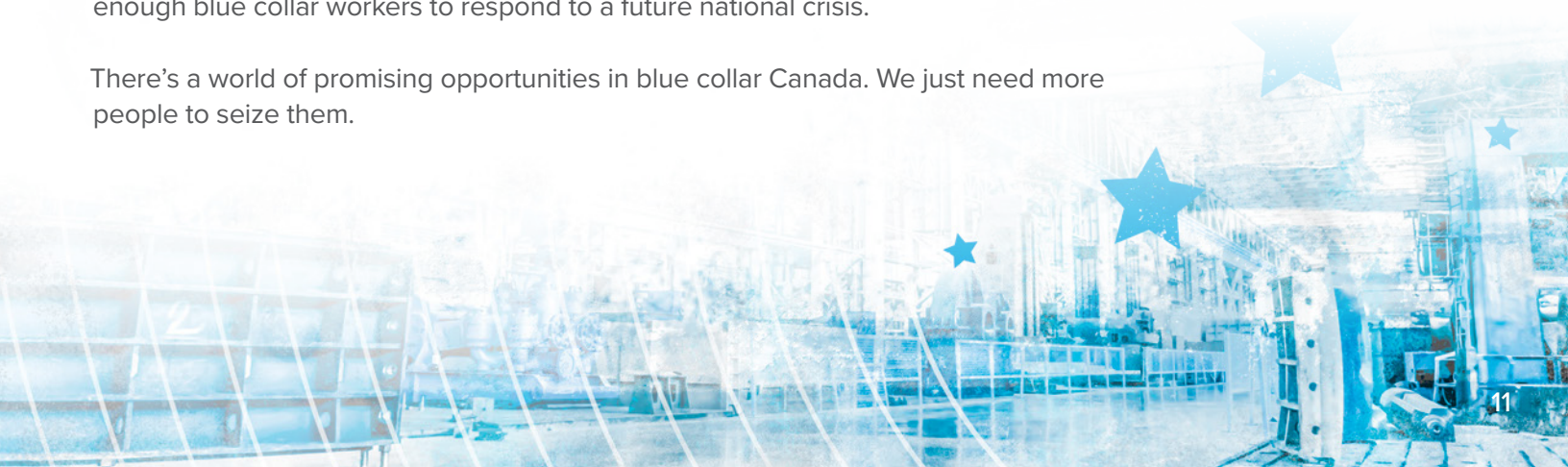


“If we’re going to get more young people interested in the trades and other blue collar jobs, it starts at the school level. While government policy makers seem to be heading in the right direction around promoting blue collar careers, students need to be aware of these highly in-demand careers, as well as the earning potential. Instead of taking on a mountain of student debt at a university, students can spend far less time and money learning a trade, for example, with a number of these jobs offering strong income potential to workers at a young age, when many of their peers are graduating university in debt and in need of a job.”

– Bruce Hein, Express franchise owner, Sarnia, Ontario

The pandemic has proven just how essential Canada’s blue collar workers truly are. But if attitudes and education systems do not change, the day may come when there are not enough blue collar workers to respond to a future national crisis.

There’s a world of promising opportunities in blue collar Canada. We just need more people to seize them.



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