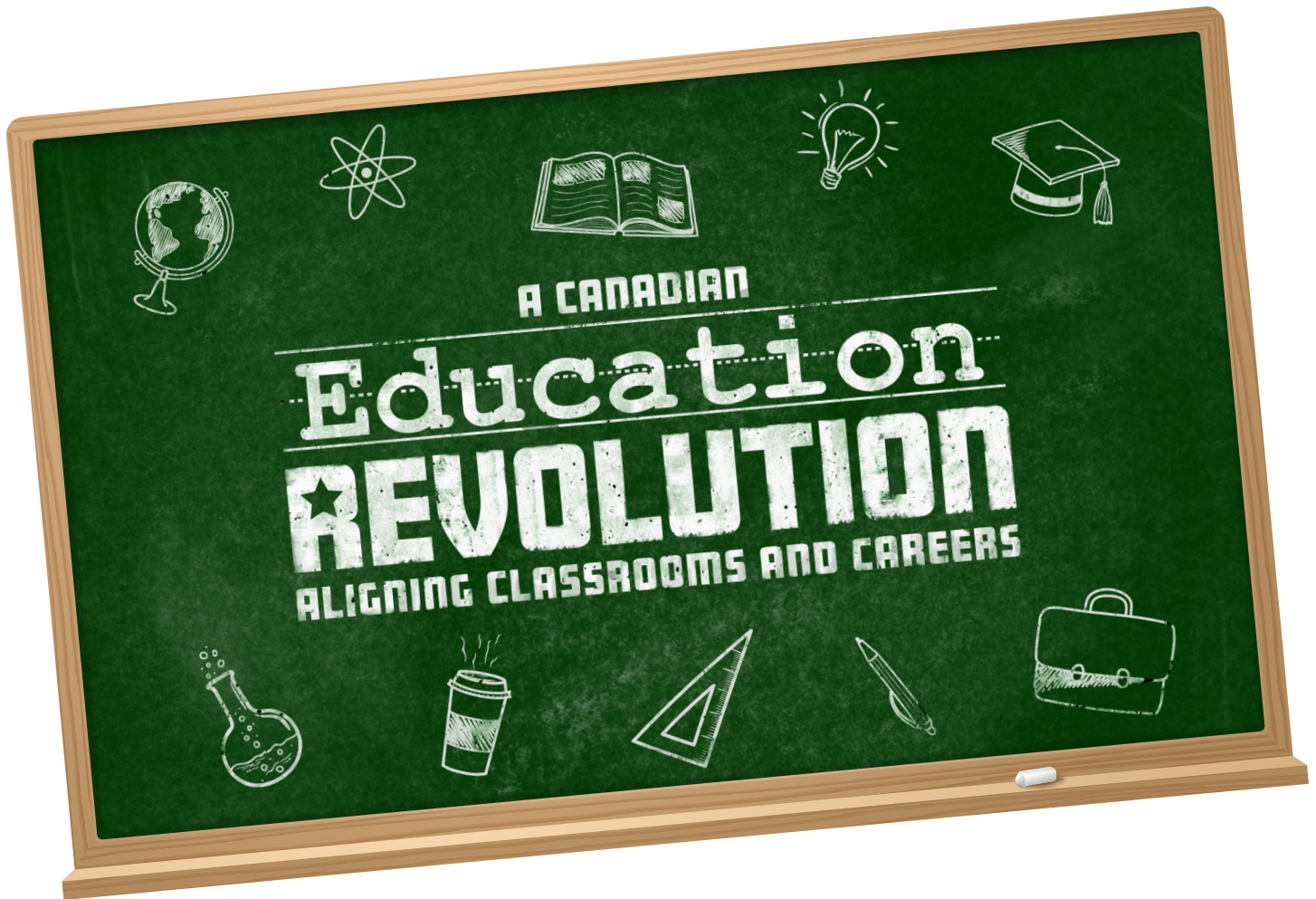




Respecting People. Impacting Business.™



How the System Fails to Prepare Workers—and What Needs to Change

*An Express Employment Professionals White Paper*

*August 2020*

[ExpressPros.com](https://www.expresspros.com)



**"With an eye on the future, it's time for educators, businesses and policymakers to come to the table and discuss where gaps exist in education and how to collaborate to bridge them. We recognize that teachers and professors do the best they can with the resources they are given, and we want to make sure their efforts are not in vain."**

**— Bill Stoller,  
CEO,**

***Express Employment Professionals***



## **A CANADIAN EMPLOYMENT SURVEY**

A national survey was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals between Dec. 5 and Dec. 30, 2019, among 630 Canadian employees (defined as adults ages 18+ in Canada who are employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed and have at least a high school degree). It offers a detailed, in-depth look at education and how it translates into the workplace. Figures are weighted where necessary by age by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, income, marital status, employment, household size, and propensity to be online to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. No estimate or theoretical sampling error can be calculated, a full methodology is available upon request.

# EDUCATION REVOLUTION: ALIGNING CLASSROOMS AND CAREERS

The education system does not work—at least not well enough for Canada’s workers. The gap between what students are taught and what they need to know when they enter the workplace continues to grow, leading to frustrated job seekers and employers.

We cannot expect that everything taught in high school or college/university will be useful in every workplace. The economy is too diverse for that. But shouldn’t schools cover some of the core competencies needed for virtually any successful career?

Canadians think so. In fact, employees believe it’s time for a radical change—going so far as to endorse an “education revolution.”

According to the nationwide survey fielded by The Harris Poll for Express Employment Professionals, 9 in 10 employees (89%) agree a whole new approach to education, skills training and learning—an “education revolution”—is needed to prepare people for the workforce. And 33% “strongly agree” with that sentiment. Canadian workers are eager for something better.

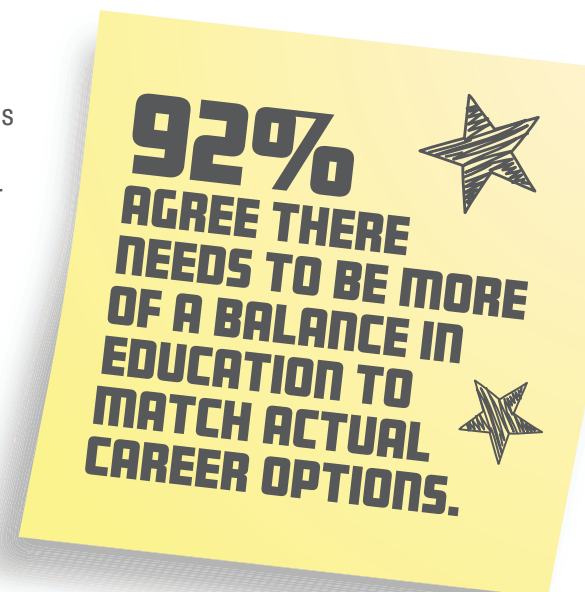
It is easy to see the reason why. This disconnect between what’s taught in the classroom and what’s needed has real life consequences. It restricts people’s ability to earn a living. It makes work frustrating and hiring difficult. It is therefore a drag on the Canadian economy.

Canadian workers already face numerous barriers to finding and keeping a job, especially those who have been on the sidelines of the labour force.<sup>1</sup> Revolutionizing the education system could help change this.

The key challenges survey respondents identify include:

1. The gap between skills needed and skills taught
2. The lack of work study or earn-and-learn opportunities
3. The cost and utility of university/college and higher education

Regardless of whether government policy changes are made to address these concerns, it is critical for everyone—employers, educators, policymakers and more—to have a clearer understanding of employees’ relationship with and perspectives on the education system, as well as what each can do to in response.



## THE PANDEMIC EFFECT

The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted our economy but also our education system. Nearly every parent in Canada was asked to become a homeschooler overnight, facilitating virtual education or taking on the responsibilities of teaching. College and university students left for spring break only to end up finishing their spring semesters at home. The entire country has been exposed to new models of learning and teaching, helping us to identify the most essential parts of the education system and to rethink old models of learning.

Some students are unable to return to physical classrooms in fall 2020, and many displaced workers are looking to learn new skills or take on coursework to begin a new career. Some parents will feel uncomfortable sending their children back to school and may homeschool by choice, while university and college students may explore distance learning opportunities more readily.

With so much rapid change underway, we should keep in mind what was not working with the education before the pandemic—when too many students entered the workforce unprepared for the jobs available to them. This unwanted disruption is a challenge but also an opportunity to refocus curriculum on what Canadians say matters for their careers.

## THE RECESSION EFFECT

The 2020 recession, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, suddenly and dramatically reshaped the Canadian economy.<sup>2</sup>

Millions of Canadians have been forced to look for new jobs, often times far outside their previous industries. There will be long-term economic damage as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic as the country charts a “prolonged and bumpy” course to recovery.<sup>3</sup> This will lead some Canadians to pursue new education and training opportunities. Above all, it is a reminder that our goal should be an education system that helps workers navigate disruption and adapt to new circumstances and industries.

## CANADA UNEMPLOYMENT RATE 1976-2020<sup>4</sup>



Source(s): Table 14-10-0287-01 (formerly CANSIM table 282-0087).



# THE PROBLEM: SKILLS DISCONNECT

In the Express–Harris Poll survey, nearly 90% endorsed the idea of an “education revolution.” This need for change is a view shared by Canadian workers of all ages.<sup>5</sup>



One reason for this view may be the disconnect between the knowledge and skills taught in school and those needed in the workplace. Four out of five (80%) say that schools are not preparing students with the skills they need to be successful in the workplace, and 82% also say that the education system has failed to evolve to meet the needs of the modern workforce.



**“People need to get educated both on the job and in the classroom... get your foot in the door with a great company and show them you can take on more and demonstrate the behaviors a company would want to see in an ideal employee.”**

— Brent Pollington,  
Express franchise owner,  
Vancouver, British Columbia

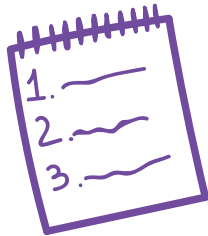


**“Employers have increasingly relied on on-the-job-training, not because it is the ideal approach, but because it is the only feasible approach. Companies are picking up the slack for the schools.”**

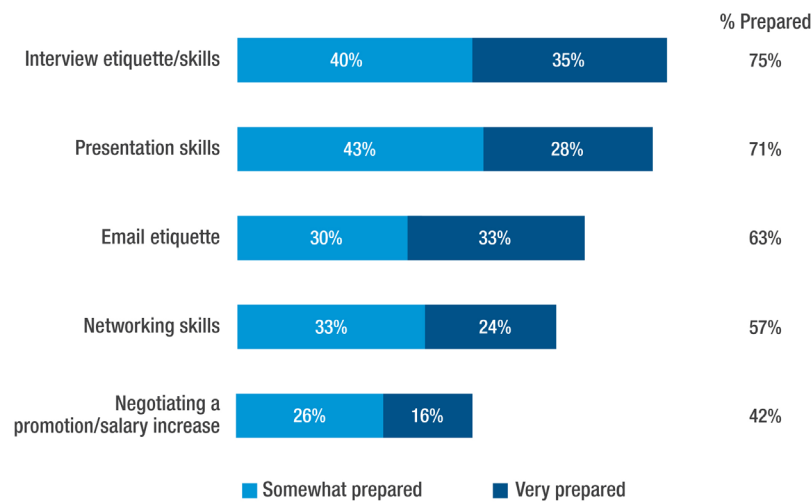
— Bill Stoller,  
CEO,  
Express Employment Professionals

# ONLY PARTLY PREPARED

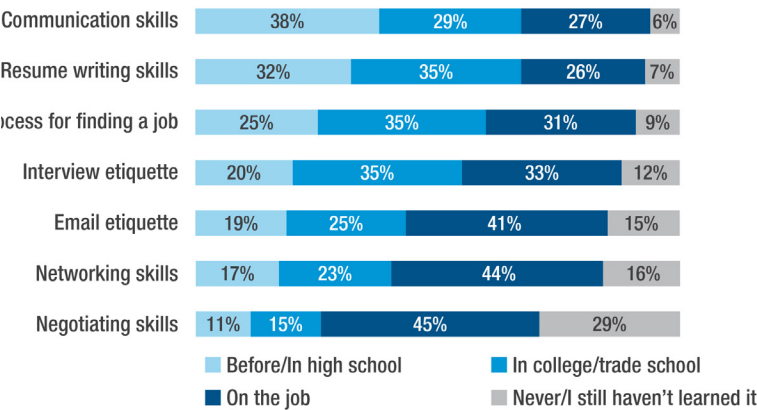
After entering the workforce following their highest level of education, the majority of Canadian workers say they felt prepared for various facets of work, but only 2 in 5 (18%) of Canadians said they felt very prepared.



Feelings of Preparation to Handle Aspects of Work



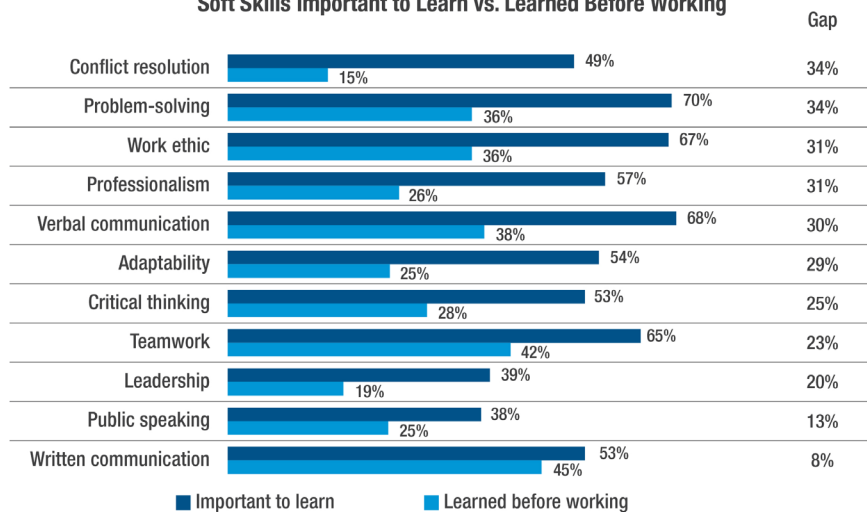
When Skills Were First Learned



Canadian workers identify many soft skills as being “important to learn,” but for each one included in the survey, the number of respondents identifying a skill as “important” exceeds the number who said they learned the skill before working.

Only about 1-in-3 report learning several important skills before or in high school, but many say they learned them while on the job or admit they have yet to learn them.

Soft Skills Important to Learn vs. Learned Before Working



Employees wish things were different. About half wish their high schools would have taught networking skills (48%) or offered interviewing tips or practice sessions (55%). In addition, 59% wish their high schools would have taught them how to handle real-life workplace situations like disagreements with colleagues.

**“On top of the required hard skills, being flexible and versatile with good communication skills will be necessary for the foreseeable future...The world of work continues to change, and companies need a workforce that can adapt.”**

— Bruce Hein,  
Express franchise owner,  
Sarnia, Ontario



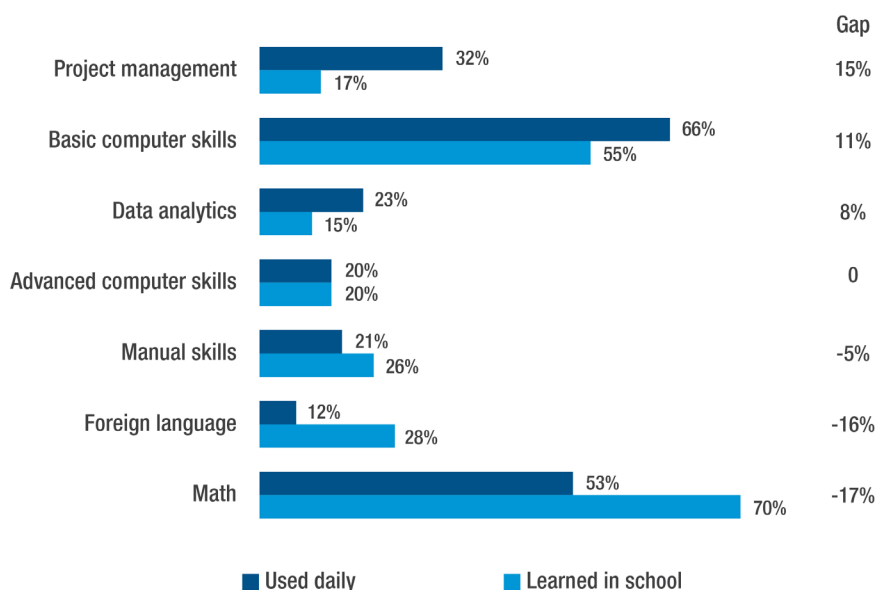
**“The obvious skills to learn are computer skills but specifically online collaboration tools. The other skills are soft skills. With technology and working remotely, people forget there is a human on the other side.”**

— Niven Lee,  
Express franchise owner,  
Delta, British Columbia



For hard skills, the story is a little different, but there’s still a mismatch—with the exception of basic computer skills—between hard skills that employees say are “used daily” versus the skills they say they “learned in school.”

**Hard Skills Used Daily vs. Learned in School**



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Similarly, employees say basic economic skills like budgeting and managing finances are missing in schools—with 61% saying they wish their high school would have taught money management. One-third say they did not learn personal finances until they were on the job.

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## EARNING AND LEARNING: COMBINING EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Eighty-seven per cent of workers believe degrees should require on-the-job experience, not just coursework, yet close to half, 45%, say they did not participate in any work experience programs—such as internships, shadowing, apprenticeships, co-op placements—while in school.

Among those who did take part in a work experience program while in school, most (83%) say it prepared them for the workforce.

### University vs. Vocational Training

Eighty-two per cent of employees agree that universities place more emphasis on grades than actually preparing workers for a job. Eighty-five per cent say job training certifications do a better job of preparing people for the workforce than university does.



In other words, on-the-job learning shouldn't make up for the education system, it should become a more central part of the education system. And indeed, 89% of Canadian employees wish that they had more exposure to the world of work while they were in school.

**"The education system should prioritize consultation with businesses to ensure students are learning skills that can lead to good jobs. Whether it is gaining feedback from employers on curriculum or partnering with organizations for internships and co-ops, businesses have invaluable guidance to share for preparing the future workforce."**

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





# UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE CONUNDRUM: ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

Frustrations over the skills disconnect are compounded by the fact that postsecondary education—even an inadequate education—can be extraordinarily expensive. Less than two-thirds (64%) of workers say a four-year university degree is the best avenue for career success.

Yet more and more, Canadians are loading themselves up with student debt in hopes of getting the best education possible—only to find that they are not prepared for the jobs they want and cannot pay off their debts with the jobs they can get.

## WAS IT WORTH IT?

Two in three (69%) of Canadian employees agree that a university degree is worth the cost, though Gen Z is the generation least likely to agree with that statement. That's notable given that due to the increase in university costs, Gen Z is likely to face higher price tags for university than previous generations.

Although 75% of employees agree that getting any degree is better than no degree, 67% also agree that an education is actually necessary to be successful in their job. Only 13% say their education has been “absolutely essential” to their career.

## WHO SHOULD PAY?

The cost of college and university is rising much faster than inflation generally. That may help to explain the generational difference on who should pay for university.

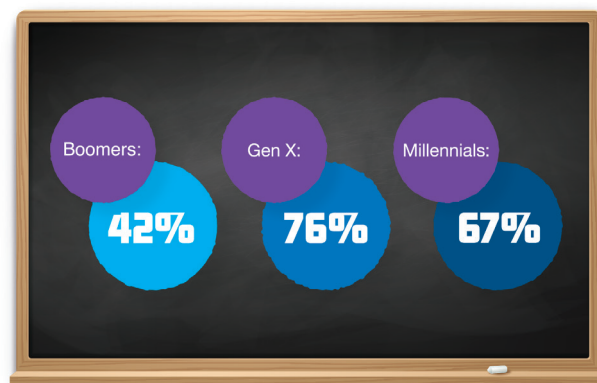
Rising university tuition costs have outpaced inflation since 1982. Outside of Quebec, it now averages \$7,600 annually per domestic student (based on the 2017/18 academic year). Since 1990, the government's share of university funding has fallen by nearly half and the cost of tuition at universities has risen 2.7 times in real terms.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, 31% believe the student should be responsible, 26% say parents or family, and 39% say the government. But there are big disparities across generations, with Gen Z—the generation facing much higher college price tags—the most likely to believe the government should foot the bill.

### Who Should Pay Post-secondary tuition?

- **Government:** (Gen Z, 56%; Millennials, 39%; Gen X, 36%; Boomers/Seniors, 29%)
- **The student:** (Gen Z, 26%; Millennials, 33%; Gen X, 43%; Boomers/Seniors, 52%)

### Worked Full-time in College/University *(among employees who attended college)*



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Overall, 90% say they had a job while in school, with 61% saying it was full-time.

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# A NEW APPROACH: LIFELONG LEARNING

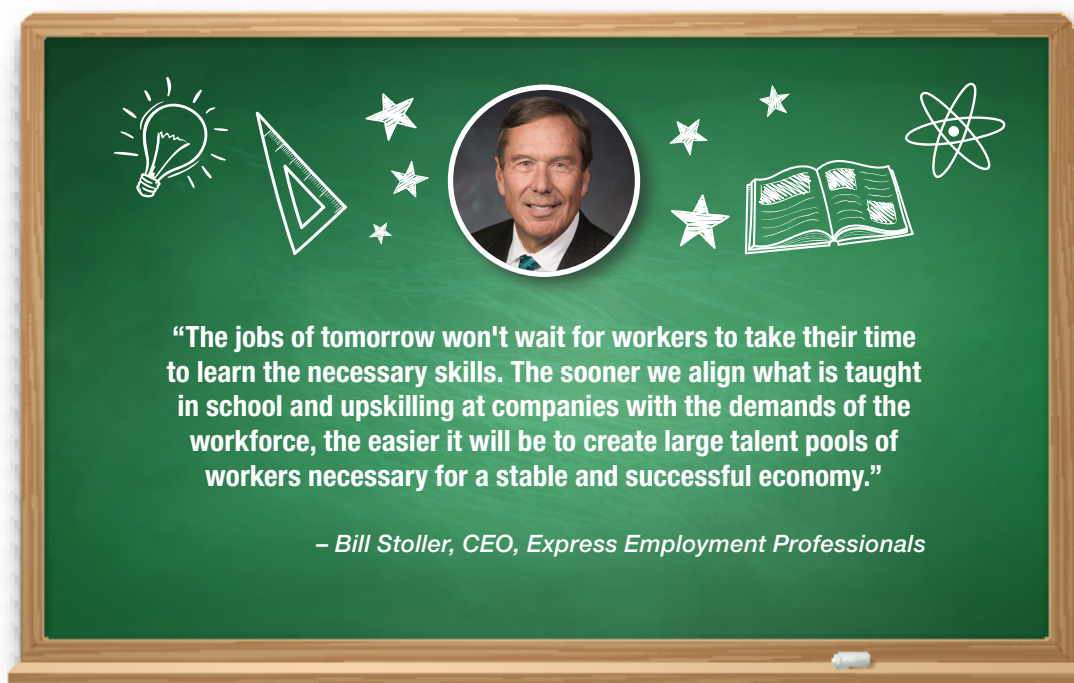
As important as it is to modernize secondary and postsecondary education, employees and employers alike must recognize that the economy and job market change too rapidly for anyone to be “done” learning or studying after high school or college/university.

Most employees (86%) agree that to remain competitive in their careers, learning cannot stop after graduation. They are right. According to a report presented at the World Economic Forum, to avoid a worst-case scenario of “technological change accompanied by talent shortages, mass unemployment and growing inequality, reskilling and upskilling of today’s workers will be critical.”<sup>7</sup>

Eighty-six per cent agree anyone who doesn’t continue to upskill in their career will be left behind in the workforce, but only 39% of Canadian employees have returned to school after entering the workforce. This gap could be reflective of generally poor opinions about the usefulness of formal education as currently imagined or barriers to access, including cost.

Reasons for going back to school include thinking it would lead to salary increases (24%), to advance at a job (29%), to refresh existing skills (24%) or to change careers entirely (41%).

New educational opportunities are not found only at schools, of course. Many professional associations, across numerous sectors, provide opportunities for Canadians to earn new credentials or skills certifications without ever having to enroll at a formal school or needing to depend on an employer to provide the opportunity.



# UPSKILLING FOR THE FUTURE

## WORDS OF ADVICE



### FOR STUDENTS

Change is needed. But reform often moves slowly. Students who enter the workforce in the coming years should work to identify careers that are in demand.

They should consider doing the following:

- Seek out opportunities in school or outside of school to hone job-seeking skills, as well as in-demand “soft skills” and technical skills.
- Research skills and qualifications that are required for in-demand jobs.
- Recognize that having a degree or certification in a given field does not guarantee employability in that field.

### RESOURCES

#### Job Genius

[ExpressPros.com/JobGenius](https://ExpressPros.com/JobGenius)

*Express has crafted Job Genius, an educational program designed to teach young adults how to successfully enter the workforce. The program includes guidance on resume writing, interviewing, soft skills and money management.*

### FOR JOB SEEKERS

Finding work is a challenge, especially if you’re told that you don’t yet have the right skills or experience after completing your education.

Keep in mind the following:

- You are not alone. This frustration is shared by many job seekers.
- You can find opportunities to gain tangible skills outside of a formal classroom setting.
- Demonstrating a willingness to learn when interviewing can help reassure a prospective employer about any skills you may lack.

### RESOURCES

#### Get Ahead

[ExpressPros.com/GetAhead](https://ExpressPros.com/GetAhead)

*Through a video series and blog articles, Express offers tips on improving a résumé and preparing for an interview.*

#### Job Journey

[ExpressPros.com/JobJourney](https://ExpressPros.com/JobJourney)

*In addition to articles on how to land a job, this Express blog offers help with how to handle a job offer, information on getting along with co-workers, ways to deal with a tough boss, retirement guides, and more.*

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When it comes to employer-sponsored education, 39% report their employer currently offers courses or programs for upskilling, and 10% are not sure.

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**“The education system needs to teach people to be self-reliant and about learning independently and continuously. There will be dramatic disruption in the workforce in the near future and we must be prepared.”**

— Niven Lee, Express franchise owner, Delta, British Columbia



## FOR EMPLOYERS

- Help job seekers recognize their growth opportunities.
- Help job seekers understand what jobs will be in demand in their area before they consider additional education.
- Provide referrals to resources to hone their skills.
- Reassure job seekers that they are not the only ones whose education may not have fully prepared them for the workplace.
- Coordinate with local educators and reformers to develop apprenticeship opportunities or work-study options.
- Investigate opportunities for grants that would support the development of apprenticeships or similar programs.

## FOR EDUCATORS AND REFORMERS

- Adjust curriculum to match career realities.
- Partner with local employers to understand what skills students need to refine before entering the workplace.
- Advocate reform with state and federal leaders.
- Partner with businesses to create opportunities for work-study, apprenticeships or other “earn and learn” models.

## FOR CAREER COUNSELORS

- Help job seekers recognize their growth opportunities.
- Help job seekers understand what jobs will be in demand in their region before they consider additional education.
- Provide referrals to resources to hone their skills.
- Reassure job seekers that they are not the only ones whose education may not have fully prepared them for the workplace.

# WAITING FOR A REVOLUTION

Many of today’s students complete their coursework with the promise—explicit or implied—that they will be “career ready.” But those who are now in their careers, whether they have worked one year or 40—say that promise does not hold up.

Schools should modernize. Education needs a revolutionary change. But no one should wait around for it. We should all act now. And it’s up to employers, educators, reformers, job seekers and even students themselves to understand the system’s shortcomings and adapt accordingly.





## ABOUT EXPRESS EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS

At Express Employment Professionals, we're in the business of people. From job seekers to client companies, Express helps people thrive and businesses grow. Headquartered in Oklahoma City, OK, our international network of franchises offer localized staffing solutions to the communities they serve, employing 552,000 people across North America in 2019. For more information, visit [ExpressPros.com](https://ExpressPros.com).



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