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STATE OF BLUE COLLAR
CANADA
SATISFIED WITH WORK  SATISFIED WITH LIFE

It's time to rethink what we think we know
about blue collar work.

An Express Employment Professionals White Paper

ExpressPros.com/CA



“There’s been a great deal of chatter about the future and frustrations of Canada’s blue collar workers. But our research shows most blue collar workers feel good about themselves and their jobs. They’re proud of who they are and what they do, and the country is better for it.”

—Bill Stoller, CEO, Express Employment Professionals



A NATIONWIDE STUDY

In the summer of 2018, Express Employment Professionals commissioned a study of Canada’s blue collar workers. This study was conducted online by The Harris Poll and included 520 Canadian adults aged 18 or older who are full-time employed, part-time employed or self-employed in a job that requires manual labour in one of the following industries: construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, automotive services, maintenance, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting or utilities. The survey was conducted between July 9 and July 23, 2018. The results of the survey, which made headlines nationally when released, are discussed in greater details throughout this paper.

—Results were weighted as needed by gender for age, education, race/ethnicity, region and household income.¹

BLUE COLLAR WORKERS IN CANADA

Canada makes many assumptions about its blue collar workers. And it turns out, many of them are wrong.

“Blue collar” means something different to just about everyone. For some, it conjures images of the careers of a past generation. For others, it’s synonymous with undesirable work or a political trope. Some blue collar workers don’t even use the term to describe themselves.

Thanks to a poll commissioned by Express Employment Professionals in 2018, we finally have real insight into the lives and views of Canada’s blue collar workforce—from blue collar workers themselves.²

Conventional wisdom says they are disaffected, but the data says they are optimistic.

Conventional wisdom says they dislike their work, but the data says they find meaning in their jobs.

Conventional wisdom says they have no chance for some form of advancement, but the data says over half have seen pay increases in the past year.

The modern blue collar workforce is changing, and it’s time attitudes change with it.

DEFINING “BLUE COLLAR”

For purposes of this paper, the definition of a “blue collar worker” is the same as that used in the Express survey: a worker who is full-time employed, part-time employed or self-employed; performs work that requires manual labour; and works in one of the following industries: construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, automotive services, maintenance, agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting or utilities.

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.



THE UNDERREPORTED STORY

THE STAR

Politics • Federal Politics

GM tells Ottawa, Queen's Park that Oshawa assembly plant will definitely close

News regarding blue collar workers usually only appears when things are going badly – for example, a car plant closes or a pipeline is being delayed. These stories show blue collar workers losing their jobs, struggling to make ends meet, frustrated with their situation and with little hope for the future.

CTV NEWS

Landman looks for work in Alberta's struggling oil patch

While there are unfortunate instances of blue collar workers being laid off, the story for most blue collar workers in Canada is a positive one.

—Sources: *The Star*³, *CTV News*⁴

“It is a misconception that blue collar jobs are low skill and low paying. Blue collar workers with specialized skills and certifications can be very valuable to employers. Many skilled and semi-skilled jobs can be lucrative for people that want to learn a trade or skill.”

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



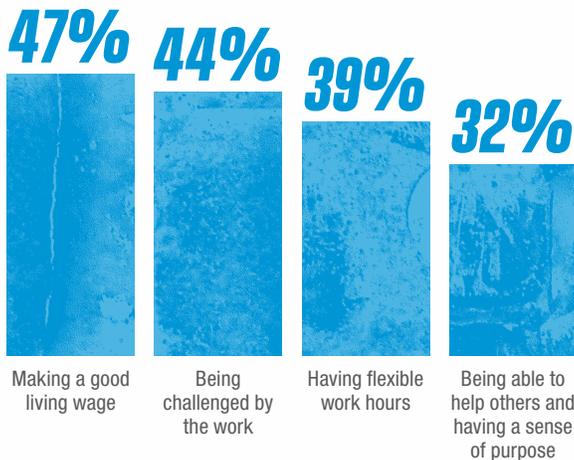
WORK THAT BRINGS SATISFACTION

Blue collar workers like what they do. The vast majority (85 per cent) say they are satisfied with their jobs. One in four (25 per cent) say they are “very satisfied.”

Their work gives them meaning, and a whopping 88 per cent say they are “proud” of the work they do. Despite the conventional wisdom about blue collar work, 79 per cent of blue collar workers say the people they know respect the work they do.

More than three in five blue collar workers (63 per cent) say they like their jobs, and among those who consider themselves “skilled trade workers,” that number rises to 66 per cent.

THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY ARE ABLE TO NAME SOMETHING POSITIVE ABOUT THEIR JOBS:



Those in the skilled trades are more likely to report making a good living wage than those who consider themselves general labour workers, 51 per cent to 42 per cent.



“We observe higher levels of job satisfaction amongst mid-level skilled tradespeople, such as: welders/fabricators; heavy machine operators; CNC machinists; carpenters; plumbers; and automotive technicians.”

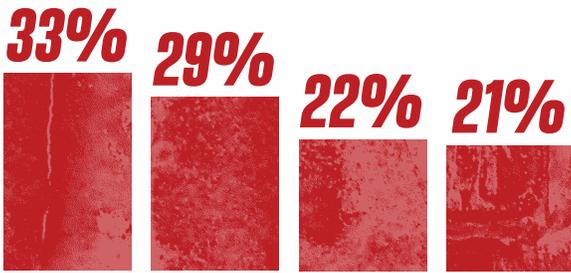
—Daniel Purdy, Express franchise owner, Abbotsford, British Columbia

SELF-EMPLOYED BLUE COLLAR WORKERS REALLY LIKE THEIR WORK.

99% OF SELF-EMPLOYED BLUE COLLAR WORKERS SAY THEY LOVE BEING THEIR OWN BOSS, ACCORDING TO THE SURVEY.



UNSURPRISINGLY, BLUE COLLAR WORKERS DO EXPRESS SOME CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR JOBS:



Agree "it can be dangerous at times"
Limited or no advancement opportunities
Not making a good "living wage"
Little to no flexibility in work hours



"Many skilled trades positions pay more than other jobs, such as administrative jobs, in the market. For example, Mechanics, CNC Operators, Millwrights, and Class 1 Driver jobs pay well above minimum wage, and have for some time."

—Jessica Culo, Express franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta

In spite of these concerns, blue collar workers are satisfied and like what they do.



CAREER PATHS

It is sometimes assumed that blue collar jobs are jobs of last resort, but that is not the case.

About one in nine blue collar workers (12 per cent) say their parents influenced their career path, and 24 per cent say they are working in a field that they expected to pursue. Those numbers go up among skilled trade workers: 13 per cent say their parents had an influence, and 35 per cent are in a field they expected to pursue.

One in nine blue collar workers say they got started in their line of work because it pays well. Only 10 per cent say it was the “only job I could get.”

Perhaps the most important statistic in dispelling the “last resort” assumption is this:

More than two-thirds of blue collar workers in Canada (68 per cent) say there is a good career path in their line of work.

WORK WORTH RECOMMENDING

Another indication of how blue collar workers feel about their jobs is that the majority would recommend that young people follow in their footsteps.

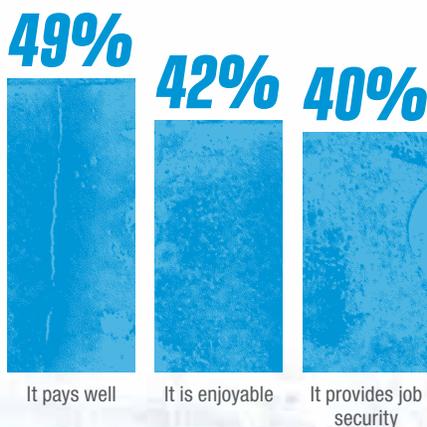
To be precise, 55 per cent say they would be likely to encourage a family member or friend to pursue a career in their field of work. Sixty-four (64) per cent say more young men should pursue careers in their field, and more than half of workers (51 per cent) say the same about young women.



“If someone is willing to get the certifications and experience required, they could make a stable career as a blue collar worker, and do well financially too.”

—Jessica Culo, Express franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta

AND WHY DO THEY OFFER SUCH ADVICE? A NUMBER OF REASONS:



WHAT ABOUT UNIVERSITY?

It's not uncommon to hear the suggestion that blue collar work is for those who couldn't go to university. So, do blue collar workers wish they had gone to university? It's a very mixed answer.

Among those with a high school diploma or less, only 28 per cent wish they had attended university, though a total of 51 per cent wish they had gone to university, vocational school and/or community college.

Still, among those who did graduate university, almost half wish they had not. Forty-five (45) per cent say they wish they had gone straight into the workforce, to vocational school, or to community college.

BLUE COLLAR EDUCATION VIEWS

**HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA OR LESS:
28% WISH THEY HAD GONE TO UNIVERSITY**

**UNIVERSITY GRADUATES:
45% WISH THEY HAD NOT GONE
TO UNIVERSITY**

Here again, society's attitudes about the relationship between blue collar workers and university need to change. It's far more complicated than some suggest. One thing is clear, though: it's possible to have a well-paying blue collar job that does not require a four-year university degree.



“Many people have a misconception that you need to be educated in a skilled trade to start a career in that field. Given the shortage of blue collar workers, we are seeing more and more employers that are looking for people that have the right attitude and just very basic skills.

Employers are starting them as apprentices that they train over time. This creates an opportunity to grow into roles with more responsibility and with that their compensation and career grows as well. There are many opportunities where employers want to train people for roles with more responsibility based on their performance. Employees that want access to these opportunities should remain open minded as even short-term jobs could lead to a great career.”

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

BLUER COLLAR, ROSIER OUTLOOK

Seventy-nine (79) per cent of blue collar workers agree that “the harder you work, the more successful you will be,” and 82 per cent agree that Canada is the greatest country on earth.

BLUE COLLAR WORKERS: THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT.

76% OF BLUE COLLAR WORKERS ARE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE.

Everyday Challenges

But life is not without its challenges. While 77 per cent of blue collar workers say they can make ends meet, more than half (56 per cent) say it is difficult to do so. Eight (8) per cent say it is “very difficult.” And the majority say they have less than \$5,000 saved for an emergency.

- 17% say they currently have no money saved in case of an emergency
- 46% say they have between \$1 and \$4,999 saved
- 19% say they have between \$5,000 and \$24,999 saved
- 12% say they have \$25,000 or more saved
- 5% declined to answer

Still, these financial challenges have not diminished blue collar workers’ optimism or belief in the future.



WHO'S DOING WHAT?

On average, Canadian blue collar workers have been working for 25 years and been in their current job for approximately 11 years. Blue collar workers in Canada work about 39 hours per week, with 15 per cent saying they work 50 or more hours each week.



**AVERAGE
39 HOURS
PER WEEK**

13% USING TECHNOLOGY IS A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE JOB

5% JOB IS IN THE TECHNOLOGY SECTOR

63% BELIEVE UNIONS HELP THE WORKING MAN

17% ARE MEMBERS OF A LABOUR UNION

**25
YEARS**

AVG. CAREER LENGTH

**11
YEARS**

AVG. CURRENT JOB TENURE

51%

WORK IN SKILLED TRADES

41%

WORK IN GENERAL LABOUR

ON AVERAGE, BLUE COLLAR WORKERS IN CANADA WORK ABOUT 39 HOURS PER WEEK:

51%



Mostly work indoors

25%



Mostly work outdoors

22%



Split their time

2%

Work inside a vehicle

76% ARE PAID HOURLY



THE FUTURE OF BLUE COLLAR WORK

The past year has been good for blue collar workers. More than half (55 per cent) received pay increases, and nearly half (42 per cent) saw increased job responsibilities. Twenty-four (24) per cent got a promotion.

RISING WAGES

55% RECEIVED A PAY INCREASE IN THE PAST YEAR.

ONE-FIFTH (19%) OF THEM GOT AN INCREASE OF 10% OR MORE.

Workers expect more good news is on the way, with 51 per cent saying they expect a pay increase in 2019.

Shortage of jobs or shortage of workers?

What about the longer term outlook? Though it's common to hear about blue collar jobs "disappearing," only 28 per cent of blue collar workers worry about a decline in job opportunities.

Forty-one (41) per cent believe the number of jobs in their field will stay the same over the next 10 years, while 31 per cent expect the number to increase. Only 12 per cent worry about losing their job in the near future.

Only 7 per cent say there is a "high likelihood of being replaced by automation"—despite the coverage in popular media about the rise of workplace robots. Workplaces are indeed becoming increasingly automated, but blue collars workers for their part are not particularly worried about being replaced altogether.

A recent study from the Center for Global Development has found that increased automation is unlikely to lead to "mass unemployment," though the study's authors do warn about the possibility of "wage stagnation" at some point in the future.⁵

Dr. Hayaatun Sillem, chief executive of the Royal Academy of Engineering in the UK, argues, "People should look at the ongoing transformation from a prism of not how many jobs will go, but rather at the changing nature and scope of roles and tasks. We should be optimistic that there would be many new jobs created partly through the fact that technology would enable us to do things we could not previously do."⁶



Blue collar workers who have access to training and retraining, in other words, are likely to be able to adapt to a changing workforce.



“All the businesses in my area need people, and it’s very difficult to find them. Even if it’s for entry-level, no experience, it’s still hard to find people who go to work every single day, are on time, and produce.”

—Bruce Hein, Express franchise owner, Sarnia, Ontario

In the current economy, the more immediate concern is not a loss of jobs but a shortage of workers. Blue collar workers are in higher demand than previous years, and companies are competing over them.⁷ Baby Boomer retirements should only increase the demand.

That demand, of course, could wane with time—especially if businesses are forced to adapt to working without blue collar employees due to a lack of job seekers. But for now, it’s good to be a blue collar worker.



“There is a shortage of blue collar workers in our area, and we expect the demand for these workers to increase in the future.”

—Jessica Culo, Express franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta

Retirement Concerns

None of this is saying that blue collar workers will not face challenges down the road. If retirement ages rise, blue collar workers could feel harsher consequences than white collar workers. Because blue collar jobs require more physical labour, blue collar workers may not be able to delay retirement. As such, they may struggle to transition easily from work to retirement with “full benefits.”⁸

More than two-thirds of blue collar workers (68 per cent) say they are worried about saving enough for their retirement, and almost half of workers (44 per cent) agree that it’s “more likely that Martians will land on earth than I’ll collect a public pension.”

TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT

Although nearly three in five workers (57 per cent) agree having a blue collar job is respected more now than it was 10 years ago, 49 per cent also say that society generally looks down on blue collar workers. Almost half, 47 per cent, say that at times they feel like “a second class citizen” because of the type of work they do.

Blue collar workers are satisfied with their jobs, however, and the vast majority say the people they know respect their work. So this indicates that blue collar workers are more likely to be displeased with society’s view of the work—not the work itself.

It’s clearly time for Canadians to rethink views on blue collar work and the people that do it. It’s not just about better understanding each other. It’s important for the strength of our economy. 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 university degree is only the way forward.

In other words, take it from blue collar workers themselves: **there are good blue collar jobs that provide a satisfying career and life—and reason for optimism in the future.**



ABOUT EXPRESS EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS

Express Employment Professionals puts people to work. It generated \$3.5 billion in sales and employed more than 566,000 people in 2018. Its long-term goal is to put a million people to work annually. For more information, visit ExpressPros.com.

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