



BETWEEN

BLUE & WHITE

THE GREY COLLAR WORKFORCE
— IN CANADA —

WHAT THEY BELIEVE AND WHERE THEY'RE TAKING US

An Express Employment Professionals White Paper



Respecting People. Impacting Business.™

ExpressPros.com/CA 



“When we talk about the labour force only in terms of ‘blue collar’ and ‘white collar,’ we’re oversimplifying. Understanding the modern workforce requires taking a closer look at the vast middle, rethinking old labels and getting to know this vital group: grey collar workers.”

—Bill Stoller, CEO, Express Employment Professionals



A NATIONWIDE STUDY

A survey of 507 grey collar workers was conducted online within Canada by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals between June 18 and July 8, 2019. Grey collar workers were defined as adults ages 18+ who are employed full-time, employed part-time or self-employed and work in one of the following professions: airline pilot or flight attendant, agribusiness professional (e.g., farmer, land manager), certified/licensed salesperson (e.g., real estate broker, stockbroker, insurance broker), clergy (e.g., minister, rabbi, imam), child care (e.g., nanny, au pair), engineer (e.g., mechanical, electrical, avionics, civil), firefighter, funeral director/technician, food preparation and catering (e.g., chef, sous chef), high-technology technician (e.g., lab technician, helpdesk technician, IT professional, medical equipment repair, solar panel installer), non-physician healthcare professional (e.g., nurse, emergency medical services personnel, physician’s assistant), paralegal, police officer, protective services, military, security or civil defense, professional musician/artist, school administrator, teacher, educator or other academic field worker, or typist/stenographer).

The survey also included 500 Canadian white collar workers (defined as adults ages 18+ in Canada who are employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed and work in an office, cubicle, or other administrative setting).¹

GREY COLLAR: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Blue collar. White collar. We have been led to believe over the years that all work fits neatly into one of two buckets.

But things are not so black-and-white—or blue and white.

There's a vast middle ground, workers whose jobs do not meet the traditional definition of either collar. And they are likely to play an even more important role in America's economic future.

These are the grey collar workers.

DEFINING GREY COLLAR

In its polling and public opinion research, Express Employment Professionals, working with The Harris Poll, uses the term “grey collar” to describe work that combines some of the manual labour aspects of blue collar work but also has components of white collar work. Several of the included professions require skilled workers with specialized training beyond a high school diploma.

For the purposes of the study, Harris defines grey collar jobs to include the following:

- Airline Pilot or Flight Attendant
- Farmer or Land Manager
- Certified or Licensed Salesperson
- Clergy
- Childcare Worker
- Engineer
- Firefighter
- Paralegal
- Military
- Teacher
- Non-Physician Healthcare Professional



North Americans are not used to talking about this group of workers who do not fit easily into the blue collar or white collar camps. A quick Google search will prove the term “grey collar” is a fairly new and unfamiliar one. “Blue collar” on the other hand has been in use since the 1920s; “white collar” since the 1910s.²

But to understand the modern workforce landscape, it is important to understand the circumstances and opinions of this group of workers—and how those views compare with the perspectives of blue and white collar workers. Thanks to a survey commissioned by Express in the summer of 2019, that is now possible.



“Jobs that were once 100% manual are now incorporating elements of technology for efficiency and information tracking. Job seekers have to be willing to learn to use electronics in roles where they never had to previously.”

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

FORCES OF CHANGE IN THE WORKPLACE

The workforce landscape is changing. Businesses of all types are embracing new models, leading to less formal work structures. Old lines have been blurred; old roles have disappeared.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, the number one “top workplace trend for 2019” was “fostering the relationship between workers and robots.”

From manufacturing to farming, administration to education, industries are incorporating advanced technologies, such as robotics and artificial intelligence, into their processes.

Skilled workers, able to thrive in this new technological world, will be increasingly in demand. This means that grey collar workers will likely require more training than in the past.

Companies long known for blue collar work will find themselves more reliant on grey collar workers. In fact, 40% of grey collar workers expect substantial job growth in their fields over the coming years.³



“Healthcare grey collar workers will continue to increase, especially as our population continues to age.”

—David Robb, Director of Marketing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Express Office



“I expect to see the work of programming and maintaining robots become the next big thing.”

—Reid Bates, Express franchise owner, Aberdeen, Olympia and Centralia, Washington

GREY COLLAR VIEWS AND ATTITUDES

Express Employment Professionals' landmark poll delved into grey collar workers' views on a diverse set of issues, from education and finances to workplace practices, job satisfaction, the outlook for the country and even politics.

Who Does What, Where?

Most grey collar jobs are indoors, with 80% reporting that they work "mostly indoors." Thirteen percent say their jobs involve "equal time spent indoors and outdoors," while only 5% report working "mostly outdoors." One percent say their jobs are mostly "inside a vehicle."

While 39% say that "using technology is a significant part of my job," 18% say they are concerned about "being replaced by automation."

Satisfied with Work

Like most Canadian workers surveyed by Express, grey collar workers are generally satisfied with their jobs and their lives: 67% say they are "satisfied with the lifestyle" that they have, and 88% agree that they are "proud" of the work they do.

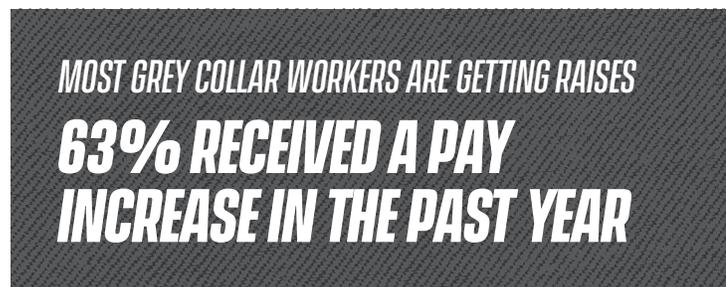
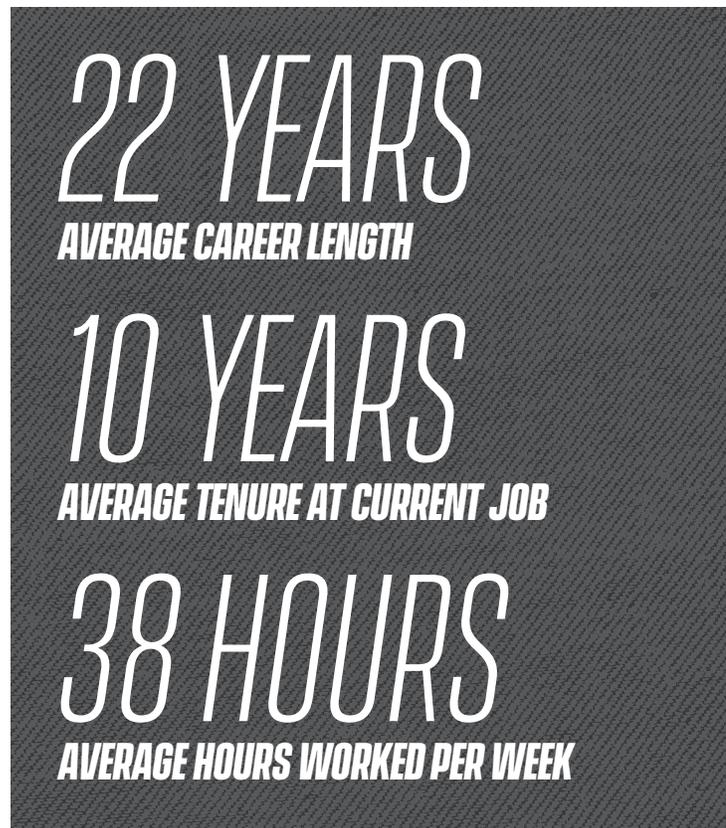
More than half, 54%, agree that their job field allows them "to help others" and have "a sense of purpose," and 70% agree that their line of work provides "a good career path."

In another indication that most are content with their profession, 58% say they would encourage a child to pursue work in their field. And 71% would choose the same profession if they "had to do it all over again."

More than two thirds of grey collar workers agree with the statement, "my employer cares about their employees," with 22% agreeing strongly and 45% somewhat agreeing.

And how do grey collar workers think others view their work? The vast majority, 85%, agree that "people I know respect the type of work that I do."

Grey collar workers are equally positive about how they are viewed by the general public, with three in four disagreeing with the statement, "At times, I feel like a second-class citizen because of the type of work that I do."

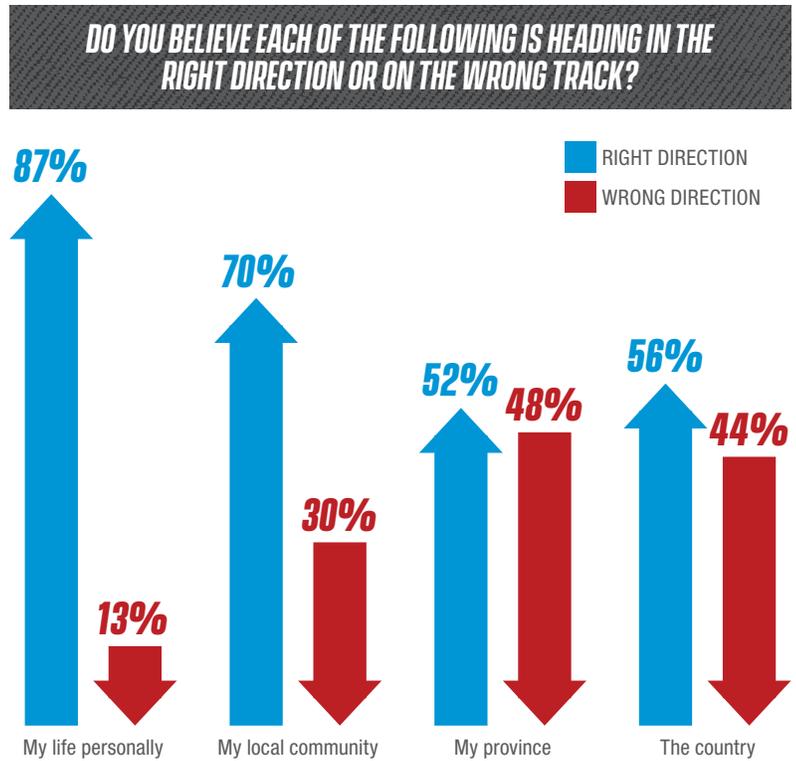


Right Direction vs. Wrong Track

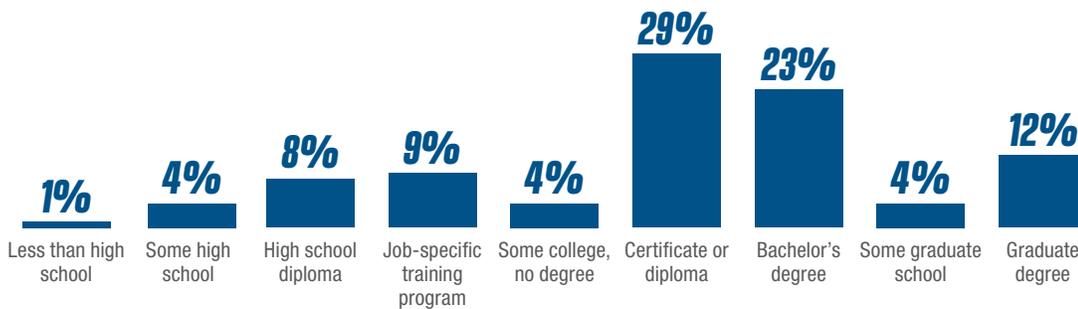
A majority of grey collar workers feel that their lives and their communities are headed in the right direction but are more evenly split when it comes to their province or the country.

College or University: Was It Worth It?

Given the demands of their professions, grey collar workers are more likely than blue collar workers to have needed some form of post-secondary credential to secure a job in their field. Over half of these skilled workers have at least a job certificate, diploma or bachelor's degree.



GREY COLLAR WORKERS' HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVELS

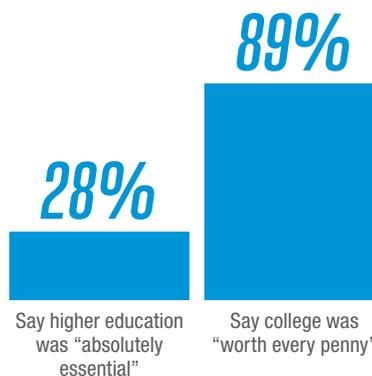


Among those with a college or university degree, 28% say they think that the higher education they received is absolutely essential to their current job. In fact, most university graduates, 89%, think going to university was worth every penny.

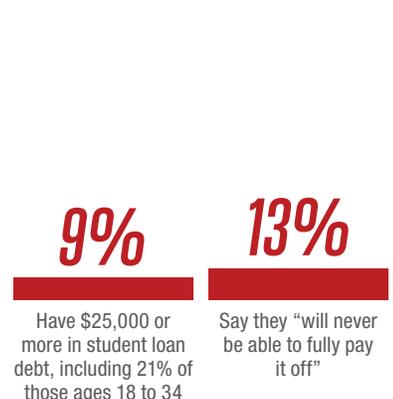
University and college debt is somewhat of an issue for grey collar workers, with 9% of those who went to university, college or vocational school having \$25,000 or more in student loan debt. Among those ages 18 to 34, that figure rises to 21%. Thirteen percent feel like they "will never be able to fully pay it off."

For workers with a high-school diploma or less, more than half look back and wish they had a four-year degree or attended a community college or vocational school. Seventy-nine percent of grey collar workers without a degree believe they would have had more opportunities if they had attended college or university.

GREY COLLAR COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY GRADUATES



GREY COLLAR COLLEGE/UNIV. DEBT—AND A LITTLE DESPAIR



GREY COLLAR POLITICS

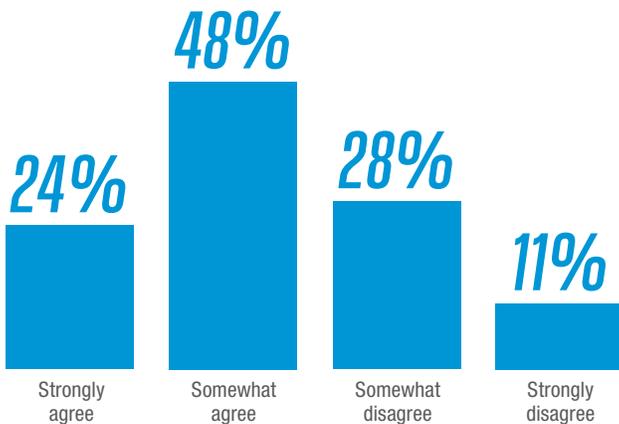
WHAT ARE YOUR TOP CONCERNS?

1. Healthcare
2. Affordability of daily living
3. Economy
4. Climate change/carbon taxes
5. Immigration



Financial Situation

"MY JOB PROVIDES A GOOD LIVING TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT MY FAMILY."



While more than three-quarters of grey collar workers say their jobs provide a good living, 50% have less than \$5,000 saved for an emergency (excluding property values or money in retirement accounts).

- 12% have no money saved for emergencies
- 16% have less than \$1,000
- 10% have \$1,000 to \$2,499
- 11% have \$2,500 to \$4,999
- 11% have \$5,000 to \$9,999
- 13% have \$10,000 to \$24,999
- 20% have \$25,000 or more
- 9% declined to answer

The majority of grey collar workers believe they have an average financial situation, compared to their neighbours. When asked if they are "financially better off or worse off than your neighbours," 16% say much or somewhat better off, 47% say about the same, and 31% say somewhat or much worse off.

Just under half, 41%, say they are financially better off than their parents were at the same age, with 27% saying they are in about the same financial situation. About 1 in 4, or 32%, say they are worse off.

Of the parents surveyed, just under half, 46%, believe their children will be better off, with 26% saying their children's financial situation will be about the same. And 28% expect their children to be worse off.

GREY AND BLUE AND WHITE

How do grey collar workers' views differ from those of blue and white collar workers? On some issues, they are—unsurprisingly—right in the middle. In other cases, they are distinct.⁴

Content in the Present

Most Canadian workers are generally optimistic about their own lives and believe they are heading in the right direction.

The majority of Canadian workers say they are satisfied with their lifestyle, but also say that life is a struggle, even if worker satisfaction is high.

Concern about savings/retirement, but looking forward to the future

Canadians say they are making ends meet and tend view themselves as financially stable, but they also worry about the future and saving enough for retirement.

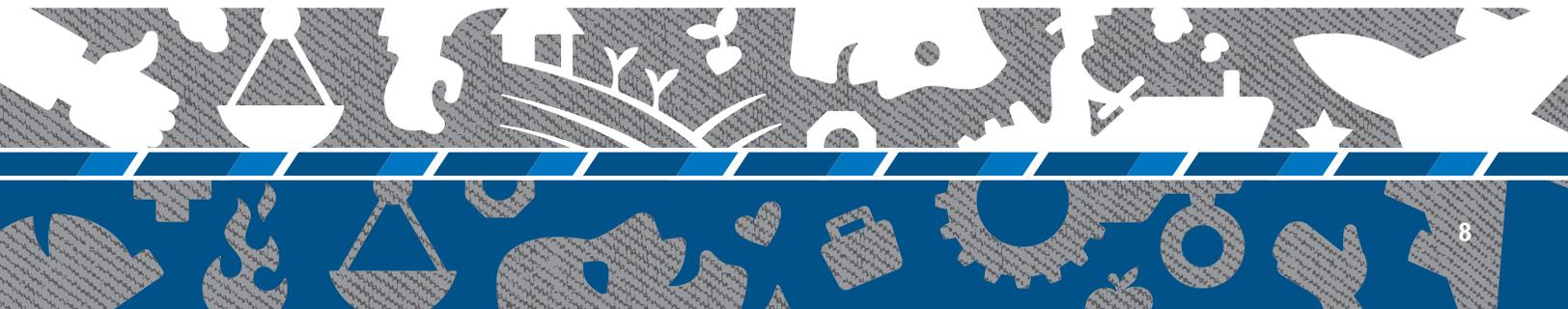
Approximately half of Canadian workers describe themselves as middle income (white collar, 56%; grey collar, 53%; blue collar, 47%) and a strong number say they are able to make ends meet.

Many of those surveyed point to the fact that they also received increased responsibilities at work and/or a promotion (white collar, 32%; grey collar, 24%; blue collar 24%). Interestingly, over half of all workers, received a pay increase last year (white collar, 63%; grey collar, 63%; blue collar, 55%).

Half of Canadian workers feel that they compare well to their neighbours financially and many feel that they are better off than their parents – although the numbers hover in the low 40% (white and grey collar) to 33% (blue collar) range. Canadians are also feeling positive about future success of their children.

The positive feelings continue somewhat less when it comes to finances and savings, with nearly 1 in 5 blue collar workers (17%) and 1 in 10 grey collar (12%) and white collar workers (9%) having nothing at all saved.

Most workers are still confident that they will reach their lifestyle goals and the majority are optimistic about the future. When asked about whether life is moving in “the right direction,” white collar workers overwhelmingly agreed at 90% (grey collar, 87%; blue collar, 74%).



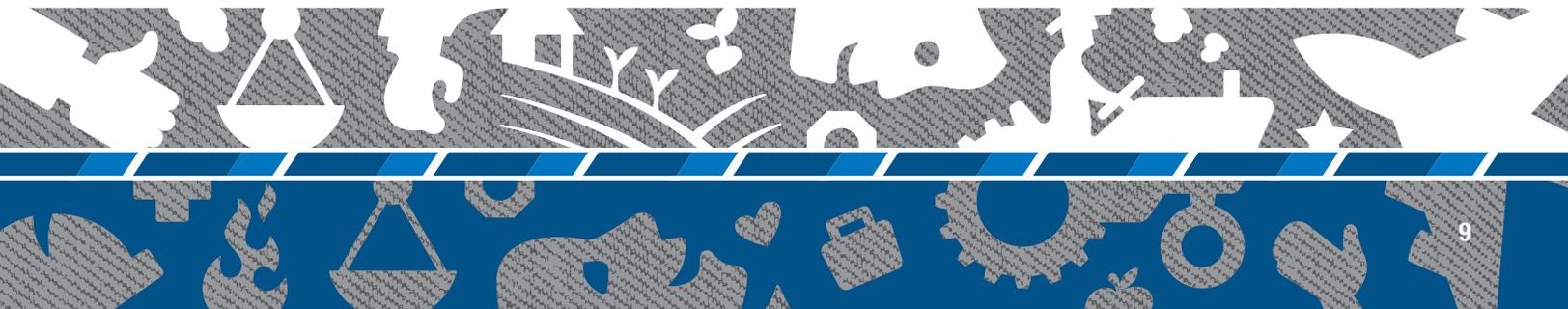
Education

While many with a college or university degree say it was absolutely essential to their current job, a significant minority say the debt from student loans and lack of job opportunities mean it does not always feel worth it.

Among those with a high school degree or less, over half look back and wish they had chosen to attend community college, university, or vocational school (white collar, 64%; grey collar, 56%; blue collar, 51%). Interestingly, both blue collar and white collar workers are more likely than grey collar workers to say they would have had more opportunities available if they had decided to go to college or university.

More than 1 in 4 college/university-educated grey collar (28%) and white collar workers (30%) believe the education they received is important to the job they currently have. In fact, most college and university graduates say post-secondary education was worth every penny. At least 3 in 4 Canadian workers believe those who pursue specialized education make more appealing job candidates, and around 7 in 10 believe specialized professional degrees/diplomas provide workers with the best “bang for their buck.”

Still, some college and university-educated workers wish they had gone to community college, vocational school or straight into the workforce instead of getting a university degree (white collar, 29%; grey collar, 23%). Nearly 1 in 5 say they have too much student debt from going to college/university (white collar, 19%; grey collar, 17%) and cannot find a good job despite their college/university degree (grey collar, 26%; white collar, 24%). For those who attended vocational school or college/university, 1 in 5 currently have student loan debt (grey collar, 21%; white collar, 20%), estimating it will take approximately five to six years on average to pay off.



THINKING BEYOND LABELS



“I think there is a danger that these terms can create stereotypes and stigmas that may not be appreciated by everybody. We just need to be careful when we use them. For instance, the term white collar is associated with professional and educated employment. Many teachers or engineers would consider that label appropriate for their line of work.”

—Jessica Culo, Express franchise owner, Edmonton, Alberta

The pace of change in the workplace is only likely to accelerate. Disruption is the new normal, so workers of all types—blue, white and grey collar—can expect their jobs to change, whether they stay with the same employer or switch employers.

Some blue collar workers, for example, may find that as their job requirements change with technology they will be more accurately classified as grey collar workers, particularly as they develop new skills, use less manual labour and manage more technology.

Examining the views of grey collar workers and using the term in our workplace lexicon can help to form a clearer picture of the modern and future workforce. But what if collar labels still do not paint the full picture?

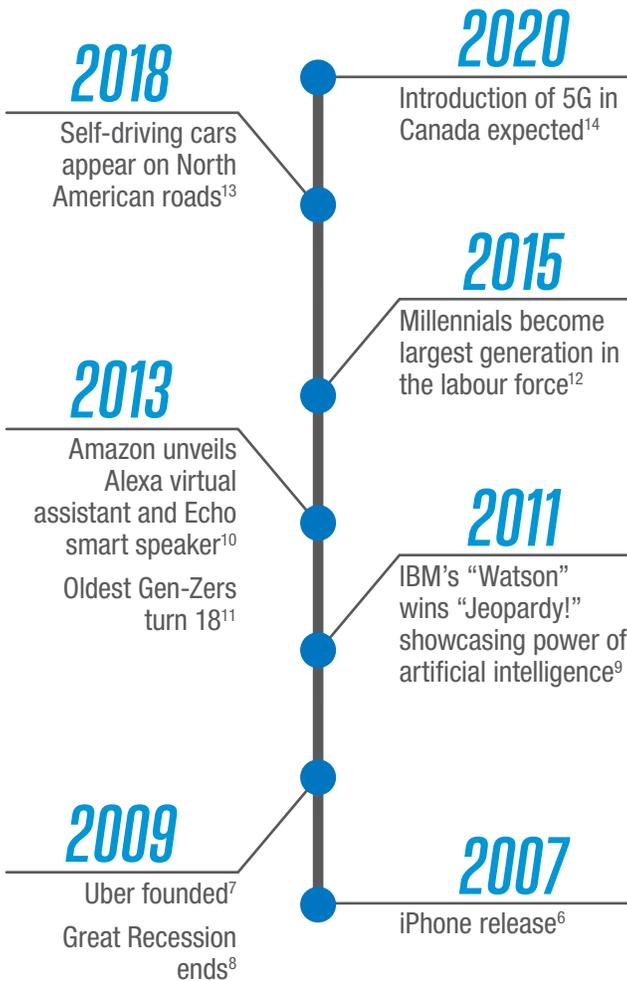
Most white collar (79%) and grey collar workers (75%) view labels such as “grey collar,” “white collar” and “blue collar” as a good way to describe the work they do, but they also view these labels as old-fashioned and not necessarily applicable anymore (grey collar, 70%; white collar, 62%).⁵

Although the majority of white collar workers (85%) describe their work as “white collar,” it is less clear cut for grey collar workers with 47% saying “white collar,” 26% selecting “grey collar,” 13% saying “blue collar,” and 15% “something else.”

The majority of white collar (75%) and grey collar workers (64%) say labeling a profession as “blue collar,” “white collar,” or “grey collar” is not offensive to them, but still the majority say labeling hurts how people view a particular line of work (grey collar, 63%; white collar, 57%) and the people who perform that particular line of work (grey collar, 66%; white collar, 53%).

DISRUPTING OUR VIEWS

RECENT DISRUPTIVE FORCES IN WORKPLACE, HOME AND SOCIETY



Change is a constant. Technologies and circumstances we take for granted today are often only a few years old, which makes it difficult to imagine what the workplace will look like five, 10 or 15 years from now.

So, while blue collar, white collar and grey collar are useful categories, especially for study, they should not be treated as inflexible. Most importantly, the men and women who go to work every day should not be quickly reduced to a label.

Labels are helpful but imperfect predictors of views and opinions. And as times change, we all should be open to new labels and new concepts—whatever collar or colour they may be.



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.

REFERENCES

1. Survey details, polling memos and methodologies are accessible at <https://www.expresspros.com/Newsroom/America-Employed/White,-Grey,-and-Blue-Collar-Workers--Haunted-by-Past,-Worried-About-Future,-Content-with-Present.aspx>.
2. “Blue-collar,” Merriam-Webster, accessed Dec. 18, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blue-collar>; “White-collar,” Merriam-Webster, accessed Dec. 18, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white-collar>.
3. “White, Grey, and Blue Collar Workers: Haunted by Past, Worried About Future, Content with Present,” Express Employment Professionals, August 28, 2019, <https://www.expresspros.com/Newsroom/America-Employed/White,-Grey,-and-Blue-Collar-Workers--Haunted-by-Past,-Worried-About-Future,-Content-with-Present.aspx>.
4. Data on white collar and grey collar workers comes from the 2019 Express survey with The Harris Poll. Data on blue collar workers comes from a 2018 Express survey with The Harris Poll.
5. This question was not posed to blue collar workers in the 2018 survey.
6. Ben Gilbert, “It’s been over 12 years since the iPhone debuted—look how primitive the first one seems today,” Business Insider, Jul. 22, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/first-phone-anniversary-2016-12>.
7. “The history of Uber,” Uber Technologies, accessed Dec. 17, 2019, <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/history/>.
8. “The Great Recession,” Federal Reserve History, accessed Dec. 17, 2019, https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great_recession_of_200709.
9. Bernard Marr, “The Most Amazing Artificial Intelligence Milestones So Far,” Forbes, Dec. 31, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2018/12/31/the-most-amazing-artificial-intelligence-milestones-so-far/#60874cf47753/>.
10. James Vincent, “After five years of Amazon’s Alexa, why isn’t it better?,” The Verge, Nov. 6, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/11/6/20951178/amazon-alexa-echo-launch-anniversary-age-funtionality-not-changed-use-cases>.
11. Deep Patel, “8 Ways Generation Z Will Differ from Millennials in the Workforce,” Forbes, Sep. 21, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deepatel/2017/09/21/8-ways-generation-z-will-differ-from-millennials-in-the-workplace/#3e0898d576e5>.
12. Graham F. Scott, “Millennials are now the biggest generation in the Canadian workforce” Canadian Business June 3, 2015 <https://www.canadianbusiness.com/innovation/the-millennial-majority-workforce/>
13. Bernard Marr, “The Most Amazing Artificial Intelligence Milestones So Far,” Forbes, Dec. 31, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2018/12/31/the-most-amazing-artificial-intelligence-milestones-so-far/#60874cf47753/>
14. James McLeod, “Rogers officially activates Canada’s first 5G network, but customers will have to wait to use it,” Financial Post, Jan. 25, 2020, <https://business.financialpost.com/technology/rogers-officially-activates-canadas-first-5g-network-but-customers-cant-use-it-yet>



Respecting People. Impacting Business.™

 [Facebook.com/ExpressEmploymentProfessionals](https://www.facebook.com/ExpressEmploymentProfessionals)

 [@ExpressEmploymentProfessionals](https://www.instagram.com/ExpressEmploymentProfessionals)

 [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com)
(Search Express Employment Professionals)

 [YouTube.com/User/ExpressEP](https://www.youtube.com/user/ExpressEP)

 [Twitter.com/ExpressPros](https://twitter.com/ExpressPros)

More fresh ideas for today's
business leaders at [RefreshLeadership.com](https://www.RefreshLeadership.com).

All Express offices are locally owned and operated.

For information about franchise opportunities,
visit [ExpressFranchising.com](https://www.ExpressFranchising.com).



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