58% of US Job Seekers Say Finding Work Will Be Harder in 2026 — Yet 42% Are Already on the Hunt

New survey reveals rising workloads, shrinking opportunities and growing pressure for better pay and balance as the new year begins.

OKLAHOMA CITY, Jan. 14, 2026 — With 2026 in full swing, U.S. job seekers are entering the new year with mixed emotions and mounting challenges. While optimism about higher wages persists, the majority believe the road to landing a job will be harder than ever.

According to a recent Express Employment Professionals-Harris Poll survey, 58% of job seekers expect it will be more difficult to find a job in the next six months, and 37% believe there are fewer opportunities compared to a year ago, a sharp decline from 48% in 2025.

At the same time, 46% anticipate overall wages will increase in 2026 compared to 2025, fueling hope amid uncertainty.

Interest in full-time work remains strong, with 82% of job seekers focused on securing full-time positions, compared to just 35% considering part-time roles.

Contract and freelance work appeals to 24%, while temporary or seasonal positions hold steady at 23%. Entry-level roles are attracting 22%, and only 11% are willing to accept positions below their most recent pay level, signaling a continued emphasis on stability and growth.

The intensity of job searches is also shifting. Currently, 42% of job seekers report actively looking for a new job, up from 35% in the spring of 2024 but slightly down from 44% in the spring of 2025. This trend suggests a market where urgency is rising but caution remains.

For those already employed, the grind is real: 47% report working longer hours or more shifts than usual in the past year, and 37% have logged more overtime.

Those with household incomes above $50,000 are feeling the strain most, with 49% working longer hours and 39% taking on more overtime, compared to 36% and 28% among lower-income workers.

Why are employed job seekers looking to make a move?

- 42% want better growth opportunities within their current industry.
- 41% are seeking the work-life balance they've been missing.
- 36% cite the need to negotiate better compensation.

Top concerns about staying put:

- 34% worry about not getting the salary increase they deserve.
- 32% fear a slowdown in work opportunities.
- 28% are concerned about losing their job if the economy declines.

Despite these pressures, satisfaction gaps remain a driving force behind career decisions.

Salary continues to lead with a 20-point gap between importance and satisfaction, followed by work-life balance at seven points and advancement opportunities at five points. While these gaps have narrowed slightly since the spring of 2025, they underscore persistent frustrations that could shape the job market in the months ahead.

"As the job market continues to evolve, success will come to those who stay focused, flexible and proactive," said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, President and Chairman of Express Employment International. "Job seekers who invest in their skills, remain open to new opportunities and clearly communicate their value will be best positioned to thrive and find the right fit in 2026."

Survey Methodology
The Job Seeker Report was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 7 to 20, 2025, among 1,003 adults ages 18 and older.

For full survey methodologies, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

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If you would like to arrange for an interview to discuss this topic, please contact Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com, Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

About Robert (Bob) Funk Jr.

Robert (Bob) Funk Jr. is the Chief Executive Officer, President and Chairman of Express Employment International, a global staffing franchisor founded and headquartered in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He leads a portfolio of workforce solution brands, including the flagship Express Employment Professionals franchise, along with several affiliated brands serving specialized markets. The Express franchise brand is an industry-leading, international staffing company with franchise locations across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

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