

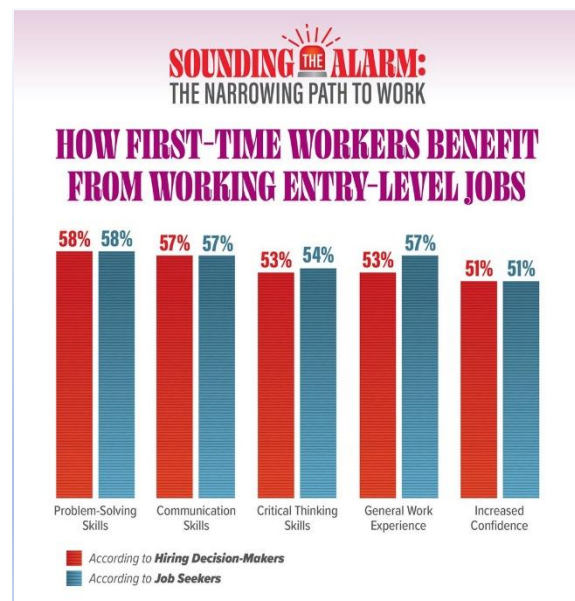


## New Express Survey: Rising Skill Demands Squeeze Entry-Level Hiring, Shrinking Talent Pipelines

*White paper warns entry-level jobs are becoming harder to access, with long-term consequences for both businesses and job seekers.*

OKLAHOMA CITY, May 13, 2026 —Entry-level work has long been the first rung on America’s economic ladder, but new research from an Express Employment Professionals–Harris Poll survey suggests that rung is slipping away, creating ripple effects that extend beyond today’s job seekers to the workforce of the future.

A new white paper, “[Sounding the Alarm: The Narrowing Path to Work](#),” examines how higher skill demands, automation and fewer true entry-level openings are compressing the bottom of the labor market and weakening the foundation of future talent pipelines.



### Key findings include:

- More than 4 in 5 hiring managers say entry-level jobs require candidates to possess more skills than in the past, and 82% of job seekers agree.
- 79% of hiring managers say entry-level jobs are essential or very important for developing future talent at their companies.
- Nearly two-thirds of hiring managers say implementing AI could allow them to reduce workforce size.
- 60% add it’s more efficient to use AI for entry-level tasks than to hire and train a candidate.

While entry-level work isn't disappearing, the availability and accessibility of true entry-level roles are changing dramatically. Positions once designed to provide a first foothold with on-the-job learning increasingly expect candidates to arrive work-ready with stronger technical and soft skills.

For example, entry-level office jobs that once focused on basic tasks like data entry or scheduling now use automation to handle much of that work. Today, entry-level workers are often expected to step in ready to manage systems, solve problems, and communicate clearly with coworkers or customers, rather than learning those skills over time.

This shift has become especially urgent because its impact is already evident in the labor market.

[Recent college graduates](#) faced worsening conditions at the end of 2025, with unemployment rising to about 5.7% and underemployment reaching 42.5%, the highest level since 2020.

When early-career opportunities narrow, job seekers struggle to gain traction, employers risk weakening future talent and leadership pipelines and communities can face lasting economic consequences. If the first rung continues to erode, the entire career ladder becomes harder to climb.

### **Rebuilding the Path to Workforce Readiness**

Drawing on national survey data from The Harris Poll and insights from Express franchise owners across the U.S., the white paper also outlines practical steps organizations can take to protect and modernize entry-level opportunities, including:

- Preserving true entry-level roles designed for zero to two years of experience
- Aligning job requirements with real training and supervision
- Maintaining early-career learning as routine tasks are automated
- Expanding internships, short-term roles and varied assignments that build foundational skills

“Entry-level work is evolving, and employees and employers need to be aware of the rapid shift so they are not left behind,” said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, President and Chairman of Express Employment International. “It is right to sound the alarm that we are in a world of dramatic change, but fears that entry-level work will disappear entirely are misguided. From our perspective, the challenge before us is twofold: job seekers need to reset their expectations and employers need to remember how critical entry-level work is — both to their success and the economy’s success.”

**Download the full white paper** to see why the rapid shift in entry-level work demands action now from employers and job seekers alike: [ExpressPros.com/EntryLevelUS](https://ExpressPros.com/EntryLevelUS). And discover more research and real-world workforce trends from the America Employed series at [ExpressPros.com/Newsroom](https://ExpressPros.com/Newsroom).

### **Survey Methodology**

The Job Insights survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from Nov. 3 to 19, 2025, among 1,002 U.S. hiring decision-makers.

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](mailto:Sheena.Hollander@ExpressPros.com), Director of Corporate Communications & PR.

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### **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.

### **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. Our international network of franchises offers localized staffing solutions to the communities they serve across the U.S., Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, employing more than 11 million people globally since its inception. For more information, visit [ExpressPros.com](https://ExpressPros.com).