Employers Plan to Hire in Second Half of 2026, but Nearly Half Can't Fill Open Roles

Express Employment Professionals-Harris Poll: Growing workloads, newly created positions and turnover are driving demand through year-end.

OKLAHOMA CITY, July 8, 2026 — Employers are heading into the second half of 2026 with plans to hire, but many are still struggling to find the workers they need.

A new Express Employment Professionals-Harris Poll survey found 84% of U.S. hiring managers feel positive about their company's hiring outlook for the remainder of 2026, nearly unchanged from 85% in the fall of 2025. Employers most commonly describe their outlook as optimistic (54%), confident (52%) and hopeful (49%).

That positivity is translating into hiring plans, though at a slightly slower pace: 60% say their company plans to increase the number of employees, down from 66% in the fall of 2025. Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) say their company plans to make significant increases.

Yet the labor market continues to show signs of a stubborn mismatch: 44% of hiring managers say their company currently has open positions they cannot fill, up from 36% in the fall of 2025 and the highest share since Spring 2023.

Companies Want to Grow, but Hiring Isn't Simple

For business leaders, the findings show hiring plans are being driven by operational needs, not optimism alone. Among companies planning to increase headcount, the top reasons are practical business needs:

- 53% cite increased volumes of work.

- 49% say they are filling newly created positions.
- 42% are replacing positions open due to employee turnover.
- 37% are staffing expansion into other categories or markets.

Not Every Company Is Expanding

Still, not all companies are adding staff. Nearly a third of hiring managers (32%) say their company plans to maintain current staffing levels or make no change in the second half of 2026, while 7% plan to reduce employee count.

Among the smaller group of companies planning to decrease staff, the leading reasons point to cost and efficiency pressures:

- 72% cite the need to reduce costs.
- 44% point to increased use of automation, technology or AI intelligence.
- 34% say their company is not replacing or backfilling employees who leave.

Hiring Challenges Remain Widespread

Even companies optimistic about hiring are preparing for complications. Nine in 10 hiring managers expect to face challenges over the remainder of the year.

The top expected challenges include:

- Navigating AI intelligence in recruitment and hiring processes: 49%
- Finding qualified candidates: 42%
- Difficulty planning labor needs due to recession or economic downturn concerns and/or changes in government policies: 32%

The data suggests employers are neither pulling back broadly nor hiring with ease. Instead, many are trying to expand while working through candidate shortages, changing technology and uncertainty that can make workforce planning more difficult.

For the labor market, that means job opportunities remain available, but the path from open role to filled position is still complicated. For employers, the challenge is not only deciding whether to hire, but how clearly and quickly they can connect with the right candidates.

“The mismatch between open jobs and available talent is not something businesses can afford to ignore,” said Bob Funk Jr., CEO, president and chairman of Express Employment International. “Job seekers have an opportunity to build skills in areas where employers need help most, and companies have an opportunity to invest in people who show potential. The right worker may not always arrive ready-made, but with the right training and support, they can become the right fit.”

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Survey Methodology
The Job Insights survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Express Employment Professionals from May 13 to June 1, 2026, among 1,006 U.S. hiring decision-makers.

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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