



BETWEEN

# BLUE & WHITE

THE GREY COLLAR WORKFORCE  
*WHAT THEY BELIEVE AND WHERE THEY'RE TAKING US*

*An Express Employment Professionals White Paper*



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“When we talk about the labor 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 1,019 grey collar workers was conducted online within the United States 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 1,011 U.S. white collar workers (defined as adults ages 18+ in the U.S. who are employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed and works in an office, cubicle, or other administrative setting).<sup>1</sup>*

## 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.



“It makes complete sense to have a classification of people who don't fall in the traditional buckets.”

—Yvonne Rockwell, Express franchise owner, Santa Clarita, California

### 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 labor 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



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.<sup>2</sup>

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.



“I think ‘grey collar’ is a helpful term to understand another part of our American workforce. By talking about the middle, we work toward telling the full story and not leaving people out, which is vital as these workers are too important to our society and are needed to help our economy grow.”

—Tracy Underwood, *Express Oklahoma Regional Director*

## **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.<sup>3</sup>



“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*

## NEWS CLIPS

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

DEC. 9, 2019

### American Factories Demand White-Collar Education for Blue-Collar Work

—The Wall Street Journal<sup>4</sup>

INDUSTRYWEEK.COM

NOV. 15, 2019

### Manufacturing Needs Cloud Engineers

—IndustryWeek<sup>5</sup>

“Most people think of jobs as either blue collar or white collar and don’t often think about the positions that fall in between those traditional terms, even though there is a lot happening in the middle not otherwise captured by traditional definitions.”

—Janis Petrini, Express franchise owner, Grand Rapids, Michigan



## GREY COLLAR VIEWS AND ATTITUDES

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

### Who Does What, Where?

Most grey collar jobs are inside, with 85% reporting that they work "mostly indoors." Ten percent say their jobs involve "equal time spent indoors and outdoors," while only 4% report working "mostly outdoors." One percent say their jobs are mostly "inside a vehicle."

While 43% say that "using technology is a significant part of my job," only 8% say they are concerned about "being replaced by automation."

Eighty-nine percent of grey collar workers are native English speakers, and 89% were born in the United States.

### Satisfied with Work

Like most American workers surveyed by Express, grey collar workers are generally satisfied with their jobs and their lives: 76% say they are "satisfied with the lifestyle" that they have, and 89% agree that they are "proud" of the work they do.

Almost half, 48%, agree that their job field allows them "to help others" and have "a sense of purpose," and 72% agree that their line of work provides "a good career path."

In another indication that most are content with their profession, 62% say they would encourage a child to pursue work in their field. And 78% would choose the same profession if they "had to do it all over again."

More than three out of four grey collar workers agree with the statement "my employer cares about their employees," with 30% agreeing strongly and 47% somewhat agreeing.

And how do grey collar workers think others view their work? The vast majority, 86% agree that "people I know respect the type of work that I do." But about one-third of grey collar workers feel less positively about how they are viewed by the general public, with one-third agreeing with the statement, "At times, I feel like a second-class citizen because of the type of work that I do." Twenty-six percent agree with that statement somewhat, while 7% agree with it strongly.

**21.5 YEARS**

**AVERAGE CAREER LENGTH**

**8.9 YEARS**

**AVERAGE TENURE AT CURRENT JOB**

**38.6 HOURS**

**AVERAGE HOURS WORKED PER WEEK**

**MOST GREY COLLAR WORKERS ARE GETTING RAISES**

**70% RECEIVED A PAY INCREASE IN THE PAST YEAR**

## Right Direction vs. Wrong Track

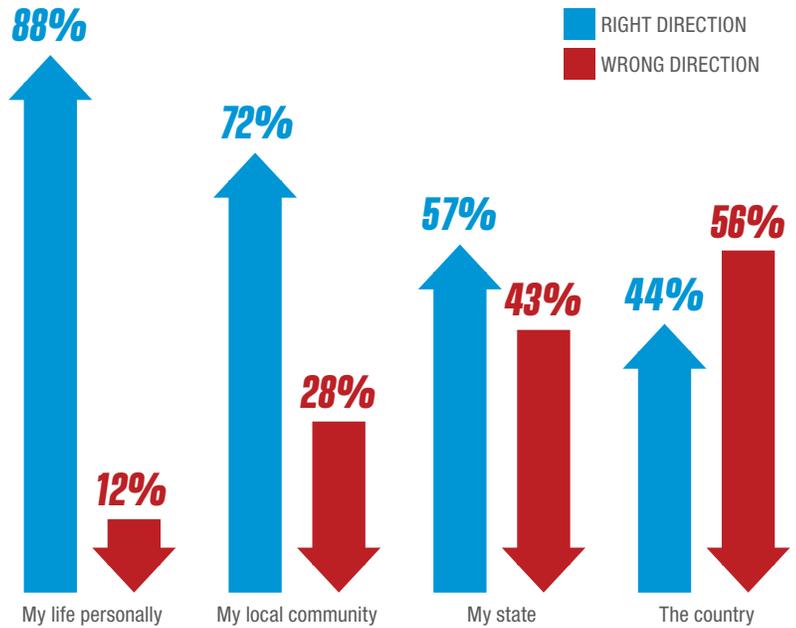
A majority of grey collar workers feel that their lives, communities and states are headed in the right direction, but a majority say that the country is on the wrong track.



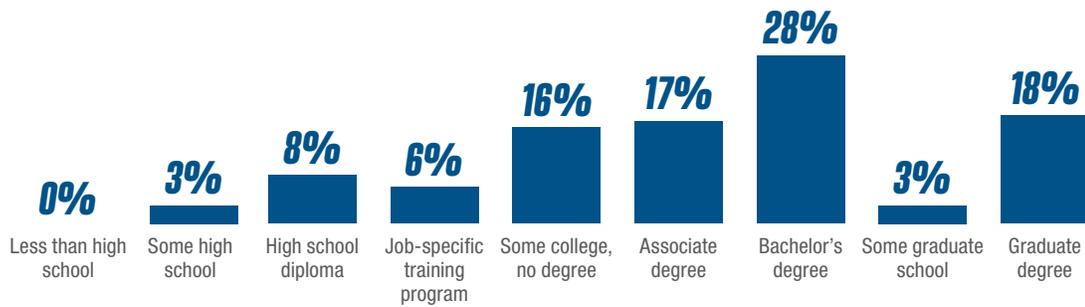
## College: Was It Worth It?

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. Half of these skilled workers have at least a bachelor's degree.

### DO YOU BELIEVE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING IS HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION OR ON THE WRONG TRACK?



### GREY COLLAR WORKERS' HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVELS

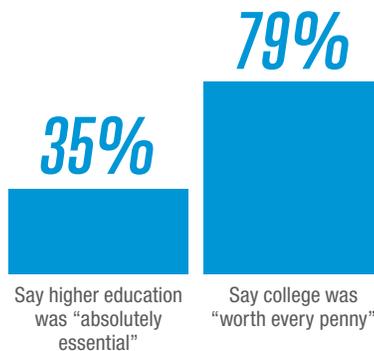


Among those with a college degree, 35% say they think that the higher education they received is absolutely essential to their current job. In fact, most college graduates, 79%, think going to college was worth every penny.

College debt is still an issue for many grey collar workers, with 16% of those who went to college or vocational school having \$25,000 or more in student loan debt. Among those ages 18 to 34, that figure rises to 29%. And one in five (20%) 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.

### GREY COLLAR COLLEGE GRADUATES

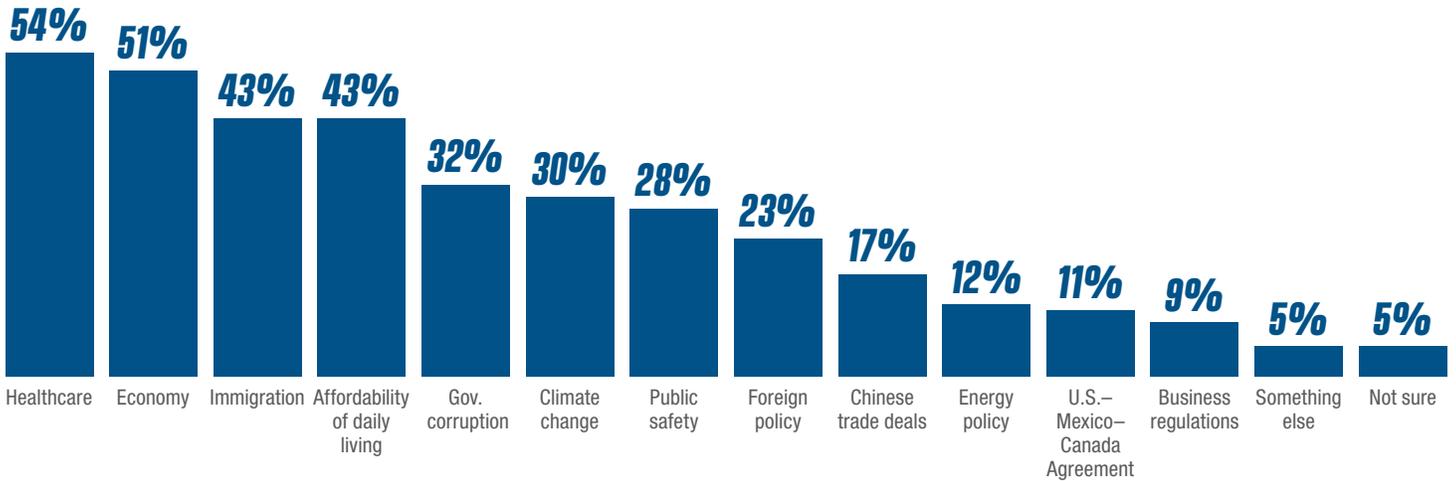


### GREY COLLAR COLLEGE DEBT—AND A LITTLE DESPAIR



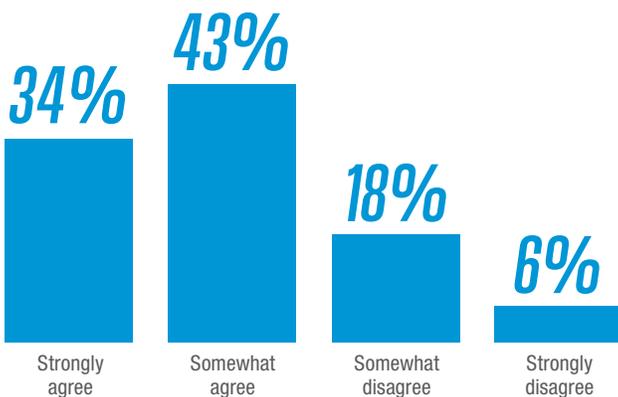
## GREY COLLAR POLITICS

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ARE YOUR TOP CONCERNS HEADING INTO THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION?



## Financial Situation

**“MY JOB PROVIDES A GOOD LIVING TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT MY FAMILY.”**



While more than three-fourths of grey collar workers say their jobs provide a good living, 40% have less than \$5,000 saved for an emergency (excluding property values or money in retirement accounts).

- 6% have no money saved for emergencies
- 17% have less than \$1,000
- 12% have \$1,000 to \$2,499
- 11% have \$2,500 to \$4,999
- 12% have \$5,000 to \$9,999
- 13% have \$10,000 to \$24,999
- 24% have \$25,000 or more
- 6% declined to answer

The majority of grey collar workers believe they have an average financial situation, compared to their neighbors. When asked if they are “financially better off or worse off than your neighbors,” 29% say much or somewhat better off, 53% say about the same, and 18% say somewhat or much worse off.

Almost half, 49%, say they are financially better off than their parents were at the same age, with 28% saying they are in about the same financial situation. About one-in-four, or 23%, say they are worse off.

Of the parents surveyed, just under half, 47%, believe their children will be better off, with 33% saying their children’s financial situation will be about the same. And 20% 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.<sup>6</sup>

## Content in the Present

Grey collar workers, by a narrow margin, are the most satisfied with their work. Eighty-eight percent of grey collar workers and 86% of both blue and white collar workers say they are at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs.

Most believe their job provides a good living financially to support their families (81% white collar, 80% blue collar, 77% grey collar), and few are worried they might lose their positions in the future (13% blue collar, 13% white collar, 12% grey collar).

Regardless of their type of work, the top reason workers value their field is the ability to make a good living wage—at 53% for all groups. Having flexible work hours is also a top reason for job satisfaction (47% white collar, 42% grey collar, 35% blue collar).

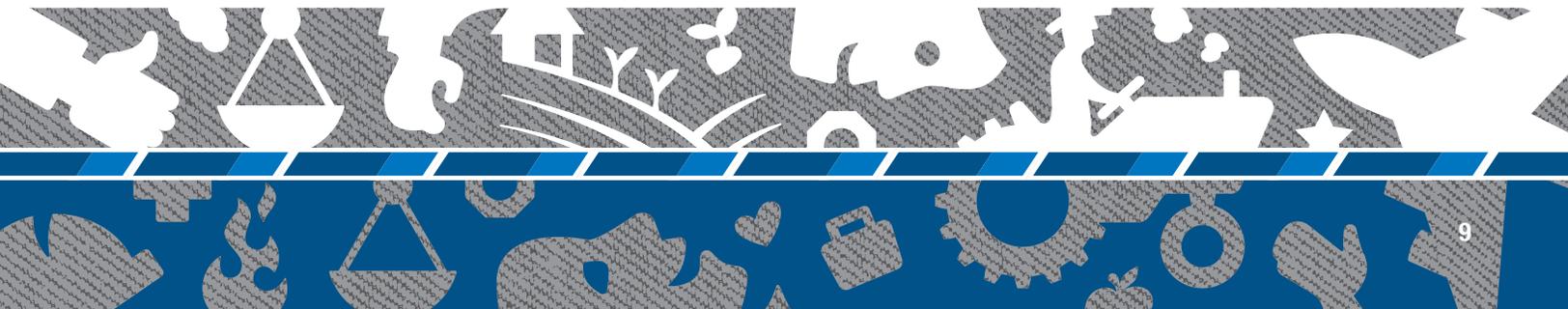
## Comparing Finances

When it comes to financial security, blue collar workers are the least prepared, white collar workers are the most prepared and grey collar workers fall in the middle. Sixty-two percent of blue collar, 45% of grey and 40% of white collar workers also say they have less than \$5,000 saved in case of an emergency.

White collar workers are the most likely group to have a fund of \$25,000 or more saved for emergencies, 33%, with only 24% of grey collar and 11% of blue collar workers reporting the same amount.

The majority of all workers are worried about saving enough for retirement (73% blue collar, 62% white collar, 59% grey collar) and only about half of workers are currently setting aside money for the later years (58% white collar, 53% grey collar). Blue collar workers are the group least likely to save for the future, at only 42%.

About half of all workers describe themselves as middle class, and most say they have received a pay increase in the past year (76% white collar, 70% grey collar, 68% blue collar). White collar and blue collar workers are more likely to say they received a promotion in the past year (36% white collar, 35% blue collar, 29% grey collar).



## Political Differences? Not So Much

At a time when the country is divided along many lines, views on political parties are notably similar between the groups. When asked which political party does a better job of helping Americans in their line of work, there is no consensus. All three groups are split roughly evenly, with grey collar workers showing a slight Democratic preference and blue and white collar workers showing a slight Republican preference.

- Blue collar: 39% Republican, 36% Democratic, 24% neither
- Grey collar: 35% Republican, 38% Democratic, 25% neither
- White collar: 39% Republican, 37% Democratic, 22% neither

## The Future

Eight in 10 U.S. workers are optimistic about their future (83% grey collar, 83% white collar, 80% blue collar), and most parents are hopeful for their children, agreeing with the idea that their children will have an even better future than they will (88% blue collar, 81% grey collar, 75% white collar). And despite any past or future worries, an overwhelming majority say their lives are moving in the right direction (88% grey collar, 86% white collar, 85% blue collar).

Looking down the road, roughly three in four workers believe there is a good career path in their line of work (75% white collar, 74% blue collar, 72% grey collar) and would encourage a friend or family member to pursue a job in it (70% grey collar, 68% white collar, 64% blue collar).

## Divergent Views

**VALUE OF COLLEGE:** While 79% of grey collar workers say college was “worth every penny,” fewer white collar workers—70%—say the same.

**FUTURE JOB DEMAND:** Grey collar workers are far more likely to encourage a child to explore a career in their field than white collar workers because they anticipate high demand for their job in the future (grey collar 45%, white collar 31%).

**TECHNOLOGY:** White collar and grey collar workers are more than twice as likely as blue collar workers to say that technology plays an important role in their jobs—54% of white collar workers, 43% of grey collar workers and 18% of blue collar workers.

**PURPOSE:** Grey collar workers are much more likely to say that their work gives them a “sense of purpose” and allows them to “help others.” Almost half (48%) of grey collar workers say that they like this attribute of their job, yet just 26% of blue collar workers and 40% of white collar workers say the same.

**WORKPLACE SAFETY:** While 39% of blue collar workers say their jobs “can be dangerous at times,” only 4% of white collar workers and 10% of grey collar workers share that sentiment.

## THINKING BEYOND LABELS



“The impact of automation, digitization, AI, robotics, and other new technologies that we aren’t even talking about yet will impact all of these workers similarly. The end result is that some jobs will completely go away, some jobs will still exist but be augmented by new technologies and in some cases, completely new jobs will be created. These same things will happen across all types of industries.”

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

The pace of change in the workplace is likely only to accelerate. Disruption is the new normal, so workers of all types—white, blue 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 labor and manage more technology.

Examining the views of grey collar workers and working the term into our workplace lexicon can help 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 (83%) and grey collar workers (81%) 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, 62%; white collar, 56%).<sup>7</sup>

Workers themselves often self-identify in ways that outside observers may not expect. Although the majority of white collar workers (80%) describe their work as “white collar,” 49% of grey collar workers see their work as “white collar,” 25% as “grey collar” and 14% as “blue collar.” Eleven percent (11%) say “something else,” rejecting all three labels.

Younger grey collar workers, ages 18 to 34, are the most likely to label the type of work they do as “grey collar” (31%) or “blue collar” (25%).

The majority of white collar (76%) and grey collar workers (73%) believe labeling a profession as “blue collar,” “white collar” or “grey collar” is not offensive to them personally, but about 60% believe the labeling hurts how people view a particular line of work as well as the people who perform that work.

More than one in four grey collar (31%) and white collar workers (27%) go further and say they would likely be in another profession if it were not for the assigned label.



“The existing two-option classifications between collars will be a thing of the past. Millennials and younger generations are a type of worker that is new to America. These groups have no ties, in a traditional sense, to organizations or institutions like the generations before them. They are more flexible and have no problem moving from company to company, career to career, working from home or in a brick and mortar business. You cannot easily classify that type of worker using traditional buckets.”

—Tracy Underwood, *Express Oklahoma Regional Director*

## **POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS?**

References to blue collar workers are common on the political campaign trail, and political analysts frequently break down their reports on political trends with references to blue collar and white collar workers.

Where politicians, like all Americans, may want to be careful is in making assumptions about how workers view themselves, what stereotypes they may be unintentionally perpetuating or what connotations those labels may have for listeners.

As the grey collar research makes clear, the situation is much more complex than pundits and politicians make it seem.

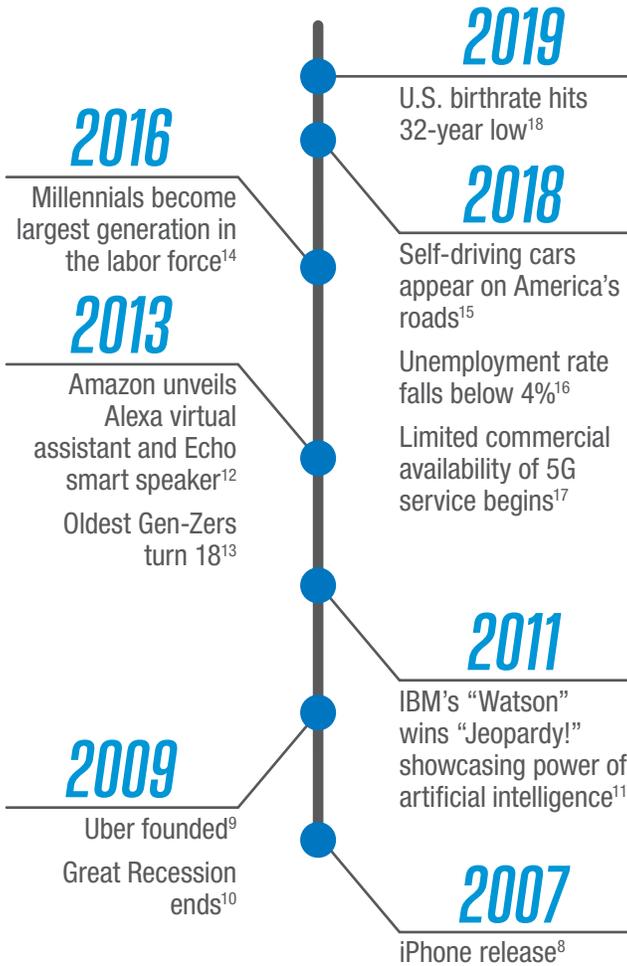


“Like any classification, it can oversimplify and allow stereotypes to persist ... There is some elitism that looks down upon blue collar work. I think people like Mike Rowe are shining an appreciative spotlight on the value of work in general and especially in blue collar work.”

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

# 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 concepts and rethink whether using labels to define work roles remains relevant—whatever collar or color they may be.



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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](http://ExpressPros.com).

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