RESEARCH BRIEF | September 2026

Earning and Learning in the U.S. Service Sector

Executive Summary

Most U.S. workers find their first job in the service sector. Over half of employed teens and one-third of U.S. workers in their early 20s are hourly workers employed in retail and food service, and these represent nearly 1 in 5 jobs in the U.S. labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2026). The service sector is the first rung on the career ladder for millions of Americans, and represents a long-term career for many. Yet workers in these jobs often contend with low wages, few benefits, and insufficient, inconsistent work hours. For these workers, of whom only 22 percent have earned a postsecondary degree (Ross and Bateman 2019), opportunities to advance their education and build skills could provide an avenue to upward mobility and greater economic security.

Schools have historically been the primary site for education and training, so it stands to reason that research on education and training pathways to desirable career outcomes has largely focused on school-based settings. However, this focus on school settings provides an incomplete picture. The conjunction of longer life spans and a rapidly changing labor market has created a need for continued education and training throughout the life course. Increasingly, workplaces have become an important site for training and skill-building opportunities as more workers weave together earning and learning throughout their careers.

Employers function as gatekeepers who can either expand or foreclose access to learning across the life course. The past decade has witnessed a quiet but significant expansion of corporate-sponsored tuition benefit programs (CSTBs) in the service sector, a shift driven in part by a change to the tax code, which allows employers to provide up to $5,250 in annual tax-exempt educational benefits (Ngo 2025). Many large retail and food service employers have now publicly reported supporting pathways to skill-building and career advancement through a range of work-based learning activities and by sponsoring educational and training opportunities. Yet despite

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this expansion, remarkably little is known about how workers in these jobs actually experience education and training — what career goals they hold, what opportunities they pursue at and outside of work, what barriers prevent them from taking up employer-sponsored programs, and who, if anyone, provides them with mentorship and career support. Nor do we know how these experiences vary across employers or over the life course.

This brief begins to fill gaps in our knowledge about education and training for workers in low-wage service sector jobs. Drawing on new Shift Project survey data collected in Fall 2025 from around 5,300 adults employed at 144 large service sector employers across the United States, we provide insights into service sector workers' career aspirations and how education and training fit within them.

A Preview of Key Findings

- In striking contrast with conventional wisdom, we find that the majority of service sector workers consider their jobs to be careers rather than waystations on the way to starting a career. A surprisingly large share of workers aim to remain with their current employer and hope to have an opportunity to advance. This is dramatically different from the dominant narrative of service sector work as transient.
- The vast majority of service sector workers see additional education and training to be important for achieving their career goals - whether they aim to stay in their current job or switch careers.
- Training opportunities offered through employers can create accessible opportunities across the life course, for younger and older workers alike, and provide those with caregiving responsibilities an accessible avenue for continued skill-building.
- Employer-sponsored opportunities are highly variable, and so too are participation rates of their workforces. Comparing across employers is a promising avenue for future research to link program features with persistence and completion rates and ultimately with desirable career mobility outcomes.

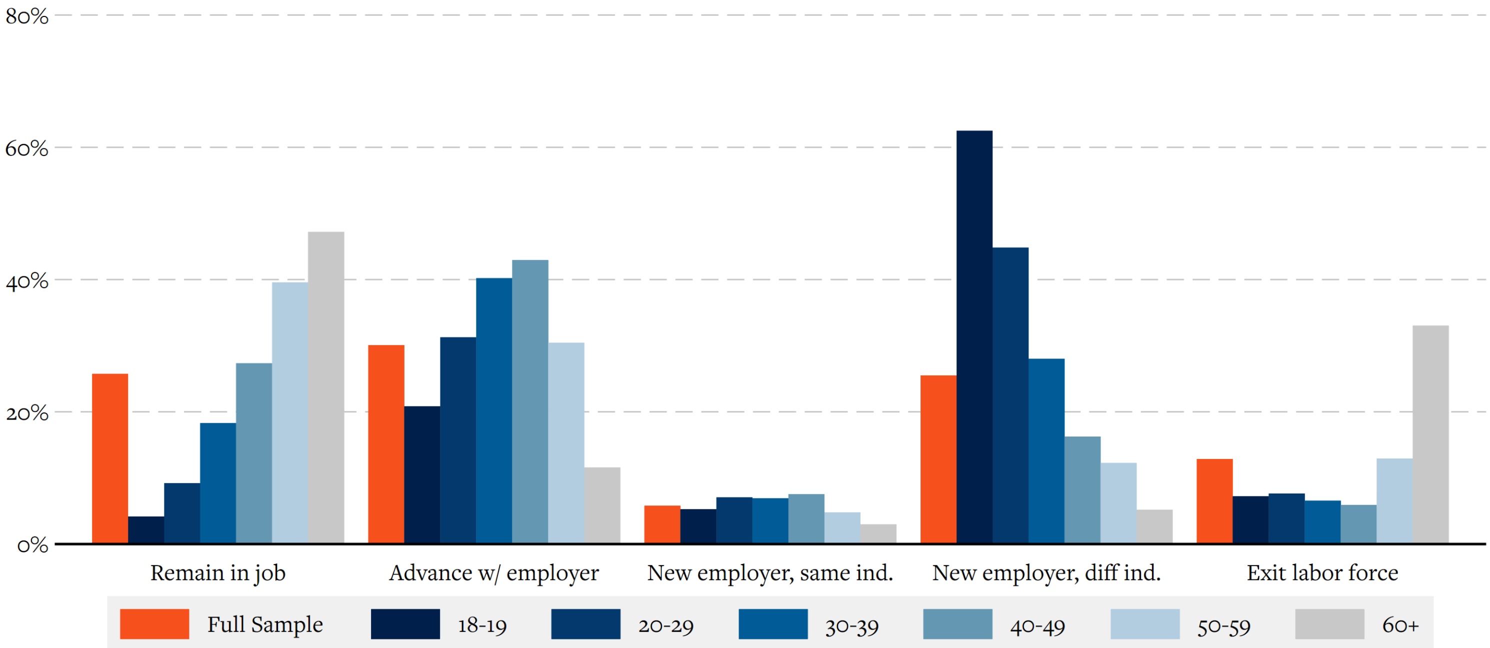
Educational and Training Aspirations

Career Trajectories

Service sector jobs are often stereotyped as a first job for teenagers, a brief waystation before moving on to a proper career elsewhere. When we asked service sector workers about their career aspirations over the next five years, about one-quarter of workers aspire to change jobs and move to a different industry. However, a much larger share hold career aspirations rooted in their current jobs. Overall, half of service sector workers aspire to remain in their current job or advance with their current employer over the next five years (Figure 1).

These aspirations vary across the life course. For workers aged 18 to 19, the service sector functions largely as a launching pad. Nearly two-thirds aspire to work in a different industry entirely within five years, while fewer than 5 percent want to remain in the same job. By the 20s, that pull toward a different industry has already begun to moderate, and by the 30s the landscape looks fundamentally different. Advancing with the current employer becomes the single most common aspiration, cited by 40 percent of workers in their 30s and 43 percent of those in their 40s, while the share seeking a different industry falls to 28 and 16 percent respectively. The share who want to stay in the same job rises steadily with age, reaching 47 percent among workers 60 and older, for whom leaving the labor force entirely is the other dominant aspiration at 33 percent. Across the full sample, the single most common response is advancing with the current employer. For a plurality of service sector workers, these jobs are not stepping stones but long-term careers.

Figure 1. Career Aspirations (Over The Next Five Years By Age Group)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 5301
Question: Over the next 5 years, would you like to...

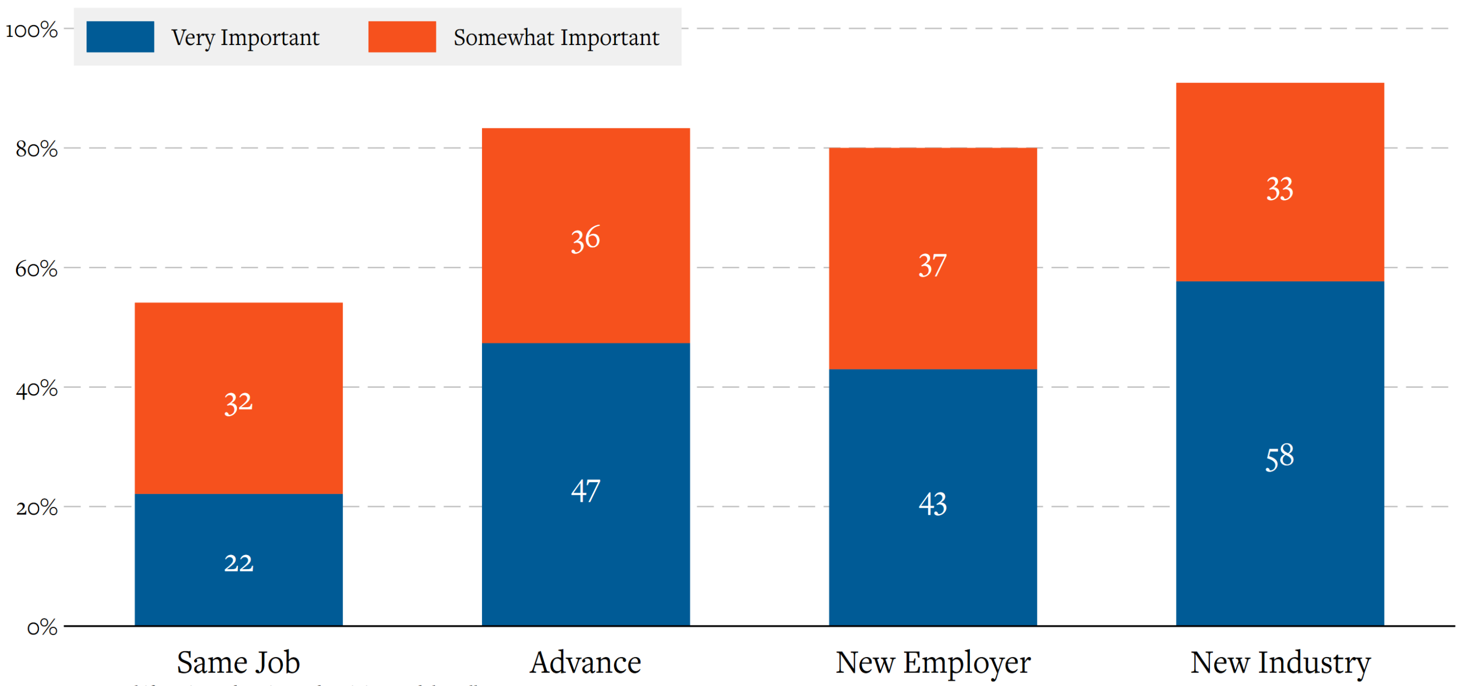
Demand for Education

Career goals vary widely among service sector workers, but the sense that further education and training is helpful, or even necessary, to reach them does not. Figure 2 shows how workers assess the importance of additional education and training for achieving their career goals. The results are striking: large majorities see education as important across all goals. Even among workers who simply want to remain in their current job, 54 percent see further education or training as at least somewhat important. That share rises to 83 percent among those aspiring to advance with their employer, 80 percent among those hoping to move to a new employer, and 91 percent among those seeking to enter a different industry entirely. Across virtually every career trajectory, service sector workers recognize education and training as a critical enabler.

Given the perception of education and training as important for achieving career goals, which types of training opportunities do workers want to pursue? Overall, more than half of workers would like to build skills at work and 41 percent aspire to skill-building opportunities outside of work (Figure 3). About one-third of workers express a desire to pursue a higher level of educational attainment, and about one-third would like to pursue a leadership program.

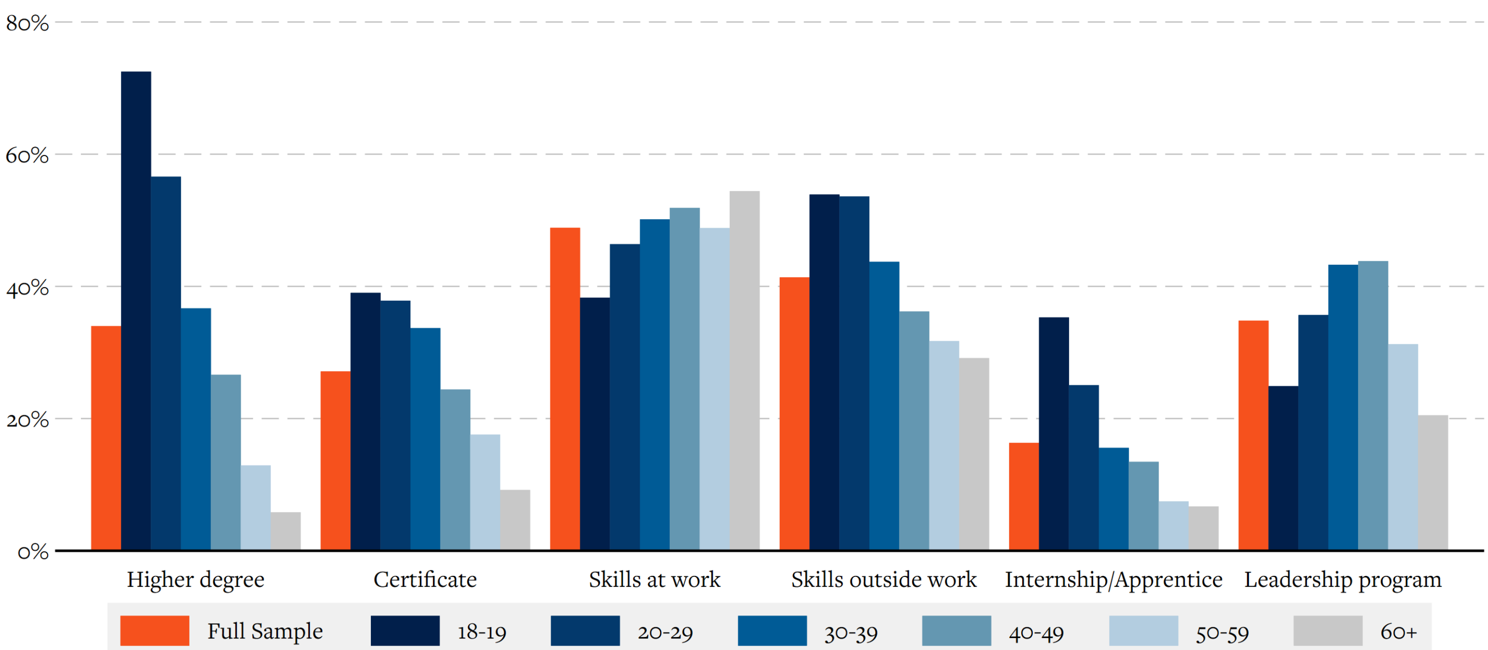
As with career aspirations, educational aspirations also vary across the life course. The majority of young workers under age 30 are intending to attain a higher degree. Aspirations to earn a higher degree decline steeply with age, from nearly three-quarters of workers aged 18 to 19 and over half of those in their 20s, down to just 6 percent of workers 60 and older. A similar decline characterizes certificates and skills training outside of work. Interest in internships and apprenticeships is concentrated among the youngest workers, at 35 percent of teens, and falls steeply thereafter. Research on work-based learning for college students finds that structured, employer-connected experiences are among the highest-value learning modalities for career preparation (Strada Education Foundation 2025). Our data suggest meaningful demand for analogous pathways among younger service sector workers, yet these remain among the rarest opportunities employers provide.

Figure 2. Importance of Education and Training for Achieving Career Goals (By Career Goal)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 4528
Question: How important do you think additional education and training would be for [career goal]?
Note: Excludes those planning to exit the labor force.

Figure 3. Future Education and Training Plans (By Age Group)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 3866
Question: In the future, would you like to... (mark all that apply)

Yet the overall picture is not one of declining learning ambition with age. Skills training at work follows the opposite pattern, rising with age and reaching its highest levels among workers in their 50s and 60s. Leadership programs peak sharply among workers in their 30s and 40s, at around 44 percent, mirroring exactly the age group most focused on advancing with their current employer in Figure 1. Taken together, a sizeable share of service sector workers aspire to be learners at every stage of the life course. The question is whether the opportunities on offer match what they need to achieve their career goals.

Participation in Education and Training Activities

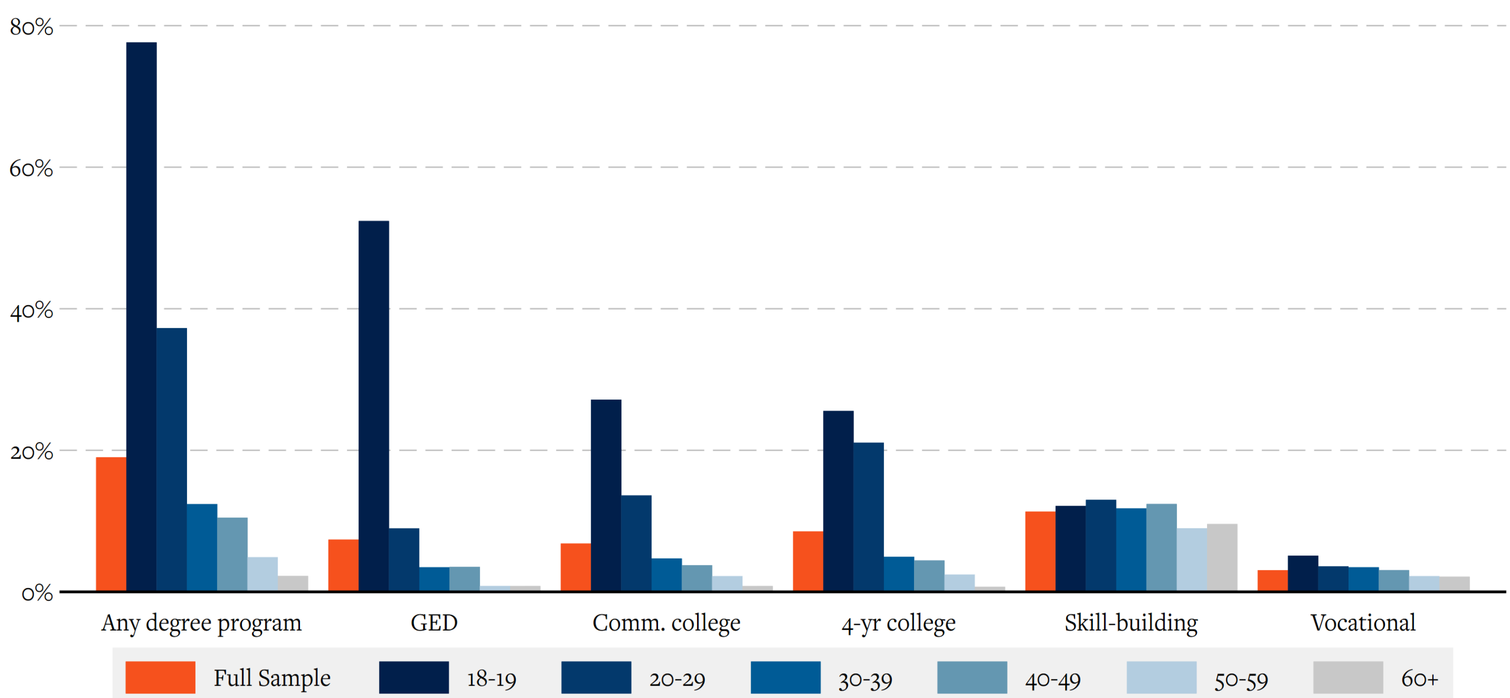
For some but not all workers, educational and training aspirations translate into participation in these activities. Workers reported on a set of education and training activities they participated in outside of work. They also reported specifically on the education and training activities that were provided by or sponsored by their employers. We present these results in turn.

Outside Work

Overall, 19 percent of service sector workers participated in any degree program in the past year. That number, however, masks enormous variation by age. Among workers aged 18 to 19, 78 percent were enrolled in some form of degree program, reflecting the overlap between teenage service sector work and high school or early college enrollment. Participation falls sharply from there — to 37 percent among workers in their 20s, 12 percent in their 30s, and just 2 percent among workers 60 and older.

Comparing these statistics from Figure 4 to the aspirations in Figure 3 reveals a consistent gap. Among workers in their 20s, over half aspired to earn a higher degree, yet only 37 percent were enrolled. Among workers in their 30s, 36 percent expressed degree aspirations but only 12 percent had participated in a degree program in the past year. The gap between wanting more education and actually pursuing it widens with age, perhaps because of an increase in competing demands with age.

Figure 4. Participation in Educational Activities Outside of Work (By Age Group)



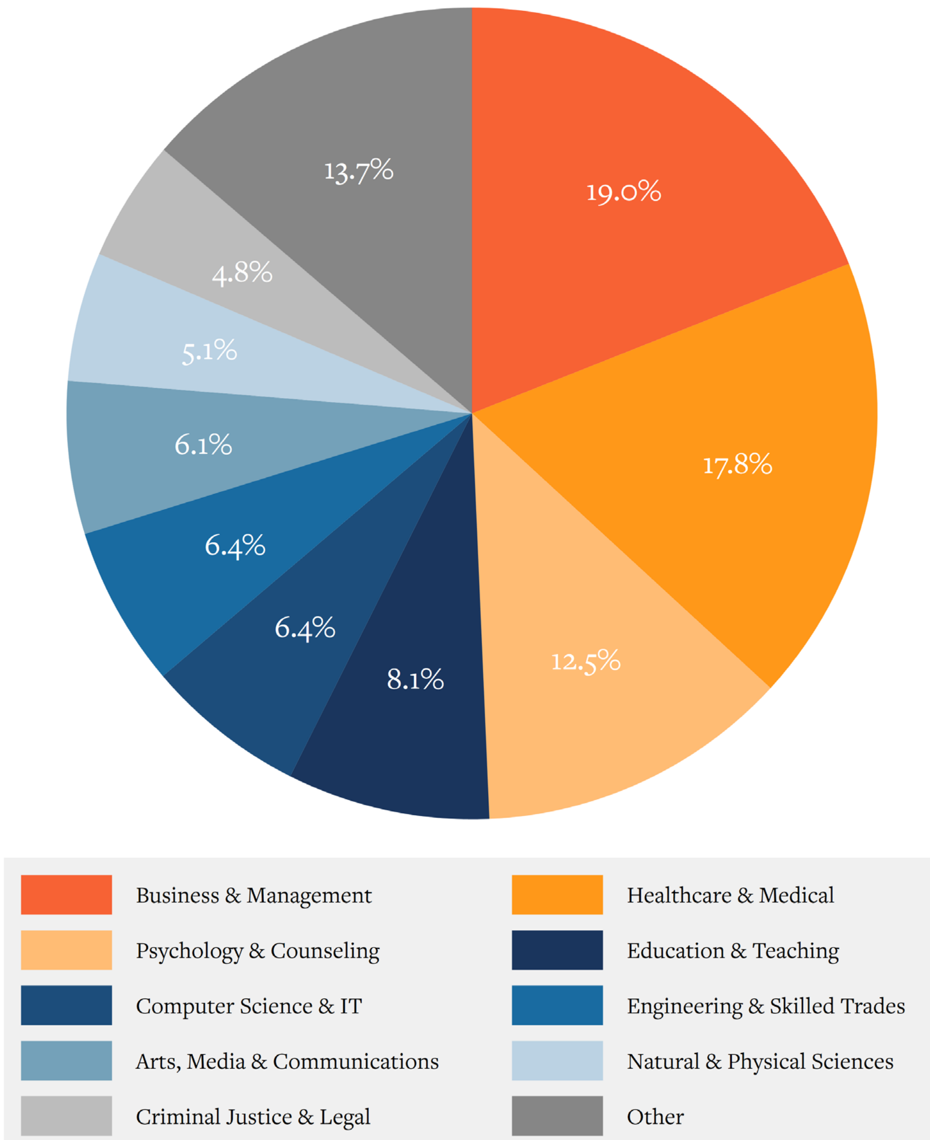
Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 5013
Question: In the past year have you engaged in any of the following educational or training activities outside of work?

Skill-building workshops or classes are the exception to this pattern. Participation is low but essentially flat across age groups, ranging from around 12 to 13 percent for workers in their 20s through 40s, and dipping only modestly for older workers. Vocational training participation is low across all age groups, never exceeding 5 percent.

Among those who did participate in education or training outside of work, participation was roughly evenly split across modalities: 37 percent attended in-person only, 31 percent online only, and 32 percent used a combination of both.

Figure 5 shows the fields of study among the nearly 20 percent of service sector workers currently pursuing a degree. Business and Management is the most common field at 19 percent, followed closely by Healthcare and Medical at 18 percent. Psychology and Counseling (12 percent) and Education and Teaching (8 percent) round out the top four. Computer Science and IT and Engineering and Skilled Trades each account for around 6 percent.

Figure 5. Fields of Study Among Workers Pursuing Education (Among Workers Enrolled in Educational Programs)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 953
Question: Please share your field of study or your major in your educational or training program. (open text)
Note: "Other" includes General/Undeclared, Liberal Arts & Humanities, Culinary & Food Service, Veterinary & Animal Care, and other/uncategorized responses.

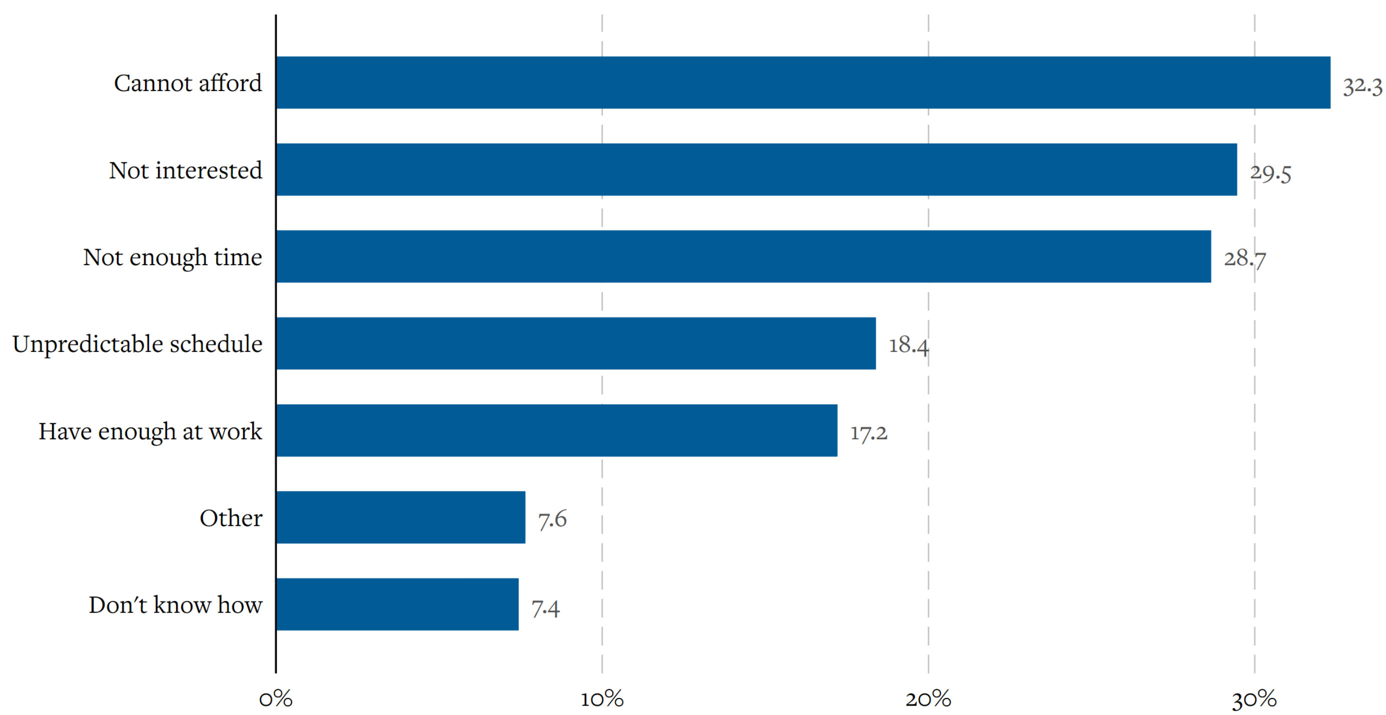
These choices largely align with projected labor market demand. According to [Bureau of Labor Statistics]() projections for 2024 to 2034, healthcare, business, and education are among the fields with the highest expected openings for college-educated workers. The fields service sector workers are pursuing are not mismatched with where the jobs will be.

Still, more than 70 percent of workers reported no education or training outside of work. What got in the way? Figure 6 shows the barriers workers cite for not pursuing education or training outside of work. About 29 percent report simply not being interested, and 17 percent say they have enough training through work to satisfy their needs. Others reported structural barriers. Cost is the single most commonly cited obstacle, with 32 percent saying they cannot afford further education or training. Time is nearly as common at 29 percent. Employers themselves can also actively impede access, as unpredictable work schedules, a defining feature of service sector employment, are a barrier for 18 percent of workers. Not knowing how to access education is a barrier for only 7 percent, suggesting information is not the primary constraint.

Employer-Provided or Sponsored Education and Training

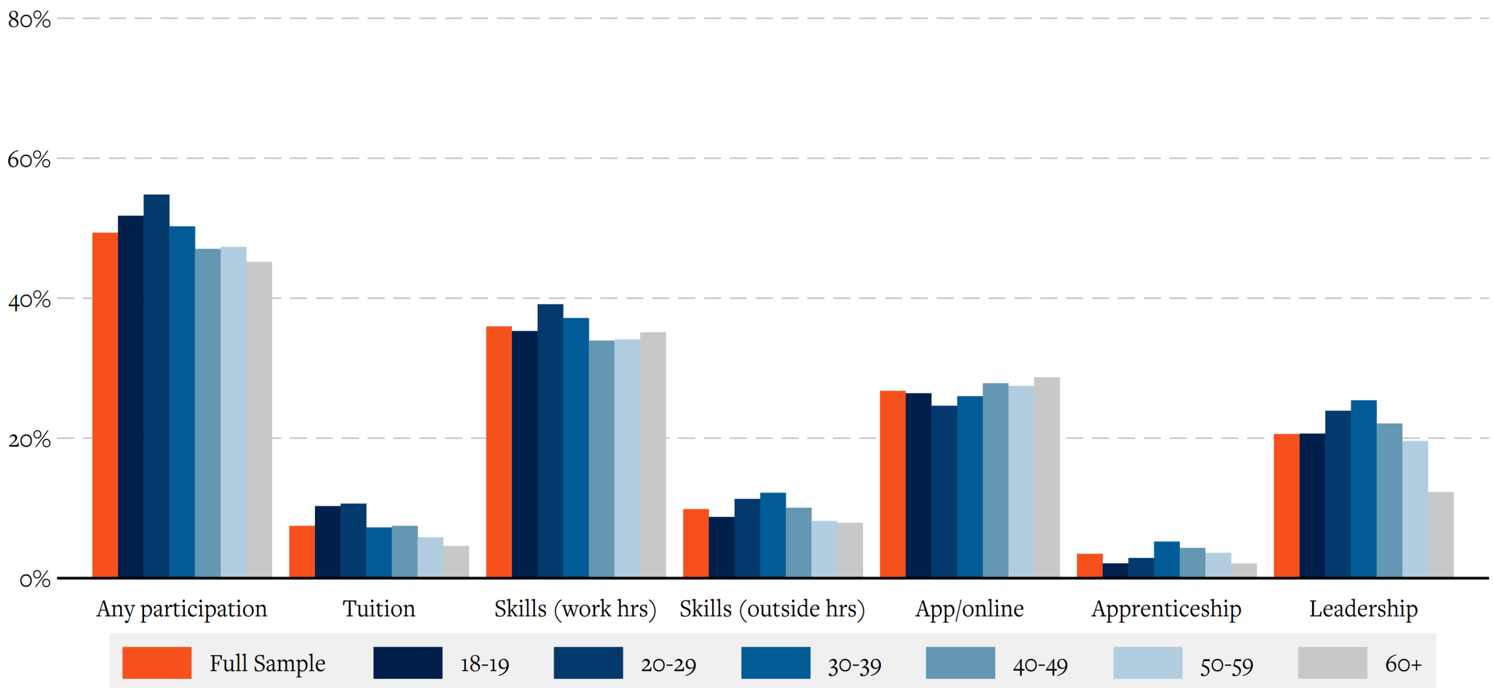
In the prior section, we presented findings on workers' pursuit of education and training outside of work. In this section, we turn to education and training sponsored by or provided by employers. Figure 7 shows that about half of service sector workers participated in at least one employer-sponsored opportunity in the past year. Unlike participation in education outside of work, which fell steeply with age, employer-sponsored participation is essentially flat across the life course, ranging from 45 to 55 percent across all age groups. Where workers' personal educational pursuits outside work are heavily concentrated among the young, the workplace seems to be a learning institution with capacity to serve workers across the life course.

Figure 6. Barriers to Participating in Education or Training Outside Work (Among Workers Not Enrolled in The Past Year)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 3388
Question: What are the main reasons you have not participated in education or training outside of work? (mark all that apply)
Note: Sample restricted to those who did not participate in education/training outside of work in the past year.

Figure 7. Participation in Employer-Sponsored Education and Training (By Age Group)



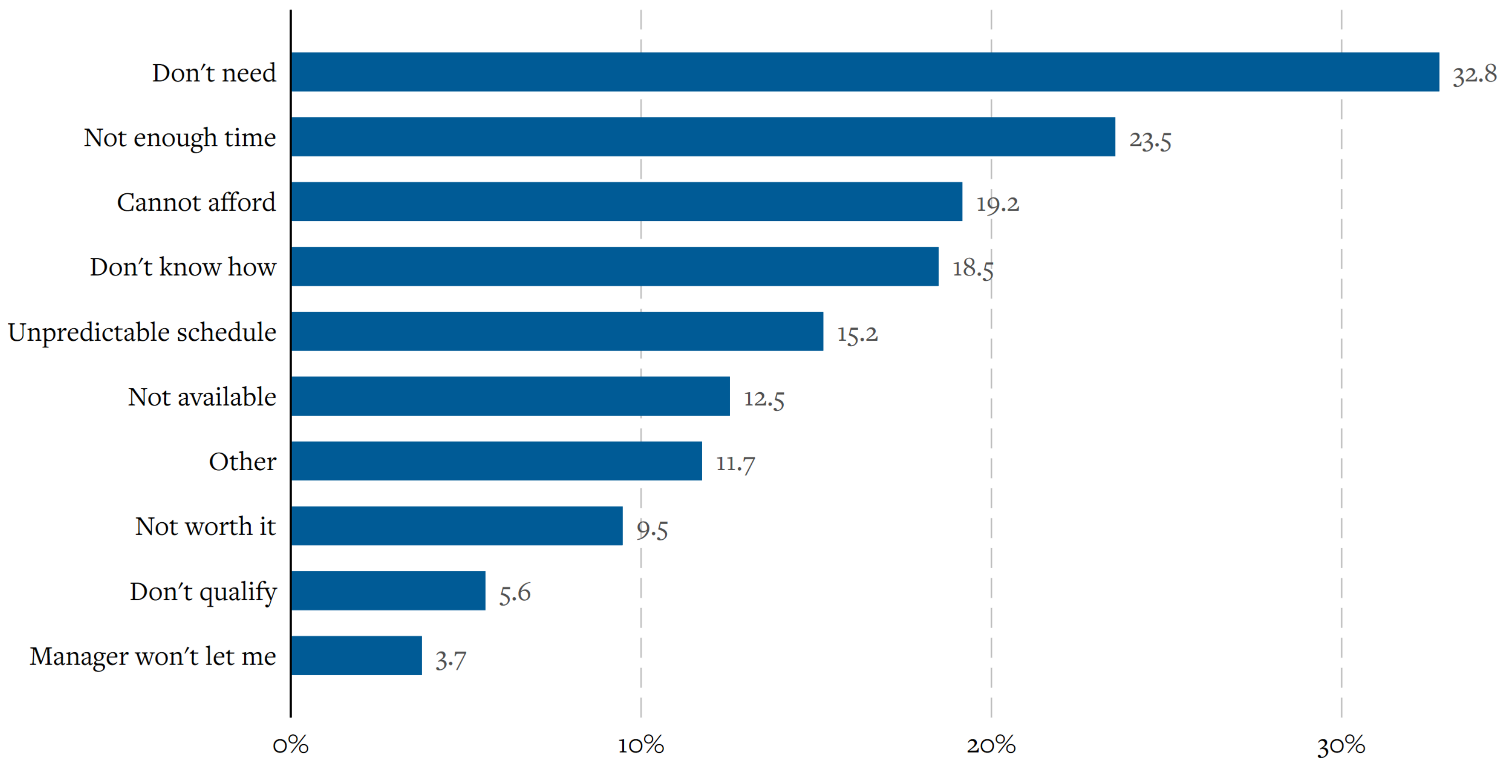
Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 4689
Question: Have you participated in any of the following opportunities offered by your employer? (% responding 'Yes I did')

"Training opportunities to build skills during work hours" is most common, at 36 percent overall. App-based or online training is next at 27 percent, followed by leadership programs at 21 percent. Tuition benefits, despite being among the most publicly discussed employer investments in workforce development, were used by just 8 percent of workers. That number is low even accounting for the fact that not all employers offer them. Among workers whose employer offers tuition benefits, only 15 percent reported using them, despite 36 percent wanting to earn a higher degree. The gap between aspiration and take-up is more than 20 percentage points, suggesting that there are still obstacles to participation in employer-sponsored education programs.

Figure 8 shows why workers who did not participate in employer-sponsored opportunities stayed on the sidelines. The most common reason is simply not feeling the need, at around 33 percent. But structural barriers are prominent: 24 percent cite not enough time, 19 percent say they cannot afford it, and 15 percent report unpredictable schedules. Notably, 18 percent say they do not know how to access what their employer offers, suggesting that employer programs suffer from an awareness and navigation problem on top of cost and time constraints.

Despite these barriers, education embedded in the workday appears to fill a gap for some, particularly workers with children. Parents are largely excluded from formal education outside of work: only 7 percent have enrolled in a degree program in the past year, compared with 33 percent of workers without children — a 26-percentage-point gap. At work, however, this pattern reverses. A regression analysis of participation across demographic groups shows little meaningful variation by age, race, or gender, but workers *with* children are actually *more* likely than workers without children to participate in education and training at work, by 8 percentage points for any employer-sponsored program, 6 p.p. for skills training during work hours, and 5 p.p. for app-based or online learning (see Appendix Table 3). For caregivers, employer programs that are integrated into the workday appear to offer a meaningful alternative and are filling a gap for workers with less discretionary time outside of paid work hours.

Figure 8. Barriers to Using Employer-Sponsored Education or Training



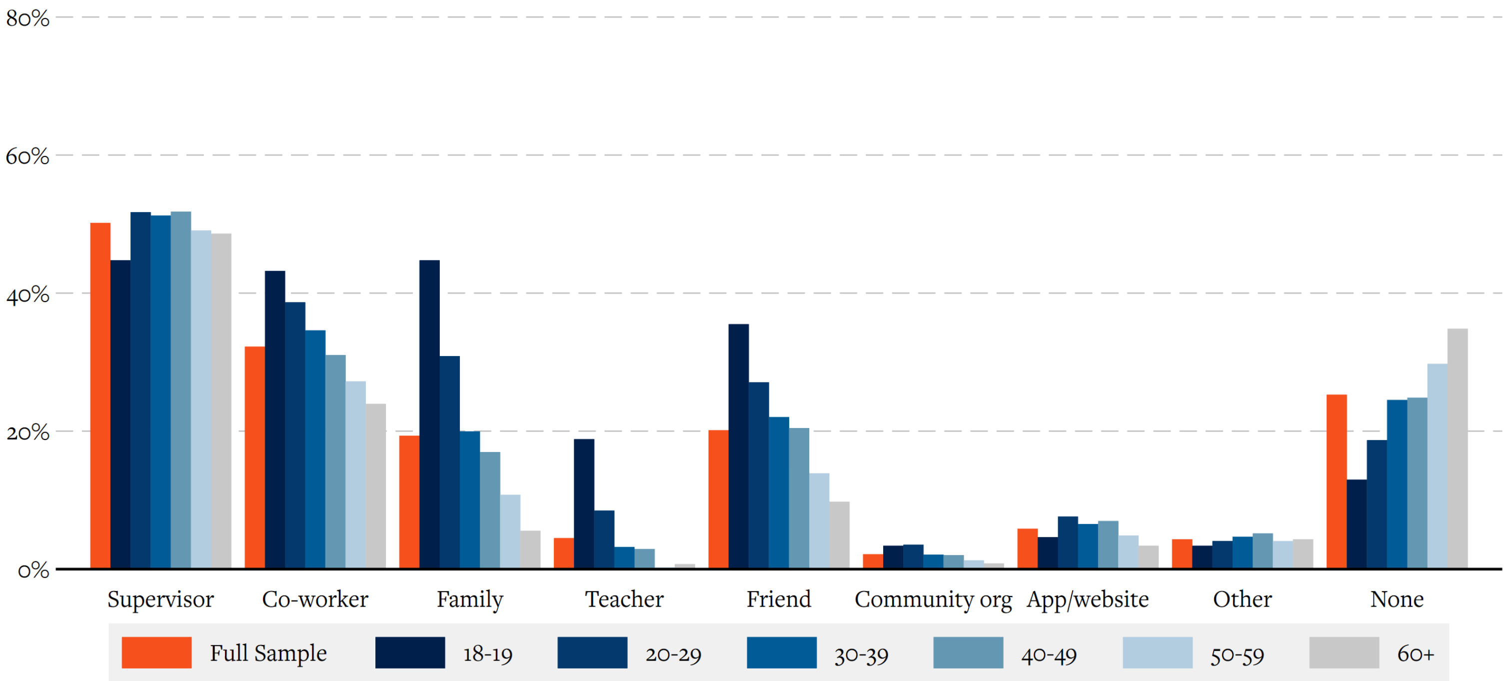
Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 1763
Question: What are the main reasons you have not participated in education/training offered by your employer? (mark all that apply)
Note: Sample restricted to those who did not participate in employer-sponsored education/training.

Career Mentorship and Support

Education and training are not the only resources workers draw on to advance their careers. A substantial body of research links career mentorship to better outcomes across the working life: higher compensation, faster promotion, and greater career satisfaction (Allen et al. 2004). Given these benefits, the extent to which employers foster mentorship in the workplace may be just as consequential as their investment in formal training.

Figure 9 shows the sources workers rely on for career guidance. The supervisor is the single most common source of career mentoring across all age groups of service sector workers, cited by about half of workers overall. This role of supervisors becomes even more critical over the life course. Among teens, family, friends, and teachers are important secondary sources, reflecting the broader networks available to younger workers still embedded in schools and households. With age, those informal sources recede sharply. Reliance on family falls from 45 percent among teens to around 5 percent among workers 60 and older, and friends and teachers follow similar trajectories. For older workers, the supervisor increasingly becomes the primary, and sometimes the only, source of career support. About a quarter of workers overall report receiving no career mentorship at all, and that share rises steadily with age. These patterns, taken together, point to the workplace and the supervisor relationship in particular as a central site of career development for service sector workers.

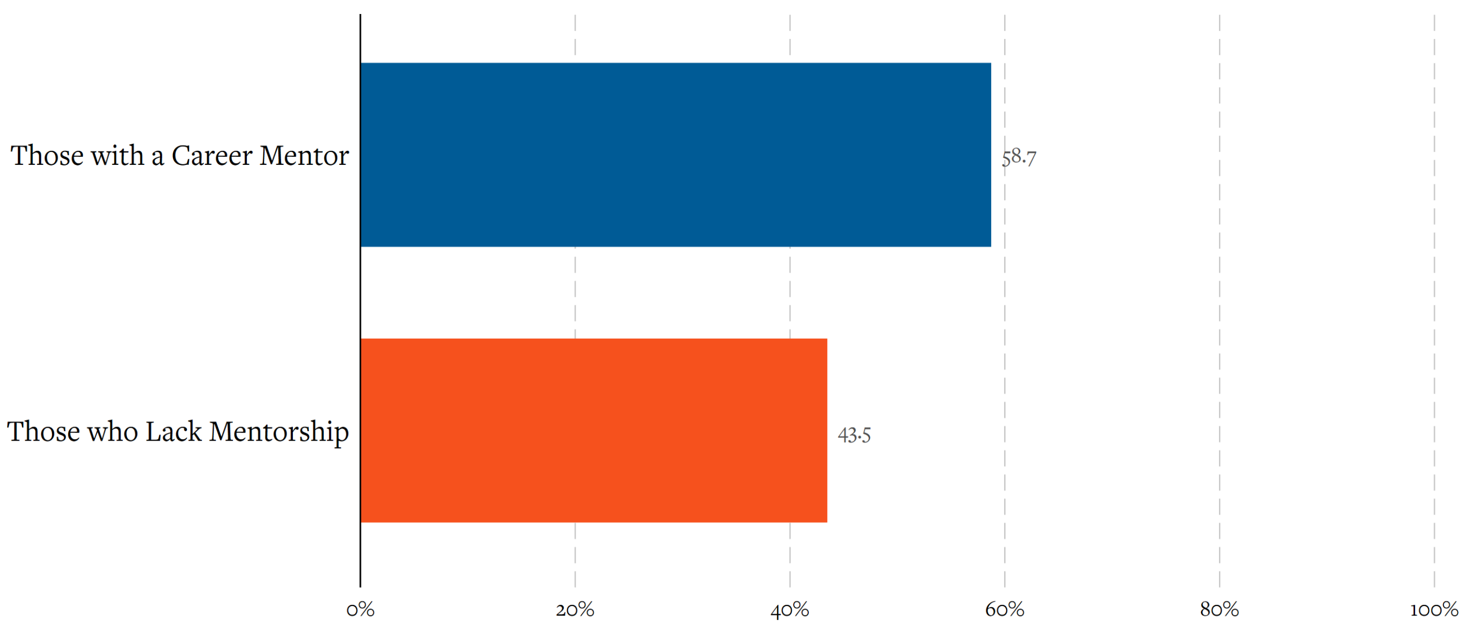
Figure 9. Sources of Career Mentoring and Support (By Age Group)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 5059
Question: Who do you receive mentoring and support from to help you advance in your career? (mark all that apply)

The availability of someone to provide career mentoring is strongly related to optimism about future career prospects. Figure 10 shows that workers with a career mentor are 15 percentage points more likely to feel very confident about achieving their career goals in the next five years — 59 percent versus 44 percent. Those without a mentor are more than twice as likely to say they are not very confident. Getting support from someone invested in your advancement is not just a nice feature of a job. It shapes whether workers believe their aspirations are achievable at all.

Figure 10. Mentorship and Career Optimism (Percent "Very Likely" to Achieve Career Goals in Next 5 Years)



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. N = 5052
Question: How likely is it that you will be able to [achieve career goal] over the next 5 years?

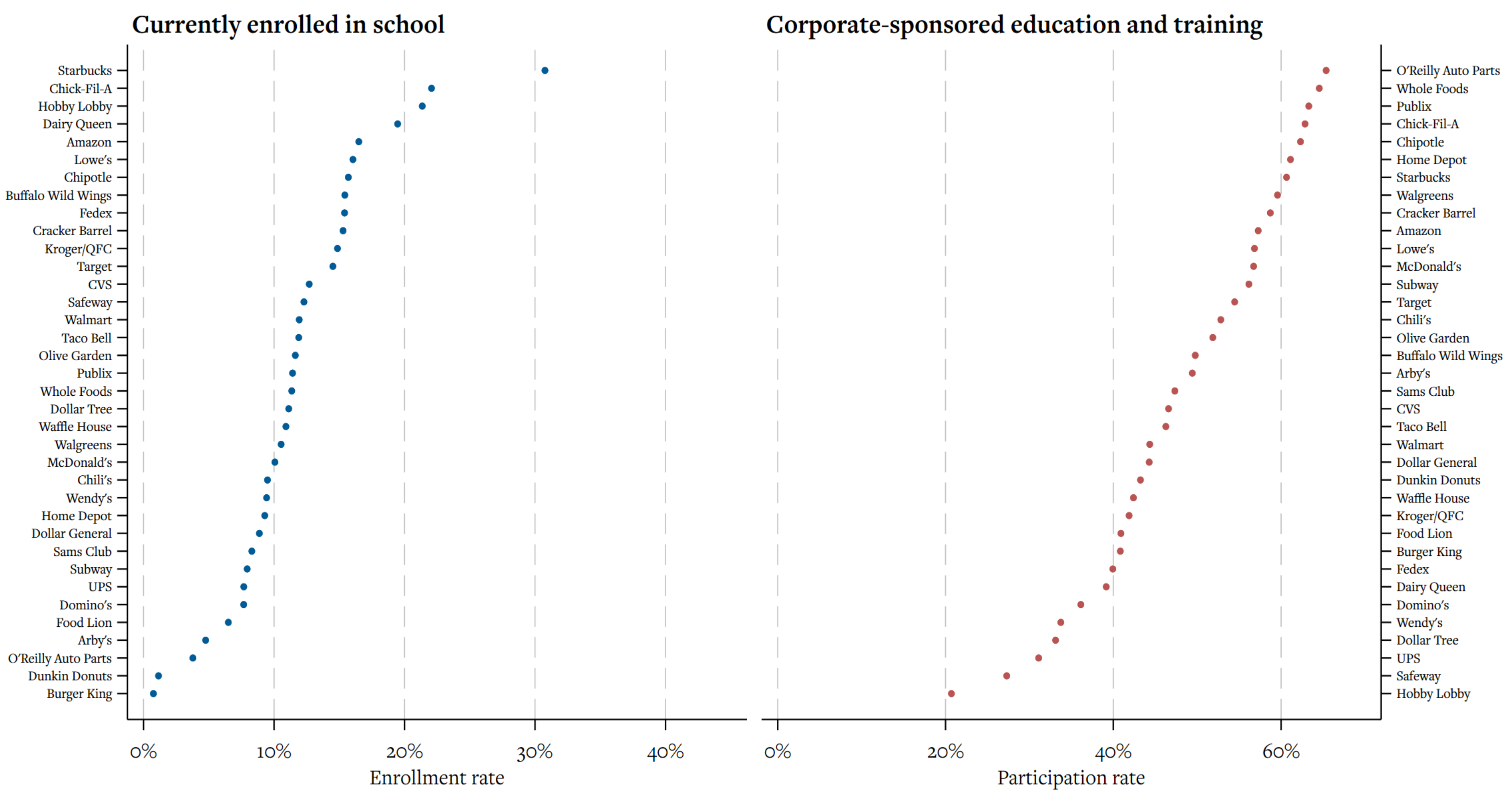
Employer Heterogeneity

> *"Personally, the only reason that I've stayed at Chipotle this long is because they do tuition reimbursement." – Chipotle worker, Texas*

We have so far described how workers collectively engage with education and training. However, we have yet to discuss the primary conduit through which the opportunities are offered. The workplace is not neutral ground. It structures which learning opportunities are visible, subsidized, and scheduled around.

In this section, we compare participation in education and training for the 36 largest employers in our sample, each with at least 100 surveyed workers. Across these firms, the variation in participation shown in Figure 11 is substantial: the share of workers currently enrolled in school ranges from near zero to 31 percent,and participation in employer-sponsored training from 21 to 65 percent. Differences in enrollment could reflect differences in who employers have hired rather than what these employers do to facilitate educational opportunities for their workforce. However, even after adjusting each employer's participation rate for individual differences in age, race, and gender, the gap between the highest and lowest enrolling employers is 30 percentage points. For employer-sponsored programs, the gap is even larger at 45 percentage points. This range suggests distinct corporate strategies and capacities to support educational attainment in the workplace.

Figure 11. Employer Variation in Education Participation



Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey (Wave 18). N = 36 employers with at least 100 surveyed workers each.
Note: Regression-adjusted participation rates controlling for age, gender, and racial composition of workforce.

To understand what drives this variation, we looked at what each of the 36 employers in our sample offers its workers in the way of education benefits. After conducting a systematic review of programs (see *Methods* in the Appendix), the picture at the bottom of the distribution is straightforward. Several employers near the bottom, such as Hobby Lobby, Safeway, Arby's, and Dollar Tree, have little to no publicly available employer-sponsored education program. At others, such as Subway, Burger King, and Dunkin', the benefit amounts to a competitive scholarship: slots are limited, and most workers will never see one. "I rarely see these scholarships given out," noted one Burger King worker in our qualitative sample. The pattern extends to on-the-job training. At Dollar Tree, one worker described receiving a manual and being left to figure it out: "They gave us a manual and said 'Here you go,' and walked out."

As we see, having a program at all can explain a lot of the variation. However, the story at the top of the distribution is more complicated: not all of it runs through program design. O'Reilly Auto Parts leads the sample in employer-sponsored participation (65 percent, adjusted) with a program that looks restrictive on paper, pointing instead to a vocational workforce that upgrades skills through on-the-job certifications rather than degree enrollment. UPS pairs one of the most generously designed programs in our sample with near-bottom participation (31 percent), consistent with a Teamsters-represented workforce for whom union-negotiated wages and job security may reduce the urgency of credential-seeking.

For most service sector workers, though, program design matters substantially. Benefits on paper do not guarantee that workers actually use them. As one worker observed, "Free tuition is a great selling point. I can tell you from working at the stores in my district, how many people are going to take advantage of that benefit? In 13 stores across the district, [...] so 425 people, maybe 5 people will take advantage of that benefit." Understanding that gap between what's offered and what's used requires looking at two dimensions along which programs vary substantially: how **accessible** they are, and how **generous**.

Consider the cases of Starbucks and McDonald's. The two programs look similar in form: both belong to a growing number of employers that use direct-pay models, in which the employer pays the institution directly or through a third-party platform, rather than requiring workers to pay tuition upfront and submit receipts for reimbursement (a model followed by roughly a quarter of employers in our sample). Direct-pay arrangements can take two forms: a bilateral partnership between an employer and a single institution (such as Starbucks' partnership with Arizona State University), or a contract with a specialized intermediary (firms like Guild Education, InStride, Workforce Edge, or, in McDonald's case, Bright Horizons EdAssist) that sits between the employer and a curated network of partner colleges and training providers. Each intermediary maintains a catalog of partner institutions covering credentials from GED completion and ESL instruction through associate and bachelor's degrees. The employer selects which programs from the catalog to make available to workers and while some employers restrict the fields of study employees can pursue, both Starbucks and McDonald's allow employees to freely choose. Despite these structural similarities, McDonald's (10 percent) trails Starbucks (31 percent) substantially on school enrollment and modestly on employer-sponsored participation (56 to 61 percent). What explains the gap?

Even among employers that offer structurally similar programs, **access** may vary substantially. Most employers, including McDonald's, impose weekly hours floors (typically 15 to 30 hours) that screen out many workers who don't get sufficient hours. In a high-turnover industry, many also impose tenure gates, 90 days at McDonald's, though these can reach 24 months at other employers. By contrast, Starbucks employees are eligible immediately, regardless of part-time status. At heavily franchised brands like McDonald's, program availability depends on whether a given franchisee has opted in, meaning workers at non-participating locations have no access at all. In practice, entirely corporate-owned chains like Starbucks reach a substantially larger share of their workforce. Like most employers, McDonald's also requires managerial approval and "good standing" as conditions of enrollment. These features cast supervisors as gatekeepers whose discretion can shape access in ways that extend well beyond formal eligibility rules. For example, at one McDonald's location, a worker told us that scholarships could be pulled for a uniform violation.

Additionally, similar programs can diverge in their **generosity.** Most impose annual dollar caps, with $5,250 (the federal tax-exclusion limit) as the most common ceiling. McDonald's franchise workers receive considerably less: $2,500 at the part-time tier and $3,000 full-time, while workers at corporate-owned locations can access the full $5,250. By contrast, Starbucks offers uncapped coverage across its entirely corporate-owned chain for 180+ ASU degree programs, plus $1,000 per year for non-ASU courses.

The variation documented here reflects deliberate corporate choices about who to reach, at what cost, and through what mechanisms. Taken together, the employer a worker happens to work for shapes their likelihood of participating in work-sponsored training in ways that go beyond who that employer hires. However, upon considering program form, accessibility, and generosity, programs differ across enough dimensions that no single feature reliably separates effective programs from nominal ones. The central unanswered question is which design choices actually matter for workers: which features drive enrollment, persistence, and completion among hourly employees, and which can exist in alignment with employers' interests. However, what the patterns make clear is that nominal program coverage is not the same as effective access.

Discussion

This brief presents novel data on how education, training, and mentorship shape the careers of workers in the U.S. service sector. By combining employer-identified, worker-reported survey data from the Shift Project with a systematic accounting of employer policies, this brief frames the employer not as a backdrop but as a central actor shaping workers' access to education. The portrait that emerges is a workforce that sees education and training as essential for achieving their career goals, and an employer landscape so variable that whether those ambitions are realized depends heavily on where someone happens to work.

Contrary to common assumptions, service sector jobs are not just a waystation on the path to beginning a career. It is true that service sector jobs are where most workers get their start and some will move on to other careers. However, the majority of service sector workers aim to remain in or advance in their current job, rather than change careers. There is a real appetite among the workforce to make a career out of these jobs, counter to dominant narratives of high turnover and low attachment.

That ambition is matched by a demand for education and training that is nearly universal, even as the type of opportunity in demand shifts at different career stages. Younger workers are most drawn to formal degrees; mid-career workers gravitate toward leadership development; older workers favor skills-building integrated into the workday. A one-size-fits-all approach will not meet the needs of workers across the life course.

Employers and the workplace training opportunities they offer can play a crucial role in making training and career mentoring widely accessible. Unlike education pursued outside of work, which falls off sharply with age, participation in employer-sponsored training holds steady across the life course; and for workers with children, who are far less likely to enroll in outside coursework, employer programs integrated into the workday appear to fill that void. Supervisors, meanwhile, are the dominant source of career mentorship for service sector workers, and often the only one available to older workers. Workers with a mentor are substantially more confident in their ability to reach their career goals.

However, the share of workers participating in education programs is smaller than the share who aspire to participate. Affordability, time, and unpredictable scheduling represent considerable barriers, and employer-sponsored tuition benefits, despite being among the most publicly touted investments in workforce development, reach only a small share of workers: just 8 percent used them, and even among workers whose employer offered the benefit, only 15 percent took it up.

Employers vary enormously in what they offer and in how much their workforce engages in education and training activities. For example, almost none of the workers at Burger King or Dunkin are enrolled in school, but over 30 percent of Starbucks workers are. Similarly, only 20 percent of Hobby Lobby workers participate in any kind of education or training, compared with over 60 percent of workers at O'Reilly Auto Parts and Whole Foods. These large gaps signal that corporate decisions about program design through channels of accessibility and generosity make a big difference.

These patterns matter beyond the workers and employers in our sample. The relationship between learning and work is being remade: automation and AI are reorganizing the skills the economy demands faster than the institutions built to teach them can adapt. Employer-sponsored training and tuition benefits have emerged as a partial, uneven solution, providing a means to couple work with opportunities for training and upskilling. Whether this expansion represents a genuine and effective broadening of opportunity remains an open question. Future research should examine which specific program features drive enrollment, persistence, and completion, and whether workers actually see wage and mobility gains from the education and training opportunities they pursue.

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Appendix

Methods

The Shift Project has collected survey data from hourly service-sector workers employed at large retail and food service establishments since the fall of 2016. In the spring and fall of each year, the Shift Project recruits survey respondents using online Facebook and Instagram advertisements targeted to workers employed at large retail and food service employers. Respondents are automatically routed to a survey landing page where they consent to participate, then complete an online self-administered survey using the Qualtrics platform. As an incentive, those who complete the survey and provide contact information are entered into a lottery for a $500 gift card. To screen out invalid survey responses, we use an attention filter, a question instructing respondents to select a particular response category to verify the accuracy of their responses. For a detailed discussion of Shift Project data collection, methodology, and data validation, see Schneider and Harknett (2022).

This brief draws on data from Wave 18 of the Shift Project survey, fielded in Fall 2025. This was the first wave to include a dedicated module on employer-sponsored education and training programs, covering participation in skills training, tuition assistance, and degree programs, as well as workers' career aspirations and barriers to educational participation. The data collection period ran from September through December, 2025. The analytic sample consists of 8,433 hourly paid workers at recognized retail and food service employers, of whom around 5,300 completed the education and training module. We identified respondents as service-sector workers if they were employed at any of the recognized retail and food service employers in the Shift Project sampling frame. See Appendix Tables 1 and 2 for a list of the most common included employers and a demographic breakdown of the sample.

To characterize the education and training programs offered by the employers in our sample, we conducted systematic desk research on each of the 36 employers represented by at least 100 surveyed workers in the Fall 2025 wave. For each employer, we consulted sources in a predefined tier hierarchy: official policy documents and employee handbooks (Tier 1); corporate career and benefits web pages (Tier 2); educational platform partner sites such as Guild Education, InStride, and Workforce Edge (Tier 3); press releases and news coverage (Tier 4); and employee review platforms such as Glassdoor and Reddit (Tier 5), used only to identify discrepancies or access barriers not visible in official sources. We answered 25 structured questions per employer covering program existence, program design and administration (payment model, annual and lifetime caps, covered costs and institutions), eligibility requirements (tenure, hours, performance, and hourly worker inclusion), worker obligations (service requirements and clawback provisions), franchise coverage, and dependent benefits. Program details were anchored to September 2025 to match the survey data collection period.

Appendix Table 1. List of Included Employers in Order of Frequency (min. 100 responses)

Employer	N	Employer	N	Employer	N
McDonald's	301	Cracker Barrel	190	Kroger/QFC	137
Home Depot	301	UPS	189	Chipotle	124
Subway	276	Walgreens	179	Chili's	117
Chick-Fil-A	250	O'Reilly Auto Parts	179	Fedex	117
Starbucks	229	Dunkin Donuts	177	Olive Garden	116
Walmart	229	Arby's	175	Hobby Lobby	116
CVS	226	Wendy's	169	Buffalo Wild Wings	112
Taco Bell	221	Amazon	168	Dollar Tree	111
Dollar General	214	Safeway	164	Waffle House	109
Food Lion	206	Publix	161	Domino's	107
Dairy Queen	202	Burger King	144	Sams Club	103
Target	194	Lowe's	141	Whole Foods	100

Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. Hourly paid workers. Employers with $N \geq 100$ surveyed workers, ranked by N.

Appendix Table 2. Breakdown of Service Sector Worker Sample by Demographic Group

Variable	Share (%)
Gender	
Male	29.4
Female	70.6
Age Group	
18-19	7.8
20-29	25.0
30-39	15.8
40-49	17.1
50-59	16.5
60+	17.9
Race/Ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic	78.9
Black, Non-Hispanic	5.2
Hispanic	10.0
Other or Two or More, Non-Hispanic	5.8
Education	
No degree or diploma earned	5.7
High school diploma/GED	38.4
Some college	55.9
N	8,433

Source: Shift Project Education and Training Module, Fall 2025 Survey. Hourly paid workers.

Appendix Table 3. Average Marginal Effects of Having Children on the Probability of Participation in Education and Training Programs

	Any	Skills (Work Hrs)	Skills (Outside Hrs)	App / Online	Degree Program
Has children	0.082^{**}	0.064^{*}	0.002	$0.045^{\dagger}$	-0.043^{**}
	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.016)	(0.024)	(0.015)
Controls	X	X	X	X	X
N	2,365	2,365	2,365	2,365	2,365

Notes: Average marginal effects from logistic regression on the probability of participation. Controls: age group, race/ethnicity, gender, education. Reference categories: Age 18–19; White, Non-Hispanic; Less than high school. $^{\dagger}p < .10$ $^{*}p < .05$ $^{**}p < .01$. Robust standard errors in parentheses.