

THE GRADUATE! NETWORK!

Retail Employees Bridging The Talent Gap Employer Community Report

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The Graduate! Network's Bridging The Talent Gap Initiative

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Introduction

The *Bridging The Talent Gap Employee Survey* was administered to employees of organizations affiliated with the retail sector from September 2018 through March 2019. Locations of survey administration included Albuquerque NM, Cleveland OH, and Saint Louis MO. There were 628 completed or partially completed surveys during this time frame.

This report covers multiple perspectives of the employee education ecosystem by detailing five landscapes.

- **Education status.** This section explores the education attainment of employees and their education goals, with overviews on credential completions, credentials currently being pursued, plans for seeking credentials in the future, and those credentials employees do not plan to complete.
- **Education currently being pursued.** This section describes the education credentials and education majors being sought by employees with focus on their perception of the education experience, benefits, challenges, support for, and motivations in pursuing their chosen education.
- **Plans for future education goals.** This section includes description of employees education focus, notions of planned timeline for completion, and motivations for planned education goals.
- **Rejection of future education goals.** This section covers the reasons employees provide for not pursuing future education, with closer examination of the academic, work based and personal factors in their decision.
- **Employee perception of employer support for education.** This section explores employees' understanding of the current education benefits their employers provide, support type, level, perceptions of why more employees do not take advantage of these benefits, perceptions on the role education benefits play in achieving important organizational goals, and potential initiatives to create an enhanced education friendly workplace.

The results of this survey should be used to provide collective insight and inform future action, to facilitate the following goals:

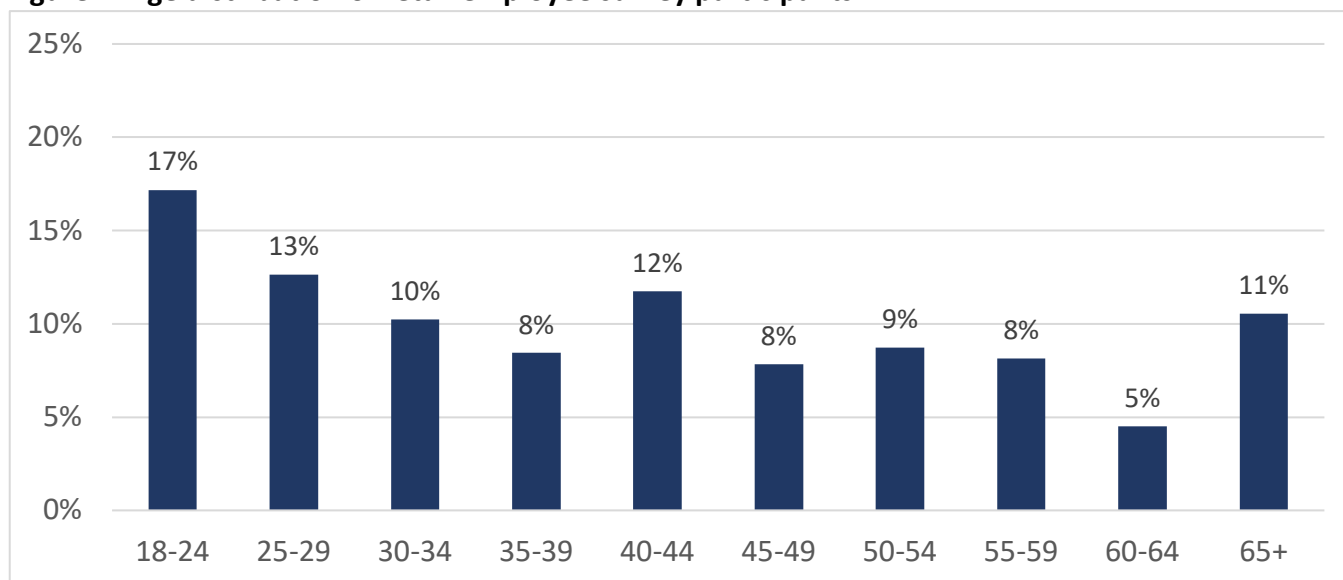
- Gain insight into employees' perspectives of education status, goals, potential benefits, and barriers.
- Gain insight into employees' perspectives on employer support for education, ways employers can provide support for education goals and improve education benefits.
- Provide context and information to guide discussions, initiatives and policy considerations with community education support organizations.

Demographics

Age. Figure 1 shows the distribution of retail employee respondents by age. Thirty-eight percent of retail employee respondents were under 40 years old, with distinct increases in the 40-44 and 65+ age ranges. The former may reflect management level respondents while the

latter could represent a sub-population of retired individuals who have chosen to work in retail. The general trend of the respondent distribution is consistent with the U.S. age distribution of retail employees, with a slight attenuation of proportion in the 18-24 age group and a slightly larger percentage in the 40 – 44 and 65+ age groups.

Figure 1. Age distribution of retail employee survey participants

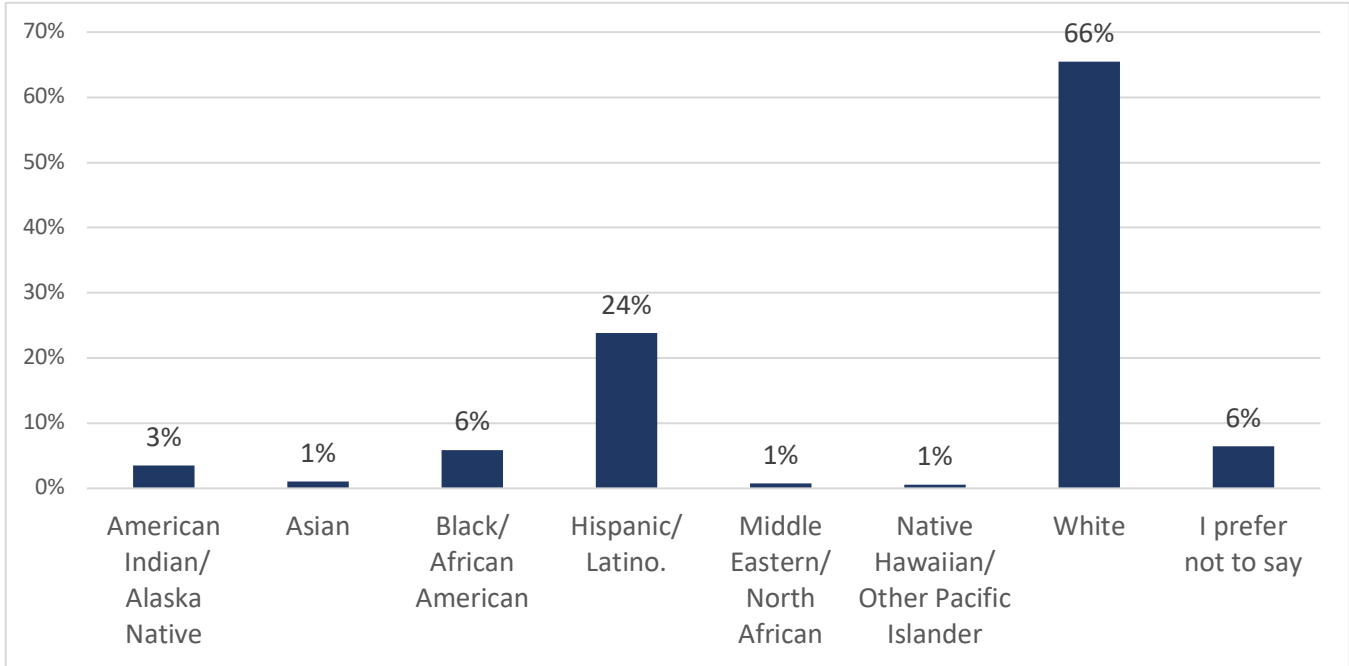


Gender. Sixty percent of respondents selected the female gender designation while 38 percent indicated they were male. Less than one percent reported non-exclusive gender identification, and 2 percent preferred not to report their gender identity.

Language skills. Twenty-two percent of employee survey respondents report they have bi- or multi-lingual skills.

Ethnicity. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the retail employees participating in the survey. Respondents had the option of identifying as many designations as they wished. Eight percent chose more than one category.

Figure 2. Ethnic/racial distribution of retail employee survey participants

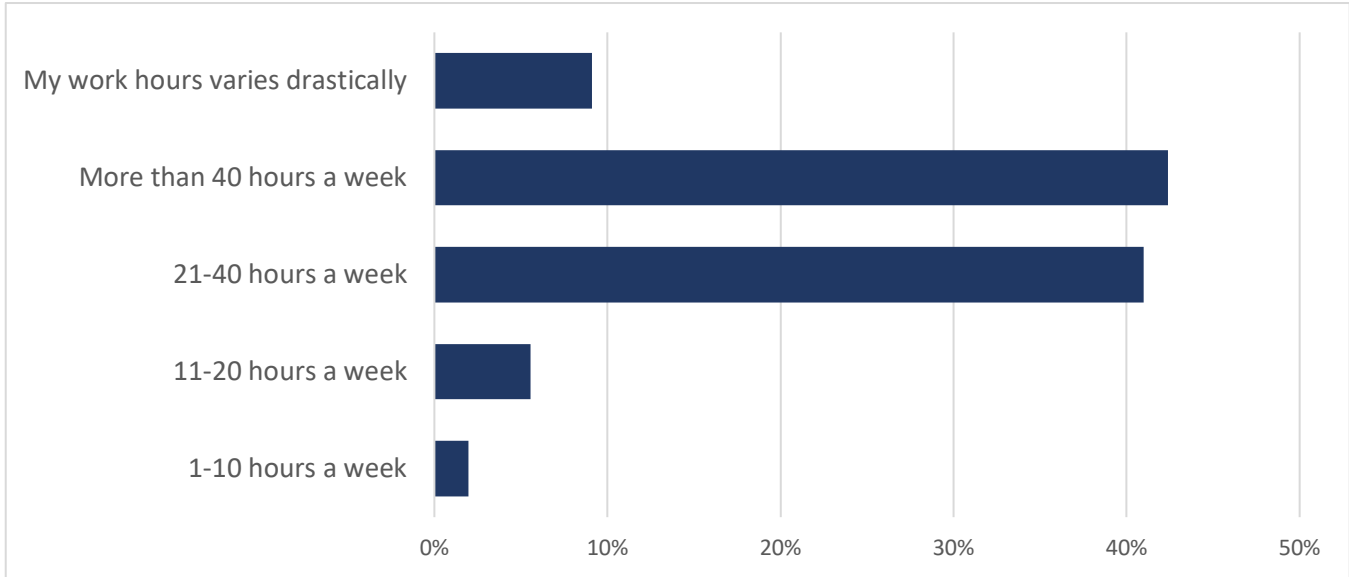


Note opportunity for more diversity in future surveys (Dan, please wordsmith)

Worker profile

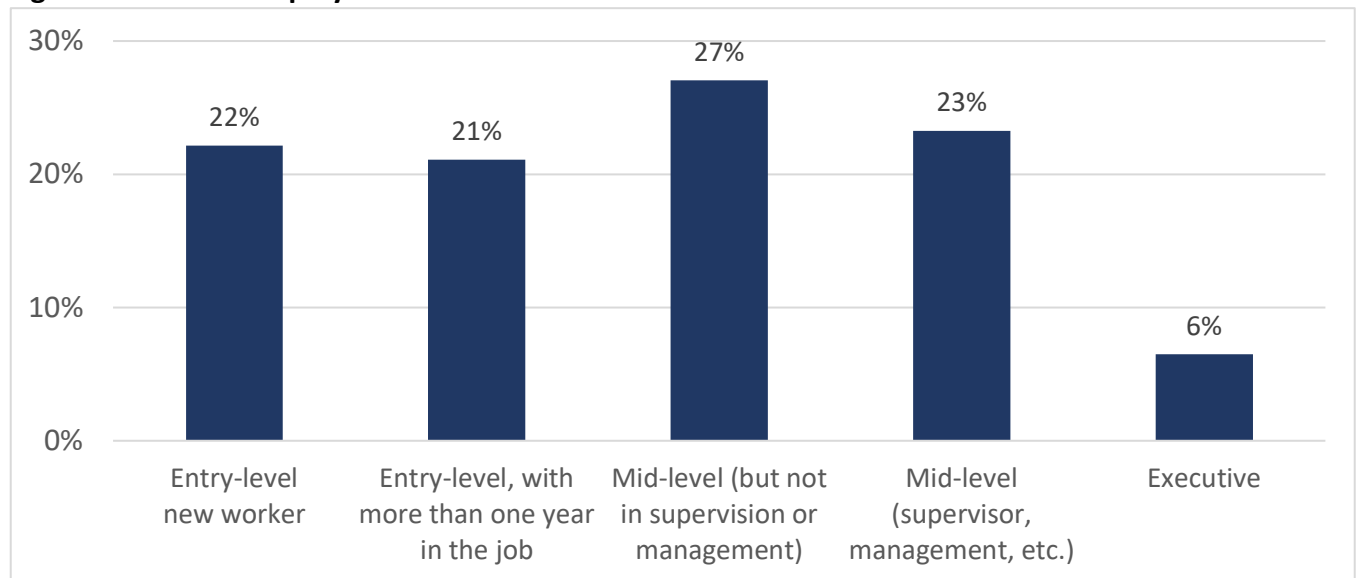
Hours worked per week. Figure 3 shows that most retail employees participating in the survey were either full-time employees (42 percent) or part-time with more than 20 hours per week (41 percent).

Figure 3. Average hours worked per week



Level of employment. Figure 4 portrays the level of employment for retail employees participating in the survey. The data reveal the portion of respondents that occupy the work level designations especially useful for developing college completion initiatives: Forty-three percent of workers are entry-level. When non-supervisory/management mid-level employees are included, the percentage of respondents jumps to 70 percent.

Figure 4. Level of Employment



Education Status

Table 1 shows the education status for survey participants.

Table 1. Education goal status	
	Completed
High school or equivalent	75%
Certificate or technical credential	19%
Associate's degree	26%
Bachelor's degree	56%
Advanced degree (Masters, MD, PhD, etc.)	24%

Note: Total percentage is greater than 100 percent because individuals may have completed multiple credentials.

Table 2 shows the status of retail employees who are looking toward their education/learning future. Each row represents the number of workers who have not completed the credential listed and their plans for doing so either currently or in the future.

Based on responses from your community, among those who have completed high school or its equivalent, 24 percent of employees are currently working on one or more credentials, while 48 percent plan to work on one or more credentials in the future.

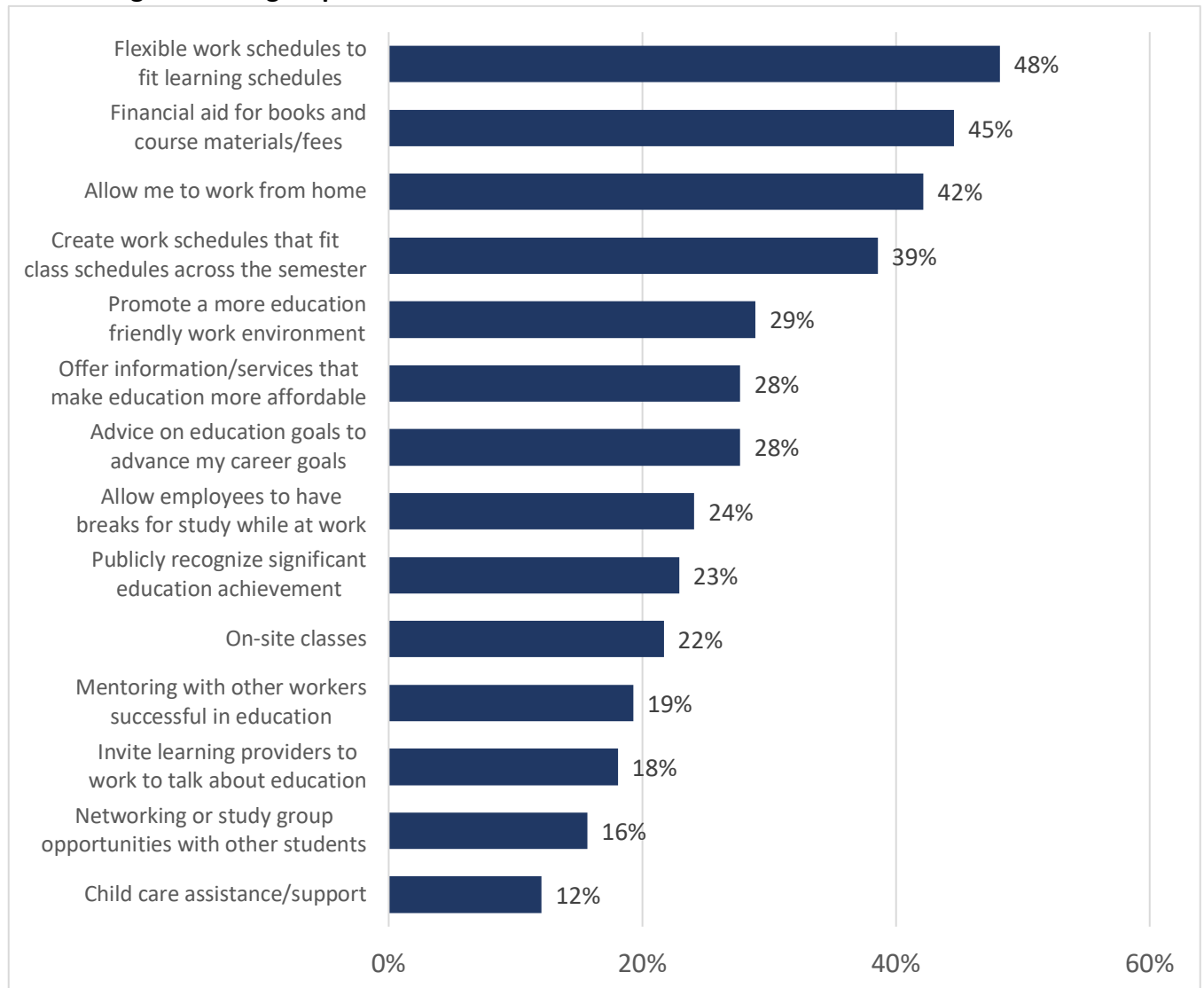
	Currently working on it	Plan to work on it in the future
High school or equivalent	24%	5%
Certificate or technical credential	6%	13%
Associate's degree	9%	22%
Bachelor's degree	22%	36%
Advanced degree (Masters, MD, PhD, etc.)	8%	40%

Note: Total percentages may be greater than 100 percent because individuals may have completed multiple credentials.

Landscape Reflection

- Review Table 1 to identify those degrees completed, being worked on, and those degrees respondents plan to complete. Based on this information, consider the education friendly enhancements identified in Figure 5 and support offered by employers that respondents identified as helpful in achieving education goals.
- Create a work team made up of employees who volunteer to consider how to make the workplace more education friendly. Share the survey outcomes in Figure 5 and develop team recommendations on how to implement these enhancements.
- Review Table 1 to identify those degrees completed, being worked on, and those degrees respondents plan to complete. Based on this information, consider the following education friendly enhancements and support offered by employers that respondents identified as helpful in achieving education goals.

Figure 5. Education friendly support provided by employers considered helpful in achieving education goals among respondents



For your consideration:

- Which support items are most prevalent? Are the costs associated with these types of support reasonable in cost and do organizations in your community have the capacity for offering them?
- Which support items can employers provide among these results that can be initiated quickly with little cost?
- Which items can education providers and other community groups support, promote or offer to enhance these initiatives.

Current Education Pursuits

Retail employees participating in the survey are working on a variety of educational goals. Table 3 below lists the areas of their education concentration. These categories represent 95 percent of all college majors across recent academic years.

Education Focus	Percent
Business	24%
Education	12%
Healthcare Professions	11%
Liberal Arts, Fine Arts and Humanities	16%
Multi-/Interdisciplinary Studies	0%
Public and Social Services	15%
Science, Mathematics, and Technology	16%
Social Sciences	17%
Other	27%

Note: Total percentages may be greater than 100 percent because individuals may choose multiple selections.

Those who are currently working on completion of their education represent an important group of employees. They have taken on the challenge of advancing their learning and professional capacity while juggling the ongoing demands of work responsibilities and personal life commitments. Employers can benefit from the perseverance and proactive character of these working learners by partnering with them in their quest. Our research shows that education support has a profound influence on employers' ability to achieve organizational goals such as increasing customer/client satisfaction, employee loyalty and involvement, and worker retention.

A good starting point for optimizing workers' learning efforts and organizational success is an objective understanding of the experiences workers go through as they seek to complete their credentials. Respondents of the employee survey have provided a window into their lives by reflecting on their experiences and motivations in taking on their education goals. The following sections detail their perspectives.

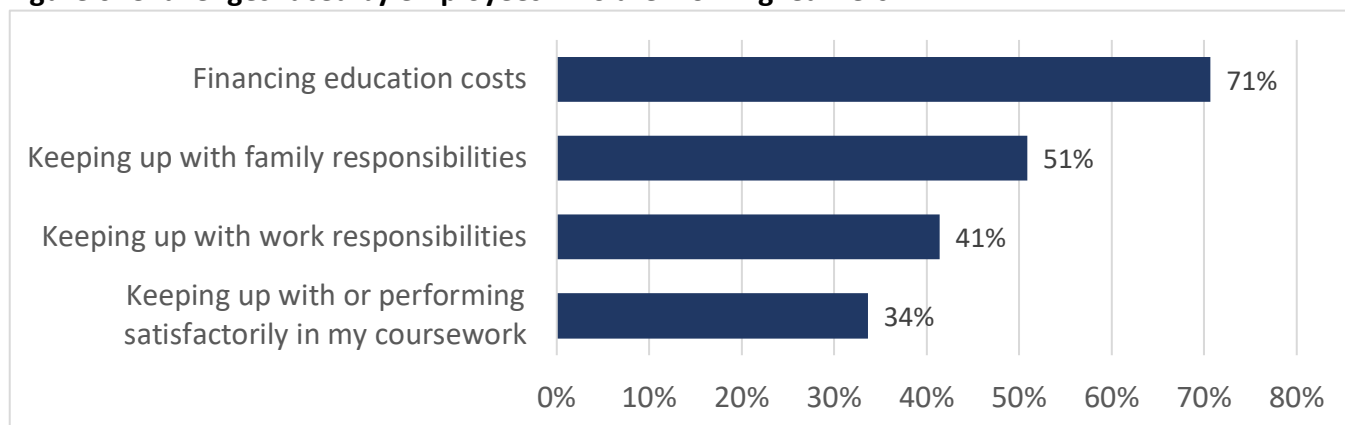
Benefits, Support, and Challenges

Among retail employee respondents currently working on their education, 87 percent believe the personal benefits they will gain from completing their education goals are worth the effort. Professional benefits are anticipated by 84 percent of these respondents.

One of the more important aspects of education success concerns the support learners gain from important people in their life. Research on success in college repeatedly shows that this support from multiple sources contributes to perseverance and academic progress. Among retail employee participants currently working on one or more education goals show, 87 percent say they have support from their family to continue and complete their education goals, while 72 percent experience a sense of support from their employer. Finally, 77 percent say they have support from the faculty and staff at their learning provider.

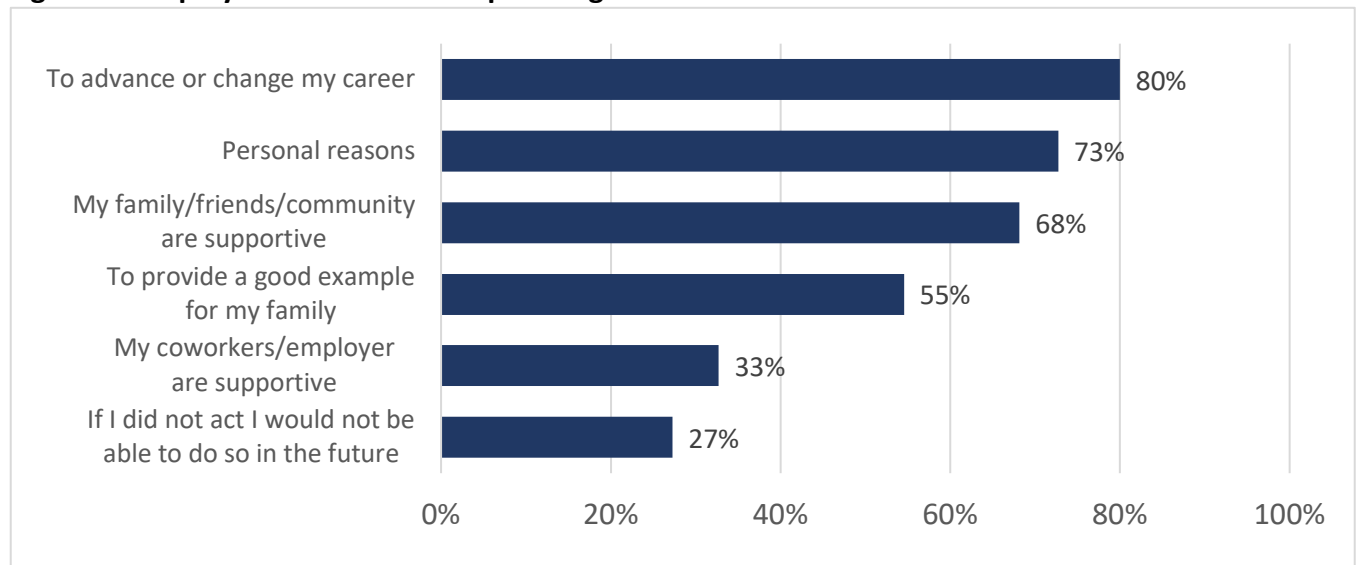
Conversely, challenges employees face work against achievement of their goals. Figure 6 displays the percentage of respondents identifying challenges in four different areas. These data show that the greatest challenge working learners experience involves financing their education, followed by the challenges of keeping up with family responsibilities.

Figure 6. Challenges faced by employees who are working learners



Motivation

Figure 7 indicates the various motivations employees have for seeking their education goals. The most common motivations are career advancement and personal motivations.

Figure 7. Employee motivations for pursuing education

Landscape Reflection

A good starting point for helping employees succeed in their education goals is to consider how they are currently progressing toward those goals. Of retail employees who participated in the survey and are currently pursuing completion of a credential 82 percent think they are making good progress toward these goals.

- How is this figure influenced by their perceived benefits, support, challenges and motivations as described above? This information provides a basis for meaningful discussion and can point to some ways you can support their success.

The partnership between employees seeking education credentials and employer support is a shared benefit for all. Our research shows substantial gains in applied work skills for labor pools of workers with an Associate's or Bachelor's degree according to more than 2,000 employers in our national dataset. Employers can play a pivotal role in this achievement of education goals by creating bridges between employees considering completion of a credential and professionals who can guide and encourage learners to persist. Among retail employees participating in the survey, 36 percent planning to complete a credential say they could benefit from talking with an education professional, career advisor, or mentor to help with some of the challenges they face. For those respondents NOT planning to complete a future degree, 35 percent say they might reconsider their plans and would also benefit from talking with an education professional. The establishment of meaningful interactions with community-based organizations providing such expertise is an immediate and effective means to bridging skill gaps.

Future Education Plans

Employees planning to complete their education credentials represent the potential an employer has for building toward a common beneficial future for workers and the employer. This information is instrumental in organizational planning of education benefit programs and staffing decisions for the future. Respondents planning to complete their education in the future shared critical information on the ways they might be motivated to take action on their plans, their anticipated timeline for taking action, and the learning focus they anticipate pursuing.

Education interests

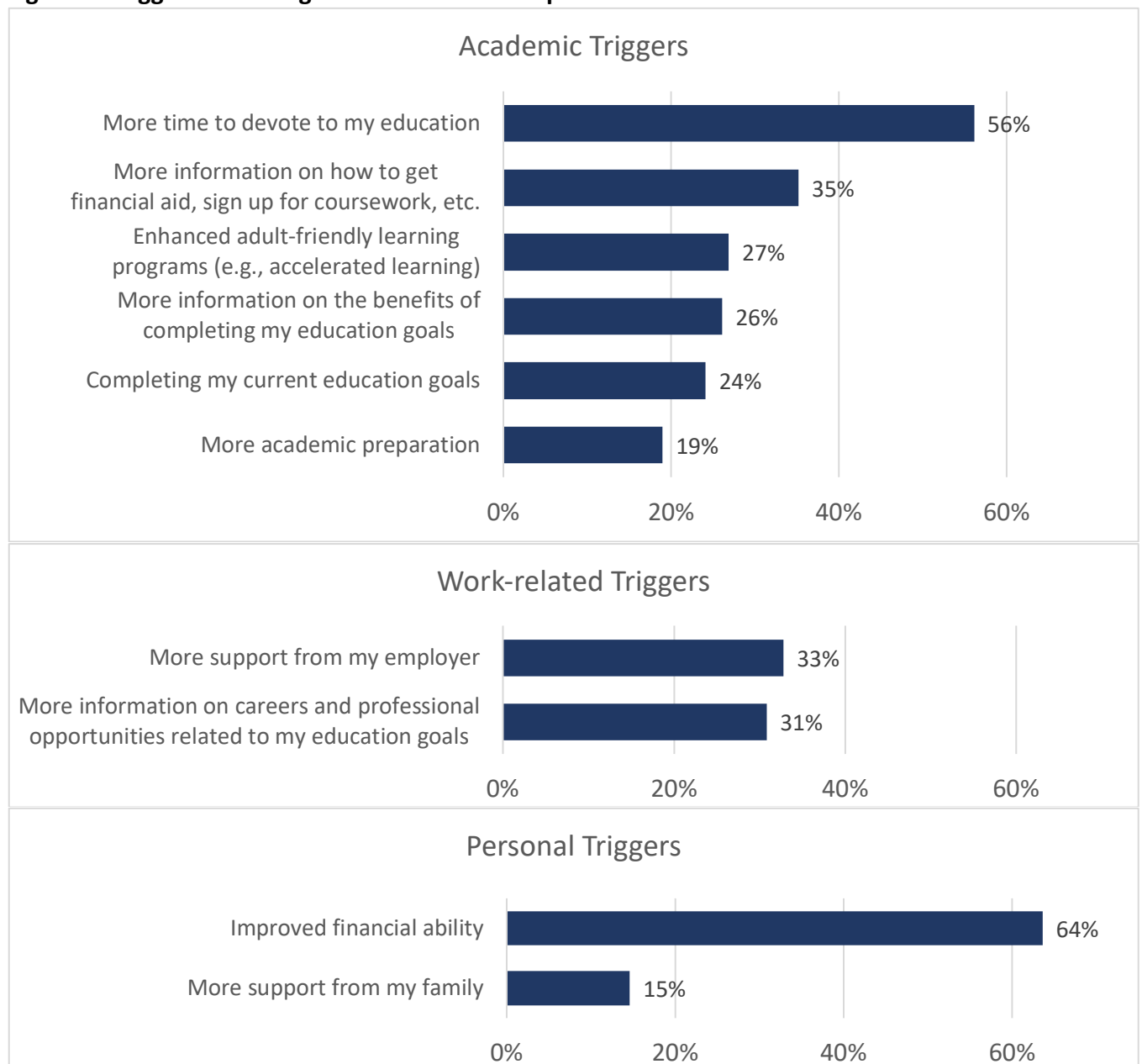
Table 4 lists the educational focus areas employees are considering in their education plans.

Table 4. Education interests of those planning to complete their education in the future	
Education Focus	Percent
Business	46%
Education	21%
Healthcare Professions	12%
Liberal Arts, Fine Arts and Humanities	22%
Multi-/Interdisciplinary Studies	2%
Public and Social Services	20%
Science, Mathematics, and Technology	23%
Social Sciences	26%
Other	24%

Note: Total percentages may be greater than 100 percent because individuals may choose multiple selections.

Action Triggers

Employees looking toward future education opportunities identify multiple triggers that would help them move from considering their education future to taking action on it. Figure 8 shows these items for employees according to the categories of academic, work-related, and personal considerations.

Figure 8. Triggers for taking action on education plans

Academic triggers. The nature of academic institutions and programs can be intimidating and overwhelming for many thinking about the demands, financial investment and time needed to succeed in their education goals. Retail employees identify the prospect of having more time to devote to their education as the most likely trigger related to academics for taking action on their plans. Additional items and their relative importance in terms of how often they are mentioned are shown in Figure 8 above.

Work-related triggers. When workers consider how they should take action on their education goals, the effect such plans have on their work life is critical. Retail employee participants cited

increased support from their employer as the most likely work-related trigger for taking action on their plans. Additional items and their relative importance in terms of how often they are mentioned are shown above in Figure 8.

Personal triggers. Personal concerns are often the most enduring barrier to taking action on education plans. They stem from long standing relationships and well-established viewpoints on their capabilities and capacity for success. Retail employee respondents identify the need for improved financial ability as the most likely personal trigger for taking action on their plans. Additional items and their relative importance in terms of how often they are mentioned are shown in Figure 8 above.

Landscape Reflection

A common problem among those considering their future education plans is the accuracy and reliability of their expectations. Especially for first-generation learners entering college course work or any learning after high school, preconceived notions of the complexity, costs, potential benefits and a host of other concerns conspire to create a sense of feeling overwhelmed at the thought of acting on their wishes. It is important to keep in mind that the opinions mentioned in this section are perceptions, not cold hard facts. Some perceptions may be accurate but others may be well off the mark. Education plans are often characterized by unrealistic expectations and changing education focus. The perceptions described here can provide a solid foundation for understanding, communicating with and reaching out to employees who are considering their education future. Some ideas for using these data include the following:

- Review the education focus most employees are considering. Are these majors consistent with the business community's goals? How can you best communicate those majors the business community considers most important?
- How important are work-related triggers to community employees considering future education? What work-place changes or specific barriers can you identify that can be reduced or removed to help these employees?
- How important are financial triggers for community employees considering future education plans? Are there education benefit plans your community can implement to address some of these concerns, especially for skills your business community seeks in employees?
- What kind of timeline do community employees have for acting on their education plans? How can you encourage timely action and build those plans into your community education and skill needs projections for the future?
- Share those triggers, barriers and concerns employees express with local colleges, universities, learning providers, and community organizations. Seek a systematic understanding of how they are addressing these concerns. What are some of the best ways you have for communicating how learning institutions are addressing employees' concerns?

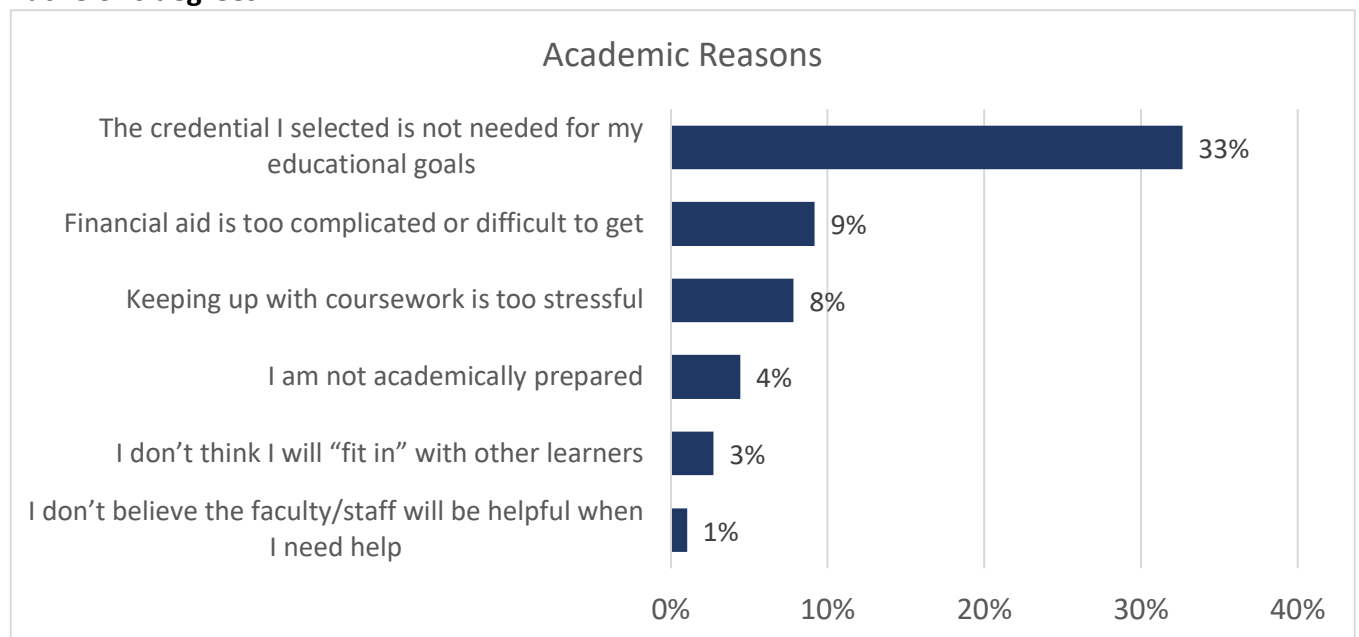
- How might your community provide information opportunities for employees who want guidance from education professionals on how to initiate their plans? What organization/learn institution/learning consortium might be most effective in offering such guidance?

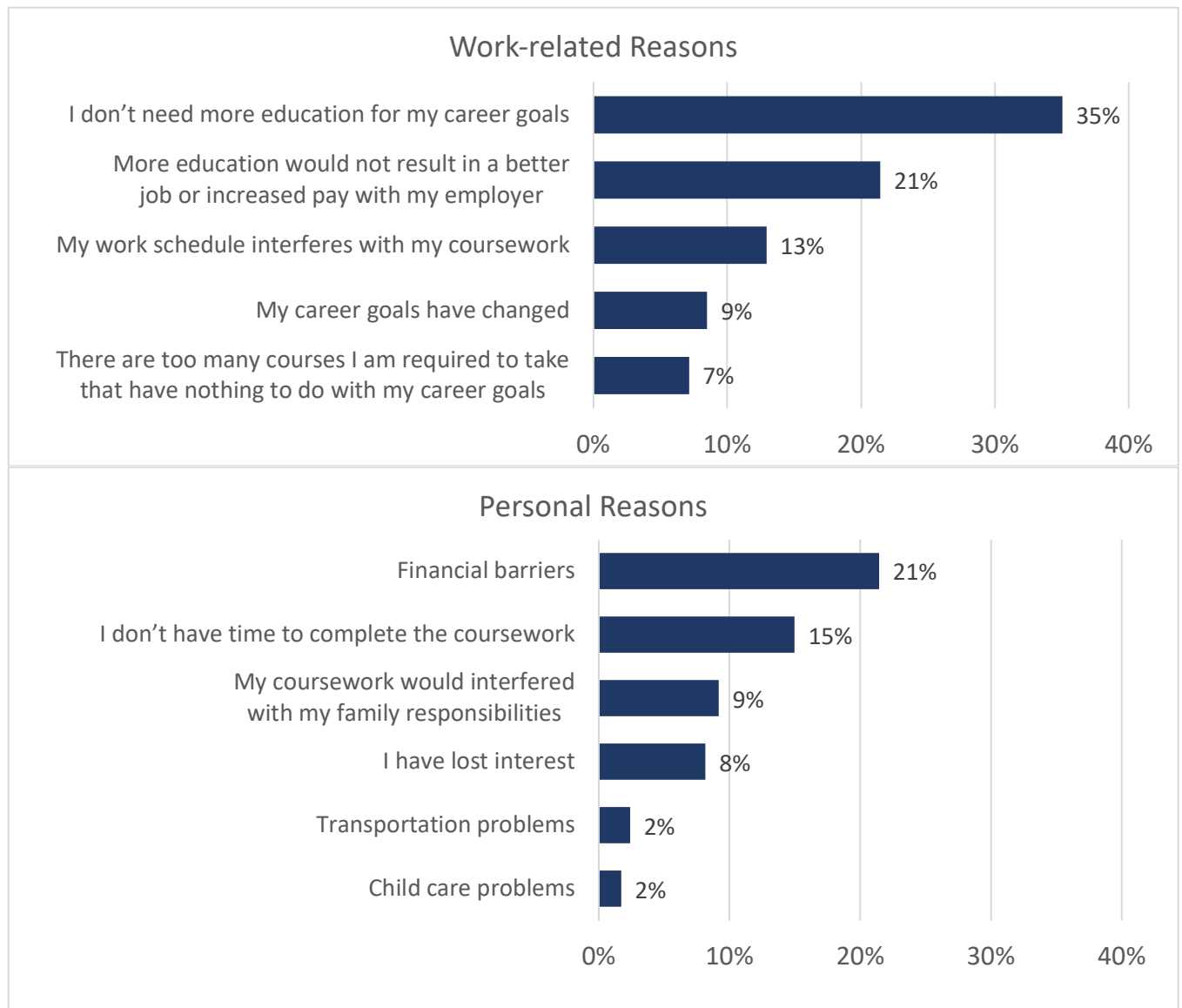
Rejecting Future Education Opportunities

It is important to remember that deciding the limits of education attainment is not inherently problematic. Not all learners will attend graduate school or complete an advanced degree. Thus, this section will focus on those credentials most commonly pursued and useful for employers: certificates/technical credentials, Associate's degrees, and Bachelor's degrees.

The survey concentrated on reasons respondents identify for their decisions along with their willingness to reassess their decision. Figure 9 portrays these reasons across three categories for employees: academic, work-related and personal, for the three credentials mentioned above.

Figure 9. Reasons for not planning to complete certificates, Associate's degrees, and Bachelor's degrees





Landscape Reflection

Reasons for not continuing education are complex and sometimes based on misinformation. Employers can reach out to these employees in at least two ways:

- Explore the reasons often cited by employees and create information outreach that addresses the concerns expressed, with some potential solutions.
 - Reach out to those employees who may be open to reconsidering their decisions. Partnering with a community organization is a useful and effective way to initiate this outreach.
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Employees' Perceptions of Employer Support for Education

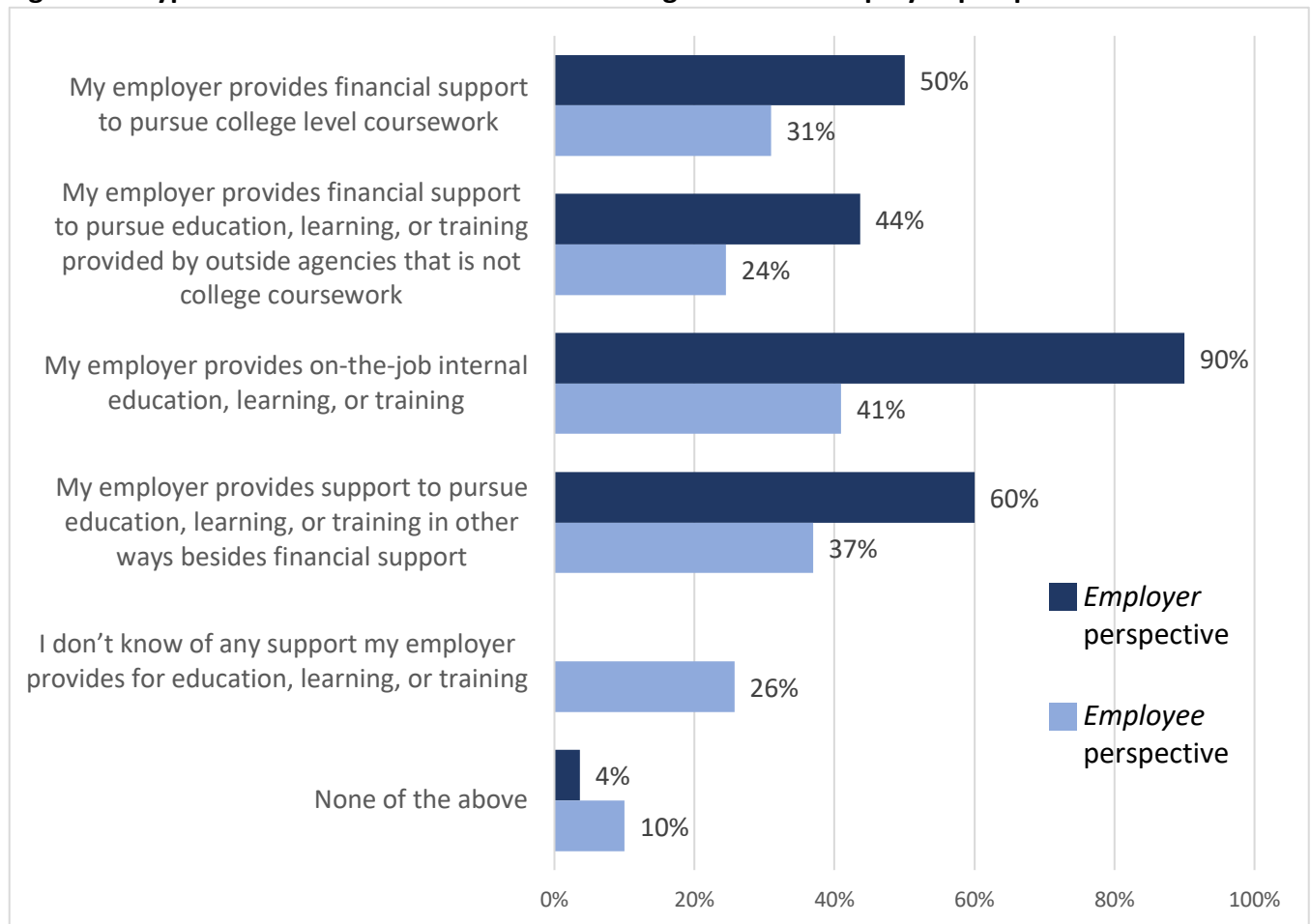
Successful organizations understand all too well the need for a well-educated workforce. The necessity to quickly adapt to changing markets and business practices place a premium on the agile employee who can contribute to employers' success and thus achieve an optimal quality of life. A highly educated work place increases the chances for success in this environment.

Supporting education among employees has become a mainstay of those highly successful companies. Eighty-seven percent of *Fortune's Best 100 Places To Work* provide tuition assistance for their employees with many of these offering associated perks to enhance this benefit, such as paid child care and paid sabbaticals (<http://fortune.com/best-companies/list/filtered?tuition=true>).

Employees' accurate understanding of these benefits is central to their optimal affect. This landscape explores employees' perceptions of employer-based education support and compares how management and employees' understanding of this benefit coincide and differ. When reviewing these comparisons, please keep in mind that these proportions reflect a general comparison between employees' and employers' perspectives rather than comparisons within any specific organization.

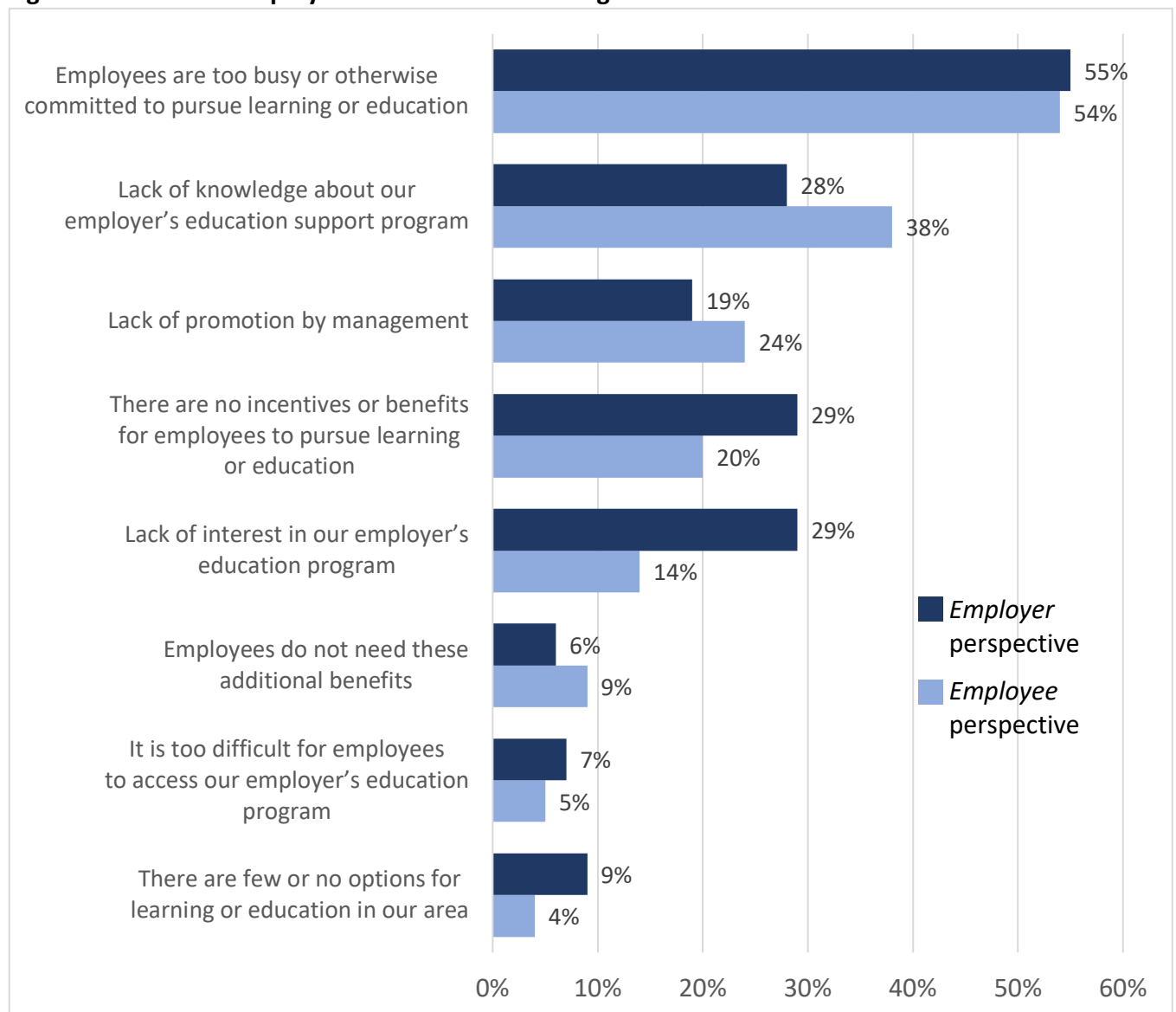
Education Benefit Basics

We asked both management and employees about the types of benefits employers offer. Figure 10 compares these perspectives.

Figure 10: Type of education benefit offered: Management and employee perspectives

Education Benefit Usage

Employers often struggle with the most effective way to encourage employees to take advantage of their education benefits. Figure 11 below shows the frequency of responses for employees versus management concerning reasons why employees do not take advantage of employer-based education benefits.

Figure 11. Reasons employees do not take advantage of education benefits

Education Effects on Organization Goals

Employees have solid opinions on how various business practices and benefits, including education benefits, might impact their workplace success. Despite their knowledge of the actual effects, their opinions and viewpoints can have substantial influence on the overall success you seek. Table 5 compares the average rating employees give versus management ratings on a scale of 0 (little influence) to 100 (very influential) regarding how much influence education support has on achieving each of nine organization goals. Keep in mind these are general comparisons rather than comparisons between employees and management in any specific organization.

Table 5. Influence of education program on employer achievement of organization goals.		
	Management rating of influence of education on achieving this goal	Average employee rating of influence of education on achieving this goal
Development of employees' leadership skills	77	79
Development of employees' professional skills	77	81
Employee advancement within a given organization	75	75
Increasing customer/client satisfaction	78	76
Increasing employee engagement/organizational loyalty	77	76
Increasing profits/savings	75	71
Increasing worker productivity	76	74
Recruitment of new employees	71	71
Worker retention	74	75

Landscape Reflection

A first step in ensuring the most effective use of education benefits is to establish a common understanding among employees and management on how the benefit is administered and what is and is not provided by the employer. Moreover, it is critical that employers understand the perspective of the employee in this effort. Management may have created a meaningful outreach only to find that misunderstandings create very different assessments of the benefit. Some actions to address these issues include the following:

- Encourage initiation of an information program on how employer-based education support operates for community employers, focusing on those areas most at odds between employees and management in Figure 10 [from Education Benefit Basics subsection]
 - Using the comparative data in Figure 10 [from Education Benefit Usage subsection],
 - Set up a workplace team made up of employees and management to explore ways you can enhance and increase utilization of education benefits you offer.
 - Create a workplace team to explore employees' understanding of the potential influences of education on meeting organization goals, especially focusing on those areas rated most highly by employees.
-