



**Career Perception of American Workers:
Career Statuses During the Pandemic**

by

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Executive Summary

The onset of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020 has fundamentally changed many businesses, politics, and even personal practices. People and organizations experienced a culture shock. A survey of over 11,000 people was conducted across the United States. The survey consisted of 48 questions, as well as extensive demographic questions. One question that was asked was whether the pandemic had made a difference in how people view their careers. Understanding what factors are involved in career path decision making could be of value to both individual employees as well as leaders.

This white paper will examine the differences between those who have considered changing their careers and those who have not. This study will examine the implications of their current career based on job-title and time in that position. Are those who are more senior more optimistic compared to those at lower levels. This paper will also be used to evaluate the potential impact of financial support for education or personal development on participants' consideration of a career change.

Introduction

The purpose of this white paper is to examine individuals' perceptions of their career paths during the COVID-19 pandemic. Did some individuals consider changing their careers? Was a consideration of a change in career more relevant to some more than others, based on their current job position? Were they more optimistic about their careers if they were most senior in their position? Last, did it make any difference if their company or organization offered any type of financial assistance towards their education or professional development? This last perspective could be especially useful to companies who are considering the pros and cons of providing educational assistance to employees.

“Have you ever thought about changing your career? By changing your career, we mean moving from one industry or field to a totally different industry or field.” This is the first question under consideration in this whitepaper. The SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic caught everyone by surprise. The size and universal scope of the pandemic was something not experienced by most of those living today. Buys et al. (2020) posited that the COVID-19 pandemic is the worst worldwide catastrophe since World War Two (WWII).

For the purposes of this white paper, the focus is on those individuals who could be suffering from career shock, and who might have considered a change in careers as the effects of the pandemic closed or significantly modified businesses around the country. Akkermans et al. (2018) described career shock as “a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual’s control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one’s career” (p. 4). The COVID-19 pandemic fits those criteria.

A survey of 11032 individuals was conducted (Edelman, 2021). One question on the survey was a yes/no question as to whether they had considered a career change, 48.48% (N=5348) said “yes,” and 51.52% (N=5684) said “no.” To understand this almost even split, the data was then evaluated based on gender, ethnic background, age, and education.

Demographics of Participants

Gender

Participants were given four options as to the best option that described their gender.

1=Female

2=Male

3=Non-binary

4=Prefer not to answer

Out of 11032 participants, all responded to choices 1-3

Male	4749	43.05%
Female	6246	56.62%

Non-
binary 37 0.34%

Ethnic Background

The survey offered nine choices for ethnic background. The responses were as follows.

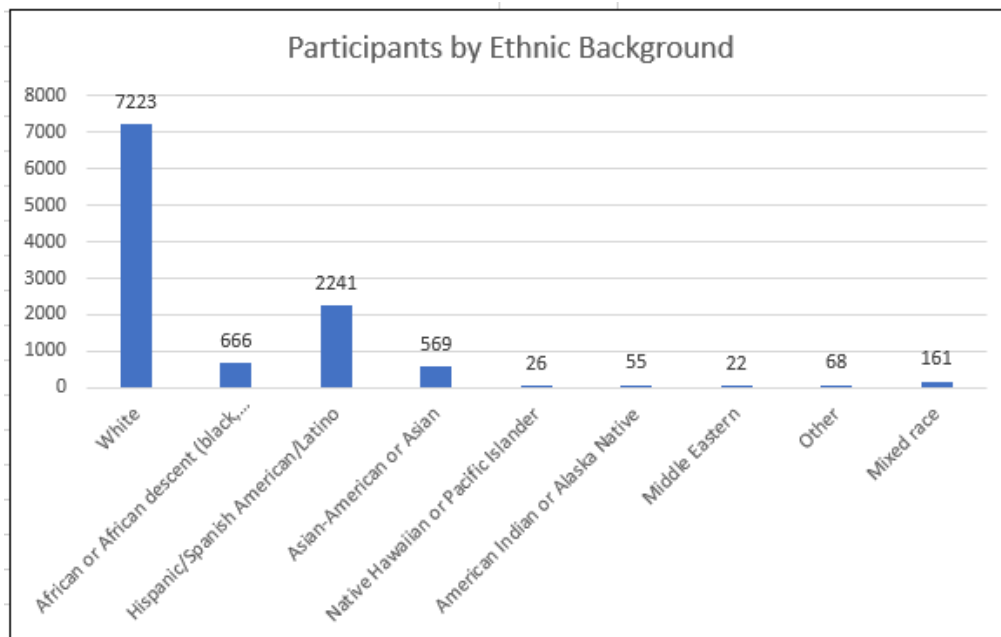
Table 1

Ethnic background of participants

Ethnic Background	Percent of Survey Population
White	65.5%
African or African descent	6.0%
Hispanic/Spanish American/Latino	20.3%
Asian-American or Asian	5.2%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.5%
Middle Eastern	0.2%
Other	0.6%
Mixed race	1.5%

Figure 1

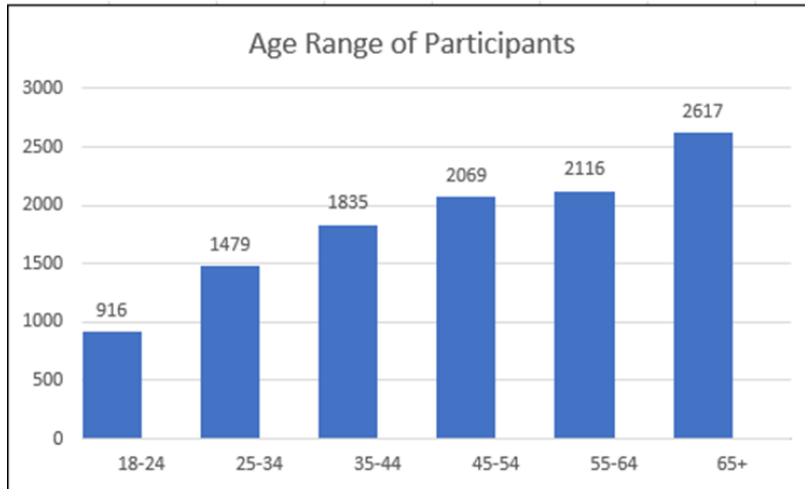
Bar chart of the ethnic background of the participants



Age Groups

Figure 2

Ages of participants by group



Participants by Education

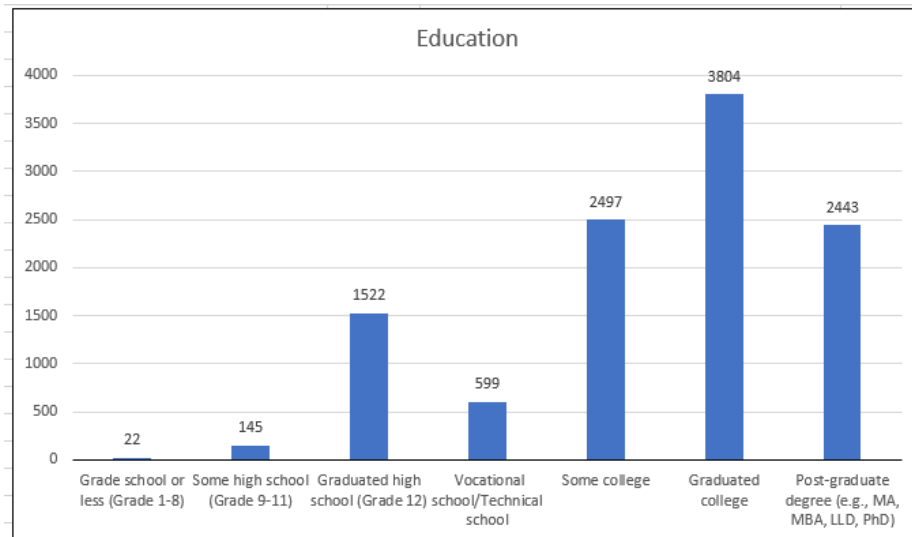
Table 2

Participants had seven categories for consideration of their education.

Level of Education	Responses	Percent
Grade school or less (Grade 1-8)	22	0.20%
Some high school (Grade 9-11)	145	1.31%
Graduated high school (Grade 12)	1522	13.80%
Vocational school/Technical school	599	5.43%
Some college	2497	22.63%
Graduated college	3804	34.48%
Post-graduate degree (e.g., MA, MBA, LLD, PhD)	2443	22.14%

Figure 3

Graphic representation of the spread of educational levels



Decision to Change Careers Based on Demographic Data

The number of people who had considered a career change was almost the same as those who had not. There is research based on the demographic profiles considered in this paper, so questions as to age (Holly Slay et al., 2018) and gender (Ali et al., 2018) and how those issues might moderate a decision to make a career change could be important. Using data from the University of Phoenix Career Optimism index survey, correlational studies were run to see if there was a significant association between the demographic factors mentioned and the consideration of changing careers. Four correlational analyses were run as shown below:

- 1) Pearson's r between having considered a career change and gender = 0.0522.
- 2) Pearson's r between having considered a career change and ethnic background = -0.0609.
- 3) Pearson's r between having considered a career change age = 0.2299
- 4) Pearson's r between having considered a career change and education = 0.05170

The results of the study indicate that within this population, there were no significant correlations between gender, age, ethnic background and education in terms of consideration of a career change. There was a weak positive, but non-significant correlation to age.

“Are people more optimistic the more senior they are in a company?” The literature is sparse in this area. The question of career optimism, however, is robust. Eva et al. (2020) reported on an extensive review on career optimism. The authors listed six antecedents to career optimism including individual personality traits, their beliefs, and career goals. However, job title does not appear to be a good indicator of career optimism. This appears to be supported by statistical analysis.

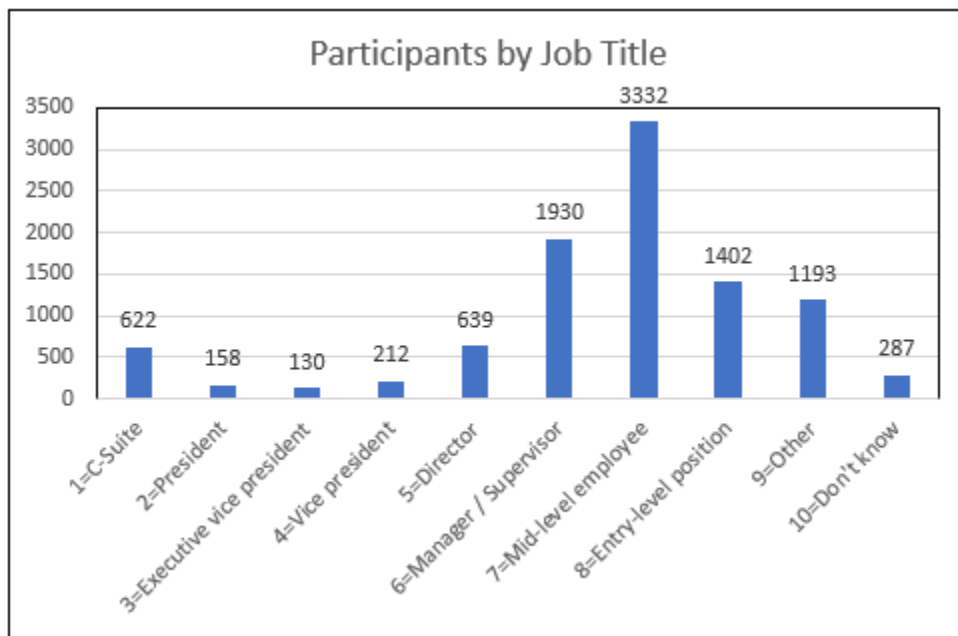
Table 3

Participants had 10 choices for various job titles which were used as an indicator of seniority within their company.

1=C-Suite	4=Vice President	7=Mid-level employee	10=Don't know
2=President	5=Director	8=Entry-level employee	
3=Executive VP	6=Manager/Supervisor	9=Other	

Figure 4

Distribution of participants by job title. 9905 participants responded.



A correlational analysis was run between the first question and the second question. The assumption is that those who were more secure might be less likely to consider a career change. The correlation between job title and whether the participant had considered a career change was not significant with a Pearson's r of 0.000451.

If employees were more optimistic and secure the more senior they were in their current position, would they be more likely to remain in that position? An analysis of the average time they reported having held the current position is indicated in Table 4. Based on the information as noted in the University of Phoenix Career Optimism index survey (Edelman, 2021) below, there is very little variation in the time in position and job title.

Table 4

Job Title	Years in Position		
C--Suite Average time in position	3.58		
President Average time in position	3.42		
Exec VP Average time in position	3.14	Mean	3.34
VP Average time in position	3.32	Standard Error	0.10
Director Average time in position	3.44	Median	3.42
Manager/Supervisor Average time in position	3.49	Standard Deviation	0.29
Mid-Level employee Average time in position	3.41	Confidence Level(95.0%)	0.22
Entry-level employee Average time in position	2.66		
Other Average time in position	3.60		
Don't know Average time in position	3.08		

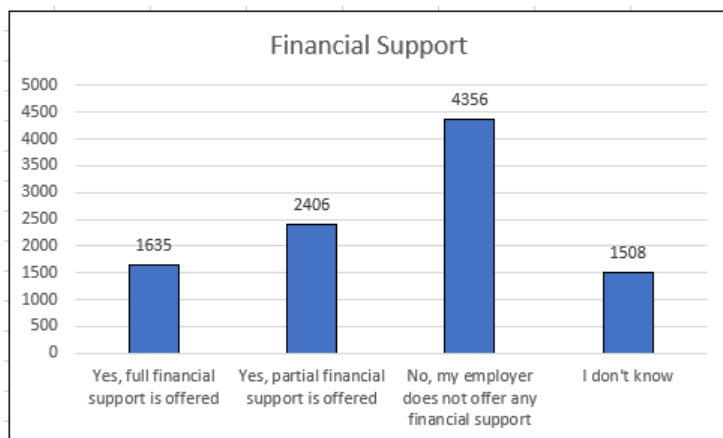
The amount of time in their current position was very consistent across all 10 job titles. The lowest number of years in a position was entry-level.

For question three, participants had four responses to the question, “Does your employer offer financial support for additional education or training?”

- 1 = Yes, full financial support is offered
- 2 = Yes, partial financial support is offered
- 3 = No, my employer does not offer any financial support
- 4 = I don't know

Figure 5

Distribution of responses related to financial support for education or training.



The question as to whether financial support for education such as tuition reimbursement has been a question for many years. The literature is mixed. In a study by Messersmith et al. (2018), they found that

financial assistance to employees did not offer a benefit to the organization and could drain needed funds. In another study by Lee et al. (2018), the topic of financial support was discussed as a tool in helping employees forced to leave due to downsizing. There have been other studies related to healthcare and younger generational employees, but the information is mixed. In a focused study of one company with high turnover (Sutton, 2020), tuition reimbursement did make a positive difference in retaining and recruiting.

In the University of Phoenix Career Optimism index survey, 9905 participants responded to the question about whether their organization offered any sort of financial assistance for education or training. The results of how the four possible responses to the question are shown in Figure 5. The question, however, is whether this information was relevant to participants in terms of whether they had considered changing careers. The answer is that there does not appear to be any association between considering a career change and financial support from the employer. A statistical correlation gave a Pearson's $r = -0.0002$.

Summary

The University of Phoenix Career Optimism index survey was an extensive survey of over 11,000 participants from all parts of the United States and all levels of employment. Some were unemployed while others were corporate leaders. This whitepaper addresses three questions that were part of the University of Phoenix Career Optimism index survey. Had individuals considered a career change, were they more optimistic if they were more senior, and did financial support from their employers make a difference?

The results indicated that about half the population had considered a career change, but there is no data to suggest that this increased or decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As far as seniority and a sense of optimism, the topic is too complex to say it is associated only with job title. As indicated previously, there are multiple antecedents affecting career optimism and job title may not be one of those. The last question regarding financial support has been one that has been argued for decades. Some employees actively provide 100% financial support for education and personal development while the majority offer little or none.

What are the implications for leadership? Most organizational leaders are very aware of turnover within their own organizations. Most organizational leaders will only remain in their current position, on average, less than four years. Replacing an employee, especially C-level employees, can be very expensive and take a long time, yet the reality is that while companies continue to seek ways to retain talented staff, titles and financial reimbursement may not be effective tools to retain those individuals.

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