

A Desire To Learn: How Employers Can Capitalize On Employees' Openness To Furthering Education

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Executive Summary

Among working professionals, the desire for career advancement and professional development is nearly ubiquitous. It comes as no surprise that nearly all employees want to advance their career and increase their earning potential, but that rarely happens without opportunities to learn and develop additional skills, either on the job or through outside resources. Employers who acknowledge and embrace this intrinsic desire for self-improvement by offering training and learning programs will find that employees are eager to engage in new learning opportunities, which can pay long-term dividends in terms of productivity and job retention. However, building a successful learning program requires a good understanding of employees' needs and desires and a commitment to build a learning offering that appeals to all employees within a company.

In May 2014, Colorado Technical University commissioned Forrester Consulting to conduct industry research around the benefits of higher education and training opportunities for working professionals. To explore this topic, Forrester developed a hypothesis that while working professionals may have a number of educational opportunities at their disposal, each employee views the opportunities differently based on the desired outcome of each activity and other demographic factors.

Forrester conducted an online survey of 5,050 full-time US working professionals, ages 18 or above, with a high school diploma or higher, all of whom had some openness to new educational opportunities. The survey also excluded those in high-turnover retail associate positions. From the survey, Forrester discovered that there are significant differences between what motivates and/or prevents employees from seeking further education. Businesses must understand these differences in order to offer their employees the best opportunities to learn and grow, and to demonstrate commitment to their employees.

KEY FINDINGS

Forrester's study yielded these five key findings:

- › **Both degree programs and professional certifications are of interest to employees.** Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents were open to new trainings and certifications, with 45% open to new degree programs. Considering survey respondents were already well educated, with 96% having a degree or some college experience, and 70% having a four-year degree or higher, organizations would do well to capitalize on a workforce eager for development opportunities.
- › **Motivations for furthering education vary primarily by age and work tenure.** While compensation is a primary motivation for nearly all interested in educational opportunities, additional motivations are more varied. Younger employees are most interested in growing their careers, whereas more tenured employees care more about increasing performance of their current job function. As employees move through various career stages, it is common for interests to shift away from degree programs toward certifications or programs not associated with a degree as a way to deepen expertise and competence within their niche.
- › **Employees are most interested in a blended learning approach.** On average, 58% prefer a blended learning approach using both online and classroom training, as this provides greater flexibility and diversity to the learning approach. This suggests an increasing openness to online education, since approximately 80% of respondents reported prior learning experiences with face-to-face instruction in brick-and-mortar institutions.
- › **Even among employees who are motivated to learn, personal and professional dynamics often become barriers to pursuing education.** The top three reasons preventing people from enrolling were: 1) they are not in a financial position to do so; 2) their current level of education is sufficient for what they want to do; and 3) their career/job situation is holding them back (e.g., workload, manager pressure not to take time away).
- › **Nearly half of employees question their company's commitment to employee development.** Advocacy for learning and development, along with commitment to help employees meet their career aspirations, comes more from employees' direct managers than company leadership. Only slightly more than half of respondents agreed that "employee learning and development is a key priority for my organization."

Employees Want To Continue Learning

From our survey sample of professional employees who have a high school degree or higher, 96% have had at least some college experience, and 70% have a four-year degree or higher. However, despite the high levels of education for employees, we discovered the following insights:

- › **Even the highly educated are very interested in additional learning opportunities.** Respondents strongly value education and show that they are open to gaining new skills in new fields, enhancing expertise in their current role, and learning new things simply because they enjoy learning. Most employees are motivated to learn.
- › **Both degree programs and trainings and certifications are of interest to employees.** Forty-five percent of survey respondents were open to the idea of enrolling in a degree program, with approximately 69% of respondents open to training and certification courses (see Figure 1).

For the 45% who are open to new degree programs, they cited the following motivations:

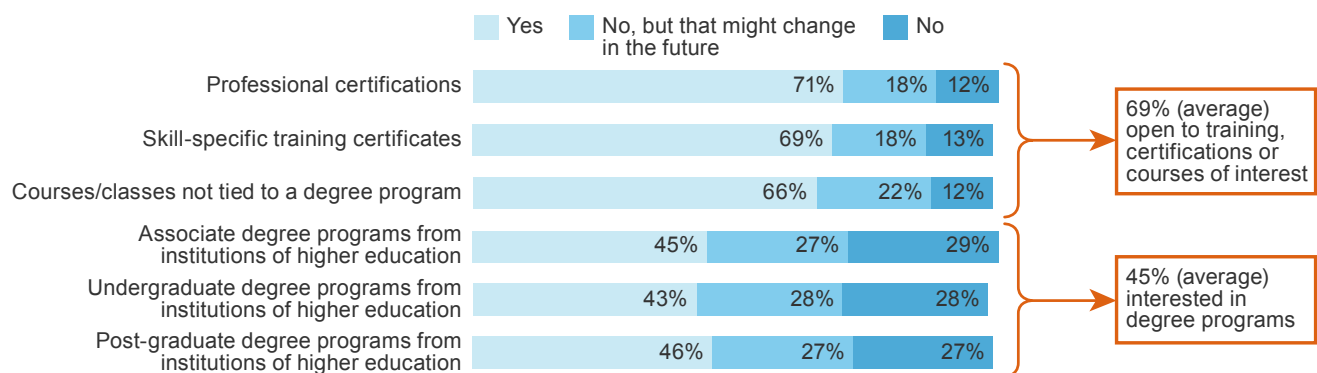
- › **Increase earning potential.** No surprise here, as the majority (68%) said earning more money was their top motivating factor.
- › **Achieve a better work-life balance.** Forty-three percent of respondents open to degree programs said they want to complete a degree to achieve a better balance with work and personal commitments.
- › **Pursue interests in new types of work that they don't currently have schooling for.** For employees open to degree programs, 34% feel a degree program is necessary to enable them to engage in the types of work they are interested in.

While degree programs provide a distinct set of benefits that draws employees to them, the same is true of trainings and certifications. Professional certifications and trainings provide a different set of outcomes that can be just as appealing to employees based on their current job situation and education level.

FIGURE 1

Employees Are More Interested In Certifications, Trainings, And Courses Not Tied To A Degree Program

“Are you open to considering any of the following educational opportunities in the future?”



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

In particular, employees surveyed felt that trainings and certifications provide:

- › **Relevant skills for immediate use.** The skills employees learn are highly targeted and can have immediate application to the work they are doing.
- › **No long-term time commitment.** These trainings are shorter in duration and more manageable for those with busy schedules.
- › **Low-cost opportunities.** Costs of these programs are often partially or fully funded by the company, or they are less expensive than courses leading to a degree.
- › **Visible and predictable results.** Employees feel more confident of immediate value they receive (financial or professionally) from certification, training, and development programs.

When asked about specific topics of interest for furthering education, respondents indicated that the top areas of interest were leadership principles/development, project management, IT, business administration, and finance/accounting (see Figure 2). Interest across a spectrum of topics appears to vary by job role. For example, IT professionals are among the most narrowly focused, with 73% showing interest in an IT-related opportunity. Interest in specific training related to their job role is at 64% among finance/accounting employees, and 51% among sales professionals. Only 36% of HR professionals and 34% of marketing/PR employees indicated interest in training related directly to their current field.

Key Motivations For Continuing Education Are Different Across Demographic Groups

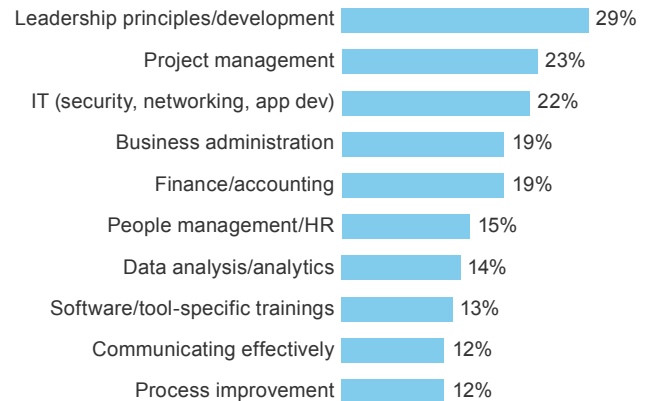
The majority of employees are motivated to pursue new education opportunities in order to increase earning potential and personal job marketability. However, these expectations vary mainly with age, tenure, and income. Some of the differing motivations between groups are:

- › **Boomers have the strongest desire to hone their skills.** Employees show a continual interest in making a greater impact and contribution in the work that they do as

FIGURE 2

Top Areas Of Interest Provide More Immediately Applicable Skills

“Regarding your interests in education, training, and development overall (across all categories), which specific areas of education or training are you most interested in?”
(Only top 10 responses shown)



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

they age and earn more money (see Figure 3, red line). Approximately 22% of lower-income Gen Z employees are interested in increasing the impact or contribution of their work as opposed to approximately 45% of Older Boomers.

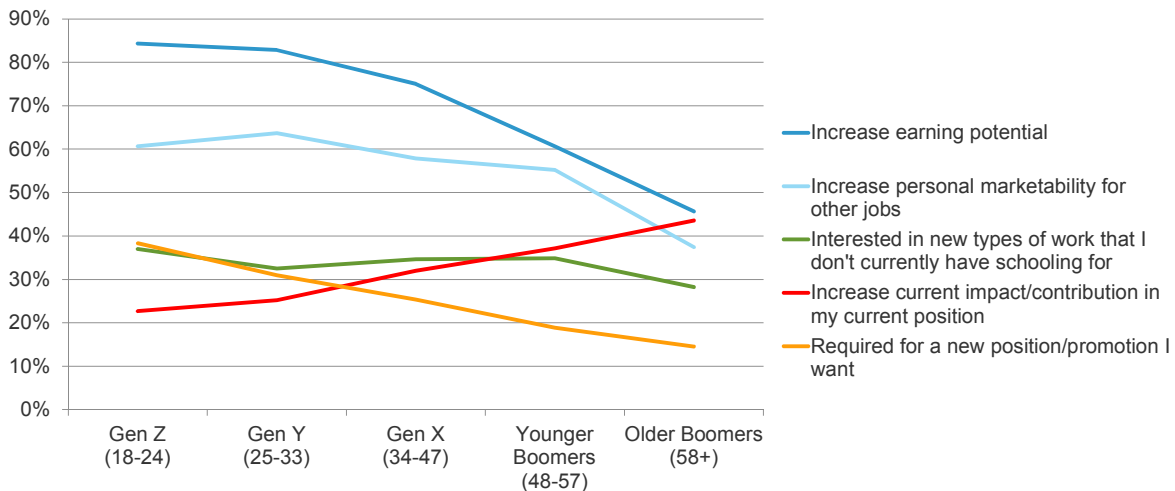
- › **Gen Y and Z employees are significantly more concerned with securing a higher salary.** Connected with getting a higher salary is increasing personal marketability for other jobs as well. Generally, younger employees are not as focused on improving in their current role.
- › **Age does not greatly affect employees' interest in pursuing new types of work.** As employees age, they tend to stay in their area of work. However, survey results showed that approximately 28% of older employees were interested in retraining for new positions (see Figure 3, orange line.) There is a decrease from the interest shown by Gen Z, but this finding for Boomers is counter to the long-held belief that older employees are not interested in new jobs requiring additional education.

› **Hourly workers are least interested in improving their current job function.** Only 24% of hourly workers are interested in improving their current job function, compared with 36% of salaried workers. Hourly workers are the most interested in new types of work they don't currently have schooling for, with 43% indicating this as motivation for pursuing new learning. Hourly workers overall have the lowest level of education, and their motivations are more focused on finding new work types that require additional education and schooling.

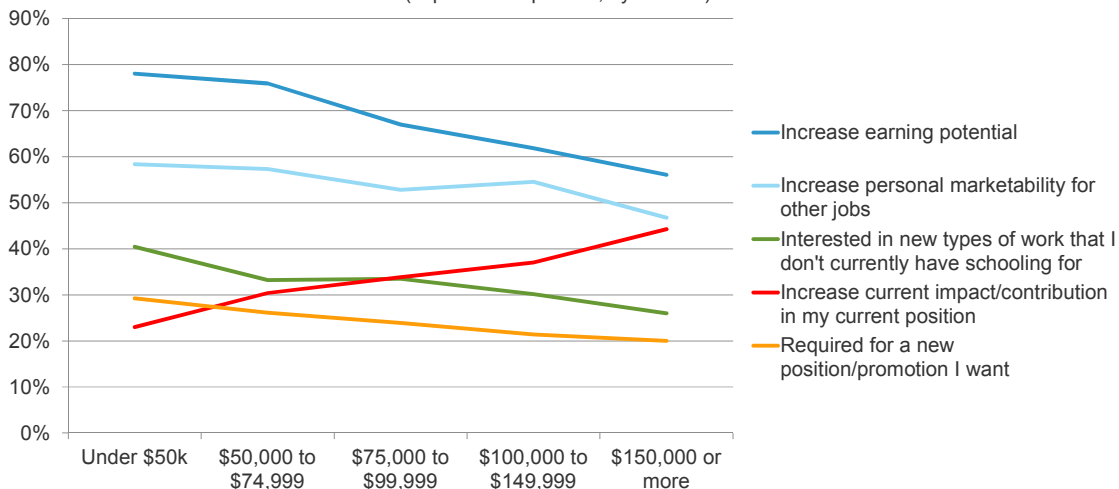
› **Increasing personal marketability is of interest to all employee types.** One would expect Gen X, Y, and Z to be interested in increasing their marketability, but the survey found that Younger Boomers particularly have an interest in marketing themselves for other jobs (see Figure 3, light blue line). Older Boomers and those employees with higher salaries are the only groups somewhat less interested in increasing their marketability through additional education, as they are likely less interested in pursuing other jobs.

FIGURE 3
Top Motivations For Education Change With Age And Income

“What are the primary career-related factors motivating you to pursue additional education?”
(Top Five Responses, by age)



(Top Five Responses, by Income)



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

Choosing The Right Institution For Furthering Education Is Important

If employees are investing the time and money in additional education, they want to make sure they are choosing the best institution to match their educational needs. From our survey, we learned that the three primary things people look for when choosing an institution for degree programs, additional training, and certifications are:

- › **A reasonable program cost.** Education is an investment, and cost is top of mind for employees looking at these institutions.
- › **Reputation of the institution.** By making the investment of their time and money, employees want to know they are learning from a reputable institution. An institution's accreditation and reputation can also potentially help increase marketability for future jobs.
- › **Flexible learning program.** Of the top five things people look for, three relate to flexibility and convenience of learning: proximity to home/work, flexible program durations, and availability of online programs (see Figure 4). People don't want to be forced into rigid programs that require in-person commitments. Many especially value the flexibility because they are able to continue working while pursuing these new opportunities.

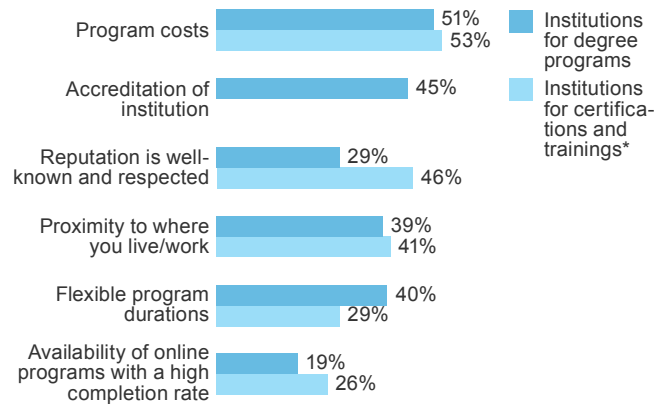
Preferred Approaches To Learning Have Shifted

Employees have changed the way they prefer to consume and interact with education content. While there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, there are a few things that people appear to be interested in widely:

- › **Blended learning programs.** While almost all respondents have earned their degrees or previous education at brick-and-mortar institutions, they have embraced technology, and 58% prefer a learning approach that blends face-to-face instruction and online learning. Interestingly, preference is even stronger among older generations. This flexibility is what people value most in order to allow them to complete their education on

FIGURE 4
Employees Look For Well-Known Institutions With Flexible Programs

“What are the key motivating factors when choosing an institution for furthering your education?”



Base: 4,118 working professionals with full-time positions interested in degree programs

*Base: 4,276 working professionals with full-time positions interested in certifications and trainings

Note: not all responses shown

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

a less rigid schedule (see Figure 5). By contrast, 20% and 21% of employees prefer the traditional classroom and online experience, respectively.

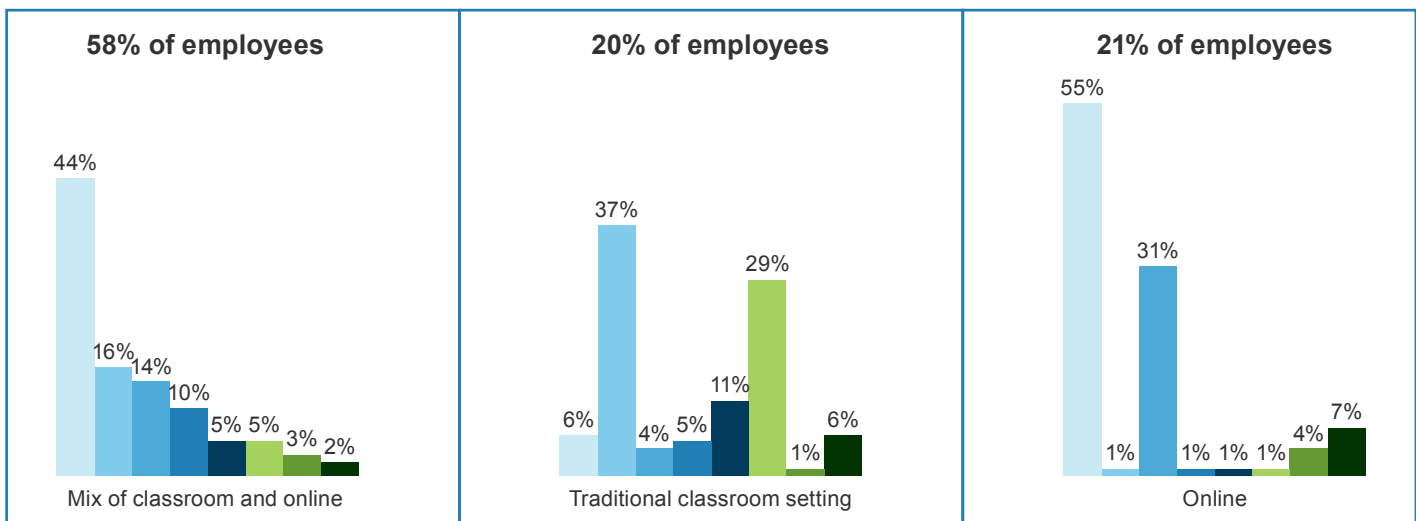
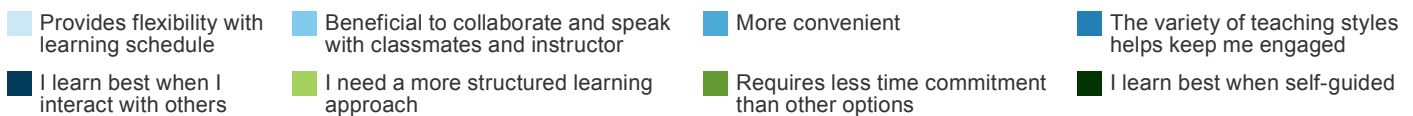
- › **Instructor-guided learning.** Employees do not want to lose the guidance of an instructor. Whether through face-to-face classroom or instructor-guided online learning, employees want easy access to instructors as well as other learners.
- › **Practical, hands-on learning activities.** Employees prefer learning activities that are relevant and applicable to their current job function. An average of 44% of employees, across all demographics, indicated that they want practical applications of their learning such as doing on-the-job training or solving real-world challenges.

Employees value blended learning approaches because they enable their educational experience to be more meaningful based on their preferred learning styles. When asked why they prefer certain learning settings, those who prefer traditional classroom settings said the biggest benefit from that setting is the collaboration with classmates and instructors, as well as the benefit of having a more structured learning approach. For those who prefer online learning, the flexibility and convenience of the online approach are most appealing (see Figure 5).

The value of a blended learning approach is that it provides resources to meet the needs for all preferred learning styles. Employees can engage online if they prefer, but they still have opportunities for collaboration with peers and instructors. Overall, the flexibility of blended learning provides the most appeal for the vast majority of those pursuing new educational opportunities.

FIGURE 5
Employees Most Value The Flexibility Of A Blended Learning Approach

“What learning setting would be most valuable to you for pursuing additional education? And why?”



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

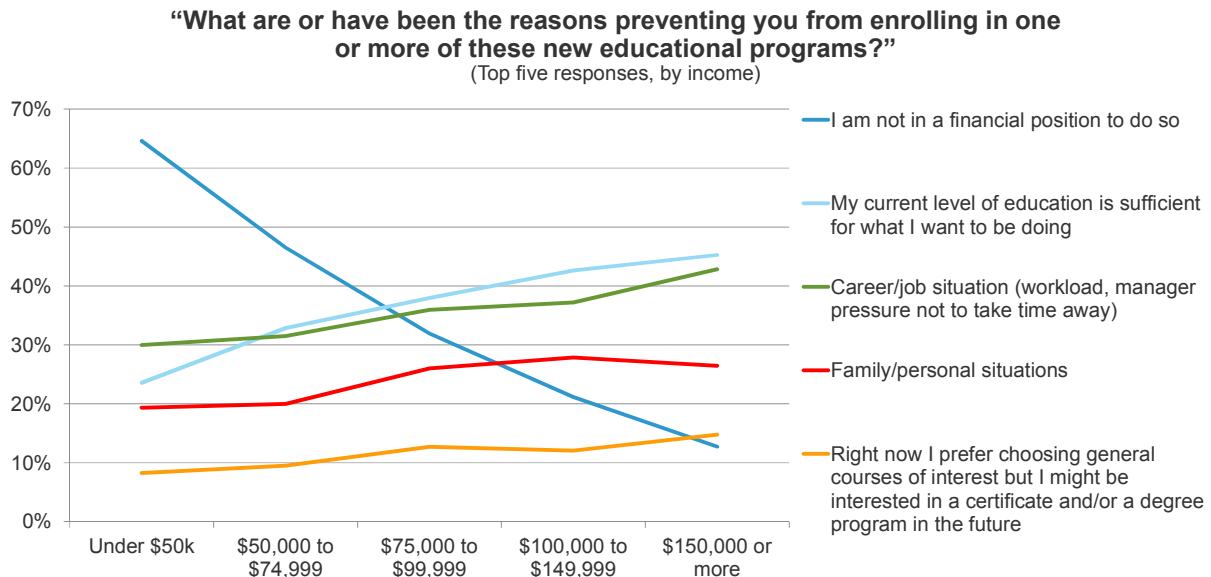
Employees Face A Number Of Barriers In Pursuing New Educational Opportunities

Just slightly more than half of employees surveyed like the process of learning new things; however, there are obstacles that stop would-be learners before they even get started:

› **Slightly more than one in three employees feel they aren't in a financial position to pursue new opportunities.** This financial burden is the primary concern of hourly employees and younger, less-tenured employees. As employees get older, their income level increases and there is less concern about tuition expenses (see Figure 6, dark blue line).

- › **Workload makes it difficult for 35% of workers to commit to further education.** Some feel pressure from managers not to take time off for additional education, while others are concerned that they can't handle the responsibilities of school and work simultaneously. They may need to take time off, which causes an additional financial burden (see Figure 7, green line).
- › **There is uncertainty about what opportunities exist by obtaining a degree.** Thirty-three percent of employees are concerned about what future employment prospects would look like if they invested in completing a degree program. They want some assurance of what kinds of jobs and salary increases to expect if they make the financial commitment and devote study time to pursue a degree. This is a concern of all age groups, although a greater concern with Gen X (45%) than with Older Boomers (26%).

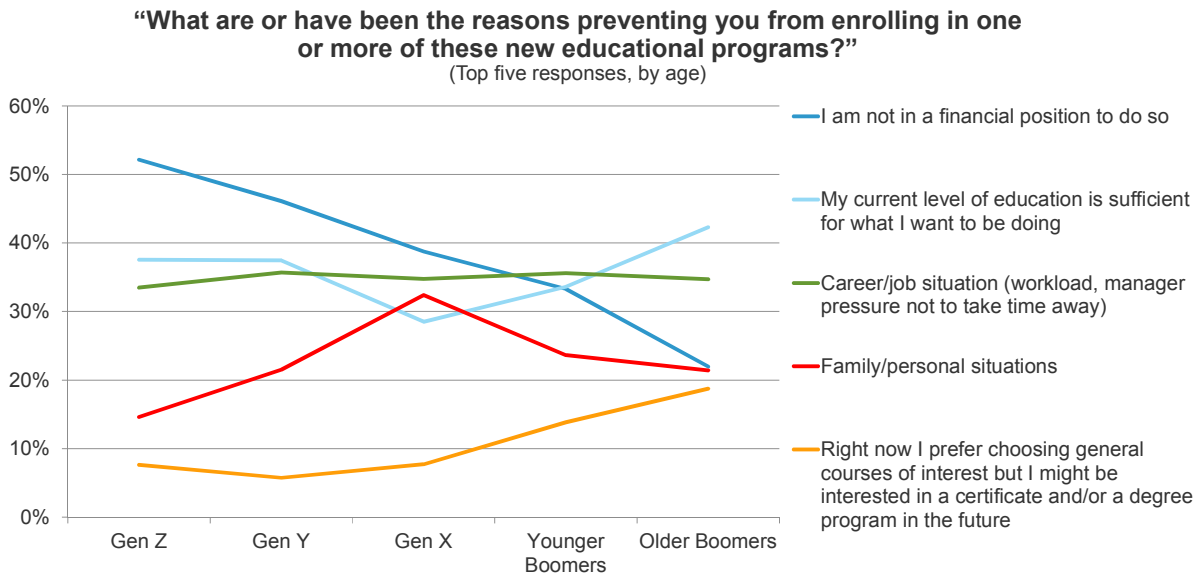
FIGURE 6
Top Barriers For Education Change With Income



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

FIGURE 7
Top Barriers For Education Change With Age

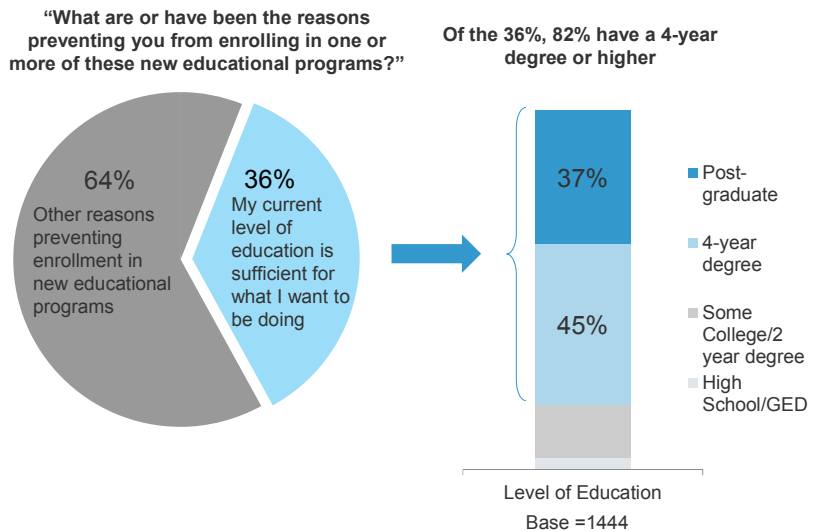


Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

› **Some employees are satisfied with their current educational level.** Thirty-six percent of those open to new education but not enrolled don't see an immediate need for additional education or the educational experiences available. Interestingly, this does not shift dramatically by work experience, as 38% of those working two years or less and 42% of those with 30-plus years of experience are satisfied with their current level of education. Of this group in total, 82% already have a four-year degree or higher and do not feel a need for additional education related to their present work (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8
Most Employees Satisfied With Their Current Level Of Education Have A Four-Year Degree Or Higher



Base: 4,037 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

Employees Perceive A Lack Of Organizational Commitment To Learning And Development

While many employees are open to learning as a way to improve their skills and job performance, employers do not always share that same commitment to learning and development, according to the survey. Currently, slightly less than half of employees feel their company is committed to investing in their learning and development. While many employees feel that their managers value learning, that same commitment does not seem to resonate from the company's leadership. Possible reasons include:

› **Corporate learning culture.** Although most companies talk about employees as their “most valuable asset,” sometimes employees don't see actions that support these words. Only 46% agreed that leadership's

commitment to employee development is meaningful. Compared with a similar statement about how much their direct manager valued learning, the responses were much more favorable, with 61% agreeing, suggesting direct managers have an important role to play culturally (see Figure 9).

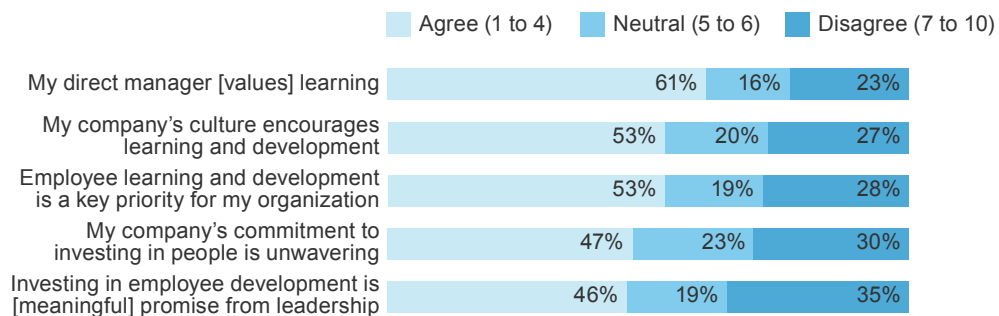
› **Lack of engagement around learning programs.** Seventy-five percent of employees surveyed indicated that their employer offers tuition reimbursement benefits, but only 28% have actually used those benefits. It raises the question of how well education assistance has been promoted and whether it is a competitive process for limited dollars in which employers must be selective in who qualifies for those benefits. Beyond just company funding, employee concerns about education are likely to contribute to the low involvement rate in tuition reimbursement programs.

FIGURE 9

Employees Don't Feel Their Employers Are Committed To Employee Learning And Development

“Thinking about your current employment situation, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.”

(1 = agree, 10 = disagree)



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

Key Recommendations

Companies wishing to capitalize on a sizable cross-section of employees who are open to new learning experiences should consider doing the following:

- › **Develop a company culture that supports all kinds of learning and development.** Company commitment to learning programs to increase employees' knowledge and skills is a desire of employees. Our survey results show that this educational support must be communicated by all levels of management in all available channels. Employers should:
 - **Create flexible formal and informal learning programs developed internally as well as secured from outside providers.** In addition, provide managers with adequate training and resources to advocate a consistent and compelling learning culture.
 - **Promote stronger communication and advocacy for tuition reimbursement and other educational support provided by the company.** The company's internal PR team, in partnership with learning and development, needs to continually communicate the kind of tuition and other financial support available for learning from external training courses and internal opportunities like rotational assignments.
- › **Understand the differences in motivations and expected outcomes for education between varied employee audiences to help build more effective learning programs, with special considerations for the following categories:**
 - **Generation X, Y and Z versus Boomer generations (age is also closely related to work tenure).** Younger employees are primarily motivated by career advancement. If a new educational endeavor can help them increase their salary, receive a promotion, or even find a higher-paying job in another part of the company, that is what will drive them toward those opportunities. On the other hand, Boomers and/or seasoned employees, while still partially motivated by higher income, look at additional education as a way to improve their current job performance and make a stronger impact in their particular discipline.
 - **Hourly versus salaried employees.** Hourly workers are looking toward education as a way to increase their income, mainly through finding new jobs or roles they don't currently have schooling for. However, despite their interest in degree programs, this group is more burdened by tuition costs and could benefit most from tuition reimbursement. In contrast, salaried workers have a higher starting level of education, often a four-year degree or higher. These workers are also motivated to increase their earning potential and expertise, but they also look at education as a way to try new things, which may not have an impact on their career.
 - **Those interested in certification programs and trainings versus those interested in degree programs.** Respondents choose certification programs and trainings or degree programs based on their educational background and present position. Certificate programs provide immediately applicable skills and do not require a multiyear time commitment, and most employees already had a degree and wanted to become better at their present position or secure advancement. Degree programs are important to those wanting to prepare for or pivot to a new career field. They are looking for flexibility in the educational setting (online work and online communications) and flexibility in working hours to focus on studies. Tuition costs are a concern of almost all employees.

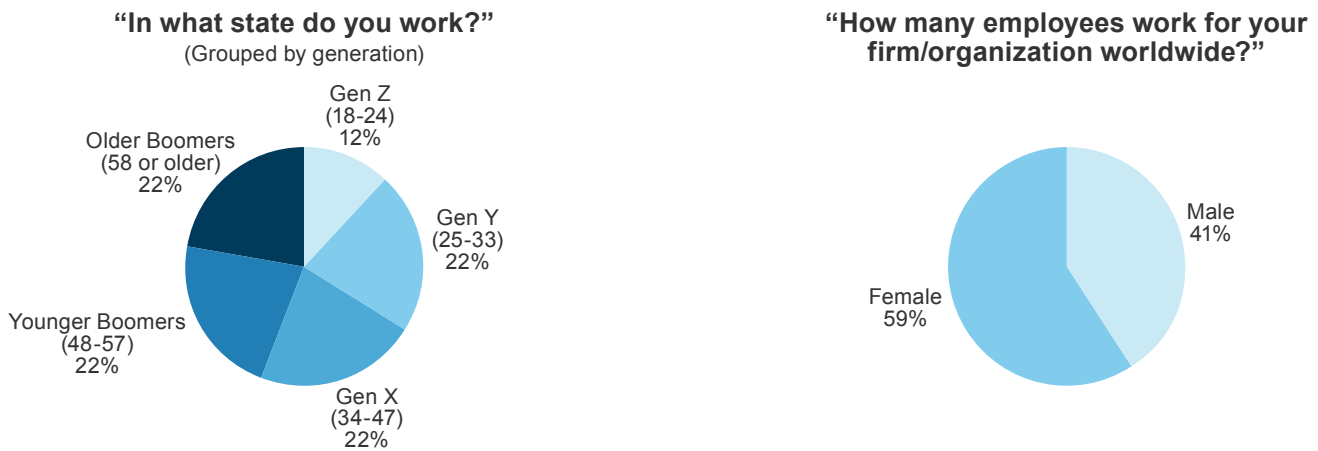
- › **Develop an educational partnership with a higher education institution that can address the varied needs of multiple audiences.** A partnership is beneficial to both the business and the institution. The right educational partner will tailor programs that fit the employer's context and their employees' needs. The institution may invite business leaders into classes to provide real-world context for learning. Classes may meet at a company location, at the higher education institution, online, or at a combination of locations determined by both organizations. Employees value custom programs that relate specifically to their current context.
- › **Provide blended learning opportunities to give employees the flexibility and collaboration benefits they seek with continuing education.** More than half of respondents said they found a blended learning setting the most valuable. Blended learning refers to online and offline learning, with each option available based on what best fits the learning situation. The blend can include self-paced online learning, a face-to-face lecture, a video, a simulation, an on-site observation, an online collaboration network, or attendance at an event — whatever fits the learning objectives. Blended learning provides the flexibility that employees in this study are seeking while still maintaining interaction with instructors and fellow learners, either face-to-face or online in a learning social network.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted a global online survey of 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions with a high school diploma or higher and who are open to new educational opportunities. Survey participants included respondents from all industries but excluded employees in retail store associate positions, where turnover is typically high. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The survey was fielded and completed in August 2014.

Appendix B: Survey Demographics

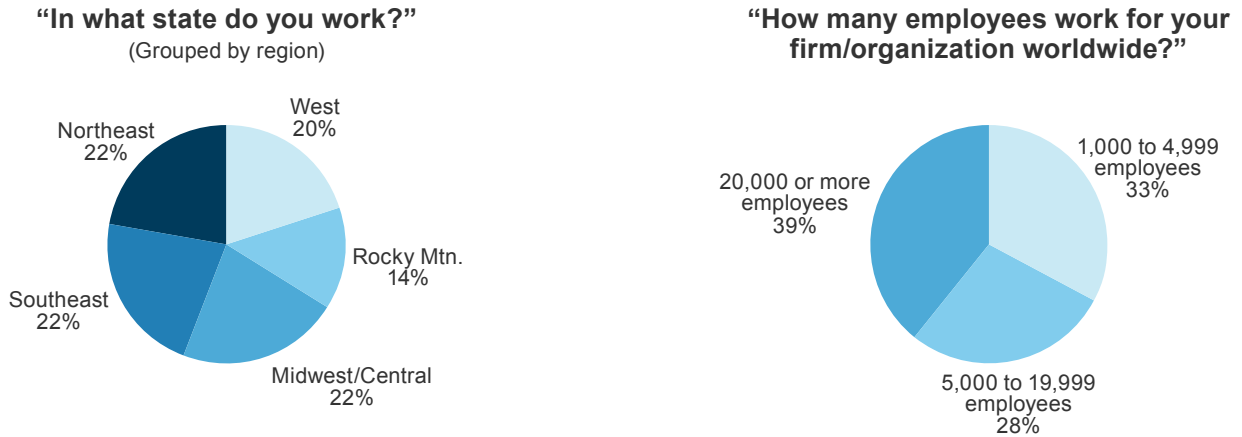
FIGURE 10
Age And Gender



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

FIGURE 11
Location And Company Size



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014

FIGURE 12
Compensation Plan And Job Category



Base: 5,050 working professionals with full-time positions

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Colorado Technical University, August 2014