



U.S. workers are carving a path to a new American Dream

Beyond AI, businesses, governments, and people need to focus more on trade education.

By Ed Mitzen

Each year, some of America's greatest artists, thinkers, and business leaders have a chance to come together at SXSW in the spirit of creativity, innovation, and future-building. And with everything currently happening in technology and the workforce, this year's gathering feels particularly timely.

Of course, questions around [AI](#) will take center stage and remain our primary cultural fixation: How long until the next incredible breakthrough? Should Americans be fearful about an impending AI apocalypse or hopeful about the prospect of unlimited [productivity](#) gains?

These topics are all valid, urgent, and deeply worthwhile to explore, but I also believe the most important workforce story unfolding in the U.S. today is less about what AI will do next, and more about what everyday Americans are doing *right now* in response to and in preparation for AI's growing impacts.

If technological advancement is going to keep accelerating faster than our institutions can or are willing to adapt, the fact that workers have already begun adapting on their own in real time is a story of deep-rooted resilience within our culture and communities. It is also a story that seems to be signaling a pragmatic and optimistic reimagining of the American Dream.

WORKFORCE DISRUPTION IS WELL UNDERWAY

The speed of AI advancement is likely to continue to be astonishing. Although we can neither predict nor control the pace of innovation, we can acknowledge that AI is no longer a hypothetical but an economic force reshaping job security, [hiring](#), and career planning.

We also need to understand that while AI adoption has added pressure, workforce fragility in the U.S. was deepening long before generative models like ChatGPT entered the picture.

Education costs have been compounding at an unhealthy rate in America for nearly half a century, with rising tuition costs significantly [outpacing inflation](#) since the 1980s. Meanwhile, the country's student debt crisis also continues deepening, with total student loan debt in the U.S. exceeding [\\$1.7 trillion in 2024](#), all while broader confidence in traditional education and career pathways has been gradually eroding.

AI isn't causing workforce uncertainty but merely adding weight on top of existing cracks in the system. To focus solely on predicting the pace and extent of AI-driven job loss misses the real story: U.S. workers are already adapting, and it's a process involving a bold reimagining of American values and stability.

AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING DURABILITY

Despite so much uncertainty, Americans don't appear to be giving in to fear as much as they're leaning into resilience and practical decision-making. There are some strong cultural signals indicating a radical shift in the U.S. workforce's strategic mindset, particularly in evolving views around traditional education and career pathways in this AI age.

More specifically, a new [survey](#) of American workers we conducted at the Business For Good Foundation via the Harris Poll revealed a clear and widespread departure from most conventional ways of thinking about professional and economic fulfillment. For example, 75% of Americans shared that their views of a "good job" does not look the same now as five years ago, while 80% agreed more people are choosing trade training over four-year degree programs.

Similarly, more than 78% said they believe long-lasting social and cultural stigmas around blue-collar work are beginning to dissipate in the U.S., with 76% saying they believe trade jobs are less likely to be replaced by AI.

Rather than fearing widespread job loss and sustained unemployment, Americans are envisioning a future workforce defined by durability, where the workforce's economic value is concentrated less in white-collar sectors and more by the durable, hands-on skills that have always played an indispensable role. It suggests an overall mood of pragmatic optimism, with Americans appearing to adjust to AI adoption much faster than our political and educational systems.

GET AHEAD OF CHANGE

While everyday Americans seem eager to get ahead of AI's inevitable changes, this likely won't happen at scale without the appropriate support from organizations and U.S. business leaders. Recognizing this heightened need for more hands-on programs to increase access to skilled trade

training, we at the Business for Good Foundation committed \$100,000 to advancing workforce development in the first half of 2026.

Of course, this will also require strategy and coordination, grounded in shared recognition that this shift away from traditional white-collar pathways is not an error but a process of economic regeneration. The growing emphasis on hands-on trades is not nostalgia, but necessary to strengthen the U.S. innovation infrastructure.

Skilled work continues to underpin all non-negotiable aspects of American society, including access to housing and healthcare. At the same time, U.S. business owners are grappling with critical, pre-existing skilled labor shortages, meaning they'll increasingly need to depend on talent pipelines beyond traditional degree models.

One recent example of what we've done at the Business for Good Foundation is a New York Capital Region pilot. As part of our commitment to workforce development, the foundation awarded a \$25,000 grant to the Social Enterprise and Training (SEAT) Center to expand trade skills programming in the region and help bridge the gap between untapped talent and industry demand.

I've seen firsthand that simple, practical investments like in the SEAT Center—those that better align workforce pathways with employer needs and expand access to education and career opportunities for motivated talent in underserved communities—can go a long way toward creating a real and sustainable path to upward economic mobility. I'm encouraging leaders across the country to take similar action, at any scale.

However, such a model will largely remain limited without other like-minded business leaders and philanthropists willing to build on and replicate it at scale, and who are prepared to fully embrace a new American dream defined less by credentials and more by individual capabilities, determination, and human resilience. While this kind of change certainly won't happen overnight, I hope that those of us who attend SXSW this week might begin aligning our business priorities with the unique spirit of this event, working together to intentionally build a brighter, more prosperous, and innovative future for the U.S. workforce.



Ed Mitzen
Co-Founder, Business for Good Foundation

bfg.org