

The Great Resignation: Workers' Experiences with Job and Education Transitions

September 21, 2022

By April 2021, half of U.S. adults had their work change in some way — fewer hours, more hours, lost a job, started a job — as a result of COVID-19.¹ One-third of adults also changed or canceled plans for additional education or training.² Many who continued working or studying experienced new formats and settings, as video conferences from home with unscripted cameos from pets, children, and household members became a part of corporate America. Frontline workers in essential services and others whose jobs didn't offer the possibility of self-isolating lived with masks, hand sanitizer, and daily exposure to contagion risks.

Amid all of this disruption, the number of U.S. workers leaving or changing their jobs sharply increased. Known variously as the Great Resignation, Reshuffle, or Realignment, the trend has been cast in the cultural imagination as a collective desire on the part of the American workforce for more rewarding or meaningful work.

This occurs as public confidence in a college education is eroding. Students increasingly doubt that a four-year education will be worth the time, effort, and money. In a time of economic uncertainty we would expect to see enrollments increase, but instead they are on the decline.

To better understand the motivations and perceptions influencing education and workforce transitions, Strada Education Network surveyed approximately 4,500 adults between the ages of 18 and 65 during spring 2022 about the employment and education changes they've experienced since the start of the pandemic.³

Decisions to enroll in postsecondary education and training were largely driven by economic and career considerations; for those who did not enroll, primary barriers included concerns over cost and doubt that education would lead to better economic or career outcomes. Individuals taking the initiative to change jobs were also the most likely to pursue additional educational opportunities. Of those respondents who have changed jobs voluntarily since March 2020, the vast majority were motivated by opportunities for advancement or the desire to have greater control over their work or work environment. Those who lost their jobs reported the most interest in education but were among the least likely to enroll.

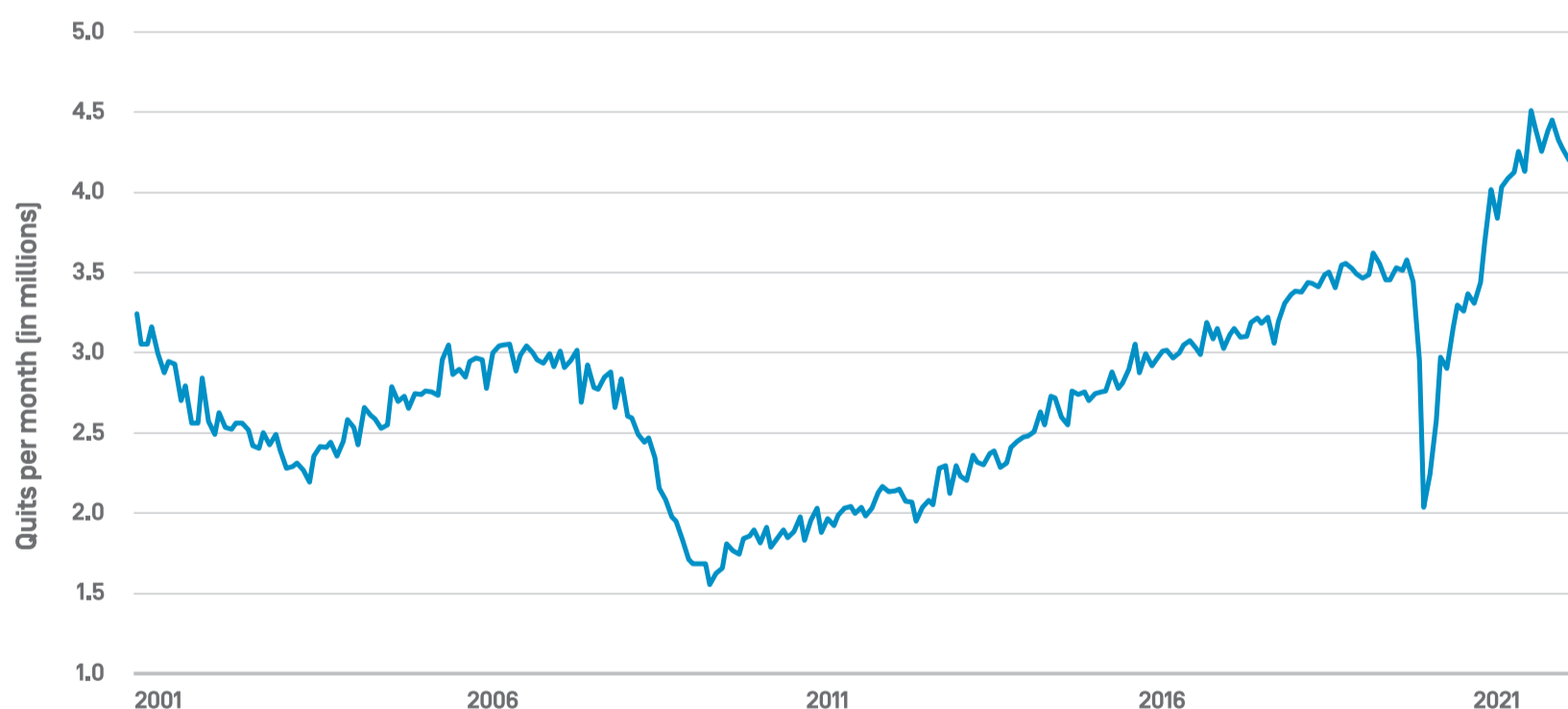
Within these broader trends, our survey finds that flexible education programs, strong connections between education and career outcomes, and options for affordability can help more individuals engage in postsecondary education and training as they navigate job transitions.

Introduction

More than two years after the start of the pandemic, the impact of Covid reverberates throughout the labor market. One shift that's received particular attention has been the record number of people quitting their jobs: The monthly number of workers who quit their job increased from 2.1 million in April 2020 to a peak of 4.5 million in November 2021 (See Figure 1).⁴ At the same time, the share of retired adults aged 55 and over climbed 2 percentage points⁵ between 2019 and 2021, indicating, by some calculations, that 2.4 million more people than expected retired during the pandemic.⁶ Collectively, these trends first became known as the "Great Resignation"⁷ in May 2021 and, in a nod to workers looking to switch jobs rather than leave the labor market altogether, has since been coined the "Great Reshuffle"⁸ or the "Great Realignment."⁹

The actual labor market shift occurring during the past two years may not be as seismic as these terms suggest, reflecting a decade long increase¹⁰ in people quitting their jobs rather than a sudden exodus. Nevertheless, it's been elevated in the public imagination as a cultural movement. When Beyoncé released the song "Break My Soul" in June 2022, casting the act of leaving a job as a step toward new meaning and fulfillment, it was immediately christened an "anthem"¹¹ celebrating the spirit of the Great Resignation.

Figure 1. Quits per month since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic



Source: Strada analysis of data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, 2001-2022.
The JOLTS includes more than eight million employers.

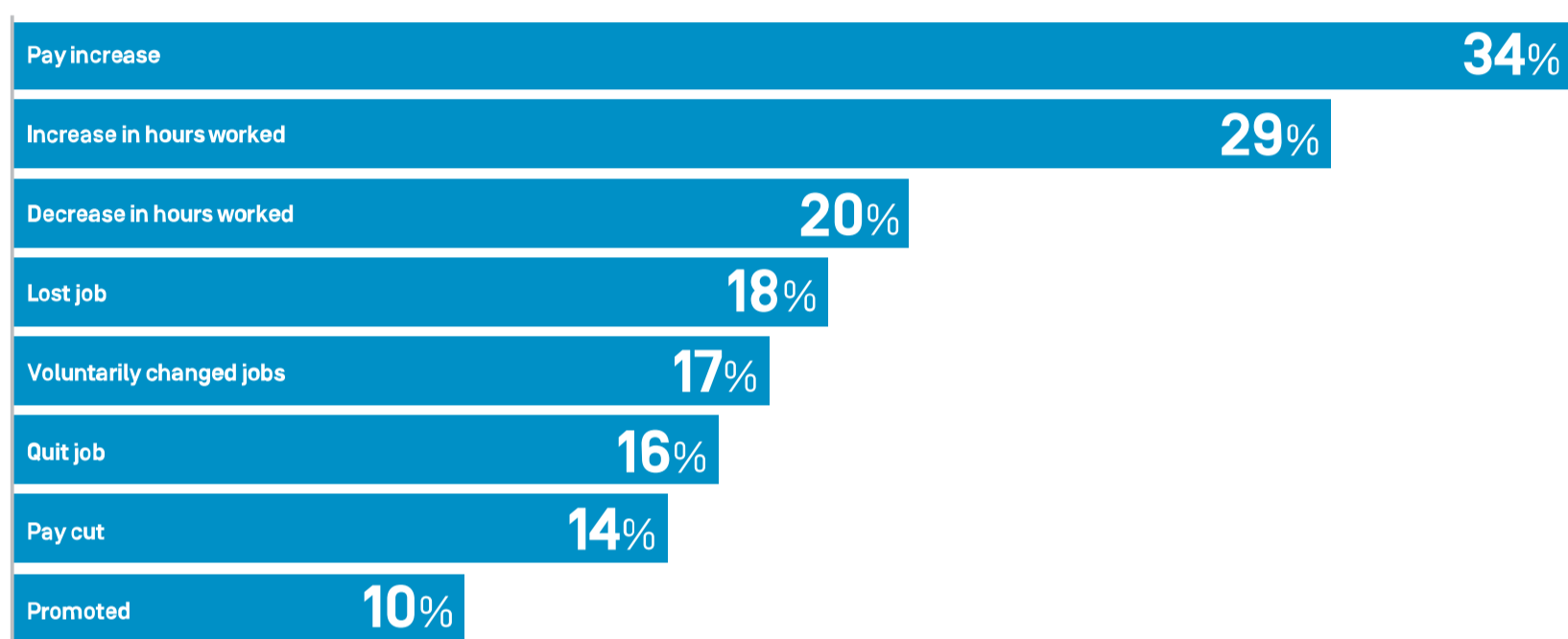
After a dip at the start of the pandemic, a sharp increase in quits fueled talk of a Great Resignation.

Against this backdrop of labor market shifts — and widespread discussion about their significance — our research explores the individual experiences and motivations influencing employment changes and engagement in postsecondary education and training. These data are drawn from a nationally

representative survey conducted in February and March 2022 of more than 4,500 adults. All of the participants were respondents of a previous Strada survey between 2016 and 2020 who agreed to be recontacted.

Ten percent of our survey population reported enrolling in postsecondary education or training since the start of the pandemic, largely driven by the opportunity for career advancement. More than two-thirds of people in our study population reported experiencing at least one employment change since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, with about half reporting that they lost, quit, or voluntarily changed jobs. Among these individuals, almost half have not returned to the workforce. Changes initiated by the individual — quitting or voluntarily changing jobs — together were the second-most common employment change experienced by the adults we surveyed, exceeded only slightly by the percentage reporting a pay increase [34 percent] [See Figure 2].

Figure 2. Share of workers who experienced a work change since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic

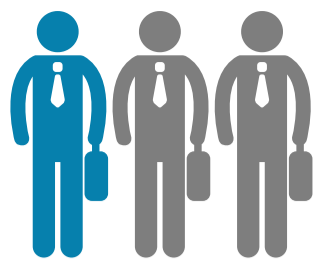


Source: Strada Recontact Survey, N = 3,039.

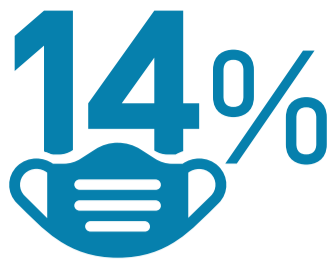
One-third of respondents to our survey quit or voluntarily changed jobs. Other reported employment changes included job loss or changes in pay or hours.

As individuals considered their education and employment plans, Covid itself was a relatively modest factor among many [See Figure 3]. Fourteen percent of our survey respondents who have not returned to work cite fears about Covid as the primary reason, and one-third of workers who wanted to switch jobs in order to work remotely [less than 3 percent of workers who changed jobs nationwide] did so because of concerns for Covid. These concerns also play a small role in education decisions, with 4 percent of people who did not enroll in education saying they chose not to because of health concerns or uncertainty about the pandemic. Instead, we find that aspirations for advancement and fulfillment, as well as a desire to exercise agency over career pathways, were strong influences on education and employment decisions. At this point, for the majority of individuals, Covid's general disruption of the status quo appears to be more related to work and education decisions than specific concerns about the virus and personal health.

Figure 3. Influence of Covid on work and education decisions



One-third of people who switched jobs in order to **work remotely** did so out of concern for COVID-19.



Fourteen percent of people who have **not returned to work** have not returned because of concerns about COVID-19.



Only **4 percent** of respondents said their decision **not to enroll in education** was because of COVID-19 or other health concerns.

Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 21 (left), N= 883 (center), N = 4,142 (right).

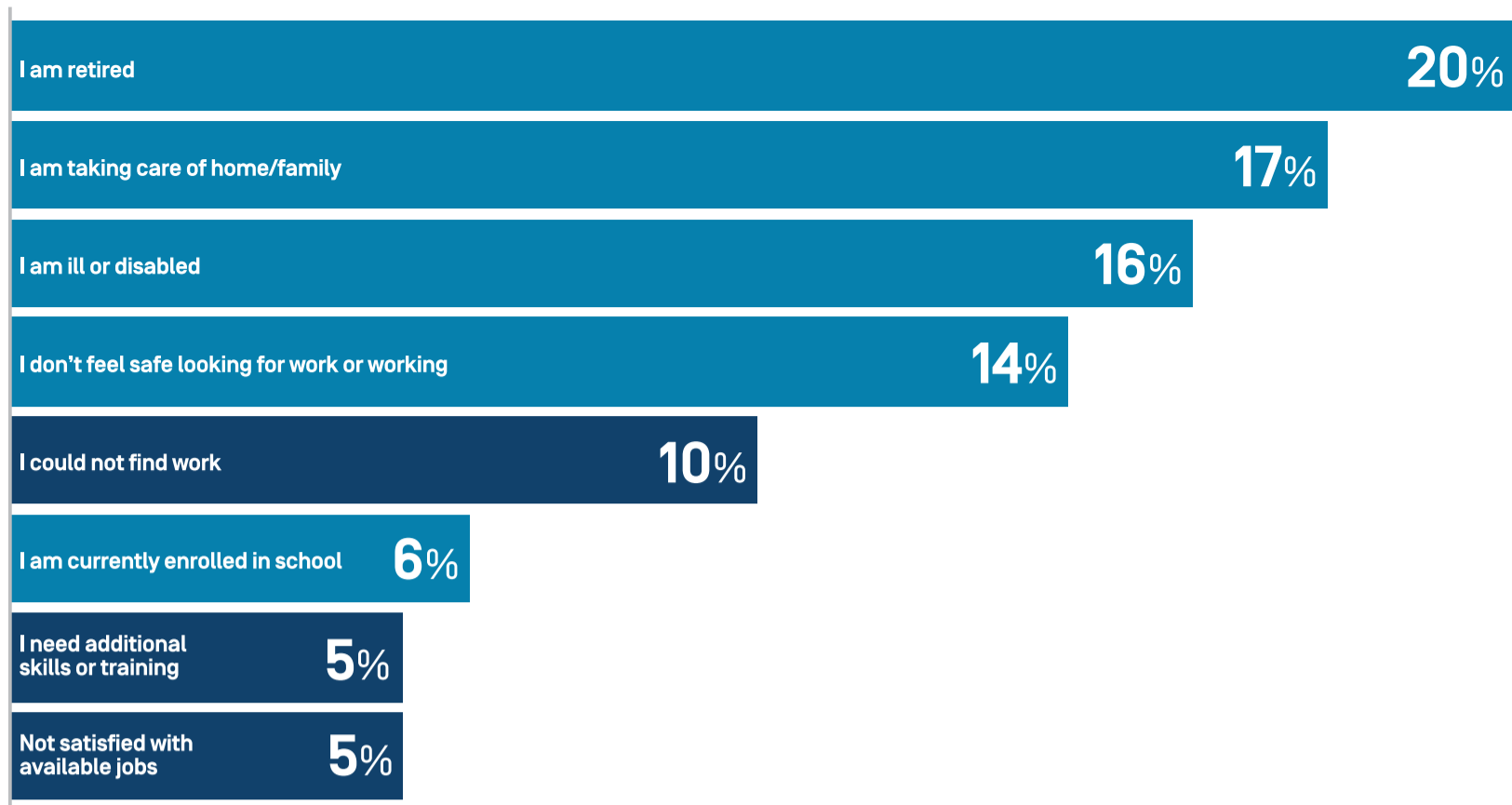
While concerns related to COVID-19 influenced some education and work decisions, they played a fairly small role in decision-making.

This current study allows us to explore workers' reasons for making employment changes, their level of satisfaction with changes, and the role of education in work transitions.

Not Returning to Work

Within our survey, one-third of respondents lost (18 percent) or quit (16 percent) a job since the start of the pandemic. Among this group, 45 percent have not returned to work. Two-thirds of those not returning to work identified personal considerations for their decision, such as retirement (20 percent), taking care of home and family (17 percent), illness or disability (16 percent), or not feeling safe looking for work due to Covid-related concerns (14 percent). Fewer respondents reported that their reasons for not returning to work were due to challenges with the labor market, such as an inability to find work (10 percent) or dissatisfaction with available jobs (5 percent) [See Figure 4].

Figure 4. Reasons for not returning to work among workers who lost or quit their jobs

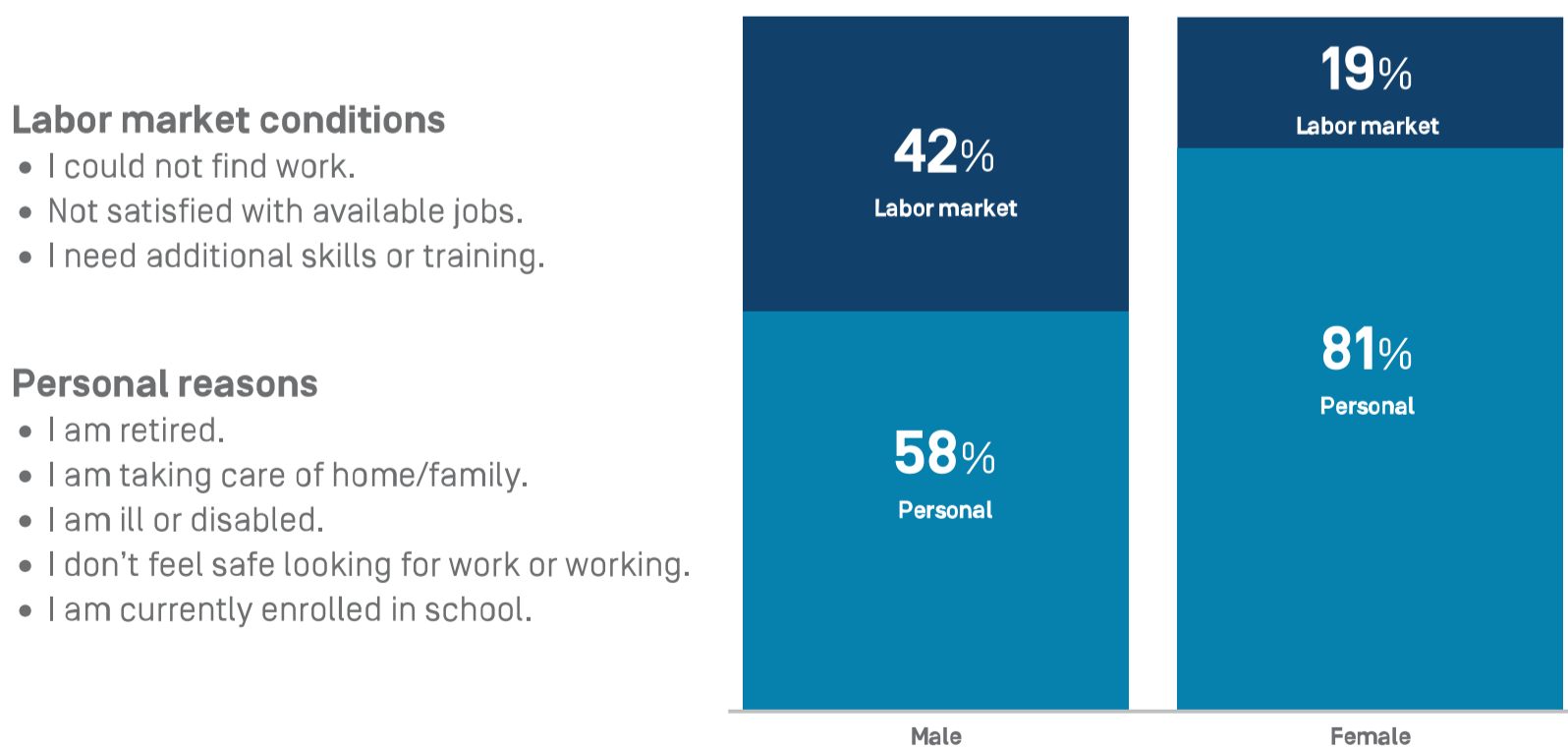


Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 883.

Most people who have left their work since the start of the pandemic and not returned were motivated by personal considerations.

Personal considerations played a bigger role for women than for men. More than three-quarters of women who have not returned to the workforce cite retirement, caregiving responsibilities, or health and safety considerations. For men, the split between personal considerations and challenges with the labor market was more even. Compared to men, women were more likely to report taking care of home and family and illness or disability as factors in not returning to the workforce. Men were more likely to report not being able to find work and not being satisfied with available jobs [See Figure 5] .

Figure 5. Reasons for not returning to work by gender among workers who lost or quit their jobs



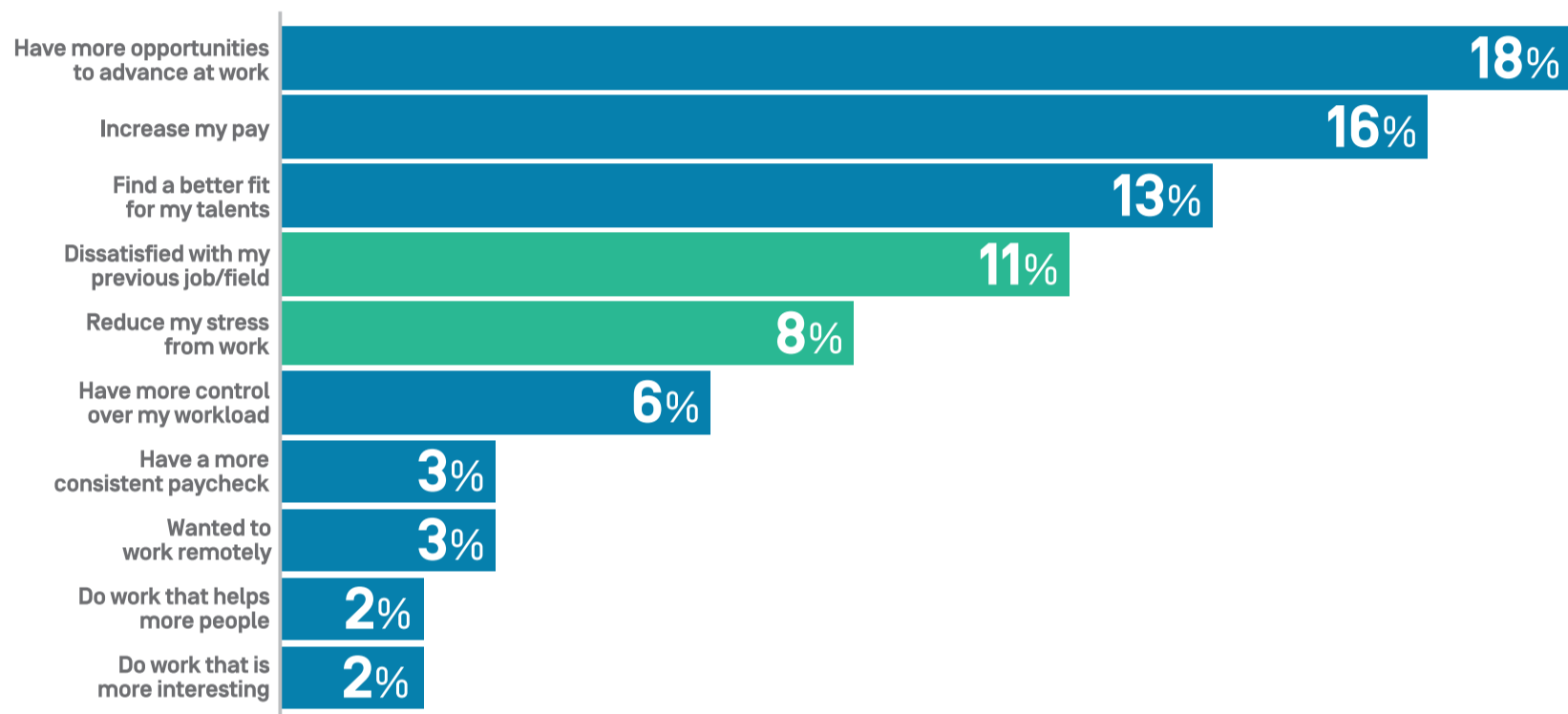
Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 883.

Personal considerations played a bigger role for women than for men in the decision to not return to work.

Voluntary Job Changes

Of the survey respondents who have voluntarily changed jobs since March 2020, most were pursuing positives rather than fleeing negatives. The top three motivations for voluntarily changing jobs, accounting for just under half of job changers, were to have more opportunities to advance at work, increase their pay, and find a better fit for their talents. Nineteen percent of job changers were motivated to exit a negative work situation, reporting dissatisfaction with their previous role or a desire to reduce stress [See Figure 6].

Figure 6. Reasons for voluntarily changing jobs

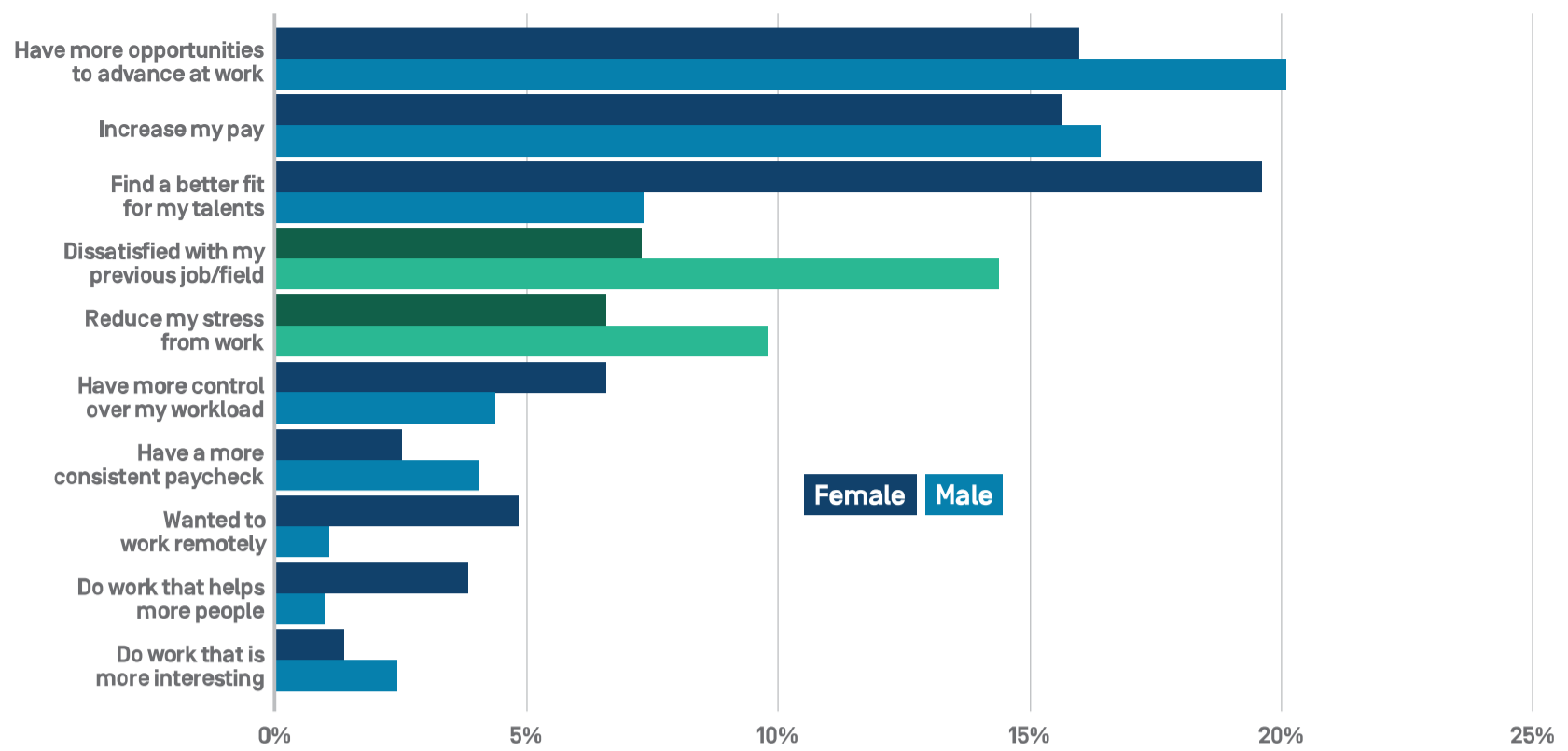


Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 535.

For people who voluntarily changed jobs, most were motivated to pursue advancement and promotion, rather than to leave a negative situation.

The biggest motivation for women who voluntarily changed jobs was to find a better fit for their talents, identified as the primary reason by 20 percent of female job changers compared with just 7 percent of men. For men, the top two motivations were to have more opportunities for advancement and to increase pay. More men than women also reported dissatisfaction with their previous job (14 percent) and the wish to reduce stress (10 percent) [See Figure 7].

Figure 7. Reasons for voluntarily changing jobs by gender



Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 535.

For women, the biggest motivation to change jobs was to find a better fit for their talents. For men, the biggest motivation was to have more opportunities for advancement.

Satisfaction with Job Changes

Across all respondents who reported any type of job change — employer, pay, hours, promotion — satisfaction with the change was evenly distributed with approximately one-third of respondents not at all or not very satisfied, one-third somewhat satisfied, and one-third very or extremely satisfied [See Figure 8].

Figure 8. Satisfaction with job change



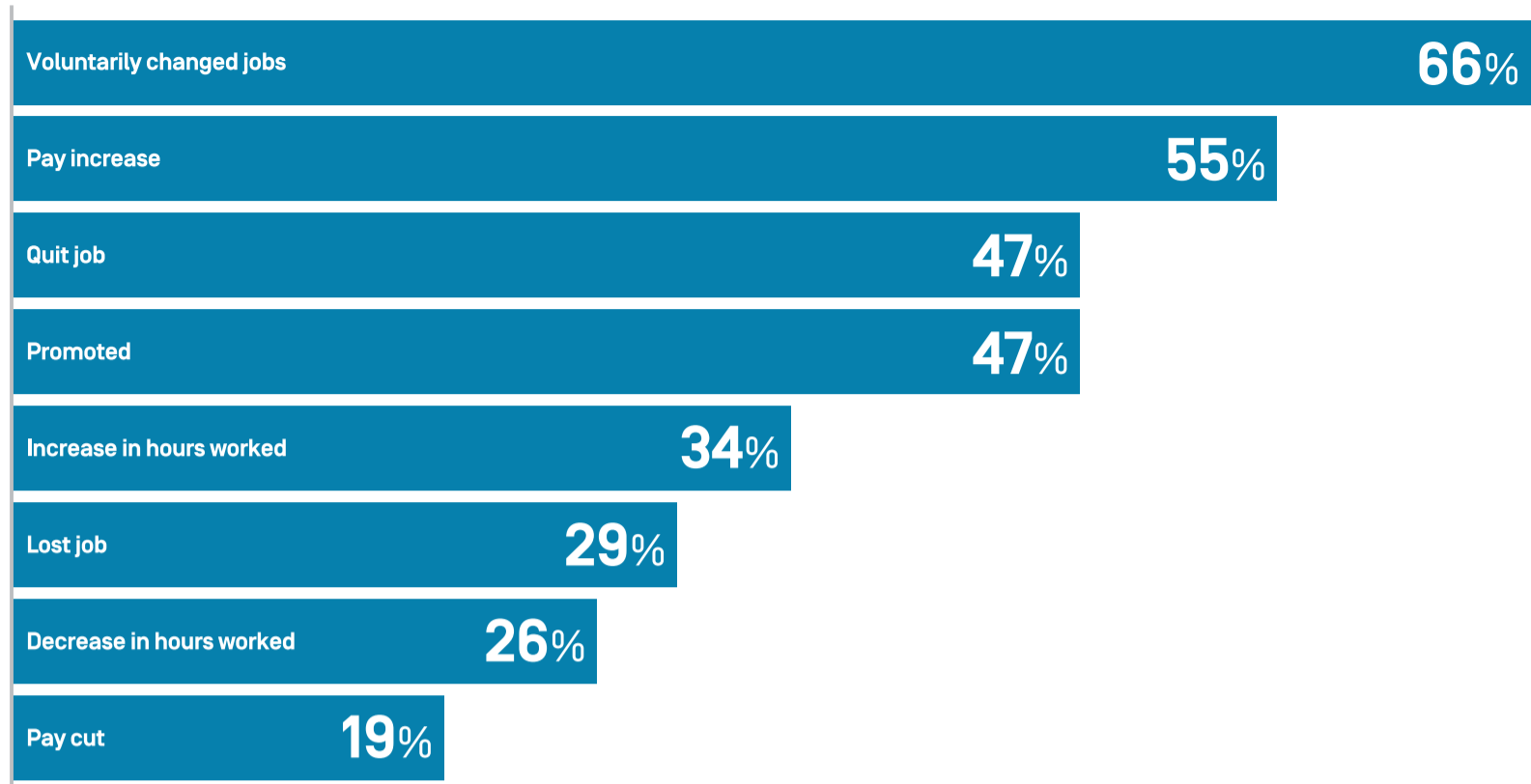
Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 3,030.

Overall, rates of satisfaction with job changes were evenly distributed.

Analyzing satisfaction levels according to type of change and motivation for change reveals greater variation. Workers who initiated their employment change or who experienced promotion or advancement were more likely to be very or extremely satisfied (66 percent and 55 percent respectively). Those who quit a job [without starting a new job] and those who were promoted had equal rates of satisfaction at 47 percent [See Figure 9].

Figure 9. Satisfaction with job change by type of change

Share of workers [very/extremely satisfied]



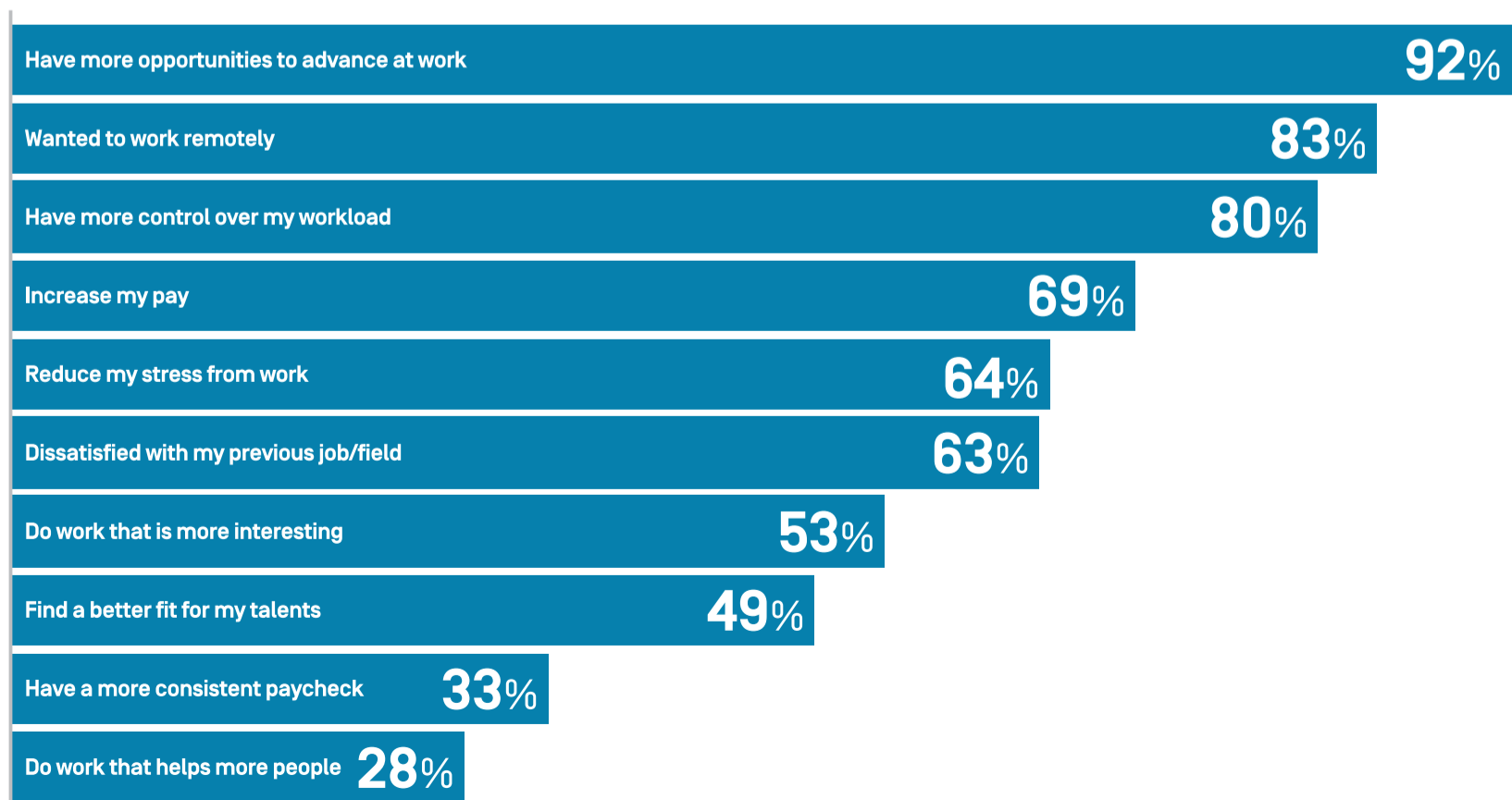
Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 3,030.

People who experienced promotion or who initiated their employment change were the most likely to be satisfied.

Even among workers who voluntarily changed jobs, their satisfaction with the job change varied greatly depending on their motivation for making the change. Workers who were motivated to make a change in order to have more opportunities for advancement, or to exercise more control over their workload or work environment, reported the highest levels of satisfaction. Workers whose job change was motivated by a desire to leave a negative situation also tended to be satisfied with the change, with almost two-thirds reporting that they were very or extremely satisfied with the job change. The lowest rates of satisfaction were reported by workers seeking a more consistent paycheck [33 percent] or those hoping to do work that helps more people [28 percent] [See Figure 10].

Figure 10. Satisfaction with voluntary job change by motivation for change

Share of workers [very/extremely satisfied]



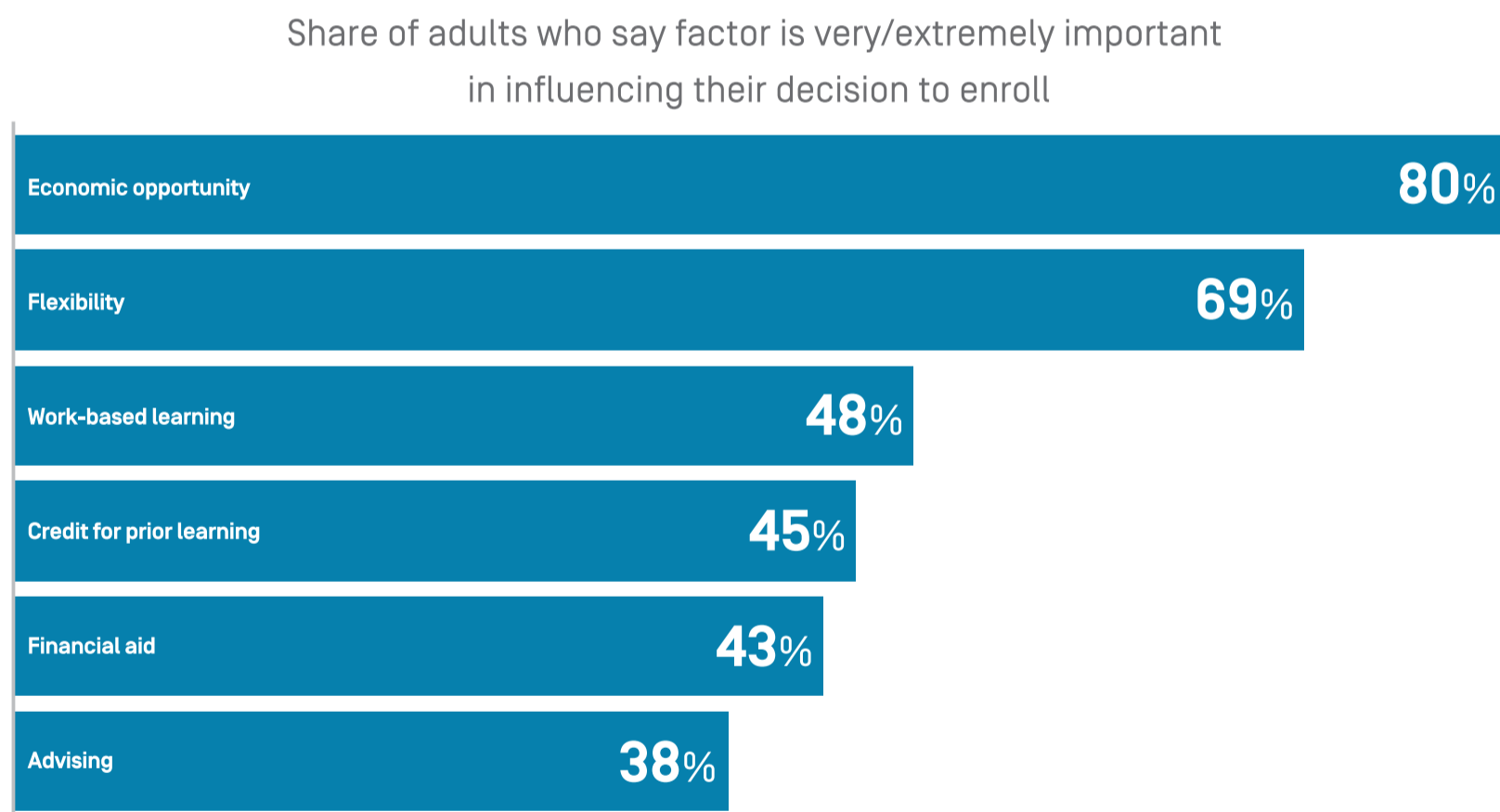
Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 531.

While people who were motivated to pursue advancement or promotion were most satisfied with their job change, those who were motivated to leave a negative situation were more satisfied than those who changed jobs to find a better fit for their talents or interests.

Postsecondary Education and Training

For those who enrolled in postsecondary education or training since the start of the pandemic, considerations related to career were top of mind. The biggest influence on their decision to enroll was whether they believed the program would result in a good job or opportunities for career advancement [See Figure 11]. Fully 80 percent of those who enrolled selected this as an extremely or very important factor. Program flexibility and the ability to take classes while at work was a very or extremely important factor for more than two-thirds of those who enrolled. Together, the importance of these factors indicate that education decisions are shaped by workers' future career aspirations as well as the responsibilities and demands of their current roles.

Figure 11. Factors most likely to influence enrollment decisions

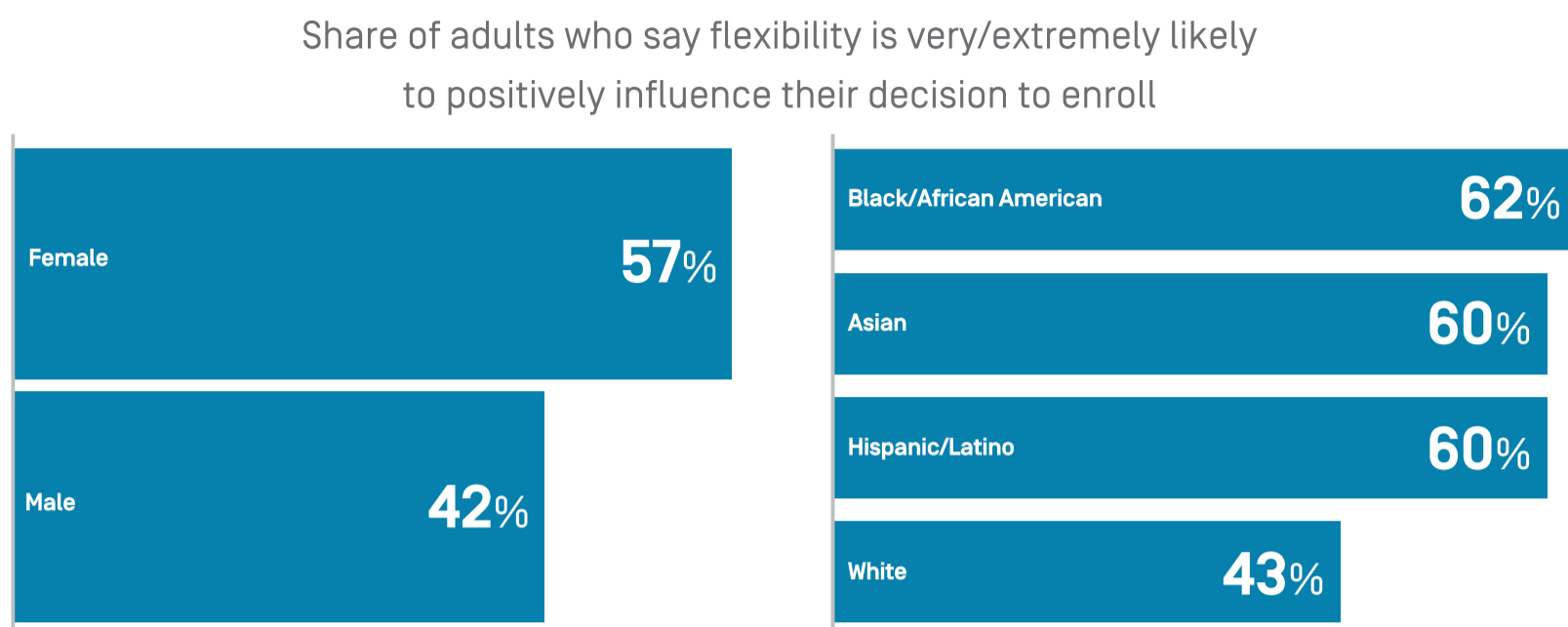


Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 359.

For those who have started a postsecondary education or training program since the start of the pandemic, the opportunity for career opportunities or advancement was the most important factor in deciding to enroll.

Flexibility was a more important factor for women than men, and for students of color compared with white students [See Figure 12].

Figure 12. Share of adults who say flexibility is very or extremely likely to positively influence their decision to enroll in postsecondary education or training

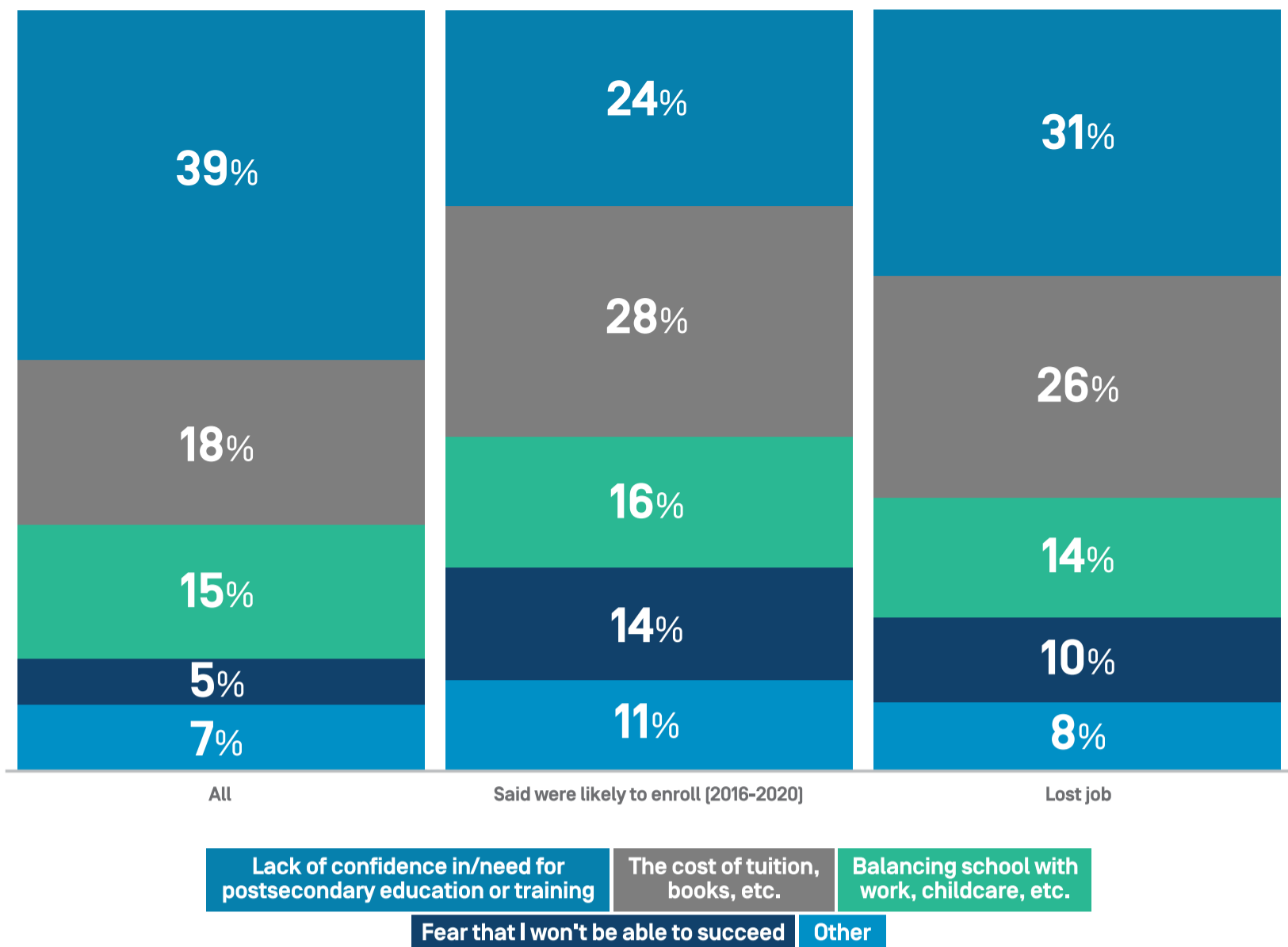


Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 359.

Flexibility was the second-most important factor influencing enrollment, and was particularly important for women and students of color.

Of individuals who have not enrolled in postsecondary education since the start of the pandemic, 39 percent reported that the primary reason was a lack of confidence in the value of postsecondary education. Even among people who had reported in an earlier survey that they were likely to enroll, a lack of confidence in education's value kept nearly a quarter from doing so. The biggest barrier for people who had been likely to enroll was concern over cost, reported by 28 percent [See Figure 13].

Figure 13. Reasons for not enrolling in postsecondary education or training

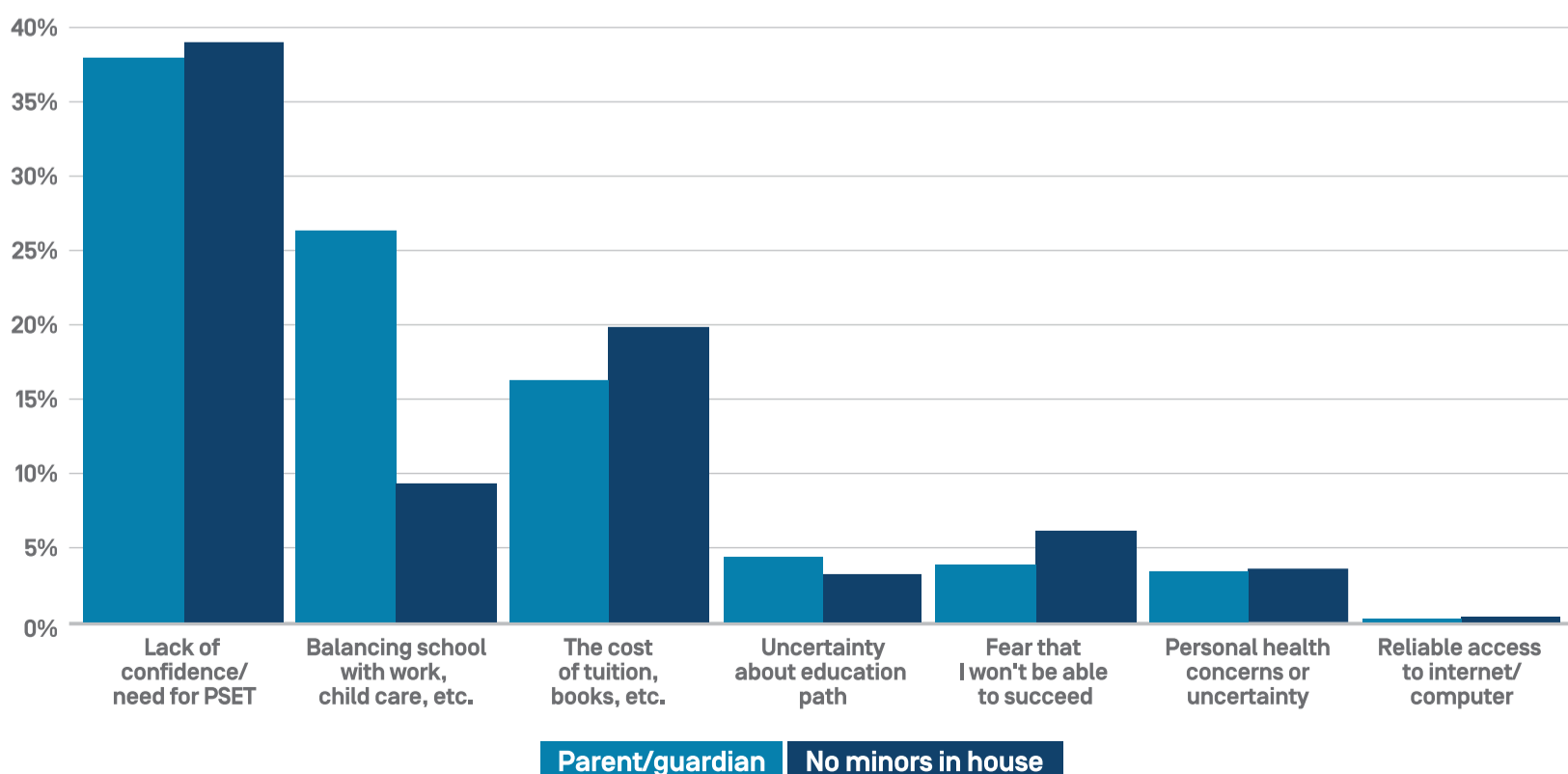


Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 4,142.

A lack of confidence that education would lead to better career outcomes was the biggest barrier to enrollment.

Concerns over balancing education with work, child care, and other responsibilities were the third-biggest barrier and was of particular importance to parents. More than one-quarter of parents identified this as the primary reason for not enrolling, compared with 9 percent of people without minors living in the house [See Figure 14].

Figure 14. Reasons for not enrolling in postsecondary education or training by parental status



Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. Add N = 4,142.

Concern about balancing education with other responsibilities was a bigger barrier for parents.

Relationship Between Job Changes and Education Decisions

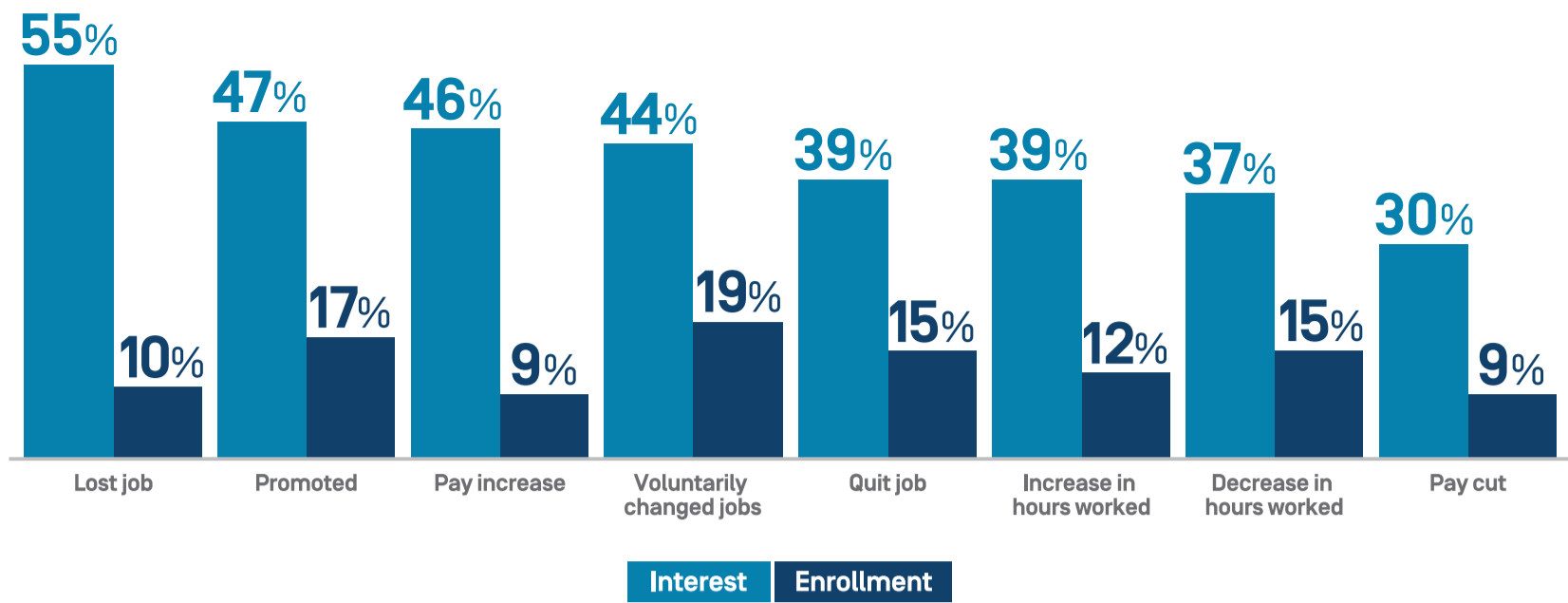
At the start of the pandemic, as layoffs and fears of job loss shook the global labor market, one-third of Americans reported that if they lost their jobs,¹² they believed they would need additional education to replace it. This percentage stayed relatively steady¹³ throughout the first year of the pandemic, with roughly one-third anticipating that they would turn to education if they lost their job. With our current data, we can examine the educational decisions people actually made as they navigated workforce disruptions.

Consistent with our earlier findings, more than half of people who lost their job reported that they were interested in education, the highest percentage among any type of job change. However, people who lost their jobs were among the least likely to enroll and had the largest gap [45 percentage points] between interest and enrollment. Concerns about the cost of education, which our data show to be a persistent and formidable barrier to enrollment, may prevent those with a sudden loss of income from starting a program, even those who are interested in education.

Yet cost was not the biggest consideration. Among those who lost their jobs, 31 percent identified a lack of confidence in the value of postsecondary education and training as the primary reason for not enrolling, while 26 percent identified cost as the primary reason [see Figure 13]. People who experienced a pay cut and people who experienced a pay increase were equally likely to pursue education, with 9 percent of people in both groups enrolling.

Among everyone experiencing an employment change, people who voluntarily changed jobs were the most likely to enroll, reporting a 19 percent enrollment rate. The second-most likely group to enroll was workers who were promoted [17 percent]. Higher enrollment rates among these groups may indicate that people are more likely to turn to education when they feel agency in their career trajectory or experience success in their career progression [See Figure 15].

Figure 15. Interest in postsecondary education or training versus actual enrollment



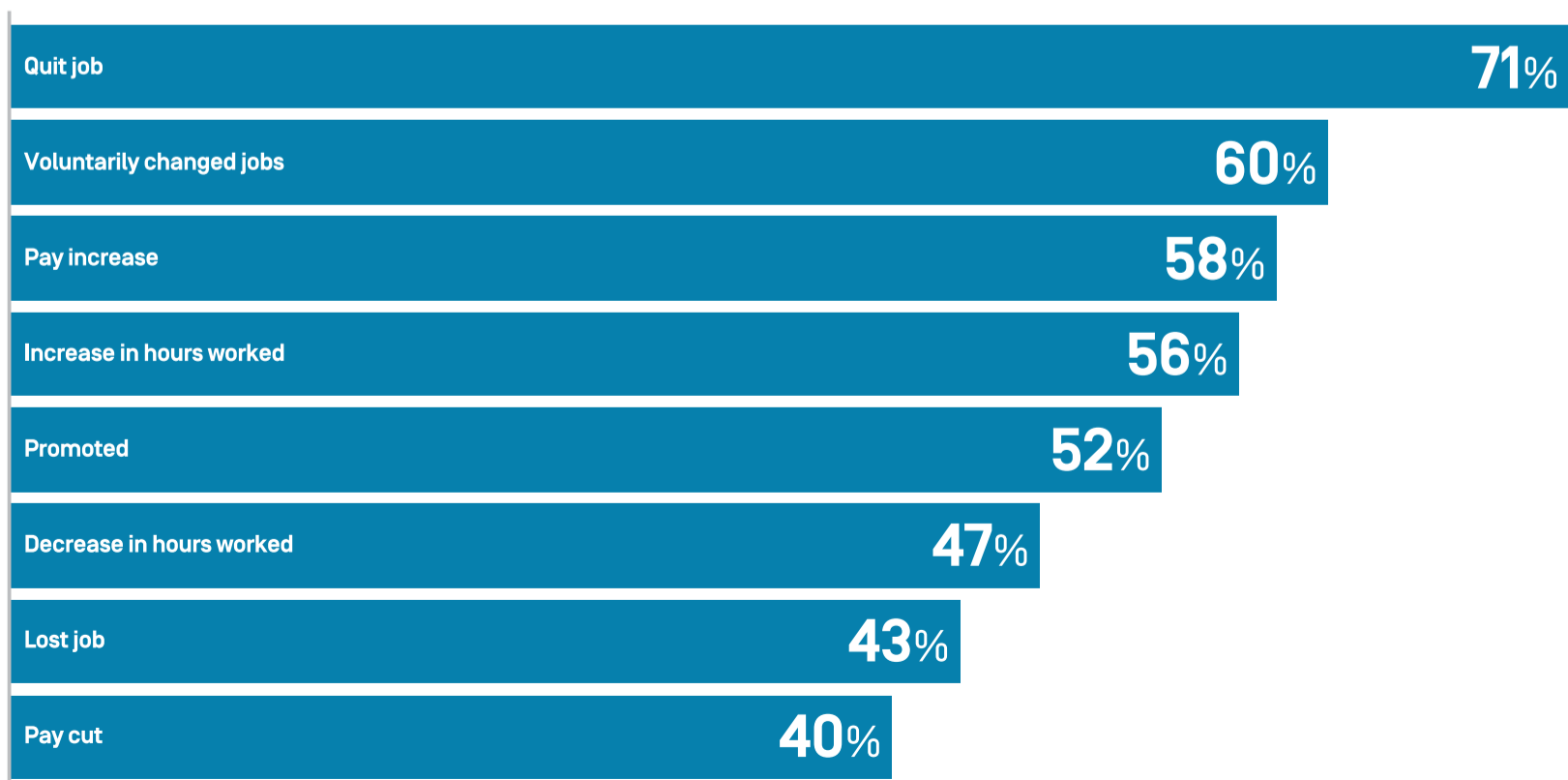
Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 4,100.

People who voluntarily changed jobs or were promoted were the most likely to enroll in postsecondary education.

This pattern is reflected in people’s perceptions of employer-provided training. Previous research has found that workers believe their employers should bear some cost for their training, and 42 percent of workers feel that employers’ involvement in their education makes for a better learning experience.¹⁴ As workers navigated job changes during the pandemic, their interest in employer-provided training varied greatly by the type of change they experienced. Those who made voluntary job changes, whether quitting a job or leaving one job for another, reported the most interest in employer training. This may be another indication that people who feel in control of their employment decisions are more likely to seek out education [See Figure 16].

However, the high rate of interest in employer training among those who quit their jobs — with 71 percent saying they were very or extremely likely to pursue education opportunities provided by their employer — could also suggest that a lack of training opportunities, or a perceived need to gain more skills to perform their job successfully, could prompt some workers to leave their current role. The importance of employer-provided training is reflected in the U.S. Department of Labor’s Good Jobs Principles, which include access to educational opportunities as well as opportunities to advance.¹⁵

Figure 16. Interest in employer-provided training by type of job change



Source: Strada analysis of data from the Strada Recontact Survey, 2022. N = 2,617.

People who quit their jobs, voluntarily changed jobs, or experienced advancement or promotion were the most interested in employer-provided education.

Conclusion

Beneath the buzz of the Great Resignation lies a complex set of experiences and motivations driving education and workforce transitions. Our research finds that most often, people who voluntarily sought out different employment did so because of a positive, forward momentum to seek advancement, new opportunities, or a better fit; far fewer people were primarily motivated by negative feelings of dissatisfaction or stress. In the words of a May 2022 New York Times article, these workforce transitions “brought less giving up and more trading up.”¹⁶

Among those who have enrolled in education since the start of the pandemic, most experienced a positive career change, such as a promotion or a voluntary job switch. On the flip side, we saw that people who lost their job were the most interested in education — but barriers like cost and doubt kept them from enrolling. These findings suggest that people experiencing a range of employment changes believe that education could benefit them as they navigate new opportunities. In addition to addressing persistent barriers such as cost and schedule flexibility, clearer understanding and greater certainty about the connections between education and employment opportunity appear to be a key for engaging adults who are interested in enrolling but do not act on that interest.

The following implications may help more individuals benefit from postsecondary education as they navigate career transitions:

Flexible programs and opportunities to learn on the job can make education more accessible for individuals balancing education with work, child care, and other responsibilities.

Understanding a strong connection between education and economic and career opportunities is a powerful motivation for pursuing postsecondary education and training.

Employer-provided training has clear value for workers who are navigating career transitions. With almost three-quarters of people who quit their jobs saying they would be interested in employer-provided training, providing this training could be an effective strategy for engagement and recruitment.

Cost remains a persistent barrier to pursuing postsecondary education, even among those who say they are interested.

Individuals who have lost their jobs show consistent interest in pursuing postsecondary education and training but lack confidence that it will benefit them in addition to experiencing financial or other barriers to enrolling.

For workers weighing career transitions, opportunities for advancement and education can contribute to a sense of meaning and achievement. As people consider the ways in which education can support their career development, strengthening connections between education and labor market needs can lead to better outcomes and a greater sense of confidence in education’s promise. Together, these strategies can move our workforce from a Great Resignation to a great resurgence in career preparation, development, and fulfillment.

Survey Methodology

Results for the Strada Work and Education Recontact Survey are based on a survey fielded by Gallup using web data collection from Feb. 16 to March 10, 2022, with a random sample of 4,502 adults ages 18 to 65, living in all 50 states and Washington, D.C.

Samples were weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. Demographic weighting targets are based on the 2018 American Community Survey figures for the ages 18 to 65 population. The data were weighted to match national demographics of age, education, gender, race, ethnicity, region, labor force participation, and population density.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.