



Bridging the gap

Overcoming a **silent standoff**
in America's talent economy

Introduction

2025 has been shaped by several macro forces that have trickled down into the talent economy. From economic volatility and geopolitics to generational workplace shifts and AI acceleration – both employers and workers are grappling with layers of uncertainty when it comes to navigating what is next for their businesses and careers.

For its third annual research study, DeVry University set out to uncover how these uncertainties are reshaping sentiment and approaches to skills development – particularly when it comes to maintaining job security, career currency and workforce retention in an era of dynamic change.

After surveying workers and employers across the United States, DeVry's 2025 research

exposes what the University is calling a “Silent Standoff” at the heart of the American workplace. Both workers and employers are confident that they are doing enough – for now – yet both quietly fear they are unprepared for what is coming next. Each side believes the burden of future-readiness belongs to the other; mutual anxiety is masked by short-term certainty and long-term avoidance.

The result? There is a growing divide between perception and reality that is inaudibly stalling workforce progress and hindering economic advancement. Workers and employers need a shared path forward as divergent expectations and blurred lines of responsibility threaten to deadlock productivity, innovation and adaptability.

The Silent Standoff has revealed three key areas putting the workplace at risk:

01

Dissonance in the talent economy

Despite conversations about labor market fragility and AI-driven job shifts, workers feel confident in their current skill sets and see no urgent need to upskill, while employers are worried their workforce is not doing enough to be ready for tomorrow. This misalignment is widening the gap between perceived stability and actual preparedness.

02

Untapped human potential

Durable (or soft) skills are becoming the foundation of job security and may be underacknowledged amid rapid tech advancement. Increasingly, balancing durable and hard skills is vital in an AI-dominated world.

03

Growth gridlock

There is a clear disconnect at the heart of career development. Workers say employer-sponsored training is lacking with few clear or accessible paths to career growth. Meanwhile, employers believe the tools are already in place and are concerned that workers are not taking advantage of the opportunities available. Until that gap is closed, true talent advancement remains at a standstill – each side waiting for the other to move first.

As a champion of success for both employers and workers, DeVry believes the solution starts with rebuilding trust and transparency via tailored education that meets the moment. The University is committed to helping both groups see eye to eye by turning lifelong learning into a team sport and creating accessible and enduring paths to personal and professional advancement. Addressing these topics head-on will foster a more confident, collaborative and prepared workforce – while creating positive economic outcomes.

Dissonance in the talent economy

Amid economic turbulence and unyielding technological advancement, workers stand firm in their confidence; they feel certain that their skills will carry them through, at least for now. Meanwhile, employers have their eyes fixed on the future, worried that today's talent may not be ready to meet tomorrow's demands. As a result, future anxiety becomes the only thing everyone shares.

Needs are misaligned

The reality is that both sides are left in a state of restless dissonance. Workers do not see what they are missing because employers are not making the future visible. Rather than collaborating to close skills gaps and nurture tomorrow's talent, each side is quietly pointing fingers. Until both sides break through this stalemate, real progress will slip further out of reach.

Worker POV



The skills I have will keep me retained and employable.

85%

are confident they do not need further qualifications to remain employable in the next five years

Bonus Stats

53%

believe their job will still be highly relevant in the next five years

53%

of workers say AI has made no difference to job security

81%

say they feel secure about remaining employed in their current job, for now

Fewer workers

have taken action to reskill this year (69% in 2025, 82% in 2024)

Employer POV



Our workforce needs to be better prepared to sustain value.

69%

cite concerns about their workforce lacking the skills needed to be successful over the next five years

Bonus Stats

66%

are worried about the workforce keeping up with tech even more than workers themselves (42%) over the next five years

40%

say AI has made workers feel less secure in their jobs

63%

agree their company has passed over workers for promotions and raises because their skill sets are out of date

Worker pessimism prevails

Amid macroeconomic uncertainties, workers are prone to pessimism and complacency; meanwhile, employers may see a lack of motivation as a fast track to layoffs. This is especially true in 2025 where company layoffs drive news headlines, and workers feel burnt out, disengaged and dispensable in the workplace and within their own careers.

Worker POV



Why put energy toward skill development when work feels like a race with no finish line? It's too hypercompetitive for me to stand out.

41%

say being unable to stand out among others is a top concern about their workplace readiness

Bonus Stats

51%

consider a lack of personal reasons, such as a lack of motivation or lack of skills, as a barrier to career advancement

58%

believe 'who you know' matters more than 'what you know'

Employer POV



We are future-focused. Workers need to be along for the journey, or they risk their jobs.

55%

of their workforce, on average, needs to upskill significantly to remain employable in five years, according to employers

Bonus Stats

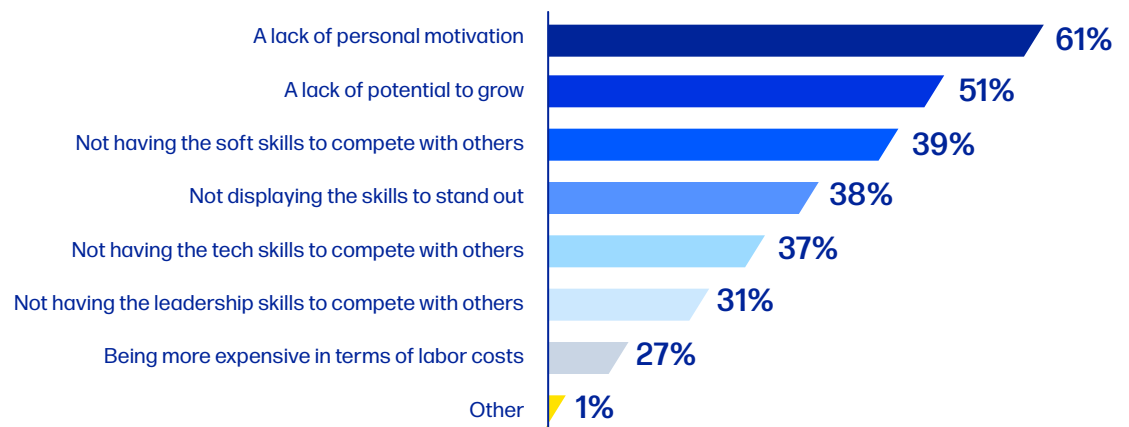
61%

cite lack of motivation as a top layoff reason when deciding to let one worker go over another

59%

say there is no reason to hire a new employee unless they have some skill advantage to offer

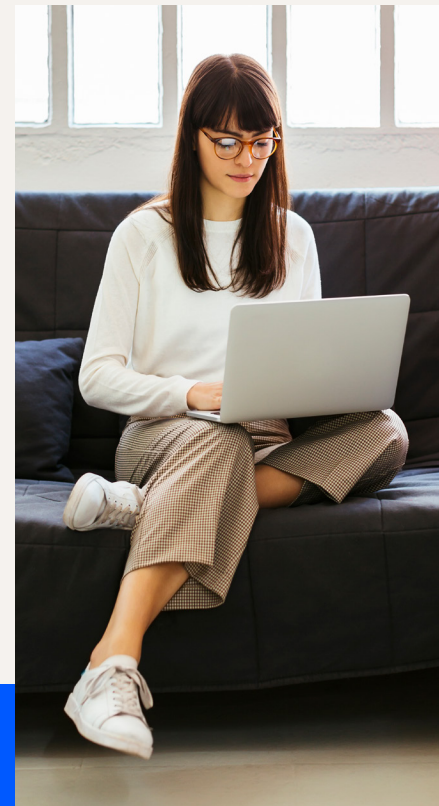
Employers' top reasons for letting one worker go over another



Both sides are insecure about the future

Workers have settled into a comfort zone, with fewer taking it upon themselves to learn new skills – skipping out on more trainings, industry events and even reading business books, as compared to 2024. However, workers are still anxious about things they think they cannot control, like the future.

Employers, meanwhile, are focused on the long term; they understand the business imperative of developing a resilient workforce, but economic uncertainties prevent insight into a clear path forward. With hiring slowing and upskilling lagging, the pressure is mounting: adapt now or risk being left behind.



Worker POV



I am focused on workplace survival, and the future keeps me up at night.

47%

say economic uncertainties are making them question how ready they are for the future of work

Bonus Stats

48%

believe being unprepared for the future of work could prevent them from the life they want

33%

report having negative feelings about the future of work, including feeling anxious, frustrated, terrified and “doomed”

Employer POV



Upskilling is important for the future, but we are unsure where to go from here.

61%

say economic uncertainties are making senior management question how ready their company is for the future

Bonus Stats

52%

say that if they cannot find workers with the skills needed, productivity will suffer, and 1 in 10 (11%) say they would have to close their business

47%

have had to slow down hiring due to economic uncertainty

Untapped human potential

Durable (or soft) skills are foundational. They are human-focused skills that are long-lasting and transferable across roles, industries and time.

As AI revolutionizes industries at breakneck speed, technical expertise alone is no longer enough. The game-changer? Durable skills – those timeless, distinctly human qualities like adaptability, critical thinking and communication.

As workers and employers agree on their value, the true power and indispensability of these skills are now being realized. The future belongs to those who can balance human judgment, intuition and emotional intelligence with technical skills in a world awash with automation.

The key to job security? Durable skills

Mastering durable skills is not just about keeping a job; it is the fast track to future-proofing a career.

78% 

of employers say durable skills are the new job security amidst constant change (63% of workers agree)

Bonus Stats

70%

of employers say durable skills are often the deciding factor in promotions

39%

of employers feel that not having the durable skills to compete with others is a top reason to let one employee go over another

Employers and workers are ranking certain durable skills as more important than technical skills for future needs

Critical thinking and problem solving are must-haves for future success. Employers are seeking job candidates who bring these durable skills to the table.

61% 

of employers recognize critical thinking and problem solving as the top skills to have in tomorrow's economy (more than half of workers agree)

Bonus Stats

58%

of workers say critical thinking and problem-solving skills are the most valuable skills to have in tomorrow's economy (consistent with the 58% of workers who shared the same belief in 2024)

61%

of employers say having excellent communication and collaboration skills are most important when hiring new employees

50%

of employers cite being able to self-lead as critical for tomorrow's jobs, though 68% are concerned about their workers' current inability to lead and manage people

What will be the most valuable employment skills and qualifications for workers to have in tomorrow's economy?



AI skills are still important

Even though employers are prioritizing durable skills as the key for navigating the future, they also believe it is important that workers have a practical knowledge of AI tools as technology continues to change the workplace. However, workers deem AI skills as more important for tomorrow's economy than employers, signaling misalignment on the value of these standalone skills.

57% 

of workers say the skilled use of AI will be the most valuable skill to have in tomorrow's economy – ranking it the second most valuable out of 13 skills, while employers ranked it fourth

Bonus Stats

62%

of employers are reconsidering who to hire due to evolving requirements for tech-based skills

66%

of employers are concerned about workers' inability to keep up with AI skills within the next five years



But workers need greater clarity on how, when and why to use AI

In 2024, DeVry found that workers were already regular users of AI tools at work (with the top use being for data analytics), while many employers felt out of their depth when it came to training their teams on AI. In 2025, workers crave clear instructions and confidence to harness AI's full potential. With the creation of new tech-driven roles, the need for direct, practical guidance is critical.

36% 

of employers say they are providing clear rules on using AI so that workers know what is allowed

Bonus Stats

39%

of workers would feel more confident using AI in their roles if they understood how AI tools work and what information they use

50%

of employers say AI and advancing tech will add more jobs than it will replace

Growth gridlock

A traditional four-year degree earned decades ago is no longer enough to get ahead in the workplace – with 67% of employers agreeing that most undergraduate degrees are out of touch with the skills and experience needed in the workplace.

Enter lifelong learning: the pursuit of continued skills building and education that forges resiliency and relevancy as industries and business priorities shift. Fortunately, there is a

shared belief that lifelong learning is beneficial. However, there is also a persistent tug-of-war and finger pointing between workers and employers over who should be fostering these learning opportunities as well as differing viewpoints on what is actually being done.

The data substantiates that workers do not have a clear, supported growth trajectory, and – unless employers and workers come together to clear this gridlock – a future-ready talent pool and business economy is not guaranteed.

Lifelong learning is not just important, it is non-negotiable

Even though an overwhelming majority of workers say they have what they need to remain employable, they still value and understand the importance of dynamic, ongoing learning over a degree earned in the past. However, workers see investments in education as slightly less worthwhile than employers. This lack of worker emphasis may be a result of workers not finding their company's training and development opportunities as relevant or valuable – with many being more likely to adopt self-directed learning and taking courses on their own initiative.

71% 

of workers and 81% of employers say investing time and money in education is worthwhile in today's economy

80% 

of employers say investing in an education today will advance a worker's professional career

Bonus Stats

40%

of workers have participated in self-directed learning or participated in courses on their own initiative when it comes to actions they have taken to upskill in the past three years

44%

of workers would spend personal time taking classes and gaining qualifications to keep their current job

62%

of workers say post-high school education will continue to be valuable as the workplace evolves over the next five to ten years. 75% of employers agree

Workers and employers agree that the more recent and specific education is, the better

Both sides agree: it is not always about earning another degree. It is about having skill-specific and recent credentials that keep pace with ever-evolving business needs. Those who keep their skills fresh will stay ahead.

57% 

of employers say the recency of certifications helps them in hiring decisions, which is more than the 53% who say the number of certifications helps them

Bonus Stats

86%

of employers say a worker who is on top of the latest developments in the industry benefits the whole organization

25%

of workers say a relevant qualification, certificate or certification earned in the past six months would boost their confidence going into an interview for a dream job

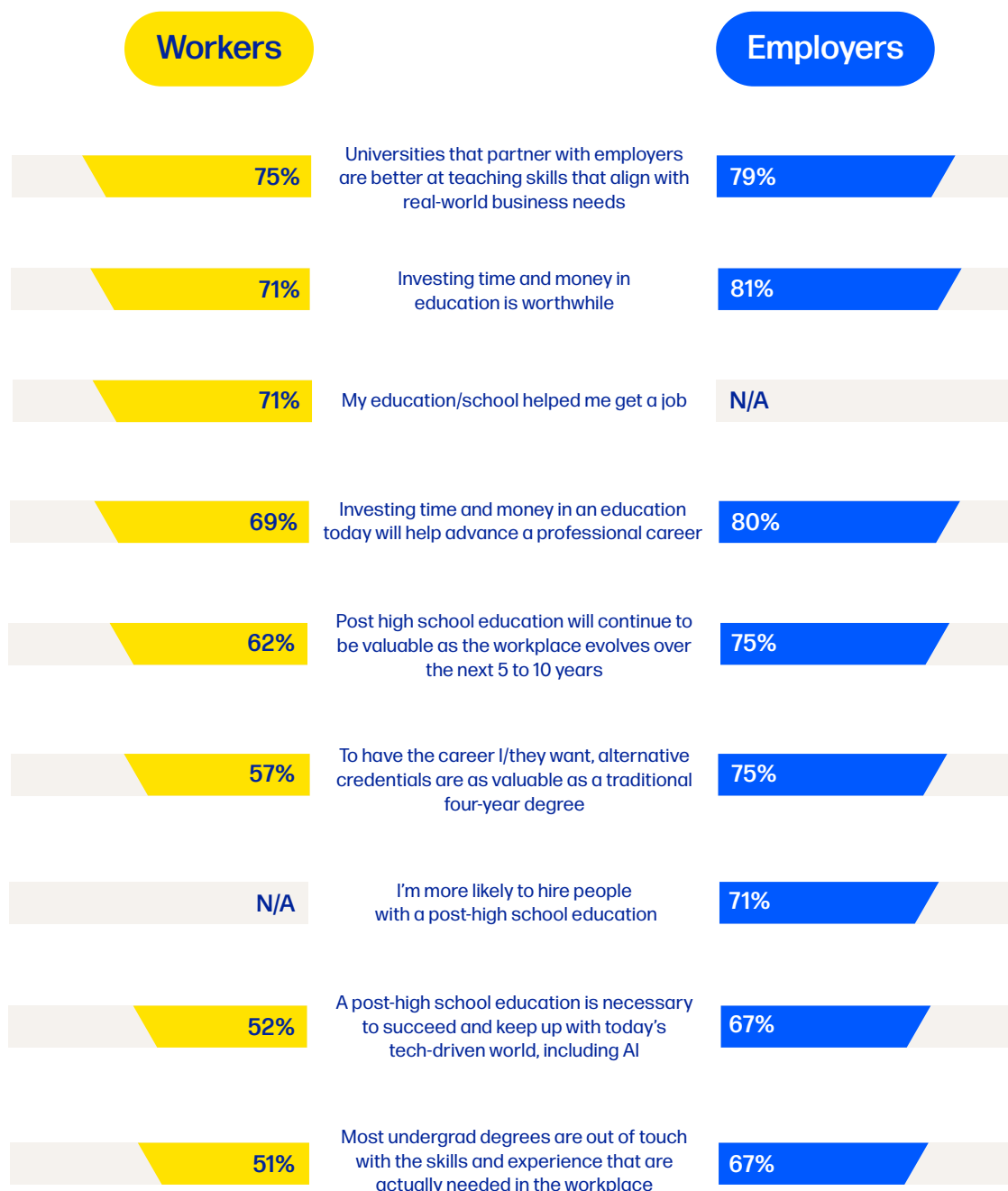
46%

of workers would invest in skill-specific certificates when it comes to education they would pursue if time and money were unlimited, compared to 33% who would pursue a master's degree

50%

of employers say qualifications, credentials, certificates and certifications are useful to give workers a framework to build new skills

Lifelong learning is valuable for both workers and employers



Represents workers and employers who strongly or somewhat agree (Top 2 NET)

Workers say access to upskilling and reskilling is in decline and that employers are falling short

Workers may feel confident for now, but many believe their employers are not doing nearly enough to future-proof their skills.

55% 

of workers say they have access to employer-provided upskilling in 2025, compared to 67% in 2024

45% 

of workers say they have access to employer-provided reskilling compared with 61% in 2024

Bonus Stat

32%

of workers say their employers are falling short on future-proofing their skills



Employers believe they are providing enough support

Employers disagree with workers – saying they are taking action to prepare their workforce and build their currency but are concerned about workers not taking advantage of the resources provided to them.

75% 

of employers believe they are doing enough to make workers' skills resilient in today's economy

72% 

of employers say that most or all of their workers have access to upskilling or tuition benefits, an increase from 57% in 2024

Bonus Stats

81%

of employers say their company is responsible for preparing employees for the future of work

67%

of employers are concerned about workers not taking the chances provided to develop their skills over the next five years

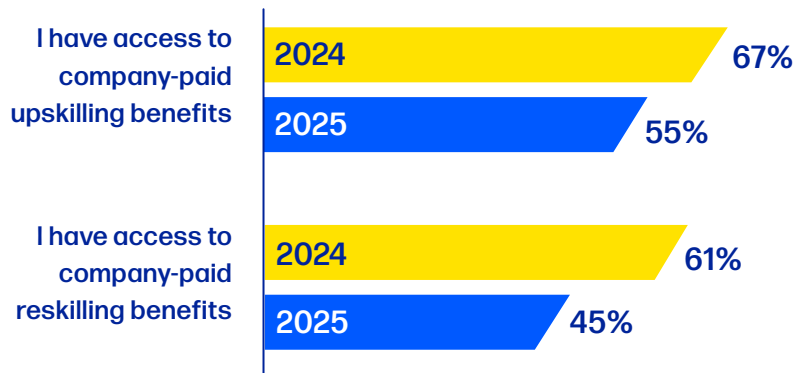
90%

of employers say that they provide upskilling or tuition benefits to at least a few workers, a slight increase from 87% in 2024

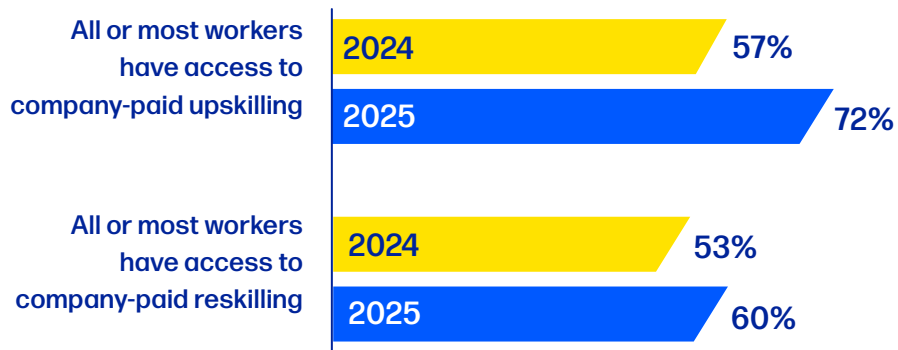
79%

of employers say they are preparing employees for changes coming to their industry

Compared to 2024, workers report having less access to employer-provided upskilling and reskilling resources



However, employers say they are providing more access to upskilling and reskilling in 2025



The future blueprint

Addressing the Silent Standoff between workers and employers is the linchpin for building workforce resiliency and unlocking competitive edge and productivity. It starts with open conversations, decisive and specific guidance and an unwavering, shared dedication for lifelong learning. Here is how workers and employers can take charge now and move toward harmonized and mutually beneficial collaboration.

Ending the talent dissonance

Worker

Don't hesitate to communicate

Workers who feel set for the present but hold hidden insecurities about the future should feel confident to ask management questions about their talent expectations. From there, they should work with their employers to set specific, achievable goals for professional growth. This action will help cultivate a sense of ownership and motivation over their career path and build skills resiliency.

Employer

Make the future visible

By demonstrating appreciation for durable skills, employers will foster genuine dialogue with their teams about the evolving demands of the workplace and the necessity of upskilling or reskilling for the future. Open communication enables workers to understand the shifting landscape and recognize not only the risks of standing still, but the opportunities that come with developing new abilities. By actively bringing workers on the journey to identify critical skill gaps and create transparent, accessible pathways for growth, employers can transform uncertainty into confidence and inspire a culture of continuous learning.

Elevating micro as the new macro

Tap into the human

Since employers state durable skills and specific certificates are attractive attributes for promotion and retention, workers should prioritize durable skills like critical thinking and problem-solving, demonstrating their ability to balance human qualities with the increasing integration of AI in the workplace. To refine these crucial skills, workers can engage in continuous learning through targeted courses, hands-on projects and interdisciplinary teamwork that fosters resilience and flexibility in an evolving technology environment. They can start by exploring what their employer already offers.

Offer clear and specific training

While AI can automate tasks and generate new opportunities, it is the nuanced judgment, ethical reasoning and creative abilities of workers that ensure these technologies are used responsibly and to their fullest potential. Employers can also play a vital role by providing clear guidance on how and when to use AI, offering structured training programs focused on both technical and durable skills, as well as building a safe space for teams to integrate AI into their workflows.

Clearing the growth gridlock

Prioritize speed to skill

Workers looking to reach broader career goals and keep their skills relevant should seek out flexible learning opportunities that fit both their schedules and their ambitions. They should choose educational institutions that offer programs teaching career-relevant, up-to-date skills and that provide stackable credentials, empowering them to quickly bolster their resume. By actively engaging in courses that adapt to workforce changes, workers will stay prepared for whatever the future of work brings.

Provide prescriptive guidance

Employers should visibly map out the critical skills needed for both current and future roles and align those with specific learning pathways. This process involves not only identifying which competencies should be prioritized but also curating tailored learning modules and programming with education partners. Establishing clear timelines and milestones, like quarterly upskilling checklists or annual learning goals, can provide employees with a concrete roadmap.

Methodology

For the third consecutive year, DeVry University engaged Reputation Leaders to survey U.S. workers and employers about their attitudes and experiences with skills development between June 17 and July 8, 2025.

The worker sample consisted of a total of 1,511 American adults between the ages of 21 and 60. The respondents were employed, underemployed or unemployed but expecting to start work in the next 12 months.

The employer sample consisted of 533 hiring decision-makers from a mix of industries, with a particular focus on the technology sector.

The margin of error for the worker sample is +/- 2.5% at the 95% level of confidence, while the figure for the employer sample is +/- 4.2%.





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