

How 'gray collar' workers became the overlooked essential employee

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Gray collar workers, which refers to healthcare professionals, firefighters, police officers and airline pilots, are projected to be one of the fastest growing demographics of employees post-pandemic, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Read More: [The benefits and policies employees want – or they'll walk](#) But therein lies the problem, according to Laroux. Because of their less restrictive education requirements, gray collar jobs more often than not get lumped in with blue collar positions. [...]research suggests that gray collar jobs may collectively make up more than half a billion of the jobs in the world's economy over the next decade.

FULL TEXT

It's not always black and white –or in this case, blue and white.

Gray collar workers, which refers to healthcare professionals, firefighters, police officers and airline pilots, are projected to be one of the fastest growing demographics of employees post-pandemic, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. They are the middle-ground between blue and white collar jobs and an equally important part of our new normal, but haven't been receiving the same amount of attention.

"They have been hiding in plain sight," says Cecile Alper Laroux, vice president at research and innovation company UKG. "This huge, critical labor force."

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The term "gray collar" was first coined in 2004 and compared to its blue and white counterparts, it is entirely a product of a modernized workforce. Gray collar workers primarily find themselves at the intersection of technology and both blue and white collar disciplines, according to Laroux. That's why, as the response to COVID called for more digitization, gray collar workers now also fall under the umbrella of essential workers.

"The essential worker definition changed dramatically," Laroux says. "Before, you would have thought of just healthcare workers as essential workers. But food preparation and manufacturing and construction and all of these [other professions] became essential just to keep the economy going, keep us fed and keep our stores stocked."

"Middle-skilled" occupations that require at least post-secondary certification but less than a bachelor's degree make up the majority of the U.S. labor market, according to the BLS. These are positions that require some combination of physical and technical skills, which makes them difficult to fully automate, creating a huge opportunity for gray collar workers.

Read More: [The benefits and policies employees want –or they'll walk](#)

But therein lies the problem, according to Laroux. Because of their less restrictive education requirements, gray collar jobs more often than not get lumped in with blue collar positions. That can complicate the job search for gray collar workers, and even minimize recognition.

"We have to de-stigmatize the 'more education is better' viewpoint in the workplace," she says. "They're not necessarily educated with four year degrees, but these individuals come to the workforce with a highly specialized and valuable set of education, skills and capabilities."

Gray collar workers are also the target demographic for upskilling and reskilling programs. Their hybrid skill set

makes them a critical cog in any company that's facing big digital changes. And as emerging COVID variants continue to impact return-to-work plans, the adoption of digital tools will only gather strength in the months and years ahead. As a result, research suggests that gray collar jobs may collectively make up more than half a billion of the jobs in the world's economy over the next decade.

"[Gray collar workers] have this magical sort of sweet spot," Laroux says. "The gray collar worker has to play a more prominent role because they have this sort of perfect balance of capabilities that we will need to power our economy and the growth that every organization is striving for."

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But in order to reap the benefits gray collar workers can provide, employers may need to rethink internal marketing strategies and find more effective ways to not just seek out this talent pool, but listen to their needs, wants and concerns.

"[Gray collar workers] have been this powerful voice but we haven't really been hearing them," Laroux says. "And when we do it'll start to change the playing field –which is something that we've needed for a long time."

Credit: Paola Peralta

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