2026 VESTWELL SAVER SURVEY

America's Paycheck Prioritization Problem

What more than a thousand savers reveal about retirement, confidence, benefits, and the future of workplace financial wellness.

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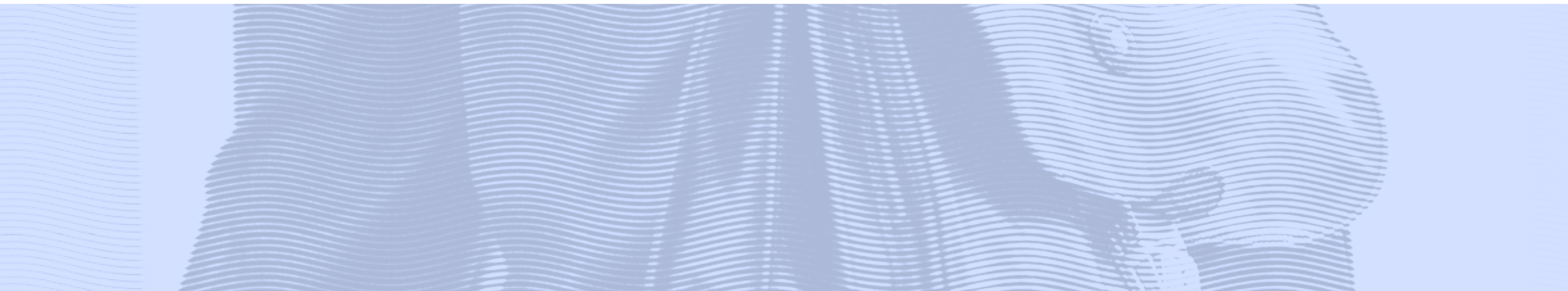


Executive Summary

American workers have not stopped believing in retirement savings. Ninety percent say it is essential or very important that their employer offer a 401(k) plan. That number was held across every age group, income level, and employer size surveyed.

What has changed is everything around it.

Workers today are managing rent, mortgages, medical bills, student loans, childcare, consumer debt, and family obligations—often simultaneously. They understand the value of saving for retirement, but are trying to figure out whether their next paycheck dollar should go there or somewhere more urgent. This is no longer primarily an access or awareness problem. It is a paycheck-prioritization problem.

For more than 50 years, the retirement system has worked to expand access: ERISA established the modern framework for employer-sponsored retirement benefits in 1974; the 401(k) followed in 1978; and more recent federal reforms, including SECURE and SECURE 2.0, have made plans easier and more practical for employers to offer.

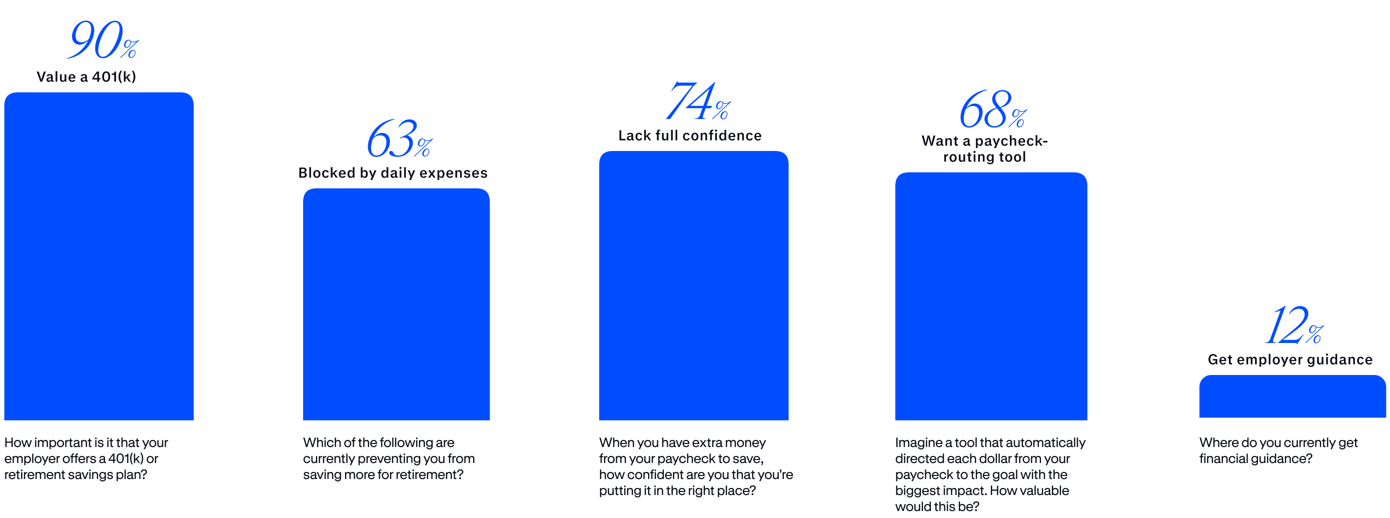
State-facilitated retirement programs have extended that progress further, with retirement savings options now available or advancing across much of the country.

The result is meaningful: more Americans can access a workplace savings vehicle than ever before.

But access alone does not create financial security. For many workers, each paycheck is already spoken for before retirement enters the equation: housing, childcare, debt, healthcare, emergency expenses, and everyday cost pressures all compete for the same limited dollars.

This report draws on 1,007 responses to Vestwell's 2026 Saver Survey to show where that problem is most acute and what workers are asking their employers to do about it.

What savers told us about their money



Finding 1

The 401(k) has become *table stakes.*

Workers value the 401(k), but they no longer think it is enough on its own as a workplace benefit.

Among respondents, 57% said a 401(k) is essential, and 33% said it is very important, for a combined 90% who consider it a requirement of employment.

61%

of workers describe the 401(k) as an expected baseline benefit, not a differentiator.

25%

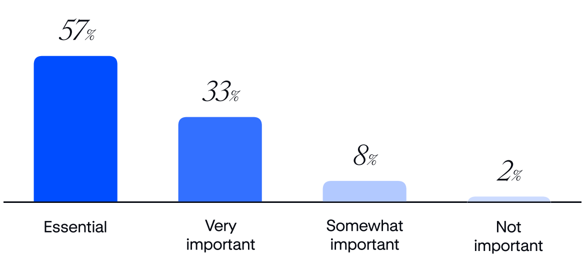
say the 401(k) is important, but not enough on its own.

The implication for employers: not offering a 401(k) is likely to cost you candidates and employees, but offering one is not enough to win them. Workers expect it the way they expect health insurance.

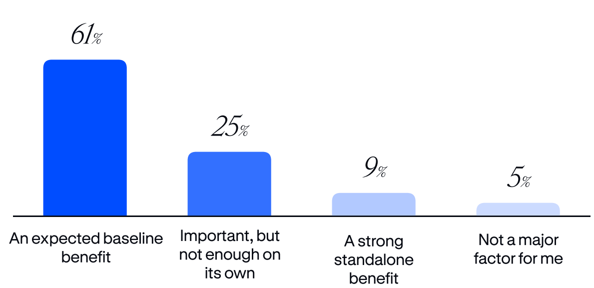
Insight

The 401(k) has become a baseline expectation. Employers may be penalized for not offering one, but they are unlikely to differentiate on the 401(k) alone.

How important is it that your employer offers a 401(k) or retirement savings plan?



Compared to five years ago, which best describes how you view a 401(k) in an employer benefits package?



Finding 2

Cash flow is the retirement crisis.

The biggest barriers to retirement savings are immediate household pressures.

Among all respondents, the top barriers to saving more were:

- **63%** cite day-to-day expenses
- **38%** cite credit card or other debt
- **32%** cite lack of emergency savings
- **20%** cite student loan payments
- **17%** cite childcare or family expenses
- **14%** cite saving for a home

Rising consumer prices have made the tradeoffs more challenging. When everyday costs go up, the paycheck dollars available for retirement go down, and the question of what comes first becomes harder to answer.

These concerns are not limited to lower-income workers. Among respondents earning $125,000 to $200,000, more than half still cite day-to-day expenses as a barrier to retirement savings. The pressure is distributed across the income spectrum.

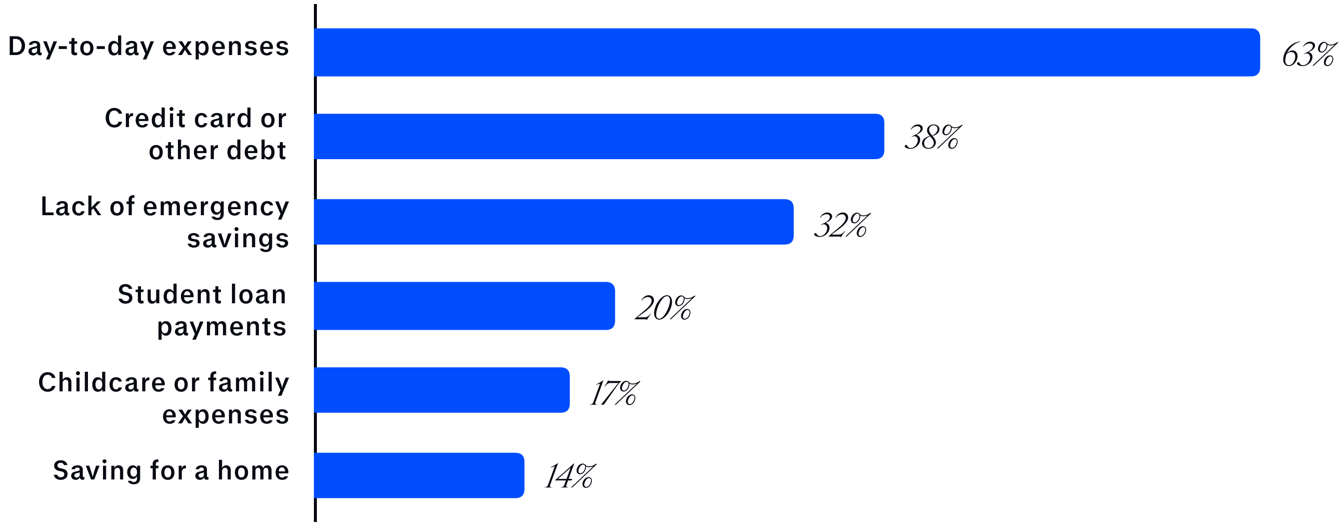
> "For many workers, retirement readiness is decided before the 401(k) contribution screen. It is decided at the level of rent, groceries, debt, and family obligations."

Kevin Gaston
Head of Strategic Retirement Consulting at Vestwell, CPC, QPA, QKC, QKA, TGPC

Insight

Workers care about retirement, but many are not saving because their paycheck is already spoken for. Solutions that ignore the full household picture will keep falling short.

Which of the following are currently preventing you from saving more for retirement?



Finding 3

Confidence is thin even when income is high.

The conventional assumption about financial stress is that it tracks income. The survey data challenge that.

64%

of workers earning $200K+ are only "somewhat confident" in where their next dollar should go.

29%

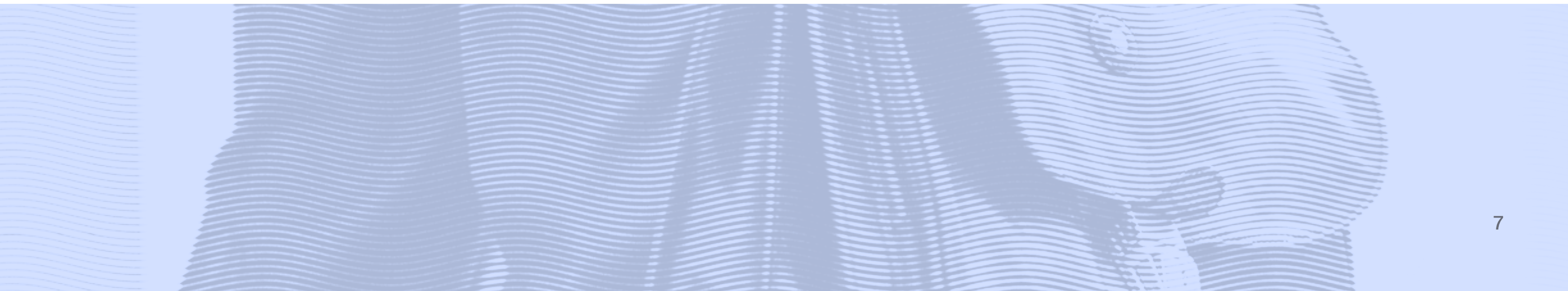
of workers earning under $75K say they are not very confident or do not know where to start.

The nature of the pressure shifts with income. For lower earners, the competing obligations tend to be rent, credit card debt, and student loans. For higher earners, the picture changes: mortgage, childcare, and supporting other family members financially.

Age adds another dimension. Workers in their 20s show the highest low-confidence rate, with 29% saying they are not very confident or do not know where to start.

But uncertainty persists through midlife: 26% of workers in their 50s are also low-confidence.

For employers, the implication is that effective benefit strategies need to meet workers where they are. Financial uncertainty looks different depending on income, age, and life stage, but it is present across the board. The workers who appear most financially stable may be navigating just as many competing demands.

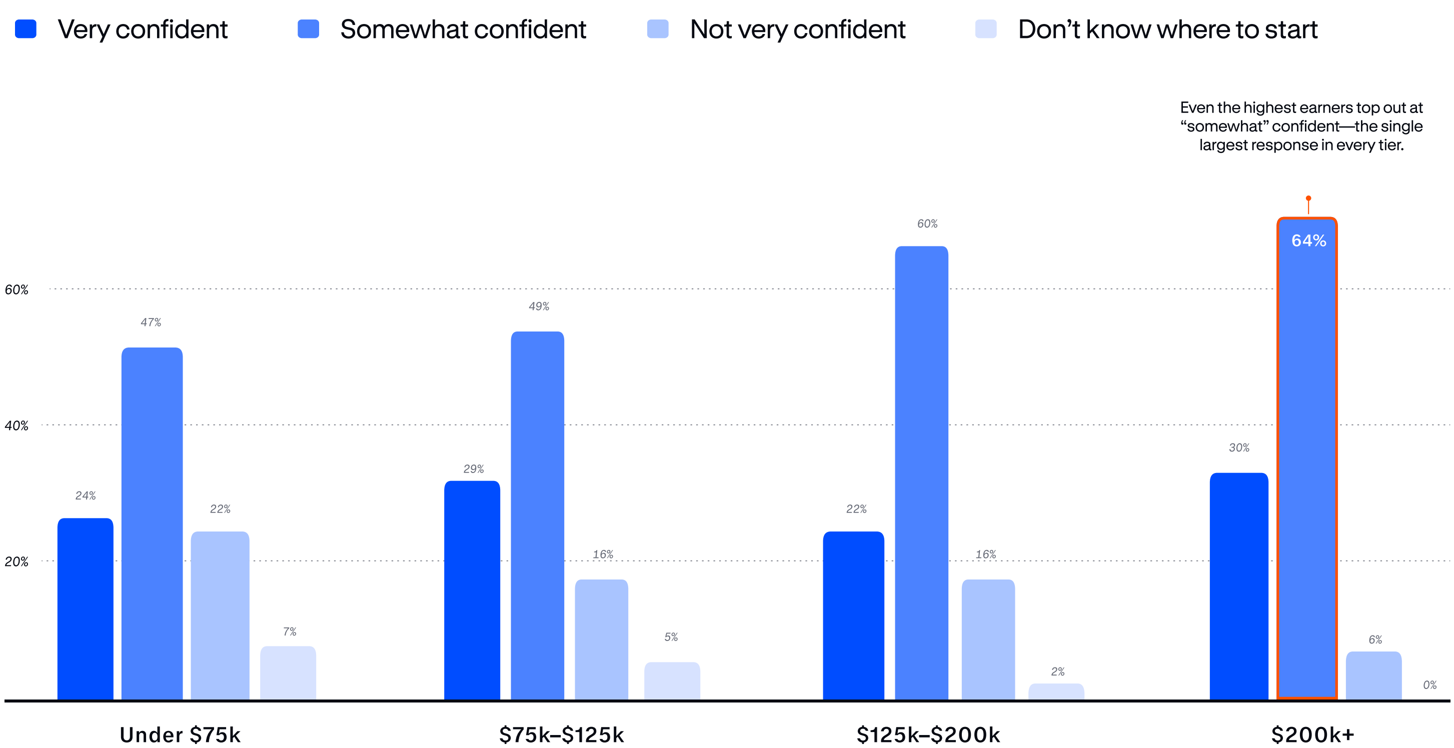


Finding 3 Cont.

Insight

Financial uncertainty persists across earnings levels and age groups. A one-size-fits-all approach to financial wellness leaves workers at every income level without the guidance they actually need.

When you have extra money from your paycheck to save, how confident are you that you're putting it in the right place?



Finding 4

A missing safety net puts retirement *at risk.*

There is a direct link between short-term financial fragility and long-term retirement outcomes.

32% say lack of emergency savings is preventing them from saving more for retirement.	**37%** want an employer-offered emergency savings account, second only to HSA/FSA benefits.

Demand for emergency savings accounts is not limited to younger workers. It is strongest among workers in their 40s, at 44%, but remains meaningful across every age group.

Workers who lack a financial buffer are more likely to pause or withdraw retirement contributions when an unexpected expense hits. Helping workers build a short-term floor is not a distraction from retirement readiness. It may be a precondition for it.

Insight

Emergency savings is not a separate benefit category. It is part of the retirement readiness equation. Employers that help workers build the short-term safety net may see stronger long-term savings behavior as a result.

01 **Emergency savings gap**
Nearly a third of savers (32%) have no cushion set aside for the unexpected.

→

02 **Unexpected expense**
A car repair, medical bill, or income gap lands — and 63% are already stretched by day-to-day costs.

→

03 **401(k) pause or withdrawal**
With nowhere else to turn, savers pause contributions or pull from their retirement accounts.

→

04 **Retirement shortfall**
Interrupted saving compounds into a materially smaller nest egg at retirement.

Finding 5

Financial guidance is coming from friends, social media, and AI.

Workers are not waiting for their employer to help them make financial decisions.

Where do you currently get financial guidance?

01	Friends or family	44%
02	Online search or social media	36%
03	A financial advisor	31%
04	Do not seek financial advice	20%
05	AI tools such as ChatGPT	18%
06	Budgeting or financial apps	18%
07	Employer benefits or HR/payroll platforms	12%
08	A bank or credit union	8%

12%

of workers get financial guidance from their employer's benefits or HR platform, fewer than those using AI tools or budgeting apps.

Finding 5 Cont.

The generational divide

Where workers turn for guidance shifts significantly by age. Among workers in their 20s, 63% rely on friends or family and 47% use online search or social media. Only 14% use a financial advisor. Among workers in their 60s, the picture nearly inverts: 53% use a financial advisor, while just 15% use online search or social media.

Household structure shapes who you ask

Household structure shifts guidance-seeking as much as age does. Single respondents without dependents lean hardest on informal sources, with 48.3% turning to friends or family and 41.7% to online search, compared with just 21.4% who use a financial advisor.

Advisor use nearly doubles, to 34.6%, among married couples with dependents. Employer channels barely move the needle for either group: HR and benefits platforms top out at 12.6% across all household types and fall to 9.6% among single parents.

AI is already in the picture

Eighteen percent of respondents use AI tools such as ChatGPT for financial guidance. That is the same share as those using budgeting or financial apps, and more than the share using their employer's benefits platform.

AI adoption is highest among workers in their 30s, at 26%, and among workers earning $125,000 to $200,000, at 34%.

Insight

Workers are getting financial guidance from friends, social media, and AI because those sources are available and easy to access. Employers have a direct relationship with workers and their paychecks. That is an advantage most are not yet using.

Finding 6

Workers are not realizing the *full value of their benefits.*

Offering a benefit is not the same as delivering one. Workers are weighing competing demands across their entire financial life, and many of the benefits designed to help them never get used. Not because workers do not want them, but because the path from offered to activated is where value gets lost.

When asked why they had delayed or ignored an employer financial benefit, respondents said:

01	I use all the benefits available to me	42%
02	I didn’t know it was available	16%
03	I didn’t think I could afford it	10%
04	I didn’t know how it worked	10%
05	My employer doesn’t offer financial benefits	9%
06	I planned to come back to it later	7%
07	Getting started felt too complicated	6%
08	I didn’t trust it	1%

Finding 6 Cont.

Taken together, 32% of all respondents said they had delayed or ignored a benefit because it was hard to find, hard to understand, or too complicated to start. Among respondents who did not say they use all available benefits, 54% cited one of those barriers.

32%

of workers said they delayed or ignored an employer financial benefit because it was hard to find, hard to understand, or too complicated to start.

54%

of workers who do not use all available benefits cited the same barriers.

A worker who does not know their HSA exists is missing tax-advantaged savings.

A worker who never enrolled in the 401(k) match is leaving compensation on the table.

Benefits that go unfound or unexplained deliver no value.

Insight

Benefit communication and design directly affect whether workers capture real financial value.

Finding 7

There is strong demand for *paycheck-level guidance.*

The survey asked respondents to imagine a tool that automatically directed each dollar from their paycheck to the financial goal where it would have the biggest impact. For example: building emergency savings first, then paying down high-interest debt, then maxing the 401(k) match.

The response was unambiguous.

68%

said the paycheck-direction tool would be very or extremely valuable.

94%

of workers who don't know where to start said the tool would be very or extremely valuable.

84%

of workers who are not very confident said the tool would be very or extremely valuable.

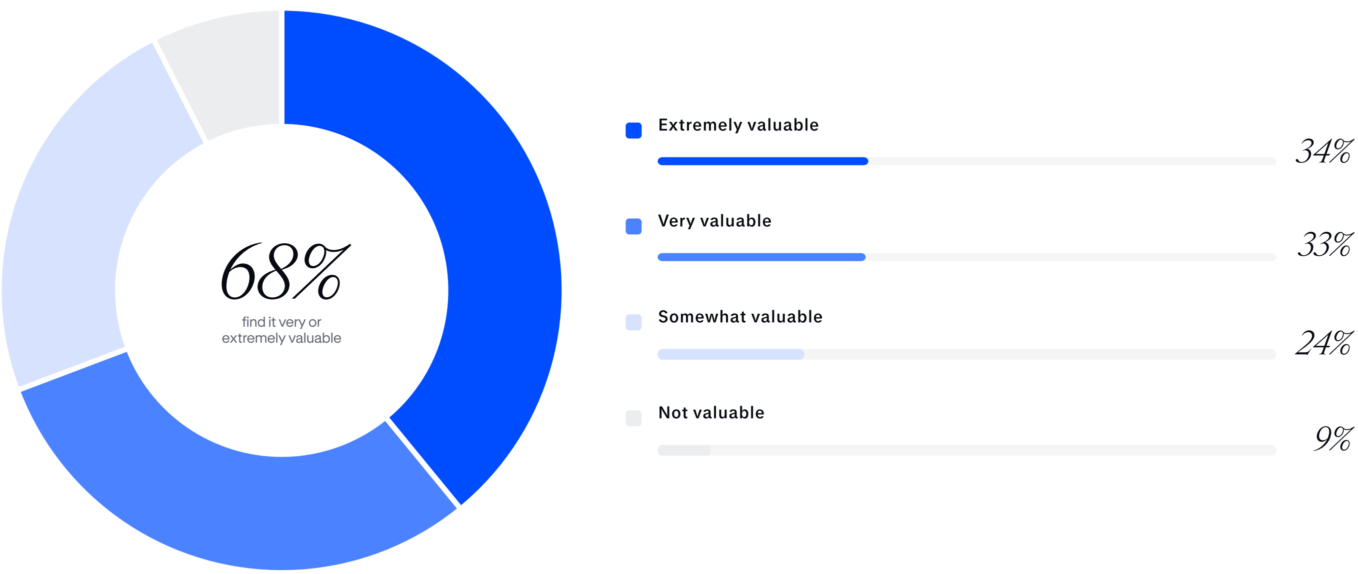
Demand is not confined to workers with lower financial confidence. Younger workers are among the most enthusiastic: 41% of respondents in their 20s called the tool extremely valuable. The appeal holds across age groups, with roughly 7 in 10 workers in their 20s, 40s, and 50s rating it very or extremely valuable.

The personalization data reinforces the same point. When asked what a financial wellness platform should use to personalize recommendations, 24% said paycheck and spending, second only to age and life stage (33%). Workers want guidance that starts where their money actually is: at the paycheck level.

Insight

Demand for paycheck-level guidance is high, cross-demographic, and unmet. Workers are not asking for more financial education. They are asking for better decision support at the moment it matters most.

Imagine a tool that automatically directed each dollar from your paycheck to the goal with the biggest impact. How valuable would this be?



What Employers Can Do *Differently*

The survey points to a persistent gap between what workers need and what they are getting from their employer.

Employees experience their financial life as a single problem: they have one paycheck, multiple competing obligations, and limited guidance about how to balance them. Employers have historically responded with separate benefit categories: a 401(k) here, an HSA there, a student loan benefit if the company is ahead of the curve. Those siloed offerings do not answer the questions workers are actually asking.

The question workers are asking

Based on the survey, workers are trying to answer three things:

1. What financial benefits do I actually have access to?
2. Which ones matter most given my specific situation?
3. Where should my next paycheck dollar go?

Employers that answer those questions can turn benefits from a static offering into a source of confidence, engagement, and financial progress.

Insight

The workers who need guidance most are getting it least. The employer that closes that gap with connected benefits, personalized guidance, and paycheck-level decision support has a significant opportunity to differentiate.

Where the disparity is largest

The gap between what workers need and what employers provide is not distributed evenly. It is sharpest among workers at smaller employers, who are less likely to have access to financial benefits at all, and among workers with the most complex financial lives: workers managing multiple competing obligations and workers at smaller employers with fewer benefit options.

Those are also the workers most likely to rate paycheck-level guidance as extremely valuable, and most likely to be turning to AI or friends and family in its absence.

Methodology & About Vestwell

The 2026 Vestwell Saver Survey was conducted in June 2026 among 1,007 employed adults in the United States. Respondents represent a range of ages, income levels, household structures, and employer sizes. The survey was designed to capture worker attitudes toward retirement savings, financial wellness benefits, and financial decision-making.

Data was collected and anonymized prior to analysis. All percentages are based on total respondents unless otherwise noted. Cross-tabulations by income, age, and employer size are noted where statistically meaningful.

About Vestwell

Vestwell is the backbone of the modern savings economy. Founded in 2016, Vestwell makes it easier for more Americans to save for the full financial journey—from retirement to education, emergencies, and disability-related expenses. Vestwell's platform helps remove traditional barriers to saving, making it more accessible, efficient, and approachable for everyone.

Vestwell provides a comprehensive suite of workplace savings solutions, including retirement plans, emergency savings accounts, student loan repayment benefits, and specialized accounts for education and disability savings. Trusted by financial advisors, employers, payroll providers, financial institutions, and government agencies, Vestwell serves more than 2 million active savers and administers over $50 billion in assets nationwide.

For more information, visit www.vestwell.com.