



# Sidetracked: The Hidden Crisis in Mid-Career Mobility

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May 2026



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## Author Credits and Acknowledgments

This report has been a collaborative effort of the NYU School of Professional Studies (NYU SPS) in partnership with the Burning Glass Institute, with gracious support from the Gates Foundation. Our thanks go to our colleague Scott Spitze who provided significant support to the research and to the development of this report.

NYU School of Professional Studies and Burning Glass Institute. (2026). *Sidetracked: The Hidden Crisis in Mid-Career Mobility*. By Carlo Salerno, Matt Sigelman, Angie Kamath, Yustina Saleh, Ashley Yuan, Kim Kreiss, Gillian Perkins, and Gwynn Guilford. With support from the Gates Foundation.

# Executive Summary

Sarah is a 42-year-old, college-educated professional with 15 years of experience in her field. She is steadily employed and collects a regular paycheck, yet her career has hit an invisible wall. For the last five years, she has received no meaningful promotion, her salary has barely kept pace with inflation, and her once-promising upward trajectory has flattened.

Sarah is one of millions of American workers caught in a mid-career stall. This report reveals that this phenomenon is a widespread and consequential barrier to economic mobility in today's labor market. Drawing on over 1.3 million career histories, we find that **24.2% of mid-career professionals are stalled**, defined as a period of five or more years with no meaningful promotion and negligible wage growth. Unlike unemployment, this crisis is not tracked in official statistics, yet it results in underutilized talent for employers and significant cumulative lost wages for individuals. For example, the financial penalty for the average stalled software developers adds up to a deficit of over \$43,000 over 15 years compared to their more upwardly mobile peers.

The wage penalty over time from mid-career stalling is persistent but not uniform. Across occupations, stalled professionals experience a significant wage gap relative to their non-stalled peers, though the extent to which that gap widens varies markedly by occupation. In fields like finance and software development, where experience compounds multiplicatively, the penalty grows over time as stalled workers miss the accelerating returns that momentum would have unlocked. In occupations with flatter reward curves, the penalty tends to be more static, and in some cases workers even recover a portion of the lost ground later in their careers.

Our analysis reveals that mid-career stall often starts developing earlier in a worker's career. By examining workers at their ten-year career mark, we find a stark divergence between those who will later stall and those who will not. **Those who ultimately stall out have already fallen behind—averaging just 1.5 internal promotions and 30% wage growth in their first decade, compared to 1.9 promotions and 71% growth for peers who have kept on pace.** This finding suggests that mid-career stall is often the culmination of a slow-moving, early-career slump, creating an early-detection window where intervention is far more feasible and effective.

Our analysis also shows that stall is not random; it is shaped by the interplay between a role's structure and the individuals within it, following predictable patterns. The variance is striking: **stall rates range from a structurally low 20.7% in information technology to a high of 30.2% in public administration.** At the same time, our model reveals that, **in some fields (like IT Support), high raw stall rates are driven by "sorting": the roles attract workers with other underlying risk factors. In other fields (like Business and Management), the dynamic is "structural": the job architecture itself creates advancement opportunities.** This is not a crisis confined to struggling sectors; it is embedded in the structure of professional work itself.

Yet stall does not have to be permanent. **Strategic reskilling into adjacent, higher-mobility roles can dramatically reduce stall risk—in some cases by over 80%.** A stalled computer programmer who pivots

into a data scientist role, for instance, can see their stall risk drop by 86%. The key is not starting over but moving laterally into roles where a worker's existing skills unlock a steeper trajectory. These transitions **follow three distinct patterns—deepening technical expertise within a related field, broadening into cross-functional planning and analysis roles, or carrying transferable competencies into an entirely new domain**—each leveraging existing human capital rather than requiring workers to begin again from scratch.

The credentials workers acquire along the way matter just as much as where they land. While the average non-degree credential appears to reduce stall likelihood by 29%, this effect is not evenly distributed. The benefit is overwhelmingly concentrated in high-quality, market-aligned credentials, which are associated with a 52% reduction in stall risk.

However, quality alone does not determine a credential's value—occupational context matters too. In fields like IT and Education, where specific certifications function as recognized markers of advancing expertise, credentials are among the strongest protective factors against stall. But in fields like Business and Management, where credentials tend to signal entry-level readiness rather than advancement, they are associated with increased stall risk. This is not because the credentials cause the stall, but because they tend to mark workers who are still operating at entry-level proficiency or who entered the field through less advantaged pathways with less built-in momentum from the start.

Importantly, because the trajectory toward stall is visible early, intervention is more powerful than late remediation. By identifying workers on a stall trajectory early and combining targeted learning with intentional talent mobility, workers and employers can redirect momentum before entrenchment.

Ultimately, **mid-career stall is a structural problem, not an individual failure**. Employment is necessary, but not sufficient for sustained prosperity. Career momentum matters. By detecting the warning signs visible within the first decade and pursuing targeted reskilling into adjacent roles, workers and employers can work together to rebuild career momentum, ensuring that talent does not remain stranded.

# 1. Introduction: The Quiet Mobility Crisis

The modern American labor market presents a paradox. By traditional metrics such as the unemployment rate, the economy appears robust, generating millions of jobs and maintaining high levels of employment. Yet beneath this surface of stability, a quieter phenomenon is unfolding: a structural decline in upward mobility for a significant share of the workforce. Large numbers of professionals remain steadily employed but experience prolonged stagnation in wages, responsibility, and advancement. They are not displaced or unemployed, but their career trajectories have stalled.

This report provides the first comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon, which we term mid-career stall. It is a mobility problem *inside* of employment, distinct from the visible disruptions represented by layoffs or sectoral decline. A substantial body of research has already documented the macro-level trends that create the conditions for stall. Studies confirm that upward job-to-job mobility has declined substantially over the last several decades,<sup>1</sup> reducing the frequency with which workers can translate experience into higher-paying roles.

At the firm level, evidence points to the weakening of internal labor markets, with fewer promotions and less-defined career ladders, particularly in the large organizations that once served as engines of advancement.<sup>2</sup> Broader social and institutional trends compound this dynamic: geographic mobility has fallen,<sup>3</sup> mid-career education has grown more expensive and risk-laden, and advancement increasingly depends on informal networks that are unevenly distributed.<sup>4</sup> The result is an economy that continues to generate jobs but struggles to generate reliable career ladders, leaving a growing share of workers stranded in place.

While this body of research illuminates the structural headwinds, the problem of mid-career stall itself has remained conceptually fuzzy and empirically unquantified. Its scale has been a matter of speculation, its core drivers have not been systematically isolated, and the pathways to recovery have been anecdotal at best. Consequently, it has been absent from mainstream policy discussions, which remain focused on the binary status of employment versus unemployment. This analysis addresses that critical gap. By moving from broad trends to a precise, measurable definition of stall, we aim to bring this hidden crisis into focus.

More fundamentally, three findings of this research, when taken together, have profound implications. First, this report reveals that stall is not a sudden rupture but a compounding process with early warning signs. Workers who will later stall show measurable divergence in promotion velocity and wage growth as early as their first decade of career experience. Second, we find that stall is avoidable, with occupational and sectoral decisions playing a major role in determining risk. And, third, we find that recovery from stall is possible, with specific career pivots reducing stall dramatically. When considered in combination, these findings yield a critical insight: stall can be detected before it hardens, and intervention can be more effective when pursued early rather than after entrenchment.

This report draws on over 1.3 million longitudinal career histories to conduct a systematic investigation of mid-career stall, examining its scale, drivers, and potential solutions. We define stall using a dual metric: a period of five or more years with (1) no meaningful promotion and (2) negligible real wage growth.

This allows us to isolate true structural plateauing from temporary slowdowns on the one hand, or cosmetic title changes on the other. Our analysis reveals that this is not a marginal issue; 24.2% of mid-career professionals nationally exhibit measurable signs of stall.

We also examine workers at their ten-year career mark and find that stall risk is already visible at that earlier stage, before formal stall classification. This early divergence—in promotion velocity, wage growth, and job-transition patterns—suggests that prevention and early intervention are more powerful than late remediation.

This is not just an abstract statistic. It is the lived experience of millions of workers like Sarah—the professional we met in the Executive Summary—who, despite years of steady employment, find that their career momentum has sputtered out. Their advancement has stalled and their earnings have stagnated. They represent a hidden crisis in the modern economy: professionals whose potential is squandered and whose economic mobility is quietly eroding. This report moves beyond diagnosis to offer actionable solutions for this critical group.

The analysis proceeds as follows:

- **Section 2** details the methodology, data sources, and our dual-metric definition of stall.
- **Section 3** quantifies the scale of the problem, identifying the industries, occupations, and demographic groups most at risk.
- **Section 4** investigates the primary factors that drive stall risk, examining both the early-career divergence that precedes stall and the mechanisms through which early disadvantages compound over time.
- **Section 5** shifts to solutions, presenting data-driven case studies on reskilling and upskilling pathways that can help stalled professionals regain momentum.
- **Section 6** concludes with a discussion of the report's core implications for workers, employers, and workforce development strategy.

By quantifying the scale of mid-career stall, diagnosing its drivers, and mapping real pathways to recovery, this report provides a roadmap for addressing a central yet underrecognized challenge to economic opportunity in the 21st-century labor market.

## 2. Brief Methodology

Our analysis draws upon the Burning Glass Institute's database of the career histories of 65 million US workers, representing the experience of approximately 65% of the college-educated US workforce. Estimated wages are built from large-scale private salary survey sources and matched to individuals' job histories using information on job titles, occupational classifications, employer, state, and year. Salaries are adjusted using the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Consumer Price Index (CPI) to produce real wages relative to 2024 wage levels. We filter for credible, sustained career paths by focusing on U.S.-based professionals with clearly defined work histories and sufficient tenure, excluding internships, student roles, and volunteer experiences. While the dataset is broadly comprehensive, its sample has the highest representation of knowledge-based roles. As such, we emphasize office occupations in our analyses across business and management, clerical and administrative services, IT and math, and sales and customer service.

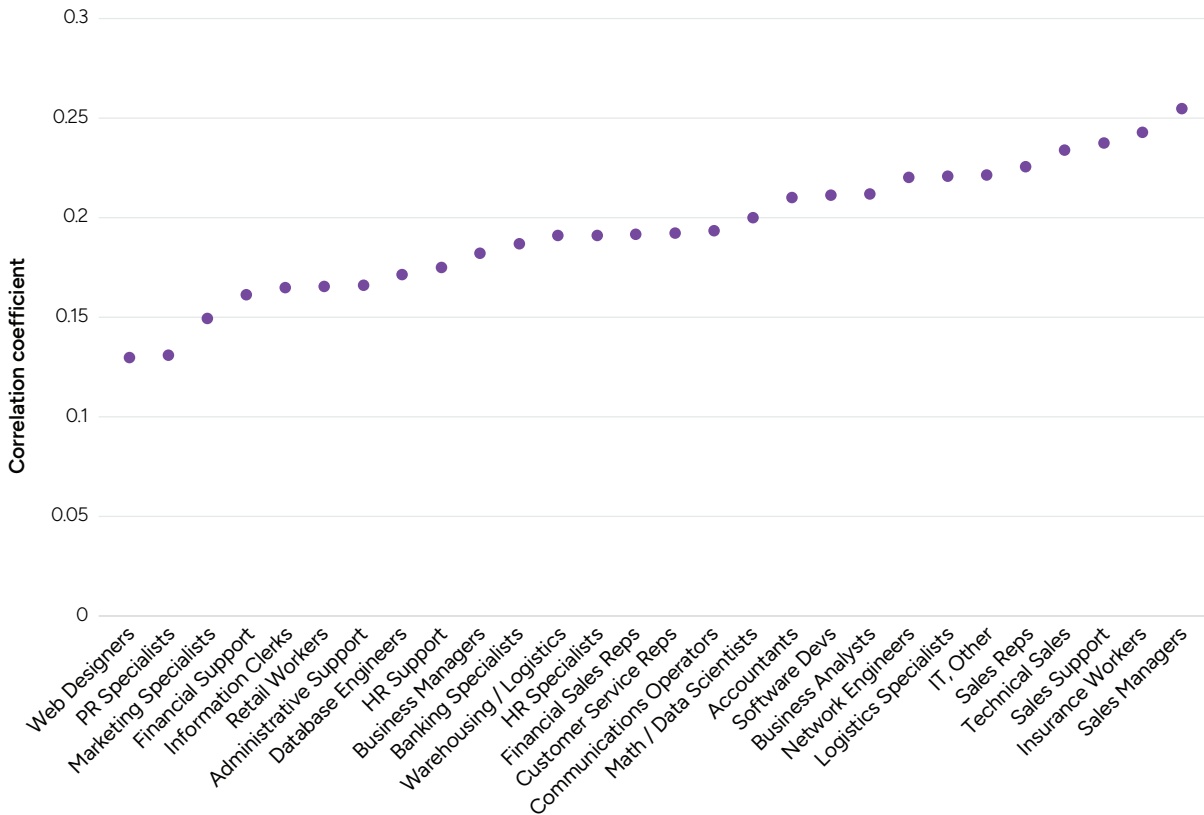
For this research, stall is defined not as unemployment or temporary volatility, but as sustained stagnation in both wage growth and advancement. Specifically, a professional is classified as stalled if, during their mid-career (defined as the 10-to-15-year career mark), they have experienced both: (1) no promotion for five consecutive years and (2) less than 5% wage growth over that same five-year period.

Requiring both conditions serves two purposes. First, it distinguishes structural plateauing from temporary slowdowns—a single five-year promotion drought or modest wage growth alone could reflect normal career volatility, but the combination suggests sustained stagnation. Second, it reduces measurement noise; by requiring simultaneous promotion stagnation (an outcome less vulnerable to data imprecision), we add confidence that wage stagnation reflects real career dynamics rather than estimation error.

The importance of accounting for both bears out when examining the correlation between wage and promotion stagnation, both overall and across roles, which in our sample is 0.213, indicating these dimensions do not always move together (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> For example, wage growth often decelerates as a professional matures within a given role—rising quickly upon entry and then flattening as compensation approaches the ceiling for that position. A worker nearing the top of their current pay band might show less than 5% wage growth over five years and yet be on a healthy trajectory, with a promotion imminent. Requiring promotion stagnation as a co-condition ensures that we are not misclassifying this routine deceleration as career distress.

However, that modest overall correlation masks meaningful variation across occupations. As Figure 1 shows, the correlation between wage and promotion stagnation ranges from roughly 0.13 among web designers and PR specialists to nearly 0.25 among insurance workers and sales managers.

**Figure 1. Correlations Between Wage and Promotion Stall by Occupation**



Source: Burning Glass Institute

Even at the high end, the correlation never exceeds 0.30, confirming that wage and promotion stall capture meaningfully distinct dimensions of career health across the full occupational spectrum. The pattern at the extremes is intuitive: sales and management roles tend to have compensation structures—commissions, performance bonuses, pay bands tightly linked to title—that tie wage growth to advancement mechanically, pushing the two metrics closer together. Specialist and support roles, by contrast, often feature flatter hierarchies where wage gains can come through skill deepening, market demand for scarce expertise, or lateral moves that carry pay increases without formal promotion, allowing the two dimensions to drift apart.

With stall defined on both dimensions, we turn to its predictors. To identify these key variables, we model the probability of this outcome using a LASSO logistic regression framework.<sup>6</sup> This approach allows us to isolate the most meaningful variables across demographics, education, and career history. To identify solutions, we use a counterfactual matching methodology. This allows us to isolate the skills and career moves that differentiate advancing professionals from their stalled peers mid-career, while controlling for initial advantages or constraints. We then map viable reskilling pathways by identifying adjacent

occupations (based on task similarity via OpenAI embeddings) that are historically associated with wage gains and lower stall risk.

Next, we integrate empirical observations from the Burning Glass Institute's [Labor Shortage Index](#) and [Credential Value Index](#) to ensure our recommended pathways align with real labor market demand. This methodology allows us to quantify mid-career stall, diagnose its drivers, and identify evidence-based pathways to mobility.

While stall is formally classified at the 15-year career mark, we designed our analysis to trace its earlier roots. We focus on two complementary timelines: the early-career period (years 0-10) and the mid-career period (years 10-15). This framework reveals a clear divergence in promotion and wage velocity as early as year 10. Because stall risk becomes detectable long before it crystallizes, our findings highlight that early intervention is far more powerful than late remediation.

### 3. Mapping the Landscape of Stall:

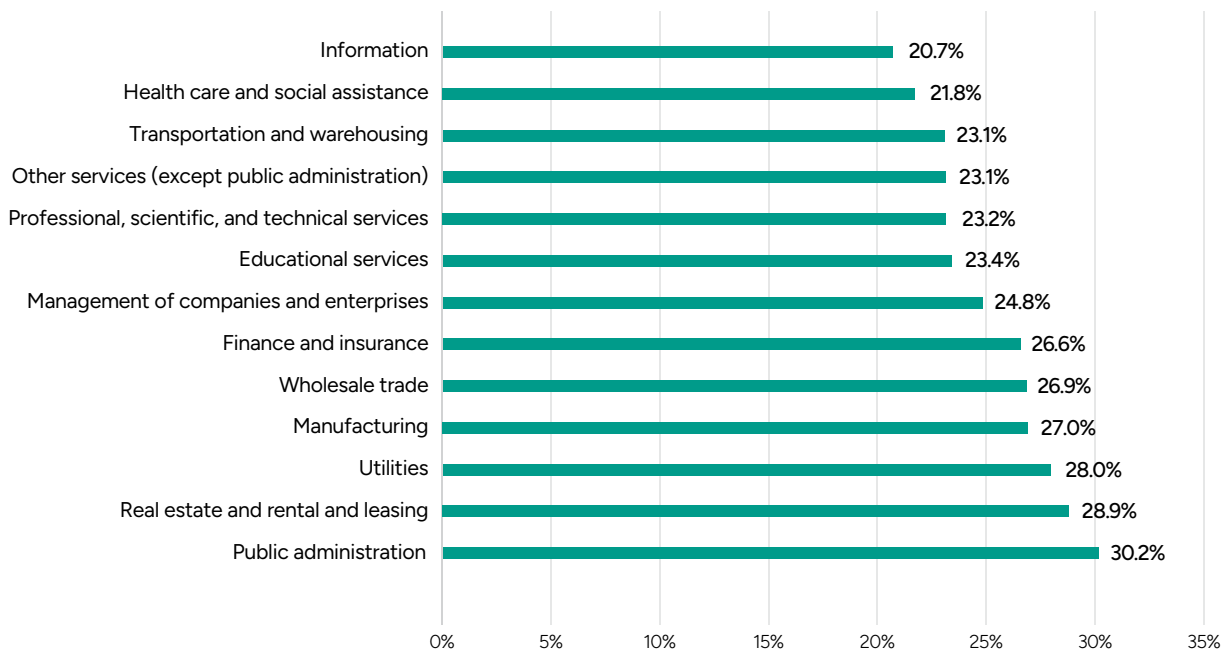
Before we dissect the underlying drivers of mid-career stall, we must first understand where it is most prevalent. This section provides a descriptive overview, mapping the terrain of career stall by showing the share of workers who experience it across different occupations, industries, and demographic groups. These figures represent the on-the-ground reality at the mid-career mark and highlight the areas where it is most common for workers to “top out”, setting the stage for a deeper investigation into the factors associated with it.

#### 3.1—Industry Variation: Where Traditional Ladders Have Weakened

Stall rates vary substantially across industries, ranging from 20.7% in Information to 30.2% in Public Administration.

A striking finding is that sectors long associated with stable, white-collar careers now exhibit the highest stall shares. Public Administration (30.2%) and Real Estate (28.9%) top that list, while Finance and Insurance (26.6%) and Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (23.2%) also exhibit significant shares of professionals who are stuck. The fact that roughly one-quarter or more of mid-career professionals in these sectors are stalled suggests that these industries may increasingly be characterized by narrower advancement funnels and heightened competition for a smaller number of senior roles.

Figure 2. Stalled Share of Profiles by Industry



Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

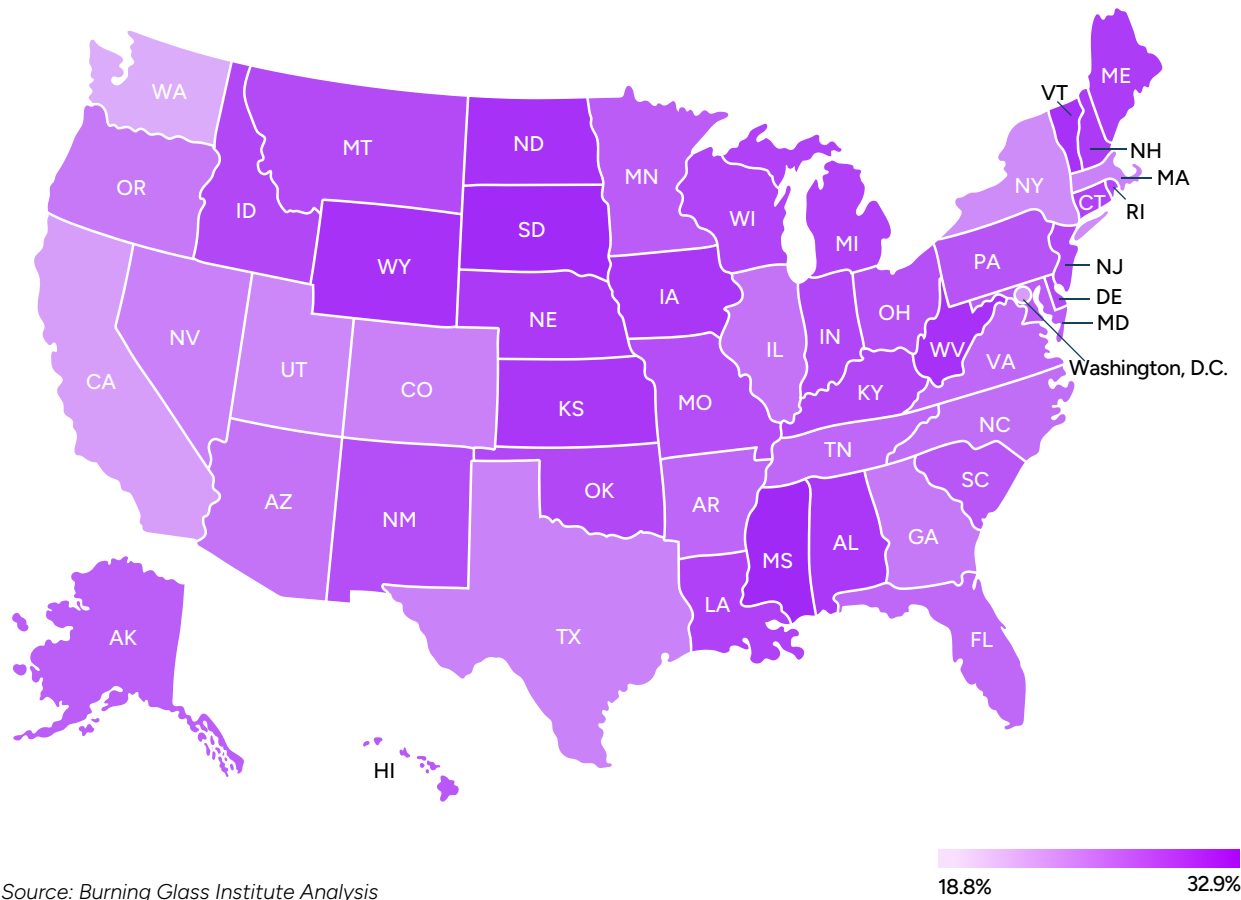
### 3.2—Geography: A National Problem with Regional Variation

Career stall is a national phenomenon: 24.2% of mid-career professionals show signs of sustained stagnation across the United States. However, this national average masks important regional variation. The heat map reveals a striking pattern: stall rates appear to track closely with the scale and economic vibrancy of a state's economy. States with large, diversified economies and robust engines for growth—such as Washington (18.8%), California (20.1%), Texas (22.6%), Utah (22.1%), Massachusetts (22.6%), and Georgia (23.4%)—show consistently lower stall rates. By contrast, rates are highest in two types of states: states with structurally constrained labor markets and less diversified industry bases, including Mississippi (32.9%), West Virginia (31.1%), and Alabama (30.1%); and states with small economies that, regardless of growth trajectory, simply lack the scale to generate diverse advancement opportunities—such as the Dakotas (31–33%), Wyoming (31.3%), and Vermont (31.1%).

The logic is intuitive: to move up, workers need ample and diverse opportunities—a broad ecosystem of employers competing for talent, adjacent industries to move into, and enough organizational scale to sustain multi-rung career ladders. Large, dynamic economies generate these conditions naturally. Smaller or stagnant economies, even those with pockets of growth, may simply not produce enough senior roles, lateral pathways, or competitive pressure on employers to promote from within. The West likely exhibits systematically lower stall rates than the Midwest and Northeast in part for this reason. One example: Information Technology shows stall rates of 16.4% in the West versus 27.0% in the Midwest.

This gap is too consistent to be random. The fact that workers in the same industry stall at different rates depending on region indicates that composition alone cannot fully explain the pattern. A manufacturing worker in the Midwest has a 20.8% higher observed stall rate than one in the West, even holding industry constant. This suggests that regional differences in how firms organize advancement, how workers move between them, and the vibrancy of local labor markets all play a role.

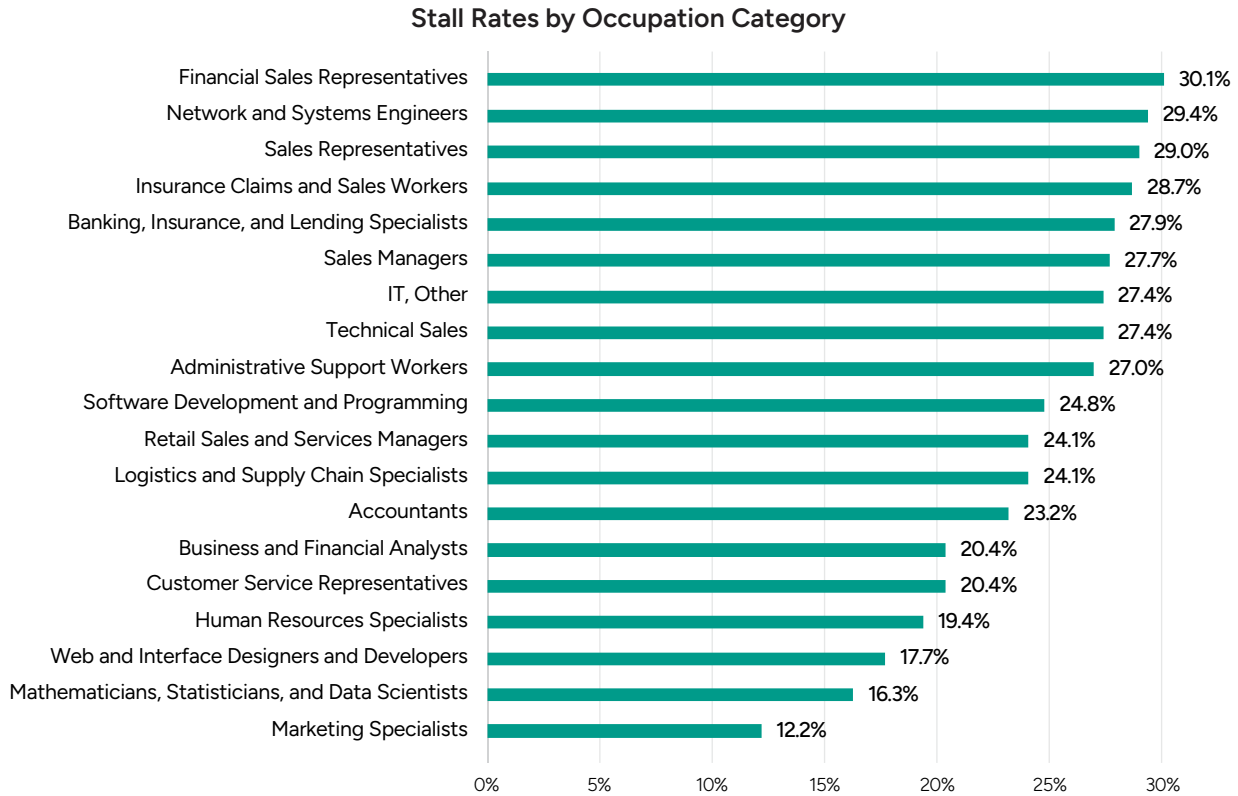
Figure 3. State-Level Rates of Mid-Career Stall



### 3.3—Occupational Hotspots: Where Stall Is Most Common

The prevalence of stall is not just a function of industry; it is also strongly associated with the function an individual performs. A descriptive overview of stall rates by occupation reveals what appear to be clear career hotspots for mid-career stagnation.

**Figure 4. Stall Rates by Occupation, Selected Examples**



Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

As the figure shows, support-oriented roles exhibit the highest raw stall rates. Financial Sales Representatives (30.1%) and Network and Systems Engineers (29.4%) have significantly higher stall prevalence than Marketing Specialist roles (12.2%)—but, even in the least impacted occupation groups, roughly one in eight professionals has topped out.

This striking pattern presents a critical analytical puzzle. On the surface, it suggests that support-track roles are structurally flawed, acting as a ceiling for advancement. However, this descriptive data alone cannot tell us why these rates are so high. Is it because of the inherent structure of the job itself, or is it a “sorting effect”—a reflection of individuals who have more generally found their way into these roles? Disentangling these two possibilities is essential for diagnosis, and we will use our driver analysis in Section 4 to resolve this question.

### 3.4—Demographic Patterns: Structure Over Simple Inequity

Stall varies by gender and race/ethnicity, but these patterns point to occupational structure rather than uniform disadvantage. In business and management roles, men exhibit higher stall rates than women (26.8% versus 24.0%). Yet in clerical and administrative services, the pattern inverts: women stall at higher rates (25.5% versus 21.9%). If stall were driven by a uniform, gender-based disadvantage, we would expect the same group to stall more frequently in every role. Instead, the data suggests that stall risk is shaped—at least in part—by the specific architecture and culture of each professional field.

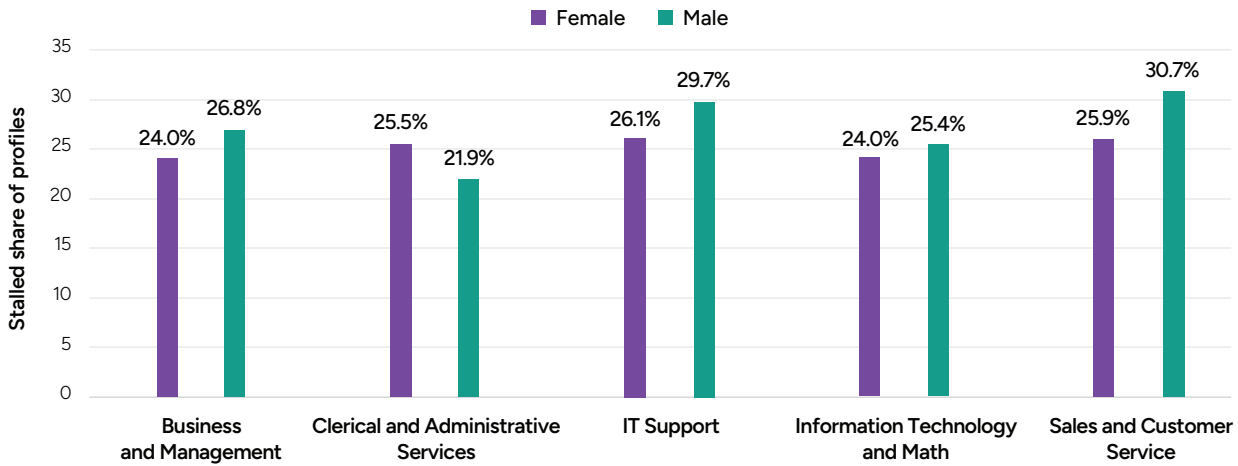
In fact, with the exception of clerical and administrative support, women stall at lower rates across virtually every major white-collar occupational category. The two fields with the starkest gender contrasts illustrate how this works.

In clerical and administrative support, advancement pathways are notoriously flat: senior roles are scarce, and upward mobility typically requires lateral moves into entirely different functions rather than climbing a ladder within the clerical track itself. Women who sort into these roles—partly due to historical counseling into such occupations but also often in pursuit of schedule predictability and job stability—may find that the very features that made the role attractive also impose a ceiling on advancement. The culture of these roles can compound the effect: work coded as “support” rather than “leadership experience” can make it harder for incumbents to be seen as promotion candidates, particularly when their presence in these roles aligns with longstanding occupational stereotypes.

In business and management, the dynamic may partly reflect selection. Women who reach management positions have typically navigated higher credential thresholds and more competitive scrutiny to get there, producing a more rigorously filtered cohort with lower stall rates. Men may flow into managerial roles more readily through informal networks and conventional career assumptions, producing a wider distribution of preparedness—and a higher rate of eventual stall.

These patterns do not rule out the role of bias; rather, they suggest that any biases operate not as uniform, economy-wide forces but are instead refracted through the distinct norms and cultures of individual professional communities. The same demographic group can face headwinds in one field and tailwinds in another, pointing to occupational culture—not systemic disadvantage alone—as the proximate mechanism.

Figure 5. Stall Rates by Occupation and Gender



Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

The racial and ethnic patterns tell a similarly counterintuitive story. White professionals consistently exhibit the highest stall rates across nearly every occupation—reaching 32% for White men in IT Support and 30% in Sales and Customer Service. Asian professionals, by contrast, show the lowest rates in most categories, particularly in Business and Management (16% for women, 17% for men) and Information Technology and Math (17% and 20%). Black and Hispanic workers generally fall in between, clustering in the low-to-mid-20% range. If stall were driven primarily by uniform racial disadvantage, historically marginalized groups would show consistently higher rates. They do not.

What does appear to matter is differential occupational sorting—which groups concentrate in which roles, firms, and regions. But that sorting is not race-neutral. Historical and ongoing racial disadvantage has disproportionately channeled workers of color into roles that tend to have more limited upward mobility; the occupational distribution we observe is partly a product of the inequality one might look for in the stall rates. A worker of color who gains entry to a management or leadership track may stall at rates comparable to—or even lower than—White peers, but the barriers that made that entry less likely in the first place represent a form of racial disadvantage that surfaces in who populates which occupations rather than in differences in stall rates within each given occupation.

As with gender, this does not mean bias is absent, but it does suggest that its effects are channeled through the specific cultures and opportunity structures of individual fields—and, upstream, through the sorting processes that determine who reaches those fields—rather than operating as a single, economy-wide force.

**Figure 6. Stall Rates by Occupation, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity**

|                   | Business and Management | Clerical and Administrative Services | IT Support | Information Technology and Math | Sales and Customer Service |
|-------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Asian - Female    | 16%                     | 21%                                  | 21%        | 17%                             | 20%                        |
| Asian - Male      | 17%                     | 18%                                  | 26%        | 20%                             | 23%                        |
| Black - Female    | 21%                     | 23%                                  | 25%        | 23%                             | 20%                        |
| Black - Male      | 20%                     | 18%                                  | 25%        | 21%                             | 21%                        |
| Hispanic - Female | 18%                     | 22%                                  | 22%        | 19%                             | 20%                        |
| Hispanic - Male   | 19%                     | 18%                                  | 26%        | 20%                             | 21%                        |
| Other - Female    | 17%                     | 19%                                  | 18%        | 18%                             | 19%                        |
| Other - Male      | 18%                     | 17%                                  | 25%        | 19%                             | 23%                        |
| White - Female    | 24%                     | 27%                                  | 29%        | 27%                             | 27%                        |
| White - Male      | 25%                     | 23%                                  | 32%        | 28%                             | 30%                        |

Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

The interaction between gender and race adds further nuance. For example, in Clerical and Administrative Services, women stall at higher rates than men across every racial and ethnic group. This consistency suggests that the architecture of this specific occupational track imposes a common barrier for women, regardless of their racial background: it is the “chair” that matters. In IT Support, the reverse holds: men stall at higher rates in nearly every group, suggesting the “chair” in that field creates a different type of structural constraint. These persistent within-occupation patterns reinforce a central finding of this section: stall risk appears to be shaped more by the architecture and culture of the role than by demography alone—though, as we will explore in Section 4, the two are deeply intertwined.

### 3.5 Core Findings: “Chair or Person?”

The descriptive evidence from this section raises a fundamental question that our prevalence data alone cannot answer: Are people stalling because of the chair they sit in, or because of the person they are?

In other words, is the high stall rate observed in a field like IT Support driven by the structural limitations of the role itself (the chair), or is it a reflection of the shared background, credentials, and early career momentum of the individuals who are channeled into that function (the person)? Section 3 has mapped the landscape of stall. To understand its underlying causes and disentangle these factors, we must now turn to a more advanced analysis of its drivers.

## 4. What Factors Drive Stall Risk?

Virtually every worker in our analysis holds at least a bachelor's degree. Yet nearly one in four has stalled. If postsecondary education alone were sufficient to sustain career momentum, we would not expect to see this level of stagnation among degree-holders—nor would we expect the dramatic variation our data reveals, with stall rates ranging from 20.7% in information technology to 30.2% in public administration. Something beyond the degree itself is sorting workers into divergent trajectories. Our analysis strongly supports a combination of three interconnected forces that often govern a professional's long-term outcomes:

- **Occupational Structure:** The field you work in sets the baseline risk. Career areas are not created equal; some have inherently steeper and more robust internal ladders for advancement, while others have lower ceilings and fewer opportunities for promotion.
- **Education and Credential Quality:** Within any occupation, two factors further differentiate who advances and who stalls. The first is degree level: an advanced degree—a master's or doctorate—provides additional insulation against stall beyond the bachelor's degree baseline, though with diminishing returns. The second, and more powerful, differentiator is non-degree credentials (NDCs). Here, what matters is not simply whether a worker holds a credential, but whether that credential is high-quality, market-aligned, and situated in a field where credentialing functions as a recognized marker of advancing expertise.<sup>7</sup> In the right context, a well-targeted credential can be one of the strongest protective factors our model identifies. In the wrong context, it may signal little at all.
- **Early Career Trajectory:** Perhaps our most consequential finding is that stall is not a sudden event but an emergent condition with a long tail. Workers who eventually stall often display a distinct performance profile—with lagging wage growth and fewer promotions—that is visible years before the plateau becomes entrenched. The disadvantages compound over time, making early momentum a powerful predictor of long-term success. Moreover, once stall sets in, the financial penalty it imposes is not static—its long-term cost varies dramatically by occupation, compounding sharply in some fields while remaining more forgiving in others.

These three factors—the structure of the field, the alignment of credentials, and the momentum of the early career—do not operate in isolation. Rather, they are tightly interwoven. Occupational structure sets the initial playing field; within that field, credentials amplify or diminish a worker's competitive position; and early career trajectory either reinforces or disrupts the occupational baseline. Together, they create a clear, predictive signature for stall risk. Understanding this signature is essential because it suggests that career stagnation can be identified and addressed long before it becomes entrenched, making early detection and intervention both feasible and urgent.

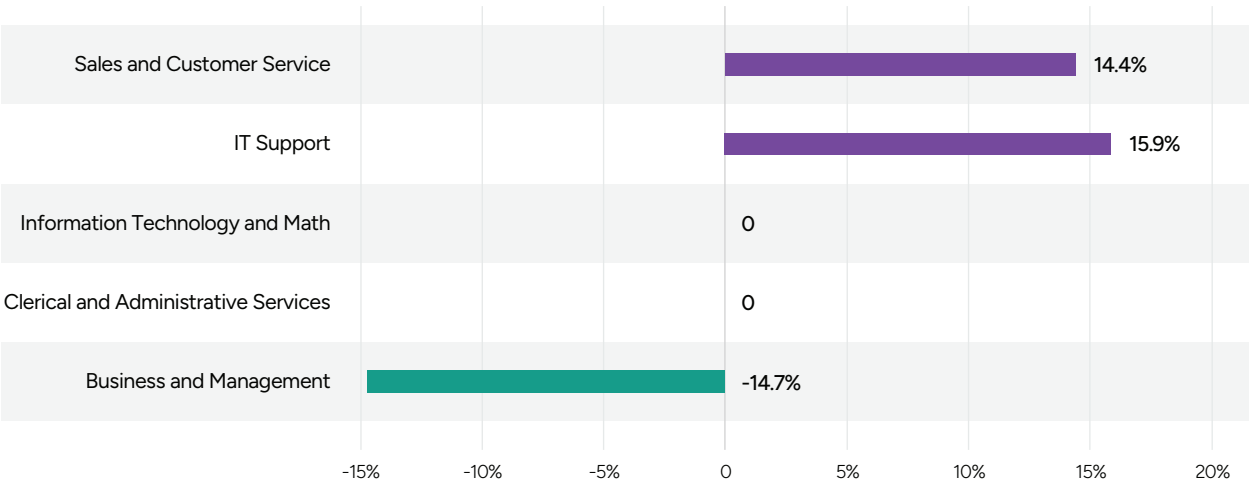
### 4.1—The Occupational Foundation: Establishing Baseline Risk

Before education, credentials, or early-career momentum matter, occupational choice itself establishes a baseline risk profile. In Section 3.3, our descriptive analysis showed high stall prevalence in roles like IT Support and lower prevalence in Business and Management. Our LASSO regression analysis—which isolates the structural risk inherent in each occupation, controlling for individual worker characteristics—resolves the “chair vs. person” puzzle and reveals the distinct forces at play.

To isolate the independent effects of multiple factors on stall risk, we estimate a logistic regression in which the outcome is whether a worker is stalled (see Appendix for further detail). These adjusted results separate the role of who you are and what you’ve studied from the role of where you work.

Professionals in Business and Management roles face a 14.7% lower likelihood of stall relative to the population average, while workers in IT Support and Sales and Customer Service face roughly 14-16% higher odds of stalling than average, precisely because the regression strips away the compositional differences that partially blurred them.

Figure 7. Relative Likelihood of Career Stall by Occupational Field



Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

This finding resolves the puzzle presented in Section 3.3, suggesting that both structural and sorting effects contribute to stall risk.

- **Double-Whammy Risk in Support Roles:** For IT Support and Sales, the analysis reveals that the high prevalence of stall rates is driven by more than a sorting effect. Even after we control for worker characteristics and risk factors, the gap largely remains. While these roles may attract workers with other risk factors, the job architecture itself carries inherent, elevated risk. The high prevalence is therefore a symptom of both workforce composition and challenging structural pathways for advancement.

- **Structural Advantage in Management Roles:** For Business and Management, the structural impact is reversed. The model shows that the job architecture itself is protective. The 14.7% lower likelihood of stall is a measure of this structural advantage, which helps explain why the overall prevalence of stall is lower in this field. One possible explanation is that managerial career paths are often designed with clearer hierarchical ladders, more frequent promotion checkpoints, and broader role mobility across functions. Because leadership roles emphasize coordination, decision-making, and oversight, workers may also find it easier to transfer their skills between teams or departments. This structural flexibility can create more opportunities for advancement or role redefinition before a career stall occurs, making the occupational architecture itself protective against stagnation.

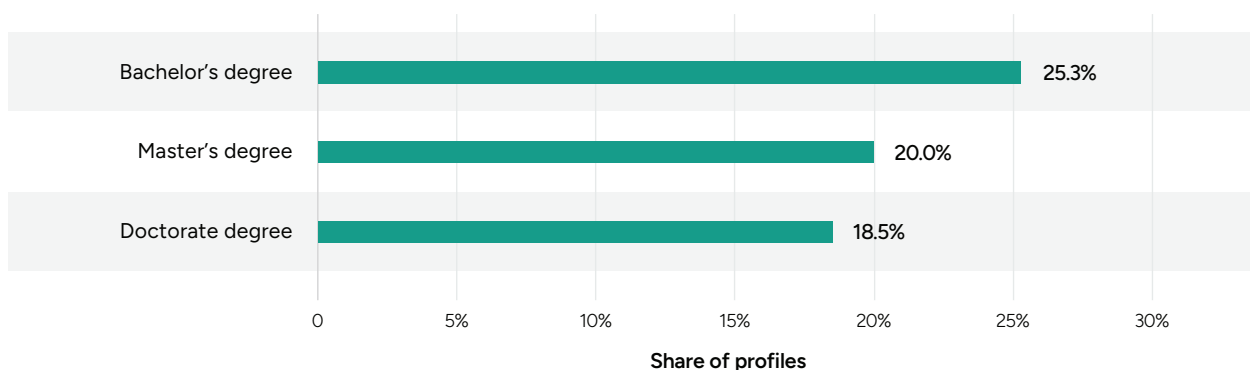
Several occupation-specific factors likely drive this variance. Career fields differ fundamentally in the number and accessibility of advancement pathways. Some fields have flatter hierarchies but robust lateral mobility and skills-based advancement that doesn't require climbing a narrow management ladder. Others have steeper hierarchies with fewer senior roles per capita relative to entry and mid-level positions, creating natural bottlenecks. Still others operate within regulatory or bureaucratic structures that constrain how quickly professionals can move up.

Ultimately, occupational structure is not destiny, but it is a powerful determinant of baseline risk. A worker in a high-stall-risk occupation is not guaranteed to stall, but they face taller odds. This is why the interaction between occupation and credentials becomes so consequential.

## 4.2—Education Level, Credential Quality, and Field of Study

The relationship between educational attainment and career risk follows a clear gradient, but one with diminishing returns. Among professionals with a bachelor's degree, 25.3% experience career stall. That figure narrows for those with advanced degrees—but not as dramatically as conventional wisdom might suggest. One in five workers holding a master's degree still stalls, indicating that degree attainment alone does not guarantee sustained upward mobility. The critical factor is not how much education a worker has, but how well that education aligns with the competencies their occupation rewards over time.

**Figure 8. Stall Share by Highest Degree**



Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

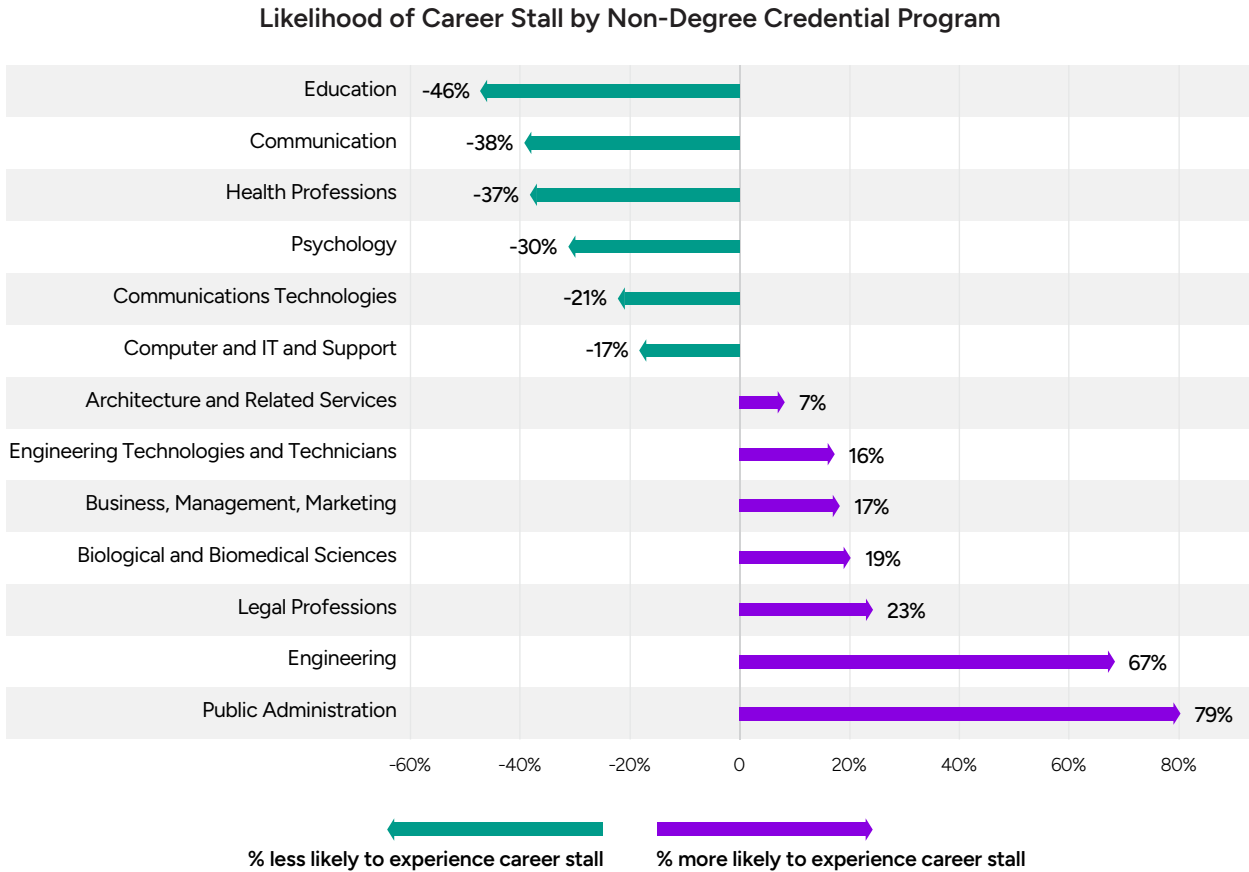
This distinction between general attainment and specific alignment becomes even sharper when examining non-degree credentials. The past decade has seen an explosion in the prevalence of non-degree credentials, encompassing everything from LinkedIn or Coursera certificates to Project Management Professional (PMP) or ScrumMaster certification. On average, earning a non-degree credential is associated with a 29% reduction in stall likelihood—a meaningful protective effect. This benefit, however, depends on context: a credential's quality and its field of study.

The 29% average reduction obscures a dramatic split: The benefit is overwhelmingly concentrated in high-quality, market-aligned credentials, which are associated with a powerful 52% reduction in stall risk.<sup>8</sup> This is one of the strongest single protective factors our model identifies, rivaling or exceeding the effect of an advanced degree. The quality dimension is relatively straightforward since it stands to reason that market-aligned credentials with a proven track record of improving outcomes would ward off mid-career stall more frequently than those without those attributes. The more surprising finding is that the value of a credential also depends heavily on the field in which it is held.

In some fields, non-degree credentials are associated with a lower likelihood of a career stall. This suggests these credentials help workers maintain career momentum. The largest reduction is in Education, where we see a 46% reduction in stall risk, followed closely by Communication (–38%) and Health Professions (–37%).

Conversely, in many other fields, non-degree credentials are associated with a higher likelihood of a career stall. This suggests that, in these areas, the credentials may not be as effective at preventing stagnation, or perhaps they lead workers into roles where stalling is more common. The largest increase in stall likelihood is seen in Public Administration (+79%), followed by Engineering (+67%). In Business Management and Marketing Support Services—a field where occupational structure itself reduces stall risk—holding a credential is associated with a 16.7% increase in stall likelihood. A high-quality credential partially offsets this effect, reducing stall risk by 10.1%, but even with a well-regarded credential, workers in these fields do not see the same protective benefit that their counterparts in credential-oriented fields enjoy.

**Figure 9. Impact of Non-Degree Credentials on Stall Likelihood, by Field of Study**



Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis

This pattern raises an obvious question: why would a credential be associated with worse outcomes in some fields? The answer likely reflects a selection dynamic rather than a causal one. In fields where credentials are not embedded in the ongoing architecture of professional advancement, they tend to function as signals that a candidate meets a baseline threshold of competency sufficient to be hired into a role, rather than as markers of readiness for promotion within one. Job postings data helps illustrate why.

In credential-oriented fields where non-degree credentials reduce stall risk—Education, Health Professions, Psychology—credential-associated postings carry notably low minimum experience requirements, with medians at around two years. These are fields where a credential functions as a recognized complement to, or even substitute for, years of accumulated experience—and where further credentials continue to mark professional development throughout a career.

In fields where NDCs are associated with elevated stall risk—Business and Management, Engineering, Legal Professions—median minimum experience requirements run to four or five years. In these fields,

credentials are not embedded in an ongoing architecture of advancement; a credential cannot bypass the tenure expectations that govern advancement. They correspond to entry-level or early-career roles, and no credentialing ladder extends beyond them. For a worker early in their career, that credential marks a meaningful threshold. But for a mid-career professional with a decade or more of tenure, a credential profile that still maps to roles requiring five years of experience tells a different story. It does not mark where the worker is headed. Instead, it marks where they entered and, by implication, where their profile has remained. In this context, the credential is more likely a symptom of stall than a cause of it. Either way, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with employers less likely to give consideration for more senior jobs to candidates marked by a low-experience credential.

The practical implication is that non-degree credentials are not interchangeable tokens of human capital. Their value is deeply conditional, shaped both by the quality of the credential itself and by whether the field recognizes credentials as part of an ongoing professional architecture or merely as conditions of entry. In fields with structured credentialing ecosystems, they function as one of the most powerful tools available for sustained career progression. In those without, their presence in a worker's profile may signal the opposite: not ongoing development, but early-career positioning that was never built upon. For workers and for the institutions that advise them, the question is not whether to pursue a credential, but whether the specific one they are considering is recognized within their field as a signal of advancement-readiness or merely a condition of entry.

### 4.3—Early Trajectory: Stall Risk Is Visible Years in Advance

Perhaps the most consequential finding of our analysis is that mid-career stall is a condition that sets in early in a worker's career rather than a sudden rupture. The trajectory that leads to getting sidetracked is often visible before the worker reaches the middle of their career. By examining workers at their ten-year career mark—a full five years before our formal stall classification—we see a clear and measurable “early divergence” between those who will continue to advance and those who will not.

The evidence for this divergence is stark. Across all occupations, future stallers have already fallen behind their peers by year ten, averaging 1.5 internal promotions compared to 1.9 for non-stallers and seeing average wage growth of only 30% while their non-stalling peers see gains of 71%. This gap is not trivial; in many high-skill fields, it is a chasm. The data on early career patterns reveals:

- For **Software Developers**, those on a stall trajectory see wage gains of just 34% in their first decade, while their advancing peers see their earnings grow 112%—a 78-percentage-point difference.
- The divergence is even more extreme for **Advertising Sales Agents**, where non-stalled workers experience 83% wage growth in their first ten years compared to a mere 10% for their peers who will later stall.
- This pattern holds even in roles with tighter wage bands. **Payroll and Timekeeping Clerks** who will later stall already lag their peers in wage growth by year 10 (22% vs. 44%), demonstrating that the divergence signal is present even when absolute wage differences are small.

This early divergence raises a critical question: Is it a result of sorting or causation?

If this is a consequence of sorting, then the divergence primarily reflects pre-existing, persistent differences between workers. Individuals with lower aptitude, motivation, or a poorer fit for their chosen field (a form of selection bias) will naturally exhibit slower growth from the beginning of their careers. Their early trajectory doesn't cause the later stall; rather, both are symptoms of the same underlying factors.

If causation is really at work here, then early disadvantages are likely reinforcing mechanisms that compound over time. While our data cannot prove these causal links, plausible pathways include:

- **Skill Depreciation:** A slower start may mean less exposure to complex projects, causing a worker's skills to drift from market demand and making it harder to compete for senior roles later.
- **Network Atrophy:** Professionals in more static roles have fewer opportunities to build the cross-functional and senior-level networks that facilitate advancement. It is also possible that workers who perceive limited opportunity invest less in networking (an instance of reverse causation).
- **Negative Employer Signaling:** A flat wage and title history may be interpreted by managers and recruiters as a signal of limited potential. This can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, though it is difficult to distinguish this effect from employers simply making accurate assessments of a worker's potential.

## 4.4—The Accumulating Cost of Stall: How the Wage Penalty Plays Out Over Time

Section 4.3 established that the trajectory toward stall is visible early, but it left open a crucial follow-up question: once a worker stalls, what happens next? Does the wage penalty stabilize, or does it continue to grow? The answer has direct implications for the urgency of intervention. If the cost of stall is fixed—a one-time setback—then the case for early action, while real, is less pressing. But if the penalty compounds over time, then every year of inaction raises the long-term price a worker pays.

Our data reveals that the answer depends on where you work.

Across the full sample, the wage gap between stalled and non-stalled professionals is best understood as a persistent level shift rather than a compounding penalty. The absolute gap remains remarkably stable over time, suggesting that the stall creates a one-time setback from which workers neither fully recover nor continue to fall behind. By Year 15, the stalled group's incremental wage gains slightly outpace those of non-stalled peers, consistent with a partial recovery—possibly driven by lateral moves, industry switches, or delayed promotions that allow some stalled workers to claw back on a modest portion of the penalty.

At the occupation level, however, the story is more varied. Financial and investment analysts exhibit a pronounced compounding dynamic: the gap widens at each horizon, consistent with a field where each year of career momentum seeds disproportionately higher future returns. Software developers show a similar, if more moderate, pattern. By contrast, project managers display a catch-up trajectory—the gap widens at 10 years but then narrows, falling below the 5-year gap by Year 15. Loan officers follow yet another

path, with the penalty continuing to accumulate before leveling off in later years. These occupation-level differences suggest that the cost of stalling is shaped by the structure of career rewards in a given field: where experience compounds multiplicatively, a mid-career stall carries an escalating price; where returns to experience are steadier, the penalty is real but more forgiving—and, for some workers, at least partially reversible.

This variation reinforces a theme running through our entire analysis: occupational structure is not just the backdrop against which careers unfold. Rather, it is an active force that shapes the severity of stall, the value of credentials, and now, the long-term financial consequences of falling behind.

While our data cannot resolve definitively the sorting vs. causation debate, for the purposes of intervention, the distinction may be less important than the finding itself. The divergence, regardless of its root cause, serves as a powerful predictive signal. It creates a multi-year window of opportunity for workers and employers to identify an at-risk trajectory and take corrective action—whether through targeted reskilling, mentorship, or strategic career moves—long before stagnation becomes entrenched. And as Section 4.4 makes clear, the cost of failing to act on that signal is not uniform—in fields where the wage penalty compounds, delay itself carries a price.

# 5. Strategies to Prevent and Override Stall

Occupational structure sets a baseline career risk, but the right skills and credentials can dramatically improve those odds. This makes early detection and targeted intervention both feasible and consequential. The strategies that matter fall into two categories: building the skill mix that prevents stall in the first place, and, for workers already plateaued, pivoting into adjacent roles where existing expertise can be redeployed for renewed momentum.

## 5.1—Skills as Mobility Insurance

To understand what sets advancing workers apart, we compared the skills listed by stalled and non-stalled professionals within each matched group. The table below shows the skills with the largest gaps—those that appear more frequently in non-stalled profiles. A value of 1.78 for Public Speaking, for example, means that within a typical matched group, non-stalled workers are 1.78 percentage points more likely to list that skill than their stalled counterparts.

**Figure 10. Skills That Distinguish Non-Stalled Workers from Otherwise-Similar Stalled Peers**

*(Median percentage-point difference in skill prevalence, non-stalled minus stalled)*

| Top Common Skills  | How Much More Common Among Non-Stalled Workers (pp) | Top Specialized Skills | How Much More Common Among Non-Stalled Workers (pp) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Public Speaking    | 1.78                                                | Social Media           | 1.82                                                |
| Leadership         | 1.69                                                | Event Planning         | 1.75                                                |
| Time Management    | 1.67                                                | Community Outreach     | 1.45                                                |
| Teamwork           | 1.59                                                | Social Networks        | 1.43                                                |
| Research           | 1.52                                                | Data Entry             | 1.33                                                |
| Editing            | 1.37                                                | Data Analysis          | 1.28                                                |
| Management         | 1.32                                                | Event Management       | 1.19                                                |
| Sales              | 1.20                                                | Marketing              | 1.18                                                |
| Team Building      | 1.05                                                | Program Development    | 1.11                                                |
| Strategic Planning | 0.96                                                | Project Management     | 1.08                                                |

*Note: Values represent how many additional percentage points of non-stalled workers list a given skill on their profile compared to stalled workers. To ensure an apples-to-apples comparison, workers are grouped into more than 60,000 matched cells based on entry occupation, initial education level, and state of first job—so each comparison is between workers who started from the same position. The figure shown is the median difference across all cells.*

The results split into two categories. The skills most common among non-stalled workers are not technical or specialized—they are foundational professional competencies. Public speaking shows the largest gap (1.78 percentage points), followed closely by leadership (1.69) and time management (1.67). Teamwork, research, editing, and management round out the middle of the list, while sales, team building, and strategic planning also appear. This pattern suggests the capacity to communicate effectively, coordinate with others, and operate beyond one's immediate task description distinguishes workers who sustain momentum from those who stall.

The specialized skills that distinguish non-stalled workers tell a more unexpected story. Social media tops the list (1.82), followed by event planning (1.75), community outreach (1.45), and social networks (1.43)—all outward-facing skills oriented around engagement, audience building, and relationship management. Data analysis (1.28) and project management (1.08) appear further down the list, joined by marketing, event management, and program development. The through-line here is that the specialized skills most associated with career progression are not narrowly technical but rather those that connect an organization to the outside world and require coordinating across people and processes.

Because these comparisons hold starting occupation, education, and geography constant, the implication is not merely that certain skills correlate with advancement. It is that the progressive layering of these competencies over time—both the foundational ability to lead and communicate and the applied capacity to engage externally and manage complex initiatives—is what separates workers who maintain momentum from those who plateau. Skill portfolios that fail to evolve leave workers exposed. Cultivating both transferable and outward-facing specialized skills is a proactive tool to strengthen resilience and expand pathways into higher-growth roles.

But skill development and credentialing are not blanket protections. As our analysis in Section 4.1 showed, their effectiveness depends on credential quality and what skills the occupational context actually demands. This same principle extends to career transitions: for workers already stalled who hope to use a job change to restart forward momentum, success depends not on acquiring skills at random but on reading the skill architecture of reachable neighboring occupations. The transitions most likely to succeed are those where the skill bridge is short, the task overlap is high, and the target role's entry structure rewards demonstrated capability over accumulated tenure—the logic that underpins the adjacent-role analysis that follows.

## **5.2—When Prevention Isn't Enough: Adjacent Roles as Escape Routes**

When prevention falls short, skills become the basis for a different kind of strategy: not avoiding stall, but escaping it. Stalled careers are not endpoints but misaligned trajectories that can be redirected. Effective reskilling is not about starting over; it is about pivoting from existing human capital into adjacent roles that share task overlap but offer better growth potential.

The logic is structural. Most high-stall occupations sit adjacent to roles that share many of the same core skills but offer materially better advancement dynamics. These neighboring occupations often have longer internal ladders, broader scope for responsibility, or stronger market demand. The skill distance between a stalled role and a higher-mobility neighbor is often surprisingly short: not a wholesale reinvention, but a focused bridge across a handful of capabilities. Critically, the most effective bridge roles tend to be those

with moderate experience requirements—occupations where targeted reskilling is legible as preparation rather than as a substitute for tenure.

What makes these transitions effective is that they convert existing expertise rather than discarding it. A worker who pivots into an adjacent role carries forward years of domain knowledge, institutional fluency, and task-level proficiency. The pivot adds new capabilities on top of a foundation that is already largely in place. This is why task similarity matters: the higher the overlap between a stalled role and its target, the shorter the reskilling runway—and the more likely the transition is to succeed.

Not all pivots look the same, however. Across occupations, we observe three distinct archetypes of successful transition. Some workers escape stall by deepening, adding more advanced technical expertise within a closely related field, as when computer programmers move into software development or data science. Others escape by broadening, expanding into a wider set of planning, analytical, or cross-functional skills, as when cost estimators pivot into project management or budget analysis. And others escape by changing domains altogether, carrying transferable competencies into an entirely different functional area, as when office managers move into business operations or management analysis. The case studies that follow illustrate each archetype in turn.

### **5.3—Escaping Stall by Deepening Expertise: Computer Programming Professionals**

Computer programming occupies an increasingly precarious position in the technology labor market. The role has been compressed from both ends: automation and AI-assisted code generation are absorbing routine coding tasks from below, while the industry's shift toward integrated software development—where design, deployment, and maintenance are bundled into a single role—has eroded the standalone programmer's niche from above. Programmers who remain narrowly focused on writing and maintaining code, without expanding into architecture, full-stack development, or data infrastructure, often find themselves in a shrinking lane with limited room to advance.

This makes programming a natural case study for the deepening archetype. The escape route does not require moving into an unfamiliar domain; it requires building more advanced technical layers on top of an existing technical foundation. For stalled computer programmers, adjacent roles offer a clear path to renewed momentum. Pivoting to software development or software quality assurance can reduce stall risk by 44% and 51%, respectively, while a move into data science lowers it by a dramatic 86%. These roles share significant task overlap with programming (87-93% similarity), meaning programmers are often just a focused skill bridge away from a higher-mobility pathway.

The specific skills that separate a stalled programmer from a mobile software developer or data scientist are narrow but consequential. For a software developer role, this means mastering modern practices like Agile, DevOps, and cloud platforms (AWS, Azure). For a systems analyst role, it means acquiring skills in business analysis and requirements elicitation. The pathway is not a reset but a pivot, leveraging existing knowledge to elevate market positioning and convert stagnation into upward trajectory.

**Figure 11. Top Re-Skilling Opportunities for Computer Programmers**

| Target Occupation                               | Similarity Score | Target Stall Share | Stall Share % Difference |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Software Developers                             | 92.8%            | 24.7%              | -44.3%                   |
| Computer Systems Analysts                       | 89.6%            | 35.2%              | -20.4%                   |
| Database Administrators                         | 88.7%            | 37.1%              | -16.2%                   |
| Computer and Information Systems Managers       | 88.1%            | 41.7%              | -5.8%                    |
| Computer Hardware Engineers                     | 87.7%            | 33.0%              | -25.5%                   |
| Web Administrators                              | 87.7%            | 28.1%              | -36.5%                   |
| Software Quality Assurance Analysts and Testers | 87.3%            | 21.7%              | -51.0%                   |
| Computer Systems Engineers/Architects           | 87.1%            | 32.1%              | -27.4%                   |
| Data Scientists                                 | 86.5%            | 6.1%               | -86.2%                   |

*Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis*

## 5.4—Escaping Stall by Broadening the Skill Base: Cost Estimators

Cost estimation is a field with a structural ceiling. The role is technically demanding but narrowly defined, centered on producing detailed forecasts that inform decisions made by others. Advancement opportunities within the occupation are limited: there are relatively few senior or supervisory positions, and the core task—calculating projected costs—offers diminishing scope for expanded responsibility over time. Meanwhile, growing automation of routine estimation tasks is compressing demand for the role itself. For cost estimators who find themselves plateauing, the path forward runs not through the occupation but alongside it—into roles that value the same analytical foundation but offer broader scope.

Targeted skill expansion can reopen upward mobility for stalled cost estimators. Adjacent occupations like project management specialists and budget analysts offer materially lower stall risk (a 13.1% and 12.4% reduction, respectively) while maintaining high task similarity (Figure 12).

**Figure 12. Top Re-Skilling Opportunities for Cost Estimators**

| Target Occupation                                  | Similarity Score | Target Stall Share | Stall Share % Difference |
|----------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Project Management Specialists                     | 86.6%            | 25.4%              | -13.1%                   |
| Budget Analysts                                    | 84.4%            | 26.1%              | -12.4%                   |
| Insurance Appraisers, Auto Damage                  | 83.5%            | 26.5%              | -11.9%                   |
| Accountants and Auditors                           | 82.9%            | 24.7%              | -13.8%                   |
| Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists | 82.5%            | 17.7%              | -20.8%                   |
| Logisticians                                       | 82.5%            | 26.1%              | -12.4%                   |
| Information Technology Project Managers            | 82.3%            | 26.5%              | -12.0%                   |
| Management Analysts                                | 82.2%            | 18.4%              | -20.1%                   |
| Financial Specialists, All Other                   | 82.0%            | 23.1%              | -15.3%                   |
| Solar Sales Representatives and Assessors          | 81.9%            | 17.6%              | -20.9%                   |

*Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis*

Success hinges on layering specific competencies onto core cost estimation experience. This means moving from narrowly focused cost forecasting into broader planning, coordination, and financial analysis functions by adding skills in project planning and delivery management (for project management specialist roles) or budget formulation, financial planning, and variance analysis (for budget analyst roles). In both cases, advancement depends on expanding beyond cost modeling to develop the planning, financial, and cross-functional capabilities that convert estimating expertise into broader strategic value within organizations.

## 5.5—Escaping Stall by Changing Domains: Office Administrative Professionals

Administrative roles are among the most common career sand traps in the American labor market. Many office managers did not set out to build a career in administration. They landed in the role as a practical stopgap, a way to pay bills while pursuing other ambitions or waiting for the right opportunity to open up. But administrative work often has a particular inertia. The role demands just enough daily coordination and institutional knowledge to make leaving feel costly, while offering little enough upward mobility to ensure that staying rarely leads anywhere. What was supposed to be a brief detour quietly becomes permanent employment, and the career ladder that once seemed just around the corner recedes further with each passing year.

The path for stalled office managers highlights a critical insight: reclaiming career momentum sometimes means looking beyond familiar fields. For office managers, the most similar adjacent roles, like executive secretaries, offer little improvement in stall risk (Figure 13). However, when office managers pivot to roles with stronger advancement dynamics, such as business operations specialists or management analysts, the improvement is substantial, with stall risk falling by 34-39%. The extra training required to make the transition is well rewarded.

**Figure 13. Top Re-Skilling Opportunities for Office Managers**

| Target Occupation                                                    | Similarity Score | Target Stall Share | Stall Share % Difference |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>First-Line Supervisors of Non-Retail Sales Workers</b>            | 89.4%            | 27.7%              | -0.7%                    |
| <b>Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants</b> | 88.7%            | 27.5%              | -1.4%                    |
| <b>Legal Support Workers, All Other</b>                              | 86.9%            | 23.4%              | -16.1%                   |
| <b>Managers, All Other</b>                                           | 85.7%            | 25.9%              | -6.9%                    |
| <b>Social and Community Service Managers</b>                         | 85.5%            | 23.0%              | -17.4%                   |
| <b>Personal Service Managers, All Other</b>                          | 85.0%            | 21.0%              | -24.5%                   |
| <b>Business Operations Specialists, All Other</b>                    | 84.8%            | 16.9%              | -39.2%                   |
| <b>Food Service Managers</b>                                         | 84.6%            | 22.3%              | -19.9%                   |
| <b>Medical and Health Services Managers</b>                          | 84.3%            | 26.2%              | -6.0%                    |
| <b>Management Analysts</b>                                           | 83.8%            | 18.4%              | -33.8%                   |

*Source: Burning Glass Institute Analysis*

The skill gaps are specific. The transition requires moving from administrative coordination to strategic work by building capabilities in areas like proposal development, business analysis, or process mapping. The foundational strengths of an office manager—organization, coordination, communication—remain valuable, but advancement hinges on adding analytical rigor.

For administrative workers, escaping a career sand trap means moving from coordination to analysis, from support to strategy. When office managers expand their skill portfolios in these directions, they transform accumulated institutional knowledge into a platform for renewed upward trajectory.

## 5.6—Connecting the Archetypes

Across all three case studies—deepening, broadening, and changing domains—the underlying mechanism is the same: workers leverage existing human capital to bridge a targeted skill gap into a higher-mobility occupation. In each case, the destination role shares not only high task overlap with the origin occupation but relatively accessible experience thresholds—a combination that allows an NDC or targeted skill investment to function as a genuine bridge rather than an insufficient proxy for years on the job. Where experience requirements are steeper, the same credential may carry less weight, a pattern that reinforces the importance of choosing transition targets strategically rather than pursuing credentials indiscriminately.

The specifics differ. A programmer adds cloud architecture and modern development frameworks. A cost estimator adds project planning and financial analysis. An office manager adds business strategy and process mapping. But the structural logic is consistent. Stall is not a verdict on a worker's capability; it is a signal that the occupation's advancement dynamics have run out of room. When workers identify adjacent roles with better dynamics and close the skill distance between where they are and where those roles begin, career momentum can be restored. The question, then, is not whether escape routes exist—they do, and they are often shorter than workers expect—but whether the institutions surrounding those workers are equipped to help them find and navigate these routes in time.

## 6. Discussion

Three core insights anchor this discussion. First, mid-career stagnation is not simply an outcome—it is a time-sensitive condition that becomes harder to reverse the longer it persists. Second, its foundations are often laid in early career, meaning that early detection and prevention matter as much as remediation. Third, it does not have to be a permanent sentence; targeted strategies involving skill development, credentialing, and occupational pivots can help workers facing, or already in the grip of, career stall overcome the economic obstacles in their path. Together, these findings shift the focus from treating stall as an isolated event to understanding it as a compounding risk that emerges early, can be detected before it hardens, and may be preventable through timely intervention.

### Early Warning: Duration Changes the Odds

Stall becomes progressively harder to reverse the longer it persists. A loss of career momentum may be reversible early on. Skills may still be current. Networks may still be intact. External signaling may not yet have hardened. But as years pass, compounding mechanisms intensify: skills lose currency and fall behind the market's evolving expectations, networks narrow to lateral peers rather than upward sponsors, static titles begin to send negative signals, and confidence in pursuing riskier upward transitions declines. Duration itself transforms from symptom to structural barrier.

Stall also becomes tolerated. Wage flatlining is rationalized. Lateral moves without scope expansion feel acceptable. Investment in new credentials or skill development is delayed. What begins as a temporary slowdown gradually becomes normalized. By the time stagnation resembles long-term entrenchment, recovery pathways narrow considerably. Our analysis shows that workers who acquire high-quality credentials or differentiated skills earlier in their plateau materially reduce stall risk. This finding underscores a core principle: stall is detectable through early wage trends, promotion timing, and skill portfolio narrowing, and it is far more responsive to timely intervention than delayed correction. Waiting too long transforms a temporary dip into a deeply embedded constraint.

### Early-Career Trajectories: Prevention Outweighs Remediation

Mid-career stall often has roots extending back to early career. As discussed earlier, workers already showing signs of lagging promotion velocity and wage growth at year ten—five years before formal stall classification—face compounding disadvantages. Career momentum compounds; so does stagnation risk. Avoiding stall does not begin at year fifteen; it begins in the first decade of work.

Early-career professionals who build cross-cutting analytical, leadership, and technical skills instead of remaining confined to narrow task roles appear better positioned to avoid later plateau. Recognition systems that flag wage flatlining, repeated lateral moves without scope expansion, or stalled skill development within the first decade could create plausible intervention opportunities before entrenchment. However, whether such early detection systems actually alter trajectories—and by how much—requires evidence from pilot

programs or randomized interventions, which is beyond the scope of this analysis. The implication is not that all mobility challenges originate in the early years of an individual's career. Rather, it is that prevention is more powerful than remediation: by the time stagnation is visible in mid-career data, compounding mechanisms are already deeply at work.

## **A Final Note: Stall is a Structural Issue, Not an Individual Failure**

Importantly, framing stall as duration-sensitive and preventable does not imply individual fault. As the geographic, industry, occupational, and demographic analyses in this report make clear, stall is a structural labor market phenomenon. It cuts across industries long associated with upward mobility. It affects professionals at multiple education levels. Even advanced degree holders experience plateau at substantial rates. Credential acquisition reduces risk but does not eliminate it; alignment with demand matters, but so does access to opportunity.

The infrastructure of upward mobility—internal promotion ladders, job-to-job transitions, scope-expanding roles—has weakened in ways that constrain these outcomes. In that context, early warning systems and early-career skill alignment are not individual self-help strategies; they are systemic responses to a systemic constraint. Stall compounds over time. But when detected early and trajectories are redirected before entrenchment, recovery is possible and momentum can be rebuilt.

# 7. Appendix

## Data Sources and Dataset Construction

Our analysis draws upon the Burning Glass Institute’s database of the career histories of 65 million US workers, representing the experience of approximately 65% of the college-educated US workforce. Estimated wages are built from large-scale private salary survey sources and matched to individuals’ job histories using information on job titles, occupational classifications, employer, state, and year. Salaries are adjusted using the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Consumer Price Index (CPI) to produce real wages relative to 2024 wage levels. The use of experience-level wages involves inherent uncertainty; however, it offers the most appropriate estimation of career advancement, especially as the markers of professional ‘stall’ vary significantly across different career paths.

Several profile-level filters are applied to ensure data integrity. All analyzed experiences for example are U.S.-based. To eliminate noisy or duplicate-heavy profiles, individual record files needed to possess a minimum of 30 professional connections and no more than 20 experience records. Internships, student positions, and volunteer roles are excluded to avoid pre-professional noise and focus strictly on career-oriented milestones. To filter for substantive, full-time roles, each experience needed to have a minimum observed duration of 90 days. Finally, we apply occupation classification confidence requirements; since occupation is a core variable in our analysis, we only include roles where titles and metadata allow for high-certainty classification. Collectively, these criteria refine the sample into credible, sustained career paths with clear histories and sufficient tenure.

The core of this analysis focuses on mid-career professionals, defined as individuals reaching a 10-year experience threshold from the onset of their first recorded role. This ‘target date’ is established following the application of quality filters to the longitudinal experience dataset. We isolate the specific job spell active at this 10-year mark—defined as the role where the tenure period encompasses the target date. All subsequent stall metrics are then calculated relative to this benchmark job, as detailed in the section below.

Following the identification of the 10-year benchmark role, the data sample is restricted to ‘office-type’ occupations to ensure a cohesive analysis of knowledge-based work. Using BGI’s career category coding engine, the dataset is narrowed to five primary domains: (1) Sales and Customer Service, (2) IT Support, (3) Information Technology and Math, (4) Clerical and Administrative Services, and (5) Business and Management (detailed in the table below). This stratification ensures the estimation sample aligns with occupations where career progression is traditionally defined by economic mobility. By excluding skilled manual labor, healthcare, and education—sectors where stability and high compensation often decouple from traditional upward mobility metrics—we mitigate the risk of misclassifying stable, high-value roles as ‘stalled.’

| Career Category                      | Career Subcategory                                      |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Sales and Customer Service           | Financial Sales Representatives                         |
|                                      | Sales Representatives                                   |
|                                      | Sales Managers                                          |
|                                      | Technical Sales                                         |
|                                      | Retail Sales and Services Managers                      |
|                                      | Sales Support Workers                                   |
|                                      | Retail Sales and Services Workers                       |
| IT Support                           | Network and Systems Engineers                           |
|                                      | IT, Other                                               |
|                                      | Mathematicians, Statisticians, and Data Scientists      |
| Information Technology and Math      | Database Administration and Architecture Engineers      |
|                                      | Network and Systems Engineers                           |
|                                      | Software Development and Programming                    |
|                                      | Web and Interface Designers and Developers              |
|                                      | Mathematicians, Statisticians, and Data Scientists      |
| Clerical and Administrative Services | Communications Equipment Operators                      |
|                                      | Warehousing, Logistics, and Operational Support Workers |
|                                      | Administrative Support Workers                          |
|                                      | Postal and Carrier Service Workers                      |
|                                      | Information and Record Clerks                           |
|                                      | Customer Service Representatives                        |
| Business and Management              | Insurance Claims and Sales Workers                      |
|                                      | Banking, Insurance, and Lending Specialists             |
|                                      | Financial and Accounting Support Workers                |
|                                      | Logistics and Supply Chain Specialists                  |
|                                      | Accountants                                             |
|                                      | Business, Administrative, and Financial Managers        |
|                                      | Human Resources Support Workers                         |
|                                      | Business and Financial Analysts                         |
|                                      | Human Resources Specialists                             |
|                                      | Fundraising and Public Relations Specialists            |
|                                      | Marketing Specialists                                   |

Consequently, this curated dataset provides a robust and internally consistent basis for evaluating mid-career trajectories within the corporate and technical sectors most prevalent in our profile data. These filtering criteria conclude the primary stage of dataset construction, resulting in a finalized sample optimized for the longitudinal analysis of career stagnation.

## Definition of Career Stall

A professional is classified as stalled only if both promotion stall and wage stall conditions are met. This dual-requirement approach ensures that the analysis isolates structural career plateauing rather than temporary slowdowns or purely cosmetic title changes.

### Promotion Stall

Promotion stall is defined as the absence of an internal or external promotion within the designated observation window. Operationally, this is implemented as more than five consecutive years since the most recent promotion (or no promotion observed). Consequently, the “five-year window” described in the narrative is strictly enforced as a period of at least five years without a recorded upward move.

### Wage Stall

Wage stall is determined using threshold-based exclusions: an individual is classified as not wage-stalled if they achieve an internal wage growth of at least 5%, or if their external (start-to-start) wage growth is at least 5%. To maintain temporal alignment with the promotion window, external moves occurring after a gap of more than five years do not, by themselves, rescue an individual from a wage stall classification. The 5% rule for external moves is applied only when the transition occurs within the five-year window.

### Composite Stall Indicator

The combined stall indicator is a binary variable such that if, and only if, both the promotion and wage stall definitions hold. The 5% wage cutoff was selected following empirical testing of alternative thresholds to establish a conservative benchmark for insufficient growth.

During the model’s development, we analyzed the correlation between wage and promotion stall across varying cutoffs. Our goal was to identify a threshold that suggests a moderate correlation between the two; this acknowledges that while they represent two perspectives of the same phenomenon, they do not always occur simultaneously. Although we experimented with separate models for each metric, the composite model provides a more intuitive and comprehensive account of career stagnation. This combined approach avoids misclassifying individuals with “flat” titles but strong wage growth, or those with title changes lacking real pay progression, thereby isolating true structural plateauing.

## Regression Methodology (Stall Likelihood Calculation)

To identify the factors most closely associated with the “stall” outcome, we employ a LASSO (Least Absolute Shrinkage and Selection Operator) logistic regression. We chose this regularization framework to address the high dimensionality of our predictor set, which includes numerous categorical dummies and interaction terms. While standard regression models can become “overfit”, which essentially means that the model memorizes noise in the data, LASSO acts as a filter by penalizing the inclusion of unnecessary variables via shrinking their coefficients toward zero, retaining only the most statistically meaningful predictors.

The model functions by minimizing an objective function that balances accuracy against complexity:

$$\min_{\beta} \{ \text{Deviance}(\beta) + \lambda \sum_{j=1}^p |\beta_j| \}$$

In this equation, **Deviance** represents the “misfit” of the model (how much the predicted probabilities differ from the actual data), while the second term is the **Penalty**. The parameter  $\lambda$  (lambda) controls the strength of this penalty. As  $\lambda$  increases, the model becomes more restrictive, forcing less influential variables to zero. This ensures the final results are parsimonious, meaning they provide the maximum amount of insight with the fewest necessary variables.

We implemented the model using a binomial family (meaning stall takes on a binary value) and an  $\alpha$  of 1, which defines the LASSO penalty. To find the optimal balance, we used 10-fold cross-validation. This process involves splitting the data into ten subsets, iteratively training the model on nine and testing it on the tenth. We selected the  $\lambda$  value that minimized the overall deviance (known as  $\lambda_{min}$ ), ensuring our model has the highest possible predictive power on “new” or unseen data.

The explanatory variables include a comprehensive range of characteristics coded as dummy variables. These include occupation categories, gender, race/ethnicity, and education levels (Sub-BA, BA, and Graduate), and non-degree credential attainment. We also accounted for field-specific nuances by including the field of study to the 2-digit Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) level, degree–occupation alignment, and their interactions. To capture intersectional effects, we included sex-by-race and sex-by-occupation interactions, alongside credential attainment indicators. To ensure a stable and reliable model, we excluded sparse categories—such as rare credential-by-field combinations—that lacked sufficient data for estimation. While we explored the inclusion of Industry (using 2-digit North American Industry Classification codes) in early versions, it was excluded from the final specification to focus the analysis on individual-level human capital and demographic drivers, as industry is highly correlated with occupation and adds little explanatory power to the model. For non-degree credentials, we utilize existing BGI research from the Credential Value Index (CVI) to further flag “quality” non-degree credentials—credentials associated with a high overall score measuring worker outcomes across five dimensions: employment, opportunity, access, demand, and learning. The CVI compares credential holders to similar workers who did not earn a credential,

which highlights worker gains from attaining a credential and allows for a more accurate comparison of credentials that serve different populations.

The final output of the LASSO logistic regression provides a refined set of coefficients for the predictors that persists through the selection process. Technically, the model calculates these relationships on a log-odds scale. In this framework, the linear combination of our predictors ( $X\beta$ ) represents the logarithm of the odds of a stall occurring:

$$\log(\text{odds}) = \log\left(\frac{P(\text{stall})}{1 - P(\text{stall})}\right) = X\beta$$

Because log-odds can be difficult to interpret intuitively, we convert these values into Odds Ratios by exponentiating the coefficients ( $e^\beta$ ). This transformation allows us to discuss the results in terms of multiplicative effects (ex., an Odds Ratio of 1.2 indicates that the odds of a stall increase by 20% for that specific group compared to the reference group). We report these odds ratios so that the marginal impact of each characteristic—whether it is a specific degree-occupation alignment, a sex-by-race interaction, or a professional credential—can be understood as a direct increase or decrease in the relative likelihood of a career stall. By focusing exclusively on the variables selected by the LASSO process, we ensure that the estimates in this report are driven by the most robust patterns in the data rather than noise. These coefficients can further be used to generate “stall likelihood” profiles, quantifying how different professional and demographic backgrounds change the probability of a career plateau.

## Identifying Upskilling and Reskilling Opportunities for Stalled Workers

While the previous regression models identify who is most likely to experience a career stall based on demographic and educational backgrounds, those models are primarily predictive. To facilitate meaningful career interventions, we must move beyond identifying risk and toward identifying the specific competencies that drive advancement. The following analysis is designed to provide this actionable roadmap using skills and credential data. By isolating the unique skill sets held by workers who successfully avoid or overcome a career plateau, we can provide data-driven guidance for curriculum design, professional development, and individual career coaching.

This analysis utilizes the same stalling dataset constructed according to the rigorous criteria defined in the preceding sections. By using a consistent data foundation, we ensure that the “non-stalled” workers we analyze for skill advantages are the exact functional counterparts to the “stalled” workers identified in our logistic models. This continuity allows us to transition from understanding the drivers of a stall to identifying the solutions—the specific “career accelerator” skills that differentiate upwardly mobile professionals from their stalled peers. To ensure an apples-to-apples comparison, we utilize an exact-matching counterfactual design, by grouping workers into “counterfactual cells” based on three critical baseline factors at the start of their careers: (1) Entry Occupation (6-digit Standard Occupational Classification Codes), (2) Initial

Education (highest degree held at the time of first job experience), (3) Geographic Location (state of first job experience). Within these groups, we compare workers who “stalled” against those who did not. By matching on these starting conditions, we can isolate the impact of skills acquired or utilized during the career rather than differences in initial schooling or regional labor markets.

The core of this analysis lies in identifying which skills are disproportionately held by non-stalled workers. We draw these from a high-confidence set of “Common” and “Specialized” skills, excluding general certifications to focus on specific competencies. We calculate the difference in shares for each skill within a matched group, where a positive difference indicates a skill is more prevalent among successful (non-stalled) workers than among their stalled peers within the same occupation and education bracket. We rank these differences to identify the top skills, or the specific competencies that appear to serve as “career accelerators.” Ultimately, these identified competencies provide a data-driven roadmap for workers currently stalled in their roles, highlighting the specific upskilling opportunities most likely to reignite their professional growth. To make these findings as practical as possible, we apply two key refinements to the data. After defining the list of top skills, we can link them to at high-quality non-degree credential programs identified through the CVI database, ensuring that the “career accelerator” skills we identify are actually teachable through proven educational pathways.

We also recognize that upskilling within a current role is not the only path out of a career stall. For many, professional growth requires a transition to a new occupation altogether. To identify these pathways, we combine descriptive statistics from our job profiles dataset with historical transition data and occupational similarity scores derived from OpenAI embedding models. This allows us to map “next-step” occupations that are not only high-growth but also share a high degree of functional overlap in terms of similar skills and tasks. By targeting roles with a lower inherent likelihood of career stall and a history of wage increases, we can identify transitions that offer the highest return on a worker’s existing experience.

To add a layer of real-world urgency, we integrate these findings with the Labor Shortage Index (LSI). The LSI ranks occupations based on multi-dimensional risk factors, including demographic shifts, 10-year employment projections, and estimated AI exposure. This synthesis identifies “double-win” opportunities: career pivots where the new occupation is structurally resistant to stalling and is currently facing a high demand for talent. By aligning an individual’s career pivot with these broader market shortages, we can guide workers toward the most efficient and rewarding paths to reignite their professional progress.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940,” *Science* 356, no. 6336 (2017): 398-406, [https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/abs\\_mobility\\_paper.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/abs_mobility_paper.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Cappelli and J. R. Keller, “Talent Management: Conceptual Approaches and Practical Challenges,” *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 1 (2014): 305–331, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091314>

<sup>3</sup> Raven Molloy & Christopher L. Smith & Abigail Wozniak, 2013. “Declining Migration within the US: The Role of the Labor Market,” Working Papers 13-53, Center for Economic Studies, U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Deming and Kadeem Noray, “Earnings Dynamics, Changing Job Skills, and STEM Careers,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 135, no. 4 (2020): 1965–2005, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa021>

<sup>5</sup> While no observational dataset can perfectly differentiate between voluntary from involuntary career plateaus, several features of our study enable us to distinguish involuntary stall. The dual requirement is key: a worker who voluntarily opts out of advancement—prioritizing work-life balance, caregiving, or satisfaction in their current role—would typically still accumulate baseline wage growth through cost-of-living adjustments, tenure-based raises, or merit increases. The fact that our stalled group experiences less than 5% real wage growth over five years, a threshold that falls below cumulative inflation in most periods, suggests these workers are losing purchasing power—a pattern difficult to reconcile with voluntary choice. A single dimension would be insufficient: the promotion criterion alone might capture contentment and the wage criterion alone might capture a bad stretch for the employer or the individual. The combination of the two measures, however, is more consistent with a worker who is stuck than one who has opted out of actively pursuing advancement. At the same time, we cannot observe workers’ underlying preferences or intentions and therefore the estimates here are offered probabilistically.

<sup>6</sup> LASSO (Least Absolute Shrinkage and Selection Operator) is a statistical method that helps identify the most important predictors in a model while limiting overfitting by shrinking less-informative variables toward zero. See Appendix for additional details on model specification and estimation.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: <https://www.credentialvalueindex.org>

<sup>8</sup> We define “high-quality” non-degree credentials as those that receive a high overall score in our Credential Value Index (CVI), reflecting strong results for workers in key areas such as getting hired, career advancement, equal opportunity, market relevance, and effectiveness. For more information, see the Appendix.

## **About the Burning Glass Institute**

Situated at the intersection of learning and work, the Burning Glass Institute advances data-driven research and practice on the future of work and of workers. We work with educators, employers, and policymakers to develop solutions that build mobility, opportunity, and equity through skills.

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