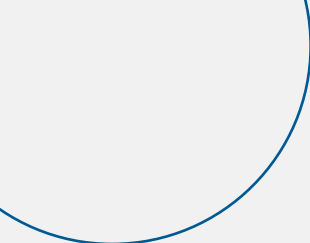


Finances on Fire

How Employees Are Navigating
Financial Decisions in the Age of AI





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INTRODUCTION

Financial Decisions Have Never Felt More Consequential

Today's employees are making some of the most important financial decisions of their lives amid rising costs, economic uncertainty, and an increasingly complex benefits landscape.

The pressure is mounting.

More than half (52%) of employees say their financial stress is higher today than it was just 12 months ago. Rising living costs (82%), growing debt (48%), recession concerns (41%), and job insecurity (24%) are creating an environment where every financial decision feels loaded with risk.

Yet workers aren't simply struggling because money is tight. They're struggling because financial decisions have become increasingly interconnected. One choice impacts another. Healthcare affects retirement. Debt affects savings. Benefits affect take-home pay.

Unfortunately, many employees don't have the tools they need to understand how these pieces impact their overall financial health.

SAVVI Financial surveyed over 600 benefits-eligible full-time employees across the United States to understand how workers are navigating financial decisions in an era increasingly shaped by technology, AI, and economic uncertainty.

The findings reveal a troubling reality: employees are making high-stakes financial decisions without a complete picture of the consequences – and they're paying the price.



46% of employees made a financial decision in the past year that they later regretted.

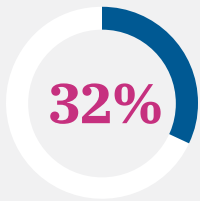
Of those, 42% said they had no way to evaluate how that decision would affect their broader financial picture before making it.

The Financial Stress Spiral

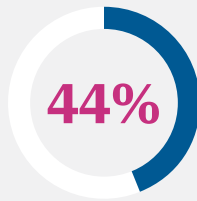
Financial stress is becoming more pervasive and difficult to escape.

Only 5% of employees describe themselves as financially secure. Meanwhile, more than one-third report experiencing high or extremely high levels of financial stress.

Certain groups are feeling the burden even more acutely:



Women were 32% more likely than men to report high financial stress



Singles were 44% more likely than married respondents to report high financial stress



Parents were 23% more likely than employees without children to say they've experienced a financial disruption in the past 12 months

The effects of financial stress extend beyond day-to-day budgeting. Employees under financial pressure are more likely to delay important decisions, tap into long-term savings, and make choices they later regret – all of which can have lasting consequences for their financial wellbeing.

What's Fueling the Fire?

Employees experiencing higher stress point to:

- 1 **Rising cost of living and inflation (82%)**
- 2 **Growing debt (48%)**
- 3 **Economic and recession concerns (41%)**
- 4 **Supporting family members financially (25%)**
- 5 **Job insecurity (24%)**
- 6 **Retirement uncertainty (17%)**

As financial pressure mounts, workers are finding themselves increasingly vulnerable to setbacks.



One Unexpected Expense Away

Nearly three-quarters (72%) of employees say a major unexpected expense would seriously strain their finances.

Worse, 37% have already experienced a financial event in the past year that did exactly that.

The Emergency Fund Gap



One in three (32%) does not have an emergency fund capable of covering more than three months of essential expenses.



Women were 176% more likely than men to report having no emergency savings at all.

Who's Most Vulnerable?

Groups more likely than average to lack an emergency fund:



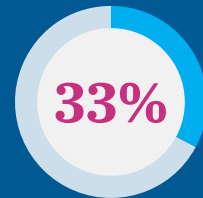
Employees
with student
loan debt



Retail &
e-commerce
workers



Hispanic
employees



Employees
in the Northeast

Without a financial safety net, many workers are forced into difficult decisions that can create long-term consequences.

The Retirement Squeeze

Retirement is supposed to provide financial security.

Instead, for many employees, retirement accounts have become emergency funds of last resort.

More than one in five workers (**22%**) have taken a hardship withdrawal or early distribution from a retirement account before retirement age.

Among those who did:

- **35%** needed money to cover basic living expenses
- **34%** needed to pay off debt
- **34%** needed to cover a major unexpected expense

The most concerning finding isn't that employees are accessing retirement funds, it's that many don't fully understand the downstream implications.

56% of employees who made a hardship withdrawal did not fully understand the long-term consequences of doing so.



Many also expressed regret:



66%

said they would have explored other options had they understood the full implications of their decision



61%

wish they had received more personalized guidance before making the decision

The problem extends beyond hardship withdrawals.

Sixteen percent have taken loans against retirement accounts, and more than one-third were unaware that leaving their employer could convert outstanding loan balances into taxable withdrawals.

Retirement Confidence Is Dwindling

Employees are increasingly uncertain about their future.



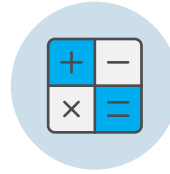
46%

don't know how much they'll need to retire comfortably



46%

don't know whether they're on track to retire when they hope to



52%

say they're less confident about retirement than they were a year ago



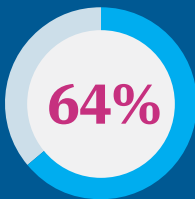
54%

have reconsidered their retirement timeline because of economic uncertainty

As a result, many are preparing to work longer than initially planned.

Delayed Retirement

Three in five employees (61%) now expect to retire later than originally planned.
The top reasons include:



Concern that savings won't be enough



Rising healthcare costs in retirement



Market volatility and investment losses

Some workers have already begun scaling back retirement savings to manage today's expenses:

10% paused contributions completely

18% reduced their contribution rates

Employees are sacrificing future financial security to address present-day financial challenges.

Employees Turn to AI for Better Guidance

When employees face important financial decisions, they’re increasingly looking beyond their employers for guidance – a trend that mirrors broader consumer adoption of AI and digital tools for everyday decision-making.

Among employees who made benefits or retirement-related decisions in the past year:



41%

sought guidance from an AI tool



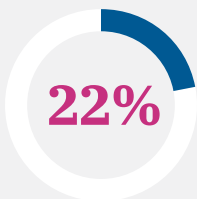
39%

sought guidance from HR or a benefits portal

AI has now emerged as a source of financial guidance, over employer-based resources. But increased adoption doesn’t necessarily translate into better outcomes.

Only **26%** of employees who made benefits or retirement decisions felt “very confident” in their choice at the time they made it.

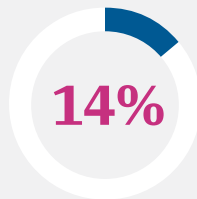
With hindsight, many realized critical information was missing:



later discovered information that would have changed their decision



didn't account for their full financial situation



didn't have access to their employer-specific plan details

The Problem with Partial Information

Employees aren't struggling because they lack access to information. They're struggling because information they rely on is fragmented and disconnected from their personal financial reality.

During their most recent benefits enrollment, employees admitted they didn't fully understand:

32% Monthly premium costs

42% Annual deductibles

47% Out-of-pocket maximums



Most importantly, **64%** didn't understand how those costs would interact during a significant health event.

Without context and financial data, AI can generate recommendations that lead to poor decisions, undermining employees' long-term financial wellbeing.



“Employees don't need AI accelerating more disparate information. They need personalized guidance fueled by cohesive and highly contextualized data.”

The Employer Trust Advantage

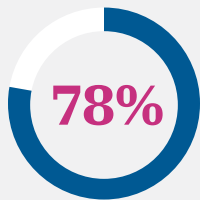
Despite growing AI adoption, employees remain remarkably clear about who they trust most when it comes to guidance about their most important financial decisions.

In fact, **68%** say they trust an employer-sponsored financial guidance platform more than any other source.

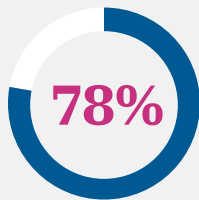
That creates a significant opportunity for employers to pair trusted relationships with smarter, more personalized financial guidance.

Employees Are Ready for Smarter Support

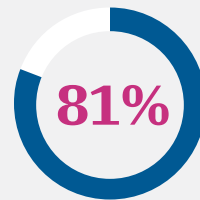
Employees aren't resisting technology, they're asking for technology that delivers guidance tailored to their unique financial lives.



would share their full financial picture to receive personalized guidance



would engage more with financial tools that considered their entire benefits package



want a single view showing how benefits, savings, debt, and financial obligations interact

Employees have an appetite for streamlined, intelligent guidance that connects the dots across their financial lives, explains the tradeoffs, and recommends the best path forward, not more disconnected tools or generic resources.

The Guidance Gap

Employees don't need more information, they need help making better financial decisions. Yet too many employers still rely on educational resources and point solutions that leave employees to connect the dots on their own.

- **73%** want more guidance on how to make benefits work harder for them
- **58%** say employer financial resources feel generic and disconnected from their situation
- **46%** received no guidance during their most recent benefits enrollment

The need is clear, and the trust is already there. What's missing is personalized guidance that turns complex benefits decisions into better financial outcomes.

86% would only share sensitive financial information with a platform they fully trust.

Employees are not rejecting AI or other innovations. They're looking for solutions that combine intelligent technology with the trust and security of an employer-sponsored experience.

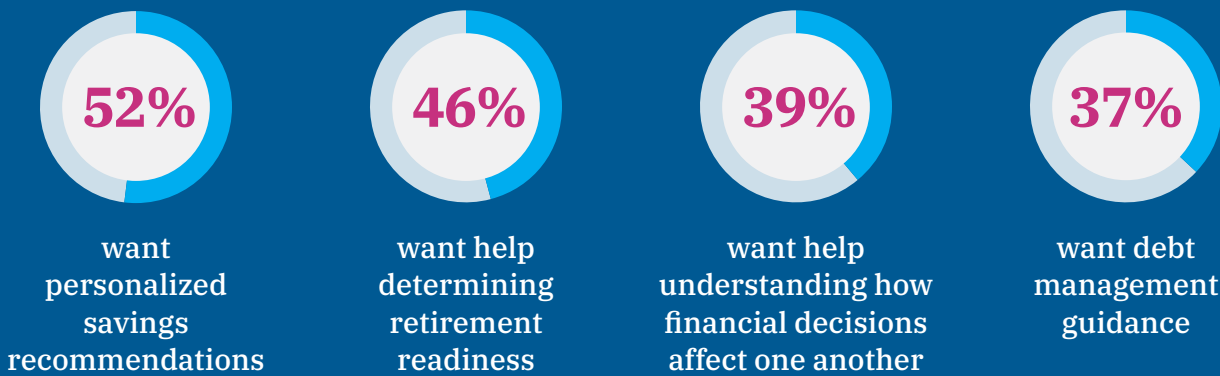


Connecting the Dots: The Future of Financial Guidance

The central theme of this research is simple: Employees don't make financial decisions in isolation, and they no longer expect financial guidance to treat them that way. Healthcare decisions affect retirement. Debt affects benefits choices. Savings impact healthcare affordability.

Employees want guidance that understands the entire picture and uses that context to help them make better decisions.

When asked what they want from financial guidance tools, employees overwhelmingly favored solutions that connect all aspects of their finances:



Most importantly, **86%** say they would feel more confident acting on guidance that not only predicts outcomes but recommends the best course of action for their specific situation.

This signals a major shift in employee expectations.

Workers no longer want static educational resources, calculators, or benefits portals that require them to piece together information on their own. They want intelligent guidance powered by complete, context-rich financial data and AI experiences that understand their unique circumstances, not generic recommendations based on isolated inputs.

Employees don't need another financial tool. They need trusted guidance that brings together their financial information, understands the tradeoffs across benefits, pay, savings, debt, and retirement, and recommends the actions most likely to improve their long-term financial wellbeing.

The future of financial wellness isn't simply more personalized, it's connected, contextual, and intelligent. Organizations that combine trusted employer relationships with AI-powered guidance rooted in a complete financial picture will be best positioned to help employees make smarter decisions with confidence.

Employee Financial Fortitude Requires Decision Intelligence

The findings from *Finances on Fire* reveal three major challenges facing today's workforce:

- 1 Rising financial stress and shrinking financial safety nets
- 2 Retirement uncertainty and costly financial tradeoffs
- 3 Fragmented guidance that fails to connect the full financial picture

Employees aren't avoiding financial decisions. They're making high-stakes decisions every day often under financial pressure, with incomplete information, and increasingly with the help of AI.

The challenge isn't a lack of information. It's a lack of trusted, context-rich guidance that helps employees understand the tradeoffs and long-term consequences of the decisions they're making.

Employers are uniquely positioned to close this gap.

They already have the trust.

They already have the benefits data.

They also have something no general-purpose AI tool can provide: the context employees need to make decisions based on their unique financial situation, employer-sponsored benefits, and long-term goals.

As employees increasingly turn to AI for financial guidance, the stakes become even higher. Without access to employer-specific information or a complete view of an individual's financial picture, AI can generate recommendations that sound credible but ultimately lead to costly mistakes – from choosing the wrong health plan to delaying retirement savings or making unnecessary hardship withdrawals.

Rather than leaving employees to navigate disconnected tools and generic AI assistants, organizations can provide trusted, AI-powered decision intelligence grounded in employer-specific data and an employee's complete financial picture.

The organizations that lead the next era of financial wellness won't simply offer benefits, they'll help employees make better decisions. By combining trust, context-rich data, and AI-powered guidance, employers can improve financial confidence, strengthen employee wellbeing, and drive better outcomes for both their people and their business.



About SAVVI

SAVVI Financial delivers workplace financial decision guidance powered by its Financial Intelligence Platform, helping employees navigate their most important financial choices. By delivering expert-level personalized guidance, SAVVI helps employees optimize their full financial journey, from early benefit decisions to creating a reliable paycheck in retirement, driving better outcomes for both employees and employers. Integrated with HR stacks, our solutions reduce admin work, lower costs, and boost employee experience.

Founded by experts in quantitative finance and data science, SAVVI was built with the understanding that the path to financial strength starts, and grows, through the workplace. Learn more at www.savvifi.com, [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [X](#).

SAVVI provides survey-less, personalized financial guidance and healthcare navigation tools that simplify benefits decisions for employees. By eliminating friction and delivering real-time, data-driven recommendations, SAVVI helps organizations improve employee financial fortitude while driving meaningful business results.

Survey Methodology and Demographics

The Finances on Fire survey was conducted from May 21–27, 2026. SAVVI surveyed over 600 full-time U.S. employees ages 25–60 who are benefits-eligible through their employer. The survey was conducted at a 95% confidence level with a $\pm 4\%$ margin of error.