

2026

Employee

Experience Trends



# Introduction

It's 2026: the second half of the fastest-paced and most technologically disruptive decade in human history. 72% of employees report experiencing significant change. As we look back to just a few short years ago, we're bewildered at how different things are today. And as we look ahead, our minds whirl with thoughts of what's to come.

How did we get here? And where in the world are we going? For HR, the most pressing question is how to prepare our workforces for an uncertain future. From new hires to long-tenured employees, this year there are a few new groups to observe carefully.

We notice long-tenured workers who've invested countless hours of their lives in their companies, who possess priceless institutional knowledge and deep relationships that help others unlock doors and remove

barriers. We find them peering outside the organization, paralyzed by the speed at which the world around them is moving. They feel stagnant. And they're deeply concerned about their future.

We're greeted by eager new hires, many of whom are just entering the workforce. They're engaged, full of big ideas, and fluent in tools unimaginable to past generations. And yet, their new joiner experiences fall consistently flat. A mere 36% report that their experience meets expectations. When they suspect that they may be viewed as dispensable, they respond in kind.

And finally, we see those employees who've spent years battling change fatigue. Today, however, they appear hardened. They're adapting to a tough job market and the incredible speed at which technology

is moving. They're evolving, and generally better for it. Yes, they've experienced a lot of change—not all pleasant, to be sure—but despite our expectations, they're more engaged because of it. They're leaning into new ways of working and are leveraging AI to relieve pressure and unlock new capabilities.

These different cohorts challenge the typical archetypes in our minds, but they share the need that all people in mission-driven groups require: to feel connected to the organization, both now and in the future. Those securely tethered to the organization—who understand its vision and direction, who understand their unique contributions, and who feel supported by their leaders—will show resiliency in the face of change to come.

- **Benjamin Granger, PhD**

# Meet the experts

Principal Researcher



**Marcus Wolf**

MA, Head of EX Advisory Services, Qualtrics

Contributors



**Benjamin Granger**

PhD, Chief Workplace Psychologist, Qualtrics XM Institute



**Matthew Evans**

MBA, Head of EX Product Science, Qualtrics



**Talia Quaadgras**

Senior Research Program Manager, Qualtrics XM Institute



**Jake Outram**

MS, Senior EX / XM Scientist, Qualtrics



**Yesenia Cancel**

MS, XM Scientist, Qualtrics



**Georgie McIntyre**

MS, EX Advisor / Org Psychologist Qualtrics



**Ethan Laser**

EX Sr. Product Marketing Manager, Qualtrics



**Assaf Keren**

Chief Security Officer, Qualtrics



**Vanessa Kowolik**

PhD, Sr. XM Scientist, Qualtrics

# Contents

- 5 **The state of employee experience**
- 8 **Trend 1 //** Disruptive tech excites employees. Disruptive org changes exhaust them.
- 14 **Trend 2 //** Employees are solving productivity pressure using AI—without you
- 19 **Trend 3 //** The hidden costs to cutting costs: disengaged employees, unsatisfied customers
- 24 **When done right, employee listening drives dramatic gains**
- 29 **Methodology**

# The state of employee experience

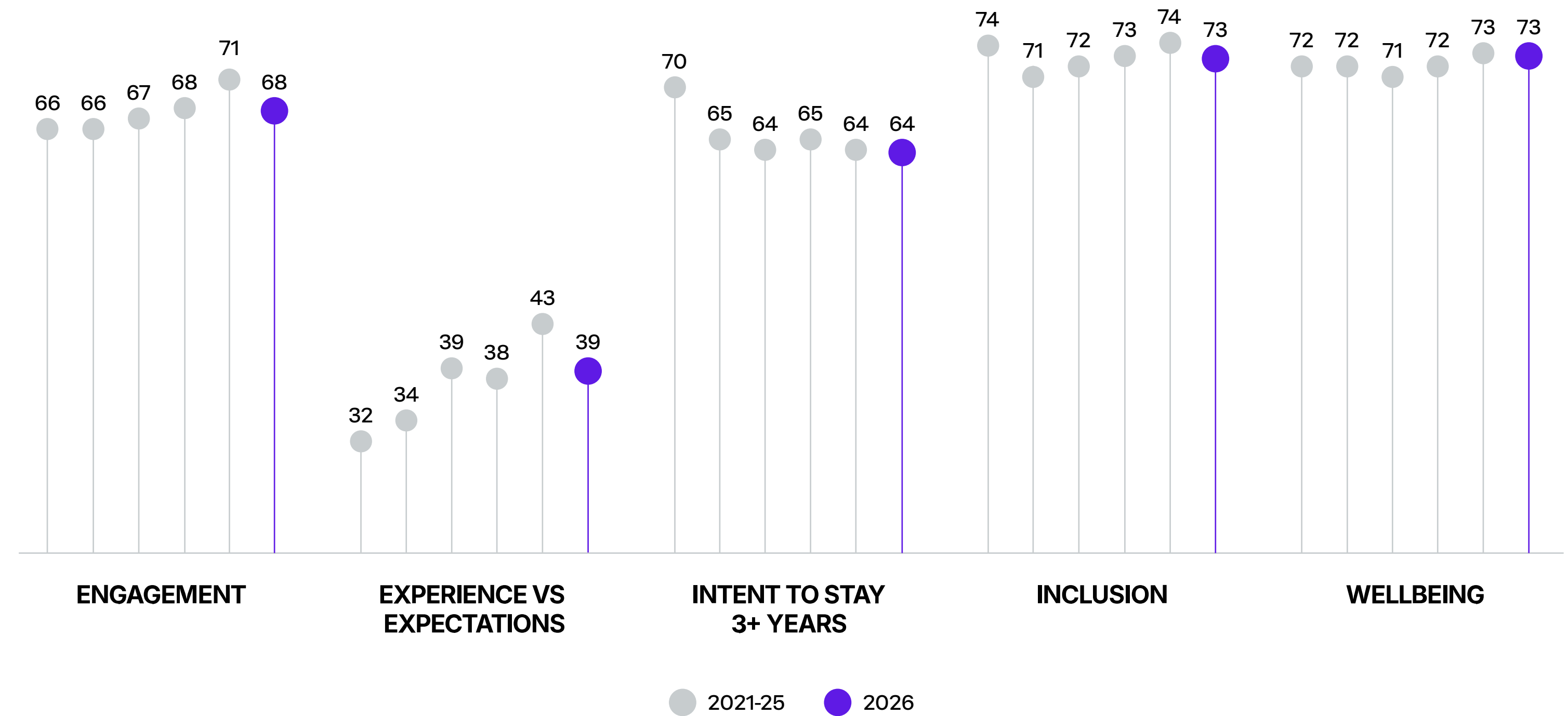
The 2026 EX Trends Report covers insights from employees across 24 countries, spanning 5 continents, and all major industries. Employees revealed their attitudes about work, what matters most to them, and the critical enablers (and detractors) of change moving into 2026.



This year we observed declines in engagement, inclusion, well-being, and experience vs expectations, returning to historical baselines following increases in 2025.

But the more important story lies beneath the surface of these top-line metrics—in the work experiences that drive employee attitudes and behaviors. The most important drivers are aspects that have always been important to people working together in groups, particularly in times of change: alignment with deep-rooted values, opportunities for growth, being treated with respect, and faith that a bright future lies ahead.

### Employee attitudes decline



Simply put, employees want to feel connected with their organization and its mission, both now and in the future.

At the same time, it's essential that we understand how employees' needs and expectations are changing and how organizations can best respond.

The biggest challenge for HR leaders and EX professionals in 2026 will be balancing two objectives: to meet the ever-evolving needs of the business while also anchoring to the fundamental truths about what motivates and engages people.

#### The most consistent drivers across KPIs



Trend 1

# Disruptive tech energizes employees. Disruptive org changes exhaust them.

**EMPLOYEES EMBRACE NEW TOOLS AND PROCESSES. THEY RESIST RESHUFFLES, CUTS, AND LEADERSHIP CHURN.**

Although change fatigue among employees has dominated headlines in recent years, employees do not view change itself as the enemy.



**72%**  
of employees  
have  
experienced  
change

Employees  
embrace new  
tools  
& processes

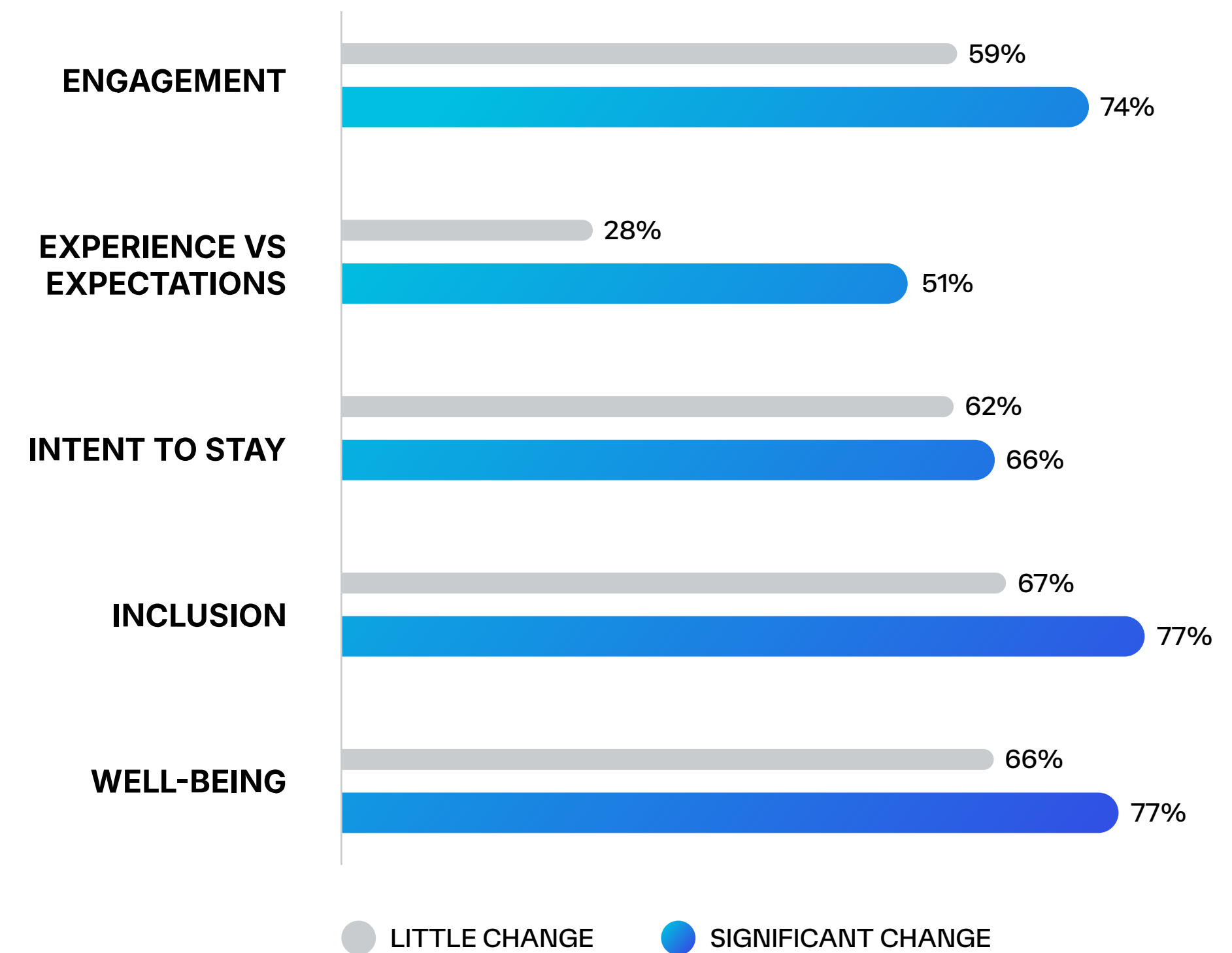


In 2026, a large majority of the global workforce are experiencing significant organizational change along with increased productivity pressure—pressure that undoubtedly stems from the growing pressures faced by their employers.

But change and pressure aren't inherently problematic. Employees who experienced significant change in the past year are actually more engaged and feel more productive than those who experienced little to no change. Likewise, busier employees who experienced more pressure report higher engagement and productivity compared to their peers.

When it comes to pressure and change, there's a Goldilocks zone: Too little can be stressful, too much can be paralyzing—but a little bit of both can be just right.

Employees experiencing more change report better job attitudes



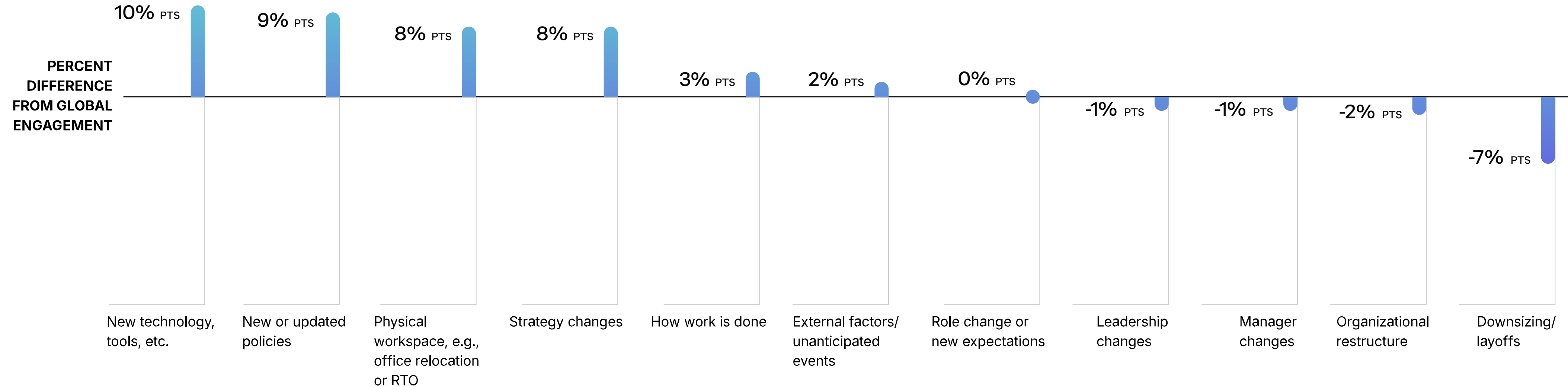
## THE SOURCE OF CHANGE MATTERS

Although employees generally responded well to change, not all organizational changes are viewed positively. Those that help organizations modernize, such as changes in technologies like AI, in workflows and processes, and in strategic direction, drive higher engagement and commitment.

On the other hand, layoffs, leadership churn, and reorganizations are viewed as disruptive. Employees who experience these changes are far more likely to be disengaged, affecting their performance and productivity.

The future will undoubtedly bring about more and faster change, and employees who've experienced the most change expect more of the same in the future. Those who feel their organizations are stagnant may be the most ill-prepared for what's to come. The key, as always, will be supporting employees through disruptive periods.

### Different changes, different employee sentiment

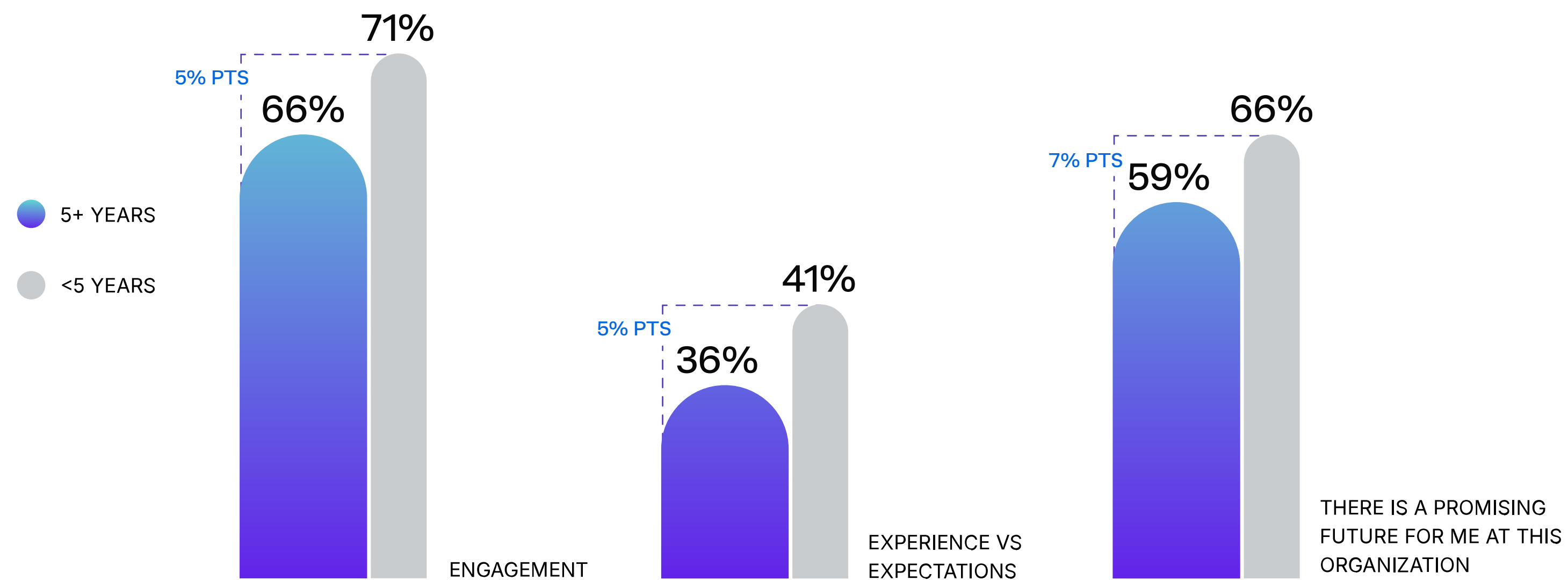


## SUPPORT YOUR CULTURE KEEPERS

Amid rapid change, our findings show that there's one group of employees who may have deeper concerns than others.

Long-tenured employees (5+ years of tenure) who often possess critical institutional knowledge and interpersonal connections are more worried about their futures than those who've moved jobs recently. If organizations are to get the most value from these employees, they must recognize that this cohort is in desperate need of support and reassurance.


Long-tenured employees are uncertain about their future



### **STREAMLINE WITH CAUTION—AND CARE**

Layoffs, reorganizations, and leadership changes—changes that employees respond negatively to—are a fact of organizational life. HR professionals and managers at every level are often tasked with helping employees prepare and respond. But it will become increasingly challenging for organizations to implement these changes while also reaping productivity gains from employees.

And when disruptive organizational changes must be made, HR and EX teams must prepare for the increased uncertainty and anxiety they fuel. Effective communication, reassurance, and resources that help employees adjust can alleviate anxiety and maintain engagement during transitions. And above all, treating people with respect, opening up lines for honest dialogue, and providing grounded optimism about the future of the organization can go a long way to connecting employees to the organization during times of change.



Feeling supported  
to adapt to change  
is the single biggest  
driver of employee  
expectations

### Analysis

I'm not surprised to see that employees who are stagnant—that is, working in an environment with little to no change—are languishing. But what's that mean for people leaders? The bigger risk to your team isn't the discomfort of evolution, but the quiet erosion of growth and purpose that occurs when people are left to stand still.

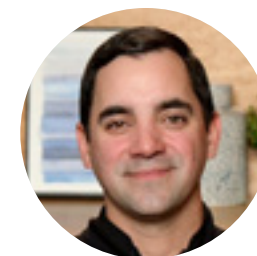


**Matt Evans**

MBA, Head of EX Product Science, Qualtrics

### Analysis

Long-tenured employees bring a wealth of institutional knowledge and value to their organizations and yet, they also feel more stagnant and concerned. This is a cohort in dire need of support and reassurance. Leaders: ask more questions of your long-tenured, committed employees. Ask them about their concerns and what you can do to support them. And don't just listen to them; show them, through your actions, that you're listening!



**Benjamin Granger**

PhD, Chief Workplace Psychologist, Qualtrics XM Institute

### Advice

People are incredibly elastic to change—we adapt with new tools, social connections, and goals.

Effective change requires a clear signal about the amount of change being felt and processed when we begin to add more. Changes that are difficult can be truly rewarding on the other side. There's a risk that we violate our values as we attempt to make changes and sacrifice trust—by maintaining our values through change we see real transformation.



**Marcus Wolf**

MA, Head of EX Advisory Services, Qualtrics

Trend 2

# Employees are solving productivity pressure using AI—without you

**EMPLOYEES ARE LEANING INTO AI TO WORK BETTER AND FASTER. MOST ARE USING THEIR OWN TOOLS—CREATING RISKS YOU MIGHT NOT SEE UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE.**

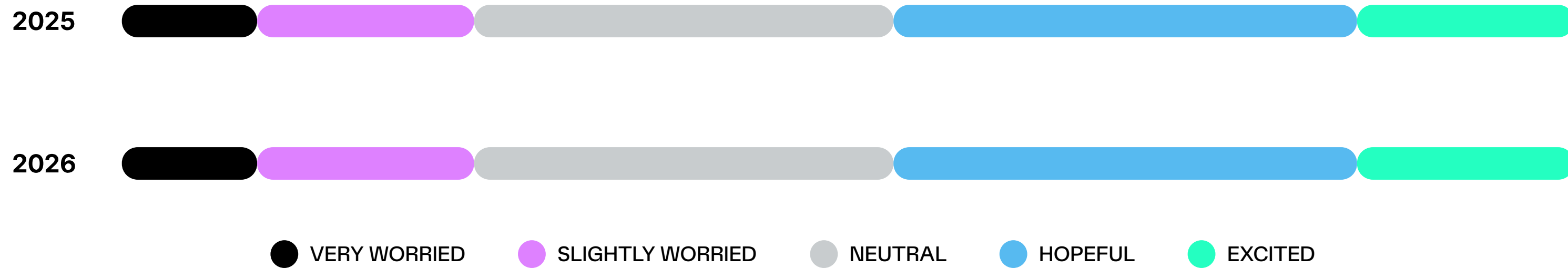
In 2026, 52% of employees report using AI at work with high frequency (daily or weekly). This is a 7-point increase from 2025.



**37%**  
of employees under high pressure source their own AI

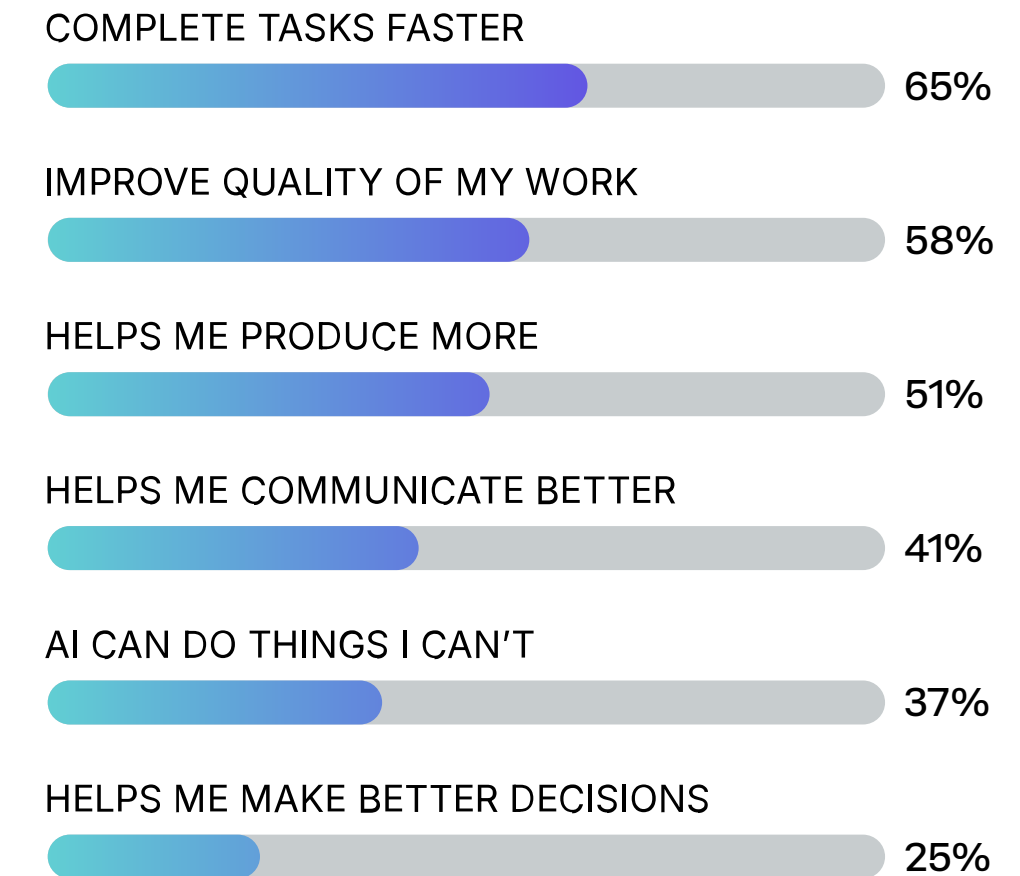
Shadow AI usage is on the rise

Employee sentiment toward AI stagnates



In past years, employee comfort with AI increased steadily as concerns diminished. But in 2026, employee sentiment about AI has leveled off—with very little change year-over-year.

Positive impact of AI on work



When asked about the positive effects of AI on their work, employees cite several benefits. Over half of the workforce says that AI helps them complete their work faster, improves work quality, and helps them produce more. And impressively, over a third of the workforce acknowledges that AI helps them do things that they couldn't before, unlocking new capabilities for themselves and their organizations.

### HIGH PRESSURE DRIVES SHADOW AI ADOPTION

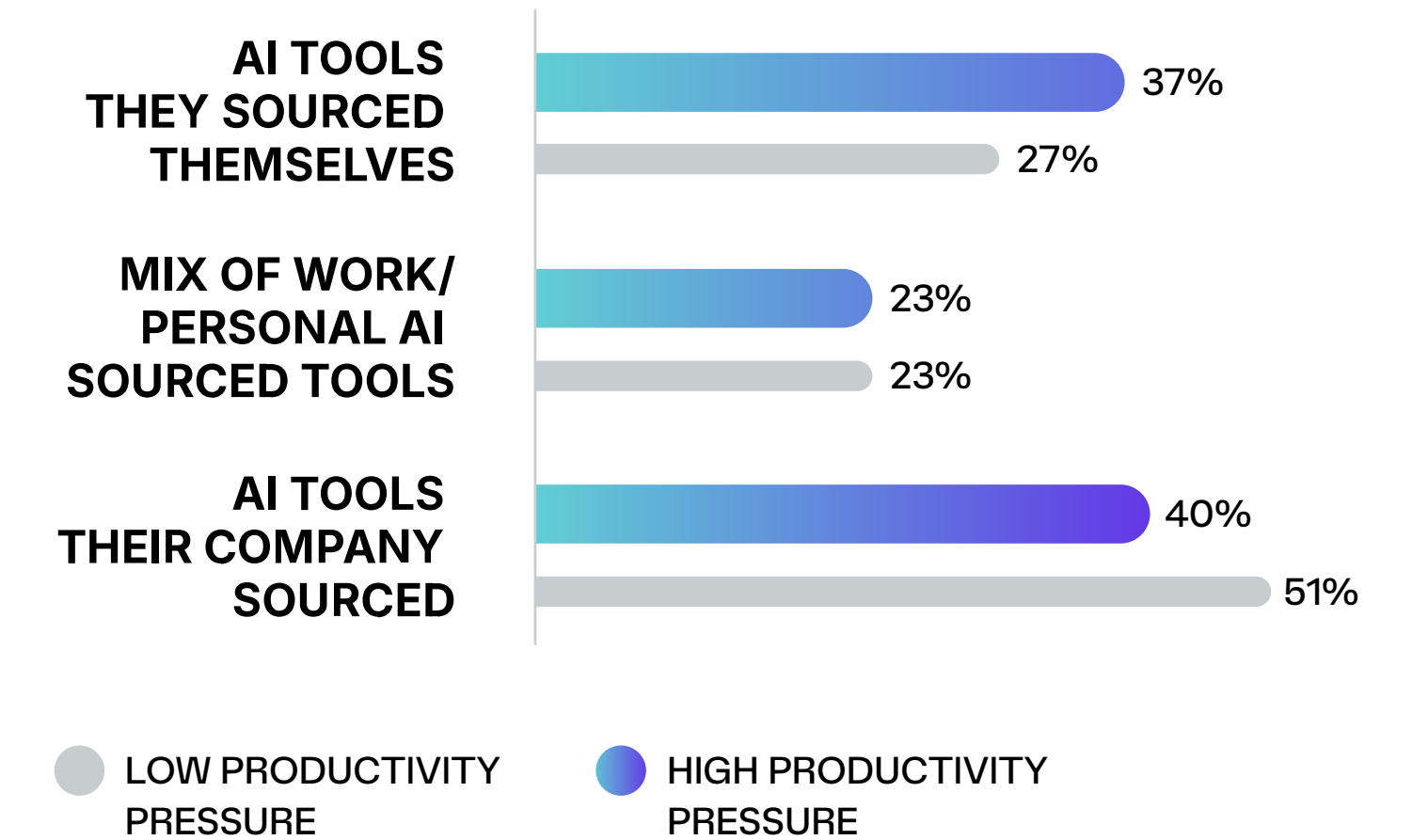
Employees view innovations like AI as enablers of organizational change. This has both promising and concerning implications. On the one hand, employees who've experienced more change report better attitudes about how AI supports their work. They also rate their companies' AI training, enablement, and ethical guidelines more positively.

On the other hand, compared to prior years, a larger percentage of the global workforce admits to sourcing their own AI tools to augment their work. This was especially true among employees who experienced increased productivity pressure over the last year.

This creates a hidden organizational cost beyond security risk. When employees solve productivity problems with shadow tools, organizations lose the opportunity to:

- + Learn which capabilities employees actually need (the tools they're choosing reveal gaps)
- + Build institutional knowledge around AI usage and best practices
- + Create governed pathways that give employees flexibility while maintaining organizational security and control

Employees under pressure source AI tools themselves more



Clearly, AI is unlocking new capabilities to help employees get their work done. It's essential that HR leaders regularly measure AI usage and sentiment to ensure that the tools they're providing meet the expectations of both employees and leaders.

This is especially important during times of major disruptions and when employees feel increased pressure to produce. These periods are likely to spur riskier behaviors among employees when it comes to AI.

Not everyone is enthused about AI's potential. Almost one-third of employees remain neutral about how AI will change the nature of their work. Organizations have a lot of work to do to demonstrate its value, and they can improve usage and comfort by giving employees specific tools for specific purposes, giving them both guidance and discretion over how to use those tools, and being clear about the value they bring to the company and to employees.



One-third of employees remain neutral about AI

**Analysis**

The greatest AI security risk isn't the technology itself. It is the shadow AI that emerges when organizations fail to provide governed alternatives. When we don't enable our teams to use AI responsibly, we inadvertently force them to bypass our controls.

This triggers critical failures: We create massive data movement risk as sensitive information flows into personal, unvetted accounts, and we create a less resilient workforce by denying them the opportunity to build essential skills in a safe environment. Ultimately, companies that attempt to solve this through restriction rather than enablement create more risk, not less, creating the exact security gaps they're trying to prevent.

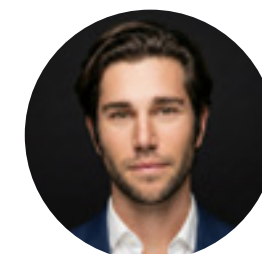
**Assaf Keren**

Chief Security Officer, Qualtrics

**Advice**

Employee experience data is one of the most sensitive and complex assets your organization owns— it's your cultural DNA. But today, we see a dangerous pattern: employees, desperate for productivity, are turning to consumer-grade tools that aren't built for enterprise EX data.

While generic LLMs have raw horsepower, they are contextually blind to the nuances of human capital. They lack the organizational psychology and the specialized guardrails required to protect your most confidential insights from being misrepresented or exposed. To lead in the AI era, HR must move beyond reactive technology. They need a new class of AI: a purpose-built engine, fine-tuned with deep context and safety protocols to deliver accurate, actionable recommendations. Trust is the byproduct of an architecture designed specifically for the mission.

**Ethan Laser**EX Sr. Product Marketing Manager,  
Qualtrics**Analysis**

When productivity expectations and company toolkits are out of alignment, employees will inevitably bridge that gap themselves. We have to ask: Are our goals actually achievable with the tools and enablement we've provided?

HR and senior leadership must move beyond simple yes or no policies and implement a persona-first strategy that aligns employee needs, IT safety, legal compliance, and business strategy for tool selection and usage policies. If the answer to AI usage or a specific productivity tool is no, that must be communicated with radical transparency and clear accountability. But if the goal is growth, leaders must ensure that the path to high performance doesn't require employees to take personal risks to meet the organization's expectations.

**Yesenia Cancel**

MS, XM Scientist, Qualtrics

Trend 3

## The hidden costs to cutting costs

**CUTTING CORNERS ON EMPLOYMENT MODELS AND ONBOARDING CREATES DISENGAGED EMPLOYEES—PARTICULARLY THE ONES MAKING LASTING IMPRESSIONS ON CUSTOMERS.**

In an effort to cut costs and drive efficiency, some organizations have shifted toward more transactional employment models, such as part-time and gig work. Others seem to be underinvesting in their newest employees.



**-7PTS**  
of frontline workers  
receive useful feedback  
vs global

Frontline  
workers report  
lower job  
attitudes  
than others



### CONCERNS FOR THE FRONTLINE

Of the nearly 34,000 employees we studied, roughly 14% reported working part-time. Part-time workers were overrepresented in industries like retail, education, and healthcare. Nearly 25% reported working directly with consumers or the public (i.e., the frontline). These cohorts overlap substantially. Overall, part-time and frontline workers reported lower job attitudes than their full-time and management counterparts. And according to frontline workers, the gap between them and senior leaders is widening.

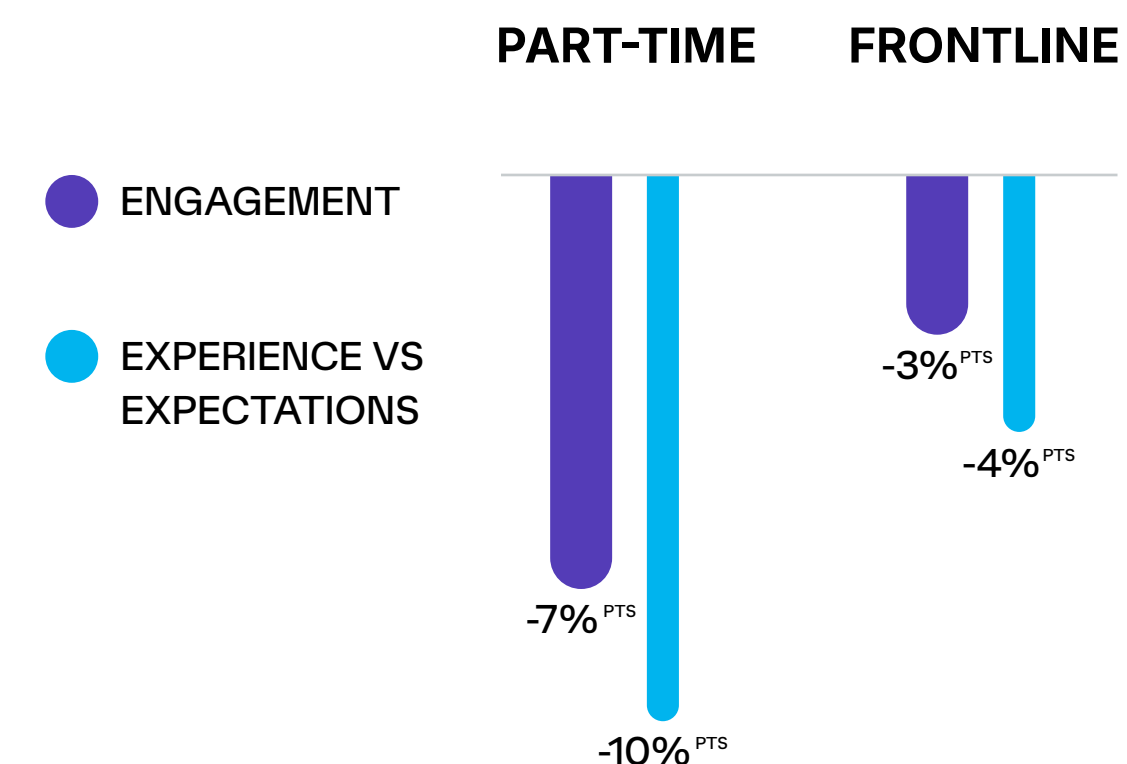
More concerning, part-time and frontline worker experiences have decreased substantially year-over-year. Beyond the top-line attitudes, frontline workers have significant concerns about failing to receive feedback that improves their performance (63%, down 7 points YoY) and being able to challenge traditional ways of doing things (50%, down 7 points YoY).

Part-time workers share these concerns, with a dismal 46% believing they can challenge ways of doing things (down 14 points YoY) and only 61% receiving useful performance feedback (down 11 points YoY).

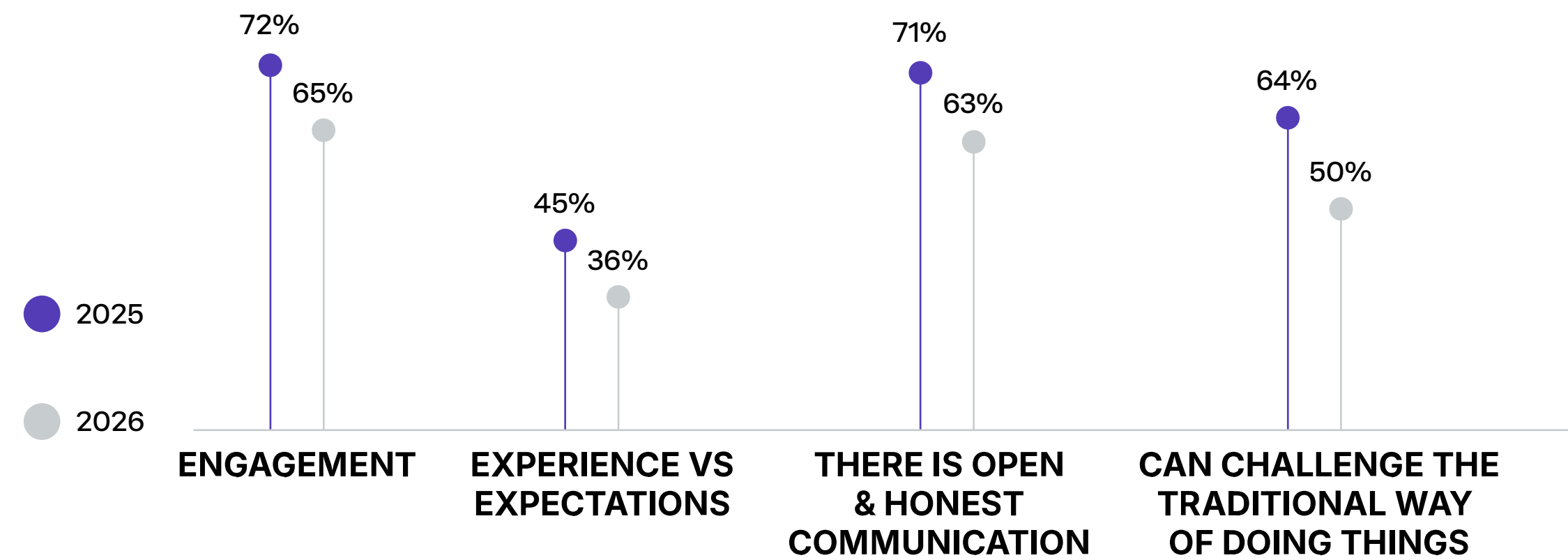
As frontline employees are critical to many organizations, and with part-time workers often performing these roles, organizations need to invest in these workers to build agency and ensure they feel empowered to raise concerns and have their voices heard

when issues arise. Further, to deliver an effective customer experience, professional development should be viewed as time and budget well spent, even when leaning on a more transactional working model.

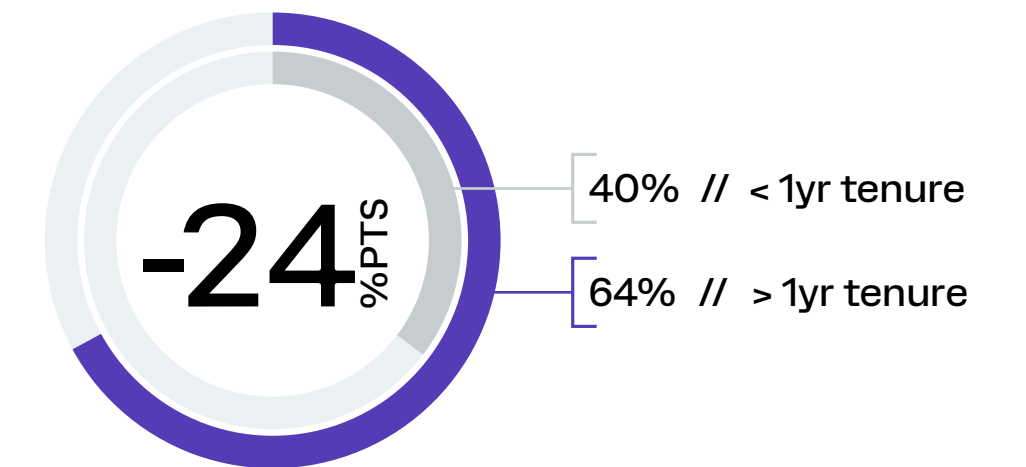
Part-time and frontline experiences lose ground from last year



Low-tenure employee sentiment declines sharply



Intent to stay 3+ years, by tenure



**FIRST IMPRESSIONS MATTER FOR EMPLOYEES AND CUSTOMERS**

Last year, employees pointed to the onboarding experience as one of the most underwhelming work experiences. And in 2026,

there's been another steep decline. Employees with less than one year of tenure are much less likely to feel engaged, included, and committed to their organizations than their longer-tenured peers. New hires also say

they experience less open and honest communication, and less than half feel they can challenge traditional ways of doing things.

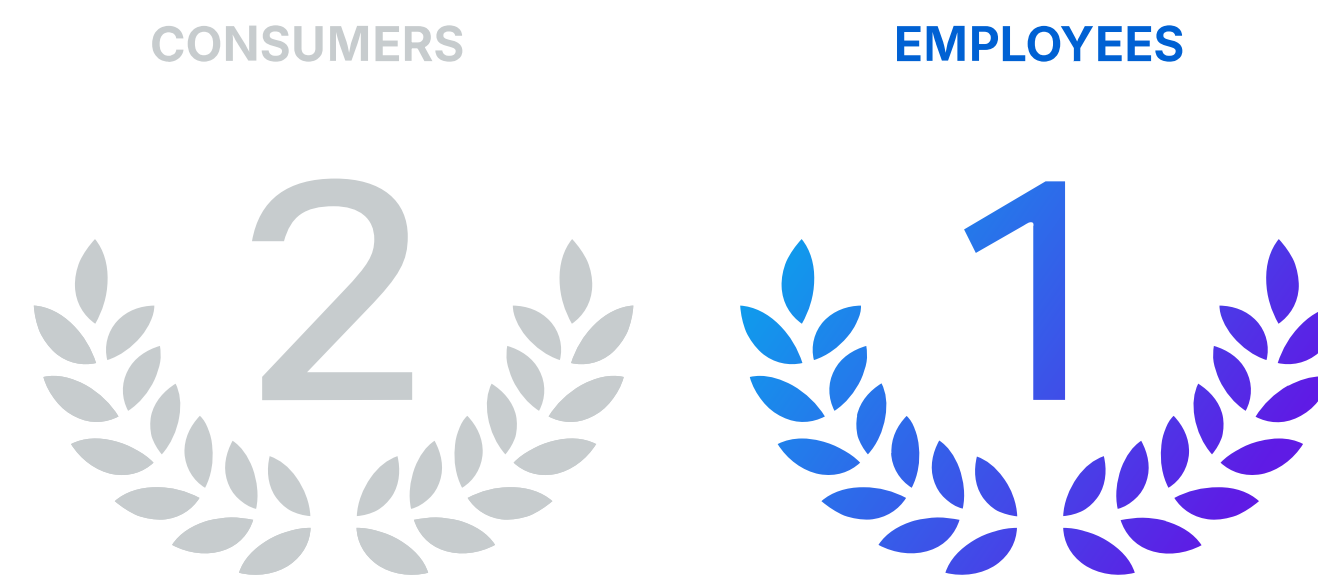
Several years ago, we noted that for the first time in our research, the new

hire honeymoon period disappeared. In 2026, the honeymoon is not only over; it's gotten downright bitter. This is especially notable in large organizations (5K—10K employees).

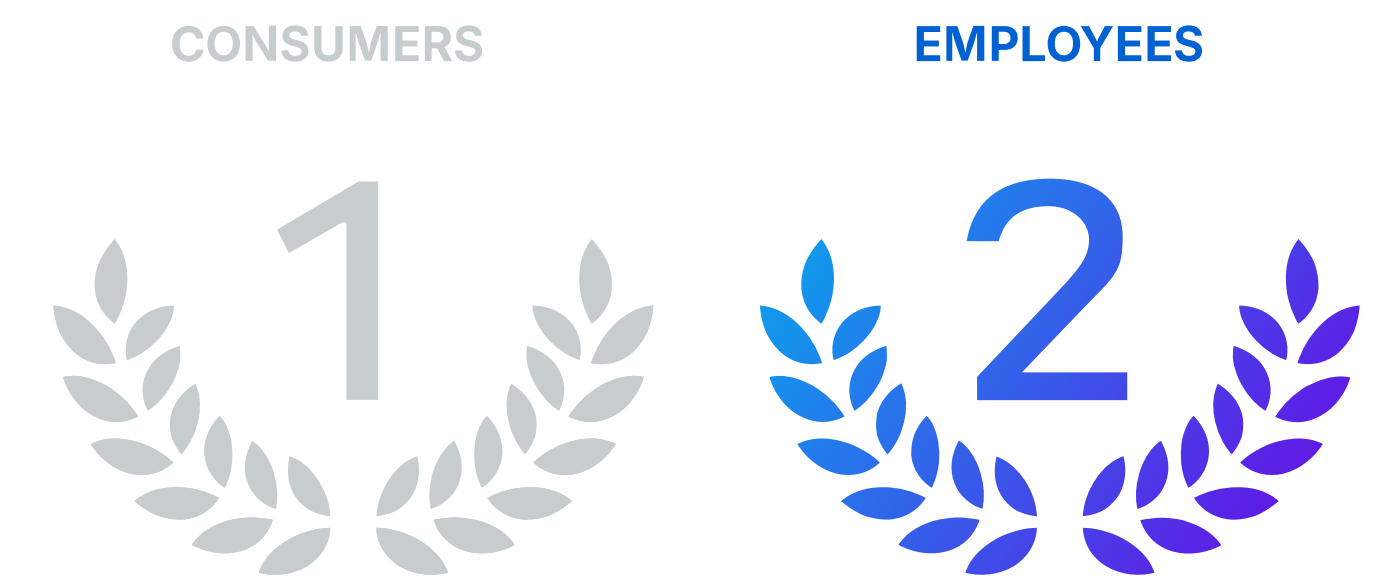
These experience gaps have direct business consequences. A large percentage of the frontline and part-time workers we studied work directly with customers. When asked to identify the root causes of customer experience issues, frontline employees cite communication problems and service delivery failures—the same concerns consumers voiced in our global consumer trends research. It's clear that customers can sniff out poorly trained and ill-equipped new hires when they encounter service issues.

Employees identify the same common causes of bad customer experiences as consumers

### Communications problems



### Service delivery issues



#### CONNECTED EMPLOYEES PROTECT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

The link between engaged employees and satisfied customers is well established. Frontline employees are an organization's best source for identifying and preventing poor customer experiences. Organizations that neglect or fail to invest in the experience of their part-time workers, frontline, and new hires will likely experience a reciprocal drop in engagement, which will inevitably manifest in productivity problems and churn among the workforce. All making it difficult to serve customers well and consistently.

The good news is that there are simple, tried-and-true ways organizations can improve their experiences. Providing meaningful recognition and feedback, opening up lines for honest communication, and seeking feedback from employees helps them deliver what customers expect.

Moreover, onboarding is one of the most critical experiences any employee goes through, and it changes how they perceive their journey. Poor first impressions are hard to overcome, but positive ones set employees up for success over the long haul.

## Advice

The poor experience of new hires isn't a surprise. Many organizations report that their candidate and onboarding practices haven't evolved from their Covid-era approaches. It is still common for new hires to join an organization having never met face-to-face with their new manager or colleagues. Therefore, it is not surprising that they don't have a good feel for the role or the culture.

Added to this is the fact that onboarding programs are frequently light-touch, online versions of what was delivered pre-Covid, with many new employees reporting that they turn up on day one (typically a Monday) to find this is one of the work-from-home days for their new teams. If they are lucky, they have a buddy who has been asked to be onsite during the first few days and weeks.

Very quickly the positivity of new joiners can turn to regret. With their recent exposure to the jobs market, it is also easier for this cohort to move (versus longer tenured employees).



**Jake Outram**

MS, Senior EX / XM Scientist, Qualtrics

## Analysis

We often see organizations prioritize the customer experience while inadvertently sidelining the very people who deliver it. When frontline and part-time staff feel disempowered, that apathy eventually reaches the customer, potentially triggering a cascade of service failures. To stay competitive in today's service-led economy, it is important to stop viewing professional development as a discretionary cost and start treating it as a non-negotiable investment.

This shift doesn't require a massive budget. It can be as simple as empowering managers to provide frequent performance feedback, engaging in genuine career conversations, and cultivating a safe space for innovation. By prioritizing employee growth from day one (regardless of a person's role or contract type) organizations do more than just improve customer service; they start to unlock their entire talent pipeline. After all, today's frontline or part-time worker may be tomorrow's leader, and investing in them now is the most effective way to secure the organization's future.



**Georgie McIntyre**

M.S., Employee Experience Advisor / Organizational Psychologist, Qualtrics

## Advice

By linking the employee and customer experience, leaders can move past gut feelings to take real actions that improve their results. To truly drive customer success and boost the bottom line, companies have to look beyond surface-level engagement and find the specific employee experience drivers that directly influence customer outcomes.



**Vanessa Kowolik**

PhD, Sr. XM Scientist for EMEA, Qualtrics

# When done right, employee listening drives dramatic gains

**EMPLOYEES WANT THEIR EMPLOYERS TO LISTEN MORE—AND WHEN ORGANIZATIONS DO, THEY RECIPROCATE WITH BETTER JOB ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION.**

If groups of people are to coordinate their efforts to accomplish a shared mission, they must talk—a lot. Employee listening facilitates discussion around the most important workplace issues.

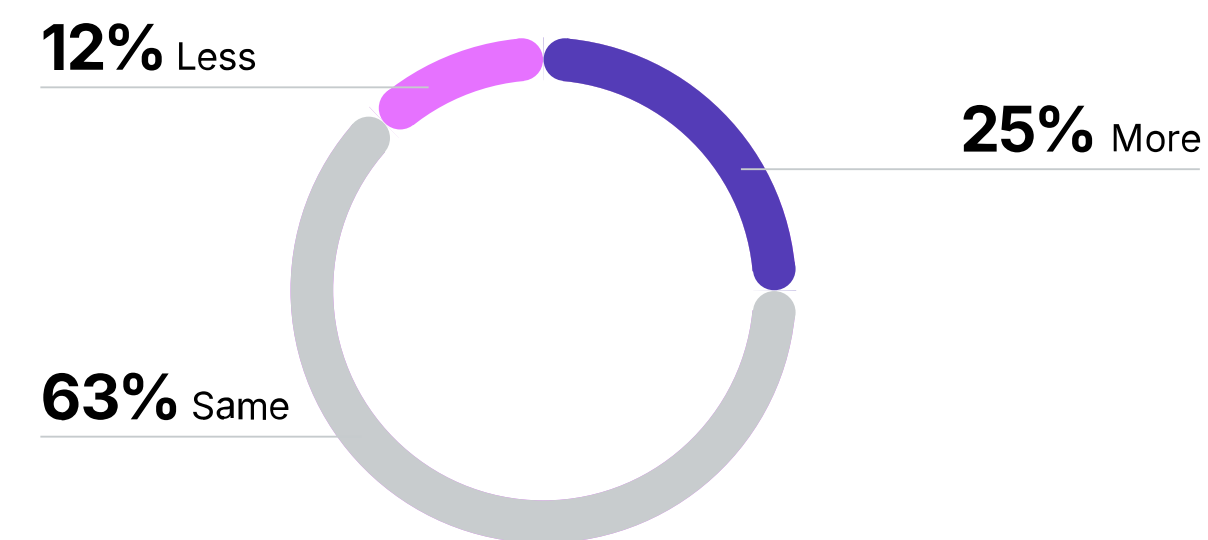
In 2026, 25% of the global workforce reported that their organizations have increased the frequency of employee listening in the last year, while only 12% reported less or much less listening. The majority of employees (62%) reported that their companies listened at roughly the same frequency.



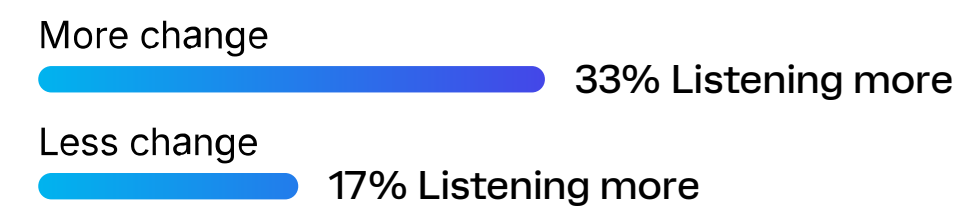
Every organization is experiencing change, and indeed, the vast majority of employees we studied have experienced change recently. After years of research on employee listening, we know that times of change are precisely when employees need to feel heard the most. High-performing organizations understand this and have increased the frequency of employee listening. Others, however, have done precisely the opposite.

Fortunately, organizations who've experienced more change are also more likely to have increased the frequency of listening. Employee listening helps organizations navigate change by illuminating important discussion topics and potential pitfalls, and by keeping employees connected with their leaders.

#### Amount of listening by employers in 2026

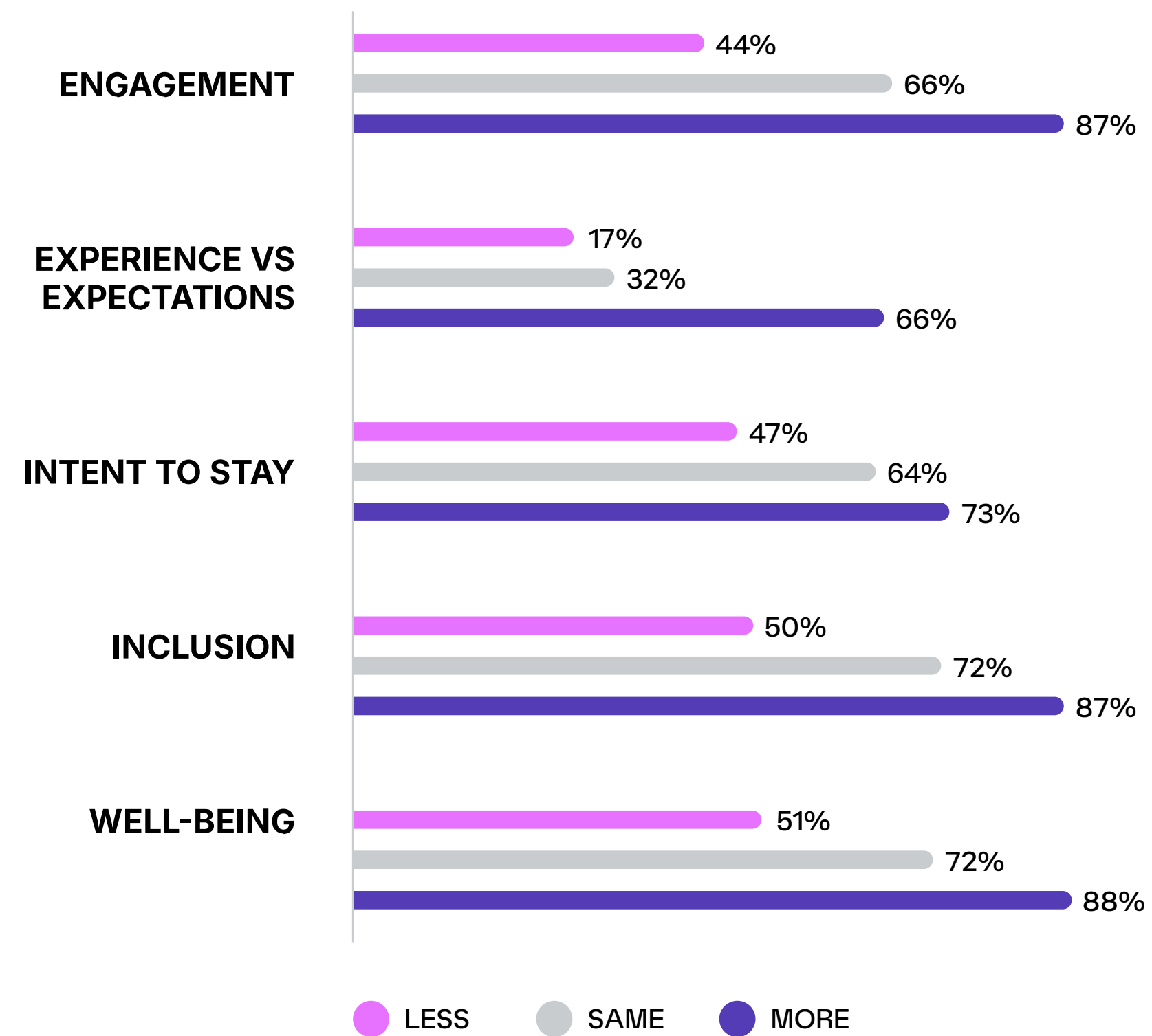


#### The more change, the more listening



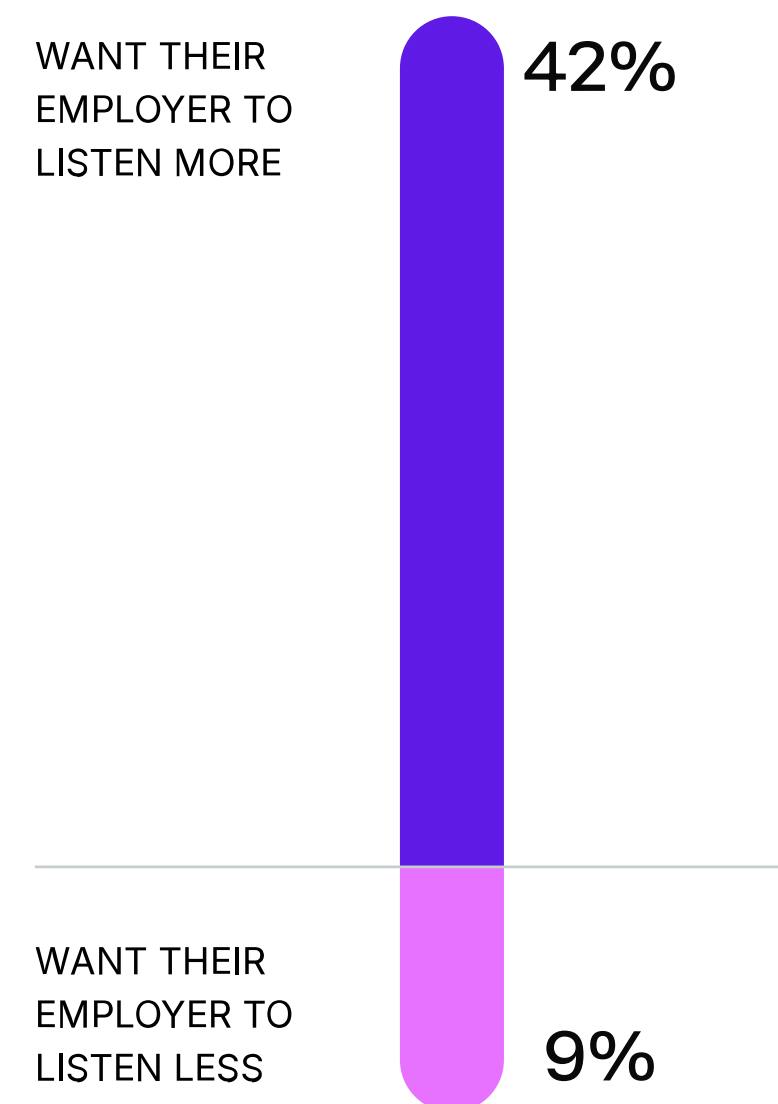
Employees whose companies ramped up listening reported higher engagement, stronger intent to stay, better well-being, and greater inclusion. Their experience was noticeably better than those with no change—and far outshined employees at companies that cut back on listening.

Employee sentiment improves with increased listening



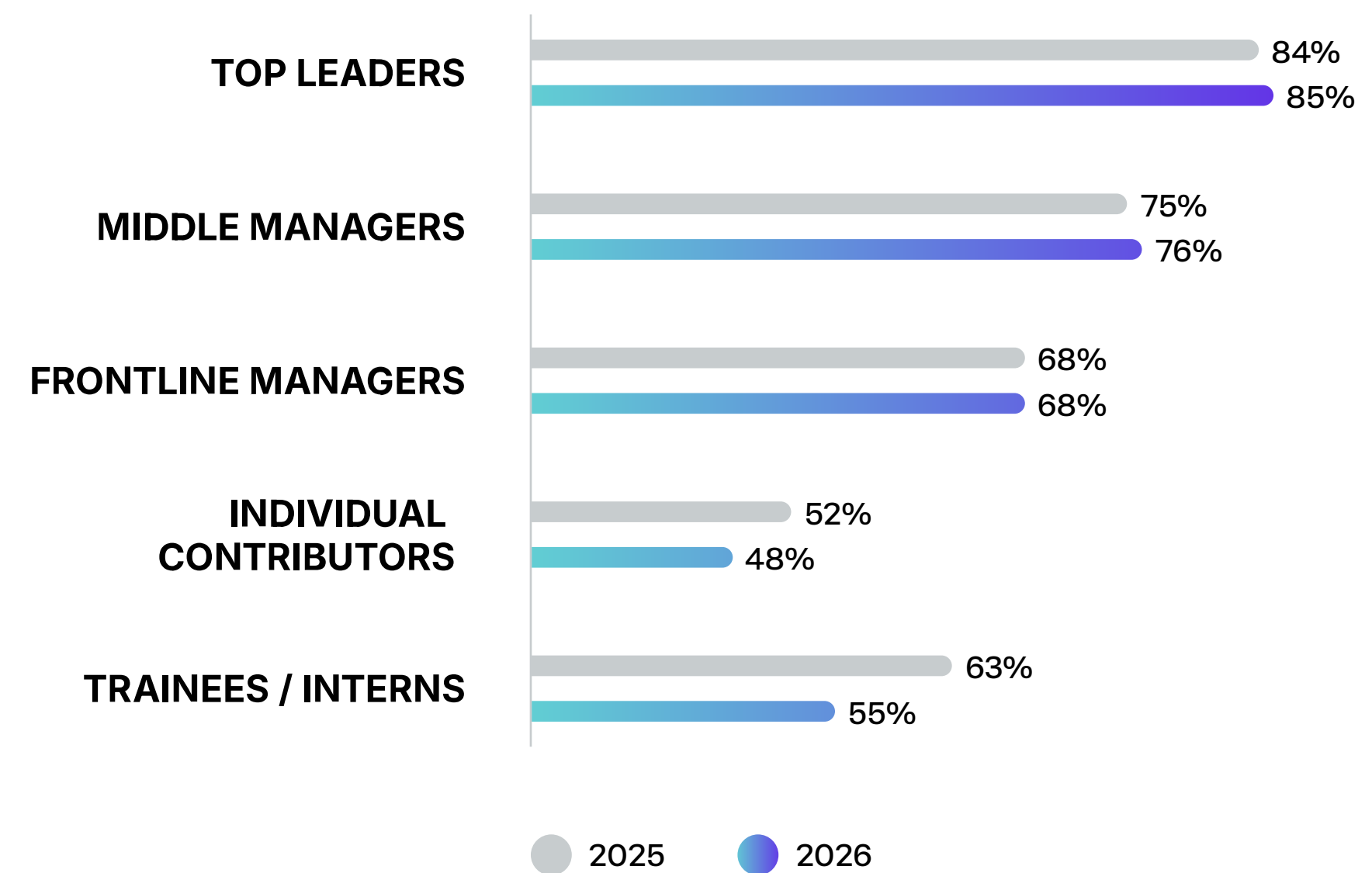
When it comes to employee preferences, 42% want their companies to listen more frequently, while less than 10% want their companies to listen less. And when asked about their experiences giving feedback, the majority (68%) say that they enjoy the activity. Only 12% say they don't.

### Employees want more listening

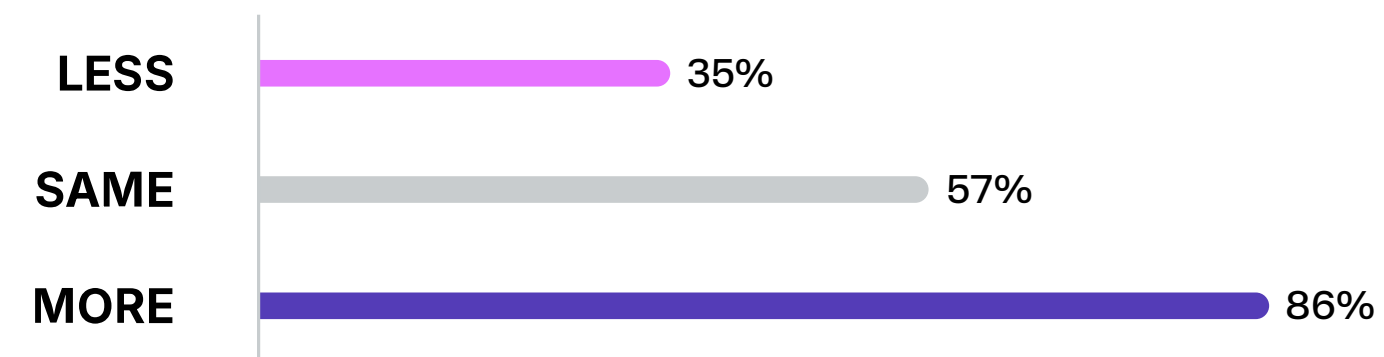


Despite positive feelings about being heard, frontline and lower-level employees are far less likely than senior leaders to see action taken on their feedback. In 2026, this gap has widened: 85% of senior leaders report positive changes, but only 48% of individual contributors agree. In comparison to historical findings, this gap appears to be growing over time.

### Have seen positive changes as a result of surveys (by employee group)



The more listening conducted,  
the more action perceived



Organizations often cite that taking action becomes more challenging with more frequent feedback. But in this study, people whose employers increased listening frequency actually reported more action as a result.

Consistent with our past research, when organizations treat employee listening as an opportunity for honest conversations, employees respond in

kind, with earnest and constructive feedback.

Although the act of employee listening has direct benefits—signaling to employees that leaders care about their perspectives—it’s the resulting actions that matter most. And from what we’ve observed in thousands of organizations across the globe, the lack of perceived action among

employees is often a symptom of poor communication. When action does happen in response to employee feedback, it’s essential that HR and people leaders communicate it, making the explicit connection between what employees said and the action being taken by leadership.

# Methodology

Data collected in September and October 2025. Our research participants consisted of 33,831 full-time and part-time employees from 24 countries and 30 industries. We sampled employees from organizations employing between 100-50,000+ employees. The sample was 51% male and 49% female.

## Region

APJ	36%
EMEA	36%
Latin America	12%
North America	15%

## Age

18-24	9%
25-34	27%
35-44	27%
44-54	21%
55+	15%

## Sex

Male	51%
Female	49%

## Employment Type

Full-time	86%
Part-time	14%

## Health Status

Physical/mental health conditions	29%
No physical/mental health conditions	71%

## Tenure

<6 months	4%
6-12 months	6%
1-2 years	11%
2-3 years	13%
3-5 years	19%
5-10 years	22%
10+ years	26%

## Company Position

Top level leadership	6%
Mid-manager	19%
Frontline manager	27%
Individual contributor	44%
Trainee/intern	4%

## Nature of Work

Frontline	24%
Non-frontline	76%

## Company Size by # of employees

100-500	35%
501-999	17%
1,000-4,999	19%
5,000-10,000	13%
10,001-50,000	8%
50,001+	8%



33,831 employees  
across 24 countries

# Qualtrics Employee Experience

Discover how to turn employee insights into game-changing actions that improve employee experiences, customer experiences, and drive business success—from reduced attrition to increased productivity.

Learn More

