

workmonitor

workmonitor 2026:

the great workforce
adaptation.



partner for talent.



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foreword.

In 2026, the world of work is defined by a distinct contradiction. On one hand, business leaders are optimistic: 95% of employers believe they will grow over the next year. On the other, the workforce is wary: only 51% of talent share that optimism.

This substantial confidence gap signals a global workforce under pressure, driven by technological advances, demographic shifts, geopolitical uncertainty and economic volatility, putting business growth at risk.

Our 23rd Workmonitor — drawing on insights from more than 27,000 workers, 1,200 employers, and over 3 million job postings — outlines how businesses and talent can adapt together to unlock growth. We refer to this as the Great Workforce Adaptation.

me and the world: from job displacement to task augmentation

First, we must close the "AI reality gap". While businesses race to embrace a new way of working, our data shows that 1 in 5 talent believe AI will have a limited impact on their tasks and nearly half perceive it as more beneficial to the company than themselves.

This leaves them vulnerable in both their careers and the value they can add to organisations. AI is not a rival to labour; it should be seen as key to augmenting tasks and highlighting the importance of roles that only people can do.

me and my team: managers are key to stability

In a high-tech environment, the human connection becomes the premium currency. While trust in senior leadership has dipped, the bond between talent and their direct managers is strengthening. Managers are now the key to stability. They are the ones who will unlock the multigenerational advantage — facilitating the exchange where Gen Z teaches tech fluency to Baby Boomers, who, in return, transfer critical industry judgement to Gen Z.

me: the rise of self-defined success

Finally, we are witnessing the end of the linear career ladder, with both talent and employers agreeing that traditional career paths are outdated. Talent are now redefining success by mitigating their risks — building "portfolio careers" and seeking security through variety rather than tenure. At the same time, employers will do well to note that while pay is the top talent attractor, work-life balance is the greatest lever for retention.

By embracing this Great Workforce Adaptation, we can bridge the confidence gap and build a new work order that enables growth for everyone.

Sander van 't Noordende,
CEO, Randstad



By embracing this Great Workforce Adaptation, we can bridge the confidence gap and enable growth for everyone."



key findings.

Workmonitor 2026 reveals a workplace marked by economic strain on both talent and employers, and AI becoming increasingly embedded.

Although talent are more cautious, they are also rethinking their own relevance and future. Alongside a quest for time flexibility and greater autonomy, there is a continued focus on upskilling and a need for greater collaboration, authenticity and trust.

Based on insights from over 27,000 individuals and 1,225 employers across 35 markets, along with secondary insights from over 3 million global job postings, here are some of the standout findings from the research.

me and the world

from job displacement to task augmentation.

Talent are recalibrating what they expect from work as they rise to the challenge of an increasingly volatile world. As employers look to the future with optimism, they need to reflect talent’s shifting focus in their recruitment and retention strategies to maintain a motivated workforce and support workers as they augment their skills through AI, while alleviating fears of job displacement.

facing pressure

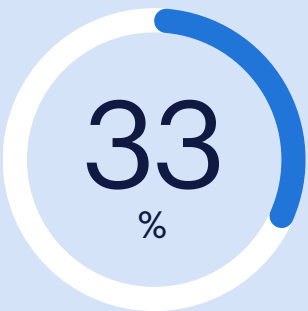
33% of talent in the UK state they have taken on a second job, while 30% have increased or plan to increase working hours in their current job. Of those with a traditional full-time role, 31% would prefer a full-time role alongside a “side hustle” to provide additional income, as would 6% of part-timers.

AI embedded

66% of UK employers state that they have invested in AI in the last 12 months, and this boost for AI has been noticeable for talent, too. 56% say more organisations encourage the use of AI, and over two-thirds (70%) feel confident they can use the latest technology.

mismatched AI expectations

Nearly half of the office workers surveyed (45%), however, believe AI will benefit companies more than employees. Employers expect 75% of tasks to be impacted by AI, but 60% of talent believe it will have limited impact on their current role. With almost a third (27%) of UK talent expecting AI to not affect their work at all.



talent who have taken on a second job to help with the rising cost of living



employers who have invested in AI in the last 12 months



talent who say their company’s overall investment in AI has increased

me and my team

managers are key to stability.

Trust in the workplace is under pressure, yet work remains a balancing force in an increasingly volatile macro environment. Collaborative, inclusive teams remain critical to performance, with managers emerging as both stability anchors and trust builders.

trust issues emerge

While 100% of UK employers are confident in the growth of their business this year, only just over half of talent feel the same. The trust talent feel for leadership and their colleagues has also declined slightly in the last year.

Similarly, collaboration is being put to the test, with employers and talent alike recognising the challenges remote and hybrid working can bring.

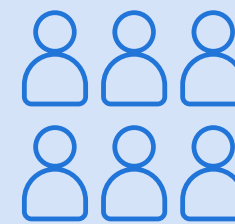
managers and AI are bridging gaps

76% of talent say they have a strong relationship with their manager (up 8 percentage points from 2025), and 65% feel more connected to them than to the company as a whole. Yet, 45% now use AI for work advice instead of consulting their manager.

five generations at work

Employers are clear on the value of diversity: 94% believe multigenerational teams improve productivity. Talent agree, with 77% stating they are more productive when collaborating and embracing different viewpoints. Furthermore, nearly three-quarters rely on colleagues from different generations to broaden their perspectives and facilitate learning.

I seek more reassurance from my manager because of the current volatile macroeconomic environment



57% agree



43% disagree

I rely on colleagues from different generations to broaden my perspectives at work

gen z (18-28 years) 65%

millennials (29-44 years) 73%

gen x (45-60 years) 71%

baby boomers (60+ years) 71%

76%

of employers say remote or hybrid work has made collaboration more challenging

me

the rise of self-defined success.

Economic volatility and a more difficult job market have led talent to be more cautious in how they navigate their careers. Even so, they are not retreating from what matters most to them. For employers, the challenge is balancing business needs with that for individual agency and autonomy.

career paths redefined

Employers value skills and experience over formal qualifications when hiring (82%) and feel that the traditional linear career path — one career or company with regular promotions — is outdated (78%). Nearly a third of talent (29%) agree, stating that they don't want a linear career but instead experience different types of jobs in different sectors.

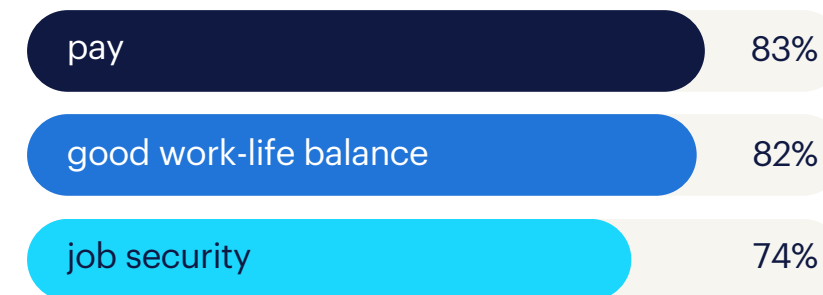
pay attracts, and work-life balance retains

83% of talent in the UK say that pay is the top factor when looking for a new job. Yet, work-life balance (51%) remains above pay (22%) and job security (21%) as the main reason for staying in their current role.

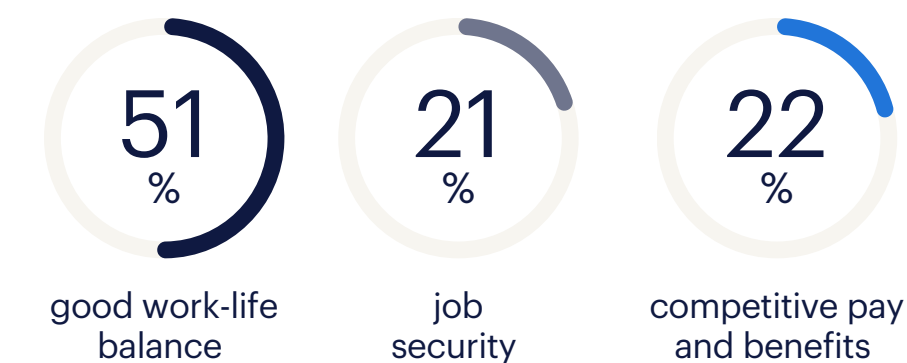
autonomy drives loyalty

Despite economic volatility, 34% quit a job incompatible with their personal life, up from 31% last year. Yet, while 76% of employers believe autonomy boosts engagement, productivity and retention, 56% don't let talent set their own schedules.

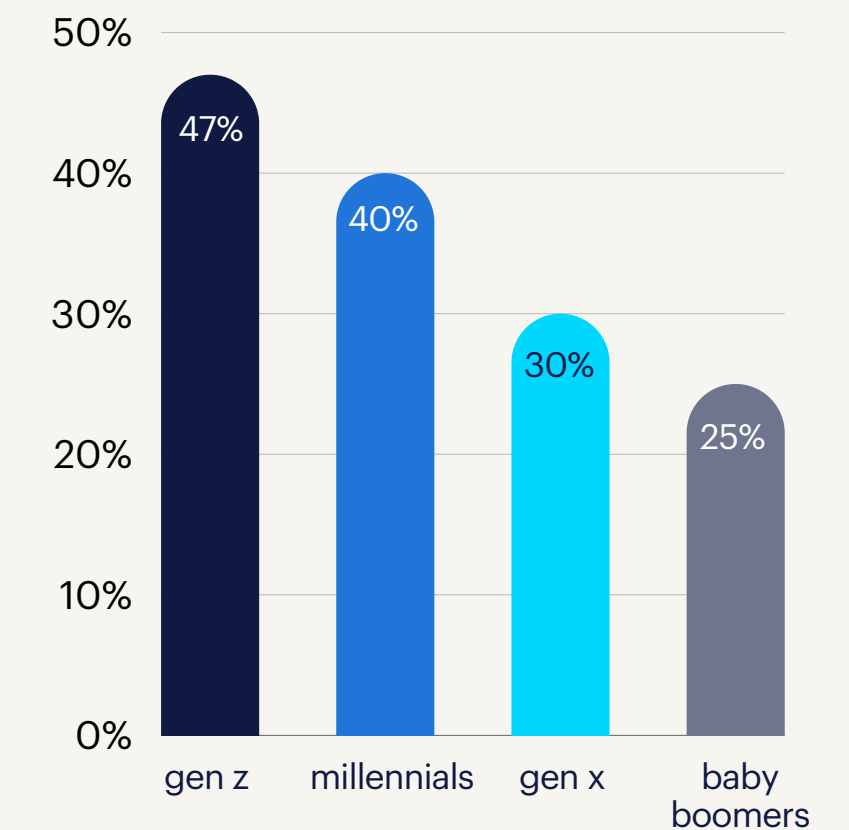
how important are these factors to you when thinking about your current job and/or potential future employment?



what is the main reason you would choose to stay at your current job?



I quit a job that didn't fit in with my personal life





global themes.

- 9 me and the world:
from job displacement to
task augmentation.
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managers are key to stability.
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the rise of self-defined success.



theme 1:

me and the world:
from job
displacement to
task augmentation.

AI, uncertainty and employability.

Talent are recalibrating what they expect from work as they rise to the challenge of an increasingly volatile world. Economic uncertainty, the rising cost of living and the impact of AI are just some of the factors shaping how talent think about their careers and future employability.

As employers look to the future with optimism, they need to reflect talent's shifting focus in their recruitment and retention strategies to maintain a motivated workforce.

It's imperative to support workers as they augment their skills through AI and allay their fears of job displacement.

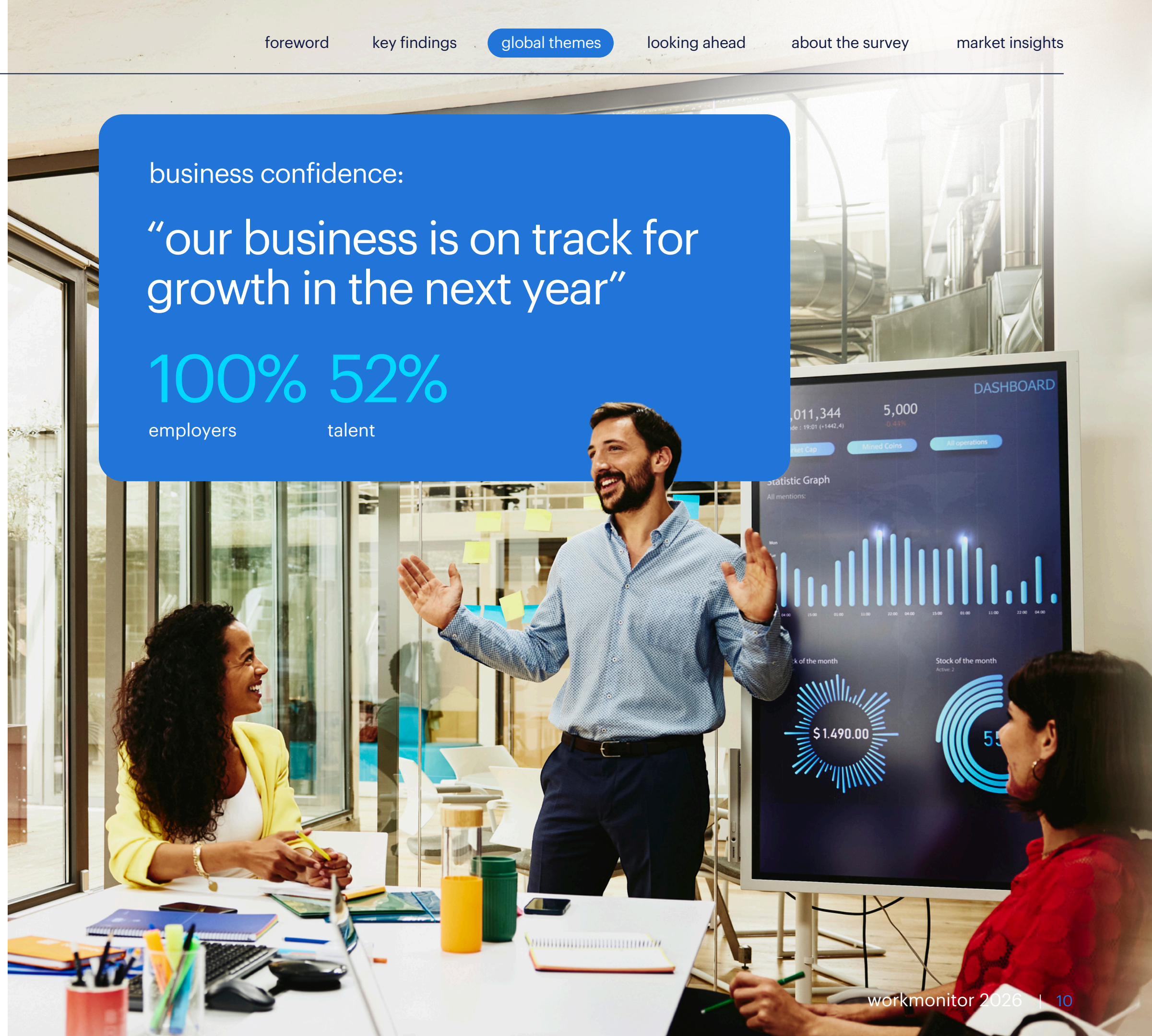
business confidence:

“our business is on track for growth in the next year”

100% 52%

employers

talent



me and the world

adapting under pressure.

With greater economic pressures on both businesses and talent, rigid traditional work formats and roles are becoming more fluid.

To help with the rising cost of living, 33% of talent state they have taken on, or are looking at taking on, a second job. Up 11 percentage points from 2024 (22%).

30% have increased or plan to increase their hours in their current job, up from 20% in 2024.

Younger generations are more likely to look for an extra job or additional hours than older generations.

Of those with a traditional full-time role, 31% would prefer a “side hustle” alongside their full-time role to provide additional income, as would 6% of part-timers.

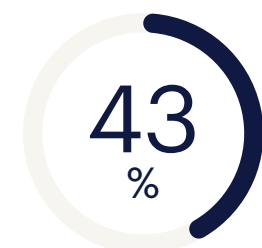
Compared to last year, respondents are less inclined to request pay increases. More people are staying in their jobs even though they are dissatisfied. Fewer respondents say they have threatened to quit to negotiate better pay or working conditions. A feeling of not belonging — traditionally a strong driver for moving on — is also less motivation to consider leaving than in 2025.

Two-thirds of talent in the UK worry about the impact of economic uncertainty on their job security (38%), with Asia-Pacific talent the most concerned globally, making them more cautious in their job-related movements.

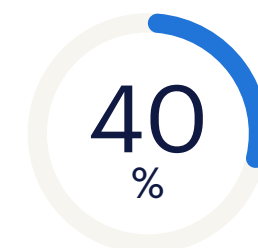
For employers, enabling more diversified ways of working could provide leverage for reassuring and, ultimately, retaining talent.

helping with the rising cost of living

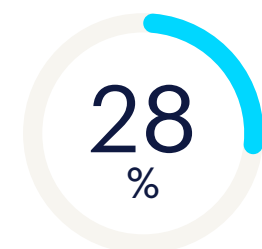
I have taken on a second job to help with the rising cost of living



gen z



millennials



gen x



baby boomers

talent are more cautious to act



● 2026 ● 2025

me and the world

AI becomes embedded.

Compared to last year, both talent and employers report that AI has evolved from the experimental stage to a core business tool.

Led by the technology and logistics sectors, nearly two-thirds of employers state that they have invested in AI in the last 12 months.

Our data indicates that AI and automation are increasingly replacing low-complexity, transactional roles, potentially helping to address severe labour shortages across industries by boosting workforce productivity.

This boost has been noticeable for talent, too. Half of workers in the UK acknowledge AI's positive impact on their productivity (55%) — a sentiment echoed by over half of employers who say it has increased their company's productivity over the last year (58%).

Talent also feel that AI makes their job easier and lets them take on more fulfilling tasks (58%).

AI continues to top the list of desired training globally — up from 37% to 39% in respondents' top three choices year-on-year, with two-thirds of talent wanting to see more investment in AI skills development from their employers (63%).

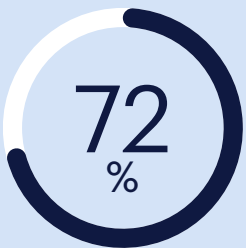
Yet, the majority of people believe that they have the skills to leverage AI positively for their careers (62%), and over two-thirds (64%) of talent feel confident they can use the latest technology.

However, there is a gap between working types, with office workers more likely to feel confident in their tech skills than non-office-based workers, such as those in skilled trade roles like engineers, electricians or supply chain managers.

As the job market shifts from deep technical AI roles — those building the systems — to AI-empowered talent who can apply AI and interpret its outputs, skilled trades in particular must focus on boosting their technology skills to make the most of this opportunity.

These trends underline that AI is not only embedded within businesses, but it's also becoming a differentiator, both for talent seeking to future-proof their skills and for employers aiming to attract and retain the best talent to build an AI-augmented workforce.

I feel confident that I can use the latest technology

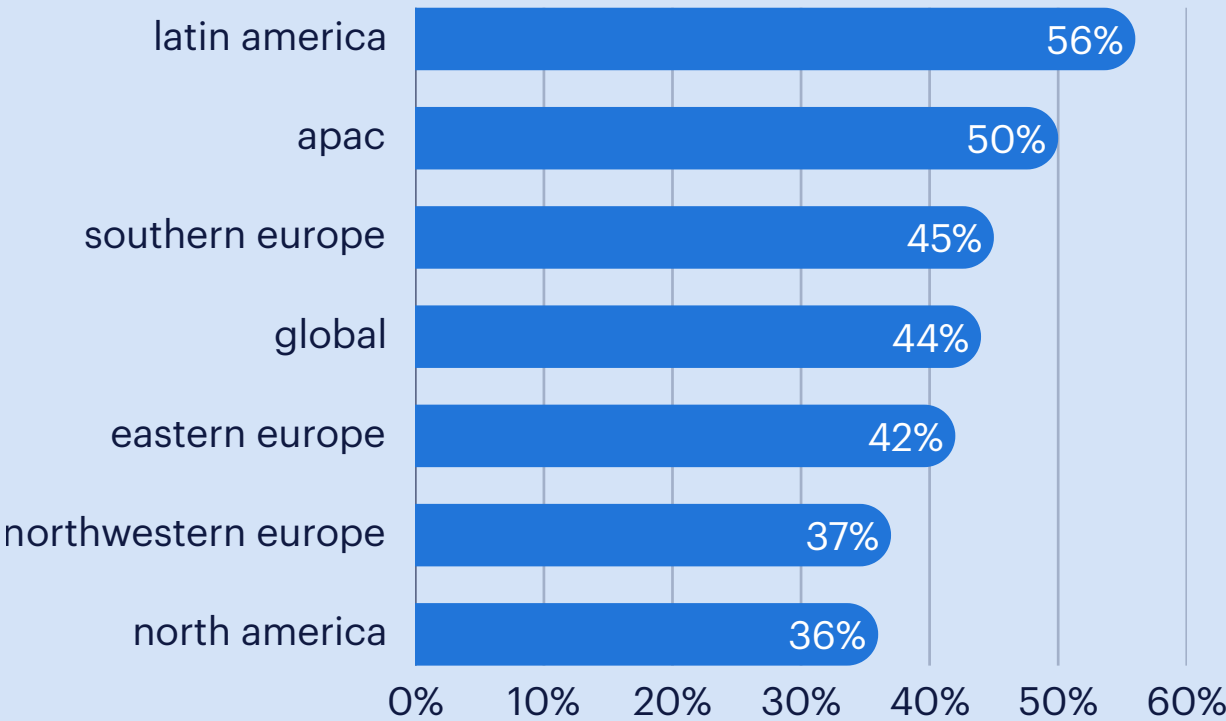


office workers



non-office workers

talent in each region who would like AI development opportunities



me and the world

mismatched AI expectations.

Beneath these positive developments around AI, however, lies a layer of uncertainty, reinforcing the essential need for talent and employers to adapt.

Nearly half of the office workers surveyed (45%) believe AI will benefit companies more than employees.

A third of all talent in the study (27%) are concerned that their jobs will disappear in the next five years, but half of talent in the UK — 50% — say they are not concerned about this.

What is more, there are important generational differences. Gen Z is the most concerned generation, while Baby Boomers show greater self-assurance and are the least worried about AI's impact and their ability to adapt.

There is also a mismatch between the perceptions of employers and talent when it comes to the impact of AI on their tasks.

Employers see tasks as being more substantially impacted by AI than talent do.

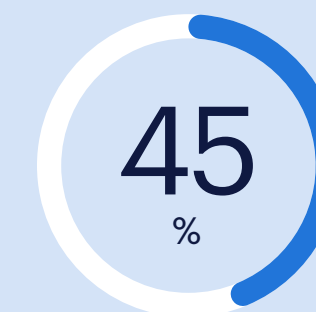
Over a fifth of talent (27%) expect AI not to affect their work at all, compared to only 24% of employers who say that the impact of AI will be low. Conversely, 64% of employers expect AI to have a high to very high impact on tasks, compared to only 25% of workers.

So, while talent are aware of the importance of AI as a tool, the need to upskill and its transformative force, they are still somewhat unclear about the structural implications of AI on their own roles and future careers.

This disconnect represents a potential breach of trust in the making: if organisations do not communicate their AI roadmaps transparently, they risk alienating the workforce they need to upskill.

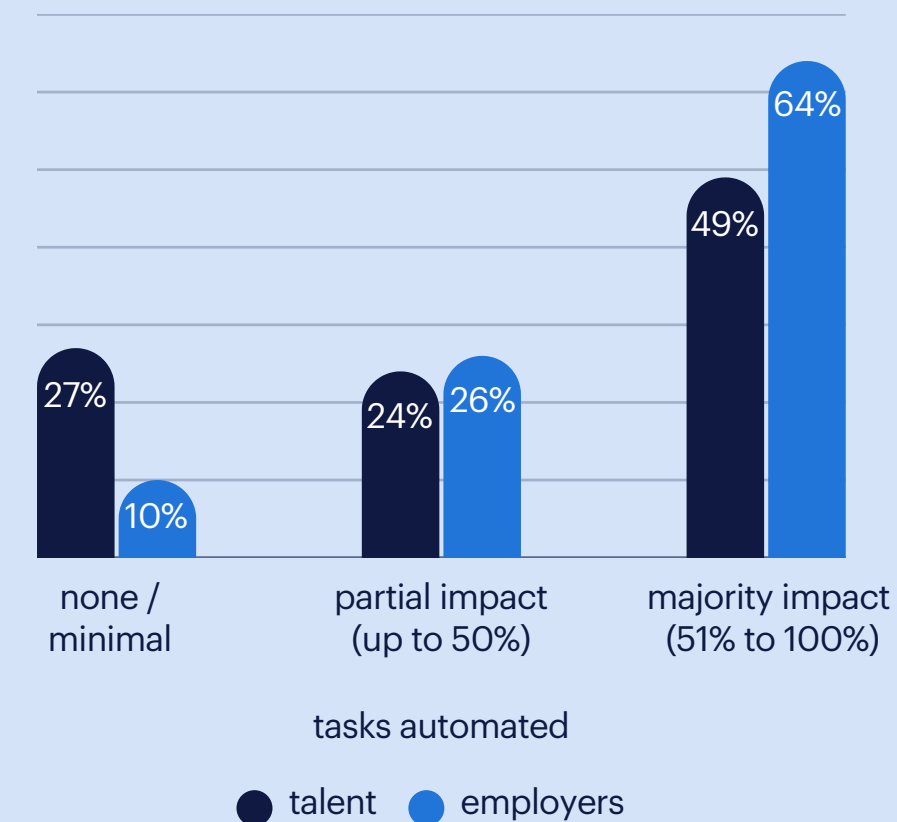
Employers need to help their teams see the benefits of AI both for their current roles and for long-term employability. This includes offering clear routes to augment their skills and using AI to their advantage, leveraging the opportunities it presents as job profiles shift. Organisations must invest in AI development where it matters most and in ways that talent feel, see and experience it in their routine work.

While talent are still deciphering the future of their roles, the market is already pivoting toward high-autonomy systems; postings for “AI Agent” skills have surged by 1,587%, signalling a shift toward self-directed AI that will fundamentally reconfigure task delivery. In response, 48% of talent are already seeking opportunities to future-proof their skills independently, taking control of their market relevance outside of formal employer programmes.



of white-collar workers feel that AI adoption mainly helps employers, not employees

how high will AI's impact be on work tasks?

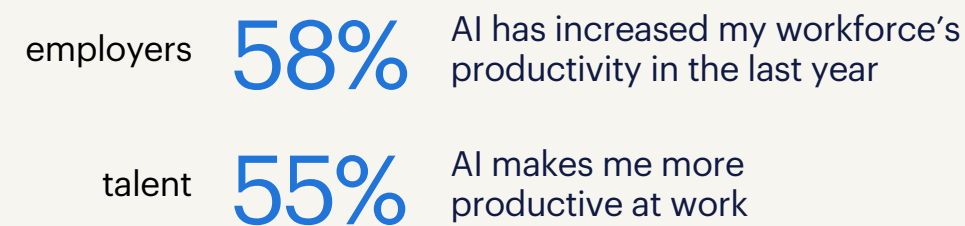


me and the world

employer-talent gap analysis.

Employers and talent diverge in their perceptions of business growth and the impact of AI. To rebuild trust and bring talent along, organisations must invest in high-impact AI development and ensure their strategies are transparent.

AI and productivity



investment in AI

employers who have invested in AI in the last 12 months



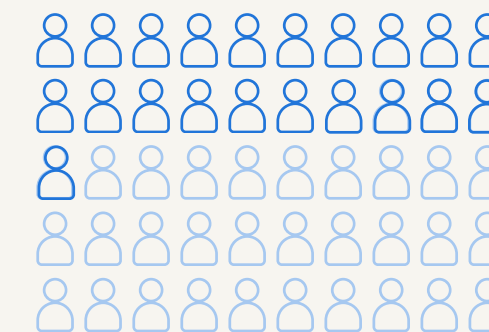
talent who say their company's overall investment in AI has increased



talent who say their business could do more to invest in AI skills development



the future of entry-level jobs



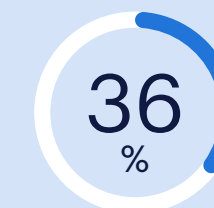
42%

of Gen Z talent believe their job security has increased in the last 12 months



employers

I am planning to hire fewer graduates this year compared to last year because of AI



talent

I worry that entry-level jobs will disappear in the next five years because of AI

me and the world

key learnings.

1.

belief needs to catch up with AI ambition

The data shows that while AI is deeply embedded in working practices for many talent and employers, significant gaps remain between their perceptions of its impact. To establish transparency, employers should communicate their AI vision and strategies across all levels. Creating opportunities to discuss expectations and realities will help build understanding across the entire workforce.

2.

enabling fluid AI adoption

Employers must identify the skill gaps arising from their strategies and train talent to fill these, providing reassurance and addressing shortages through in-house development. Workers, meanwhile, will need to commit to lifelong learning and adaptation to enhance their employability, with a particular opportunity for skilled trades to improve their command of AI to fill emerging job roles.

3.

agility as a retention lever

Both talent and employers are feeling the challenging business landscape. With significant percentages of the workforce taking on second jobs or additional hours to make ends meet, it is more important than ever for employers to show empathy for the pressures talent are under. Taking an agile approach to work formats and workflows will allow employers to create opportunities to support talent and build systems that allow them to meet the needs of a challenging economic environment.



theme 2:

me and my team:
managers are key
to stability.

trust and collaboration.

Trust in the workplace is under pressure, yet work remains a balancing force in an increasingly volatile macro environment. Collaborative, inclusive teams remain critical to performance, with managers emerging as both stability anchors and trust builders for workforces made up of five generations for the first time in history.

the working relationship outlook



me and my team

rebuilding trust.

In an unpredictable world, workplaces continue to provide a sense of community and stability. Close to three-quarters of talent (72%) state that their workplace does this successfully, although this sentiment has softened slightly since 2025 (79%).

Yet, trust is coming under pressure here, too, with trust in leadership (72%) and among colleagues (76%) both declining slightly since last year. In both cases, younger generations are less trusting than older ones. APAC emerges as the region with the highest trust levels both toward their organisations’ leadership (77%) and their colleagues (81%).

Business confidence is also affected, with more than 9 in 10 employers (globally) confident in the growth of their business this year, but only just over half of talent feeling the same.

Despite small declines since last year, more than three-quarters of respondents still feel trusted by their employers (78%), and 73% feel comfortable sharing their viewpoints openly.

76% say they can be their authentic selves at work — a sentiment led by older generations — while the number of people hiding aspects of their personality has declined from 62% to 56%. Baby Boomers are the most confident about staying true to themselves, with Gen Z being the most cautious.

Even so, polarisation in broader society also affects how we express ourselves at work. 39% of UK respondents state that they actively avoid political discussions, while only 28% feel they now talk more about politics than five years ago.

54% of employers have responded to this development by putting in place formal policies or guidelines on what should be considered appropriate topics for conversation at work.

Respondents from Southern Europe were most likely to say that their organisation had done so (61%), while Latin American employers were least likely (46%) to have such policies in place.

This underscores that people’s continued need for the workplace to provide a socially accepting environment means refocusing retention strategies on maintaining and rebuilding trust. Our research tells us that there are two key factors for achieving this: strengthening collaboration across jobs and generations, and nurturing the role of managers.

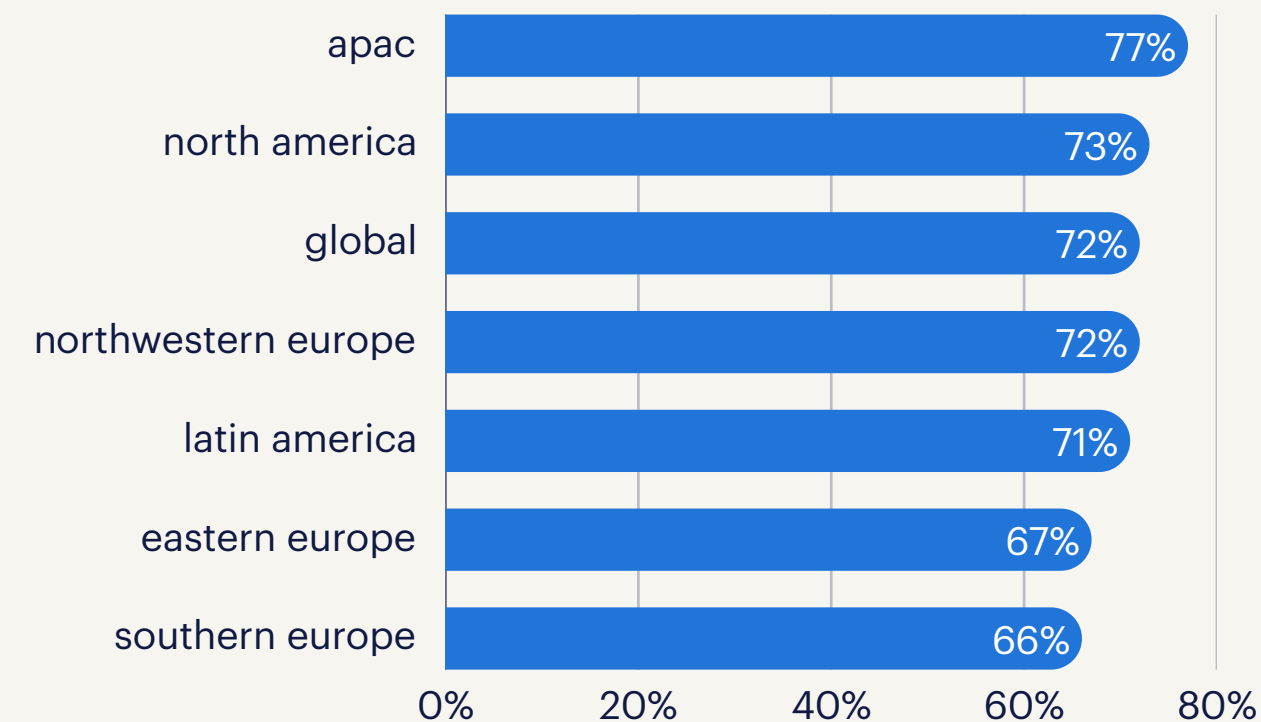
75%

I feel comfortable sharing my personal viewpoints at work without fear of discrimination

39%

I actively avoid discussing politics with colleagues

I feel I can trust the leadership team of my company



me and my team

managers and AI are bridging gaps.

With the workplace as an anchor in high tides, talent’s relationship with managers becomes a renewed focus.

Almost three-quarters of talent (76%) say they have a strong relationship with their manager, up 8 percentage points from 2025. Relations are strongest in IT, finance and engineering.

Crucially, nearly two-thirds of UK talent (65%) also said they felt more connected to their manager than to the company as a whole. Against this backdrop, people are increasingly turning to their managers for reassurance and clarity.

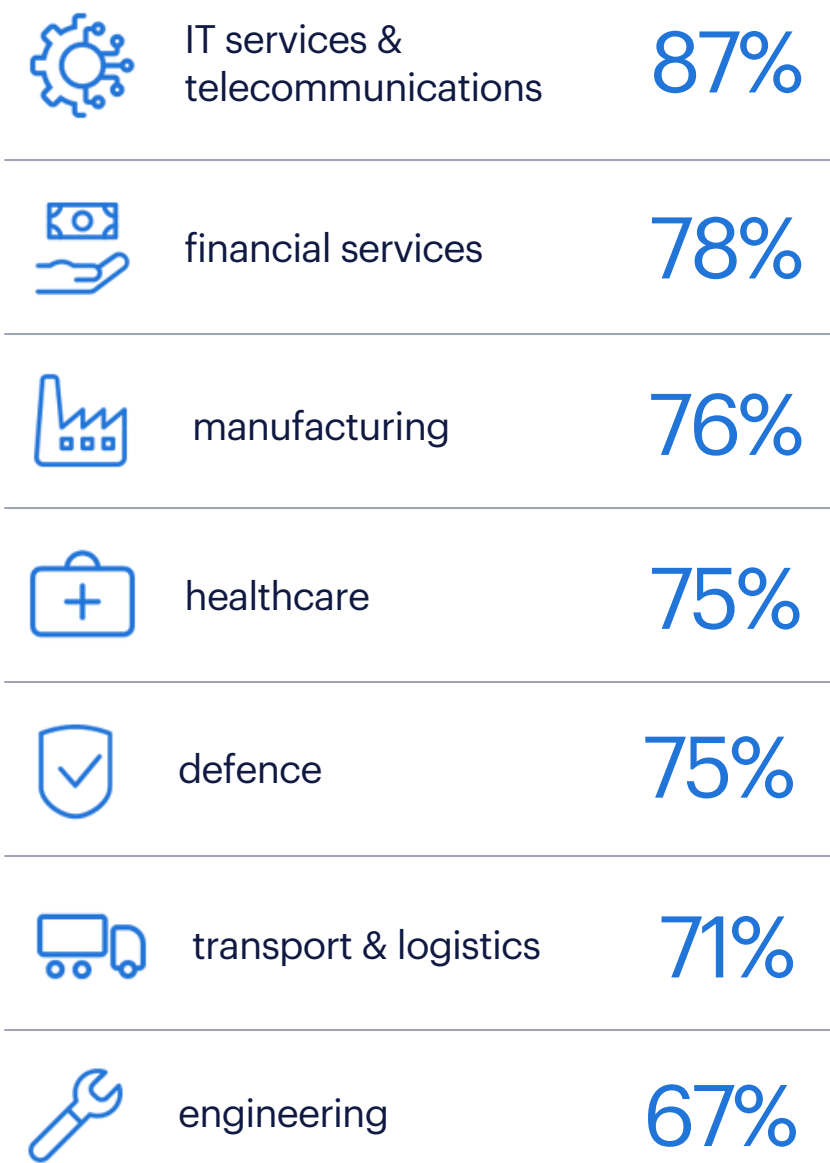
External volatility drives 57% to seek reassurance from their managers. This is likely because they believe their manager has their best interests in mind (74%) and trust them with their career progression (70%, down 3 percentage points).

Yet, half of talent surveyed state that they use AI for work advice instead of their manager, with younger people more likely to do so than older age groups. This recourse to AI might be explained by the fact that job security is keeping a similar share (48%) from raising issues with their manager.

While employers need to be aware that AI is becoming a “go-to” for employees, the greatest opportunity lies in developing managers’ roles as trust architects for the workforce.

Employers are already leveraging managers in their retention strategies. 74% state that they are actively encouraging managers to check in with talent more regularly to avert attrition. Nurturing managers to play their role as trust architects even more effectively could become vital to future talent strategies.

I have a strong relationship with my manager



reassurance, insecurity and AI advice



me and my team

collaboration as a productivity lever.

Another antidote to volatility in the world of work and beyond is a continued focus on collaboration among individuals, teams and five different generations at work.

Talent believe that they are more productive when collaborating and taking others' views on board (78%).

Multigenerational collaboration stands out particularly. 74% of talent say they rely on people from different generations to broaden their perspectives. Workers also recognise the value of different generations teaching one another.

Meanwhile, 95% of employers highlight generational diversity as a productivity lever, and 90% want to see management spend more time improving team collaboration.

Failure to nurture collaboration also creates a retention risk. Nearly a third of talent (31%) have quit a job because of a lack of collaboration, with non-office workers (33%) slightly more likely to say so than office workers (29%). Most employers (93%) also recognise a healthy workplace environment as a top retention factor.

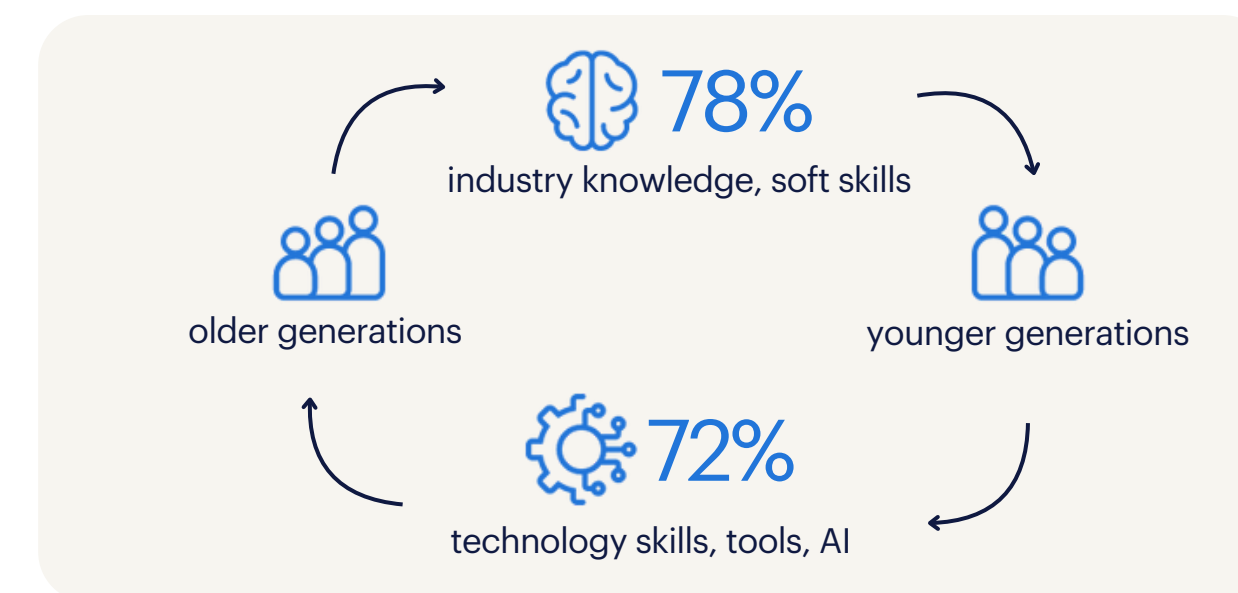
In addition, in-person collaboration matters. Despite continued debates about office returns, nearly half of talent feel that working in the office — with their team — boosts their productivity (48%), a finding that applies across generations.

Employers are also aligned on the value of real-life collaboration, with 81% stating that remote or hybrid work has made collaboration more challenging.

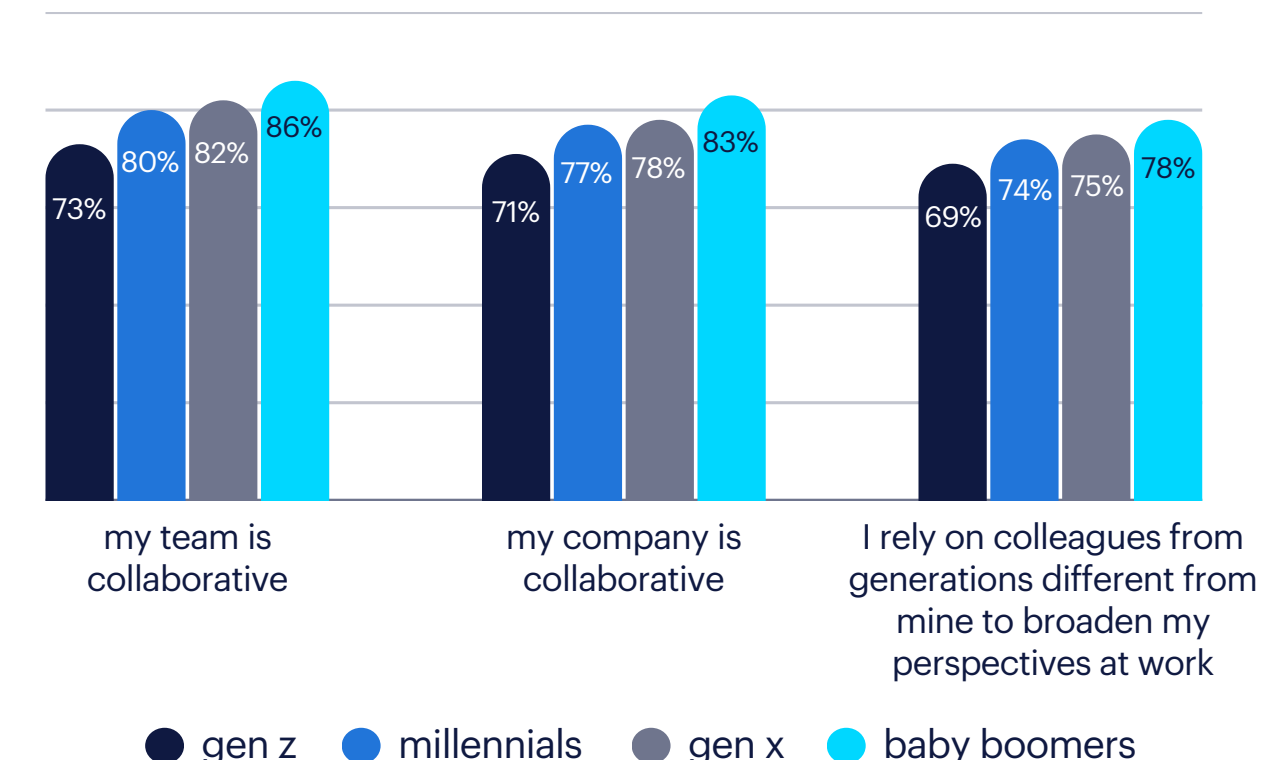
The good news is that most talent believe their employers strike the right balance. 80% describe their teams as collaborative, while 77% view their companies the same way.

Beyond human connection, collaboration is becoming a technical necessity, with demand for AI Trainers (+247%) and Prompt Engineers (+97%) surging and mobility in these roles reaching over 50%. The most effective AI teams are now operating as fluid networks rather than static silos.

generations teaching each other



the state of collaboration in global businesses



me and my team

employer-talent gap analysis.

Despite volatile economic conditions, concerns over job security and rising living costs, collaborative, healthy workplaces continue to be a key retention factor.

managers as trust architects

I have encouraged managers to check in with employees more due to retention risks

74%

employer

I seek more reassurance from my manager because of the volatile macroeconomic environment

57%

talent

I avoid raising issues with my manager due to job insecurity

48%

talent



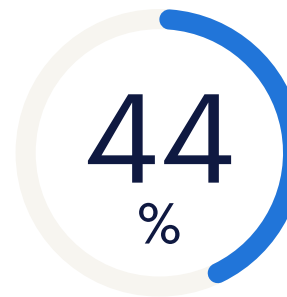
recognising the benefits of working together

remote or hybrid work has made collaboration more challenging

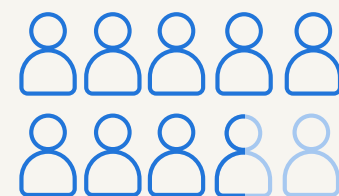


employers

working in the office/workplace improves my productivity



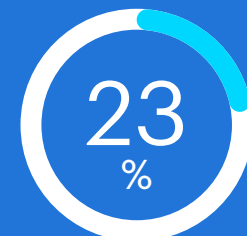
talent



84%

employers

management in my organisation should spend more time improving collaboration among teams



of talent quit a job because there wasn't a collaborative atmosphere

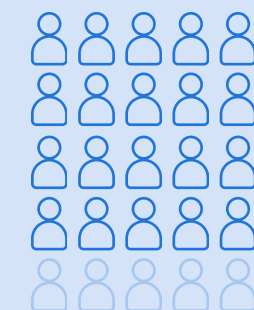


drawing on a mix of generations

77%

talent

I am more productive when I collaborate and multiple perspectives are involved



having a mix of generations working together is a positive for productivity

94%

me and my team

key learnings.

1.

managers as stability anchors

Against a backdrop of disruption and economic challenges, trust between employers and talent is under greater pressure. However, with high levels of trust between managers and workers, employers have an opportunity to better understand the dynamics driving their talent's motivations and ambitions. They need to capitalise on these anchors of stability to rebuild trust and boost loyalty.

2.

collaboration focus

Talent and employers are aligned on the benefits of collaboration, and there is a high risk of attrition for organisations that don't get this right. Taking the time to explore how links between and within teams can be enhanced will pay dividends for employers. With a solutions-oriented approach, talent must play a key part in enhancing collaboration, especially across different generations.

3.

cross-generational learning

With five generations working side by side, employers must be mindful of the sensitivities of each age group. However, there is also a great opportunity to develop talent by creating pathways that allow learning from one another, especially in industry knowledge, soft skills and technology. Managers should encourage talent to share what they need from the team to boost their employability and, vice versa, what they can do to support colleagues.

theme 3:

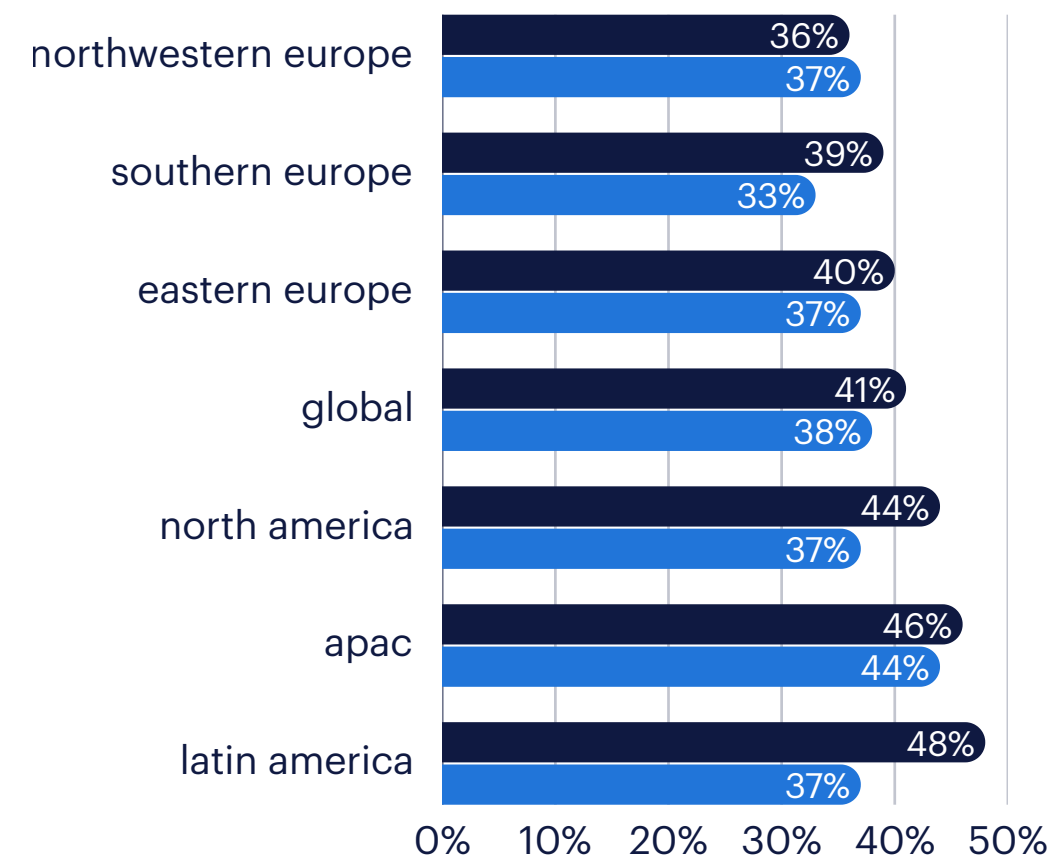
me: the rise of self-defined success.

recalibrating success.

Economic volatility and a tougher job market have made talent more cautious in navigating their careers. Still, they are not abandoning what truly matters to them; instead, they are redefining success in an increasingly unpredictable environment. This means prioritising personal goals, work styles and career paths — whether traditional and linear or more diverse.

For employers, the challenge is balancing business needs with the need for individual agency and autonomy.

global perspectives on career paths



- I want to follow a traditional linear career path (one career/company with regular promotions)
- I want to have different types of jobs throughout my career (switching sectors and roles)

58%

I feel more engaged and productive at work if I feel I can be my authentic self

me

charting their own course.

With work acting as a strong, anchoring community in these volatile times, people also continue their quest to be true to themselves and in control of their working lives.

57% of office workers feel more engaged and productive when they can be their authentic selves, and 96% of employers tell us that they support this. Talent must be able to trust that their environment is inclusive enough to accept them as they are. This is key because nearly a third of respondents (27%) have quit a job because they could not be their authentic selves, with Gen Z talent (34%) feeling particularly strongly about this.

The search for authenticity in the workplace also links to how talent want to mould their careers. Just as traditional job roles become more fluid, so the appeal of traditional,

linear careers is fading as workers increasingly prioritise variety, autonomy and self-direction. However, there are several nuances to consider.

Employers tell us that they prioritise experience and skills-based hiring over formal qualifications (87%) and feel that traditional linear career paths — one career/company with regular promotions — are outdated (72%).

Nearly 2 in 5 talent (38%) agree, stating they don't want a linear career, preferring instead to experience different jobs across a variety of sectors. However, a comparable share (41%) still desire a traditional career path.

Talent are not only redefining career journeys but also questioning the traditional full-time role as the preferred way of working.

When looking at talent globally across all work types, while 53% currently hold a full-time position, only 29% state that a single full-time role is their preferred working arrangement. Instead, for nearly a fifth, the preferred mode of working is a full-time role with a side hustle or additional hours (18%). Self-employment comes third at 11% — nearly double the share of global talent currently working for themselves (6%) — followed by part-time roles (11%) and part-time roles with a side hustle (10%).

Both current full-time and part-time employees show a strong preference for adding a side hustle to their current working arrangements.

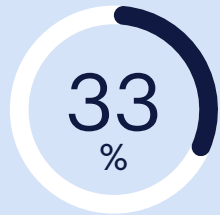
This trend — also seen in our previous report [The Gen Z workplace blueprint](#) — suggests that workers are not only looking for additional income streams but also new, more varied ways of making a living.

the rise of the side hustle

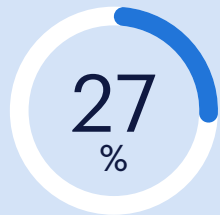
preferred working models (top three preferences)

talent with a full-time role
who say they prefer a:

full-time role



full-time role
with side hustle



self-employed



talent with a part-time role
who say they prefer a:

part-time role



part-time role
with side hustle



full-time role



me

stay for work-life balance, leave for pay.

As they redefine their relationship with work, talent are increasingly prioritising autonomy and outcomes over the traditional 9-to-5 schedule.

Although currently constrained by market conditions, flexibility and work-life balance are essential to this new definition of work.

While pay attracts talent (81%) over and above other considerations, work-life balance (46%) is the main reason for staying in the current role, topping job security and pay/benefits (23% each).

The share of those who say their job offers a good work-life balance has fallen slightly, from 79% to 77%, with Baby Boomers experiencing the highest levels among all generations and Gen Z the least (69%).

Not surprisingly, with a more cautious approach to changing jobs, requests for flexible working have risen from 45% in 2025 to 48% this year.

Nevertheless, the share of those whose jobs provide flexibility in terms of working hours — “I can control when I work” — is down slightly from 65% to 62% since last year.

Non-office workers (60%) continue to have less freedom over when they work than their office colleagues (65%). Among the generations, Baby Boomers feel that they have more freedom in choosing their working hours (66%) than their younger colleagues, especially Gen Z (59%).

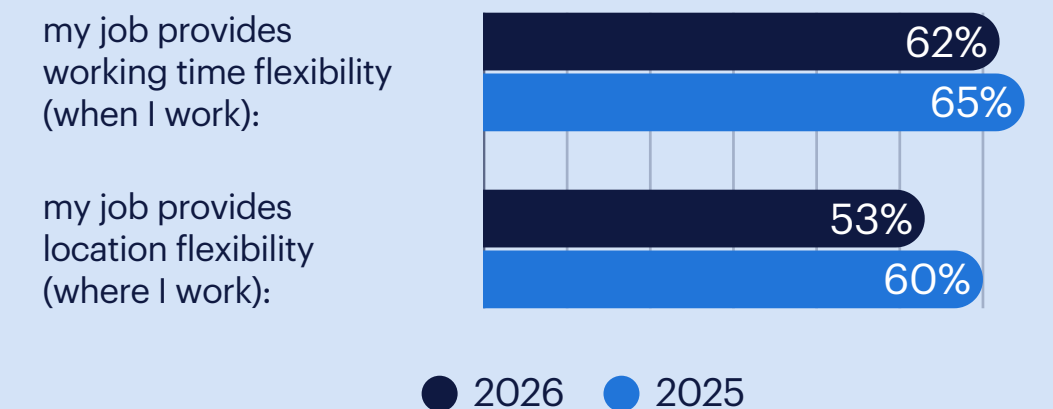
As for work location, 34% of respondents agreed that employers have become stricter about enforcing office attendance, a scrutiny most acutely felt by Millennials (38%).

These return-to-office mandates are visibly affecting people’s location autonomy — where they work — which is down to 53% from 60% in 2025.

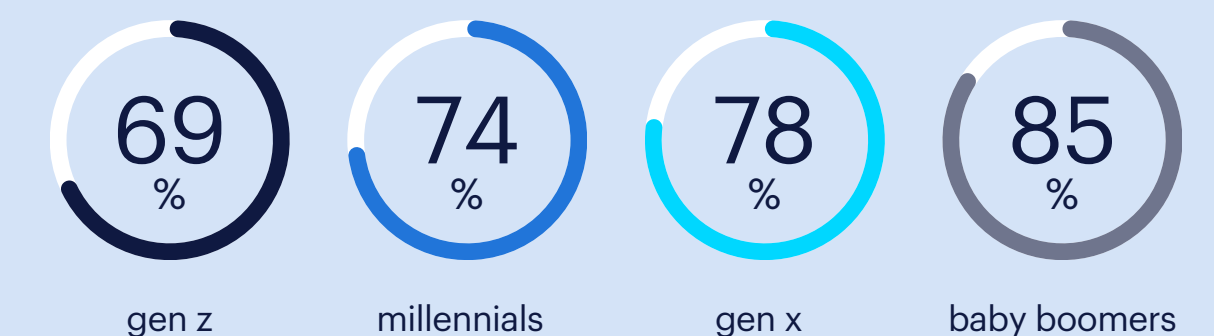
However, flexible working is only part of the equation as talent are seeking more comprehensive autonomy in performing their work. One example of this is having flexibility in the projects they choose, which more than half of talent (56%) report they are able to do. This is likely based on the strong relationships of trust that workers have with their managers and the leadership, leading to high levels of trust in independent productivity.

Yet, for employers, this quest for greater autonomy, while judged a positive, also poses new challenges in terms of facilitating greater independence.

flexibility in decline



my job offers a good work-life balance



me

autonomy is the new loyalty pass.

As greater autonomy in how work is performed becomes more central for talent, employers need to balance this priority with retaining control over outcomes.

While UK employers believe that greater autonomy leads to higher engagement, productivity and retention in their organisation (76% agree), their attitudes to different types of autonomy vary.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) say that their organisation lets talent set their own working location, yet 90% don't allow workers to set their own schedules, such as working hours.

Employers are also cautious that greater autonomy could lead to challenges in collaboration and communication (26% agree; 74% disagree). Over half of those surveyed felt that workers expect too much autonomy in the work setting (44% agree; 56% disagree).

Employers must bridge this control gap because work-life balance and flexibility are such strong motivators for talent to stay in a role, even when other factors — such as pay — are less competitive.

Despite volatile economic conditions, slightly more respondents than last year quit a job that didn't fit with their personal life, up to 34% from 31%. There was also a small uptick in the number of talent who left because of a lack of flexibility, rising to 32% from 30%. Half of the respondents said they quit because they lacked the independence to work on their terms, such as setting their own agenda or meeting personal working requirements, such as flexible or remote working.

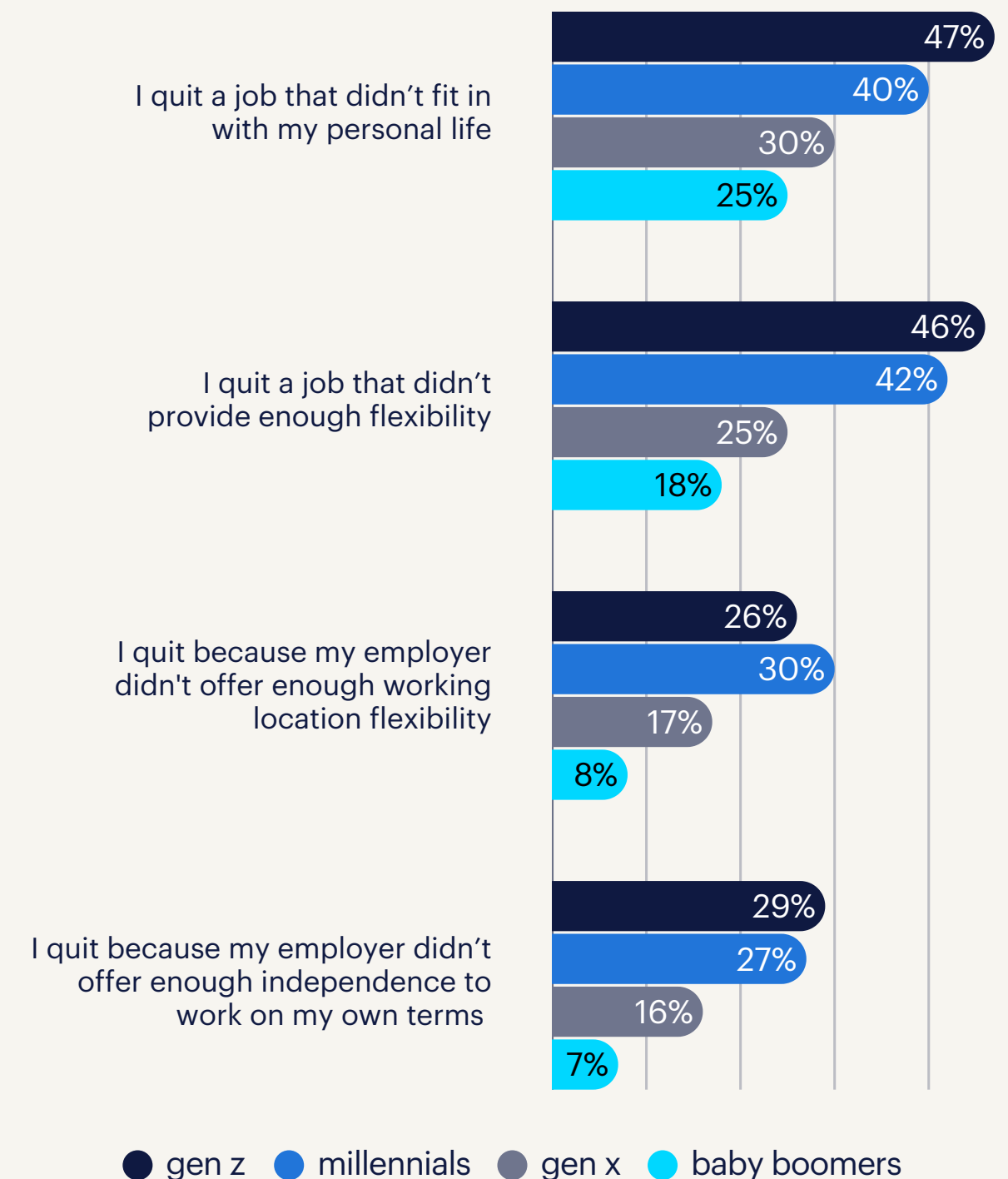
Among the different generations, Gen Z was the most likely to have quit for these reasons.

Even though pay emerged as the main reason for moving to another role, many would also not entertain accepting a new job if there was no flexibility around work location (57%) or working hours (66%).

This quest for autonomy is increasingly used as a strategic lever by those with the most market influence. Talent in high-density AI markets like Malaysia and the US, for example, report the highest “openness” to new opportunities (60% and 49% respectively).

Organisations have an opportunity to improve retention by acting on the connection between autonomy and agency that talent prioritise. While employers often still view workplaces through the lens of established processes and roles, talent have a much more fluid perspective on their job. The solution is not compromise, but redesigning work to keep leaders in charge while giving talent the freedom they need to excel, remain engaged and stay.

autonomy and retention across generations



me

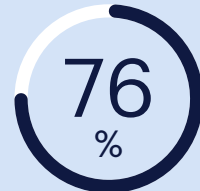
employer-talent gap analysis.

Employers need to be responsive to talent’s search for autonomy and self-defined ways of working and career paths. The goal is to develop new approaches that prioritise what matters most to talent but in ways that enable employers to retain control over outcomes.

autonomy has come a long way...

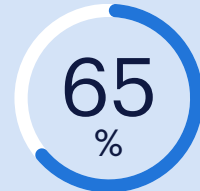
employers

greater autonomy leads to higher engagement, productivity and retention in my organisation



talent

my job provides flexibility in terms of working hours — I can control when I work



talent

My job provides flexibility in terms of location — I can decide where I work from



... but still remains a challenge for employers

autonomy can lead to challenges in collaboration and communication

26%

employers

workers today expect too much autonomy

44%

employers



employers have to cater for different career journeys

I value skills and experience over formal qualifications when hiring talent

82% employers

the traditional linear career path (one career/company with regular promotions to management roles) is outdated

78% employers

solutions are needed to avoid talent turnover



talent

I quit a job because my employer didn't offer enough independence to work on my own terms (e.g., set own agenda or decide own assignments/deadlines)

talent 34% I want to follow a traditional linear career path

talent 33% I want to have different types of jobs throughout my career



me

key learnings.

1.

crafting portfolio career paths

Given the uncertainty many talent feel, there are mixed preferences for the ideal career path. Some clearly see the traditional linear career ladder and a full-time job as a reassuring guide, while others prefer less predictable, more diverse portfolio careers. Employers who can offer a wide range of pathways may stand out more when competing for talent. Defining these paths jointly will better match talent ambitions and build greater trust between employers and workers.

2.

pay attracts, work-life balance retains

Talent are more cautious about their demands, but work-life balance remains the biggest motivator for them to stay in a role. While pay is the factor most likely to lure them away for new opportunities, many will not move at the expense of losing flexibility. At a time when it may not always be possible to match competitors' pay packages, employers can leverage flexibility as a key differentiator.

3.

autonomy requires trust

What started as a demand for flexible working hours or location — such as working from home — is increasingly evolving into a much wider need for autonomy. This goes beyond the “where” and “when”, to include aspects such as approaching work and delivering the desired outcomes on your own terms rather than working within rigid traditional frameworks. Granting this autonomy is a clear way for an employer to demonstrate they trust their people, and in turn, inspire loyalty. Trust will be vital on both sides to overcome employers' reservations, and this can be built by working on solutions together.



looking ahead.

the great workforce adaptation: closing the gap.

Our findings reveal that the 2026 business agenda for growth is marked by a critical disconnect. While business leaders in the UK are unanimous in their growth expectations (100%), the talent powering that growth remains unconvinced, with only half sharing this optimism. This “confidence gap” is a structural risk.

It signals the need for a fundamental shift we call the Great Workforce Adaptation. As we navigate this new era, the priority must shift from simply managing talent to actively realigning with them.

The following insights offer a blueprint for closing this divide, transforming uncertainty into a shared engine for growth.

insight 1: overcome the AI reality gap through augmentation

A reality gap persists regarding technology: while employers increase their efficiency plans, 1 in 5 workers believe there will be no impact on their tasks. This leaves talent vulnerable; success lies in pairing human strengths with machine efficiency, not job displacement.

opportunity for employers:
Shift the narrative from threat to task augmentation. Be transparent about AI’s impact to help talent move from denial to preparation.

opportunity for talent:
Close the AI reality gap by moving to AI fluency. Proactively upskill to become the human teacher in the loop, focusing on judgments and roles only people can provide.

insight 2: bridge the confidence gap to unlock growth

Trust is the key to stability in a volatile global economy. With trust in senior leadership dipping, the relationship with direct managers has become the organisation's most critical asset. Growth can only be unlocked when businesses and talent align on their optimism for the future.

opportunity for employers:
Empower managers as trust architects to provide the reassurance talent needs to remain engaged amid uncertainty.

opportunity for talent:
Leverage the multigenerational advantage through reciprocal mentorship, where Gen Z provides tech fluency and older generations transfer industry judgment.

insight 3: support the rise of portfolio careers

The linear career ladder is over; 78% of employers in the UK agree it is outdated. Talent are mitigating risk by building portfolio careers based on variety rather than tenure. While pay remains the top attractor, work-life balance is now the primary lever for retention.

opportunity for employers:
Prioritise balance to retain the best. Supporting fluid, non-linear career paths will secure loyalty from a workforce seeking security through flexibility.

opportunity for talent:
Build security through variety. Future-proof your employability by curating a diverse range of experiences rather than climbing a single ladder.



about the survey.

The Randstad Workmonitor, now in its 23rd year, explores the views of talent in 35 markets across Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Americas, providing an inside look at their attitudes, ambitions and expectations as the world of work continues to transform.

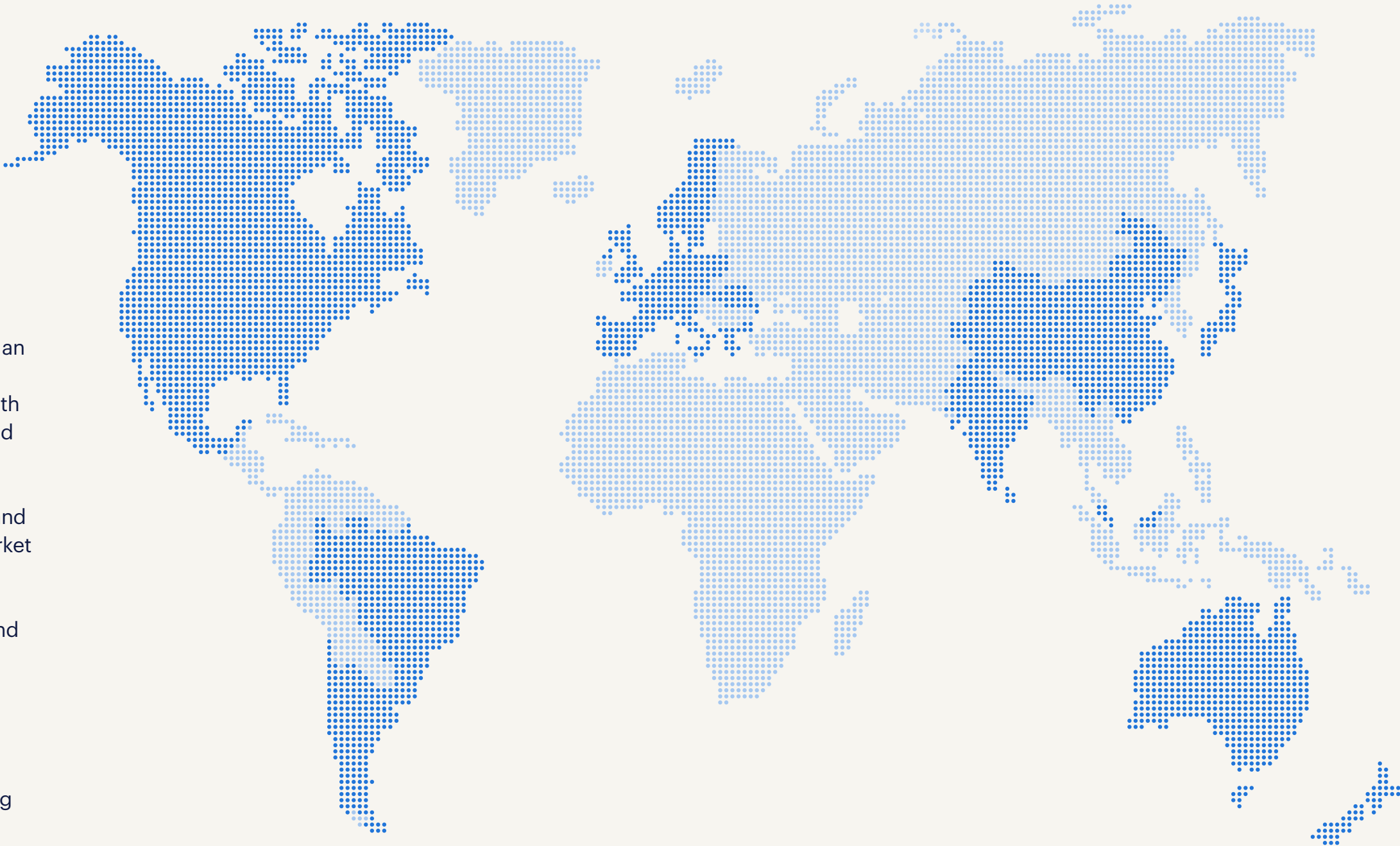
Through this comprehensive study, we seek to hear and amplify the voice of talent — specifically, what they want and expect from their employers and how willing they are to ask for it. To do this, we conceptualise and measure the gap between workforce realities and aspirations, tracking how this evolves over time. In parallel, the study captures the perspectives of employers, enabling a direct comparison between employer intent and talent expectations to identify where alignment exists and where gaps remain.

To capture the views of talent, the study was conducted online among workers aged 18-67 who are either employed for at least 24 hours per week, sole traders, or unemployed but considering looking for a job in the future, with a minimum and maximum sample size of 250 and 1,750 interviews per market.

Employer perspectives were captured through an online survey among C-suite and senior talent leaders at global and regional organisations, with a minimum and maximum sample size of 20 and 55 interviews per market.

Evalueserve was used for sampling purposes, and secondary data was compiled by Randstad Market Intelligence from over 3 million job postings.

The 2025 survey was conducted between 10 and 28 October 2025 among 27,062 workers, and between 9 and 30 October 2025 among 1,225 employers, across 35 markets including Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong SAR, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, the United States and Uruguay.



27,000+
talent surveyed

1,225+
employers surveyed

35
markets

select a market.

<u>argentina</u>	<u>germany</u>	<u>norway</u>
<u>australia</u>	<u>greece</u>	<u>poland</u>
<u>austria</u>	<u>hong kong SAR</u>	<u>portugal</u>
<u>belgium</u>	<u>hungary</u>	<u>romania</u>
<u>brazil</u>	<u>india</u>	<u>singapore</u>
<u>canada</u>	<u>italy</u>	<u>spain</u>
<u>chile</u>	<u>japan</u>	<u>sweden</u>
<u>china</u>	<u>luxembourg</u>	<u>switzerland</u>
<u>czech republic</u>	<u>malaysia</u>	<u>türkiye</u>
<u>denmark</u>	<u>mexico</u>	<u>united kingdom</u>
<u>france</u>	<u>netherlands</u>	<u>united states</u>
	<u>new zealand</u>	<u>uruguay</u>





The UK market shows optimism about future business growth, with employers and talent reporting confidence above the global average. Placing high value on internal workplace relationships, demonstrating stronger trust in colleagues and managers than other markets. UK talent is more skeptical about the positive impact of AI on productivity and is less likely to be taking on a second job to cope with the rising cost of living.



market snapshot: the uk.

me and the world: from displacement to augmentation.

A more fraught external environment and the impact of AI mean both talent and employers need to adapt traditional work formats and roles.

- 100% of employers are confident of growing next year, compared to 95% across the globe.
- 52% of talent surveyed share their optimism, more than the global average (51%).
- To help with the rising cost of living, 33% of talent state they have taken on or are looking to take on a second job, compared to the global average of 40%.

When considering AI:

- 55% of talent feel that AI helps improve their productivity (global: 62%), as do 58% of employers (global: 54%).
- 64% of talent feel confident that they can use the latest technology (global: 69%).
- 64% of employers estimate AI will impact a high proportion of tasks (50-100%), with 49% of talent agreeing (global: 58% vs. 53%).
- 45% of talent believe the adoption of AI in the workplace will mainly benefit companies, not them (global: 47%).

me and my team: managers are key to stability.

The workplace is under pressure, yet remains a balancing force in an increasingly unpredictable economic environment.

- 72% of talent trust the leadership of their company (global: 72%).
- 78% say that they trust their colleagues (global: 76%).
- 76% of talent say they have a strong relationship with their manager, compared to 72% of their global peers.
- 74% believe their manager has their best interests in mind (global: 71%).

Collaboration across generations boosts productivity:

- 77% of talent believe that they are more productive when collaborating and taking others' views on board (global: 78%).
- 76% of employers say that remote or hybrid work has made collaboration more challenging (global: 81%).
- 71% of talent say they rely on people from different generations to broaden their perspectives (global: 74%).
- 94% of employers surveyed highlight generational diversity as a productivity lever (global: 95%), and 84% want to see management spend more time improving team collaboration (global: 90%).

me: the rise of self-defined success.

Talent have become more cautious navigating their careers, but still want to chart their own course and not abandon what matters to them.

- 34% of talent say they want to follow a traditional, linear career path (global: 41%), but 33% say they want to have a portfolio career, switching sectors and jobs throughout their career (global: 38%).
- While pay attracts talent (83% vs. 81% globally), work-life balance (51% vs. 46% globally) is the main reason for staying in the current role, topping pay/benefits (22%; global: 23%) and job security (21%; global: 23%).
- 76% of employers agree that greater autonomy leads to higher engagement, productivity and retention in their organisation (vs. 72% globally).
- 34% of talent still say they quit jobs that didn't fit their personal lives (global: 39%).
- 19% left because they weren't given enough independence to work on their own terms (global: 25%).
- 43% of talent would not consider accepting a new job if there was no flexibility around work location and 44% would not accept a role without working hours flexibility, compared to 43% each globally.



your thoughts,
let's start a conversation.

inquiries
press@randstad.com

[request a call back](#)

