

**WHO
ARE
WE?**

**2026 GLOBAL
HUMAN RESOURCES REPORT**

THE 2026 GLOBAL HUMAN RESOURCES REPORT

Four findings from this year's data frame who we are in HR. These findings present a highly fractured view of our profession with some room for optimism about its potential evolution.

There are sharp divisions on questions including are we committed to serving the business or just HR? We will sacrifice to succeed at work or do we reject that premise? Are companies a force for good? Should our employees have more power over wages and working conditions?

It's good news that there's some alignment among our CHRO respondents to those, and other, survey items. It's bad news that there's a difference – often significant – in the opinions of those below CHROs and in COEs.

If there are two (or more) camps in HR, does this create a drag on HR execution? Does the business or organization see us as unified or as a house divided against itself? To what extent do these differences interfere with execution of the business strategy? The HR agenda?

A report titled “Who Are We” also begs the question “Who Do We Need to Be?” How we show up as HR leaders must meet business needs in a fast paced, quickly transforming, unforgiving marketplace. Will you have the enthusiasm to develop creative solutions if you're not in HR because you care about your company's financial success? If you're not optimistic about the HR profession, how will you grow others to become strategic and influential HR leaders?

We share facts, findings and observations throughout our report. We hope you use this report with your HR team to discuss capabilities, mindsets and attitudes, and how to best combine those to deliver the results your organization needs.

Who Are We?

Four findings from this year's Global HR Census

Four findings. One uncomfortable truth: HR is not one profession. It is several, divided by worldview, stalling in the middle and uniquely different at the top.

1 We Are Divided

Four fundamentally different mindsets exist within HR about business, labor and individual sacrifice for careers.

50%

of HR professionals don't agree that companies are a force for good.

[See page 5](#)

2 We Are Stressed & Working Hard

We work long hours and experience stress, but still find peak engagement at elevated stress levels.

73%

engagement of those who say they feel significant stress "sometimes." Among the highest measured.

[See page 12](#)

3 We Are Stalling in the Middle

Experienced HR practitioners three levels from the top are the most disengaged group in our profession.

44%

engagement of those with 9 - 15 years of experience and 3 levels below the CHRO (21 points below average).

[See page 17](#)

4 We Are Our Best at CHRO

CHROs behave, act and work differently than nearly all other HR professionals.

82%

of CHROs are Highly or Extremely engaged. Zero are disengaged.

[See page 20](#)

Four things HR leaders should do differently

These recommendations are made to the field but specifically to CHROs, whose position and authority best equip them to act. They are not easy recommendations but rather ones that directly and honestly address the challenges that the Census surfaces.

1 Make commercial fluency (and interest) a hiring and promotion criterion

Commercial orientation and seniority travel together. Ensure your HR Success Model screens for genuine commercial belief, not just business acumen. Try to convert skeptics on your team through exposure to the business and customers.

2 Confront the worldview gap in your HR function directly

Half your function may be skeptical that companies are a force for good. A decent portion don't care if employees get more negotiating power over your company. Share your worldview and your vision at HRLT retreats, team meetings, all-hands. Listen and learn from theirs.

3 Create focused activities to support the 9–15 year, three-levels-below cohort

Bring this stalled cohort closer to the business, strategy and operations. Use HRLT relationships, strategic exposure and direct career conversations to understand ambition. Use role redesign to increase scope, autonomy and meaning.

4 Reframe sacrifice as a norm; be honest about what reaching the top requires

The willingness to sacrifice for success survey item shows the largest behavioral gap. Be direct in career conversations about extra hours, trade-offs and challenging roles. Help people make conscious choices early; not discover the reality at year 15.

More on p. 23

1. We Are Divided

While previous years' Census data suggested divisions within HR, this year's data lays bare stark differences in attitudes within our profession. These distinct "camps" show highly varying motivations and beliefs for what they do and why they're in HR.

An overall analysis shows there are four distinct camps along two axes - Optimist - Pessimist and Commercial - Non-Commercial (see Chart 1). The differences among them challenge us to think about who is best positioned to serve the business.

There are clearly business leaders with a passion to deliver results for their companies. There are those working long weeks while maintaining high engagement. And there are those who experience neither, which raises important questions.

If someone is not in HR primarily to achieve business outcomes, that might be seen as unfortunate but not disqualifying. However, how should we approach someone who strongly disagrees that companies are a force for good in the world? Can they align with a pro-business HR agenda? What about those whose fundamental orientation is pro-labor? Does that color their effort and engagement in a company that opposes organizing?

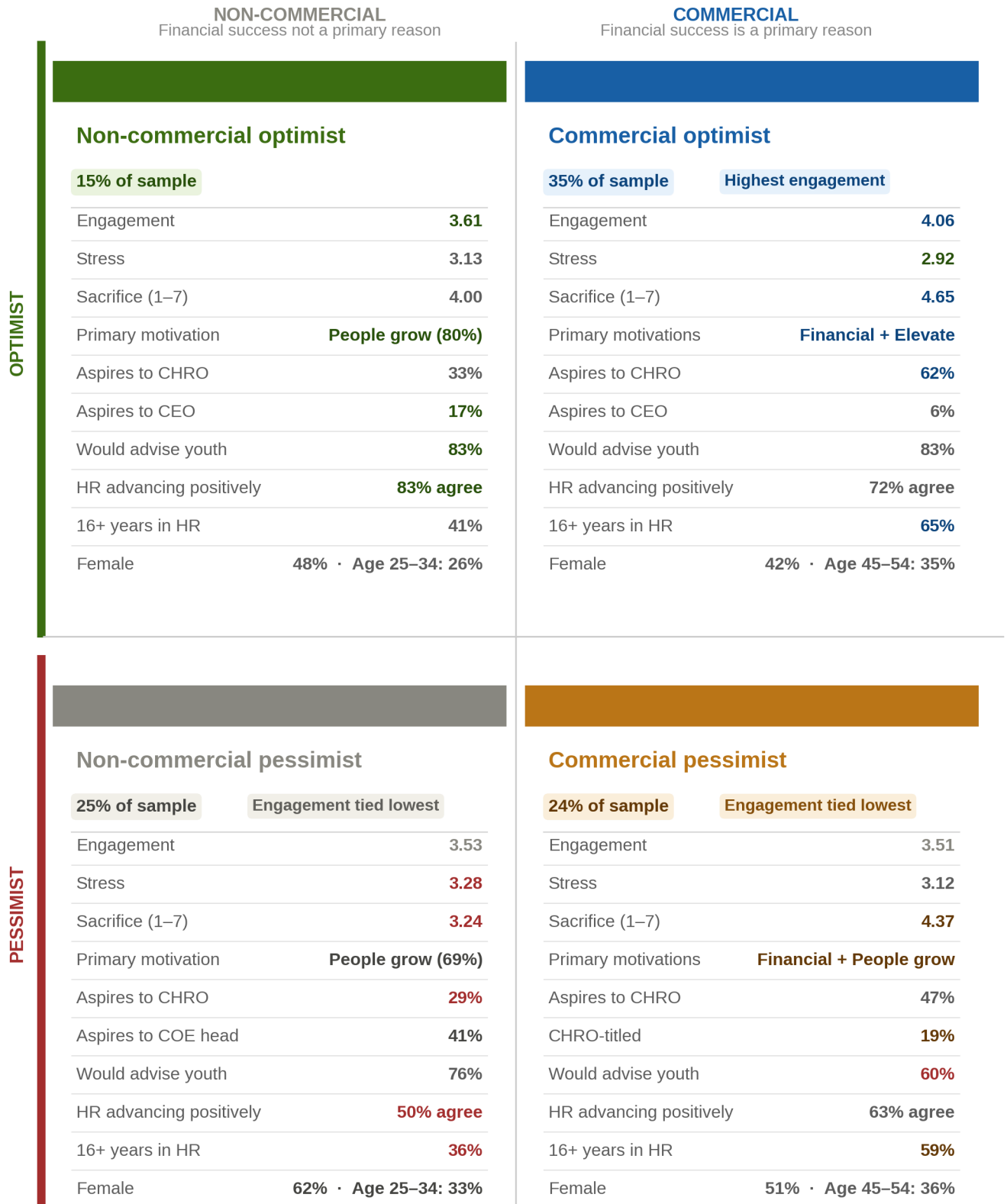
Given HR's decades-long struggle to prove our business bona fides, our ideal face to the business is one that knows, gets and loves business. There's a camp for that too. The four quadrants are:

Commercial Optimist (35%)

This is the most coherent professional identity in the census, and the one that most closely resembles the profile of the HR leaders who reach the top.

Commercial Optimists believe companies are broadly a force for good, and they are in

Chart 1



Scale metrics

Engagement

1–5 scale

1 = *Not at all engaged* · 3 = *Moderately engaged*
5 = *Extremely engaged*

Stress

1–5 scale

1 = *Never/almost never* · 3 = *Sometimes*
5 = *Very often (weekly)*

Sacrifice (1–7)

7-point agreement scale

1 = *Strongly disagree* · 4 = *Neither agree*
7 = *Strongly agree*

Quadrant definitions

Optimist

Agrees/strongly agrees that companies are generally a force for good in the world

Pessimist

Neutral, disagrees, or strongly disagrees that companies are a force for good

Commercial

Financial success is a primary reason they are in the HR profession

Non-commercial

Financial success is secondary or not a significant reason for being in HR

Other metrics explained

Primary motivation

The Q26 reason most frequently cited as a primary reason for being in HR

16+ years in HR

Share of quadrant with 16 or more years of professional experience in HR

CHRO-titled

Share currently holding the CHRO title (not just the top HR role in their org)

Would advise youth

Share who would recommend HR as a career to a young person today

HR primarily to help their organization succeed financially. Those two convictions reinforce each other — if you believe the institution is legitimate, it's logical to commit yourself to its commercial success.

The result is the highest engagement of any quadrant (4.06 or 77%), the lowest stress (2.92), and a willingness to sacrifice that is nearly a full point above the next closest group.

Sixty-two percent aspire to the CHRO role. Sixty-five percent have sixteen or more years in the profession. They are experienced, commercially fluent and professionally optimistic — and 83% would advise a young person to enter HR.

This group's optimism appears to be the product of long careers in which they have found ways to integrate the commercial demands of their employers with their own sense of professional purpose.

The question for the profession is not whether this group will lead, but how to find more people who are engaged by this path.

Non-Commercial Optimist (15%)

Non-Commercial Optimists share the Commercial Optimist's belief that companies are forces for good but they are in HR to develop people rather than drive financial performance. Think practitioners who find meaning primarily within their craft.

They are also the group most likely to aspire to CEO (17%), which is three times the rate of any other quadrant. This suggests a group that sees organizations as worthy of leading, and who may intend to lead them — just not necessarily through the CHRO seat.

Their engagement (3.61 or 63%) is solid but unremarkable, and they are younger and earlier-career

than the Commercial Optimists.

They are also the most bullish on HR itself — 83% say HR is advancing positively, and 83% would recommend it to a young person.

The risk for the profession is that this group's talent is misdirected for lack of a commercial purpose. They're a powerful force if harnessed and lead in the right direction.

Commercial Pessimist (24%)

The Commercial Pessimist profile presents a paradoxical combination of what sustained commercial ambition looks like without having institutional confidence.

This group is the most senior of the four quadrants — 19% are CHRO-titled, the highest of any cell — and their sacrifice willingness (4.37 out of 7) remains high.

They are working long hours, they are financially motivated, and many of them have reached or are approaching the top. But they do not believe companies are broadly forces for good.

Their disenchantment shows. Only 60% would advise a young person to enter HR, the lowest of any quadrant. 63% agree that HR is advancing positively, a number that's noticeably lower than both optimist groups.

This segment is worth our attention. These are not people who became cynical early and gave up.

They seem to be committed commercially, personally and professionally and arrived at skepticism through experience rather than ideology.

Non-Commercial Pessimist (25%)

This quadrant carries the lowest willingness

to sacrifice in the matrix (3.24 out of 7) and is tied for the lowest engagement (3.53 or 58%).

Non-Commercial Pessimists neither believe companies are forces for good nor are they primarily motivated by commercial outcomes. They are in HR to develop people and represent employee interests, in organizations they view with skepticism.

They are the youngest and most junior of the four groups, the most female (62%), and the most concentrated in Talent Management (39%) and L&D.

Only 29% aspire to the CHRO role; 41% aim for COE leadership. This says that they see their professional ceiling as functional expertise rather than enterprise leadership.

They are practitioners who care deeply about people but who don't trust organizations, presumably including the ones that employ them. They also don't have strong aspiration toward the senior roles that would give them structural power to change things.

Is this group a drag on your HR agenda? A group with latent potential that needs activation? Can you serve your organization well if you don't believe in it or even commercial pursuits in general?

The data doesn't answer those questions definitively, but they're questions that every CHRO should be asking.

Where the Divisions Show

Selected survey items directly highlight the wide range of attitudes and behaviors in the field. The four quadrants powerfully show the groups in HR. But underneath those quadrants are some equally powerful data points that may help you better understand each group.

Willingness to Sacrifice to Advance Career

This question helps separate the four quadrants and the large distribution of responses below suggests why. Respondents were evenly split in their agreement (Agree/Strongly Agree & Disagree/Strongly Disagree) about whether they are willing to sacrifice for their career.

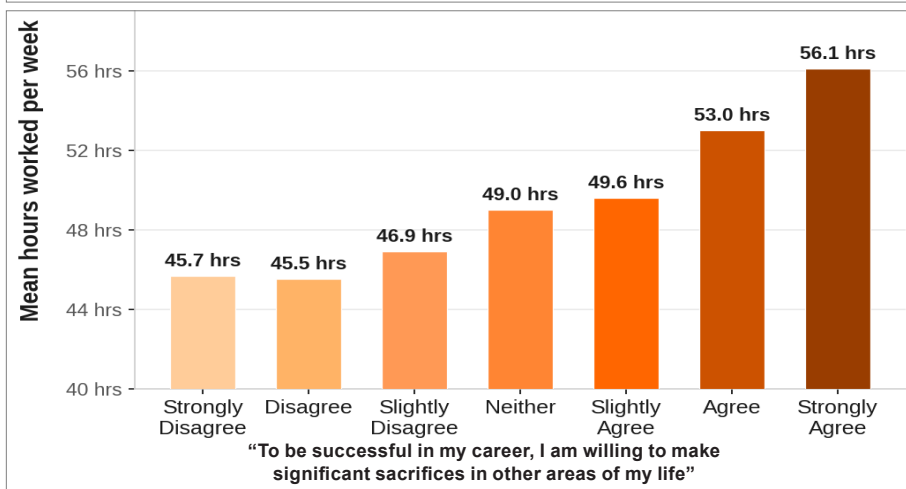


You may see the Slightly Agree category at 28% and think this means that a majority of people are willing to sacrifice.

But when we correlate this question to the item on number of hours worked per week, we see that Slightly Agree respondents only work a fractional amount more than those who are neutral on this question.

So Slightly Agreeing that you're willing to sacrifice has little practical influence on your actual sacrifice.

The good news is that there's a strong correlation between those who say they're willing to sacrifice (or not) and their hours worked.



Attitudes on Corporate Social Issues

We asked a few questions on social issues and found the answers were also significant drivers of the four quadrants. Given the strong business focus that HR has tried to cultivate over the past few decades, it is surprising to see that 50% of respondents could not agree that **“Companies are generally a force for good in the world.”**

We included the word “generally” in the question to soften what could feel like an absolute statement. But 32% of respondents were Neutral, 15% Disagreed and 3% Strongly Disagreed. CHROs were the most positive group with 57% either Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing with the statement.

That also says that more than four of ten CHRO's cannot affirmatively say that companies are a force for good in the world.

Is there an anti-corporate wing in HR?

The 2026 HR Census data begs the headline question. We find an interesting confluence of responses to the questions we asked about business issues.

50% of respondents do not agree that companies are a force for good. That's a challenging starting point for a profession that prides itself on being a business partner and insists that they deserve to be at the executive table. It calls into question how one can serve an organization successfully if one doesn't, at a bare minimum, believe in its goodness.

41% say that helping their business to be financially successful is not a primary reason they are in HR. It is certainly possible to contribute positively at work without this belief. It seems likely, however, that those who aren't primarily at work to help their employers will be less able or willing to direct their efforts to best serve the business. Function-driven, rather than business-driven, initiatives are far more likely to emerge in this scenario inspired by ideological, not financial, criteria.

40% agree that "Employees should have more negotiating power at work for wages and conditions." This is a transparently pro-labor/pro-union sentiment that's anathema to the stance of most HR departments and their companies.

When we also see that "Knows the business deeply" is the lowest rated capability, by far, out of seven options, it suggests at least an antipathy towards business and perhaps an animosity.

These sentiments are registered by a very meaningful percentage of HR respondents so can't be dismissed as being from a few disengaged or dissatisfied employees. They are most prominently displayed below the CHRO level but can be found at all seniority levels.

Their attitudes are clear – their actions are not. Does this group who doesn't believe companies are a force for good, who's not in HR to make their company financially successful, who wants employees to have more bargaining power: are they actively or passively against the corporate entity? Can they be brought into the fold of those who believe the opposite on those issues?

The Human Resource profession has worked for decades to convince executives that we're business-obsessed partners who are focused on strategy execution to advance the enterprise. It's important to recognize that there's a sizable percentage of our profession who likely are not.

There was high variability on the question of whether **employees should have more negotiating power for wages and conditions**. 8% Strongly Agreed, 32% Agreed and 38% were neutral. Only 22% actively disagreed that they should have more bargaining power.

The HR function is at the forefront of labor issues including union organizing campaigns, major layoffs and shutdowns, strikes and similar issues. They are not a neutral party in those situations. They are representatives of the company.

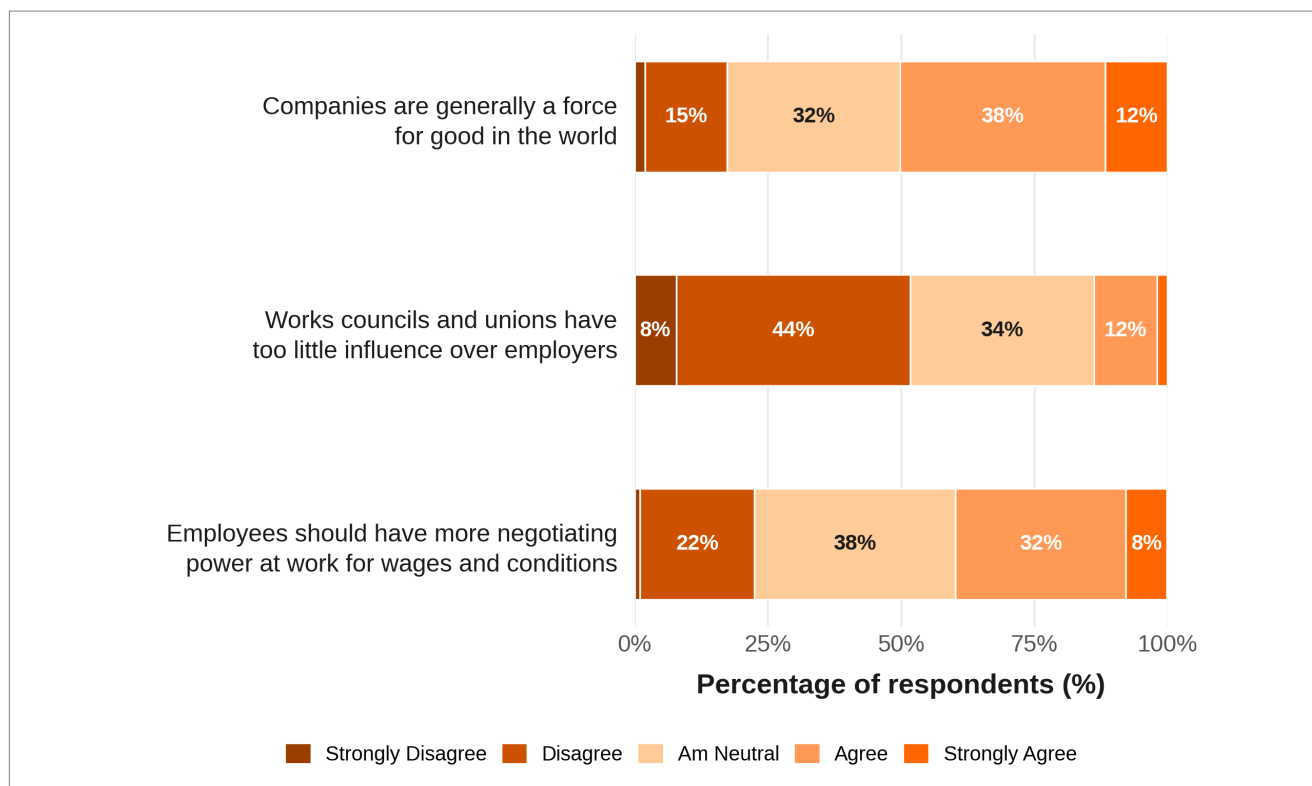
What signal does it send to business leaders reading this report that only 22% of their HR department believes that employees should *not* have more bargaining power over wages and conditions?

A final item with high variability was wheth-

er **Works Councils and unions have too little influence over employers**. That's a question related to the employee negotiating power question, but more specific in referencing the actual negotiating bodies.

While just 14% Agreed or Strongly Agreed with the item, 34% of respondents were neutral, for a total of 48% who didn't clearly disagree that they should have more influence.

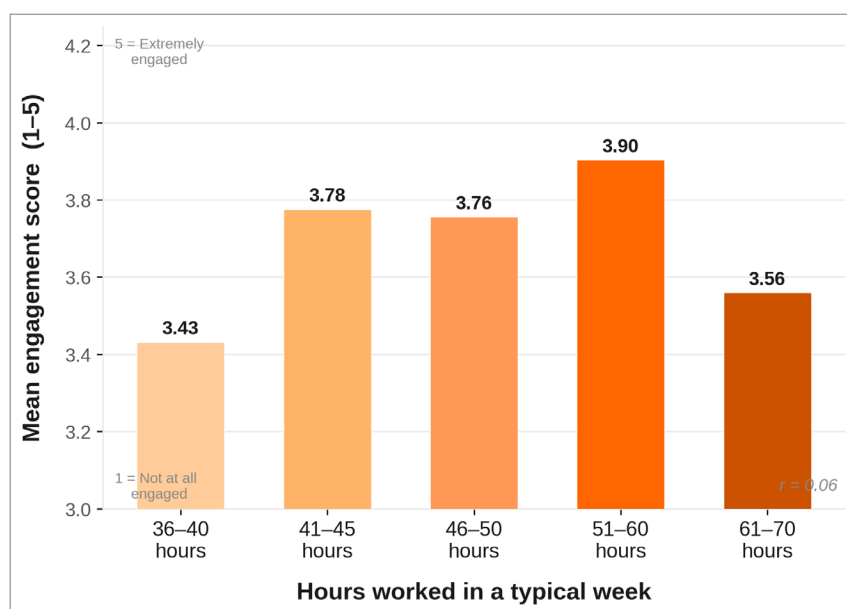
The same logic applies here as with the previous question. As a company representative who is on the opposite side of the bargaining table from these groups, how well are you representing your organization if your mindset is that they deserve more power over your company?



2. We Are Stressed & Working Hard; Engagement is Down

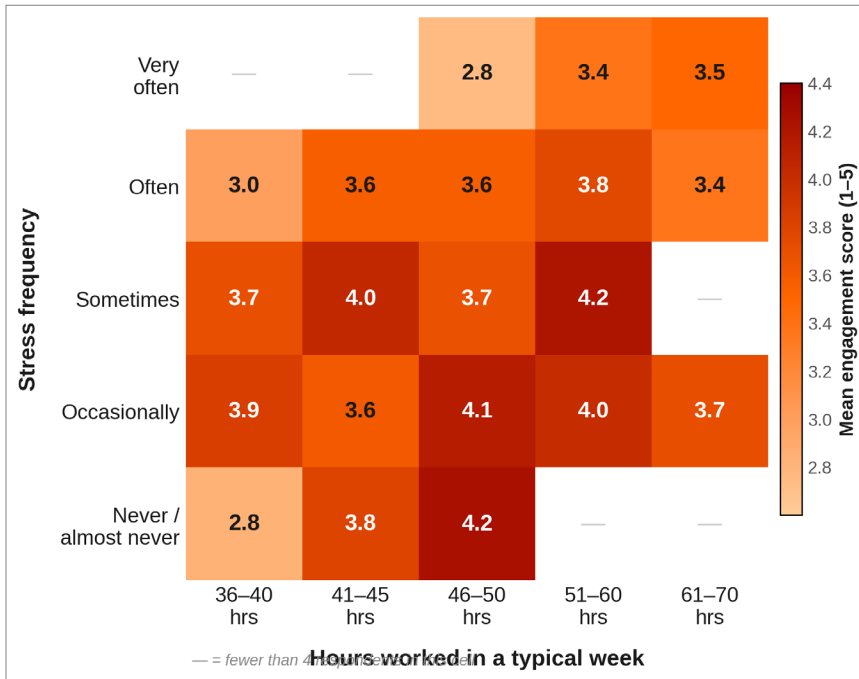
We are not a profession deterred by working hard and we're more engaged when we work harder, up to a point. The 2026 Census shows respondents work an average of 49.4 hours each week. More than 80% of us work more than 40 hours a week and nearly 40% of us work more than 50 hours in a typical week.

Engagement of HR professionals showed a mean score of 3.73, with 65% of the sample rating themselves as Highly or Extremely engaged. That engagement level is lower than the results in our two prior surveys.



Consistent with [Yerkes-Dodson Law](#), more hours *did not* decrease engagement. In fact, there is a near-normal curve in the hours vs. engagement relationship where the maximum engagement is reported by those working 51 - 60 hours a week.

The interesting interplay is between hours worked, engagement and stress. Hours worked and engagement increase together up to the point where we report feeling “significant stress” often each week.



That level of stress seems to cap engagement, although engagement is still the highest among more stressed individuals who work more hours.

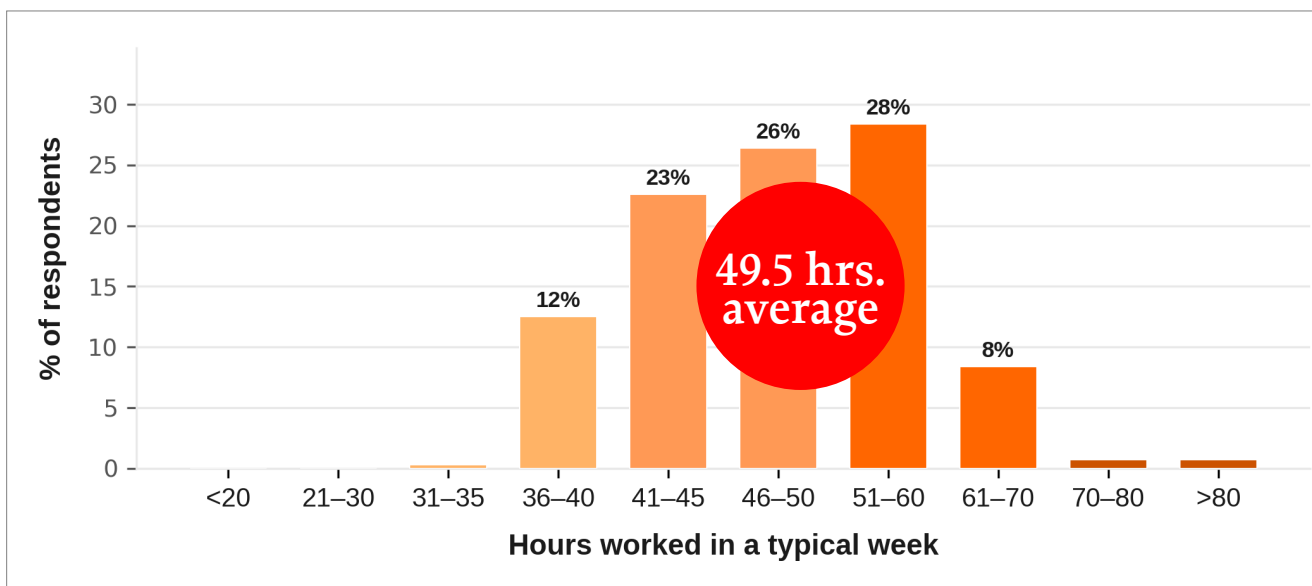
There's an undercurrent of thinking amongst some in HR that more hours worked must lead to burnout. There's no proof in the broader scientific literature to support that linear relationship and none in this survey.

A significant number of hours can be worked by an individual who reports a moderate frequency of significant

stress and who still experiences above average engagement.

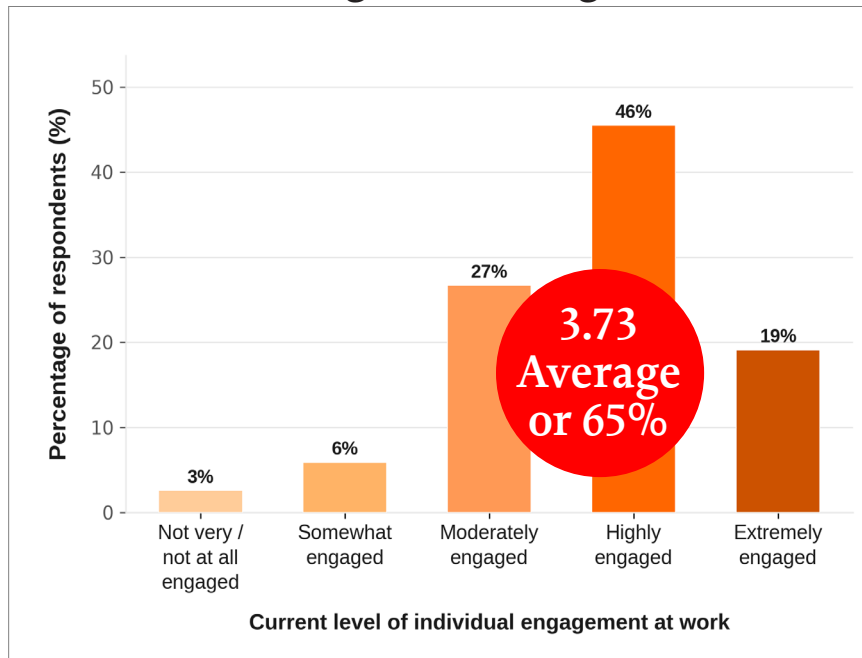
In fact, our survey finds the hardest working, most stressed individuals still report engagement not far below average.

Average Hours Worked in a Typical Week



What We Know About Engagement

Somewhat Strong but Falling



While having 65% of HR leaders as Highly or Extremely Engaged feels positive, our 2019 survey found 72% at that level and our 2024 survey found 70% at that level.

So the conclusion is that engagement is still strong but falling. It's down by 10% in the past 7 years.

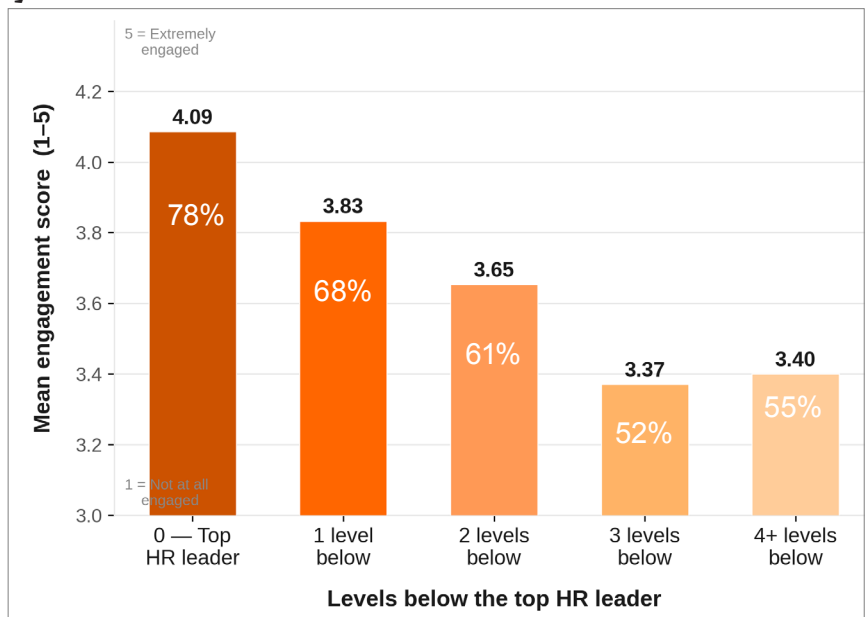
This is consistent with the significant drops in the self-reported willingness of HR leaders to sacrifice to advance their careers, a finding we cover later in the report.

Predictable Decrease by Level

Engagement falls meaningfully each level below the top HR job in the organization.

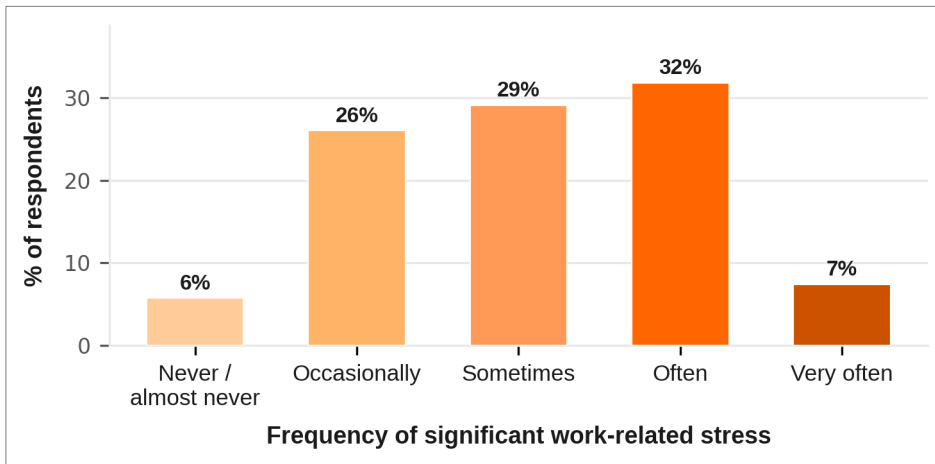
Two levels below the top HR leader engagement, at 61%, is below the average of 3.73. It bottoms out at 3.37 or 52% for those three levels below. The difference between the 3.4 four levels below and the 3.37 isn't significant.

This is a common engagement pattern, but one would hope HR could better manage the organizational factors that produce it.



What We Know About Stress

How HR leaders are experiencing stress is a complex and multi-layered story. On their face, the survey results show 68% of us are weekly sometimes, often or very often experiencing significant work-related stress. That



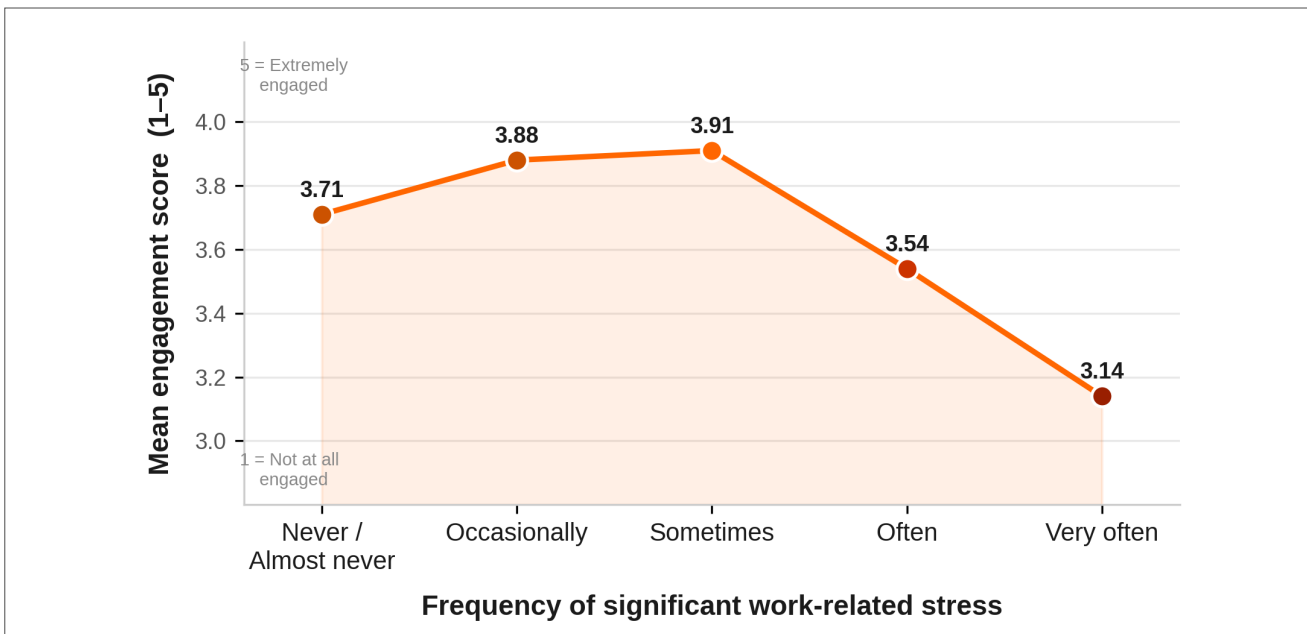
feels worrisome until we look at how those results relate to other survey items.

Those who Sometimes feel significant weekly work stress have the highest engagement of any respondent group at 3.91 or 73%, above the survey average (see

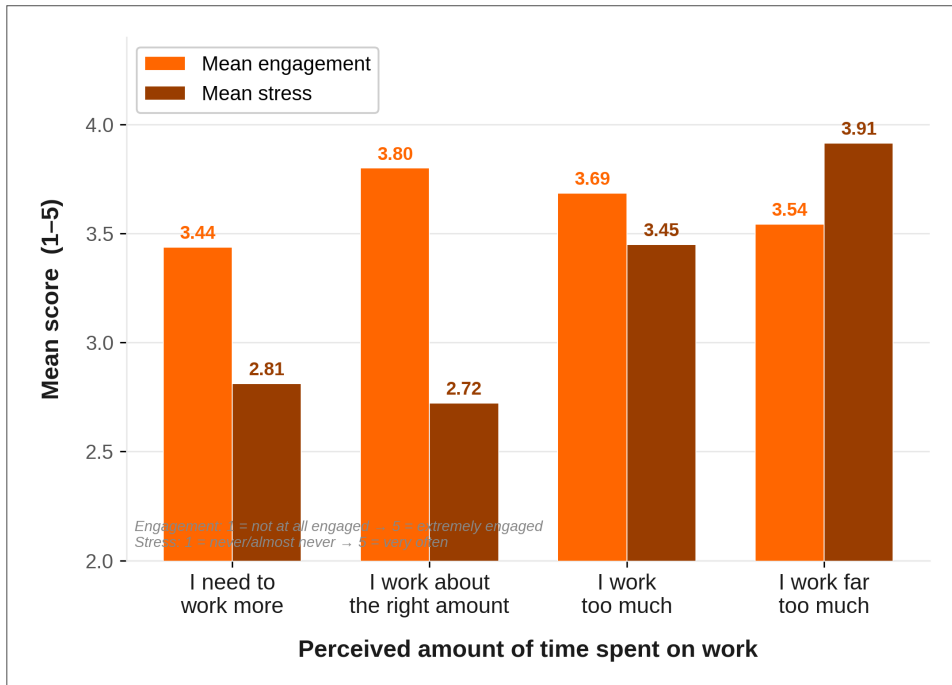
below).

There's a sharp cliff after that, as engagement falls to 3.54 or 59% and then 3.14 or 36% for those who respectively report Often or Very Often feeling that level of stress.

The Relationship between Frequency of Stress and Engagement



Perceived Work Overload Predicts Feelings of Stress, Engagement



As feelings of work overload increase, so do perceptions of stress. Those who feel they spend the right amount of time on work have the lowest perceived stress.

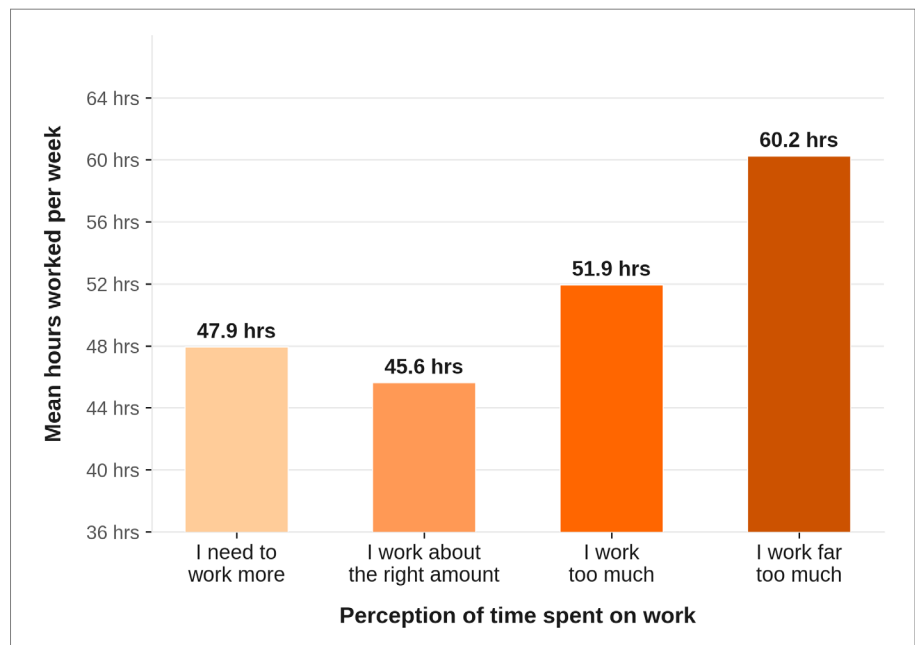
Their level is more than a full rating point below those who feel they work far too much.

Engagement also falls, but not sharply, as perceived work overload grows.

Actual Hours vs Feeling of Intensity Shows Unique Relationship

While perceived work intensity is related to stress (see above), the relationship of intensity to actual hours worked is more complex.

We see a strong correlation for much of the relationship but curiously those who say they need to work more, actually work 100 more hours a year than those who say they work the right amount. These individuals are working hard, but feel their effort isn't landing where it needs to.



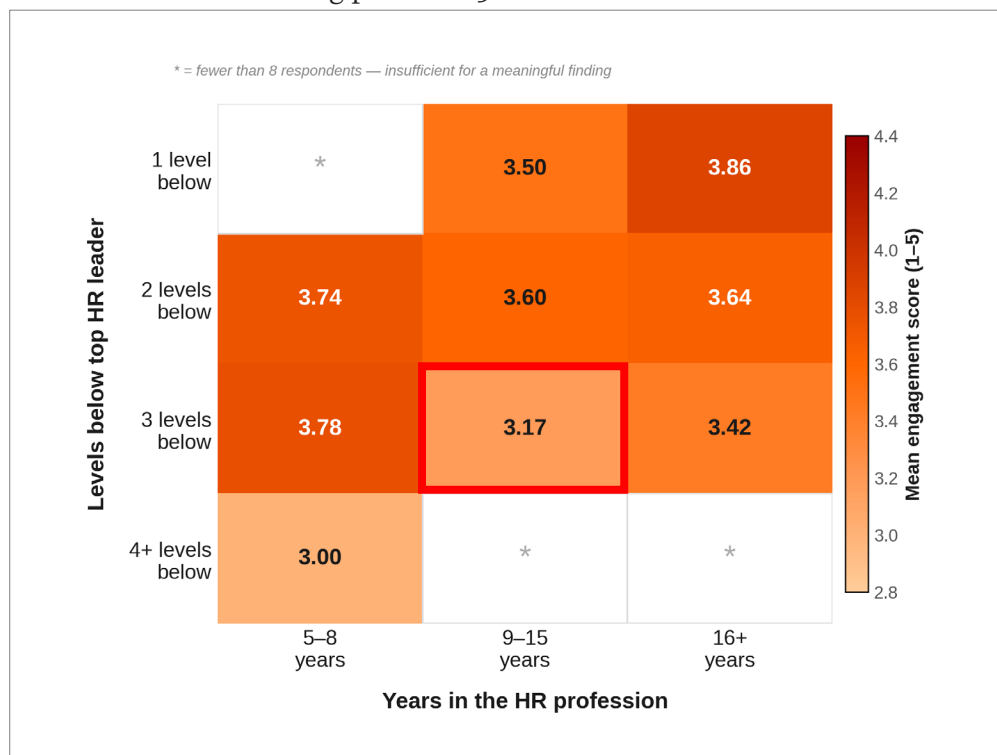
3. We Are Stalling in the Middle

A unique phenomenon happens in the mid-career window of today’s HR professional. Engagement bottoms out, stress peaks and CHRO aspiration fades.

Tenure (9–15 years) is the “when” of the stalling problem. 3 levels below is the “where” of the stalling problem. The intersection is the sharpest finding.

When we look at who sits 3 levels below, they are disproportionately in the 9–15 year cohort. The two variables are correlated but not identical.

This means that someone with 9–15 years of experience who is still 3 levels from the top is experiencing both pressures simultaneously.



These individuals have enough experience to know what they're missing but not enough seniority to create change.

This group scores a mean engagement of 3.17 — meaningfully below the sample average of 3.73 and the lowest of any cell in the chart with a sufficient sample to draw conclusions.

What makes this finding particularly notable is that it is not simply a function of being junior or new. These are experienced practitioners. Their disengagement cannot be dismissed as naivete or early-career uncertainty. It seems to be something more structural.

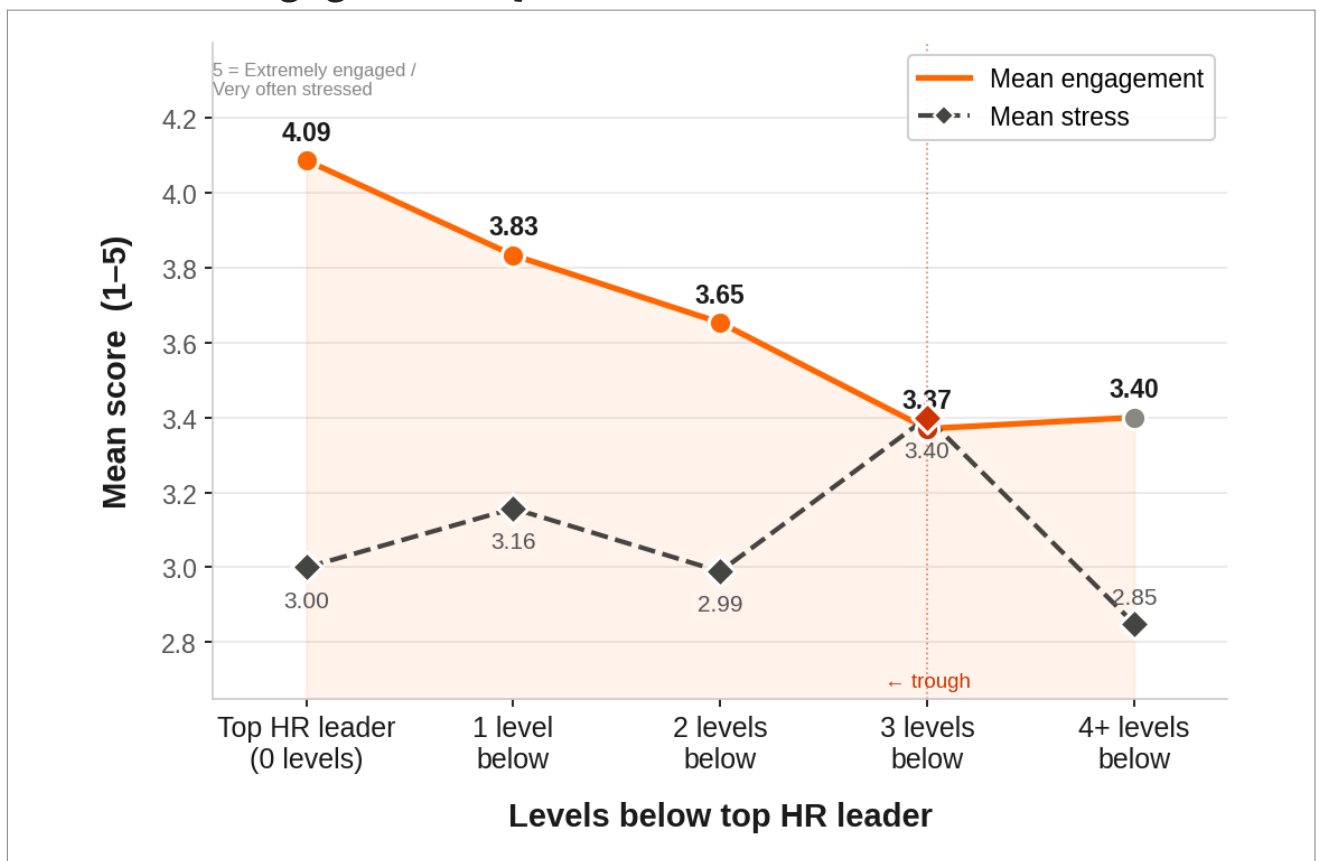
Why This Might be Happening

To understand why, it helps to think about what the intersection of these two dimensions says about their experience (see chart below). Someone with 9–15 years in HR has enough experience to have a clear sense of what good HR leadership looks like.

They have likely managed significant projects, led teams, advised business leaders and developed a professional identity.

At the same time, they sit three levels below the top HR leader so the decisions that shape the function, define its priorities and determine its influence happen several layers above them.

Stress and Engagement by Levels Below CHRO



They can see the gap between their capability and their power. That gap, experienced over years rather than months, could likely drive pessimism and disengagement.

Contributing Factors

We suggest that a few factors strongly contribute towards these findings.

First, at 9–15 years and three levels down, many of these individuals are managing teams for the first time or leading programs with real potential organizational impact. Yet they may have limited visibility to senior leadership and limited ability to shape the strategic decisions their work is meant to support.

Second, this is the career span where ones' trajectory either accelerates toward senior leadership or plateaus. If one can see or feel a career deceleration coming, we should expect engage-

ment to be a casualty.

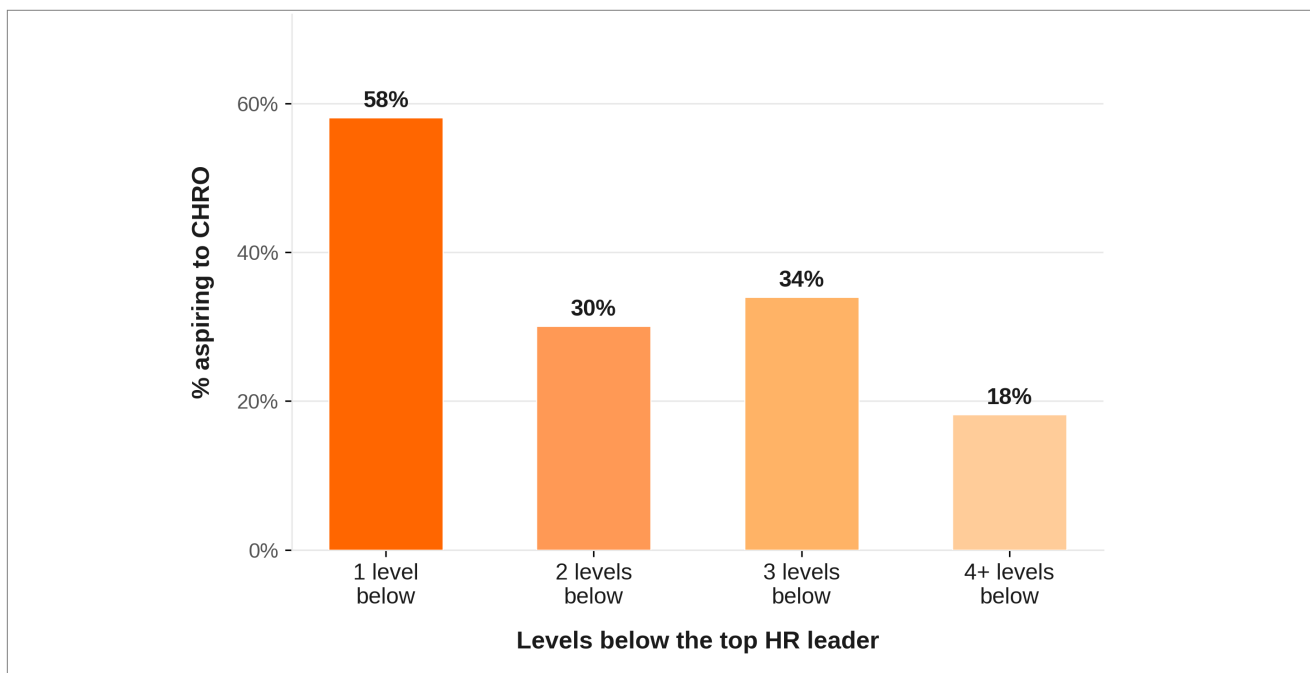
Third, large organizations create challenges that smaller ones do not. Three levels of hierarchy in a 50,000-person company creates a genuine distance from strategic influence, while the same distance in a smaller firm might be far more navigable.

The good news is that the 16+ year group does not show the same dip, suggesting that those who navigate this window and remain in the profession eventually find their footing.

They either reach senior roles, developing alternative sources of professional meaning, or simply making peace with where they sit.

But the 9–15 year group has not yet done that work, and the data suggests we need to better support that journey.

Precipitous Drop in CHRO Aspirations Below Their Directs



4. We Are Our Best at CHRO

The 2026 Global HR Census identifies CHROs as categorically different from every other segment in our research. These differences extend to how they think, what they believe and what they've been willing to trade for the top job. A key question is whether their experience shaped their mindset or vice-versa.

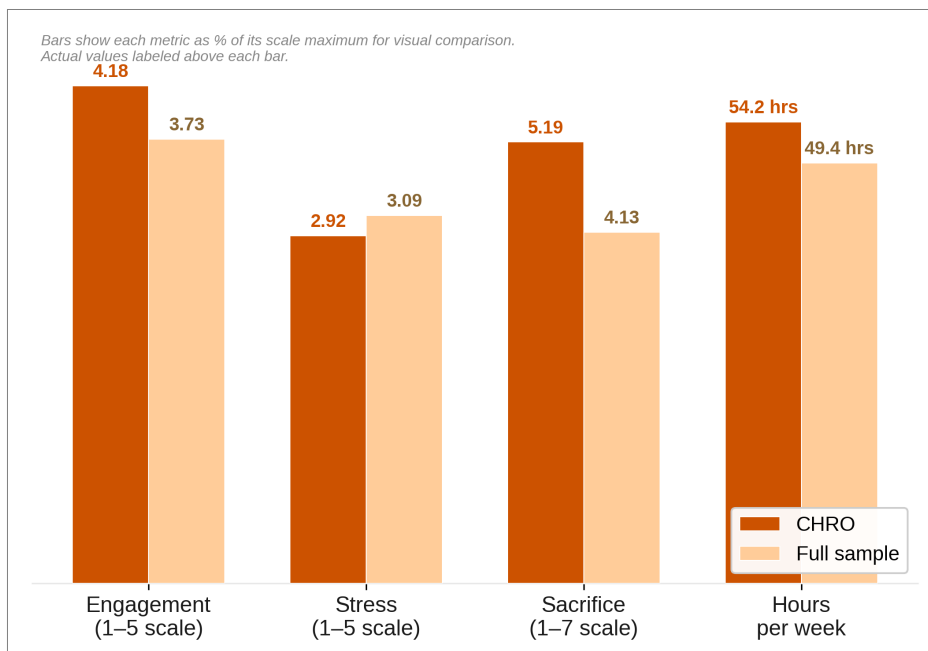
Among the most significant differences from other respondents, we see that CHROs have:

A Business-first Worldview

CHROs are unique in their worldview from the rest of the profession. This feels like an enduring perspective rather than an attitude developed once they reached at the top.

Only 20% of CHROs agree that employees should have more negotiating power compared to 58% of Associates and 51% of Senior Managers. That's a meaningful difference and likely reflects their role as "chief negotiator" on labor issues.

The implication for CHROs reading this report is clear: the people designing and executing



HR strategy believe close to the inverse of what the majority of HR practitioners do.

While leaders are not required to share the worldview of every level below them, it's a problem if it creates blind spots about what motivates those in the function, what they need to thrive and why the most experienced practitioners three levels down are disengaged.

It also provides CHROs an opportunity – as we discuss in “What To Do Next” – to share with their team members and potentially bring them along to their perspective.

Meaningfully Higher Engagement

CHROs are the most engaged group in the profession without exception. Mean engagement for CHROs is 4.18 or 82%, the highest of any level, any function or any demographic group.

More striking is that not a single CHROs reports being somewhat or not engaged. The flip side of this high number may be a lack of a visceral understanding of how those two or three layers below experience work.

CHROs have arrived at a role that aligns their values, their authority, and their sense of purpose in a way that almost no other role in the profession does.

Lower Stress

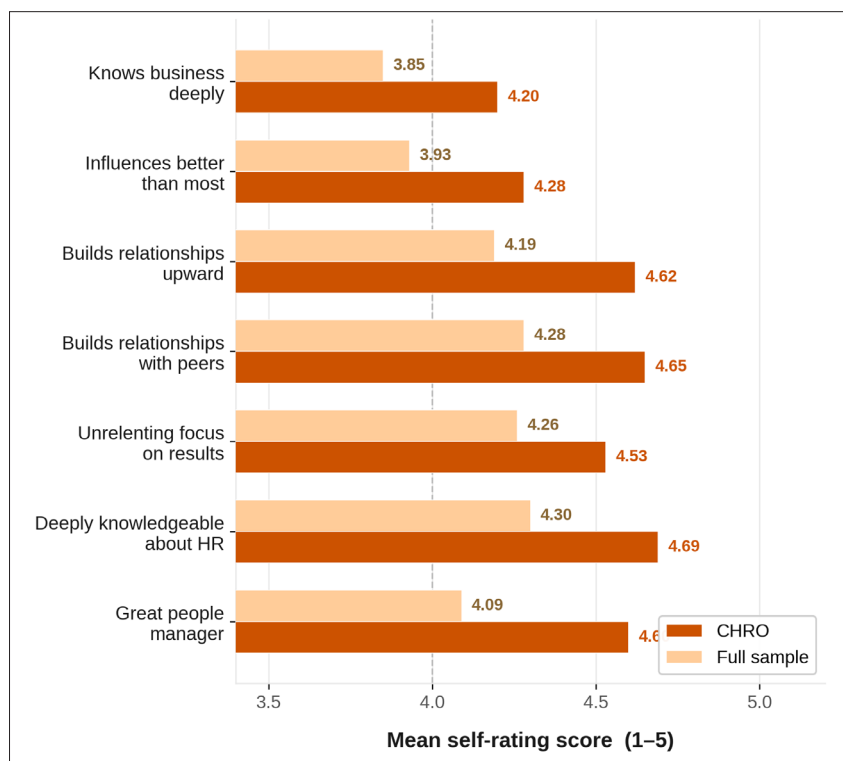
CHROs stress is lower despite working more hours. CHROs work an average of 54.2 hours per week yet report a mean stress score of 2.92 out of 5.0. That's lower than nearly every other

level and well below the sample mean of 3.11.

This is the optimal balance: intensity without overload. CHROs are working hard in roles they control. The difference between 54 hours that feel purposeful and 54 hours that feel overwhelming is likely that autonomy and control.

Willing to Sacrifice

Their willingness to sacrifice for professional success is exceptional. At 5.19 out of 7 on the sacrifice willingness scale, CHROs score nearly



a full point above the Senior HR leader group as a whole (4.71) and more than two points above the sample mean (3.73).

This does not appear to be a rationalization of the sacrifice they've already made. Sacrifice willingness is correlated with behaviors and attitudes including hours worked, career commit-

ment and commercial orientation that suggest an active orientation towards sacrifice rather than a passive one.

The data implies that CHROs did not become willing to sacrifice because they reached the top. They reached the top in part because of a sustained willingness to sacrifice that preceded their appointment.

Not Universally Optimistic

They are commercially oriented but not uniformly optimistic. 72% of senior HR leaders say that helping their companies to be financially successful is a primary reason they are in HR. This is the highest percentage of any group in the survey.

55% of CHROs agree companies are generally a force for good, and 64% agree HR is advancing positively as a profession. These are majority positions, but they are not universal.

The 45% of senior HR leaders who do not believe companies are broadly forces for good — the Commercial Pessimists discussed elsewhere in this report — represent a meaningful portion of people who have reached the top while

maintaining institutional skepticism.

Highly Capable and Knowledgeable

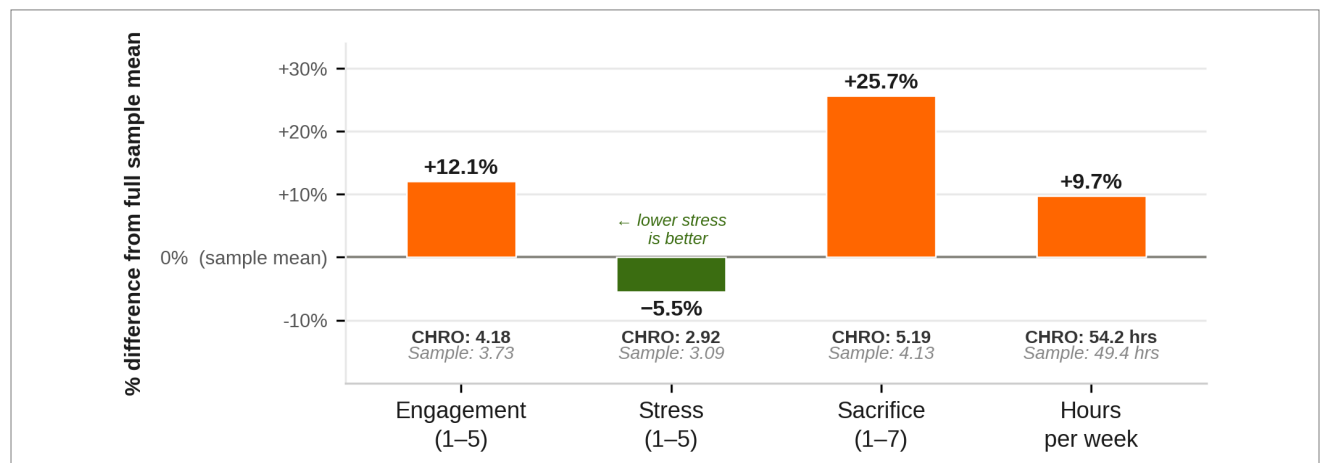
Their self-assessed capability reveals something important. CHROs rate themselves highest on HR knowledge. 72% say it completely describes them. This is the highest single-item “completely-describes” score of any function on any item in our analysis.

Their upward relationship building (53% completely) and peer relationships (56% completely) are also strong. But, curiously, they say that business knowledge is their relative weak point. Only 28% say that knowing the business deeply completely describes them.

This is one of the stranger findings in the census and one of the more consequential. The CHRO role is built on the premise of strategic business partnership, yet the people who hold it are more confident in their HR expertise than in their commercial expertise.

It’s unclear whether this reflects genuine development gaps or simply a higher commercial standard that CHROs hold themselves to.

CHROs vs. All Other Survey Respondents



What to Do Next

The 2026 Global HR Census makes visible something the profession has long sensed but rarely stated directly. HR is not one profession, but several. We are as much divided by our worldviews as we are united in our love of the function and its purpose.

Much like the question about predicting potential — potential for what? — the recommendations that follow depend on what we believe HR is for.

The founders of this profession earned their seat at the table by demonstrating business value to skeptical leaders. That argument was won on commercial terms, and it has shaped who reaches the top ever since. That selection process has produced highly engaged, commercially effective CHROs.

The recommendations below are made to the field but specifically to CHROs, whose position and authority best equip them to act.

1. Make commercial fluency (and interest) a hiring and promotion criterion in HR

The data shows that commercial orientation and seniority travel together. Commercial Optimists appear across career stages, not just at the

top, so the orientation appears to be a condition of advancement rather than a consequence of it. We can't conclude that the relationship is causal but the pattern is consistent enough to act on.

The near-term action is to audit your HR hiring and promotion criteria. Does your HR Success Model include a genuine assessment of whether candidates believe in the commercial mission of the enterprise — not just whether they can speak the language of business?

There is a meaningful difference between someone who has learned to present HR in business terms and someone who is in HR because they want their company to win.

“The near-term action is to audit your HR hiring and promotion criteria. Does your HR Success Model include a genuine assessment of whether candidates believe in the commercial mission of the enterprise?”

The former is a skill; the latter is an orientation. Your assessment process, specifically interviews, can easily assess for this with some

well-structured and direct questions.

An aggressive version of this recommendation is to make cross-functional experience a prerequisite to be a CHRO. Our data shows that those who have worked outside HR say they have meaningfully stronger expertise across every HR domain without exception.

If the profession is serious about producing commercially interested HR leaders, requiring a stint in finance, operations, sales, or strategy before reaching VP level should quickly accelerate that interest and fluency.

2. Directly address the CHRO vs. others worldview gap

The values gap between CHROs and the rest of the HR function is an uncomfortable finding. It's also a finding that could easily be acknowledged and then ignored.

But, if you're a CHRO, and you found out that half your function was skeptical that their company is a force for good or that fewer than a quarter of your HR team believed employees should not have more negotiating power or that many of them were not in HR to help their company be profitable, how would you react? Would you try to change those beliefs? Strategically staff so more commercially oriented people were in visible roles? Simply accept that the team has a different worldview than you do?

We suggest that you have the conversation. We assume that most CHROs have never explicitly discussed their own worldview with their direct reports, let alone their broader HR teams.

Use the appropriate forums — structured discussions at team meetings, all-hands, HRLT retreats — to share your views, their origin and your vision for the function.

The goal is not to convert Pessimists into Optimists or Non-Commercials into Commercials (unless you choose it to be). It is to build a function where people with different orientations understand the purpose of your HR function and work effectively together to achieve it.

A bolder recommendation is to use the 2x2 worldview matrix as an actual team diagnostic. Ask your HR leadership team to map themselves and then reflect on how they show up. Do they act consistent with their stated worldview? Are you OK with the distribution? What will you do if someone is a Non-Commercial Pessimist in a key role?

“The values gap between CHROs and the rest of the HR function is an uncomfortable finding. It's also a finding that could easily be acknowledged and then ignored.”

A well-composed HR leadership team probably contains majority of Commercial Optimists and Business Drivers, a meaningful minority of Non-Commercial Optimists, and very few Non-Commercial Pessimists in roles where commercial alignment matters. Until you know your team's composition, it's difficult to manage them intentionally.

3. Create focused activities to support the 9–15 year, three-levels-below cohort

The mid-level stalling problem is structural and it requires structural solutions. In the near term, CHROs should identify HR team members in the 9–15 year, two-to-three levels below window and create a distinct visibility

program for them.

Practically this doesn't need a large investment. It can be done with highly controllable activities like improving direct relationships

“In the near term, CHROs should identify HR team members in the 9–15 year, two-to-three levels below window and create a distinct visibility program for them.”

between the HR leadership team and this cohort, giving them regular exposure to strategic discussions in the function, and having explicit conversations with them about their career trajectory.

The longer-term structural intervention is to redesign roles. AI can likely free-up time in these roles to increase their responsibilities in ways that can make the jobs richer. Job redesign can ideally increase autonomy and meaning of the roles, and larger scope may mean higher pay as well.

An overall [HR structure review](#) could show that flattening the HR structure would give this cohort genuine decision-making power. That change would directly address the gap between capability and authority that appears to be a primary driver of their disengagement.

4. Reframe sacrifice as a professional norm and be honest about what the CHRO role actually requires

The data on willingness to sacrifice to improve ones career is the most direct evidence that we aren't being as transparent as we need to be about what's required to rise to the top.

In our [Talent Management Institute](#) programs, we still have students who voice that they should not have to sacrifice to move upward, that their success is based on “working smart, not hard” and other career limiting beliefs. Logic would say differently and the survey data backs that view.

The gap between those who are financially motivated and sacrifice-willing and those who are not is nearly a full point on a 7-point scale. This is the largest behavioral gap in the entire dataset. Yet we find that the profession rarely discusses sacrifice explicitly in career conversations or public discourse about what it takes to become a CHRO.

In the near term, CHROs should be direct in mentoring conversations, talent reviews and HR team events about how they have invested in their careers. They should be honest about the extra hours they worked, the personal trade-offs they made and their willingness to take on roles that were uncomfortable or inconvenient.

Not everyone wants to make the sacrifice for success tradeoff. That's fine. There are roles up and down the HR hierarchy. But what we can do is help people make informed, conscious choices earlier in their careers about whether those trade-offs are the right one for them.

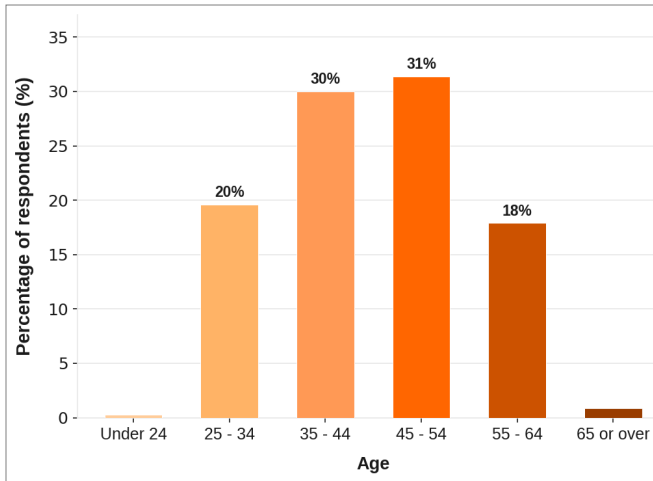
Making the [rules of work clear](#) is a passion for us at Talent Strategy Group as a way to create a more fair workplace. Being honest, early, with team members about the reality of success is far more fair than having them discover 15 years into their career that the path requires more than they were told.

APPENDIX

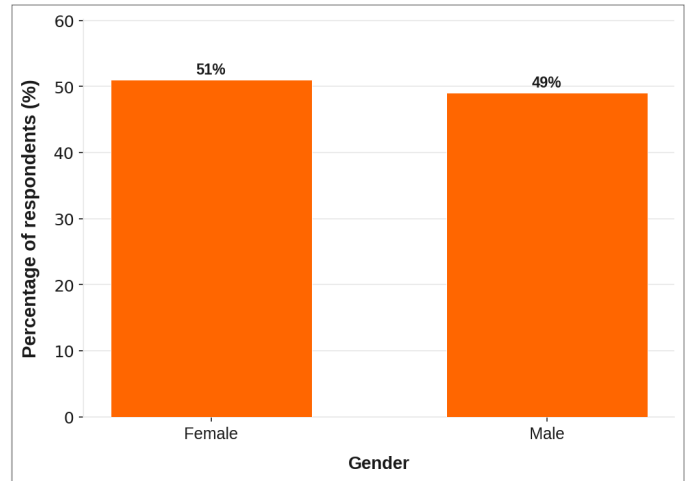
Appendix

Our report Appendix includes raw percentages for every item asked on the survey. We have not commented on each individual item since we believe the findings in the report best contextualize the response data.

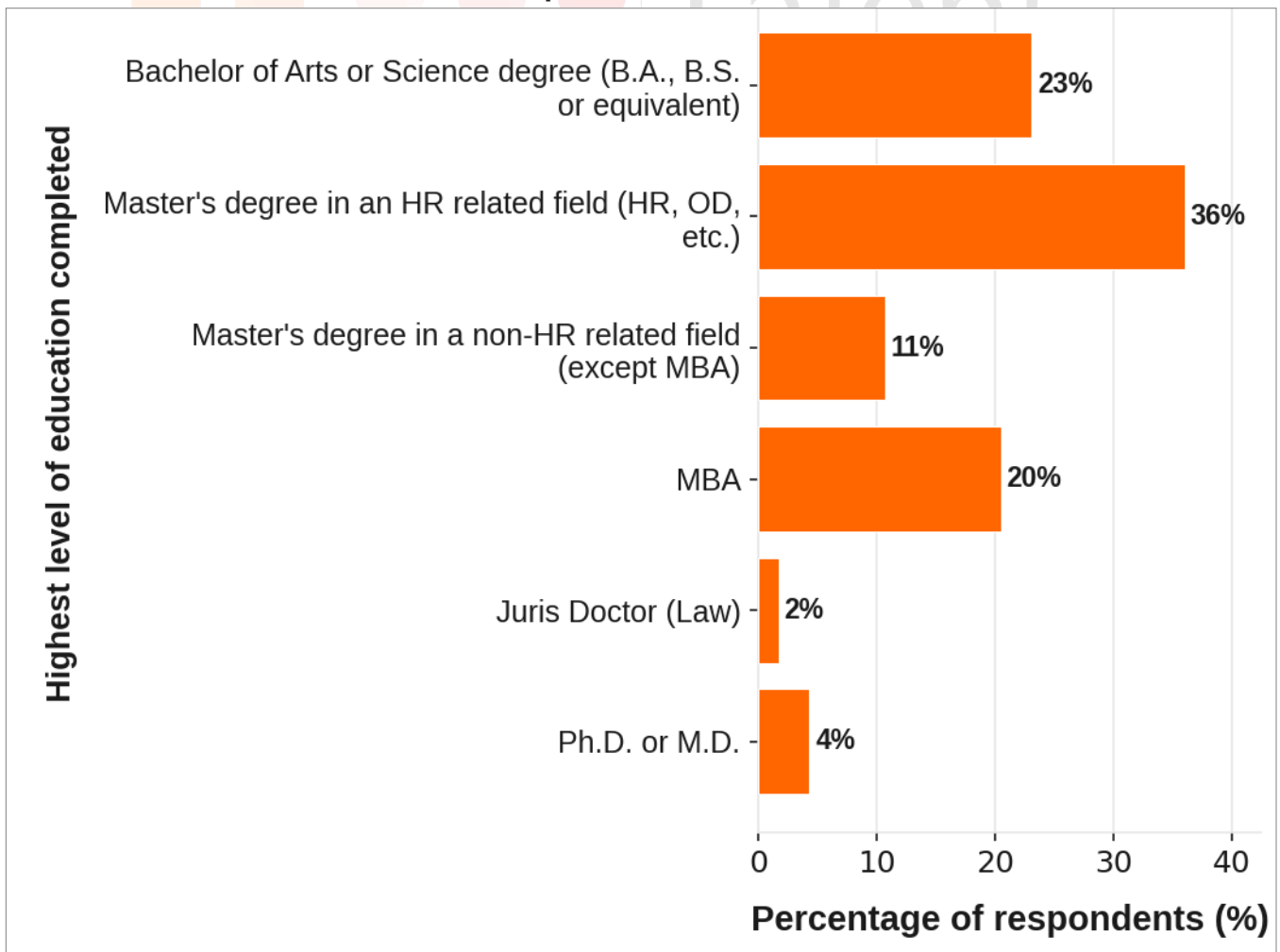
Respondent Age



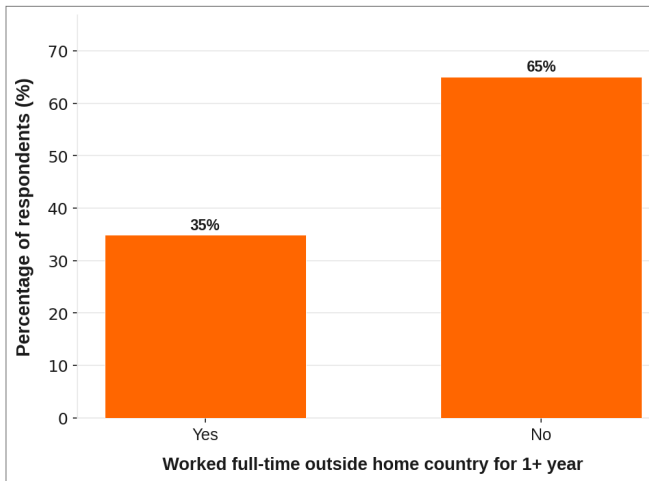
Respondent Gender



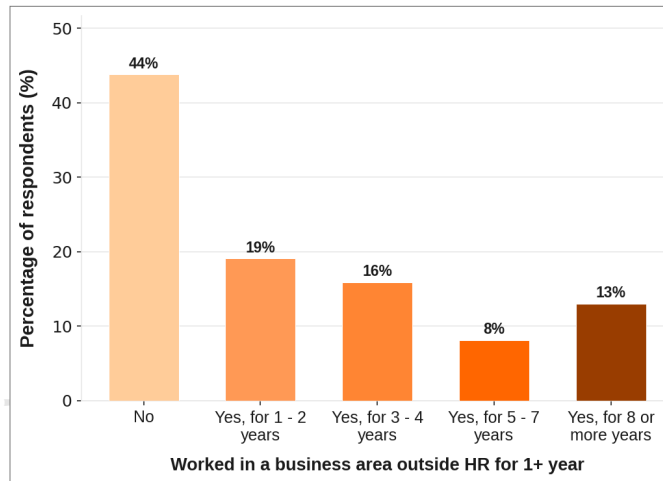
Respondent Education



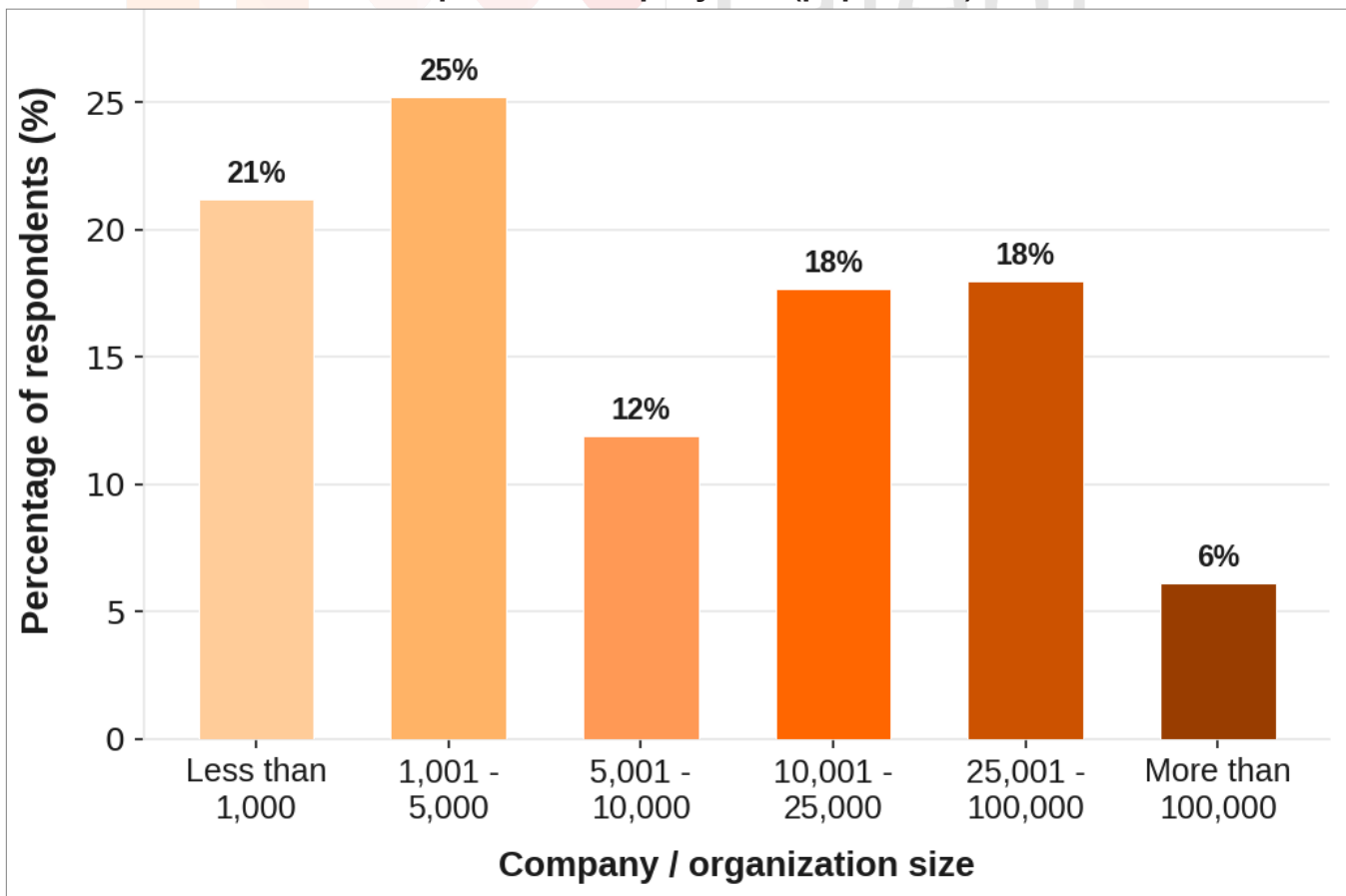
Worked outside home country



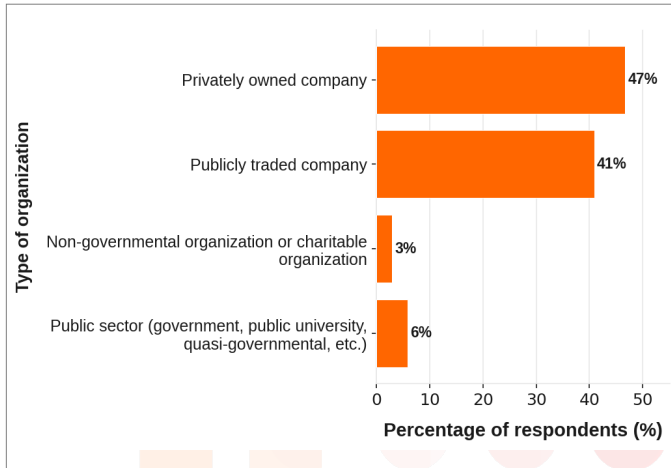
Worked outside of HR



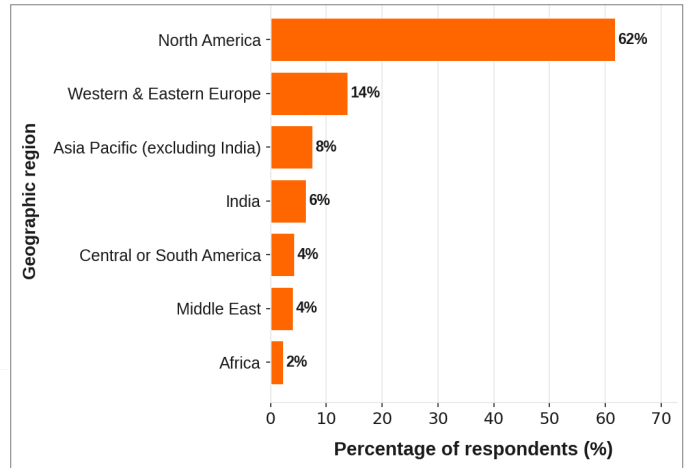
Respondent company size (population)



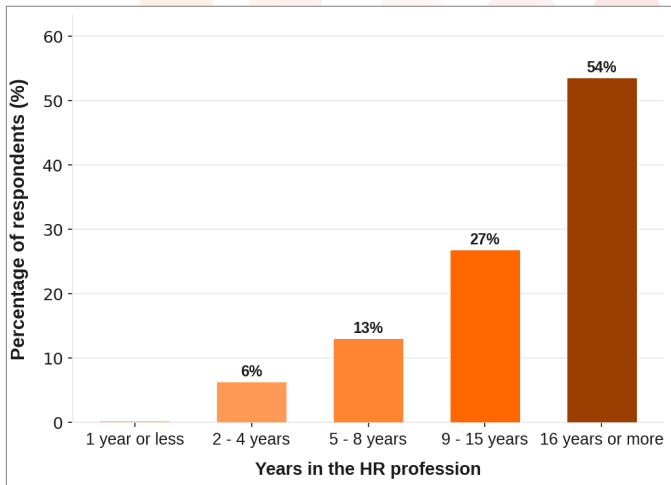
Type of organization



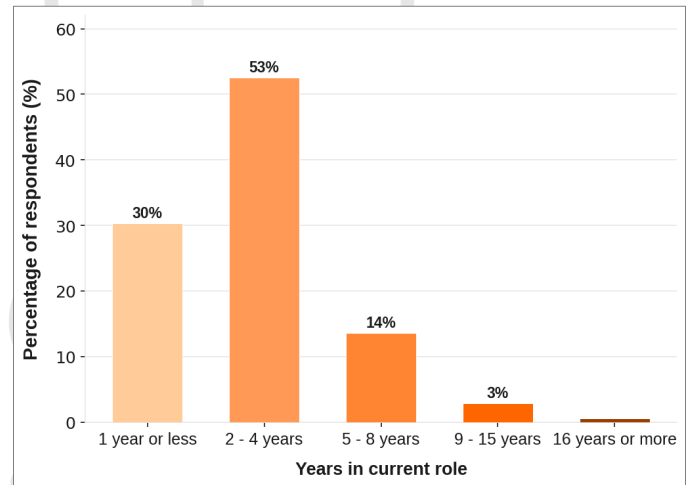
Location of organization



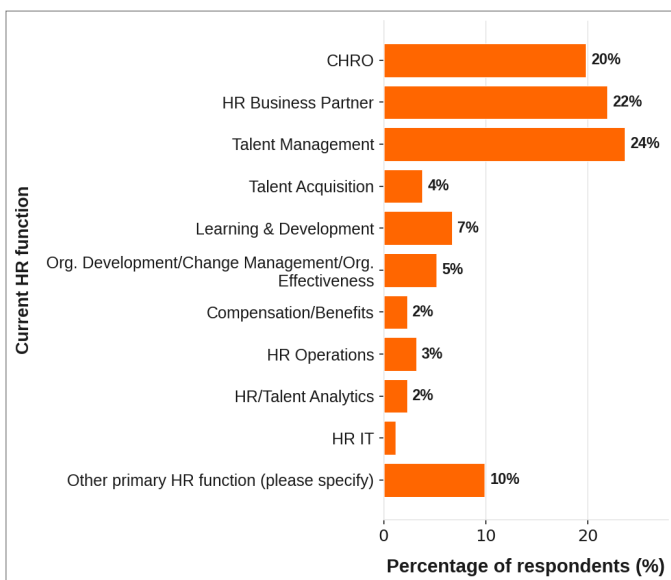
Years in the HR profession



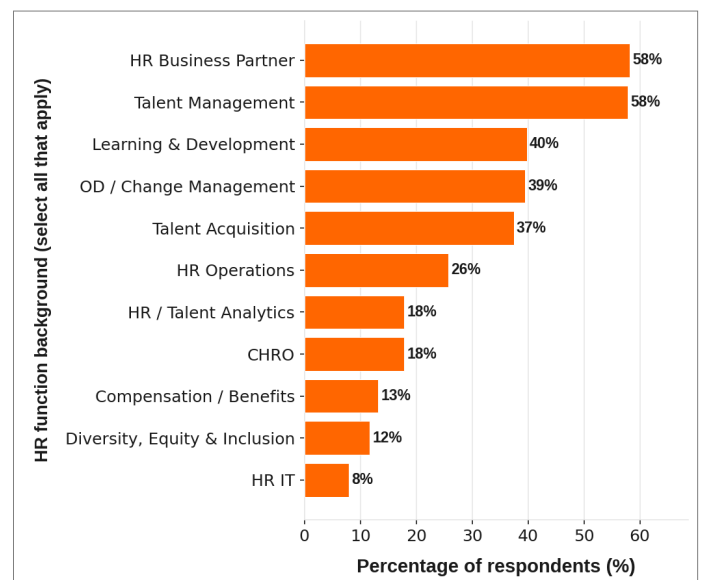
Years in current role



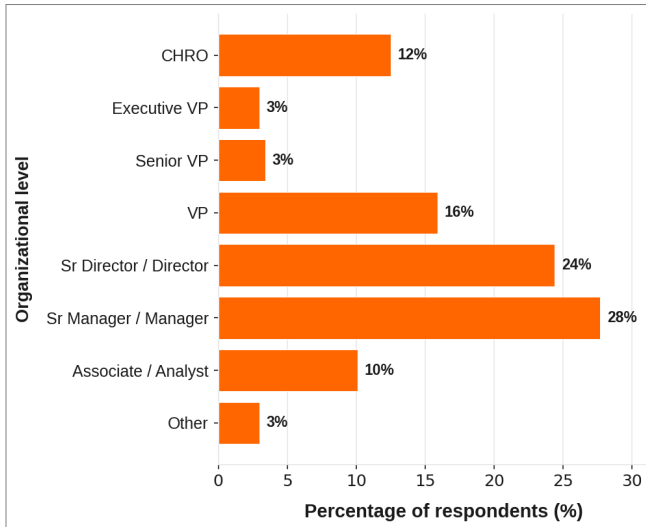
Current HR function



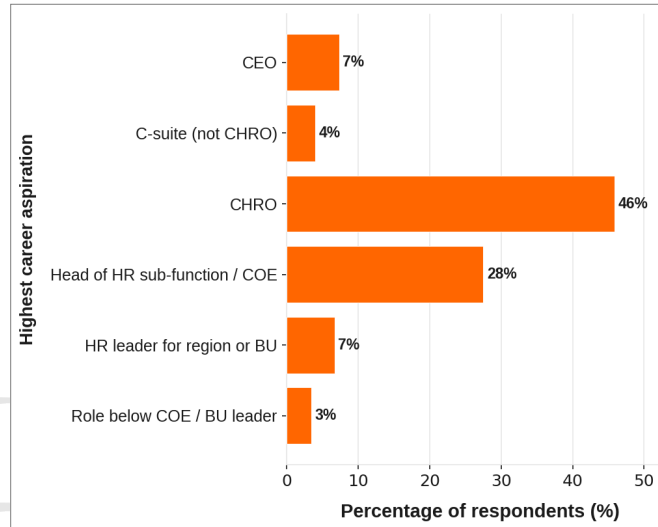
All HR functions worked in



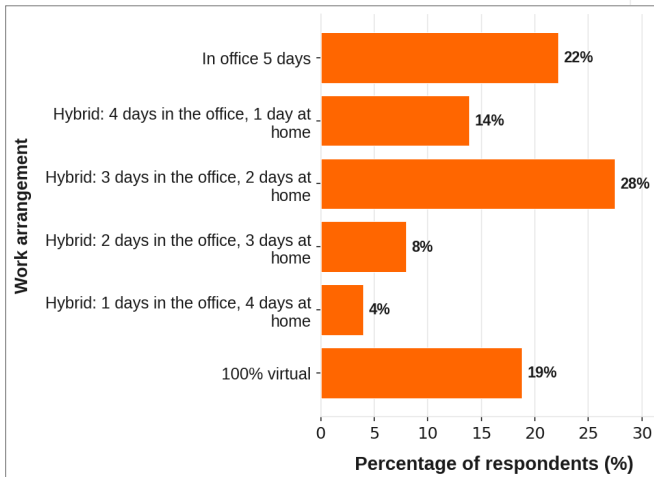
Title in their organization



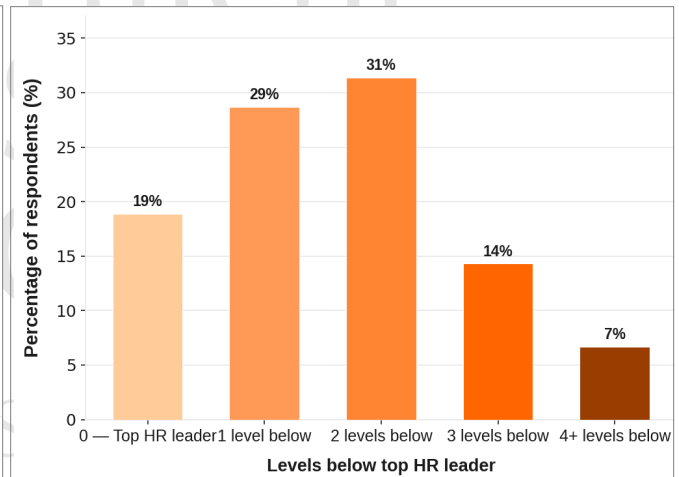
Highest career aspiration



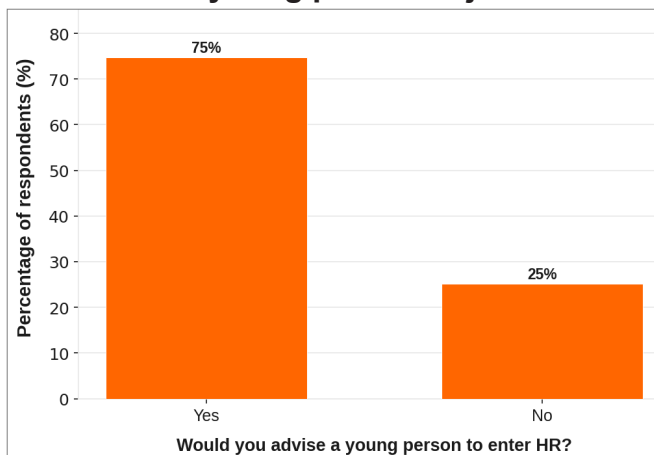
Working arrangement



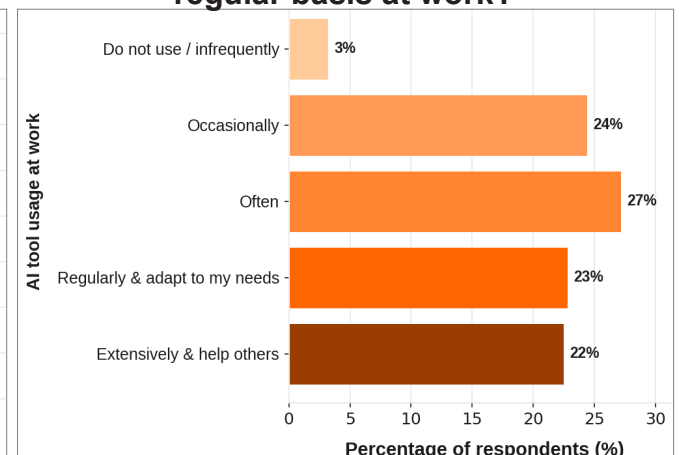
Level in their organization



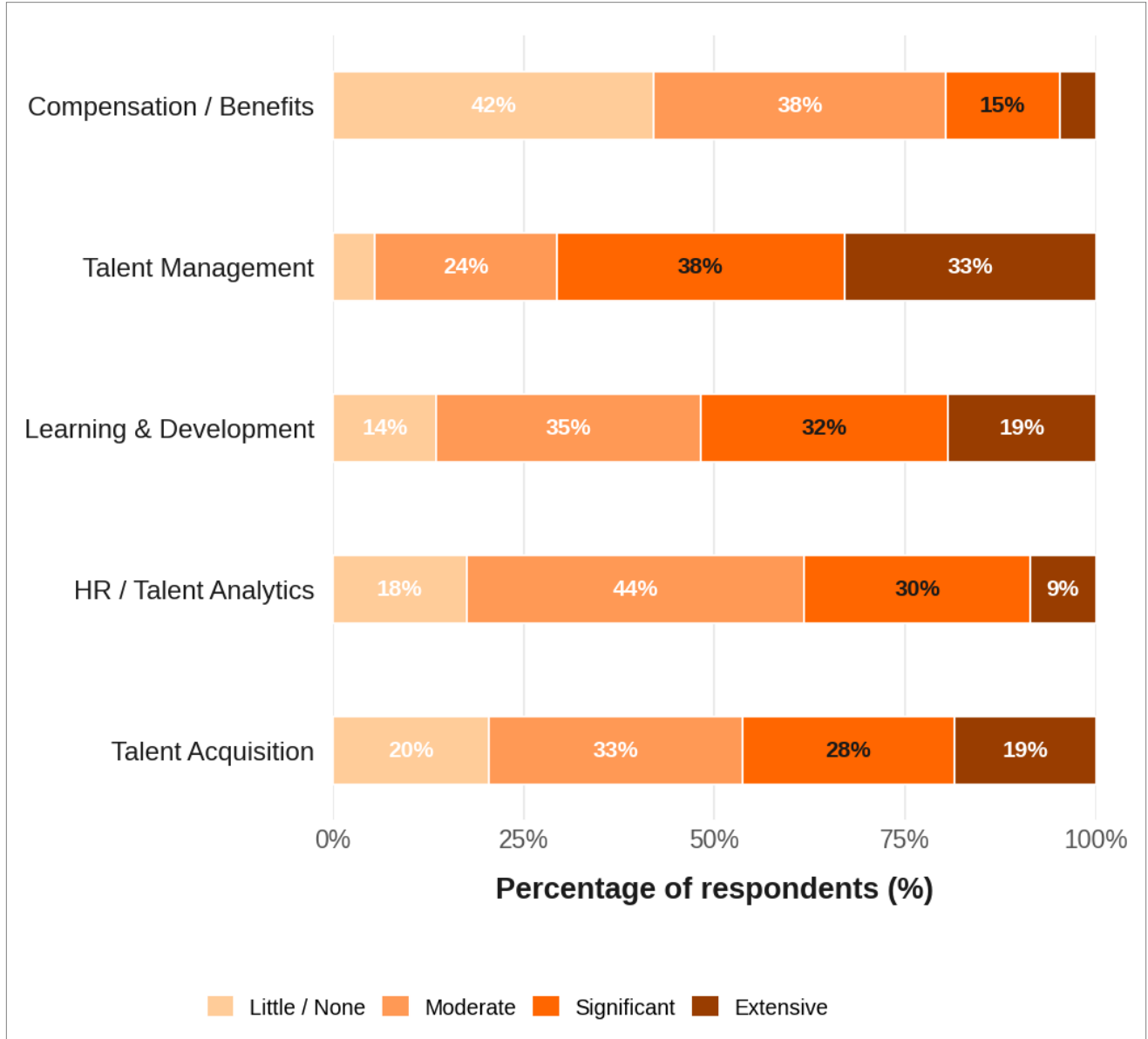
Advise a young person to join HR?



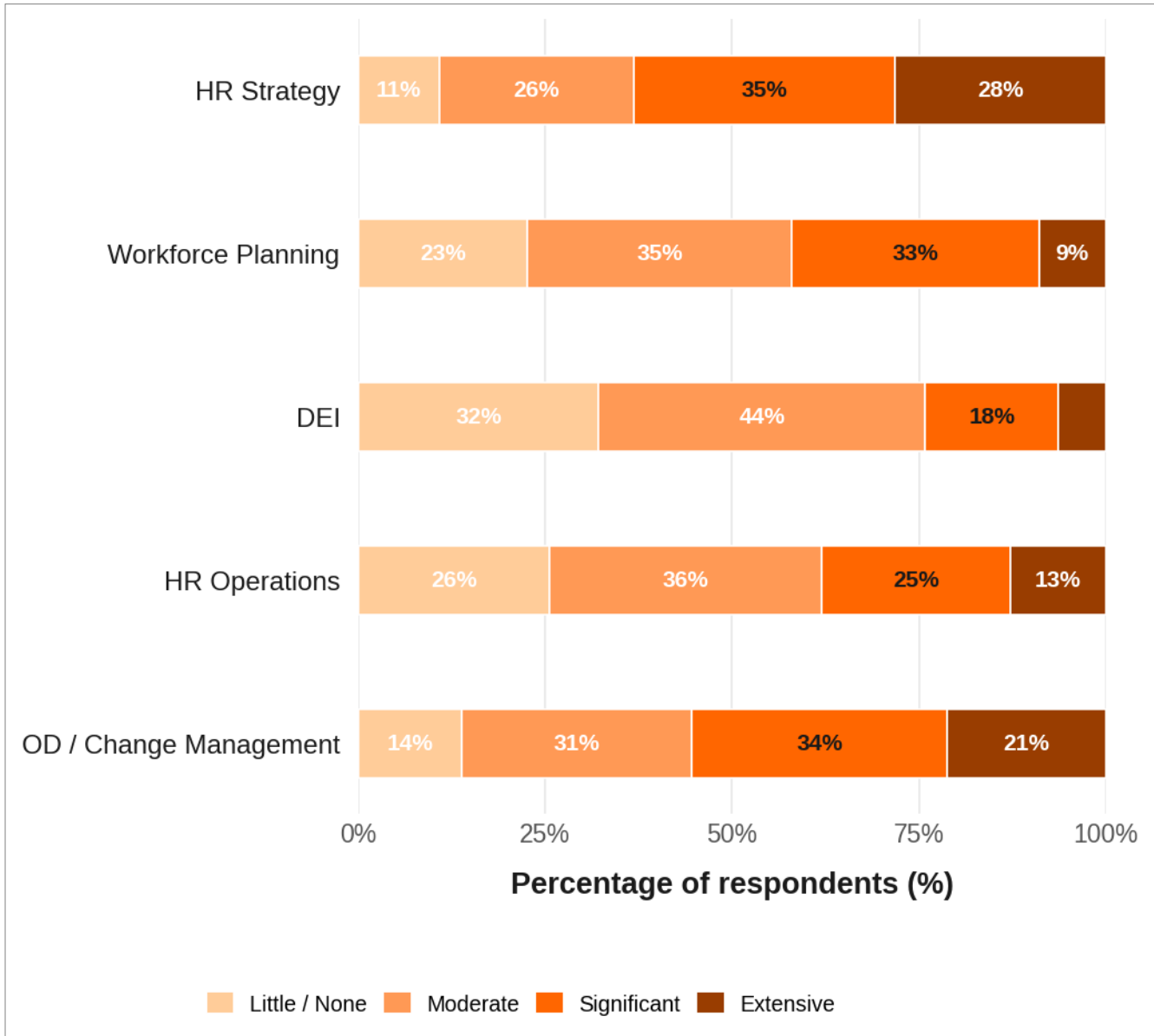
To what extent do you use AI tools on a regular basis at work?



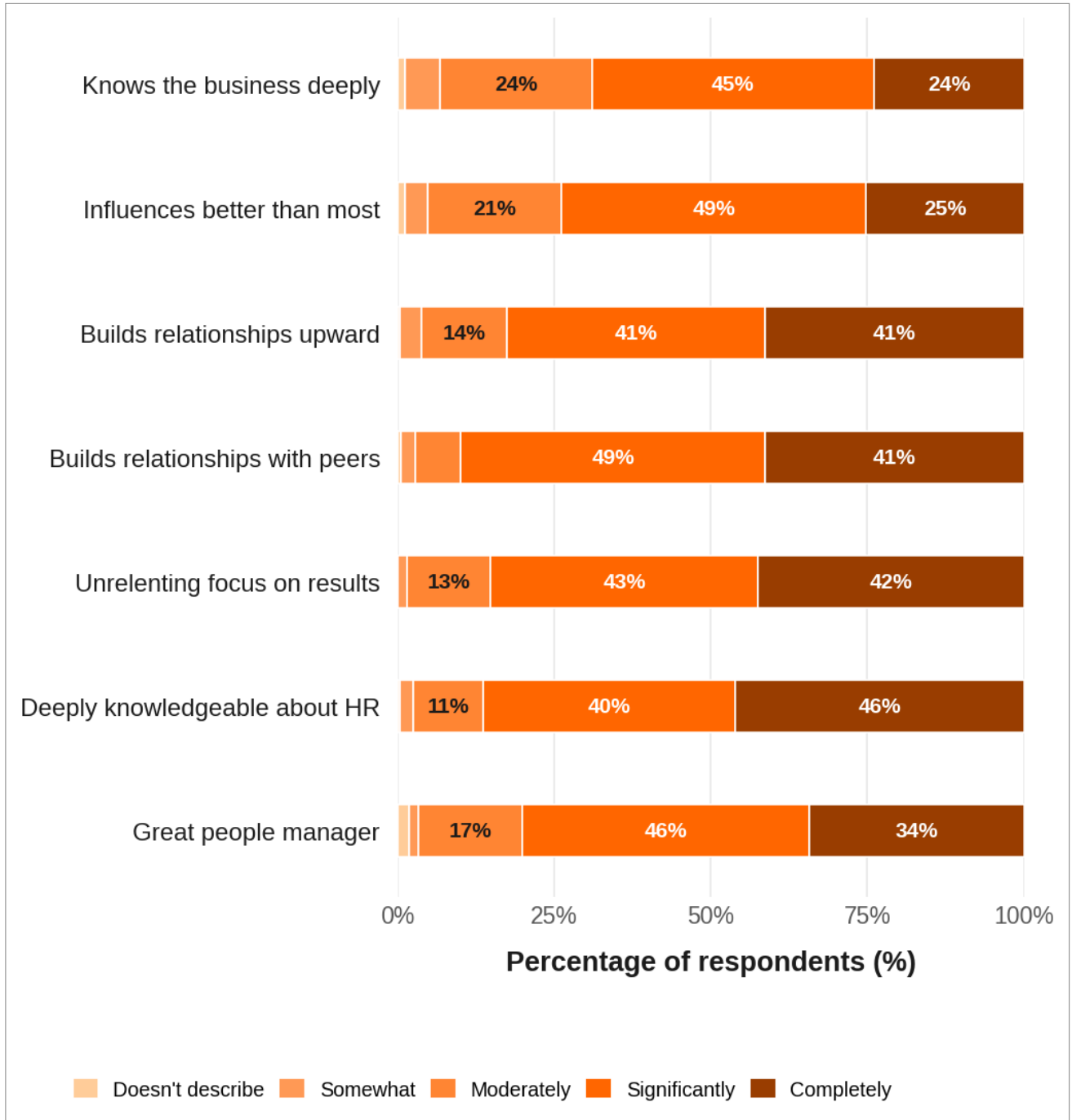
Which HR functions have you spent significant time in (3+ years)? (page 1)



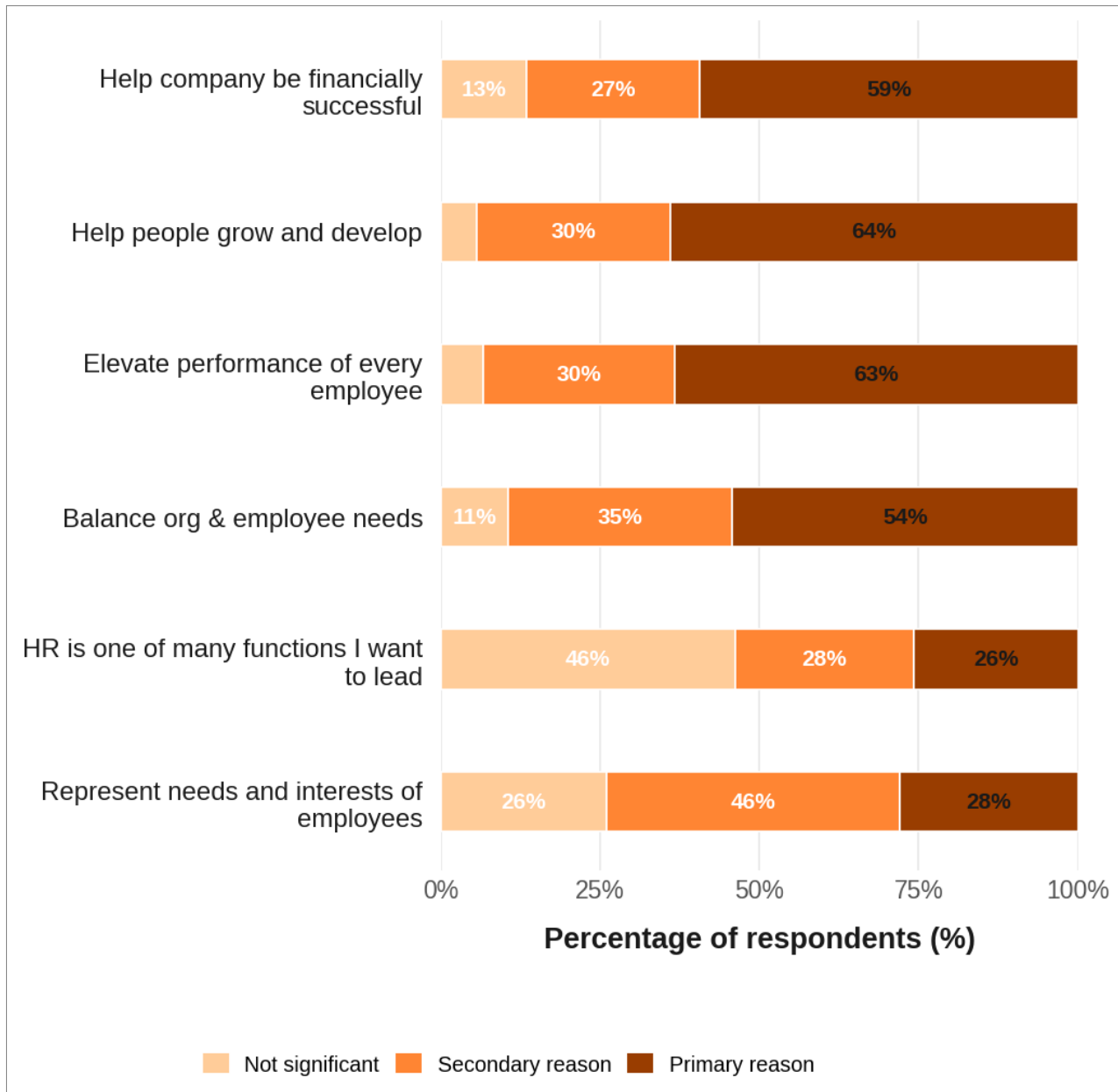
Which HR functions have you spent significant time in (3+ years)? (page 2)



What is your level of expertise in the design (not implementation) of the following processes?

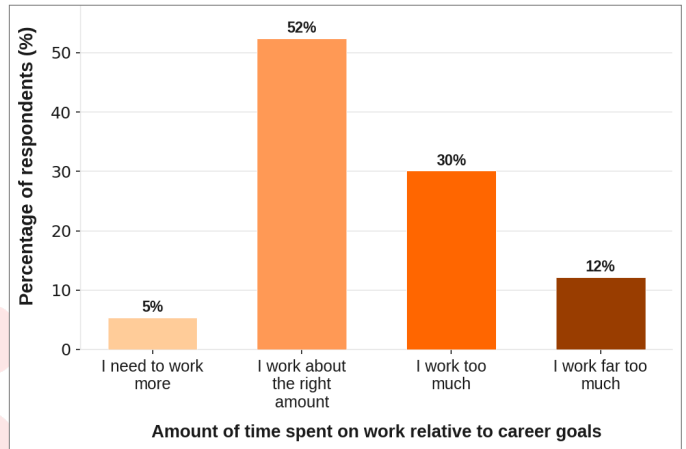
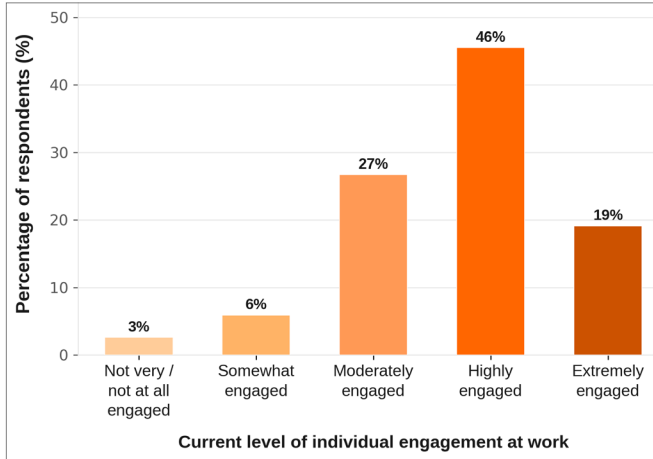


What is your level of expertise in the design (not implementation) of the following processes?

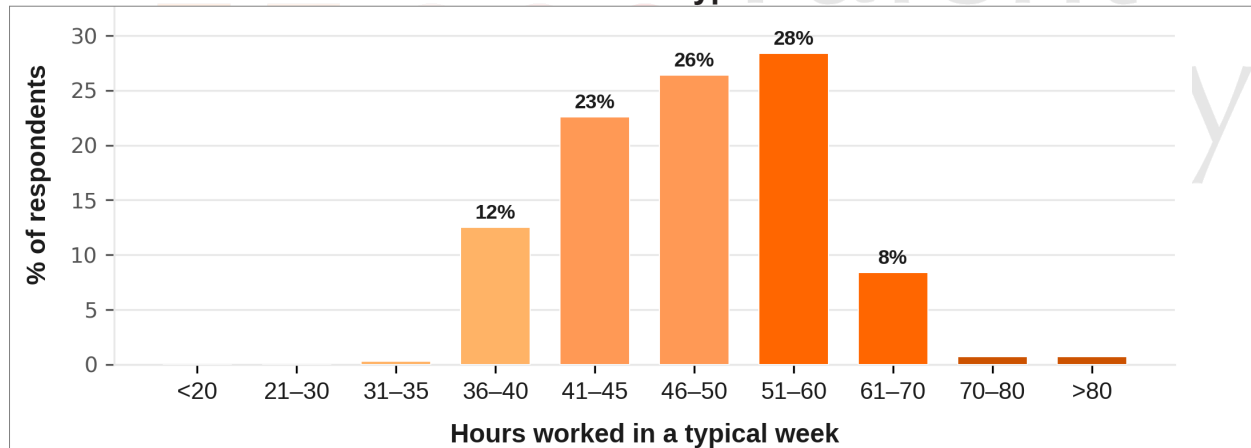


Given your current career goals and personal ambitions, how much time do you spend on work?

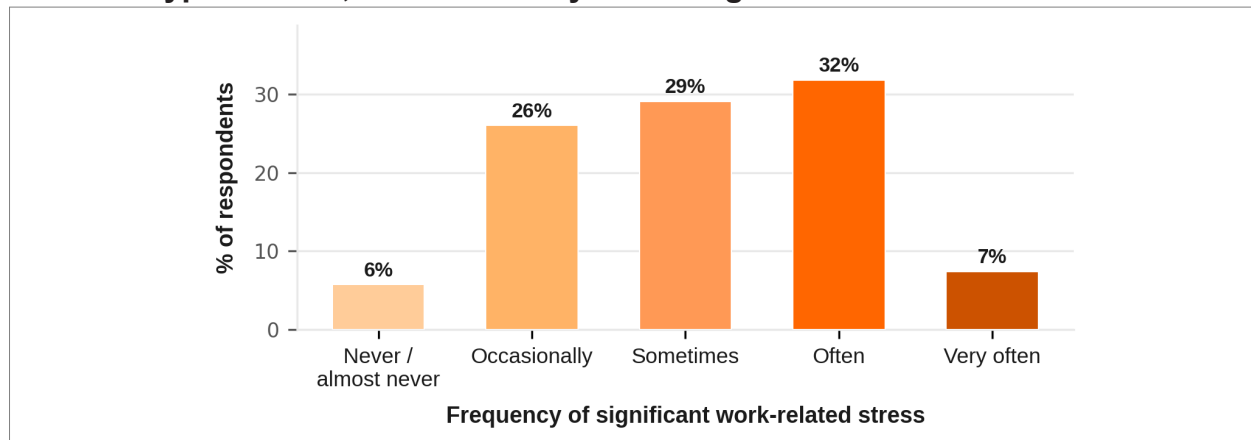
Engagement



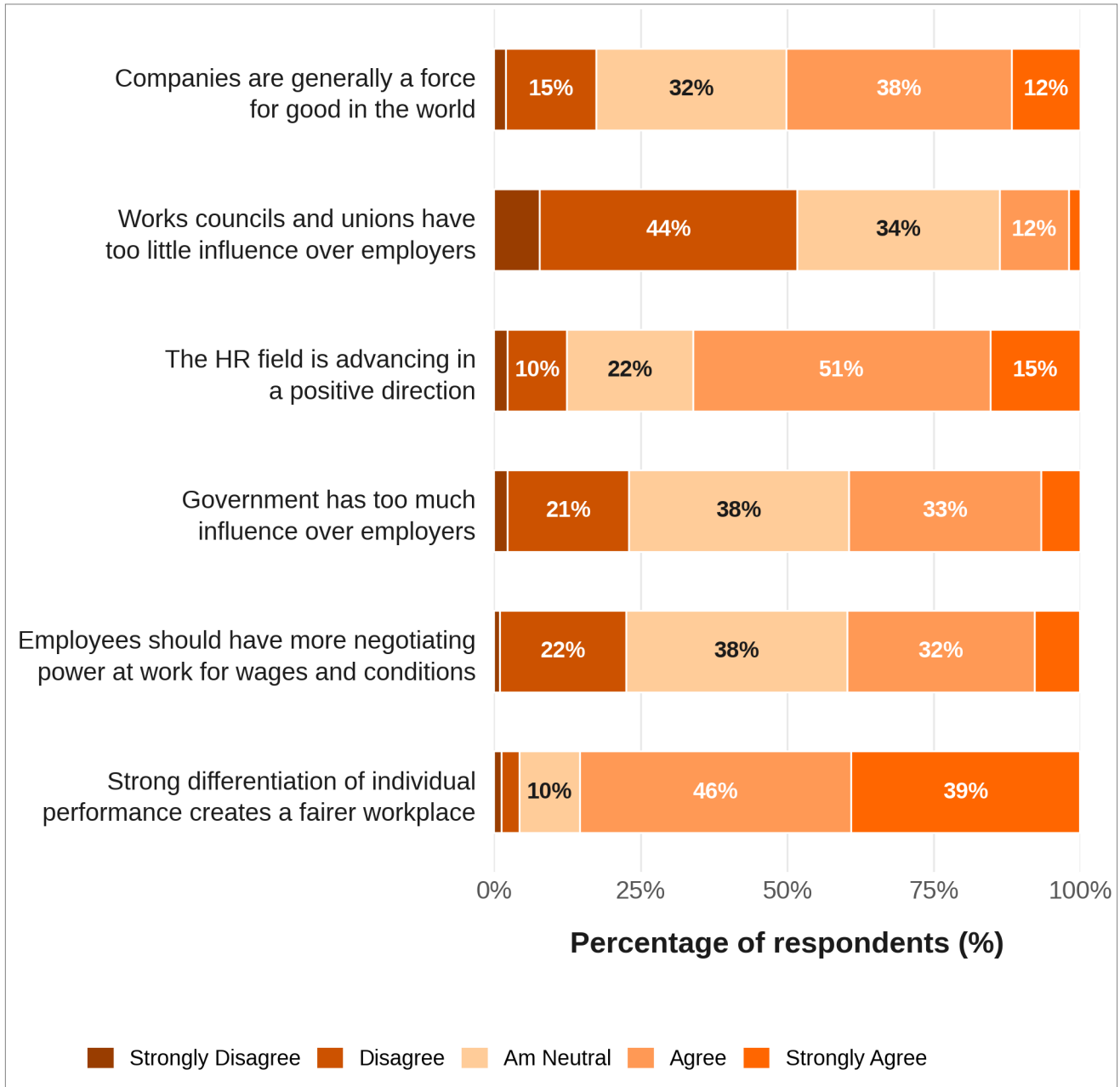
Hours worked in a typical week



In a typical week, how often do you feel significant work-related stress?



Please share your assessment of the following items.



ABOUT

About [The Talent Strategy Group](#)

The Talent Strategy Group advises the world's premier companies, NGOs, foundations and investors. Our consulting support spans creating HR strategy and structure, designing HR operating models and conducting HR leader analysis through designing simple, powerful and science-based practices for performance management, talent reviews & succession, high potential acceleration and other core talent practices.

Our innovations include the creation of talent philosophy, the talent production line, the OPTM360, and rapid cycle design processes for HR and talent strategy, performance management and talent reviews & succession planning.

We are the leading provider of talent management education, anchored by the [Talent Management Institute founded at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School](#). We have graduated more than 7,000 leaders from our programs since 2011.

About this Report

This report is based on 500+ respondents to a survey administered in the 1st half of 2026. We sought participants through our direct mail list and LinkedIn. While the survey demographics suggests a broad and inclusive group of participants, the respondent profile could have been skewed by those who know our firm or its principals, or by a U.S.-heavy respondent group. We believe the survey sample accurately represents HR as a whole, but we did not use experimental controls that would give additional confidence to that claim. There is an obvious response bias to longer-term HR professionals. This report is research, not science, and should be used with the caution that you would apply to any other non-scientific document.

AI Use

AI (primarily Claude with occasional ChatGPT support) was heavily used in the analysis and production of this report. An initial thematic analysis was done by Claude. Some of the suggested themes were retained and others deleted or modified. Use of AI allowed finer gradation in our findings, including the Optimistic/Commercial analysis.

We found the analysis and suggestions directionally helpful but lacking in nuance and understanding of the field in some areas, and it drew conclusions beyond what we believed the facts justified in others.

Claude provided initial copy in sections including the Optimist/Commercial categories, the CHRO finding and the What to Do Next section. Moderate to significant re-writing occurred to all Claude-provided copy both to tone-down the dramatic language used and to remove a near obsessive use of the em dash.

All charts and graphs were generated by Claude. Charting was double checked for correctness as we found obvious errors that required regeneration of content.