



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Elevating Humans in an Era of AI and Disruption

Do you know what's actually happening with your people?

Every organization has infrastructure for seeing its financial reality. Most lack comparable insights into their human capital. The **Human Work score** – our topline global measure of belonging, trust, growth, and motivation – stands at **64/100**. Beneath it: rising pressure, a recognition gap that undermines performance, and an AI divide that's widening by role.

The 7 findings below tell an interesting story: **The organizations closing the gap between financial and human visibility are performing differently on every measure that matters.**

# 1. The profitability paradox

The bottom line looks healthy. Who's absorbing the cost?



**72%**

describe org. profitability  
as good or great



**51%**

feel increased pressure  
at work vs. last year



**48%**

say work was a better  
experience in the past

Workers are bullish on the business – but the same data tells a different story about what it feels like to work inside it. Pressure is up, exhaustion is widespread, and nearly half say work used to be better. If organizations are doing fine, it's the people inside them who are absorbing the cost.

The sense that work has deteriorated is not nostalgia – it arrives early. Workers with just 4–7 years at their organization already agree at 46%. Only 42% say the current pace of change feels manageable – and senior leaders find it manageable at rates 16–21 points higher than individual contributors (ICs). Meanwhile, 1 in 3 workers holds a second job – for 22%, it's another full-time position.

Disruption has become the baseline: 39% of workers report their organization went through layoffs in the past year, 28% through a merger or acquisition, 49% carry some fear of being laid off.

## 2. The leadership bubble

Leaders and individual contributors are experiencing different organizations – on strategy, on AI, and on what comes next.



**77%**

can see how their work connects to strategy



**54%**

of ICs feel personally invested in achieving it

Seeing strategy and feeling invested in it are not the same thing. The 23-point gap among individual contributors – between seeing the strategy and feeling part of it – represents a large share of the workforce that will comply but not commit. Discretionary effort lives in that gap.

The same divide runs through AI. This is not an anxiety story – 50% of workers lean positive about AI’s impact on their future. What the data reveals is a readiness and equity problem: Organizations are accelerating AI adoption while a large set of workers are being left behind.



**50%**

feel optimistic or excited about AI’s impact on their future work



**26%**

are ambivalent – watchful, not decided



**23%**

feel pessimistic or experience existential dread

Executives are making AI strategy. Individual contributors are on the receiving end of it. The leadership AI bubble is a transformation risk: 73% of executives believe their organization is putting people first in AI adoption; only 44% of ICs believe the same.

### 3. The visibility crisis

Good work goes unseen. Managers lack the capacity to change that. And the workers who need development most are receiving it least.



**41%**  
of ICs believe that their contributions often go unnoticed



**49%**  
of ICs believe people decisions are evidence-based



**41%**  
of ICs who acquire new skills receive nothing from their org

Workers have substantially more confidence in their own performance than in their organization's ability to recognize it. Overall, only 66% believe their organization can identify its strongest contributors.

The largest visibility failure is in the middle. Half of self-rated good performers – roughly a third of the entire workforce – have not been recognized in the last quarter. And 51% of exceptional self-raters believe high performers at their organization are easily overlooked.

When workers grow their skills, the most common organizational response is increased responsibility. The second most common is nothing. For ICs, nothing is the #1 outcome (41%).

Behind the development pipeline gap is a supply-side problem. 53% of managers lack adequate time or resources to support their direct reports. Managers without both hold meaningful career conversations at just 29% – vs. 79% for fully resourced managers. The downstream effects extend beyond development: under-resourced managers show 77% mental exhaustion rates, are significantly more likely to be job-seeking (36% vs. 17%), and their teams show weaker belonging and lower trust.

## 4. The deskless divide

Frontline workers are equally motivated – but consistently underinvested in.



**43%**

of deskless workers have no recognition program



**33%**

of deskless workers have been recognized in their program in the last 3 months



**77%**

of recently recognized deskless workers see a career path – vs. 46% unrecognized

Deskless workers are not disengaged – their motivation rate is essentially identical to desk-based employees. What separates them isn't attitude; it's access. The largest trust gap for deskless workers is whether their organization cares about their wellbeing – the biggest such gap in the dataset.

43% of deskless workers have no recognition program – or don't know if one exists. Only 33% of all deskless workers have been formally recognized in the last quarter. The gaps that define the deskless experience are about development and preparation: deskless workers are 13 points less likely to have had meaningful career conversations, 19 points less likely to feel prepared for AI change, and 11 points less likely to prefer advancing at their current organization. Recognition processes largely designed for workers with desk access have not been deliberately extended to workers without it.

## 5. Recognition is infrastructure

Workers believe recognition changes not just how they feel but how they work. The problem is not belief. The problem is reach.



**66%**

of workers have a formal recognition program



**41%**

of workers were recognized in the last quarter



**46%**

of workers feel contributions are unseen where no program exists

Workers don't need to be persuaded that recognition matters – they already know it. 70% say recognition they received has helped others understand their skills and contributions. Three-quarters say it changes not just how they feel but how they actually work. Recognition at scale is how organizations generate talent intelligence they can't get from performance ratings or engagement surveys alone.

But 1 in 3 employees has no formal recognition program. Only 41% of workers were recognized in the last quarter. Among workers with no program, 46% feel their contributions go unnoticed – a number that falls to 32% where programs exist. Those who most need recognition to make their contributions legible are often the ones receiving it least.



**80%**  
say recognition makes  
valuable work visible



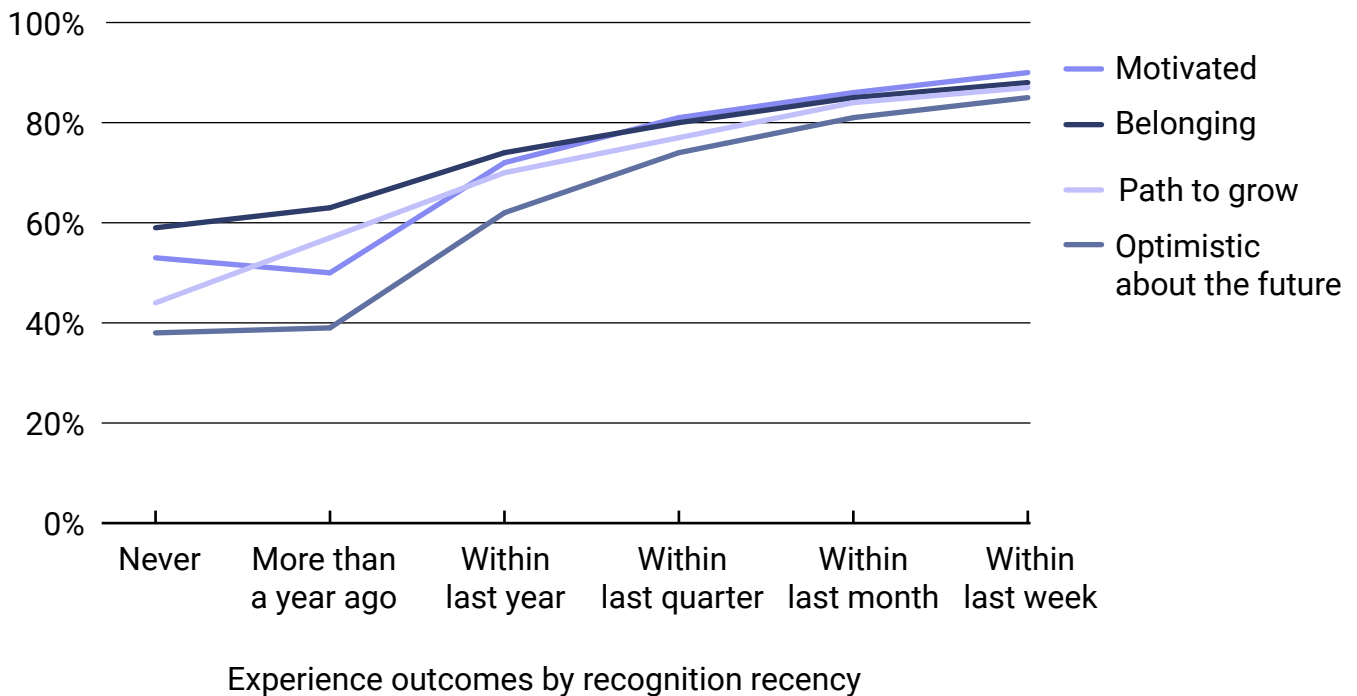
**78%**  
of workers and  
**82% of senior leaders**  
say it should inform  
promotion decisions



**77%**  
say it makes them  
more likely to go  
above and beyond

Employees with recognition programs who were recognized within the last week are nearly twice as likely to feel a sense of belonging as those who have never been recognized (87% vs 44%). The same pattern holds for motivation (88% vs. 59%), seeing a path to grow (85% vs. 38%), and optimism about their future at work (90% vs. 53%).

**Frequent recognition drives employee experience**



## 6. When milestones miss the moment

Work anniversaries are among the rarest opportunities an organization gets. The data suggests most are wasting it.



**33%**

of workers have never received a service milestone recognition



**6 in 10**

workers have never had a milestone that was a meaningful celebration of their work

61% of workers have never been recognized for a service milestone in a meaningful way. 33% have never been recognized for a milestone at all. The quality gap worsens with tenure: workers with 16+ years are the most likely to say their milestone recognition was not meaningful – a striking failure at exactly the moments when loyalty deserves acknowledgment.

The role gap compounds this: only 27% of individual contributors say their milestone was a meaningful celebration, compared to 59% of executives. A long-serving IC and a long-serving executive have both given years of their working life to the organization – but the odds of that being meaningfully marked differ by more than 2 to 1.

The most commonly received milestone elements are transactional: manager messages (39%), cash bonuses (38%), leadership messages (37%). Yet one of the elements most directly connected to meaning – peer messages and memories – was received by only 21% of milestone recipients. And the more elements included, the more meaningful the recognition: 1 component yields 31% finding it meaningful; 6+ yields 87–90%.

## Three imperatives for leaders

### 1. **Build infrastructure, not just programs.**

Half the workforce has gone 3 months without formal acknowledgment. A third have no program. The gap between Recognition Exposure (54) and Impact (74) is not a motivation problem – it's a reach problem.

### 2. **Close the IC and deskless gap deliberately.**

Individual contributors and deskless workers are 10–25 points below their managerial counterparts on belonging, career path, recognition recency, and AI preparedness. These gaps don't close on their own.

### 3. **Treat manager capacity as a strategic input.**

53% of managers lack adequate time or resources to support their people. Managers without both have meaningful career conversations with their teams at just 29% – vs. 79% for fully resourced managers.

Do you know what's actually happening with your people – and if not, what are you building to find out?

Read the [full report](#) to learn more.

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