TWO YEARS INTO COVID:

The State of Human Connection at Work

FINDINGS FROM THE
WORKHUMAN IQ SPRING 2022
INTERNATIONAL SURVEY REPORT

workhuman

Table of contents

workhuman*

Executive summary

"People are not the most valuable asset in your company. People are your company."

ADAM GRANT
Bestselling author and organizational psychologist

If you're being honest (don't worry, we won't tell), does your HR department embrace this philosophy? How about your executive team? When you're faced with a decision for how to allocate budget for incentives and rewards, are you putting the human first? When things are in a state of flux, the companies that double down on caring for their people are the ones that win every time.

Humans are social creatures. To thrive and do our best work, we need to feel seen, appreciated, and valued for who we are and what we do. So how does a people-first approach translate into organizational policy and practice – into the day-to-day of work?

Based on findings from a survey of 2,268 full-time workers across the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Ireland, this report explores the state of human connection at work, providing proof points and practical advice for HR and business leaders to create magnetic, human-centered work cultures.
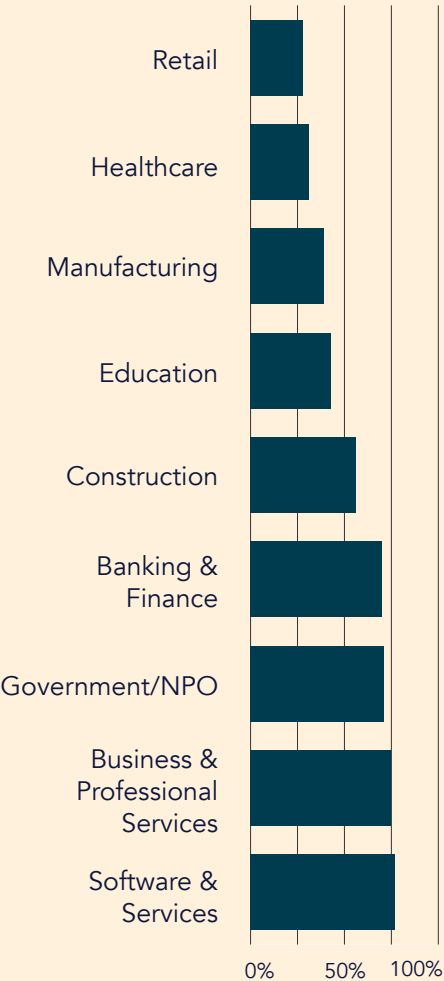
Where work happens

2D VS. 3D WORK

Two years ago, a global pandemic turned nearly every universal truth about work on its head. Take the very idea of an office. Pre-pandemic, work was a physical place for most people – at least for part of the work week. When health and safety concerns compromised the office, companies that once refused to accept remote work were forced to allow flexibility (some reluctantly) so business operations could continue.

Most industries have at least 25% of employees working either hybrid or fully remote.

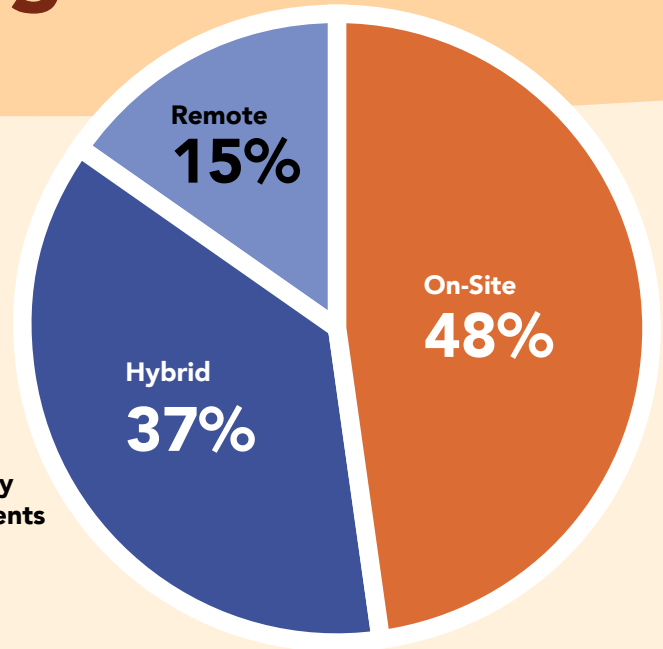| Industry	
Retail	
Healthcare	
Manufacturing	
Education	
Construction	
Banking & Finance	
Government/NPO	
Business & Professional Services	
Software & Services	

0%   50%   100%

Selection of industries with at least 100 responses

For some industries, work has always been and continues to be a place to which people go. Most respondents in this survey who work 100% on-site are in retail, manufacturing, healthcare, food and beverage, and education. Even in these industries, adoption of hybrid work (a mix of on-site and remote work) is gaining traction: 37% of education workers and 28% of manufacturing workers said their work environment has changed since the pandemic to include more remote work.
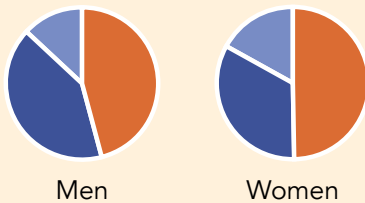
While none of the industries represented in this survey have a majority of fully remote workers, many have mostly hybrid workers: 70% of banking and finance workers, 77% of software and services, and 71% of government and nonprofit workers are either hybrid or remote.
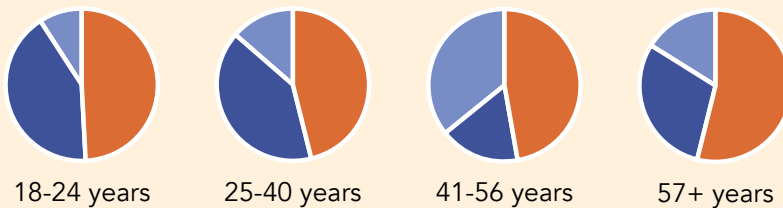
Where are people working?

Other than industry, the likelihood of remote work is impacted by company size and other employee demographics.

Remote 15%

On-Site 48%

Hybrid 37%

All survey respondents

Workers who are 41-56 years of age are most likely to be working remotely.

Gender

Men

Women

Age

18-24 years

25-40 years

41-56 years

57+ years

Race

Asian

Black

Hispanic

Mixed or Multiple Ethnicities

White

Company size

1-99 Employees

100-999 Employees

1k-10k Employees

10k+ Employees
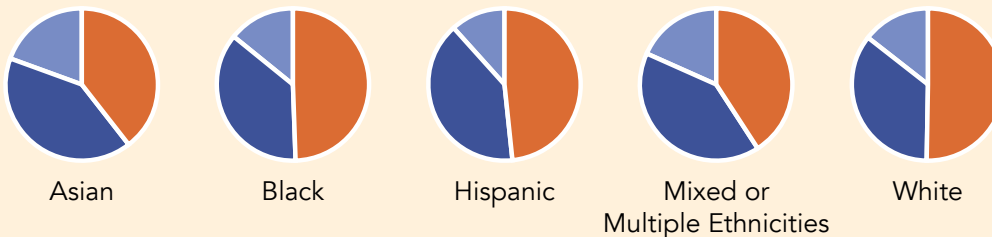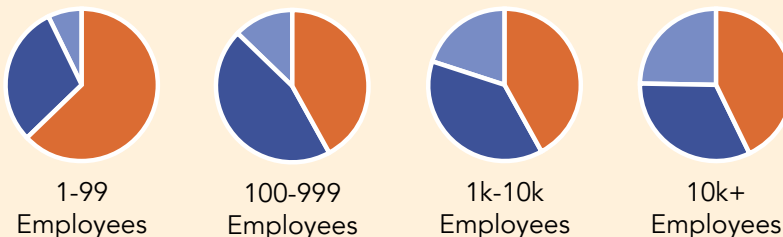
The very experience of work now seems to fall into two distinct categories: 2D and 3D. For 2D work, you can work out of the comfort of your home office on a screen, collaborating on video calls and in constant virtual connection with your colleagues. For 3D work, you interact directly with people and materials. The place you conduct business likely hasn't changed, but additional health and safety measures have certainly become the norm.

That's the state of where work happens. Now let's go deeper. How do the 2D and 3D work experience differ? What can we learn about how connected workers are to their colleagues and company culture? In this report, we'll delve into the data to explore these questions and more.
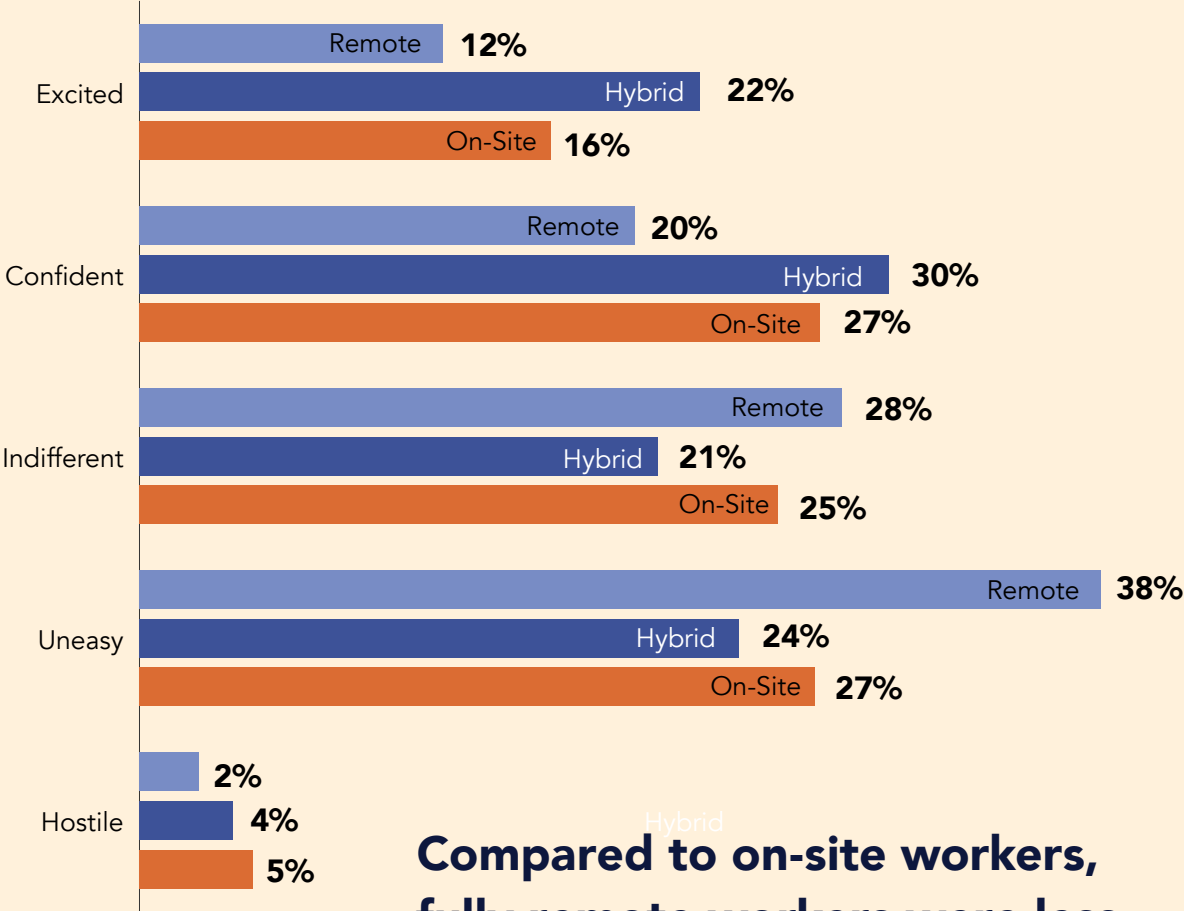
The 2D vs. 3D experience
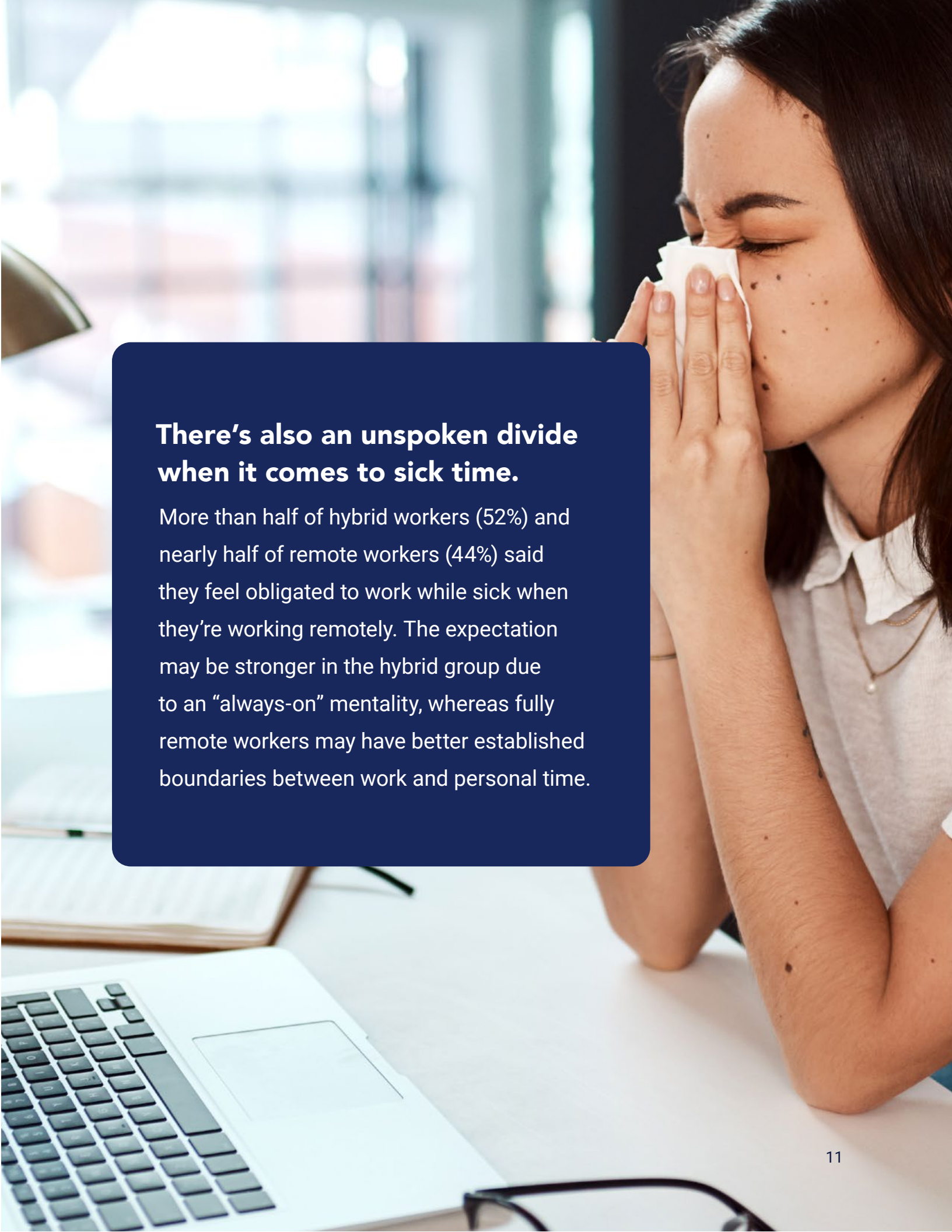
RESILIENCE, CONNECTION, AND APPRECIATION

As more employees are separated physically at least part of the time, some leaders are understandably concerned about the potentially detrimental impact on culture and connection – and ultimately the resilience of the workforce.

How employees weather change

When things are changing at your organization, how do you most often feel?

Excited
- Remote **12%**
- Hybrid **22%**
- On-Site **16%**

Confident
- Remote **20%**
- Hybrid **30%**
- On-Site **27%**

Indifferent
- Remote **28%**
- Hybrid **21%**
- On-Site **25%**

Uneasy
- Remote **38%**
- Hybrid **24%**
- On-Site **27%**

Hostile
- Remote **2%**
- Hybrid **4%**
- On-Site **5%**

Compared to on-site workers, fully remote workers were less likely to say they feel confident and more likely to feel uneasy about change.

There's also an unspoken divide when it comes to sick time.

More than half of hybrid workers (52%) and nearly half of remote workers (44%) said they feel obligated to work while sick when they're working remotely. The expectation may be stronger in the hybrid group due to an "always-on" mentality, whereas fully remote workers may have better established boundaries between work and personal time.

11

When it comes to connection, workers were asked how connected they feel to both their colleagues and their company culture.

Across all ways of working, **people feel more connected to colleagues than company culture**.

This shouldn't come as a surprise since **people are your culture**.

Hybrid workers feel more appreciated and connected to company culture than other groups. Both hybrid and on-site workers feel more of a sense of connection to colleagues – thanks to at least some face-to-face interaction – than fully remote workers.

This sense of connection (or lack thereof) likely feeds into how appreciated people feel. Overall, 60% of people say they feel somewhat or very appreciated for the work they do. That's a reasonably high percentage (though far from what we'd like to see), considering almost half (49%) of all workers said they had too much work to do over the past year.

Looking at these numbers through the lens of where work is done, hybrid workers feel the most appreciated but also the most overworked. Hybrid workers are getting more face time with peers and management, which might explain feeling more appreciated. Yet balancing two modes of working may also make people feel like they're required to be "on" all the time.

Hybrid workers feel the most appreciated but also the most overworked.
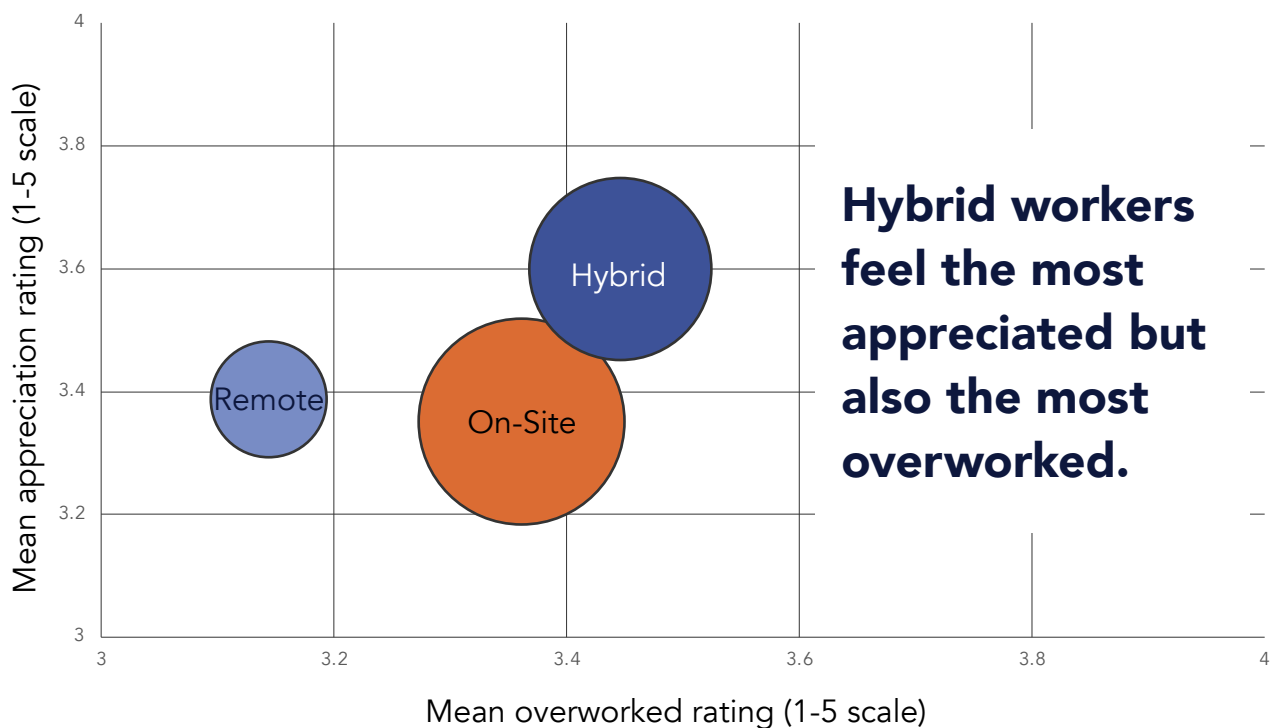
If your company has some combination of hybrid, remote, and on-site workers, consider that 39% of hybrid and 29% of remote workers agree with the statement: "When I work from home, I don't receive as much recognition as my on-site colleagues." Pay attention to how praise is distributed across your employee base.

Weak ties and potential boomerangs

TURNOVER RISKS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Workplace disruption has been called many things
this past year – the Great Resignation, the Big Quit,
the Great Talent Swap, and even Turnover Tsunami.
Whatever you call it, the desire for change persists, as
does the challenge of recruiting and retaining top talent.
The stakes are high when you consider the cost to
replace an employee is up to two times their salary.

More than one-third of workers (36%) said they plan to look for a new job in the next 12 months. Job seeking is down two percentage points from our June 2021 survey, but still higher than a December 2019 survey where only 21% were job seekers. The number is significantly higher in Ireland, where nearly half (47%) of workers have one foot out the door. Millennials (aged 25-40) are also more likely than any other generation to look for a new job this year (47%).

DEC. 2019

JUNE 2021

NOV. 2021

21%

38%

36%
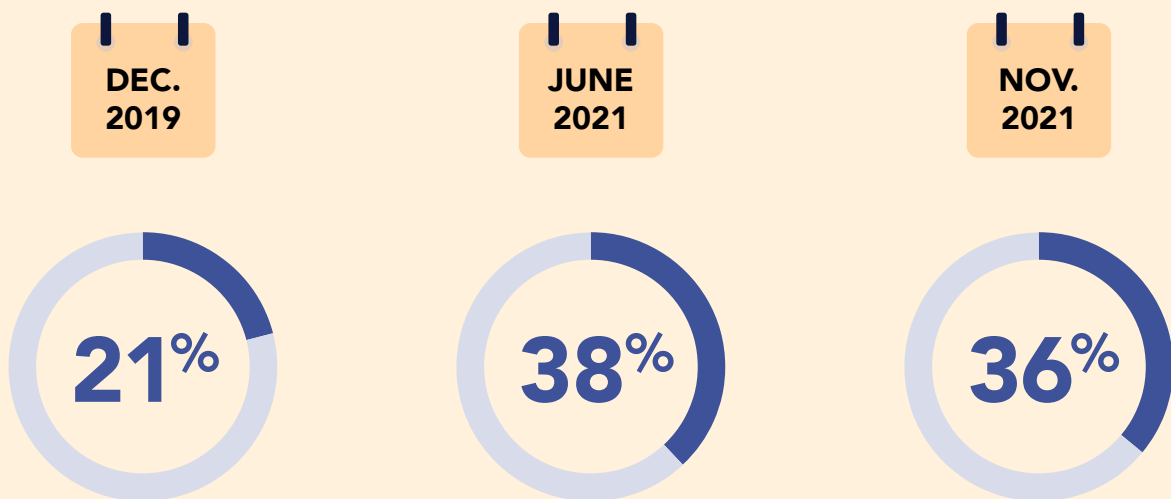
The number of employees looking to change jobs remains higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Workers were asked if they perceived an increase in people leaving their organization in the last year: 50% said "yes." When an employee chooses to leave, there are costs associated with recruiting and retraining, but also in terms of morale and others' lived experiences at work.

The negative ripple effect is undeniable. People who see turnover around them are more than 2x as likely to be looking for a new job themselves (48% vs. 24%).

Of respondents who perceive increased turnover:

26% said
"It has made me consider leaving the organization as well."

44% said
"My workload has increased."

20% said
"My work support network has decreased."

19% said
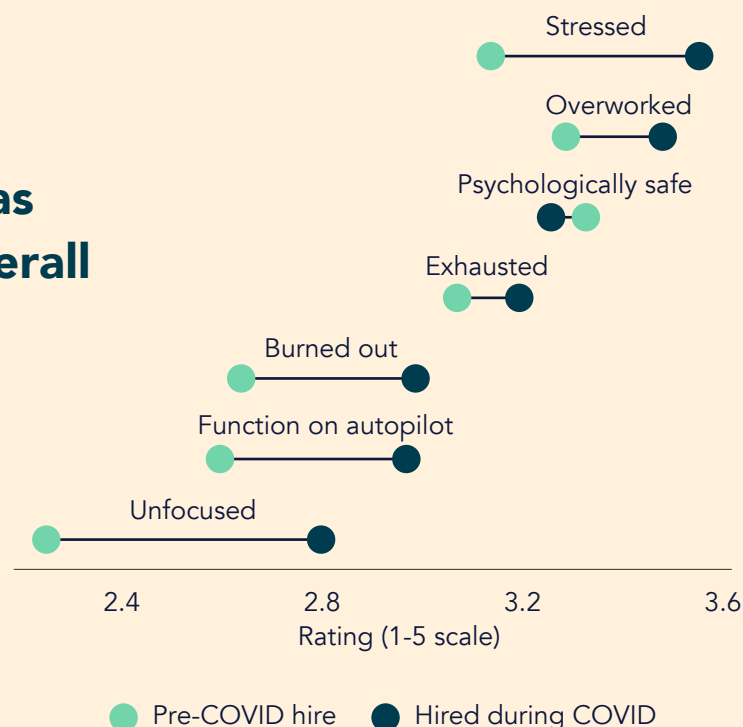"It has made me doubt the stability of the business."

.What about COVID new hires?

Even though they started a new job in the middle of a pandemic amidst new methods of recruitment (70% of COVID new hires say they onboarded remotely), more of these workers describe themselves as highly engaged (44%) than anyone else.
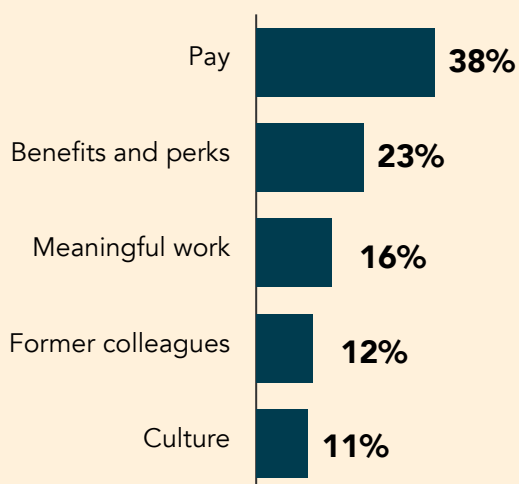
While they're still in the honeymoon phase, it's tenuous. COVID new hires report feeling more overworked, burned out, stressed, and less psychologically safe than their more tenured colleagues.

Additionally, 50% of workers hired during the pandemic say they plan to look for a new job in the next 12 months (compared to just one-third of employees hired pre-COVID). And they are much more likely to return to a former employer (69% compared to 56%).

The experience of workers hired during COVID was more difficult overall than those hired pre-COVID.

Stressed
Overworked
Psychologically safe
Exhausted
Burned out
Function on autopilot
Unfocused

2.4   2.8   3.2   3.6

Rating (1-5 scale)

● Pre-COVID hire   ● Hired during COVID

Top reasons employees would boomerang

Reason	
Pay	38%
Benefits and perks	23%
Meaningful work	16%
Former colleagues	12%
Culture	11%

One trend HR and recruiters should embrace amid this disruption is boomerang employees – former employees who may have left for a new opportunity but are willing to bring what they've learned back to the organization. Most job-seeking workers (62%) said they would return to a former employer.

While compensation tops the list, don't discount the allure of modernized benefits and the opportunity to do meaningful work. A global pandemic was a wake-up call for so many people – a forcing function to reassess what's most important in life and work.

What really matters

MOVING FROM TRANSACTIONAL TO MEANINGFUL WORK

At a time when people are questioning how they spend their time and how they make a living,

HR and business leaders should take a step back and think about ways to make work less transactional – and more human.

Doubling down on connection, community, and belonging makes the most sense financially, in terms of mitigating turnover, and it's also what employees expect.

Workers were asked: "How important is diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) for you in terms of staying at your current organization?" Seventy-two percent said it's somewhat or very important. That number is even higher for Gen Z workers (86%) and Black workers (87%).

Regardless of where your company is at on its DE&I journey, make sure you communicate your values and the steps you're taking to make progress.

Another area of opportunity to humanize work comes in the form of life events. If you're human, chances are you'll experience a life event while working, whether it's buying a house, getting married, running a marathon, or having a baby. Sixty-six percent of workers say they would appreciate more opportunities to celebrate personal life events at work, and yet 54% of organizations don't currently celebrate those events (21% said their company used to celebrate prior to COVID-19).

39% of workers feel valued as individuals when their organization acknowledges and celebrates a personal life event.

We're more than just productivity machines. When a manager or colleague acknowledges that, we feel seen and motivated to contribute more to the organization. Consider unique and even virtual ways to gather the work community together to commemorate these moments. And don't forget about your remote workforce.

Remote workers employed at companies that commemorate these moments feel more respected (78% vs. 58%) and appreciated (75% vs. 44%) overall than remote workers at companies that do not.

The whole human

A NOTE ON BURNOUT AND WELL-BEING

In addition to fostering a culture of belonging and taking the time to get to know employees as people with rich lives outside of work, well-being should take center stage in your HR strategy.
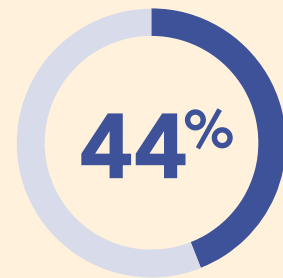
To understand the extent to which people are thriving (or not) at work, respondents were asked several questions related to their physical and emotional health.
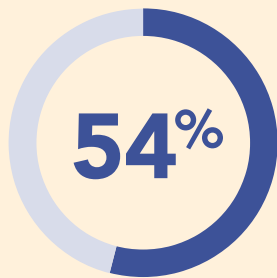
54%
said they feel mentally exhausted and drained after every workday.
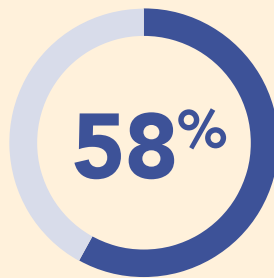
58%
said they do not think much about what they're doing at work and function on autopilot.

44%
said they have trouble staying focused at work.

Think about how this state of mind can bleed into people's family lives and even their sleep and eating habits, which inevitably leads to more negative impacts when it comes to productivity and performance at work.

Working parents in particular have had to navigate added stressors when it comes to ever-evolving COVID policies at schools and day care facilities. In this survey, 56% of survey respondents were parents and 25% said they had a child during the pandemic. Overall, Canada scored highest when it comes to parents feeling supported by their company and their manager in their return to work. Ireland and the United States scored lowest on those metrics.

Parents in Canada and the U.K. felt more supported during and after parental leave than parents in the U.S. or Ireland.

Do you feel that company policy with regard to parental leave adequately supported your return to work? For example, options for extended leave, reduced and/or flexible work hours?

Canada	84% Yes
United Kingdom	84% Yes
Ireland	79% Yes
United States	74% Yes
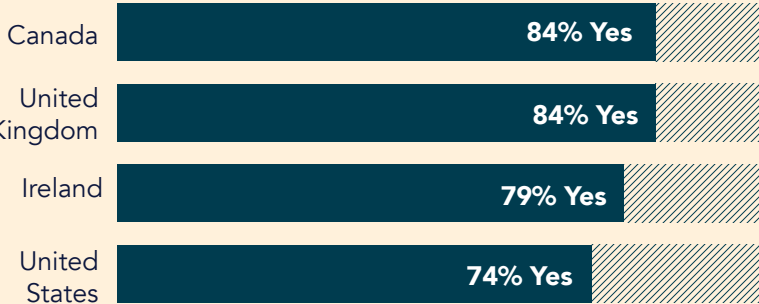
Do you feel that your manager adequately supported your return to work? For example, good communication, being brought up to speed, being understanding, etc.

Canada	90% Yes
United Kingdom	86% Yes
United States	81% Yes
Ireland	80% Yes
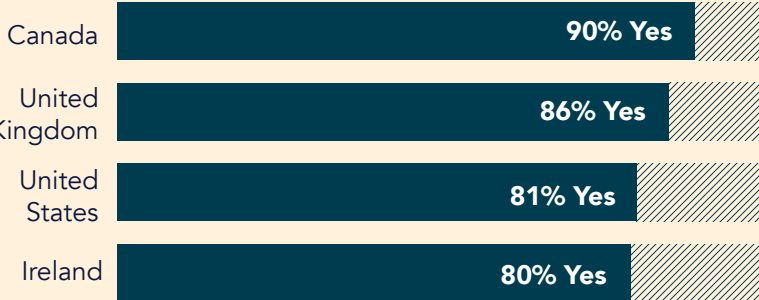
In their own words:

In what ways did you or did you not feel supported after your parental leave?

"All work was left for me. [I] was thrown back in at the deep end."

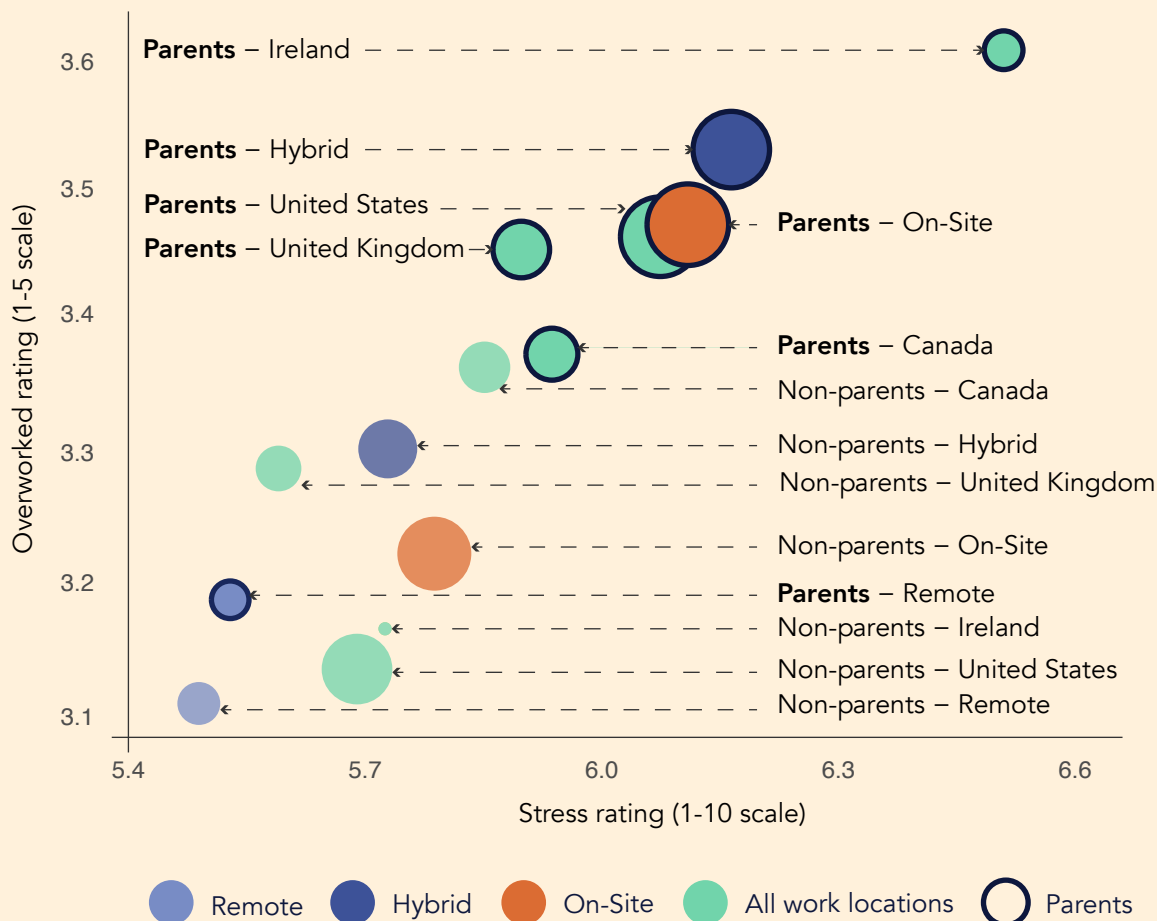"My manager [has] kids of similar ages as mine so he was very understanding of my situation and expectations."

"Felt like I might be replaced soon so I resumed work as soon as I could."

"I was not chastised and was given a welcome back celebration."

Even still, survey data indicates working parents –
especially women and parents in Ireland – feel much
more stressed than their non-parent colleagues. This
might explain why parents are slightly more likely (+3
percentage points) to be looking for a new job this year,
with 25% of those job seekers citing the primary reason
as better flexibility and work-life balance.

Parents who work fully remote have notably less stress and feel less overworked.

Y-axis: Overworked rating (1-5 scale), values 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6

X-axis: Stress rating (1-10 scale), values 5.4, 5.7, 6.0, 6.3, 6.6

Labels: Parents – Ireland; Parents – Hybrid; Parents – United States; Parents – United Kingdom; Parents – On-Site; Parents – Canada; Non-parents – Canada; Non-parents – Hybrid; Non-parents – United Kingdom; Non-parents – On-Site; Parents – Remote; Non-parents – Ireland; Non-parents – United States; Non-parents – Remote

Legend: Remote, Hybrid, On-Site, All work locations, Parents
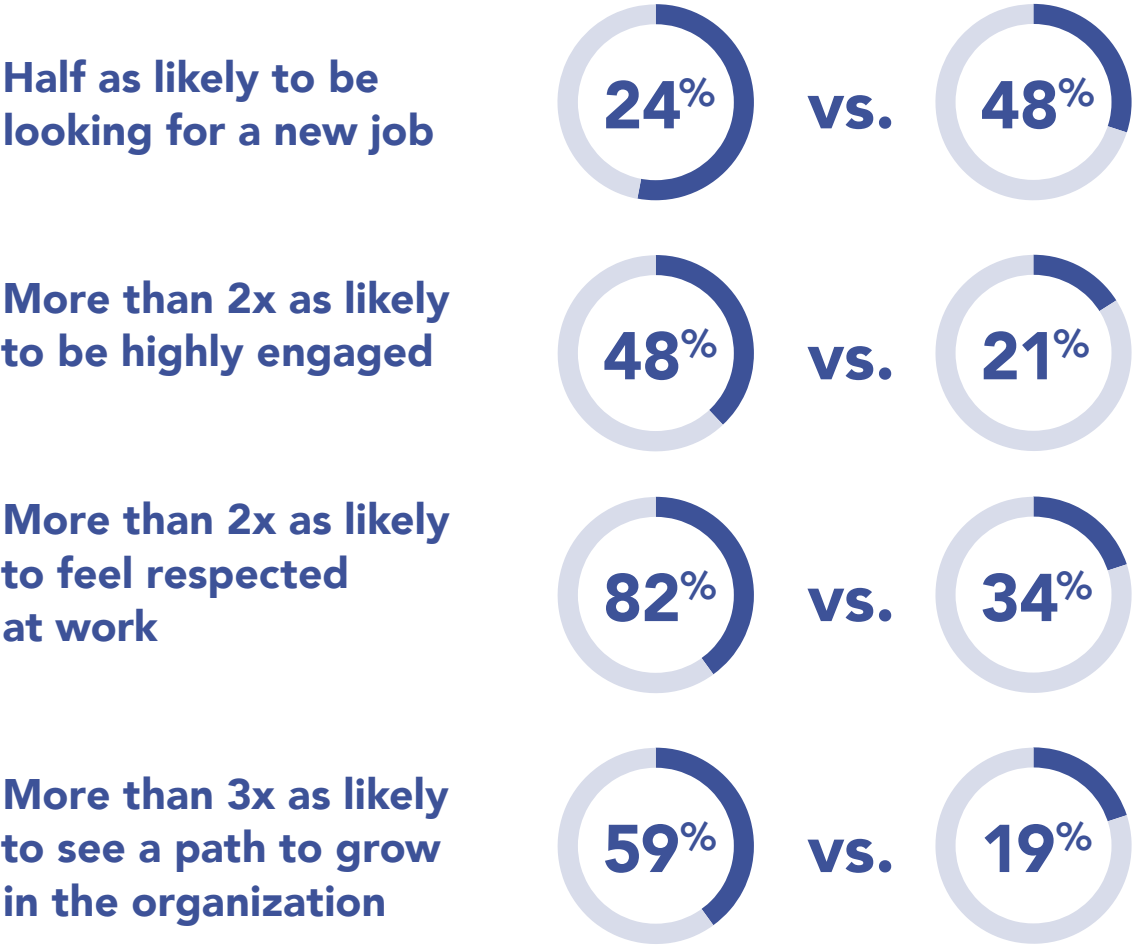
Intentional appreciation

START WITH THANKS

The story of each individual worker may vary. But what this survey reveals, overall, is a workforce that's burned out, stressed, and overworked – and yearning for a sense of connection. How can business and HR leaders mitigate the detrimental side effects from nearly two years of upheaval?

Start by modernizing HR practices to meet the current pace of work. It takes little to no budget – perhaps a shift in mindset – to give praise when you see someone doing something right, rather than waiting for a formal review. We're all human and feel seen when we're shown appreciation.

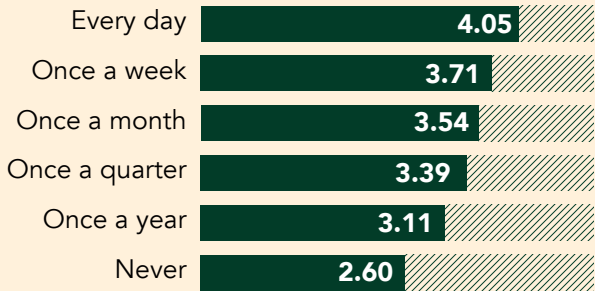Here's the outsized business impact of appreciation. **People who were thanked in the last month are:**

Half as likely to be looking for a new job
24% vs. 48%

More than 2x as likely to be highly engaged
48% vs. 21%

More than 2x as likely to feel respected at work
82% vs. 34%

More than 3x as likely to see a path to grow in the organization
59% vs. 19%

Giving thanks more frequently not only drives these key metrics, but also fosters the culture of connection you need to recruit and retain top talent.
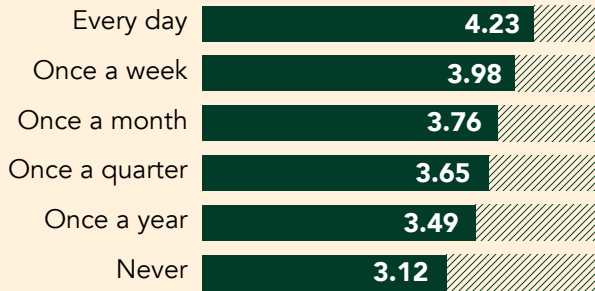
The more recently someone has been thanked by a manager and/or peer, the greater their sense of connection to the company culture and their colleagues.
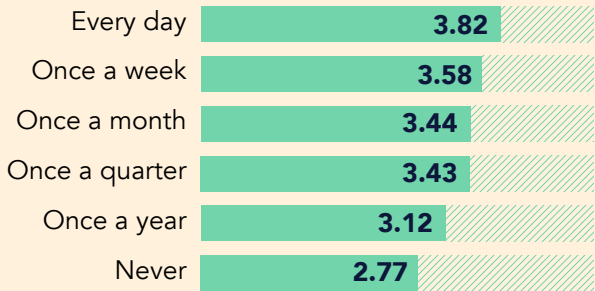
Manager recognition:

Every day	4.05
Once a week	3.71
Once a month	3.54
Once a quarter	3.39
Once a year	3.11
Never	2.60

Connection to company culture (1-5 scale)

Manager recognition:

Every day	4.23
Once a week	3.98
Once a month	3.76
Once a quarter	3.65
Once a year	3.49
Never	3.12

Connection to colleagues (1-5 scale)

Peer recognition:

Every day	3.82
Once a week	3.58
Once a month	3.44
Once a quarter	3.43
Once a year	3.12
Never	2.77

Connection to company culture (1-5 scale)

Peer recognition:

Every day	4.16
Once a week	3.90
Once a month	3.70
Once a quarter	3.63
Once a year	3.56
Never	3.02
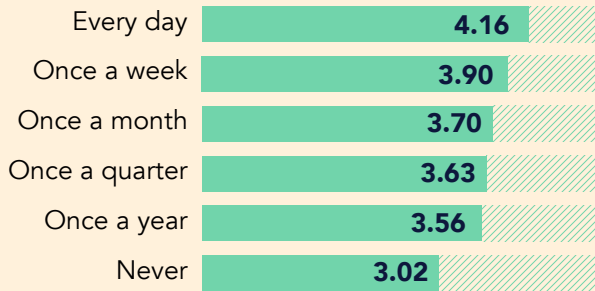
**Connection to colleagues (1-5 scale)**
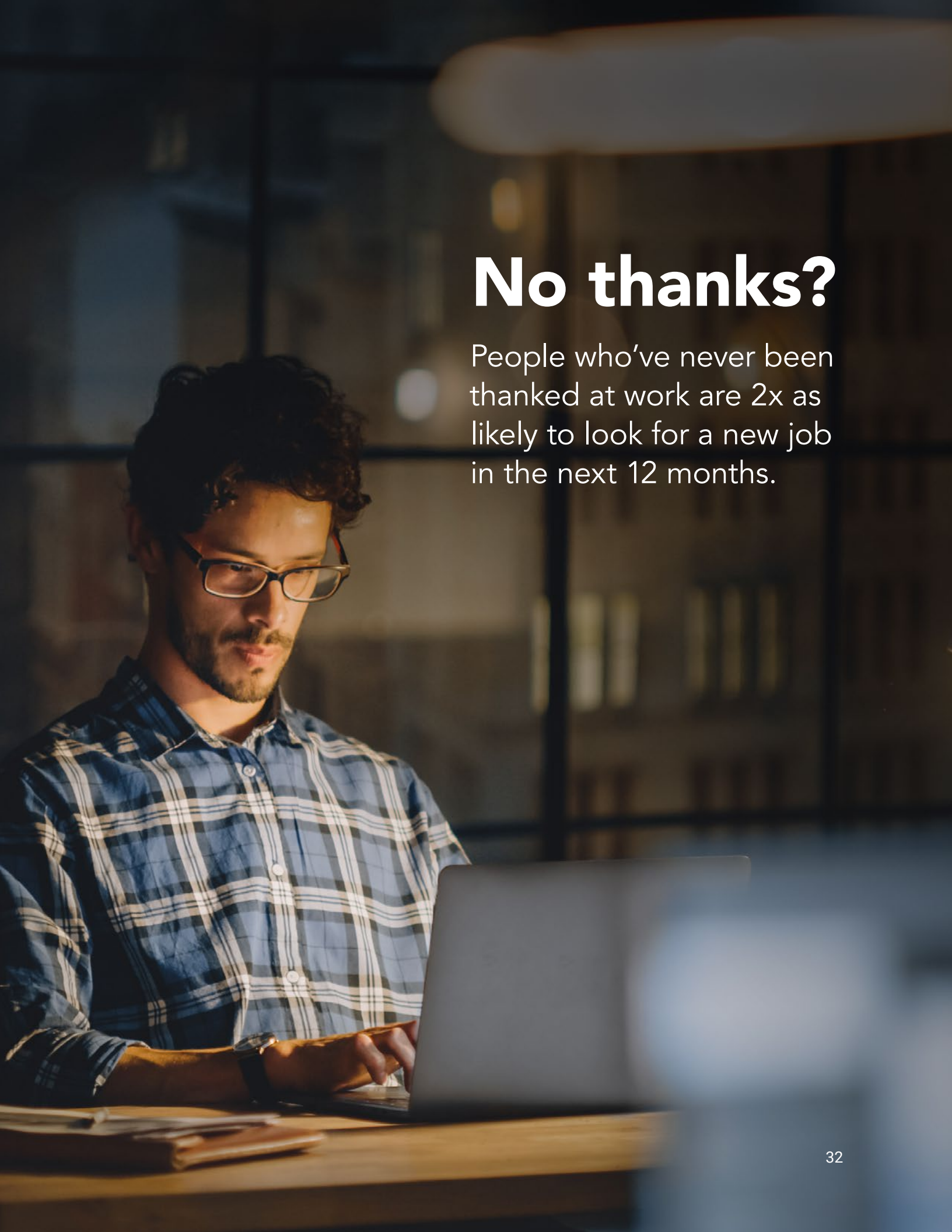
No thanks?

People who've never been thanked at work are 2x as likely to look for a new job in the next 12 months.

What reduces turnover?

A strong sense of connection to company culture and colleagues can drive a sense of purpose and collaboration across an organization and is strongly associated with decreased turnover intention.
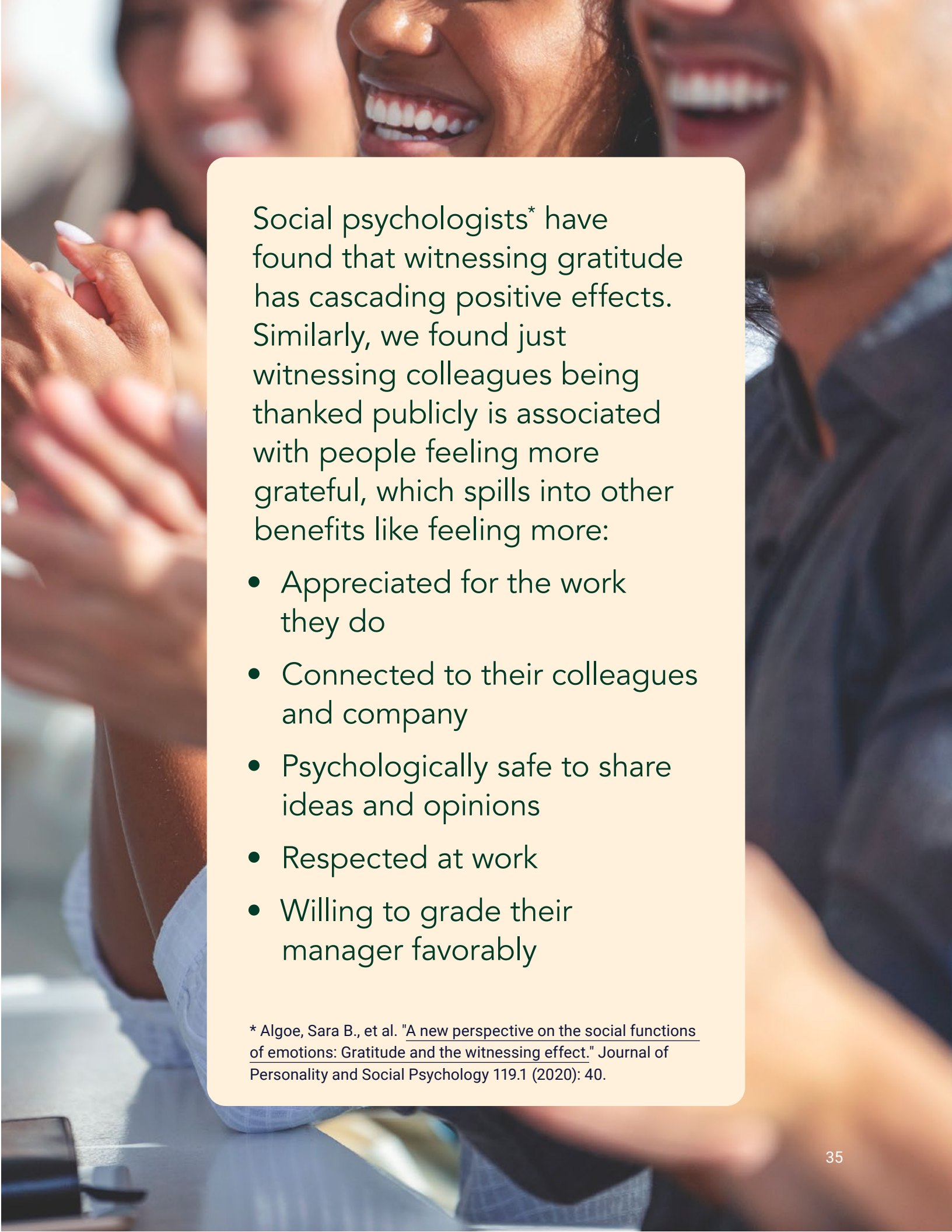
Appreciation strengthens the essential bonds of a culture people want to be a part of. So, becoming more intentional about saying "thank you" in the moment can also mitigate the burnout that's become prevalent in so many organizations.
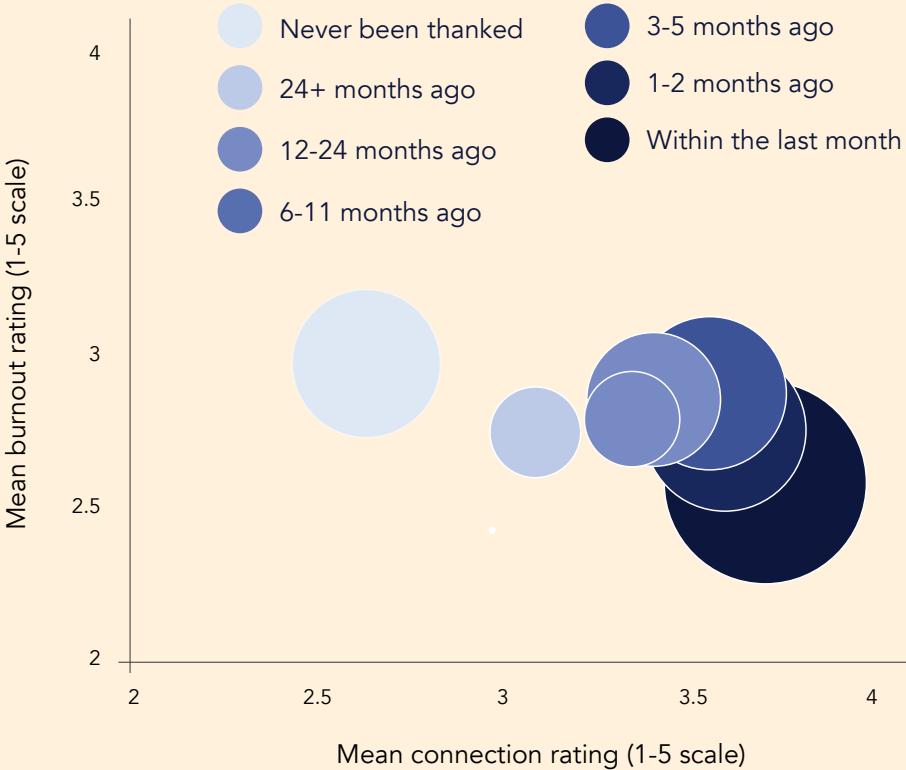
Thanked workers feel more connected and less burned out.

While progressive work policies and well-being programs have their place, consider the simple yet powerful impact of peer-to-peer recognition in setting the tone for a more human way of working.
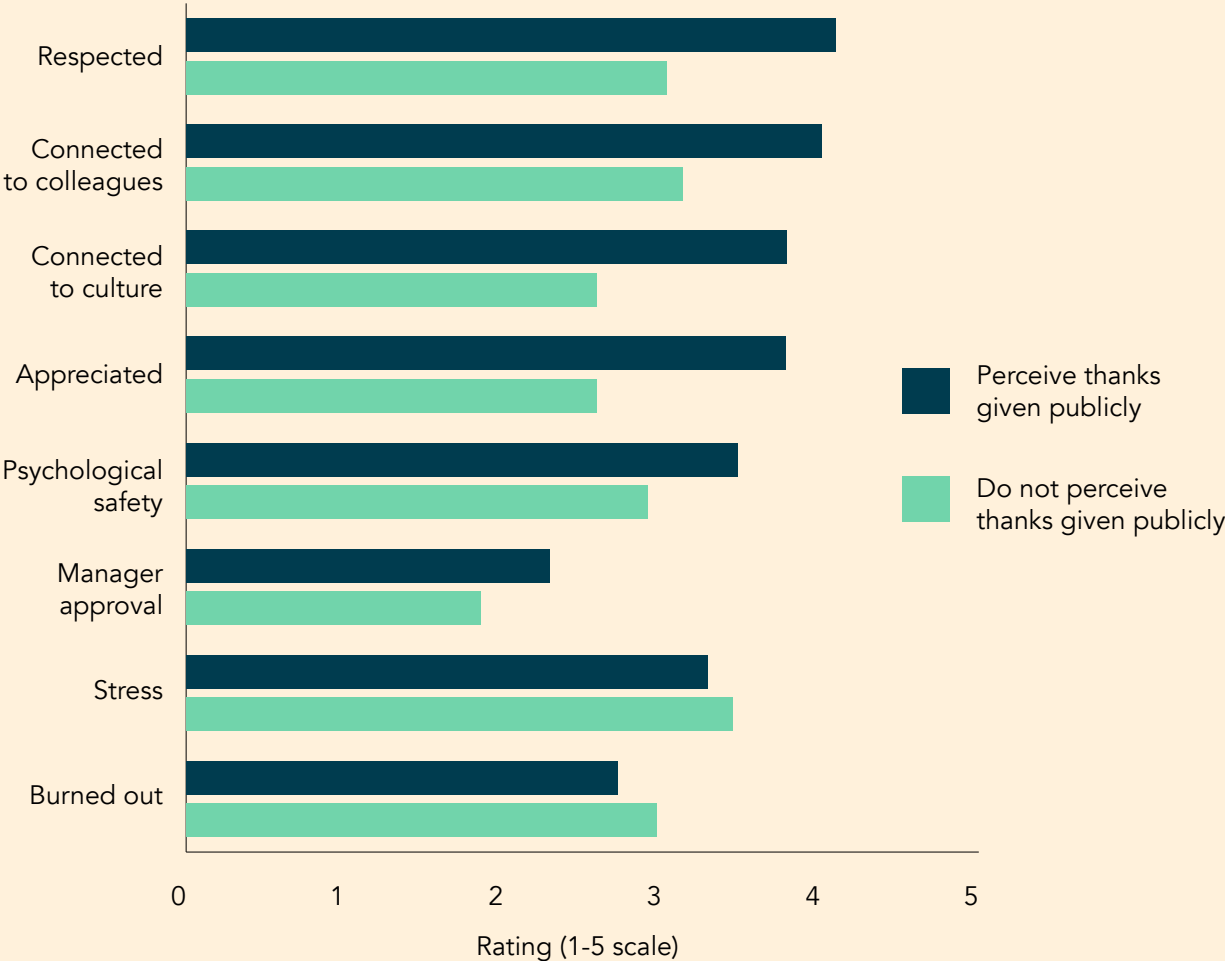
Social psychologists* have found that witnessing gratitude has cascading positive effects. Similarly, we found just witnessing colleagues being thanked publicly is associated with people feeling more grateful, which spills into other benefits like feeling more:

- Appreciated for the work they do

- Connected to their colleagues and company

- Psychologically safe to share ideas and opinions

- Respected at work

- Willing to grade their manager favorably

* Algoe, Sara B., et al. "A new perspective on the social functions of emotions: Gratitude and the witnessing effect." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 119.1 (2020): 40.

Did you see that?

Witnessing public thanks is also associated with less burnout and stress. That means the more you can amplify and socialize recognition, the more impact it will have across your organization.

Legend:
- Perceive thanks given publicly (dark navy)
- Do not perceive thanks given publicly (teal)

X-axis: Rating (1-5 scale)

Categories:
- Respected
- Connected to colleagues
- Connected to culture
- Appreciated
- Psychological safety
- Manager approval
- Stress
- Burned out

Next steps

"Recognition builds lasting connections between people."

ERIC MOSLEY
CEO, Workhuman

This year's survey data supports the need for recognition in building relationship capital – the "stickiness" that can buffer against record high quit rates. But it goes even further than that.

By strengthening your company's "thank you" muscle – empowering everyone to share praise in the moment as work happens – you take a critical step in building a culture where people are treated as human first and foremost. Human-centered workplaces are grounded in respect, appreciation, and gratitude – and they're the places where people want to do their best work. Just having a strategic recognition program is a great start. Employees at companies with recognition programs are 2x less likely to be planning to leave.

Here are four ways to build a human workplace:

1. Ask for feedback and listen.

Why? With a workforce more dispersed than ever, the only way you'll know how employees are feeling is by asking for feedback on a regular basis.

How? Consider sending a pulse survey to gauge how connected on-site, hybrid, and remote employees feel to your mission and culture. Ask what would make them feel even more connected.

2. Communicate your values.

Why? Most workers want to work for an organization that values DE&I.

How? While no company has DE&I perfectly figured out, it's important that everyone knows what your values are, where you're at, and the road map ahead.

3. Be human.

Why? No one does their best work if they don't feel their colleagues and company value them as people.

How? Make a conscious effort to celebrate life moments – big and small – with your team. Give people space and time to take care of their personal and family life so they're less likely to feel burned out and can be more present at work too.
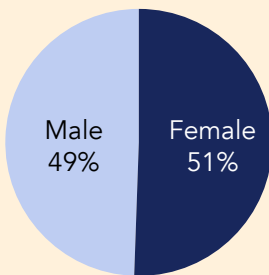
4. Say "thank you" – and mean it.

Why? Showing appreciation builds meaning, making people feel respected and motivated to take on whatever challenge your organization faces.

How? An employee recognition program is your armor to buffer against stress and burnout and solidify the connections you need for the future of work.
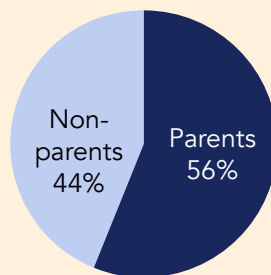
ABOUT THE SURVEY

This survey was directed by Workhuman® iQ from November 12-14, 2021. This is the 14th deployment of the employee survey since its launch in spring 2011. The respondent sampling of the survey was conducted by independent market research firm Dynata. The final sample of the survey was composed of 2,268 randomly selected fully employed persons in the U.S., Ireland, Canada, and U.K. (age 18 or older). The survey has a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points at a 95% level of confidence.
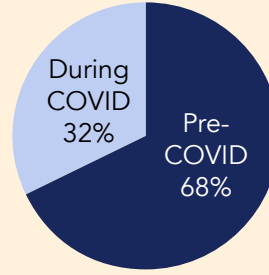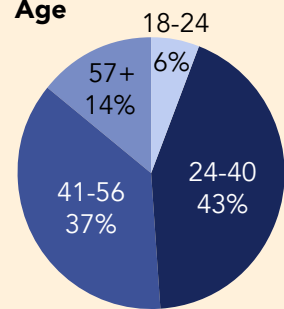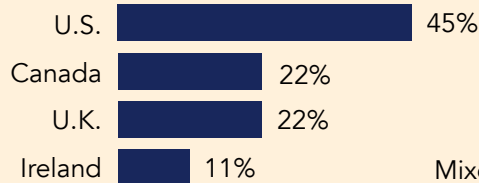
Gender

Male 49%
Female 51%

Parent status

Non-parents 44%
Parents 56%

Hire date

During COVID 32%
Pre-COVID 68%

Age

18-24 6%
57+ 14%
41-56 37%
24-40 43%

Region

U.S.	45%
Canada	22%
U.K.	22%
Ireland	11%

Race

White	61%
Asian	16%
Black	13%
Mixed or multiple	5%
Hispanic	4%
Smaller groups	2%

Role

Individual contributor/ entry level	42%
Manager/supervisor	23%
Middle manager	23%
Senior manager	9%
C-suite	4%

Tenure

< 1 year	7%
1-3 years	22%
4-7 years	27%
8-10 years	13%
11-15 years	12%
16-20 years	7%
20+ years	12%

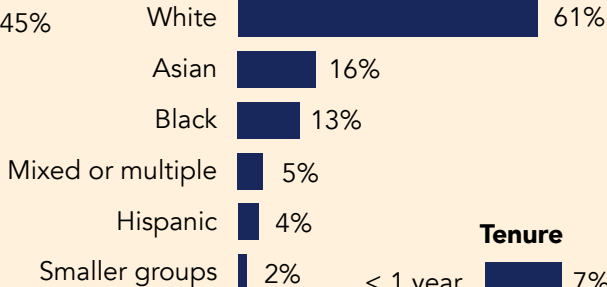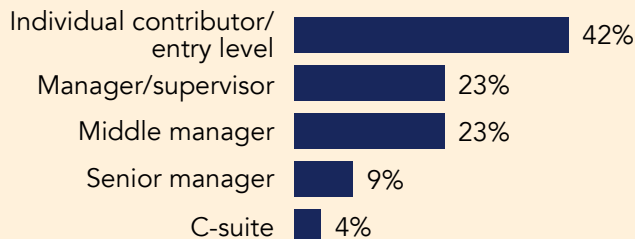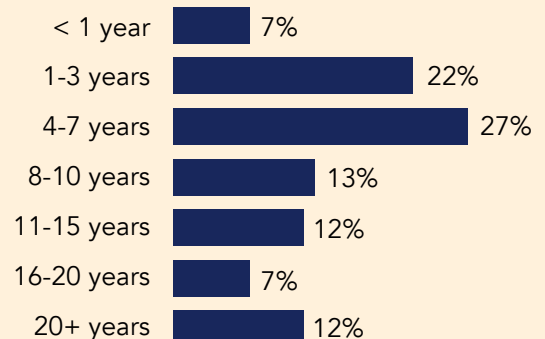## ABOUT WORKHUMAN

Workhuman® is pioneering the human workplace through award-winning Social Recognition® and Continuous Performance Development solutions. Workhuman inspires more than six million humans across 180 countries to perform the best work of their lives. For the past 21 years, human resources and business leaders alike have used Workhuman Cloud® to gain the proactive insights necessary to transform and lead a more connected, human-centered workplace that accelerates engagement and productivity. To learn more about Workhuman's mission to make work more human for every person on the planet and how you can ensure great work is celebrated and amplified in your workplace, visit **workhuman.com**.

+1 888.743.6723 | workhuman.com
Or read more on our blog: workhuman.com/resources

workhuman*