



2026 State of the Workforce Report

High Performance Doesn't Have to Be a Grind





Executive Summary

OVERVIEW

The 2026 State of the Workforce study surveyed 2,620 employed adults to examine the prevalence and impact of grind culture—the pervasive mindset that prioritizes relentless hard work and constant hustle as the primary path to success. While grind culture can drive achievement, it also poses significant risks to employee well-being, mental health, and retention.

KEY FINDINGS

Grind Culture Is Widespread But Nuanced

More than half of workers (54.9%) believe that failing to constantly improve means falling behind. This finding represents a cultural shift where professional development has moved from aspiration to expectation. However, most workers reject toxic extremes. Only 11.2% equate tiredness with working hard enough, and just 9.3% believe they must avoid non-career hobbies to be successful.

The Human Cost of Extreme Hustle Mentality

Employees who believe most in grind culture experience dramatically higher rates of burnout (30.9% vs 20.4%), planned turnover (33.0% vs 18.7%), moderate-to-high anxiety (50.4% vs 38.9%), and depression (50.3% vs 38.8%)—roughly 50% higher than their peers with healthier work attitudes.

Manager Support Remains a Critical Protective Factor

Employees with strongly supportive managers show significantly healthier relationships with workplace demands. They're less likely to believe success requires sacrificing relationships (24.2% vs 36.5%) or that successful people lack time for hobbies (6.8% vs 13.3%). Strong managerial support channels ambition in sustainable directions while maintaining work-life balance.

Remote and Hybrid Work Carries an “Invisibility Tax”

Remote and hybrid employees are 28% less likely than on-site workers to believe hard work leads to visible results (29.6% vs 40.9%), suggesting a troubling perception gap despite equivalent effort. This disconnect likely stems from limited informal communication, reduced organizational visibility, and concerns about career advancement.

Resilience Offers Powerful Protection and Performance Benefits

Resilient employees filter out the toxic elements of grind culture while maintaining optimistic views of hard work's value. They're 33% more likely to believe hard work leads to rewards, but also much less likely to believe success requires sacrificing personal relationships. Across a variety of mental well-being indicators, resilience has been a force multiplier for positive change. The most resilient employees experienced five times greater reductions in stress symptoms and dramatically lower burnout than their least resilient peers.

Four Resilience Factors Drive Sustainable High Performance

Employees who maintain healthy beliefs about effort and reward show 19% higher Engagement, 15% higher Positivity, 14% higher Purpose, and 12% higher Work-Life Balance scores. These psychological resources make effort feel meaningful and rewarding without tipping into toxic productivity.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Organizations face a critical choice: allow grind culture to extract unsustainable performance at the cost of employee well-being, or invest in resilience-building programs that channel ambition in a healthier way.

The data clearly demonstrate that sustainable high performance doesn't require toxic hustle—it requires strengthening the psychological resources that make hard work feel meaningful. Recognized. Rewarding. Companies that proactively invest in manager training, resilience development, and visibility systems for remote workers can create protective environments that buffer employees against broader societal stress while driving superior organizational outcomes.

Noses Were to the Grindstone in 2025

Grind culture is a **pervasive mindset and societal expectation** that prioritizes relentless hard work and unwavering dedication as the path to success. Sometimes called “996,” this mindset glorifies long hours and incessant productivity.

While grind culture can sometimes lead to increased output and rapid career advancement, our research shows that it can also result in burnout, toxic productivity, work-life imbalance, and **negative impacts** on mental and physical health. Grind culture is especially prevalent in high-pressure industries and tech-driven environments, which emphasize achievement and output.

Percent of Respondents Displaying Aspects of Grind Culture

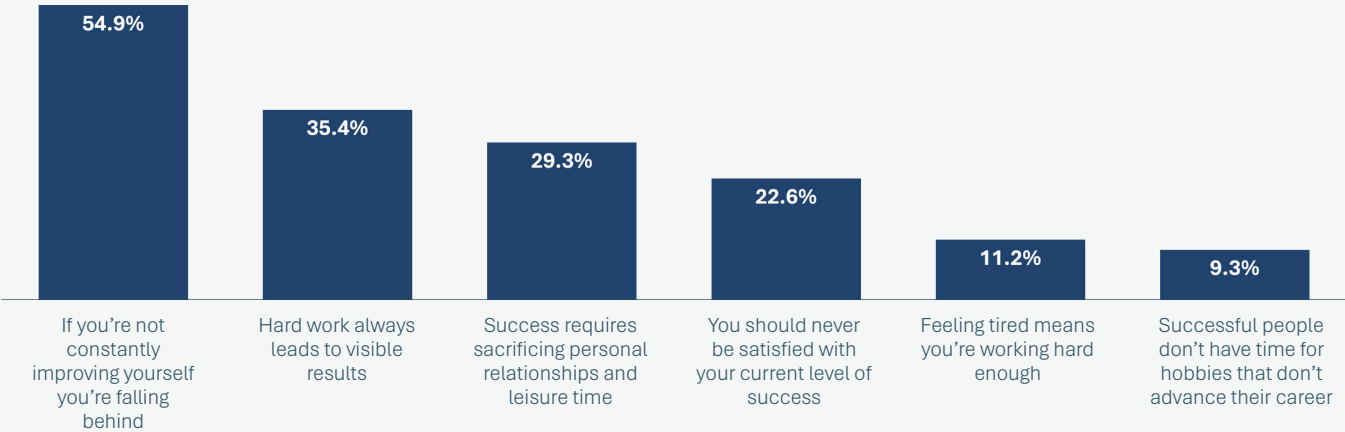


FIGURE 1 ■ Percent Agreed / Strongly Agreed

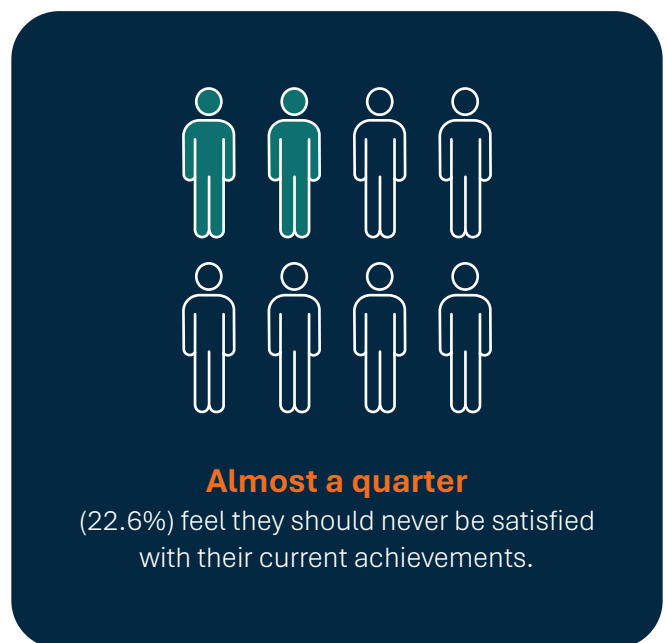
GRIND CULTURE OCCURS ACROSS THE WORKFORCE, WITH A FOCUS ON SELF-IMPROVEMENT

The State of the Workforce survey reveals that employees are working hard and generally believe they must continue to do so. There are both positive and negative consequences to this drive. Overall, the data indicate a workforce energized by self-improvement, while largely rejecting the most toxic extremes of grind culture.

On the upside, more than half of survey respondents (54.9%) believe that failing to constantly improve means falling behind. While the belief points to a great deal of pressure, it also suggests the kind of growth mindset that drives innovation, skill development, and career advancement. The data also spotlight a significant cultural shift: professional development and lifelong learning are not aspirational ideals, but mainstream expectations across every segment of the workforce.

Similarly, over a third of workers (35.4%) maintain an optimistic faith that hard work leads to visible results and rewards. This finding reflects a can-do attitude fueling a persistent workforce committed to excellence and achievement.

On the other hand, negative patterns of grind culture do emerge. These attitudes risk tipping healthy ambition into unsustainable pressure. Cue the burnout, quitting, and depression.

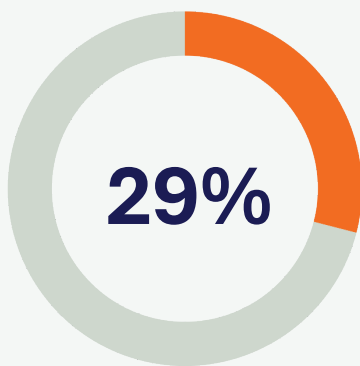


The most extreme beliefs garnered minimal support. Only 11.2% equate tiredness with working hard enough, and just 9.3% think successful people avoid hobbies that don't advance their careers. These low figures suggest that most workers understand that rest and outside interests are compatible with, and even essential to, sustained success.

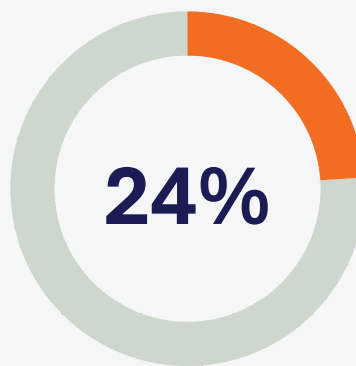
Hourly Workers Buy Into Hustle Culture More Than Their Salaried Peers

Hourly workers endorse hard work beliefs far more than salaried workers. They're more likely to agree that feeling tired means you're working hard enough (13.9% vs 9.8%) and that hard work always leads to visible results and rewards (43.4% vs 32.0%).

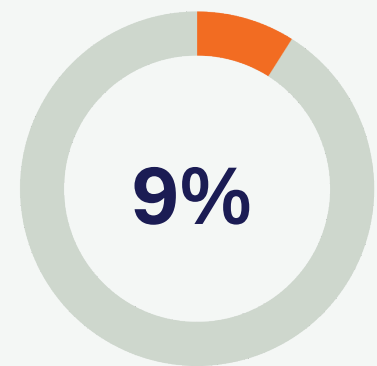
But then, the pattern changes, and hourly and salaried workers start to mirror each other. Both groups agree at similar rates that:



Success requires sacrificing personal relationships



You should never be satisfied with current achievements



Successful people don't have time for non-career hobbies

FIGURE 2

Interestingly, salaried workers are slightly more likely to believe they must constantly improve or fall behind (57.2% vs 51.6%). While hourly workers may romanticize hard work itself, salaried employees feel more pressure around continuous self-optimization.

And yet, deskless workers have also embraced the tech industry's relentless drive for continuous improvement. The industry breakdown (Figure 3) reveals notable variations in how grind culture manifests across different sectors.

Unsurprisingly, technology workers lead in embracing continuous improvement, at 66.9%. The sector's rapid pace of innovation and competitive talent market demand a commitment to constant professional evolution.

But who’s right behind tech? Manufacturing. 57% of these workers endorse the belief that failing to constantly improve means falling behind.

This represents a cultural evolution for manufacturing. Traditionally, this workforce focused on standardized processes—learn it this way, do it this way. But the pressures of productivity metrics, automation adaptation, and continuous process improvement have changed these workers’ learning and development needs.

Workers in finance, a notoriously intense industry, show the highest rates on several concerning metrics: 39.1% believe hard work always leads to visible results, 31.4% accept that success requires sacrificing relationships and leisure time, and 25.0% feel they should never be satisfied with their current success.

On the positive side, extreme beliefs about glorifying tiredness and rejecting non-career hobbies remain in the single digits or low teens across all industries, indicating that even in high-pressure sectors, workers maintain boundaries around rest and personal interests.

Opinions on Grind Culture Dynamics by Industry

Question	Business	Finance	Health Products/ Devices	Health Services	Manufacturing	Technology
Successful people don’t have time for hobbies that don’t advance their career	8.0%	9.8%	11.0%	6.0%	6.8%	12.1%
Feeling tired means you’re working hard enough	8.7%	11.8%	8.8%	8.6%	9.3%	12.9%
You should never be satisfied with your current level of success	20.6%	25.0%	17.8%	19.8%	16.9%	29.5%
Success requires sacrificing personal relationships and leisure time	22.1%	31.4%	25.2%	24.7%	31.1%	29.5%
Hard work always leads to visible results and rewards	30.5%	39.1%	25.4%	38.6%	28.9%	31.2%
If you’re not constantly improving yourself you’re falling behind	49.4%	56.6%	51.5%	42.9%	57.0%	66.9%

FIGURE 3

Managers Can Protect Employees From the Worst of Grind Culture—But Also Get the Best Out of It

Employees with strongly supportive managers show a healthier relationship with workplace demands. In fact, they endorse toxic grind culture beliefs at notably lower rates, likely because supportive leadership consistently helps workers maintain better boundaries and work-life balance.

Those with strong managerial support are **less likely** to believe that:

- Success requires sacrificing personal relationships (24.2% vs 36.5%)
- Successful people lack time for hobbies (6.8% vs 13.3%)

So how do managers get the most out of hard work? Interestingly, employees with supportive managers are **more likely** to believe that hard work leads to visible results and rewards (38.9% vs 30.7%). While they reject hustle mentality, they maintain a more optimistic view of their efforts paying off, perhaps because their managers actively recognize and reward their contributions.

This pattern reveals that strong managerial support doesn't diminish employees' work ethic or ambition. By reducing burnout-inducing beliefs and recognizing effort, managers channel steady hard work in healthier, more productive directions.

Manager Support Boosts Positive Productivity

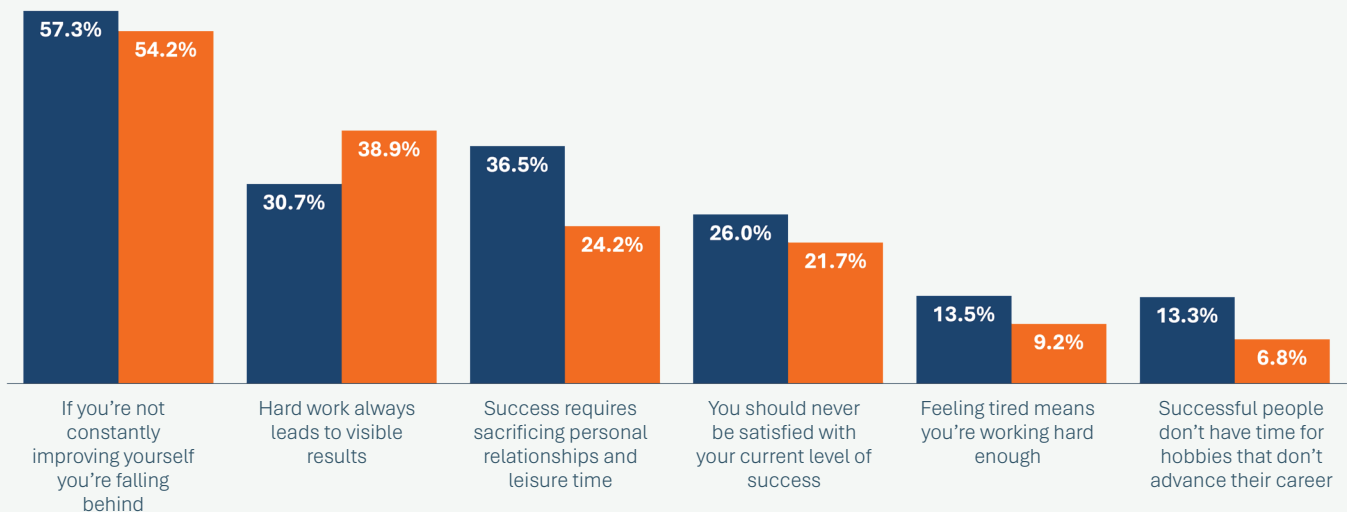


FIGURE 4 ■ Does not feel strongly supported ■ Feels strongly supported

Remote/Hybrid and On-site Work Trends Have Converged

Over the past three and a half years, remote and hybrid work arrangements have steadily declined while on-site work has dramatically increased. The two trends are now converging to near parity (Figure 5).

This convergence confirms a major organizational pivot back to traditional office-based work. The two models now represent an almost even split of the workforce, marking a near-complete reversal from the remote-dominant landscape immediately post-pandemic.

Previous State of the Workforce studies have highlighted the benefits of hybrid and remote work. In 2022, State of the Workforce data showed that remote/hybrid employees experienced substantially greater psychological safety than their on-site counterparts. They felt more comfortable discussing difficult issues on their teams. They took reasonable risks more often and felt their contributions were valued.

In 2023, **we found that remote/hybrid** workers were less sensitive to turnover triggers as well, including family responsibilities, co-worker relationships, manager relationships, and even compensation as turnover triggers. Only rarely has remote/hybrid work shown to be a liability.

Remote/Hybrid and On-site Work Trends Converge

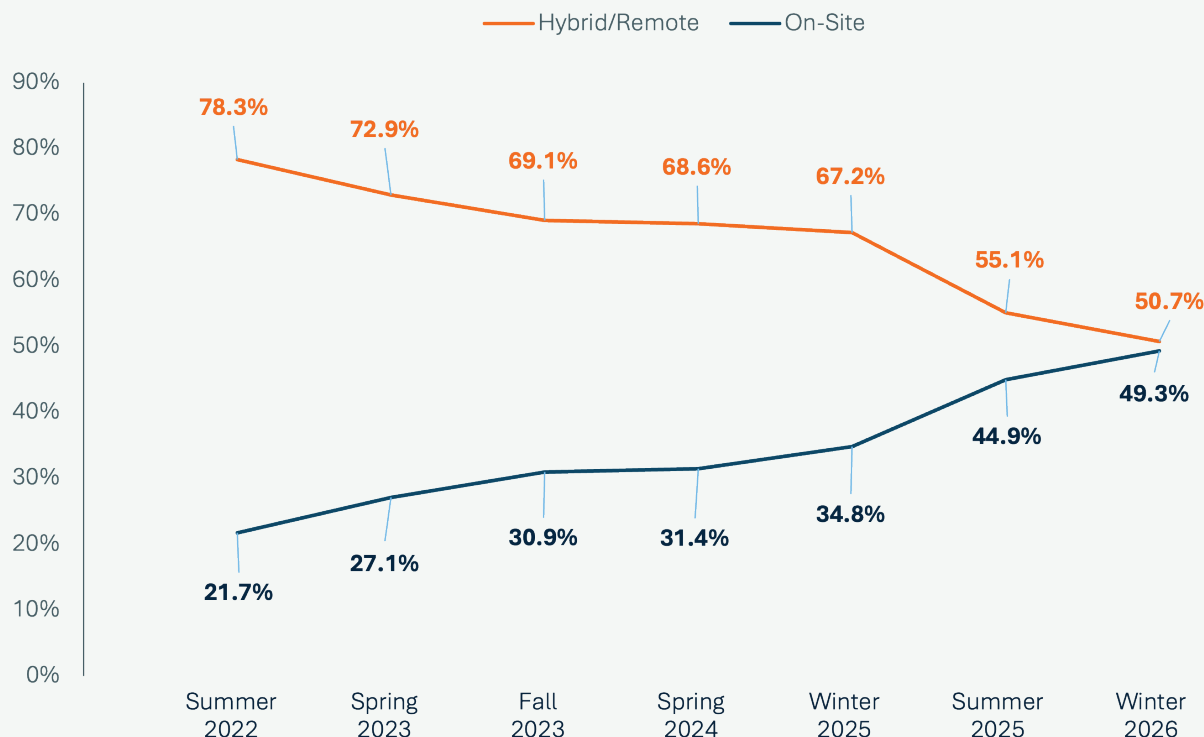


FIGURE 5



28%

of remote/hybrid employees are less likely to believe that hard work leads to visible results and rewards

TODAY, REMOTE/HYBRID WORKERS DO NOT FEEL RECOGNIZED

While remote/hybrid and onsite workers had roughly similar responses to most of the grind culture measures, one gap stands out.

Remote/hybrid employees are 28% less likely to believe that hard work always leads to visible results (40.9% on-site vs 29.6% remote). This new insight comes on top of data from the Summer 2025 State of the Workforce report, revealing that remote/hybrid workers feel significantly higher work uncertainty stress.

Elevated stress levels and the growing perception of disconnect between effort and reward likely stem from similar root causes—limited informal communication, reduced organizational visibility, and concerns about career advancement.

All-in Grind Culture Grinds People Down

EXTREME HUSTLE MENTALITY TAKES A SEVERE TOLL ON WELL-BEING

When we combine our six grind culture aspects into an overall measure, we can see which workers most highly endorse the grind mindset. Figure 6 compares high and low endorsement of grind culture to well-being outcomes—and the contrast is stark.

Employees most deeply invested in grind culture beliefs are experiencing mental health challenges and burnout at rates that are roughly 50% higher than their peers with healthier work attitudes. Those in the top 25% of grind culture adherence experience dramatically elevated rates of:

- Burnout (30.9% vs 20.4%)
- Planned turnover (33.0% vs 18.7%)
- Moderate-to-high anxiety (50.4% vs 38.9%)
- Moderate-to-high depression (50.3% vs 38.8%)

This data suggests a self-defeating cycle: the very beliefs that promise success and achievement are actually undermining employees' ability to sustain their careers and maintain their mental health. The near-identical rates of anxiety and depression (both hovering around 50% for high grind adherents) point to a workforce segment in crisis, where toxic productivity beliefs have created a cyclone of psychological distress that ultimately drives people out of their jobs rather than propelling them toward success.

Grind Culture Damages Well-being

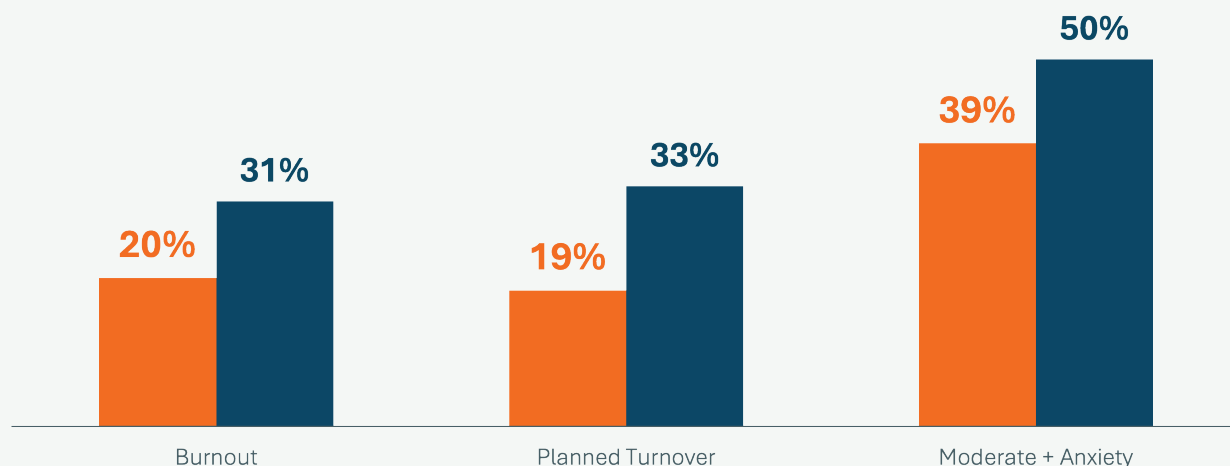


FIGURE 6 ■ Lowest Grind Scores ■ Highest Grind Scores

Resilience Reduces the Negative and Accentuates the Positive of Grind Culture

Resilient employees are highly productive and protected from the negative impacts of grind culture. In Figure 7, we can see a fascinating and unexpected pattern.

The least resilient employees are much more likely to buy into damaging grind culture beliefs. They're nearly twice as likely to believe that success requires sacrificing personal relationships and leisure time (37.7% vs 21.4%) and more than four times as likely to think successful people don't have time for hobbies that don't advance their career (15.5% vs 3.4%).

They're also more prone to believing they must constantly improve or fall behind (62.1% vs 51.0%) and should never be satisfied with their current success (28.5% vs 19.9%).

But does the least resilient group also believe that hard work leads to visible results and rewards? No.

Percent of Respondents Endorsing Aspects of Grind Culture by Resilience Level

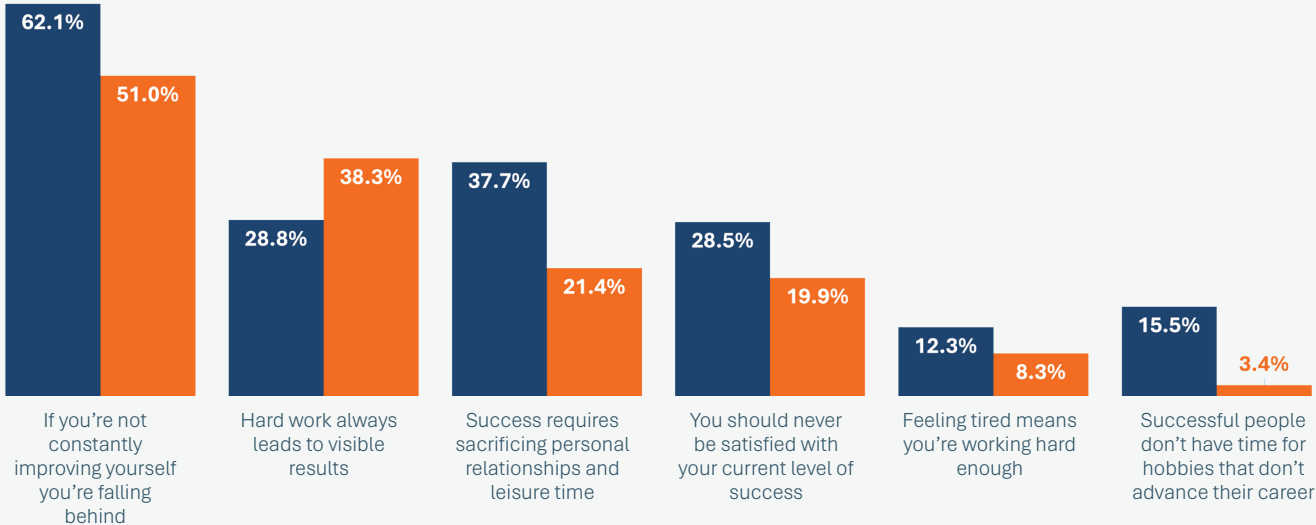


FIGURE 7 ■ Least Resilient ■ Most Resilient

The *most resilient* workers show substantially higher belief that hard work leads to visible results and rewards (38.3% vs 28.8%). The 10-point gap reveals that resilience doesn't diminish work ethic, but amplifies it. By maintaining boundaries and rejecting the idea that work should devour every waking hour, resilient workers preserve their capacity to believe in the value of their efforts.

These resilient employees are proof that sustainable productivity beats burnout culture. When you protect your personal life, you're more, not less, convinced that hard work matters. Resilience appears to filter out the toxic elements of grind culture while allowing people to maintain an optimistic, balanced, view of hard work's value.

meQ'S RESILIENCE FACTORS BOOST HIGH EFFORT

Using data from each survey respondent's meQ assessment, we identified the traits associated with the positive aspects of grind culture.

Across meQ's 18 resilience factors, four were strongly related to employees' endorsement that hard work leads to visible results and rewards:



These findings suggest that sustainable high performance is not simply about working harder—it's about cultivating the psychological resources that make effort feel meaningful and rewarding.

RESILIENCE ALSO MAKES THE WORKPLACE BETTER

Resilience doesn't just benefit individual employees—it creates a more collaborative and supportive workplace culture.

As Figure 8 shows, highly resilient individuals are substantially more likely to mentor others (60% boost), help coworkers develop new skills (43% boost), and provide emotional support during difficult times (25% boost). Similarly, resilient employees show greater commitment to organizational behaviors, being more likely to offer improvement suggestions (72% boost) and volunteer for additional assignments (30% boost).

Interestingly, resilience appears less associated with unpaid overtime behaviors, suggesting that highly resilient employees contribute more strategically rather than simply putting in longer hours. These patterns indicate that building employee resilience yields returns well beyond individual performance, fostering the kind of discretionary, prosocial behaviors that strengthen teams and drive organizational effectiveness.

Percent of Respondents Endorsing Aspects of Grind Culture by Resilience Level

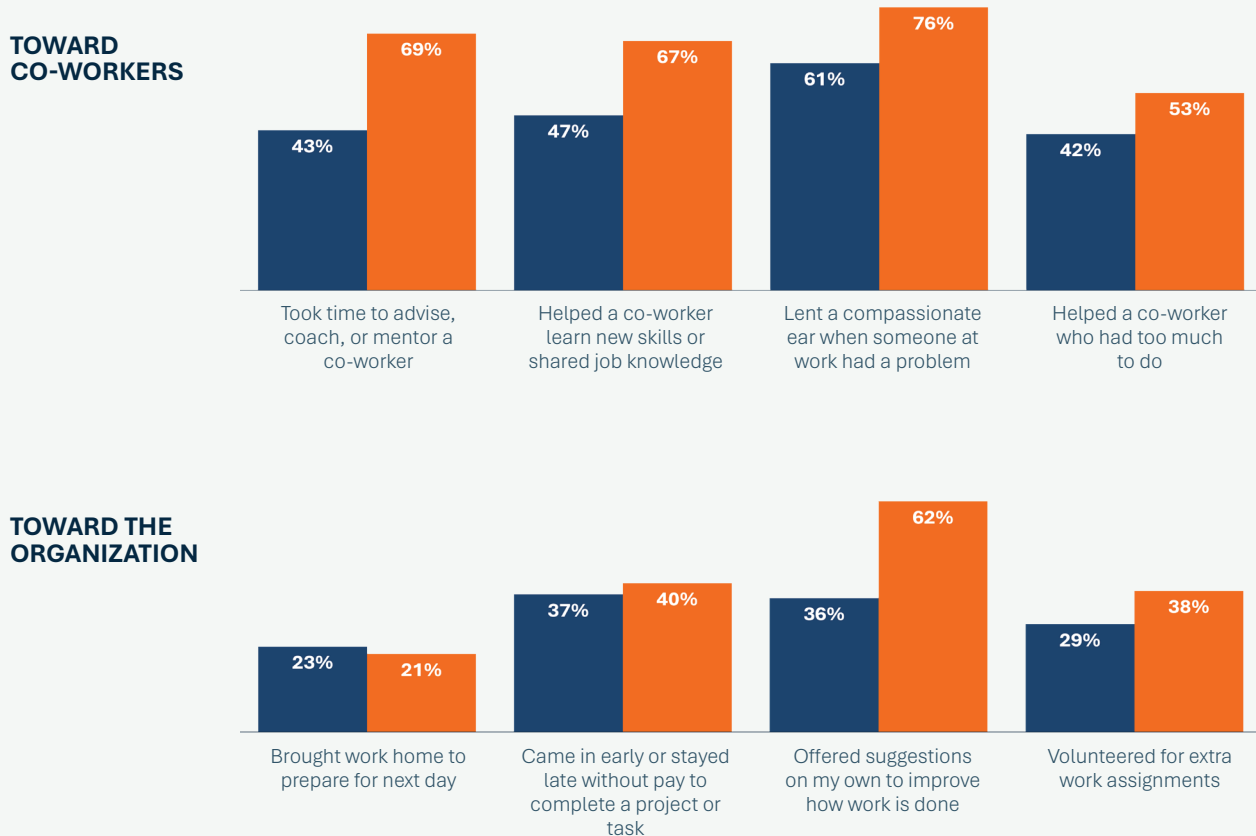


FIGURE 8 ■ Least Resilient ■ Most Resilient

The Protective Effect of Proactive Resilience

Many reports suggest that the world’s workforce is experiencing unprecedented levels of emotional distress, with profound implications for organizational health and productivity. According to **Gallup’s 2025 State of the World’s Emotional Health report**, 39% of adults globally experienced significant worry in 2024, while 37% reported stress. Both are substantially higher than a decade ago. Sadness affected 26% of respondents and anger 22%, with all negative emotions elevated compared to 2014 levels.

In contrast to these global trends, data from the meQ State of the Workforce report gives us a different story. Well-being indicators showed improvement in the most recent study data, due in part to employees who are proactive about self-care.

Compared to a year prior, burnout dropped from 32.2% to 24.0%, and job-related worry dropped from 31.2% to 26.5%. Somatic symptoms of stress, such as physical discomfort from neck and shoulder soreness, also decreased from 36.7% to 33.3% over the same period. In some cases, well-being indicators are more than 20% better (Figure 9).

Perhaps most striking, positive emotions increased substantially, with 53.1% of participants reporting more positive than negative daily emotions by October 2025, matching early 2022 levels.

Well-being Trends Among meQ Users: 2022 - 2025

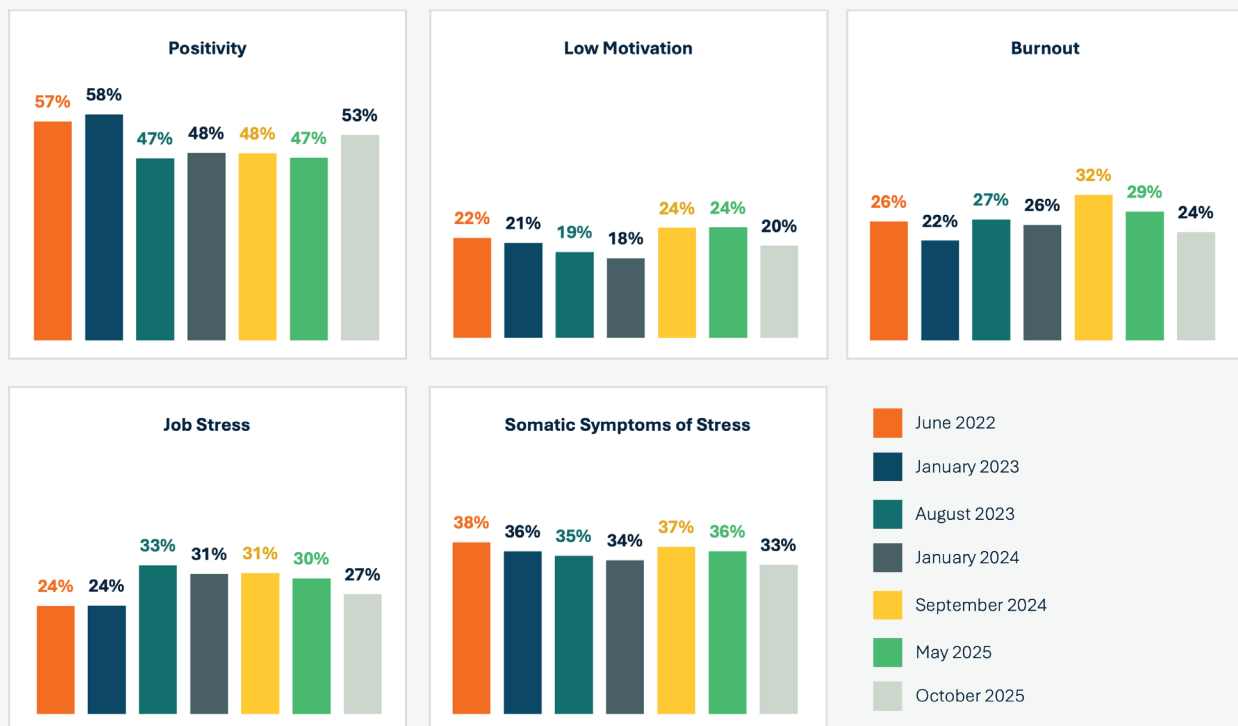


FIGURE 9

Proactive resilience-building creates compounding advantages for mental well-being and performance. Proactive resilience becomes an even more pronounced benefit when we look at the last 12 months.

Compared to the least resilient employees, those in the most resilient quartile experienced dramatically greater improvements across nearly all negative well-being indicators (Figure 10).

- Somatic symptoms of stress were down among the most resilient employees at a rate 5 times higher than among the least resilient employees (22.4% vs 4.1%).
- Burnout decreased by 25% for the most resilient compared to 15.1% for the least resilient.
- Job-related worry dropped by 21% versus just 4.4%.
- Morning motivation challenges also improved more substantially among the resilient group (-11.5% vs. -13.8%).

While resilience-building programs benefit all employees, they create compounding advantages for those who develop stronger resilience capacities. Sustained engagement with such interventions doesn't just prevent decline but actively accelerates positive emotional and physical well-being outcomes.

Global emotional distress may be rising, but the data affirms that organizations can buck the trend. By proactively investing in structured resilience-building programs, leaders can create protective environments that buffer employees against broader societal stress and actively enhance their emotional well-being. The effort translates directly into reduced burnout, improved engagement, and ultimately, stronger organizational performance.

12-Month Well-being Trends by Resilience Level

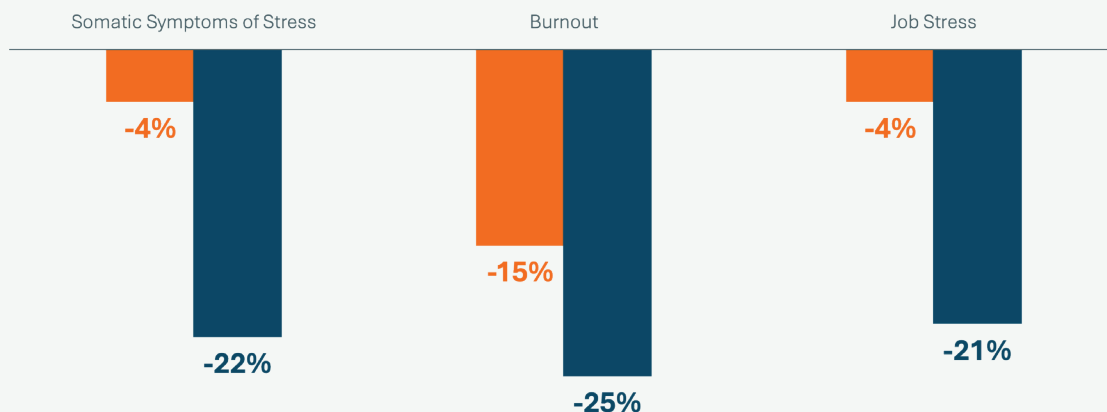


FIGURE 10 ■ Least Resilient ■ Most Resilient

4 Ways to Drive Maximum Performance with Minimum Grind



Invest in resilience-building as a strategic business priority.

The most resilient employees experience five times greater improvements in stress symptoms and 66% greater reductions in burnout compared to their least resilient peers over 12 months. These compounding advantages translate directly into reduced turnover, improved engagement, and stronger organizational performance, exactly the opposite of grind culture's consequences.



Focus on four key factors: Engagement, Positivity, Purpose, and Work-Life Balance.

Employees who strongly believe hard work leads to rewards show 19% higher Engagement, 15% higher Positivity, 14% higher Purpose, and 12% higher Work-Life Balance scores. Organizations that strengthen these specific resilience factors can harness the benefits of a strong work ethic without the burnout associated with toxic grind culture.



Train managers to provide holistic support that protects employee well-being.

Employees with supportive managers are less likely to think that success requires sacrificing personal relationships (24.2% vs 36.5%) or that successful people lack the time for hobbies (6.8% vs 13.3%). Strong managerial support helps workers maintain healthier boundaries and work-life balance while channeling their strong ambition in sustainable directions that reduce burnout-inducing beliefs.



Prioritize visibility strategies for remote and hybrid workers.

Remote/hybrid employees face a steep "invisibility tax," being 28% less likely to believe hard work leads to visible results. Organizations should implement structured recognition systems, regular virtual check-ins, and explicit documentation of remote employee contributions to bridge this perception gap, maintain the benefits of remote/hybrid work situations, and support continued high performance.

Methodology

A total of 2,620 employed adults participated in meQ's 2026 State of the Workforce study. The survey was administered online in October 2025 to examine well-being trends among employees across a variety of industries.





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