# More than Work

# Contents

*More than Work* starts from a simple belief: work has never been fixed. It has always evolved as people, organisations, and societies have imagined better ways of living and working together. Today, that evolution feels especially urgent. Demographic changes, longer working lives, new expectations from younger generations, and the growing role of technology are reshaping not only how we work, but what we need from it.

This project identified three crossroads facing the world of work. Each marks a fork in the road where a new reality is clashing with traditional workplace structures, asking us to pick a way forward.

Care explores how demographic change has multiplied the caregiving responsibilities of the workforce. Now, people at the peak of their careers often simultaneously care for both the younger and the older generation. What needs to change to better support them and keep them engaged at a critical time of their lives?

Nurture examines the changing context young people find themselves in: surrounded by so many opportunities and so much information that they risk getting lost in them. What do they need to navigate this complexity and fulfil their potential?

Heritage confronts a glaring paradox. People are working for longer, yet many organisations are still unprepared to fully recognise and use the value of experienced workers. How do we ensure longer careers remain a source of value, growth, and contribution?

For each chapter, *More than Work* draws on Gi Group Holding research, but we felt that data only told us part of that story.
So, we also listened. We spoke with a range of experts, organisations trying to build different workplaces, and people who found themselves face-to-face with the most pressing issues.
*More than Work* is an invitation to rethink work as one of the places where people can grow, contribute and belong, and to choose to shape the future of work, informed by evidence, grounded in people's experiences, and open to new possibilities.

# 1. Care

## A labour of love

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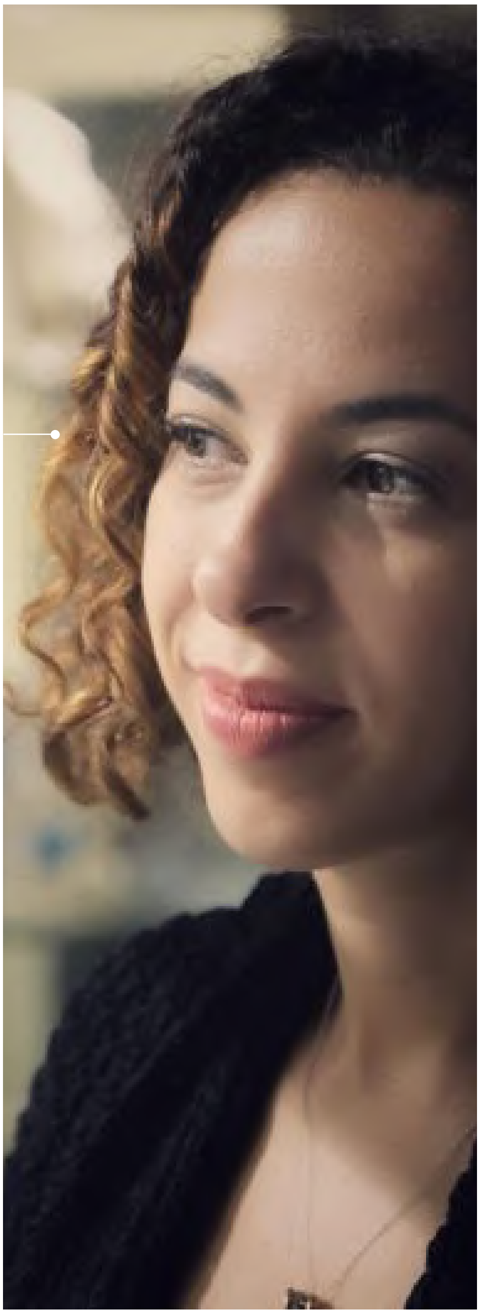
# Maha A.



**MAHA A.**

Senior Manager People Consulting/ DEI Leader

Some conversations shape careers more than years of work. Maha was about to have one of them. She had rehearsed for months, preparing what she wanted to say, and yet she was still worried about breaking the news to her manager: she was pregnant.

Maha, a senior consulting manager at a large consulting firm who was 36 at the time, had built her career at the intersection of HR and technology, starting out in Silicon Valley before moving to Montreal. She had always been ambitious and determined to be visible, vocal, and do all she could to advance her career. “I was always in builder mode,” she told us. “I’ve always been drawn to building – systems, ideas, teams.”

She had long postponed having a child because she worried that her career might take a hit or slow down. In HR, she had seen that women’s careers tend to take a hit after they become mothers, with promotions dwindling and salaries plateauing. Working in tech and STEM – competitive, male-dominated industries that tend to value long hours and availability in the office – only reinforced her fears: she worried that her efforts to build her career would vanish when she announced her pregnancy. And so, she hesitated for months, hiding her growing baby bump with colourful scarves and clothes and telling herself the conversation could wait.

Until, five and a half months pregnant, she could no longer hide it. Sitting in her manager’s office, she heard herself uttering words she now can’t believe: “I’m pregnant, *but* I want to tell you that I’m fully committed to the role and the growth of this company. My commitment level and energy won’t change.”

Her manager’s reaction shifted something in her. He looked at her with a straight face and said: “Oh, congratulations! And that’s all great. But how would you feel about a promotion?”

Maha describes that moment as a quiet inner earthquake. Relief, disbelief, and the realisation that her long-held convictions about parenthood and work might have been wrong. “Wait a second: I could be a mother and also have a big career?” she thought.

She told her manager her maternity leave would start in a matter of weeks, as if to prove that a promotion would be impossible - how would that even work? Her manager told her not to worry: someone could hold the fort until she was ready to come back.

Still in disbelief, she then spent months preparing for the life changes ahead. “I put my consultant hat on, and I thought: I’m going to rock this,” she says. Blogs, books, podcasts, and YouTube channels became her guide, teaching her about pregnancy milestones, growth curves, sleep progression, and what to expect at each stage of her child’s early life.

But in the first year, Maha and her partner quickly realised their child’s development would take a different path. These health conditions added more responsibilities to an already full life.

She had promised her manager that her energy and commitment wouldn’t change after her maternity leave, and she made good on that promise. “The quality of my work never dwindled, no matter how demanding it was,” she says.

> *“I put my consultant hat on, and I thought: I’m going to rock this.”*
>
> Maha A.

But both her position and caregiving duties, especially as the parent of a disabled child, were full-time jobs. On top of a working parent’s traditional struggle to reconcile her schedule with her child’s, she spent nights researching, preparing questions for appointments, and navigating a benefits and social security system that, she says, “takes a PhD to understand.

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It soon took a heavy toll on her. Exhaustion replaced Pilates classes.

She ceased to find joy in small things. She lost her appetite. It was a sustained period of pressure, and eventually, it forced a shift. “Even with my partner’s help, there was no time for me,” she says, “and I didn’t realise it until my body pushed back.” Maha had to rethink how she was managing energy, expectations, and complexity in ways she hadn’t before.

She has since shared her experience publicly as a call for realism and a warning against the often-unquestioned myths of working while caregiving. Her inner consultant had piled pressure on her, convincing her that she could – and should – optimise everything, that discipline and efficiency would be enough. But, as she puts it, “the whole façade of perfection collapsed.” It taught her and those around her that no one “does it all alone,” and it’s foolish to expect care to fit rigid structures. It requires networks, flexibility, and recognition.

Caregiving, she says, reshaped how she thinks about leadership, work, and life. She often says she wouldn’t change her child for the world, but she would change the world for him.

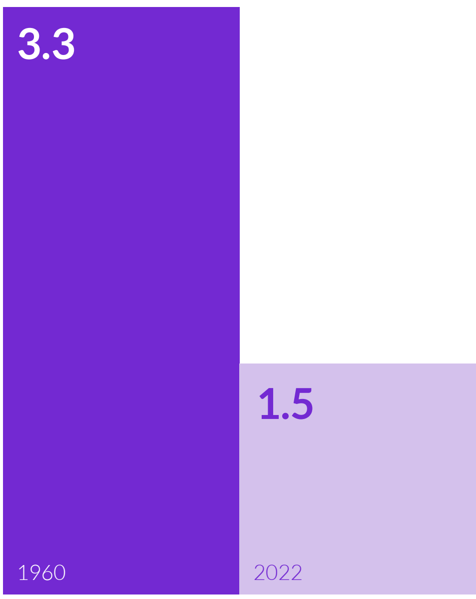
Care is rewarding and exhausting, fulfilling and lonely, and never, never perfect.

# The changing nature of caregiving

Maha's story shows how a decades-long mindset that equates commitment to a job with constant availability has turned caregiving responsibilities into one of the defining challenges of the modern workplace – and a test of how far employers have acknowledged this reality and are ready to act upon it.

For every story like Maha's, who found a manager ready to imagine a different way forward, there are still countless other people – both workers and leaders – for whom the work of chipping away at that old wall has only just begun.

**Global fertility rates**




Source: OECD

Caregiving today looks different from a generation ago, when it was handled by multiple members of the same household or community. Families were larger, people had children at a younger age, and female unemployment rates were higher: there was no shortage of people – mostly women – who could help to look after a child or a sick or elderly relative.

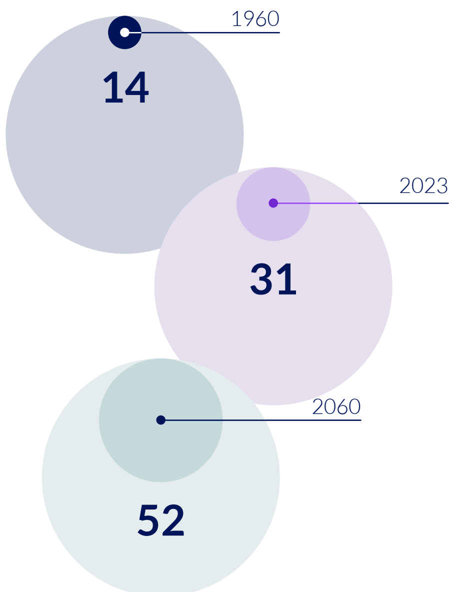
Demographic shifts like smaller families, ageing populations, longer lifespans, and rising female labour participation have radically changed those informal support systems, especially in higher-income countries.

Families have fewer babies: fertility rates have more than halved since 1960, according to the OECD's *2024 Society at a Glance report*, falling from 3.3 children per woman in 1960 to 1.5 in 2022.

In OECD countries, there are more and more elderly people, while the working-age population decreases: in 1960, there were 14 people over 65 years of age for every 100 working-age people. In 2023, that figure reached 31 per 100. And the same figure is predicted to rise to 52 by 2060.

Meanwhile, life expectancy has climbed by over a decade, meaning that care needs have grown even as the pool of caregivers has shrunk. At the same time, people are having children later in life. According to the OECD's 2024 Society at a Glance report, the age of first-time mothers has risen by six years since 1960, from 25 to nearly 31 in 2022. While the OECD doesn't track the age of first-time fathers, country-specific studies show it has increased at a similar pace in several higher-income economies. This shift, too, has consequences: grandparents are older, sometimes frailer, and family networks are thinner. Many mid-career professionals find themselves simultaneously caring for their children and ageing parents – a phenomenon that has become known as the "sandwich generation" – all while building their careers.

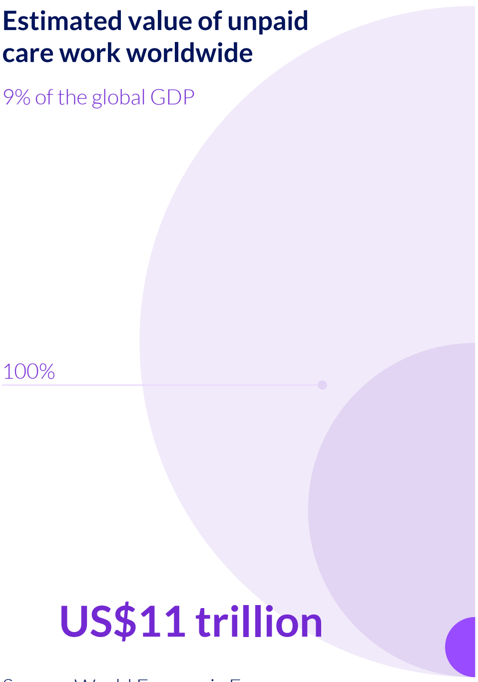
**People aged 65+ for every 100 working-age people**




Source: OECD

**Estimated value of unpaid care work worldwide**

9% of the global GDP




Source: World Economic Forum

Although long-term care systems have expanded in many higher-income countries, a large and often invisible share of family caregiving remains unpaid work and falls largely on the shoulders of a growing share of the workforce. One in every four workers globally is also a caregiver today, a silent labour force that moves between homes and workplaces, its efforts unseen, unpaid, and often unsupported – just like their voices.

To give just one idea of the size of this unrecognised work, and of the burden on workers, the World Economic Forum has estimated that, if unpaid care work were compensated globally, it would be worth around US$11 trillion – about 9% of the global GDP, or 60% of the economy of China.

These slow, vast shifts have caused care to cease being a private matter tucked within the walls of a household; it's a structural fact reshaping the world of work.

The ability to balance employment with caregiving determines who stays in the workforce, who advances, and who struggles, and is a key factor in labour shortages, rising burnout, and the quiet exodus of workers who can't make both parts of their lives fit. Employers can no longer treat caregiving as an individual problem: it's a collective one, built into the way entire economies function.

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# Alice V.

Alice, a mother of one and communications manager in her forties, realised the balance she had spent years building was about to change when she heard that her company expected employees to return to the office more frequently.

She had postponed pregnancy for years. Like many women seeking financial stability and career establishment, she strategically delayed it, wanting to build a solid base before taking on the demands of parenthood.

She had lived in Rome, gradually advancing within a large energy company, before moving back to Milan to be closer to the proverbial village that would help her raise her baby and allow her not to abandon her professional self. Her partner stayed back in Rome to care for his elderly mother.

Her life changed in ways she hadn't been warned about. “Mothers often find themselves completely isolated,” she says. Between being a de facto single mother and a woman in a managerial position, she says that, for a long time after going back to work, she felt like she “ceased to exist.” She went from being an avid traveller and reading four or five books a month to not opening a book or hopping on a long-distance flight for years. The space once filled by curiosity and movement was replaced by survival routines.

**ALICE V.**
Head Of Global Content & Communications

*“I want my son to see and learn that contrary to societal pressures and popular assumptions, women can make it on their own. I think he's proud of having a working mom.”*

Remote work had allowed her to keep all the different pieces of her life together – until a management shift reduced the flexible working policies. When Filippo turned 4, she would have to move to Rome or spend nearly half of each month away for work, leaving him with his grandparents.

Her requests for a formal transfer to Milan were repeatedly blocked.

The management change was accompanied by a gradual hardening of the company's culture. Competition became fierce, and sometimes colleagues appeared to encroach on her area of responsibility while she was busy with childcare. Other times, someone would say a word too many about her working remotely so often.

She remained driven and ambitious and became frustrated by being pigeonholed as the new mother who should only be preoccupied with childcare. “When people have children, it's not like they suddenly become aliens,” she adds. “If anything, parenthood makes them hungrier for challenges and opportunities. Especially in the early years, being able to assert yourself beyond diapers and feeding helps you feel whole again.”

No matter how much she liked her job and the company she worked for, she began looking for a new job. Flexible working policies topped the list of her requirements.

Once, she even gave up on a position she was at an advanced recruitment stage for because of the company's lack of flexible and remote work policies. “I would never, ever, not even for all the money in the universe, consider working for a company with no flexible working policies,” she says.

Eventually, she found a job with an organisation where leadership culture was markedly different – “overflowing with empathy and humanity”, in her own words. Here she works remotely and flexibly, without having to hide or justify her caregiving needs. “I wake up knowing I'll have a busy day, but also knowing that if something unexpected happens, I won't have to panic about how to manage work.”

Juggling her work and personal life in this way isn't always easy – she says, it requires the skill and discipline of “a seasoned project manager.” Whenever life gets in the way, and she can't finish her tasks between 9 am and 5 pm, she picks work back up as soon as her son is asleep, after 9 pm.

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Still, she says it allows her to balance both areas of her life without erasing herself. She has even managed to start reading again, in the early morning or on her lunch breaks. She describes the new workplace environment as giving her “a sense of peace and serenity”. She knows she doesn’t have to choose between being a present parent and a thriving professional: she can be both.

“I want my son to see and learn that contrary to societal pressures and popular assumptions, women can make it on their own,” she says. “I think he’s proud of having a working mom.”

# Care and career

## Parenthood is often framed as a career limbo, a point where ambition supposedly dwindles, drive diminishes, and people prefer using their energy in other spheres of their lives.

Once people have children, assumptions go, they become less available for work trips, responsibilities, and socials. They clock off early. They lose their drive – after all, they've got something else to think about. And so, parents end up being overlooked when promotion and hiring decisions come up.

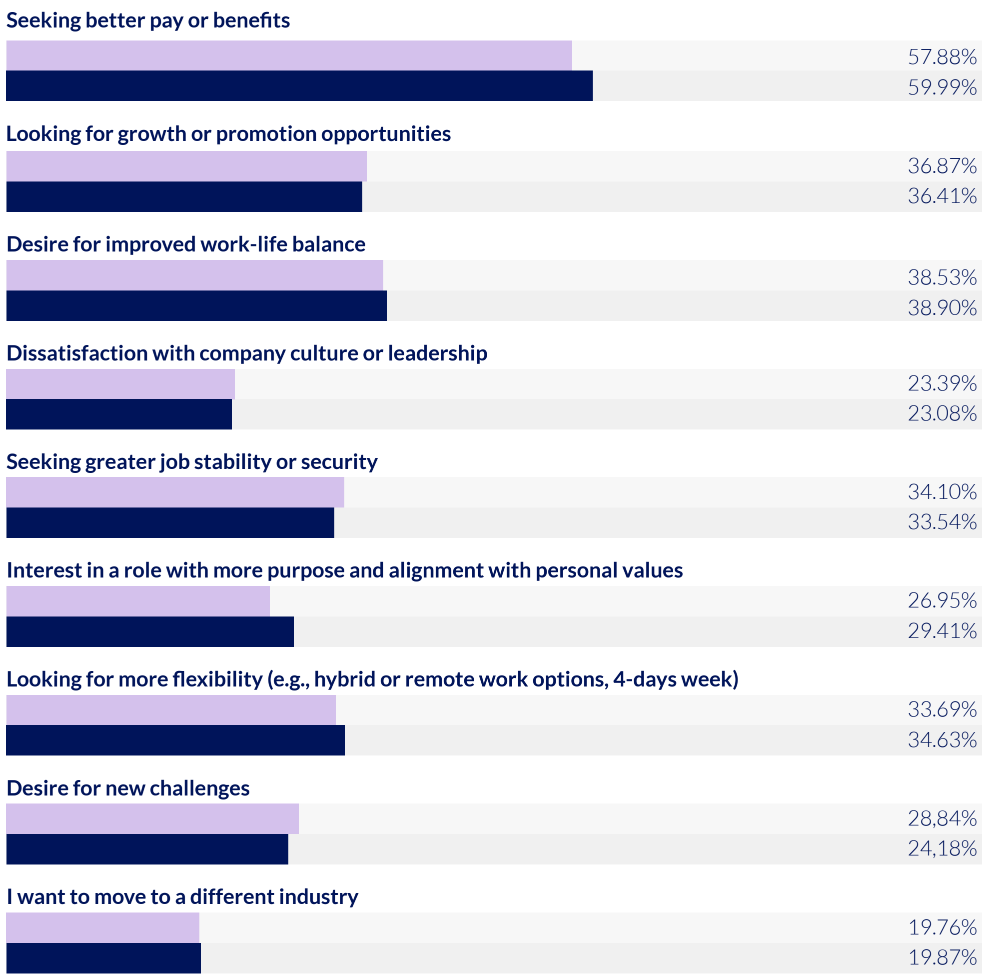
But our survey of nearly 10,000 workers across 20 countries shows a different picture: parenthood may change how people work, but it doesn't diminish their commitment or drive. Parents remain as ambitious as their child-free colleagues – if not more.

We asked workers their top motivators at work, and parents and non-parents gave the same answers: higher pay, job security, and personal growth. If anything, parents were more inclined than their colleagues to look for a new job as a way to seek new challenges (28.8% vs 24.1%).

GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY

### Which factors drive your decision to look for a new role?

Parents
Non-Parents




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

The findings raise the question of whether assuming parents want to slow down at work becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, the same way that benching a player in team sports tends to make them less of a contributor: if you overlook parents for stretch assignments or promotions, their commitment and energy level drops. If they feel unheard and unseen because of workplace norms they can no longer conform to, they'll stop trying to make their contributions stand out.

Fixing this is difficult because it encompasses areas of work life that extend far beyond its formal aspects, such as office hours, flexible work policies, or remote work. Take visibility: coffee chats, social events, and networking can quietly shape how opportunities are distributed. And parents who can't attend those gatherings risk being excluded from these opportunities regardless of their merit or performance.

Maha A., who navigated these assumptions in North America, where visibility is closely tied to loyalty and performance, found herself quietly slipping under the radar despite being a top performer in her company.

"The expression 'out of sight, out of mind' occurs to me," she says. She was never explicitly told she was dropping the ball at work; but somehow, the work that used to reach her first now came last. "If you don't keep in touch with people through coffee breaks and chats, if you don't take part in office socials, you find yourself pushed aside and losing opportunities," she says.

The good news is that organisations can work to fix this. The key is to challenge assumptions and recognise that ambition and approaches to work are not one-size-fits-all: a different way of working doesn't have to be a lesser way of working. Measuring retention, engagement, and promotion rates – and acting on the data – might help companies become aware of the blind spots and biases in their culture and practices and taking steps to dismantle the barriers that keep parents from being seen, heard, and valued.

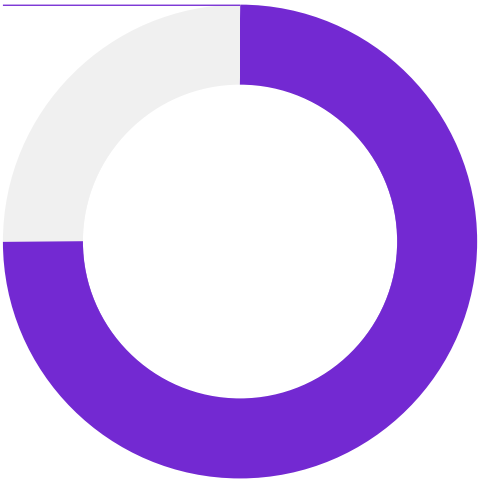
Parents make up more than a third of the global workforce: finding ways to support them can help organisations tap into a largely overlooked, often invisible resource. It might just require a different kind of support.

# The motherhood penalty

**For all the ways that care is changing, one thing remains remarkably stable: most unpaid caregiving work continues to fall squarely on women's shoulders, jeopardising their careers - sometimes, even their employment.**

According to the International Labour Organization, 76% of all unpaid care is performed by women. In the EU, women spend 1.9 more hours than men dealing with unpaid caregiving work every day. The figure adds up to a staggering 28.5 days of extra unpaid care work per year, a disparity that creates fertile ground for structural inequalities, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviour.

**76%** of all unpaid care is performed by women



Source: ILO

# The bias that starts at work

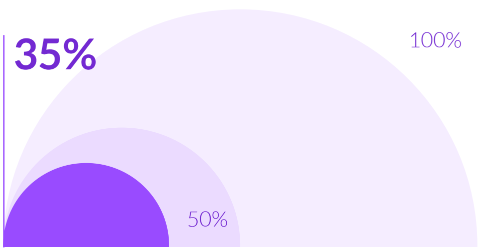
## Women are often on the receiving end of discrimination in the workplace.

According to our 2025 survey of more than 10,000 candidates, women are 40% more likely than men to experience gender-based discrimination or microaggression at work.

Sometimes, that discrimination is directed not at their gender per se, but at their role as parents or caregivers. Some 14% of workers – one in every seven – report experiencing discrimination or microaggression related to their caregiving responsibilities. Another 13% have experienced discrimination because of childcare or parenthood, while 11% have experienced pregnancy-related discrimination.

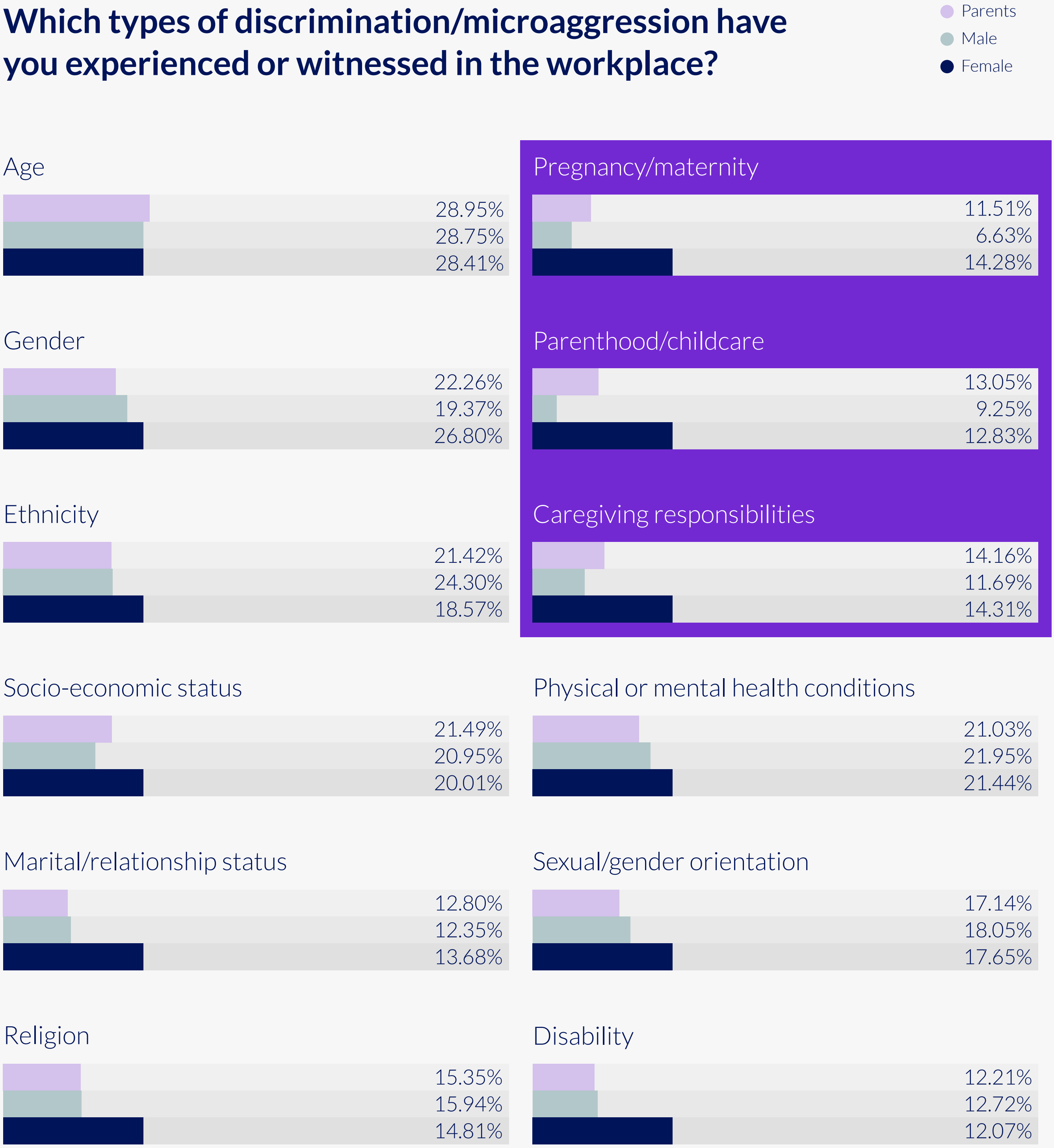
Often, these instances of discrimination are rooted in the assumption that women with caregiving responsibilities lose focus and ambition. Because of the pernicious stereotype that people stop being ambitious and driven the moment they become parents, managers and colleagues often take it for granted that new mothers can't be in roles that entail travelling or responsibilities due to their new roles at home, and forget asking them and listening to what they want.

According to the Gi Group Holding report, The Generational Equation, 35% of workers believe that women who return from maternity leave do not perform as well as before.




GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY

## Which types of discrimination/microaggression have you experienced or witnessed in the workplace?




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

# Keeping new mothers in the workforce

**Struggling to juggle their professional and caregiver roles, many women decide to reduce their hours or leave their jobs altogether after becoming mothers.**

"Many women do that reluctantly", says Alessandra Employability Director at INTOO Italy, a Gi Group Holding career development and outplacement support company. "They want to remain in the workforce and are forced to leave by external circumstances."

Often, these circumstances are financial. Childcare costs can eat up a parent's entire salary, so leaving work to care for their children makes little budgetary difference. The trend has only become more pronounced in recent years, with childcare and early education costs rising and some companies returning to less flexible work policies – so much so that the media in some higher-income countries declared that a "she-cession" was underway, i.e. a mass exodus of women from the workforce.

But the hidden cost of that decision is enormous: in the long run, it results in lower wages, a perception of lower skills, and slimmer chances to obtain promotions or new opportunities. Once women shelve their professional lives and leave the labour market for years, it becomes difficult to get back in. Their skills cease to develop, they lose contact with their professional network, and their CV gaps become extensive. Trying to return to work after their children have grown up becomes a daunting, frustrating experience.

It also has broader implications for businesses and entire societies. Each woman exiting the workforce represents more than a private loss: it means lost productivity, lost social security contributions, and one less person working when all hands on deck are needed. It leads to impoverishment and creates real fractures and inequality.

Companies have a crucial role to play in making the return to work after motherhood smoother and more realistic – for example, through phased return-to-work options, mentoring schemes and peer-support groups, and flexibility. Several interviewees said they would welcome company benefits that facilitate juggling parenthood and work or make returning to work easier.

Ideas included care sabbaticals; a personal caregiving budget, similar to the wellness stipends that some companies offer, but to spend on childminders, day care and the like; and financial support for external childcare services.

> *"When you have a baby who cries for hours every day, always wants to be held, keeps you awake at night for months, and the best thing in the world seems to be able to take a 10-minute shower... It's natural to want to take a break from other responsibilities in your life."*
>
> Alice V.

**ALESSANDRA GIORDANO**

Employability Director, INTOO Italy

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# We encourage women to stay in employment even when caregiving responsibilities of any nature pop up and help them reorganise their lives before they go on maternity leave.

We ask them: ‘What’s your backup plan when your child gets sick? What role do you want to return to?’. We help them negotiate tasks and responsibilities more equitably with their partners, build support networks, and make the most of the support that their countries, companies, and personal networks can offer. The goal is to enable conscious, responsible, and empowered decision-making. And if they eventually choose to become stay-at-home mothers, that’s OK: every choice is legitimate. But it must be an informed and intentional choice, not something they’re pressured into by societal expectations or external circumstances.

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# Laura G.

**LAURA G.**
Insurance Advisor

Laura first noticed that her mother’s health was declining during a family gathering. She struggled to breathe and seemed unable to eat, so the next day, she took her to the hospital – the first of many visits, and one that marked the beginning of her battle with cancer. On top of being a counter clerk at an insurance agency in Milan and a mother of three children, Laura, 53, became a caregiver looking after a terminally ill parent, while working in an unsupportive workplace.

Her story reflects how caregiving for a vulnerable adult upends life and how poor management can worsen the strain.

*“People caring for an elderly parent live in limbo; they need flexibility, support, and someone who listens.”*

Laura’s mother’s health declined slowly but steadily. First, she stopped showing interest in her pastimes, such as the occasional stroll with Laura through a nearby IKEA store. Then, she stopped going out for groceries or cooking lunch and chose to order in instead. Then, her flat filled up with medical equipment – crutches, oxygen tanks, an electric bed with side rails, and she ceased to be able to live independently.

With her husband often away for work and not enough money for a helper, Laura reorganised her life around caregiving. She visited her mother three times a day – before work, after work, and right before bedtime – to give her medication, cook, tidy up, or just check in on her, often leaving her youngest daughter home alone.

At work, she kept her phone close in case of emergencies, and during her breaks, she phoned doctors. All while taking her mother to several medical appointments per month as her cancer spread: “Later on, my daughter told me that it felt like not having me around at all”, she says.

Things quickly grew tense at work. Laura’s role as a part-time counter clerk required her to attend to customers in person, making flexibility or remote work impossible. Her role was also a place where worlds collided: as an employee of a large multinational company, she had access to benefits, and Italy’s statutory caregiver workplace protections, entitled her to three days of paid leave per month. But she was also part of a small branch with its own culture, and each request became a source of conflict with her manager and co-workers.

“Nobody seemed to see what I was going through,” Laura says. Relationships with colleagues became strained: they no longer invited her for coffee with the team, and she had the impression that they thought she was unfairly taking advantage of company policies. Her manager offered little support even though he, too, knew what it was like to lose a parent. At first, he occasionally asked her to postpone taking time off. Then, he began to criticise her absences publicly. “You’re off again?” Laura says that he would shout from across the office, sometimes in front of customers.

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Laura had cared deeply about her job in the past, but she became less engaged. “My mind was always elsewhere,” she said.

Then, an unexpected promotion moved her to a leadership role in another branch – at her company, career progression was linked to objective performance and staffing needs, rather than line managers’ evaluations. She accepted the new job gladly, but it came with extra hours and responsibilities that worsened her strain. “If I had known my mom would die a few months later, I would have turned down the promotion to spend time with her,” she says. “But I thought the crisis would pass, and I would be foolish not to accept.”

Laura only took extended time off work after her mother’s death.

Looking back, she says she would have appreciated more days off or a caregiving budget. But more than any perks, she wishes she had been treated differently, something that doesn’t so much depend on policies as on culture. “People caring for a sick relative live in limbo; they need flexibility, support, and someone who listens,” she says.

She felt treated as though her life hadn’t changed; nobody even proposed reassigning her to a flexible back-office position where she wouldn’t have to be present every minute.

She says policies aren’t enough if managers lack the empathy to ensure people are treated with dignity. “Your employer and the law can give you days off, money, benefits,” she says. “But if your workplace treats you as a burden, nothing works.”

# Caring for adults and elderly

**Caregiving goes beyond childcare. But while parental leave and childcare support are increasingly part of HR policies, the same cannot be said for eldercare or care for relatives with disabilities.**

Motherhood is often much simpler for organisations to deal with because it is more common and has received more attention in the last couple of decades.

Millions of workers find themselves responsible not only for children but also for elderly parents, disabled relatives, or chronically ill family members – a shift that has a profound impact on their personal and working lives.

## Care requirements are often complex and unpredictable

Elder and disability care often presents irregular, intensive, and emotionally taxing responsibilities that can overlap unpredictably with work schedules – because they hardly ever follow a schedule at all.

Caregivers may need to help loved ones move around their hometown, for example to attend medical appointments during the workday.
They might have to administer or track medication several times a day or manage chronic conditions.
Or elderly or disabled loved ones might just need support with daily living tasks like cooking, cleaning, and personal hygiene.

The unpredictable nature of elder and disability care can make maintaining a stable work routine challenging. A caregiver may need to leave work at short notice for emergencies, adjust schedules for medical appointments, or provide overnight assistance. This constant negotiation between care, professional life, and sometimes even a worker's own family, which can result in disrupted work hours and heightened stress, with little support from workplace care benefits.

## Elder or disability care often lacks formal recognition and dedicated infrastructure

There aren't any kindergartens for the elderly. Few countries fund retirement homes, assisted living facilities, and home assistance efficiently, and so the cost of care falls on their own family – and is often beyond their reach.

Only a limited number of countries also provide comprehensive leave or flexible work options specifically for adult caregiving. Where these policies exist, the support they offer often falls short of caregivers' needs, and the bureaucracy to access it is often complex and time-consuming, piling more pressure on someone's time and headspace. In those cases, companies can help in dealing with the bureaucracy, streamlining the process for workers in need and saving them days of unpaid work.

## Physical and emotional exhaustion come with assisting someone whose health is declining

Caring for an adult or elder relative can be physically demanding.
Even tasks that may seem routine in daily life can become exhausting when performed on top of existing personal and professional responsibilities.

The emotional toll can be even more significant when someone assists a loved one whose health is deteriorating. Even when it doesn't trigger stress reactions, anxiety, and even depression, watching a loved one's health decline over months or years is harrowing. Caregivers often feel a sense of constant responsibility, compounded by guilt – that no matter how much they do to help, it's not enough – as well as a state of extreme alertness to emergencies and possible signs of sudden decline. These physical and emotional pressures are less visible and often fall entirely on the individual, accumulating alongside professional obligations and leaving caregivers vulnerable to burnout.

# A culture that cares

**Finding a balance between work and caregiving is one of the defining challenges of today's workforce.**
**But like every challenge, care is also an opportunity to explore new ideas and imagine solutions that would have once been unthinkable.**

We asked workers and leaders how they thought organisations could find a balance. From flexible work arrangements and role redesigns to cultural changes that normalise caregiving and provide visibility, they had plenty to say.

## Work-life harmonisation

### In recent decades, work cultures have often been built around the idea of work-life balance.

The idea that professional and personal responsibilities exist in separate spheres that co-exist and compete for time during the day. Work-life balance was imagined at a time when people and organisations started questioning practices such as long hours– and decided the time allocated to personal and family life had to be protected. The goal was to work when at work and live free of work-related stress when off the clock, setting clear boundaries and preventing each of the two spheres from encroaching on the other.

But this conception leaves little room for the unpredictable demands of caregiving. A newer concept, work-life harmonisation, imagines a way for work and life to coexist fluidly, with each supporting the other and without resisting what can't be resisted: emergencies, illness, deadlines. Some days may demand more attention at work, while other days caregiving or personal matters, such as care, take priority. And that's okay: rather than striving for perfection in both spheres simultaneously, employees can adjust their focus dynamically, creating a more realistic rhythm that reflects their lives better.

**Harmonising complex schedules and tasks requires flexibility and trust.**

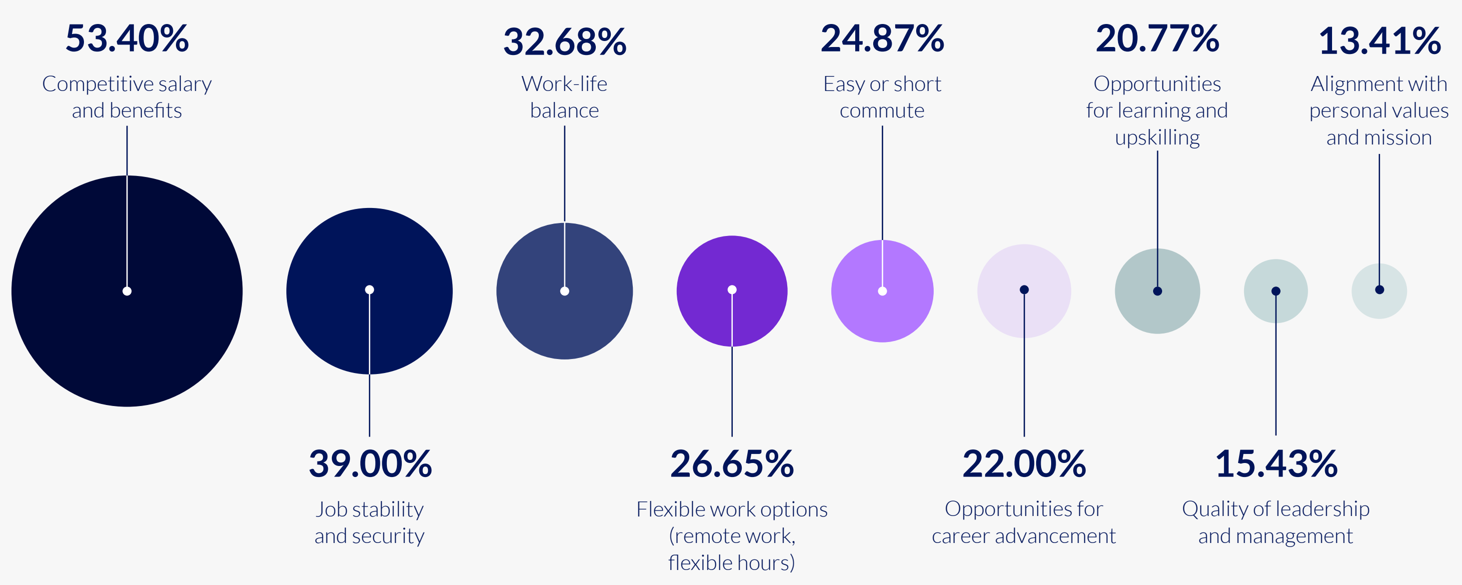
Employees manage schedules with autonomy, pausing tasks for family responsibilities and resuming them as needed, without being bound to the 9-to-5 when needed.

Workplaces, in turn, have to become designed around real human needs rather than rigid structures, enable employees to understand, support, and work with each other even when life gets in the way.

# When flexibility is essential

**Ask caregivers what they want, and after the usual suspects - higher salaries and stability - they will invariably say flexibility.**

Our survey clearly shows that flexible work policies were among the most popular motivators for job changes. An improved work-life balance and more flexibility were the third and fourth top reasons for accepting a job offer, after competitive salary, job stability, and security.




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

> *"9-to-5 is just not inclusive – to people with disabilities, caregivers, parents. We talk about a talent shortage, but then we don't know how to cater to the talent out there."*
>
> Maha A.

**Caregivers ask us to listen to them and not to be judged solely on standards they may not always be able to meet.**

In other words: they ask for humanity in the workplace. They want different assessment systems that stray from the old construct of work, focused solely on performance. They want care and real life to stop being banned on the job – because they do, inevitably, get in the way.

Making such changes requires organisations to be flexible, too, because no solution works for everyone. For people like Maha and Alice, who appreciated having responsibilities and a career when they came back from maternity leave, someone like Laura wanted a chance to slow down during her critical moment of care. Listening is crucial, it requires a great deal of empathy.

And empathy, in turn, needs managers, who have the skills and the openness to handle diversity – of gender, age, care, and any other nature – without forcing it to conform to anything. Being a manager today requires a series of key non-technical skills to allow everyone to perform at their highest level, and it requires leaders to abandon their biases and be trained to be inclusive.

In this landscape, many are abandoning the concept of work-life balance, which implies that work and personal life compete for time during the day and can be kept separate. Work and life rarely sit neatly side by side. For many caregivers, the traditional 9-to-5 fails to capture their reality: their days start earlier and end much later. The key isn't imposing rigid structures but finding a rhythm that allows life and work to coexist.

## Flexibility solutions for caregiving workers

**Temporary role reassignment**
Provide flexibility for employees whose work requires fixed hours or in-person presence or temporarily shift to positions compatible with remote work and flexible scheduling.

**Flexible work design**
Part-time roles and job-sharing arrangements so caregivers can step back without losing income entirely.

**Paid care sabbaticals**
Unpaid leave is not a viable option given the financial strain caregivers already face. Paid sabbaticals demonstrate organisational commitment and signal to employees: "you matter, we want you back."

**Concierge service**
Support for employees to go about bureaucratic and day-to-day chores, from post office runs to bureaucratic and day-to-day chores.

# Building a caregiver-friendly culture

No policy works if the culture doesn't back it up: supporting employees demands a shift in culture to help them overcome the barriers that can limit their participation.

This means equipping managers with the skills to lead empathetically, recognising and protecting caregivers' rights, and ensuring that those taking leave or flexible arrangements are treated with dignity.

**Empathetic leadership training**
Educate managers on how employees' lives fundamentally change when they become caregivers.

**Cultural change**
Address discrimination towards employees using legal caregiver leave. Caregivers should not be made to feel guilty, viewed as "opportunistic," or labelled "unreliable" for exercising their rights.

**Visibility and inclusion strategies**
Recognise that informal networking, coffee chats, and social events create career opportunities. Caregivers who miss these moments risk becoming invisible regardless of performance. Organisations must find alternative ways to ensure they maintain presence and connection within teams.

**Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)**
Create peer support communities specifically for caregivers sharing experiences, hacks, and providing support.

# Designing benefits that matter

**What do job seekers really want from their benefit packages – and are companies actually delivering? Our candidates and HR leaders surveys tell a story of both hits and misses.**

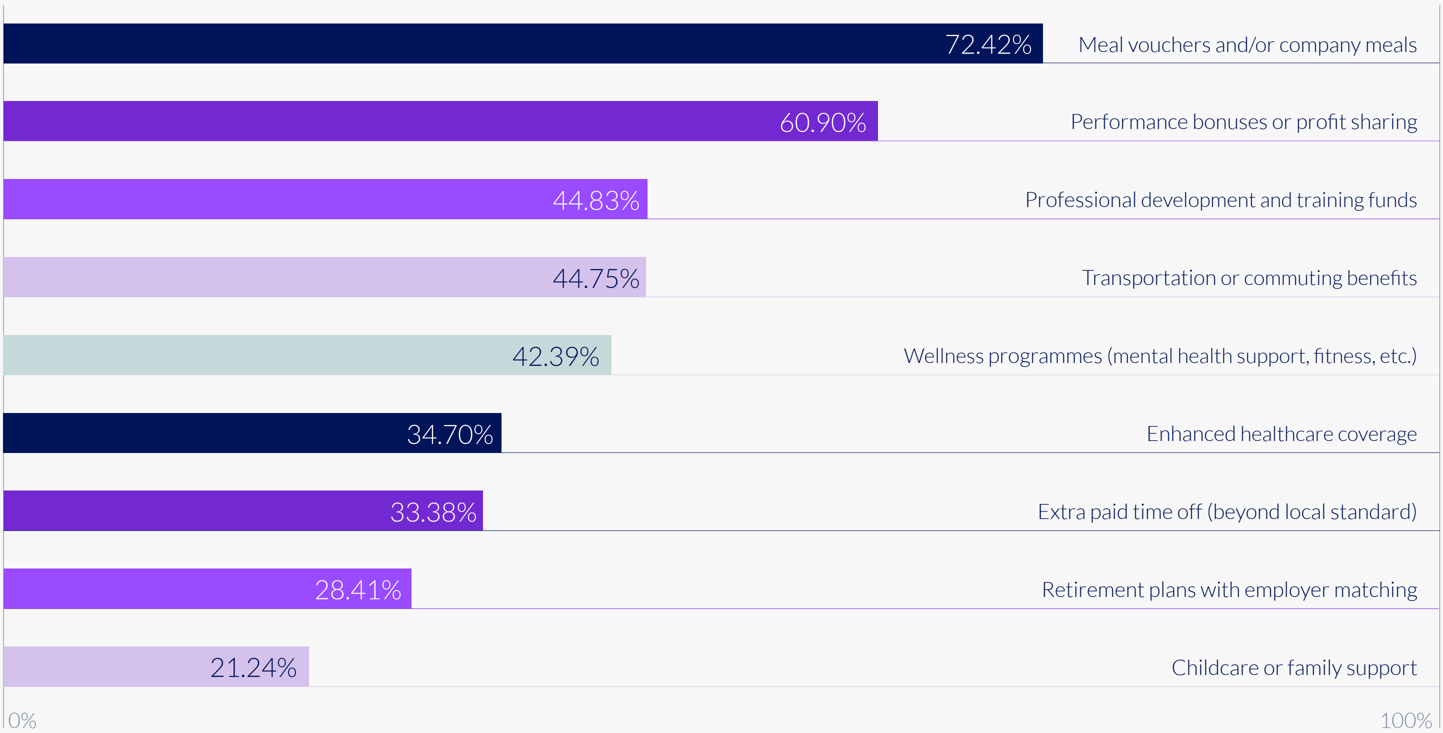
Candidates with children sent a clear signal about what matters the most to them. Extra paid time off was the second most popular benefit, beyond just profit sharing and performance bonuses – some 40% of parents said it would make a company stand out. Other care-related benefits also ranked highly: one in every five candidates said childcare or family support was a key differentiator, a figure that underscores the growing importance of the issue.

While employers are delivering on some fronts, such as performance bonuses, their response lags in other areas. Deployment rate is significantly higher than candidate demand for perks like transportation or commuting benefits (offered by 45% of companies, while only 34% of workers said it would make a company stand out). Only 33% of the companies we surveyed offer extra paid time off as a benefit, and only about 21% of companies provide childcare or family benefits.

The mismatch shows how many candidate attraction strategies might still be relying on traditional, potentially outdated perks. It also reveals the opportunity for talent attraction and retention – for organisations that focus on addressing the evolving needs of employees, ramping up benefits such as family support and flexible time off.

HR LEADERS GLOBAL SURVEY

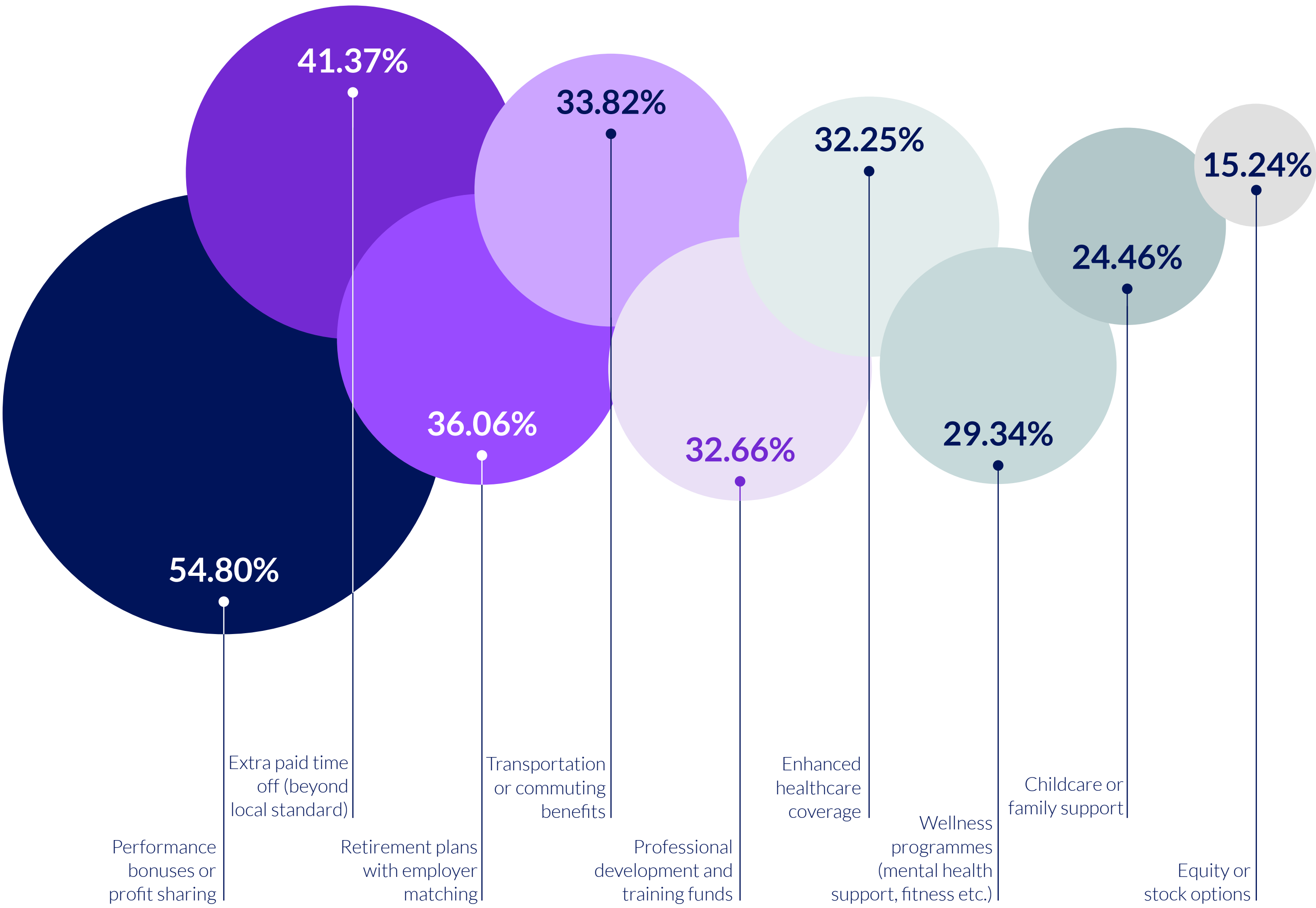
## Benefits provided by companies worldwide




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global HR Leaders Survey, 2025

CANDIDATES GLOBAL SURVEY

## What perks make a company stand out to parents?




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

## More tools to help caregiving employees thrive

In our interviews with workers and leaders about care in the workplace, we heard many suggestions that reflected solutions that were already being introduced by many companies. Other suggestions surprised us – because they didn't fit neatly into a clear category or because they emphasised the value of practical, imaginative assistance that could help them manage responsibilities at home and in the office.

**Benefits navigation counsellor**
Dedicated people and tools (including AI-powered ones) to help caregivers understand complex bureaucracy, benefits, and guide them through company, government, and insurance coverage, eliminating hours of searching through libraries and Google.

**Financial support for care services**
Corporate welfare discounts are appreciated but insufficient. Companies should subsidise or provide access to a dedicated caregiving budget, similar to wellness stipends, to make home care workers and assisted living services more affordable.

# Best practice: Continental

*Trust is the most important word in this company. Without it, you can introduce as many initiatives as you like, and they won't work.*

**STEFAN HENRICHS**
Continental Italia CFO
and Diversity Manager

**Continental Italia has been on a continuous journey to strengthen its employee welfare, in particular caregiving responsibilities, from parental support to a recent focus on the care of adult family members.**

In 2025, the company received the "Great Place to Work" certification for the second consecutive time, with employees saying they feel welcome, treated fairly, and able to balance work and private life.

The company focuses on maintaining an open dialogue to ensure its culture evolves alongside its people's needs. "It is important to have a barometer of where we are and whether we are doing the right things," Stefan Henrichs, CFO and Diversity Manager at Continental Italia, tells us.

Over the years, Continental Italia built structural tools to listen to staff, and they became a compass to determine the company's course of action. For example, HR set up a mothers' group that operates independently of HR and senior management, tasking it with delivering unfiltered feedback on policies and culture, as well as proposing concrete improvements.

And as the advice trickled in, it has been turned into an overarching safety net for women: managers commit to keeping returning mothers in the same roles, maintaining regular contact during leave so they can remain updated about what might be changing within their team or inside the company. The goal is to help mothers shape their own return to work by staying connected to their colleagues and the business. "In these situations, the company needs to protect and safeguard women," Henrichs says. "We have to work through it together."

From there, the company developed a coherent support framework. A salary top-up during optional maternity leave supplements the statutory allowance by 20%. An external counselling programme offers specialist support to parents before, during, and after their leave.

A peer mentoring scheme pairs new mothers with experienced colleagues, providing both practical advice and emotional support. Continental recently expanded access to mental health support services to include immediate family members, who can now access sessions at no cost.

But Henrichs is clear that policies alone do not produce results. What makes them work is the culture built over years. “Trust is the most important word in this company,” he says. “Without it, you can introduce as many initiatives as you like, and they won’t work.”

Henrichs doesn’t see these policies and benefits as the end of Continental’s efforts. He has his eyes on different, yet increasingly significant challenges, such as the growing impact of eldercare and disabilities on employees’ lives, and the need to better support fathers.

“I don’t yet know exactly which actions we’ll take,” Henrichs says.
But any response will build on the trust-based culture the company has developed over the years. “We’ll talk, we’ll meet, we’ll look at the problem – and together, we’ll figure it out.”

# 2. Nurture

## The missing map

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# Marta B.

## MARTA B.

Conservation roboticist
and co-founder of Trovador

Marta B. remembers finding her passion early. They are a 19-year-old student, conservation roboticist, and National Geographic-funded explorer building a start-up to restore forests on terrain where humans struggle to work efficiently. They were born and raised in Ericeira, a rural seaside community on the rugged coast north of Lisbon where access to formal technical education was scarce and specialised literature or magazines hard to get.

> *“From a very young age, I could see how climate change was reshaping the environment around me”*
>
> Marta B.

Their father was a mechanic, and they spent a lot of time in his workshop as a kid, watching, waiting, and helping out while he worked. Eventually, curiosity started filling the long hours. They began taking the tools and scrap materials within their reach to experiment with their own creations. By the age of nine, Marta was making simple robots from cardboard and spare parts. “I was exploring electronics, more advanced mechanics, and building my own toys,” they say. Soon, robotics became a passion and the solution she turned to for the challenges they saw around them.

They grew up in a community living in connection to nature, in a town surrounded by forest and inhabited by farmers and fishermen. Ecosystem degradation, pollution, and urbanisation became visible very quickly. “From a very young age, I could see how climate change was reshaping the environment around me,” they recalls. After the first project, a dog-like robot that could only walk forward and backward, they created a cardboard humanoid. Other projects followed, all improvised, made with scrap materials, and self-taught. But as they grew older, they applied her growing technical skills to the challenges they saw in the environment around them. They began building conservation-focused machines, from plastic-pollution vacuum robots to underwater devices designed to reduce noise and protect whales and dolphins.

In 2023, Marta co-founded Trovador, a company to solve a tricky problem in Portugal’s reforestation efforts. With climate change accelerating, wildfires have been ravaging forests across the country. Authorities have promptly launched initiatives to reforest affected areas, but because the terrain in many of them is mostly mountainous, seed-planting is slow and dangerous when carried out by humans. Marta envisioned the prototype of a robot capable of planting trees in cliffs, slopes, and burned landscapes, and today, that idea has become a one-cubic-meter prototype designed to be capable of operating in almost any environment.

They began studying international business to learn how to scale their idea, and to date, they have raised €100,000 through grants and prizes, including from National Geographic. Marta is now part of the organisation’s Explorer community as a conservation roboticist. “That’s pretty much what I want to do with my life,” they says.

# Ambitious, qualified, and eager to prove it

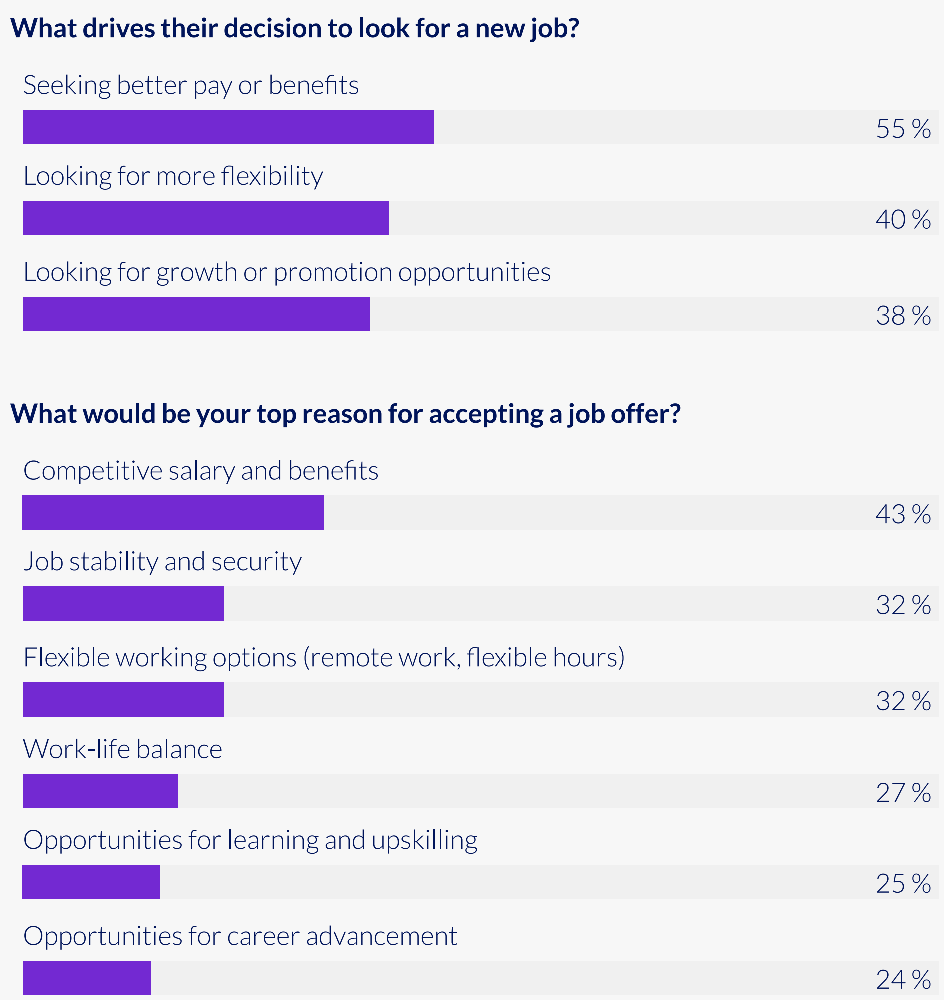
## Younger generations are often the subject of broad assumptions. Some have called them lazy, undisciplined, or uninterested.

Our 2025 Global Candidate Survey tells a different story. They are more informed, more qualified, more creative, and more ambitious than any generation before them. Possibilities have multiplied – job titles, degrees, opportunities to connect, and careers that cross borders – and access to information about them has expanded just as quickly.

Workers under 25 are defined by adaptability and hunger for success, even if that ambition occasionally looks different from the one that defined previous generations. They are much more likely to consider a job change in their future than their more experienced colleagues. But ask them what they are after, and their top answers won't deviate significantly from those of other generations: better pay, stability, and growth.

Above all, they value personal development and the sense of being seen and heard. When asked what drives them to pursue professional development opportunities, 48% cite personal growth, more than any other age group. Some 24% cite recognition from management – again, more than other generations.

## What do young people want?




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

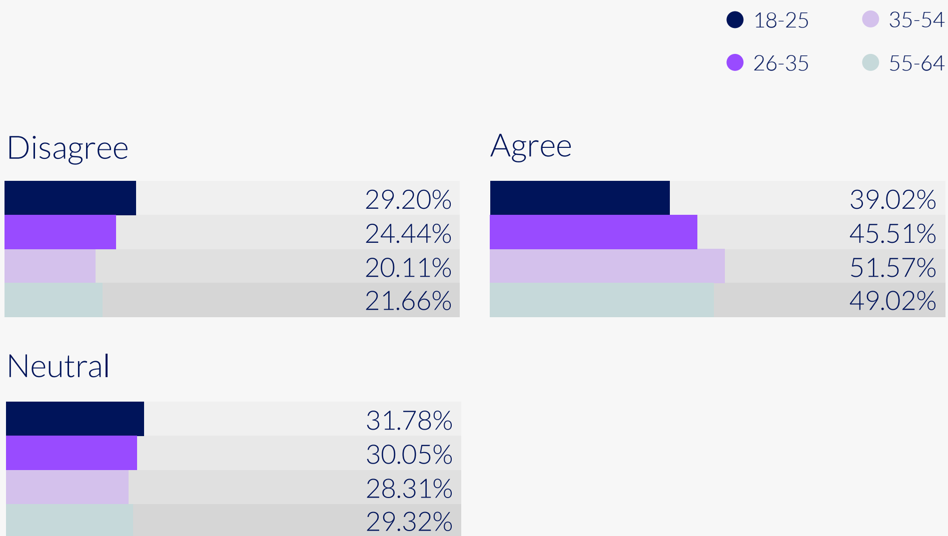
Yet they feel unheard and mischaracterised. When we asked respondents across age groups what they saw as the main challenges facing young people entering the workforce, one in three under-25s flagged lack of experience while 60% of older respondents identified it as a key obstacle. Nearly half of young workers believe they are not given the same opportunities as older workers. About one in four candidates believes that recruitment processes are skewed in favour of older candidates.

Therein lies the paradox: workers under 25 are ambitious and highly qualified, yet a growing number of them are struggling to find stable footing in the labour market, while companies report difficulty finding young people to match their hiring needs.

The reasons are complex and multifaceted: it's not because they lack drive, or because organisations have turned their backs on younger professionals, but because the system designed to take them from education to employment was built for a world that no longer exists.

**GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY**

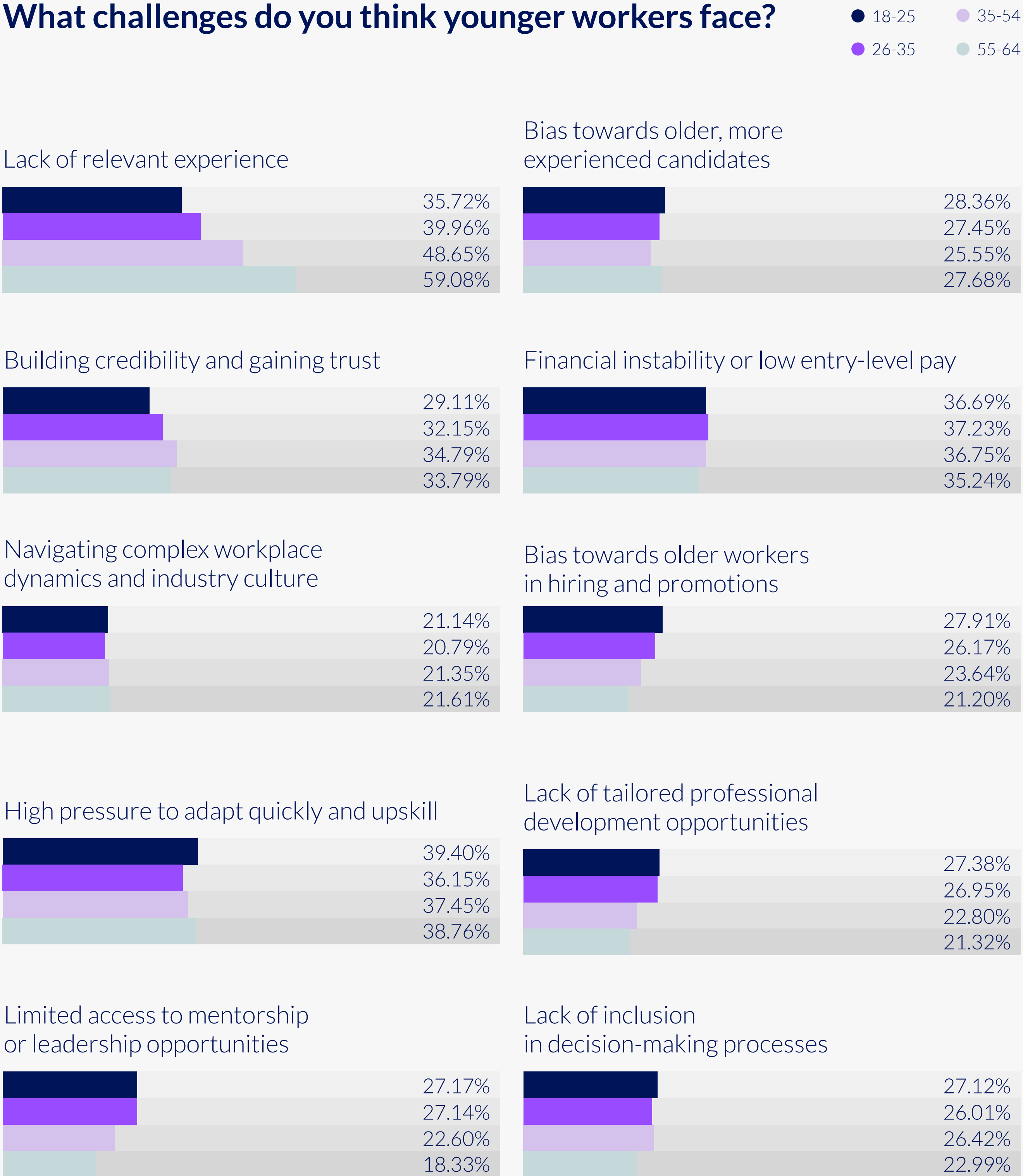
## Do you think younger workers have the same opportunities for growth as older workers in your company?




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY

## What challenges do you think younger workers face?




Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

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# Andrea A.

Andrea took his first steps into the world of work at 20, logging into the Ministry of Defence’s website to check the results of an exam he had taken. He had more than a little hope riding on the outcome: after a year aboard an Italian Navy military ship, he was trying to join the Air Force. The results were not what he expected. He had not made the cut, and that rejection marked the start of a years-long search for his place.

Since then, he has worked across different industries, searching for someone to believe in him, only to have his hopes frustrated again and again. His story proves how difficult it can be to navigate the world of work as a young person, among seemingly unlimited choices, a lack of clear career paths, and only sparse guidance from institutions and employers.

*“Andrea hoped that work would give him a chance to build what his parents had: the stability and financial freedom to buy a flat and start a family.”*

**ANDREA A.**
Production operator

Andrea grew up in a working-class family near Rome. For his parents, work meant stability, but not necessarily choice: entered the workforce early. His father as an industrial pipe installer, his mother as a store assistant – and let their careers unfold naturally with clear, predictable expectations, staying put where they started. Andrea hoped that work would give him a chance to build what his parents had: the stability and financial freedom to buy a flat and start a family.

After the Air Force rejection, his first significant experience was as an electrician for an industrial company. Over time, his role informally expanded, and he began communicating with the board to provide updates on ongoing projects, especially during long transfers across Italy, Tunisia, or Kazakhstan. Nearly three years in, he asked for a permanent contract, but his manager denied his request and told him that if he didn’t like it, he could leave.

Feeling like he had hit a wall, Andrea decided to pivot; he left the company and enrolled in university. By then, he was 24. He’d learned to love organisations, people, and processes, so he picked Organisational Psychology, studying part-time and working various jobs to pay for his degree: waiter, photographer, and finally retail assistant in a motorcycle gear and apparel store.

Just like in his previous job as an electrician, his role expanded in retail. He trained colleagues, managed operations, and solved customer issues. The company grew, too, opening seven new branches in a couple of years. A few years in, he had strong results and a university degree, so he asked to take on a different role within the company – perhaps in HR, the subject of his studies. For the third time in his career, he was refused.

Because he studied part-time and had plenty of work experience before starting university, Andrea was over 30 by the time he graduated. He still couldn’t afford housing near work and lived outside Rome. He sent dozens of applications that only triggered automated replies; the HR roles he had studied for seemed blocked by age limits, unpaid internships, and priority given to candidates who had completed expensive vocational programmes.

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The feeling of running into walls had become familiar, and Andrea decided to leave Italy. He moved to the Netherlands, where he started from scratch yet again: sorting mail at night, then stacking pallets in a logistics warehouse.
After ten days, a supervisor called him aside. Questions followed. Then, for the first time in his life, came an offer.

He had proved precise, resourceful, and reliable: would he accept a promotion to machine operator, responsible for coordinating others?

Andrea felt, finally, recognised.
He continues to apply for roles in HR, and eventually, he hopes to move into the industry, either in his current company or in his native country. His experience has taught him that his parents' linear career path is a thing of the past. He knows this promotion is only a small step. But after years of frustrated attempts to find his place, it feels like one in the right direction.

# Lost in the noise: the case for better guidance

**For Baby Boomers and much of Gen X, careers followed a recognisable script. School led to a job, found through personal contacts or a local posting, and once you were in, you learned the role and grew into it over time.**

That world, with its predictable rhythms, challenges, and expectations, is no longer the one younger generations face.

They navigate a rapidly evolving information landscape. The same environments that have democratised access to training and job opportunities also make it easier for trends and predictions about the future of work to flourish and vanish just as quickly, in wild swings often driven by claims about automation, disappearance, or collapse. Some of this information is accurate. Much of it is shallow. All of it lands hard on people who don't yet have a structured understanding of how the world of work actually operates.

And without authoritative, credible leadership from those with that understanding, it creates a world where, for the inexperienced, hope and empowerment coexist with an age of insecurity. "There is a very fragmented perception of the world of work among young generations," says Chiara Violini, President of Fondazione Gi Group.

That fragmentation pushes aspirations towards a narrow band of visible, high-status roles while demand grows elsewhere. An OECD survey of 15-year-olds, *The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation*, found that a whopping 50% of girls and 44% of boys expect to work in just 10 occupations, a clear sign of misalignment between aspirations and opportunity.

This is a problem employers have long recognised, and it is getting worse. In OECD countries, 39% of 15-year-olds are classified as "career uncertain," meaning they don't know what job they expect to have by the time they're 30. In less than a decade, that figure has almost doubled.

> *"When new technologies emerge, we tend to overestimate the short-term impact, but underestimate the long-term impact"*
>
> Stefan Kühn, Senior Economist, ILO

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs report, 63% of organisations believe skill gaps will be the primary barrier to business transformation between 2025 and 2030.

Technology is accelerating the pressure. AI is reshaping entry-level work faster than the guidance infrastructure can adapt, making the world seem fragile and uncertain. The pace at which skills become outdated is accelerating. Roles that once stayed consistent for years are now constantly being redefined as tasks, tools, and responsibilities shift. According to the World Employment Confederation, some 87% of employers anticipate that technological disruptions will force organisations to rethink workforce skills and resources broadly.

AI, in particular, is reshaping early-career pathways. "Many companies are investing in process automation, and rightly so," says Enza Artino, Gi Group Holding's Head of Global Talent Management, Learning & Development. But several companies have cut entry-level hires in the belief that many tasks can be performed by AI – increasingly affecting operational activities that traditionally served as the start of early-career pathways for blue-collar workers, fuelling frantic reports of an upcoming "job-pocalypse."

Entry-level roles now require different competencies that are not yet frequently taught in universities. The barrier to entry is higher, and young professionals entering organisations today often find themselves disoriented. Not only do they have to learn about the world of work, but they also have to develop skills and an understanding of jobs that might not have existed in the past.

"When new technologies emerge, we tend to overestimate the short-term impact, but underestimate the long-term impact," Stefan Kühn, a Senior Economist at the International Labour Organization and co-author of the *Employment and Social Trends 2026 report*, tells us.

This breeds uncertainty that hampers young people's attempts to start out in the workforce. "As they try to figure out the practical uses of AI, companies might be reluctant to do large-scale hiring of young workers and train them only to realise they might not need them," Kühn says. Organisations are caught between two uncertainties: how much AI will change their needs, and whether investing in junior talent still makes sense in the short term.

But on the other hand, organisations will need experienced workers at some point. "If you don't have the entry-level jobs, how are people gaining experience?" Kühn says.

It all paints a picture of broken transitions between education and the world of work. "We don't just need labour: we need new skills," says Artino, "skills that young people can't yet have, precisely because they are new."

In the meantime, uncertainty shapes how young people think about their own futures. According to our 2025 Global Candidate Survey, one in four under-25s – a higher proportion than any other age group – expect some of the biggest changes in their professional lives to come in the form of more frequent job changes and short-term contracts. Some 30% – again, more than any other age group – expect to be impacted by a rise in freelancing and self-employment opportunities.

Most have drawn a practical conclusion from all this: they will need to invest in themselves, with or without institutional support.

# The training gap

**Our survey reveals a demand for training, mentorship, and leadership opportunities that organisations might not be meeting.**

Some 28% of respondents under 25 mentioned limited access to mentorship or leadership opportunities and a lack of tailored professional development opportunities as key challenges. The figures are significantly lower among older respondents, suggesting that more experienced colleagues tend to underestimate how acutely young people feel this gap.

The overwhelming majority (88%) of young professionals have embraced training as important or very important in their careers. About 24% view skill development primarily as an employer responsibility, while some 30% – more than any other generation – believe that self-funded learning will be necessary to stay afloat. However, 40% of them feel unsupported by their current employer, another indicator that the demand is consistent, but the delivery is not.

Under-25s report feeling significant pressure to grow and adapt quickly: 40% cite it as one of the most challenging aspects of starting out in the workforce. Entry-level salaries often lag behind expectations, making it harder to invest time and energy in learning – yet this pressure has not translated into resistance.

Preferences for training are also clear. Nearly half of respondents favour on-the-job learning, followed by in-person workshops (42%) and live, instructor-led online courses (29%). Self-directed research (20%) and conferences (24%) are less popular options.

The opportunity is clear: young talent is actively looking for direction at the same moment that skill gaps are slowing transformation. Clearer training pathways and credible upskilling commitments address both problems at once.

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# Brais B.

Brais understood what he wanted to do in his life after watching *The Wolf of Wall Street*. He was 10 years old, growing up in La Coruña, Spain, and remembers watching the intensity of the corporate world. “I thought, this is incredible,” he tells us. He knew then that he wanted to enter the world of business.

By his early teens, he was already trying to carve out a path for himself. With a group of friends, he launched a small fashion project, designing T-shirts and hoodies and selling them to their peers. They launched two collections and gained their first taste of what it meant to create something new and bring it to market, before folding the project. “We were proud of everything we did, but it wasn’t our passion,” he says.

Today, Brais is a 19-year-old student of international commerce in Granada and the co-founder of SKOMB-BY-TEX, a start-up specialising in vegan leather production. The company was born out of a school assignment: in January 2024, a professor asked students to create a business project aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Drawing on his prior experience, he went back into fashion. Together with his classmate Luisanny Lara Martinez, he began searching for sustainable alternatives to leather. They discovered an academic dissertation describing how the fermentation of SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast) with tea and sugar could produce a leather-like biomaterial, though no one had successfully scaled it until then – and that was the Eureka moment.

**BRAIS B.**

Co-Founder and CCO of SKOMB-BY-TEX, International Business student at the Escuela Internacional de Gerencia in Granada

“We said to each other, this is our opportunity,” he says. After months of research and experimentation, they developed a compound that could be dried after 15 to 30 days of growth, then treated with non-toxic, natural processes to create a flexible, vegan, and biodegradable leather-like material with three applications: vegan leather for fashion, biodegradable packaging, and a food wrap.

The project turned heads quickly. Brais and his partner found themselves winning awards across Europe and travelling to London, Vienna, and Berlin. They even met with executives from established companies, including Inditex and Caixa, who asked about patents, research, and whether young people truly believe they can change the world.

> *“Travelling across Europe, pitching to international business leaders, seeing heads turn… it felt like living my 10-year-old self’s dream.”*
>
> Brais B.

Brais couldn’t believe how seriously he was being taken. “In the moment, it was just incredible,” he says. “It felt like living inside my 10-year-old self’s dream.”

Despite all the attention and awards, the project remains fragile. Without more funding, production materials sit in the garage of Brais and Luisanny’s professor. Scaling depends on acquiring specialised machines, and as college students, they don’t yet have the resources to buy them.

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The road ahead might be long. But Brais says both their successes thus far and the ones yet to come depend on his relationship with mentors and more experienced people who can help him chart the way forward. One thing that resonated with him in his conversations with businesspeople and entrepreneurs is how so many of them told him that their first project was “crap.” And so was the second, and sometimes several more, before they finally hit their stride.

It’s the sort of role model and success story that helps Brais understand that failure is just part of the game, and one that his generation could benefit from. “They didn’t stop,” he says about his most important learning. “They founded one company, then another one when it didn’t work out, then another. They don’t give up, and they believe in their ideas. It’s the kind of inspiration that shows you what you can do.”

# Beyond pay: what young workers actually need

**Training alone, however, is not enough.**

Younger generations think differently, yet we keep seeing them through the wrong lens, without truly listening. More than any other generation before them, people under 25 are interested in value that extends beyond monetary compensation. The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside a fragmented political landscape and an increased focus on personal well-being, has made them more mindful than their predecessors of mental health, boundaries, and work-life balance.

Professionals under 25 care deeply about their personal growth and overall wellness, and they are open and direct about their expectations. Support such as mental health resources or fitness initiatives is very popular among younger workers, with nearly 40% of candidates saying that it would make a company stand out to them.

**When considering job offers, which additional benefits would make a company stand out to them?**


Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

Flexibility is also one of their key priorities. The younger the worker, the more they favour a task-based, performance-driven approach, rather than a model based on strict availability and office hours – a direct clash with the return-to-office policies that many companies are introducing.

When we asked young workers about their top reasons for accepting a job offer, work-life balance and flexible work options came in third and fourth, right after a competitive salary and job stability, and before reasons such as the role and key responsibilities or opportunities for career progression. Some 40% of young candidates tell us that their decision to leave their current job is driven in part by the need for more more flexibility, with a further 40% choosing it as a key requirement for their next role. 32% name it as a key requirement for their next role.

# The NEET challenge

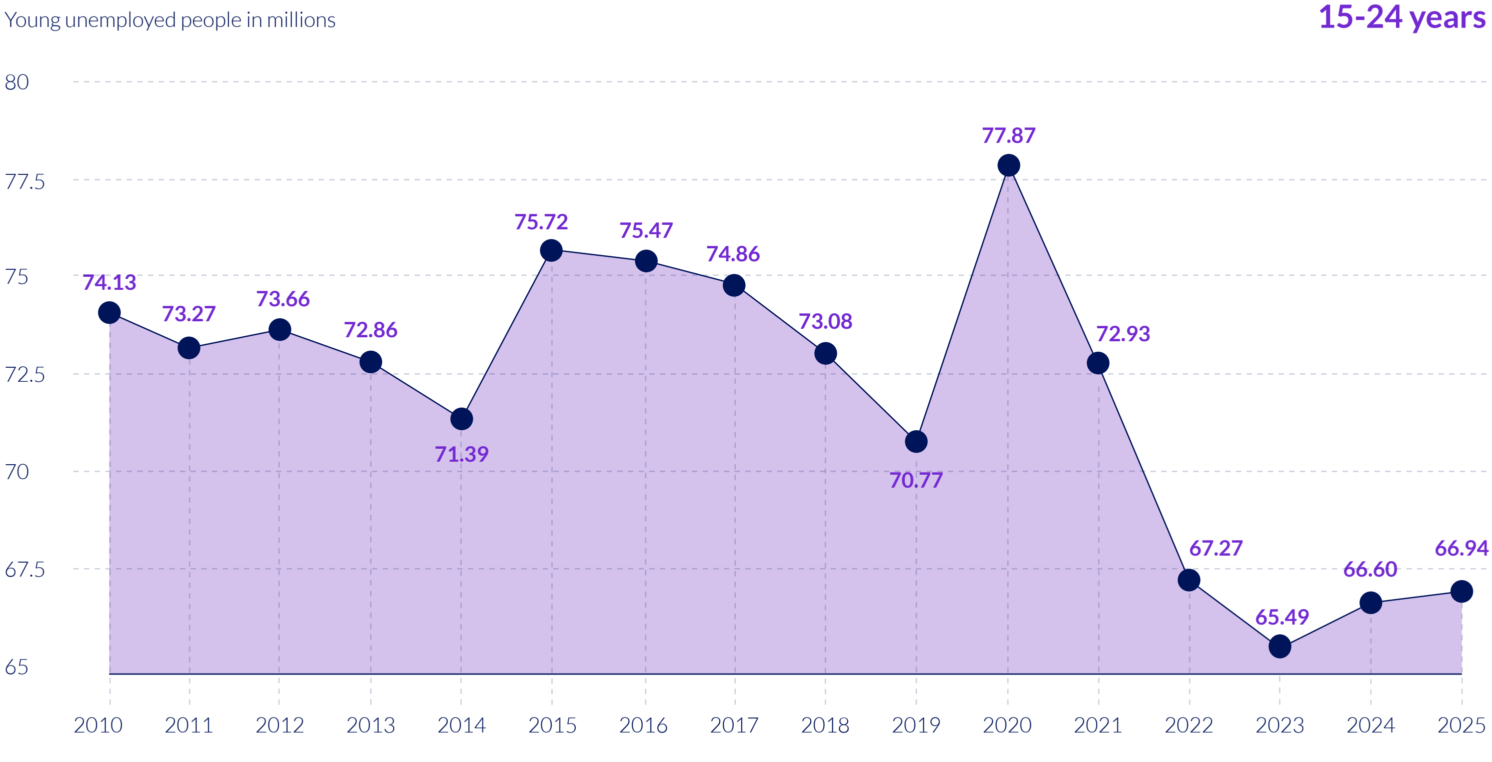
## This gap between what young people need and what the system provides has consequences that extend well beyond the workplace.

When guidance is absent, entry points are closed, and expectations go persistently unmet, some young people disengage entirely. That is where the NEET problem begins.

Around one in five young people worldwide isn't studying, working, or in any kind of training. This includes unemployed youth, but also those who are no longer looking for a job – and so, they are not captured by unemployment figures at all.

NEET – Not in Education, Employment, or Training – is the metric designed to describe and analyse this group: those who've disengaged due to care responsibilities, repeated rejection, or simply can't find a job.

## Number of young unemployed people worldwide from 2010 to 2025




Source: International Labour Organization

The ILO considers it a more reliable measure of vulnerability than unemployment alone, as Stefan Kühn, senior economist at the ILO, tells us: "When you have an increase in young people who not only are not employed, but are also not in education, that's a bigger problem," he says.

After years in which NEET rates fell across the world, they now appear back on the rise. In 2025, 257 million people between 15 and 24 years old – or 20.0% – were NEETs. The figure hit a historic low in 2023 before reversing course, and is expected to grow 1% by 2027.

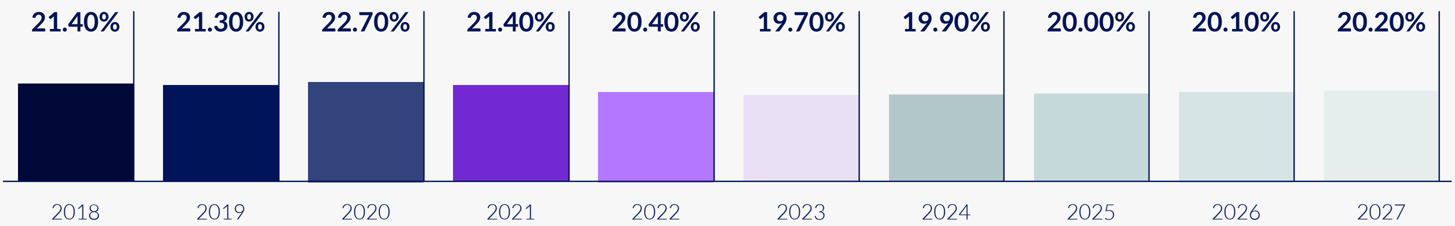
The gap runs along predictable fault lines: NEET rates reach 27.9% in low-income countries versus 10.9% in high-income ones. Therefore, much of the increase is driven by Africa and Asia, where NEET rates remain high and the youth population is growing. Young women are significantly more exposed: they are 14.3 percentage points more likely to be NEET than young men, often due to care responsibilities.

While NEETs are often described as a single group, the label encompasses a far more complex reality. Some young people cycle between short-term jobs, others go into informal work, and others still withdraw after repeated rejection. Some never manage to enter the labour market at all, perhaps because of illness or care responsibilities. What they share is a disrupted transition from education to work – and a system that had no mechanism to catch them.

The cost is felt at every level. "For economies, it means skills shortages, wasted potential, and slower growth," says Fondazione Gi Group's Violini. For individuals, the longer someone stays out of education and work, the more difficult it becomes to reconnect with education or employment. Prolonged NEET periods can weaken confidence, reduce future employability, and increase the risk of long-term vulnerability – and the effects tend to compound over time.

Getting people back into education or work is the hardest part. Many young people disengage quietly, making them hard to identify and reach. "It's hard to even just find someone who is a NEET to reach out to," Violini says. And that is often only the first obstacle of a potentially long reactivation process.

## Global youth NEET rates




Source: International Labour Organization

# Helping youth overcome the NEET trap

**Young people are falling through gaps that the system hasn't closed. But the solutions exist. They just require employers, schools, training providers, and public services to act earlier, coordinate better, and design entry pathways that reflect who young people actually are, not who the system assumes them to be.**

Closing the NEET gap – and improving the school-to-work transition for young people – requires structural intervention across the entire school-to-work journey, such as:

## Solving the NEET puzzle: the Dedalo laboratory

In July 2025, Fondazione Gi Group launched Dedalo, a laboratory to study the NEET phenomenon and offer solutions and initiatives for companies, institutions, and associations to tackle the problem and help young people find their way out of the maze of exclusion that the condition carries.

The initiative operates through three strategic pillars:

**Analysis:** generating evidence-based research to identify the root causes of youth inactivity.

**Connection:** building a collaborative network between institutions, businesses, and families.

**"Filo di Arianna":** a dedicated project that identifies and promotes best practices and successful interventions to reintegrate young people into the workforce and education systems.

Dedalo also publishes an annual analysis and advocacy report, providing an update of the NEET phenomenon and offering in-depth insights into its evolving challenges.

**Earlier, structured career guidance**
Career orientation should start well before the end of compulsory education and be embedded in school curricula. Early exposure to different occupations, realistic labour market information, and guided self-assessment help reduce misaligned expectations and early disengagement.

**Stronger school-to-work pathways**
Clear and structured transitions between education and employment reduce the risk of falling out of the system. This can be achieved through closer coordination between schools, training providers, and employers to ensure continuity rather than gaps.

**Dual systems combining learning with work experience**
Models that integrate classroom learning with paid, real-world work experience have consistently shown better outcomes. They allow students to build skills, confidence, and a professional identity while remaining in education.

**Reinforced vocational and technical education pathways**
Professional, vocational, and technical education need greater visibility and status. Strengthening tertiary vocational education and aligning curricula with labour market demand can provide alternatives to purely academic tracks.

**Local, multi-stakeholder networks**
Coordinated local ecosystems involving schools, employers, public services, and community organisations can help to identify at-risk youth early and facilitate support services.

**Multiple entry routes into employment**
NEETs are not a single profile, so entry-level hiring should not rely on a single standard pathway. Employers can design different entry routes that account for varying levels of readiness and provide tailored support rather than excluding candidates.

**Removal of practical participation barriers**
Transport costs, equipment, irregular schedules, and unpaid entry steps can prevent capable young people from participating. Addressing these frictions improves access and persistence.

**Visible and credible progression pathways**
Many young people struggle to see how entry-level roles connect to longer-term careers. Publishing simple progression maps, transparent pay ranges, and clear skill requirements can help close the narrative gap between aspiration and opportunity.

**Build structured bridges into work**
Structured transitions such as apprenticeships, traineeships, paid work placements, and school partnerships become more important, especially at a time when entry-level roles seem to be decreasing. These pathways maintain access while responding to changing productivity models.

# Best practice: The discovering paths mentor program

**"By the time most young people have to pick a college or a career, they don't respond well to being spoon-fed solutions and answers" says Christina Myers, Executive Director of Compliance and People at Vericast.**

Tell them what they should be doing, Christina says, and you'll lose them. What they need is a space to ask better questions, and someone who listens to them and helps them think things through. What do I enjoy? What am I good at? What do the opportunities out there actually look like?

Christina is a mentor and member of the Discovery Paths Mentor Program in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, which provides high school students with something every adult wishes they had in their school years: mentors who listen carefully, respond honestly, without judgment or preconceptions, and have their back as they explore different options and figure things out.

The programme launched in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 2009. Since then, it has paired around 150 high school juniors every year with senior professionals who volunteer to offer one-on-one mentorship.

**CHRISTINA MYERS**

Executive Director for Compliance and People at Vericast, Mentor at the Discovering Paths Mentor Program in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

*"We learned very quickly that talking to them for a long time doesn't work. It's about talking with them, without shutting them down."*

They all gather as a cohort for nine months to explore careers through visits, activities, and hands-on experiences such as STEM labs, healthcare simulations, ecology fieldwork in streams, conversations with professors, business leaders, and tradespeople.

The programme understands that young people are not short on ambition or information – if anything, they are drowning in both. This often results in paralysis from the many options, anxiety about what could go wrong, and the pressure to succeed without knowing how to get there. What mentors provide is a trusted hand guiding them through unfiltered chaos, someone helping them find their way through the possibilities and the social media half-truths about disappearing jobs, AI takeovers, and overnight success stories.

The programme doesn't try to control that noise or feed students more information through presentations or lectures. "We quickly learned that long conversations with them are not effective." Christina says. "It's more about talking *with* them without shutting them down."

Instead, mentors listen without judgment. The fact that they are strangers to students at first turns out to be a winning feature of the programme, rather than a bug, because there is no personal history, no expectation, no "I've known you since kindergarten." Just curiosity, and someone who lets them ask questions, explore ideas, and be who they want to be. Over time, some form such strong bonds that they befriend each other's families and even attend sports games or life events together.

Myers says that she once witnessed a student from the programme tell his mentor he'd love to work on a fishing boat. Christina became worried about how the mentor might respond. But instead of calling the idea absurd or asking the questions that a parent might ask, the mentor just replied, "That's super cool! Tell me more. Why are you interested in that? How do you think you would get that job?"

"Listening without any preconceived notion of what they should be doing in their life is a huge thing," Christina says.

And while no orientation initiative can ever shield high school students from economic uncertainty or the cultural pressures they face, what the programme offers is still priceless: realism, encouragement, and a trusted adult who supports them and is available for doubts, questions, or feedback.

In one case, Myers described a young woman who signed up to the programme adamant that she would become a doctor. Both of her parents were physicians, and she remained staunchly convinced throughout most of the programme, as the cohort explored industry after industry. Then, she shadowed a teacher almost on a whim – and something clicked. By the end of the year, she told her parents she wanted to teach instead, and the family was supportive. It was an orientation programme doing exactly what it was supposed to do: helping a young woman ignite her passion and talents, and doing it through real-world experiences.

Myers says that she recently followed up with the young woman, years after she had joined the programme. "She is out of college and in a classroom of her own," she says proudly.

# 3. Heritage

## The long game

“”

# Sandrine M.

When Sandrine M. found herself out of a job at 52, after 12 years as head of marketing for France at a major staffing company, the circumstances forced a question into focus: what does a senior marketing executive do next, in a field that prizes youth above almost everything else?

Sandrine worried she would struggle to land another position. She knew many people her age didn’t find a job after a layoff or an acquisition. And the risks were likely to be higher in marketing – an industry she had had a long career in and had watched being revolutionised again and again. Age perception in marketing was different from industries like finance or HR, where experience is often rewarded: her field valued youth, agility with new platforms, and freshness above all else. Could she convince other people that she continued being an asset? And if not, how could she reinvent herself?

**SANDRINE M.**

Global Brand And Product Marketing Manager

> *“A lot of people are told they need to reinvent themselves at a certain age. But to be able to reinvent yourself, you need to be mentally available.”*

After her last day, she decided to give herself some time. With France’s unemployment system providing financial cover, she took stock: she joined support groups for senior job seekers, where she saw countless people who had built themselves entirely around their careers and now felt stuck. She realised things were different for her: she had plenty of hobbies – such as weightlifting and pottery – which helped structure her days during this hiatus.

She began seeing that she could also continue her career outside the industry in which she had spent so much of it.

But fortunately, after a while, she was asked to teach communication at a business school, although the gig didn’t keep her busy for the whole week. About a year after her redundancy, her former manager called to offer her another gig: covering for the woman who had her role in the acquiring company after she had had a burnout.

A few months later, the company’s CMO called: a position was opening. Could she be interested?

Sandrine applied and got the job. She still wonders whether this is the last turbulence of her career, and remains uncertain how long she can stay in marketing. “If I lose this job, there are very few chances for me to find another marketing position,” she told us.

But her experience clarified that her identity had never been her job title. If the marketing world no longer found her profile interesting, she could do something completely different. That belief made her redundancy easier to navigate than the despondency she saw in those jobseeker support meetings.

# Senior workers are an untapped resource

## Across advanced economies, the composition of the workforce is changing rapidly.

By 2040, four out of five countries will see the growth of their working-age population slow, and in many cases, the trend will reverse into outright decline. In several higher-income economies, such as China, Germany, and Italy, workforces have already begun shrinking. Today's workplaces are more age-diverse than at any point in recent history – with four, sometimes five, generations working side by side.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) has repeatedly warned that workforce ageing is already adding constraints on labour markets and economic growth. That coincides with our findings. Employers report increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining talent, particularly at entry and mid-career levels. According to our 2025 Global Survey of HR Leaders, nearly 75% of companies see talent shortages and a lack of candidates with the right skills as one of their key challenges. The issue has become a major talking point in HR, and companies have responded accordingly, refining employer branding, investing in graduate pipelines, and accelerating early-career development to secure scarce skills.

"Companies desperately need skilled young people because they are their future," says Alessandra Giordano, Employability Director at INTOO Italy, the Gi Group Holding career development and outplacement company. But the flip side of the demographic shift has received far less attention until recently: what to do with the growing number of senior workers.

Workers over 55, in particular, are growing faster than any other age bracket in organisations. Across the world, people aged 55 and above represented 10.9% of the workforce in 1995 – but grew to 16.3% in 2020, according to the International Labour Organization. In the EU, most countries will see the share of senior workers increase to 55% of their labour force by 2030.

At the same time, not just life spans, but health spans have become longer. "In the past, at age 60, you were considered old," said Emanuela Notari, a longevity strategy and age-inclusion expert. "Now, 60-year-old women have 30 years ahead of them. The stretch between 60 and 75 has become a period in which people still have the energy, expectations, and curiosity typical of a younger age, but also the self-awareness of an older one."

But the way the careers of experienced workers are managed still largely follows a decades-old, simplistic arc. Employees were recruited, developed for a few years, promoted… and when they moved beyond their forties, structured development fell away until they exited the company, often within a relatively predictable timeframe. Career paths narrowed, training opportunities declined, and employees were expected either to have "arrived" or perform the same role until departure. There was little strategic focus on employability in the later stages of working life.

This legacy still shapes how senior workers are treated today. Many are seen as have-been in the final phase of their careers, left in limbo, waiting for retirement. Development discussions become less frequent, training budgets are redirected elsewhere, and workers quietly find themselves earmarked for cost-reduction plans, even as they might well account for organisations' largest untapped resource. "So many managers of 50 or 55 who have just lost their jobs or who are still in work but unsatisfied feel like part of the office furniture, somebody whose opinion doesn't matter," Notari said.

And so, in the era of longevity, organisations have decided to become ultra-focused on youth. And as they struggle with talent attraction, high turnover among younger staff, and skills gaps, they fail to harness the resource right at their fingertips.

> *"The stretch between 60 and 75 has become a period in which people still have the energy, expectations, and curiosity typical of a younger age, but also the self-awareness of an older one."*
>
> Emanuela Notari, longevity strategy and age-inclusion expert

GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY

## How HR leaders see workers vs how they see themselves


Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

# The tiredness myth

**More experienced workers are often perceived as tired, out of step with modern workplaces, and less accepting of new ways of working.**

After all, they joined the company many years ago, working with certain tools and processes – only to see nearly everything transform around them. They had a clear idea of when they might retire and saw that moment recede farther and farther into the future. But as workforces continue to age, these perceptions must be scrutinised.

Our global 2025 surveys of HR Leaders and Candidates show a sizeable disconnect between the way senior workers are perceived by HR leaders and the way they see themselves. Some 69% of HR leaders mention "Adapting to new technologies" as one of the key challenges facing workers above 55 in their industries. Significantly fewer senior candidates – only about 57% – agree with the statement, highlighting a considerable share of workers who feel misrepresented by the stereotype of the digitally illiterate, tech-averse older worker.

> *"There are people who are more curious. And that individual tendency – rather than age – is what dictates how adaptable they are."*
>
> Emanuela Notari, longevity strategy and age-inclusion expert

That's the damage stereotypes cause. "We need to stop generalising," Notari said. "The truth is that there are people who are more curious and people who are less curious, and that individual tendency – rather than age – is what dictates how adaptable they are."

## Many senior workers can be persuaded to embrace change, although they might not do so naturally and unconditionally, as younger people do.

They have more history, have seen several waves of technological and organisational disruption, including some that didn't work out, and might be more sceptical of new disruption and risk.

But often, the stereotypes around senior workers' aversion to change might be a self-fulfilling prophecy – the result of outdated career models rather than age-related characteristics. Until recently, there have been relatively few attempts to encourage older generations' participation in training and innovation, the assumption being that, past a certain age, interest had simply dried up. But if organisations cease to invest in updating their skills, senior workers might stop developing them. If they are not considered for certain roles, they will never grow into them.

Interestingly, after “Adapting to new technologies”, HR leaders named “Bias or stereotypes about adaptability and innovation” (59%) and “Generational and cultural gaps in younger-dominated industries” (40%) as the most common challenges facing senior workers, which suggests they are aware of the harm caused by stereotypes and boxing in more experienced people.

Putting the same question to senior employees – asking them about the greatest challenges they face – leads to significantly different answers and more points where perceptions diverge.

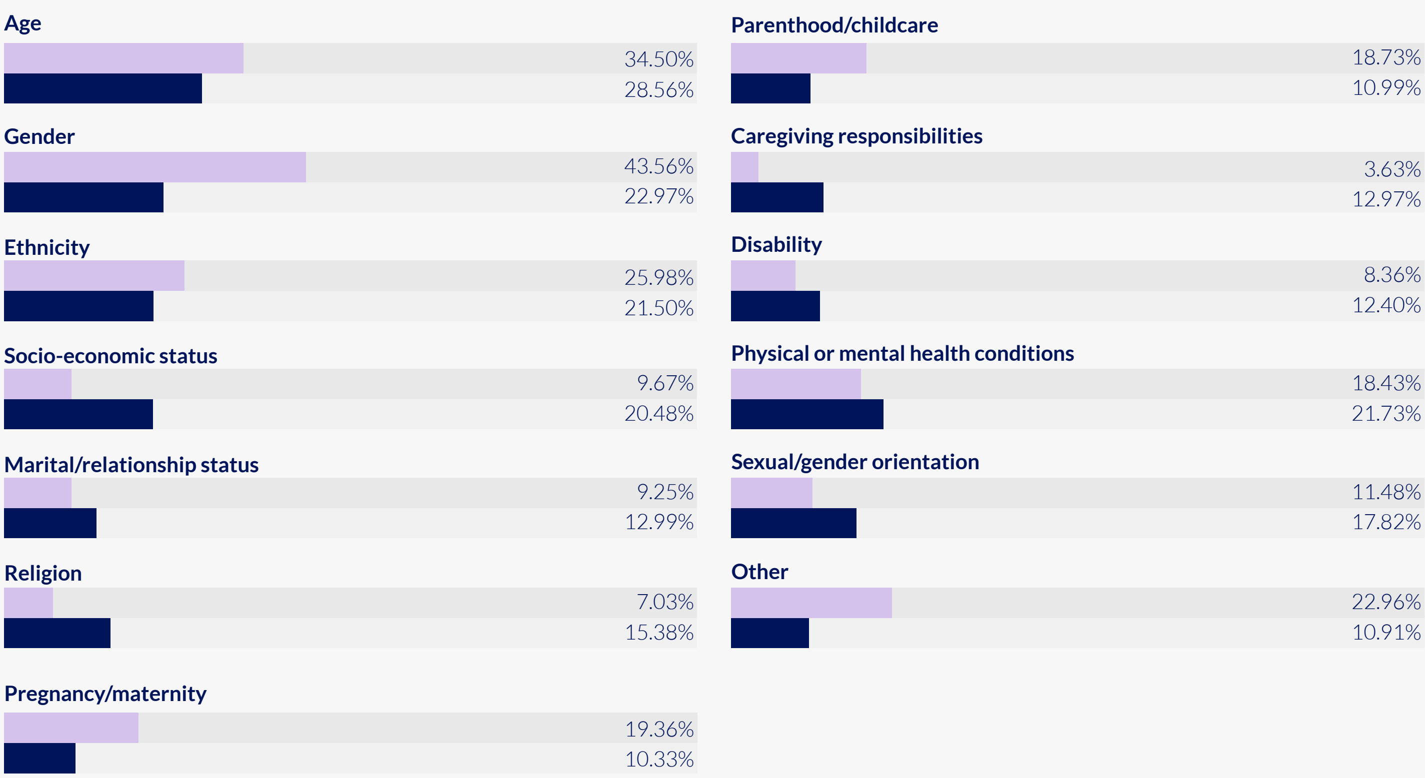
- More than 40% of senior candidates identify the lack of professional development paths as a key challenge, compared to only 22% of HR leaders.
- Some 44% point to limited opportunities for career progression, compared to only 23% of HR leaders.
- Some 42% say that being seen as overqualified is a key challenge, compared to 25% of HR leaders.

It all points to a gap between what senior employees expect from themselves and their companies, and what those companies offer. They don’t feel ready to be sidelined in new projects; they don’t feel tired of training. If anything, respondents seem to want to take on more from their companies – more opportunities, more responsibilities, more challenges.

This bias has real consequences. Some 40% of senior workers believe their cohort is not given the same growth and training opportunities as younger workers. And one-third of respondents report having witnessed or experienced age-related discrimination.
This makes ageism the most common form of workplace discrimination witnessed by candidates, even above gender-based discrimination.

**GLOBAL CANDIDATE SURVEY**

## The most common types of discrimination in the workplace




Source: Gi Group Holding, Global Candidate Survey, 2025

# Designing multigenerational teams

**Increasing age diversity in the workforce might be a challenge, but it's also an opportunity for companies.**

> *"In a way, older workers are no different from any other worker. They need to feel seen, valued, and marry a sense of purpose."*
>
> Alessandra Giordano, Employability Director, INTOO Italy

Not only do senior workers tend to remain in a job far longer, take fewer days off, and identify with the company more, but they also carry a large share of institutional memory, professional networks, and knowledge of how work has historically been delivered.

This is particularly evident in manufacturing companies, where senior workers know factories and production lines inside out. They know how to reboot machines when they shut down, how to diagnose problems, or compensate their team's blind spots. Especially in smaller companies, their departures cause a loss of knowledge that can harm the operations in very tangible ways.

At the same time, research consistently shows that age-diverse teams – where senior workers bring knowledge of clients, industry, and the company's values and culture and can train the younger generations, and younger people bring new, more efficient ways of working – are more motivated, perform better, and have higher retention rates.

According to the Harvard Business Review, companies embracing a multi-generational workforce are 45% more likely to see their market share grow.

But unlocking these benefits requires efforts from organisations. Age groups can become polarised and keep to themselves even in the most age-diverse companies.

And any progress can be thwarted if a company's culture isn't age-friendly: one that encourages respect and acceptance.

Building bridges between the generations requires stepping into each other's shoes. "Rather than creating hollow, forced roles, we should identify topics that matter to all generations, that genuinely interests them – and then bring them around a table to discuss them," Notari said.

As examples, she mentioned involving workers in future design tools to help them visualise their futures or exploring what major trends mean for them.

One of the ways to do that is to nudge senior workers towards training and mentor roles. But asking this of the older generation requires keeping them engaged and not making them feel like they've been parked in a meaningless role until retirement – or until the next round of cost-saving layoffs. It requires making them feel valued: respecting their skills, vision, and institutional knowledge, even when these require corrections or nudging towards a different corporate direction.

In her job, Paola Marongiu, Delivery Manager at INTOO Italy, helps companies manage lay-offs and guides workers towards the next move in their careers. She regularly advises both senior workers and companies on the potential for training, mentoring, and handover roles, where workers can leverage their experience and knowledge.

But she has seen many poorly managed attempts. In one recent case, a large customer service operation was outsourced abroad while new automated systems were introduced. Senior staff were asked, with little notice, to transfer years of accumulated knowledge to colleagues in another country and to train algorithms, even as colleagues were being laid off. The change was framed as an operational step rather than a strategic shift, with little explanation about what it meant for the company's future. As a result, many experienced employees felt sidelined and undervalued after long careers in customer care. Resistance followed; some senior staff refused to collaborate altogether, prompting the company to exclude them from the transition.

Marongiu believes that these outcomes are avoidable. When handled well, knowledge transfer can strengthen both engagement and continuity. "We increasingly suggest that people over 50 or 55 are valued for their ability to transfer skills, through structured shadowing, handovers and mentoring," she says. "That kind of role carries enormous value."

The best approaches start early. Companies that explain the wider strategy, invest in training, and formally recognise expertise create very different dynamics. After all, senior workers sit on a heritage of skills, and automation or outsourcing only work because that heritage exists.

> *"We increasingly suggest that people over 50 or 55 are valued for their ability to transfer skills, through structured shadowing, handovers and mentoring"*
>
> Paola Marongiu,
> Delivery Manager, INTOO Italy

## How to plan for an older workforce

Age-related bias rarely stems from a single policy failure. More often, it is the cumulative result of outdated career models, uneven access to development, and a lack of intentional age management. Here's what our interviewees suggested organisations do to address these systemic issues:

**Map critical skills and ownership**
Identify where key competencies sit across the workforce, particularly among senior employees. This enables informed succession planning and creates structured opportunities for knowledge transfer before exits occur.

**Design age-inclusive learning models**
Offer continuous training across all career stages, using different formats where appropriate.

**Analyse workforce data by age group**
Segment engagement scores, performance ratings, promotion rates, and training participation by age.

**Embed age explicitly in non-discrimination policies**
Many companies specifically mention ethnicity, religion, and gender-based discrimination in their formal policies. Do the same for age: explicit inclusion sets expectations and provides a reference point for accountability.

**Structure intergenerational collaboration**
Many companies act as if intergenerational synergies happen spontaneously, just by creating mixed-age teams and letting the magic happen. But mixed-age teams rarely succeed by chance – it takes culture and active management. Consider introducing initiatives, facilitated projects, and clear roles to ensure expertise flows both ways, rather than relying on informal interaction.

**Develop mentoring as a skill, not an assumption**
Encourage senior employees to act as mentors, but don't leave them on an island. Back their experience with training. Effective mentoring requires structure, feedback, and clear expectations.

**Promote long-term employability awareness**
Support employees, particularly from mid-career onwards, in understanding how their roles are evolving and which skills will sustain their employability over time. This benefits both organisations and individuals.

**Use internal communication to challenge stereotypes**
Just as gender-focused campaigns have helped to shift perceptions about women in STEM subjects, challenge assumptions about senior workers in your communications. For example, highlight senior employees in roles linked to innovation, change, and learning.

# Turning longevity into a competitive asset

Awareness is catching up with reality. Many companies now acknowledge that longer working lives are no longer an exception but the norm. What remains less settled is how to respond in practice, especially once employees cross the informal threshold of 55. Development is still too often treated as something that tapers off with age, and talking about it for over-55s still draws sceptical smiles: what else is there left to develop?

The resistance is more cultural than practical, but fortunately, that mindset is starting to look dated. “The point is to develop skills, not necessarily careers,” says INTOO’s Giordano. She believes a transition is underway, and the new direction will become clearer in about a decade: investments, training, and proper development paths for over-55s, making real investments in their talent.

**The principle itself is simple: older workers are no different from any other worker – they need to feel seen, valued, and find a sense of purpose.**

More than promotions or titles, they ask for relevance, for their experience to be used well, and for clarity about where they fit in a fast-changing workplace. Ignore that, and experience walks out the door. Act on it, and longevity becomes an asset rather than a liability. “In a way, older workers are no different from any other worker,” Giordano says. “They need to feel seen, valued, and marry a sense of purpose.”

Behind every job title there is far more than a role, a skill set or a number in a workforce statistic. There are stories, responsibilities, turning points, ambitions, and challenges that continue to shape people throughout every stage of their professional lives.

*More than Work* was never intended to be just a report about demographic shifts or labour market trends. It is an invitation to reflect on how we look at work, care, age, opportunity and value within organisations and society. The voices, insights and perspectives gathered across these chapters remind us that people do not leave their lives at the door when they enter the workplace.

*Care* shows us that professional commitment and personal responsibility are not separate worlds. *Nurture* reminds us that young talent does not lack ambition, but often lacks direction, access and meaningful support.

*Heritage* challenges us to rethink experience not as something static or outdated, but as living knowledge that evolves, adapts and continues to generate impact.

Across all chapters, one idea remained constant: people can't be reduced to age brackets, career labels or workplace assumptions. Intergenerational collaboration, continuous learning, flexibility and inclusive cultures are not simply business strategies; they are ways of recognising the human potential that exists at every stage of life.

The future of work will not be built only through technology, innovation or productivity targets, but through our ability to value people in all their complexity. And perhaps the most important reflection *More than Work* leaves us with is precisely this: when organisations create space for people's realities, responsibilities and aspirations, they do not just build stronger businesses, they create workplaces where stories, experiences, and people truly matter.

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