Jennifer Moss

The Impact of COVID-19 on Burnout:

Key Trends

By Jennifer Moss

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Introduction

In 2019, the World Health Organization included the term burnout in its 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an occupational phenomenon.

The WHO defined burnout as a "syndrome" conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
2. Increased mental distance from one's job
3. Feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy

Perhaps most importantly, the WHO emphasized that "burnout refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life."

This language acknowledged that burnout is more than just an employee problem; it's an organizational problem that requires an organizational solution.

According to Christina Maslach of the University of California, Berkeley, Susan E. Jackson of Rutgers, and Michael Leiter of Deakin University, burnout has six main causes:

1. Unsustainable workload
2. Perceived lack of control
3. Insufficient rewards for effort
4. Lack of a supportive community
5. Lack of fairness
6. Mismatched values and skills

Burnout and the Pandemic

Burnout has been a growing problem for years, but it took a massive global crisis to highlight its catastrophic impacts.

To better understand how the pandemic was exacerbating burnout, we decided to ask how people are feeling.

Teaming up together, Leiter, Maslach, and David Whiteside, the director of insights and research at YMCA WorkWell, and I created a survey that analyzes the state of burnout and well-being during COVID–19. We combined several evidence-based scales, including the Maslach Burnout Inventory General Survey (MBI-GS), a psychological assessment of occupational burnout, and the Areas of Worklife Survey (AWS), which assesses employees' perceptions of work-setting qualities that affect whether they experience engagement or burnout.

With support from Harvard Business Review, we gathered feedback from more than 1,500 respondents in 46 countries, in various sectors, roles, and seniority levels, in the fall of 2020. We added three open-ended questions and received over 3600 qualitative responses. Respondents shared at length how they were feeling in their own words and it was overwhelmingly negative. Both the qualitative and quantitative data pointed to a glaring reality — the pandemic was having a large effect on mental health and well-being at work.

Burnout was measured in two separate ways within the survey:

1. Average scores of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI aggregate). Scores to the MBI are an average of the 9 questions from 0–6, with 0 being "Never" and 6 being "Daily". Higher scores indicate higher levels of burnout.
2. Self-report Burnout: The WHO definition of burnout was provided and the following question would be presented: "According to this definition, do you believe that you have experienced burnout in the past three months?" A 1–5 five scale was deployed: 1 represents "Not at All" and 5 represents "Extremely Often". Higher scores indicate higher levels of burnout.

The following significantly predicted lower levels of burnout:

1. Having a manageable workload
2. Having your decisions supported
3. Feeling like you have the respect of your colleagues
4. Feeling like you are adequately recognized at work
5. Feeling like you can discuss your mental health at work
6. Feeling a strong connection to your family during COVID–19
7. Feeling a strong connection to your friends during COVID–19
8. Feeling a strong sense of purpose in your work

In terms of self-reported burnout, the key areas that predicted lower levels of self-report burnout were:

1. Having a manageable workload (the strongest predictor)
2. Feeling like you are adequately recognized at work
3. Feeling like you can discuss your mental health at work
4. Feeling a strong connection to your family during COVID–19
5. Feeling a strong connection to your friends during COVID–19
6. Feeling a strong sense of purpose in your work

Data suggests biggest areas that help prevent burnout are:

1. Feeling like you have a manageable workload
2. Feeling well recognized and respected
3. Feeling like your organization is a safe space to discuss mental health
4. Feeling like you have strong relationships outside of work
5. Feeling strongly connected to your work

Workload

62 percent of people are struggling to manage their workload have experienced burnout often or extremely often in the last three months.

Purpose

70 percent of employees who are not inspired by the mission and values in their work have experienced burnout often or extremely often in the last three months. 25 percent of those who are inspired by the mission and values in their work didn't experience burnout.

Mental Health

65 percent of people who don't feel comfortable openly discussing mental health at work have experienced burnout often or extremely often in the last three months.

Age

65 percent of people who don't feel comfortable openly discussing mental health at work have experienced burnout often or extremely often in the last three months.

Overall, our data shows that youth and young employees in the workforce lower levels of well-being than other age groups. Some possible reasons can be related to salary and position, and working environment in COVID–19. Additionally, younger employees being more likely to work from smaller spaces, often alone or with roommates, and with less resources to make working from home a healthy and effective place to work.

Gender

Women show higher levels of burnout than their male counterparts.

These are the most common statements found in the qualitative data (what respondents shared in their own words)

1. General mental health concerns
2. Increasing and unmanageable work demands
3. Isolation and lack of connection
4. Loss of work-life separation
5. A need for more empathy and understanding

Key Themes and Trends

Burnout was a rapidly growing problem long before the pandemic hit. The crisis simply exacerbated an existing issue.

By April, 2.6 billion people had gone into lockdown, and places of employment for 81% of the global workforce were fully or partially closed. A huge percentage of knowledge workers began doing their jobs from home — many collaborating on Zoom, whose daily active users skyrocketed from 10 million to 200 million. This sudden shift did what little else had been able to accomplish before: expose how thinly stretched and worn down we all were — and had been for a while. And it also made our burnout much, much worse..

Some of the key themes that jumped out from the data included an overwhelming number of people who felt mentally unwell. We learned that 85% of respondents mentioned that their well-being had declined during COVID–19. Increasing loneliness and disconnection amongst friends, family, and coworkers would also negatively impact mental health and increase the risk of burnout.

Not surprising, a large number of respondents describe unsustainable workloads. Women are burning out more than men, and our younger workforce is the most burned out demographic. We would read the responses from millennials finding it hard to start a brand new job at the beginning of their career during a global pandemic lockdown.

It would be enlightening and sometimes difficult to hear people describing in their own words how the pandemic impacted their well-being. When I read that 67% of respondents were struggling to face another day at work, it reminded me of the toll burnout plays on our physical and mental health.

In the following pages of this report you'll find the numbers associated with these key themes alongside correlated statements from around the globe.

What did we learn, in a nutshell? Burnout is universal.

Important Statistics

57%

of employees felt that the pandemic has had a "large effect on" or "completely dominated" their work

47%

are struggling with an unmanageable workload

39%

feel a strong sense of trust with the leaders in their organization while an almost equal amount do not (37%)

55%

haven't felt like they have been able to balance their home and work life

31%

feel they have been able to balance their home and work life while having to plan for their child(ren)'s education, 53% do not

39%

feel as though they have been able to maintain a strong sense of connection with their colleague, 39% do not

31%

rated their well-being as Poor or Very Poor. Only 21% rated it as Good or Excellent, only 2% rated their well-being as Excellent

People are not feeling like they are able to maintain a strong connection with family (25%), friends (50%), and colleagues (39%).

21%

rated their well-being as "Good" and only 2% rated it as "Excellent"

85%

of respondents made mention of how at least one area of their well-being has declined

89%

mentioned at least one way work life has worsened this year. A significant number - one researchers have never seen in their date

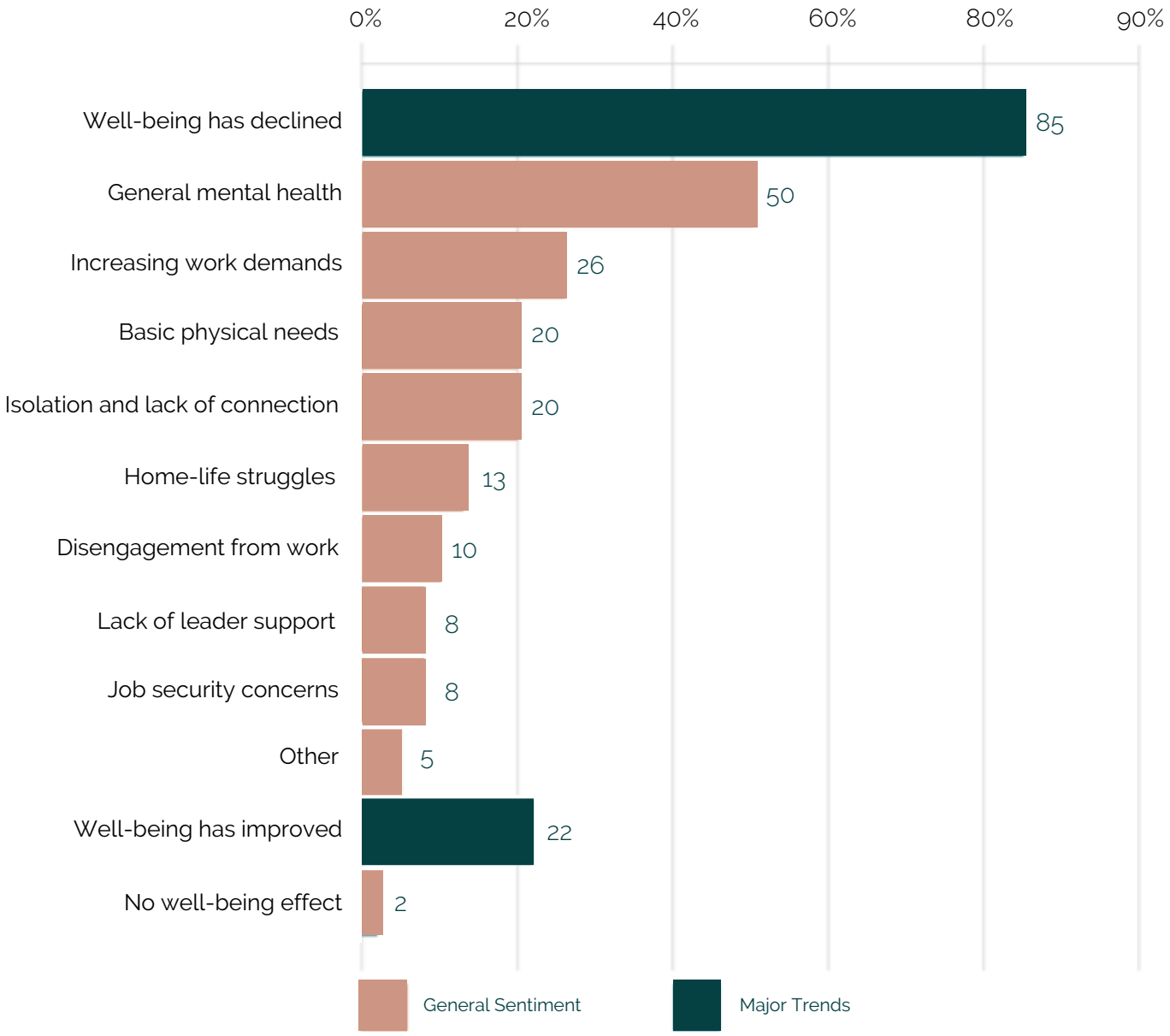
The good news.
In about 20% of cases, people talked about how their well-being and their work life has notably improved during COVID-19. There has been growth this year and it's worth mentioning

How do respondents believe that their well-being has changed?

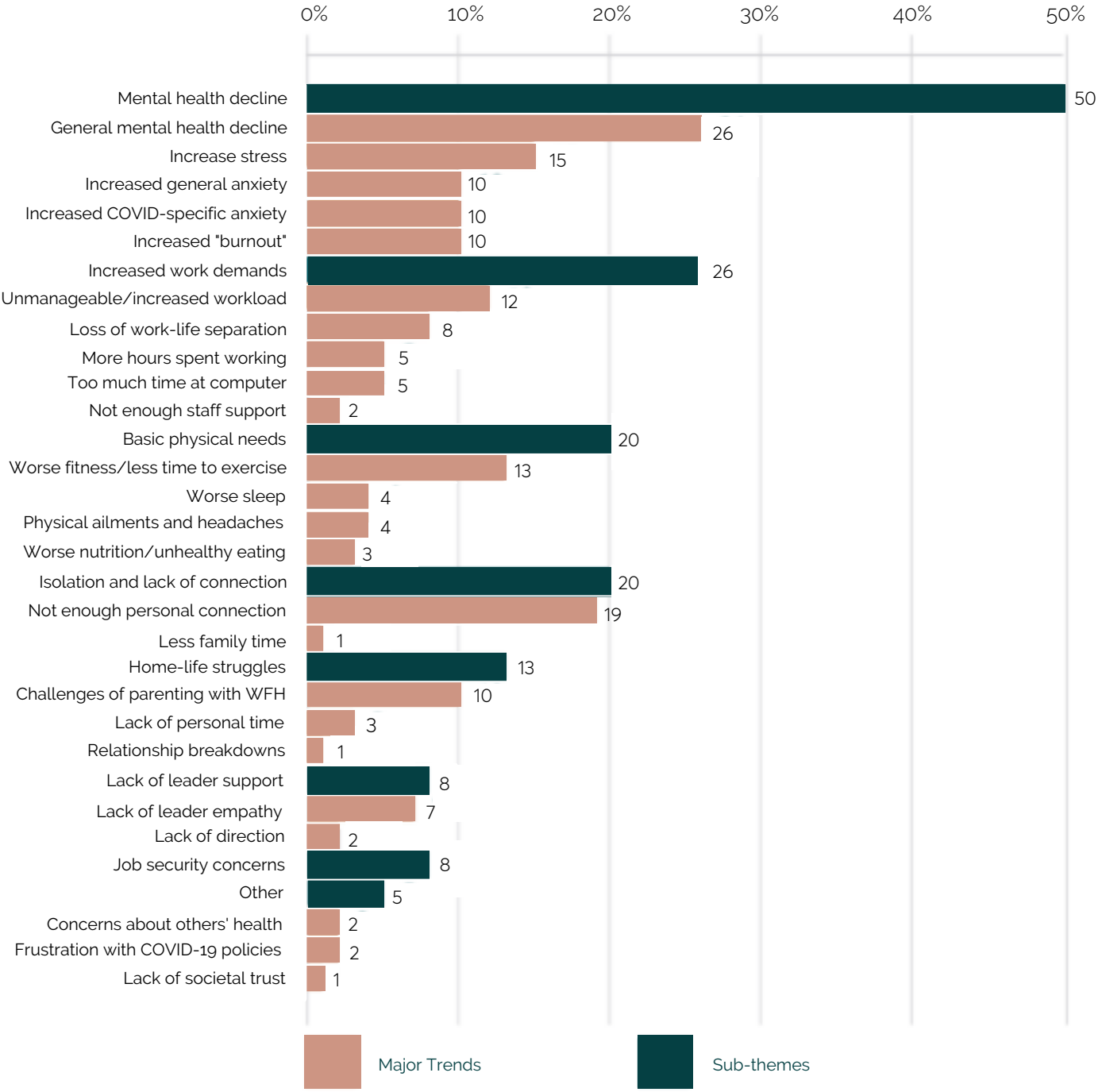
IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Thinking back to the start of COVID-19, how has your general well-being changed? And, what has been the biggest contributor to those changes?

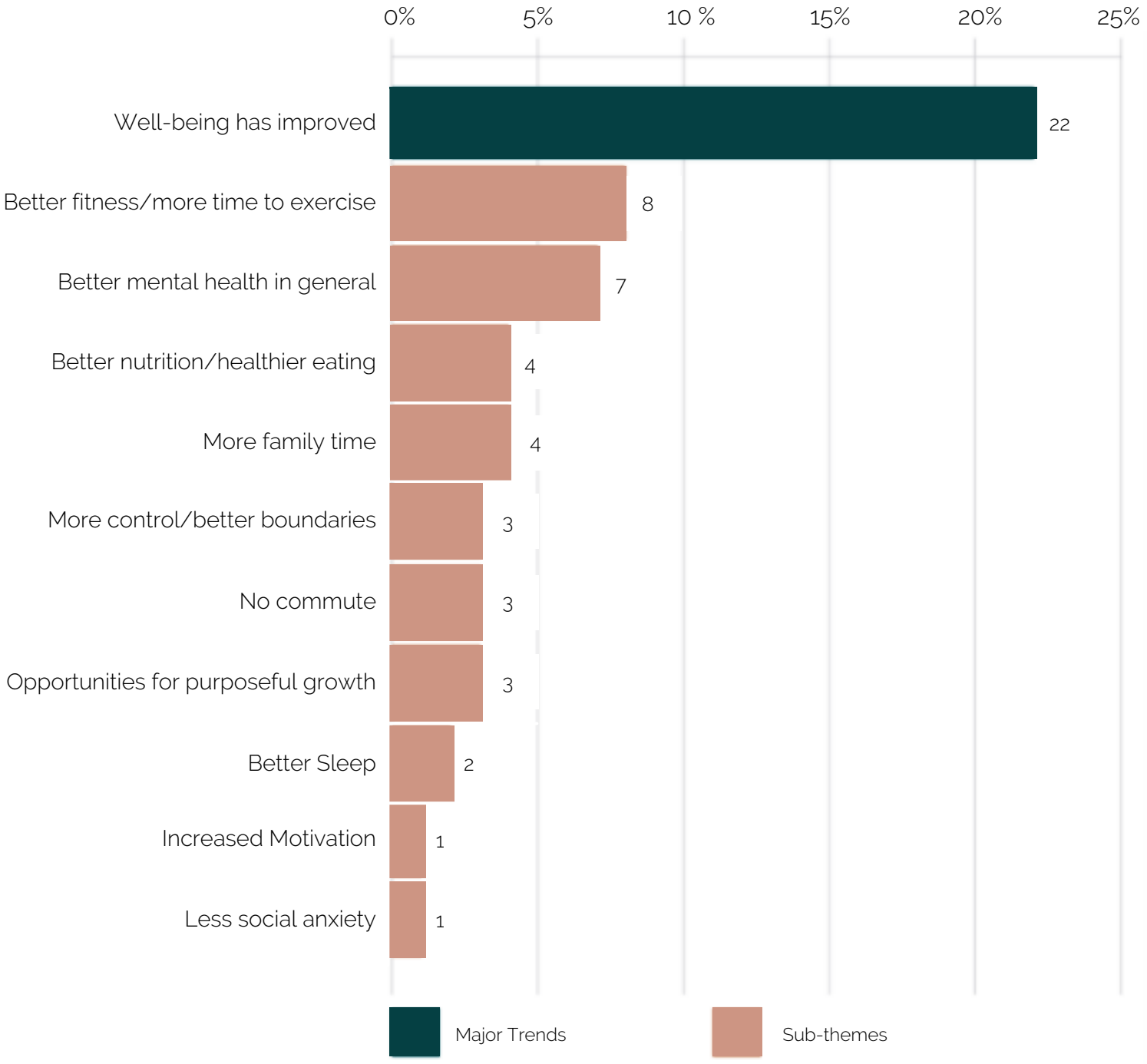
Percentage of Working Adults by Sentiment and Major Trends

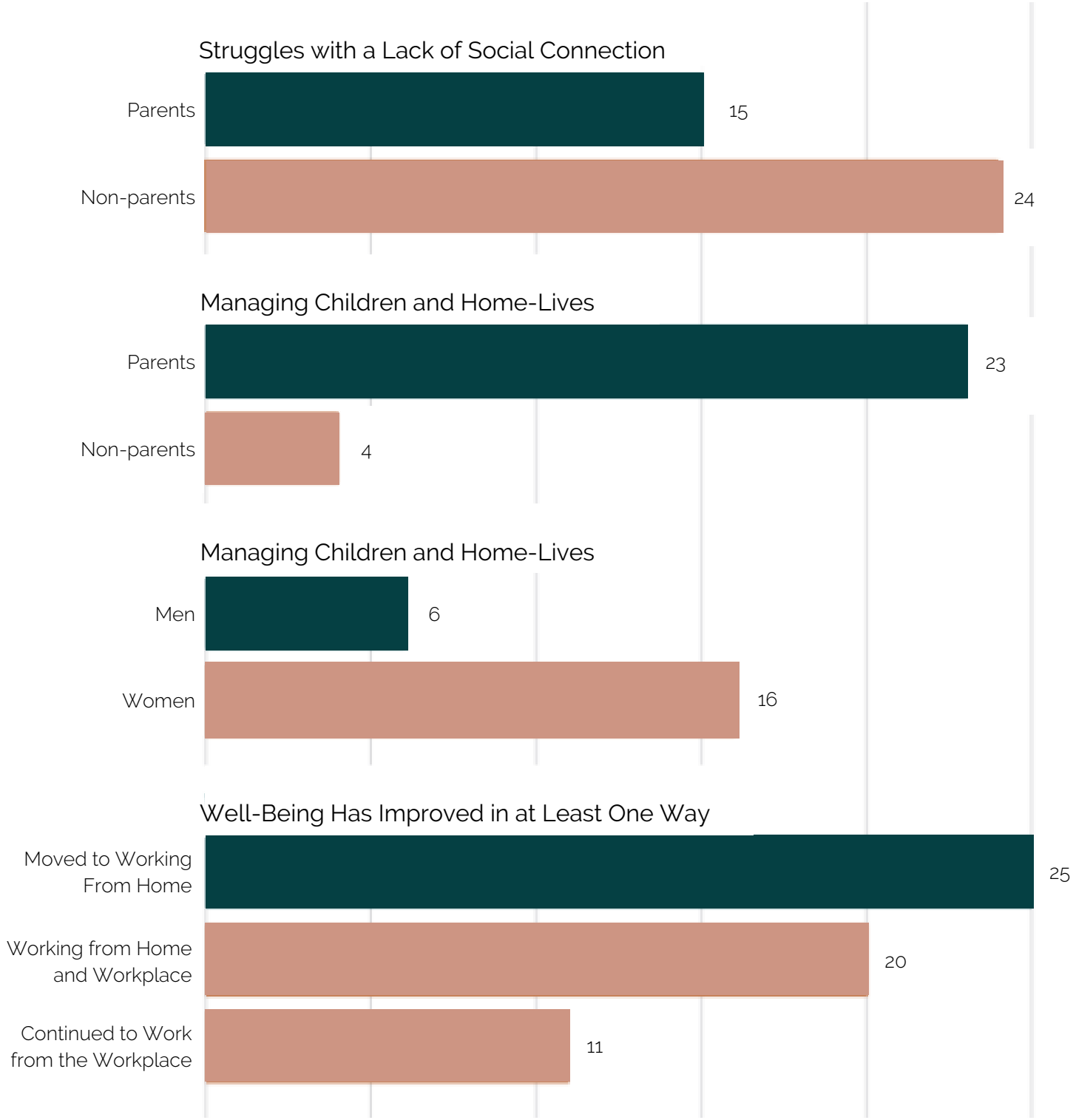


Percentage of Working Adults Indicating Different Types of Well-being Decline



Percentage of Working Adults Indicating Different Types of Well-being Improvement




Struggles with a Lack of Social Connection
Parents
15
Non-parents
24
Managing Children and Home-Lives
Parents
23
Non-parents
4
Managing Children and Home-Lives
Men
6
Women
16
Well-Being Has Improved in at Least One Way
Moved to Working From Home
25
Working from Home and Workplace
20
Continued to Work from the Workplace
11

Particularly Powerful Well-being Comments

"I feel like I've gone from feeling mostly okay about trying to balance work with parenthood and the rest of life to feeling like I'm just failing at everything. Being asked to work full time, parent full time, and teach full time just isn't sustainable."

"I am emotionally tired frequently, heart-broken at times. Experiencing worry frequently. Moving around less, gaining weight. Sleeping less. Biggest contributors, loss of freedoms and a way of living, not being able to connect/gather with others in person very much, loss of variety, travel, experiences."

"Fatigue all day, every day, and underlying anger. Realizing that my boss and those above her are still focused only on something as shallow as their metrics, and that in the future healthcare will choose to take the health of their employees before they give up the wealth of their elites."

"The lack of separation between my home and work spaces makes stepping away very difficult; I am rarely fully out of work, mentally speaking. Being stuck at home also creates boredom gaps (and general worries about the future) which are easy to allay with work (in pursuit of meaning and connection when COVID has made both harder to come by). The same is true of my colleagues, who began the lockdown being "performatively online", i.e. they wanted to show that they were busy, and have stayed there because (in my perception) they lack viable alternatives in terms of mental engagement. This creates a spiral of performance and expectation which is extremely detrimental to our well-being as a group."

"I sit all day. My ankles were swelling at one point, and I had to sleep with my feet elevated. I don't sleep well. I have no time to do anything I enjoy. I skip lunch because of back to back mtgs, although I'm one room away from my kitchen. I go from one WebEx or Teams meeting to the next. I have no support as a single parent and no childcare. The 3 other leaders on my team do not have young children and also have a spouse/partner and family support. I have to look "fine" on the video mtgs I'm in every day. The biggest contributor is a constant need for leadership to show others that our team can do everything we did before and constantly trying to prove our value."

"My physical health has worsened bc I am having a harder time taking care of myself and balancing work and kids. Bc the kids can't have school and childcare they are so in need of attention when we're done with work it's hard to get even 30 mins to exercise the way I need to. I'm in constant pain, have way more frequent headaches, am always tired, and very sad emotional outbursts sometimes. I have fewer opportunities to get support and respite for myself. Life is slower in some ways which is great. No more commute or hustle to get kids to and from school...but busier in do many other ways bc I have to be even more to my kids and co-workers than before...teacher, friend, and for work... emergency response provider, policy guru, technical assistance provider, grant writer, team support, asset manager, coalition member/leader, etc. The biggest contributor is trying to be parent/teacher/friend and worker all at the same time....I can't just focus on one at a time, and when I try, there are constant interruptions. Work hasn't made any real accommodations except for flex time which helps but it doesn't prevent burnout."

"I have been a lot less social. I see people over Zoom/Google Duo, but since I have to do so much of that at work, in my personal life, it just seems like it is another chore. I have disconnected from loved ones since I am trying to social distance, and see my kids losing their connections to friends/social groups as well. It's been a challenge. One of my kids is going to school for 2 hours a day, but she can't sit near her friends, they can't do anything but schoolwork (no fun activities), so she is starting to not like school either. It used to be one of her favorite places to be and now it seems more like too much hard work for the benefit. I also hate complaining when I see what so many others are dealing with(fires/hurricanes/loss of loved ones due to COVID-19), as it is much more devastating than my burnout at work and lack of ability to socialize. That realization puts me in another guilt spiral."

"I have a general sense of tension, constantly. Blood pressure spikes when I hear the email or Slack chimes. Lack of enthusiasm about holidays or events that I would normally love. Biggest contributors ? Trying to work and supervise my child's education and well being, in the same moments. Though she's at school now, for how long? Being in an education related field that saw absolutely overwhelming and sudden spikes in demand and therefore workload. Uncertainty about the future. I can't pick just one."

"My mental health has significantly deteriorated. Coping with the pervasive anxiety and worry during this pandemic takes up a lot of bandwidth, and needing to work through that means I am expending energy managing the noise in my head and expending more energy than normal for my regular output. It is exhausting. Which then leads me to be too tired to do the self-care activities that would allow me to replenish my energy levels: i am too tired to work out, I am too tired to facetime with friends or family, I am too tired to cook healthy meals... which then further contributes to the low baseline energy levels. "

"I've become more exhausted as Covid-19 has drawn on. Trying to find a job has been more frustrating, as companies just aren't hiring right now. It's a full time job - full time rejection. Add the role of homeschool teacher, increased housework since we're home all the time, and the lack of supports, and things get overwhelming. Social interaction helps in trying times, but with high risk health issues, that's not an option. Perhaps most exhausting is things don't have to be this way. Too many people are selfish, having parties, hosting friends every weekend, not wearing masks or social distancing. If people would follow the guidelines set by medical and scientific experts, this wouldn't be dragging. There's no end in sight right now because of this selfishness, which makes it even more exhausting to do the right thing."

"It has had a tremendous impact on my well-being - I've had mental health challenges (I manage anxiety) and I've hit major roadblocks with that. My physical health has changed because I can't exercise like I used to before. It's affected me economically and has frustrated me as a millennial and I feel as though my career has been set back yet again."

How do respondents believe that their work life has changed?

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Thinking back to the start of COVID-19, how has your work life changed? And what has been the biggest contributor to those changes?

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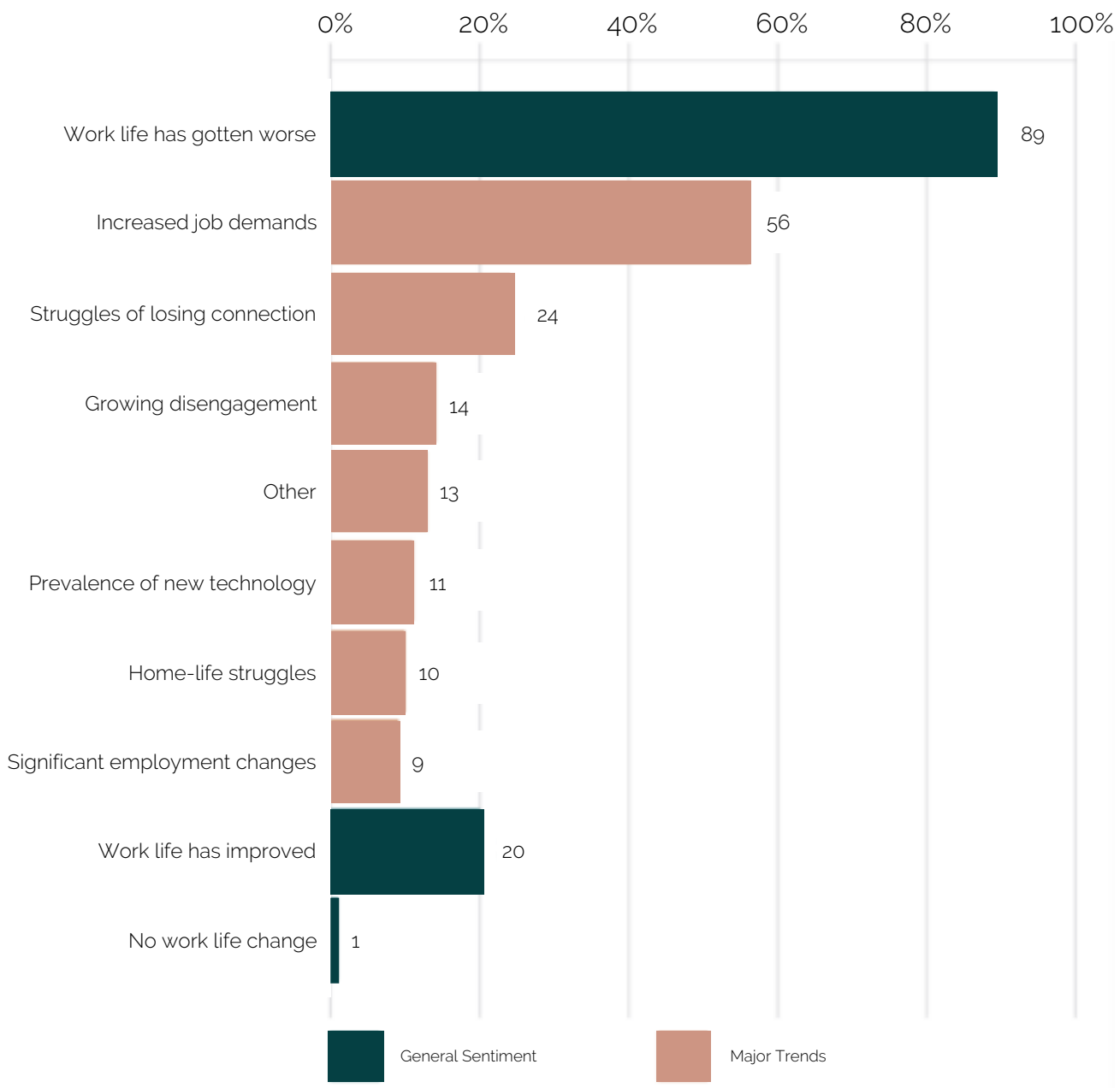

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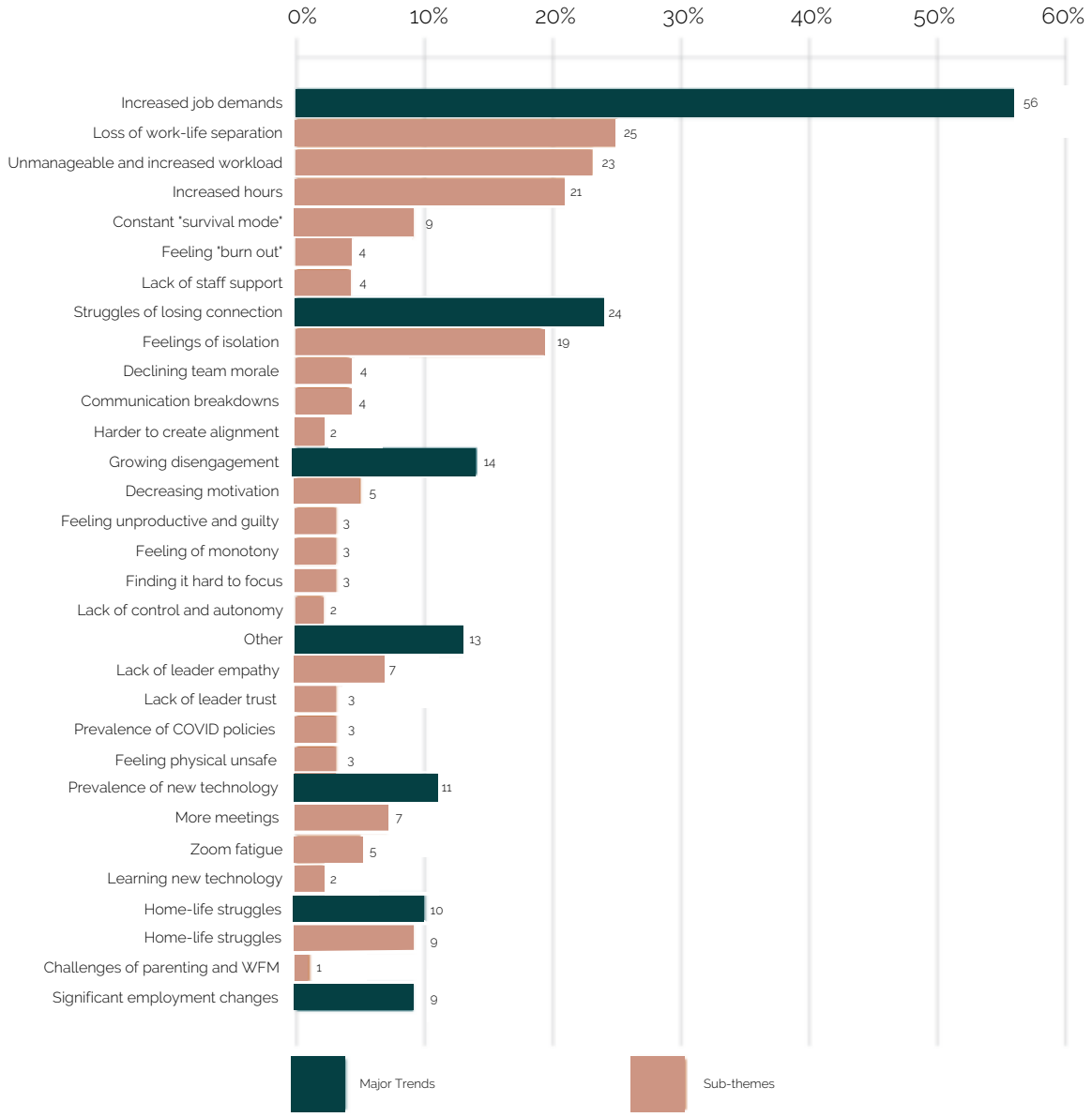

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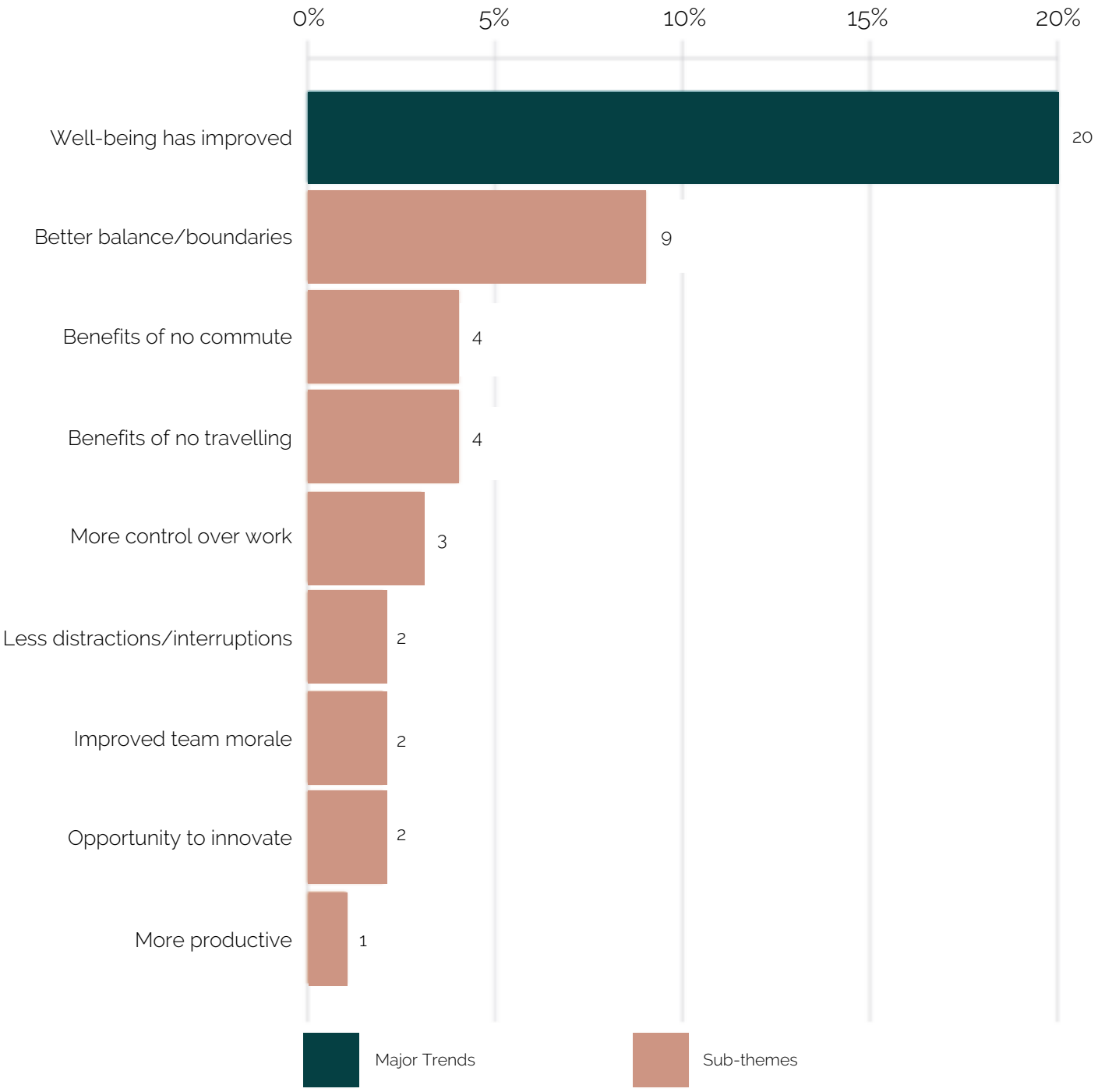
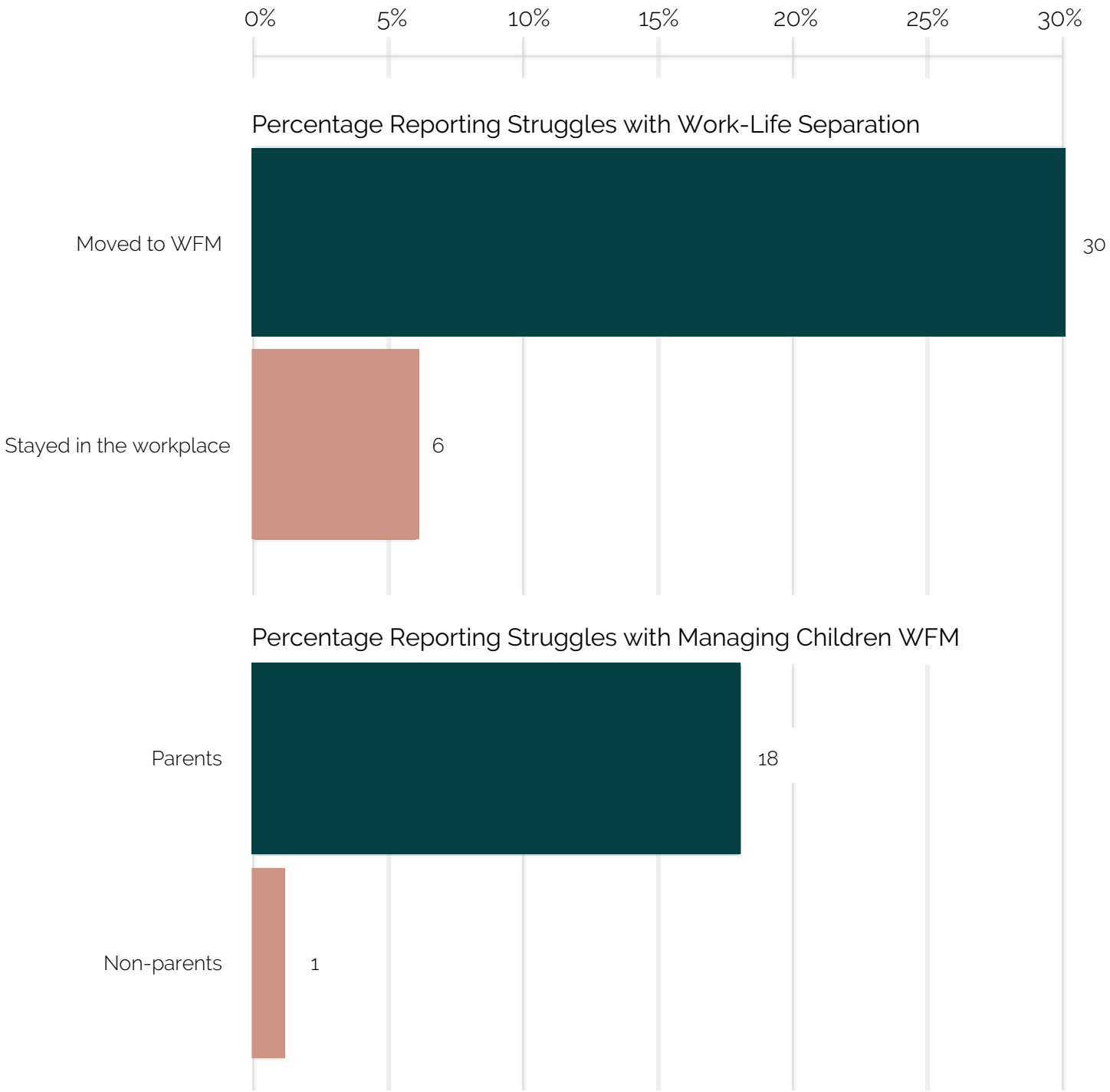


Some Interesting Differences



Particularly Powerful Work-life Comments

"Fight and Flight was activated daily, multiple times and especially when working in an environment where social distancing and hygiene etiquette is not well understood or practiced (intellectual disability support). The management team where not enforcing reasonable, necessary and practical measures to ensure safety due to the risk of being perceived negatively by client families i.e. management stated that they didn't want to upset families when they see staff wearing masks as they support their adult intellectually disabled children. There was an expectation to deliver quality programs/supports to these individuals without full consideration to implementing appropriate full PPE and social distancing. Anxiety levels were incredibly high due to constant heightened alertness. I experienced a clients saliva particles land on my face, seeing clients cough and spray saliva into the face of staff (unintentional), a particular client who has no hygiene etiquette awareness & seeking sensory stimulation from putting their hand in their mouth and nose, continuously grabbing staff. I made persistent, yet very professional, requests to management to encourage staff to wear masks and to inform staff of available shields that they agreed to purchase, however not informed the staff of having them available to them. Seeing and hearing staff express their fears about their safety and that of other clients as well as fearing expressing that to management in case of being bullied. I also experience being bullied by the manager however I was unable to provide evidence as I was working alone. Her behavior was unpredictable and aggressive and I felt threatened from her simply seeing her walking through the facility. I eventually had a break down. I've been off work for a couple of months now. Writing this has been difficult. "

"Everything seems like a rush. There's more pressure to produce and no one respects time boundaries. Emails start at 5:30 am and don't end until 10 pm because they know you have nowhere else to go. For single people with no families, they bother you more because you don't get to say "I need to take care of my kids" so it's worse."

"Getting sick changed my relationship with mortality. The fact that nursing was at the front of the epidemic taking care of all the patients needs. We were pastoral care, Social workers, connected families during their last breath and words. We have young nurses that are experiencing PTSD as a result of COVID we were at war with an invisible thing that threatened to kill us all."

"I am more available to my kids being around but at the same time I feel like I am not. It's hard to explain- like I am not 100% there with them. But it's nice to be able to have dinner on table earlier and handle chores when it's usually left for the weekend. I feel like I spend the weekend relaxing more to recharge than I ever did before."

"I'm now locked in a guest room during the day because the entire downstairs, including my workspace, is used for my son's daily therapy/schooling. It feels like my day is without structure - just trying to make do and squeeze in productivity where I can. It's hard to manage work and life when everything feels like it's in flux. We have a household schedule but it doesn't feel solid. My life feels like a compilation of workarounds and temporary fixes."

"I am now working from home primarily and trying to get two disenchanted kids through distance learning. My husband has worked out of the home the entire time of Covid, so the responsibilities are all mine. If I do go into work, I need to wear a mask and gloves and not perform my job to my previous abilities due to Covid restrictions. I am only half as effective in my case management as I was previously, because I cannot observe living situations/relationships as I could prior to Covid. I am half as effective at home, because I am even more exhausted than I was when working out of the home and only having to manage my own time. But, as a mother, we are trained to multi-task, I just wish I was more effective at it. "

"In my one bedroom apartment, I am not working from home. I am living at work."

"I had to re-prioritize many things I was working on to focus more on the crisis (I work in a global communication team for a large retailer). I had to postpone many initiatives as resources had to be moved elsewhere to support more immediate needs. My timelines for most projects are way off track. I also had to scale back my hours for a couple of months while I tried to balance my job and homeschooling 2 kids. I'm back to normal hours again, but feel more exhausted each day than I normally would. I was hoping the energy would magically re-appear, but I'm realizing that virtual meetings are more draining than live meetings...sometimes after several hours of meetings, I feel physically ill and drained and need to rest. That would never happen in the office, those meetings would often give me more energy than take it away."

"I'm working more hours, a lot of the time straight through lunch. there seem to be a lot more meetings, than before we started working remote. those 5 minute conversations we would have by stopping by someone's desk, or seeing them in the kitchen, can't happen anymore, so they have been replaced with 25/30 minute meetings or 50/60 minute meetings. i've been trying to find ways around scheduling meetings to chat with people about whatever is on our minds, but at times a face to face via video chat is the best way."

"I work much longer days and am far more sedentary. While my overall well- being feels basically fine, I have days where I feel more aimless, or "untethered." Like I am unsure if whether I am working towards the greater good alongside my colleagues any more. Are we all tracking in the same direction? Are we just doing our best to keep our heads above water, and maybe that's enough? But then there's always this lingering sense of, "what did you accomplish today, this week, this month?" from leadership that puts pressure on to keep up the same productivity even if that productivity is in the wrong direction. I work for a public electric utility where the culture has always been (excuse the language) "butts in chairs" and over night we went to at least half of the organization teleworking-- with, in my estimation, a severe lack of trust and accountability. We were already dealing with a culture of overmanaged and under-led, and this situation has exacerbated it. Piled onto COVID-19 we have social unrest in the state and rampant wildfires in our service territory. The foundation of the organization feels shaky on the best of days and meanwhile whenever leadership addresses the organization, most provide a totally different impression of how things are tracking. I don't know if they are projecting false positivity, or truly believe things are going well-- and I can't decide which of those is worse."

"It seems like everyone in my company and team is working more intensely and for longer each day. It's a period of very concentrated effort, which does not feel sustainable. Working remotely is adding more stress, by necessitating more calls to align/check in/work together. In addition to that, the workload seems to be increasing, and as we are absorbing/delivering more, it seems we are also getting asked to do increasingly more."

"There is no semblance of balance or separation in the structure. Now my work is literally in my living room and my parenting is happening in my "office" (which is on the kitchen table). Roles collided and it makes for an almost comical impossibility (taking important meetings from the floor of my closet, while my daughter passes me notes under the door telling me she needs a snack)."

"My general well-being has gone downhill due to the constant need to be working or making up for lost time with my husband. I am not as positive as I once was, I am constantly anxious and quite nervous that if I don't step up and handle everything given to me at work, that I will be laid off like the rest of my team has. I am not sleeping at night because of the constant stress and it's now resulting in me kind of being a constant mess. The biggest contributors to this has been the way my company has been managing the business. They froze all vacation from March 1 until July 1, they docked my pay by 35% - they furloughed almost 50% of the company and they laid off over 35% of those people who they furloughed. I worked the whole pandemic and it was between 60-68 hours a week including weekends. With how many cuts they have made and said it's because 'people didn't step up to the plate' the fear and anxiety that I could be next if I don't step-up is just overwhelming. There is no work/life balance anymore - it's just work and my boss doesn't care two bits of how it's effecting me and my life."

"It's become wholly virtual. I work for a Company that has topped Glassdoor's Best Place to Work list multiple times, a Company that is known for its culture - a culture I love. But it is not the same. All the fun stuff and connection is so hard to replicate virtually, that work-life now feels like it is all about work, and not much else. I have struggled to balance my personal needs to keep mentally well and healthy, with my work life."

"There's no respite from work. I work 9-9 almost every day. My husband is working in the office, and I'm working from the kitchen counter with the baby in the living room. I don't get time to focus on anything. If I'm spending five minutes with my son, my instant messages are blowing up (and I hear the noise). If I'm working with my back to my son, I'm constantly turning around to check on him."

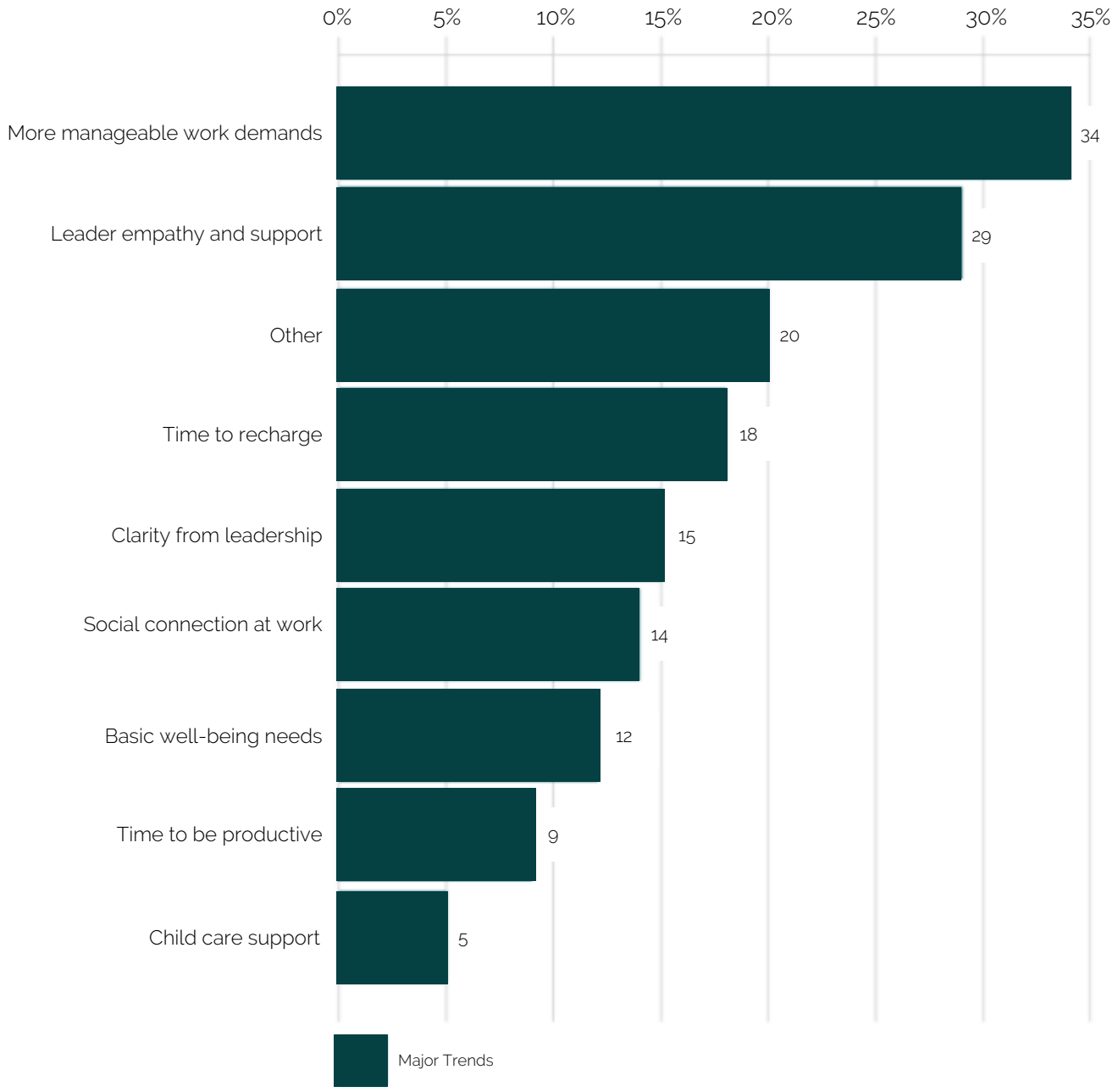
"I am now managing work, while being a parent, school teacher and cafeteria worker and looking for an outlet (besides school - virtually) for myself and my family outside of our four walls has been a big impact. Having a clear delineation of where these things took place help to combat some of the stress but now everything happens within one place and the only differentiation are the spaces within the four walls."

What do respondents need more of to feel they can be at their best at work?

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In your own words, what do you need more of in the next three months to feel like you are able to be your best at work?

Percentage of Working Adults by Major Trend



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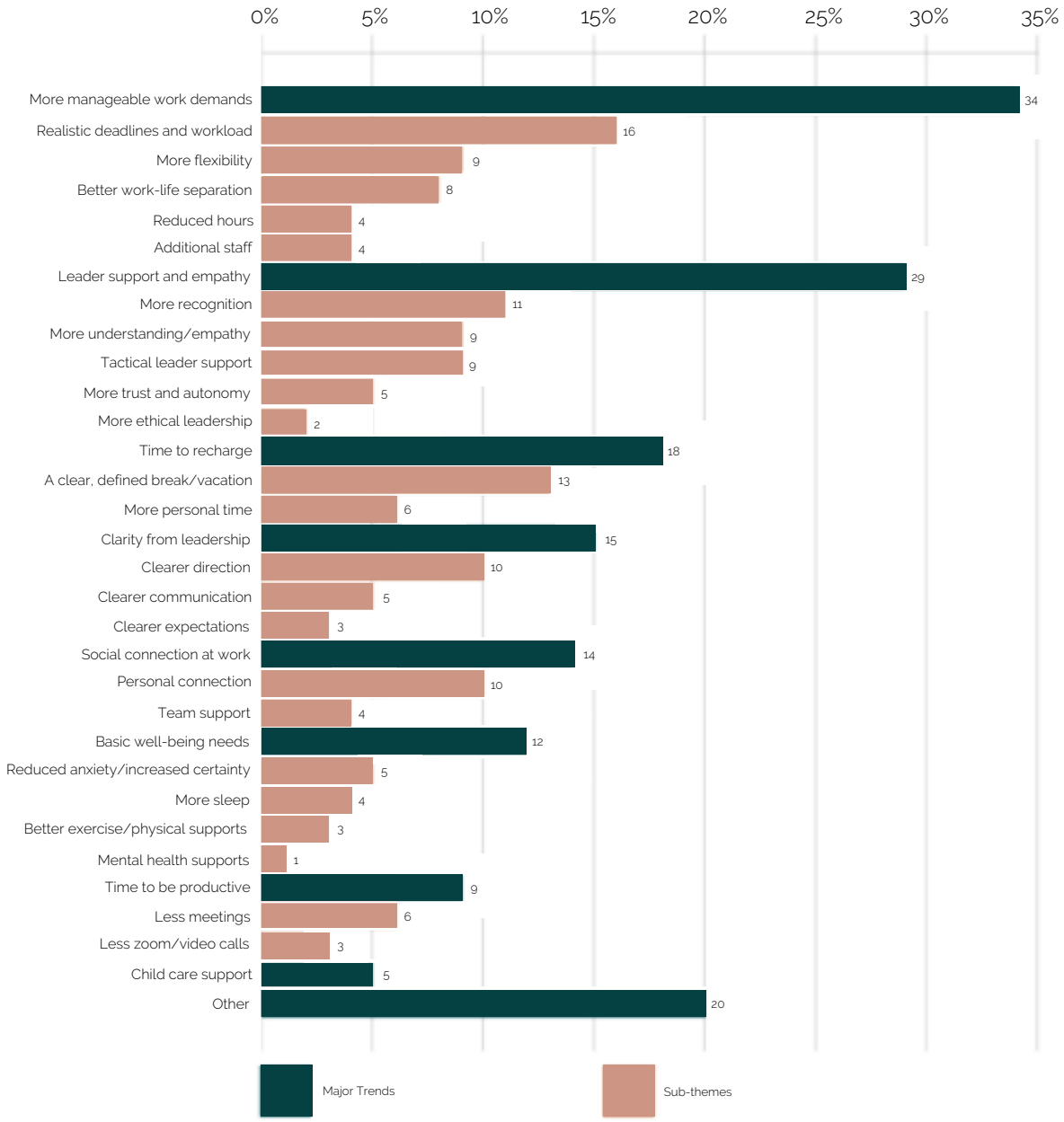
Percentage of Working Adults Indicating Each Type of Need and Sub-need



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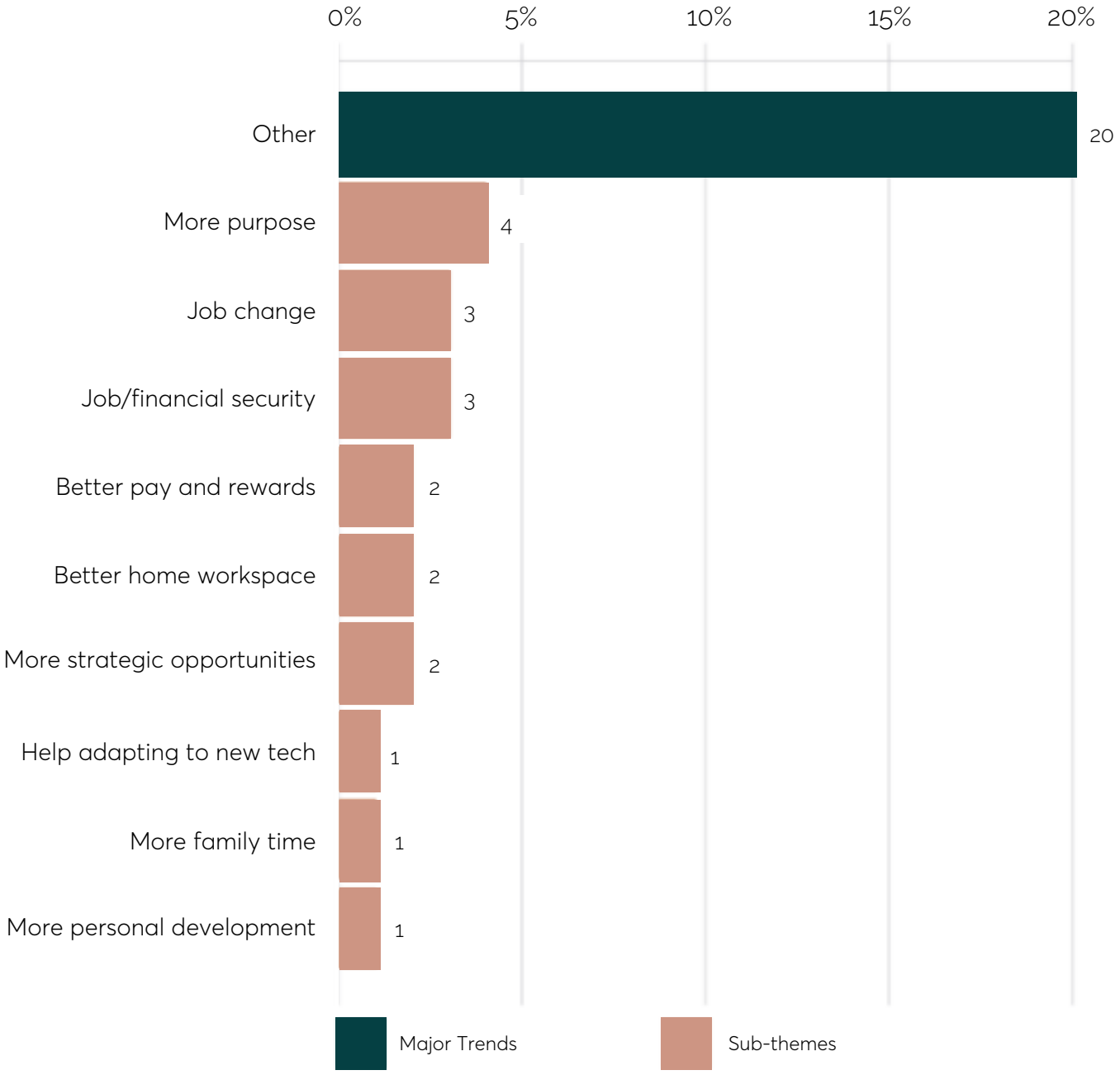
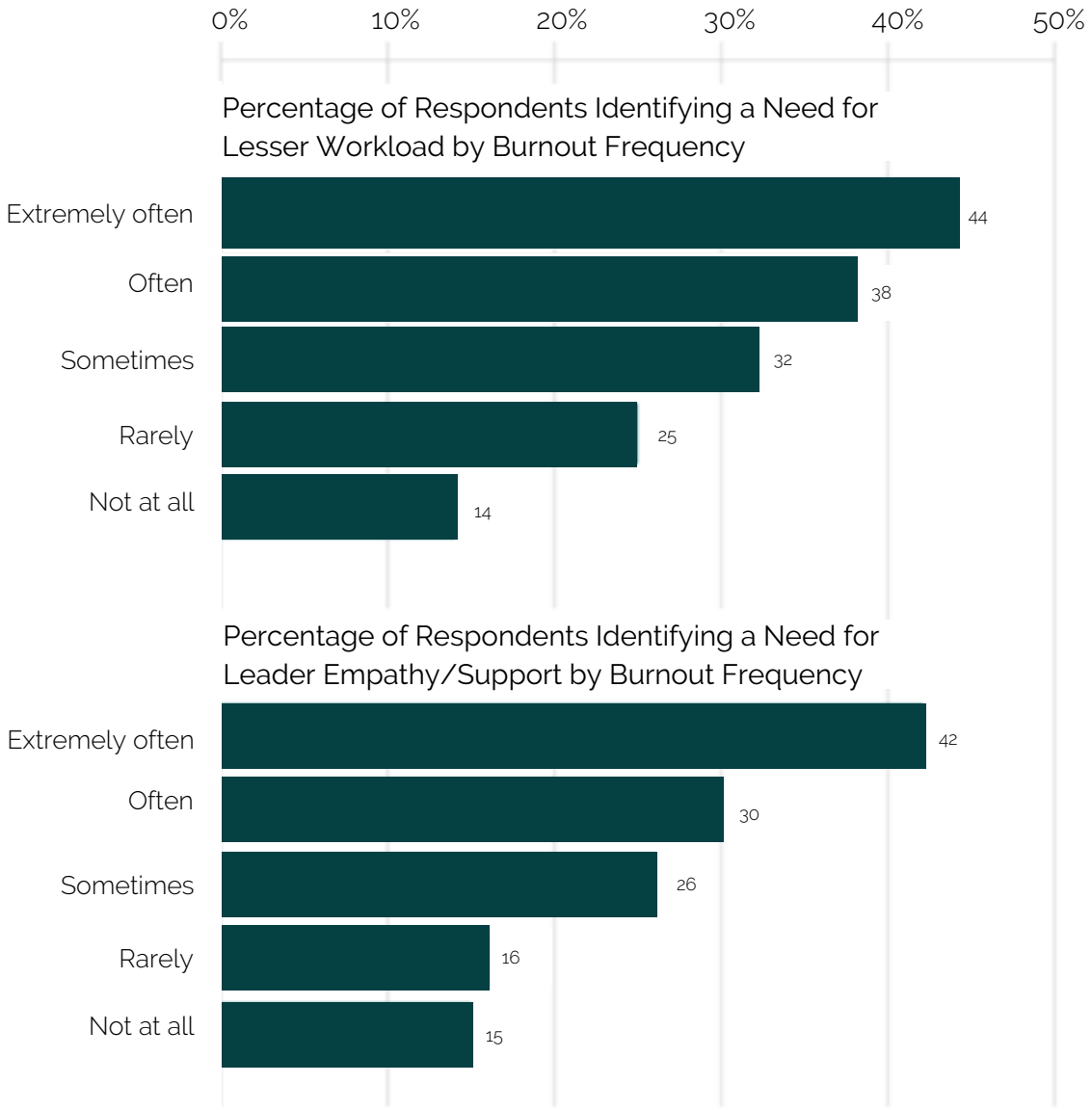
Percentage of Working Adults Identifying "Other" Needs



Burnout Question

Burnout is defined as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. According to this definition, do you believe that you have experienced burnout in the past three months?

Key Needs by Burnout Frequency



Particularly Powerful Needs Comments

"Connection with my colleagues. I started this job 6 days before the pandemic meant that we had to work from home. I found it challenging to connect with new colleagues over Zoom calls. Even when I do go to the office, we are not allowed to meet in person. Since starting this job 7 months ago, I think I have spent a total of about 10 hours face-to-face with my colleagues, and maybe 40- 60 hours in zoom meetings with them. It's hardly enough to build trust, respect, etc. in a way that would feel meaningful to me."

"Executive leaders who care about my and others' health by allowing people to be home if they want to be to feel safe. People were forced back into the office and nobody felt safe. They rotate schedules and there are cases happening in the building. Our executives were quoted in an article saying we had 2 employee deaths and that it wasn't a bad "batting average." I've heard rumors of our CEO comparing it to the flu. I have an "exception" to stay working at home because of chronic lung conditions and I had to fill out and sign a form about it. I'm not trusted."

"Fewer priorities. My company is doing a good job of articulating our top priorities while also emphasizing the importance of employee wellness. But as a people leader, there are times when just staying connected with my team, understanding their situations and responding accordingly takes all of my energy, leaving less time and energy to think strategically and advance my unit."

"Flexible schedules and deadlines. Not holding on to pre-pandemic ideas about our collective ability to get things done. Projects that require multiple people's involvement have to have longer timeframes and more flexible roles. This is due to everyone having increased burdens, increased responsibilities and needs during this pandemic. We have to give each other additional, flexible time to accomplish tasks and projects. Expecting everything to happen 9-5, M-F, and during old frameworks is unrealistic now. We have to blow up the old paradigms. Our goal-setting and project management frameworks need to account for the increased physical and emotional burdens of the pandemic. Instead of saying get this task accomplished by tomorrow, we need to start saying we'll get this task accomplished as soon as possible."

What do people need?

The data clearly emphasizes that if leaders want to prevent burnout, they need to immediately make changes to key predictors of burnout. Managing workload, improving relationships, reducing loneliness, making workplaces physically and psychologically safe, and perhaps the most compelling piece of data gleaned from the report was the impact of empathy, or lack thereof, on mental health. Companies who lacked empathetic leadership are feeling the consequences as the Great Resignation unfolds.

According to one survey by the Canadian Centre for the Purpose of the Corporation, 42 percent of Canadian employees say they're considering changing their job or entire career in the next year. In the U.S. a record four million people quit their jobs in April 2021 alone according to the Labor Department. A Microsoft survey of 30,000 global employees found that 41 percent are planning to quit or change jobs in the next six months. But data shows that more pay isn't the answer; only four percent said that compensation was their reason for quitting.

In an already competitive market for talent and skills, this could have enormous implications for the economy. Plus, when it comes to the shortages in healthcare, the impact on communities could be catastrophic.

When we talk about empathy in leadership, people can become uncomfortable. Not because they don't have any; they've just been taught that leadership is displayed in behaviors that exhibit authority, emotional discipline, stoicism. And this doesn't jive with how an empathic leader might behave.

Some people are quick to say empathy is too sentimental, too emotional for the workplace. But in reality, it is challenging to develop, particularly if there isn't a strong genetic predisposition. And empathy can be tough to sustain.

And yet, a lack of empathy and compassion at work continues to show up in the data as a predictor for burnout. To remedy this, leaders must start actively listening to their people and validating that juggling work and life during a global pandemic is extremely challenging. Leaders need to advocate for their people and remind peers in decision-making positions that right now is not the time for business as usual — despite the pressure to keep pushing forward.
Here are a few tactical suggestions for applying the learnings from the data to increase empathetic leadership:

Decrease Workload

Do a workload audit:

- What are team members working on?
- How often are urgent needs taking over priority needs?
- Are there ways to reduce the urgent needs through better expectation management or dispersing of workloads?
- Are there opportunities for more training to increase efficiency and speed?

Better Communication

- Increase check-ins and non-work-related conversations about life — ensure there is balance.
- Create psychologically safe workplaces where people can speak up.
- Stop prioritizing one-way communication — find other channels like AMA-style Q&A with leadership to make them more accessible to the greater organization.

Advance Corporate Citizenship

- Enhance or initiate grief policies — go beyond the standard time off and make it less restrictive.
- Improve family planning policies by ensuring that both maternity leave and paternity policies are equitable.
- Make workplaces safe for conversations about mental health — leaders also need to show vulnerability to reduce the stigma.

Reduce Loneliness

- Create space for people to be authentic — celebrate all types of thinking.
- Use social collaboration platforms in an open way where managers aren't monitoring or proctoring.
- Reduce overly competitive work environments by switching out individual goals for shared goals.
- Make sure all team members — both in the physical office and the virtual one — are getting equal attention .
- Check in on people who live alone and find ways to connect with them in meaningful ways .

Any great leader knows that empathy drives great leadership. If that tenet is at the root of decision making, preventing burnout becomes more likely. And the pro-social payoffs are plenty. Empathetic leaders build trusted relationships with and among their teams; have an integrity-based workforce connected to shared goals; make people feel psychologically safe during times of uncertainty; create a healing space for grief and mourning; spark inclusive discussions by making people part of the organizational story; and are more likely to listen actively as a means to prevent future harm.

The most powerful data merely adds evidence to what we've known in our guts all along. This could not be truer in the data shared here. The pandemic shocked us into realizing that work is important but not more important than life. Work can be a positive source of fuel and joy. It can also be catastrophic to our mental health. To make meaning out of what the world experienced, during the pandemic, we can't ignore the learning.

To ensure that we don't waste this crisis, we as leaders need to do better. And, the data is telling us — we may no longer have a choice — the power dynamic has shifted and the workforce is demanding more. More empathy, more kindness, more support, more flexibility, more agency.

Transformation is hard. But, now more than ever, it's time to lean in to the discomfort.

JM

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