JUNE 2023

New Realities: Employee Wellness and Organizational Culture in Design Firms

Key Findings from an Industry Survey of Design Professionals

LENS

CAMERON MACALLISTER | GROUP

About

New Realities Series

The 2020 coronavirus pandemic and ongoing social, political, environmental and economic transformations have created unprecedented conditions for architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) companies worldwide. The industry is accustomed to economic cycles, but we have never experienced today's combination of public health threats, disruption of our traditional ways of working, and sudden, severe economic challenges.

With encouragement from our clients, Cameron MacAllister Group launched a series of brief surveys addressing these "New Realities" in the design and construction industry. This report is the eighth in our series, focusing on the relationships between employee wellness and organizational culture from the perspective of design professionals. This report is based on a survey of 2,750 diverse professionals representing 57 firms from across the United States and Canada. The survey was conducted online between August 31 and October 14, 2022. The survey was conducted as a partnership between Cameron MacAllister Group and Lens. As always in Cameron MacAllister Group research, the names of contributors and individual firms remain strictly confidential.

Cameron MacAllister Group

Cameron MacAllister Group is a trusted advisor to architecture and engineering firms, construction companies, major owners, and professional organizations. Clients include 11 winners of the AIA Firm Award and many other industry honors. We are leaders in the industry, having held senior leadership roles in architecture or engineering firms. Our work includes sustainability consulting; diversity, equity, and inclusion consulting; strategic planning; organizational and leadership development; market intelligence, research, and client feedback surveys; media relations; marketing strategy and client development; practice management assistance; leadership and ownership transitions; professional coaching and training, and counsel in mergers and acquisitions.

Lens

Lens is a design strategy, research, and innovation practice group within Shepley Bulfinch. We work together to design beyond the typical boundaries of architectural projects – exploring and developing transformative ideas to help organizations, communities, and our planet thrive. Lens collaborates with clients and project teams to address big, purpose-aligned themes in our communities such as wellbeing, sustainability and resilience, and justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Our multi-disciplinary team offers facilitation, visioning & engagement, research, organizational development, regenerative design & development, and specialized planning services.

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Introduction

Over the last several years, organizations and professionals in the design industry have searched for their "new normal" amidst the disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic, the great reshuffle, and volatile social, political, economic, and environmental conditions. For many, a sense of normality or even stability has proven elusive. Many of our clients tell us that they continue to worry about employee productivity, morale, mental health and wellbeing, and the health of their firms' cultures. This issue has received substantial attention within the industry, with an op-ed written on the subject by the past-president of the AIA and industry events dedicated to the topic of employee wellness.[1] We have heard from firms that have experimented with myriad ways to address the situation, adopting hybrid work policies, introducing wellness benefits, and devoting time and resources to firm culture initiatives, but many employers continue to report that morale remains low while stress levels and the prevalence of mental health issues in the workplace soar.

While anecdotal evidence on this issue abounds, there is little industrywide data available about how design professionals are experiencing the workplace today, or about how organizational dynamics might be tied to social and emotional wellbeing at work. Without this evidence, firm leaders were left to guess at what might be happening industry-wide, and about how to best help their current and prospective employees thrive within their particular organizations. To address this gap, Cameron MacAllister Group and Lens undertook a national study on the topics of organizational culture and employee wellness in the fall of 2022.

This study asked the employees of participating firms to answer a short survey about their experiences in their current organization, and aimed to address several key areas of inquiry:

- What are our employees really experiencing in the new hybrid work environment?
- What are the elements of the architectural workplace that are building healthy culture? What isn't working?
- What are systemic issues that support or hinder wellness in the workplace?
- Are there demographic differences in how employees are responding to their current workplace culture?
- What are firms doing to address these questions?

The study was open from August 31, 2022-October 14, 2022. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to 159 firms. 57 firms participated in the study, with 2,750 individuals submitting survey responses. These individuals represent 41 states, three Canadian provinces, and several additional international locations. Respondents spent an average of twelve minutes responding to the 30-question survey, providing a mix of qualitative and quantitative feedback in the form of responses to multiple choice questions, comments, and open-ended questions. Further information about the demographics of participants can be found in Appendix A.

Analysis of data collected through the survey yields several key insights about employee health and wellness in the design industry today:

1. Firms across the industry are navigating significant cultural tensions as they establish their new normal – and employees feel it.

Mirroring patterns seen in a study conducted by our team in Summer 2021, the survey revealed ongoing tensions around hybrid work, with many professionals reporting positive experiences of remote and hybrid work, while feelings of isolation, struggles with cultural cohesion, and concern about the mentorship of emerging professionals persist.[2] Meanwhile, new tensions have emerged: responses reveal a pull between the need for autonomy and the need for structure and certainty in our industry today, with many reporting both a concern about a lack of structure and clarity within their organizations and in the broader world, while also reporting that they are micromanaged at work. These issues have been shown to contribute to poor social-emotional health within the workplace.[3] Finally, the study reveals emerging tensions between building a supportive culture and navigating market demands. Just 78% of respondents report that their firm's leaders care about their wellbeing, with many identifying concerns about workload, staffing, and earning a living wage in open-ended responses.[4]

2. Design industry professionals are more likely to experience inclusion and psychological safety at work than in the past, but race, and gender-based differences in experience persist.

The vast majority of respondents experience inclusion in the workplace, with 87% indicating that they feel like valued members of their teams and 87% indicating that they feel comfortable being themselves at work, significantly exceeding the rate of inclusion documented in past industry studies.[5] Similarly, experiences of psychological safety, or feelings of comfort when taking interpersonal risks in the workplace, are widespread with 92% of respondents reporting that they feel comfortable asking teammates for help and 83% reporting that they feel comfortable bringing up problems and tough issues in their teams. However, the study also reveals significant gender, and race-based differences in how professionals experience culture in design firms, suggesting that there is still work to do to achieve justice, equity, and a culture of belonging in our industry.

3. ## Design industry professionals suffer from high rates of burnout in the workplace.

16% of design professionals responding to the survey report experiencing symptoms of burnout by indicating at least two of the three conditions: a lack of energy at work, a lack of enthusiasm about their jobs, and the perception that their work has little to no positive impact in the world.[6]

4. ## These social-emotional wellbeing issues are compounded by significant work-life concerns.

Just 53% of professionals in participating firms report that they have enough time and energy to pursue their interests outside of work, while 23% disagree or strongly disagree. Meanwhile, 34% of professionals – and 39% of women – report that they have suffered from poor mental or emotional health because of work-life conflict in the last six months. 23% of women report that their physical health has suffered as a result of work-life conflict in the same time period.

5. ## Young professionals are struggling with a wide-range of interpersonal, burnout, and mental health issues in design workplaces, with Millennial professionals at particular risk.

Professionals under age 40 are less likely than their older counterparts to experience inclusion, psychological safety, or engagement at work. Meanwhile, those under 40 are much more likely than older professionals to report worrying about social, political, economic and environmental issues that are in the news while they are working, highlighting the broader climate of uncertainty that has a disparate impact on Millennial and Gen Z professionals today. These issues seem to impact Gen Z and Millennials differently, with employees under 30 tending to experience issues commonly associated with "paying dues" and the hierarchical nature of work in the design industry. Meanwhile, those age 30-39 report stresses associated with paying dues while at the same time reporting additional stresses associated with increased levels of responsibility and work, but perhaps without increased recognition or control.

6. ## There are significant gaps in the ways that interior designers and other design professionals experience design firm culture and workplace wellness, suggesting that role-based inequities exist within the industry.

   Interior designers are significantly less likely than architects or engineers to experience inclusion or psychological safety in the workplace. Meanwhile, interior designers and operations staff are more likely than others to experience markers of a psychological threat state while at work. Finally, interior designers are also more likely than others to experience symptoms of burnout and more likely to say that they have considered leaving their jobs within the last six months to improve their mental health.

7. ## Mental wellbeing is a key driver of turn-over in design firms today.

   When asked whether they have considered leaving their current jobs for mental-health reasons in the last 6 months, 27% of respondents agree or strongly agree, while a further 14% say that it's hard to decide. Meanwhile, a recent change of job is correlated with elevated cultural satisfaction and engagement in the workplace, suggesting that the great reshuffle may have helped many in our industry to find a healthier job-person fit.

Taken together, these findings indicate that there are strong correlations between mental health and organizational culture in the design industry, and that these links may be able to explain the ongoing patterns of burnout, anxiety, and low morale that firm and industry leaders have observed, even after introducing work-life benefits such as hybrid and remote work and flexible scheduling. To comprehensively address these issues in a time of ongoing disruption, firm leaders will likely need to invest in holistic, yet flexible, action plans that align firm and team culture, organizational strategy, and work-life policy and practices.

What We Heard

Cultural Tensions within the Design Industry

While "firm culture" may be used casually to refer to office gatherings, happy hours, or firm traditions, management theorists use the term "culture" to refer to a characteristic that extends to the heart of organizations. It is defined by "the taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations and definitions that characterize organizations and their members," or, more simply stated, a shared, often unspoken, understanding of "just the way things are done around here" within organizations.[7,8] Culture is defined not only by what gets rewarded within organizations, but also by how undesirable behaviors are rooted out. As John Amaechi has said, "That's what defines the culture. The worst behavior tolerated."[9]

Culture, research suggests, is closely tied to organizational effectiveness. It is most successful when there is alignment between the culture and external market demands and when there is both clarity about what the culture is and a strong sense of alignment around the culture within an organization.[10] Decades of management research have demonstrated that culture has not only organization-level effects on performance and long-term effectiveness, but also individual-level effects on employee engagement, productivity, health and well-being.[11] Finally, research has demonstrated that culture, as a socially constructed dimension of organizations, evolves over time through the collective actions of individuals within an organization. Optimizing both organizational effectiveness and employee wellness therefore hinges upon accurately understanding current culture and initiating appropriate change management strategies to better align individuals around a culture that well adapted to its external environment.

As a means of describing the cultures within design firms, our team used the Competing Values Framework to ask survey participants to define their firm's dominant cultural characteristics. This model is based on the idea that organizational culture can be broadly understood based on how organizations define effectiveness in the face of two sets of competing demands: flexibility and discretion vs. stability and control; and external focus and market differentiation vs. internal focus and integration. These two axes define four basic culture types: **Create** cultures, which tend to emphasize flexibility, individual achievement, and entrepreneurialism; **Collaborate** cultures, which imitate families, emphasizing internal cohesion, teamwork and employee involvement; **Control** cultures, which are internally focused and emphasize stability, efficiency, and predictability; and finally, **Compete** cultures, which are externally focused and emphasize profitability, productivity, and results ***(Figure 1)***.[12]

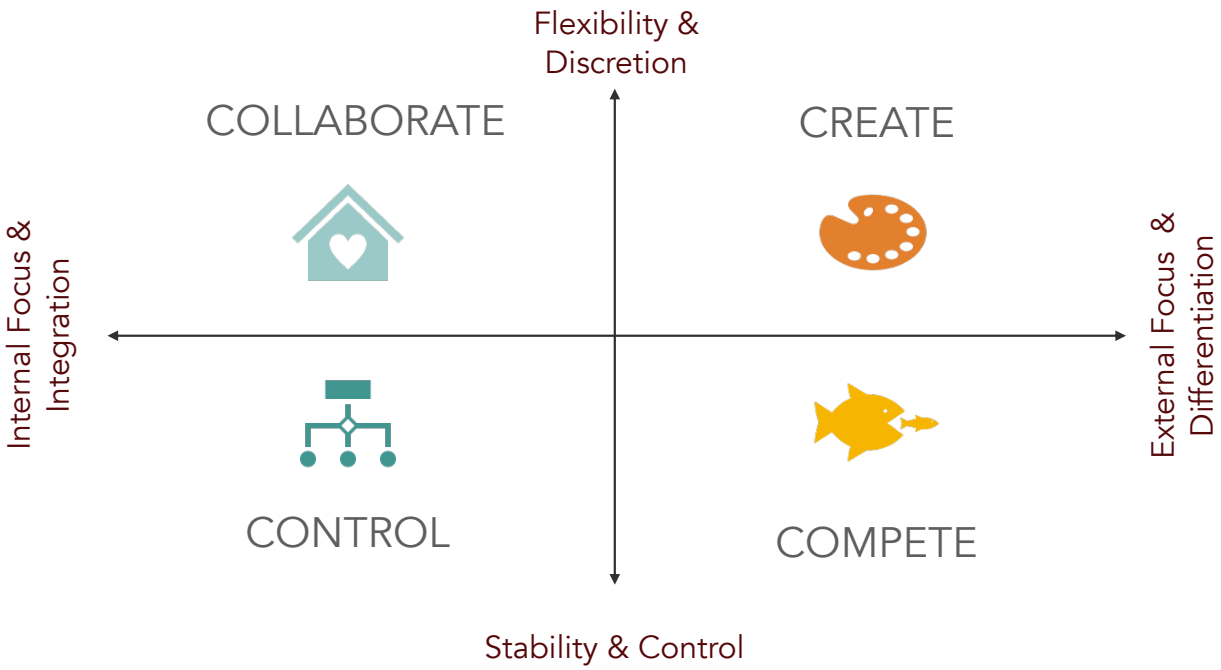


Figure 1
Competing values framework, based on the work of Kim S. Cameron

To assess firm culture, the survey provided respondents with four possible descriptions of an organization's dominant characteristics, with one corresponding to each culture type. Participants were asked to divide a total of 100 points across the four statements, assigning more points to those statements that most closely described their firm's present state. Our team then plotted the average culture profile within our industry using the average weighted response for the statement corresponding to each quadrant of the competing values framework. This analysis demonstrates that across the industry, cultural emphasis is relatively balanced, with respondents assigning the **Create** quadrant an average of 23%, the **Collaborate** quadrant an average of 29%, the **Control** quadrant an average of 20%, and the **Compete** quadrant an average of 28% ***(Figure 2)***. According to survey respondents, the dominant culture within the industry today is therefore **Collaborate** culture, which is closely followed by **Compete** culture.

This balanced average profile masks a great deal of variety in individual and firm-level responses. At an individual level, firm culture perceptions vary significantly on the basis of race, age, seniority, and role, suggesting that both personal identity and position within an organization have a tendency to shape the ways in which design industry professionals experience their organizations' cultures ***(Figure 3)***. As organizational effectiveness is often tied to cultural congruency, or alignment between various aspects of an organization's culture, many organizations within the design industry may find value in clarifying their cultures so that the individuals within an organization have more consistent experiences of culture.[13]

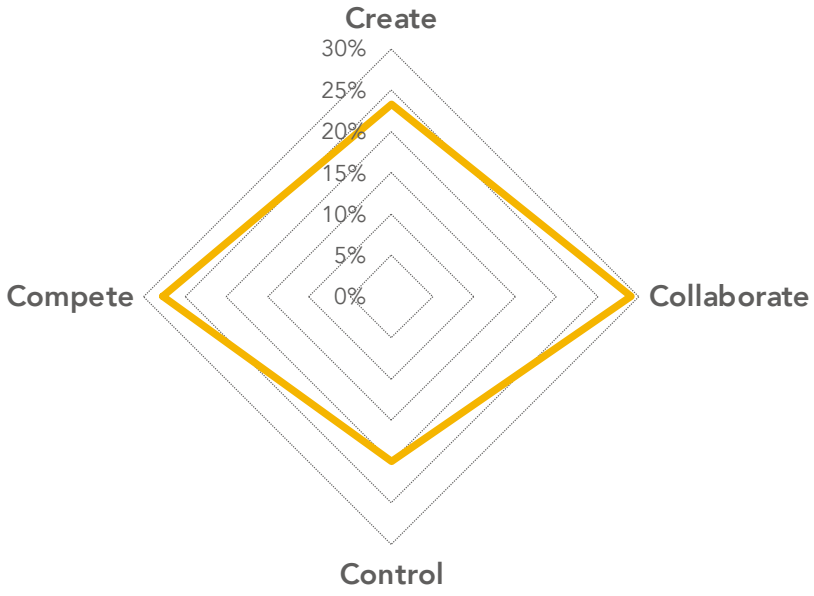


Figure 2
Average industry-wide culture profile

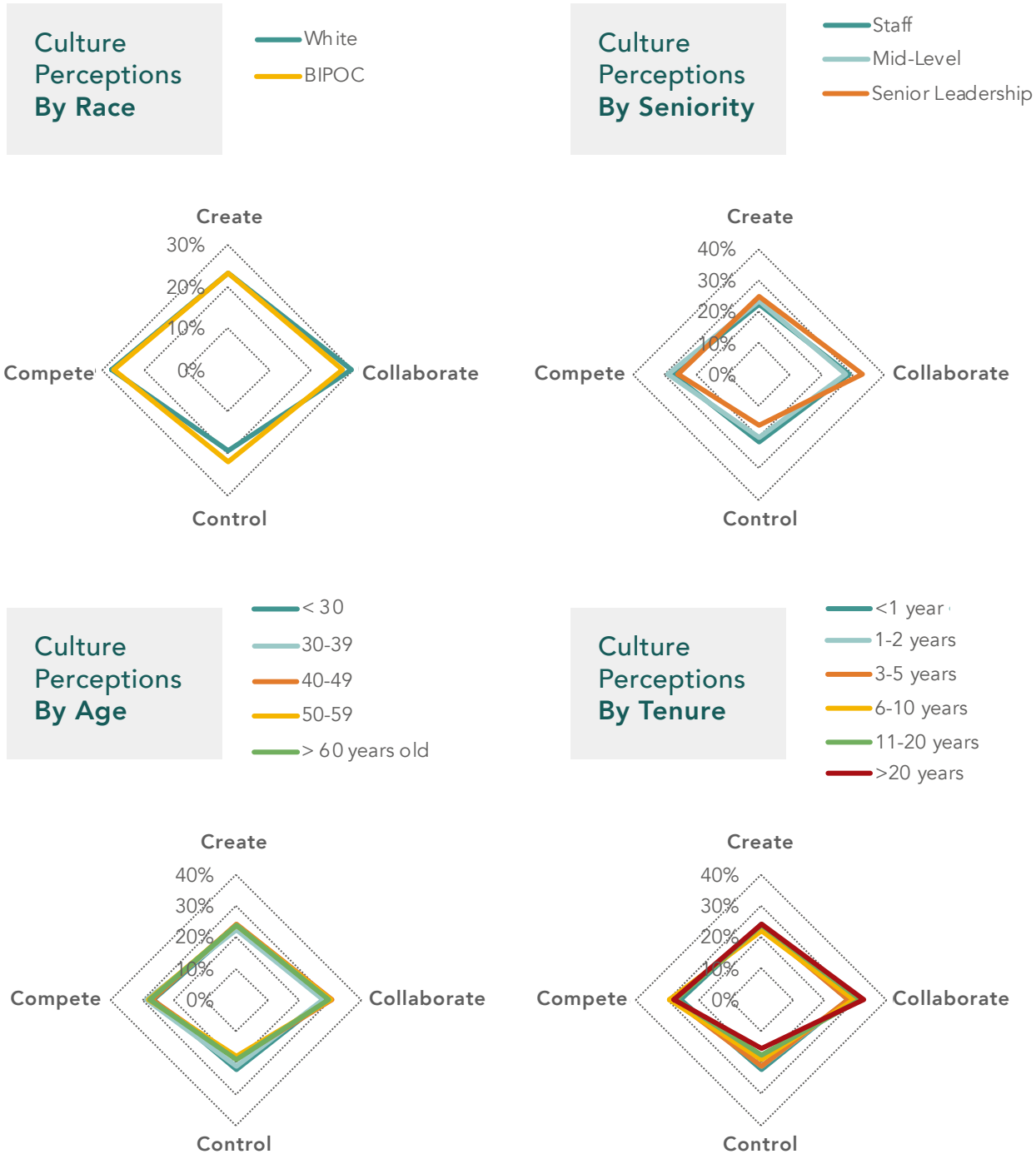


Figure 3

Variations in cultural perceptions on the basis of race, age, seniority and tenure

Culture perceptions also vary significantly between firms in the design industry. Participants' responses regarding their firm's culture vary significantly based on firm affiliation ($p<.0001$). There is also significant variation between the average culture profiles of participating firms. Culture type, or the dominant area of cultural emphasis, varies, with participating firms representing each of the four culture types. By far the most common dominant culture, however, is **Collaborate** culture, with 66% of the participating firms displaying a dominant **Collaborate** culture ***(Figure 4)***. Culture strength, or the degree to which the dominant culture if emphasized within an organization, also varies significantly, with culture strength ranging from 28% to 55%. These variations in culture type and strength give rise to a wide variety of firm culture profiles within the industry ***(Figure 5)***. This high degree of variation in firm culture profile suggests that organizations within our industry are devising a wide range of responses to the internal and external pressures that are shaping our businesses today.

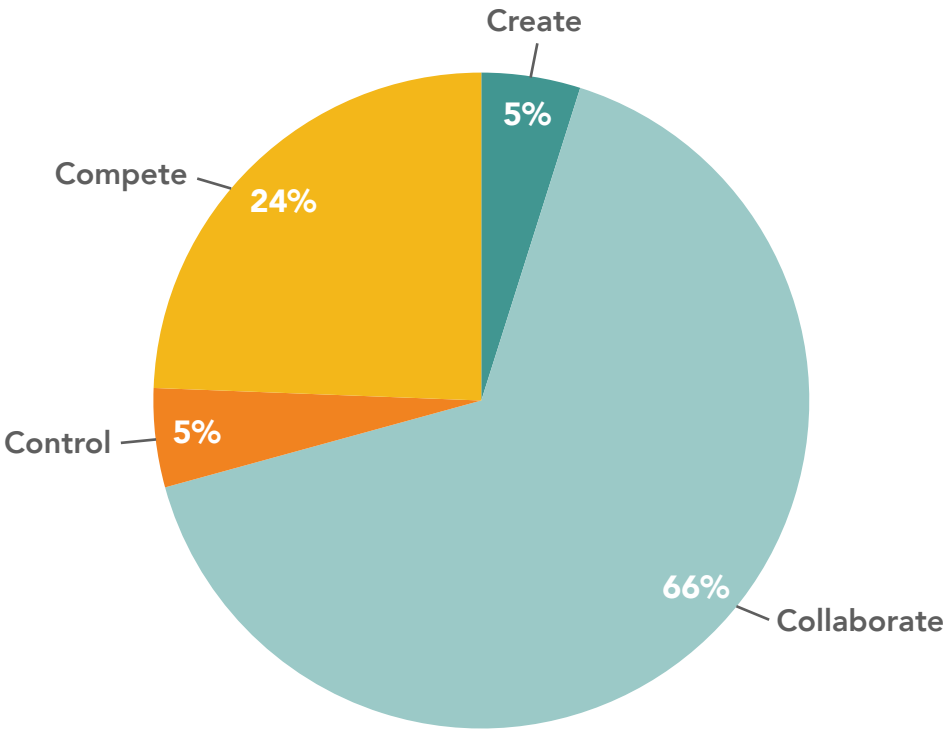


Figure 4
Distribution of participating firms' dominant culture types

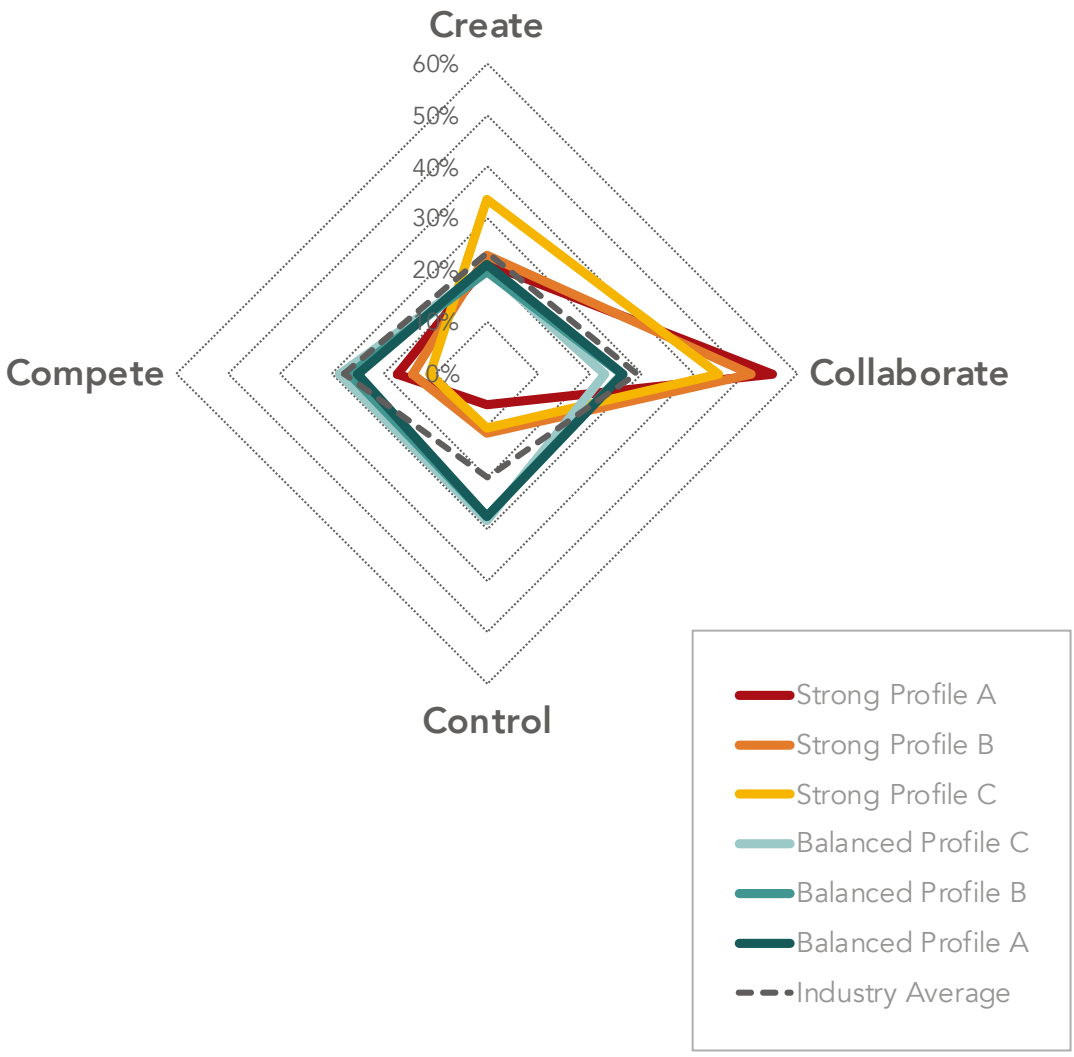


Figure 5
Comparison of strongest and most balanced average firm culture profiles in the survey sample

It's important to note that there's no "right" or "wrong" when it comes to firm culture profile. While there are moderate associations between the degree of emphasis on Collaborate culture, feeling connected to one's colleagues (Spearman's coefficient=.302) and believing that an organization's leaders care about well-being (Spearman's coefficient = .306), there aren't other significant correlations between areas of cultural emphasis and employee experiences in the workplace. Overall, the qualitative ways in which individuals describe their culture aren't strong predictors of most of the indicators measured on the survey, including inclusion, psychological safety, engagement, burnout, work-life satisfaction, or flight-risk. This in turn suggests that a firm's culture profile, or theory of effectiveness, isn't in and of itself a strong predictor of employee morale or wellbeing at work.

As our team considered data collected from the survey in the context of broader industry challenges, we identified several key points of cultural tension within the industry that are central to employee wellbeing and perceptions of culture in our industry today. These tensions align with areas of the competing values framework, suggesting that this model is a useful tool for understanding how firms might navigate these issues ***(Figure. 6)***:

CULTURE TENSIONS IN THE INDUSTRY TODAY



COLLABORATE VS. CREATE

Desire for connection and strong culture vs. the desire for hybrid and flexible work arrangements

The need for mentorship and sponsorship and skill development vs the desire for autonomy and agency



CREATE VS. CONTROL

Desire for certainty and control about things (career paths, values, roles and responsibility, quality) vs. the desire to be creative & entrepreneurial



COLLABORATE VS. COMPETE (or people vs. survival)

Stress of unmanageable workloads vs. fear of recession

Figure 6
Cultural Tensions in the Industry Today

Building hybrid culture: The first area of perceived tension concerns hybrid and remote work, as firm leaders seek to balance many individuals' desire to adopt a wider range of working arrangements and with the desire to foster employee connection and a strong in-person culture. These questions, as well as associated questions of how to provide mentorship and skill development while also promoting autonomy and agency, can be broadly understood as tensions between the **Create** and **Collaborate** quadrants of the competing values framework.

Balancing autonomy and certainty: The second area of tension in the industry today concerns competing desires for certainty and control about things (career paths, values, roles and responsibility, quality) vs. the desire to be creative & entrepreneurial. This can be understood as a tension between the **Control** and **Create** quadrants of the competing values framework.

Caring for our people while navigating market volatility: Finally, as both workloads and costs of living and repaying student debt mount across the industry at the same time that there is significant threat of a future recession, firms and individuals within the industry seek to balance the need to invest in caring for employees and the need to remain competitive in the marketplace. These issues can be understood as tensions between the **Collaborate** and **Compete** quadrants of the competing values framework.

Data collected from this survey sheds light on how employees and firm leaders in our industry are currently experiencing each of these areas of perceived tension.

Create vs. Collaborate: Building Hybrid Culture

As firms seek to establish their "new normal" after years of pandemic-related disruptions, the future of remote and hybrid work have been central considerations. After a substantial period of working from home, many professionals in our industry have expressed interest in continuing to work from home at least some of the time for the foreseeable future: In a summer 2021 survey, our team found that just 31% professionals in the AEC industry personally wished for a full-time return to the office in future.[14] Meanwhile, 62% of respondents reported that they believed that their organization's leadership would prefer that all employees return to the office full-time when it became safe to do so.[15] This suggests that, at least at the time, many professionals within the industry perceived conflicts between their personal desires regarding work arrangements and those of their organizations' leaders.

These perceived tensions are directly correlated with the **Collaborate** and **Compete** quadrants of the competing values framework. In the 2021 survey, key considerations associated with preferences for more work from home included: comfort, autonomy, commute time, flexibility, and ability to focus.[16] These considerations all place emphasis on individual autonomy, discretion and productivity, and are therefore strongly correlated with the **Create** quadrant of

the framework. Meanwhile, key considerations associated with preferences for more in-office work include learning and access to mentorship, collaboration, and access to in-office tools and resources. These considerations, which emphasize togetherness and collaboration, are all strongly associated with the **Collaborate** quadrant of the framework.

When explaining their preferred working arrangements and the rationale for these preferences, most professionals responding to the 2021 survey indicated that they sought balance between **Collaborate** and **Create** culture. 93% of respondents indicated a preference for hybrid work, with most preferring to work from home 1-2 days per week.[17] Meanwhile, most respondents identified a mix of considerations associated with both the collaborate and create quadrants when asked to identify the top three considerations in determining their preferred working arrangement.[18]

Over a year after the 2021 study on the post-pandemic workplace was conducted, remote and hybrid work continue to be far more common in our industry than they were prior to the pandemic. Nearly two out of three professionals report working in a hybrid fashion today, with 22% working remotely, 32% going into the office one to two times per week, 31% going in three to four times per week, and just 15% working in-person full time. Working patterns vary considerably by region, with those in the Midwest and West working from the office less frequently on average than others, while those from the South, Northeast and Canada work from the office most frequently on average ***(Figure 7)***.

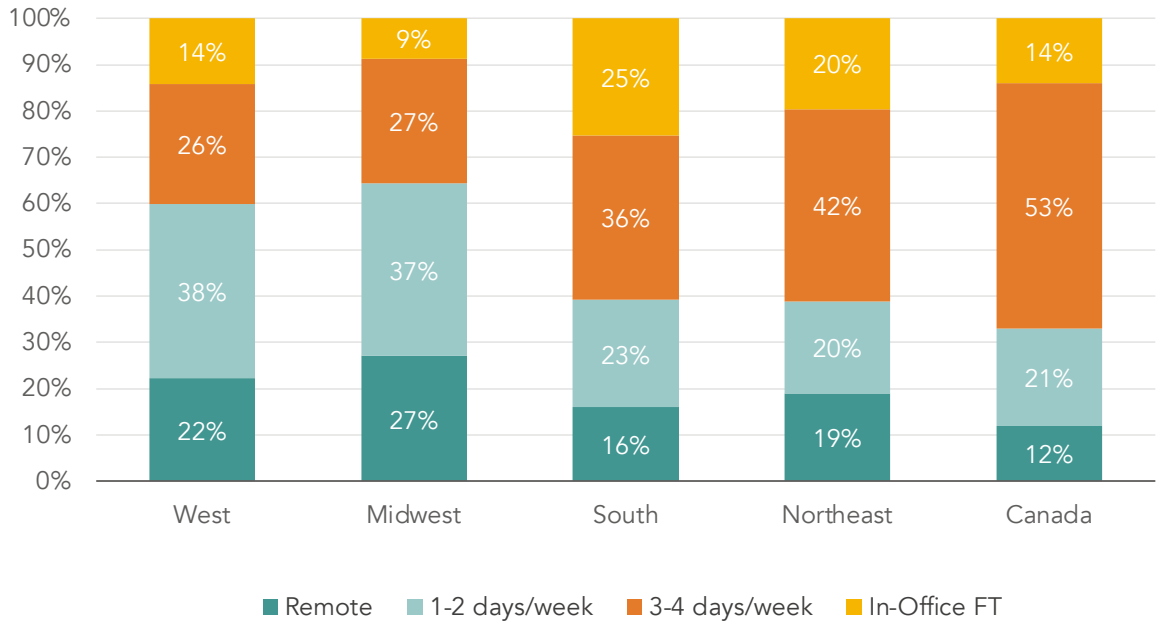


Figure 7
Frequency of in-person work by region

Hybrid work patterns vary considerably on the basis of personal identity, with women and parents of young children going into the office less frequently on average than other survey respondents. Women are more likely to work remotely, while men are more likely to work full in person. Industry-wide, 24% of female respondents say that they work remotely, compared with 19% of men. Meanwhile, 12% of female respondents work in-person full-time, compared with 19% of male respondents ***(Figure 8)***. At the same time, parents are more likely to work remotely than those without children. Those with children under 5 are especially likely to work remotely, with 28% of that cohort adopting a remote work arrangement. These demographic differences are worthy of consideration as firm leaders make decisions about the future of hybrid work, as they suggest that these working arrangements may be more important than average to some groups that have historically been underrepresented in the profession.

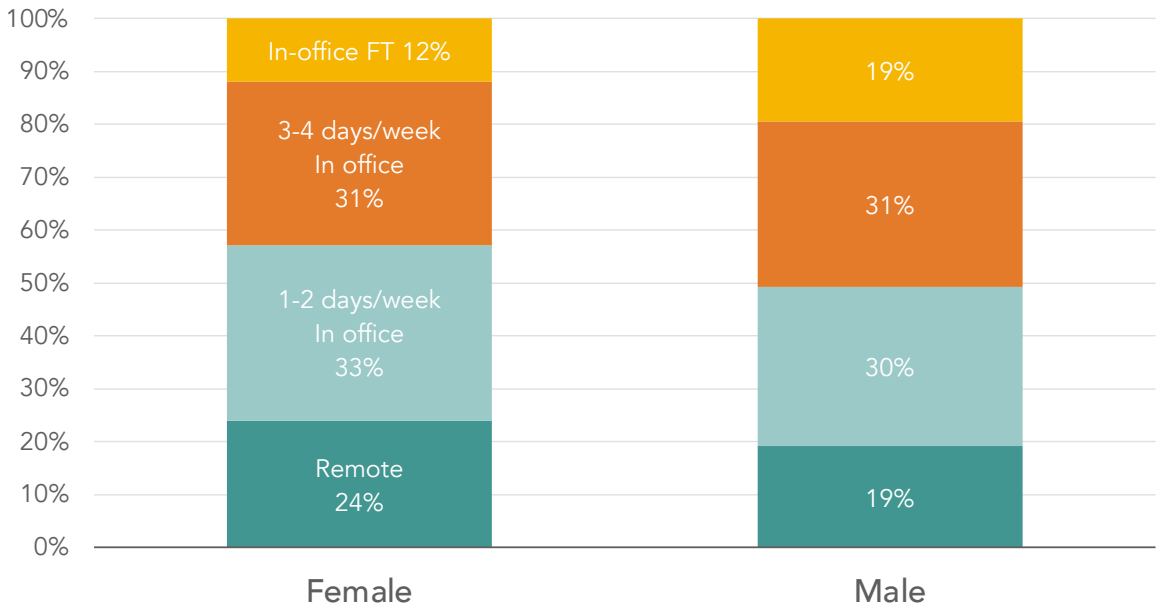


Figure 8
Frequency of in-person work by gender

Working arrangements also vary based on age and seniority, with employees age 30-49 and mid-level leaders going into the office less often than others. Mid-level leaders are more likely to work remotely or come in 1-2 times/week, and less likely to work FT from the office. Staff and senior leaders are more likely to work full-time from the office ***(Figure 9)***. Meanwhile, those under 30 and over 50 are more likely to work in-person FT. Given anecdotal evidence that firm leaders are currently struggling to hire and retain mid-level leadership, these trends are also worthy of consideration as policy is evaluated.

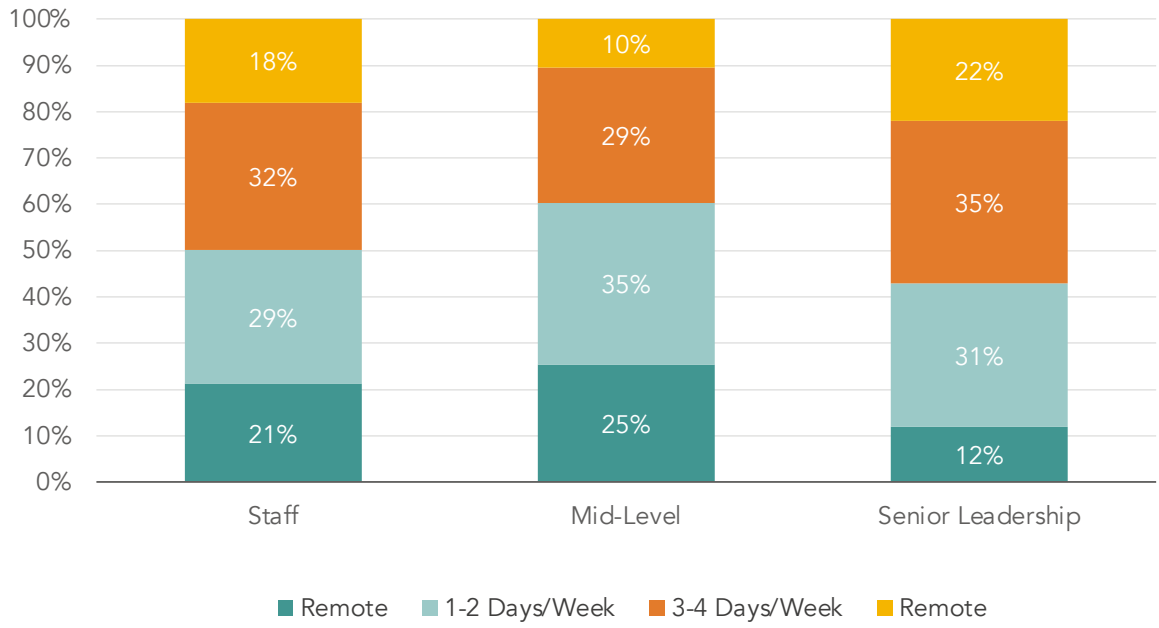


Figure 9
Frequency of in-person work by seniority

With hybrid work the predominant working arrangement today, it's important to note that working from the office 3-4 days per week is associated with modestly diminished interpersonal experiences relative to those who work in the office less frequently:

Inclusion: Respondents who work from their offices three to four days per week are less likely than others to feel comfortable being themselves at work, while those who work remotely are most comfortable (p=.006) ***(Figure 10)***. There aren't significant work arrangement-based variations in response to the other key dimension of inclusion, feeling like a valued member of one's team.

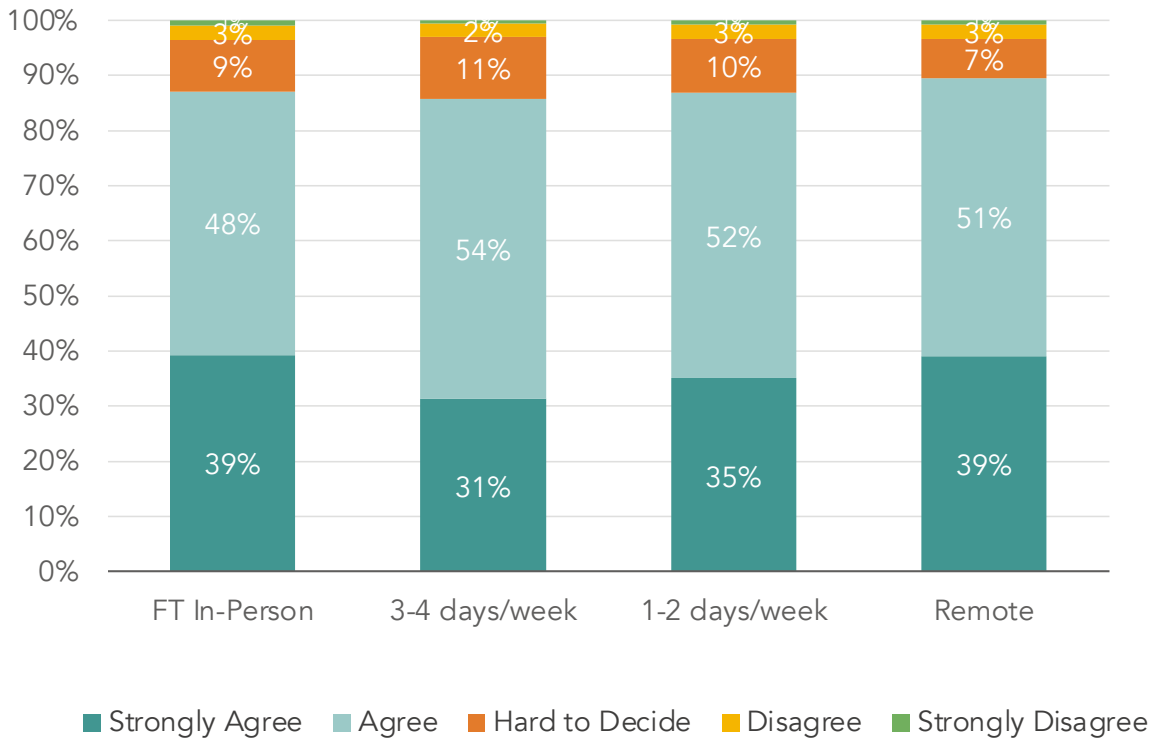


Figure 10
"I am comfortable being myself at work" by frequency of in-office work

Psychological Safety: Respondents who work from their offices three or more days per week are less likely to feel comfortable bringing up problems and tough issues in their teams, while those who work remotely full-time are most comfortable (p=.011), ***(Figure 11)***

Autonomy: Those who work remotely are least likely to feel micromanaged at work, while those who go into the office three or more days per week are most likely to feel micromanaged (p=.041), ***(Figure 12)***.

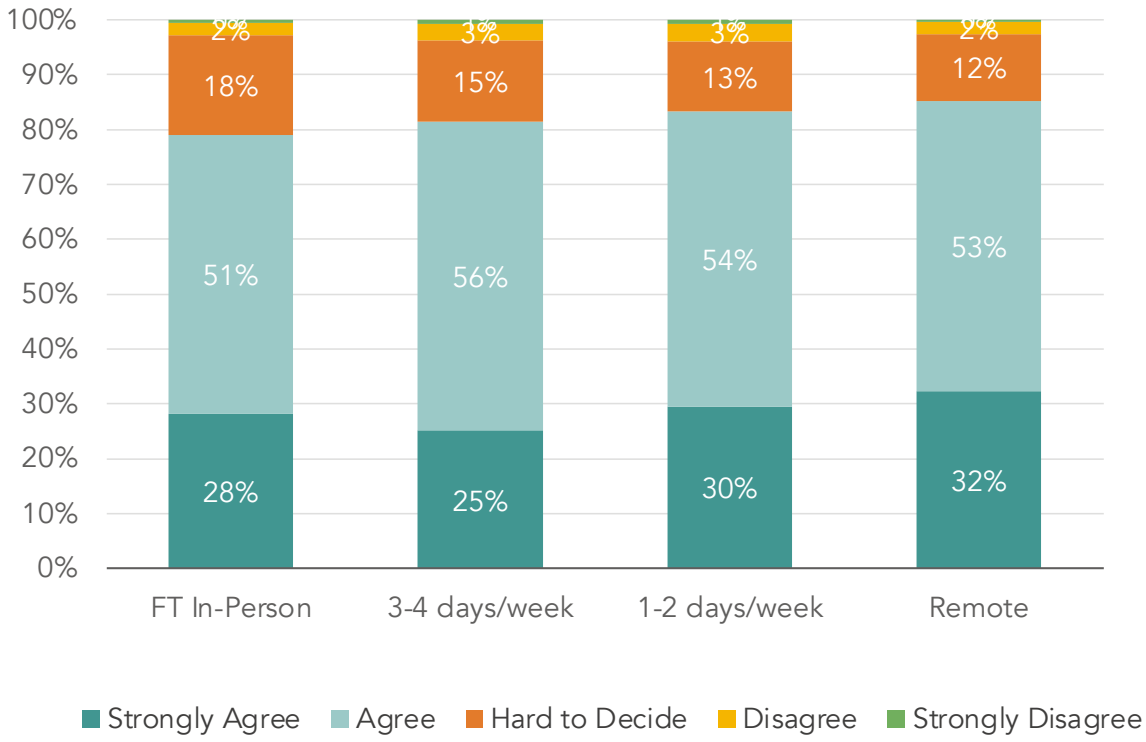


Figure 11
"I am able to bring up problems and tough issues within my team"
by frequency of in-office work

The linear correlation between autonomy and working arrangement suggests that there may a strong connection between experiences of micromanagement and frequency of in-person work, with those who work from the office most frequently least likely to experience autonomy in the workplace ***(Figure 12)***.

The connection between physical proximity and feelings of togetherness is less clear-cut. While those who work in the office three to four days per week are less likely to experience inclusion or psychological safety at work, those who work from the office 1-2 days per week don't experience those adverse effects, while those who work remotely have significantly heightened experiences of both inclusion and psychological safety ***(Figure 10-11)***. Meanwhile, there are no significant correlations between working arrangement and feelings of connection to one's colleagues (p=.295). Instead, many professionals across the industry are feeling disconnected, with just 72% of respondents reporting that they feel connected to their colleagues, regardless of work arrangement.

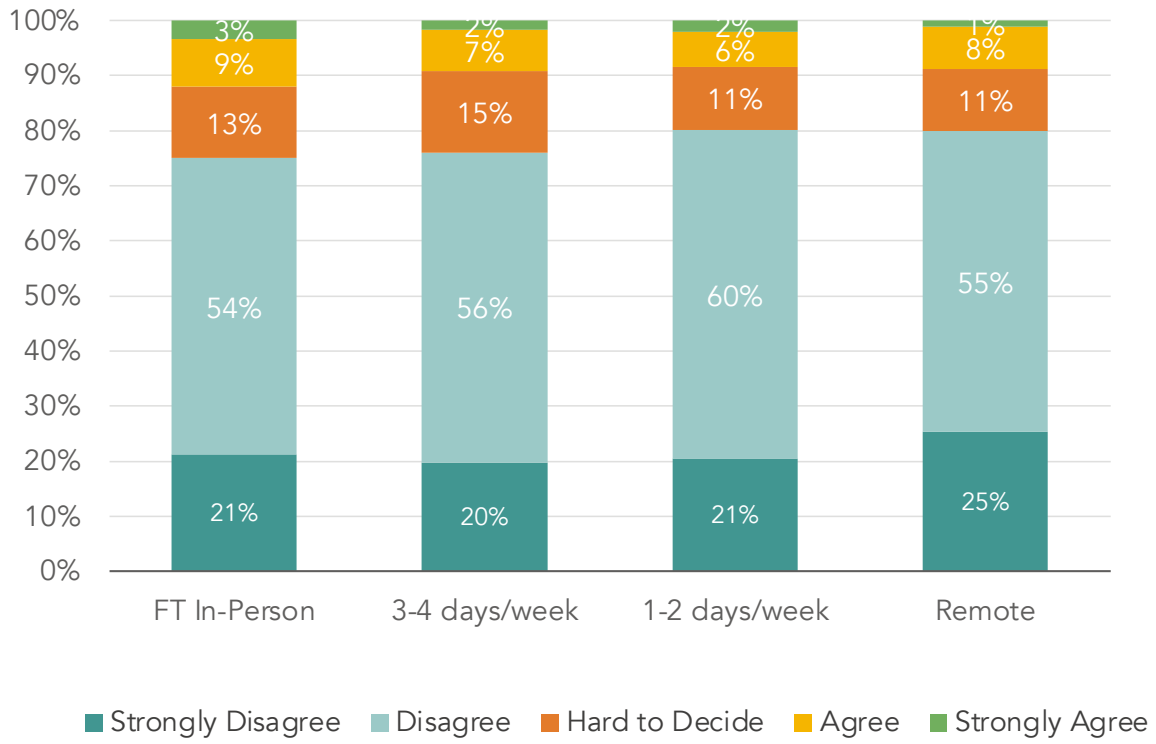


Figure 12
"I feel that I am micromanaged at work" by frequency of in-office work

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that, while there is clearly work do be done across the industry to build a sense of connection between colleagues, increasing the amount of time that individuals spend working in physical proximity to one another may not be the answer. This suggests that, when establishing hybrid work policy and building a culture to support it, firm leaders would be well advised to focus on developing emotional, rather than physical, proximity between colleagues – whether in in-person, hybrid or remote settings.

Create vs. Control: Balancing Autonomy and Certainty

The second area of cultural tension highlighted in the survey is the tension between the desire for certainty and control over outcomes and the desire to be creative, independent and entrepreneurial. Following years of uncertainty due to public health crises, political and social unrest, climate change, and market volatility, however, adults across industries continue to experience a heightened sense of worry relative to the years leading up to 2020.[19] With this context in mind, do design firms need to place greater emphasis upon creating a sense of certainty for their employees than they have historically?

Research conducted by neuroscientists and synthesized by consultants at the Neuro-Leadership Institute has shown that certain types of social interactions tend to activate reward states in the brain while others can activate psychological and even physiological threat states. Positive interactions can broadly be understood as those that activate one's sense of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, or fairness.[20] Mental wellbeing in the workplace is tied to both autonomy and certainty, suggesting that professionals need interactions in the workplace that activate both of these senses. In other words, professionals across industries seem to benefit when both the sense of stability associated with **Control** culture and the sense of autonomy associated with **Create** culture are activated.

Findings from the survey demonstrate that, at present, experiences of autonomy are more common than experiences of certainty in the design industry ***(Figure 13)***. 78% of survey respondents experience autonomy in the workplace, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they are micromanaged at work. Meanwhile, just 58% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that there are clear rules and order within their organizations. The survey demonstrates not only high degree of uncertainty within the design workplace, but also widespread uncertainty about the broader social, political, environmental and economic climate that contributes to significant worry while professionals are at work. 44% of respondents say that they find themselves worrying about these issues while working, compared with just 37% who disagree or strongly disagree.

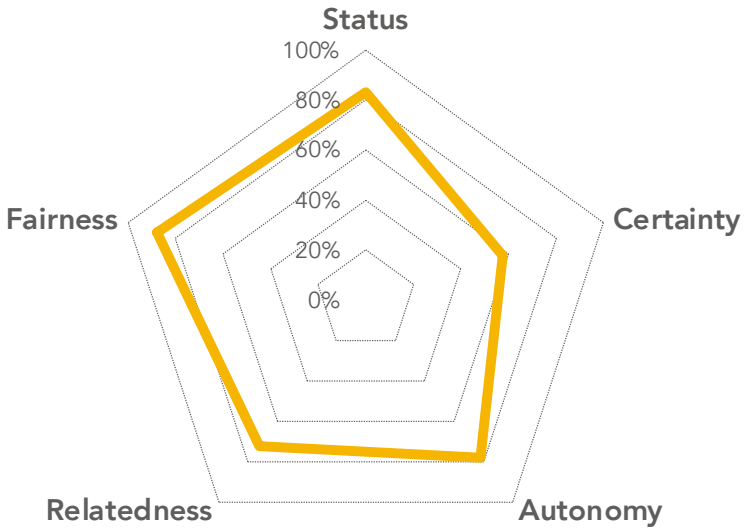


Figure 13
Prevalence of experiences of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness (SCARF model) across the design industry

Experiences of certainty and autonomy vary significantly by age, suggesting that this lack of certainty isn't evenly distributed across the industry. Young professionals are far more likely than older ones to worry about issues that are in the news while they are working, with 48% of respondents under age 40 saying that they worry about these issues while at work, compared with just 39% of respondents over age 60 ***(Figure 14)***. Professionals age 30-39 also experience a diminished sense of certainty within their organizations, with 53% reporting that there are clear rules and order within their organizations, while 67% of respondents under age 30, and 66% of respondents over age 60 agree ***(Figure 15)***. This suggests that firm leaders might focus on early and mid-career professionals' experiences when seeking to balance experiences of certainty and autonomy within the workplace.

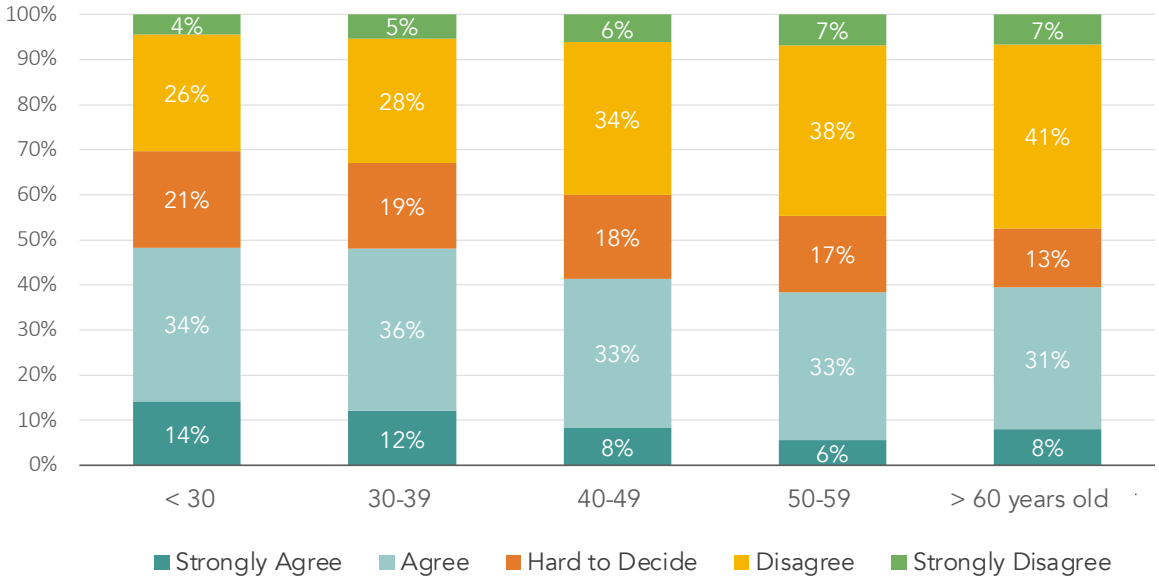


Figure 14
When I'm working, I find myself worrying about social, political, environmental, and/or economic issues that are in the news.

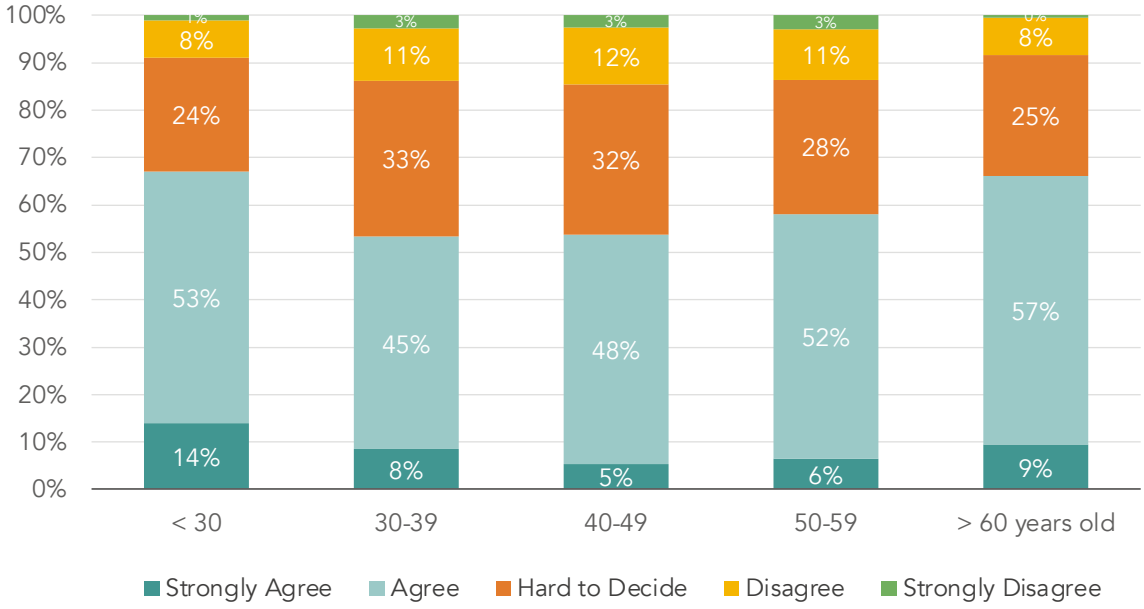


Figure 15
There are clear rules and order within my organization.

Collaborate vs. Compete: Caring for our People while Navigating Volatility

The final area of cultural tension highlighted in the survey is the tension between a desire to providing a supportive environment for the people within a firm and the desire to ensure firm survival within a competitive market environment. These tensions can be broadly understood as tensions between **Collaborate** and **Compete** culture. Across industries, mental health issues and work-related stress are significantly elevated relative to pre-pandemic levels.[21] These issues have been linked to diminished productivity and high turnover among professional workers, thereby creating an incentive for employers to place an emphasis on **Collaborate** culture as they invest in employee well-being.[22] Meanwhile, however, with inflation and escalation at continued high levels and interest rates rising, economic trends point toward a softening market for architectural services.[23] This creates a competing incentive for firms to place emphasis on **Compete** culture as they seek to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and maintain financial performance in the face of decreased demand for their services.

While burnout is often used colloquially to describe acute stress related to workload or work-life issues, organizational psychologists define it as a psychological condition that emerges as a result of chronic interpersonal stresses in the workplace. It is characterized by three key symptoms: exhaustion or chronic fatigue, cynicism about or detachment from one's work, and inefficacy or a sense of reduced accomplishment through one's work.[24] Engagement, meanwhile, describes a closely related and nearly opposite condition of thriving in the workplace, and is characterized by energy (as opposed to exhaustion), dedication to one's work (as opposed to cynicism), and a feeling of absorption in one's work.[25]

The survey demonstrates that design professionals are feeling these tensions acutely as they navigate significant burnout, wellness, and work-life issues in the workplace. The survey measured each of the dimensions of burnout, revealing that 16% of design professionals are currently exhibiting at least two of the three symptoms of burnout, while 63% of respondents exhibit all three symptoms of engagement. Of the dimensions measured, energy had the least positive response, with just 69% of respondents reporting that they are energized by their jobs. Meanwhile, 74% of respondents experience efficacy, reporting that their work makes a positive impact in the world. 75% of respondents experience dedication as opposed to cynicism, reporting that they are enthusiastic about their jobs. Finally, 82% of respondents experience absorption, reporting that they are immersed in their work ***(Figure 16)***. These issues have a real cost to firms: respondents experiencing two or more burnout symptoms are 118% more likely than those who are engaged to have considered leaving their jobs within the last six months in order to improve their mental health or wellbeing ***(Figure 17)***.

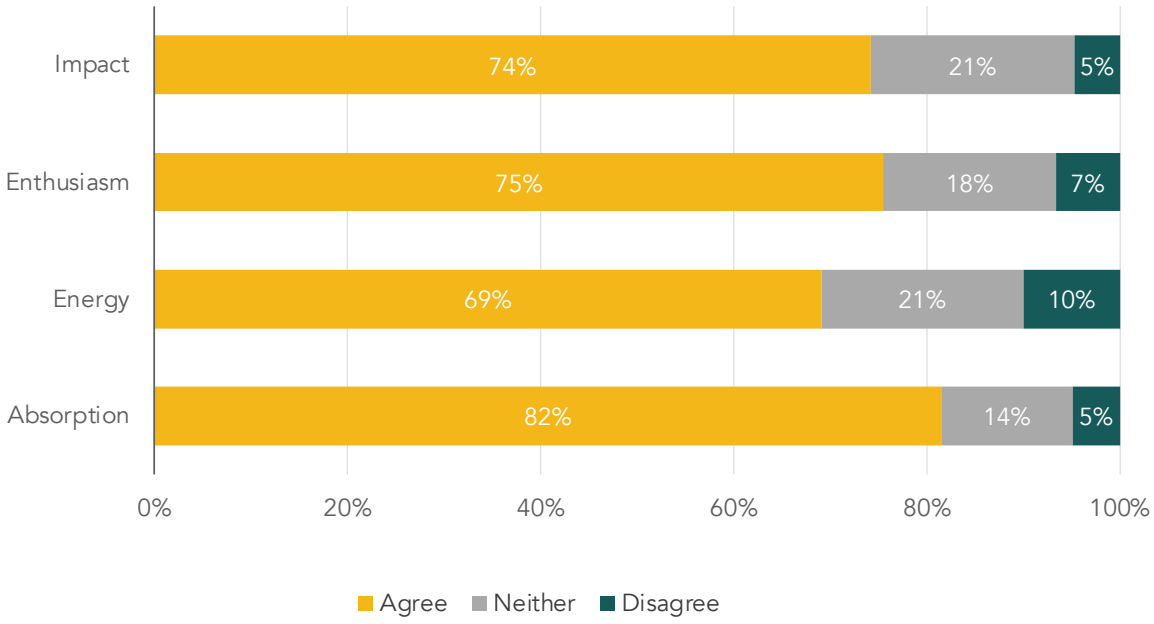


Figure 16
Industry-wide prevalence of burnout and engagement symptoms

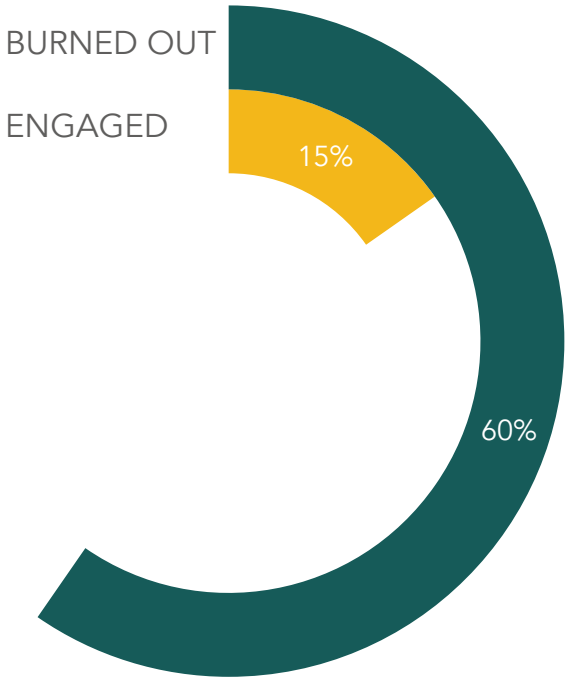


Figure 17
Likelihood of considering leaving job for mental health reasons in the past six months by burnout and engagement status.

Strong correlations between burnout and experiences of interpersonal dynamics in the workplace suggest that burnout and engagement are closely tied to the degree to which professionals experience a culture of connection and care within the workplace. Compared with those experiencing engagement in the workplace, respondents who display symptoms of burnout are 62% less likely to feel connected to their colleagues and 57% less likely to believe that their organization's leaders care about their well-being ***(Figure 18)***. Meanwhile, those who report that they're energized by their work are far more likely than who aren't to experience inclusion (51% more likely to say that they feel like valued members of their teams and 42% less likely to say that they can be themselves at work), less likely to experience psychological safety (39% less likely to feel comfortable bringing up tough issues in teams and 28% less likely to feel comfortable asking colleagues for help), 76% less likely to feel connected to their colleagues, and 77% less likely to believe that their organization's leaders care about their well-being ***(Figure 19)***. Neither burnout nor engagement is significantly correlated with work-life perceptions, suggesting that interpersonal dynamics are a far stronger predictor of this aspect of mental wellbeing in the workplace than work-life issues. This suggests that, even at times when demands upon staff are unavoidably high, firm leaders can promote employee wellbeing by promoting a culture of connectedness, care, psychological safety, and inclusion.

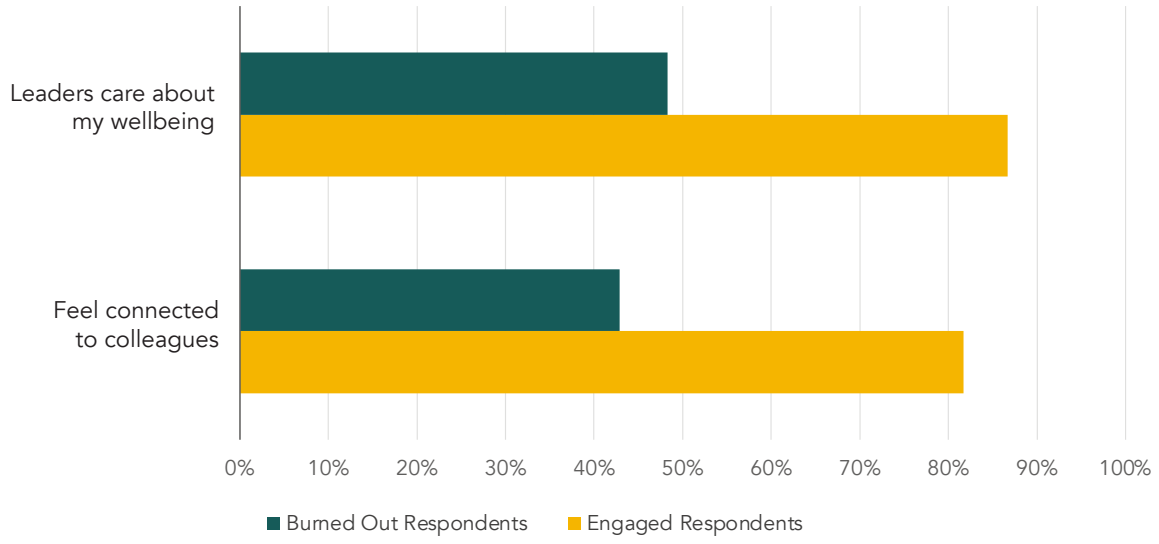


Figure 18
Likelihood of experiencing interpersonal stressors at work by presence of burnout and engagement symptoms.

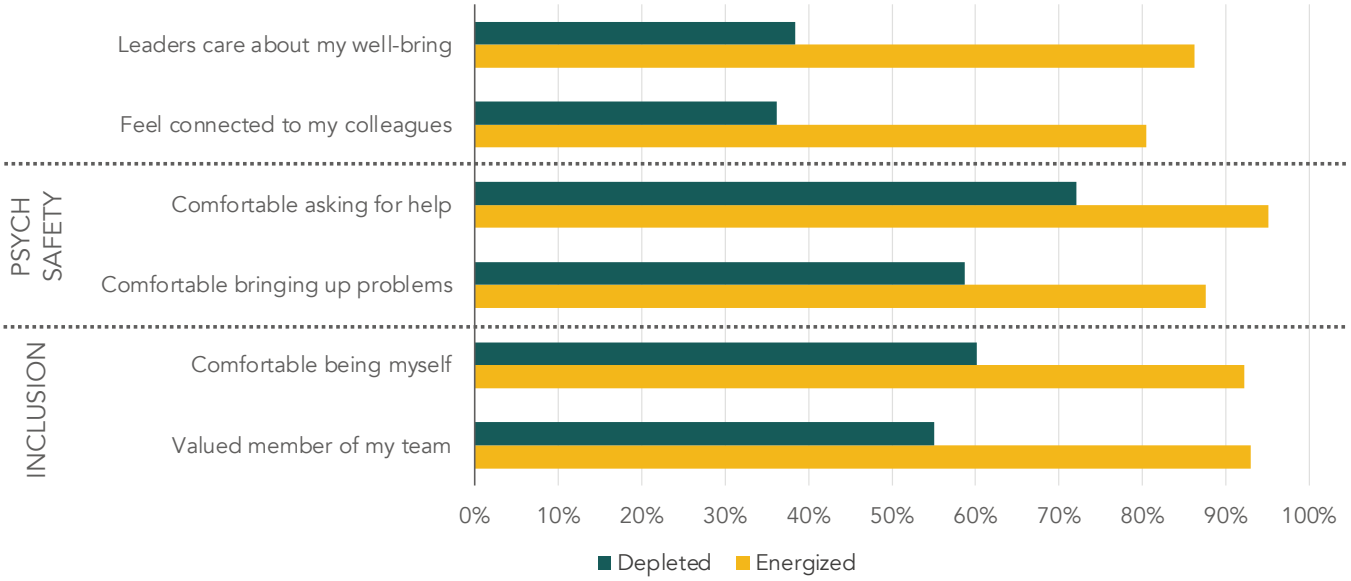


Figure 19

Likelihood of experiencing inclusion, psychological safety, connection and support in the workplace by whether a respondent is energized or depleted by their work

While not the strongest predictor of burnout, survey respondents connect the high prevalence of work-life issues in the industry today to broader physical and mental health issues. Just 53% of respondents report that they have enough time and energy to pursue their interests outside of work, while 23% disagree or strongly disagree. This issue predates the pandemic. In the 2018 Equity in Architecture Survey, a similar proportion of respondents, 51%, reported that they had time and energy to pursue interests outside of work. Respondents report that work-life issues are currently impacting their health and wellbeing in the workplace. 34% of professionals – and 39% of women – report that they have suffered from poor mental or emotional health because of work-life conflict in the last six months. 23% of women report that their physical health has suffered as a result of work-life conflict in the same time period ***(Figure 20)***. With work-life issues more common than they have been in past industry studies, professionals continue the pattern of making personal, rather than professional, trade-offs when conflict arises. Just 14% of professionals report turning down a promotion, a project opportunity, or work-related travel in the face of work-life conflict in the last six months.

Taken together, these findings suggest that both culture and workload are closely tied to health and wellbeing in the workplace today. Even in situations where it's not possible to reduce workload or deemphasize the need to remain competitive, the survey suggests that employers may be able to elevate engagement and reduce mental health challenges associated with burnout by cultivating a greater degree of inclusion, psychological safety, care and connectivity within the design workplace.

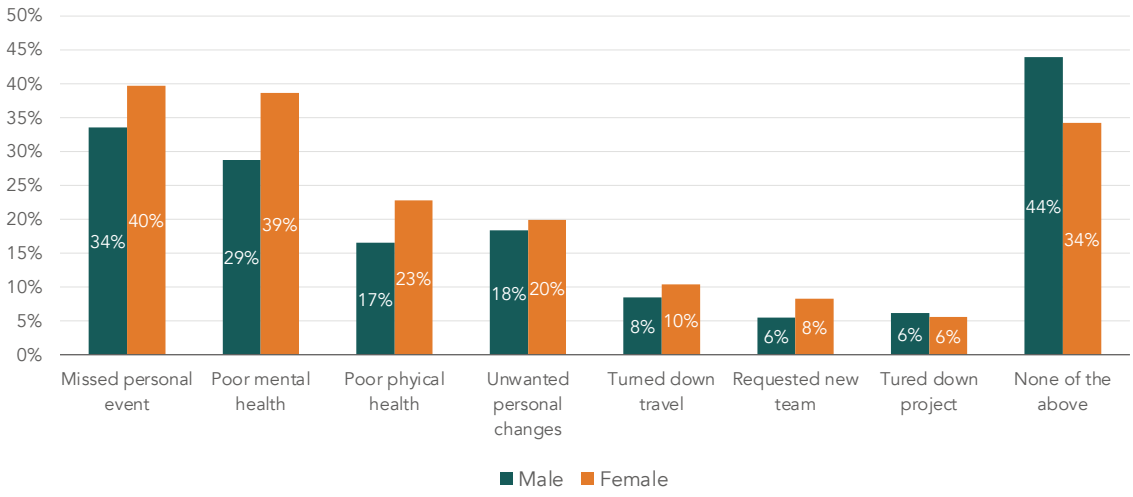


Figure 20
Work-life conflict in the last six months

Progress on Inclusion, but Racial and Gender Inequities Persist

While the survey shows that experiences of inclusion are common across the industry, it also demonstrates that the cultural tensions highlighted described in the last section are disproportionately experienced by demographic groups that have traditionally been marginalized within the profession. This suggests that, while progress has been made over the last decade in increasing diversity within the profession and in changing culture broadly, there is still work to be done to ensure that all individuals have opportunities to thrive at work, regardless of their personal identity or background.

Identity & Interpersonal Stressors

Overall, 87% of survey respondents report experiencing inclusion in the workplace, indicating that they feel like valued members of their teams and that they can be themselves in the workplace. Experiences of inclusion, however, differ based on race and gender. BIPOC professionals are less likely than White professionals to experience inclusion, with a lower likelihood of feeling valued (p=.027, 86% of BIPOC professionals vs. 88% of white, ***Figure 21***) and a lower likelihood of feeling comfortable being themselves at work (p=.001, 84% of BIPOC professionals vs. 88% of white professionals). When comparing among individual racial and ethnic groups, Hispanic and Latino/Latina professionals are least likely to feel valued (81% of Latino/Latina professionals, p=.001), while Black and African American professionals are least likely to feel comfortable being themselves at work (p=.002, ***Figure 22***).

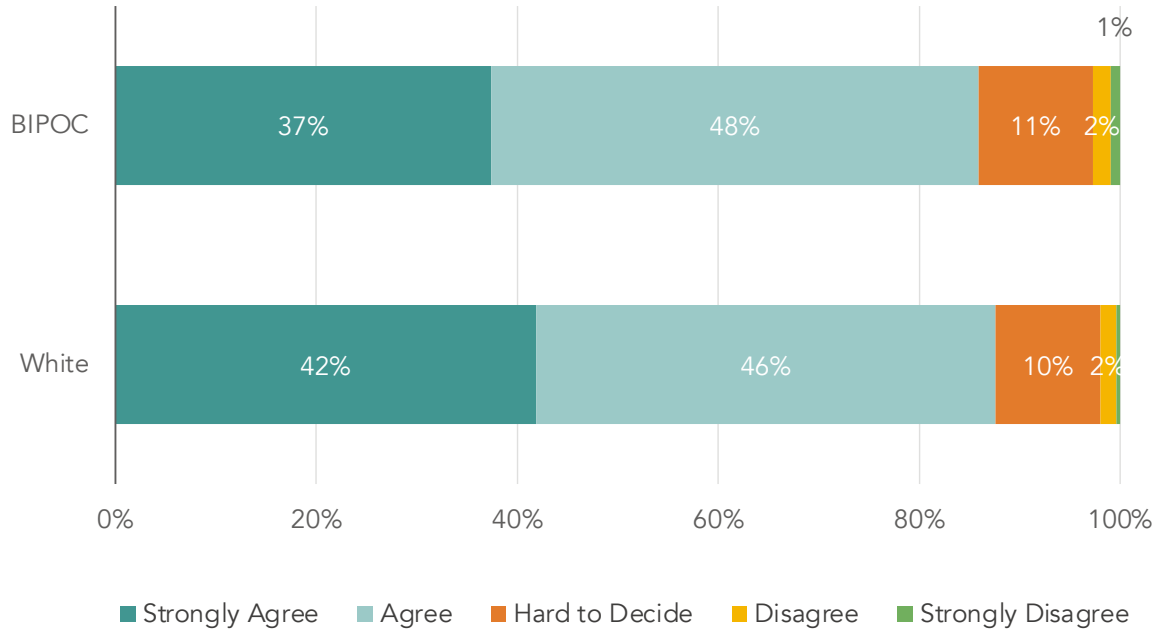


Figure 21
"I feel like a valued member of my team" by race or ethnicity

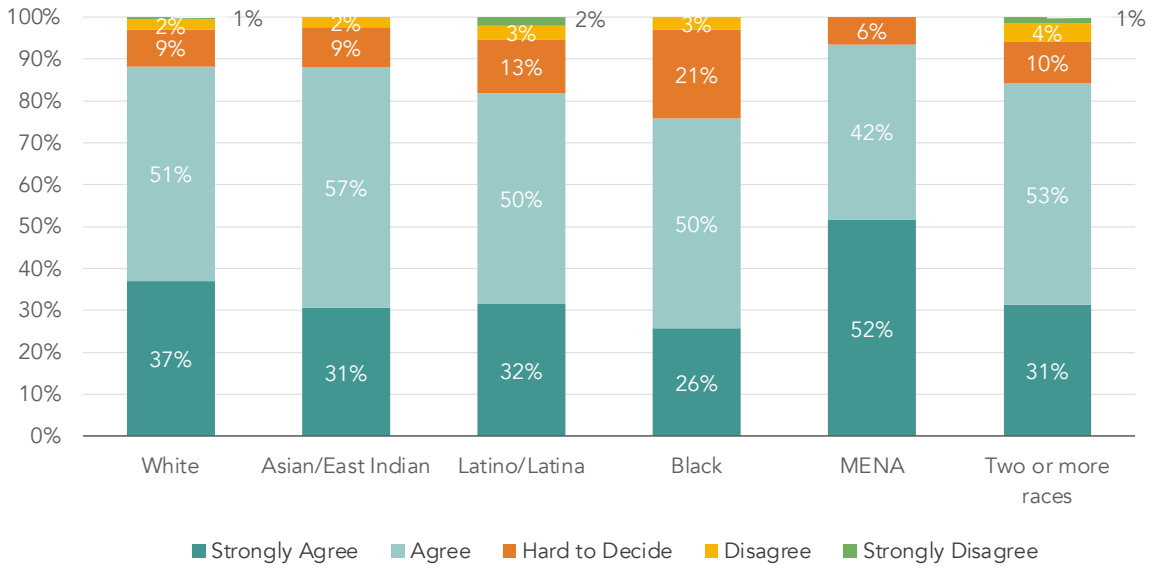


Figure 22
"I feel comfortable being myself at work" by race or ethnicity

Personal identity is also correlated with experiences of psychological safety in the workplace. Men are 5% more likely than women and 13% more likely than non-binary respondents to feel comfortable bringing up problems and tough issues within teams (p=.000, ***Figure 23)***. There were no significant correlations observed between race or ethnicity and psychological safety.

Finally, both race and gender are correlated with a respondent's likelihood of experiencing several types of social interactions that have been shown to activate threat and reward responses in organizational settings. Men are 5% more likely than women and 13% more likely non-binary individuals to say that their colleagues value their opinions (p=.012). BIPOC professionals, meanwhile, are 43% more likely than white professionals to say that they are micromanaged at work ***(Figure 24)***. These workplace tensions are tied to statistically significant variations in the degree to which design professionals report that they are supported by their organization's leaders. Male respondents 3% are more likely than female respondents and 6% more likely than non-binary respondents to report that their organization's leaders care about their well-being.

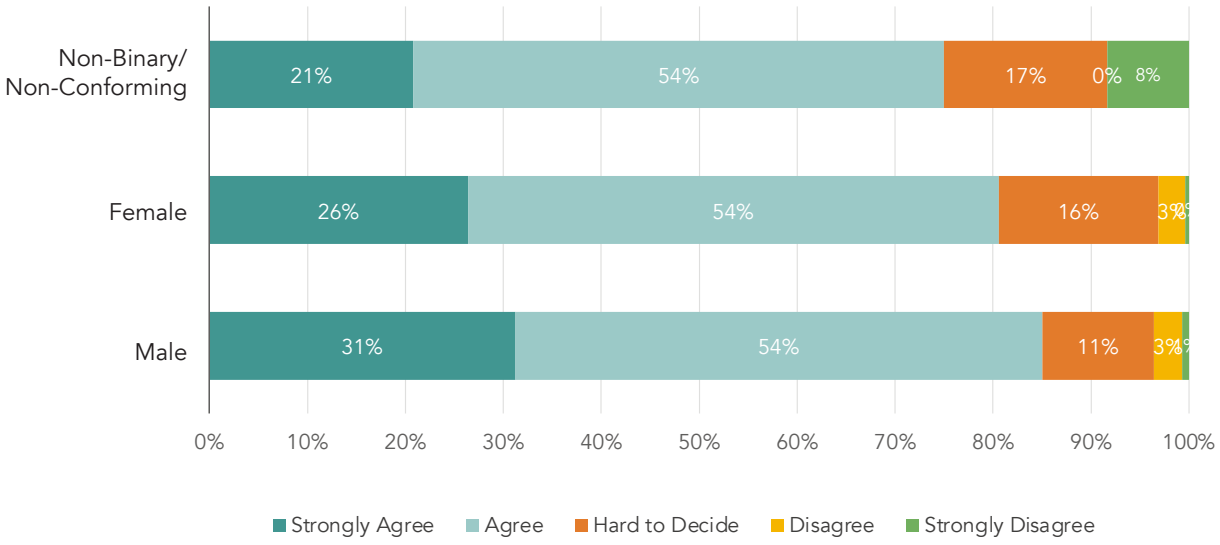


Figure 23
"I am able to bring up problems and tough issues within my team" by gender identity

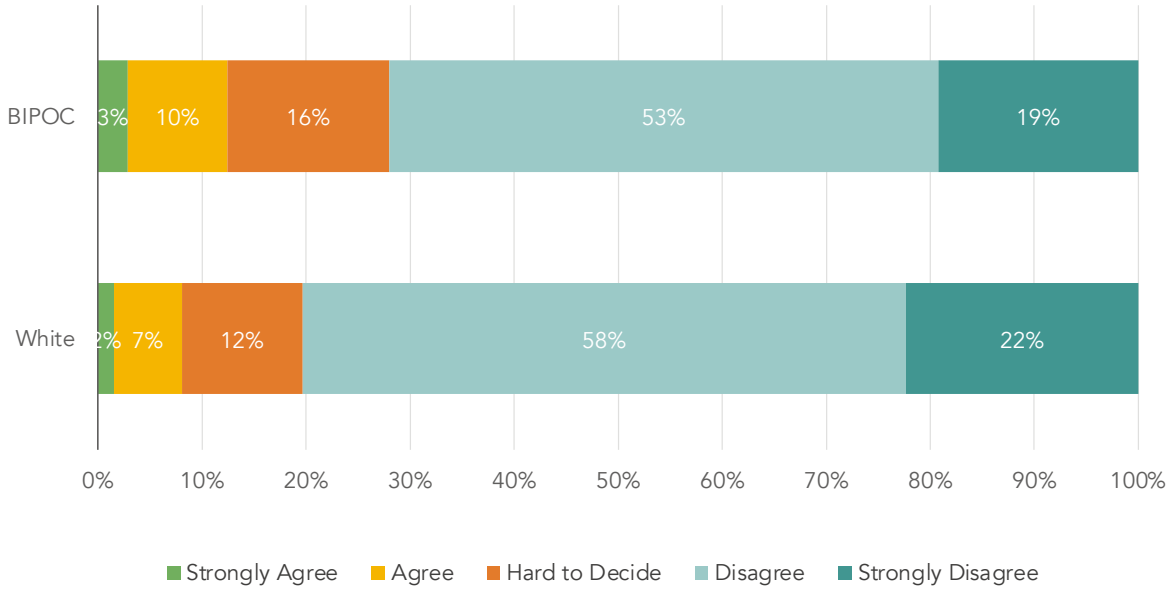


Figure 24
"I feel that I am micromanaged at work." by race or ethnicity

While these differences in the nature and quality of interpersonal interactions and relationships are relatively small, they are still significant in the sense that they shed light on dynamics that may help or impede firms' justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. For instance, as psychological safety, inclusion, and perceived organizational support are all significant predictors of both burnout and engagement in the design workplace, any identity-based differences in the quality of interpersonal experiences in the workplace may impede efforts to promote the health and wellbeing of diverse teams in the design workplace.

Identity & Engagement

Findings from the Wellness and Culture survey indicate that race and gender are, in fact, correlated with engagement in the workplace. Gender is a strong predictor of burnout and engagement among design professionals, with male professionals significantly more likely than female or non-binary professionals to experience engagement in the workplace (p=.003, ***Figure 25)***. Engagement is especially low and burnout especially high among non-binary professionals. While 65% of male respondents report experiencing all three dimensions of engagement, just 61% of female respondents and 50% of non-binary respondents report these experiences. Meanwhile, 16% of male respondents, 16% of female respondents, and 29% of non-binary respondents report experiencing at least two of the three dimensions of burnout.

Somewhat surprisingly given their diminished likelihood of experiencing inclusion in the workplace, BIPOC respondents are slightly but significantly more likely than White professionals to report experiencing most dimensions of engagement and less likely to report experiencing symptoms of burnout ***(Figure 26)***. Compared with White respondents, Black or African American respondents are 11% more likely to say that they're energized by their work, while Middle Eastern or North African respondents are 17% more likely (p=.005, ***Figure 27)***. Meanwhile, they are 10% less likely than Black respondents and 24% less likely than Middle Eastern or North African respondents to say that they are enthusiastic about their jobs (p<.0001). Finally, Asian, and East Indian respondents are significantly more likely than others to say that their work makes a positive impact in the world, with 81% of Asian and East Indians agreeing, compared with just 74% of other respondents (p=.007).

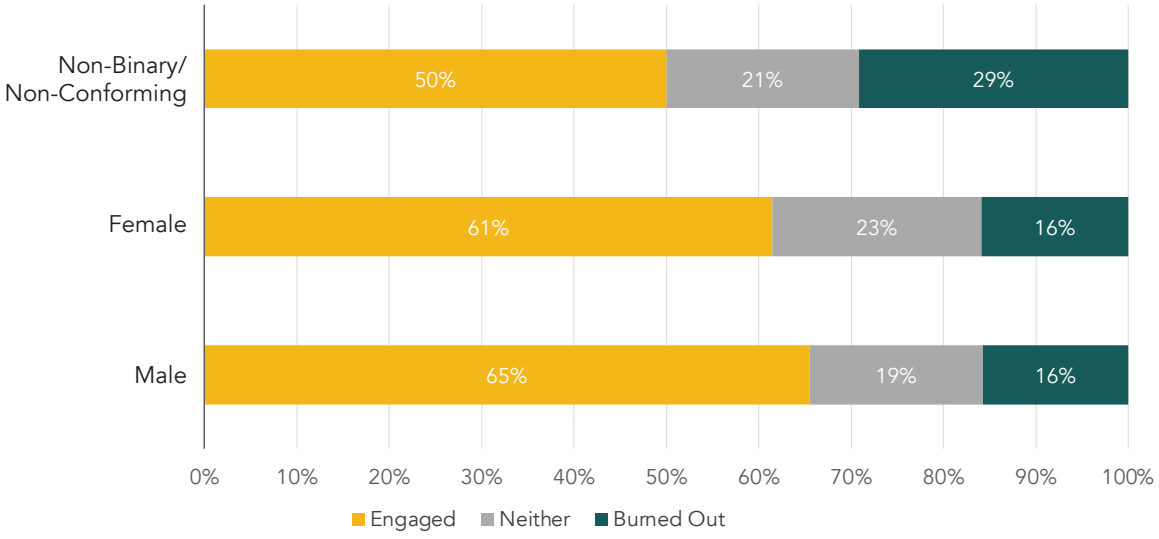


Figure 25
Burnout and engagement prevalence by gender identity

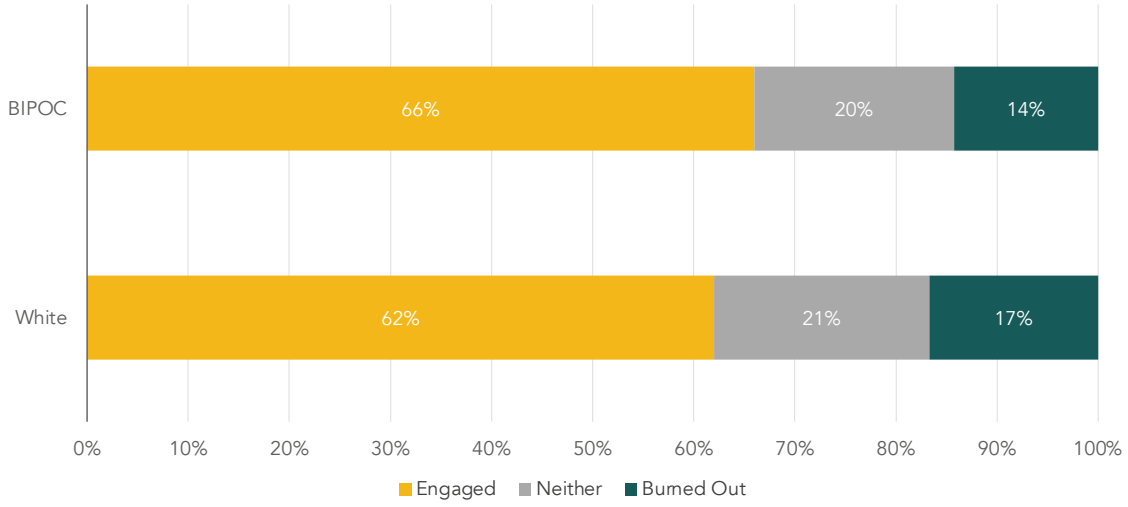


Figure 26
Burnout and engagement prevalence by race or ethnicity

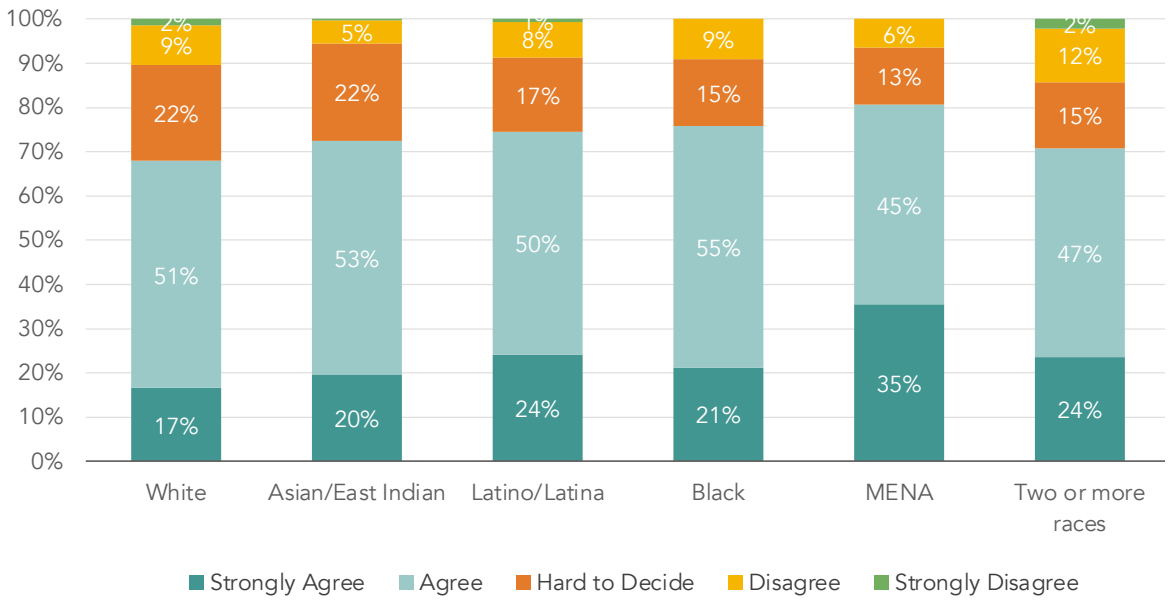


Figure 27
"I am energized by my work" by race and ethnicity

Interior Designers Struggle while Engineers and Architects Thrive

While the survey was designed to focus on the experiences of professionals in design firms across the AEC industry, most participating firms offer architectural design services as well as at least one other discipline ***(Figure 28)***. Nearly all participating firms include responses from both design and operations staff. Our team was therefore curious about how an individuals' roles might shape their experiences of culture and wellness in design firms. We found that, both within individual firms and across the industry, there are significant differences in experiences of organizational culture and wellbeing on the basis of role. Where these differences exist, engineers tend to have the most positive experiences in the design workplace, while interior designers are having the least positive experiences.

On an interpersonal level, interior designers are significantly less likely than architects or engineers to experience inclusion or psychological safety at work. They are 5% less likely than architects and 7% less likely than engineers to feel like valued members of their teams ($p=.005$). Interior designers are also significantly less likely than others to feel comfortable bringing up problems and tough issues within their teams, with just 71% of interior designers reporting comfort, while 84% of architectural professionals and 89% of engineering professionals agree or strongly agree ($p<.0001$, ***Figure 29***).

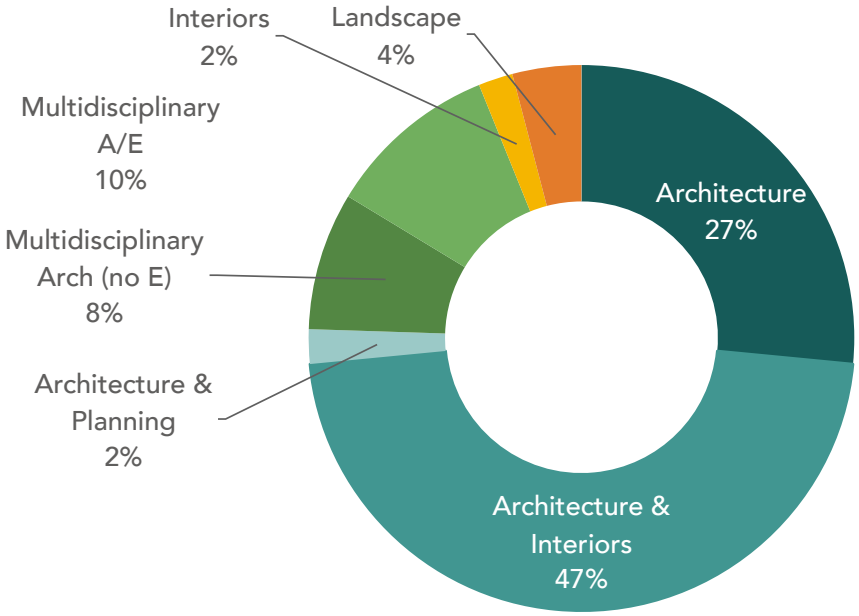


Figure 28
Distribution of participating firm types

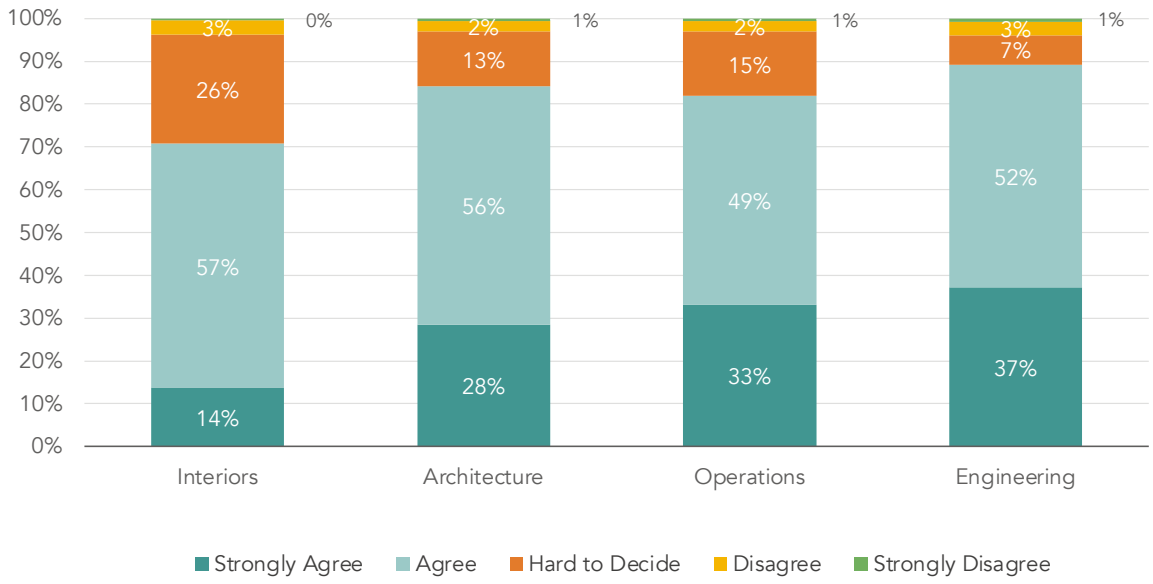


Figure 29
"I am comfortable bring up problems and tough issues within my teams" by role

Interior designers are also more likely than others to experience the types of social interactions that provoke psychological threat states while at work, while engineers are least likely. These types of interactions, described in the SCARF model that was developed by the NeuroLeadership Institute, include those types of interactions that threaten an individual's sense of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, or fairness.[26] Engineers enjoy a heightened sense of status in the workplace, reporting that their colleagues value their opinions at a 10% greater rate than interior designers and a 7% greater rate than operations staff (p=.003). They are also more likely to experience certainty in the workplace, with 65% of engineers reporting that there are clear rules and order in their workplaces, while just 54% of interior designers and operations staff do (p=.011). Meanwhile, both interior designers and architects are less likely than others to experience autonomy in the workplace, with 12% of interior designers and 10% of architects reporting that they are micromanaged at work while just 2% of engineers report this experience (p<.0001, ***Figure 30)***. Finally, interior designers are least likely to believe that their organizations treat them fairly, while engineers, operations, and architecture staff are most likely (p=.015, ***Figure 31)***.

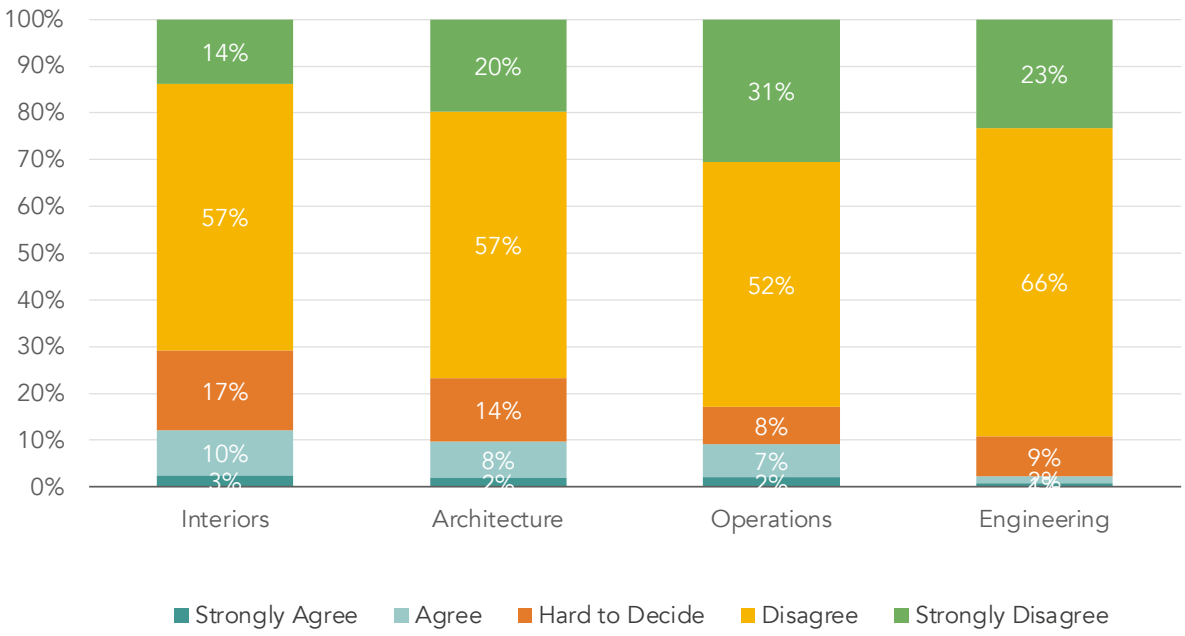


Figure 30
"I feel that I am micromanaged at work." by role

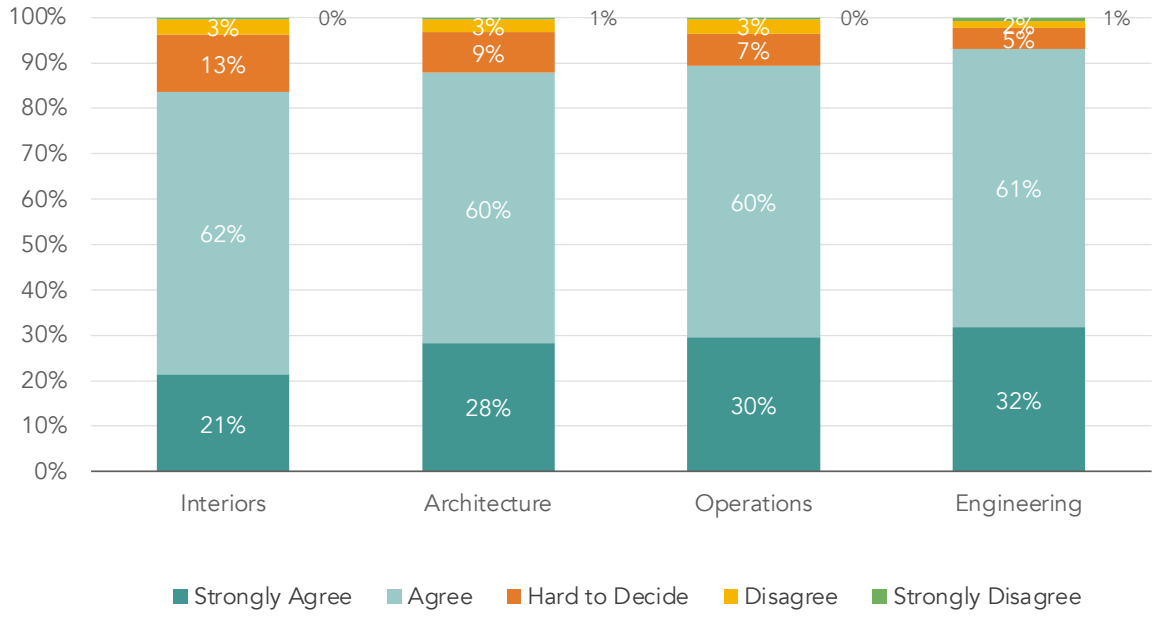


Figure 31
Perceived fairness of organization by role

These significant differences in the quality of workplace interactions and relationships are correlated with role-based differences in mental wellbeing in the workplace, and ultimately, professionals' intentions to stay in their current firms. Compared with those in other roles, interior designers are less likely to experience engagement at work (p=.011, ***Figure 32)***. While 65% of engineers and 64% of architects are engaged at work, just 54% of interior designers are. Meanwhile, 18% of interior designers are experiencing at least two symptoms of burnout, while 15% of engineers and architects are. Interior designers are also more likely than others to report experiencing mental health issues in the workplace, with 45% of interior designers reporting suffering from poor mental or emotional health within the last six months. 33% of architectural operations professionals and 29% of engineering professionals report experiencing these issues. These wellbeing issues ultimately translate to issues of retention: while 36% of interior designers agree or strongly agree that they have considered leaving their jobs in the last six months in order to improve their mental health or wellbeing, just 24% of engineers and 26% of both architects and operations professionals say the same ***(Figure 33***, p=.034).

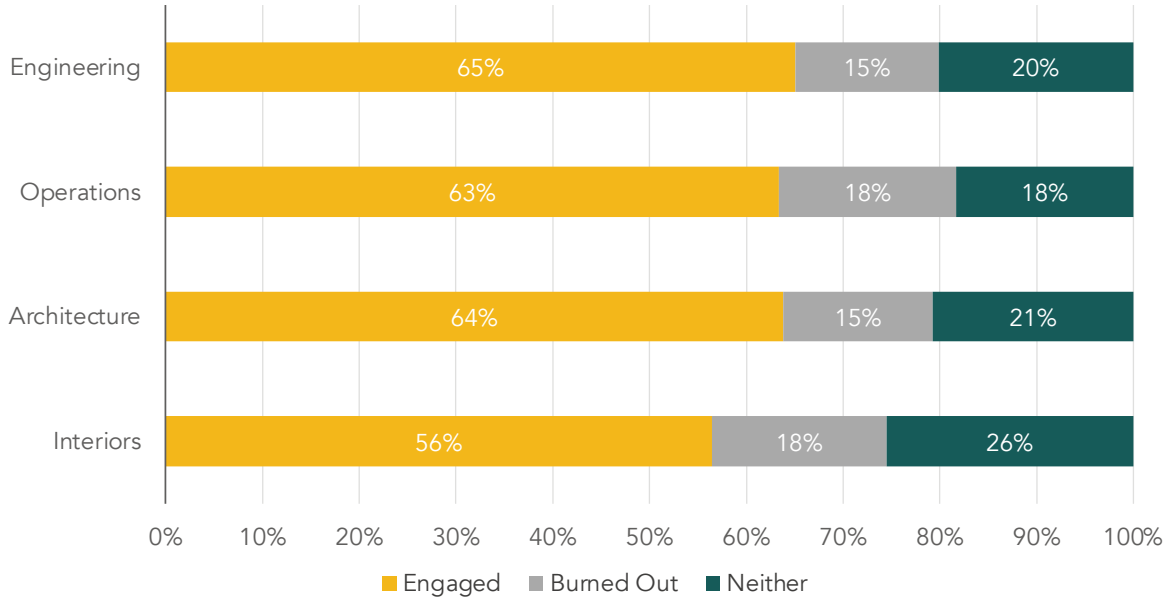


Figure 32
Engagement and burnout prevalence by role

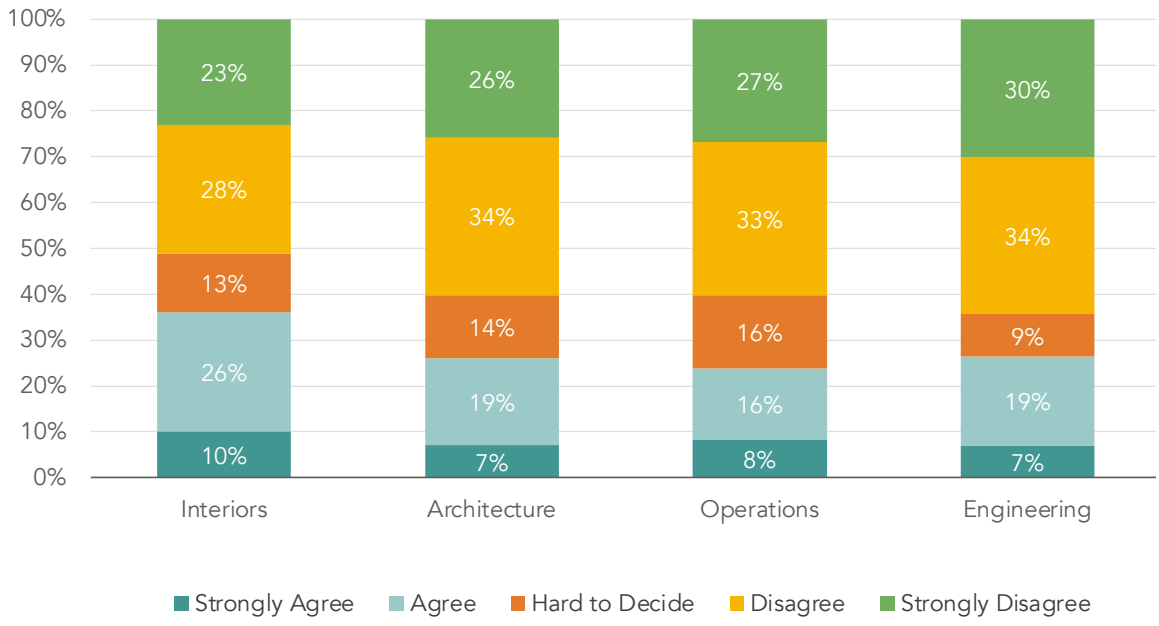


Figure 33
Respondents who have considered leaving their jobs within the last six months to improve their mental health or wellbeing by role

The Kids are Not Alright: Paying Dues, Anxiety and Mid-Career Malaise

Across many of the areas of inquiry in the survey, the experiences of the industry's young professionals are less positive on average than those of older professionals. Those under 30 are more likely than older respondents to report suffering from interpersonal and engagement issues many of the common symptoms of "paying dues" in the workplace, with feelings of low status, experiences of being micromanaged at work, a lower likelihood of experiencing inclusion, a lower likelihood of experiencing engagement, and lower comfort bringing up problems and tough issues in teams. Meanwhile, those age 30-39 share many of these experiences of paying dues, while also facing stresses related to increased responsibility, experience, and autonomy in the absence of increased control or autonomy. In addition to the negative experiences listed above, Millennial respondents were more likely than other age groups to experience a lack of certainty in the workplace, discomfort asking colleagues for help, increased prevalence of work-life issues, a decreased likelihood of believing that they are treated fairly in the workplace or that their organization's leaders care about their wellbeing, and an increased likelihood of considering changing jobs to improve one's wellbeing.

Social Dynamics and Age-Based Hierarchy

Those under 40 are significantly less likely than older members of their teams to experience inclusion in the design workplace. They are less likely to feel valued ($p<.0001$) or to feel comfortable being themselves at work ($p<.0001$, ***Figure 34)***. Meanwhile, psychological safety is far more common among older employees than those under 40. It is a particular concern for employees age 30-39. Those under 40 are less likely to feel comfortable bringing up problems and tough issues within their teams ($p<.0001$), while those 30-60 years old are less likely to feel comfortable asking for help ($p=.016$).

Compared with older employees, those under 40 are less likely to experience the types of social interactions that have been shown to activate a neural reward response. Professionals age 30-39 are most likely to experience conditions that have been shown to elicit a threat response based on the NeuroLeadership Institute's SCARF framework ***(Figure 35)***:

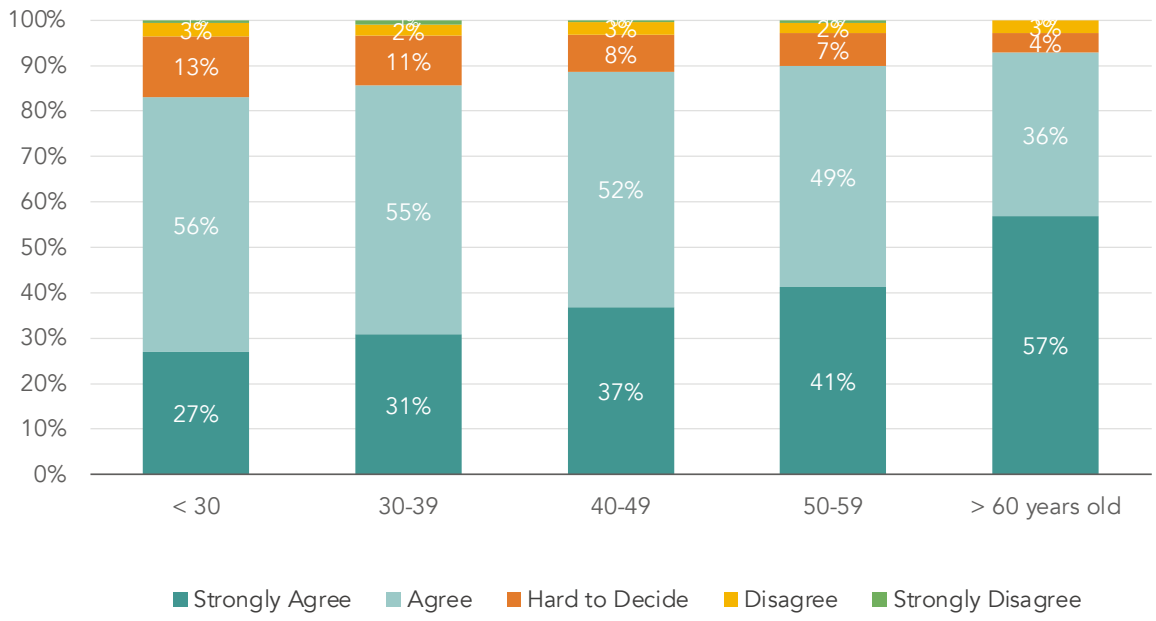


Figure 34
"I am comfortable being myself at work" by age

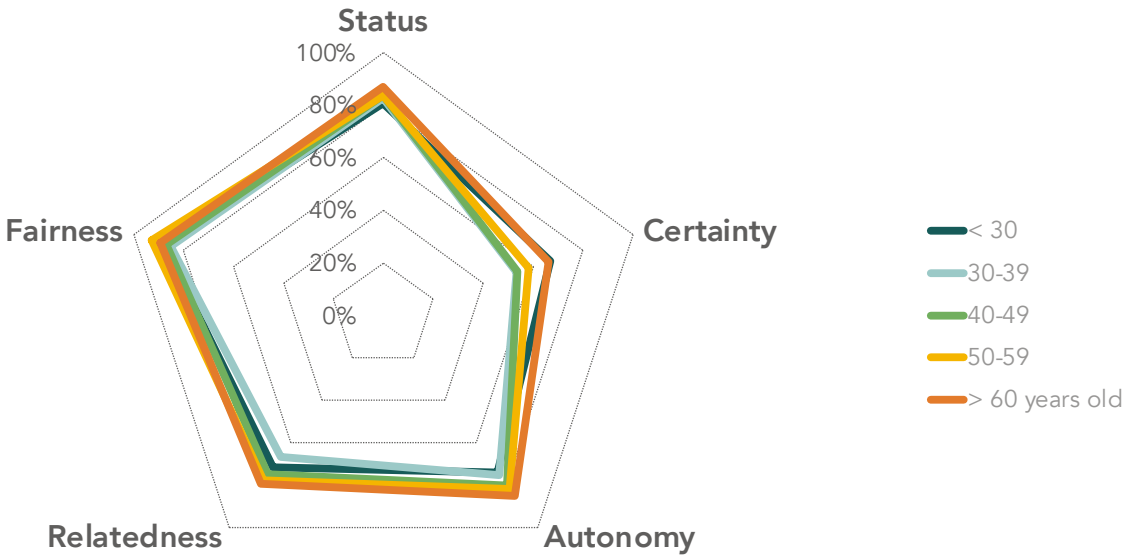


Figure 35
Perceptions of interpersonal workplace dynamics (SCARF model) by respondent age

Status

Those under 40 are less likely than older respondents to feel that their colleagues value their opinions, with 19% of those under 30 strongly agreeing, 25% of those age 30-39 strongly agreeing, and 31% of those over 40 strongly agreeing (p=.000).

Certainty

Those under 30 and over 60 are most likely to feel that there are clear rules and order within their organizations, with 67% of those under 30 and 66% of those over 60 agreeing or strongly agreeing. Meanwhile, those age 30-39 are least likely to agree, with just 53% of professionals in this age group agreeing or strongly agreeing while 14% disagree or strongly disagree (p<.0001).

Autonomy

Those under 40 are 40% more likely than those over 60 to feel micromanaged at work (p<.0001), with 12% of professionals under age 30 and 10% of professionals age 30-39 agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are micromanaged at work, compared with just 7% of professionals over age 60.

Relatedness

Those under 40 are 11% less likely than older employees to feel connected with their colleagues, with 71% of respondents under 30 and 67% of respondents age 30-39 agreeing or strongly agreeing, while 79% of those over age 60 do (p<.0001).

Fairness

Those 30-39 are least likely to believe that their organization treats them fairly, with 22% of those in their 30s strongly agreeing and 64% agreeing. Meanwhile, 41% of those over 60 strongly agree, with an additional 48% agreeing (p<.0001).

Establishing a Culture of Care

In addition to significant interpersonal stressors in the workplace, many young to mid-level professionals report uncertainty both within and beyond their organizations. These issues are compounded by a perceived lack of organizational support and significant work-life issues for those in their 30s, and especially for those who are parents of young children. The combination of these stressors is correlated with mental wellbeing, burnout, and retention issues, with professionals in their 30s more likely than others to report that they have considered leaving their jobs in order to protect their mental health.

Young professionals face significant uncertainty, both within and beyond the workplace. Professionals under age 40 are significantly more likely than older professionals to say that they find themselves worrying about social, political, economic and/or environmental issues that are in the news while they are working (p<.0001, ***Figure 36)***. While just under 40% of professionals over age 50 find themselves worrying while at work, 48% of professionals under 40 report experiencing these concerns. Professionals in their 30s also report uncertainty within the workplace, with just 53% of this group reporting that there are clear rules and order within their organizations.

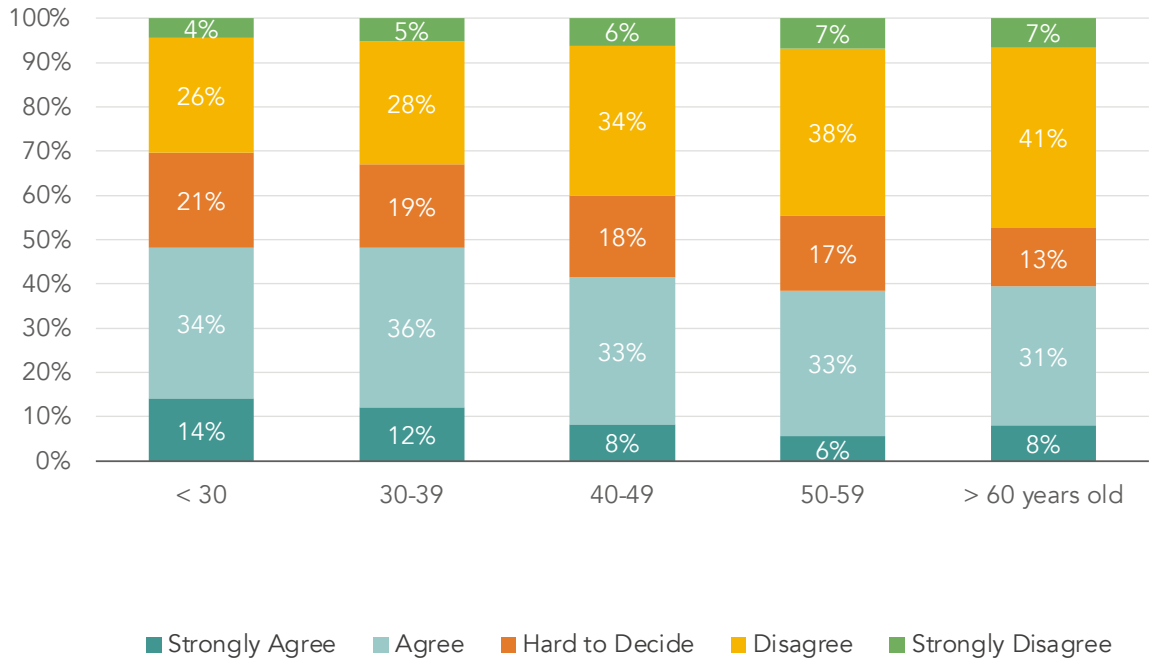


Figure 36
"I find myself worrying about social, political, economic or environmental issues that are in the news while working" by age

Millennial professionals also report higher rates work-life conflict relative to other age groups. Along with those in their 40s, professionals in their 30s are less likely than others to say that they have the time and energy to pursue interests outside of work, with less than half of those in their 30s agreeing or strongly agreeing, while 60% of those under 30 and 63% of those over 60 do ***(Figure 37***, p<.0001). These work-life challenges have real impacts on mental wellbeing, with 42% of professionals age 30-39 reporting that they have suffered from poor mental health as a result of work-life conflict within the last six months.

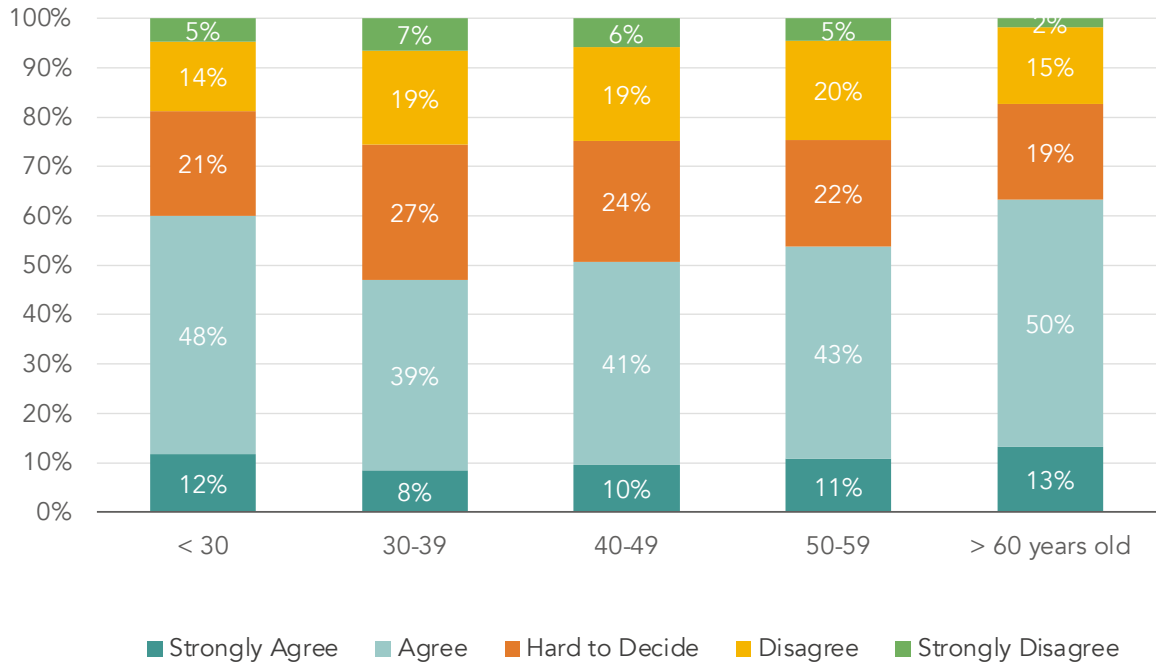


Figure 37
"I have enough time and energy to pursue interests outside of work" by age

Amidst these experiences, many professionals in their 30s question whether their organizations' leaders care about their wellbeing ($p<.0001$). Compared with 82% of those over 50, just 72% of those in their 30s agree or strongly agree that their organizations' leaders care about their well-being. Only one in five respondents in their 30s strongly agrees, compared with 30% of those over 60. Perceptions of care, described by organizational scholars as "perceived organizational support," are closely correlated with many of the interpersonal and work-life dynamics discussed in this section. Top predictors of perceived organizational support include: perceptions of fair treatment within an organization (those who agree are 161% more likely to feel supported), whether an individual feels like a valued member of their team (those who agree are 86% more likely to feel supported), whether they believe that colleagues value their opinions (those who agree are 54% more likely to feel supported), and whether they are able to pursue interests outside of work (those who agree are 28% more likely to feel supported). Fair treatment by one's organization and feeling like a valued member of one's team is more predictive of perceived organizational support among those in their 30s than it is for those in other age groups, suggesting that inclusion and fairness, or perceived organizational justice, may be especially important for this cohort's wellbeing in the workplace ***(Figure 38)***.

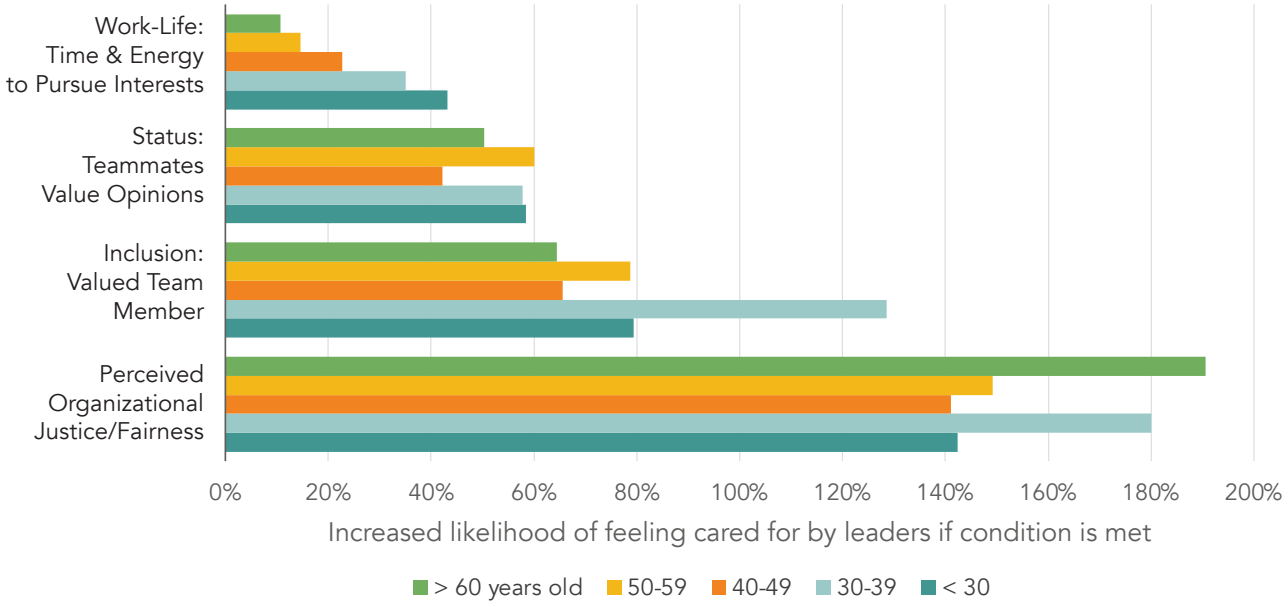


Figure 38
Top predictors of perceived organizational support by age cohort

Perceived organizational support is also tied to key wellness outcomes in the survey, including engagement, burnout, and whether a respondent has considered leaving their job for mental wellness reasons. With interpersonal stress more common among young professionals, these individuals are at a heightened risk of suffering from burnout, which is described in organizational psychology literature as an outcome of chronic interpersonal stress in the workplace. Responses from the survey demonstrate that this occurs in design workplaces, with those under 40 least likely to be engaged and most likely to be burned out, while those over 50 are most likely ($p<.0001$, ***Figure 39)***. Just 53% of design professionals under 30 and 59% of professionals in their 30s report experiencing all three dimensions of engagement while 73% of professionals in their 50s and 75% of professionals in their 60s report these experiences. Experiences of burnout are also correlated with age, with those under 40 more likely to experience at least two of the three symptoms of burnout ($p=.000$). These variations in experience are tied to differences in individuals' experiences of the following dimensions of burnout and engagement:

Energy/Exhaustion

Those under 40 are least likely to be energized by their work or enthusiastic about their jobs, while those over 50 are most likely. 61% of those under 30 and 65% of those in their 30s agree or strongly agree that they are energized by their work, while 78% of those over age 50 report the same.

Dedication/Cynicism

Those under 40 are least likely to be enthusiastic about their jobs, while those over 50 are most likely. 73% of those under 30 and 72% of those in their 30s report that they are enthusiastic about their jobs, while 81% of those over age 50 experience enthusiasm.

Inefficacy

Those under 40 are less likely to believe that their work makes a positive impact in the world, while those over 40 are more likely. While 72% of those under 30 and 71% of those in their 30s report that their work makes a positive impact in the world, 82% of those age 60 or older agree.

Absorption

Finally, immersion in one's work increases with age, with each age group significantly different. While 71% of professionals under age 30 report that they are immersed in their work, 90% of those age 50 and over agree or strongly agree.

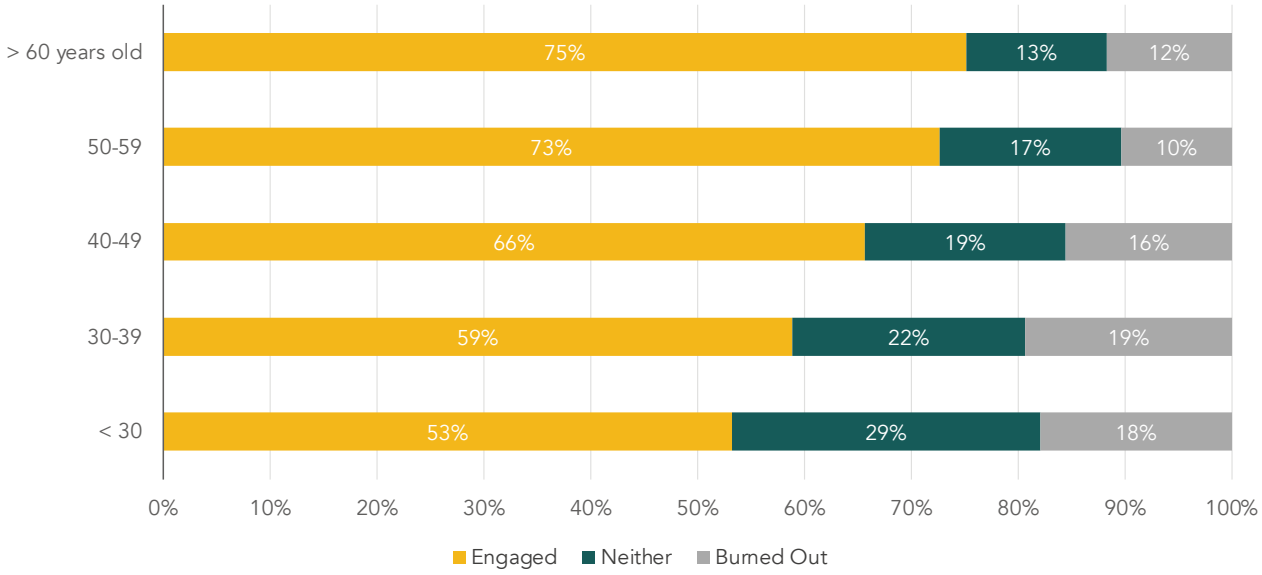


Figure 39
Burnout and engagement prevalence by age

Ultimately, these tensions are tied to retention issues for employers. Those 30-39 are significantly more likely than others to have considered leaving their jobs to protect their mental or emotional well-being (p<.0001, ***Figure 40)***. Nearly one in three design professionals in their 30s reports that they have considered leaving within the last six months, with about one in ten strongly agreeing. A further 15% say that it's hard to decide. In comparison, just 22% of those under 30 and 23% of those over 50 say that they have considered leaving for wellness reasons.

These findings, considered alongside those on age and burnout, mental wellbeing, work-life issues, and interpersonal stress in the workplace, suggest that young professionals, and especially those in their 30s, are facing workplace stress from a number of directions. These stresses have a real impact, not only on the individuals working in our offices, but on firms' bottom lines as they contend with increased turnover and burnout issues that have been shown to result in decreased productivity. Ultimately, increased focus on the ways in which workplace culture and interpersonal dynamics shape the experiences of young professionals in design workplaces is likely to result in better outcomes, both for emerging professionals and for their employers.

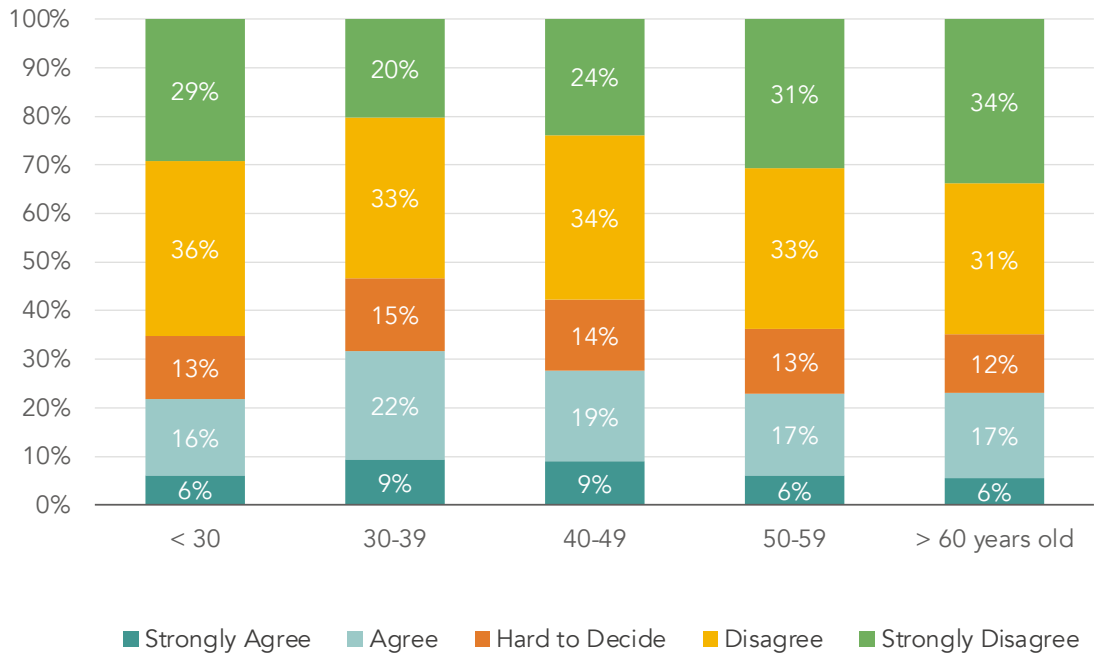


Figure 40
"Within the last six months, I have considered leaving my current job in order to improve my mental health or well-being" by age

Assessing the Great Reshuffle

The final industry trend that the research team considered in depth is the lingering impacts of the great reshuffle on firm culture and individuals' wellbeing. Reflecting industry trends, a significant proportion of survey respondents have changed jobs since the start of the pandemic, with 34% reporting tenures of two or fewer years with their current firm. Overall, we found strong evidence that those who had changed firms during the later stages of the great reshuffle were more likely to be thriving in their jobs than those who had remained in their jobs throughout the pandemic. Meanwhile, we found that the great reshuffle may continue for some time, with significant flight risk among those who have been in their current jobs for three to ten years. Finally, the survey also suggests that employers who wish to reduce flight risk would do well to focus on workplace culture and interpersonal dynamics, with perceived organizational support, perceived organizational justice, engagement, and work-life satisfaction topping the list of predictors of flight risk.

Newest Hires and the Most Tenured Thrive while Mid-Tenure Employees Reconsider

Overall, the experiences of respondents who switched jobs during the great reshuffle are more positive on average than those of respondents with mid-range tenures of three to ten years. In large part, this seems to be tied to differences in the ways that new hires view the structures of their organizations, their relationships with firm leadership, and the quality of work-life experience. New hires experience far greater rates of certainty in the workplace than others, with nearly seven in ten new hires reporting that there are clear rules and order in their organizations. By comparison, just over half – 52% -- of those with six to ten years in their current firms report experiencing certainty ($p<.0001$). New hires are also more likely to have positive work-life experiences, with 67% of those with tenures of under a year reporting that they have time and energy to pursue interests outside of work while just 45% of those with six to ten year tenures do ($p<.0001$, ***Figure 41)***. Finally, those with less than a year, or more than 20, in their current organizations are most likely to experience organizational support, with 83% of new hires agreeing or strongly agreeing that their organization's leaders care about their wellbeing. Meanwhile, those who have been with their firms for 6-10 years are least likely, with just 74% believing that their leaders care ($p<.0001$, ***Figure 42)***.

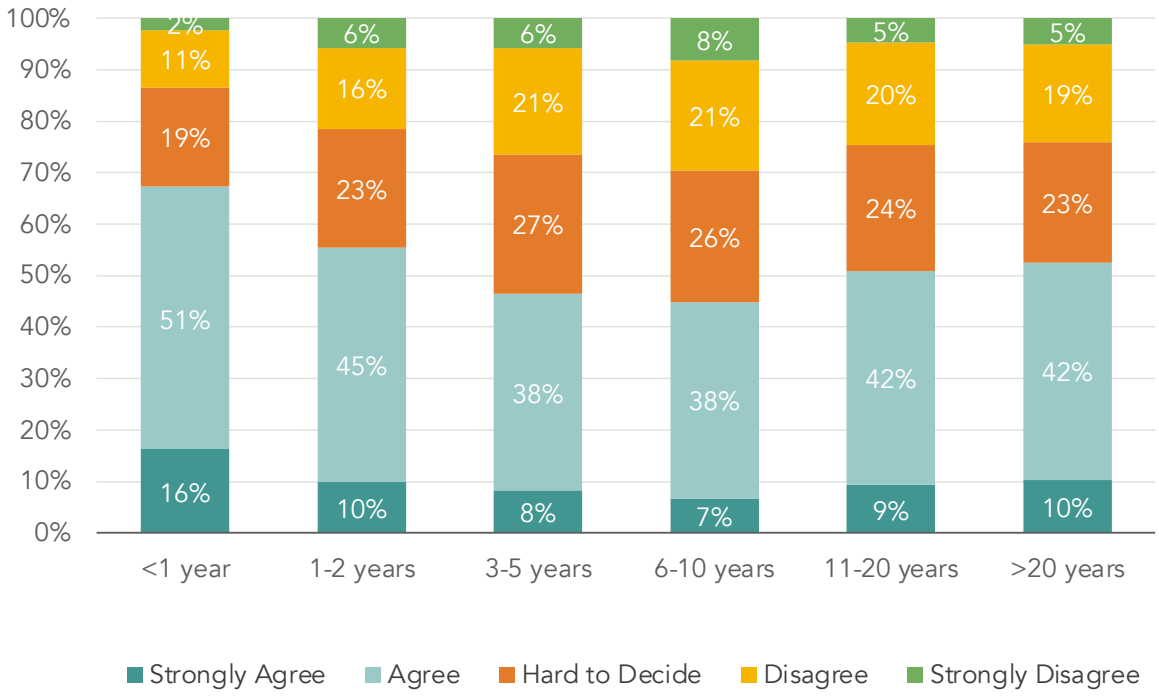


Figure 41
"I have the time and energy to pursue my interests outside of work"
by years worked with organization

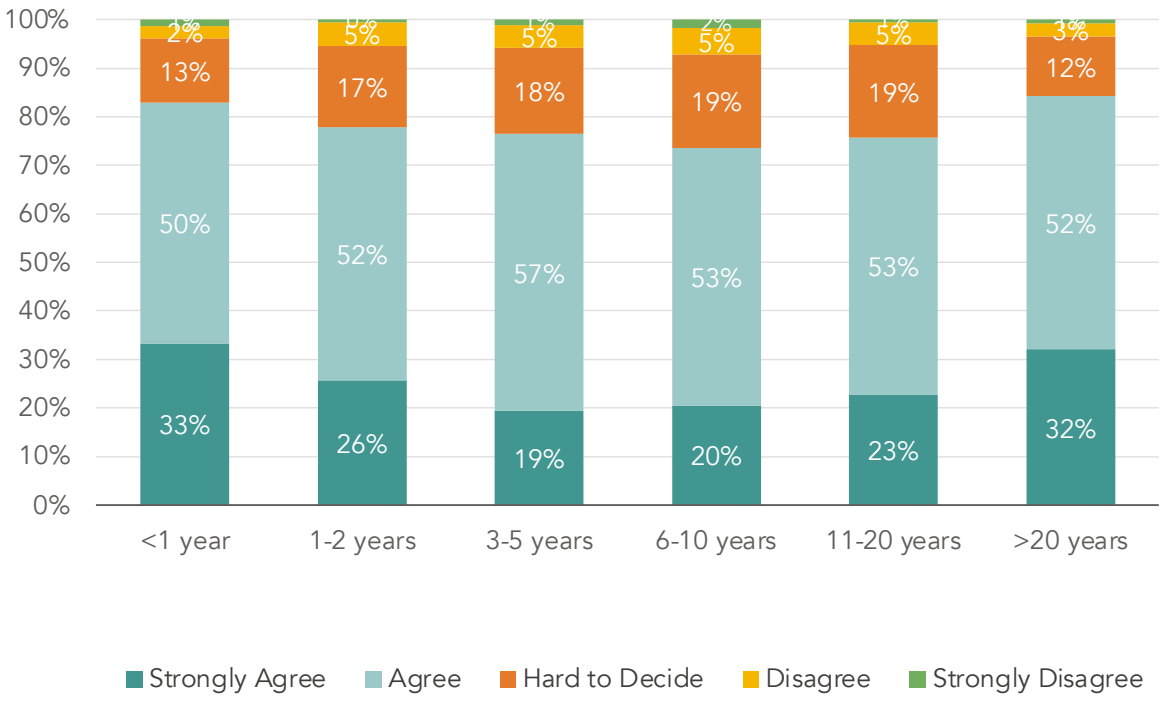


Figure 42
"My organization's leaders care about my well-being" by years worked with organization

These positive organizational experiences are correlated with a lower incidence of mental health issues like burnout and a higher prevalence of engagement in design workplaces. A remarkable 72% of those with tenures of less than a year with their current firms report experiencing all three dimensions of engagement, while just 54% of those with 1-2 year tenures, 59% of those with 3-5 year tenures, and 58% of those with 6-10 year tenures do. Meanwhile, only 10% of new hires report experiencing at least two of the three symptoms of burnout, while those with one- to-ten-year tenures are roughly twice as likely to report suffering from burnout ***(Figure 43)***. These differences in overall burnout and engagement levels are tied to the following significant differences in how respondents experience each of the dimensions of these conditions:

Energy

Those with less than a year in their current firm, as well as those with 10+ year tenures, are more likely than those with 2-10 year tenures to feel energized by their work ($p<.0001$). 80% of those with tenures of less than a year report being energized by their work, while just 61% of those with one-to-two-year tenures do.

Enthusiasm

Those with less than a year, or more than 20, are most likely to feel enthusiastic about their jobs. Those with 3-5 year tenures are least likely ($p<.0001$). 84% of those with tenures of less than a year report being enthusiastic about their jobs, while 71% of those with tenures of six to ten years agree or strongly agree.

Efficacy

Those with less than a year, or more than 10 are most likely to believe that their work makes a positive impact in the world, with those with 3-5 year tenures least likely ($p<.0001$).

Absorption

Those with 20+ year tenures most likely to experience absorption, with 28% strongly agreeing that they are immersed in their work, followed by those with 11-20 year tenures, with 21% strongly agreeing ($p<.0001$). Absorption is also common among new hires, although strong agreement is less prevalent. 80% of those with tenures of less than a year agree or strongly agree, compared with just 61% of those with one-to-two-year tenures.

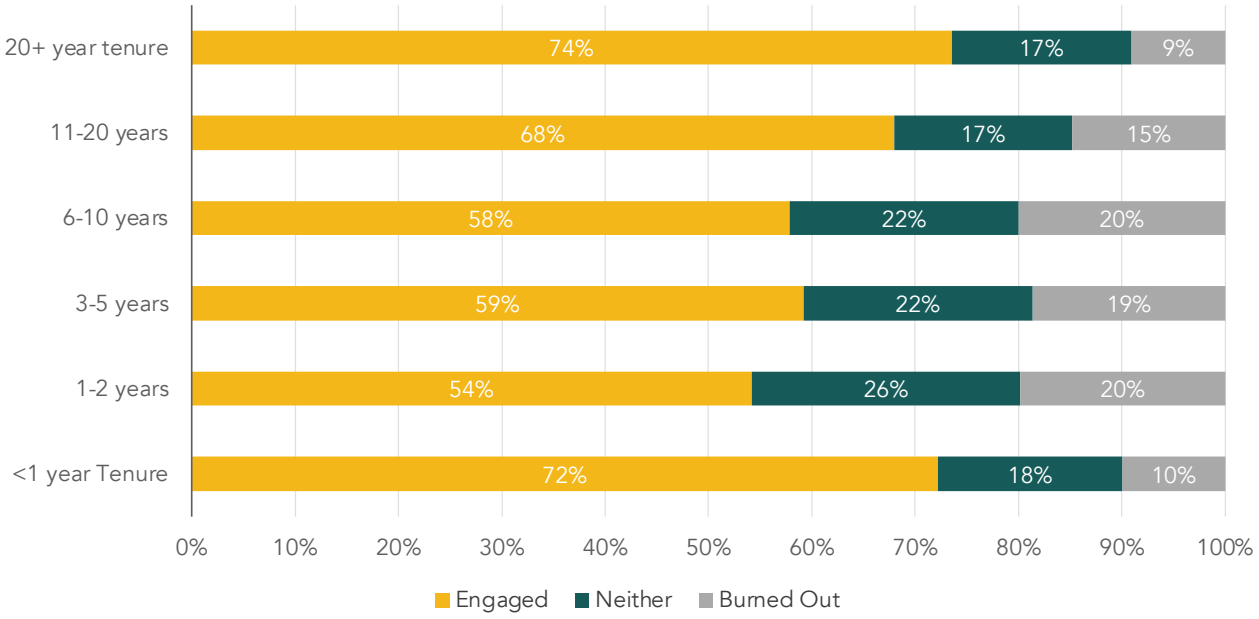


Figure 43
Burnout and engagement prevalence by years of employment with current firm

While new hires have some of the most positive experiences of engagement, certainty, organizational support, and work-life, their interpersonal experiences in the workplace are not typically more positive than those of employees with longer tenures. Many new hires struggle to connect with their colleagues, with approximately two thirds of new hires reporting that they feel connected to their colleagues while those with tenures of six or more years are significantly more likely to experience connection (p<.0001, ***Figure 44)***. Those with the longest tenures are also more likely to experience inclusion, psychological safety and autonomy in design workplaces:

Inclusion: Those with one-to-five-year tenures are least likely to feel like valued members of their teams, while those with tenures of greater than ten years are most likely (p<.0001). Those with tenures under ten years are less likely than those with tenures of over ten years to feel likely they can be themselves at work (p<.0001).

Psychological Safety: Those with <10 years in their firms are less likely than those with longer tenures to feel that they can bring up problems and tough issues within teams (p<.0001). Those with tenures of 1-5 years are less likely than more tenured employees to feel that they can ask for help (p=.001)

Autonomy: Those with 20+ year tenures are significantly less likely than others to feel micromanaged at work. Those with 3-5 year tenures are most likely. (p<.0001).

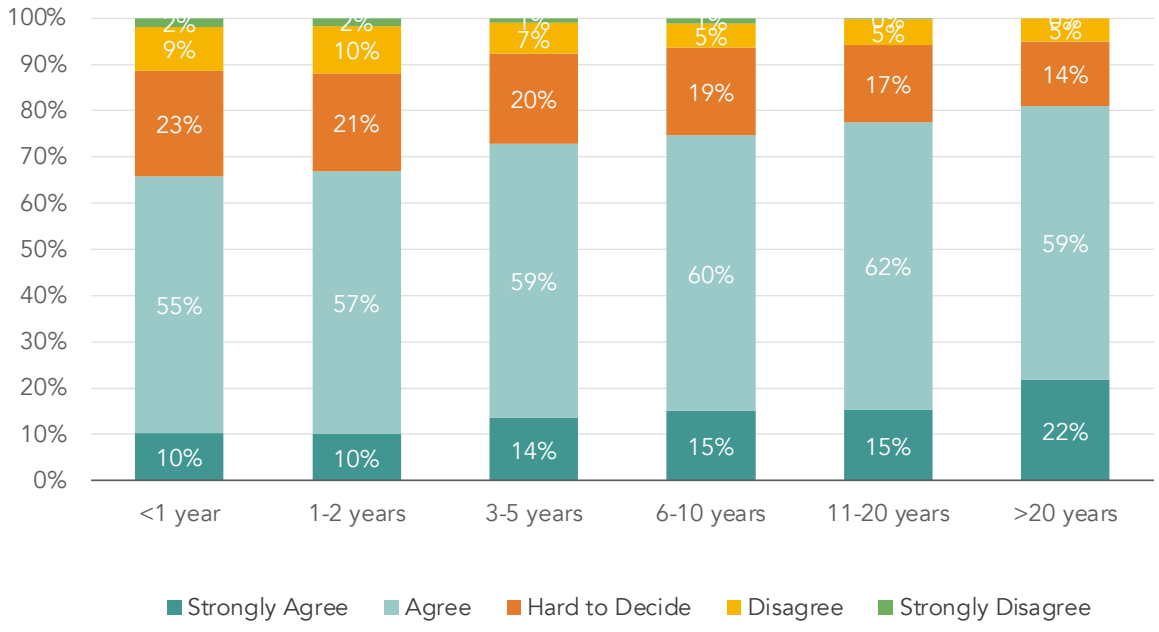


Figure 44
"I feel connected to my colleagues." by years of employment with firm

Meanwhile, employees with mid-range tenures are more likely than others to struggle with a range of issues and, ultimately, to say that they have considered leaving in order to improve their mental health. Those with less than a year and 20-or-more-year tenures are least likely to say that they have considered leaving their jobs within the last 6 months in order to improve their mental health ($p<.0001$). Meanwhile, those with three- to-ten-year tenures are significantly more likely than others to say that they have considered leaving, with 34% of those with three-to-five-year tenures and 37% of those with six-to-ten-year tenures reporting that they have considered leaving ***(Figure 45)***.

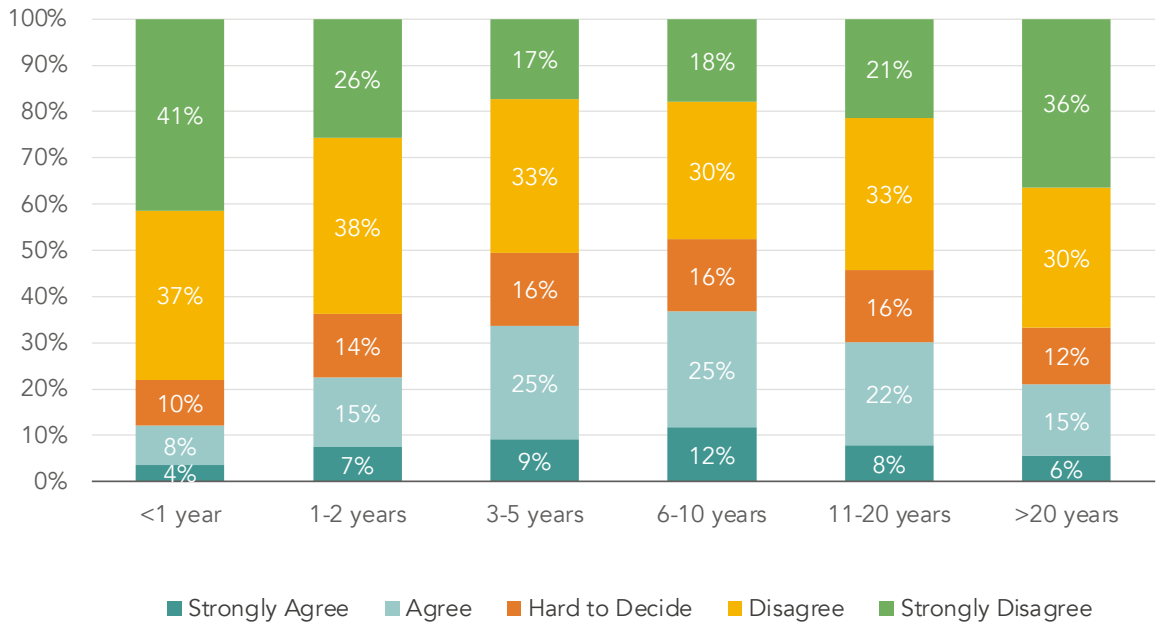


Figure 45
Respondents who have considered leaving their jobs within the last six months to improve their mental health or wellbeing by years of employment with current firm

Predicting and Reducing Flight Risk

While the survey demonstrates that pressures from turnover persist within the industry, particularly among Millennial employees and those with mid-range tenures, survey responses also point to several key predictors of retention likelihood that may help firm leaders to better understand how to help employees find wellness, satisfaction, and engagement within firms. Several factors measured within the survey, including perceived organizational support, perceived organizational justice ("my organization treats me fairly"), burnout and engagement, and work-life perceptions, are strongly correlated with respondents' likelihood of reporting that they have considered leaving their jobs within the last six months ***(Figure 46).*** Those experiencing at least two symptoms of burnout are three times as likely as those who aren't to report that they have considered leaving their jobs, with 60% of this group reporting that they have considered leaving. Meanwhile, the positive state of engagement is correlated with a significant decrease in flight risk, with just 15% of those experiencing all three dimensions of engagement reporting that they have considered leaving, a 67% reduction in flight risk relative to those who aren't experiencing engagement.

Organizational and interpersonal dynamics are also key predictors of retention. Compared to those who don't agree, those who say that their organization's leaders care about their wellbeing are 67% less likely to have considered leaving. Meanwhile, believing that one is treated fairly is correlated with a 65% reduction in flight risk, and having enough time and energy to pursue interests outside of work is correlated with a 61% reduction in flight risk. Inclusion and psychological safety are also moderately correlated with flight risk, with those who feel like valued members of their teams 63% less likely to have considered leaving, those who feel comfortable being themselves at work 41% less likely to have considered leaving, those who are comfortable asking colleagues for help 56% less likely to have considered leaving, and those who feel comfortable bringing up problems and tough issues within their teams 49% less likely to have considered leaving.

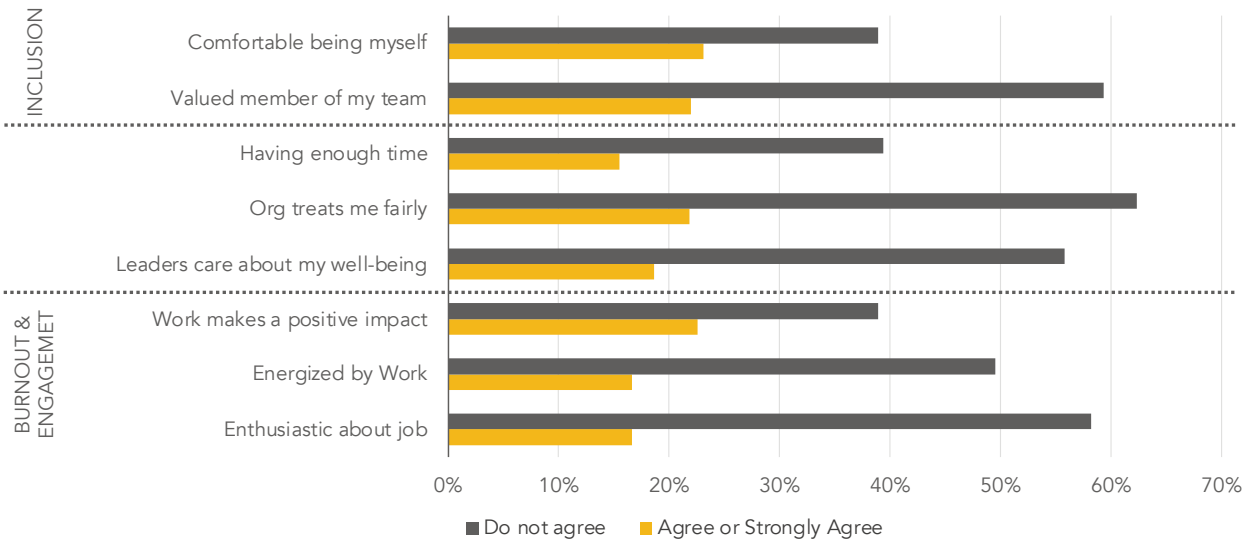


Figure 46

Likelihood of having considered leaving job within the last six months by response to questions about burnout, engagement, and workplace dynamics

What Employees Want (and What Firm Leaders Can Do About it)

Respondents were invited to give us open-ended responses to a couple of questions. However, without multiple choice responses, the task to categorize and tabulate all 2,750 surveys would have been a massive undertaking. Instead, responses were all read and based on pulling roughly 1000 surveys, clear response patterns for each of the two questions emerged.

What is the most beneficial thing your firm is currently doing to support your social and emotional well-being at work?

Keeping in mind that the survey was conducted during the fall of 2022, responses to this open-ended question reflected the conditions within firms at that time.

Flexibility.

By spring of 2023, most firms had settled into a work pattern that included more time in the office. While some firms now have a fully open office, with employees at their desks five days a week, most have worked out a hybrid schedule that involves at least one remote day a week.

In our survey, employees most often identified "flexibility" as the most valued benefit their firms were offering employees. The term was used to describe not just work schedules but also location – the choice to work from home or the office. Having flexibility seemed to not only allow for a better balance of work and life, but, for many, it provided a more efficient and productive way of working. It also implied a level of trust that was appreciated. The quotes which follow are examples of what respondents meant by "flexibility."

> "I feel like I am given an incredible amount of self-agency to do my work, setting my own priorities, having a great deal of flexibility in setting my schedule, being trusted to get the job done, and being able to bring a personality to my work."

> "Transitioning back to a hybrid model with several days in the office per week. This allows me to interact with people outside of my project team and discuss things that are not work related."

> "Allowing us to decide how remote we are."

> "Providing flexibility. That is why I stay. It allows me to do meaningful work and take care of my family at the same time. I feel like I can do both here."

> "Giving the option to work in the office. Forced remote work during the pandemic created an unhealthy blurring of home and work life."

Support.

Providing an infrastructure in the form of proactive HR systems and/or personal check-ins was another benefit employees reported as beneficial for their social and emotional well-being. Many employees reported that they valued leaders who recognized not only the difficulties of managing workload, but also of those in life outside of work. For some, this translated into deliberately managing workload to ease stress. The following quotes reflect a variety of ways that we heard that firms supported design professionals.

> "Being mindful of how many projects overall the office takes on. There was a point at which the office turned down project work (and good projects, too) because people were overstaffed and too busy to take on more work."

> "What keeps me going is the teams I work with have my back and I have theirs. I know that there are a lot of people who are trying to give from an empty cup at the moment and it makes it very hard."

> "Great principal that allows me to take as much responsibility as I want, but always makes it clear that I can dial back at any point."

> "We are having monthly check-ins with the principals of the firm. This has created a great opportunity for us to share how we are doing, what can be improved, and what we would like to work on in the future. It makes me feel like I am being heard and valued."

RTO Activities.

Respondents told us that their firms encouraged a return to the office through a variety of activities – happy hours, social gatherings, "wellness games", birthday celebrations and "random shows of appreciation." Many appreciated these more communal ways of coming together with colleagues, especially after being apart for so long. The quotes which follow reflect some of the variety of ways RTO activities were appreciated.

> "We've recently embarked on team building sessions facilitated by an outside team-building consultant."

> "The firm hosts happy hours, talks and other events to encourage socialization outside of projects."

> "Encouraging folks to return to the office. The work staff is our second family. We need to be able to interact with our teammates/office family."

> "Promoting in-office social gatherings. It's a very simple thing, breaking bread together, but very powerful."

Positive Office Environment.

Employees mentioned a variety of amenities their firms provided that tended to create a friendly, positive, and welcoming environment. These included office renovations – standing desks, naturally lit spaces, greenery – as well as amenities like yoga spaces, gym memberships, snacks. We heard that these improvements created a more enticing working environment that made returning to the office more desirable. What follows are a few examples of ways employees appreciated the positive office environment.

> "Providing an excellent physical working environment (light, air, greens, and etc)."
>
> "The new 3rd floor space, offering different spaces that support multiple work typologies - LOVE."
>
> "The most beneficial thing is prioritizing the office renovation. The more enticing the office is compared to home workspaces, the more people will want to work in-person, which makes the office more enjoyable to work from - once there's a critical mass and not a spread-out few."
>
> "Creating a fair environment for everyone – lots of opportunities to learn and take the lead if someone is willing."
>
> What's one new thing that you wish that your firm would start doing to support your social and emotional well-being at work?

While respondents indicated that their firms are already taking positive steps to support their social and emotional well-being at work, they also had suggestions regarding additional steps that their firms could take to better support their health. It is clear, and important to keep in mind, that frustrations and challenges the industry was suffering from long before the pandemic are reflected in response to this question. The pandemic simply brought some of these longstanding issues in firms to the forefront.

Response categories below are presented in roughly the order of frequency of response.

More Balanced Workload/Hiring.

The number one response to this question was about balancing workload. The multiple-choice questions in the survey made it clear that burnout is a major issue for design firms. Open-ended responses to the question above echoed that sentiment. In addition to complaints about having to meet impossible deadlines, feeling overworked and frustrated, and never being "off the clock," there was concern about taking on clients and projects with unrealistic expectations. Chronic understaffing and the need to hire were issues related to this topic. The quotes below represent the range of responses categorized under this topic:

"Deadlines are too tight and last minute. Too many fire drills, one after another."

"We need to better staff projects with the appropriate personnel. This would go a long way to help reduce the stress on those who are carrying significant burden because they are doing the work of 2, or 3 people."

"Push-back on client-driven deadlines, which are often unrealistic without lots of overtime effort."

"HIRE MORE FOLKS to lighten the load."

"When you have 16 projects going on at once the human brain cannot switch tasks effectively."

Schedule Issues.

Responses included a variety of suggestions to provide a more productive and efficient work environment, including: 4-day work week; unlimited PTO; having continued flexibility in the time and place one works, and not being penalized for it. In addition, there were some who wanted to return to the 5-day in-office work week, others who wanted to be fully remote and many who wanted a hybrid work environment. Arguments for all sides of these schedule issues often focused on improved productivity and greater efficiency. The quotes below represent the range of responses categorized under this topic:

"Embrace the hybrid work wholeheartedly. It feels like many in leadership are being forced to accept that many of us would prefer remote work with no set number of days in the office."

"While we have great benefits, I think we could be doing more to expand our PTO and parental PTO programs to be a more forward-thinking organization and to also commit to a 4-day work week."

"When on PTO, you are really not on PTO because you are always checking in. Give people permission to check out on PTO."

"Allow studio time to be voluntary rather than mandatory. I find I am much more productive from home and working in a large office gives me stress (even though it's a nice office and people are nice)."

"Clearer guidelines for permanent WFH policies."

Feedback/Interaction/Acknowledgment.

Some employees craved more interaction with their team, their firm's leadership, employees in other offices, those on other teams, new hires, etc. Many of these respondents told us that they hoped to see more opportunities to acknowledge employees for their work. Additionally, a number of respondents who worked in remote or hybrid settings described the experience of operating in something of a vacuum. Having more interaction, in both directions, reminded them they were part of a greater whole. The quotes below represent the range of responses categorized under this topic:

"If I don't go into the office, I won't speak to anyone that day. We need to provide individuals a place to connect and bond or all the young architects and engineers will burnout and leave."

"Foster collaborative in-person design culture and display creative process physically in office. People need to step away from their computer and not be isolated with their project teams."

"More opportunities to recognize good people doing good work."

Social Gatherings.

The urge to connect more with colleagues, team members, non-team members, other offices was strong among respondents. COVID had such an isolating impact that employees seemed hungry to get to know each other again and to meet new colleagues through happy hours, town halls, and other events. The quotes below represent the range of responses categorized under this topic:

> "Hold regular informal office gatherings outside of monthly all-staff meetings to help against burnout."

> "They used to do yoga/fitness classes, in-house cooking/barbecues, and holiday events. Those would be good to start again. Anything to break up the day and offer a reason to leave your desk and see people you don't normally work with. It feels useless to drive an hour into work to sit at a desk alone all day and drive home!"

Support Wellbeing and Health.

Whether in the office or off-site, some employees felt strongly that the firm could offer various physical and mental health opportunities to guard against stress and burnout. The quotes below represent the range of responses categorized under this topic:

> "Allow breaks for mental health that don't take away from PTO; explore/research ways to notice and deal with burnout; offer ways of dealing with stress."

> "Coordinate lunch well-being walks around the neighborhood."

Better Compensation.

There were a number of responses that specifically dealt with compensation – whether that was a promotion, increased salary, better benefits, payment for overtime work, equity in pay, cost of living increases or help in repaying student loans. The quotes below represent the range of responses categorized under this topic:

> "Pay for networking opportunities that happen during work hours instead of using personal time (ie. lunch and learns when reps come in)."

> "More transparency about promotions and salary. Most people seem to get promoted because they are a "favorite" of someone. The decisions do not seem based on a common standard. Salaries and bonuses are the same."

> "Paying a living wage."

> "Spot bonuses."

More Accountability/Transparency/Clarity.

This issue came up with a fair amount of frequency. While it seems less intuitively related to wellbeing, there appeared to be enough frustration in this area, it was worth highlighting, especially as analysis of the multiple-choice survey questions demonstrates clear relationships between employee wellbeing and interpersonal dynamics in design workplaces. Accountability really refers to responsibility – whether that's on a project or with management. Transparency addresses an open atmosphere that engenders trust. Clarity is simply being clear – about roles, about policy, about expectations.

> "Hire hard-working individuals based on merit. A continuous issue in the firm is staff bailing on major deadlines. Burnout directly happens when there is understaffing, performance failures, and unexcused absences."

> "Find a new way to measure productivity/profits that would allow employees to work more flexible hours and be paid not on a 40 hour-week (or more) scale but on a basis of getting work done."

> "Set clear expectations for all team members on a project and provide time for feedback."

> "More transparency about promotion process and salaries."

Positive Office Environment.

This refers not just to the amenities provided in the office – major renovations, quiet spaces, snacks, technology, etc. -- but also the atmosphere that it creates. Several expressed a desire to cultivate a more positive working environment that would make coming into the office more worthwhile – particularly for those with hybrid schedules.

> "I wish our office was cleaner. Being able to work from home is nice because I can keep my space very tidy and looking nice, but I have less control of how our office looks.

> "I wish they would give people more places in the office to isolate and work. The open office is distracting. Higher dividers or more isolated study nooks would be very helpful."

> "Allow me to have my own desk rather than sharing an unknown destination every day."

> "Music at work."

Checking In.

Related to the sense of feeling somewhat disconnected for the past few years, some employees would like to have more personal check-ins – just having someone, most often their direct manager, who is asking how they're doing.

> "Supervisor check-ins...not about project specifics...but asking how well I feel I am handling the workload. With, hopefully, an empathy to help guide through the worry and stress toward a long-standing resolution."

> "I feel like we could be better at team check-ins. Some people are really struggling with the work-life balance, but it takes a while to get it out of them."

Training/Mentoring.

There is clearly a thirst to learn and advance oneself professionally. A number of employees voiced interest in having more opportunities – either for themselves or for others. Whether this would be in the form of a formal mentoring program, an off-site program or on-the-job training, this issue came up with some frequency.

> "Supervisors are well-trained to coordinate a document, but several need formal and informal mentorship and training on managing a group of people."

> "Have employees, especially those managing people, work in the office more frequently. Offer more mentorship for new employees."

> "Personal annual education funds for staff development w/approval of manager."

Conclusions

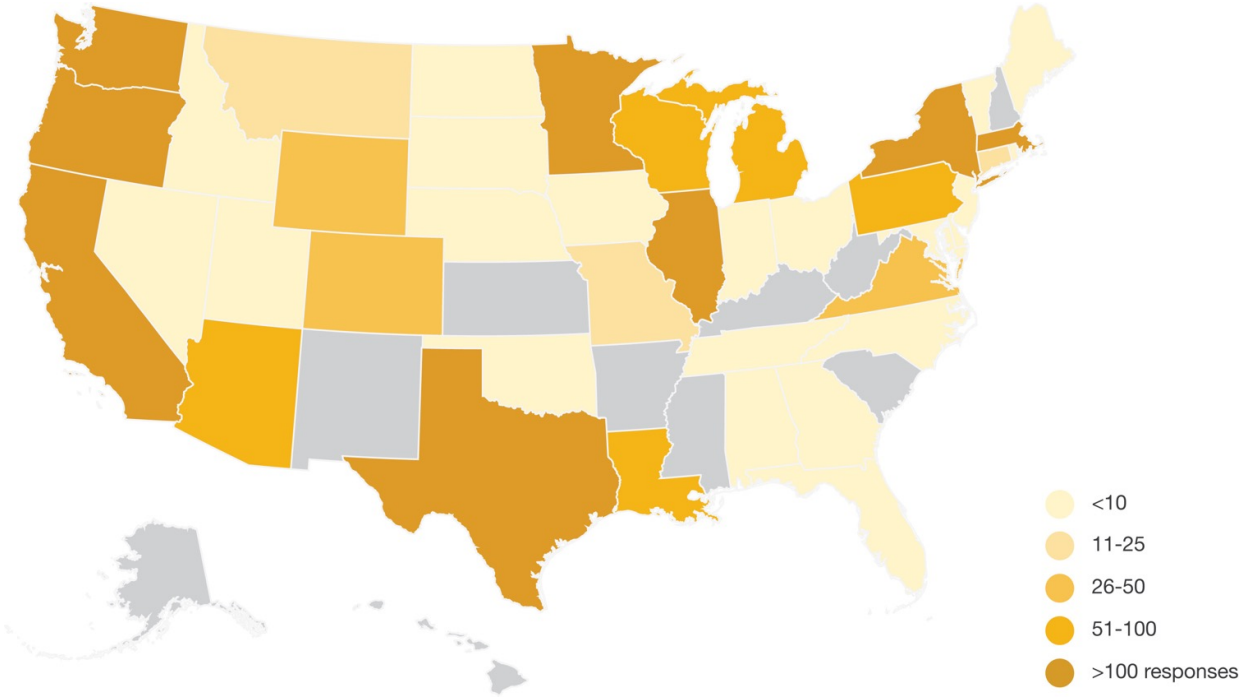
All told, the perspectives that were shared as a part of this project suggest that the design industry is in a moment of significant cultural reinvention, and that the tensions associated with this transformation are having real impacts on the health and wellbeing of design professionals at all levels of practice. These impacts, however, are not experienced evenly across the industry. Young and mid-level professionals, those who have been with their firms for several years, interior designers, and female, non-binary and BIPOC professionals all face greater interpersonal and cultural stressors than others in the industry. The presence of these stressors is correlated with increased prevalence of burnout, work-related mental and physical health ailments, and likelihood of leaving a firm to protect one's wellbeing. This suggests that firm leaders who seek to improve morale and wellbeing within their organizations will need to pay careful attention to the needs of employees from minoritized groups who face acute burdens, while also addressing the interpersonal dynamics that are likely to exacerbate stress in the workplace for all professionals. As we collectively work to build a more just and equitable profession, it's imperative that design firms and their leaders foster positive interpersonal dynamics that are aligned with clear and healthy organizational cultures. Ultimately, our cultures are defined by the worst behaviors that we tolerate – and their impacts on the most vulnerable members of our professional community.[27]

The analysis of this data also draws clear connections between workplace culture, interpersonal dynamics, and many of the employee wellness and retention issues that have concerned firm leaders over the last several years. This suggests that those seeking to establish healthy workplaces would do well to focus on cultivating clear cultures where employees feel included, experience psychological safety, and have positive interpersonal interactions on a routine basis. In these healthy cultures, any concerns about whether leaders care about employee wellbeing or whether individuals are treated fairly should be taken seriously, as perceptions of fairness and organizational support are highly predictive of both mental health outcomes and employee retention. By extending the scope of conversations about employee wellbeing beyond work-life issues, employers will be able to develop more holistic solutions to these issues, with the ultimate goal of supporting a broader range of professionals in satisfying and sustainable careers in the design industry.

Appendix A: Who Responded?

Overall, the survey garnered 2,750 responses from 57 firms. Respondents reporting working in 41 states across the US, three Canadian provinces, and several additional international locations ***(Figure 47)***. The highest concentrations of respondents are in places where there are the most architectural professionals, with the West Coast, the Northeast, Texas and the upper Midwest all well-represented in the survey.

The following demographic information was provided by respondents and has been used to complete the cross-tabulations in this report.



2,750 RESPONSES

41 STATES

3 PROVINCES

57 FIRMS

Figure 47
Geographic distribution of survey respondents

Gender

Respondents were relatively evenly split along gender lines, with 51% identifying as female, 47% identifying as male, 1% identifying as non-binary, and 1% identifying as other ***(Figure 48)***.

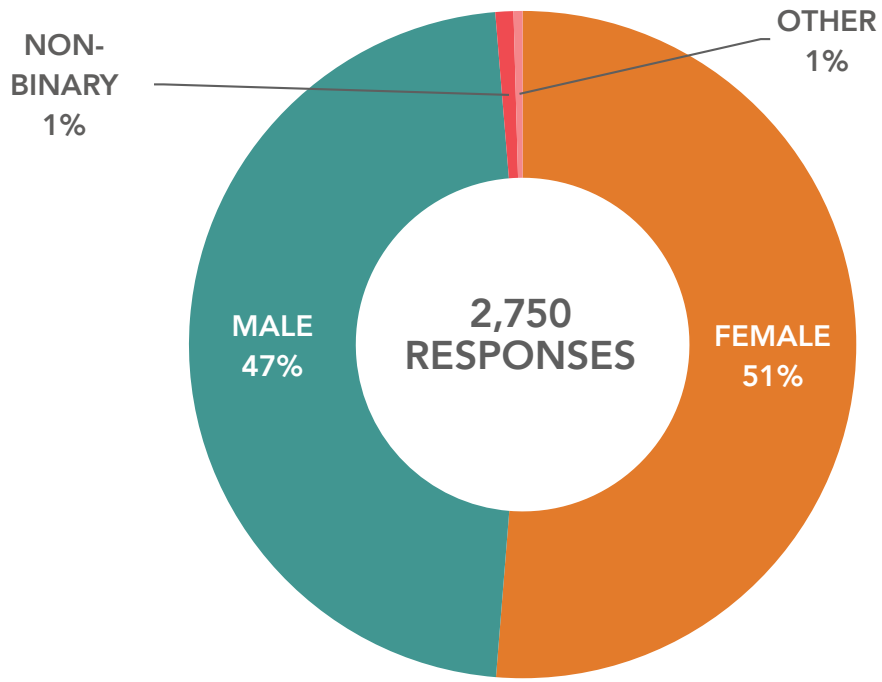


Figure 48
Respondent distribution by gender

Race and Ethnicity

Like the industry at large, respondents were predominately White, with 77% identifying as White or Caucasian, and 72% identifying White as their only racial or ethnic identity. Meanwhile, 8% of respondents identify as Hispanic, Latina or Latino, 3% identify as Black or African American, 2% identify as Middle Eastern or North African, 1% identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native, .5% identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2% identify as other.

Racial and ethnic diversity isn't distributed evenly across age cohorts within the profession. While 39% of those under age 30 identify with a race or ethnicity other than White or Caucasian, just 14% of those over 60 do. ***(Figure 49)***

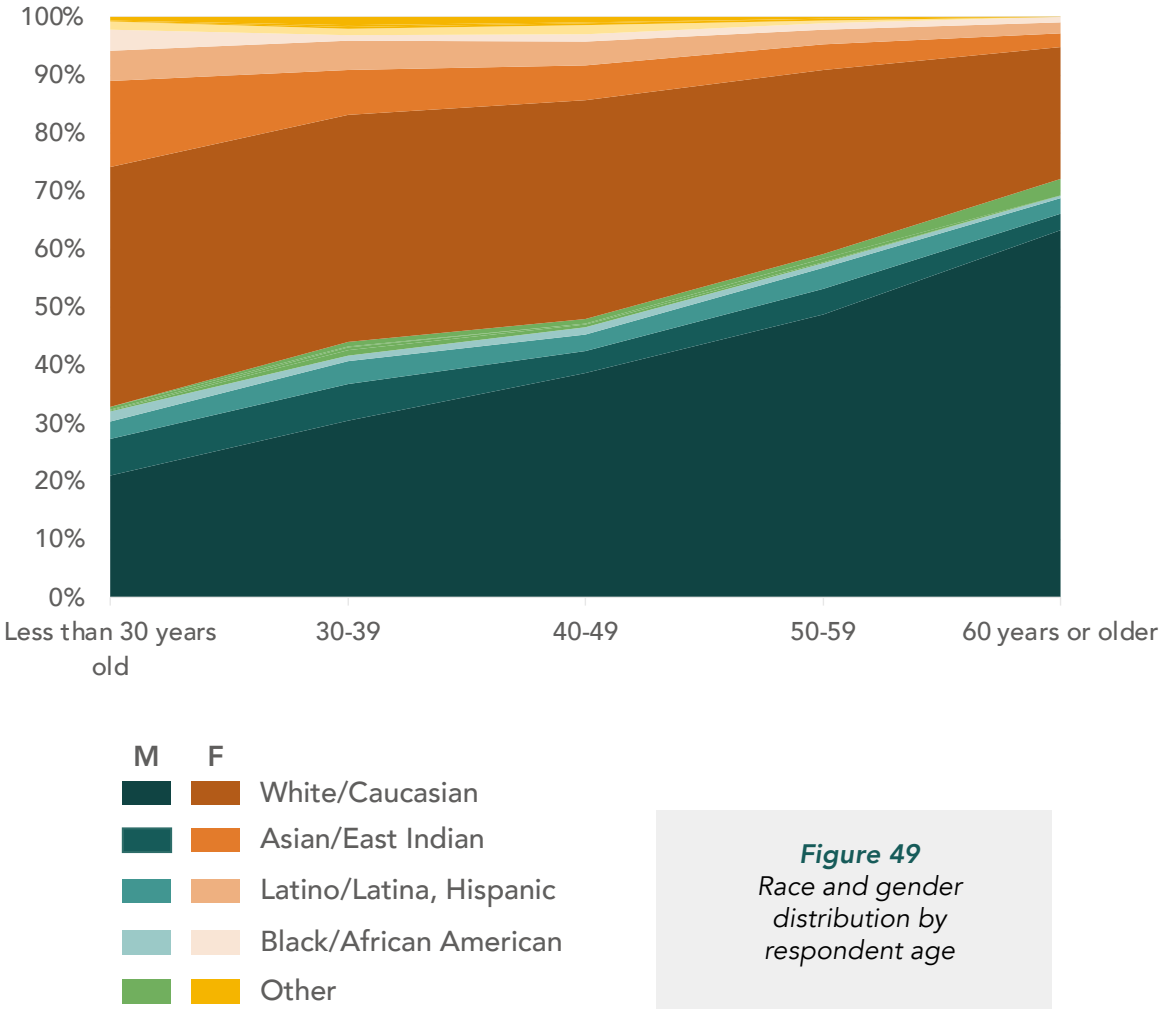


Figure 49
Race and gender distribution by respondent age

Age

Respondents tend to be young, with 18% under age 30, 33% age 30-39, 24% 40-49, 18% 50-59, and 8% 60 years or older ***(Figure 50)***. The median age of survey respondents was 30-39, with 30-39 also the largest age group.

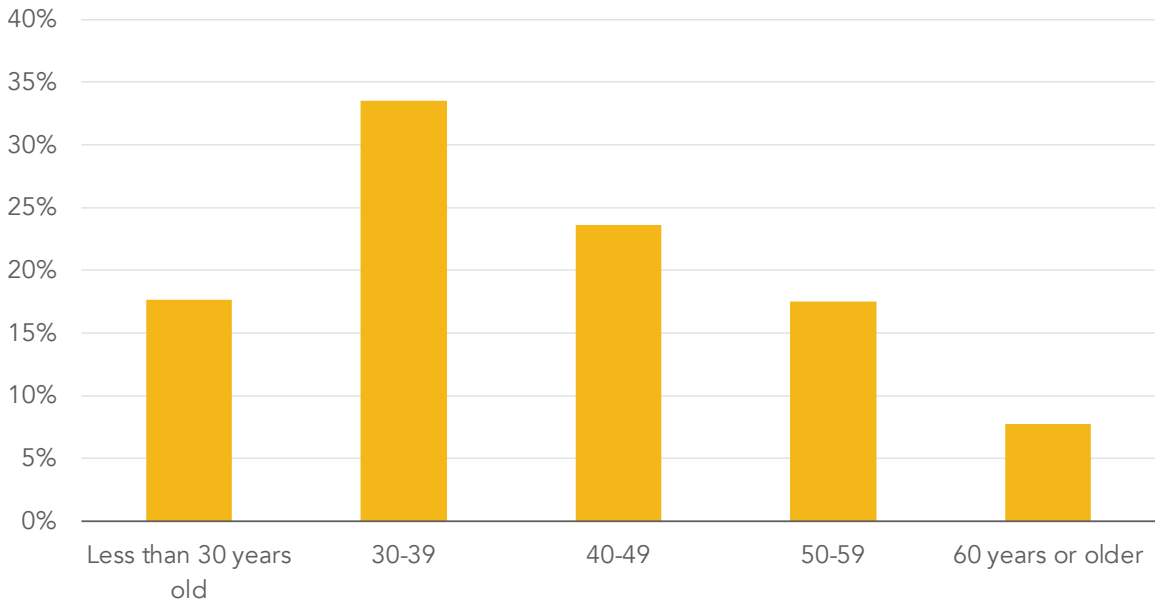


Figure 50
Respondent age distribution

Parental Status

About half of respondents report that they are parents, with 18% saying that their youngest child is under age 5, 14% reporting that their youngest child is school aged (5-17), and 16% reporting that they have adult children. Likelihood of being a parent increases with age, with male respondents more likely than female respondents in each age cohort to be parents ***(Figure 51)***.

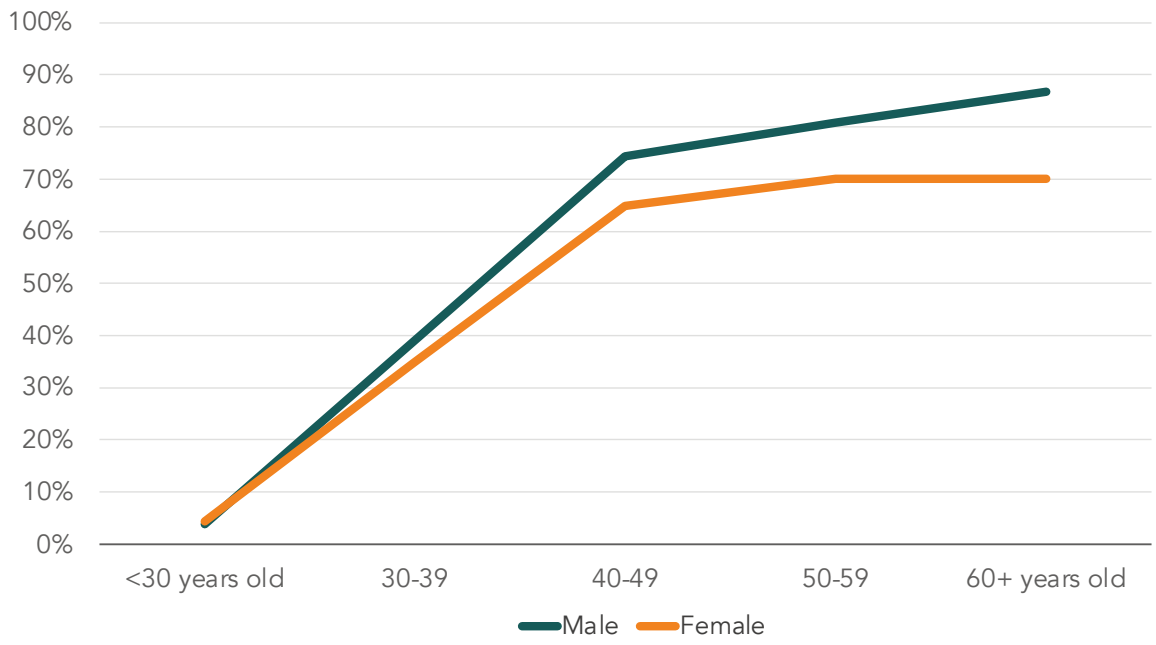


Figure 51
Parent likelihood by gender

Tenure with current organization

The median respondent has been employed with their current firm for three to five years, with 19% reporting tenures of less than a year, 15% reporting one-to-two-year tenures, 24% reporting three-to-five-year tenures, 19% reporting six-to-ten-year tenures, 13% reporting 11-20-year tenures, and 9% reporting tenures of longer than twenty years.

Seniority

The plurality of respondents report holding mid-level leadership positions within their organizations, with 43% holding mid-level positions, 16% holding senior leadership positions, 36% holding untitled staff positions, and 2% reporting "other." White male respondents are most likely to hold mid- and senior-level leadership positions in their firms, while BIPOC respondents are most likely to hold staff-level positions ***(Figure 52)***.

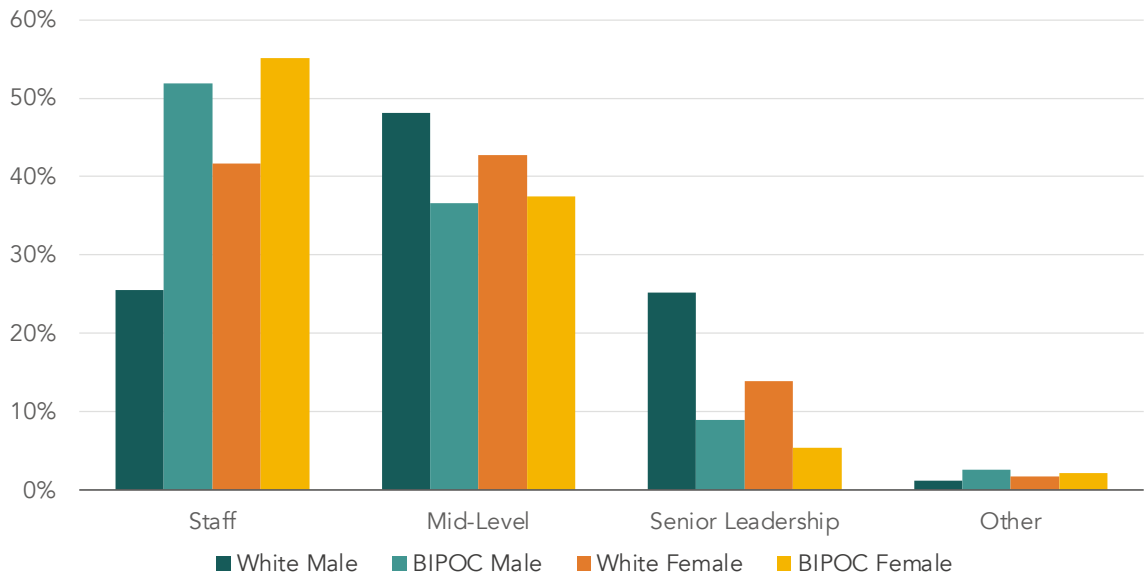


Figure 52
Seniority level by race and gender

Role

Most survey respondents, 63%, reported serving in architectural roles within their organizations. Meanwhile, 17% serve operations roles, 9% serve interior design roles, 5% serve engineering roles, 1% serve in planning, 1% serve in landscape architecture, and 4% serve in other roles ***(Figure 53)***.

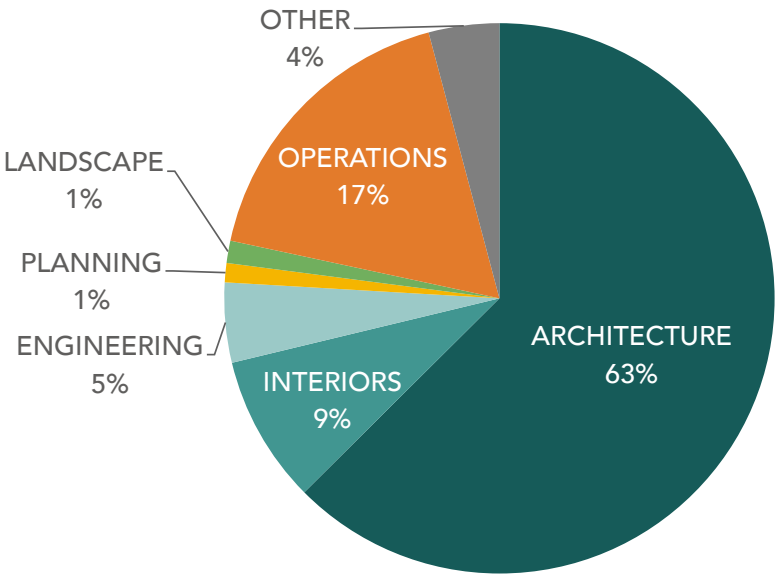


Figure 53
Respondent role distribution

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