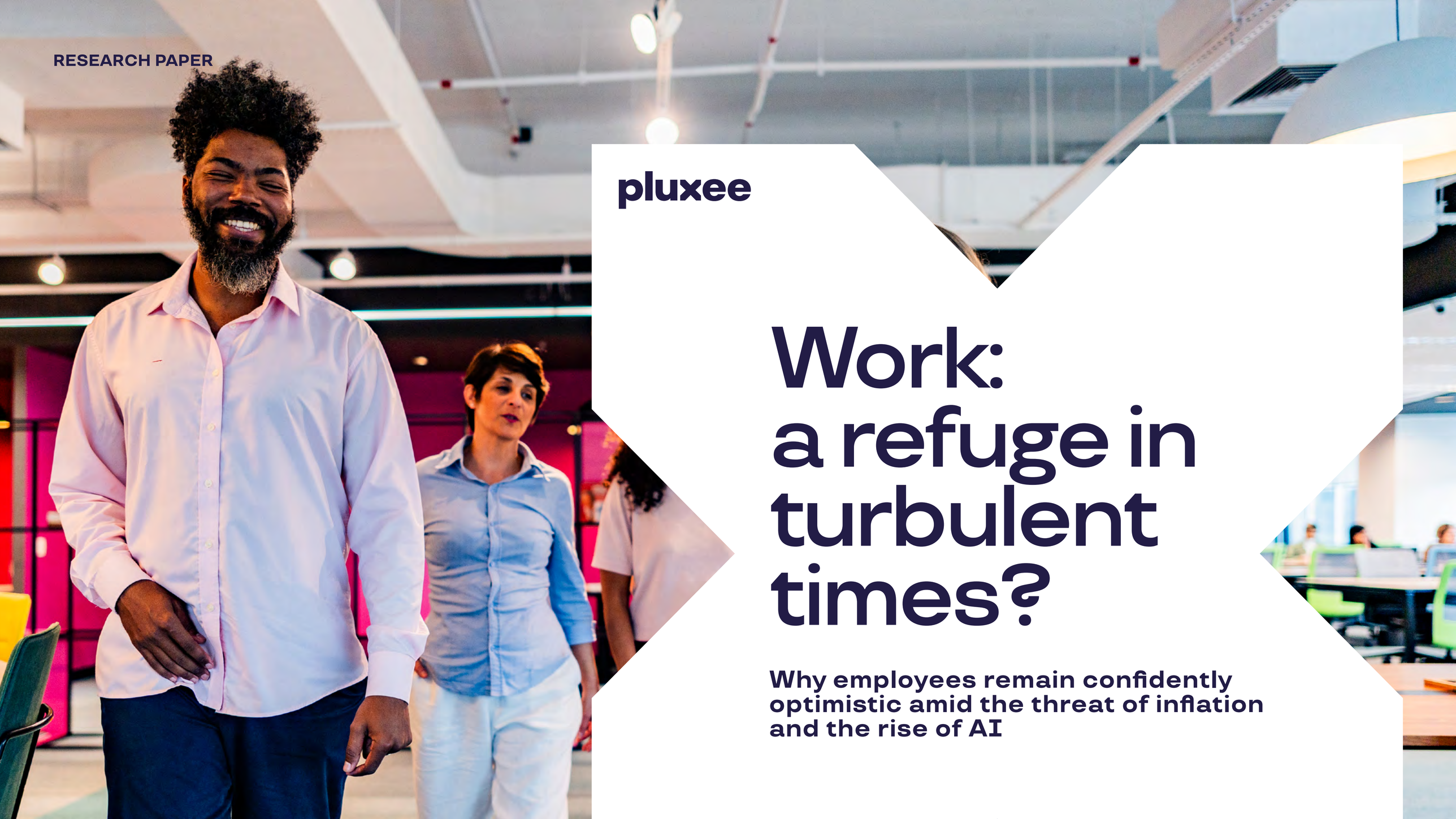
RESEARCH PAPER



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Work: a refuge in turbulent times?

Why employees remain confidently optimistic amid the threat of inflation and the rise of AI

“Why has the workplace become a refuge?”

Aurélien Sonet
Chief Executive Officer of Pluxee

A new era of work is emerging, and employees are welcoming this transformation with confidence. This is one of several striking findings from our new research paper – a follow-up to 2025’s *The New Rules of Engagement* – that explores how employees are coping amid global instability and the rise of AI.

Despite its concerns about the rising cost of living, 76% of the workforce has a positive mindset, and most employees demonstrate a remarkable capacity to adapt and move forward with resilience. This determined optimism arises from workers’ strong connection to their company, which they view as a pillar of stability they can rely on during turbulent times.

“76% of the workforce has a positive mindset. This determined optimism arises from workers’ strong connection with their company, which they view as a pillar of stability they can rely on during turbulent times.”

Our study also reveals how employees perceive AI in the workplace. Although they recognize that this technology will significantly transform the way they work, 65% of workers have already embraced it. They see its potential to make their jobs less complicated and more engaging.

Yet this enthusiasm must not overshadow an important challenge to help younger generations enter and succeed in a job market reshaped by AI. As career paths evolve and new skills become essential, organizations will play a vital role in helping new talent find their place, develop their potential, and thrive.

Over the past fifty years, Pluxee has gained a deep understanding of the world of work by listening to employees and companies as they navigate change. With AI poised to bring both new challenges and opportunities, our research shows that most workers are ready to leap into a bold new era of work. Now, organizations must help them make the most of it.

An international study

We conducted the second edition of our global survey with Ipsos in May 2026. Designed to explore how employees worldwide experience engagement, it reflects the voices of thousands of individuals across countries, sectors, and age groups. This study offers extensive international data and representative samples – analyzed by Antoine Solom, Senior Consultant at Focus – along with key insights into workers' morale amid uncertainty and the rise of AI.

14

countries

The number of surveyed countries increased from 10 in 2025 to 14 in 2026: Brazil, France, the UK, Spain, Belgium, Romania, Turkey, USA, Mexico, India(1), Italy, Chile, Germany and Colombia.

11,000

respondents

(1) To ensure the comparability of results across markets, responses from India were excluded from the consolidated global analysis due to distinct response patterns observed within the dataset.

MEET OUR EXPERTS

Jean-Baptiste Barfety
Public policy expert on the transformation of work and the role of the company in society

Jean-Baptiste Barfety is known for highlighting the structural and policy factors shaping today's pursuit of meaningful work. This year, he turned his attention to AI. He brought together 17 companies (representing 1.5 million employees) and drew on an international literature review and working groups with HR leaders and frontline managers to write *Working with AI, Deciding Among Humans* (Projet Sens, May 19, 2026), his latest report. Barfety – a co-leader of a research group at Collège des Bernardins focused on work, a former advisor to the French Ministry of Labor, and the rapporteur for the influential Notat-Senard Report that shaped French legislation on purpose-driven companies – bridges academic insights and corporate realities.

Antoine Solom
Senior Consultant at Focus, specializing in research, advisory, and strategy for engaging transformations

Antoine Solom shares his expertise in driving business transformation for global organizations. Solom previously spent thirty years at Ipsos, notably as Lead Managing Director of its HR Analytics and Consulting Solutions department, with a focus on Engaging Work Cultures.

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Introduction

Checking in with employees

The current state of play

People can't seem to get enough of work. Not only do they devote a third of their lives to their jobs, but they are captivated by work-centric TV shows even during their leisure time. Many of these series – like *The Bear*, which follows a crew of misfits as they scramble to earn a Michelin star for their chaotic restaurant – aren't set in a typical office environment yet still offer a highly relatable and entertaining portrait of the world of work in the 2020s. The popularity of these programs, where work is the true star, lies in how they capture the frustrations and tensions that are hallmarks of any workplace today; the joy and sense of belonging they can provide in an increasingly unsettled world; and the never-ending struggle to strike a happy medium between personal life and career. **These emotionally charged shows make people feel seen and heard, echoing the goals of this study in surveying employees across the globe.**

"People can't seem to get enough of work. Not only do they devote a third of their lives to their jobs, but they are captivated by work-centric TV shows even during their leisure time."

HIGHLIGHTS FROM *THE NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT*

Pluxee's 2025 study found that employees consistently move along an engagement spectrum over their careers, spanning eight types, from The Outsider to The All Parts Engaged. Two factors largely shape their position on this spectrum: whether they prioritize their personal life or their work, and whether they favor individualistic or community-oriented activities.

The research also identified Measured Engagement, a phenomenon in which employees choose to engage with work more intentionally to protect their personal lives or community service.

***The New Rules of Engagement* concluded that reciprocity is essential for organizations seeking to unlock the full potential of employee engagement. This means rewarding employees' valuable contributions with growth opportunities, autonomy, material benefits, and meaningful human connection.**

An unexpectedly positive workforce

Several initial findings from this year's study challenge conventional wisdom. Despite the constant stream of negative news about the state of the world – and with half of this year's respondents saying they worry about the future of both their country and the planet – **our data indicates that employees' mindsets remain remarkably positive. Overall, 76% say they feel "enthusiastic", "happy", or "confident", matching the results of the international study we conducted a year ago.**

Yet that's only part of the picture. **Although these fears about global instability have not shaken employees' overall confidence, one concern does weigh on them daily: inflation and its impact on purchasing power. 70% of workers cite it as their top worry, and 25% say they "cannot stop thinking about it".** In Europe, countries such as Romania, France and Spain are particularly focused on this issue. Globally, the threat of a looming economic crisis ranks third (59%), meaning that together these two financial concerns overshadow employees' fears about the acceleration of climate change (number 2), insecurity (number 5), war (number 6), and job loss – the latter coming at the very bottom of workers' overall worries.

Why are financial pressures top of mind? Because they have such a tangible impact on people's lives. **According to our study, in most countries, more than half of workers struggle to make ends meet, sometimes leaving them with no money by the 10th day of the month.**

This mounting pressure on their budgets means that employees are less satisfied with their lives than they were a year ago. Globally, when asked "How much do you like your life today?", they still give a relatively high rating of 7/10, with the notable exception of Italy, where workers indicate lower levels of contentment. **However, in 2026, there's a noticeable 8% decrease in employees' satisfaction with their personal lives compared to 2025. This is particularly visible in Brazil, Mexico, Spain, France, and the UK.**

> Although morale is generally positive, the USA, Mexico, and Turkey stand out," explains Antoine Solom. "Positive sentiment exceeds 85% and is rising compared with 2025."

The top three concerns employees "can't stop thinking about" in 2026

Inflation and its impact on my purchasing power — 25%

The acceleration of climate change — 17%

Another economic crisis affecting my country — 17%

Q: "How worried are you regarding..." (%)

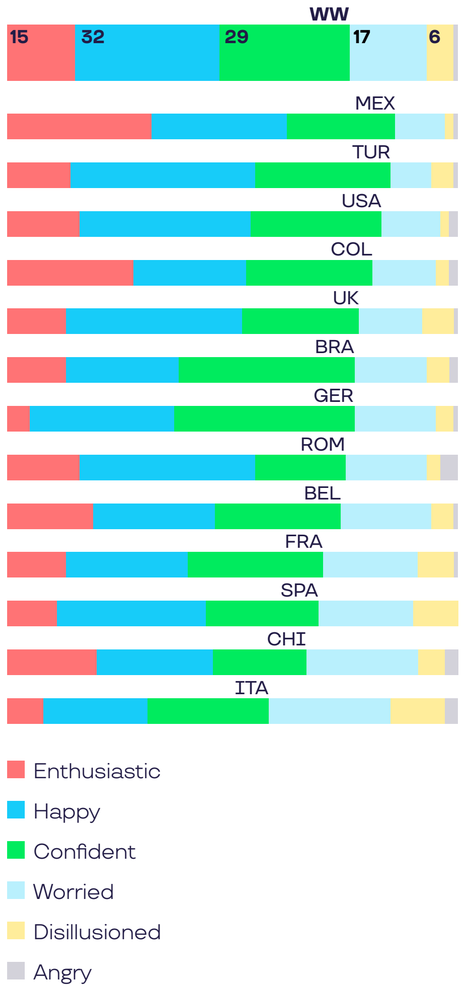
Despite global upheaval, employees overall maintain a surprisingly positive mindset

76%

describe themselves as

"happy", "enthusiastic", or "confident"

A few countries are leading the positivity pack



Q: "What word best describes your current mindset?" (%)

Today's three paradoxes of engagement

Although employees worldwide report declining satisfaction with their personal lives, a deeper analysis reveals that workers' appreciation for their jobs remains comparatively high and stable.

This reflects the increasingly complex reality employees face today, with our findings revealing these striking paradoxes:

1 **While work plays a less central role in employees' lives, their connection with their company grows stronger.**

2 **In a context of persistent financial pressure, workers are prepared to leave jobs they no longer find interesting.**

3 **AI is poised to transform workers' roles, yet they do not fear it.**

Together, these three paradoxes offer a vivid snapshot of employee engagement today, set against the backdrop of the major technological transformation in the workplace driven by AI as well as global uncertainty.

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Paradox #1

While work plays a less central role in employees' lives, their connection with their company grows stronger

The steady rise of Measured Engagement

Ongoing uncertainty, reduced purchasing power, and lower life satisfaction are prompting employees to make bigger trade-offs at work to better focus on their personal lives. Three data points show this gradual shift. First, when asked, "How involved are you in your job?", a greater number of workers across all countries responded that "I do what my boss says, but I can put a limit if it goes too far" (up from 34% in 2025 to 38% in 2026). Second, those saying, "I work as much as I can", dipped by 5 percentage points (from 46% to 41%) over the same period. Third, the share of employees who say work is the center of their lives has declined from 19% in 2025 to 13% in 2026. **Taken together, this amounts to a de-centering of work.**

WHAT IS MEASURED ENGAGEMENT?

The New Rules of Engagement was the first research paper to identify Measured Engagement, a trend in which employees engage with work deliberately to protect their boundaries, values, and work-life balance – a pragmatic response to a world of work that often expects people to overextend themselves.

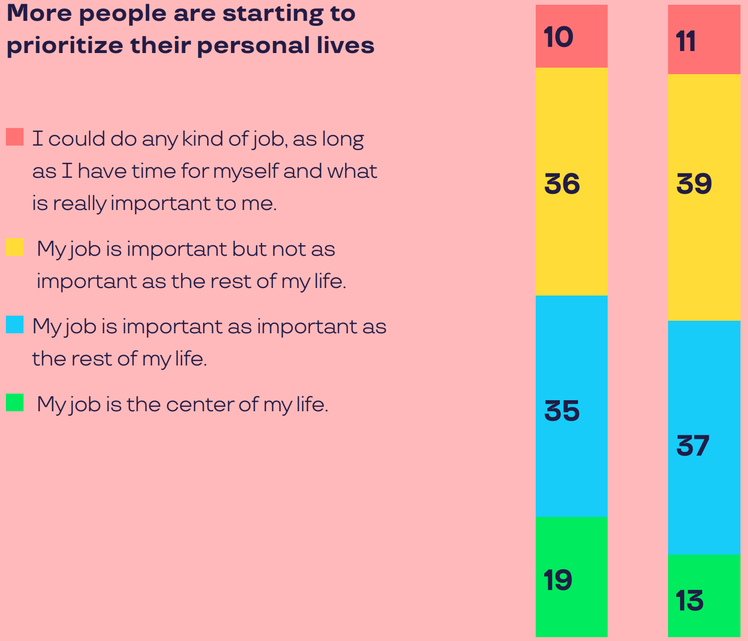
According to Jean-Baptiste Barfety – a former advisor to the French Ministry of Labor who specializes in the transformation of work and the role of the company – **this phenomenon can be attributed to deep structural shifts. As our society becomes more individualistic, people are more likely to place greater importance on their lives than on work.** Our data shows that in the UK and other EU countries such as France, Spain, and Germany, contrary to popular belief, younger workers tend to be more work-centered than older employees.

However, workers' prioritization of personal boundaries must not be mistaken for disengagement. **What we see here is that people are increasingly adopting Measured Engagement*,** a concept Barfety identified in last year's study. Back then, he found it in about 34% of workers across all generations, and it has now inched up to about 38%, suggesting this trend is here to stay, particularly in European countries.

Laure Pourageaud
Pluxee's Group Chief Human Resource Officer

"The fact that today's employees are increasingly imposing limits on how they work isn't the same as outright disengagement."

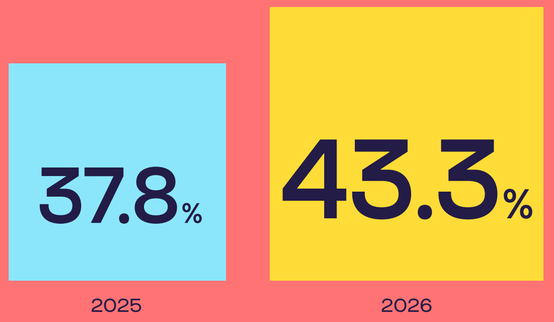
More people are starting to prioritize their personal lives



Q: "How important is your job for you?" (%)

European employees are at the forefront of Measured Engagement

% of employees in Europe who answered "My job is important but not as important as the rest of my life"



Work as a refuge in an uncertain world

With employees devoting more time to their home lives and adopting a more measured approach to work, one might assume they value their jobs less. Yet the data tells a different story. **Professional satisfaction remains high across all countries, with average scores above 7 out of 10, in contrast to people's waning appreciation for their personal lives. Meanwhile, 87% report that they either "love" or "like" their organization,** up 4 percentage points from last year. European countries lean more toward "like", but Turkey, the USA, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Colombia are firmly in the "love" camp.

What explains work's popularity? According to Jean-Baptiste Barfety, **today's employees are highly emotionally invested in their company because the workplace has become a reliable "refuge" for them. He says that it "serves as a shock absorber protecting them from some of the discomforts they might be experiencing because of inflation and global uncertainty."** He adds that "this reflects the type of mindset that, during hard times, drives people to seek stability and invest in 'safe assets' such as gold or real estate."

Jean-Baptiste Barfety

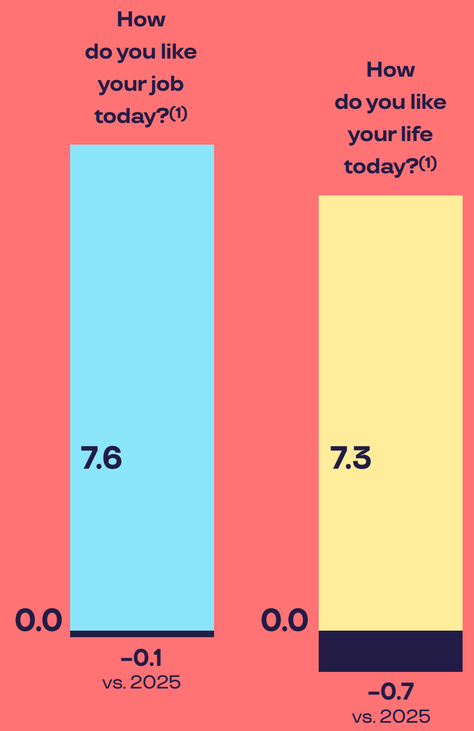
"As traditional institutions fade, the workplace remains a place where adults see peers daily, share experiences, participate, feel connected to others, have a purpose and thrive."

In a context of uncertainty, people's connection to their workplace is undeniable

87%

of employees say they either **"love" or "like"** their organization

While workers' appreciation of their personal lives is eroding noticeably, their valuation of work is both high (above 7 in all countries) and relatively stable



(1) Score from 0 to 10, 0 meaning you hate it and 10 meaning you love it.

Beyond its shock-absorbing capabilities, work has been recast as a refuge for a broader societal reason: traditional pillars, such as religious organizations, political forums, or community get-togethers, have lost much of their power. **"As these institutions fade, the workplace remains a place where adults see peers daily, share experiences, participate, feel connected to others, have a purpose, and thrive," notes Barfety.** Yet companies now serving as "connectors" does not mean that organizations are employees' sole source of stability. Friends, family, and community still play a key role in their lives.

This refuge depends on one key factor: workers' fears of unemployment remaining low. "So far, despite a tough labor market, organizations have managed to reassure their employees," says Jean-Baptiste Barfety. "But should the market deteriorate sharply, this dynamic could shift, with the prospect of great job losses prompting some people to view their companies as sources of instability rather than shock absorbers."

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Paradox #2

In a context of persistent financial pressure, employees are prepared to leave jobs they no longer find interesting

Employee loyalty isn't unconditional

The idea that organizations are a refuge for employees could lead some companies to believe they have fully mastered engagement and resolved retention issues. After all, why would employees leave a safe environment during a crisis? **However, the research shows that job loss isn't a major concern for workers right now, suggesting that their attachment to their organizations isn't primarily driven by fears of unemployment amid uncertainty. The data also indicates that employee loyalty today is increasingly conditional.** There's a significant drop in survey responses indicating unconditional loyalty, with those stating "I intend to stay as long as I can" down 5 percentage points from 2025 levels.

Meanwhile, responses expressing conditional loyalty ("I intend to stay as long as my job remains interesting") are up by 6 points overall, with the largest increases in Western Europe, from senior to Gen Z employees. This echoes last year's study, which found that **employees expected reciprocity from their organizations in return for their engagement. It is consistent with what employees say elsewhere in the survey: what makes them feel fulfilled, what keeps them at their jobs, and what drives their commitment is, above all, the interest of the work, the variety of tasks, and recognition of their dedication.**

"What makes workers feel fulfilled, what keeps them in their jobs, and what drives their commitment is, above all, how interesting the work is, the variety of tasks, and recognition of their dedication."

Conditional loyalty is on the rise

6 points

more employees are reporting conditional loyalty than in 2025

Why employees choose to stay

So, what exactly makes a job "interesting" enough to keep employees loyal to their company rather than seeking new opportunities elsewhere? Our analysis of employee responses reveals three main expectations.

When asked what their company's HR priorities should be in the coming months, apart from higher salaries, **the most common answer worldwide was "employee well-being and working conditions" (35%).** Jean-Baptiste Barfety notes that this "aligns with last year's study, which found that one of the biggest obstacles to employees' confidence in the workplace was the complexity of processes that drain both their time and energy. Precious resources that employees would prefer to devote to their private lives, which are strained as inflation erodes their purchasing power."

Workers' second big ask was for their organization "to recognize people based on their commitment and success at work" (33%), followed by enhancing the compensation package with employee benefits (29%). For Barfety, this also confirms the findings of the 2025 study, which revealed that **workers increasingly "seek rewards that match their real needs, while boosting productivity, creativity, engagement, and excellence at work."**

The third most pressing need expressed by employees is growth, with 25% wishing to be "provided with better individual support and career development opportunities" and a further 21% calling for their company's HR to put developing "people's skills through more training, particularly in AI" at the top of their agenda.

The Countries Flying the Flag for Conditional Loyalty

Among all the countries we surveyed, Belgium (40%), France (40%), and the UK (39%) have the highest percentages of employees who say they intend to "stay in their jobs as long as they're interesting". The first two increased by 10 points over the past year, and the UK by 6 points. However, Turkey has recorded the greatest overall rise, at 15% since 2025.

Antoine Solom

"This surge in conditional loyalty underscores the importance of skills development processes, associated mobility, etc., at a time of major transformation driven by AI."

Conditional loyalty is evident when responses from workers indicating "unconditional loyalty" ("I intend to stay as long as I can") decline, while those implying "conditional loyalty" ("I intend to stay as long as my job is interesting") rise

Q: "How long do you intend to stay in your company/organization?" (%)

The three top HR priorities in an era of conditional loyalty, according to employees

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Paradox #3

AI is poised to transform workers' roles, yet they do not fear it

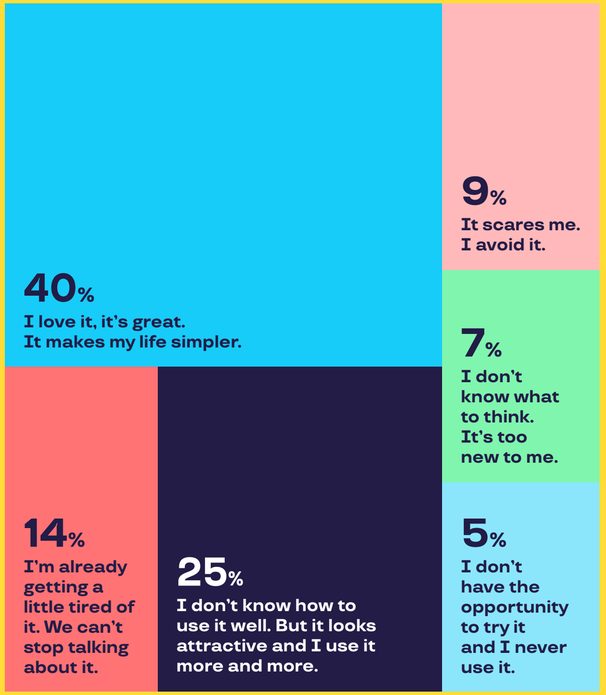
AI at work, welcomed or feared?

Graduation ceremonies at US universities are traditionally the epitome of positivity. So, it came as a bit of a surprise this spring when big-name commencement speakers were roundly booed by students for hyping AI. The jeers were seen as a sign of the disconnect between establishment figures championing this technology and young graduates who think it threatens their prospects for an entry-level job.

But do people already in the workforce also fear AI – viewing it as a disruptor set to make their jobs obsolete? **"One of the most remarkable findings of the survey," says Jean-Baptiste Barfety, "is that, while employees across the globe fully recognize that AI will be a major force in transforming the world of work as we know it, their anxiety about this new technology and what it means for the future of their jobs appears to have been overstated."**

The AI revolution is welcomed by 65% of employees. An astonishing 40% described AI as "great" and said they "loved" using it. This pro-AI contingent is particularly strong in Turkey and in the Americas, including the USA, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia.

Contrary to popular belief, the beginning of the AI era has been welcomed by employees



Q: "What is your opinion regarding the use of AI?" (%)

65% of employees welcome the AI revolution

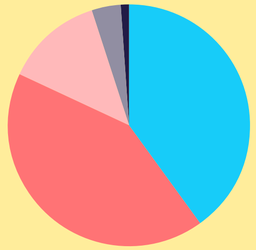
Jean-Baptiste Barfety

"Employees' appreciation of AI could make it a powerful tool for future engagement."

A further 25% of workers admitted that, although they were not well acquainted with AI tools, they find them attractive and are keen to use them more regularly. Only 9% truly reject AI outright, saying that "it scares" them and therefore avoid using it.

According to the data, most employees are not only open to using AI but also unafraid of being replaced by it, despite all the negative noise to the contrary. **40% are confident that their jobs will not disappear** – a conviction especially prevalent among workers aged 55 and older (54%), which is noteworthy, as they're also the age group that reports having the fewest AI skills (68% say they're a "beginner" or "unfamiliar" with it). **An even greater share (42%) concede that the content of their jobs will most likely change, "but in a positive way", saying that AI will make their jobs "less routine and more interesting".** This is an outlook popular with managers, engineers, and people who already readily embrace this technology.

Most employees aren't afraid of AI taking their jobs and see its potential to transform what they do



Q: "What impact will AI have on your job?" (%)

- **40%** I don't really see any risk of my job disappearing because of AI.
- **42%** The content of my job will probably change but it will be positive, less routine and more interesting thanks to AI.
- **13%** My job will probably disappear. But no right away. I have time.
- **4%** My job is threatened in the short term by AI.
- **1%** I have already lost my job because of AI.

Employees' hopes for AI

What explains employees' positivity and resilience amid one of the greatest transformations in work since the Industrial Revolution? For Jean-Baptiste Barfety, it partly stems from people already being so emotionally connected to their company that they're convinced it will protect them from redundancy driven by forces like AI. **That sense of security has empowered employees, enabling them to start adapting to the changes ahead.** This is reflected in the fact that most employees who regularly rely on AI for their work currently have the confidence and curiosity to learn to use it as they go (39%), rather than having managers (9%) or colleagues (9%) teach them these skills.

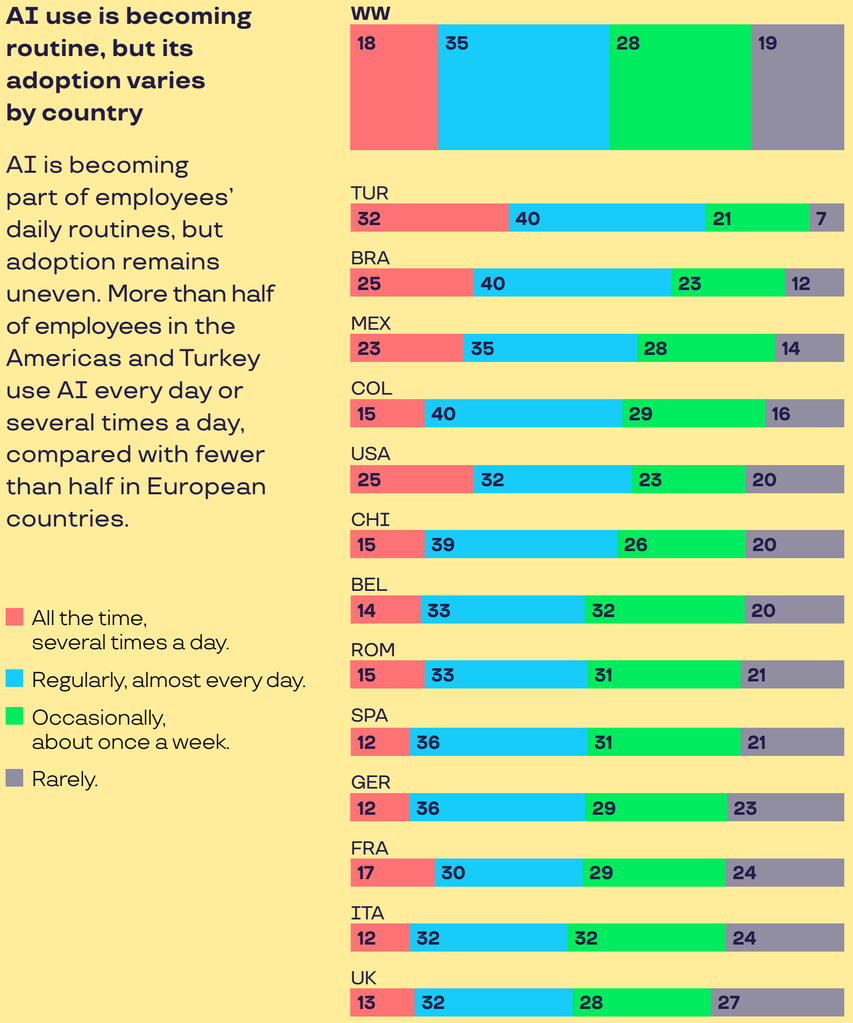
There's another important factor at play here. **According to Antoine Solom, "the main reason employees say they love using AI is that 'it makes their lives easier' by being convenient and saving them time."** Seeing as 31% of workers rank being "more efficient" as the main challenge for their company in the years to come, Barfety attributes employees' openness to AI to their hope that, in the long term, this technology will finally deliver the organization-wide simplification they long for, rather than just becoming another layer of tools, checks, and processes burdening their workday.

Antoine Solom

"AI has become a personal assistant, used whenever and however one wants, addressing two key issues for employees: saving time and gaining simplicity and efficiency."

AI use is becoming routine, but its adoption varies by country

AI is becoming part of employees' daily routines, but adoption remains uneven. More than half of employees in the Americas and Turkey use AI every day or several times a day, compared with fewer than half in European countries.



Q: "You use AI..." (%)

How can companies become AI-ready?

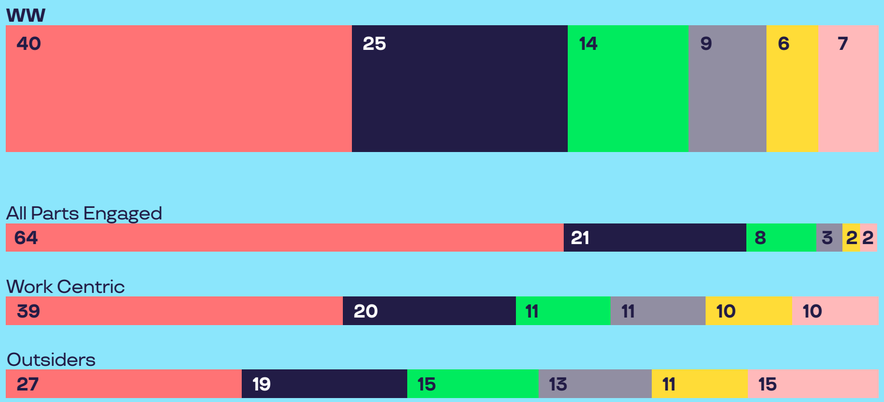
Companies now face the challenge of ensuring that AI becomes the game-changer employees expect for efficiency and well-being, so that workers' current enthusiasm for this technology endures. Only then can they also reap the rewards of leveraging AI's potential as a powerful retention tool. **Our data highlights a clear correlation among employees' openness to the world, overall engagement, and enthusiasm for AI.**

Using the Engagement Spectrum from our prior study as a reference, we assessed employees' opinions on AI based on the eight types of engagement they currently identified with. At the highest level of engagement, we have the All Parts Engaged – those who, despite prioritizing work, still actively participate in their community. **64% of them express a love for AI and use it frequently.** As we move toward the opposite end of the spectrum, the percentages decline: 39% of "Work Centrists" are enthusiastic about AI, and just 27% of the least engaged group, the "Outsiders", are fans of this emerging technology. The latter is the employee population most likely to be "scared" by this technology and least likely to have had the opportunity to use it. The takeaway? The more engaged and outwardly curious employees are, the more likely they are to embrace AI.

A clear knowledge gap is emerging within the workforce. Yet, forward-thinking companies can bridge this divide by actively promoting AI literacy and other initiatives that meet employees where they are in their engagement journey. As a reminder, our previous study showed that engagement profiles are not fixed in stone and fluctuate over the course of a career. **Our next paper will outline key steps for organizations to optimally transform individual use of AI into a collaborative strength. To make sure that no employee – wherever they may currently stand on the Engagement Spectrum – is left behind in the AI revolution.**

There is a link between employees' engagement and their enthusiasm for AI

The more an employee's profile aligns with the part of the Engagement Spectrum where commitment to their job, community, and personal life intersect, the more likely they are to be open to AI (as shown by the All-Parts workers engaged profile). Conversely, the Outsider is less likely to be open to this new technology.



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We bring to life sustainable and personalized employee experiences, at work and beyond. We help companies attract and retain talent through Employee Benefits and Engagement solutions. Operating in 28 countries, we've been creating lasting impact for people, businesses, and the planet for fifty years.

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