

Life@Work

2025



**Understanding
Today's Experiences
of the Workplace**

In partnership with

VOCACenter

Key Findings

Most U.S. adult workers report positive experiences at work.

- 29% experience joy 81–100% of the time
- 42% experience joy 51–80% of the time
- 29% experience joy less than half the time

Three main elements make work more meaningful:

- **People (33%):** Respondents note interpersonal connections, including camaraderie with coworkers, collaboration within teams and building strong workplace relationships
- **Purpose (29%):** Achieving goals, feeling accomplished or finding meaning and purpose in work are consistent themes
- **Impact (24%):** Assisting others, supporting customers or making a difference in people's lives are often emphasized

Making a difference matters more than money.

- Workers satisfied by helping others are significantly more likely to experience high levels of joy compared to those who are motivated by money (37% vs. 13%)

Workers point out four primary challenges in today's workplaces:

- Work complexity, including technological changes (23%)
- Interpersonal dynamics (21%)
- Workload management (16%)
- Client relationships (10%)

To deal with these challenges, U.S. workers often turn to:

- Leadership support (26%)
- Self-reliance (22%)
- Peer support (21%)
- External support from friends and family (14%)

Most workers miss out on faith-based resources for handling challenges:

- Only 4% of workers leverage faith-based resources
- This rises to just 9% among practicing Christians

Understanding Today's Workplace Experience



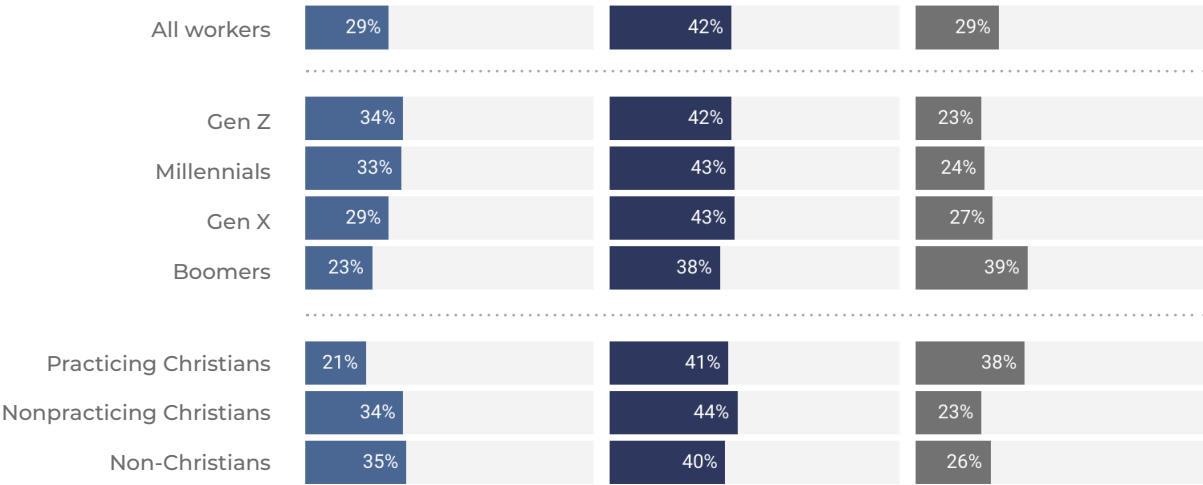
The nature of work has transformed dramatically in recent years, leaving many leaders grappling with how to create environments where people thrive. In this context, understanding what makes work meaningful and what people long for in their work has never been more crucial. This Barna research, conducted in partnership with VOCA Center, gives a glimpse into the deep currents that shape workplace fulfillment. What we discovered both challenges assumptions and affirms timeless truths about human nature and what gives people meaning.

THE STATE OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Feeling joy at work is more common than many might expect. The majority of U.S. adult workers (71%) say they experience joy more than half the time they're at work. Specifically, 29 percent of workers report experiencing joy 81–100 percent of the time, while 42 percent experience it 51–80 percent of the time. Still, this leaves a significant portion—29 percent of workers—who experience joy less than half the time, suggesting considerable room for improvement in how workplaces are structured and led.

What percentage of the time do you experience joy at work?

● 0–50% of the time ● 51–80% of the time ● 81–100% of the time



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024.

Though most workers experience positive levels of joy at work, Boomers and practicing Christians experience this joy at a higher rate, while younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) lag behind. Why might this be? With decades under their belt refining their career paths, Boomers have likely settled into roles that speak to their strengths and values. They may also hold senior positions with greater autonomy and clearer purpose, which can add to workplace satisfaction. Additionally, it's important to remember that Gen Z and Millennials entered the workforce during periods of economic uncertainty—Millennials during the “Great Recession” and Gen Z during the pandemic. This could be weighing down their workplace experience and overall career outlook.

High levels of joy among practicing Christians reveal something equally significant about the role of faith in how we work. A deep, grounded faith in God can positively influence many areas of life, including how people approach and find meaning in their daily work.

What Makes Work Meaningful?

So, what exactly creates meaning and fulfillment at work? Our research identified three primary sources. The strongest source of workplace meaning falls under the category of **people, community and relationships**, with 33 percent of workers citing experiences like interpersonal connections, camaraderie with coworkers and team collaboration as their primary source of fulfillment. This finding underscores a fundamental truth: work is inherently social, and meaningful human connection is crucial for workplace satisfaction.

The second most significant source comes from **the work itself, achievement and purpose** (29%). People find deep satisfaction in meaningful work, in achieving goals and in feeling that their role serves a greater purpose. This aligns with the timeless understanding that work itself, when properly oriented, can be a source of profound fulfillment.

The third major source, mentioned by 24 percent of workers, is **helping others and making a difference**. This finding was consistent across all demographic groups, industries and job types in Barna’s survey.

What Gives U.S. Adults Joy at Work?



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024. This was an open-ended survey question; coded responses shown.

A Note About Financial Motivation

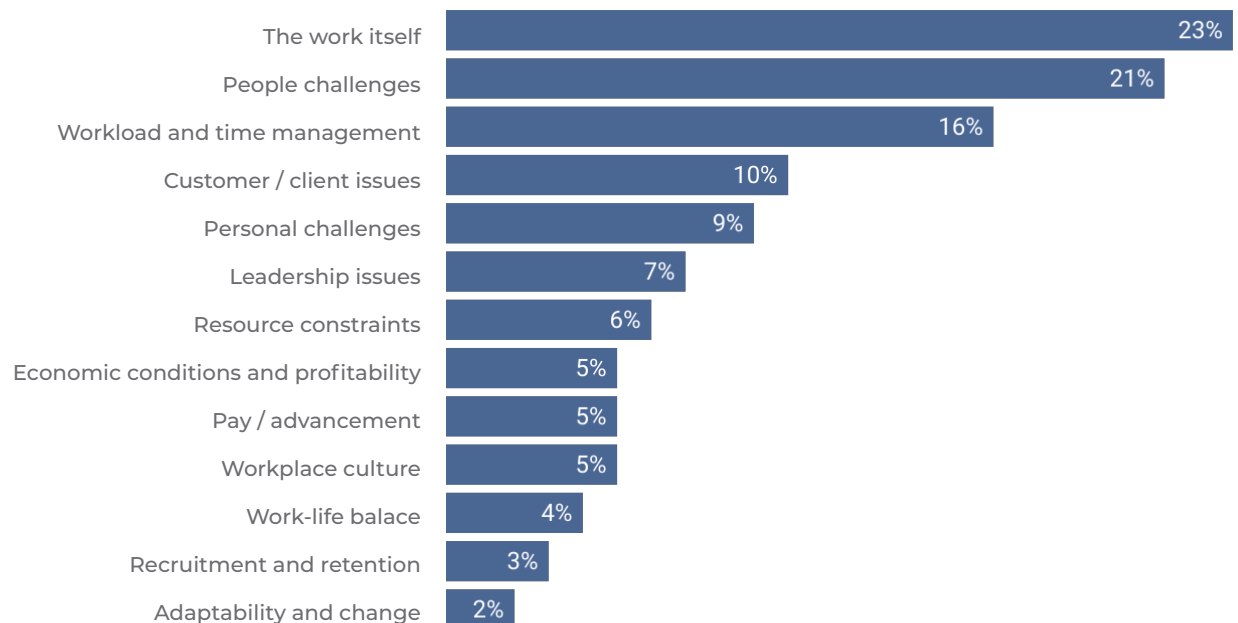
Perhaps one of our most notable findings concerns the relationship between financial motivation and job satisfaction. Workers who derive their primary satisfaction from helping others are nearly three times more likely to experience high levels of joy (81–100% of the time) compared to those motivated primarily by financial rewards (37% vs. 13%). **While fair pay is important, structuring work primarily around financial incentives might actually be counterproductive to creating a fulfilling workplace.** The data implies that people who view their work primarily through a transactional lens tend to experience less job satisfaction overall. Instead, employers might find more success by emphasizing or creating opportunities for workers to help others and make a difference. *See the infographic on pages 9–10 for more insights connecting joy and job satisfaction.*

WORKPLACE CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The research reveals important insights about workplace challenges and how people manage them. The most common challenges workers face relate to the work itself (23%), followed by people challenges (21%) and workload and time management (16%). When experiencing challenges, workers most commonly turn to leadership and management (26%), rely on themselves (22%) or seek help from peers and colleagues (21%).

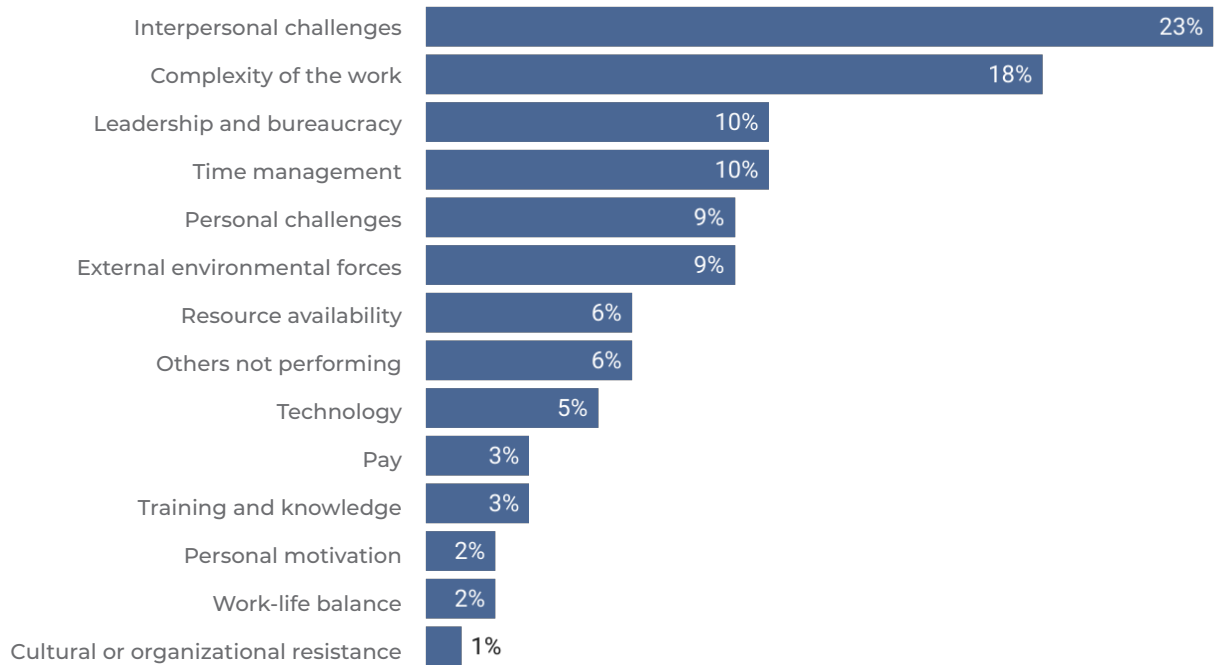
With about one in four identifying the actual work as their biggest challenge, this isn't just about having a "hard job"; **today's workers are dealing with evolving technology—including artificial intelligence—and adapting to the increasing complexity of how work gets done.**

What is the biggest challenge you face in your work?



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024. This was an open-ended survey question; coded responses shown.

What is the most significant source of your challenge?



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024. This was an open-ended survey question; coded responses shown.

Many report struggling to learn new processes and systems to stay relevant in rapidly changing industries. The acceleration of artificial intelligence and automation technologies has left some workers questioning the value and longevity of their skills, likely creating additional pressure to continuously adapt and advance.

People challenges also reflect the deeply collaborative nature of today's workplace. Most jobs now require extensive interaction and coordination with others, making interpersonal dynamics a critical factor in workplace success.

The third most significant challenge (workload and time management) illuminates the reality that many are juggling multiple projects, face competing deadlines and need to constantly reprioritize their efforts. The fact that this ranks as a distinct challenge separate from "the work itself" suggests that the volume and pace of work can create their own pressures.

Faith Resources: An Untapped Support System

Perhaps one of the most significant findings—especially for faith-based organizations—is how few workers access faith-based resources when facing workplace challenges. **Only 4 percent of all workers turn to faith-based resources when dealing with workplace challenges, a figure that rises to just 9 percent among practicing Christians.** This represents a major missed opportunity, as those who do utilize faith resources report higher resilience and more consistent workplace satisfaction. This underutilization of faith-based support is particularly noteworthy given the positive correlation between practicing faith and finding deeper meaning and purpose in work.

Overwhelm

Most workers (71%) tell Barna they feel overwhelmed by their challenges less than half of the time, but there are standout groups. Gen Z and Millennials are more likely than older generations to say they experience overwhelm more often.

Daily Experiences

While headlines often focus on compensation, career advancement, work-life balance and talent retention, these concerns rank surprisingly low in our study of what actually challenges workers day-to-day. Pay and advancement issues were cited by only 5 percent of workers as their biggest challenge, while work-life balance registered at just 4 percent and recruitment and retention concerns at 3 percent.

This may reflect a shift in workplace priorities following the pandemic. Workers who have experienced significant workplace disruption might be more focused on stability and operational effectiveness than on advancement or work-life boundaries. This might also suggest that many organizations have already made meaningful adjustments to support better work-life integration, making it less of an active challenge for most workers.

We may also be seeing evidence of a workforce that has developed increased resilience to change. After navigating the massive disruptions of the pandemic, followed by subsequent workplace transformations, it could be that today's workers have developed stronger adaptability muscles.

HOW WORKERS NAVIGATE CHALLENGES

Interestingly, we find that practicing Christians show higher resilience in facing workplace challenges, being more likely to turn to leadership and faith resources for support. They're also more likely than other groups to find joy in helping others and making a difference, suggesting that **practicing faith provides additional meaning and purpose in work.**

Turning to Leadership

When facing difficulties, workers show a clear pattern in seeking support, with formal leadership being the most common source of help (26%). The fact that workers turn first to their superiors, managers and organizational leaders points to both the continuing importance of traditional management structures and workers' confidence in formal channels for problem-solving.

Relying on Themselves

Of note is the strong showing of self-reliance, with 22 percent of workers indicating they prefer to handle challenges on their own. Several dynamics could be at play here. Some workers might view self-sufficiency as a professional strength or feel pressure to project capability. Others may have learned through experience that they can trust their own judgment and solve problems alone, making self-reliance an efficient first approach. Still, this tendency toward self-reliance could also signal potential concerns about organizational culture—some workers might feel unsupported or fear negative consequences for seeking help.

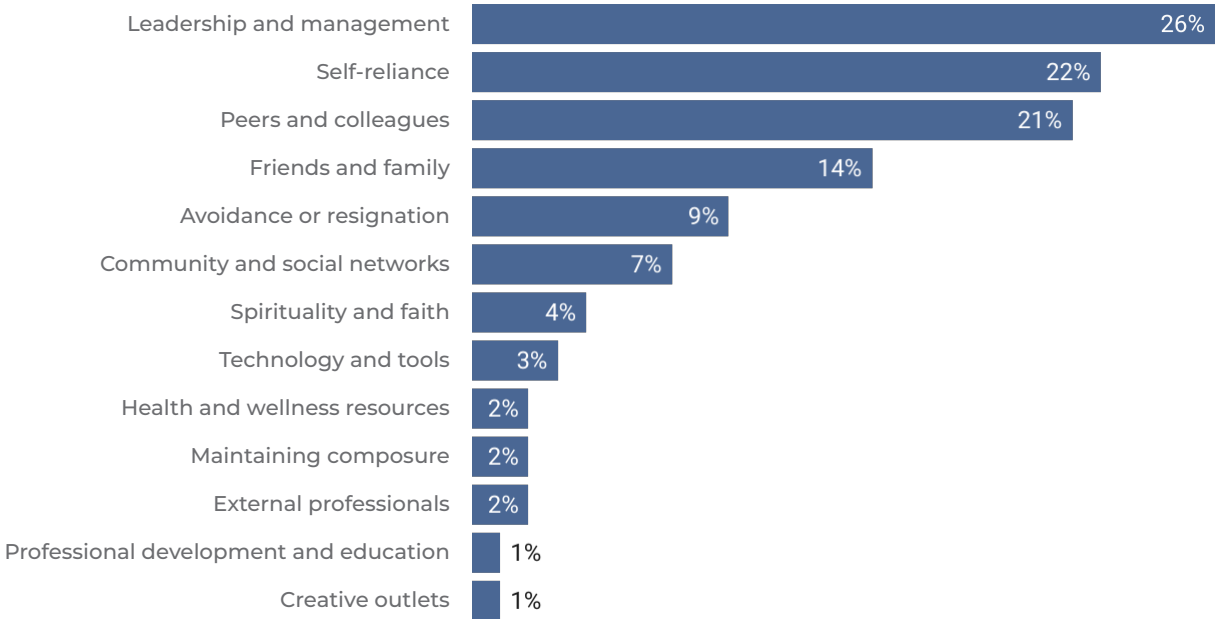
Peer Support

The nearly equal preference for turning to colleagues (21%) reveals the vital role of peer support. These relationships are quite different from leadership guidance, likely providing more immediate, practical assistance based on shared experiences. Alongside this, the role of friends and family (14%) in workplace problem-solving reveals how much work challenges spill into personal life—and how valuable an outside perspective can be.

These findings tell us something important about the nature of workplace support. **Workers use a mix of formal and informal, internal and external resources when dealing with challenges.**

There’s also a notable tension between the high ranking of leadership support (26%) and what we know about leadership challenges from other parts of the research (refer back to pages 5–6). While workers most commonly turn to leaders for help, we also see that leadership issues rank among significant workplace challenges. This suggests that, while workers see leadership as a key resource for problem-solving, the quality or availability of that resource varies significantly.

Where U.S. Adults Seek Help to Navigate Workplace Challenges



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024. This was an open-ended survey question; coded responses shown.

What Makes Work Meaningful

Our research uncovers compelling relationships between where workers find meaning and their overall job satisfaction, workplace experiences and resilience in facing challenges.

Who Finds Joy in What

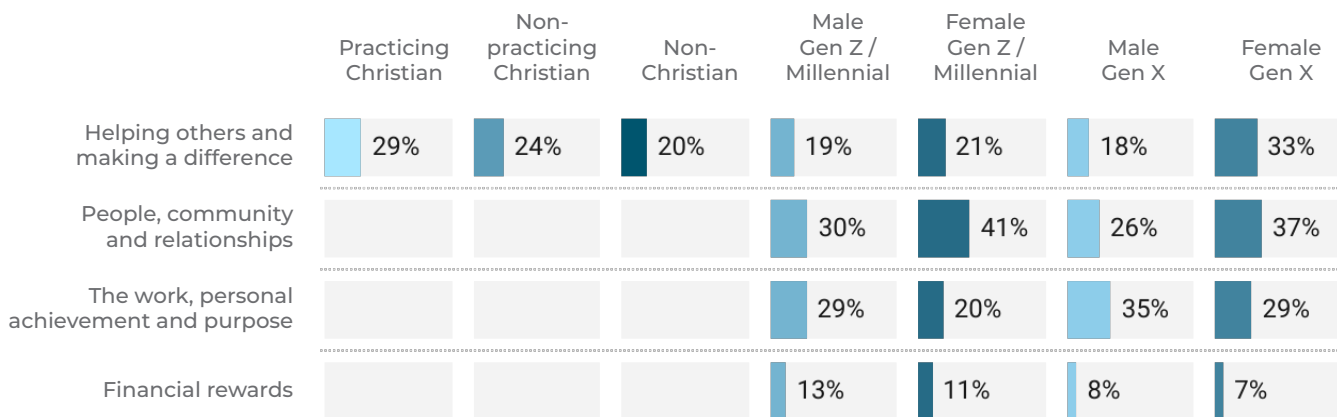
Faith engagement: Practicing Christians are more likely to derive workplace satisfaction from “making a difference” and service-oriented contributions.

Generation and gender: Seasoned female professionals (Gen X and older) prioritize impact-driven work, while younger women value workplace relationships. Younger generations across genders show stronger orientation toward financial incentives than their senior counterparts.

Employment type: Staff in supportive roles tend to find fulfillment through interpersonal connections, while those in leadership positions derive greater satisfaction from achievement-oriented outcomes.

Where Workers Find Joy at Work

(Only statistically different responses shown)



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024. This was an open-ended survey question; coded responses shown.



The Influence of Positive Work Culture

Workers who find joy in their workplace environment report the highest satisfaction levels of all groups, with 50 percent being very satisfied—a full 15 percentage points higher than their peers who do not find joy in their workplace environment. This dramatic difference underscores how crucial a positive work culture is to overall job satisfaction.

Those who derive joy from making a positive impact on others also show notably higher satisfaction levels—42 percent report being very satisfied with their jobs, compared to 34 percent of other workers.



The Limits of Financial Motivation

Workers who identify financial rewards as their primary source of joy report significantly *lower* job satisfaction—only 26 percent say they’re very satisfied, compared to 37 percent of other workers. This 11-percentage-point deficit suggests that making money the primary focus might actually diminish overall workplace satisfaction.

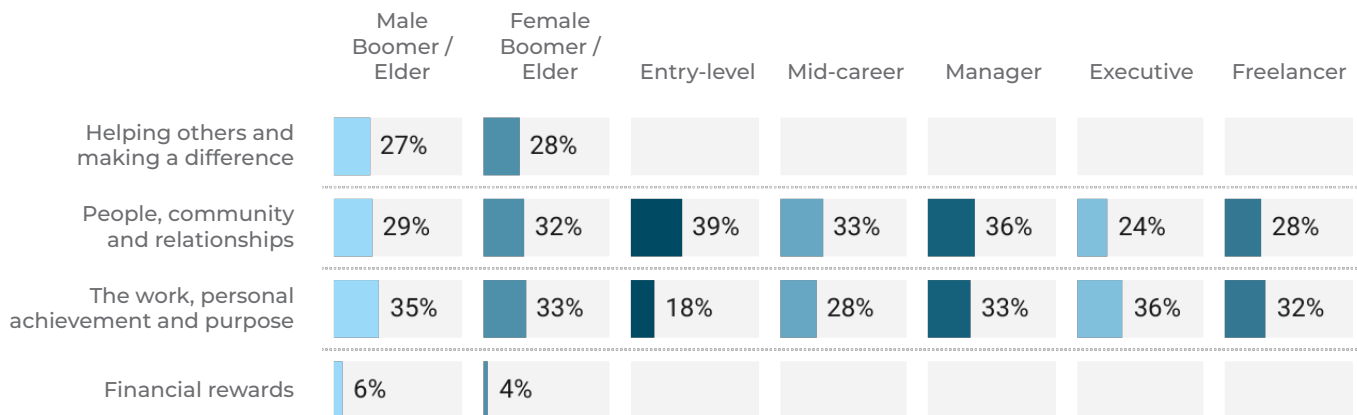


The Role of Relationships & Community

Workers who find joy in workplace relationships report high satisfaction levels: 40 percent say they are very satisfied, 6 percentage points higher than their peers. This aligns with other findings about the importance of workplace community and suggests that strong workplace relationships contribute significantly to overall job satisfaction.

Where Workers Find Joy at Work (cont'd)

(Only statistically different responses shown)



n=2,146 working U.S. adults, December 2024. This was an open-ended survey question; coded responses shown.

Practical Next Steps

The data suggests that meaning at work isn't just about the work itself—it's about how people understand and approach their work. If you want to create a more fulfilling workplace, these findings offer some clear next steps.

For Leaders

Focus on building strong communities at work.

Given that people and relationships are the top sources of workplace fulfillment, creating opportunities for meaningful connection and collaboration should be a priority. This might include structured mentorship programs, collaborative projects or simply creating spaces and times for team members to build authentic relationships.

Help people see the impact of their efforts.

Helping others brings so many workers joy. This is an opportunity for leaders to create clear lines of sight between daily tasks and how that work positively influences others. This could mean sharing customer success stories, creating feedback loops that help workers see their contribution or redesigning roles to maximize opportunities for meaningful engagement with others.

Pay extra attention to younger employees in their journey at work.

The generational gap in workplace satisfaction suggests that Gen Z and Millennial workers may need additional support in finding fulfillment at work. Leaders could provide this support by helping younger workers see the purpose in their work, giving frequent feedback and providing opportunities for personal and vocational growth.

Don't underestimate the power of purpose.

With meaningful work being a significant driver of fulfillment, leaders should regularly communicate their organization's "why" and help team members connect their daily work to larger, meaningful outcomes. Celebrating achievements and their broader impact can help reinforce this connection.

For Workers

Seek meaning beyond the paycheck.

While financial compensation matters, those who find purpose in helping others report nearly three times the workplace joy compared to those motivated primarily by money.

Invest in workplace relationships.

With people connections being the top source of workplace joy (33%), intentionally building quality relationships with colleagues can significantly boost your work experience.

Commit to continuous learning.

With 23 percent of workers citing the work itself (including navigating technological changes) as their biggest challenge, developing personal growth habits and regularly upgrading your skills will help you stay ahead of workplace demands.

Recognize the value in helping others.

Workers who find satisfaction in helping others experience more joy (37% report experiencing joy most of the time vs. 13% of those motivated by money). Look for opportunities to make a difference through your daily tasks.

For Faith & Work Organizations

Bridge the awareness gap.

With only 9 percent of practicing Christians turning to faith resources for workplace challenges, focus on making your resources more visible, accessible and directly applicable to common workplace issues.

Focus on helping workers connect faith to daily tasks.

Create practical frameworks that help Christians see the connection between their faith and specific workplace activities, beyond general principles.

Equip faith leaders to address workplace issues.

Partner with churches and ministries to help their leaders better understand and speak to the actual challenges today's workers face.

Collaborate with workplace leaders.

Since 26 percent of workers turn to leadership when facing challenges, develop resources specifically for Christian leaders to help them support their teams from a faith perspective.

Ready to implement these insights? Start with an audit of current practices.

- How clearly can employees see their work's positive impact?
- What opportunities exist for meaningful connection and collaboration?
- How well is your organization's purpose communicated and connected to daily work?
- Are employees aware of available faith-based resources that might help them navigate workplace challenges?



The answers to these questions can guide specific initiatives to enhance workplace meaning and satisfaction. Informed by this research, VOCA Center offers solutions to help you create an actionable, effective plan tailored to your goals. Visit VocaCenter.org/Barna or scan the QR code to access this free guide.

Partner Perspective by VOCA Center

At VOCA, we are driven to equip individuals to find God's best in their work. We guide people in discerning both their vocational calling and how to excel in the work they are given to do. This year's research with Barna has provided valuable insights into this journey:

1. Joy is just a personal touch away.
2. There's a sobering lack of connection with God as people go about their work.

These findings reveal important truths about our relationship with work, particularly regarding how individuals can experience fulfillment regardless of their circumstances.

JOY IS POSSIBLE IN ANY JOB

Everyone can have joy at work (and most people do at least some of the time). Joy comes from positively impacting another person. Think of it as following Jesus' command to love your neighbor when you're on the job.

Connecting your work to the larger biblical narrative and entering work with a refined sense of purposeful mission are great practices. There are also simple, practical ways to find joy in your work right now, no matter your role. Here are some ways to do this:

Ask for feedback.

Open the door to discovering how you're doing at work. This can help you see your personal impact and how your actions affect your colleagues.

Keep a people impact journal.

Make a daily habit of listing the names of people you've positively affected through your work and the nature of that impact. This can be encouraging and motivating.

Look for the unseen.

In the workplace, it's common for individuals to be overlooked, unheard or not recognized for their contributions. Be intentional to notice, engage with, help and compliment these individuals.

Despite the old saying "It's just business, it's not personal" — business has always been personal. In fact, it's human relationships and meaningful interactions that bring genuine joy to our work. Keep your eye out for personal connections and simple acts of kindness to increase the joy factor in your work right away.

Why Joy Matters for Leaders

Leaders who care about joy at work aren't just being sentimental—they're being strategic. Joy is a leading indicator of retention, which reduces costly turnover and recruiting efforts. It also fosters trust, which fuels productivity and team cohesion.¹ In our experience we see that when employees find joy in what they do and who they do it with, they're more likely to stay, grow and contribute their best. Joy isn't a luxury; it's a leadership imperative.

A CALL TO INTEGRATED FAITH & WORK

Perhaps the most alarming data in these findings is the absence of individuals accessing spiritual resources to deal with work problems. Imagine how Christians' daily work experiences would be transformed if they invited God into their work to give wisdom, grace and strength for their assignments. Stress and anxiety could be lessened if we prayed more and casted our cares on him. Productivity, innovation and joy could be heightened if we received wisdom from the one who gladly gives it.

The data shows us that most Christians are missing opportunities to experience God's presence in their work. This represents both a spiritual and practical gap that calls for more faith-based resources and intentional equipping. The bottom line is this: Your work can be better, and even more so when your faith is integrated in the work you do.

1 Deborah Lovich and Rosie Sargeant, "Enjoying Work Matters More Than You May Realize," Boston Consulting Group, February 13, 2024, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/joy-at-work-matters-more-than-you-realize>.; Paul J. Zak, "The Neuroscience of Trust: Management behaviors that foster employee engagement," *Harvard Business Review*, December 31, 2016, <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>.

About the Research

In partnership with VOCA Center and as part of the Trends@Work co-op, Barna Group authored a survey research instrument to research major trends in the contemporary workplace. This survey was fielded in December 2024 to 2,146 U.S. adult workers (those working full- or part-time jobs). The survey utilized quotas for age, gender, race / ethnicity, education, region and income to reach a diverse representation sample of U.S. adult workers.

Together, VOCA Center and Barna designed six specific survey questions concerning workplace joy and challenges. This report represents findings of Barna Group's primary analysis.

About the Partners

Barna

In its 40-year history, Barna Group has conducted more than two million interviews over the course of thousands of studies and has become a go-to source for insights about faith and culture, leadership, vocation and generations. Barna Group has worked with thousands of businesses, nonprofit organizations and churches across the U.S. and around the world. Barna is an independent, privately held, nonpartisan organization based in Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas.

[Barna.org](https://www.barna.org)

VOCA Center

VOCA's mission is to empower Christians to find better work by connecting God's wisdom, power, and presence with their on-the-job lives. VOCA delivers teaching, coaching and leadership development so Christians can engage their workplace with clarity and confidence.

[VocaCenter.org](https://www.vocacenter.org)