

life @ work

How Workers Find Joy, Face
Challenges and Seek Support

| 2026

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This report was produced in partnership with VOCA Center. Barna Group was solely responsible for data collection, analysis and writing of the report.

Introduction by Barna Group

Work occupies more of adult life than almost anything else people do. Yet how it actually feels day to day—what brings satisfaction, what wears a person down, where people turn when things get hard—is easy to overlook. To better understand the joys and challenges of life at work, Barna Group and VOCA Center have partnered for the second year to produce the Life@Work report.

Last year's report found a workforce largely energized by relationships and purpose: most workers reported regular joy on the job, and pointed to people, meaning and impact, not money, as what made work worth doing. This year's findings show a workplace shaped less by grand ambition and more by fundamentals: relationships that make a job worth showing up for, a paycheck that offers some measure of security, and workloads that outpace the time available to manage them. They also point to a generational divide in how mental health shows up as a workplace challenge and a marked shift in where people turn for support—friends, family and, notably, faith, more than formal workplace resources.

At the end of this briefing, we take a closer look at how this year's findings compare to Life@Work 2025. For VOCA Center, whose mission is helping Christians connect God's wisdom and presence to their working lives, the findings raise a pointed question: With self-reliance still the workplace default and rising interest in faith as a means for navigating workplace challenges, what kind of support do employees actually have access to and what kind are they still missing?

Key Findings

01 Joy

Relationships and financial security are almost tied as the top sources of joy at work (22% and 20%), with older workers and practicing Christians reporting the strongest sense of purpose.

02 Challenge

Time pressure, pay and mental health top the list of workplace challenges. Mental health hits Gen Z hardest: 18 percent name it as their top challenge, compared with 4 percent of Boomers.

03 Help-Seeking

Workers rely first on themselves (40%), then a direct supervisor or manager (33%) and a spouse or partner (31%). Formal and professional support remains far less used.

04 Faith & Coping

Practicing Christians lean on prayer (31%), scripture (22%) and faith community (14%) at three to six times the rate of non-Christians.

05 Future Needs

Workers want more structured support. Professional training and mentoring are the only two resources where interest in the year ahead outpaces how much workers currently use them.

The Findings

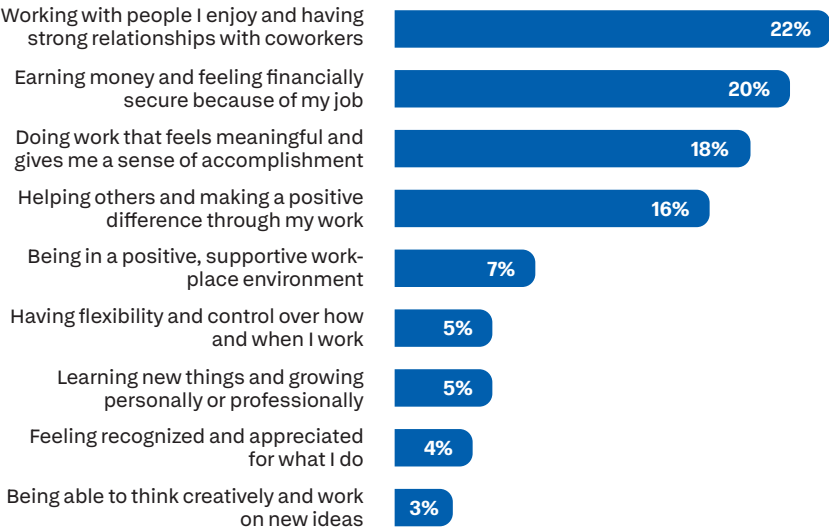
1. What Makes a Job Worth Showing Up For: People & Pay

When workers describe what makes a job worth showing up for, the top two answers are almost tied: 22 percent stay for the people around them—coworkers they enjoy and relationships that feel genuinely supportive. Close behind, 20 percent point to financial security, the plain relief of earning enough to feel steady. Meaningful work and a sense of accomplishment follow at 18 percent, with helping others close behind at 16 percent. Recognition, creativity and flexible schedules round out the list, each named by fewer than one in 10 workers. For most people, joy at work still starts with who they’re working alongside and whether the paycheck sustains them financially.

Relationships and Financial Security Rank as Top Two Sources of Joy at Work

What gives you joy at work?

Select one



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

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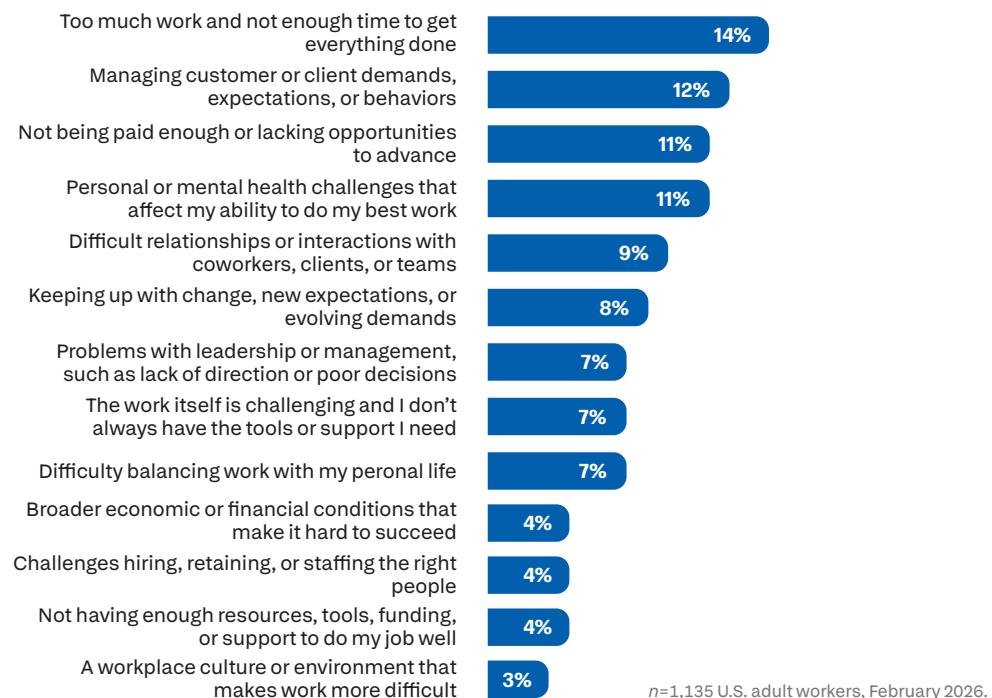
2. Time Tops the Complaint List, and Mental Health Splits by Generation

Workers' biggest complaint is a familiar one: not enough hours to get everything done, cited by 14 percent as their top workplace challenge, ahead of customer or client demands (12%) and feeling underpaid or stuck (11%). Look specifically at who names a personal or mental health challenge as the thing most affecting their ability to do good work, though, and a sharp generational line appears. Among Gen Z workers, 18 percent point to mental health as their single biggest obstacle, compared with 13 percent of Millennials, 8 percent of Gen X and just 4 percent of Boomers. Gen Z workers are four and a half times more likely than Boomers to name this as their defining challenge.

Workload & Time Constraints Create Greatest Job Strain

What is the biggest challenge you face in your work?

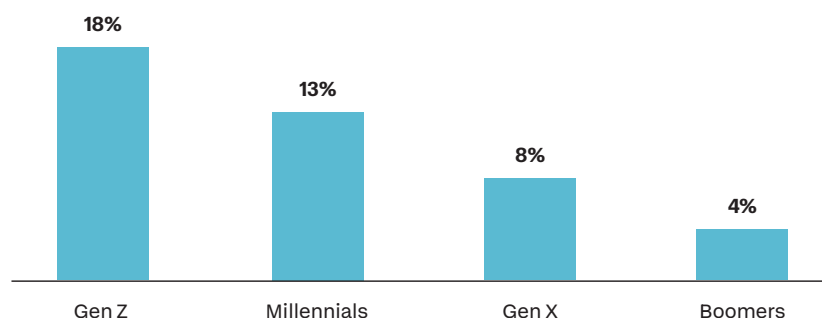
Select one



Gen Z Are More Likely Than Boomers to Cite Mental Health as Top Challenge

What is the biggest challenge you face in your work?

% who say "personal or mental health challenges that affect my ability to do my best work".



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

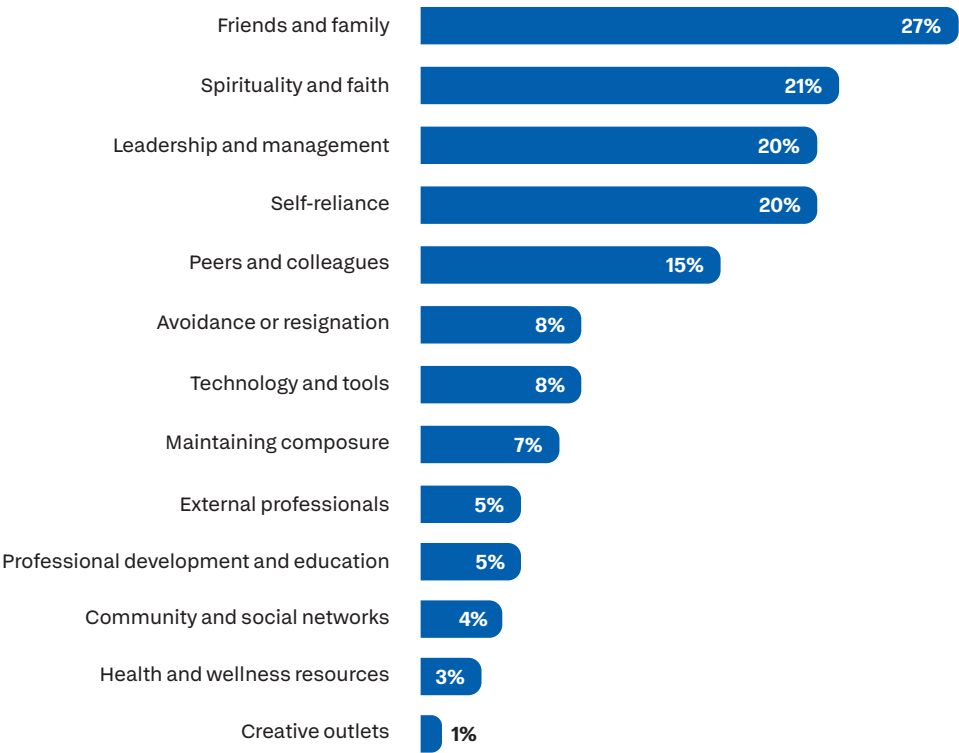
3. When Work Gets Hard, People Call Home Before They Call HR

Friends and family are the first stop for nearly three in 10 employees (27%) navigating a tough stretch at work, more than any other source of support. One in five (21%) turn to faith and seeking God, while self-reliance and turning to a leader or manager tie for third, each named by 20 percent. Peers and colleagues follow at 15 percent. Formal channels barely register: only 5 percent name an external professional such as a therapist or counselor, and professional development resources draw about the same share. For most workers facing a hard stretch, the people closest to them—not a formal program—are still the first call.

Friends and Family Outrank Every Other Source of Workplace Support

Who or what do you turn to for help navigating these challenges?

Open-ended



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

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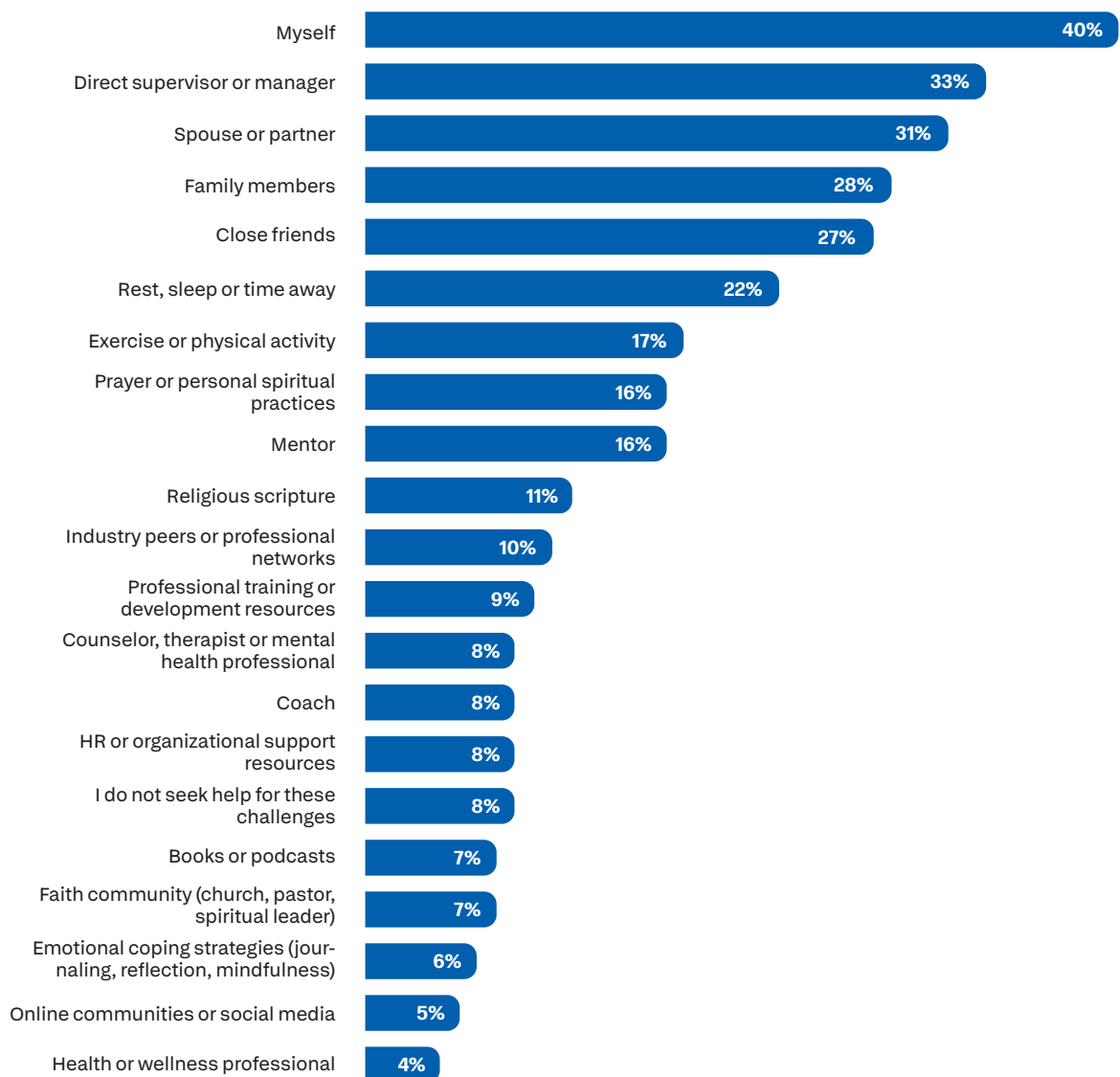
4. Self-Reliance Leads, but Workers Are Ready to Lean on Others

Self-reliance remains the most common way job holders navigate challenges at work, but it isn't the only place they put their trust. In the past year, two-fifths (40%) turned to themselves for support—more than any other source—followed by a direct supervisor or manager (33%) and a spouse or partner (31%). Looking ahead, “myself” still leads the list of resources workers want more of next year, but at 35 percent, five percentage points lower than actual past-year use. Direct supervisors (28%) rank ahead of every formal resource, including HR, coaching and mentorship. Professional training is the top resource where interest for next year outpaces how much employees currently look to this for support at work.

Direct Relationships Rank Above Every Formal Support System for Help at Work

Which of the following have you turned to for help in the past year?

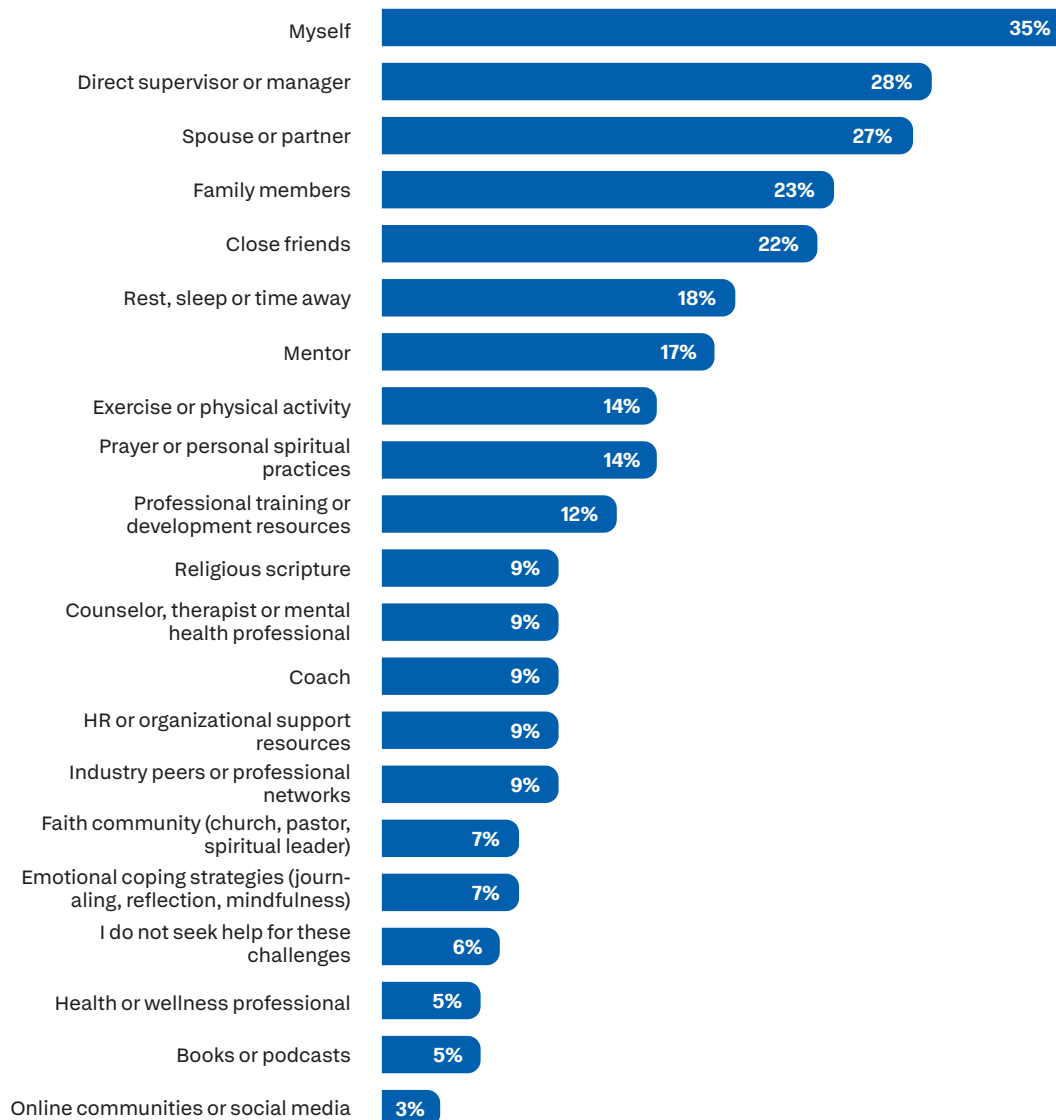
Select all that apply



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

Which of the following would you be most interested in helping you through workplace challenges in the next year?

Select all that apply

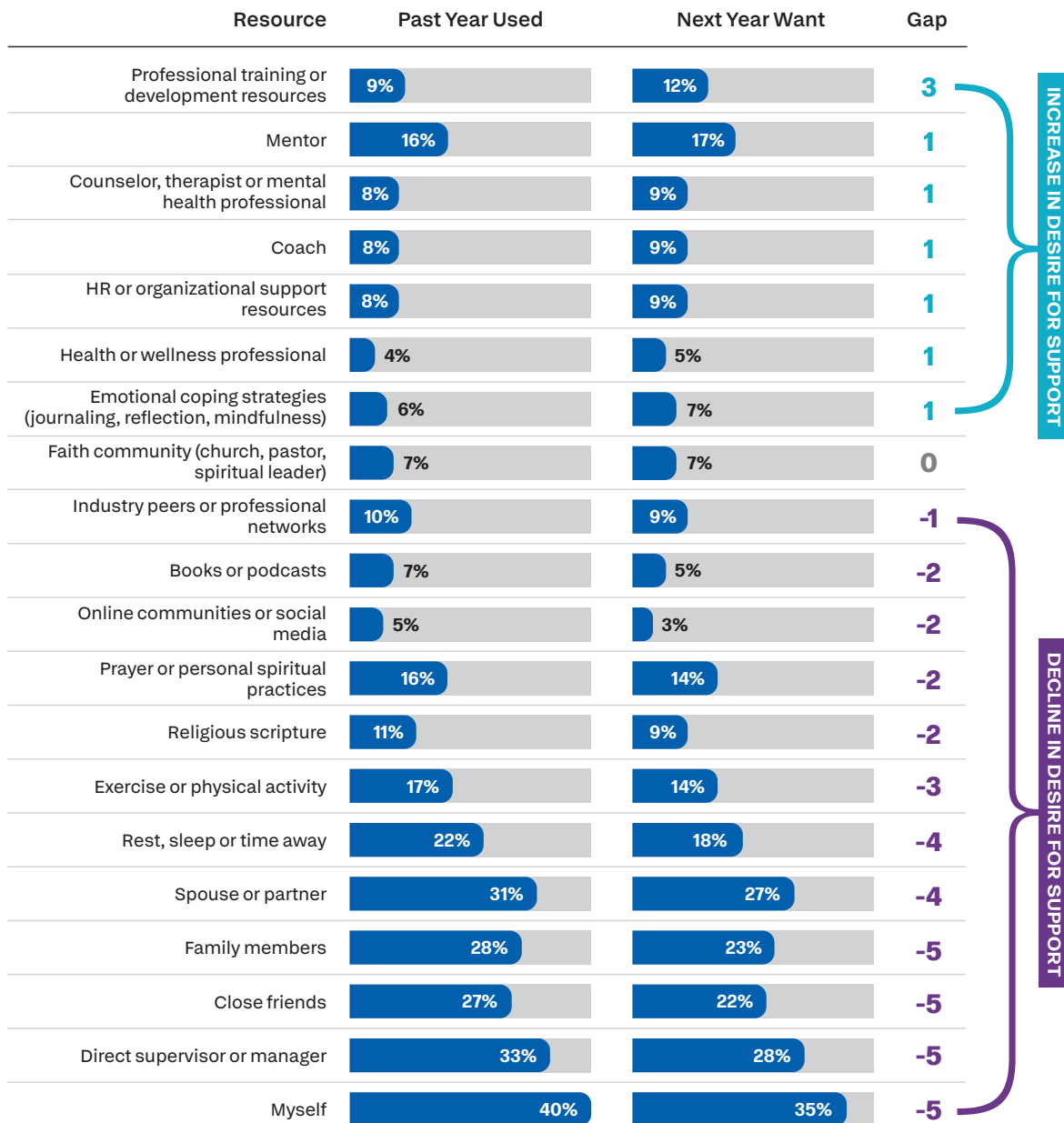


n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

Past-Year vs. Next-Year Support: Interest Rises for Training, Dips for Self-Reliance & Close Relationships

Sources of support for workplace challenges

Positive = unmet needs / sorted by gap / differences



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

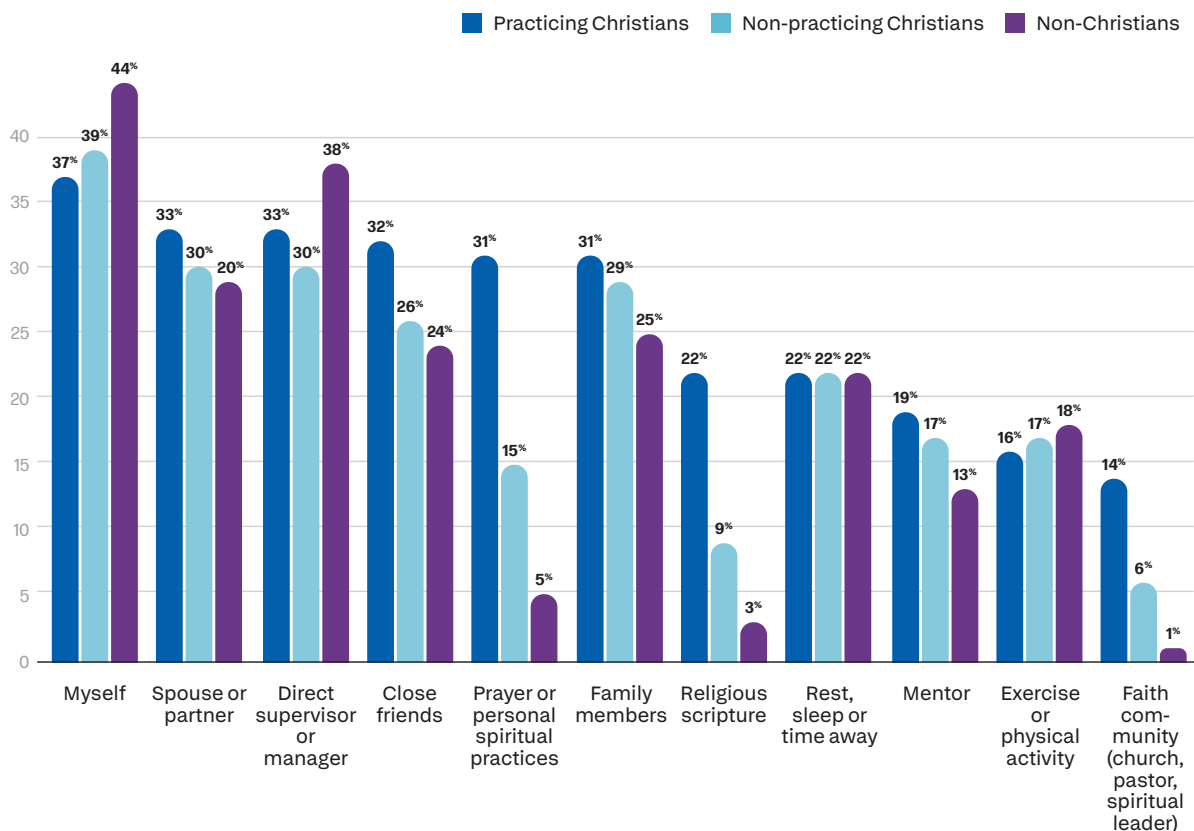
5. Practicing Christians Help Themselves First, Then Turn to Faith

Practicing Christians turn to faith a lot more than everyone else, but they still rely on themselves first. Prayer ranks fifth on their own list, at 31 percent, but that's still six times the non-Christian rate. Scripture (22%) and faith community (14%) show similarly wide gaps. Faith has become part of a fuller toolkit for practicing Christians, not a replacement for the people and habits they already relied on.

Self, Spouse & Supervisor Rank Ahead of Prayer for Practicing Christians

In the past year, have you turned to any of the following for help?

Top 11 / select all that apply / sorted by practicing Christians



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026



Faith has become part of a fuller toolkit for practicing Christians, not a replacement for the people and habits they already relied on

6. The Biggest Shift Since 2025: Turning to Faith, Up 17 Points

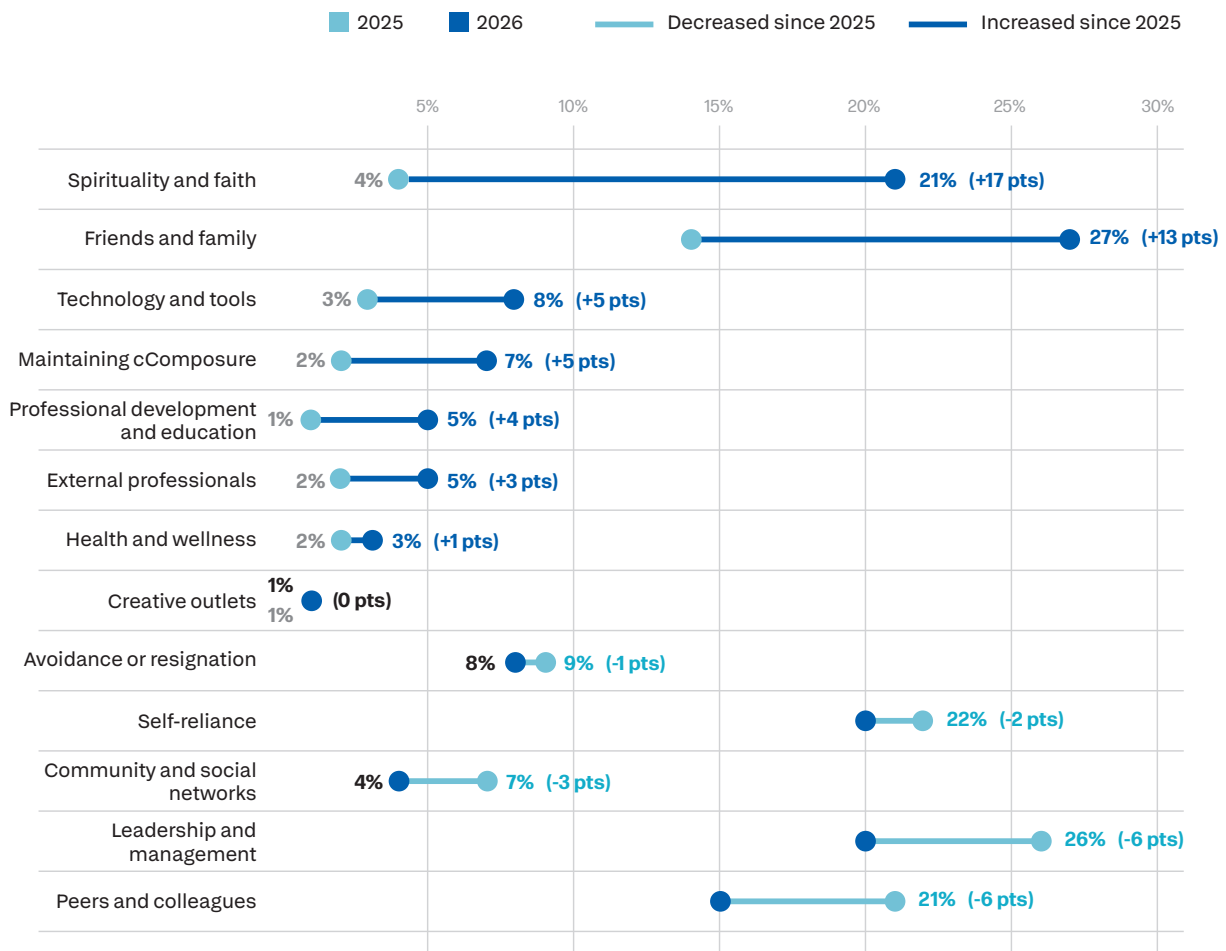
Of the questions asked identically in the 2025 report and again in 2026, one shows the clearest movement: Turning to faith and spirituality for help with workplace challenges rose from 4 percent of workers in 2025 to 21 percent in 2026, a 17-percentage-point increase. Two groups drove much of that shift. Black and African American workers and practicing Christians each rose 28 percentage points over the same period, the largest increases of any subgroup measured.

Two factors may help explain the jump. The first is methodological: The 2026 survey asked this question after a block of items on religious perspectives, while in the 2025 report, the survey asked it before any religion-related content appeared. That shift in placement may have made faith more top-of-mind for respondents answering an open-ended question in 2026 and could have contributed to the increase. The second potential reason: Barna's broader research has tracked a wider trend toward spiritual openness across the U.S., particularly among Gen Z and Millennials, and this finding may be one more data point in that pattern. Both explanations are plausible, and they are not mutually exclusive—question order may have inflated an increase that was already underway.

As Faith and Friends Rise, Leadership and Peer Support Decline

What or Who Do You Turn To For Help Navigating These Challenges?

Open-ended survey question / sorted by largest positive shifts

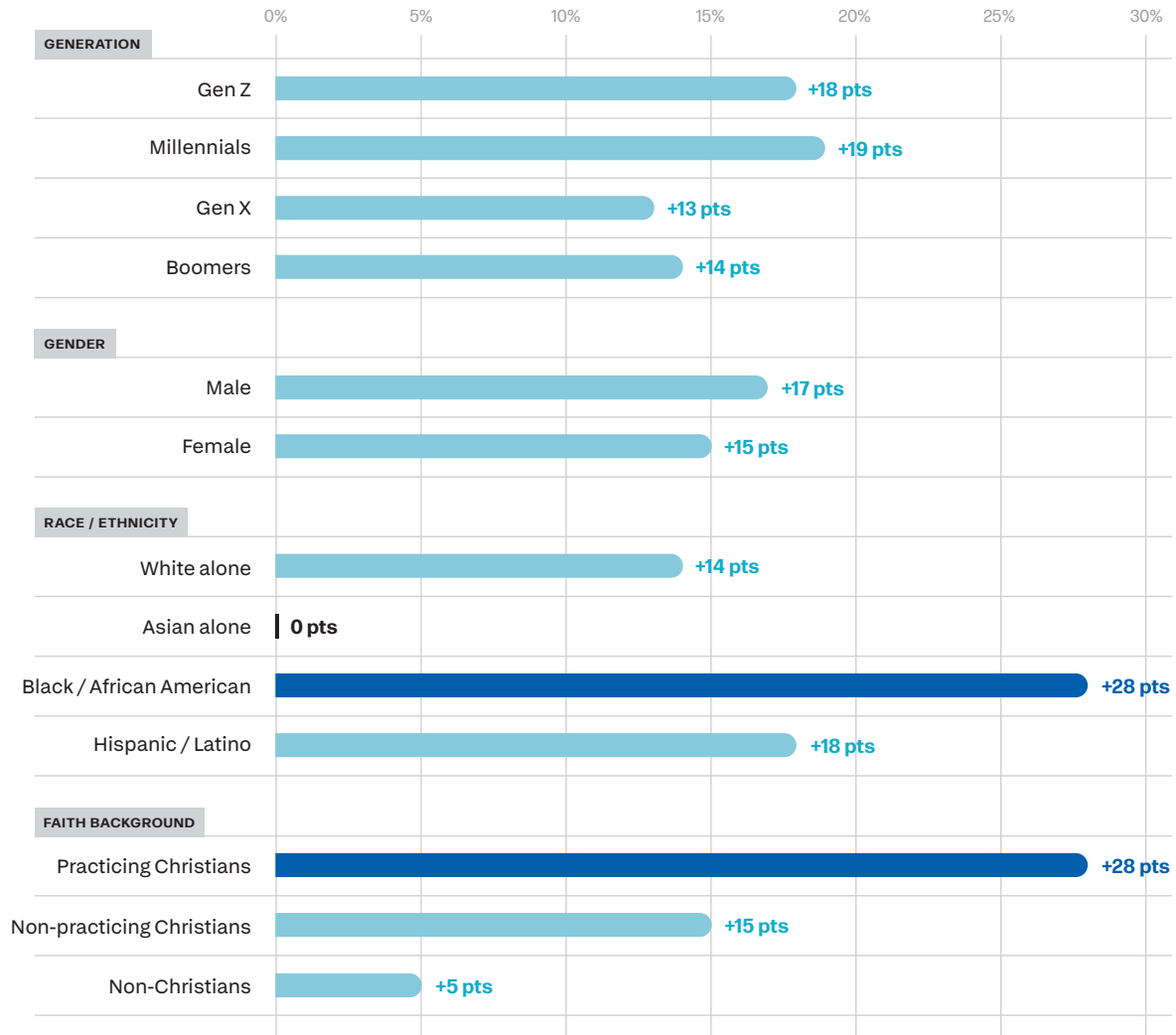


n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

Black Workers & Practicing Christians Drive the Turn Toward Faith

Spiritual and faith: change since 2025

Percentage point difference (2026 minus 2025) by demographic group



n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

Workers turning to faith and spirituality for help with workplace challenges rose from 4 percent of workers in the 2025 report to 21 percent in 2026



Beyond the Biggest Shift: How Joy and Challenges Have Reshuffled

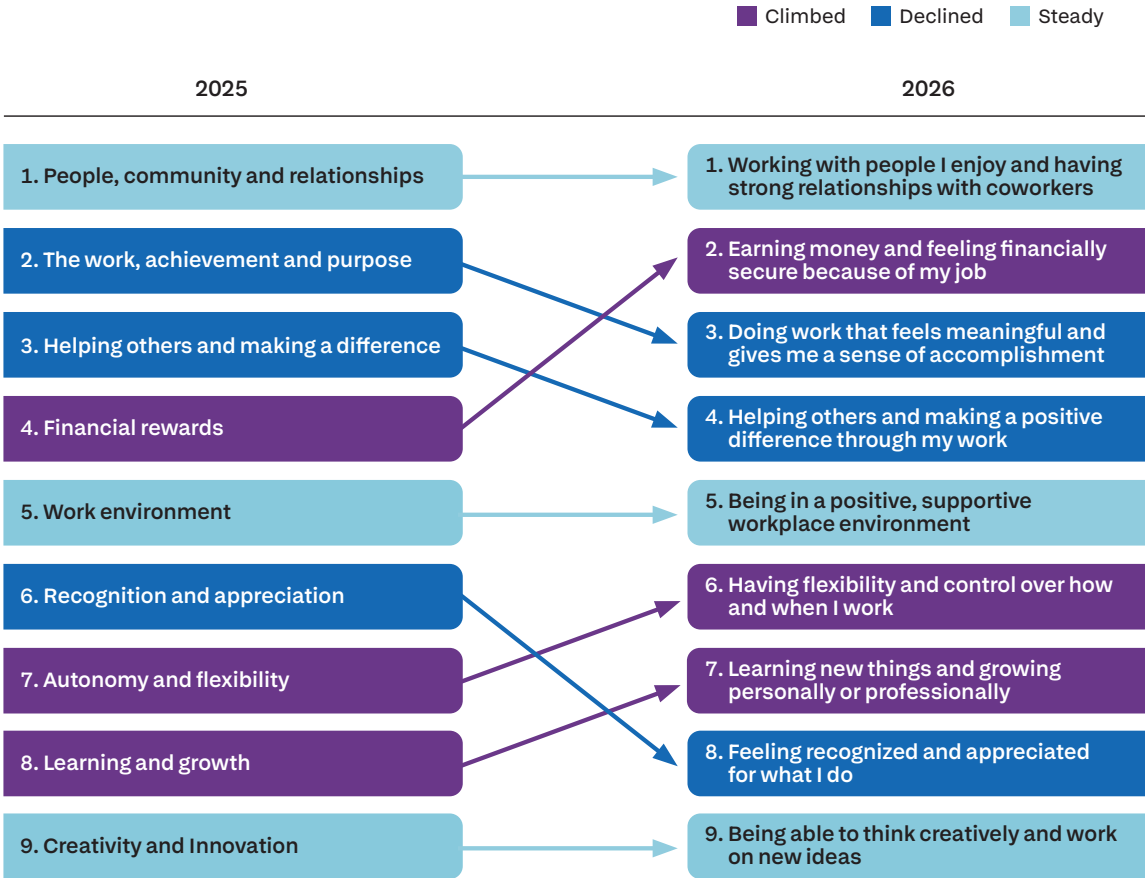
Joy at Work: Financial Security Is Climbing the List

Relationships remained the top source of joy at work in 2025 and 2026, but financial security climbed from fourth place in 2025 to second in 2026, the largest riser on the list. Meaningful work and a sense of purpose slipped from second to third, helping others eased from third to fourth, and recognition and appreciation fell the furthest, from sixth to eighth. A methodological note to point out: In the 2025 report, responses were coded from an open-ended question, while 2026 responses were collected from a fixed list of answer choices, so the two years aren't a perfect apples-to-apples comparison—the change in format alone could account for some of the movement. Even so, the size of financial security's rise stands out enough to be worth watching in future waves.

What gives you joy at work?

2025 categories: qualitative thematic coding of open-ended responses

2026: select-one survey options using exact wording of 2025 thematic coding



n=2,146 U.S. adult workers, December 2024; n=1,135 U.S. adult workers, February 2026.

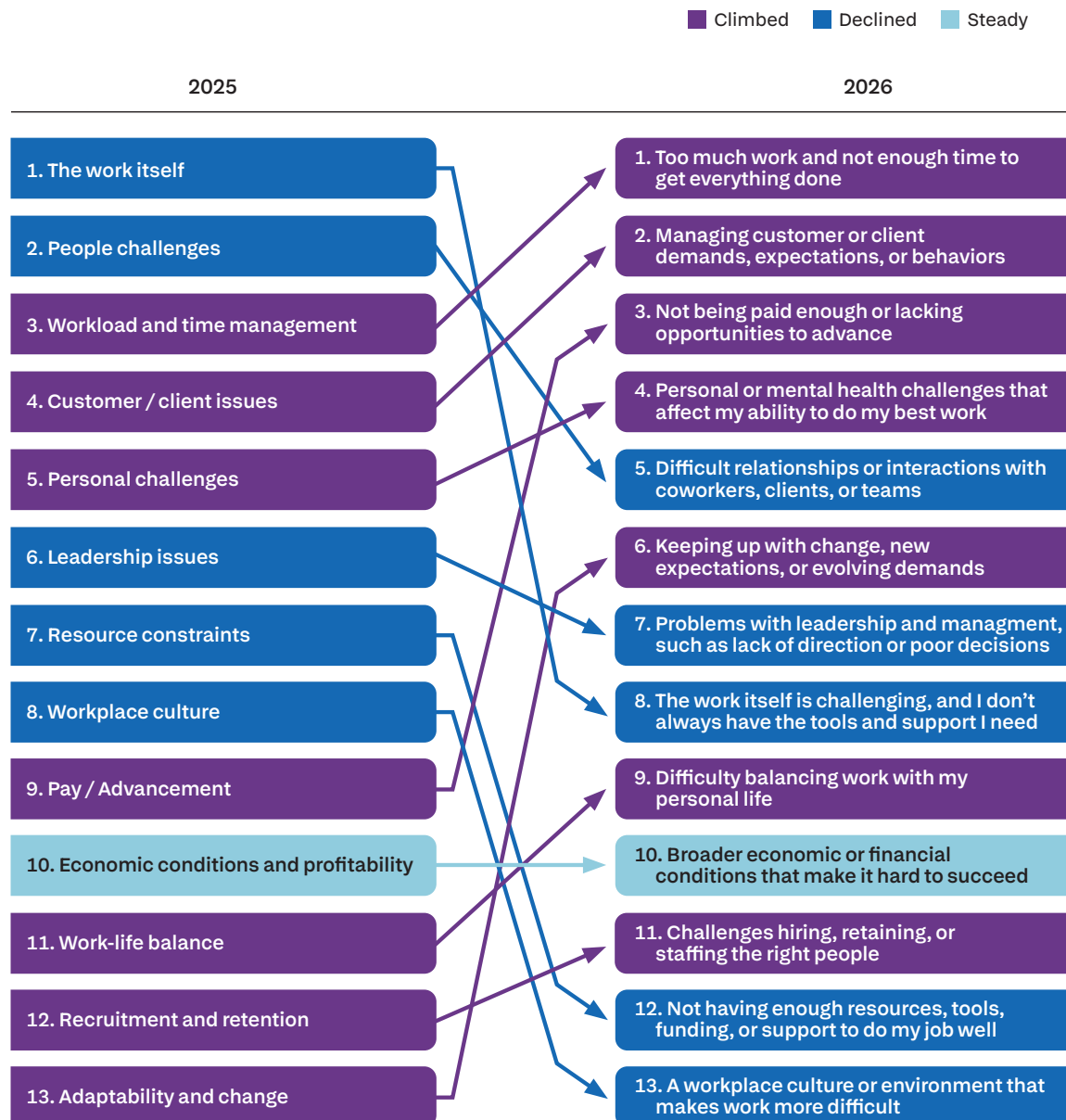
Challenges at Work: Time Crunch & Client Demands Hit Hard in 2026

The nature of employees' complaints has shifted since 2025. Workload and time pressure jumped from third place to first, and pay and advancement climbed even further, from ninth to third. Customer and client demands rose from fourth to second. Meanwhile, “the work itself”—the top challenge in 2025—fell to eighth, and interpersonal “people challenges” dropped from second to fifth. As with the joy rankings on the previous page, 2025 categories in this comparison were coded from an open-ended question, and 2026 categories reflect a fixed list of answer choices. Because of this methodological difference, these ranking changes should be read as directional rather than exact.

What is the biggest challenge you face at work?

2025 categories: qualitative thematic coding of open-ended responses

2026: select-one survey options using exact wording of 2025 thematic coding



Conclusion

This year's findings describe workers who still find real joy in relationships and a steady paycheck, who face sharply different challenges depending on generation, and who largely manage those challenges on their own. Turning to faith hasn't closed the gap in workplace support, but it does show more workers opening a door that had mostly stayed shut. Where that door leads depends less on this data than on what leaders, workers and faith-based organizations choose to build behind it. Here are a few practical next steps to help you get started.

Practical Next Steps

For Leaders

You're already a trusted resource. Direct supervisors rank second only to self-reliance as a source of support (33% past year, 28% next-year interest), ahead of any formal HR or coaching program. Investing in how well leaders show up for their teams may matter more than adding new programs.

Watch the generational mental health gap. Gen Z workers are four and a half times more likely than Boomers to name mental health as their top challenge. That gap is worth noticing on multigenerational teams, without assuming it reflects less resilience.

For Workers

Self-reliance has limits. "Myself" remains the top source of support in 2025 and 2026, but workers' own interest in relying solely on themselves eases next year, from 40 percent to 35 percent—a sign that many are open to spreading the load.

Ask what's already available. Professional training is one area where next-year interest outpaces current use. Before assuming a resource doesn't exist at your workplace, it's worth asking.

For Faith & Work Organizations

Meet a real and growing turn toward faith. Turning to faith or spirituality for workplace help rose 17 percentage points since 2025, most steeply among practicing Christians and Black and African American workers—a promising signal of growing openness.

Build on an existing practice. Practicing Christians already turn to prayer six times as often as non-Christians do. Faith-based organizations have a practice to build on, rather than something new to introduce.

Partner Perspective by VOCA Center

At VOCA, we exist to help Christians connect God's wisdom, power, and presence to their working lives. We deliver this through inspiring podcasts, digital publishing, and confidential coaching. This year's data indicate some encouraging news: openness to and desire for spiritual resources for work are on the rise.

On the other hand, we see two important gaps:

Gap 1: Desire for spiritual resources isn't translating into practice.

It seems that practices like prayer, Bible reading, and seeking spiritual counsel are lagging in actual habits. This is why, at VOCA, we created a 24/7 spiritual coach for work called AiSD (AI Spiritual Director). Users can start here to find always-on, biblically-grounded counsel and prayer prompts for their work.

Gap 2: Self-reliance keeps winning.

The self-reliance we see across this survey doesn't surprise us. Most people have learned through trial and error that the only person they can truly trust is themselves. Yet at VOCA, we believe human beings are made to do life together, to share our triumphs and joys, to seek counsel and receive prayer from fellow travelers.

Here are some practical tips on how workers can leverage community and spiritual practices as they engage in the world of their work:

- **Pray specifically about your workday, not just generally about "my job."** Naming a real deadline, a difficult coworker or a decision you're facing invites God into the texture of your work.
- **Loop in a manager or trusted peer.** They're already the second most-used source of support workers turn to—there's no need to navigate a hard season alone.
- **Don't wait for a formal program to appear.** Mentoring and coaching show some of the widest gaps between what workers want and what they currently have—sometimes building the bridge starts with one honest conversation. Observe the people around you. Who has God placed in your path that might offer wise counsel? Make some time, take them to coffee or meet on Zoom. Give the relationship a try by simply asking one or two burning questions. It's not good for us to work alone!

About the Research

In partnership with VOCA Center, Barna Group authored a survey research instrument to research major trends in the contemporary workplace. This survey was fielded in February 2026 to 1,135 U.S. adult workers (those working full- or part-time jobs) age 18 or older. Data collection utilized quota sampling for age, gender, race/ethnicity and region, and minimal statistical weighting has been applied to maximize statistical representativeness. This report represents findings of Barna Group's primary analysis.

Where this report compares 2026 findings to results from Barna and VOCA Center's 2025 report ($n=2,146$ U.S. adult workers, December 2024), note that the two studies differ somewhat in sample size and quota composition, and in one instance, in how response categories were built. Differences of a few percentage points between years should be interpreted with that context in mind.

About the Partners



Barna Group

Since 1984, 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



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

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