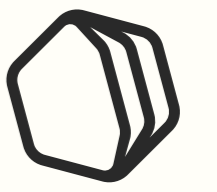Qatalog × GitLab

language.work

Killing Time
at Work '22

Research exploring knowledge workers' experience of asynchronous work, the barriers to adoption, and its growing importance in the modern workplace.

Index

The clock is ticking...

The dramatic workplace shifts of the pandemic gave us a once in a lifetime opportunity to reshape how we work forever. We could have restructured work to be asynchronous, allowing us to build work around our lives, but we failed. Now, our research shows we're falling back into old habits – ones that should have been cast aside when we had the chance.

Asynchronous work is happening in pockets, but not everyone is being supported to work this way. Many who do work asynchronously still feel uncomfortable, with their organizational structures, tooling, and leadership stuck in the old way of working.

Digital presenteeism is pervasive, with employees working an extra hour each day to show that they are still online and contributing, due to a fear that colleagues and bosses will think they aren't working hard enough.

We're sticking to old norms, maintaining the same practices, and adopting tools that mean we keep working like we used to – but it's a crutch. The world has changed, and expectations are now very different. Businesses simply can't afford to lean on the old ways in a new world.

This is no longer a 'nice to have'. The fierce war for talent means that companies have to get this right. Today's workers are already demanding greater flexibility. For future generations, it will be non-negotiable. The old way of work is dead, but the future of work we all want isn't something that will just happen to us; it's something we must actively and intentionally build.
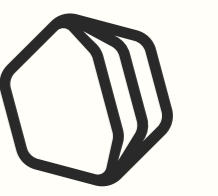
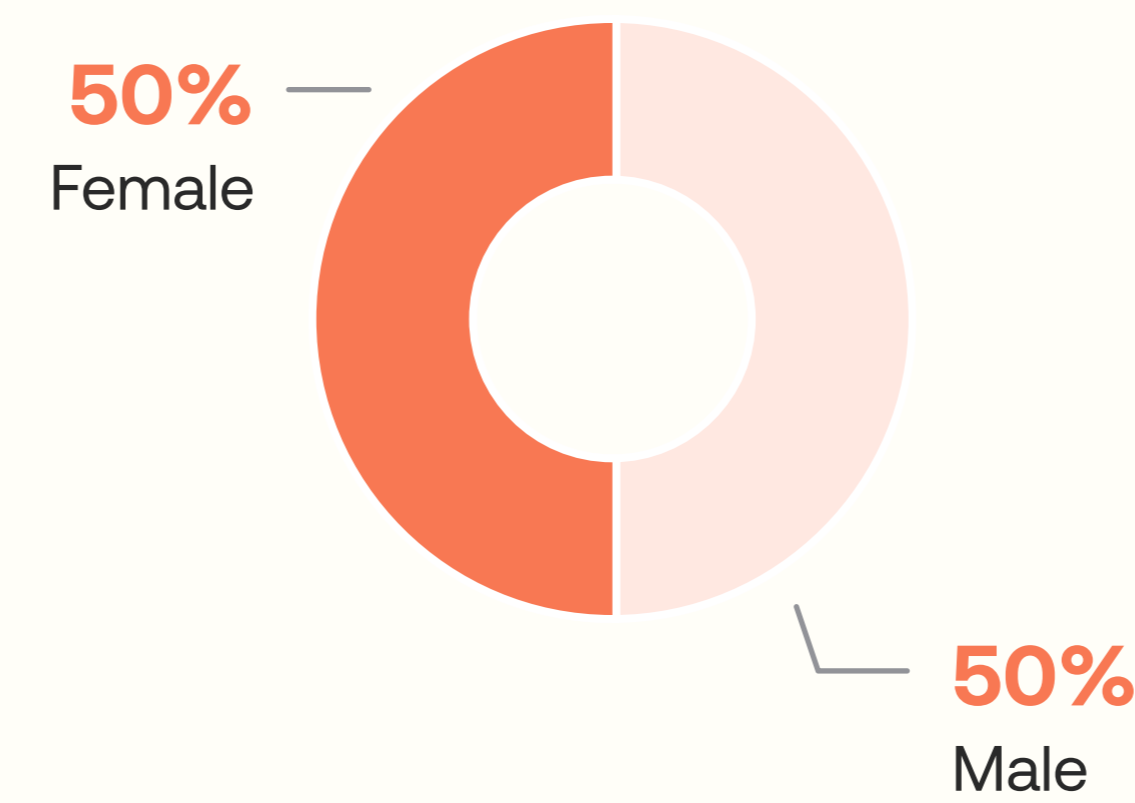– *Tariq Rauf, Founder & CEO at Qatalog*
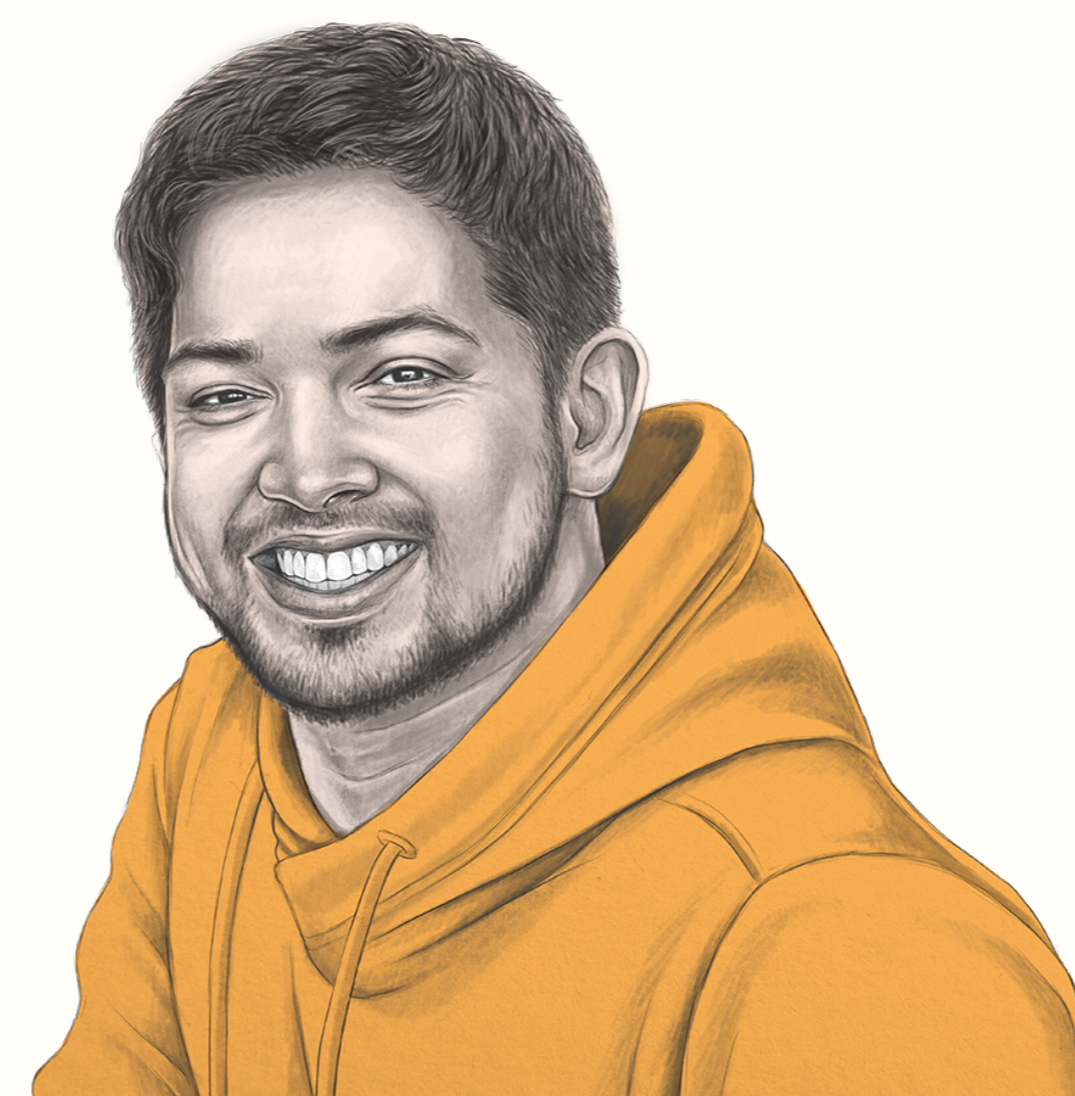
The study

Qatalog and GitLab set out to uncover the reality of what work is really like in the modern workplace – from how we manage our time to how employee expectations have shifted.

2,000 knowledge workers participated in this survey – 1,000 in the US and 1,000 in the UK. For the purposes of this study, "knowledge worker" was defined as someone who works predominantly from home, an office, a co-working space, or a combination of these, and uses a computer or laptop more than 50% of the time to carry out their work. Research was carried out by Attest between 19-21 March 2022.

Gender

50% Female

50% Male

Management level

8% C-level
10% Director / Vice President
25% Administrative
29% Manager
9% Analyst
4% Consultant
15% Associate
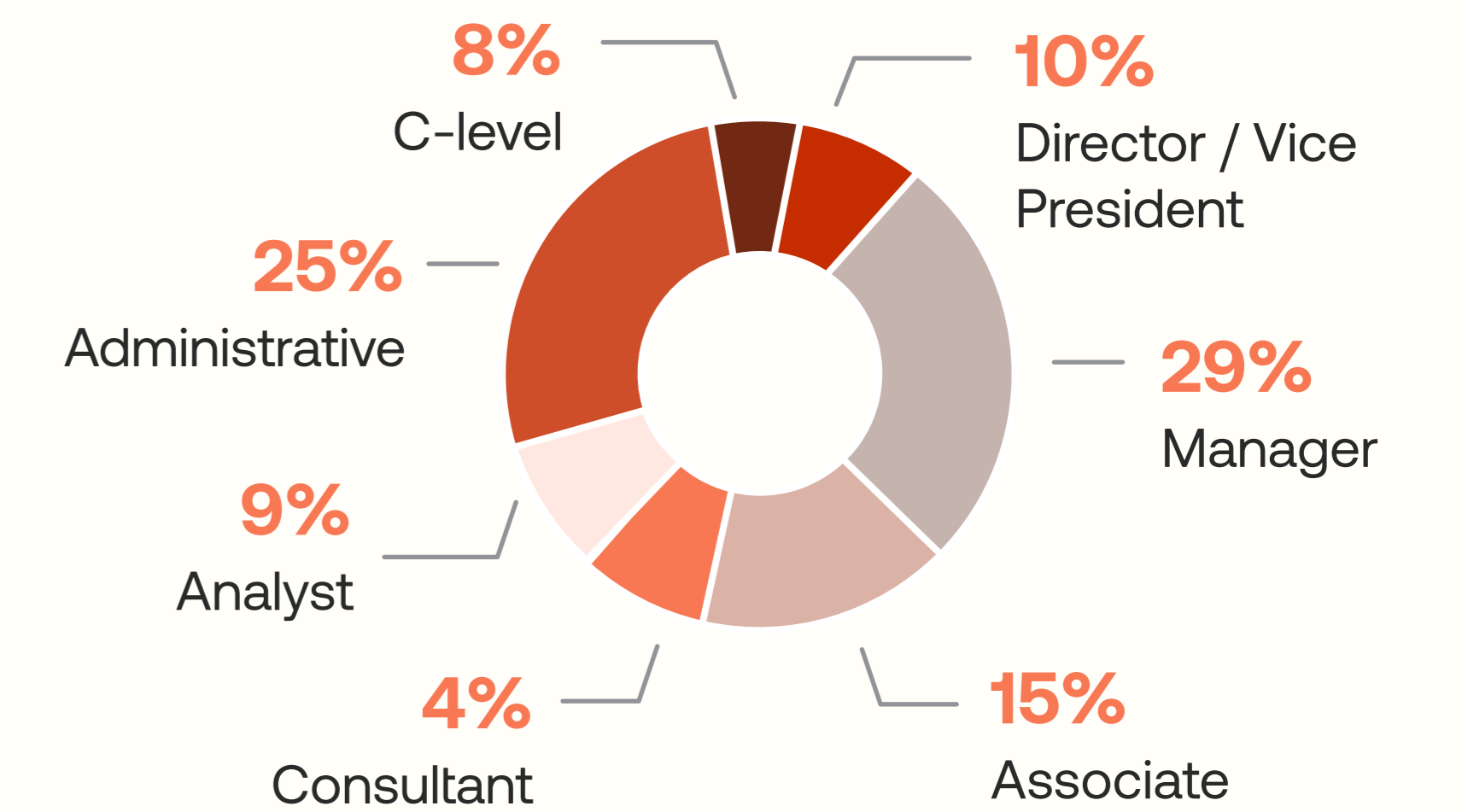
Employment status

Full-time	Part-time
90%	**10%**

Company size (employees)

26-100	**17%**
101-500	**26%**
501-1000	**18%**
1000+	**39%**
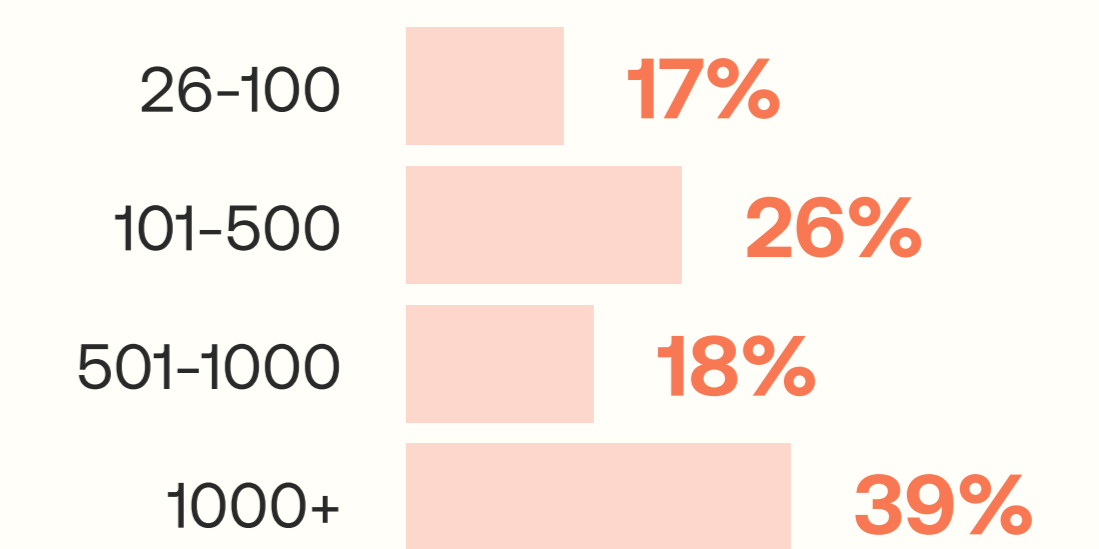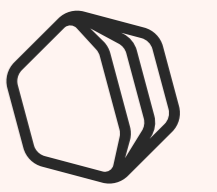
Glossary

Asynchronous work

Asynchronous (async) work is when people on the same team complete their work during different times of the day on their own timetable, and without the expectation of immediately responding to others, as you might do during virtual or in-person meetings, or instant messaging apps.

Digital presenteeism

A remote version of traditional presenteeism, when workers are at their desk to signify they are "working". Example: Stanley Hudson from The Office.

The digital manifestation of presenteeism involves being visible and available online to show colleagues and bosses you are "working", whether that means responding to notifications and emails, or sitting in Zoom meetings you don't need to attend.

Knowledge worker

A knowledge worker is someone whose job involves developing and using knowledge, rather than producing goods or services.

For the purposes of this study, it was defined as someone who works predominantly from home, an office, a co-working space, or a combination of these, and uses a computer or laptop more than 50% of the time to carry out their work.

Working hours

"Working hours" used to describe the time you did your work, typically a version of the 9-5. For many people working asynchonously, these have become "coordination hours" - the time you coordinate with others and consolidate work done separately.

True working hours should also include the time spent doing asynchronous deep work, not just the time you are available for others.
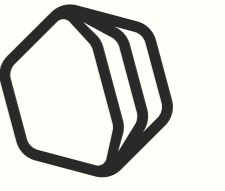
Setting the
scene

Async is the next frontier for work

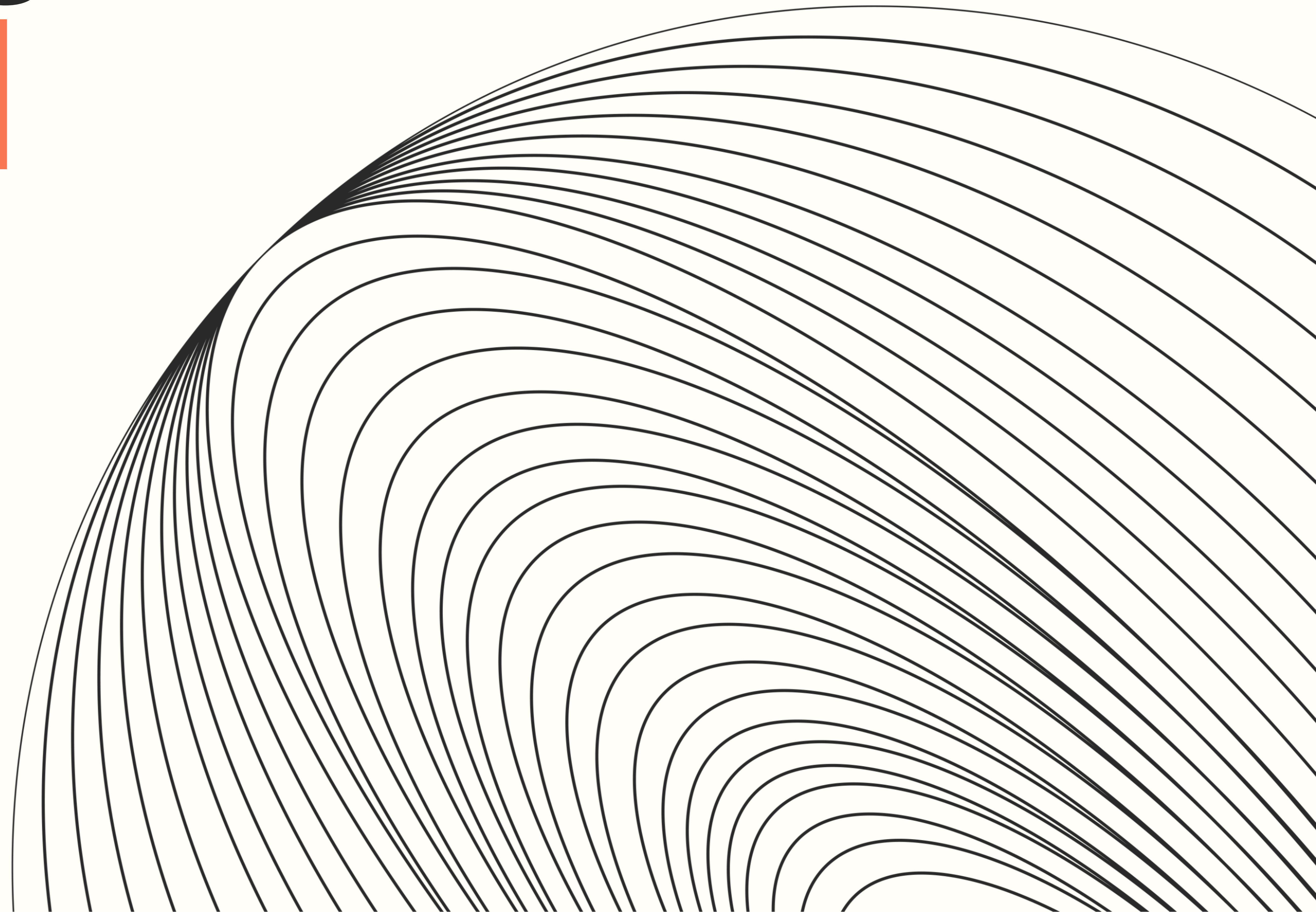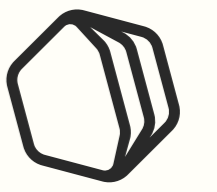The genie is out of the bottle. From the rise of flexible working and async to distributed workforces, the way many of us think about our time when it comes to work has changed irreversibly. The concept of **"time" at work is dead. We just don't know it yet.**

But asynchronous work is nothing new. **Knowledge work is inherently async.** Since the very beginning, knowledge workers have worked asynchronously. Some sort of communication happens; people go away, they do the work, then come back; communication happens; people go away. Effort, interval, effort, interval.

What happened next?

Knowledge work may be inherently async, but most workers could still be found working in offices, where synchronous work was the default. That was until the pandemic hit in early 2020. Suddenly, workplaces dispersed into people's homes and employees began to experience a new way of work. A new reality was shown to be possible and expectations began to change.

Workers expect the flexibility to choose when they work
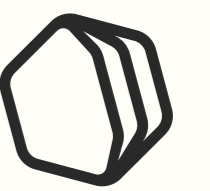
Working patterns have changed
65% of workers said they have more flexibility to decide **when they work** compared to before the pandemic. This was fairly consistent across age ranges, although those between the ages of 35-50 appear to have experienced the biggest increase, perhaps due to many in this group having families at home.

There's no turning back
Flexibility and the ability to work asynchronously is now high on the priority list for knowledge workers, and expectations have changed: **Nearly half** of workers said they expect to have more flexibility as to when they work in the next 3 years. Very few **(11%)** said they would expect less flexibility.

Workers over 50 were less likely to expect more flexibility in the next 3 years, while those in the **35-50 age bracket,** having experienced the most increase in flexibility over when they work, expected this to continue.

This means companies that offered flexible working during the pandemic will undoubtedly face pushback from workers if they try to revert to old ways of working, leading to significant talent acquisition and retention problems.

Do you have more flexibility in deciding when to work compared to before the pandemic?

65% — Yes
35% — No
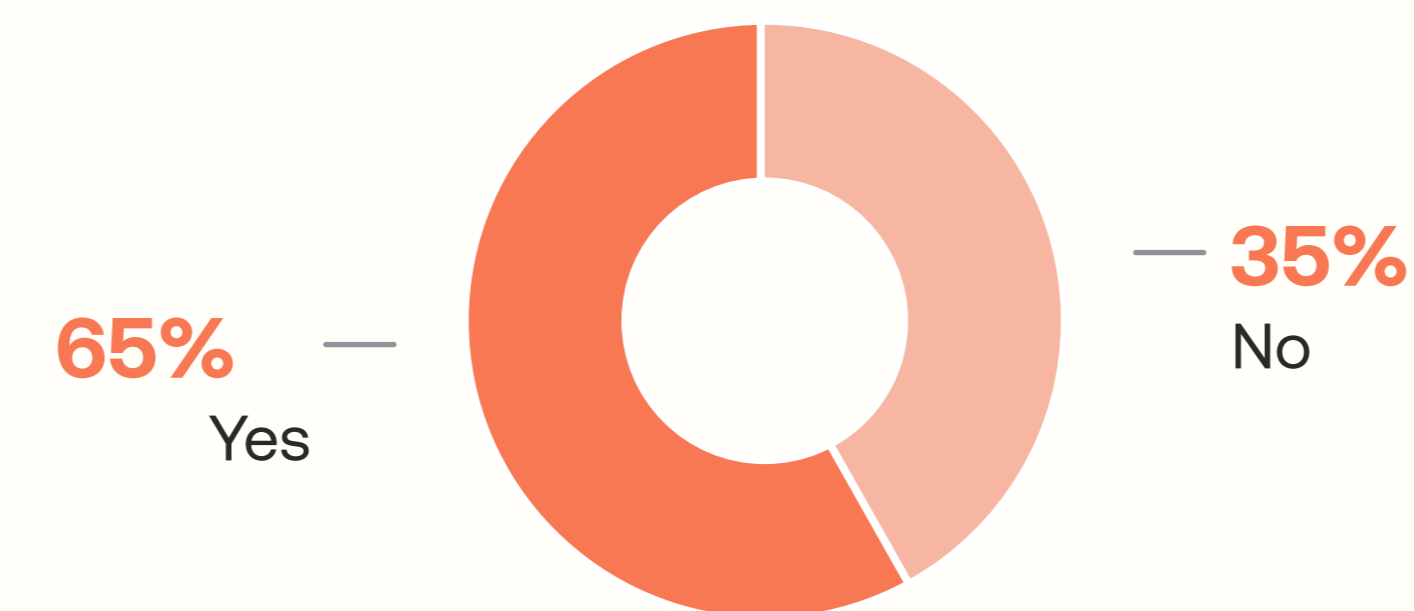
Do you expect to have more flexibility in the next 3 years?

49% — Yes
51% — No
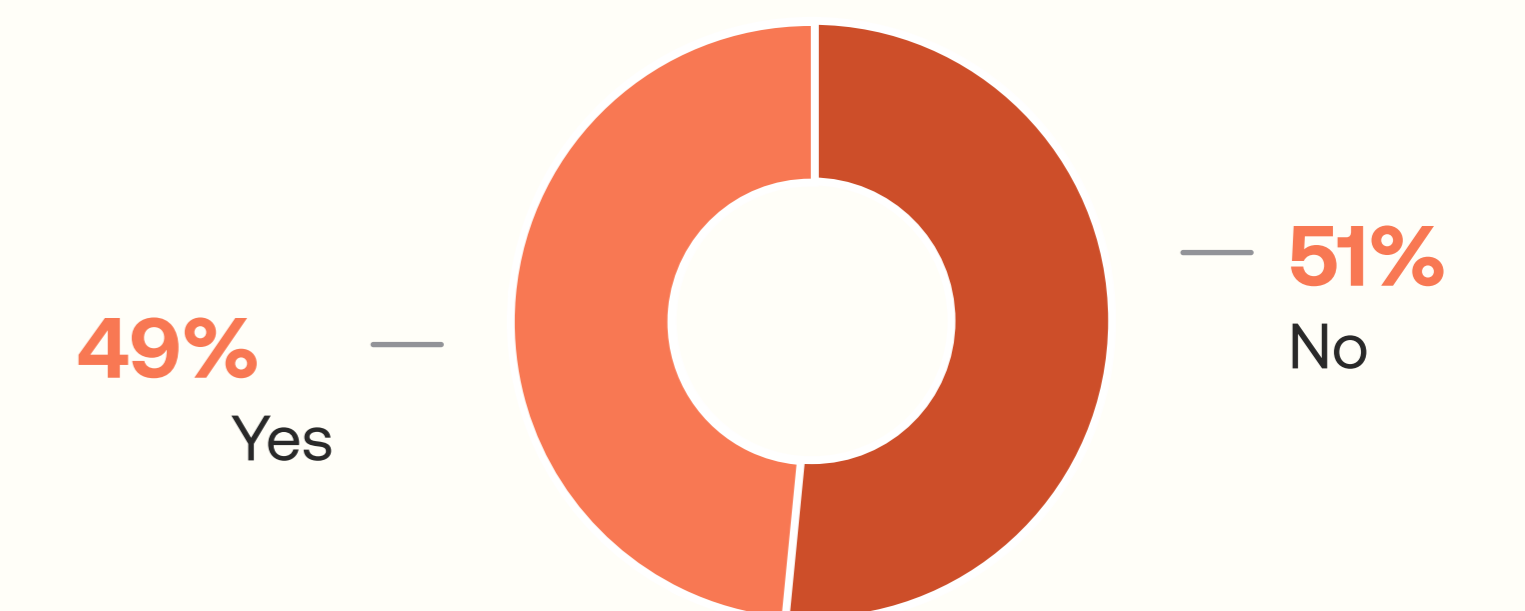
Workers between the age of 35-50 have experienced the biggest increase in flexibility

	More flexibility	No change or Less
21-34 years	66%	34%
35-50 years	71%	29%
51-65 years	57%	43%

More flexibility / No change or Less
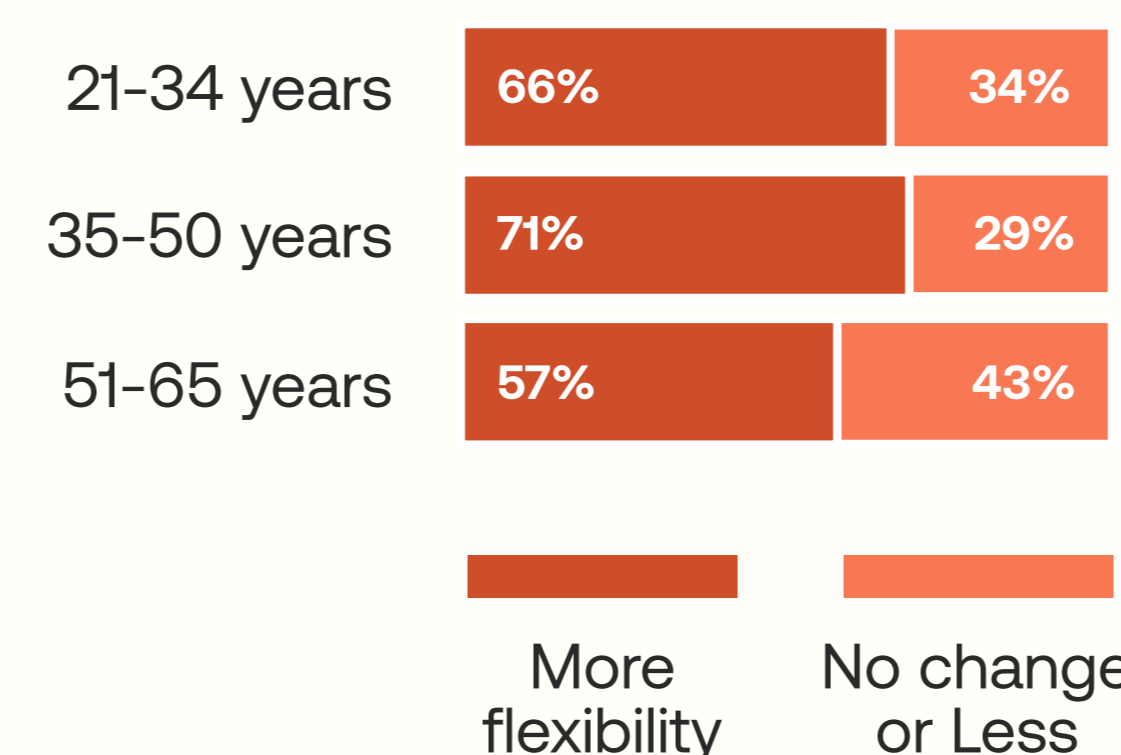
Workers between ages 35-50 expect flexibility to continue in the future
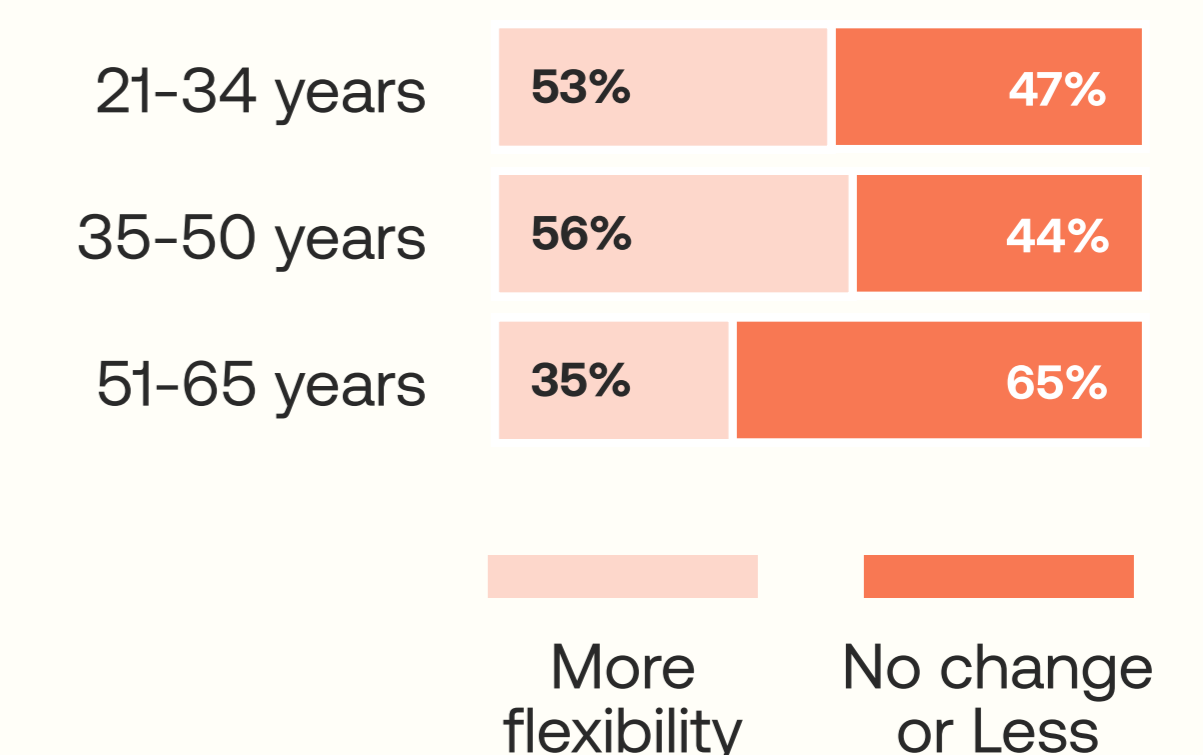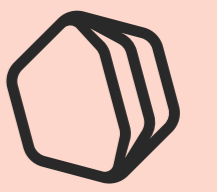
	More flexibility	No change or Less
21-34 years	53%	47%
35-50 years	56%	44%
51-65 years	35%	65%

More flexibility / No change or Less

65% of workers said they have more flexibility to decide *when* they work compared to before the pandemic.

But 'async' remains misunderstood - and unevenly distributed

The term 'async' is alien to most
The changes that occurred due to the pandemic should have marked the end of the 9-5 with a new paradigm for work, but many of the same problems remain: few people are able to work async with any consistency and those who do receive poor support from employers. In fact, the term 'asynchronous work' is still alien to many, with only **15%** of people understanding the term very well and over **40%** never having heard of it.

However, it seems to be a topic business leaders are thinking about, with **84%** of those at the C-Level saying they understand the term. But that doesn't mean they're implementing it evenly across all groups.
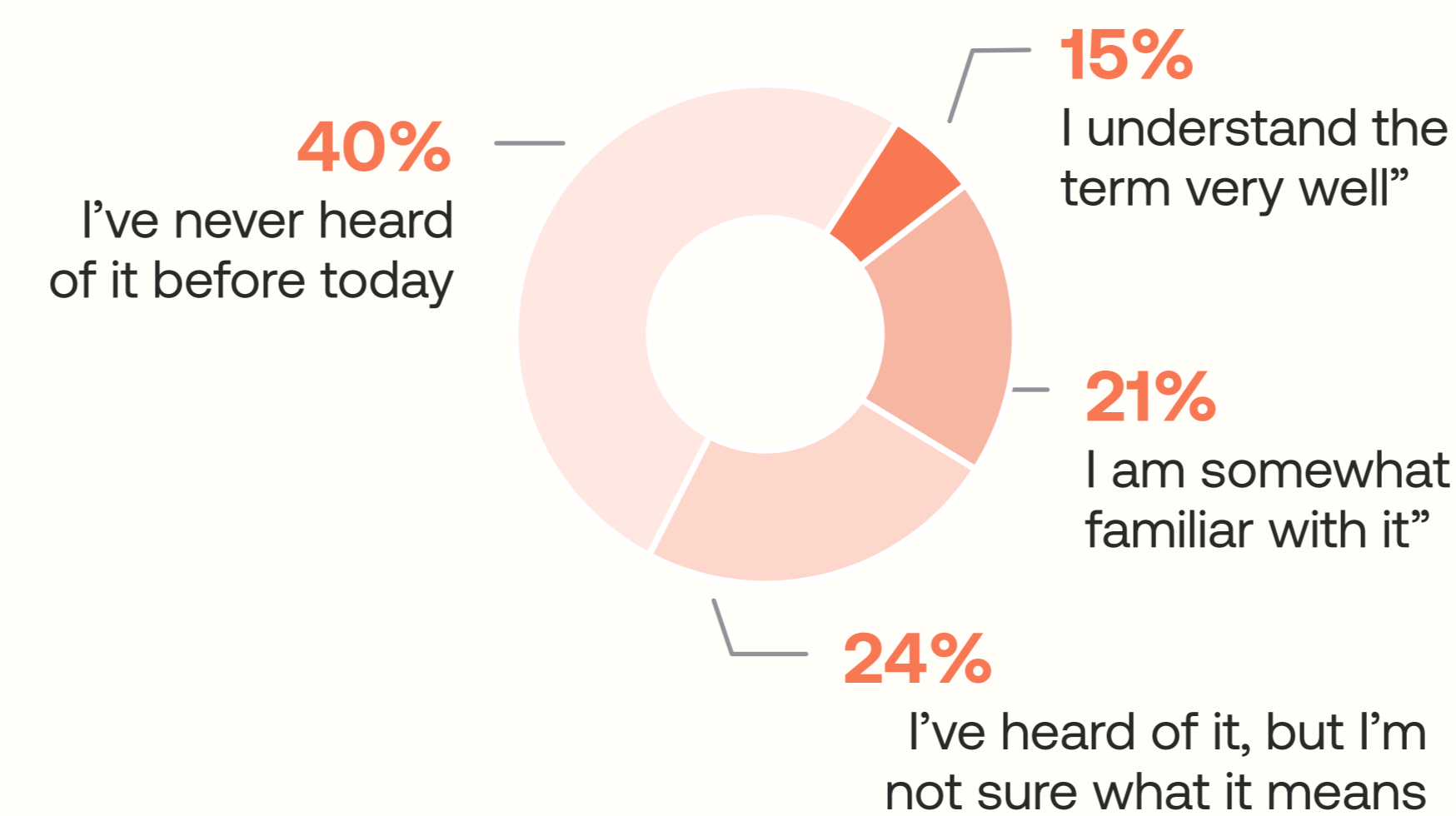
New flexibility not being shared evenly
Asynchronous work is happening in pockets, but the picture is mixed, and management level also appears to be a clear indicator as to whether you have the freedom to work async.

74% of those at the C-level said they work asynchronously 'Often' or 'Always', compared to **48%** of those at Vice President or Director level, **32%** of those at a Manager or Consultant level, and **24%** of those in Analyst or Administrative roles. It's clear that managers are not affording the same support and trust to their team as their own company and bosses are giving them.
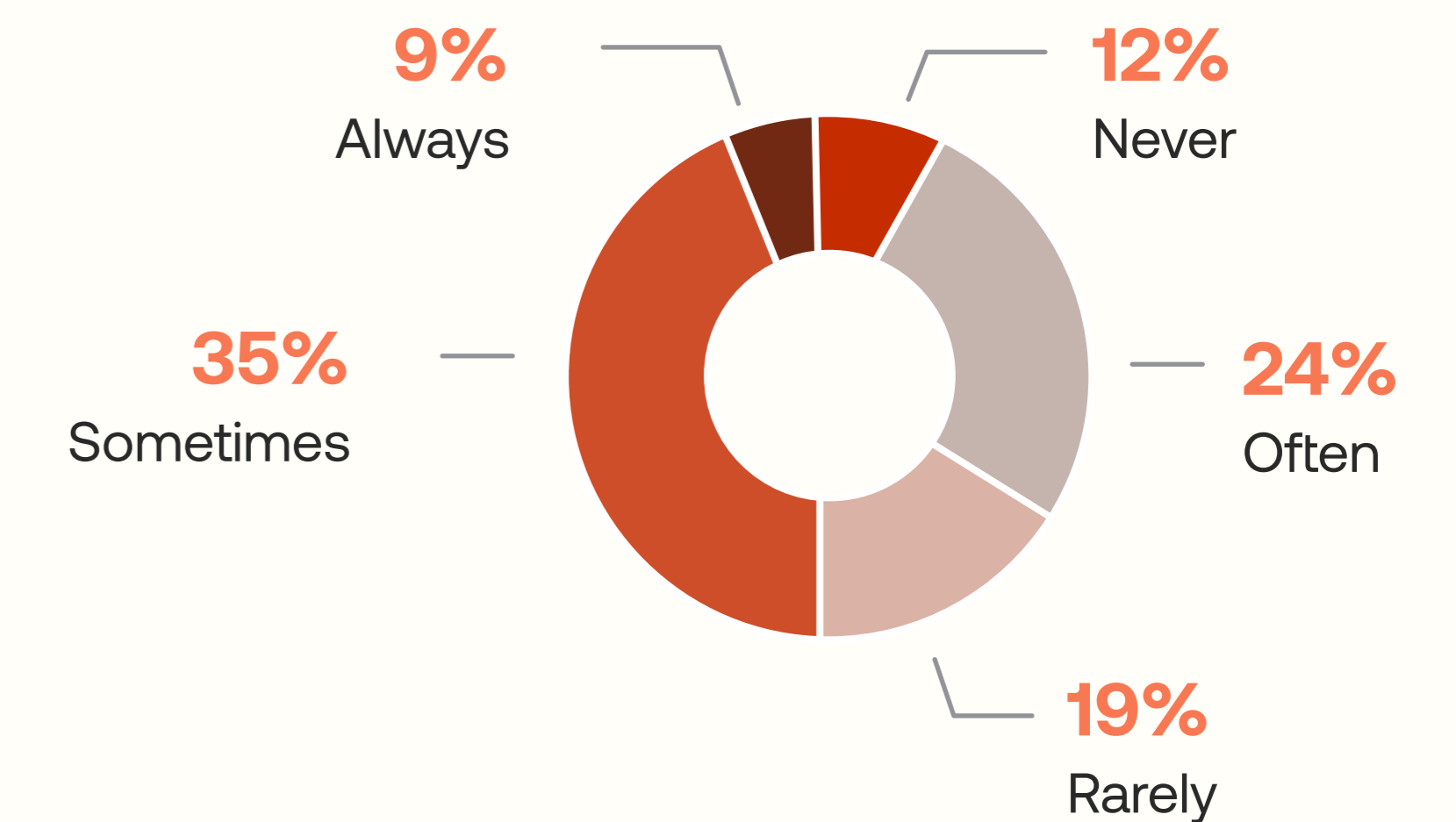
Ultimately, adoption remains low for most workers. Employers must do more to support async work, not only because it's in line with worker expectations, but because it helps with retention, productivity, and quality of work.
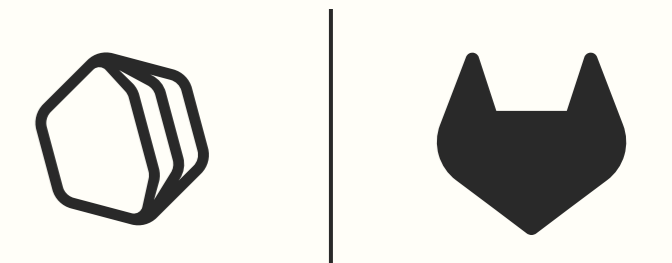
How familiar are you with the term 'asynchronous work'?

- **40%** I've never heard of it before today
- **15%** I understand the term very well"
- **21%** I am somewhat familiar with it"
- **24%** I've heard of it, but I'm not sure what it means

How often are you able to work in an asynchronous way?

- **9%** Always
- **12%** Never
- **35%** Sometimes
- **24%** Often
- **19%** Rarely

Top-level execs understand 'asynchronous work' the best

"I understand the term very well & I am somewhat familiar with it"

C-level	**84%**
VP / Director	**58%**
Manager / Consultant	**38%**
Analyst, Administrative or Assistant	**20%**
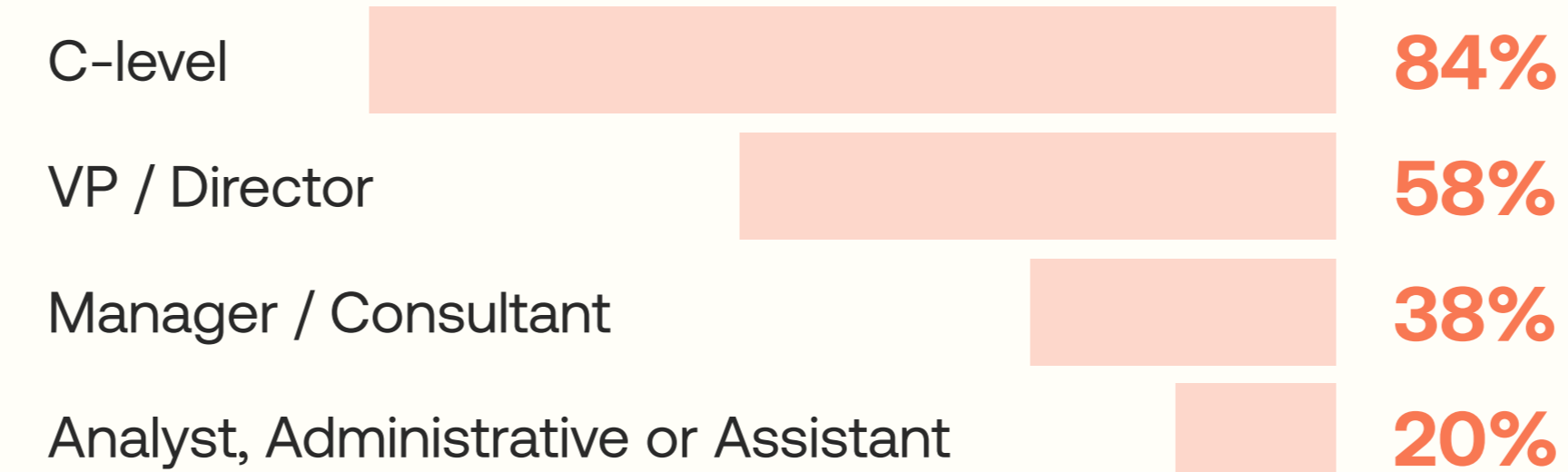
Async privilege for senior staff

"How often are you able to work in an asynchronous way?"

C-level	**74%**
VP / Director	**48%**
Manager / Consultant	**32%**
Analyst, Administrative or Assistant	**24%**

Always or Often
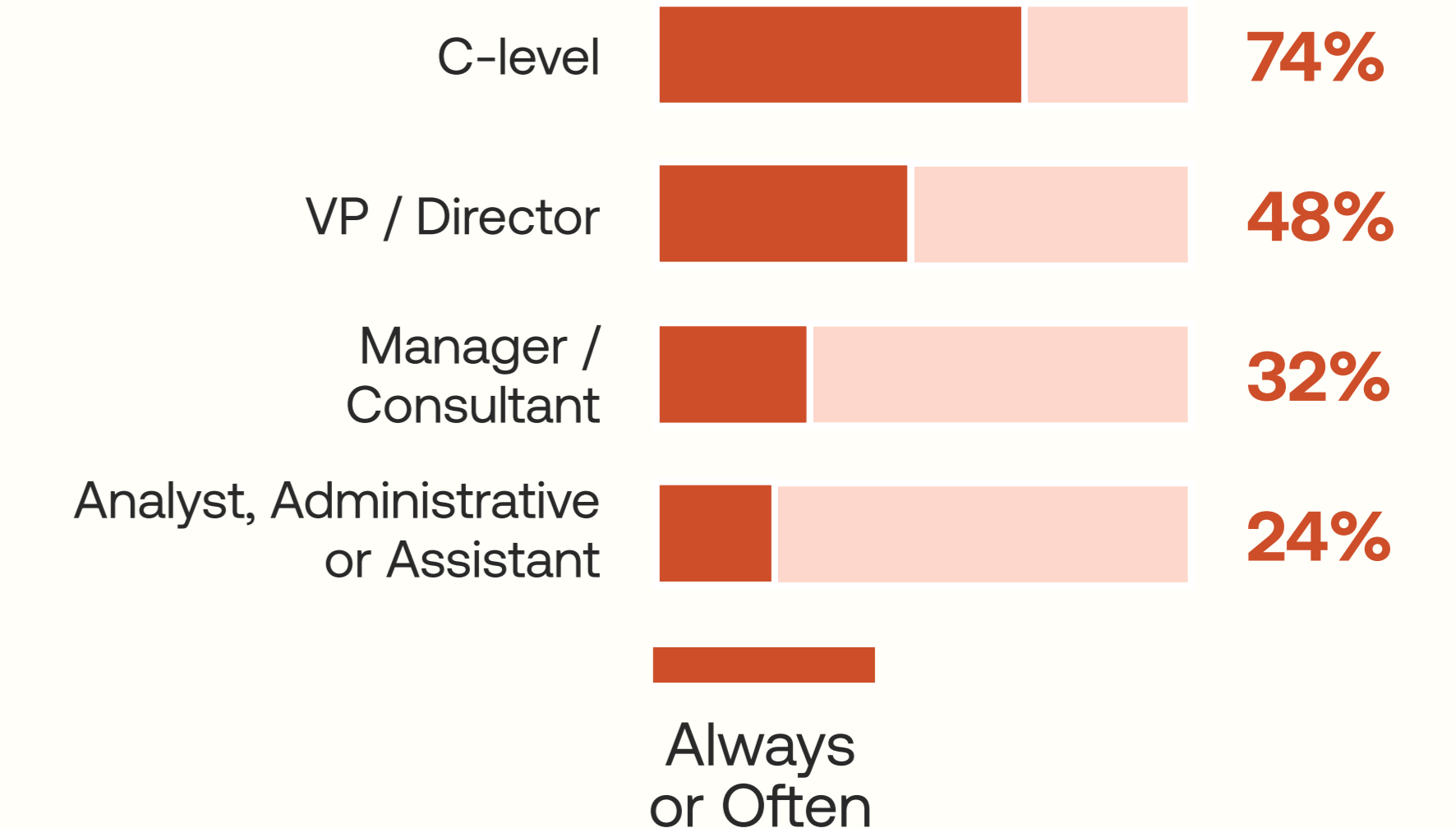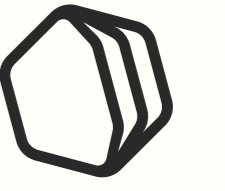
Barriers to async success
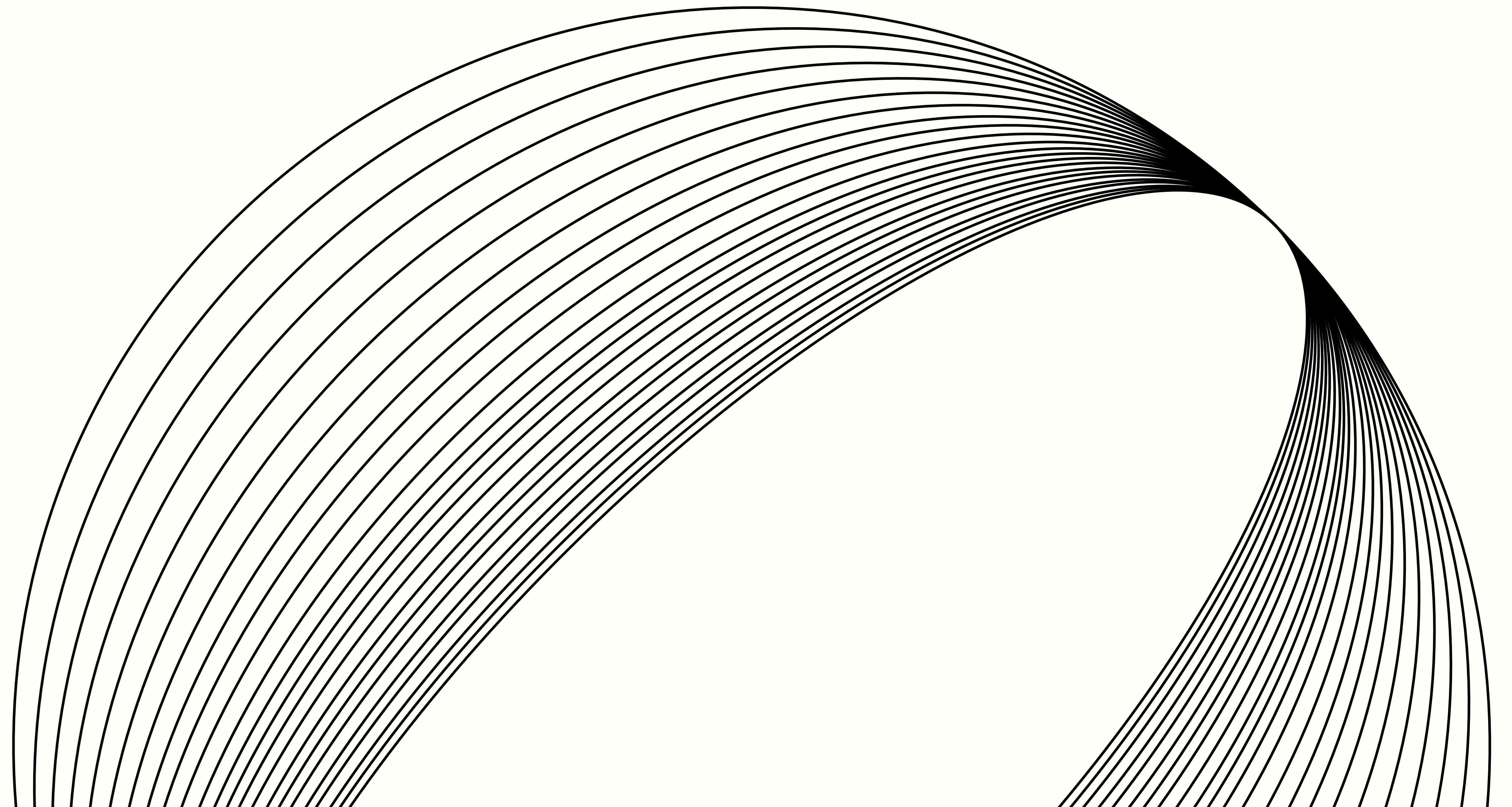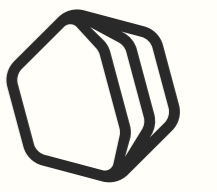
It's clear that more flexibility and asynchronous work is the direction of travel, which aligns with employee expectations. But it's not easy implement and, even with the best intentions, companies still encounter barriers to asynchronous work. The most significant of these barriers fit into two categories: digital presenteeism and a failure of technology.

A culture of digital presenteeism

Digital presenteeism is the pressure workers feel to show colleagues and bosses they are available online and "working" during traditional working hours, or even longer. This pervasive culture of digital presenteeism is driving burnout and damaging output. We expected to find that those working async would feel less "presenteeism" pressure – but that turned out not to be the case.

Technology for work is broken and replicate

There are plenty of tools that say they support a new way of working – but most actually make us less productive, and replicate old ways of working in a digital format. At the same time, workers are overwhelmed by the number of tools they're expected to keep up with and the constant ping of notifications that make async working much harder.

Async barrier #1: A culture of digital presenteeism

Workers feel "presenteeism" pressures
Replicating behaviors learned in the office, the research identified a culture of "digital presenteeism", with **54%** of workers feeling pressure to show they are online at certain times of the day, rather than being encouraged to focus on their output.

It's actually worse for async workers
One might expect those who work asynchronously to feel the least presenteeism pressure, as that would explain why they are able to work async. However, the opposite is true, with **70%** of those who always work asynchronously saying they felt pressure (including **68%** of C-level executives). This suggests that those working asynchronously are worried people won't recognize that they are working, even in organizations where async work is possible.

It also highlights the need to talk about async, normalize it, and set expectations – even in companies where it is happening extensively. It isn't enough to simply let it happen. It needs to be intentional – which starts with leadership.

Organizations and leadership are resistant to change
More than half of workers **(54%)** say their colleagues are stuck in old habits and almost two thirds of people **(63%)** believe that management and senior leadership within their organization 'prefer a traditional culture with employees in the office'. And when employees can't be in the office, presenting themselves as "online" is likely seen as the next best thing.
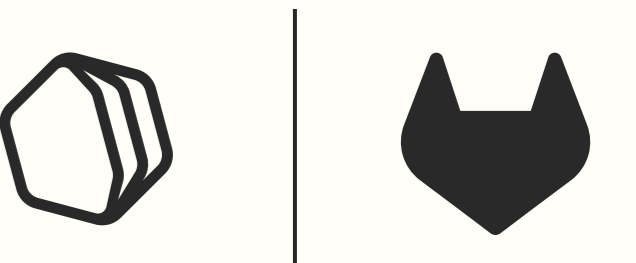
I feel pressure to signal to colleagues I am online and working during standard working hours

46% No

54% Yes
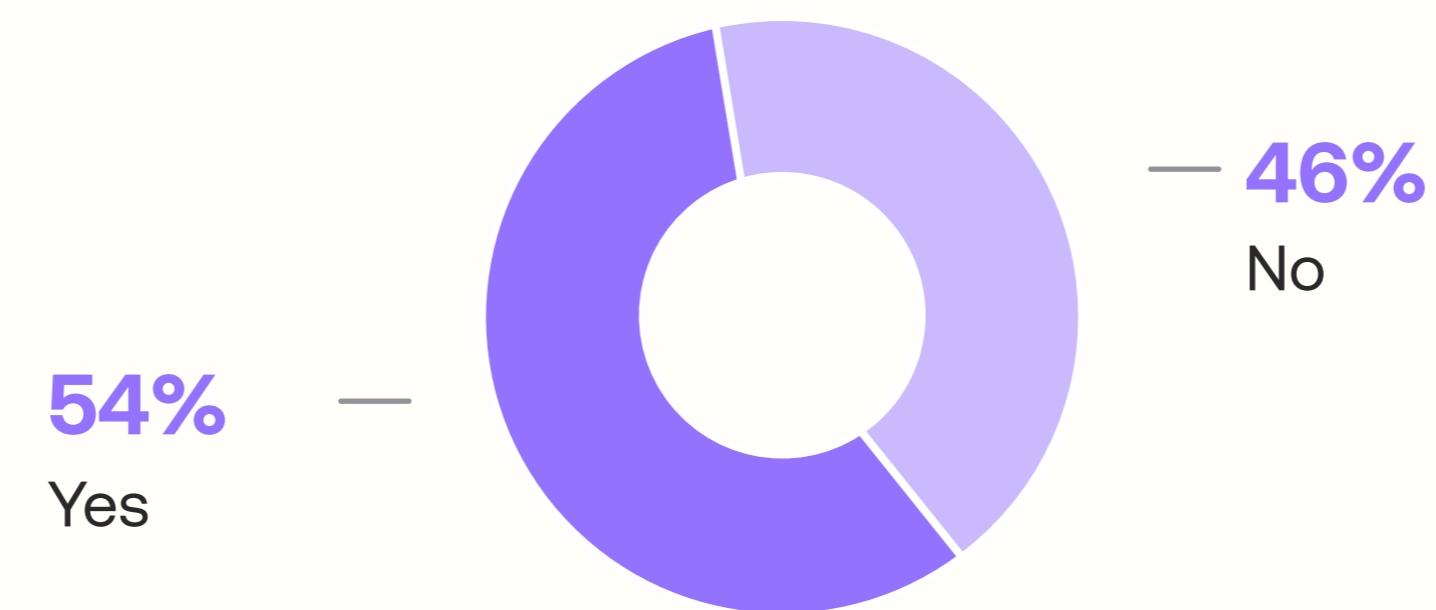
C-level execs feel "presenteeism" pressures more acutely

68% Yes

32% No

Presenteeism pressure is worst for async workers

	Feel pressure	Don't feel pressure
Always work async	70%	30%
Rarely/never work async	49%	51%
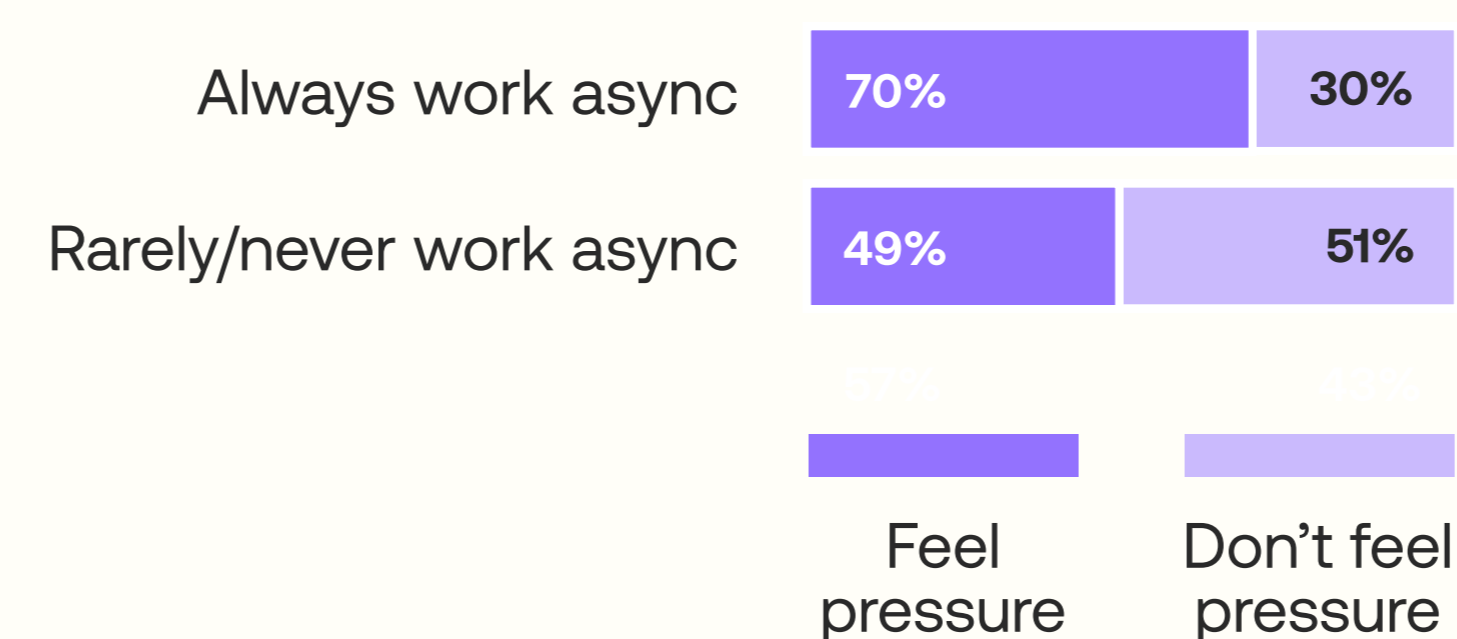
I believe my organization's leaders prefer employees in the office

37% No

63% Yes
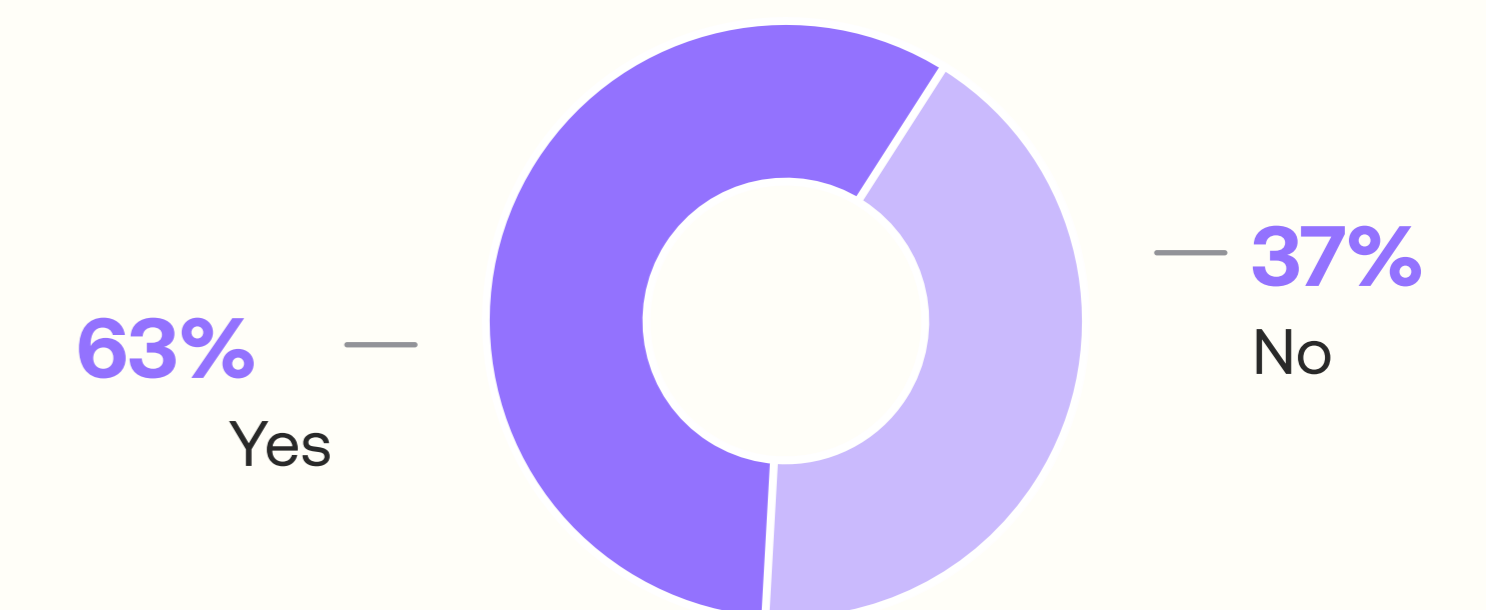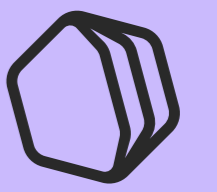
54% of knowledge workers feel pressure to show they are online at certain times of the day.

Async barrier #1: A culture of digital presenteeism

Presenteeism affects productivity

People are spending significant extra time 'working' as a result of presenteeism, with the average worker spending an additional **67 minutes** online every day, in order to avoid suspicion from colleagues and bosses that they are not working hard enough. This is equivalent to more than 5.5 hours each week, and highlights the deep lack of trust in some workplaces.

Productivity during these additional hours is mixed. Only **25%** of people said they were highly productive and another **25%** fell on the unproductive side, with the rest somewhere in between. Senior members of staff seem to be using the extra working hours most productively – **over 86%** of C-level, Directors, and Vice Presidents said they are highly or moderately productive.

Flexibility boosts quality of output

In addition to the wasted time, an overwhelming majority of people **(81%)** believe they are more productive and create higher quality output when they have more flexibility over when they work, providing yet more evidence that the pressure to be online at certain times of the day is counterproductive.

Employers can't expect creativity on demand. Putting a whiteboard in a room and spending an hour "brainstorming" does not guarantee creative output. That's not how our brains work. Employers need to give people time and space to do creative work, which helps workers to be their happiest and most productive selves.
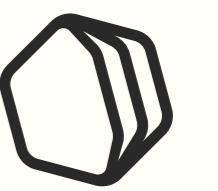
Extra time spent "working" due to presenteeism

67 minutes per day

I am more productive and create higher quality output when I have flexibility over when I work

81% Yes — **19%** No
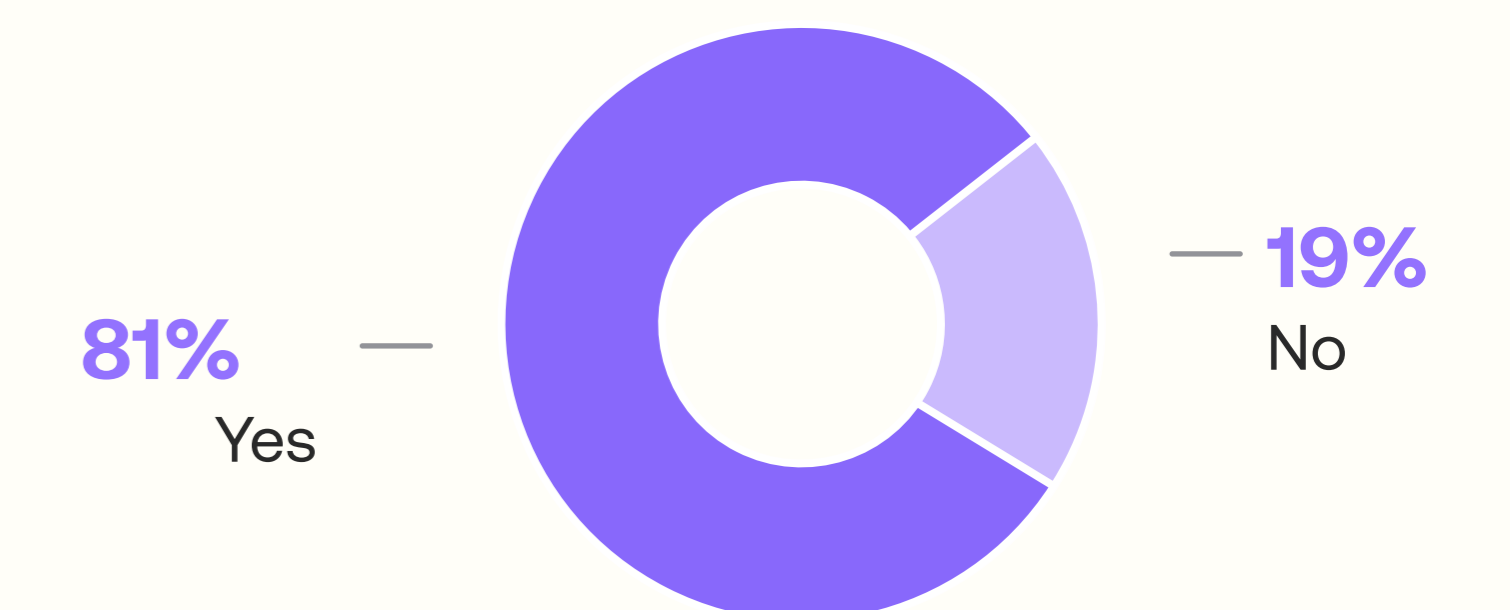
Productivity during extra 'presenteeism' hours is mixed

Highly productive — Moderately productive — Unproductive

25%	50%	25%
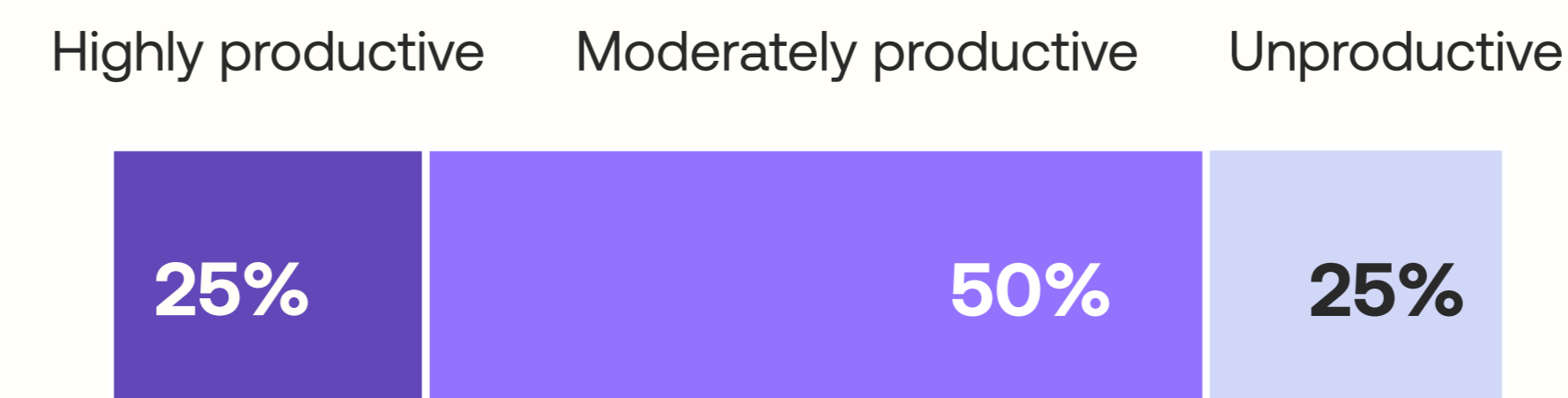
Although senior management are more productive

Highly productive — Moderately productive — Unproductive

42%	44%	14%
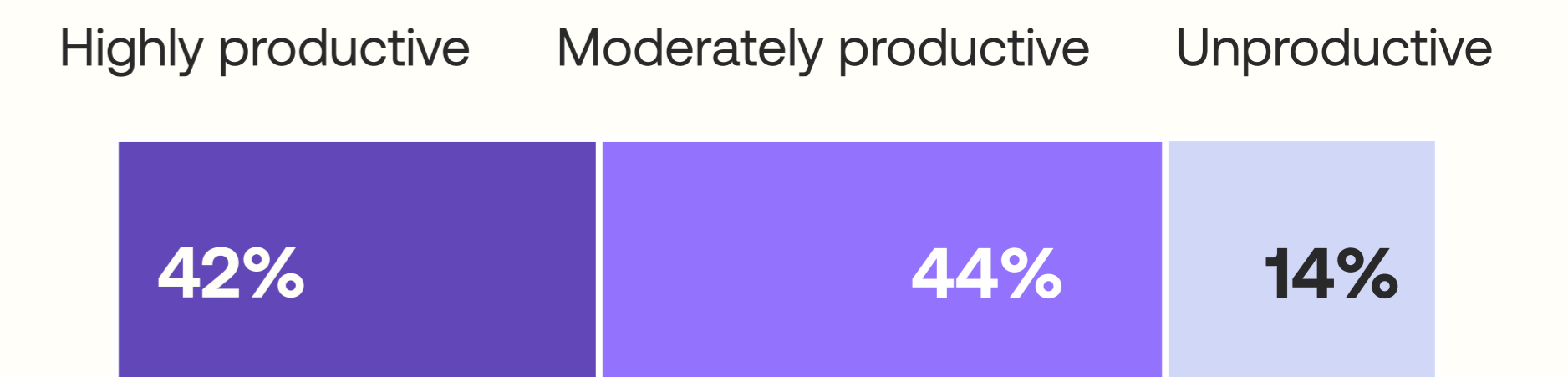
*Senior management includes C-level, Directors, and VPs
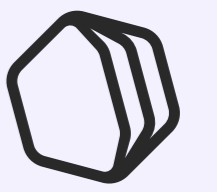
Workers spend an extra 67 minutes online every day, to show their colleagues and managers they are still online and working.

Async barrier #2: Technology for work is broken

Unshackled from the office, but chained to work 24/7
Technology has failed unequivocally on its promise to create a better working world. Despite widespread adoption of productivity software, workers still don't have access to technology that supports asynchronous work. On average, today's knowledge workers now receive notifications from **6.2** different applications or programs. **73%** of people reply to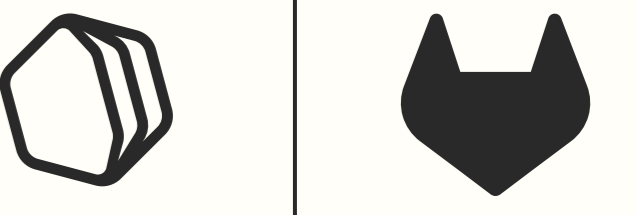 those notifications outside of working hours, eating into their leisure time and making it hard to switch off from work.

Workers can't switch off
The available tools have actually made it harder to switch off. More than half **(52%)** of people find it hard to switch off from work when they want, with notifications on their phones and laptops being the second biggest reason for this.

Difficulty switching off is inherently linked with digital presenteeism. Workers identified a range of things they do to signal to their colleagues that they are online and working, highlighting the way technology has encouraged a new form of presenteeism in today's digital workspace.
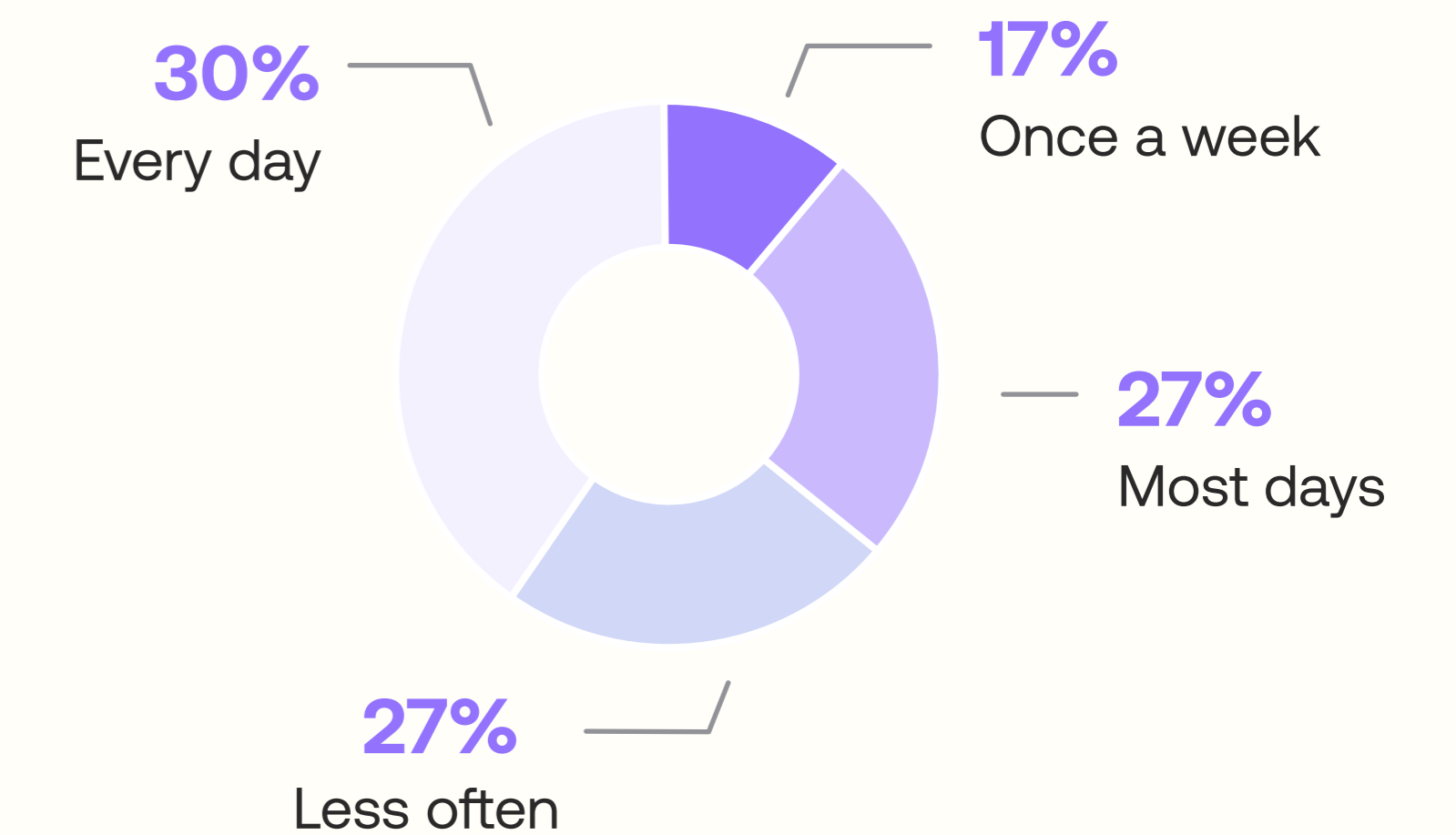
To fix these issues, existing technologies and new market entrants need to be more considerate of the user and completely redesigned for the new way of work, rather than supporting old habits in new environments.

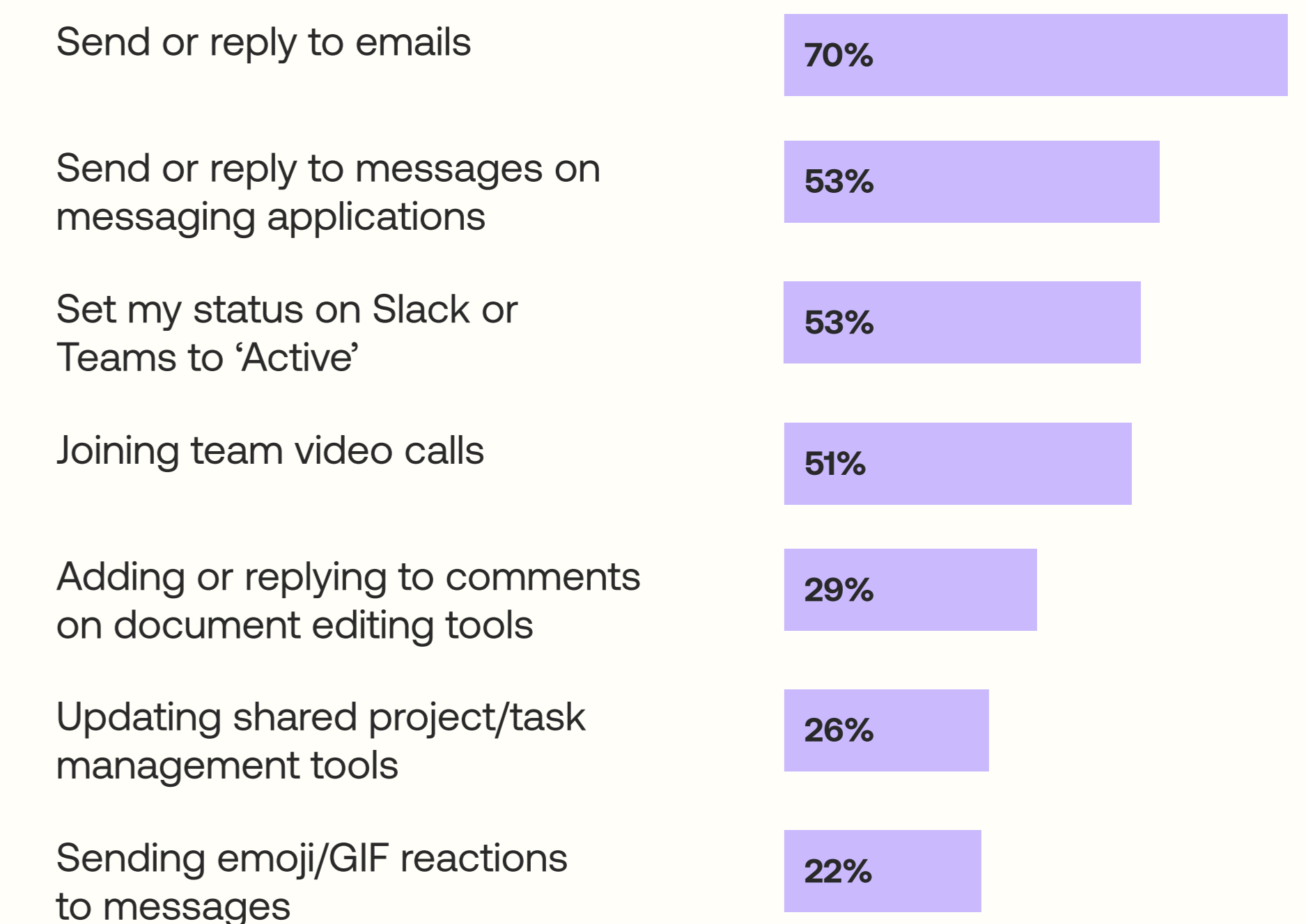## How many work applications send me notifications

Average	**6.2**
US	**7.3**
UK	**5**
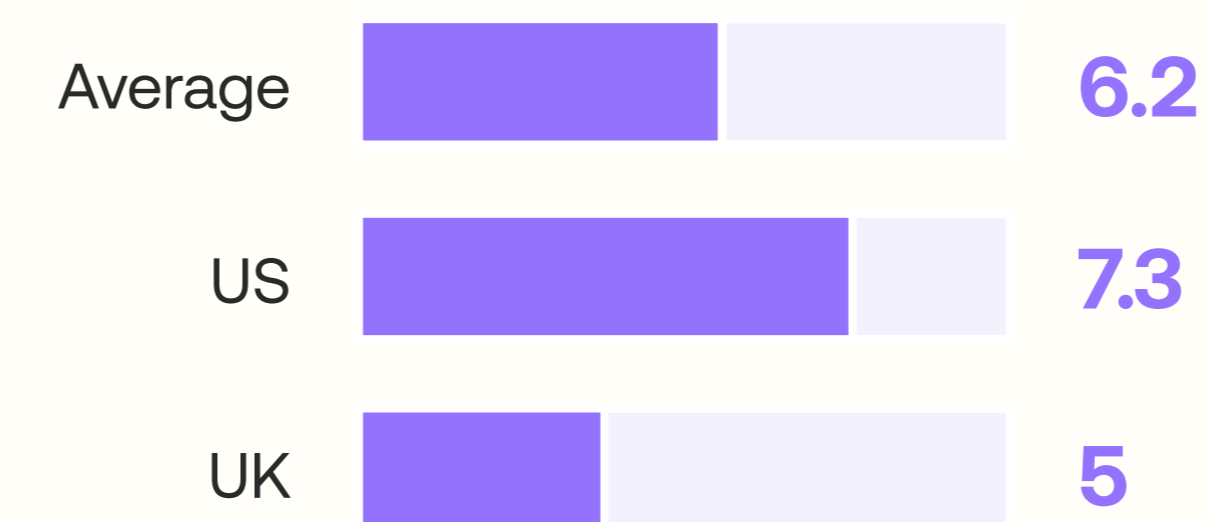
How often I reply to notifications outside of my working hours

- **30%** Every day
- **17%** Once a week
- **27%** Most days
- **27%** Less often

I find it difficult to switch off because

I am preoccupied thinking about what I need to do	35%
I get notifications on my phone or laptop	32%
I really enjoy my job	28%
My work makes me stressed	27%
The company culture makes me feel like I need to be available and responsive	26%
My customers and clients expect me to be available and responsive	24%
I have been told I need to be available and responsive	15%

How I signal to colleagues I am online and working

Send or reply to emails	70%
Send or reply to messages on messaging applications	53%
Set my status on Slack or Teams to 'Active'	53%
Joining team video calls	51%
Adding or replying to comments on document editing tools	29%
Updating shared project/task management tools	26%
Sending emoji/GIF reactions to messages	22%

The war
for talent

The war for talent: Why companies have to get this right

Acquiring talent in the new world of work
Flexibility has quickly become one of the key battlegrounds for companies trying to attract and retain talent. In a stark example of what's at stake, nearly two-thirds **(66%)** of workers said they would consider resigning if they were prevented from working flexible hours, and **43%** indicated they would consider a lower paid role if it gave them greater schedule flexibility.

Younger workers are also consistently more likely to place greater value on flexibility, highlighting the longer-term shift underway as these workers grow into leadership roles.

When forced to choose between a company with 'a traditional 9-5 schedule and 25 meetings per week' or 'a company with zero meetings and zero expectation to be online at specific times', **62%** of workers chose the latter (although this trend was reversed among senior staff).

Employees are more open to distributed roles than ever before. This will accelerate the transition to distributed teams working across different time zones, putting further pressure on organizations to adopt async working practices.

The positive impact of flexibility on wellbeing
Many organizations are missing an opportunity to improve employee wellbeing, with those able to work async shown to be much happier. Workers are also keen on this way of working because it makes them more productive, creates higher quality outcomes, and gives them more free time to pursue hobbies and other interests outside of work.
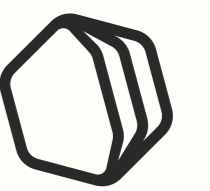
Flexibility is critical for retaining talent - especially among younger generations

73% More likely to consider a 100% remote role in a distributed company compared to before the pandemic

79% among those aged 21-34

66% Would consider looking for a new job if they were prevented from working flexible hours

76% among those aged 21-34

43% Would consider a lower paid role if it offered more schedule flexibility
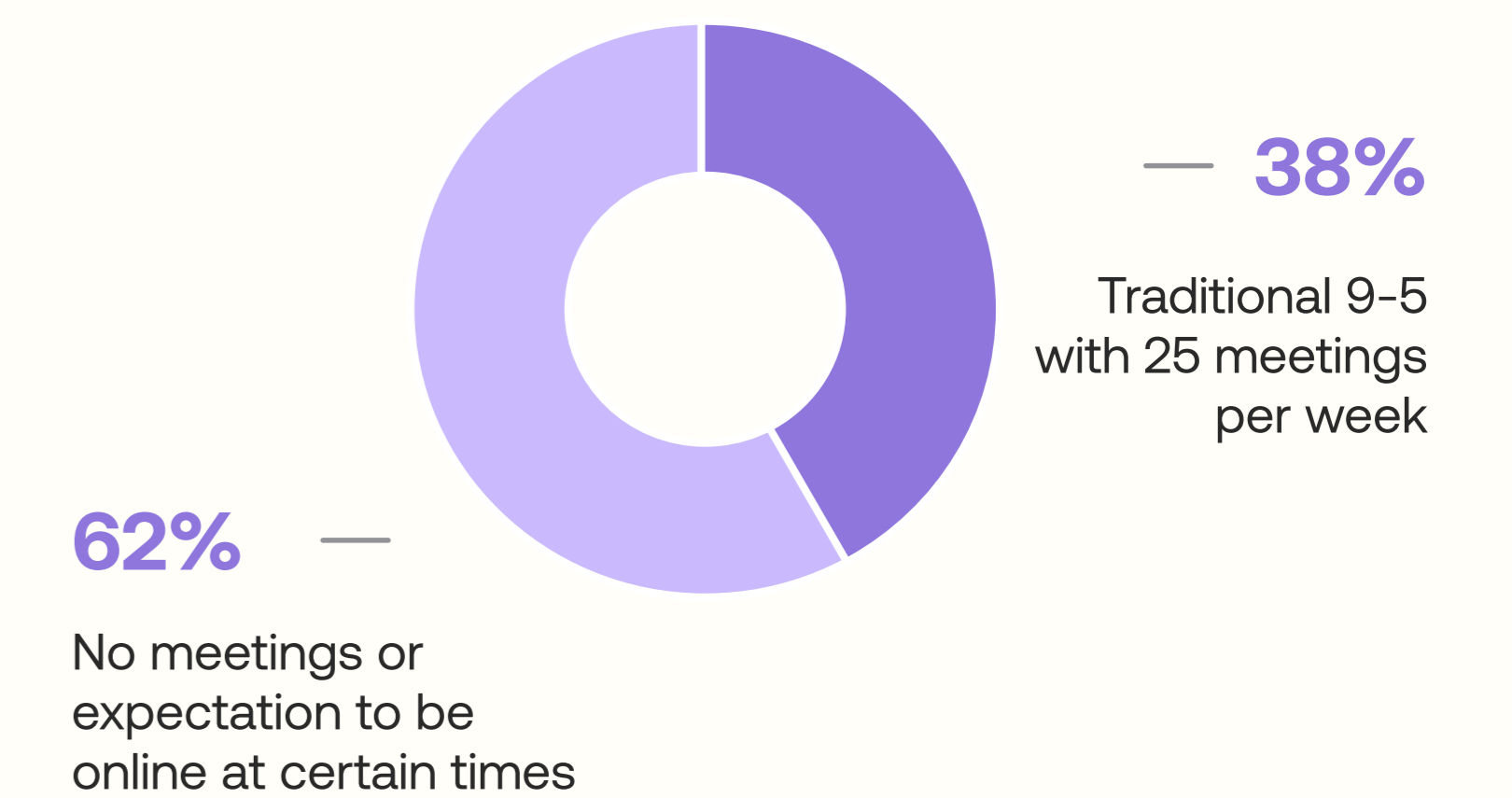
48% among those aged 21-34

74% Increased schedule flexibility allowed them to spend more time on hobbies, volunteering and side hustles
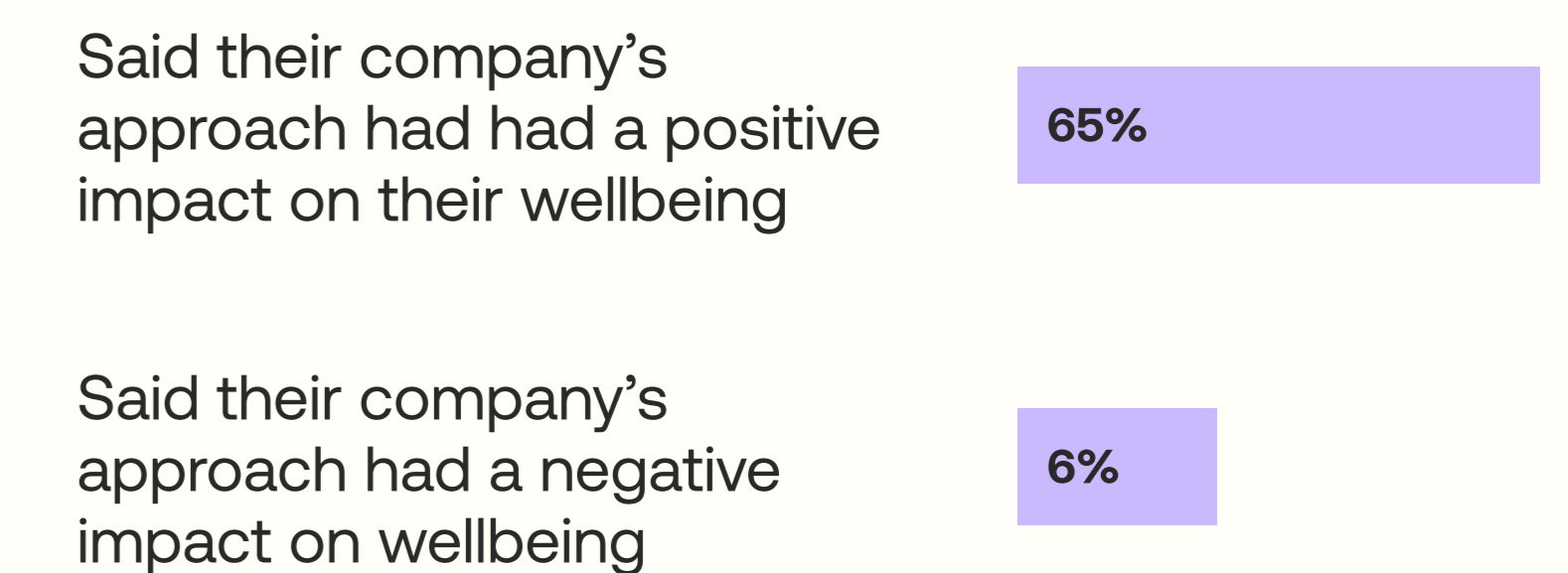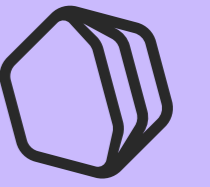
81% among those aged 21-34

Workers want async

If you were forced to choose, which of the following would you prefer:

— 38%
Traditional 9-5 with 25 meetings per week

62% —
No meetings or expectation to be online at certain times

Async improves employee wellbeing

Among those who work asynchronously 'Often' or 'Always':

Said their company's approach had had a positive impact on their wellbeing — **65%**

Said their company's approach had had a negative impact on wellbeing — **6%**

66% of workers said they would consider looking for a new job if their flexibility was limited.
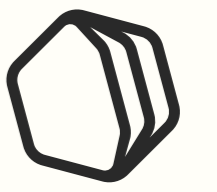
The most recent adaptation of remote work exposed the world to the power of location independence. The next frontier is far more powerful — time independence — which is only unlocked when progress is decoupled from linear time.

For every company insisting on a return to office, there's a company with no physical headquarters. For every team suffering through meeting overload, there's a team recording their meetings to be watched later at 1.5x speed. For every founder based in a "tech hub" city, there are a hundred others in cities, towns and villages around the world.

The opportunity ahead of us is to learn what's working, and get rid of what isn't. Experienced remote-first companies like GitLab and Qatalog have a lot of operational wisdom to share, and the body of knowledge on asynchronous work is growing exponentially. Our management philosophies are maturing through hard-won successes, and we are excited to document them transparently, so any team can build on that foundation.

In ten years, we'll look back at this period and wonder why asynchronous work seemed so difficult. Those who will succeed in the next decade will have an iterative mindset, an empowered team, and a bias for action.

– Darren Murph, Head of Remote at GitLab
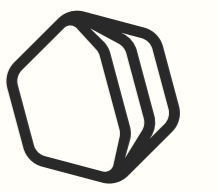
Want to go async-first?

Visit language.work to download a standalone guide with with 12 practical recommendations to help transform your culture and technology and transition to an async-first way of working.

language.work

It's time for a new language of work.

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