

2026 REPORT BY



Running on Empty

*How Modern Work Created
a Motivation Crisis*

Sample Overview:

Based on original research from The Predictive Index's 2026 Motivation At Work survey of 1,000+ U.S. adults across all major demographics and Census regions, this report explores the growing disconnect between what employees need to thrive and what organizations currently deliver.

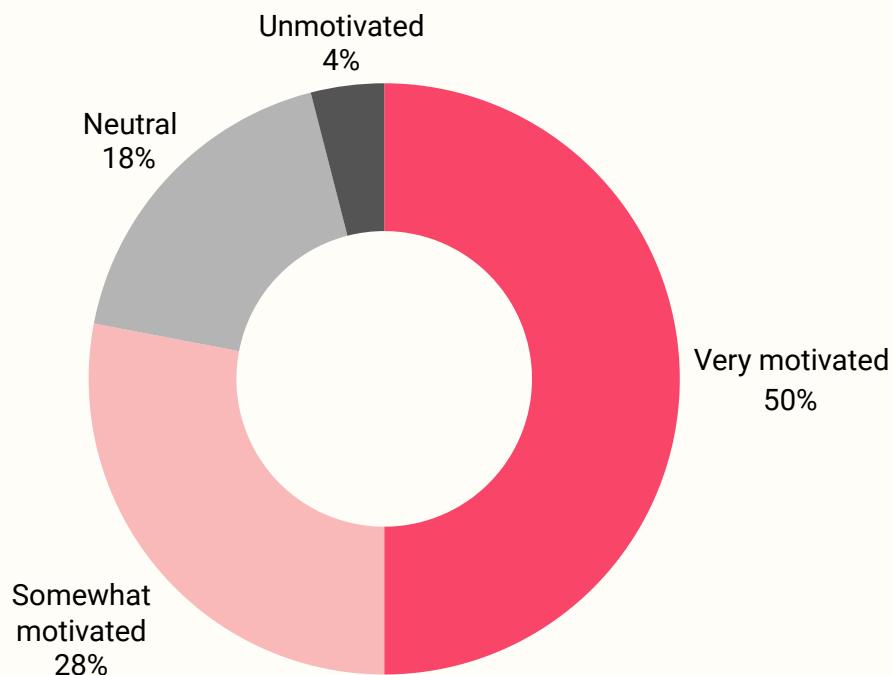
Most employees don't walk into a new job planning to disengage.

They arrive with energy, ideas and genuine interest in contributing. According to our survey of 1,000 U.S. employees, **78% started their current role motivated.**

But once onboarding ends and the structure that came with it disappears, something shifts. Priorities blur, questions go unanswered and the energy people arrived with starts to erode.

Day One Motivation

When you first started your current role, how would you describe your level of motivation?

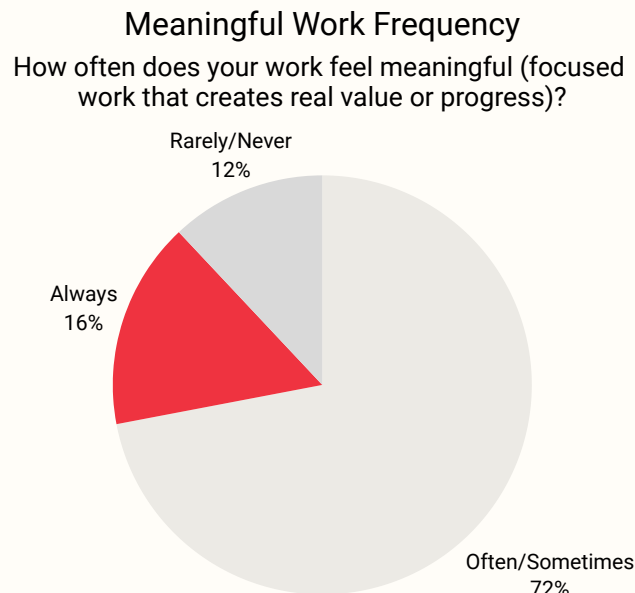


Organizations are investing more in engagement programs, wellness initiatives and productivity tools than ever before. Even so, meaning at work feels harder to sustain than ever.

The problem is not that meaningful work has disappeared. It's that the conditions that allow it to happen consistently are breaking down.

They showed up ready. Here's what got in the way.

Only 16% of employees say their work always feels meaningful. For the vast majority, that sense of meaning shows up intermittently – present some days, absent others, never quite something they can count on. Another 12% rarely or never feel that connection at all. This signals a deeper erosion beneath the surface.



Meaning exists, but most employees experience it in bursts. A project lands well, a manager takes notice, and a piece of work connects to a bigger picture.

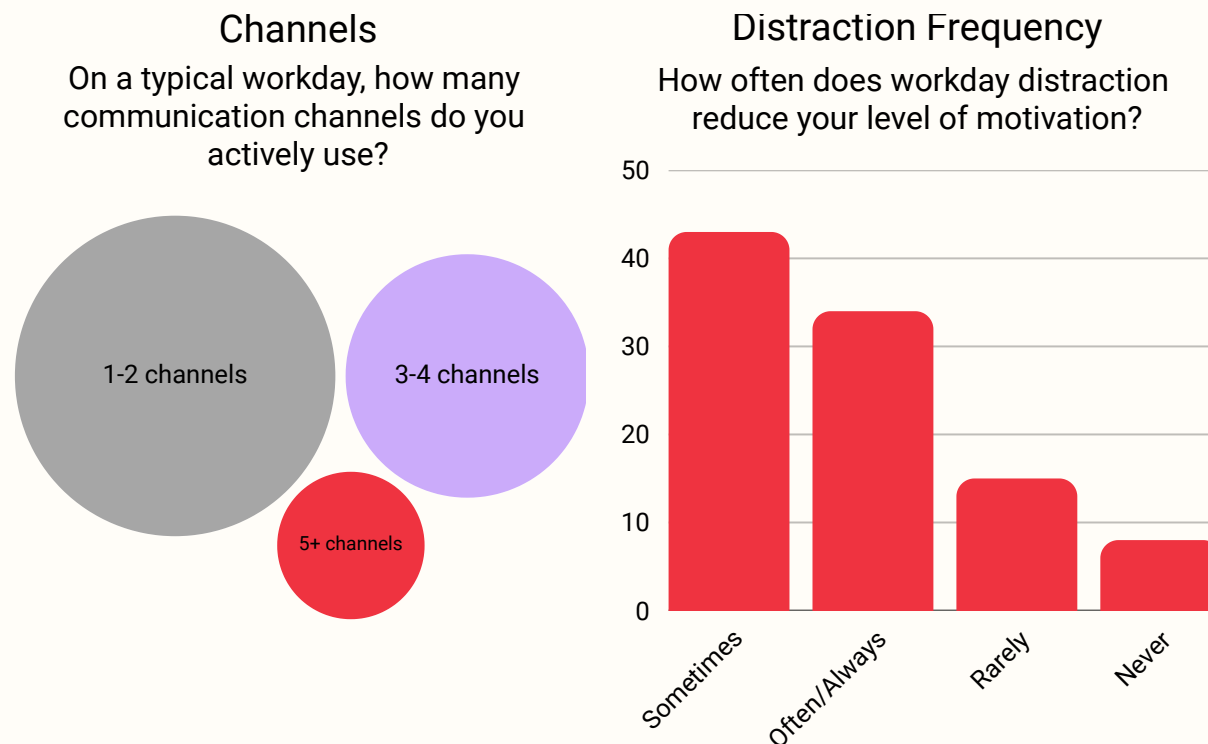
Occasional meaning produces occasional motivation.

Consistent meaning is what keeps people engaged.

Then, once the moment passes, employees are left to deal with competing priorities, unclear direction and the slow grind of days that feel productive but not purposeful.

When work feels meaningful, employees understand why their contribution matters and can see how their effort connects to something larger than the task in front of them. Without that connection, busyness becomes a poor substitute for purpose. People can stay productive on the surface while quietly losing the thread of why any of it matters. That's when disengagement takes hold – not dramatically, but gradually, one unfulfilling day at a time, until the energy people showed up with is gone.

Distractions can interfere with meaningful work.



Our survey found that distractions interfere with meaningful work for 77% of employees, and 41% juggle three or more communication channels daily. When people are constantly context-switching, the moments where work could feel meaningful get crowded out before they have a chance to register. The result is a workforce that stays busy but feels empty.

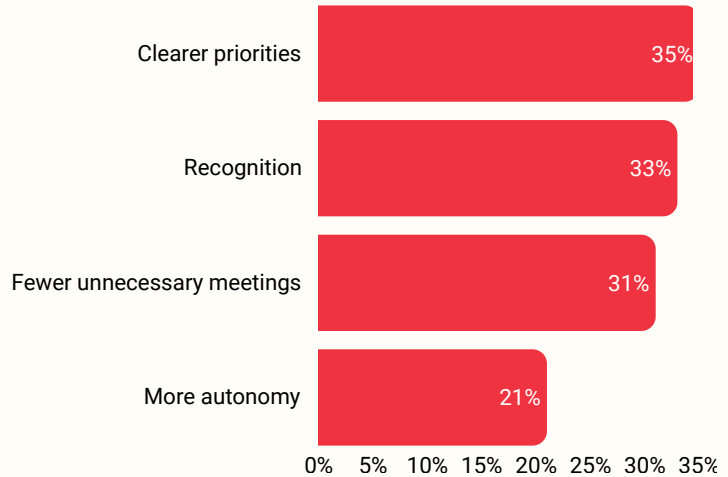
The organizations best positioned to avoid this outcome are the ones [connecting roles](#) and management to what actually drives each individual. When managers understand what makes each person tick, meaningful work stops being a happy accident and instead becomes consistent.

If meaning exists but isn't reaching people consistently, the next question is what's blocking it. The answer usually starts with something deceptively simple: **clarity**.

Clarity from leadership collapsed — and no one noticed.

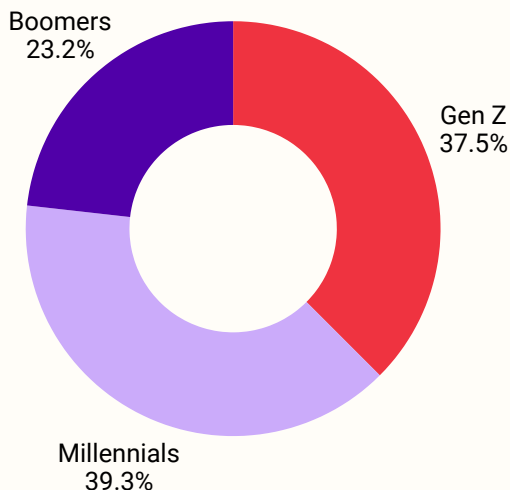
When we asked employees what would most improve their motivation, clearer priorities ranked #1 at 35%, ahead of recognition (33%), fewer meetings (31%) and autonomy (21%). Yet only 35% say their priorities are very clear on a typical workday.

What Would Improve Motivation Most?



Generational Divide: Clear Priorities

Who says clear priorities are the most important?



For younger employees, especially, that fragmentation cuts deeper.

Millennials (44%) and **Gen Z (42%)** are far more likely than **Baby Boomers (26%)** to say clearer priorities would improve their motivation, making clarity a prerequisite for keeping younger talent engaged.

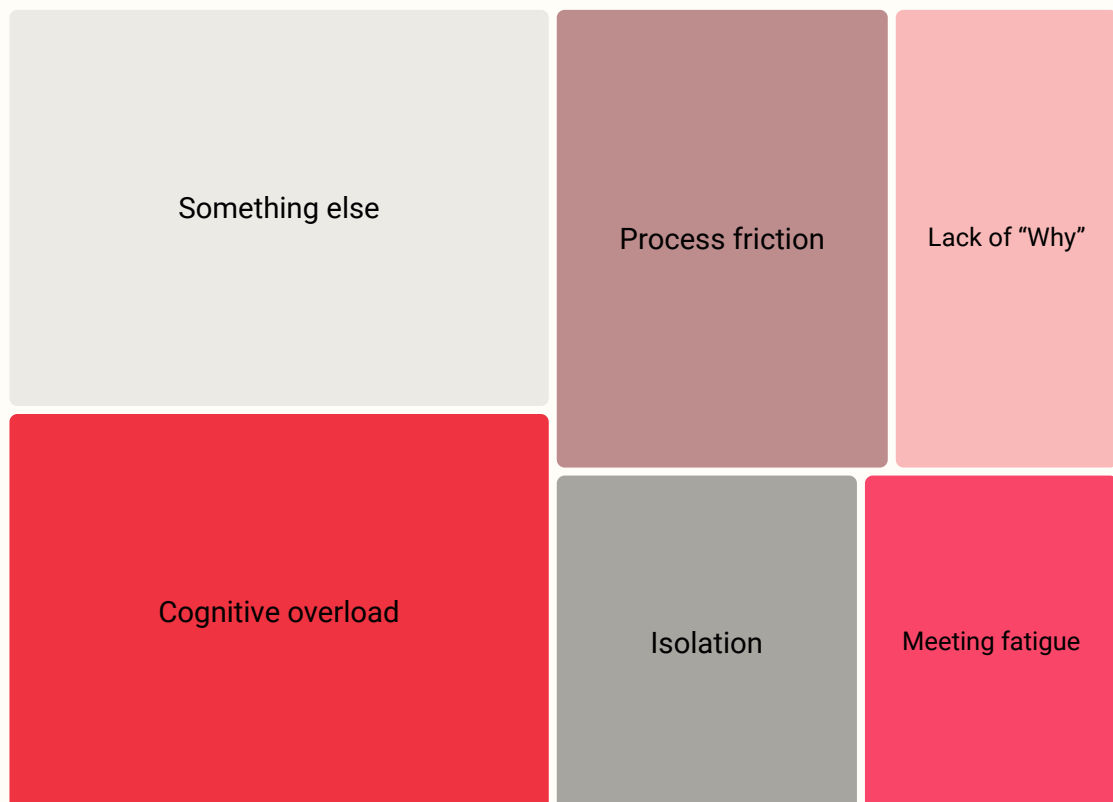
Gallup also found that [clarity of expectations showed the largest decline](#) of any engagement factor since 2020, dropping nine points for all U.S. employees. This problem has been building for years.

Without clear direction, employees default to urgency – a poor substitute for tackling actual priorities.

When everything seems equally important, it can lead to cognitive overload, which one in four employees identifies as their biggest daily energy drain.

Biggest Energy Drainers

On a day-to-day basis, which of the following is the biggest "energy drainer" for you?

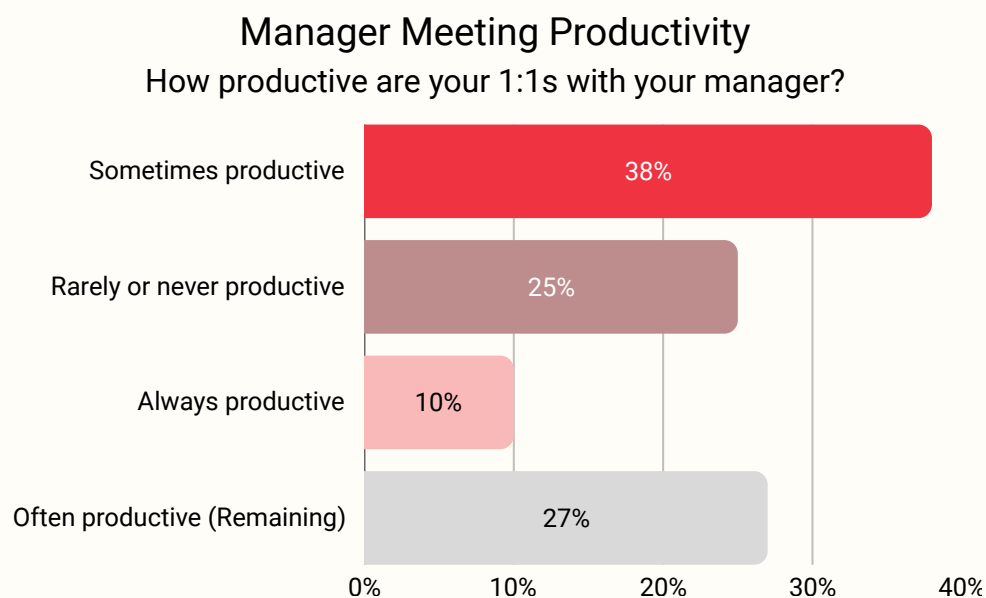


Knowing that clarity matters is only half the equation. How leaders deliver it matters just as much. Some employees need context and detail before they can commit to a direction. Others need autonomy to determine how they'll get there. A behavioral understanding of your team bridges the gap between the direction leaders think they're giving and the direction employees are actually receiving.

The manager handoff is breaking down.

The manager-to-employee relationship is the most direct line between organizational intent and individual experience. Strategy, culture, clarity – all of it passes through the manager before it reaches the people doing the work. When that relationship underperforms, everything downstream suffers.

Right now, it's underperforming. Only 10% of employees say meetings with their manager are always productive. The largest group (38%) describes them as only sometimes productive. That matters because the manager relationship is where motivation gets reinforced or lost. When managers use one-on-one time to set clear expectations, check in on development and make employees feel seen, they directly address the clarity and meaning gaps that drive disengagement in the first place.



Many 1:1s default to status updates rather than alignment, development and coaching, precisely what younger employees are signaling they need most. When those conversations stay surface-level, younger workers don't feel supported and start looking for the door.

Managers who understand their people's behavioral profiles are better equipped to make those conversations count. Knowing what drives each

person makes it easier to personalize communication, set expectations that land well and turn routine check-ins into genuine development conversations.

The manager relationship shouldn't be the weakest link. With the right insight, it can even become the strongest one.

Generic engagement strategies miss the people they're designed for.

Most engagement strategies are built to work across an entire workforce at once, which means they're built around general assumptions about what people want, how they communicate and what motivates them. The problem is that "generally" doesn't describe anyone in particular.

What motivates one person drains another, and what feels like clarity to one employee feels like micromanagement to the next. When organizations ignore those differences and treat engagement as a universal problem with a universal solution, they end up with programs that work for some, miss most and explain exactly why motivation keeps eroding despite genuine effort.

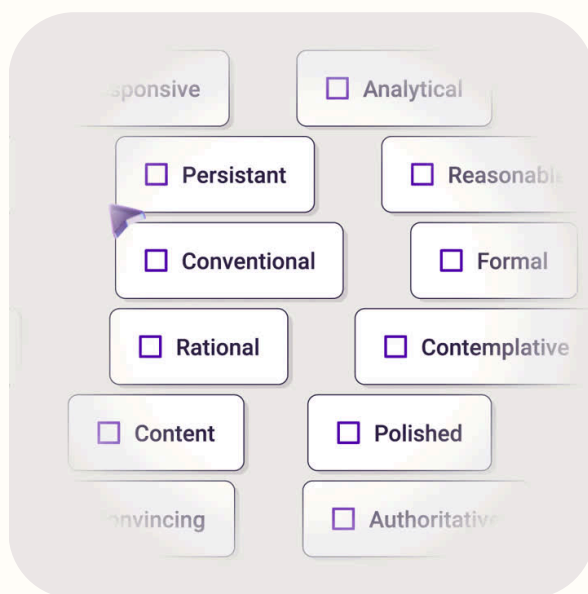
The image shows a digital workspace interface. At the top, there are two profile pictures and a navigation bar with tabs: **Workspace**, Relationship, Feedback, Goals, and Private Notes. Below the navigation bar, there are three main sections:

- Human Check-in**: "Let's take a moment to checkin on our mental health!"
① How are you feeling?
②
- Top Priorities**: "A chance to surface the progress of work-in-progress and align on priorities"
① What are your top 3 priorities?
②
- Career Development**: "Let's make sure we're supporting growth"
① What are your 2 year career goals?
②

Behavioral understanding is what gives your tools something fact-based to work with. When leaders know what drives each person on their team, blunt instruments like AI become genuinely useful by surfacing the right opportunities, flagging the right risks and helping managers have better conversations with the people they lead.

Behavioral insight gives leaders a concrete way to understand what actually drives each person on their team:

- How they process information
- What motivates them
- How they respond to feedback
- What kind of environment allows them to do their best work



PI's Behavioral Assessment gives leaders a concrete starting point for understanding what drives each person on their team. When managers have that insight, clarity improves, conversations deepen and motivation becomes sustainable for organizations.

[Try it now](#)

The average employee doesn't exist. Stop designing for one.

The difference between a workplace where motivation sticks and one where it doesn't usually comes down to how well leaders understand the individuals they're leading – what drives them, what drains them and what they need to do their best work. That understanding is the foundation that makes clarity possible, manager relationships meaningful and engagement sustainable. And it's available to any organization willing to invest in it.



The Predictive Index has spent nearly 70 years helping organizations understand their people. Our behavioral science gives leaders the insight they need to hire with confidence, design high-performing teams and manage in a way that actually connects- combining decades of validated science with tools built for how work happens today.

[See what PI is all about](#)

Because when you understand what drives people, you make better decisions about them.