

Morgan Stanley
AT WORK

State of the Workplace

2026 Financial Benefits Study



Introduction

Morgan Stanley at Work's sixth annual State of the Workplace Financial Benefits Study shows the critical role these play in employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Amid a tightening job market and AI disruption fears, employees continue to look for employers to offer comprehensive financial support—and they are willing to make career decisions based on the strength of those offerings.

At the same time, while trends are positive year-over-year amid a K-shaped economic recovery, financial stress remains a core challenge for many. Focus continues on financial planning, guidance, maximizing current benefits and long-term financial security.

Specific financial benefits—particularly equity compensation and retirement support—have become strategic levers. Employees value benefits that include personalized education and professional advice. At the same time, employers recognize a direct connection between financial stress and workforce performance.

Together, these themes underscore a shift toward more holistic, integrated financial benefits strategies, where long-term planning, equity, and scalable support are central to meeting both employee needs and organizational goals.



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Financial Benefits	5
Equity Compensation	15
Retirement	22
Conclusion	28
Methodology	29

Core Findings

1

COMPREHENSIVE BENEFITS MATTER

Over nine in 10 (92%) employees believe their company should offer the best possible benefits package, and 79% believe their company needs to do a better job helping them understand how to maximize the financial benefits offered.

5

FINANCIAL BENEFITS ARE TALENT AND RETENTION LEVERS

85% of employees say they would feel more invested in their company if it offered financial benefits tailored to their needs, and 91% would consider switching jobs for benefits that help them reach their goals.

2

FINANCIAL STRESS CONTINUES TO AFFECT WORK AND LIFE

Six in 10 (61%) employees are reducing contributions to workplace benefits overall (vs. 67% in 2025), and 56% say financial stress negatively impacts their work and personal life (vs. 66% in 2025). Financial stress negatively affects Gen Z (73%) considerably more than Millennials (58%), Gen Xers (49%), or Baby Boomers (41%).

6

EMPLOYEES WANT PRACTICAL HELP WITH FINANCIAL PLANNING

73% of employees feel they need to accelerate their financial planning efforts and 84% encountered financial issues in the past year—most often with budgeting (39%), financial goal setting (35%), and retirement planning (34%).

3

EMPLOYERS LINK EMPLOYEE FINANCIAL HEALTH TO PRODUCTIVITY

80% of HR managers worry employee financial issues negatively affect productivity, and more than half (53%) believe financial stress-reducing benefits matter most to job satisfaction—even above mental or emotional support (26%) and physical wellness benefits (19%).

7

FOR EQUITY AND RETIREMENT, PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE MATTERS

23% of recipients want company support in getting the most out of their equity compensation. Meanwhile, retirement planning assistance from financial professionals is important to 95% of employees when choosing where to work.

Financial Benefits





“Our 2026 insights show employees continue to turn to their employers for support with personal financial needs, and employers help meet those needs through a full spectrum of workplace financial benefits. Companies that invest in comprehensive offerings that include financial planning and education are better positioned to support productivity, strengthen engagement, and retain talent in an environment where needs and expectations continue to grow.”

SCOTT WHATLEY

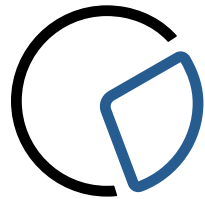
Head of Morgan Stanley at Work

Key Insights



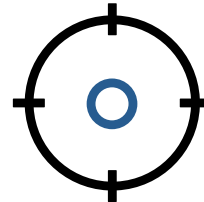
EMPLOYEES PRIORITIZE SAVING AND INVESTING...

Employees' top personal strategic priorities for 2026 are building savings (56%), investing for the long-term (51%), and saving enough to get their employer 401(k) match (45%).



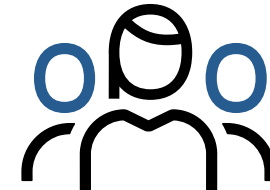
...EVEN AS THEY CONTINUE TO CUT BACK ON BENEFIT CONTRIBUTIONS

61% of employees say they are reducing contributions across key long-term goals, including 401(k)s (35%), long-term savings (27%), emergency savings (26%), and HSAs (24%).



FINANCIAL & INVESTMENT PLANNING ARE IN FOCUS

75% of employees believe financial benefits focused on financial and investment planning are essential to meeting their financial goals, and 90% of HR executives agree.



COMPANIES ARE FOCUSING ON RETENTION AND TECH

65% of HR executives say hiring and retention is their company's top strategic financial priority for 2026, followed by technology investment (43%). In fact, 79% of HR execs report taking proactive steps towards integrating generative AI into their workflows.

Financial Stress Matters for Employees and Employers

Employees and employers alike report that personal financial stress has an impact in the workplace.

56% of employees

report that financial stress is negatively affecting their work and personal life.

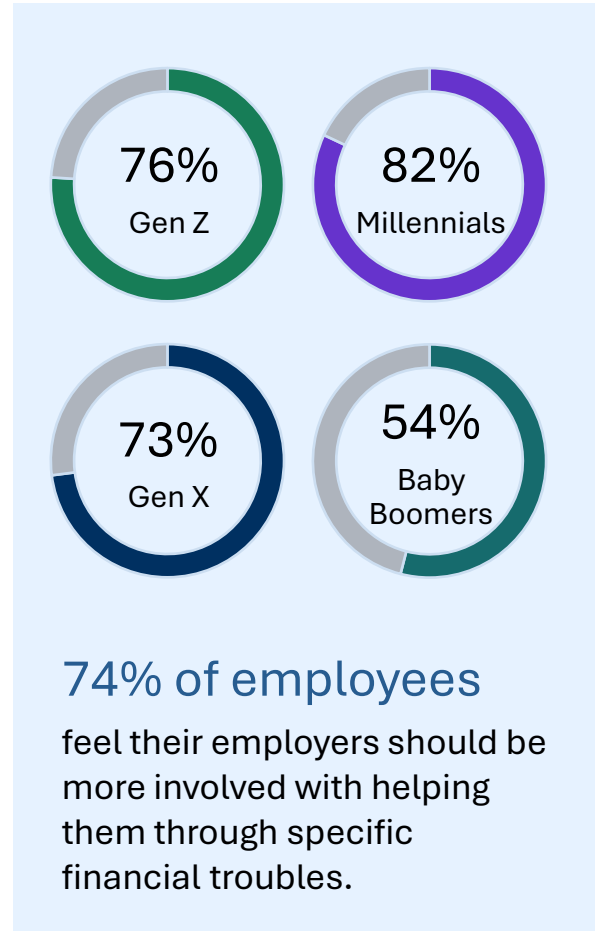


80% of HR executives

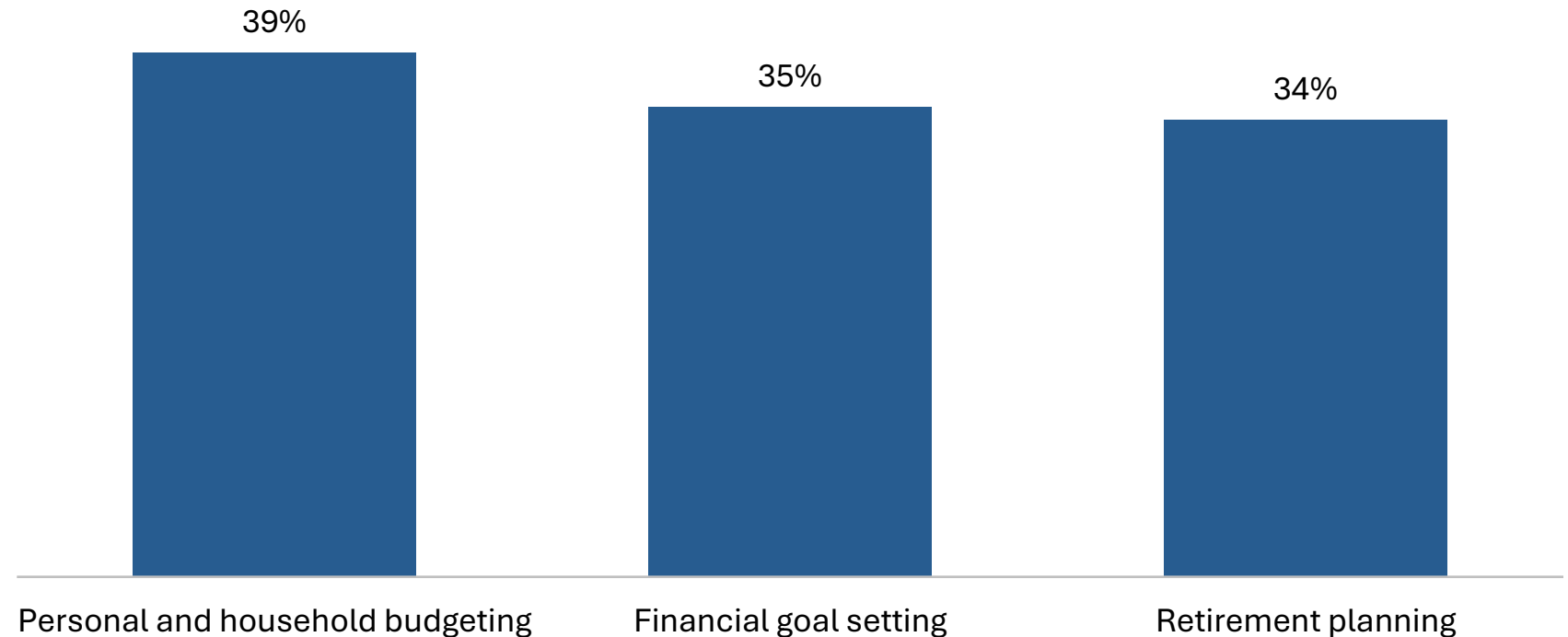
are worried employees' personal financial issues are negatively affecting productivity.

Employees Want Workplace Support for Financial Challenges

Employees are looking to the workplace for foundational financial support, particularly among younger generations.

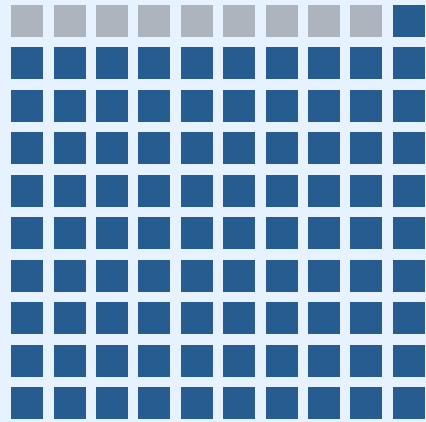


EMPLOYEE RESPONSES: Top 3 issues cited in their personal life over the past year



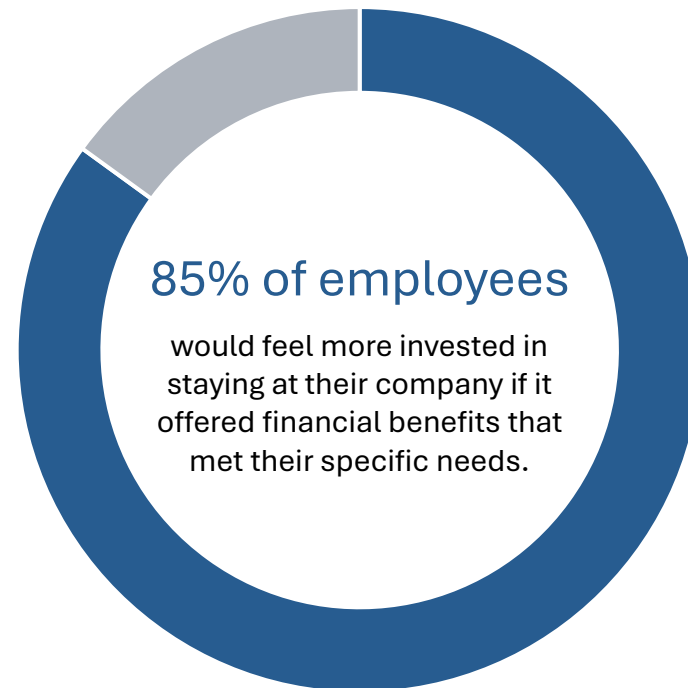
Robust Benefits Drive Retention

HR leaders and employees agree benefits are key to retention, with most employees willing to leave their current job to get financial benefits that meet their needs.



91% of employees

say they would consider a new job if it provided financial benefits that helped them reach their goals.



And Retention is Top Strategic Priority for Companies

With “retention and hiring” as top strategic financial priorities for companies in 2026 (65%), workplace benefits can help support the bottom line. Meanwhile, employees prioritize long-term financial security.

Top 3 personal financial priorities for employees 2026

1

Building up savings
56%

2

Investing for the long-term
51%

3

Saving enough to get employer match on 401(k) contributions
45%

Top 3 strategic financial priorities for companies in 2026

1

Hiring and retention
65%

2

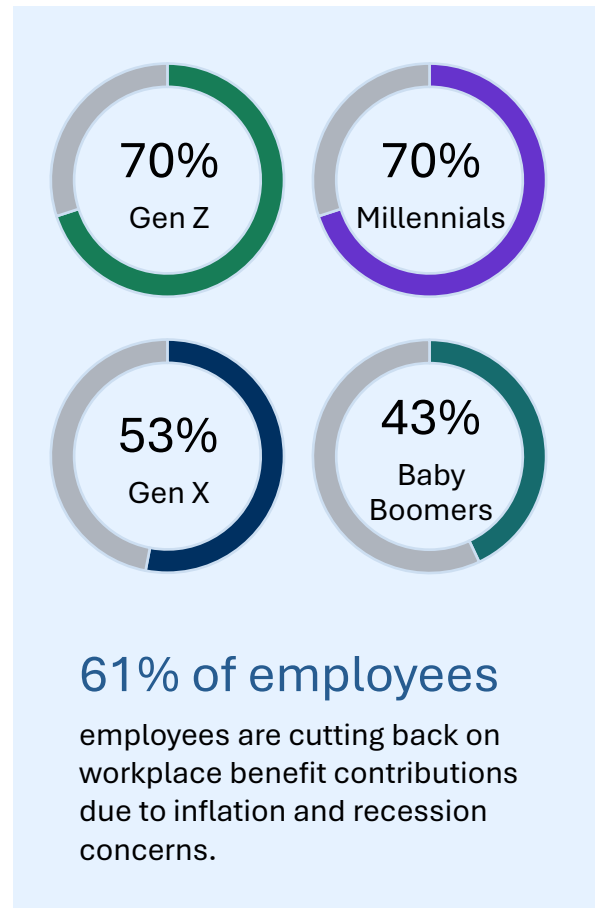
Technology investment + regulatory requirements
43%

3

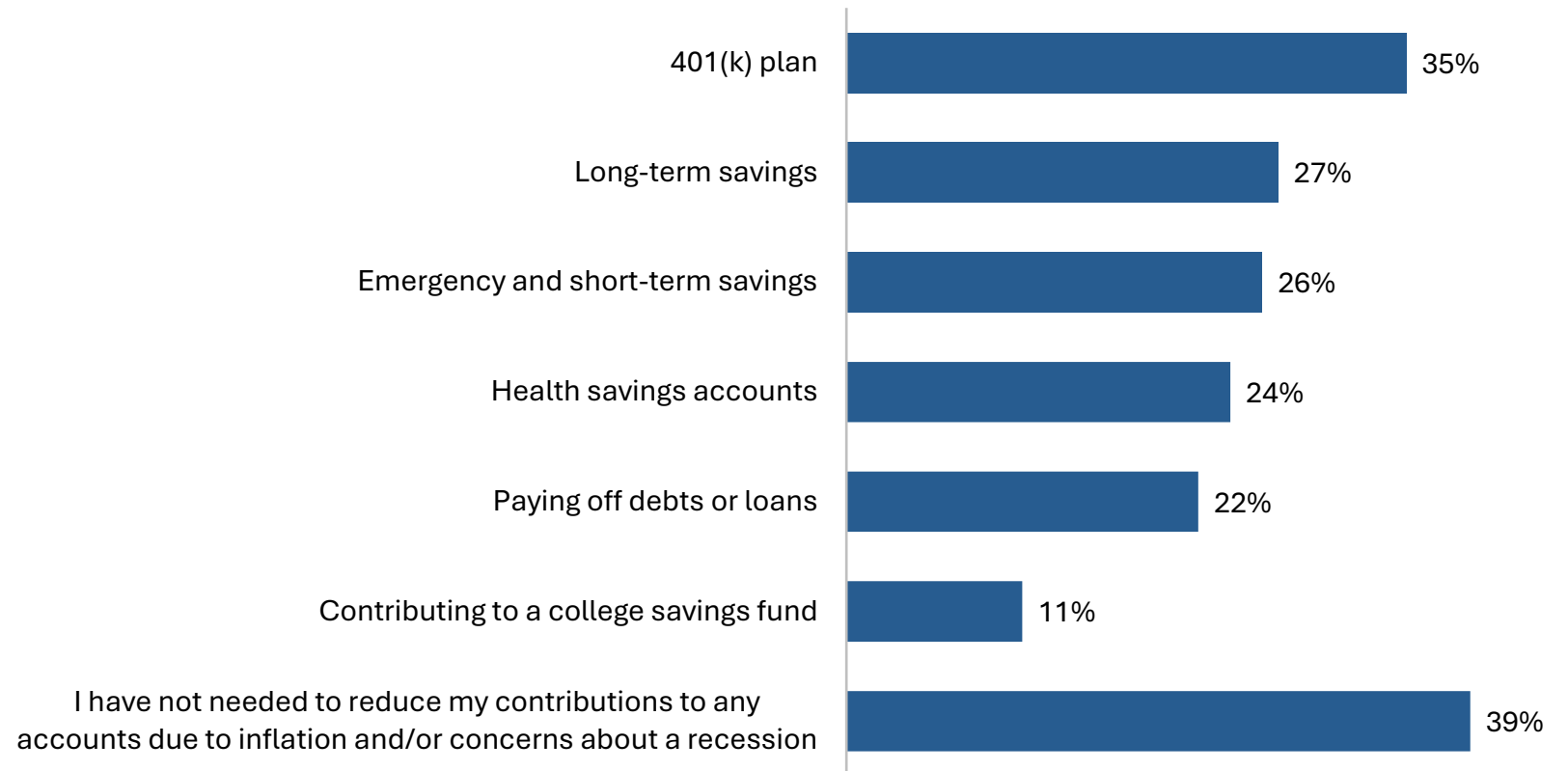
Investment banking
36%

Employees Are Cutting Back

Employees are reducing contributions to workplace benefits, including 401(k)s and savings accounts—especially among younger generations.

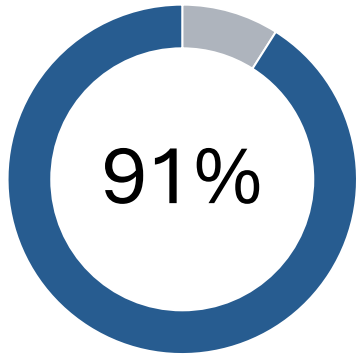


EMPLOYEE RESPONSES: Have you reduced your contributions to any of the following accounts specifically because of the economic impacts related to inflation and/or concerns about a recession?



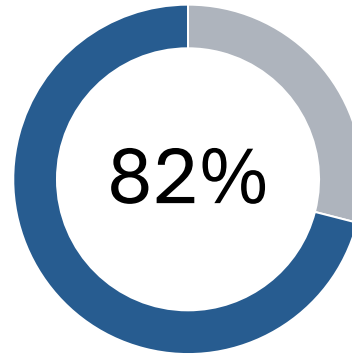
Financial Planning Is In Demand

Employees and HR leaders agree that financial planning benefits are critical to support personal goals.



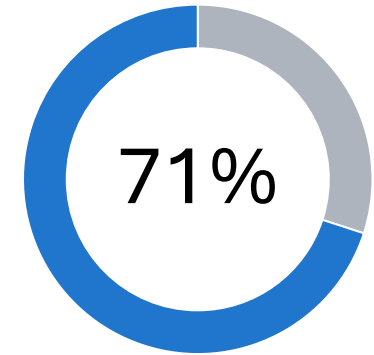
OF EMPLOYEES

believe workplace financial benefits are essential to reach their personal financial goals.



OF EMPLOYEES

who flagged increased financial stress were more likely to say they needed to accelerate their financial planning efforts to make up for lost time.



OF HR EXECUTIVES

agree that help with financial planning is essential for employees to meet their personal financial goals.

HR and Employees Agree More Can Be Done

Companies may want to carefully consider how their financial benefits and education programs align with employee needs.

71%

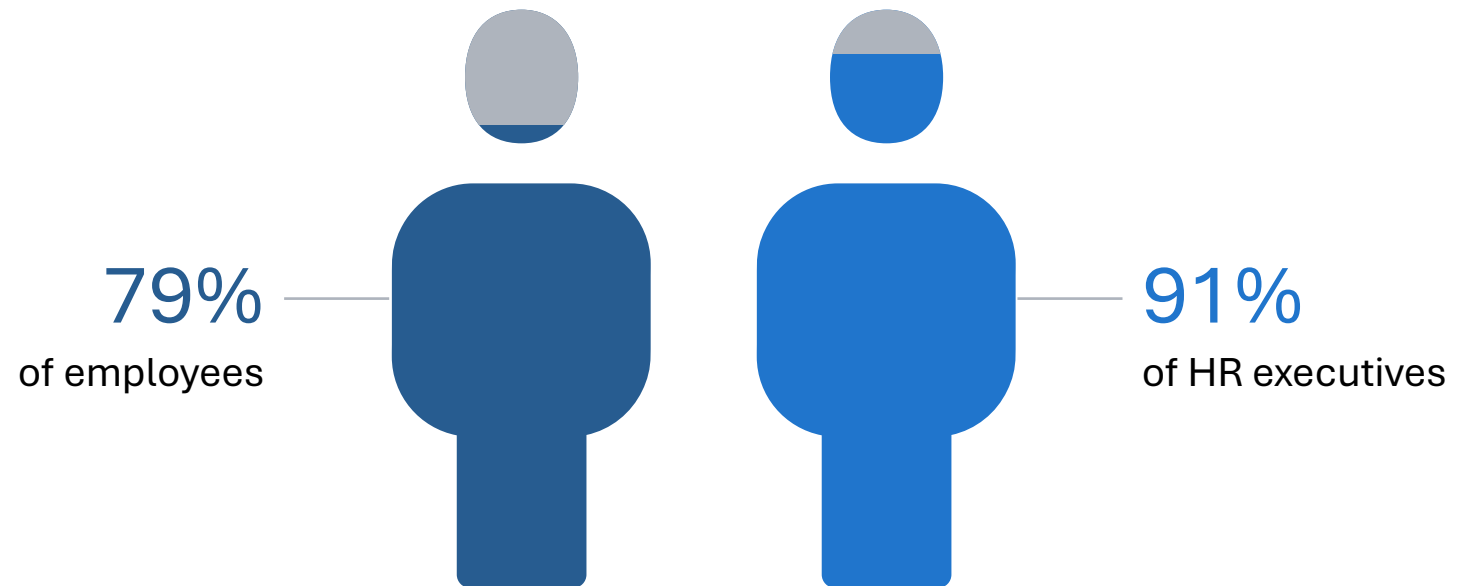
of HR executives received employee requests for a specific type of financial benefits support that their company does not currently offer.

54%

of HR leaders path say their company is on a good path to adding differentiated benefits but gaps remain.

37%

of HR leaders say there's still room to improve.



agree that their companies still need to do a better job helping employees understand and maximize the financial benefits available to them.

Equity Compensation





“Equity compensation continues to resonate as a meaningful driver of motivation, and employees understand equity as a way to unlock long-term value for their personal financial goals. This presents a powerful opportunity for employers to link employee motivation and engagement with company success, and education is key in forging this connection.”

KATE WINGET

Chief Revenue Officer of Morgan Stanley at Work

“Equity compensation has moved beyond an executive-only benefit to become a strategic tool for engaging and retaining talent across organizations. As more employees seek out equity compensation, companies that use equity as part of a broader talent strategy can foster a culture of ownership and loyalty.”

CRAIG RUBINO

Head of Corporate Relationship Management and Engagement, Morgan Stanley at Work

Key Insights



EMPLOYEES & HR SEE LONG-TERM VALUE IN EQUITY COMPENSATION

Employees believe the most important advantage of equity compensation lies in helping them meet long-term investing goals such as retirement (28%), while HR leaders cite giving employees a stake in company success (33%).



EMPLOYEES WANT EQUITY COMPENSATION

More than 4 in 5 (86%) employees say they would be interested in receiving equity compensation, and three quarters (75%) of recipients view equity as an effective motivator.

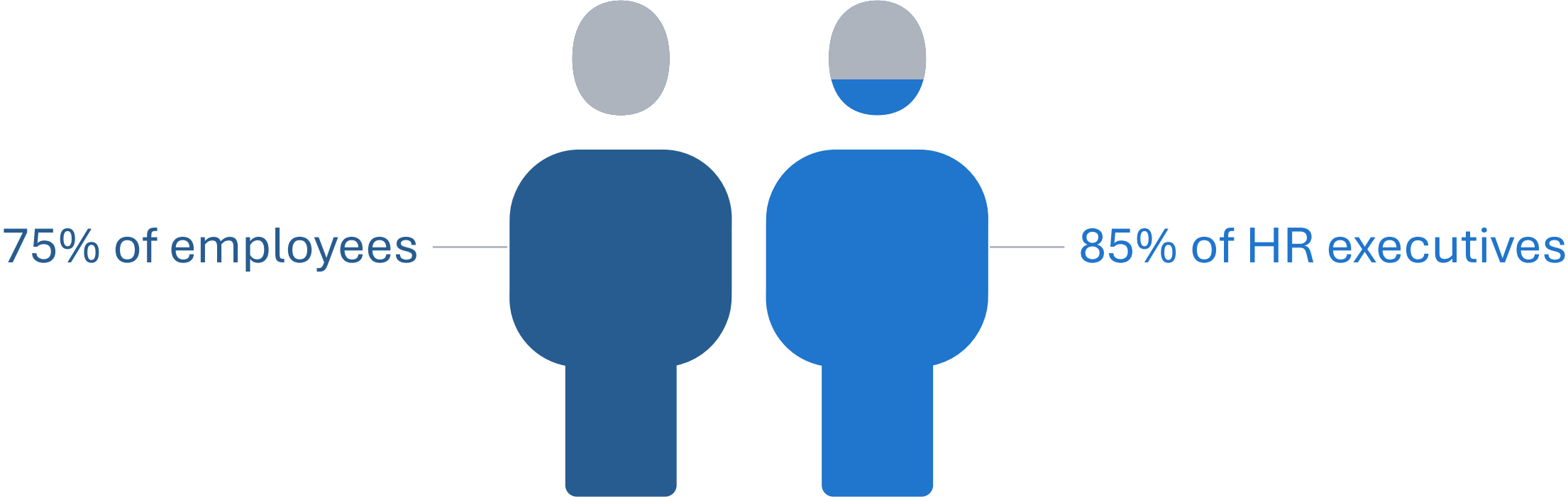


SIGNIFICANT UNTAPPED DEMAND REMAINS

Just 37% of employees work at companies that offer equity.

Equity Compensation Drives Employee Motivation and Engagement

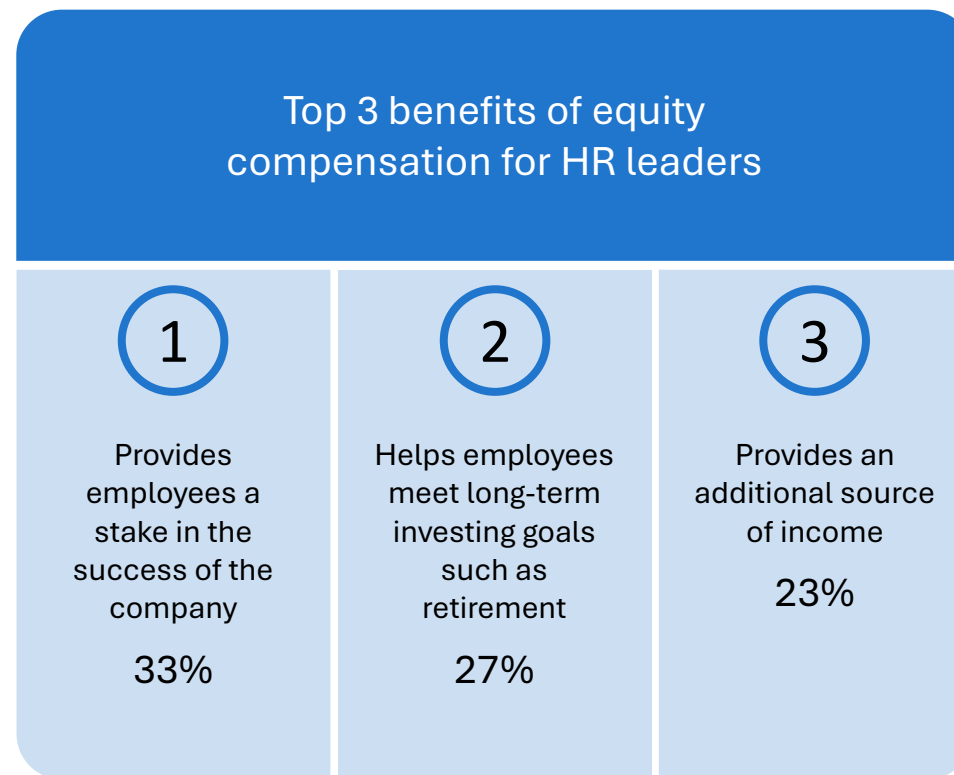
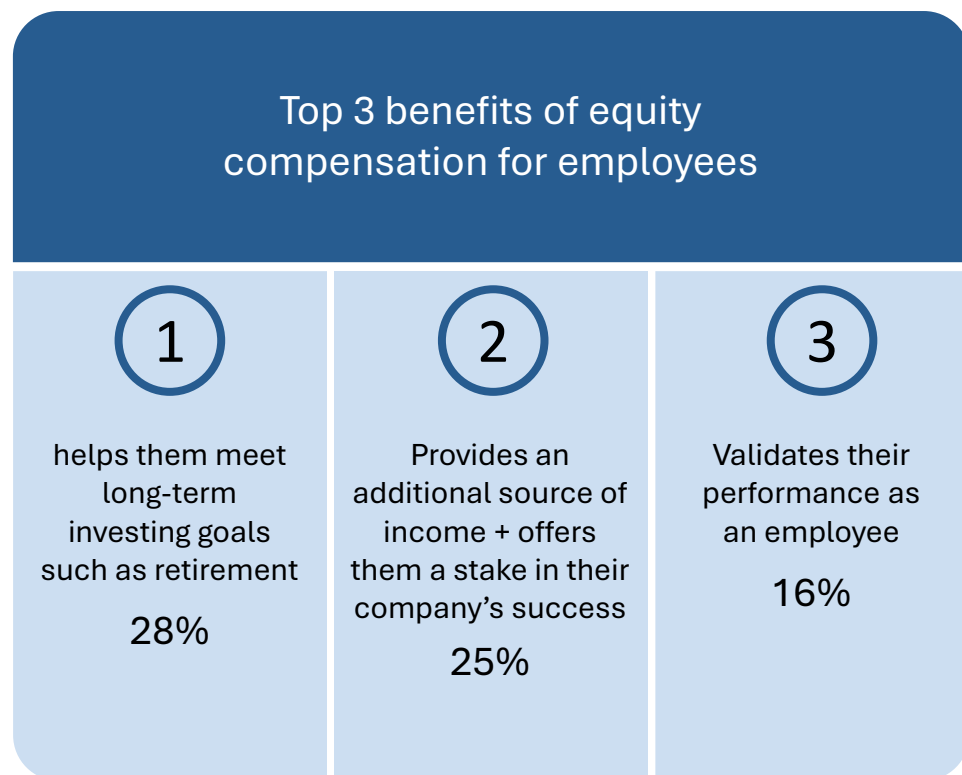
Nearly all of those surveyed completely or strongly agree that equity compensation is the best tool to effectively motivate employees.



agree that having a benefit plan that includes equity compensation and stock ownership is the most effective way to motivate employees and keep them engaged.

Yet Employees and HR Leaders Value Equity Differently

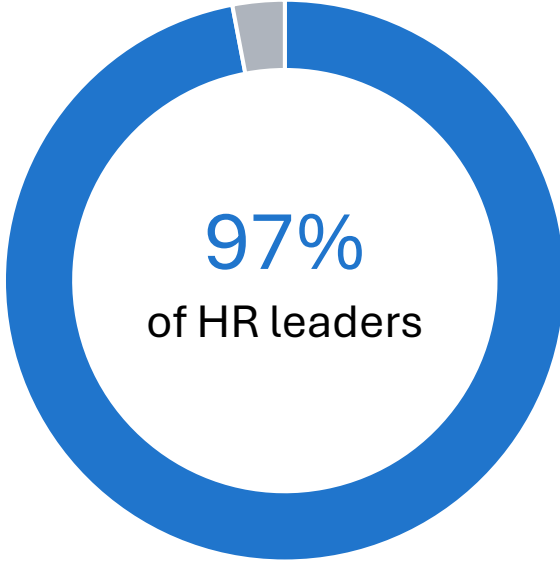
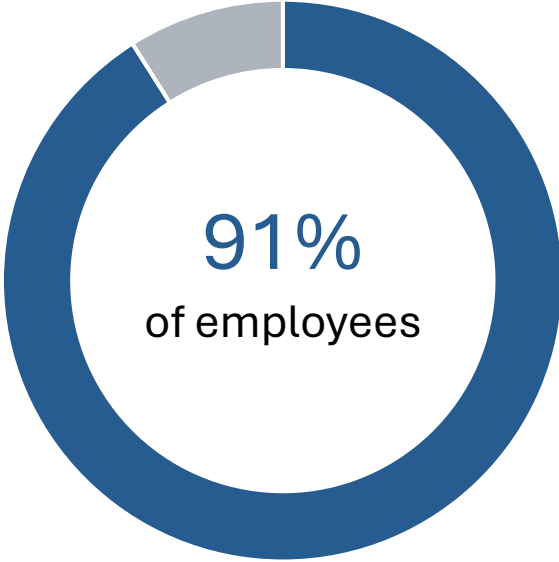
While both employees and HR leaders agree on some of the top benefits provided by equity compensation, they prioritize different aspects.



Equity Education is Working

Employees and HR leaders at companies that offer equity compensation agree that equity education programs are effective.

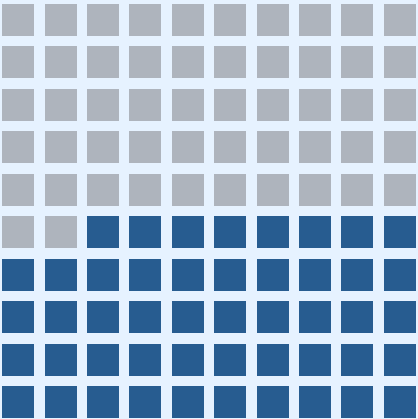
PERCENTAGE OF THOSE WHO RATE THEIR COMPANY'S EQUITY PARTICIPANT EDUCATION PROGRAM AS EFFECTIVE



... yet 15% of HR leaders have heard employees express worry or concern about not knowing how to fully utilize equity compensation or employee stock purchase plans.

Employees Want More Equity Support

Applying equity compensation to real-life financial goals can be complex, and employees and HR leaders agree added support is necessary.



48% of employees
that work at companies that offer equity compensation want help maximizing their equity or employee stock purchase plans.

PERCENTAGE OF THOSE WHO SAY HELP MAXIMIZING EQUITY COMPENSATION OR EMPLOYEE STOCK PURCHASE PLANS AS PART OF THEIR FINANCIAL BENEFITS IS ESSENTIAL TO MEETING THEIR FINANCIAL GOALS



Retirement Solutions





“Retirement planning has an outsized influence on how employees evaluate their workplace benefits. While access is nearly universal, employees increasingly expect guidance, particularly from financial professionals, to help translate participation into long-term financial confidence. Employers that deliver holistic retirement support can create a meaningful advantage in attracting and retaining talent.”

JEREMY FRANCE

Head of Institutional Consulting Solutions and Retirement at Morgan Stanley

Key Insights



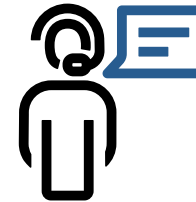
EMPLOYEES WANT COMPREHENSIVE RETIREMENT GUIDANCE

Employees want planning assistance throughout the full retirement cycle, placing the greatest value on goals-based investing (46%), retirement income solutions (45%), and access to a Financial Advisor (43%).



401(K) CONTRIBUTIONS ARE A BALANCING ACT

Over a third (35%) of employees are reducing their 401(k) contributions because they are concerned about economic impacts related to inflation or recession, while at the same time nearly half (45%) focus on saving enough to earn their employer match.



RETIREMENT PLANNING BENEFITS ARE DECIDING A FACTOR

95% of employees say retirement planning assistance from financial professionals is important when choosing where to work, and more than half (51%) cite it as a top or high priority.

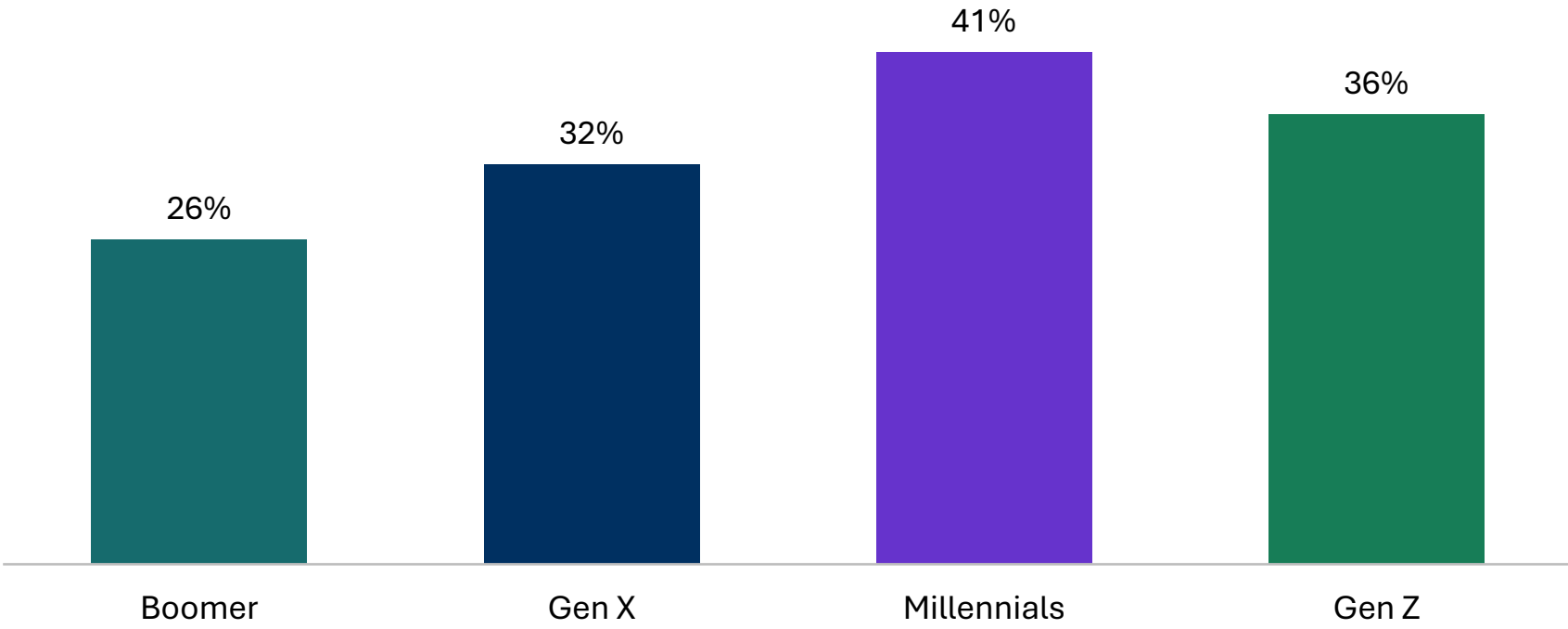
Financially Stressed Employees Reducing 401(k) Contributions

While participation in 401(k) plans increased year-over-year (90%, up from 86%), financial stress still affects retirement savings behavior.

35%
of employees are still reducing 401(k) contributions specifically because they are concerned about economic impacts related to inflation or recession.

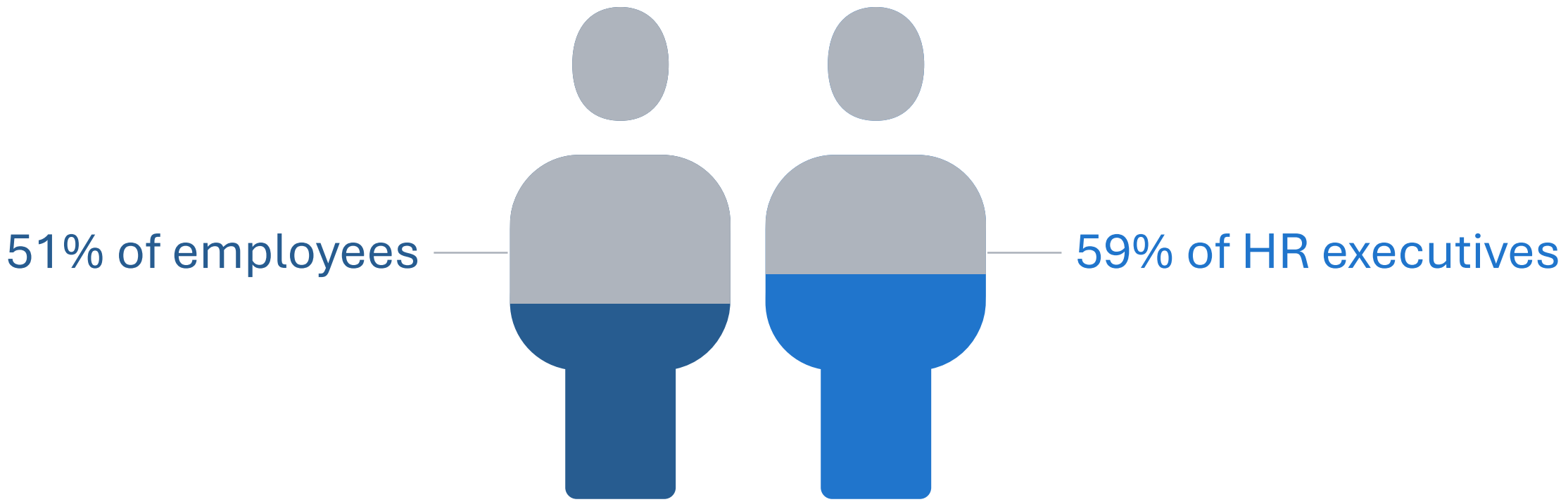
... rises to 41%
among those who also said financial stress is negatively affecting work and personal life.

Employee responses: Generational breakdown of those still reducing 401(k) contributions specifically because they are concerned about economic impacts related to inflation or recession.



Retirement Remains Key Factor in Talent Attraction and Retention

As companies prioritize hiring and retention, retirement benefits are a key area to consider.



believe access to retirement planning assistance from financial professionals is a top or high priority for retaining current employees.

Retirement Guidance Remains in High Demand

When it comes to the most valued types of retirement planning assistance, employees and HR leaders select different priorities.



Conclusion



Workplace financial benefits remain a stabilizing force for employees and a strategic asset for organizations, supported by greater access to planning resources, professional guidance, and more holistic offerings.

Employees are looking to their employers not just for access to benefits, but for meaningful support that helps them maximize opportunities, navigate economic uncertainty and make more confident financial decisions. Across benefit categories, the message is clear: access alone is no longer enough. Employees value personalization, education, and advice that helps turn participation into real-world outcomes.

As expectations rise, companies that invest in comprehensive, guidance-driven financial benefits—supported by ongoing investment in technology and access to human financial professionals—will be best positioned to attract, engage, and retain talent in 2026 and beyond.

Methodology

The data from the Morgan Stanley at Work Employees Survey and HR Managers Survey comes from a survey of 1,000 U.S.-Employed adults and 600 HR leaders for companies. The survey was conducted on behalf of Morgan Stanley at Work using an email invitation and an online survey between January 22nd and January 26th of 2026, by Wakefield Research (www.wakefieldresearch.com).





About Morgan Stanley at Work

Morgan Stanley at Work provides workplace financial benefits that build financial confidence and foster loyalty—helping companies attract and retain top talent. Our end-to-end solutions support your organization at any stage of growth through a powerful combination of modern technology, insightful guidance, and dedicated service; they include Equity, Retirement, Deferred Compensation, Executive Services, and Saving and Giving solutions. And while we’re fulfilling your company’s benefits needs, we’re also enhancing your employees’ financial well-being. Each benefit solution also includes our engaging Financial Wellness program, which provides employees with knowledge, tools, and support to help them make the most of their benefits and achieve their life goals.

About Morgan Stanley Wealth Management

Morgan Stanley Wealth Management is a leading financial services firm that provides access to a wide range of products and services to individuals, businesses, and institutions, including brokerage and investment advisory services, financial and wealth planning, cash management and lending products and services, annuities and insurance, retirement, and trust services.

About Morgan Stanley

Morgan Stanley (NYSE: MS) is a leading global financial services firm providing a wide range of investment banking, securities, wealth management and investment management services. With offices in 41 countries, the Firm’s employees serve clients worldwide including corporations, governments, institutions and individuals. For further information about Morgan Stanley, please visit <https://www.morganstanley.com/>.

Disclosures

This report is not an offer to buy or sell or a solicitation of any offer to buy or sell any security or other financial instrument or to participate in any trading strategy. This material does not provide individually tailored investment advice and has been prepared without regard to the individual financial circumstances and objectives of persons who receive it.

This report has been prepared solely for information purposes. The information herein is in-part based on, derived from, or includes information generally available to the public and has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable. Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC does not guarantee their accuracy or completeness.

This report includes select statements made by certain survey participants. Morgan Stanley makes no representation or warranty concerning the content of such statements and is not implying an affiliation or approval with/of any such persons or the views expressed by such persons.

This material may provide the addresses of, or contain hyperlinks for websites. Except to the extent to which the material refers to website material of Morgan Stanley Wealth Management, the firm has not reviewed the linked site.

Equally, except to the extent to which the material refers to website material of Morgan Stanley Wealth Management, the firm takes no responsibility for, and makes no representations or warranties whatsoever as to, the data and information contained therein. Such address or hyperlink (including addresses or hyperlinks to website material of Morgan Stanley Wealth Management) is provided solely for your convenience and information and the content of the linked site does not in any way form part of this document. Accessing such website or following such link through the material or the website of the firm shall be at your own risk and we shall have no liability arising out of, or in connection with, any such referenced website.

Morgan Stanley at Work, Shareworks, Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC, and its affiliates, employees and Financial Advisors do not provide legal or tax advice. Individuals should consult with their tax/legal advisors before making any tax/legal-related investment decisions. Stocks/equities fluctuate in value and may be worth more or less than their original cost. Past performance is no guarantee of future results.

Employee stock plan solutions are offered by E*TRADE Financial Corporate Services, Inc., Solium Capital LLC, Solium Plan Managers LLC and Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC (“MSSB”), which are part of Morgan Stanley at Work.

Morgan Stanley at Work services and stock plan accounts are provided by wholly owned subsidiaries of Morgan Stanley.

Morgan Stanley at Work stock plan accounts were previously referred to as Shareworks, StockPlan Connect or E*TRADE stock plan accounts, as applicable.

In connection with stock plan solutions offered by Morgan Stanley at Work, securities products and services are offered by MSSB, Member SIPC.

E*TRADE from Morgan Stanley is a registered trademark of MSSB.

All entities are separate but affiliated subsidiaries of Morgan Stanley.

The laws, regulations, and rulings addressed by the products, services, and publications offered by Morgan Stanley and its affiliates are subject to various interpretations and frequent change.

Morgan Stanley and its affiliates do not warrant these products, services, and publications against different interpretations or subsequent changes of laws, regulations, and rulings. Morgan Stanley and its affiliates do not provide legal, accounting, or tax advice. Always consult your own legal, accounting, and tax advisors.

When Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC, its affiliates and Morgan Stanley Financial Advisors and Private Wealth Advisors (collectively, “Morgan Stanley”) provide “investment advice” regarding a retirement or welfare benefit plan account, an individual retirement account or a Coverdell education savings account (“Retirement Account”), Morgan Stanley is a “fiduciary” as those terms are defined under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, as amended (“ERISA”), and/or the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (the “Code”), as applicable. When Morgan Stanley provides investment education, takes orders on an unsolicited basis or otherwise does not provide “investment advice”, Morgan Stanley will not be considered a “fiduciary” under ERISA and/or the Code. For more information regarding Morgan Stanley’s role with respect to a Retirement Account, please visit www.morganstanley.com/disclosures/dol. Tax laws are complex and subject to change. Morgan Stanley does not provide tax or legal advice. Individuals are encouraged to consult their tax and legal advisors (a) before establishing a Retirement Account, and (b) regarding any potential tax, ERISA and related consequences of any investments or other transactions made with respect to a Retirement Account.

© 2026 Morgan Stanley. All rights reserved.

CRC 5436052 5/2026