



# The future of workplace experience

## 2026





# Employees are hungry for stability and connection at work



The workplace has entered an era of permanent impermanence. According to ezCater's latest research, expectations about when — and how often — people come into the office are still shifting, AI has gone from an experiment to an everyday tool, and employees are navigating a landscape that's changing faster than most organizations can track.

On the surface, workers seem to be keeping pace — 81% say they're happy with their current work-life balance. But look closer, and a tension emerges. Today's employees have a growing appetite for stability and control — over where they work, how they spend their time, and what their days on-site look like.

In this year's report, based on a survey of more than 1,000 American workers, we take a closer look at what employees truly want from their workday, and how organizations can drive productivity without burning people out. We examine how AI is reshaping how work gets done — and why human connection remains at the heart of thriving workplaces. We also explore how leaders can harness something surprisingly powerful: the combination of thoughtful office design and food that gives employees a genuine reason to be in the workplace.

# Employees want flexibility — and a good reason to work in person

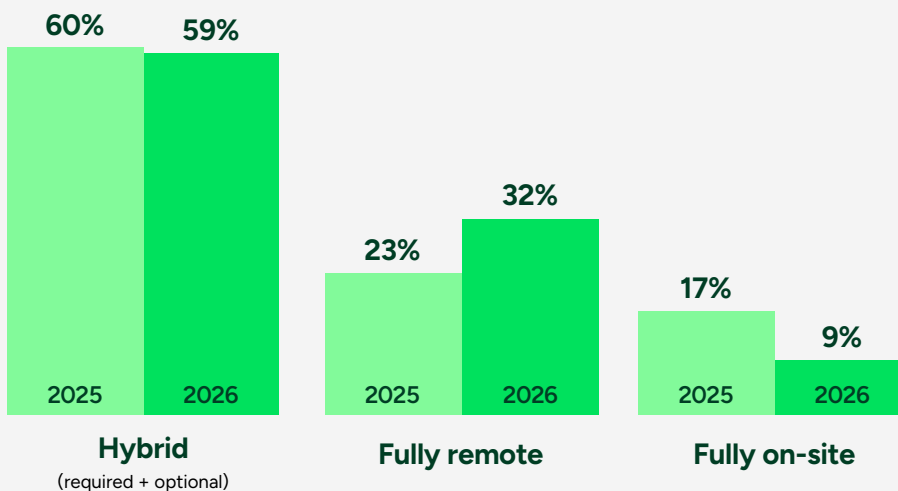




# When workers picture their ideal workweek, it's hybrid

Nearly 6 in 10 workers say a hybrid setup is their preferred way to work, with models that offer employee choice leading the way. The most popular choice is hybrid-optional (37%), where employees have the flexibility to decide their in-office days.

## Workplace preferences are trending



Year over year, employees' preferred work models are trending away from fully on-site (down 45% compared to 2025) — and toward fully remote options (up 37%).

## RTO without perks is a risky move

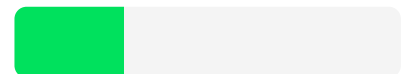
As companies bring formerly remote employees back on-site, perks and incentives are often missing — and it's putting retention on the line.

# 76%

of previously remote workers say they either expect a new perk or would welcome one when their work model changes



Yet, nearly half (47%) of workers who transitioned from remote to hybrid or fully on-site say they didn't receive any new perks when on-site requirements were introduced



When remote workers are required on-site without any incentive, they're 27% more likely to actively look for a new job compared to those who received a perk when their work model changed

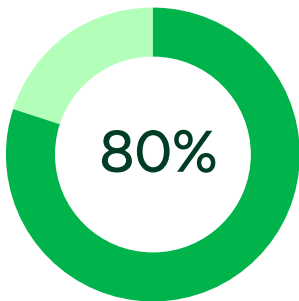


## All signs point to an on-site future

More than a quarter of hybrid and remote workers (26%) say they expect their company will transition to a fully on-site model at some point.


## Perks, not pressure, are what bring people into the workplace

Employees don't just want flexibility, they want benefits that make office days feel worthwhile.




of hybrid and remote workers say there are perks that would incentivize them to work on-site more frequently

The top three incentives to get employees back on-site are:

 #1 Flexible work hours

 #2 Food-related perks

 #3 Generous vacation time



## What's on the menu for Care.com? Higher attendance.

At Care.com, on-site meals have turned in-office days into something employees actually look forward to, tripling attendance on key days without the need for new mandates.

[Read case study](#)

# Technology is speeding up work and deepening the need for human connection







From Slack pings to Zoom calls, technology powers nearly every part of the workday. While 74% of employees say it enhances communication and 71% claim it improves collaboration, the speed it offers doesn't always bring peace of mind — 31% say they feel worried or anxious about AI becoming more embedded in their role. And as AI becomes more embedded into daily workflows, often without training, workers are getting more done but feeling less grounded, making human connection more important than ever.

## AI is everywhere — and workers are figuring it out on their own

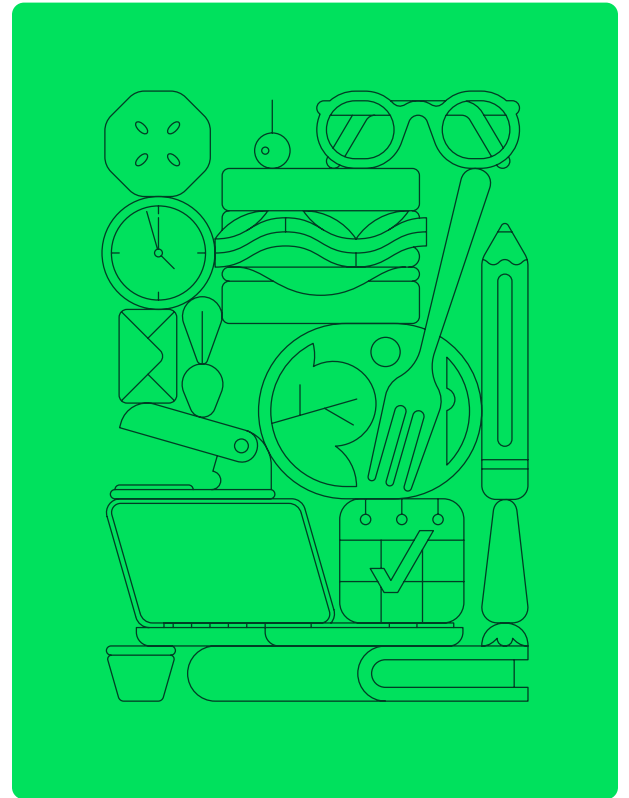
Employees lean on AI tools to keep up with work demands, but most are still learning as they go.

**63%**   
of workers have recently used AI to streamline work tasks  
(up 7% from last year)

**39%**   
Only 39% of workers say their company provides training on how to use AI for their job



Directors and C-suite leaders are 24% more likely to use AI than individual contributors and managers



## AI makes work faster, but less human

Employees say AI is a powerful productivity partner, but it can get in the way of real relationships at work.

Among workers who have recently used AI, **86%** agree it makes them more efficient and productive



**36%**  
of employees who have recently used AI now turn to those tools with their questions instead of reaching out to a coworker



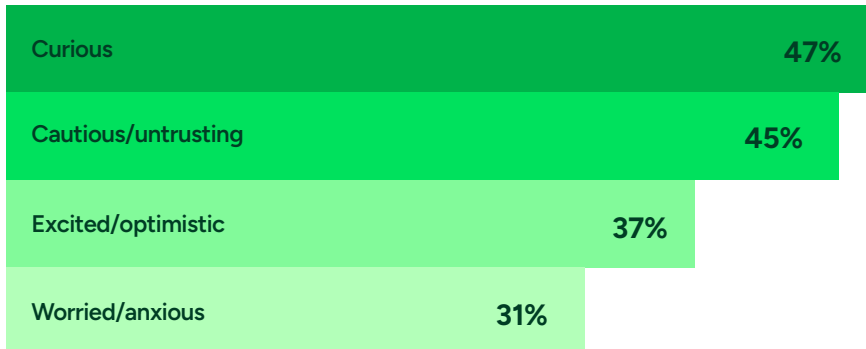
**24%**  
of employees agree AI tools are beginning to replace genuine human connection at work



## Workers are just as *cautious* about AI as they are *curious*

Despite widespread adoption, most employees aren't all-in or all-out on AI. Most are somewhere in the middle.

### How workers feel about AI becoming more embedded in their roles:



### AI job worries are real:

# 25%

of workers are worried AI could replace their position



Individual contributor and manager-level employees are 83% more likely than directors and c-suite leaders to worry AI could replace their role

## Human connection eases AI concerns

As technology like AI becomes more embedded in daily work, employees are turning to real people for reassurance.

The majority of workers (60%) agree that having consistent human touchpoints at work helps relieve worries they have about AI



As AI and other tools accelerate the pace of work, employees are feeling the strain — managing heavier workloads, adapting to new technologies, and navigating the pressure to keep up. The question now is: what helps them stay productive without burning out?

# What workers need to be productive — without burning out





Technology and AI are speeding up work, but nonstop output isn't the goal. Workers say better results come from flexibility and access to everyday essentials, like food, focus time, and manageable workloads. Many, however, feel pressured to be "always on," and some are quietly setting boundaries to avoid burnout.

## Employer-provided meals boost productivity

Employees say they can stay more focused on work when they don't have to plan, pack, or pick up lunch.



67%

of workers say that a daily or weekly employer-provided meal would make them more productive at work



Gen Z and millennials are 16% more likely than Gen X and boomers to say a meal benefit would boost their productivity

## The cost of being "always on"

74% of workers agree that being productive all the time leads to burnout

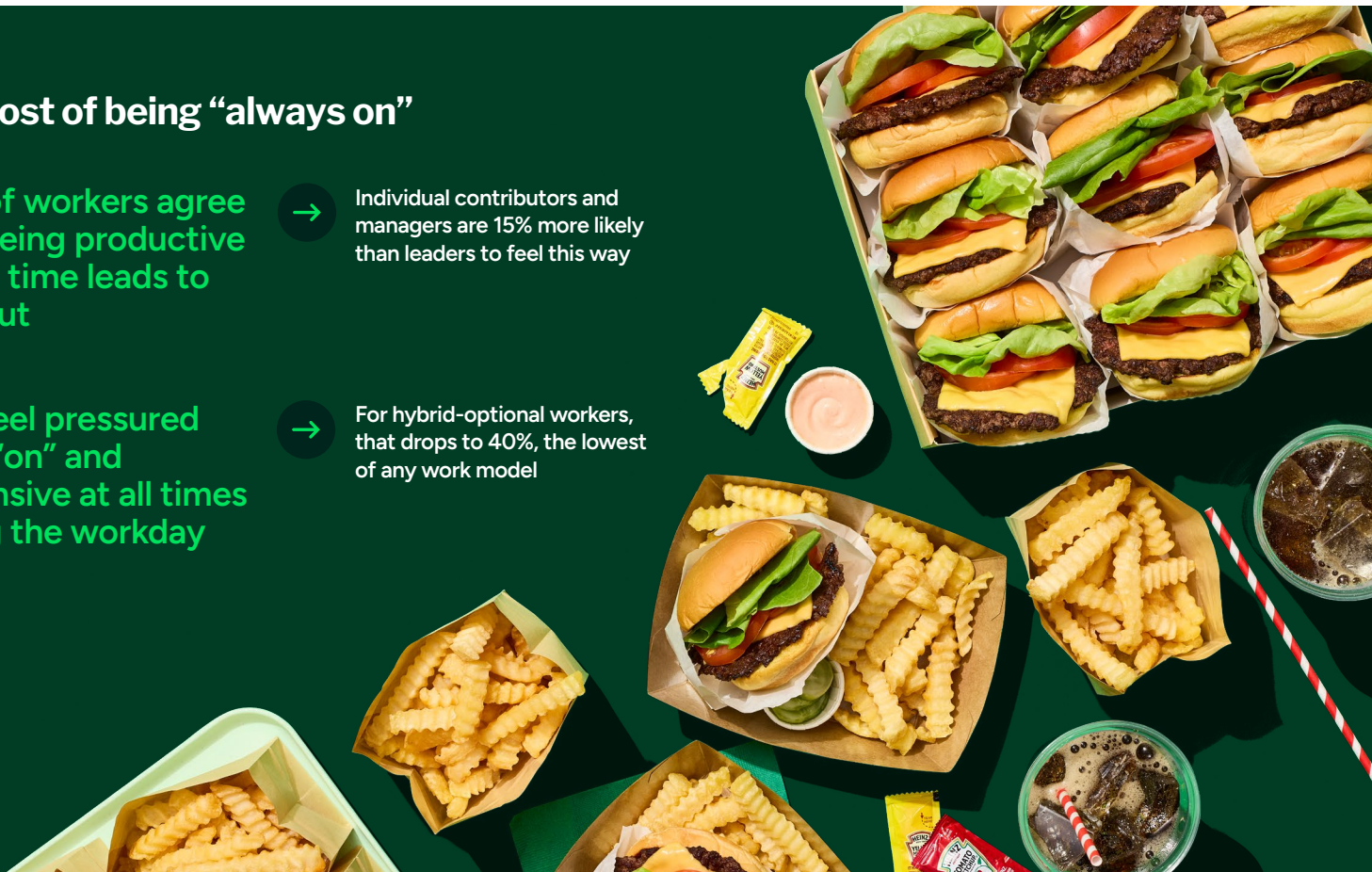


Individual contributors and managers are 15% more likely than leaders to feel this way

52% feel pressured to be "on" and responsive at all times during the workday



For hybrid-optional workers, that drops to 40%, the lowest of any work model





## Workers are setting boundaries to avoid burnout

86% of workers have some kind of boundary to keep work from taking over — from taking mental health days to turning off notifications.

How workers are setting their work/life boundaries:

Mental health days



No work notifications on personal devices during non-working hours



No work apps on personal devices period



No meetings on certain days or times



# Connection is the secret to better work






In a fast-moving workplace, human relationships ground people. Workers say connection boosts productivity, strengthens results, and makes them more likely to stay at a company. But as hybrid and remote work reshape interactions, building those connections takes more intention than ever.

## Social time at work can boost business performance

When employees have time to connect with one another, both people and business outcomes often win.

**79%**   
agree that having friends at work helps drive better results for the company

**69%**   
of workers say socializing with coworkers during the workday makes them more productive

**69%**   
say this social time makes them more likely to stay at the company longer

**Work friendships matter, but they're becoming harder to cultivate**

**66%**  
say having friends at work is important

65%  
60%  
Only 60% of workers have friends at work, down from 65% in 2025

How — *and where* — people work plays a significant role in whether those relationships can take shape.

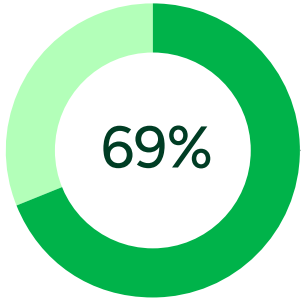
**Hybrid and on-site workers are 74% more likely to have friends at work than fully remote workers**

→ They're also 70% more likely to say having friends at work is important, and 41% more likely to agree that friendships with coworkers drive better company results

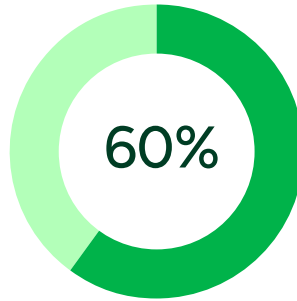


## Food is a fast track to connection

Sharing meals turns everyday moments into deeper relationships.



workers agree that events centered around food help them feel more connected to their coworkers



say they're more comfortable asking a work favor from someone they've shared a meal with in person than from someone they've only interacted with online



# The next generation of work: Ambitious, anxious, and hungry for mentorship and connection





Younger workers are ambitious and deeply connection-driven, but they're also more anxious about their future at work — from AI and burnout to whether they're willing to make a long-term commitment to their current job. Winning them over means balancing flexibility with stability, giving them real connection and mentorship, and using tangible perks — especially food — to make on-site time feel social and worth the trip.

## Younger workers are less likely to stay put

Gen Z and millennial workers are 47% more likely to seek new work opportunities compared to Gen X and boomers

## For younger workers, relationships at work are non-negotiable



Gen Z workers are 73% more likely than older generations to wish there were more opportunities for social interaction



They're 38% more likely to say they wish they were more socially connected to their coworkers

## Mentorship is a bright spot for Gen Z

Younger employees are actively seeking mentorship — and finding it.

62%

of all surveyed workers have a mentor they feel comfortable learning from at work

75%

of Gen Z workers say the same, making them 28% more likely than older colleagues to have this kind of support





## Tech savvy, but more anxious about AI

Gen Z is the most fluent in new tech, and the most uneasy about where AI is headed.

Gen Z workers are 53% more likely than older generations to say they feel worried or anxious about AI

## Guilt for taking breaks hits younger workers the hardest

Stepping away may be encouraged, but it still feels risky for many workers, especially early-career employees who feel the pressure to stay “on.”

On average, Gen Z and millennials are 24% more likely to feel guilty about stepping away than Gen X and boomers



## Food is a big win for Gen Z

For Gen Z, food isn't just a perk. It's a powerful reason to come on-site.

Hybrid and remote Gen Z workers are 48% more likely than older generations to say food-related perks would incentivize them to work on-site

# Small changes, big impact: Keeping pace with change





As technology continues to accelerate the pace of work, and workplace models evolve, leaders don't need a full reset. They need changes that better match what employees are asking for: stronger wellbeing support, offices designed for collaboration, and flexible food perks that make on-site time worth the trip.



## Offer more meaningful support for wellbeing

Workers are feeling a pullback on wellness support in the workplace. Only 52% agree their company offers generous wellbeing resources, and 54% say they wish their employer did more. The takeaway? Introduce small, visible ways to show employees they're cared for, such as:

- ✓ Flexible schedules
- ✓ Mental health days
- ✓ Affordable meal program

These kinds of perks don't just support day-to-day wellbeing — they can also make in-office days feel more worthwhile, giving employees a positive reason to come in rather than viewing return-to-office as a mandate. Together, they help people feel supported, set healthy boundaries, and better manage their energy before burnout starts to take hold.

## Design offices as hubs for collaboration and small-group work

92% of workers say the office still has a purpose, and over half (57%) see its future as a place for collaboration and face-to-face interaction, not just individual desk time.

But most offices are still set up around where people sit, not how they work. Today's layouts still lean heavily on open areas and cubicles, even though 41% of workers say they'd prefer offices with more private spaces for individuals or small groups, while only 18% say private offices make up most of their current layout.

The answer isn't to add more cubicles. It's to repurpose open or underused space into fully enclosed rooms for small-group work — so the office actually supports the collaboration and connection people come in for.

## Give employees the flexible food perks they're asking for

Employees want food-related perks, but most companies aren't delivering. Only 23% of companies offer them, yet 42% of employees wish their company offered more perks with food. At the same time, 66% of workers expect their company to provide a recurring food benefit, like daily or weekly meals. To close that gap, food programs need to scale and adapt. With [ezCater's Meal Program](#), each employee orders what they want from a list of local restaurants, on a schedule and subsidy that fits your workplace. Meal Program makes it easy to roll out (and ramp up) recurring meals across different teams, days, and locations, with more than 125,000 restaurants to choose from each week.

# Feed your team's need for real connection

As technology accelerates workflows and expectations continue to rise, employees are both anxious and ready to learn. The one thing that hasn't changed is the need for human connection.

## People want workplaces that feel more human.

In practice, that means flexibility where it matters, support employees can actually feel, and more opportunities to socialize with coworkers beyond meetings and messages. Food can help bring those moments to life. Discover how ezCater Enterprise can help you build a workplace people want to show up for and do their best work.

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