

# MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

---

MAY 2023 EN:INSIGHTS FORUM  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

230204



**SIRM**® EXECUTIVE  
**NETWORK**



---

**The May 2023 EN:Insights Forum** gave Executive Network (EN) members a look at new SHRM research on mental health in the workplace. This new research builds on SHRM’s previous investigations into the topic to examine how U.S. workplaces can impact an employee’s health in both positive and negative ways.

“We found that work can function as both a risk factor and a protective factor for mental health,” explained Ragan Decker, Ph.D., lead researcher for SHRM. “There are increased expectations for mental health support in the workplace. Organizations that successfully create a workplace that supports mental health can reduce negative impacts and increase the positive impacts that work has on employee mental health.”

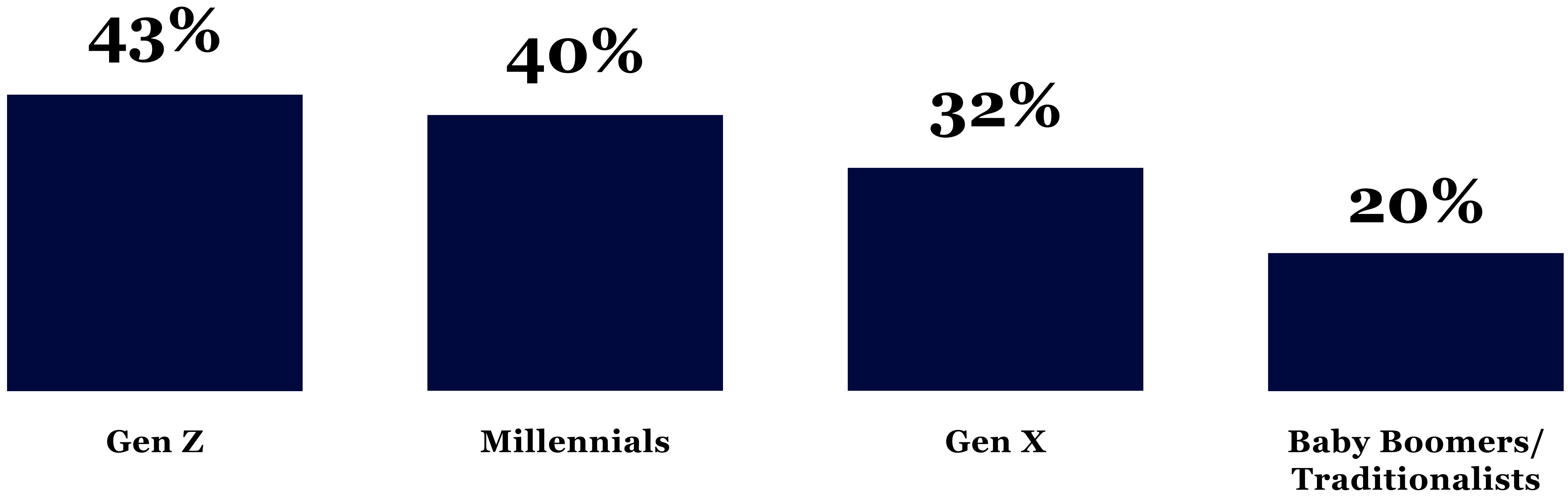


**RAGAN DECKER, PH.D.**  
LEAD RESEARCHER FOR SHRM

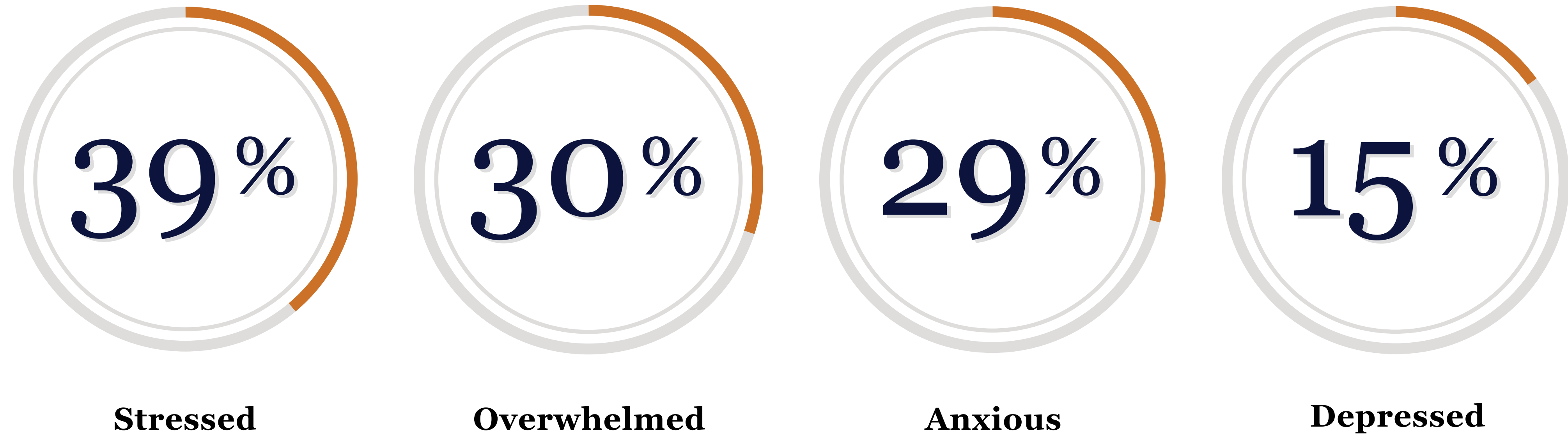


**Job-related levels of mental health issues are alarming:** The study found that 1 out of every 3 U.S. workers (33%) say their job has had a negative impact on their mental health during the past six months, such as creating feelings of being stressed, overwhelmed or anxious. The research shows younger workers are more likely to experience negative mental health impacts because of work.

PERCENTAGE OF U.S. WORKERS EXPERIENCING NEGATIVE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS BECAUSE OF WORK:



PERCENTAGE OF U.S. WORKERS WHO SAY THEIR JOB HAS MADE THEM FEEL:



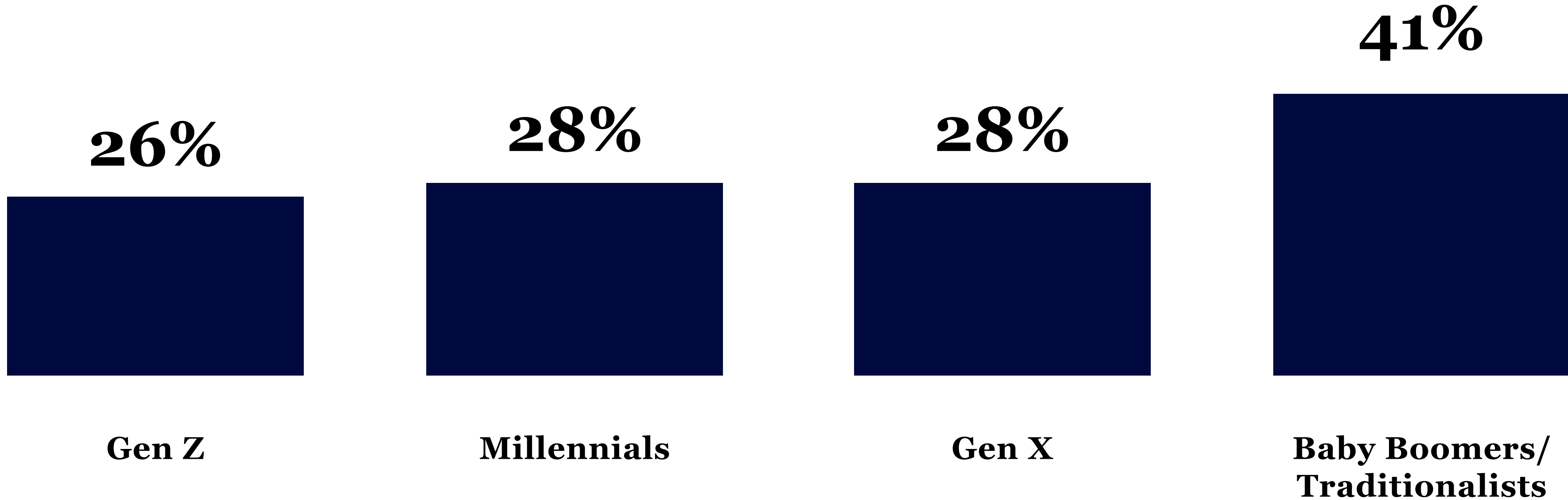
... at least weekly over the past six months.

“Even more concerning is the fact that we found 15% of U.S. workers have reported feeling depressed at least once per week in the past six months as a result of their job,” Decker said. “We even found that 27% of Gen Z and 18% of Millennials say that they feel depressed at least once per week because of their job. This highlights the significant impact work can have on employees’ mental health and well-being.”



**Work can produce positive emotions too:** Almost 1 in 3 U.S. workers (31%) said their job had a positive impact on their mental health during the previous six months. Older workers were most likely to say work enhances their mental health.

PERCENTAGE OF U.S. WORKERS EXPERIENCING POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS BECAUSE OF WORK:





“In addition to these positive feelings, we found that, at least once a week during the past six months, 39% of U.S. workers said their job has made them feel fulfilled, 30% said their job has made them feel happy, and 15% said their job made them feel like they belong,” Decker said. “So, when it comes to mental health, work can function as both a protective factor as well as a risk factor.”

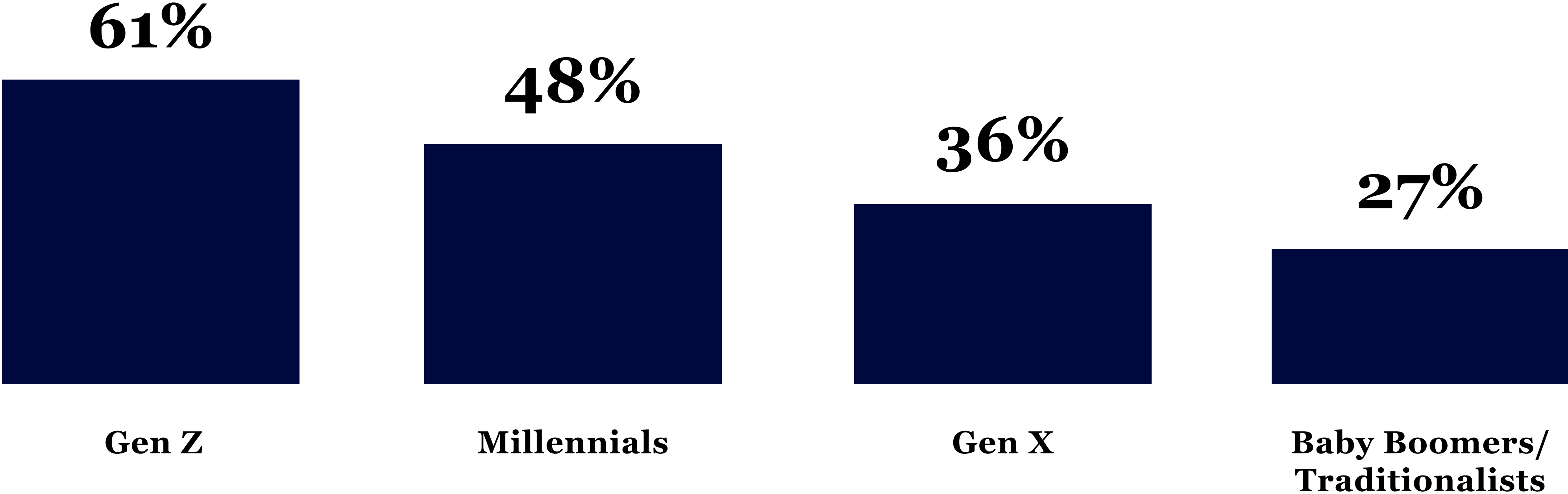
She added: “It’s important for organizations and executives to recognize the dual nature of how work influences mental health. By acknowledging potential risks, we can implement strategies and policies to mitigate them, but we can also harness some of these positive effects of work to enhance employees’ mental well-being.”





**Workers increasingly want workplaces to support their mental health:** SHRM Research found 45% of employees have increased expectations for the level of mental health support their organization should provide as compared with last year. Almost two-thirds (63%) of employees say access to better mental health resources at work would improve their mental health, while 41% say they would likely leave their job for a new job with better mental health benefits.

PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS WHO WOULD CHANGE JOBS FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS:







## STRATEGIES FOR CREATING A SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

1. Design workplaces that support mental health.
2. Enhance psychological safety and mental health training for supervisors.
3. Offer mental health resources.
4. Implement mental health accommodations.



**Workplace support can make a significant impact:** SHRM Research found organizations that supported mental health at work not only reduced the negative effects caused by work but saw a greater instance of positive effects.

AT ORGANIZATIONS **SUCCESSFULLY**  
CREATING A WORKPLACE THAT  
SUPPORTS MENTAL HEALTH:

- Workers experiencing **negative** mental health effects: **14%**
- Worker experiencing **positive** mental health effects: **43%**

AT ORGANIZATIONS **NOT SUCCESSFULLY**  
CREATING A WORKPLACE THAT  
SUPPORTS MENTAL HEALTH:

- Workers experiencing **negative** mental health effects: **53%**
- Worker experiencing **positive** mental health effects: **17%**

“As executives, it’s crucial to foster a work environment that minimizes risks and maximizes the positive impacts work can have on mental health and well-being,” Decker said. “Our research highlights the power of workplace support. We found that organizations that are successful at creating a workplace that supports mental health can reduce the negative impact of work on mental health and actually increase the positive impact of work on mental health.”



**A framework for workplace mental health and well-being:** The Surgeon General has identified five characteristics of workplaces that support worker mental health.<sup>1</sup>

“The U.S. Surgeon General’s framework for workplace mental health and well-being identifies five components that are critical in the workplace,” Decker said. “When it comes to job-related anxiety, depression and stress, our research found three key drivers. If organizations focus on these workplace characteristics, they can mitigate negative work-related mental health outcomes. When we shift our focus to positive outcomes, we find that there are other drivers that are important. If organizations focus on these workplace characteristics, they can enhance positive work-related mental health outcomes.”

## TOP DRIVERS OF **NEGATIVE** OUTCOMES (E.G., JOB-RELATED ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND STRESS):

- Lack of protection from harm —> offering safety and job security.
- Lack of work/life harmony —> offering flexibility and autonomy.
- Lack of opportunity for growth —> offering career advancement and professional development.

## TOP DRIVERS OF **POSITIVE** OUTCOMES (E.G., JOB-RELATED FULFILLMENT AND HAPPINESS):

- Community and connection —> offering social support and belonging.
- Mattering at work —> offering meaning, dignity and recognition.



**Supervisors have a key role to play:** When employees are confronting mental health challenges, supervisors can be a source of understanding, support and accommodation. Yet many employees remain reluctant to ask their supervisor for help.



of U.S. employees feel uncomfortable discussing their mental health with their supervisor.



of U.S. employees seek mental health support from their direct supervisor.

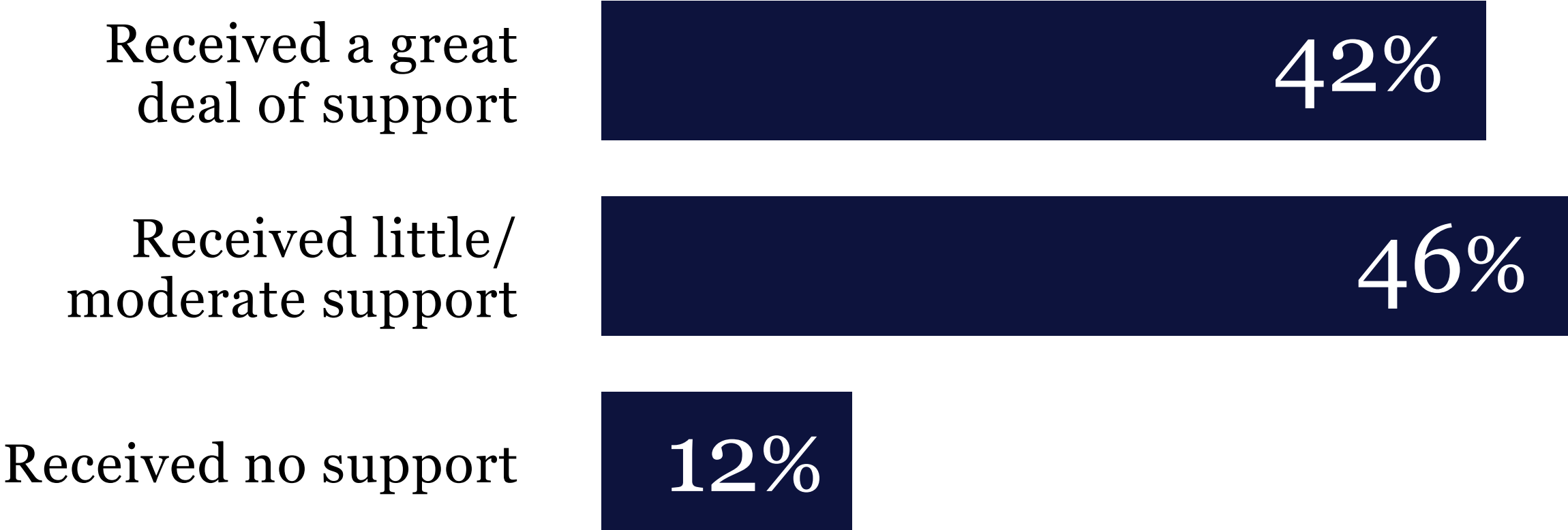






“It’s important for supervisors to foster that sense of psychological safety on their teams, so employees feel comfortable discussing their mental health with their supervisor,” Decker said.

**Among those employees who sought support:**



Decker added, “This suggests that supervisor may need mental health training, so they have the tools, skills and knowledge to respond appropriately when an employee comes to them for mental health support.”



**Offer mental health resources:** Almost 2 in 3 employees (63%) say better access to workplace mental health resources would improve their mental health. SHRM Research identified several workplace mental health resources that are effective for employees.

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES WHO SAY THE FOLLOWING MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES WOULD BEST SUPPORT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH:



**Paid mental health days  
(beyond sick days)**



**Mental health coverage as part  
of employee health care plans**



**Free or subsidized virtual  
mental health services**

While 72% of organizations already offer some kind of mental health coverage as part of their employee health care benefits, just 7% of organizations offer paid mental health days in addition to other paid time off.<sup>2</sup>



**Employees seek time-based accommodations for mental health support:** SHRM Research found that nearly half (48%) of U.S. employees believe that paid or unpaid time off is the most valuable accommodation for their mental health, followed by flexible schedules, which could include part-time hours, job sharing, or adjustments to their starting and ending times.

PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEES SEEKING THE FOLLOWING TIME-BASED ACCOMMODATIONS TO SUPPORT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH:



**Paid or unpaid time off**



**Flexible schedules**



**Work breaks**

**Mental health matters:** “The bottom line is that mental health in the workplace is more important than ever, and support for mental health is increasingly important to employees,” Decker said.



# MAKING ROOM FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE



JULIA  
ANAS

---

CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER,  
QUALTRICS

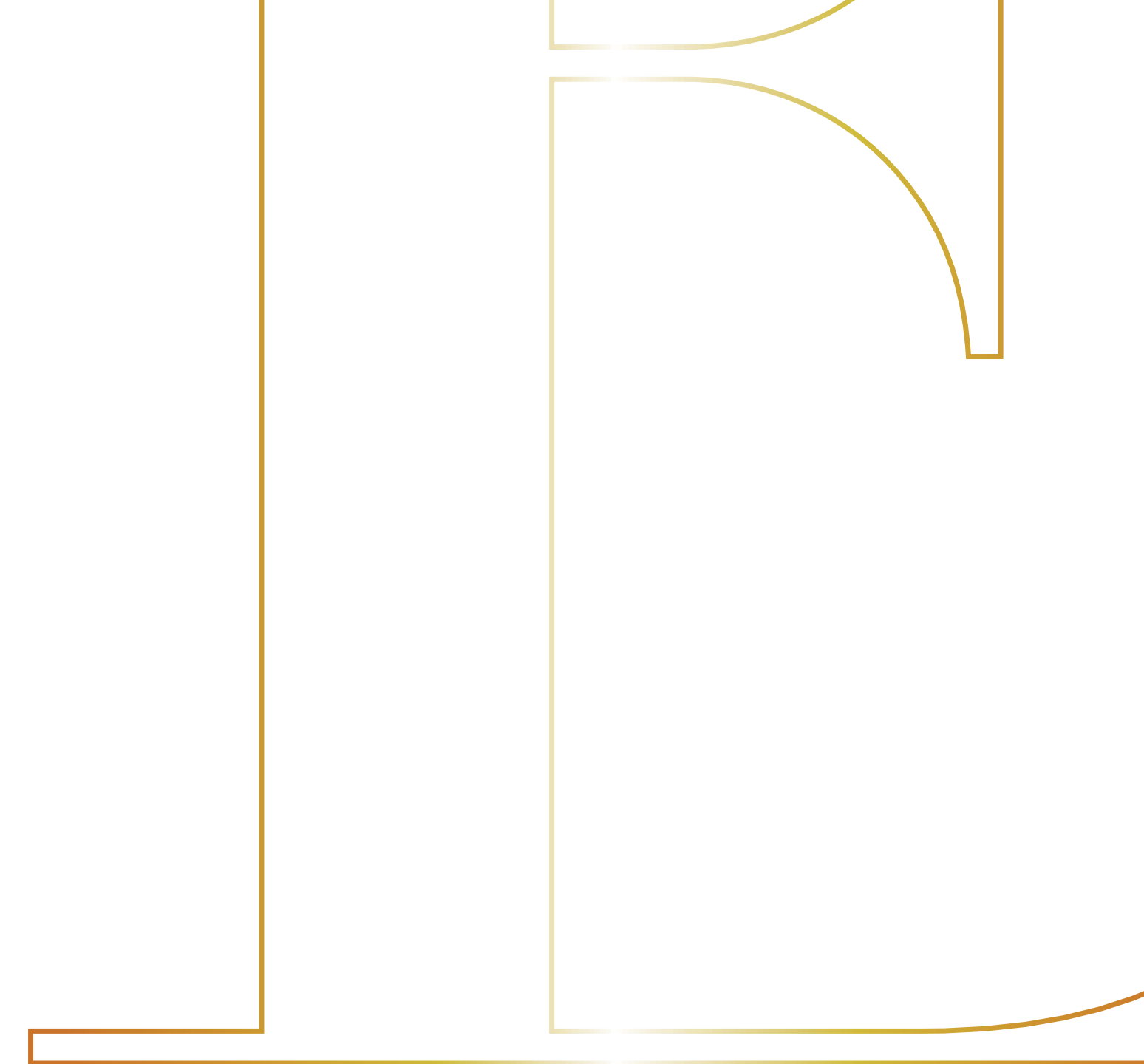






Julia Anas serves as chief people officer at Qualtrics, the software company behind an experience management platform used by thousands of companies such as Uber, Coca-Cola and Delta Air Lines. She has played a critical role building a talented and diverse organization and driving employee development and compensation planning, as well as organizational design, talent and succession planning in alignment with the organization's business objectives.





Looking at the SHRM research on mental health in the workplace, Anas responded, “I have to share two different emotions. I feel saddened that 57% of workers feel uncomfortable sharing with their managers but, on the flip side, I was really encouraged to see that this is a need people are open about prioritizing for themselves.”

She added: “Not only are they open about it, but 41% say that they’re likely or very likely to leave for another role that offers significantly better mental health benefits. That shows the ownership employees are taking to say, ‘This is important to me.’ I think that says a lot in terms of just underscoring the importance of mental health in the workplace.”



# Q & A WITH JULIA ANAS

**Q: What are some of the creative ways you've seen employers boost employee use of mental health resources?**

**A:** It all starts with the culture of being able to just openly speak. We've seen the culture shift in terms of being able to talk about mental health in a different way than what we did a few years back, which in many ways is fantastic. Because robust mental health is important to every human on the planet. We all need it. I know I need it. Recognizing it's something that's really important and a need that we all have, being able to talk about that openly, being able to say, this is why it matters in our company, this is why it's impactful to our employees and to their experience. Creating that open environment creates psychological safety and connectedness to people feeling that I belong here. I feel like I'm understood, I'm seen.

It's also important to have leaders lean in with empathy, maybe in different ways than they have. That means being intentional. If it's important at the company level, it needs to be important to every leader. Having that conversation and saying, 'Hey, how are you doing? Let's just focus on you.' Every leader needs to lean in with that care and that compassion. There definitely are benefits and programs that companies can offer but, for me, the most important thing anyone can do in any company is model the behavior.



**Q: What are some strategies to convince your company to offer mental health days in addition to the sick days?**



**A:** That's something that we do at Qualtrics in the U.S. We call them personal/well-being days, and I'll say it's been a journey. We have a diverse set of employees and know that all employees are different, and we acknowledge that their needs are different too. It's been a matter of sharing that when people feel that they're taken care of or looked after it creates a better employee experience, it creates more trust in the organization, and as a result it yields better engagement.

From that perspective, it's a question of whether you care about your workforce and your people, which I believe is safe to say is the case for many organizations, as their people are their most valuable asset. People really make companies successful, and recognizing that mental health is part of what they need, and to fuel that need, is a journey. Helping leaders understand the impact that has is important. It's around giving me that space as an employee and creating that intentional space for an employee to say, 'Hey, this is what I need.' And the company is saying, 'Hey, that's important, and we are going to create a benefit to support you in doing that.' And so we've done that at Qualtrics. We give employees five personal/well-being days a year, and we encourage people to use those before using their vacation days, to take care of themselves and their needs.



# Q. How long have you seen it take organizations to begin to implement some of the strategies to support their teams and their mental health?

A. I've been at Qualtrics for two and a half years, and I will say this: We have certainly been on a journey to better understand our employees' needs. One of the things we do each year is ask our global employee population, using our own technology, what's important to them. And because everyone's going to say that all of these great ideas and new benefit offerings are important, we force them to prioritize.

For example, in 2021, we were considering an expanded wellness offering and we heard employees voice a need for it. We know wellness needs are not a one-size-fits-all benefit. At the start of 2022, we introduced an annual \$1,200 USD (or local equivalent) wellness reimbursement that employees can use on anything from workout classes to therapy. That was a new budget spend, where I used the employee experience data that we had been gathering during the pandemic to advocate for.

We monitor all of our programs on a quarterly basis, but what brought my heart the most joy at the end of last year was to see that 95% of our global employees leveraged some element of that reimbursement, and 87% of our employees utilized 100% of the benefit for which they were eligible. It demonstrates to me that people are taking ownership of their own wellness and their own well-being. We're creating the space and funds to go do that, but it takes the employees to be accountable to take action. People take action when it matters.



**Q: In this era of layoffs—which can create anxiety, depression and stress—how can organizations keep their teams feeling safe when there’s such uncertainty?**

**A:** It comes down to how you create that connection to feeling like employees understand what’s happening within the organization. How are you bringing your workforce along in that journey, and when is the appropriate time? How are you helping them to understand the why behind it? How are you reminding them of the resources that they have? Leaders, as they meet with teams, can acknowledge how tough the circumstances may be. It’s a real opportunity for leaders to lean in and be vulnerable. It doesn’t show weak leadership. It actually underscores that you’re human, that you are relatable and people can connect to you.

In that moment, you have to be relatable, but also be able to share with them where we’re headed. That is the important piece in change management. Many will feel at ease if they can understand what the big decision was and the strategic pillars that were driving it. In some cases where employees may still scratch their heads, they’ve got that trust in leaders in terms of the decisions that were made. But being real and acknowledging that while certain business needs must be met, this isn’t an easy moment.



**Q. Do you see a difference between people who work from home versus people who are going to the office, in terms of their mental health?**



**A:** Not every employee's needs are the same, including from a mental health perspective. While working remotely during the height of the pandemic, I got time back to invest in myself in different ways. Without a commute, I created time in the mornings, before anyone else woke up in my house, to work out and just be. That was my time, and I felt better as a result.

Having said that, as an organization, we've transitioned back to the office four days a week. And let me tell you, needing to hold onto my personal time—which is what I've found I need for my own mental health, Julia's minute to herself—I've had to prioritize differently. It's become a nonnegotiable for me that I need to make time for, while still needing to make time for my commute and get to my meetings on time. Yes, my alarm clock now goes off a little earlier, but it's how I continue to give back to myself, which is important for me and everyone else.



# Additional resources for supporting employee mental health:

---

- [A Field Guide For Mental Health in Your Workplace: From Evaluation to Action](#)
- [Workplace Mental Health Ally Certificate](#)
- [SHRM EN & Thrive Mental Health Pledge](#)

## Endnotes

---

1. The Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/workplace-well-being/index.html>
2. *Belonging and Mental Health in the Workplace*. SHRM, 2022. <https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/Documents/October%202022%20EN%20Insights%20Forum%20Recap%20-%20Belonging%20and%20Mental%20Health%20in%20the%20Workplace.pdf>



The logo for SIRM Executive Network. It features the letters 'SIRM' in a white serif font, with the 'I' and 'R' overlapping. This is enclosed in a white rectangular box. To the right of this box is a registered trademark symbol (®). Further right, the words 'EXECUTIVE' and 'NETWORK' are stacked in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

**SIRM**® EXECUTIVE  
**NETWORK**