

# Communicating Culture During A Hybrid Revolution

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**A Post-Pandemic Study of the Impact of Remote Work on  
Companies and Their Internal Communication Functions**

**June 2024**

**USC** Annenberg  
School for Communication  
and Journalism  
*Center for Public Relations*



International Association  
of Business Communicators

# Overview of the Study

In the past four years, the world of work, particularly for those who have office-based jobs, has changed in ways that few would have predicted. A new vocabulary and related acronyms have evolved to reflect these changes, including “work from home” or WFH, “remote work,” “return to office” or RTIO, and Zooming.

Since the end of the pandemic, employers have been wrestling with the challenges of how to adapt to this new reality. These challenges include assuring productivity and quality while also maintaining the values and culture of their organizations that define their position in the marketplace.

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) wanted to understand the role communication professionals play in addressing these challenges and to help communicators shape the future of work at their organizations.

IABC asked the Center for Public Relations at the University of Southern California to conduct a study that provides direction on the future of the workplace. This report presents the findings from that study.

# The questions at hand

- Do organizations have written policies on working from home or remote work?
- What are organizations' current and long-term policies and practices for remote workers?
- How is productivity monitored for remote workers?
- Does remote work contribute to organizational success?
- What challenges do organizations face because of remote work?
- What incentive do employers offer to get workers to return to the office?
- What is the role and impact of internal and employee communications for remote work?
- What is the current level of employee morale among different types of workers?
- How has remote work impacted the culture of organizations?

# Research method

An online survey was distributed by email to individuals identified in databases of the USC Center for Public Relations and the International Association of Business Communicators. Those receiving the survey were screened for having either oversight or direct responsibility for internal or employee communications at their organizations.

The questionnaire was prepared by Dr. David Michaelson with support from Dr. Ulrike Gretzel under the supervision of Fred Cook, the director of the Center for PR. The survey was programmed using Qualtrics and was active from April 8, 2024, through May 2, 2024. 204 respondents qualified for inclusion in the full study.

Throughout the report, percentages are based on the total number of respondents answering each question.

# Findings from the study

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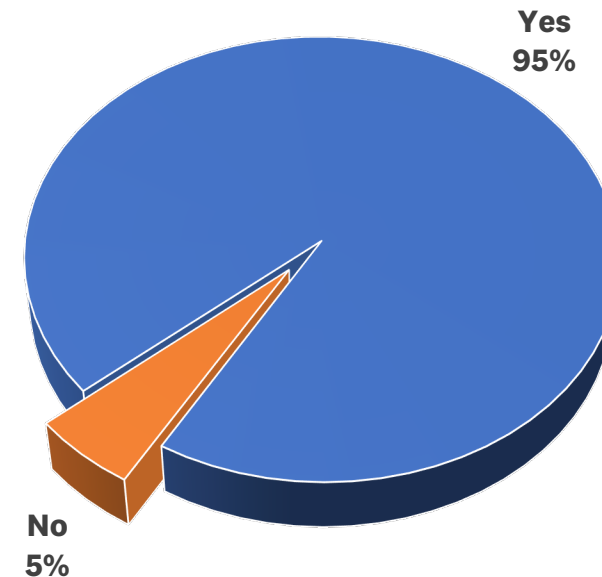
# Managing hybrid and remote work

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# How are employers managing “work from home” and remote work?

When asked if their organizations have policies, practices, or procedures in place for “work from home” or other forms of “remote work” for their office-based employees, virtually everyone (95%) said their organization has taken these actions.

Organization Has Policies, Practices or Procedures for Work From Home or Remote Work



Base =204

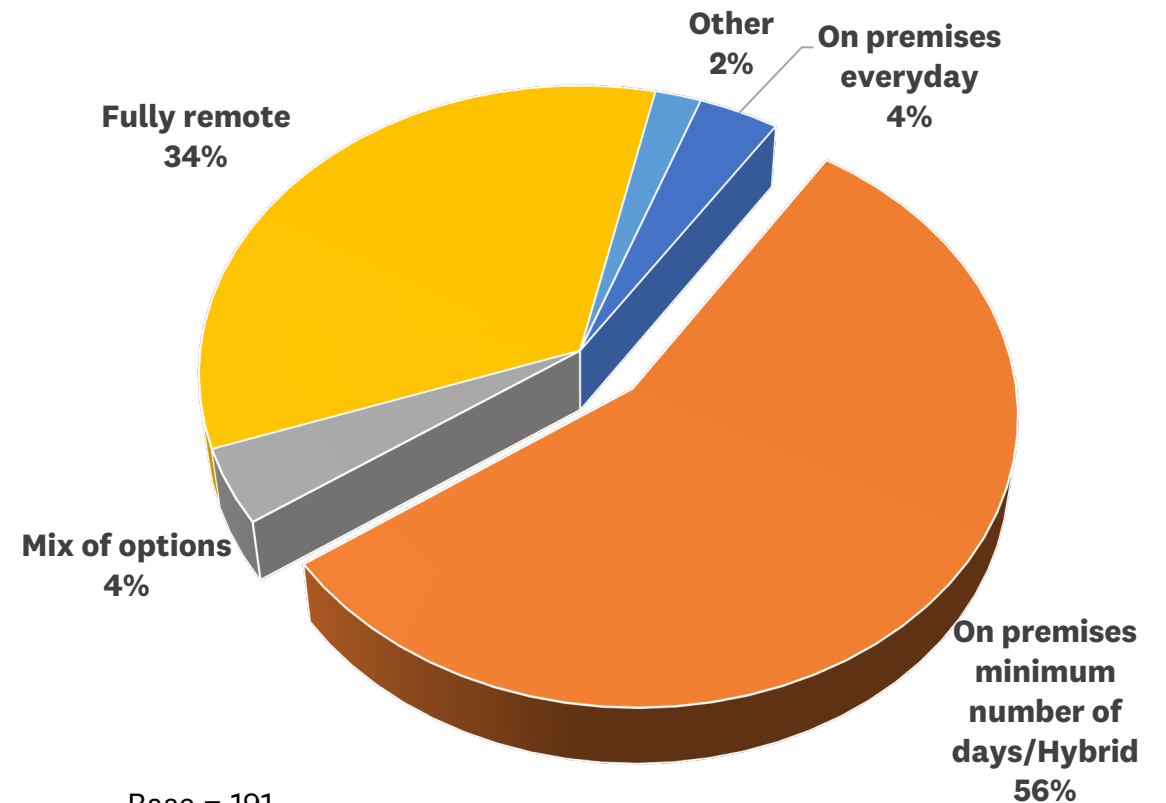
Q10. Does your organization have policies, practices or procedures for "working from home" (WFH) or other forms of "remote work" for white collar or office-based employees?

# What policies and procedures are in place for hybrid work?

Remote work has become the norm for most office-based workers for at least some part of the work week. Over half (56%) of organizations use a hybrid approach that requires a minimum number of days in the office each week, and 34% report that their organizations are fully remote.

Only four percent of organizations in our study require their office-based employees to report to the office every day.

Current Policies, Practices, or Procedures



Q11. Which ONE of the following is part of your organization's CURRENT policies, practices or procedures on "working from home" or other forms of "remote work" for these office-based employees?

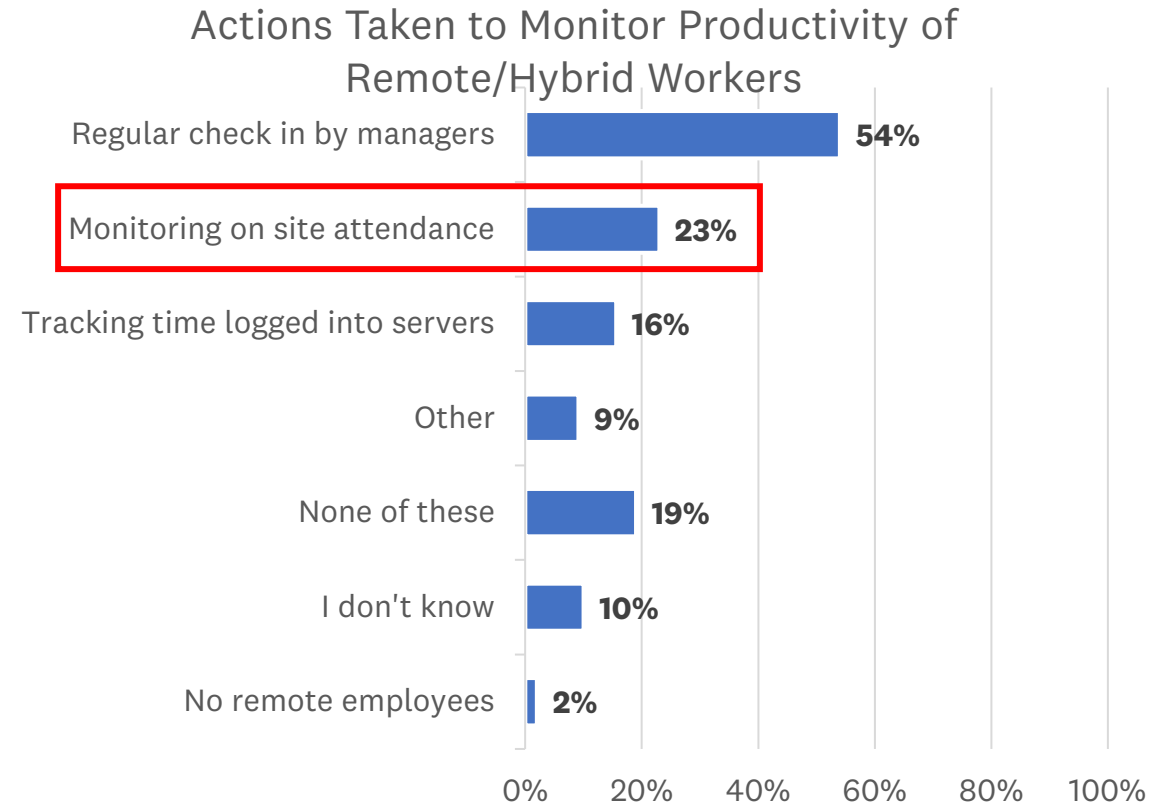


# How do employers monitor hybrid work?

Employers are still relying on traditional methods of supervision to monitor their remote staff, with half (54%) of organizations relying on managerial “check-ins” to monitor productivity levels.

Even though most companies have some form of remote or hybrid work, only one in four (23%) appear to monitor on-site attendance actively.

Even fewer (16%) track the time logged into servers among those working off-site.



Base =186

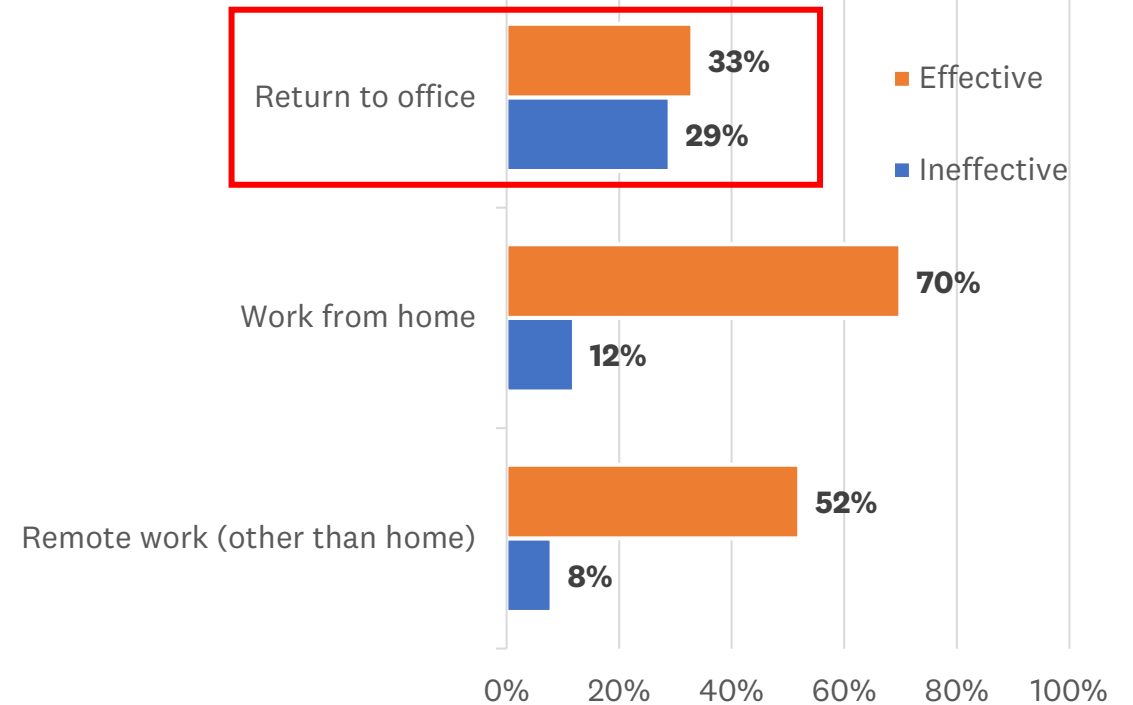
Q12. Which of the following actions is your organization taking to monitor the productivity of remote and hybrid employees?

# Are “work from home” and “remote work” policies effective?

Seven in ten (70%) say policies and procedures for working from home are effective in contributing to the success of their organizations, and half (52%) give the same evaluation to policies for remote work.

While “work from home” and “remote work” practices are viewed as effective, these same organizations are divided on the effectiveness of policies and practices about returning to the office. One in three (33%) say these policies and procedures are effective, while 29% report they are ineffective.

Effectiveness of Each Policy, Procedure, or Practice



Base = 171

Q15. Overall, how effective are each of the following policies, practices or procedures in contributing to the overall success of your organization?

# Challenges of remote and hybrid work

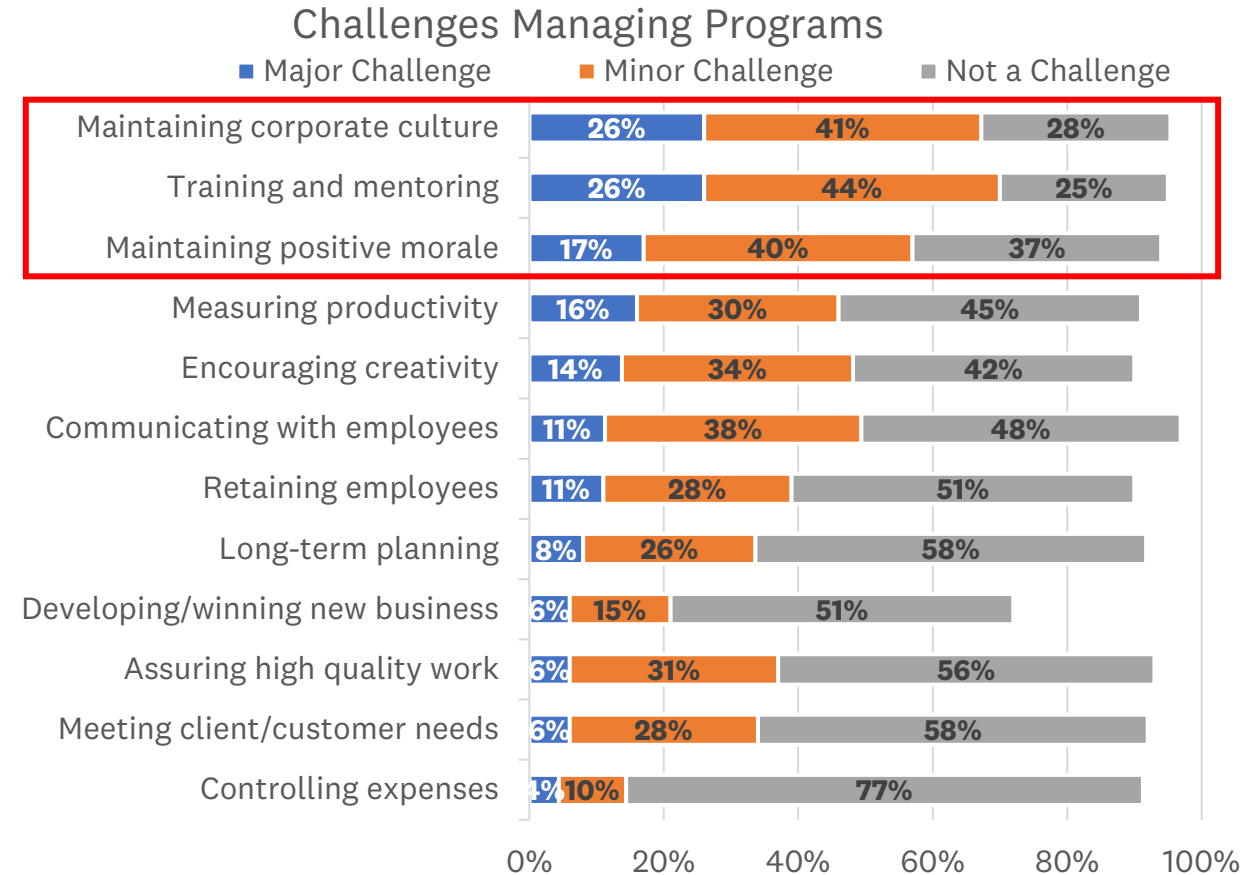
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# What are the biggest challenges resulting from remote and hybrid work?

Maintaining the corporate culture within an organization while managing remote work is the primary challenge for communicators, with two-thirds (67%) expressing remote work as a challenge and one in four (26%) calling it a "major challenge."

Training and mentoring, which are often key components in maintaining corporate culture, are also reported as a challenge to the same degree (70%).

Not surprisingly, a majority of communicators (57%) also report "maintaining positive morale" as a challenge at their organization because of managing "work from home" and "remote work" programs.



Base = 160

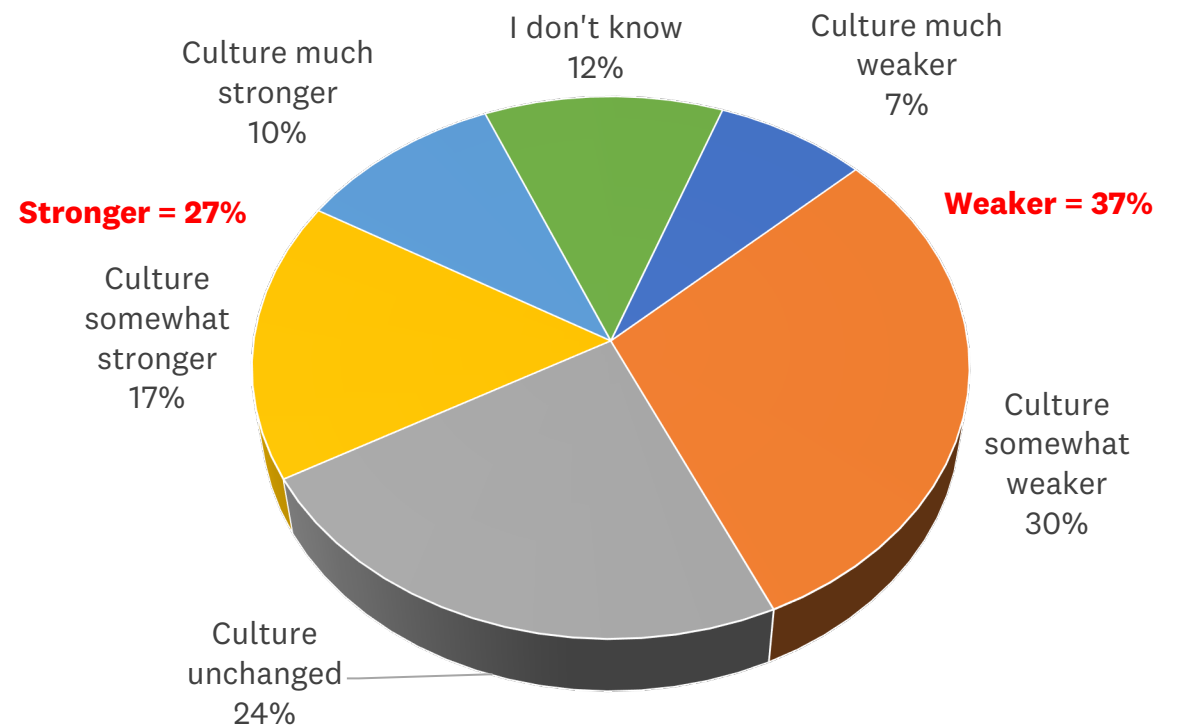
Q16. How challenging are each of the following in managing "work from home" and "remote work" programs at your organization?

# How is corporate culture impacted by remote and hybrid work?

Many communicators report challenges with their corporate cultures, and almost four in ten (37%) say their corporate culture is weaker because of these workplace changes.

By contrast, significantly fewer (27%) say their cultures are stronger due to the impact of “work from home” or “remote work.”

Impact of Policies, Practices & Procedures on Culture



Base =186

Q13. Which one of the following best describes the impact of CURRENT "work from home" or "remote work" policies, practices or procedures on the culture of your organization?

# The challenges in maintaining morale in a hybrid work environment

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# How is worker morale changing?

44% report that morale is improving because of remote work policies. One in four (27%) report employee morale is “getting worse” due to the impact of “work from home” and “remote work.” As you will see on the next graph, this difference seems to depend on where you work.

Only 7% believe that their company’s overall reputation has suffered from WFH policies.

Impact of “WFH” or “Remote Work” on Culture



Base = 172

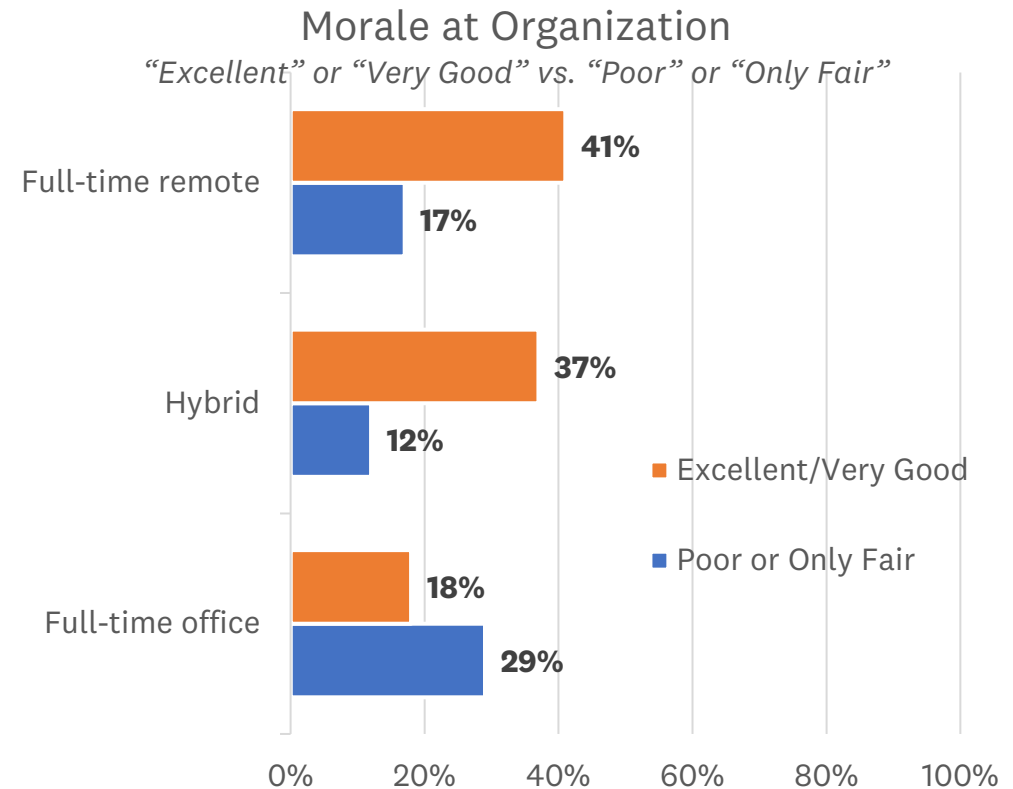
Q14. Below are various outcomes of corporate culture. Thinking about your organization's CURRENT "work from home" or "remote work" policies, practices or procedures, how are they impacting these outcomes?

# Does morale differ from those working remote and from those in the office?

Hybrid and remote work significantly impact morale among white-collar workers, but not in the way that was expected.

Four in ten communicators report that morale for remote (41%) or hybrid (37%) is “excellent” or “very good.”

By comparison, less than half as many (18%) report the same level of morale for those working full-time at the office, with 29% saying the morale of these on-site workers is “poor” or “only fair.” Most report that it is the same.



Base = 150

Q20. How would you rate the current level of morale at your organization for each of the following types of employees?

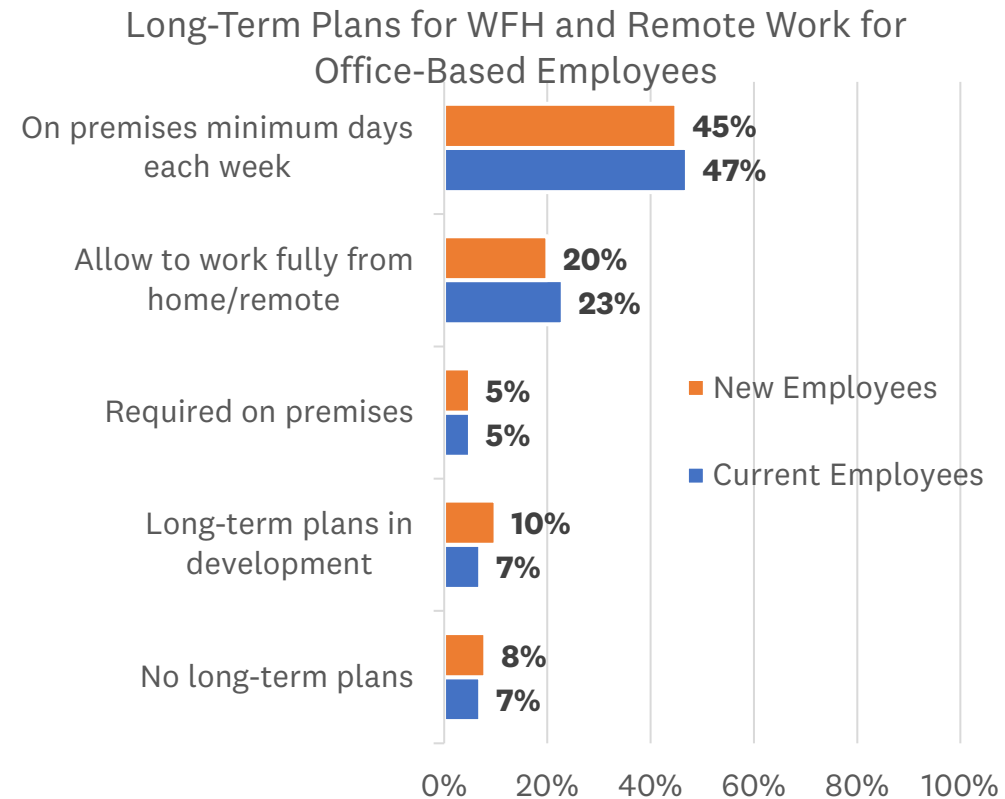


# How are employers planning for the future?

The most common plan for both current and new employees is a hybrid approach that asks them to be at the office a minimum number of days per week (45% to 47%).

About one in five organizations say their long-term plans will allow current (23%) and new staffers (20%) to work entirely from home or remote.

Only one in twenty (5%) employers in the study report long-term plans requiring employees to be on premises full time.



Base = 148

Q21. What are your organization's long-term plans for "working from home" or other forms of "remote work" for CURRENT office-based employees and NEW office-based employees?

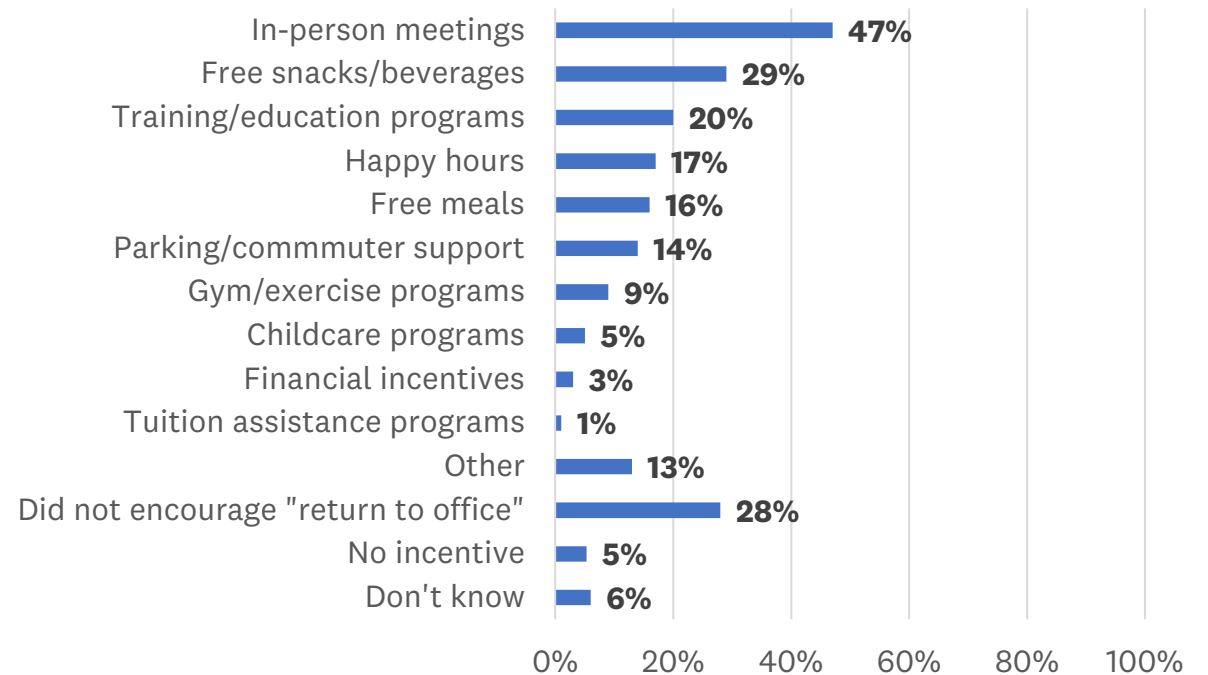
# How do employers encourage a return to office?

In-person meetings are the most common action taken to encourage their employees to return to the office. Half (47%) of organizations have taken this action.

Perks such as free snacks (29%), happy hours (17%), or free meals (16%) are also offered, but at considerably lower frequencies.

Few organizations are using financial incentives (3%) or childcare (5%) to encourage RTO. One-third do nothing or do not take efforts to encourage employees to return to office.

Actions Taken by Organization to Encourage Employees to "Return to Office"



Base = 151

Q22. Which of the following actions did your organization take to encourage employees to return to the office after the COVID pandemic?

# The role of communication professionals in a hybrid work environment

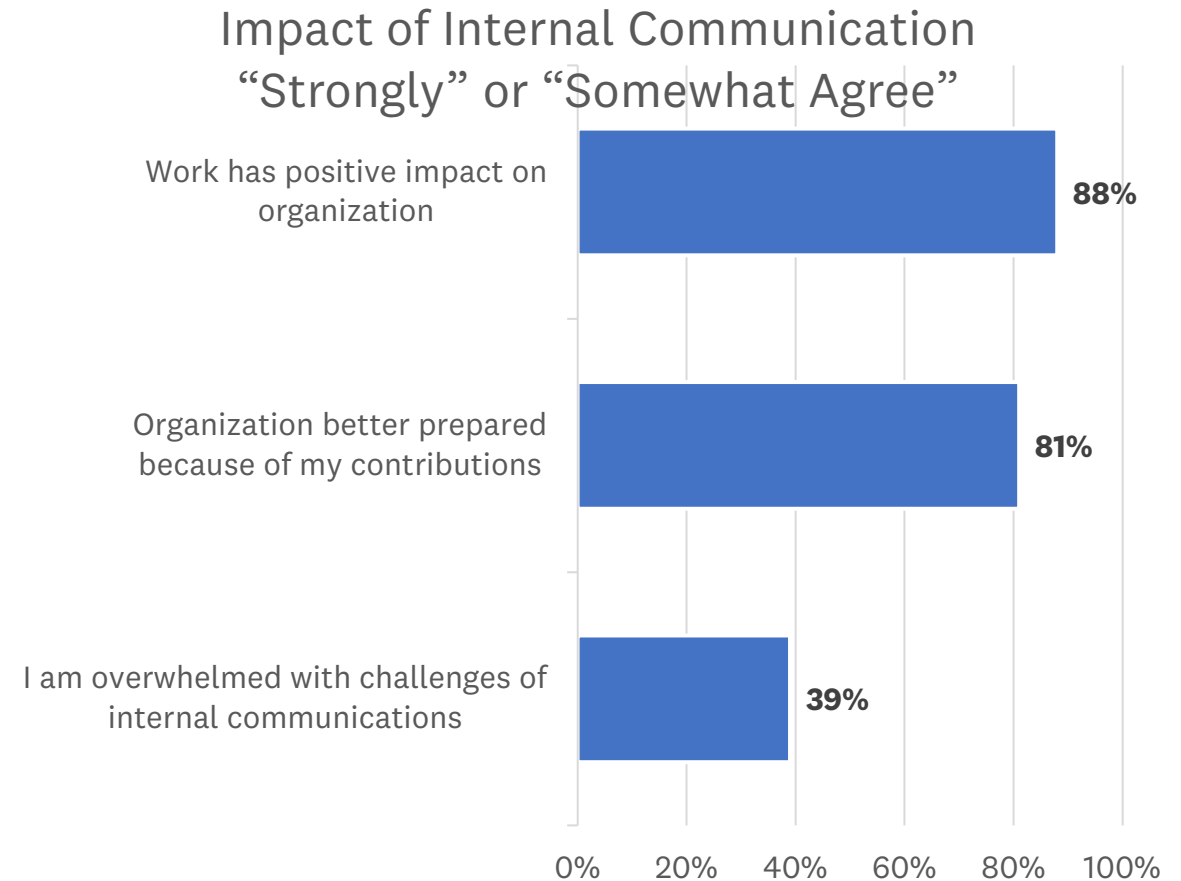
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# How effective are internal communicators in a hybrid world?

Nine in ten (88%) agree their work has a positive impact on their organization.

Eight in ten (81%) agree their organization is better prepared to meet its challenges because of these contributions.

Relatively few (39%) express concern about being overwhelmed with the challenges of their jobs.



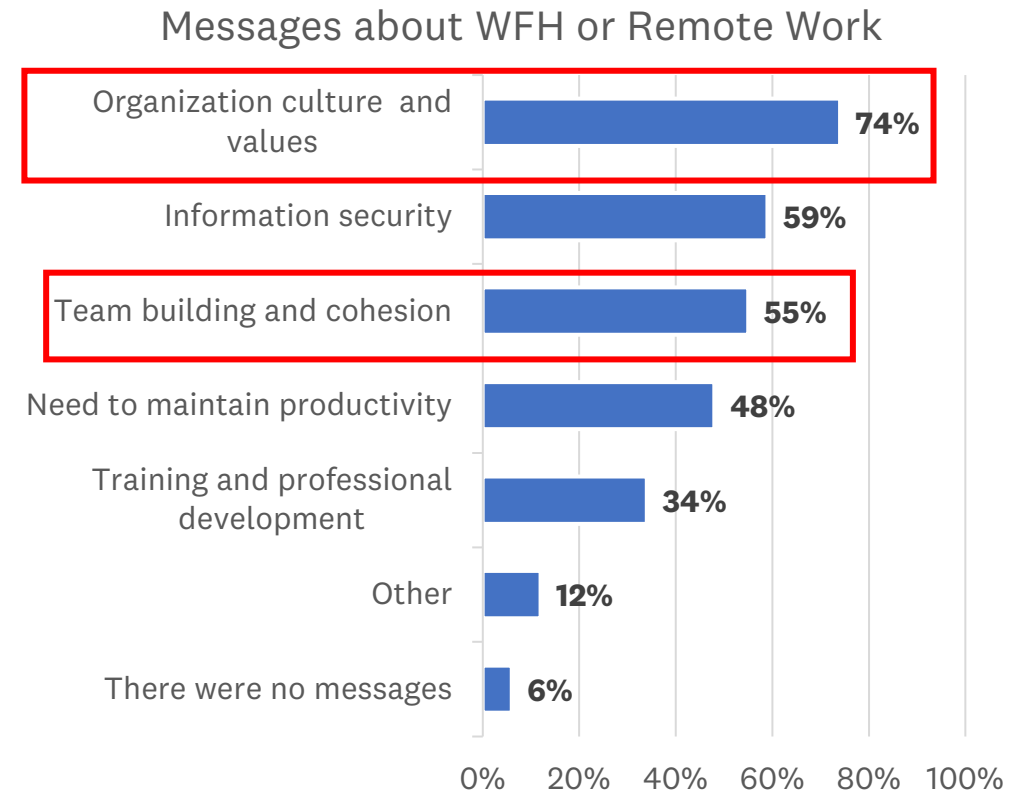
Base = 155

Q28. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about your personal role overseeing or managing internal communication at your organization.

# Which messages are included in communication about hybrid and remote work?

Three in four (74%) communicators include messages about their organization’s culture and values when talking about “work from home” or “remote work.” Team building and cohesion, a critical part of corporate culture, are also frequently mentioned (55%).

These messages reflect the challenges of the negative impact on corporate culture due to remote and hybrid work noted earlier in this report.



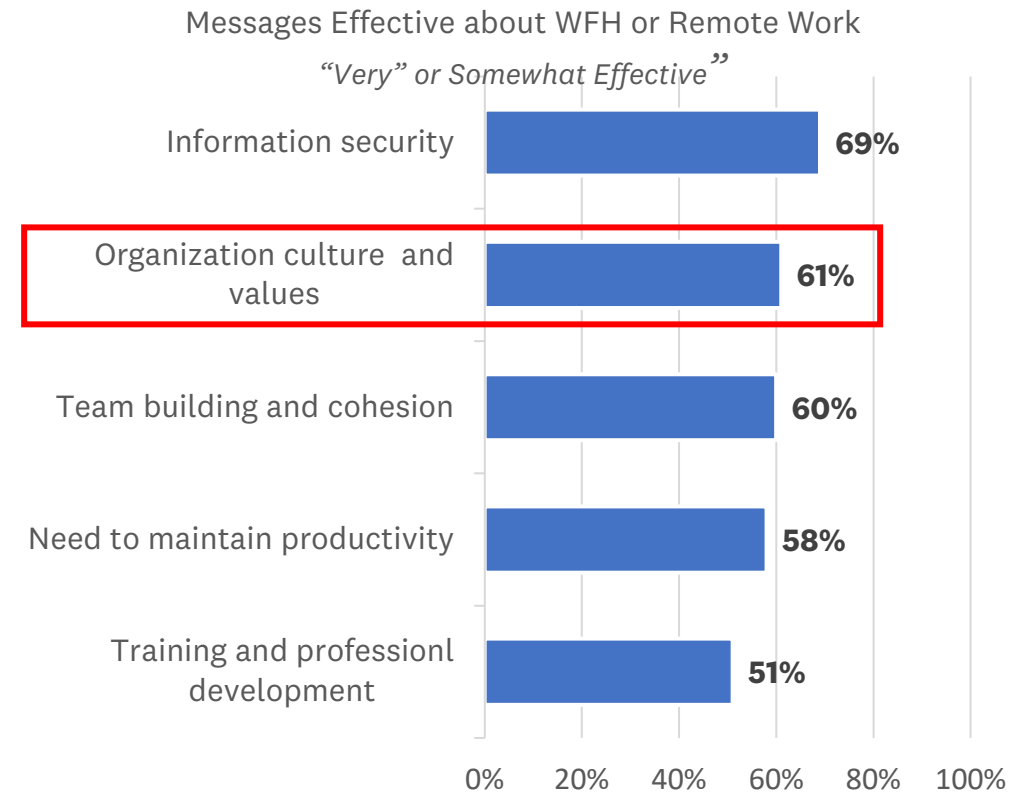
Base = 151

Q18. Which of the following were included in your organization’s messages about “work from home” or “remote work”?

# Are these messages effective?

Only 61% consider messages about organizational culture and values “very” or “somewhat effective,” even though this is the area that is most likely to be negatively impacted by “work from home” and “remote work.”

Messaging about team building and cohesion (60%) face a similar challenge.



Base = variable

Q19. How effective were each of these messages in achieving your organization's goals concerning "work from home" or "remote work"?

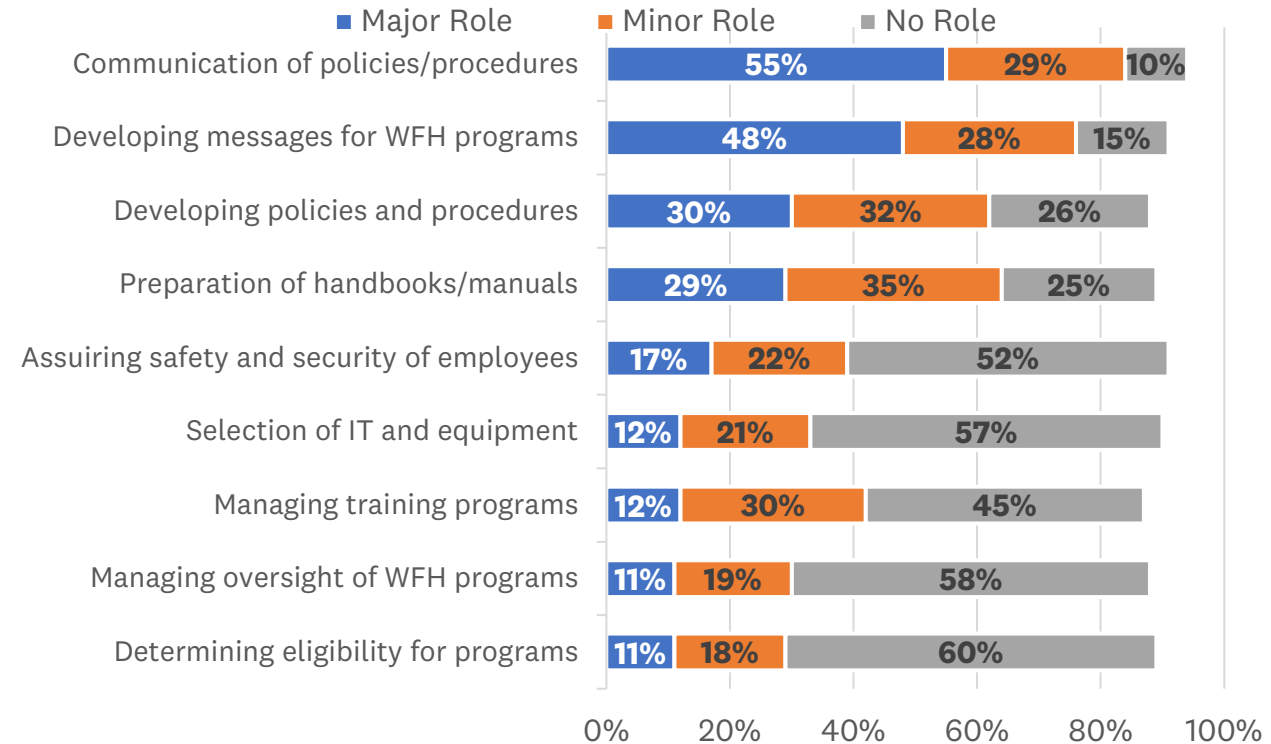
# Are there opportunities for communicators to expand their influence on corporate culture?

As noted earlier in this report, remote work has a significant impact on organizations' cultures.

While communicators play a significant role in communicating policies and procedures for remote work, they are much less likely to have the same degree of involvement in developing or administering these policies.

This is an opportunity for communication teams to demonstrate that their value to the long-term success of their organizations extends beyond communication.

Role of Communications on Programs



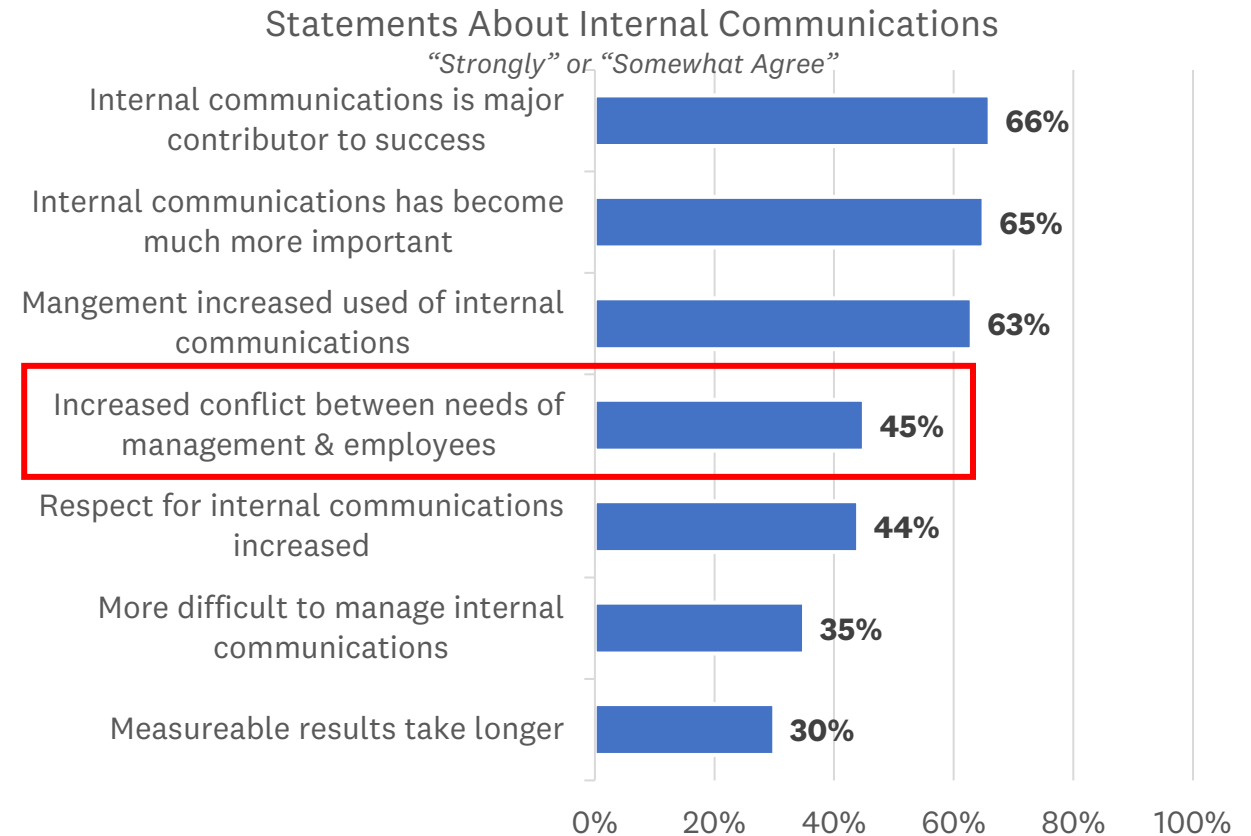
Base = 153

Q17. How much of a role did the INTERNAL AND EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS function at your organization have in each of the following areas when planning for "work from home" or "remote work" programs?

# How has hybrid work impacted the role of internal communications?

Two in three communicators agree that internal communications contributes to success (66%), that it has become more important (65%), and that its use has increased (63%).

Despite this positive impact on the function, almost half (45%) of communicators say this new work environment has increased levels of conflict between management and employees.



Base = 155

Q25. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding INTERNAL AND EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS at your organization.



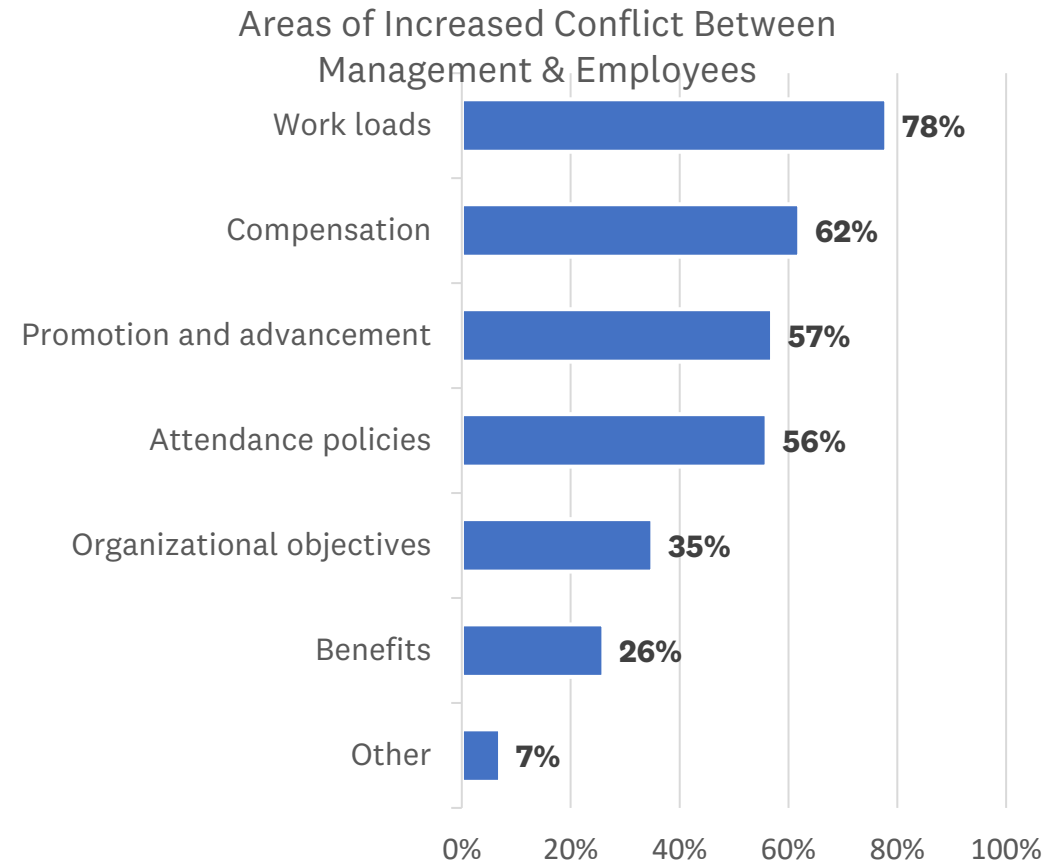
# What are the conflicts between management and employees?

The changing work environment raises unanswered questions about how your job and your career are impacted by your location.

Are remote workers working as hard or harder than those in the office? Are in-office employees more likely to get a raise or promotion?

Because WFH may have been perceived as temporary, employees' and management's expectations are not yet aligned on issues such as workload (78%), compensation (62%), and promotions (57%).

These are the areas of potential conflict that internal communications should address by listening to both sides and institutionalizing their expectations.



Base = 68

Q26. Which of the following are areas where there is increased conflict between management and employees?

# What does all this mean for the future of work in a hybrid world?

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# Implications for the future of work in a hybrid world

**The wide adoption of remote and hybrid practices has created a delicate balancing act between corporate culture and employee morale, which presents internal communicators with the opportunity to **redefine the future of work** and their role in it.**

Working from home and remote work have moved from the exception to the rule for office-based employees. It is clear employees enjoy this flexibility and its positive impact on their work/life balance. This is reflected in the perceived much higher levels of morale of those working remotely compared to those working on-site.

Employers, by contrast, are faced with a different reality. While the morale of their workforce is higher among those working remotely, the culture of their organizations is fading—likely due to a lack of day-to-day interactions that are essential for communicating the organization's values, mission, and purpose. This shows up as increasing conflicts between management and employees on basic areas of workloads and advancement.

# Implications for the future of work in a hybrid world

In this new era of work, the urgency to prioritize organizational culture and values in all internal communication cannot be overstated. This is not just about maintaining leadership and competitive positioning in the marketplace but also about preserving the essence of the organization. Employers must prioritize organizational culture and values in all internal communication to maintain leadership and competitive positioning in the marketplace.

With oversight of remote workers focusing primarily on managerial supervision, employee and internal communication teams are essential to ensure that all workers understand and internalize what organizations stand for and their values in maintaining their unique cultures. This is a clarion call for reinventing internal communications to ensure that corporate cultures thrive and organizations achieve their goals.

# Thought Starters

Reimagining your future sounds like an overwhelming assignment, but it doesn't have to be. The pandemic created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for internal communications professionals to play a leadership role in transitioning to a permanent hybrid work environment and creating a new approach to building corporate culture. If it hasn't already started, that process should begin now. Here are a few ideas

1. Present a data-based rationale to management for a new 5-year plan.
  - Many companies are still figuring out how to get their white-collar employees back into the office. Our research has shown that these efforts are likely a waste of time and may cause more harm than good. Instead, assume the hybrid work is here to stay and begin realigning culture around it. Take the lead by drafting a plan for senior management that outlines your recommendations, based on this data, for maintaining and building corporate culture with employees who work from different locations. Even if your company is set upon returning to the office full-time, you can develop a plan that addresses the potential challenges.

# Thought Starters

2. Collaborate with employees/management to codify their expectations.
  - Because there has been a lack of monitoring of remote work, there is a definite need for setting more permanent standards for what employees can expect from the company in terms of support, career development, and compensation, and what the company can expect from the employees in terms of availability, workload, and engagement. This type of “Declaration of Expectations” clarifies roles and responsibilities and sets up a mechanism for evaluating the performance of employees who are not in the office while reinforcing the organization’s culture.
3. Create new opportunities to connect people and build relationships.
  - People have realized that they can work very efficiently on Teams and Zoom, which saves both time and money. However, culture is based on relationships that require a deeper level of connection. This is a logical place for the internal communications function to lead by implementing new methods for connecting people across geographies and divisions. It might be a new technology solution like holograms, which now can transmit an executive’s total-body image worldwide in real-time for a meeting, or an AI platform that matches co-workers interested in the same activities. Or it might be something as simple as a remote mentoring program for incoming employees who work from home.

# Thought Starters

4. Deploy employee influencers to reinforce messaging on social media.
  - TikTok, YouTube and Instagram may seem unlikely places for Corporate America to connect with its stakeholders, but these are the primary sources of information for younger employees. Messages directed to that demographic are best delivered by people they know in places they trust. Recruit your company's social media savvy people and provide them with unique access and content. Then, encourage them to share their unbiased opinions with current and future coworkers, who may be less familiar with the company and its values.
5. Increase access to senior management.
  - Our research showed that human connections are the key to building culture. And the pandemic taught us that technology actually makes connecting with each other easier than ever. The problem was that during the pandemic, we only connected to the people we needed to accomplish our daily tasks, not the ones we might run into walking down the hall. Companies can use that same technology to make more meaningful connections by setting up online office hours with senior management. Allocate one or two hours each week with your C-suite executives to speak to individual employees who sign up for 20-minute conversations about any topic they choose. You can even record and share some of these conversations internally. Little ideas like this can deliver big results, in less time than it takes to commute to the office.

# Thought Starters

6. Engage on issues aligned with employee passions.
  - Nothing brings people together more than having a common purpose. Find out what issues or problems your employees care about and participate in finding a solution. Whether it's a local community program or a global initiative, supporting a cause that resonates with your workforce amplifies an organization's values and provides a common ground for people who may not work closely together.
7. Recognize and reward “cultural conduct” in unexpected ways.
  - In this survey, the most significant employee concerns about WFH are related to recognition and career advancement. The traditional performance review was not designed for workers who work remotely. They may need to be rewarded outside of the annual cycle. With a bit of creativity, these moments can become culture-building opportunities. An unexpected bonus for a complex project. A gift for a new baby. Bespoke backgrounds for Zoom calls. A gift certificate at a favorite restaurant. A note from the CEO. Little things often have a big impact. This may sound like HR, but it's really PR!



# Thought Starters

## 8. Curate and tell stories that reinforce culture.

- Stories are the foundation upon which culture is built. Every company has its own stories, but few are skilled at telling them. Communications should own the process of finding, preserving, and sharing stories across the organization. They can be captured in print, audio or video. Some might focus on the founder, while others might be about someone just hired. Encourage your employees to share their experiences because stories make people feel like they're part of something special — even if they never visit an office.

## 9. Don't be afraid to try something different.

- The pandemic has reshaped our work landscape in ways we couldn't have imagined. While we can't predict the future of work, we know it will be different from the past. Adapting to this level of change can be challenging when the strategies and tactics we have employed for years no longer fit our purpose. But change is always accompanied by the opportunity to experiment, invent and evolve.
- We've also experienced a significant shift in the perception of internal communications. Their expertise has become more valued, more respected, and more relied upon. They have earned the permission to lead; they need the courage to reinvent their jobs and themselves.

# Conclusion

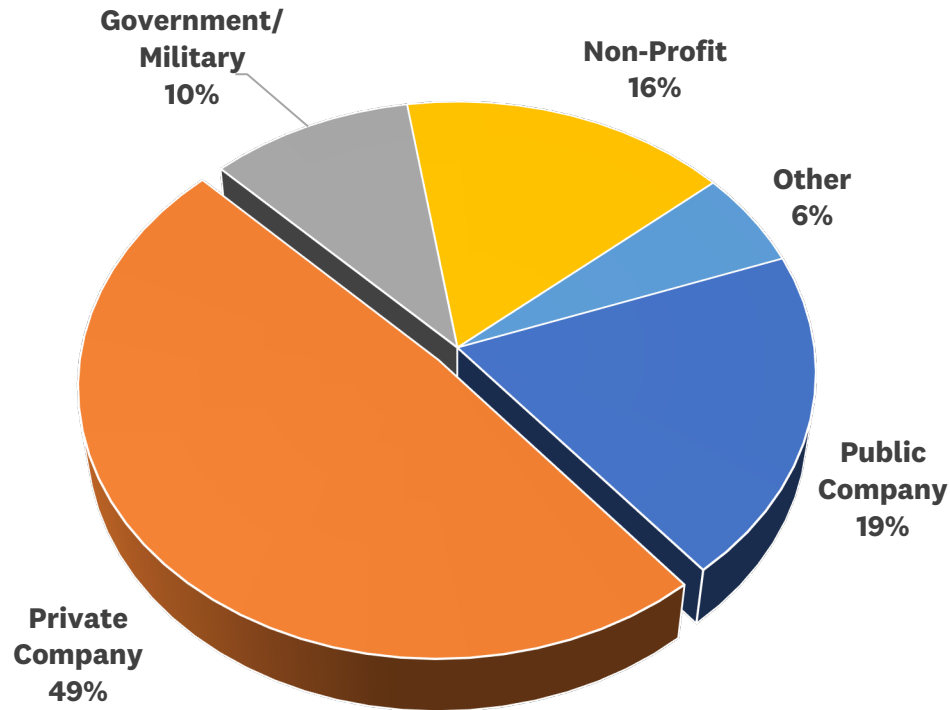
The wide adoption of remote and hybrid practices has created a delicate balancing act between corporate culture and employee morale, which presents internal communicators with the opportunity to redefine the future of work and their role in it.

# Study Participants Organizations

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# Types of Organizations & Structure

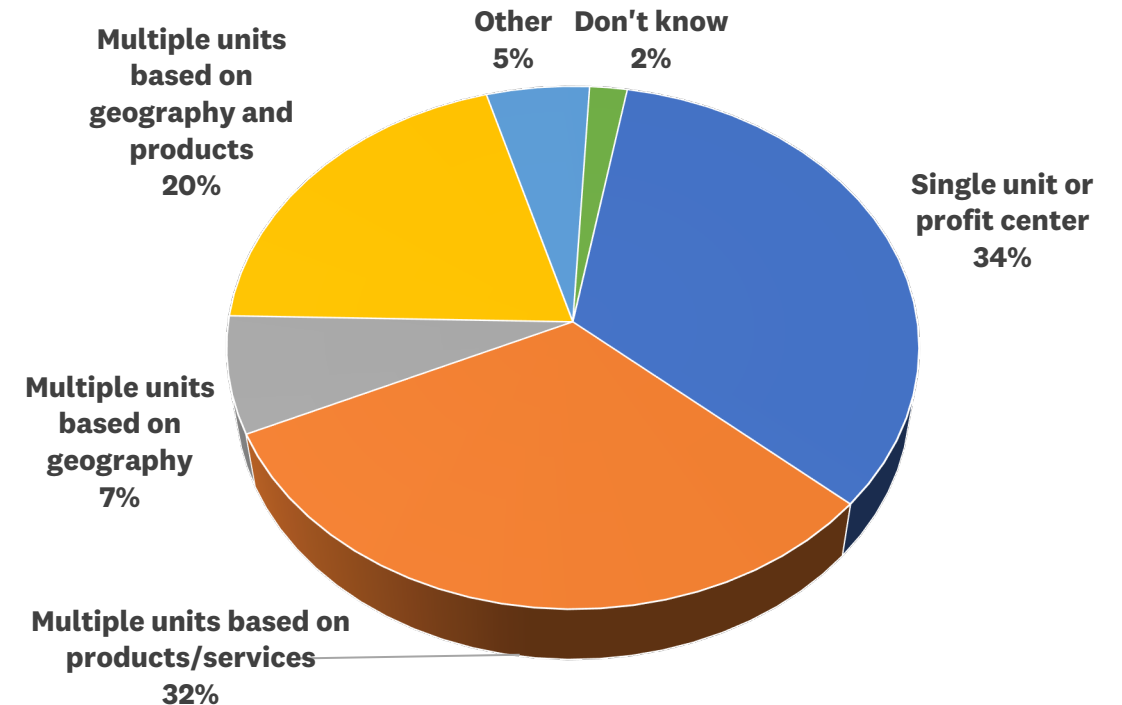
Types of Organizations Participating in Study



Base =210

Q4. Which ONE of the following best describes your organization?  
(screening question)

Structure of Organizations Participating in Study

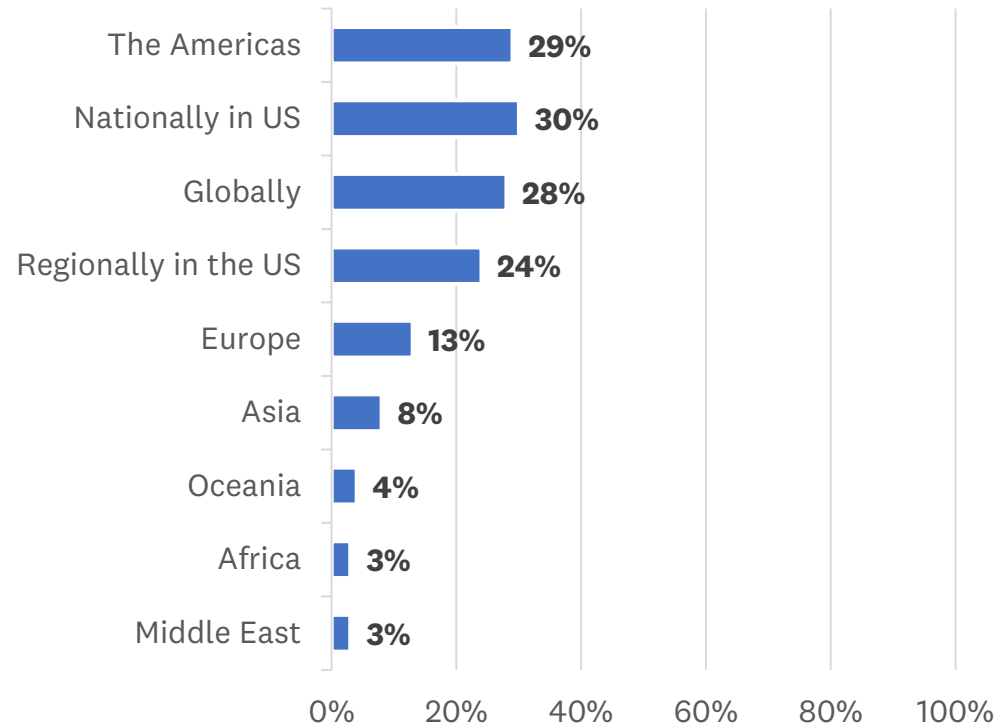


Base =208

Q7. Which ONE of the following best describes how your organization is structured?  
(screening question)

# Operating Areas & Location of Headquarters

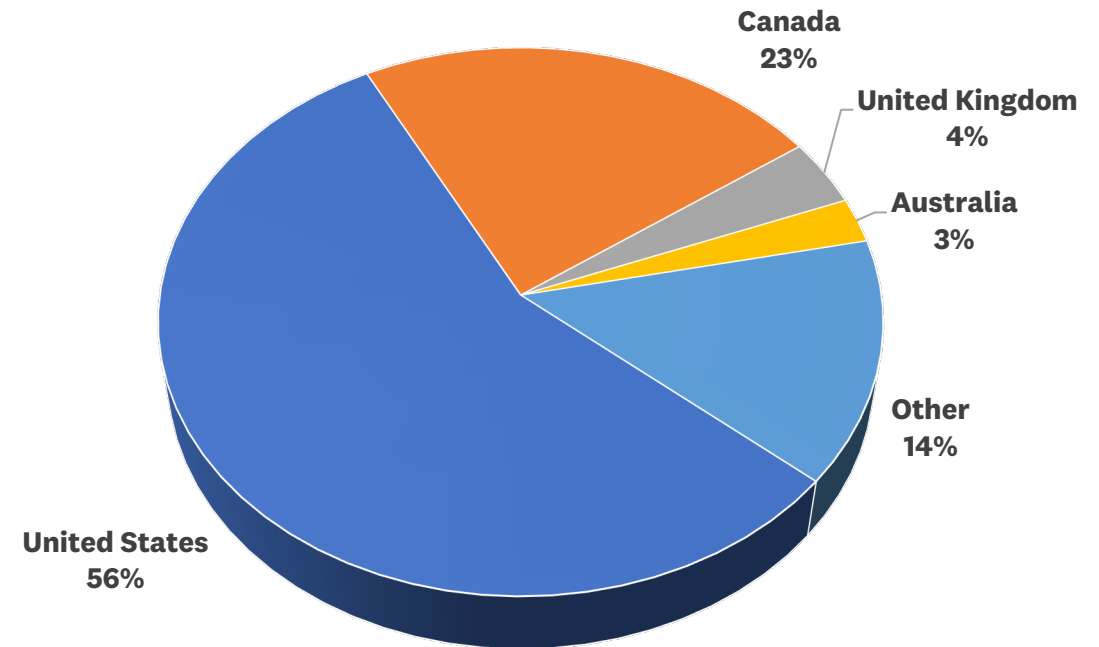
Where Organizations Operate



Base = 210

Q6. Where does your organization operate geographically?  
(screening question)

Headquarters

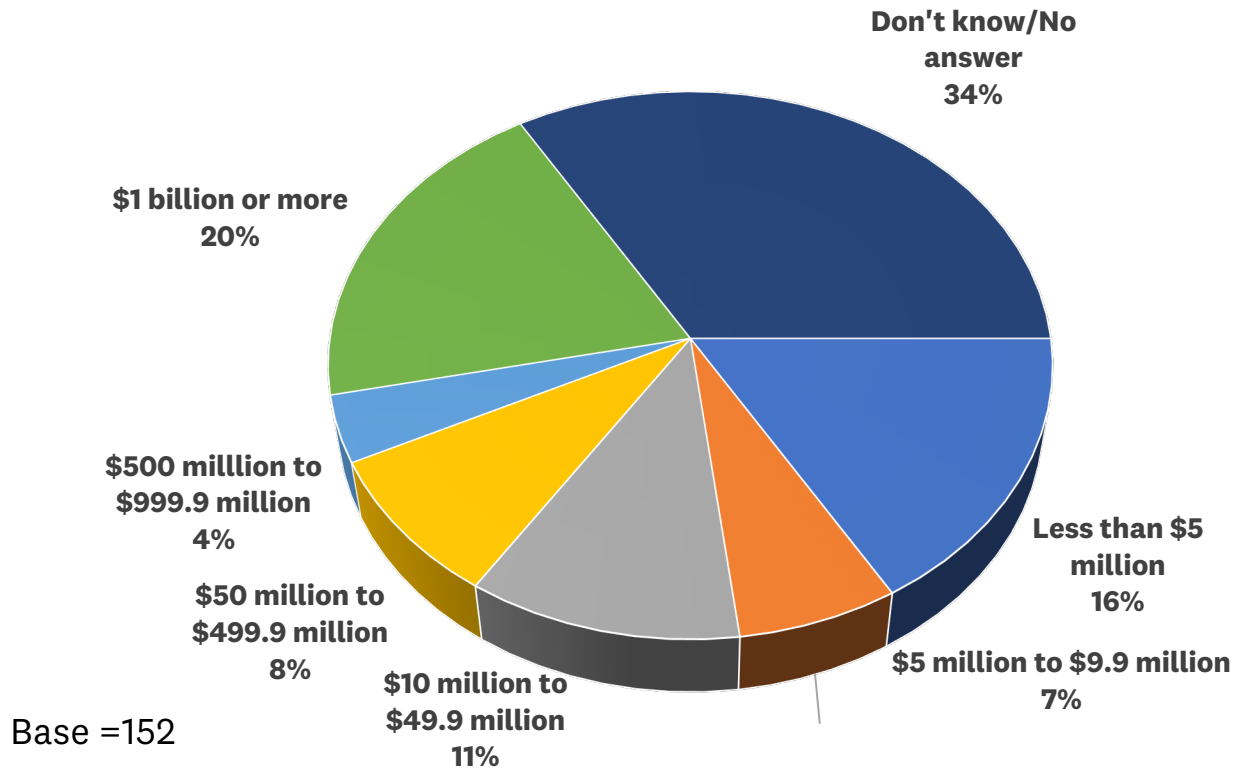


Base = 153

Q31. In which country/territory is your organization headquartered?

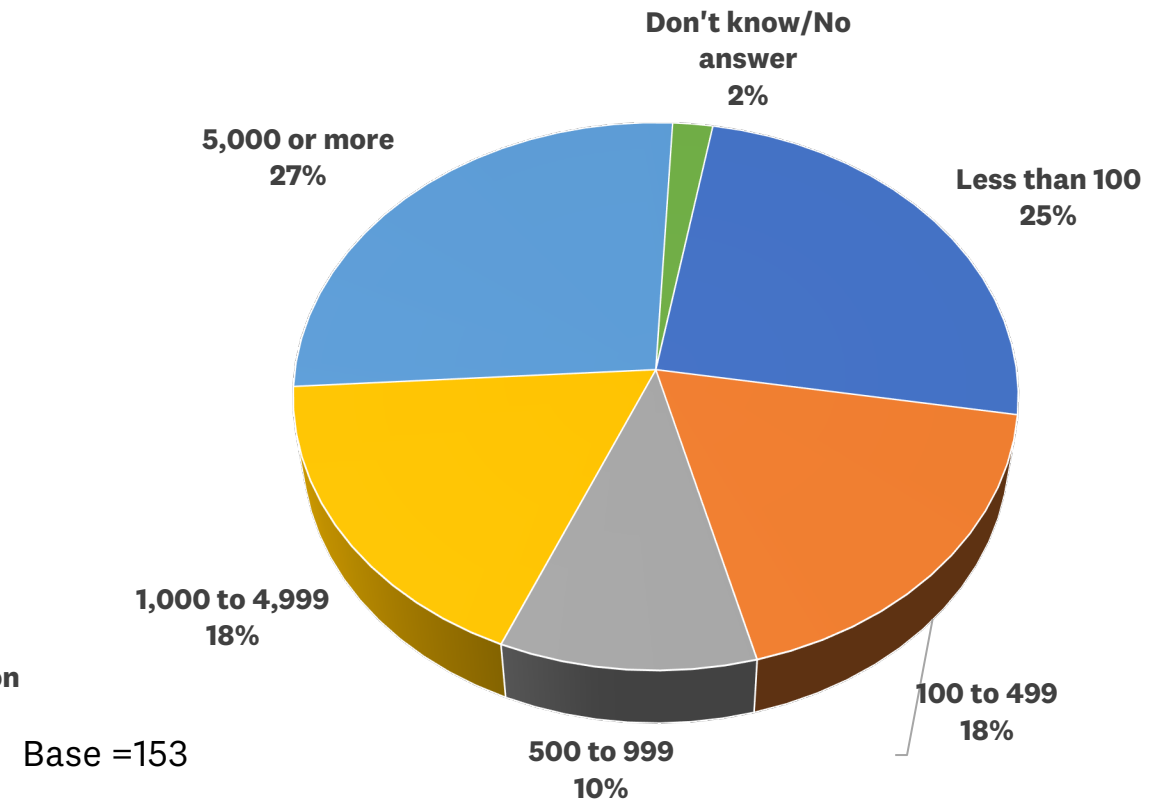
# 2023 Revenues & Number of Employees

Revenues for 2023



Q33. What were your organization's revenues for 2023?

Number of Employees



Q31. How many individuals does your organization employ at all locations, both full-time and part-time?

# Study Participants Communications

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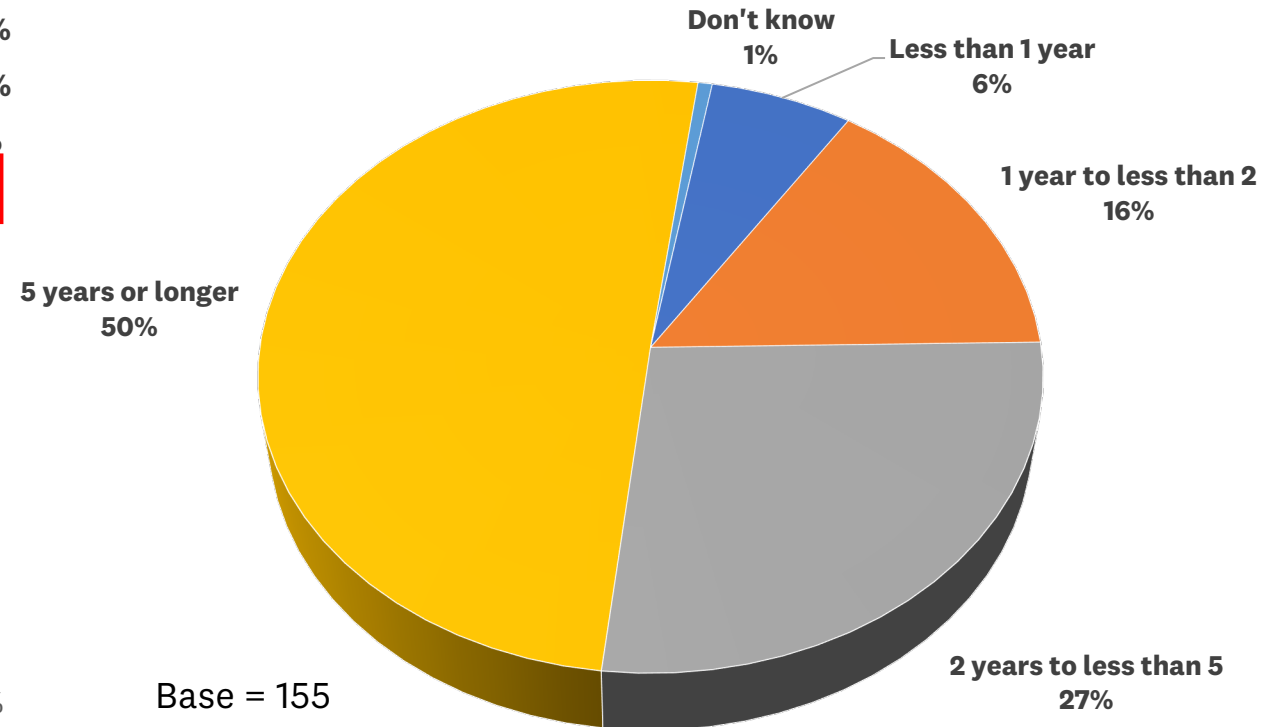
# Areas of Responsibility & Time in Position

Areas of Responsibility



Q8. For which of the following areas is your organization's communication function responsible?

Time Overseeing/Managing Internal Communications

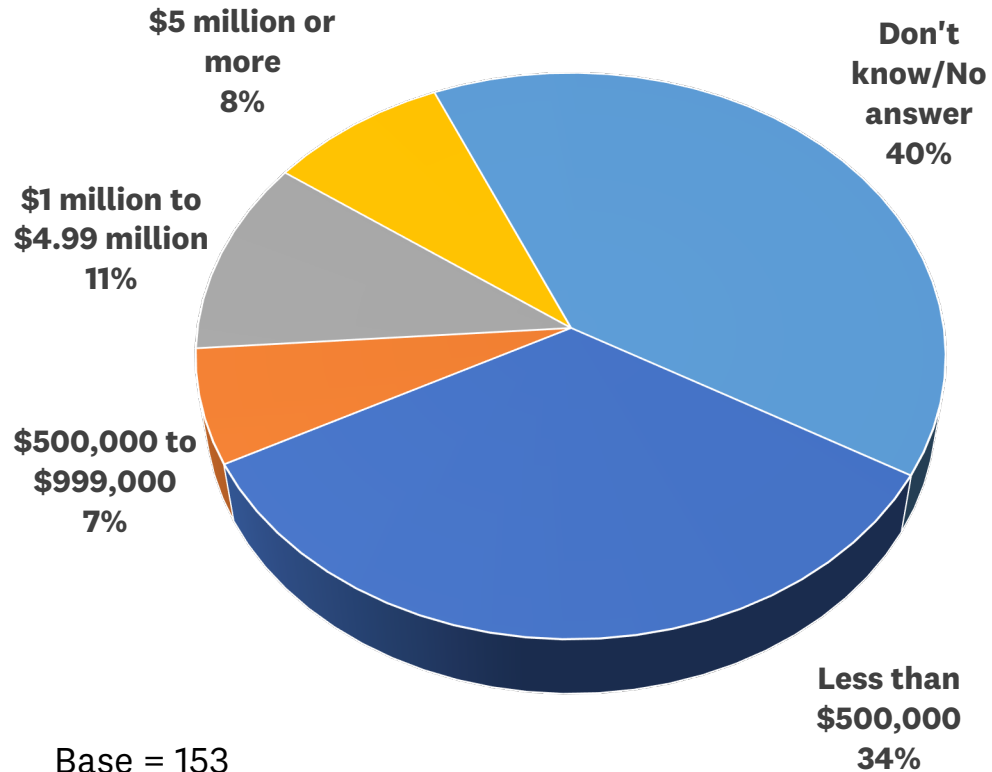


Q27. How long have you been in your current position overseeing or managing internal communications at your organization?

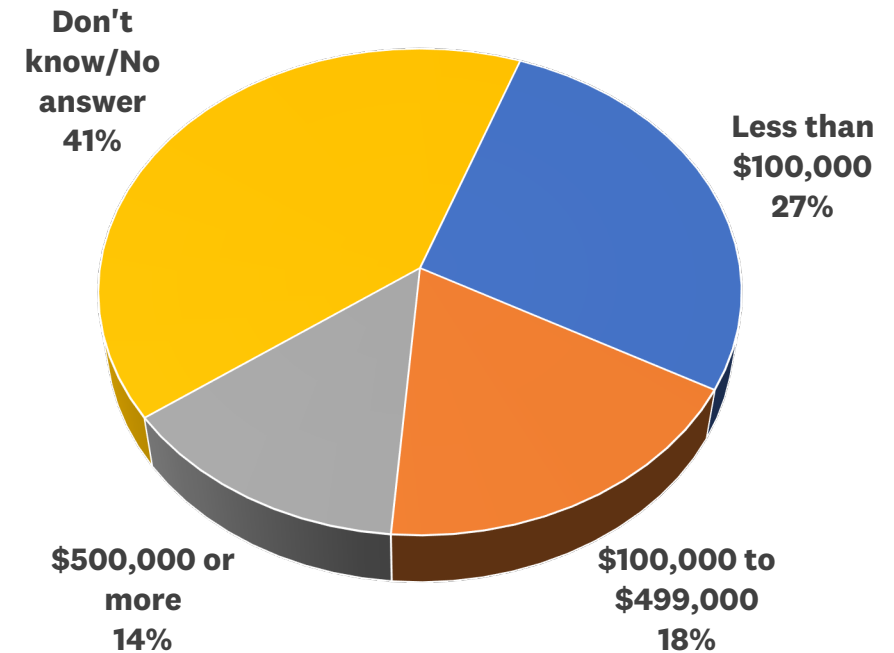


# 2023 Revenues & Number of Employees

Total PR/Communication Budget



Internal/Employee Communication Budget



Q30. In the most recently completed fiscal year, what was your organization's total budget (including staff salaries and related costs for PR/COMMUNICATION and for INTERNAL/EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION)?