



Navigating the Talent Landscape 2026:

Trends, Insights & Recommendations





Introduction

At Mason Alexander, we believe that understanding what truly drives today's professionals is key to building tomorrow's successful organisations. As the world of work continues to evolve, staying connected to the changing expectations, motivations and values of the workforce has never been more important.

To uncover these insights, we surveyed professionals across the Technology, Life Sciences, Financial Services, Accounting & Finance, Legal and Business Support sectors to better understand how people feel about their careers — from job satisfaction and salary expectations to flexibility, recognition and the role of AI in the workplace.

This report reveals the key findings from our **2026 Career Insights Survey** — exploring the trends shaping employee behaviour and what they mean for employers in a highly competitive talent market. It also highlights key elements of upcoming legislation, the **EU Pay Transparency Directive**, including pay transparency measures, that will affect recruitment, pay structures and employer obligations.

Whether you're an employer looking to attract and retain top talent or a professional planning your next career move, these insights offer a clear view of what's driving decisions in today's job market — and where the biggest opportunities lie in 2026.

At Mason Alexander, we remain committed to connecting people and potential — and helping our customers navigate the future of work with confidence.

Key Insights and Trends 2026

Market Movement: Job Changes and Search Activity

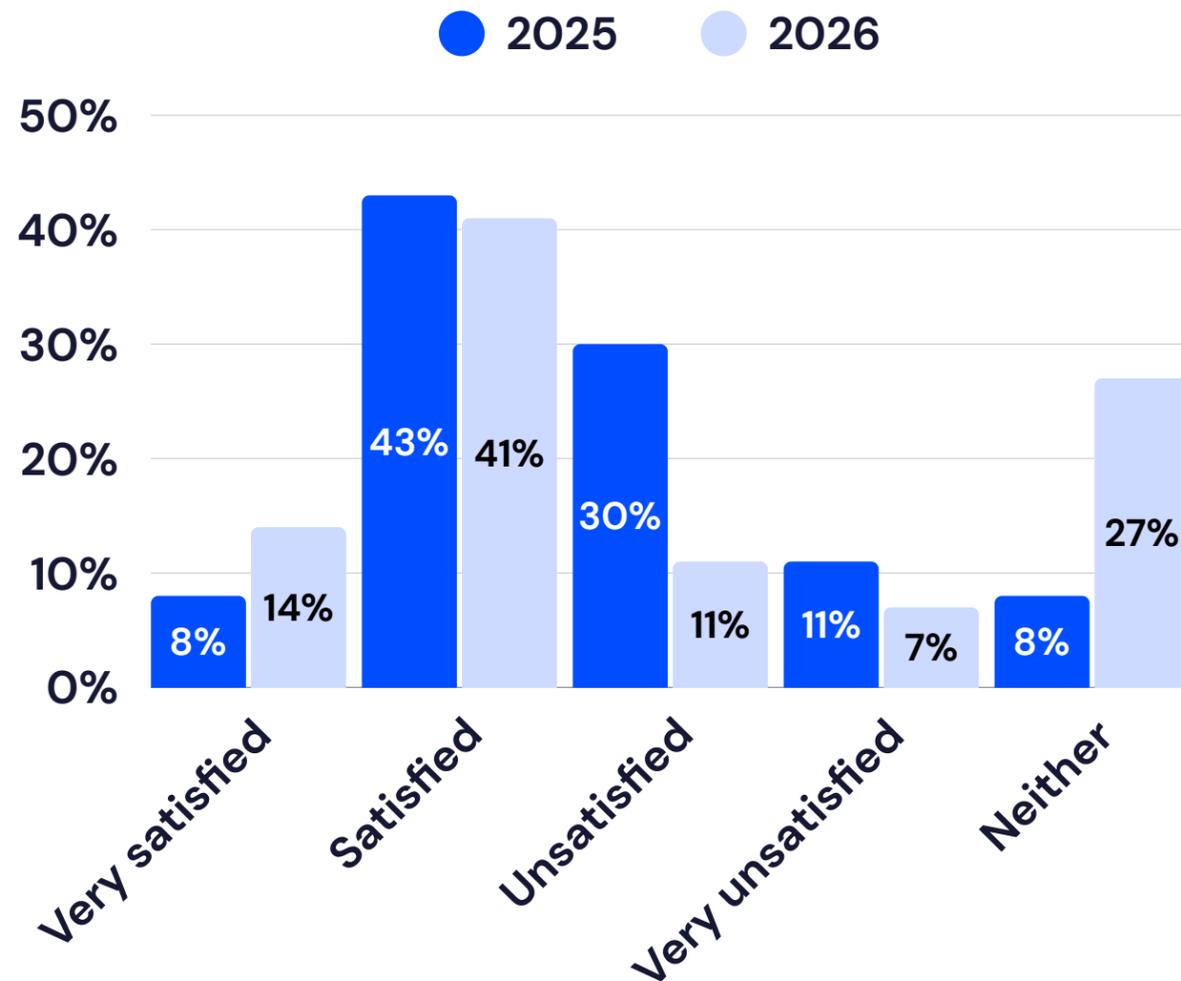
After several years of high mobility, market movement in 2026 is showing signs of stabilisation. **24%** of professionals changed roles in the past year (down from **29%**), while **23%** are actively seeking new opportunities, compared to **53%** in 2025. Of those currently active, **63%** expect to move within the next three months. A further **18%** expect to begin their job search early this year, indicating potential momentum building into Q1.

These findings indicate a more settled workforce; however, Mason Alexander focuses on engaging **passive candidates**, recognising that while fewer professionals are actively searching, high-quality talent is still open to the right opportunity.

Insight for Employers: In 2026, retention is being driven not just by pay and stability, but by meaningful work, clear career paths and cultures that inspire trust. When professionals do decide to move, it's typically for roles that offer both **purpose** and **progression**.



of professionals are actively looking for a new job, with **63%** of the same respondents aiming to move **within the next 3 months**.



Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has edged upward this year, with **55%** of professionals feeling satisfied or very satisfied in their current roles – up from **51%** in 2025. This suggests employers' renewed focus on engagement and retention is beginning to pay off.

However, **18%** of professionals remain **unsatisfied**, and **27%** are **neutral** – highlighting that while stability has improved, fulfilment is not universal.

The data shows that satisfaction correlates closely with recognition and growth. Those who received promotions or bonuses in the past year were more than twice as likely to describe themselves as **“very satisfied.”**

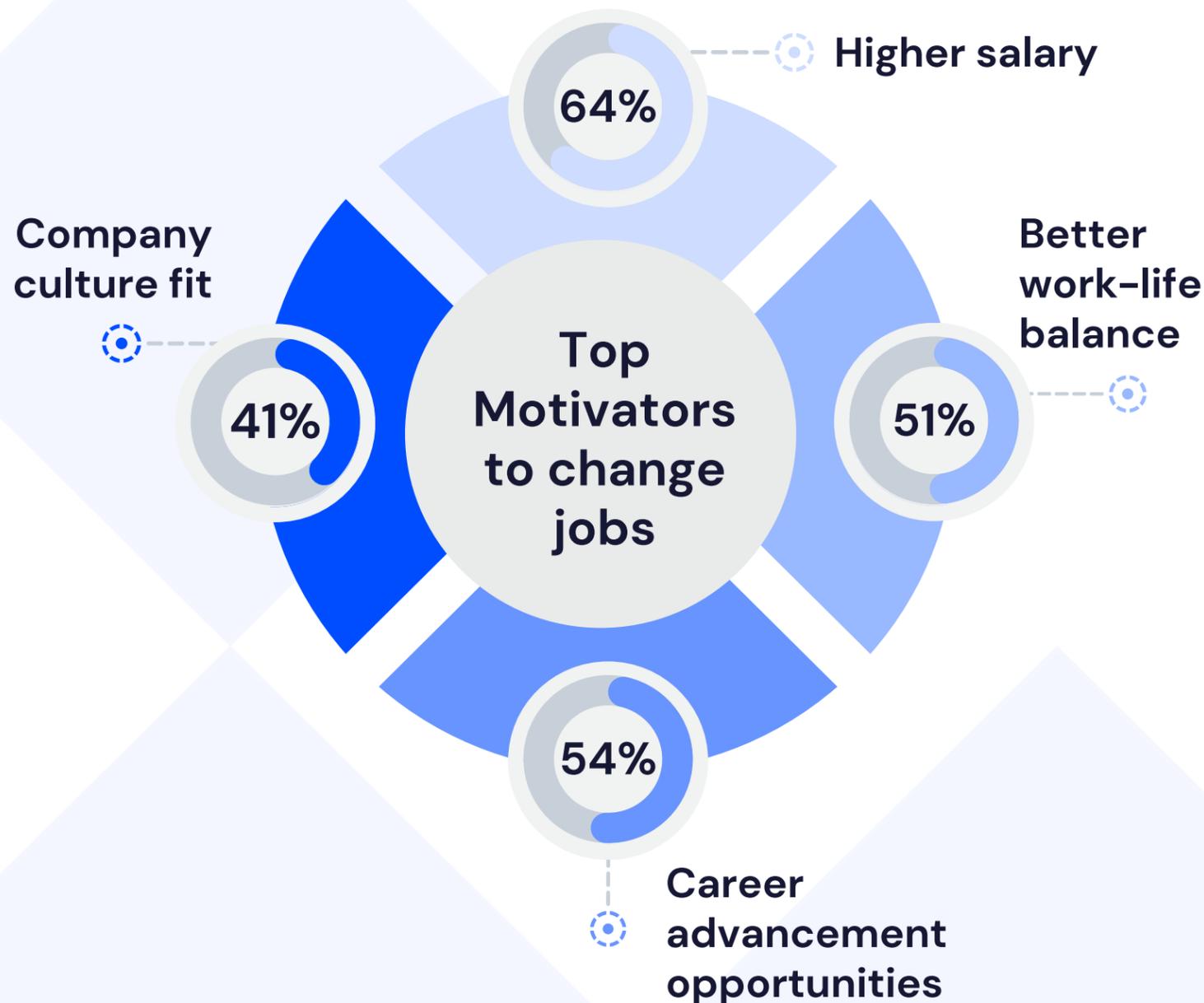
Insight for Employers: Employees value stability, but they stay for opportunity and recognition. Employers should continue strengthening individual development plans, internal mobility, visible leadership communication and reward structures to keep satisfaction on an upward trend.

Key Insights and Trends 2026

Key Motivators for Job Changes

As with last year, **higher salaries (64%)** and **career advancement opportunities (54%)** remain the most compelling reasons for job changes.

However, **better work-life balance (51%)** and **company culture fit (41%)** also scored highly, underscoring a preference for roles that balance financial rewards with professional growth and lifestyle compatibility.



*Above figures represent % of all candidates that selected each reason as a motivating factor to change job.

Sector & Gender Insights

Across industries, salary and progression remain the strongest motivators — but nuances emerge when comparing sectors and gender.

Financial Services (81%) and **Legal (83%)** professionals continue to be the most salary-driven, reflecting highly competitive and performance-based environments.

In contrast, **Life Sciences professionals (67%)** place greater emphasis on career progression, closely followed by seeking new challenges — showing a strong appetite for professional development and innovation.

Technology professionals also prioritise salary (**58%**), but their motivations are more balanced, with nearly equal importance placed on new challenges, advancement opportunities and a mix of work-life balance and culture fit.

Gender differences are equally notable:

- **Men** are primarily influenced by salary (**66%**) and progression (**57%**)
- **Women** place greater value on work-life balance (**62%**), followed by salary (**59%**) and culture fit (**54%**).

◆ These distinctions underscore the importance of **tailored engagement strategies** that reflect individual motivations and working styles rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

Insight for Employers:

While compensation is still king; culture, flexibility and progression are now part of the same equation. Employers who align all three — not just salary — will hold the strongest appeal in 2026.

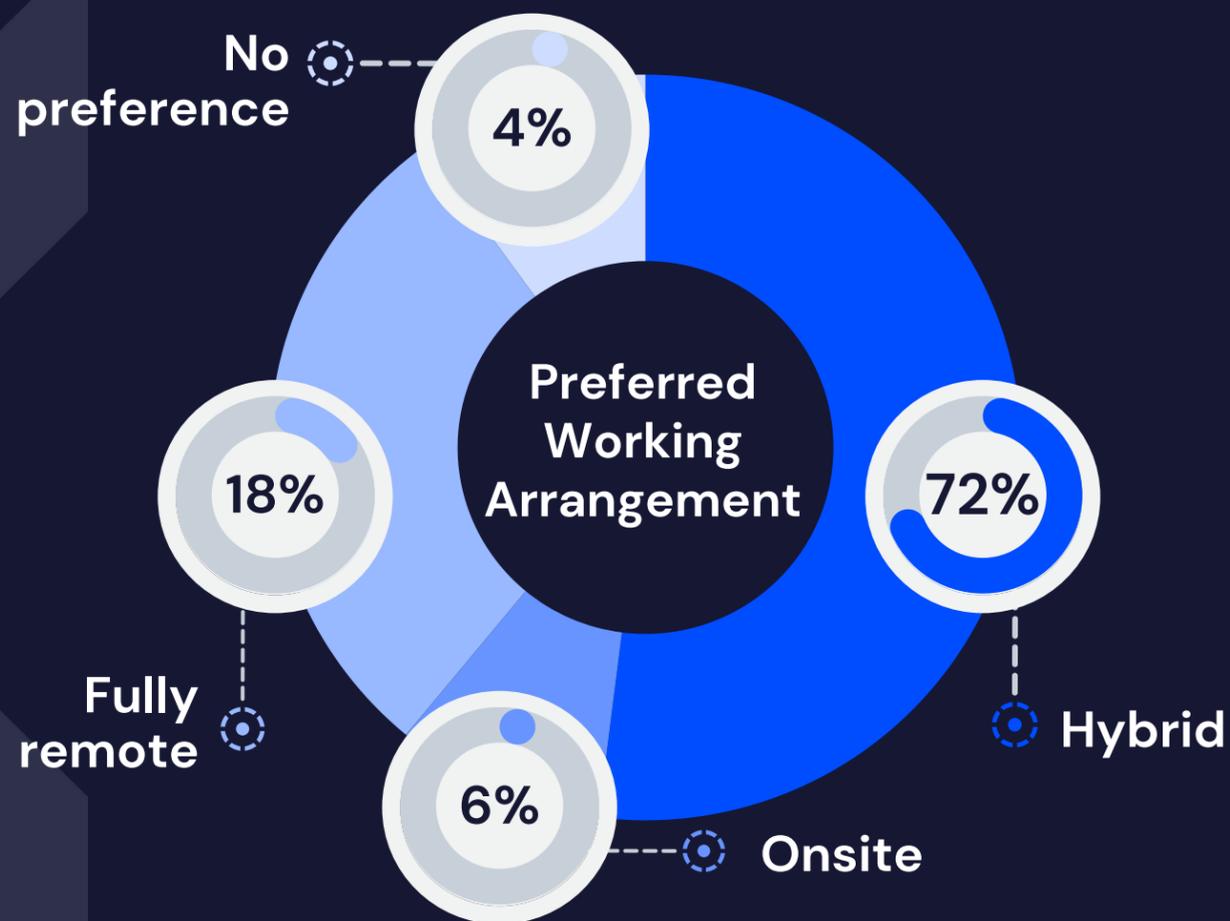
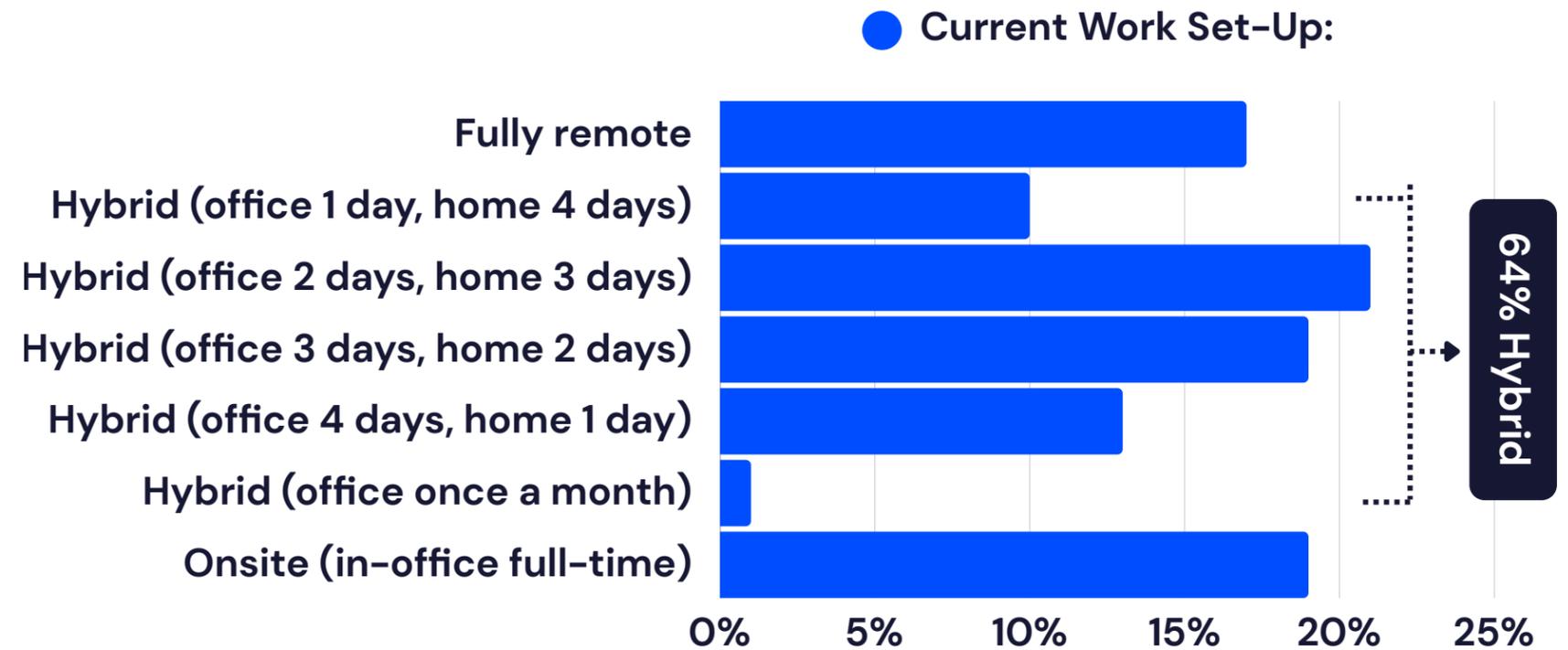
Key Insights and Trends 2026

Flexibility and Work Preferences

The data shows a clear movement toward structured hybrid arrangements — with **hybrid** work rising from **55%** last year to **64%** this year, while **fully remote** setups declined from **26%** to **17%**.



◆ This shift reflects how employers are refining their **return-to-office strategies** and embedding more predictable hybrid structures within their operations.



◆ When it comes to preferred working arrangements, **hybrid remains the clear favourite among professionals** — further highlighting that the ideal balance lies in flexibility, not extremes. Most professionals value the **autonomy** and **focus** that remote work allows, but also recognise the benefits of **in-person collaboration** and **connection** that come with time spent onsite.

◆ **41%** of professionals said they would **trade a higher salary for greater flexibility and work-life balance** — including **44%** of women and **40%** of men. This reinforces the view that flexibility is now a key component of overall compensation and wellbeing.

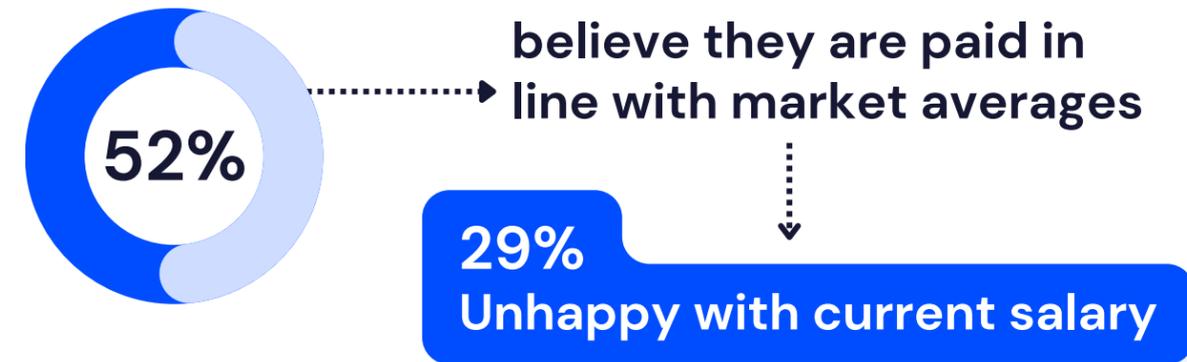
Insight for Employers:

✔ **Flexibility** continues to play an important role in attraction and retention, but it is increasingly being delivered through more **structured models**. As more organisations, particularly larger global firms, move toward greater **onsite presence** to support **collaboration** and **performance**, flexibility around working hours and expectations remains a key differentiator. Employers who strike the right balance between in-office engagement and autonomy will be best positioned to retain talent in 2026.

Key Insights and Trends 2026

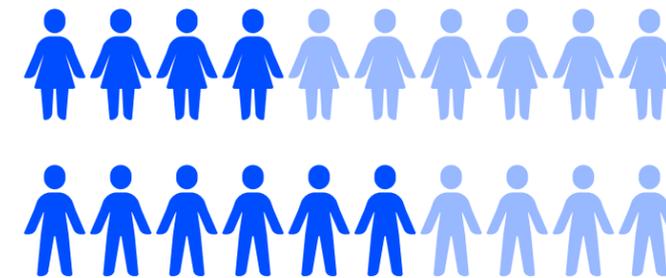
Salary, Pay Expectations and Promotions

While most professionals feel their pay is fair, confidence in future earnings varies — particularly between men and women. **52%** believe they are paid in line with market averages (up from 49% last year), while **29% remain dissatisfied** with their pay, unchanged year-on-year. Encouragingly, **67%** received a salary increase during 2025 (up from 53% last year), and **53% expect another increase** in 2026.



Gender-Specific Differences:

Similar to last year, men (**60%**) are significantly more likely than women (**38%**) to expect a pay rise in the year ahead, highlighting a persistent confidence and expectation gap. This reinforces the importance of clearer communication around **pay progression, review processes** and **advancement criteria**.



Nearly 4 in 10 women expect a pay rise during 2026.

6 in 10 men expect a pay rise during 2026.

Pay Transparency and Upcoming Legislation:

From June 2026, the **EU Pay Transparency Directive** will require Irish employers to strengthen fairness and clarity in pay. Key points affecting recruitment include:

- **Gender pay reporting:** Organisations with 50+ staff must publish gender pay gaps and complete joint pay assessments where gaps of 5%+ exist.
- **Job postings:** Salary ranges must be included in all job postings.
- **Recruitment practices:** Employers cannot ask candidates about current salaries to set offers.



Insight for Employers:

Clear pay structures and progression pathways will be essential in 2026. Employers that proactively strengthen salary transparency and address gender confidence gaps will be better positioned to retain talent and build trust.



Promotions and Bonuses:

Despite salary increases being relatively common, progression remains limited:

- Only **18%** were promoted in the past year
- **27%** report not being promoted in over two years

Meanwhile, **64% received a bonus in the past 12 months**, reinforcing that financial reward remains a key engagement lever — particularly where promotion opportunities are slower to materialise.



Key Insights and Trends 2026

Job Security and Recognition

Perceptions of job security remain strong:

- ◆ 73% feel secure in their role (37% very secure, 36% somewhat secure).
- ◆ Yet, men continue to feel more secure (40% very secure) than women (31%).

When it comes to feeling valued beyond pay:

- ◆ 56% say they feel recognised for their work,
- ◆ 22% are neutral, suggesting room for improvement in everyday recognition.

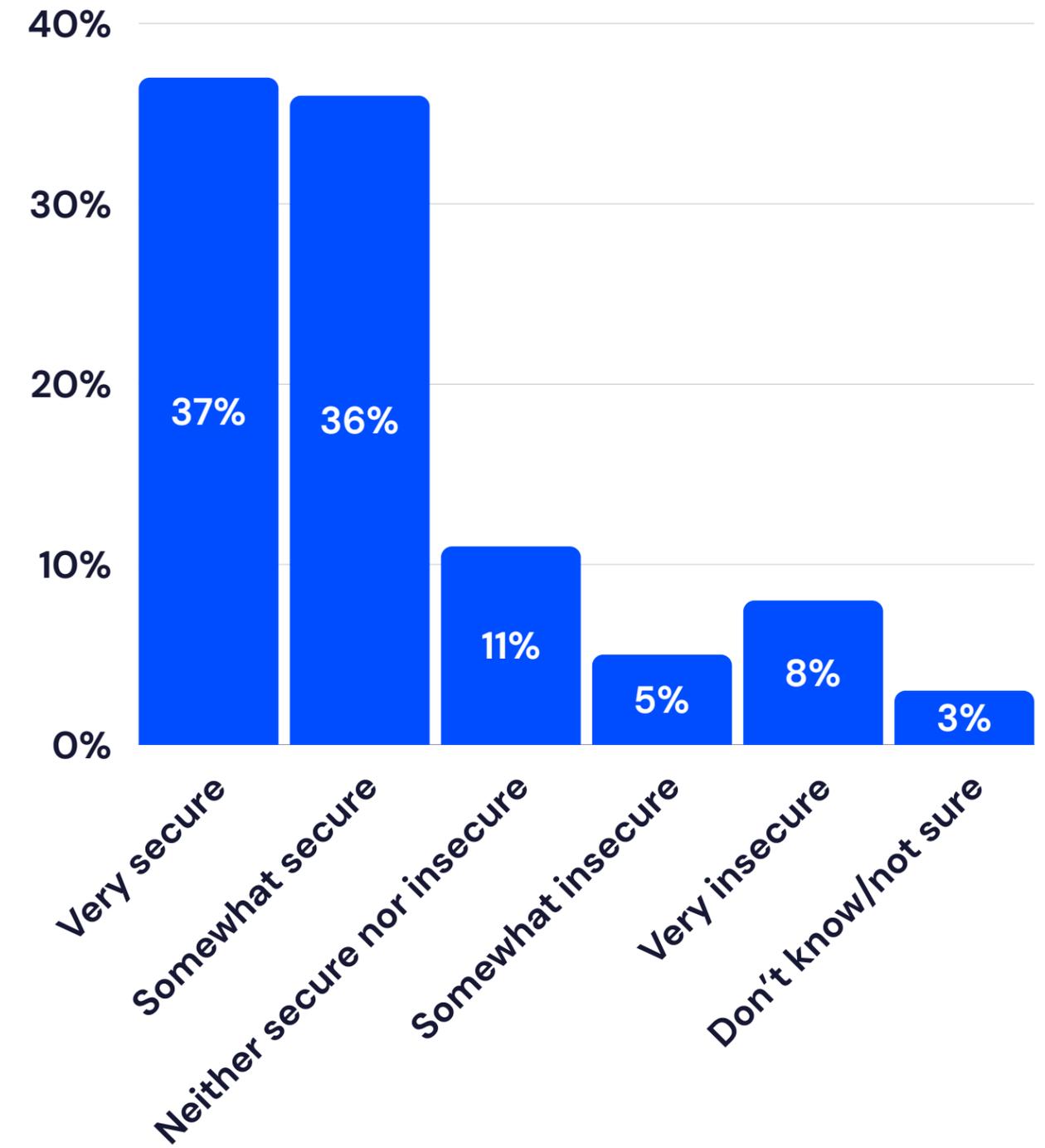


Insight for Employers:

Security, recognition, and meaningful work go hand in hand. Employees want to feel their contributions truly matter and that they're adding value. When professionals feel seen, appreciated, and understand the impact of their work, they're less likely to seek stability elsewhere.

Embedding recognition into day-to-day leadership communication — not just performance reviews — and creating opportunities for employees to contribute meaningfully can significantly enhance engagement and retention.

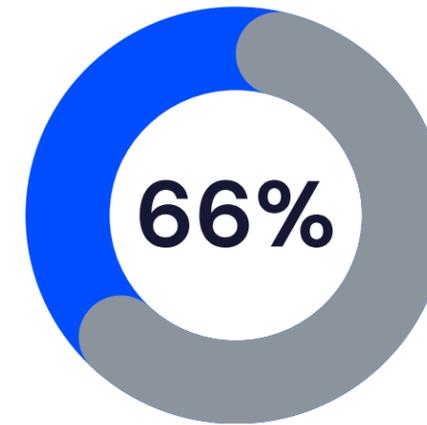
How secure do you feel in your current role?



Key Insights and Trends 2026

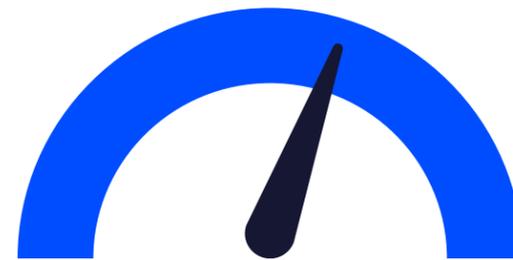
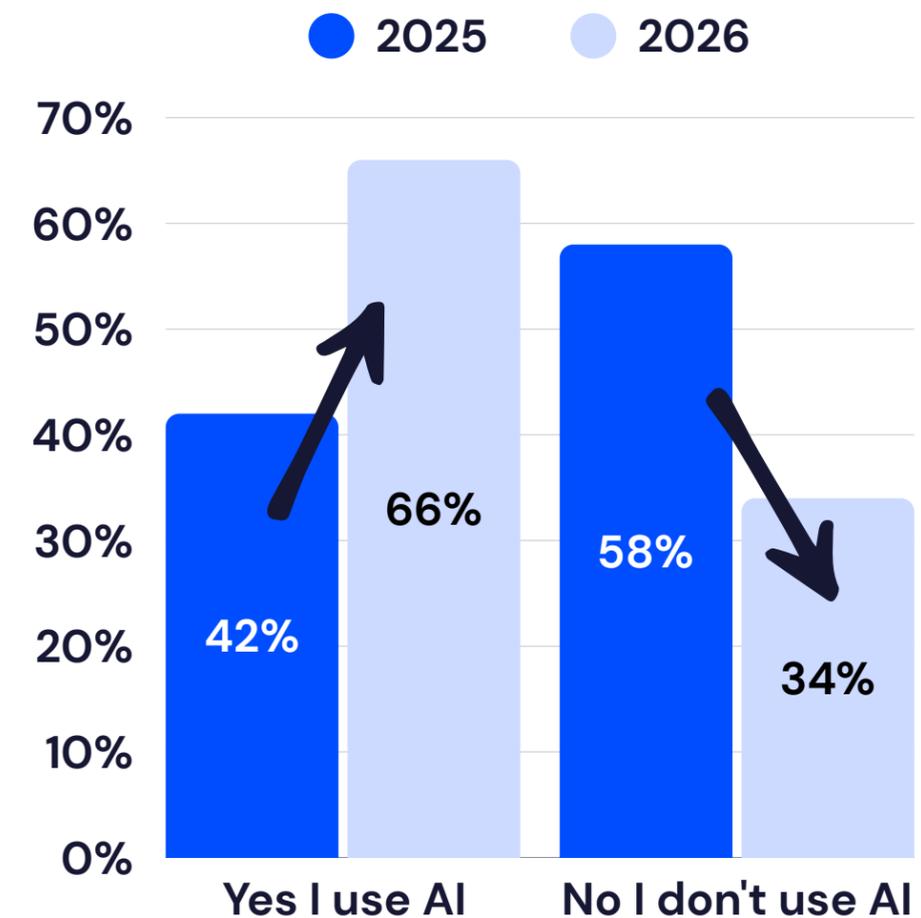
Artificial Intelligence in the Workplace

- AI adoption has grown significantly, transforming workflows across every sector.
 - 66% of professionals now use AI tools in their roles — up from 42% last year — and 56% believe AI will affect their long-term career path.
- However, most professionals feel underprepared for this shift:
 - Only 30% believe their employer provides adequate training
 - While 61% report limited or no support.



Use AI in their current role

Do you use AI in your current role?



The average impact rating for AI on career decisions is **6/10**, showing cautious optimism balanced by uncertainty.



Insight for Employers:

AI is becoming an essential part of the modern skill set. Employers should focus on upskilling and support, ensuring employees feel equipped and empowered rather than replaced.

Training in both technical and soft skills will be key to long-term confidence and performance.



Key Insights and Trends 2026

Confidence and Job Application Behaviour

Confidence continues to influence how professionals approach job applications.

When asked how often they apply for roles without meeting all listed criteria:

- 26% of men said **always**, compared to just 13% of women.
- 13% of women said they **never apply unless they meet 100% of the requirements** – versus only 3% of men.

✓ Insight for Employers:

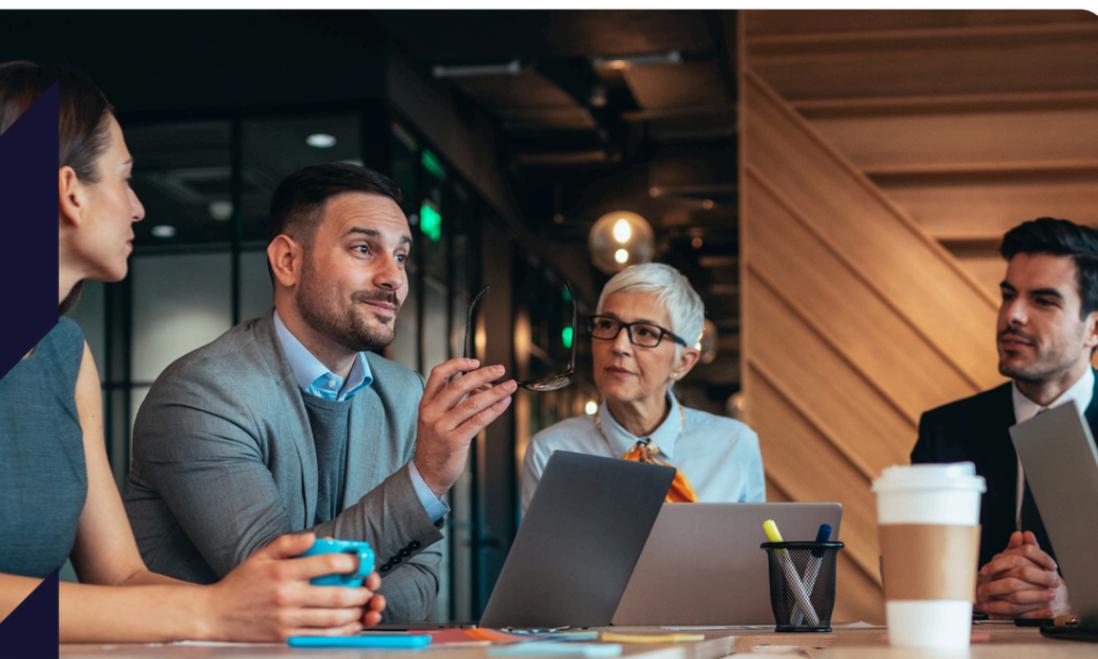
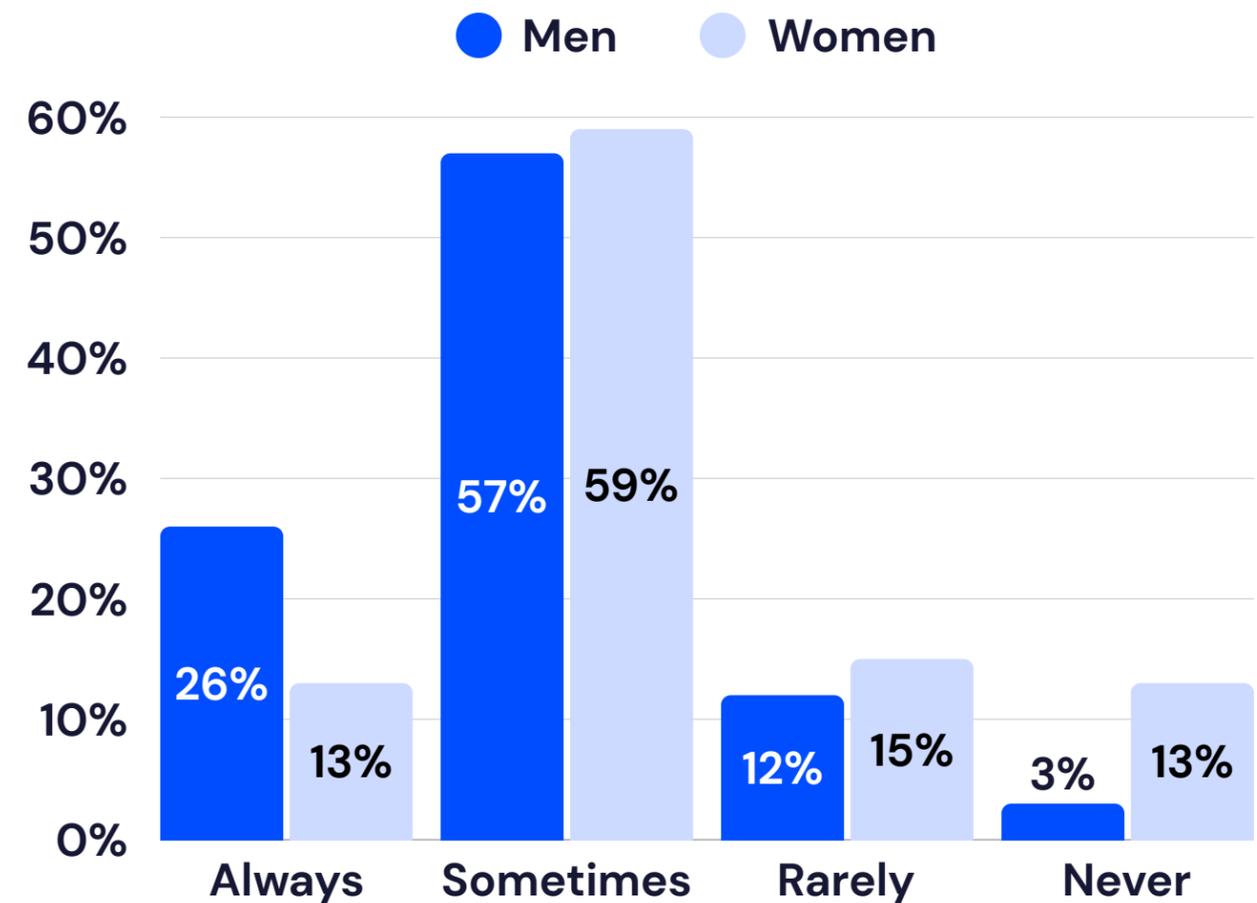
Overly rigid job specifications may unintentionally limit applicant pools. Employers should clearly distinguish between **essential** and **desirable skills** and communicate openness to transferable experience to attract broader, more confident talent.

Working with Recruiters

Trust continues to define job seekers' relationships with recruiters.

- 44% of professionals prefer to **work exclusively with one trusted recruiter or agency** – valuing personalised support, transparency and guidance throughout their job search.

How often do you apply for a job if you don't meet 100% of the listed requirements?



✓ Insight for Employers:

This trend reflects the growing importance of **relationship-led recruitment**. Employers who partner **exclusively** with an experienced recruiter gain access to **deeper candidate networks** and **stronger alignment** between role requirements and candidates' motivations.

Recommendations for Employers

Based on the survey's findings, Mason Alexander advises employers to consider the following strategies to attract and retain top talent:



Align compensation with career growth

- Competitive pay remains essential, but employees also seek visible progression opportunities. Clearly communicate promotion pathways, advancement criteria, and opportunities to take on impactful projects – combining financial reward with career development.

Foster recognition and daily impact

- Employees want to know their work matters. Embed recognition into everyday leadership communication, provide regular feedback, and highlight the impact of contributions. Appreciation beyond pay helps strengthen engagement and reduce turnover.

Balance structured flexibility with collaboration

- Hybrid and flexible working arrangements remain common, with an increasing trend toward 4–5 in-office days. Clarity and structure are key. Define expectations for in-office days, collaboration requirements and flexible hours to support productivity while maintaining autonomy.

Ensure transparency and equity in pay

- With new legislation on pay transparency coming into effect in 2026, clear and consistent pay frameworks are critical. Address gender confidence gaps, openly communicate salary ranges, and align pay structures with progression pathways to build trust and retention.

Leverage relationship-led recruitment

- Accessing top talent increasingly relies on trusted, relationship-driven approaches. Partnering with experienced recruiters can provide deeper candidate networks, better alignment with role requirements, and higher-quality hires.

Partner with Mason Alexander for a Competitive Edge

In 2026, professionals are seeking more than stability — they want purpose, growth, recognition and a sense of value. The findings from this year's survey reinforce that salary alone is no longer enough. Employees stay where they feel seen, supported and able to progress.

At Mason Alexander, we help employers turn these insights into impact. Our team partners with organisations to design recruitment and retention strategies grounded in real data — connecting you with the talent, intelligence and market perspective needed to stay ahead in an increasingly competitive environment.

Whether you're scaling teams, refining your EVP or navigating challenges around pay, flexibility or progression, we bring both the insight and execution to help you attract and retain the right people.

By partnering with Mason Alexander, you gain:

- Access to current market intelligence and salary benchmarking
- Strategic support to shape stronger, more equitable hiring practices
- A collaborative recruitment partner focused on long-term success

The world of work continues to evolve — but with the right partnership, your business can evolve with it. Together, we can build a workforce that's engaged, future-ready and aligned to the ambitions of both your people and your organisation.



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