

Careershifters

The State of Career Change Report 2026

Insights and trends from UK professionals
in career transition



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Summary

This report sets out the findings of a survey of 11,567 active UK career changers in 2026 – who they are, what’s motivating them, what’s holding them back, and what this means for individuals, employers and policymakers.

Key findings

1. Career dissatisfaction is taking a serious toll on people’s lives

- 73% of career changers say their work negatively affects their overall life satisfaction
- Of these, 91% report that their work negatively affects their mental health
- Only 3% always feel fulfilled by their work; 48% never or rarely feel fulfilled by it

2. Unsupportive or unhealthy work environments are the most important motivations for change – not pay

- The three leading motivations for change are unsupportive or unhealthy work environments (43%), poor work-life balance or wellbeing (41%), and values or purpose misalignment (40%)
- Pay is important (30%), but less so than other factors

3. The biggest barrier for career changers isn’t fear or money – it’s clarity

- 49% say the biggest obstacle to changing careers is figuring out what else they want to do
- Only 12% cite financial constraints as their top obstacle
- Nearly 60% want to move into a different industry entirely, yet 36% have no idea which industry or role they’re aiming for



4. Most career changers have been considering a change for at least a year

- 3 in 4 career changers (74%) have been thinking about changing for a year or more; 1 in 4 have (26%) been considering it for 3+ years

5. Almost half of career changers are navigating a life-defining decision completely alone

- 47% of would-be career changers have drawn on no support at all
- Of those who have sought help, the most common source is friends and family (38%), not professional guidance

6. Most career changers feel neutral about AI – and even those who feel negatively struggle to articulate why

- 75% of respondents are neutral about the impact of AI on their careers
- Of those who felt negatively about AI's impact, 52% of these feel unsure about what that impact might be
- The creative industries are the exception: 35% of creative workers report negative effects, and they're the most able to explain why

Key recommendations

For individuals

- Most career changers know they want to change but don't know what to change to, three quarters have been thinking about it for more than a year, and almost half are navigating the process entirely alone.
- Based on this data, the most important thing career changers can do is start, even before they feel ready. Clarity comes from small, low-risk experiments, rather than analysis alone. Structured support is more effective than relying on friends and family, and it's worth being wary of letting financial worries become a reason not to begin exploring.

For employers

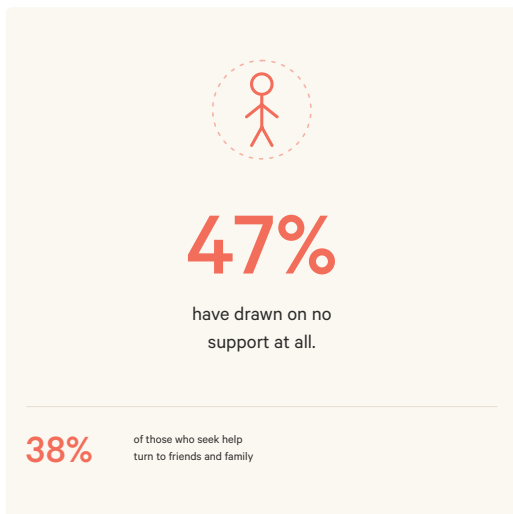
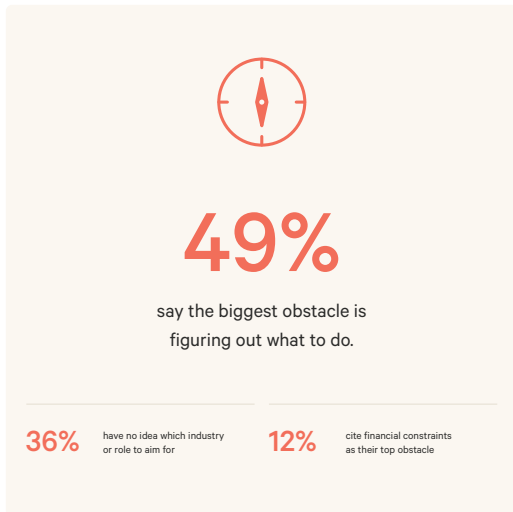
- The factors that are most driving career changers to want to shift are also ones that employers have direct influence over.
- Employers who want to attract and retain good people should focus on prioritising psychological safety and sustainable workloads, investing in internal mobility, normalising career development conversations, measuring overall career health, not just engagement, and designing for the flexible, non-linear careers that are now the norm.

For policymakers

- Working lives are getting longer and career transitions are becoming more frequent, yet public support remains disproportionately focused on early-career and unemployment pathways.
- The data in this report points to four priorities: strengthening support for mid-career transitions, creating financial safety nets that reduce the risk of change, embedding wellbeing as a measurable outcome in workforce strategy, and investing in the development of agency – the single highest-leverage skill for navigating career change – in young people and adults alike.



1. Career Change at a Glance in 2026



2. Introduction

More of us are going to make career changes than ever before.

Why? We're living and working longer. AI is reshaping industries in real time. Portfolio careers are growing rapidly. We're taking more career breaks. And there's a greater desire for meaning and fulfilment in work.

In 2006, we started Careershifters to provide the support we wish we'd had when going through our own shifts.

Now, two decades later, we're delighted to share this first-of-its-kind report in a way that we hope informs career changers themselves, but also importantly employers and policymakers.

The 11,567 respondents that have shaped this report don't represent the entire UK workforce. They represent something arguably more revealing: a live snapshot of people in motion – those actively questioning, exploring and attempting to redesign their working lives.

For those making shifts, the data shows why career change can feel like such a challenging and emotional experience; at the same time, thanks to the generosity of many of our audience members who've shared their stories, we can see how impactful successful shifts can be.

For our wider society, the data paints an even more striking picture. When work harms life satisfaction, it affects families, communities and productivity. When professionals feel stuck for years, potential is wasted.

That's why we're calling for employers to improve workplaces and policymakers to make more support available to people making mid-career shifts.

We hope you can join us in making this happen.



Richard Alderson
Founder & CEO of Careershifters

“



Cat

Shifted from consumer goods to non-profit

I was comfortable, but ultimately felt unfulfilled and inauthentic in my work.”

“

I knew that I didn't want to be tied down to one particular location, or to a corporate life that offered no freedom.”



Jasmeet

Shifted from molecular biology to photography

“



Hazel

Shifted from non-profit to portfolio

I went through phases of loving my job, then going through phases where I felt unfulfilled, bored, and kept asking myself 'Is this it?'"

“

I wanted a career where no day is the same and allowed me to have a better work/life balance.”



Satta

Shifted from teaching to tech



3. Core Insights: Why do people want to make a career change?

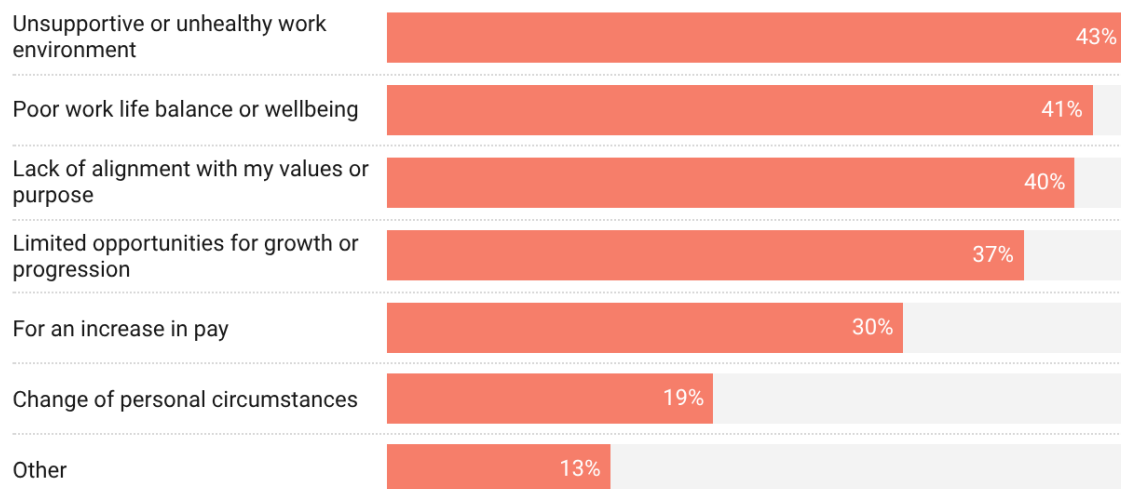
3.1 Overview

The three primary motivations for making a shift are unsupportive or unhealthy work environments (43%), poor work-life balance or wellbeing (41%), and values or purpose misalignment (40%).

Pay ranks notably lower than the conditions around it.

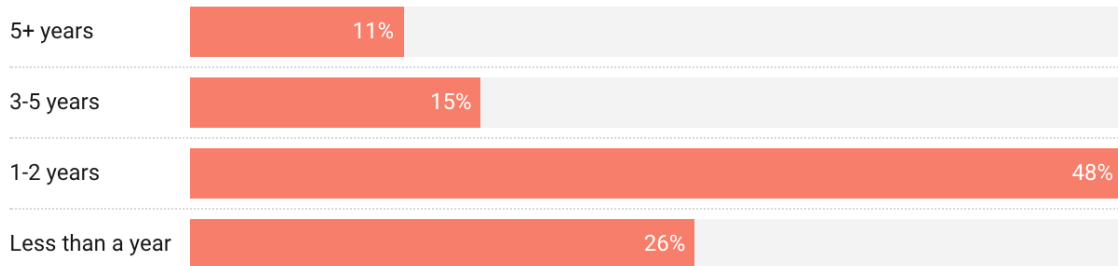
And these are not temporary frustrations. 74% of career changers have been considering a shift for more than a year, with more than a quarter considering it for three years or more.

3.2 Motivations for a career change



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 11,567; Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

3.3 Time spent considering a career change



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,943

“



Marta

Shifted from own business to humanitarian work

The most difficult thing was giving myself permission to change.”

“

No matter how many degrees or titles you have, when you step into a different field, you start from zero and people often look at you with polite skepticism.”



Yana

Shifted from physics to art

“



Paul

Shifted from charity frontline to digital content

Having been in the same role for such a long time it was difficult for me to believe I could do anything else.”



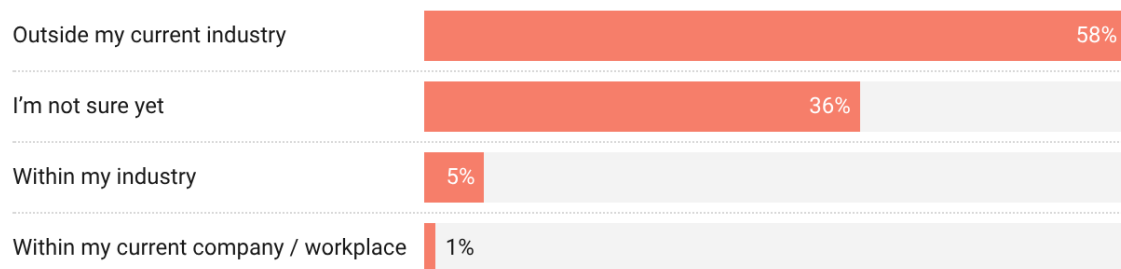
4. Core Insights: What types of shift do people want to make?

4.1 Overview

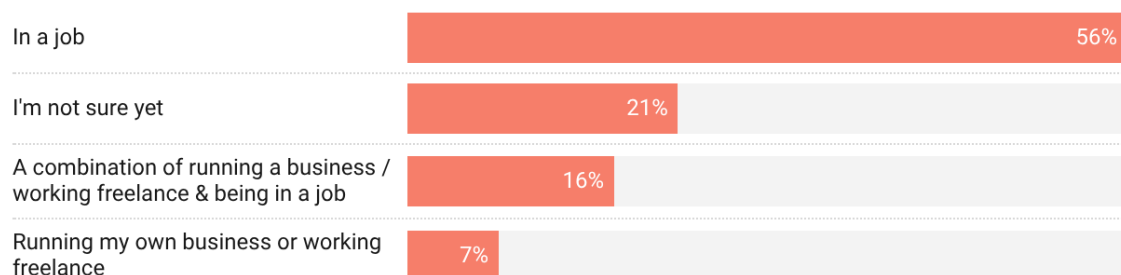
Most people looking to change careers feel the need for a significant change, not a small tweak to their situation – nearly 60% want to leave their industry entirely.

The majority (56%) want to move into employment rather than create something alone.

4.2 Type and destination of career change



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,894



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 11,507



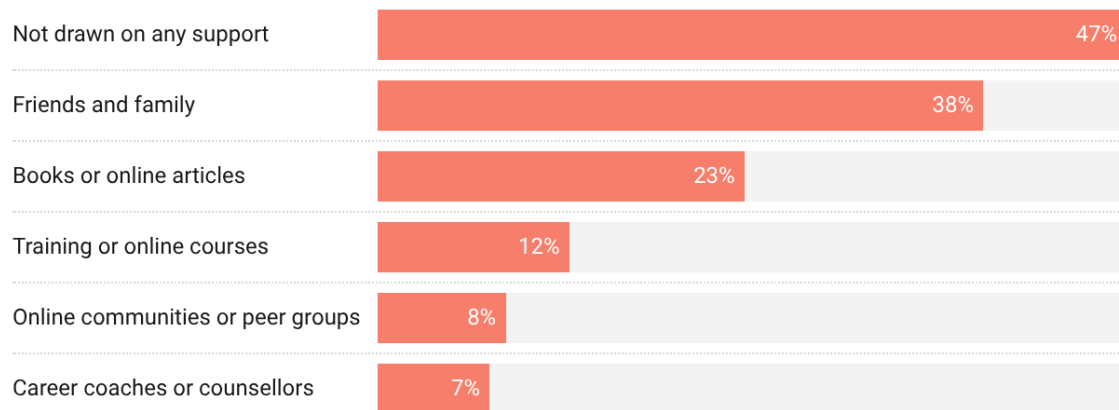
5. Core Insights: What support have people drawn on?

5.1 Overview

Almost half (47%) of career changers are navigating the process without any external support or guidance.

Of those that are drawing on support, it's primarily coming from friends and family (38%) and books or online articles (23%).

5.2 Support sought during a career change



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,227. Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

“



Susan

Shifted from human resources to
freelance consulting

You can't do it all by yourself, so having people you can trust to support your journey makes all the difference.”



“



I was finding it increasingly hard to balance work alongside family life.”

Alice

Shifted from strategy consultant to business owner

“

I was utterly miserable in my job. Everything was about profits, not people, and I was being inauthentic every day.”



Suzanne

Shifted from finance to counselling

“



I was feeling very alone and was flip-flopping on a daily basis: ‘Is this so bad that I need to uproot myself for a big shift? Or is it ‘okay enough’ because it affords me the life I want outside of work?’

Daniel

Shifted from high education admissions to synagogue director

“

We can get siloed into one professional identity. So when that changes, other people may be accepting, or they might wonder if you’re going through some kind of crisis.”



Andrew

Shifted from TV to Corporate

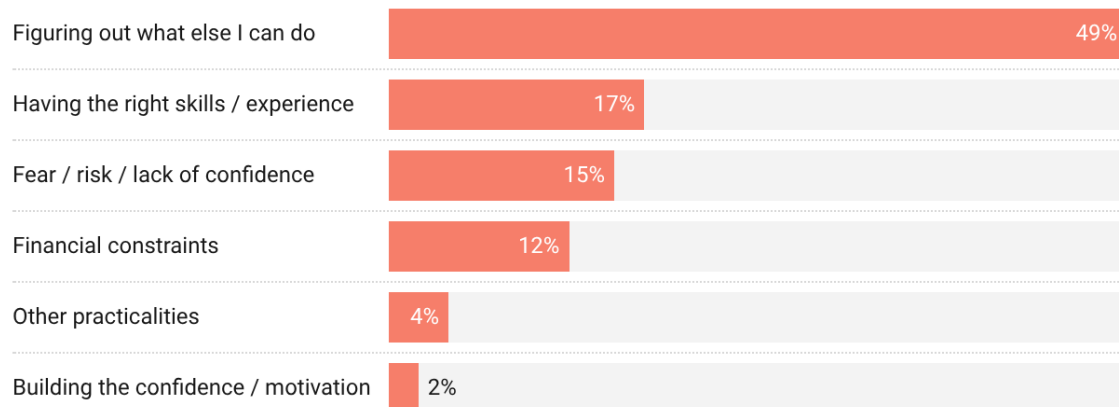


6. Core Insights: What are the barriers to a career change?

6.1 Overview

The biggest barrier to career change isn't money, fear or skills – it's clarity. Nearly half (49%) of career changers say the hardest part is figuring out what they actually want to do next, while financial constraints rank as the primary obstacle for only 12%.

6.2 Biggest obstacles to career change



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 11,169

“



Glyn

Shifted from a larger corporate to small business

Being in a safe job on a comfortable salary can really hold you back from taking risks. Having been stuck in a rut for so long, the most difficult thing was managing the mindset shift.”

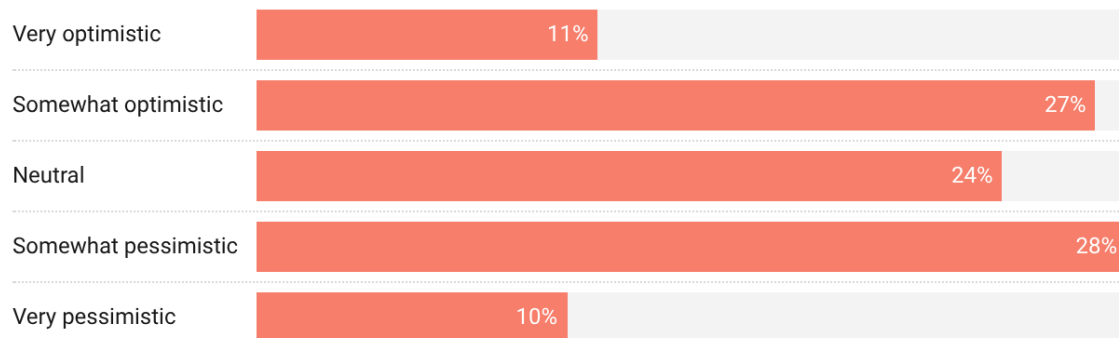


7. Core Insights: How do career changers feel about their future working life?

7.1 Overview

The outlook from career changers about their future working lives is mixed: 38% feel very optimistic or optimistic about their future working life, while the same percentage feel very or somewhat pessimistic.

7.2 Level of optimism about future working life



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,067;

“



Howard

Shifted from public services to
portfolio career

When you've spent so long in employed roles where there are engrained expectations about what careers look like, it can be easy to get sucked into doom-scrolling on LinkedIn.”

8. Spotlight: AI and the Future of Work

8.1 Overview

75% of career changers feel neutral about AI's impact on their careers, with only 17% reporting a negative impact, and 8% a positive one.

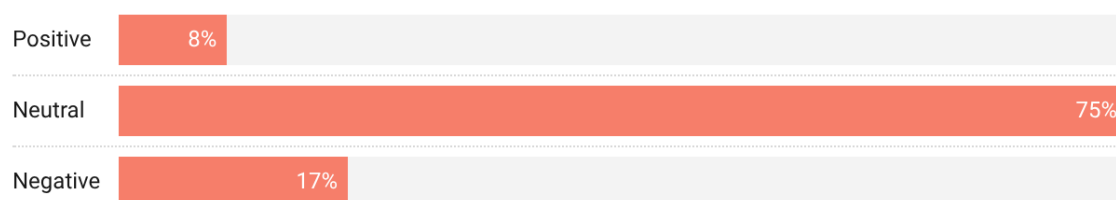
Among those who do feel negatively, the dominant response is uncertainty rather than a specific fear – 52% can't articulate how AI is negatively affecting them, while 32% believe it is making their skills feel less necessary. For most, the threat feels real but shapeless.

The exception is the creative industries, where the concerns are more defined. 35% of creative workers report a negative impact, citing uncertainty about what's coming (35%), a sense that their skills are becoming less valuable (22%), and fear of role replacement (17%). Creative workers are both the most affected, and the most able to explain why.

Tech, engineering, and science workers sit at the other end of the spectrum – the only sector where a meaningful proportion (16%) see AI as a positive career force.

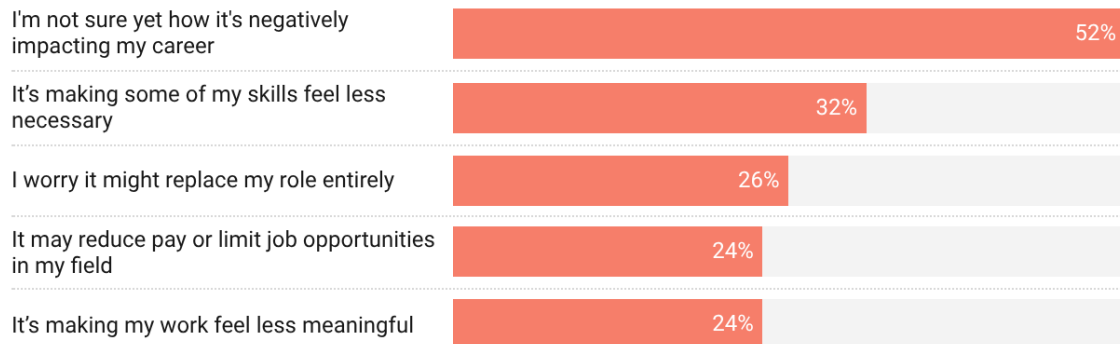
Trades, hospitality, and healthcare workers are the least likely to see any upside.

8.2 Perceived impact of AI on careers



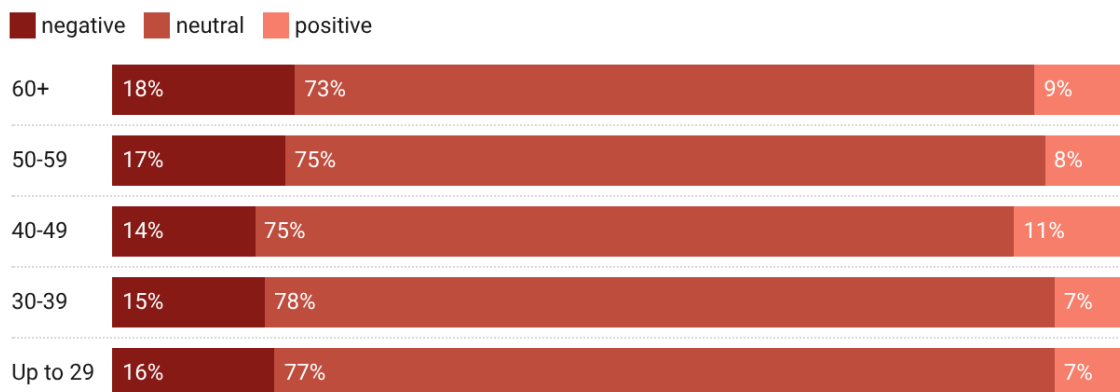
Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,637

8.3 Negative effects of AI on careers



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 1,566; Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

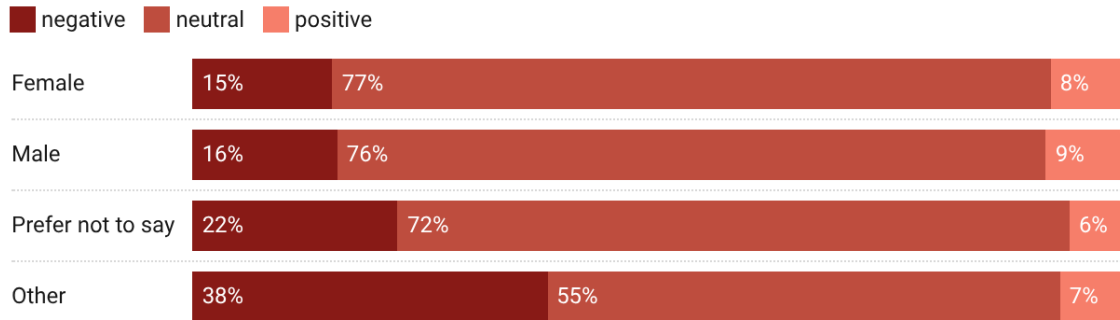
8.3.1 By age



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 1,525

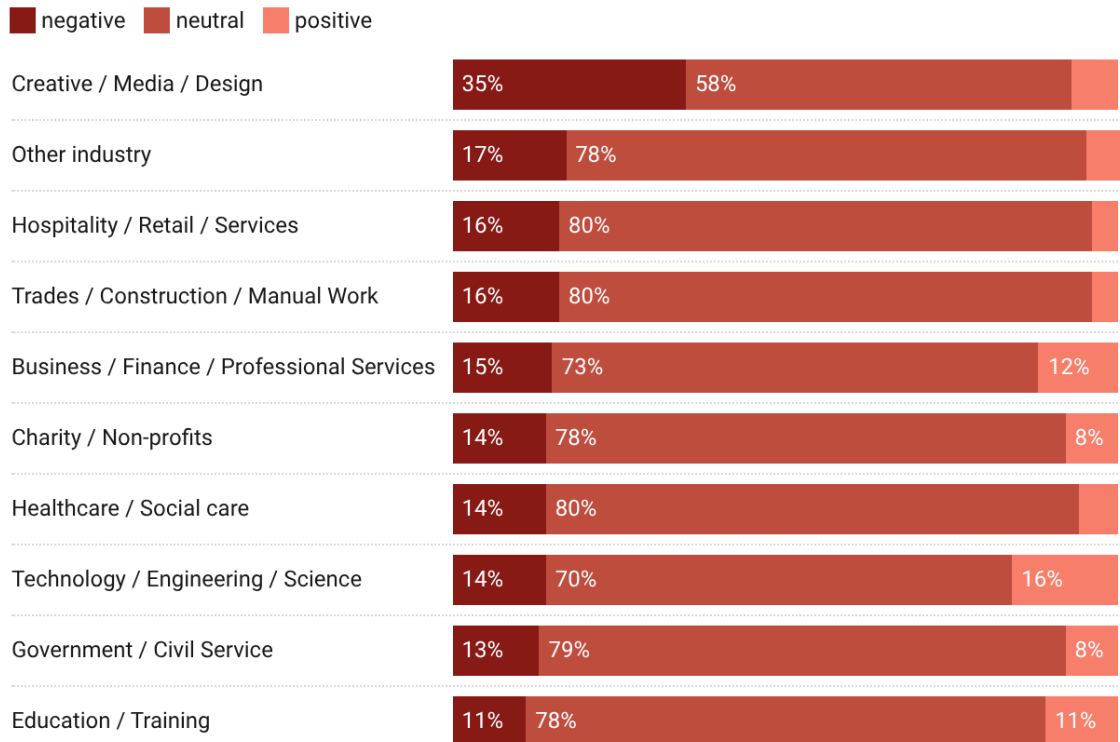


8.3.2 By sex



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 1,524

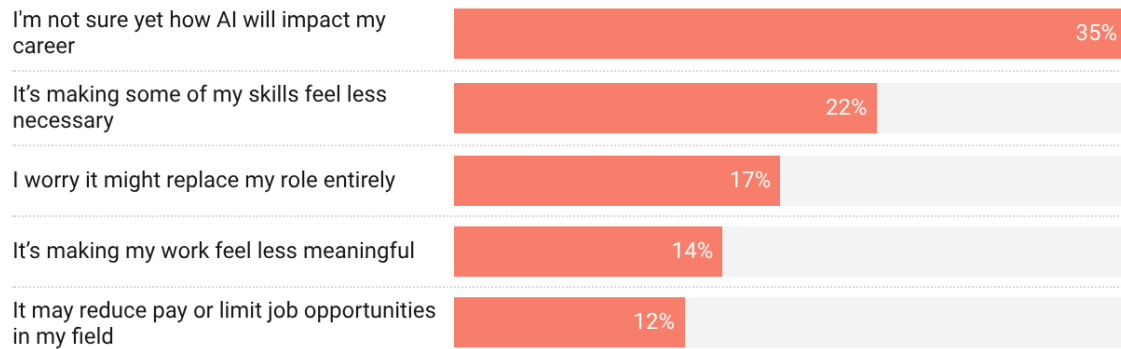
8.3.3 By industry



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 1,533



8.3.4 Focus: creative / media / design industries



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 145; Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

9. Spotlight: Wellbeing and fulfilment at work

9.1 Overview

For the majority (73%) of career changers surveyed, work is damaging their overall life satisfaction. Of those, 91% report that their work negatively affects their mental health. Only 3% say work affects their life satisfaction positively.

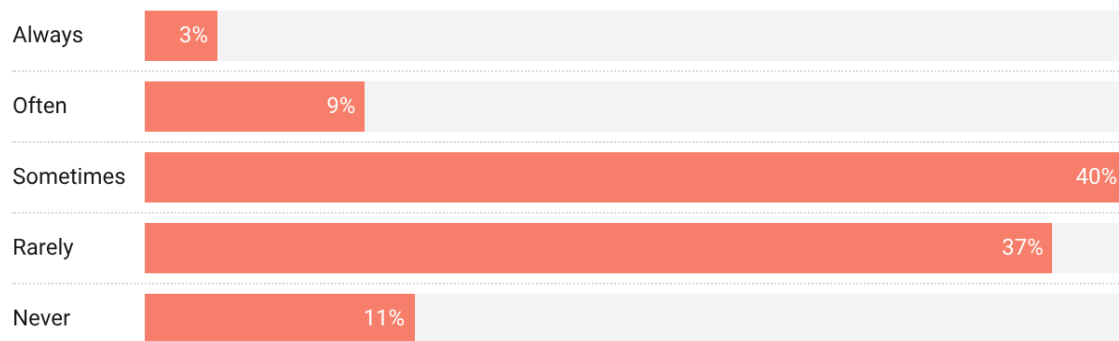
The impact isn't just emotional. 55% say work negatively affects their ability to pursue hobbies and personal interests, while significant proportions report impact on their physical health and relationships.

Only 3% always feel fulfilled by their work, while nearly half (48%) rarely or never do.

The sector most affected is government and civil service, where 78% report a negative impact on life satisfaction.

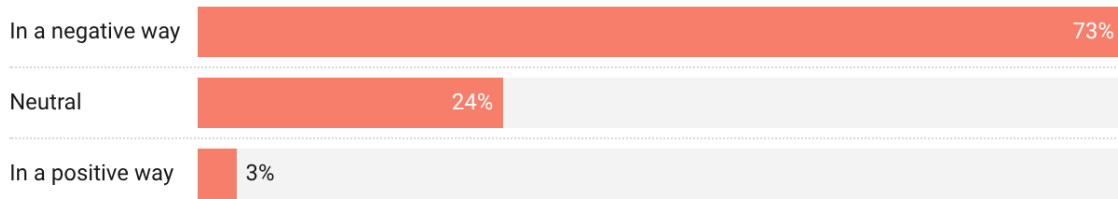
There is little difference in levels of fulfilment or work satisfaction across age group or by sex.

9.2 Levels of fulfilment in current or most recent work



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,169.

9.3 Work's impact on life satisfaction



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,135.

9.3.1 By age



Number of respondents to survey question: 10,199

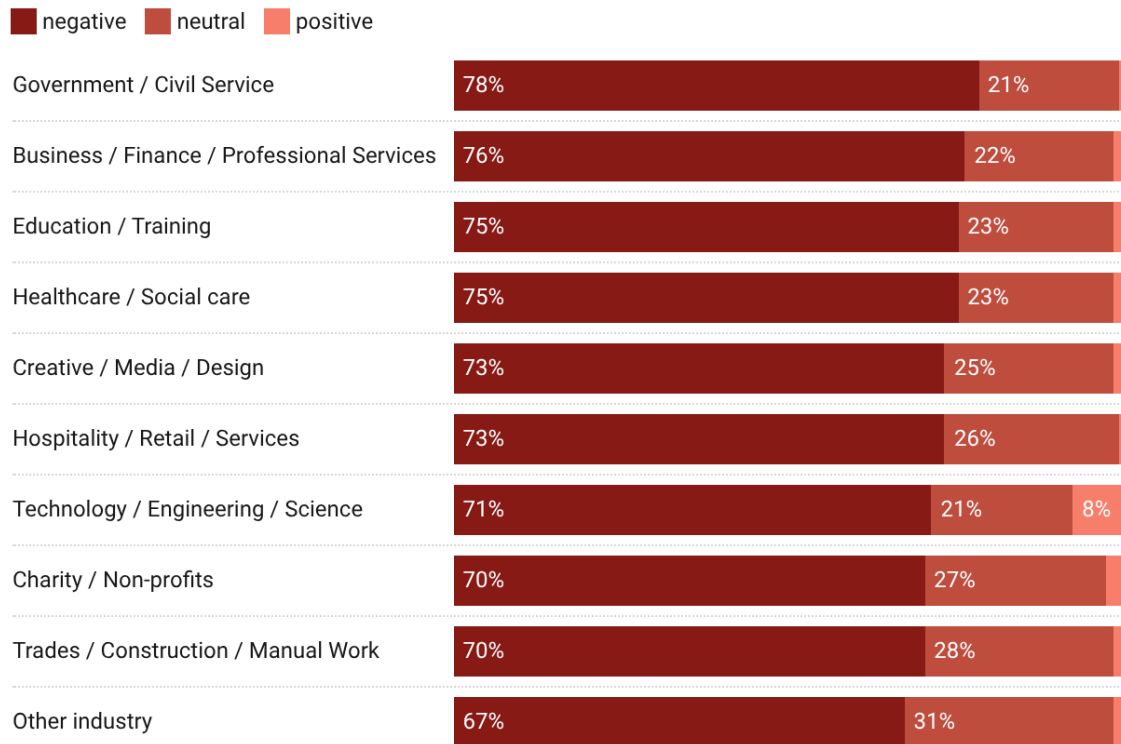
9.3.2 By sex



Number of respondents to survey question: 10,199

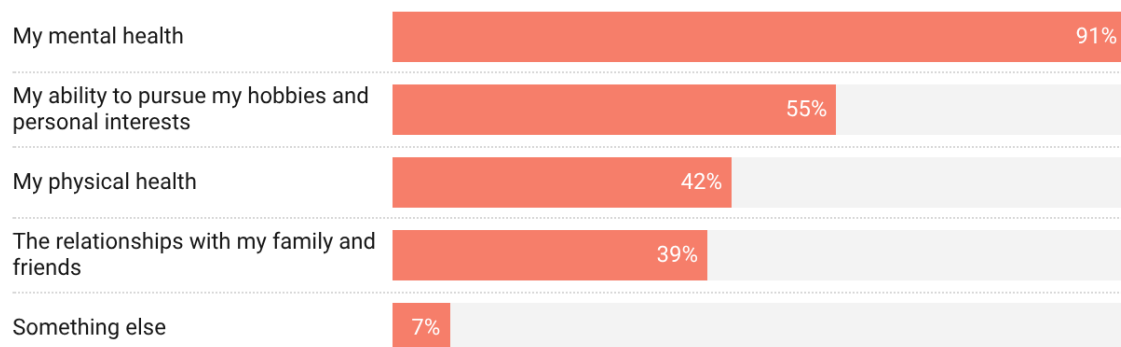


9.3.3 By industry



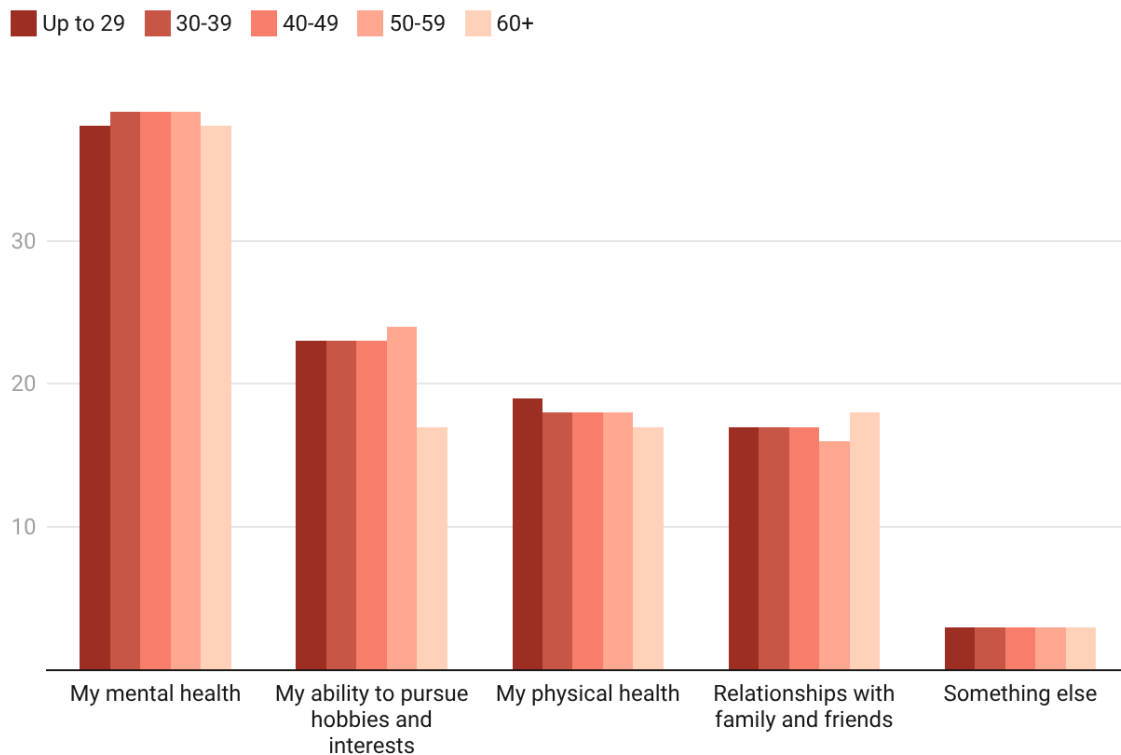
Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,249

9.4 How work impacts negatively on life



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 7,369. Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

9.4.1 By age



Number of respondents to survey question: 7,454 Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

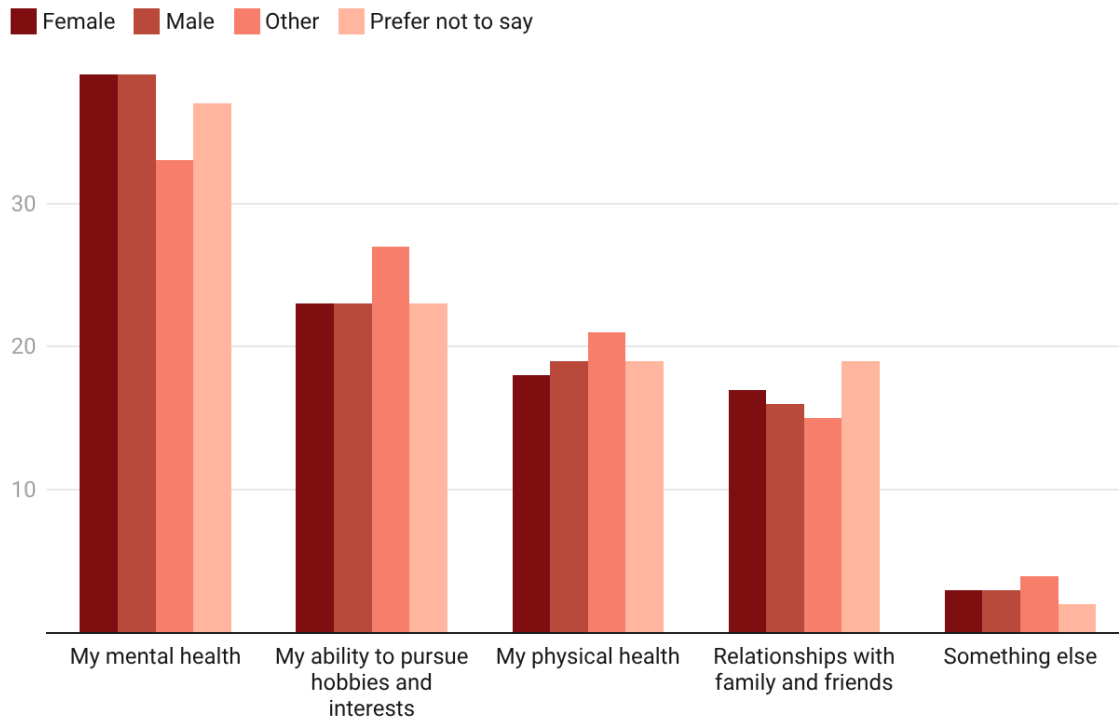
“ I found myself feeling completely drained all the time. It was affecting my work-life balance... it really took its toll on me. I ended up off work for six months with burnout, and I knew that something needed to change.

Paul
Shifted from charity frontline to digital content

“ I'd got to the point where I was dreading going into work, I was stressed out, and teetering dangerously close to burnout.

Jess
Shifted from psychology to interior design

9.4.2 By sex



Number of respondents to survey question: 7,448. Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

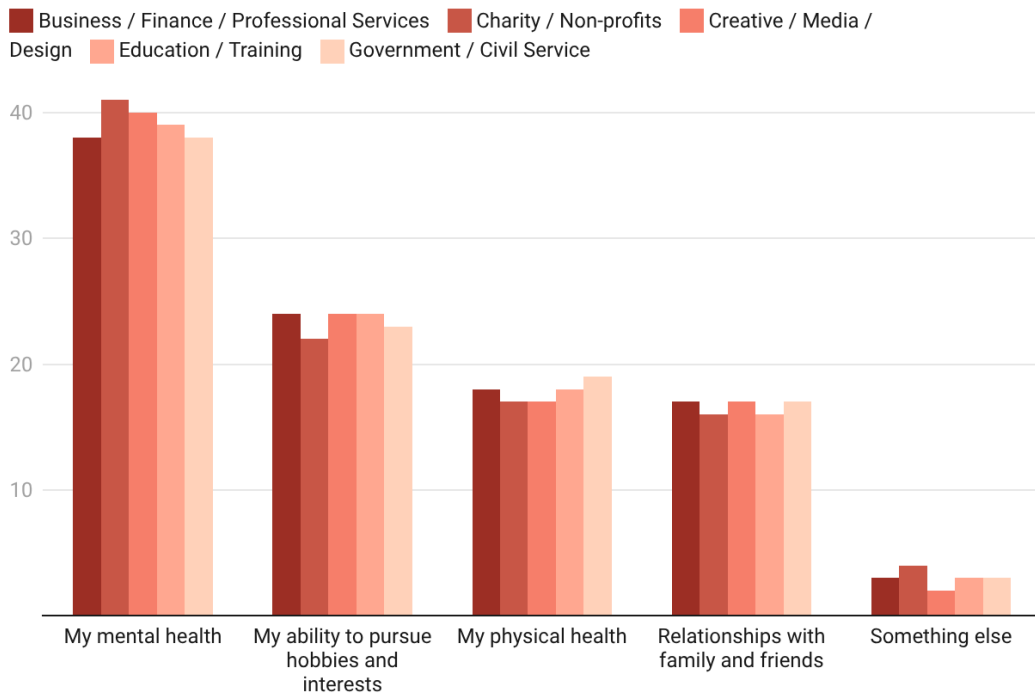
“The day I realised that my job was actually detrimental to my mental and physical health, was the day I realised that I needed a change.”

Megha
Shifted from retail to finance

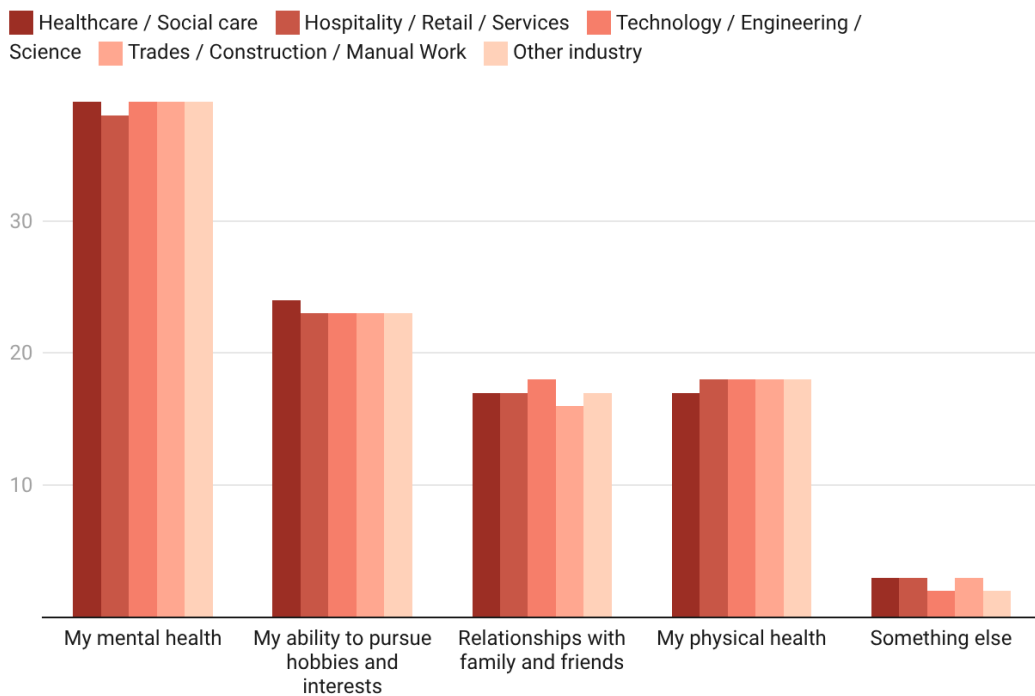
“I felt unfulfilled, lonely, under immense pressure, bullied and not good enough.”

Lynsey
Shifted from fashion to yoga

9.4.3 By industry



Number of respondents to survey question: 7,493. Participants could select more than one answer for this question.



Number of respondents to survey question: 7,493. Participants could select more than one answer for this question.

“



Elaine

Shifted from research to a portfolio career

My full-time job was so overwhelming and stressful that I threw all my energy into finding a way out – instead I felt constantly stressed and anxious.”

“

Don't stay in a job that's making you miserable for so long it starts affecting your health. Nothing is worth sacrificing your physical health or your sanity for.”



Santhie

Shifted from tax accountant to freelance journalist, editor and writer

“



Sue

Shifted from charity to hospitality

My mental health was suffering, and I often found myself having to take time off to recover from compassion burn out.”

“

Work shouldn't absorb your whole life and have a negative impact on your mental health.”



Cyrielle

Shifted from corporate PR to own business



10. Recommendations

Bringing together the data from this report and our work with 18,000+ shifters over the last two decades, we have a number of recommendations for career changers, employers and policymakers.

10.1 Recommendations for Career Changers

- **Start before you feel ‘ready’.** Nearly half of career changers have been thinking about a change for more than a year. The sooner you act, the sooner you’ll start feeling clearer about where you want to go and how to get there. That doesn’t mean taking a big risky leap – it can simply be taking action on your shift alongside your current work.
- **Start with experiments, not decisions.** Clarity rarely comes from simply ‘figuring it out’ in your head. Small, low-risk experiments – conversations with people in roles that interest you, classes, short courses, side projects or shadowing – generate the real-world data and insight that you need most.
- **Don’t allow financial worries to distract you from starting to explore.** Money is a real constraint for some – but this survey found it ranks well below clarity, environment, and wellbeing as a cause of feeling stuck. If finances feel like the primary obstacle, it may be worth examining whether they’re the real barrier, or a distraction that diverts you from taking action.
- **Seek structured support, not just encouragement.** Friends and family can offer comfort, but career change requires a different kind of help: structured exploration, expert guidance, objective challenge, and access to people who’ve navigated similar transitions. That support exists, but you may need to look beyond your immediate network to find it.
- **Know that you’re not alone.** The scale of dissatisfaction in this report can, paradoxically, be a source of reassurance. You’re not doing anything ‘wrong’, and there are many people out there who are feeling the same as you.



10.2 Recommendations for Employers

- **Prioritise psychological safety and sustainable workload.** With 43% of respondents citing unsupportive or unhealthy work environments as reasons for wanting to change careers, these need to be taken seriously if retention is a priority. Train managers to model and reward psychological safety; conduct regular, anonymous workload audits and act visibly on findings; set clear boundaries around out-of-hours communication; and hold leadership accountable for culture through performance frameworks.
- **Invest in internal mobility.** If 75% of employees feel stuck for 1 year+ before leaving, there's opportunity for redeployment into positions that are a better fit on both sides. Give people visible, accessible routes to move across teams and functions, so that wanting something different doesn't automatically mean leaving.
- **Make values visible and lived.** 40% cite misalignment with purpose or values. This is not solved through branding. It requires congruence between stated values and daily behaviour.
- **Normalise career development conversations.** Many employees are asking existential career questions silently. Create supportive, curiosity-driven spaces for open dialogue to build trust, loyalty, and make room for problem-solving.
- **Recognise the rise of flexible careers.** Longer working lives and a shifting world of work mean traditionally linear career paths are disappearing. Employers who offer flexible structures, secondments, and hybrid role design will become increasingly attractive.
- **Focus on improving employees' career health, not just their engagement.** We define career health as having three core components: career fit – whether someone's work draws on what energises them, what they do well, and where they want to go; wellbeing at work; and the sustainability of the individual's career within their wider life. When all three are present, employees are not only more likely to remain, but also to be more productive and more fulfilled.



10.3 Recommendation for Policymakers

- **Strengthen awareness and pathways to mid-career support.** Funding and access remain disproportionately focused on early-career and unemployment transitions. Especially as working lives lengthen, the data shows a need for support in structured exploration at mid-career – not just technical reskilling, but guided processes for figuring out what comes next.
- **Create financial safety nets for career transitions.** Finances were not the biggest reported barrier, but they remain a real challenge for many people. Flexible retraining loans, learning allowances, childcare initiatives or targeted tax incentives would meaningfully reduce the risk of making a change.
- **Embed wellbeing into workforce strategy.** This survey shows work is a significant factor harming mental health at scale. A workforce strategy that does not include wellbeing as a measurable outcome is not fit for purpose.
- **Invest in developing agency – in young people and adults alike.** Agency is the capacity to act as a causal influence in one’s own career: to boldly take initiative in uncertain conditions; to learn by doing; to be comfortable making mistakes; and to draw on the help of others. It’s the highest leverage skill for navigating career changes and it develops through experience, not instruction. This is not something we should wait until mid-career to develop.



11. About the Survey

11.1 Survey data

The data in this report is based on the results of 11,567 UK respondents of the Careershifters Career Change Test on the Careershifters website, between 22nd October 2025 and 19th January 2026.

The survey data is not representative of all workers across the UK. Instead, it provides a unique lens into active career changers, who are not captured in general workforce surveys.

11.2 Overview

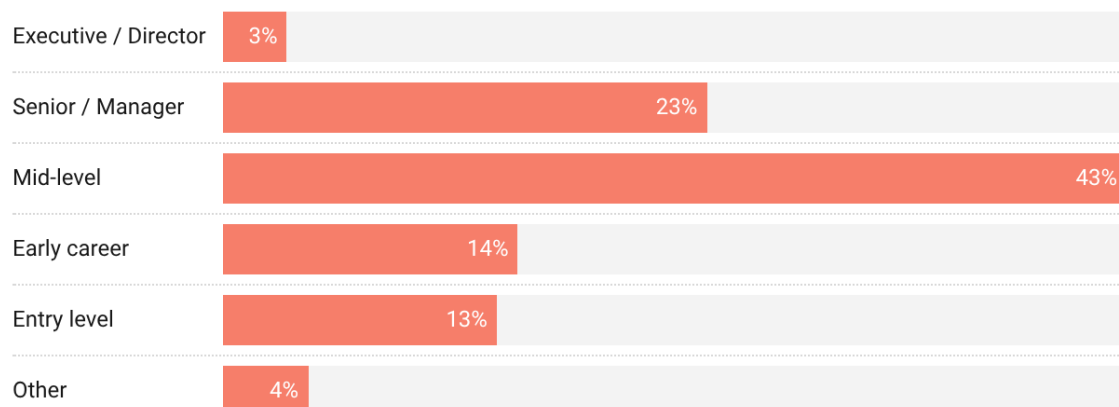
The majority of respondents (69%) were mid and senior level in their careers.

The industries most represented were education / training; business / finance / professional services; and healthcare / social care.

The most common age groups were 30-39 and 40-49, while respondents were weighted heavily towards females (61% female vs 38% male).

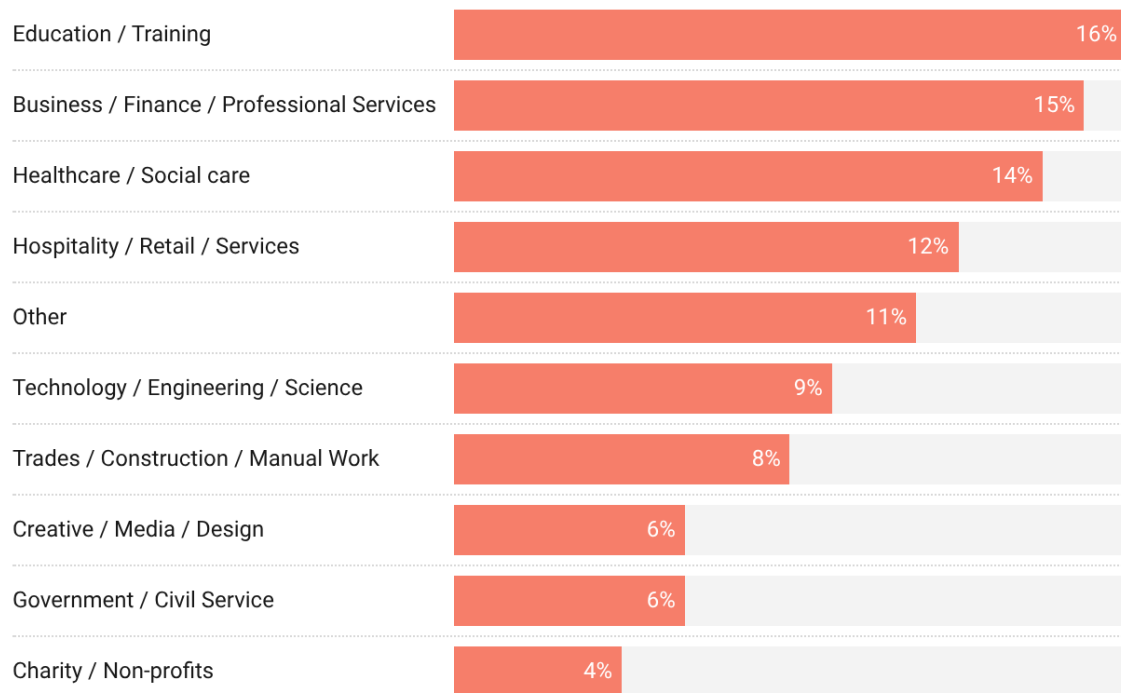
11.3 Survey demographics

11.3.1 Current career level



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,015.

11.3.2 Current industry sector



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,045.

“



Ashley

Shifted from corporate to small business

Making the decision to shift in the first place was the biggest hurdle.”

“

Breaking into the industry was tough as a midlife career changer, but persistence paid off.”

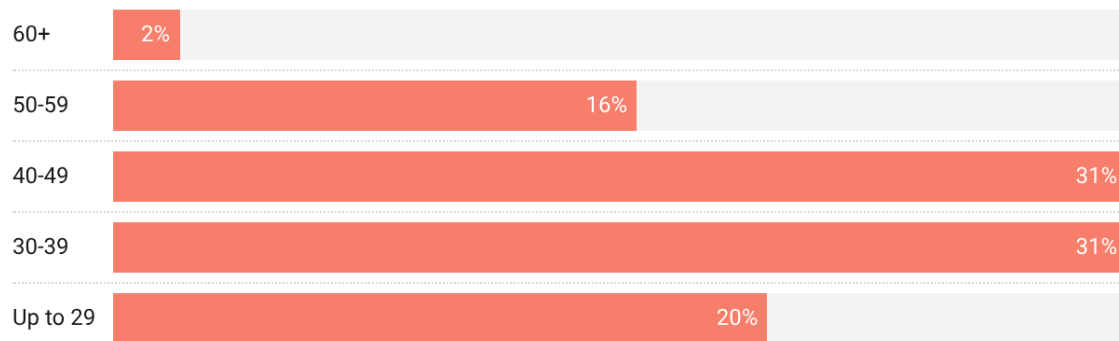


Paul

Shifted from dentistry to aviation

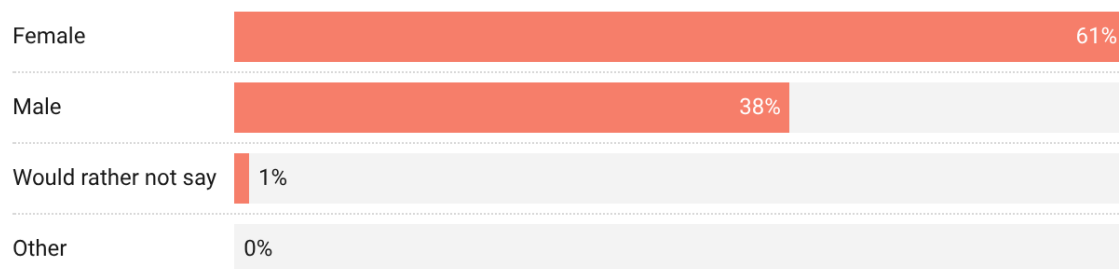


11.3.3 Age



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,135.

11.3.4 Sex



Note: Number of respondents to survey question: 10,124. Other equals 0.4 respondents.

11.4 How to cite this report

Use the following:

“Careershifters (2026). The State of Career Change Report 2026: Insights and trends from UK professionals in career transition. Available at: <https://www.careershifters.org/state-of-career-change-report>”



12. About Careershifters

We help people at a career crossroads find exciting, viable and fulfilling options for 'what next'. We do this through workshops, courses, free resources and a like-minded worldwide community.

We set up Careershifters because we were moved by the huge number of people around us who were unhappy in their work.

Our mission is two-fold: firstly, to help others like us make successful shifts into more fulfilling work and, secondly, to be a model of the kind of organisation that we want to see more of in the world.

Since 2006, we've reached 9m+ people through our website, worked directly with 18,000+ career changers across 70+ countries and built community of 180,000+ shifters.

We're proud to be a certified BCorp since 2017, with recertifications in 2021 and 2024.

We're run by a team who've each made their own successful shifts and who now work on their own terms across four continents.

Our work has been featured across international media including the BBC, The Times, The Guardian, Financial Times, The Telegraph, Independent, The Sunday Times, The Observer, The Evening Standard, CNBC, Mashable, Woman and GQ.

Find out more at www.careershifters.org.



