

2023 Career Perspectives:

A Study in Paradox



The Great Resignation didn't suddenly appear, nor did "quiet quitting" silently descend on organizations.

A perfect storm was circulating and strengthening around career development for years—a storm that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

Long before the pandemic, a multitude of factors were shaping perspectives on career development. Multiple generations in the workplace influenced the disparate views of career success, informed by the shifting priorities and values of each generation. Digital transformation reshaped the way work got done, giving rise to remote employees and the gig economy. But if these forces started to blow like the proverbial winds of change, the pandemic accelerated them into a full-blown storm, transforming workers and workplaces in its wake.

The pandemic highlighted a deeper global interconnectedness and brought personal values and priorities sharply into focus. The long-term adoption of remote and hybrid work radically changed the way employees view flexible work conditions. And employees and employers alike have become highly sensitive to issues like burnout and overall wellness.

So, what's left in the wake of the storm? Continued turnover, skill gaps, and a very real fatigue factor. All of this comes at a time when organizations need the clouds to part and when employees and employers alike would like to feel a sense of calm after the storm.

Organizations need employees to be at their best—they need people to contribute. And employees want to be satisfied by the work they do. How can we create an environment that holds both sets of needs in balance so they can not only survive, but thrive?

Career development can be that shelter in, or after, the storm. But only if organizations and people leaders lean into development conversations, and the fact is that they often shy away from them. Why? Perhaps it is a lack of confidence around engaging in career conversations. It could be that these discussions get lost in the list of daily to-dos. Or maybe it's the fact that career development can be a vexing issue.

Career development is both ubiquitous and deeply personal, which sets up an overarching paradox that organizations and leaders struggle to resolve. And people leaders are directly confronted with hard questions when it comes to career. "How can I recognize the common issues of career and engagement while addressing each person's unique needs and values? How can I resolve my concern that talking about career development will only lead to attrition—the very thing I am looking to prevent?" And what about the question leaders don't often voice: "I need to develop others but what about my **own** career development?"

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In early 2023, GP Strategies surveyed over two thousand employees and people leaders across the globe to get a current perspective on career development.

**Respondent
Breakdown:**

815

People leaders

1,313

Individual
contributors

The result?

The emergence of four paradoxical themes with seemingly contradictory messages—all of which are true.

This report will explore those four key paradoxes as well as draw comparisons across global regions and prior GP Strategies research studies on the same topic.





Paradox #1:

I'm more engaged
in my current job
when talking about my
next job or my future.

Paradox #1: I'm more engaged in my current job when talking about my next job or my future.

With voluntary turnover numbers at some of the highest they've ever been,¹ it's clear that employees are not afraid to make the leap to new opportunities or to opt out of a traditional job in favor of a "gig." However, organizations don't need to be fearful of unwanted turnover if they take the steps to prioritize career development in a way that supports their talent.

Because the truth is that employees are contributing to their organizations *and* balancing personal priorities, including career development. Across all populations and regions, almost three-quarters of those we surveyed indicated career development is a priority.

Career development has been a
priority for me this past year.
Percent of respondents who strongly
agree or agree with the above statement.

75% All employees

73% Individual contributors

81% People leaders

Some regional differences emerged with
this question:

88%

In the APAC region, people leaders indicated that career development is an even more significant priority.

64%

In the EMEA region, the favorable score across people leaders and individual contributors was significantly lower at **64%**, with an increased number of neutral responses to the question.

Career development impacts
engagement in my current role.
Percent of respondents who said career
impacts engagement.

81% All employees

82% Individual contributors

81% People leaders

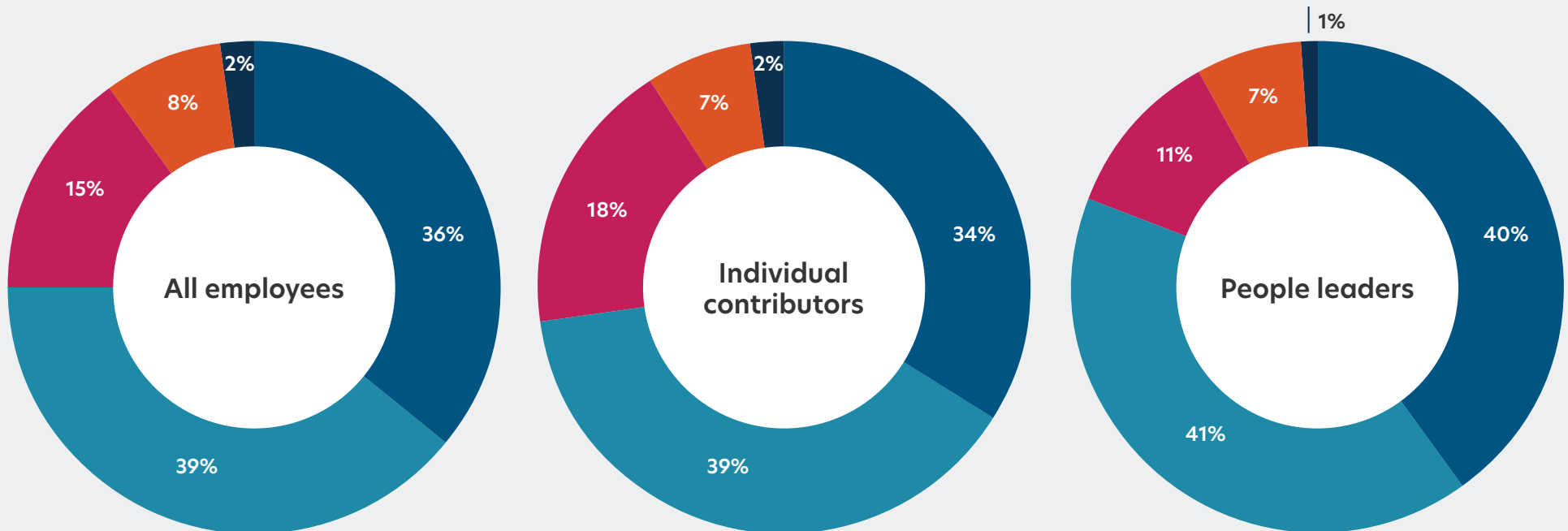
¹ Quit rates in February 2023 at 4.0 million
or 2.6% per the Bureau of Labor Statistics

Prioritizing career development

To what extent do you agree?

“Career development has been a priority this past year.”

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree



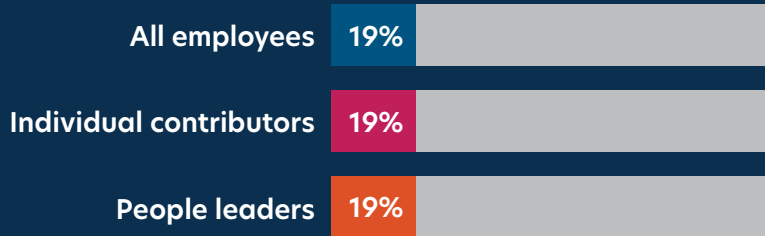
Regional differences emerged in these results as well.

Consistent with the increased prioritization of career on the part of APAC leaders, these leaders also indicated that career development impacts their engagement to a greater degree than their non-APAC counterparts. The same cannot be said for individual contributors in the APAC region who indicated career development impacts their engagement to a lesser degree than their global counterparts. In the EMEA region, nearly half of respondents indicated that career support greatly impacts engagement levels.

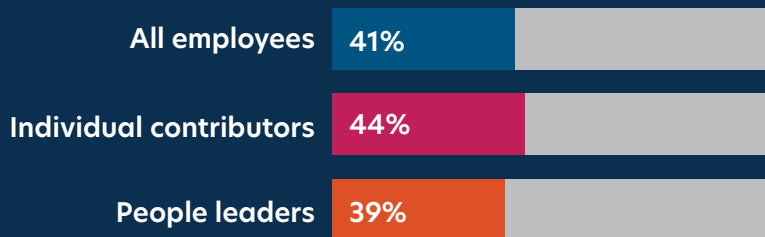
Career development impacts engagement.

How does career support impact your level of engagement?

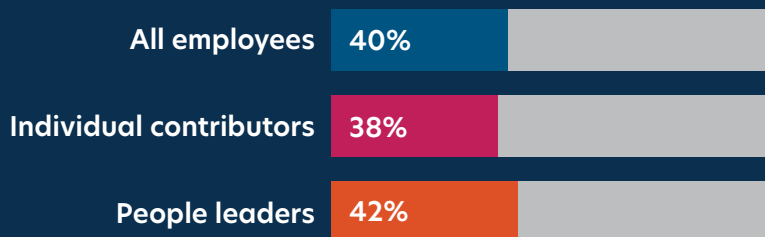
Career support has **no impact** on my level of engagement.



Career support has **some impact** on my level of engagement.



Career support **greatly adds** to my level of engagement.



It can be tempting to see the high prioritization of career as indication of a workforce focused on their own needs or a group actively working on searching for a job instead of contributing to their organization. However, over 80% of those surveyed across all levels said that career development greatly impacts their engagement in their current role. This point holds true when compared to historical data. For organizations looking for what they can do to keep their people engaged, career development is key.



Leaders can let people know they are valued by focusing on their career development. When they do, they send the message that they value their people. Prioritizing career indicates that the organization is invested in their future. It engenders a sense of connection and trust. It tells them, “You are a part of our organization, **and** we want you to do well.” This is a win-win scenario, good for the organization and employees alike.



Learn more about [GP Strategies' X-Model of Engagement](#).

Employees can stay in their current role and thrive.

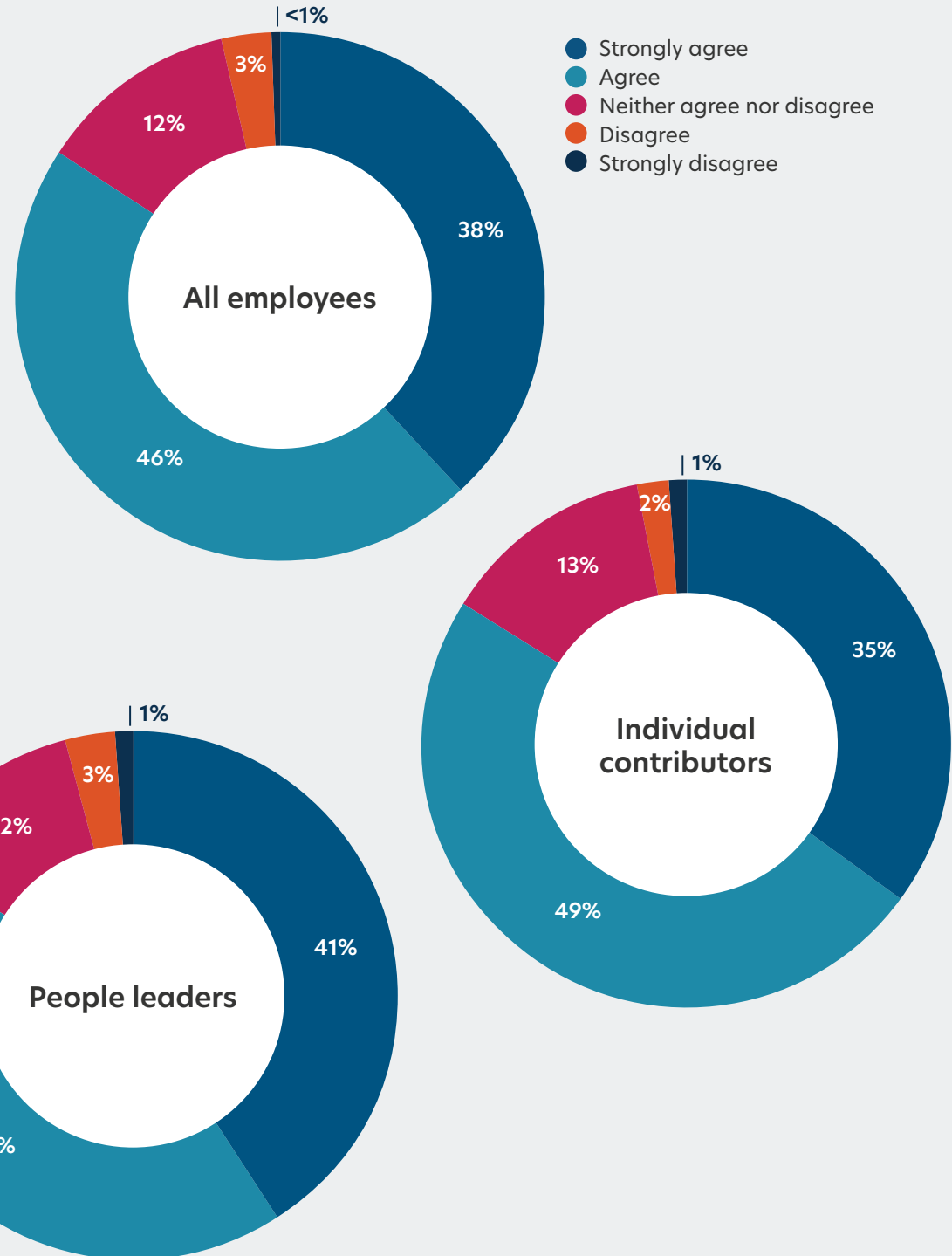
To what extent do you agree with the following?

“I don’t think there is anything wrong with staying in the same job if I can try new things or develop my skills.”

Leaning into career conversations is imperative since employees—regardless of management level or geographic region—will stay in the same job if they can get what they need and want. In fact, **84%** of respondents agree that “there is nothing wrong with staying in the same job if I can try new things or develop my skills.”

This is a critical point for leaders who are hesitant to lean into career conversations, and it’s an attitude that remains unchanged over the years as we’ve tested the notion.

While it may seem counterintuitive, **employee engagement in one’s current job increases when those employees are supported in their planning for what’s next.** If that paradox holds true, career development continues to be a powerful tool not only to drive performance and satisfaction today, but also to secure the talent organizations need for the future.



Paradox #2:

Values and strengths are important in my current job, and financial reward is important for my next job.

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When employees sit down with their managers, **61% want to talk primarily about their values and strengths and how they can do more work that satisfies them.** Values continue to play a significant role in the manager-employee conversation, outranking other factors such as previous roles and experience, level of compensation, and promotions. Additionally, historical data indicates that values have consistently been the highest priority. Nevertheless, employees today are taking a slightly more balanced approach to what's important to them—while values continue to rank first, there was increased focus on compensation and previous experience among this year's respondents.

All too often, career conversations get pushed to the side as leaders focus on deliverables, to-dos, and job performance or contribution. But contribution is only one side of the engagement equation, and **it's important not to mistake contribution for engagement.** To do so is to risk losing some of your most valuable assets. Why? Because it's possible to be contributing to the organization but not satisfied by the work that you do or your job conditions. Focusing on contribution alone without acknowledging something bigger creates a grind that frustrates and fatigues. It sets employees up for unsustainable outcomes.

When leaders understand the personal values, strengths, and desired growth areas of their employees, they get a beat on what matters to their people. Recognizing the conditions under which their people will do their best work makes it easier for leaders to identify opportunities for their development. This creates favorable and sustainable job conditions for everyone involved.



61%
indicate values and strengths
are the most important areas
of focus when discussing career
with their leaders.

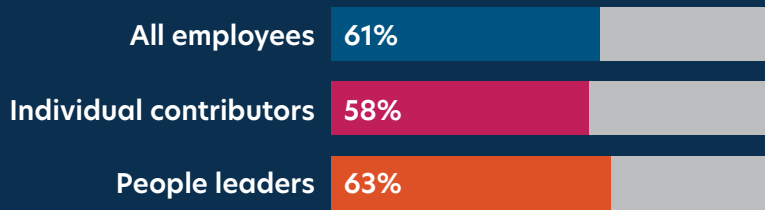
58%
of individual
contributors
indicated the
same priority.

63%
of people
leaders
indicated the
same priority.

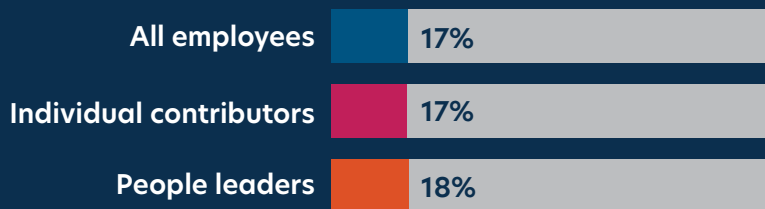
Talking about what's important

Which of the following is most important for you and your manager to get on the same page about?

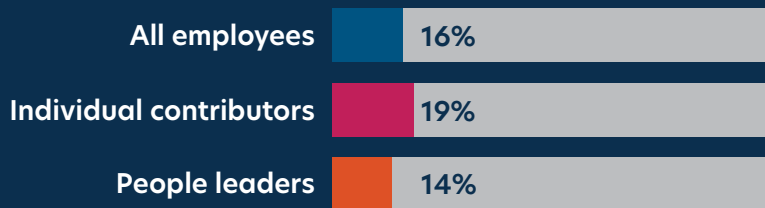
My values and strengths and how I can do more work that satisfies them.



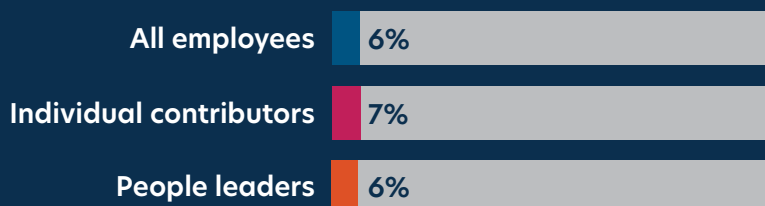
My previous experience and roles.



My level of compensation and how I can increase it.



My position and when I will get promoted.



Employees who contribute and have their personal objectives fulfilled by their work are more engaged and less likely to look for something new. So, while contribution is an obvious focal point for leader and employee interactions, talking about values and strengths lets your people know you appreciate not just what they do, but who they are. A genuine exchange between a leader and an employee about what matters most to the employee might be the most significant retention tool available.

While EMEA's and America's numbers were similar in nature, in APAC, the role of personal values was not quite as strong, and the difference between individual contributors and people leaders was wider. Individual contributors were far less likely (-8%) to indicate values as a primary driver in career discussions, with respondents instead preferring to discuss their previous experience and roles during career conversations.

In addition to the need for a focus on strengths and growth opportunities, respondents to our survey indicated that financial reward is the top factor they will look for in a new position. Are they sending a contradictory message by telling their managers that they want to talk about values and then prioritizing financial reward when they look for their next position? It's less a contradiction than a tension between two factors, both of which are true at the same time.

This is an “and, also” proposition. One element doesn't need to be sacrificed for the other. What might have once been perceived as a contradiction (“You can't have work aligned with your values and make money”) is now a reality: employees want to do work that is meaningful to them, **and** they want to be rewarded financially. Employees want to talk to you about their values **and** if they do look for a new position, they are going to make sure that new position includes more financial compensation.

What's the takeaway for leaders? Talking about what's important on a regular basis will help ensure alignment and engagement, but periodic check-ins about to compensation should not be ignored.

While individual contributors and leaders in all regions across the globe prioritized financial reward, APAC respondents placed more emphasis on promotion as a key driver, whereas non-APAC respondents emphasized interesting work as a key feature of their next role.

Top criteria
individual contributors
will look for in their
next position

1 Financial reward

2 Promotion

3 Work-life balance/
interesting work

Top criteria
people leaders
will look for in their
next position

1 Financial reward

2 Promotion

3 Work-life balance/
interesting work





Paradox #3:

Ask me what I want—
often—and tell me what
the organization wants.

Paradox #3:

Ask me what I want—often—and tell me what the organization wants.

When it comes to the frequency of career conversations, the evidence is clear: employees want to discuss their careers regularly. **More than three-quarters of respondents want to be engaging with their manager around career conversations at least quarterly.**

This number has held steady globally, encompassing both people leader and individual contributor populations, and has remained resilient over time through historical data. Unfortunately, a disparity often exists between the frequency with which people desire career conversations and the frequency with which those conversations are held.

Employees who want to discuss career quarterly or more frequently:

81% All employees

78% Individual contributors

82% People leaders

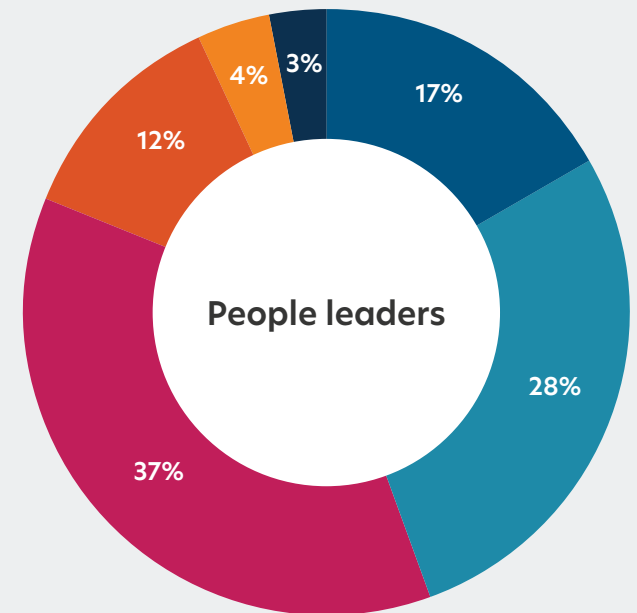
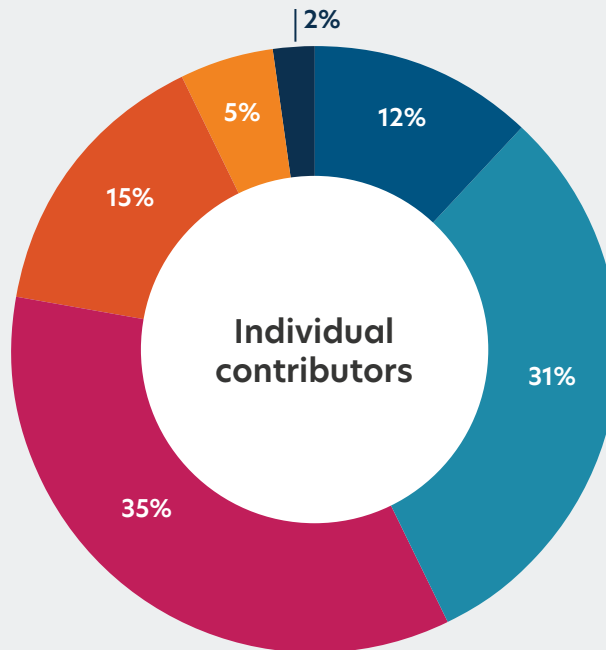
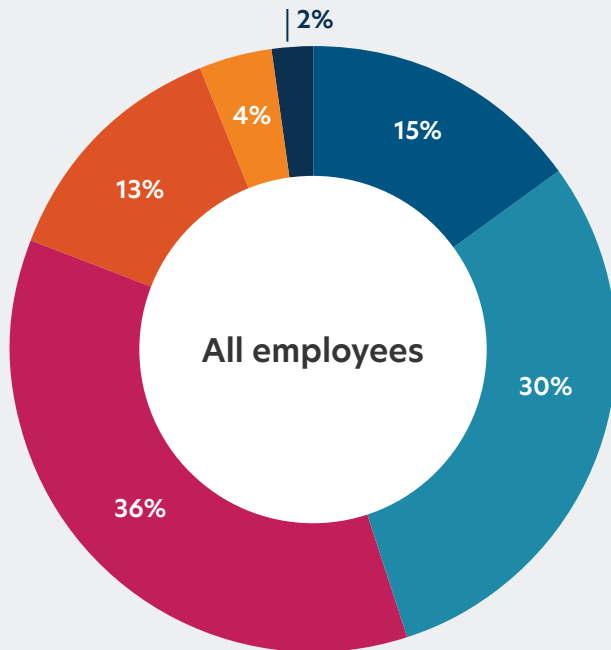
In the APAC region, leaders expressed an even stronger desire (+3%) for frequent career discussions.



Frequency of career conversations

How frequently would you like to talk to your manager about career development?


- More than once a month
- Monthly
- Quarterly
- Annually
- Never
- Other



Employees want their leader to connect them with opportunities, and if leaders in the organization have a specific idea of where they should go, employees want to know.

Not only do employees want to talk about career frequently, but an overwhelming 96% want their leader to play some role in their career development. What does that role look like?

When it comes to career development, support from people leaders means engaging in a dialogue about the things that matter to employees. Support also means making the connections between personal priorities and organizational opportunities. In fact, employees ranked “connecting me with opportunities” as the most important role leaders can play. Many respondents indicated they want leaders and organizations to make even more direct and explicit connections to new opportunities, and if the leader or organization has a bias for where they think they should go next, they want to know.

A man with a beard and a woman with curly hair are standing in a modern office, looking at a tablet together. The man is wearing an orange sweater and the woman is wearing a yellow sweater. They are both smiling and appear to be engaged in a collaborative work activity. The background shows a blurred office environment with other people working.

As leaders gain insight into the values and goals of their employees, there is an expectation that they will use that knowledge to connect their people to opportunities—opportunities that align with their strengths, talents, and interests.

People leaders are the fulcrum of opportunities.

This desire for leaders to play the role of connector is not surprising. People leaders often have a view into organizational strategy, goals, and opportunities and a critical line of sight into where jobs are or will be. At the same time, people leaders also need insight into what their people want and where they want to grow. Through regular communication, and specifically through career conversations, they gain that focus on the unique values, strengths, and aspirations of the individuals they lead. The leader's role is then to connect organizational needs with personal aspirations.

Further, employees want leaders to advocate for them, connect them to opportunities, and show them what the future can look like. The best way they can do that effectively is to be aware of what's important to each employee. This will help them reconcile organizational and individual needs when opportunities presents themselves.

Leaders are the connectors between the unique needs of employees and the broader opportunities available in the organization.



Employees need to:

- Get clear on your personal values.
- Know what job conditions are important to you.
- Clarify your work priorities.
- Identify opportunities for skill development.
- Communicate what you need.
- Keep a growth mindset.
- Own your own engagement.



People leaders need to:

- Keep a clear line of sight into opportunities.
- Advocate for your people.
- Understand what is important to each team member.
- Engage in regular dialogue.
- Share talent for the greater good.
- Clear obstacles to development.
- Own your own engagement—one dead battery can't jumpstart another!



Organizations establish:

- Proper compensation that aligns with market value.
- New job opportunities.
- Stretch assignments.
- Cross-functional projects.
- Training and development.
- Provide mentorships.
- Create a work environment with a clearly defined mission/vision/values.
- Ensure people have the tools they need to do their best work.
- Encourage a culture of feedback and coaching.

Finally, much like the role compensation played in our respondents' motivation for their next job, compensation also emerged as an important element in an employee's career discussion with their leader. When compared to our prior research on the topic, compensation is a rising priority for many people when engaging in career discussions with their leaders. This vividly illustrates that, **while compensation is not the first priority, it is an issue not to be ignored.**



Paradox #4:

My current priorities
prevent me from prioritizing
my development.

Paradox #4:

My current priorities prevent me from prioritizing my development.

Fewer than half of respondents indicated that they are spending the **right amount of time** on their career, an indication that there is a lot of room for improvement. And an investment in an employee's development pays dividends for the organization and the individual alike.

What that investment looks like has everything to do with what's most important to that individual. When asked about whether or not they would take advantage of professional development opportunities if they were available to them, our respondents were eager for more. Almost three-quarters of people leaders and 70% of individual contributors said that they are likely or very likely to take advantage of development opportunities.



Employees who say they are spending the right amount of time on their development:

43% All employees

38% Individual contributors

49% People leaders

Employees who are likely or very likely to take advantage of development opportunities:

74% All employees

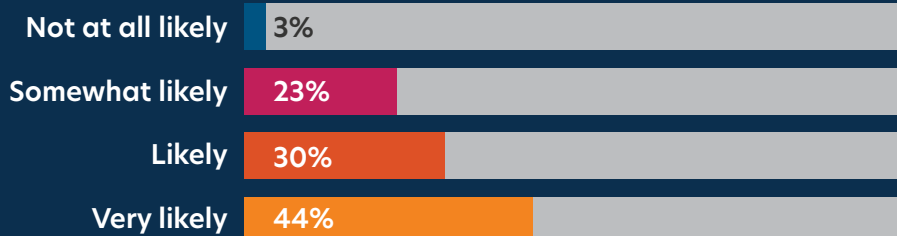
70% Individual contributors

78% People leaders

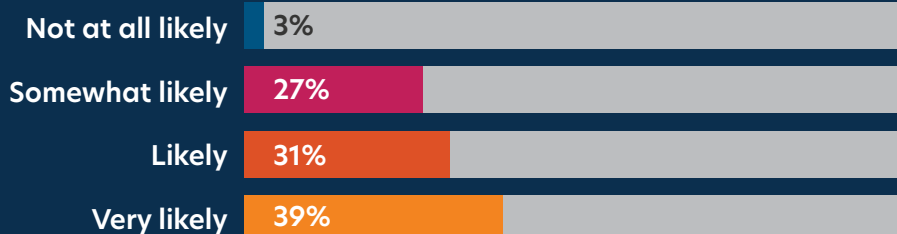
Development opportunities

If your organization offered professional development opportunities to you, how likely would you be to take advantage of them?

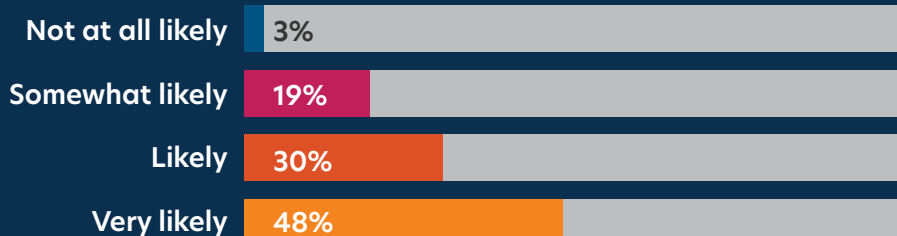
All employees



Individual contributors



People leaders



What's holding them back?
Lack of time and competing priorities are the top two factors.

Individual contributors in the APAC region were slightly less likely to indicate they would take advantage of development opportunities when compared to both people leaders in the same region and individual contributors across the globe.

Supporting career development can be an uphill battle—particularly when it’s viewed as an extra, a nice-to-have, or as being out of alignment with an organization’s overall strategy. Until there is a paradigm shift in which organizations and people leaders view development as integral to the organization’s agenda, formal and informal development will fall prey to the excuse, “I don’t have time” and “I have too many other things going on.”

Creating a culture of development, while desirable, isn't easy. Leaders can step in and be supportive, but only if they recognize the value in doing so.

What employees are saying:

And also, they are saying this:



Important questions still remain:

- What can you do to clear hurdles that prevent employees from attending formal training opportunities?
- What are the ways you can focus on on-the-job skill development?
- How can you shift mindsets and encourage your team to learn from each other?

Individuals	People leaders	Organizations
<p>Reflect on your values—know what’s most important to you.</p> <p>Think about job conditions—what are the circumstances under which you do your best work?</p> <p>Speak up—engage in a dialogue about what’s important to you in your job.</p> <p>Keep a growth mindset—take advantage of new opportunities when they present themselves.</p> <p>Prioritize your development—know what obstacles you need to be cleared to give you enough time for career and professional development.</p>	<p>Keep an organizational mindset—be aware of what opportunities exist.</p> <p>Don’t be a hoarder—share talent for the greater good of the organization.</p> <p>Understand your people— know what’s important to them, like their values and what interesting work looks like from their perspective.</p> <p>Engage in conversation—performance, career, and engagement conversations should take place regularly.</p> <p>Clear obstacles—remove barriers that might get in the way of development opportunities.</p> <p>Support and advocate—encourage the pursuit of development and be a champion for your people in terms of compensation, opportunities, stretch assignments, etc.</p>	<p>Communicate values—be clear on what the organization stands for so people know if their values are aligned with yours.</p> <p>Establish a performance review process—ensure this process is fair, clear, and consistent.</p> <p>Invest in programmatic support—make training, workshops, coaching, and mentorship opportunities broadly available.</p> <p>Create equitable and transparent access—provide and communicate clearly new opportunities and chances for growth.</p> <p>Hold leaders accountable—ensure people leaders engage individual contributors in meaningful career conversations.</p>



Conclusion

The critical impact of career development and career conversations between leaders and their employees is not new; the need for career discussions with a focus on what's important to employees has not changed. What **has** changed is the way employees are looking at what they want out of their careers. The amplification of personal values, the availability of opportunities, and a generation who isn't afraid to use their voice means employees are speaking up about what they want. But are leaders listening? Employees want to fulfill their desire for interesting and meaningful work, **and** they want compensation. They want to talk to their leaders regularly, **and** they want their leaders to tell them if they see a good fit in the organization for their talents and interests. They want to talk about what's next **and** remain engaged in the work they are doing right now.

Talent retention and career development top the list of priorities for all levels of leaders in so many industries. From the C-suite to the frontline, leaders recognize that talent is their most important and valuable asset, and they articulate that retention and engagement are critical priorities. Now it's time to prioritize career development as an organizational imperative and a key to retaining those valuable assets.

A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor, but how can people leaders prepare and take the helm of a paradox-driven workforce?

By talking to their people about the opportunities they have today and their growth and development potential for tomorrow.

When career conversations are embraced, leaders and organizations needn't be as worried about attrition and quiet quitting. Embracing a dialogue around career allows employees, leaders, and the organization to see the brighter skies that lead to both contribution and satisfaction while setting sail for an engaged culture of meaningful work.

Meet the experts

Katy Bailey

Senior Product Lead, Leadership Development | GP Strategies

Katy Bailey is a learning strategist, consultant and thought leader in the field of leadership development. Her career has always involved training and education in some form—from public health outreach and higher education to her current role in corporate learning. Katy holds Master's degrees in Organization Development (University of San Francisco) and Higher Education Administration (Canisius College), as well as a SHRM-CP credential.

Leah Clark

Principal | LeaderConnect

Leah Clark is a thought leader, author, and founder of LeaderConnect. She is also an extended member of the GP Strategies team. She researches, writes, and speaks on the topic of leadership and has written several articles and research reports including pieces on authentic leadership communication, leading during uncertainty, leadership mindsets, and the impact of introversion and mindfulness on innovation. Leah holds a Master of Arts in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in English and Sociology from Boston College.

Special thanks for contributions to this report:

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Mike Shoenfelt
Emily Vogel
Nancy Williams

GP Strategies conducted the research by applying an online data collection methodology between December 5, 2022 - February 17, 2023. Overall, 2,128 responses were received. 1,313 of those respondents identified themselves as individual contributors and 815 identified themselves as people leaders.

1,387 responses came from the APAC region (65%), and 141 from EMEA (7%), and 600 (28%) came from the Americas region.



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