

RESEARCH REPORT

THE PRICE OF SUCCESS: NAVIGATING THE TRADE-OFFS THAT SHAPE CAREER GROWTH



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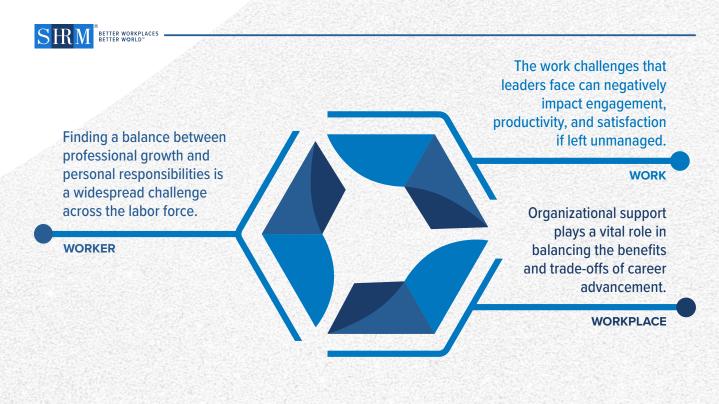
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INTRODUCTION

Career advancement is often seen as a key driver of both professional and personal development. It serves as a powerful motivator for individuals to enhance their skills, embrace new challenges, and unlock their full potential. Workplace advancement can also provide added financial stability for many, offering opportunities for higher salaries and enhanced benefits.

The ever-evolving workforce includes a diverse range of workers, from early professionals to established leaders. Not only can understanding potential and existing challenges in career progression help organizations mitigate challenges threatening employee well-being and retention, but it can also help employers provide support to employees who are eager to advance in their careers. Though the benefits of career advancement can be rewarding, advancement can also come at a price. As employees move into more-senior roles, they are commonly faced with a variety of trade-offs or sacrifices that can impact both their personal and professional lives.

These sacrifices are a natural part of professional growth, but they often can be difficult to navigate without adequate support, and organizations play a pivotal role in preparing their workforce to manage these complex challenges effectively. By fostering an environment that acknowledges, welcomes, and helps workers navigate these challenges, organizations can enhance the employee experience and facilitate the continuous professional development of their workforce, resulting in positive growth for their organization. Considering this, SHRM conducted a survey of 2,249 U.S. workers at the levels of individual contributor, manager or supervisor, and director or higher to explore the various trade-offs involved in career progression and identify key strategies for organizations to support their workforce as they climb the career ladder.



THE PRICE OF SUCCESS: NAVIGATING THE TRADE-OFFS THAT SHAPE CAREER GROWTH

KEY FINDINGS

- 1. Financial rewards and compensation, work/life balance and family time, and opportunities for professional growth and development are the top priorities of employees' career advancement decisions. Individual contributors tended to place a moderate or high value on financial rewards and compensation, but the influence of monetary incentives on career decisions began to wane in favor of leadership opportunities and influence as employees moved into management and director-level roles. Directors and above were four times more likely to value leadership opportunities and influence compared to individual contributors (16% versus 4%), highlighting how priorities evolve with career progression.
- 2. Personal sacrifices frequently accompany professional advancement. As professionals progress in their careers, they often reported making a range of personal sacrifices. The most common sacrifices included working longer hours than they preferred (63%), spending less time on leisure activities and hobbies (50%), neglecting self-care (39%), and spending less time with family (36%). Female directors and above were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to say they have worked longer hours than they'd like (71% versus 60%), spent less time on self-care (46% versus 30%), spent less time with family (39% versus 32%), and neglected their physical health (41% versus 25%).
- 3. Professionals often prioritize their career ambitions at the expense of their health and well-being. Nearly half of workers agreed that their physical health (47%) and mental health (45%) have been negatively impacted by their career advancement. When asked to reflect on the sacrifices they have made for career advancement, about 3 in 5 employees said that they would not be willing to neglect their physical health (59%) or mental health (57%) again if given the chance.
- 4. Robust organizational support plays a vital role in mitigating the negative effects of career sacrifices. Mentorships and sponsorships, leadership development resources, and supportive supervisors and senior leaders were linked with higher motivation to push forward in the face of career adversity. Notably, employees who had a mentor or sponsor were 1.5 times more likely to say they felt strongly motivated to overcome career obstacles compared to those who did not have a mentor or sponsor (54% versus 35%).
- 5. Many leaders still face considerable challenges in their roles despite meeting career-level milestones. For instance, 1 in 5 directors and above (20%) reported difficulty in confiding in others about their struggles at work. Similar amounts reported feeling like they cannot make mistakes at work without major scrutiny (20%) and lacking sufficient guidance and support for their ongoing career development (19%).



UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS THAT DRIVE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Career aspirations serve as a powerful driving force behind an individual's professional decisions and career trajectories. These aspirations, shaped by personal ambition and organizational culture, influence not only the paths individuals choose, but also the determination and resilience with which they pursue their goals. Workers' aspirations can include achieving leadership positions and finding a meaningful balance between their work and personal lives.

What is the highest job level you aspire to achieve in your career?

Aspirational Level → Current Level +	Individual contributor	Manager	Director	Senior, managing, or executive director	Vice president	C-suite officer	CEO or president	Percentage who aspire to a higher- level job
Individual contributor	49%	26%	9%	6%	3%	2%	5%	51%
Manager	_	38%	18%	25%	8%	2%	8%	61%
Director	_	-	35%	22%	22%	11%	10%	65%
Senior, managing, or executive director	_	-	-	36%	22%	22%	20%	64%
Vice president	-	-	-	_	46%	30%	24%	54%
C-suite officer (excluding CEO or president)	-	-	-	_	-	57%	43%	43%

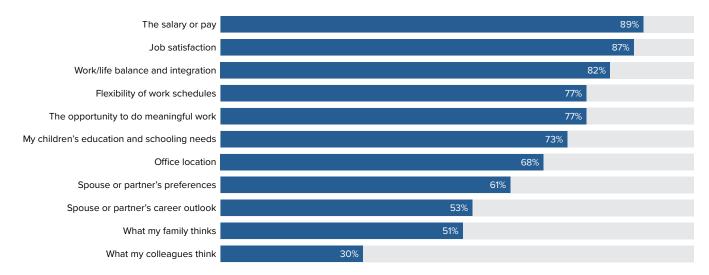
Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: n=2,249. Blue highlights denote those that did not report aspiring to a higher-level job. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Workers said a wide variety of considerations factor into their career advancement decisions, including salary, the opportunity to do meaningful work, and their partner's or family's opinions. However, workers reported that the most influential of these factors were salary, job satisfaction, and work/life balance and integration, with **89%** of workers sharing that salary has a moderate or high influence, followed by job satisfaction (**87%**), and work/life balance and integration (**82%**). These top three influences stand out due to their potential for impact on employees' personal lives, underscoring the impact that personal lives have on employees' professional decision-making. Notably, directors and above were significantly more likely to say that job satisfaction had a high level of influence on their decision-making (**54%**) compared to individual contributors (**45%**) and managers and supervisors (**51%**).

Workers are largely influenced by salary, job satisfaction, and work/life balance and integration when making career decisions.

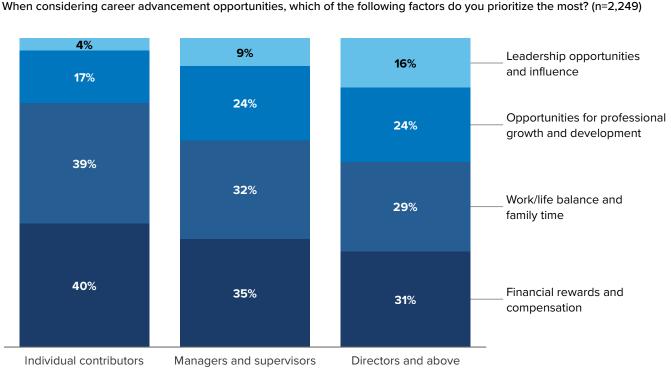
Which factors have moderate or high influence on your decision-making when it comes to career advancement opportunities?



Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: n=2,249. The spouse or partner questions were only asked to respondents with a spouse or partner (n=1,362). The children's education question was only asked to respondents who are a parent or guardian of a child under 18 (n=927).

Overall, when considering career advancement opportunities, financial rewards and compensation served as the top priority for employees who are looking to advance. Women were significantly more likely to prioritize work/life balance and family time compared to men (35% versus 30%). Notably, as workers progressed from individual contributors to director-level roles, their prioritization of financial rewards and work/life balance and integration began to steadily decrease while their prioritization of opportunities for professional growth and development as well as leadership opportunities and influence steadily increased. This shift goes to show that as employees climb the career ladder, they begin to place a higher emphasis on workplace opportunities that enhance their skills and continued growth in their careers.



Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

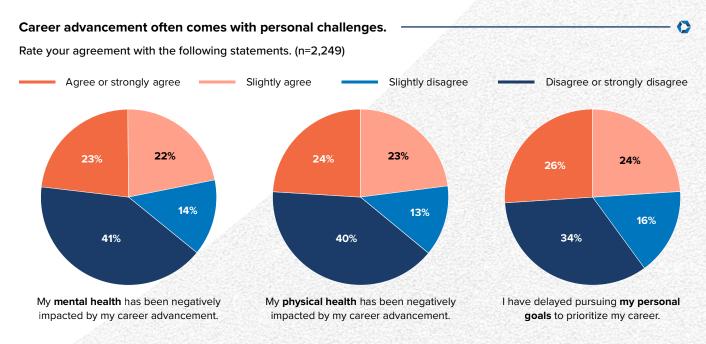
Workers carefully evaluate the elements that shape their career paths, often prioritizing opportunities that align with their personal values and professional goals. When key factors such as growth, flexibility, or meaningful benefits are absent, these opportunities may lose their appeal or workers may feel compelled to seek roles elsewhere. To effectively offer support, organizations must understand the values that employees hold when making career decisions. By tailoring opportunities based on what employees prioritize at different job levels, organizations can create environments in which employees feel valued and equipped to succeed at any stage of their careers.

As workers' job levels change, so do their priorities.



THE PRICE OF SUCCESS: MAKING TRADE-OFFS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

As people progress in their careers, they are often required to make trade-offs that impact their personal lives and overall well-being. The demands of higher-level positions typically result in increased workloads and responsibilities, leaving less time for personal interests and work/life integration. This can lead to heightened stress levels and a sense of imbalance as workers struggle to meet the expectations of both their personal and professional lives. Understanding the sacrifices employees often make for their career progression is crucial for organizations aiming to provide the necessary tools and support to help employees manage these challenges effectively.



Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Nearly half of workers said that their career advancement has negatively impacted their mental health (45%) and physical health (47%), and this impact is significantly more pronounced among women, with 52% saying their mental health has been adversely impacted compared to 42% of men. These trade-offs are even more pronounced as employees move up the career ladder. Directors and above were significantly more likely than individual contributors to agree or strongly agree that their physical health has been negatively impacted by their career advancement (26% versus 20%). They were also more likely to agree or strongly agree that they have delayed pursuing their personal goals for career advancement (29%) compared to individual contributors (27%) and managers (18%).

When workers were asked about the trade-offs they have made to advance their careers, over 3 in 5 (63%) said that they have worked longer hours than they would have preferred and 1 in 2 (50%) said that they spent less time on leisure activities and personal hobbies. Notably, female directors and above were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to have spent less time on leisure activities and hobbies, less time with family, and less time on self-care; to have worked longer hours than they preferred; and to have neglected their physical and mental health.

Which of the following have you done so that you could focus more on your career advancement? — 🌔

	Overall	Men	Women
1. Worked longer hours than I would have liked	63%	59%	67%
2. Spent less time on leisure activities and hobbies	50%	48%	52%
3. Spent less time with friends	49%	48%	50%
4. Spent less time on self-care	39%	30%	48%
5. Spent less time with family	36%	33%	40%
6. Neglected mental health (e.g., increased stress or burnout)	36%	27%	45%
7. Neglected physical health (e.g., less physical activity or unhealthy eating habits)	35%	26%	44%
8. Missed an important milestone (e.g., a birthday or anniversary)	22%	20%	24%
9. Engaged in behaviors that conflict with my personal values	11%	12%	11%

Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: n=2,249.



REFLECTIONS: WOULD THEY DO IT AGAIN?

Workers reflected on the trade-offs they made to advance in their careers, recognizing that such decisions are often unavoidable in the pursuit of professional growth. Yet, these trade-offs are not inherently negative, especially when approached thoughtfully or with the right support systems in place. When evaluating whether the professional gains justified the personal costs, many workers expressed a willingness to make similar choices again, but often with reservations, underscoring the value they place on career advancement and the understanding that trade-offs are often inevitable. Their insights highlight the intricate balance between career ambitions and well-being, shedding light on the ongoing dialogue surrounding work/life integration.

For organizations, these insights carry key implications. Certain trade-offs are part of climbing the career ladder, but this does not absolve employers of the responsibility to create environments in which those trade-offs are reasonable and sustainable. To retain top talent and foster long-term productivity, organizations must prioritize employee well-being. This means offering tangible support and fostering a workplace culture that validates balance over burnout. By doing so, businesses not only align with workers' evolving expectations but also demonstrate their commitment to fostering a sustainable and inclusive future of work.

Of the **nearly two-thirds** of workers who said they have worked longer hours than they prefer, **82**% said they were willing to make this trade-off again, though **47**% have some reservations doing so.

Work longer hours than I would like (n=1,414) 35% 14% 47% Spend less time on leisure activities and hobbies (n=1,122) 29% 43% 21% 7% Spend less time with friends (n=1,103) 27% 46% 21% Spend less time on self-care (n=881) 22% 29% 13% 37% Spend less time with family (n=817) 15% 37% 32% 17% Neglect my physical health (n=780) 15% 27% 39% 20% Neglect my mental health (n=801) 14% 30% 35% Yes, without a doubt Yes, with some reservations Probably not Definitely not

Many participants are willing to make the same trade-offs again, but often with reservations. Reflecting on the following actions you've done to advance in your career, would you do them again if given the chance?

Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: Participants were only asked about actions they said they have done to advance in their careers. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Many workers expressed willingness to make the same trade-offs again, but more than half said that they would probably or definitely not neglect their physical health (59%) or mental health (57%) again if given the chance, highlighting the value that workers put on protecting their health and well-being.

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HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN SOFTEN THE IMPACT OF TRADE-OFFS

Some of these trade-offs are inevitable due to the demands of advancing into higher-level positions, but there are opportunities for organizations to offer better benefits and support that can help workers feel more at ease and comfortable making these decisions. As such, it is critical for organizations to demonstrate a willingness to address and support employees in making these trade-offs by ensuring the perceived gains outweigh the costs. Some trade-offs can be made more attractive by increasing tangible rewards such as salary, benefits, or job security, but there are others that even financial incentives cannot address. For example, sacrifices such as missing important life events or having limited family time can present challenges that are not easily addressed through financial rewards alone. Understanding what professionals deem as worthwhile outcomes provides valuable insights into how organizations can align their support with employees' values and goals. Salary increases, better benefits and compensation packages, opportunities for personal growth and learning, and greater job security or job stability were among the front-runners of outcomes that would make workers feel more comfortable making these trade-offs.

Workers are more willing to make certain trade-offs for career progression in exchange for — higher salaries and better benefits and compensation.

	Salary increases	Better benefits and compensation	Opportunities for personal growth and learning	Greater job security or stability		
Trade-offs:	Percentage who said the above outcomes would make them more willing to make these trade-offs:					
Work longer hours	86%	61%	50%	52%		
Make a longer commute	85%	61%	48%	53%		
Increase frequency of work- related travel	84%	60%	48%	49%		
Do things outside of my comfort zone	83%	61%	51%	49%		
Sacrifice time from my hobbies	82%	54%	39%	41%		
Endure higher levels of job-related stress	76%	51%	40%	42%		
Sacrifice my time for self-care	74%	43%	31%	34%		
Sacrifice the amount of time I spend with my family	65%	31%	26%	25%		
Miss important milestones	57%	28%	21%	23%		

Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

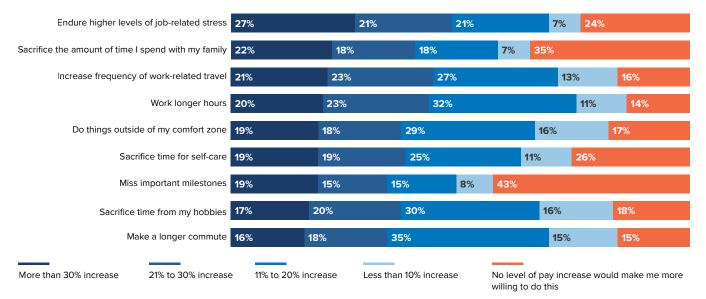
Note: These options were shown to respondents who did not say they were "very willing" to make each trade-off.

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Although salary increases were generally seen as the most effective in mitigating the impact of employees making personal sacrifices, workers' feelings on the range of salary increases varied across the trade-offs they were willing to make for career progression.

Salary increases can ease the impact of the sacrifices employees make to advance in their careers. —— 🛟

How much of a pay raise would be necessary to make you more willing to consider doing the following?



Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025. Note: Participants were only asked about actions they did not report being "very willing" to make. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

These findings suggest that salary and financial compensation have a major influence on decisionmaking, and while it is essential for organizations to adjust financial rewards to reflect added responsibilities, monetary incentives alone are not enough to address all employee concerns. Despite competitive salaries, many employees remain hesitant to fully engage in certain tasks or make certain trade-offs, such as missing important milestones (e.g., birthdays and anniversaries) or sacrificing time spent with family. This hesitancy highlights that organizations must also prioritize nonmonetary factors such as work/life balance and integration and fostering a supportive workplace culture. These elements, when combined with financial compensation, create a more comprehensive strategy to enhance employee satisfaction, drive engagement, and build workforce resilience.



OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

When leaders at the director level and above were asked about some of the challenges they have faced in their current leadership position, **1 in 5** shared that they are unable to confide in others about their struggles at work (**20%**) and that they cannot make mistakes at work without major scrutiny (**20%**). This highlights that in addition to providing support to employees aspiring to climb up the career ladder, further support is needed to ensure their continued success once they are in these roles.

What are some challenges you have faced in your current position?

Overall		Men		Women		
1. Inability to confide in others about my struggles at work	20%	1. I cannot make mistakes at work without major scrutiny	20%	1. Inability to confide in others about my struggles at work	22%	
2. I cannot make mistakes at work without major scrutiny	20%	2. Inability to confide in others about my struggles at work	19%	2. Lack of female representation in leadership roles	20%	
3. Lack of guidance and support for my career development	19%	3. Lack of guidance and support for my career development	18%	3. Others take credit for my work or my ideas	20%	
4. Others take credit for my work or my ideas	18%	4. Loneliness or isolation from others at work	17%	4. I cannot make mistakes at work without major scrutiny	20%	
5. Loneliness or isolation from others at work	17%	5. Others take credit for my work or my ideas	16%	5. Lack of guidance and support for my career development	19%	

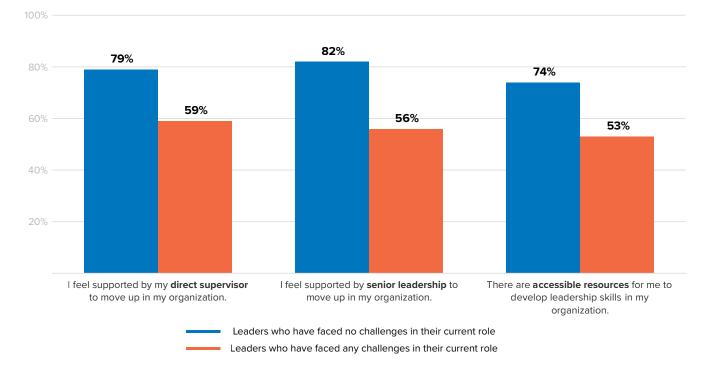
Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: Results based on responses from 856 U.S. workers in director or higher roles; 37% responded "none of the above" when presented with the list of challenges.

Leader loneliness is a common issue encountered by those in director and above roles, who often find themselves isolated in their leadership struggles with few peers to share their experiences. The research showed that **1 in 5** directors and above (**20%**) grapple with the inability to confide in colleagues about workplace challenges, with **17%** experiencing feelings of loneliness or isolation.



Despite feeling the pressures of holding senior leadership roles, those who agreed or strongly agreed that they feel supported by their direct supervisor or senior leadership or have access to resources to develop their leadership skills were significantly more likely than those with lower levels of organizational support to say that they have not experienced any of these challenges. This finding underscores the importance of leadership support in bolstering the confidence of those in director and above roles by providing them with the tools necessary to navigate the challenges that can come with added responsibilities. As a result, these leaders are better prepared to handle adversity and the organization gains a resilient leader who thrives in the face of challenges.



Leaders who receive organizational support are less likely to face challenges in their current roles. —— 🗘

Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: n=856. Bars reflect the percentage of leaders who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the three statements regarding organizational support.

Having organizational support doesn't just benefit those at higher job levels, however — it also benefits other workers who face adversity in the workplace not related to management or leadership roles. Individual contributors, managers, and supervisors also reported higher levels of resilience when feeling supported by their organizations. When asked about potential challenges they will or have encountered, nearly half of employees (47%) said they feel strongly motivated to persevere through career adversity.



Support from direct supervisors and senior leadership proved to be an effective source of motivation, re-emphasizing the idea that fostering a supportive work environment nurtures resilience in the workforce. Regardless of job level, those who agreed or strongly agreed that they feel supported by their direct supervisor or senior leadership were significantly more likely to say they feel strongly motivated to push forward compared to those who said they strongly disagreed, disagreed, or only slightly agreed that they feel supported.



There are accessible resources for me to develop leadership skills in my organization.

	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%
I feel strongly motivated to push forward	4				
heer strongly motivated to push forward		30%		51%	

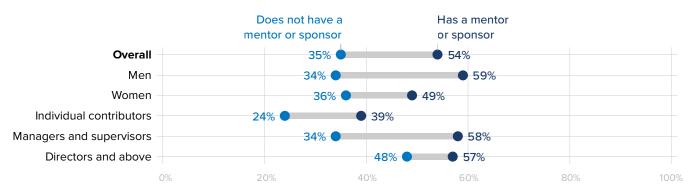
Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

Note: n=2,249. Agree NET refers to those who slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed. Disagree NET refers to those who slightly disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

MENTORSHIPS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Supervisors play an essential role in providing day-to-day support and resources to help employees overcome challenges and perform at their best. However, mentorships and sponsorships offer a more formalized layer of guidance that can supplement supervisory support. Employees who have a mentor or a sponsor were significantly more likely to say they feel strongly motivated to overcome barriers compared to those who do not have a mentor or sponsor (54% versus 35%), highlighting the impact of career guidance and backing in helping employees navigate workplace challenges and fostering an environment conducive to professional growth.





Those who said they were "strongly motivated" to push forward when thinking about overcoming career challenges. (n=2,249)

Source: The Price of Success: Navigating the Trade-Offs That Shape Career Growth, SHRM, 2025.

According to SHRM Linkage,

"A mentorship is typically an informal program in which employees will share their knowledge with a co-worker. Sponsorships are formal programs in which sponsors are matched with rising leaders with the express purpose of advancing the person's career. Instead of just sharing knowledge, sponsors use their power for their 'sponsee.'"

Having a mentor or sponsor who is dedicated to investing their time, expertise, and network in an employee plays a critical role in building that employee's confidence. By sharing a wealth of knowledge and experience, mentors and sponsors offer an invaluable resource in developing leadership skills among professionals climbing the career ladder. Their belief in those whom they mentor and sponsor serves as a morale booster and empowers their mentees and sponsees to strive for and achieve their career goals while overcoming any obstacles that may arise.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

As individuals advance in their careers, sacrifices are often inevitable. It may not be possible to eliminate the need to make trade-offs, but there are strategies that organizations can employ to mitigate some of the effects of these trade-offs on their employees.

Engage employees through leadership support and mentorship opportunities.

As employees progress in their careers, they encounter new challenges and personal trade-offs, often facing heightened scrutiny and pressure that can impact their mental and physical well-being. Supportive supervisors and leaders play a vital role in addressing these demands, providing guidance and a sense of security that helps employees feel valued and understood. Direct support from leadership helps ease these pressures, while mentorship and sponsorship programs offer essential strategies for prioritization and achieving balance. By establishing these initiatives, organizations empower employees to manage the stress of career advancement and sustain a healthy work/life balance. Regular engagement, such as personalized check-ins, further helps employees navigate the sacrifices often associated with growth, reducing burnout and building resilience. This support ensures employees are better prepared to handle the challenges of advancing roles while maintaining their overall well-being.

Ensure employees have accessible resources for leadership development opportunities.

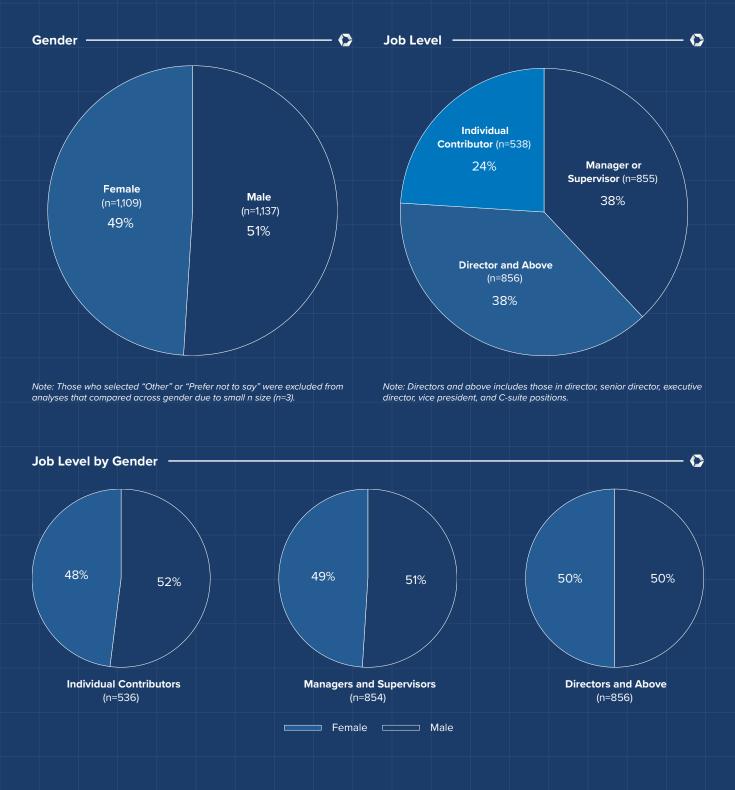
Accessible leadership development resources are crucial for empowering employees to embrace career advancement while managing its associated trade-offs. As individuals move into senior roles, they require enhanced skills and competencies to manage increased responsibilities. By offering comprehensive leadership development programs, organizations equip employees with the tools they need to thrive, reducing the negative impacts of these transitions on their personal lives. Continuous learning opportunities help employees feel more confident in taking on new challenges, fostering a sense of accomplishment and well-being. This proactive approach not only supports career growth but also minimizes the personal sacrifices that employees may face, creating a more balanced and sustainable career trajectory.

Offer tailored support to senior-level employees.

Tailored support for senior-level employees is essential for sustaining leadership effectiveness and driving organizational success. It is important to guide employees as they advance up the career ladder, but it is also critical for organizations to acknowledge that directors and above need continued support as they face distinct challenges such as leader loneliness and the high-stakes pressure to avoid making mistakes. Personalized support, whether through executive mentorship or leadership development programs, empowers these leaders to communicate and perform at their best. By meeting their unique needs, organizations stand to gain not only more confident leaders but also employee trust as staff feel assured that organizations are making investments in their people.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

A total of 2,249 U.S. workers were surveyed in June and July 2024 using a third-party survey panel. Of the 1,109 female workers, 256 were employed at the individual contributor level, 423 at the manager or supervisor level, and 430 at the director level or above. Of the 1,137 male workers, 280 were employed at the individual contributor level, 431 at the manager or supervisor level, and 426 at the director level or above. A total of three respondents indicated "Other" or "Prefer not to say" for their gender. These respondents were included in the overall analysis but were excluded from gender-based comparisons.





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