The Post-Absence Experience Is in the Eye of the Beholder

Diverging Views of Return-to-Work Challenges Could Impact Employee Outcomes and Retention



Helping employees return to work productively after a leave is an important goal for employers. But HR leaders and employees don't always see post-leave challenges the same way. New research from The Standard shows that HR professionals are more likely to identify women and younger generations as struggling with issues such as caregiving, work schedules and engagement. Employees identify many of the same challenges, but they don't always agree on who is most affected. Employers who consider both HR and employee perspectives can better equip themselves to improve loyalty, satisfaction and reintegration outcomes.

TheStandard®

Insights

Achieve Stronger Return-to-Work Results by Leveraging Multiple Viewpoints

Looking at return-to-work experiences through both the HR and employee lenses reveals new opportunities to support employees after leave. Understanding where perspectives differ can better position organizations to create more effective return-to-work experiences, which could increase loyalty and retention.

Key Findings:

HR decision-makers and employees often identify the same return-to-work challenges. But they don't always agree on who is most affected.

- **HR leaders see a larger gender gap in return-to-work challenges than employees do.** Across issues such as caregiving, stigma and stress, HR professionals say women struggle more than men. Employees identify many of the same trends, but they see a much narrower gender gap.
- **HR professionals view return-to-work difficulties as more concentrated among younger generations than employees do.** When it comes to engagement, work schedules and work-life balance, HR professionals say Generation Z and millennials struggle more than older workers. Employees believe these challenges are more evenly distributed across generations.
- **Overall, employees and HR recognize reintegration as a significant return-to-work challenge across the workforce.** The study reveals greater alignment between HR and workforce groups when it comes to perceived return-to-work difficulties, especially across workplace generations. This finding signals that companies should focus more attention on reintegration for all populations.

> **Employers invest significant time and resources in supporting employees while they're on leave. But what happens after they return is just as important. Understanding how employees experience the transition back to work can help organizations create a stronger and more supportive return-to-work experience."**

Dottie Tieslau,
Assistant Vice President
Policyholder Services
The Standard



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The first day back is only the beginning.

Return-to-work support is likely an underutilized opportunity.



Observation 1

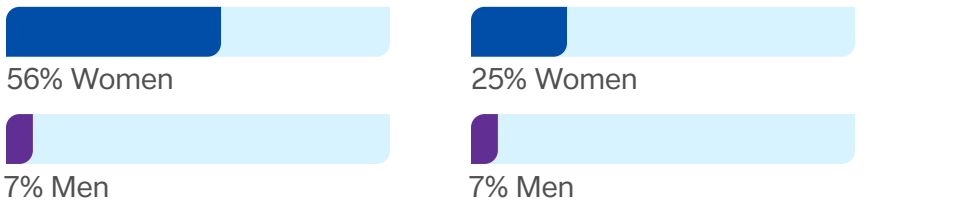
HR leaders believe women struggle more with return-to-work challenges than employees do.

How big is the gender gap in return-to-work challenges? It depends on who you ask. HR leaders view women as more likely than men to face challenges after a leave. Employees also see women as more likely to struggle than men, but to a much smaller degree. The differences in perception stand out when it comes to caregiving, workplace stigma and stress.

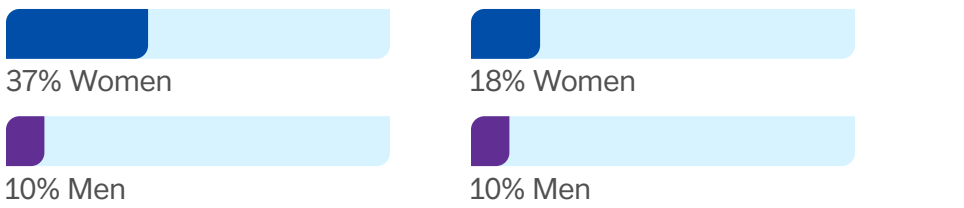
> **Just getting back into the routine of things. I was exhausted from caregiving and then went straight back into work with no break in between. It's tiring mentally and physically."**
>
> *43-year-old woman working in business/professional services at an organization of fewer than 50 employees*

HR decision-makers say that women struggle with return-to-work challenges more than men. But employees see a much narrower gender gap.

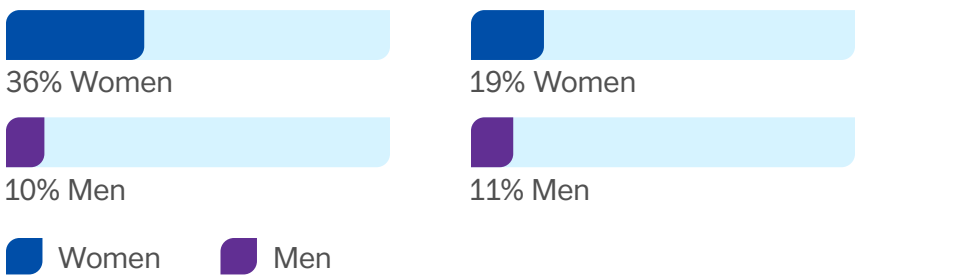
Difficulties With Caregiving Needs



Difficulties With Stigma



Difficulties With Stress or Fatigue



Reflections

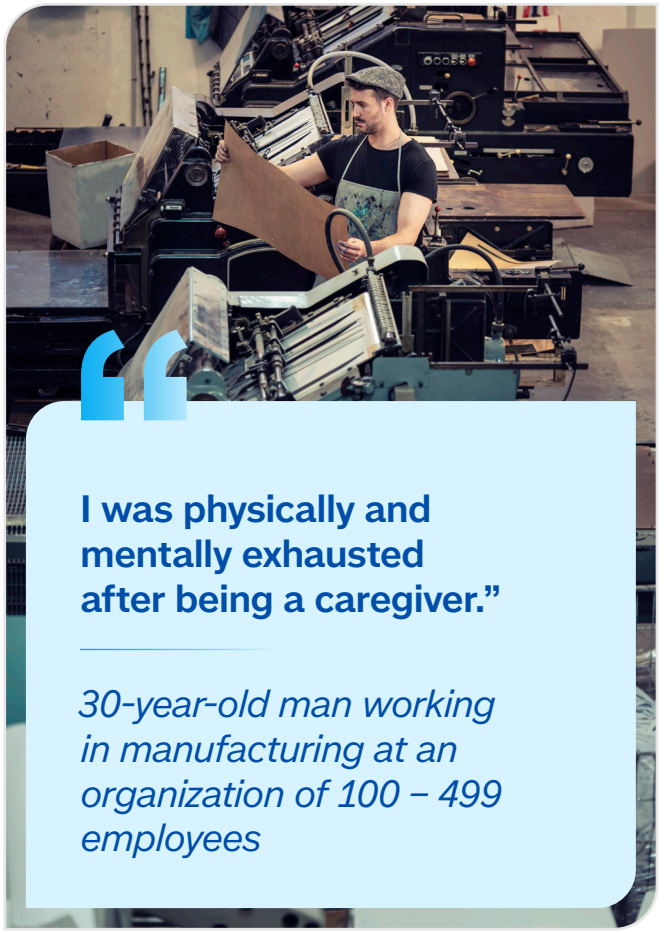
1. Women and men share the work of caregiving more equally than employers realize.

When it comes to caregiving challenges after leave, HR decision-makers see a large gap between women and men. Employees also think women struggle with caregiving, but the difference is less pronounced.

Could there be more to the caregiving picture than employers are seeing? Prior research from The Standard suggests there may be. In "Leave Perception by Gender: What HR Isn't Seeing About Absence for Women and Men," 71% of men said they take leave to care for a loved one's physical health. Meanwhile, just 6% of HR professionals believed men were likely to do so. Women told a different story as well: 48% said they take caregiving leave, but HR leaders estimated it at 60%.*

Taken together, the findings suggest employers may not have a complete picture of how caregiving responsibilities affect employees during and after leave. HR professionals are much more likely than employees to associate return-to-work caregiving challenges with women, while The Standard's prior research on leave perceptions found that men take caregiving leave far more often than HR expects.

These differences raise important questions for employers about who needs support and whether caregiving resources are reaching the employees who need them most. Looking at caregiving through the employee perspective may help businesses strengthen morale, retention and productivity post-leave.



I was physically and mentally exhausted after being a caregiver."

30-year-old man working in manufacturing at an organization of 100 – 499 employees

Explore Leave Perception by Gender: What HR Isn't Seeing About Absence for Women and Men

* Leave Perception by Gender: What HR Isn't Seeing About Absence for Women and Men, The Standard, October 2026


HR Sees Women as Struggling Most With Caregiving After Leave
HR's Perception:
Women
56%
Men
7%
Employees' Perception:
Women
25%
Men
7%

2. Women bear the brunt of return-to-work stigma, but viewpoints differ on how much.

Both HR leaders and employees believe more women than men face stigma challenges after leave. However, compared with employees, HR professionals think women are much more likely to face stigma than men when coming back to work.

The difference in perspective matters. Employees returning from leave may worry about how their absence affects perceptions of their commitment, availability and future career opportunities. If employers view those as primarily a women's issue, they risk overlooking team members who are struggling. Left unaddressed, those concerns can hamper engagement, productivity and retention. By exploring employee viewpoints, employers can identify potential barriers earlier, provide more meaningful support and improve reentry outcomes.



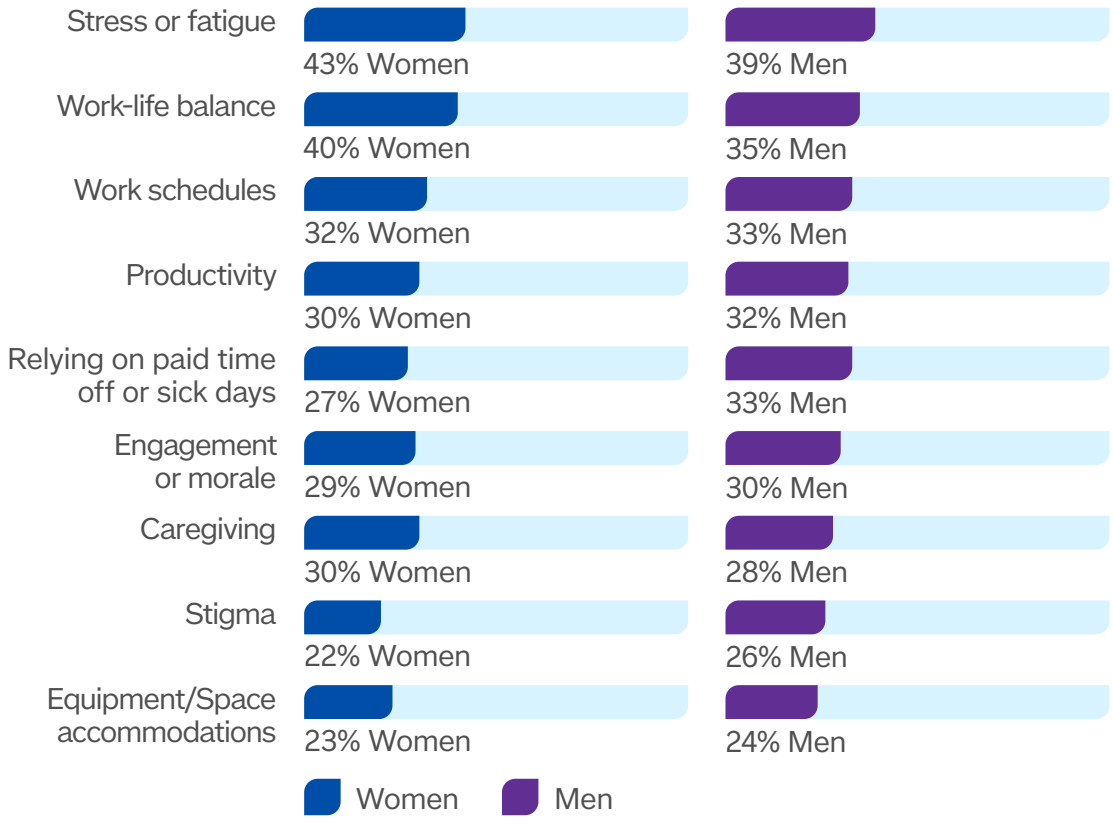
3. Stress and fatigue can complicate the return-to-work experience.

Similar to other return-to-work obstacles, HR believes women face more strain and exhaustion than men do. Employees don't see as large a gap between women and men when it comes to these challenges.

In fact, when employees assessed their own reentry experiences, stress and fatigue ranked as the top challenge for both women (43%) and men (39%).

For employers, the significance of stress and fatigue extends beyond employee well-being. These difficulties can lead to lower concentration, engagement and productivity. Understanding how employees are managing those pressures could better equip organizations to improve return-to-work outcomes and overall business results.

Return-to-Work Struggles: Employee Self-Assessment



It was difficult having energy for the first week back. My anxiety and stress drained me and I felt that I was so far behind."

63-year-old woman working in communications at an organization of 100 – 499 employees

Observation 2

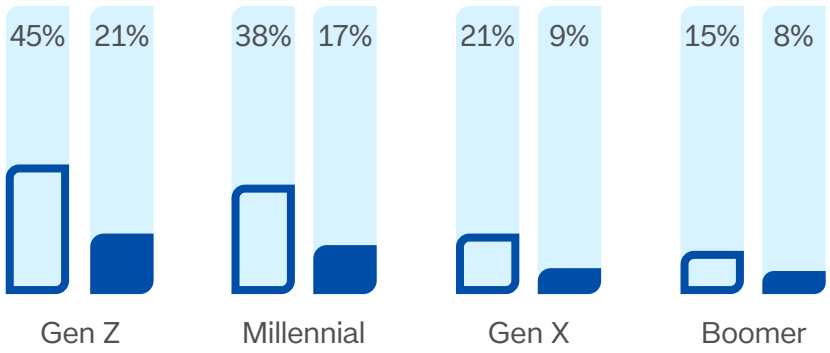
Return-to-work challenges are less generation-specific than employers believe.

Which generations struggle most with returning to work after leave? HR decision-makers point to Gen Z and millennials. Employees see many of the same patterns, but they think return-to-work struggles are more broadly shared across the workforce. The differences in perspective become most apparent when it comes to engagement, work schedules, work-life balance and productivity.

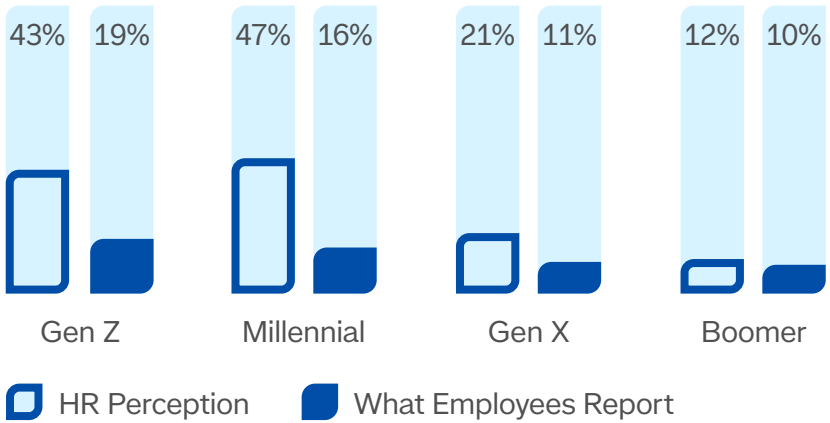
HR thinks Gen Z and millennials struggle the most after leave. But employees see a more balanced picture across generations.

HR vs. Employee Perceptions on Differences Among Generations

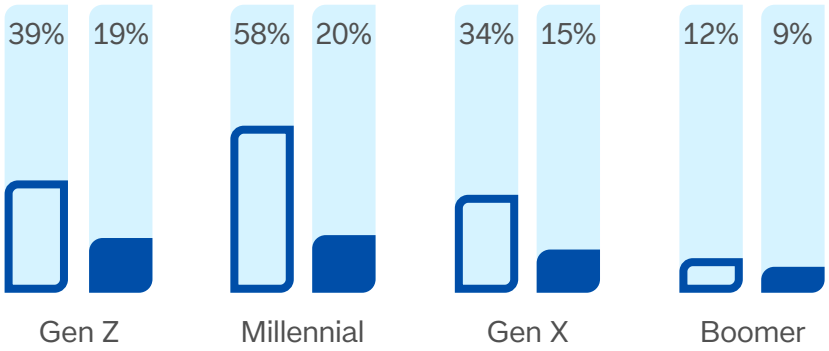
Difficulties With Engagement



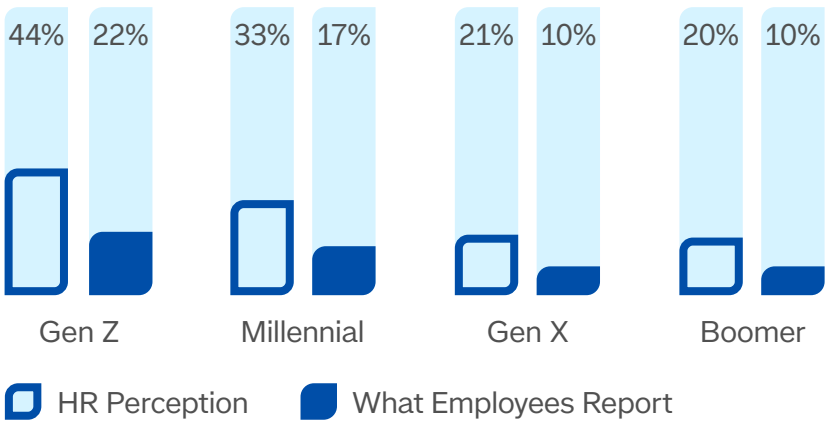
Difficulties With Work Schedules



Difficulties With Work-Life Balance



Difficulties With Productivity





Reflections

1. Reducing disengagement starts with identifying the root cause — is it a symptom or a problem?

HR leaders say Gen Z and millennials struggle the most with engagement after leave. Employees identify similar trends but see a much narrower generational divide.

The findings raise important questions. Are employers overlooking post-leave engagement issues in older workers? Should the focus be on what's driving engagement challenges in the first place? Looking beyond who is disengaged and exploring what's causing it could help organizations improve return-to-work outcomes.

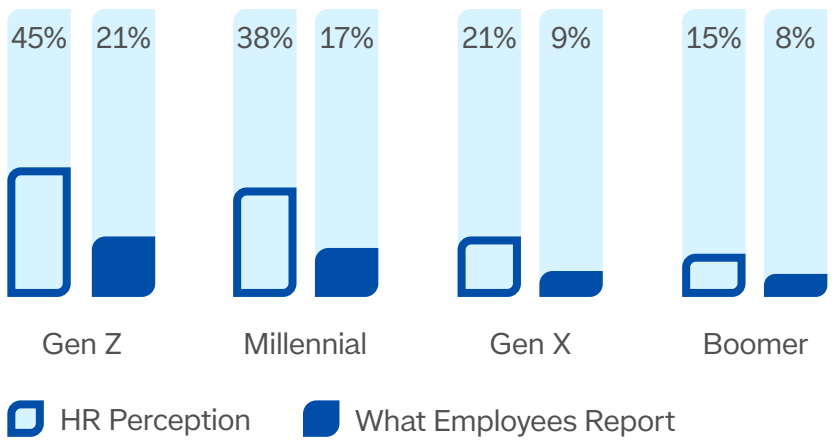
As discussed previously, employees said their top return-to-work challenge was stress and fatigue. Lingering stress and fatigue might make it more difficult for employees to fully reengage after leave.

Understanding what contributes to disengagement can help employers identify opportunities for support. This includes post-leave surveys, return-to-work check-ins and flexible work arrangements. When organizations address the challenges behind disengagement, they can help employees reconnect with their work, ease the transition back and strengthen overall workforce performance.

The Power of Return-to-Work Programs

Formal return-to-work programs offered by a benefits provider with the right expertise can lead to more positive outcomes for employees and businesses. Support should be tailored, offer proactive intervention and rely on professionals with strong clinical expertise. It's equally important that programs include protocols for helping team members remain in their jobs when possible, while they continue to receive support or treatment.

HR Thinks Younger Generations Struggle More With Return-to-Work Engagement



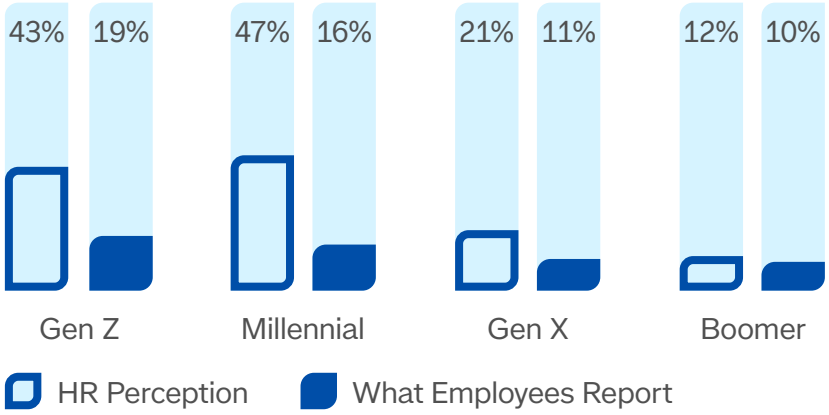
2. The ability to disconnect could matter more than age.

HR decision-makers perceive a larger generational disparity in difficulties with work schedules than employees do.

Employers may be observing broader boundary challenges among younger workers. Prior research from the Integrated Benefits Institute shows that Gen Z employees struggle to disconnect from work. And remote workers noted higher stress levels than hybrid and in-office workers. The study concluded that stronger boundaries can play an important role in reducing stress.*

While the IBI research focused on Gen Z, the challenge may be broader. If employees can't fully disconnect from work, schedule-related difficulties may persist regardless of age.

Younger Generations Stand Out More in HR's Views of Schedule Challenges After Leave



* Gen Z Mental Health and Absence, IBI, July 2026



I had gotten used to waking up at certain times and being in certain spaces. Adjusting to work time was a bit of a hassle initially."

38-year-old man working in technology software and services at an organization of 50 – 99 employees

3. Challenges with work-life balance may hinder productivity upon returning to work.

The same pattern appears in perceptions about which team members face challenges with work-life balance and productivity when they come back to their jobs. HR leaders are more likely to identify millennials and Gen Z as struggling in these areas, while employees believe there is a much narrower generational divide.

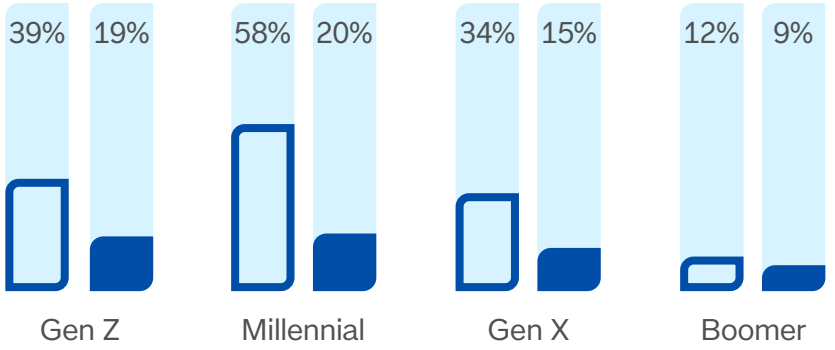
What do these misaligned beliefs mean for employers? It's likely challenges with work-life balance are affecting the ability of employees across the spectrum to be as productive as possible upon coming back to the office.

Exploring employee views on how workload, flexibility and competing responsibilities impact post-leave productivity is a good start. Organizations should also solicit manager observations on common factors that keep employees from being productive after leave. Doing so will enable companies to focus on solutions that create a smoother reentry experience for all age groups.

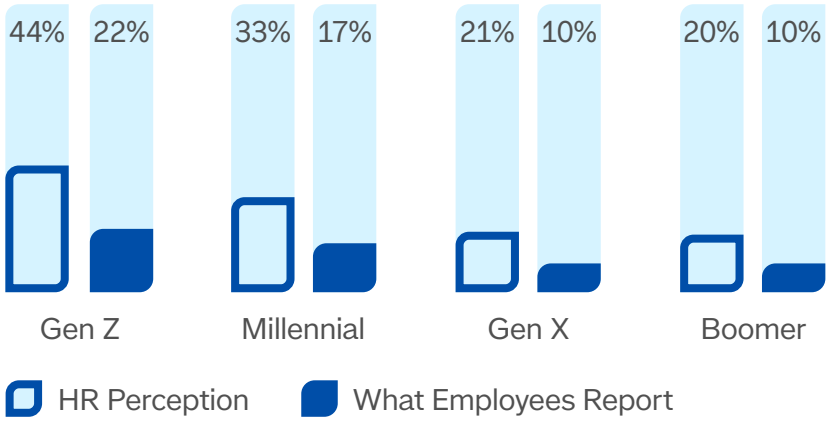




HR Sees Work-Life Balance as Primarily a Millennial Challenge After Leave



HR Views Productivity as More of a Challenge for Gen Z and Millennials After Leave



Observation 3

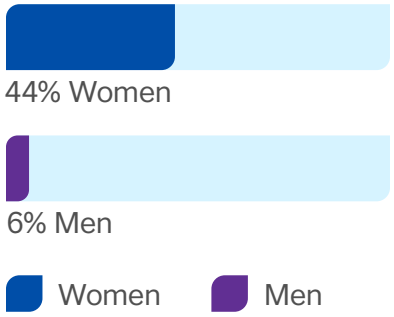
HR and employees both think return-to-work hurdles span the workforce.

Unlike many other return-to-work challenges, HR leaders and employees share similar viewpoints on reintegration. Both groups believe it is an obstacle across the workforce and observe a similar generational distribution of difficulties. While employees are more likely than HR decision-makers to identify reintegration struggles for both women and men, the overall pattern suggests broad agreement that reintegration is a significant hindrance after leave.

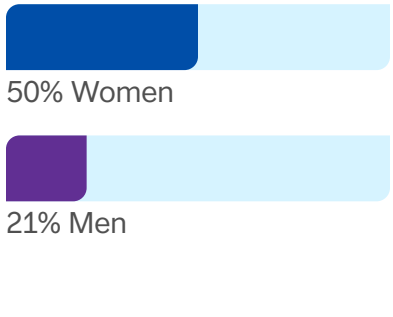
> **Getting back into the routine and catching up on my responsibilities was a bit overwhelming."**
>
> *33-year-old man working in technology software and services at an organization of 100 – 499 employees*

Difficulties With Reintegration

HR Perceptions on Differences by **Gender**

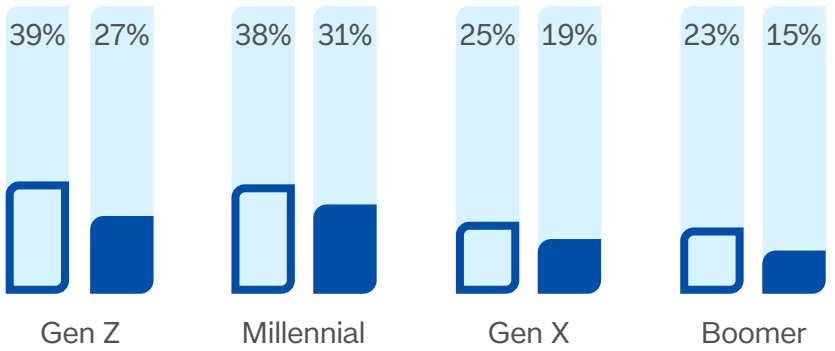


Employee Perceptions on Differences by **Gender**



Women Men

HR vs. Employee Perceptions on Differences Among **Generations**



HR Perception What Employees Report

Reflections

1. HR has an opportunity to create a smoother reentry for their employees.

HR and employees align on the view that returning to work can be difficult, with some minor differences. Looking through the lens of workplace generations, employees tend to say their team members face fewer struggles than HR believes. But compared with HR, employees perceive that both women and men encounter more reintegration barriers. Despite these small gaps, the data suggests HR leaders and employees share the belief that reintegration is a workforce-wide challenge.

What approaches make sense across employee populations? Employers should focus on helping team members reestablish routines, reconnect with colleagues, manage new responsibilities and regain confidence in their roles.



2. The first day back is only the beginning.

The return date isn't the end of the return-to-work journey. Often, adjustment and recovery time continue long after an employee returns. With both employees and HR decision-makers viewing reintegration as a significant challenge across the workforce, the findings suggest the transition back to work continues well beyond the first day.

That extended transition can have important implications for employers. Team members returning from leave are often navigating stress, job responsibilities and personal obligations. If those challenges persist, they can affect engagement, productivity and the overall employee experience long after they return.

Rather than viewing reintegration as a single event, organizations would benefit from treating reintegration as an ongoing process that unfolds over weeks or months. Understanding that challenges may emerge well after an employee returns can help employers identify issues earlier and provide support when it's needed most.

> **It took a long time to adjust."**
>
> *24-year-old man working in education at an organization of 500 – 999 employees*

What does a challenging reentry experience reveal about the leave itself?

The Standard's research shows employees and HR recognize how difficult reintegration can be. The IBI study found Gen Z employees in particular struggle with reintegration. But it also raised a broader question: What does a difficult return say about the leave itself? In the IBI study, Gen Z noted the highest rates of stress-related leave. And when they returned? Only 35.9% said the return was "very smooth." This was the lowest percentage among all the generations.*

The findings suggest time away from work does not always translate into recovery or readiness to work. If employees remain stressed or unable to disconnect during leave, those pressures may follow them back to the workplace. It also reinforces a theme seen throughout this research. A successful absence and reentry may depend not only on taking leave, but also having the time, support and boundaries during that leave to truly step away from work.

* **Gen Z Mental Health and Absence**, IBI, July 2026

3. Return-to-work support is likely an underutilized opportunity.

With both HR leaders and employees saying reintegration is a significant challenge across the workforce, what can employers do to ease reentry?

Peer communities, mentoring or buddy programs, manager check-ins, mental health resources and structured return plans can help employees navigate the transition back to work and rebuild confidence in their role.

Employee resource groups are another avenue for providing support. While 32% of HR professionals say they have an employee resource group centered on return to work, existing ERGs focused on related areas are another avenue for pointing employees to resources and benefits they may not know about. Groups devoted to mental health, caregiving, parenting or disability can empower employees to build connections and access support when they return to their roles.

Making the most of current ERGs constitutes a cost-effective way for companies to refine their return-to-work approach. Employers who take this step stand to improve employee experiences and support stronger engagement and retention over time.

Just 32%

of employers offer return-to-work ERGs, making them one of the **least common ERG types.**



Summary of Findings

Return-to-work challenges look different depending on who you ask. Across many measures, HR leaders see larger gender and generational differences than employees do. At the same time, both groups identify reintegration as a significant hurdle. Together, the findings suggest employers can benefit from examining return-to-work experiences through multiple perspectives to better understand employee needs and improve overall retention, loyalty and satisfaction.

Key Data:

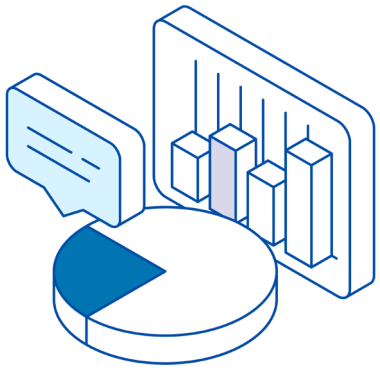
- HR leaders perceive greater gender divides in return-to-work challenges than employees.
- HR leaders view many return-to-work challenges as concentrated among younger generations. Meanwhile, employees think there's a more even generational distribution.
- Reintegration is the only area where employees identify greater challenges for men and women than HR leaders. And both groups are largely aligned on the generational breakdown.

Why It Matters

- **Employers need to build support strategies that cross generations and genders.** HR professionals identify larger gender and generational divides than employees do. This raises questions about whether support strategies meet the needs of employees transitioning back to work. A better understanding of employee perspectives may help organizations design more effective support programs and improve employee satisfaction and retention.
- **If employees don't see a clear, supportive path for coming back to work, they might not return to their jobs.** The findings suggest employers would benefit from addressing barriers to engagement and productivity, such as stress related to work schedules, flexibility and boundaries. Working with a benefits provider who offers a formal return-to-work program can help address these challenges and improve overall reentry success across demographic groups.
- **Employers who focus on the return-to-work date more than reintegration will be less successful.** Both HR and employees see reintegration as an impediment across genders and generations. This suggests employers should look beyond return dates. Instead, they should focus on the support, resources and workplace conditions that help employees thrive long after they return. Doing so may strengthen engagement, retention and long-term workforce performance after leave.

About the Research

On behalf of The Standard, two third-party research firms conducted nearly identical surveys. One was with HR decision-makers and one with employees. Each survey explored differences in return to work, benefits priorities and ERGs.



HR decision-maker survey:

- Fielded: 509 HR decision-makers
- Field dates: Jan. 5 – 23, 2026

Employee survey:

- Fielded: 501 employees
- Field dates: Feb. 9 – 19, 2026

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