

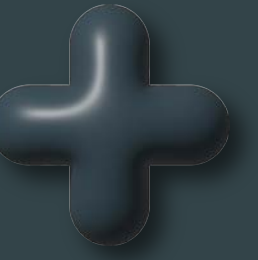
The new generation: what's their problem?

Understanding the nuances
of early career employment

A report brought to you by

stafford long  partners





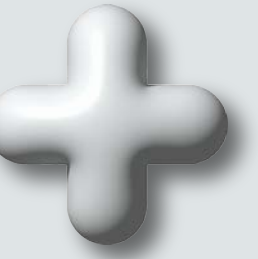
So, what is their problem?

We're sorry to say it, but their problem is **you**.

Wait, wait - we don't mean just you. We mean the employers, educators and policymakers who stick young people under the same, catch-all 'Gen Z' umbrella, and then wonder: "Where are we going wrong?"

The point is mindsets – not birth years – shape behaviour. And slapping a generational label on young people is, frankly, hugely reductive. It doesn't help anyone understand their motivations, ambitions and priorities. And it certainly doesn't encourage change.

Luckily, we've put together this handy report that blends psychometrics with storytelling. Want to know how young people think? This is a window into how they're visualising (and choosing) their future. After all, we're not here to put anyone in a box. We're here to deliver a fresh, immersive narrative to those who know things have shifted. So, if you're keen to bin off generational guesswork for tangible insights – this is the place to start.



Who did we speak to?

Before we dive into the insights and soak up all the stats – let's get to know our audience. We spoke to just **over 1,000** young people aged between 13 and 25 from all walks of life, and all stages of education.

We spoke to those still in school or college, right through to postgraduates. Students from comprehensive schools and from fee-paying schools. Those who weren't in education any more. Those who were home schooled. Almost a quarter (**24%**) of our pool identified as being disabled, neurodivergent or living with a long-term health condition. We did speak to slightly more women than men*. And our respondents were majority White British (**60.7%**) individuals with the remaining **40%** comprising of those from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic groups.

So, you see. Not just one experience. Not just a collective group. 1,003 different voices, perspectives, motivations and ambitions.

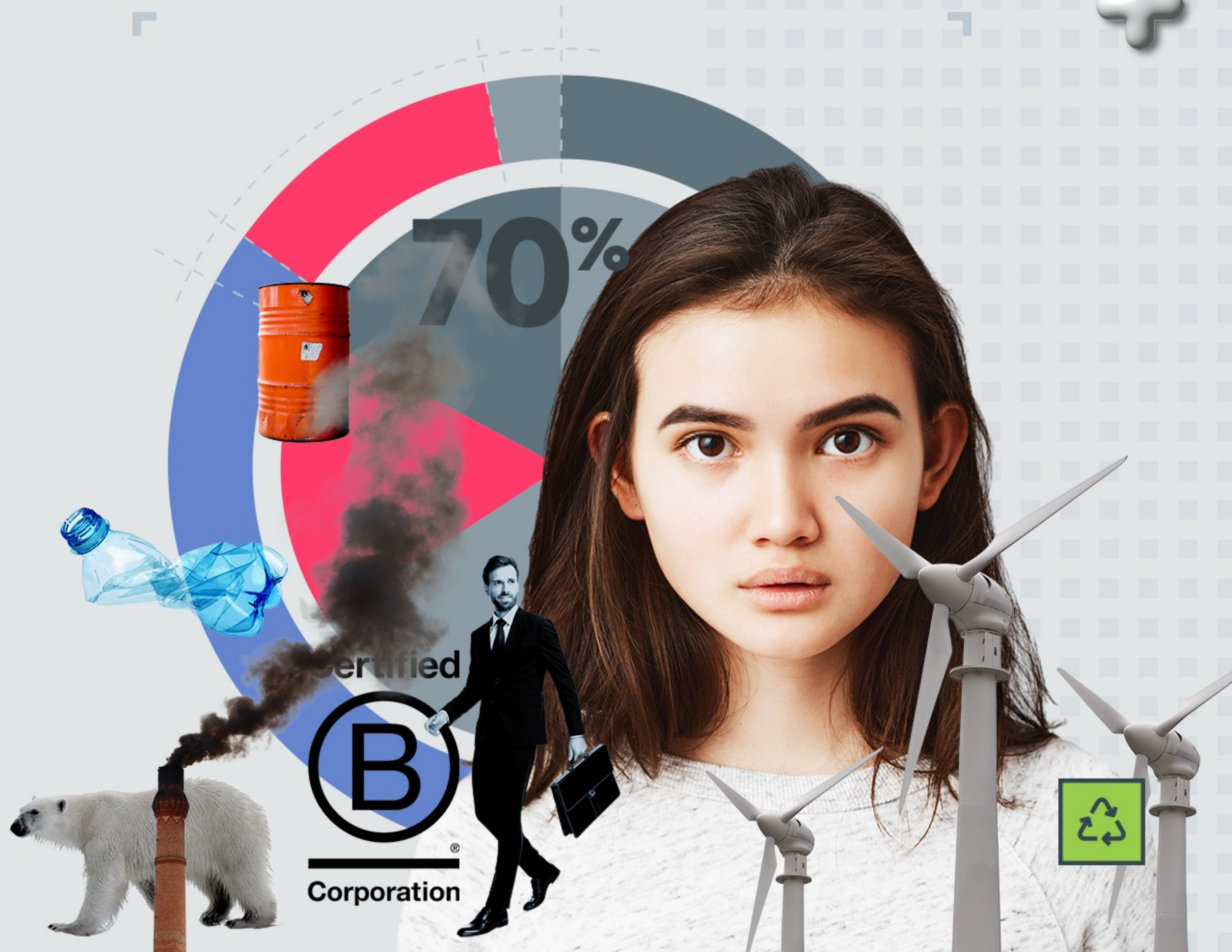
*While the number of non-binary respondents in this research was too small to draw statistically significant conclusions, we acknowledge the importance of representing gender-diverse voices. Future work looks to ensure greater inclusion of non-binary and gender-diverse participants to build a fuller picture of Gen Z experiences.

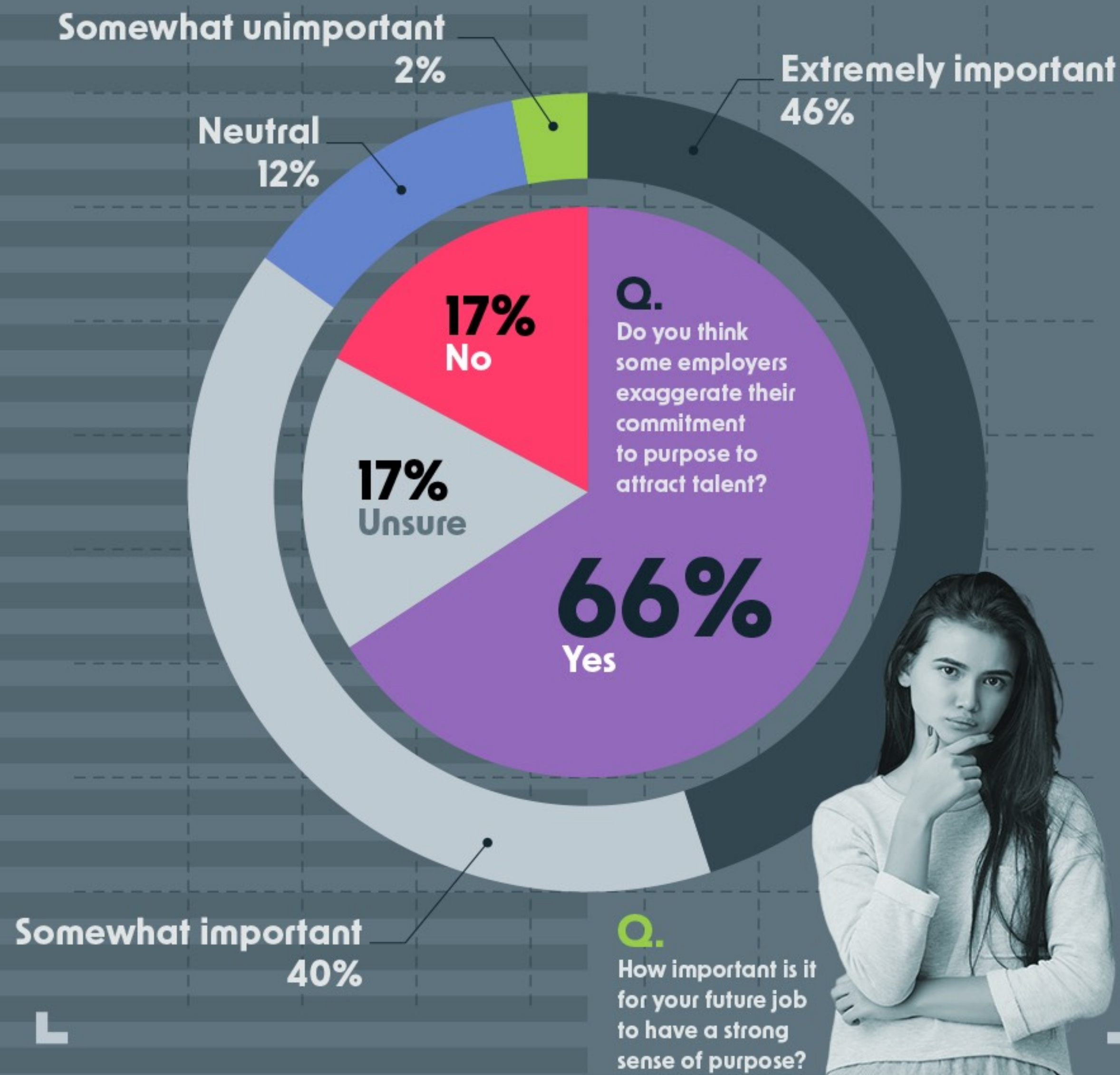




**Now we know who we've been talking to,
let's not waste another moment.
Time to hear what they had to say.**

Why don't they
believe us?



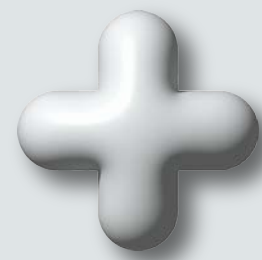


Purpose washing won't remove stains

Our research shows that young people are a value-driven bunch. Who can blame them? They've grown up in a world saturated by misinformation – and as a result, they demand transparency. They value clear values. And when they see a company talk about purpose, they're not taking it with a pinch of salt. More a healthy scoop of scepticism.

In fact, their radar for inauthenticity is so finely tuned that they're incredibly wary of 'purpose-washing'. Is a corporate statement genuine, or just a recruitment tactic? Our research shows that **66%** of 16–25-year-olds believe employers exaggerate their commitment to purpose. And **64%** of 16–18-year-olds (regardless of whether they're finishing their GCSEs or they're post-college) feel the same.

Clearly, mere talk won't cut it.



How to earn their trust

Authenticity isn't a buzzword, it's the baseline. Mission statements are all well and good, but without real transparency they're a bit like a handshake from a mannequin – looks right, but lacking that human touch. So, what do we suggest?

Show genuine efforts and tangible results. Share behind-the-scenes stories and evidence-backed insights that prove you mean what you say. Give young people a window into your world; if they can't see behind the corporate veneer, they'll look elsewhere.

Your current employees know the job better than anyone. First-hand videos, testimonials or day-in-the-life snapshots provide an unfiltered perspective with real legitimacy. Influencer collaborations can help bridge that trust gap, too. Just make sure you partner with people who believe in your brand. And of course, ensure they're influencers young people won't just relate to, but recognise.





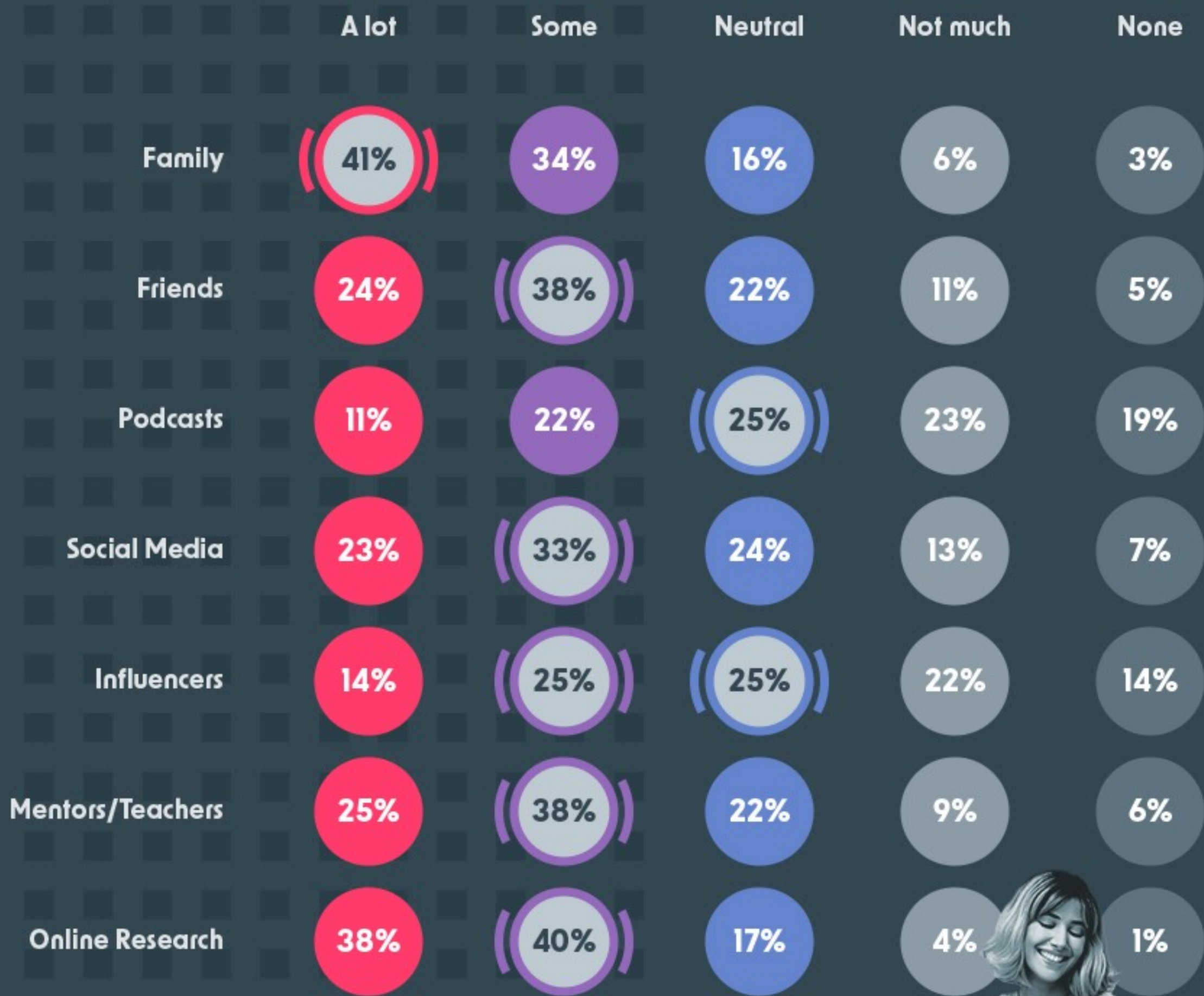
66

**Purpose means I am going
somewhere every day and doing
something I want and need to do.**

Respondent: man, 16–18
university student from a fee-paying school

Why are they always
on their phones?





Q. When it comes to thinking about your future career, how much does each influence your opinions and decisions?



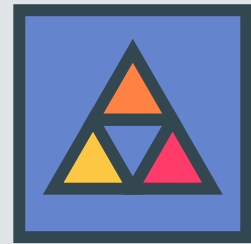
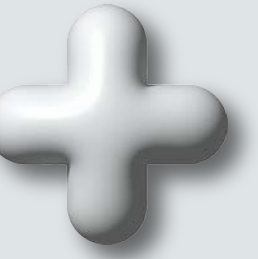
Because it's not just a phone...

It's a portal to everything important – connection, entertainment, activism, education, cat videos and of course, work. And when it comes to finding a job, what might look like endless scrolling is more likely to be extensive research. That's because **78%** of young people seek out online reviews, testimonials, employee experiences and company insights to inform career decisions.

However, the digital world doesn't hold all the influence. Family matters. So much so that **75%** of those we spoke to still value career guidance from those closest to them. Just under half (**41%**) said advice from family influences them "a lot", with just over a third (**34%**) agreeing they have "somewhat" of a steer. And interestingly, even though it seems like everyone has one these days, podcasts came in with the lowest combined impact (**33%**).

So, you're not just considering young people, but their families too. How are you going to stay T-O-P of everyone's FYP*?

*For you page – someone's content feed, tailored for them by an all-knowing algorithm.



How to reach them

First off, get your house in order. This audience will find you across multiple platforms, so making sure every touchpoint is up to date, consistent and informative is key. We're talking career pages, social media, third-party review sites...the whole shebang. Don't solely rely on platforms like Google. Expand your reach across the likes of TikTok, Reddit and even AI tools like ChatGPT or Gemini.

Oh, and just on those review sites – encourage your employees to leave their own. As we've heard, real voices resonate far more than corporate copy.

Once young people have found you, keep them with you via engaging content hubs. Offer comprehensive, easy-to-navigate information on roles, but also the areas that matter to them – such as opportunities for growth, job security and your workplace culture. And don't forget the real influencers. Parents and guardians have serious sway, so things like success stories, FAQs, brochures and events tailored to families will help provide transparency (and reassurance) for them, too.





66

**It's about having a clear direction
of what you want to achieve,
and where you want to go.**

Respondent: woman, 22–25
postgraduate degree, state-school educated

Why do they think
they know everything?





Q.

What steps are you currently taking to prepare for your future career?*

Self-study 397

Online courses 332

Part-time jobs 312

Networking 231

Volunteering 223

Internships 151

Community activities 135

Caregiving 86

None 66

Q.

How are you accessing these career preparation opportunities?

35%
I found them myself

24%
Through online platforms or job boards

19%
My school/college provides them

11%
My parents/guardians arranged them

11%
Through a community or youth organisation

*Respondents had the option to choose multiple answers

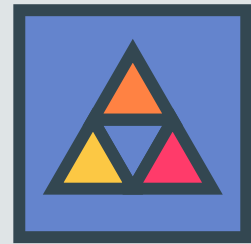
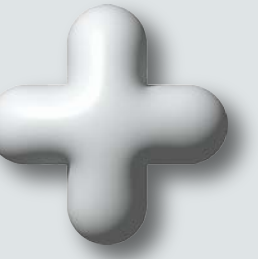


They're doing their homework

It's not that young people think they know everything. It's that, as we've learned, they're a sceptical bunch. They're not taking things at face value; they're doing their homework. And research shows they have to. Nearly **one in four** young people lack any ongoing academic or extracurricular support. They're on their own self-educated journeys, fuelled by information they're seeking out themselves. It's this DIY mindset that's become a defining trend when it comes to career readiness.

And it's why accessible, flexible resources are so important. This is a generation of independent, entrepreneurial thinkers. Our survey revealed **503** respondents were exploring opportunities on their own, and **397** were locked in self-study. And digital resources are their destination – **350** turn to online platforms like job boards, while **332** were pursuing on online courses.

So, it's not that they think they know everything; they're focused on learning everything they can.



How to spark their interest

With that in mind, empowering young people on their self-driven journeys is going to help build deeper loyalty, and stronger trust. The key is to provide value before asking for an application. Nurture the relationship first. Think of it like handing out a free (educational) sample – that little taster might just be enough to spark their appetite and leave them wanting more.

Options like free webinars, workshops or open-access resources can help young people build relevant skills before they apply. Importantly, support independent growth. Shine a spotlight on mentorships,

online training and flexible schedules that encourage side-projects. Remember, skill building doesn't stop when you finish school. This is an audience who crave learning and development. With the right opportunities, you'll support these DIY-ers in building the skills they need – as well as a real sense of loyalty to your organisation.





66

Having purpose means having something that will benefit me in the future.

Respondent: man, 19–21
vocational qualifications from a state school

Why do they
look bored?





52%

have strong entrepreneurial ambition

25% do not

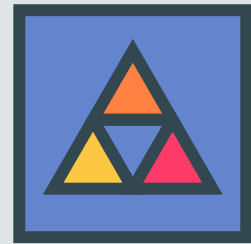
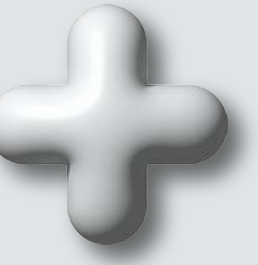
23% are unsure



They want to be trusted and involved

A seismic shift in attention spans and the way young people engage with the world means they're always looking for quicker, more flexible ways to grow, connect and explore new opportunities. It's about instant gratification. You know how annoying it is when that little buffering wheel appears? Well imagine that...but it's your career. For this generation, entrepreneurial endeavours are in and rigid, hierarchical corporate structures are out.

Our research shows **51%** of young people already have a side hustle. And **52%** consider the idea of starting their own venture over standard employment. This reflects their attraction to non-linear career paths. They look for 'squiggly' careers – with horizontal moves into new skills or industries and the freedom to explore passion projects. The idea of a traditional corporate ladder just isn't the vibe.



How to support them

As an employer, you need to prepare for a workforce that might not be fully devoted to their roles (or to you). However, by offering non-linear career paths and supporting personal interests, you have a far better chance of staying relevant – and retaining their talent. Transparency around clearer career pathways, mentorship and networking is also key, especially for those who aren't as confident in themselves.

When showcasing opportunities, highlight lateral moves, project-based roles and department rotations where possible. Basically, side-to-side not up-and-down.

And options. Lots of options. Encourage those side projects. You've got untapped potential sitting right there, so tap into it. Supporting individual pursuits can boost motivation and creativity.

And perhaps most importantly, have trust. Young people want more than admin tasks, and they have big ideas. Invite them to strategic discussions and problem-solving sessions. It won't just bring new approaches to the table; it'll inspire a sense of value. And everyone likes to feel valued, don't they?





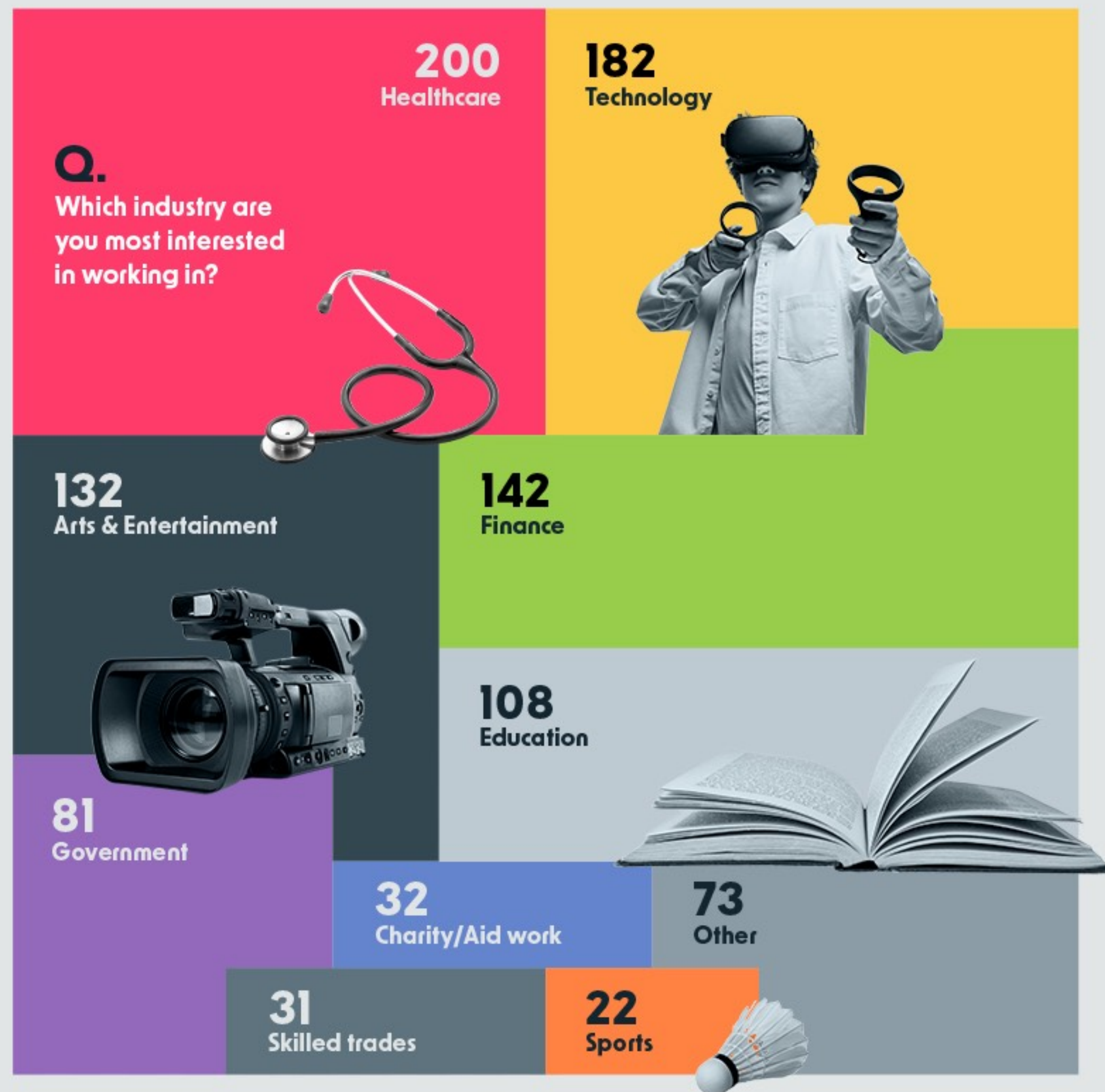
66

**I want to be valued in
a workplace where my work
is recognised.**

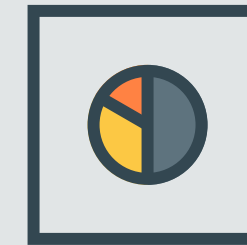
Respondent: woman, 22–25
undergraduate degree, state-school educated

What else
don't we know?





Respondents were asked to choose one industry sector only – 1003 respondents took part



What industries are they into?

We also asked young people which industries interest them most. If you're an employer in one of these fields – great! If not – also great! There's still plenty to learn about what makes them so attractive to our audience.

Top spot went to **healthcare (20%)**. This boils down to variety, stability, the need for skilled workers. Plus, the feel-good factor of helping others. Tough to argue with that.

Next came **technology (18%)**. No prizes for guessing this one. From AI to cybersecurity – it's all happening here. Plus, there's the neat advantage of remote working and attractive salaries.

Finance took bronze, **(14%)** proving that this money-savvy industry hasn't lost its charm. Young people are drawn to the progression, variety, and potential for high earning (who wouldn't be?). It's also seen as a launch pad for entrepreneurship or leadership roles.

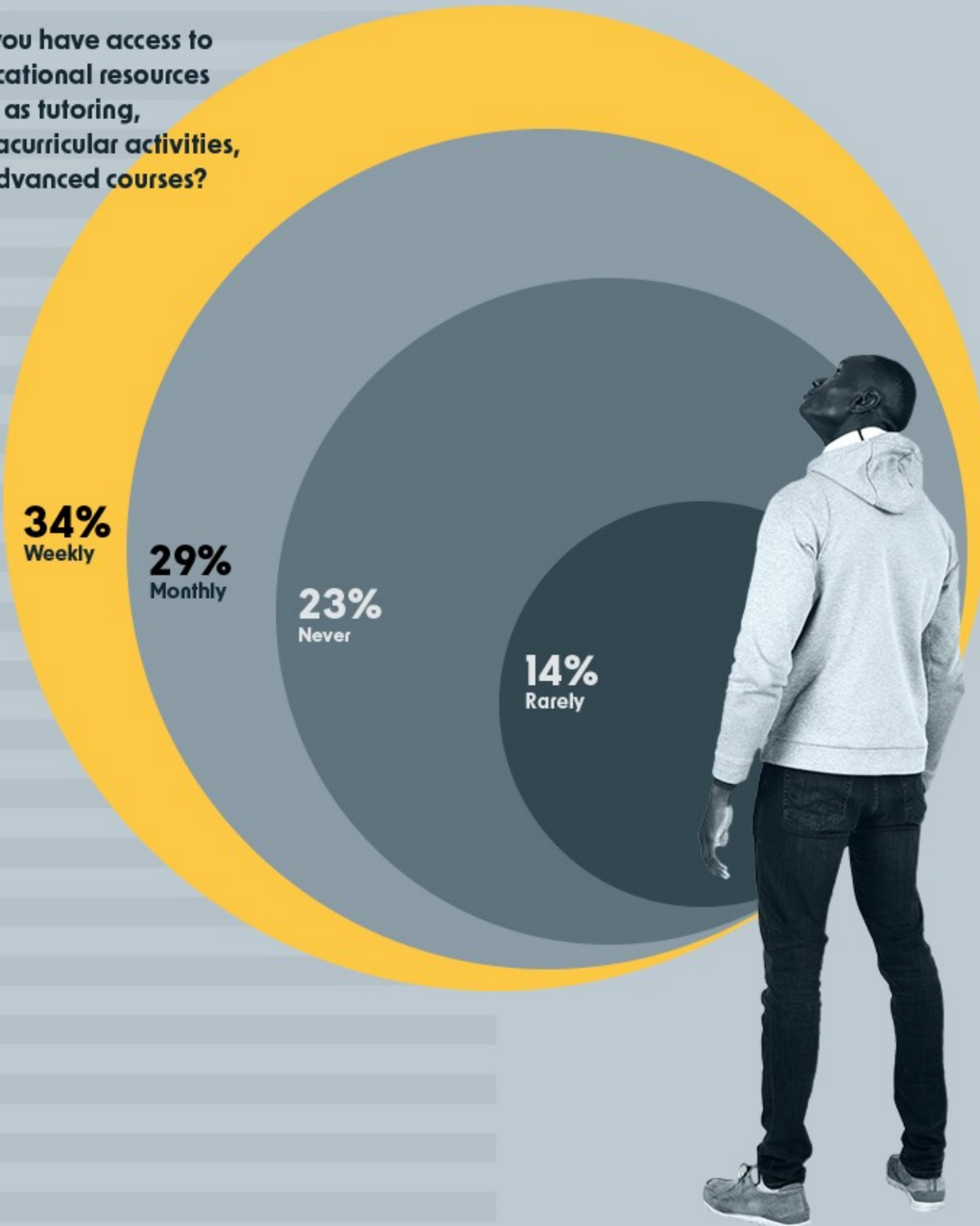
Arts and Entertainment slid into fourth **(12%)** attracting people who want to express their identity, tell stories, and create impact. The speedy growth of streaming, content creation, and interactive media has also boosted all possibilities.

Fifth place went to **Education (11%)**. Yep, the next gen is keen to help the next-next gen. Whether it's teaching, edtech, or policymaking, this industry offers an opportunity to impact and learn something new in the process.



Q.

Do you have access to educational resources such as tutoring, extracurricular activities, or advanced courses?

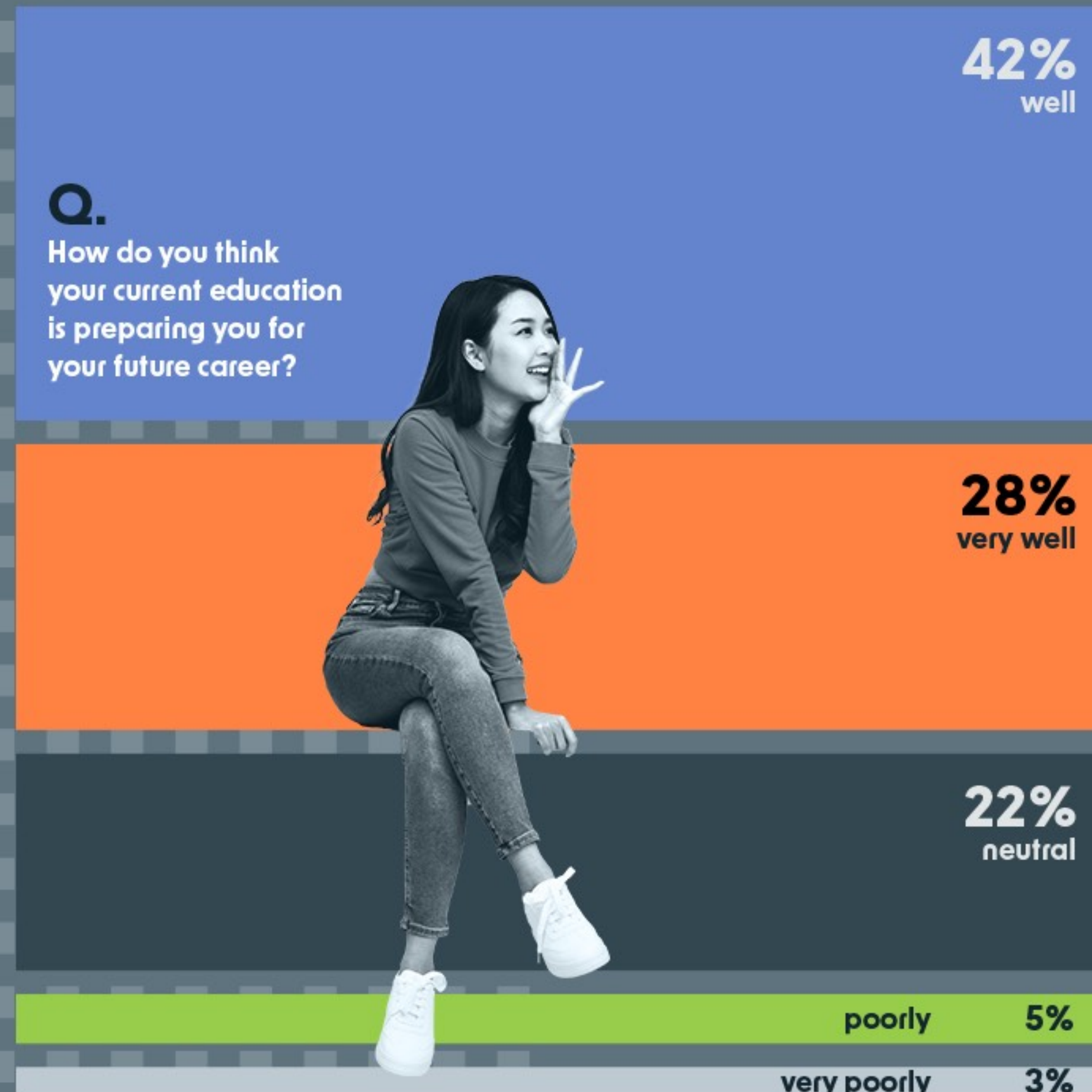


Do they have the resources to grow?

Well... it's a mixed bag.

Our research shows only about a third (**34%**) get access to extra educational resources most weeks. Meanwhile, nearly one in four (**24%**) say they never get any support like that at all.

Then there's the rest – **29%** receiving support most months, and **14%** less than once a month. Altogether, that's nearly one in four missing out on ongoing help. So, while plenty enjoy regular academic or extracurricular support, quite a few miss out completely or only catch the odd opportunity here and there.

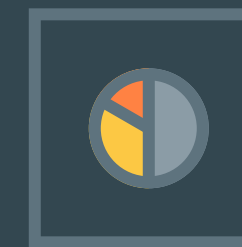


Is school getting them career-ready?

Now, we often assume school plays the biggest role in getting young people ready for the world of work. And to a degree, it does. Our research found that over two thirds feel confident in their schooling's career prep. Around a fifth (**22%**) are neutral on the matter. And only a small handful (**8%**) think things have gone a bit pear-shaped. So, overall? Things are looking peachy.



Q.
Which of these skills
do you think is the
most important for
your future career?



What skills do they value most?

In our research, soft skills came out on top – things like communication, empathy, and adaptability are seen as essential for today's workforce.

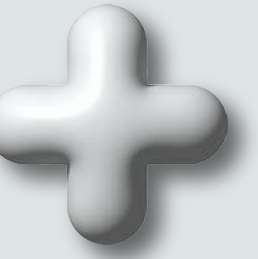
But there's no landslide victory here. Analytical thinking, creativity, leadership, life experience, and technical know-how are all still in the picture. In short, it's not either-or. Young people have a balanced approach – one where soft skills are key, but not to the exclusion of other areas.



66

**Purpose is something that
provides a lot of value in
the long-term.**

Respondent: man, 16–18
university student with A-levels from a state school



So, what now?

Well, you're going to have to offer something different. Something that shows, with real authenticity, that you see young people as far more than just a faceless, aimless collective. It's got to be something that helps them feel empowered, trusted, reassured and confident – in you, and themselves.

With that being said, now might be a good time to say hello. **Hello.** We're Stafford Long: an award-winning employer communications agency. And as it happens, bridging the gap between employers and their audience is our bread and butter. As experts in everything from employer branding to ED&I, we love nothing more than finding, attracting and securing the right people in the right way. Just something to keep in mind...

Enjoyed what you've read?

If you're keen to find out how we can bring these kinds of insights to your organisation, please drop us a message:

info@staffordlong.co.uk

What we've covered off here is just the tip of the iceberg.

Hopefully, hear from you soon!



Thank you.

stafford long  partners

Employer Branding + Targeted Advertising + Research and Strategy + ED&I

An **LHH** Brand

