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The Great Detachment has a price tag. Most employers aren't paying it.

What 1,000 full-time U.S. employees say it costs them to show up for work, and what actually keeps them there.

SHAREBITE RESEARCH / Q3 2026 / N=1,000

It's a support problem.

Employers spent 2026 asking people to come back. Employees spent it deciding whether to stay.

2026 is the year employers ordered workers back to their desks and workers decided whether to stay. Companies are tightening in-office mandates, but employees are staying put but quietly checking out. Some economists call it the Great Detachment.

Cost of living has stayed high. The price of simply showing up to work, counting the commute, the lunch and the childcare hours, has become a flashpoint most employers aren't pricing into retention strategy.

This data captures that in employees' own words: financially stretched, skipping meals because of work demands, and tying their sense of being cared for directly to whether they stay.

Across nine findings, the same relationship keeps surfacing. Where employees believe their employer is paying attention to their day-to-day needs, intent to leave falls sharply. Where they don't, it climbs.

THE HEADLINE NUMBER

Seven in ten workers would leave for better benefits. Among those who feel their employer doesn't care, it's 84%.

THE FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

Nine findings.

01 **Retention Risk** **69.1%** would leave for better benefits	02 **The Care Gap** **51.1%** feel their employer cares	03 **Cost Pressure** **82.3%** would benefit from cost offsets
04 **Skipped Meals** **71.7%** skip a meal weekly because of work	05 **Office Attendance** **38.9%** say free meals are the top draw	06 **Brand & Culture** **55.5%** judge culture by the food
07 **Connection** **27.7%** got closer over shared meals	08 **Performance Drag** **15.6%** name benefits as a drag on performance	09 **The AI Question** **4.5%** trust AI with hiring decisions

01 RETENTION RISK

Seven in ten would walk for better benefits.

69.1% say they'd leave their job for one with better benefits. 61.9% have already left, or seriously considered it, because they felt their employer didn't care about their day-to-day needs.

WOULD LEAVE FOR BETTER BENEFITS, BY WHETHER THEY FEEL THEIR EMPLOYER CARES

SHARE OF RESPONDENTS

N=1,000

IMPLICATION

Perceived employer care is a direct, measurable predictor of flight risk.

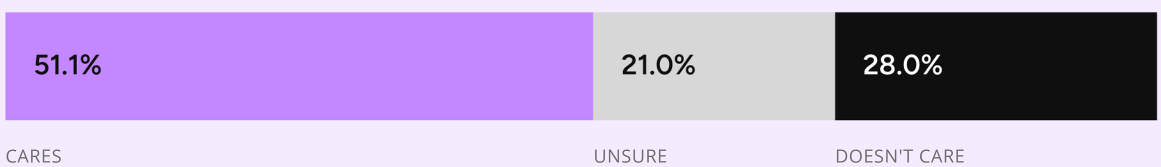
02

THE CARE GAP

Only half your workforce is confident you care.

51.1% feel their employer cares about their wellbeing. 28.0% say it doesn't and 21.0% aren't sure. Roughly half aren't confidently in the "cared for" camp.

DO YOU FEEL YOUR EMPLOYER CARES ABOUT YOUR WELLBEING?



83.7%

say feeling supported by their employer affects their work: 49.3% somewhat, 34.9% highly.

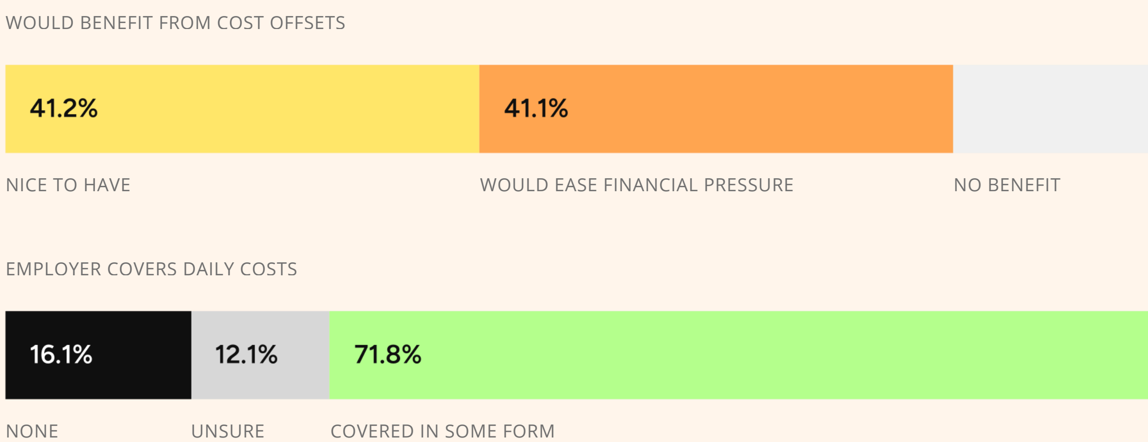
IMPLICATION

This isn't a soft sentiment metric. It has a measurable connection to performance.

03 COST PRESSURE

The need is near-universal. The coverage isn't.

82.3% say they'd benefit from their employer offsetting daily living costs such as meals, commute and childcare. Yet 16.1% say their company covers none of it, and 12.1% don't know.



At companies with 1–50 employees, **25.0%** say they'd struggle to make ends meet without cost-offsetting support, the highest share of any size segment.

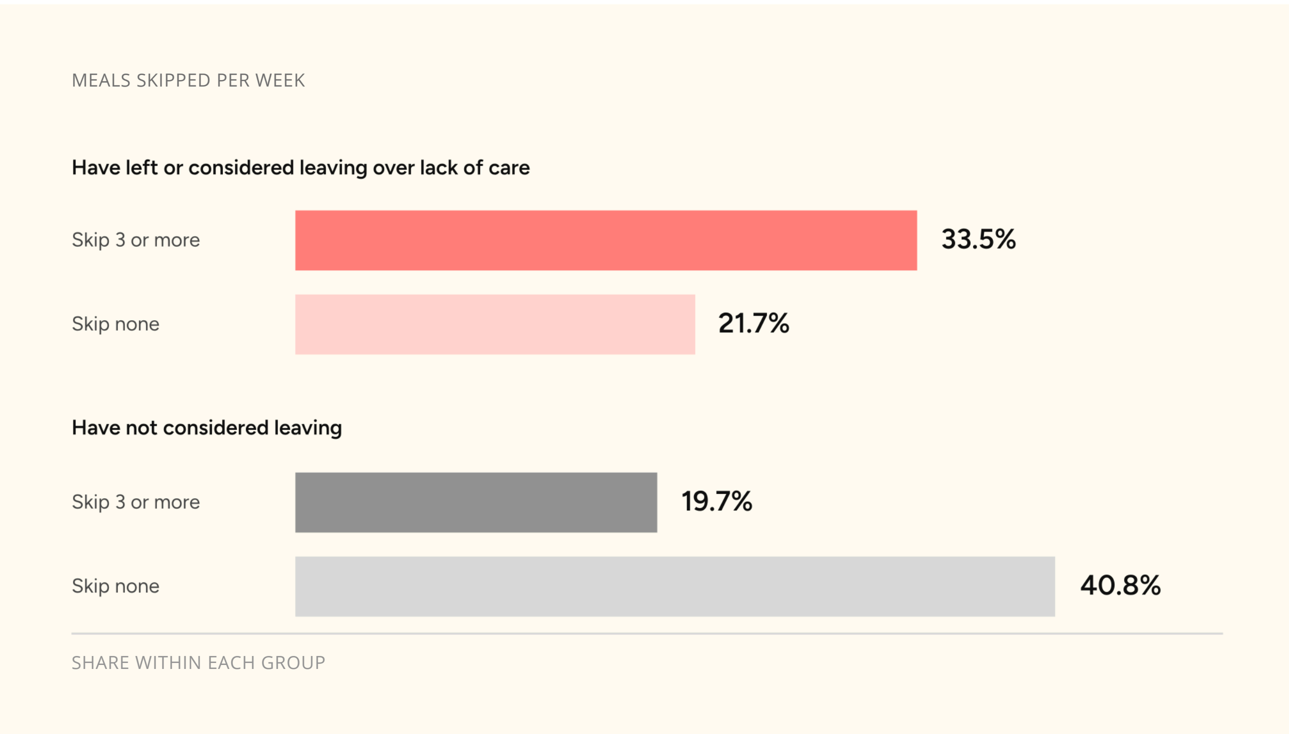
IMPLICATION

Financial-pressure relief is a near-universal need, and smaller companies show the most acute dependency.

04 SKIPPED MEALS

Skipped meals are an attrition signal hiding in plain sight.

71.7% skip, delay, or cut short at least one meal a week because of work. 28.3% skip three or more. And 47.6% say it hurts their ability to perform.



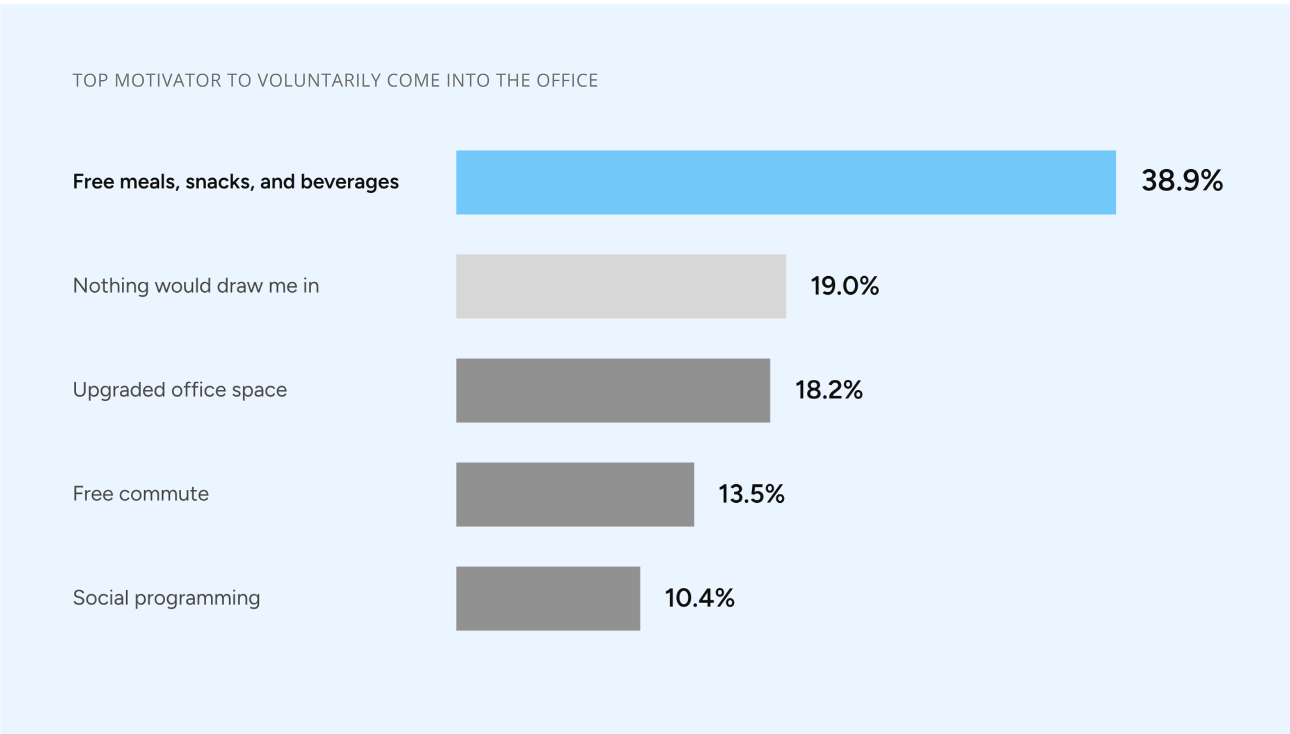
IMPLICATION

Meal-skipping is both a wellbeing issue and a leading indicator of attrition risk.

05 OFFICE ATTENDANCE

Nothing brings people in like food. Nothing else is close.

Given no mandated in-office days, free meals, snacks, and beverages are the single largest motivator to come in voluntarily, more than double the next option.



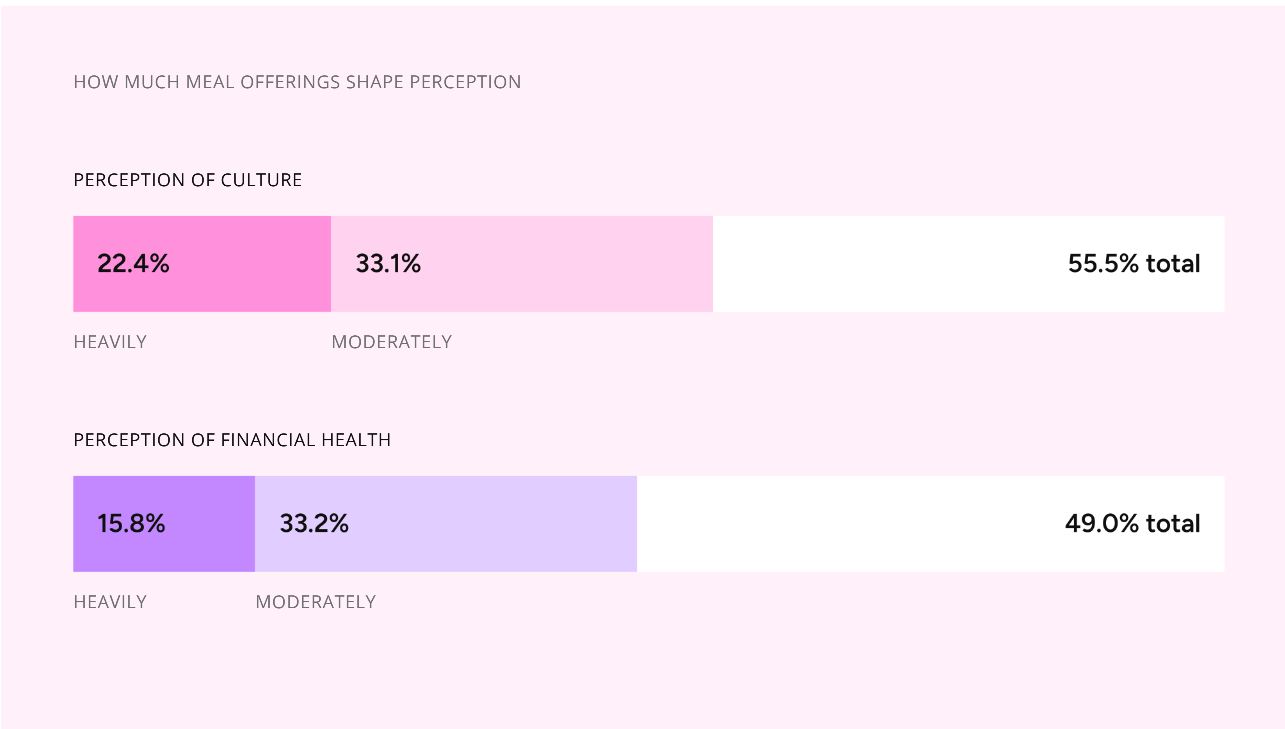
IMPLICATION

Meal benefits are the single highest-leverage, achievable motivator available to employers.

06 BRAND & CULTURE

What's in the fridge tells employees what you think of them.

55.5% say a company's meal and snack offerings moderately-to-heavily shape their perception of its culture. 49.0% say the same about its financial health.



IMPLICATION

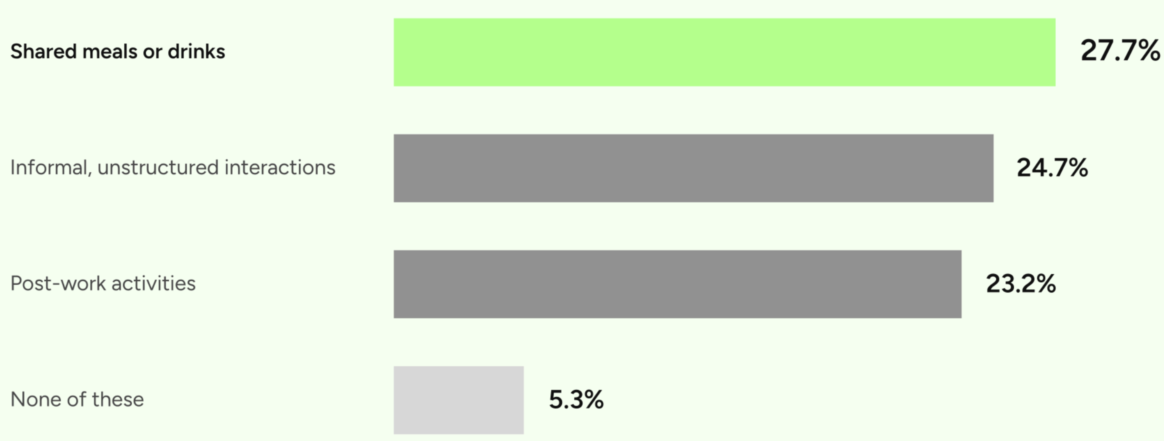
A rare benefit that speaks to both the head (is this company solvent?) and the heart (does this company value me?).

07 CONNECTION

Culture gets built over lunch, not in the all-hands.

Shared meals and drinks are the single most-cited moment where employees say they've grown closer to coworkers. Only 5.3% say none of these moments apply to them.

WHERE EMPLOYEES SAY THEY GREW CLOSER TO COWORKERS



MOST-CITED MOMENT, SINGLE SELECT

IMPLICATION

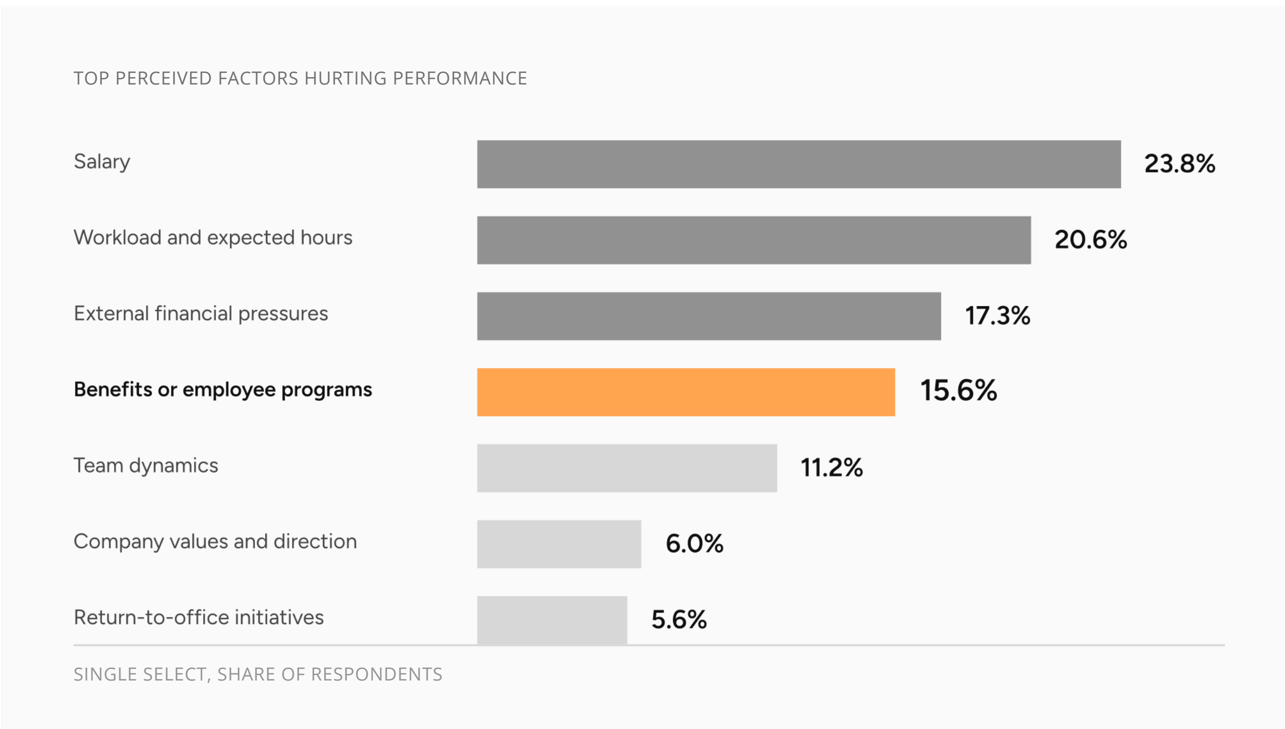
The rituals employers already control do more for connection than most formal engagement programs.

08

PERFORMANCE DRAG

Benefits gaps rank fourth, and they're the easiest one to fix.

Salary and workload still dominate the performance conversation, but benefits sit just behind external financial pressure, ahead of team dynamics and return-to-office.



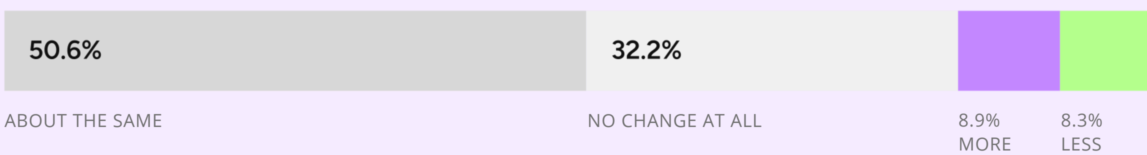
IMPLICATION

Benefits gaps are a material and addressable contributor, one employers can act on far more readily than base salary.

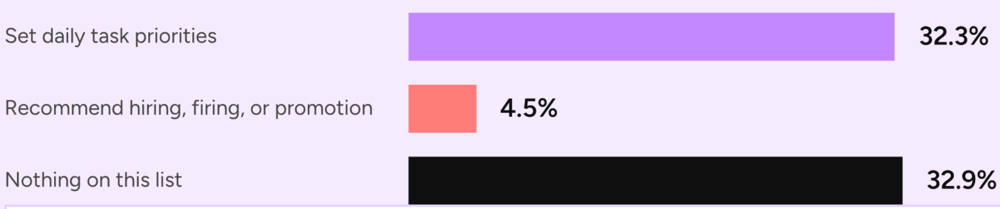
AI hasn't changed the workday yet. Trust hasn't either.

50.6% say their workload is about the same despite AI, and 32.2% say it hasn’t changed how they work at all. Only 8.9% work more because of it; 8.3% work less.

AI'S EFFECT ON WORKLOAD



WHAT EMPLOYEES TRUST AI TO DO



Working more because of AI is concentrated in middle management: **26.1%** of Managers and **15.2%** of Directors report it, versus 8.9% overall.

IMPLICATION

Employees are open to AI in low-risk, logistical roles but remain deeply skeptical of AI in decisions that affect their careers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What to do differently.

The productivity and retention problems employers are trying to solve with RTO mandates and AI investment are, underneath, a support problem, and a cheaper, faster one to fix.

01

Close the care gap before it costs you talent.

Half of employees aren't confident their employer cares, and that uncertainty correlates strongly with intent to leave.

02

Treat meal benefits as a retention lever, not a perk line-item.

Employees use them to judge financial health and culture, and they're the strongest motivator for voluntary office return.

03

Track meal-skipping as an early warning sign.

Employees who skip more meals are markedly more likely to have left or considered leaving over feeling uncared for.

04

Don't assume company size solves this.

Smaller companies show the highest share of employees who'd genuinely struggle without cost-offsetting support.

05

Don't over-invest in AI as a retention fix yet.

Its impact is concentrated among people managers, and even there trust is confined to low-stakes use cases.

IN CLOSING

It's support, not software, that gets the work done well.

The technology companies are betting on to drive productivity hasn't yet earned the trust or the reach to deliver on it.

Meanwhile the low-cost, high-trust lever, having employees who feel genuinely cared for, already has demonstrated returns in retention and performance.

Until AI closes that gap, the smarter allocation is the one that keeps human workers engaged: meal programs, cost-offsetting benefits, and the broader signal that leadership actually cares.

METHODOLOGY

Findings are based on a weighted survey of 1,000 full-time U.S. employees, fielded Q3 2026. Figures reflect stratified answer and respondent percentages from the weighted dataset unless otherwise noted. Cross-tabulations were computed from individual-level response data to surface directional relationships; these are descriptive cross-tabs and have not been tested for statistical significance.

ABOUT SHAREBITE

Sharebite is an enterprise meal benefits platform for high-performance teams. Companies use it to fund meals in the office, at home, and on the road, with controls and reporting built for finance and people teams. One meal is donated to a person in need for every order placed.

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