The Employee Voice

Heartbeat

by Peakon

The rise of the employee voice

We receive almost 22,000 employee comments a day on the Peakon platform, so it's clear that employees have something to say. But the question remains: Are their employers responding?

The dynamic between employee and employer is changing, and now employees are starting to become more vocal about their needs.

This two-way dialogue between employees and their employers is something that's critical for employee engagement.

As research has revealed, when your employees are engaged, it results in better performance, productivity and employee retention — among other factors.

Drawn from over 11 million survey comments, Heartbeat: The Employee Voice deep dives into the data behind the world of work to find out what employees are saying — and whether their organisations are actually listening.

What do we mean by employee engagement?

Coined by Boston University professor William Kahn in 1990, employee engagement represents the emotional investment your employees have in what they do, and your organisation and its overarching goals.

Employee engagement has become a key metric for understanding the health of an organisation's culture. When employees are engaged, they are able to bring their 'full selves' to work, are more productive, and more likely to stay with their organisation.

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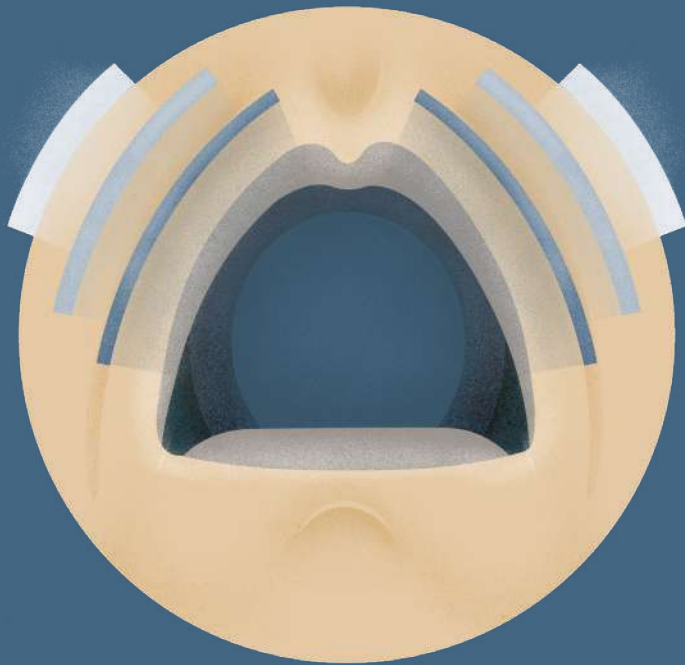
What are employees talking about?

We're all motivated by different factors at work. Although our individual motivations may differ, our basic needs from our employers do not. So what do employees want when given the freedom to ask?

Employees aren't asking for magic tricks — they just want the basics

When it comes to finding out what employees want, asking targeted questions about different aspects of the workplace is a great way to obtain insight about how they're feeling. However, using additional open-ended questions serve as a great way to capture exactly what issues are at the forefront of employees' minds. The Peakon platform asks the following question of survey respondents:

"If you had a magic wand, what's the one thing you would change about [your organisation]?"

Open-ended questions encourage employees to be totally honest with their employer and communicate their main cause of frustration, and the resulting detailed data set means that employers can act quickly to make practical changes.

When presented with our hypothetical Magic Wand question, it turns out that there's nothing magical or impossible about what employees want — in fact, it's quite the opposite. Employees are discussing very real issues, and they're asking for very real solutions that are well within their organisation's ability to deliver — as long as they're listening.

Perhaps predictably, financial themes such as pay and salary rank highly in the most-discussed Magic Wand topics, while other key comments centre around workplace relationships, such as management and staff. Employees also use the question to comment on their working environment, as well as on topics relating to business strategy and internal processes.

Employees aren't asking for magic tricks — they just want the basics

"If you had a magic wand, what's the one thing you would change about [your organisation]?"

Rank	Topic
01	Pay
02	Communication
03	Management
04	Staff
05	Office
06	Process
07	Department
08	Salary
09	Product
10	Customer

Perhaps one of the most telling findings, however, is that employees are using their open-ended answers to ask for better communication at work. Research shows that effective communication in organisations can have a strong impact on both employee engagement and strategic objectives, because it creates a sense of belonging. When employees feel that there is a two-way dialogue with their organisation, it paves the way for transparency, innovation and profitability.

These requests may not seem magic, but what they do tell us is that employees want universal, basic things in order to be engaged — and that when companies listen to their employees, there are achievable ways to do that.

When we dive a bit deeper into employee comments, we can begin to develop a

clearer image of what experiences different groups are having at work, and how they communicate this through the language they use. Analysing the sentiment behind these comments can add an extra layer to this understanding.

Targeted questions and employee sentiment

Alongside open-ended questions, employees responding to Peakon surveys are also asked specific questions about their job — such as the environment they work in, or their perception of their autonomy within their role. Employees score these questions on a 0 to 10 scale, and have the option to leave a comment to add more context to their answer.

When a respondent answers with a score and comment between 0 and 6, this is considered to be a negative response. A response rated between 7 to 8 indicates neutrality, and scores between 9 and 10 are considered to be positive. Analysing employee sentiment gives us a richer understanding behind the topics that surface in their survey comments. For more information on our data's question set, read the methodology behind Heartbeat.

Employee needs continue to evolve over tenure

From day one at a new job until the day we leave, we are continually developing our skills, experience and knowledge of our organisation and industry.

We're also doing the same with the language we use at work. From the newest member of the team to the strategically-driven leader, employee needs and priorities change over tenure, which is reflected in the topics they discuss.

Employees in their first 3 months of tenure are excited by a new job and new experiences
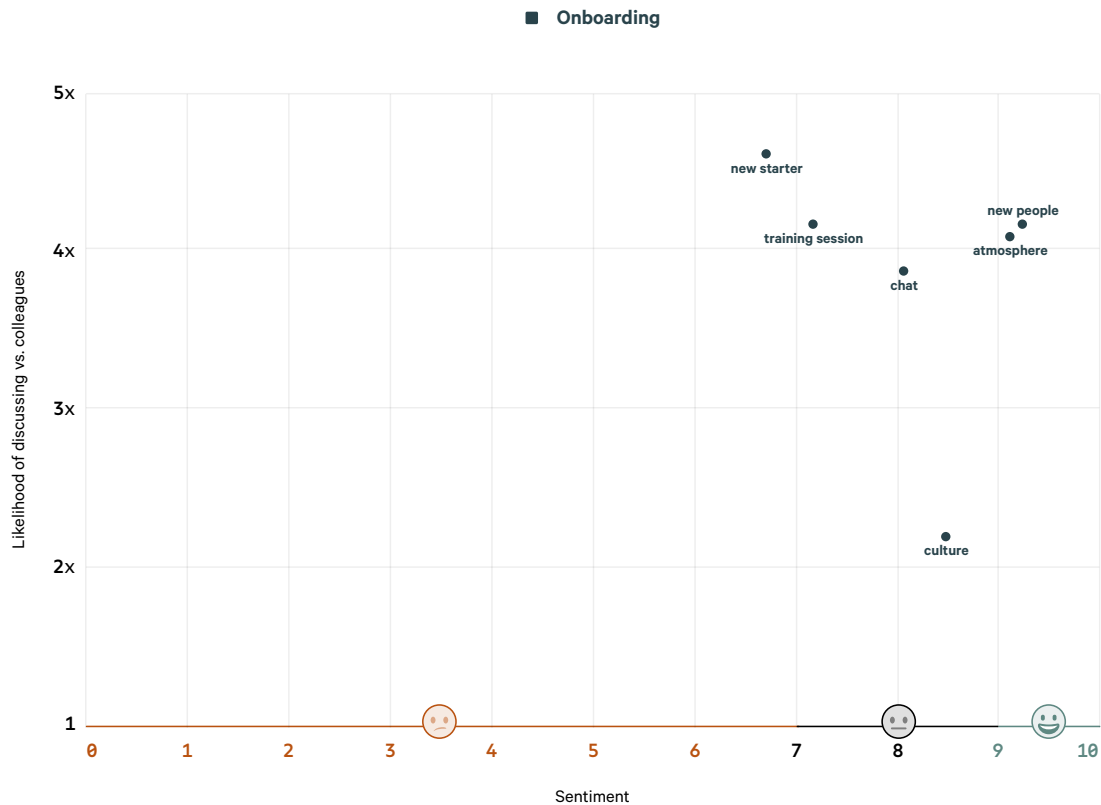
A new job is an exciting time in any employee's professional journey. Brimming with new faces and new career opportunities, this is the time that most recent recruits will begin fully immersing themselves in their new organisation and learning the ropes.

During their first three months at an organisation, employees face a steep learning curve that encompasses their strategic and personal growth.

On one hand, the onboarding process gives them a clearer understanding of their organisation and how to do their job. It's understandable, then, that their comments — and hours spent at work — are punctuated by training sessions to help them understand their company's mission and strategic objectives.

However, their comments are also deeply driven by the more experiential side of their new job, and where they fit in. Using terms such as 'atmosphere', 'culture' and 'chat', this group

of employees is beginning to make new social connections at work and become immersed
— and invested — in their organisation and its people.

If this cohort seems more self-aware of their newness with references to 'new starter'
and 'new people', their relative optimism for what lies ahead is reflected in their
comments; on average, they're more positive in sentiment relative to than most of their
longer-serving colleagues.

Employees between 3 to 12 months begin to find their voice

■ 3-12 months
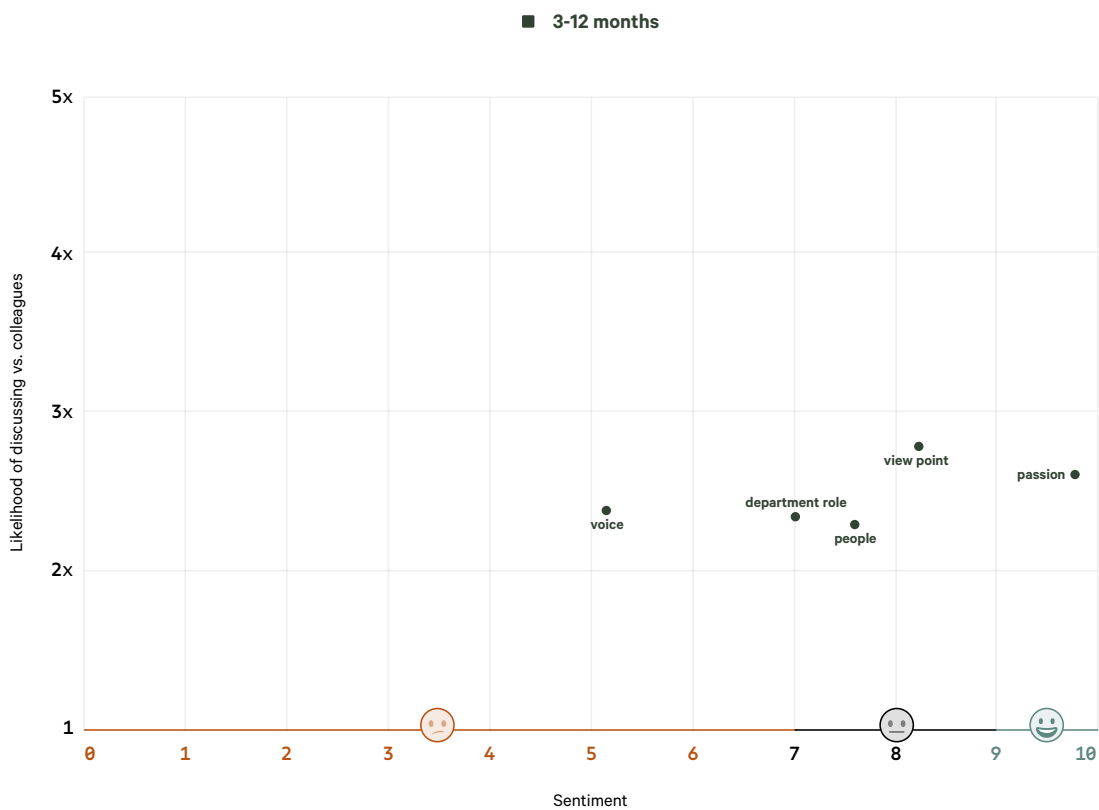
As the initial onboarding period ends, employees are becoming more comfortable both
professionally and socially, and have a better understanding of their role, their team and
their organisation's mission.

Phrases such as 'department role' and 'people' point to this deeper understanding. They now
know where they fit and how they can collaborate with other members of their department.

If this group of employees has started finding their feet, then the same is true of finding their voice. References in their comments to topics like 'view point' show that this cohort is empowered to share their opinion, while 'passion' denotes that employees are finding their work motivating and meaningful.

However, with other topics such as 'voice' imbued with accompanying negative sentiment, they may not be getting the opportunity to vocalise their opinion as often as they'd like, which can lead to disengagement down the line.

Research shows that up until two years of tenure, employees tend to be most engaged. Coupled with their use of language around themes of meaningful work and freedom of opinions, we can see how this contributes to a feeling of psychological safety in the workplace for this cohort.

Outlined by William Kahn in his landmark 1990 study of employee engagement, psychological safety describes the ability to be your full self at work without fear of negative reprisals to your self-image, status or career.

In this employee group, freedom of opinions — and being able to vocalise them — is something that is deeply valued and fosters greater psychological safety.

## Employees at 1 to 2 years of tenure look for new challenges

■ 1-2 years
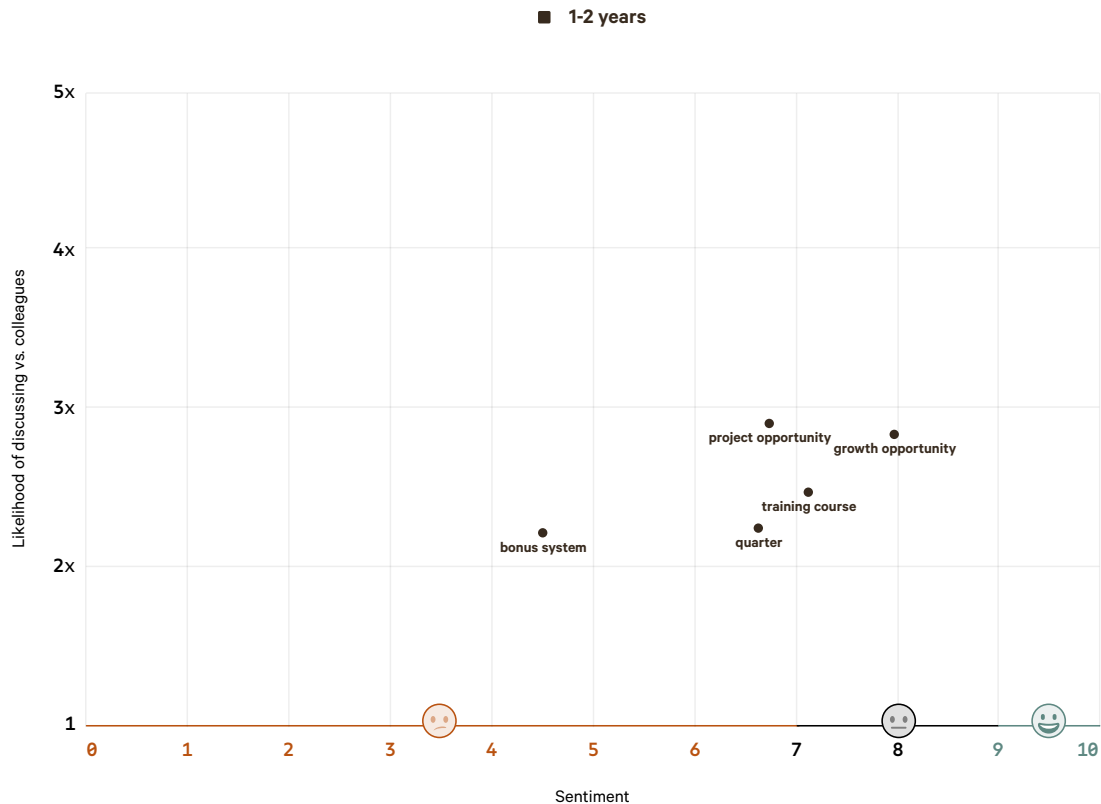
After one to two years in an organisation, employees are likely to remain highly engaged and productive members of the team.

At this stage in their career, they're already starting to look for new challenges to continue their professional growth and refer to this in their comments, with more mentions of training courses and growth or project opportunities than other groups.

However, this employee group's charge for growth is not just focused on skills development. References to phrases such as 'bonus system' in their feedback could suggest a need to balance professional learning and development with financial reward and career progress.

With engagement scores still remaining high at this point in tenure, we find now's the ideal time to start having conversations about growth, and to support them to upskill.

Employees between 2 to 5 years of tenure are considering leadership and the next steps

■ **2-5 years**
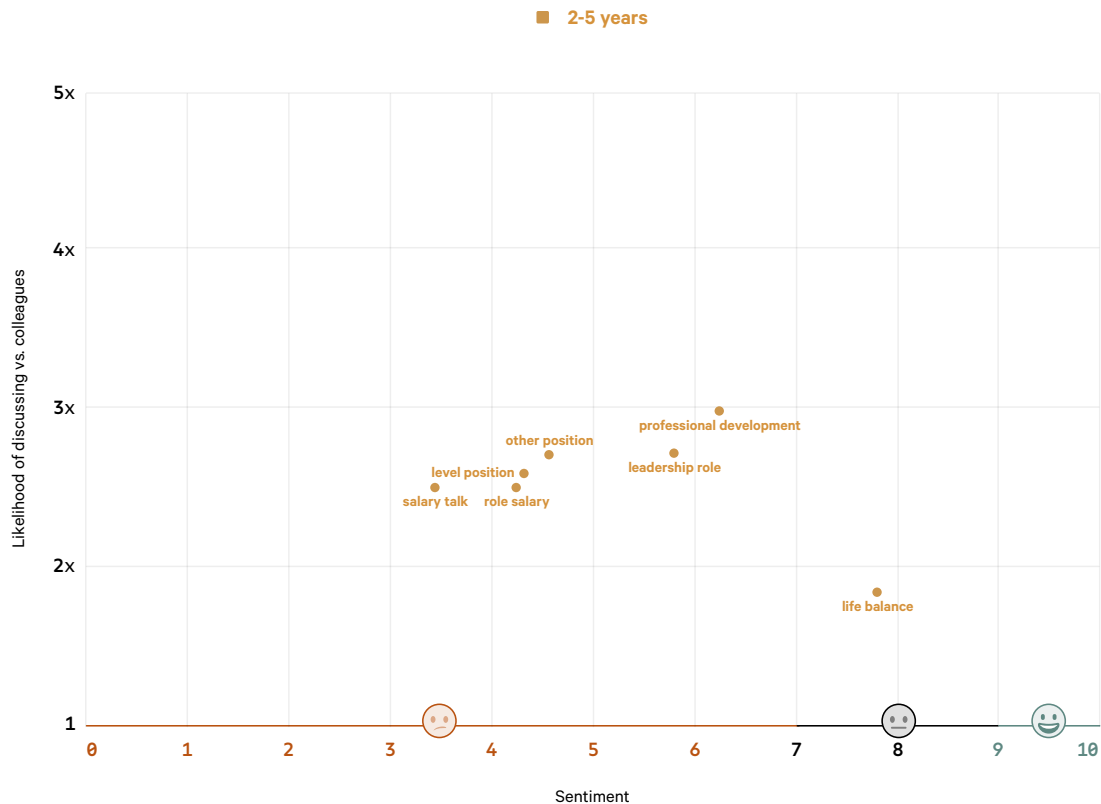
By the time an employee has spent two to five years at their company, they start thinking about the next stage in their career: becoming a leader.

With comments focused heavily on professional development, salary and leadership, this group of employees has their sights set on the next rung of their professional ladder, and are seeking the skills they need to reach it.

However, while this cohort may be actively seeking leadership and growth opportunities, these may not be within their current organisation, with comment topics referencing seeking 'other positions' and negativity surrounding salary negotiations.

This potential disengagement risk is mirrored by comment sentiment. Of all the tenure groups, this cohort seems to feel more negative than their peers about their current position and future prospects. This sentiment is backed up by research; according to a

2018 [report by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the median number of years that wage and salary workers stay with their current employer is 4.2 years.

While moving on may be top of mind for this cohort as reflected in their language, it's also an important marker that organisations need to take notice of and provide them with the opportunities they need to grow.

At five to ten years of tenure, employees have invested a good amount of time growing with their company. They know the inner workings of their organisation, and have built up a toolkit of skills and experience.

Employees at a company between 5 and 10 years are thinking about strategy, experience and new career options

■ 5-10 years
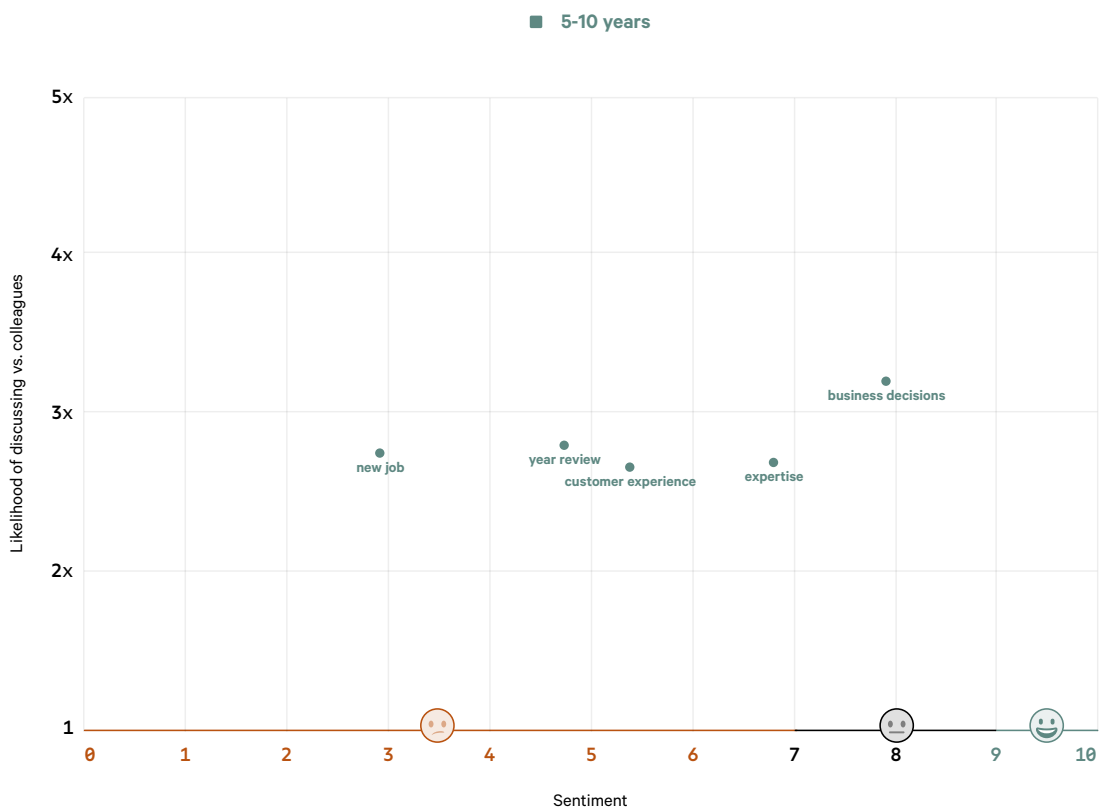
At this point, they're starting to think more strategically about their company's goals, and how their skills play a role in achieving them. Topics such as 'business decisions' and 'customer experience' demonstrate this new concern, which is likely coupled with reaching a level of seniority within their company.

However, while these employees may seem settled, their feedback also suggests they might also be weighing up their options to take that expertise elsewhere. References to a possible 'new job' on the horizon shed light on this, while negative sentiment surrounding their annual review and 'expertise' suggest that they don't feel valued for the experience they bring.

As we've seen in our previous research, this attrition warning and separation phase begins nine months ahead of when an employee actually leaves an organisation, and employees are more likely to leave unchallenging work than a challenging workload. At this point in their tenure, these employees have an intimate knowledge of how their business runs — and losing them means losing that on-the-ground expertise.

Mitigating this potential risk is about ensuring that these employees are provided with the developmental opportunities to stay on.

Employees at a company over 10 years show loyalty and belief in the organisation's mission

■ **10+ years**

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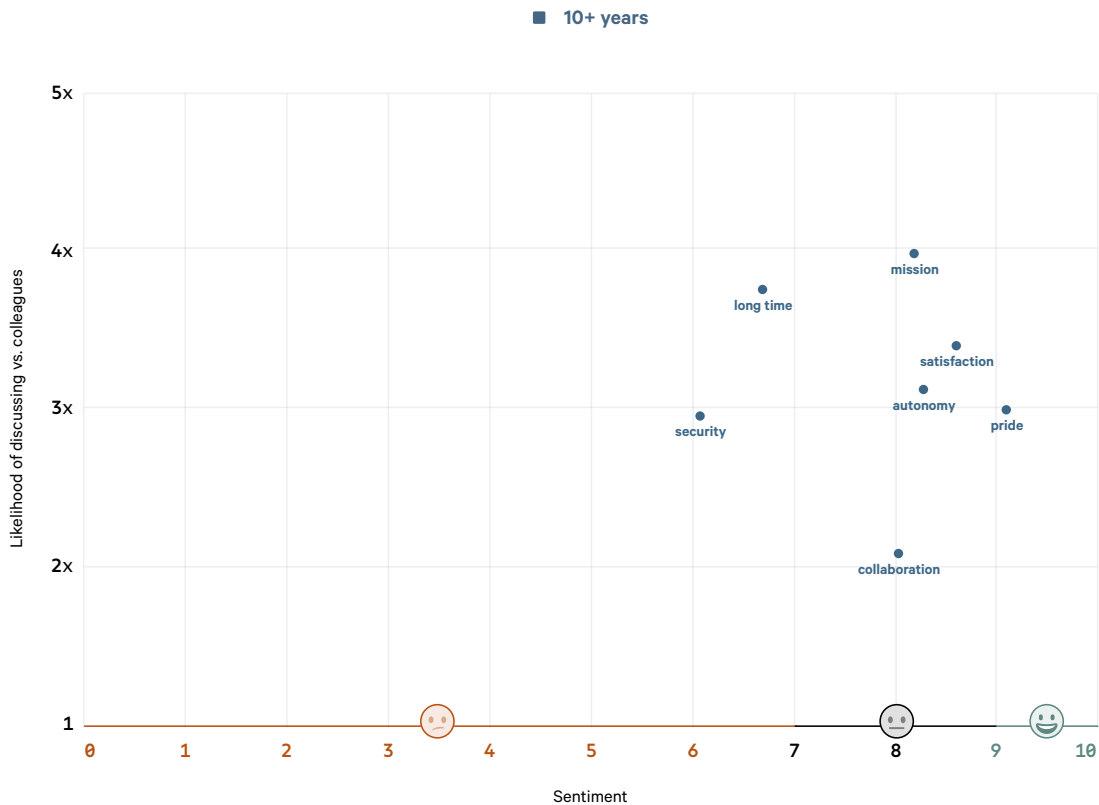
After a decade spent working at an organisation, employees reach a milestone phase of their career — and their long-term commitment and loyalty to their organisation shows in their language.

Comments centred around topics such as 'pride', 'satisfaction' and 'security' show that engagement in this cohort of employees remains high and that they deeply value the relationship they have with their organisation. They also value a balance of collaboration and autonomy when it comes to their workload — suggesting that they have cultivated strong relationships with team members and enjoy working with them.

When we look at the bigger picture, we can see how this cohort's comments suggest a level of psychological safety. On average, they are not only proud to be at their organisation and satisfied with their work, but they also value sharing their opinions with other members of their team.

Different generations have more in common at work than you might expect

We're now in a time when we have five generations in the workforce, each motivated by different things and shaped by different experiences. As a result, it's easier for us to spot pervasive generational stereotypes, which seek to highlight how we differ, rather than what makes us similar at work.

So, how is each generation communicating with their workplace, and what are they saying?

Before we can begin to analyse what these different groups are saying, we first need to define what is meant by generations. While the points of transition between each may vary, for the purposes of this report, we've chosen to use the parameters defined by the Pew Research Center.

The Silent Generation, which spans those born from 1928 to 1945, comprises the oldest

members of the current workforce. Following them are the Baby Boomers, whose generation spans 18 years from 1946 to 1964. They are succeeded by Generation X, who span the 15 years between 1965 and 1980. Millennials, who are soon to be the largest generation represented in the workplace, comprise people born from 1981 to 1996. The final generation — known as Generation Z — began in 1997.

Employee comments highlight contrasting generational experiences

■ **Gen Z**　　■ **Millennials**　　■ **Gen X**　　■ **Silent generation**
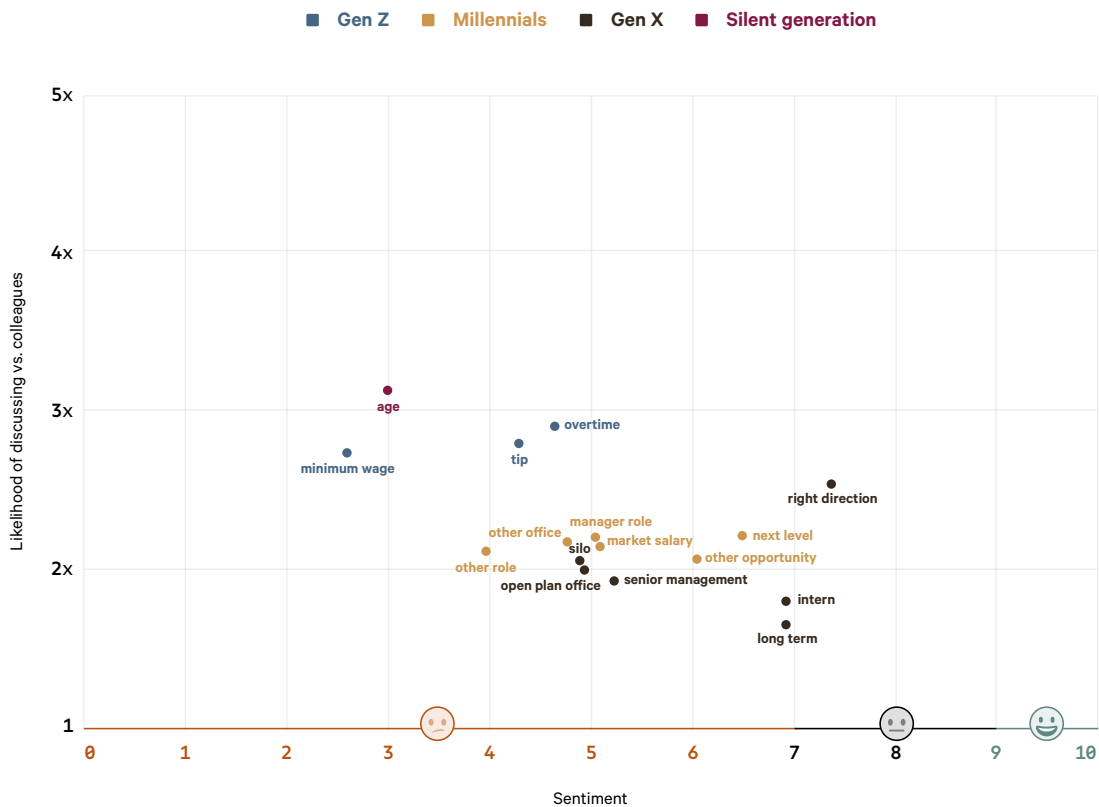
As the newest members of the workforce, and having grown up in less-than-auspicious times, it's understandable that one of Generation Z's more prominent workplace experiences centres around their finances. References to terms such as 'minimum wage', 'tips' and 'overtime' with accompanying negative sentiment paint a clear picture of the overarching socioeconomic circumstances that plague both of the younger generations: an uncertain job market, crippling student debt and an inability to gain a foothold in the housing market. One generation up, Millennials continue this debate with comment topics referencing 'market salary' and 'manager role', both imbued with negative sentiment, suggesting that they feel both undercompensated and undervalued at work.
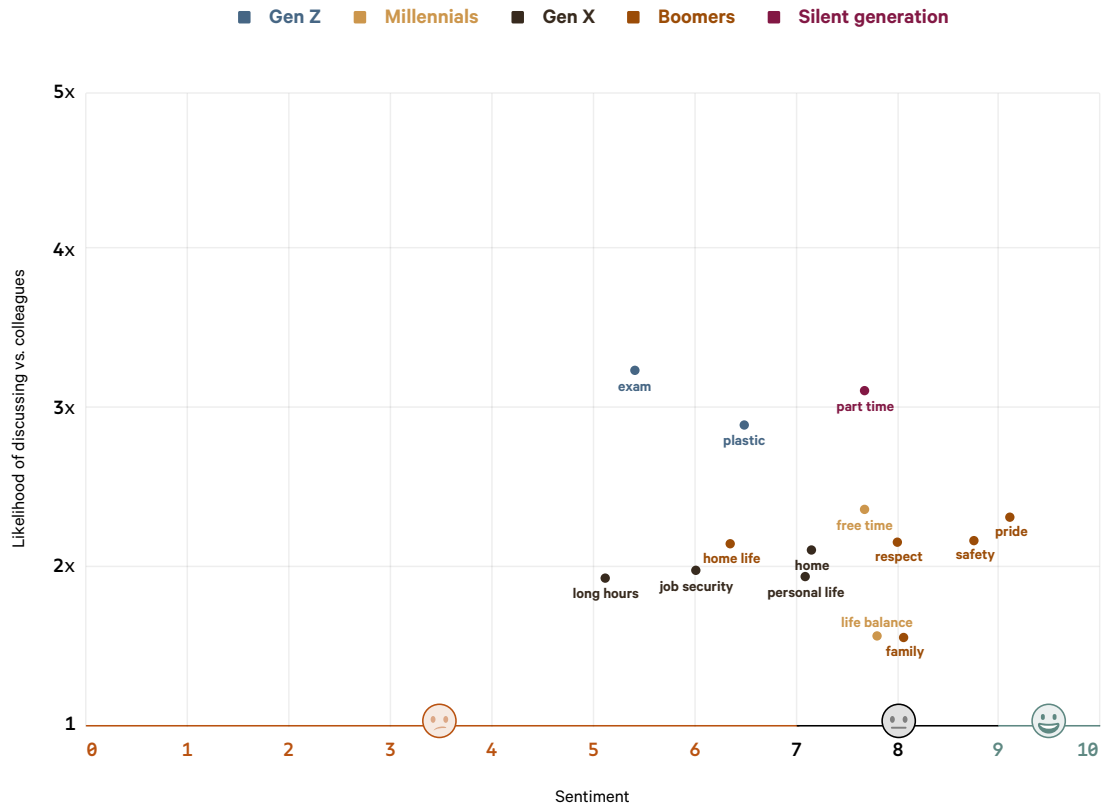
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As earlier research suggests for this demographic, Millennials also continue the quest for an experience-led life — even at work. References to other offices, roles, opportunities and countries filter into their employee feedback, and these are loaded with negative sentiment, suggesting disengagement. Considering that Millennials find less meaning in their work, are dissatisfied with pay and less inspired by their organisation's mission than Boomers and Generation X, the challenge remains to keep this cohort engaged — and this is reflected in their language.

Generation X are similarly experience-led, but in a different way to their younger peers. With more strategically-minded comments than other generations, Generation X's experience of their working life revolves around themes of their business heading in the 'right direction' and their potential role as a mentor to new interns. As we will see with this generation's preferred communication habits, Generation X employees value collaboration — so it comes as no surprise that they refer to 'silo' in a negative light.

However, while Generation X employees value collaborating with their peers, they don't like doing so in an open space. As the one generation to negatively reference 'open plan office' more so than their peers, Generation X employees particularly value having quiet spaces that allow them to concentrate over open plan collaborative spaces. Research points to a possible reason for this sentiment — Generation X is likely one of the generations that experienced the shift from closed to open working spaces.

For the Silent Generation, their employee comments give a vital clue into their everyday experience at work. References to the topic of 'age' with accompanying negative sentiment suggests a deeper underlying issue with regard to age-related concerns — this generation is aware of their older years, and the bias that it may bring.

Work-life balance is a topic that affects all generations

■ **Gen Z**   ■ **Millennials**   ■ **Gen X**   ■ **Boomers**   ■ **Silent generation**

Likelihood of discussing vs. colleagues

Sentiment

When we analysed the language of employee comments, we found a compelling case for how employees of different generations experience their lives outside the office.

Boomers and Generation X have particularly strong linguistic ties to life beyond the office, seen in topics like 'family' and 'home life'. When we look at sentiment, there are even more telling similarities.

Our data for the Boomer generation suggests that they are more optimistic and are the most value-led generations, with comments focussed around topics of 'pride' and 'respect' — but their references to their 'home life' suggest that their experience has come at a cost.

Similarly, comments from Generation X reference 'long hours' and 'personal life' alongside 'job security', underscoring a potential imbalance between their working and personal lives.

The Silent Generation's comments on the topic of 'part time' suggest that they're not

quite ready to leave the workforce yet, but still value being part of their organisation, while Millennials value their 'free time' and 'life balance'.

As the youngest generation, it's understandable that Generation Z worries about balancing the needs of their education alongside getting vital work experience post-graduation, with references to 'exam' suggesting a need for their employer to be aware. Generation Z is also one of the only generations to reference social concerns within employee comments. Raised in a time when the effects of climate change are making weekly headlines, it shows that they care deeply about the world around them with comments referring to plastic use in the workplace — and perhaps it's something that can help organisations reach them as a generation.

Generation Z uses more self-referential language

■ **Gen Z**　　■ **Millennials**　　■ **Boomers**
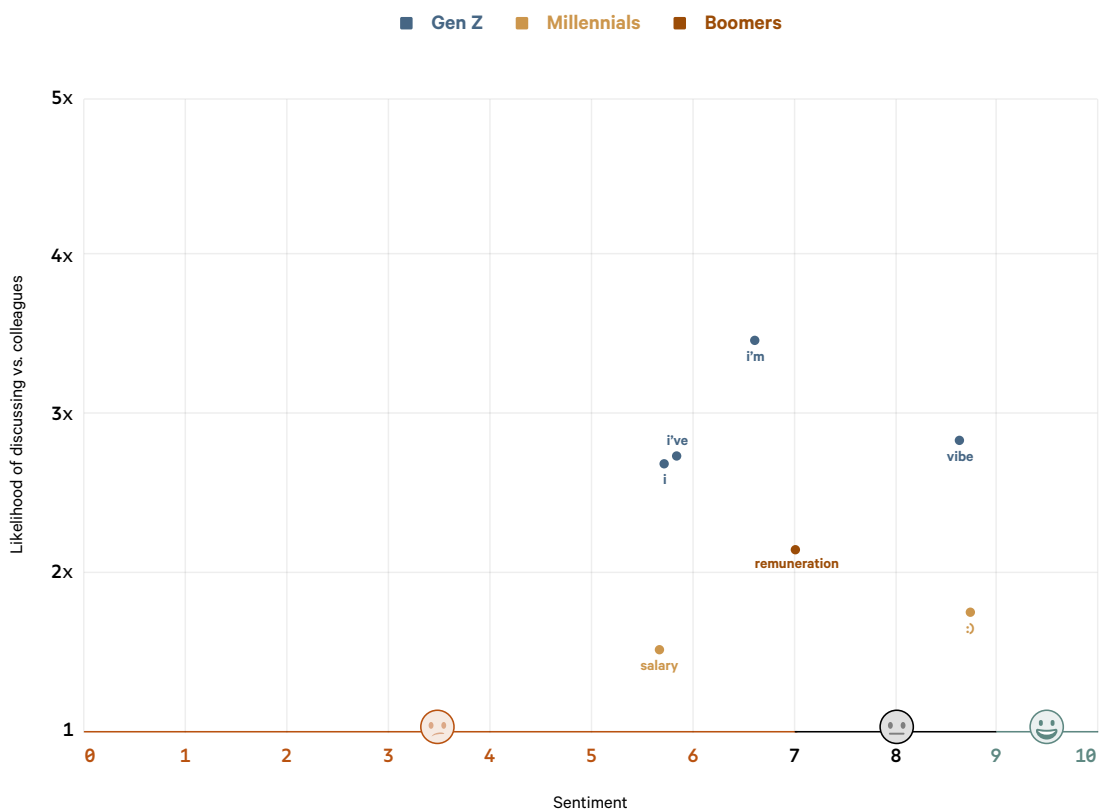
A linguistic analysis also shows that different generations speak a different language — even if they share a common tongue. Of all the generations, this is most clearly expressed through Generation Z. With more self-referential comments that feature use of the first-

person 'I' than other generations, this group stands out with their personal experiences and views of their workplace. Sentiment makes our understanding of this self-referentiality much richer; the data shows that Gen Zers tend to use this more personal voice when expressing something they are unhappy about at work.

Generation Z also stands out because they use uniquely generational slang as a linguistic identifier, describing the 'vibe' of their office in place of its atmosphere or culture.

Millennials, on the other hand, are more likely to refer to their employee experience followed by a smiley emoticon. In a world where face-to-face conversations are becoming increasingly rare, this use of a smiley face could be an approach to foster more warmth and human connection. In contrast, Baby Boomers distance themselves through much more formal language in employee comments, using terms such as 'remuneration' to give feedback compared to 'salary' used by their Millennial peers.

Communication is a hot topic for older generations

■ **Millennials**　　■ **Gen X**　　■ **Boomers**　　■ **Silent generation**
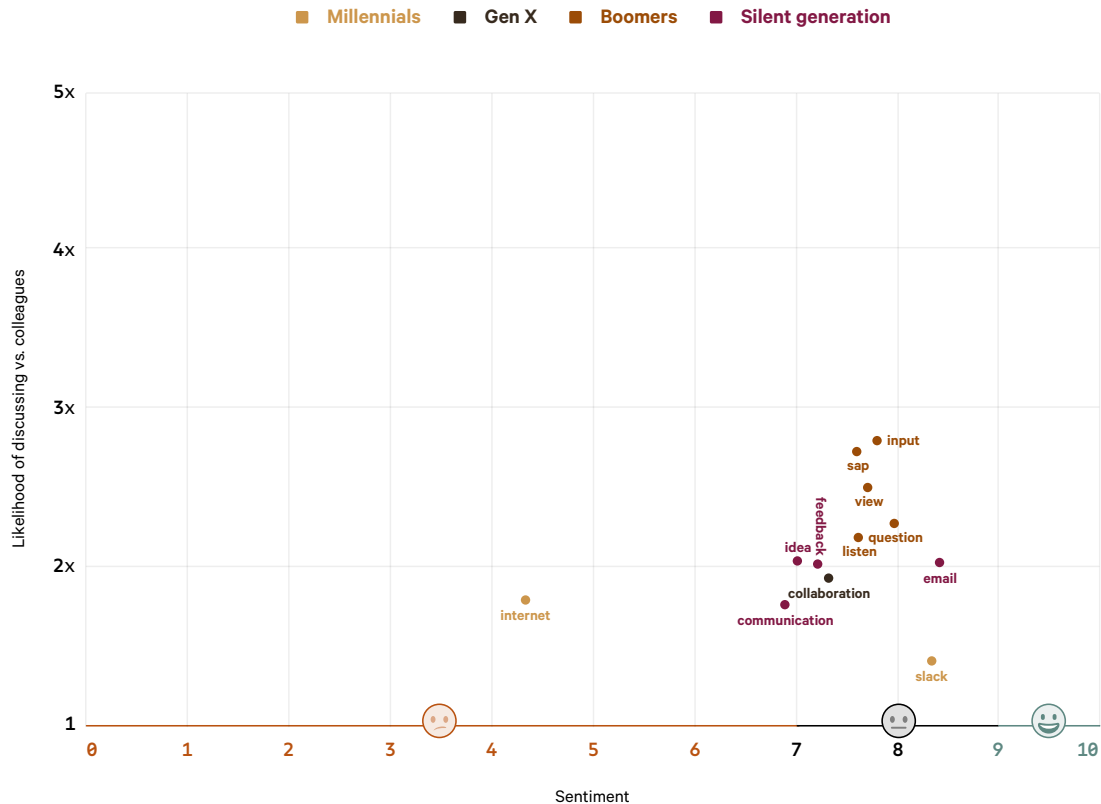
When it comes to the act of communication itself, it's the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Silent Generation who most discuss having input, contributing ideas and being listened to in their organisations. For the Baby Boomers, references to giving their 'view' and the ability to ask questions seems to reflect a balanced, transparent relationship with their employer. On the other hand, the Silent Generation values being listened to and providing ideas, while references to 'collaboration' in Generation X employee comments reveal that they enjoy working with their wider team.

Different generations also communicate in different ways and use different industry tools, meaning that organisations can tap into this in order to reach all levels of their workforce. Baby Boomers are discussing business software such as SAP, while Silent Generation reference using email to communicate. Slack, a cloud-based communication and file-sharing tool, is the preferred channel for Millennials — and they largely enjoy using it. As Millennials are known for being a generation that's always connected, this finding highlights how they rely on the internet for both work and as a means of collaboration.

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While this data does add to a growing picture that generations think and communicate in different ways, these topics, linguistic markers and channels will continue to evolve over time. This is something that organisations need to be conscious of, capture in their employee surveys and harness, in order to ensure that they are able to communicate effectively with all levels of their workforce, no matter the generation.

02

What is prompting employees to speak up?

From environmental concerns to maintaining a work-life balance, our analysis of employee comments gives us a good grounding in what different experience team members are having at different points in their career. But what motivates them to make their voice heard?

Our research shows that employees tend to leave a comment on their employee survey when they have an issue that needs to be solved — something that could cause them to become disengaged. So, why is this happening? Perhaps, it's as tech mogul Bill Gates once said: "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning."

That's not all — the more negatively employees feel about an aspect of their work, the more likely they are to leave a comment to bring it to their employer's attention. Comment rates with a score of 0 are have the highest comment rate of all, showing that when employees are very frustrated, they want their employer to know about it. This comment rate dips as employees become more ambivalent — or passive — about sharing their opinion, with scores between 6 and 8 garnering the lowest comment rates. We can also see a slight uptick when employees leave a high score of 10, showing that when they feel strongly about something — either positively or negatively — this is more likely to result in a comment. However, comparatively speaking, a score of 0 is twice as likely to result in a comment than a 10.

When employees speak up and leave a comment in their survey, it could be a warning sign that something is troubling them. When their organisation is listening for this insight on a regular basis, it means they can be proactive and address issues as they occur.
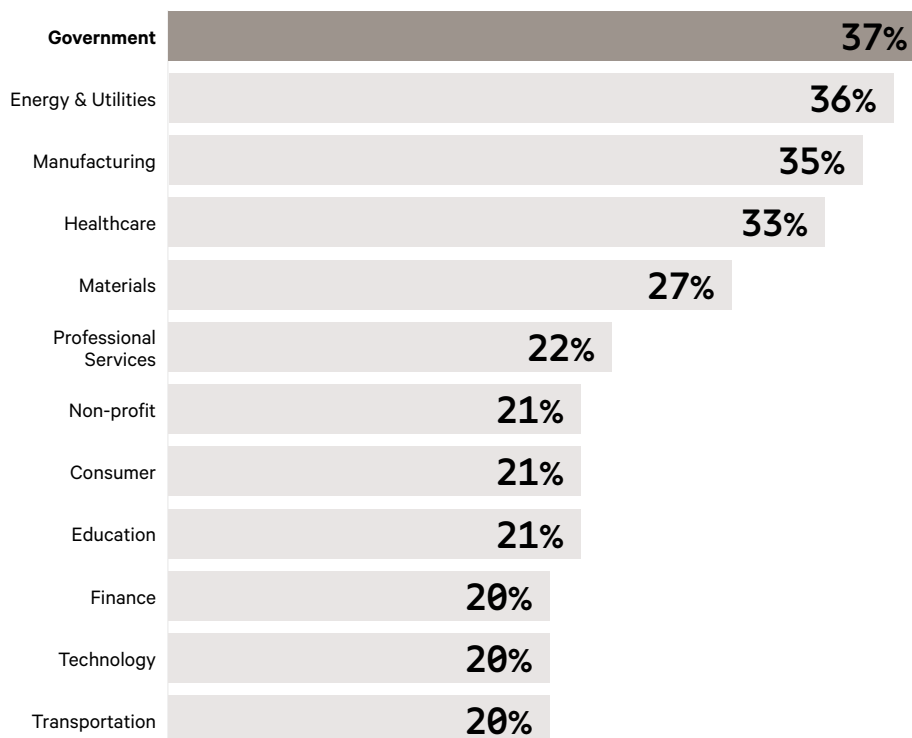
03

The state of the
employee voice
by industry

We've seen what employees are saying, and what motivates them to speak up. However, all this feedback is redundant if organisations are not listening. So how well do employee comment rates match up with responses from their organisations — and crucially, could organisations be doing more to understand what their employees need?

To answer this question, we compared employee comment rates and organisation response rates on the Peakon platform. When an employee leaves a comment on a survey question, their manager or a leader at their organisation has the ability to acknowledge it with a single click. They can also respond to the comment and begin an anonymous dialogue with the employee who left it. Both of these actions are counted as a response.

Employees in Government and Energy and Utilities are most likely to speak up

Employee comment rate

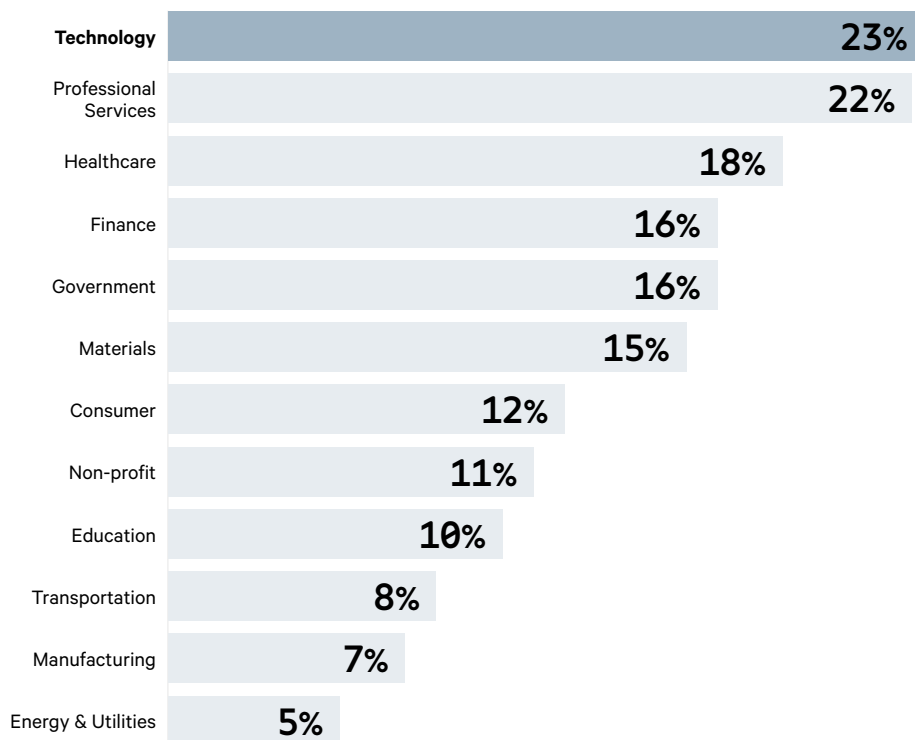| Industry	Rate
Government	37%
Energy & Utilities	36%
Manufacturing	35%
Healthcare	33%
Materials	27%
Professional Services	22%
Non-profit	21%
Consumer	21%
Education	21%
Finance	20%
Technology	20%
Transportation	20%

Analysing the data by industry sector, we found that the more traditional Healthcare, Government and Manufacturing sectors are the most prolific in regard to employee

feedback, with the highest comment rates out of all the industries. Energy and Utilities ranked similarly highly in terms of comment volume with employees likely to leave a comment 36% of the time a score is left.

Meanwhile at the other end of the scale, the Education, Transportation and Finance sectors are the least likely to leave a comment, each with an equal likelihood that an employee will leave a comment 20% of the time.

Office-based industries are more likely to respond to their employees

Employer response rate

Industry	Response rate
Technology	23%
Professional Services	22%
Healthcare	18%
Finance	16%
Government	16%
Materials	15%
Consumer	12%
Non-profit	11%
Education	10%
Transportation	8%
Manufacturing	7%
Energy & Utilities	5%

When we take a look at organisational response rates, we can see nuances of responsiveness at industry level that could demonstrate differing levels maturity towards employee engagement.

Overall, there is a clear divide between the responsiveness of office-based and non-office organisations, with the exception of the Healthcare sector. Technology, Professional

Services, Healthcare, Finance and Government respectively top the list in terms of manager feedback rates to employee comments, while traditionally non-office-based industries such as Transportation, Energy and Utilities and Manufacturing are the least responsive sectors.

Historically, office-based industries have a higher cost of training and acquisition of employees than non-office ones, meaning that retention becomes a priority in a bid to mitigate the cost of training new employees. By contrast, research shows that traditional non-office industries experience comparatively lower training costs, and turnover rates are much higher.

In our industry-wide analysis, Technology was the most responsive industry overall, with a manager response rate of 23% — or just under one in four employee comments. The Technology sector and the concept of innovation go hand-in-hand, so the finding that this industry sector is most responsive perhaps show a similarly innovative approach to employee feedback.
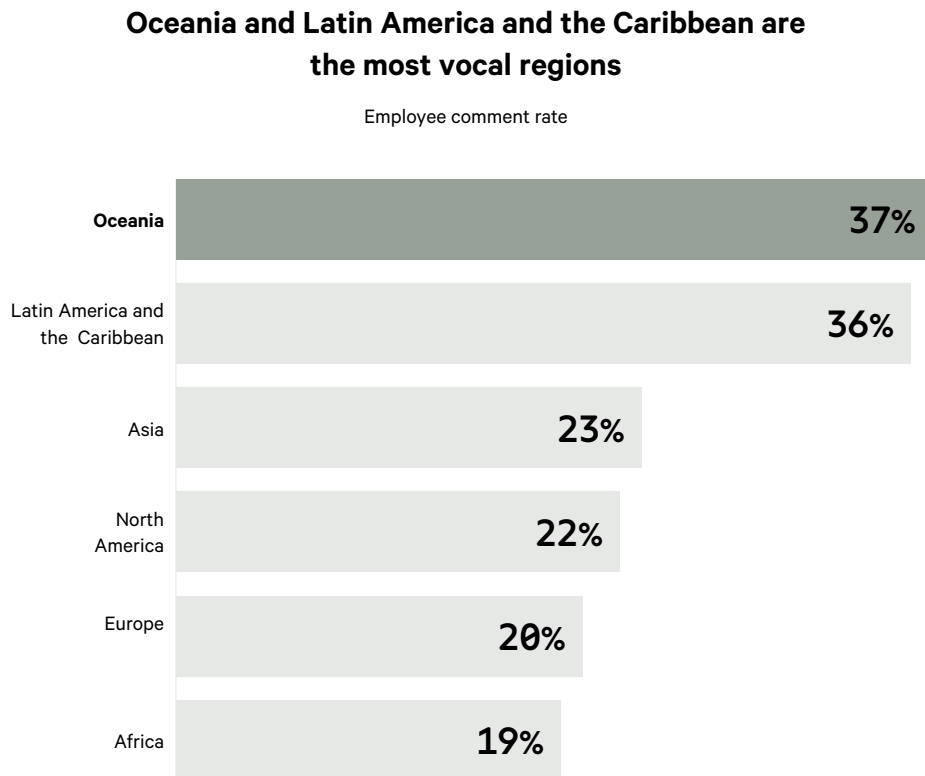
Education and Non-Profit's placement at the lower end of the list with 10% and 11% manager response rates respectively, while Energy and Utilities, Manufacturing and Transportation place at the bottom of the list, ranging from 5% to 8%. With distributed workforces and shift work common among these groups alongside more on-the-ground work, this lack of response could be indicative of different workplace cultures, and a different attitude towards employee feedback. However, with employees in the Manufacturing and Energy and Utilities keen to share get their voice heard, we can see a large disparity; on average only 7% of comments are responded to in Manufacturing, and only 5% in Energy and Utilities.

04

The state of the
employee voice
by region

As we've seen when we examine the employee voice by industry, sectors differ in terms of their employee comment rate and resulting responses. But how does this employee-employer dialogue change when we analyse our data across cultural and geographical borders?

Oceania and Latin America and the Caribbean are the most vocal regions

Employee comment rate

Region	Comment rate
Oceania	37%
Latin America and the Caribbean	36%
Asia	23%
North America	22%
Europe	20%
Africa	19%

The Oceania region, which comprises Australia and New Zealand, is the most communicative in comparison to the others, with employees likely to leave a comment 37% of the time when a survey score is left. Employees in Latin America and the Caribbean are similarly happy to give text feedback, with a 36% likelihood of leaving a comment when a score is given on a survey.

Africa and Europe, by comparison, are the regions that are least likely to leave employee comments, with only a 19% and 20% likelihood that employees will give text feedback on their survey.
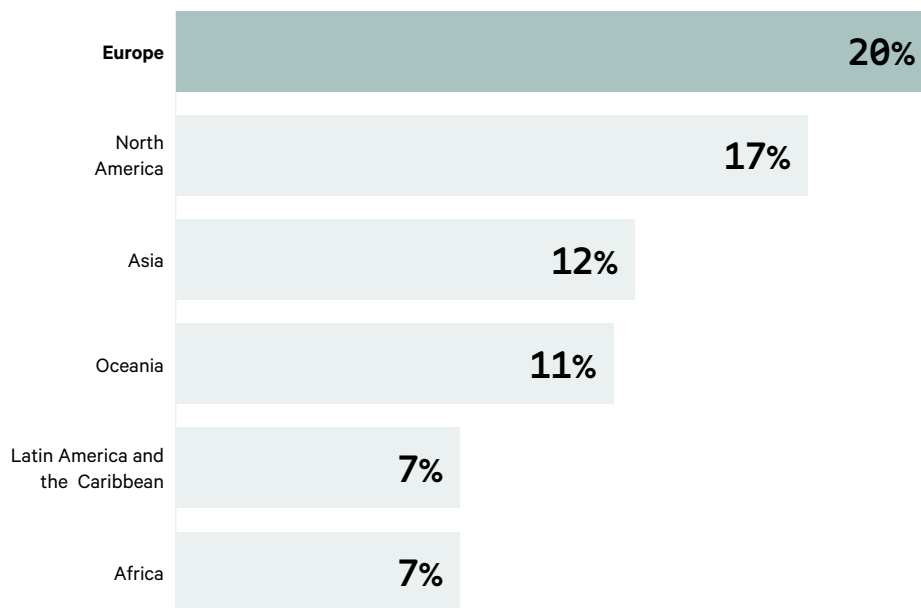
In North America, the likelihood of leaving a comment is still relatively low at 22%, while Asia is only slightly higher at 23%.

When we look at these results, it's clear that cultural and industry differences have a role to play in employee engagement and commenting behaviour. While the differences between industries are less clear-cut, as working culture evolves in the wake of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and traditional industries adapt to meet the challenges of a new, more digitalised, world, we are already seeing how this impacts employee engagement.

However, employee experience — and how employees choose to express that to their employer — is only one part of the conversation. The question now becomes: Are their organisations listening?

European employees are most likely to receive a response from their employer

Employer response rate

Region	Response rate
Europe	20%
North America	17%
Asia	12%
Oceania	11%
Latin America and the Caribbean	7%
Africa	7%

While European employees are some of the least likely to leave a comment according to our data, we didn't find the same with their employers. In fact, European employees are the most likely to receive an acknowledgement or response to their comment from their organisation, with one in five receiving a reply.

Northern America is the second most responsive region, with managers replying to 17% of comments. Asia and Oceania, with response rates of 12% and 11% respectively, sit in

the middle for manager response rates. Considering Oceania's employee readiness to leave a comment, we can see that these employees are not seeing responses from their organisations — and it's a similar situation with Latin America and the Caribbean, whose likelihood of leaving an employee comment is over five times the likelihood of getting a response from their organisation, with only 7% of comments responded to.

At the bottom of the list with the lowest manager feedback rates are Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Africa's low level of responses from management seems to mirror their lower levels of employee comments overall.

When we compare our data of employer responsiveness by region and industry, it's evident that there can be a big disparity between employee comment rate and employer responsiveness. Some of this disparity can be explained by the fact that different industry sectors and regions may be at different maturity levels with regard to employee engagement, and that some are more likely than others to have manager access enabled on the Peakon platform.

While some regions and industries remain hesitant to engage directly with their employees directly, willingness to give managers access to their employee feedback shows a more forward-thinking approach to employee engagement, and actively encourages a dialogue between managers and employees.

05

The value of listening

Based on our unique dataset, this report set out to examine what employees are saying, and whether or not their employers are listening to their feedback.

In the initial stages of our research, we decided to put this theory to the test. We asked 2,000 people across the UK and US the following question: 'How often does your manager listen to your feedback?'

The results showed that only 35% of respondents felt that their manager listens to them frequently or very frequently. That leaves two thirds of employees who feel unheard at work.

This sentiment is backed up by our data. When we look at our data segmented by generation, tenure, region and industry, we can see that this issue represents two sides of the same coin. Employees are more likely to speak up when they have a concern that needs to be addressed and prevents them from reaching their full potential — and if their organisation isn't listening to what they say, we can see the effects of this in their employee comments.

Not feeling heard is only the first symptom that organisations could be listening a little more closely. As their comments suggest, if employees don't feel listened to, they're likely to look for other opportunities and other ways to reclaim their voice.

There is a lesson for all here: Employees are in the best position to tell you what they need to be fully engaged and bring their best selves to work every day. Organisations have an opportunity — and a responsibility — to harness this desire to be heard, act on the feedback, and build a high-performance culture based on trust and communication.