

A Forrester Consulting
Thought Leadership Paper
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Mindfulness And The Leader Of The Future

Why Mindfulness At Work Matters More Than Ever



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Mindfulness and meditation

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present and engaged in the moment, aware of your thoughts and feelings without distraction or judgment.

There are many different ways one can practise mindfulness, including through meditation, breathing exercises, body scans, sleep, listening to music, journaling and more.

Executive Summary

Business leaders of today are under more pressure than ever before to juggle the challenges of the present — customers' increasingly sophisticated demands, disruptive technologies, increased competition, and the seemingly unending presence of global pandemics — while innovating to stay ahead of the future. This requires them to be mindful, aware, and as stress-free as they can be; but at the same time, the stress of all these responsibilities makes that harder.

What are organizations doing to ensure that both their employees and their leaders are prepared for the high mental demands of the future? One proven solution is to help them develop their resilience and stress tolerance through mindfulness.

Headspace commissioned Forrester Consulting to explore the state of mindfulness in large, global enterprises. To explore this topic, Forrester conducted an online survey with 477 business leaders at the director-level and above, whose organizations and employees are participating in company-led mindfulness or meditation programs. Forrester also conducted three interviews with business and HR leaders to gain further insights on their employee experience priorities, and the challenges they face in cultivating a mindful workforce.

KEY FINDINGS

- › **Business leaders are feeling overwhelmed, but they are struggling to disconnect from their work.** They rank sleep, meditation, and time off from work as most effective in helping them cope with stress, but their inability to stop thinking about work can compromise their quality of rest.
- › **Most leaders already recognize the ability of meditation to help relieve stress, but its other benefits are not as clearly understood.** Studies have shown that meditation and mindfulness can help leaders strengthen intrapersonal skills such as self-awareness and self-regulation, but most respondents still associate meditation with stress relief.
- › **Executives need to promote public openness and transparency around mental health.** Some employees are still reluctant to show vulnerability, or the need to take care of their mental health, as they think it affects how they are perceived by managers and peers.

Business leaders of today are under more pressure than ever before to juggle the challenges of the present while innovating to stay ahead of the future.

The Future Requires Leaders That Are Curious, Mentally Agile, And Self-Aware

“The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

The adage is as relevant today as it was decades ago when it first surfaced. From global pandemics, to disruptive technologies, we are currently living in an era of systemic uncertainty. Static business models are no longer sufficient, and organizations that want to thrive, or even to simply survive, feel the daunting and ever-present need to constantly innovate and reinvent themselves.

These future-ready, innovation-centered organizations will also require a new type of leadership at their helm. Tactical skills will no longer be enough; leaders of tomorrow need to be inspired, curious, creative, and boldly tolerant of failure.¹

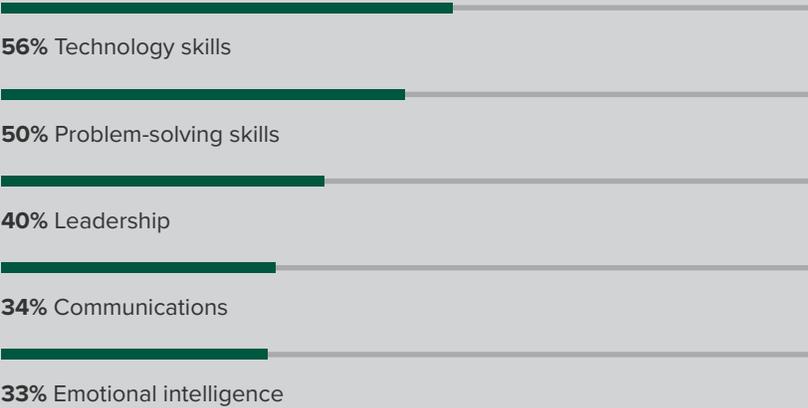
While traditional leadership skills still matter, intrapersonal traits such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and emotional maturity have become pivotal. A study comparing successful executives against executives who have “derailed” found that successful executives were able to handle stress with composure and mistakes with grace, while a lack of self-awareness and learning agility, as well as insensitivity to others, were the top reasons for derailment.² Despite growing evidence of its importance, organizations often still overlook the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills in favor of business and technical skills (see Figure 1).



Future-ready, innovation-centered organizations will require a new type of leadership at their helm — these leaders of tomorrow need to be inspired, curious, creative, and boldly tolerant of failure.

Figure 1

“Which of the following skills are you training employees on, so that they are better prepared for the future?”



Base: 477 business leaders (director-level and above) in large enterprises across North America, Europe, and APAC
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Headspace, February 2021

Organizations often overlook the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills in favor of business and technical skills.

Business Leaders Need A Mental Respite From Work

The demands and responsibilities associated with their positions make leaders more susceptible to stress and anxiety. It is no surprise then that the majority of surveyed business leaders reported multiple symptoms of stress and burnout.

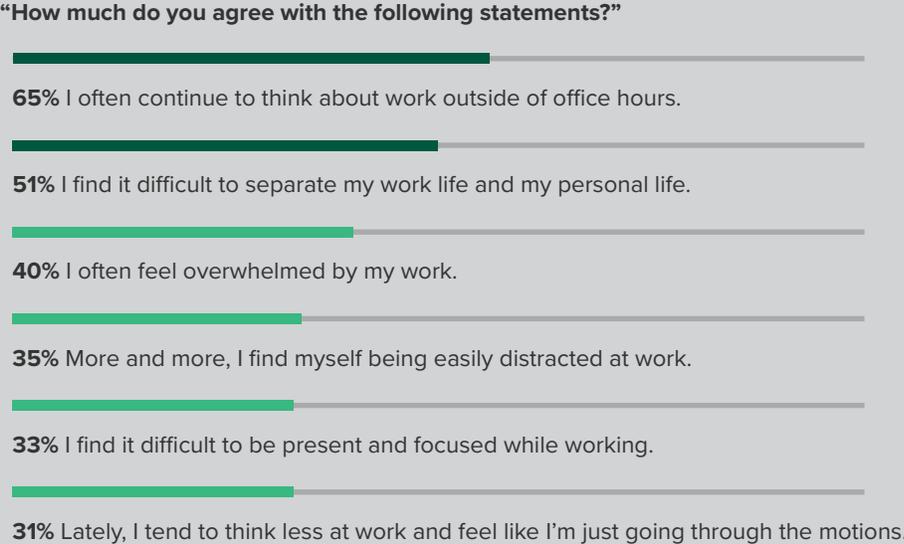
- > **Forty percent say they feel “overwhelmed by their work,” while about a third struggle to “be present and find focus while they’re working.”** These sentiments impact leaders’ daily work performance and productivity (see Figure 2). For knowledge workers, whose day-to-day is often defined by complexity, there are similar stress-related challenges: Those who are under a constant state of stress and fatigue are less able to process and embrace change.³ The implication here points to losses in job satisfaction and employee happiness, which has a direct correlation with overall productivity.
- > **Respondents are trying to disconnect from their work, but the majority find it difficult to disengage mentally.** The top three most effective coping mechanisms for work-related stress – sleep, meditation, and time off from work – all indicate that respondents want some respite from work (see Figure 3).

This study also looked at how demographic and organizational factors affect stress levels; and found that the following groups were more vulnerable to stress:

- Respondents who are 50 years of age or older.
- Respondents based in Asia Pacific.
- Engaged employees who report that they can, “find new and interesting aspects in their work.”

Note: Within this sample, gender, ethnicity, organizational role, and company size had no bearing on respondents’ reported stress levels.

Figure 2: Business Leaders Struggle To Find Separation Between Their Work And Personal Lives



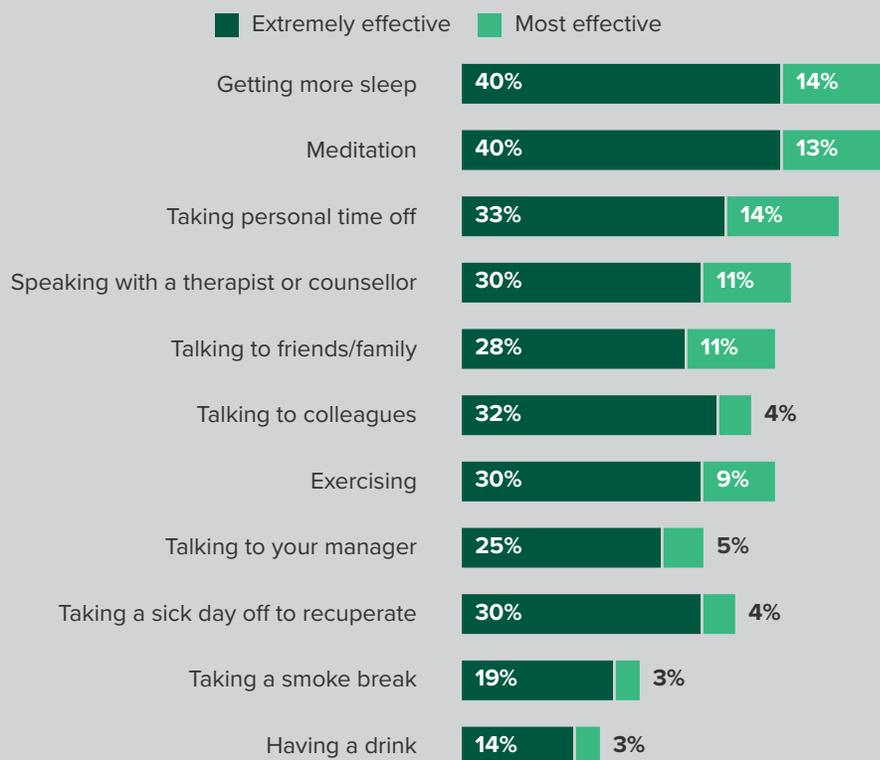
Base: 477 business leaders (director-level and above) in large enterprises across North America, Europe, and APAC
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Headspace, February 2021

- > **However, with two-thirds of respondents saying that they continue to think about work outside of office hours, their quality of rest may be compromised.** While this may seem harmless, prolonged inability to disconnect for work-related thoughts and anxieties can lead to burnout.
- > **While business leaders generally prefer the neutrality and perspective of external parties, talking about and sharing their problems with others can help to relieve stress.** As compared to speaking with colleagues and/or a manager, being able to talk things over with either a therapist, counsellor, or friends and family was more effective. One interviewed HR leader also suggested that some employees do not want to be perceived as being vulnerable and “weak” by their coworkers and managers, and so, they end up downplaying their stress levels, which can further exacerbate the levels of stress they experience.

Overall, these results indicate that leaders need more guidance and tools in order to enable them to sufficiently balance and separate their work from their personal lives. Having this balance will allow them to be present, motivated, and focused on the right things at the right time.

Figure 3: Workday Stress Is Often Carried Through To Leader’s Personal Lives

“Please rate how effective each of the following methods are in helping you cope with work-related stress.”



Base: 477 business leaders (director-level and above) in large enterprises across North America, Europe, and APAC
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Headspace, February 2021

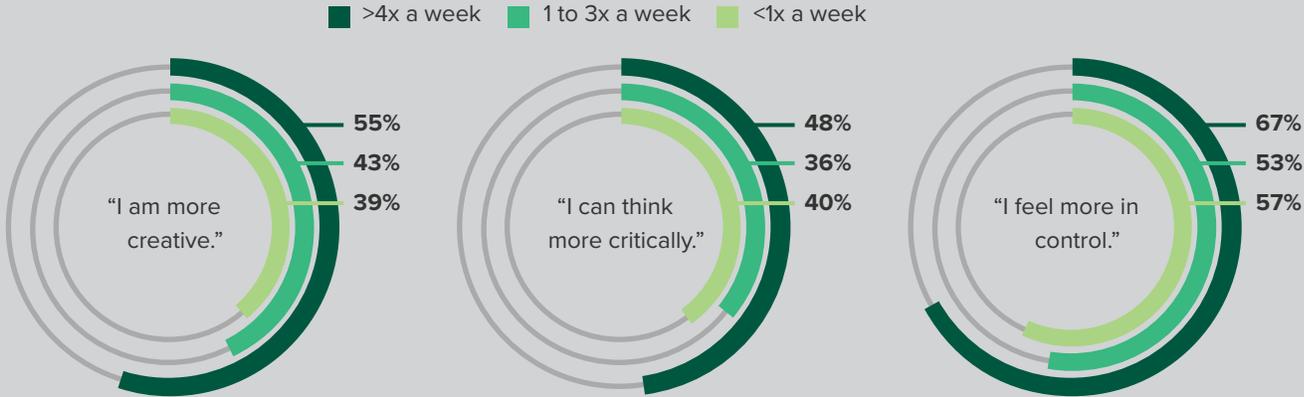
Business Leaders Know The Potential Of Meditation And Mindfulness

From stress reduction, to the regulation of emotions, to self-compassion and empathy, the benefits of meditation and mindfulness at work are well-documented.⁴ Scientific studies have demonstrated its effects across different domains, including physical, psychological, cognitive, and conative realms. And the findings from this study support and reinforce the existing research.

- › **Meditation minimizes the effects of sleep disturbance, especially for those who are frequently travelling and working irregular schedules.** One interviewee shared that constant travelling across different time zones and continents often left them feeling sleep-deprived; however, the interviewee noted that meditation helped them to overcome jet lag and fall asleep faster at night. This then allows the individual to start their following day feeling truly refreshed, more alert, and with higher energy levels.
- › **Mindfulness also promotes creativity and critical thinking.** By disrupting engrained and automatic thought patterns, mindfulness prevents rote, mindless thinking and behaviors.⁵ As a result, 43% of business leaders who meditate say they “are more creative,” and 39% say they “can think more critically.” These outcomes are even more evident amongst those who practice meditation more frequently (see Figure 4).
- › **Overall, meditation and mindfulness practices place employees in a more productive mental state.** Fifty-six percent of respondents report that meditation has helped them “feel more in control,” and 42% say they are “more present and focused.” This sense of autonomy and control promotes the right mental state for workers to find flow and meaning in their work, and, in turn, reduces stress.⁶

Figure 4: Respondents Who Regularly Meditate Are More Likely To Experience Benefits

“Which of the following benefits have you experienced as a result of meditating?”

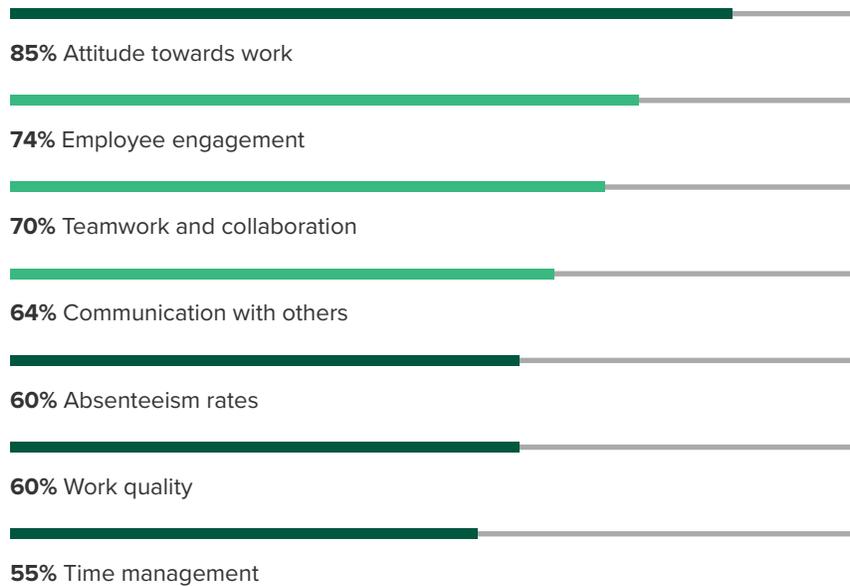


Base: 477 business leaders (director-level and above) in large enterprises across North America, Europe, and APAC
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> **Mindful employees have a more positive attitude, and they work better with others.** The most noticeable improvement that business leaders saw in their employees who meditate were an improved attitude towards work (85%) and improved employee engagement (74%). This also has a halo effect on their coworkers, as their teamwork and collaboration improve as well (70%) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

“How much improvement have you observed in employees or teams who are part of these mindfulness programs with regard to their...?” (Percent showing significant and moderate improvement)



Base: 477 business leaders (director-level and above) in large enterprises across North America, Europe, and APAC
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Headspace, February 2021

Organizations Need To Actively Drive Mindfulness In Employees

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS ARE CLEAR, BUT MOST ARE NOT PRACTICING ENOUGH

The survey findings indicate that respondents are familiar with the benefits of meditation, not just in themselves, but in their team members as well. However, while our research also shows that employees who meditate more frequently tend to experience more benefits, but of those who meditate, 40% do so less than once a week. This could be due to inertia amongst beginners.

- › **Seventy percent of organizations that have a mindfulness program deploy it through an app.** This suggests that employees already have access to the tools and guidance they need to practice meditation, but they are not in the habit of meditating regularly.
- › **Some might view meditation as an exercise mainly for stress relief.** One interviewee shared at being asked how often they meditate: “I started meditating mostly to help me calm down when I’m feeling overwhelmed, so [how frequently I meditate] really depends on how I’m feeling at the moment. It could be as little as once every couple of weeks, or as often as five times a week.”
- › **Organizations are deploying apps, but the approach they’re taking on app use and integration does not account for proper socialization.** Two interviewees shared similar thoughts about the “word-of-mouth” power when it comes to meditation:
 - “You can’t force employees to meditate, but they are more likely to try it out if they see others are doing it in the office.”
 - “As an HR manager, I know how important mental health and meditation are, but it took me a really long time to get into meditation. I just wasn’t used to the idea of sitting still for so long, but ultimately, I gave it a shot because my friends kept telling me how it helped them.”

Overall, the qualitative interviews with business and HR leaders suggested that while those who meditate are aware of its effectiveness in stress reduction and emotional control, few are cognizant of its contribution to developing self-awareness. As such, almost half of those who meditate only do so sporadically, to the degree where those individuals are only seeing limited benefits.



Respondents who meditate more frequently tend to experience more benefits, but of those who meditate, 40% do so less than once a week.

Key Recommendations

Forrester's in-depth survey of 477 business leaders about meditation and mindfulness at work yielded several important recommendations:



Start with self-leadership. Effective communication and leadership of others begins with self-awareness of one's strengths, weaknesses, emotional state, and how those attributes affect one's thoughts and behaviors. Mindfulness promotes a process of self-reflection that gives leaders a safe, personal space to non-judgmentally assess themselves and others.



Promote a failure-tolerant culture. Stigma around mental health remains, although its prevalence varies by culture and organization. Within the corporate context, this stigma stems from a reluctance to show vulnerability and weakness at work for fear of embarrassment, a loss of esteem and stature, or even being passed over for promotions.⁷ Executives need to reject the age-old, cutthroat virtues that once dominated the corporate culture by creating an environment that prioritizes and values psychological well-being.



Reframe how employees (and leaders) view meditation and mindfulness. Most people are already aware of how meditation can help improve stress and sleep, but its role in leadership development is less well-known. Incorporate mindfulness and mental training in all leadership development programs.



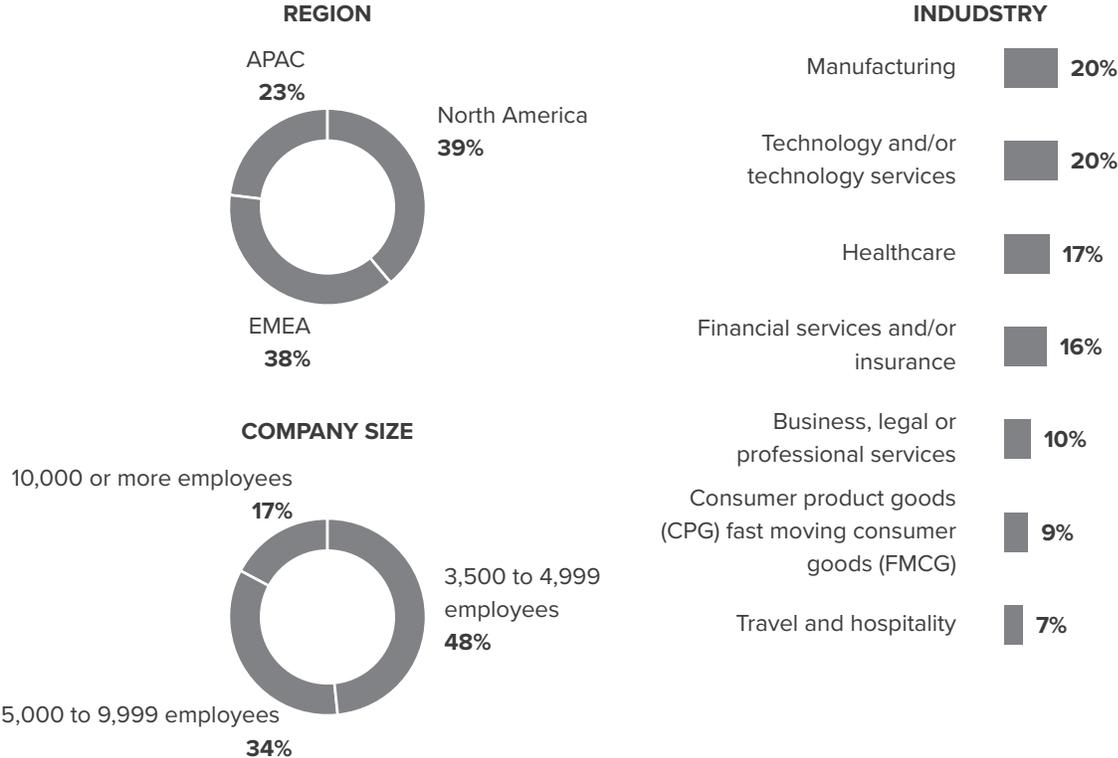
Dedicate resources and build capabilities within the organization to socialize your mindfulness program. A desktop or mobile app, which makes meditation easily accessible for all employees, is a good start; however, organizations will need to keep employees engaged. This could include incorporating gamification through individual/team challenges, identifying mindfulness ambassadors to host group meditation sessions, and/or planning adjacent events (i.e., speeches or workshops) around broader wellness initiatives.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 477 business leaders (director-level and above) whose organizations and employees are participating in a company-led mindfulness or meditation programs. Questions provided to the participants asked about their personal experiences with stress, meditation, and leadership, as well as about their organizations' mindfulness programs. To supplement the survey results, Forrester also conducted three interviews with business and HR leaders to get further insights on their employee experience priorities and the challenges they face in cultivating a mindful workforce and culture. The study began in January 2021 and was completed in February 2021.

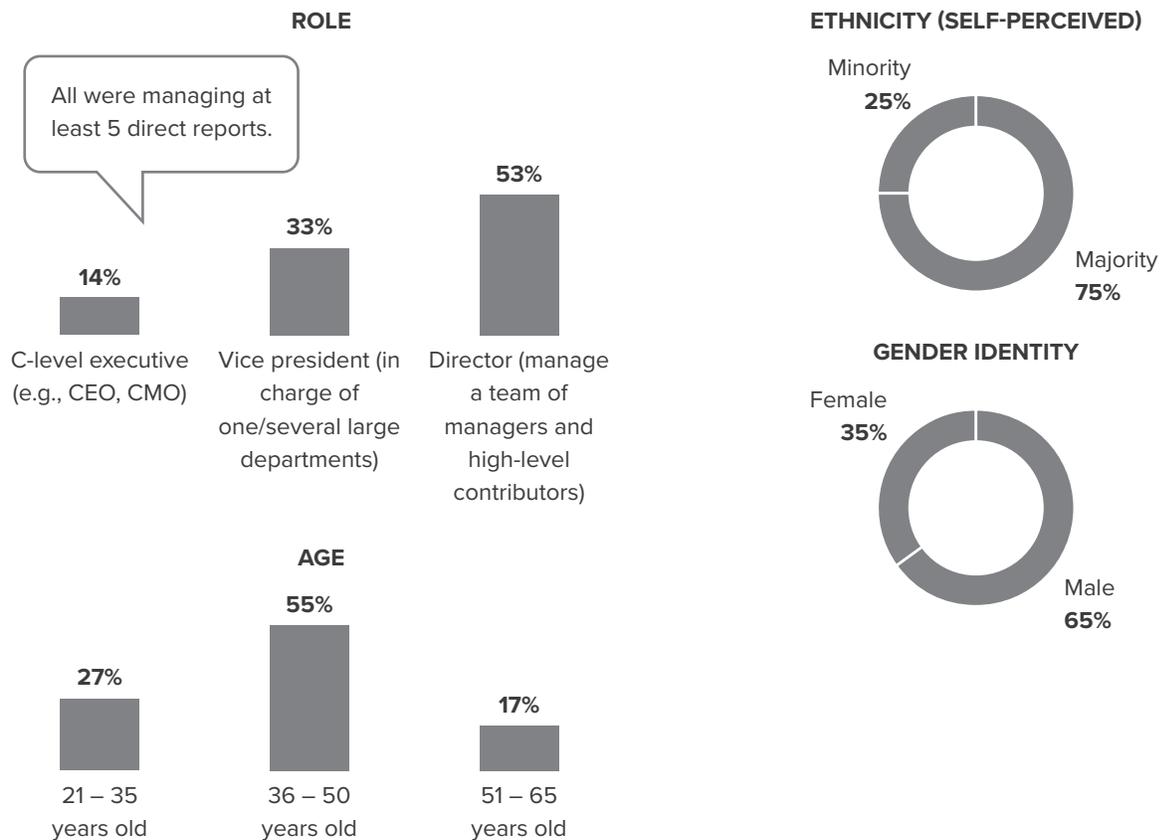
Appendix B: Demographics

FIRMOGRAPHICS



Base: 477 business and people leaders in large enterprises (>3,500 employees) in North America, Europe & APAC
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Headspace, February 2021

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Base: 477 business and people leaders in large enterprises (>3,500 employees) in North America, Europe & APAC
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Headspace, February 2021

Appendix C: Supplemental Material

RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

“The Future Of Work Requires Changes To Management Culture,” Forrester Research, Inc., March 2, 2021

“Drive Organizational Adaptivity With A Future Fit Learning Culture,” Forrester Research, Inc., December 15, 2020

“Introducing Forrester Future Fit,” Forrester Research, Inc., April 1, 2019

“Engineer Your Technology Environment To Improve Employee Productivity And Flow,” Forrester Research, Inc., December 15, 2017

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Hyland, Patrick & Lee, R. & Mills, Maura. (2015). Mindfulness at Work: A New Approach to Improving Individual and Organizational Performance. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. -1. 1-27. 10.1017/iop.2015.41.

Watson, Liana. (2004). Self-leadership: becoming an exceptional leader. *Radiologic technology*. 75. 457-67. quiz 468.

Appendix D: Endnotes

- ¹ Source: “Introducing Forrester Future Fit,” Forrester Research, Inc., April 1, 2019.
- ² “‘Derailed’ executives are people who were very successful in their careers (spanning 20-30 years and reaching very high levels) but who, in the eyes of the organization, did not live up to their full potential.” Source: Hogan, J. & Hogan, R. & Kaiser, Robert. (2010). Management derailment: Personality assessment and mitigation. *American Psychological Association Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. 3. 555–575.
- ³ Source: “Engineer Your Technology Environment To Improve Employee Productivity And Flow,” Forrester Research, Inc., December 15, 2017.
- ⁴ Source: Hyland, Patrick & Lee, R. & Mills, Maura. (2015). Mindfulness at Work: A New Approach to Improving Individual and Organizational Performance. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. -1. 1-27. 10.1017/iop.2015.41.
- ⁵ Source: Shapiro, S. L., Carlson, L. E., Astin, J. A., & Freedman, B. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness. *Journal of clinical psychology*. 62(3). 373–386, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20237>
- ⁶ Source: Lovelace, Kathi & Manz, Charles & Alves, Jose. (2007). Work stress and leadership development: The role of self-leadership, shared leadership, physical fitness and flow in managing demands and increasing job control. *Human Resource Management Review*. 17. 374-387. 10.1016/j.hrnr.2007.08.001.
- ⁷ Source: Richard Farson and Ralph Keyes, “The Failure-Tolerant Leader,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 2002 (<https://hbr.org/2002/08/the-failure-tolerant-leader>).