

The Employer Reputation Gap

The growing role of culture,
purpose and leadership
visibility in 2026



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Alex Hankinson



Flo Powell

Foreword

For more than 30 years, we have worked with businesses to build and protect their reputations.

In that time, one objective has remained constant: **attracting and retaining the right talent**. What has changed is how decisively reputation now shapes that outcome.

Today, businesses are competing in a market where hiring is harder and expectations are higher. At the same time, candidates are looking beyond job descriptions and salaries to understand what a company stands for, how it behaves and whether it reflects their values.

As a result, employer brand has become a critical driver of growth. This is something we are seeing in almost every client conversation. So, we set out to measure it.

Working with Censuswide, we surveyed 1,000 UK employees, including a robust B2B sample across insurance, law, accountancy and technology. Alongside this, we partnered with the University of Sussex Career Lab to understand how those about to enter the workforce evaluate employers in practice.

We combined this with qualitative insight, including discussion groups, desk research and expert analysis from across the future of work.

What emerged is a clear pattern.

There is a growing gap between what organisations believe they communicate and what candidates actually see and understand.

For businesses with ambitious growth plans, that gap is not just a communications challenge. It is a commercial risk.

This report sets out to quantify that shift and what it means for organisations competing for talent today.

Flo Powell and Alex Hankinson
Joint Managing Directors
Midnight

Executive summary

Employer reputation is now a decisive factor in hiring and it is increasingly built on culture as much as success.

This research shows that candidates are making clear decisions based on how they perceive a company. Nearly one in five choose not to apply for a role due to poor reputation or lack of alignment with their values, while others are turning down offers or leaving organisations altogether.

The key takeaways:

01

Businesses need to communicate their culture better – or fall into the reputation gap

- **83%** say employers must consider impact on people, society and the environment alongside profit
- **18%** say poor workplace culture would prevent them from recommending an employer
- **25%** say positive company culture is a major reason they would recommend an employer to others

Some of the students in our focus group found it difficult to work out what businesses 'actually do' from their website or external comms, let alone assess their reputation.

If businesses are failing to communicate on such a simple level then some of the statistics in this survey will be a wake-up call.

02

Employees are taking major actions when they perceive reputation to be poor

Employees are already leaving companies, choosing not to accept job offers or deciding not to apply for positions, based on their perception of an employer's reputation – and they are doing so in meaningful numbers.

- **19%** decided not to apply for a role based on company reputation
- **15%** declined a job offer and **13%** left an employer for the same reason

03

Business leaders need to work harder on their personal brand

The results showed a growing desire for leaders to be visible across multiple channels and to explain their principles and values clearly. But often they are absent.

- **61%** said the profile / reputation of a business leader (like a CEO or Managing Director) would influence whether they applied for a job
- **31%** base their opinion of a leader's reputation on public statements and views
- **24%** base their opinion of a leader's reputation on media coverage – and the same percentage on what they say at conferences and events

Executive summary

Methodology

Quantitative research



(600 UK employees – general, 400 UK employees – equal spread across primary sectors of insurance, accountancy, legal and tech), aged 18+.

Research conducted by Censuswide in February 2026.

Qualitative research

Discussion group and desk research with five students from the [University of Sussex Career Lab](#).

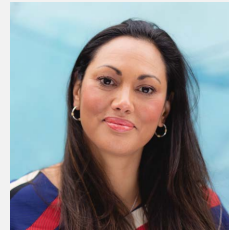
Research conducted in February 2026.

Discussion group supported by qualitative researcher and Midnight partner Adam Hankinson of [AH! Insight](#).

Expert analysis



Flo Powell
Joint Managing Director,
[Midnight](#)



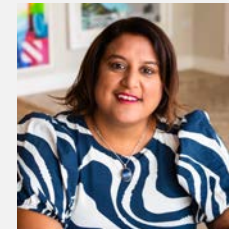
Alex Hankinson
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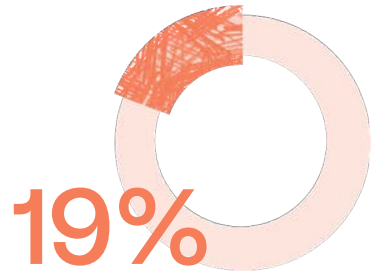
Dr Naeema Pasha
Author, Speaker & Founder
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World of Work](#)



Mo Kanjilal
Founder and Director,
[Edge of Difference](#)

Recruitment and retention are failing due to poor reputation

Poor reputation is having a visceral impact on the future of business, impacting both recruitment and retention.



Almost a fifth of Gen Z workers have opted not to join a company, despite receiving a job offer, because:

“...they weren’t comfortable with the employer’s reputation.”

A quarter of employees say they have left or seriously considered leaving an employer due to leadership behaviour or public controversy – and 16% had done the same due to damage to a company’s public reputation.

The positive news is that a good reputation has the power to deliver meaningful outcomes, just as clearly as a bad one delivers negative:

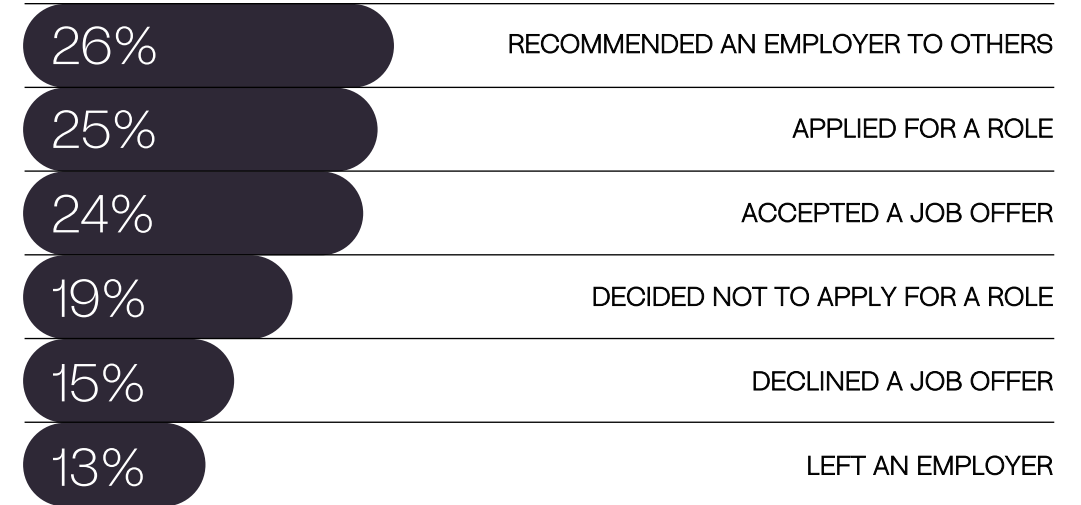
- A quarter of people have recommended an employer to others because they perceive it to have a good reputation
- A quarter have applied for a role and **24% accepted a job offer** for the same reason



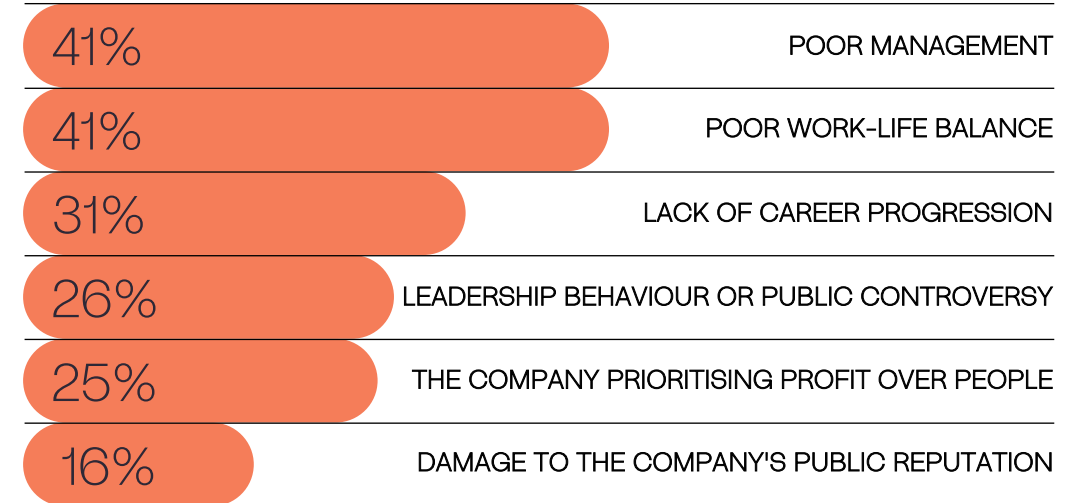
The starting gun in a race to define, influence and tell the story of business reputation, culture and purpose has been fired – and could determine the future for many businesses.

Reputation as a decision maker in attraction and retention

Which of the following have you done based on a company’s reputation?



Which of the following have caused you to leave or seriously consider leaving an employer?



Recruitment and retention are failing due to poor reputation

Reputation really matters to Gen Z v Baby Boomers

The younger you are, the more you are likely to take actions and make decisions based on a company's reputation.

Gen Z were top in the following categories:

33% vs 5%
Have applied for a role

41% vs 5%
Have accepted a job offer

29% vs 10%
Recommended an employer

19% vs 7%
Declined a job offer

15% vs 6%
Left an employer

■ Gen Z ■ Baby Boomers

In fact, there's a rising scale of percentages amongst the demographic, from Baby Boomers to Gen Z in almost all answers, showing a clear direction of travel.

“

The actions that employees will consider taking if their values are not shared and a company's reputation does not match up is remarkable.

To hear that people are walking away from a job, whether it's one that's being offered or one they are currently in, because of the external reputation of a business is extremely interesting.

I think what we're seeing here in general is a need for people to feel that their identity with work should feel like an extension of them.

If an organisation and a job reflects who they are, that can drive attraction. They are thinking: "If I join this organisation, it's a reflection of my identity, of my own skills and values."

If the employer falls short of that, there's a problem."



Dr Naeema Pasha, Author, Speaker & Founder of Henley Business School's World of Work



Reputation is digital – but don't try to fake it

The battle for company reputation is played out primarily online with peer reviews, careers pages and company websites high on the list for most employees when choosing whether to apply for a role; and authenticity is key.

Almost half of employees agree that how current employees talk about the company provides an important marker in how they gauge employer and brand reputation.

However, they are also growing increasingly skilled at spotting content that feels manufactured or fake.

Content that felt genuine and trustworthy included:



Media coverage (earned media)

More than a fifth of employees value media coverage in trade, national or business press in helping them measure employer brand reputation – its independence adds to its authenticity.



Leadership content

Public behaviour or statements by senior leaders came as high as second on the list, mentioned by almost a third of employees – underlining the increasing role of CEOs and MDs in defining the reputation of the business they run.



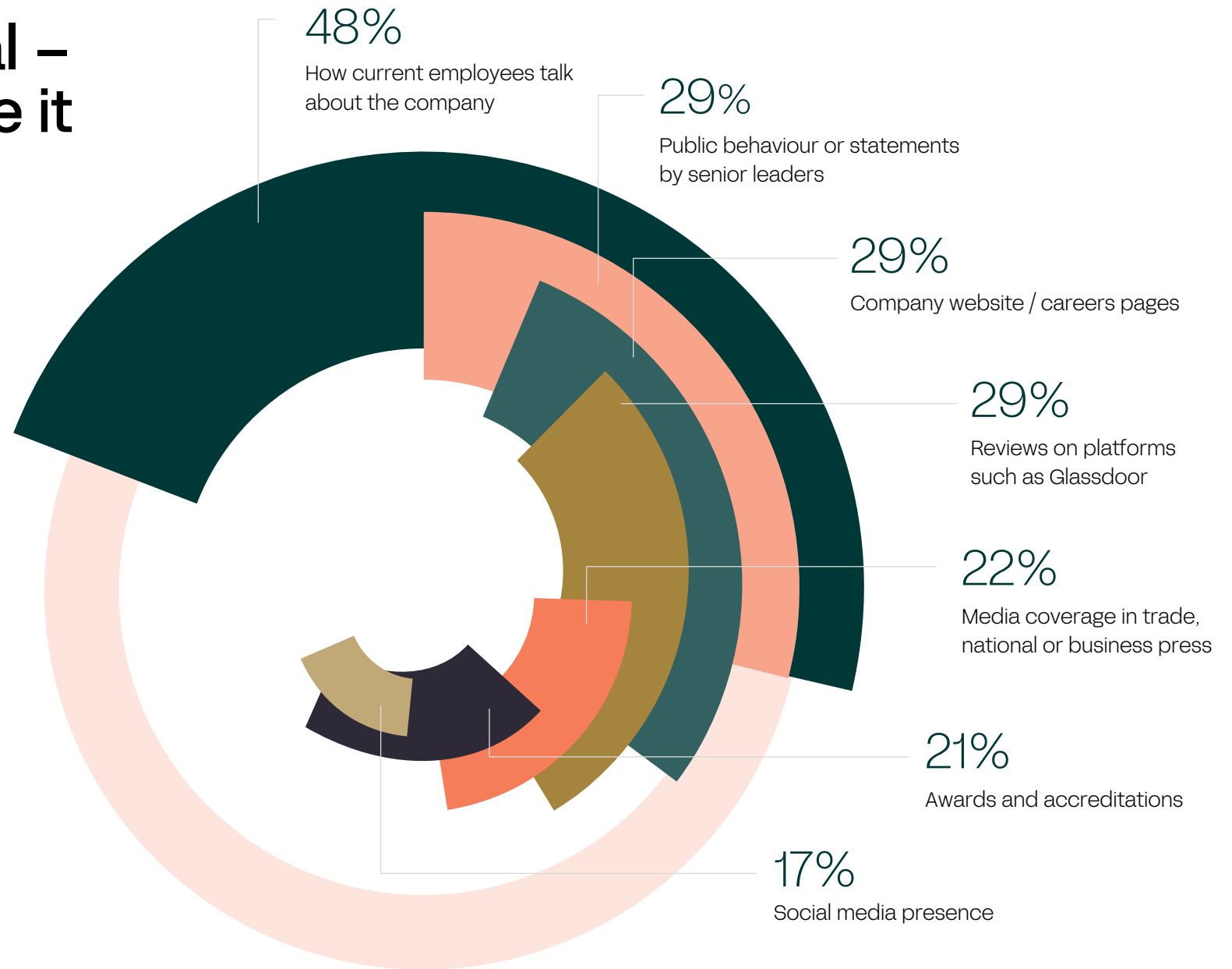
Social media (despite a generation split)

Social content came only sixth – but far higher for Millennials (22%) and Gen Z (21%), who named it as a go-to source compared to just 2% of Baby Boomers. A significant trend.



Reputation is digital – but don't try to fake it

When deciding whether to apply for a role, which of the following most shape your perception of a company's reputation as an employer?



Reputation is digital – but don't try to fake it

The Generation Game: factors influencing perceptions of business reputation

How current employees talk about the company:



54% vs 40%

Gen X Boomers

Company website:



31% vs 24%

Millennials Gen Z

Public behaviour / leader statements:



31% vs 31% vs 23%

Gen Z Millennials Boomers

Awards and accreditations:



26% vs 13%

Millennials Gen X

Online reviews:



39% vs 9%

Gen Z Boomers

Social media:



22% vs 21% vs 2%

Millennials Gen Z Boomers

Media coverage is beating the generation gap

24% & 23% vs 20% & 18%

Millennials Gen Z Gen X Boomers

Gen Z Gen X Millennials Baby Boomers

“

The challenge for businesses looking to build content that supports a positive reputation is how to make it feel real and believable.

In a focus group of pre-employment graduates and undergraduates, the discussion quickly turned from where they go for information about a business to how they rate that content in terms of how genuine it felt.

It underlined the value of encouraging employees to link to their employer on LinkedIn, for instance. Individual voices were more trusted than corporate ones. Combining the two effectively is key.”



Flo Powell, Joint Managing Director, Midnight Communications

Culture and values are the heartbeat of reputation

The culture of a business, together with its purpose and values, are driving employer brand reputation like never before – even challenging fair pay and benefits when it comes to defining what a good business looks like.

Two major stats stand out:

82%



of employees told us it's important that an employer shares their personal values

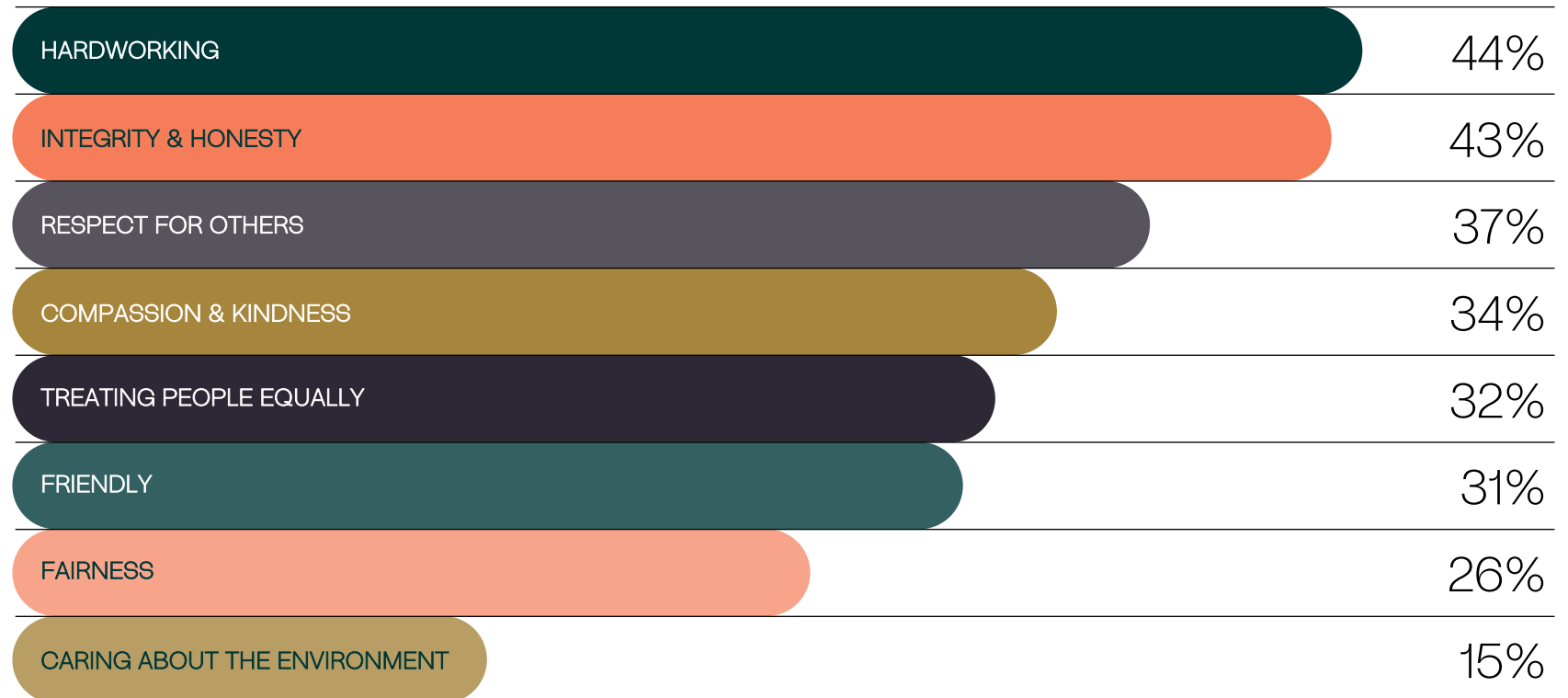
41%

said 'very important'

4%

said 'not important at all'


The list of personal values employees say are important to them – and want to see mirrored by their employer:




Culture and values are the heartbeat of reputation


Company culture is only just below pay in the reasons an employee would recommend an employer to others:

31% 
Fair pay and benefits

25% 
Positive company culture

16% 
Trust in senior leadership

11% 
Ethical business behaviour

9% 
Strong public reputation

“

The threat of ‘quiet quitting’ – when current employees appear settled but are in fact disengaged and planning to leave.

It’s clear that culture is a factor in both attraction and retention – even when companies don’t realise it. The reality is if you don’t engage with employees, you may never know what’s coming down the line.

For employees who ‘just need a job’ or when the most important thing is that work is near to home, then people will put up with poor culture even if they aren’t enjoying it... But only until they find a good alternative.

Quiet quitting is a big risk for businesses with poor culture because they may have people on board who are disengaged and only staying because they feel they have to. These results underline just how important the culture and values of a business are.”



Mo Kanjilal, Founder and Director,
Edge of Difference





Culture and values are the heartbeat of reputation

If you want to win in attraction, treat your people right

Factors deterring employees from referring their employer:

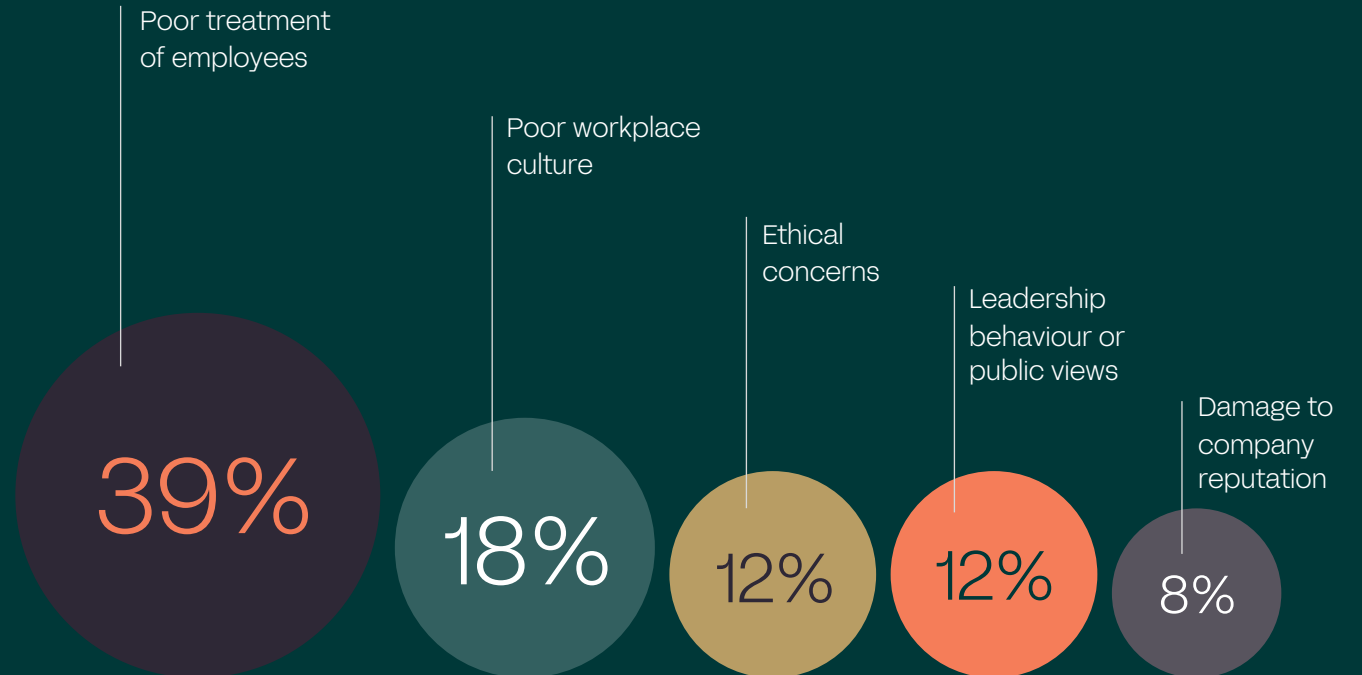


There's a clear move in the future of work towards a business environment in which culture, ethics and doing the right thing by people and the planet are increasingly important to employees.

The onus is on employers and business leaders to build and effectively communicate that culture – and of course to live by it.”



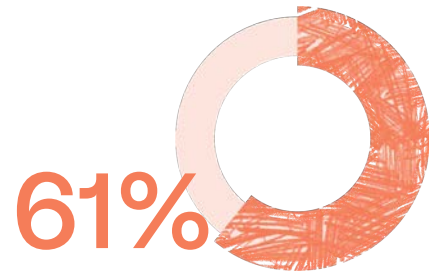
Alex Hankinson, Joint Managing Director,
Midnight Communications



Business leaders are increasingly intrinsic to business reputation

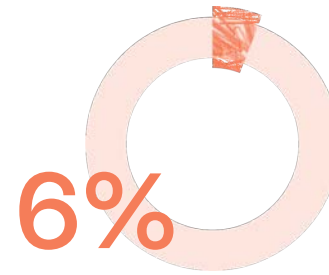
C-suite profile can play a powerful role in brand reputation, with younger employees in particular willing to be influenced by leaders.

It means the days of the silent CEO are on their way out. Leaders of the future will need to be visible, proactive and on brand.

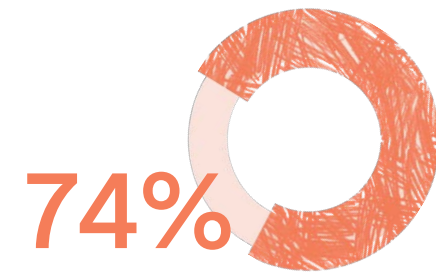


61% said the profile / reputation of a business leader (like a CEO or Managing Director) would influence whether they applied for a job

21% said 'significantly'



6% said a CEO's public profile does not influence their decision at all



74% Millennials are at least twice as influenced by a CEO's profile compared to:

27% Baby Boomers

64% Gen Z

It's time to speak up: proof that business leaders need to communicate to build reputation

The results suggest that keeping your head below the parapet as a business leader will only get you so far.

Employees and prospective employees want CEOs and Managing Directors to be visible and credible – and they are searching for evidence before they apply.

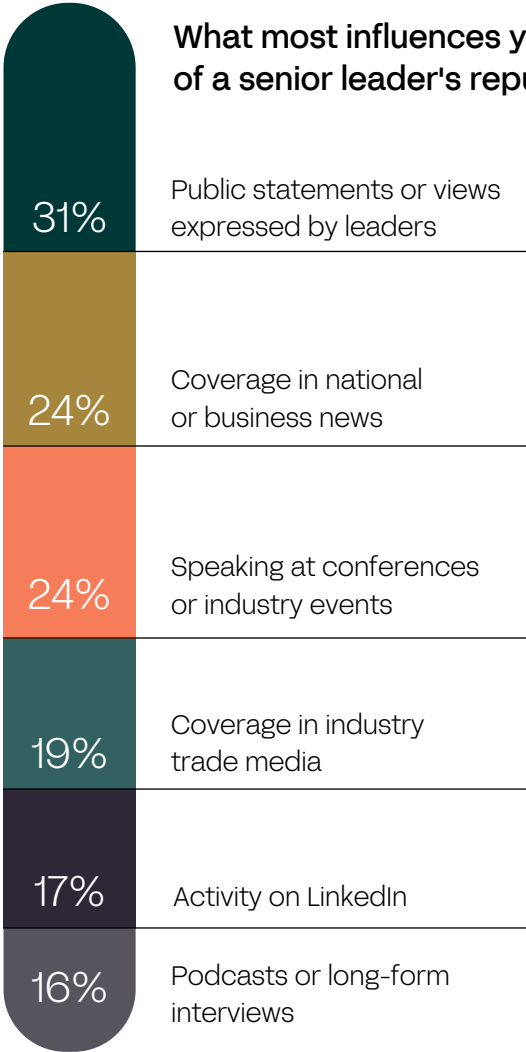


Listening to a leader's public views is the top way for employees to gauge reputation, making **external communications more important** than ever.



Speaking at conferences is also highly valued – it was third on the list (and up to second for Gen Z). Leaders need to think more strategically about external communication.

Business leaders are increasingly intrinsic to business reputation



What most influences your perception of a senior leader's reputation?



The days of the silent CEO are numbered.

There's an increasing desire from employees, customers and the public to know more about leaders – actively seeking them out across every channel to understand their values, purpose and leadership style. The CEO of the future will need to be fluent across all platforms, highly connected to their PR partners – and media trained to skilfully manage their profile.”

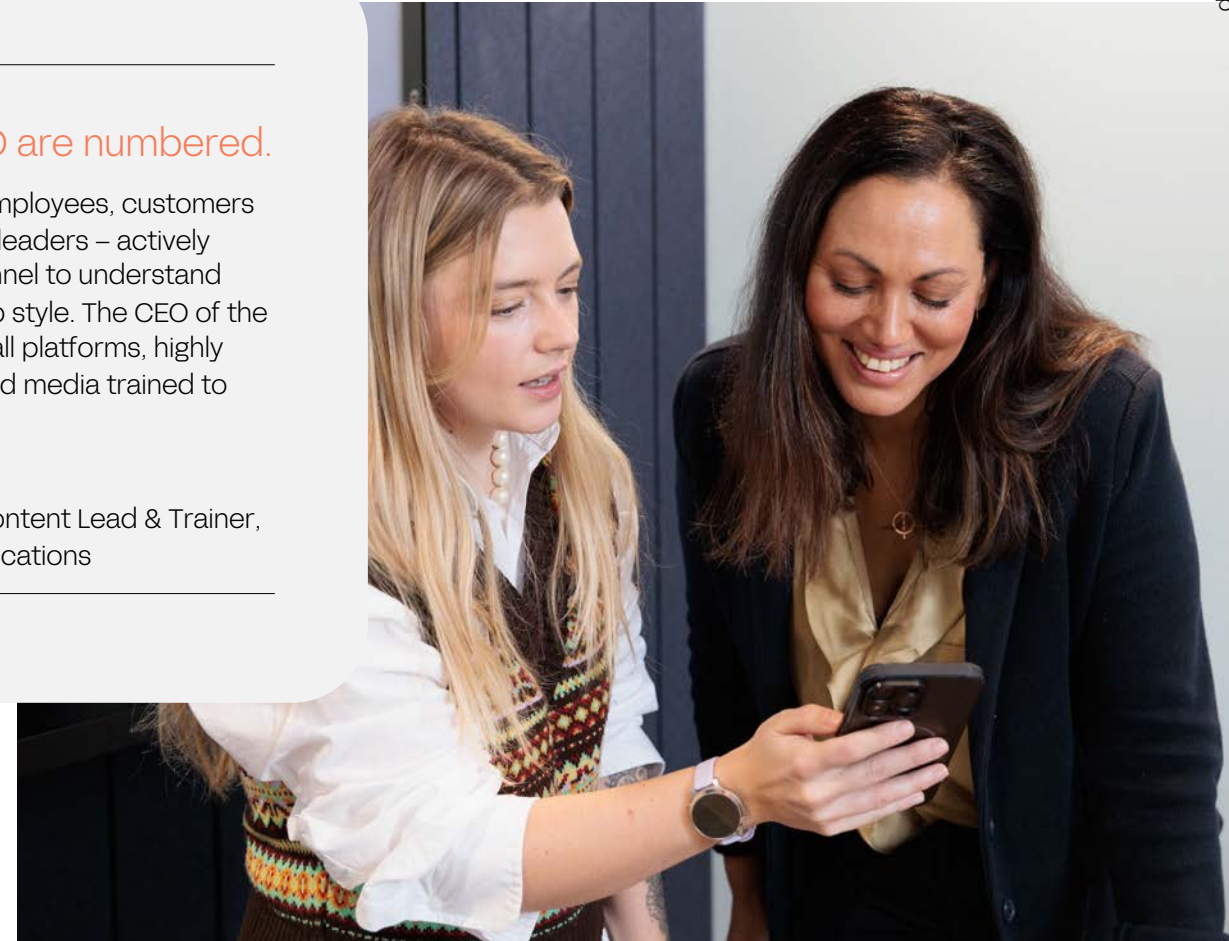


Chris Hatherall, Content Lead & Trainer, Midnight Communications



Discussion point

40% of entry level employees say 'nothing most influences them' in their perception of a senior leader's reputation. Is the pre-work generation being left out of the discussion?



Articulate your purpose to improve reputation

ENVIRONMENT & B CORP



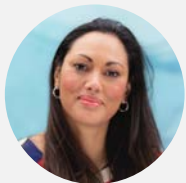
These statistics underline that having a purpose beyond profit – and caring about your business' impact on society and environment – are now significant contributors to a positive employer brand reputation.

We're seeing that shift reflected at Midnight, where job applicants are regularly mentioning our B Corp status as a reason they chose to apply, and we actively encourage and support clients looking to start on their own certification journey.

The good news for businesses is that having a purpose - and a strong reputation – also impacts the bottom line.

In a report to mark the 10th anniversary of the B Corp movement in the UK, in November 2025, it was revealed that B Corps returned 20% turnover growth across 2024-25 (almost seven-times higher than the 3% for all UK SMEs) with 11% employee headcount growth (compared to 2% for all UK SMEs)."

[Purpose-led businesses thriving and outperforming UK peers, new data shows – B Lab UK](#)



Alex Hankinson, Joint Managing Director,
Midnight Communications

83%

say employers must consider impact on people, society and the environment alongside profit

More than four-fifths of employees want their employer to care about more than profit when setting a business culture, putting ethics and purpose right at the heart of a strong reputation.

Environment, diversity and social impact came out as clear markers in this field – underlining their role in the future of work.

35%



of employees now expect employers to act responsibly towards the environment

15%



included caring about the environment in their top three personal values

11%



included diversity in their top three values

10%



say having an accreditation such as B Corp increases their trust in a business as an employer

Articulate your purpose to improve reputation

DIVERSITY

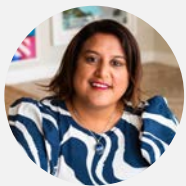


People want to work somewhere where they align with the purpose or vision of a business. They want to feel included and to feel like they will be listened to – and able to contribute to all those things.

If you're trying to recruit and people don't see that, they aren't going to apply. Equally, if people you employ don't see those things happening, many will not see a future for themselves in the same company.

That's a real thing, that happens. Businesses out there are struggling to recruit and retain if they don't have an inclusive workplace.

Does your business talk about adjustments and accessibility in the recruitment process? Do you talk about flexible working, maternity, paternity, employee benefits? Do you think about people who are interested in learning and development? Businesses need to be talking about things like this to attract new employees in the future of work – and right now."



Mo Kanjilal, Founder and Director,
Edge of Difference



Listen to the next generation to learn where brand reputation is built (and what to do better)

Business websites: nice design – but what do you actually do?

In a focus group with undergraduates and graduates, company websites came in for criticism from students for failing to give basic information about what the business does – and what its culture and purpose are.

Max, third year undergraduate in banking and finance:

"I was surprised by the lack of storytelling from businesses about their work culture. In some cases, it was difficult to even work out what they do as a business.

It was even hard to find out what a business actually does sometimes. I was looking at the About Us section and it didn't really say a single thing other than 'we're a high performing team and we deliver this or that.'

But what do you make? What do you do? What is your service? It wasn't clear – even on their own website.

It was also reflected on socials where there was a massive lack of showing what they actually do. Not even a bio on many employee accounts."

01

LinkedIn – the go-to for authentic insight

The professional networking platform is increasingly seen as a place to gain insight into a company's culture and ethos – and an ideal way to connect with people who have insider experience of what a business culture feels like.

All the students in our focus group had a LinkedIn account and had been encouraged and trained by their university on how to use it to support their future careers.

The ability to connect directly with an employee already working at a business they are interested in was seen as one of the biggest benefits.



Varsha, studying a Master's in Data Science:

"I look for testimonials and people's feedback, especially employees who are working at the company you are researching. Are they being paid well, what is the work environment like? Maybe I'll find them on LinkedIn and get in touch."

Law undergraduate:

"LinkedIn is a good one. I like the layout and how it's not really social media, but you can see who people work for. You can always get in touch by following them and messaging, which is really interactive. You can't do that as easily on other platforms."

02

Glassdoor for unfiltered feedback

'GLASSDOOR'

Max:

"I like the fact that it's testimonials from people who have decided to put it up there. It's not the company who has issued it. When a company puts out something it's from their marketing team, to make them look good – and that doesn't always translate. I'm looking for insights – like 'the company's good but they work you 60 hours a week'. I find that helpful."

03

Reddit a surprise contender – for anonymous views



Law undergraduate:

"If I was quite deep into my research and I wanted to know the actual opinions of employees, I would probably look on somewhere like Reddit because I think the anonymous aspect of it means you get real opinions."

04

Listen to the next generation to learn where brand reputation is built (and what to do better)

X for crisis and controversy



Law undergraduate:

"Maybe X, especially for scandals. What are they trying to hide from mainstream media?"

Psychology undergraduate: :

"I'm looking at how a business positions themselves as a brand. So, for example, the content that they put out or how do they then react to controversies? Just seeing how they react, how they speak to clients and people, I think that's quite important."

Other contenders

Careers fairs

In-person is back in vogue and valued by students

Careers webinars

A chance to meet current employees online is rated highly

Sector specialists

Legal Cheek and All About Law in the legal sector, for example, are highly valued

National and trade media

Media coverage in relevant publications

Hackathons

A sursector together with coding boot camps and challenges. prise mention in the tech



What students want from their first employer

- A big name for the CV
- Fair pay
- Career progression and a supportive culture
- Hybrid working and good work-life balance
- A chance to socialise at work
- Respect and being treated in the right way

WHAT A GOOD REPUTATION LOOKS LIKE



It's how an employer treats staff, how clients respond to them, how the news positions them as a brand and what the brand stands for.

Also, whether what they actually do reflects all that."

Psychology undergraduate

A reputation built on strong culture is key to success in the future of work

Employee perception of brand reputation is playing an increasingly pivotal role in where they choose to work and how long they stay – and it is culture and values that will tip the balance in the future of work.

Reputation mattered across all generations in this survey, with employees making big decisions based on it.

Twin desires and twin challenges



- 1 Employees want employers to match their personal values
- 2 Employees want businesses to have a purpose that goes beyond profit

- 1 How to communicate their purpose and build a stronger reputation
- 2 How to find their purpose and make it meaningful



67%

Said future workers would be more influenced by a company's reputation in future

6%
Said 'less influenced'

20%
Said 'stay the same'

A focus on culture, ethics, inclusivity and purpose sits alongside a desire for a better work-life balance and flexible work patterns for many employees.

Remuneration remains top of the wish list, which comes as no surprise, but employees say their attitudes are evolving to focus on less tangible impacts, too.

A reputation built on strong culture is key to success in the future of work

In what ways have your expectations of employers changed in recent years?



Stats like these are leading some experts to suggest that culture will lead the future of work, even in an era in which AI is changing the workplace so dramatically.



The results of this survey underline how important culture, inclusivity, fairness and reputation will be in the future of work.

So much discussion right now is around the influence of AI in shaping the future. However, Industry 5.0 in my opinion is not an industrial revolution. This next stage cannot be just based on technocracy and growth. It has to be about how we enable people to perform to their best.

We're under a lot of pressure. Continuous growth, productivity, all that hustle culture, isn't sustainable.

The future of work is going to be about values and culture. It's about not having the behaviours which disengage people and thinking 'if we disengage people we'll find others.'

That no longer works because there's more and more people who don't want to be disengaged. There's more and more people who want to be valued for their integrity. They want respect, they want people to be treated fairly.

These are the qualities of the future of work, alongside technology adoption."



Dr Naeema Pasha, Author, Speaker & Founder of Henley Business School's World of Work

Grasp the opportunity: the future of work will be better

It's only right to end on a positive note.

If the future of work is an eco-system of businesses with a purpose, building their reputation in the fields of company culture, ethics, fairness, inclusivity, social impact and environmental impact, then employees are in good hands.

The majority of employees think the future of work will be better

70% Millennials
62% Gen Z



56%
Say **'better'**

22%
Said **'much better'**

16%
Said **'worse'**

The challenge for businesses and leaders is to live up to that dream – and to communicate it effectively.

With thanks to

Adam Hankinson
[AH! Insight](#)

Dr Naeema Pasha
[Henley Business School](#)

Mo Kanjilal
[Edge of Difference](#)

University of Sussex
[Career Lab Students](#)



Take our free **'Employer Reputation Gap' Quiz**

Is your employer brand telling the real story?

You might be a great place to work- but if your external reputation doesn't match the employee experience, top talent and credibility are slipping through the cracks.

Find out if there's a damaging reputation gap in just minutes with our free quiz.

Click the QR code or visit:
scorecard.midnight.co.uk/reputationgap



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