

PART 2

STATE OF
WORKPLACE
EMPATHY
2026

C-SUITE SPECIAL REPORT

Inside America's C-suite: What happens when executives don't feel safe?

businessolver

Inside the report

Businessolver's 2026 State of Workplace Empathy study was fielded by Edelman DXI, which surveyed 300 C-suite executives and 1,000 employees, including managers.

Throughout the report:

- Empathy is defined as "the ability to understand and/or experience the feelings or perspectives of another."
- "CXO" is the abbreviation for "C-suite executives," which includes 4 C-suite roles: CEOs, CFOs, CHROs/CPOs, and CIOs/CTOs.

The story

America's C-suite is operating under a remarkable cluster of mental health strain, toxicity, intimidation, and fear of acting on empathy, all amidst a shared reality problem. Diverse perspectives are a good thing, but making decisions without a shared view of what employees and peers are experiencing can invite blind spots and risk. Because what executives either can't see or don't feel safe voicing out loud will inevitably erode culture, performance, and the employee experience. The warning signs are already present in the data.

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Table of contents

Data reveals what America's most powerful leaders see, miss, and fear voicing 4

The authority paradox: Empathy is riskiest for C-suite's culture champions 5

What happens when the CEO doesn't feel safe demonstrating empathy? 6

The future of empathetic leadership: Millennial CXOs struggle most 7

The C-suite is not psychologically safe 9

One C-suite. Four workplace realities. 12

Flexibility is a C-suite coping mechanism, but performance still comes first 13

Empathy fallout: The business implications are already here 15

About Businessolver 16

Appendix 17

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Data reveals what America's most powerful leaders see, miss, and fear voicing

Can C-suite executives (CXOs) lead effectively if they don't feel safe voicing their views? Can they manage a culture problem if they can't agree it exists? Can they empower employees when transformation priorities don't align? And through it all, can they protect their mental wellbeing?

This year's findings reveal widespread barriers to empathetic leadership, including psychological safety, confidence, culture, and time. While leaders see the upside of empathy to the business, many still worry that operationalizing empathy will undermine their credibility, cost them respect, or challenge their authority.

In fact, **nearly 60% of CEOs expect their decisions to be challenged if they lead with empathy**. And among the 61% who say it's difficult to demonstrate empathy, 26% fear they'll be viewed as weak. The irony? CEOs are seen as the C-suite's strongest culture champion, but they report the greatest discomfort with that responsibility.

Across Businessolver's study of 300 CXOs, findings point to something bigger than executive misalignment. America's leaders are carrying varying degrees of mental health strain, intimidation, perceptions of culture, and comfort leading with empathy.

Empathy has won the business case but not the room

9 in 10 CXOs acknowledge empathy's value to their business, but 41% expect their decisions to be challenged if they lead with empathy. Coworker intimidation and toxicity are highest among the 2 executives expected to shape culture: CEOs and CHROs/CPOs.

	Empathy directly contributes to business results	Expect decisions to be challenged if they lead with empathy	Coworker intimidation	Culture is toxic
CEO	99%	**59%**	**44%**	**33%**
CFO	97%	29%	33%	15%
CIO/CTO	97%	25%	20%	4%
CHRO/CPO	88%	**51%**	**40%**	**37%**

The authority paradox

Empathy is riskiest for C-suite's culture champions

Employees say they set the tone on culture while executives name CEOs and HR leaders as the primary culture champions. The 2 roles least comfortable with that responsibility.

The leaders carrying the most responsibility for a culture of empathy are also carrying the strongest pressure to protect their authority. CXOs say the responsibility for culture sits with the CEO first (30%) and CHRO/CPO second (26%). However, while executives tend to follow hierarchy, employees say they collectively set the example: Only 2% of CXOs say non-manager employees have the greatest impact on empathy versus 32% of employees—a 16X gap.

Who owns culture?

Who has the most impact on building a workplace culture of empathy?	Non-manager employees say...	CXOs say...
Manager or supervisor	25%	22%
Non-manager employees (peers)	**32%**	**2%**
CEO	23%	30%
Other C-suite leaders	11%	20%
CHRO/CPO or HR leaders	9%	26%

Non-manager employees are **16X** as likely as CXOs to say employees shape workplace empathy

The contradiction: CXOs say CEOs and CHROs/CPOs have the greatest influence on workplace empathy, but those 2 roles are also the most likely to say empathy is difficult and potentially damaging to their authority.

59% of CEOs and 51% of CHROs expect their decisions to be challenged if they lead with empathy

	Total CXOs	CEO	CHRO/ CPO	CFO	CIO/CTO
It's hard for me to consistently demonstrate empathy in my day-to-day work	40%	**61%**	**48%**	28%	24%
I will be challenged on my decisions for the business if I use empathy	41%	**59%**	**51%**	29%	25%
I will not be respected as much if I demonstrate empathy at work	28%	**43%**	**37%**	21%	12%

See the full data on page 17 in the appendix.

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What happens when the CEO doesn't feel safe demonstrating empathy?

How can a culture of empathy prevail when the leader expected to shape it feels the most vulnerable demonstrating empathy? Among CEOs, reported mental health issues climbed 9 points year over year, toxic culture jumped 25 points, and difficulty demonstrating empathy surged 32 points.

Today, 59% of CEOs expect their decisions to be challenged if they lead with empathy and 43% fear it will cost them respect, even as 73% say employees are entitled to empathy at work.

Despite their good intentions, however, clear blind spots could threaten CEO decision-making around employee wellbeing, benefits, retention, culture, and workforce readiness.



4 potential CEO blind spots

34-point leadership empathy gap

99% of CEOs rate themselves as empathetic

65% of employees agree

23-point organizational empathy gap

99% of CEOs call their organization empathetic

76% of employees agree

19-point flexibility gap

49% of CEOs say their company offers flexible work locations

30% of employees say the same

17-point retention gap

44% of employees connect empathy with lower turnover

27% of CEOs make that connection

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The future of empathetic leadership

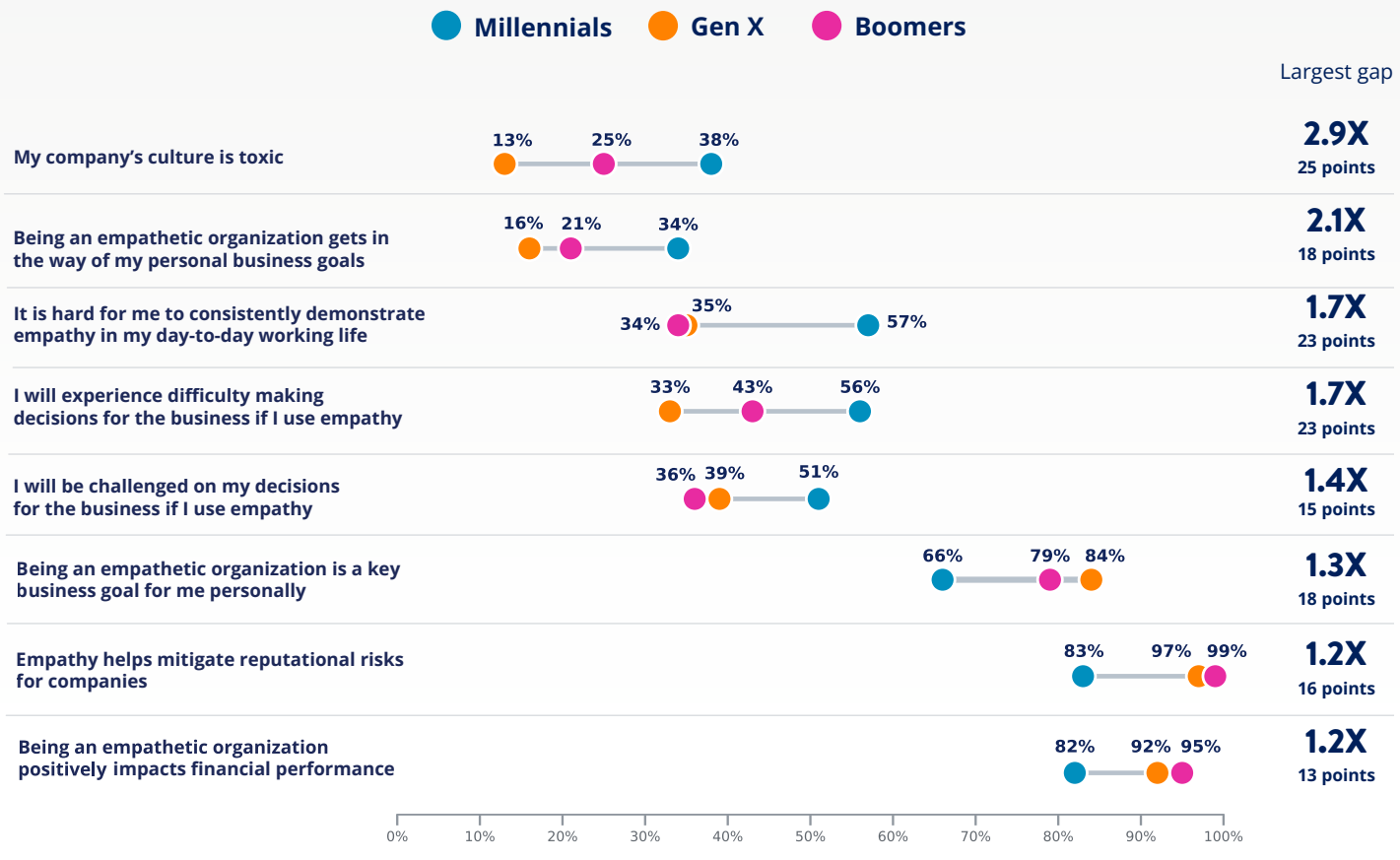
Millennial executives are 2X more likely to say empathy "gets in the way"

Millennial CXOs report a more challenging environment for empathetic leadership: **34% say empathy "gets in the way" of their business goals, more than 2X the rate of Gen X. They likewise report nearly 3X the rate of toxicity, and they're 1.7X more likely to say empathy complicates business decisions**.

Additionally, only 66% of Millennial CXOs say empathy is a personal business goal versus 84% of Gen X leaders, an 18-point gap. Millennials also trail Boomers by 16 points on empathy's ability to mitigate reputational risk. Ultimately, Millennial leaders acknowledge the value of empathy, but they're less likely than older generations to view it as an advantage and to feel safe putting empathy into action.

65% of Millennial CXOs say it would be easy to find a new job if they decided to quit versus 46% of Gen X and 41% of Boomers.

Millennial CXOs are 2X as likely to say empathy "gets in the way" and report nearly 3X more toxicity



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Empathy becomes more politically risky as organizations scale

Empathy and psychological safety risks rise sharply with company size. CXOs at larger organizations are 2.4X more likely to fear losing respect for demonstrating empathy and 2.4X as likely to say their culture is toxic. They're also nearly 2X more likely to feel intimidated by coworkers.

	Fewer than 1,000	1,000+ employees	Gap
I will not be respected as much if I demonstrate empathy at work	17%	40%	**2.4X** 23 points
My company's culture is toxic	13%	31%	**2.4X** 18 points
I feel intimidated by coworkers	23%	45%	**1.9X** 22 points
I will experience difficulty making decisions for the business if I use empathy	29%	53%	**1.8X** 24 points

Where empathy is needed most, it feels 5.6X riskier

Empathy becomes professionally riskier exactly where it is needed most. Nearly 8 in 10 CXOs in toxic cultures fear losing respect for showing empathy at work. In healthier cultures, that number drops to just 14%—a 5.6X difference.

	CXOs in non-toxic cultures	CXOs in toxic cultures	Gap
I will not be respected as much if I demonstrate empathy at work	14%	78%	**5.6X** 64 points
I will be challenged on my decisions for the business if I use empathy	28%	87%	**3.1X** 59 points
It's hard for me to consistently demonstrate empathy in my day-to-day work	27%	85%	**3.1X** 58 points

C-suite psychological safety collapses in toxic cultures

73% of CXOs in toxic cultures feel intimidated by coworkers versus 23% in non-toxic cultures, a 50-point gap.

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The C-suite is not psychologically safe

Burnout and anxiety signal rising pressure

Technology leaders and CFOs report the greatest mental health strain, while newer CXOs cite 2.3X more mental health issues but just 6% toxicity, a 5.5X gap with tenured CXOs.

Overall, 33% of CXOs report a mental health issue, with burnout and anxiety highest among affected CEOs. But although executive pressure is widespread, it doesn't look the same. At 39%, CIOs/CTOs are most likely to report a mental health issue, yet just 4% say their culture is toxic, and only 20% feel intimidated by coworkers—the lowest among C-suite roles.

The greatest mental health disparities appear not by role, however, but by tenure. **Executives with less than 5 years of tenure are 2.3X more likely than those with 10 to 15 years of tenure to report a mental health issue (55% versus 24%), but only 12% of newer CXOs report intimidation and 6% cite toxicity**, showing how executive mental health, culture risk, and psychological safety don't necessarily move in parallel.

Migraines



Among CXOs who cite a mental health issue, 49% of women report migraines versus 30% of men.

Nearly 4 in 10 CIOs/CTOs and CFOs cite a mental health issue

	Reported a mental health issue in the past year	Leading conditions among affected CXOs
CEO	32%	Anxiety 50%; burnout 50%
CFO	37%	Migraines/headaches 46%; burnout 43%
CIO/CTO	39%	Migraines/headaches 45%; anxiety 34%; burnout 34%
CHRO/CPO	24%	Anxiety 50%; burnout 33%

See page 18 in the appendix for mental health issues by C-suite role.

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Newer CXOs report 2.3X more mental health issues but far less intimidation and toxicity

Executives with less than 5 years in their roles are 2.3X more likely to report experiencing a mental health issue than those with 10 to 15 years of tenure. But when looking at coworker intimidation and culture, the pattern reverses.

CXOs with 10 to 15 years of tenure are:

- 3.7X more likely to feel intimidated by coworkers
- 5.5X more likely to describe their culture as toxic
- 1.6X more likely to struggle to consistently demonstrate empathy



Tenure changes the C-suite experience

	Less than 5 years	10 to 15 years	Gap
I experienced a mental health issue in the past year	**55%**	24%	**2.3X** 31 points
I feel intimidated by coworkers	12%	44%	**3.7X** 32 points
My company culture is toxic	6%	33%	**5.5X** 27 points
It's hard for me to consistently demonstrate empathy in my day-to-day work	29%	45%	**1.6X** 16 points

See page 19 in the appendix for full data by tenure.

CEOs are 3.6X more likely than CIOs/CTOs to fear losing respect for using empathy.

See how pressures and perceptions change by C-suite role on page 12.

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The C-suite-employee mental health divide

CXOs and employees report nearly identical coworker intimidation. **Yet employees are 1.7X more likely than CXOs to report a mental health issue, 55% versus 33%, a 22-point gap**. Among those affected, employees report substantially more depression and isolation, while anxiety and burnout are widespread across both groups. Without regular pulsing and a strong grasp on culture, perceived employee wellbeing can quickly become an executive blind spot.



Employees report 5X more loneliness and 4.5X more depression than CXOs

Condition*	CXOs	Employees	Gap
Loneliness or isolation	7%	35%	**5X** 28 points
Depression	12%	54%	**4.5X** 42 points
Anxiety	42%	65%	**1.5X** 23 points
Burnout	40%	53%	**1.3X** 13 points

**Condition percentages are among respondents who reported experiencing a mental health issue in the past year. Respondents could select multiple conditions.*



The employee experience fallout

66% of employees would accept lower pay to work for a more empathetic employer.

Learn more in Businessolver's 2026 State of Workplace Empathy Report.

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One C-suite. 4 workplace realities.

The leader carrying the greatest mental strain isn't necessarily the leader who sees the most toxicity. And the leader closest to the employee experience isn't necessarily the one most worried about workforce readiness. These differences can sharpen C-suite decision-making, but without shared evidence and the psychological safety needed to challenge assumptions, they can just as easily turn into blind spots.

CEO

Reports the highest coworker intimidation at 44% and is 3.6X more likely than CIOs/CTOs to fear losing respect for showing empathy (43% vs. 12%).

- Experienced a mental health issue: **32%**
- Feels intimidated by peers: **44%**
- Difficulty demonstrating empathy: **61%**
- Top empathy barriers: **Not raised to show empathy, 46%; Leadership does not support empathy, 37%**
- Top business risks/concerns: **Cybersecurity threats, 79%; Increased healthcare costs, 79%**

CFO

Cites substantial mental strain, yet 53% still view empathy as a perk. They also report some of the lowest worry about future business risks, suggesting personal strain doesn't translate into workforce urgency.

- Experienced a mental health issue: **37%**
- Feels intimidated by peers: **33%**
- Difficulty demonstrating empathy: **28%**
- Top empathy barriers: **Too busy with work, 62%; Fear being viewed as weak, 43%**
- Top business risks/concerns: **Talent shortages, 80%; Increased healthcare costs, 73%**

CIO/CTO

Reports the highest mental health incidence and the greatest concern about future workforce risks, yet only 4% describe their culture as toxic and 20% report coworker intimidation.

- Experienced a mental health issue: **39%**
- Feels intimidated by peers: **20%**
- Difficulty demonstrating empathy: **24%**
- Top empathy barriers: **Unsure how to express empathy, 56%; Too busy and lacking leadership support, both 44%**
- Top business risks/concerns: **Talent shortages, 93%; Rising labor costs or unionization, 92%**

CHRO/CPO

Cites the highest workplace toxicity at 37% and high coworker intimidation, yet they report the lowest mental health incidence and the least concern about talent shortages at 71%.

- Experienced a mental health issue: **24%**
- Feels intimidated by peers: **40%**
- Difficulty demonstrating empathy: **48%**
- Top empathy barriers: **Unsure how to express empathy, 42%; Not raised to show empathy and uncertainty about what to say or do, both 36%**
- Top business risks/concerns: **Data privacy, 84%; Cybersecurity threats, 77%**

Workplace flexibility is a C-suite coping mechanism, but performance still comes first

CXOs and employees agree that flexible work hours and time away support mental wellbeing. About 3 in 4 among both groups say they take mental health days to prevent burnout (75% CXOs, 74% employees), and that remote work is important for their mental wellbeing (79% CXOs, 75% employees). Even so, financial performance still comes first. While **92% of CXOs say companies with flexible work policies are more empathetic, 93% say financial performance is a bigger priority than allowing employees flexible work arrangements**.

Workforce readiness blind spots

88% of CIOs/CTOs worry technology will outpace systems or skills versus 63% of CFOs, a 25-point gap. HR is least alarmed about talent: 71% of CHROs/CPOs worry about talent shortages versus 93% of CIOs/CTOs. See the full findings in Part 1 of Businessolver's C-suite Special Report.

Technology leaders are 1.6X more likely than people leaders to feel productive working remotely

72% of CIOs/CTOs feel more productive working remotely versus just 45% of CHROs/CPOs, a 27-point gap. Technology leaders are also the most likely to prioritize remote and hybrid work.

	Total CXOs	CEO	CFO	CIO/CTO	CHRO/ CPO	Largest gap between roles
I feel more productive when working remotely than when working in the office	58%	53%	61%	**72%**	**45%**	**27 points** 1.6X
When I look at new opportunities, I prioritize those that allow at least some remote work	84%	87%	84%	**93%**	**73%**	**20 points**
I prefer a mix of remote and in-person work (hybrid)	71%	68%	76%	**80%**	**60%**	**20 points**
The ability to work remotely is important to my mental health	79%	**87%**	80%	77%	**71%**	**16 points**

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CXOs at larger companies are 24 points more likely to say remote work supports their mental health

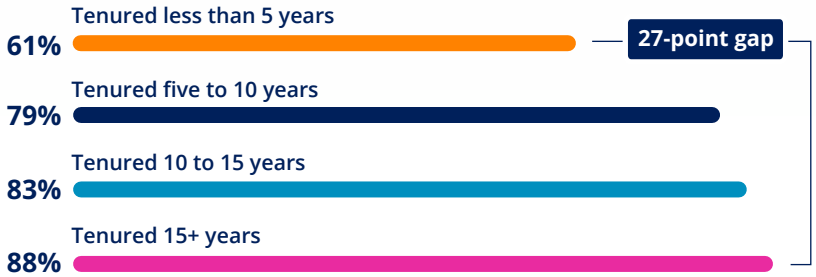
CXOs at organizations with 1,000+ employees are substantially more likely to use and value flexibility than those at smaller employers, but size does not impact the fact that performance comes first.

	Fewer than 1,000 employees	1,000+ employees	Gap
The ability to work remotely is important to my mental health	67%	91%	**24 points**
I sometimes take mental health days to prevent burnout	67%	83%	**16 points**
I understand the benefits to my employees in allowing them flexible work arrangements, but financial performance is a bigger priority	92%	94%	**2 points**

The value of remote work rises sharply with tenure

CXOs with 15+ years at their organization are 1.4X (27 points) more likely than newer executives to say remote work is important to their mental health, 88% versus 61%.

The ability to work remotely is important to my mental health



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Empathy fallout

The business implications are already here

What happens when the leaders with the most power to shape an empathetic culture feel the least safe leading with empathy?

Looking at the findings across **Businessolver's 2026 Empathy reports**, it's clear for many organizations that the business risks and blind spots aren't hypothetical—they're already here.

- **Mistaking growth for organizational health:** 70% of CXOs in toxic cultures report significant financial growth compared with 36% in non-toxic cultures, even as intimidation, layoffs, and benefits cuts rise.
- **Missing the mental health and culture warning signs:** 55% of employees report a mental health issue versus 33% of CXOs, and employees are nearly 2X as likely to describe their culture as toxic.
- **Scaling AI without readiness:** 51% of employees worry they're falling behind with AI, and 54% say AI has disrupted their career progression.
- **Underestimating retention risk:** Employees are 2X more likely than CXOs to connect empathy with lower turnover, and 66% of employees would accept lower pay to work for a more empathetic employer.

Taken together, these findings point to a consequential leadership challenge. Business performance can look strong even as trust, psychological safety, wellbeing, and workforce confidence erode beneath the surface. One thing is certain, leaders can't address these risks if they don't feel safe voicing them or can't see them.

The organizations best positioned for what comes next will be those that treat empathy not as a leadership liability, but as a source of business intelligence. That means listening and measuring for what financial results alone don't reveal, closing the gaps between executive and employee experiences, and creating cultures where leaders at every level can act with empathy without fearing that it will be mistaken for weakness.

> **At the end of the day, you need to bring data to show how the business can perform better and how retention can be better. If you're not grounded in data and how empathy will propel good business outcomes, it can be difficult to get major decision-makers to pay attention."**
>
> - Marcy Klipfel, Chief Engagement Officer, Businessolver

See more insights in Businessolver's 2026 State of Workplace Empathy reports

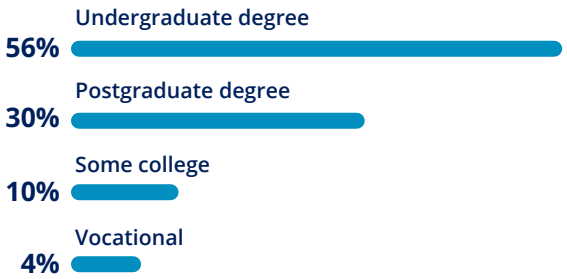
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About Businessolver's 11th annual State of Workplace Empathy study

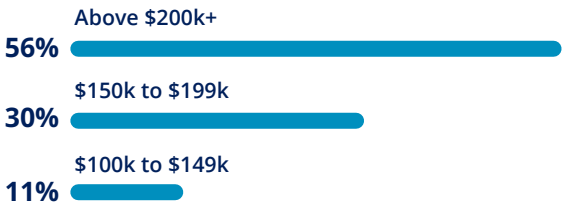
In 2026, Edelman Data DXI fielded an online survey of 1,300 participants across 6 key industries: Financial services, government, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, and technology. To qualify, respondents needed to be 21 years or older, a U.S. resident, and employed full-time or part-time within their respective organization with 100 or more employees. Unless otherwise noted, agreement, concern, and importance findings are reported as Top 2 Box results. AI investment goals, business experiences, and benefits of empathy reflect selected responses. References to "strongly agree" are Top Box findings.

C-suite respondent demographics

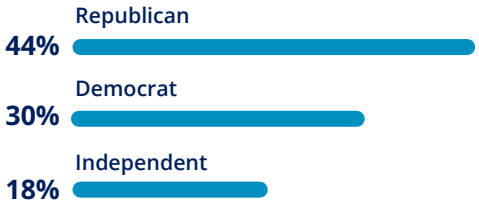
Education



Income



Political party affiliation



Generation



Gender



Some categories may not total 100% due to "Other" category or insignificant responses.

About Businessolver

Businessolver is an independently owned benefits technology company advancing a more proactive, connected, and anticipatory benefits experience. Through a secure SaaS platform, governed intelligence, and an always-on service model designed to act early and stay aligned, Businessolver helps organizations reduce complexity, strengthen engagement, and deliver consistent outcomes across total wellbeing. With more than two decades of innovation, Businessolver unifies people, data, and operations so that insights turn into action — and benefits work better for employers, employees, and partners.

Appendix

Barriers to empathy by C-suite role

Barrier*	Total CXOs	CEO	CFO	CIO/CTO	CHRO/CPO
Too busy with work	40%	35%	**62%**	44%	31%
Not sure how to express empathy at work	35%	28%	19%	**56%**	42%
Not raised to show empathy	32%	**46%**	14%	11%	36%
Leadership does not support empathy	31%	37%	19%	**44%**	25%
Not sure what to say or do	31%	35%	29%	17%	**36%**
Do not consider themselves empathetic	31%	30%	33%	17%	**36%**
Fear being viewed as weak	30%	26%	**43%**	17%	33%
Colleagues are not supportive	29%	30%	24%	28%	**31%**
Believe empathy does not belong at work	27%	**33%**	24%	17%	28%
Lack confidence in their ability	24%	24%	24%	22%	25%

**Findings are among CXOs who say empathy is difficult to demonstrate consistently in their day-to-day work. Respondents could select multiple barriers.*

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Reported mental health conditions by C-suite role

Condition*	Total CXOs	CEO	CFO	CIO/CTO	CHRO/CPO
Depression	12%	21%	7%	7%	17%
Anxiety	42%	**50%**	39%	34%	**50%**
Burnout	40%	**50%**	43%	34%	33%
Loneliness or isolation	7%	13%	0%	10%	6%
PTSD	8%	13%	4%	7%	11%
Eating disorders	19%	17%	21%	14%	**28%**
Addiction or substance abuse	11%	4%	14%	3%	**28%**
Chronic pain, such as back, neck, or joint pain	26%	25%	**32%**	28%	17%
Sleep disorders or chronic fatigue	19%	17%	18%	14%	**33%**
Migraines or severe headaches	39%	42%	**46%**	45%	17%
Long-term or chronic illness	13%	8%	11%	7%	**33%**

**Condition percentages are among CXOs who reported experiencing a mental health issue in the past year. Respondents could select multiple conditions. Some role-level results should be treated as directional due to subgroup base sizes, particularly among CHROs/CPOs.*

Mental health, psychological safety, and empathy by tenure

Finding	Less than 5 years	5 to less than 10 years	10 to less than 15 years	15+ years
Experienced a mental health issue	**55%**	33%	**24%**	28%
Feel intimidated by coworkers	**12%**	38%	**44%**	32%
Describe company culture as toxic	**6%**	18%	**33%**	28%
Find empathy difficult to demonstrate consistently	**29%**	42%	**45%**	38%
Fear losing respect for demonstrating empathy	**14%**	27%	**36%**	32%
Expect empathy-led decisions to be challenged	**25%**	43%	**46%**	42%
Expect empathy to complicate business decisions	**31%**	40%	44%	**48%**
Remote work is important to mental health	**61%**	79%	83%	**88%**
Less willing to sacrifice wellbeing than five years ago	**84%**	75%	69%	70%