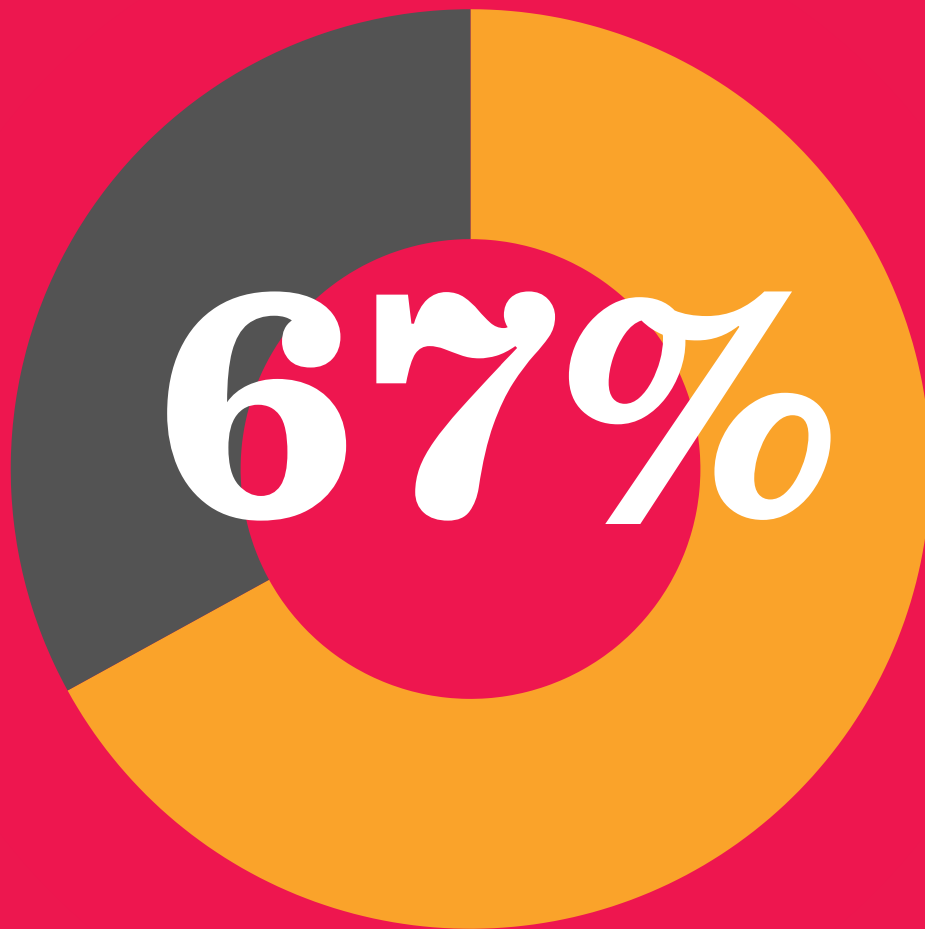


Hidden Truths, High Costs:



of employees feel high pressure to hide parts of themselves at work—and it's draining culture, innovation, and the bottom line.

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Definition of covering

Covering (first coined by Prof. Kenji Yoshino) is the act of hiding or minimizing aspects of one's personal attributes—such as race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or other personal characteristics—in order to fit in, avoid discrimination and stereotypes, and be perceived as more professional and promotable in the workplace.

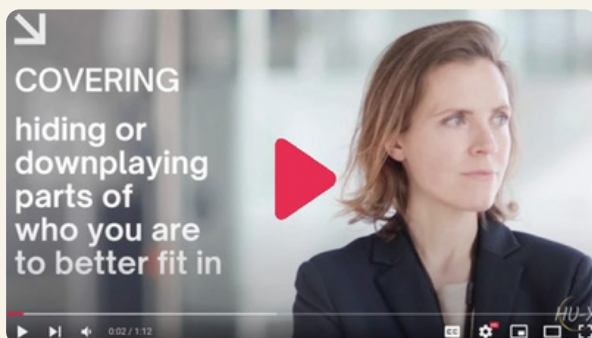
Some level of covering is normal and expected, as it reflects adaptability and emotional intelligence, allowing individuals to navigate diverse social and professional contexts. However, excessive or chronic covering can become harmful, leading to stress, burnout, and feelings of disconnection, ultimately undermining both individual well-being and organizational performance.

To participate in the study, go to:

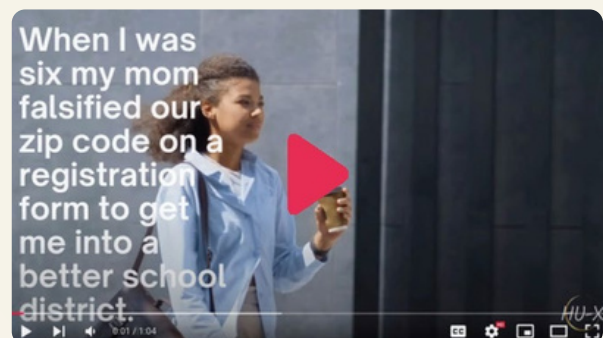
https://qualtricsxmbmbwgzwlr.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b777QgrLGROliTk

Short testimonials about Covering

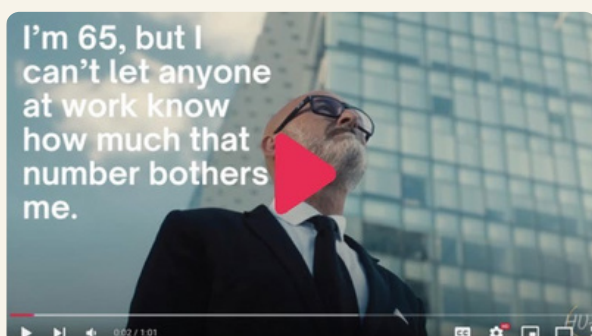
Overview of covering as a concept



Story 1



Story 2



Story 3



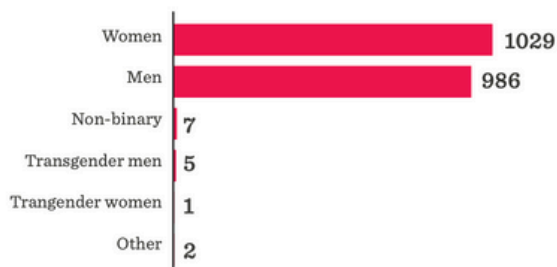
Study purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of what employees are covering at work, why they cover, how this impacts them as individuals, the implications for their ability to perform their jobs, and the broader cost to organizations. The data in this report is current to April 2025. This report is a living document — we will continue to add to it as our data analysis progresses, so stay tuned for ongoing insights and findings.

Population surveyed

(n=2030 US employees)

Gender



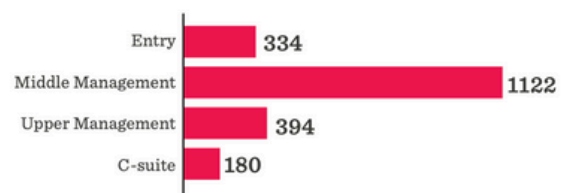
Organization industry



Generations



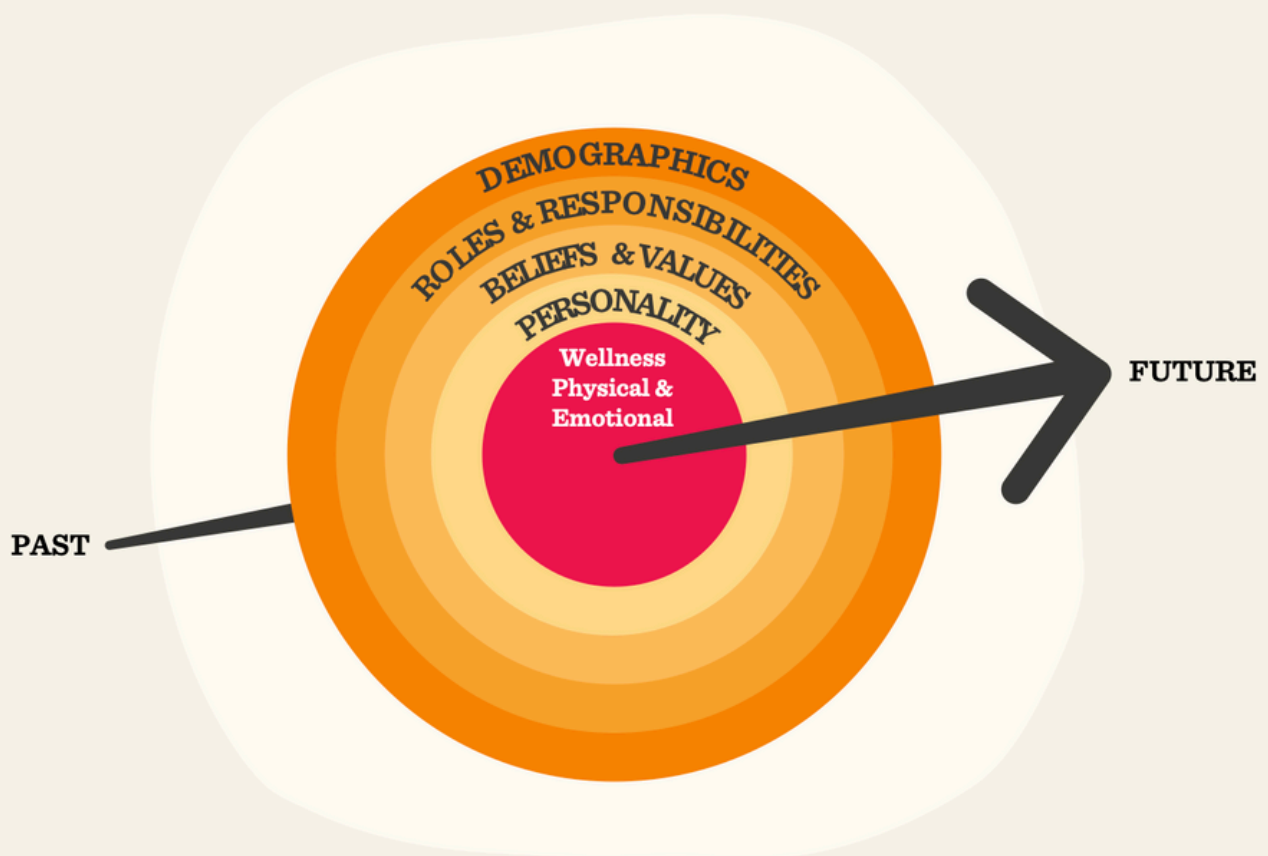
LEVEL/SENIORITY



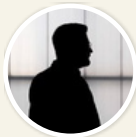
A framework for covering

At its core, the framework consists of concentric circles representing different layers of identity, from the innermost "Physical & Emotional Wellness" to the outermost "Demographic Categories." Between these layers lie "Personality," "Beliefs & Values," and "Roles & Responsibilities." This layered approach demonstrates how covering behaviors extend beyond visible demographic characteristics to encompass more nuanced aspects of identity. The arrow spanning from past to future demonstrates how covering behaviors are shaped by historical experiences (what happened before) and future concerns (what might happen next), suggesting that people may selectively reveal or conceal aspects of their past and anticipated future based on workplace dynamics.

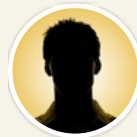
The placement of wellness at the centre highlights how fundamental physical and emotional well-being is to workplace experience, while the outer layers represent increasingly visible aspects of identity that individuals may choose to cover. This comprehensive model helps organizations understand the multifaceted nature of covering and its impact on employee experience, moving beyond traditional diversity metrics to address the full spectrum of human identity in the workplace.



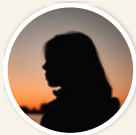
How prevalent is covering?



I cover my age a lot I turn 60 tomorrow and i'm the oldest person on my job. We have a lot of younger people always make jokes, etc. But I deal with it. Sometimes it bothers me sometimes it doesn't



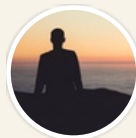
There are some pro-Trump coworkers. I have heard the comments towards immigrants they have made. I have to cover for my family, pretend they are not immigrants themselves. This behavior should not be allowed at work.



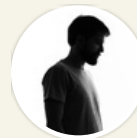
I hid my sexual orientation and relationship status. I went through great lengths to cover it up. The organization could have prevented bullying.



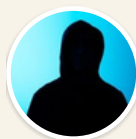
I cover my age as in marketing it would seem like I am old and out of touch even though I am very trendy and up to date. I mainly hide it at hiring and then try and ensure I don't give away my exact age so generally people think I'm 10 to 15 younger than actual.



I cover being an introvert quite frequently as I work in HR and have to talk to people all day long. It is very tiring but I chose this career path so I would need to change paths to resolve this.



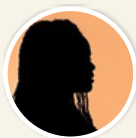
I have to cover my ADHD all the time, as I could be perceived as incapable or incompetent if I let it be known



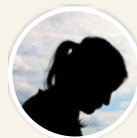
When I got married, my spouse was same sex and although my company doesn't care, I chose to keep quiet.



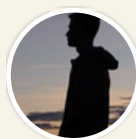
As a mother I have had to leave the workforce on multiple occasions due to health problems at home. It is viewed as being unreliable and flighty. I often have to put in extra effort to sale myself when interviewing for roles because I have gaps on my resume. I often use bigger words, point out my current enrolment in school, and confirm I will not be having anymore children in the future.



I am a queer black woman in America, specifically the south. I have covered my sexual orientation at every job I've worked for, and I do not share personal beliefs.



I had a boss that wanted us all to get the Covid shot I did not want to get it they told me it was mandatory I just played along as though I was accepting it thankfully he ended up not making us get it.



I am constantly covering my **neurodiversity** and anxiety disorder. It is hard at times but not terrible. I really think there's not much the organization can do for me except as society gradually learns more about neurodiversity.



I needed to cover my political views to avoid being blacklisted. I could not share my opinions over what is happening in the Middle East despite others sharing their beliefs. I think it would have been better to ask no one to share instead of it being one-sided.



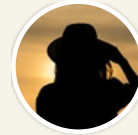
I have worked in places where people have high-level degrees (PhDs and MDs) and I often felt I needed to cover for my **economic background, which is being poor and struggling to make ends meet.** I did go to college, but this didn't help with the thinking I was worthy of the position I had at my organization. I often hide how unstable my life was growing up, including dropping out of high school.



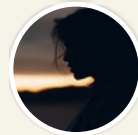
When I had a mental breakdown. I could not be honest for fear of judgment and unfair treatment..



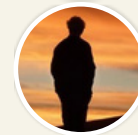
All of my co workers were talking about their cool experiences as college and I had to cover because I did not go to college.



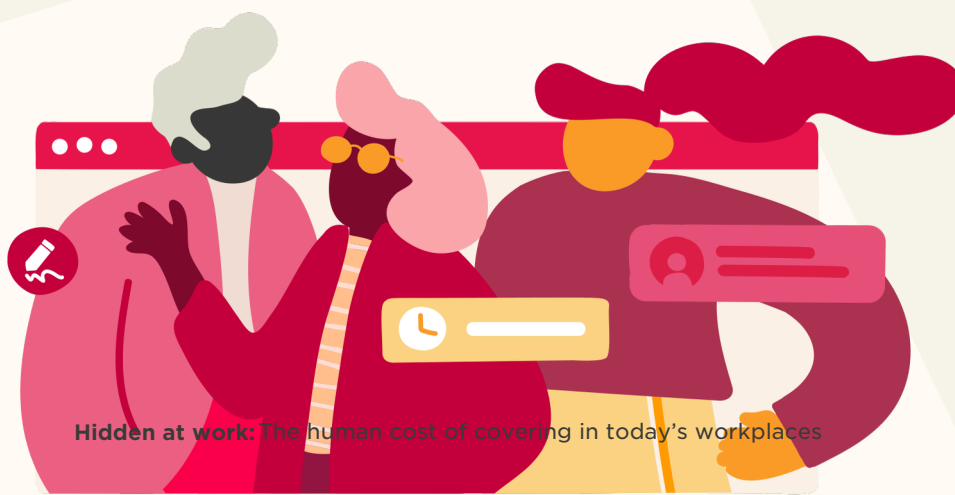
I have IBS and i'm constantly pretending I'm ok at work even though I'm in pain or running to the bathroom, just so I can be present at work. There's constantly other people in the bathroom as well...



I have tried to appear happier than I am. My depression would not go over well. I got through it and was pleased with myself. I would like to no thave to deal with anyone.



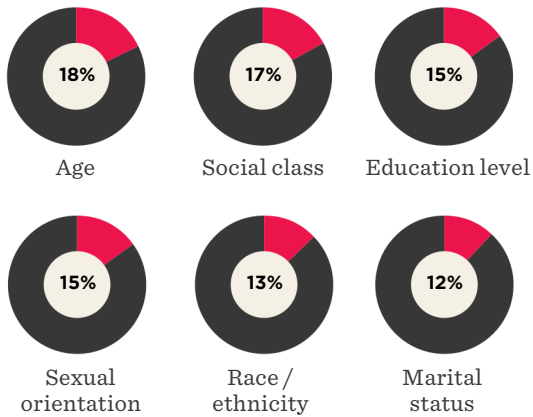
I work from home. I have to take my sons to school every morning and because of their school schedules I am unable to log on to my **computer until about 9:30 am every day. But** I don't ever tell anyone at work about this and I keep work apps on my phone so that I can respond to messages quickly, so that way nobody knows that I have to start my workday later than we are supposed to.



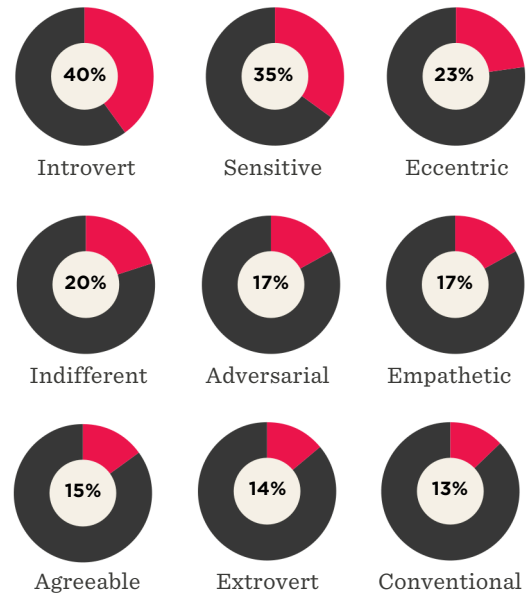
What is being covered often and always?

Personal and wellbeing

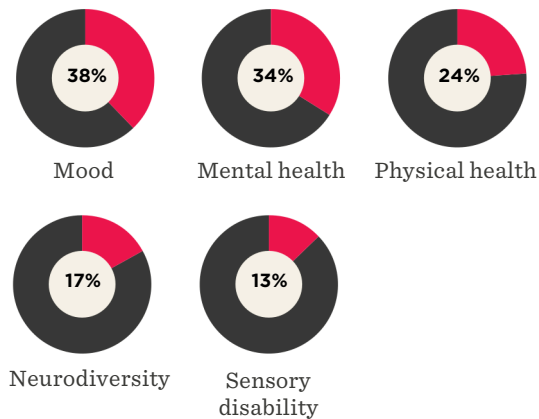
Demographic



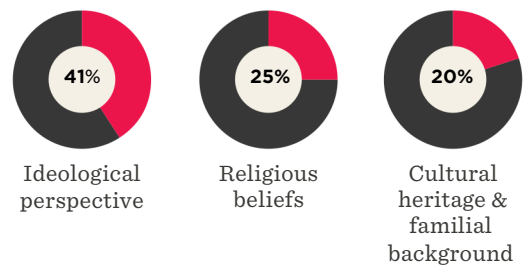
Personality traits



State of wellbeing



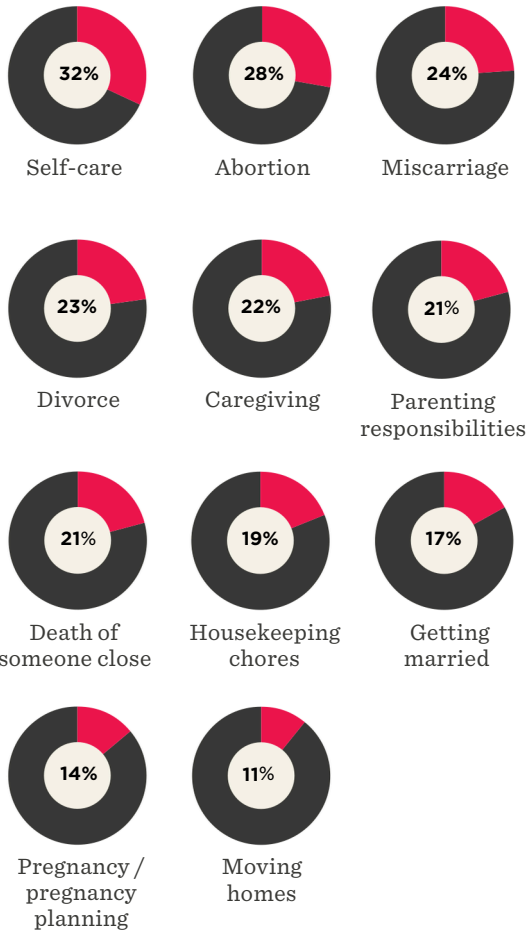
Values & beliefs



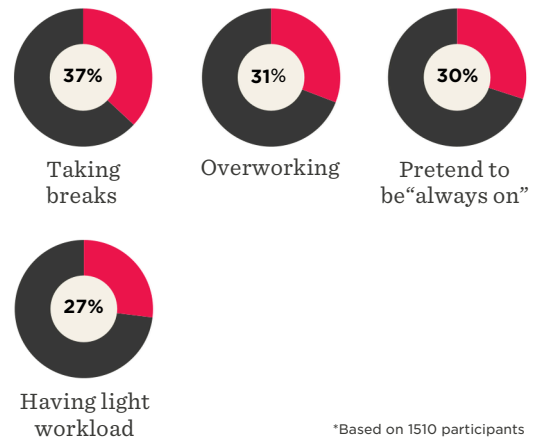
What is being covered often and always?

Experiences and work

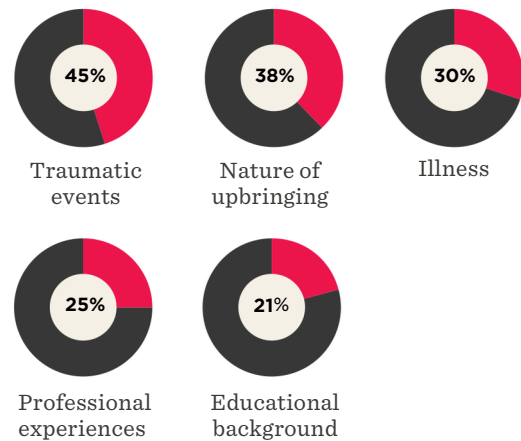
Roles & major events



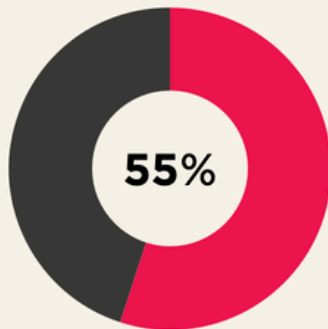
Work norms*



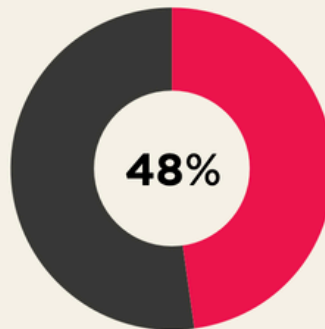
Past experiences



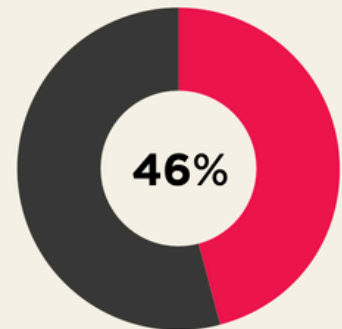
Why are people covering?



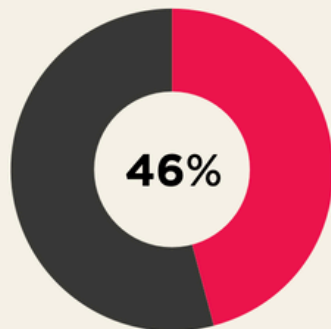
To maintain
professional image



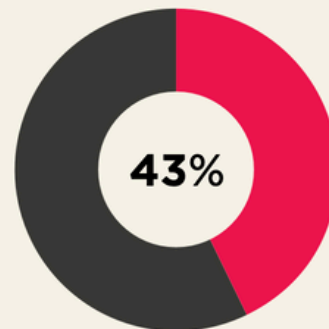
For social
acceptance



To avoid
discrimination



To increase the likelihood
of getting a **promotion,**
raise, or bonus



To increase the
probability of getting a
better **year-end review**

With whom do respondents cover?*



* Based on 1510 participants who reported covering sometimes, often, or always.

** Examples: happy hour with the team, chance encounters outside the office.



Highlights and notes

Authority Figures Drive the Highest Covering Rates

Respondents report the highest levels of covering when interacting with senior leaders **(55%)** and direct managers **(54%)**. This suggests that hierarchical relationships in the workplace—especially with authority figures—create significant pressure for individuals to manage their self-presentation or conceal aspects of their identity.

Team Dynamics Influence Covering Behavior

Nearly half of respondents **(47%)** feel the need to cover around teammates and peers from other departments. This indicates that workplace culture and group dynamics play a significant role in shaping how individuals present themselves.

External Interactions Require Covering

Interactions with clients **(45%)** and colleagues outside of work contexts **(40%)** also prompt significant levels of covering, highlighting how professional relationships extend beyond the office environment and influence behavior.

Lower Levels of Covering with Direct Reports and HR Respondents

Report less covering with direct reports **(39%)** and human resources **(37%)**, which may reflect a perception of greater psychological safety or reduced pressure to conform in these interactions. However, it is not able that more than one-third still feel the need to cover most or all of the time when engaging with HR—a function specifically designed, at least in part, to support employees.

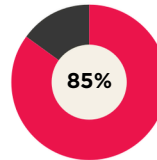


The impact and cost of covering

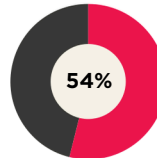
Impact on employees



Stress

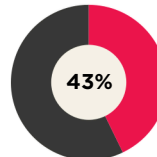


reported some degree of stress due to the need to cover.



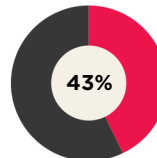
reported experiencing **moderate to severe levels of stress** due to the need to cover.

Career progression



reported that if it wasn't necessary for them to cover, **they would be further ahead professionally.**

Impact on life outside of work

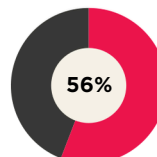


having to cover at work is also **impacting their lives outside of work.**

Impact on organizations

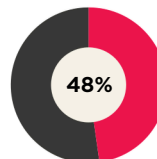


Engagement



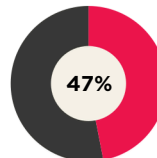
say that if it wasn't necessary for them to cover, **they would be happier and more engaged at work.**

Creativity



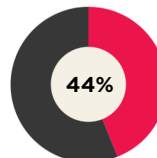
say that if it wasn't necessary for them to cover, they would **be more innovative.**

Performance



say that if it wasn't necessary for them to cover they would be **performing at a higher level.**

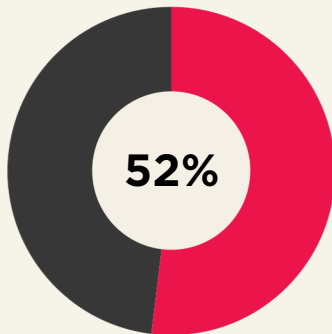
Productivity



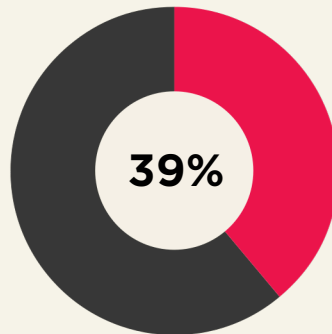
say that if it wasn't necessary for them to cover, they would **be more productive at work.**

The survey as an intervention tool

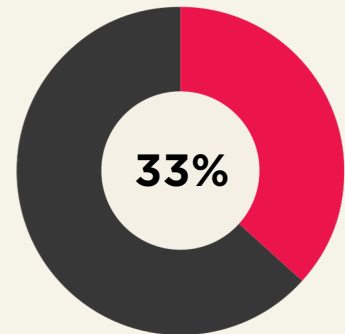
Positive impact



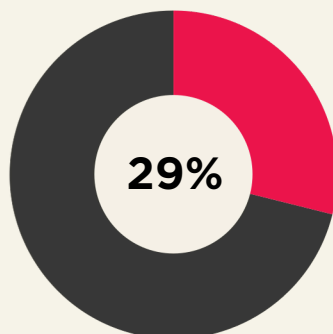
"I am more **aware of the phenomenon** of covering in the workplace."



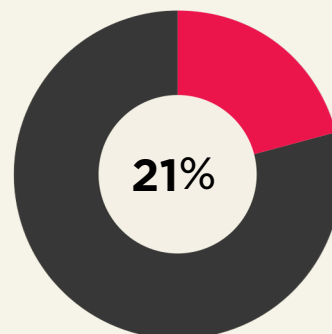
"I gained a better understanding of how covering affects my own **work behavior.**"



"I feel more **empathetic** towards colleagues who may experience covering."



"I hope the topic of covering becomes **more widely discussed** so we can foster a more inclusive work environment."



"I am motivated to **adjust my behavior to help others** feel less compelled to cover."





Personal factors impacting covering behavior

Impact of gender on covering

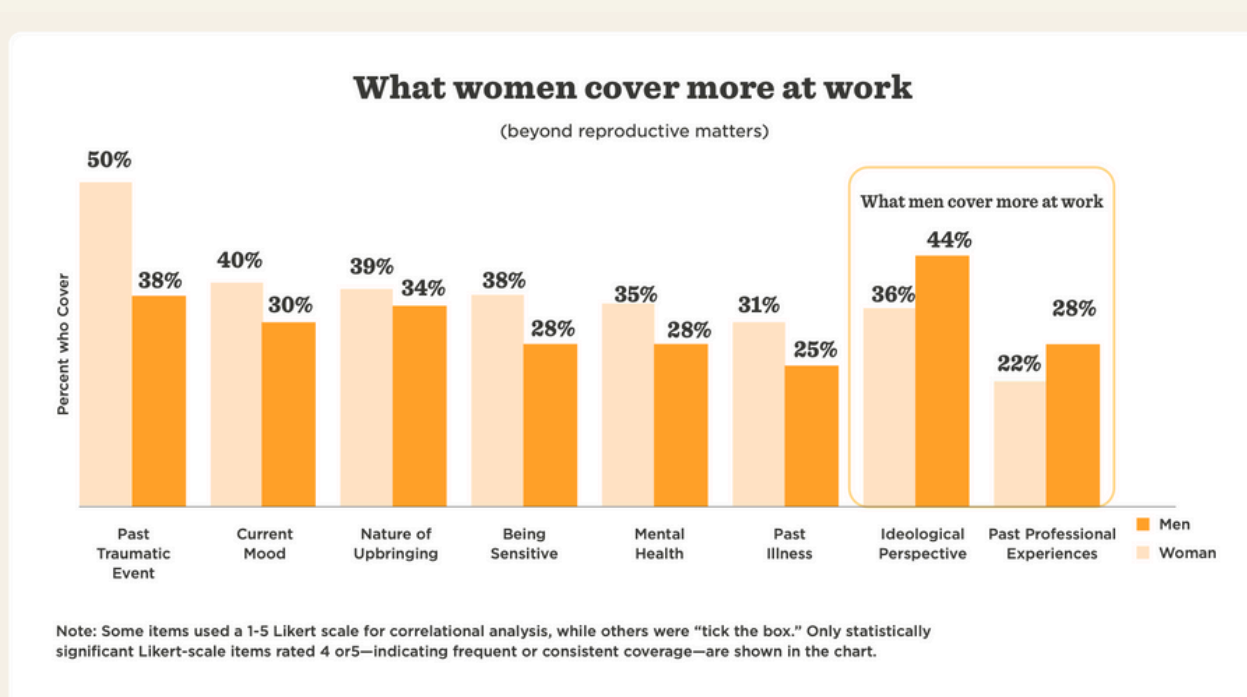


Who is covering more?

The study uncovers a substantial gender gap in what men and women choose to conceal in professional environments. Women often downplay aspects of their health and well-being, such as mood, mental health, past illnesses, and sensitivity, which are frequently viewed as vulnerabilities at work. As might be expected, they are more likely to keep personal experiences related to reproduction (i.e., pregnancy, miscarriage, and abortion) private, underscoring the disproportionate impact these events have on women compared to men.

Men are significantly more likely to conceal their past professional experiences and ideological perspectives in the workplace. This tendency may stem from fears of judgment, bias, or the risk of being perceived as misaligned with company culture or leadership expectations. Concealing past professional experiences could be a strategy to avoid scrutiny over career transitions, perceived failures, or non-traditional career paths.

Similarly, hiding ideological perspectives suggests a reluctance to engage in discussions that might challenge prevailing norms or invite workplace conflict. These patterns highlight how both men and women navigate unspoken workplace expectations, albeit in different ways—women by downplaying personal vulnerabilities and men by shielding aspects of their professional and ideological identities.

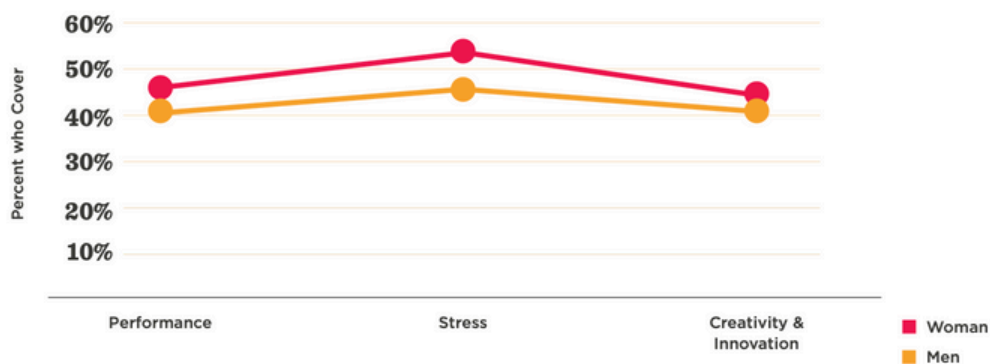


The cost of covering

Not surprisingly, women who cover across multiple areas report a greater toll, with higher percentages indicating that it increases their stress, stifles their creativity and innovation, and hinders their performance. While both men and women are affected, the disparity suggests that the expectation to suppress aspects of their identity in professional settings places a disproportionate burden on women, limiting their ability to reach their full potential.

Reported negative impact of covering

on Stress, Creativity, and Performance

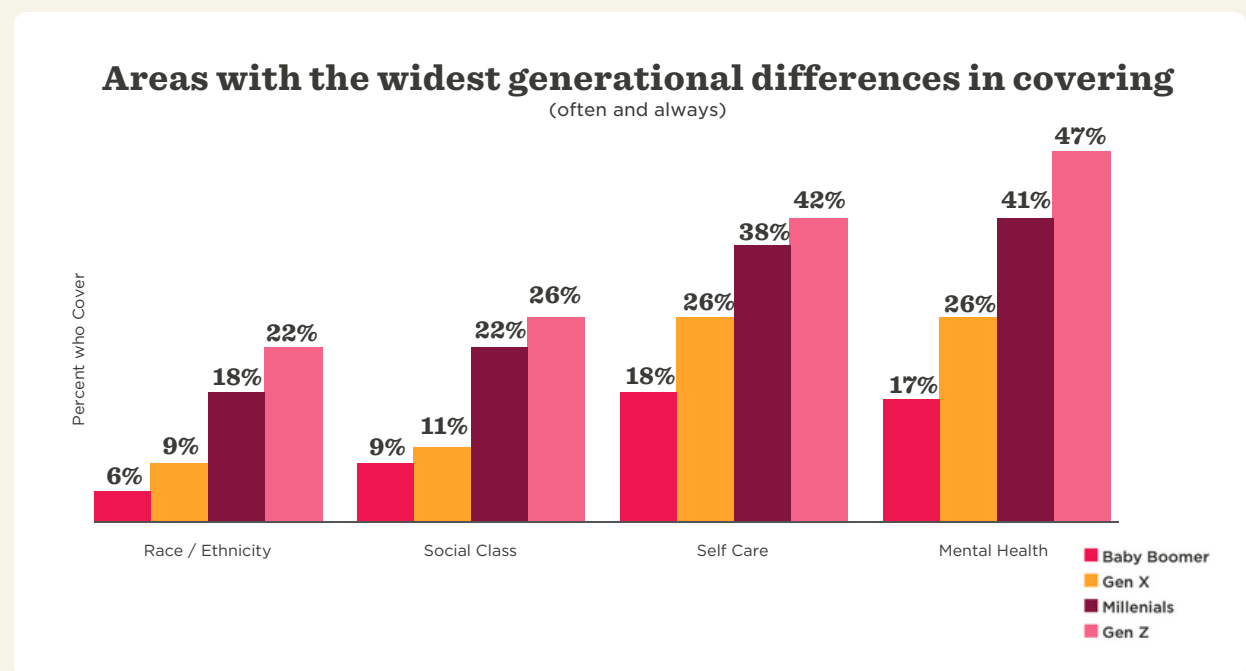


Impact of age on covering



Who is covering more?

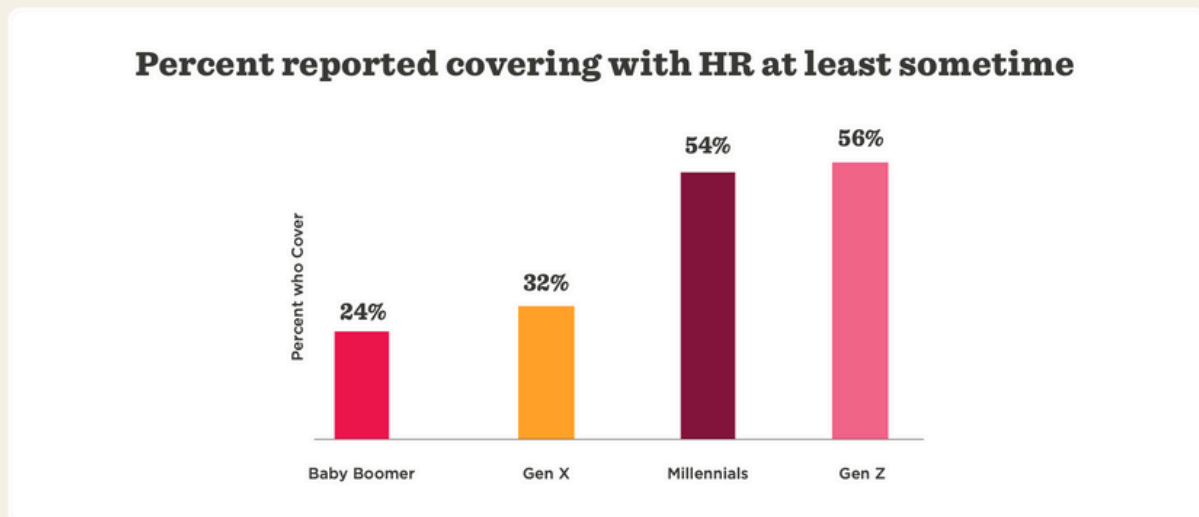
Survey data shows that Gen Z and Millennials are significantly more likely than Gen X and Baby Boomers to cover various aspects of their identities, experiences, and behaviors.



The biggest generational gaps in covering are in Mental Health (30-point difference) and Self Care (24-point difference) between Gen Z and Baby Boomers. Both the pressure to project a strong professional image and **genuine mental health** challenges likely explain why younger workers are more inclined to conceal their struggles and their self-care practices.

With whom are they covering?

Younger generations appear to engage in more identity covering across all workplace contexts. The starkest generational divide emerges in interactions with HR, where 56% of Gen Z reports covering compared to just 24% of Baby Boomers. This pronounced difference might reflect younger workers' heightened awareness of HR's potential influence over their career trajectories and advancement opportunities.



Why are surveyed younger generations covering?

Multiple factors drive younger generations to cover aspects of their identity, experiences, and behaviors at significantly higher rates than Gen X and Baby Boomers. Based on the results of the study, for Gen Z and Millennials, covering is often a strategic decision aimed at increasing their likelihood of promotions, raises, and bonuses, securing better year-end reviews, avoiding discrimination, and gaining social acceptance. Above all, maintaining a strong professional image is a key motivator, with 55% of Gen Z survey takers and 62% of Millennials reporting that they engage in covering for this reason.

It is possible that younger workers are in a career phase where progression is top of mind, making them more likely to suppress aspects of their personal lives that might not align with traditional workplace expectations.

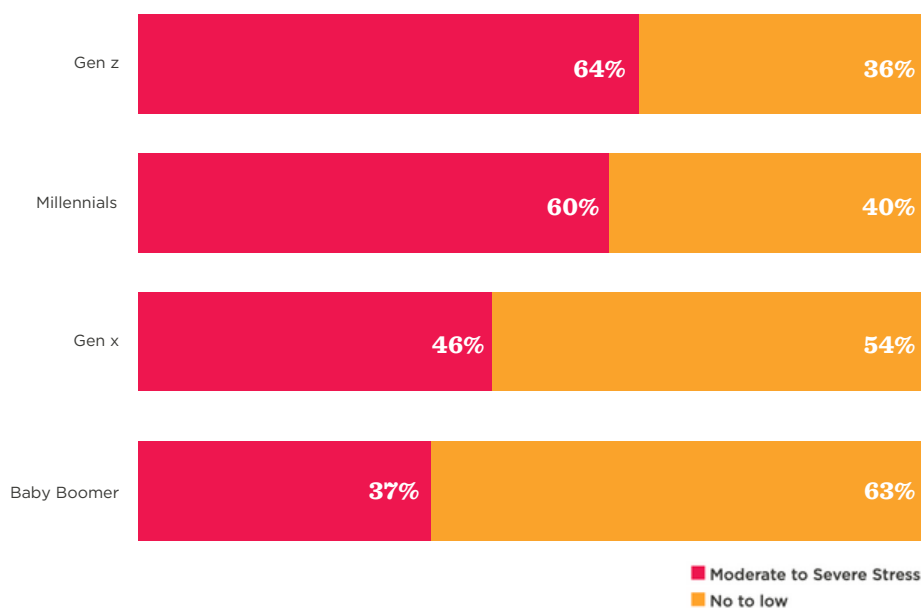
The fact that younger generations cover more—and across nearly every aspect of their identity—indicates the immense pressure they feel to conform, succeed, and establish credibility in their careers.

The cost of covering

In alignment with Millennial and Gen Z covering more than other generations, they also report that as a result of covering they experience:

- Increased stress (see chart below) and reduced mood at work
- Reduced productivity, performance, and creativity
- Hindered career progression and engagement

Reported stress as a result of the need to cover at work



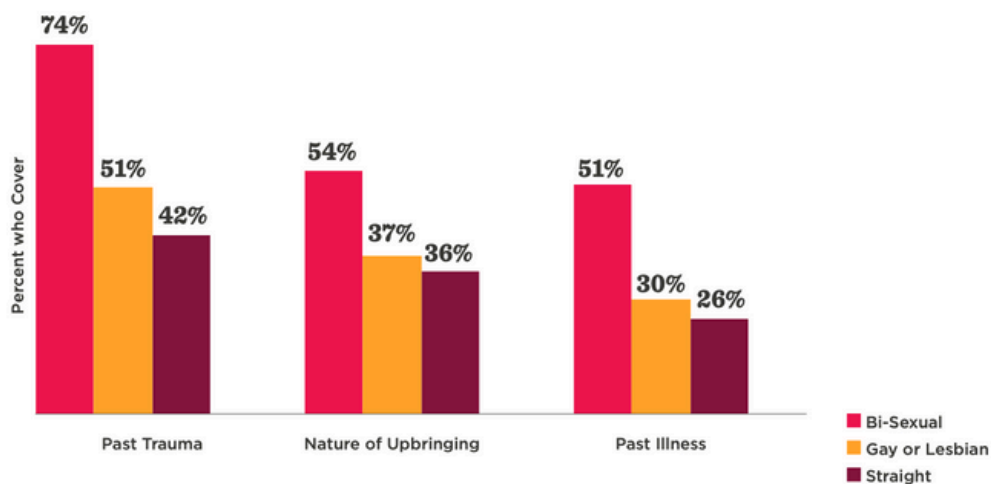
Impact of sexual orientation on covering



Who is covering more?

Bisexual employees conceal more of their identities and experiences at work than other sexual orientation groups in our survey. While 48% of bisexual respondents and 39% of gay and lesbian respondents report covering their sexual orientation often or always, bisexual individuals report the highest levels of covering across nearly every other dimension. They are more likely than their peers to downplay personal identity factors such as cultural heritage and ideological perspectives, as well as wellbeing-related attributes like mental health challenges, neurodiversity, sensory disability, and even daily mood. Bisexual respondents also lead in covering life-role and past-experience topics—including self-care routines, pregnancy, fertility struggles, miscarriage, abortion, loss of loved ones, major life transitions (e.g., moving), traumatic events, upbringing, and past illnesses—highlighting the uniquely layered pressures they face in managing multiple facets of identity simultaneously.

Percent of covering past experiences by sexual orientation



In addition, bisexual respondents are especially likely to downplay aspects of their personality—such as eccentricity, introversion, and sensitivity—and even hide everyday work habits like carrying a heavy workload or taking routine breaks. This pattern suggests they feel pressure to conform to workplace norms and demonstrate competence, minimizing anything that might draw extra scrutiny or signal “difference.”

With whom do bisexual survey takers cover more?

Bisexual survey respondents report the highest levels of covering across all workplace relationships, with the greatest incidence occurring with their direct manager (74%), senior leaders (72%), and peers (69%). Interestingly, the workplace context where bisexual employees feel most comfortable—though still at a rate higher than the overall population—is HR, where 53% report covering. This figure is closely followed by gay and lesbian employees (50%).

Why are surveyed bisexuals covering?

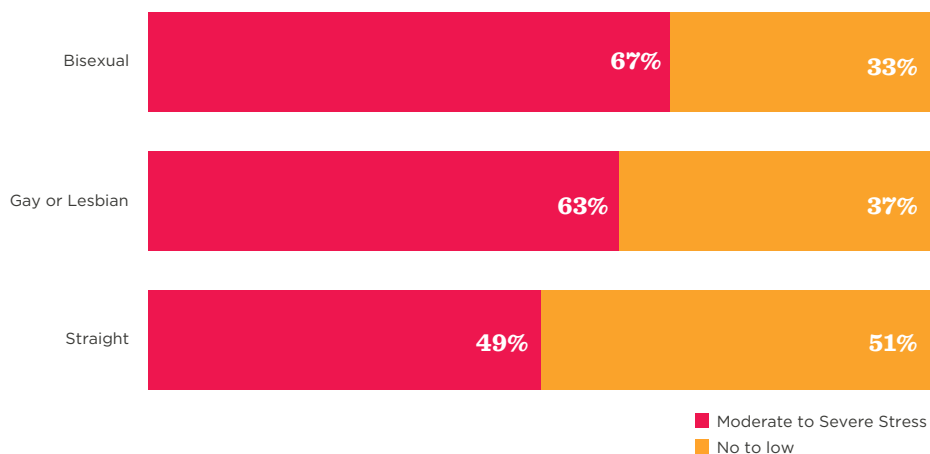
The primary reasons bisexual individuals engage in covering are to maintain a professional image (66%) and to avoid discrimination or bias (66%), followed by social acceptance, receiving better year-end reviews, and increasing their likelihood of promotion, raises, or bonuses.



The cost of covering

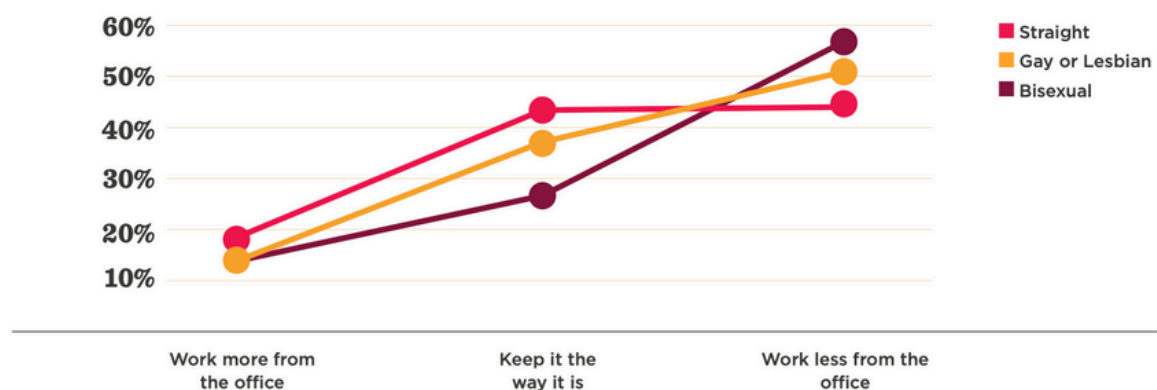
Given the extent to which bisexual, gay, and lesbian employees feel the need to cover, it's no surprise that they experience higher levels of stress as a result. Bisexual individuals also report a generally lower mood at work compared to others. Additionally, many believe that if they didn't have to cover as much, they would be more productive, innovative, creative, and overall happier and more engaged in their work.

Stress levels by sexual orientation



While no group expresses a strong desire to spend more time in the office, bisexual respondents stand out: they report the greatest preference for reducing their in-office hours and the lowest satisfaction with their current workplace arrangement. One likely explanation is that working remotely reduces the need to conceal their identity—lowering stress and, in turn, improving their performance.

Work from office preferences by sexual orientation



Impact of socio-political ideology on covering

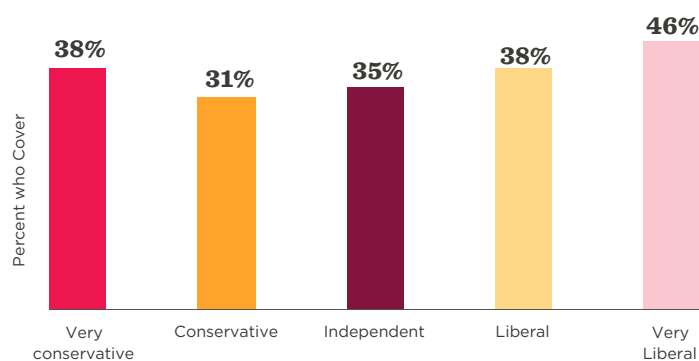


Who is covering more?

The survey reveals a nuanced relationship between political ideology and covering behaviors across the political spectrum. Those identifying as “Conservative” report the lowest levels of covering at 31%, while “Independent” respondents show slightly higher rates at 35%. Interestingly, both “Very Conservative” and “Liberal” individuals report identical covering rates of 38%, challenging the assumption of a simple linear relationship between political ideology and covering behaviors. The highest levels of covering are observed among “Very Liberal” individuals, with 46% reporting such behaviors. These findings suggest a more complex pattern where covering is most prevalent at the far-left end of the spectrum, lowest among traditional conservatives, with varying rates among other ideological groups.

Extent of reported covering by political ideology

(from very conservative to very liberal)



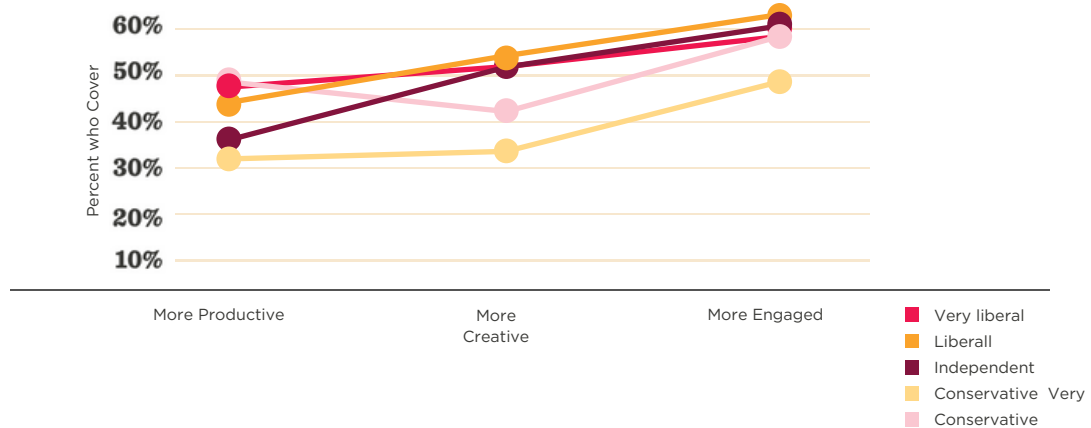
Why and with whom are very liberal respondents covering more?

Survey respondents identifying as very liberal reported high levels of covering across workplace contexts, with 67% doing so when interacting with senior leaders and 65% with their managers/supervisors. The primary motivations for covering were maintaining a professional image (62%) and social acceptance (56%). These findings suggest that very liberal individuals experience heightened pressure to manage perceptions in professional settings, particularly in interactions with authority figures. This trend highlights the connection between socio-political ideology and workplace dynamics, where very progressive beliefs may drive increased efforts to align with perceived norms.

The cost of covering

Very Liberal respondents report significantly higher negative impacts on their productivity, creativity, and engagement compared to Conservative respondents, suggesting that they are more likely to view in-office work as detrimental to their performance.

Reported negative impact of covering on productivity, creativity, and engagement



Discussion

Potential explanation for why very liberal cover most

The study found statistically significant correlations between identifying as very liberal and the likelihood of identifying as LGBTQ+, having a mental health condition, or being diagnosed with a learning disability. This correlation suggests that higher rates of covering among very liberal individuals may be associated with the prevalence of these historically socially stigmatized characteristics within this group, rather than stemming directly from political views alone. Individuals within this demographic might engage in covering behaviors related to various aspects of their identities beyond their political stance.

Potential explanation for why very conservative cover more than conservatives and independents

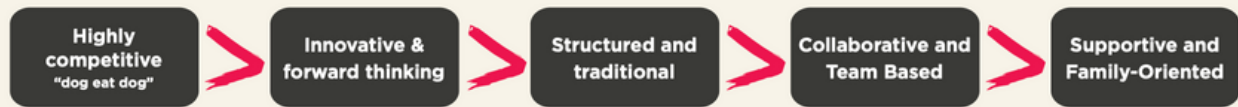
Respondents who identified as very conservative reported higher levels of covering compared to those who were moderately conservative. This may be because very conservative social circles tend to be more homogeneous and place a higher value on group uniformity and cohesion (Jost et al., 2018). This cultural context can lead to a greater perceived need to cover aspects of oneself that deviate from group norms, highlighting the influence of social environments on individual behavior in the workplace.





Work Environment factors impacting covering behavior

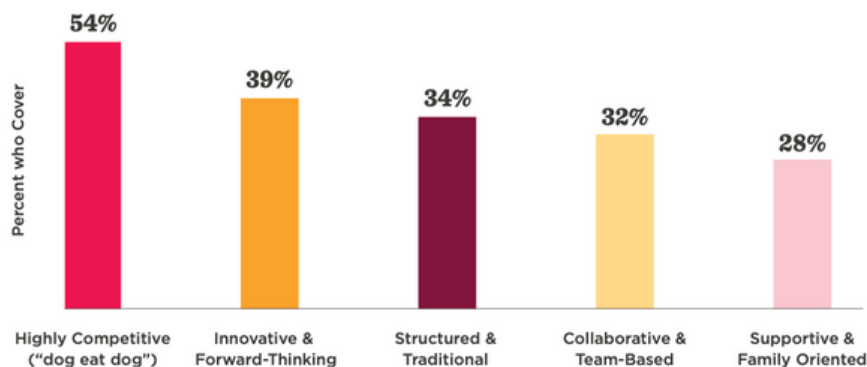
Impact of organizational culture on covering



Who is covering more?

The study found that covering behaviors varied significantly by organizational culture. Employees in highly competitive environments reported the highest rate of covering (54%), while those in supportive, family-oriented cultures reported the lowest (28%).

Reported covering across various organizational cultures



What is being covered?

This pattern held across nearly all survey dimensions: employees in highly competitive organizations reported the highest levels of covering—across personal attributes, perspectives, health and wellness, roles outside of work, past experiences, and personality traits—while those in supportive, family-oriented organizations reported the lowest. Additionally, employees in competitive environments were more likely to conceal their need for breaks, even when overwhelmed, and felt greater pressure to maintain an “always-on” image—such as responding to emails very early or late—to demonstrate commitment and availability.

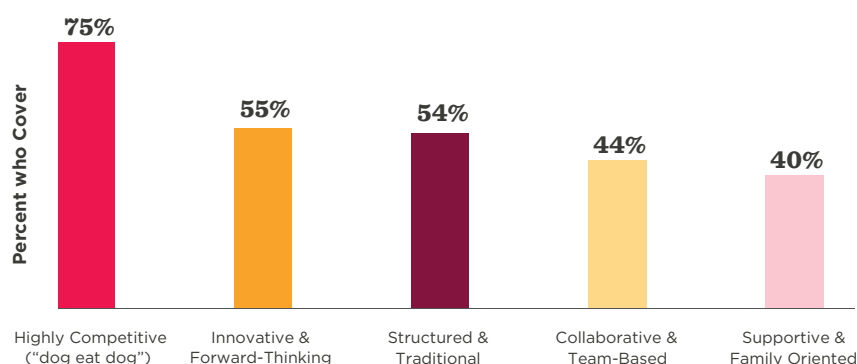
With whom do those in highly competitive organizations cover more?

Employees in highly competitive organizations reported the highest levels of covering across all stakeholder groups: 74% with direct managers or supervisors, 68% with senior leaders, and 66% with peers—whether in formal work settings or informal encounters like happy hours. The biggest gap appeared in interactions with HR: just 28% of employees in supportive, family-oriented cultures covered with HR, compared to 62% in highly competitive environments.

The cost of covering

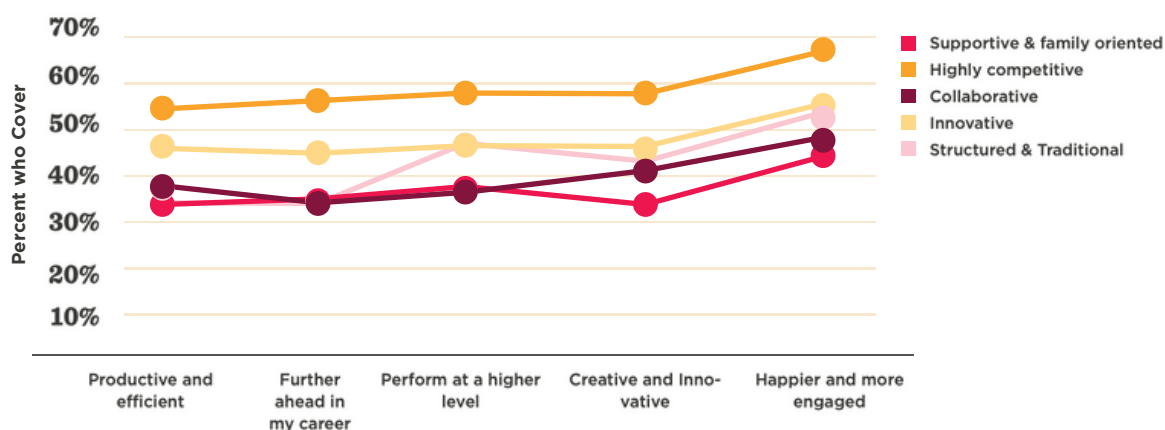
Stress – Covering was found to be closely linked to stress levels, with employees in highly competitive workplaces reporting the highest strain (75%). In contrast, supportive and family-oriented cultures reported the lowest stress levels, highlighting the connection between workplace culture, covering, and employee well-being.

Reported stress as a result of the need to cover



Performance – Covering significantly impacts performance, especially in highly competitive organizational cultures. Employees in these environments reported the highest negative effects of covering across metrics like productivity, career progression, creativity, and engagement—up to 70% for engagement at work. Structured and Traditional cultures also showed significant performance impacts, likely due to a combination of covering and rigid workplace norms that limit flexibility and self-expression. In contrast, Supportive and Family-Oriented cultures demonstrated the lowest performance challenges, with fewer than 35% of employees reporting negative effects. These findings highlight the critical role of workplace culture in shaping employees' ability to perform effectively while minimizing the burden of covering.

Reported Impact of covering on employee performance across organizational cultures

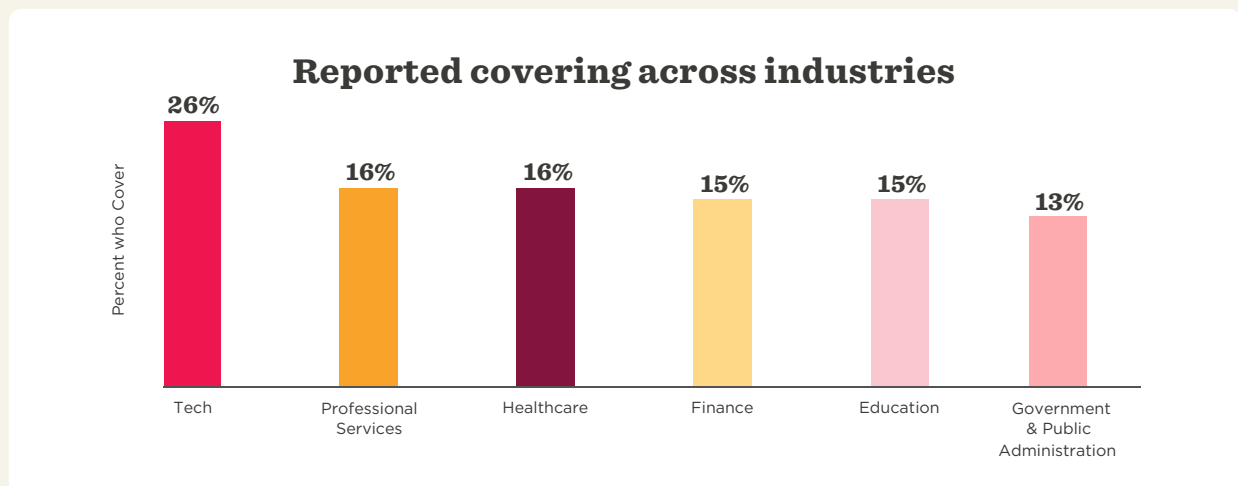


Impact of organizational industry on covering



Who is covering more?

Tech industry respondents reported the highest rates of frequent covering—26% said they often or always feel compelled to conceal aspects of their identity at work. Professional services and healthcare followed at 16%, while government respondents reported the lowest rate, with just 13% feeling the need to cover.



What is being covered?

Tech professionals exhibit pronounced covering behaviors across mental, physical, and age-related dimensions: 43% often or always conceal their mental health status, 31% regularly hide health conditions or challenges, and 30% frequently mask their age—likely reflecting concerns about ageism in a youth-centric industry.

When it comes to roles outside of work, parental responsibilities are the most frequently covered aspect in the tech industry. A significant 27% of tech workers reported covering their parental duties, highlighting a unique pressure within the sector to downplay family obligations.

Why are tech survey takers covering more?

Among tech respondents, 52% view covering as a strategic tactic to boost their chances of promotions, raises, or bonuses. In contrast, over half (53%) of government and public administration respondents cover primarily for social acceptance.

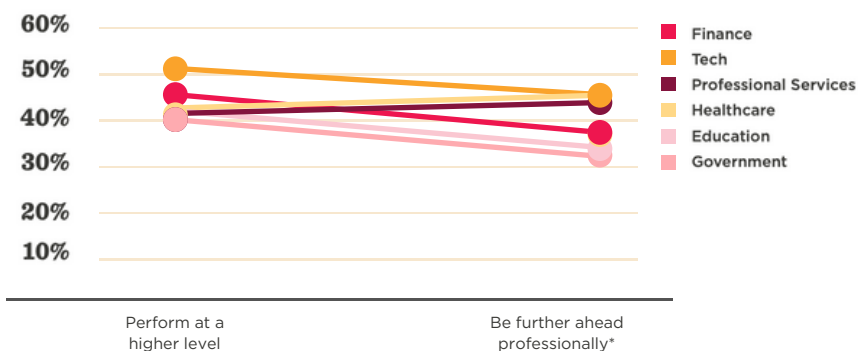
With whom do survey takers in the tech industry cover more?

Covering in tech is most common in informal settings—like happy hours or chance encounters—where a large majority admit to doing so. It's also frequent during interactions with senior leaders. However, when dealing with direct managers or supervisors, tech workers cover at roughly the same rate as those in other industries, with no significant difference.

The cost of covering

The highest impact of covering on both performance and career progression was noted among tech. The lowest impact in these areas was recorded in government.

Covering across different stakeholders



*The results are statistically significant only after removing Professional Services, suggesting a greater variability in how covering impacts career progression within this sector.

Discussion

The largest gaps in both the prevalence and impact of covering lie between the tech and government/public administration sectors: in tech, performance-driven promotions, rewards, and bonuses-anchored in peer reviews and competitive metrics-create strong pressure to conform, whereas government career growth follows seniority and standardized evaluations, making covering far less advantageous. Moreover, tech's rapid-innovation culture fosters a high-stakes environment where employees feel compelled to fit in, while government services emphasize stability and fairness, offering a more secure atmosphere with less need to conceal personal attributes.

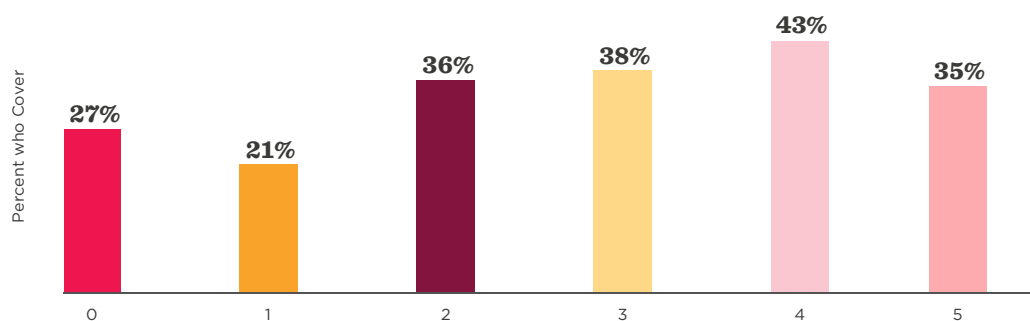
Impact of days working in the office on covering



Who is covering more?

Covering rates by in-office days follow a non-linear pattern: employees in the office one day a week report the lowest rate (21%), while fully remote workers report higher covering. As in-office days increase, covering rises to a peak at four days a week (43%) before dipping again for those in the office five days a week.

Reported covering by number of days in the office



What is being covered more as a function of the number of days in the office?

Covering peaks among employees on-site four days a week: 45% conceal their social class and 44% hide details about their upbringing, compared with just 13% of those on-site only one day a week who cover both their social class and their upbringing. By contrast, there's no significant link between office attendance and covering personality traits—employees manage that aspect of their identity at similar rates, regardless of how often they work on-site.

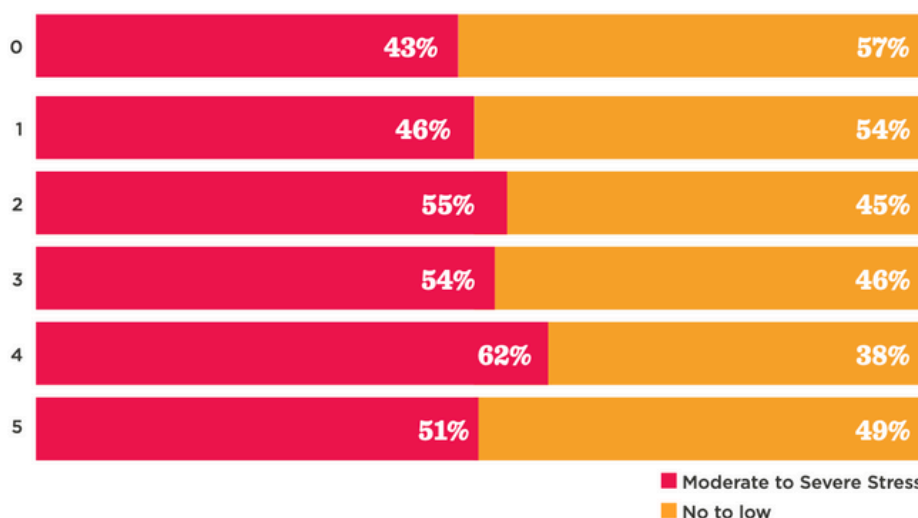
Who are the stakeholders that four-day-a-week employees say they cover with?

Employees who spend four days a week in the office are most likely to “cover” their identities when interacting with the people they see most often—direct supervisors and team peers. This pattern suggests they feel the greatest pressure to hide or downplay aspects of themselves in their closest workplace relationships.

The cost of covering

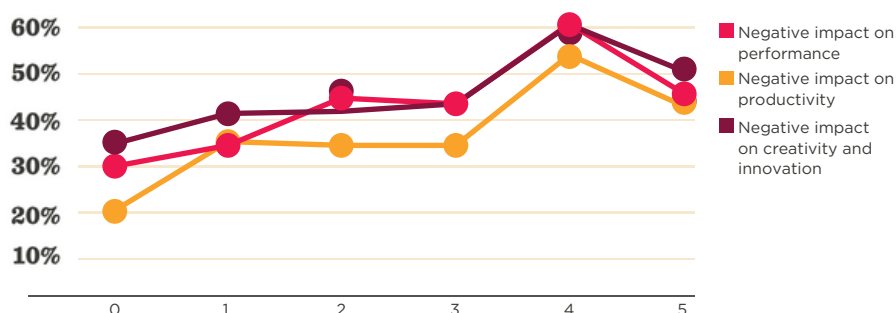
Stress – As the number of in-office days rises, so does employee stress. Only 43% of fully remote workers report moderate-to-severe stress, but that figure jumps to 62% for those in the office four days a week. Although stress dips slightly for employees in the office five days (52%), more than half still experience moderate-to-severe stress.

Reported stress levels by number of in-office days



Impact on work – In parallel, employees report increasingly adverse effects of stress on their work as the number of in-office days rises, with the worst outcomes observed at four days in-office per week.

Reported negative impact of covering as a function of number of days in the office



Discussion

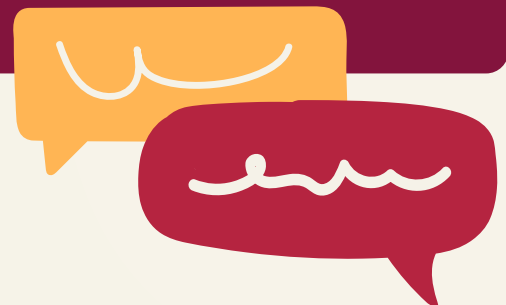
Why is covering higher for fully remote workers than for those working one day in the office? Remote employees often feel they must prove their dedication, striving to match—or even exceed—the commitment of their in-office peers. With fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction, they may overcompensate by masking more of their personal identity to uphold a polished, professional image. By contrast, those who come into the office just one day a week enjoy enough in-person contact to set clear expectations and eliminate uncertainty about what needs to be concealed. Surprisingly, even though fully remote workers conceal more of themselves than the one-day-a-week group, they don't experience higher stress or larger drops in performance, productivity, or creativity—in fact, their negative impacts are lower than those of their one-day-a-week office-going counterparts.

Why do employees working one day in the office cover the least?

Working one day in the office may reduce pressure to conform, as limited exposure minimizes the need to manage identity. Occasional in-person interactions might foster belonging without full immersion.

Why do employees working five days in the office cover less than those working four?

Employees in the office five days a week report lower covering than the four-day group because their routines, expectations, and social norms are stable, reducing ambiguity and the need for impression-management. In addition, people who feel more at ease with office culture—or whose roles don't allow remote work—naturally self-select into five-day schedules, concentrating lower-covering individuals in this group. But lower covering does not mean a five-day schedule is cost-free: full-time onsite work often brings a heavier personal toll, including long commutes, reduced time for family responsibilities, fewer opportunities for exercise or medical care, and overall diminished recovery time.



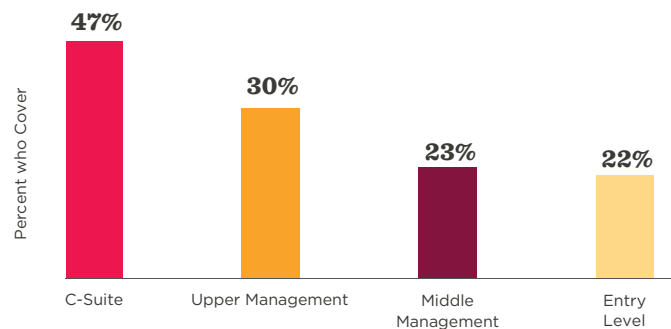
Impact of level in the organization hierarchy on covering



Who is covering more?

There is a clear correlation between level in the organization and covering: the higher someone is in the organizational hierarchy, the more they cover.

Reported covering across the organizational hierarchy



What is being covered?

Compared to entry-level staff, C-suite executives are nearly—and in some cases more than—twice as likely to cover their marital status, their educational background, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and sensory disabilities. While these areas show the largest gaps, the topics executives cover most often are their ideological perspectives, physical health or discomfort, and religious or spiritual beliefs.

In three key areas, lower-ranking employees report greater pressure to cover aspects of their lives, reversing the typical hierarchy trend. Twenty percent of entry-level staff conceal pregnancy or fertility, likely due to their younger age and limited access to childcare compared to higher earners. Thirty percent hide eccentric personalities, reflecting stronger conformity pressures in junior roles. And 29% of entry-level and middle managers conceal light workloads, possibly to avoid extra assignments or manage perceived performance. These patterns reveal how organizational expectations shift across the corporate ladder.

With whom are those in higher positions covering more?

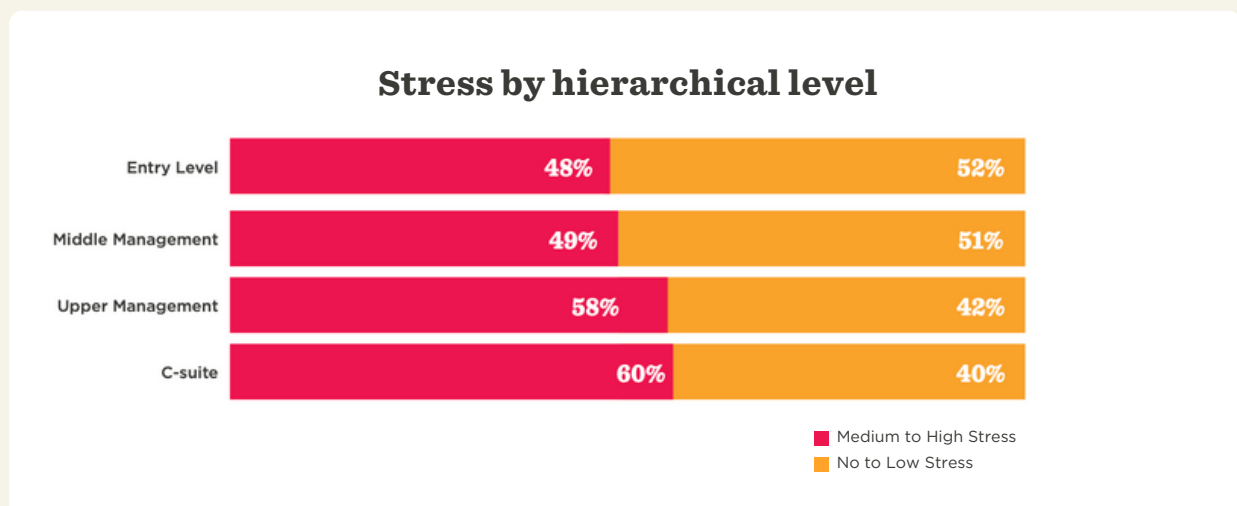
C-level participants consistently engage in more covering across almost all stakeholder groups and contexts, with the highest levels occurring among peers within team (66%) and direct supervisors (66%).

Perception of opportunities and belonging

Senior leaders were significantly more likely to report receiving advancement opportunities: 59% of upper-management respondents and 54% of C-Suite executives said they had access to career-mobility options, and 61% of both groups reported receiving promotion opportunities. They were also more likely to feel they could bring their whole selves to work.

The cost of covering

The higher employees rise in the organizational hierarchy, the greater the covering costs that they bear. Upper management and C-suite leaders face increased pressure to appear “always on” (38% and 35%, respectively) and are more likely to experience heightened stress due to covering.

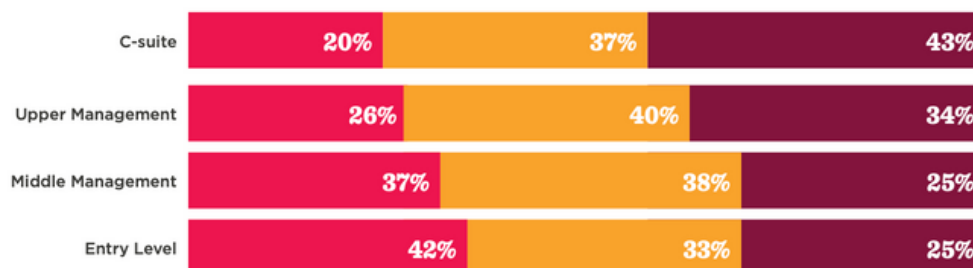


C-suite respondents believe they would experience significant benefits if it were not necessary for them to cover: higher performance (56%), increased productivity (52%), and be further ahead professionally (51%).

However...

Despite reporting covering more and despite experiencing all the negative effects associated with it, C-suite respondents report the highest mood while working (67% report having a positive or very positive mood). They also significantly more likely to recommend their workplace to others (NPS = 23).

eNPS by hierarchical level



Discussion

The data suggests C-suite leaders may experience more stress and identity covering due to their highly visible positions where perception could impact their credibility. Their paradoxical higher mood and loyalty might stem from having succeeded within the system, potentially reinforcing an internal locus of control that frames challenges as conquerable rather than unfair. Having “drunk the Kool-Aid,” they perhaps view the organization as a meritocratic path to success, which might boost their mood and eNPS despite requiring personal compromises—reflecting both leadership advantages and psychological justification for their sacrifices.





Strongest correlations with employee NPS

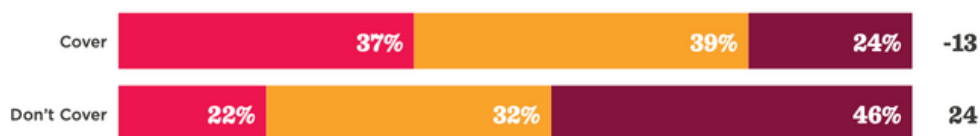
Interactions with NPS

Employees who feel the need to cover aspects of who they are report lower eNPS (Employee Net Promoter Scores) and have a higher percentage of detractors across various dimensions.

Strongest correlations between covering of personal attributes and eNPS

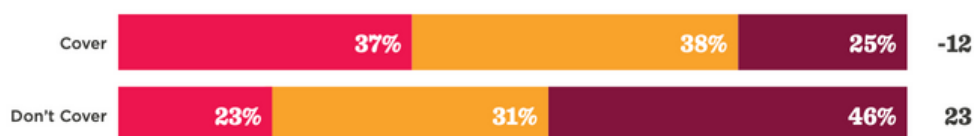
■ Promoters (9-10)
■ Passives (7-8)
■ Detractors (0-6)

eNPS by hierarchical level



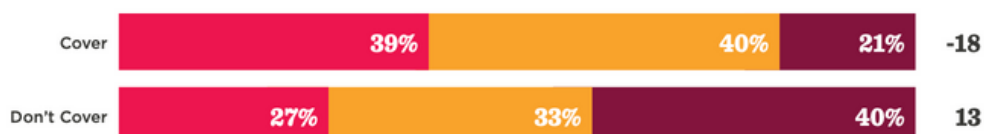
Employees who covered their ideological perspectives reported an eNPS 37 points lower than those who did not.

Cover mood



Employees who feel the need to cover their mood at work (emotional labor) reported an eNPS 35 points lower than those who did not.

Cultural heritage

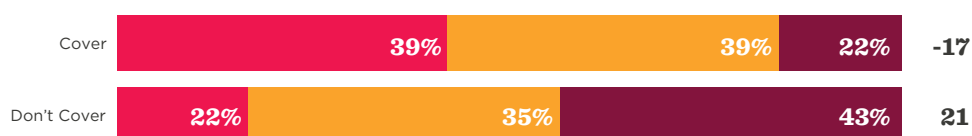


Employees who feel the need to cover their cultural heritage at work reported an eNPS 31 points lower than those who did not.

Strongest correlations between stakeholder groups whith which respondents cover and eNPS

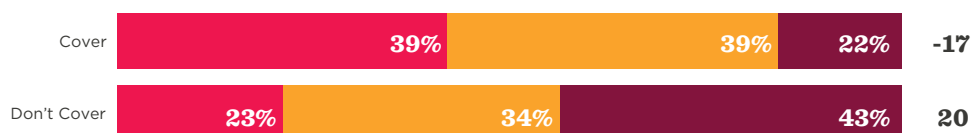
■ Promoters (9-10)
■ Passives (7-8)
■ Detractors (0-6)

Direct manager or supervisor



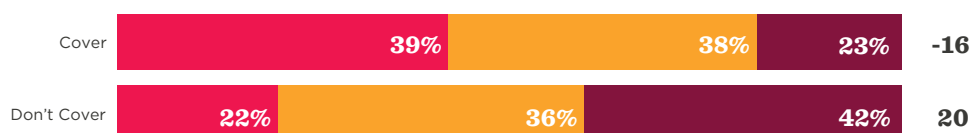
Employees who feel the need to cover with their direct manager or supervisor reported an eNPS 38 points lower than those who did not.

Peers within team



Employees who feel the need to cover with peers within their team reported an eNPS 37 points lower than those who did not.

Senior leaders



Employees who feel the need to cover with senior leaders reported an eNPS 36 points lower than those who did not.

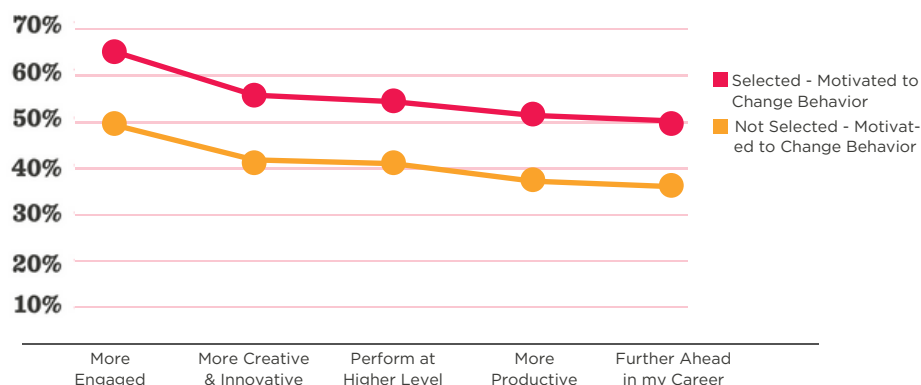
Three factors impacting the willingness to help others cover less

1. Personal experience with covering

Employees who cover personal aspects at work, such as health challenges or behavioral modifications for professional reasons, are more likely to support colleagues doing the same. This increased empathy and willingness to help stems from their shared experience of balancing workplace expectations with personal vulnerabilities.

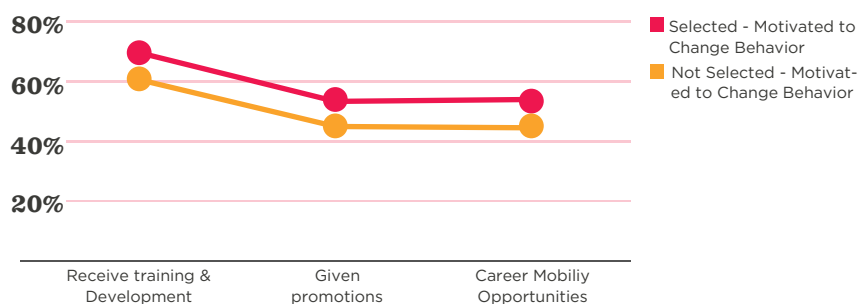
2. Viewing covering as an obstacle to performance

Those willing to adjust their behavior so others can cover less are more likely to view covering as detrimental to engagement, creativity, innovation, performance, productivity, and career progression. This suggests that the motivation to help stems not only from empathy arising from shared experiences but also from the belief that there are concrete benefits to reducing the burden of covering.



3. Perceiving the organization positively & willingness to adjust behavior

Employees who express motivation to change their own behavior so others don't have to cover tend to have a markedly more positive view of their organization, as evidenced by a higher employee Net Promoter Score. This group also rates career mobility, training and development, promotion opportunities, and feeling respected more favourably. These findings suggest that employees who hold a positive perspective of their workplace are more inclined to take proactive, prosocial steps to help their colleagues feel a reduced need to cover.



Discussion #1

Willingness to adjust behaviors arises from a mix of psychological and experiential influences. For example, a scarcity mindset can make employees see efforts to reduce covering as a threat to their own performance, sapping their motivation to support colleagues. By contrast, those who've witnessed hard work being rewarded, enjoyed internal mobility, or benefited from quality training tend to feel more secure—and less constrained by scarcity. Such experiences, which signal a fair and just organization, naturally foster a greater openness to help others and embrace change.

Repeated negative outcomes, meanwhile, can breed learned helplessness, discouraging any attempt to improve workplace conditions. In these cases, clear leadership support and visible success stories are essential to break the cycle, restore confidence, and renew engagement.

Locus of control also matters: people with an internal locus believe they can influence the work environment and are more likely to adapt their behavior, whereas those with an external locus feel less empowered to change. Ultimately, both personal characteristics and organizational context shape these mindsets—and, in turn, employees' readiness to modify their behavior in ways that allow others to cover less.

Discussion #2

The differences in willingness to adjust behaviors can be attributed to several psychological and experiential factors that influence workplace dynamics.

Scarcity mindset

A scarcity mindset may lead employees to view efforts to help others as threatening to their own performance. However, individuals who have:

- Personally experienced or witnessed hard work being rewarded
- Received mobility opportunities
- Benefited from quality training programs

These employees typically feel more secure and less constrained by scarcity. Such experiences, often connected to perceptions of a fair and just organization, foster greater willingness to help others.

Locus of control

The concept of locus of control significantly impacts behavior adjustment:

- Internal locus: Employees who believe they can influence workplace climate are more likely to adjust their behavior accordingly
- External locus: Those who feel they have little control may be less inclined to make changes

It's important to note that poor work environments can contribute to scarcitymentality and learned helplessness, regardless of personality traits.

About the authors

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Tia Katz is the Founder and CEO of HU-X, a pioneering consultancy that offers a unique partnership model between organizations and 90 world-wide top-tier experts in executive, leadership, and organizational development. Prior to establishing Hu-X, Tia was IBM's Global Head of Senior Executive Development, guiding the growth of the company's 4,000 most senior leaders and spearheading the vision for its culture transformation, and she also held leadership roles in Citi's Executive Development department. Contributor to Fast Company, David Green's Digital HR Podcast, MarketWatch, and MoneyTalks News, Tia focuses on measuring the real-world impact of leadership initiatives and guiding teams and organizations toward lasting, positive change.

Stephen Lindia, PhD - Head of Analytics, Hu-X



Steve Lindia serves as Head of Analytics at Hu-X, where he combines talent management, organizational development, and data analytics expertise. Throughout his 30-year career, he has pioneered data-driven approaches to enhance organizational performance. Prior to Hu-X, Steve held an executive position at Bank of America, where he led talent management, organizational effectiveness, and analytics initiatives. His deep expertise in talent analytics has established him as a thought leader who emphasizes developing human potential as a driver of organizational success. Steve's work focuses on promoting inclusive behaviors and improving leader effectiveness. His ongoing commitment to data-driven decision-making keeps him at the forefront of analytics innovation in organizational development.

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About HiBob

HiBob is a people-first HR tech company helping fast-growing, global businesses thrive. Our platform, Bob, simplifies people management, drives productivity, and builds strong cultures. Designed for modern work, Bob empowers HR and business leaders to support their people because people-first strategies aren't just good for people, they're good for business.

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HU-X enhances the Human Experience at work through global coaching, culture architecture, and leadership development. Its team includes facilitators, leadership experts, culture architects, OD consultants, behavioral economists, and human factor engineers. With 60+ coaches worldwide, Hu-X aligns culture with strategy and elevates team performance.

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