

# The Top 10 Findings on Resilience and Engagement

From the ADP Research Institute, the 10 most intriguing discoveries from a global study of resilience and engagement.

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The challenges of the past year have threatened people’s physical and psychological well-being, both personally and professionally. But if business leaders and their teams are able to better discern where they currently stand in terms of their own physical and mental health, they will be better able to determine which actions to take to survive and ultimately thrive through current and future challenges.

My colleagues and I at the ADP Research Institute recently finished conducting a [global study of resilience and engagement](#), looking at levels of both across 25 countries in 2020. We surveyed a minimum of 1,000 people per country, for a total of over 26,000 participants. Our hope in conducting this research was twofold: first, to help leaders become more engaged and resilient in their own lives, despite the deeply unsettling events of the past year; and second, to identify ways that leaders can build engagement and resilience in their employees.

Before we dive in, it’s important to note that we define *engagement* as the emotional state of mind that causes people to do their best work sustainably, and *resilience* as the capacity of an individual to withstand, bounce back from, and work through challenging circumstances or events. Our validated survey instrument enabled us to calculate which employees were *fully engaged* — highly committed and willing to give their all to their team and organization. Fully engaged employees are dedicated to an organization’s purpose, certain in their definition of excellence, confident in the support of their teammates, and excited by their organization’s future. In contrast, we designated those employees who were not fully engaged as “just coming to work.”

Similarly, through the 10 items that measure and predict resilience, we were able to identify *highly resilient* employees who demonstrated agency and the ability to compartmentalize, felt psychologically safe, and demonstrated trust in their leaders’ abilities to anticipate the future, communicate, and follow through on commitments.<sup>1</sup> Those employees who were not highly resilient were designated as *vulnerable*. (See “The Relationship Between Engagement and Resilience” for more details on how engagement and resilience are correlated.)

Engagement is a *proactive* state of mind. We measured engagement levels by asking respondents questions such as how clear their expectations were, whether they got to use their strengths every day, whether they felt they would be

recognized for doing excellent work, and whether someone at work was encouraging them to grow. Resilience, in contrast, is a *reactive capacity*, describing how people will respond when challenges arise.

Given the world events of the past year — and our previous research on engagement, which has been conducted for more than a decade — some of our findings were predictable, such as the low levels of engagement and resilience we found around the world: Only 14% of workers were fully engaged, and only 15% of workers were highly resilient. Many of the results, however, did surprise us. What follows are our 10 most intriguing *discoveries*.

**1. Trust is everything.** The most powerful driver of both engagement and resilience is trust. Employees who said they completely trust their team leader were 14 times more likely to be fully engaged. Those lucky enough to completely trust their colleagues, team leader, *and* senior leaders, selecting 5 on a trust scale ranging from 1 to 5, were 42 times more likely to be highly resilient. Psychologically, it's easier to engage in our best work when we don't have to expend mental resources looking over our shoulders or protecting ourselves against dysfunctional workplace practices that erode trust, like bullying or micromanaging. When it comes to building engagement and resilience, trust is everything.

**2. One is the loneliest number.** It is almost impossible to be either engaged or resilient if you do not feel like part of a team. Those who said they are on a team were 2.6 times more likely to be fully engaged and 2.7 times more likely to be highly resilient than those who didn't identify as team members. For millennia, humans have experienced psychological well-being only when they feel connected to and supported by a small group of people around them — whether that group is a family unit, a small band of hunters and gatherers, or a hyperlocal team at work. Human flourishing happens through team flourishing — and if there's no team to be had, engagement, resilience, and excellence are nowhere to be found.

**3. Office space isn't essential.** Virtual workers are both more engaged and more resilient than those who are physically in an office or shared workspace. This was true before the pandemic and is even more true now. Before the pandemic, our research had found the most engaged people around

the world were working from home four days a week and working in an office one day a week. These workers reported having both more freedom to set their own schedules and more opportunities to do what they love. In 2020, well into the pandemic, 20% of virtual workers were fully engaged and 18% were highly resilient — a stark contrast to the 11% of fully engaged and 9% of highly resilient office-based workers during the same period. How the work is done and with whom people work are both important, but organizations can stop worrying about whether virtual work is detrimental to teamwork. Feeling like part of a team is a state of mind, not a state of place. Engagement and resilience are about who you work with, not where you're working.

**4. It's good to be in tech.** The most engaged industry is technology — perhaps because tech workers already had a greater reliance on technology to connect and collaborate before the pandemic. These employees are still doing their best work, sustainably, and are able to use their strengths at work each day. For many in tech, working from home and connecting exclusively virtually with coworkers may feel more familiar than for the rest of us: 20% of technology workers are fully engaged, followed by those in the finance and professional services industries, at around 16% and 15%, respectively. The industries with the smallest percentage of fully engaged workers are app-based task employment and manufacturing, hovering around only 12%.

**5. Nurses and teachers are suffering most.** Our study found that the least resilient professions are in health care, health care support, and education. Undoubtedly, there are many potential causes for this beyond the coronavirus pandemic, such as inherently stressful work and comparatively lower wages. However, since our data revealed the strong link between resilience and the feeling of being on a team, one of the most powerful causes of this limited resiliency is likely that neither the teaching nor nursing profession is organized around teams.

Most hospitals are organized around parallel processes, such as nursing, therapy, or physician care, which rarely come together to create organized teams. Instead, nurses “live” in departments where one nurse supervisor manages 50 or more individual nurses. For the most part, teachers work not in teams but in classrooms, where they are individual

contributors by default rather than team members.

Interestingly enough, one of the benefits of the pandemic for teachers is that many school districts have encouraged teachers to organize themselves into mutually supportive, dynamic “teaching pods” — in other words, teams. The teaching profession — along with many other professions — may want to explore how these pandemic-induced changes could usefully outlast the pandemic.

**6. The unknown is scarier than change.** Though people talk a lot about how each of us fears change and needs our hands tightly held through any transformation, this study challenged those assumptions. We asked people how many workplace changes they had experienced as a result of COVID-19 — such as promotions placed on hold, more virtual work, changed hours, or social distancing at work, to name a few. Surprisingly, the people who reported five or more changes at work were 13 times more likely to be highly resilient. This suggests that we humans fear the unknown more than we fear change. Company leaders shouldn’t rush employees back to normalcy when so much of the danger inherent in this current “normalcy” remains unknown and unknowable. Instead, leaders should tell their teams specifically what changes they are making to their work and why in order to increase their overall level of resilience.

**7. The honeymoon (effect) is over.** Pre-pandemic, we consistently found that the most engaged employees were those who had been with the company less than one year. This was not due to the quality of the work environment in the first year but was instead caused by the honeymoon effect: New employees are much more likely to rate their experience positively, just as newlyweds are much more likely to bask in the warm glow of new love. The honeymoon effect is partially explained by the fact that people want to confirm to themselves that they made a wise decision to join a new company.

But now, for the first time ever, this effect has vanished. People on the job less than a year are now *less* likely to be highly resilient or fully engaged (14% for each), and people who took a new job during COVID-19 are even less so (with 11% highly resilient and 8% fully engaged). Workers who have taken on new roles during the pandemic were two times less likely to be fully engaged than others.

These findings have two troubling implications. The first is that many workers have not chosen their current job but instead were forced to take it out of necessity. The second implication is that after the pandemic eases and the pressure on the job market lifts, companies will have to be extremely intentional and intelligent in order to retain those millions of workers who took on their current role under duress.

**8. Members of Gen Z are no less resilient than their elders.** Contrary to conventional wisdom, young people in Generation Z (aged 18 to 24) are not less engaged and less resilient than older generations. Our data contradicts the notion that younger generations are superficially confident but emotionally vulnerable: Age does not predict resilience. Resilience is much more a function of exposure to challenges, being on a team, and trusting one’s colleagues than it is of age.

**9. Relationships boost resilience.** Women are not more resilient than men, or vice versa. However, around the world, married people are more resilient than singles — and this holds true whether or not a couple has kids. Going into this study, we thought that having children might increase employees’ stress and therefore reduce their resilience, but this did not prove to be true. In fact, married people with kids were slightly more resilient than any other category. That said, do not imagine that children are an unmitigated blessing — because if you are single with children, you are two times *less* likely to be resilient. This data strongly suggests that it is much harder to summon and sustain one’s resilience when going through life alone.

**10. Resilience and engagement levels rise with your role.** The higher up in the organization someone is, the more resilient and engaged they are likely to feel. Those in upper management are over three times more likely to be fully engaged compared with individual contributors, and over four times more likely to be highly resilient. In one sense, this is positive news: We need those who have been given great responsibility to have the psychological well-being to exercise that responsibility wisely over time.

However, this strong relationship between role level and both resilience and engagement is also deeply worrying: In today’s working world, in virtually all professions, the real value to our customers, our patients, our children, and our

communities is delivered by the folks on the front lines of organizations. They are the ones who have to make the most decisions — and the best decisions — for our companies, schools, hospitals, cities, and towns to thrive. The data reveals that at present, we haven't yet figured out how to give these workers what they truly need, at scale, to contribute their best in the face of life's many challenges.

Many of these issues, such as the lack of teams in certain industries and the disconnect between senior leadership and front-line workers, predate the pandemic and have grown even more prevalent since it began. With COVID-19 and virtual work testing everyone's engagement and resilience daily, people are better able to discern and highlight these long-standing systemic concerns — which better enables leaders to tackle them.

As this data reveals, leaders must remember that people don't fear change so much as they fear the unknown, so employees need clarity and specificity from leaders, not sugarcoated enthusiasm. People function best in teams, so anything leaders do to help them feel a part of a small,

high-performing team — whether or not they are colocated — will boost workers' engagement and resilience. Leaders need to see their employees not as "labor" but as the messy, complex, emotional beings they are — dealing with real-world human challenges, just like they are. The more that leaders can infuse these findings in their organizations' policies and practices, the more likely we will all be to flourish, both during these difficult times and beyond.

## About The Author




Marcus Buckingham (@mw Buckingham) is a *New York Times* bestselling author, a global researcher, and head of ADP Research Institute — *People + Performance*.

## References

1. You can see the eight engagement questions on p. 6 of ADP Research Institute's "[Global Workplace Study 2020](#)."

## The Relationship Between Engagement and Resilience

Engagement and resilience are correlated, yet each is independent of the other. It's possible to be fully engaged but not highly resilient, and vice versa.

	 Just Coming to Work	 Fully Engaged
 Highly Resilient	5%	10%
 Vulnerable	80%	5%

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