Littler 2026 Labor Survey Report

SEPTEMBER 2026

Littler

Executive Summary

When it comes to labor relations, many U.S. employers are in a bind.

They know they need to address a variety of thorny issues, from the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) to multigenerational workforces to increasingly aggressive collective bargaining tactics. Yet regulatory whiplash and short-term cost pressures often keep employers tethered to the status quo, making it hard to act on employee relations and engagement initiatives that can effectively mitigate risk.

Littler's 2026 Labor Survey explores how in-house counsel, human resources (HR) professionals and business executives are navigating the current landscape. The report's second edition draws on findings from more than 650 respondents at organizations that span a range of sizes and industry types and represent both unionized and nonunionized workplaces. Most respondents (93%) were based in the U.S., with the remaining 7% based outside of the U.S. but with organizations that have U.S. operations

The report offers businesses a comprehensive look at where their peers stand and how they can adapt to modern labor relations trends.

LABOR RELATIONS STRATEGY: TO UPDATE OR NOT TO UPDATE?

As the workplace—and what employers and employees want and need from each other—evolves, some organizations' labor relations strategies have not kept pace.

Over the past two years, many employers say they have seen employees become more vocal or disruptive in challenging management in public forums (24%) and on social media (30%). Survey respondents also identify a range of factors that are likely to drive interest in unionization among their employees—including work-life balance (52%) and job security (48%)—and unionized employers are grappling with more challenging bargaining tactics and labor's growing propensity for strikes.

Yet labor relations strategies can lack some components necessary to effectuate communication strategies, promote contingency planning and ensure stakeholders understand the workforce impacts that come with business and operational changes. This may stem in part from a lack of recent updates to their policies, as just 29% of respondents with labor relations strategies in place say they have been updated since the start of 2025.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: GOING BEYOND "CHECK-THE-BOX" EXERCISES

Effective employee relations is now a matter of "engagement or else," as Jonathan Levine, co-chair of Littler's Labor Management Relations Practice Group, put it in a March 2026 article. Organizations that invest in meaningful employee engagement are better positioned to address workplace concerns before they become legal disputes, organizing campaigns or operational challenges.

The good news? Eight in 10 survey respondents say employee engagement is part of their labor relations strategy. Roughly two-thirds of organizations have focused on improving engagement over the past year by providing forums for employees to share feedback (64%), engaging in workplace culture initiatives (62%) and training managers to spot and respond to concerns (61%). However, only 29% are concentrating on analyzing metrics to measure the success of these programs—a crucial factor to their ongoing success.

The challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce are top-of-mind for employers, too, with 87% indicating that their communication and engagement approaches are tailored to the preferences and styles of different generations. However, the survey suggests that there is room for employers to improve when it comes to leadership communications, as 51% say inadequate communication from leadership is a barrier to better employee relationships and just 16% of respondents believe their employees have a strong relationship with senior leadership.

THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF AI IN LABOR RELATIONS

AI has emerged as both a workplace concern and an opportunity.

The majority of respondents (87%) expect unions to utilize fear around AI displacing or changing jobs to fuel employee interest in organizing over the next year, including 58% who anticipate this to a moderate or large extent.

A substantial proportion of employers believe that increased use of AI will reshape job responsibilities (67%), redistribute work across teams (42%) and reduce entry-level roles (30%). Yet fewer than 10% feel very prepared to manage the potential labor/employee relations issues that may arise as a result. Again, communication will be a key tool in managing employee fears. Though most employers say they are communicating in some form with employees who are worried about AI-related impacts, only 17% are doing so proactively and consistently.

The survey also spotlights two developing AI use cases: how unions are leveraging the technology in organizing efforts and, on the other side of the table, how businesses are incorporating it into collective bargaining negotiations. While 60% of employers are concerned with the use of AI in the former, employers with unionized workers appear to be underutilizing AI to prepare for and aid in bargaining efforts.

STATE REGULATORY CHANGES, SECTOR-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

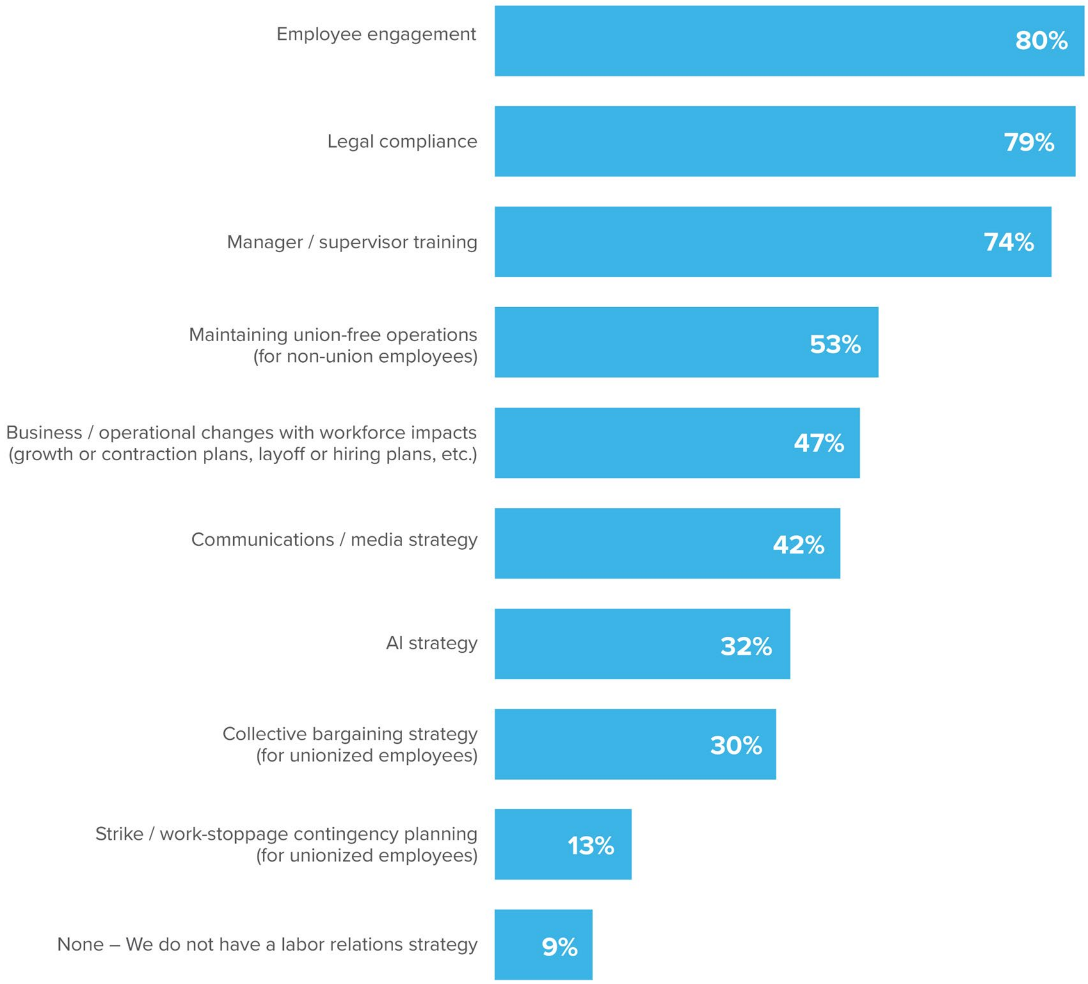
While National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) policy initiatives remain relatively stagnant (for now), state policymakers are attempting to fill the gap with regulations that address state regulation of union organizing, "captive audience" meetings, sectoral bargaining, the transfer of power from the NLRB to state agencies and AI, among others. However, only about a third of respondents are concerned about each of the policies listed above, with another 29% expressing no concern at all—reinforcing that in this moment of volatility, employers may be choosing to sit tight instead of taking action.

The report that follows investigates these and other important data points, including sector-specific findings—namely in healthcare, retail/hospitality and manufacturing—and differences among large organizations (those with 10,000 employees or more), as well as those with and without unionized employees.

For a complete breakdown of respondent demographics, see the methodology and demographics section.

LABOR RELATIONS STRATEGIES: COMPONENTS, UPDATES AND POLITICS

Which of the following are components of your organization's labor relations strategy? (select all that apply)



Employee engagement strategies are an effective tool for employers to proactively identify and address workplace concerns, strengthen organizational culture and reduce vulnerability to labor organizing efforts.

Against that backdrop, it's encouraging that 80% of respondents say that employee engagement is part of their organization's labor relations strategy. A similar portion cite legal compliance (79%) and manager and supervisor training (74%) as components.

However, less than half are focused on other important aspects of labor relations management, such as business and operational changes that carry workforce impacts (47%) and communications and media strategy (42%). Only 32% of respondents cite AI strategy as a component, though employers could very well be taking steps to address AI in ways that are not yet documented in their labor relations strategies.

Among employers with some unionized employees, 85% report having a collective bargaining strategy and 37% say the same of strike/work-stoppage contingency plans. While those rates may seem high, the lack of uniform inclusion signals that many employers are giving away power at the bargaining table and/or are unprepared to maintain operational continuity given today's heightened bargaining tactics and labor's growing propensity for strikes.

Case in point: the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which tracks stoppages involving more than 1,000 workers that last an entire shift, recorded 30 in 2025. Cornell University's Labor Action Tracker, which captures smaller and shorter actions, reported 303 last year. Both totals dipped slightly from 2024, but the number of workers involved remained roughly flat—and strike participation in both years exceeded 2021 and 2022 (with 2023 widely seen as an outlier).

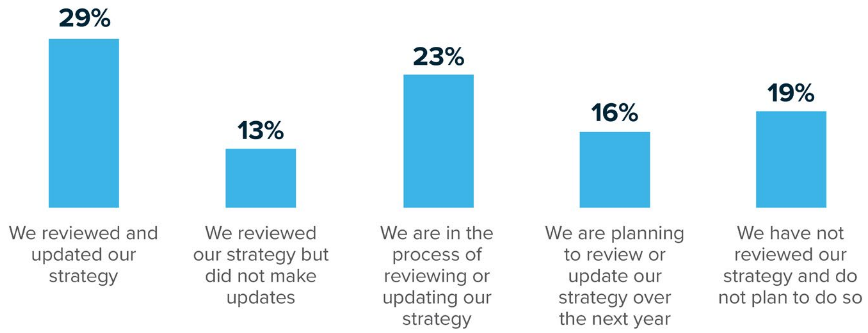
The industries most affected by work stoppages in 2025 were hospitality/food service, healthcare, manufacturing and education. Healthcare in particular is responsible for a substantial proportion of strikes, yet only 19% of healthcare employers we surveyed say their strategies include relevant contingency plans; and just 20% of manufacturers have a plan in place.

Large organizations were more likely to cite maintaining union-free operations for nonunion employees as a component of their labor relations strategies (70%), as were those in industries with greater exposure to organizing activity, including manufacturing (78%), retail/hospitality (70%) and healthcare (69%).

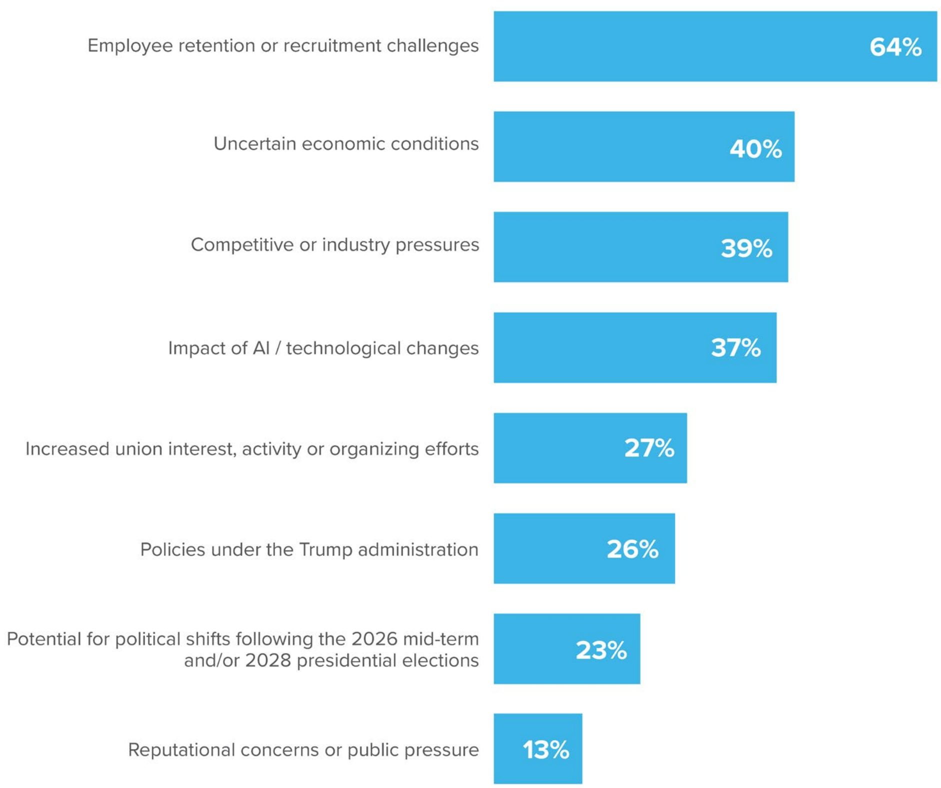
"In today's labor environment, preparedness is a competitive advantage. Labor relations should be treated like any other critical business risk, not as an afterthought. Employers that invest in proactive planning for union activity and workforce disruption move from reacting under pressure to leading with confidence, protecting both operations and long-term business objectives."

Brooke Niedecken,
co-chair of Littler's Labor Management
Relations Practice Group

Which of the following best describes your organization's approach to reviewing or updating its labor relations strategy since the beginning of 2025?
This question was only asked to employers with a labor relations strategy.

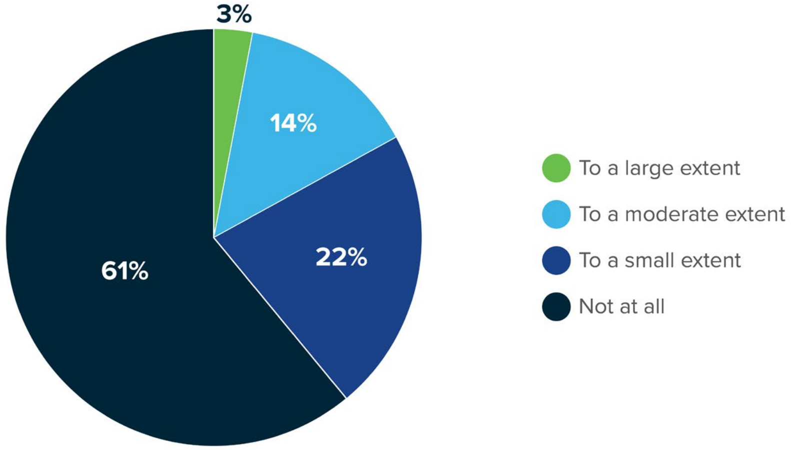


Which of the following influenced your organization's decision to review or update its labor relations strategy? (select all that apply)
This question was only asked to those whose organizations reviewed or plan to review their labor relations strategy.



To what extent have policies under the Trump administration and/or the current political climate influenced your organization's decision not to review or update its labor relations strategy?

This question was only asked to those whose organizations did not review, or reviewed but did not update, their labor relations strategies.



Part of having an impactful labor relations strategy is reviewing and updating it as workforce and business conditions evolve. However, of the 91% of employers with a strategy currently in place, only 29% have reviewed and updated it since the beginning of 2025. Though that number is higher for large organizations (43%) and among healthcare respondents (37%).

More than a third (36%) of those with strategies reviewed them but either did not make updates (13%) or are in the process of reviewing or updating (23%).

Of the employers that revisited their strategies or intend to do so, employee retention or recruitment challenges are the leading catalyst, with 64% (and 74% of healthcare respondents) citing them as an influence. Uncertain economic conditions (40%), competitive pressures (39%) and the impact of AI/ technological changes (37%) are the next most common drivers. Only 27% say increased union interest, activity or organizing efforts played a role—though the share was higher for large organizations (49%), those with unionized employees (45%) and healthcare companies (40%). In written feedback, respondents also point to new leadership taking the helm and recent or anticipated growth as important motivators.

Finally, despite the pro-business stance of the Trump administration, the survey data suggests politics are not a key reason for employers declining to revisit their labor relations strategies. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (61%) said the administration's policies had no bearing on their decision not to review or update their labor relations strategies.

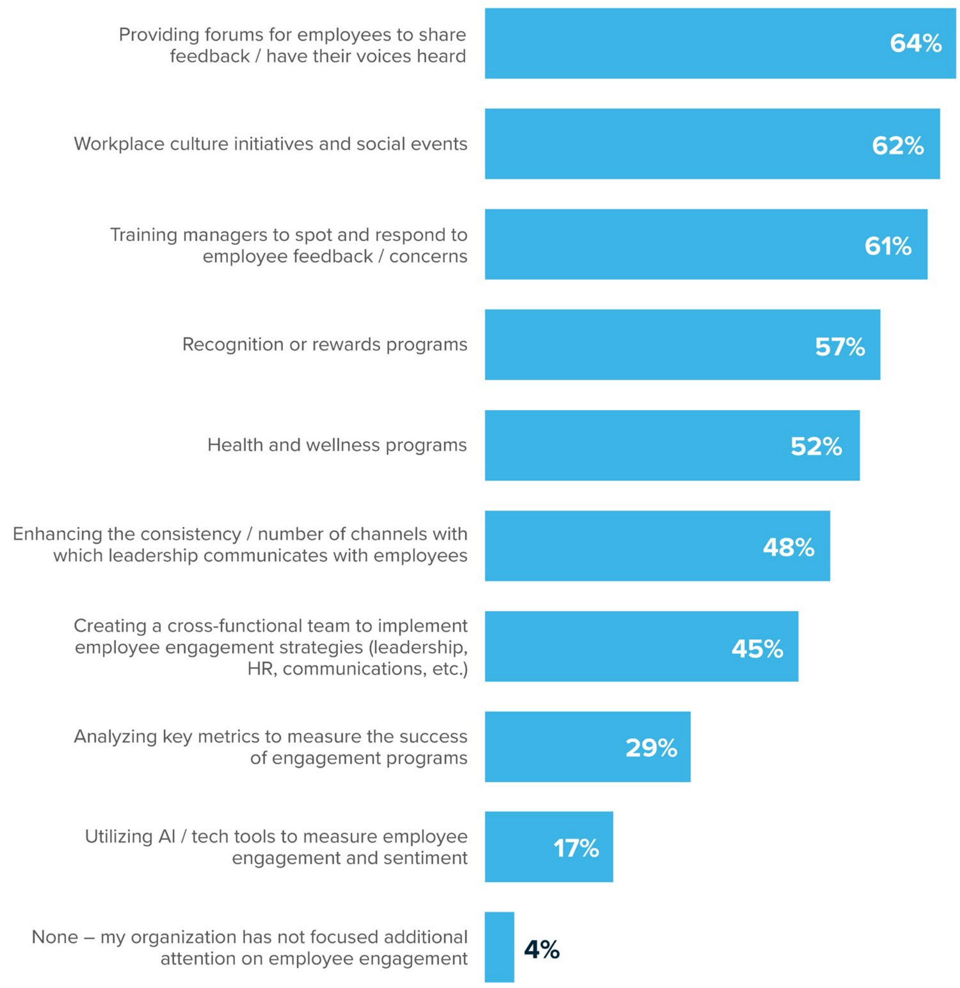
"Employers should neither ignore Washington nor overreact to it. Changes in the White House or at the NLRB can affect risk assessments and legal strategy, but labor relations decisions should be guided primarily by what's best for the business and its employees. Companies that chase every political shift often create inconsistency, while those that stay focused on their long-term workforce strategy tend to be better positioned regardless of who's in power."

Jonathan Levine,
co-chair of Littler's Labor Management Relations Practice Group

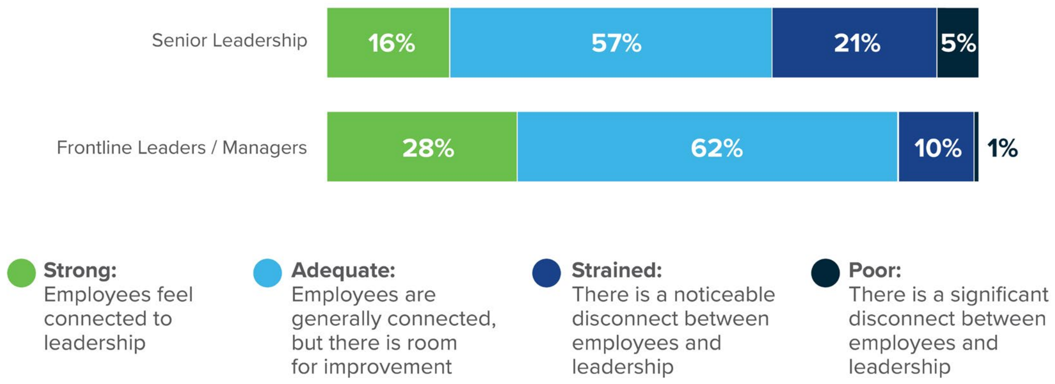
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: FOCUS AREAS, COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND LEADERSHIP GAPS

Employee engagement approaches and priorities

In which of the following areas has your organization focused on improving engagement with employees over the past year? (select all that apply)



Which of the following do you think best describes the current relationship between employees and leadership at your organization?



Employers today face new hurdles in maintaining strong employee connections, fostering trust and ensuring employees feel heard and valued. In addition to hybrid work creating distance among teams, recent economic, sociopolitical and technological shifts have amplified employee concerns over wage stagnation, job insecurity, workplace safety and a host of other issues.

The survey data shows that relationships between employees and their bosses remain under some strain: only 16% of employers—and 8% from large organizations—report a strong relationship between workers and senior leadership, while 28% say the same about relationships with frontline leaders/managers.

Fortunately, impactful employee engagement can help build trust—and potentially address concerns that might drive "union curious" employees to organize—while also unlocking better performance, retention and profitability.

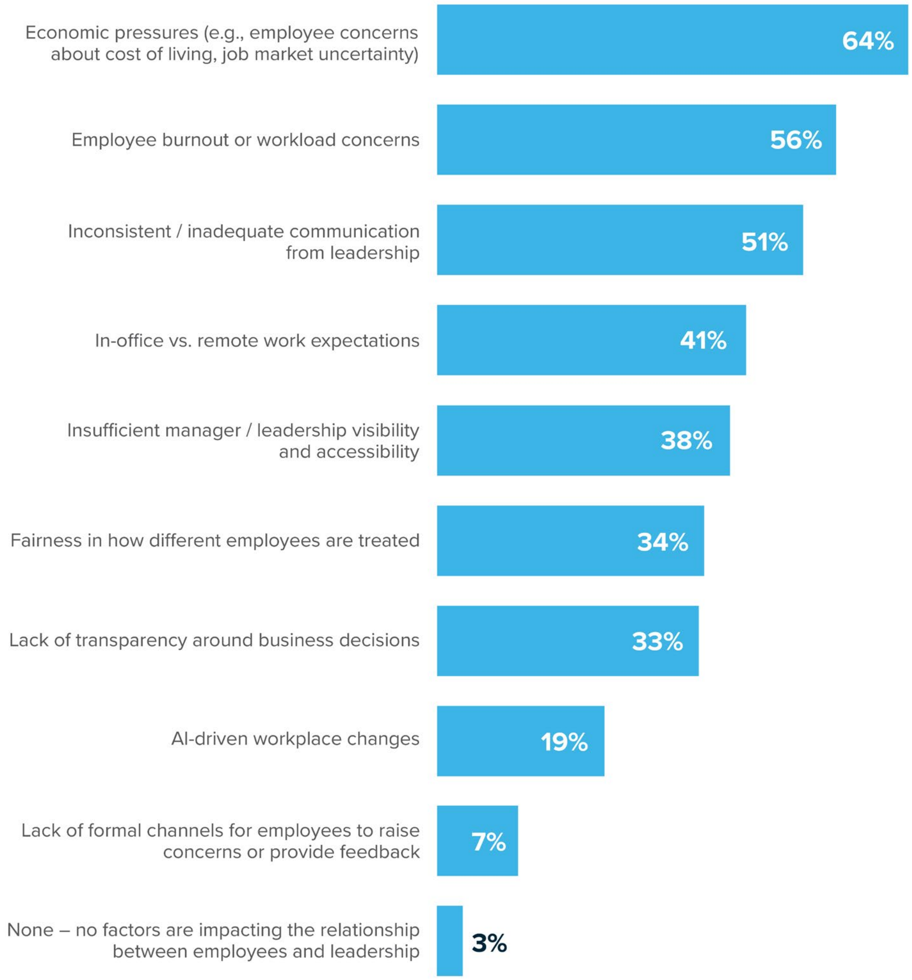
Last year's Labor Survey asked about elements included in organizations' employee engagement programs, with the top areas relating to rewards, manager trainings, mental health and wellbeing, surveys and leadership forums.

This year's survey honed in on where organizations are focused on improving engagement with employees. The majority of respondents selected a wide range of areas that reinforce 2025's findings—from forums for employee feedback (64%) and social events (62%) to manager trainings (61%, and 72% of large organizations) and rewards programs (57%, and 74% of healthcare respondents). Yet only 29% are analyzing metrics to assess the effectiveness of those programs, potentially making it harder to determine whether engagement efforts are working.

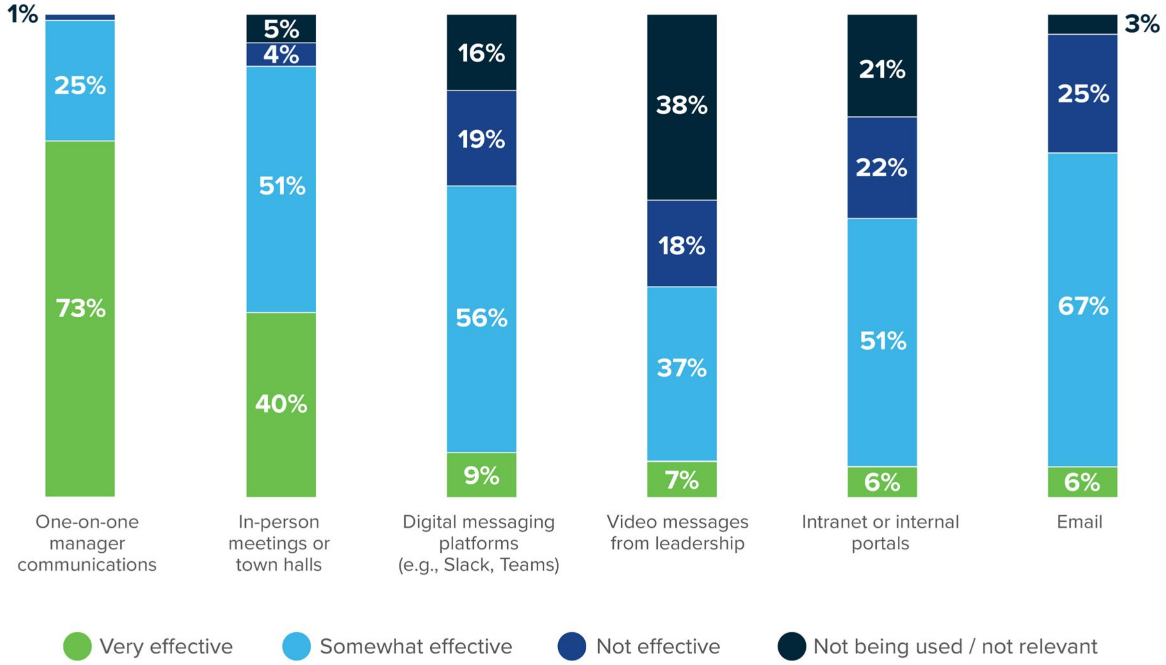
AI and other technologies can help on this latter front, but only 17% are using these tools to measure engagement. Organizations could also benefit from incorporating two-way feedback loops to identify and address the root causes of disengagement.

Leadership communications

Which of the following factors do you think are impacting the relationship between employees and leadership at your organization? (select all that apply)



How effective do you believe the following channels are for manager/leadership communication with employees regarding workplace matters?



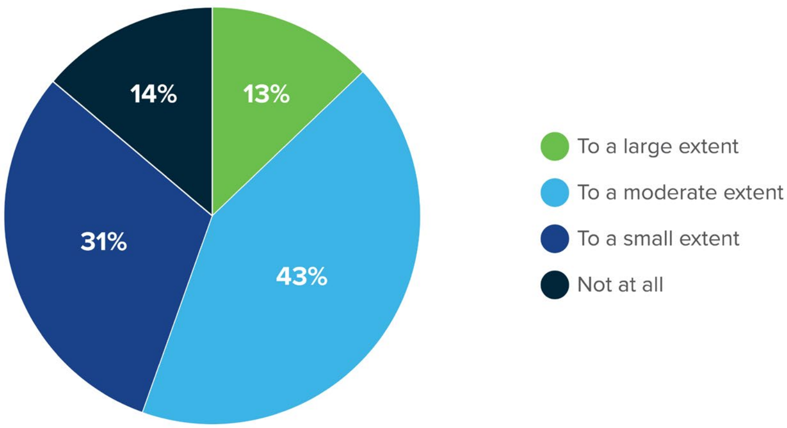
Transparent and consistent leadership communications can improve not only employee engagement but labor relations as a whole. According to Gartner, employees are 4.3 times more likely to trust leaders who explain decisions. Yet 51% of employers we surveyed cite inadequate communication from leadership as a barrier to better relationships with employees, trailing only economic pressures (64%) and employee burnout (56%).

This stems in part from how and where leaders communicate. Direct communication stands out as most effective: nearly three-quarters of respondents (73%) view one-on-one manager communications as very effective for communicating with employees about workplace matters, followed by in-person meetings or town halls (40%). No other channel received that rating from more than 9% of respondents. Email exemplifies the gap: while most consider it at least somewhat effective, only 6% call it very effective and 25% say it isn't effective at all.

For some, this might be a matter of accessibility. Multiple respondents noted that many of their workers lack access to company email addresses or intranets and instead prefer short, digestible communications via digital messaging or text. Others observed that many don't own a computer or smartphone. And one respondent cited skepticism among younger workers, saying: "[Our] organization skews younger. Corporate communications are generally disfavored and distrusted."

Managing a multigenerational workforce

To what extent is your organization focused on tailoring its communication and engagement approaches to the various preferences and styles of a multigenerational workforce?



With five generations now working side by side, organizations must communicate—and engage—with multigenerational workforces, including baby boomers who may favor in-person meetings and Gen Alpha digital natives accustomed to instant messaging.

While 56% of respondents say their organizations are focused on tailoring communications and engagement approaches to a multigenerational workforce to a large (13%) or moderate (43%) extent, the remainder are only doing so to a small extent (31%) or not at all (14%). A lack of focus in this area could be detrimental to businesses, resulting in turnover, decreased employee engagement or disruptive organizing activity.

Effectively engaging with a multigenerational workforce often means adopting a more individualized strategy. "One of our greatest successes has been recognizing that a one-size-fits-all approach to communication is no longer effective," one respondent told us. "We have intentionally incorporated multiple communication methods…to better connect with employees across generations."

Another noted that "different generations communicate differently…Accepting that an email, or a presentation, or a posting in our intranet is not going to reach everyone, important messages are shared repeatedly using multiple formats."

Some respondents caution that tailoring communications by age alone paints with too broad a brush. One said their organization's approach focuses "on other categorical differences (such as role type, location, remote vs. onsite) rather than generational differences," while another commented that "avoiding assumptions based on age and focusing instead on individual preferences has been important in building engagement across all generations."

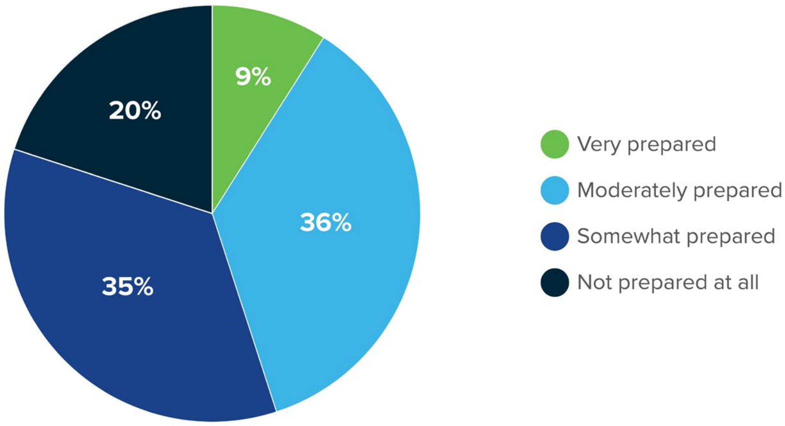
"Creating a workplace where employees across generations are effectively communicated to and with is critical to enhancing overall employee engagement and retention efforts. While much has been said about Gen Z redefining the employer-employee relationship, focusing too heavily on any one generation risks disengaging others. A strong multigenerational communications strategy should be a holistic effort that creates structures where all employees feel their voices are meaningfully heard."

Brendan Fitzgerald,
co-chair of Littler's Labor Management
Relations Practice Group

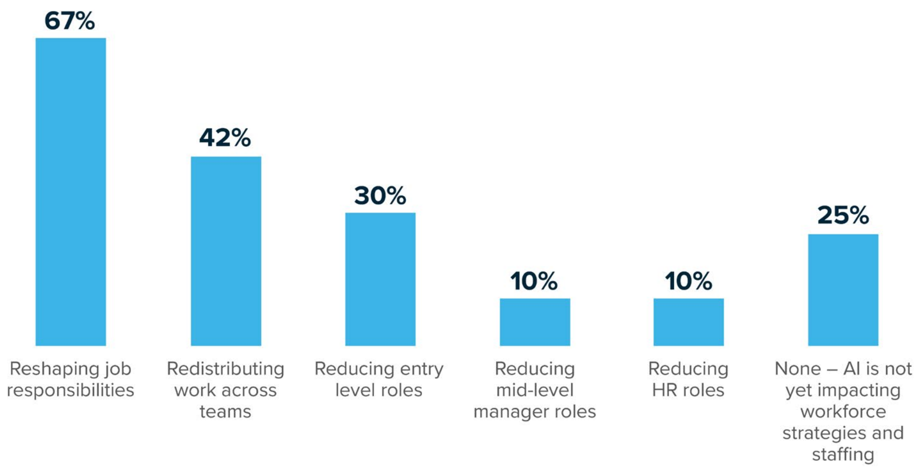
AI AND LABOR RELATIONS

The impact of increased AI use on the workplace and in driving union interest

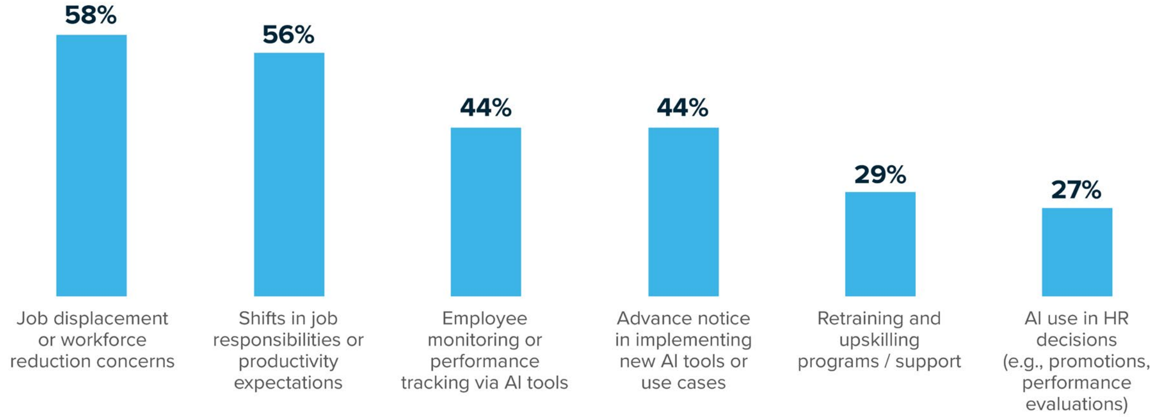
To what extent do you think your organization is prepared to manage the potential labor/ employee relations issues that may come with increased AI adoption?



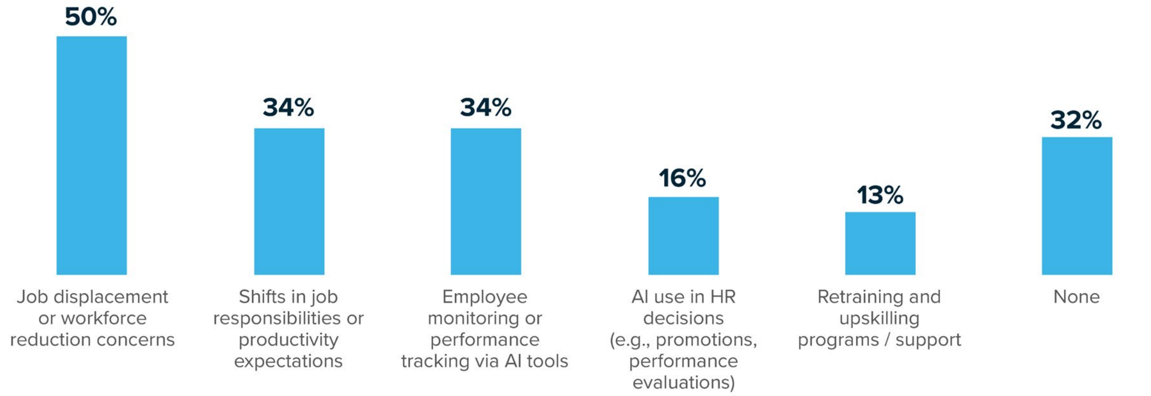
In which of the following ways do you think the increased use of AI is impacting, or may impact, your workforce structure and staffing needs? (select all that apply)



Which of the following issues related to AI use in the workplace have emerged in discussions with unions or collective bargaining negotiations? (select all that apply)
This question was only asked to employers with unionized employees and those who have had AI emerge in discussions or negotiations.



Which of the following issues related to AI use in the workplace do you think could prompt employees to be interested in a potential unionization effort? (select all that apply)
This question was only asked to employers with no unionized employees.



A substantial proportion of employers believe that increased use of AI will reshape job responsibilities (67%), redistribute work across teams (42%) and reduce entry-level roles (30%). Yet fewer than 10% feel very prepared to manage the potential labor/employee relations issues that may arise as a result: just 45% say they are very or moderately prepared, while 20% are not prepared at all.

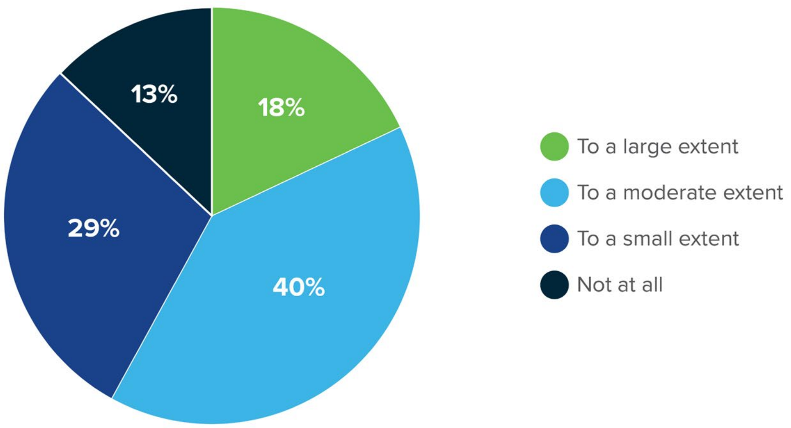
The readiness gap could stem from employers not viewing AI as a pivotal labor strategy issue. However, the Communications Workers of America, the AFL-CIO Technology Institute and UNI Global Union have each advocated in favor of collective bargaining over AI deployment. Other labor organizations are also calling for greater transparency and oversight, while some are seeking employer-funded upskilling programs to help workers transition into new roles. What's more, outside of benefits/compensation and work-life balance, this survey found that job security—an issue that AI-related displacement fears only underscores—is the top factor that employers see as likely to drive interest in unionization.

Among employers with unionized employees that have encountered AI-related issues in union discussions or collective bargaining negotiations, concerns about job displacement or workforce reductions are the most common (58%). Other issues include shifts in job responsibilities or productivity expectations (56%), employee monitoring via AI tools (44%) and advance notice in implementing new AI tools (44%).

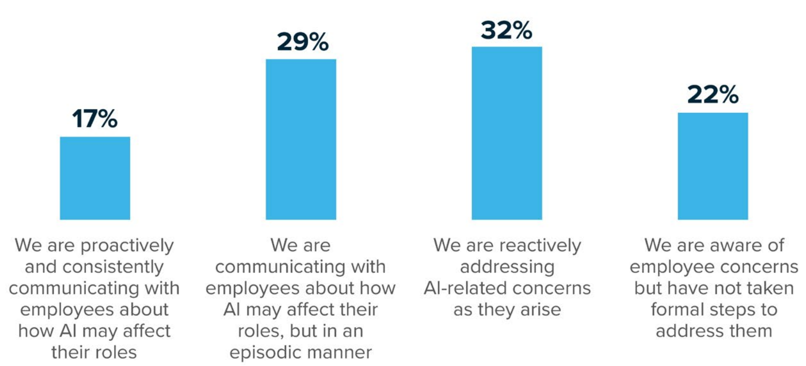
Respondents at nonunionized organizations also see job displacement and workforce reductions relating to AI as a concern: 50% (and 75% of large organizations) say it could prompt employee interest in a potential unionization effort. Beyond that, however, no individual AI-related issue was cited by more than 35% of this respondent group, with 32% saying that none of the issues we asked about will drive union interest.

Communicating about AI

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Over the next year, unions are likely to utilize fear around AI displacing or changing jobs to drive interest among employees in union organizing."



Which of the following best describes how your organization is communicating with employees who may be concerned about workforce reductions or changes in job responsibilities as a result of increased AI use in the workplace?



Employers appear keenly aware that unions may capitalize on mounting employee concern around AI-driven workforce changes. The majority of respondents (87%) expect unions to utilize fear around AI displacing or changing jobs to fuel employee interest in organizing over the next year, including 58% who anticipate this to a moderate (40%) or large (18%) extent.

They have a right to be concerned: According to *Axios*, "AI anxiety dominated much of the conversation at the AFL-CIO's national convention" this past June, with "leaders from the group's 65 affiliated unions call[ing] on politicians to impose significant AI regulations." Such advocacy doesn't even account for other AI-related issues that may drive employee dissatisfaction, such as the environmental impacts of AI.

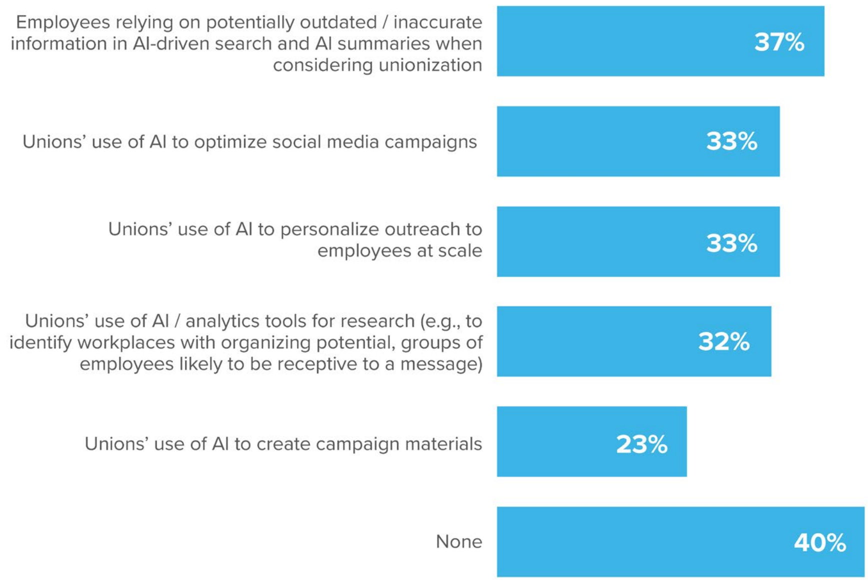
Even amid these concerns, just 17% of organizations are proactively and consistently communicating with employees about how AI may affect their roles. Most are doing so episodically (29%) or reactively (32%), while 22% have yet to take formal steps to address concerns at all despite being aware they exist.

"Some employers treat AI as an IT project when it's really a workplace change project. That's a mistake. Companies that get ahead of the 'how will this affect my job and future' concerns from employees can reduce labor relations risk and give their workforces a reason to help drive the technology forward rather than organize against it."

Jonathan Levine,
co-chair of Littler's Labor Management
Relations Practice Group

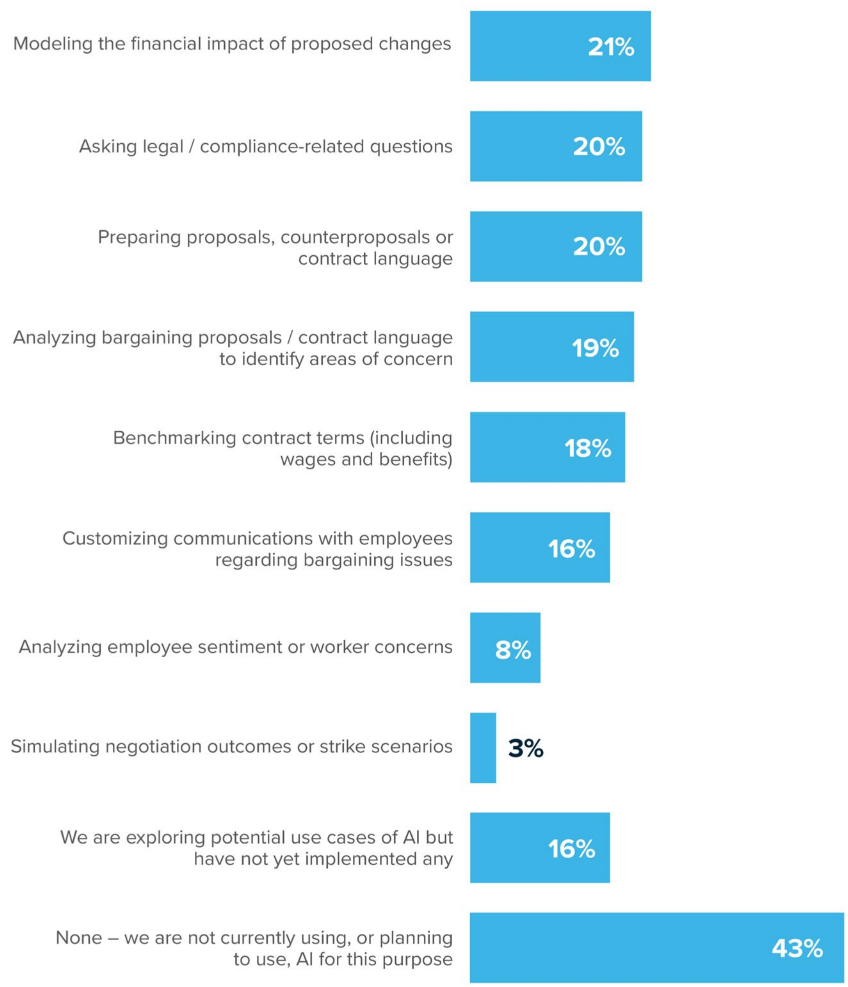
AI use in organizing campaigns and collective bargaining

Which of the following are currently of concern to your organization as it relates to the use of AI in the process of union organizing campaigns? (select all that apply)



How, if at all, is your organization using AI in collective bargaining and/or negotiations with labor unions? (select all that apply)

This question was only asked to employers with unionized employees.



In the AI era, employees seeking answers about a labor dispute or the company's position are increasingly likely to turn not to their employer or even their peers but to an AI-powered search platform—one that may serve up outdated or inaccurate information. As a result, employers can more easily lose control of the narrative.

It tracks, then, that the most common employer concern about the use of AI in union organizing campaigns is employees relying on results from AI-driven search and AI summaries when considering unionization (37%). About a third also cite unions' use of AI to optimize social media campaigns (33%), personalize outreach to employees at scale (33%) and research likely workplaces or employee groups with organizing potential (32%).

Employers are also starting to use AI in collective bargaining with labor unions. The right AI tools can turn years of notes, proposals and agreements into something employers can search and act on fast.

Before negotiations begin, AI can analyze changes in areas like contract language, recent industry settlements and past bargaining patterns to identify risks, inform strategy and anticipate likely union positions. During bargaining, AI can take notes, generate action items and prepare stakeholder updates ahead of the next round. It can also draft proposals, tighten ambiguities in contract reviews, estimate the economic impact of proposed changes and review bargaining correspondence to assess shifts in a union's tone or priorities.

Yet the survey data reveals that many organizations with unionized employees are not currently deploying AI for these purposes—in fact, 43% are not even planning to.

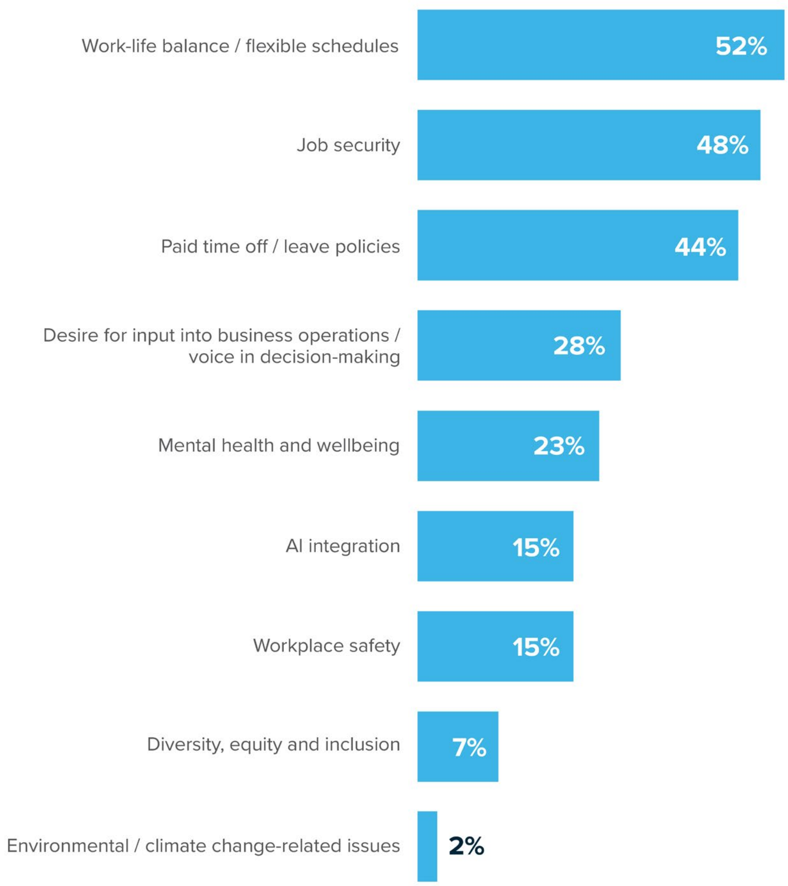
Those who are leveraging AI are mostly using it to model the financial impact of proposed changes (21%), ask legal/compliance-related questions (20%), prepare proposals, counterproposals or contract language (20%) or analyze bargaining proposals/contract language to identify areas of concern (19%). Less than 10% are using AI to analyze employee sentiment (8%) or simulate negotiation outcomes or strike scenarios (3%).

"AI can't negotiate on an employer's behalf, but it can help bargaining teams perform administrative work and/or translate historical data into talking points to support their proposals. This increases the team's capacity, allowing employers to come to the table better prepared and to respond more efficiently to union proposals based on practical data points. Employers new to using AI should start small: pick an upcoming negotiation or work group to pilot AI, get your data in order, assess the tool's value, and establish review rules and data security before scaling."

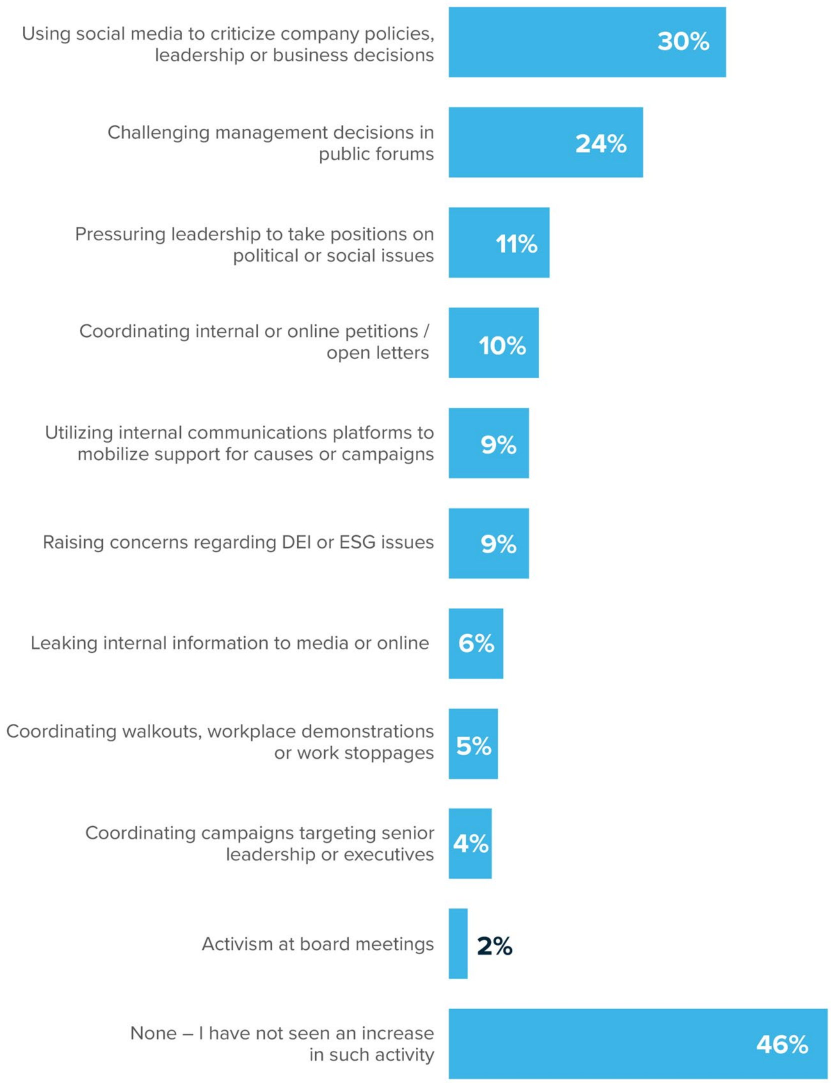
Brooke Niedecken,
co-chair of Littler's Labor Management
Relations Practice Group

UNIONIZATION DRIVERS

Outside of compensation and benefits, which of the following factors do you think are likely to drive interest in unionization among employees at your organization? (select all that apply)



In which of the following areas, if any, have you observed some employees becoming more vocal or disruptive over the past two years? (select all that apply)



Understanding what drives employee dissatisfaction—and how workers respond when concerns go unaddressed—is important to assessing labor relations risk.

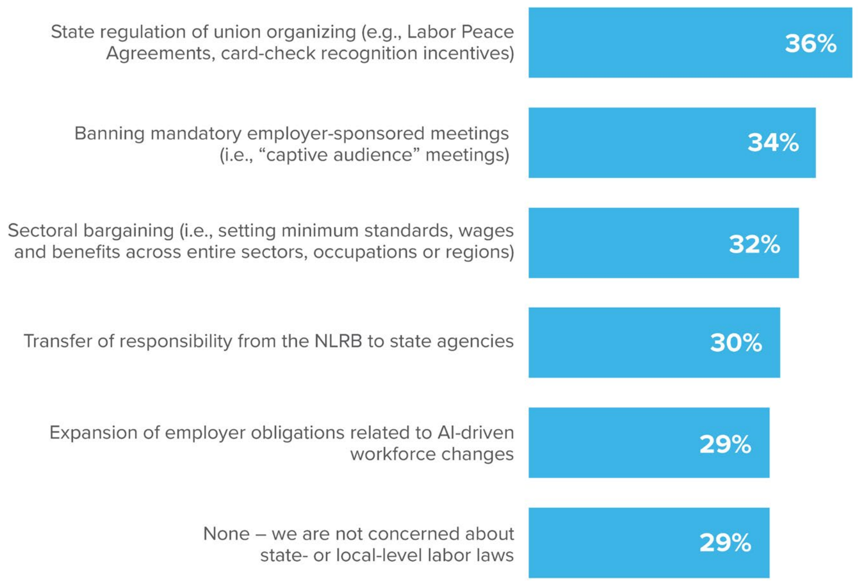
Asked what factors outside of compensation and benefits they think are likely to drive interest in unionization among employees, employers most often cite work-life balance (52%), job security (48%) and paid time off/leave policies (44%). Concern about paid time off and leave is more prevalent among healthcare (57%) and manufacturing (55%) respondents, while job security stood out among employers with unionized employees (59%) and at large organizations (60%).

The findings echo last year's survey, when job security (which likely incorporates fear around technology-related displacement) and work-life balance also ranked among the top three potential drivers of union interest, alongside employees' desire for input into business decisions (see page 15 here).

Vocal and/or disruptive employees are becoming more common fixtures in many workplaces. Roughly half of respondents to this year's survey report that over the past two years employees have become more vocal or disruptive in challenging management, via social media (30%) or in public forums (24%). Those behaviors are considerably more prevalent at large organizations, where 61% report social media criticism and 36% report public challenges to management.

STATE AND LOCAL REGULATORY CHANGES

Which of the following labor-friendly policies advancing at the state and local levels are of concern to your organization? (select all that apply)



The past year has seen federal labor policy remain at a relative standstill. Though the NLRB regained its quorum last December, the Board has yet to address most of the major Biden-era decisions employers hoped to see reversed. While that may change with the Board recently regaining a Republican majority, several states have taken action in the meantime to fill perceived voids in federal labor law.

Some states have banned or severely restricted employer "captive audience" meetings, whereas others have implemented statutes related to unemployment benefits for striking workers and streamlined union organizing processes.

A new Massachusetts law, for instance, allows a union to be certified without a vote and to represent workers at a "sectoral" level—leading to the first rideshare drivers' labor union in the nation. For their part, lawmakers in California and New York have attempted (unsuccessfully) to empower their own agencies to handle cases previously managed by the NLRB and (more successfully) to expand oversight of AI-related workforce impacts.

Despite these developments, only about a third of respondents say they are concerned about key labor-friendly policies advancing at the state or local levels, with state regulation of union organizing (36%), banning mandatory employer-sponsored meetings (34%) and sectoral bargaining (32%) leading the way. Twenty-nine percent expressed no concern at all.

This data reinforces findings from Littler's 2026 Employer Survey, wherein only 15% of executives said their organizations were monitoring state labor law reform to a large extent.

"The growing patchwork of labor-friendly policies at the state and local levels comes with real compliance challenges that should be on employers' radars. While some may expect these laws will be preempted, those challenges will take time to litigate and there are consequential issues that may escape preemption. It's important that employers evaluate risk by staying abreast of state and local legislative activity and proactively engaging on issues that could have a major impact on how they operate their businesses."

Brendan Fitzgerald,
co-chair of Littler's Labor Management
Relations Practice Group

Methodology and Demographics

In June and July of 2026, 665 professionals completed Littler's survey via an online survey tool.

Most respondents (93%) were based in the U.S., with the remaining 7% based outside of the U.S. but with organizations that have U.S. operations. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) are with organizations that do not have any unionized employees and 34% have a mix of union and nonunion employees; less than 1% have workforces that are fully unionized.

Respondents were from a variety of industries, with the top represented industries being manufacturing (15%), retail/hospitality (11%), healthcare (11%), nonprofit (10%) and technology (8%).

Respondent titles included:

- HR professionals (45%)
- In-house lawyers (32%)
- Labor/employee relations professionals (10%)
- Other C-suite/director title (8%)
- Other business professional (6%)

Companies represented were of a variety of sizes, with the following number of employees worldwide:

- More than 10,000 employees (19%)
- 5,001 to 10,000 employees (6%)
- 1,001 to 5,000 employees (23%)
- 501 to 1,000 employees (11%)
- 101 to 500 employees (26%)
- 1 to 100 employees (14%)

Responses to some questions in the survey do not add up to 100% due to rounding, and some exceed 100% because respondents were invited to select more than one answer.