

March 2023



Employee Sentiment Report: Retail

Findings from a survey of
1000 frontline workers



Executive summary

Retailers are facing huge workforce challenges amid the “Great Attrition.” According to [McKinsey & Company](#), the quit rate in U.S. retail and hospitality outpaces the overall national quit rate by more than 70 percent.

This high turnover rate isn’t new – annual employee turnover among frontline retail workers has been at least 60 percent for a long time. But replacing more than half of store staff regularly has become a lot more challenging amid “record inflation and a continuing global pandemic,” according to McKinsey & Company.

These staffing challenges are particularly ill-timed. Brick-and-mortar retail is experiencing a major resurgence, driven by consumers who are craving physical connections with the brands they love. And these shoppers are bringing with them higher expectations than ever before.

The hybrid and digital strategies retailers employed over the past few years have been effective: the modern shopper is fluid, having no qualms about jumping from one channel to another throughout a single path to purchase. At the same time, consumers have become accustomed to a high degree of personalization and speed – a holdover from the pandemic when so many things were available literally at our fingertips.

These forces are converging to create a conundrum for retail leaders: how to deliver personalized, convenient, and digitally-integrated, cross-channel shopping experiences with an unhappy workforce that’s dwindling daily?

To help retailers find answers, Waitwhile conducted a national survey of frontline retail workers to better understand their (un)happiness at work and to surface tactical solutions that retailers could employ to improve the experience they offer to both their employees and their customers.



About the research

The analysis in this report was compiled using responses to a Waitwhile survey of frontline retail workers (manager-level and below) in the United States, aged 18+. The survey was conducted online via Pollfish in January 2023 and included 1000 respondents, balanced across gender, age, and geography.

Part 1: Employee happiness

Nearly 1 in 2 frontline retail workers are apathetic or unhappy at work

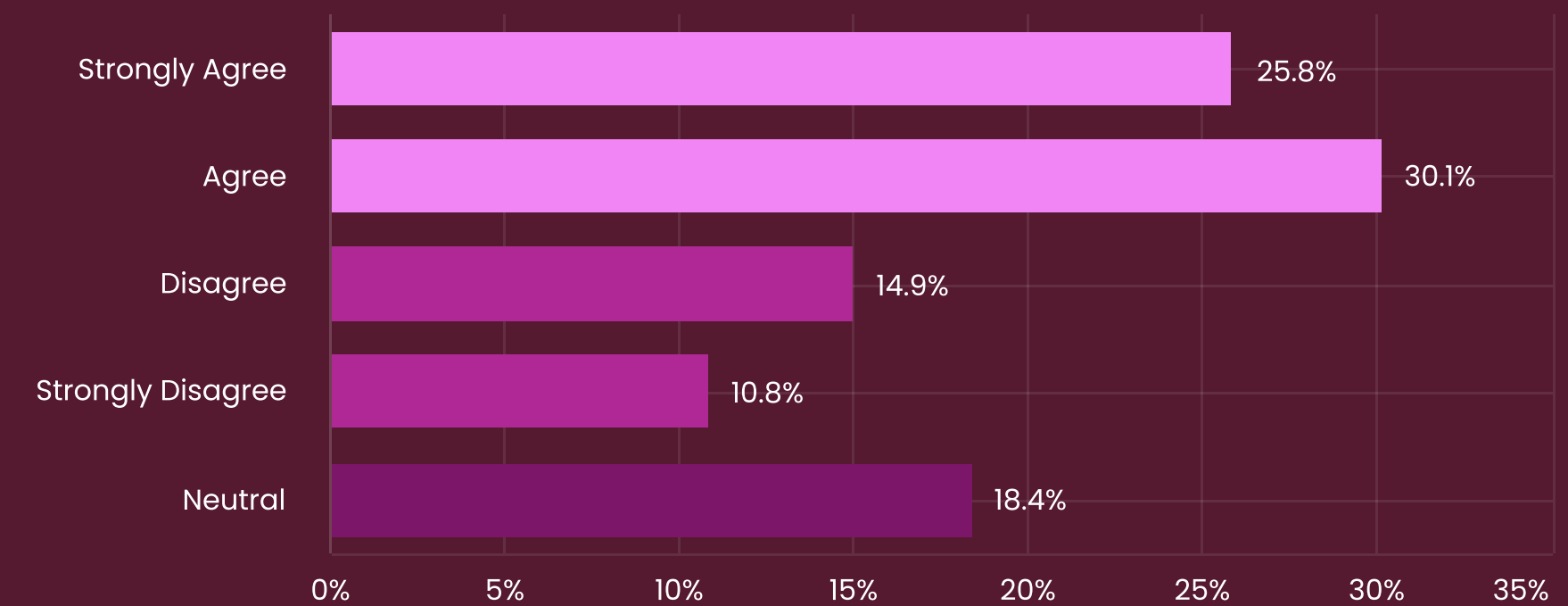
Only a little more than half of the workers surveyed indicated that they were happy with their jobs, meaning that nearly one in two retail workers are unhappy or apathetic at work.

Unhappiness at work can lead to cascading negative effects that damage morale and impact your bottom line. A [2019 Oxford University Said Business School study](#) found that happy workers are 13% more productive. More recently, a [2022 Gallup poll](#) found that business units with engaged workers have 23% higher profit compared with business units with miserable workers.

Widespread unhappiness may be driving employee turnover and undermining key business goals.

Figure 1

I'm happy with my job



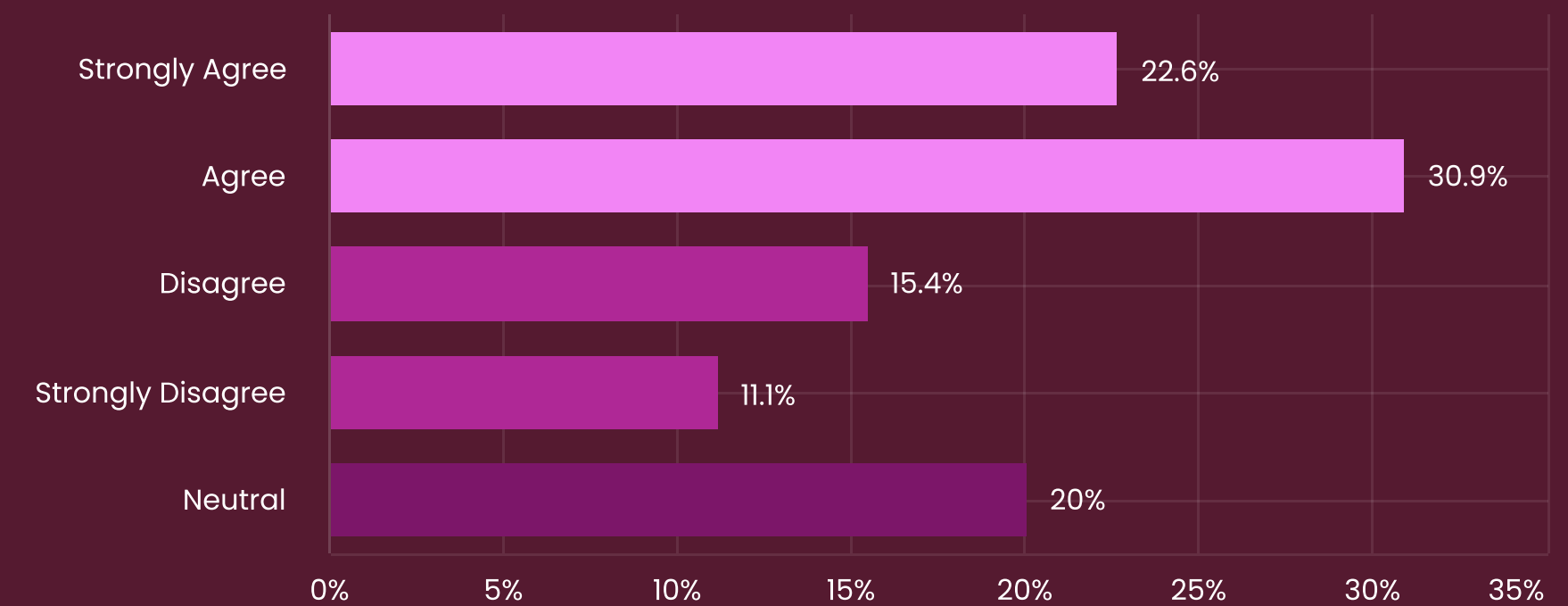
54% of frontline workers find their work meaningful

Nearly 54% of the frontline retail workers surveyed said that they found their work meaningful. This data spread looks nearly identical to that in Figure 1, suggesting a correlation between feelings of significance and employee happiness. Finding ways to make employees feel impactful may contribute to greater overall happiness.

Critically, the portion of the workforce that seems to be emotionally detached is not small. More than 46% of retail workers do not find their work meaningful, which has serious implications. According to a [2021 study by McKinsey & Company](#), when employees find their work meaningful, their performance improves by 33% and they are 49% less likely to leave.

Figure 2

I find my work meaningful



53% of retail workers are most fulfilled by customer interactions

Nearly three-quarters of retail workers report being bored at work (Figure 3). 1 in 5 say they are bored on a daily basis and 1 in 4 report being bored a few times a week.

Even amid this rampant boredom, more than 50% of retail workers surveyed said that they find interacting with customers to be the most fulfilling part of their job (Figure 4).

Considering these two findings together suggests that there's a dearth of customer interaction opportunities for retail workers. Instead of interacting with shoppers, workers may be busy with less engaging, manual tasks. To combat boredom, retailers should seek out ways to increase employee face time with customers by automating – or bringing efficiency to – more solitary duties. Additionally, retailers may want to create new opportunities for meaningful employee-customer interactions, perhaps by offering [virtual or personal shopping appointments](#), which are climbing in popularity.

Figure 3

I find myself bored at work...

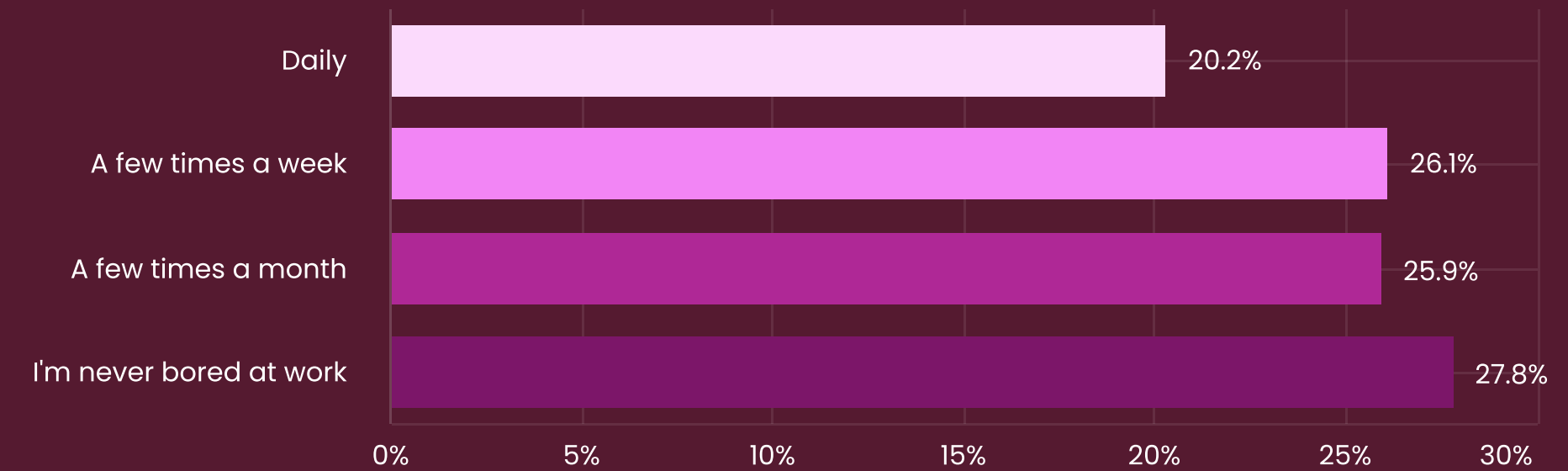
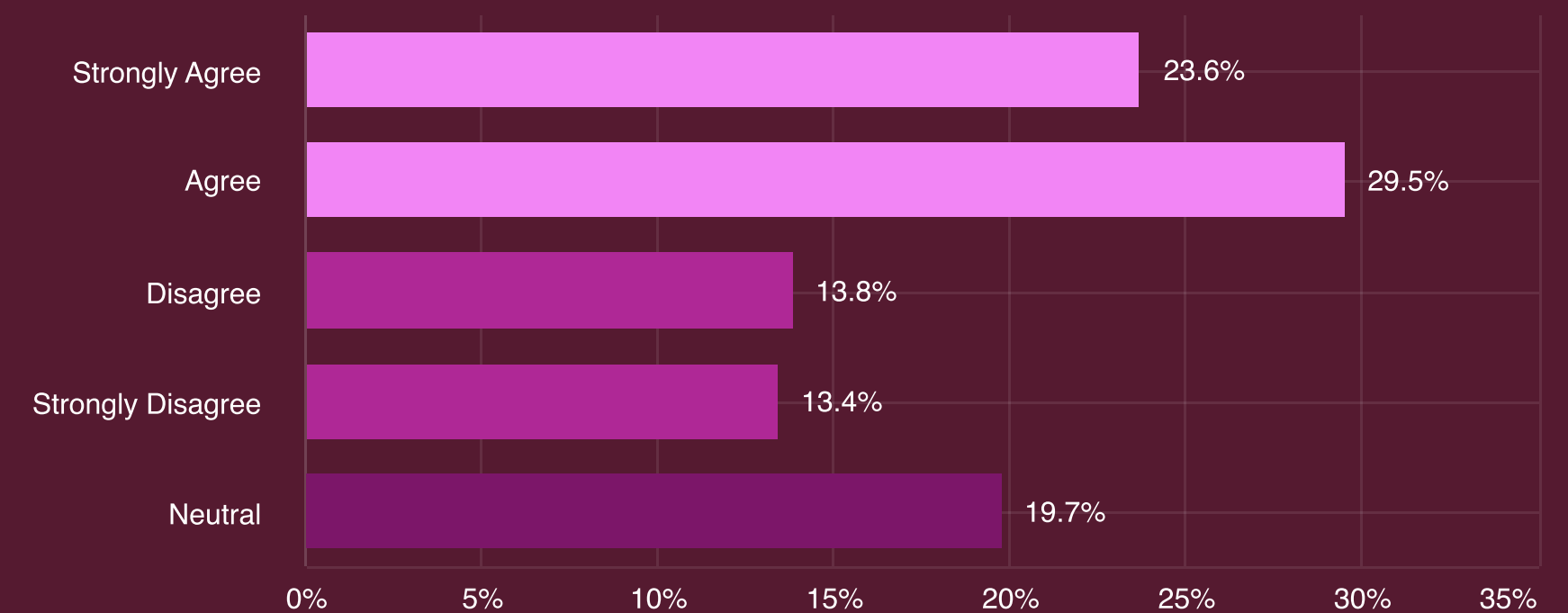


Figure 4

Interacting with customers is the most fulfilling part of my job



Workers are most anxious about meeting customer satisfaction goals

Nearly 40% of retail workers report being anxious at work (Figure 5). Interestingly, when these employees were asked about the main contributors to their anxiety, the majority chalked it up to the pressures of meeting customer satisfaction goals (Figure 6).

The high expectations for delivering outstanding customer service may be thwarted by an insufficient amount of opportunities for customer interaction, as discussed on the previous page. This may be contributing to the anxiety retail workers experience when it comes to meeting customer satisfaction goals. Without ample opportunities for meaningful customer interactions, they're unable to deliver. Additionally, these anxieties may be further compounded by difficulties associated with consumer behavior, which we discuss in the following section.

Of note, too, is that more than 70% of anxious retail workers are stressed by working long hours and last-minute scheduling changes (Figure 6). Workforce challenges are clearly taking an emotional toll on employees.

Figure 5

I feel anxious at work because of goals or expectations set by my manager/leadership

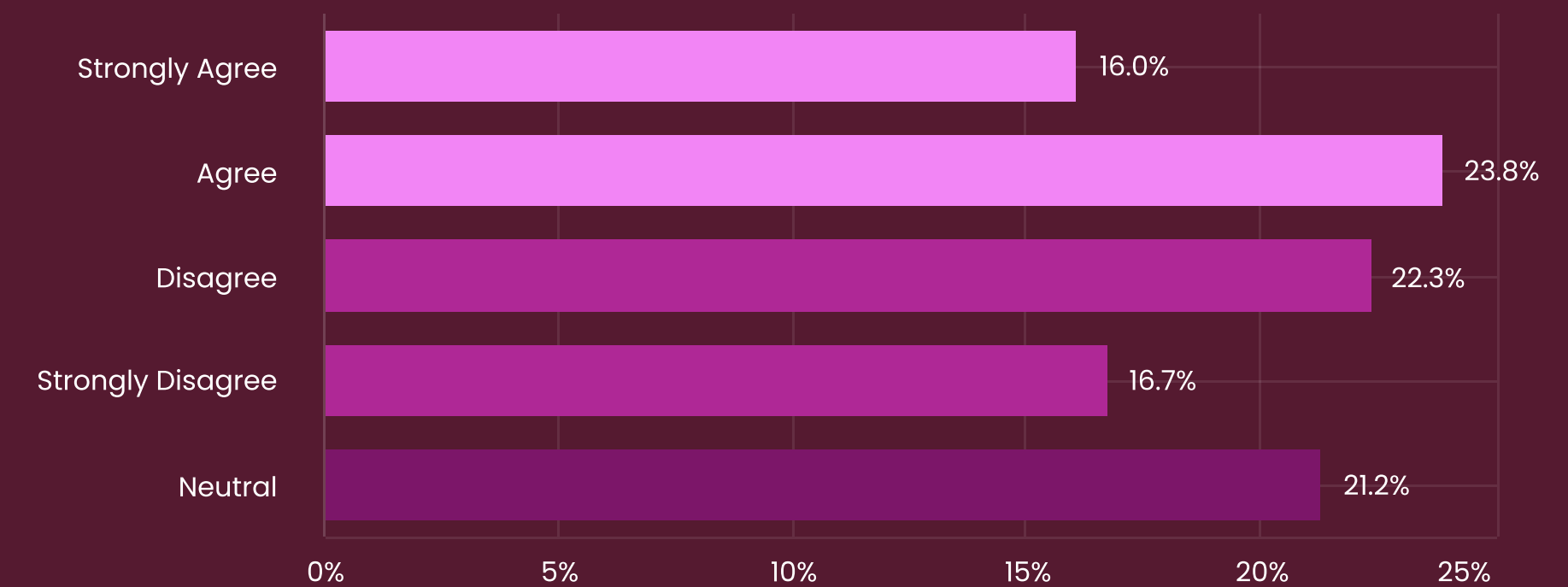
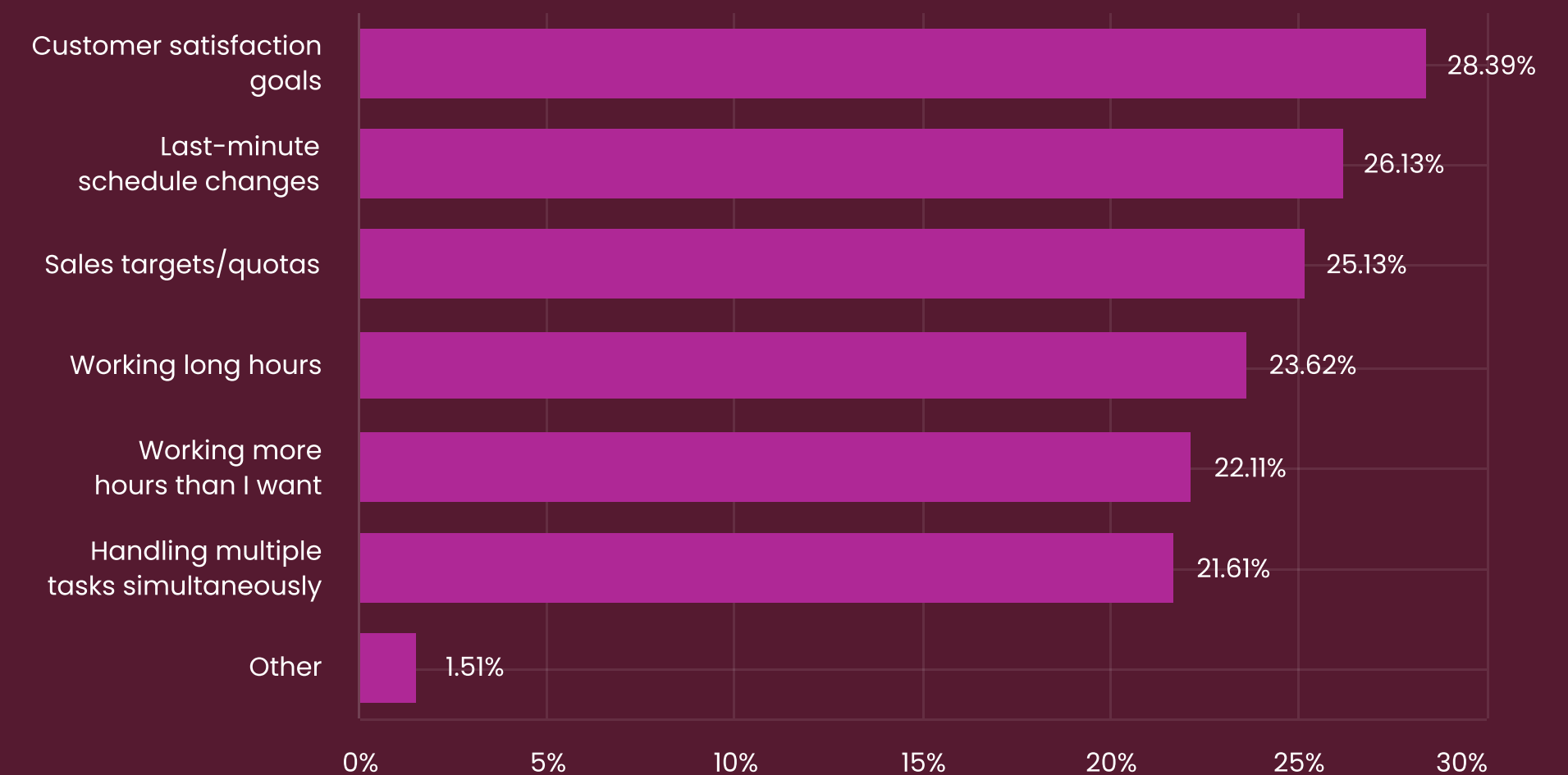


Figure 6

The following cause me anxiety (Select up to 2)



Part 2: Frustration at work

68.5% of retail workers regularly deal with frustrated or angry customers

Reports of incivility are on the rise with frontline workers across industries. According to research published in [Harvard Business Review](#), 78% of employees believe that bad behavior from customers towards employees is more common than it was 5 years ago.

This survey confirms that frontline retail workers have to deal with tense situations at work on a regular basis. Nearly 70% of those surveyed here reported the need to grapple with angry or frustrated customers. More than 1 in 5 retail employees need to deal with frustrated or angry customers daily.

This exposure to incivility takes a mental and physical toll. Alicia Grandey, a professor of psychology at Penn State, has been studying how the mistreatment of frontline workers affects their health and productivity.

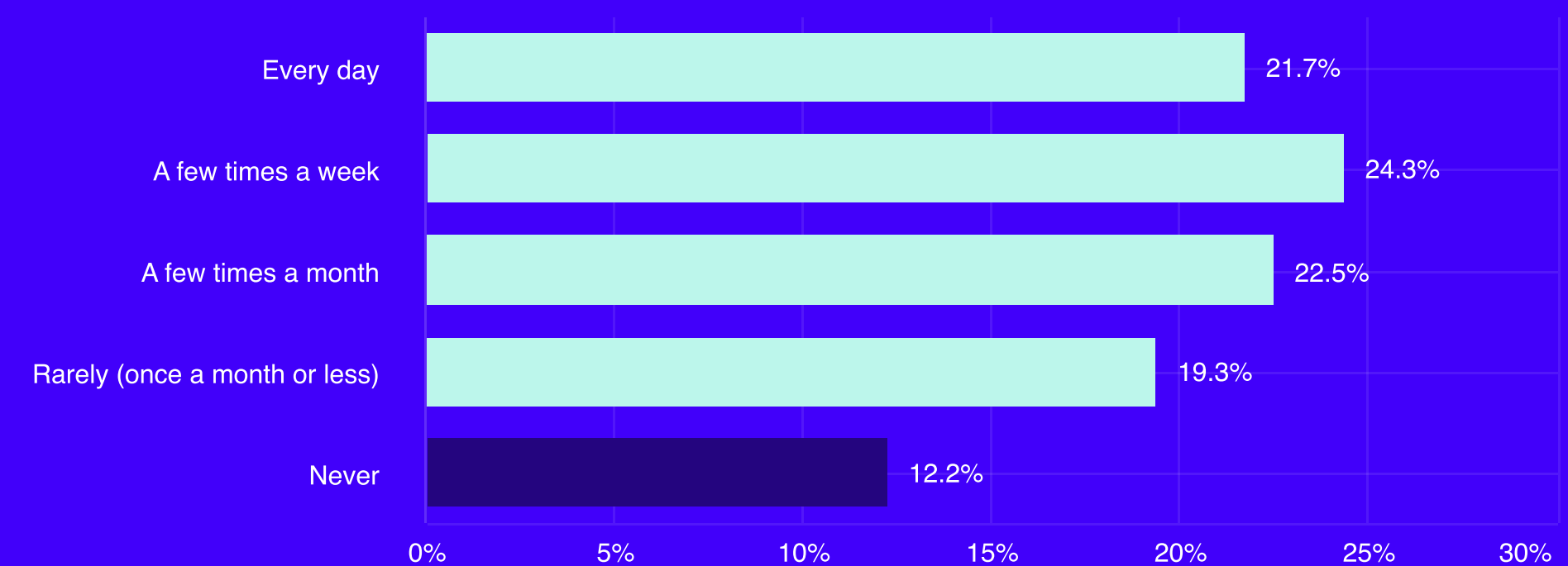
As reported in [Harvard Business Review](#), the effects are detrimental to employee mental health, productivity, and, ultimately, business outcomes.

Grandey’s research has found that being the target of incivility – or even just witnessing it – can make us go into fight-or-flight mode. This reduces our “cognitive processing power away from the thing we are trying to focus on,” she writes. Grandey also details the emotional labor associated with mediating incivility. Frontline workers have to control their emotions to do their job well, and the emotional labor of “surface acting” is depleting, leading to job burnout and turnover.

The high rate of frustrated or angry customers reported by frontline retail workers in this survey should be a major concern for retail leaders.

Figure 7

I have to deal with frustrated or angry customers...



73% of retail employees say that long lines or long waits are a problem at work

The high occurrence of incivility in retail stores is likely due to the presence of long wait times and long lines. Last year, Waitwhile surveyed 1200 consumers for [The State of Waiting in Line \(2022\)](#), and found that lines were most commonly encountered at retail establishments and that 75% of customers feel bored, annoyed, frustrated, or impatient if they have to wait in line.

This survey confirmed that long lines and wait times are a persistent problem in retail. Nearly three-quarters of the employees surveyed report queues and long waits as a problem at work, with almost 1 in 5 saying this is a daily issue (Figure 9). When it comes to reports of incivility, the frontline workers surveyed said that long wait times are the top reason customers get frustrated (Figure 8).

The phenomenon of human impatience has long been documented and lines are a particular nuisance, even being referred to as [“a timeless form of torture.”](#) Retailers must work to find inventive solutions to reduce wait times or completely eliminate lines in order to improve their customer experience – and subsequently, employee happiness.

Figure 8

What are the main causes of customer frustration (Select up to 2)?

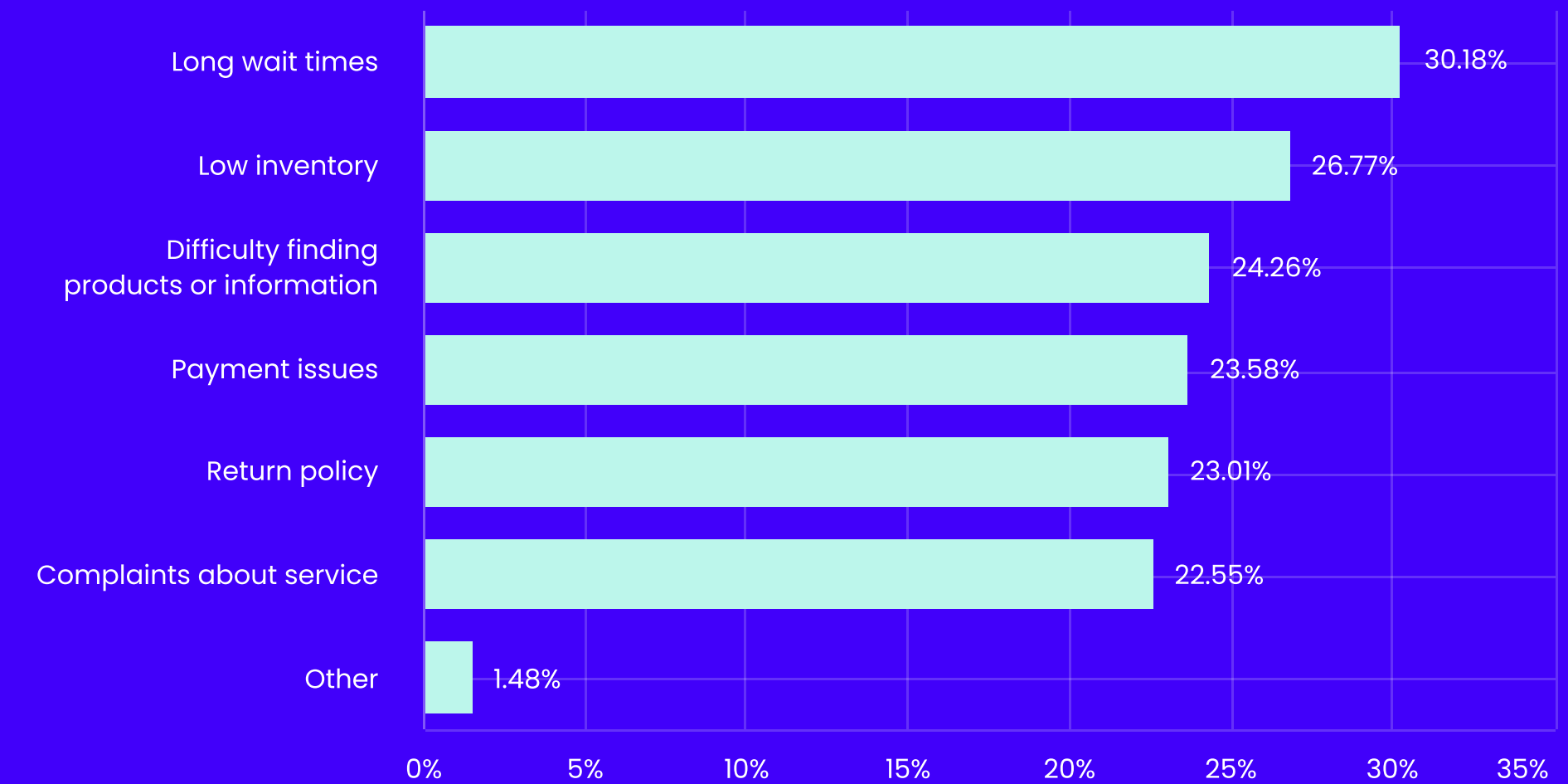
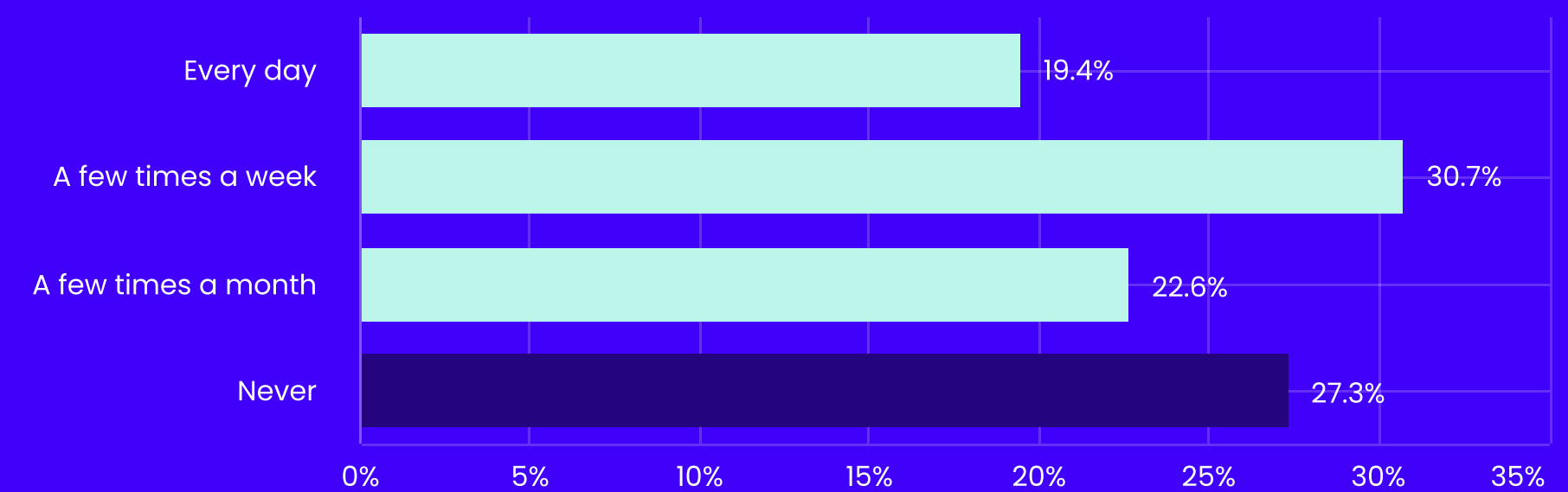


Figure 9

Long lines or long waits are a problem at work...



Part 3: How retail workers view tech

Nearly 1 in 2 retail workers want more automation

In their report on the “Great Attrition,” [McKinsey & Company](#) urged retailers to simplify frontline retail jobs in order to increase employee happiness and combat high turnover. Key to this imperative is the need to invest in technology to automate mundane tasks, “freeing up time and energy for more meaningful roles in the store,” according to the consulting firm.

The current research found that a significant number of frontline retail employees are bogged down by tasks that they find to be repetitive or manual. 41% of the employees surveyed reported a significant time suck from these kinds of job responsibilities (Figure 10).

It’s important to note, too, that retail workers are craving automation to improve their day-to-day. Nearly 1 in 2 retail workers report wanting more automation at work (Figure 11). When asked about which job functions they wish could be automated, the top answer was dealing with recurring customer issues, complaints, or questions (selected by 56% of respondents). It’s clear from this finding and the extremely high reported rates of customer incivility (Figure 7) that dissatisfied shoppers are taking a toll on frontline workers.

Identifying mundane, repetitive, or energy-depleting tasks – and finding ways to automate them with tech – will likely have positive benefits on the emotional well-being of staff and improve overall employee satisfaction.

Figure 10

I waste significant time completing repetitive or manual tasks at work...

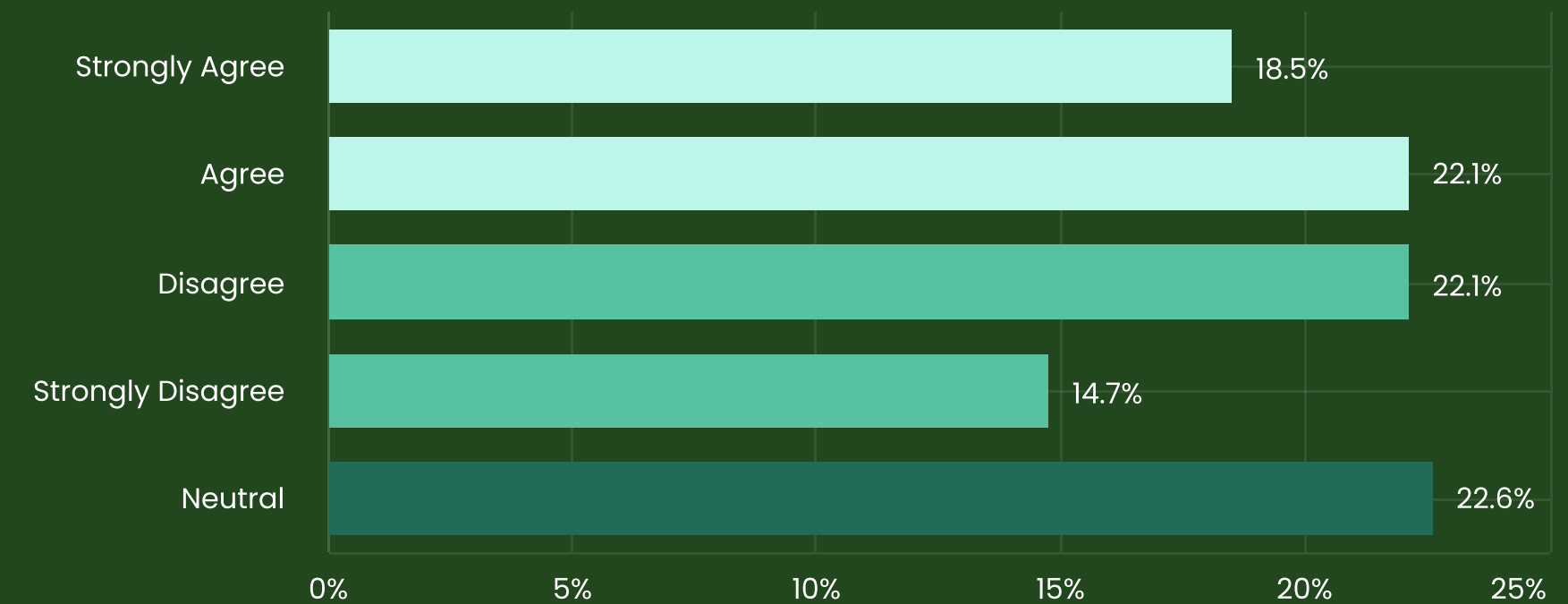
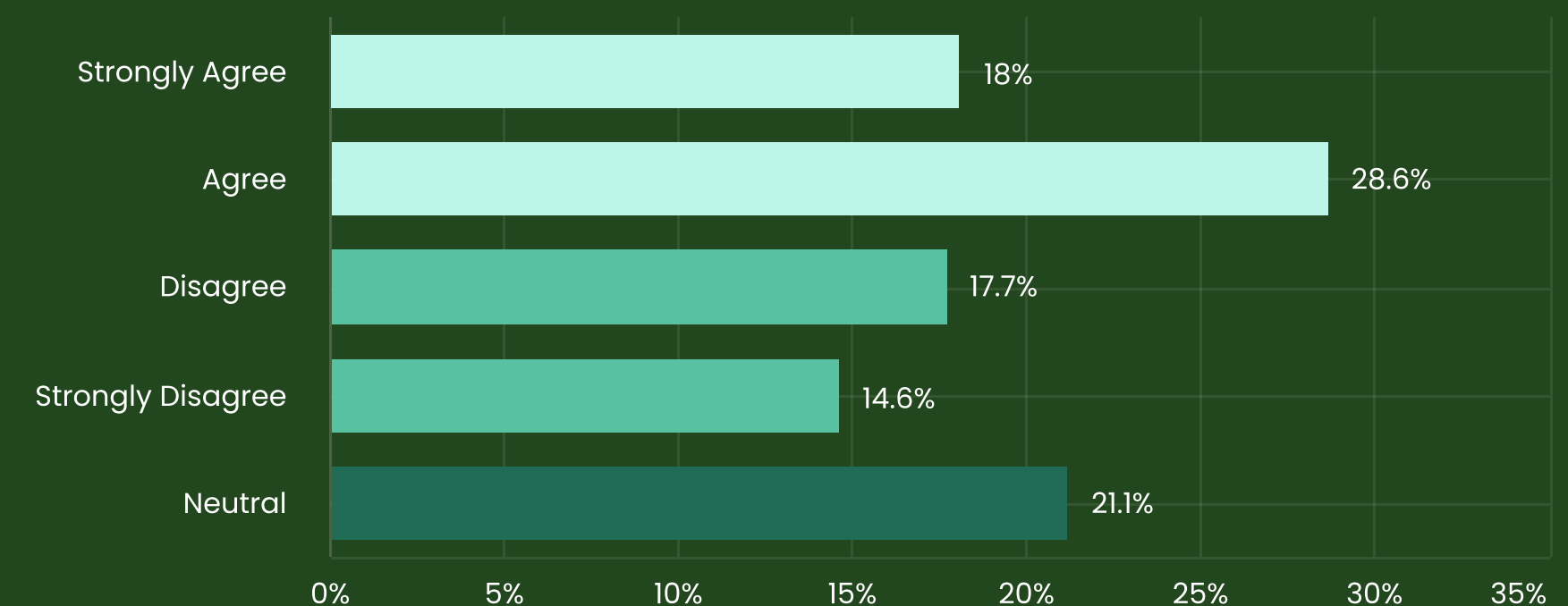


Figure 11

I wish certain aspects of my job could be automated.



The majority of frontline employees want better technology

According to frontline workers, retailers are falling behind when it comes to digitizing their physical spaces. 40% of retail employees report that they waste time dealing with dated or poorly designed technology at work (Figure 12).

Critically, a majority of retail workers are craving better tech to help them succeed. Nearly 54% of the retail employees surveyed said that they want a greater investment from their companies in maintaining, improving, or expanding the technology they have to use at work (Figure 13).

Technology has been clearly identified as a key tool retailers can use to improve employee morale, productivity, and business outcomes. With pressing workforce challenges, now is the time for retailers to audit their tech stacks and identify new solutions that would bring much-needed efficiencies to key workflows.

Figure 12

I waste time dealing with outdated or poorly designed technology at work...

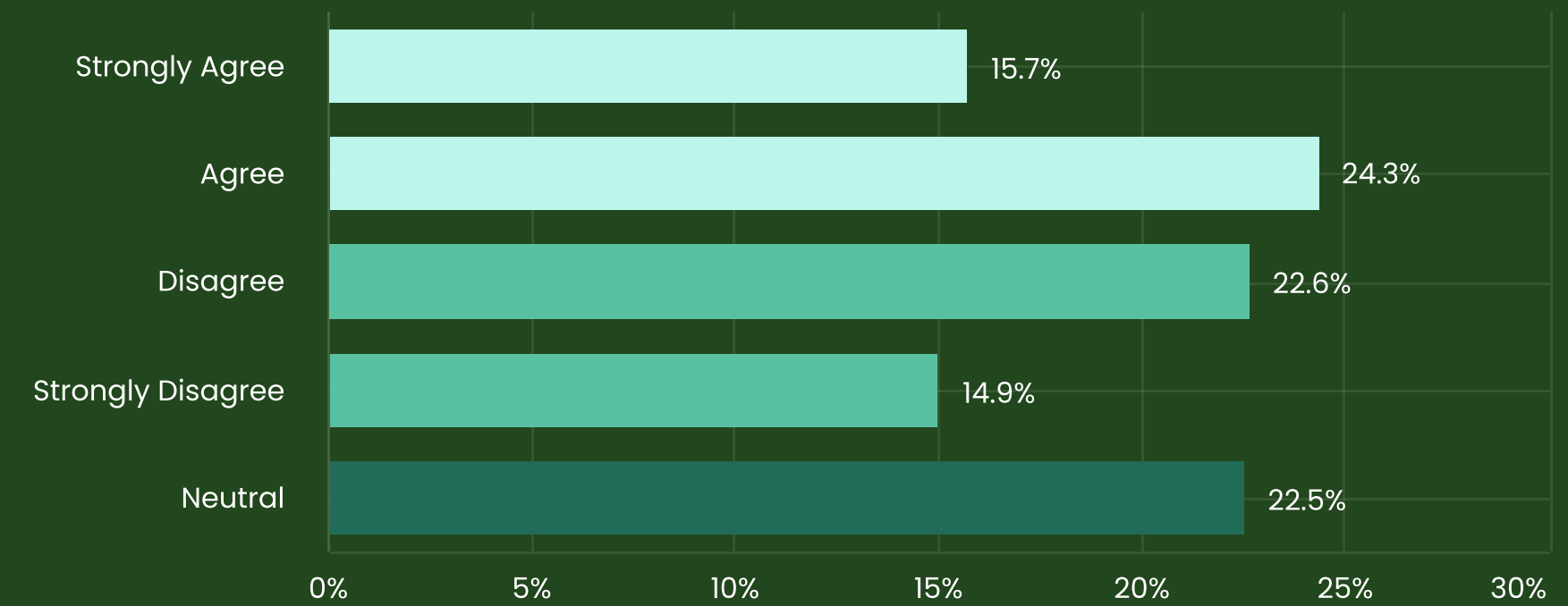
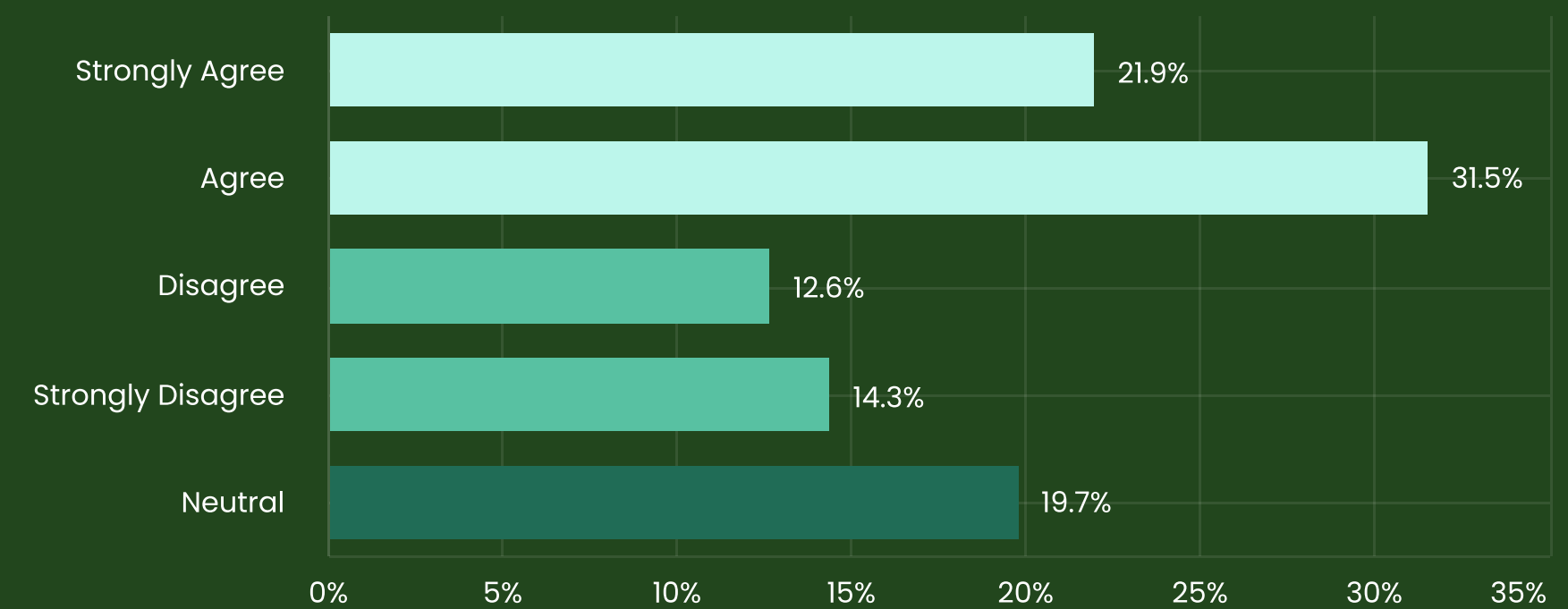


Figure 13

I wish my company invested more in maintaining, improving, or expanding the technology I have to use at work.





Conclusion

2023 is a critical year for retailers, most of whom must work through a labor shortage while expectations from consumers continue to climb.

Here's what we already knew:

- Retail has high turnover. Annual employee turnover has been at least 60 percent for a long time, but replacing staff is especially difficult in today's economic climate.
- Brick-and-mortar retail is booming. Consumers want physical connections with the brands and products they love.
- Years of digitization have conditioned shoppers to have extraordinary expectations for all retail interactions. Customers crave personalization, speed, and convenience – all of which are difficult to deliver with a strained workforce.

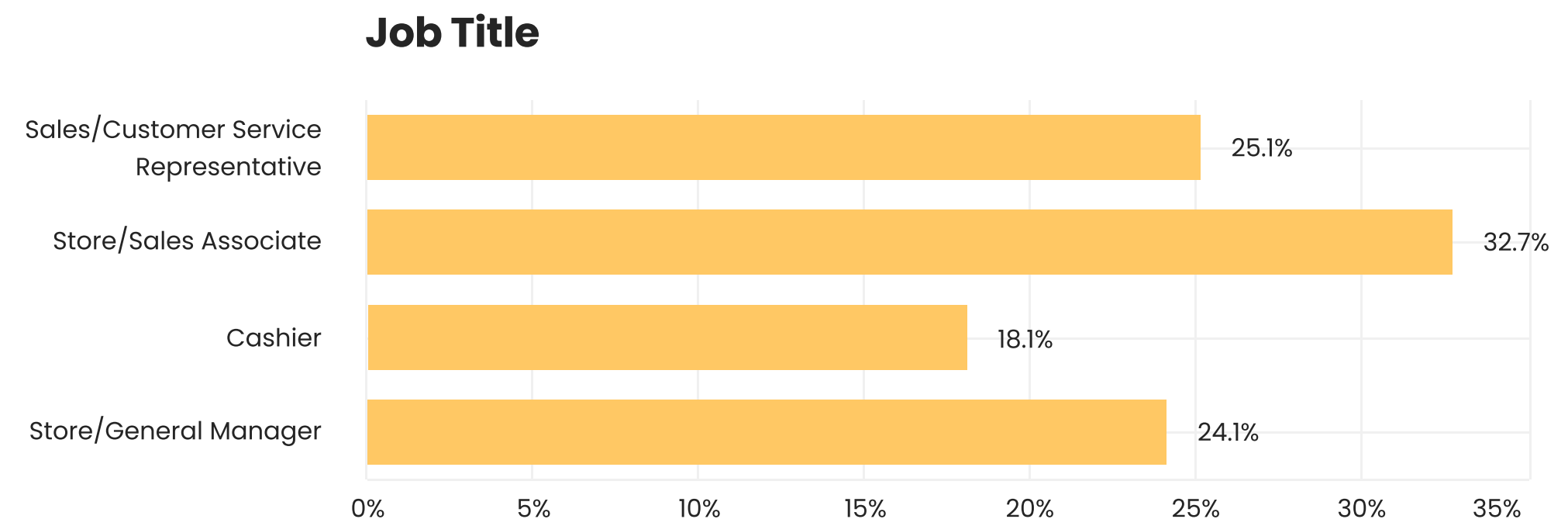
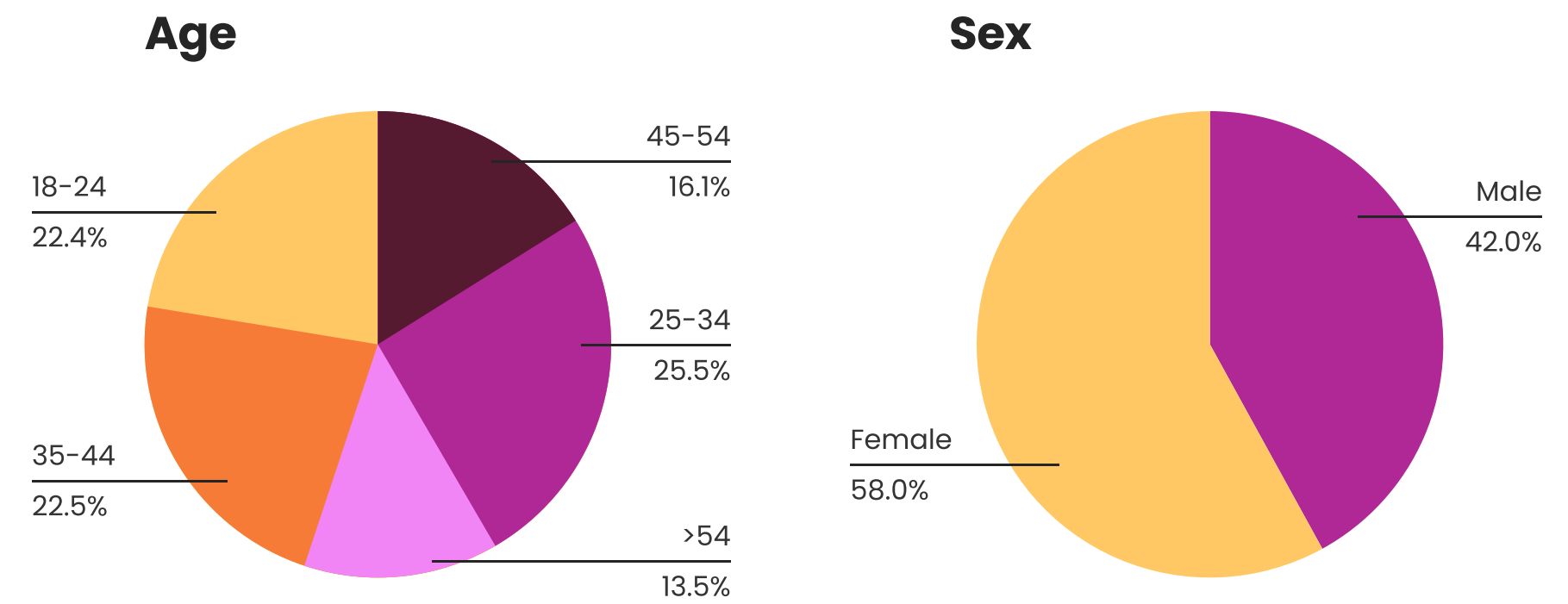
And here's what this study uncovered:

- Only a little more than half of retail workers say they're happy or find their work meaningful. 72% are regularly bored.
- Incivility is a problem. Nearly 70% of retail employees report regularly having to deal with frustrated or angry customers.
- Long wait times are the #1 reason customers get upset. 73% of frontline workers say that long lines or long waits are a persistent problem.
- The use of technology in-store is largely not up to par. Nearly 1 in 2 retail workers want more automation and 54% of employees wish their companies invested more in better tech.

Now is the time to make meaningful changes to your operations. The best retailers will find ways to harness excellent tech solutions that bring key efficiencies to their workflows, improving employee satisfaction while crafting standout experiences that today's cross-channel consumer will love.

Survey demographics

This report was compiled using responses to a Waitwhile survey of 1000 frontline retail workers in the United States, aged 18+. The survey was conducted online via Pollfish in January 2023.





Boost your sales with the perfect customer flow.

Waitwhile is a customizable cloud-based solution that any retailer can use to create the perfect end-to-end customer flows with waitlists, appointments, messaging, and analytics across any number of locations. Waitwhile lets customers wait from anywhere and track their status in real-time – while helping businesses automate customer flows, reduce wait times, and speed up operations with machine learning.

Brands like Best Buy, Louis Vuitton, Balenciaga, Samsung, and Ace Hardware use Waitwhile for queue management, curbside/in-store pickup, clienteling, warehouse management, and more. A flexible design ensures Waitwhile can be customized to how your business runs and a robust API with extensive documentation means that Waitwhile integrates seamlessly into your existing workflows.

Used by thousands of companies across every industry around the world, Waitwhile has saved 200+ million people more than 10,000 years of waiting in line.

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