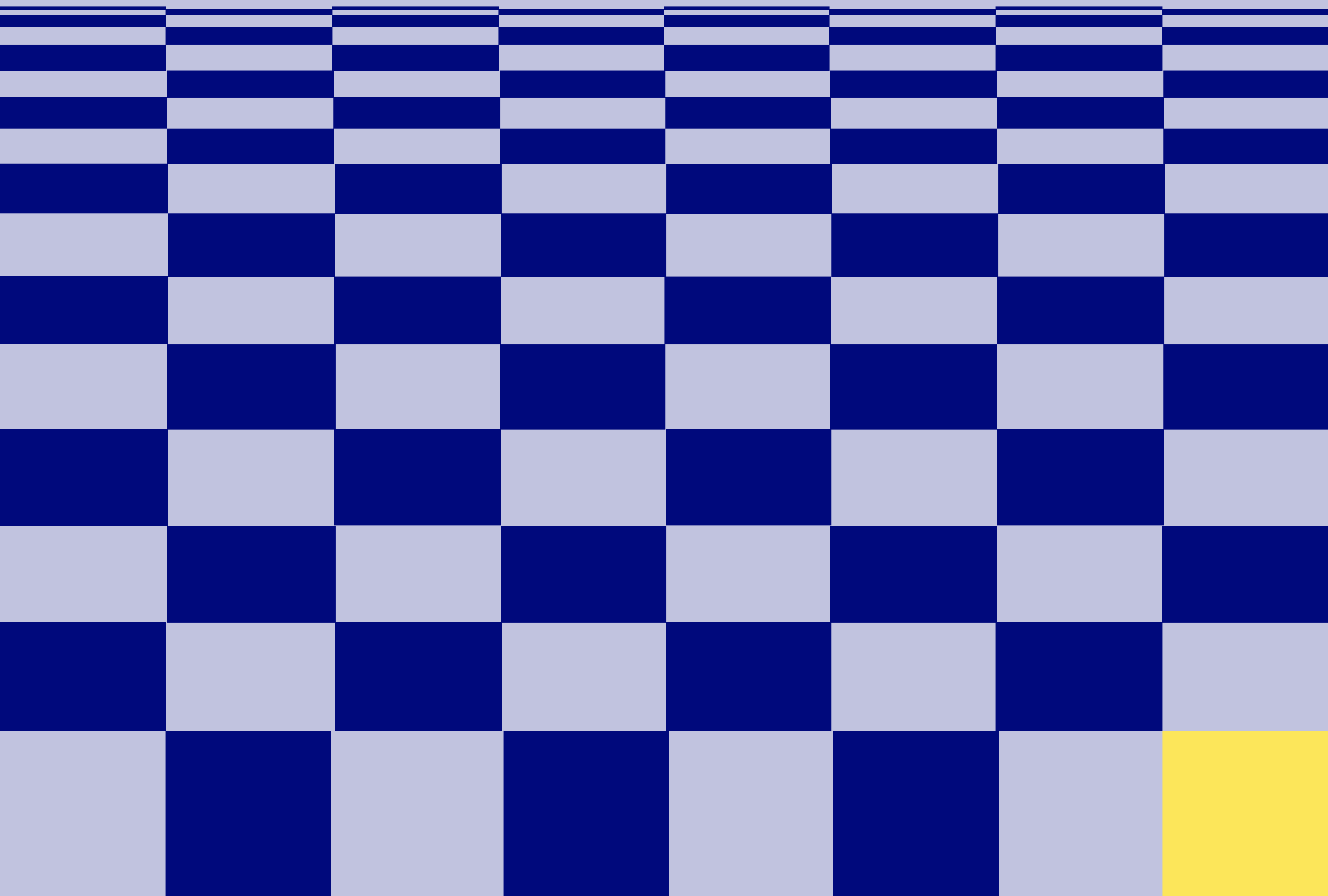


artnet AWITA

# HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME



**HARDWIRING CHANGE:  
BUYING BACK TIME**

**HOW TO SOLVE  
THE MID-CAREER EXIT  
CRISIS FACING  
WOMEN IN THE ARTS**

# **FOREWORD**

The art industry could be facing a major talent drain if it doesn't address the structural issues facing women.

This report marks the second annual collaboration between Artnet and the Association of Women in the Arts (AWITA), continuing a shared effort to bring clear data and sharp analysis to the realities shaping women's careers across the art world. While the inaugural survey revealed gaps in leadership roles and pay for women, this edition offers a more detailed picture of the structural pressures determining who is—and, crucially, who isn't—able to build a sustainable long-term career in the arts.

Just as importantly, responses from over 2,000 survey participants point consistently toward tangible solutions: fair pay, more transparency in decision-making, mentorship, and better tools to reduce mounting administrative burdens.

What struck me the most is how many Gen Z and millennial-aged women are considering leaving the industry within the next five years: nearly half. That figure suggests that many of the workers who should be moving into leadership roles and hiring the next generation of arts professionals are instead questioning whether they can afford to stay.

I know this feeling well because I lived it. A few years ago, I left the arts after hitting a wall that I suspect feels familiar to many: My salary was incommensurate with not only my growing workload, but also some male peers' pay. There were no clear criteria for promotion and organizational dysfunction was being absorbed quietly—and disproportionately—by the women most disadvantaged by it.



What emerges from our research this year is a portrait of an industry asking highly skilled workers—mid-career women, especially—to tolerate financial instability, administrative overload, and structural inequities. More than half of respondents identified fair pay and job security as the most important factors in sustaining a career. Others pointed to mentorship and clearer promotion and growth structures. Across nearly every section of the survey, the same demands surfaced again and again.

At the same time, this report captures a workforce already in the throes of a major transition. Women across the arts are experimenting with A.I. tools because they are looking for ways to reclaim time from administrative labor and unsustainable workloads. Yet arts firms have largely failed to keep pace with technology and innovation, leaving workers to navigate these shifts on their own. While there are real, material concerns about how A.I. should be used, it is evident that, if adopted meaningfully and intentionally—to support workers rather than replace them—it could be transformational for women who are bearing the brunt of admin and other forms of undervalued labor.

I ultimately returned to the arts for two reasons. The first is that the number of talented people in this industry is unparalleled and inspiring—who you work with matters. Second, how you work matters just as much. I firmly believe change is possible, and I want to be a part of it. The respondents to this survey appear to believe that, too, consistently pointing to practical, actionable remedies to make work more equitable. This report, which we intend to build upon annually, provides an ever-expanding roadmap that can help us chart a new course for women in the arts.



**Margaret Carrigan**  
News Editor, Artnet News

# **OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

Hardwiring Change: Buying Back Time represents the second installment of a long-term research series examining structural barriers facing women in the art industry. This initiative, launched by Artnet and the Association of Women in the Arts (AWITA), aims to establish a data-driven framework that highlights the realities of women's roles, salaries, benefits, and career advancement in the fine arts sector, moving beyond anecdotal evidence and driving meaningful change toward gender equity in the industry.

Our research primarily targeted women working in professional roles across the arts, though the respondent pool ultimately included a broader cross-section of arts professionals and artists. The survey launched on March 3, 2026, and closed on March 24, 2026, receiving 2,004 responses in total. Survey responses were reviewed and organized by manually examining entries and categorizing responses into consistent answer groups for analysis. Multi-select questions allow for multiple answers per respondent, so percentages may exceed 100 percent and are calculated as a share of respondents answering the relevant question. Open-ended responses were coded into standardized categories to support consistent analysis and reporting, while duplicate or unclear responses were reviewed and addressed where appropriate.

The 2026 respondents skew toward the U.K. (35 percent) and the U.S. (37 percent), with a further 16 percent based in continental Europe. Ninety-two percent identify as women; 74 percent identify as white or Caucasian. Educational attainment is high—53 percent hold a master’s degree — and 46 percent have more than 20 years of experience in the arts. The findings in this report should be read as mostly representing the experience of women working in the arts in the U.K., U.S., and Europe with a majority white identification, not the global arts workforce as a whole.

We acknowledge that the racial composition of the sample limits the conclusions we can draw about intersectionality, and we have flagged sample sizes inline where subpopulation analysis falls below a robust threshold.

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Millennial women are most at risk of leaving the arts
- 2 Structural barriers peak at mid-career
- 3 Arts workers embrace A.I.—cautiously
- 4 A.I. adoption exposes a gap in governance
- 5 A clear and consistent set of demands

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BY THE  
NUMBERS

50.6%

Of survey respondents between the ages of 35 and 44 are considering leaving the art industry.

27.3%

Of women say mentorship would help make their career feel more sustainable.

817

>70%

Respondents said admin takes up more than 25 percent of their time.

Of respondents aged 25–54 are using A.I. in their day-to-day work.

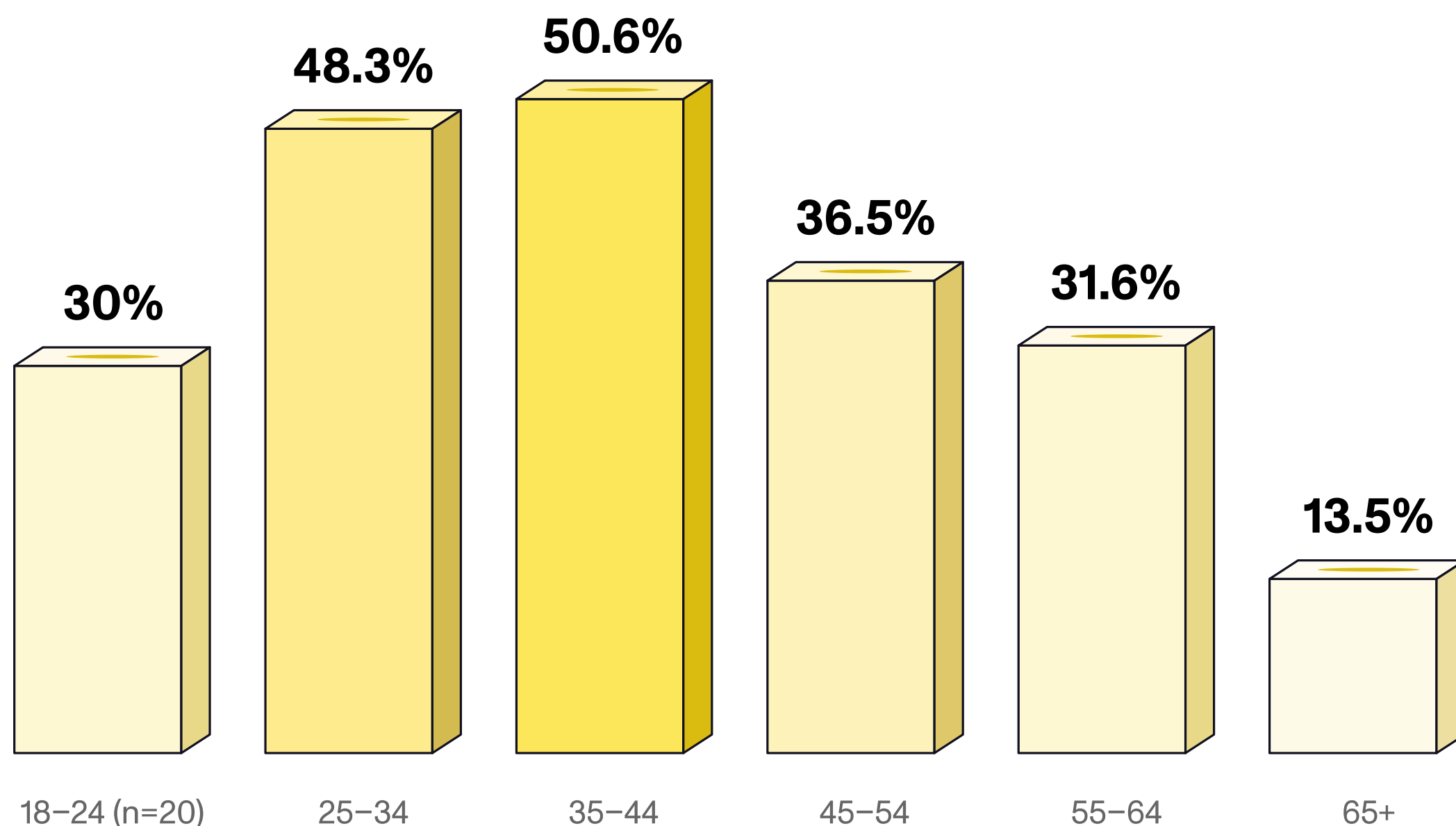
HARDWIRING CHANGE:  
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# 1. MILLENNIAL WOMEN ARE MOST AT RISK OF LEAVING THE ARTS

# The art industry could be facing a talent pipeline problem.

Nearly half of survey respondents aged between 25 and 44—roughly corresponding to Gen Z and millennials—are considering leaving the arts in the next five years. The sentiment is most pronounced (50.6 percent) for those hitting the mid-career mark between the ages of 35 and 44—precisely those who should be stepping into leadership roles.

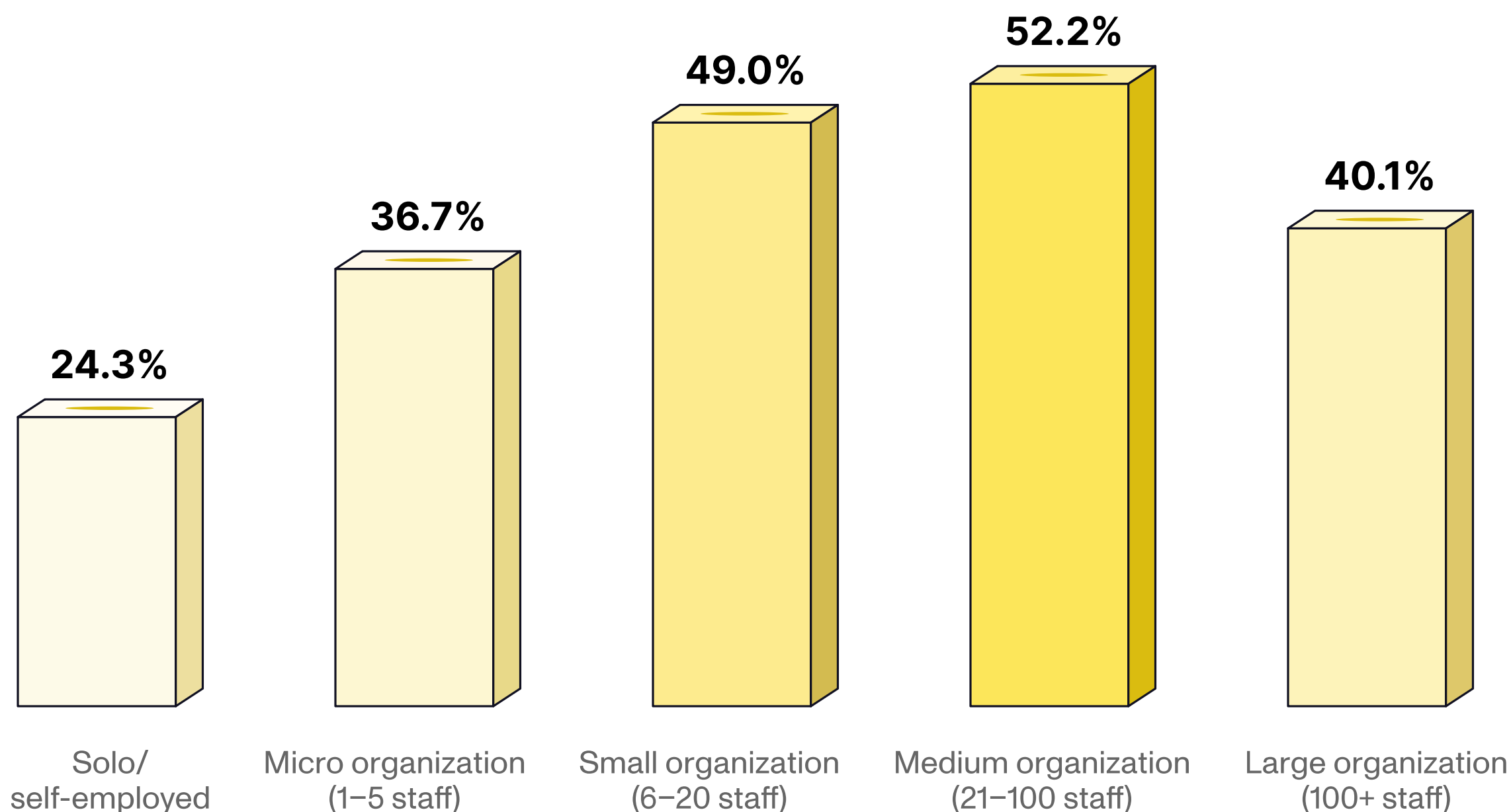
**Percent considering leaving the arts  
in the next five years by age**



## HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME

### 1. Millennial women are most at risk of leaving the arts

Percent considering leaving the arts in the  
next five years by **organization size**



Organization size appears to shape attrition risk. Around 49 percent of respondents working in small organizations, or those with 20 or fewer staff, and 52 percent of those at mid-sized organizations (21-100 staff) are the most likely to consider leaving, compared with around 40 percent in larger firms.

Among those considering leaving, pay-related concerns dominate. A majority (71.5 percent) cited a lack of recognition or adequate compensation in the workplace, while 62.9 percent pointed to broader

## HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME

### 1. Millennial women are most at risk of leaving the arts

financial instability—overlapping but distinct pressures that together underscore the economic strain facing arts workers. (Respondents could select multiple reasons; percentages therefore exceed 100 percent.)

**“COST OF LIVING IN  
THE AREA, NO OVERTIME,  
NO BENEFITS—FINANCIALLY,  
I CANNOT GROW MY PERSONAL  
LIFE BY CONTINUING  
MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE  
IN THIS CAPACITY.”**

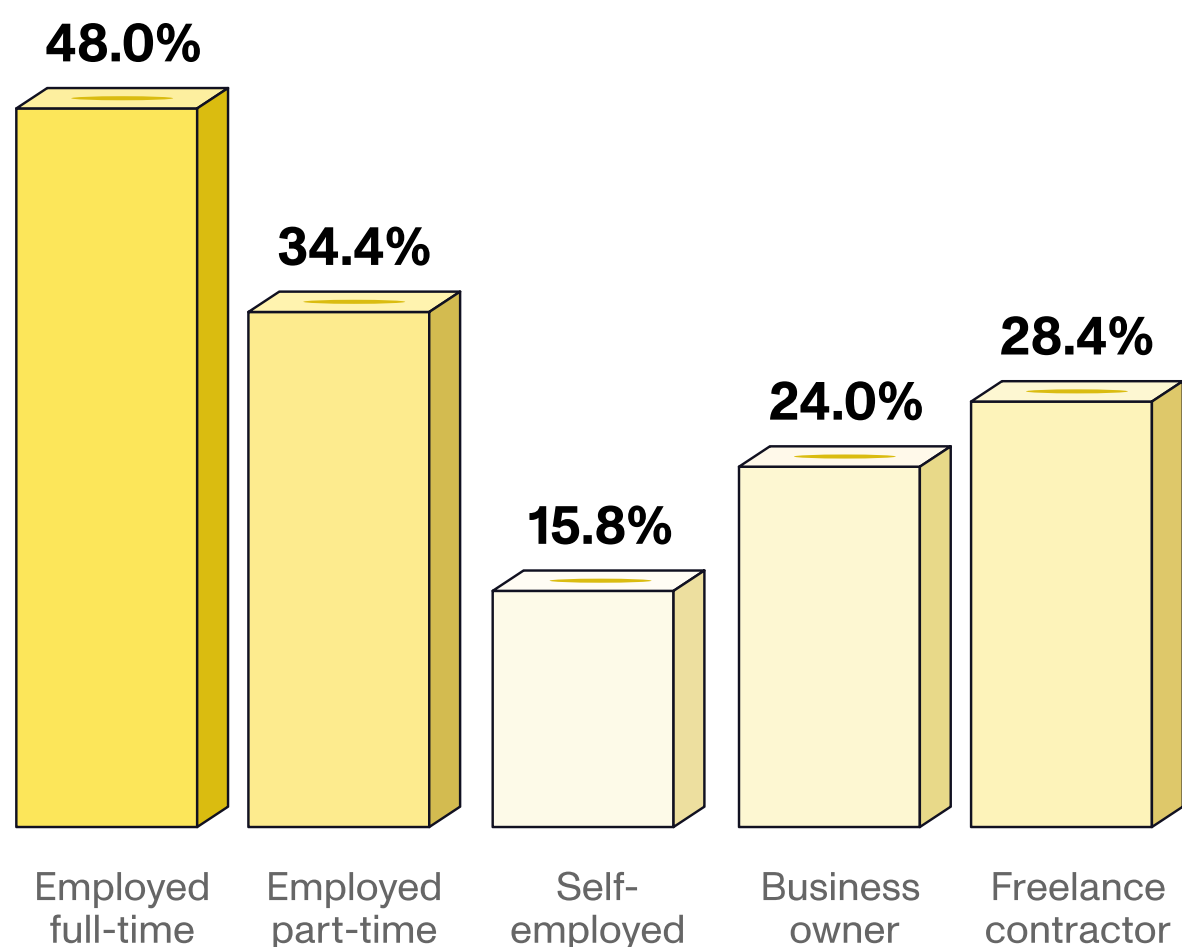
## HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME

### 1. Millennial women are most at risk of leaving the arts

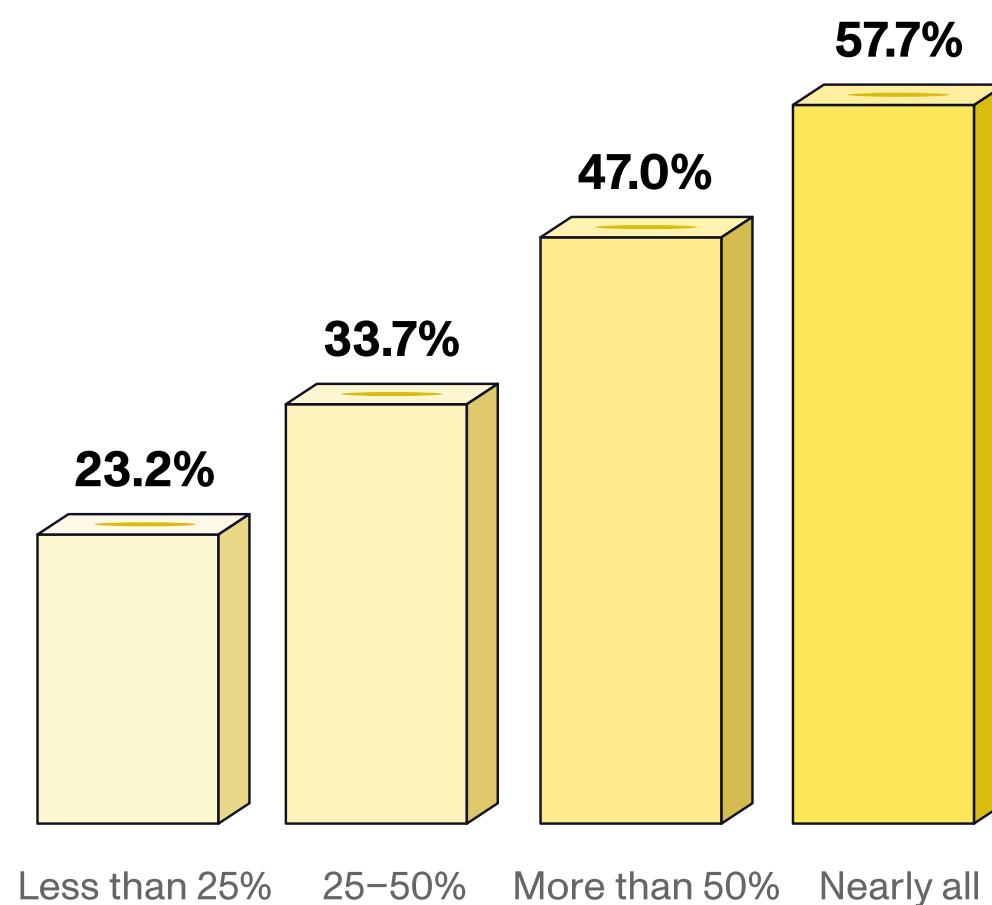
The mid-career pressure point is compounded by unsustainable workloads. Women in full-time roles report particularly high administrative burdens, with 48 percent spending more than half their working time on administrative or logistical tasks. This suggests that attrition risk is driven not only by pay and advancement concerns, but by the cumulative strain of how work is structured.

The single highest potential leaving rate was found among mothers in their late twenties and early thirties, with 64.3 percent of women between 25 and 34 thinking of exiting the field.

Percent spending >50 percent  
of their time on admin  
by **employment type**



Percent considering leaving  
the arts in the next five years  
by **time spent on admin**



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### 1. Millennial women are most at risk of leaving the arts

This small but powerful signal suggests that caregivers of young children face some of the steepest barriers within the field. This was followed closely by those aged 35–44 without children, 57.6 percent of whom may opt out of an arts career in the next five years.

The rate of respondents who are considering leaving the arts varies by sector, with workers in nonprofit arts organizations reporting the highest levels of potential attrition (53.3 percent), closely trailed by those working in the commercial art market (49.2 percent).



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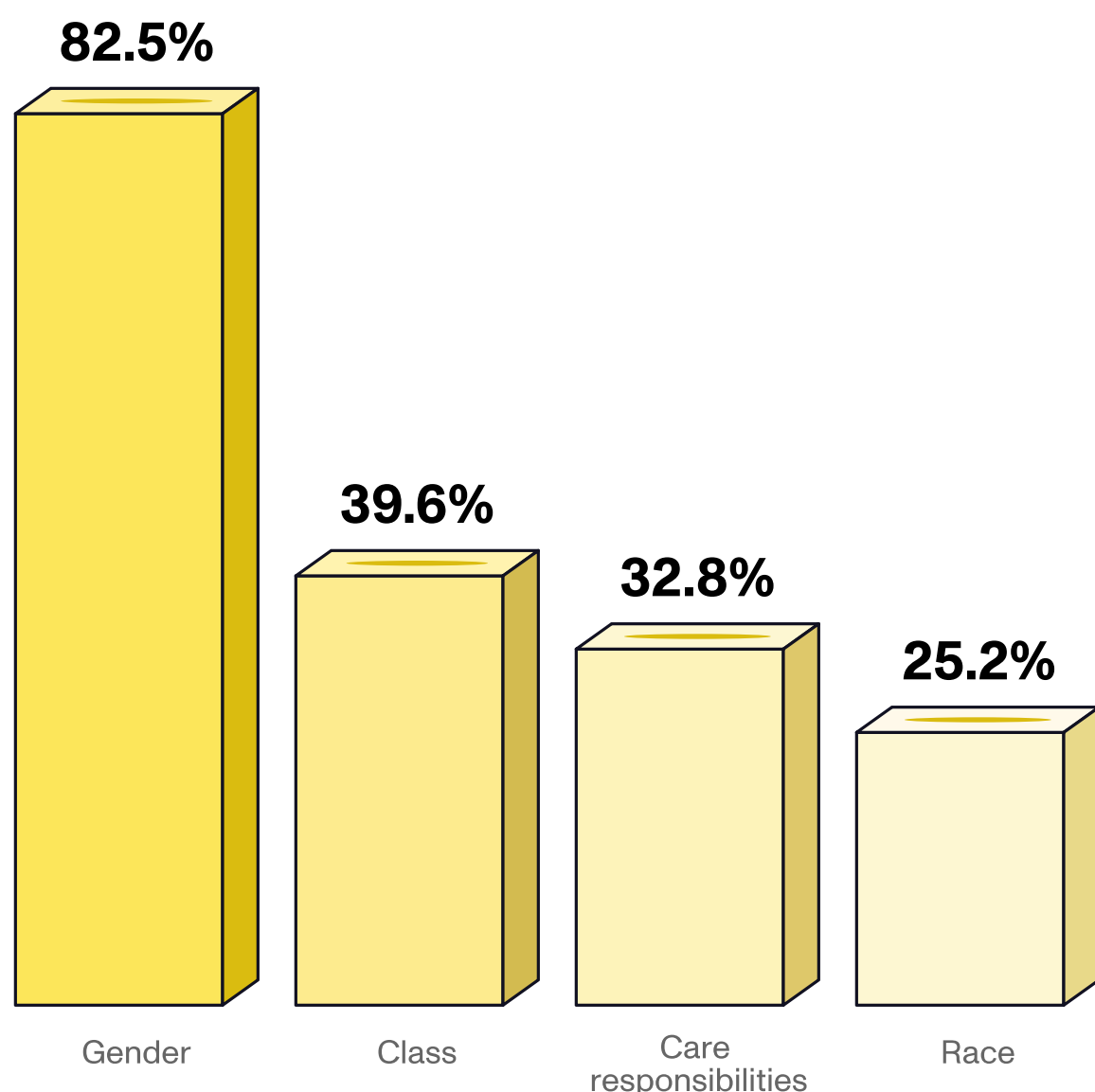
## **2. STRUCTURAL BARRIERS PEAK AT MID-CAREER**

# Structural barriers compound the mid-career crunch.

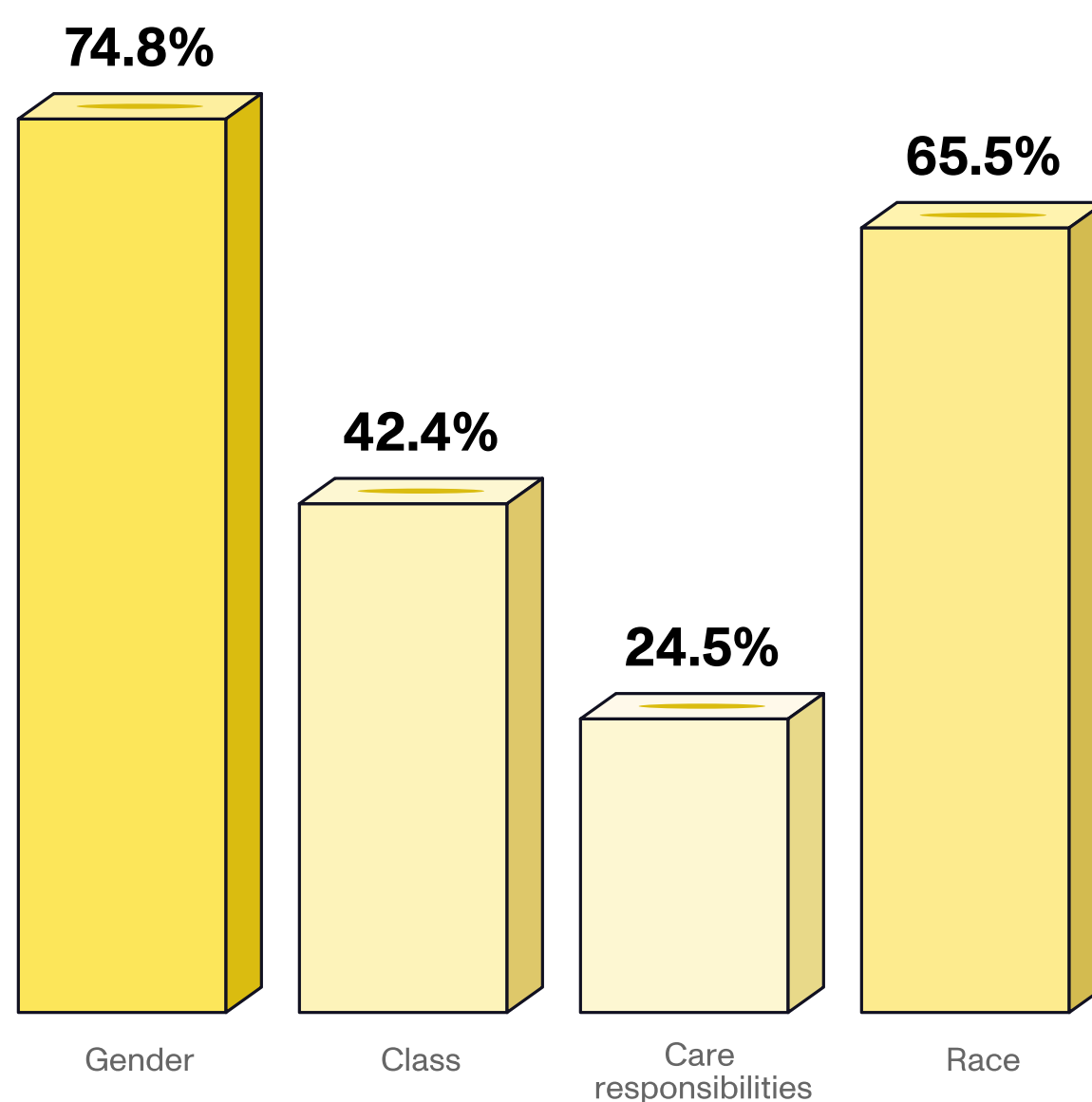
Around 76 percent of women aged 35–54 report that they have faced structural barriers, such as gender, race, or class.

Gender is by far the most commonly cited barrier, named by 82.5 percent of those who have experienced obstacles—more than double the rates for class (39.6 percent), care responsibilities (32.8 percent), and race (25.2 percent).

**Top structural barriers reported by all respondents**



**Top structural barriers reported by women of color**



However, experiences diverge significantly by race. Women of color are more likely to report facing structural barriers (80.8 percent vs. 68.7 percent of white women). Meanwhile, 89.3 percent of Black women report facing structural barriers (n=25), which is the highest of any group. Of those, all said race was a factor. Black women and Asian women are the only two groups in which race surpasses gender as the primary barrier.

The presence of women in senior leadership appears to reduce—but not eliminate—the likelihood of facing structural barriers. In workplaces where women hold senior leadership roles, the rate of women reporting structural barriers drops to 33 percent, compared with 80 percent in organizations without women leaders. This suggests that representation at the top can improve workplace conditions, but on its own can't remedy deeper structural inequities.

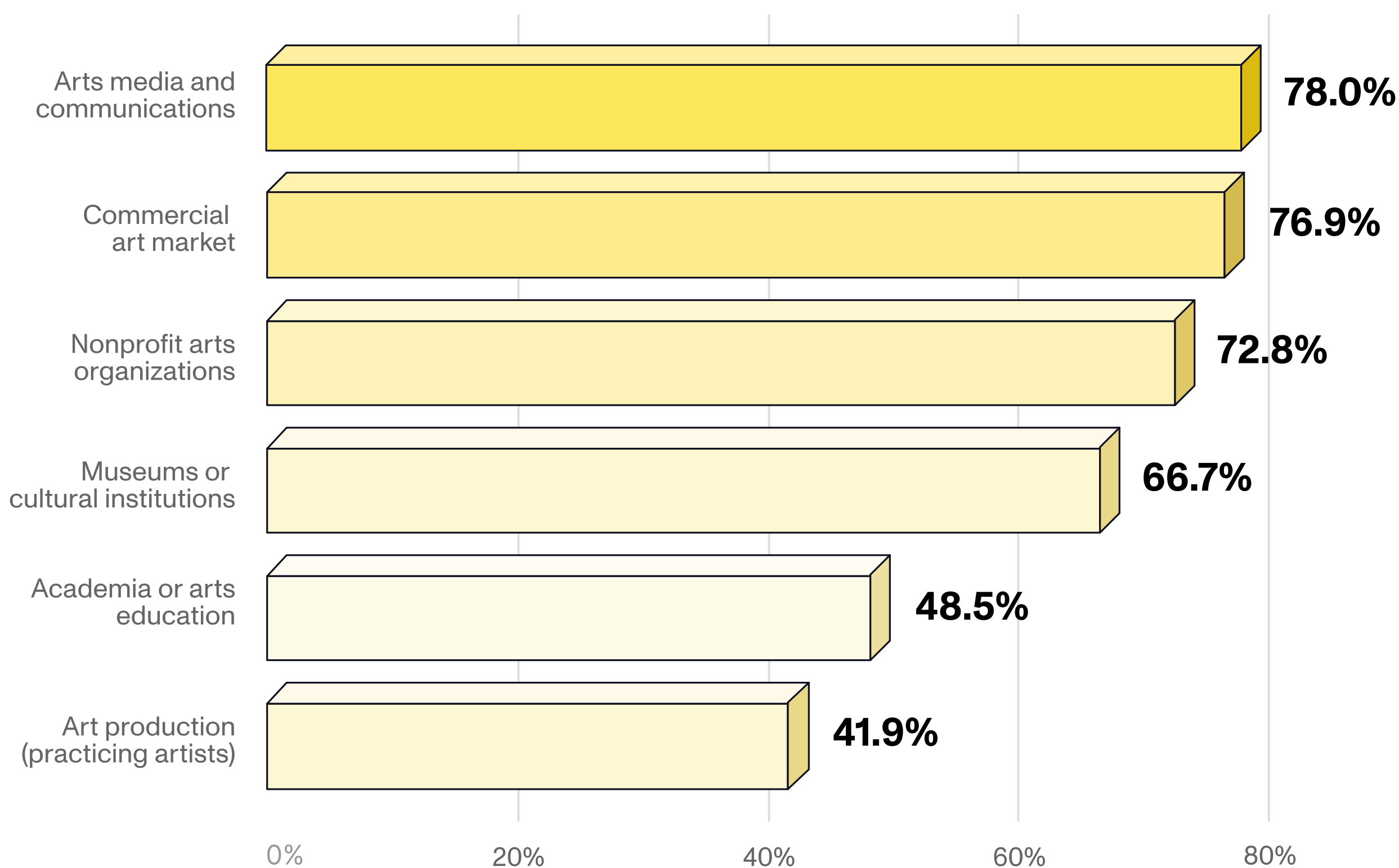
**“IN THE BEGINNING I FELT,  
‘FUCK IT, I WILL GO FAR AND  
CHANGE THIS SHIT.’  
NOW I AM MORE,  
‘MAYBE I SHOULD JUST DO  
SOMETHING ELSE.’”**

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# **3 . ARTS WORKERS EMBRACE A.I.— CAUTIOUSLY**

A.I. has rapidly become part of day-to-day work across the arts, but who is using it—and how widely—varies significantly by sector and age.

A.I. use for work by sector

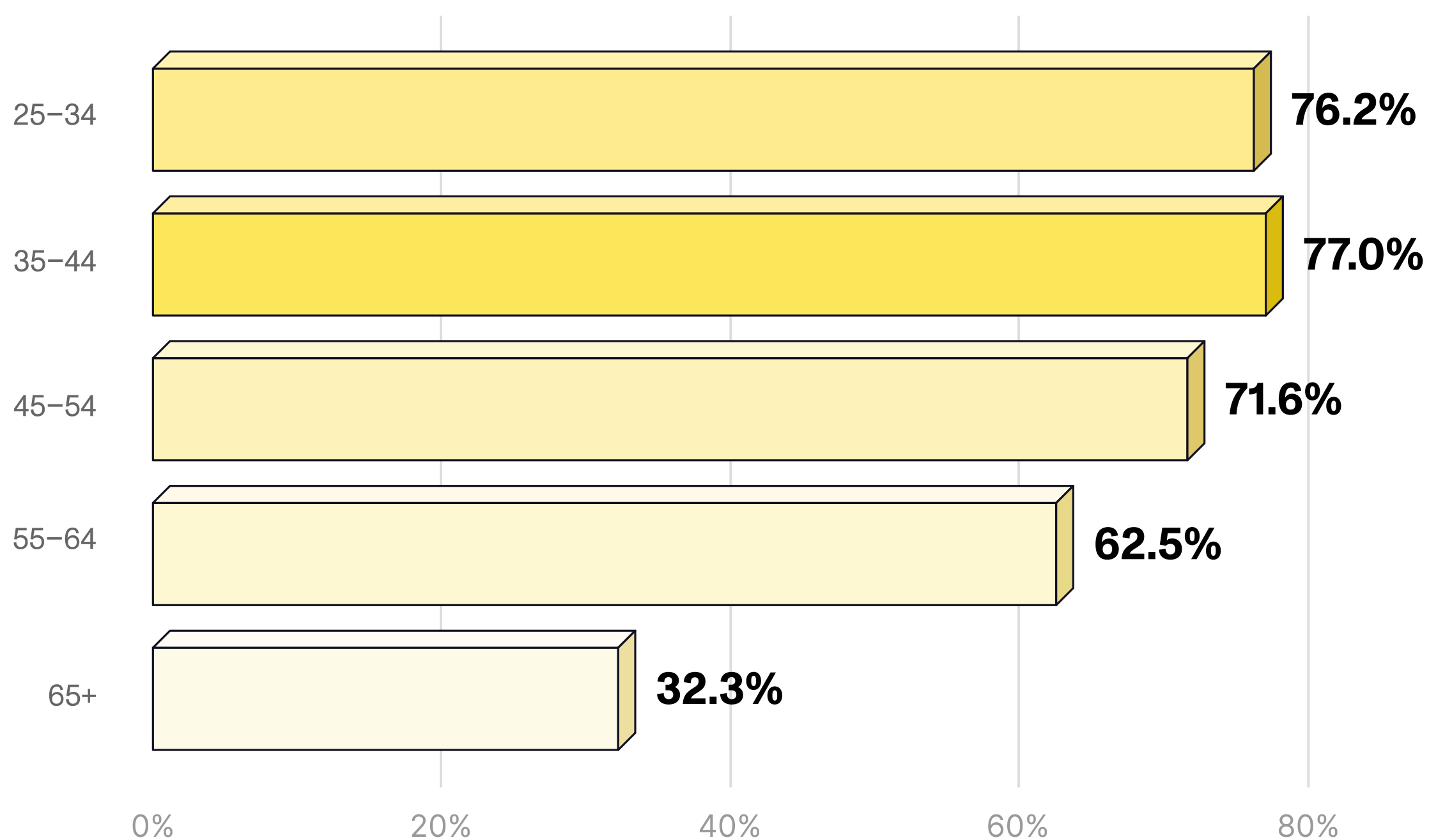


## HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME

## 3 . Arts workers embrace A.I.—cautiously

Uneven adoption of A.I. across sectors is likely compounded by disparities in institutional capacity. Usage is highest in arts media and communications and the commercial art market, where more than three-quarters of respondents report using A.I. tools. Nonprofit organizations are not far behind (72.8 percent), while there is slightly lower uptake (66.7 percent) among workers at museums and cultural institutions.

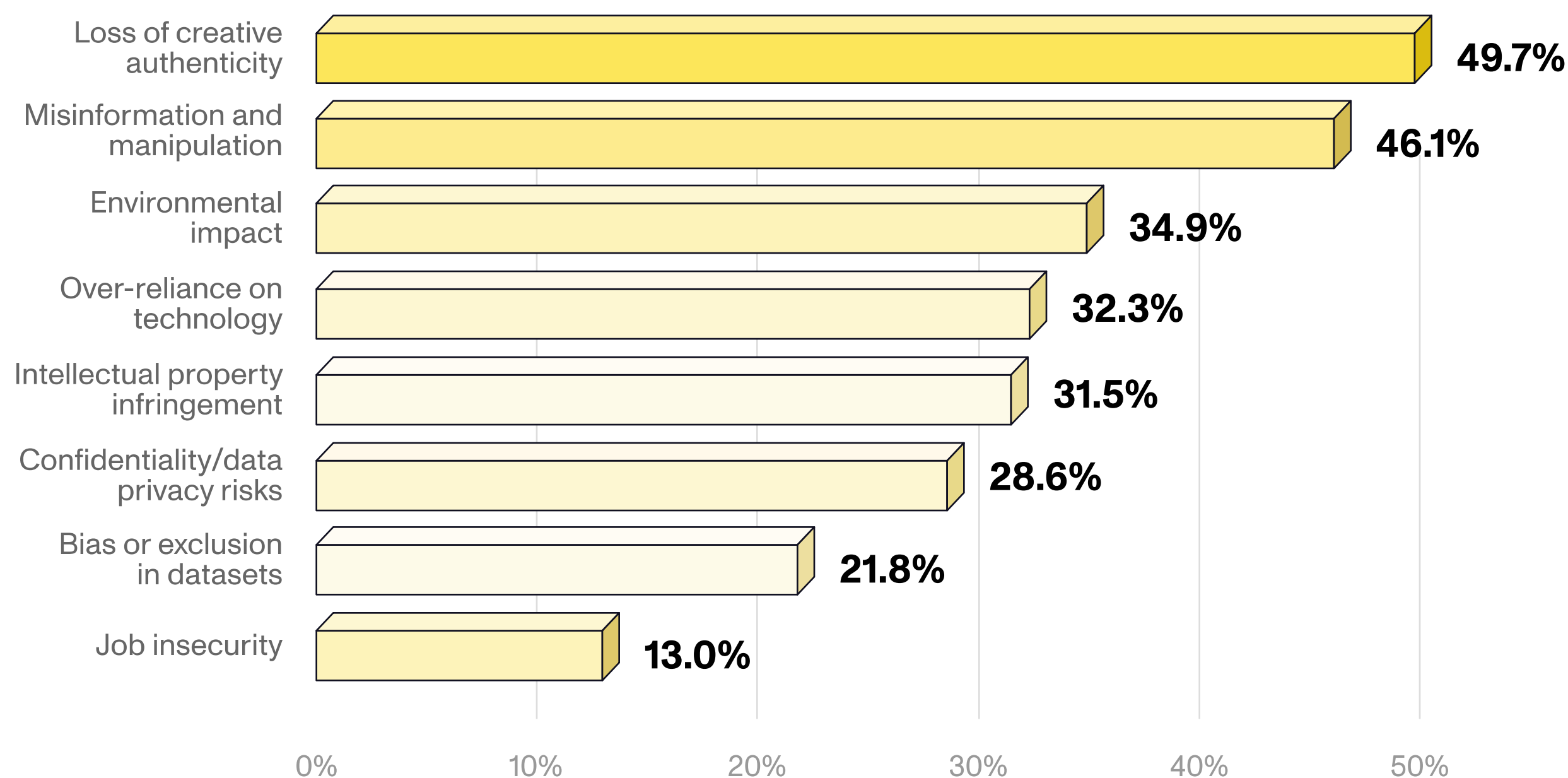
### A.I. use for work by age



**“I STILL WRITE MYSELF,  
BUT I CHECK SPELLING AND  
ALSO IF I SHOULD ORDER MY  
TEXT IN A NEW WAY. MY  
ADMINISTRATION WORK IS  
SO MUCH EASIER NOW.”**

Age is another key differentiator. Adoption peaks at 76 percent among respondents aged 25–44 and remains relatively high through mid-career (71.6 percent among those 45–54), before declining to 62.5 percent for 55–64-year-olds. Usage falls significantly to 32.3 percent among respondents aged 65 and over, indicating a pronounced generational divide.

**Concerns around A.I. usage**



Respondents express a wide range of concerns about A.I.'s impact:

- The most commonly cited risks relate to creative integrity and quality, with roughly half (49.7 percent) of all respondents pointing to loss of creative authenticity, a figure that remains consistent across sectors.
- The environmental impact of the technology was a top concern for around 46 percent of workers in museums and institutions—the highest of any sector.

- Artists and academics are the most likely to worry about IP infringement, with around 44 percent reporting anxiety over how creative and knowledge work is being used to train A.I.
- Job insecurity, by contrast, is less of a concern overall (13 percent), although just under a third of those working in arts media report fears of displacement, in keeping with the well-publicized disruption of journalism by A.I.

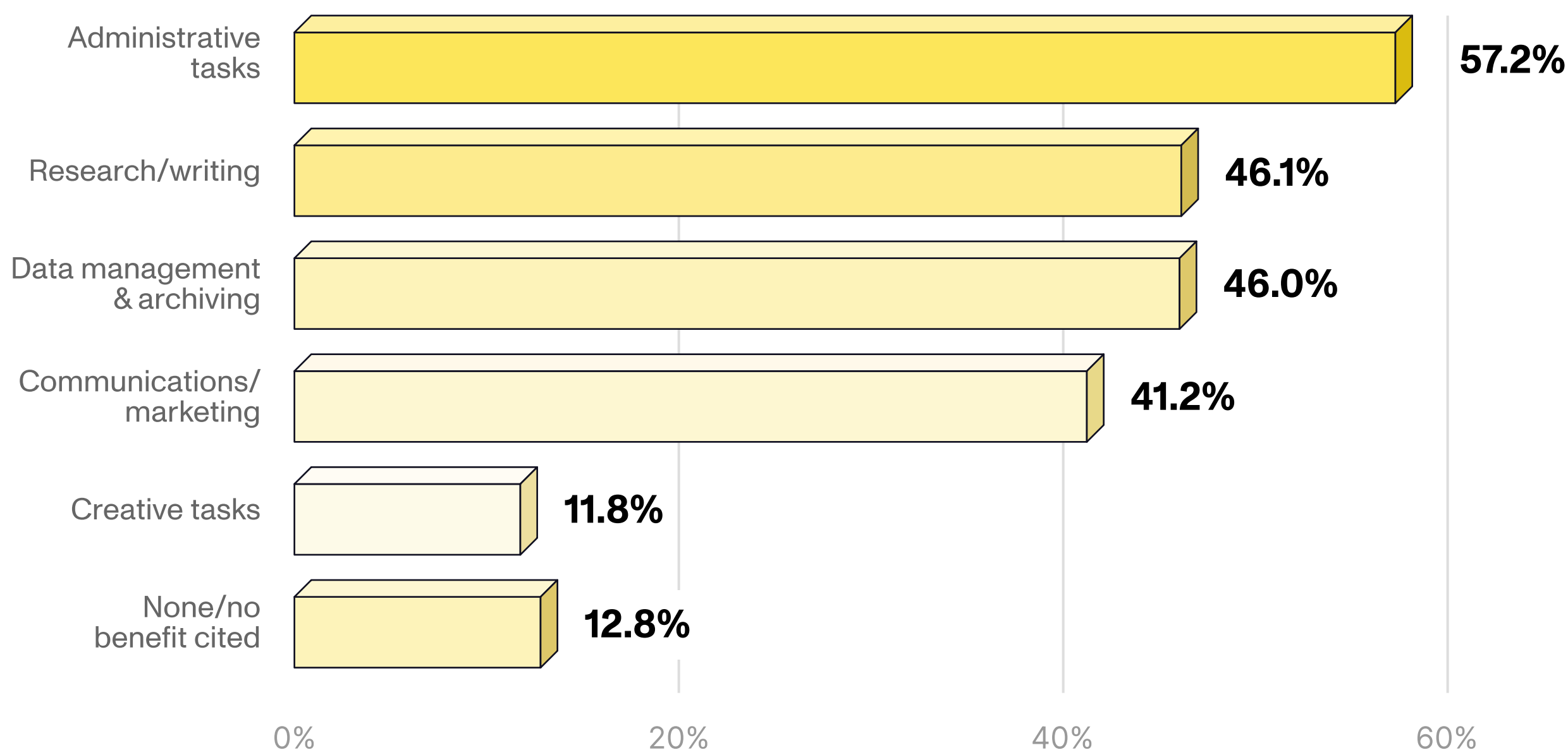
Generally, those who are using A.I. widely report using consumer-facing tools, which are primarily for information gathering and basic task assistance. ChatGPT dominates by a wide margin (594 respondents), far outpacing tools like Google Gemini (234) and Claude (185). This points to a bottom-up pattern of adoption: Workers are experimenting independently with publicly available tools rather than through organization-wide implementation strategies.

**“I DON'T REALLY WANT TO USE  
A.I. BUT FEEL I HAVE TO IN  
ORDER TO GET WORK DONE.**

**IT CREATES THE ILLUSION  
THAT I HAVE MORE CAPACITY  
THAN I DO. I'M NOW USING  
A.I. TO DO WORK I SHOULD  
HAVE BEEN PAID FOR IN THE  
FIRST PLACE.**

**THE EXPECTATION OF DOING  
LESS DOESN'T GO AWAY WITH  
A.I. I THINK IT'S MAKING THAT  
EXPECTATION WORSE.”**

**Where A.I. can be most useful in the workplace**



The scale of administrative burden also helps contextualize this uptake in A.I. tools. When asked where A.I. could be most useful, a majority of respondents point to administrative tasks (57.2 percent), research (46.1 percent), and data management (46 percent)—far outpacing interest in creative applications (11.8 percent). This suggests that, for many workers, A.I. could be key to alleviating the operational overload and burnout that contributes to attrition risk.

Twenty-six percent of practicing artists say no aspect of their work would benefit from A.I., the highest in any sector.

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# **4 . A.I. ADOPTION EXPOSES A GAP IN GOVERNANCE**

# Workers are adopting A.I. tools faster than organizations are adapting to them.

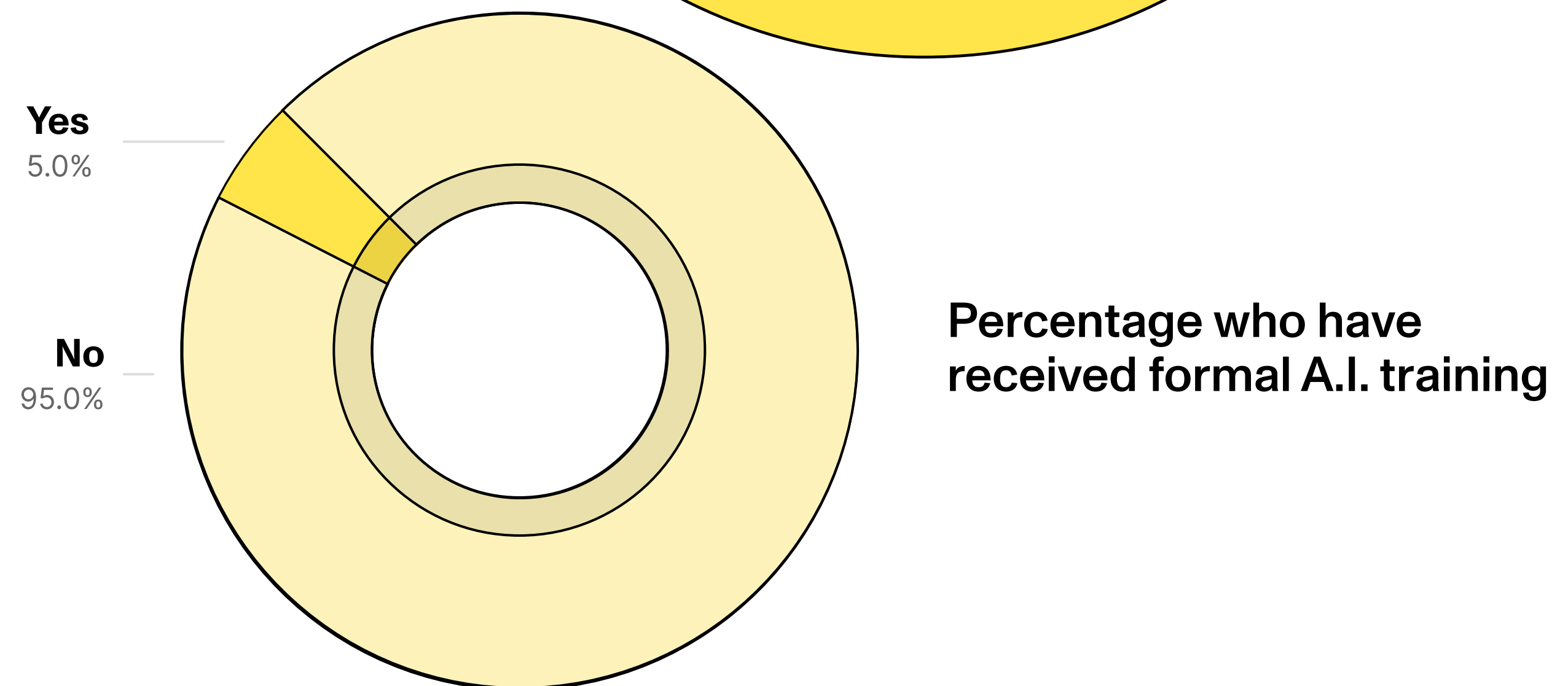
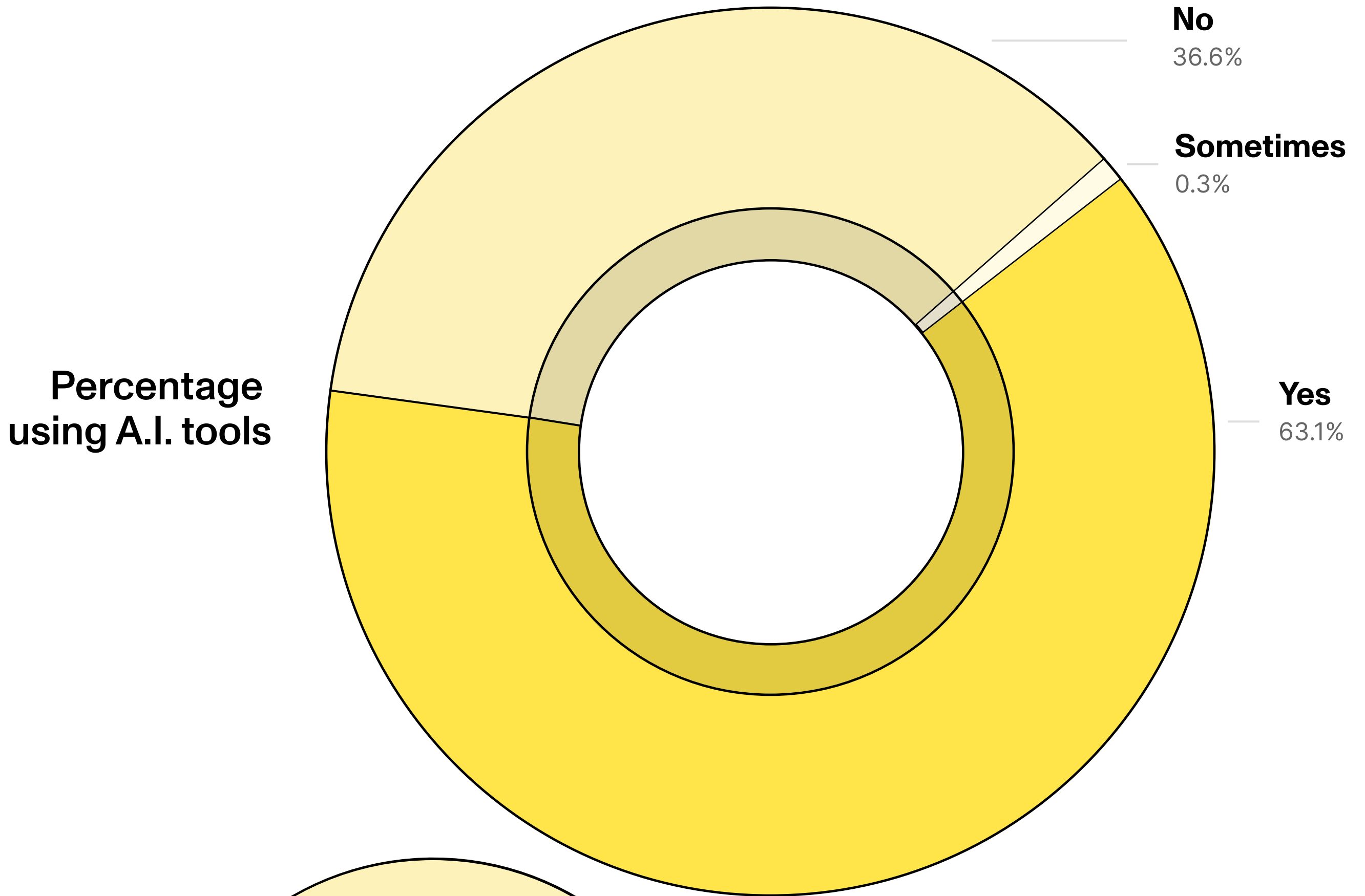
Based on how respondents are using A.I. tools, adoption appears driven more by individual interest and immediate productivity needs than by coordinated institutional transformation. Nearly two-thirds of respondents report using A.I. tools in their work, yet 67.3 percent say they have received no instruction on how to use them.

This gap extends to organizational policy. Four in 10 respondents (43.1 percent) report that their organization has no formal A.I. policy in place, and fewer than a quarter (22.5 percent) say they have adequate access to A.I. tools or training. Formal training remains rare, reported by just 4.8 percent of respondents overall.

The presence of organizational A.I. policies appears to have only a modest effect on adoption rates. Respondents working at firms with A.I. policies report slightly higher usage (75 percent) than those without (70 percent), while adoption is somewhat lower among those unsure whether policies exist (63 percent). The bottom line: Workers are adopting A.I. tools regardless of whether formal institutional guidance is in place.

# HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME

## 4 . A.I. adoption exposes a gap in governance



There's a tension between the prevalence of concerns around authenticity, misinformation, intellectual property, and the lack of formal governance, suggesting that many risks are being navigated at the individual rather than organizational level.

**“IT’S STILL NEW. WE HAVEN’T  
RECOGNIZED WHAT WE  
NEED TO KNOW/DO OR HOW  
TO USE A.I.”**

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# 5 . A CLEAR AND CONSISTENT SET OF DEMANDS

# The data reveals a clarion call for fair pay and career progression, increased transparency, and mentorship.

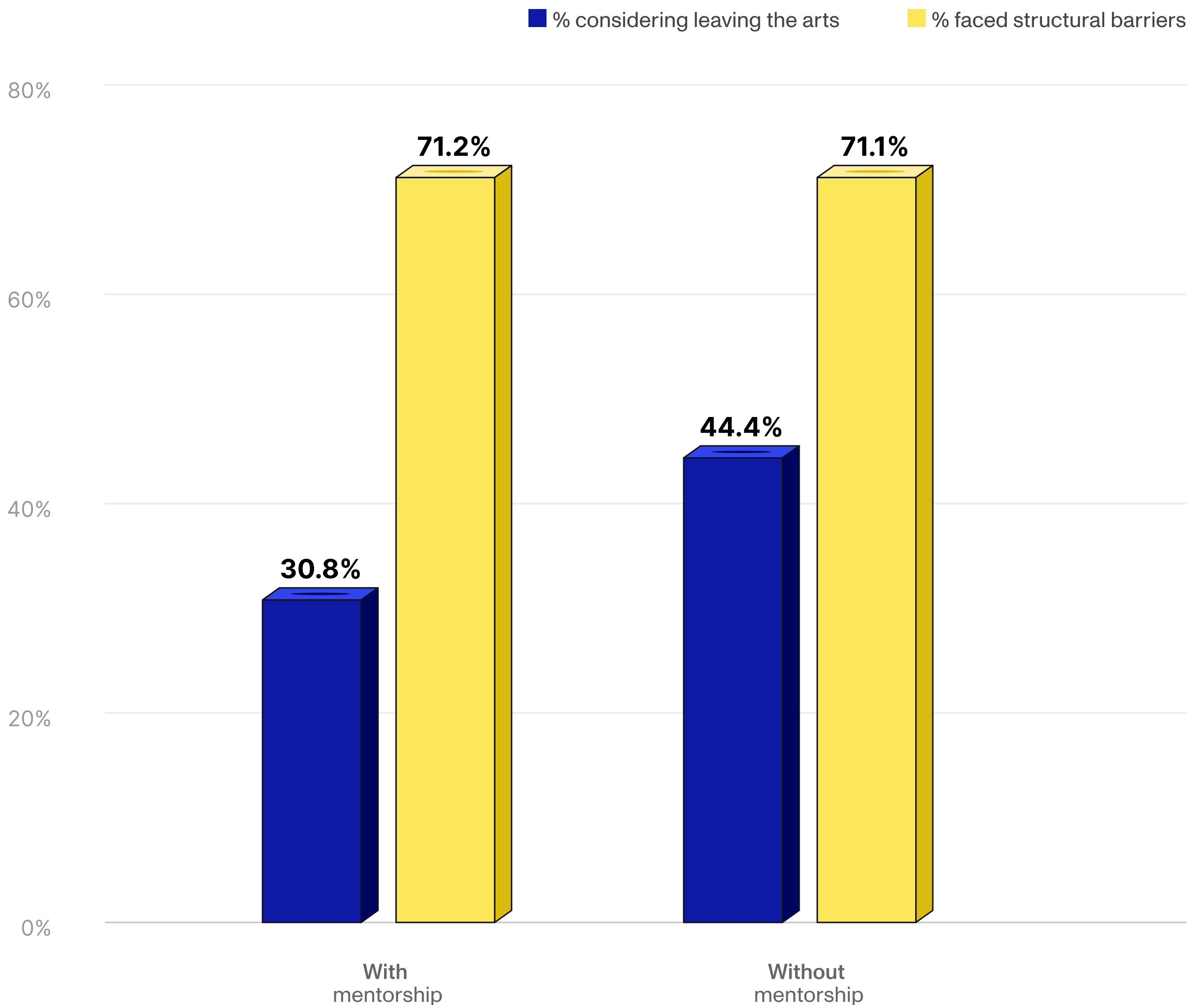
Across the findings, a consistent pattern emerges: Mid-career women especially are navigating high workloads, persistent structural barriers, and limited institutional support—factors that are driving them to consider other career options.

More than half of respondents—54.7 percent—say fair pay and job security would most improve their ability to sustain a career, while nearly half call for clearer and fairer pay and progression structures (46.7 percent) and better communication about decisions and expectations (45.4 percent) to improve equity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives also rank highly, cited by 36 percent of respondents. Support systems are also key, with roughly a quarter of respondents citing mentorship or peer networks as essential.

Indeed, mentorship appears to play an important role in retention, even if it does not eliminate structural inequities. Respondents with access to mentorship are significantly less likely to consider leaving the arts workforce—roughly 31 percent, versus 44 percent among those without mentorship—despite reporting structural barriers at nearly identical rates (around 71 percent in both groups).

**Mentorship buffers career exit but does not  
remedy structural barriers**

Among women in the arts who answered both questions



**“BETTER PAY. WE LACK MONEY  
TO BE ABLE TO OFFER MORE  
TRAINING, FLEXIBILITY, ETC.  
CAPACITY IS SO STRETCHED  
THAT ONLY MORE INVESTMENT  
WILL SOLVE SOME  
OF THESE BARRIERS.”**

## HARDWIRING CHANGE: BUYING BACK TIME

## 5 . A clear and consistent set of demands

At the same time, many respondents report significant administrative burden, with around 72 percent spending at least a quarter of their time on admin tasks—pointing to a need to reclaim time as part of improving working conditions. This is also where A.I. tools could offer some of the biggest wins if they were introduced as a systemic solution.

The findings in this report make clear that the arts cannot afford to treat burnout, inequity, and attrition as inevitable costs of working in culture. Retaining the next generation of leaders will require institutions willing to rethink how labor, support, and opportunity are structured across the field so that millennial and Gen Z workers can envision long-term futures within it.



# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Report Author: Margaret Carrigan  
Images courtesy of AWITA.



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