To Lead or Leave:

Exploring Public Relations' Issue with Rising Talent

PRC NEXT

PR COUNCIL

Introductory Note

If you've spent any time in or around public relations or communications agencies, you've no doubt witnessed the sudden departure of incredible rising talent.

From the viewpoint of a junior-level employee, maybe it was your supervisor or team leader. For mid-level pros, it might have been your work spouse and confidante – the person who'd been in the trenches with you since you were interns together. At the leadership level, this could have been the person who'd run the day-to-day on a few key accounts whom you had identified for your firm's high-potentials program. Maybe the person who left was you. One day they look like they're confidently making the transition from agency doer to agency leader, and the next they've exited the agency altogether.

Some degree of staff turnover is unavoidable, and it brings fresh talent into an agency, launches new alumni ambassadors for a firm, and supplies the private and public sectors with individuals schooled in the "agency experience." But ask any leader of any agency, and they'll tell you the same things: they'd love to see fewer team members become alumni at this 5- or 7- or 10-year mark and wonder what they could have done to change the outcome.

At the same time, many of those new alumni had previously envisioned longer tenures at their agencies. After learning the ropes and expanding their skills over a number of years, they'd stepped into the roles they'd been preparing for – leading teams, managing projects and guiding clients. Then some sort of gap or disconnect emerged. They say they'd have liked to stay, "if only … ."

Finding that answer and filling in that blank – two sides of the same coin – captivated our PRC Next board and are the driving forces behind this research in partnership with the PR Council.

Our team – comprised of 12 of us chosen from member agencies and tasked with bringing the perspective of next-generation leaders to current industry challenges – wanted to dig into questions all agency leaders are trying to answer: What are the factors that make some rising leaders stay with their agencies while others pivot out of the agency world, and what changes or solutions might agencies offer to keep them?

Our goal with this research is to help agencies and agency leaders better understand and respond to the evolving needs and motivations of agency talent. Because despite all the change and disruption in our field, our greatest assets continue to be our people – and being armed with these insights about talent will be beneficial to all of us who have a stake in the future of the communications industry.

The PRC Next board

About the Study

The PRC Next project "**To Lead Or Leave: Exploring Public Relations' Issue With Rising Talent**" is a study exploring the factors that contribute to staff retention within public relations and communications firms, and what agencies have in their power to influence as it relates to retention. The research is based on an online survey of 367 PR professionals in May 2018. All have agency experience currently (350) or within the past 10 years (17). Reflected in the sample were a roughly even split of PR professionals who work in small (50 or less), medium (51-250) and large (250+) firms; across age groups (18-25, 26-30, 31-36, 37+); who are partnered and single/non-partnered; and who are parents, non-parents, and planning-to-be parents.

Summary

PR agency professionals are highly aware that their industry is in a state of significant change, and they're facing this with a sense of optimism about the future and a confidence – in small firms and large, from young pros and seasoned – that they can play a leadership role in that evolution. Challenges loom, of course, and the greatest by far relates to compensation. Across all demographics, concerns about pay dominate pros' thoughts. Beyond pay, there is a nuanced collection of factors that influence rising talents' decisions to stay or go, that excite them about their careers, and that would most improve their job performance. The way those factors shape experience is most significant for two groups, in particular: the group we're calling "mid-millennials" (age 26-30) and those pros who don't yet have kids but are planning to in the next five years. For each of these groups, defined by specific and largely overlapping life stages, the data tells a story of decreased satisfaction and increased uncertainty, which feels true to the anecdotal experience of anyone who's spent time around agencies. Whether a pro is at a small, medium or large firm also has a strong influence on their views, with employees of larger firms generally having more frustrations than their smaller-firm counterparts with their work lives. And yet, despite all the highs and lows, eight in 10 agency professionals would recommend the "agency experience" to someone entering the field.

Key Findings

06 Cautious optimism for an industry in transition

07 Compensation concerns lead the way

08 Challenges varied beyond the checkbook

09 Many pathways up or out

10 Improving job performance

11 More than just “millennials”

13 Angst anticipating working parenthood

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KEY FINDINGS

Cautious optimism for an industry in transition

PR agency professionals overwhelmingly agree that their industry is changing. Ninety-four percent agree with the statement that they expect the PR industry to evolve over the next five years, and 91 percent expect their role to evolve over that time. Change is indeed in the air, and agency employees are here for it with their stereotypical dose of positivity.

Across the board, public relations professionals are optimistic (85 percent) in their outlook for the PR industry. The youngest professionals, ages 18-25, are even more optimistic than their older colleagues, with more than nine in 10 reporting optimism about the future of their chosen field.

More than eight in 10 report they're optimistic about the future of their current company, with nearly half reporting being "very optimistic" about the future of their current company. That company optimism isn't felt as strongly at large agencies, where a notably smaller 63 percent of employees report optimism about the future of that agency. Employees of medium-size agencies, however, report higher-than-average company optimism, at 93 percent.

As they size up the future that is to come for PR, three in four agency pros feel prepared to play a leadership role in its evolution, and they are scattered all throughout the agency talent profile. These future leaders are nearly evenly divided across small, medium and large firms; across age groups; single and partnered; and with kids and without. The factors that make someone feel most prepared to lead are optimism for the industry and high levels of engagement and security in their job. Our industry's future leaders can indeed be found anywhere.

85%

of PR professionals are optimistic in their outlook on the future of their industry.

KEY FINDINGS

Compensation concerns lead the way

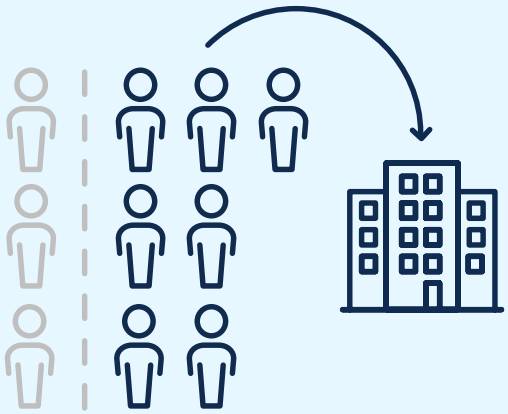
Compensation is the elephant in the cubicle at PR firms. When asked about the three biggest frustrations or challenges they face in their current jobs, PR pros overall put comp at the top of the list (50 percent), as did every demographic group studied in this research.

As PR pros look ahead in their careers, better compensation leads the list of things agency professionals look forward to most. When asked about the three items that excite agency professionals most about the next steps in their career, pros overall put earning more money at the top of the list (54 percent), as did every demographic group studied in this research. And when asked about job factors that would be most effective in enticing them to change jobs or encouraging them to stay, compensation leads the pack by a nearly 2-to-1 margin beyond all other factors, including title/promotion, flexibility, training, and more.

Compensation challenges also emerge as a critical roadblock to perceived career advancement for a vast majority of agency professionals.

Nearly seven in 10 report believing that, to receive a substantial raise, they will need to switch companies.

This belief is even more widely held among longer-tenured employees, those who work in large firms, and those who are mid- and older-Millennials (ages 26-36).



Nearly 7 in 10 report believing that, to receive a substantial raise, they will need to switch companies.

Challenges varied beyond the checkbook

Once you get past the overwhelming impact of compensation on the experiences and opinions of PR agency professionals, a vast array of career path influences emerge from the research. To start:

- **8 in 10** agency pros are happy in their current jobs.
- **95 percent** are engaged in their jobs.
- **92 percent** feel secure in their jobs.

  Happiness ratings are higher for shorter-tenure employees, older professionals and those with kids.

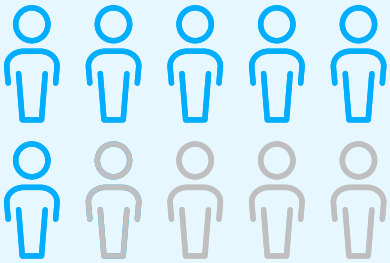
When compared to engagement data for U.S. workers as a whole, which Gallup reports as 32 percent engaged, PR firms look to be in a position of strength when it comes to retaining employees. Despite this:

- **More than 6 in 10** agency professionals are open to changing jobs.
- **One in 5** of all agency pros are ambivalent about their jobs or actively/passively looking for a new one, with that being a more likely scenario for those at a large firm (33 percent), who are mid-millennials (30 percent), or who plan to start a family within the next five years (28 percent).
- **One in 3** agency pros would not agree with the statement that they plan to be at their company one year from now.

The factors driving this softening commitment to PR firm employees' current agencies is varied. After compensation, the biggest frustrations or challenges pros face at their current firms are cited as:

- **38 percent:** Volume of the work
- **36 percent:** 'Always on' nature of an agency
- **32 percent:** Opportunities for advancement/ promotion

Once you pass that point, the top challenges run the gamut from the nature of the work itself, to the influence of managers/leaders, to the amount of diversity at the company, and to access to flexibility for family and non-family priorities. The challenge mix is unique for each professional.



More than 6 in 10

PR agency professionals are open to changing jobs.

KEY FINDINGS

Many pathways up or out

A similarly varied set of factors are identified as those that would be most effective in enticing an agency professional to change jobs or encouraging him or her to stay in their current job. After the 2-to-1 margin of the leading factor, compensation, the other leading factors identified are:

- Working on clients/issues that are more interesting/exciting/challenging
- Clear opportunities for advancement/ promotion
- More flexible day-to-day environment (e.g., schedule, hours, ability to work from home)

Each of these factors were cited by about one-third of respondents.

Those are followed closely by:

- Working on clients/issues that are more aligned to personal values (26 percent)
- Better programs to foster work-life balance (20 percent)

A variety of other factors were selected by at least one in 10 pros as being key drivers of their retention or decision to move, including more ownership and control over decisions, geographic opportunity, non-traditional career paths, and support from mentors, sponsors and coaches.

As PR firm pros look ahead to what excites them most about the next steps in their career, after compensation, they most look forward to:

45%

Professional development/becoming more skilled or accomplished

34%

Working on clients that are more interesting/exciting

31%

Working on clients that are more meaningful/aligned with personal values

31%

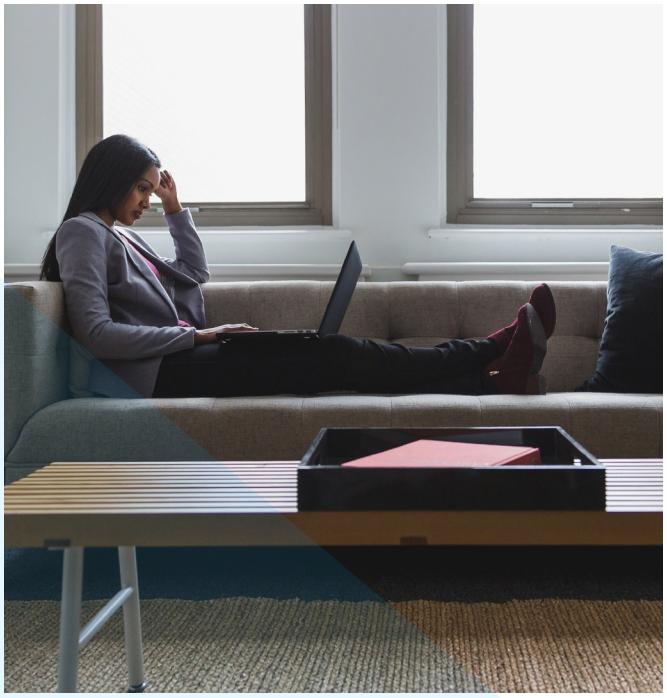
Having more control over one's work and time

29%

Working to create change within one's own organization

Improving job performance

For those tasked with identifying or developing programs and policies to improve agency performance, the respondents provided helpful input. Meaningful feedback (50 percent) and hard-skills (46 percent) and soft-skills (38 percent) training lead the list of items PR agency professionals would like to see to help them do their jobs better. Other items that received support from one-third of all pros include mentoring/coaching, experience in other roles (e.g., job shadowing, job rotation), and greater flexibility in the day-to-day work environment (e.g., flexible hours, working from home).



PROFESSIONALS WANT MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK

Respondents cited the following items that PR agency professionals would like to see to help them do their jobs better.

50%
Meaningful feedback

46%
Hard-skill trainings

38%
Soft-skills training

KEY FINDINGS

More than just “millennials”

One of the most fascinating findings in the research had to do with millennials or, more specifically, the fact that “millennial” is far too broad a brush to understand PR agency employees who are now 18 to 36 years old. The data revealed distinct attitudinal differences among subsets of millennials – particularly for “mid-millennials” (ages 26-30), as compared with “young-millennials” (ages 18-25) and “older-millennials” (ages 31-36).

It’s clear that the impact of life stages is coming to the fore at this time for mid-millennials. Professionals in this group are now hitting the point in their careers where they’re making the transition from doer to leader (roughly five to seven years in). At the same time, this group is starting to plan for the long term – taking steps like partnering off, buying a home, getting a pet, thinking about starting a family and focusing on interests outside of work. As these stages inside and outside the walls of their agencies are colliding, mid-millennials are developing a relatively heightened focus on compensation, flexibility, and relationships with managers and teams.

Consider a few of the more notable demographic exceptions for mid-millennials, as compared with the discussions above. When identifying their top job frustration or challenge, this age group cites compensation at a rate that is markedly higher than the other age groups, and they ranked it their No. 1 frustration twice as often as the next most cited challenge; the other age groups did not have a similar outlier. Again on the issue of challenges/frustrations, this age group cited access to flexibility for non-family priorities at a notably higher rate than the other age groups (6-14 points higher).

MID-MILLENNIALS CHANGE JOBS FOR A RAISE

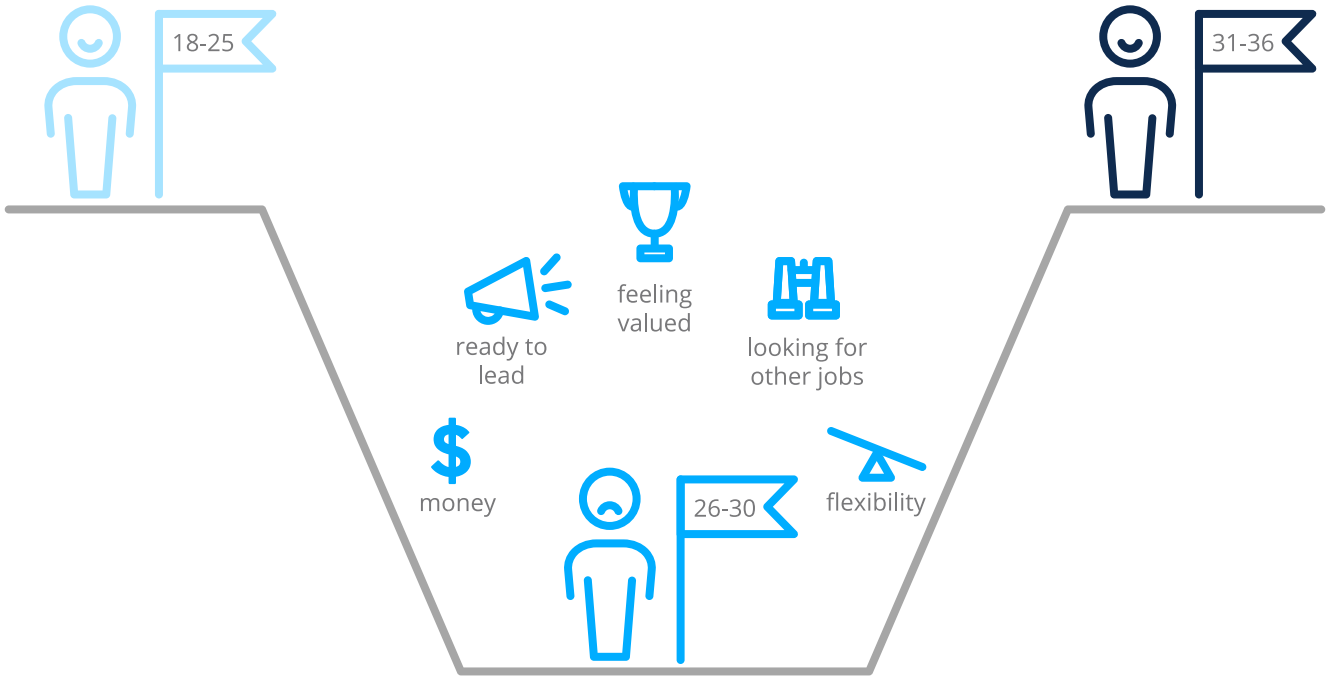
Nearly 8 in 10

– the highest of all ages – believe they need to change companies to get a substantial raise or promotion.

More than just "millennials" (continued)

This age group reported being least prepared to play a leadership role in the evolution of the PR industry – even the young-millennials reported higher confidence – and, moving into the older-millennial age group, this confidence level jumps 14 points. Looking at the agency pros who are ambivalent about their jobs or actively/passively looking for a new one, the percentage of mid-millenials who fall into this group is double the rate of each of the other age groups in the study. Of all age groups, mid-millennials report feeling the least valued as an employee of their company (7 points lower than the next-lowest group), and they are the age group least likely to be planning to be at their company one year from now (10-16 points lower than the other age groups).

MID-MILLENNIALS REPORT FEELING THE LEAST VALUED AS AN EMPLOYEE OF THEIR COMPANY



And yet – despite these numerous indicators of feeling less settled, satisfied and anchored than their older and younger colleagues – mid-millennials are just as likely as all other age groups to recommend "the agency experience" to a person entering the field.

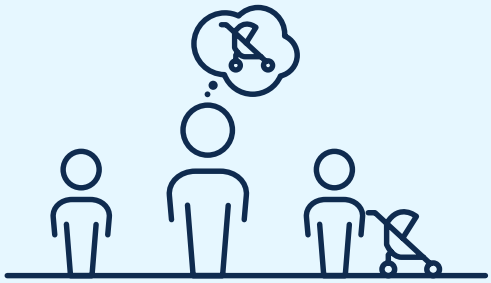
Angst anticipating working parenthood

Along with the mid-millennials sub grouping described above, some similar findings were revealed across data related to parenting. In looking at responses from agency professionals along the lines of those who have kids, those who are planning to start a family in the next five years, and those who don't plan to have kids, another interesting storyline emerged about life stages.

Transitioning from a worker to a working parent is one of the biggest work-life milestones, and that transition back to work after the birth or adoption of a child is often given anecdotally as a driver of mid-level turnover at agencies. Yet this research points to the possibility that the anticipation of child-related work-life conflict of those planning to be parents is driving that narrative, perhaps even more than the actual challenges of being a working parent.

Consider a few of the more notable demographic exceptions for the "planning kids" group, as compared with the "kids" and "no kids" cohorts.

Looking at the agency pros who are ambivalent about their jobs or actively/passively looking for a new one, the percentage of those "planning kids" who fall into this group is double the rate of those with kids and nearly double the the rate of those not planning to have kids – and it's in line with the rate of mid-millennials in this category. When identifying their top job frustration or challenge, the "planning kids" group cites compensation as their No. 1 frustration nearly twice as often as those with kids and those not planning to have kids.



Those planning for kids are **twice as likely** to be ambivalent/looking for jobs and frustrated with their compensation.

Angst anticipating working parenthood (continued)

When considering the critical factors to make a professional stay with their agency or entice them to leave, earning more money is rated highest most often by those who don't have kids yet but plan to (71 percent, compared with 58 percent and 60 percent for those with kids and those not planning to have kids).

Having greater flexibility in day-to-day work environment is cited by pros across all kid-related subgroups as something that could improve job performance, but it's cited by pros who are planning for kids but don't have them yet at a rate (41 percent) notably higher than pros with kids (27 percent) and who don't plan to have kids (22 percent). Of all kid-related groups, those planning for kids report feeling the least valued as an employee of their company (6-7 points lower than the other groups).

Roughly three-quarters of mid-millennials as described above belong to the "planning kids" group, and it appears that some of those same unsettled/uneasy factors are at play as PR pros are looking ahead and trying to come to terms with life stage transitions that are as yet unknown.

MAJORITY OF MID-MILLENNIALS ARE SIZING UP PARENTING

More than 7 in 10 mid-millennials are planning to have kids in the next 5 years.

2% of mid-millennials have kids

72% are planning to have kids in the next five years

26% are not planning to have kids in the next five years

Agency truths hold true

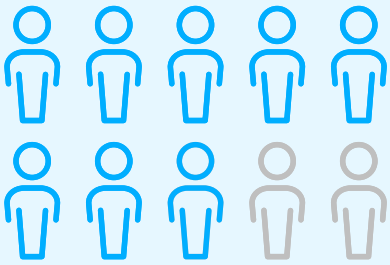
The general understanding that agencies have a transient talent pool was supported in this research. Close to half (45 percent) of respondents have moved from one PR/ communications firm to another, and more than half (52 percent) have been at their current company for less than three years. In addition to being a long-held truth in the PR industry, this tendency to job-hop aligns with widely reported generational shifts in the U.S. workforce.

The PR agency universe is a dedicated talent pool, as well.

Eight in 10 agency professionals say that their professional career is “very” or “extremely” important to them.

This dedication holds true across life stages, with just a 3-point variance between those who are partnered and non-partnered, and just a 3-point variance among those with kids and those without.

For all its ups and downs, the “agency experience” comes highly recommended -- eight in 10 PR pros would recommend working at a PR firm to a person entering the field.



8 in 10

agency professionals say that their professional career is “very” or “extremely” important to them.

In Focus

Talent Profiles

17 The New Grad

18 The Mid-millennial

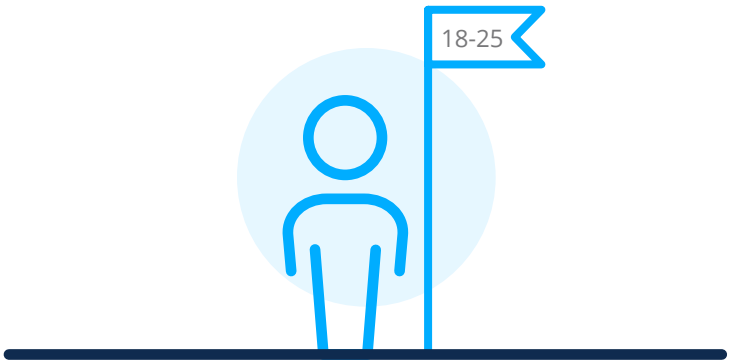
19 The Pro Planning for Parenthood

Firm Size

20 Small, Medium, Large

* In Focus profiles represent key demographic findings of interest related to age, parental status, and size of employer

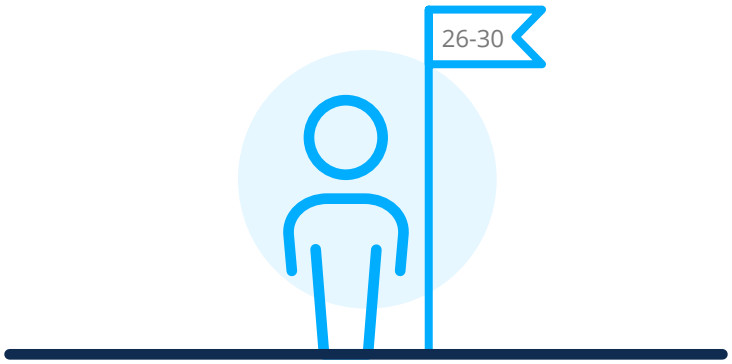
The New Grad



- **More optimism** about the industry than all other ages
- **Top job frustrations/challenges** are compensation, opportunities for advancement/promotion, volume of the work, and the "always on" nature of the industry
- **More excited than all other ages** by the prospect of professional development/ becoming more skilled or accomplished
- After compensation, the most critical factor to encourage them to stay or entice them to go is **clear opportunities for advancement/ promotion**
- To **improve their performance**, most interested in meaningful feedback on their performance, and training in hard and soft skills
- **Most likely of all groups** to say their career is "extremely important" to them

*Young-millennials, ages 18–25

The Mid-millennial



- **Twice as likely** as other age groups to be ambivalent about their job or passively or actively looking for a new one
- **More likely than all other** younger/older ages to cite access to flexibility for non-family priorities as a frustration or challenge with their job
- Looking at the next steps in their career, **most excited by** the prospect of more money, becoming more skilled/accomplished, and having more control over their work and time
- In their ranked list of factors that would most encourage them to stay at their job or entice them to leave, this group ranks "**working on clients/issues that are more meaningful/ more aligned with my values**" higher on the list than younger/older pros
- **Feel less valued** by their companies than younger/older pros
- **Only six in 10** plan to be at their current company one year from now
- **Most likely of all the age groups** to believe that they'll have to change companies to get a substantial raise or promotion
- **Most likely of all the age groups** to report they have interests outside of work that are more important to them than their job

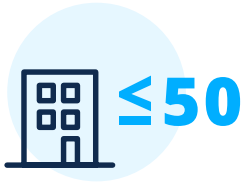
*Mid-millennials, ages 26–30

The Pro Planning for Parenthood

Compared with those who already have kids and those who do not plan to have kids:

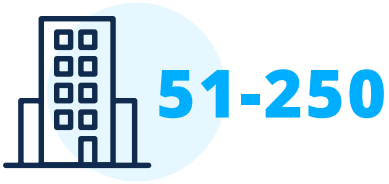
- **Twice as likely** to be ambivalent about their job or looking for a new one
- **Twice as likely** to rank compensation as their top job frustration or concern
- Rank **earning more money** as a top factor in deciding to stay or go from their job at the highest rate (71 percent compared with 58 percent and 60 percent)
- Feel **least valued** by their companies (76 percent compared with 82 percent and 83 percent)
- Only group who listed "**having more control over my work and time**" as a top-three item that excites them about the next steps in their career
- Cite "**greater flexibility in day-to-day work environment**" as a top-three factor to improve job performance at the highest rate (41 percent compared with 27 percent and 22 percent)
- Only **six in 10** plan to be with their company one year from now, which is the same rate as the pros who don't plan to have kids (pros who do have kids plan to stay at their jobs at a rate of eight in 10)
- **Three out of four** believe that they'll have to change companies to get a substantial raise or promotion, 10 points higher than those who are not planning to have kids

*No kids yet, but planning to in the next five years



SMALL

- Highest industry optimism
- Only demographic where managers or leaders one works for is cited as a top challenge
- Twice as likely to cite access to flexibility they want for their family as a top frustration
- Twice as likely to cite peers/ team members they work with as a top frustration
- Half say greater flexibility in day-to-day work environment (flex-hours, working from home, etc.) would be a top factor in improving job performance, double the rate of other pros
- Highest rate of saying they have interests outside of work that are more important than their job
- Least likely to say their career is “extremely” important to them



MEDIUM

- Highest company optimism and intention to be at their firm in one year
- Only group for whom working on clients/issues that are more interesting/exciting makes it into the top three factors they’re most excited about in their careers
- Only group for whom working on clients/issues that are more meaningful/more aligned with their values makes it into the top three factors that would make them stay or go
- Having a better title cited as a critical stay/go job factor three times as often as at small firms
- Highest rate (nine in 10) of feeling valued as an employee at their company
- Highest rate (six in 10) of saying that, aside from family, their professional career is the most important thing to them

LARGE

- Lowest industry and company optimism
- Feel least valued by their companies
- About twice as likely to be ambivalent about job or looking for a new one
- Just over half intend to be at their firm in one year
- Compensation cited as their top challenge at the highest rates
- Notably more likely to cite clear opportunities for advancement/promotion as a top frustration
- Notably highest belief (eight in 10) they’ll need to leave for a substantial raise or promotion
- Notably most satisfied with their access to training, learning and development

Questions to Explore

The challenge that lies ahead of the industry and the leaders tasked with shaping its future is taking these insights and experiences from professionals and using them to evolve and improve the agency experience for the rising generation of talent. Here are questions that are worth further exploration.

AS AN INDUSTRY

- What are best practices that firms in the industry are using to address these talent issues?
- How do we level set general skills requirements at each level? Does this need to be standardized?
- How are we supporting the transition from agency doer to agency leader?

AS FIRM LEADERS

- How do our employees' experiences and opinions compare with those in this research? Are there markets or divisions/places within our company where these dynamics are more favorable or unfavorable?
- How might we take steps toward eliminating some of these identified challenges?
- How can we evolve our programs and policies to make ours a more attractive workplace to stay and to grow?

AS AN EMPLOYEE

- How have my experiences in the industry compared with those in this research? Have they been more favorable or less favorable?
- As I look at the experiences of professionals who are on the path ahead of me in terms of age or experience or life stage, who do I know in those shoes and what questions do I have for them?
- How might I incorporate this information about my industry peers' experiences into my own professional development plans?

The Authors

Created in 2018 by the PR Council, which represents more than 100 of the leading communications firms in the U.S., PRC Next is comprised of 12 rising leaders chosen from member agencies and tasked with bringing the perspective of next-generation leaders to current industry challenges and opportunities. Track their journey, goals and mission through #PRCNext.

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