

HR On **The Edge**

50 conversations. One uncomfortable truth.

50

HR professionals interviewed

6

Core themes emerged unprompted

56%

Raised AI as a challenge

~60%

Named engagement as core issue



Middle management



Communication overload



Engagement crisis



Change fatigue



AI anxiety



Talent & retention



Foreword

What keeps you awake at night?

As a product person, I take every opportunity to talk to potential clients. Not to pitch them, but to listen. In the corridors between sessions. In coffee lines. In the moments between meetings. Over the years, I've found these conversations are often far more honest than formal discovery calls or focus groups.

In May 2026, at a major HR industry event, I spent two days stopping people and asking a single question: What are your three biggest challenges right now? No multiple choice. No survey framework.

Fifty conversations later, some themes that emerged were expected. Many were not. The problems people described weren't unheard of but rather familiar, persistent, and, in many cases, getting worse despite years of investment in tools and programs designed to solve them.

This report is a reflection of what I heard: six themes that surfaced repeatedly, without prompting, from people living these challenges every day. Draw your own conclusions, but the patterns are difficult to ignore.



Lukas Foglar

Co-Founder & Chief Product Officer, LutherOne

Methodology

Why ask this way?

The rapid-fire format was a deliberate choice. Surveys are shaped by the questions you ask. Facilitated discussions are shaped by whoever speaks first. A 30-second unprompted question, "what's your biggest challenge right now?", produces something different: the thing that's actually top of mind. The themes below are what surfaced repeatedly, across roles, company sizes, and industries, without anyone being pointed toward them.

The limitation, named honestly

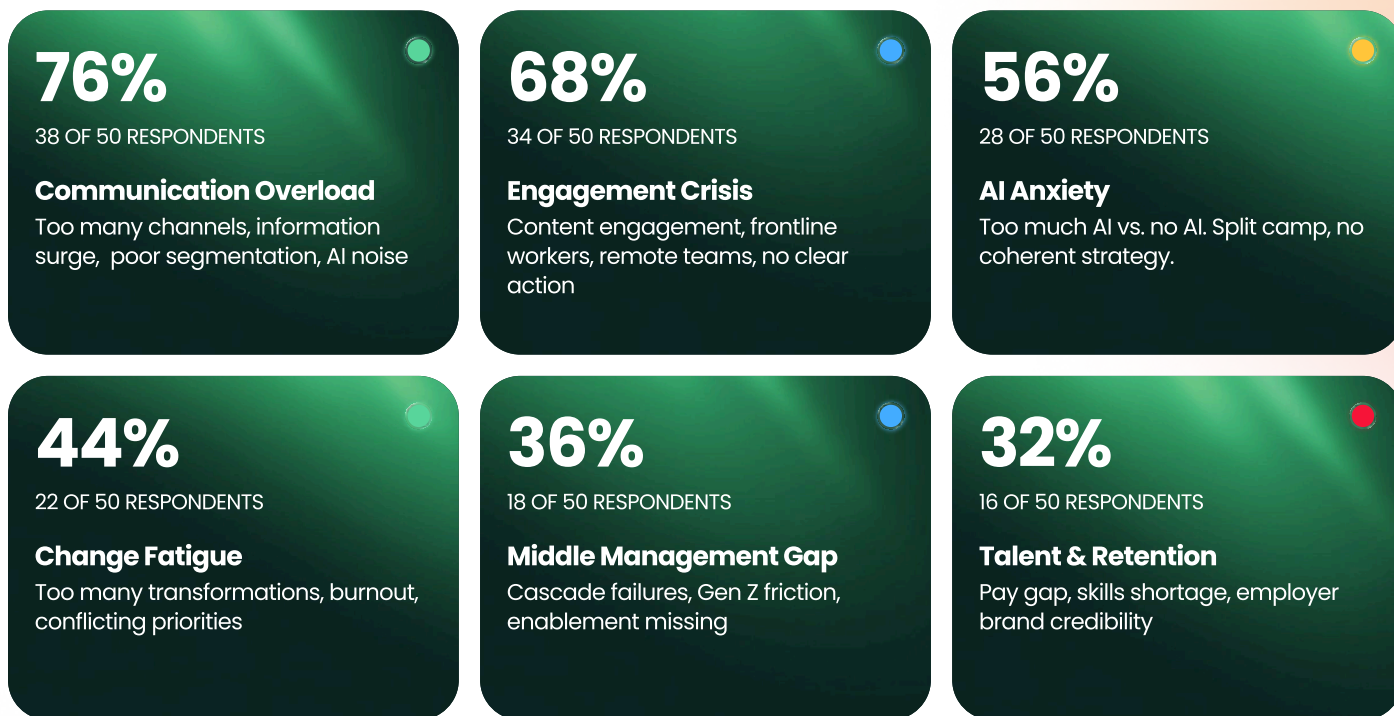
This is **qualitative data**. Frequency reflects salience, not prevalence. Something mentioned by 38 of 50 people is genuinely widespread, but absence of a theme doesn't mean the underlying issue doesn't exist.

Use this as a **directional signal**, not a statistically representative study. The value is in the patterns, not the percentages.

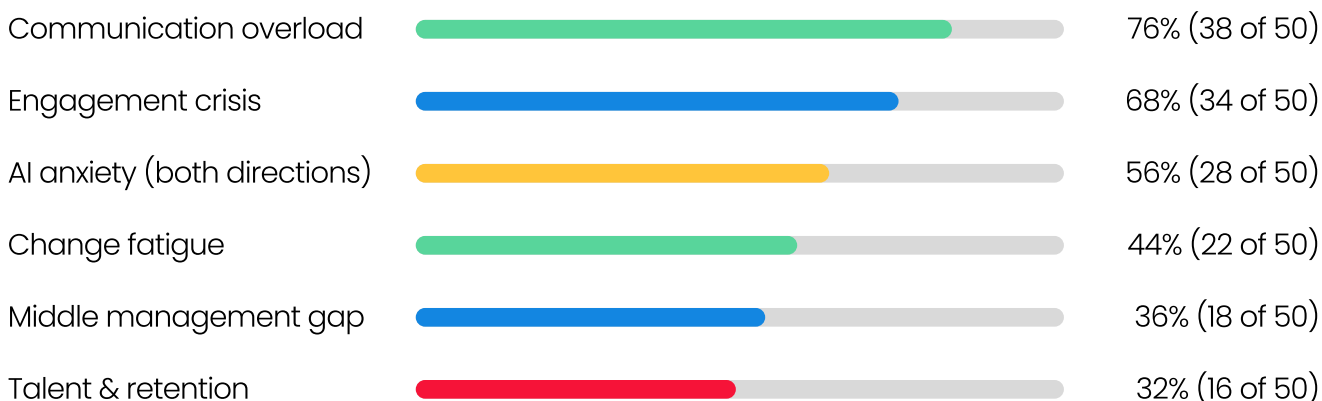
The Data

Six Themes at a Glance

The table below shows how frequently each theme appeared, as a percentage of all 50 conversations. No theme was prompted. Each represents something that surfaced organically.



Core challenges – % of respondents who mentioned each theme



Core challenges, % of respondents who mentioned each theme unprompted

Theme 01

Communication Overload

76% of respondents

One thing to flag before diving in: only about a third of the people who raised communication as a core issue had an internal comms remit. The rest were in generalist HR, L&D, talent, and similar roles. Yet this came out louder than almost anything else. Communication overload isn't just an IC problem. It's everyone's problem.

The most common complaint wasn't pay, burnout, or AI. It was noise. Too many channels, too much content - emails, newsletters, pings on messengers, employees who've quietly stopped paying attention.

"Too much information and emails. Legacy tools and their limitations. Data from different channels with no coherent picture."

Internal communicators were just as frustrated. The problem isn't only volume. Nobody has a reliable way to measure whether communication actually changes behaviour. Clicks and opens are hard enough to track, cultural shift is a different conversation entirely.

What people said they need:

- Meaningful segmentation: different messages for different audiences, not just different fonts
- Metrics that capture behaviour change, not just engagement rates
- A channel mix that doesn't require employees to check five platforms to stay informed
- Middle managers who can translate strategy, rather than just pass it down

The Engagement Problem Nobody Can Define

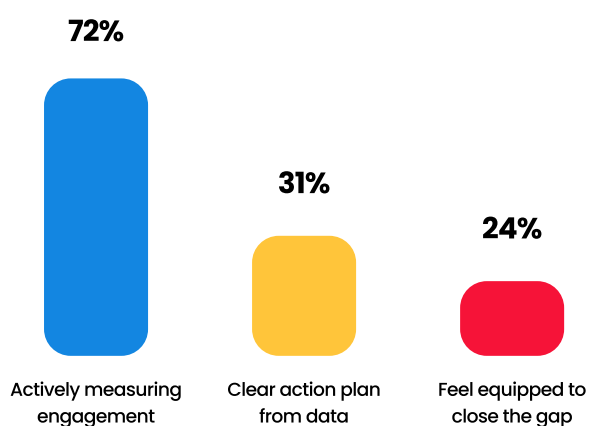
68% of respondents

Everyone knows engagement is the problem. Almost nobody could say exactly what they meant by it, or what fixing it would actually look like. HR teams are measuring (eNPS, surveys, pulse checks), but the data isn't translating into action. That gap keeps coming up.

"Engagement and satisfaction. But then what? How does it translate to actual performance?"

Frontline and remote workers came up repeatedly as particular pain points. The cascade model is visibly breaking down for distributed workforces. The people furthest from HQ are often furthest from any sense of organisational purpose. The measurement industry has outpaced the intervention industry. Everyone knows there's a problem, most can't describe what solving it would look like on a Tuesday afternoon.

The engagement measurement-action gap (estimated from responses)



Note: Percentages are estimated from qualitative responses, not a formal survey instrument.

What people said they need

- A clearer line from engagement data to concrete interventions
- Tools built for frontline workers, not just desk-based employees
- Better support for middle managers, who drive the cascade but often lack engagement
- Messages that earns attention rather than demanding it

The AI Split

56% of respondents

AI came up in 56% of conversations. What made it striking wasn't the number: it was the split. Roughly half felt their organization had too much AI in some areas, that it was eroding the human element of HR work. The other half felt left behind, still on outdated tech, watching everyone else move faster.

Neither camp described having a coherent AI strategy. It's happening to them, or it isn't happening at all. That's the real finding.

"Too much AI noise. We're losing the human signal inside it."

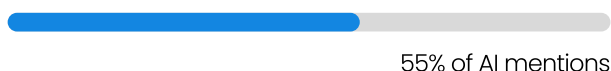
Camp one: AI-generated content feels hollow, and employees have started questioning whether the communication they receive was written by a person at all. Camp two: HR functions still running on legacy systems, watching the gap widen. Both camps, one common thread: no strategy. It's landing on people without a framework to make sense of it.

The AI split – of the ~28 who raised AI as a challenge

Too much AI (human touch at risk)



Not enough AI (falling behind)



What people said they need:

- AI that handles administrative load without replacing human judgment
- Transparency in AI-assisted recruitment. Candidates want to know.
- A clear organisational position on how AI will and will not be used in people processes
- Training that goes beyond tool familiarity into genuine mindset shift

Theme 04

Change Fatigue Is Real and Cumulative

44% of respondents

What people described were workforces that have been through restructures, digital transformations, culture programs, and leadership changes - sometimes several in quick succession. They're not resistant to change. They're just tired.

"Too many changes, and they conflict with each other. People don't know which priority is the priority."

What people said they need:

- Genuine prioritisation: fewer initiatives, better executed
- Change communication that goes beyond town halls and all-staff emails
- Leader buy-in that shows up in behaviour, not just messaging
- Recognition that employees need recovery time between major changes

Theme 05

Middle Management Is the Bottleneck

36% of respondents

This came up across functions, roles, and industries. Different words, same diagnosis: the middle layer isn't equipped, isn't supported, and in many cases, isn't engaged enough to carry what the organization is asking of them.

"Middle manager engagement is the gap. We train them on skills, but not on how to lead through uncertainty."

Managing a team that spans Boomers and Gen Z takes real adaptability. Most managers haven't been given the tools or time to develop it. And when the middle layer is checked out, everything above it stops reaching the people below.

What people said they need:

- Manager enablement that goes beyond skills training into confidence and judgment
- Regular feedback loops specifically for managers, not just their teams
- Communication support: not just content to pass on, but help interpreting it
- Recognition that managing a multigenerational team is a distinct capability

Theme 06

Talent: The Expectation Gap

32% of respondents

Retention, recruitment, and reward all circled the same tension: the gap between what people expect and what organizations can actually deliver. The employer branding challenge is partly a credibility problem. When what you say externally doesn't match what people experience internally, word travels fast.

"Employer branding gets treated like B2C marketing. It's not. The audience already knows someone who works here."

What people said they need:

- Pay positioning that is honest about constraints, not just aspirational
- A candidate experience that reflects the actual culture, not an idealised version
- Transparency in AI-assisted application processes
- Employer branding treated as an inside-out discipline, not a marketing campaign

The Existential Thread

Across all 50 conversations, something else surfaced that doesn't fit neatly into a category. HR professionals are being asked to drive engagement while sometimes struggling to feel engaged themselves. They're expected to be the architects of culture, change, and wellbeing. Often without the resources, data, or senior buy-in to do it properly. Several respondents mentioned 'seat at the table': the old frustration about HR being treated as a support function rather than a strategic one. The fact that it is still being raised tells you something.

"We're supposed to solve engagement. But who's thinking about the engagement of the people in HR?"

What the data points to is a function under sustained pressure: squeezed between leadership expectations, workforce needs, technology demands, and shrinking budgets. And being asked to hold it all together with a smile and a pulse survey.

So What?

- 01** The communication problem is solvable, but it requires investment in segmentation, measurement, and middle manager capability, not just more content.
- 02** The AI conversation needs to move from anxiety to strategy. Organisations without a coherent position on AI in people processes are already behind.
- 03** Change fatigue is a capacity issue, not a mindset issue. Telling people to 'embrace change' doesn't work when they are already stretched.
- 04** Middle managers are the highest-return investment most organisations are currently under-making.
- 05** The engagement measurement industry is ahead of the engagement intervention industry. That gap needs closing.

Solutions that offer direct actionability are a key differentiator. The gap between measuring and doing is exactly where practitioners feel most stuck.

None of this is new. What's different is the combination: how many of these things are hitting at once, and how many of the people dealing with them said they don't have what they need to actually fix it.



Want to talk it **through**?

We offer a free consultation to share how we've helped organisations tackle the challenges in this report: communication overload, engagement gaps, AI strategy, and the rest. No pitch deck. Just an honest conversation.

[Book a free consultation](#)

lutherone.com