The Great Expectation Gap:

Rethinking Work and Worth in Singapore

How Singapore's Workforce Balances Pay, Purpose, and Pragmatism

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Foreword

Closing the Expectation Gap: Building Workplaces That Work for Everyone

In every conversation about the future of work, one truth stands out: both employers and employees want the same thing — fairness, growth, and purpose. Yet, how each side defines and delivers on these values can look very different.

At Jobstreet by SEEK, we know that understanding these differences is the first step toward building workplaces that truly work, for everyone. This report, ***The Great Expectation Gap***, reveals how Singapore's workforce balances ambition with reality, and how employers are navigating these ever-evolving employee expectations.

The data presented in this report paints a clear picture: talent today is pragmatic, not entitled. They understand that there are trade-offs to finding a suitable job, but they also expect transparency in return. Meanwhile, employers are striving to meet rising expectations but are often constrained by cost pressures and market realities. They want to deliver, but they struggle to consistently meet employee expectations, which may not be surprising if they are constantly changing between jobs, ages and life stages.

Our goal in sharing this research is simple — to close the distance between perception and performance.

By learning how expectations evolve and where they diverge, we can create better matches, stronger trust, and workplaces built on mutual understanding.

Yuh Yng Chook
Director, Asia Sales and APAC Service,
Jobstreet and Jobsdb by SEEK

Methodology Summary

Conducted via **Milieu's proprietary online panel** from **19 September to 2 October 2025,** this quantitative study comprised two parallel surveys across a total of n=800 respondents:

- **Employees and Jobseekers (n=500):** Singapore Citizens, PRs, and residents aged 25–45, representing diverse industries, job functions, and life stages.
- **Employers and Hiring Managers (n=300):** Decision-makers from both SMEs and MNCs across key sectors including services, F&B, technology, logistics, retail, and manufacturing.

The employee survey included 18 questions, and the employer survey 13, covering themes of workplace priorities, hiring challenges, and evolving career expectations.

Key Insights

The Big Picture: Singapore's Great Expectation Gap

At first glance, Singapore's employees and employers seem aligned: both value fair pay, balance and growth. But beneath this shared language lies a widening gap between what workers prioritise and what companies actually deliver.

Singapore's workforce is pragmatic but disappointed. While most employees understand trade-offs, 80% say that within the first three months on the job they have noticed a mismatch or misalignment around pay fairness, job scope or transparency.

Employers, on the other hand, believe they are performing well on balance and flexibility, but they may be underestimating how much financial fairness and clarity of work expectations define genuine satisfaction.

The result is a misalignment that quietly drives turnover and disillusionment.

80%
of all employees say they have experienced a job misalignment

18%
of employers say they offer "above-average" pay

51%
of employees lament they cannot find roles matching their salary expectations

Key Insights

What Employees Want versus What Employers Think They Offer

Both employees and employers care about similar priorities — pay, flexibility, growth, and culture — but they interpret the value of these things very differently.

Employees value fairness and reciprocity: fair pay for honest work, growth for loyalty, flexibility for trust.

Employers equate balance with fairness, assuming flexible hours or wellness perks compensate for pay or clarity gaps.

This misunderstanding is what fuels this expectation gap and discontent.

Singapore's workforce knows they cannot have everything, but that does not mean they will settle. Instead, they make **conditional compromises:** they will trade one thing if the exchange feels fair, balanced, and future-focused.

What Employees Want			What Employers Offer	
46% rank pay as their top priority, but only **25%** feel they receive it. Many highlight other priorities that show they value balance — but not *instead* of fair pay.	46%	**Pay & Benefits** **High gap:** Compensation undervalued.	18%	Only **18%** offer above-average salaries. **36%** offer career growth as "opportunity," but employees measure fairness through pay equity.
46% prioritise flexible work **26%** say employers could improve their access to it.	46%	**Flexibility** **Moderate gap:** Access uneven.	43%	**43%** say they offer flexibility, but access depends on seniority or role.
28% want career growth and more learning opportunities.	28%	**Career Growth** **Perception gap:** Opportunities exist but may not feel relevant or attainable.	36%	**36%** claim to provide strong growth pathways.
80% have experienced mismatched expectations, often around pay, job scope or culture.	80%	**Culture & Transparency** **High gap:** Early trust breaks & low clarity.	27%	**27%** of employers cite "misaligned expectations" about role requirements during the hiring process.

Employees expect transparency and reciprocity — fair pay for honest work, flexibility for trust, growth for loyalty.

Employers prioritise culture and balance, but undervalue how financial recognition and role clarity build trust.

Key Insights

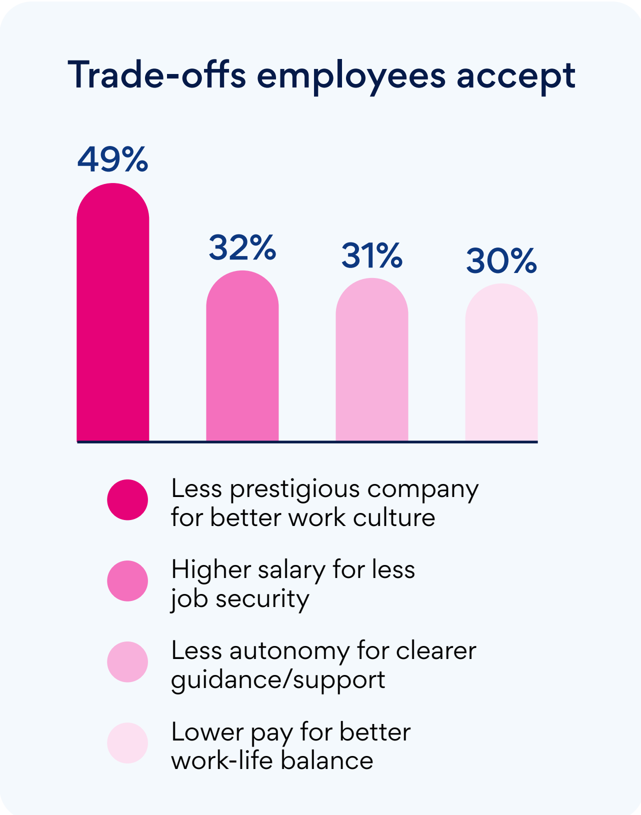
The Trade-Off Mindset: Conditional Compromise

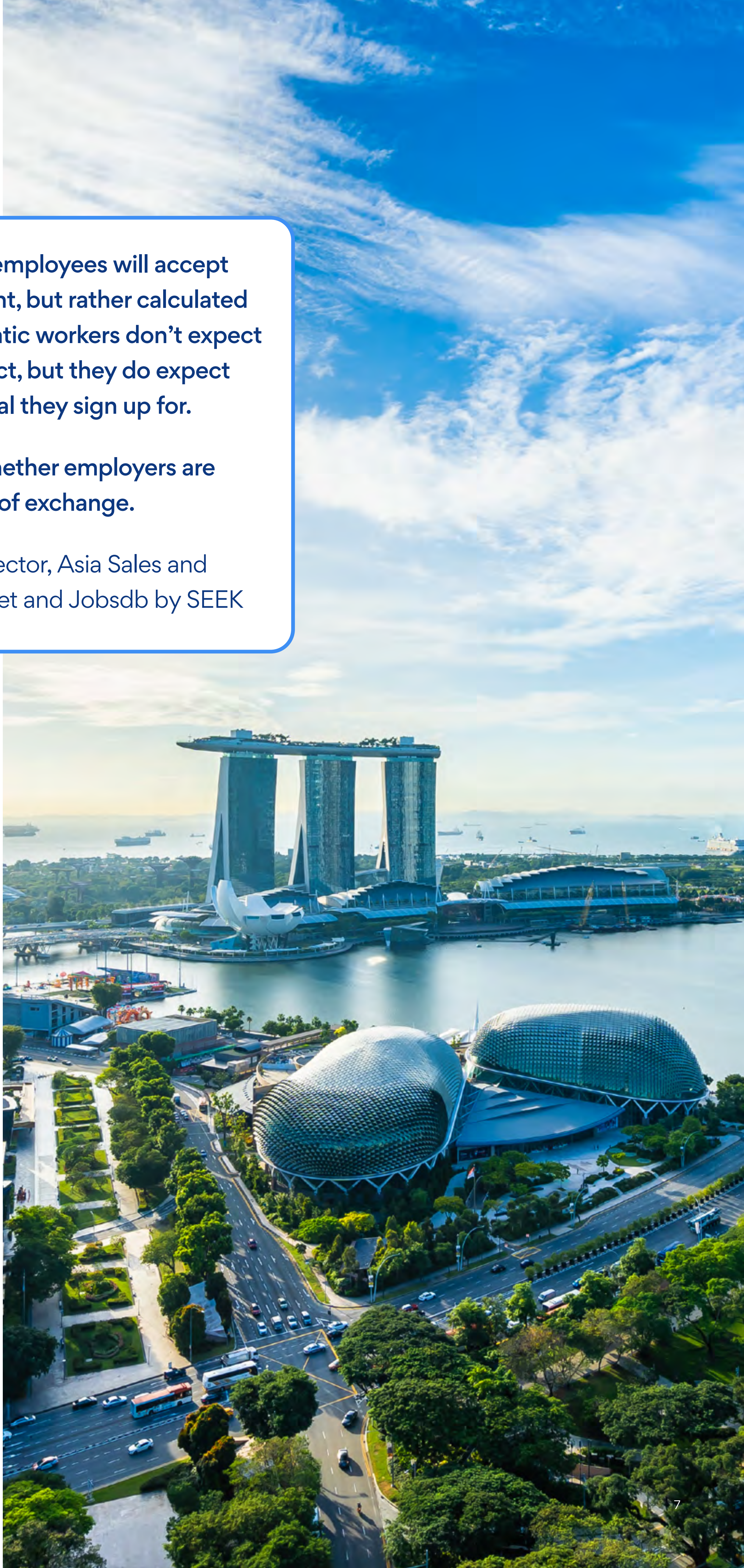
While competitive salary tops the list of employee priorities, most workers also accept that trade-offs are part of modern employment. This isn't a contradiction — it's them being realistic.

Singapore's workforce knows they cannot have everything, but they are selective about what they will compromise. This conditional compromise means they may give something up, but only if the exchange feels fair and balanced.

Employers face similar trade-offs from the other side. Many (64%) say they'd hire less experienced candidates for good attitude, or provide more training in exchange for lower starting pay. Both sides are negotiating balance — just from different pressures.

Those in SMEs show slightly higher willingness to compromise (likely prioritising job security), while MNC employees expect the "full package."





> These trade-offs that employees will accept don't reveal entitlement, but rather calculated fairness. These pragmatic workers don't expect employers to be perfect, but they do expect transparency in the deal they sign up for.
>
> The real question is whether employers are offering the right kind of exchange.
>
> — Yuh Yng Chook, Director, Asia Sales and APAC Service, Jobstreet and Jobsdb by SEEK

Employee Data

Employees: Pragmatic but Disappointed

Despite understanding the realities of business, most employees feel short-changed.

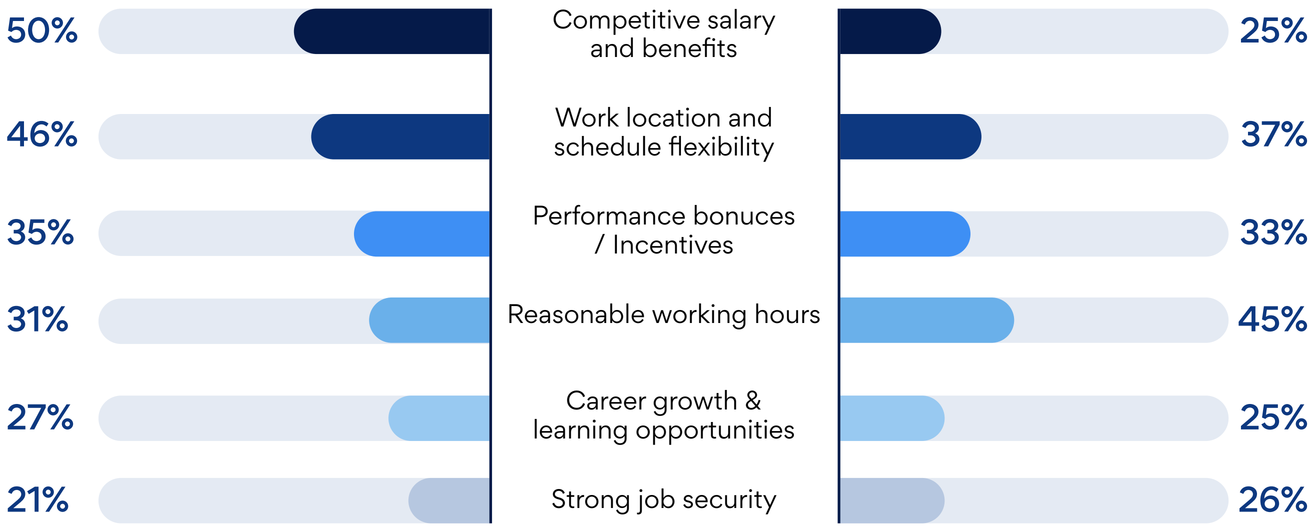
Only 25% say they receive competitive pay, yet 46% rank it as their top priority.

Younger workers (25–34) prioritise growth and learning. Mid-career professionals (35–44) crave balance and recognition. Older employees (45–54) value stability, honesty, and respect.

What Employees Want versus What They Get

“What matters most to you when looking for a job?”

“What does your employer currently provide?”



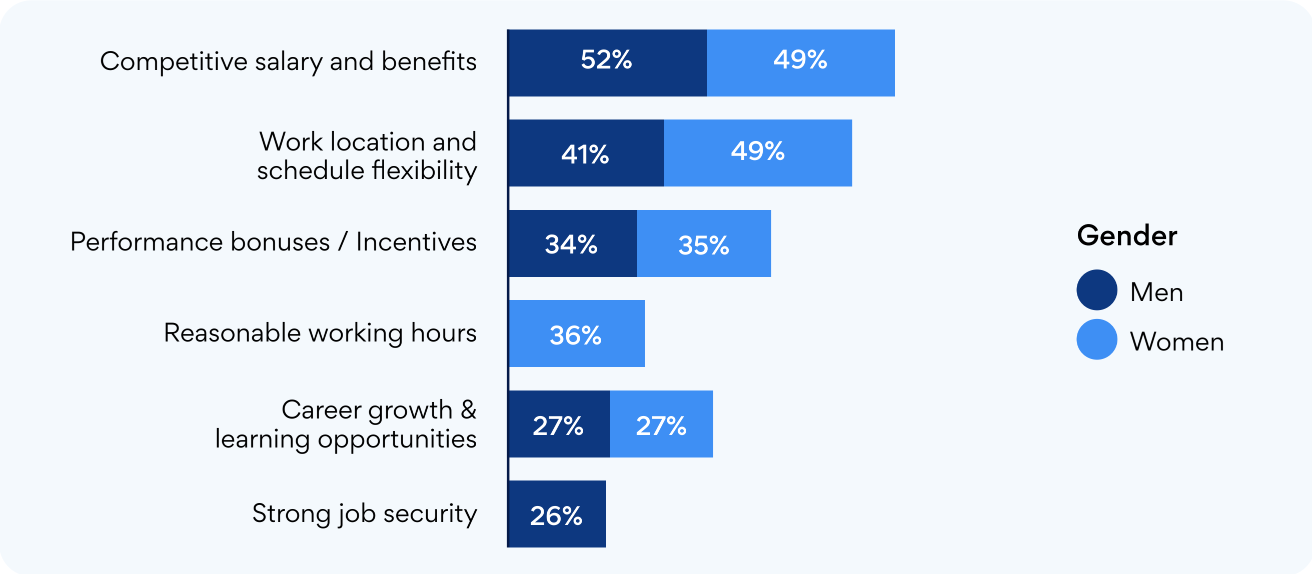
3 things talent wish employers would add today to improve their experience at work

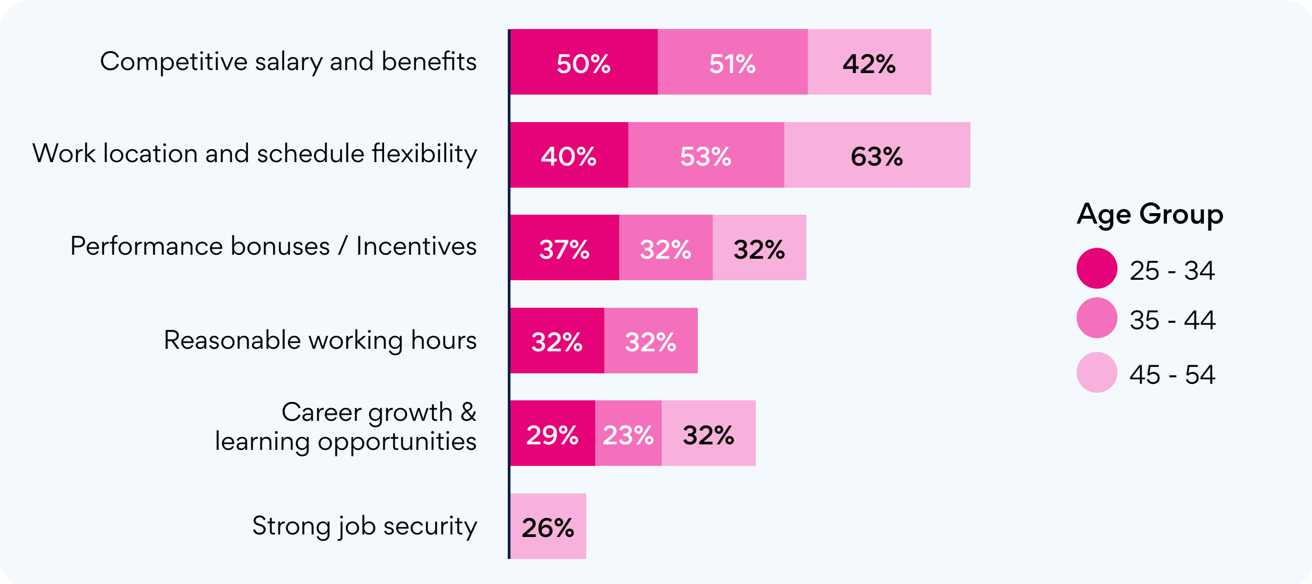
46%
Competitive salary and benefits

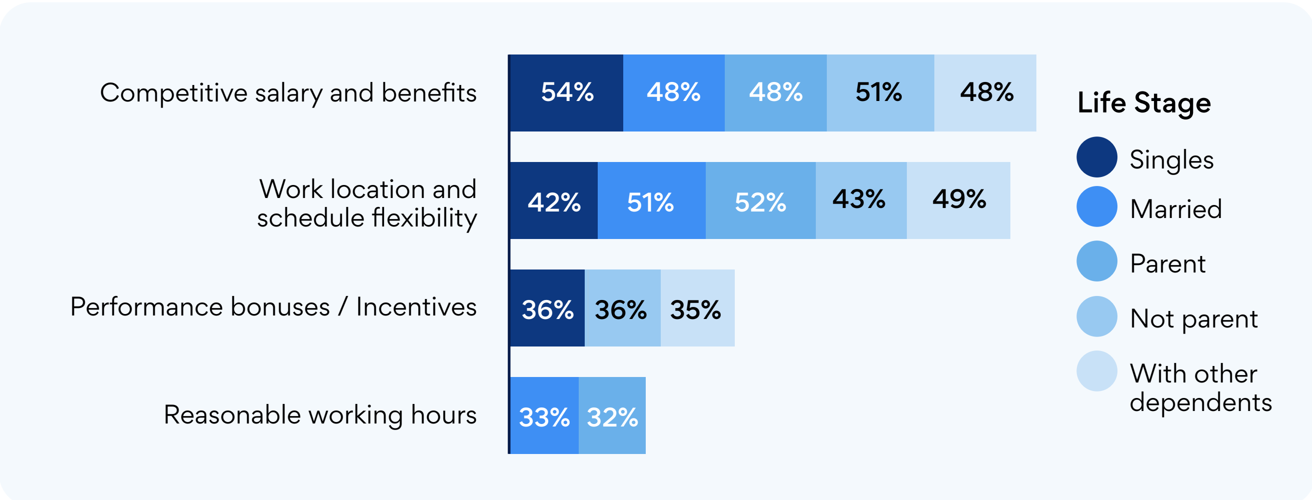
39%
Performance bonuses / incentives

28%
Career growth & learning opportunities

Across demographics, pay and flexibility dominate as job search priorities — swapping order depending on life stage — but the underlying driver is always fairness:







Employee Data

Mismatches: Where It Breaks Down

Eight in ten employees have experienced some form of mismatch, and six in ten identify it within the first three months. The top causes of this are pay misalignment (24%), unclear roles (22%), and culture mismatch (19%).

80%

of all employees say they have experienced a job misalignment

60%

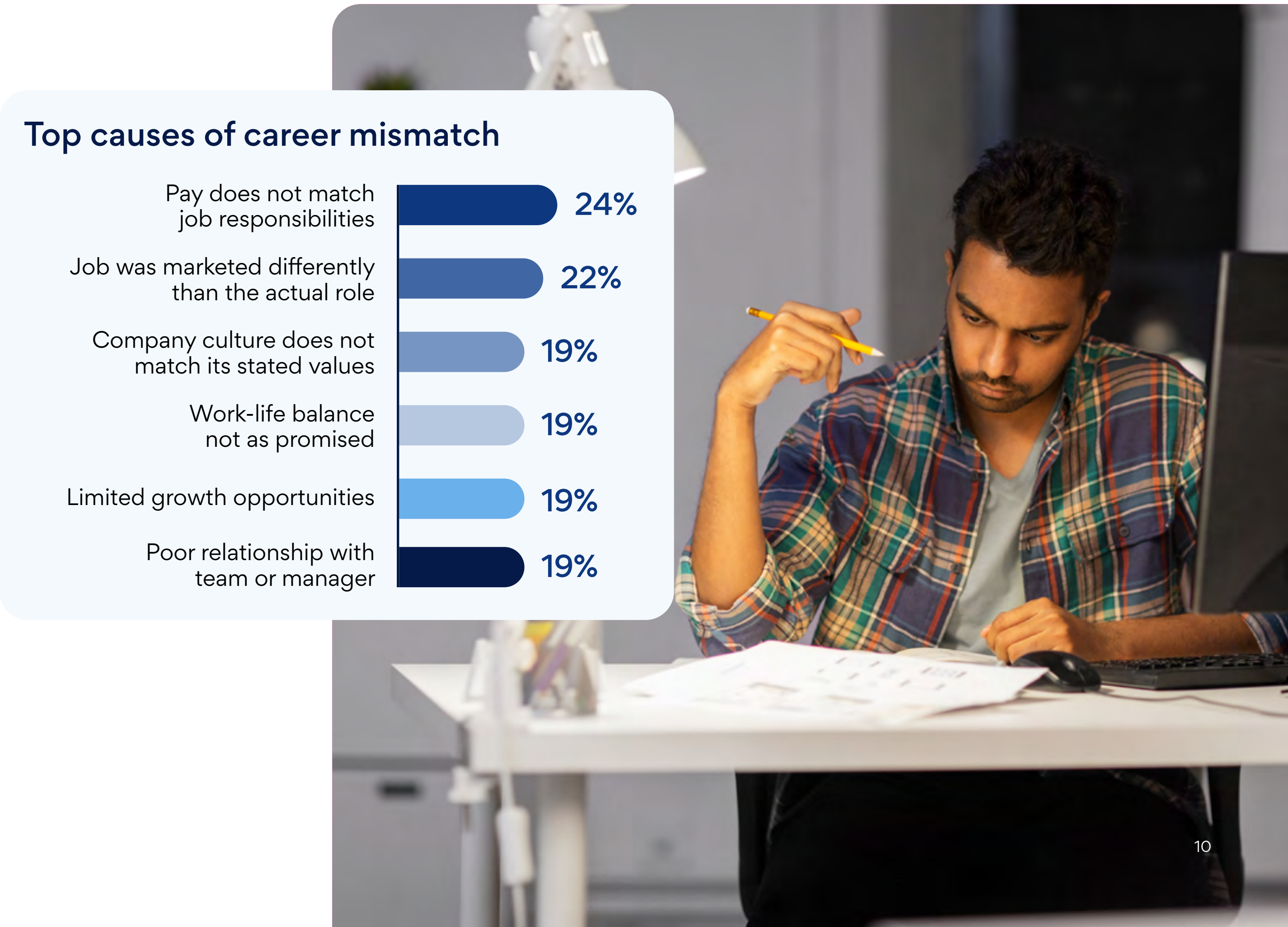
noticed this within the **first 3 months**

12%

noticed this **between 4-6 months**

8%

noticed this after **more than 6 months**

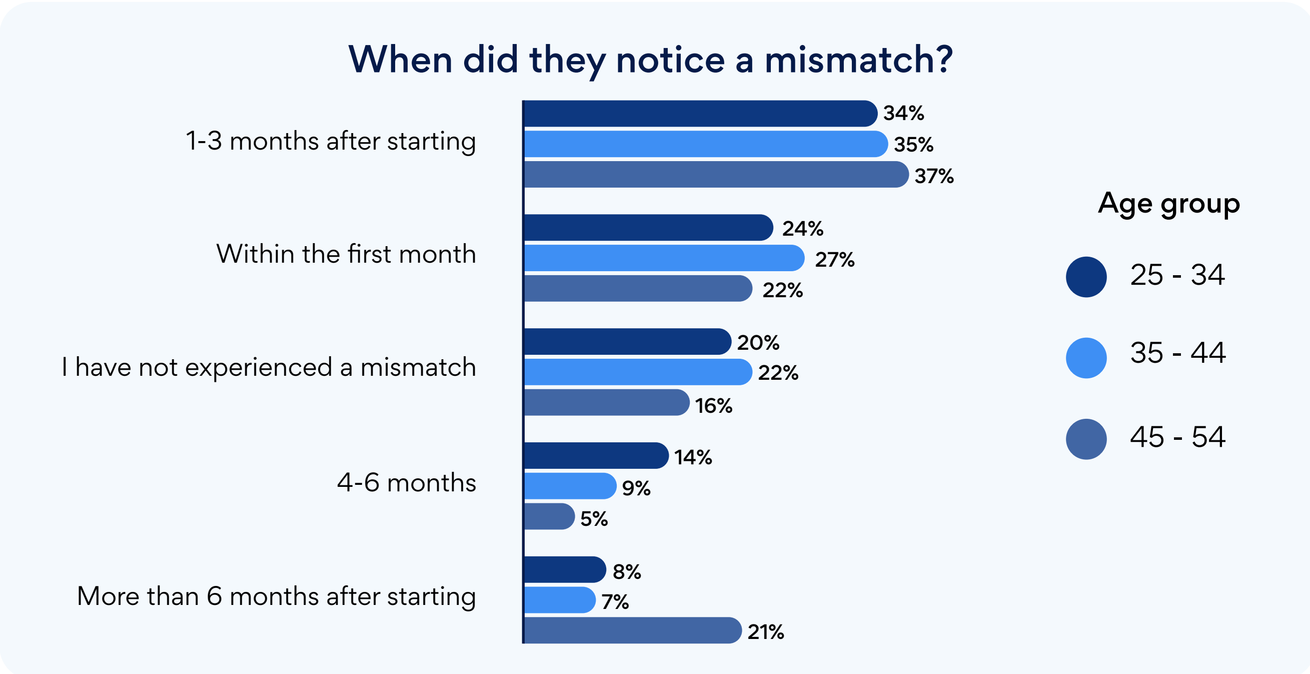


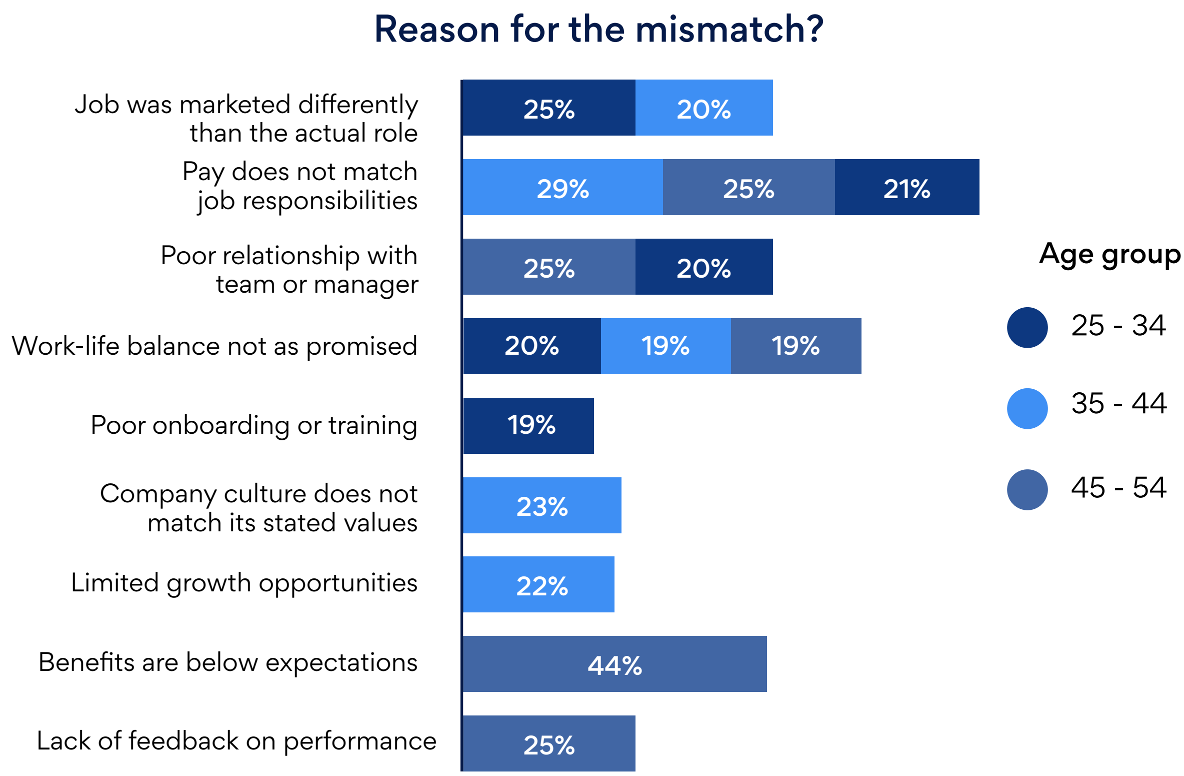
When we break this down further, we see how these mismatches evolve - making it potentially harder for employees to stay on top of employee expectations.

Younger employees face a "reality check": This could be due to numerous reasons, including job descriptions not matching lived experiences, overmarketing, or simply being ill-prepared for the workforce.

Mid-career employees are driven by pay fairness and career impact: They are most sensitive to pay gaps, culture misalignment and stagnant career growth.

Older employees experience slower disillusionment, tied to benefits and respect: This signals a need for tailored retention strategies.





Warning! Catch these mismatches early

When the majority of respondents say they notice misalignments within three months of starting a new job, that's a glaring red flag for hiring accuracy and onboarding clarity.

> **The data shows that while mismatches between employees and employers may evolve with age, the root cause remains the same: a lack of honest, two-way communication about what employees can truly expect versus what employers can sustainably deliver.**
>
> — Yuh Yng Chook, Director, Asia Sales and APAC Service, Jobstreet and Jobsdb by SEEK

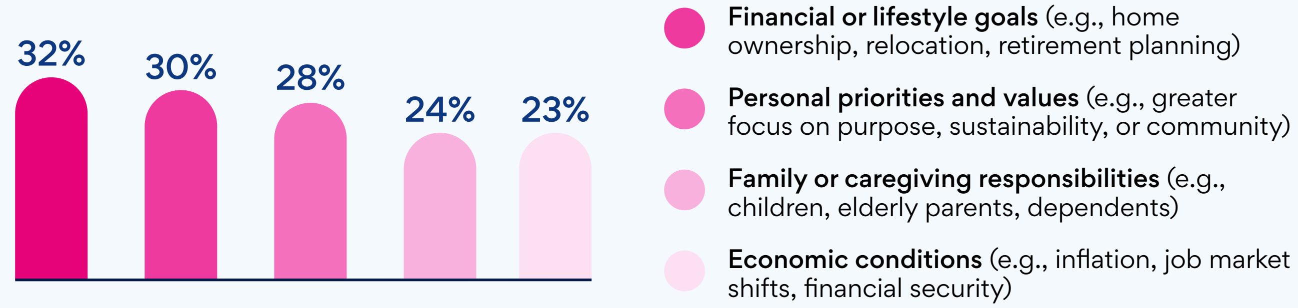
Employee Data

Evolving Priorities Reshape how Employees Assess Job Satisfaction

Although employees are evenly split between those whose priorities have shifted since starting their current role (49%) and those whose haven't (51%), factors like mental health, lifestyle goals, and family responsibilities are driving much of this change.

For men, it's personal priorities and shifting values that comes out on top (36%) while for women it's mental health (38%). For the youngest staff aged 25-34, mental health comes first (33%), while family and caregiving responsibilities is the priority that has shifted the most for those aged 34-44 (31%) and 45-54 (44%).

What were the top factors that influenced this change in priorities?



When we compare this to data on whether their priorities have shifted, we found those whose focus has changed are slightly more likely to report early mismatches than those who say their priorities haven't. This does not suggest that changing priorities create mismatches; rather, when expectations shift, employees are more attentive to whether their role still aligns with what they now value.

	Have your priorities changed?	
	Yes	**No**
Noticed job mismatch 1-3 months in	37%	32%
Noticed job mismatch within the first month	24%	25%

It's worth employers and HR teams noting this when it comes to creating job descriptions for hiring. We often see these same JDs floating around for years with little change or understanding of how employees' priorities may be shifting. Hirers should consider who they are trying to target for specific roles, and what changes they may be grappling with, or where their focus currently lies.

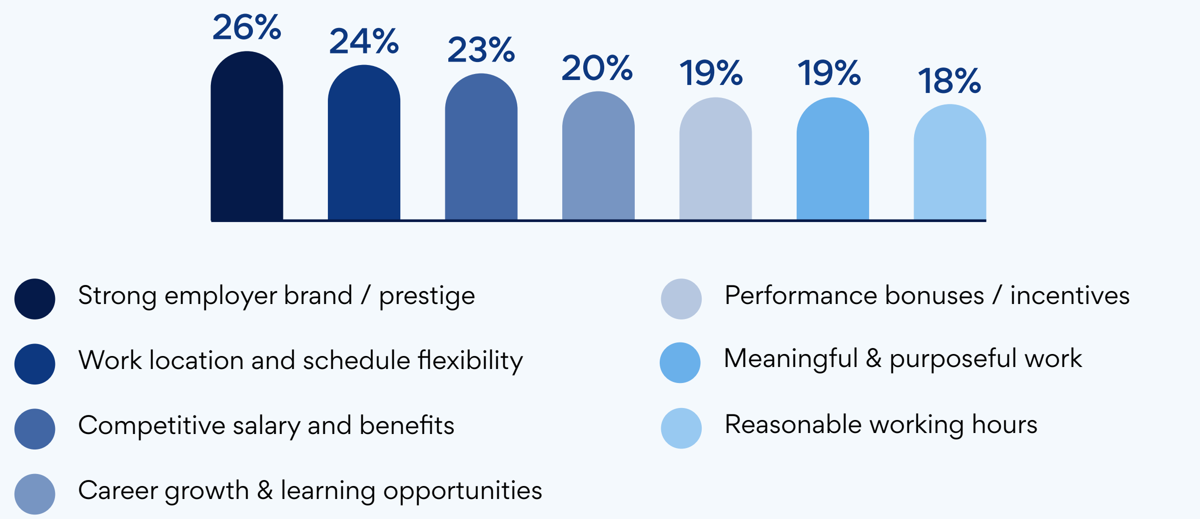
— Yuh Yng Chook, Director, Asia Sales and APAC Service, Jobstreet and Jobsdb by SEEK

Employee Data

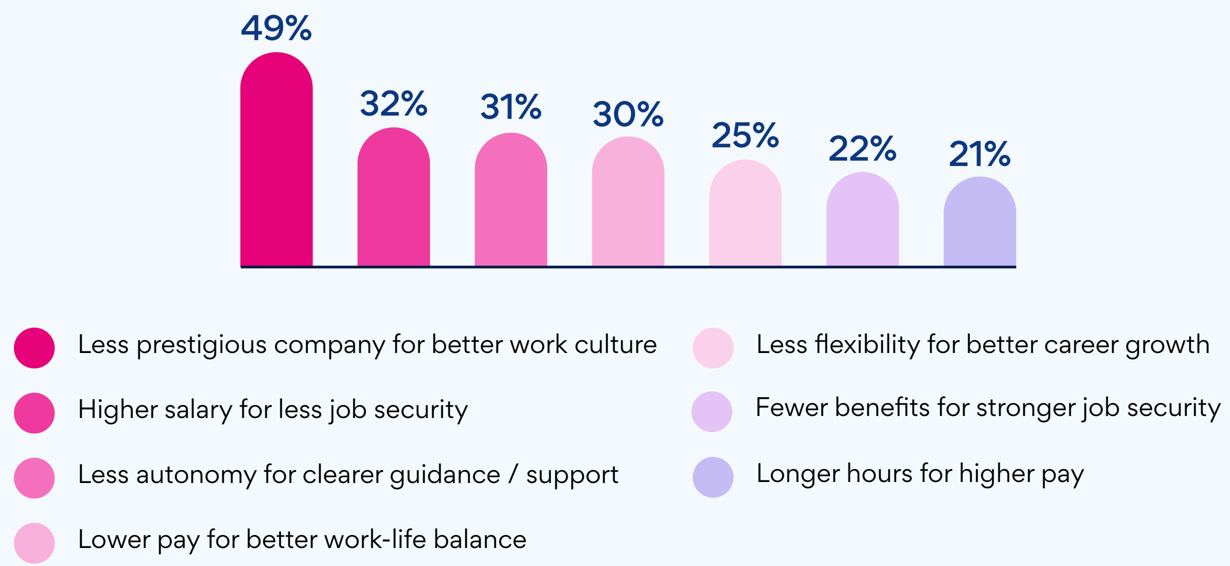
The Conditional Compromise

Alongside these shifting priorities, the data tells us that when push comes to shove, employees will trade certain priorities in favour of others. However, what they are willing to compromise on comes with conditions.

What employees are most willing to compromise on when job searching



The trade-offs they will accept



A reality check

Despite all the data showing that employees value pay and compensation highest, 23% are willing to compromise on it.

This isn't a contradiction, but rather a reflection of realistic trade-offs employees feel they must make.

Some other interesting things to note with these trade-offs:

Flexibility and salary are not always deal-breakers.
Employees recognise these as competitive advantages not all employers can offer. They are willing to sacrifice them for stronger career growth, better culture, stability, and clear growth pathways, prioritising long-term security.

Salary compromises are often short-term trade-offs.
Singapore's competitive market means candidates prioritise job security or career progression over immediate pay. For instance, 32% would accept a higher salary for less job security, and others compromise pay for work-life balance (30%) or clearer growth (25%). So, even if pay is the top desire, flexibility in expectation is crucial for navigating a tight job market.

Employers are not meeting expectations, forcing realism.
Only 25% report competitive salary/benefits, yet nearly half desire more. This indicates employees are adjusting expectations due to the scarcity of "ideal jobs".

Employee Data

Trade-Offs by Company & Age Group

Even across different life stages, employees in Singapore have the same desire for fairness.

- **Younger employees:** willing to trade flexibility for growth.
- **Mid-career:** prioritise balance and culture.
- **Older employees:** value job security over everything.

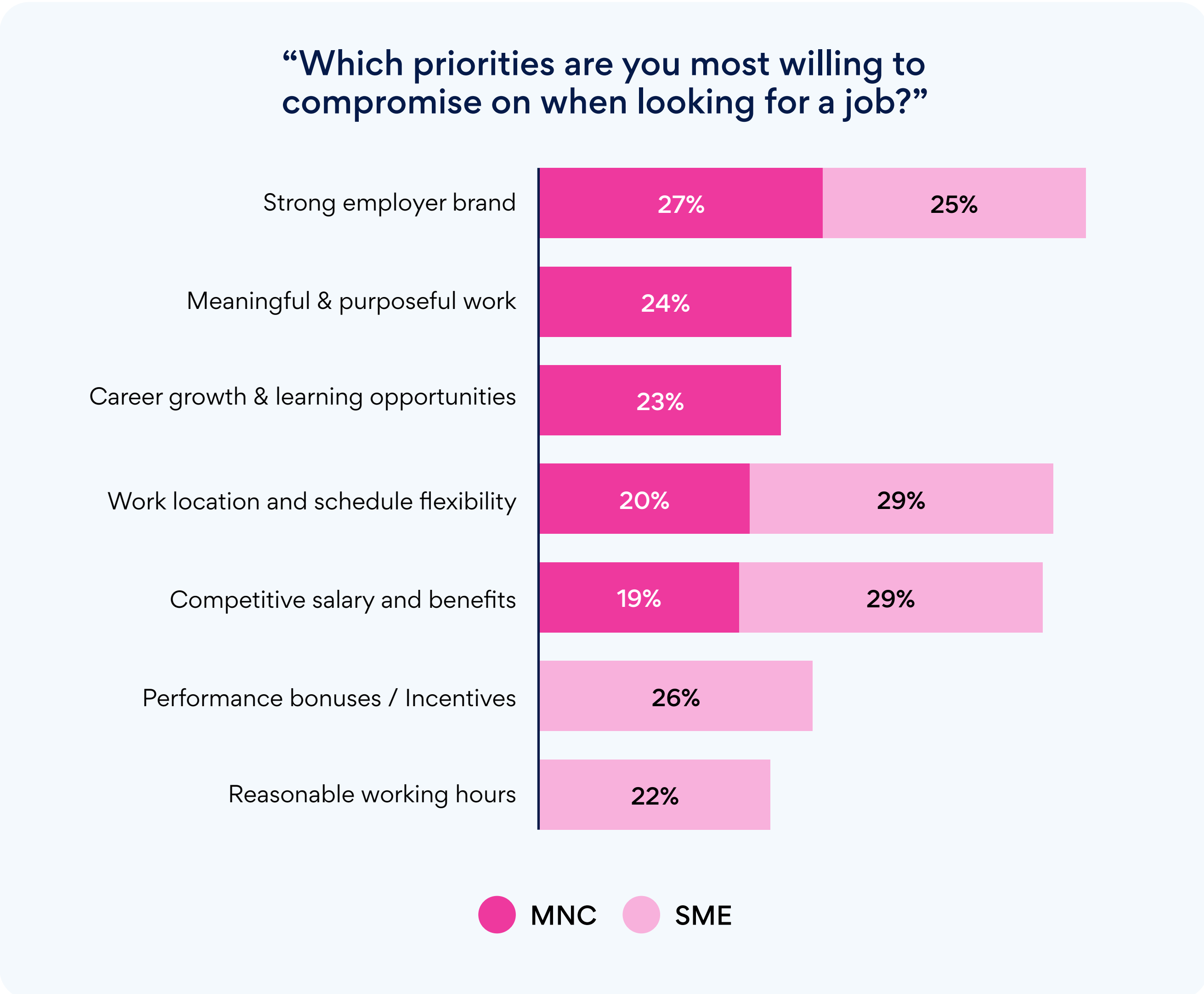
These differences may seem generational, but they all point to the same core expectation — that effort, loyalty and performance are met with fairness through pay, balance, or security.

MNC employees want "the full package" while SME staff are more flexible

When segmenting respondents into the size of organisation they work for, a trend emerges: those who work for MNCs are less flexible on trade-offs than those who are at SMEs. This isn't because expectations around these trade-offs are lower, but rather due to risk tolerance being higher.

SME respondents are more willing to compromise across almost all priorities. This may be due to recognising that smaller firms cannot always compete on pay, benefits or brand prestige. Their compromises suggest a more realistic, security-driven mindset, where trade-offs are accepted in exchange for stability, culture or growth potential.

On the other hand, MNC employees are less willing to compromise, especially on pay and flexibility — but they are more willing to give up brand prestige, meaningful work and growth opportunities. MNC staff likely already enjoy strong structural benefits, so their compromises tend to be more intangible than practical.



Employer Data

Employers: Well-intentioned but Misaligned

Employers across Singapore believe they are delivering value, but employees see the gaps. They are not disconnected from what talent wants — in fact, they are trying to build workplaces that offer balance, belonging, and growth — but good intentions do not always translate into impact.

Nearly half of employers (46%) believe they already meet employee expectations, driven by well-intentioned offerings around work-life balance and professional growth.

The top reported benefits include:

- **Reasonable working hours (55%)**
- **Performance bonuses (52%)**
- **Work flexibility (43%)**
- **Career growth (36%)**

These reflect a strong *intent* to care, but it may not be as impactful as employers hope.

While employers emphasise culture and development, only about one in five say they offer above-average salaries — the lowest-ranked benefit — revealing a significant blind spot around financial fairness.

46%
believe they meet employee expectations

55%
say they offer "reasonable working hours" - the most common benefit across all employers

18%
say they offer above-average pay - the least common benefit across all employers

90%
say that employee expectations 'sometimes' or 'frequently' change

Additionally, 90% of employers say they notice employee expectations change after they start working at their company shows that this expectation gap isn't static, it's moving.

This shifting goal post adds to the pressure: employers are chasing evolving priorities that they cannot always anticipate. Some of these shifts follow predictable patterns — younger workers tend to prioritise growth, mid-career staff look for balance, and older employees value stability — but employers still struggle to keep pace with how quickly these priorities evolve.

Employer Data

The Hiring Disconnect

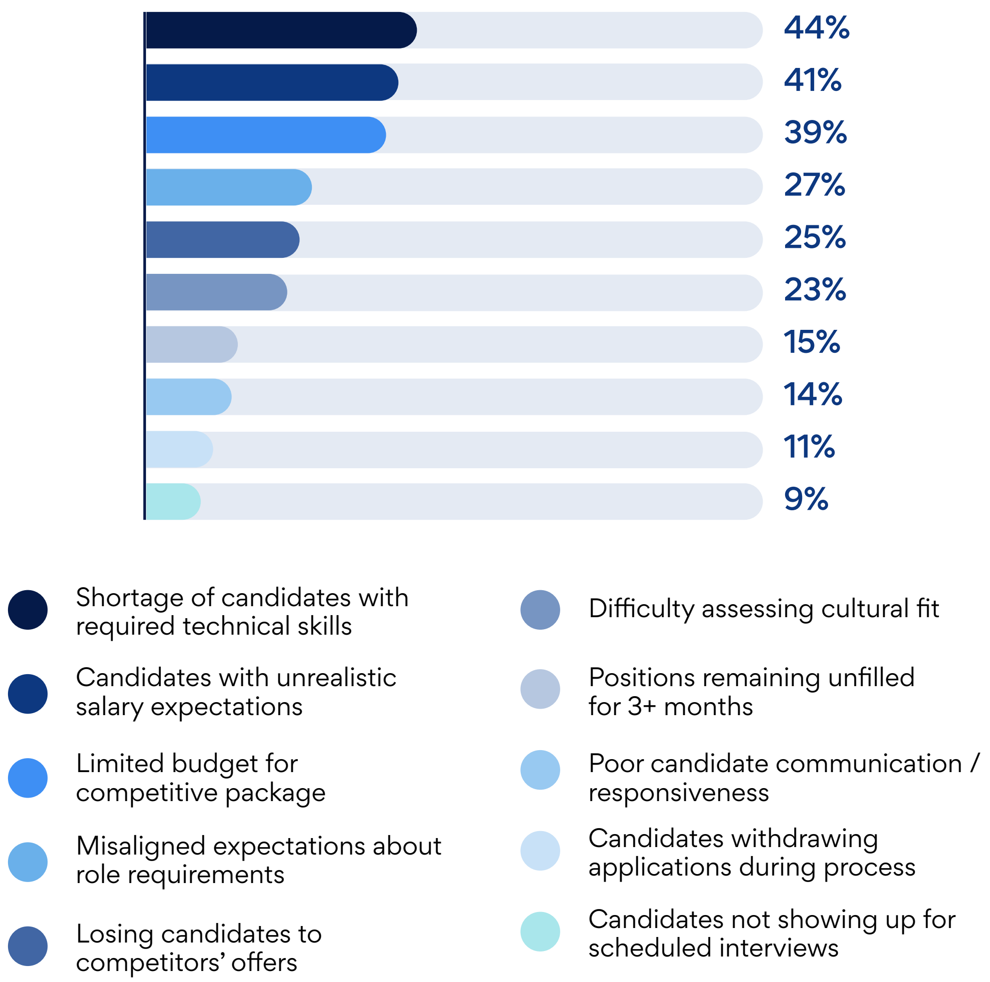
Interestingly, the biggest struggles for employers in Singapore mirror employee frustrations:

44%	41%	39%
Shortage of skilled talent	Unrealistic salary expectations	Budget limitations

It's also important to note that employers, too, see misaligned expectations about role requirements (27%) as a challenge when hiring, and 25% worry about losing candidates to competitors who can offer more pay.

This shows employers can see the signs and the gaps - but are they doing enough to address them?

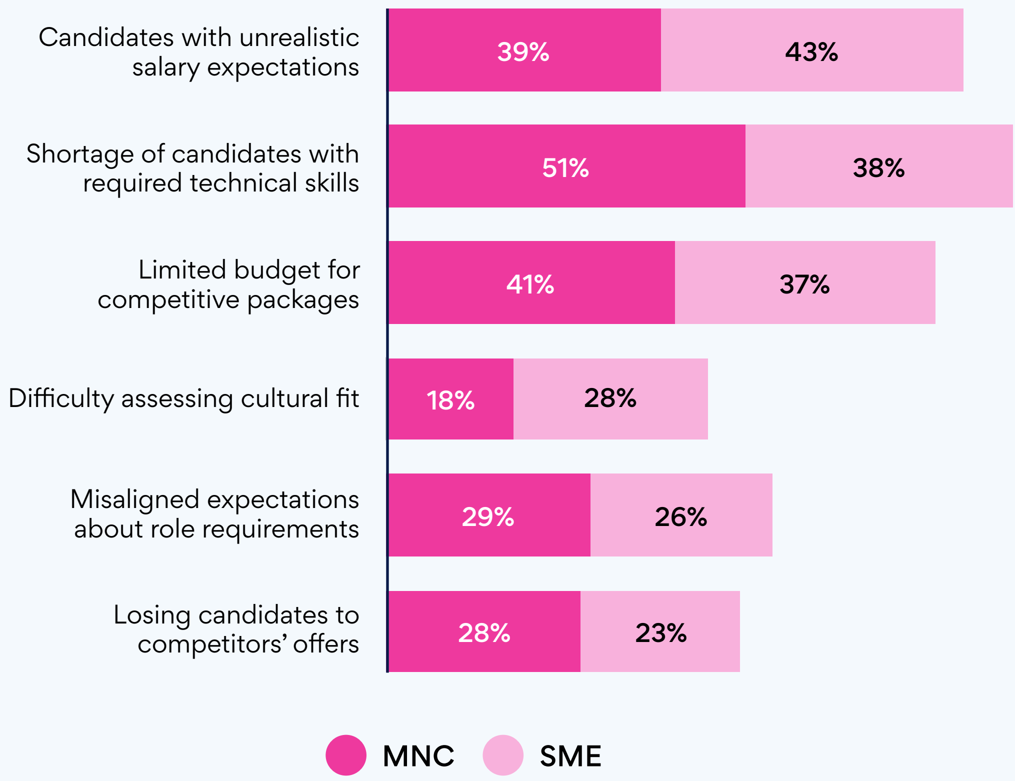
"What are your biggest challenges in the hiring process?"



When broken down between SMEs and MNCs, we see that smaller businesses struggle more with unrealistic salary expectations (43%) and skill shortages (38%), while MNCs face skills shortages (51%) and limited budgets (41%).

Both also struggle with role misalignment, showing that businesses of all sizes face the same issues from different ends of the spectrum — but while SMEs lack budget, MNCs lack agility to address challenges.

SME and MNC biggest hiring challenges



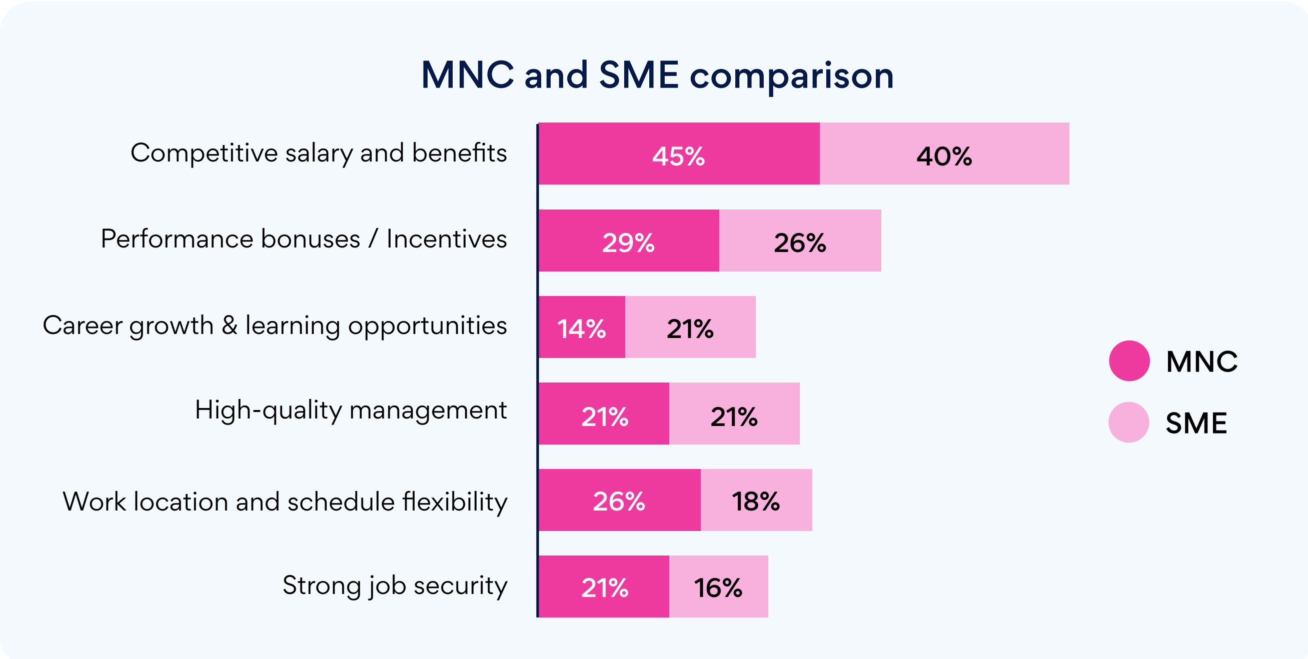
Employer Data

The Real Delivery Problem

When we look at the priorities for employers, we see they echo the top employee priorities almost exactly: compensation, flexibility, and growth.

The truth is that while employers are trying to meet expectations, they often cannot afford, operationalise or scale things fast enough.

This is also reflected across business types, with MNCs struggling most with competitive pay (45%), bonuses (29%) and flexibility (26%). SMEs report similar pay (40%) and bonus challenges (26%), but slightly more strain on career growth opportunities (21%) and management quality (21%).



Employer Data

The Trade-Off Trap: Balancing Ideals and Realities in Hiring

When it comes to hiring, employers are clear about their top priorities — adaptability, problem-solving, and strong skills are considered non-negotiable. Beyond capability, salary expectations and cultural fit also rank highly, showing that employers still value soft traits and mindset as much as technical expertise.

This is pragmatic: companies are not chasing perfection, but resilience. They want employees who can adapt, solve, and grow with the business.

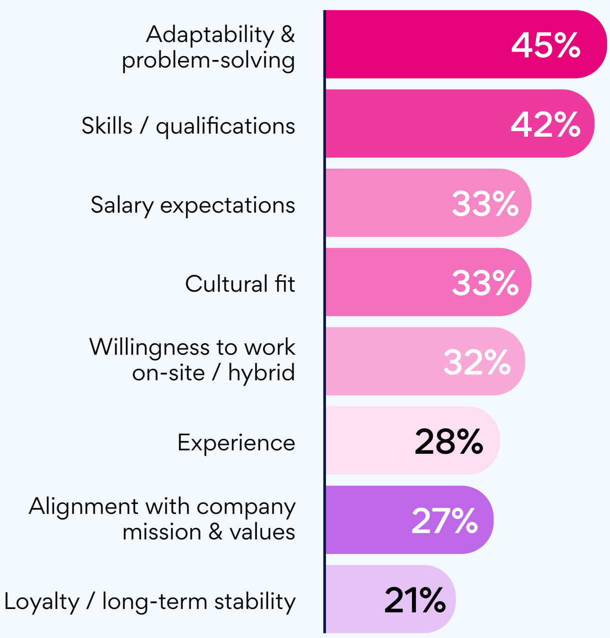
However, when talent is scarce or budgets are tight, those ideals quickly give way:

- **64%** would hire a *less experienced candidate* with a *good attitude*.
- **36%** would accept lower experience in exchange for *lower salary expectations*.
- **35%** would *provide training for a lower starting salary*.
- **28%** would *hire for cultural fit despite skill gaps*.

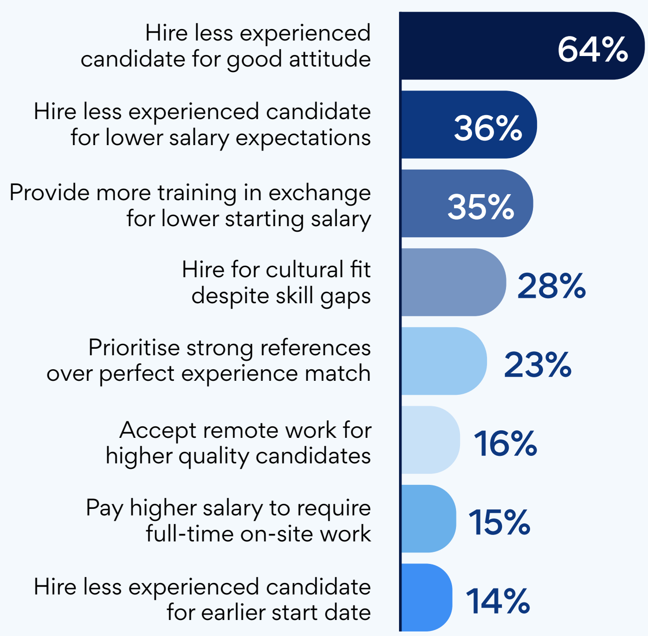
This shows us that employers are not rigid and try to stay flexible — but flexibility here often flows one way. While companies bend on experience, they rarely stretch on pay. For employees, however, pay remains the baseline of fairness.

This is where the trap lies: **the compromises employers make to remain sustainable do not always align with what employees perceive as fair trade-offs.**

"Which of the following are truly non-negotiable when hiring?"



"Which trade-offs would you consider when hiring?"



> We're seeing expectations evolve faster than most employers can keep up with. Around 90% of employers say employees' priorities shift over time — often due to relationships, personal values or growth opportunities. It's not that companies aren't listening or don't understand that employee needs evolve; it's that most systems are still designed to react rather than anticipate these changes.
>
> — Yuh Yng Chook, Director, Asia Sales and APAC Service, Jobstreet and Jobsdb by SEEK

Bridging the Expectation Gap

Across both sides, priorities align in theory but diverge in delivery. Employers say they are listening, but operational limits and shifting values keep them one step behind. Employees feel progress has stalled — that promises of flexibility, pay fairness, and growth often stop short in practice.

This data underscores a critical tension:

Both employers and employees believe they're being reasonable, yet each feels the other has stopped meeting them halfway.

Understanding this divide starts with unpacking the key drivers behind it — the practical, cultural, and emotional forces shaping how each side views fairness, value, and change.

Money Matters Most
Pay remains the hardest, most defining aspect of satisfaction — for both sides.

Promises versus Reality
Employers tend to overestimate intangible benefits while underestimating the importance of compensation.

Shifting Values
Expectations evolve fast — 90% of employers say priorities frequently change.

Trade-Offs Are Structural
Employers make rational trade-offs (e.g., cost control) to stay viable, while employees interpret these as lack of care or broken promises.

What Can Employers Do?

Employers can no longer rely on generic engagement programmes or annual reviews — they need ongoing alignment between what's promised, what's possible, and what's delivered. The goal isn't perfection, but precision: knowing what to clarify, modernise, and adapt in real time.

For SMEs

Clarify the match:
Define realistic expectations early through transparent job descriptions and honest discussions about growth and pay.

Update Job Descriptions regularly:
Consider your targeted candidates and what life stage they are at. How can you meet them where they are and show you understand their needs? How can this come across in a job description?

Build small loops of trust:
Employers need to catch shifting priorities or job mismatches early. Create lightweight systems during onboarding or the probation period for regular check-ins and two-way feedback.

Be upfront about trade-offs:
Acknowledge your resource limits, but highlight what you can offer — stability, autonomy, flexibility. Be honest about your ability to meet these expectations.

Be realistic about short-term trade-offs:
If you cannot offer competitive pay now, understand that talent will not put up with this for long. Provide new hires with a development and action plan to get them to the compensation they desire in an agreed-upon timeframe.

Leverage agility:
Use your smaller size to pilot new engagement or learning initiatives faster than larger organisations can.

For MNCs

Connect culture to growth:
Make career pathways visible and measurable; ensure employees see a clear line between effort and advancement.

Close the compensation loop:
Strengthen pay transparency and reward mechanisms to rebuild trust in fairness.

Redefine flexibility:
Balance global policy with local nuance — tailor hybrid and benefit models to market expectations.

Recalibrate with data:
Use engagement insights quarterly to guide managerial coaching, retention focus, and communication tone.

What Can Employees Do?

Employees have more agency than they think — but it starts with clarity. Managing expectations means knowing what truly matters, communicating it early, and staying adaptable as priorities evolve. The most satisfied employees are not those who expect everything, but those who negotiate consciously and build alignment over time.

1. **Know what your trade-offs are:**
   Be clear on your current priorities and what you value most. Bring this up in the interview stage and prioritise the roles that align with this. Ask the right questions to know if a company will also be able to shift with you if your priorities were to change.

2. **Do your due diligence:**
   Research culture, management style, and flexibility before accepting offers to reduce post-hire mismatch.

3. **Communicate changes early:**
   When your personal priorities do shift, ensure you flag them before disengagement sets in. Do not wait for formal feedback opportunities — bring things up with your manager as soon as possible.

4. **Invest in adaptability:**
   Treat skill-building and self-management as insurance — they expand your options and reduce dependence on employer compromises.

Closing the Great Expectation Gap

This gap isn't about disagreement — it's about the current distance between a shared goal of meaningful employment and a healthy work environment. Employers are focused on sustainability and structure; employees are chasing meaning and momentum. Between the two lies a space where intentions align, but experiences diverge.

Bridging this gap will require more than policy updates or pay adjustments. It demands a cultural reset where transparency replaces assumption, and dialogue replaces guesswork. Employers must learn to communicate not only what's ideal, but what's realistically possible, and understand how different life stages shape shifting priorities, so they can anticipate these changes. In turn, employees must take ownership of the trade-offs they make, stay aware of how their priorities evolve, and speak up early before disengagement sets in.

> **When both sides can engage honestly about trade-offs, growth, and values, alignment will follow. That's how workplaces stop reacting to change and start anticipating it — through some compromise, but mostly through clarity.**
>
> — Yuh Yng Chook, Director, Asia Sales and APAC Service, Jobstreet and Jobsdb by SEEK

About

Jobstreet by SEEK

Jobstreet is a leading employment marketplace, connecting the right people with the right work in Singapore since 1999. Operated by SEEK, an Australian Securities Exchange-listed company, Jobstreet combines its deep local expertise with SEEK's world-class AI technology and platform to create relevant job and talent matches across Asia Pacific.

For more information, visit www.jobstreet.com.