

A man and a woman are standing in a warehouse, looking at a tablet together. The man is on the left, wearing a dark jacket, and the woman is on the right, wearing a dark blazer over a light shirt. They are both looking at the tablet held by the woman. The background shows metal shelving units filled with boxes. The entire image has a blue tint.

# Workforce in Flux: Americans and the Changing World of Work

February 2026

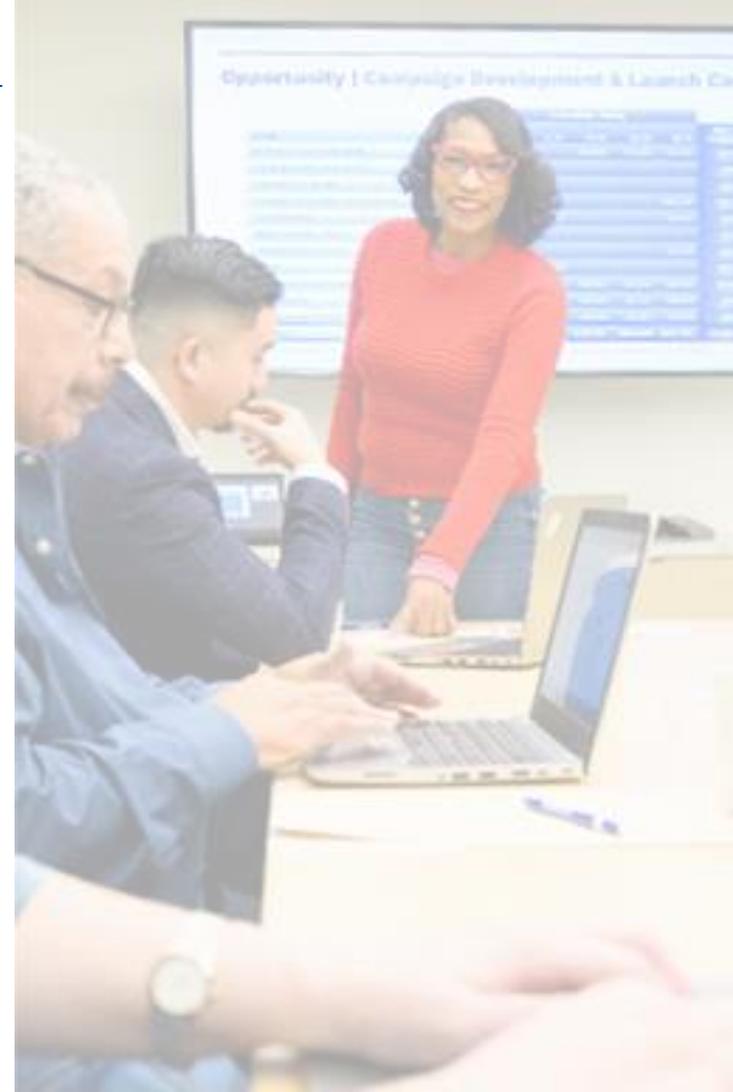
## The Survey

In 2025, the only constant in the job market was change, with automation, AI, economic fluctuations among the major drivers.

Mass layoffs, rapid shifts and consequential disruptions left many workers feeling uncertain about their professional futures. Existing data and research – from high-level economic indicators such as the monthly jobs reports, to studies like [Closing the Opportunity Gap](#), tell part of this story. However, very little is known about the experiences of the people behind the numbers.

This research seeks to fill that critical gap, exploring a number of topics, including:

- How job market volatility is reshaping workers' confidence and ability to achieve landmark financial milestones.
- Where workers are turning for the support and professional development they need to stay ahead.
- How Americans are experiencing AI in their professional roles.



## Key Finding #1: There is an AI Hype vs. Reality gap.

- **AI is not yet a primary career tool. Despite the dominance of AI in the news cycle, only 22 percent of Americans currently use AI for career training, advancement, or upskilling.** More than one-third of Americans (35%) still do not use AI in their professional lives.
  - Gen Z, despite being the 'digital natives' of the workforce, are not leading the charge, with only 21 percent using AI for professional development.
  - Gen X (41%) and Gen Z (38%) are most likely to NOT use AI in their professional lives.
- **Most employers, despite valuing AI skills, are not providing adequate on-the-job training or talking about the technology with employees.** Only 41 percent of Americans report their employers providing adequate training on AI, and 34 percent say their employer does not discuss AI at all.
- **American workers are divided on AI.** More than half (54%) say they do not trust AI to support or advance their careers. However, 57 percent say AI is a good supplement to their skills.
  - Gen Z was least likely to say AI is a good supplement to their skills, at 45 percent, compared to Baby Boomers, who were most likely to say it is, at 67 percent.
- **Despite significant AI disruptions this year, less than half of Americans (48%) said AI is required to survive in the workforce.** Of all generations, Baby Boomers are most inclined to believe AI is required to survive in the workforce (57%) and that AI provides a career opportunity (60%).



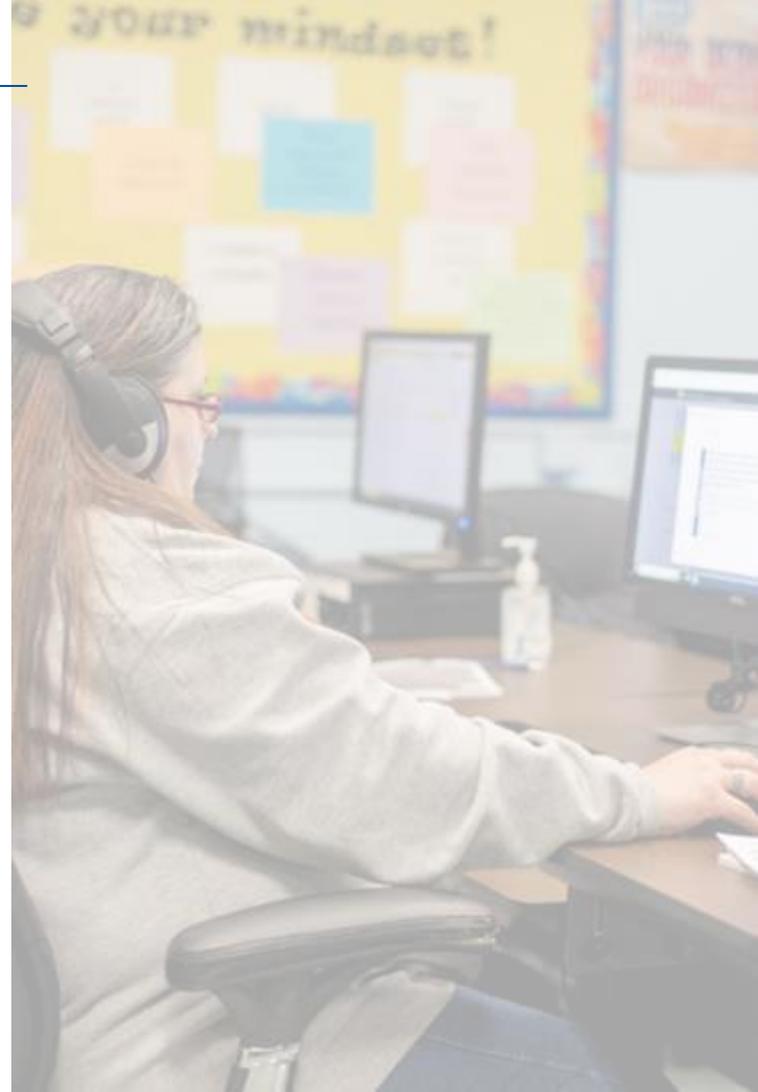
## Key Finding #2: A “generational recession” is causing a divide between Gen Z and their older peers.

- **Unemployment is elevated among younger workers.** In this representative sample, 15 percent of Gen Z respondents identified as “unemployed and looking for work,” compared to the average of 11 percent across all generations.
- **Gen Z is the most pessimistic generation when it comes to their careers.** Approximately 82 percent said they were confident about their current position/career, lower than Baby Boomers (94%) and the overall average (86%).
  - Only 28 percent of Gen Z workers reported feeling confident in their knowledge of “what to do next” if they were to lose their job today, compared to 59 percent of Baby Boomers.
- **Gen Z respondents were more likely to report experiencing a delay in financial milestones** (42%) due to concern over current job security.
- Across every financial category—including paying off debt, education and investments—roughly one in five **Gen Z respondents (ranging from 17% to 22%) stated they have “significantly delayed” or completely put off their plans due to employment anxiety.**
- Less than one-third (31%) of Gen Z respondents plan to stay on their current career path (vs. 41% total, 42% Millennial, 48% Gen X, 48% Boomer).



## Key Finding #3: Americans are confident in themselves, but not in the market.

- When asked to reflect on their current positions/careers and where they were in comparison to 12 months ago, **86 percent of Americans reported currently feeling confident, with just over half (53%) reporting feeling very confident.**
  - Baby Boomers were the most confident generation, at 94%.
- When it comes to confidence in securing a better job in the future (based on individuals' experience, skill sets, etc.):
  - Americans are most confident in the next 1-3 years (72% confident) versus the next 12 months (63%) and the next 4-5 years (64%).
- **When it comes to career advancement, upskilling, and training, Americans are bypassing traditional professional organizations,** with the top opportunities utilized being free online resources (34%) and social media (33%).
  - For Gen Z, social media (38%) is the number one source for career training and upskilling, followed closely by free online resources (34%).



## Key Finding #4: Americans have been hit hard by job cuts, leading to low confidence in the job market and potential long-term unemployment challenges.

- In 2025, most Americans were either directly affected by job cuts or know someone who has been.
  - Thirteen percent were directly laid off in the last 12 months.
  - Seventeen percent had their hours reduced.
  - Twenty-seven percent were not directly impacted, but had close friends or family members who were.
  - Twenty-three percent said their close circles were not impacted, but layoffs had touched their wider professional circles (colleagues, acquaintances, etc.).
- Of those who reported being unemployed and looking for work, **nearly one-quarter (24%) have been searching for more than a year, indicating a risk of long-term stagnation.**
- More than half (56%) of Americans said the current economy makes it difficult for them to use their education and skill set.
- When asked about their career plans, given the effects of recent economic disruptions, **about one in five Americans are planning a dramatic career shift**, while about 41% plan to stay in their current roles.



## Implications

- **Reaching People Where They Are (Online):** Across all generations, free online resources are the most utilized tool for upskilling, and social media is the number one career source for Gen Z. Organizations should prioritize putting free resources online and socializing them to reach job seekers, especially young job seekers.
- **Bridging the AI Gap:** Despite the hype, AI currently remains a secondary player in the workforce. Our findings are also reflected in a [recent report](#) from the Yale Budget Lab and Brookings, which found that "Despite fears of an imminent AI jobs apocalypse, the overall labor market shows more continuity than immediate collapse. The percentage of workers in jobs with high, medium, and low AI 'exposure' has remained remarkably steady over time (since ChatGPT was introduced in 2022)." AI integration at the organizational level has been fragmented, and many workers are still unclear on whether using AI can boost career opportunities. There is an opportunity to help American workers become more comfortable with AI in their professional development, through coaching and online courses.
- **Personalized Coaching and Career Guidance:** While Americans' self confidence remains high, most feel the current economy stifles their ability to use their education and skills. More tellingly, that confidence diminishes when faced with job loss, with a majority of workers unsure of what to do if they were to lose their job today. Workers who face career challenges can benefit from knowing the resources available in their communities for carer support and coaching.



## The Methodology

Goodwill Industries International (GII) commissioned an online survey among a nationally representative general US population sample across age, gender, and region. The survey, conducted through Audience Align, between December 5-11, 2025, oversampled Gen Z (n=557, ages 18-27) as the target incoming workforce, in addition to collecting data from Millennials (n=271, ages 28-43), Gen X (n=241, ages 44-59) and Baby Boomers (n=231, ages 60+). The average completion time was six minutes.

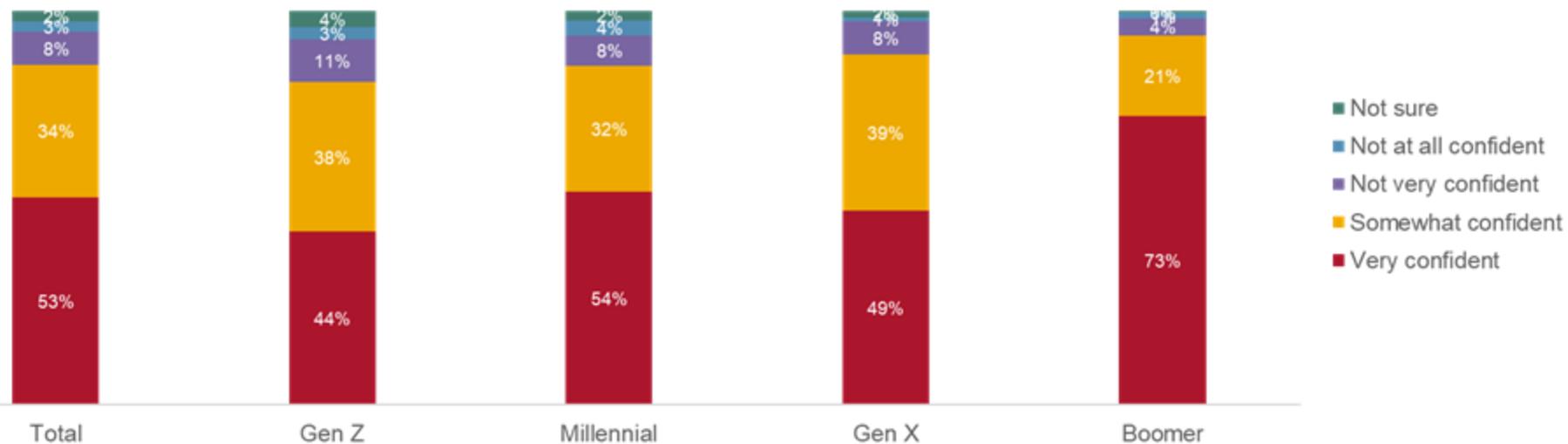




# APPENDIX

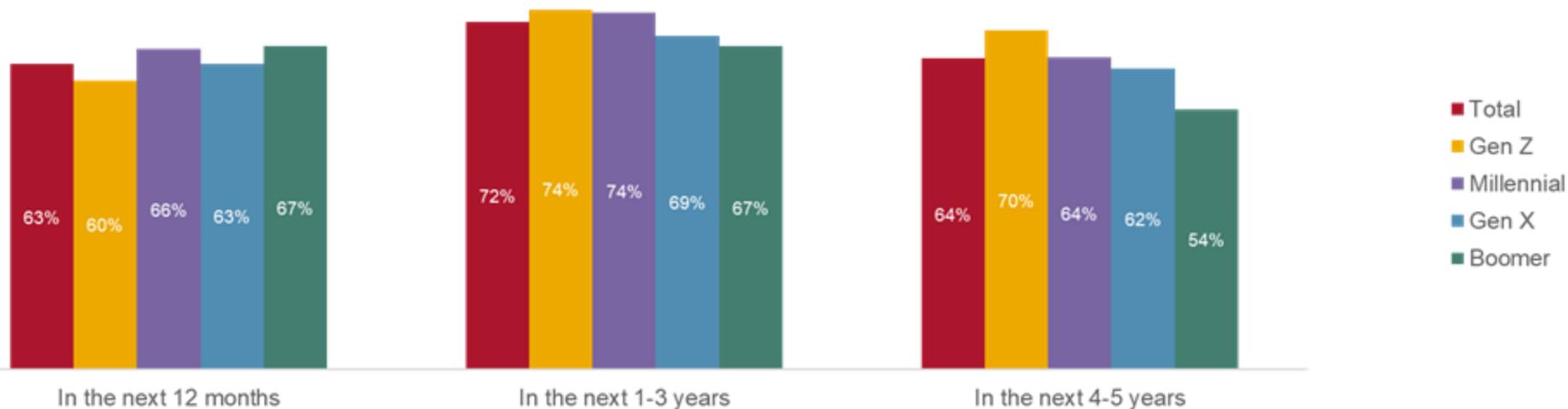
*Topline Data Results*

Q1: How confident do you feel in your current position/career compared to 12 months ago:



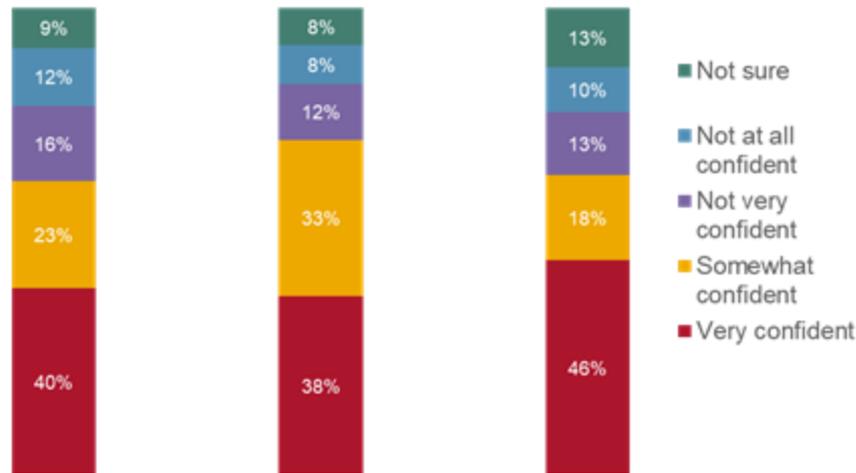
Q2: Given your education, experience and expertise/skill sets, please rate your confidence in securing a better job in the following time frames:

*Net Confident (Very confident or Somewhat confident)*



Q2: Given your education, experience and expertise/skill sets, please rate your confidence in securing a better job in the following time frames:

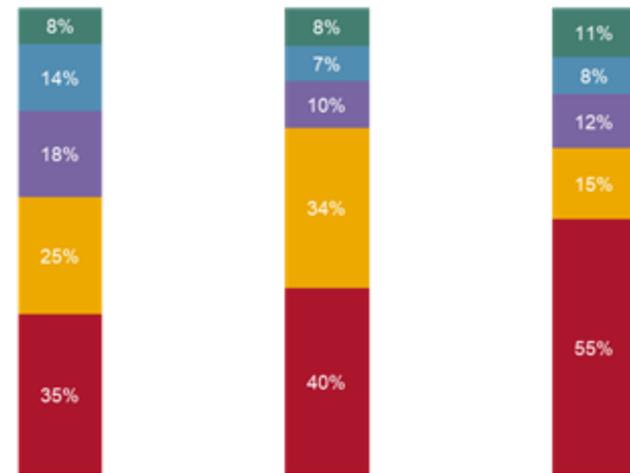
**Total**



In the next 12 months    In the next 1-3 years    In the next 4-5 years

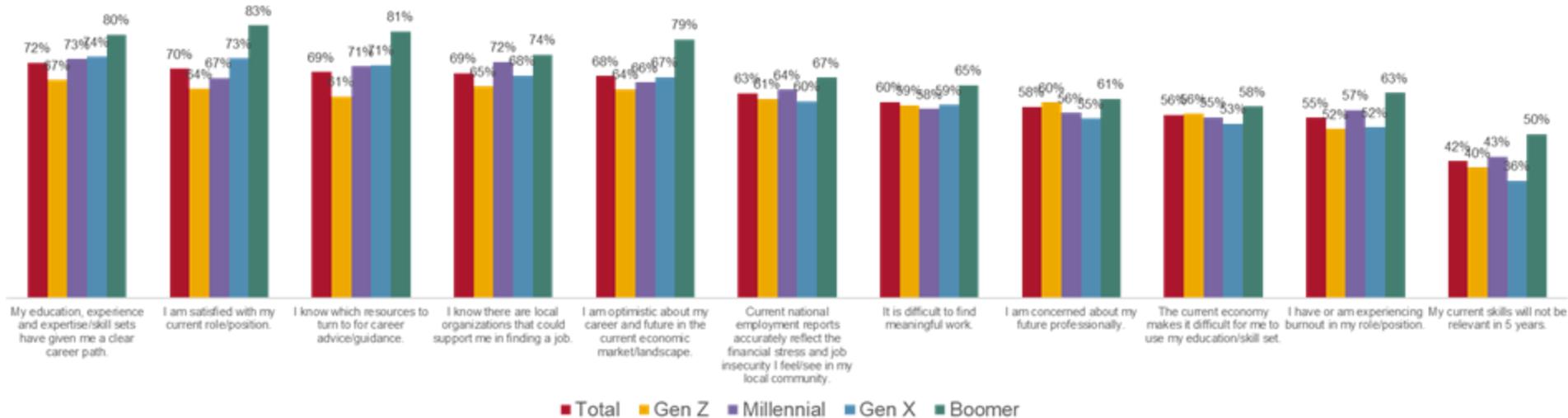
Q2: Given your education, experience and expertise/skill sets, please rate your confidence in securing a better job in the following time frames:

**Gen Z**

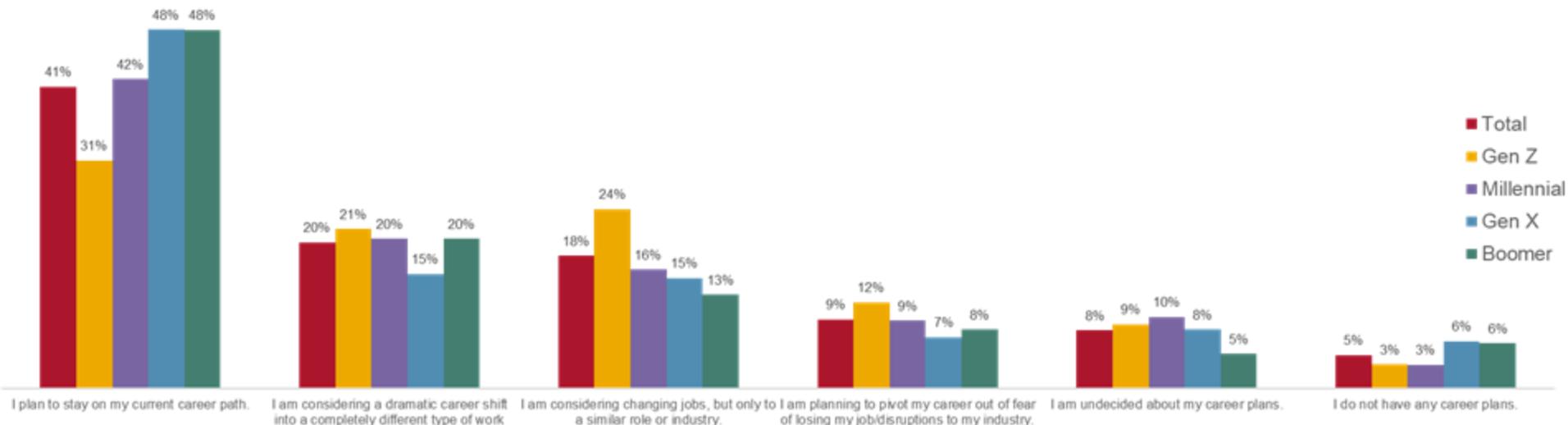


In the next 12 months    In the next 1-3 years    In the next 4-5 years

Q3: Rate your agreement with the following statements.  
*Net Agree (Strongly agree or Somewhat agree)*

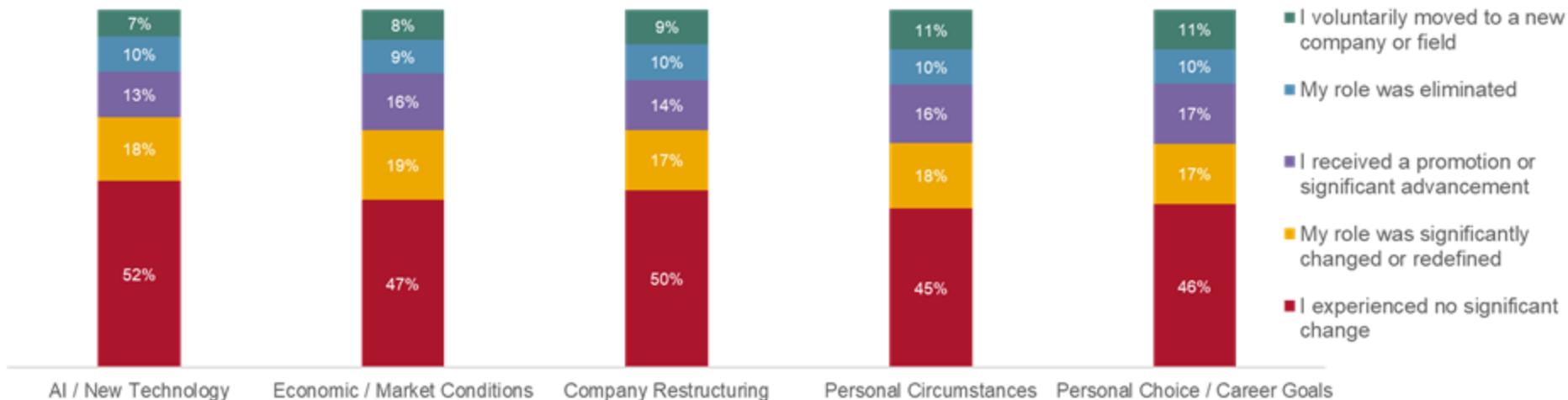


Q4: Thinking about the effects of recent economic disruptions (like inflation, industry changes, or job market volatility), which statement best describes your career plans?



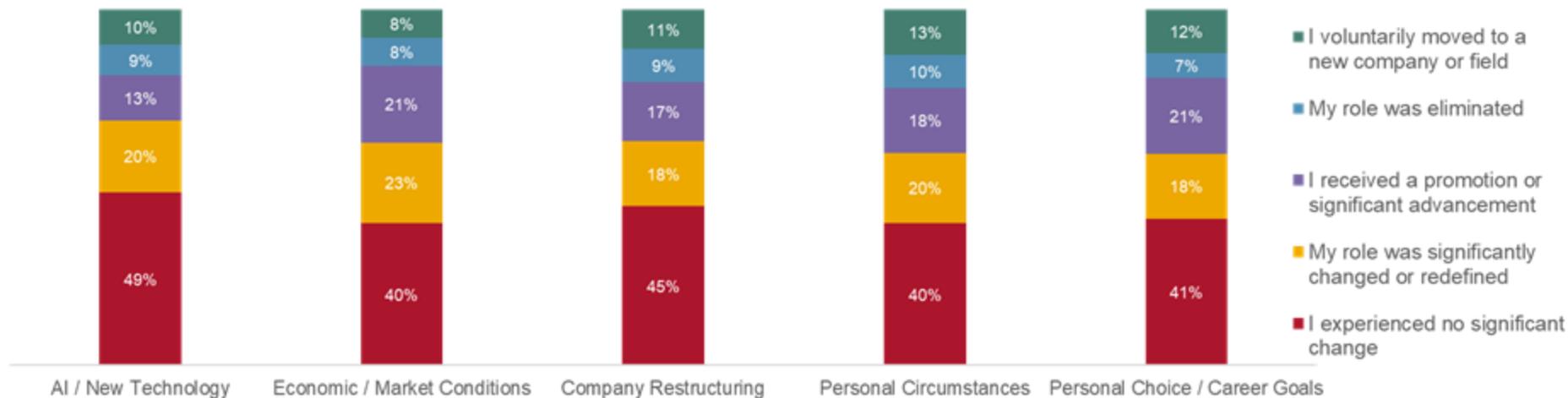
Q5: Thinking about the last 12 months, did any of the following factors cause a significant change in your job or career?

*TOTAL*



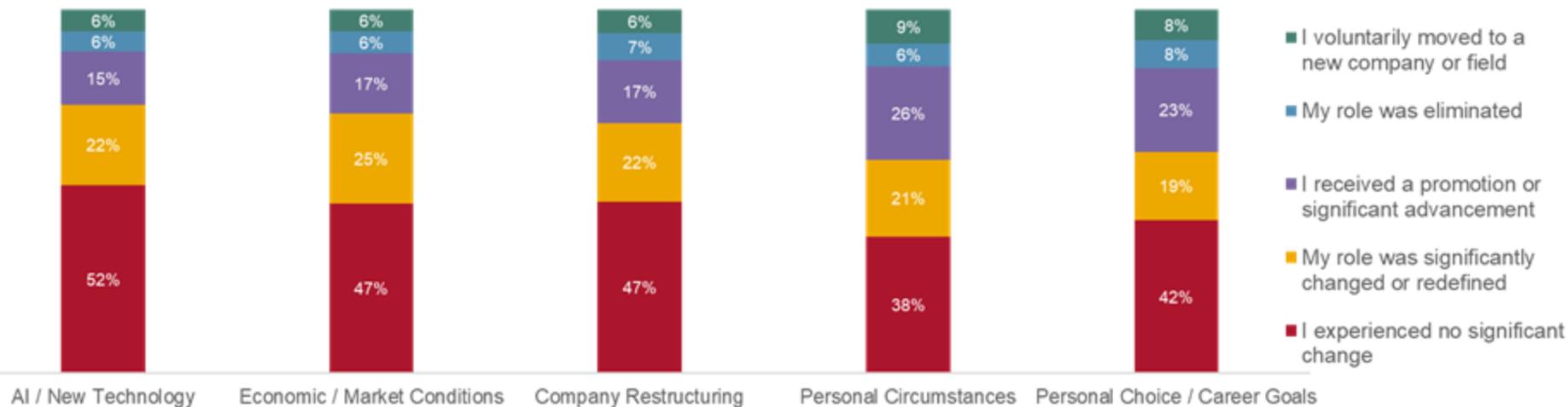
Q5: Thinking about the last 12 months, did any of the following factors cause a significant change in your job or career?

*Gen Z*



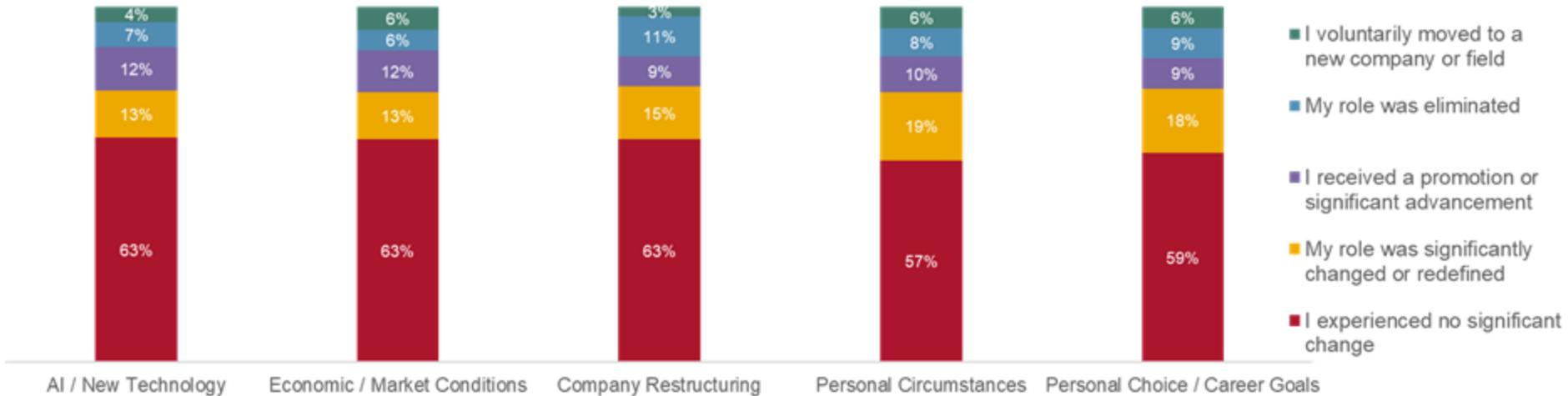
Q5: Thinking about the last 12 months, did any of the following factors cause a significant change in your job or career?

*Millennial*



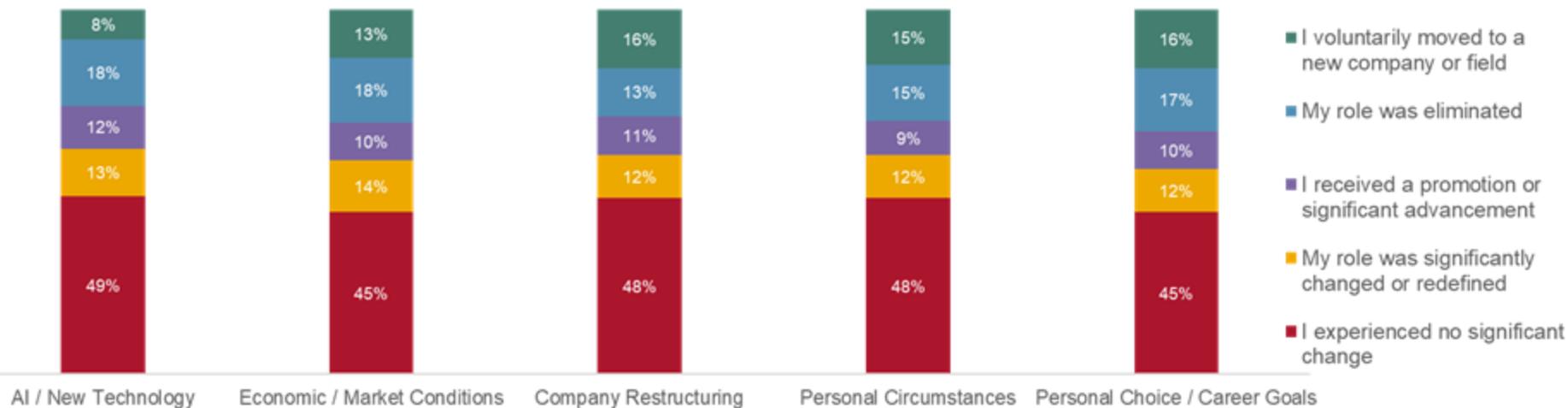
Q5: Thinking about the last 12 months, did any of the following factors cause a significant change in your job or career?

*Gen X*

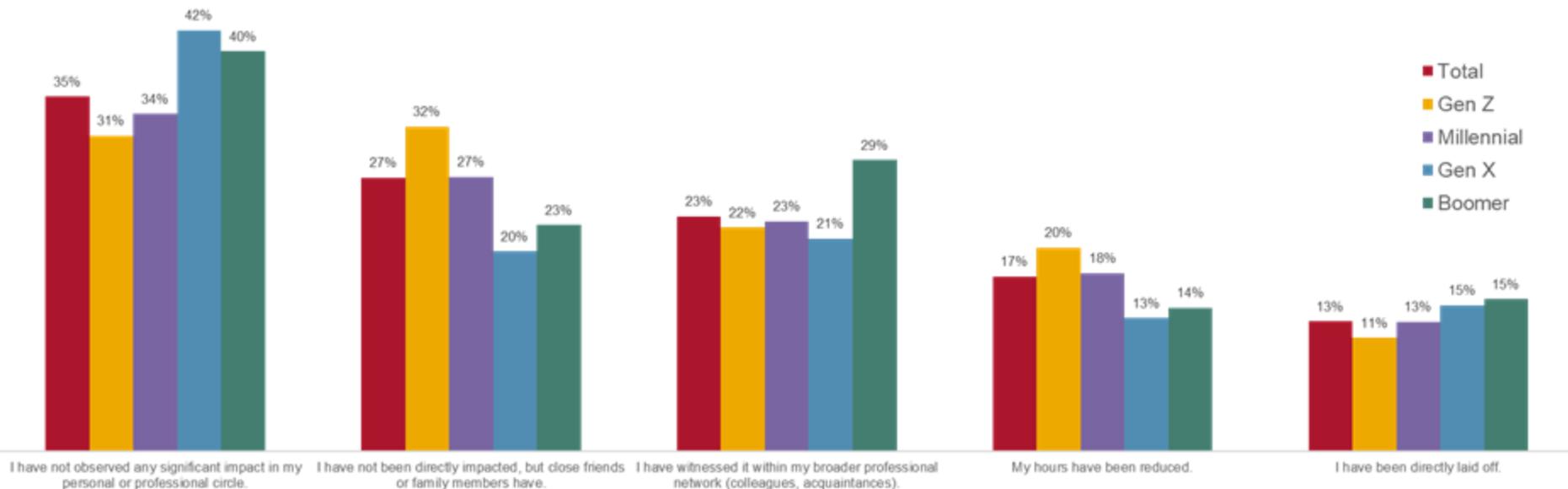


Q5: Thinking about the last 12 months, did any of the following factors cause a significant change in your job or career?

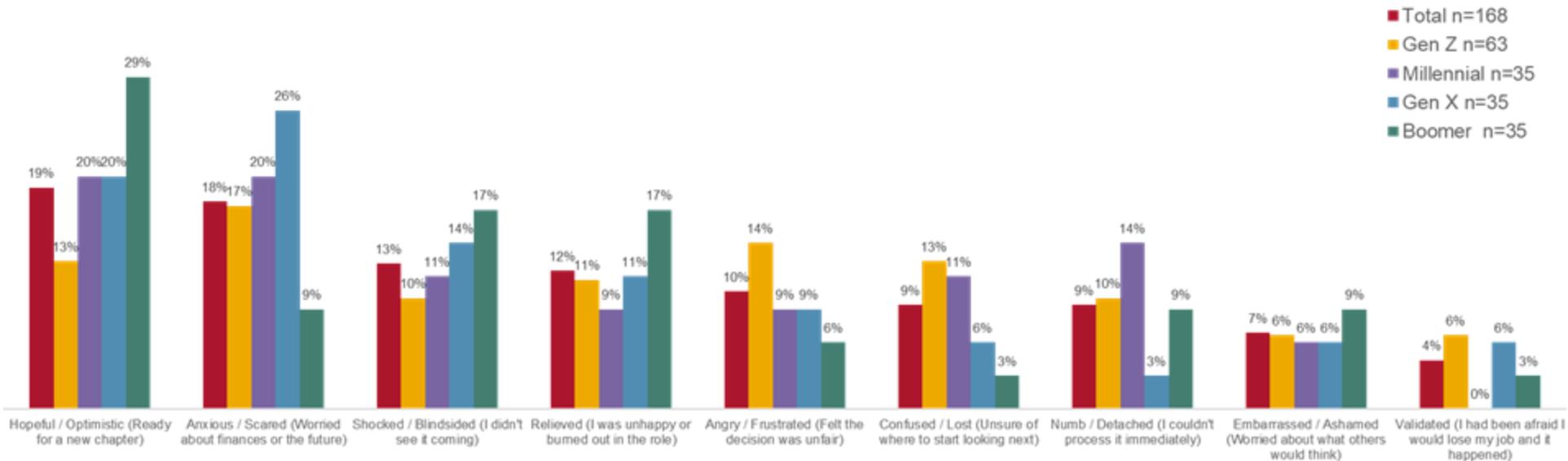
*Boomer*



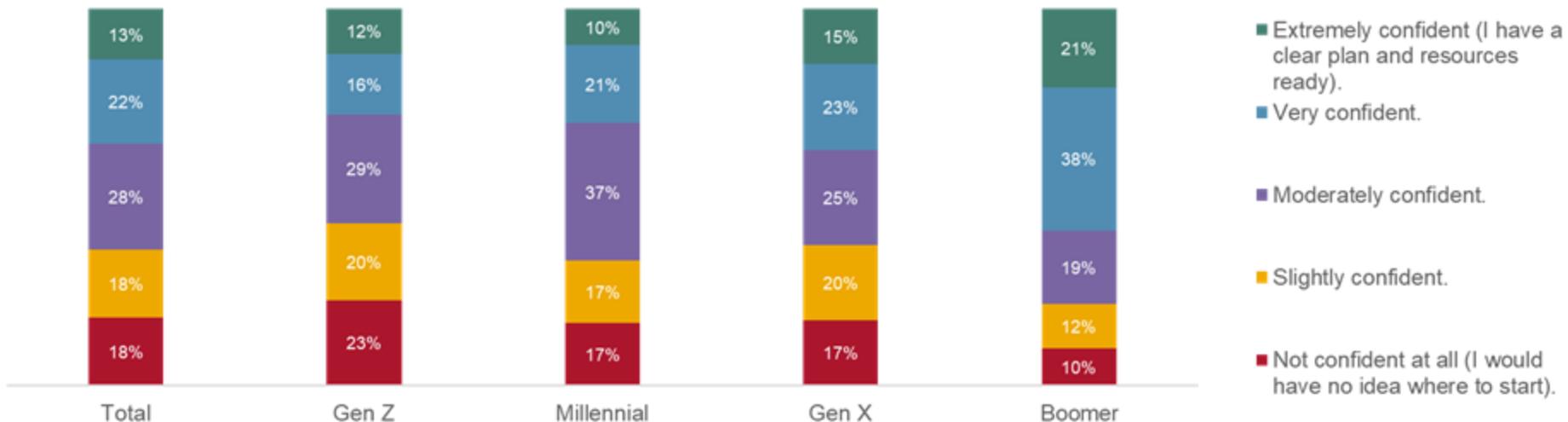
Q6: To what extent have you been personally impacted by layoffs in the past 12 months?



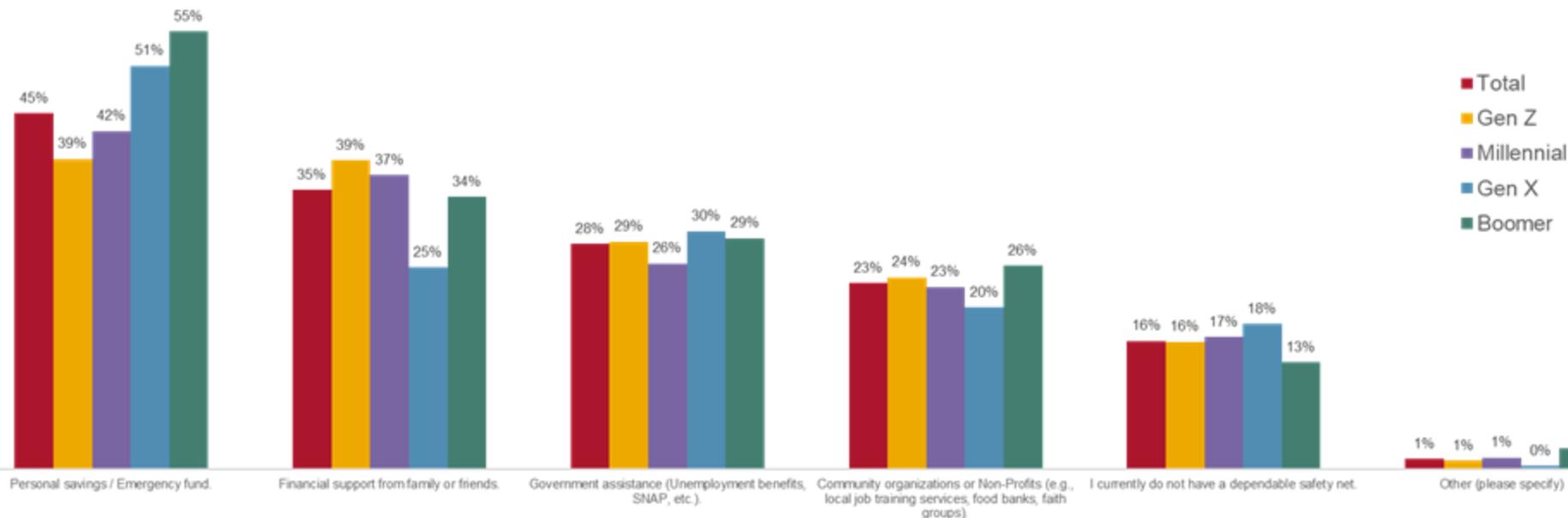
Q7. What was your immediate emotional reaction to your layoff?



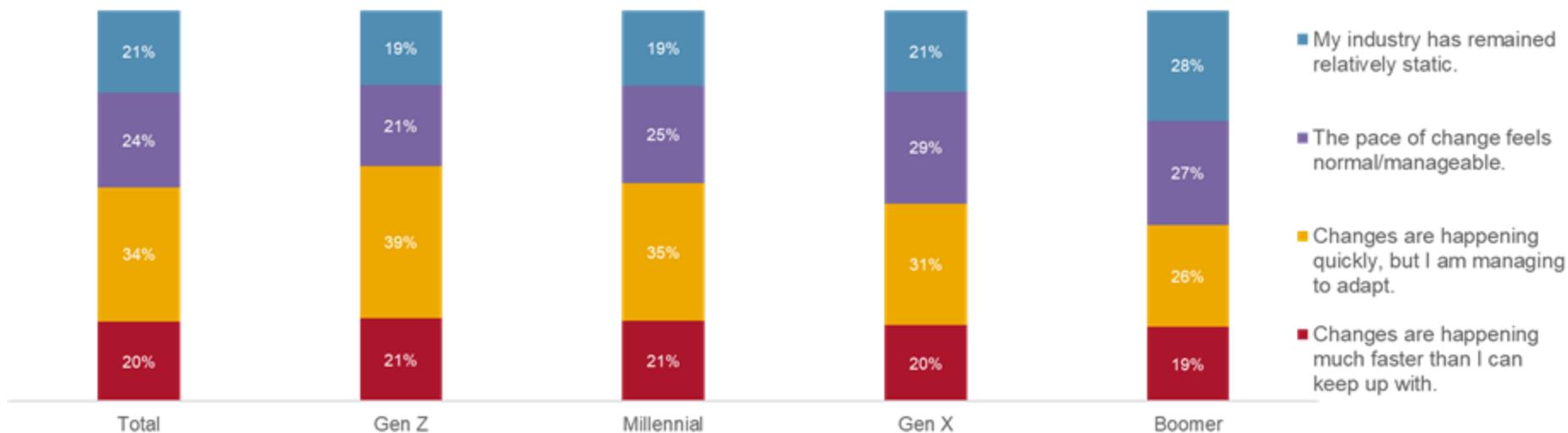
Q8: How confident do you feel in your knowledge of "what to do next" if you were to lose your job today?



Q9: Which of the following best describes your primary "safety net" if you were to experience a sudden career disruption?

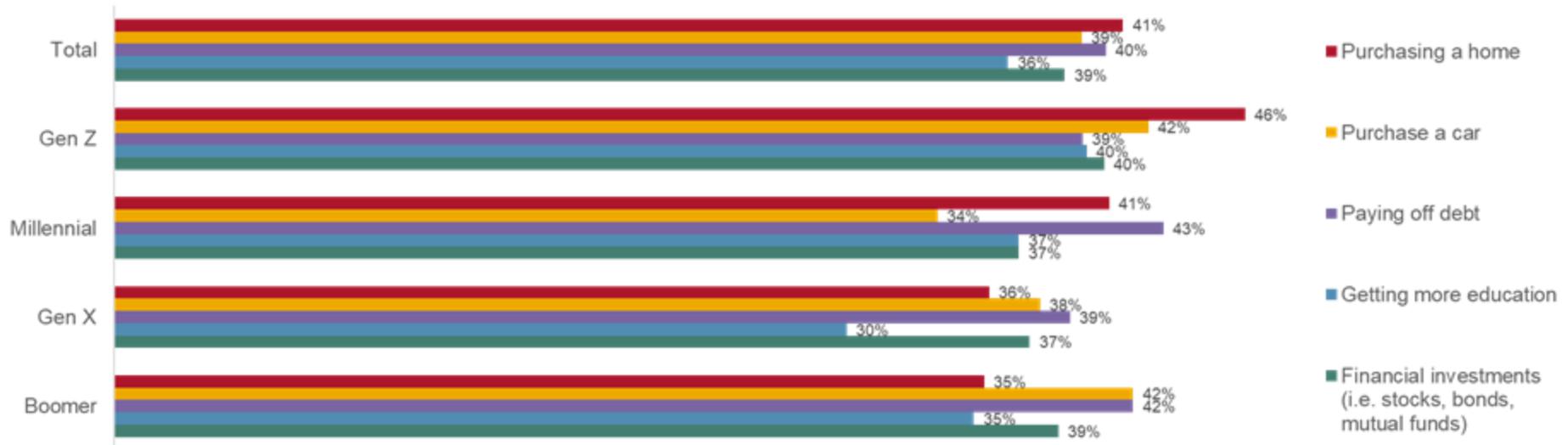


Q10: Comparing the current job market to previous years, how would you rate the speed of change regarding required skills and role expectations in your industry?



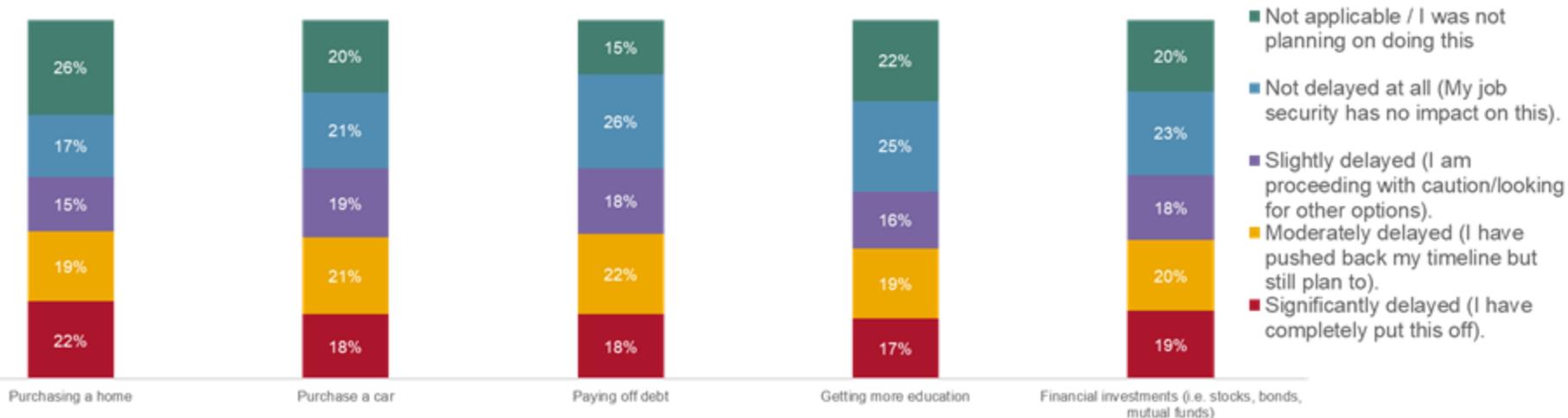
Q11: To what extent has concern over your current job security or employment prospects caused you to delay major financial milestones in the past 12 months?

*Net Delayed (Significantly delayed - I have completely put this off OR Moderately delayed (I have p*



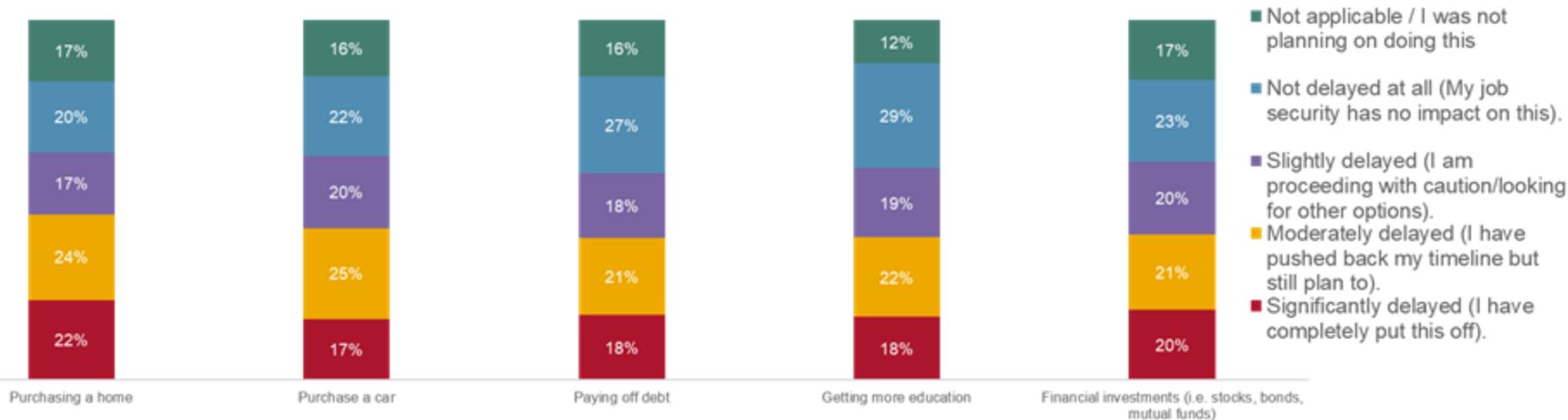
Q11: To what extent has concern over your current job security or employment prospects caused you to delay major financial milestones in the past 12 months?

**TOTAL**



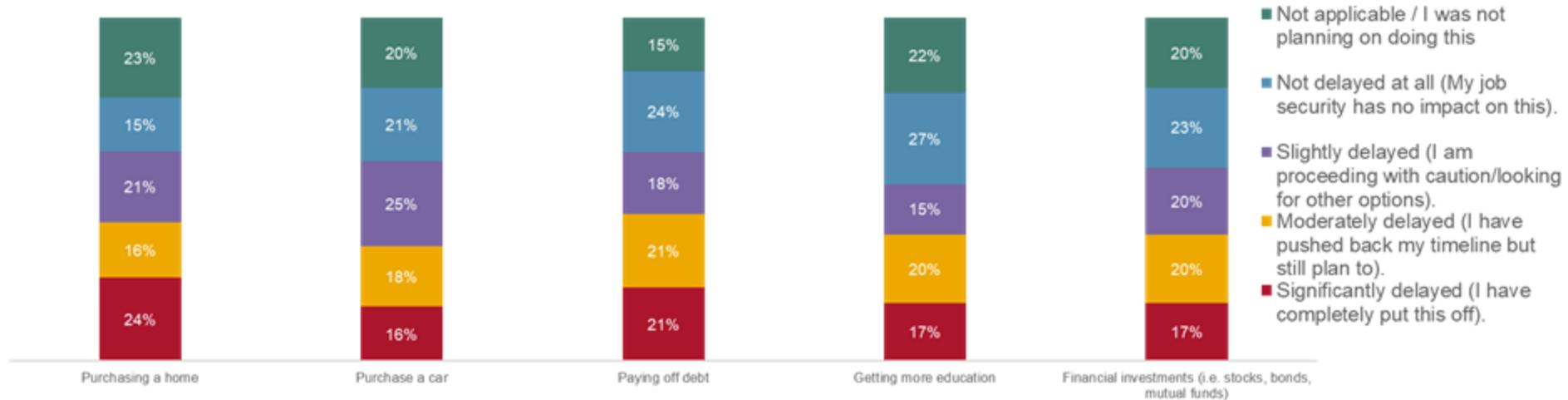
Q11: To what extent has concern over your current job security or employment prospects caused you to delay major financial milestones in the past 12 months?

**Gen Z**



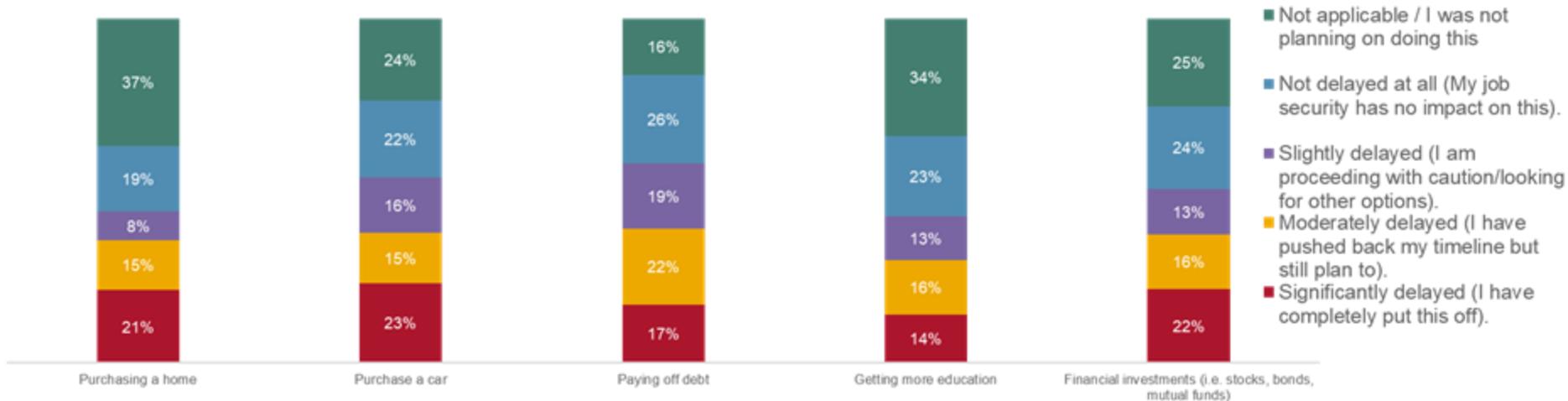
Q11: To what extent has concern over your current job security or employment prospects caused you to delay major financial milestones in the past 12 months?

*Millennial*



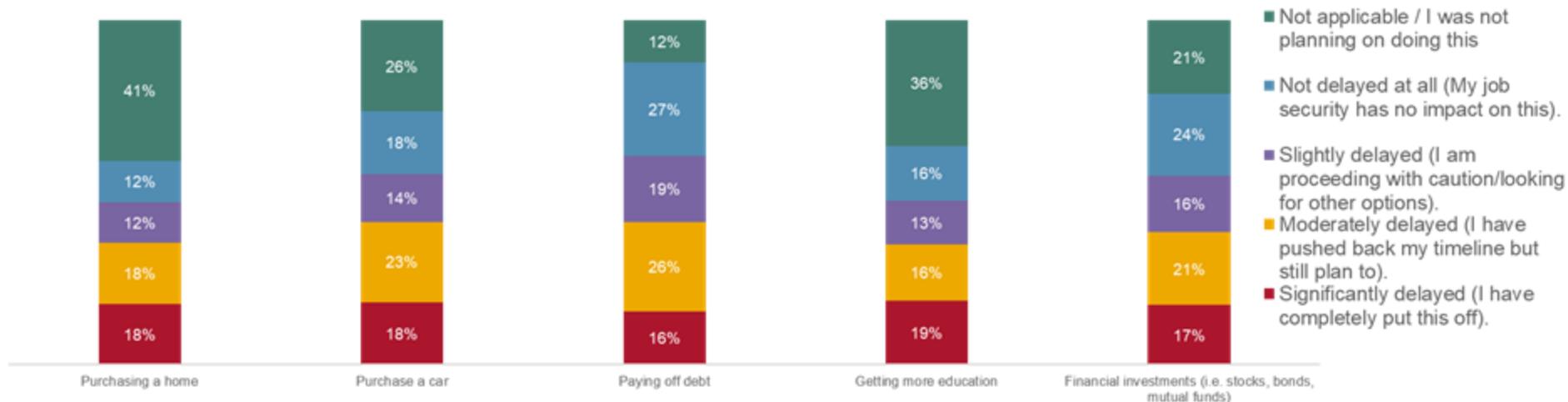
Q11: To what extent has concern over your current job security or employment prospects caused you to delay major financial milestones in the past 12 months?

*Gen X*



Q11: To what extent has concern over your current job security or employment prospects caused you to delay major financial milestones in the past 12 months?

**Boomer**



Q12: What resources have you or do you use for career training, advancement, and upskilling?

	Total	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Free online resources	34%	34%	34%	35%	33%
Social media	33%	38%	38%	28%	21%
Employer-provided training	28%	26%	32%	28%	29%
Online learning platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Coursera)	27%	28%	28%	21%	30%
Books/Textbooks	24%	29%	24%	15%	19%
Higher education institutions	22%	28%	19%	15%	17%
In-person workshops/seminars	22%	23%	23%	21%	21%
Artificial Intelligence (AI)	22%	21%	20%	20%	26%
Professional organizations & certifications	20%	20%	20%	21%	21%
None of the above	14%	11%	11%	20%	18%
Local community resources (e.g. Goodwill, SkillUp Coalition)	13%	14%	15%	10%	10%
Local or national industry groups	11%	11%	13%	5%	17%
Other (please specify)	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Q13: How have you integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) in your personal and professional life?

- I do not use AI.
- AI is an integral part of my day.
- I use AI regularly but selectively.
- I continue to use AI because it is practical and beneficial.
- I have used AI without much success.
- I continue to try and use AI occasionally.
- I have begun to explore AI.

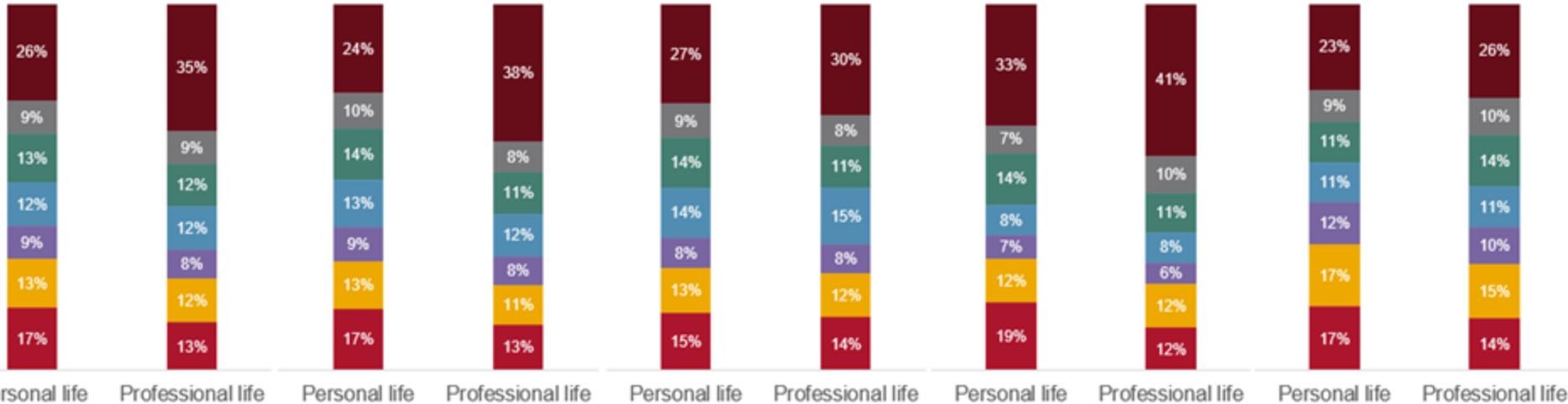
**Total**

**Gen Z**

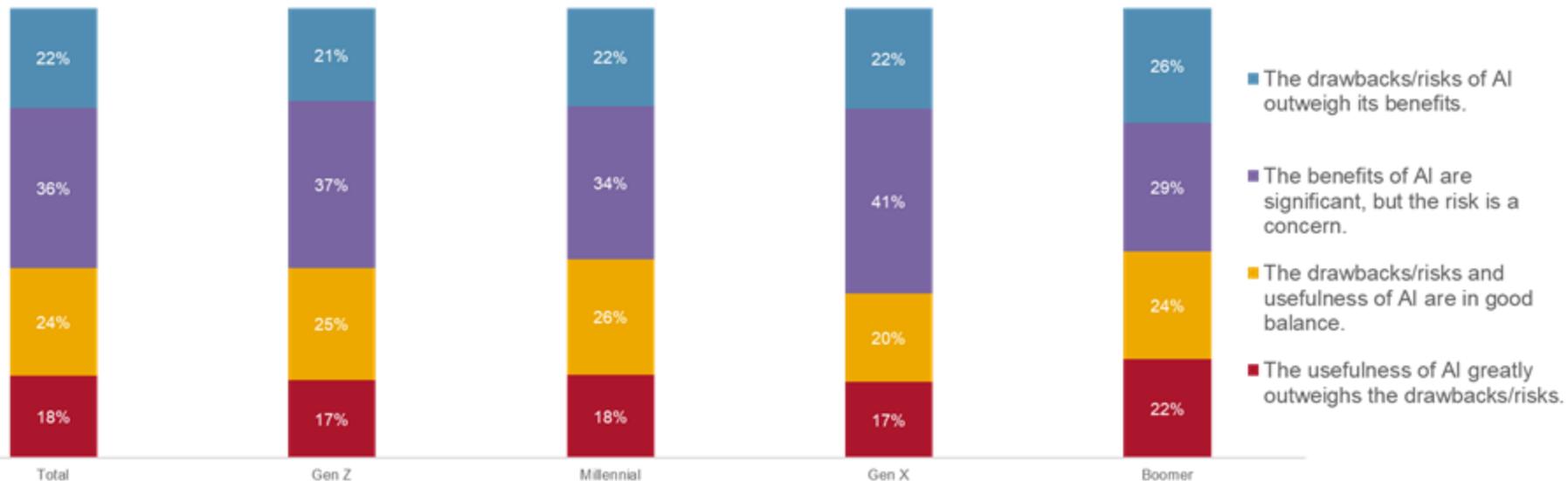
**Millennial**

**Gen X**

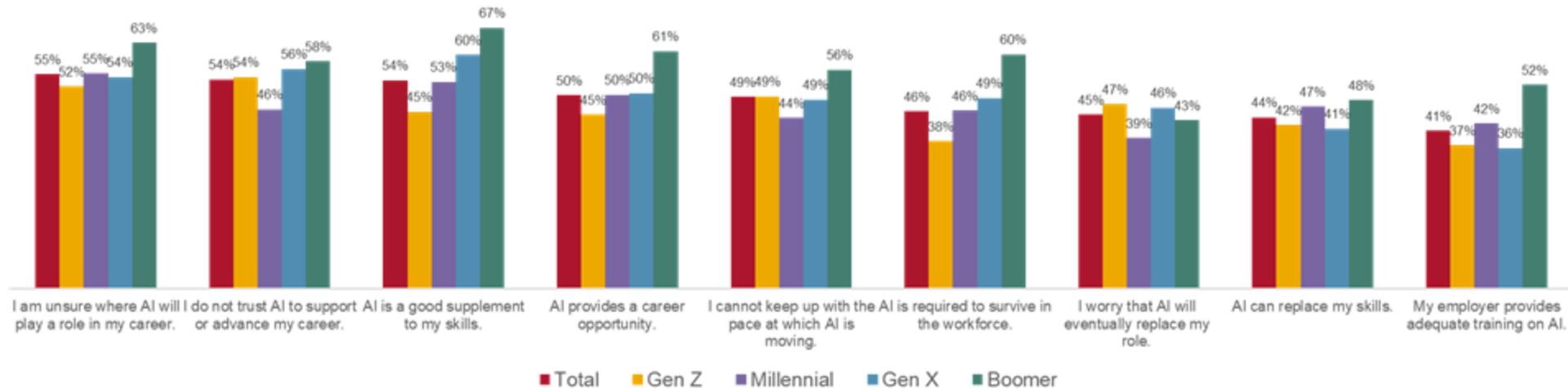
**Boomer**



Q14: In general, how do you feel about the benefits of AI vs. the risks of AI?

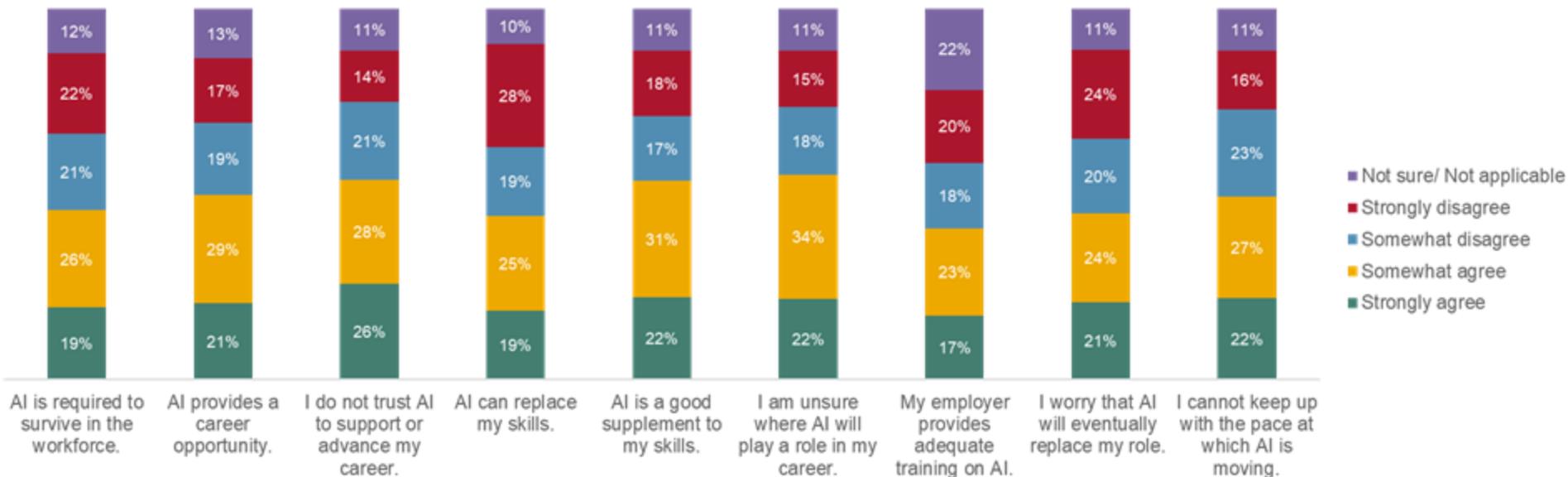


Q15: Rate your agreement with the following statements regarding AI in the workforce.  
*Net Agree (Strongly agree or Somewhat agree)*



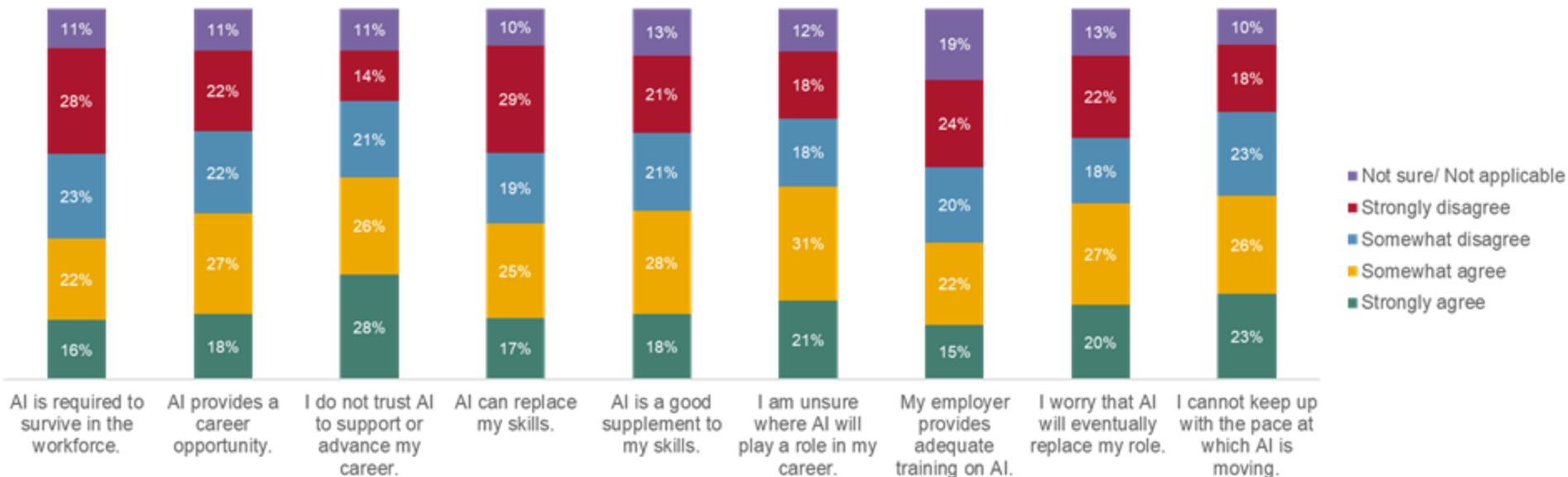
Q15: Rate your agreement with the following statements regarding AI in the workforce.

*Total*



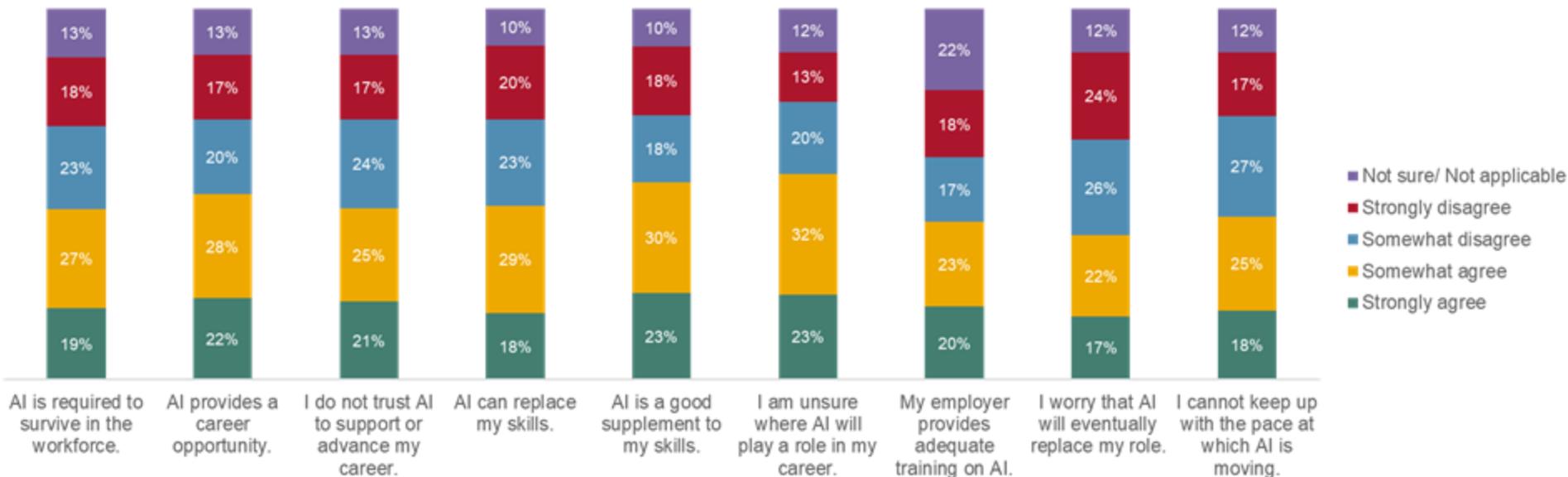
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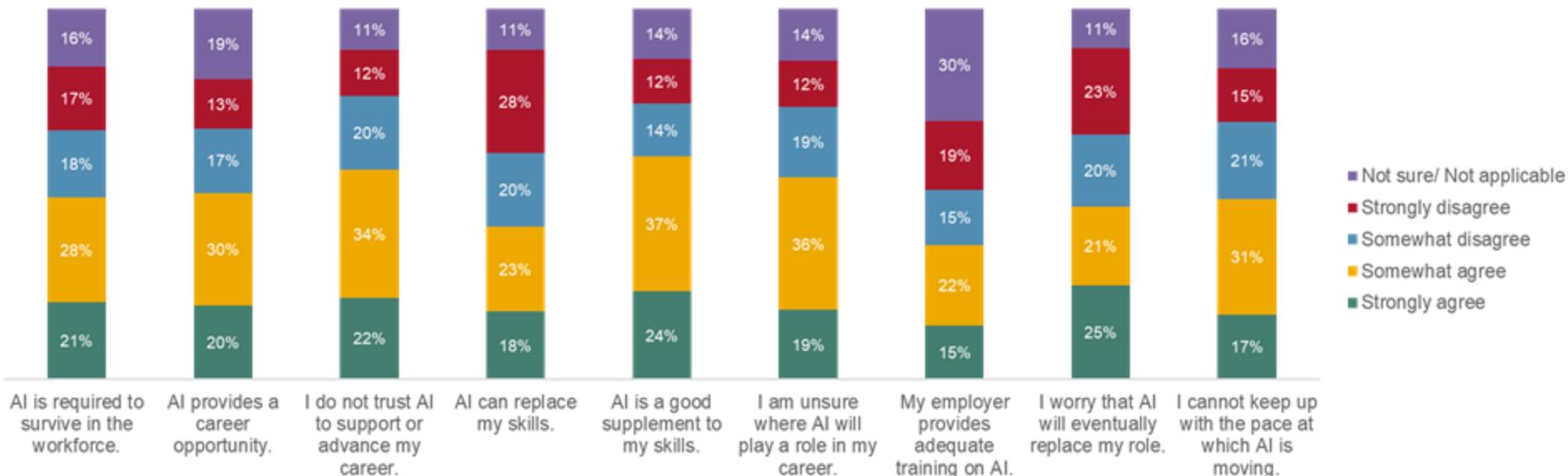
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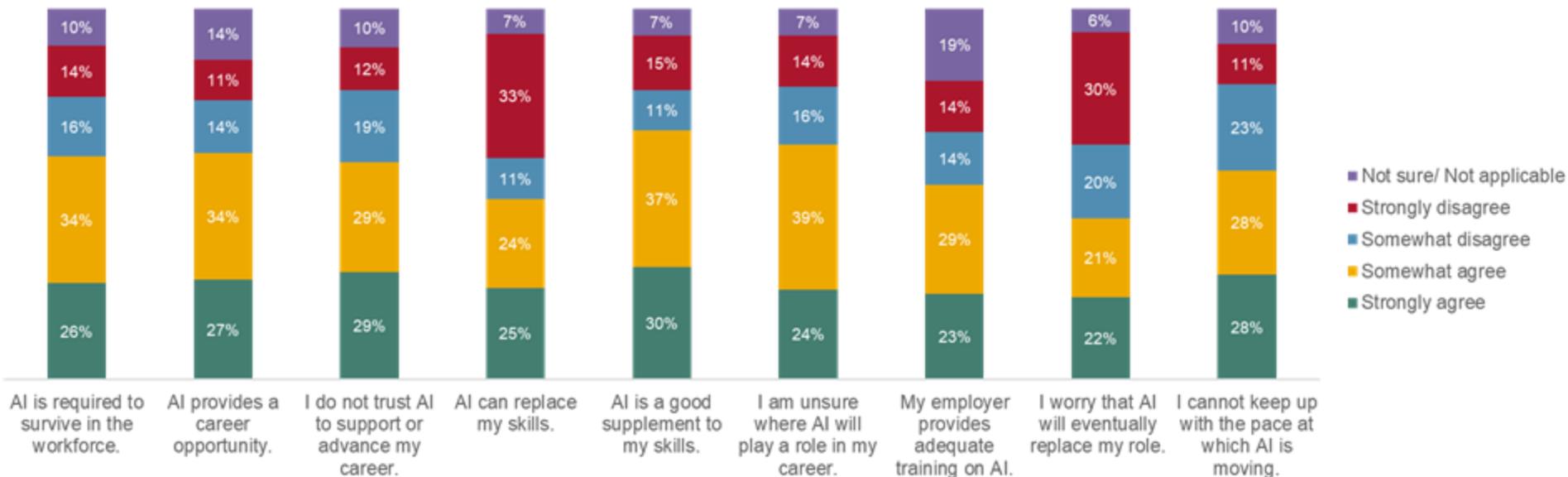
Q15: Rate your agreement with the following statements regarding AI in the workforce.

*Gen X*

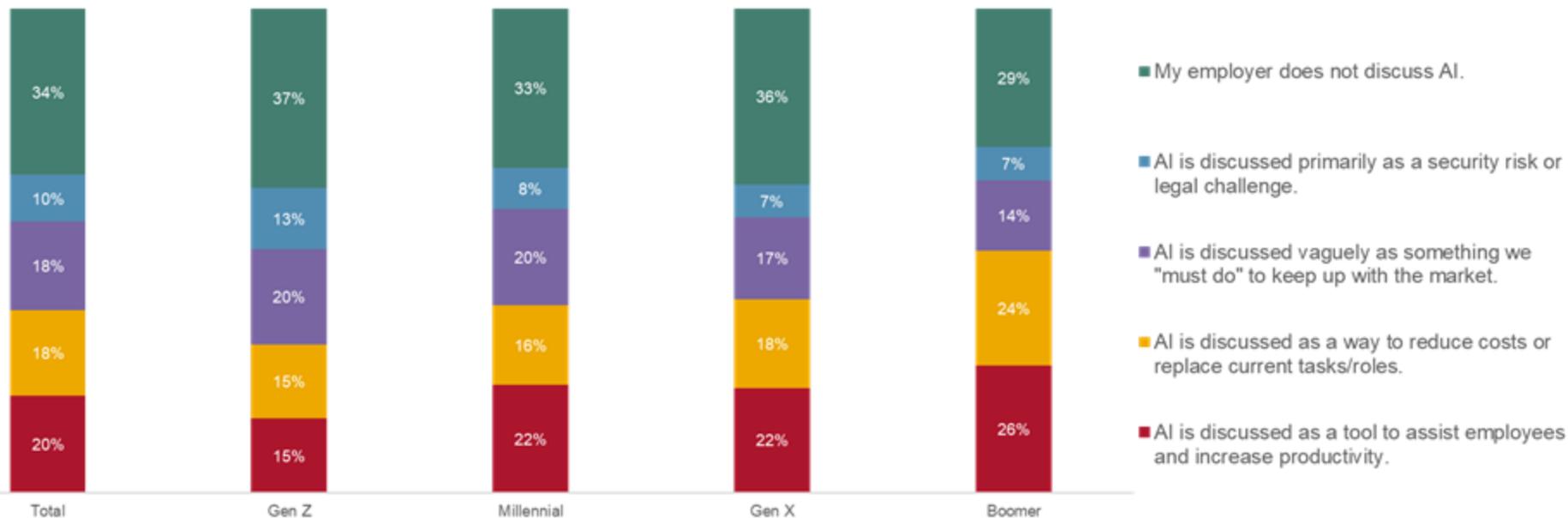


Q15: Rate your agreement with the following statements regarding AI in the workforce.

*Boomer*



Q16: How would you say your employer is talking about Artificial Intelligence (AI)?





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