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It's time to say goodbye to the office and the 9-to-5 as we know it

Findings from the inaugural Remote Employee Experience Index

future forum
by  slack



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About the Future Forum and the Remote Employee Experience Index

The Covid-19 crisis has caused shock waves across workplaces and transformed the traditional office environment into one giant, uncontrolled work experiment. Organizations and executives are scrambling to rewrite the rules for how and where work should happen. They are also striving to find new ways to maintain productivity and foster a sense of belonging among employees in this new world of distributed work.

To help organizations determine the best way forward, Slack and its partners established the Future Forum, an organization whose role is to reimagine leadership and management in the context of the now digital-first workplace. As part of its launch, the Future Forum released the Remote Employee Experience Index, a new quarterly report that will help provide the data and analysis organizations need to navigate work transformation.

The Remote Employee Experience Index is a quarterly assessment and report on five key perceptual elements of the remote working experience. It evaluates:

Productivity

The ability to complete tasks efficiently while delivering a high quality of work

Work-life balance

The fluidity between priorities in work and personal life

Managing work-related stress and anxiety

The ability to manage pressure and worry in the virtual workplace

Sense of belonging

A measure of whether knowledge workers feel accepted and valued by others on their work team

Satisfaction with working arrangement

The perception of the infrastructure and support that underpins their remote work experience

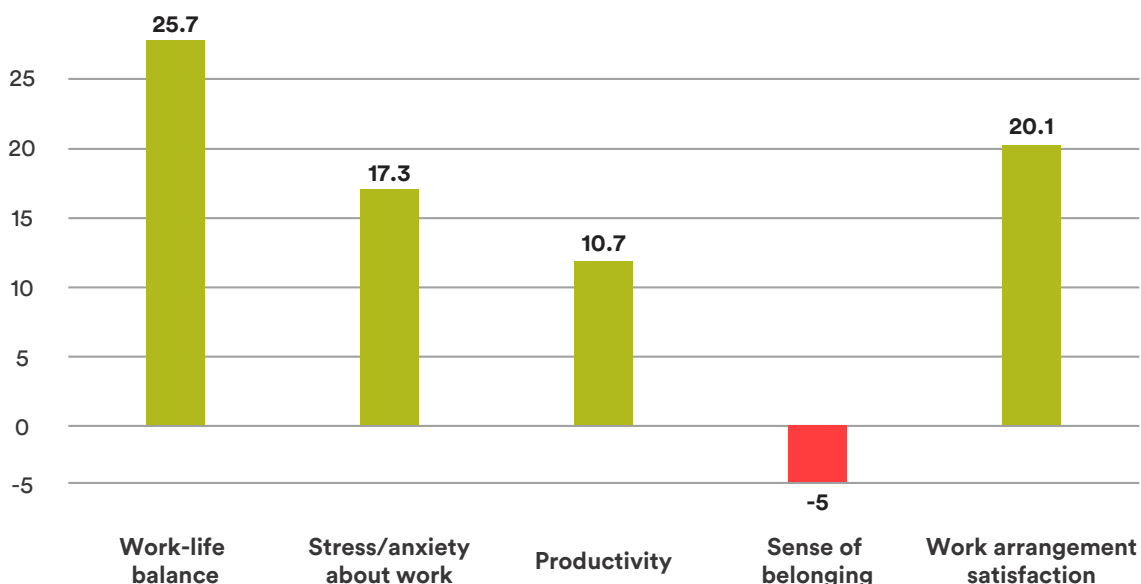
To assess the impact of working remotely, each element was scored on a 5-point scale, from “much better” to “much worse” than working in the office, with the midpoint being “about the same as working in the office.” The highest possible index score of +100 would indicate that, in aggregate, all remote knowledge workers feel much better about all elements of the index. A neutral score of 0 indicates no net change, and a score of -100 would indicate that employees feel much worse about working from home across each element.

Key findings

The data shows that, globally, knowledge workers are more satisfied with working remotely than they were with office-based work (+9.2). People said their work-life balance has improved (+25.7), and most said they are more satisfied with their working arrangement than they were pre-pandemic (+20.1). There were notable improvements in managing work-related stress and anxiety (+17.3) and in productivity (+10.7).

This data also indicates that most knowledge workers do not want to return to the old way of working. Only 11.6% of them want to return to full-time office work, while almost three out of four people (72.2%) want a hybrid remote-office model.

The only element in which knowledge workers are less satisfied with remote working is their sense of belonging (-5.0). People are feeling less accepted and valued by others on their work team. It is vital to ensure that employees remain engaged and to foster a sense of connection among them. According to [Gallup's 2020 analysis of employee engagement](#) and team performance, organizations with engaged employees are 23% more profitable. And employees with a sense of belonging are 66% more likely to have a sense of well-being—and be more productive as a result.



The choice is clear: Knowledge workers want a hybrid remote-office model

Two primary takeaways emerged from the inaugural index. First, companies may lose their best talent if they decide to move full-time back into the office. In general, peoples' lives have improved since they began working remotely. Second, there's more and more evidence that productivity isn't impaired. In fact, it improves in a remote work environment.

To retain the best talent, companies will need to take a hybrid remote-office approach that will require rethinking office spaces. They will need to move to an asynchronous culture that allows people to work when and where they can be most productive. In terms of leadership, employees are looking to executives who "walk the walk" and genuinely embrace new ways of supporting remote work.

The Covid-19 pandemic: Is there opportunity in crisis?

The coronavirus pandemic has had an enormous impact on us as individuals, as a society, and as a workforce. No one can say for certain which elements of our lives, if any, will return to the way they were pre-pandemic. What is certain is that our work environments will be altered forever. The office-centric models with centralized locations, 9-to-5 days, and headquarters as the seat of power will not work in the remote world.

Although the challenges are vast, the savviest organizations and leaders are seizing this as an opportunity to rethink work from a broader perspective and find answers to fundamental questions such as: How can people come together to accomplish great things? How can we unlock untapped potential and engage a broader, more diverse set of employees? How can we break bad habits such as overuse of meetings? And how can we leverage modern technologies that have emerged in the past decade? Now that organizations have no choice but to work differently, they have the chance to establish new cultures and leadership principles, redesign the places used for work, and improve peoples' working experiences. Now is the time to rethink culture-building and social connection in a remote context. The office environment cannot be the fix-all for providing a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

Successful elements of a hybrid remote-office approach

Faced with the challenges and opportunities of reshaping the future of work, organizations are weighing their options and figuring out how to best move forward. Prior to the pandemic, businesses often didn't think through all the possibilities of the working experience because they limited their options to what would work in an office, despite the explosion of tools that have made effective collaboration from a distance possible and accessible to many.

In terms of possible futures, there are essentially three options.

1. **Return to the office five days a week:** Organizations can stay office-bound and try to re-create the office as it was, once it's safe to fully do so. Leaders in these organizations may think they have more control because they can see if people show up for work. Organizations that take this approach are likely to regret it, because the best and brightest will leave for jobs that give them more flexibility.

The full-time office option has several pros and cons. CEOs note that some people want a dedicated workspace and good network connectivity. Others want social interaction. CEOs also worry about scheduling time for group brainstorming and innovation. They also point to the risks of claiming to move to hybrid environments half-heartedly, and the risk to remote employees at companies who still centralize executives in headquarters and meetings in conference rooms.

2. **Commit to remote-first:** Organizations may choose to create "remote-first" teams in which individuals can work from anywhere, perhaps with a core team in a certain time zone. This requires greater flexibility in schedules and the ability to use asynchronous as well as synchronous tools that allow people to respond during regular hours. This model is likely to have some physical space for occasional gatherings such as team-building activities.

3. **Embrace the hybrid model:** Organizations may also opt for a hybrid remote-office working model—the most desirable model for knowledge workers, according to data from the index (72.2% prefer this option). These highly flexible work environments allow greater personal freedom to work where and when people want, combined with availability of space for teams whenever they need it. This model accommodates professions that require co-located spaces, such as lab research or A/V production. With a hybrid model, digital tools become the new headquarters, rather than brick-and-mortar buildings.

Key findings

Teams can use asynchronous collaboration tools to centralize communications and shareable assets such as content, visuals and audio into one place at the start and end of the day.

Traditional offices and business practices no longer make sense

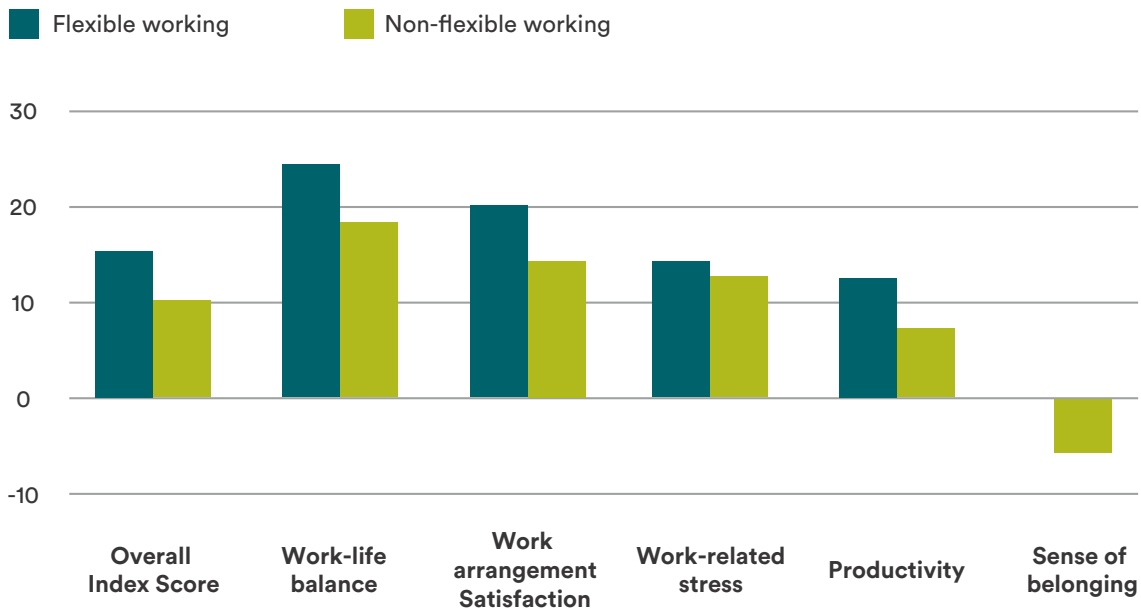
The inaugural index uncovered several key findings that support the assertion that it's time to replace the traditional office model with something that works in the remote world. In addition to thinking of the office as the place where work has to happen, organizations need to reassess and fundamentally change their business practices.

No more 9-to-5

Office-based norms have long imposed a relatively uniform insistence that work happens primarily 9-to-5. Companies have generally chosen to continue following this logic into the remote world. However, the index shows that one of the single biggest factors that influences a positive remote experience is the ability to break free of the 9-to-5 and instead work a flexible schedule.

Employees who have the option of working a flexible schedule score higher across every element of the index than those required to continue working 9-to-5. The positive impact on elements such as work-life balance (+23.0) is not surprising. More interesting is the fact that those with flexible schedules score nearly twice as high on productivity compared with those working 9-to-5 (+13.1 compared with +7.1) and significantly better when it comes to sense of belonging (-0.2 compared with -5.8).

Flexible schedules improve every dimension of remote work



Source: Future Forum Remote Employee Experience Index 2020

Regular meetings don't work in the remote world

Meeting-heavy schedules do not work well in the remote world. For example, workers who attend weekly status meetings actually feel worse about their sense of belonging (-2.7) than workers who receive status updates asynchronously through digital channels (+5.8).

This new form of asynchronous communication depends on companies **giving employees access to modern tools**. The index shows that employees working at companies that are early adopters of technology have dramatically higher “sense of belonging” scores: +4.7 compared with -8.5 for employees at companies that are slow to adopt technology.

Some level of live interaction continues to be important to building and maintaining team chemistry. The index shows that organizations need to build in opportunities for social interactions less frequently but more intentionally. The interactions that

Key findings

have the most significant impact on workers' sense of belonging are:

- Biweekly team celebrations to recognize team members or achievements (+9.9)
- Monthly team-building activities (+9.7)
- Monthly games or unstructured group social activities (+8.1)

What impacts belonging on teams?



Challenges

- Status meetings
- Outdated tools



Benefits

- Team celebrations
- Social activities

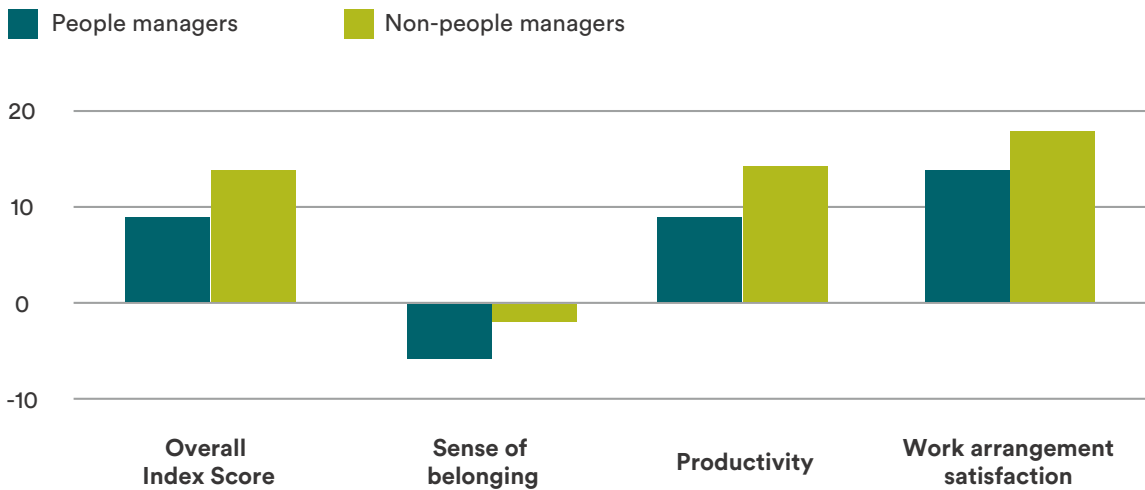
Executives and managers will need to reassess their roles and approaches

People managers, especially middle managers, face some of the most acute challenges in adapting to remote work. In fact, people managers have a lower overall index score (+10.5) than individual contributors (+15.2). They face particular challenges when it comes to:

- Sense of belonging:
People managers (−7.0) Individual contributors (−0.6)
- Productivity:
People managers (−9.4) Individual contributors (+14.8)
- Managing stress and anxiety:
People managers (+12.8) Individual contributors (+17.7)

In the **remote work world**, the role of the manager has shifted from gatekeeper to coach and social connector. Social ties are more difficult to build and maintain in a digital-first workplace. Add to this the fact that middle managers were already challenged, in that moving from an individual contributor to a manager position is hard work and requires an entirely new skill set. Organizations need to devote time and resources to providing people managers with new tools to enable them to coach and connect with their teams.

Managers are struggling more than ICs



Source: Future Forum Remote Employee Experience Index 2020

Remote workers with children, especially women, will need extra support

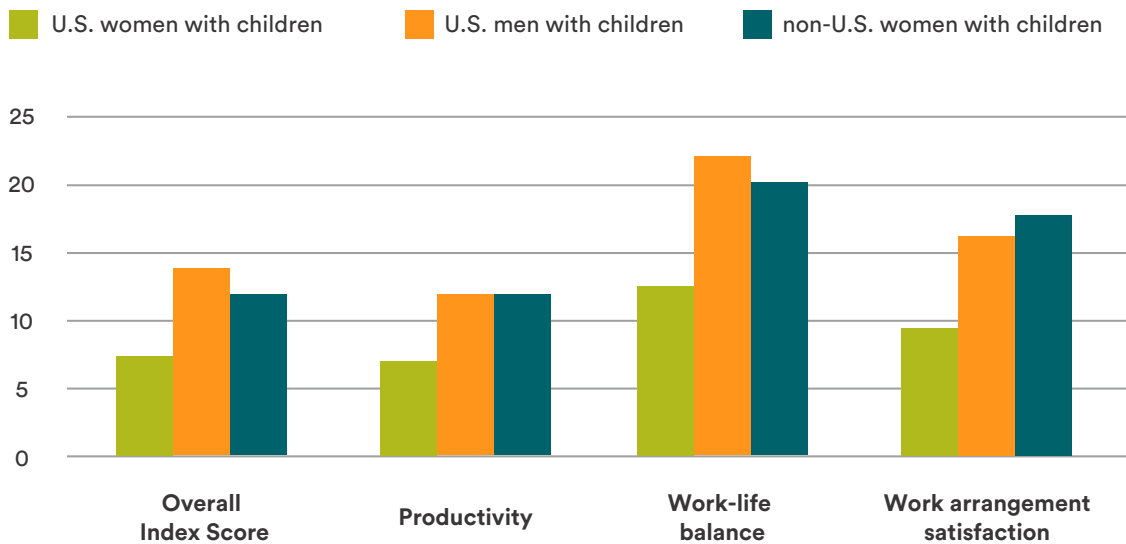
There is one group that faces a disproportionate challenge in balancing work and child care: women with children in the U.S. They score lower overall in their positive perception of remote working (+7.4) compared with both U.S. men with children (+14.3) and women with children outside the U.S. (+12.3). These differences are particularly pronounced in areas such as:

- **Work-life balance:**
Mothers outside the U.S. (+20.4) score 60% higher than U.S. moms (+12.8)
- **Productivity:**
Mothers outside the U.S. (+12.0) score almost twice as high as U.S. mothers (+6.6)
- **Satisfaction with working arrangement:**
Mothers outside the U.S. (+17.8) score 95% better than U.S. mothers (+9.1)

The evidence clearly points to the lack of a strong social safety net, including publicly funded child care, disproportionately affecting U.S. women with children. It's unlikely that the government will take decisive action to meet this need, so it is up to companies to step up and fill the void. If they don't, they risk losing out on a significant **pool of talent**. Companies can provide support in a number of ways, from childcare to more flexible work structures.

Key findings

Women with children in the U.S. are disproportionately impacted

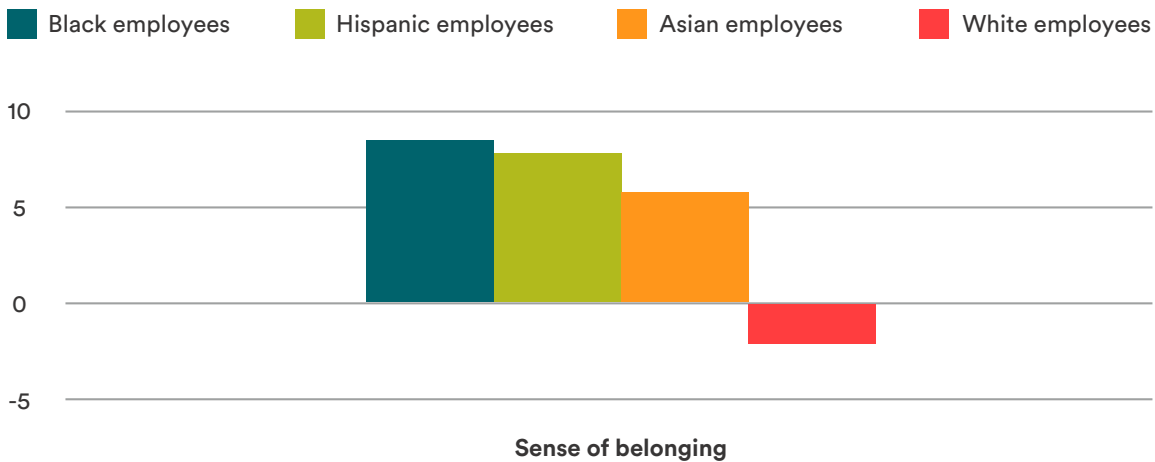


Source: Future Forum Remote Employee Experience Index 2020

Underrepresented groups may fare better in some ways in the remote working world

One of the most surprising findings is that in the U.S., historically underrepresented workers have higher overall index scores than their white colleagues: Black (+10.1), Asian (+16.6), Hispanic (+10.5), white (+8.9). And the most dramatic difference is seen in the most persistently problematic element of remote work, the sense of belonging: Black (+8.4), Asian (+7.6), Hispanic (+5.2), white (-1.3).

Non-white employees feel an improved sense of belonging when working remotely

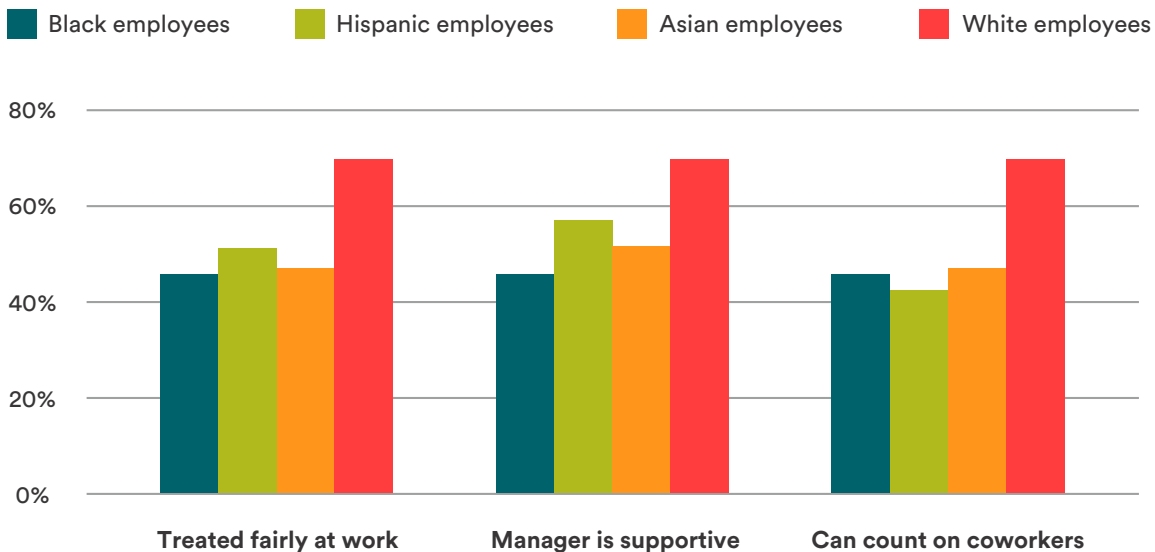


Source: Future Forum Remote Employee Experience Index 2020, U.S. only

This data demands greater scrutiny and exploration. It's not clear what combination of factors creates this difference: Why is remote work helping level the experience? One potential theory is the practice of code-switching. At a recent summit hosted by the Future Forum, social psychologist [Brian Lowery of Stanford University](#) described code-switching: "The way I talk right now is different from the way I talk at home. I show up and I code-switch. That's a cost. It's exhausting when you show up every day and find a way to fit in. Letting people work remotely reduces that stress. It puts more people in a position that allows them to show up as their full selves."

The norms of the digital workplace are yet to be written. We have an opportunity to start over, to throw out baggage that built up over centuries, and to build teams that are truly representative of our society.

Non-white employees feel a decreased sense of support when working remotely



Source: Future Forum Remote Employee Experience Index 2020, U.S. only

There remain dramatic problems; systemic disparities are still visible. For example, in the U.S., 65% of white knowledge workers agree with the statement “My manager is supportive when I need help,” compared with only 46% of Black knowledge workers. It will take time and deliberate effort to get this right, but the opportunity for remote work to be a great equalizing force is clear and unmistakable.

Regardless of whether they are individual contributors or managers, employees in this remote working environment need nurturing and a sense of belonging. Organizations need tools and resources that keep people connected and appreciated. Based on data from the index, the first people who are likely to leave are women and traditionally underrepresented workers. The result is a less diverse, and likely less innovative and creative, workforce.

A final word

Despite the disruption the pandemic has caused, there are many bright spots and new possibilities that can transform the workplace for the better. Distributed teams and hybrid models are not only viable but necessary. They open up broader talent pools and enable more diverse teams to work together in engaging ways. There are cost advantages, both in terms of real estate and people.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity lies in rethinking work broadly and unlocking untapped potential in broader groups by leveraging modern technologies. New norms around employee engagement and communication are paving the way toward more positive, inclusive organizational cultures and more fulfilling work lives.

Companies that decide to move back to the office full-time may lose some of their best talent, including women and people of color. There's a significant opportunity to embrace diversity in the workplace and allow people to add their unique perspectives.

It's time to transform to a hybrid remote-office approach and rethink office space, and to equip people to work when and where they can be most productive. Leaders who genuinely embrace new ways of supporting remote workers will wind up with a more diverse workforce, more inclusive work environments, increased innovation and productivity—and better outcomes overall for their organizations.

To access the full global report, [click here](#).