

# Communications in Transition: Navigating C-Suite Pressures, Evolving Issues, and AI

Gravity Research x Executive Communication Council Survey

June 2025

**GRAVITY**  
RESEARCH

We empower organizations to **anticipate risk** and **rationalize reputational concerns** against a backdrop of evolving public pressures.

### Societal & Reputational Intelligence

- Monitor pressures from media, activists, and policymakers
- Benchmark peer responses
- Feed internal decision-making processes with timely information and rigorous analysis

### Stakeholder Influence Analysis

- Map the most important stakeholders on your key issues
- Targeted people research, third party analysis, and thought leadership support

### Political & Reputational Vetting

- Identify reputational risks tied to policymakers, corporate partners, and influencers
- Develop custom vetting criteria to ensure partners align with your values

# Societal Issue Research Deliverables

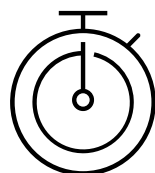
## Monitoring & Benchmarking Reports



- Analysis on emerging risk from policymakers, activists, and the media
- Benchmarking on peer and industry leader engagement and backlash



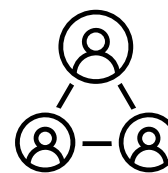
## On-Demand Research and Crisis Support



- Timely research and benchmarking on priority issues
- Daily updates on corporate and stakeholder responses to major events and crises



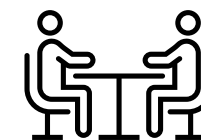
## Peer Insights & Proprietary Surveys



- Quarterly quantitative risk assessments and custom risk mitigation tactics
- Insights from surveys paneling leading corporate affairs executives



## Decision-Making Support



- Regular meetings with Executive Advisors to discuss analysis and business impacts
- On-call meetings to support emerging issues and crises



**International Support:** International issue monitoring and benchmarking including issue primers, quarterly updates, and on-demand crisis support are available.

## QUICK METHODOLOGY

- ✓ **Survey partnership:** Gravity Research x Executive Communication Council
- ✓ **Fielded:** April 21 - May 2, 2025
- ✓ **Respondents:** 147 communicators, between Gravity Research's Corporate Insider Panel and ECC's ecosystem
- ✓ **Gauged:** Dynamics with CEOs / principles, the most high-stakes societal issues, how folks are messaging DEI, plans to respond to tariffs, artificial intelligence

## AGENDA

1

**Societal Issues,  
focus on AI**

2

**Tariffs & DEI**

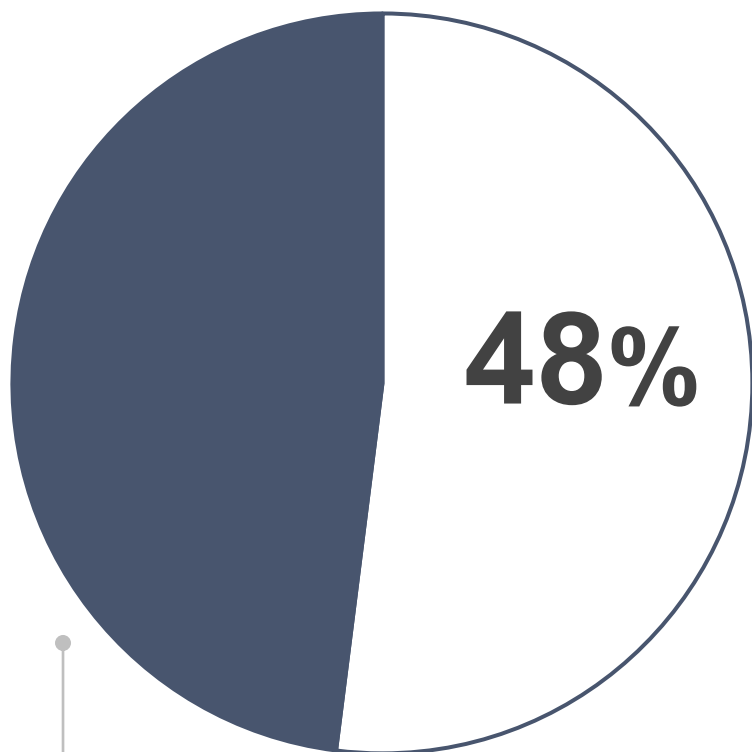
3

**CEO Dynamics  
and Comms  
Teams**

## AI USAGE

## AI tools power daily workflows and key communication tasks

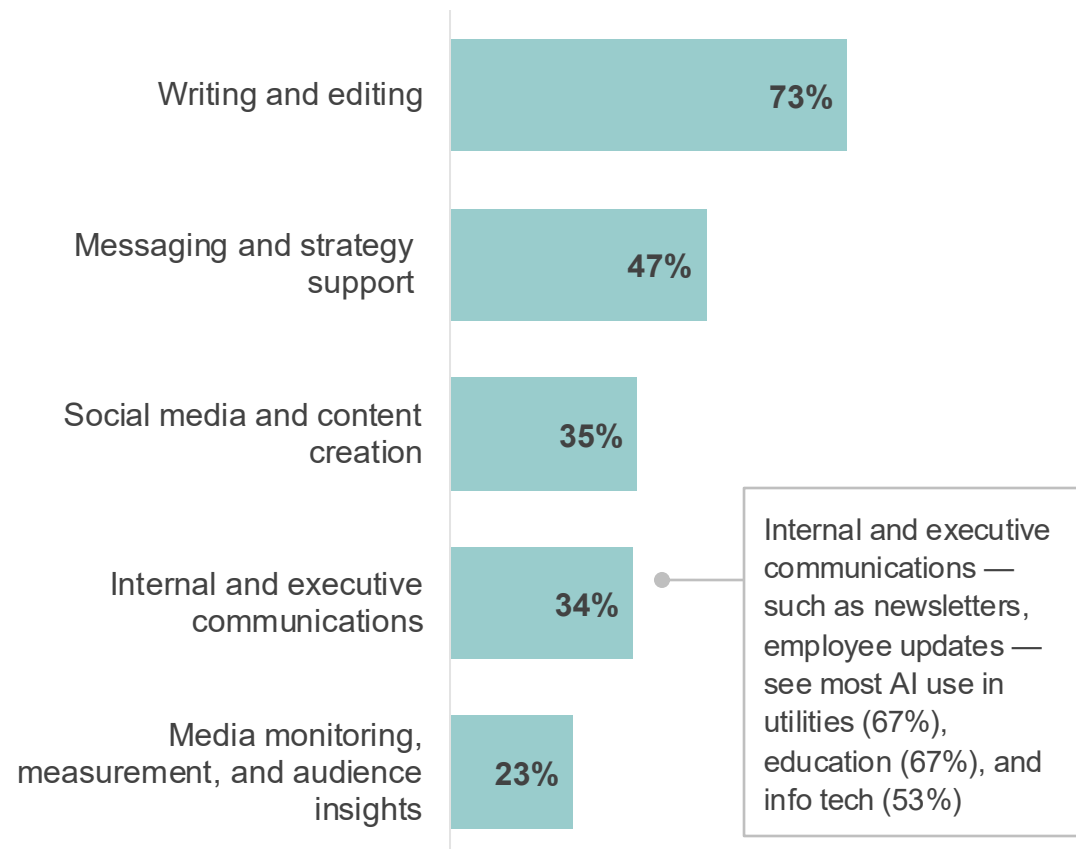
Share of executive and general communicators who selected **using AI tools in their role as a communicator at least once a day**



Daily use is most concentrated in **communications services**, where 63% use AI several times a day.

## WHAT THEY USE AI FOR

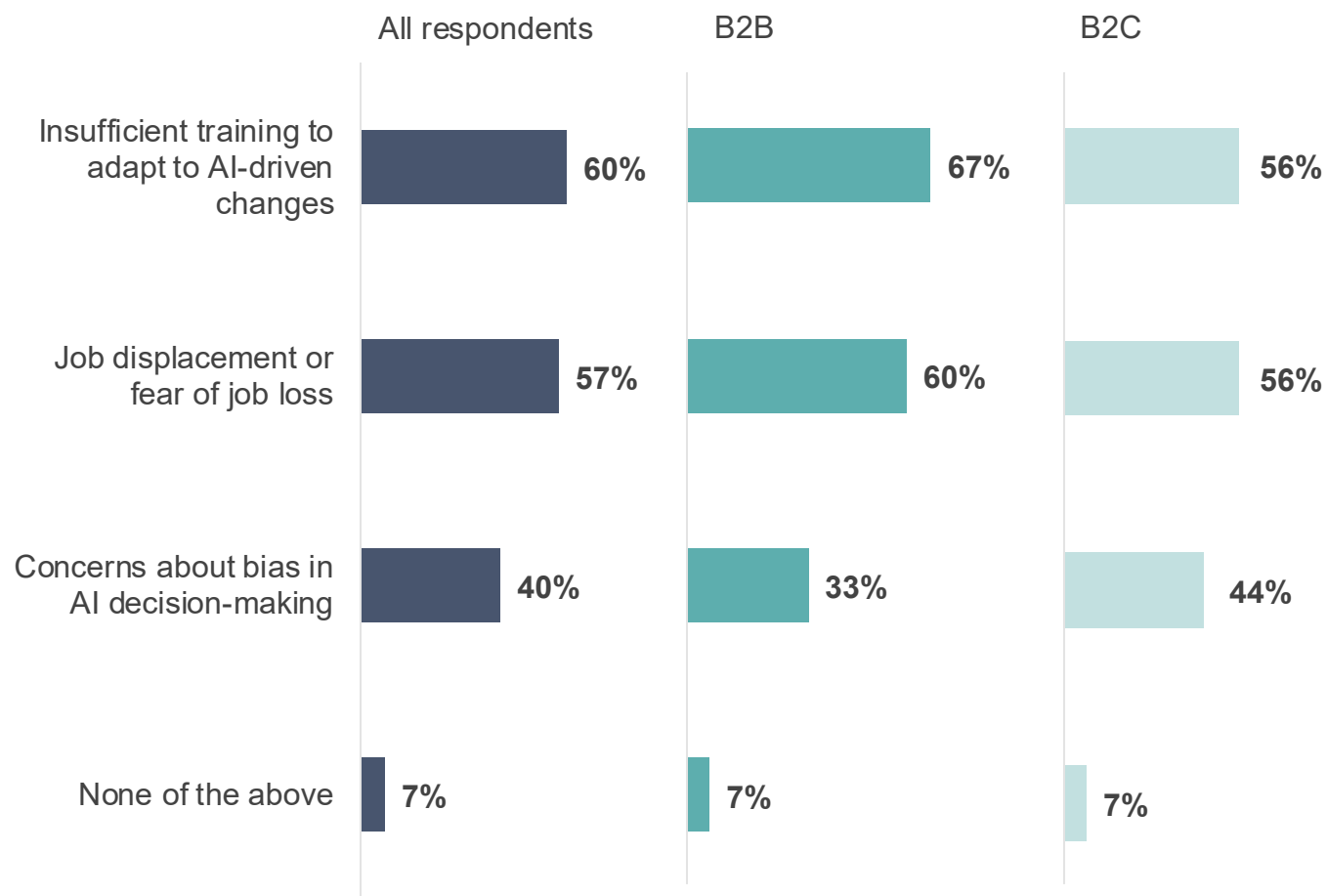
Share of executive and general communicators who selected the following as **tasks they use AI to assist with in their role as a communicator**



## AI USAGE

# Lack of AI training is dampening employee morale

Share of general communicators who selected the following as **impacting morale at their company**:



**60% of all respondents say employees lack the training needed to adapt to AI-driven change.** The issue is especially acute in health care (70%) and financial services (69%), where AI is often layered on top of already complex operational structures. This could mean that morale issues may be less about resistance to AI itself, and more about anxiety over integration.

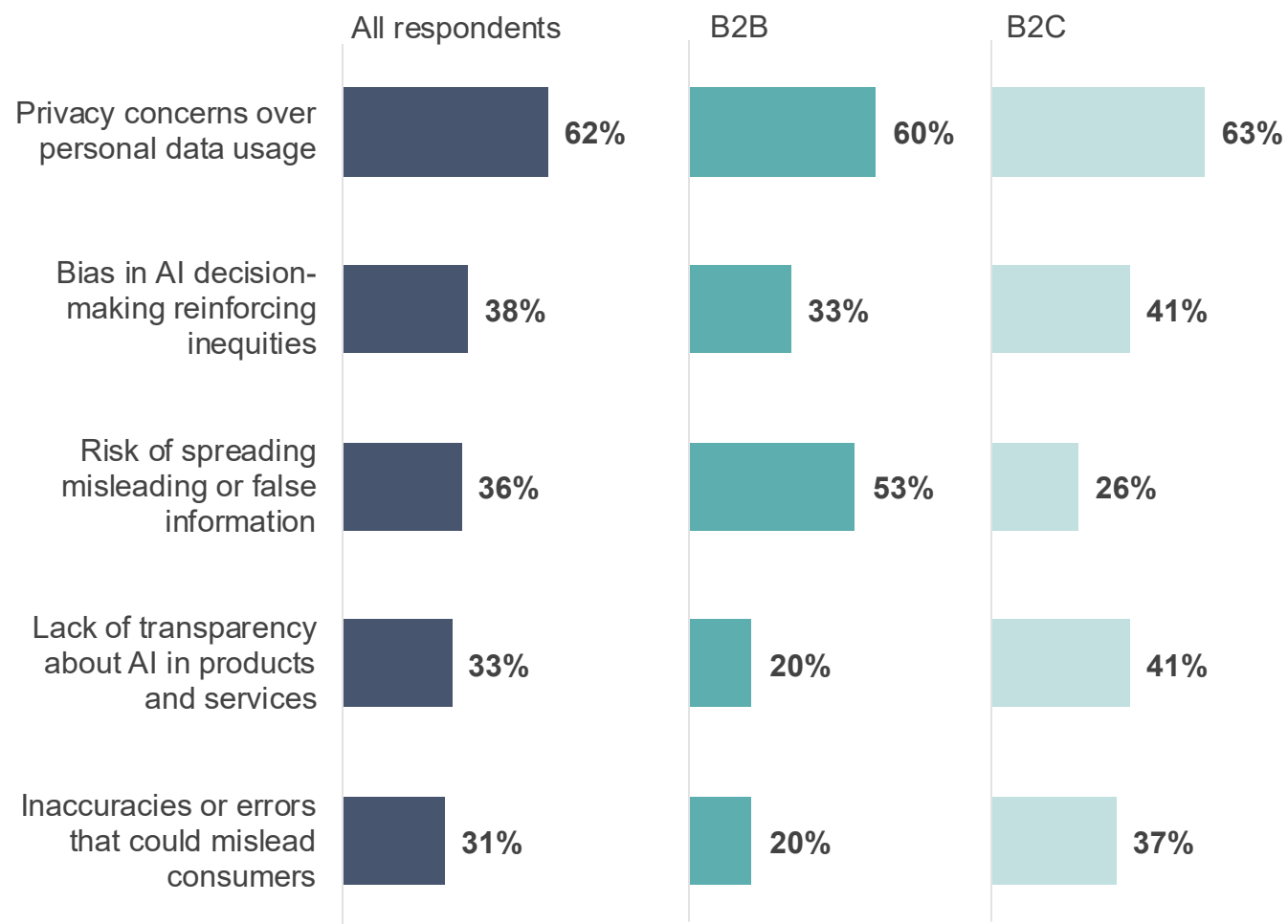
**Job displacement fears are fueling uncertainty across sectors.** Over half of executives (57%) say fear of job loss is affecting morale — with that number highest in financial services (69%). This sector may be grappling with greater ambiguity about how AI will automate roles and where human input will remain essential

One executive noted the positive impacts of AI, writing that morale is “more positive” because AI “helps with tasks and moving faster.”

## AI USAGE

## Privacy concerns are the top threat to consumer trust

Share of general communicators who selected the following as **impacting consumer trust of their company**:



\*Share of response option "None of the above" not shown

**62% of all respondents said privacy concerns over personal data usage could erode consumer trust.**

This view was especially strong in B2C companies (63%) and health care (80%), where consumer data sensitivity and brand reputation are closely intertwined. The elevated concern in health care likely reflects the sector's reliance on sensitive patient data, while B2C companies may be responding to heightened consumer awareness around data collection practices.

**Bias and misinformation could drive risk. Roughly one-third of respondents** flagged concerns about bias in AI decision-making (38%) and the spread of false information (36%) as serious threats to consumer trust. These concerns spike in health care (60%), which is especially alert to the risk of AI outputs reinforcing inequities or misleading the public.

**B2B leaders are more divided.** Notably, 40% of B2B executives selected "None of the above" — more than any other group.



## SOCIETAL ISSUES

# Political fractures in the U.S. are upending communications strategies

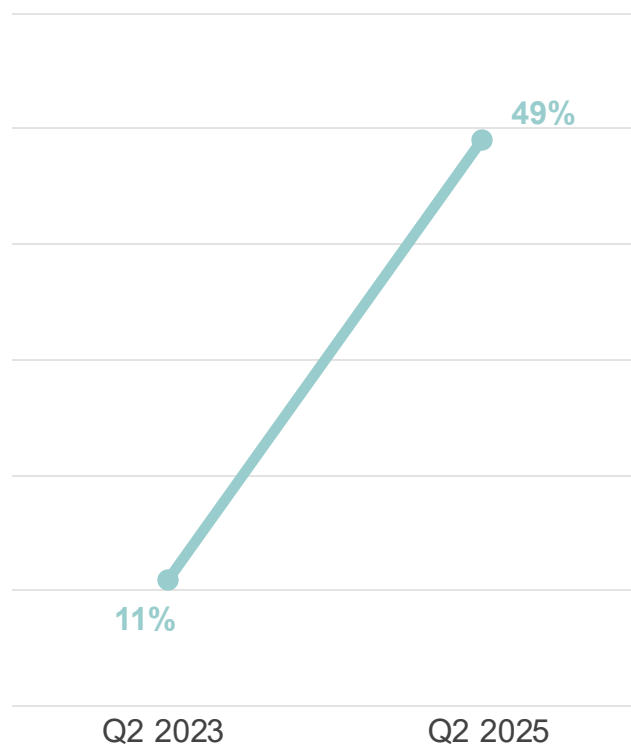
Roughly half (49%) of communicators now name 'U.S. political fractures' as the biggest factor shaping their communications strategy this year—a sharp increase from just 11% in 2023, underscoring how political polarization in the U.S. is reshaping executive messaging<sup>1</sup>

Share of executive and general communicators who said the following are the top three topics they believe will have the **biggest impact on their executive communication strategy this year**

**Education leaders** are highly focused on U.S. political fractures (60%), likely due to recent political attacks and policy threats targeting universities.

One respondent specified that *“politicized regulatory attacks on academic independence”* will have an outsized impact.

## U.S. political fractures



Vision of the organization is a top strategic priority in most industries, especially **health care (58%), education (45%), and consumer discretionary (50%)**. **Financials** lag at just 20%.

## Vision of the organization



<sup>1</sup>Gravity Research x ECC's 2025 Q2 surveys and the ECC's 2023 Q2 survey

## SOCIETAL ISSUES

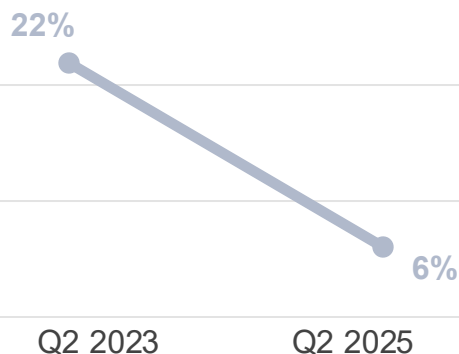
# ESG focus falls while economic factors increase in importance

ESG's influence on communications strategy dropped 16 points since 2023, reflecting growing hesitation amid the terms' increased politicization. Meanwhile, concern about the economy is on the rise, with one-third of respondents saying it will shape their strategy<sup>1</sup>

Share of executive and general communicators who said the following are the top three topics they believe will have the **biggest impact on their executive communication strategy this year**

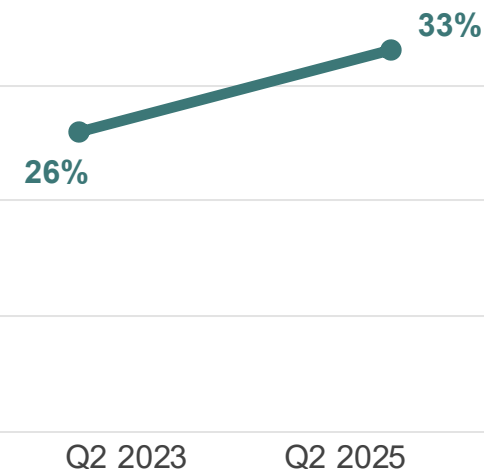
Some sectors like **energy (20%)** and **Industrials (14%)** still prioritize ESG, likely due to regulatory and stakeholder pressure — even as many companies pull back on ESG messaging because of political pushback.

## ESG



Industries such as **industrials (57%)** and **information technology (38%)** are particularly attentive to global economic tightening, likely due to supply chain disruptions and fluctuating demand. One respondent even cited “*tariffs*” as a top three impact.

## Global economic tightening

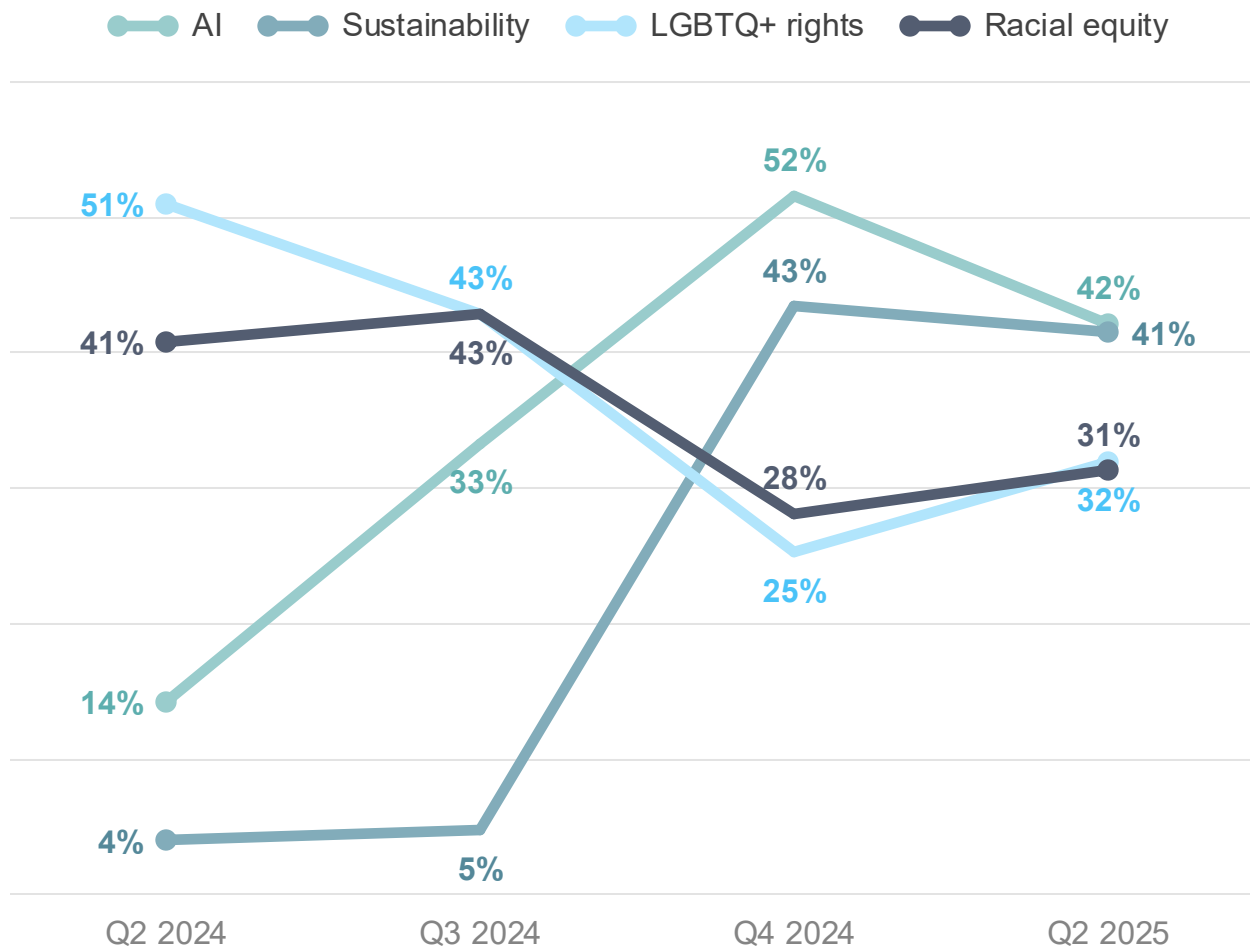


<sup>1</sup>Gravity Research x ECC's 2025 Q2 surveys and the ECC's 2023 Q2 survey

## SOCIETAL ISSUES

## Societal pressure clusters around technology, ESG and policy risks

Share of executive and general communicators on the top three societal issue areas **their company feels pressure to engage with**<sup>1</sup>:



**AI's rapid rise as a top concern** likely reflects organizations scrambling to manage both the risks and expectations surrounding new generative AI tools, especially as regulatory and ethical questions intensify. This shift is even more pronounced among executive communicators, who now rank AI (47%) and sustainability (46%) as their leading areas of pressure, while general communicators still feel strongest pressure on LGBTQ+ rights (67%) and racial equity (45%).

**Sustainability's sharp rebound** this quarter suggests that as ESG debates heat up and regulatory scrutiny grows.

**Racial equity and LGBTQ+ rights are seeing less pressure than last year overall**, but remain top of mind for general communicators, even as executive focus shifts to AI and ESG — showing a clear divide between C-suite and broader comms team pressures.

<sup>1</sup>Gravity Research's CIS 2024 Q2, Q3, Q4, and 2025 Q2 surveys

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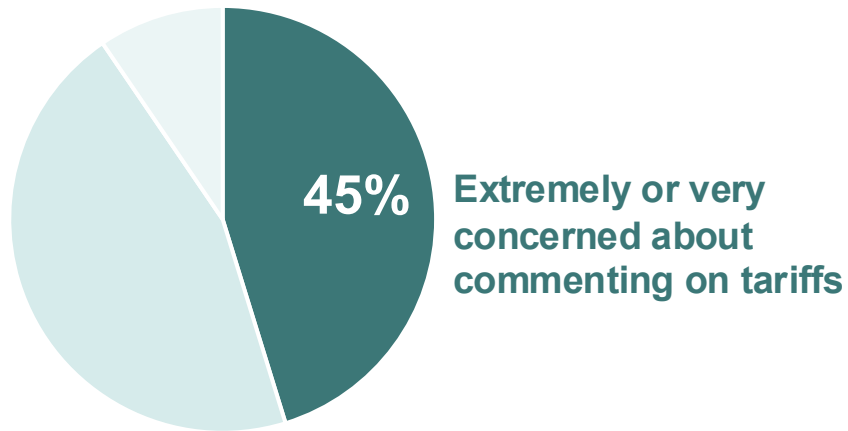
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**CEO Dynamics  
and Comms  
Teams**

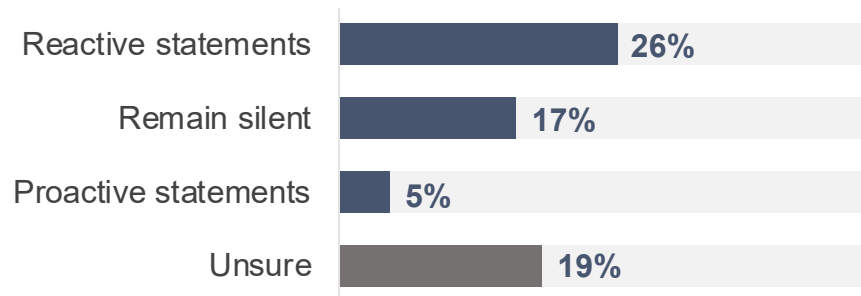
## TARIFFS

## Most companies are staying quiet on tariffs, even with concern high

Share of general communicators who were 'extremely' or 'very' concerned about **potential reputational risks from publicly commenting on tariffs**:



Share of general communicators who **plan to communicate about tariff-related issues** in the following ways:\*



\*Share of response option "Other" not shown

**Tariffs are a reputational tightrope for many.** Roughly half (45%) are at least "very" concerned about commenting about tariffs, a figure that ticks up among B2Bs (53%) and health care companies (50%), where policy shifts may directly impact supply chains or international partnerships.

Financials, meanwhile, are skewed toward low concern, with 38% only slightly concerned and 19% not concerned at all, likely reflecting less of direct business impact and stakeholder expectations to remain silent.

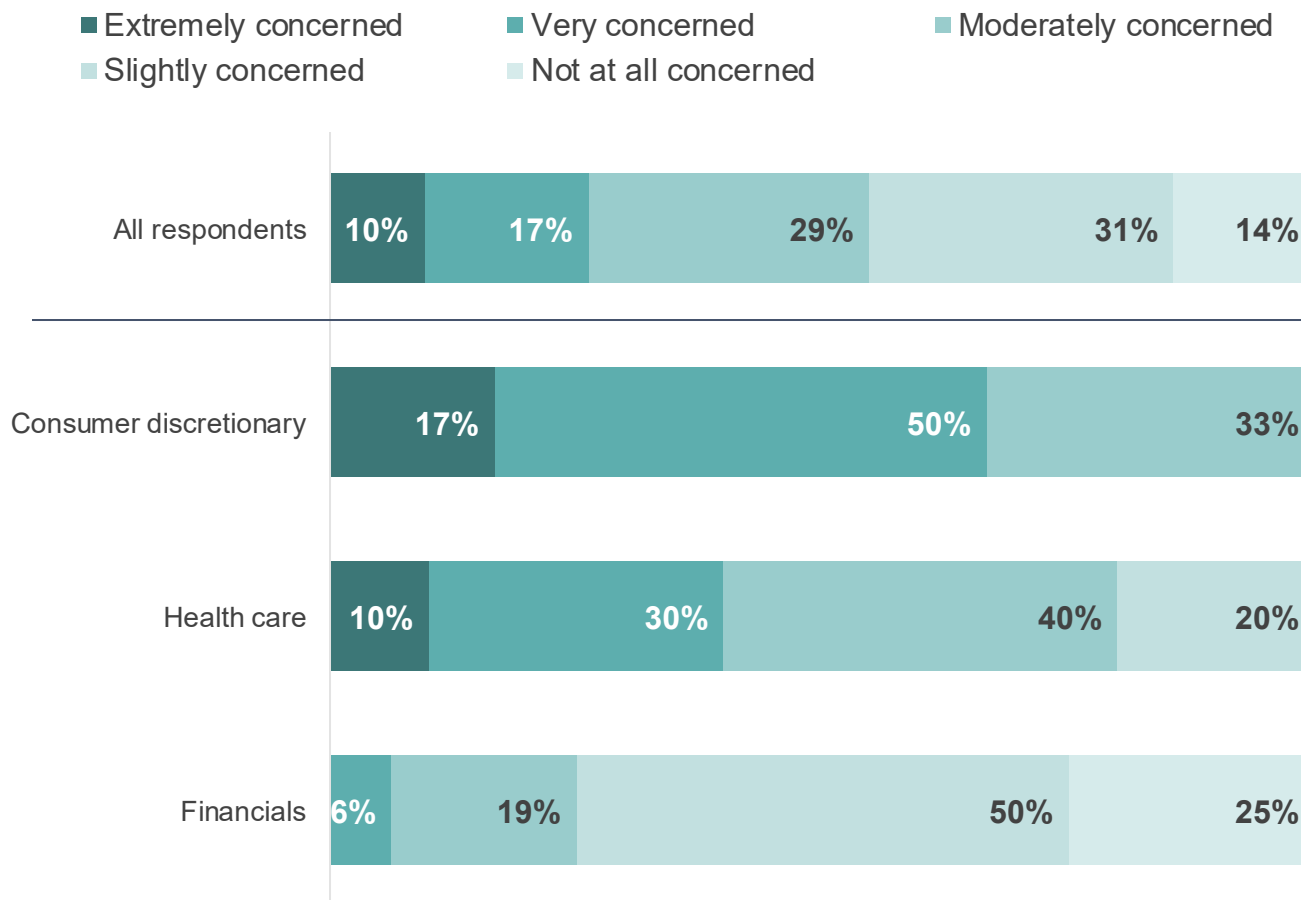
**Proactive messaging is rare.** Many companies have learned that linking price increases to trade policy can invite political backlash, making public statements a calculated risk. That said, Gravity Research has clocked higher levels of corporate engagement on tariffs compared to societal issues such as DEI and LGBTQ+ issues, with corporations closely connecting tariffs to their bottom line.

Statements are more likely to be reactive (26%) than proactive (5%) — or undecided. The response option "other" was especially common among health care (40%) and financials (44%), with qualitative responses mentioning engaging trade associations and managing client needs.

## TARIFFS

# Concern about price hikes is highest where consumer trust is fragile

Share of general communicators who are concerned about **potential reputational risks from rising prices** in response to tariff-related costs:



**Most see reputational risk from price hikes as real, but not urgent.** About a quarter of respondents (27%) are at least very concerned about reputational fallout from tariff-driven price increases, but this varies significantly by industry.

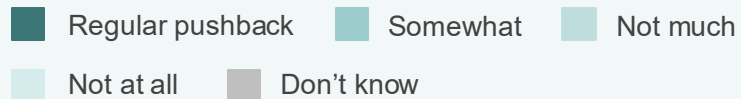
**Consumer discretionary (50%) and health care (30%)** had the highest shares of very concerned respondents, perhaps reflecting separate risks: Consumer discretionary would be the first industry to take a hit from reduced consumer spending, while Health care could see reputational risk if essential services increase in cost

**Discretionary is also the most likely to remain quiet on price hikes (67%),** as high visibility large consumer bases across the political spectrum could prompt backlash from both policymakers and consumers, damaging brand reputation on two separate fronts

## Reaffirming values internally No. 1 strategy for any employee pushback

**Few companies are immune to employee pushback on DEI.** When asked if they've received employee pushback on DEI in the past year, 40% of respondents said regularly, and 31% said somewhat

General communicators ranked how often they've received **pushback from employees to maintain corporate commitments to DEI** in the past year:

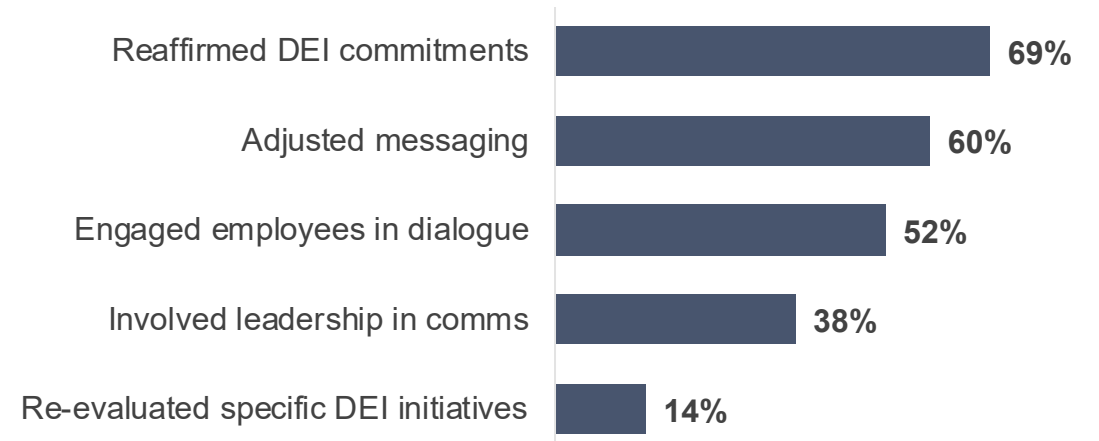


**B2B firms (53%)** and **health care companies (60%)** are the most likely to report regular pressure, compared to just 33% of B2C respondents. Without the demands of direct consumer engagement, employees at less publicly visible B2B firms may feel more empowered to challenge internal DEI rollbacks

**“DEI has become an increasingly contentious issue.** It's not perfect, but I believe we've found some effective ways for our leaders to talk to colleagues with authenticity by **focusing on the values that guide them and us.**” – Health care executive

In response to employee pressure, **69% of executives** said they **reaffirmed DEI commitments via internal communications.**

Respondents selected how their company **responded to employee pushback to maintain commitments to DEI:**\*



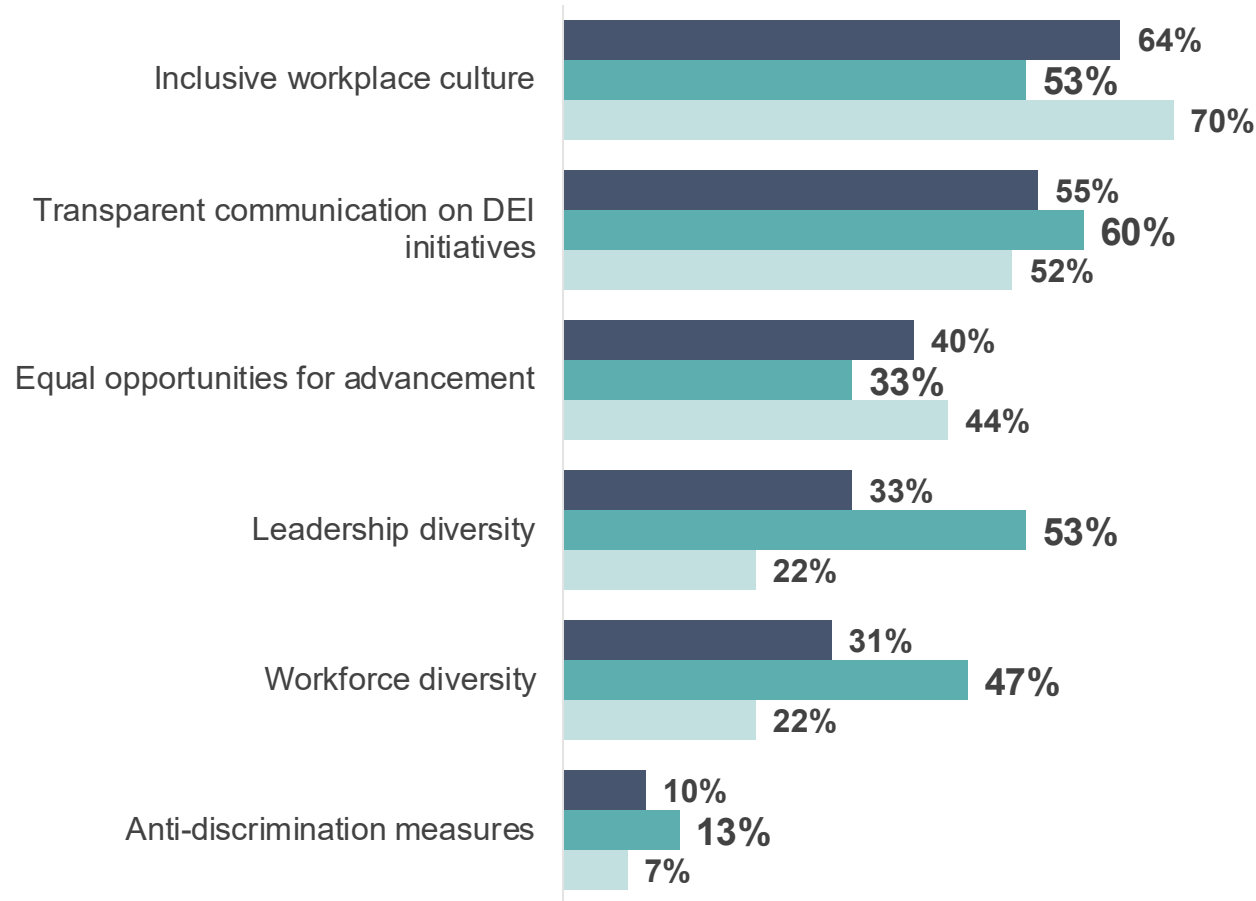
**Companies are trying to evolve, not retreat.** Only 7% of respondents say they took *no specific action* in response to employee pushback, while **60%** adjusted messaging or implementation while *maintaining* goals. One exec describes the struggle as *“maintaining consistency between internal communications and culture work with changing external environment”*

\*Respondents were allowed to select all that apply

# Inclusion, transparency, and a path to advance top employee DEI concerns

Share of general communicators who said **employees raised the following as concerns:**

■ All respondents ■ B2B ■ B2C



- **Inclusion tops the list.** 64% of all respondents say inclusive workplace culture is the most frequently raised DEI concern. This bodes well for companies that are pivoting to “inclusion” in their core values over DEI terminology, although employees will have to feel it to believe it
- **Transparency is a close second.** 55% of all respondents say employees are asking for more transparent communication on DEI initiatives. This is mostly consistent across business orientation and industry, signaling that transparency is a universal problem and difficult to maintain in the current environment
- **Concern about leadership representation is industry-dependent.** 60% of health care executives report employees raising leadership diversity as a concern, compared to just 19% in financials and 17% in consumer discretionary. This could reflect internal scrutiny around executive representation, or simply highlight industries slower to diversify the C-suite



## EMPLOYEE PRESSURE

## Balance and transparency are top strategies – and challenges

The most challenging aspect about managing employee pressure, in executives' own words:

***“The environment of fear created out of Washington, DC...”*** – Health care executive

***“Maintaining consistency between internal communications and culture work with changing external environment”*** – IT executive

***“Being transparent, open and honest. The harsh realities of where we are makes some decisions hard to deliver and hard to receive”*** – Health care executive

***“Balancing different stakeholders and expectations while maintaining clear commitment to DEI and why DEI is fundamental to our business”***  
– Health care executive

***“Competing expectations of external stakeholders and the need to ensure any internal communication does not appear to contradict what we are communicating externally”***  
– Consumer discretionary executive

*\*Quotes lightly edited for clarity and emphasis*

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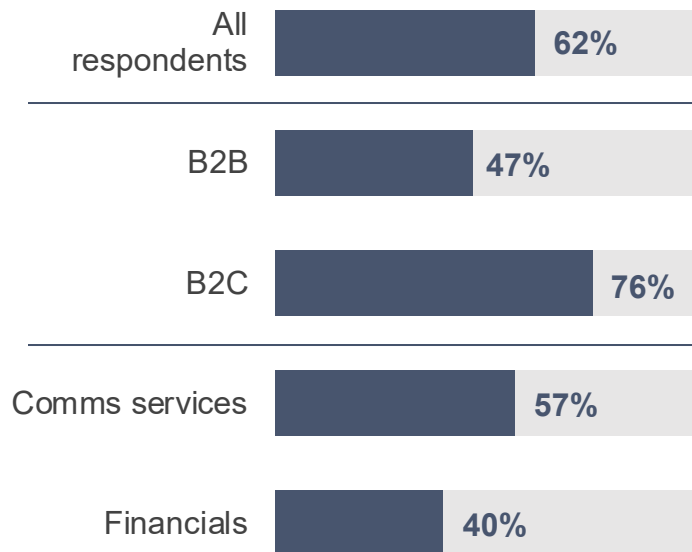
**CEO Dynamics  
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## CEO RELATIONSHIP

## CEO communication alliances are strongest in consumer-facing firms

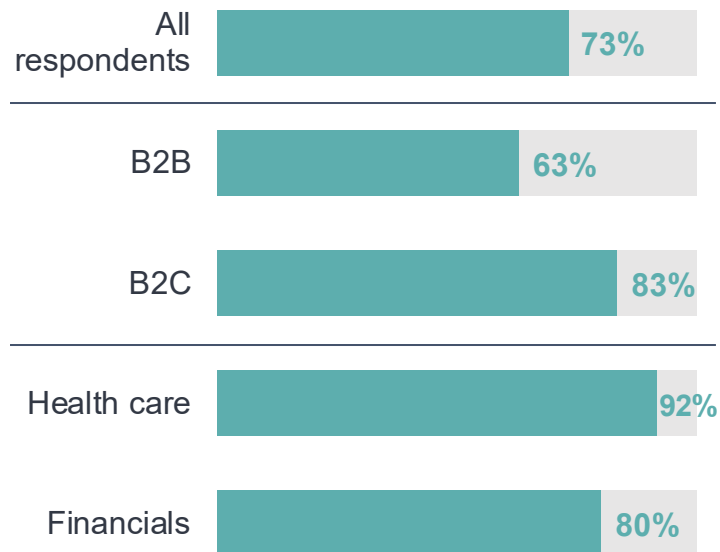
B2C executives are building the strongest, most collaborative ties with their CEOs, while B2B and financial execs keep things a bit more formal

Share of executive communicators who said they have a “**strong**” or “**very strong**” relationship with their CEO in terms of managing up and strategic communication



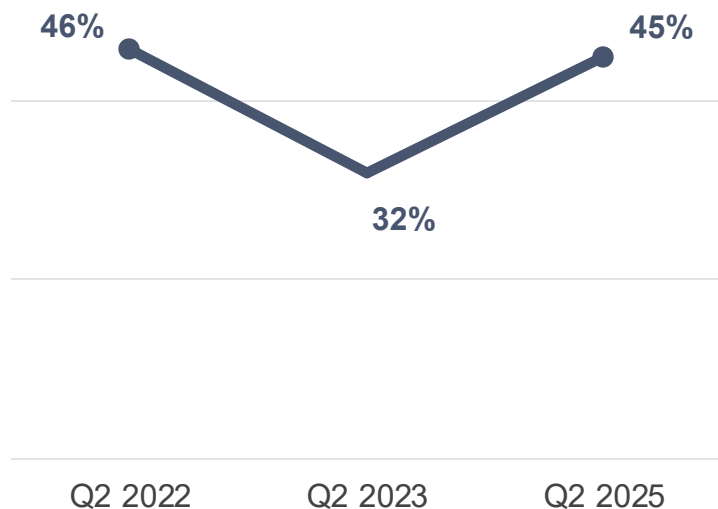
Most financial executives (60%) rate their relationship with their CEO as “moderate,” which could reflect more formal or transactional dynamics compared to other sectors

Share of executive communicators who “**often**” or “**sometimes**” initiate conversations with their CEO about communication tactics on sensitive topics



“Occasionally there is a conflict between my personal views and the leadership. The leadership would rather stay silent than address certain issues. Which often ends up with us being dragged into the situation later with less control over the messaging.” – Financials executive

Share of executive communicator who say collaboration with the executive they work most closely with has **increased** year-over-year

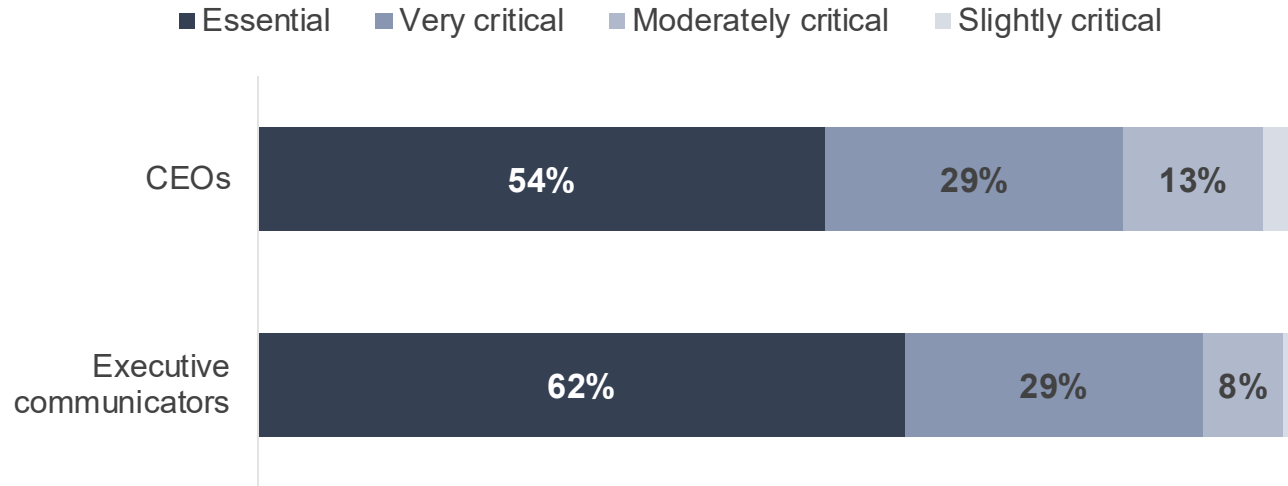


Both B2B and B2C respondents report nearly identical rates of increased collaboration with their closest executive, rebounding to pre-2023, likely in response to rising external pressures and a need for unified messaging

## CEO RELATIONSHIP

## Exec. communicators see both their craft and their CEO as ‘essential’

Share of executive communicators **rating the importance of executive communicators’ and CEOs’ roles** in navigating today’s political and societal landscape



“I am fortunate in that my principal has a lot of trust in me and my decisions or recommendations. **Even if they ultimately choose a different direction, I usually have a chance to be heard**”  
– Education professional

Most (62%) executive communicators rate their role as essential, placing their significance just ahead of the CEO’s (54%).

Health care views its duties with more seriousness: Every communicator (100%) sees their own function as essential and 80% see the CEO as essential.

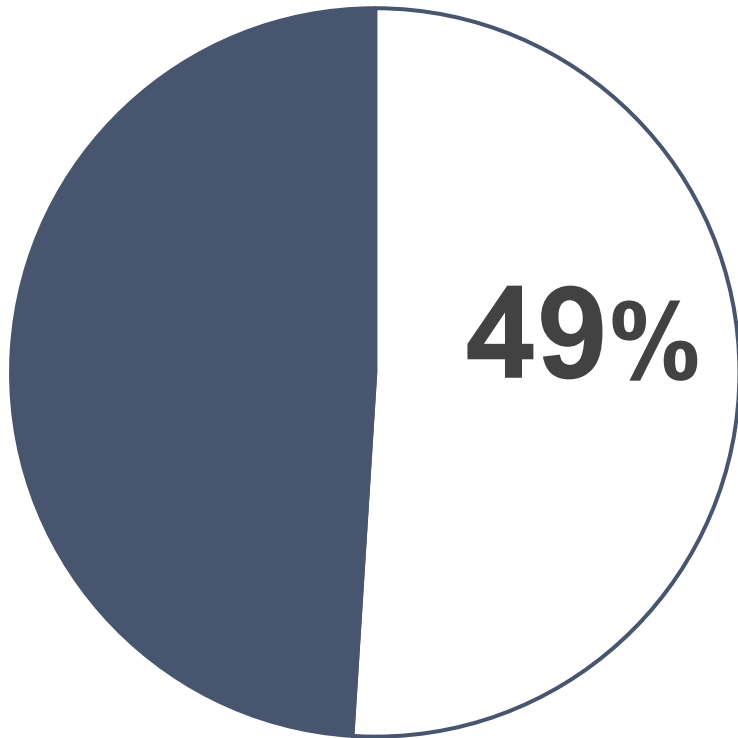
By contrast, just 38% in information technology view their own function and the CEO’s role as essential—making IT the least likely to see executive communications as critical.

**Notably, VPs & above are the most convinced — 70% call their own function essential and 75% say the CEO essential** — perhaps because senior leaders collaborate most closely on high-impact strategic decisions.

## CEO RELATIONSHIP

## About half experience tension with CEO over sensitive issues

Share of executive communicators who experience tension or disagreement with their CEO when addressing sensitive topics at least “sometimes”



*“One of the unfortunate aspects of my current role is that, though I am the speechwriter to a CEO, I am not given direct access to the CEO and instead must communicate with the CEO through our Chief Communications Officer and the CEO Comms Director. This inefficient system means that I never have an opportunity to have contentious issues with the CEO or resolve them” – Industrials professional*

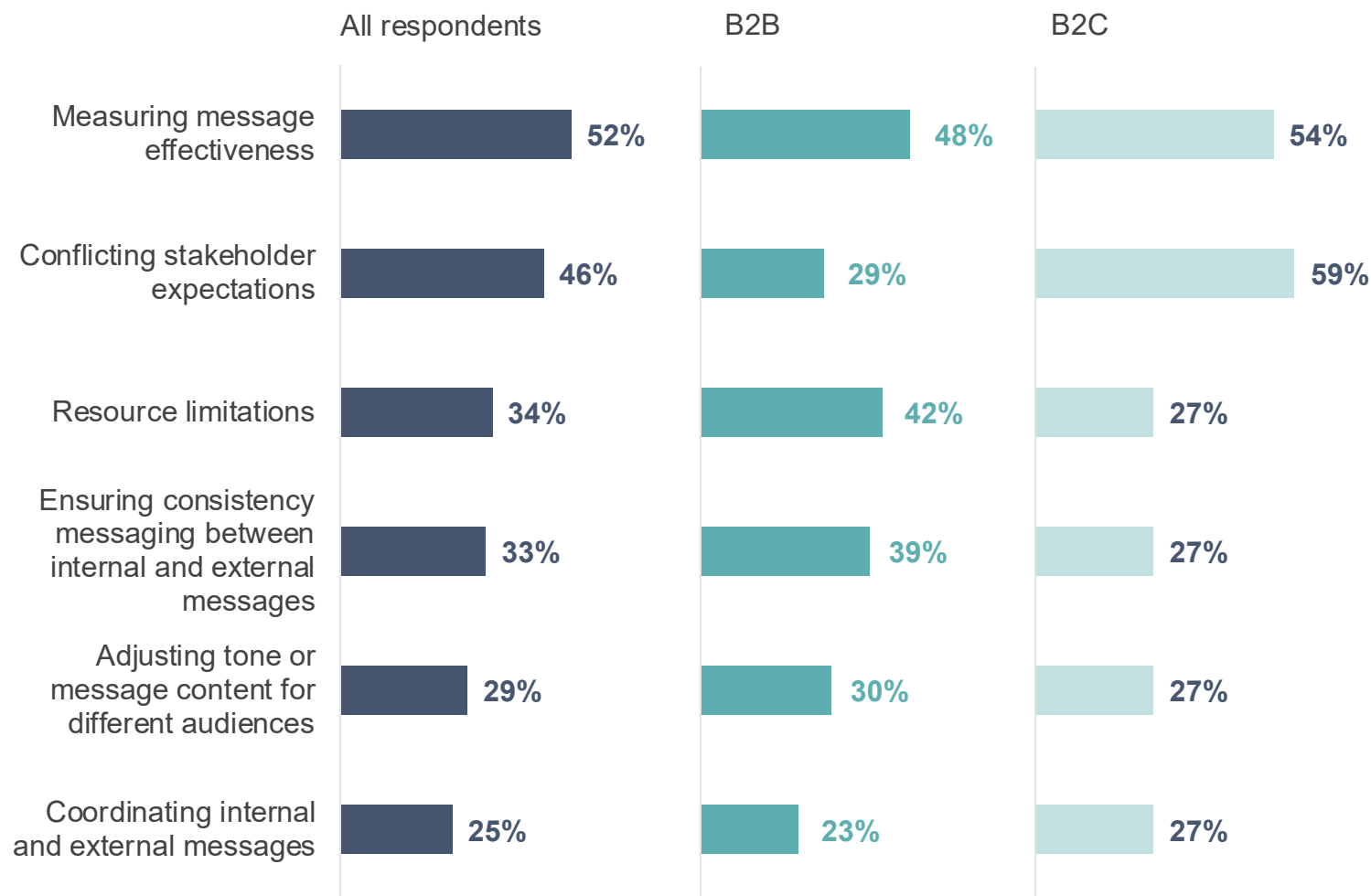
*“More frequently today than in the past. My leadership has largely opted to stay silent on the... Trump Administration, and worse, seems confident that they can continue to expand the business amid the upheaval” – Energy professional*

*“Rarely, but the caution around communicating about DEI is frustrating” – Automotive professional*

## COMMUNICATIONS

## Measuring impact, managing stakeholders lead messaging woes

Share of executive and general communicators who selected the following as the top 3 challenges they face **when managing internal messaging with external messaging**



**Measuring message effectiveness is the top challenge for communicators (52%),** especially in communications services (63%), consumer staples (83%), and for our executive communicators group (53%).

**Conflicting stakeholder expectations ranks second overall (46%),** hitting hardest in consumer staples (100%), financials (76%), and for our executive communicators group (37%). This pain point is likely fueled by the ongoing push and pull between employee needs and external pressures from investors, customers, and media — particularly as brands face scrutiny on issues like DEI, climate, and politics.

This stakeholder balancing act is even sharper for **B2C communicators, where 59% report conflicting demands** from customers, employees, and the public — all expecting quick, visible responses

## COMMUNICATIONS

## Executive communications team structures are all over the place

Share of executive and general communicators who selected the following as **how their organization structure its executive communication support**



**33%**

**A centralized exec. comms team supports one or multiple leaders**

Fortune 1000 companies double down on formal structures with 40% centralizing comms



**10%**

**Other**

This includes one communicator supporting several leaders, centralized or hybrid teams, and ad hoc support



**26%**

**A general comms team supports all exec. comms, among other responsibilities**

Industrials stand out for distributing responsibilities, with 50% using a general communications team rather than a dedicated or centralized approach



**5%**

**Exec. comms is managed by executives themselves or their direct staff**

Executive communications are rarely managed solely by executives, but this approach is more common in education (10%) and utilities (20%)



**24%**

**Each senior executive has a dedicated communicator or team**

Global 500 firms are more likely to provide senior executives with a dedicated communicator/team (48%)

## WHAT IS HAPPENING

## Key Takeaways



**Measuring communications impact and juggling stakeholder demands** are top challenges for executive communicators



**AI use is now widespread**, with nearly half using these tools daily—yet it's also one of the top societal issues of concern



**DEI remains a pressure point:** While focus on DEI issues is shifting, communicators continue to navigate internal and external expectations, with some sectors reporting tension or evolving language around these topics



**U.S. political fractures and economic uncertainty** are reshaping executive communications strategies

## What Companies Should Do



**Develop tools** for better measuring message impact



**Develop clear guidelines and governance** for responsible AI use in communications



Encourage **honest conversations** and align DEI messaging with company values to address both employee and public concerns



**Stay agile**—be ready to update messaging as political and economic climates evolve



## METHODOLOGY

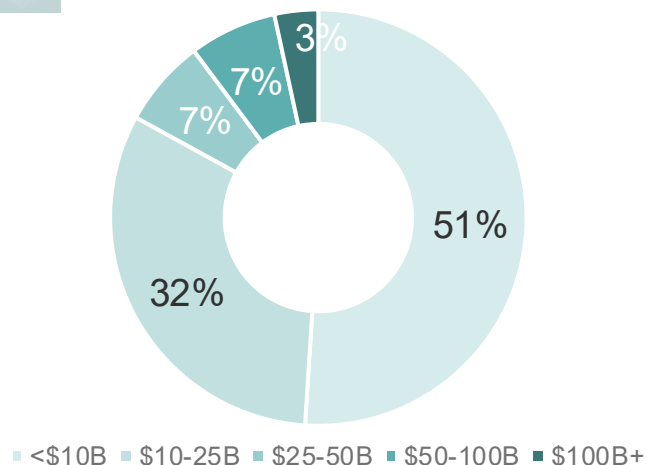
### Corporate Insider Group x ECC survey demographics

Between April 21st and May 2nd, 2025, 147 executive and general communicators completed the **Gravity Research x ECC Survey**. These graphs reflect demographics for our corporate participants.

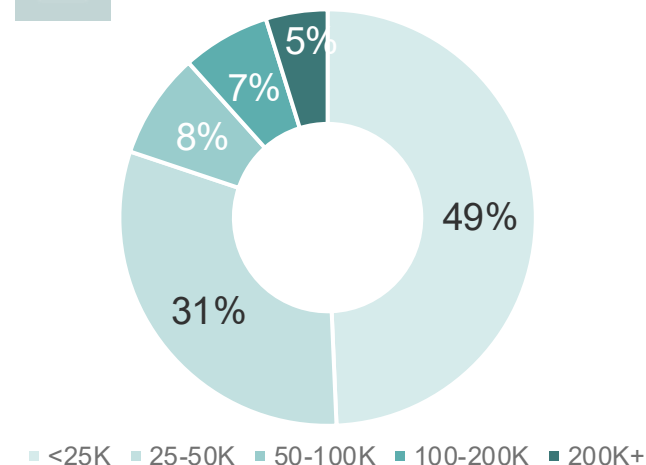
**Annual revenue** and **employee** bands were derived to segment participants with comparable organizations.

Gravity Research also evaluated participants by **industry** and whether the company **primarily served consumers**, a business-to-consumer (B2C) company, **or businesses**, a business-to-business (B2B) company.

#### Insiders by Revenue



#### Insiders by Headcount



### Insider Demographics

**Industry Sectors:** Industries represented among Insiders are communication services, consumer discretionary, consumer staples, financials, health care, industrials, information technology, materials, and retail.

**Seniority:** Insiders reflect senior-most leaders within their organizations, including titles such as vice president, senior vice president, executive vice president, and c-suite leadership.

**Corporate Functions:** A variety of functional areas were represented by these executives, including communications, marketing, government affairs, public policy, external affairs, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, reputation, and risk management with some leaders holding responsibility in multiple areas.

# THANK YOU.

## GRAVITY RESEARCH

We empower corporate leaders to anticipate societal issue risk and rationalize reputational concerns against a backdrop of evolving stakeholder pressures



### LET'S CONNECT.

Learn more about how we can support your team by contacting Joanna Piacenza at [jpiacenza@gravityresearch.com](mailto:jpiacenza@gravityresearch.com).

