

prialto

PRIALTO EXECUTIVE PRODUCTIVITY REPORT SUMMER 2020

HOW COVID-19 CHANGED EXECUTIVE PRODUCTIVITY

Introduction

We launched Prialto over ten years ago, executives have often asked us to share productivity tips and best practices. While we are always happy to share our front-line insights, there is no shortage of experts who are willing to tell you how to be more productive. What seems missing is solid, peer-to-peer insights and advice.

In 2019, we decided to fill this gap by augmenting our expert advice with detailed data on what executives are doing to stay productive. We surveyed 500 leaders from across the U.S., United Kingdom, Australia and Canada to identify trends in time management strategies, tools and other productivity habits.

Then the work environment suddenly changed. COVID-19 disrupted every aspect of business and forced executives to quickly and drastically adapt their productivity habits.

To help our community move forward, we surveyed another 500 executives to gather insights into the strategies they're using to cope with all of the challenges and uncertainties. We contrasted these findings with our 2019 survey to paint a full picture of how executive productivity has evolved as a result of COVID-19.

Executive Productivity

pro·duc·tiv·i·ty / noun

The efficiency of productive effort toward one's personal and business objectives. The ability to organize your actions and time to get better results with the same amount of time and energy.

2019 Snapshot

Here are some of the key insights from our November 2019 survey to give you an idea of what executive productivity was like on the eve of the pandemic.

80% of Executives Regularly Enlisted Help

This gave them more time to focus on strategic tasks and also helped prevent burnout. Interestingly though, 49% of executives delegated admin work but only 19% had an assistant, indicating that they offloaded tedious tasks onto key employees who have other priorities.

68% Said They Preferred Working in the Office

Despite all of the pre-pandemic enthusiasm about WFH benefits, 68% of executives said that they were most productive in the office. This report will dive into how most executives have increased productivity without being in the office and how they've adapted to challenges in the new work environment.





2019 Snapshot

35% Said Work-Life Balance is Essential for Their Productivity

The most productive executives prioritized taking care of themselves as much as they do their businesses. Not only does work-life balance help prevent burnout, it also gives executives the energy they need to achieve long-term goals.

57% Follow a Strict Productivity System

Creating a productive schedule requires an upfront time investment. However, most executives have found it pays off with less stress and better performance since they have a clear plan to achieve their goals.

2020 Will Be a Successful Year

The most powerful takeaway from this survey is that despite everything that's happened since COVID-19 struck, most executives believe that the second half of 2020 will be successful. It's important to note that the survey was conducted as states and countries prepared to reopen and was taken by high-earning executives engaging primarily in information work. As we go to press, COVID-19 cases are again on the rise in many states. The results of our survey might differ dramatically were they asked now or during another period of this turbulent time.

In general, our 2019 survey found that executives tend to be highly positive people, with 86% of them reporting that they're satisfied with their productivity, though many acknowledged areas in need of improvement.

38%

are confident they'll achieve the goals they set in the beginning of the year

38%

are confident they'll achieve revised goals they recently set for the second half of the year

17%

don't think they'll achieve their goals but are confident they'll make meaningful progress

7%

are concerned that their business won't survive the crisis

93% of executives believe they are on track to success. This positivity will have a deep effect on how executives approach the challenges they're facing in the second half of the year.

Contents

This report is broken into three sections to provide a clear picture of how executives are coping during these dynamic times.

1. What's Changed

Surprisingly, majority of executives, have experienced positive changes since since the start of the pandemic.

2. The Challenges

Despite their positive attitudes, executives have experienced immense challenges in leading their teams through rapid changes.

3. How Executives are Moving Forward

Driven by their optimism, many executives have made investments that mediate their short-term challenges and help generate lasting success.

Throughout the report, we'll share insights into what's driving the results and how you can leverage the data to improve your productivity during this chaotic time.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white top, is seated at a desk in a modern office setting. She is looking towards a large computer monitor. The monitor displays a video conference with four participants in a grid layout. The background shows a window with a view of greenery. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the monitor and the ambient office lighting.

What's Changed

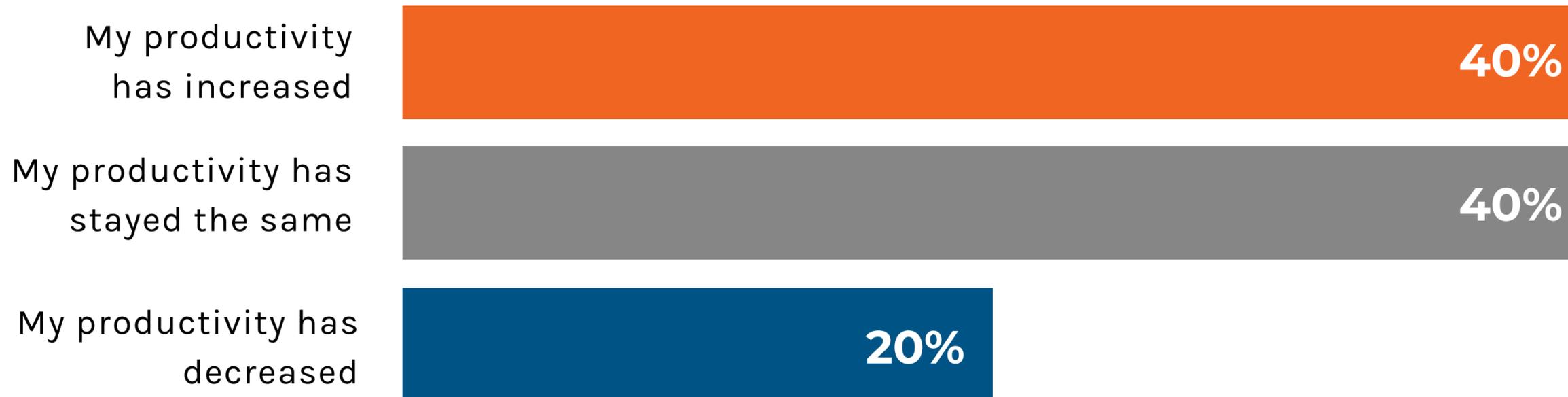
Despite all of the social, health and business challenges in the first half of 2020, most executives have seen a positive impact on their work lives. In this section, we'll show how the changes brought on by the pandemic improved executives' productivity, time management and work-life balance.

Executive Productivity Has Increased

One of the benefits of facing any immense challenge is that people are forced to focus on the activities that matter most. As executives' lives were upended by the pandemic, they had to reprioritize their time to minimize the effects of rapid change on their teams. As a result, majority of executives have increased or sustained their productivity during this time.



How would you rate your productivity now compared to before the pandemic?



This productivity improvement is driven partially by executives' refusal to let the crisis get in the way of their goals. However, another key factor is that the pandemic forced them to adopt a lifestyle that's more conducive to working on strategic priorities.

November 2019 Survey Question

What activity do you think is the best use of your time?

Independent work

37%

Strategy meetings

30%

Meetings with direct reports

21%

Interactions with external parties

12%

In our 2019 survey, we asked executives what they thought the best use of their time was, and 67% said activities that involve deep work.

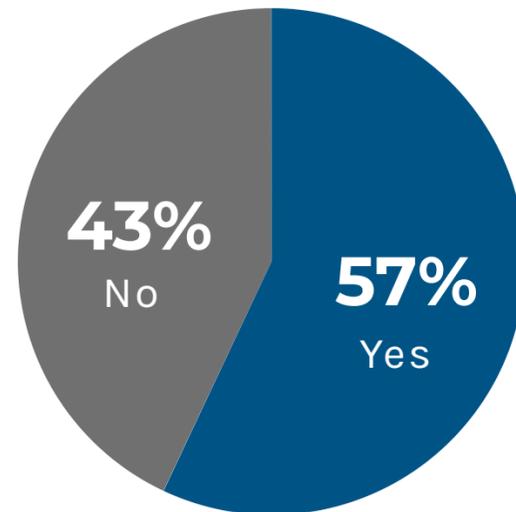
For better or worse, stay-at-home orders forced executives to shift from a schedule with lots of travel, networking events and external meetings to one where they must focus their time on strategic priorities.

More Executives Use a Time Management System

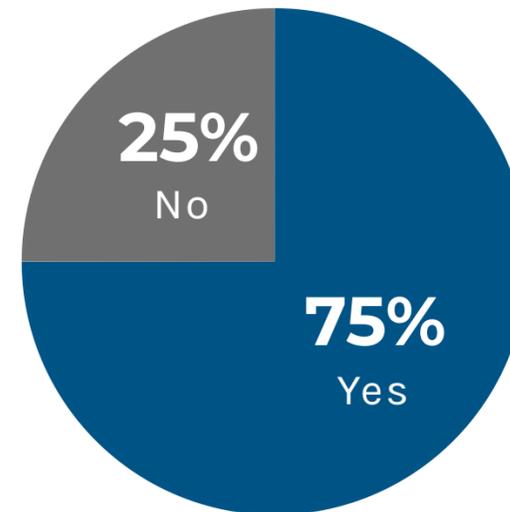
One of the ways that executives have been more strategic with their time is by adopting a new productivity system. Since November 2019, the percentage of executives who follow a system has increased 18%.

Question

Do you follow a productivity management system like Getting Things Done (GTD), Agile Results or time blocking?



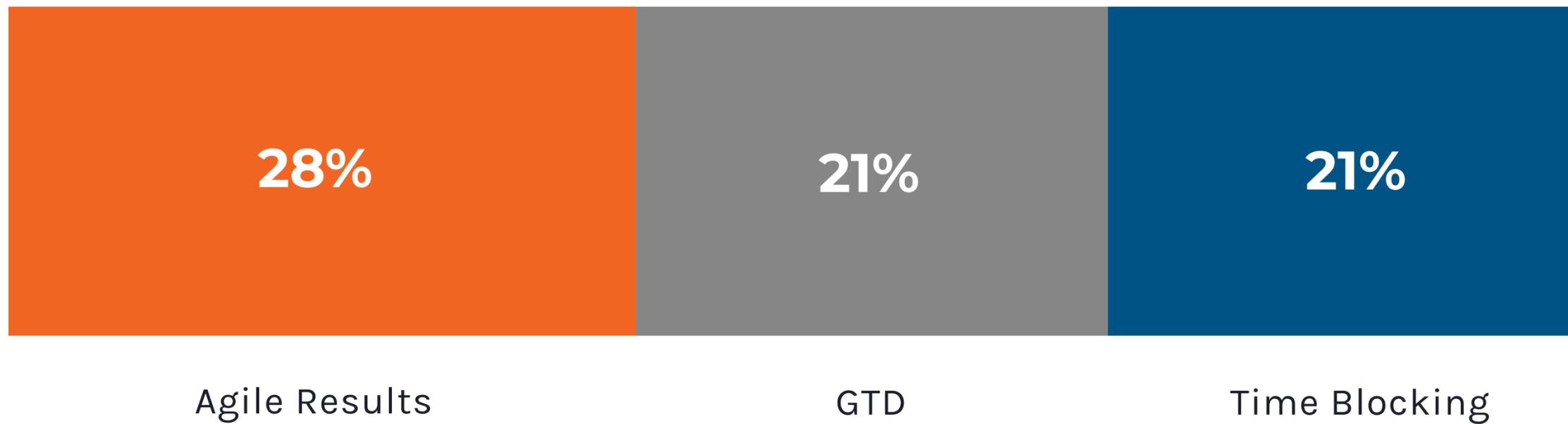
2019



2020

Productivity systems are particularly useful during these fast-changing times because they help executives sort through the noise and demands and focus on the priorities that are most likely to push them and their teams forward.

Most Popular Productivity Management Systems



Leaders Adopted a Plethora of New Tools

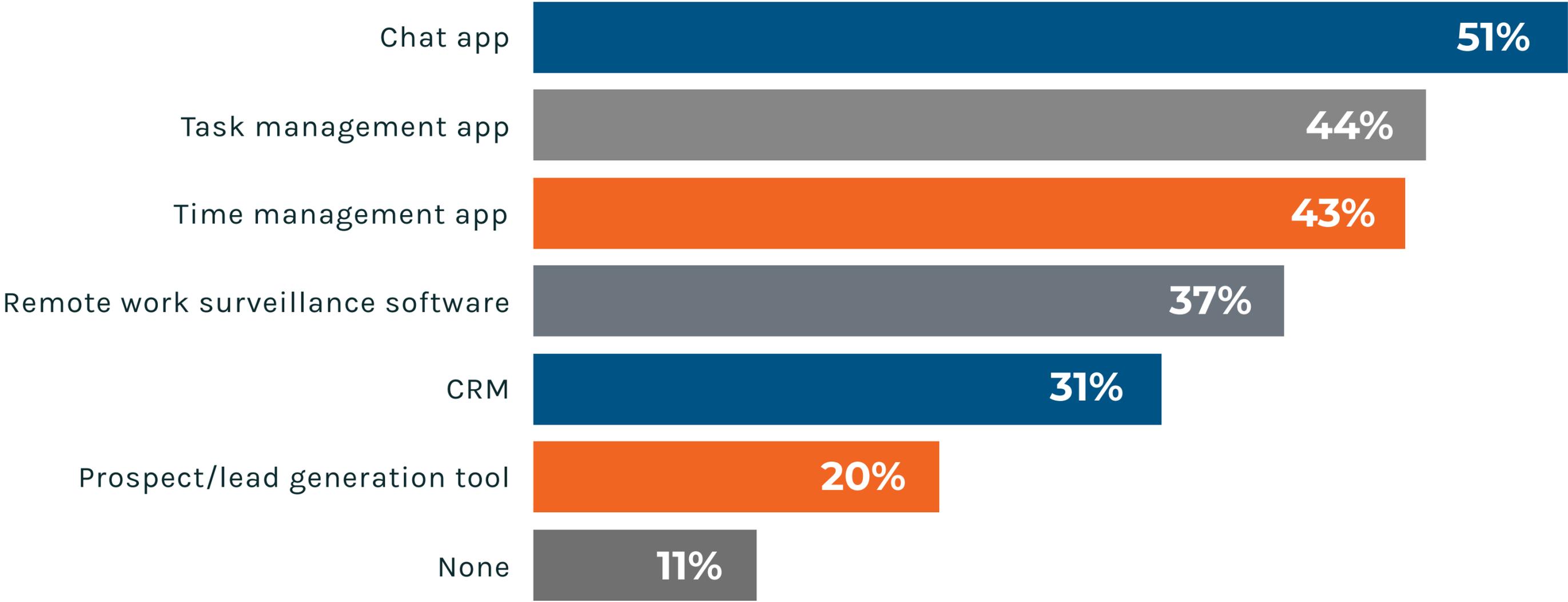
89%

of executives have embraced
new tools since the pandemic
began

While the majority purchased software that makes remote work easier, some used this slow period to replace their company's sales systems so that they're prepared for a strong recovery.

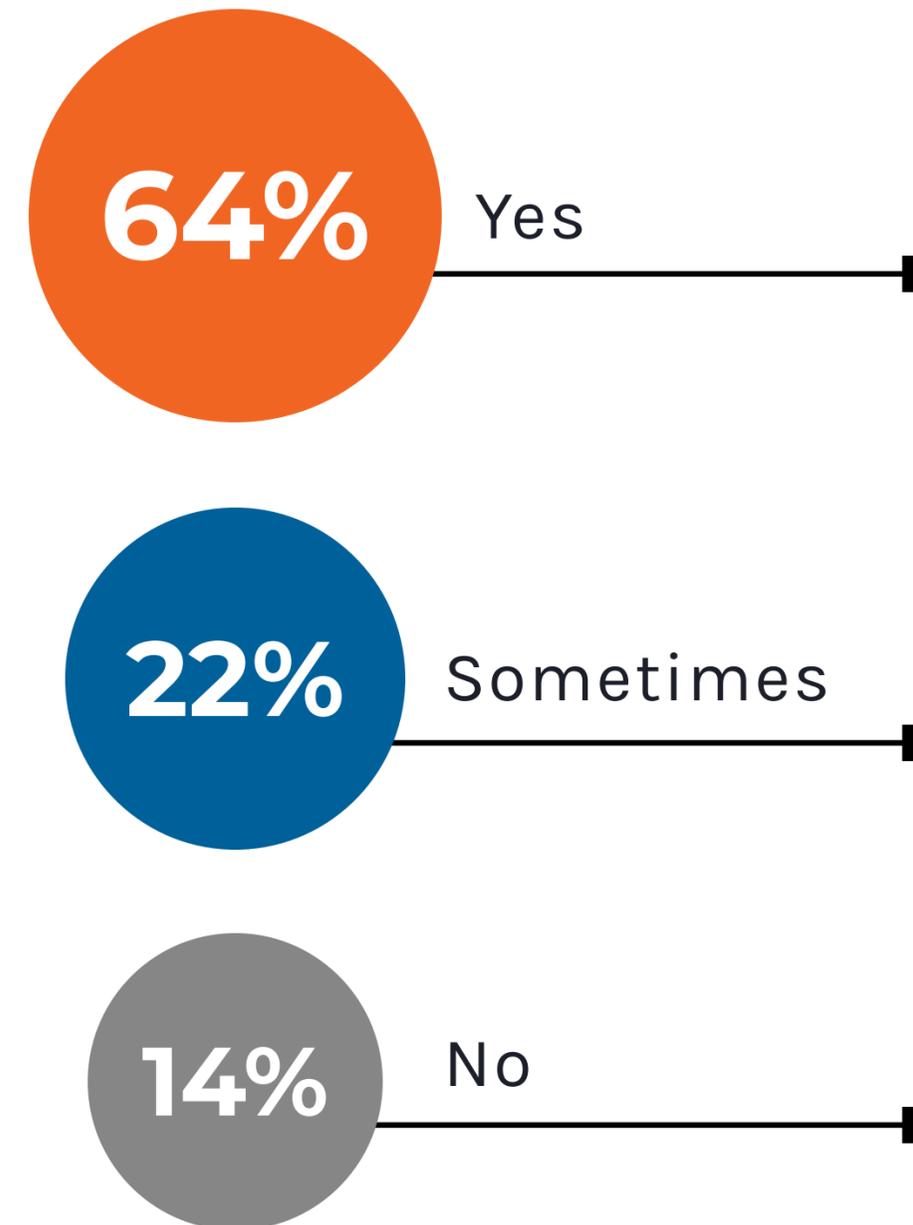
Question

Which of the following new tools have you adopted for yourself and/or your team since the pandemic began?



November 2019 Survey Question

Do you seek out new tools to make you more productive?



This high rate of technology adoption is consistent with our previous findings that most executives turn to new tools to boost their productivity.

The general consensus is that technology is one of the fastest ways to make productivity improvements.

Leaders Have Better Work-Life Balance

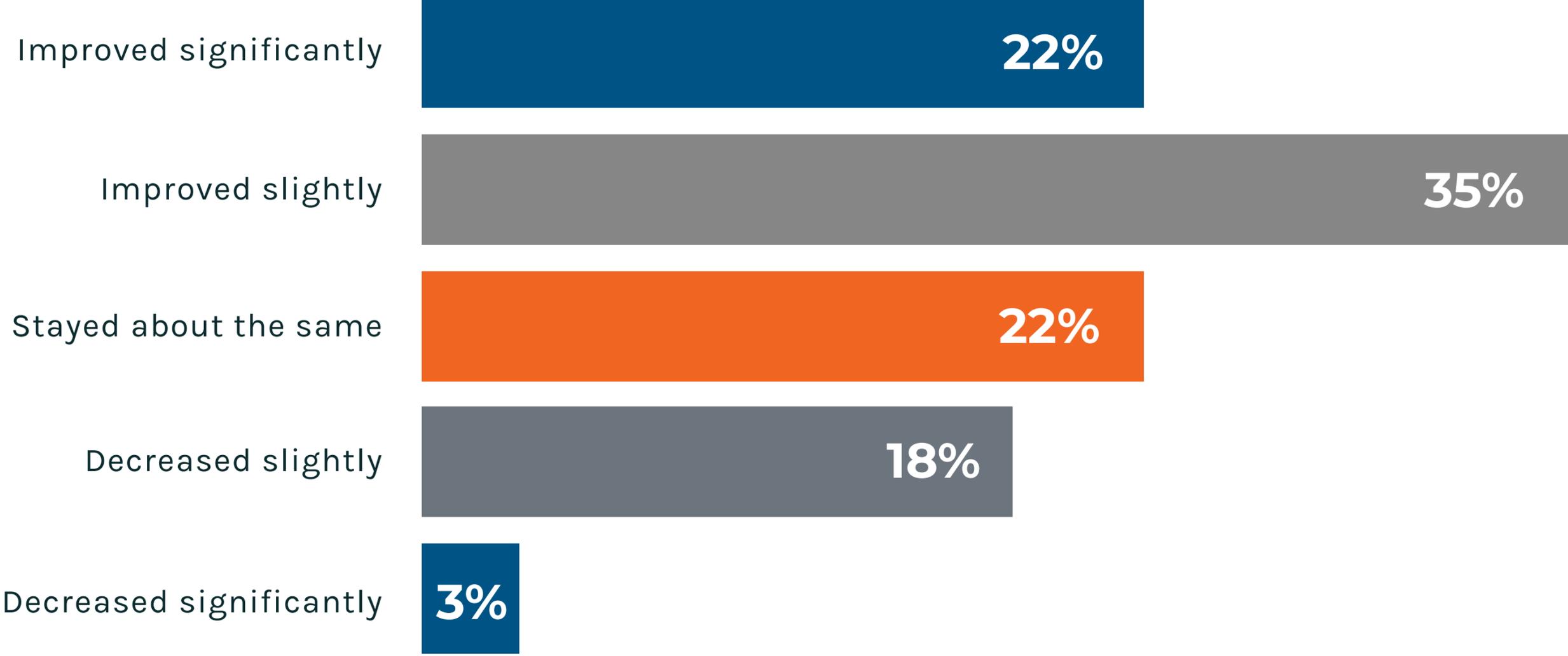
57%

said their work-life balance
has improved during COVID

The elimination of commutes and after-hours events has allowed executives to spend more time with their families and on leisure activities. As a result, 57% said their work-life balance has improved.

Question

How has your work-life balance changed since the pandemic?



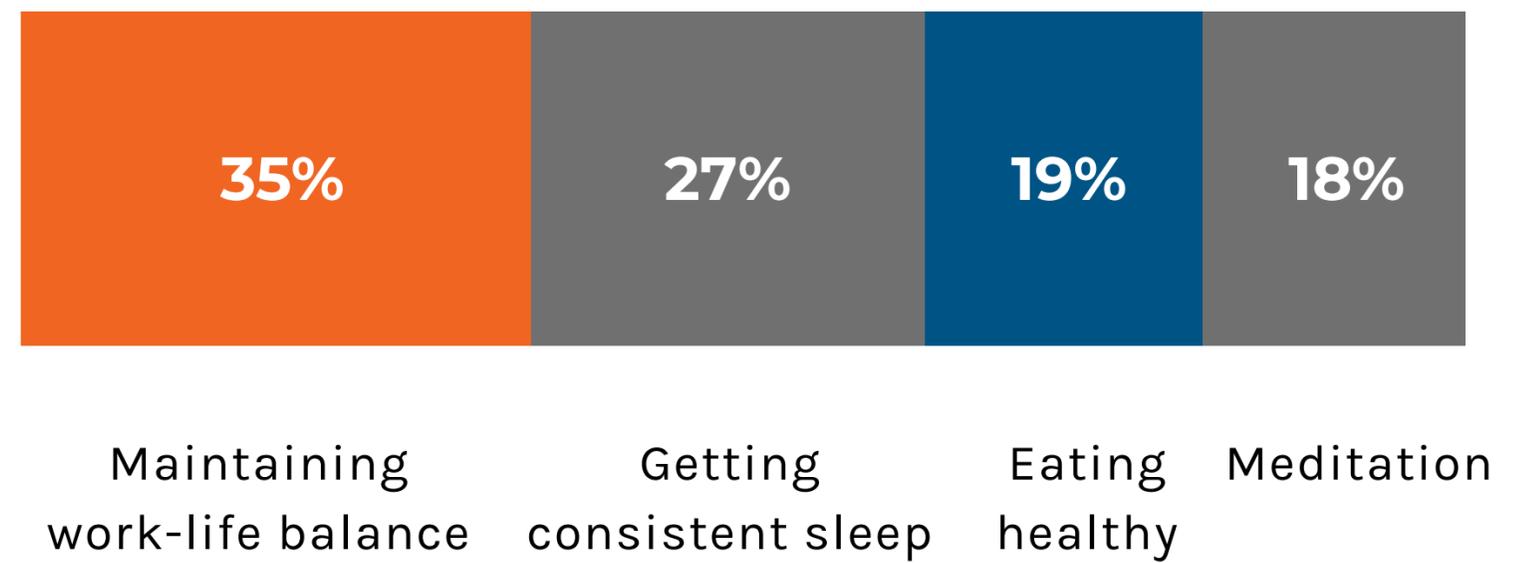
In addition to improving executives' well-being, our previous research suggests that this also contributes to the productivity boost that many of them have experienced since COVID-19 started.

In our November 2019 survey, 35% of executives said that maintaining work-life balance is the habit that has the biggest impact on their productivity.

While working fewer hours may seem at odds with high productivity, it's highly impactful because it lowers stress levels, reduces the risk of burnout, reduces fatigue and has other benefits that boost performance.

November 2019 Survey Question

What habit has the biggest impact on improving your productivity?



Key Takeaways

Despite the many hardships triggered by COVID-19, executives were able to take advantage of the new environment to boost their productivity and work-life balance. Here's how you can too.

1. Adopt a productivity management system.

Time management experts, research and our own observations tell us that no particular system is better than another. What's key, however, is the level of adoption, meaning that simpler systems that are easier to adopt tend to be better than more complex ones. We recommend choosing the system that feels most intuitive to you and then sticking to it.

2. Be sure that you exercise discipline and control.

In order to avoid spending too much time on urgent tasks, exercise discipline and invest in more "compound time," that time spent on activities that will yield a long-term payoff in knowledge, creativity and energy. [As Michael Simmons explains](#), these activities act like compound interest whereby a small early investment yields large returns over time. Increasing your knowledge, deepening your relationships and planning strategically will enhance your well-being and support your continued success.

3. Adopt new technology to help you and your team stay on track.

There is a general consensus that software is the fastest and longest-lasting way to support the productivity systems you adopt. If you don't already have effective task management and communication tools in place, now is the time to make that investment so nothing slips through the cracks. If you have solution that is underutilized, spend some of your compound time to put it to use.

The data shows that to maximize executive productivity, you need to take a holistic approach in which you leverage a combination of strategy, technology and productivity systems to consistently achieve your personal and business objectives.



The Challenges

The far-reaching effects of COVID-19 triggered a unique set of challenges that few executives were prepared to handle at once. In this section, we'll dive into the three core issues we discovered and the nuances of these challenges. We'll also break down how executives have approached problem-solving.

These Challenges Stem from Three Core Issues

1. Adapting to an unproductive workspace.

The sudden shift to working from home provided little time for executives to optimize for the new work environment.

2. Leading teams that have never worked remotely.

To prevent significant miscommunications, executives had to quickly develop new communication strategies to keep everyone engaged and on the same page.

3. Having to pivot frequently and with incomplete information.

The unpredictability of the pandemic has forced many executives to replace long-term plans with rapid decisions.

The Top Productivity Challenges

Any productivity expert will tell you that becoming more productive doesn't happen overnight. You have to adopt new habits continuously until, over time, you replace all of your bad habits with positive ones.

One of the biggest disruptions caused by COVID-19 is that it broke even some of the most productive people's productivity habits. As stay-at-home orders were swiftly implemented, executives had little time to adapt to the new reality. As a result, they suffered from a variety of productivity disruptions in their new environment.

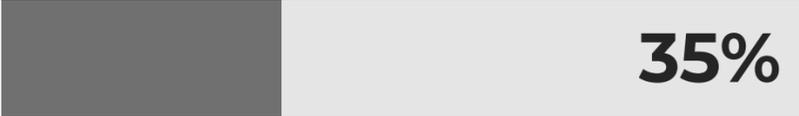


Question

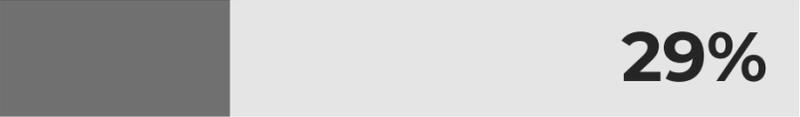
Which of the following productivity challenges are you facing?



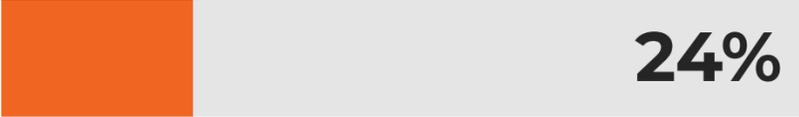
There are lots of distractions in my work environment



It's difficult to balance work and care-giving responsibilities



My team is less responsive than before the pandemic



I'm stressed because I don't know the best path forward

The biggest productivity challenges that executives faced were ones experienced by virtually every professional who had to suddenly transition to remote work. Sharing a work environment with family members is distracting, as is the added responsibility of caring for children 24/7 and/or providing extra support for high-risk loved ones.

Maintaining Strong Communication Requires Additional Effort

One of the biggest arguments in favor of working in an office is that it's easy to communicate. In addition to the spontaneous water cooler conversations that promote team bonding, it's much easier to tell if someone is available to chat about something quickly or if they're deeply preoccupied with something else. This ease of communication sparks a lot of conversations that don't occur naturally in a remote environment.

When executives were forced to shift their teams to working remotely with little warning, they had to quickly develop new communication best practices to ensure that their teams remain connected through this tumultuous time.

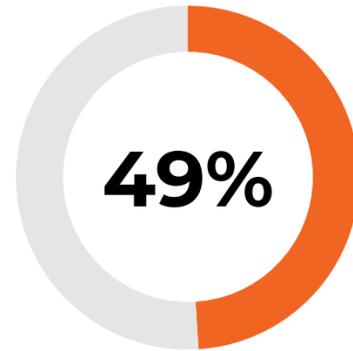


Question

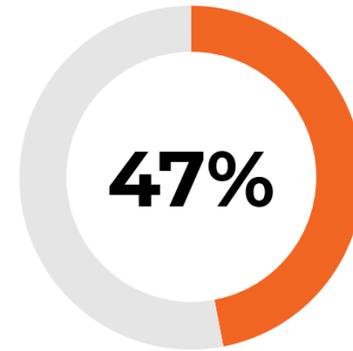
What things are you doing to maintain strong communication in the COVID-19 era?



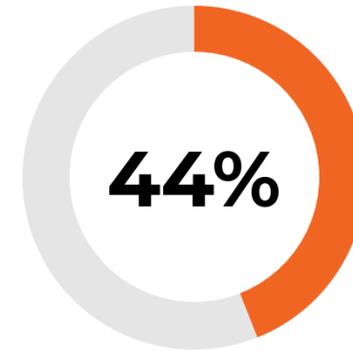
Requiring employees to regularly update a task management tool



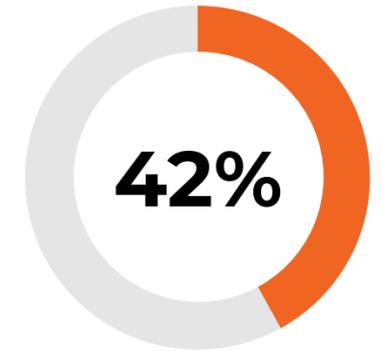
Hosting daily check-ins with direct reports



Having more frequent team meetings



Encouraging employees to have quick chats throughout the day



Hosting virtual social activities

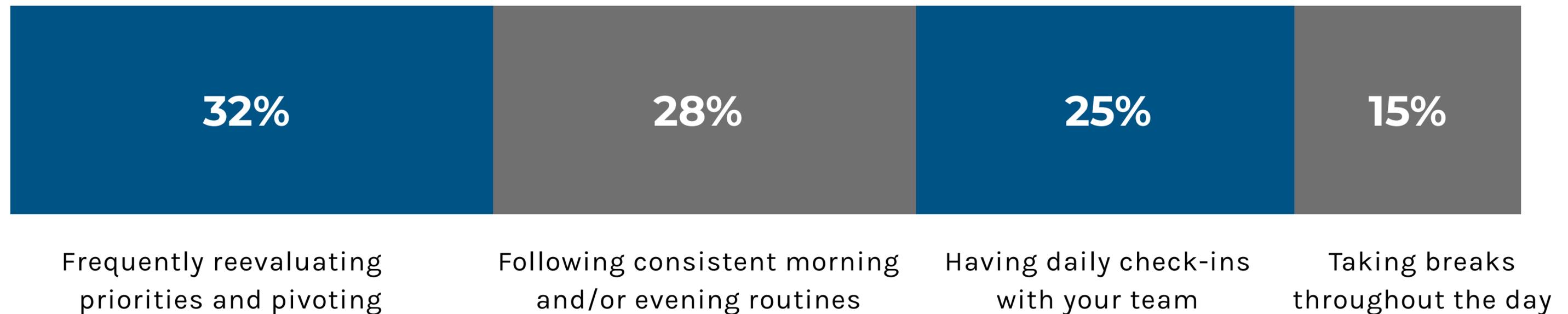
Taking a multi-pronged approach to improving communication helped executives get their teams quickly up and running in a remote environment. By implementing these changes, they were better able to lead through the chaos.

Executives Must Balance Constant Change

One of the biggest challenges of leading during this crisis is that the situation changes daily and unpredictably. This has forced many executives to shift from following annual or quarterly plans to making decisions as the factors affecting their businesses evolve. As a result, they've adopted new habits to move forward through the uncertainty.

Question

What habit plays the biggest role in helping you be productive right now?



Personalities Shape Approach to Productivity

The split between executives who are relying on embracing constant change and those who are following consistent schedules is likely based on individual personalities. In a crisis, some leaders adapt as quickly as possible to capture new opportunities, and others rely heavily on their core vision to chart a more stable path forward amidst the uncertainty. Recent [research](#) from McKinsey indicates that the best approach is the one that makes leaders the most calm and confident. Teams look to their leaders for guidance, and executive teams need to provide a clear path forward as the crisis evolves.



Key Takeaways

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 have forced knowledge workers to rethink how they collaborate, lead and work productively. Here's how you can overcome these challenges.

1. **Implement robust communication policies.**

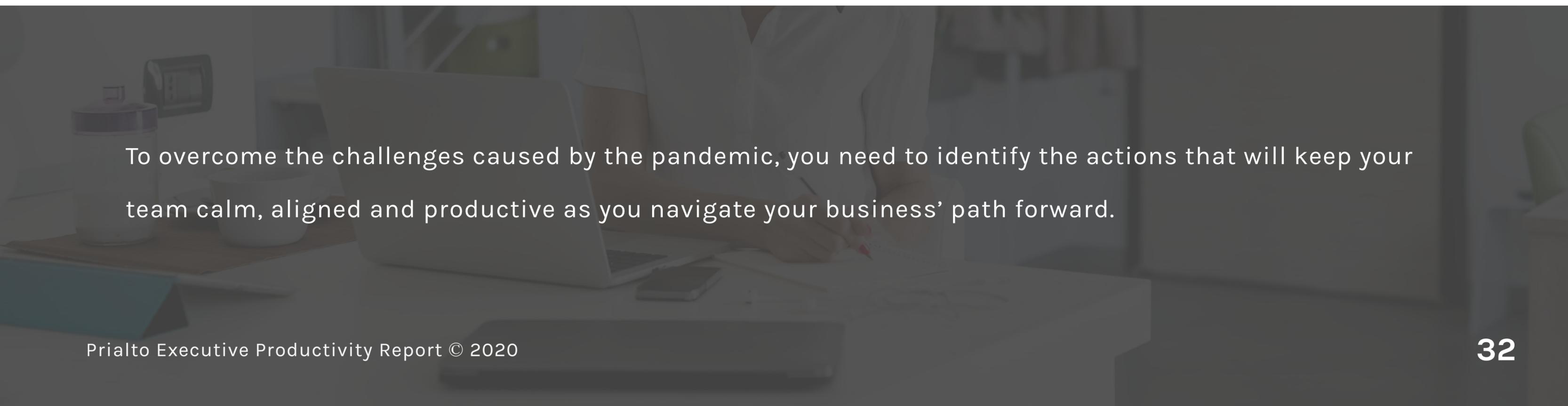
In a constantly evolving work-from-home environment, it's easier than ever for information to slip through the cracks. To prevent this from happening, buttress communication tactics such as hosting daily check-ins, updating task management tools in real time and hosting virtual social activities to help your team bond and stay aligned.

2. **Commit to a leadership strategy that helps you remain calm.**

In a crisis, you have the option to rapidly pivot to achieve immediate gains or prioritize stability by following consistent routines. Recent research from McKinsey suggests that it's essential for leaders to remain calm and create a clear path forward whether that involves controlled, rapid change or a slower approach.

3. Take a new inventory of distractions in your work environment and mindfully work to control for them.

If your company plans to remain remote for the long-term, optimize your space for maximum productivity. Set boundaries with the people you're living with and turnoff all non-urgent notifications so that you can focus on the deep work that drives success.

A person is sitting at a desk in a home office, working on a laptop. The desk is cluttered with various items, including a water bottle, a coffee cup, and some papers. The person is wearing a white shirt and is looking at the laptop screen. The background shows a window with blinds and some shelves.

To overcome the challenges caused by the pandemic, you need to identify the actions that will keep your team calm, aligned and productive as you navigate your business' path forward.

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing glasses and a grey cardigan over a dark polka-dot top, is smiling while talking on a mobile phone. She is sitting at a desk with a laptop open in front of her. The background shows a wooden bookshelf with several books. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent grey filter.

How Leaders Are Moving Forward

With a crisis as unpredictable as COVID-19, the path toward recovery is likely to be marred by unexpected events that continuously test executives' ability to lead their teams.

However, as noted at the beginning of the report, 93% believe that they'll be satisfied with what they've accomplished at the end of the year.

Here are some of the actions executives are taking to manage their stress, sustain their productivity and set their teams up for success.

Executives are Taking a Holistic Approach to Stress Management

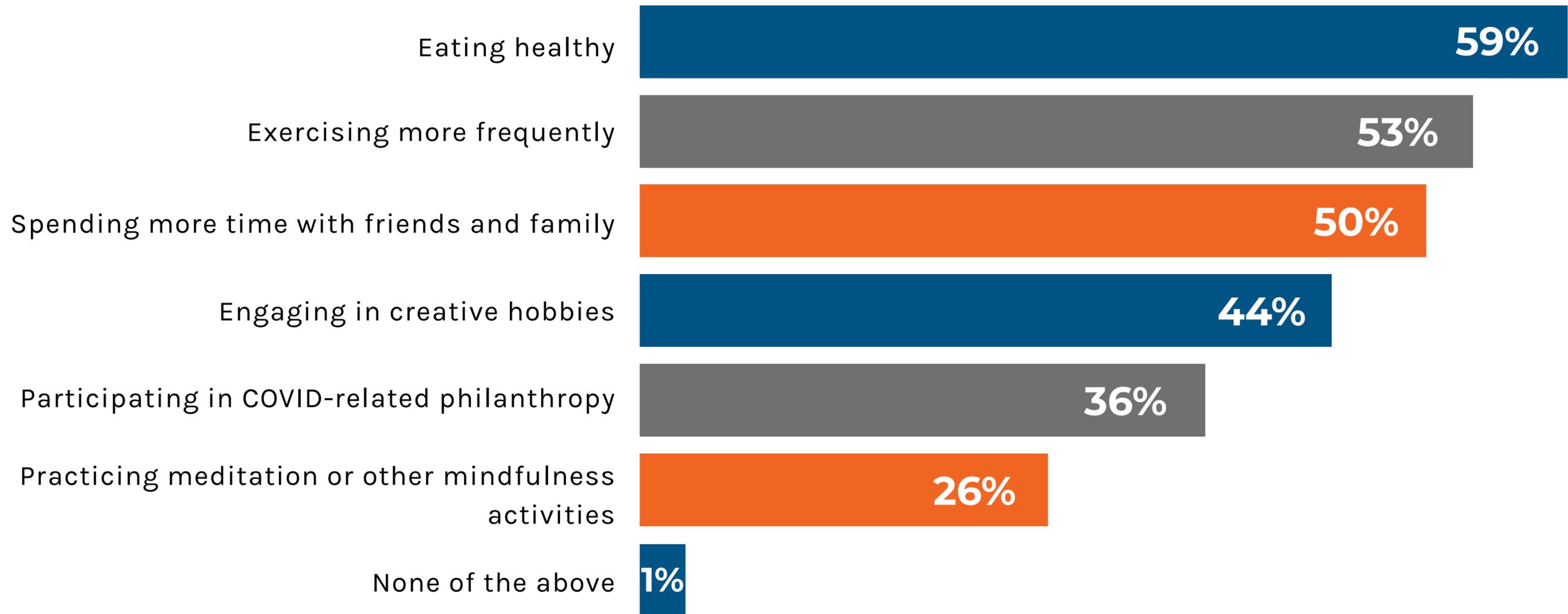
99%

of executives invest a significant amount of time in their well-being

Leading through a long-lasting crisis is exhausting. To manage stress, 99% of executives invest a significant amount of time in their physical, emotional and mental health. Investing the time in their personal well-being helps executives maintain the stamina they need to lead their teams through this entire crisis.

Question

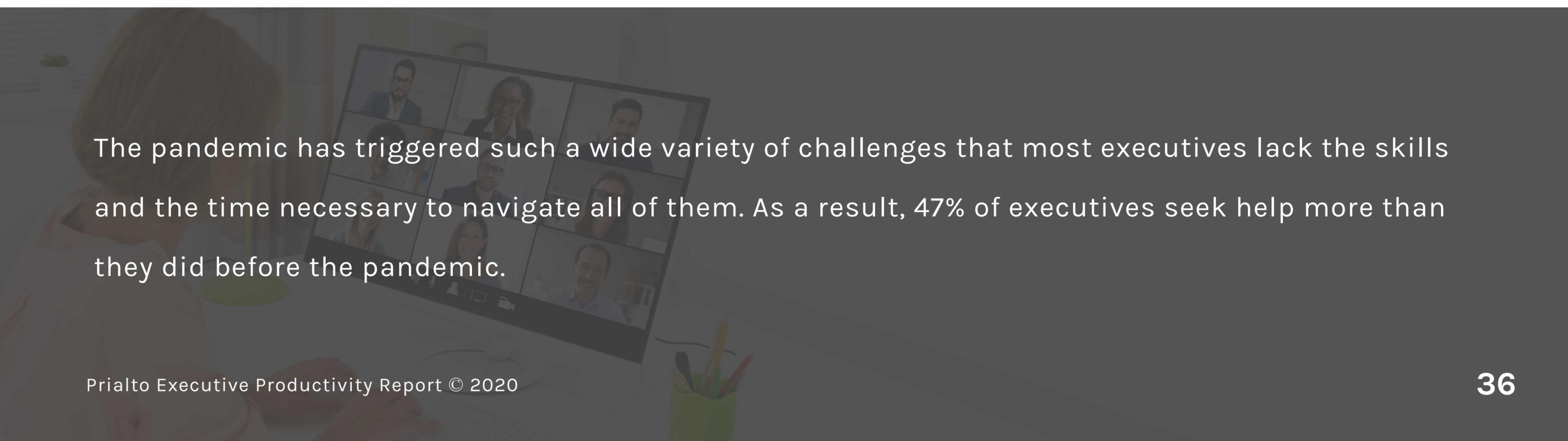
What strategies are you using to manage stress and stay productive during the pandemic?



Creating a Successful Recovery is a Team Effort

47%

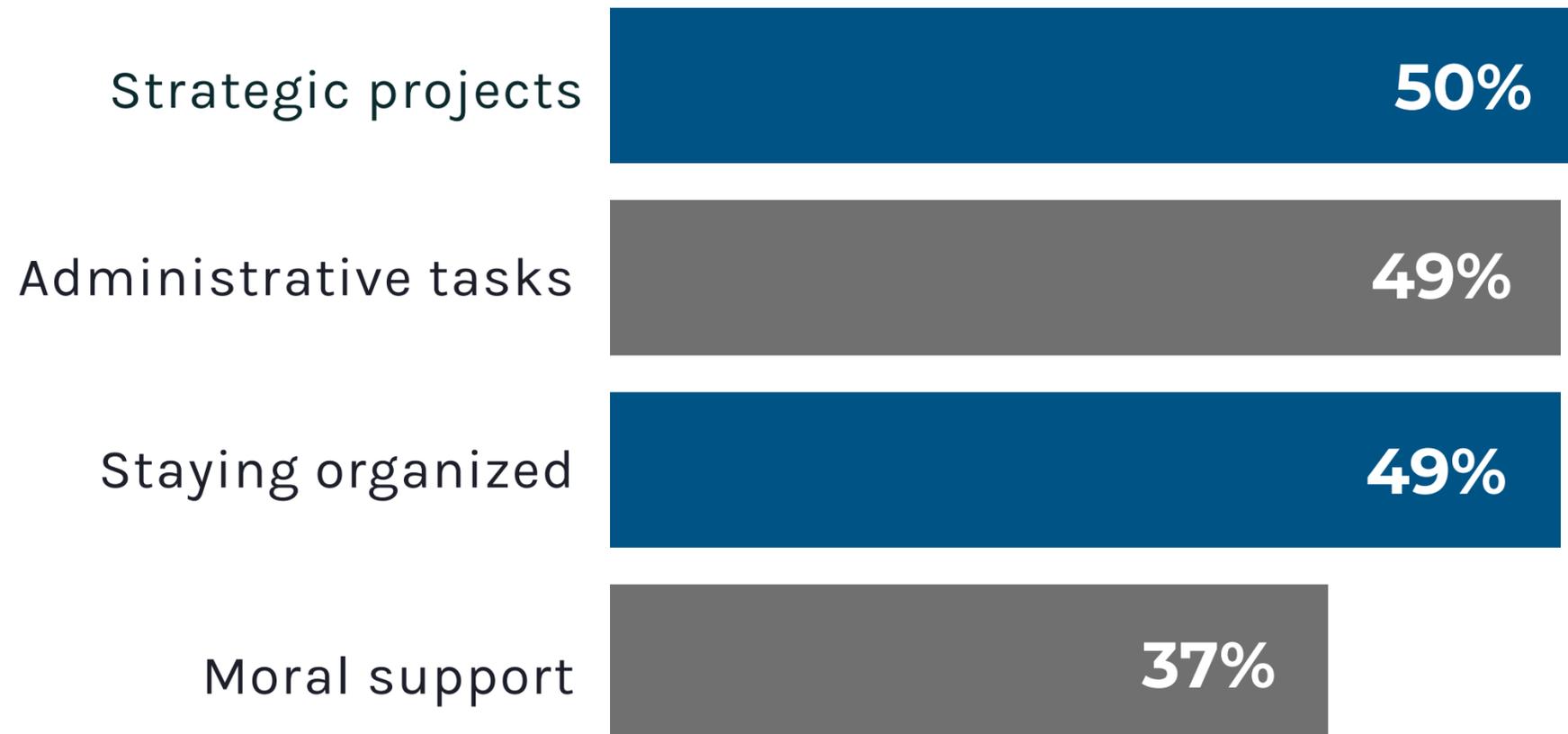
of executives seek help more than they did before the pandemic



The pandemic has triggered such a wide variety of challenges that most executives lack the skills and the time necessary to navigate all of them. As a result, 47% of executives seek help more than they did before the pandemic.

Question

Compared to before the pandemic, which activities are you now more likely to seek help with?



Insights Into These Challenges

The top three areas that executives are seeking additional support with reveals a lot about the challenges they're facing.

- 1.** Most are encountering business issues at a scale they've never experienced before, which can generate doubt about the best strategies to implement.
- 2.** Since they have to make a lot of tough decisions under tight deadlines, they need more time in their days, so they're offloading more administrative work.
- 3.** It's easy for tasks to slip through the cracks when they're juggling multiple urgent priorities, so they need help keeping track of everything on their plate.

These issues create a lot of stress, which is why over a third of executives need extra moral support to remain positive for their teams.

Executives Plan to Make Investments to Boost Their Productivity

As executives look to the future,

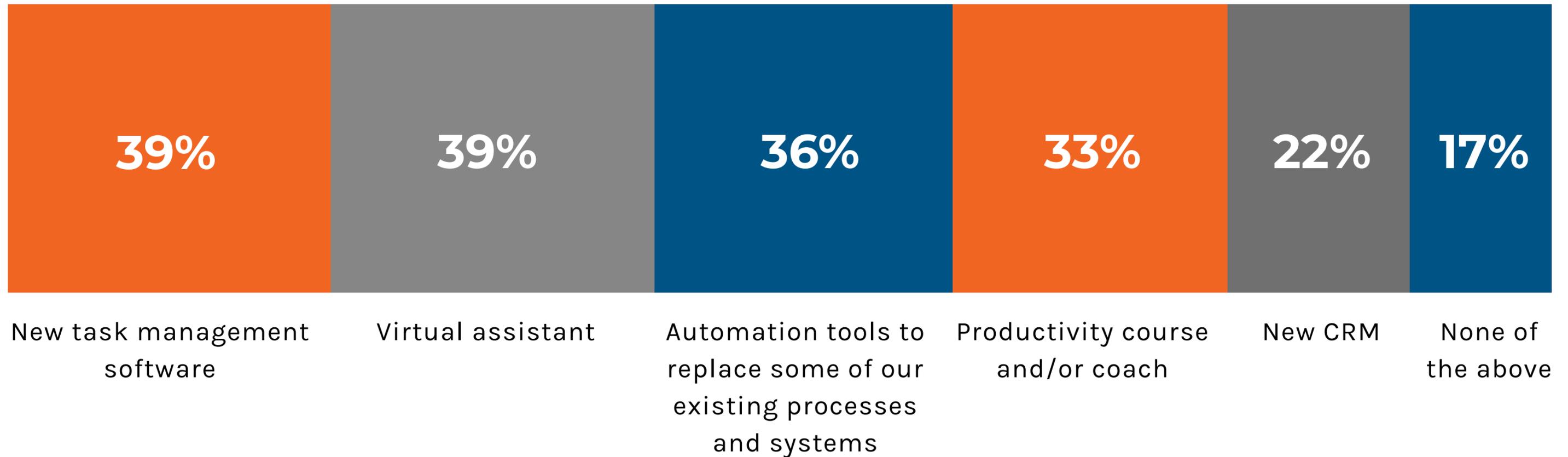
83%

of them are planning to make investments in new technology

If made, these investments will help them be more resilient in the face of future crises, because they'll have the systems in place to respond with greater agility than they may have in the past.

Question

Which of the following tools and resources are you interested in exploring over the next 6-12 months?



Key Takeaways

While the path forward for many businesses remains full of uncertainty, most executives are taking steps to prepare for the future. Here's how you can set your team up for long-term success.

1. Proactively manage your stress.

Sustained stress can trigger burnout and make it nearly impossible to achieve your goals. Investing in your personal well-being by exercising, engaging in meaningful hobbies and practicing mindfulness activities will help you sustain the stamina needed to succeed in this environment.

2. Delegate administrative tasks to an assistant so that you can focus on strategic priorities.

Offloading tedious tasks like scheduling, data management and document formatting frees up your time and mental energy so you can invest in activities that yield lasting benefits and drive your success and happiness.

3. Map out the tools, systems and teams you need to succeed over the next six to twelve months.

Technology plays a key role in maximizing productivity, especially when work environments are constantly evolving. Creating a roadmap will help you narrow your focus, make high-impact investments and equip you and your team to succeed.

To set yourself up for success over the next six to twelve months, secure the technological and admin support you need to achieve your strategic priorities without burning out.

Afterward

The first half of 2020 was a rollercoaster of changes. Despite the immense uncertainty, executives remained optimistic and continued to push their businesses forward. Here are the top three ways they've adapted:

- 1. Executives have become more intentional about how they use their time.**
The majority have adopted productivity management systems, spend more time on strategic projects and have improved their work-life balance.
- 2. They're driving rapid changes within their organizations.**
Most executives are making quick decisions, purchasing new technology and implementing new policies to help their teams keep up in the chaotic environment.
- 3. Executives are taking a holistic approach to personal and team morale.**
There isn't a single solution to stay focused during this tumultuous time so they're engaging in a variety of small activities to manage theirs and their team's stress.

Survey Methodology

This research is based on questions we posed to executives working primarily in service professions in which much of their work is conducted online. We retained an independent survey company that secured responses between May 23 and May 25, 2020, from 500 executives in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia who had a minimum salary of \$100,000 or the local equivalent.

The responses and our conclusions based on these responses were greatly affected by the fact that we surveyed executives with relatively high incomes who work primarily in the information economy.

The executives we surveyed worked for companies with the following number of employees:

- 1500+ - 22%
- 501-1500 - 21%
- 151-500 - 20%
- 51-150 - 13%
- 11-50 - 11%
- 10 or less - 13%



Prialto provides virtual administrative assistants to executives, entrepreneurs and businesses. Our virtual executive assistant services are curated and managed based on the more than half million hours of executive productivity support we've delivered from our headquarters in Portland, Oregon, with creative insights from our global staff in Asia and Central America.

Our global telecommuting enables talented people in peripheral parts of the world economy to do cool work with dynamic business professionals in amazing places like San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Austin and Los Angeles.