



Government  
Business  
Council

# The People's Lifeline

A Candid Survey of Benefits Administration Officers in the Federal Government

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Underwritten by

**accenture**

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# Overview

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## Purpose

To better understand federal leaders' experiences with benefits administration, Government Business Council (GBC) and Accenture undertook an in-depth research study. Benefits administration is a key part of government services, and administrators perform a key role in many federal agencies, particularly those that interact with the public. They are the frontline of the federal government in providing support and assistance, including healthcare and financial assistance to veterans, disbursing supplemental food assistance payments, and processing unemployment claims, among many other functions.

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## Methodology

In June 2020, GBC released a survey exploring perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of federal leaders regarding benefits administration, exploring challenges to program integrity and operations in the federal social and human services space. While 308 respondents from the federal government participated in the survey, only 223 qualify for representation in the findings shown here due to holding some level of leadership or involvement in benefits administration. This audience offers unique insight into current opportunities and challenges in benefits administration and can speak authoritatively about every step of the process.

Respondents carry a range of responsibilities, including:

- adjudicating applicant eligibility
- data support
- management
- customer service
- connecting potential applicants with benefits programs
- identifying fraud and security issues.

For more information on respondents, please see Respondent Profile.

1. 5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(1), "Merit system principles" governing federal personnel management

# Executive Summary

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## **Respondents feel undervalued, understaffed, underequipped**

Respondents report that their main sources of frustration come from poor support structures, both managerial and technological. 53% say that they require better tools or less frustrating processes; 41% say their office is understaffed; and 40% feel that their work isn't valued by their team.

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## **Long waiting times and inefficient communications with applicants make for a slow process**

The benefits administration process itself can also be a source of frustration. 26% report that the longest part of their process can take over 18 weeks to complete. Only nine percent report that the actual disbursing of benefits is the slowest part of the process – the majority point to lagging and inefficient communications with applicants as their biggest frustration.

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## **Updating benefits processes could have significant impact**

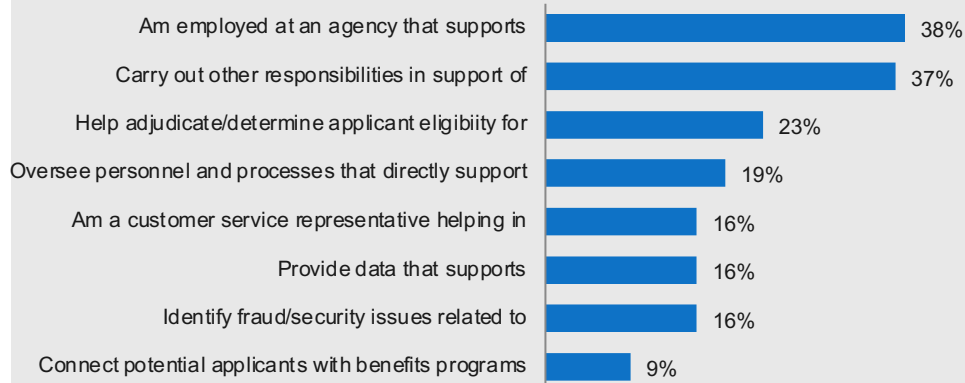
Along with changes in managerial styles and policy, federal benefits administrators feel that automating or otherwise digitizing the application process would have a positive impact on their job. With 26% reporting that they spend more than half of their time communicating with applicants about inadvertent errors, a simple and automated process that can respond to routine questions or common errors could pay significant dividends for both workplace efficiency and employee satisfaction.

# Respondent Profile

## Respondents have a wealth of experience in benefits administration

Employee respondents to this survey know what they're talking about. The majority of respondents are integral parts of the benefits administration process, providing both client-facing and direct support, and most of them have served in their roles for over a decade. This wealth of experience, combined with a range of different roles, gives this survey both a long and deep view.

*"I \_\_\_\_\_ the administration of citizen benefits."*



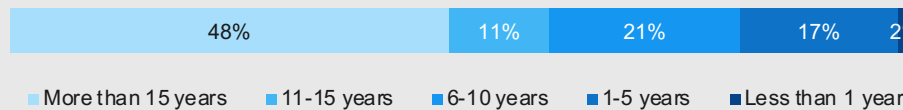
Percentage of respondents, n=128  
Respondents were asked to select all that apply

**1 in 6**

respondents work directly with applicants for benefits administration, whether helping to adjudicate/determine eligibility, as a customer service representative, or connecting potential applicants with benefits programs.

Nearly half of these respondents have worked in their current capacity for over 15 years.

*How long have you served in this capacity?*

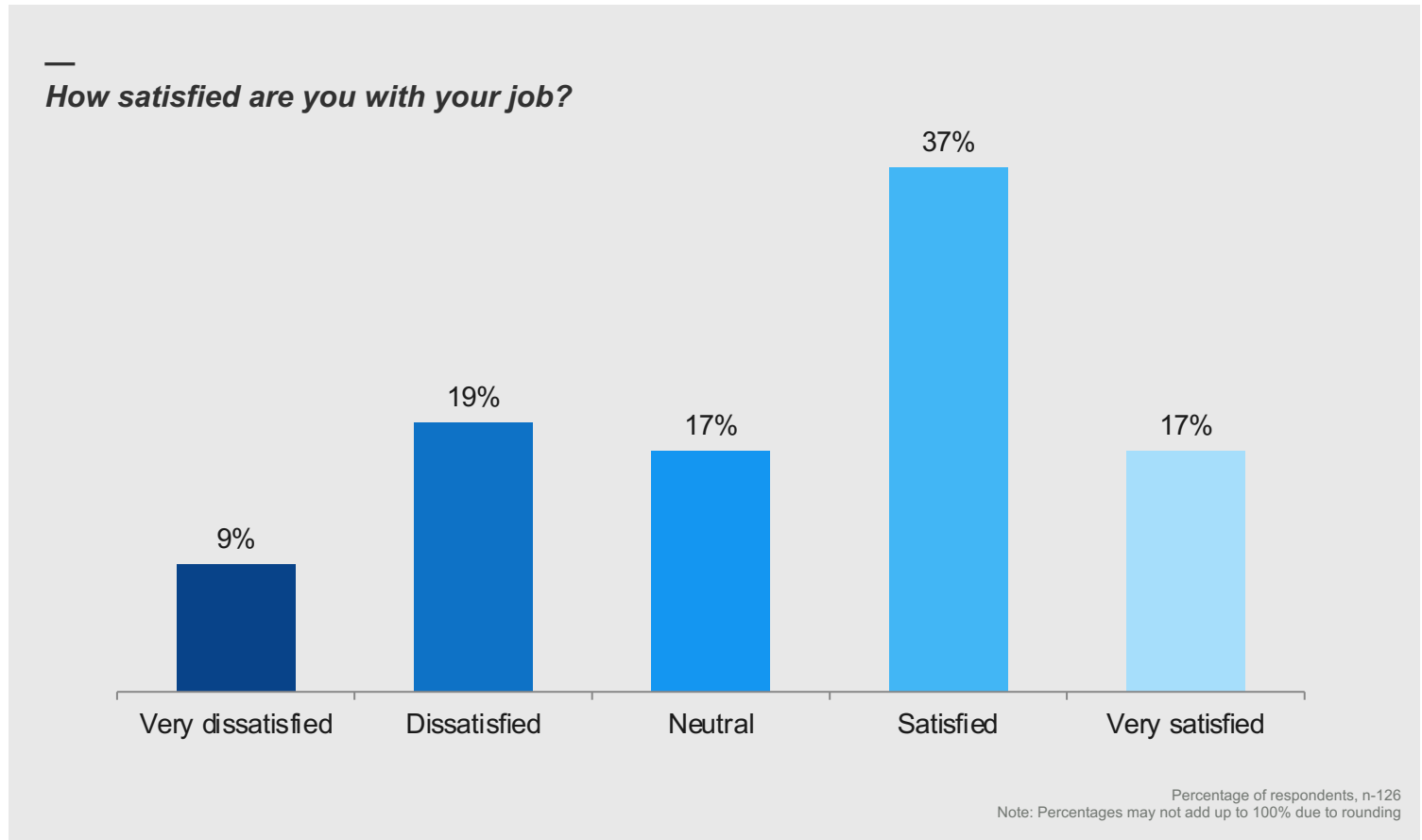


Percentage of respondents, n=126  
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

# Research Findings

## At least 1 in 4 respondents are not satisfied by the nature of their work / Attitudes and Perceptions

However, 37% of respondents report feeling satisfied with their jobs, and 17% report feeling very satisfied, over half of respondents. Another 17% report feeling neutral about their work.



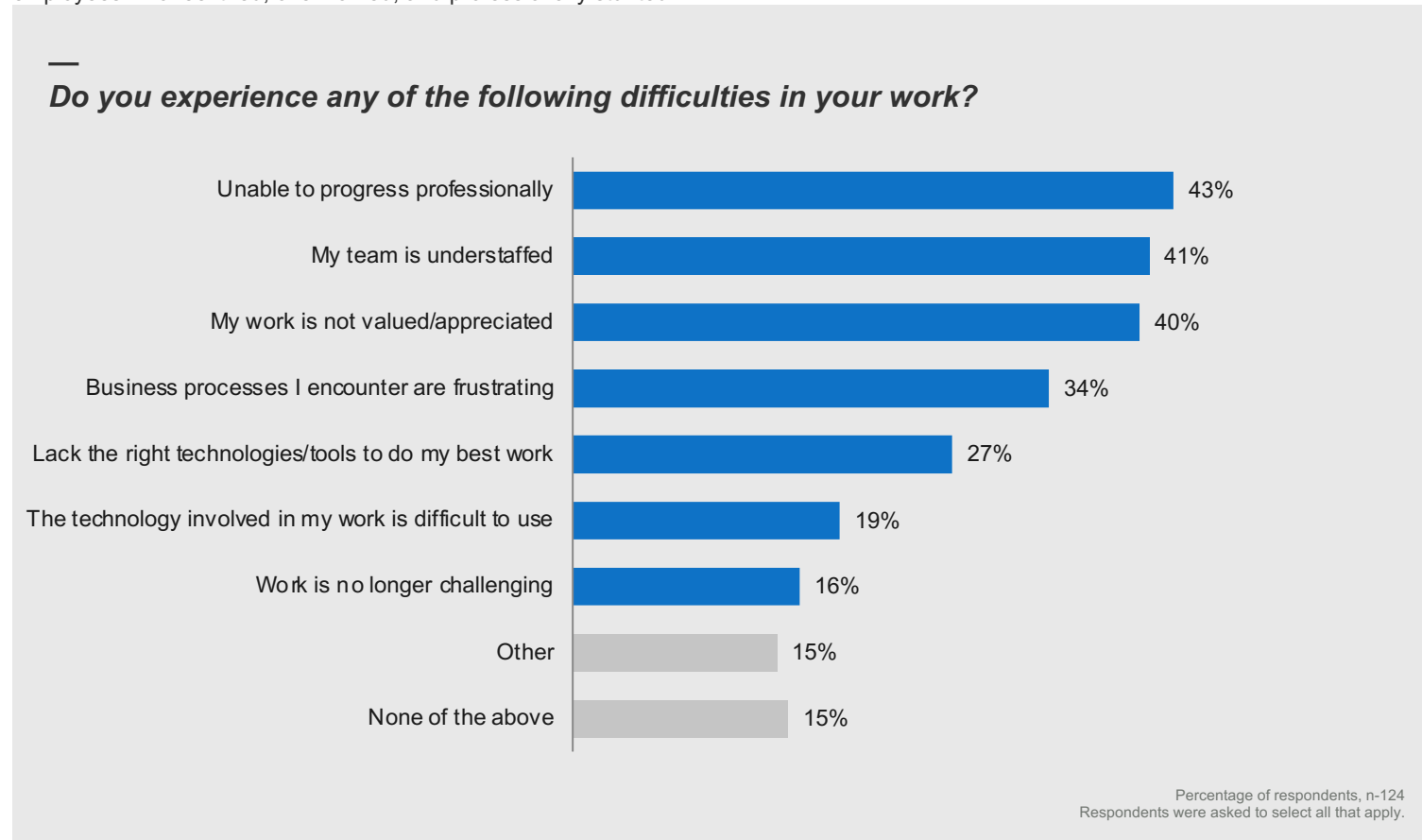
This is a higher rate of dissatisfaction than Americans report as a whole. According to the Pew Research Center<sup>1</sup>, 17% of Americans are dissatisfied with their current jobs, compared with 27% of benefits administrators. On the other side of the spectrum, 49% of Americans report feeling very satisfied with their work, compared to just 17% of benefits administrators. This is an opportunity to explore how to boost the satisfaction rate among employees in this field.

**54%**  
of respondents report feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their job.

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## Common challenges include lack of opportunities for career growth and understaffing / Attitudes and Perceptions

Nearly half of all respondents indicate that they feel frustrated with an inability for them to progress professionally in their place of work. At the same time, 41% indicate that their teams are understaffed, and 40% say that their work is not valued. This paints a picture of employees who feel tired, overworked, and professionally stunted.

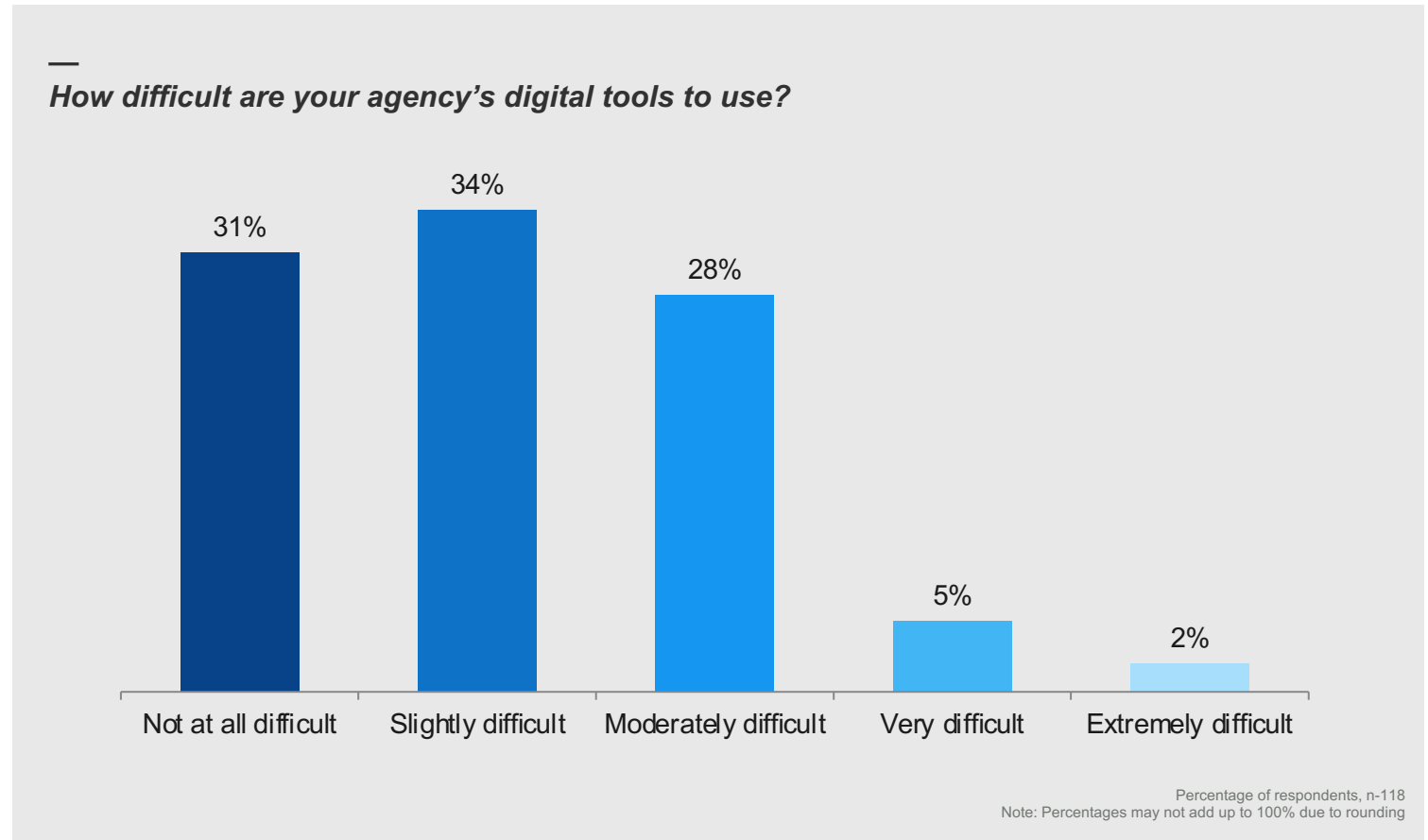


34% of respondents indicate frustration with business processes, and 19% report that they lack the appropriate tools to do their best work. These responses suggest that there is an opportunity for managers and supervisors to better support their employees through streamlining processes, sourcing appropriate technologies, and making efforts to show employees that their work and talents are valued within the agency.

**40%** of respondents indicate that they felt their work was not valued or appreciated by their coworkers and managers.

## Digital tools are not intuitive for the majority of respondents / Attitudes and Perceptions

The digital toolboxes that agencies use should be designed to support employees in their work, whether by eliminating repetitive tasks through automation, consolidating easily-searchable databases, providing security, or fulfilling other needs. 31% of respondents say that they have no difficulty managing the digital tools that their agency uses.



However, well over half of respondents report some level of difficulty in managing these digital tools. Problems navigating new systems can slow productivity and add to employee frustration. As agencies and organizations move increasingly into the digital age, it is imperative that the tools made available are intuitive, accessible, and serve to support – not sabotage – employees. Ensuring that employees are receiving adequate training and support with these tools is a key step in the introduction of any new digital or automated addition to the benefits administration process.

**69%** of respondents find their agency's digital tools difficult to use.



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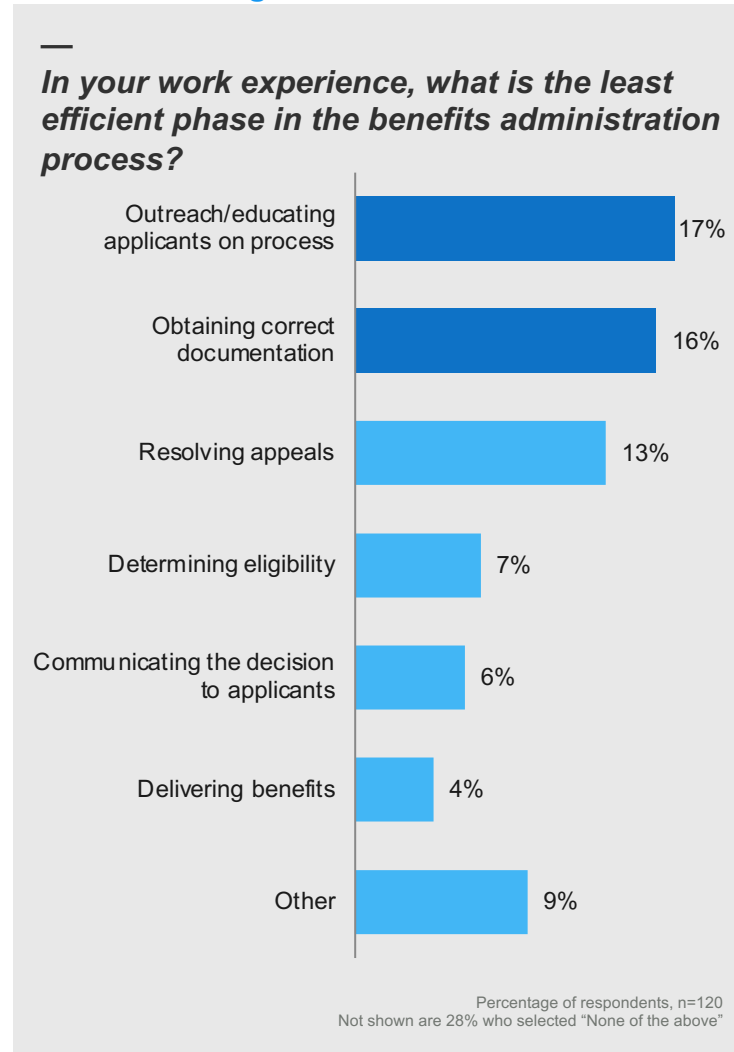
## What digital tools do respondents use to support their work? / Attitudes and Perceptions

Respondents point to their computers and phones as their integral support systems used on a daily basis. They also identify a variety of other programs and systems, ranging from collaborative software like Skype and Teams to agency-specific databases and communication systems.



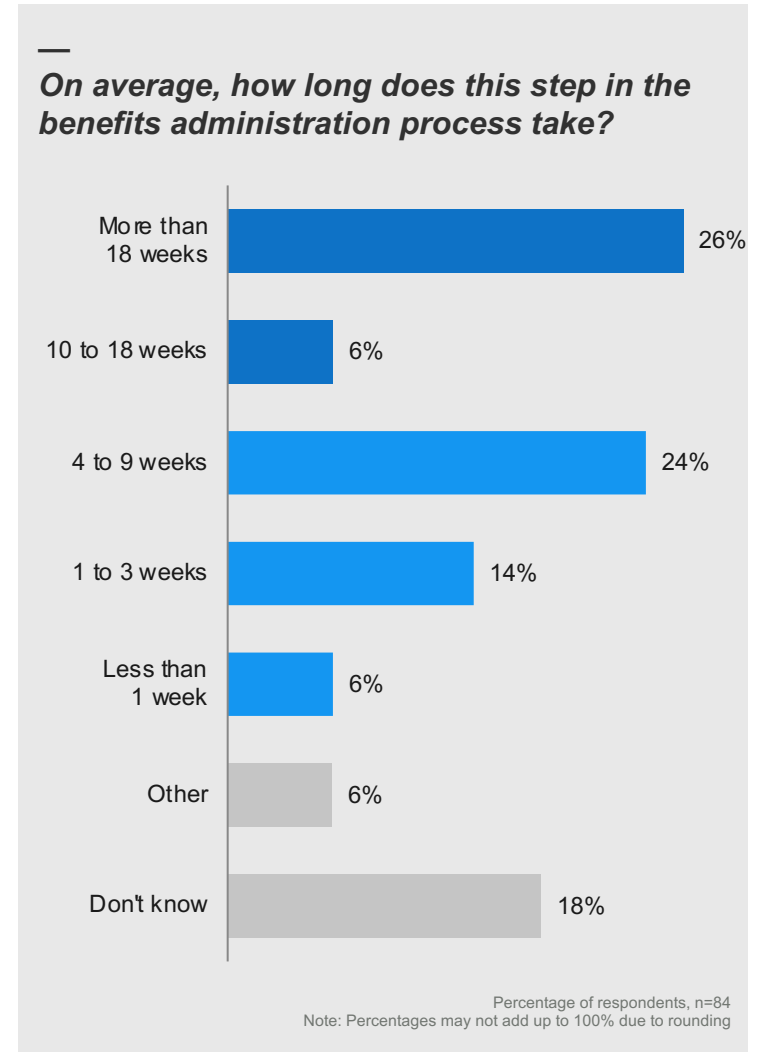
**Long waiting periods and difficulties reaching applicants contribute to inefficiency /**

**Current challenges**



**33%**

of respondents say that the phases based on exchanging information with clients – outreach and documentation – are the most inefficient parts of the benefits administration process.

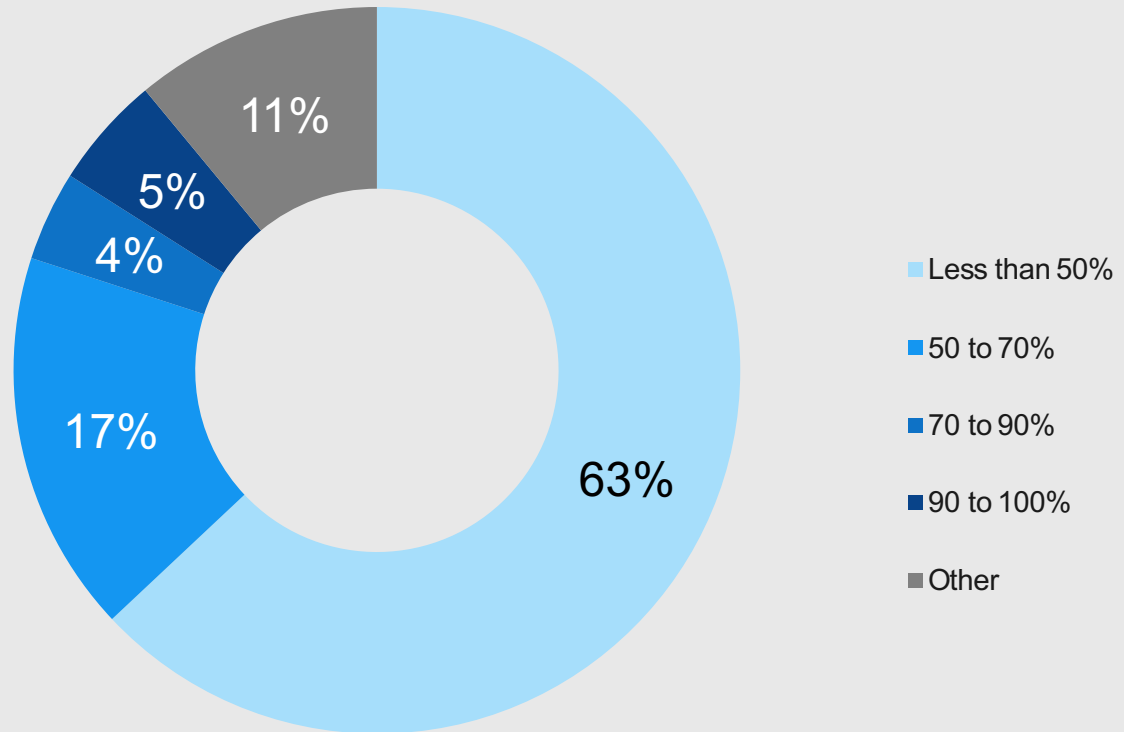


**26%**

of respondents report waiting more than 18 weeks to complete the least efficient step in the benefits administration process.

1 in 4 respondents spend over half their time seeking to correct errors / **Current challenges**

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**What percentage of your time do you spend communicating with citizens about applications that contain inadvertent errors?**



Percentage of respondents, n=111  
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

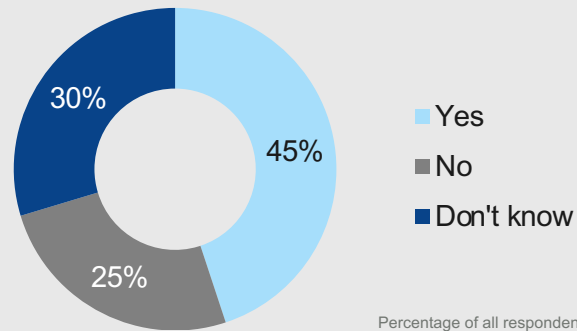
Of those who work in client-facing positions within benefits administration, 26% spend more than half of their time communicating with citizens about mistakes within their applications. This is time-consuming work that can be repetitive and emotionally exhausting, particularly given that 16% say that obtaining correct documentation is their biggest source of frustration. This presents an opportunity for automation processes to be implemented. One respondent suggested that “benefits calculated automatically by system would eliminate potential incorrect payment.”

**5%**  
spend almost all of their time responding to inadvertent errors within applications.

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## Agencies are taking steps to improve, but seeing mixed results / [Steps to improvement](#)

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***In the past year, has your organization successfully implemented technology, policy, or strategy to make one or more steps of your benefits management process more efficient?***



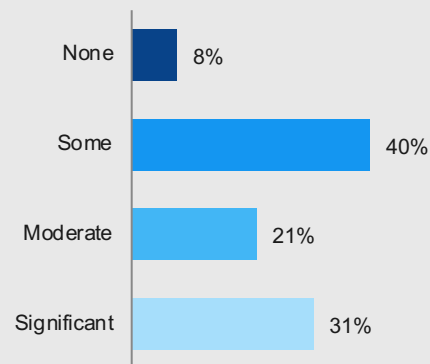
Percentage of all respondents, n=118  
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

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### 30%

of all respondents were unsure if their organization had successfully implemented a method of making their benefits management process more efficient. This may indicate that the measure wasn't as effective as hoped, or that the agency could work to improve communication around the method.

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***How much time and/or frustration did your organization save by implementing this solution?***



Percentage of respondents, n=52  
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

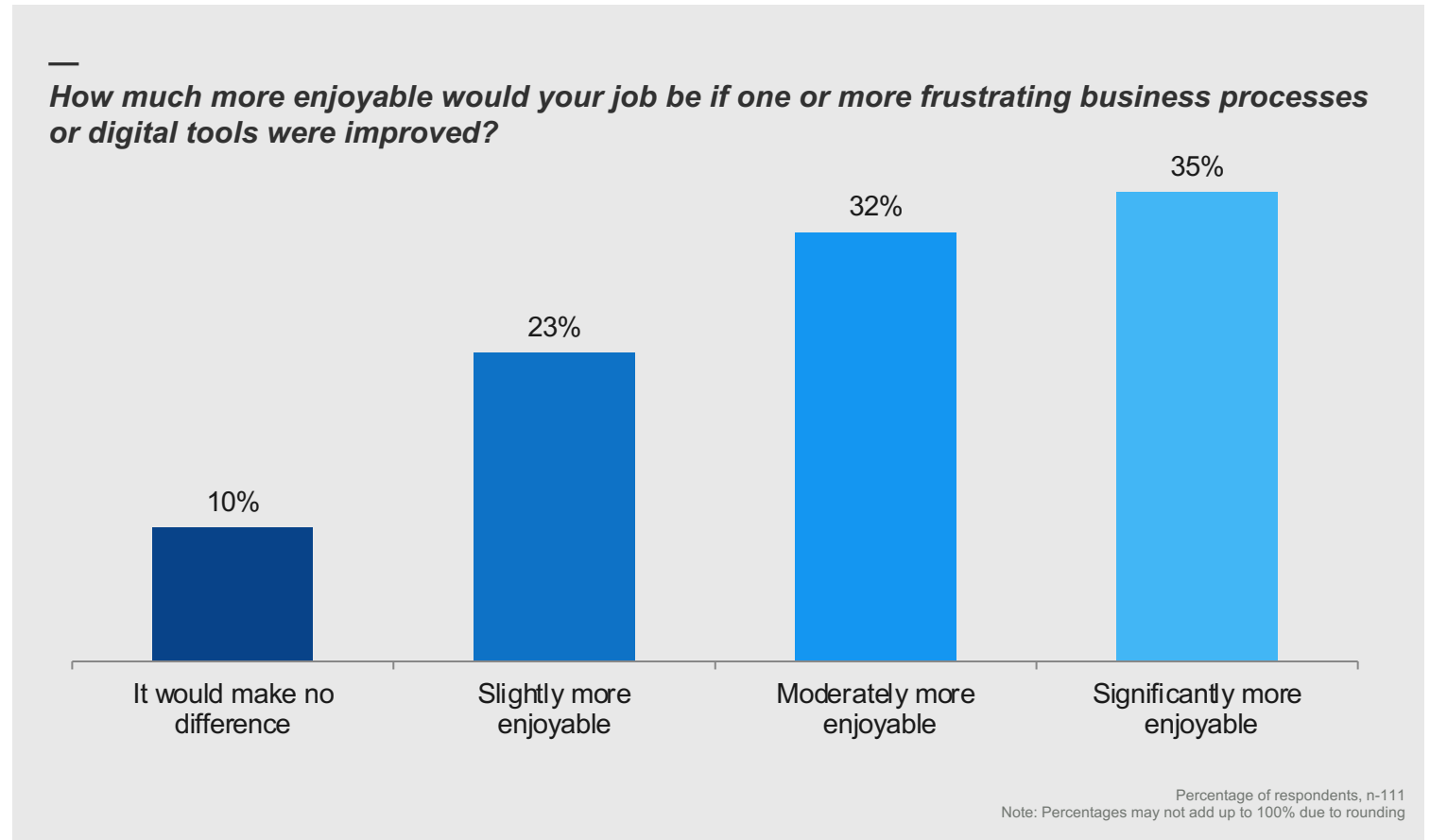
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The amount of time and frustration saved by these measures varied, with over half of respondents indicating that it helped save moderate to significant time and frustration.

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## Job satisfaction would be significantly higher if tools were improved / Steps to improvement

Improving time-consuming, inefficient, or low-value processes or tools could have a significant impact on employee satisfaction, allowing them to focus on the content of their work and less on the minutiae.

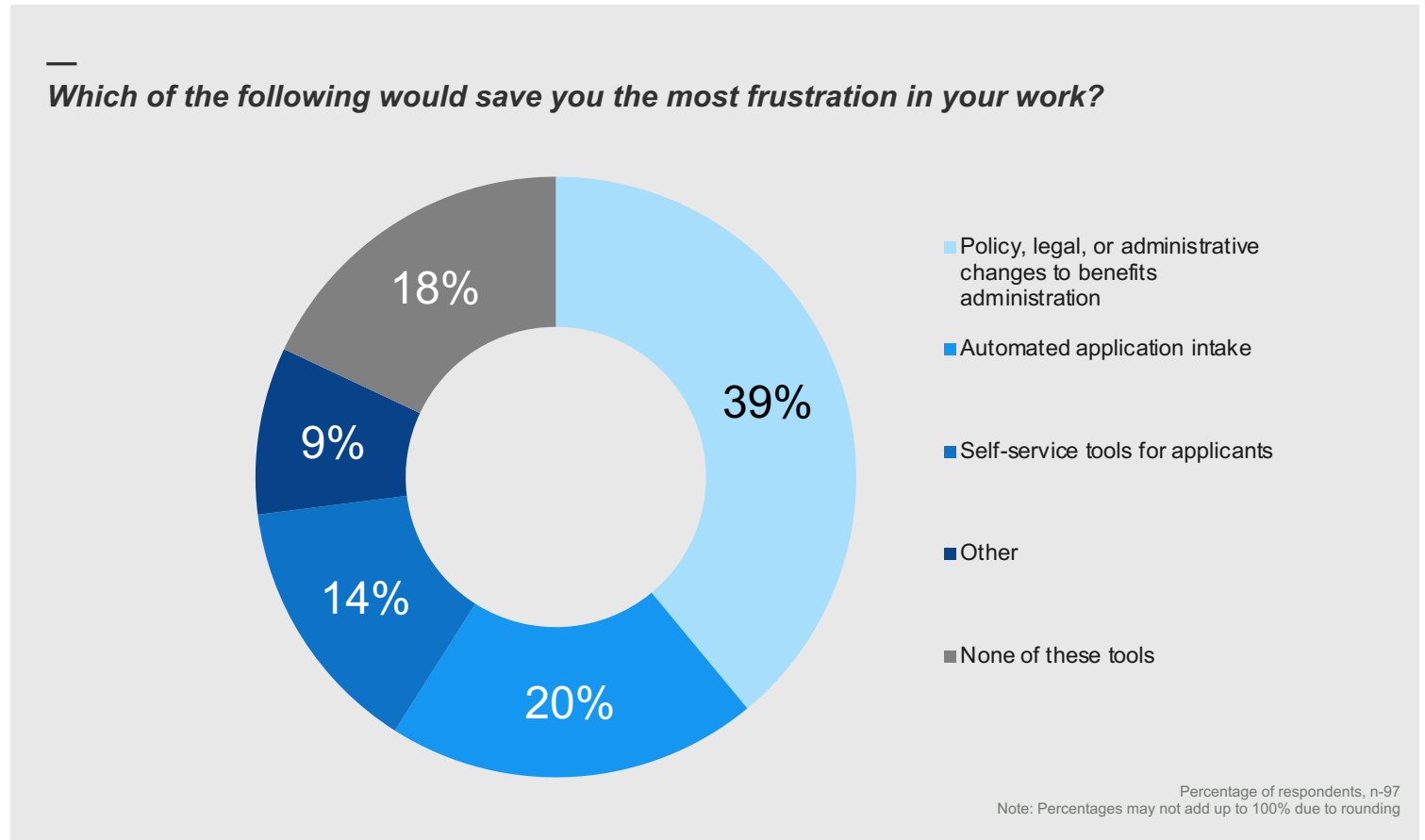


Technology is playing an increasingly large role in employee satisfaction. According to Randstad's survey "Workplace 2025: The Digital Frontier<sup>2</sup>," respondents cited "feeling equipped with the latest digital and technology skills" as one of the most important factors in their job satisfaction. 66% also reported that the speed of their employers' digital transformation is not as fast as they would have hoped. As employee satisfaction is a key component in the success of any agency, ensuring that they are equipped with technology that can support their work and reduce their frustrations is an important step.

**90%** of respondents say their jobs would be more enjoyable if frustrating processes or tools were improved.

## Digitizing application process could ease employee frustration / Steps to improvement

34% of employees report that moving parts of the application process into the digital sphere, including automating intake procedures or developing tools for applicants to answer their own questions, would relieve the most frustration in their jobs.



The process of benefits administration includes some procedures and labor that, if modernized, could streamline the process. Automated intake may save effort and frustration on both the part of the benefits administrator and the applicant, as parts of the process may be repetitive or time-consuming. Self-service technology available to applicants could answer some of their most pressing questions, leaving benefits administrators more time to address more complicated issues.

**39%** of respondents report that substantive structural changes to benefits administration would improve their jobs.

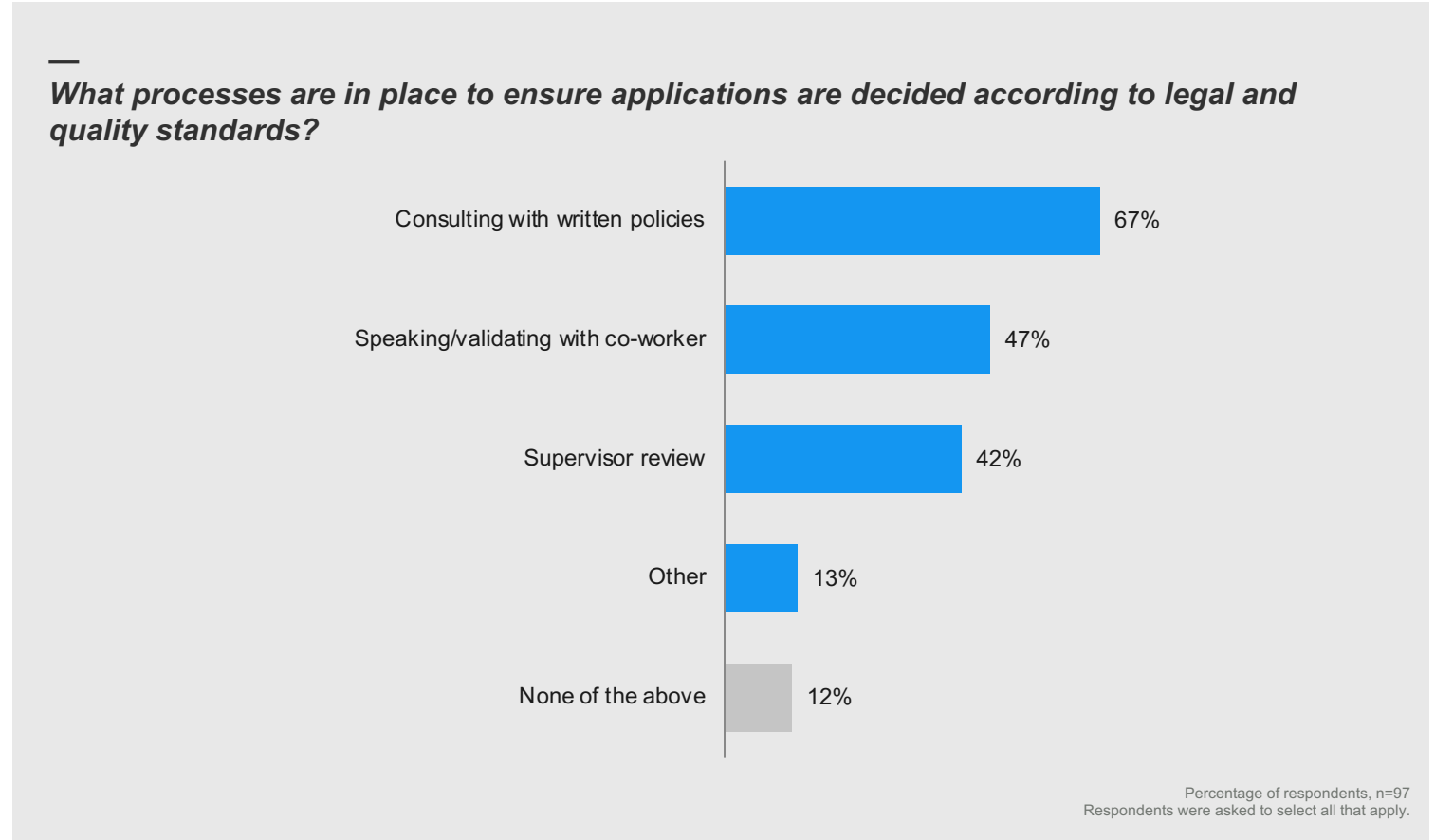
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Simplify the process. Get rid of the complexities and unnecessary red tape. Empower your representatives with the ability to expand their capacity to assist the customers.” – Survey Respondent

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## Checking written policies is the most popular form of quality assurance / [Steps to improvement](#)

To make sure that applications are decided in a way that is legal and up to the quality standards of benefit administration agencies, respondents used both written policies as well as verbal validation with coworkers. Supervisory reviews, while still used by 42%, seem to be less common.



67% of respondents rely primarily on written policies to make determinations about benefit applications. This ensures a standard set of parameters, but it can be time-consuming, and it is important that these policies are up-to-date and reflect the current legal and quality standards of the agency. Qualitative results also indicated anecdotal frustration that policies were applied unfairly or irregularly.

**7 out of 10**

respondents refer directly to written policies when ensuring applications are decided legally and fairly.



# Final Considerations

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## When considering how to improve the benefits administration process:

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### **Examine opportunities to automate low-value work**

45% of respondents reported that their agency has already implemented a policy or tool intended to make one or more of the benefits administration steps more efficient. The success of these interventions is varied (40% said it saved them “some” time and frustration), but it indicates an openness within the sector to such solutions. The automation of some aspects of client services, particularly intake, stands out as a solution that would improve both employee satisfaction and process efficiency. By streamlining repetitive or time-consuming tasks or creating digital means for clients to ensure their documentation is submitted and up-to-date, benefits administrators can focus on other aspects of their jobs.

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### **Ensure that employees are equipped to work with digital tools**

35% of employees reported that they found the digital tools used by their agency to be moderately to extremely difficult to use, and many qualitative responses reported that their lack of training hampered their ability to use tools that were intended to make their work easier. Any innovations or implementations in automation should ensure that they are simple and intuitive to use for both benefits administration employees and for the end users. Much of the frustration around the benefits administration process lies in what respondents viewed as overcomplicated systems that required more low-value work on both sides that was prone to error. Any future strategies should seek to engage tools and promote policies that will streamline and simplify the process.

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### **Simplify the process**

Complex and repetitive requirements for accessing benefits is onerous for both benefits administrators and the public they serve. 39% of respondents say that a change in policies or legal processes would save them the most frustration in their work. With customer and workforce input, simplifying processes around customer needs would make the benefits administration process both more efficient and more effective.

# Sources

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1. Pew Research Center. "How Americans view their jobs." October 6, 2016. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/10/06/3-how-americans-view-their-jobs/>
2. Randstad USA. "Workplace 2025: The Digital Frontier." <https://rlc.randstadusa.com/for-business/learning-center/future-workplace-trends/workplace-trends-2025>

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