

2023

DSP Survey Report



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Executive summary

The **2023 Relias DSP Survey Report** highlights a variety of interesting insights into intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) care and the experiences of direct support professionals (DSP) in the field.

This report is based on a survey of DSPs working for IDD service providers. Participants gave their input on supervisor support, recognition, and career advancement. Based on the survey data, we can see that a desire for workplace wellness, a thirst for learning opportunities, and a yearning for career growth options are driving DSPs' attitudes toward work.

When we think of the broader context of the past several years, this makes sense. The intense strain the COVID-19 pandemic put on DSPs undoubtedly increased their desire to improve their psychological well-being. On top of that, the inequitable nature of how the virus affected the IDD population may have spurred this already curious group of professionals to learn even more, so they could provide better care to persons served.

Though the risk factors surrounding COVID-19 have diminished, the eye-opening experiences of the last three years may well be responsible for these shifts.

Based on the data we collected in this survey — our third one — we have seen that the prevalence and quality of training and well-being programs at an organization will affect its DSP retention rate.

Indeed, those who were satisfied working for their current organization also reported significant levels of satisfaction around available training and career advancement opportunities and how their organization promotes well-being. These same satisfied employees were more likely to stay with their current organizations moving forward.

Our results found that the impact of DSP supervisors is huge. This is a trend we have seen among the DSP workforce over the last several years. DSPs consistently report that they prefer recognition from their supervisor more than anyone else. On top of that, those DSPs who are more likely to stay with their organization are the ones who report a decent level of satisfaction with their supervisor.

Throughout this report, we'll explore all these points in depth and how they affect organizational culture. With this data, we hope to provide a launching pad for IDD organizations' continued push to better train and care for their DSPs.

Key findings

- 1 Having a safe platform to provide feedback about a supervisor was very to extremely important to

81%

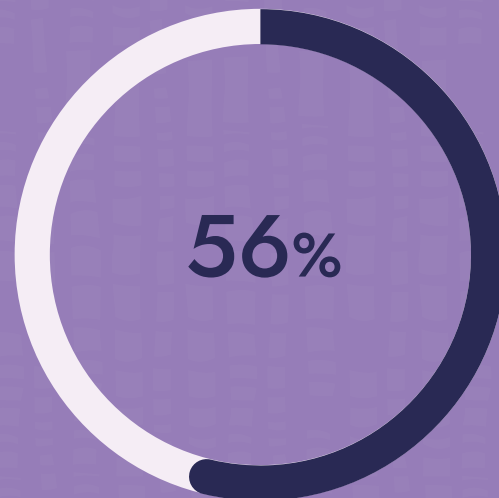
of respondents. However, only

59%

of respondents said they currently have such an avenue available.

- 3 Less than half felt well prepared for their job after onboarding training.

46%



- 2 A majority of respondents reported that they would be very much to extremely more likely to stay with their current organization if offered career advancement opportunities.

- 4 Over one-quarter

27%

were dissatisfied with how their organization shows appreciation for their work.

Who is the report for?

This report is a resource for organization leaders in IDD services who are seeking insight into different aspects that affect DSP turnover and retention. The information also benefits IDD and DSP advocates seeking to inform policies for better working conditions that will increase DSP satisfaction with their organizations. Increased satisfaction and retention ultimately positively affect the individuals whom DSPs serve.

Methodology

Our survey was conducted to determine how IDD providers conduct aspects of their business as it pertains to DSPs. This includes DSP training and career advancement, employment and hiring practices, DSP supervision, and more. In partnership with the American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR), the survey was distributed via email to ANCOR members, Relias clients, and non-Relias clients and via in-app notifications to Relias clients on the Relias platform.

Statistical significance testing was performed across different groups or between items through a series of non-parametric analyses, including Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis H, Chi-square, and Spearman rank-order correlation, using an alpha level of 0.05. Non-parametric analyses are appropriate when sample sizes are small, data are categorical, or there is a violation of normality required for parametric analyses. Given the categorical nature of the data, non-parametric analyses were appropriate for comparing between groups or items. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.



Demographics

Our 2023 DSP survey had

763

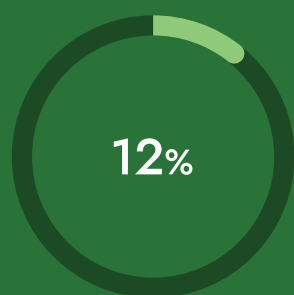
direct support professionals
participate as respondents.

66%

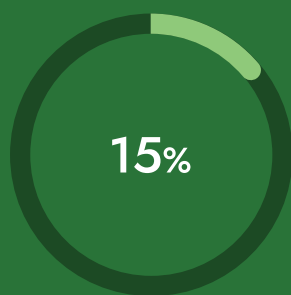
The majority of these respondents
had **five or more** years of experience.



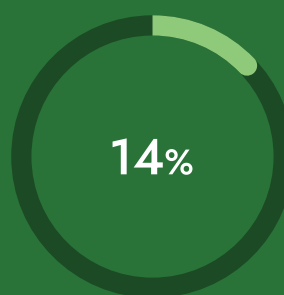
BREAKING THAT DOWN, WE HAD



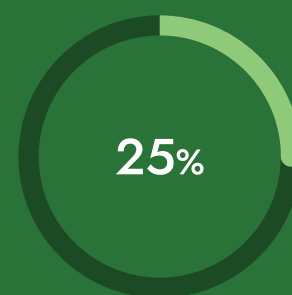
reporting 5-6 years
of experience



reporting 7-10 years
of experience



reporting 11-15 years
of experience



reporting 16 or more
years of experience

The remaining **34%** of respondents
had the following years of experience

100

80

60

40

20

10

10% with less than one year | **12%** with 1-2 years | and **12%** with 3-4 years.

When we asked respondents how long they had worked for their current organization, however, we saw more variation.

A majority (54%) reported working at their current organization for four years or less.

See the image to the right for a break down of this data.

54%

22% less than one full year

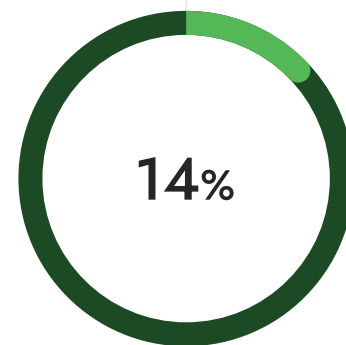
16% one to two years

16% three to four years



Interestingly, the next most popular answer choice was 16 years or more.

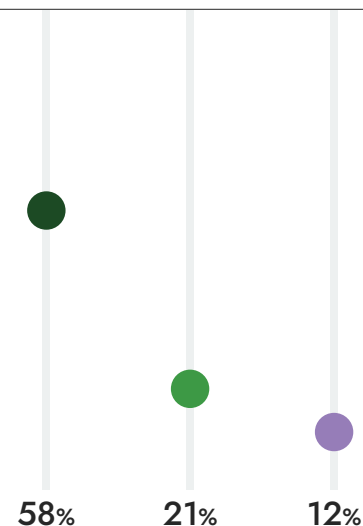
It seems that while most of the industry has dealt with turnover, some organizations have proven able to retain staff long term.



Following these questions, we asked respondents how they described their race/ethnicity (if they felt comfortable doing so). The results showed that 58% identified as **white or Caucasian**, 21% identified as **Black or African American**, and 12% said they identified as **Hispanic or Latinx**. Closely related to this question, 91% of respondents reported English as their first language, with 4% reporting Spanish. It must be noted, however, that this survey was only distributed in English and could thus have skewed these results in favor of English speakers.

Our survey also found that a large majority of respondents identified as female, as 76% of respondents reported that "female" best described their gender identity, 18% reported male, 2% reported nonbinary, and 4% chose not to answer.

Finally, we asked respondents if they identified as having a disability. Most (82%) said no, and 10% reported yes.



Work experience

Though we often categorize DSPs as a single group, in fact they work across a variety of settings with a diverse pool of clients.

To better understand the DSP experience, it's important to gauge where, and with whom, DSPs work. To that end, we asked respondents which types of support they provided.

86%

A large number of respondents worked in either in-home or community-based residential settings.

45% of respondents worked in in-home settings, meaning they provided support to individuals in their clients' own homes.

A slightly smaller percentage (**41%**) worked in community residential settings, where they provided support to individuals in a facility owned by their agency.

29%

The next largest group worked in non-residential settings where they supported individuals via day and community programs outside their homes.

Finally, **15%** provided employment support, while another **10%** provided support via an institutional residential setting.

Now that we have surveyed the types of work our DSP respondents were performing, let's **dive deeper** into what they told us about the DSP work experience.

Challenges faced by DSPs

To properly gauge the DSP experience, we must examine the challenges DSPs face in their roles. To that end, we asked respondents what they disliked about working as a DSP.

The results were more varied than the ones given for job satisfaction. It should be noted that 27% reported “I do not dislike anything about my job.” Of those who did report some dissatisfaction, four main reasons were given. The largest source of dissatisfaction (38%) was not feeling fairly compensated for their work. Next, 25% said that they did not feel appreciated for their work, 23% reported that COVID-19 made their jobs significantly harder, and 21% told us they did not receive enough support for their work.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, sitting at a table and looking at a laptop screen. They are both smiling and appear to be engaged in a collaborative activity. The man on the left is wearing a yellow jacket, and the man on the right is wearing a red hoodie. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor or semi-outdoor setting.

In **2019** and **2021**, we saw similar trends, with the main differences being dissatisfaction with compensation and the difficulties posed by COVID-19.



While compensation continues to be the largest concern among DSPs, the percentage of respondents who reported not feeling fairly compensated has decreased considerably. This decrease could be the result of temporary funding received through legislation passed during the COVID-19 public emergency, which allowed DSPs to receive their first meaningful pay increase in quite some time. Without additional funding after the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency, IDD organizations may come to a “fiscal cliff” at some point in the near future, leaving them unable to maintain the increase in wages they’ve been able to offer their DSPs (and thus negatively affecting their retention rates).

Employment satisfaction

To understand the experiences of today's DSPs, we asked respondents to report their satisfaction levels with their current organization. A majority (67%) reported feeling somewhat to completely satisfied with working as a DSP for their current organization. This level of job satisfaction has held for several years, as 66% of respondents to the 2021 Relias DSP Survey Report reported feeling somewhat to completely satisfied with their role.

The reasons DSPs enjoy their jobs have also stayed steady.

IN OUR 2023 SURVEY

86%

of respondents told us they enjoyed their work because they felt they made a difference in the lives of the people they supported. In 2021, 90% of respondents reported this as a factor in their enjoyment of their roles, while in Relias' 2019 DSP Survey Report, 82% reported the same.

IN THE SAME VEIN

82%

of respondents in our 2023 survey reported that they enjoyed being with the people they supported. This was an important factor in 2019 and 2021 as well, with 87% giving this answer in 2021 and 73% answering the same in 2019.

This high level of satisfaction is good news for IDD organizations, as satisfied DSPs are more likely to buy in and enjoy company culture. Using the statistical models described in the Methodology section, we gleaned several interesting insights into employee satisfaction and how that translates into action items for your organization.

Respondents who reported feeling satisfied with working as a DSP at their current organization were also statistically significantly more likely to:

- Say there are no challenges to working as a DSP
- Feel well prepared for their work as a DSP
- Be satisfied with their available advancement programs
- Report a greater likelihood of staying at their current organization
- Agree that they have a safe avenue by which to provide feedback on or to their supervisor
- Be more satisfied with their current supervisor
- Believe their supervisor cares about their psychological well-being
- Believe their organization promotes well-being
- Feel satisfied with how their organization shows appreciation to its workforce
- Continue working as a DSP

From the data, we can glean that organizations that effectively engage in culture building focus on three main aspects:

- Hiring or training competent, knowledgeable, and kind supervisors
- Offering effective training and career advancement opportunities to DSPs
- Creating a culture that supports the professional and personal well-being of staff

Through the rest of this report, we will explore what our survey uncovered regarding these three aspects of culture building and what you can take from this data to implement at your own organization.



Staff support, appreciation, and well-being

The job of a DSP can be both psychologically and physically tiring, causing many in the field to experience burnout and compassion fatigue. To build an organizational culture that can effectively retain qualified DSPs, you need to build out your organization's ability to support DSPs through their challenges and promote workplace well-being among your staff.

IN FACT

65%

of respondents reported that they would be moderately to extremely more likely to stay with their current organization if it invested in employee well-being or mental health programs. Though we've used slightly different qualifiers to measure respondents' desire for investments in employee well-being in past surveys, this metric seems to have stayed stable over time. In 2021, 64% of respondents reported that they were slightly to much more likely to stay with their current organization if it invested in these types of initiatives.

DESPITE THESE NUMBERS, JUST

52%

of respondents reported that their organization offered employee well-being and mental health programs, with 35% reporting they did not know if their organization offered these types of programs.

Further analysis of the data reveals that well-being and mental health programs are key, however, to creating a quality culture. **Respondents who reported that their organization offered these programs were significantly more likely to believe that their supervisor and other organizational leaders cared about their psychological well-being.**

This group also proved more likely to think that their organization promoted employee well-being.

To address the gap between the types of programs that DSPs want and that organizations offer, in the following section we will explore what our survey uncovered about how DSPs like to receive appreciation and recognition.

DSP appreciation and recognition

The perception respondents had of their organizations' appreciation efforts was a rather mixed bag. A little over half (52%) reported that they were somewhat to completely satisfied with how their organization showed appreciation for their work. And 21% reported feeling neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, while 27% said they were completely to somewhat dissatisfied. Interestingly, these numbers have held steady over time, with 51% of respondents to our 2021 survey reporting they were somewhat to completely satisfied with their organization's appreciation efforts, while 30% reported feeling somewhat to completely dissatisfied.

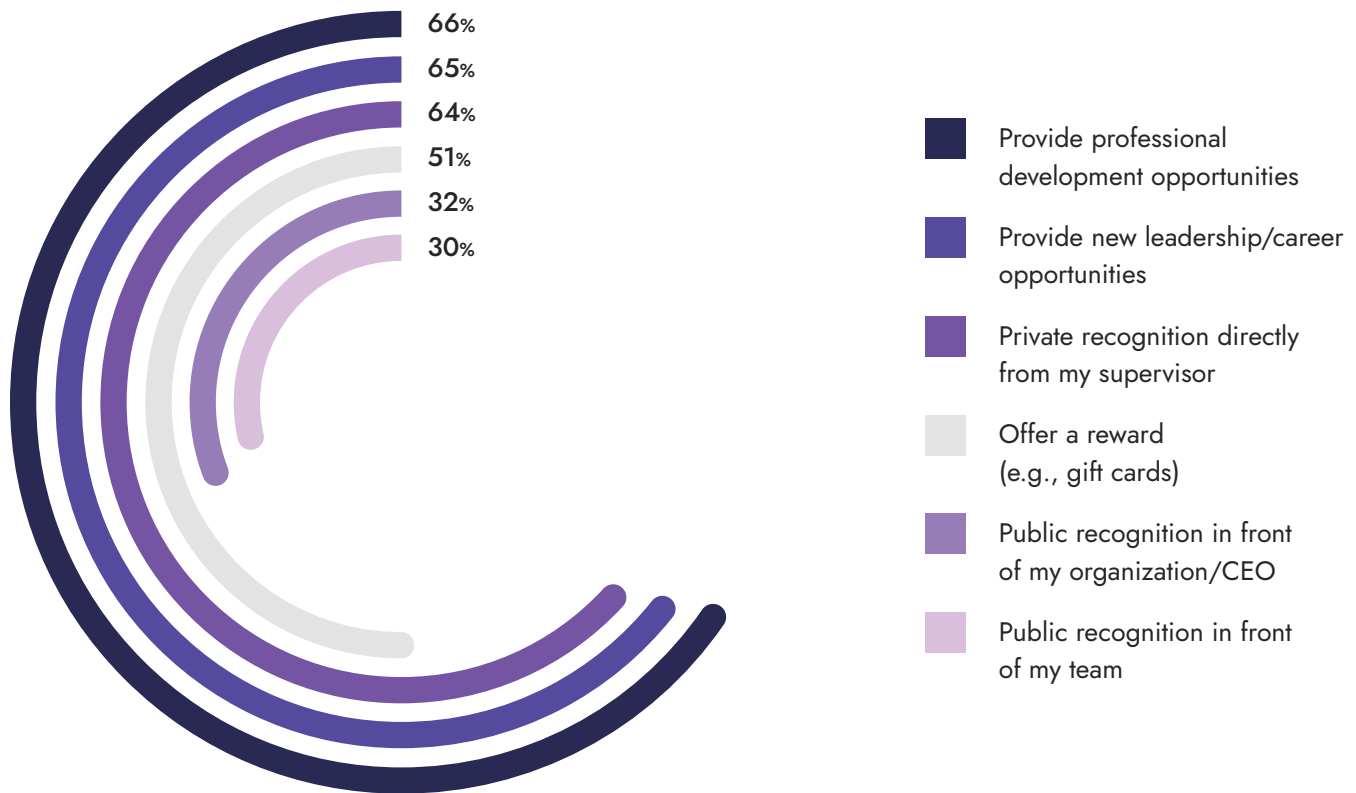
It is encouraging to see that a majority of respondents consistently expressed satisfaction with how their organization showed its appreciation for their work. Yet the fact that between one-quarter and one-third of respondents are consistently dissatisfied shows room for improvement.

To understand what organizations are doing well and where these improvement areas lie, we asked respondents to rank how valuable they find different forms of appreciation. Three choices stood out, with a large majority of respondents finding professional development, leadership and career opportunities, and private recognition very to extremely valuable.

Most Preferred Methods of Receiving Recognition



Interestingly, public recognition was generally not desired. Just 32% reported that recognition in front of their organization or CEO would be valuable and 30% reported the same for recognition in front of their team.



These numbers have also stayed steady over time, with respondents in 2021 reporting that professional development opportunities (66%), career growth opportunities (63%), and private recognition from their supervisor (69%) were the most valuable ways that an organization could show appreciation.

Further analysis revealed the depth of this desire to learn and grow, as well as for quality supervision. Respondents who reported satisfaction with their organization's career advancement programs proved more likely to feel satisfied with their organization's appreciation efforts. The same held true for those who felt satisfied with their current supervisor.

To create an effective culture, your organization must address these points. In the following sections, we'll explore what DSPs want from career advancement and training opportunities, and from supervisors. With this data, we hope to illuminate areas where your organization can further its efforts to create a great culture that retains qualified staff and helps improve client outcomes.

Training and career advancement

For DSPs to provide the best care to persons served, confidence and competence in the required skills is crucial. But we also know from past surveys that DSPs crave training not only for skill acquisition, but career advancement.

For organizations to retain and grow their DSP workforce, they must provide training to help their DSPs cultivate their skills, while also allowing DSPs to explore career advancement opportunities.

Competence and confidence

Most respondents felt very confident in their skills and abilities. In fact, 82% reported feeling very to extremely competent and confident in their DSP skills. Despite this confidence, respondents seemed less impressed with their organization's training efforts.

When we asked how prepared for work DSP respondents felt based on the training provided by their organization during onboarding, we found that almost two-thirds felt very or moderately well prepared.

4% Not all prepared



18% Somewhat prepared



32% Moderately prepared



32% Very prepared



14% Extremely prepared



While these results are far from bad, the fact that one-third of DSPs felt only moderately prepared to begin their role with their current organization after onboarding is a tad troubling. **Indeed, we found that respondents who felt more prepared due to training received from their organization were significantly more competent and confident in their DSP skills once on the job.**

To increase the confidence in their DSP skills, most respondents (61%) reported that they wanted more educational opportunities. Diving deeper into this data, we find that 39% of respondents wanted more continuing education opportunities, while 32% wanted a wider variety of training options. The next most popular option was to receive better quality training, with 22% of respondents reporting this way.

From this data, we can tell that DSPs want to learn and they feel that their organizations need to provide them with better and more varied training opportunities.

Career advancement programs

On top of training to enhance their DSP skills, respondents also showed a keen interest in training aimed at career advancement. A majority of respondents (56%) reported that they would be very much to extremely more likely to stay with their current organization if offered career advancement opportunities. When looking at historical data, the desire for career advancement among DSPs has only grown. In 2019, 34% reported career opportunities would affect their retention, while in 2021 this grew to 40%.

Clearly, more and more, DSPs want to grow their careers. So what can organizations do to advance the careers of their DSPs?

By and large, respondents preferred career laddering and reskilling programs. When asked what types of career advancement would have the most impact on their decision to stay with their current organization:

38%

reported educational opportunities toward a degree paid for by the organization

32%

said a certificate program paid for by the organization

AND 27%

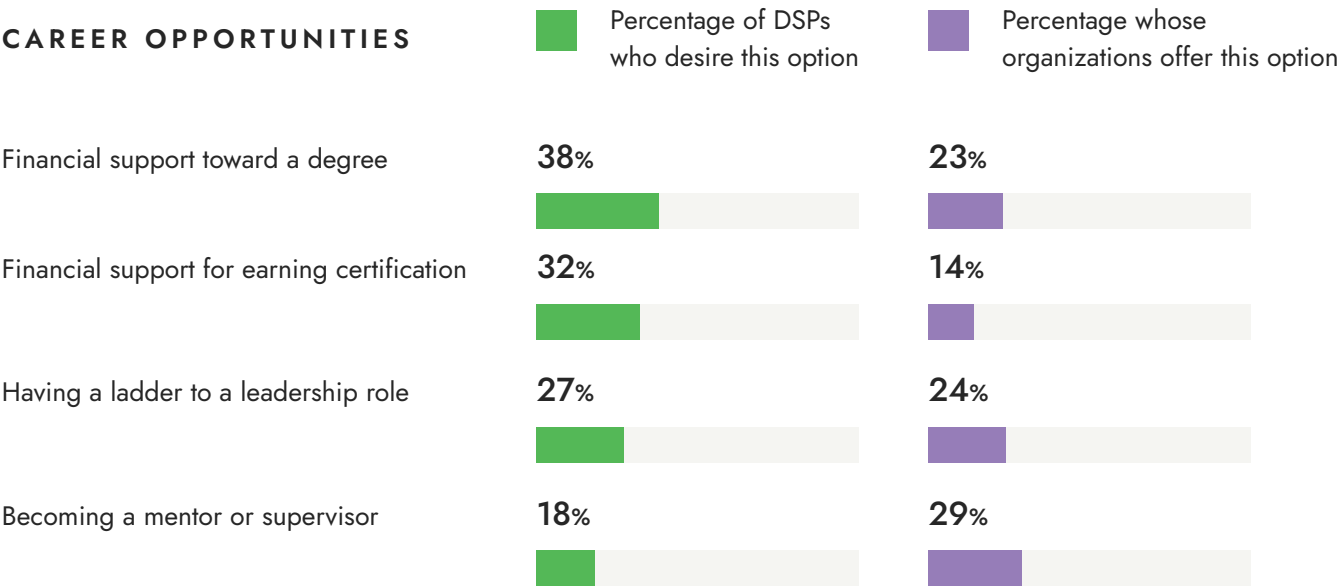
wanted a professional ladder to a leadership position

Further analysis of this data only drove home this point. **Those DSPs who reported feeling dissatisfied with their jobs were more likely to have no career advancement programs made available to them.** What's more, the satisfied respondents were more likely to have some combination of the options just mentioned.

Unfortunately, responses indicate a gap between the career advancement programs that DSPs want and the ones most of their organizations offer.

- The most commonly offered career advancement program (29%) among respondents' organizations was becoming a mentor/supervisor.
- The next most frequently offered option (24%) was a professional ladder to a leadership position.
- The other program of note offered by respondents' organizations was having the organization pay for educational opportunities toward a degree (23%).

The second most desired program by DSP respondents, having their organization pay for a certificate, was tied for the least frequently offered, with just 14% of respondents' organizations offering this type of career advancement program.



Finally, it should be noted that **26% of respondents' organizations offered no career advancement programs at all.** More than likely, this gap comes from the limited resources available to IDD organizations, which can hinder their ability to offer such programs. Nonetheless, we wanted to highlight this as an avenue for change for organizations with larger budgets.

How training and advancement impact culture

As alluded to previously, respondents satisfied with their role were significantly more likely to have:

- Their organization pay for education toward a degree and/or pay for certificate programs.
- Access to professional conferences.
- A professional ladder to leadership in their organization.
- Ability to become a mentor and/or supervisor.

As we've shown, DSPs want access to training and career advancement opportunities. Those who received these opportunities were significantly more likely to feel satisfied in their role with their current organization. We've also seen that training can have a huge impact on DSP retention.

But offering training and career advancement goes beyond retention and career growth. Those respondents who reported feeling satisfied with the career advancement opportunities at their organization were more likely to think that their organization's leaders cared about their psychological well-being. Conversely, those respondents who felt dissatisfied with their career advancement opportunities were more likely to believe their organization did not care about their psychological well-being.

No matter what type of career advancement programs your organization pursues, one of the keys to its success will be getting buy-in from DSPs.

— IN FACT, **58%**

of respondents told us that it was very to extremely important that direct support professionals were involved in the creation of career advancement programs at their organizations. By involving DSPs in the planning process, you will guarantee that any training or career advancement programs actually provide what DSPs need to succeed. Additionally, the organization will demonstrate a higher level of appreciation and recognition of DSPs and their skill sets.

Supervision

Quality supervision is key to DSP retention. In fact, **50% of respondents said they had left a job because of a supervisor.** But finding the right leader for your team is easier said than done. A supervisor needs a combination of soft skills and technical skills that can only come from years on the job. To understand the skills a supervisor needs to effectively lead a team of DSPs, we asked respondents to weigh in on important personality traits and communication styles of an effective supervisor.

Supervisor traits

When it comes to hiring the right supervisor, finding a person who fits in well with your DSP team is paramount. To understand the personality traits that DSPs find most appealing in a supervisor, we asked respondents which attributes they found most important. Two main answers came to the fore:

Shows respect for staff members as individuals

52%

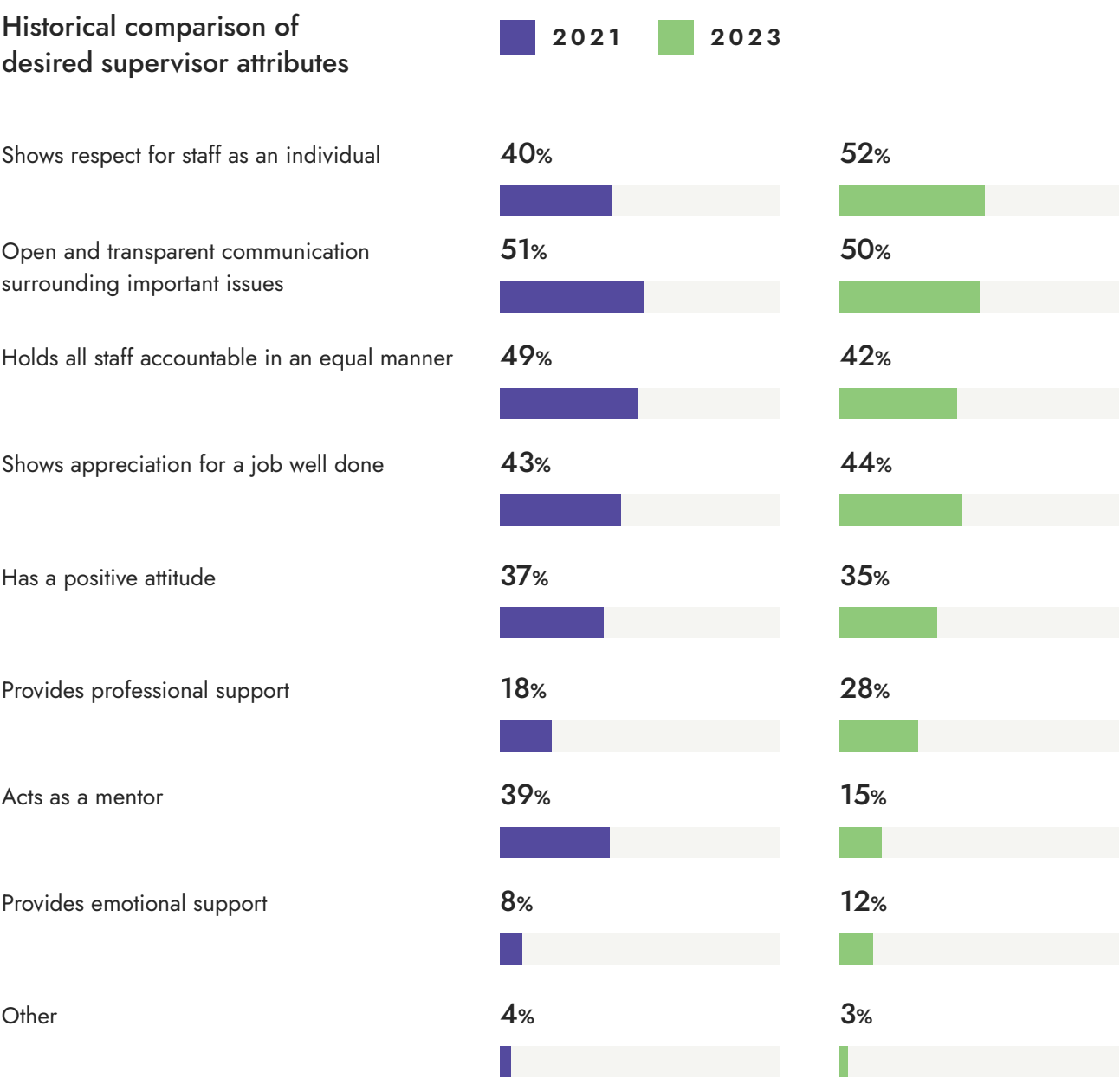
Has open and transparent communication surrounding important issues

50%

While the percentage of respondents who reported open and transparent communication as a key supervisor trait has stayed steady since our 2021 survey, considerably more reported that they wanted their supervisor to show respect for staff members as individuals. In 2021, 40% of respondents said this was an important attribute for supervisors — 12% less than in this year's survey. This is a marked shift over time in what DSPs want from a supervisor.

Building on this, good supervisors proved to have a statistically significant impact on DSP workplace wellness. Respondents who were satisfied with their current supervisor were more likely to believe that their supervisor and organization leaders cared about their psychological well-being. On top of that, these respondents also proved more satisfied with how their organization showed appreciation to its workforce and with the career advancement programs their organization provided.

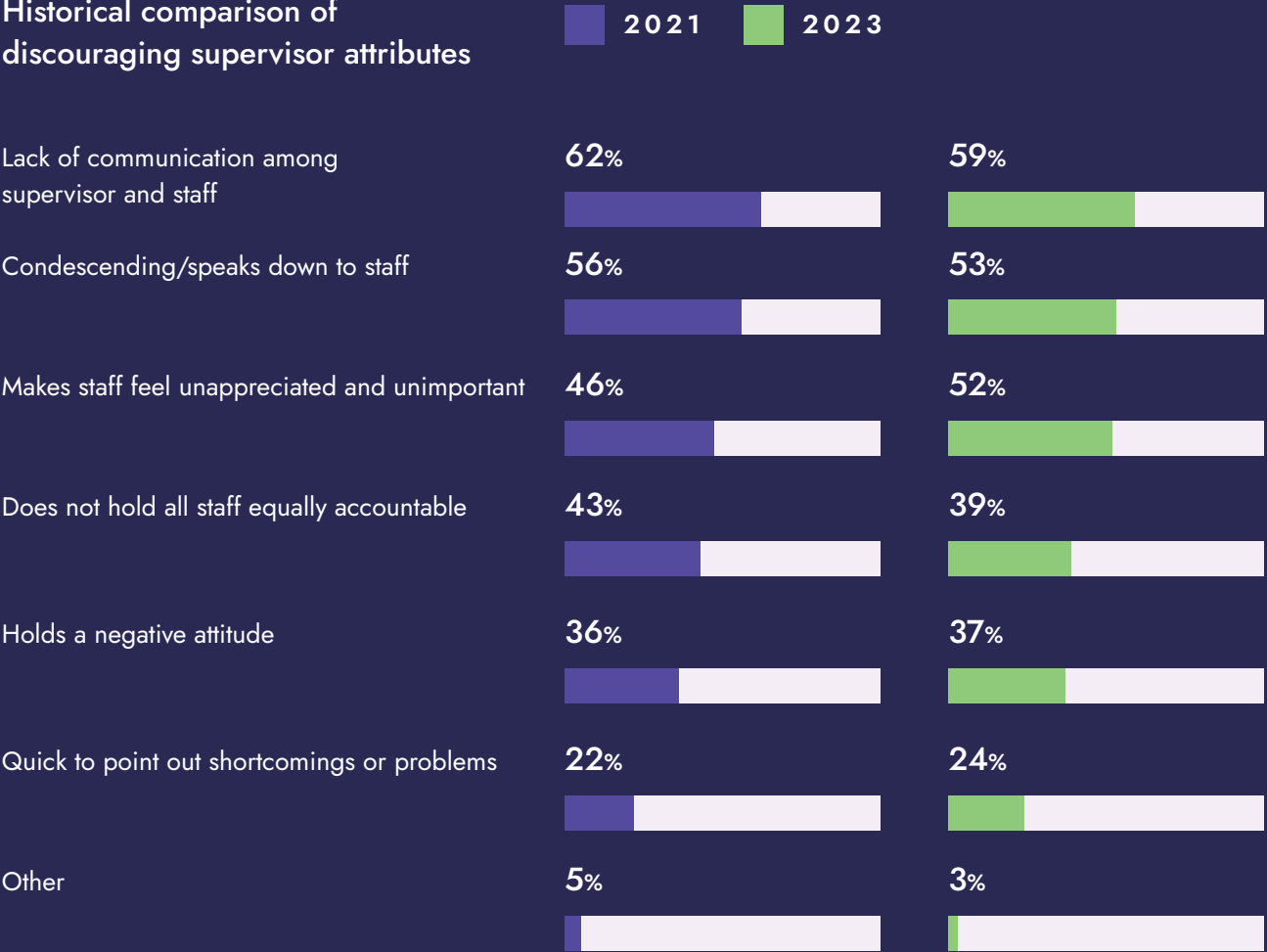
Also of note, DSPs’ desire for their supervisors to act as mentors has vastly increased. In 2021, 15% reported this as a desired attribute; in 2023, however, that percentage rose to 39%.



Given that half of our respondents have left an organization due to a supervisor, it's also important to gauge what DSPs do not want from a supervisor. To understand this, we asked respondents to report on the top three attributes they found most discouraging.

Three main answers stood out: lack of communication between supervisor and staff (59%); condescending and/or speaks down to staff (53%); makes staff feel unappreciated and unimportant (52%). These were also the top three discouraging traits reported by respondents in 2021, with the percentages holding relatively steady.

Historical comparison of discouraging supervisor attributes



Supervisor feedback and communication

Finding a qualified supervisor is only part of the process of improving DSP supervision in your organization. Creating organizational structures that allow DSPs to give feedback both to and on their supervisor is critical, as well as providing supervisors with the training and support they need to consistently improve their communication skills.

Indeed, **81% of respondents reported that having a safe platform to provide feedback about a supervisor was very to extremely important.**

This has held true over time as well, with 80% reporting the same in 2021. Despite this strong desire among DSPs for an avenue to provide feedback on a supervisor, just 59% of respondents reported currently having such an avenue available. While this discrepancy is a tad discouraging, it does represent a small increase over time, as 55% of respondents in 2021 reported having a safe avenue available to provide feedback.

The availability of these feedback avenues had a marked impact on DSP satisfaction and organizational culture. Those respondents who had the ability to safely provide feedback about their supervisor were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their supervisor. Additionally, these respondents were more likely to report that they were satisfied with working as a DSP at their current organization.

Just as important as providing safe channels for DSPs to give feedback on their supervisors is the level of comfort DSPs feel speaking with their supervisors. Fortunately, 74% of respondents reported they were somewhat to extremely comfortable talking with their current supervisor about the stress and challenges they faced in their job. This is a slight increase over 2021, when 69% reported the same way.

This is a positive trend, as DSPs who were comfortable with speaking to their supervisors about the challenges of their role also proved more likely to be satisfied with their current organization as well as with their supervisors.

ABOUT RELIAS

Relias is a global software company that specializes in education and training solutions for healthcare and human services providers. For more than 11,000 organizations around the world, Relias continues to help its clients elevate the performance of teams to get better at maintaining compliance, developing staff, and promoting consistent, high-quality care.

ABOUT ANCOR

For more than a half-century, ANCOR has worked to shape policy and share solutions to strengthen the ability of community-based providers to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As the leading voice in Washington for community providers, ANCOR represents 2,000 members that operate in nearly every corner of the country to make inclusion a reality for people of all abilities.

The profession of direct support in IDD services is critical to advancing the equity, inclusion, and human rights of people with disabilities. These individuals who give so much of their time and talent to improving the lives of those they support and upholding their dignity should be given our utmost respect. Provide the best support and appreciation to your DSPs. To learn how Relias and ANCOR can help you support your DSPs, contact us today.

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