Powering up productivity

Making the case for investment in people, skills and technology.

The Open University

Employers & Partnerships

Contents

Foreword

Low productivity has become the Achilles' heel of the UK economy for the last decade and a half, with productivity lagging behind other major economies and holding back our competitiveness and living standards.

With growth so vital to the new UK Government's agenda, solving what has become known as the "productivity puzzle" becomes even more important.

But why is it important to employers?

The benefits of increased productivity look different in every business. For private sector organisations, higher productivity may lead to higher profitability and growth. For public and third sectors this might be providing higher quality services more efficiently to the public.

Solving the productivity puzzle is vital for every employer's future success and this report investigates why this challenge remains unsolved at a business level. Our survey has found that one in four organisations report that their productivity has actually worsened in the last five years. We asked businesses how they are measuring their productivity and whether they have the expertise to do so effectively.

The second part of the report looks at solutions. Increasing productivity isn't about working employees harder for longer hours or simply recruiting more staff. With the help of a number of experts, we look at the importance of skills, employee wellbeing, technology and equality, diversity and inclusion in the workforce as key levers to improving productivity. At The Open University, we have worked with many

organisations to address these areas and I have seen at first hand the results employers enjoy when they invest in people, skills and technology.

Improved productivity will benefit businesses, employees, public services and the wider economy. Governments, employers and learning providers such as The Open University all have an important role to play. I hope this report and its recommendations help you to solve your productivity challenges and chart a path to future success.

Viren Patel
CEO, OU Worldwide and Director of Employers & Partnerships at The Open University
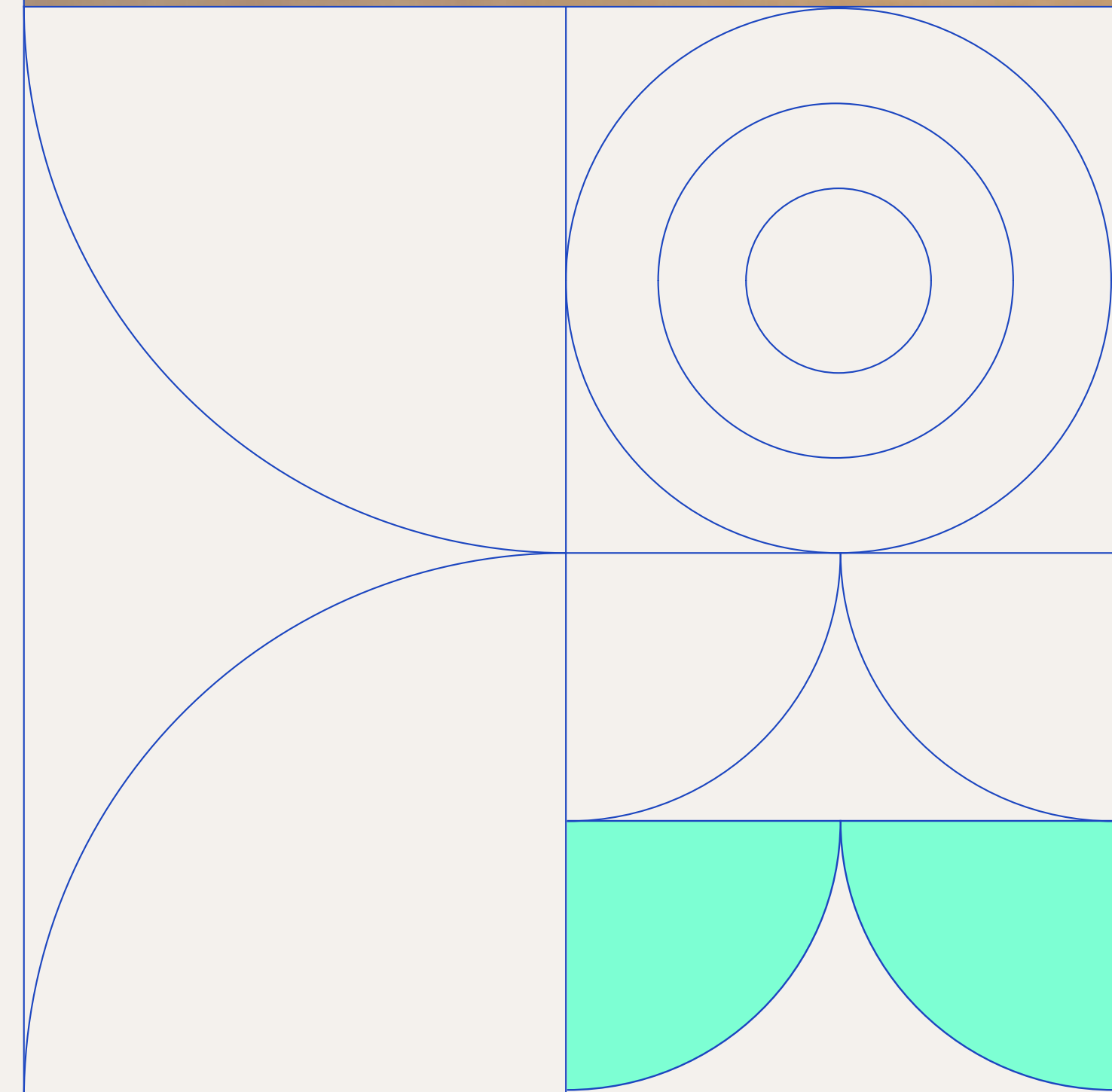
Introduction

The UK's productivity has flatlined since the financial crisis of 2008. In fact, the country has one of the poorest productivity performances among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 38 advanced economies, according to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. [1]

From 1974 until 2008, the UK's productivity grew by an average of **2.3%** a year, but that rate slumped to average growth of around **0.5%** between 2008 and 2020. [2] In 2022, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimated that the United States was **23%** more productive than the UK, France was **18%** more productive, and Germany was **10%** more productive in terms of output per hour worked. [3]

What's more, the UK is increasingly dependent on a small number of companies to drive its productivity growth. The ONS found that the most efficient **10%** of businesses were responsible for **63%** of the annual growth in UK labour productivity between 2011 and 2019. [4] Analysis suggests that the UK's productivity decline is due to underinvestment in capital and skills. [5]

The UK's poor productivity performance is holding back its economic growth and competitiveness.

It is also reducing the amount of money that could potentially be invested in public services. Furthermore, declining productivity growth is stifling wage rises and hindering improvements in living standards. Research by the Resolution Foundation in 2023 found that if wages had continued to grow at the rate they were before 2008, real average weekly earnings would be around £11,000 higher per year. That equates to a lost wages gap of **37%**. [6] There is no sign of an imminent improvement in productivity, either. According to the ONS, the UK's productivity in the second quarter of 2024 was estimated to be **0.1%** lower compared with the year before. [7]

Go deeper: UK productivity figures

To view the latest key economic indicators for UK productivity, see. [here](#).

[1] Source: National Institute of Economic and Social Research (2022)
[2] Source: National Institute of Economic and Social Research (2022)
[3] Source: Office for National Statistics (2022)
[4] Source: Financial Times (2023)
[5] Source: London School of Economics and Political Science (2023)
[6] Source: Resolution Foundation (2023)
[7] Source: Office for National Statistics (2024)

The collective benefits of productivity growth

With economic growth top of the UK Government's policy agenda, productivity is a problem that it is urgently looking to solve. This report explores how organisations in every sector, regardless of their size, can play their part in improving the nation's productivity. In doing so, they will not only be helping the country, they will also benefit themselves. More productive organisations can offer competitive prices to their customers, develop higher quality products or be more resource efficient, leading to cost savings.

Productivity can be defined as the ratio of output to input and it can be measured in different ways. For example, productivity can be measured according to how many worker hours are deployed to complete a task or how many materials are used to make a product. Generally speaking, productivity measures the efficiency of an organisation at producing goods and services, although it can be complex to measure productivity in an economy that combines manufacturing with knowledge work.

Greater productivity is about doing more with fewer resources. Nevertheless, any drive to boost productivity should not involve putting people under pressure to achieve overly ambitious results. Improved productivity is not about people working harder or doing longer hours – Japan has a longer working week than the UK, but is **23%** less productive. [8] Rather, it is about changing organisational culture, rethinking the way work is done, and creating opportunities for people to thrive and develop in the workplace so they produce more output.

This report – which is based on a survey of over 500 decision makers from across the UK and features expert input – highlights some of the biggest barriers to improved productivity today. It also offers recommendations for how organisations can improve their productivity and help set the UK on course for higher growth, higher wages, higher living standards and better public services.

[8] Source: Office for National Statistics (2022)

Executive summary of key findings

We surveyed over **500 decision makers** in organisations across the UK to understand the extent to which their organisations are prioritising, measuring and attempting to improve productivity. The survey results highlighted these key themes:

1. **Declining productivity growth is a real challenge for UK organisations**

27% of organisations **agree that productivity has worsened** over the past five years

75% of decision makers say that improving productivity is a **medium/high priority**

59% have **programmes or initiatives in place** to improve their productivity

2. **Nearly a third of organisations are failing to measure their productivity**

29%

of organisations are not currently measuring their productivity

26%

lack the expertise to measure productivity effectively

41%

of SMEs don't measure their productivity now or plan to do so in future

3. Lack of skills, outdated technology and wellbeing challenges are among the biggest barriers to improved productivity

41%

of decision makers believe that skills shortages are having a negative impact on their organisation's productivity

24%

say that a lack of relevant technical skills and outdated systems or technology are barriers to improved productivity

20%

of decision makers cite mental health and wellbeing challenges as being detrimental to productivity

4. **Less than a third of organisations are embracing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as a means of boosting productivity, with the private sector leading the public sector**

30%

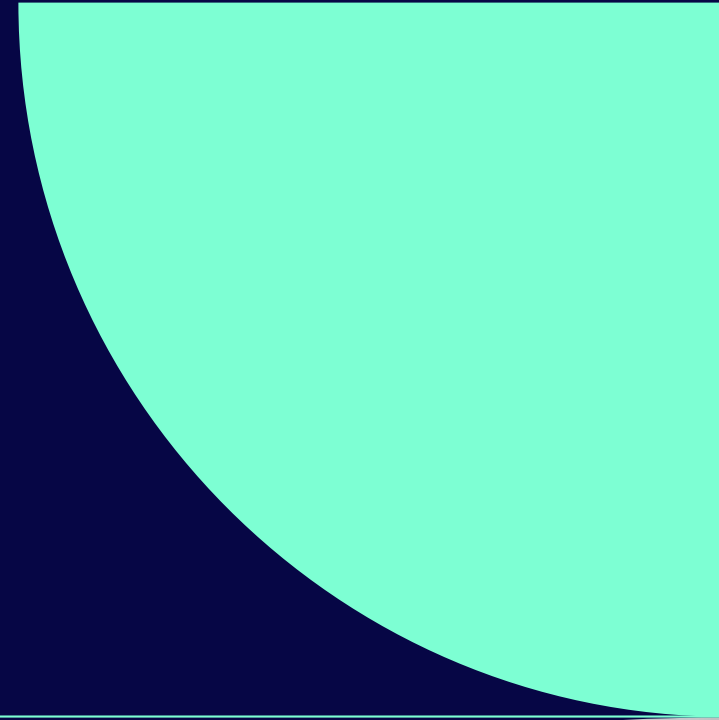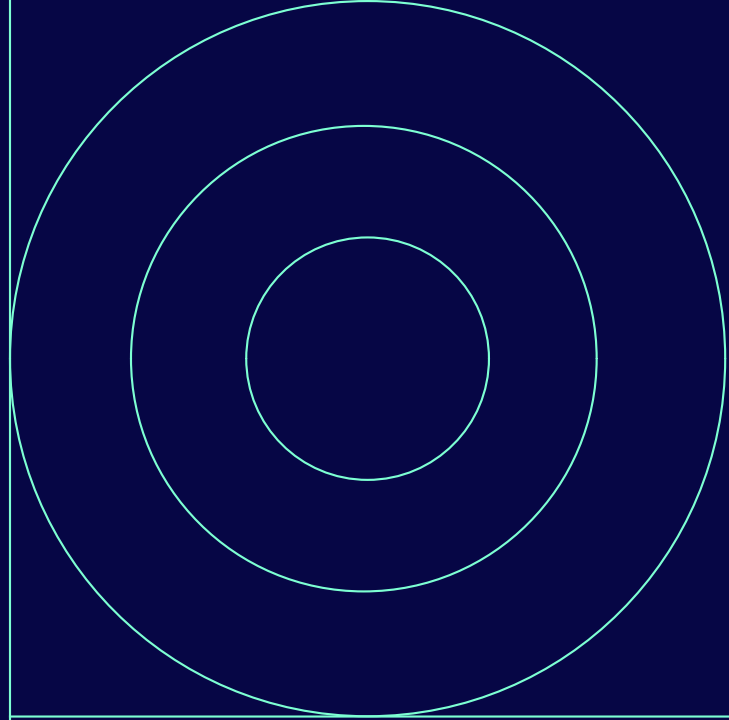of organisations are **embracing EDI** to improve productivity

32%

of private sector organisations are **embracing EDI to improve productivity**

23%

of public sector organisations are **embracing EDI** to improve productivity

To read our recommendations for improving productivity within your organisation, see **page 48**.

Expert commentators

The report was written by leadership and management journalist, Sally Percy. Analysis of the survey findings was informed by interviews with:

Safaraz Ali, Founder and CEO, the Multicultural Apprenticeship and Skills Alliance and the Pathway Group and Entrepreneur in Residence at The Open University

Nerys Bolton, Associate Head of School, Curriculum and Innovation, School of Health, Wellbeing & Social Care, The Open University

Martin Carmody, Managing Director, Stratos

Sir Cary Cooper CBE, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health, Manchester Business School

Anthony Impey MBE, CEO, Be the Business

Dr Fidèle Mutwarasibo, Director of the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, The Open University

Make the most of measurement

"What gets measured, gets managed," is one of the most famous adages of the late management guru **Peter Drucker**. So, if organisations are not measuring their productivity, they are unlikely to be managing it well either.

Nearly a third **(29%)** of decision makers surveyed said their organisation is not currently measuring productivity. What's more, the smaller the organisation, the less likely they are to measure it. Only **30%** of micro-organisations are currently measuring productivity, compared with **80%** of large organisations. Over a quarter of organisations **(26%)** say they lack the expertise to measure productivity effectively.

Without measurement, organisations only have limited ability to manage their productivity. This may help to explain why more than one in four organisations **(27%)** agree that their productivity has worsened over the past five years and **59%** have

programmes or initiatives in place to improve their productivity. Improving productivity is a medium or high priority for three-quarters **(75%)** of decision makers.

Organisations can use various methods for measuring their productivity. These range from measuring output per hour worked and revenue per employee through to employee performance, employee absenteeism, key performance indicators, customer satisfaction surveys, quality scores and timesheets.

It can also be helpful to measure staff engagement, since engagement is a driver of productivity.

Dr Fidèle Mutwarasibo, Director of The Open University's Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, recommends that employers undertake a "mood survey" of staff to explore whether they feel satisfied and valued, and also whether their talents are being used to the full.

At Milton Keynes-based creative and digital agency Stratos, productivity is measured through systems that measure the utilisation and capacity of the team to understand how long projects take, whether the team needs more resources, and whether clients are being overserviced. Team members are responsible for completing daily and weekly timesheets that provide the necessary data.
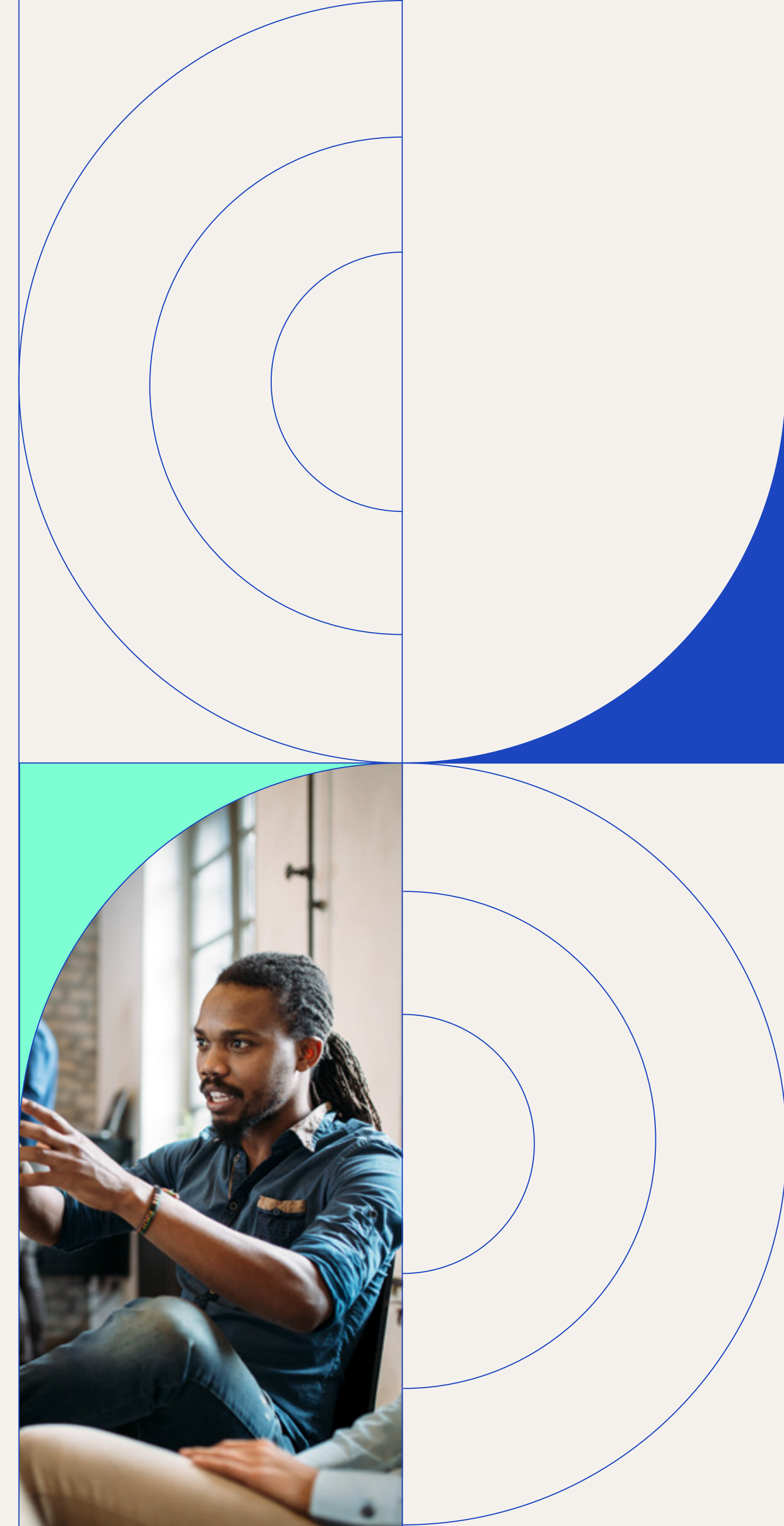
Martin Carmody, Managing Director of Stratos, explains that Stratos measures productivity because it does not want to set unrealistic expectations and timescales for its team or clients. "This just leads to team burnout, anxiety and awkward client conversations," he says. "Measuring utilisation provides us with the data to make informed business decisions and ensures we consistently deliver our very best work within agreed client budgets and deadlines."

As people are its business, Stratos also wants to foster a culture that is inclusive, supportive and respectful. To bring everyone on board with its approach, it undertakes education and training and explains why it measures productivity.

"Utilisation and productivity need to be treated with respect and the team's understanding of this is crucial," Carmody says. "It's not in play to 'point fingers'. It's to truly understand what time we have available to us."

By monitoring its productivity, Stratos benefits from being able to plan the team's workload, in a controlled schedule – which is essential for operating its hybrid/remote working model. "The team is always aware of what is in the pipeline, when they are due to deliver, and what is expected," Carmody explains. "When we see utilisation reach our team's capacity, this informs us we either need more temporary resources, to recruit or to understand if we are overservicing, and why."
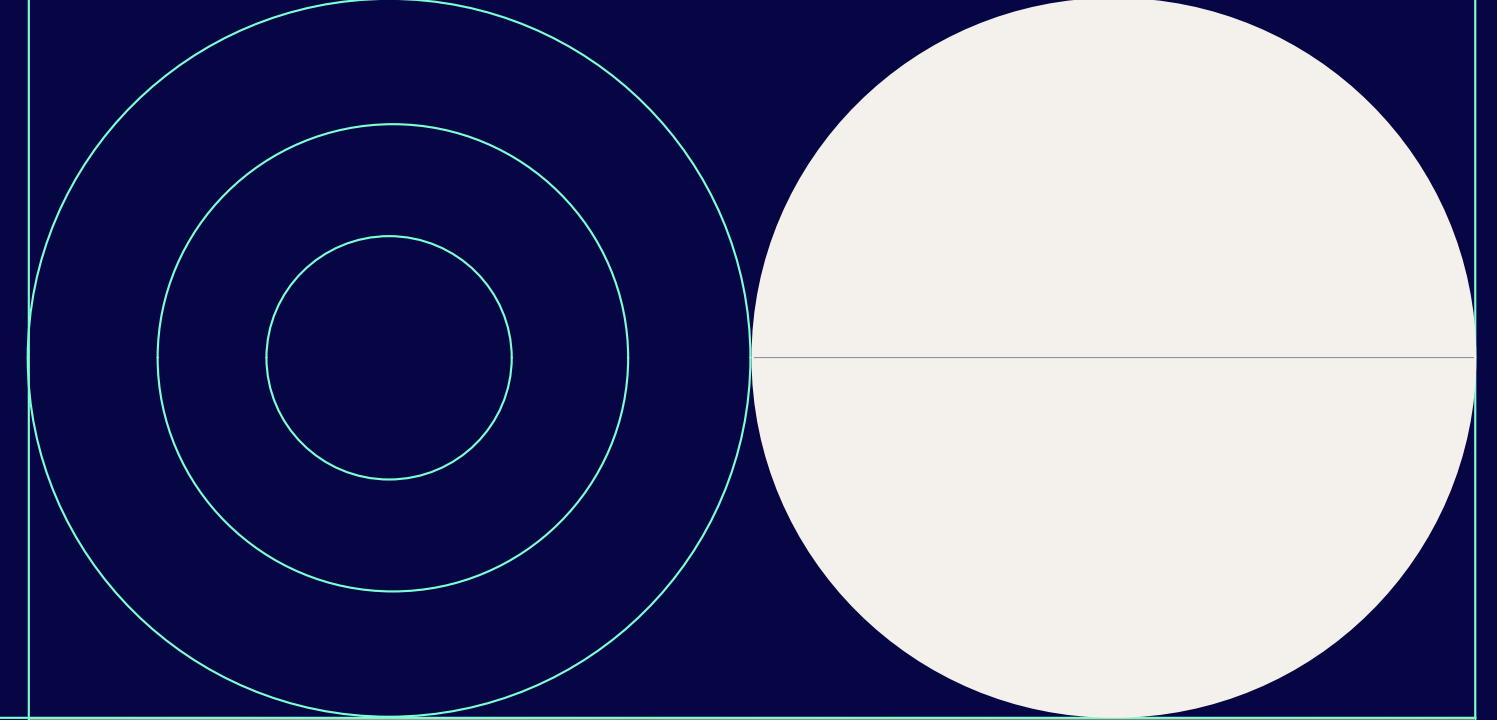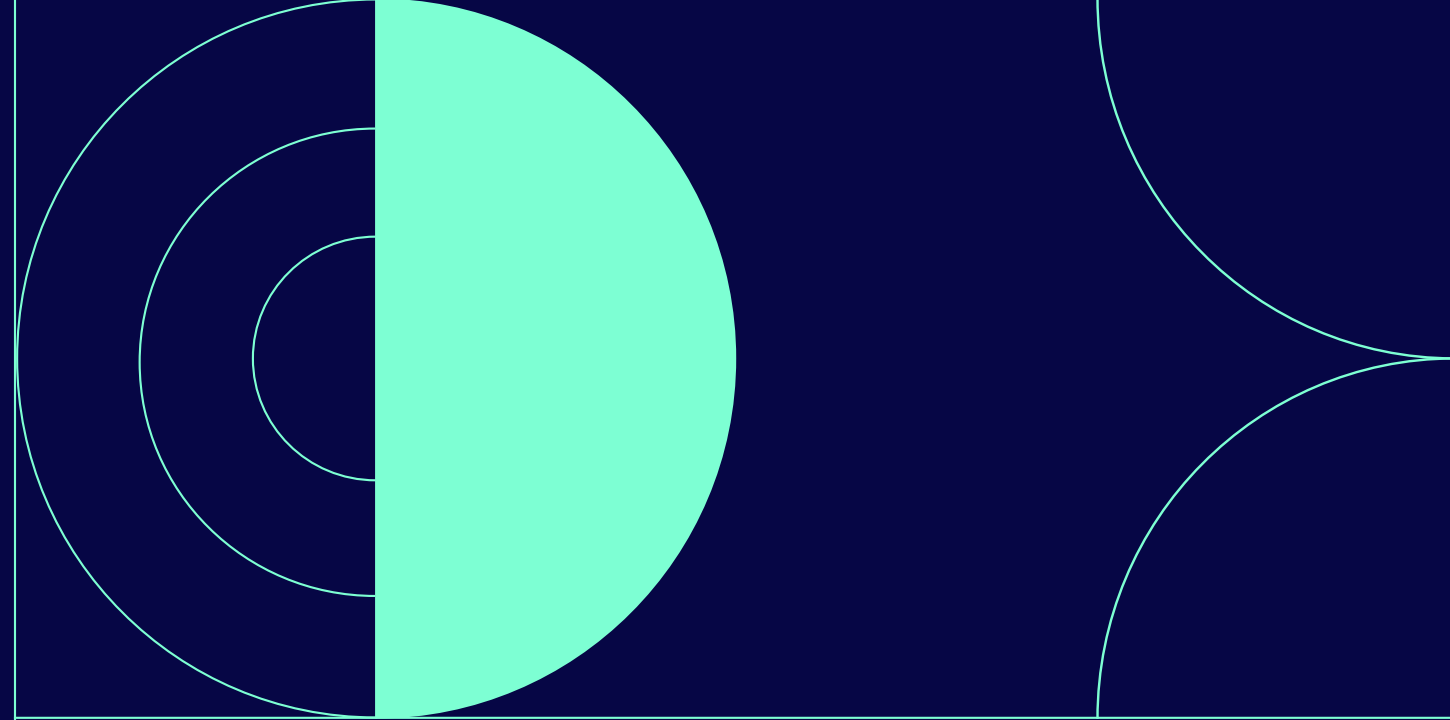
Focus on SMEs

The survey found that measuring productivity is not a priority for most SME organisations. Only **19%** of SMEs agreed it was a high priority, compared with **55%** of large organisations. This helps to explain why SME organisations are far less likely to measure productivity than their larger peers. Two out of five SMEs **(41%)** said they are not currently measuring productivity and do not plan to do so in the future. In contrast, just **6%** of large organisations said the same.

Anthony Impey MBE, CEO at Be the Business, believes that SME leaders may not necessarily appreciate the significance of improved productivity. "Productivity is about good growth," he says. "It is about increasing turnover, but not increasing costs at the same time. For leaders of smaller organisations, it is also about giving them their time back and achieving a better work-life balance, which is often the thing that they want more than anything else."

SMEs are less likely to use all methods for measuring productivity compared with large organisations. When they do measure, however, their top three methods are customer satisfaction, employee performance review and targets, and task completion.
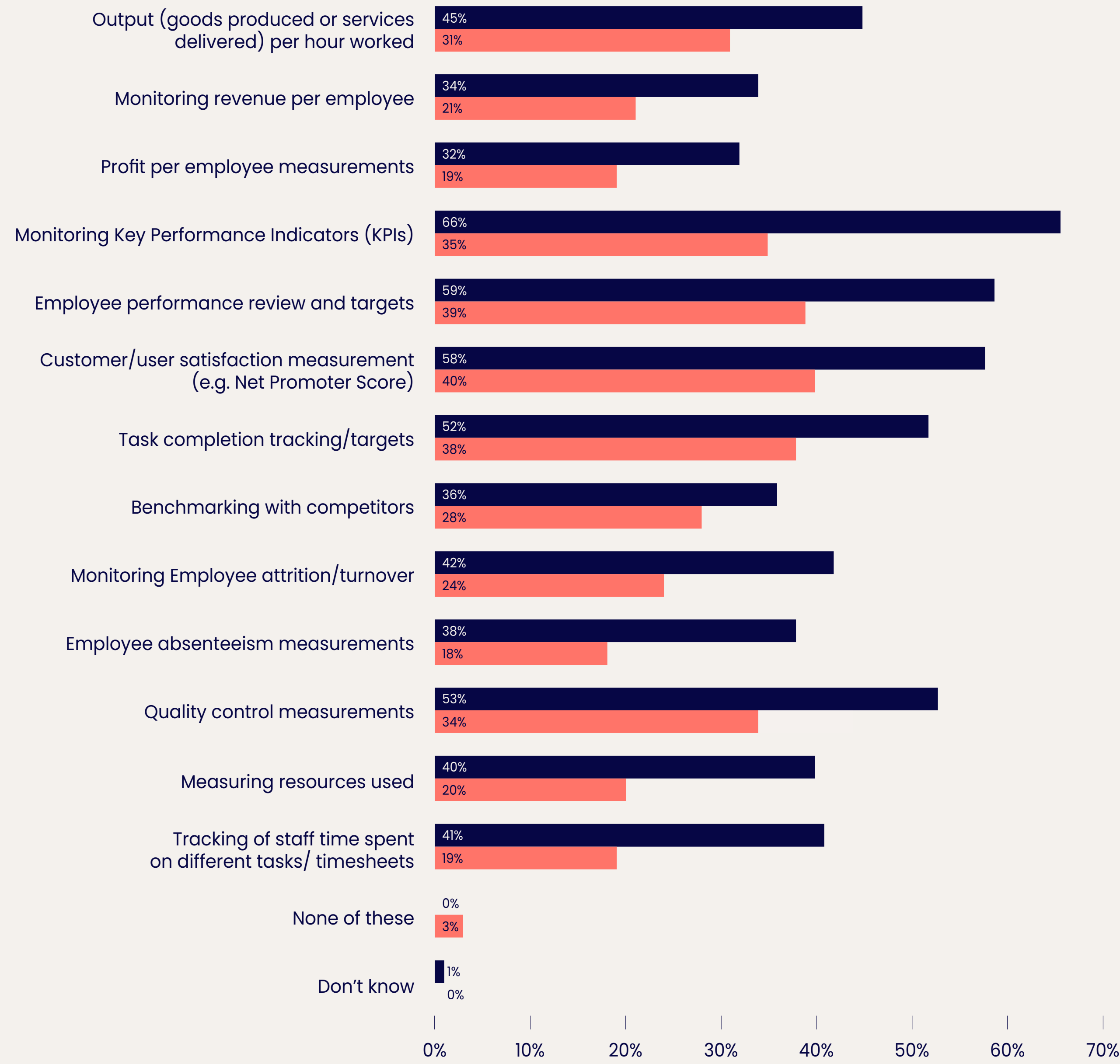
Methods being used to measure productivity: large organisations versus SMEs

Method	Large (250+ employees)	SME (1 to 249 employees)
Output (goods produced or services delivered) per hour worked	45%	31%
Monitoring revenue per employee	34%	21%
Profit per employee measurements	32%	19%
Monitoring Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	66%	35%
Employee performance review and targets	59%	39%
Customer/user satisfaction measurement (e.g. Net Promoter Score)	58%	40%
Task completion tracking/targets	52%	38%
Benchmarking with competitors	36%	28%
Monitoring Employee attrition/turnover	42%	24%
Employee absenteeism measurements	38%	18%
Quality control measurements	53%	34%
Measuring resources used	40%	20%
Tracking of staff time spent on different tasks/ timesheets	41%	19%
None of these	0%	3%
Don't know	1%	0%

Legend:
- Large (250+ employees)
- SME (1 to 249 employees)

A lack of expertise is a major barrier to SMEs measuring their productivity more effectively. Over a quarter **(29%)** of SMEs cited this as an issue, compared with **23%** of large businesses. **Impey** also believes that SMEs are held back from measuring their productivity by a shortage of time and skills. "It feels too difficult for them," he says. "Leaders of these organisations are incredibly busy, frequently working 12-hour days, six or seven days a week."

Over a third of SMEs **(36%)** agree that the skills shortage is impacting their productivity. Alongside skills, they identified lack of budget **(33%)**, outdated systems and technology **(17%)** and mental health and wellbeing challenges **(16%)** as barriers to improved productivity within their organisation.

To improve their productivity, Impey suggests that rather than rolling out big initiatives, SMEs should focus on making regular, continuous improvements to their working practices. These might include adopting a new piece of AI software to summarise documents, running shorter meetings and encouraging employees to do short training courses.

It is key that SMEs improve their productivity, Impey argues, since they are rooted in the communities in which they operate. He says: "If you want to drive up living standards and have a more equal distribution of wealth across the country then enabling small businesses to become more productive is one of the most effective ways of addressing many of the local challenges that exist."

29%

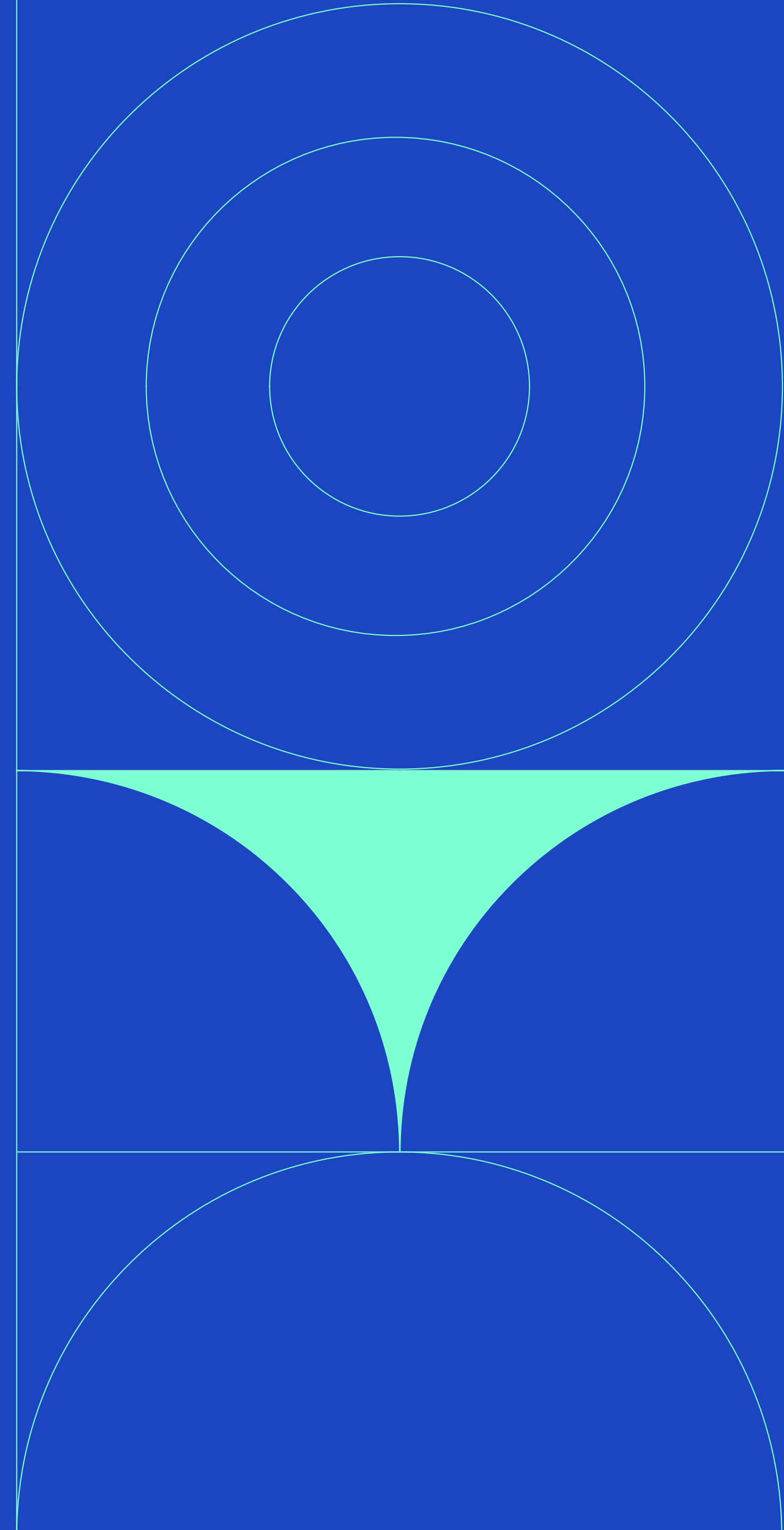Over a quarter of SMEs cited a lack of expertise to be a major barrier in measuring their productivity

It feels too difficult for them. Small organisations are incredibly busy, working flat out.

Anthony Impey MBE - CEO, Be the Business

Invest in skills to boost productivity

Investment in skills boosts productivity by empowering people to innovate, exploit new market opportunities, solve problems, serve customers better, make more effective use of their time and reduce costs. Currently, however, a shortage of skills is hampering the productivity of organisations.

Two in five **(41%)** decision makers surveyed for the report said that a skills shortage is having a negative impact on the productivity of their organisation. This finding aligns with The Open University's latest Business Barometer, published in partnership with the British Chambers of Commerce in June 2024. The Barometer revealed that **62%** of UK organisations are currently facing skills shortages. [9]

The survey conducted for this report found that the issue of skills shortages is particularly acute in medium-sized organisations with 50 to 249 employees **(65%)** and small organisations with 10 to 49 employees **(51%)**. It is also more apparent in the public sector **(55%)** compared with the private sector **(38%)**.

Furthermore, a lack of relevant technical skills **(24%)** was second only to lack of budget **(27%)** and equal to outdated systems or technology **(24%)** among the top barriers that businesses face when trying to improve their productivity. Given that a lack of skills constitutes such a major obstacle to improved productivity, organisations should consider investing in reskilling and upskilling as a priority. According to the Confederation of British Industry, investing in reskilling can bring a **6%** to **12%** increase in productivity. [10]

41%

of decision makers said that a skills shortage is having a negative impact on the productivity of their organisation
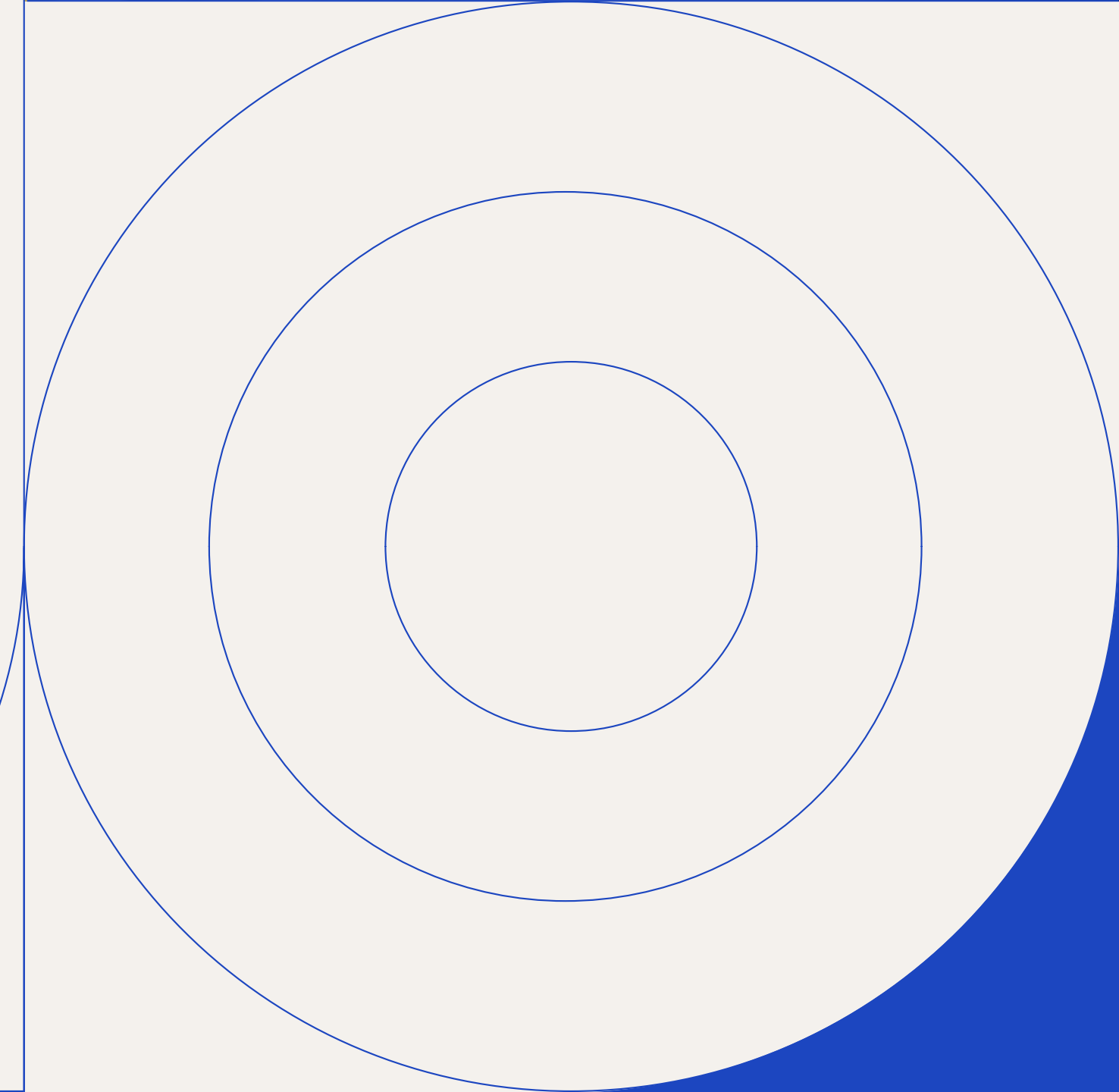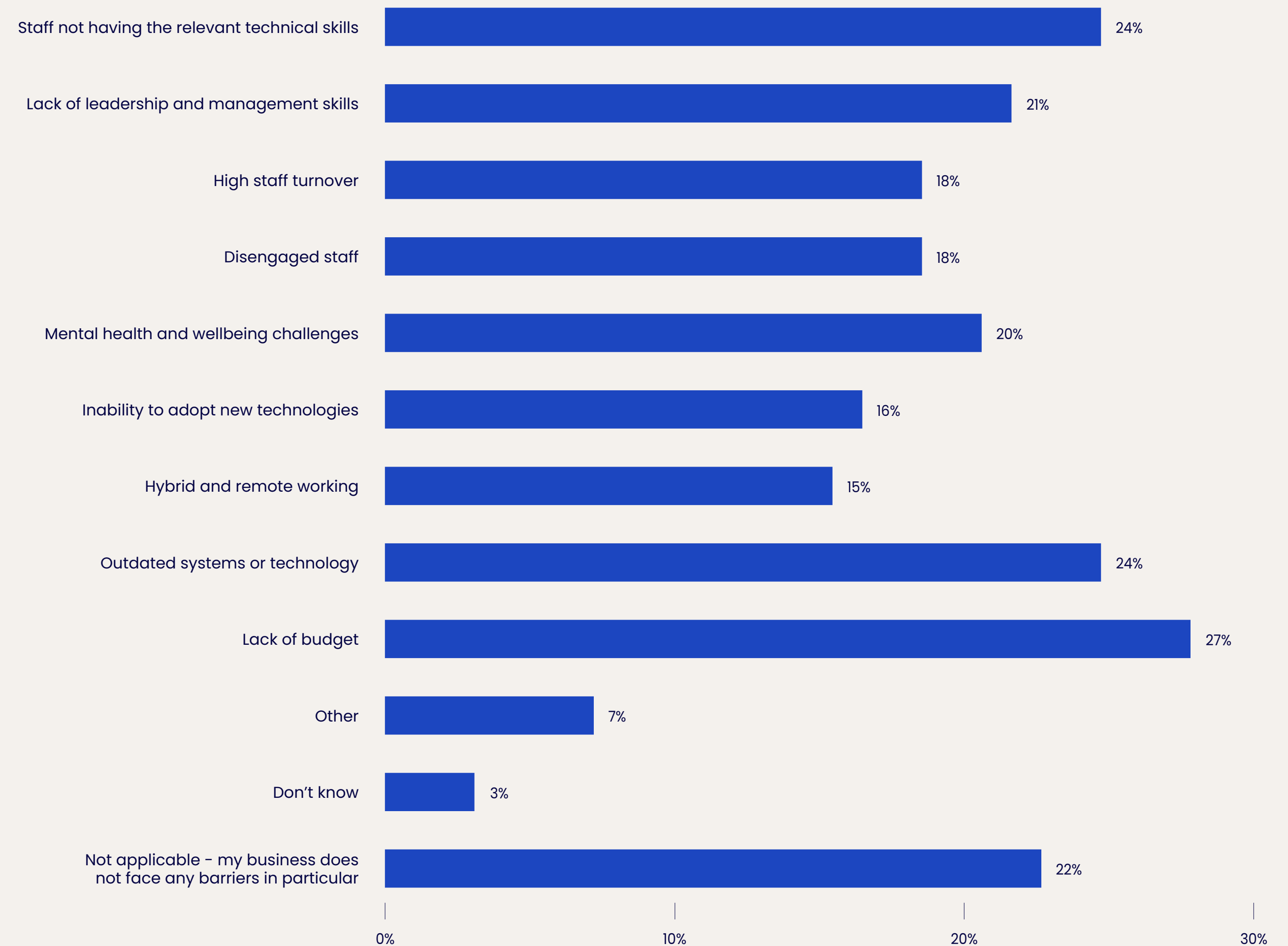
[9] Source: The Open University & British Chambers of Commerce (2024)
[10] Source: Confederation of British Industry (2022)

Continuous learning is important for the whole organisation, including its most senior leaders, says **Sir Cary Cooper CBE**, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Manchester Business School. "Senior people are the role models," he explains. "If employees don't see senior people in their organisation getting any development, what does that say? With the fast-moving pace of technology, all of us need to keep learning."

He also believes that traditional recruitment approaches alone will rarely solve an organisation's skills challenges. For that reason, employers must be imaginative about how they can source, reskill and upskill their talent. "It's about thinking off the wall about which groups of people can be trained up," he says.

Which, if any, of the following barriers does your business face when trying to improve productivity?

Barrier	%
Staff not having the relevant technical skills	24%
Lack of leadership and management skills	21%
High staff turnover	18%
Disengaged staff	18%
Mental health and wellbeing challenges	20%
Inability to adopt new technologies	16%
Hybrid and remote working	15%
Outdated systems or technology	24%
Lack of budget	27%
Other	7%
Don't know	3%
Not applicable - my business does not face any barriers in particular	22%

BASE: B28 decision makers surveyed - 528

21%

of decision makers identified **a lack of leadership and management skills** was a hindrance to productivity

"

Leadership and management skills equip managers with the capability to consider how the organisation can evolve

Dr Fidèle Mutwarasibo – Director of the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership, The Open University

Notably, a lack of leadership and management skills was identified as a hindrance to productivity by a fifth **(21%)** of decision makers, with this figure climbing to **29%** for those who work in large organisations. This is a concern since leadership and management skills are critical to boosting organisational productivity, according to **Dr Fidèle Mutwarasibo**, of The Open University's Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership.

"Leadership and management skills equip managers with the capability to consider how the organisation can evolve to improve its productivity," Mutwarasibo says. "Perhaps by adopting new technological tools or processes, setting targets or capitalising on the diversity of its workforce."

Another way in which leadership and management training can boost productivity is by giving managers the skills and techniques to inspire, motivate and empathise with their teams.

Sir Cary believes that the UK is suffering from a shortage of "socially skilled line managers". Unfortunately, this shortage is resulting in demanding workplace environments where employees quickly become overloaded, leading them to underperform or go off sick with stress.

Anthony Impey, of Be the Business, also emphasises the importance of leadership and management skills, especially for smaller businesses. "Lots of small business leaders are accidental managers," he says. "They're very talented at their craft and they turn that craft into a business that generates a livelihood for them. But running a business requires them to develop a whole new skillset. So, there's an opportunity to equip business leaders with leadership and management capabilities that will help them to get even more value out of their time and the time of the people who work for them."

The Open Degree – a bespoke qualification

Peter is a Technical Leader in Mass Spectrometry with Almac Sciences based in Craigavon, Northern Ireland. Using the OU's credit transfer system, Peter was able to build on prior study at a university in England. Peter was at a stage in life where he wanted to settle down, have a family and buy a house and the OU's flexible distance learning was ideal. Peter's employer, Almac Group, sponsored his studies and as a result he has now completed his degree and graduated with an Open Degree, after studying a selection of modules in Investigative Maths, Engineering Design and Astrobiology to empower his career development.

[Read here](#)
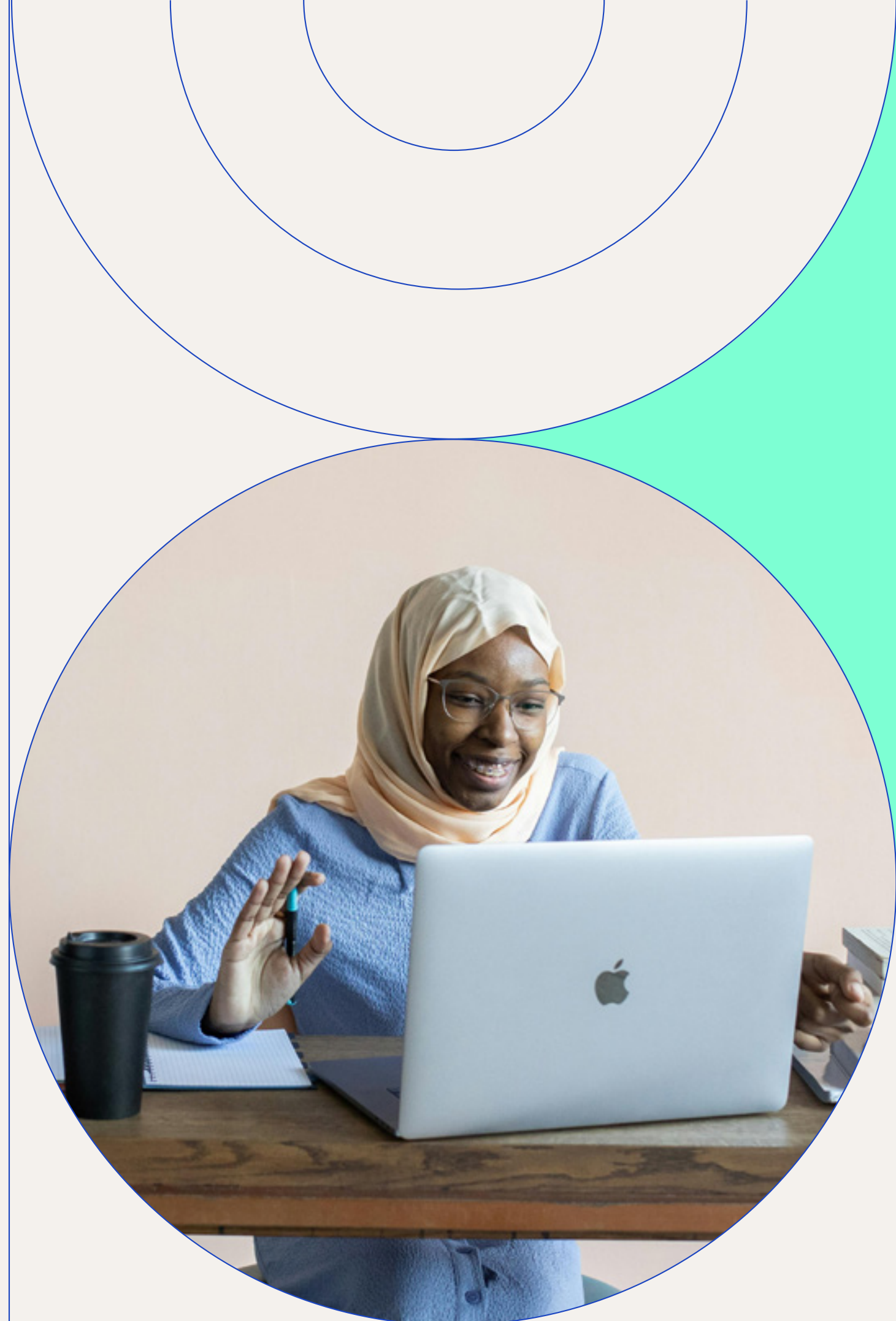
Focus on apprenticeships

There's no shortage of talent in the UK, argues Safaraz Ali, Founder and CEO of the Multicultural Apprenticeship & Skills Alliance and the Pathway Group and Entrepreneur in Residence at The Open University. The challenge is being able to find and empower that talent, however.

Apprenticeships can be a great way to equip people with the skills they need to succeed in the workplace, but they are often misunderstood. People can assume that apprenticeships are only suitable for low-level jobs that do not require qualifications or prior experience. They are also perceived, in some quarters, as badly paid and an inferior option to taking a university degree.

In reality, apprenticeships are available in a wide range of industries and roles from architecture through to business management, marketing and engineering. There are also differing levels of apprenticeships with degree apprenticeships being equivalent to an undergraduate or master's degree, meaning that apprenticeships are suitable for all ages and all levels. The average salary for apprentices in the UK is nearly £20,000 a year. [11]

"In most cases, apprenticeships are a ladder for career progression," Ali says. "They also add value to the employer by giving them someone who believes in their brand and someone they can coach and develop. It's a licence to educate someone in your own way, in the culture of the organisation, which gives you a competitive edge." This argument is backed up by findings from The Open University's Business Barometer, which found that **86%** of employers already offering apprenticeships were committed to maintain or growing apprentice numbers in the next 12 months. [12]

Ali believes that apprenticeships are a useful strategy for organisations looking to boost their productivity. This is because apprenticeships enable them to build and develop a pipeline of loyal talent that has the specific skills and experience they need. Apprenticeships can also enhance an organisation's employer brand, helping it to stand out from the crowd – a major advantage when it comes to attracting and retaining talent. "Offering apprenticeships shows that you're an organisation that cares for its staff and believes in engaging with communities," Ali says. "And that builds trust with employees, customers and suppliers."

[11] Source: Glassdoor (2024)
[12] Source: The Open University & British Chambers of Commerce (2024)
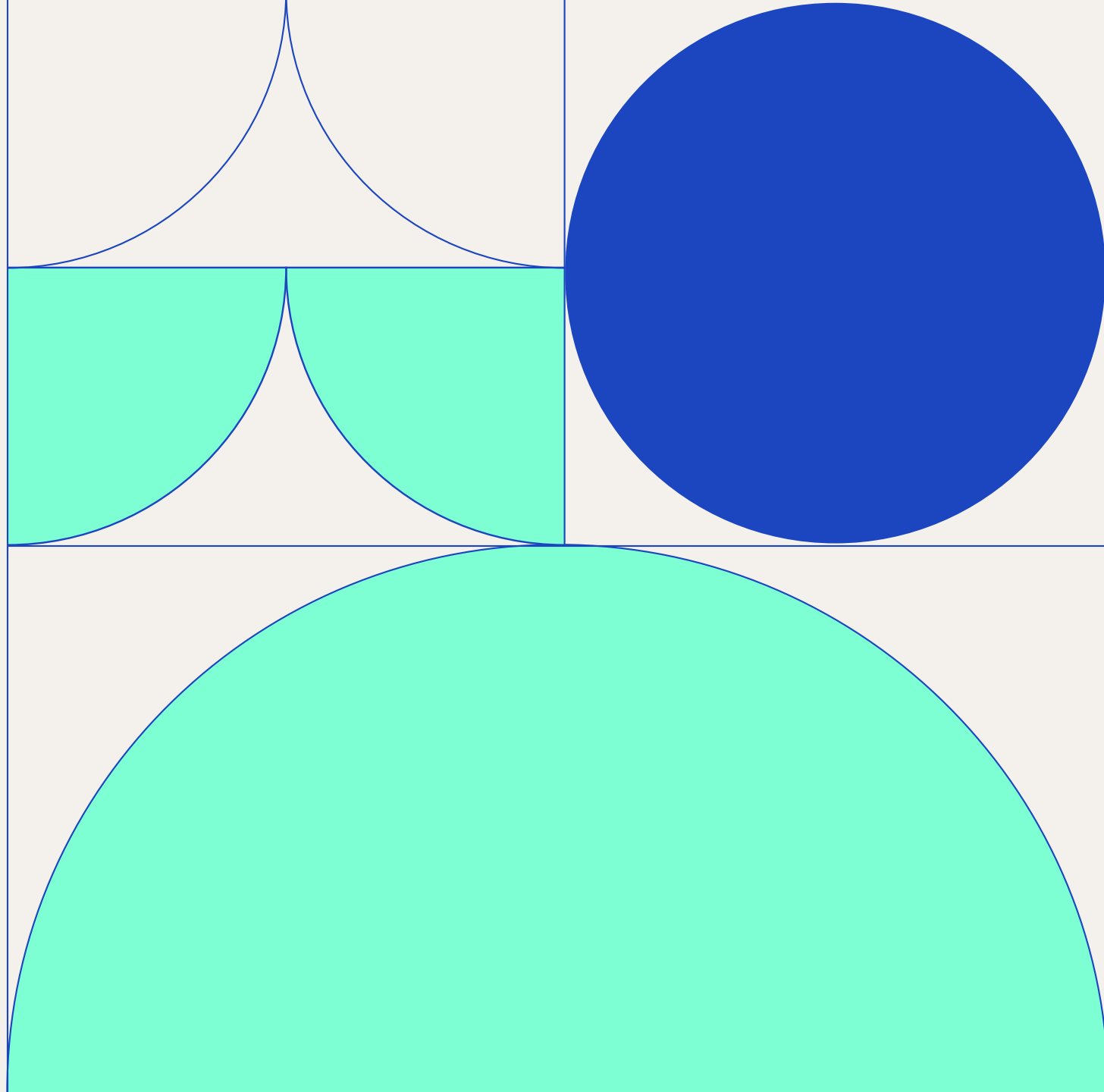
Professor **Sir Cary Cooper**, of Manchester Business School, argues that degree apprenticeships could be a game-changer for employers looking to unlock the potential of their people. That's because degree apprentices are likely to receive training not just in the essential technical skills they need, but also in the management skills that will help them to more effectively lead and motivate teams.

Additionally, apprenticeships can be a crucial element of organisations' equality, diversity and inclusion strategies.
As entry routes, they can help to make an organisation more accessible to a broader talent pool of people, including underrepresented communities and individuals who may have missed out on traditional educational routes. They can also be a way to produce the vital role models who rise through the ranks of an organisation and inspire others to follow them.

To showcase the talent among multicultural British apprenticeships, Ali's Pathway Group has founded the Multicultural Apprenticeship Awards, which highlight the achievements of individual apprentices and the contributions of the employers and learning providers that have assisted them on their journey. Find out more about the Multicultural Apprenticeship Awards.

Go deeper:

For an example of an organisation that is using apprenticeships to boost productivity, see this case study with IBM, which offers a 'ladder of opportunity' for employees.

Capitalise on technology

74%

of decision makers believed that adopting new technologies would positively impact the productivity of their organisation

State-of-the-art technology can be a major driver of productivity by enabling staff to work more efficiently, collaborate and communicate more effectively, and automate repetitive and time-consuming tasks. On the other hand, outdated technology and cumbersome systems can have the opposite effect: they can result in tasks taking longer to do, inhibit communication and collaboration, and leave staff members feeling frustrated and stressed.

The positive impact of technology is highlighted by the UK's financial services sector, which has invested heavily in technology and innovation. Financial services are the UK's second most productive sector after real estate, with productivity that is nearly **2.5 times higher** than the whole-economy average. [13]

[13] Source: TheCityUK (2024)
[14] Source: The Open University & Business Chambers of Commerce (2024)

This survey found that outdated systems or technology constituted one of the biggest barriers to improved technology for UK organisations, cited by nearly a quarter **(24%)** of decision makers. The problem was most notable in medium-sized organisations **(43%)** and was more evident in the public sector **(29%)** compared with the private sector **(23%)** and the third/voluntary sector **(21%)**.

Inability to adopt new technologies was also cited as a barrier to improved productivity by **16%** of respondents, with the problem again being more marked in medium-sized organisations and the public sector. This finding is supported by The Open University's latest Business Barometer, which highlighted that **64%** of respondents were not confident about applying either green or AI technologies. [14]

Significantly, **74%** of decision makers believed that adopting new technologies would positively impact the productivity of their organisation. For technologies to be successfully adopted, however, staff must be equipped with the skills to use them.

Go deeper:

Find out **how drone technology can make an important contribution to various industries** and how The Open University is supporting research through the Innovation and Capacity building in Agricultural Environmental and Rural UAV Services (ICAERUS) project. The aim of ICAERUS is to apply, showcase and support the effective, efficient and safe deployment of drones as well as, identify the risks and added values associated with their use. Free courses are also being developed to aid business understanding of the technology.

Discover more

To learn more about **rural economy research** at The Open University, check out the related Rural Economy Cluster.

Discover more

Anthony Impey, of Be the Business, argues that alongside leadership and management capabilities, technology is the factor that can make the greatest difference to an organisation's productivity. There are a wide range of technological tools that can support organisational productivity from collaboration apps through to project management software.

Impey highlights that generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is a particular game changer because of its wide range of use cases, which include ideation, drafting documents, reporting and text analysis. According to consultancy McKinsey, GenAI could enable labour productivity growth of 0.1% to 0.6% annually through to 2040.[15]

"GenAI will eclipse all other technologies in terms of how we work," Impey says. "It's transformative because it is changing the relationships we have with technology." He believes that GenAI will make it far quicker and easier for organisations to interact with their customers in areas such as producing invoices and quotes and handling complaints.

Impey believes that, to date, the UK has not effectively capitalised on its status as a global technology leader to promote tech adoption more broadly within the local business community. "We are world leaders in technology, but we need to be better at diffusing this expertise" he says. "As a result, technology excellence isn't being transferred from the world leading companies to the rest of the UK economy."

Networking with other employers in the local area can be a good way for organisations to share best practice around productivity improvements, including opportunities to use new technological tools. For this reason, creative agency Stratos and partner agencies have established Picture This, an events programme for its local business community. The programme is designed to facilitate the exchange of insights, understanding around how different employers approach challenges, and knowledge of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.
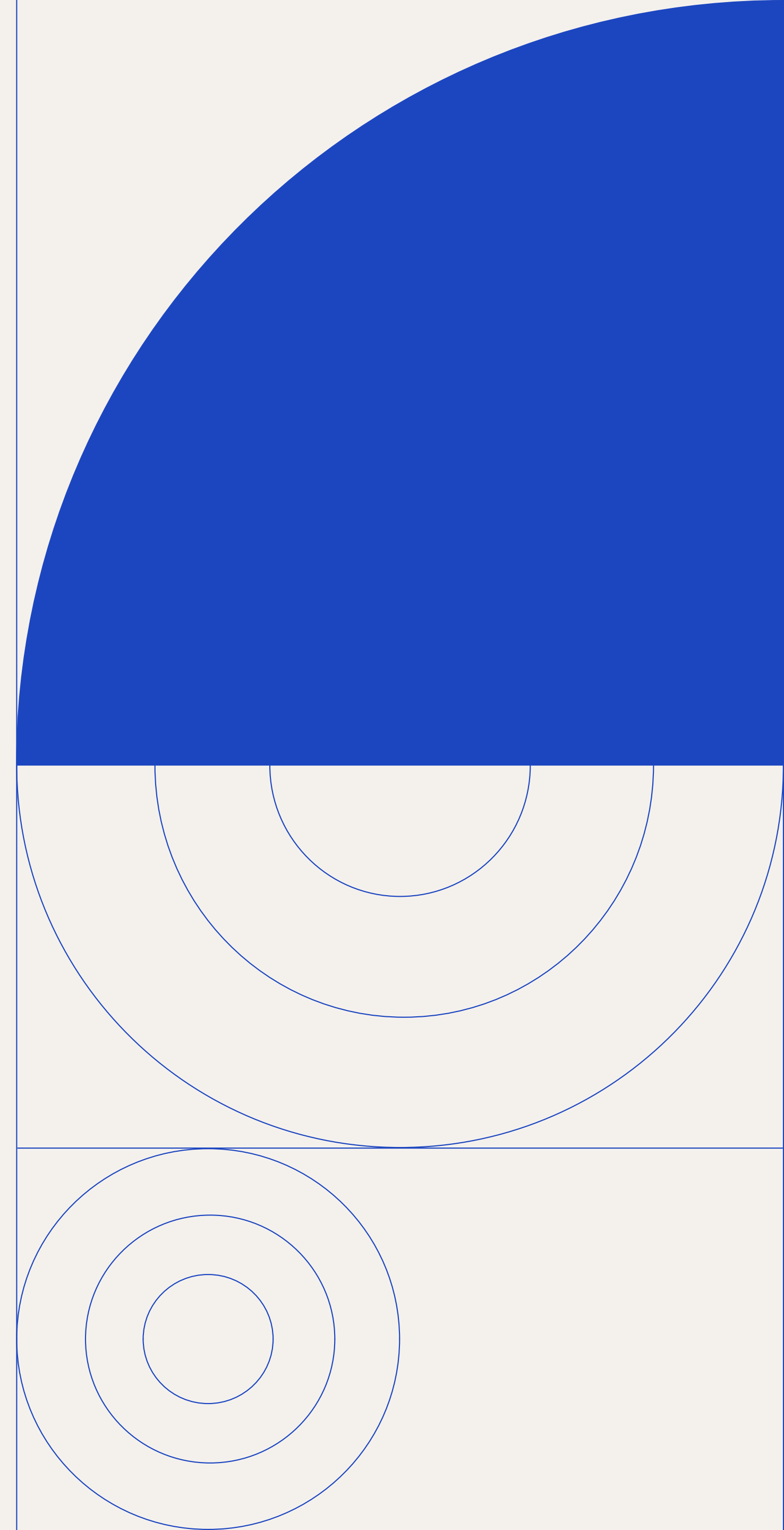
For more information, , visit the Picture This website.
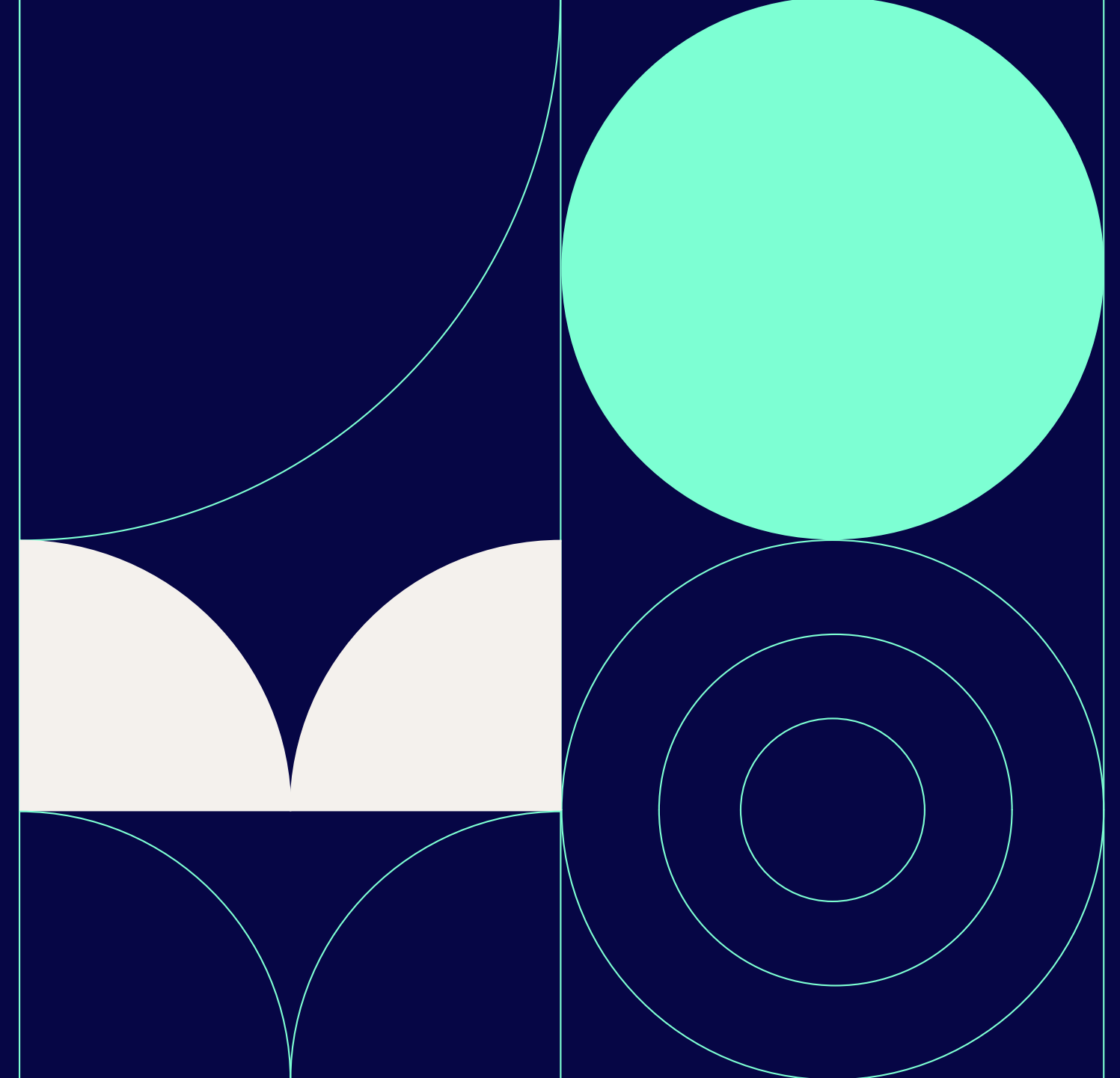
Go deeper:

Find out how The Open University is using Generative AI and data to provide enhanced support to students.

Discover more

[15] Source: McKinsey (2023)

Take a flexible approach to work

While hybrid and remote working practices existed before the Covid-19 pandemic, the widespread shift to remote working in 2020 made them far more commonplace. This shift – combined with technological advances – has transformed societal thinking about the nature of work, reshaping our views about when and where it should be done.

Many employees see the rise of hybrid and remote working practices as a positive development that enables them to better balance life with work. Recently, however, there has been a trend among some employers to promote return-to-the-office policies, with certain well-known business leaders citing productivity concerns. Yet the findings of this report do not indicate that hybrid working practices are detrimental to productivity.

Hybrid and remote working practices were only cited as a barrier to improved productivity by **15%** of decision makers. What's more, over a quarter of respondents **(27%)** said their business was offering hybrid and flexible remote working specifically to improve productivity. Meanwhile, almost a third **(29%)** were looking at offering flexible working – for example, providing flexibility around working hours and days.

29%

of respondents were considering offering flexible working, such as flexibility in working hours and days

15%

of decision makers cited hybrid and remote working as a barrier to improved productivity

27%

of respondents said their business offers hybrid and flexible remote working to improve productivity

Professor **Sir Cary Cooper**, of Manchester Business School, believes that offering flexible working could be an invaluable strategy for organisations looking to boost their productivity.
"If people feel trusted on the issue of flexible working, they will feel more valued and want to produce more for you," he says, "because you've given them autonomy and control over their work."

[16] Source: The Independent (2024)

In fact, Sir Cary believes that a flexible working approach is more likely to drive productivity improvements than a hybrid working policy that mandates people to be in the office for a proportion of the week, often on specific days.

Flexible, hybrid and remote working practices are less feasible in sectors where employees provide in-person services.

Obvious examples include education, health, social care and public transport. That said, we may see some limited moves to boost alternative working practices for in-person roles. For example, the UK Government wants to make it easier for teachers to work from home during free periods so they can do marking and lesson planning uninterrupted. The hope is that this will help to boost recruitment to the profession. [16]
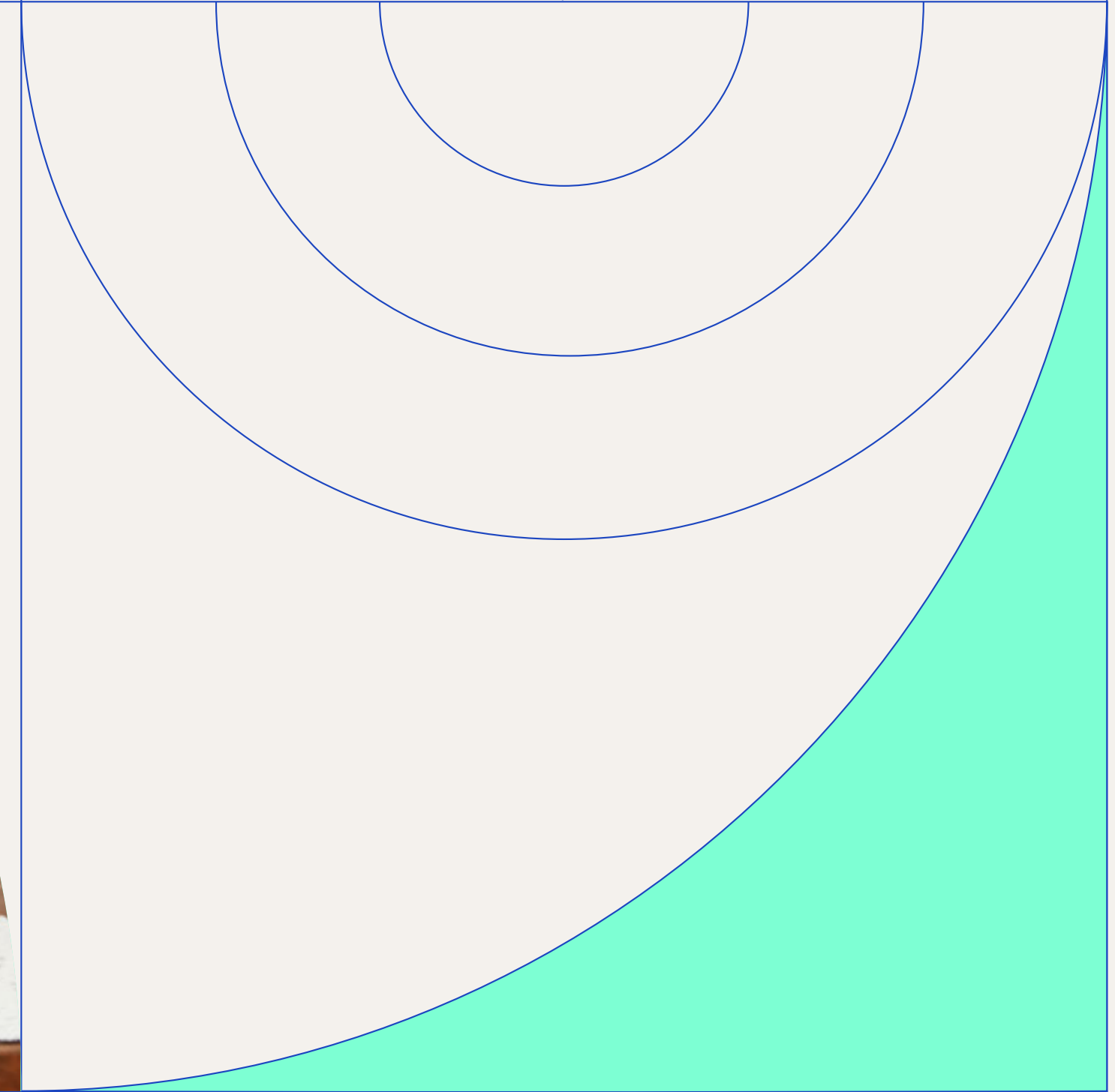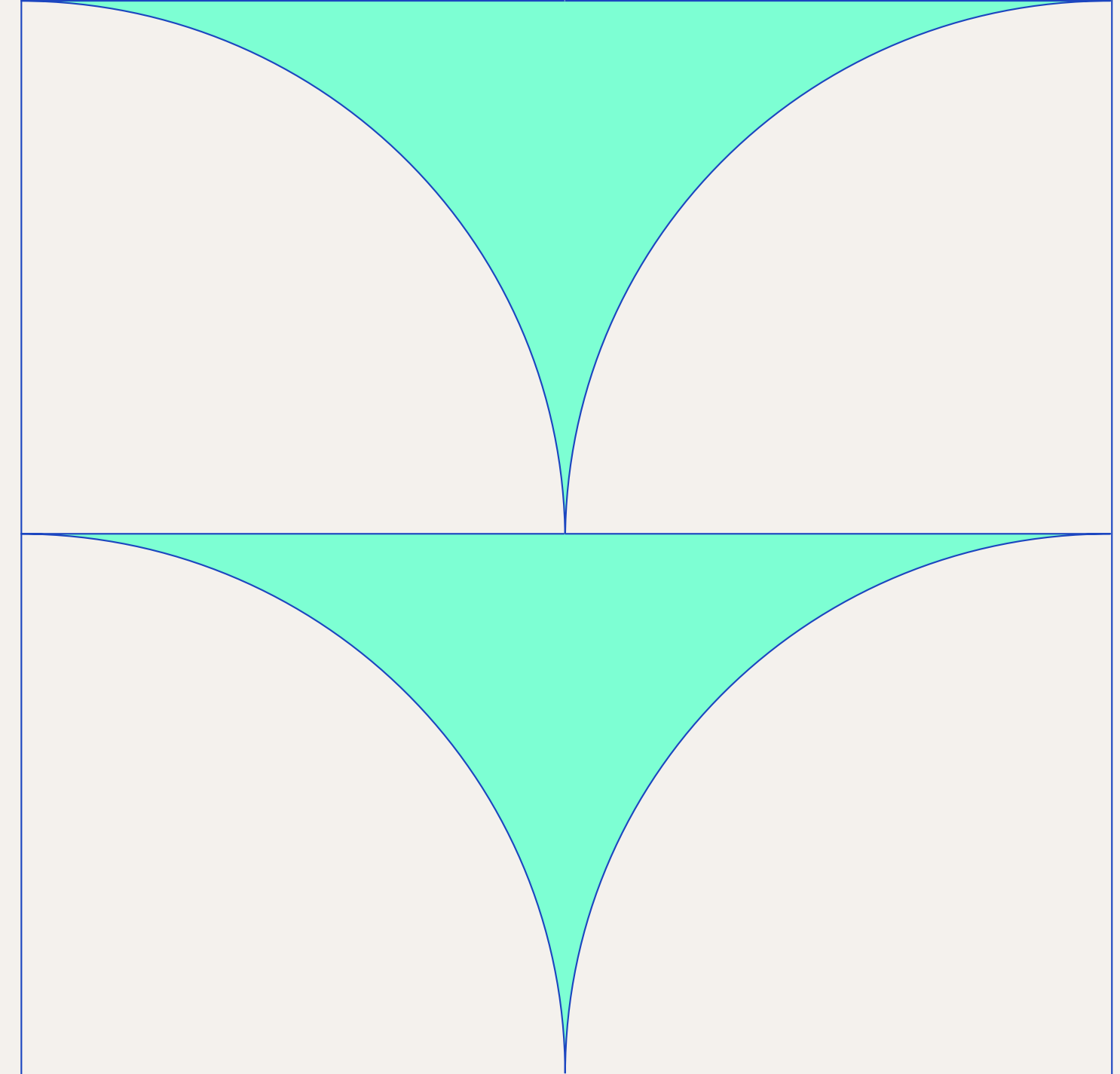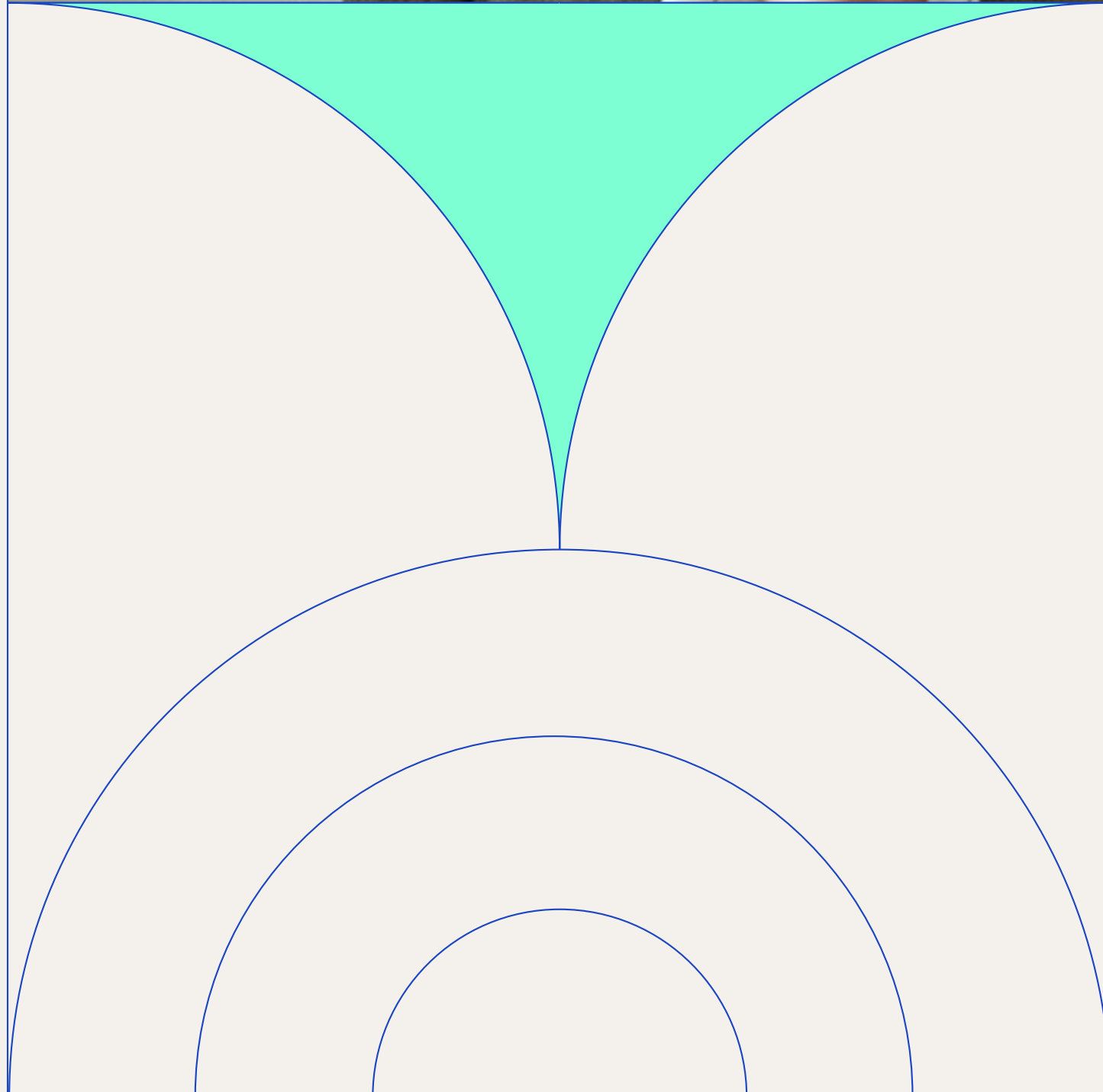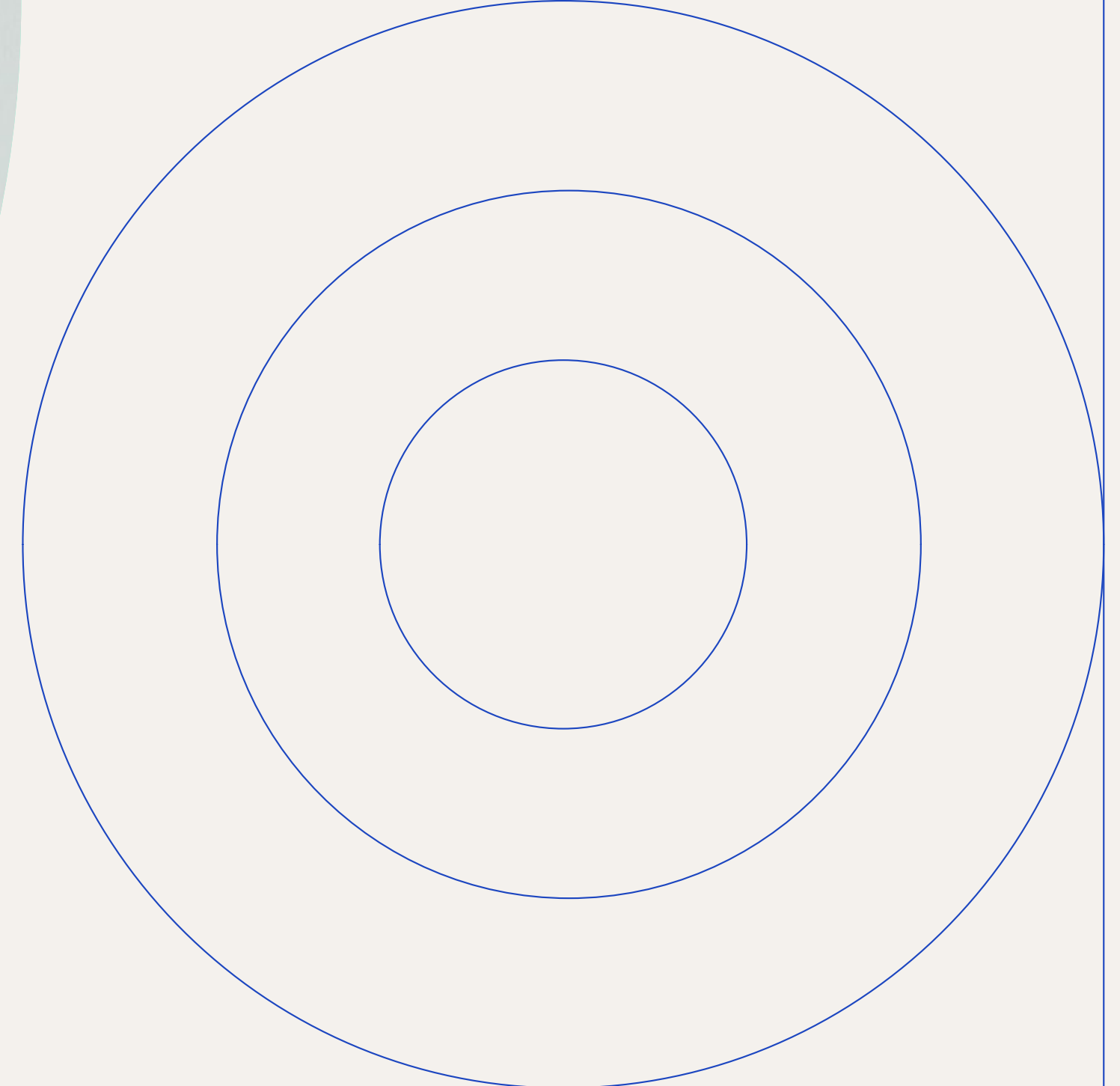
One size does not fit all

Ultimately, working hours and locations are a matter for every organisation to determine based on their own needs, customer needs, and those of their staff. Whichever approach they adopt, it is important that they promote a positive culture and ensure that work is completed to the standards required.

When developing its own hybrid working policy, creative agency **Stratos** aimed to stay attuned to the needs of both its teams and clients, while maintaining a focus on work-life balance. "From an agency perspective, certain tasks are suited for remote work, while others thrive with face-to-face collaboration," says **Martin Carmody**, Managing Director of Stratos. "A hybrid approach balances the strengths of both settings." He points out that while tasks such as ideation, copywriting and technical design are often better undertaken in a distraction-free environment, brainstorming sessions and project kick-off meetings can be more effective in-person.

58%

of leaders reported a mismatch between **young people's skills and employer expectations** over the past three years

Elevate Equity: Harnessing Young Talent

The challenges faced by younger workers since the Covid-19 pandemic were the subject of a recent event hosted by The Open University, entitled **Elevate Equity: Harnessing Young Talent**. At the event, experts shared their hints and tips for attracting, developing and growing young talent. They also discussed how to onboard workers in the new working environment.

[Watch the event](#) on The Open University website.

51%

of leaders attributed this skills gap to a **lack of work experience** caused by the Covid-19 pandemic

Don't forget younger employees

When implementing working practices that involve some element of remote working, it is crucial that employers pay particular attention to the needs of younger people. A survey by The Open University in 2023 found that over half **(58%)** of organisation leaders had identified a mismatch between the skill levels of young people and the expectations of employers over the past three years. Leaders highlighted a decline in soft skills, such as communication, teamwork and time management, as well as a decline in technical skills. Two of the most significant reasons for this mismatch were a lack of work experience due to the Covid-19 pandemic **(51%)** and a lack of opportunity to work with, and learn from, colleagues in a remote or hybrid work setting **(31%)**. [17]

Employers should consider how they can attract, develop and grow young talent by providing them with practical support, including the skills, tools and coaching that will enable them to thrive in a remote or hybrid working environment. **Sir Cary** also emphasises the importance of effective onboarding that enables junior employees to flourish from the start. "In some organisations, HR needs to get better at onboarding young people," he says. 'It needs to help young people understand the culture and feel valued. That involves mentoring them properly and giving them a development plan."

[17] Source: [The Open University (2023)](#)

Support wellbeing

At a national level, long-term sickness continues to be a major issue for the UK economy, resulting in lost productivity. Levels of long-term sickness have risen considerably since 2019, when 1.97 million people were economically inactive for this reason. In April 2024, the number of people in the UK not working due to long-term sickness peaked at 2.83 million, with mental health issues and Long Covid both impacting on long-term sickness levels. [18]

It is not just long-term sickness that is an issue either. Short-term sickness is also on the rise. A report published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and healthcare company **Simplyhealth** in 2023 revealed that UK employees had been absent for 7.8 days on average over the past year – the highest level they had reported in a decade and two days more than the pre-pandemic average of 5.8 days. Nearly 1,000 organisations were analysed for the report, which identified stress as a significant factor for both short - and long-term absences. Over three-quarters **(76%)** of respondents reported stress-related absence in their organisation in the past year. [19]

This report also reflects the impact of declining health on organisational productivity. A fifth **(20%)** of decision makers cited mental health and wellbeing challenges as one of the key barriers to improved productivity within their organisation. These challenges were particularly pronounced in sectors known for their long working hours, including law **(50%)**, finance and accounting **(27%)** and IT and telecoms **(27%)**. They were also most evident in large organisations with a turnover of £10 million or more and most likely to be cited by London-based respondents.

Professor **Sir Cary Cooper**, of Manchester Business School, highlights the important influence that line managers have on employee wellbeing. "Organisations have a problem with mental health because they don't manage their people properly," he says. "Often, they have too many managers who are technically great, but don't have good people skills."

This lack of people skills is fuelling the UK's mental health crisis, he believes. "We have people who are suffering and who are not at work when they could be," he says. "We also have people who are suffering and are still at work, but they're not adding any value because they're so stressed out. My view is that if we recruited and promoted people based on greater parity between their people skills and their technical skills, we would have less sickness absence. And we would have greater productivity because they would build a team better."
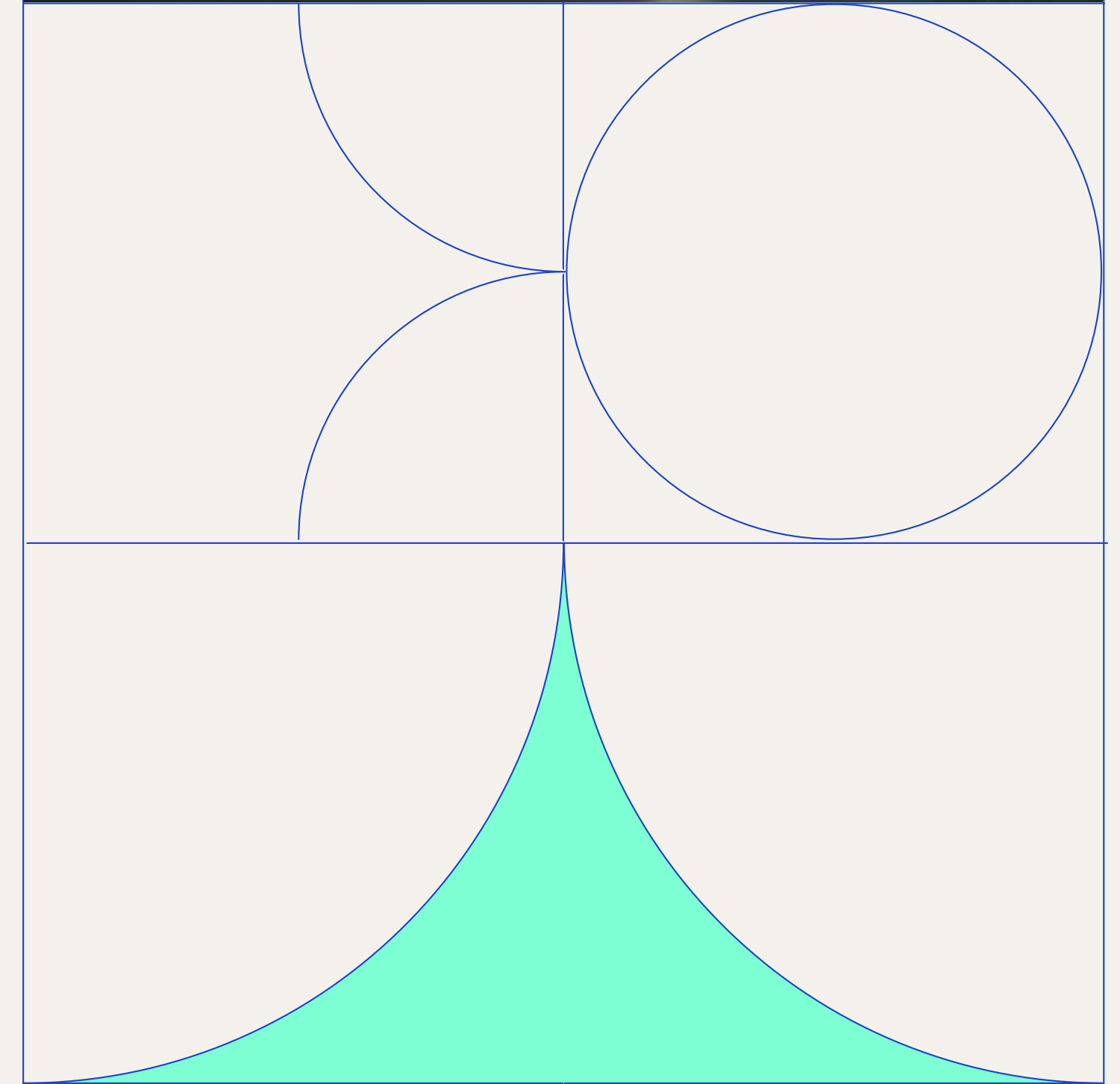
[18] Source: Statista (2024)
[19] Source: CIPD (2023)

Link between skills and wellbeing

The rise in the UK's economically inactive population is fuelling skills shortages. These are in turn negatively impacting on staff wellbeing, leading to absenteeism and further skills shortages. The Open University's latest Business Barometer highlights the vicious cycle that exists. More than two-thirds of decision makers (68%) reported that skills shortages had increased the workload of other staff, while 34% said that they had decreased staff morale or wellbeing. [20]

Nerys Bolton, Associate Head of School, Curriculum and Innovation at The Open University's School of Health, Wellbeing & Social Care, explains that in the health sector, heavy workloads are resulting in staff taking time off work due to sickness. "They're getting more and more work to do without having the skills, knowledge and capacity to do it," she says.

Employers can undertake numerous interventions to improve the wellbeing of their staff, thereby improving productivity. These range from talking to staff to ensure that their workloads are manageable and that they feel supported – and listened to – by their leaders through to offering flexible hours and counselling services. Employers should also consider whether remote working practices are leading some employees to feel isolated.

[20] Source: The Open University & British Chambers of Commerce (2024)
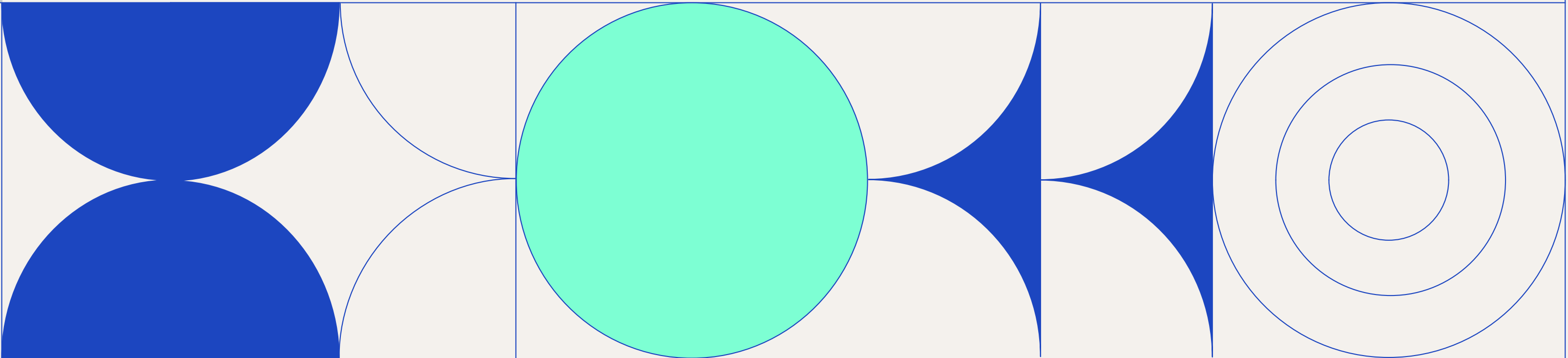
"Employers need to figure out how they can help their employees to have a work-life balance," says **Dr Fidèle Mutwarasibo**, of The Open University's Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership. "They should intervene where necessary, for example, by making sure that people who work from home benefit from some touch points with their colleagues.."

Mutwarasibo advises employers to be sensitive about making interventions that could be culturally inappropriate. People who come from certain communities may not feel comfortable with the suggestion of counselling, for instance, because they would typically turn to their community for support. Nevertheless, if they are not able to access community support for some reason, they may still need help from their employer to manage their wellbeing issues.

Another way that employers can boost staff wellbeing is by investing in their learning and development. A study, published in 2023, by learning and development platform **TrainingZone,** in partnership with The Open University, found that training of all kinds – including apprenticeships and university degrees as well as short and bite-sized courses – brings a range of benefits, including enhanced wellbeing. Over a third **(38.5%)** of respondents to the research reported better stress and mental health management as a result of short-term skills development, with a similar percentage **(36.2%)** saying the same of long-term skills development. [21]

[21] Source: TrainingZone & The Open University (2023)

Mental health and wellbeing challenges as a barrier to improved productivity: By organisation size

Large organisations	23%
Medium-sized organisations	26%
Small organisations	20%
Micro organisations	11%

0%   10%   20%   30%
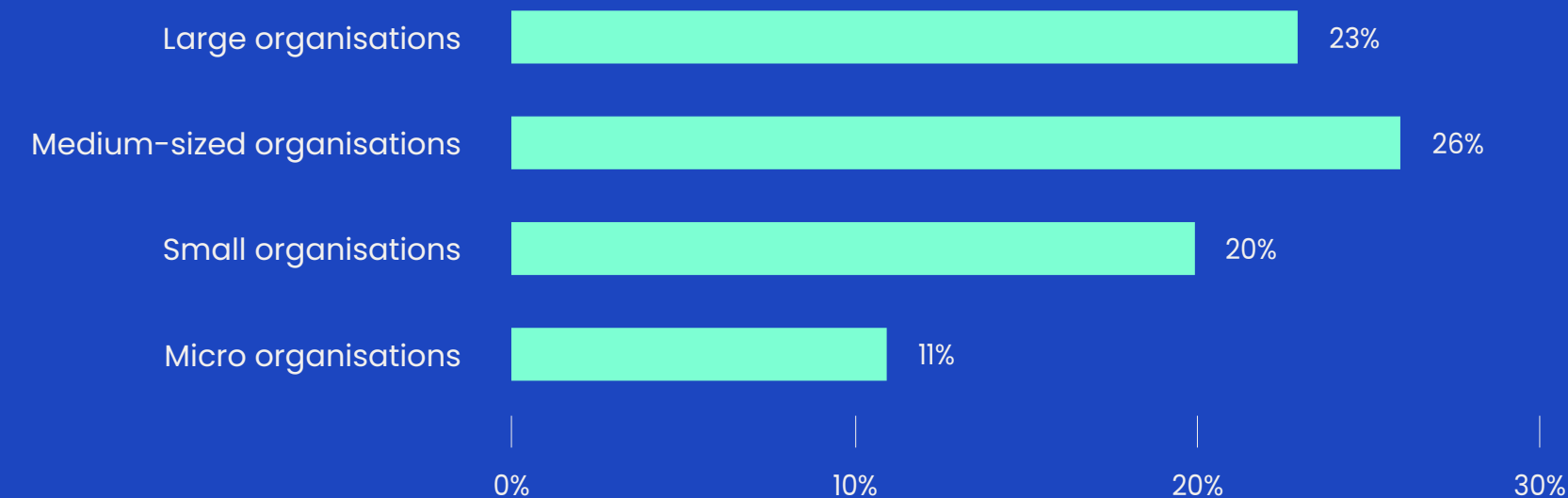
Mental health and wellbeing challenges as a barrier to improved productivity: By sector

Private sector	22%
Public sector	17%
Third/voluntary sector	17%

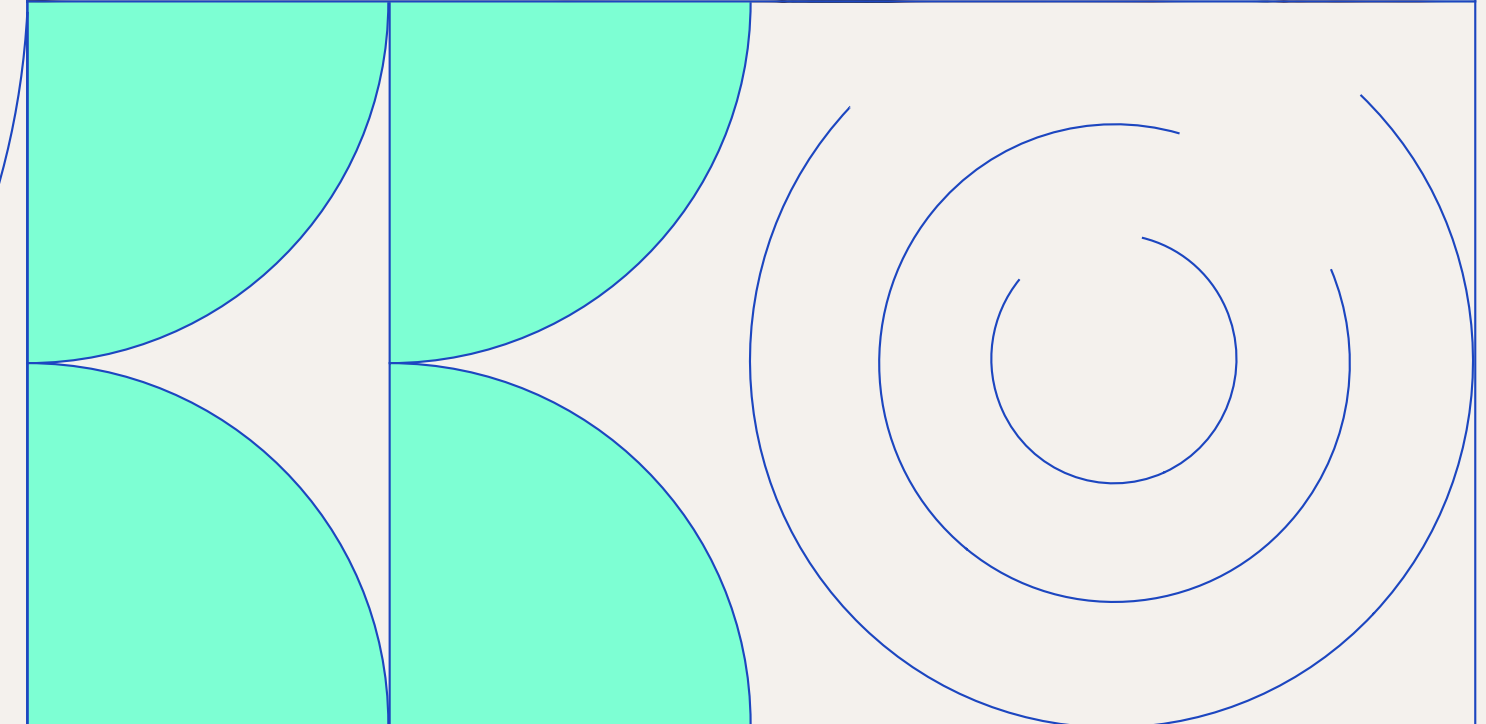0%   10%   20%   30%
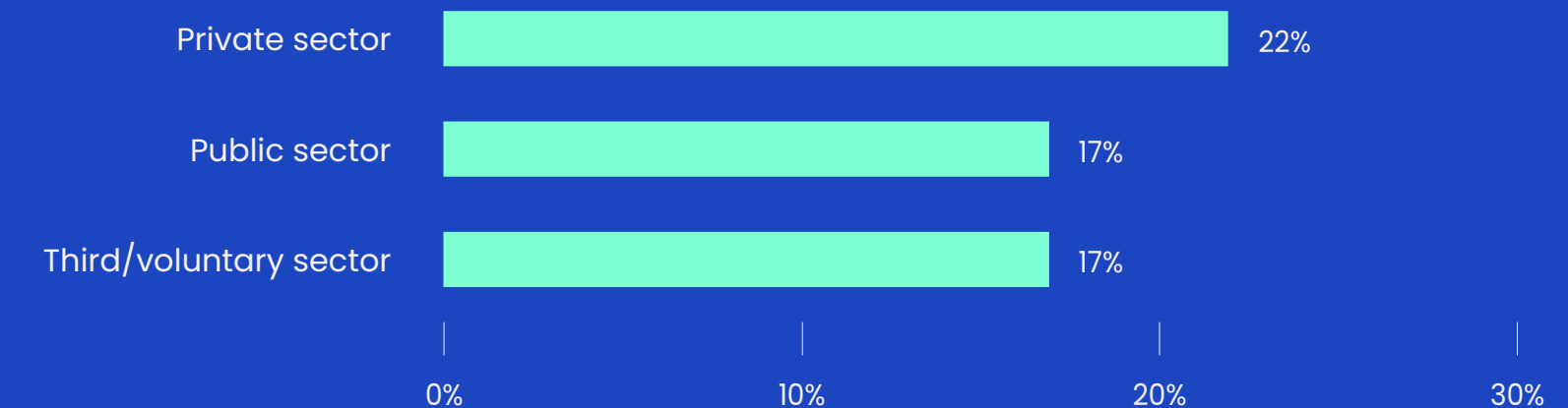
Empower hidden talent

Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) enhances productivity in a couple of important ways. Firstly, it helps to foster a sense of belonging in the workplace because employees feel accepted, valued and included. As a result, employees are more likely to be engaged with their work and to seek out opportunities to innovate and drive efficiencies. In fact, a study by **Boston Consulting Group** found that companies with above-average diversity on their management teams reported **19%** higher revenue from innovation compared with companies with below-average leadership diversity. [22]

Secondly, a focus on EDI enables organisations to attract and retain talent from the broadest possible talent pools within both their local community and the wider sector. This is a crucial consideration given the ongoing skills shortage in the UK.

[22] Source: Boston Consulting Group (2018)

Despite the link between EDI and productivity, less than a third **(30%)** of respondents to this survey said their organisations were embracing EDI as a means of improving productivity. Larger organisations are more likely than smaller organisations to be focused on EDI, potentially because of the scale of their staffing requirements, their available resources, and their need to meet the expectations of stakeholders, including customers.

EDI was also found to be more of a priority for companies in IT and telecoms **(48%)**, law **(42%)** and media, marketing, advertising and sales **(40%)**. Noticeably, private sector organisations were far more likely than public sector organisations to embrace EDI as a means of improving productivity.

Is your organisation embracing EDI as a way to improve productivity?

Sector	%
Private sector	32%
Public sector	23%
Third/voluntary sector	29%

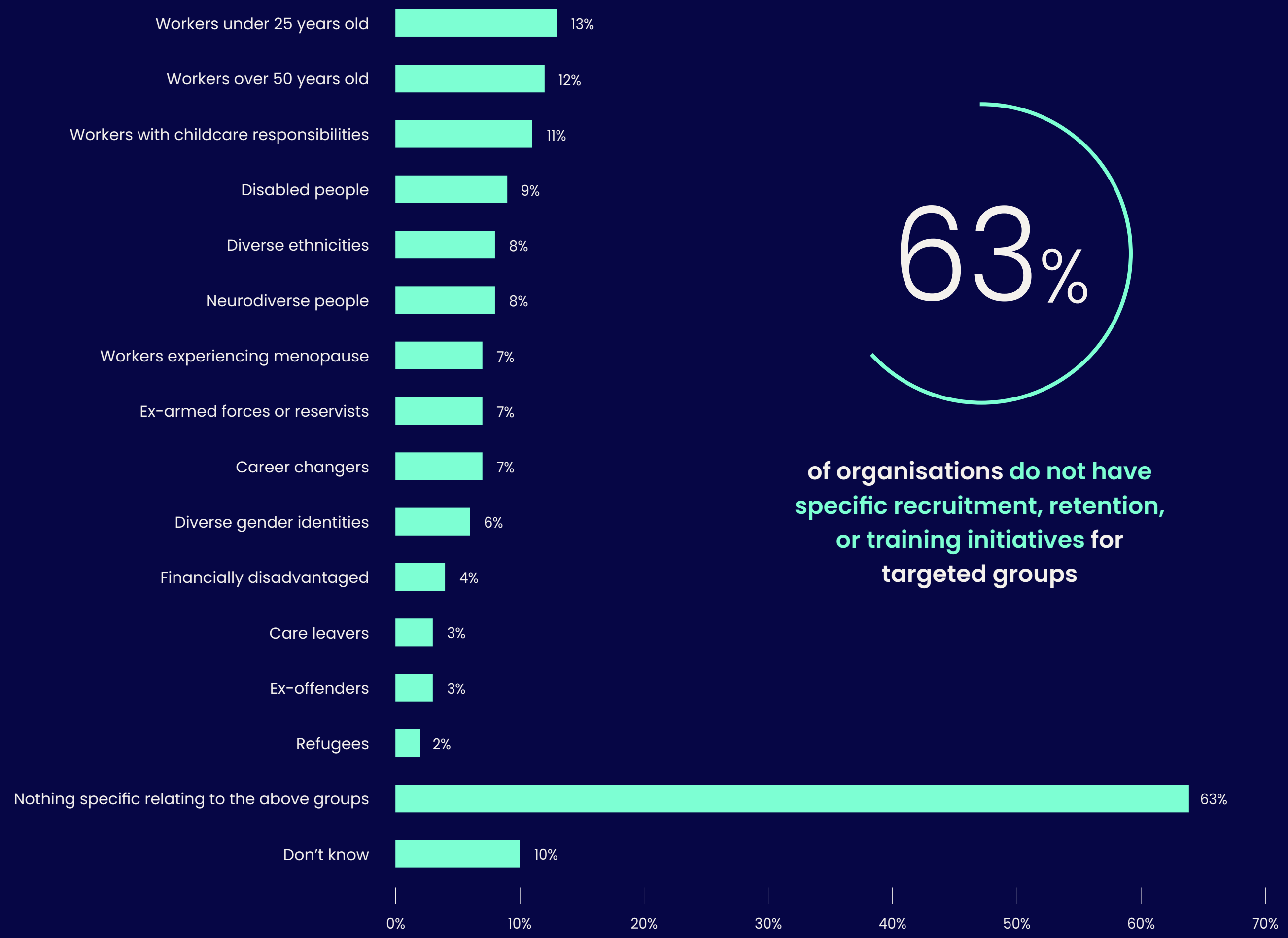0%   10%   20%   30%   40%
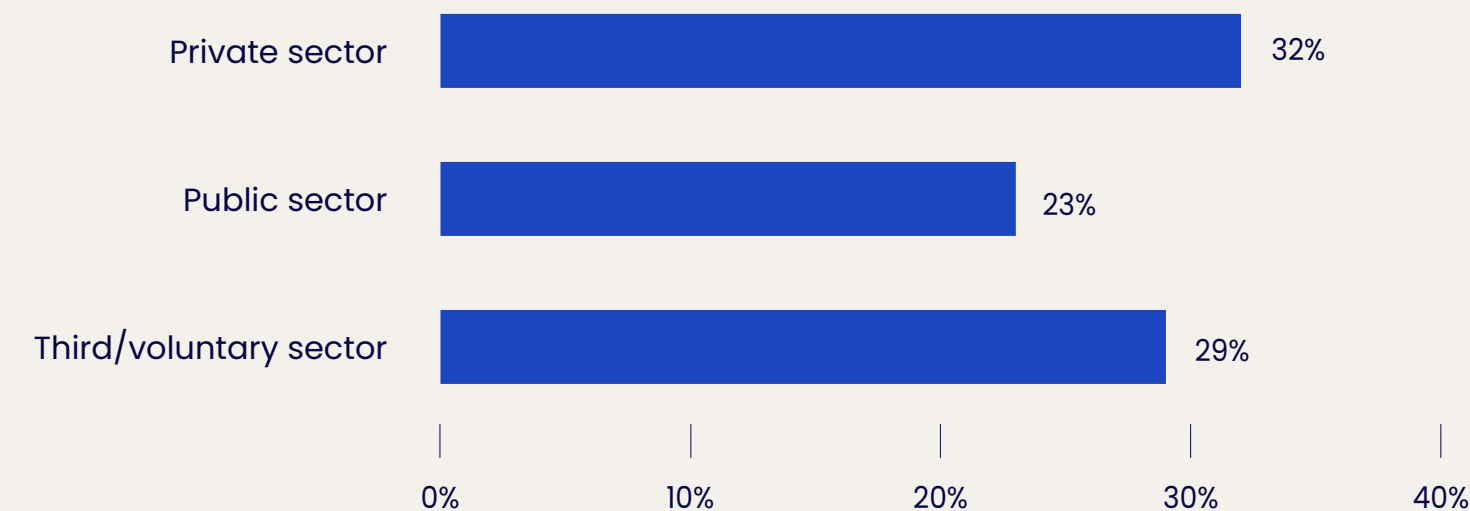
30% of respondents said their organisations are **embracing Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion** as a way to improve productivity

Does your organisation have specific recruitment, retention or training initiatives? (no. of responses: 1,124)

BASE: (Total: N = 1124)
Weighting: Total (size)

Category	Value
Workers under 25 years old	13%
Workers over 50 years old	12%
Workers with childcare responsibilities	11%
Disabled people	9%
Diverse ethnicities	8%
Neurodiverse people	8%
Workers experiencing menopause	7%
Ex-armed forces or reservists	7%
Career changers	7%
Diverse gender identities	6%
Financially disadvantaged	4%
Care leavers	3%
Ex-offenders	3%
Refugees	2%
Nothing specific relating to the above groups	63%
Don't know	10%

63%

of organisations do not have specific recruitment, retention, or training initiatives for targeted groups

The limited focus on EDI highlighted in this research reflects the findings of the 2024 Business Barometer. That study revealed that nearly two-thirds **(63%)** of employers did not have any specific recruitment, retention or training initiatives targeted at underrepresented labour pools. Furthermore, only **9%** of organisations had initiatives targeted at disabled people, **8%** were trying to tap the talents of people with diverse ethnicities and a mere **2%** were trying to recruit, retain or train refugees. [23]

By unlocking the hidden talent that exists in their local community, and giving them a route into the workplace, organisations have a huge opportunity to access hidden talent that boosts their productivity, argues **Dr Fidèle Mutwarasibo** of The Open University's Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership. For example, there are many talented people within the UK's refugee and migrant communities who are not doing jobs that capitalise on skills they have developed in their home countries.

[23] Source: The Open University & British Chambers of Commerce (2024)

Source: The Open University & British Chambers of Commerce (2024)

Also, the female workforce in the UK is underutilised due to the cost and sometimes unavailability of childcare. Analysis by the Trades Union Congress has found that more than **1.46 million** women are kept out of the labour market in the UK because of their caring responsibilities, with women in their thirties the hardest hit compared with men of the same age. [24] The Open University's latest Business Barometer highlights the limited efforts made by employers to target this talent pool. Just **11%** have specific recruitment, retention or training initiatives for workers with childcare responsibilities. [25]

Exclusion from the workforce due to caring responsibilities can be a particular issue within diverse communities since parents may lack broader family support. Recognising this issue, The Open University has launched [Supporting Diverse New Motherhoods for Work Inclusion](#) – an Open Societal Challenges research project... that aims to improve the experiences of mothers in organisations by exploring the intersectional influences of women's career experiences and highlighting the interplay of gender, ethnicity, and motherhood. [26]

Mutwarasibo proposes several strategies for organisations looking to boost their productivity by tapping hidden talent pools. Success starts with creating the right culture, he says, so that new joiners feel included from day one.

For this to happen, an organisation is likely to need diversity training and to ensure that diversity principles are applied in practice. It is also important to have role models, from board level or management team downwards. A psychologically safe culture is key so that people feel they have permission to share their ideas. Additionally, he recommends that organisations undertake skills audits to unearth the full range and breadth of their people's skills and talents. They should also look outside their traditional recruitment channels.

Specific training programmes that are targeted at diverse communities can help to unleash the potential of hidden talent. As an example, The Open University's **Black Leadership Empowerment Programme (BLEP)** – which is supported by Auto Trader and Manchester Airport Group – aims to produce and support the black business and community leaders of the future. The programme equips students with the skills to analyse, influence and change the systems they operate within, regardless of whether those systems are workplaces or communities. It also offers mentoring as well as the opportunity to interact with inspiring leaders who support the programme in the capacity of keynote speakers.

[24] Source: [Trades Union Congress (2023)](#)
[25] Source: [The Open University & British Chambers of Commerce 2024](#)
[26] Source: [The Open University](#)

11%

of employers have initiatives for workers with childcare responsibilities

Go deeper:

Discover how The Open University's Black Leadership and Empowerment Programme is providing educational routes into leadership roles within business and the wider community.

[Discover more](#)

Discover how The Open University has partnered with Uber to offer higher education for eligible drivers and family members as part of its Uber Pro rewards programme.

[View case study](#)

Focus on productivity in the public sector
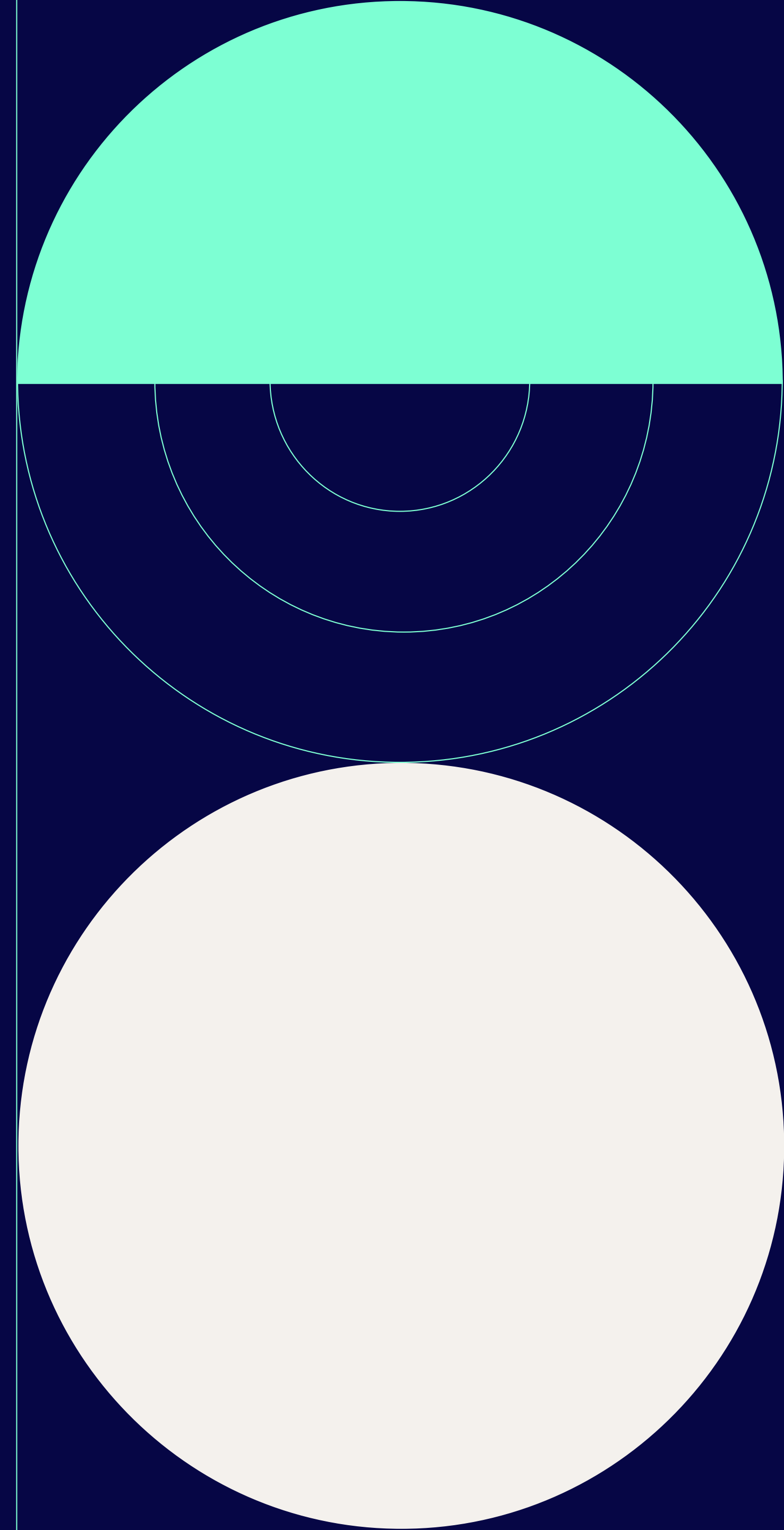
In the context of the public sector, improved productivity can be seen in terms of efficiency i.e. delivering more or better services with the same or fewer resources. Since the UK Government is under pressure to improve public services without substantially increasing spending, public-sector productivity will be a major area of policy focus.

Research by the ONS has found that total public-sector productivity grew by an average of just **0.2%** per year between 1997 and 2019. [27] What's more, during the first quarter of 2024, public-sector productivity is estimated to have been around **6.4%** lower than the pre-pandemic peak in the last quarter of 2019. [28]

So, it's no surprise that the public-sector leaders who responded to our survey were more likely than their private-sector peers to say that productivity in their organisation had worsened over the past three years **(30% versus 27%)**. Furthermore **61%** of public-sector decision makers said their organisations had established programmes or initiatives to improve productivity.

Productivity can be difficult to measure in the public sector, which helps to explain why a third **(33%)** of public-sector respondents did not believe that their organisation has the expertise to do so.

Outcomes cannot always be easily defined, and both the quantity and the quality of outcomes need to be captured, with these potentially influenced by external, variable factors.
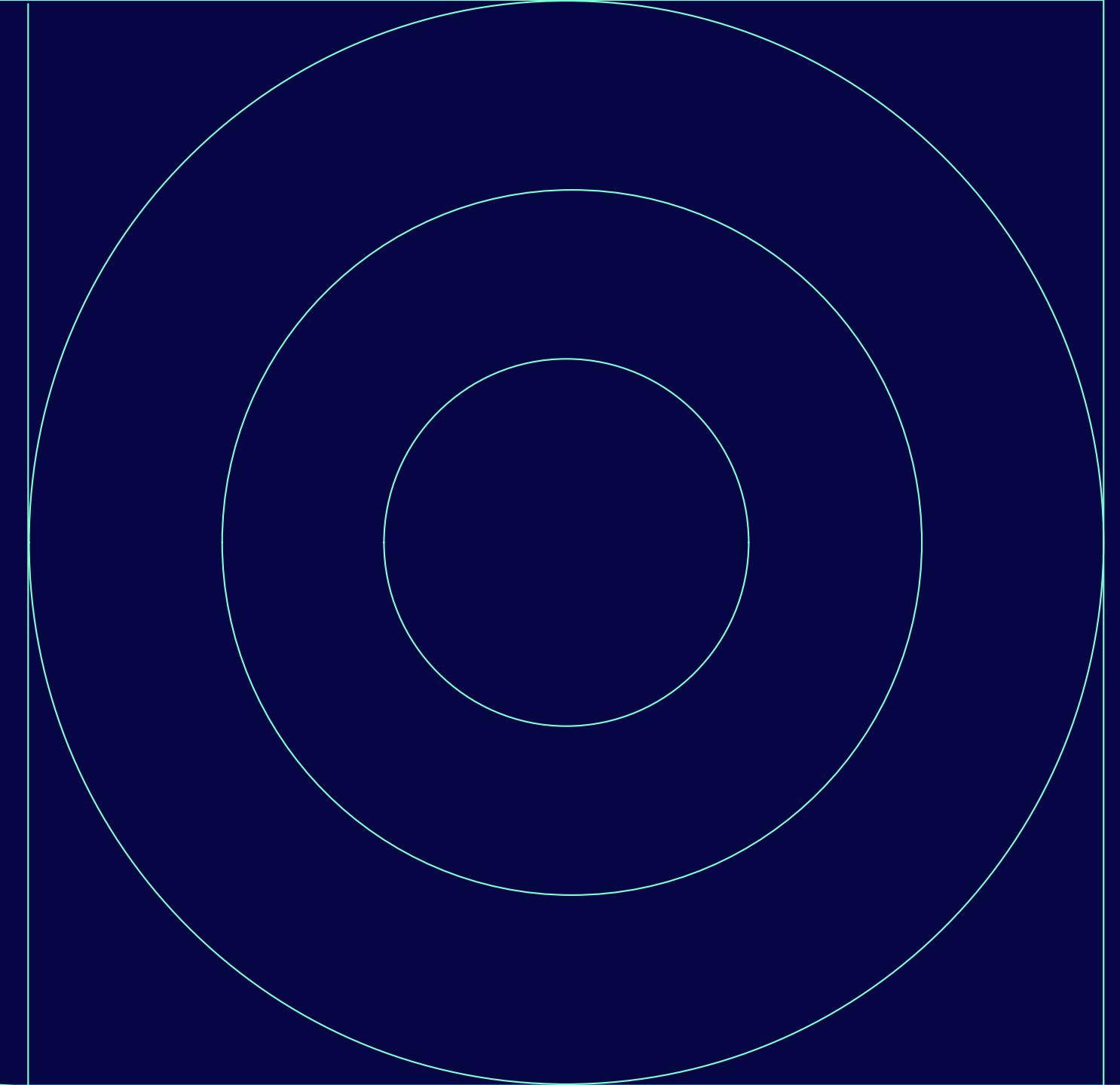
61%

of public-sector decision makers said their organisations had established programmes or initiatives to improve productivity
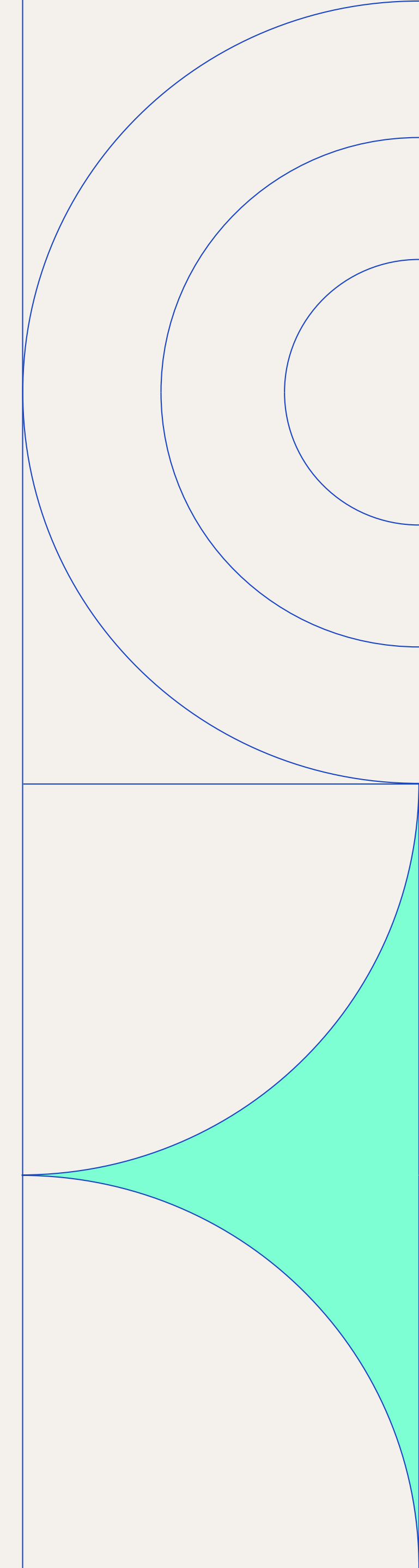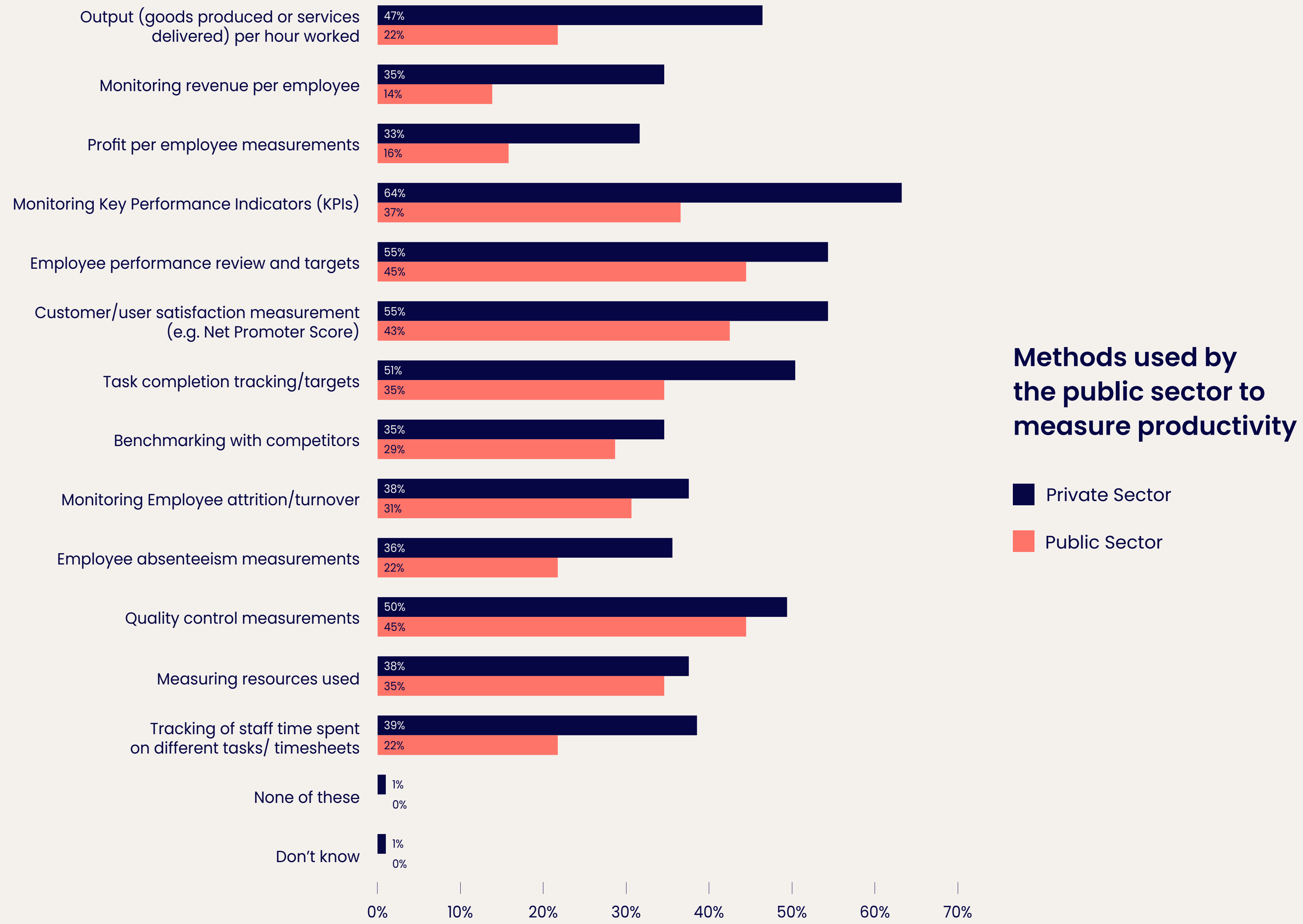
[27] Source: ONS (2023)
[28] Source: ONS (2024)

For example, the ONS measures the output of health services based on the number of medical treatments delivered and the waiting time for treatment, but it cannot measure the extent to which a patient's quality of life has improved as a result. For some public services, such as the armed forces, it is almost impossible to adequately define the outcomes that the service delivers to citizens.

Nevertheless, the survey highlighted some scope for the public sector to improve its approach to measuring productivity by adopting the same practices as commercial organisations. Compared with the private sector, the public sector is notably less likely to apply a wide range of methods of measuring productivity, from output per hour worked through to monitoring key performance indicators, task completion and employee absenteeism.

Methods used by the public sector to measure productivity

Method	Private Sector	Public Sector
Output (goods produced or services delivered) per hour worked	47%	22%
Monitoring revenue per employee	35%	14%
Profit per employee measurements	33%	16%
Monitoring Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)	64%	37%
Employee performance review and targets	55%	45%
Customer/user satisfaction measurement (e.g. Net Promoter Score)	55%	43%
Task completion tracking/targets	51%	35%
Benchmarking with competitors	35%	29%
Monitoring Employee attrition/turnover	38%	31%
Employee absenteeism measurements	36%	22%
Quality control measurements	50%	45%
Measuring resources used	38%	35%
Tracking of staff time spent on different tasks/ timesheets	39%	22%
None of these	1%	0%
Don't know	1%	0%

Private Sector

Public Sector

Certain public services in the UK – including the NHS, education and social work – are currently experiencing pronounced skills shortages. The effect of these shortages is reflected in this survey. Over half **(55%)** of public sector decision makers said that a skills shortage has had a negative impact on their organisation's productivity – compared with **41%** of all organisations and **38%** of those working in the private sector.

The public sector stands out in the survey for its high levels of investment in leadership and management training, however. Overall, **44%** of public sector leaders are investing in leadership and management skill development compared with **36%** of private sector leaders.

Nerys Bolton, Associate Head of School, Curriculum and Innovation at The Open University's School of Health, Wellbeing & Social Care, believes that while the public sector's commitment to leadership and management is encouraging, management training should not just be targeted at middle and senior leaders. "Training should be available to people at all levels," she says, "so that junior staff members are already equipped with basic management skills before they even start leading a team."

Crisis in the NHS in England

The issue of productivity in the NHS in England was highlighted by the recent Darzi review. The review, by Lord Darzi, a surgeon and former Labour health minister, highlighted that a shortage of GPs had resulted in longer waiting times for patients while a shortfall of capital investment had resulted in crumbling buildings, a maintenance backlog and outdated technology equipment – all of which impacted productivity.

A rise in hospital staff of **17%** between 2019 and 2023 had not been matched by a rise in the number of appointments, operations and procedures, Darzi found. Rather than achieving outcomes, clinicians were spending time on process problems, such as finding beds in wards. [29] By September 2023, the waiting list for routine NHS treatment had climbed to a record high of nearly **7.8 million** [30] while the NHS Staff Survey results for 2023 showed that **41.7%** of staff had felt unwell due to work-related stress in the last 12 months. [31]

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the NHS had typically delivered productivity growth at a faster pace than the rest of the public sector and the wider economy. But the disruption to NHS services caused by the pandemic – combined with reduced resilience due to underinvestment – meant the health service had little spare capacity to cope with the shock of the pandemic. Research by NHS England suggests that acute hospital productivity in 2023/4 was **8%** lower than before the pandemic, before industrial action is taken into account. [32]

[29] Source: Inews (2024)
[30] Source: The Independent (2023)
[31] Source: NHS Providers (2024)
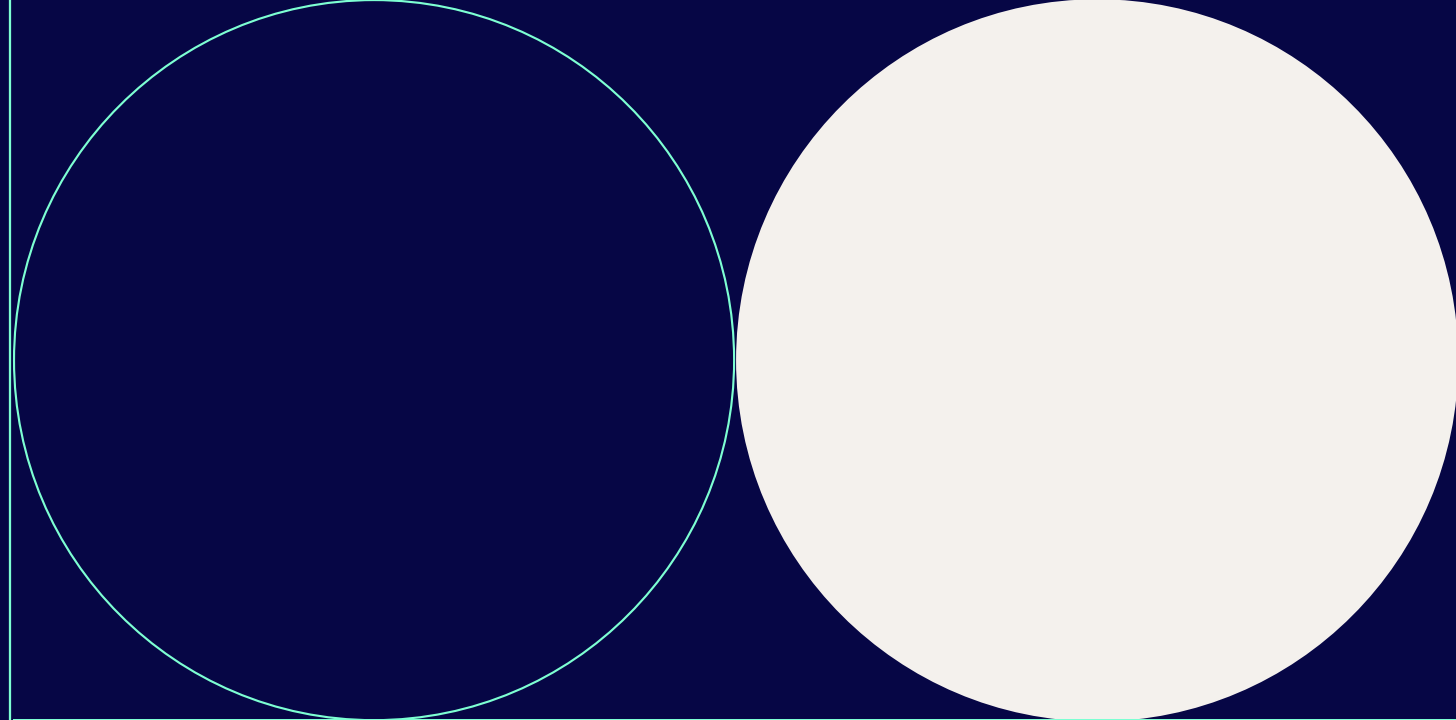[32] Source: NHS England (2024)

41.7%

of NHS staff had felt unwell due to work-related stress in the last 12 months

8%

lower hospital productivity was reported in 2023/24 compared to pre-pandemic levels

Nerys Bolton, Associate Head of School, Curriculum and Innovation at The Open University's School of Health, Wellbeing & Social Care, believes that a long list of factors that is hampering the productivity of the NHS. These include inadequate infrastructure and technology, cumbersome processes, poor communication and a shortage of skilled staff. Together, these factors result in another barrier to improved productivity: low morale. "Staff go into work knowing every day is going to be a battle," she says.

In the specific case of nurses, Bolton believes that one way to boost morale – and therefore productivity – would be to upskill them to deal with some of the more complex issues that occur on wards on a daily basis. "Nurses are very disillusioned," she explains. "They don't feel empowered to take decisions and they don't feel invested in, which means the care suffers".

She also emphasises the importance of listening to staff and valuing them, saying: "A reason why a lot of staff members go off sick is they don't feel appreciated. They just feel they're given more and more work without the skills and capacity to do it."

Another way that the NHS can improve both productivity and staff morale is by changing its approach to measurement in these areas, Nerys Bolton argues. She says that while the NHS does measure certain output, such as how long it takes for nurse call bell systems to be answered, it does not necessarily use the results of its measurement activities to improve the way things are done. Sometimes the data isn't even used at all.

"People think, 'I don't see any improvement from what the organisation is doing,'" Nerys Bolton says. "The staff often don't see any positive outcomes of some of the measurements that are undertaken, and are often used as a stick to beat them with, which then has the opposite impact on productivity and morale. This can then lead to pushback against the next productivity improvement initiative that comes round."

Go deeper:

A partnership between The Open University and Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust is addressing productivity challenges by developing local, hidden nursing talent.

[View case study](#)

A four-point plan

According to the UK Government's 2019 Business Productivity Review, organisations should follow a four-step plan to unlock their untapped productivity potential: [33]

1. **Define** what productivity means to the organisation and spot opportunities for change.

2. **Map** the likely costs of change and associated outcomes, quality and value of change, and the support available to help identify solutions.

3. **Audit** the organisation to identify which data needs to be measured and which new products, services and processes are likely to deliver the desired change.

4. **Embed** change within the organisation, using strong leadership and staff training, as well as measurement.

Source: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5dc1453ee5274a4a9b0a2c8c/business-productivity-review.pdf

[33] Source: Business Productivity Review 2019, BEIS.gov.uk

Recommendations:

As part of their plan to address productivity, organisations should consider the following recommendations:

Establish the productivity goals that are most relevant to the organisation and communicate those goals to employees, being clear that the aim is to improve their workplace experience as well as deliver results – such as greater profits or greater efficiency. For example, the benefits of improved productivity may include higher levels of customer satisfaction, better outcomes for users of public services, or simply small business leaders getting their own free time back.

Set up data-gathering processes, such as timesheets, service-level agreements or customer satisfaction surveys. These should directly relate to the identified areas for improvement. Use the data to inform positive initiatives that help to drive productivity improvements that benefit staff, customers, and the organisation overall. It is important that staff have bought into the advantages of these initiatives and do not feel that they have been put in place purely so they can be monitored.

Invest in reskilling and upskilling the whole workforce. Investing in skills will help staff to perform their roles more efficiently. It will also encourage them to stay with the organisation since people prefer to work for employers that invest in their development and career ambitions. Leadership and management training can help managers to identify productivity goals and effectively lead the process for mapping, auditing and embedding the process for improving organisational productivity. Lifelong learning should be promoted for the whole organisation, and seen as an employee benefit, to develop and retain staff for the long term and help them to recognise that rather than having one career, they are likely to have many careers in the future.

Explore opportunities to deploy new technological tools, such as GenAI. When tools take away their mundane tasks, people are freed up to focus on higher-value activities such as innovation. Equip people with the skills they need to use new tools to their full potential. Where job roles could change as a result, provide the training required to pivot to new roles to use the new technologies that have been adopted.

Unearth the hidden talent within the workforce and local community. Undertake a skills audit to discover which skills, experience and talent may exist within the workforce and local area and are not being used at present. Provide people with tailored support and flexible learning opportunities so that they have the qualifications and skills they need to move into new roles within the workforce. Organisations could identify underrepresented groups with their local community or sector and launch an initiative to bring them into the workforce and become role models for others. They should also commit to inclusive recruitment practices, such as appointing diverse, unbiased hiring panels.

Actively support wellbeing in the workplace. Create a workplace where people feel valued and listened to and are fairly rewarded for what they do. Develop policies that support people to flourish while showcasing their existing skills and learning new ones. Also, aim to establish the right balance between office-based and hybrid and remote working so that young people, in particular, are coached to grow and learn outside the office. Recognise that any type of learning and development is likely to have a positive impact, alongside mental health support and services.

Make regular, incremental changes to improve productivity. Many organisations, especially smaller organisations, lack time and resources, which makes it challenging for them to launch major productivity initiatives. So, it may be more sensible for them to focus on smaller actions that make a difference. These might include trialling a new project management tool, testing out customer satisfaction surveys, or offering a free course to promote effective remote working.

Seek external expertise on how to improve productivity. Outside experts, including consultants and learning providers, can offer new insights and perspectives on how the organisation can operate more efficiently. Get involved with other organisations, groups and events within your sector and broader business community so that you're able to exchange knowledge with, and learn from, peers.

How The Open University can help to drive productivity in your organisation

This report has highlighted a number of ways in which productivity can be increased within your workforce. The Open University (OU) works with more than 2,700 employers across the four nations of the United Kingdom to provide learning and development to staff and our research and innovation addresses some of the most pressing challenges faced by society.

Learning and development

We work with employers, large and small across a wide range of sectors.

- An impressive **73 of the FTSE 100** have sponsored staff on OU courses.

- More than **140 local authorities** and **165 NHS Trusts** and nations health boards have worked with us to upskill and reskill staff.

Employers choose OU learning due to our **track record in delivering flexible, supported, distance learning.** Seven in ten learners are already in work and can **flex their studies** around work and personal commitments.

Quality education is important to learners and businesses and the OU has been awarded an overall Gold rating in the Office for Students' Teaching Excellence Framework. The OU's Business School is part of an **elite group of just 1% of business schools** worldwide that are triple accredited.

Programmes that can boost productivity

If you are looking to equip your managers and leaders to implement the changes outlined in this report, our Senior Leader Apprenticeship, Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship, Masters of Business Administration (MBA) and microcredentials such as Agile leadership and management and Business management: people management and leadership are all quality programmes that can help you implement productivity improvements by developing a full understanding of how businesses operate and function.

However, to drive productivity, learning should be offered throughout the organisation, incorporated into attraction and retention strategies and seen as part of your employee's workplace benefits offering.

If your organisation requires digital skills to implement new technologies, the Digital and Technology Solutions Professional Degree Apprenticeship helps employers develop in-demand IT skills to drive technology adoption forward. Short course options to build specific skills include our microcredential Cisco: Python programming and short course An introduction to artificial intelligence.

Employees can also be sponsored on an undergraduate or postgraduate Open Qualification that can align with career and business needs through the Open Degree and the Open Masters. Learners can tailor modules from across our curriculum to gain a qualification that fit those needs as they evolve.

How can my business try out OU learning?

A great way to sample OU learning is through OpenLearn. The platform contains over **15,000 hours of online courses and content available to all, absolutely free**. The site attracts millions of visitors each year, giving your employees the opportunity to explore a range of subjects, and build skills and the confidence to embark on more formal study.

Paid-for short courses are also a great starting point and learners can start at any time. Productivity boosting courses available include Communication skills in the digital world, Developing team leader skills, Introduction to business and workplace coaching and Managing a budget.

Solving challenges through research

We work with people from all walks of life, universities, research centres, charities, businesses, third sector organisations, policy thinktanks and councils across all four nations on research that transforms lives. We believe innovation starts from the ground up in close collaboration with the people living through real-world challenges. That's where the Open Societal Challenges (OSC) programme supports and enables those outside the OU to work with our researchers to address society's most pressing issues.

The OSC themes are Sustainability, Tackling inequalities and Living well. OSC applies the research excellence of OU academics to important societal challenges facing people across the UK and worldwide.

Current projects looking at ways to boost productivity and creating more positive workplace cultures include: Transforming pain management through digital, patient-centred pain logging, Shining a spotlight on early pregnancy endings as a workplace issue, Tackling inequalities in rural areas and changing the discourse of 'rural deficit' and Modelling Resilient Hospital Systems.

The Open Societal Challenges Online Platform enables those outside the OU to work with our researchers on existing challenges or submit new ones. OSC is strengthened by everyone involved. Our research empowers those outside of the OU to come together as a team to address the issues that our wider communities agree are the biggest in the world. Anyone who seeks to improve the environment, make society more equal or help people to live better quality lives is welcome. All our research, wherever it comes from, will help create a future full of opportunities.

Get in touch

If you would like to speak to one of our business team advisors, you can leave a message on our answerphone service and someone will call you back to answer your query within two working days.

You can do this by calling **0300 303 0122**, or **+44 (0) 1908 655767** if calling from outside the UK.

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Employers & Partnerships