GCHECK RESEARCH PUBLICATION

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THE RISE OF THE SHADOW WORKFORCE

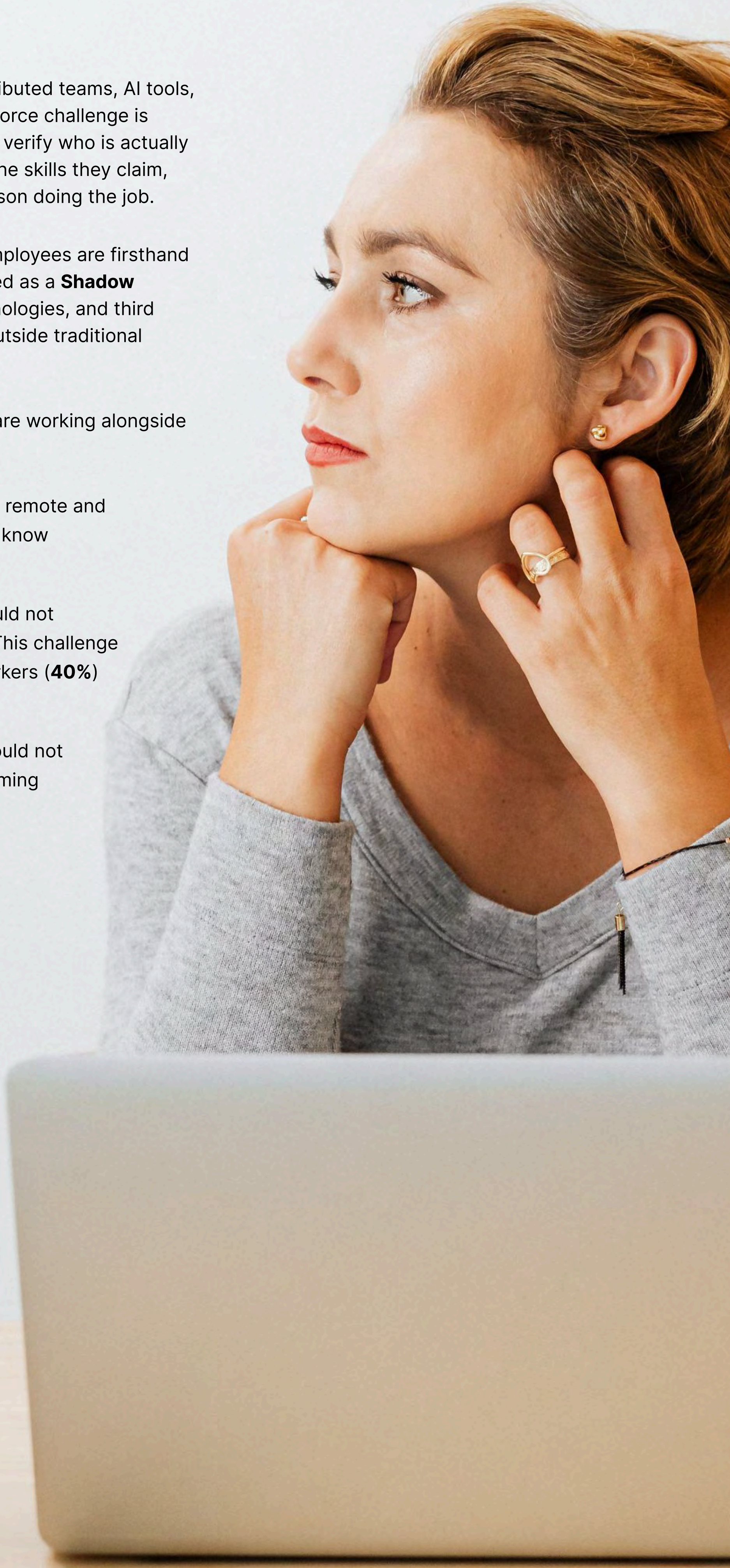
A growing layer of workers, technologies, and third parties is operating behind the scenes, often outside traditional visibility and verification. New GCheck data shows employees are firsthand witnesses.

As organizations embrace remote work, distributed teams, AI tools, contract labor, and global hiring, a new workforce challenge is emerging. Employers increasingly struggle to verify who is actually performing work, whether workers possess the skills they claim, and whether the person they hired is the person doing the job.

Today, new data from GCheck shows that employees are firsthand witnesses to the rise of what is best described as a **Shadow Workforce**: a growing layer of workers, technologies, and third parties operating behind the scenes, often outside traditional visibility and verification processes.

At the most basic level, employees say they are working alongside people they do not really know:

- More than half of employees (**52%**) say remote and hybrid work has made it harder to truly know coworkers.
- Nearly one-quarter (**24%**) say they would not recognize many colleagues in person. This challenge is more pronounced among remote workers (**40%**) than fully in-person workers (**19%**).
- More than one-third (**36%**) say they would not know if coworkers were actually performing their jobs throughout the day.



71%

have worked with someone who was not what they claimed professionally

81%

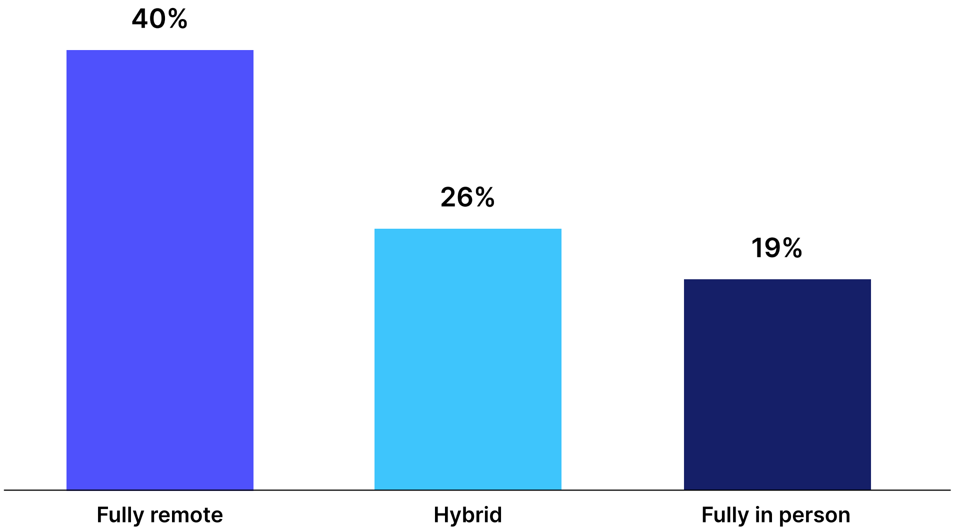
have worked for an employer that hired someone who could not do the job

28%

have suspected a coworker was not the person who was actually hired

FIGURE 1 **Remote work widens the recognition gap**

Employees who say they would not recognize many colleagues in person, by work arrangement.



Base: 1,500 employed U.S. adults, weighted.

Faking It to Make It

Not knowing who you are working with is only part of the problem. Employees increasingly believe organizations are hiring people who are not as qualified as they claim, and in some cases, are not who they claim to be at all.

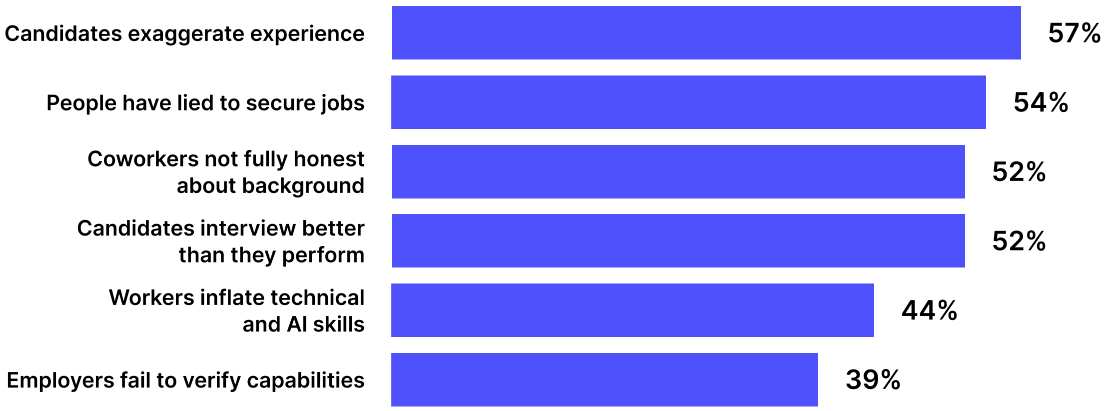
Nearly three-quarters (**71%**) say they have worked with someone who turned out not to be what they claimed professionally, while **81%** have worked for an organization that hired someone who ultimately could not perform the job they were hired to do. More than three-quarters (**77%**) have had to cover for, fix, or take on extra work because a coworker lacked the skills necessary to do the job. More than 1 in 5 (**22%**) do so frequently, absorbing extra work, corrections, and cleanup that rarely shows up in any performance review.

Employees believe hiring systems are being gamed at nearly every stage:

- **57%** say candidates exaggerate experience
- **54%** believe people have lied to secure jobs
- **52%** believe coworkers have not been completely honest about their background or experience
- **52%** say candidates interview better than they perform
- **44%** say workers inflate technical and AI-related skills
- **39%** believe employers fail to properly verify capabilities before hiring

FIGURE 2 **Employees believe hiring is gamed at nearly every stage**

Share agreeing with each statement about how candidates and coworkers present themselves.



Base: 1,500 employed U.S. adults, weighted.

But employees are not just questioning whether people can do the job. They are questioning whether they are doing the job at all. Nearly 1 in 3 believe coworkers have had other people perform work on their behalf (**30%**), and a similar share believe coworkers are working multiple jobs during the workday (**30%**).

Together, these findings point to the defining challenge of the Shadow Workforce: uncertainty.

Employees increasingly question whether coworkers are who they claim to be, whether they have the skills they advertised, and whether they are the ones actually doing the work. Those concerns are amplified by the fact that nearly half (**45%**) believe colleagues intentionally create the appearance of productivity without actually being productive.

And those concerns are not based solely on suspicion. Employees acknowledge that many workers, including themselves, engage in behaviors designed to create the appearance of productivity, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish genuine productivity from the appearance of it.

The Illusion of Productivity Creates Cover for the Shadow Workforce

The Shadow Workforce often hides in plain sight, blending into everyday workplace activity and making it harder to separate meaningful work from visible activity.

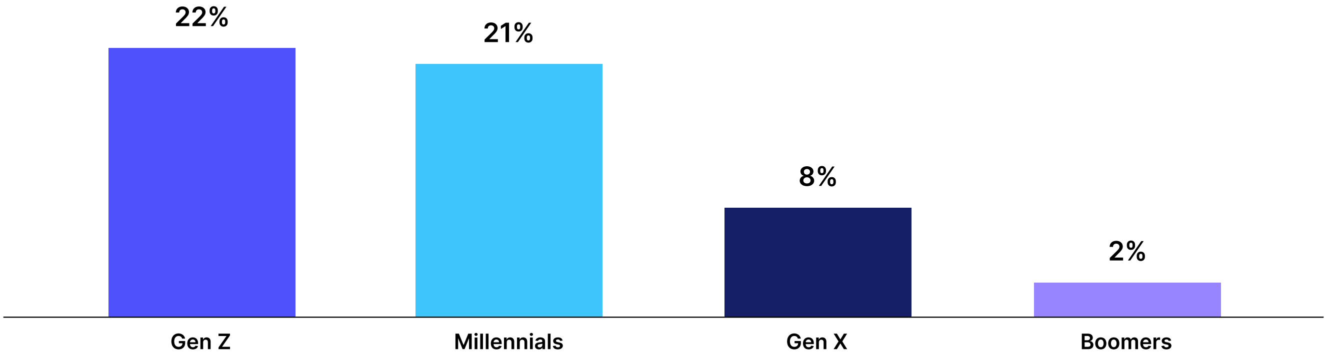
Many employees (**84%**) believe coworkers exaggerate how busy they are, while nearly half (**45%**) believe colleagues intentionally create the appearance of productivity without actually being productive.

Workers themselves admit to engaging in behaviors that blur the line between activity and output:

- 1 in 5 (**17%**) have pretended to be working while doing something else.
- 1 in 6 (**14%**) have used AI to complete work while allowing employers to believe they completed it themselves. This behavior is especially common among younger workers, including Gen Z (**22%**) and Millennials (**21%**), compared with Gen X (**8%**) and Boomers (**2%**).
- 1 in 10 (**8%**) admit taking credit for work completed by someone or something else.

FIGURE 3 **Younger workers are far likelier to pass off AI work as their own**

Employees who used AI to complete work while letting employers believe they did it themselves, by generation.



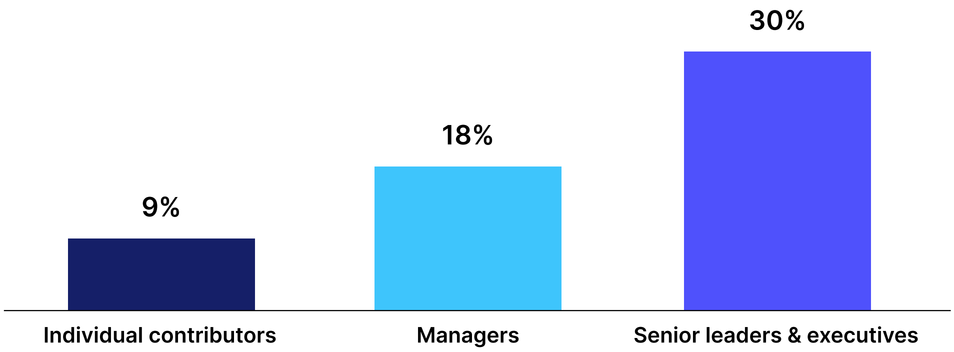
Base: 1,500 employed U.S. adults, weighted. Boomer estimate shown for directional comparison (n<100).

The Executive Exception

Seniority runs in a direction many would not expect. Rather than declining as responsibility rises, quietly passing off AI work climbs with rank: fewer than 1 in 10 individual contributors (**9%**) report it, compared with **18%** of managers and **30%** of senior leaders and executives. Because the three groups are similar in age, this is not a generational effect. The people most responsible for setting standards are the likeliest to sidestep the honesty they expect of their teams.

FIGURE 4 **Covert AI use rises with seniority**

Employees who used AI to complete work while letting employers believe they did it themselves, by role.



Base: 1,500 employed U.S. adults, weighted.

Employees also report engaging in other behaviors that make workplace activity harder to verify, including manipulating online status indicators (**11%**), working another job during work hours (**8%**), and delegating substantial portions of their work without employer knowledge (**7%**).

Ghost Workers Are the Most Extreme Form of the Shadow Workforce

These findings suggest the challenge is not simply whether work is getting done. It is whether employers can confidently determine who is doing it, how it is being completed, and whether workplace activity reflects actual productivity. That uncertainty is no longer theoretical.

At its most extreme, it opens the door to one of the most concerning emerging workforce risks: ghost workers.

Most employees have never heard the term ghost worker. Yet many have already observed behaviors associated with one. More than one in four employees (**28%**) have suspected a coworker was not actually the person hired or was not performing their own work.

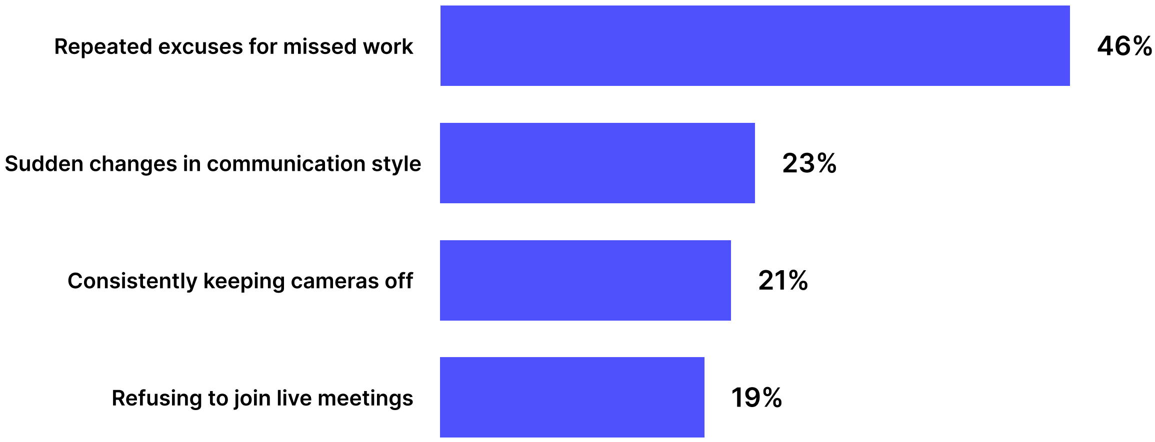
- *Suspicion is even higher among managers (**38%**) and hybrid workers (**37%**), suggesting those closest to managing work may be seeing warning signs others miss.*

Even more concerning, one-third (**33%**) have either heard of or personally know situations where someone was offered money to let another person use their identity or work authorization to obtain employment.

Employees also point to a growing list of warning signs associated with potential ghost worker activity. Nearly half (**46%**) say repeated excuses for missed work have caused them to question a coworker's credibility, while **23%** cite sudden changes in communication style. One in 5 point to consistently avoiding cameras (**21%**) or refusing live meetings (**19%**) as reasons they have questioned whether a colleague was actually who they claimed to be.

FIGURE 5 **The warning signs employees notice most**

Behaviors that have made employees question a coworker's credibility.



Base: 1,500 employed U.S. adults, weighted.

Ghost workers may be the most extreme expression of the Shadow Workforce, but the findings suggest the conditions that allow them to exist are already taking shape. They are a warning sign of a broader workforce challenge: one where organizations increasingly struggle to verify who workers are, what they are capable of doing, and whether they are actually doing the work they were hired to do.

As work becomes more digital, distributed, and AI-enabled, those questions become harder to answer, and more important for employers to get right. The challenge is no longer simply verifying workers at the point of hire. It is maintaining confidence that the person hired remains the person doing the work, that critical skills are genuine, and that accountability does not disappear after onboarding.

Verification Becomes the New Workforce Imperative

THE CONCEPT

The Verification Half-Life™

The assurance an employer buys with a one-time background check at hire begins to decay the moment onboarding ends. A background check confirms identity, history, and credentials as they stand on a single day, and nothing reconfirms that the person hired is still who they were, still qualified, and still the one doing the work. Every day since the last check leaves an employer knowing a little less than it thinks it does.

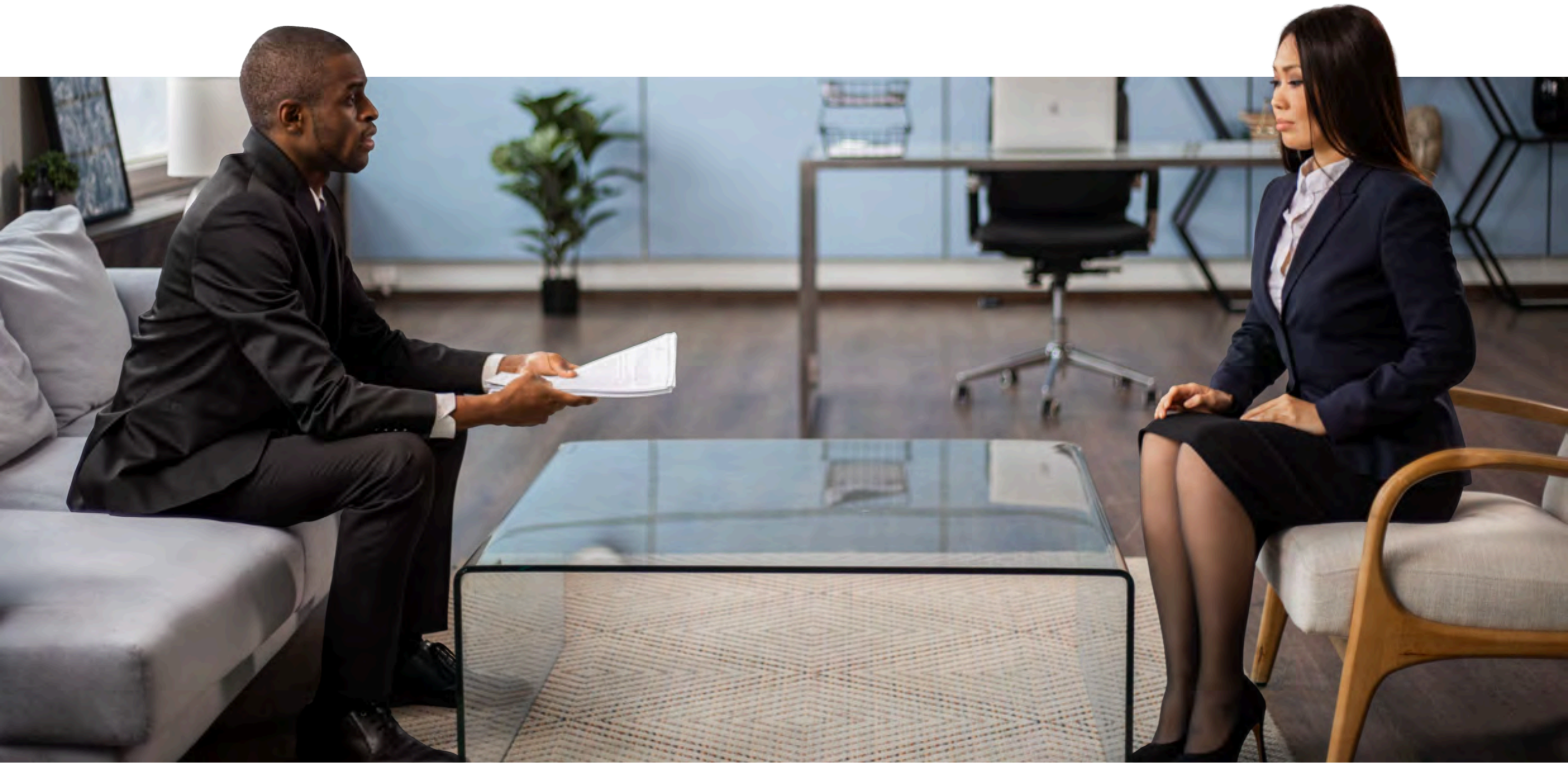
These findings describe a single underlying problem. A background check confirms who someone is, what they have done, and what they are qualified to do once, at the point of hire, and the confidence it provides starts to fade from that moment forward. Identities can be substituted, credentials and licenses can lapse, records can change, and the person who was screened is not always the person still doing the work. GCheck calls this the Verification Half-Life™: the steady erosion of certainty that follows a one-time check when nothing reconfirms who a worker is, what they can do, and whether they are the one doing the work.

Employees understand the risks. Nearly every employee (**97%**) believes misrepresenting skills or identity creates business risk, including **52%** who say it creates significant business risk.

Yet employees have little confidence that current safeguards are sufficient. Only **14%** believe employers are doing enough today to verify workers, while fewer than 1 in 4 (**24%**) are very confident their employer would catch someone who significantly misrepresented their skills, experience, or identity.

Closing that gap calls for a new model, one that extends beyond resumes, interviews, and one-time background checks. Each of the measures employees ask for works by resetting the clock, confirming identity and capability again rather than assuming them after day one:

- **78%** strongly support stronger skills and identity verification
- **60%** want proof candidates can actually do the job
- **59%** want stronger identity verification
- **54%** want verification applied consistently to every hire
- **40%** want greater transparency into what is verified
- **37%** support ongoing verification and monitoring after hire



The message from employees is clear. The patterns described here challenge one of the oldest assumptions in business: that the person hired is the person doing the work. Employees increasingly believe that assumption can no longer be taken for granted. Closing the Verification Half-Life™ means treating identity, capability, and accountability as something to be confirmed continuously throughout the employee lifecycle, not assumed once and left to decay.

Operational Responses to the Verification Half-Life™

A background check is a snapshot in time, accurate the day it runs and no longer. Each response below resets the clock, reconfirming identity, capability, or accountability rather than assuming it after day one.

Verification Bound to the Person

A reusable, biometric-bound identity credential, re-presented at each checkpoint, so the person who verified is the one who shows up.

33% know of identity-for-hire schemes

Source Verification, Not Self-Report

Employment, education, and credentials confirmed directly with the source, closing the gaps embellishment depends on.

57% say candidates exaggerate experience

Same Checks, Same Job Category

Not every role calls for the same depth of screening, but every hire in the same job category gets the same checks, with human review of findings, so results stay consistent, contextual, and compliant.

54% want consistent checks within their job category

Transparency as a Talent Magnet

Verification standards stated up front, discouraging embellishment and attracting candidates who value integrity.

40% want transparency into what is verified

Continuous Monitoring, Matched to Your Risk

A clear result at hire is a snapshot in time, not a standing fact. Ongoing rescreening reruns the checks that matter most for your industry:

- Criminal records: a new arrest or conviction after hire (all industries)
- Licenses and credentials: lapses and disciplinary actions caught between hires (healthcare, licensed trades)
- Random and recurring drug testing: safety-sensitive and DOT roles
- Healthcare sanctions and exclusions: no excluded provider goes unnoticed (healthcare)
- MVR and driver monitoring: violations and suspensions flagged (transport and logistics)

37% want verification that continues after day one

Screening depth is matched to role risk. Employees in the same category are held to the same monitoring plan.

Methodology

Findings are based on a GCheck survey of 1,500 employed U.S. adults, fielded in June 2026 via Pollfish and weighted, with a margin of error of approximately plus or minus 2.5% at 95% confidence and wider for subgroups. Figures reflect employees' own reported behaviors and their perceptions of colleagues and employers; the two are reported separately and never combined in a single figure. Subgroups under 100 respondents are shown for directional comparison only, most notably Baby Boomers, and race and ethnicity were captured but excluded from analysis as largely confounded by age.

Segment	Group	Sample (n)	Share
Gender	Male	737	49%
Gender	Female	763	51%
Generation	Gen Z (18-29)	136	9%
Generation	Millennials (30-45)	590	39%
Generation	Gen X (46-61)	694	46%
Generation	Baby Boomers (62-80), directional	80	5%
Work mode	Fully in person	865	58%
Work mode	Hybrid	403	27%
Work mode	Fully remote	232	15%

How the statistics were computed

All figures are weighted proportions, rounded to whole numbers, so a total may differ from its components by a point. Single-select questions report the share choosing a response; multi-select questions report the share selecting each item, so their totals can exceed 100%. Where a question was asked of a subset, the base is that subset. No index or composite scores are used.

About GCheck

GCheck is a modern hire-to-retire screening platform dedicated to Compliance for Good®, helping organizations hire and retain with speed, accuracy, and fairness. The platform delivers background checks, identity verification, drug testing, employment and professional verifications, continuous monitoring, and compliance management through one unified system. The Compliance for Good® framework rests on three pillars: Transparent, Fair, and Protective Compliance. Learn more at **gcheck.com**.

Related GCheck Research

The Rise of the Shadow Workforce is the third study in a GCheck research trilogy examining trust across the employment lifecycle.

The 2026 Trust in Hiring Report. Why candidates exaggerate and misrepresent themselves, and where trust breaks down at the hiring stage.

The Automation Anxiety Report 2026. How AI is reshaping worker confidence and inflating the skills that candidates claim.