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Implications of Stress on CISOs

Survey Report, February 2023

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Introduction & Methodology

Ask any security leader, and they are likely to tell you that being a CISO takes its toll. In our experience, the smaller the company, the more likely the security team is to be stretched thinly. We've also seen that the larger the organization, the greater the ratio of IT spend that is dedicated to cybersecurity, leaving security teams at SMBs with less resources to achieve the same goals.

In this report, we wanted to hone in on small and medium sized organizations, and see how CISOs are coping in such a critical role.

Do they have the staff and the resources they need? Are they experiencing growing stress levels, and if so, how does that impact the organization as well as their own mental and physical health?

For the first time, we are taking a quantitative look at the true state of mental health for CISOs in SMBs today and uncovering the burden they carry. Is stress impacting their ability to protect their environments, what are they giving up to support the business, and critically – what steps would reduce their stress levels and give them back a much-needed work/life balance?

Methodology

To get greater insight into the stress levels of today's CISOs, we commissioned a survey of 200 full-time CISOs, 25% working in the United Kingdom and 75% in the United States. The survey was completed by Global Surveyz, an independent survey company.

All CISOs work at companies with between 500-10,000 employees, with a security team size of 5 people or less. Industries covered are broad, excluding only banking, government, education, and non-profit. The respondents were recruited through a global B2B research panel, invited via email to complete the survey, with all responses collected during Q4 2022. The average amount of time spent on the survey was 10 minutes and 4 seconds. The answers to the majority of the non-numerical questions were randomized, in order to prevent order bias in the answers.

Key Findings

1

CISOs need greater resources to cope with day-to-day IT challenges

All CISOs reported that they need additional resources. On average, CISOs believe that a 29% increase in resources would help them to cope with their IT security challenges. However, 83% admit that they are compromising on the staff they hire to fill these gaps, likely due to urgency to hire for the roles and growing skills shortages. Both lack of resources and compromising on the capabilities of new hires are likely causes of stress. It's no surprise that according to our data, 94% of CISOs describe themselves as stressed.

2

Lack of resources are having a measurable impact on the business

This stress is taking its toll. 74% of CISOs said that team members have quit over the past 12 months due to the stress of their job. 77% believe that their limited bandwidth and lack of resources has led to important initiatives falling by the wayside. The security gaps are not only felt by the CISOs themselves. In 79% of cases, CISOs say they have received complaints from their board, colleagues, or employees around security tasks not being handled effectively. Critically, 66% of CISOs admit that their stress levels impact their ability to adequately protect the organization.

3

Stress also impacts CISOs personal lives

Beyond the impact on the business, stress levels are affecting CISOs' work/life balance. 84% said they have canceled at least one vacation due to an urgent work issue, and 64% said they miss private events such as dinners and parties due to work fatigue, as 91% consistently work 40+ hour weeks with no break. More than 60% admit to losing their temper with their family and friends because of work-related stress, and 77% say that their work stress is directly impacting their physical health as well as their mental health, including negatively affecting nutrition and sleep.

4

What would help? Reducing stress for today's CISOs

When asked what would support CISOs in lowering their stress levels, the answer is not more people on the team. Instead, 45% of CISOs would like more automated tools in place. We then dove into whether making changes to those tools would help reduce stress levels. We found that the top solutions desired by today's CISOs are consolidating multiple security technologies to a single platform, automating manual tasks, and adding additional protection technologies. Organizations should take note, as with the stress levels as they stand, 38% of CISOs are already considering or actively looking elsewhere.

Survey Report Findings

What Resources Would Allow CISOs to Cope with Current IT Security Challenges?

100% of CISOs admitted they need additional resources to adequately cope with current IT security challenges.

On average, CISOs believe they need 29% more resources than they currently have in place. This is a significant number, equating to a missing staff member in a 3–4-person team.

It's also important to recognize the hidden added stress underneath these numbers, where skills gaps and budget shortages make this problem much more difficult to solve.

Weighted average: 29%
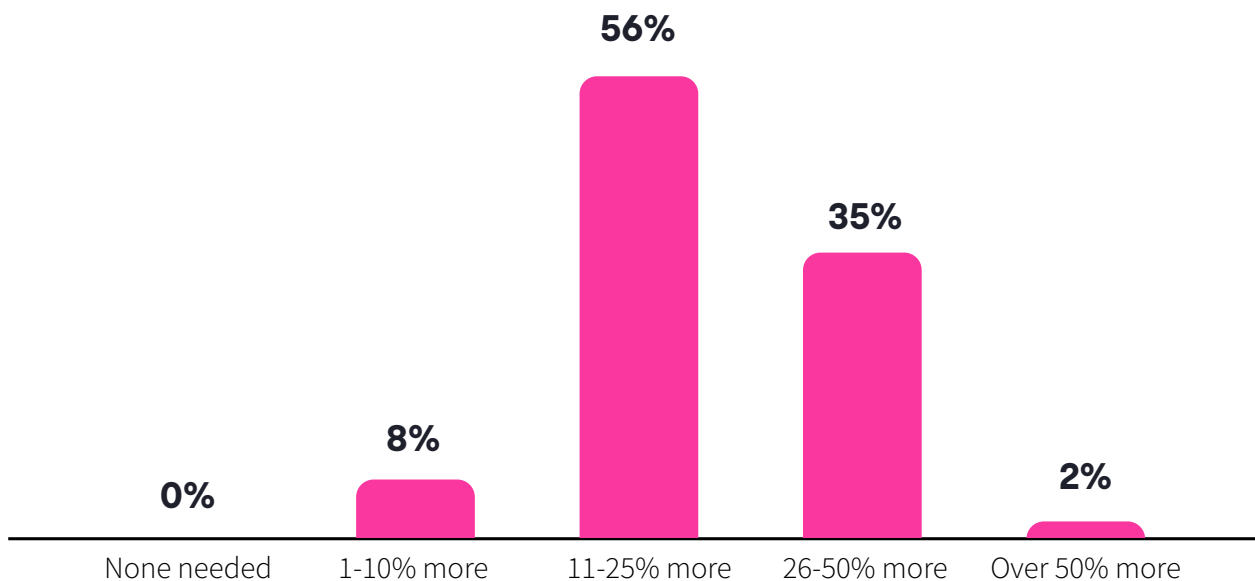more resources are needed

Figure 1: Additional Resources Needs to Adequately Cope with Current IT Security Challenges

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

Prevalence of Compromising on a Hiring Selection

Are CISOs compromising on their hiring selections just because they need to fill roles?

83% admit they are indeed compromising on the candidates they hire. While 19% say that they have only done this once, 19% said they are doing so frequently.

The well-known cybersecurity talent shortage is real. Given today's sophisticated threat landscape, filling roles with inexperienced or less competent staff is a recipe for disaster. However, CISOs may feel they have no choice.
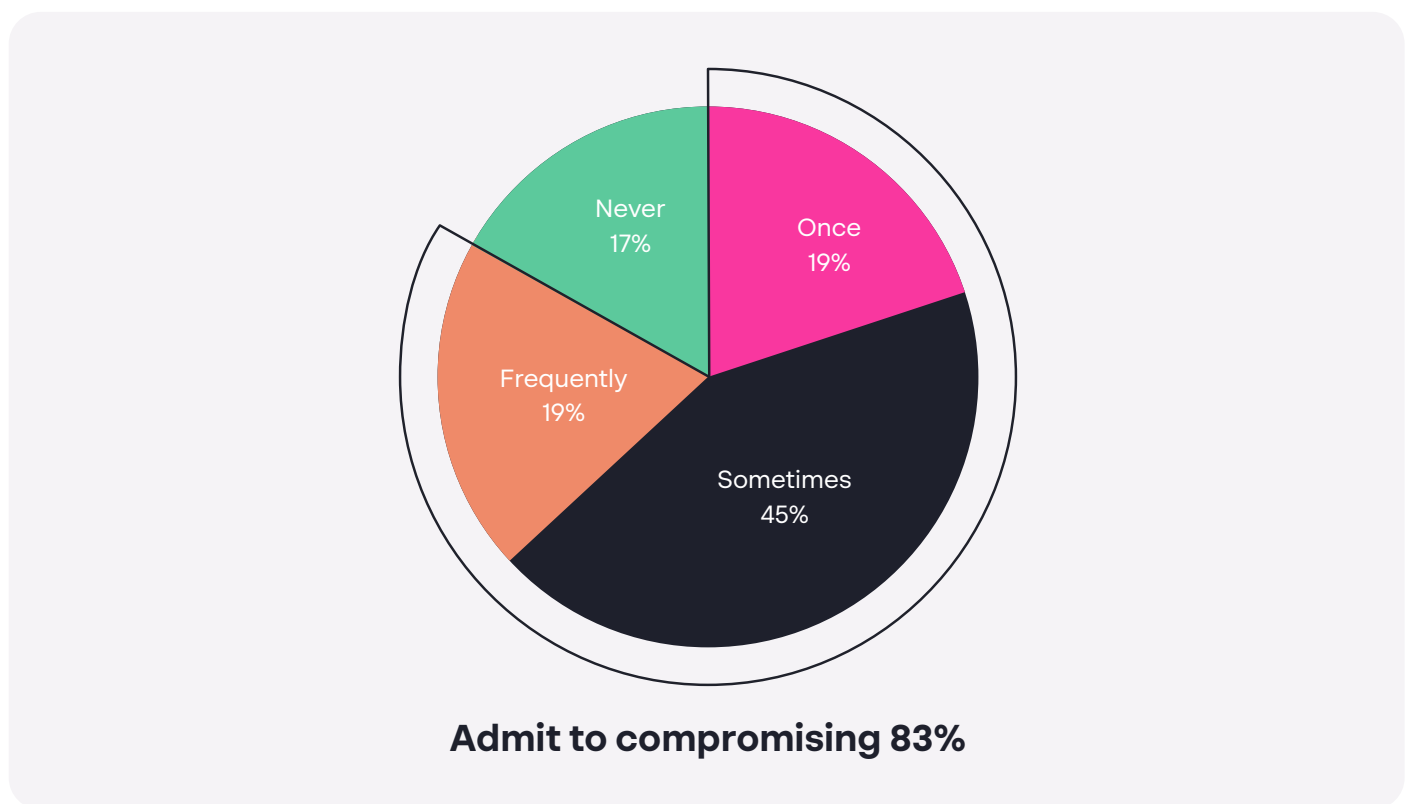

Figure 2: Prevalence of Compromising on a Hiring Selection

Does Stress Lead to Employee Churn?

74% of CISOs said that over the past year, Security team members are quitting because of the job's stress level.

In 47% of cases, this has happened more than once over the past 12 months.

Security leaders are already short on time, and employee churn means they need to focus on finding new candidates, hiring and onboarding them, and getting them up to speed. This applies even greater pressure on what they can achieve.

Several
times
8%

Never
26%

A few times
39%

Once
27%
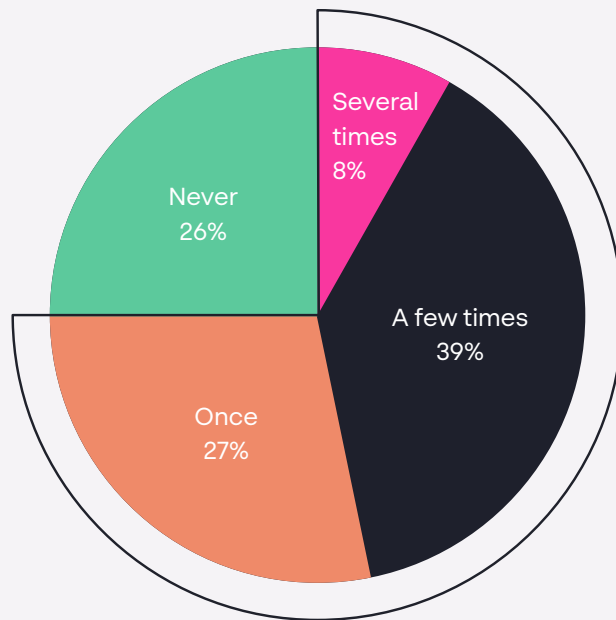
Quit due to stress

Figure 3: Impact of Job's Stress Level on Employee's Churn

Does a Lack of Management Bandwidth and Resources Impact Important Initiatives?

According to 77% of CISOs, limited management bandwidth or lack of resources is impacting important initiatives that are not being addressed.

It stands to reason that when time and resources are limited, decisions will need to be made around which initiatives take priority, and which need to fall by the wayside. Not addressing important initiatives puts companies at risk. It also means that CISOs don't have enough time to implement initiatives and technologies that could potentially ease the burden on their time.
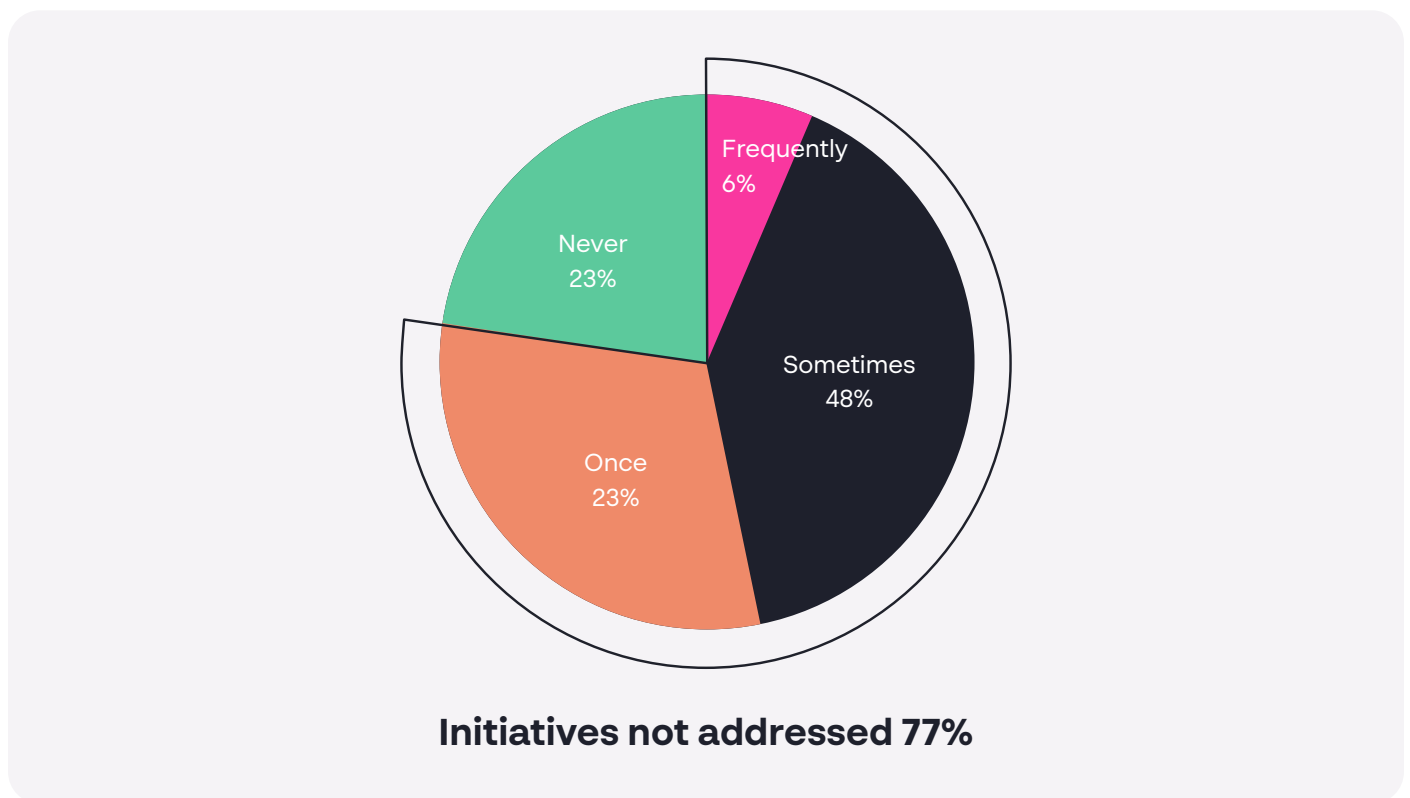

Initiatives not addressed 77%

Figure 4: Important Initiatives Not Addressed Due to Management Bandwidth or Lack of Resources

Complaints Received About Handling Security IT Tasks

We asked CISOs how many complaints they received in the past year from bosses, colleagues, or subordinates related to IT security tasks. These are complaints that say security tasks were not being handled satisfactorily.

79% of the CISOs said they received these kinds of complaints, with an average of 3.2 complaints over the past year.

While many managers and team leaders might feel like they aren't doing enough, or are stretched on time and resources, it brings the message home when you can see that other members of the organization are aware of the gaps and the impact of these gaps.
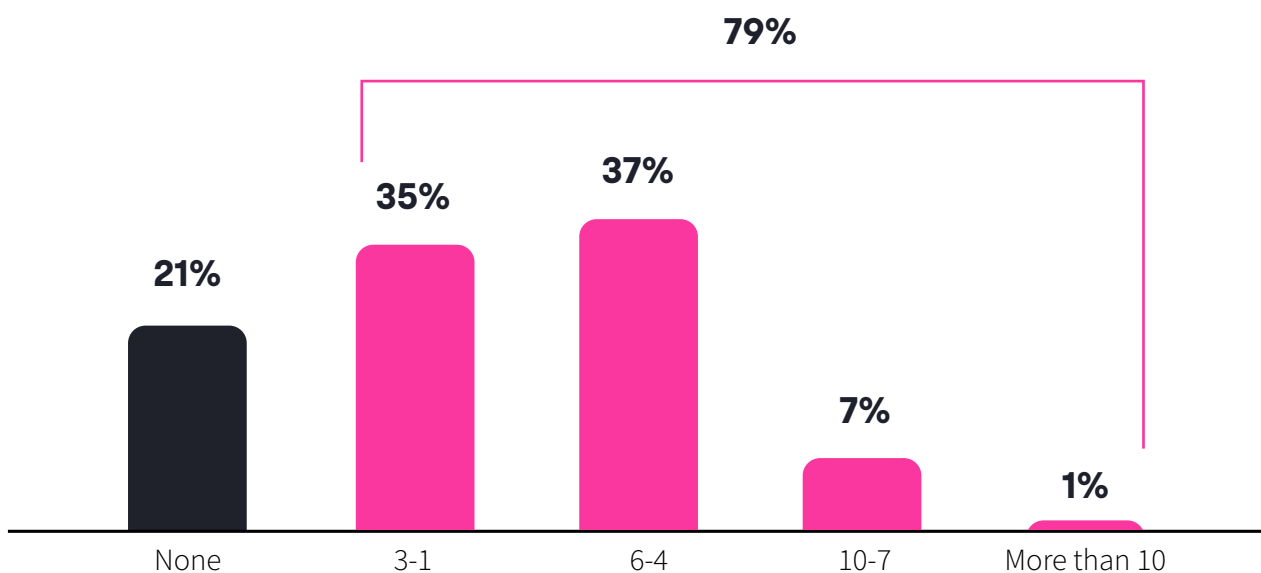
Weighted average: 3.21 complaints

Figure 5: Complaints Received About Handling Security IT Tasks

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

Balancing Tactical/Operational Tasks with Strategic/Management Tasks

We asked CISOs if they are spending too much time on tactical/operational tasks compared to strategic/ management tasks.

93% of CISOs said they are spending more time than they should on tactical tasks.

In 27% of cases, CISOs are spending their time almost exclusively on tactical/operational tasks instead of strategic/ management tasks. Given the constantly shifting threat landscape, these CISOs are likely not keeping pace.
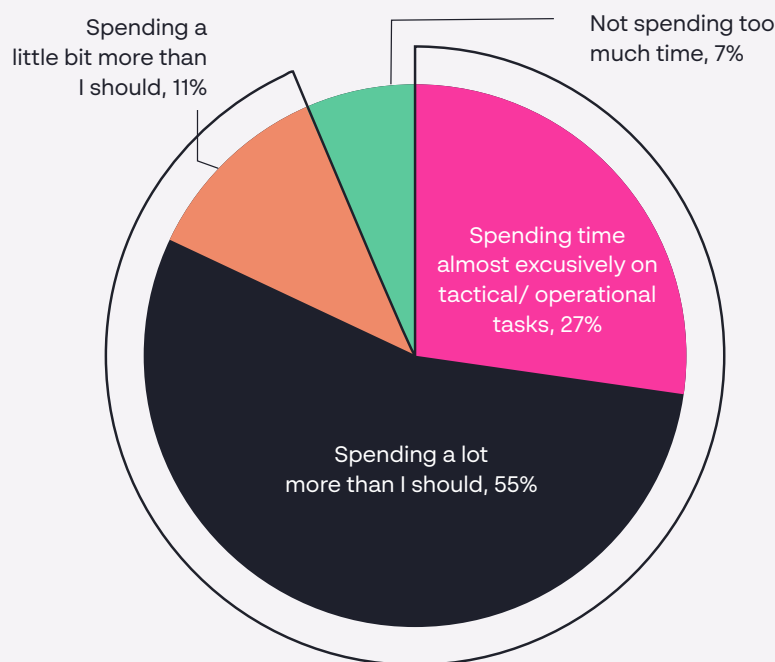
*Figure 6: Time Spent on Tactical/Operational Tasks
vs. Strategic/Management Tasks*

Is Work Overload and Stress Compromising the Ability to Protect the Organization?

94% of CISOs are stressed at work (figure 7), and 65% of CISOs said their ability to protect their organization is compromised due to work overload and stress. (Figure 8). It's interesting to see that 35% say that while they might be stressed, it's just a part of the role and it doesn't compromise their ability to protect the organization.

Cybersecurity teams are here to remove risk from the organization, but when they are stressed themselves, this actually adds risk to the equation.

No stress at work, 6%

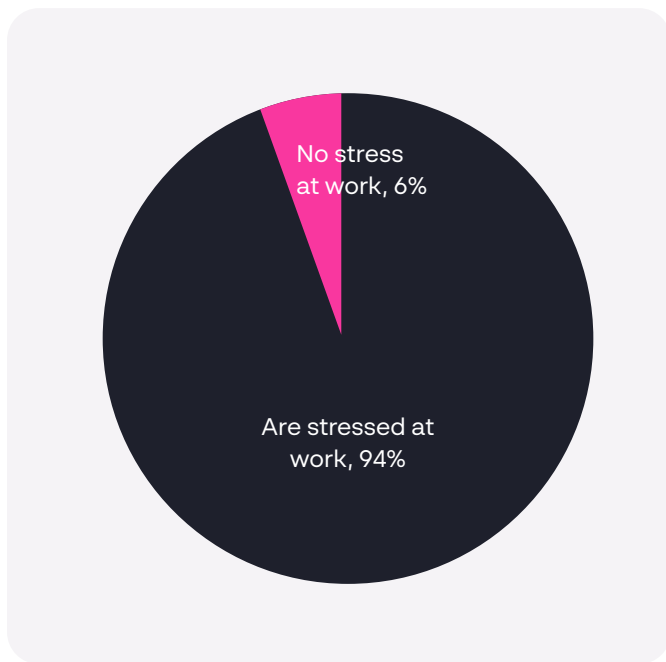Are stressed at work, 94%

Figure 7: Are CISOs Stressed at Work?

Difinitely, 9%

Not at all, 35%

Somewhat, 56%

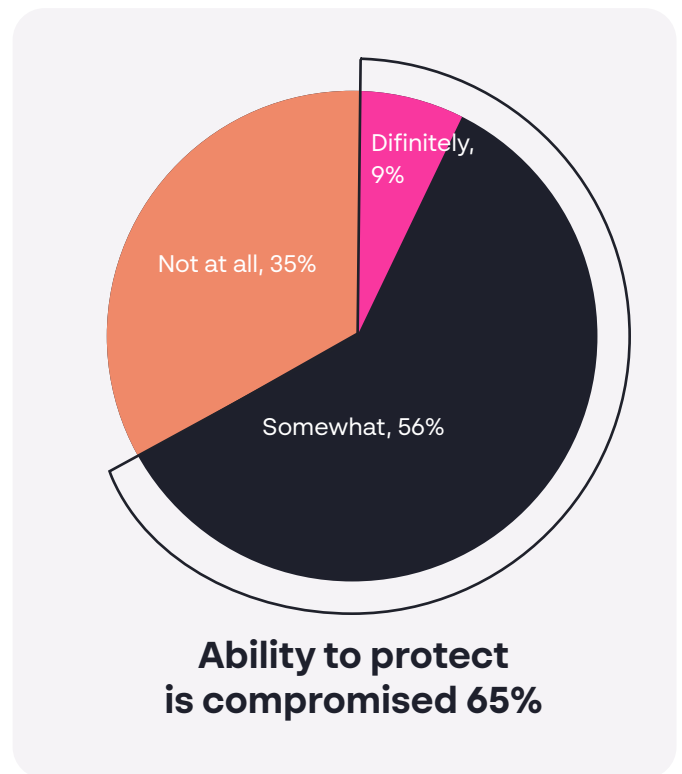**Ability to protect is compromised 65%**

Figure 8: Is Work Overload and Stress Compromising the Ability to Protect the Organization?

Are Urgent Security-Related Tasks Impacting Work/Life Balance?

84% of CISOs indicated that on at least one occasion they have had to postpone or cancel a vacation due to an urgent security task during the previous year. In 11% of cases, this has happened 4 or more times.

The lack of work/life balance can be detrimental to mental and physical health, and can actually exacerbate the stress levels CISOs feel.

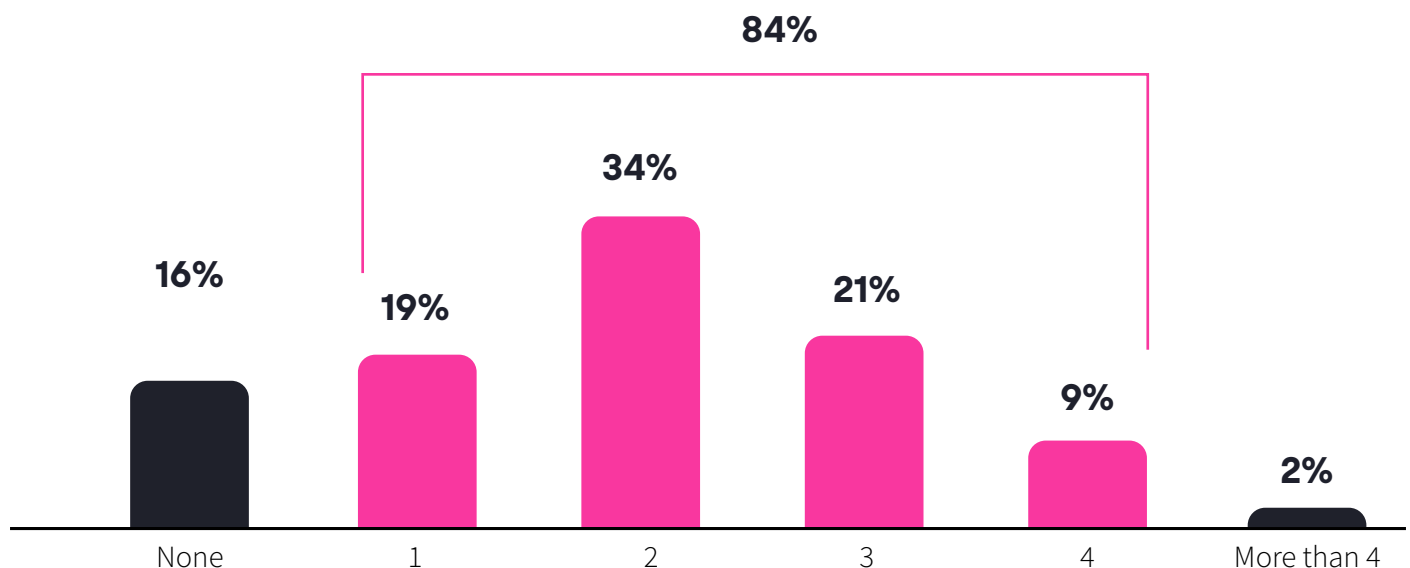**Weighted average: 1.94 vacations**
postponed/cancelled

Figure 9: Times an Urgent Security-Related Task Caused the CISO to Postpone or Cancel a Vacation

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

Hours per Week (Actively Working)

Only 9% of CISOs are working less than 40 hours per week. On average, CISOs are working 43.1 hours per week. This likely doesn't include ad-hoc tasks like checking emails or answering quick questions from team members during off hours.

Weighted average: 44.8 hours
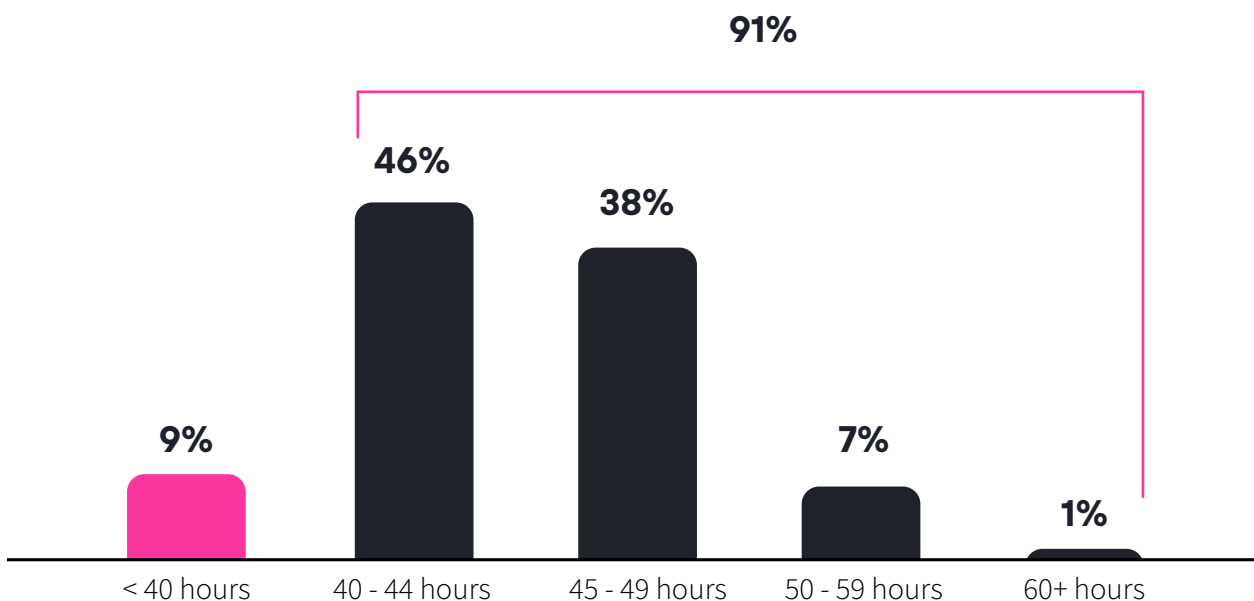
Figure 10: Hours per Week (Actively Working)

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

CISOs Stress Level Compared to Other Roles

We asked CISOs if their stress level is higher compared to other roles in their organizations.

71% of CISOs believe that their stress level is higher compared to other roles. Only 9% said they perceive it to be lower.
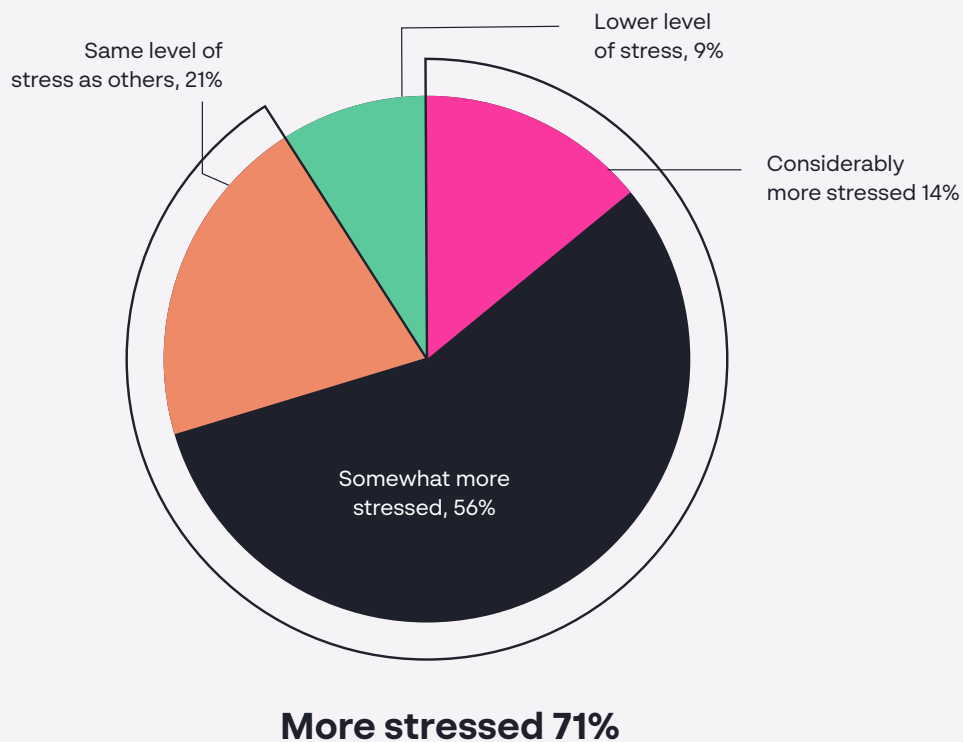

Figure 11: CISOs Stress Level Compared to Other Roles

Forgoing Private Events (Dinners, Parties etc.) Due to Work Fatigue

Over the past year, 64% of CISOs said they had to forgo private events due to work fatigue. These numbers are consistent with the data from three years ago, showing that the problems in the industry aren't changing.

Year after year, CISOs are expending an oversized amount of effort and energy on their jobs, and the constant pressure and stress they live with makes it difficult for them to enjoy personal events and time with friends and family. Which, of course, only exacerbates their stress levels.
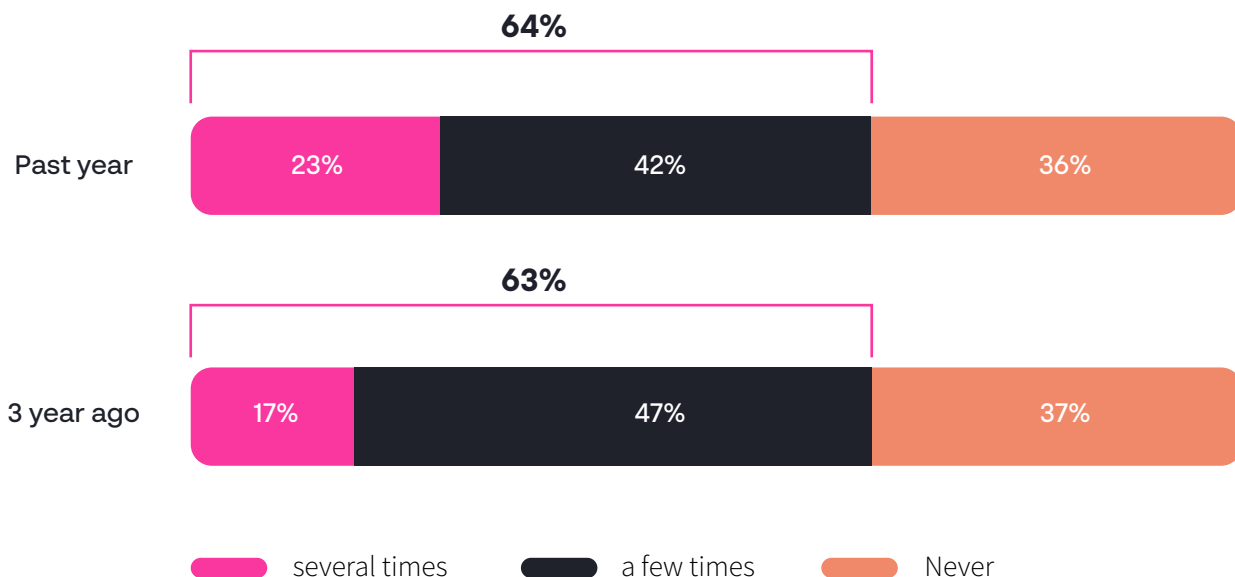

Figure 12: Forgoing Private Events (Dinners, Parties etc.) Due to Work Fatigue

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

Do CISOs Lose their Temper with Family and Friends Due to Work-Related Stress?

Over the past year, 62% of CISOs admitted to losing their temper with family and friends due to work related stress.

Again, these numbers are consistent with the data from 3 years ago, showing that stress levels haven't dropped. When work stress has such a strong and direct impact on CISO's personal relationships, something has to change.

62%

| Past year | 22% | 41% | 38% |

60%

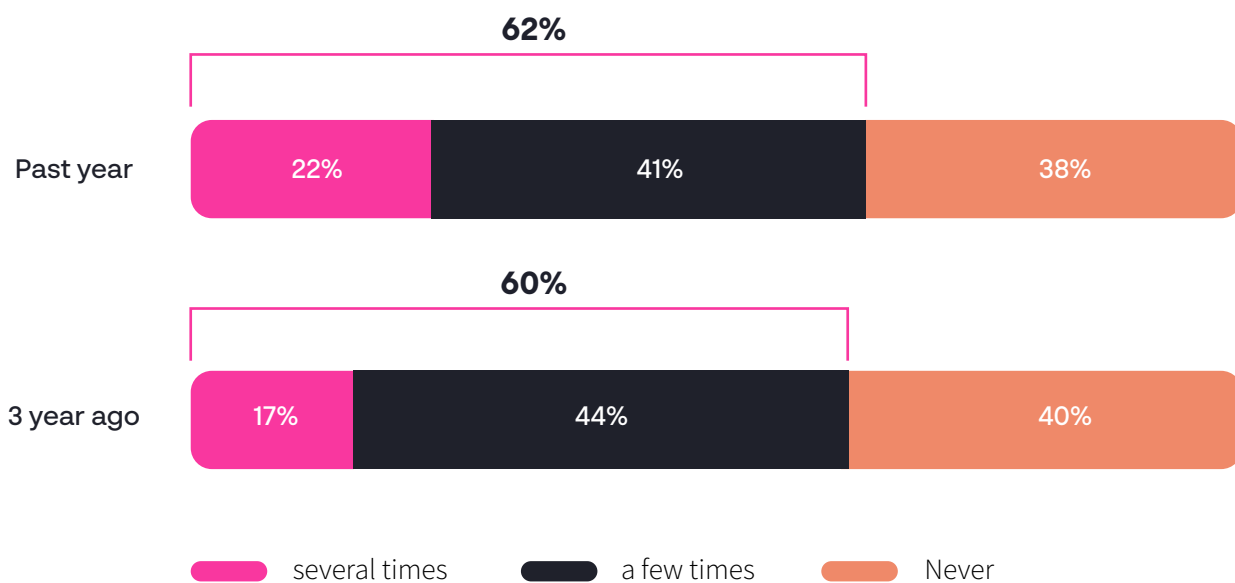| 3 year ago | 17% | 44% | 40% |

█ several times █ a few times █ Never

Figure 13: Losing Temper with Family and Friends Due to Work-Related Stress

Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding up of numbers

Impact of Work Stress on Health-Related Issues

77% of CISOs said that work stress has had a negative impact on their physical health as well.

The top issues are poor nutrition due to lack of time to choose the right meals (43%), significant weight gain (40%), and significant weight loss (31%).

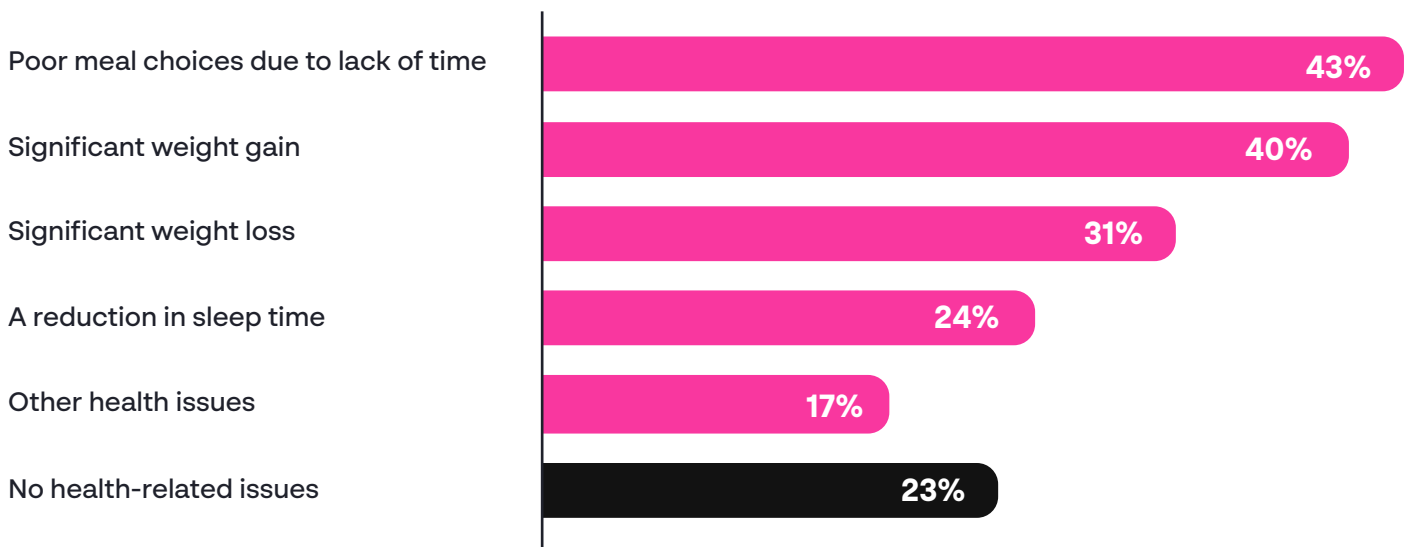|	
Poor meal choices due to lack of time	43%
Significant weight gain	40%
Significant weight loss	31%
A reduction in sleep time	24%
Other health issues	17%
No health-related issues	23%

Figure 14: Impact of Work Stress on Health-Related Issues

Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

How Can Organizations Reduce Stress Level at Work?

According to CISOs, the top initiatives that could reduce stress levels at work are getting better or more automated tools (45%), better training (41%), and the ability to outsource some of their responsibilities (40%).

It's interesting to see that hiring more workers is fairly low on the list, and today's CISOs would prefer better tools and training to more headcount. This could be due to the high levels of churn and the time it takes to find the right staff and get them trained and onboarded efficiently. In contrast, the right technology is a more consistent and reliable solution.
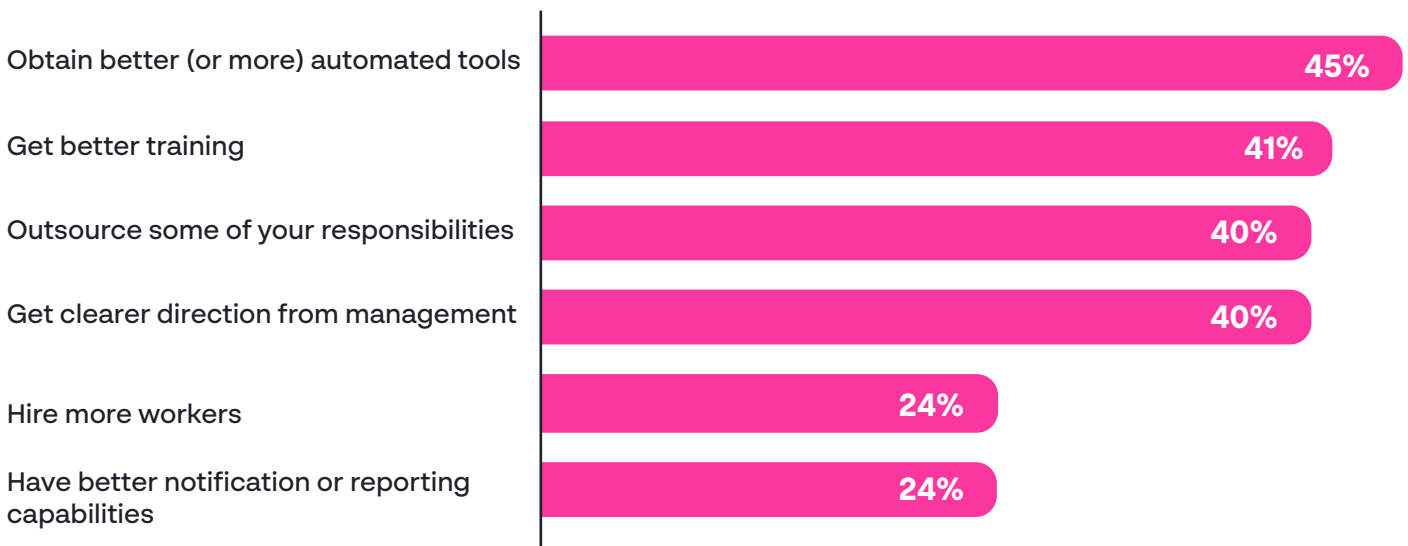
Obtain better (or more) automated tools	45%
Get better training	41%
Outsource some of your responsibilities	40%
Get clearer direction from management	40%
Hire more workers	24%
Have better notification or reporting capabilities	24%

Figure 15: Top Impacts on Reducing Stress Level at Work

Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

Are CISOs Actively Looking for a New Job?

38% of the CISOs are considering or actively looking for a new job.

When senior leadership aren't given the staff and technologies they need, it stands to reason they will begin to look elsewhere.
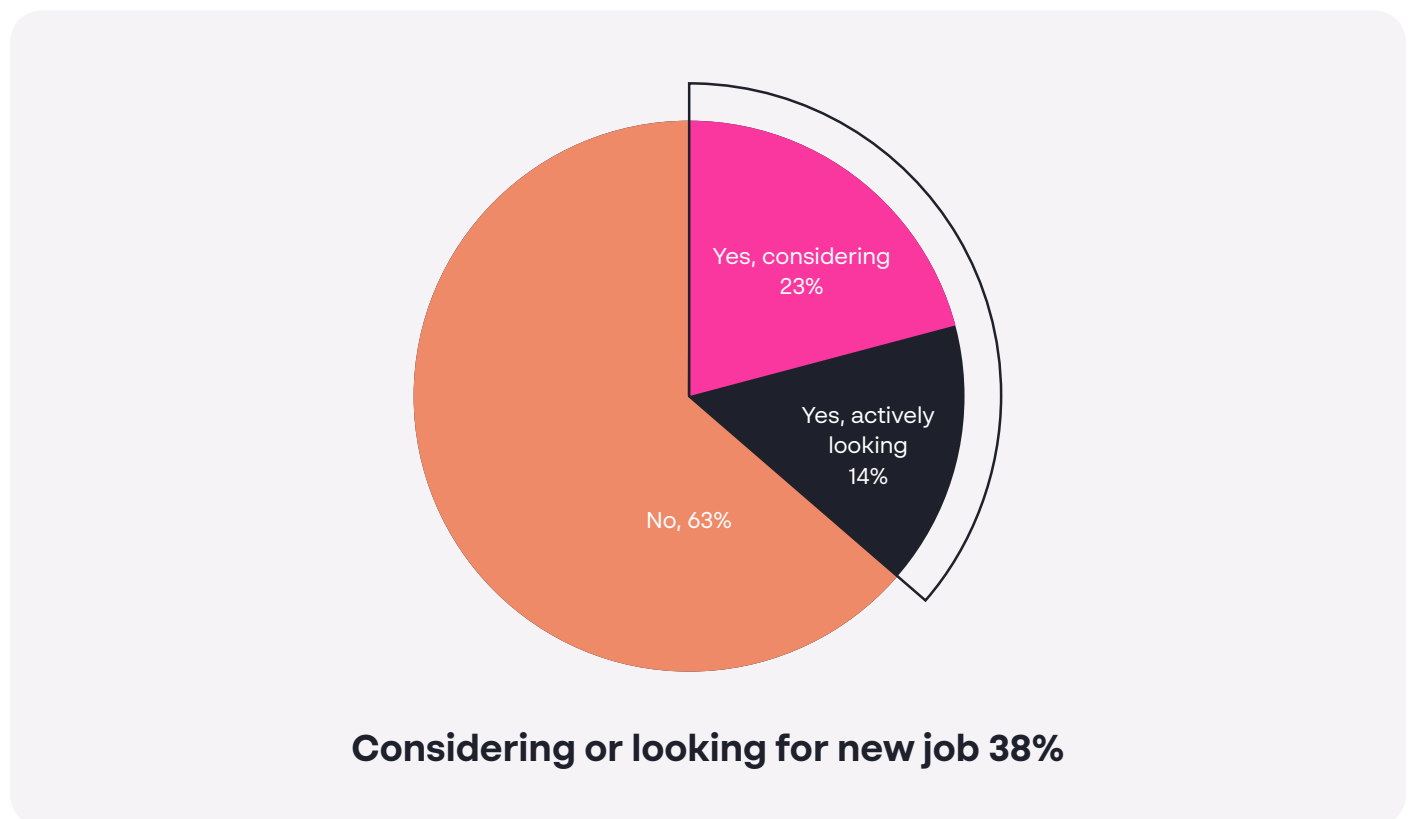

Figure 16: Are CISOs Actively Looking for a New Job?

What Would Reduce CISOs Work Related Stress Levels?

We asked CISOs to decide what technology initiatives would positively affect their work-related stress levels.

57% said consolidating multiple security technologies on a single platform or interface would decrease their work-related stress levels.

51% say that automating time-consuming repetitive manual tasks would be helpful, and 50% agree that adding additional protection technologies would make a difference. 49% say that having access to expert cybersecurity guidance and recommendations could reduce their stress levels, too.
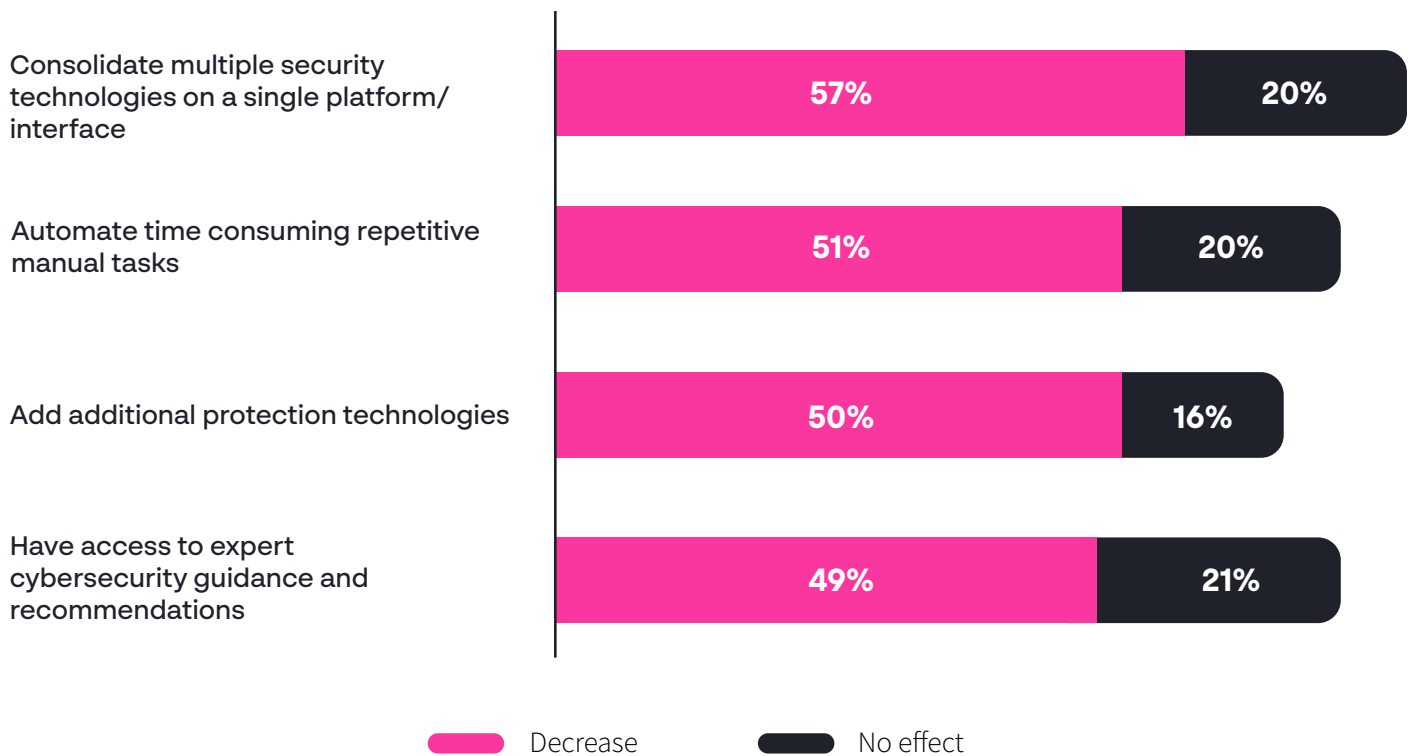
	Decrease	No effect
Consolidate multiple security technologies on a single platform/interface	57%	20%
Automate time consuming repetitive manual tasks	51%	20%
Add additional protection technologies	50%	16%
Have access to expert cybersecurity guidance and recommendations	49%	21%

■ Decrease   ■ No effect

Figure 17: What Would Reduce CISOs Work Related Stress Levels?

Question allowed more than one answer and as a result, percentages will add up to more than 100%

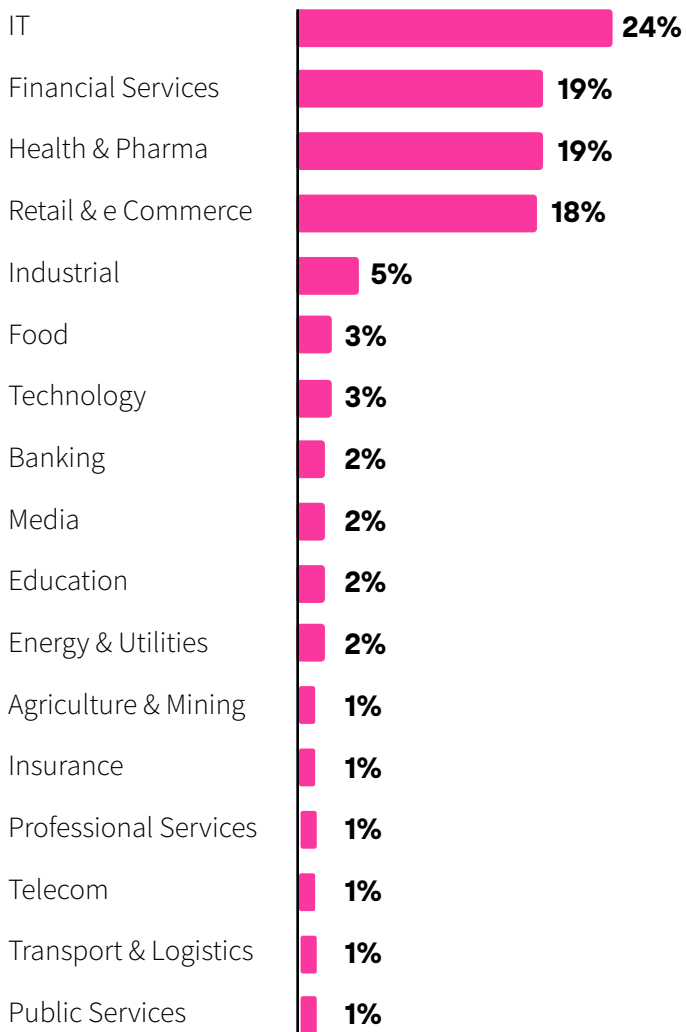# Demographics

Job roles, function, company

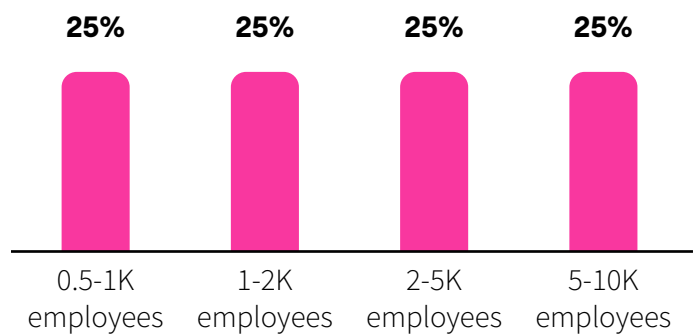|	
IT	**24%**
Financial Services	**19%**
Health & Pharma	**19%**
Retail & e Commerce	**18%**
Industrial	**5%**
Food	**3%**
Technology	**3%**
Banking	**2%**
Media	**2%**
Education	**2%**
Energy & Utilities	**2%**
Agriculture & Mining	**1%**
Insurance	**1%**
Professional Services	**1%**
Telecom	**1%**
Transport & Logistics	**1%**
Public Services	**1%**

Figure 18: Industry

Company Size:
- 0.5-1K employees: **25%**
- 1-2K employees: **25%**
- 2-5K employees: **25%**
- 5-10K employees: **25%**

Figure 19: Company Size

Security Budget:
- less than $100K: **2%**
- $100K to $249K: **3%**
- $250K to $499K: **31%**
- $500K to $999K: **57%**
- Over $1M: **7%**

Figure 22: Security Budget

Country:
- United Kingdom, 25%
- United States, 75%

Figure 20: Country

Department:
- Security, 18%
- IT, 82%

Figure 21: Department
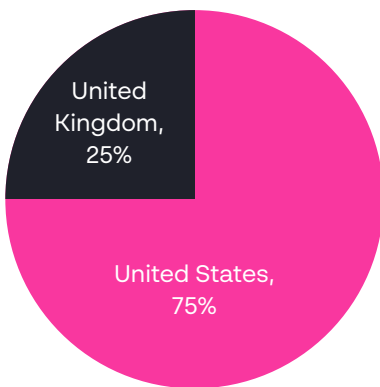
Security Team Size:
- it's just me, 4%
- 2 to 5 people, 96%

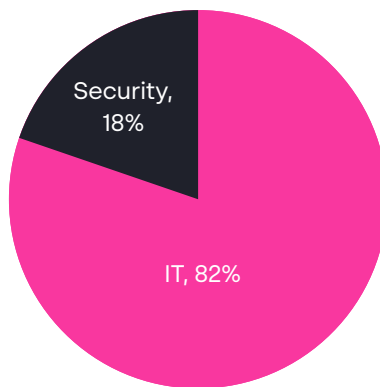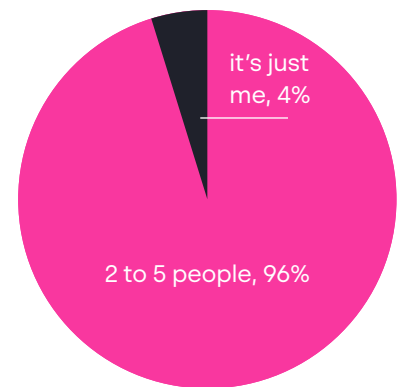*Figure 23: Security Team Size (Employees)*

About Cynet

Cynet is a provider of the world's first end-to-end, natively automated XDR platform – Cynet 360 AutoXDRTM – backed by a 24/7 MDR service. The platform was purpose-built to enable small security teams to achieve comprehensive and effective protection regardless of their resources, team size, or skills. It does this by managing day-to-day security operations so teams can focus on managing security rather than operating it.

→ Request a Demo
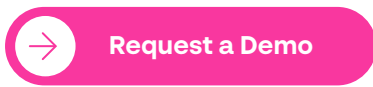
For more information, please visit us:

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