'I might as well be a robot'. How the pandemic forces a re-think for Planners

Results and implications of the APG survey

April 2021

'I might as well be a robot'

The working experience of planners during the pandemic has thrown up some big issues that are not going away.

A lot of the collaboration and interaction that makes the job joyful and creatively inspiring has been lost

Our survey of 337 Planners shows that after this experience, they have more reasons to look elsewhere.

Now is the time to re-think the contract between the strategic thinkers we depend up on a crisis and the agencies who employ them.

We have a prescription for making things better that we urge agency leaders to follow.

5 key learnings direct from the planners

1. **Burnout is a real risk.** Nearly two thirds of planners have been working longer hours, combined with one third who feel they have been managed worse than before the pandemic.

2. **Planners are shouldering more responsibility** yet almost half are getting less training.

3. **A sense of disconnection:** Nearly half of planners say the job has been less enjoyable and planners miss other planners and creative conversations more than anything else.

4. **Many feel the role has been pared down** to deck writing and short term, tactical planning.

5. **A generation of talent under threat**: A quarter of planners are unsure if they stay in the industry.

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Time to re-think and time to inspire

Value them or lose them. And as we re-engineer working life post-lockdown, there are some critical actions agencies need to take to keep and benefit from the best planning talent.

1. **Give credit where credit is due**: Planners have been resilient and resourceful and the motor for new client strategies and new business.

2. **Space to think:** Let planners work in the way that suits them best. That could be in the agency. But it might well not be.

3. **Time to train**: Planners crave mental stimulation and want to develop. Fast.

4. **Check in, don't check up**. Managers need to show they care about the person, not just the delivery of the work.

5. **Prove Planning is valued**. If you get planners to work with and for less, they will vote with their feet.

'*Why pick a fun career with creative colleagues when I could churn out boring zooms and decks for twice the money elsewhere?*'

Like many professional services jobs, planning has become significantly harder during the pandemic.

Many Planners feel their job has been pared back to basics, losing the aspects that set it apart from tech and consultancy roles
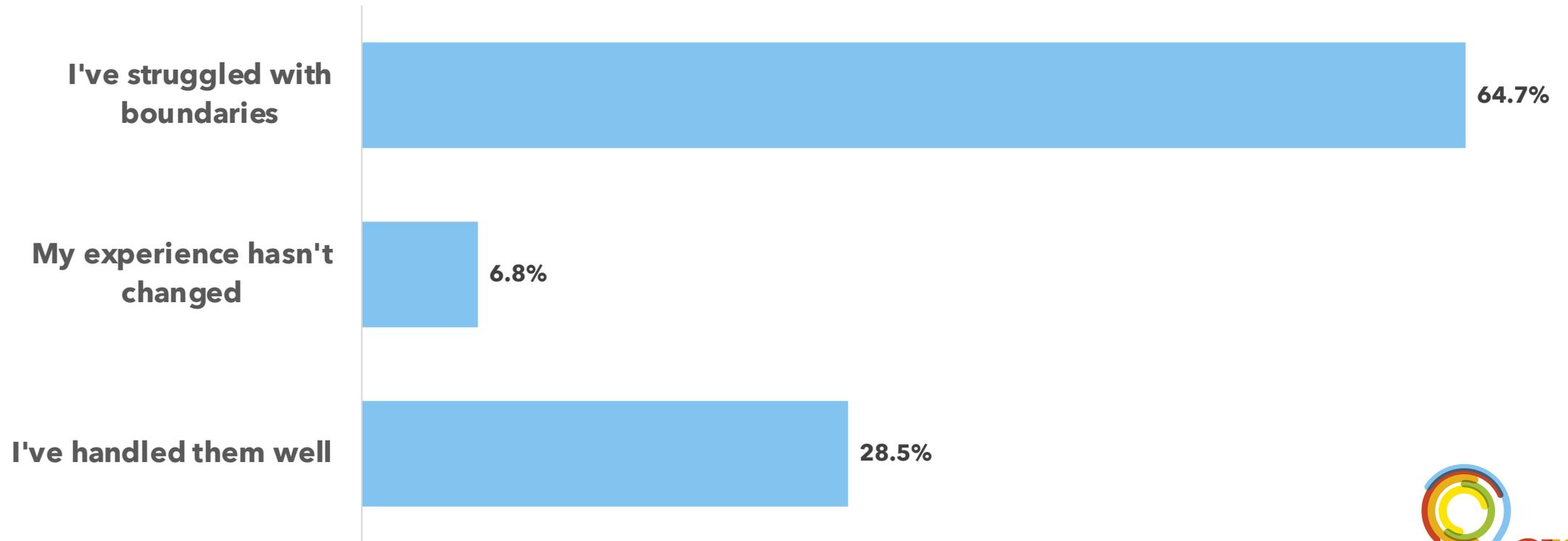
The majority of Planners say they have worked more hours during the pandemic

What's happened to the number of hours you work in the pandemic?

I've worked more hours	61.3%
I've worked the same hours	23.4%
I've worked fewer hours	15.4%

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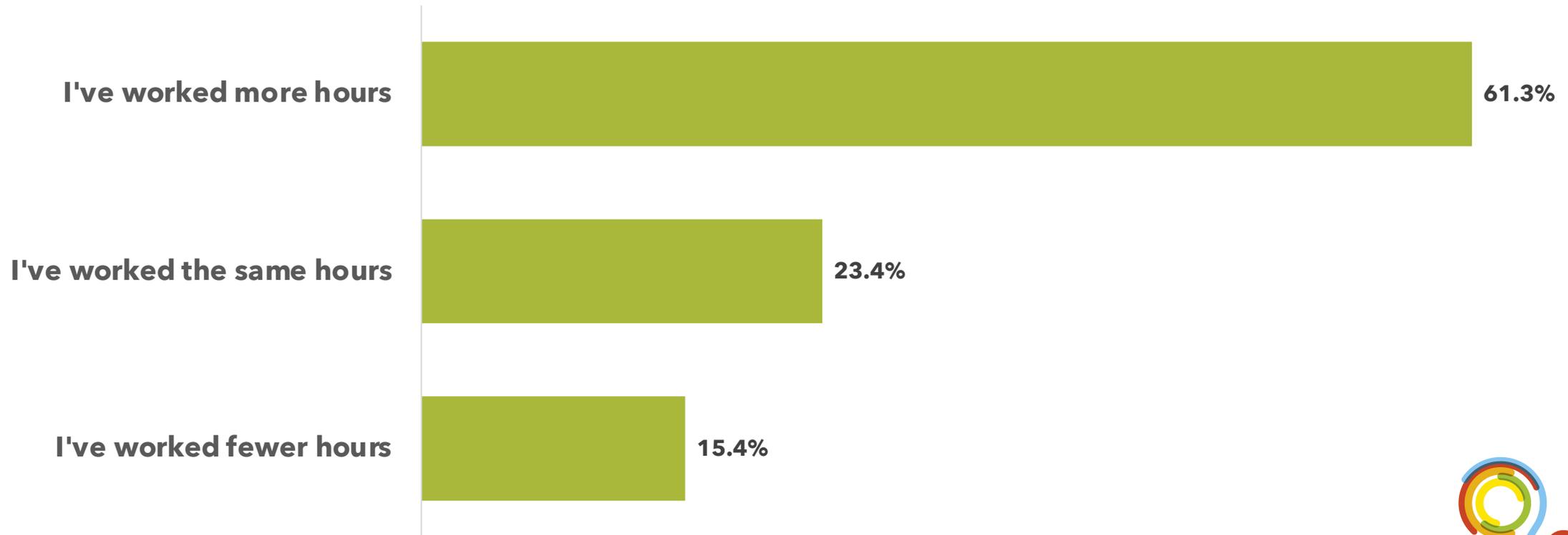
Many have struggled to maintain work / life boundaries

How have you coped with work / life boundaries during the pandemic?

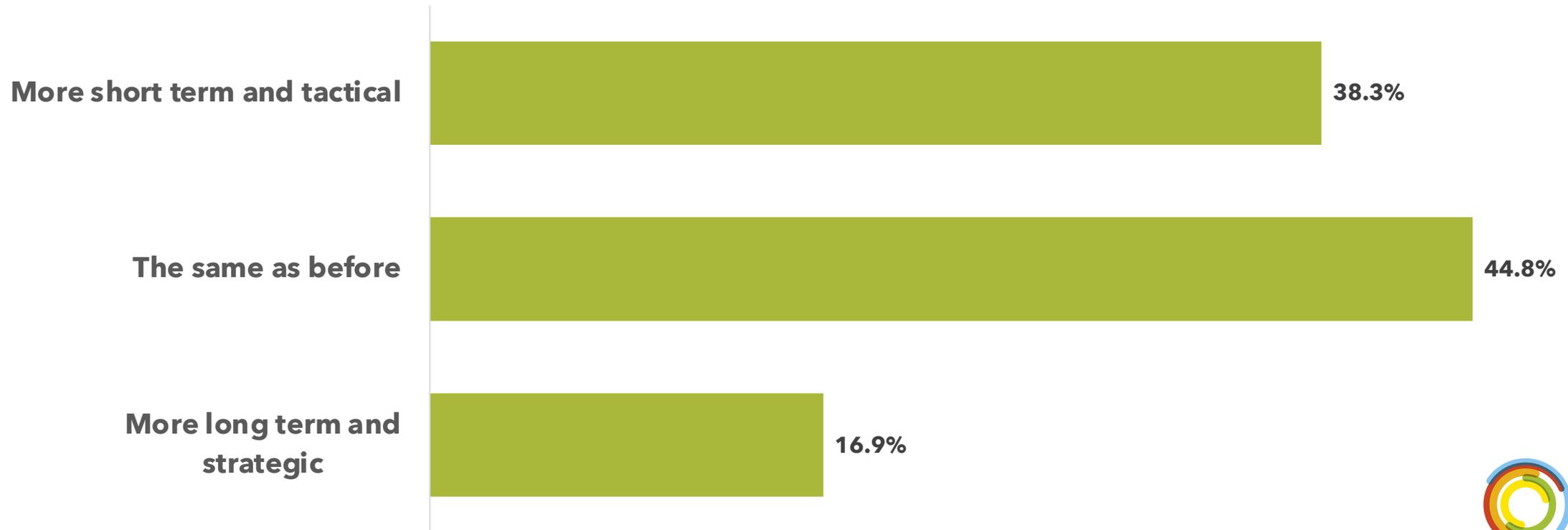|	
I've struggled with boundaries	64.7%
My experience hasn't changed	6.8%
I've handled them well	28.5%

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Most Planners have found doing their jobs more challenging during the pandemic

How challenging have you found your job during the pandemic?

More than before	64.4%
The same	28.2%
Less than before	7.4%

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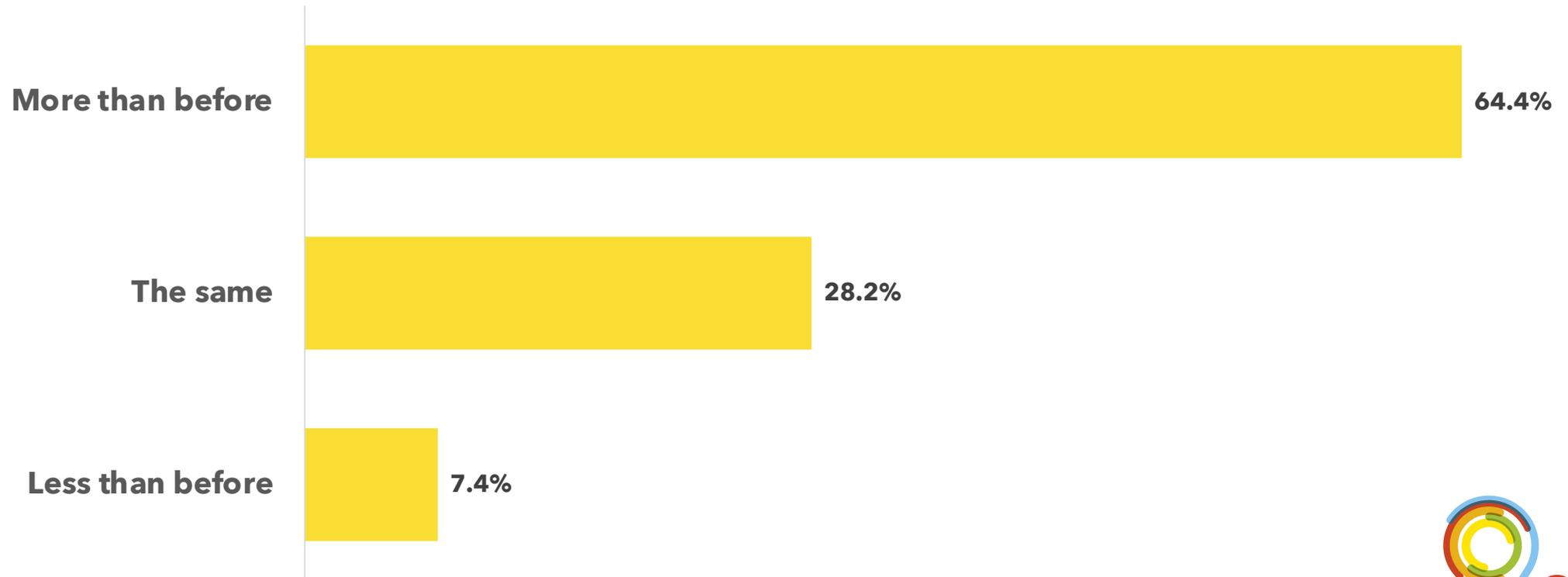
And the planning they've been doing has been slightly more short-term and tactical

Which of the following best describes the planning you've been asked to do during the pandemic?

Category	Percentage
More short term and tactical	38.3%
The same as before	44.8%
More long term and strategic	16.9%

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What's been the biggest loss to you as a Planner throughout the pandemic?

'The pandemic has eroded the shoulders of your day. The grey bits when you can noodle and think. The moments when you are exposed to new stimulus and new ideas. The biggest loss has been true chunks of time to think as a result of being constantly plugged into the matrix.'
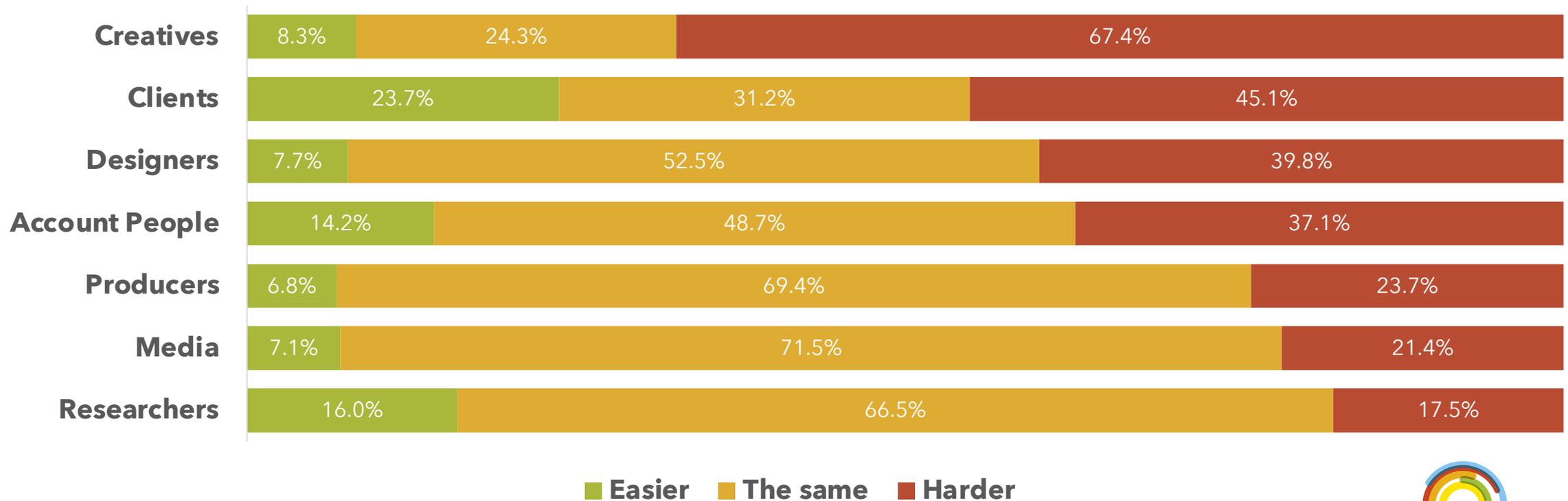
'I'm doing my job in a vacuum'

Lost is the essential interaction and collaboration with peers that is at the heart of developing better strategies and ideas; the serendipitous insights and ideas you get from informal discussion and just being around other people.
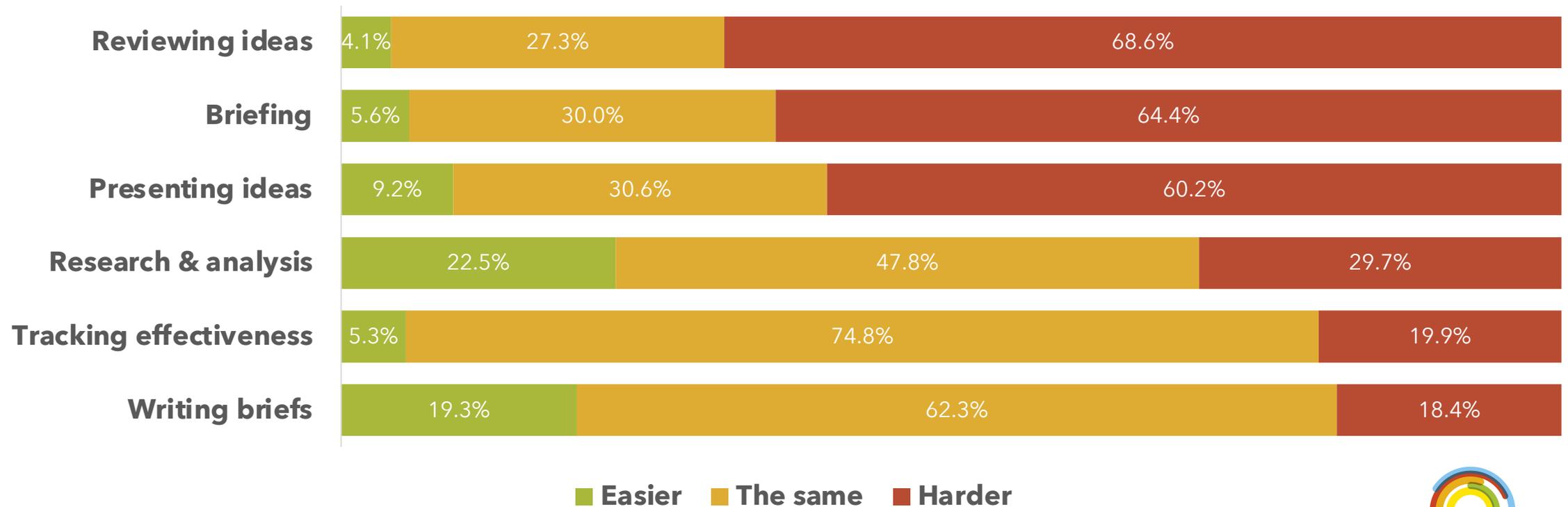
Creatives are the colleagues Planners have found it hardest to work with during the pandemic

Has it become easier or harder to work with the following colleagues during the pandemic?

| Colleague	Easier	The same	Harder
Creatives	8.3%	24.3%	67.4%
Clients	23.7%	31.2%	45.1%
Designers	7.7%	52.5%	39.8%
Account People	14.2%	48.7%	37.1%
Producers	6.8%	69.4%	23.7%
Media	7.1%	71.5%	21.4%
Researchers	16.0%	66.5%	17.5%

Easier ▪ The same ▪ Harder

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And briefing, reviewing and presenting ideas are the things Planners have found it harder to do

Have the following elements of planning become easier or harder during the pandemic?

	Easier	The same	Harder
Reviewing ideas	4.1%	27.3%	68.6%
Briefing	5.6%	30.0%	64.4%
Presenting ideas	9.2%	30.6%	60.2%
Research & analysis	22.5%	47.8%	29.7%
Tracking effectiveness	5.3%	74.8%	19.9%
Writing briefs	19.3%	62.3%	18.4%

■ Easier ■ The same ■ Harder

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Planners have also felt less connected to their peers

Have you felt more or less connected to your fellow Planners during the pandemic?

Less connected than before — 61.4%

About the same — 18.4%

More connected than before — 20.2%
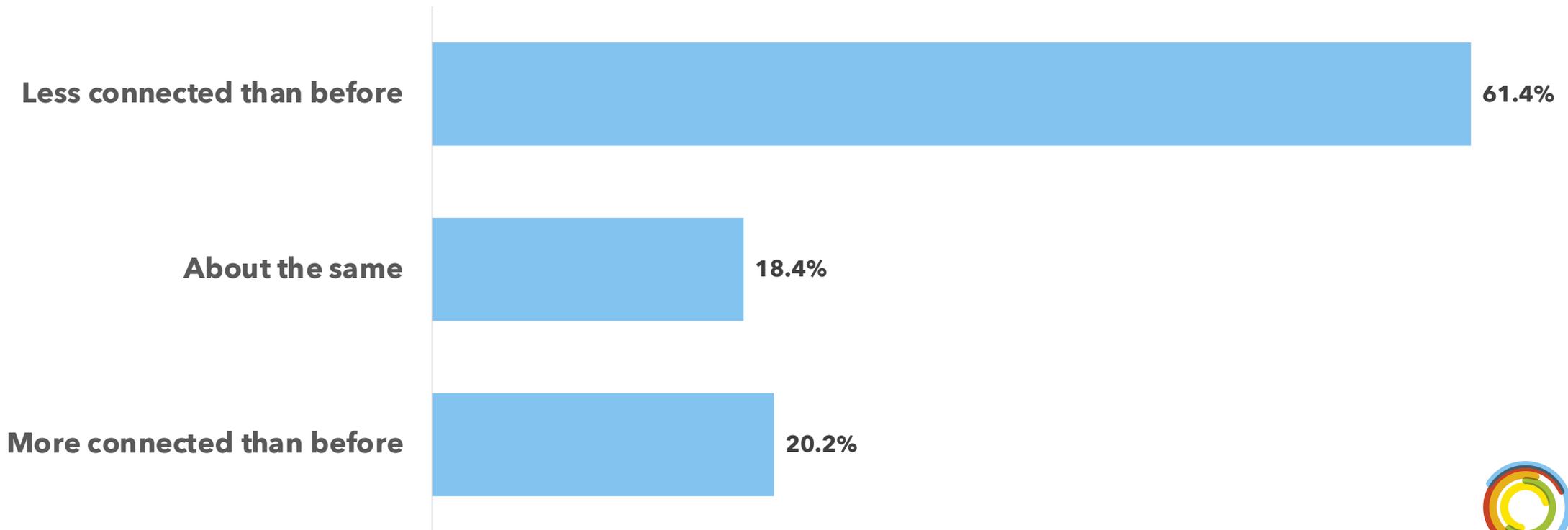
What's been the biggest loss to you as a Planner throughout the pandemic?

'I miss bouncing ideas off people who are around in the office. Sometimes it feels like I'm doing my job in a vacuum. I feel planners get to some of their best ideas by talking about them with others and letting people poke holes, offer new takes on it, etc. in passing. On that note, being stuck at home has meant less creative inputs / experiences in day to day life - no more improv class, no more stumbling upon a cool pop up or book, no more meeting strangers who talk your ear off about their ideas, weird passion, etc. I've had to get inventive with inspiration and inputs.'

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What's been the biggest loss to you as a Planner throughout the pandemic?

'Being around other brilliant people to learn from also the culture of an agency - when you're in the office you feel part of something. It's vibrant. There's atmosphere. but at home, I might as well be a robot - churning out decks, writing briefs, giving creative feedback. It makes you realise how important the context is to the content of your job and takes away the core reason I chose advertising. It feels like what being a management consultant must be like but just on half the salary.'
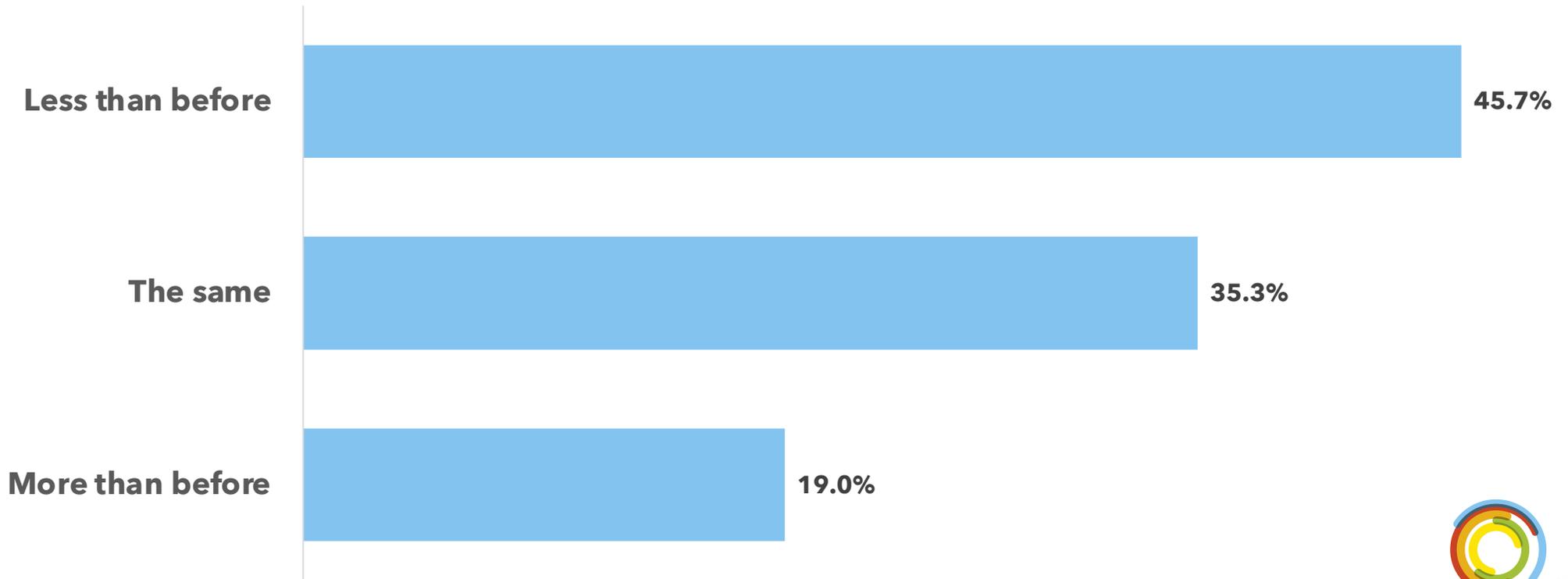
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For some Planners, work now matters less

Is work less or more important to you than it was before the pandemic?

Less important	34.7%
The same	44.8%
More important	20.5%

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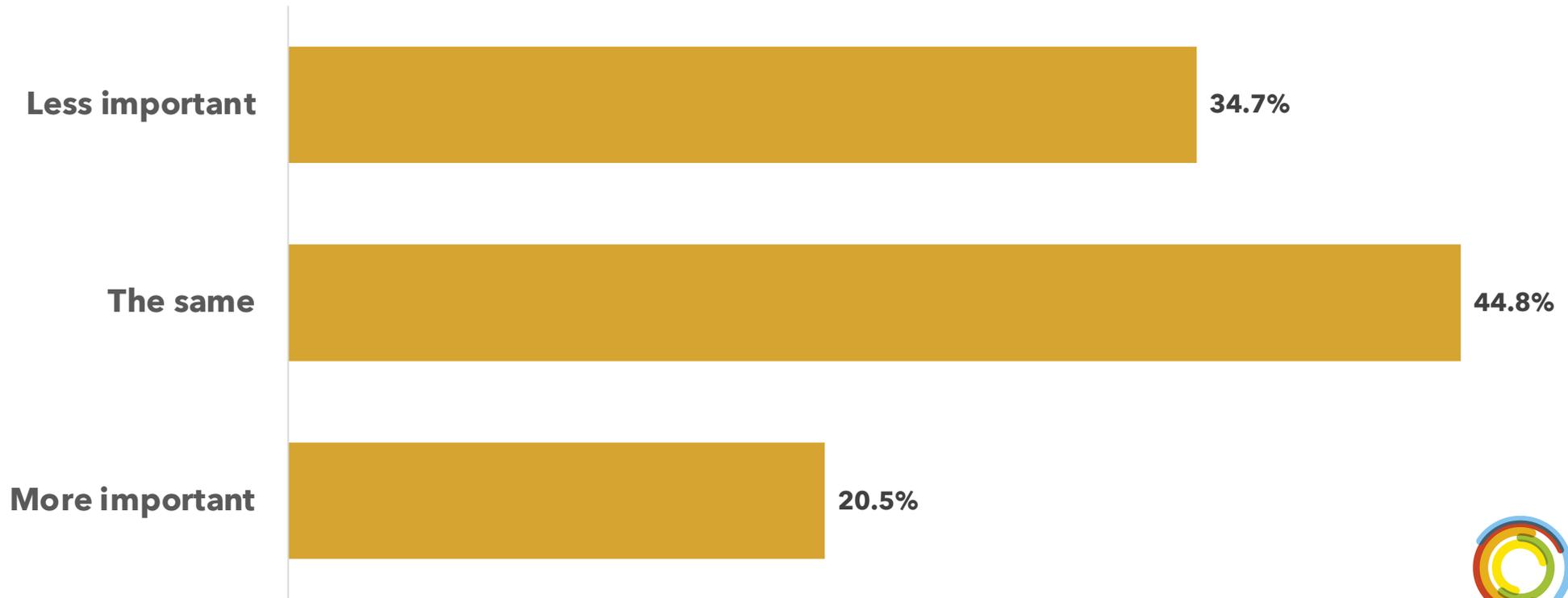
On balance, Planners say doing the job has been less enjoyable

How much have you enjoyed your job during the pandemic?

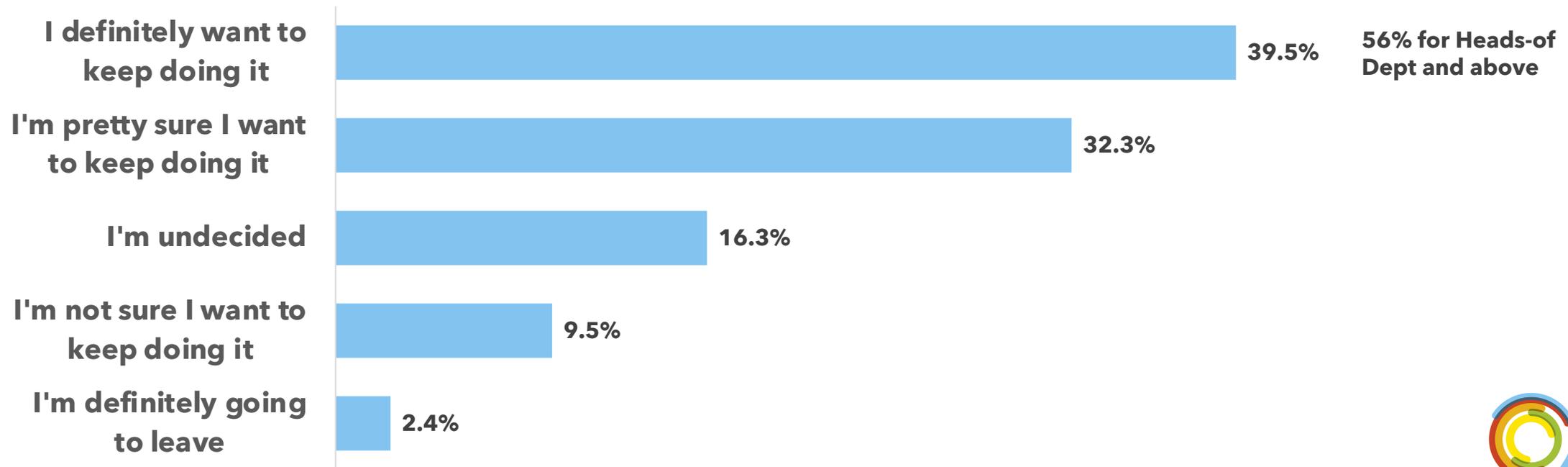| Category	Percentage
Less than before	45.7%
The same	35.3%
More than before	19.0%

More than half say that the pandemic has affected their long-term career plans, especially more junior Planners

Has the pandemic affected your long-term career plans?

Yes — 52.8%

No — 47.2%

61% below Planning Director level

65% for Planners who identify as an ethnicity other than white

Most plan to remain in the discipline after the pandemic, but a quarter are unsure about staying

How has the pandemic affected your desire to remain a planner in the future?

Response	Percentage
I definitely want to keep doing it	39.5% — 56% for Heads-of Dept and above
I'm pretty sure I want to keep doing it	32.3%
I'm undecided	16.3%
I'm not sure I want to keep doing it	9.5%
I'm definitely going to leave	2.4%

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Why are you thinking of leaving planning / the industry?

'The pandemic has put things into perspective and helped me evaluate what's most important in life. For one, work life balance has become a top priority for my future career. Burnout and being over-worked is no longer something I glamorize. Balance and self care and prioritizing mental health, family and the people I love have all become more important to me during this crisis.'

Why are you thinking of leaving planning / the industry?

'It's ultimately just advertising. There's a lot to like about it. But I feel like I could want to do more or different.'

This is a unique moment in time

There is an opportunity, and a need, to use the changes the pandemic has wrought to make things better

How?

1. Recognise and reward the resilience and resourcefulness Planners have shown

In the crucible of the pandemic Planners have rapidly learned new and useful skills like on-line research and brainstorms, improved time management, inventive and faster ways of working and better writing, presenting and pitching. Coming out of the pandemic these new abilities need to be recognised and rewarded.

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What new planning skills have you learned during the pandemic that you want to keep afterwards?

'Independence and resourcefulness. I was already used to managing my own time and work before so was well prepared on one level, but this has taken it to the next level.'

Most planners feel they have been given more responsibility during the pandemic

How much responsibility have you been given during the pandemic?
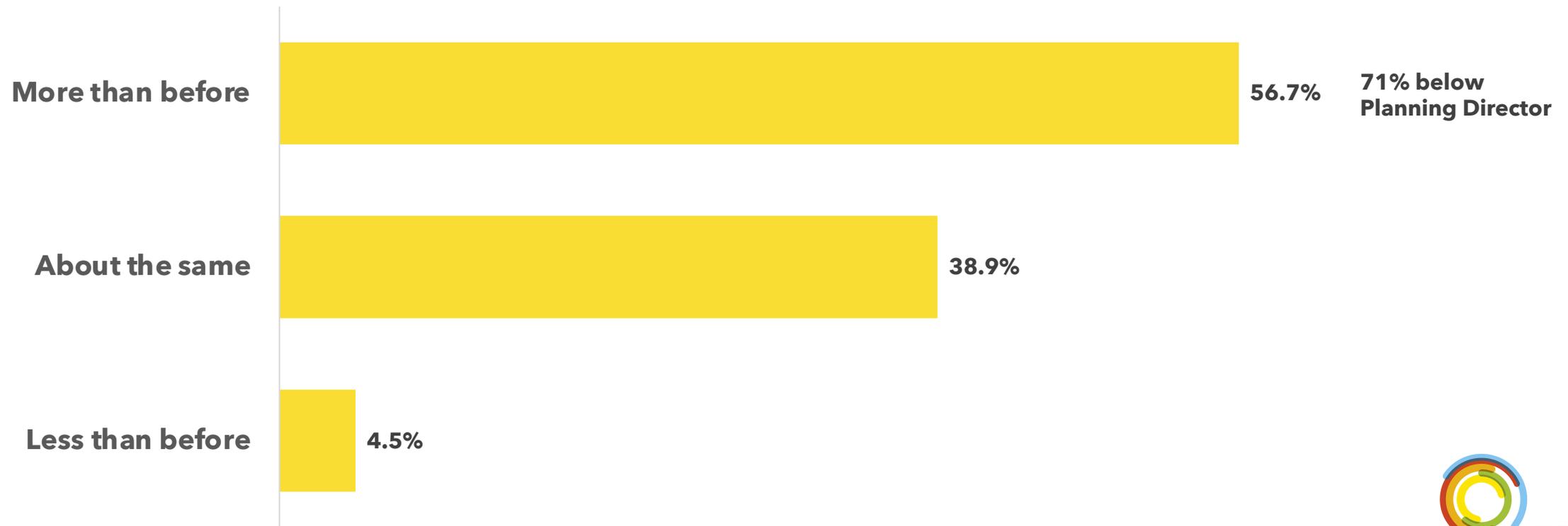
More than before	56.7% **71% below Planning Director**
About the same	38.9%
Less than before	4.5%

What new planning skills have you learned during the pandemic that you want to keep afterwards?

'Being put in a position where I'm encouraged to test and try new skill sets, especially as a junior planner - so being given more responsibility over writing briefs and running research groups, for example.'

What new planning skills have you learned during the pandemic that you want to keep afterwards?

'I have learned several new ways to run virtual workshops - and been forced to think through what works and what doesn't in different environments.'

What new planning skills have you learned during the pandemic that you want to keep afterwards?

'Simplification. We've realised that pitching remotely is challenging to hold the attention and engagement of people is much tougher for longer periods; so we're challenging ourselves more to 'take stuff out' and keep things simpler and more direct.'

But these new skills haven't always translated into more rapid progression

How fast do you feel you've been progressing as a Planner during the pandemic?

Slower than before — 28.2% — 34% below Planning Director

About the same — 42.4%

Faster than before — 29.4% — 35% below Planning Director

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2. Let Planners work in the way that suits them best

Having the space and flexibility to work in the way which suits you best and time for quiet reflection and thinking have been highly valued during the pandemic, and are critical to retain for many Planners. It simply helps them do their jobs better.

What aspects of planning in the pandemic do you want to keep hold of afterwards?

'Distance. Being able to work in solitude or control my environment, at least for a few days a week, has made me a better planner. I've been better able to carve out space and time to really tackle thorny problems. Our work is much more effective (or likely more effective!) as a result - and our clients are happier.'

After the pandemic, Planners have a clear preference for 2-3 working days in the office

Post pandemic, how many days a week would you like to travel to your place of employment?

Category	Percentage
WFH all the time	5.9%
One	9.5%
Two	35.9%
Three	36.2%
Four	8.0%
Five	4.5%
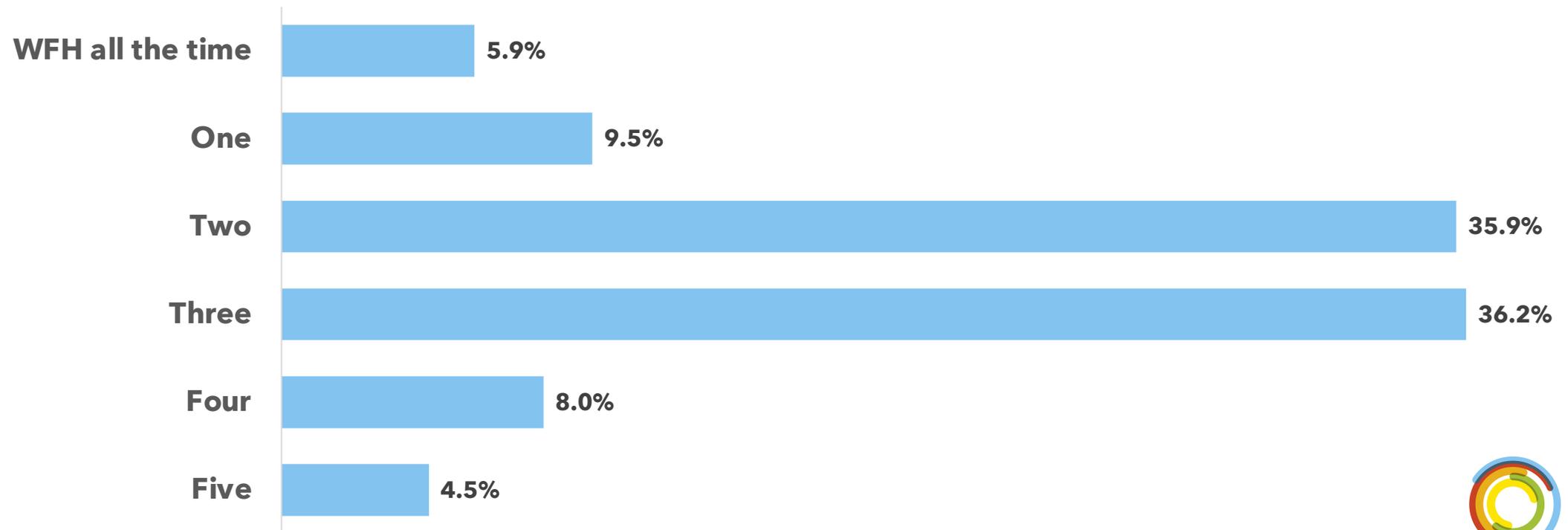
What advice do you have for planning managers following the pandemic?

'I think planners need a lot of space to think. We are strategic, but also creative. And to me, inspiration comes from living out in the world and experiencing things, so it's important to prioritize that. That being said, everyone works differently so I think just having the option to work the way you want, whether it's wfh or in an office, it's crucial to set each planner up for success by allowing them to create the work/life balance that works for them.'

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What advice do you have for planning managers following the pandemic?

'Continue to trust smart people to be smart and work hard as you were forced to in the pandemic when we all worked from home. Give them more freedom to take time off, work more flexibly and get out into the world. God knows if we didn't need to spend more time out in the world before, we definitely do now.'
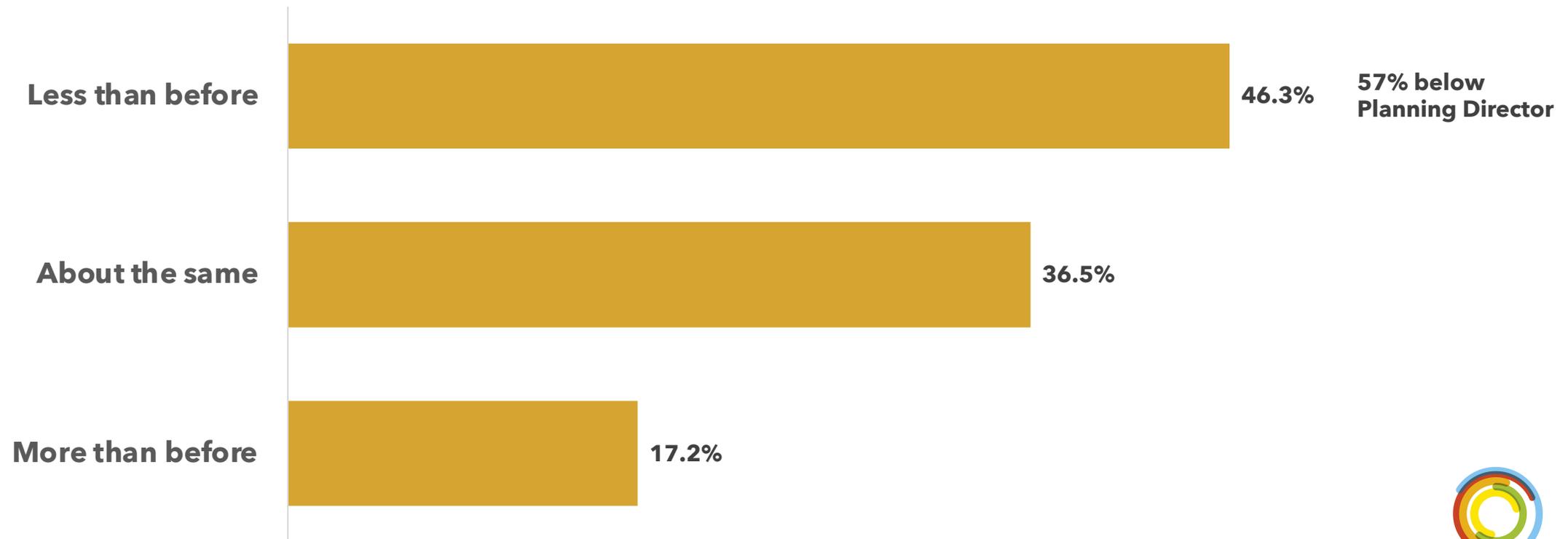
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3. Invest in training

Planners have received less training since the start of the pandemic, especially more junior members of the discipline. The response to the APG Top Talks and training programs shows the importance of continuous learning and feeling part of a planning community. Leaders must reinvest in training and development.

Most report receiving less training during the pandemic, especially more junior Planners

How much training have you received during the pandemic?

Less than before	46.3% **57% below Planning Director**
About the same	36.5%
More than before	17.2%

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In what way has the APG been valuable to you during the pandemic?

'In the absence of any management, training or development in the planning team, it's been a huge help to proactively learn and refresh knowledge.'

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In what way has the APG been valuable to you during the pandemic?

'The talks and the planning community helped keep me going. It was important to know everyone else was going through similar challenges.'

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4. Show empathy for the different experiences of different Planners

Different Planners have had very different experiences of the pandemic. Agencies need to keep 'checking in on, not checking up on' Planners and managing them more personally moving forward.

The pandemic has affected the mental health of most Planners either positively or negatively

How would you rate your mental health throughout the pandemic?

Rating	Percentage
Excellent	5.9%
Good	29.1%
Unchanged	22.6%
Poor	36.8%
Terrible	5.6%

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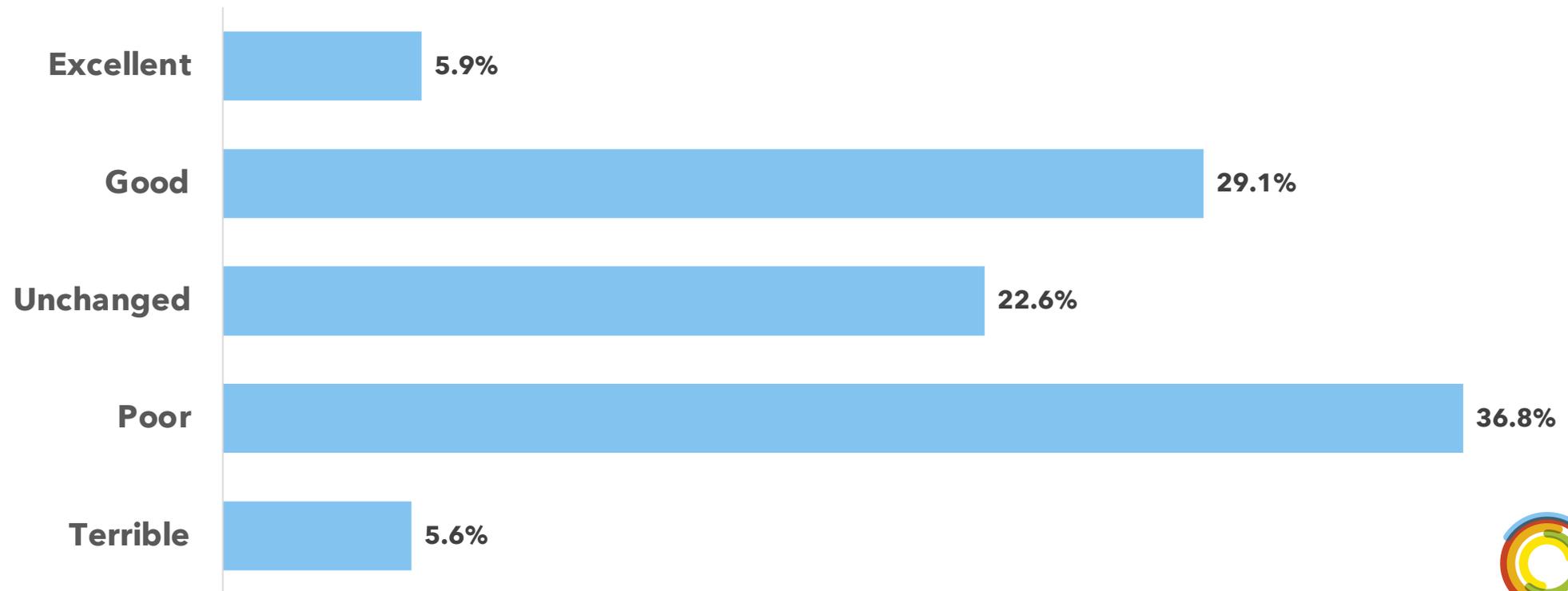
Many Planners feel they have been managed about the same throughout the pandemic, but around 30% say worse

How do you feel you've been managed and supported during the pandemic?

Better than before	18.1%
About the same	51.0%
Worse than before	30.9%

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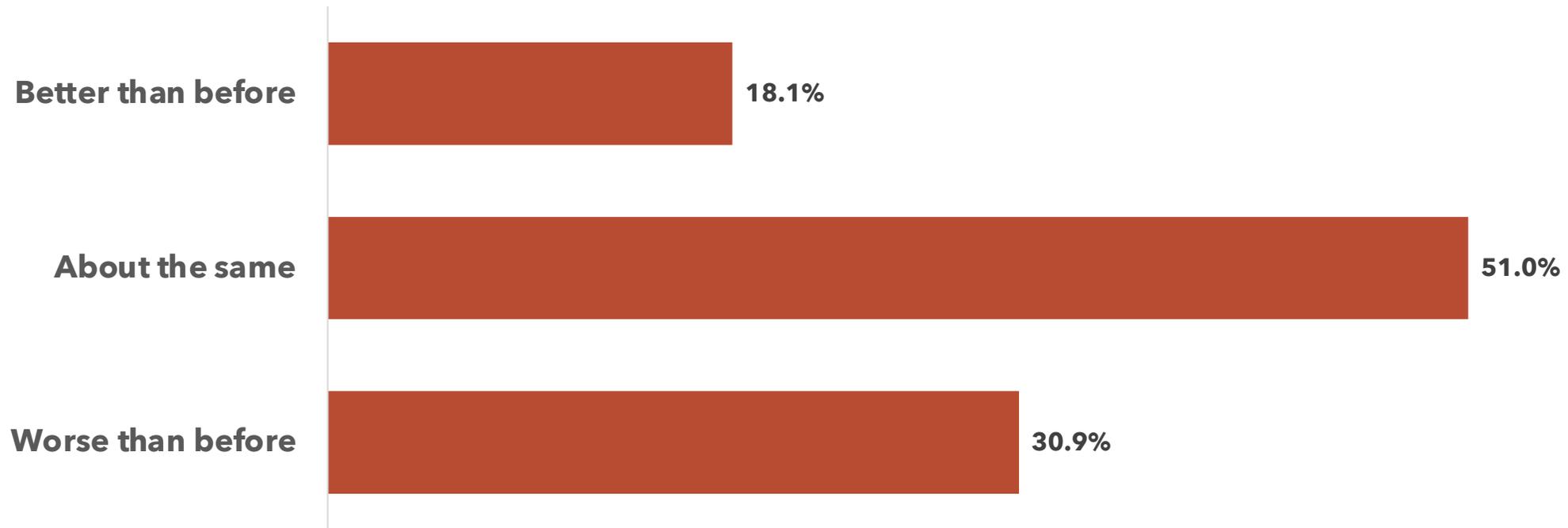
Planners from minorities are less likely to feel that diversity and inclusion is high enough on the discipline's agenda

Do you feel diversity and inclusion has been high enough on the planning agenda during the pandemic?

Yes — 52.8%

No — 47.2% **56% for Planners who identify as an ethnicity other than white**

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What advice do you have for planning managers following the pandemic?

'I think agencies hide behind open bars, "fun" culture or awards to make working in adland worth it - but I think we can make it a better and healthier experience by just simply taking care of the people who are in the building. Asking how they are. Creating space for work-life balance. Giving people a clear path for growth!'

What advice do you have for planning managers following the pandemic?

'Check in not check up, and check in with us more often - and keep a closer track of the work load that each account is throwing out!'

5. Prove that Planning is valued

Ultimately Planners want to know that their discipline is valued by agencies and clients, and valued in the world at large. This is what we now have a chance to prove.

What advice do you have for planning managers following the pandemic?

'Given Covid has put agencies under greater cost pressures, are you a) trying to get planners to work for less with fewer resources or b) trying to get planning valued more? The future of our discipline and your department depends on you picking b!'

Thanks. We hope it was interesting.

Sample: 337 Planners

Generated through the APG database and social media.

Location - 70% in UK, 9% in USA, remaining 21% spread across 26 other countries.

Gender - 52% Male, 47% Female, 1% Non-binary or Gender Fluid.

Ethnic identity - 76% White, 7% Hispanic or Latino, 5% Asian, 5% Mixed, 2% Black, 1% Middle Eastern or Arab, 3% Other or preferred not to say.

Level - 36% Below Planning Director, 30% Planning Director, 34% Head-of-Dept or above.

Working status - 82% Employed full-time, 5% Part-time, 11% Freelance, 2% Seeking.

Planning specialisms (multi-choice) - Brand 81%, Integrated 51%, ATL 45%, Marketing 32%, Social 30%, Content 22%, Media, Design, Experiential, UX and CRM all 10% or less.

Fieldwork dates: 1st-10th March 2021

A note on additional variances

Beyond the differences highlighted, responses were very consistent for different kinds of planners. Additional deviations from the average were as follows:

- More junior Planners (below Planning Director) were slightly more likely than the average to have missed the company of their fellow Planners and be finding it harder to work with account people.

- Very senior Planners (Heads of Department and above) were slightly more likely than the average to say they have found their jobs challenging, coped well with work / life boundaries, enjoyed their jobs as much as before and experienced good mental health during the pandemic.

- Female Planners were slightly more likely to say they've worked more hours and struggled with work / life boundaries, but they were also more likely to say they'd been managed better than before the pandemic.

- And Planners who identified as being of an ethnicity other than white were more likely to report having worked longer hours than the average.

However these were all small differences and not statistically significant given our sample size.