

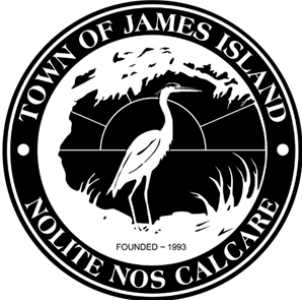


2026 SMALL BUSINESS ADVOCACY SURVEY

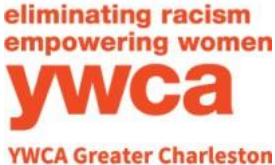
KEY FINDINGS & DATA HIGHLIGHTS

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS

2026 Local Economic Ambassador Members



2026 Advocacy & Abundance Committee Members



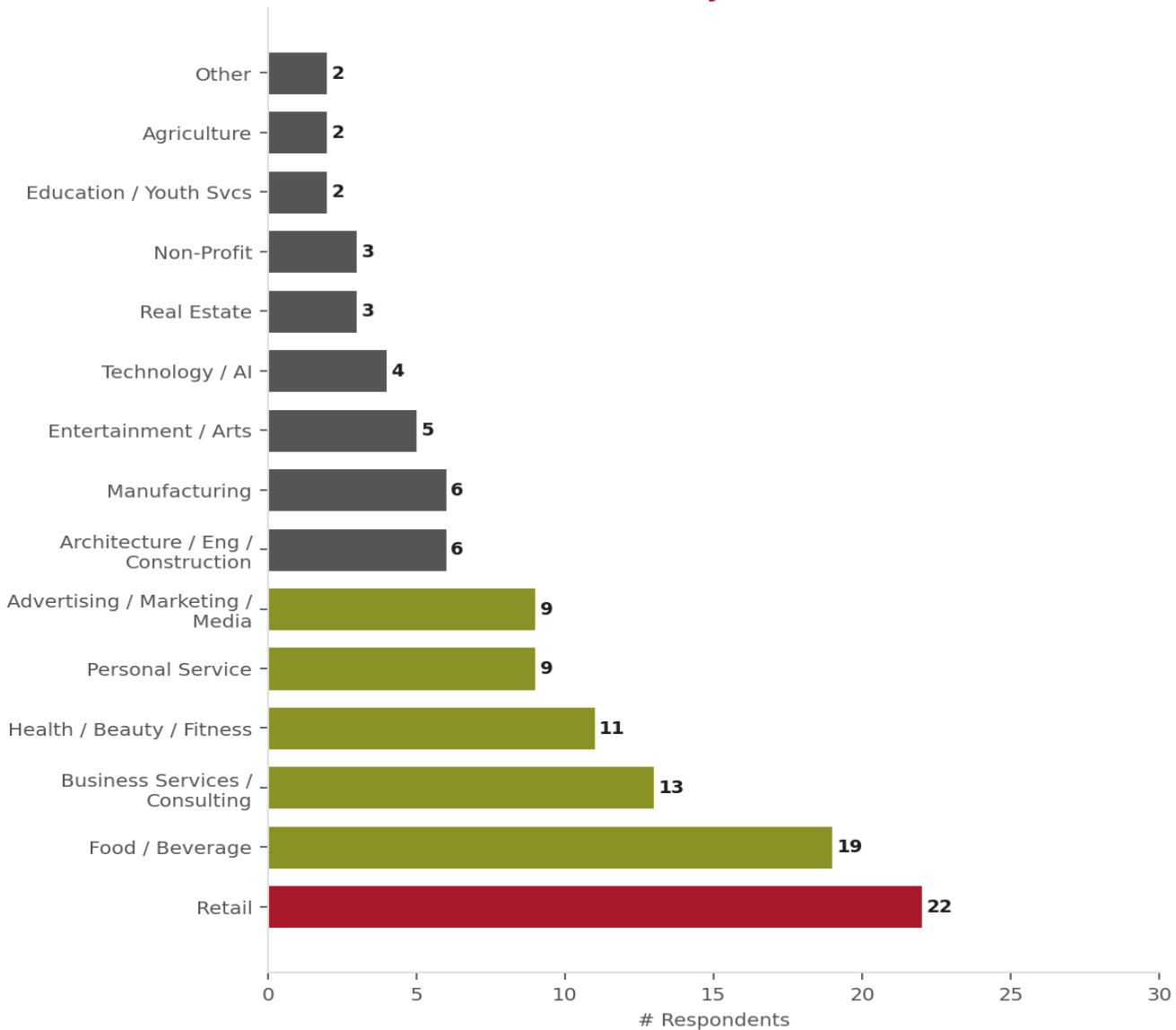
SECTION 1: WHO RESPONDED

Business demographics, industry breakdown & geographic distribution

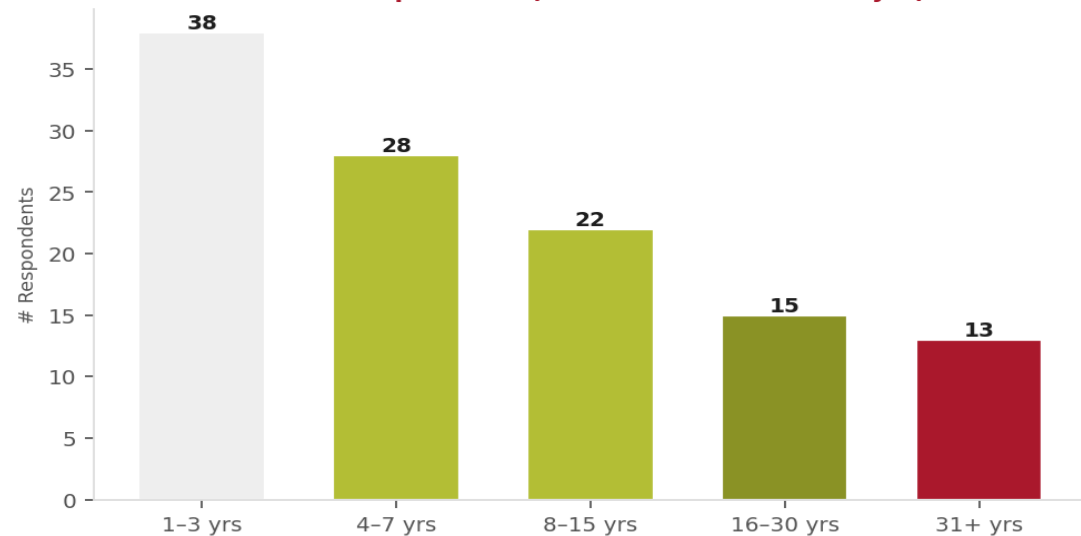
WHO RESPONDED: BUSINESS DEMOGRAPHICS

116 Qualified Local Business Owners · Tri-County Region of South Carolina

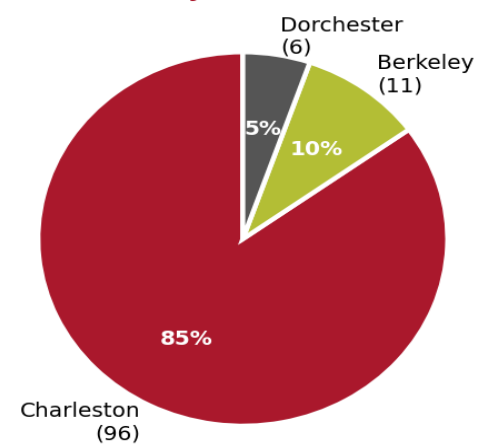
Industry Sector



Years in Operation (mean: 11.8 · median: 8 yrs)



County Distribution



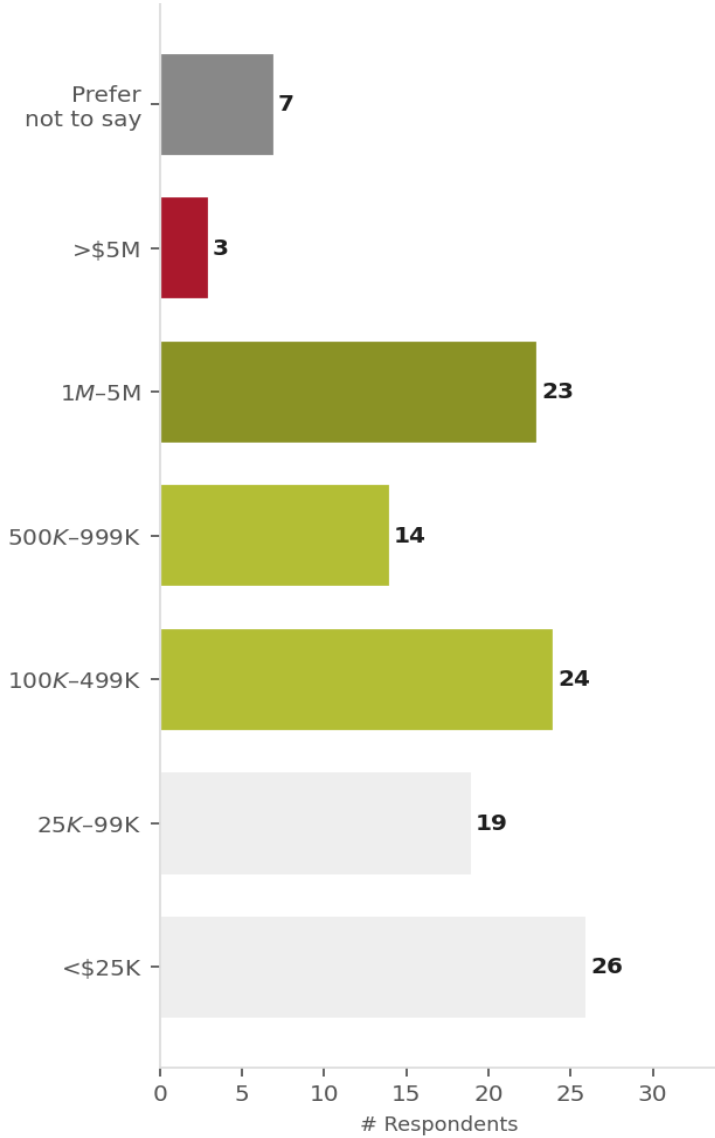
SECTION 2: REVENUE & EMPLOYMENT

Financial performance in 2025, early 2026 outlook, and workforce changes

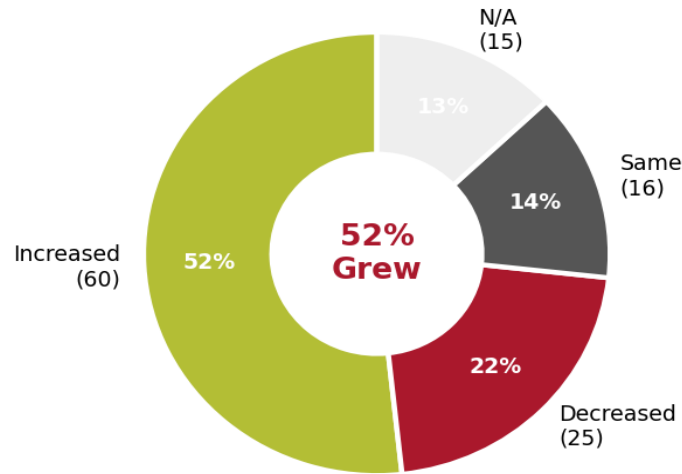
REVENUE & FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

2025 performance and early 2026 outlook

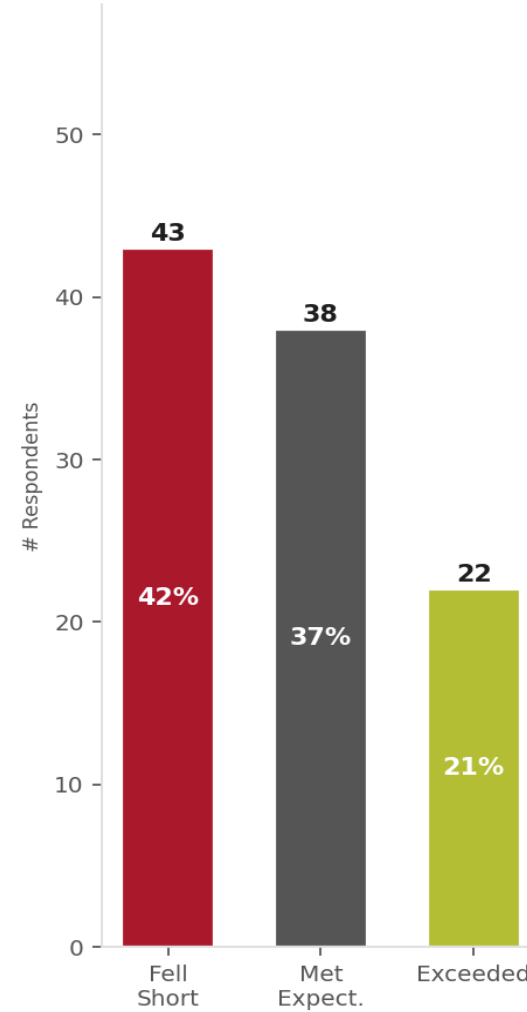
2025 Annual Revenue



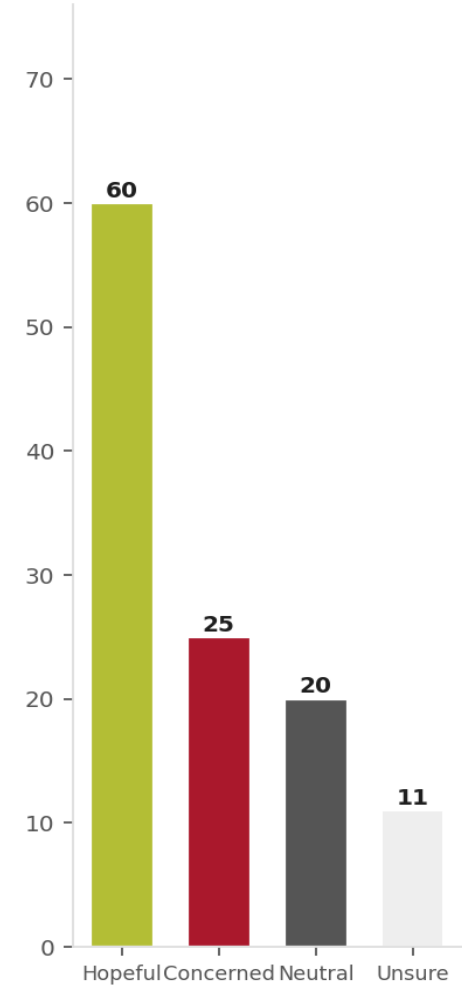
2025 Revenue vs. 2024



Q1 2026 vs. Projections



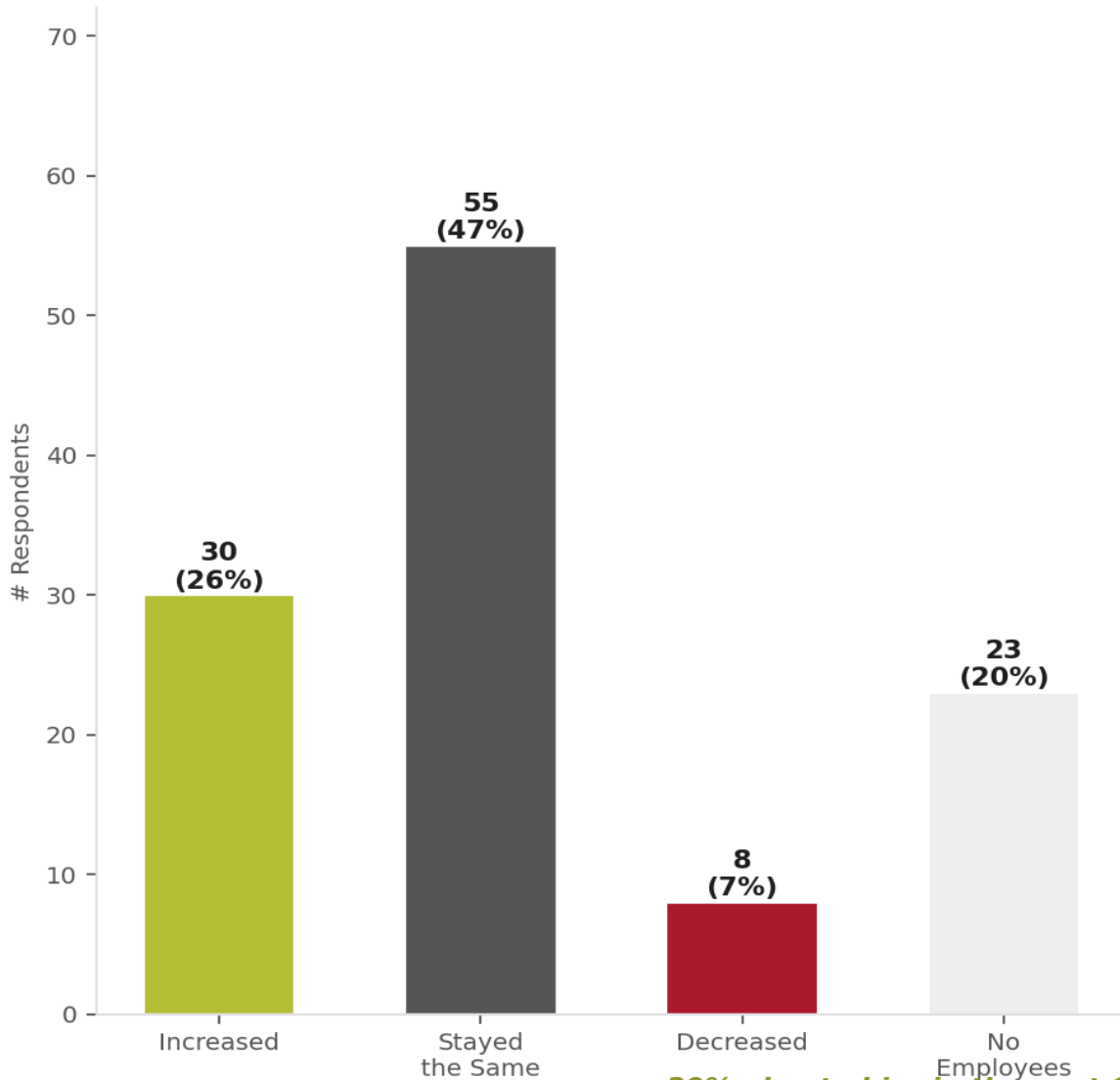
Year-End Outlook



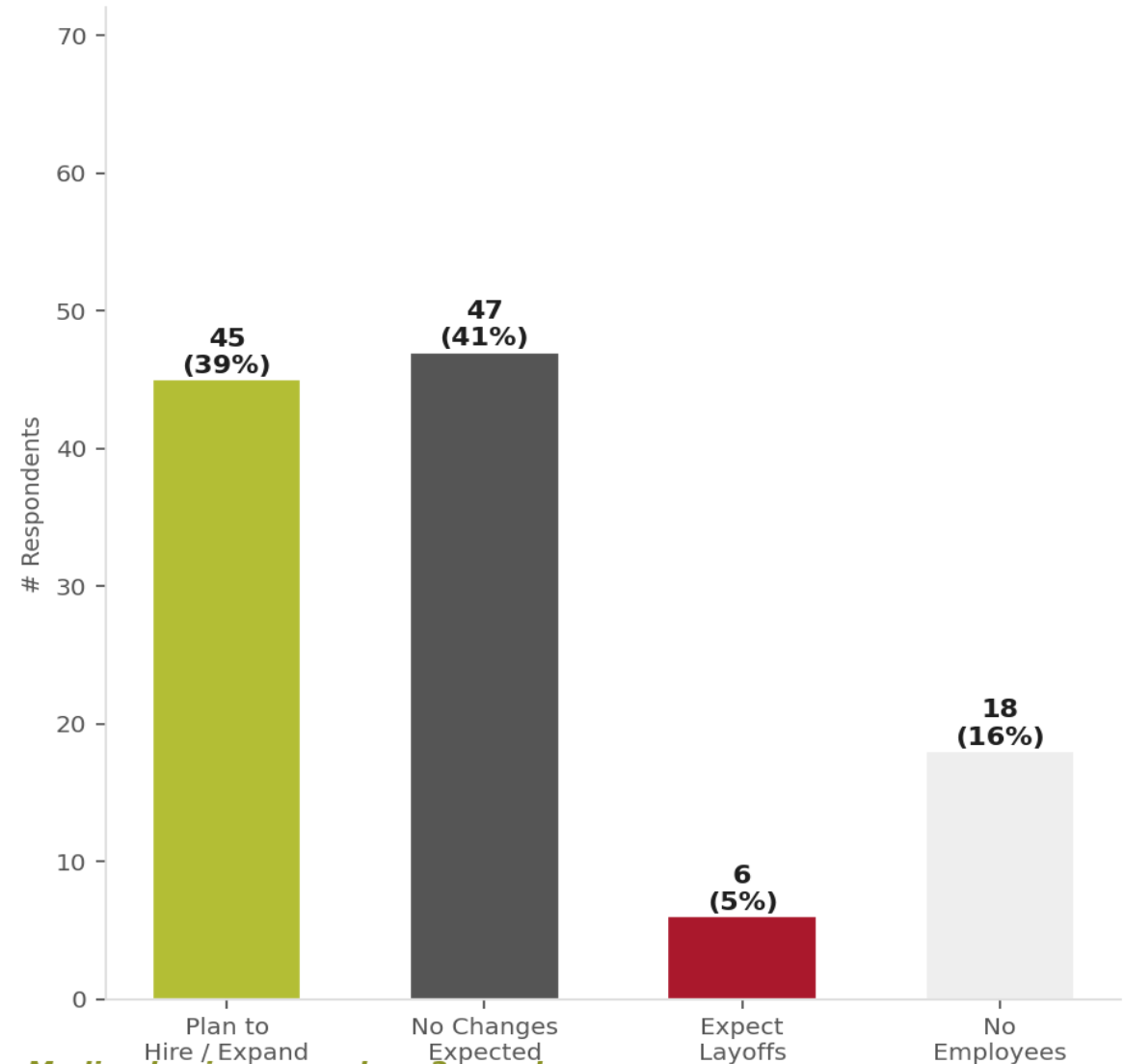
EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

Staff changes over the past 6 months and anticipated next 6 months

Past 6 Months: Employment Change



Next 6 Months: Anticipated Change



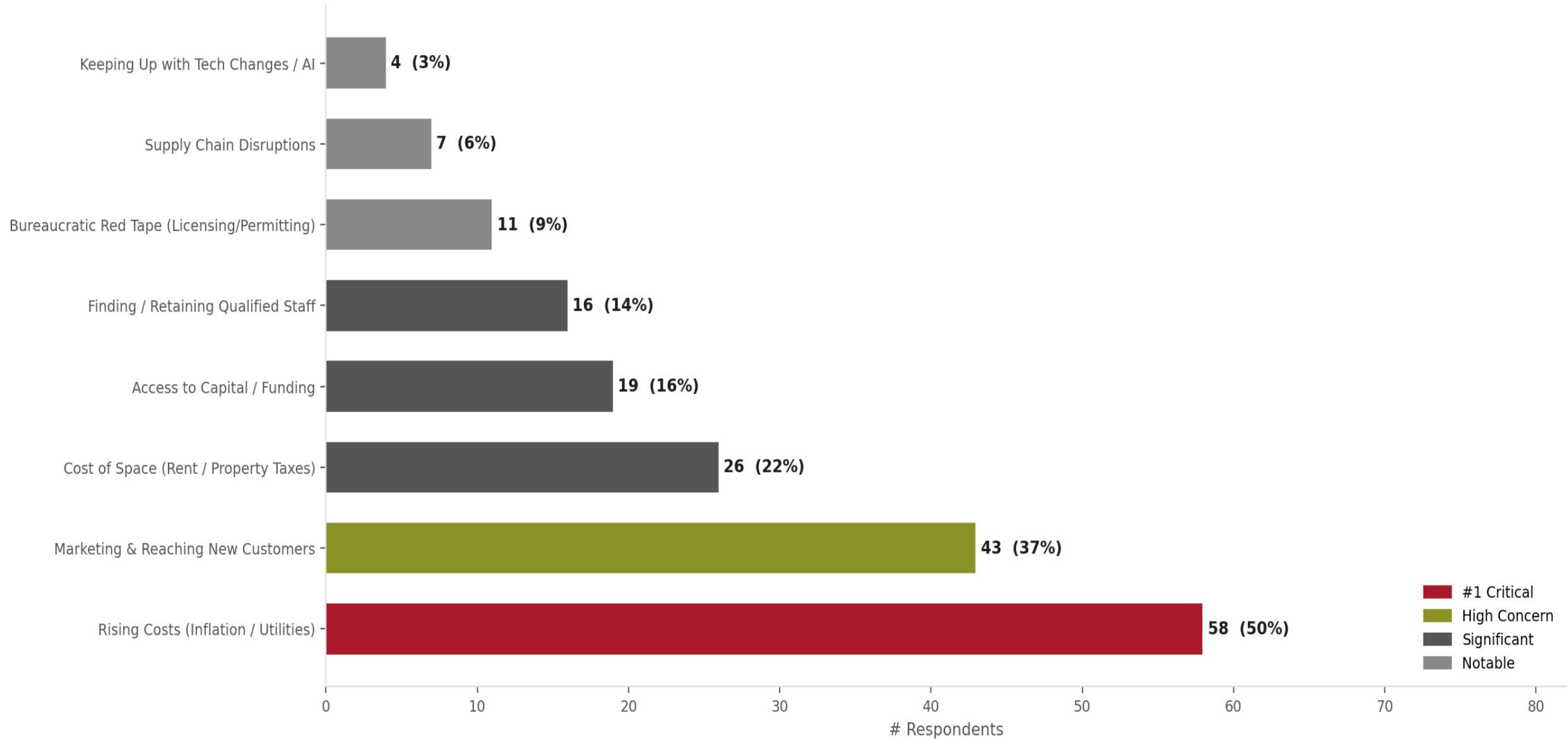
39% plan to hire in the next 6 months · Median business employs 3 people

SECTION 3: COSTS & CHALLENGES

Top business challenges, expense pain points, and the impact of rising costs

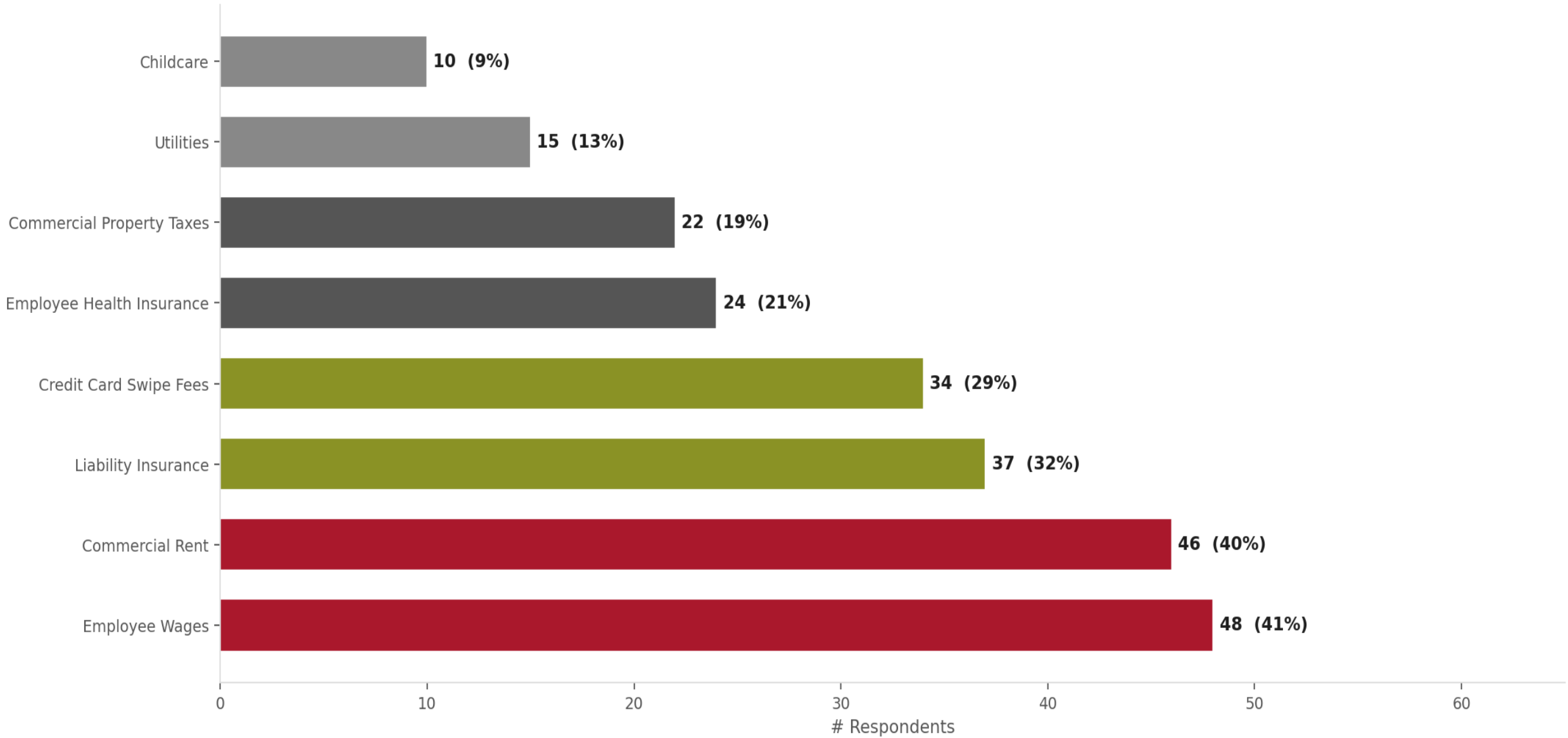
TOP CHALLENGES FACING TRI-COUNTY SMALL BUSINESSES

Select up to 2 most significant · n=116



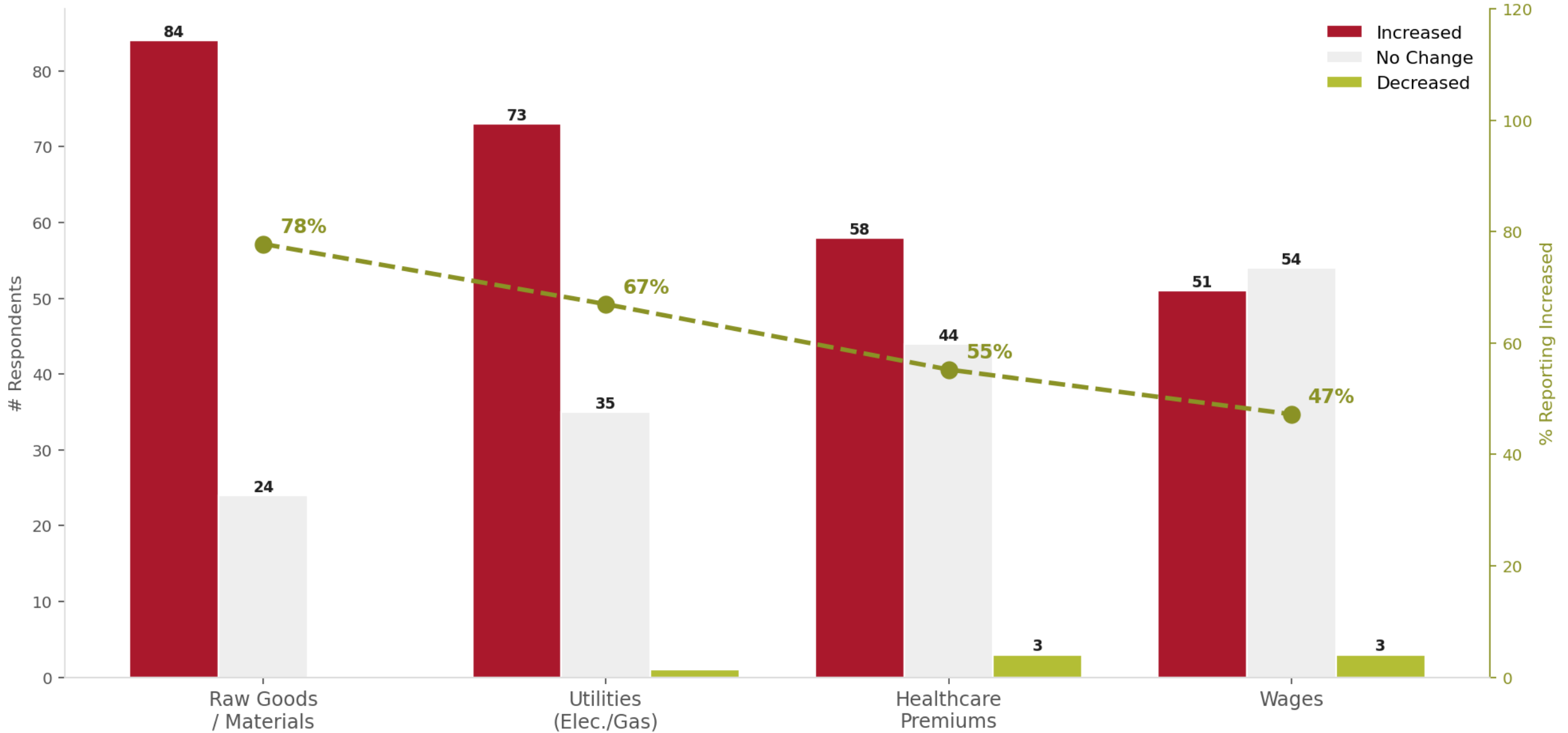
TOP BUSINESS EXPENSE PAIN POINTS

Select top 3 most painful expense categories · n=116



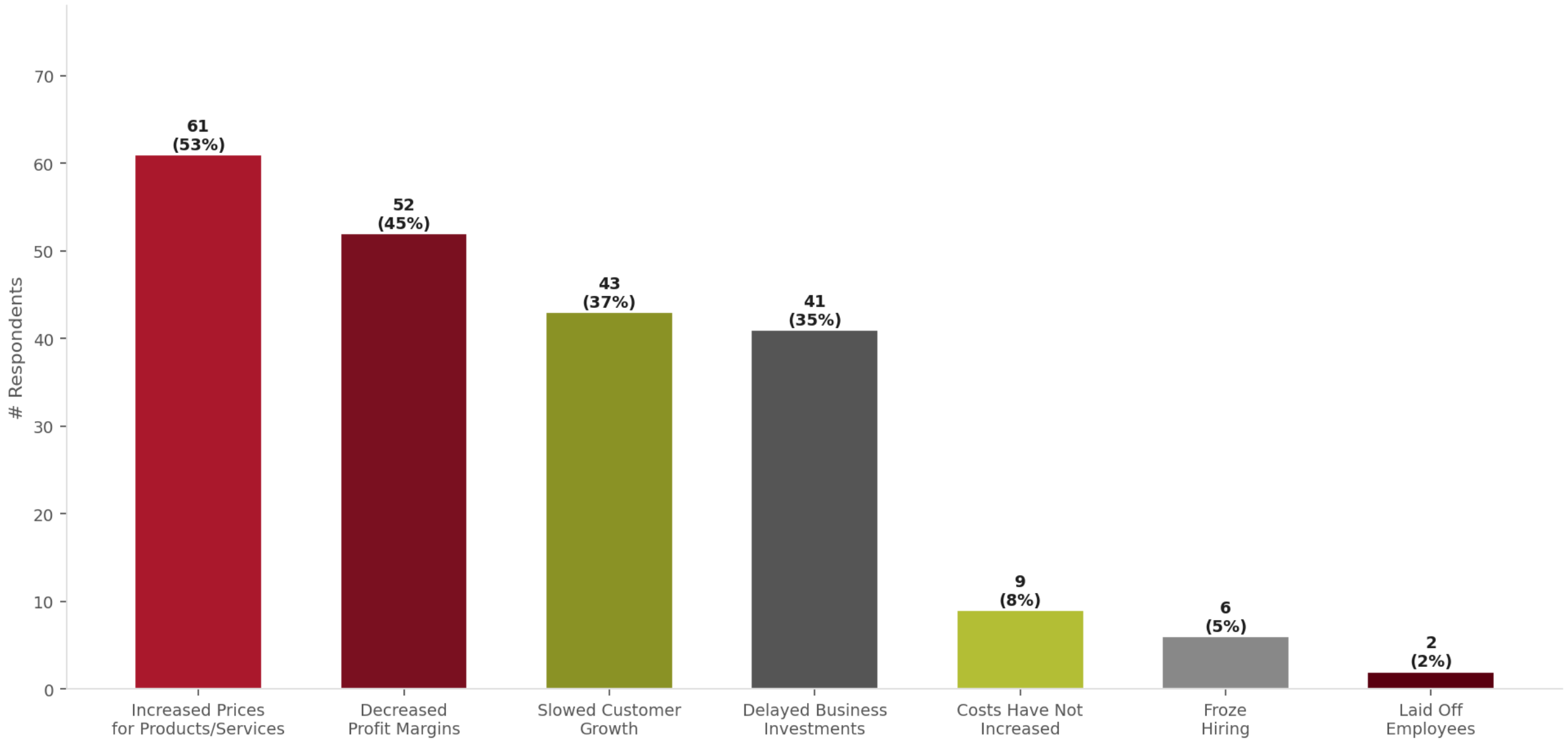
YEAR-OVER-YEAR COST TRENDS

Did these costs increase, stay the same, or decrease in the past 12 months?



HOW RISING COSTS ARE IMPACTING BUSINESSES

Actions taken or impacts experienced · Select all that apply · n=116

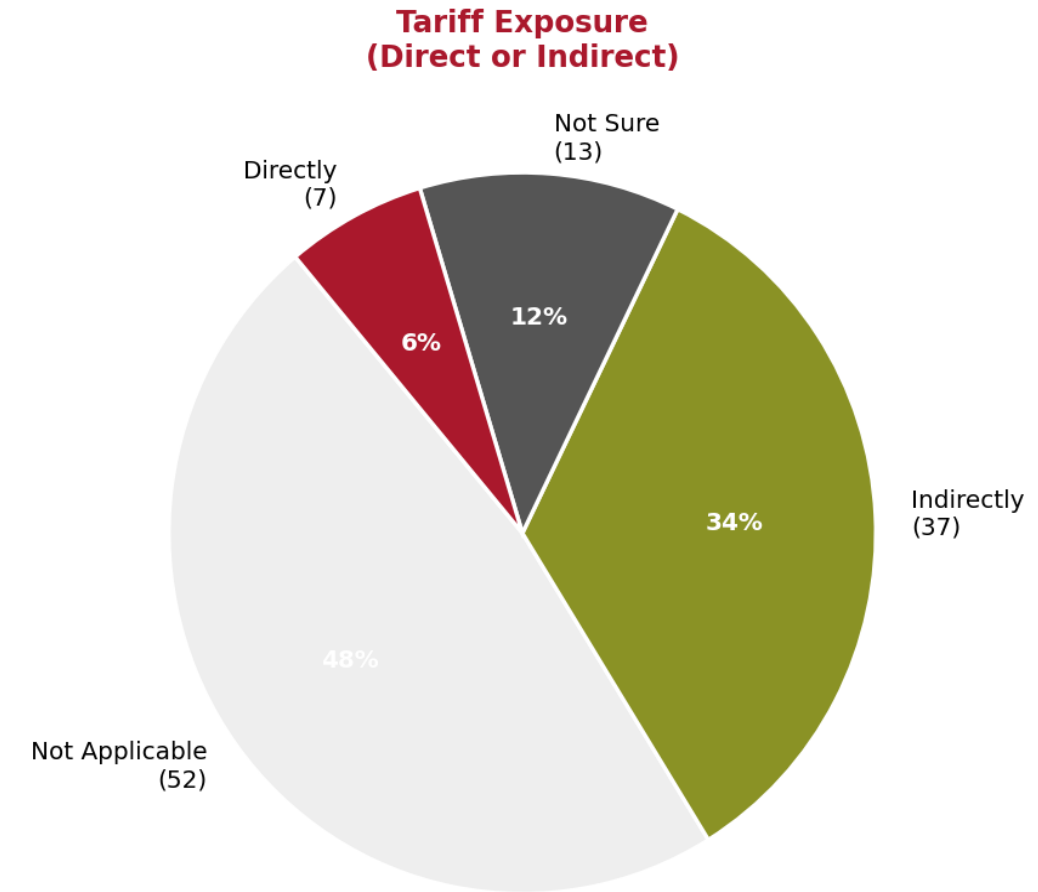
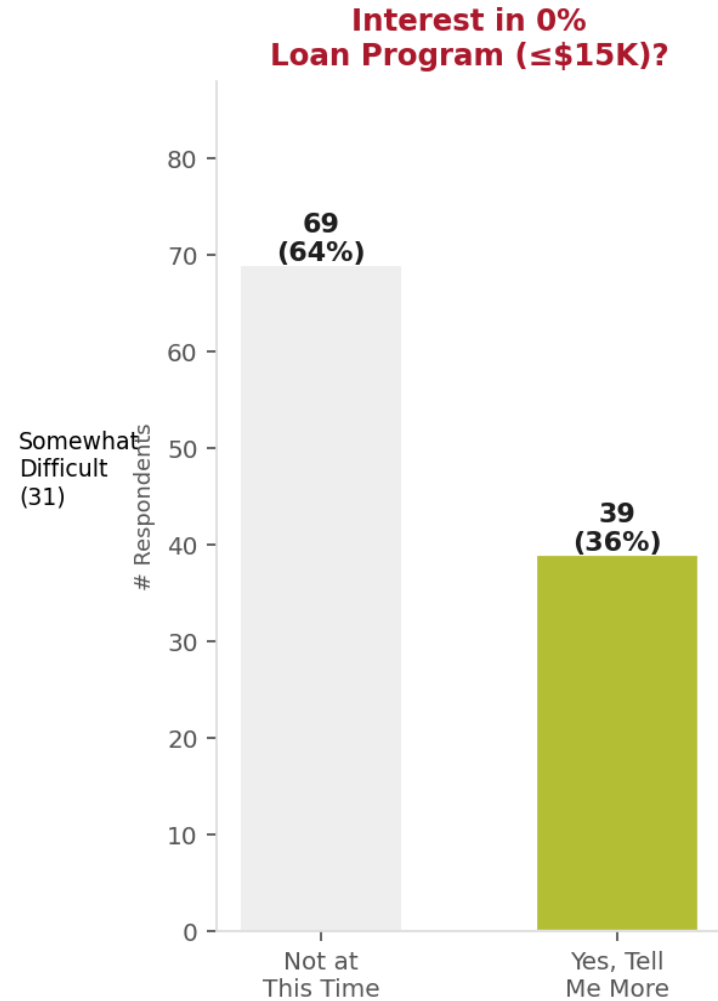
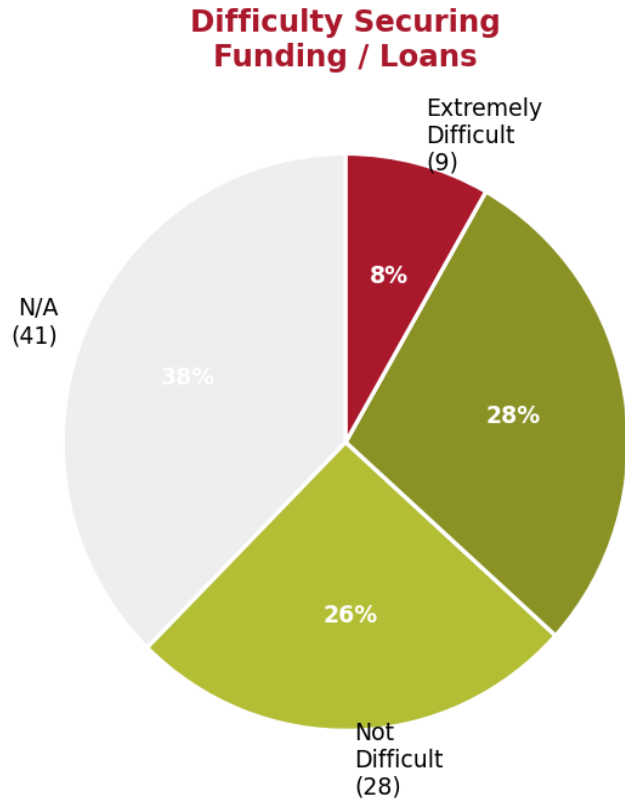


SECTION 4: CAPITAL ACCESS & TRADE POLICY

Funding difficulty, tariff exposure, and business responses to trade uncertainty

ACCESS TO CAPITAL & TARIFF EXPOSURE

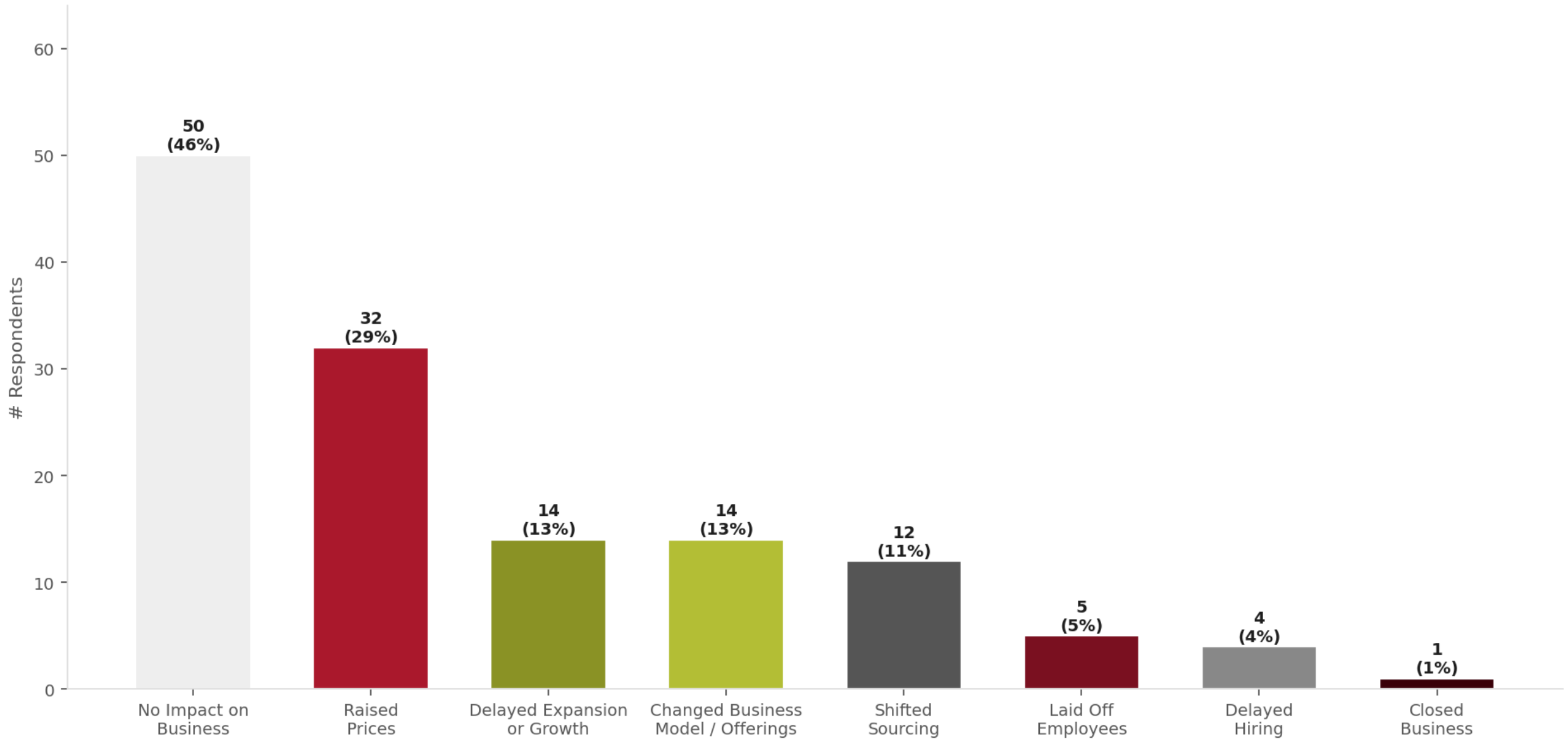
Funding difficulty and trade policy impact on local businesses



40% of businesses report some tariff exposure · 34% want to learn more about a 0% interest loan program

HOW BUSINESSES ARE RESPONDING TO TARIFFS

Actions taken due to tariff impacts · Select all that apply · n=109 applicable



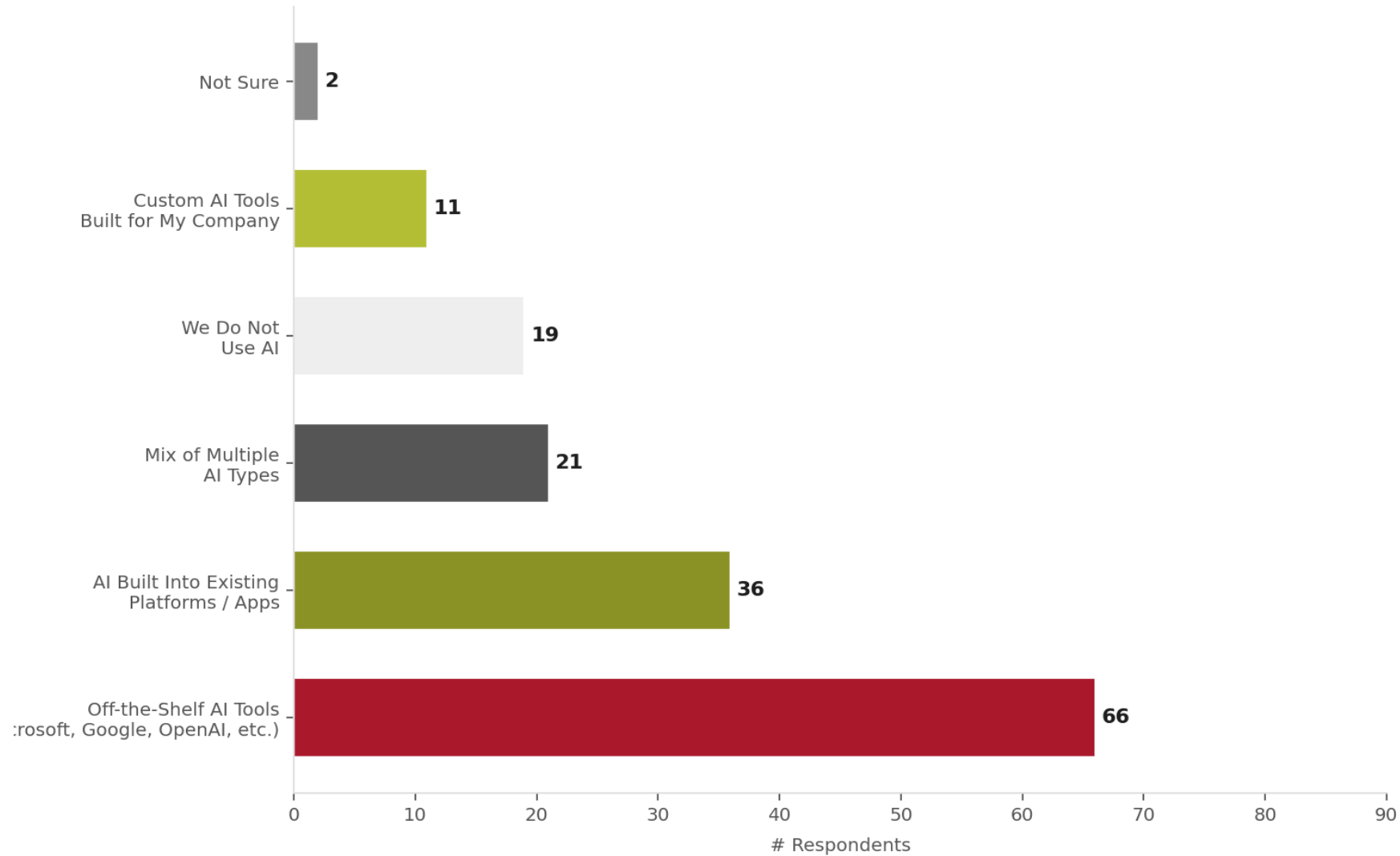
SECTION 5: WORKFORCE & TECHNOLOGY

Employee retention barriers, health benefits, and AI adoption trends

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ADOPTION

Are you currently using AI tools in your business operations? · n=109

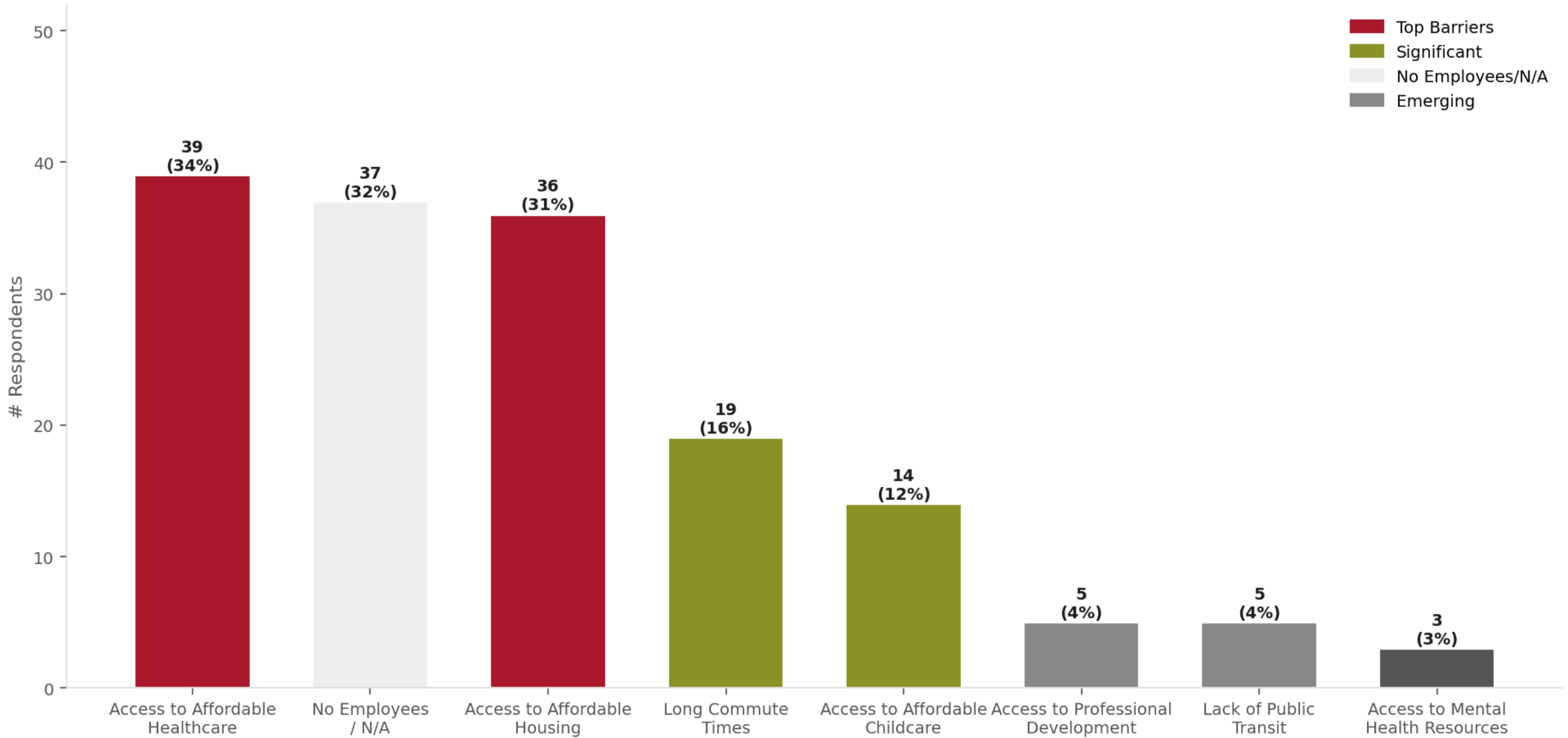
Type of AI Tools Used (select all that apply)



Off-the-shelf tools dominate among early adopters — significant opportunity for AI education & support

WORKFORCE & TALENT RETENTION BARRIERS

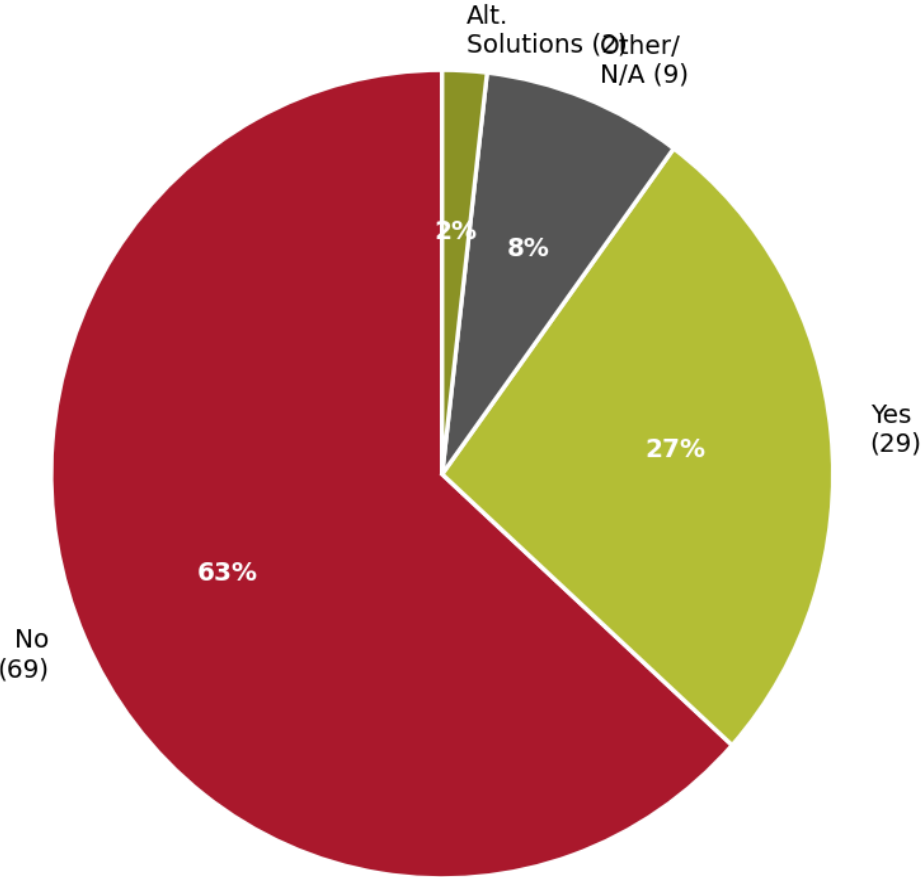
What factors make it hardest to attract and retain employees? · Select all that apply · n=116



EMPLOYEE HEALTH BENEFITS OFFERING

Do you currently offer health insurance or benefits to employees? · n=109

Currently Offer Employee Health Benefits?



Key Insights

63%
do NOT offer employee health benefits

25%
offer traditional health insurance

78%
say healthcare premiums increased year-over-year

34%
cite health insurance as top expense pain point

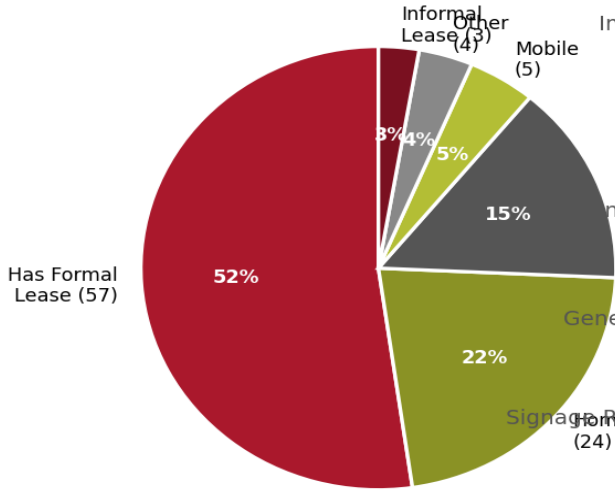
SECTION 6: REGULATORY & COMMERCIAL SPACE

Lease situations, regulatory friction, and resources businesses need

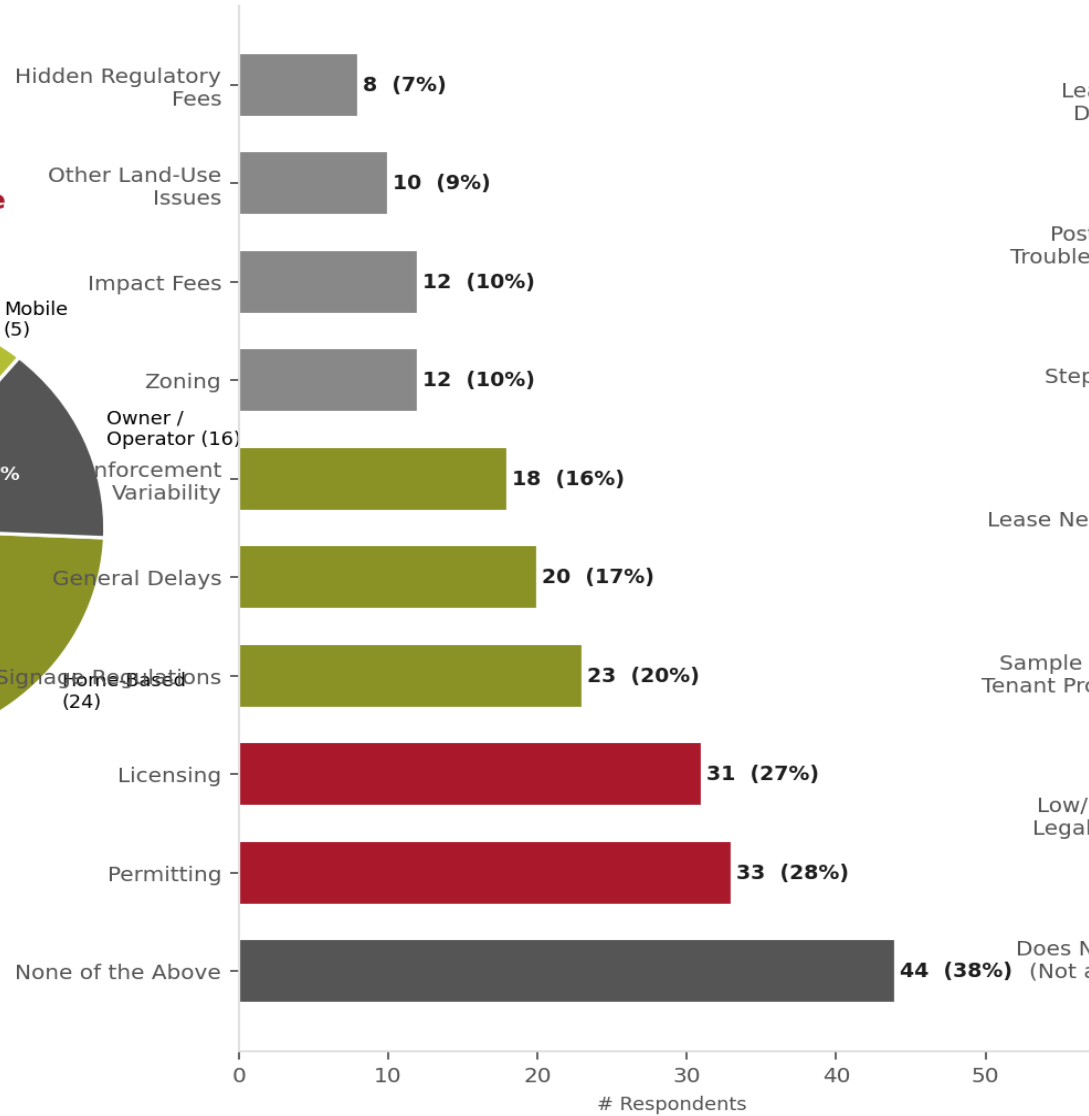
COMMERCIAL LEASING & REGULATORY BURDEN

Lease situations, regulatory friction, and resources businesses need

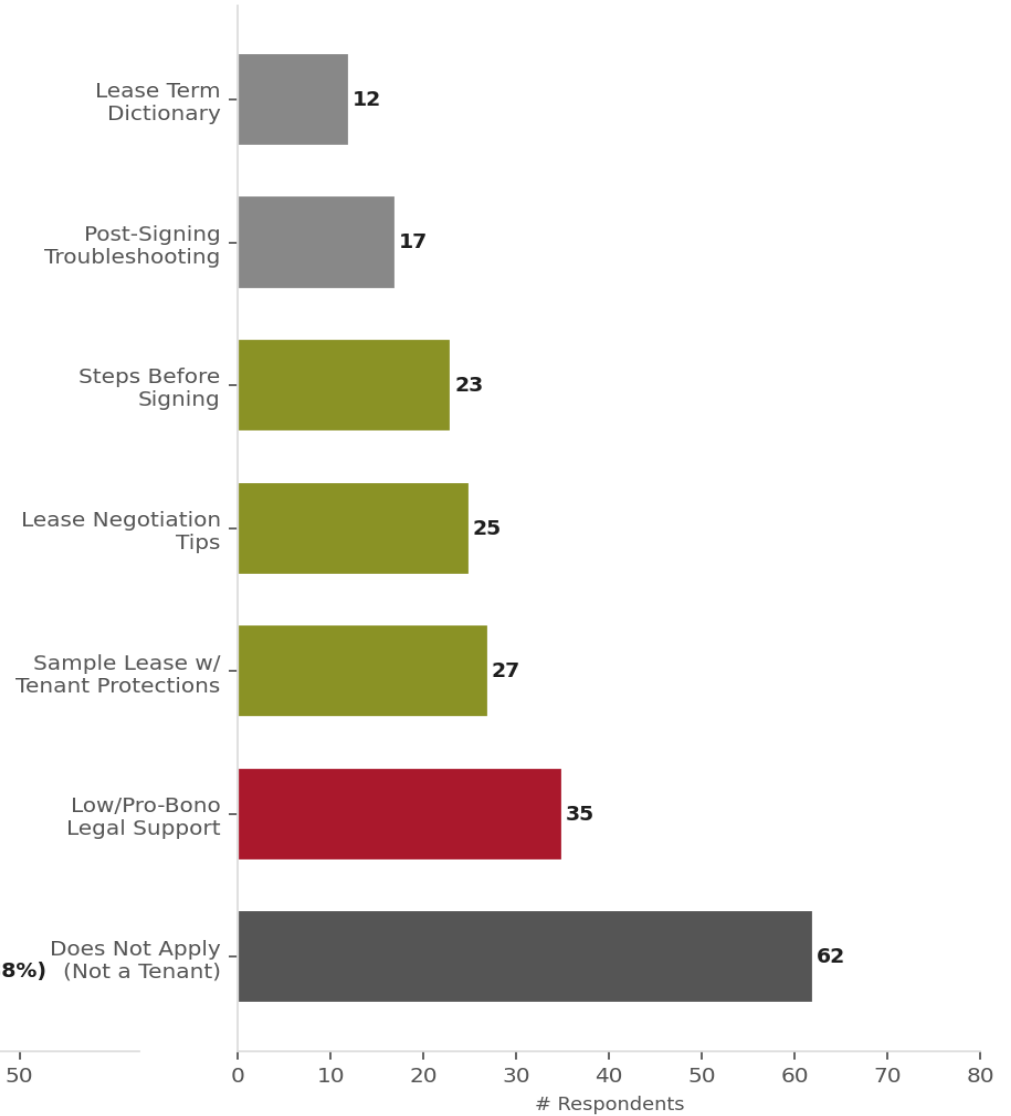
Commercial Lease Situation



Regulatory Issues Experienced (select all)



Lease Resources Needed (select all)



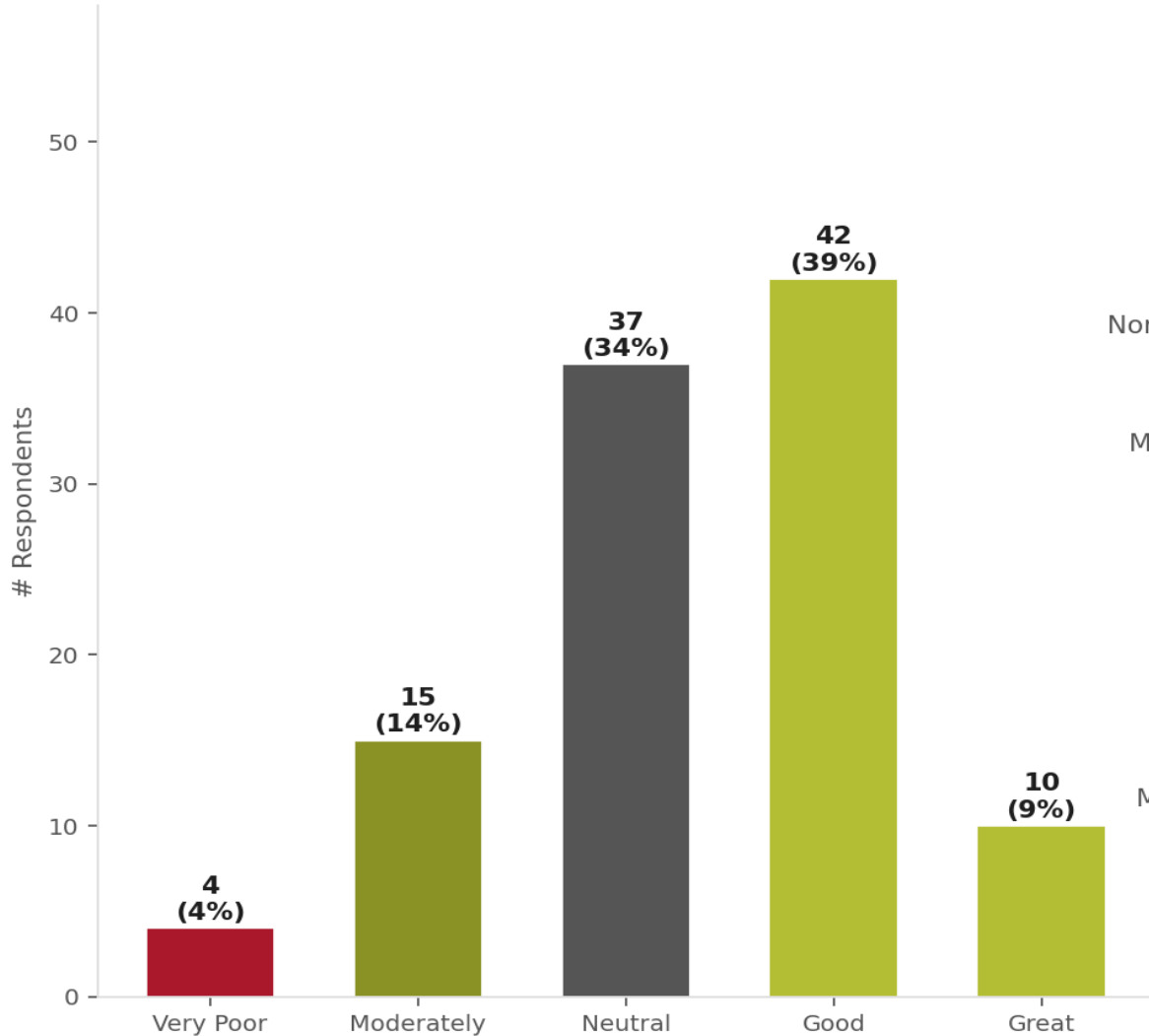
SECTION 7: BUSINESS CLIMATE & ADVOCACY

Local climate ratings by city, unfair competition, and what businesses are asking for

LOCAL BUSINESS CLIMATE RATINGS

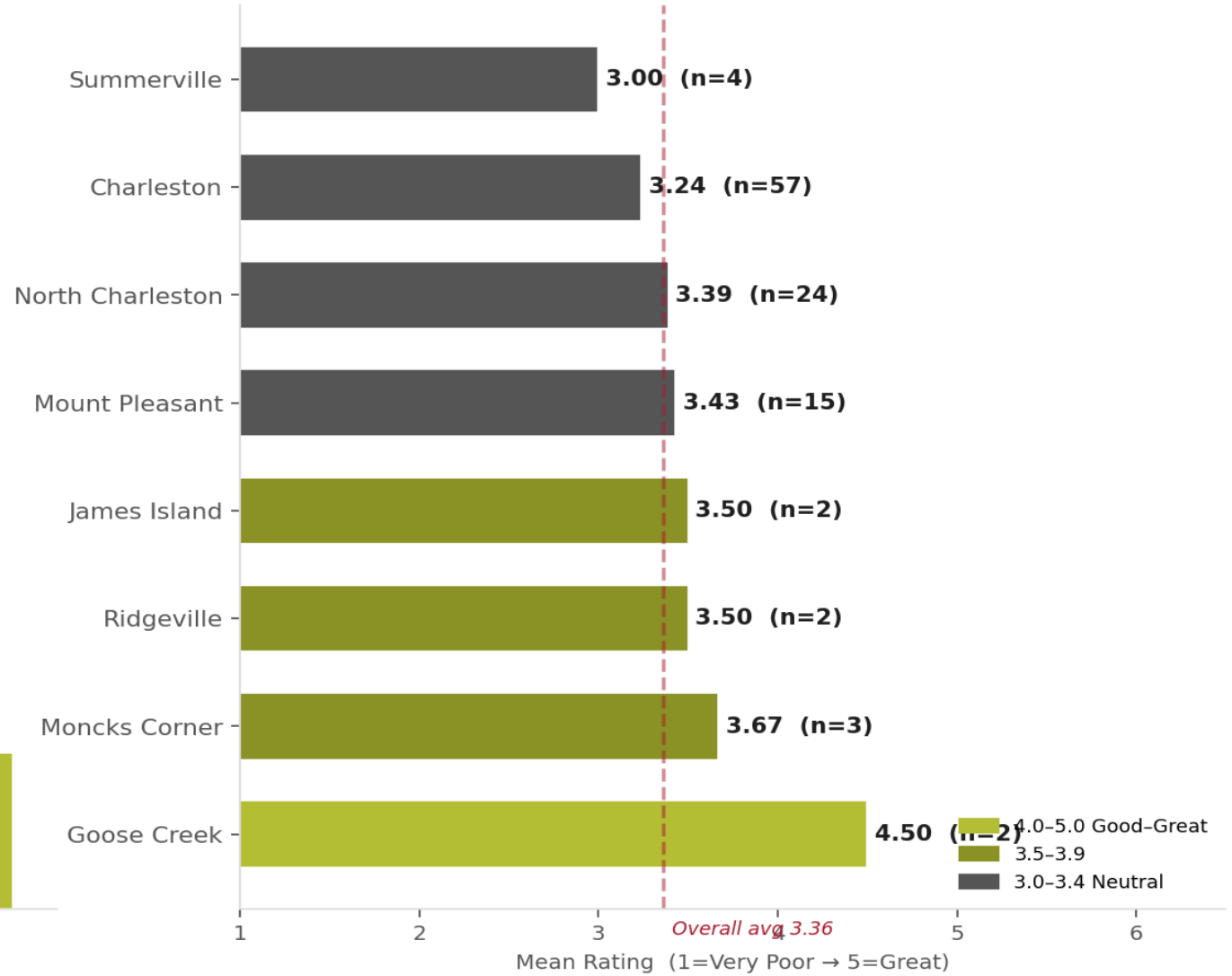
Overall rating of local municipal business climate & mean score by city · n=109

Overall Business Climate Rating



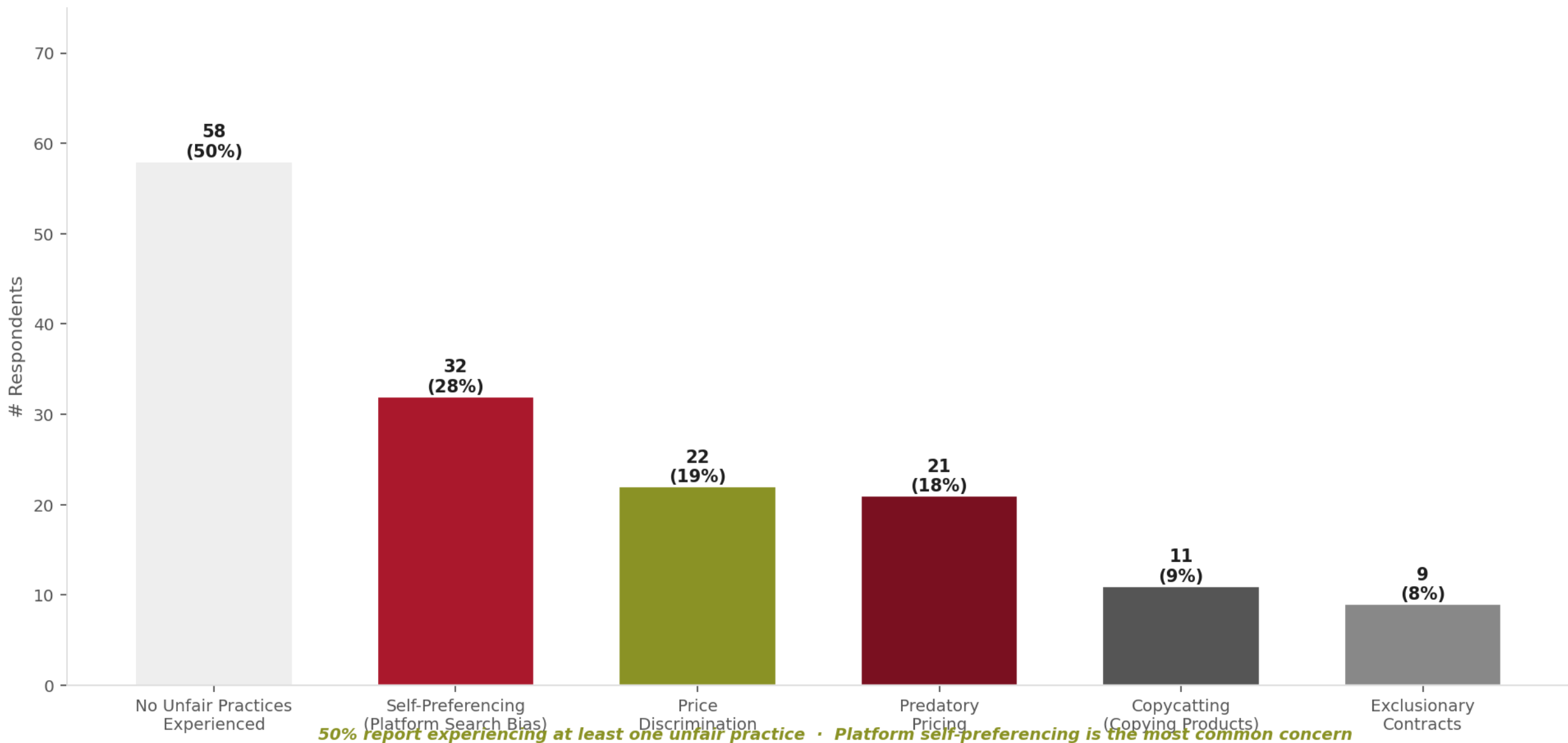
Overall Mean Score: 3.36 / 5.0

Mean Climate Rating by City (cities with n≥2)



UNFAIR COMPETITION PRACTICES EXPERIENCED

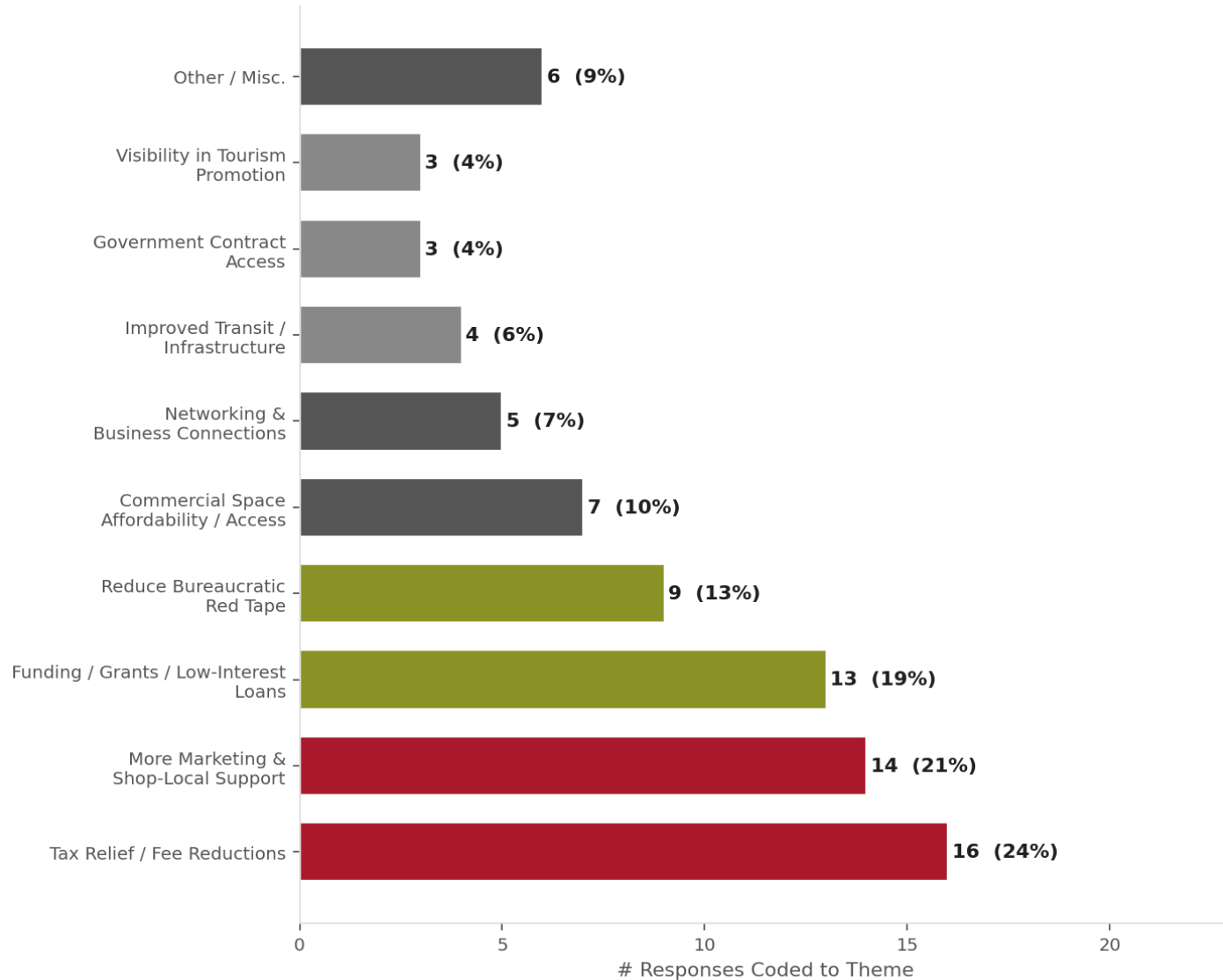
Select all that apply · n=116



WHAT HELP DO BUSINESSES NEED? — OPEN-ENDED THEMES

68 respondents answered: what is one specific thing local govt or advocacy could do to help?

Themes from Open-Ended Responses (coded from 68 responses)



Sample Voices from Respondents

"Reasonable commercial rent caps or tax breaks for small local businesses."

"More free local marketing and promotion resources to attract local customers."

"Offer temporary tax reductions or fee waivers to ease operational cost pressure."

"Help fund start-up equipment and initial expenses for the first 3-6 months."

"Reduce lengthy and unduly burdensome bureaucratic red tape."

"Send a yearly checklist to maintain proper licensure and certification."

52%

Revenue grew in 2025 vs. 2024

52%

Hopeful about year-end revenue

42%

Q1 2026 fell short of expectations

39%

Plan to hire next 6 months

50%

Cite rising costs as #1 challenge

53%

Raised prices to offset cost increases

34%

Report tariff exposure

50%

Experienced unfair competition practices

Top Themes from Open-Ended Responses (n=68)

Tax Relief & Fee Reductions (24%)

Businesses want temporary tax cuts, fee waivers, and relief from rising operational costs.

Marketing & Shop-Local Support (21%)

More programs to drive foot traffic, tourism tie-ins, and community promotion of local businesses.

Funding / Grants / Low-Interest Loans (19%)

Access to affordable capital — grants and 0% or low-interest loan programs top the list.

Cut Bureaucratic Red Tape (13%)

Streamline licensing, permitting, signage rules, and regulatory processes causing costly delays.

Affordable Commercial Space (10%)

Rent control, subsidized pop-ups, and more available commercial space for small operators.

THANK YOU

Lowcountry Local First

For questions about this survey or advocacy support,
contact Lowcountry Local First.

lowcountrylocalfirst.org