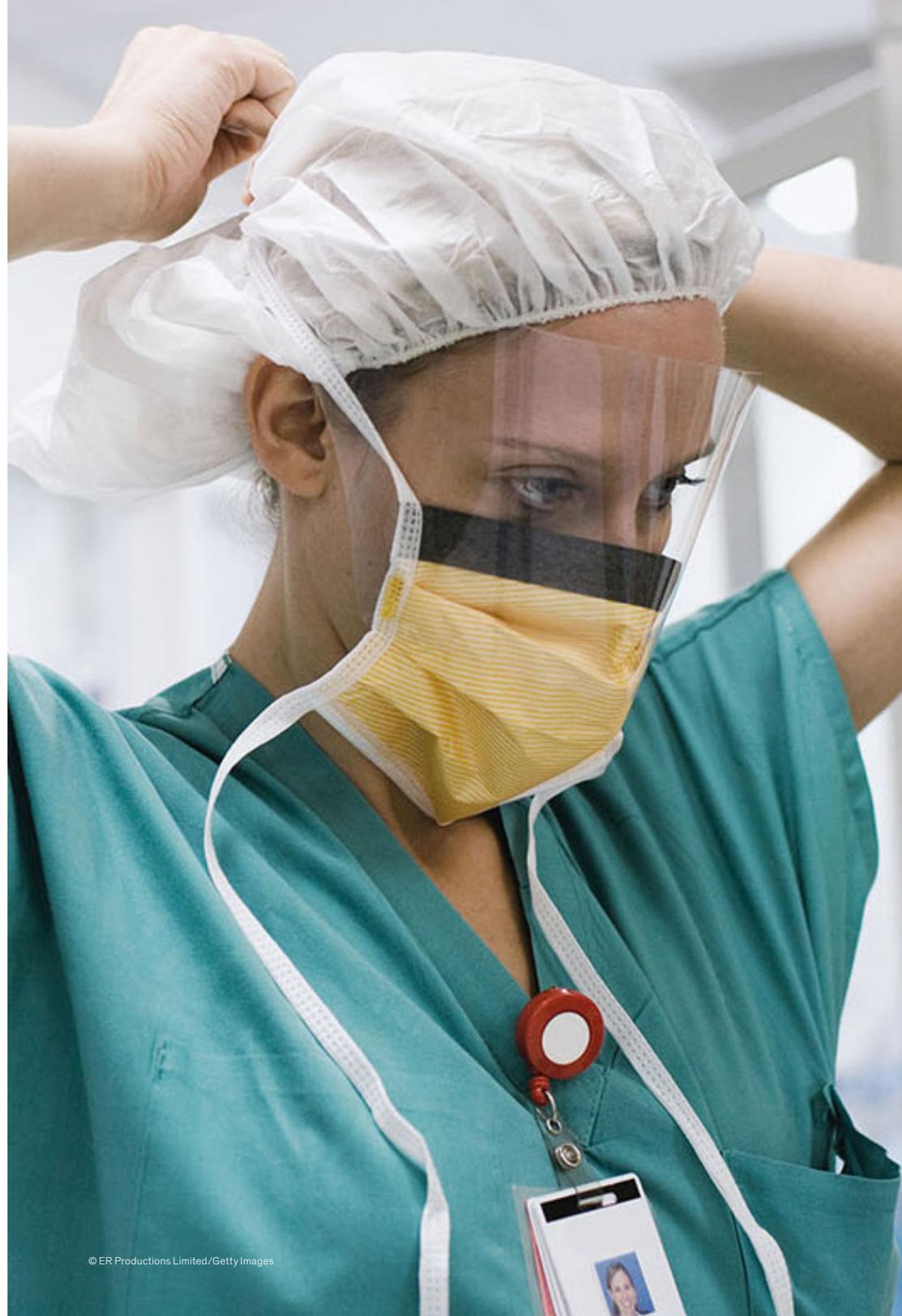


Healthcare Systems & Services Practice

# Surveyed nurses consider leaving direct patient care at elevated rates

Nurses and other healthcare professionals shed light on why they are considering leaving, as well as what might make them stay.

*by Gretchen Berlin, RN; Meredith Lapointe; and Mhoire Murphy*



**Healthcare workers** and their organizations continue to face unparalleled demands stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirty-two percent of registered nurses (RNs) surveyed in the United States in November said they may leave their current direct-patient-care role, according to McKinsey's latest research. That is an increase of ten percentage points in under ten months.<sup>1</sup>

To retain frontline clinicians and, over time, help begin to address widespread staffing shortages, healthcare leaders are designing and deploying strategies focused on supporting their workforce. In the exhibits below, we share eight insights to help stakeholders shape their approaches.

Given the contents below and our broader research, we see two key implications for healthcare organizations to consider over the medium to longer term.

1. Identifying opportunities for workforce retention strategies to be more directly tailored to employee needs and preferences, including more personalized programs and support, will continue to be important. This may include the following:
  - doubling down on environmental factors (for example, team dynamics, purpose or meaning of work, feeling valued by organization), flexibility, and professional development opportunities
  - ensuring total rewards offering is aligned with organizational strategy and meets a holistic set of needs (for example, dependent care and mental-health services)
  - amplifying continuing-education programs, roles, and resources that support novice clinicians and "in need" skill sets (for example, behavioral health)
  - providing training and resources for leaders to support the individual needs of their team members, as well as collective team health

2. Minimizing workload strains, where possible, will require innovation but provide much needed relief. For example:

- deploying advanced analytics to improve accuracy and timeliness of demand forecasting, workforce alignment, and real-time labor management
- redesigning roles and processes (including through digitization and automation where appropriate) to reduce friction points, increase flexibility, and incorporate support to enable top-of-license practice
- exploring new ways to grow the talent pipeline, including ensuring that end-to-end hiring processes are as efficient as possible and exploring partnerships and career pathway designs focused on highest need roles/skill sets, untapped pools of talent, and diverse cohorts

We also recognize the need for society at large to continue to support and elevate the role of nursing and other frontline healthcare workers. We take this opportunity to thank healthcare professionals and their organizations for what they do every day, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Research methodology

**From November 16–30, 2021**, McKinsey surveyed 710 frontline nurses and 156 other US-based healthcare professionals currently providing direct patient care to better understand their experiences, needs, preferences, and career intentions. A similar survey was also conducted in February 2021, with approximately 400 frontline nurses.

All of the respondents indicated spending more than 70 percent of their time delivering direct patient care and had at least one year of work experience. Professionals surveyed practiced in all regions of the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West).

All survey questions were based on the experiences of the individual professional. Survey responses were weighted by the respondent's primary work setting to align with the actual breakdown of the nursing workforce across settings from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Key insights shared are statistically significant and represent populations with a sample size  $n > 30$ ; for smaller sample sizes (for example,  $n < 100$ ), results should be taken as directional.

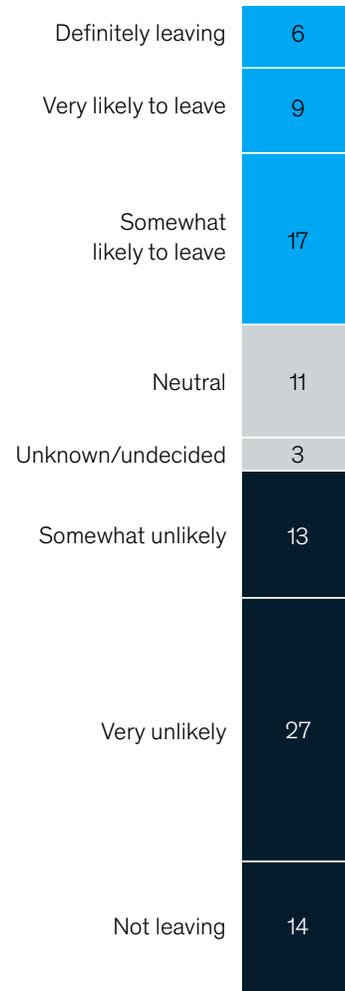
<sup>1</sup> Gretchen Berlin, Meredith Lapointe, Mhoire Murphy, and Molly Viscardi, "Nursing in 2021: Retaining the healthcare workforce when we need it most," McKinsey, May 11, 2021.

## Surveyed nurses said staffing, pay, and lack of support are factors affecting decision to leave

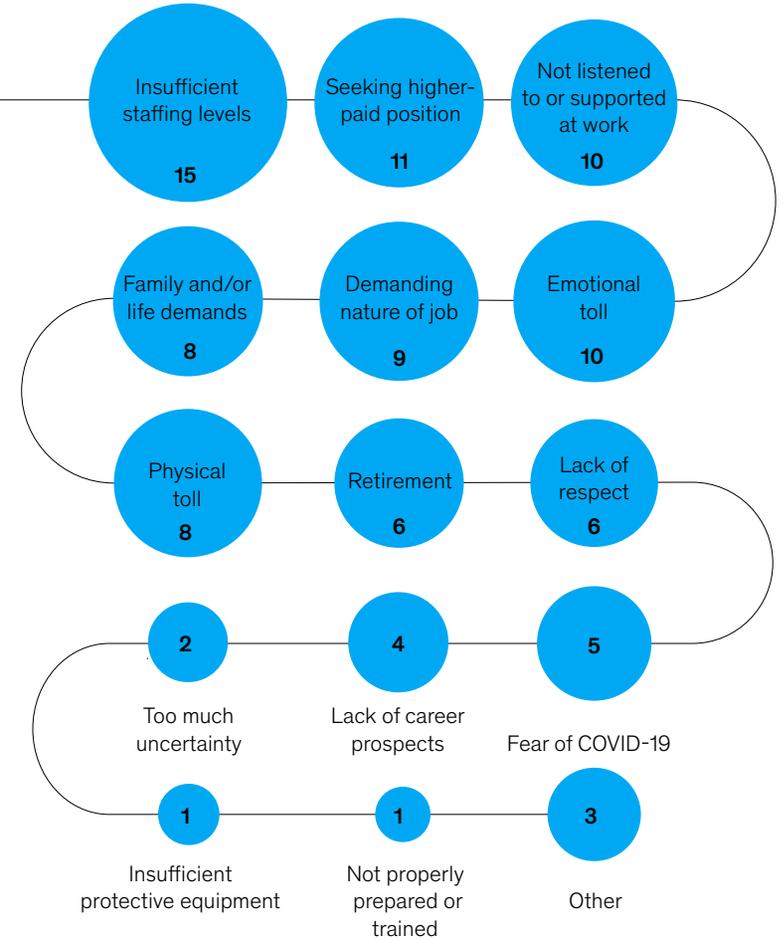
- Among surveyed RNs, 32 percent indicated a likelihood of leaving their current position providing direct patient care in November 2021, up from 22 percent in February 2021.
- The strongest drivers of intent to leave included insufficient staffing levels, seeking higher pay, not feeling listened to or supported at work, and the emotional toll of the job.

## Surveyed nurses express an increased intention to leave direct patient care.

Likelihood of leaving current position in next year,<sup>1</sup>% of respondents (n = 710)



Factors influencing decision to leave,<sup>2</sup> mean score out of 100 points<sup>3</sup> (n = 228)



<sup>1</sup>Question: How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year?

<sup>2</sup>Question: If you were to decide to leave your current role, to what extent do the following factors contribute to your decision? Question asked only to those respondents who indicated that they were "somewhat likely," "very likely," or "definitely likely" to leave their current position providing direct patient care in the next year.

<sup>3</sup>Respondents scored each factor on a scale of 1 to 100 in terms of extent of contribution of factor; mean score (out of 100 points) is shown in chart.

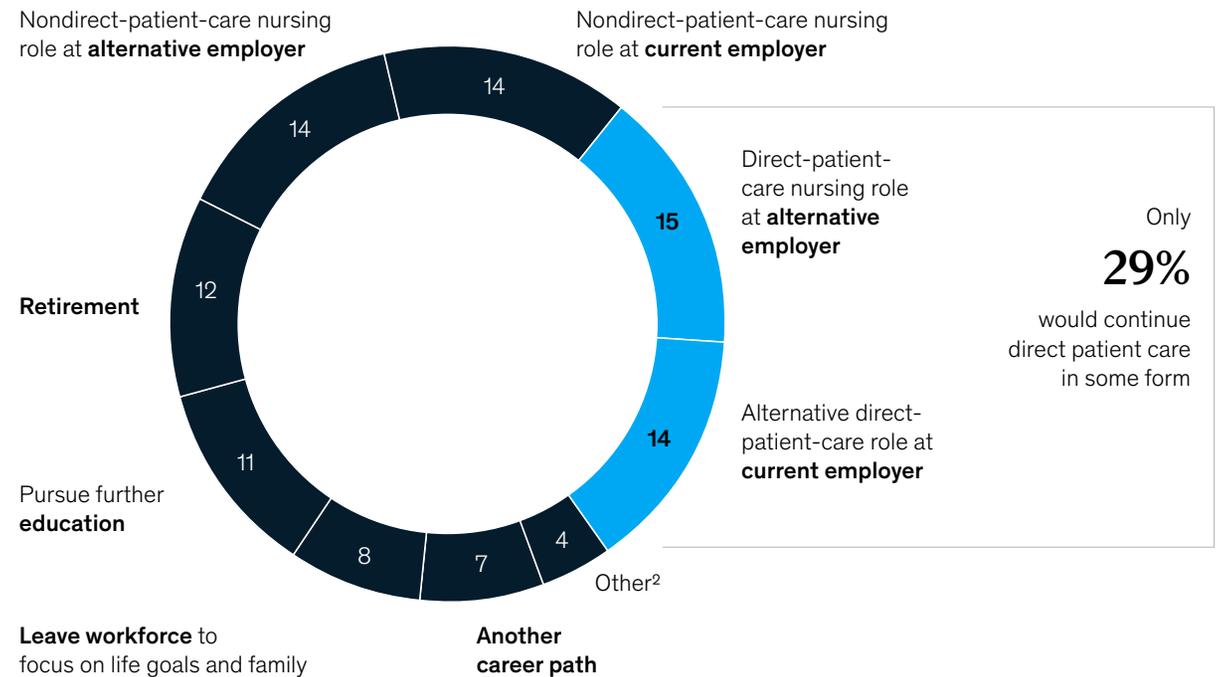
Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

## Surveyed nurses cited alternate roles/careers, retirement, education, and focus on family/life goals as potential plans if considering leaving

Among survey respondents, 35 percent of RNs who were likely to leave their current roles indicated plans to stay in the workforce but in a nondirect-patient-care role (for example, another career path or alternate role). An additional 20 percent indicated plans to exit the workforce completely, such as through retirement or to focus on their family.

## Of the surveyed nurses likely to leave their current roles, less than one-third intend to stay in direct patient care.

Intended plans for nurses likely to leave a direct-care position in next year,<sup>1</sup>% of respondents (n = 228)



<sup>1</sup>Question: What are your plans if you were to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? Question asked only to those respondents who indicated that they were "somewhat likely," "very likely," or "definitely likely" to leave their current position providing direct patient care in the next year.

<sup>2</sup>"Other" includes "I do not know/prefer not to say," "other" (option to specify), and "not applicable."

Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

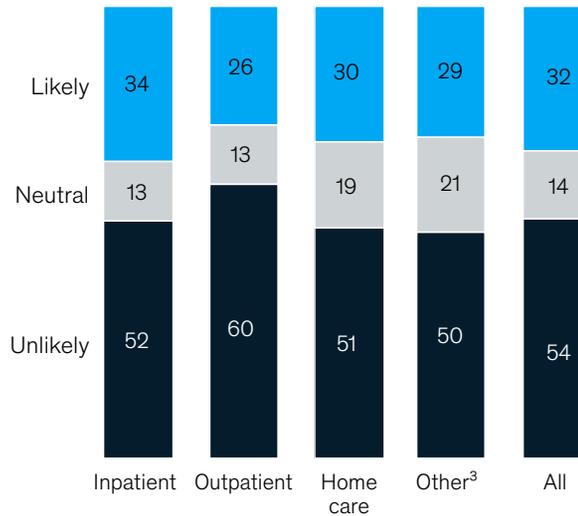
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## There are a variety of challenges for surveyed nurses

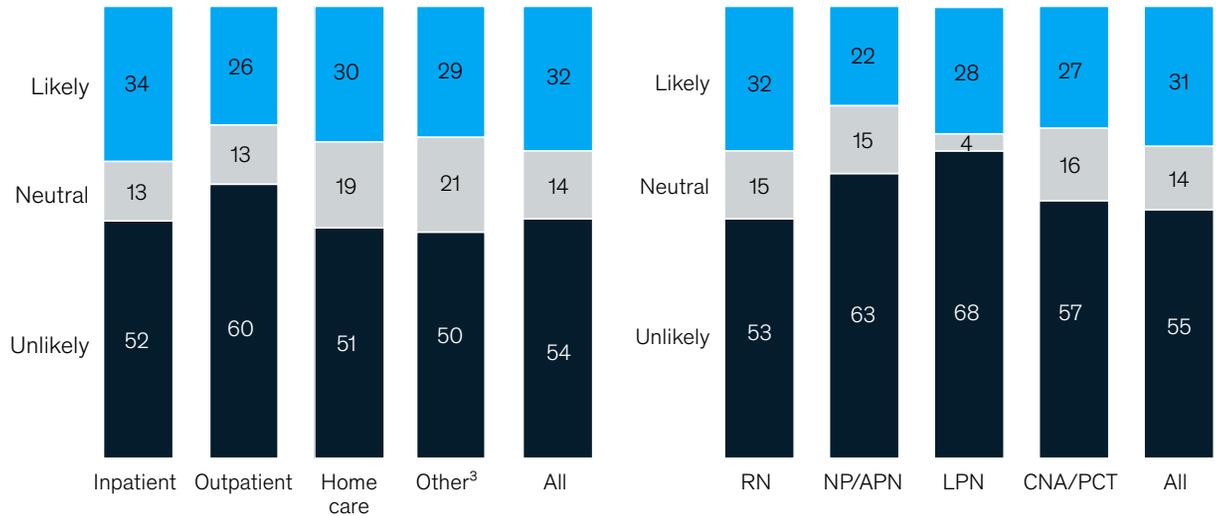
Efforts to support and retain today's healthcare professionals require action across the continuum of care as well as addressing role-specific needs and preferences.

## Challenges for surveyed nurses exist across settings of care and roles.

**Surveyed nurses' likelihood of leaving, by setting,<sup>1</sup>**  
% of respondents (n = 708)



**Surveyed healthcare professionals' likelihood of leaving, by role,<sup>2</sup>**  
% of respondents (n = 866)



Number	446	106	94	62	708 <sup>4</sup>	710	59	53	44	866
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Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

<sup>1</sup>Questions: How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? In what setting do you spend the majority of your time working? "Likely" includes "definitely will leave," "very likely," and "somewhat likely"; "unlikely" includes "somewhat unlikely," "very unlikely," and "definitely will not leave." For smaller sample sizes (where n < 100), results are directional. <sup>2</sup>Questions: How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? Which of the following best describes your medical profession? RN = registered nurse; NP/APN = nurse practitioner/advanced practice nurse; LPN = licensed practical nurse; CNA/PCT = certified nursing assistant/patient care technician. <sup>3</sup>Other" includes emergency-department and long-term-care settings. <sup>4</sup>Excludes 2 respondents who did not indicate a primary setting of practice.

Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

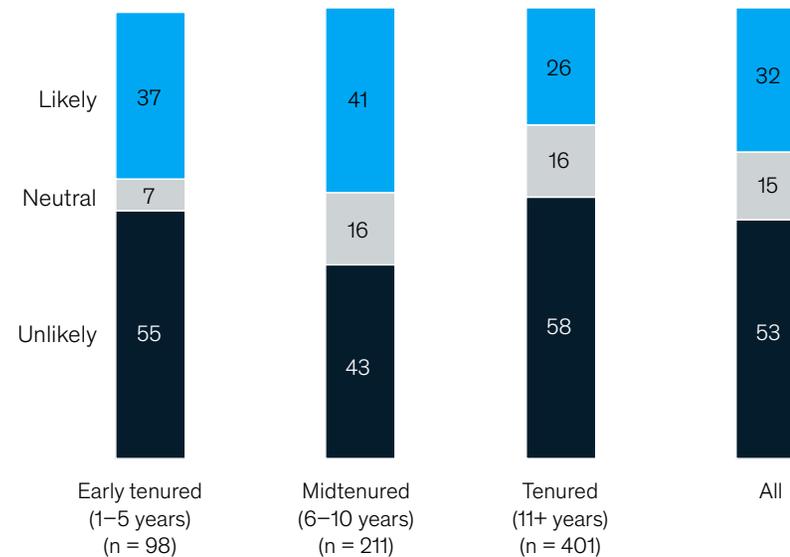
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## Pay was cited as a bigger factor for early and midtenured nurses

- Nurses in years one through five and six through ten of their nursing careers are more likely to state an intention to leave their current role than those with 11-plus years of experience.
- Surveyed nurses with less than ten years of experience cited higher pay as a more influential factor, while retirement and the physical toll of the job was a bigger factor for surveyed RNs with 11 or more years of experience.

## Early and midtenured nurses surveyed are most at risk of leaving their current roles.

Likelihood of leaving current position in next year, <sup>1</sup>% of respondents (n = 710)



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

<sup>1</sup>Questions: How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? How long have you been providing direct patient care?

"Likely" includes "definitely will leave," "very likely," and "somewhat likely"; "unlikely" includes "somewhat unlikely," "very unlikely," and "definitely will not leave."

For smaller sample sizes (where n < 100), results are directional.

Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

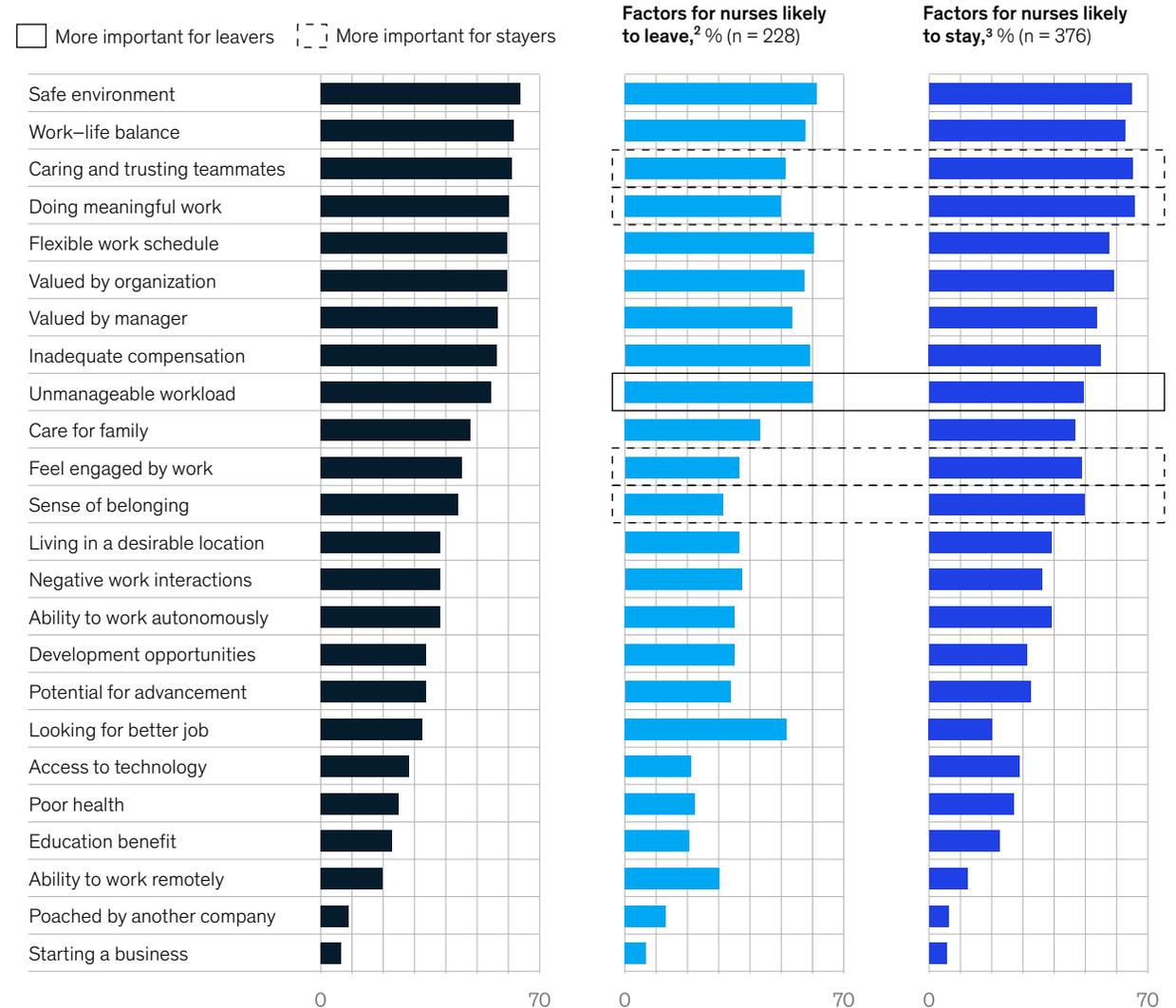
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## What's keeping nurses in the profession and what's driving them to consider leaving?

- Across surveyed RNs, the most influential factors of whether to stay in role included safety, flexibility (such as work–life balance, work schedule), and environment (for example, a trusting/caring team, feeling valued by organization, doing meaningful work). While adequate compensation remains important, it was not as influential as other factors among respondents.
- When asked specifically about flexibility, surveyed RNs indicated that control over time off and aspects of schedule are most important.
- Early and midtenured nurses surveyed placed particular importance on safety, compensation, ability to care for family, feeling valued by their organization, and access to professional development opportunities.

## Safety, flexibility, and work environment are top priorities for surveyed nurses.

**Factors affecting surveyed nurses' decisions about whether or not to stay in current position,<sup>1</sup>**  
 % of respondents ranking factor as important (n = 710)



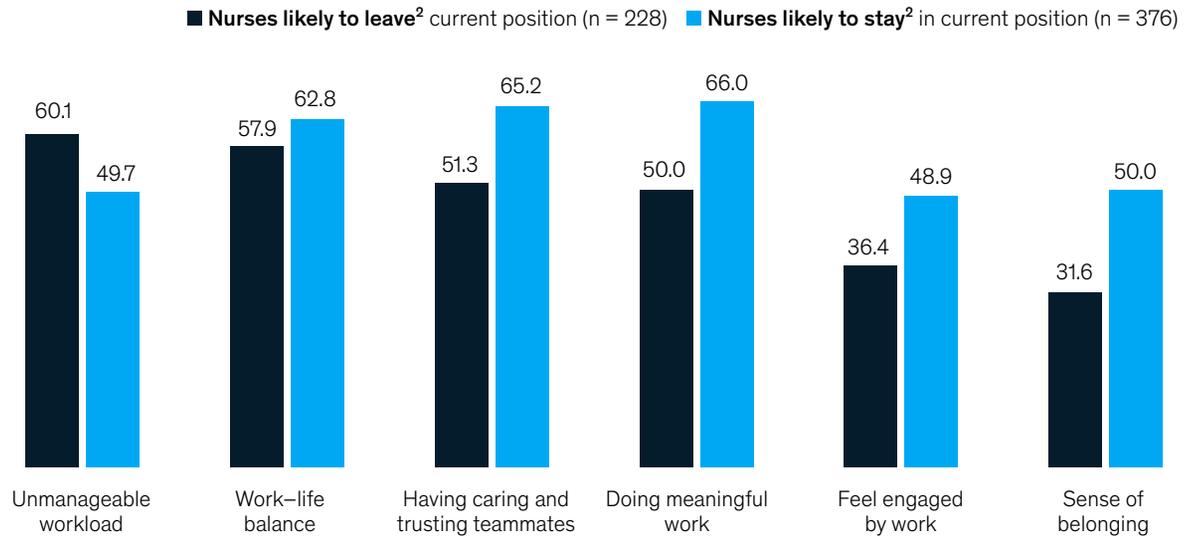
<sup>1</sup>Question: To what extent do the following factors affect whether or not you will stay at your job? Responses were categorized as follows based on respondent ranking: not important (1–2), neutral (3), important (4–5).  
<sup>2</sup>Question: How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? "Likely to leave" includes respondents who indicated that they are "definitely," "very likely," or "somewhat likely" to leave their current role providing direct patient care in the next year.  
<sup>3</sup>Question: How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? "Likely to stay" includes those who indicated that they are "somewhat unlikely" or "very unlikely" to leave or that they "definitely will not" leave.  
 Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

## Key factors differed in importance among surveyed nurses based on intent to leave

Surveyed nurses who were more likely to leave the profession placed outsized importance on manageable workloads, while those more likely to stay placed outsized importance on doing meaningful work, having caring and trusting teammates, having a sense of belonging, and feeling engaged by their work. Safety, flexibility, work–life balance, compensation, and feeling valued were among factors with approximately equal weight in each group.

## Surveyed nurses who plan to stay in their current roles cite caring teammates and meaningful work as critical factors.

Factors affecting decision about whether or not to stay in current position,<sup>1</sup>% of respondents (n = 710)



<sup>1</sup>Question: To what extent do the following factors affect whether or not you will stay at your job? Responses were categorized as follows based on respondent ranking: not important (1–2), neutral (3), important (4–5). How likely are you to leave your current position providing direct patient care in the next year? “Likely to stay” includes those who indicated that they are “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” to leave or that they “definitely will not” leave.

<sup>2</sup>Indicated as “more important” if the difference in “important” ranking between surveyed nurses likely to leave and surveyed nurses likely to stay is statistically significant and >10 percentage point difference, in addition to being in top factors of overall importance to cohort. Note: “looking for better job” excluded given direct correlation to intent to leave.

Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

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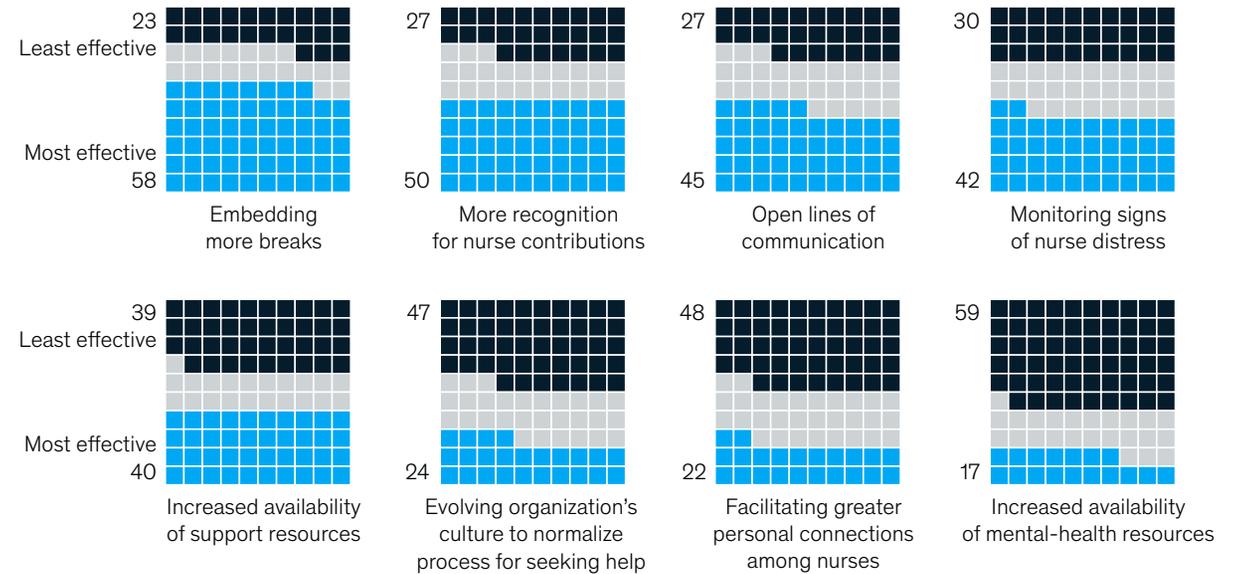
## Breaks and sufficient recognition continue to be most valued by surveyed nurses

— Regarding well-being supports, embedding more breaks and sufficient recognition continued to be the offerings most valued by surveyed RNs. No single offering, however, was rated highly effective by more than 60 percent of respondents.

- Surveyed RNs with one to ten years of experience valued “embedding more breaks” more than RNs with 11 or more years of experience.
- When asked specifically about how they'd like to get respite and/or take a break, surveyed RNs preferred reduced patient loads, more support staff, and taking time off.
- Emergency department RNs surveyed indicated that they valued the “availability of mental-health resources” more than their peers in other settings.

## Surveyed nurses say that traditional support levers, while important, go only so far.

Perceived effectiveness of support initiatives for nurses' well-being,<sup>1</sup> % of respondents (n = 710)



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

<sup>1</sup>Question: Please rank each of the following initiatives based on how effective you feel they would be in supporting the well-being of caregivers given the pressures of the pandemic response, as well as other ongoing dynamics of your job. Responses were categorized as follows based on respondent ranking: most effective (1–3), neutral (4–5), least effective (6–8).

Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

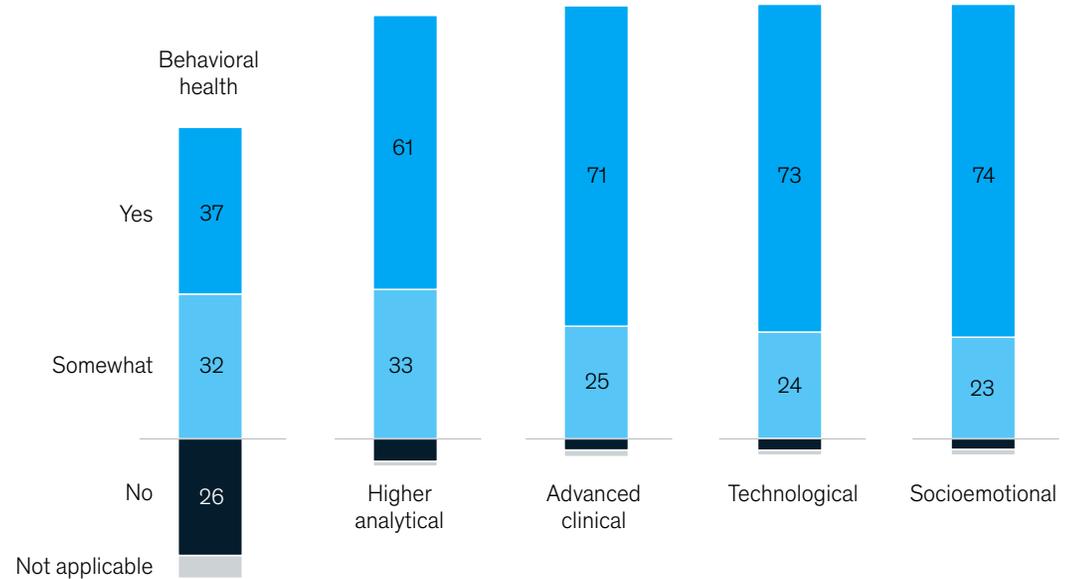
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## Surveyed nurses cited behavioral-health skills as a potential gap

- Fewer than 40 percent of surveyed RNs perceive that they have the behavioral-health skills required to be successful as a nurse in the future

## Surveyed nurses report feeling less equipped in the behavioral-health skills needed for patient care.

Whether or not nurses feel they have the skills needed to be successful in future, by skill type,<sup>1</sup>  
 % of respondents (n = 710)



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

<sup>1</sup>Question: Indicate if you feel that you currently have the following skills to be successful as a nurse in the future.

Source: McKinsey November 2021 Frontline Workforce Survey

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While broader solutions—and collaboration across the public and private sector, for example, to increase nurse educator capacity and elevate the role of nursing—are critical in the long term, healthcare organizations can consider a number of medium and longer-term strategies to support their workforces. Examples include doubling down on retaining critical talent grounded in the specific needs and preferences of the front line; minimizing workload strains where possible through advanced analytics (planning, deployment) and workflow redesign; and innovating around new ways to grow the talent pipeline (including with partners).

## Healthcare organizations can support nurses and other frontline staff through innovations to grow the talent pipeline and by using advanced analytics to reduce workload strains.

### Disclaimer

**These materials** are being provided on an accelerated basis in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These materials reflect general insight based on currently available information, which has not been independently verified and is inherently uncertain. Future results may differ materially from any statements of expectation, forecasts, or projections. These materials are not a guarantee of results and cannot be relied upon. These materials do not constitute legal, medical, policy, or other regulated advice and do not contain all the information needed to determine a future course of action. Given the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, these materials are provided “as is” solely for information purposes without any representation or warranty, and all liability is expressly disclaimed. References to specific products or organizations are solely for illustration and do not constitute any endorsement or recommendation. The recipient remains solely responsible for all decisions, use of these materials, and compliance with applicable laws, rules, regulations, and standards. Consider seeking advice of legal and other relevant certified/licensed experts prior to taking any specific steps.

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