A man with dark curly hair and a beard, wearing a dark blue sweater, stands next to a woman with dark curly hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. They are both smiling and looking at a laptop on a white countertop. The man is holding a small brown cup. The woman is typing on the laptop. In the background, there is a large window with a view of a city at dusk. A gold-colored spherical pendant light hangs above the counter. On the counter, there is also a smartphone and another brown cup. In the foreground, a large wheel of cheese is visible on a wooden board.

talent trade-offs unlocked:
the give and take
of talent retention.



partner for talent.

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the give and take of talent retention.

In a time of global economic uncertainty and evolving market dynamics, a new set of workplace trade-offs is emerging. Understanding these shifts is essential for employers to navigate change and better align with talent expectations while securing organizational success.

Our latest Workmonitor Pulse research finds that the global workforce prioritizes different aspects of their work arrangements. People are willing to make trade-offs with employers about these priorities, including time flexibility, work location, pay, stability and less work pressure.

key findings.



1. employability is a top priority

Remaining relevant in the job market is more important to talent than the ability to work remotely.

- 67% of workers prioritized employability over remote working
- 52% preferred skilling over remote working.



2. stress is a dealbreaker

Work-life balance still matters a lot, especially when it comes to alleviating job pressure.

- 60% of workers would rather have less stress than more pay
- 40% have already moved to a role with less stress but lower pay



3. time matters more than place

Time autonomy is the most desired form of flexibility, outranking pay and working remotely.

- 59% would rather have time flexibility than a higher salary
- 56% prefer it over location flexibility



4. a full-time return on-site comes at a cost

When asked what it would take to return to the workplace full-time, talent were clear:

- 65% — greater time autonomy
- 64% — a higher salary
- 61% — more leave days



5. progression and shared values drive long-term retention

While employability is essential, it's just a starting point. Long-term retention is driven by:

- 74% — inflation-linked annual raises
- 68% — managerial career support
- 67% — shared organizational values



foreword.

Talent and employers are rethinking what is most important to them and the compromises they are willing to make along the way.

During these uncertain macroeconomic times, for talent, employability comes first — the ability to stay relevant, skilled and secure in shifting job markets. It's not just about progressing within their current role or organization, but about staying prepared for opportunities wherever they may arise.

With that sense of security, talent are thinking about what else they are looking for in their employment - prioritizing reduced stress, greater autonomy over working hours or long-term well-being.

As talent consider what they're willing to trade off, organizations must also determine what they are willing to give and take in return. For employers, this is a key moment to rethink how they can ensure productivity by attracting, engaging and retaining the best of their workforce.

Expectations, on both sides, are evolving — around flexibility, compensation, managerial support and values alignment — and the value exchange must feel fair to both parties to be successful.

Leaders who can successfully balance these trade-offs and lead with adaptability and long-term vision will be best placed to earn trust, strengthen engagement and build a more resilient and productive organization.

[Sander van 't Noordende](#),
CEO, Randstad

5,250
talent surveyed

7
markets

18-67
year-old people

The survey for our 2025 Workmonitor Pulse study was conducted between 28 March and 9 April 2025 among 5,250 workers in Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

1. staying employable is my biggest priority.

Global economic volatility shifts talents' focus back to staying relevant.

Faced with macroeconomic uncertainty, talent today are making tough choices. When asked to choose between employability and the ability to work remotely, 67% globally opted for employability.

Similarly, when asked to choose between employability and a role that excites them, 59% prioritized the former. This was most strongly expressed by Gen X (62%) and by respondents in Japan (66%), but was least important in Germany (45%) and to fully remote talent (52%).

In addition, more than half of those surveyed (52%) stated that they prefer to have skilling and training opportunities than the ability to work remotely.

Our annual [Workmonitor](#) reports had highlighted a broader evolution in talent's priorities between 2022 and 2025, with flexibility at the forefront.

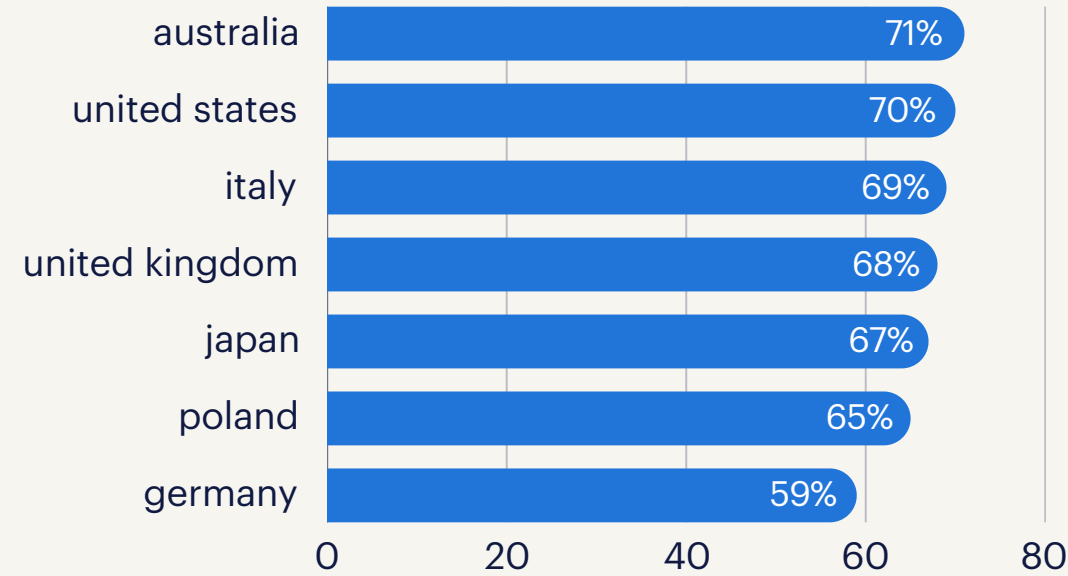
However, the trade-offs revealed by the Workmonitor Pulse data now shows that talent is refocusing on long-term employability.

Flexible arrangements remain strong motivators across generations and job types, but staying relevant in the fast-changing world of work is becoming non-negotiable.

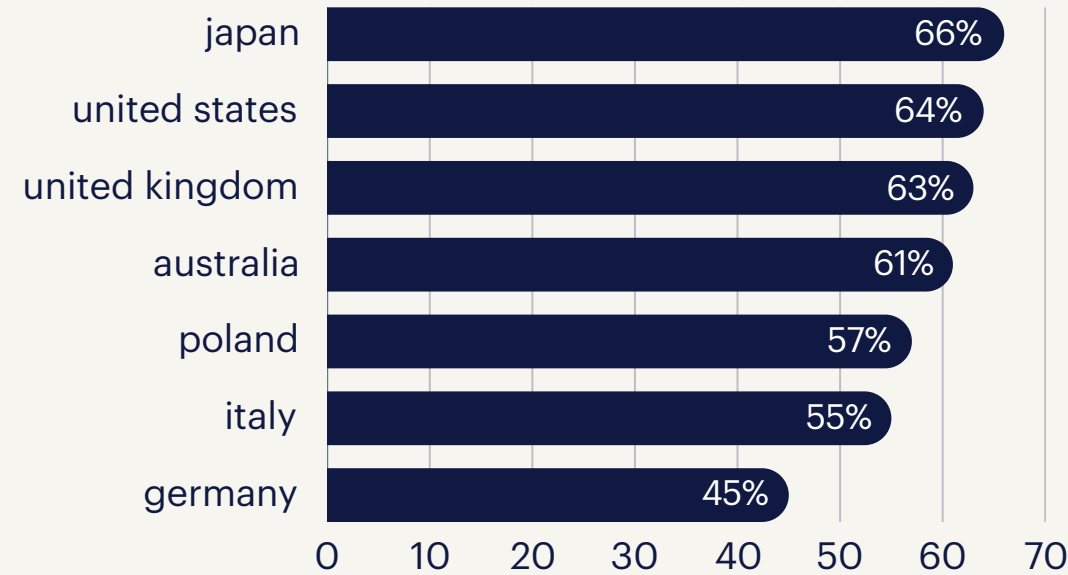
Our Workmonitor Pulse findings align with the growing importance of skilling and developing future-relevant skills in areas such as AI, as identified in previous Workmonitor reports.

Overall, the data indicates that by offering opportunities to boost employability, employers can reasonably expect greater flexibility from workers in return.

staying employable is more important than the option to work remotely



staying employable is more important than an exciting, inspiring role



2. stress is a dealbreaker for me.

Despite economic pressures reshaping talents' priorities, one thing remains clear: work-life balance still matters — a lot.

Globally, 60% of talent say they would choose a less stressful role at work over a higher salary, and 40% have already made that choice. This preference holds steady across generations and job types.

Across all work types — fully on-site, hybrid, and fully remote — it's the fully remote workers leading the charge, with 67% saying they'd take less stress over more money. Among the generations, Millennials (63%) and Gen X (61%) were the most likely to say they would prioritize less stress over higher pay compared with Gen Z and Baby Boomers (both 57%). By country, Japan topped the list, with 72% of respondents agreeing.

And it's not just talk — many of our respondents have already turned their intentions into action.

Talent in Poland stood out, with 46% of workers having accepted lower pay to alleviate stress, while Italy had the lowest share of respondents who had done so (34%).

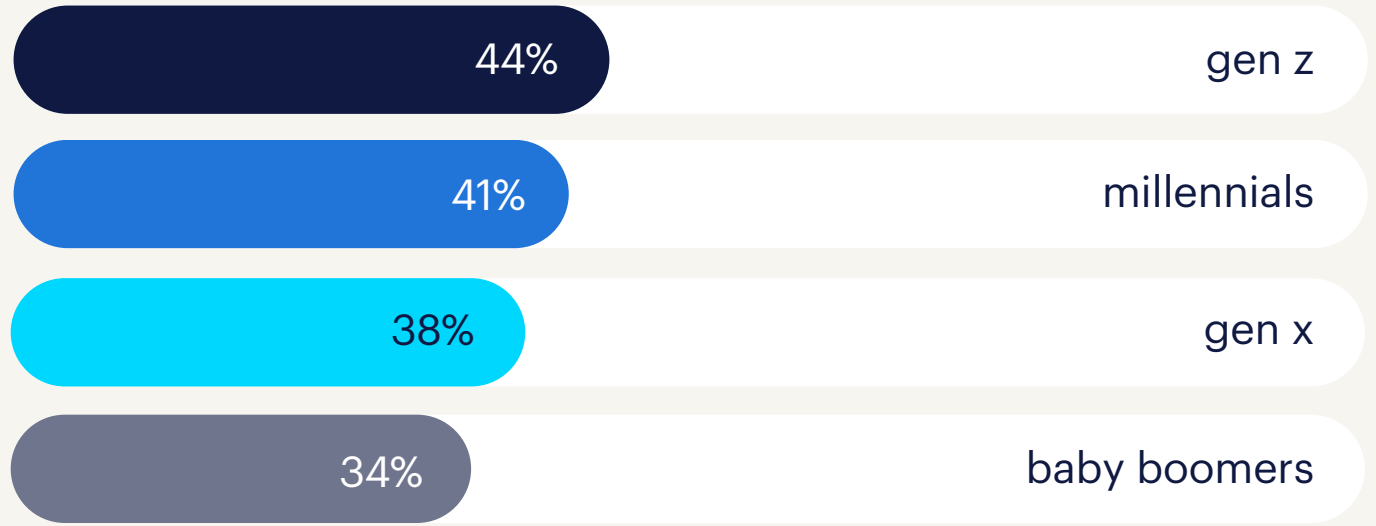
Similarly, 39% of respondents globally had previously taken a role with more flexibility but lower pay, with Japan leading among the markets surveyed (44%).

43% of respondents said they had accepted a role with fewer opportunities for advancement in exchange for better work-life balance — a trade-off most commonly reported by Gen Z (48%). These choices reflect a growing willingness among workers to prioritize flexibility and well-being over fast-tracked progression or higher pay. This presents a unique opportunity to integrate talent strategy with broader commercial goals, enabling greater agility in the face of rapid market change.

Even in uncertain economic times, these findings suggest that organizations that create healthier work environments — by reducing stress, supporting balance, and offering flexibility — will be better positioned to attract and retain talent. These conditions shape how supported employees feel, especially during peak times or transitions.



I have accepted lower pay to have less stress



3. I'd trade higher pay for more control over my time.

While remote working has dominated conversations, autonomy over when people work, rather than the location, has moved to center stage.

In fact, 56% of talent globally say they'd rather control their hours than their work location. Among the generations, Millennials were most likely to express this preference, at 60%.

Furthermore, 59% stated that control over their working hours is more important than a higher salary. While this theme transcends generations, it's worth noting that younger talent are more inclined to act on it, with Gen Z being the most likely to have sacrificed pay for greater flexibility (49%), compared with just 27% of Baby Boomers.

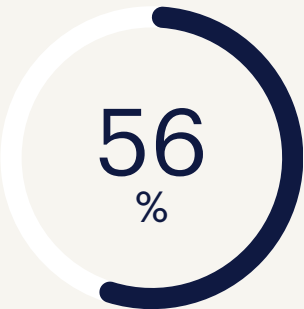
Talents' focus on finding a better time balance may also go some way toward explaining that 46% would prefer more leave days over a higher salary, with fully remote workers scoring highest among the work types (53%).

These trade-offs resonated most with Japanese talent, who consistently scored higher than those in other markets. Japanese respondents prioritized time autonomy over location flexibility (62%) and pay (66%). They would also trade a higher salary for more annual leave (60%) and working from home regularly (56%).

As the boundary between work and personal life continues to blur, talent want to achieve a better balance.

Understanding what flexibility means to different workers is essential. Whether through self-scheduling, adjusted shifts, or revised leave policies, personalized approaches that reflect the diverse realities of work and life will help organizations attract and retain top talent in a changing world.

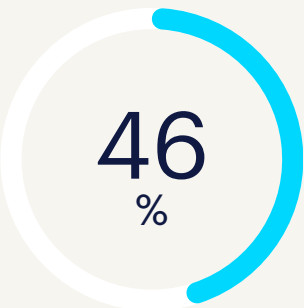
Control over my hours matters more than control over my location.



I would choose control over my hours instead of a higher salary



I would rather have more annual leave days than a higher salary



4. what I need to return on-site full-time.

Talent are clear on what they want in return for full-time on-site work — and it’s not just more money.

Depending on their current work arrangement, talent expect more flexible working hours, a higher salary and additional annual leave to make the shift worthwhile.

Among the fully remote workers, 74% expect more flexible hours, 75% expect higher pay, and 66% want more leave if asked to return to the office full-time.

Workers are also willing to trade location flexibility for long-term value, such as skilling, but not if they feel forced.

That said, many would make significant trade-offs to avoid a full-time return to the office. Half of respondents globally said they would forgo higher salaries for the ability to work from home regularly (50%). Meanwhile, 53% of talent would waive in-house job promotions in favor of regular remote working.

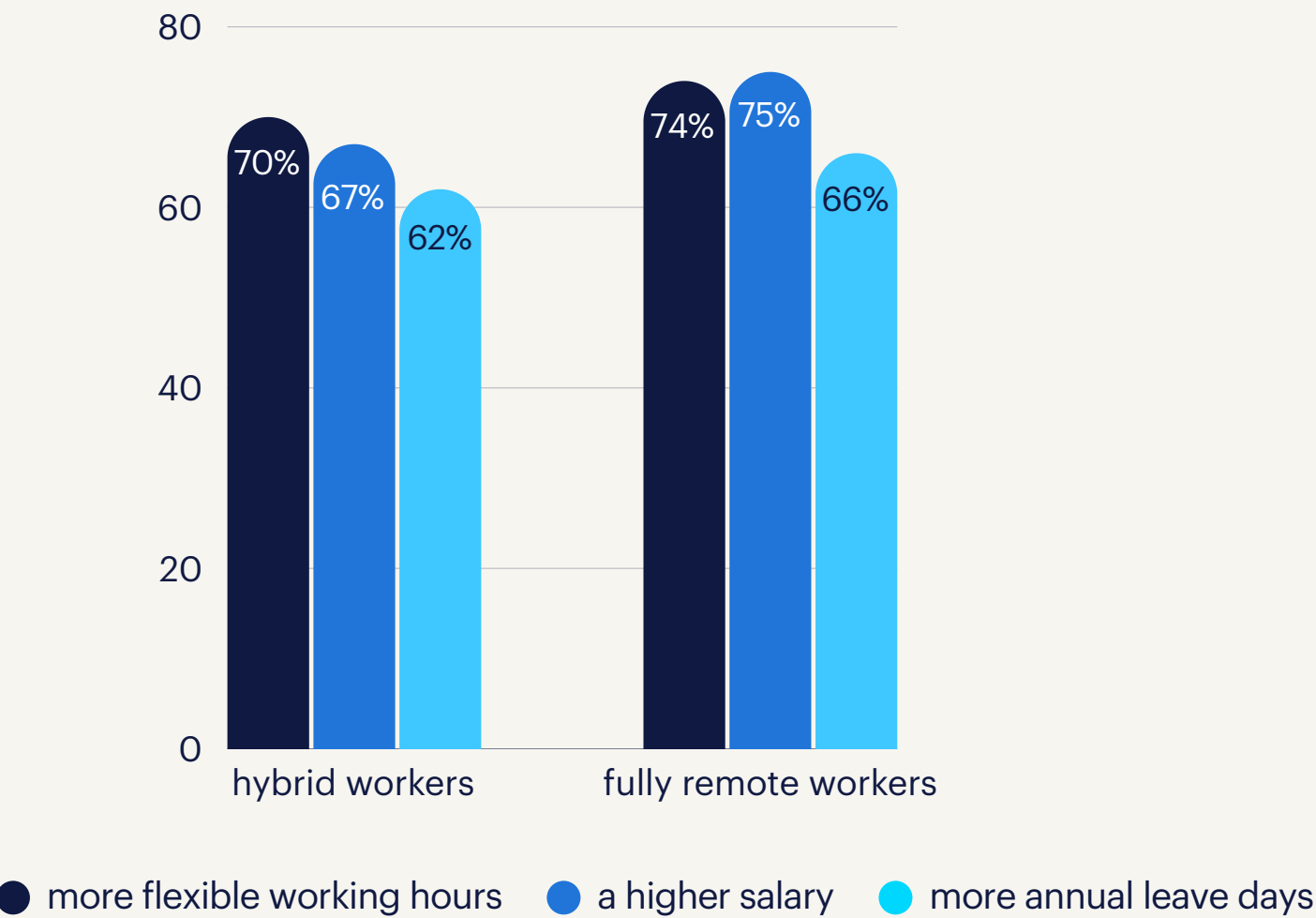
A third globally would consider quitting their job (38%) if they were asked back full time, even if it means taking a lower salary (39%). Again, those most affected, like fully remote and mostly remote hybrid workers, were most outspoken about quitting (59%, 53%) and lowering their pay expectations in the process (58%, 52%).

Voluntary trade-offs seem acceptable; mandatory ones risk attrition.

Additional Randstad research suggests that employers recognize the need to make trade-offs, offering alternative benefits in exchange for remote working. While 56% of job postings in high-remote sectors mention benefits in their listing, this rises to 64% in low-remote sectors.

As the pendulum swings back toward more on-site working, the key for employers is to give people a reason to come in — offering purpose and a fair balance of ‘give,’ not just ‘take.’

If I were asked to work on-site full-time, I would expect:



5. what drives me to stay long-term.

While employability has become a foundational expectation and flexibility a point of negotiation, neither is a key differentiator for long-term retention.

Once these basics are in place, other factors begin to weigh more heavily on talent loyalty and retention. Asked what would make them more likely to stay in their current role for the next five years, respondents focused on three key drivers.

Nearly three-quarters of all respondents (74%) indicated that receiving annual raises that match or exceed inflation is important for staying with an organization. Generationally, this consideration was slightly more important to Gen X and Baby Boomers than to their younger peers (77% and 76%, respectively). At 79%, annual pay rises were perceived as more vital in the US than in any other market surveyed.

For more than two-thirds of respondents (68%), knowing their managers supported their career development — and receiving that support — was critical. Managerial support was equally vital for fully on-site and fully remote talent (both 69%), though it was slightly less important for those in hybrid roles.

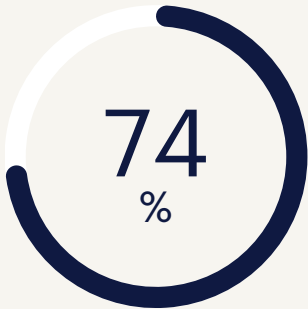
Again, the need for managerial support was most acutely felt in the US (74%).

The third factor is a connection to company leadership, as well as having a shared vision and values (67%), with US talent leading other markets (74%).

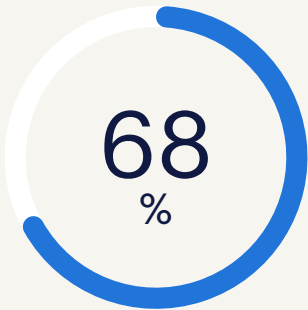
This was further supported by data showing that 40% of respondents had taken on more meaningful roles aligned with their values, even if paid less. Gen Z stood out with their determination to follow through, with 47% admitting to having done so. Furthermore, talent were less likely to leave their current role if given options such as sabbaticals (58%), support caring for a family member (42%), or for aging relatives (41%).

From an employer’s perspective, our findings reinforce the need to work closely and communicate with talent to understand what motivates them to stay, along with their priorities and associated trade-offs.

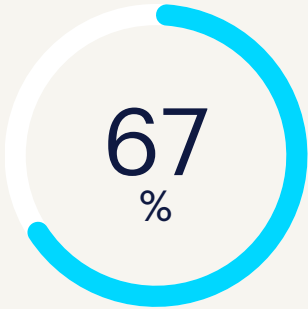
top five-year retention drivers:



Inflation-matching annual raises



Receiving manager support



Shared organizational values



talent trade-offs unlocked: what this means for employers.

Past Workmonitor research has shown that, in more stable times, talent are typically quick to move on.

However, in times of economic uncertainty, talent are refocusing on employability and staying relevant in the workplace.

Despite this, our Workmonitor Pulse survey reveals workers aren't backing down when negotiating their workplace demands. Across all generations and job types, talent are carefully weighing the trade-offs they're willing to make. And it is not one-directional — talent expect employers to meet them halfway, too.

This could signal an opportunity for more collaborative approaches around the trade-offs that both sides are willing to make.

Against this backdrop, here are some recommendations to help employers find common ground in attracting and retaining talent, now and in the future.

employability is the entry point for engagement

The world of work and business is transforming at a fast pace. In light of this, talent are aware they need to stay relevant to the job market.

Organizations that help workers remain employable over the long-term will stand out in the competition for top talent.

Skilling, training and professional development will be crucial for talent retention, strengthening employers' negotiating position.

However, employability is only an entry point. Other factors — such as regular pay rises, manager support and value alignment — become more relevant for retention over time.

flexibility matters, but compromises can be reached

Despite talent's strong opinions about returning to on-site work, there are opportunities for negotiation to create working practices that benefit both employees and businesses.

Talent is now valuing time flexibility more than pay and location. Where possible, letting talent choose when they work can give employers an edge.

It's also vital to identify core causes of stress, which can be a dealbreaker for workers. Reducing tensions at work will help attract and retain the best talent.

Where a return on-site is required, organizations should ensure that the purpose of this move is communicated effectively, so that its benefits and trade-offs are clear.

retention is personal

As we've seen in previous Workmonitor research, tailored approaches to talent retention are more effective than one-size-fits-all strategies.

Addressing individual needs — like reducing stress, career support, and family commitments — is crucial. Employers who engage in ongoing dialogue with talent will be best positioned to create mutually beneficial arrangements.

With continued talent scarcity, offering career experiences and work formats that people want will be vital to drawing in and keeping top talent, especially once the economy stabilizes and talent become more open to new opportunities.

An abstract graphic on the left side of the slide. It features two concentric white circles on a blue background. A horizontal bar, consisting of a cyan rounded rectangle followed by a white circle, is positioned across the middle of the circles. To the left of this bar is a small light blue circle. In the center of the inner circle is a dark navy blue circle. To the right of the inner circle is another white circle.

your thoughts.

let's start a conversation

inquiries
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