

2024

# DSP Research Report

in collaboration with  The Guild  
FOR HUMAN SERVICES



# Table of contents

**03 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**04 KEY FINDINGS**

**05 METHODOLOGY**

**06 DEMOGRAPHICS**

**08 WORK EXPERIENCE**

Challenges faced by DSPs  
Employment satisfaction

**13 STAFF SUPPORT, APPRECIATION,  
AND WELL-BEING**

DSP appreciation and recognition

**16 TRAINING AND CAREER  
ADVANCEMENT**

Competence and confidence  
Career advancement programs  
How training and advancement impact culture

**19 SUPERVISION**

Supervisor traits  
Supervisor feedback and communication

**AUTHORS**

Jordan Baker, MA  
Arlene Bridges, BA  
Nellie Galindo, MSW, MPH  
Elise Valdes, PhD  
Suzanne Henderson, MPA  
Teresa Lane, ALM  
Michael J Clontz, MSW, LICSW

# Executive summary

Inspired by the **Relias 2023 DSP Survey Report** conducted with ANCOR, The Guild for Human Services collaborated with Relias to replicate the survey within their own direct support professional (DSP) staff in order to compare their findings to the nationwide Relias survey as a benchmark and provide a snapshot of the experiences of DSPs in one organization.

---

The Guild for Human Services (The Guild), a Massachusetts-based human services provider, has followed the Relias DSP Survey Report since 2019. The Guild leadership and research team use the Relias report as a data benchmark and as a snapshot of national trends in the direct support workforce. With 95% of provider organizations reporting moderate or severe staffing shortages in the past year (State of America's Direct Support Workforce Crisis 2023, ANCOR), it is critical to listen to feedback from DSPs and prioritize their needs in strategic planning.

The research team at The Guild collaborated with Relias to replicate the nationally available 2023 DSP survey. With a quantitative comparison against the national benchmark, The Guild will conduct data-driven planning for organizational improvements. When DSPs feel confident, competent, and valued, the students and adults supported at The Guild greatly benefit.

The Guild DSPs reported very different demographics than the 2023 Relias respondents. While 91% of Relias respondents reported English as their first language, only 33% of The Guild respondents did. Most Relias respondents (58%) identified as white or Caucasian, compared to 4% of those at The Guild. Relias had 21% of respondents identifying as Black or African American compared to 84% of those at The Guild. In addition, The Guild had a larger percentage of male-identifying DSPs than Relias, and The Guild respondents had fewer years of experience in the field.

Data analysis showed many similar trends between The Guild DSPs and nationwide survey respondents, such as the key role of supervisors in DSP satisfaction, the desire for well-being and mental health programs, and the request for professional development programs. The Guild DSPs also mirrored the Relias study in their top two areas of dissatisfaction: not feeling fairly compensated and not feeling appreciated for their work.

The Guild DSPs showed significantly more satisfaction with the effectiveness of their onboarding, with 69% reporting they were very prepared or extremely prepared to begin their job (vs 46% national). In addition, there was a significant correlation between The Guild DSPs' perception of preparation from onboarding with their job satisfaction.

Throughout this report, we will compare data gathered from The Guild's staff and Relias' national survey data to help shape DSP professional development, well-being, appreciation, and retention initiatives.

**Note: Throughout this report, the data gathered via Relias' nationally available report will be referred to as "the national data."**

# Key findings

Most respondents felt somewhat to completely satisfied working as a DSP for their current organization.

**67%** National    **72%** The Guild

“I make a difference in the lives of people I support”

Most popular reason reported for enjoying work as a DSP, both The Guild and national data

Most respondents reported that having a safe platform to provide feedback about a supervisor is very to extremely important.

**81%** National    **81%** The Guild

A lower percentage report that they have a safe platform. **(59% National, 68% The Guild)**

DSPs are somewhat to extremely comfortable talking with a supervisor about stress and challenges.

**74%** National    **80%** The Guild



Compared to the national survey, more DSPs at The Guild felt very prepared to extremely prepared by their onboarding.

**46%** National    **69%** The Guild

DSPs report that compensation and appreciation are key challenges to address.

**27%** | **37%**

I don't dislike anything about my job

**38%** | **31%**

I am not fairly compensated for my work

**25%** | **20%**

I feel like I am not appreciated for my work

Top 3 for national: ■  
Top 3 for The Guild: ■



# Methodology

The Relias survey was conducted to determine how intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) providers conduct aspects of their business as it pertains to DSPs. This includes DSP training and career advancement, employment and hiring practices, DSP supervision, and more. In partnership with the American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR), the survey was distributed via e-mail to ANCOR members, Relias clients, and non-Relias clients and via in-app notifications to Relias clients on the Relias platform.

Statistical significance testing was performed across different groups or between items through a series of non-parametric analyses, including Mann-Whitney U, Kruskal-Wallis H, Chi-square, and Spearman rank-order correlation, using an alpha level of 0.05. Non-parametric analyses are appropriate when sample sizes are small, data are categorical, or there is a violation of normality required for parametric analyses. Given the categorical nature of the data, non-parametric analyses were appropriate for comparing between groups or items.

All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28. The Guild for Human Services (The Guild) and Relias collaborated so The Guild could replicate this survey in their specific population in order to compare to a national benchmark.

The Guild replicated the methodology above with the following organization-specific modifications. The Guild used a combination of methods to reach all DSPs, including flyers with QR code, staff meeting visits, training session visits, email links, and text links. They offered the survey to DSPs from all programs and all shifts. They informed them that the survey was anonymous and did not impact their employment in any way. They offered paid meeting time to complete the survey, but did not offer any incentive or consequence.



# Demographics

The Relias national survey had 763 direct support professionals participate as respondents, while The Guild had

75

direct support professionals participate as respondents.

The majority of national respondents had **5 or more years** of experience,

66%

while the majority of respondents from The Guild reported **less than 5 years** of experience.

60%

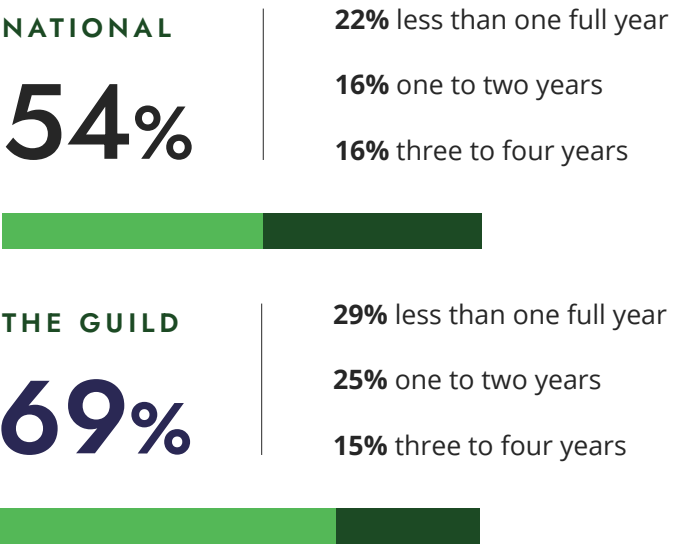
## BREAKING THAT DOWN



Further, 10% of the national sample reported less than one full year of experience compared to **23%** for The Guild. In the Relias sample, 12% reported one to two years of experience compared to **19%** for The Guild, and 12% of the Relias sample reported three to four years experience, compared to **19%** for The Guild.

When we asked respondents how long they had worked for their current organization, we saw similar distributions. 54% of national respondents reported four years or less at their current organization, while 69% of The Guild respondents reported the same.

See the image below for a breakdown of this data.

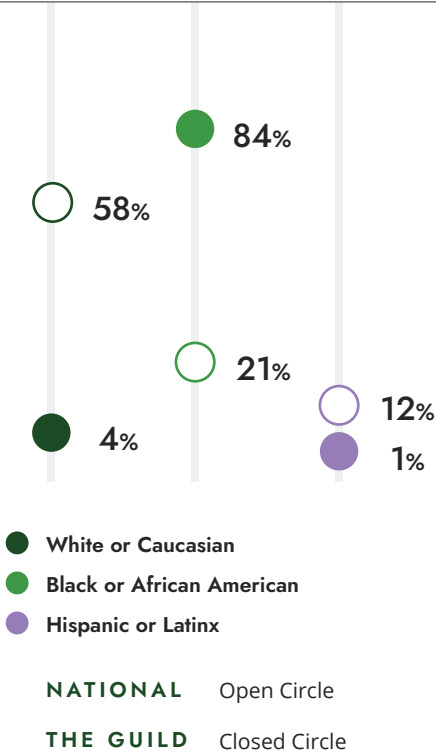


**Interestingly,** for National DSPs the next most popular answer choice was 16 years or more at **14%**, while for The Guild five to six years was the next more popular category at **19%**.

Following these questions, we asked respondents how they described their race/ethnicity (if they felt comfortable doing so). Among national respondents, 58% identified as **white or Caucasian** compared to 4% at The Guild, 21% of national respondents identified as **Black or African American** compared to 84% at The Guild and 12% of national respondents reported they identified as **Hispanic or Latinx** compared to 1% at The Guild.

91% of national respondents reported English as their first language compared to only 33% of The Guild respondents. The Guild had a far more diverse array of first languages reported including Luganda (21%), Haitian Creole (20%), and French (16%). The Guild supports English language learners with training programs, exam accommodations, and some translated materials, while providing evidence-based guidance to their supervisors and trainers. However, this will continue to be an area of strategic focus and improvement.

The majority of national respondents identified as female (76%) compared to only 41% of The Guild respondents. Only 18% of Relias respondents identified their gender as male, compared with 55% of The Guild respondents. Additionally, 4% of both national respondents and The Guild respondents chose not to answer, and 2% of national respondents identified as non-binary.



Finally we asked respondents if they identified as having a disability. Most (82% for national and 84% for The Guild) said no, and 10% for national and 4% for The Guild said yes.



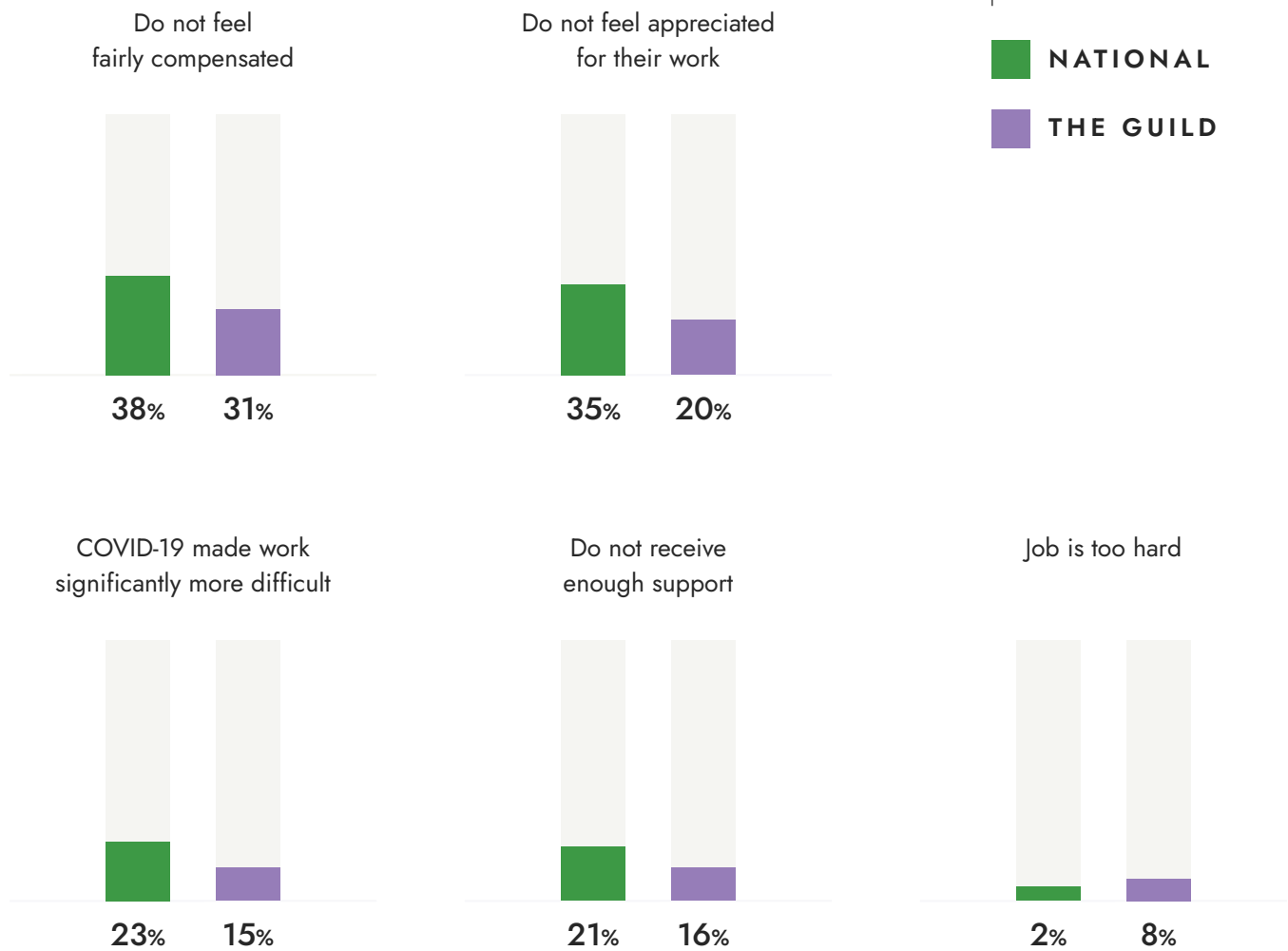
## Challenges faced by DSPs

To properly gauge the DSP experience, we must examine the challenges DSPs face in their roles. To that end, we asked respondents what they disliked about working as a DSP.

The results were more varied than the ones given for job satisfaction. It should be noted that 37% of The Guild respondents reported “I do not dislike anything about my job.” Of those who did report some dissatisfaction, four main reasons were given which were similar across both The Guild and national samples: not feeling fairly compensated for their work, not feeling appreciated for their work, not enough support, and COVID-19.







While the top challenges reported by the DSPs at The Guild are the same as those faced by DSPs nationally, it is encouraging to see that these percentages are lower compared to the national average.

IN THE  
NATIONAL SURVEY

## Employment satisfaction

To understand the experiences of today's DSPs, we asked respondents to report their satisfaction levels with their current organization. **67% of national respondents and 72% of The Guild respondents** reported feeling somewhat to completely satisfied with working as a DSP for their current organization.

86%

of respondents told us they enjoyed their work because they felt they made a difference in the lives of the people they supported.

COMPARED TO  
THE GUILD WHERE

71%

of respondents reported this as a factor in their enjoyment of their roles.

This high level of satisfaction is good news for IDD organizations, as satisfied DSPs are more likely to buy in and enjoy company culture. Using the statistical models described in the Methodology section, we gleaned several interesting insights into employee satisfaction and how that translates into action items for your organization.

Across both Relias' respondents and The Guild, respondents who reported feeling satisfied with working as a DSP at their current organization were also statistically significantly more likely to:

- Say there are no challenges to working as a DSP
- Feel well prepared by onboarding training
- Report feeling satisfied with available advancement programs
- Stay at The Guild or their current organization
- Feel satisfied with how their organization shows appreciation to its workforce
- Agree that they have a safe avenue by which to provide feedback on or to their supervisor\*
- Be more satisfied with their current supervisor\*

\*A positive correlation was found within The Guild data, but it was not statistically significant, likely due to the smaller sample size.

From this data we can conclude that both nationally, and within The Guild, organizations that effectively engage in culture building focus on three main aspects:

- Hiring or training competent, knowledgeable, and respectful supervisors
- Offering effective training and career advancement opportunities to DSPs
- Creating a culture that supports the professional and personal well-being of staff

Throughout the rest of this report, we will explore what our survey uncovered regarding these three aspects of culture building and what you can take from this data to implement at your own organization.





# Staff support, appreciation, and well-being

The job of a DSP can be both psychologically and physically tiring, sometimes causing burnout or compassion fatigue. To build a culture that can effectively retain qualified DSPs, organizations must create systems to support DSPs through their challenges and promote workplace well-being.

## IN FACT

65%

of national respondents



83%

of The Guild respondents

reported that they would be moderately to extremely more likely to stay with their current organization if it invested in employee well-being or mental health programs.

## DESPITE THESE NUMBERS, JUST

52%

of national respondents



26%

of The Guild respondents

reported that their organization offered employee well-being and mental health programs with 35% of national respondents and 49% of Guild respondents reporting they did not know if their organization offered these types of programs.

Further analysis of the data reveals that well-being and mental health programs are key, however, to creating a quality culture. **Respondents in both the national survey and The Guild survey who reported that their organization offered these programs were significantly more likely to believe that their supervisor and other organizational leaders cared about their psychological well-being.** This group also proved more likely to think that their organization promoted employee well-being.

The Guild already offers an Employee Assistance Program and other wellness resources, so these responses have driven follow up actions. In addition to considering enhanced well-being programs, The Guild will improve communication about these benefits.

To address the gap between the types of programs that DSPs want and that organizations offer, in the following section we will explore what our survey uncovered about how DSPs like to receive appreciation and recognition.

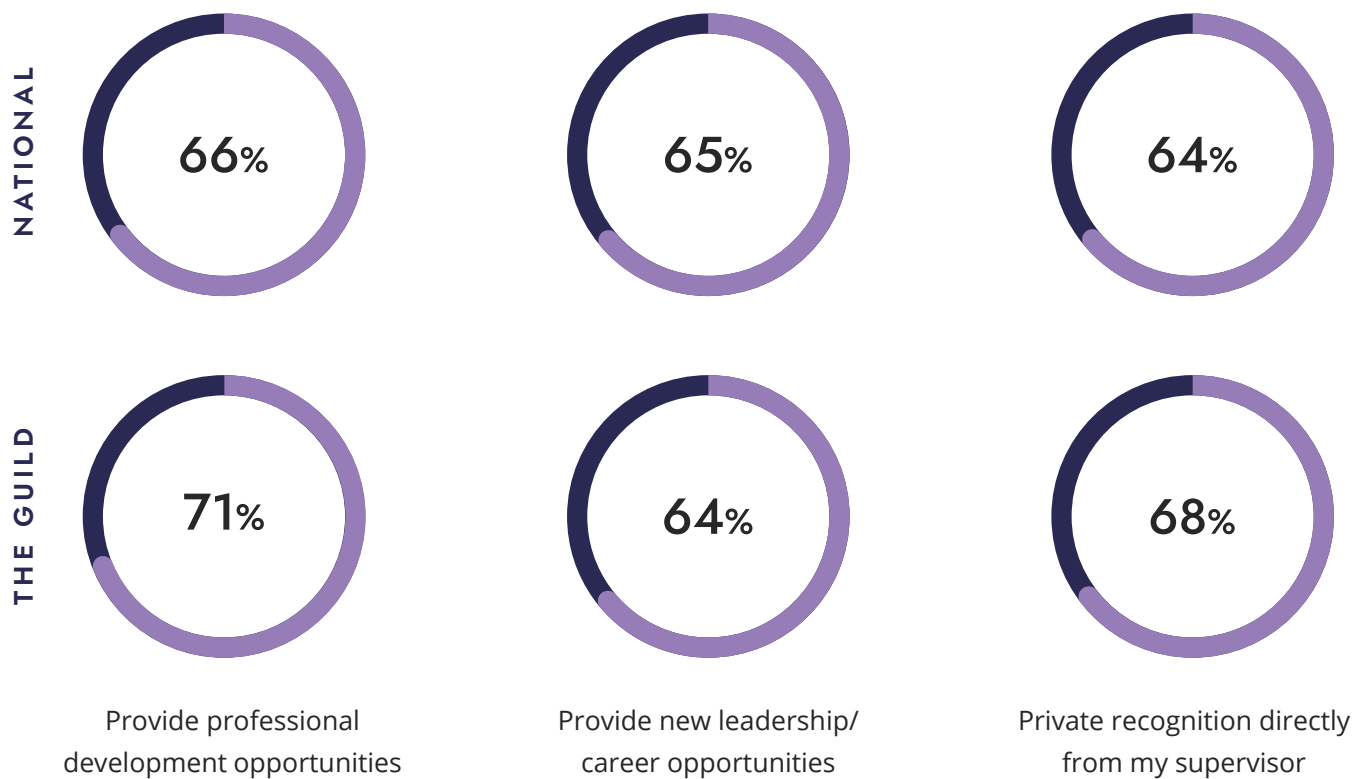
# DSP appreciation and recognition

The perception national respondents had of their organizations’ appreciation efforts was somewhat more spread out than at The Guild. A little over half (52%) of national respondents reported that they were somewhat to completely satisfied with how their organization showed appreciation for their work, while this was slightly higher among The Guild respondents at 64%. Furthermore, 21% of national respondents reported feeling neither satisfied nor dissatisfied compared to 11% of The Guild respondents, and roughly equal numbers of Relias (27%) and The Guild (25%) respondents reported they were completely to somewhat dissatisfied.

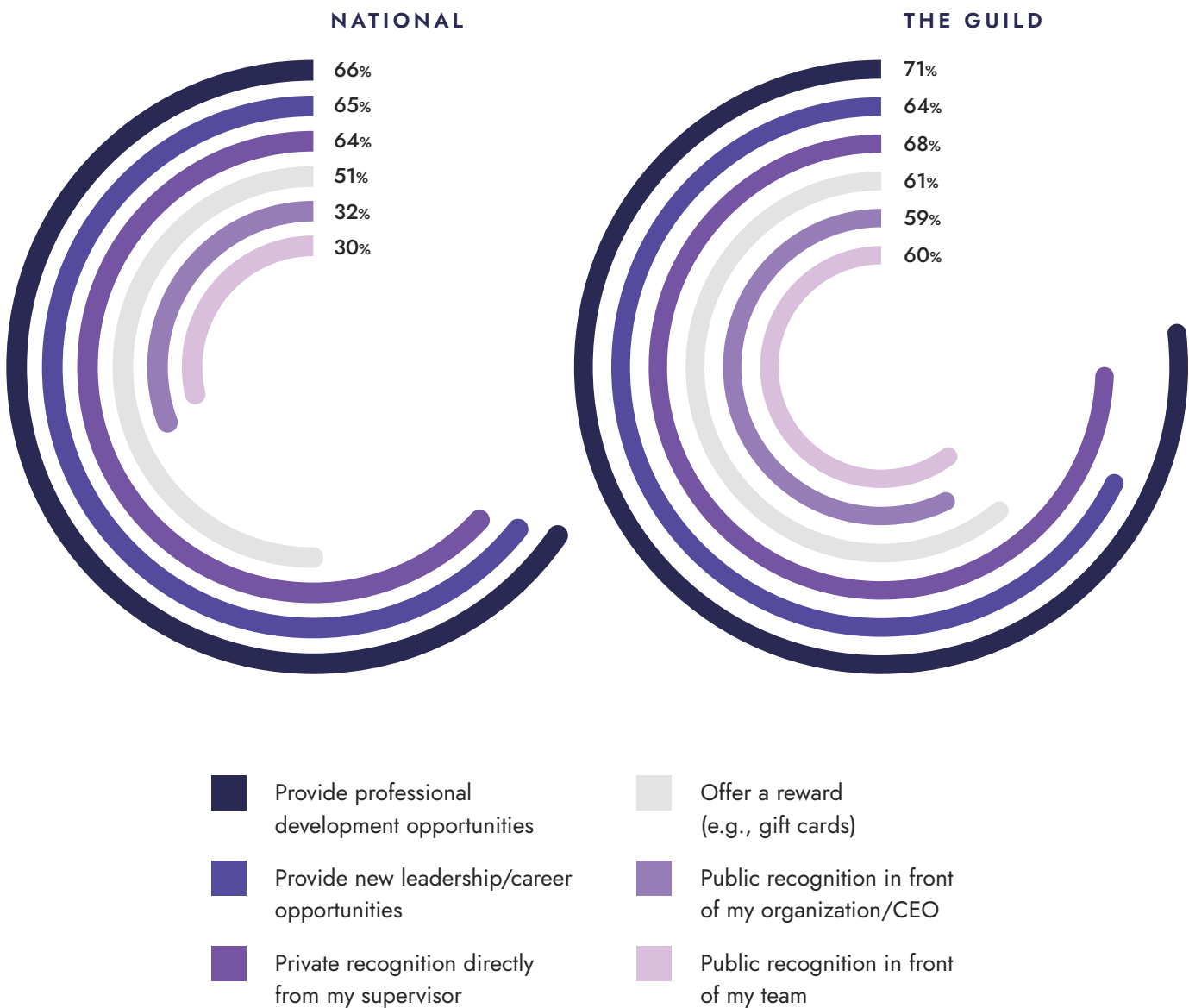
It is encouraging to see that most respondents are satisfied with how their organizations show appreciation and this is even more strongly seen at The Guild; however, the data still shows room for improvement.

To understand what organizations are doing well and where areas for improvement may lie, we asked respondents to rank how valuable they find different forms of appreciation. The top three choices were the same among national and The Guild respondents: provide professional development opportunities (66% national vs 71% The Guild), provide new leadership/career opportunities (65% national vs 64% The Guild), and Private recognition from my supervisor (64% national vs 68% The Guild).

## Most Preferred Methods of Receiving Recognition



However, one interesting contrast is that while public recognition was generally not preferred in the national sample, respondents from The Guild placed a higher value on public recognition. While only 32% of national respondents reported that recognition in front of their organization or CEO would be valuable to them, 59% of respondents from The Guild placed value here. Similarly, only 30% of national respondents reported that recognition in front of their team would be valuable to them, compared to 60% of respondents from The Guild. DSPs from The Guild also placed a slightly higher value on receiving a reward such as a gift card (61%) compared to 51% from national respondents.





# Training and career advancement

For DSPs to provide the best support to persons served, confidence and competence in the required skills is crucial. But we also know from past surveys that DSPs crave training not only for skill acquisition, but career advancement.

For organizations to retain and grow their DSP workforce, they must provide training to help their DSPs cultivate their skills, while also allowing DSPs to explore career advancement opportunities.

## Competence and confidence

When we asked how prepared for work DSP respondents felt based on the training provided by their organization during onboarding, 46% of national respondents reported being very or extremely prepared compared to 69% of respondents at The Guild.



NATIONAL

THE GUILD

Extremely prepared

14%

37%

Very prepared

32%

32%

Moderately prepared

32%

12%

Somewhat prepared

18%

15%

Not at all prepared

4%

4%

The fact that over half of DSPs nationally feel moderately prepared or less by their organization after onboarding reflects a priority for action and improvement. DSPs at The Guild reported much higher satisfaction with their onboarding preparation. **Indeed, we found that respondents who felt more prepared due to training received from their organization were significantly more competent and confident in their DSP skills once on the job.**

To increase confidence in their DSP skills, respondents to the national survey and The Guild survey placed a high importance in the following four areas: more continuing education opportunities (39% national, 44% The Guild), a wider variety of training (32% national, 20% The Guild), better quality of training (22% national, 29% The Guild) and more practice of DSP skills (17% national, 41% The Guild).

## Career advancement programs

On top of training to enhance their DSP skills, respondents also showed a keen interest in training aimed at career advancement.

By and large, respondents preferred career laddering and reskilling programs. When asked what types of career advancement would have the most impact on their decision to stay with their current organization:

38% 39%

reported educational opportunities toward a degree paid for by the organization

32% 24%

said a certificate program paid for by the organization

AND 27% 33%

wanted a professional ladder to a leadership position

■ NATIONAL  
■ THE GUILD

## How training and advancement impact culture

No matter what type of career advancement programs your organization pursues, one of the keys to its success will be getting buy-in from DSPs.

— IN FACT, **58%** of respondents from the national survey

AND **75%** of respondents from The Guild

told us that it was very important or extremely important that DSPs are involved in creating career advancement programs at their organizations. By involving DSPs in the planning process, you will guarantee that any training or advancement programs actually provide what DSPs want and need to succeed. Additionally, the organization will demonstrate a higher level of appreciation and recognition of DSPs and their skill sets. This provides an opportunity for The Guild and other organizations nationwide to involve their DSPs in this process, providing them the programs they want and valuing their input.

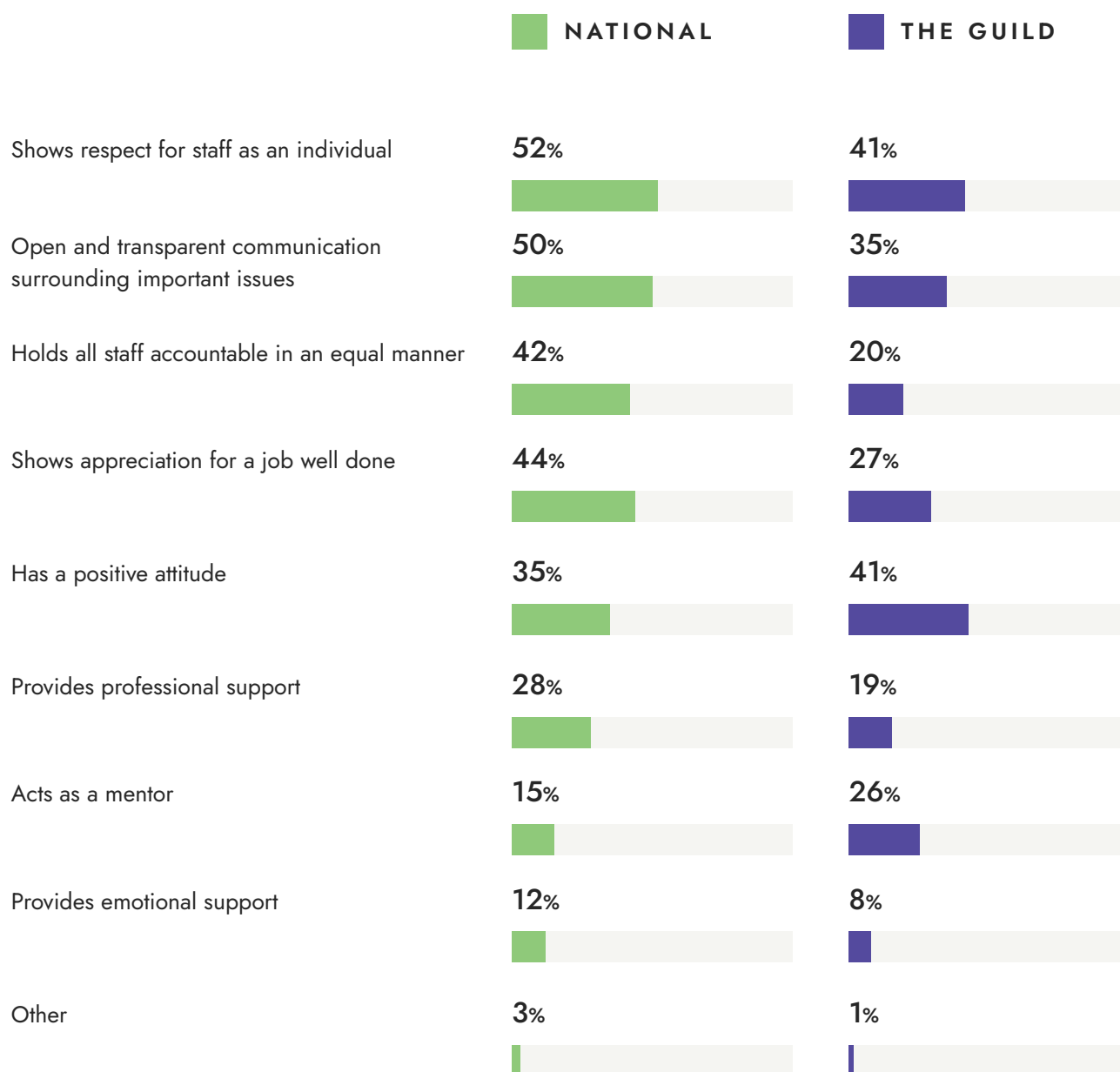


# Supervision

Quality supervision is key to DSP retention. In fact, **50% of Relias respondents said they had left a job because of a supervisor.** But finding the right leader for your team is easier said than done. A supervisor needs a combination of soft skills and technical skills that are cultivated on the job. To understand the skills a supervisor needs to effectively lead a team of DSPs, we asked respondents to weigh in on important personality traits and communication styles of an effective supervisor. It is encouraging that **among The Guild respondents only 19% had left a job because of a supervisor.** However, this could be partially due to the relatively shorter work experience of The Guild respondents.

## Supervisor traits

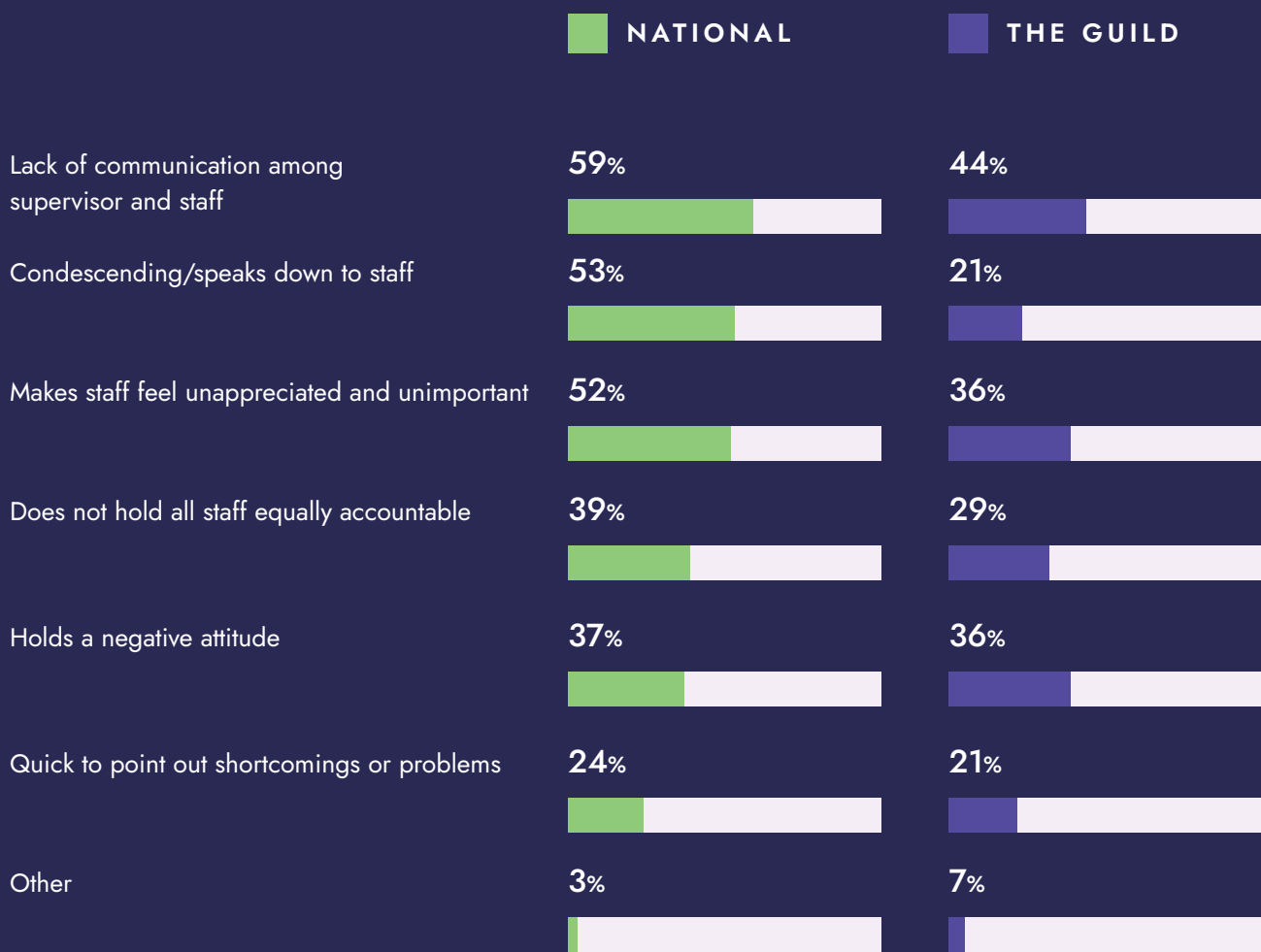
When it comes to hiring the right supervisor, finding a person who fits in well with your DSP team is paramount. To understand the personality traits that DSPs find most appealing in a supervisor, we asked respondents which attributes they found most important.



Good supervisors proved to have a statistically significant impact on DSP workplace wellness among respondents to both surveys. Respondents in both surveys who were satisfied with their current supervisor were more likely to believe that their supervisor and organization leaders cared about their psychological well-being, and they were more satisfied with how their organization showed appreciation to its workforce.

Given that half of Relias respondents and nearly 20% of The Guild respondents have left an organization due to a supervisor, it's also important to gauge what DSPs do not want from a supervisor. To understand this, we asked respondents which attributes in a supervisor would most discourage them as a DSP.

The Guild shared two of the top three negative characteristics with national results: lack of communication between supervisor and staff (59% national, 44% The Guild); makes staff feel unappreciated (52% national, 36% The Guild). However, more national respondents said that being condescending or speaking down to staff was discouraging (53% Relias), while the third most discouraging characteristic for The Guild was holding a negative attitude (36%).





## Supervisor feedback and communication

Finding a qualified supervisor is only part of the process of improving DSP supervision in your organization. Creating organizational structures that allow DSPs to give feedback both to and on their supervisor is critical, as well as providing supervisors with the training and support they need to consistently improve their communication skills.

Indeed, **81% of respondents in both the national and The Guild survey reported that having a safe platform to provide feedback about a supervisor was very to extremely important.** However, not all DSPs agreed that this avenue was available to them. 59% of national respondents and 68% of Guild respondents reported that they had a safe avenue to provide feedback about a supervisor.

Just as important as providing safe channels for DSPs to give feedback on their supervisors is the level of comfort DSPs feel speaking with their supervisors. Fortunately, 74% of national respondents reported they were somewhat to extremely comfortable talking with their current supervisor about the stress and challenges they faced in their job, and The Guild respondents were even more comfortable, with 80% feeling comfortable talking with their supervisor.

This is a positive trend, as DSPs who were comfortable with speaking to their supervisors about the challenges of their role also proved more likely to be satisfied with their current organization as well as with their supervisors.

## **ABOUT THE GUILD FOR HUMAN SERVICES**

Headquartered in Concord, Massachusetts, The Guild for Human Services serves more than 160 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities annually through educational, residential, and clinical programming. Offering flexibility within structure, The Guild for Human Services promotes the development of academic, social, vocational, and independent living skills through a private, 365-day, special education school serving up to 90 students; 9 group homes for 72 youth; as well as 15 residential homes for 75 adults diagnosed with intellectual disability, autism, and other developmental challenges.

## **ABOUT RELIAS**

Relias is a global software company that specializes in education and training solutions for healthcare and human services providers. For more than 12,000 organizations around the world, Relias continues to help its clients elevate the performance of teams to get better at maintaining compliance, developing staff, and promoting consistent, high-quality care.

## **ABOUT ANCOR**

For more than a half-century, ANCOR has worked to shape policy and share solutions to strengthen the ability of community-based providers to support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As the leading voice in Washington for community providers, ANCOR represents 2,000 members that operate in nearly every corner of the country to make inclusion a reality for people of all abilities.

The profession of direct support in IDD services is critical to advancing the equity, inclusion, and human rights of people with disabilities. These individuals who give so much of their time and talent to improving the lives of those they support and upholding their dignity should be given our utmost respect. Provide the best support and appreciation to your DSPs. To learn how Relias and ANCOR can help you support your DSPs, contact us today.

[LEARN MORE](#)

