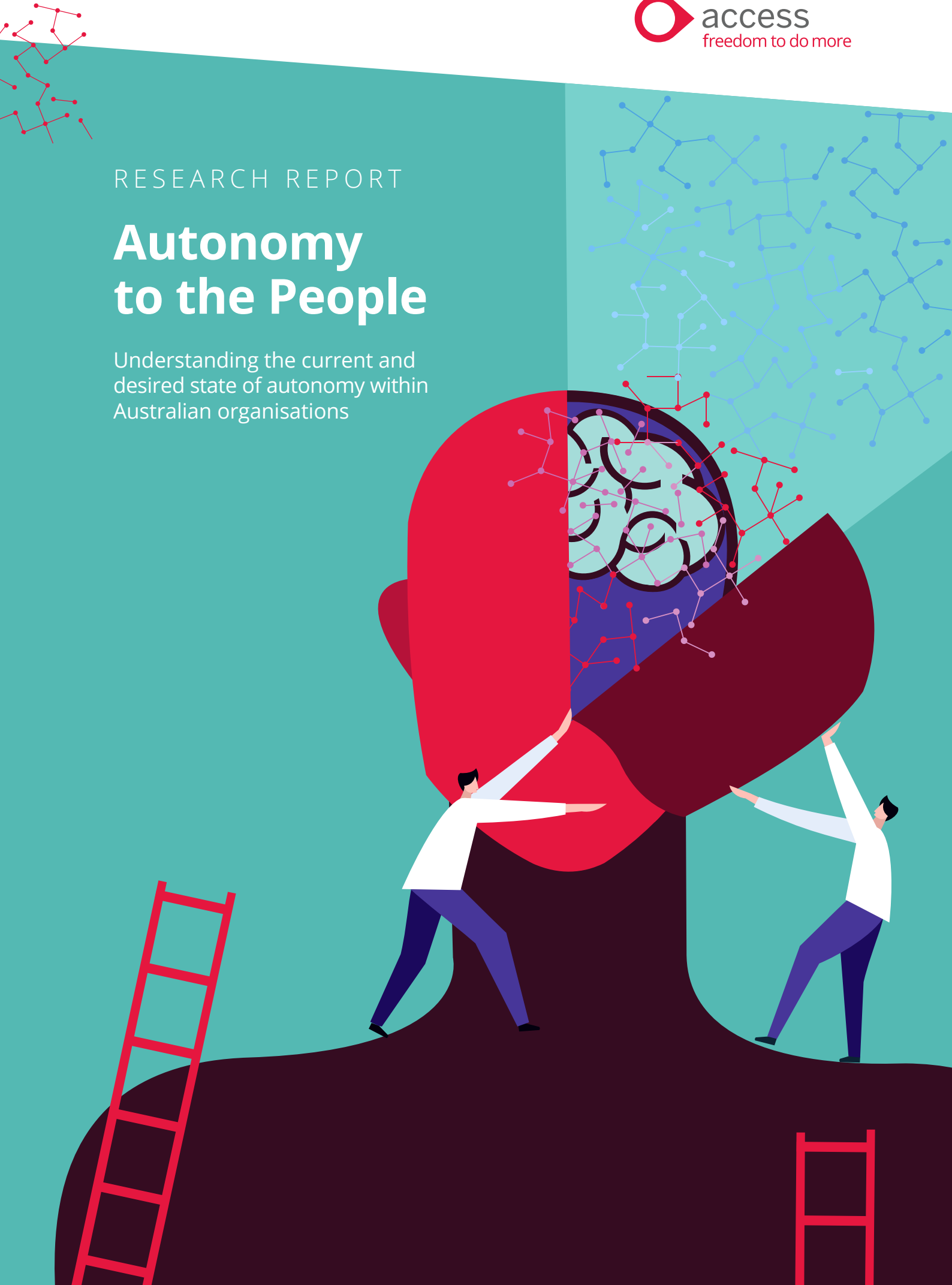


RESEARCH REPORT

# Autonomy to the People

Understanding the current and  
desired state of autonomy within  
Australian organisations



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# Executive summary

Our research analysed the demand for autonomy, the current state of Australian organisations' ways of working, and the styles of their leaders and managers. The findings show a clear disconnect between the way organisations operate, and the way people want them to.



Better ways of working has long been a topic of strategic consideration for organisations. The overnight move to remote working, saw the adoption of technology to assist in that shift, hit another gear.

As a provider of business software solutions, The Access Group wanted to better understand the preference for and prevalence of different organisational models in Australian businesses and the perceived benefits it delivered. What emerged was a strong desire for an autonomous way of working, from employers and employees alike and the benefits this model presented to both.

So if autonomy is desirable and good for business, where can managers and organisations change their behaviour to create the conditions for autonomous employees to flourish? These are the questions our study set out to answer. We hope you find the insights useful for you and your organisation.

The key findings are as follows:



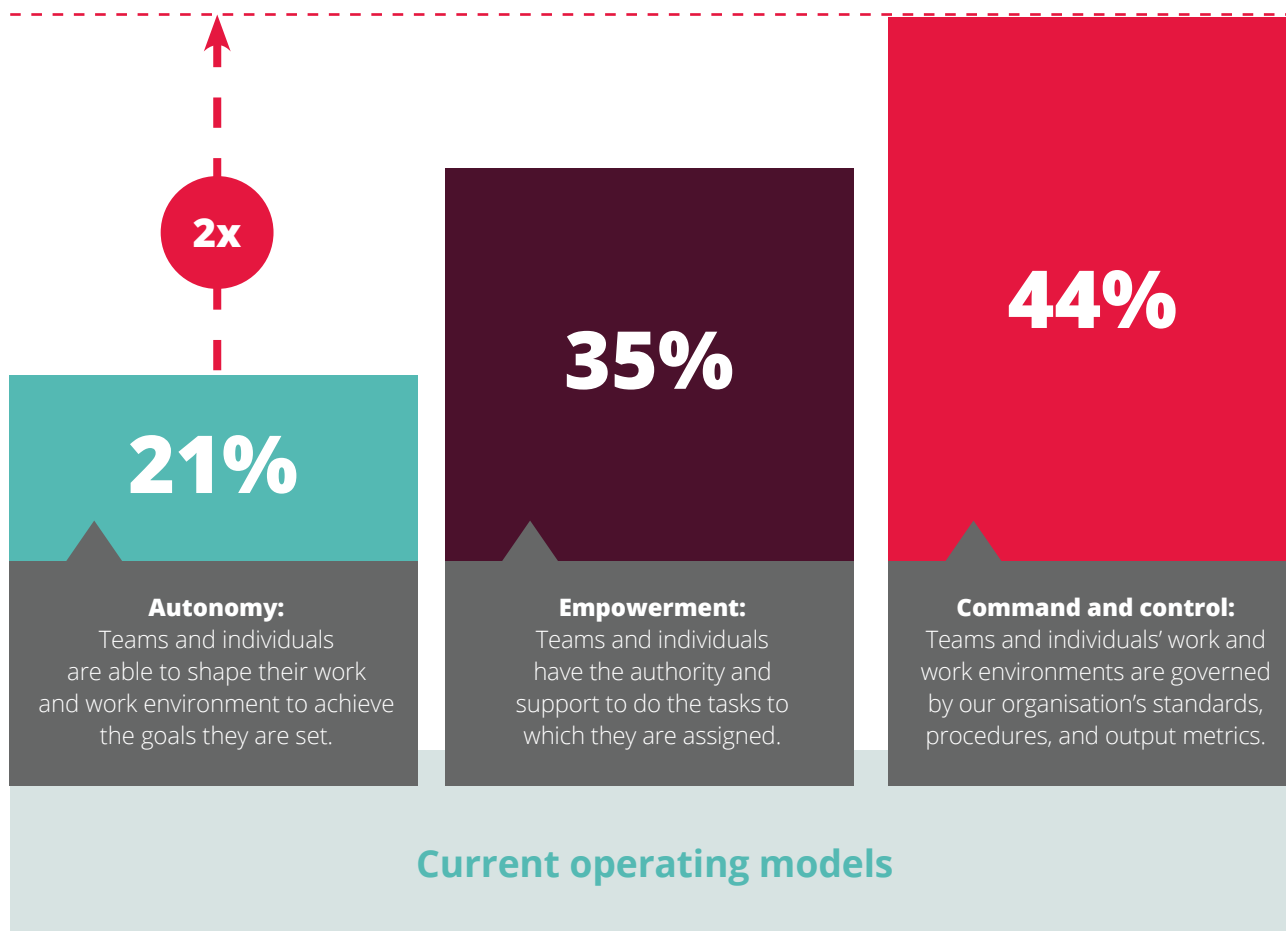
# The desire for autonomy

Autonomy is relatively rare in today's organisations. Australian organisations' approaches are mostly a mix of empowerment and top-down control. They are twice as likely to operate with a 'command and control' model than one promoting autonomy.



## Current ways of working

Australian organisations are **twice as likely** to operate with a 'command and control' model than one promoting autonomy.



When asked to choose the statement which best described their organisation's current ways of working, the vast majority of respondents (79%) described their organisation as operating with either empowerment (35%) or command and control (44%). Only 21% of respondents felt the autonomous definition best described their organisation.

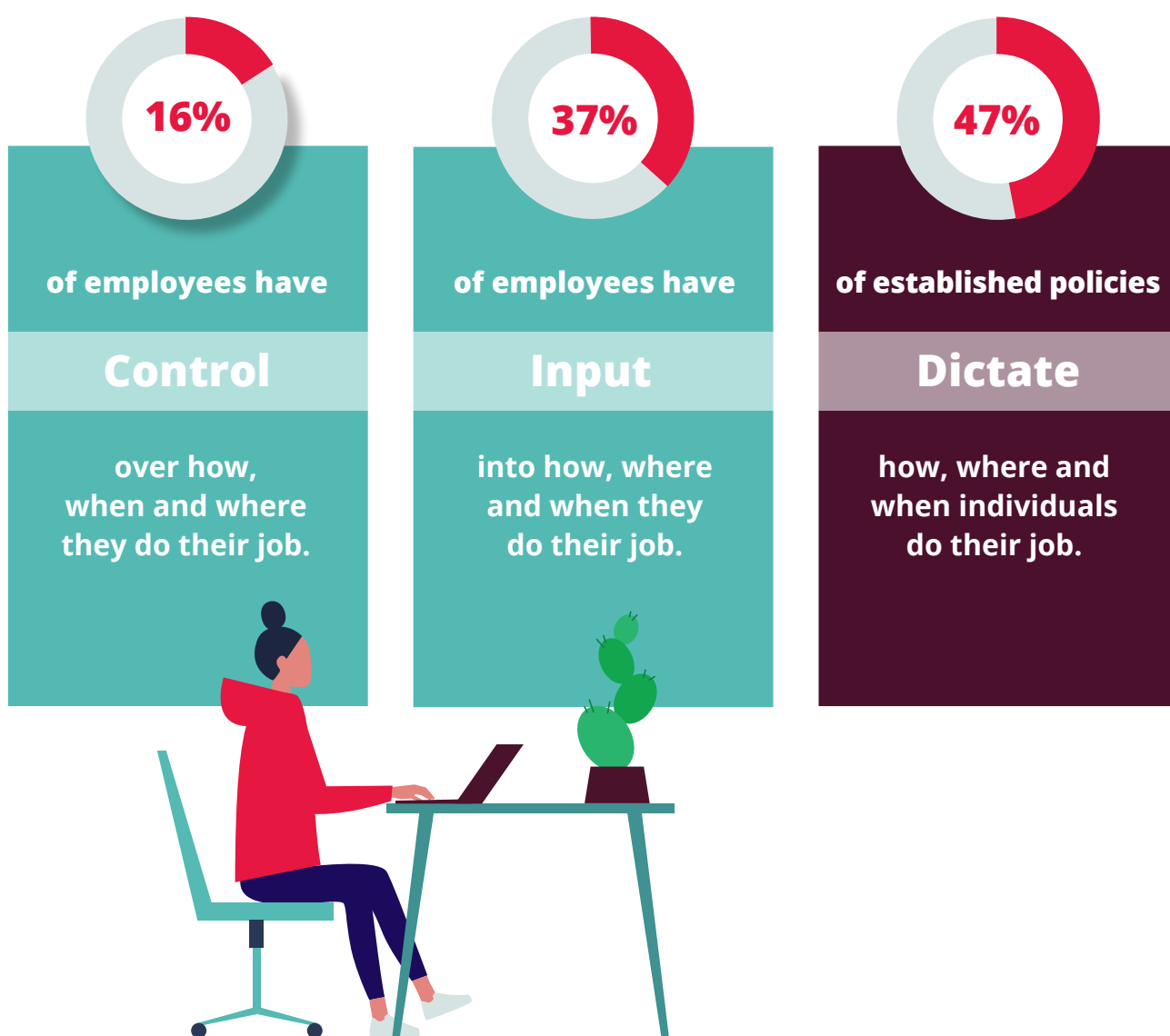
This trend is broadly consistent across different industry types, with 82% of respondents from manufacturing, construction and utilities selecting either the empowerment or command-and-control definitions. Only the services sector reported a more even split between the three models, with 31% of respondents believing their organisation operated with an autonomous approach.

This offers an overall baseline for how organisations currently operate. To get a better sense of where and when autonomy is most needed, we examined the prevalence of specific behaviours and traits aligned to the three models.

We found **empowering and controlling behaviours are both more common than autonomy-enabling traits**. Australian organisations are more likely to empower their employees in terms of getting their input into their goals and responsibilities, and welcoming ideas from employees to further the organisation's development.

However, organisations are more controlling when and where employees work. Almost half (47%) limit people's self-determination - their ability to choose where, when and how best to do their job — in favour of adherence to established policies.

## Current model of self-determination

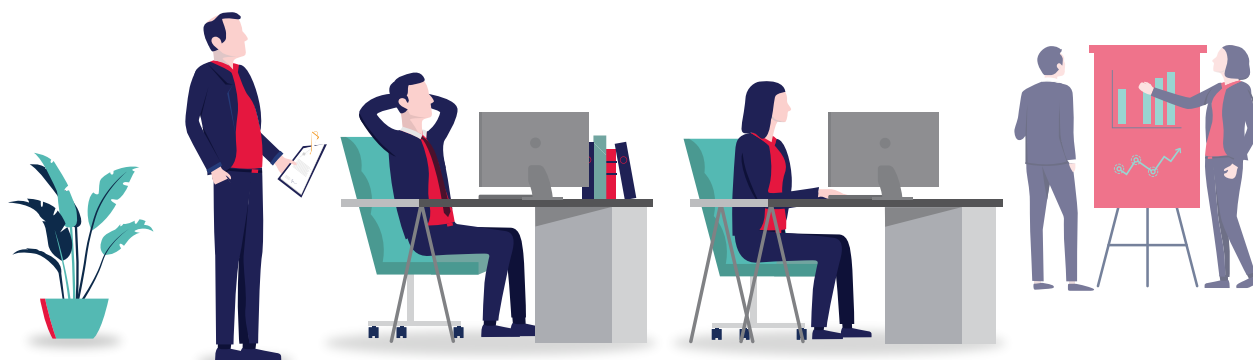
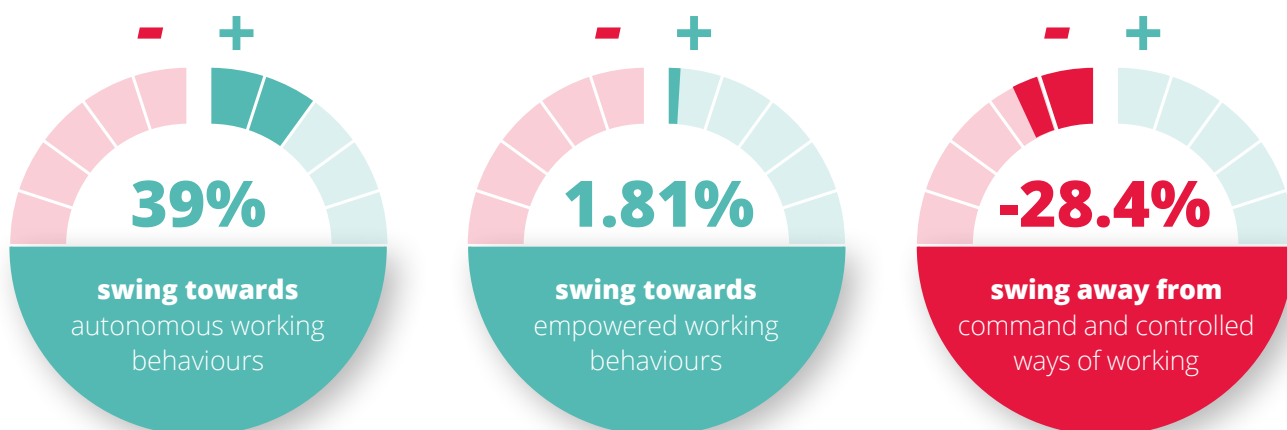


The only behavioural area where the autonomous approach is more common than the top-down control model concerns the availability of information. Just over a quarter (26%) felt their organisation had a limited approach to providing the necessary information to perform their task. In contrast, 36% felt their organisation took a more holistic approach and made information freely available to help employees understand the organisation's strategy.

### Employees demand more autonomy

Employees clearly want their organisation to foster more autonomy. Analysing the percentage change between current and ideal behaviours, there is a swing of almost 70% away from command-and-control behaviours towards those enabling autonomy.

#### Average % change between current and ideal working behaviors

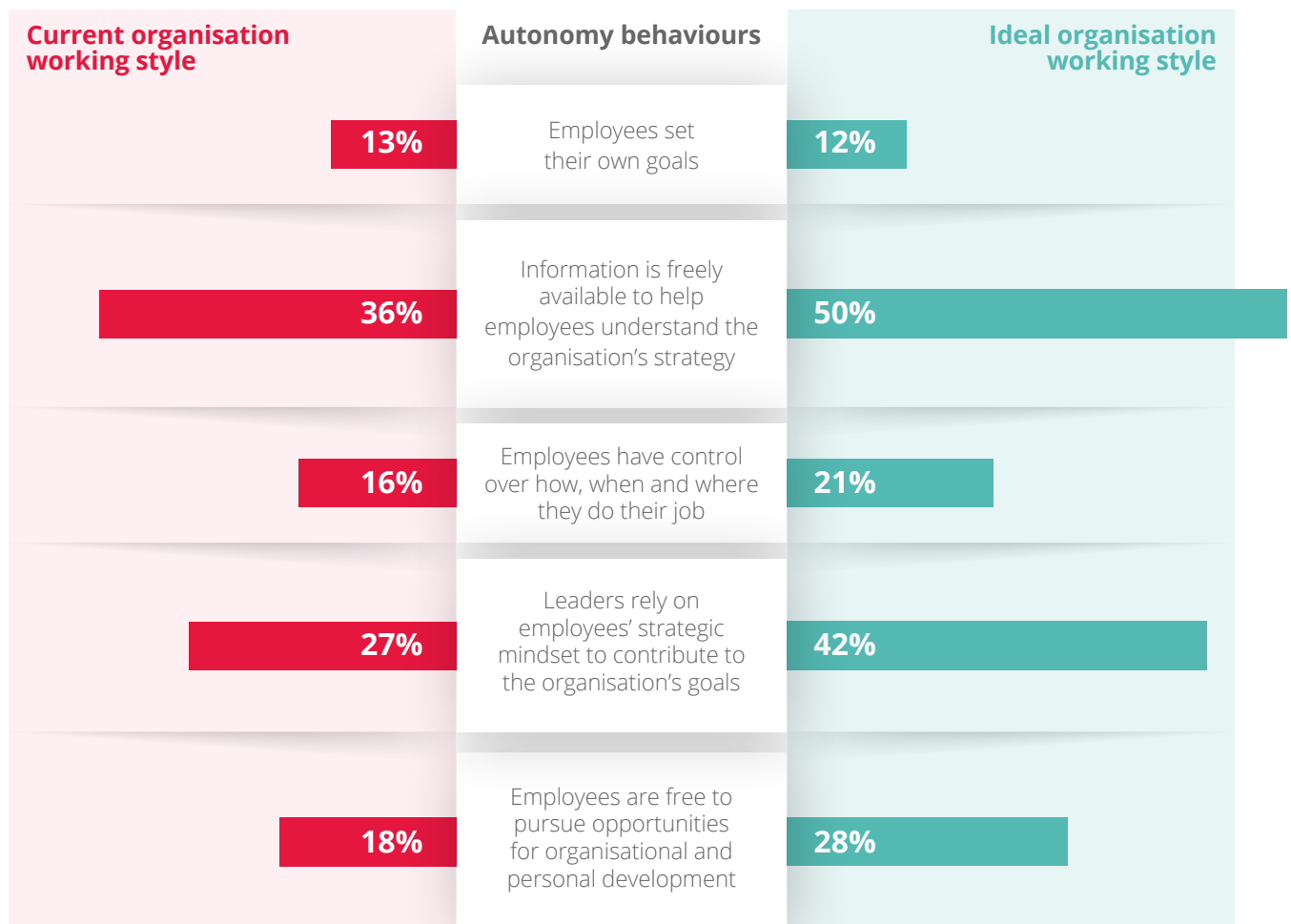


Respondents were also more likely to choose the autonomous model as their ideal overall state than either the empowered or controlled model.

The research suggests organisations are failing employees' expectations in several key areas. Behaviours signalling autonomy are consistently less prevalent than respondents would like, demonstrating employees' desire for:

- Greater access to information about the organisation's strategy
- A change in oversight style to one where leaders rely on their strategic understanding to ensure they contribute to the organisation's goals
- More scope to pursue opportunities for personal and organisational development
- More control over when, where and how they do their job.

## Autonomy-enabling behaviours: current vs ideal



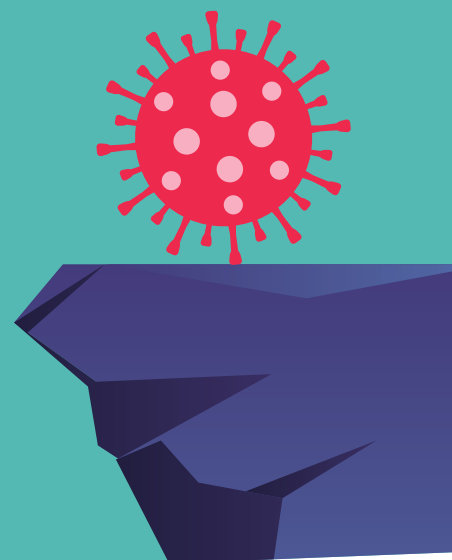
At first glance, it may be a surprise respondents didn't want more control over setting their goals. However, effective autonomy as an operational model is not about leaving employees to fend for themselves without guidance or direction. It could be argued that setting individual and team goals should be a collaborative process.

Employees do their best work when they have a clear idea of the expectations placed upon them, access to information and strategic direction, self-determination of when and where to do the task, and managers who avoid micromanagement in favour of ensuring individuals align to the same objective.



# The COVID-19 effect

We have seen how organisations are likely to operate an empowerment or command and control model than an autonomous one. This is despite the forced move to hybrid working brought by the pandemic and the associated need for individuals to operate more autonomously.



While we cannot compare organisations' current operating state with pre-COVID times, the pandemic has changed attitudes to be more in favour of autonomy. Respondents believe all the ingredients for autonomous ways of working are significantly more important to their organisation than before the pandemic.

Percentage change in importance of the following factors to respondents' business since the start of the pandemic



**49%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*Responsibility for something they believe is important*



**32%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*have control over who they do their job with*



**50%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*are informed and aligned to their organisation's strategic goals*



**51%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*have control over the resources they need to do their job*



**44%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*have control over what they do in their job and how they do it*



**54%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*have control over when and where they do their job*



**44%**

of respondents have changed how they think about:

*can pursue opportunities to further their personal development and organisational goals*



*Italic text indicates autonomy statement*



It's clear the pandemic has proven what most of us currently experience: autonomy must play a significant role in the way in which we now work.

As in the case of any significant business disruption, it is an opportunity to recalibrate and pivot. With half of respondents believing it is more important now that employees are informed and aligned to their organisation's strategic goals, access to data and resources through the effective use of technology can be a true enabler of autonomy.

**51%**

want to have control  
over the resources they  
need to do their job

**50%**

want to be informed and  
aligned to their organisation's  
strategic goals



# Management styles

We have seen there is demand for more autonomy, and a business case for it, yet our research suggests organisations are not delivering to these expectations.



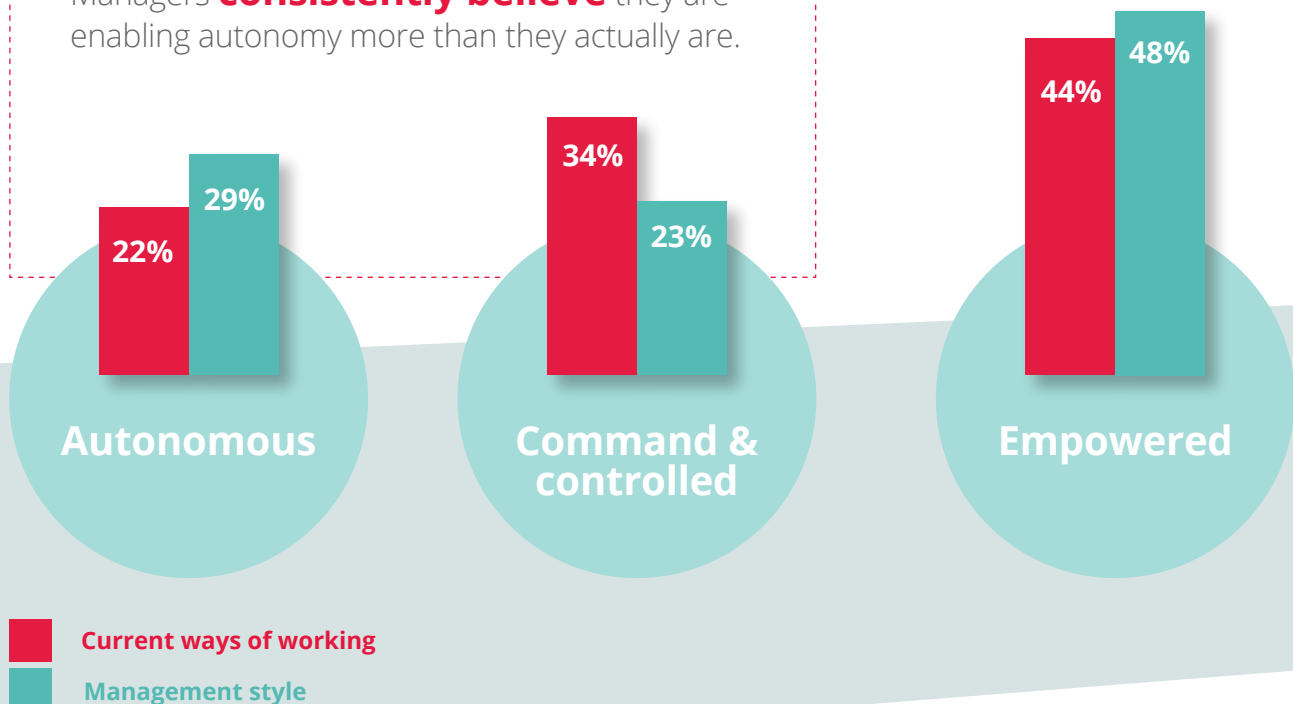
An organisation's behaviours are a product of its leaders and managers, so how do management styles in Australian organisations reflect the reality of their operations?

## Managers' styles don't match the way organisations operate

The starkest finding is the disconnect between managers' view of their style and their perception of their organisation's operations. Managers are either more critical of their organisations, or more optimistic about their behaviours, as they consistently believe they are enabling autonomy more than they actually are.

## Management style vs current ways of working

Managers **consistently believe** they are enabling autonomy more than they actually are.



The disconnect is particularly apparent among respondents whose organisations operate in a command-and-control model. For example, over half (51%) of managers in command-and-control organisations believe their oversight style enables their staff's autonomy, yet only 16% believe their organisation has the same approach. Over two-thirds (68%) believe they allow employees input into their goals, while only 29% feel their organisations works this way.

There are several potential explanations for this disconnect. Respondents may believe their style is an outlier in their organisation. Their experience as an employee can also be very different from their approach to managing their own teams. There is possibly an element of bias here too. We all like to think our way of doing things is the best. Whatever the explanation, the results demonstrate that while autonomy is a more preferred management style than the top-down approach, managers are still reluctant to give away too much authority. Empowerment remains the most popular management style.

### **Processes and technology are effective at enabling autonomy**

An organisation's people are one part of the equation for delivering outcomes. Using the ITIL framework as a construct, we also evaluated respondents' view on the effectiveness of processes and technology in supporting autonomy.

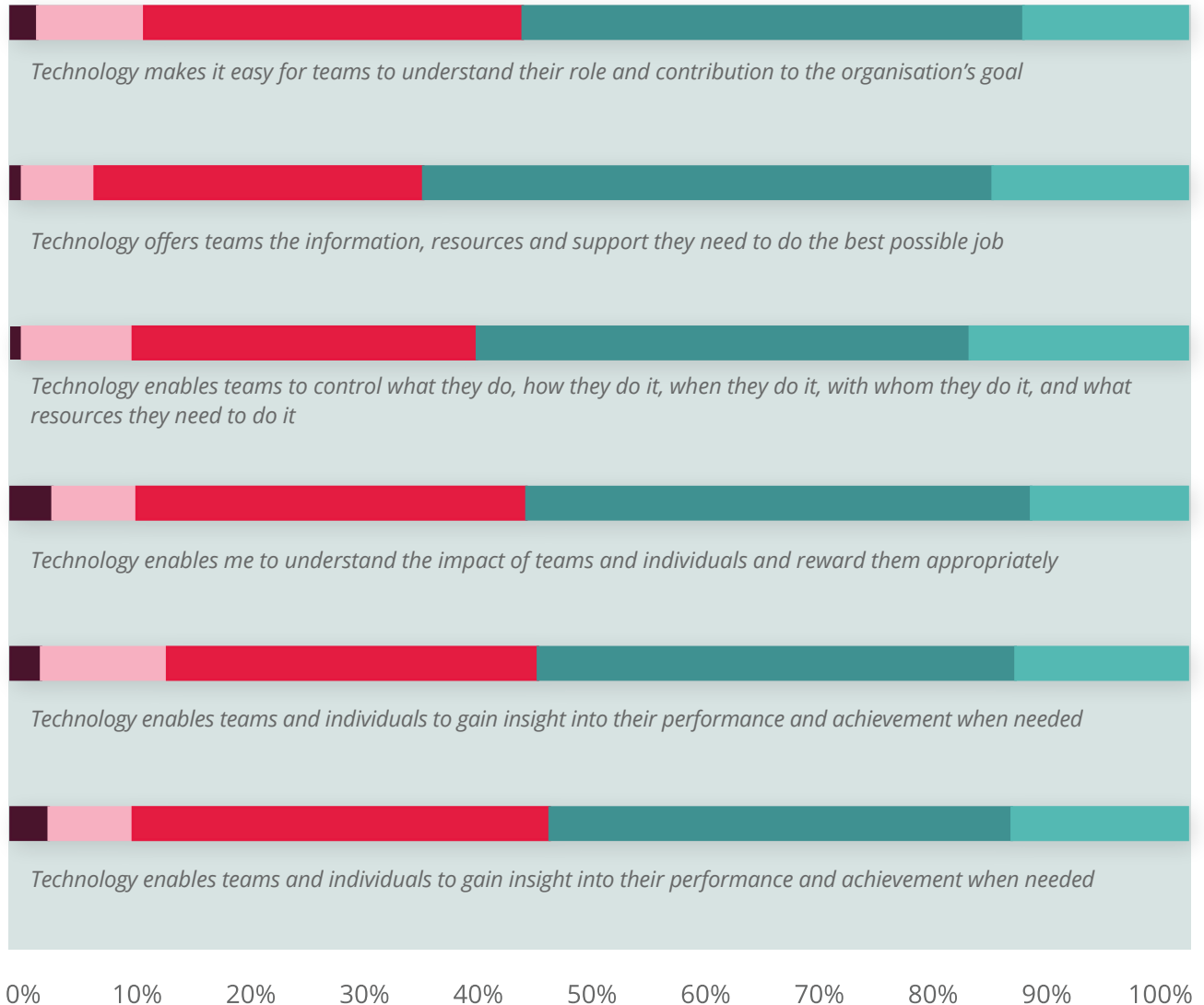
The results are clear that technology and process play an important role in enabling teams and individuals to be autonomous. Over half of respondents believed technology was effective or very effective in supporting autonomy. Similarly, respondents see processes as effective at supporting all aspects of autonomy.



## Effectiveness of technology at supporting aspects of autonomy

Least effective
  Somewhat effective
  Effective
  Quite effective
  Most effective

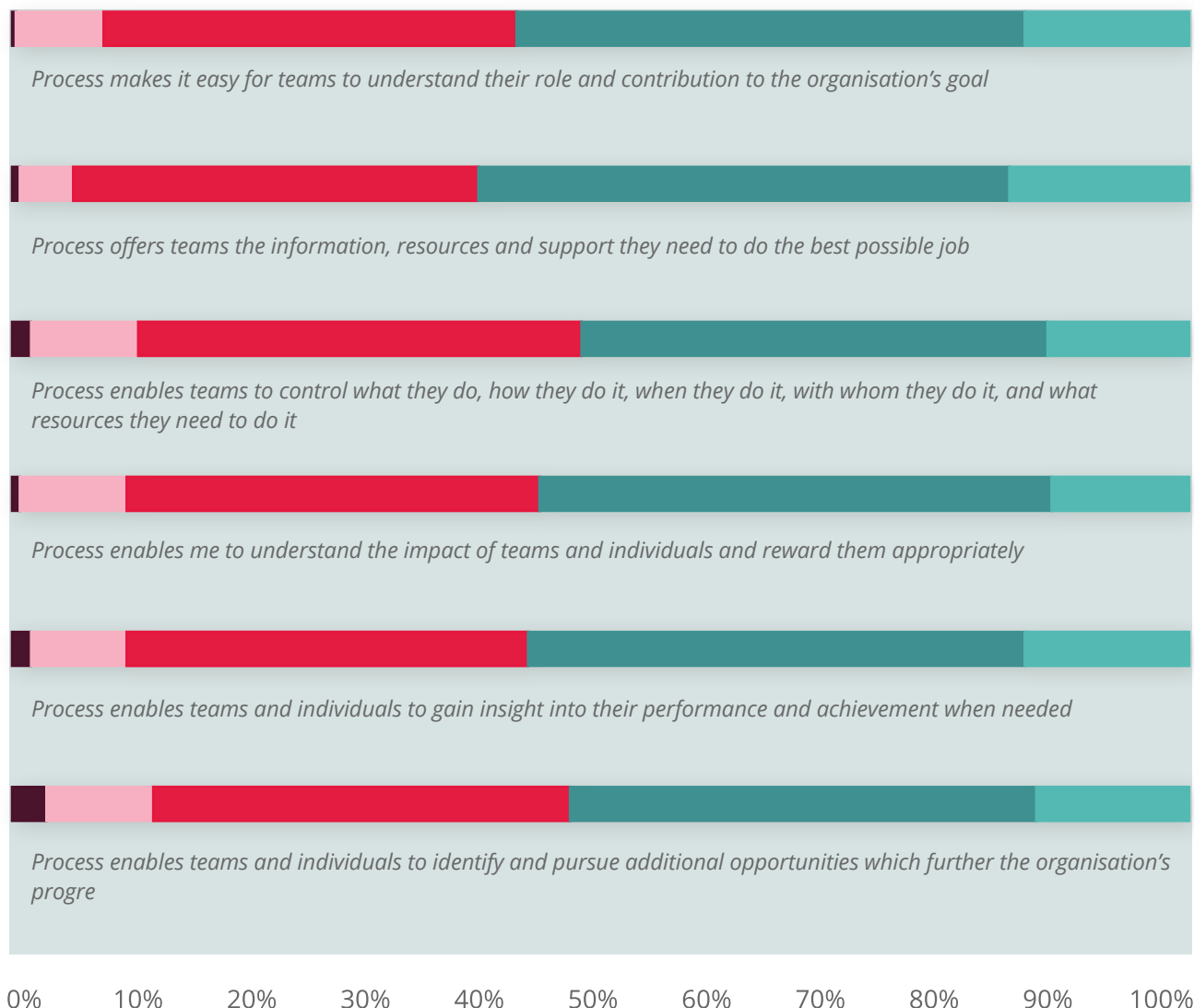
*Italic text indicates autonomy statement*



## Effectiveness of process at supporting aspects of autonomy

Least effective    Somewhat effective    Effective    Quite effective    Most effective

*Italic text indicates autonomy statement*



### Few employees have extensive access to the resources needed for autonomy

The ability to access data and resources at the point of need is a critical enabler of autonomous individuals and teams.

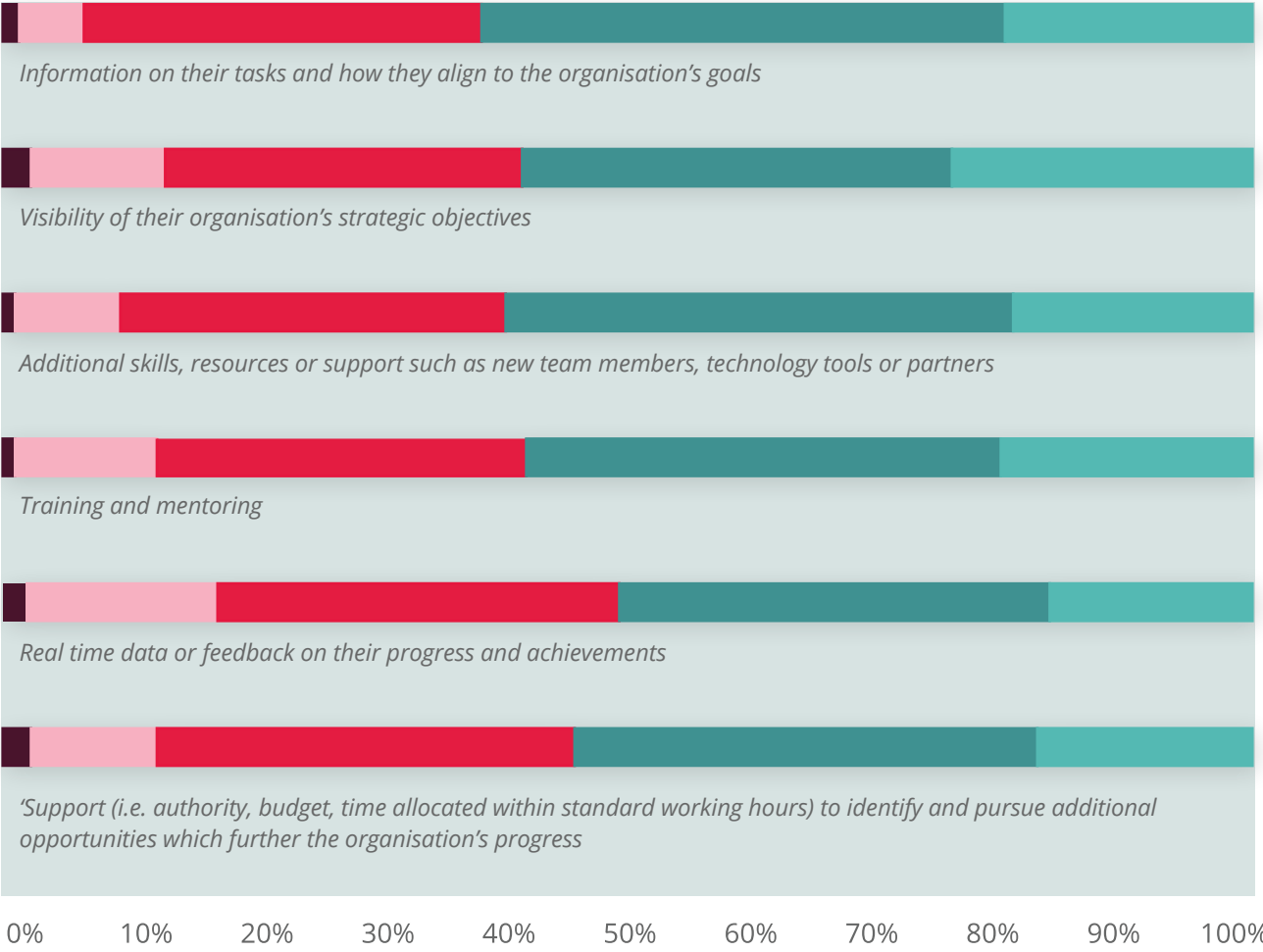
Our research shows few organisations are effectively delivering this level of access. Less than a quarter of respondents believed they had 'extensive access when needed' to: visibility of their organisation's objectives; information about their tasks; training and mentoring; additional skills or support; and data or feedback on their progress and achievements.

The absence of extensive support and insight goes some way to explaining why autonomy is not more prevalent in organisations today.

# Access to resources, data, insights and support to enable autonomy

Least effective      Somewhat effective      Effective      Quite effective      Most effective

*Italic text indicates autonomy statement*



# Conclusions

The research suggests organisations and employees achieve better outcomes in many areas of business when teams and individuals can act more autonomously. The desire for autonomy is shared by organisations, managers and employees alike.



In our view, the transition to an autonomous state is a journey rather than a goal. From fostering innovative new services or delighting customers, there are opportunities here for organisations to move beyond empowerment and create autonomous, agile and high performing organisations fit for the future.

The research proves that Australian organisations are doing a good job in empowering their people but a disconnect exists between most people's current and ideal state at work. Leaders can do more to meet employee expectations, particularly in terms of enabling employees to control important aspects of their work lives, in sharing information, data and insights to help them do their jobs, and in adopting oversight styles that are based on outcomes rather than inputs.

The results also show tools are available for organisations that want to continue their journey of empowerment towards autonomy. Instead, how organisations operate is far more likely to be dictated by the way they choose to use the tools, processes, and resources either to foster autonomy and empowerment, or to command and control their employees.

We come back to the ingredients of effective autonomy: a shared understanding of the organisation's goals and business context, the trust to make decisions based on this understanding, and management styles which judge on outcomes aligned to the goals, not simply outputs.

The Access Group is taking the idea of enabling autonomy one step further. Access Workspace is reimagining work through innovative connected technology, all in one central location. Intuitive apps connected to key business software provides every employee true visibility, in real-time, to the data and functionality they need to move towards a more autonomous way of working.

# Appendix - methodology

This research was conducted for The Access Group by Meta Strategy and Hall & Partners. This report was prepared for The Access Group by Meta Strategy.



## Comprehensive research review

Initial research by Meta Strategy reviewed existing studies of empowerment in the workplace, management models and recent literature on the role of autonomy. This research informed the structure and content of the fieldwork.

## Fieldwork surveying 308 professionals in Australian organisations

Interviewees were part of an online panel conducted in August 2021. All were based in Australia, and worked at a manager or higher level, with direct reports, in organisations of between 20 and 1,000 employees.

### Job domains:

HR Roles n=106 (34%)

Non-HR Roles n=202 (66%)

### Ages:

Gen Z (18-24) & Millennials (25-40) n=80 (26%)

Gen X (41-56) n=135 (44%)

Baby Boomers (57-75) n=93 (30%)

Three definitions of ways of working were used based on existing academic and workplace research into organisational styles. The definitions align to our framework of autonomy, empowerment, and command and control.

- **Autonomy:** Teams and individuals are able to shape their work and work environment to achieve the goals they are set.
- **Empowerment:** Teams and individuals have the authority or power to do the tasks to which they are assigned.
- **Command and control:** Teams and individuals' work and work environments are governed by our organisation's standards, procedures, and output metrics.

To further investigate the specific behaviours associated with these three types of practice, we identified a series of organisational and management traits to use in the research, grouped into five areas:

- Responsibility and goals
- Information
- Self-determination
- Oversight and alignment
- Growth and development





### About The Access Group

The Access Group is one of the leading providers of business management software to UK, Ireland and Asia Pacific mid-market organisations. It helps more than 55,000 customers across commercial, public sector and not-for-profit sectors become more productive and efficient. Its innovative Access Workspace cloud solutions transform the way business software is used, giving every employee the freedom to do more. Founded in 1991, The Access Group employs more than 3,850 staff.

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