

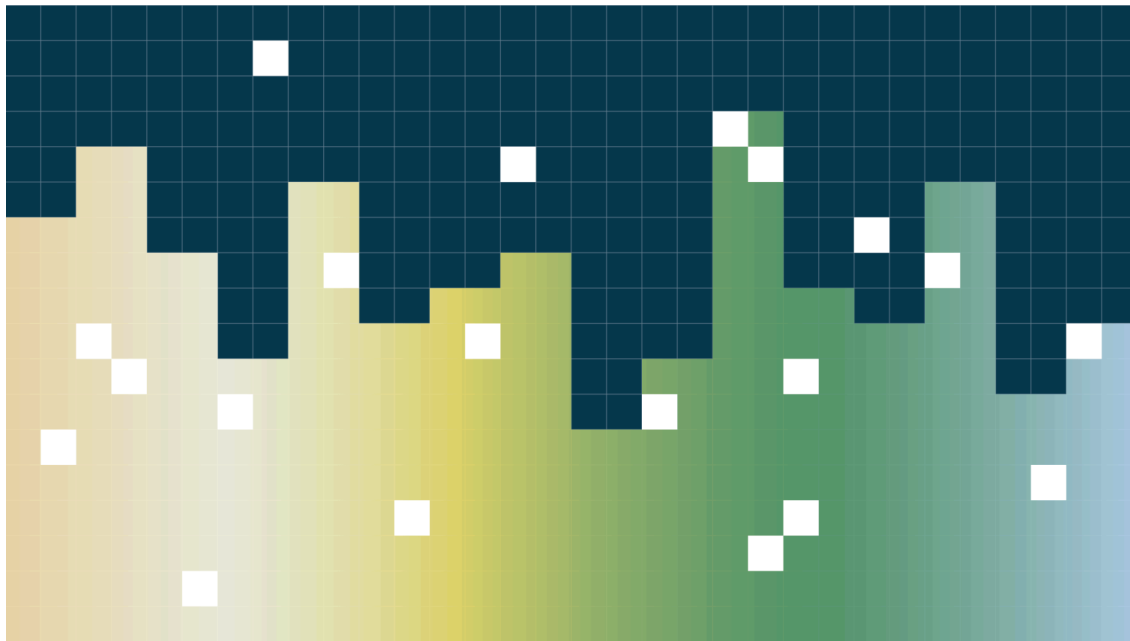


Business And Society

The HBR Charts that Help Explain 2025

by HBR Editors

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HBR Staff

Summary. A lot happened in 2025. Luckily, charts can help make sense of it all. Here are some of HBR's most popular, topical, and important charts of the year. They cover a wobbly economy, an explosion of AI-generated slop at... [more](#)

What *happened* in 2025? Well, a lot. There were tariffs, breakthroughs and disappointments with AI, and a wobbly economy that sent decidedly mixed signals. There were crises of purpose, execution, and management.

Honestly, it feels like more than one year's worth of stuff. And trying to take it all in can be a somewhat head-spinning task. But we have some good news: charts can help. (Charts always help!)

In that spirit, we offer a snapshot on what happened this year—and what resonated with you, our readers. These are the charts that (mostly) explain 2025.

How People Are Really Using Gen AI in 2025

It's been three years since the launch of ChatGPT, but it can still feel hard to answer the question: what are people actually doing with generative AI? To find out, researcher Marc Zao-Sanders [scoured online forums and articles](#) for examples of people talking about exactly how and what they used it for—a follow-up to [his popular 2024 article](#). (He also wrote about the strengths and weakness of this social listening approach in a [separate piece](#).)

What did he learn? For one, looking at the 2024 and 2025 data side-by-side, he discovered that a *lot* is still in flux. In Zao-Sanders' list of the top 100 use cases, there were 38 new entries this year. The most notable theme of his research, however, was that users were increasingly pointing the technology at themselves, rather than using it to produce outward-facing work.

The top three use cases—“therapy/companionship,” “organizing my life,” and “finding purpose”—“reflect efforts toward self-actualization, marking a shift from technical to more emotive applications over the past year,” he wrote. When use cases were grouped into themes, this pattern was even clearer. “Personal and professional support” supplanted “content creation and editing”

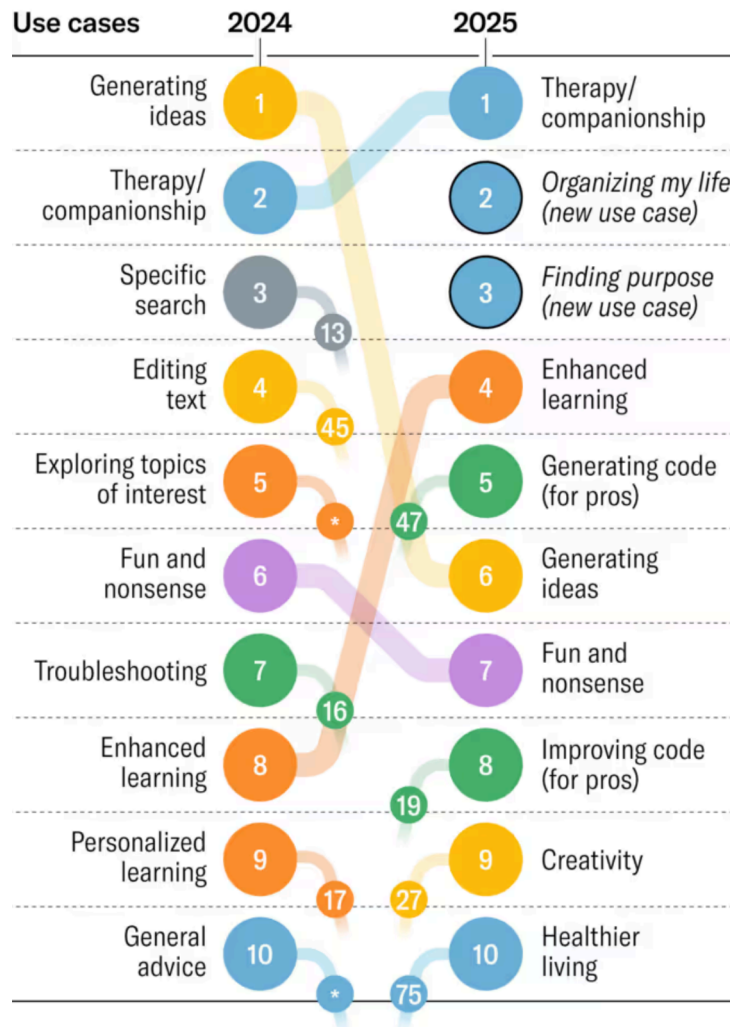


as the top theme, rising from the third slot. “Technical assistance and troubleshooting” dropped from the second most popular theme to the fifth.

Top 10 Gen AI Use Cases

The top 10 gen AI use cases in 2025 indicate a shift from technical to emotional applications, and in particular, growth in areas such as therapy, personal productivity, and personal development.

Themes



*Did not make list of top 100 in 2025
Source: Filtered.com



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Research: What Explains the “Vibecession”?

At the beginning of 2025, the economy looked good. But, according to consumers, it didn’t feel good. It felt bad. The vibes were just off. (You might remember this as a talking point around the U.S. presidential election.) But while people claimed they were worse off than they were pre-pandemic, their consumption of everyday goods, an indicator of economic well-being, had actually increased. Was this disconnect a sign that the U.S. economy was in rougher shape than it appeared, or was it just bad vibes?

Numerator CEO Eric Belcher and Leo Feler, the company’s chief economist, [parsed the data to try to find an answer](#). Looking at a panel of 150,000 representative American households, they came up with two explanations:

- First, consumers were comparing themselves to other people, not just their past selves. And in many cases, they felt like they weren’t keeping up.
- Second, the end of unprecedented government support during the pandemic left people feeling frustrated—an example of the [“endowment effect.”](#)

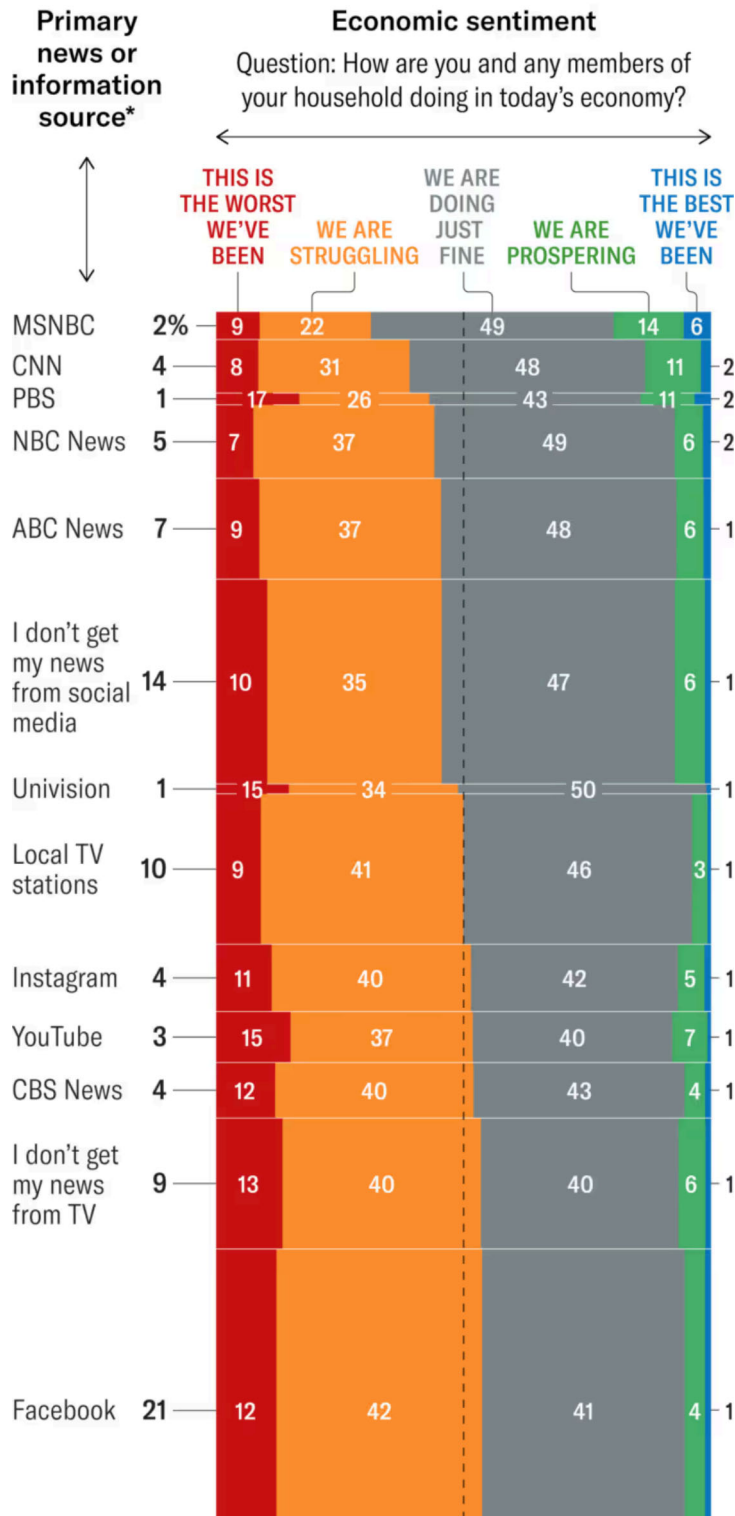
There were areas where vibes may have played a larger role, however. Looking at the disconnect between sentiment and consumption, Belcher and Feler also considered media diet. While consumption wasn’t meaningfully different for people who got their news in different places, sentiment was: consumers of conservative media tended to have a gloomier view of the

economy than folks who got their news from more liberal sources or social media. “This leads us to conclude that differences in sentiment associated with differences in media consumption are just ‘vibes’ and do not reflect underlying economic realities.”

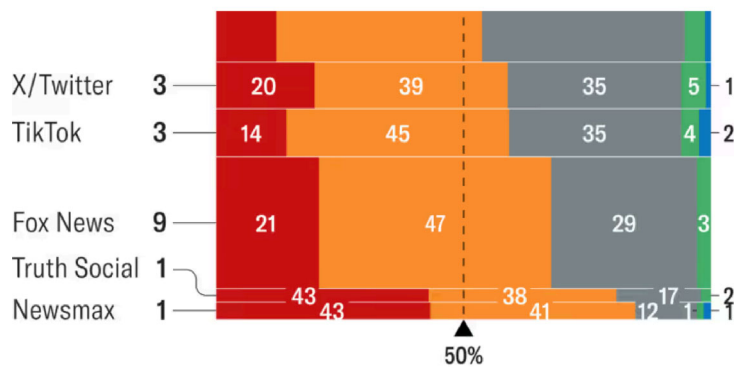


Consumer Sentiment Is Based on Their Primary News Source

Whether consumers feel optimistic or pessimistic about the country's current economy seems to be related to where they get their news. Those who get their news primarily from sites like Newsmax and Truth Social are much more likely to believe the economy is the worst it's ever been, while those who get their news from MSNBC, PBS, or CNN are more likely to believe the economy is doing just fine.



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*Question: Which of these is the social media platform/TV station from which you get most of your news or information



Source: Numerator

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AI-Generated “Workslop” Is Destroying Productivity

A new scourge is haunting workplaces: low-effort but plausible looking AI-generated slop. Maybe it’s an email that leaves the recipient increasingly confused the longer they try to figure it out. Or it could be a polished looking report full of nonsensical ideas and made-up numbers. Usable code that turns out to be full of errors.

Workslop. That’s [the term coined by authors](#) Kate Niederhoffer, Gabriella Rosen Kellerman, Angela Lee, Alex Liebscher, Kristina Rapuano, and Jeffrey T. Hancock to describe this phenomenon. They defined it as: “AI generated work content that masquerades as good work, but lacks the substance to meaningfully advance a given task.” And they found that workslop was having a corrosive effect on the social fabric of workplaces.

Specifically, being on the receiving end of workslop made people think their colleagues were less creative, capable, reliable, trustworthy, and intelligent. It’s easy to understand why: employees reported spending an average of almost two hours for each instance of workslop that splatted onto their desk.



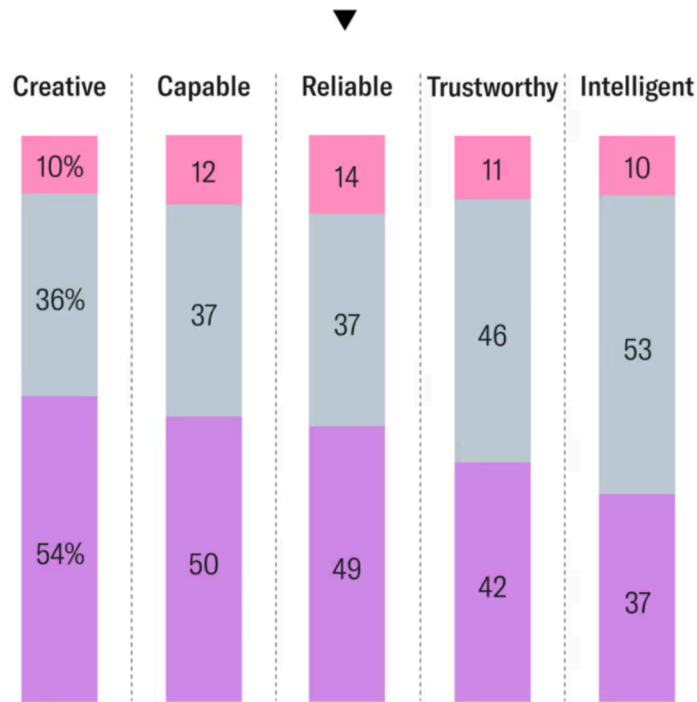
The good news is we’re not cursed with to live with workslop. The authors suggested how leaders might accidentally be encouraging workslop—and what they can do to prevent it.

Workslop Makes Colleagues Think Less of Each Other

Respondents report that receiving low-effort, AI-generated work lowers their opinion of colleagues across five traits.

How did receiving this work change your perception of your colleague?

I saw them as: LESS THE SAME MORE



Source: Kate Niederhoffer et al.



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How the Busiest People Find Joy

“Research suggests that to have a satisfying life, you need to regularly feel three things: achievement (recognition or a sense of accomplishment), meaningfulness (a connection to something



bigger than yourself), and joy (happiness or positive emotion) in the moment,” write business school professors Leslie A. Perlow, Sari Mentser, and Salvatore J. Affinito. While many successful people report feeling okay about the first two, the third seems harder to come by.

“Why is joy—this third pillar of life satisfaction—so elusive for so many?” they ask. To answer this question, they studied 1,500 graduates of Harvard Business school who were balancing careers and families. They weren’t just asking *why*, however. They also wanted to find *what* the people who were finding joy in their busy day-to-day were doing differently.

No matter how much (or little) free time you have, they found that it’s possible to cultivate joy. But how you go about it matters a lot. For one, activities with friends and family are more rewarding. They also identified four other important trends: active pursuits outperform passive ones; it’s important to do what you *want* to do, not just what you think is good for you; it helps to mix up your activities; and protecting your free time is essential.

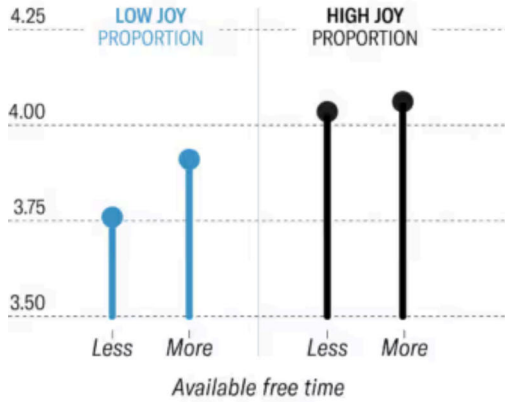


The Keys to a Happier Life

Simple strategies that research shows will boost your life satisfaction.

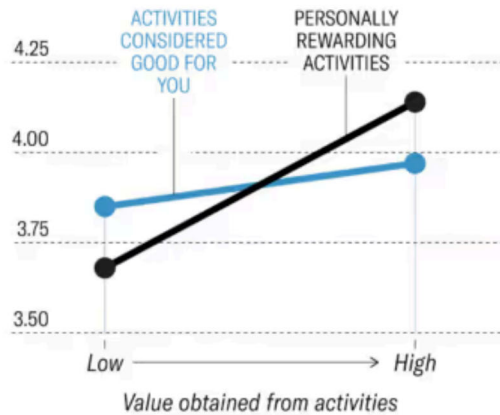
When free time is spent joyfully, life satisfaction is higher, no matter how much free time you have.

Average life satisfaction (1–5 scale)



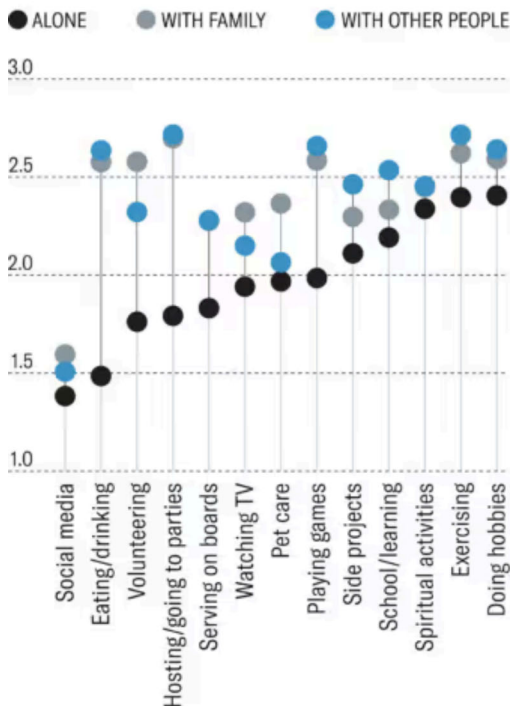
Life satisfaction rises significantly as you go from doing personally rewarding activities of low value to ones of high value. The change is less dramatic with activities generally considered good for you.

Average life satisfaction (1–5 scale)



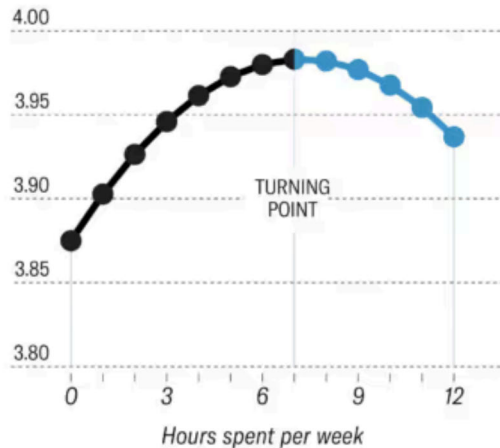
People get more joy from doing activities with others than from doing them alone.

Average joy (0–3 scale)



Life satisfaction declines when people spend too much time on a single free-time activity.

Average life satisfaction (1–5 scale)



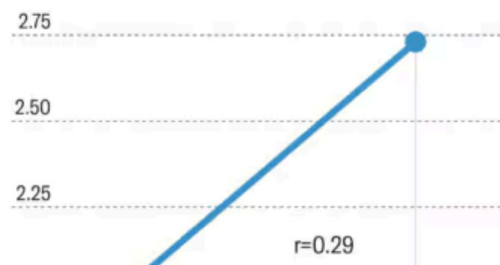
People find more joy in active solo activities than in passive ones.

Average joy (0–3 scale)



People who experience more joy in their free time tend to find more value in work.

Average value found in work (0–3 scale)





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The New Economic Data Companies Need to Be Watching

One of the persistent questions of 2025 was: How is the U.S. economy *really* doing? The first year of the Trump administration brought rapid policy changes such as tariffs and a surge in deportations, as well as power struggles over the independence of the Federal Reserve and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For business leaders looking to make clear-eyed decisions in an already uncertain climate, getting the right data was essential.

To help, authors Martha Gimbel and Ernie Tedeschi of the Budget Lab at Yale suggested that leaders should keep a weather eye on [a few economic indicators](#) that might not normally be at the top of their list. They introduce them through four major questions:

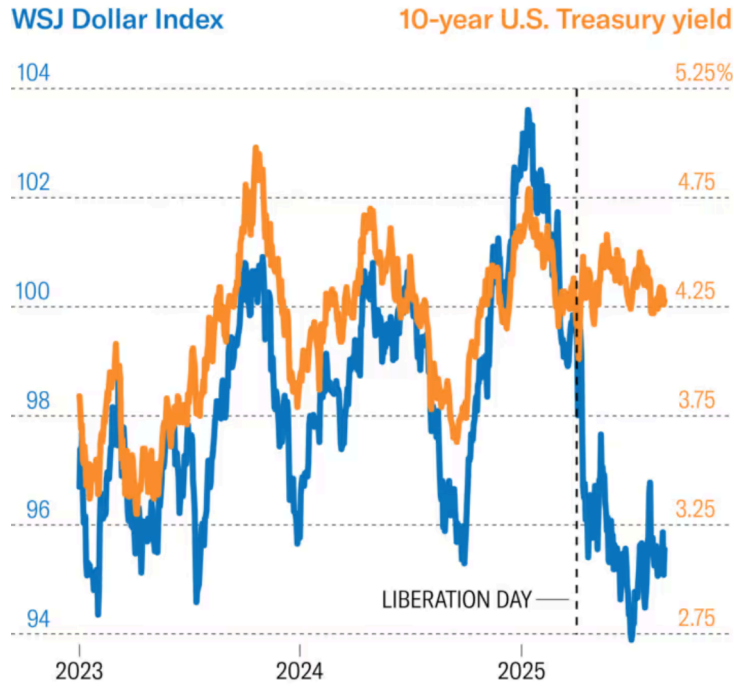
- “Are consumers and the labor market holding up?”
- “How much are tariffs biting?”
- “How are markets pricing in possible lack of Federal Reserve independence and/or other risks to U.S. political stability?”
- “Are investors turning on the dollar?”

To help answer these questions, they point to a few different measures companies should be watching. Among them is the gap between the dollar and 10-year bond yields—an aberration

because they usually rise and fall together. This “may in part reflect greater market anxiety about U.S. growth, the U.S. fiscal trajectory, and the role of U.S. dollar going forward,” they note.

U.S. Dollar Strength and 10-Year Treasury Rate

Since May, the treasury’s 10-year rate (which corresponds with bond yields) has grown slightly, but the rise is still within historical norms. Similarly, the value of the U.S. dollar has fallen in recent days but is also within recent norms. What’s unusual is for these two factors (the 10-year rate and the U.S. dollar value) to move in opposite directions, as has happened between May 2025 and September 2025. These two factors began diverging around April 2, Liberation Day, and may reflect greater market anxiety about U.S. growth, U.S. fiscal trajectory, and the role of the U.S. dollar going forward.



Source: U.S. Treasury Department and the Wall Street Journal



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They also looked at changes in consumer spending for hints at how demand might shape the labor market; and at effective tariff rates, which they claim aren't fully "priced in," in part because expansive carveouts have dulled their bite. What does it all add up to? For the moment, an economy that's still chugging along. But given the climate of uncertainty and the to-be-determined effects of policy changes, businesses would do well to watch for signs that things might take a turn for the worse.

Consumer Spending Seems to Be Holding Up

Besides some volatility at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, there's been little evidence that spending has slowed down or that consumers are feeling pressured.

Average change in consumer spending



Source: Calculations made by Martha Gimbel and Ernie Tedeschi based on Bureau of Economic Analysis data, capturing three-month-average changes in personal consumption expenditures (PCE)

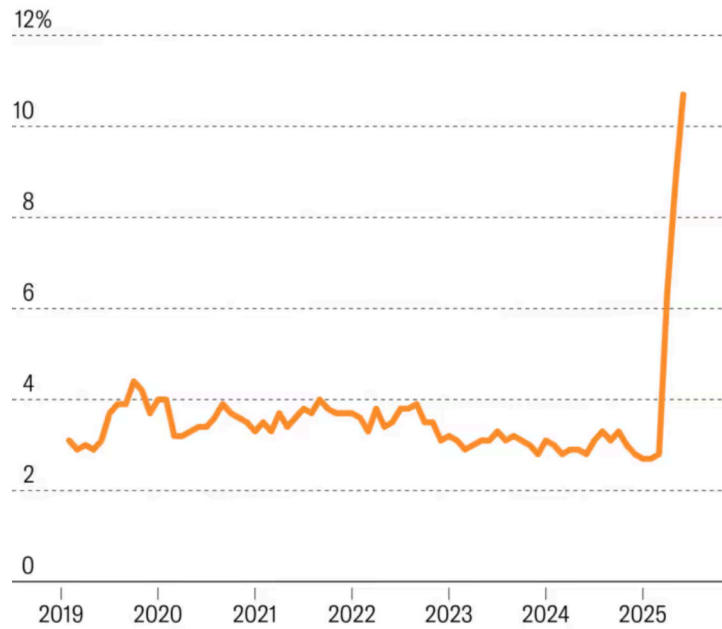


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The Effective Tariff Rate Has Jumped Substantially—but There’s Room to Rise

As of yet, tariffs have not been fully “priced into” the economy, in large part because importers are taking advantage of tariff carve-outs in certain countries, such as Canada. While the effective tariff rate rose to 10% in May 2025, companies are still not experiencing the projected 20% rate anticipated once the tariffs are fully implemented.

Change in effective tariff rate



Source: Calculations made by Martha Gimbel and Ernie Tedeschi based on census trade data and Daily Treasury Statements



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How to Stay on Top of Your Team’s Projects—Without Micromanaging

Do you know enough about what your team is doing? Or, are you asking for so many updates that you’re making them feel micromanaged? Can you strike a better balance?



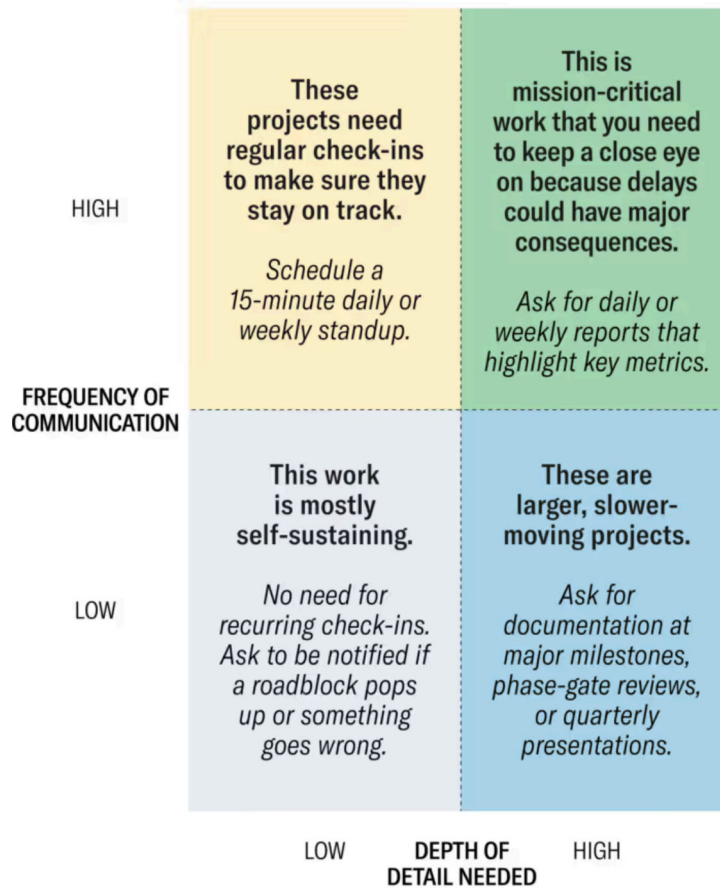
Having the right amount of information at the right cadence is essential to being an effective leader, but it isn't easy to achieve. That's probably why [this helpful approach](#) from executive coach Melody Wilding resonated with readers this year.

Wilding recommends mapping your team's work by 1) how much detail you need and 2) how frequently you need it. "Use this grid to clarify expectations with your team," she writes. "Share *what* information you need and *why* you need it, connecting your ask to how it makes their job easier."



Stay in the Know Without Micromanaging

Striking the right balance between oversight and autonomy is the key to effective leadership. Use a visibility grid to tailor your involvement based on how much detail you need—and how often you need it.



Source: Melody Wilding



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4 Styles of Coaching—and When to Use Them

Leaders often struggle with coaching. They aren't trained in how to do it, it doesn't come naturally, and they worry about asking for help to get better at it. Moreover, there isn't one "right" way to coach—it needs to reflect your experience, personality, and the



situation at hand. As a result, many people end up simply giving instructions, thinking that's what coaching is.

Leadership coach Ruchira Chaudhary wants to help. Based on research, including over 100 interviews with leaders, she developed a 2x2 to help leaders identify the right approach for them and their situation.

The Coaching Styles Framework

This framework is based on the concepts of “push” coaching—offering direct instructions and feedback—and “pull” coaching—encouraging self-reflection through questions. The four quadrants represent different levels of push and pull. The higher the pull, the more preparation it requires of a manager. Use this framework to navigate your coaching journey and determine the most effective style for the situation at hand.



Source: Adapted from *Coaching: The Secret Code to Uncommon Leadership*, by Ruchira Chaudhary



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Chaudhary writes that this framework is “based on the concepts of “push” and “pull” that are widely used in the field of sports to develop an athlete’s skills and performance.” The push style is more hands-on with the coach providing clear guidance and feedback, “telling athletes what to do and how to do it.” The pull approach is built around guiding and supporting, and “relies on asking open-ended questions to encourage self-reflection so athletes can discover solutions on their own.”

...

As 2025 comes to a close, leaders can pause to reflect on how the challenges, the changes, and the trends captured in these charts shaped their year. We may be turning the page on the calendar, but what we’ve learned will surely shape where we’re headed next.



HBR Editors This story is by the staff at Harvard Business Review.



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