



It's Not You, It's Me:
Why DS Special Agents
Leave The Diplomatic
Security Service

U.S. Department of State
Diplomatic Security Service
Supervisory Special Agent
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“I consider the pros and cons of staying or leaving DS every day, and I LOVE this job, but there is only so much that a person can take.”

- Current DS agent



Hypothesis:

DS has a retention problem. DS is short hundreds of special agents; agents are leaving the organization at an alarming rate – largely due to misaligned HR rule structures.



Key Terms:

- **Attrition:** Anyone leaving the organization for any reason, including, retirement, resignation, transfers to other government organizations, death, or any other reason.
- **Retention:** The ability and/or effort to encourage employees to stay.



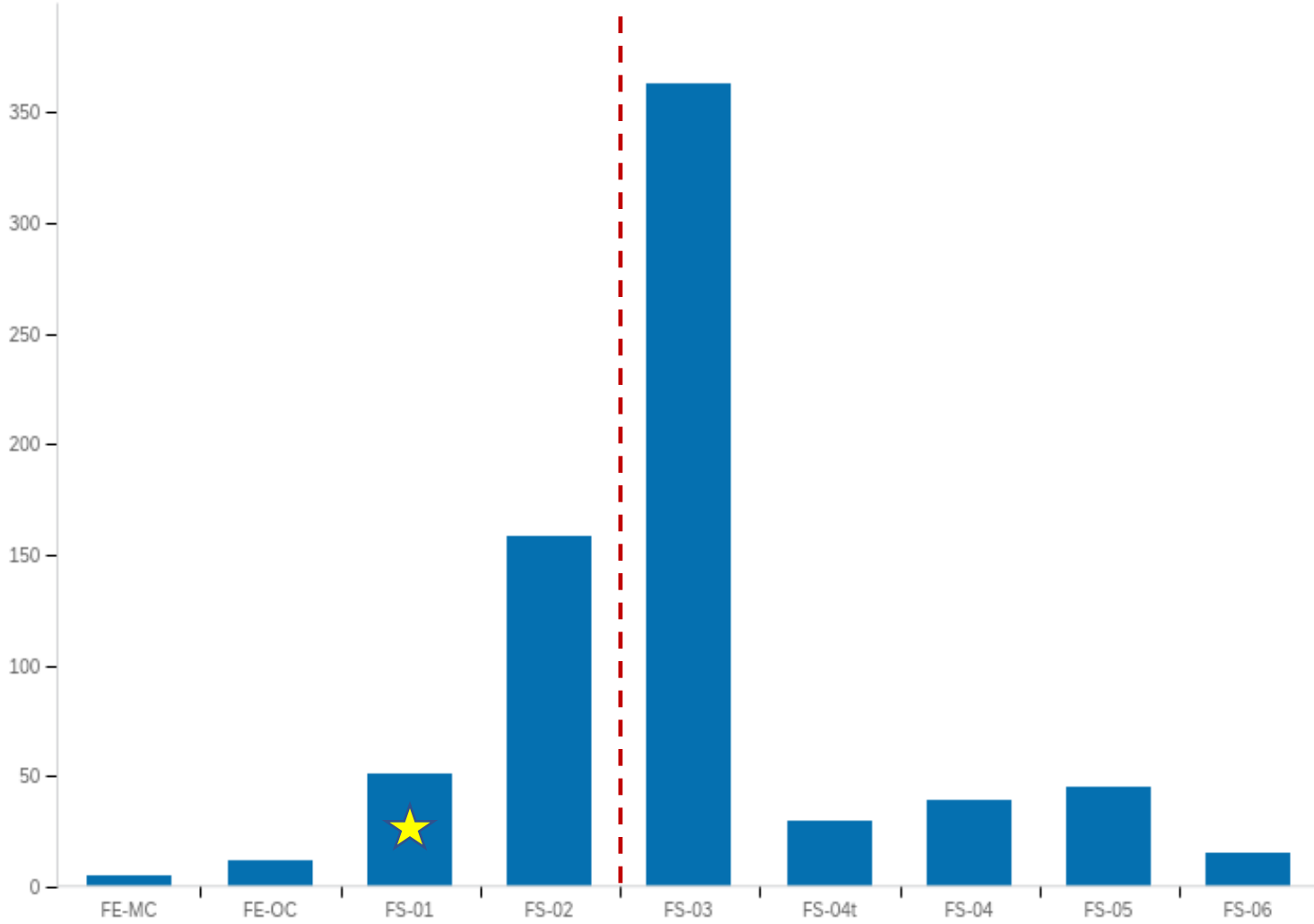
Research Methodology

- 4 Years of DS Exit Data
 - 2012-2014
 - 2022
- Literature Review
- 1,000+ Qualtrics Survey Responses
 - 36% of Total Active Agents Responded
- Interviews
 - DSS
 - USSS

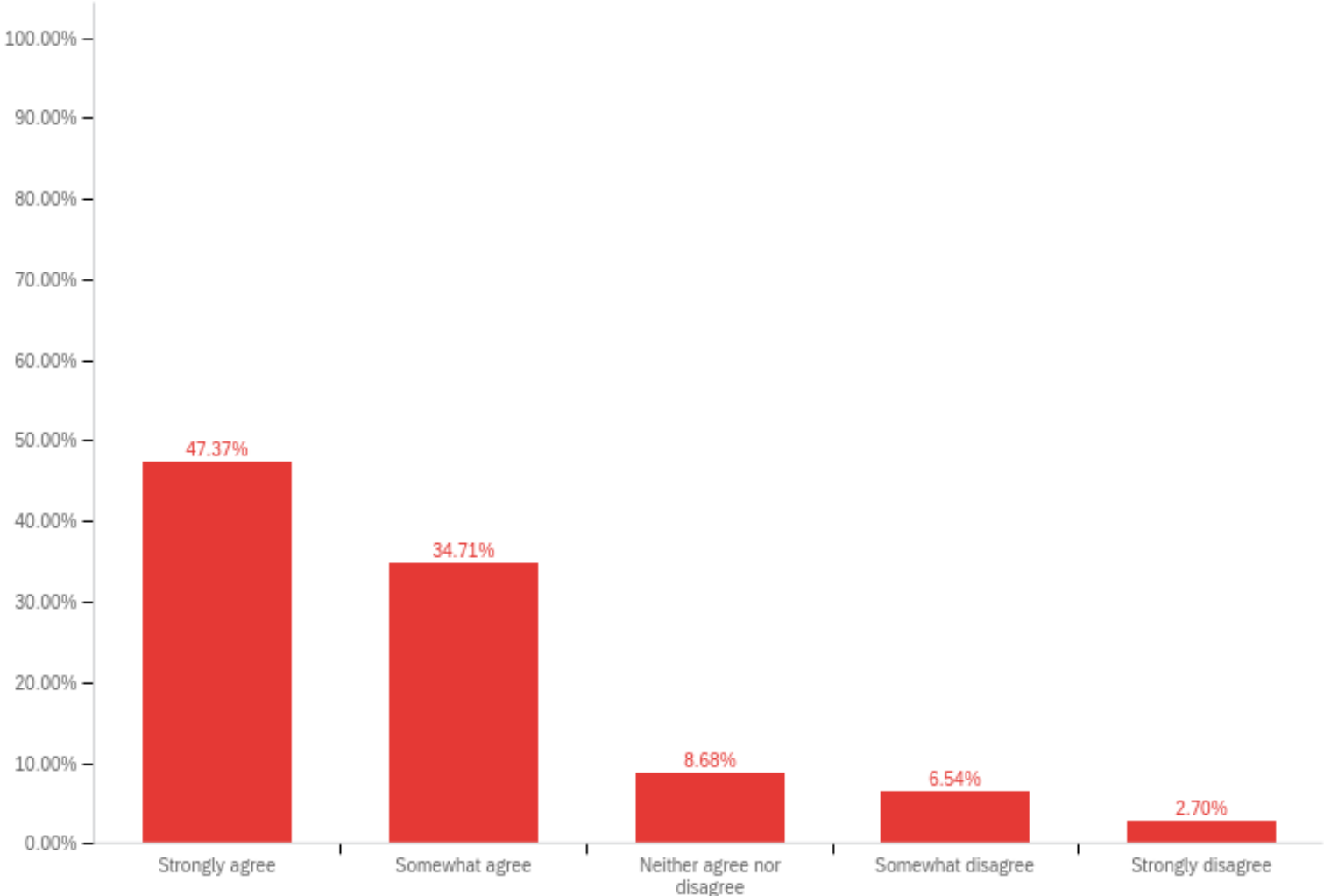


Key Survey Questions

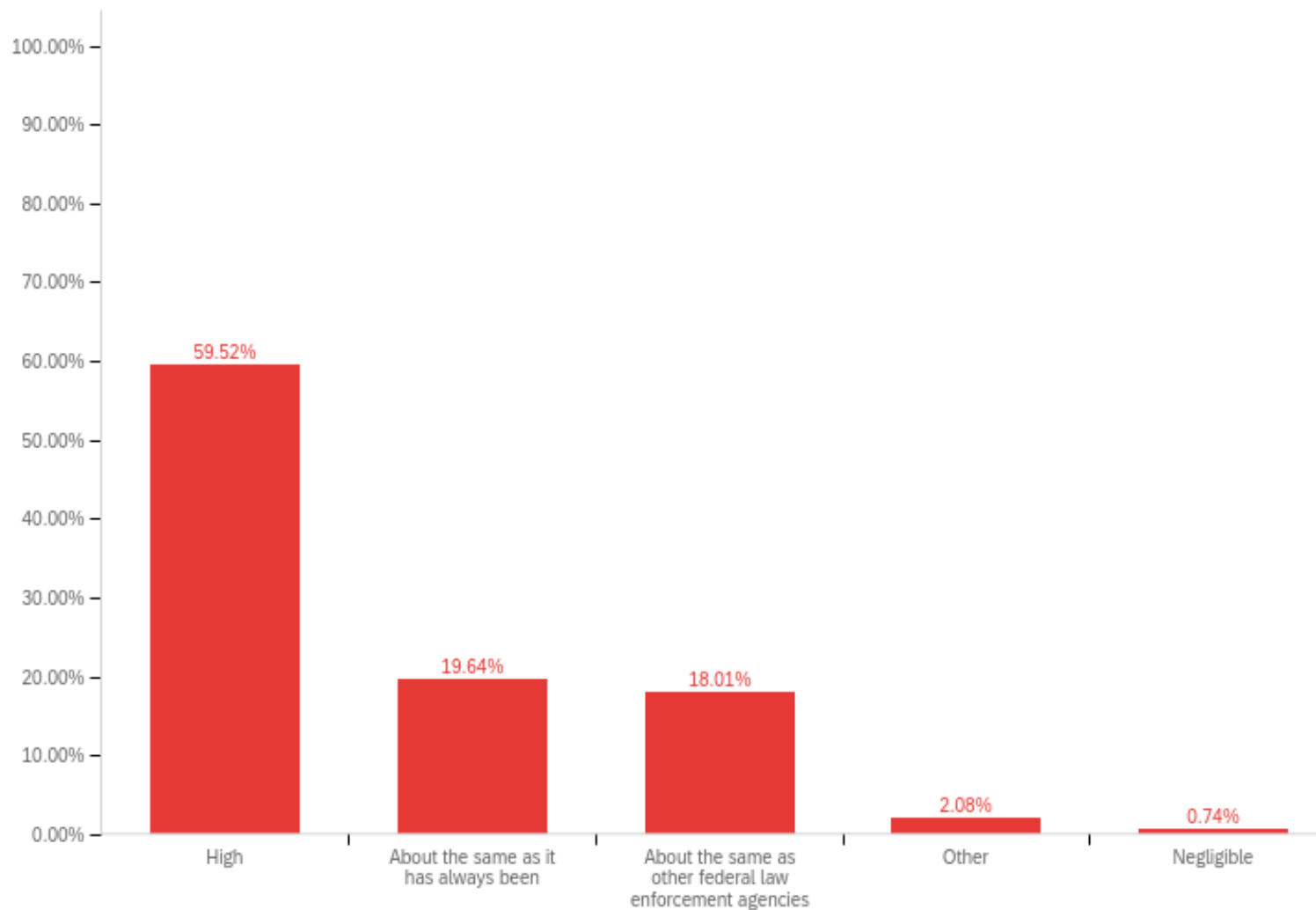
Q57 - What is your current grade/rank, or the grade you held at the time of your resignation or retirement?



Q24 - Please respond to the following statement, "DS has a retention problem".



Q25 - 9. What do you believe the 2022 DS agent attrition rate was? ("attrition" is defined as, "departure from an organization for any reason, including resignations, retirements, termination, etc.")



The Numbers

- According to the research, the average attrition rate for DS agents is 2.59%, below the 5% average for federal government workers of comparable ranks, and on par with the 2% average for the Foreign Service.
- The perceived shortage is primarily the result of failing to meet hiring goals, not due to increased levels of retirements and resignations.
- As of December 2022, DS had 2,003 FS 2501 special agents – over 200 short of its approximate authorized strength of 2,200 FS 2501 agents (DS has approximately 130 GS 1811 agents).

- DS averages approximately 400 agents who are operationally unavailable due to annual leave, home leave, medical leave, sick leave, leave without pay (LWOP), external details, long term training, and educational and “out-of-cone” assignments, or limbo status while waiting for a visa or other issues associated with onward assignments, representing 17 percent of the workforce.
- Hiring shortfalls and operationally unavailable agents put *DS at approximately 73 percent of its authorized strength* – this, plus the high operational tempo of protection operations, is why agents (rightly) sense that there are not enough agents to meet operational requirements.

Hypothesis Re-visited:

DS has a retention problem. DS is short hundreds of special agents. Agents are leaving the organization ~~at an alarming rate~~ and HR rule structures are mainly to blame.

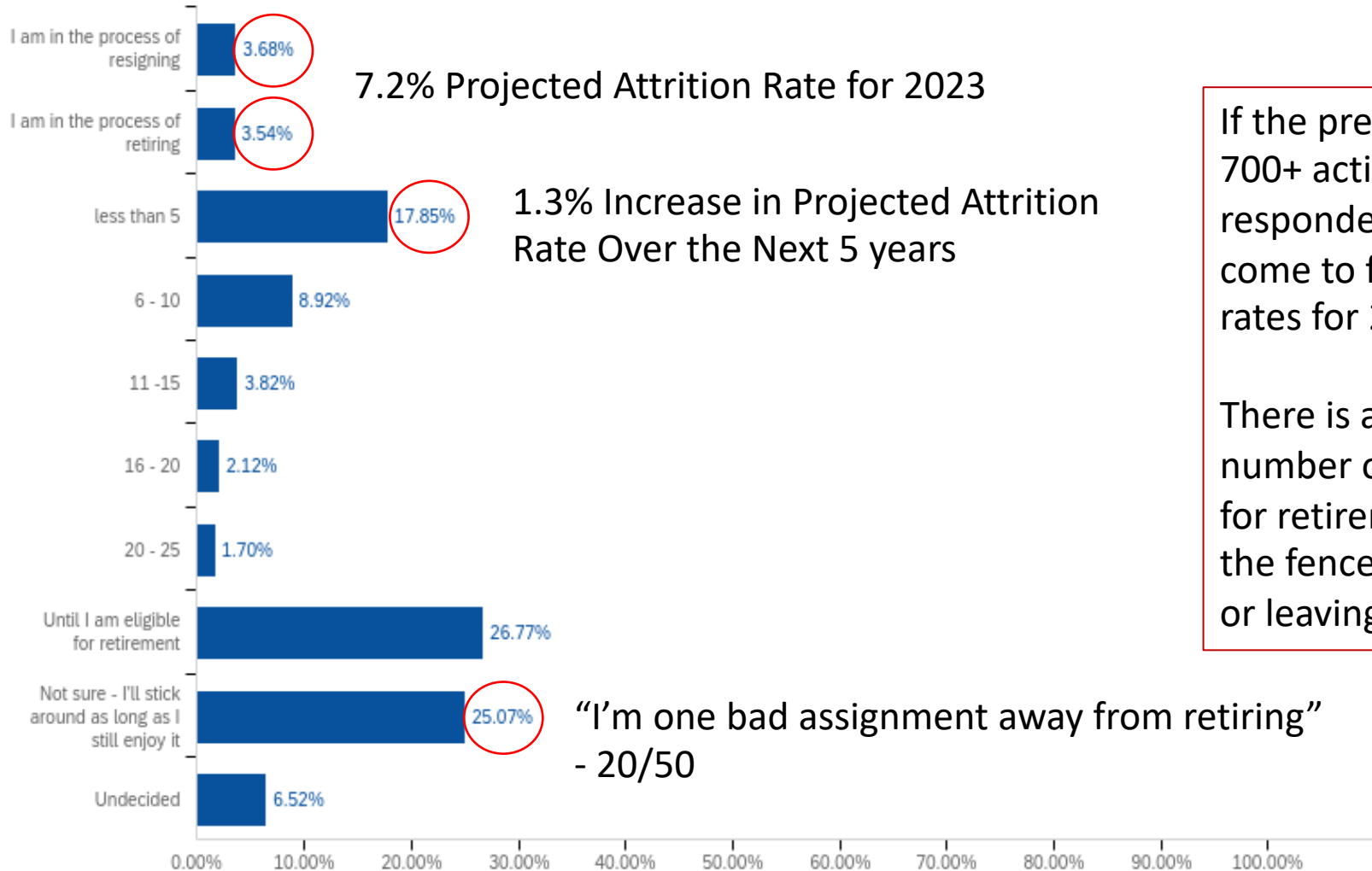
Q: If attrition rates are low, why do retention efforts matter?

A: For two reasons:

According to the research, attrition rates (quits and retirements) are set to rise significantly – exacerbating current staffing shortfalls.

Departure motives are consistent, predictable, and can be mitigated by reforming current HR policies and procedures, publishing accurate organizational priorities and recruiting materials, and addressing the pay cap.

Q30 - How many more years do you plan to stay with DS as a 2501?



If the predictions of the 700+ active agent respondents to the survey come to fruition, attrition rates for 2023 would triple.

There is also a large number of agents eligible for retirement who are on the fence regarding staying or leaving.



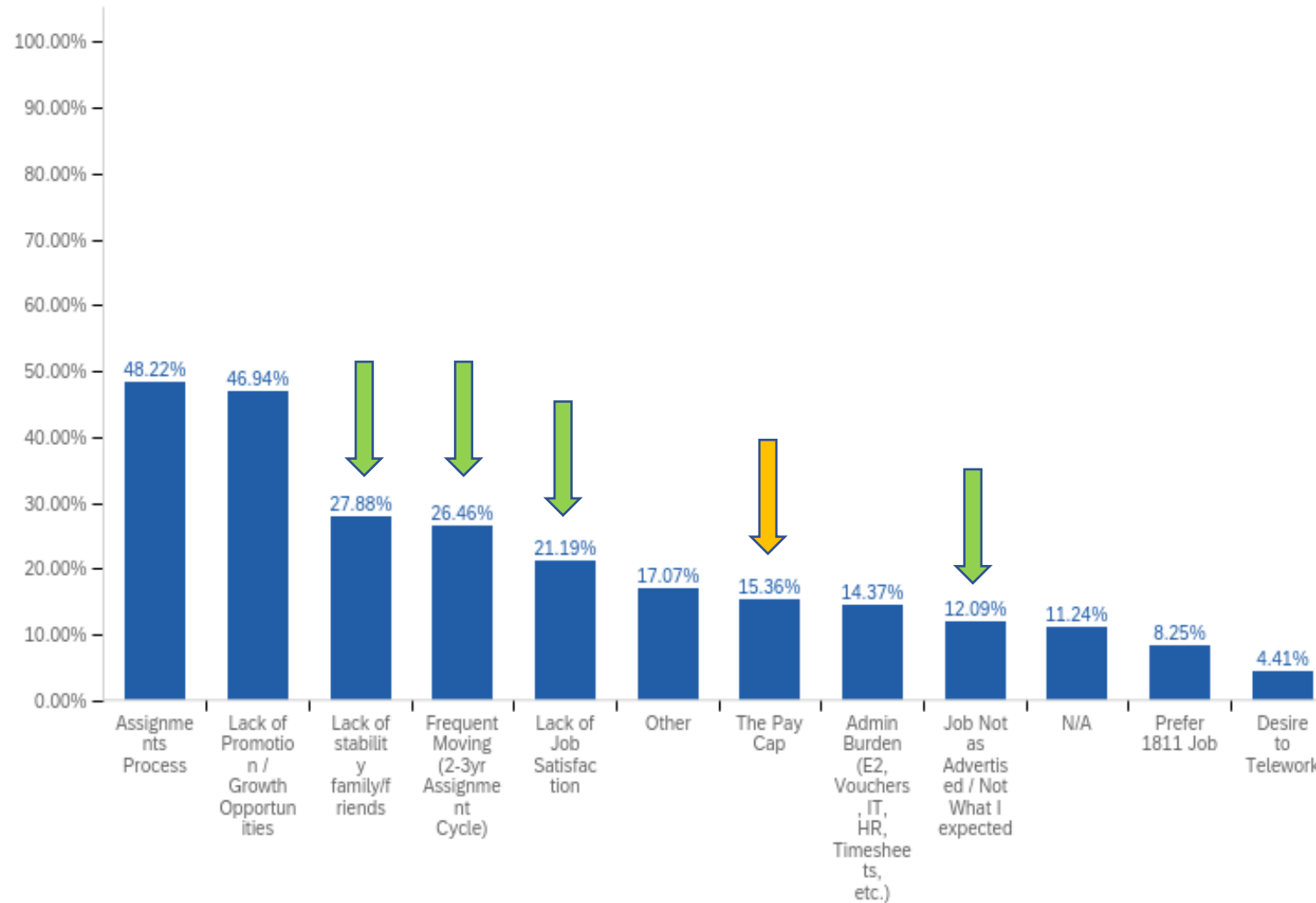
The Two-Legged Stool

DS has a recruiting unit and a hiring unit, but it does **not** have a retention unit. There is no formal process to maintain and analyze departure data, interview departing personnel, forecast trends, or pursue any effort to retain personnel.

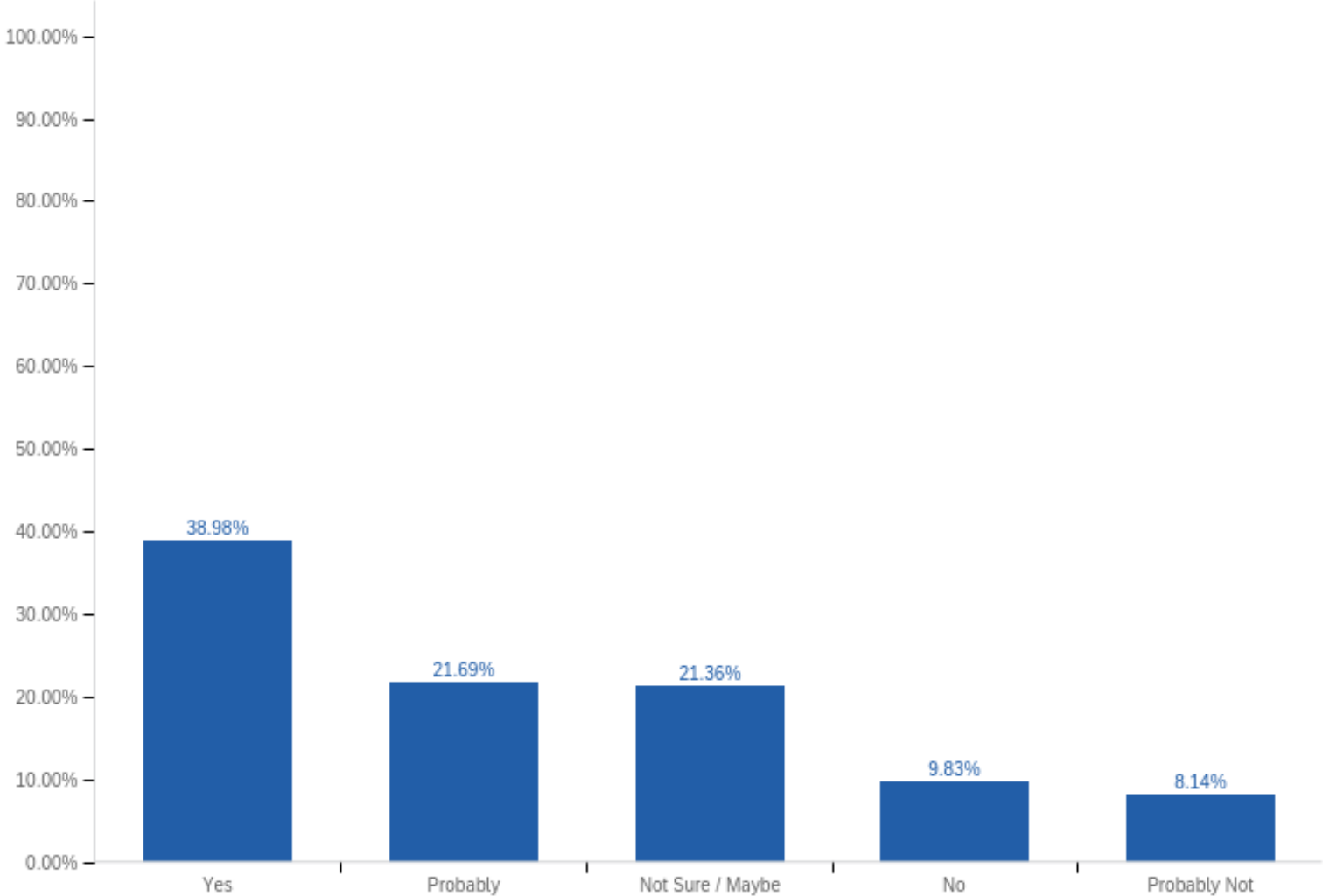
Here's what we're missing by not analyzing why people leave...

Q16 - If you resigned from DS, or have ever considered resigning, what were the reasons?

QID16 - Groups

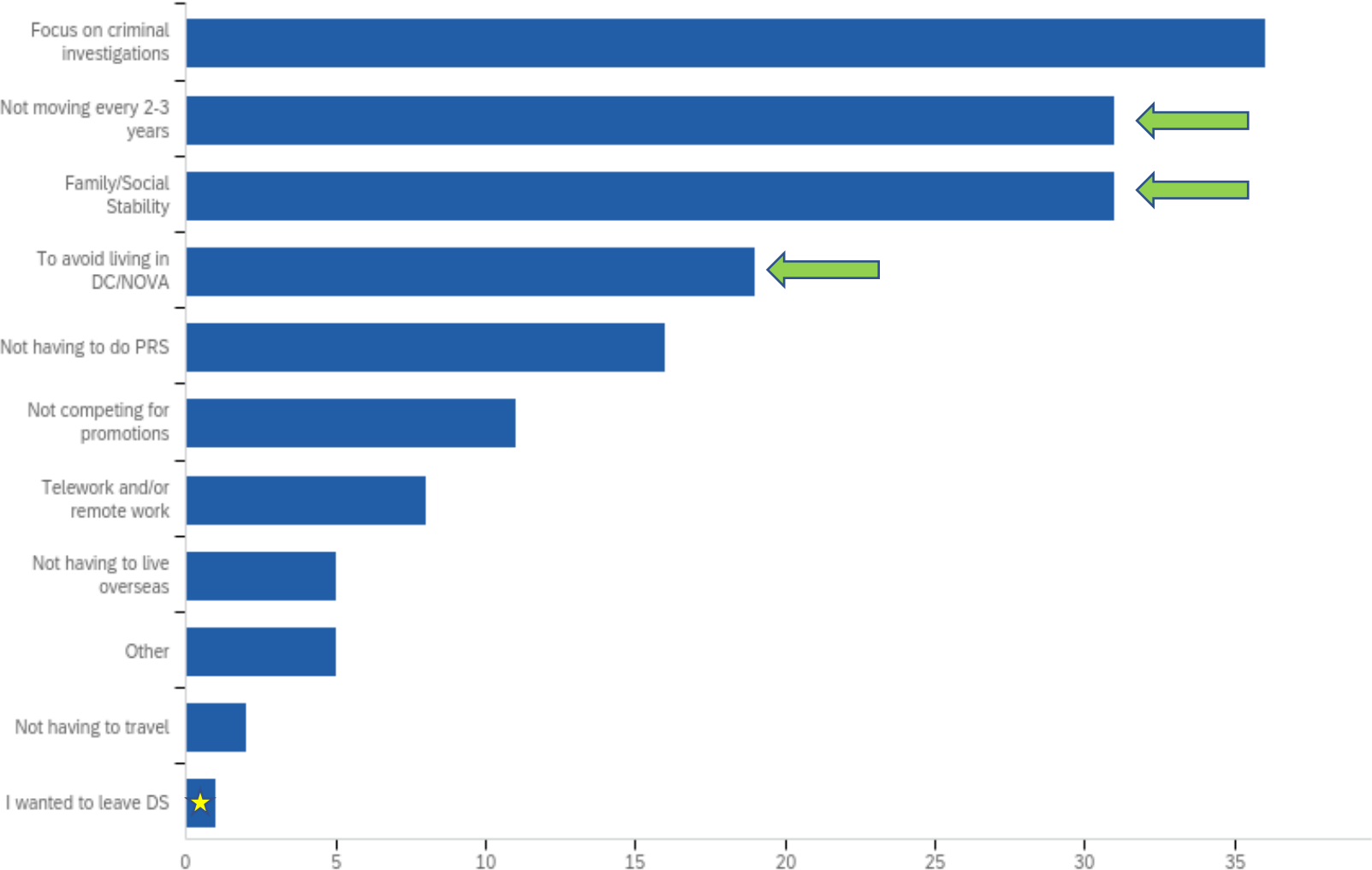


Q16a - If you could have moved less frequently and/or served longer tours in the same field office(s) while assigned domestically, would that have made you significantly less likely to resign, or consider resigning?

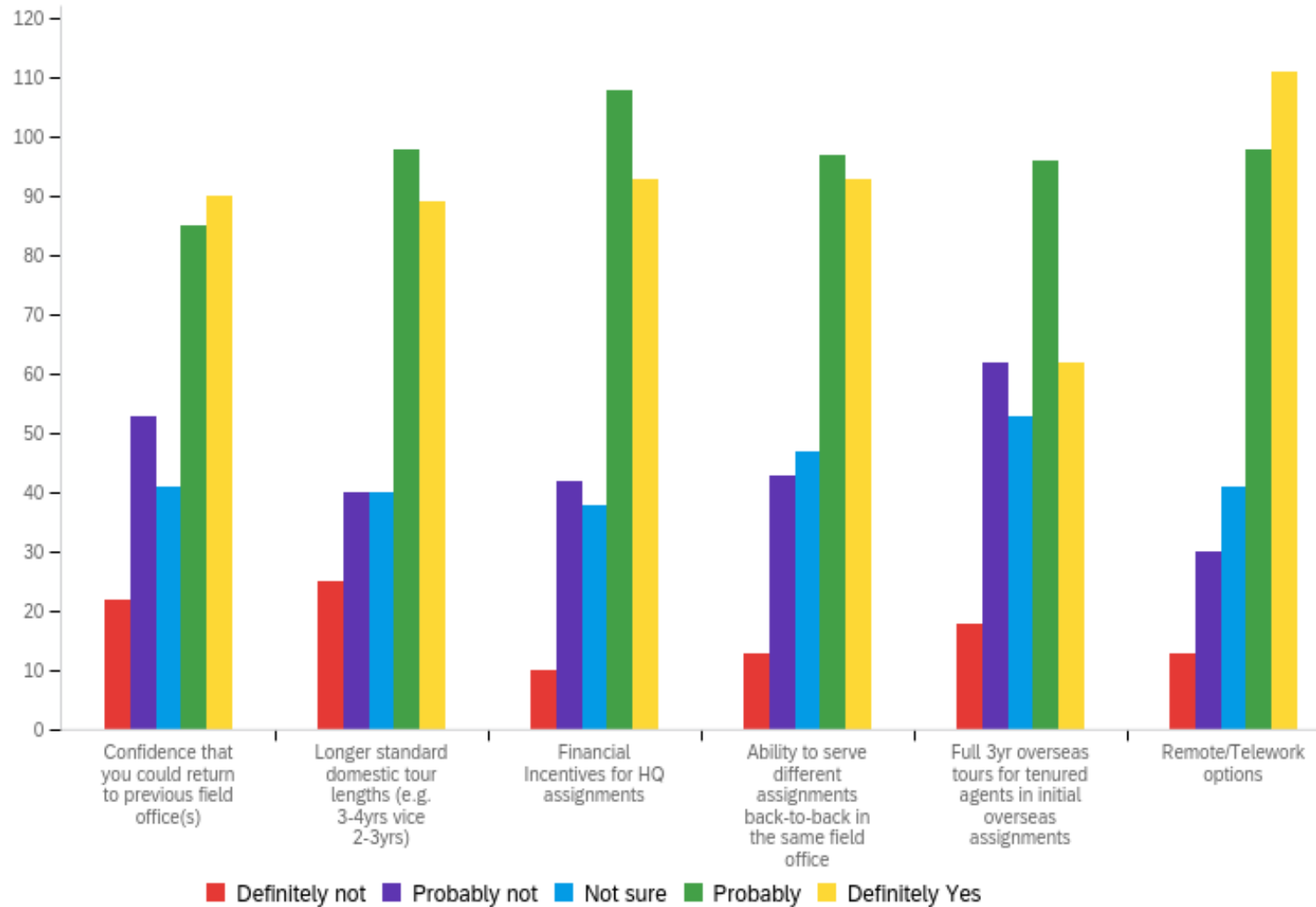


Q16b - What is attractive about the idea of an 1811 position at another government agency?

QID21 - Groups

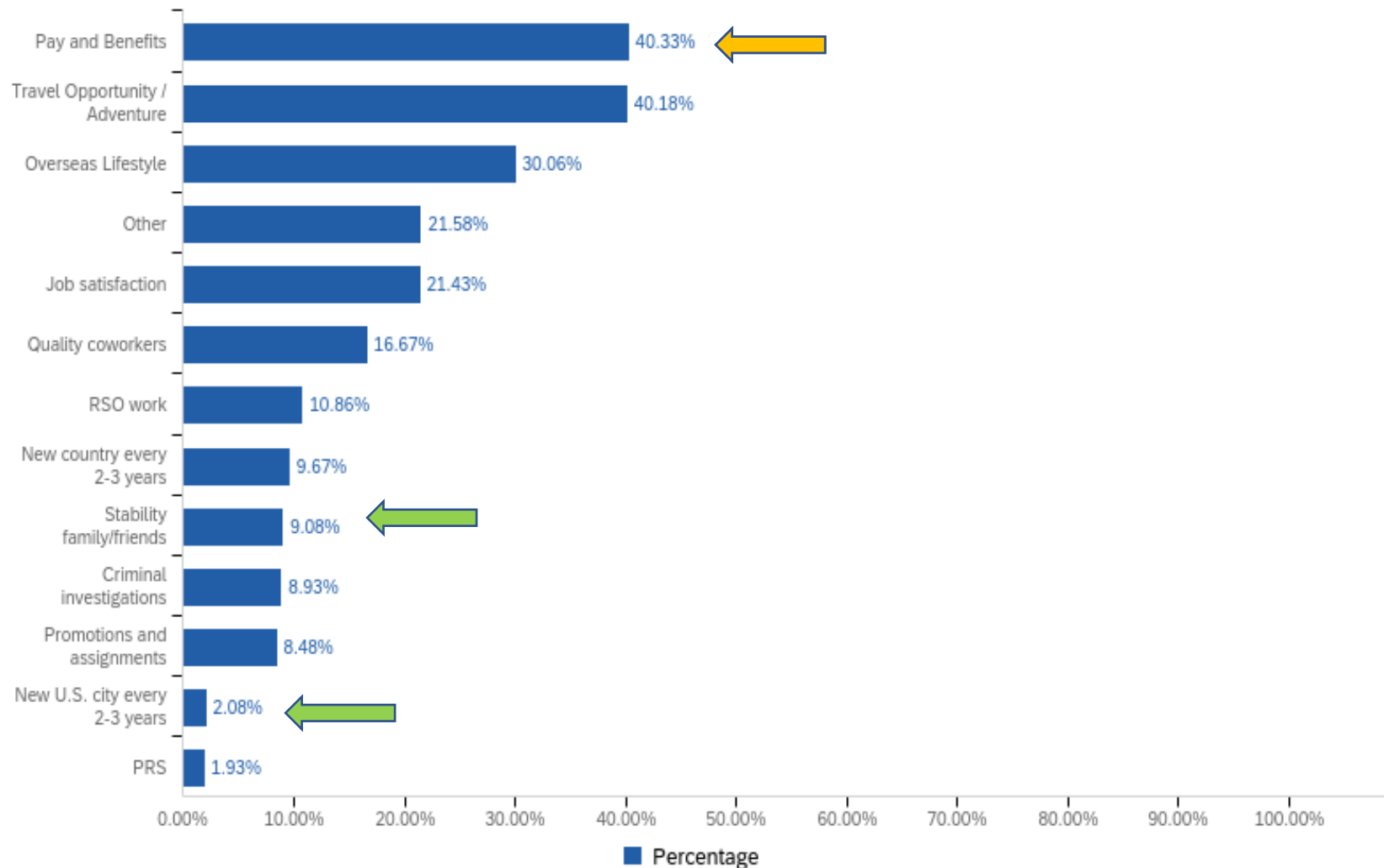


Q49 - Would the following changes have made you less likely to resign, or consider resigning?



Q19 - If you've considered resigning or retiring at the earliest opportunity but instead elected to stay on with DS, what are the biggest factors in your decision to stay?

QID18 - Groups



Drivers of Attrition and Employee Dissatisfaction rooted in HR Policy and Procedures:

- **Instability Too Hard on Family/Friends**
 - CDP SOP: Tour Lengths, Tour Sequencing, “Homesteading”, Right to Return to “Home Office”, etc.
- **Pursuit of Higher Education and Re-appointments**
 - Authorized University List, LWOP, and an easy path to return
- **Non-State Tandem Difficulties**
 - CDP SOP, LWOP Limitations, Remote Telework, Intra-field office Assignment Opportunities
- **Family Medical Care Issues**
 - LWOP and Remote Telework Limitations
- **Insufficient Pay or Benefits**
 - FBI Headquarters Staffing Initiative & U.S. Secret Service Mid-level Annual Bonus and Pay Cap Regulations
- **Job Not What Expected**
 - Truth in Advertising, Truth During Orientation, Accurate Mentorship

Findings

DS has the authority to develop standard operating procedures for career management that meet its own unique requirements. The current career development plan is written for the greater Foreign Service and does not serve the unusual needs of DS.

Most DS agents love their job and would prefer to remain with DS; however, those who make the difficult decision to leave do so primarily based on high levels of family instability caused by frequent domestic transfers.

Foreign Service career development imperatives do not adequately align with a largely domestic-based security and law enforcement agency. The result of this dissonance is a driver of DS agent attrition.





Recommendations

DS should amend its HR policies and procedures to better suit a largely domestic based security and law enforcement organization operating within the Foreign Service.

DS should establish a retention program to further understand issues impacting special agents.

DS should also work to address the pay cap, resolve organizational priorities, and accurately reflect the realities of the job in public facing advertising and internal SOPs.



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