

▶ **The 2026 European Top Performers Study**
**The Incentive Travel Practices That Separate Europe's Top
Performing Companies**

March 2026

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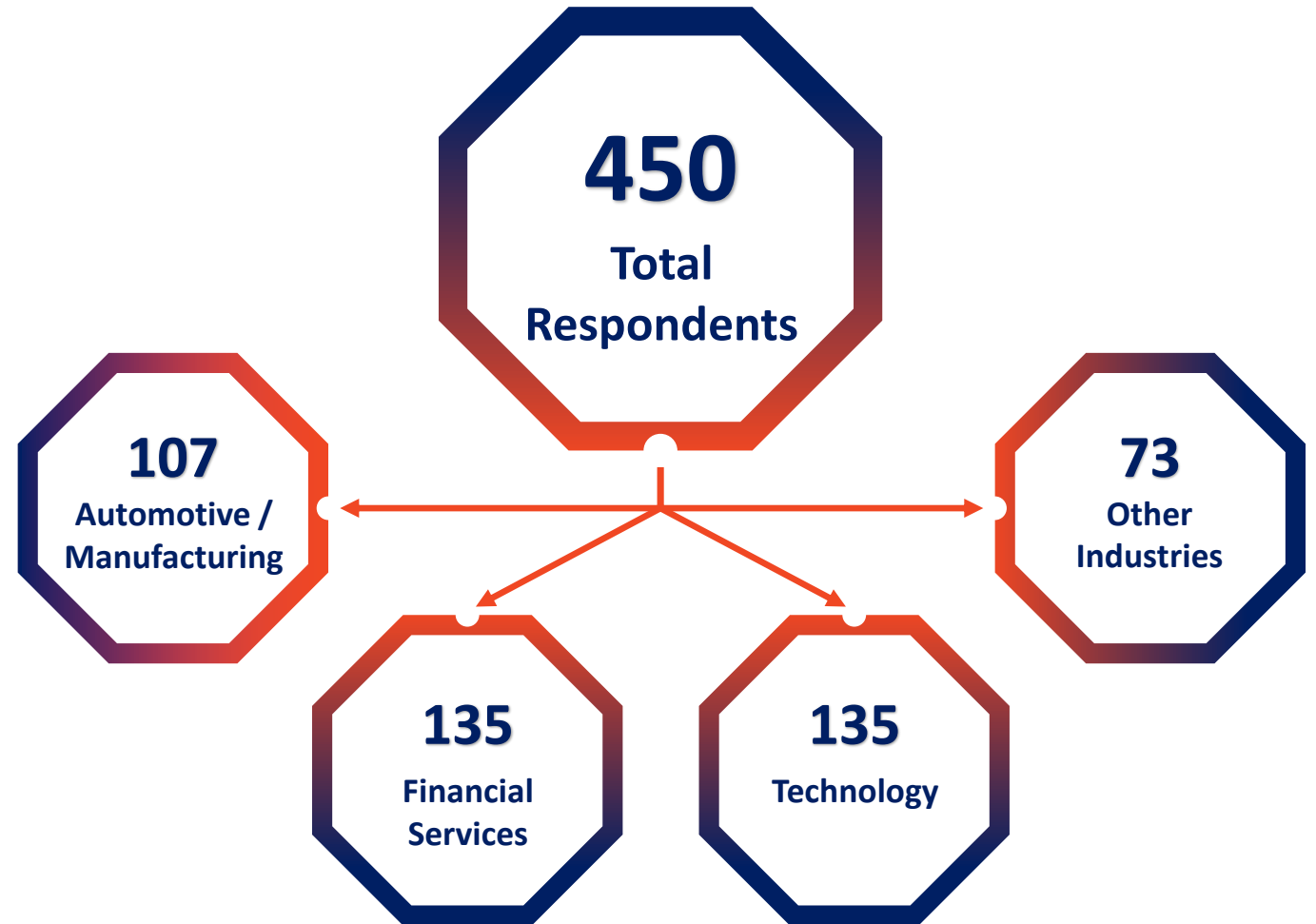
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► Research Overview

During December 2025 and January 2026, the Incentive Research Foundation conducted the European iteration of its Top Performers study, focused on non-cash reward and recognition programs. This research explores how organizations design and manage incentive travel programs, identifying practices that differentiate top-performing companies from their peers and offering strategic guidance for organizations seeking to replicate high-performance approaches.

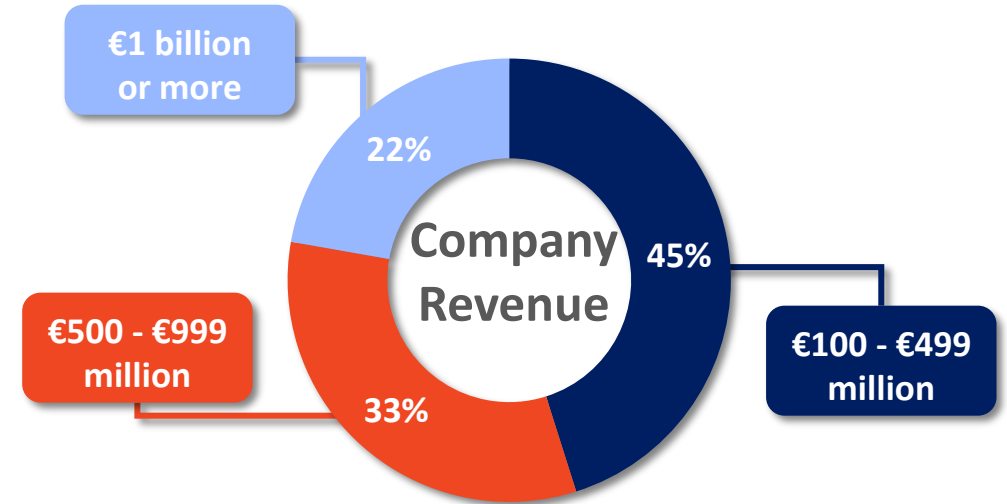
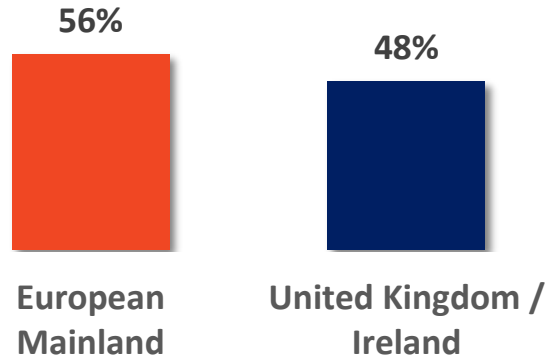
Respondents meet the following criteria:

- Employed full-time at a company generating at least €100 million in annual revenue
- Holds influence over or is directly responsible for the development of company's non-cash incentive travel rewards program(s)
- 23 to 65 years of age

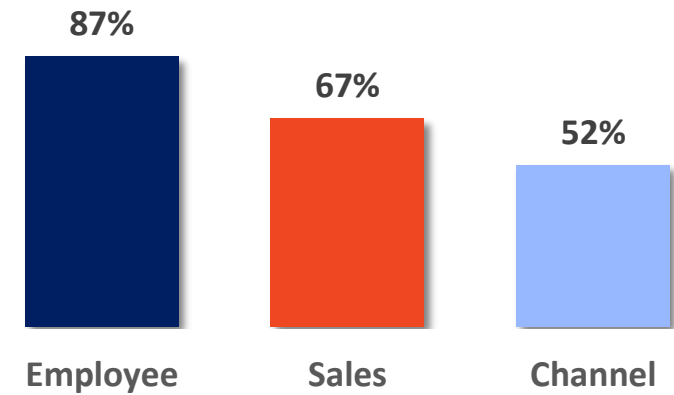
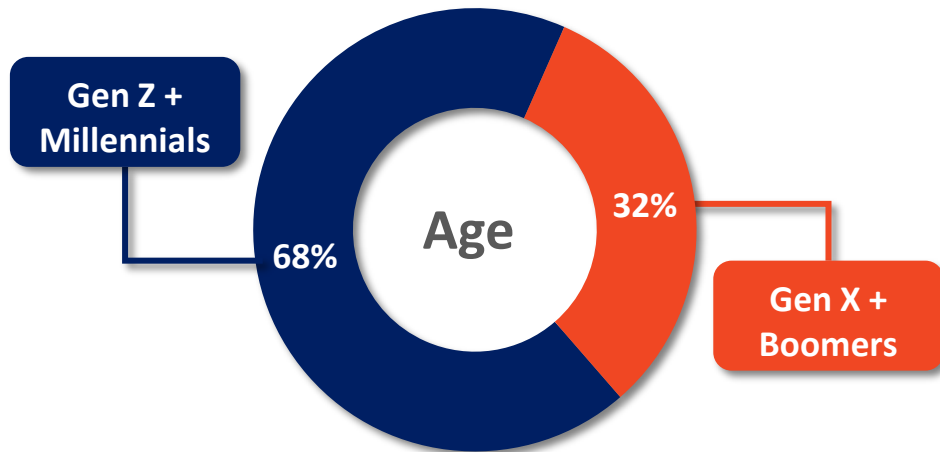


▶ Respondent Profile

Region



Reward Program Types

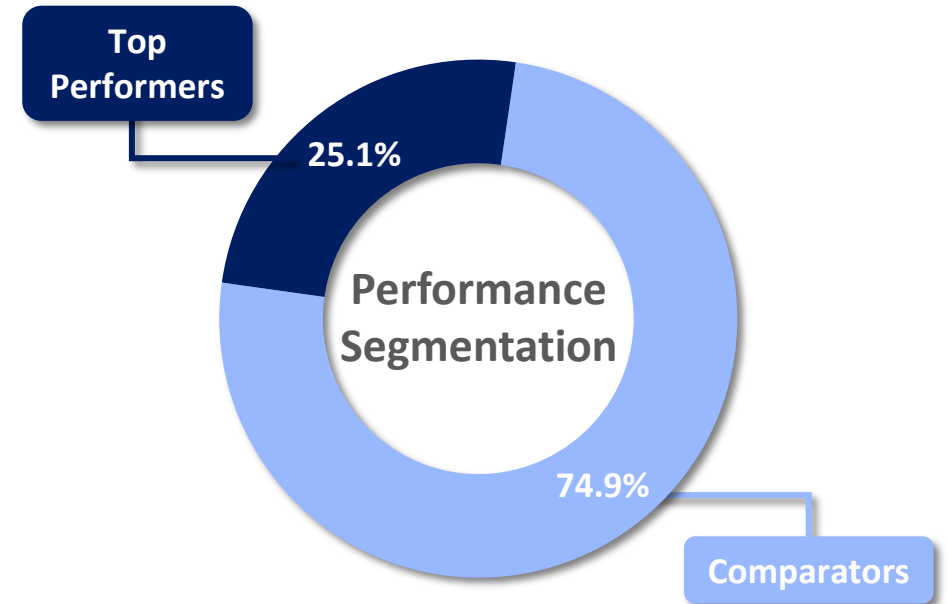


► Methodology

To accurately distinguish high-performing organizations, this study uses a set of defined business performance indicators rather than relying on external awards or third-party rankings. Companies are segmented based on their self-reported outcomes across critical growth, retention, and talent metrics.

Top Performers are organizations that:

- Achieved significant revenue growth over the previous year
- Expanded their total customer base over the previous year
- Increased their employee base over the previous year
- Consider themselves successful in:
 - Meeting key performance goals (financial, growth, etc.)
 - Acquiring new customers and retaining existing ones
 - Attracting and retaining high-performing talent
 - Establishing and maintaining a reputation as a desirable workplace



Organizations that did not meet these thresholds form the Comparator group, providing a basis for analyzing differences in incentive and reward strategies.

► Methodology

The primary focus of this report is a comparison between Top Performers and Comparator organizations to identify differences in incentive and reward strategies.

In addition to performance-based segmentation, results were analyzed by:

- Region: European Mainland and United Kingdom/Ireland
- Industry: Automotive/Manufacturing, Financial Services, Technology, and Other
- Program Type: Channel, Employee, and Sales

Findings for these segments are included throughout the report where statistically significant differences are observed.

▶ Key Findings

- **Incentive Travel Programs Drive Impact**

The majority of Top Performers indicate that incentive travel is more impactful in driving participant engagement and performance than any other reward type. Half also agree that incentive travel is the most impactful reward for driving key business outcomes.

- **Top Performers Leverage Incentive Travel More Effectively**

They are more likely than Comparators to see incentive travel as supporting customer loyalty, sales growth, and engagement with company culture, reflecting a more holistic approach to leveraging the reward program.

- **Top Performers Prioritize the Participant**

When designing incentive programs, their top priorities include high perceived value, unique experiences, and flexibility for participants. At the same time, Top Performers deemphasize cost as a design priority compared to others.

- **Strong Leadership Support Provides a Stable Foundation**

Top Performers report significantly higher executive and internal support, spurring increased management buy-in and stronger internal staffing

▶ Key Findings

- **Top Performers Invest Selectively**

Although they qualify a smaller share of participants for incentive travel rewards, Top Performers provide trips with nearly 1.5x the reward value of Comparators. They focus on exclusive, luxurious experiences to drive participation.

- **Measurement Discipline Separates Top Performers**

The majority of Top Performers track ROI/business impact, customer satisfaction and loyalty, and long-term outcomes such as sustained engagement and retention. They also report higher confidence in demonstrating ROI and are more likely to link incentive travel programs to long-term participant and company benefits, reflecting a disciplined, outcomes-driven approach.

- **Continuous Program Optimization Generates Results**

Top Performers review program performance more frequently than Comparators and are more likely to introduce new destinations, experiences, and technology platforms, ensuring their programs remain engaging, innovative, and aligned with participant needs.



Non-Cash Rewards Program Structure

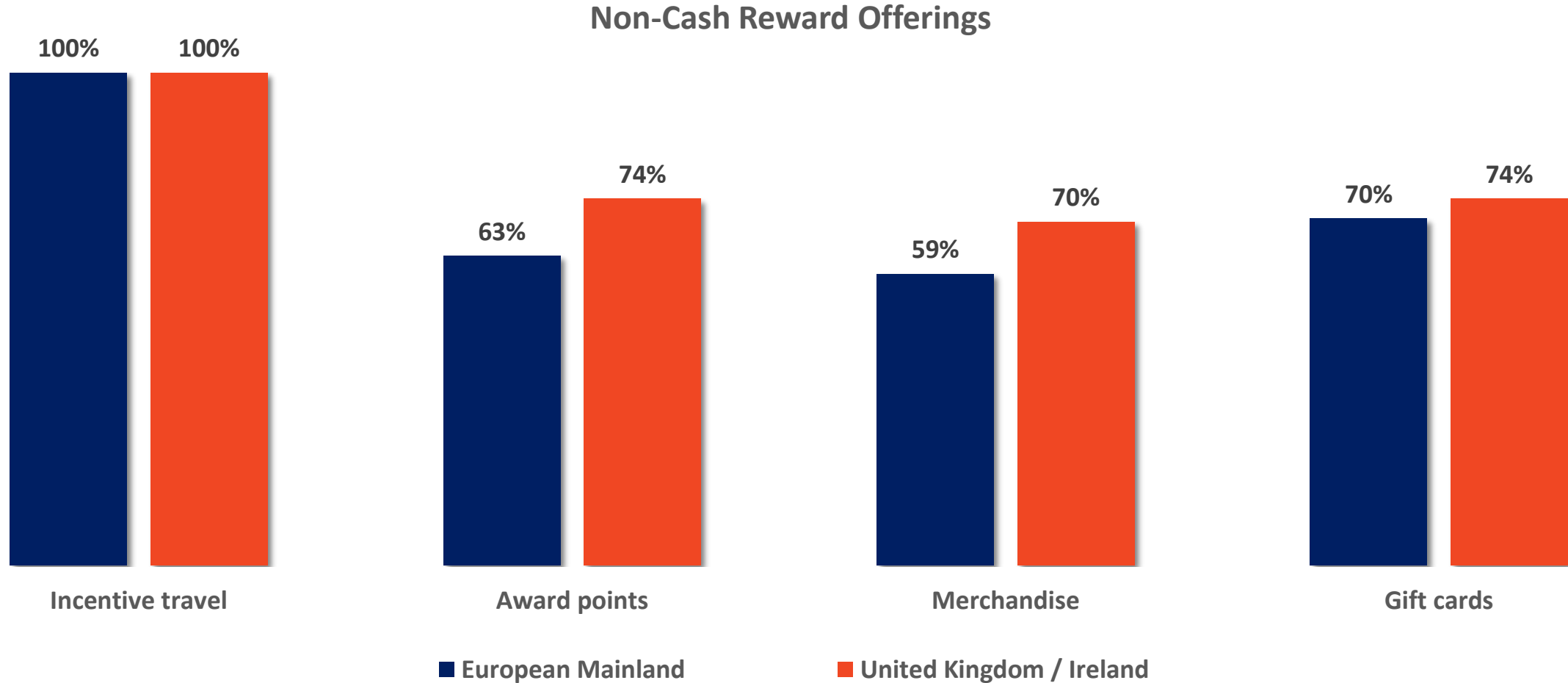
▶ Non-Cash Reward Offerings

In addition to incentive travel, Top Performers are more likely to offer a variety of reward options.



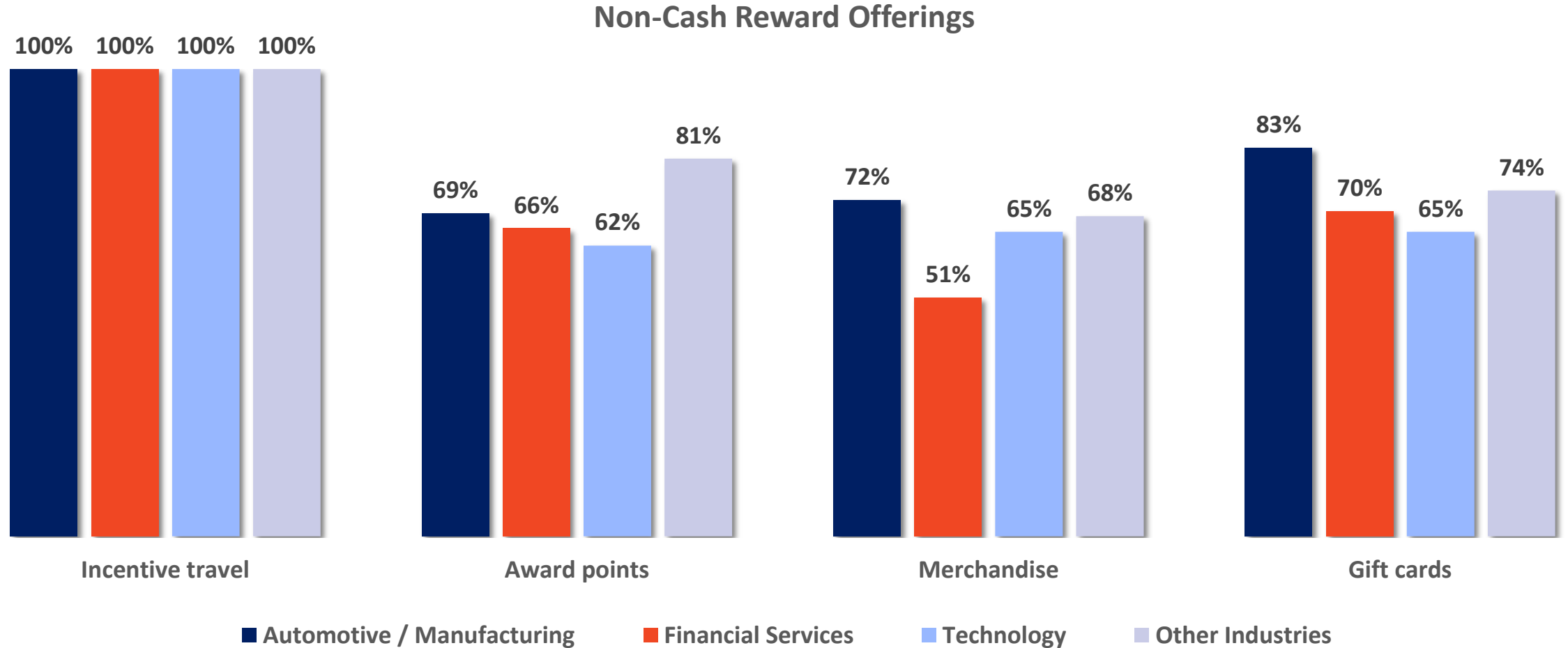
▶ Non-Cash Reward Offerings

Organizations headquartered in the United Kingdom and Ireland emphasize a broader mix of reward offerings.



▶ Non-Cash Reward Offerings

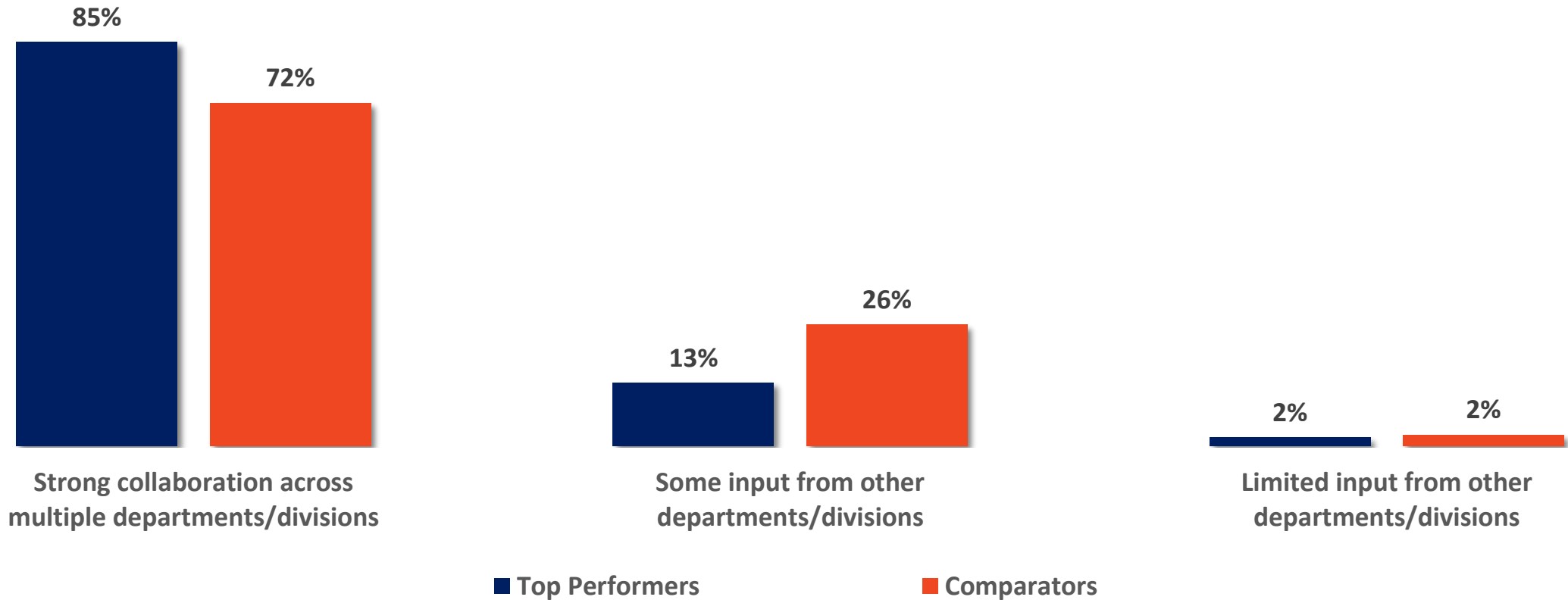
Merchandise and gift cards play a more significant role in automotive and manufacturing industries.



▶ Program Design Collaboration

Strong cross-department collaboration is a hallmark of Top Performer incentive travel programs.

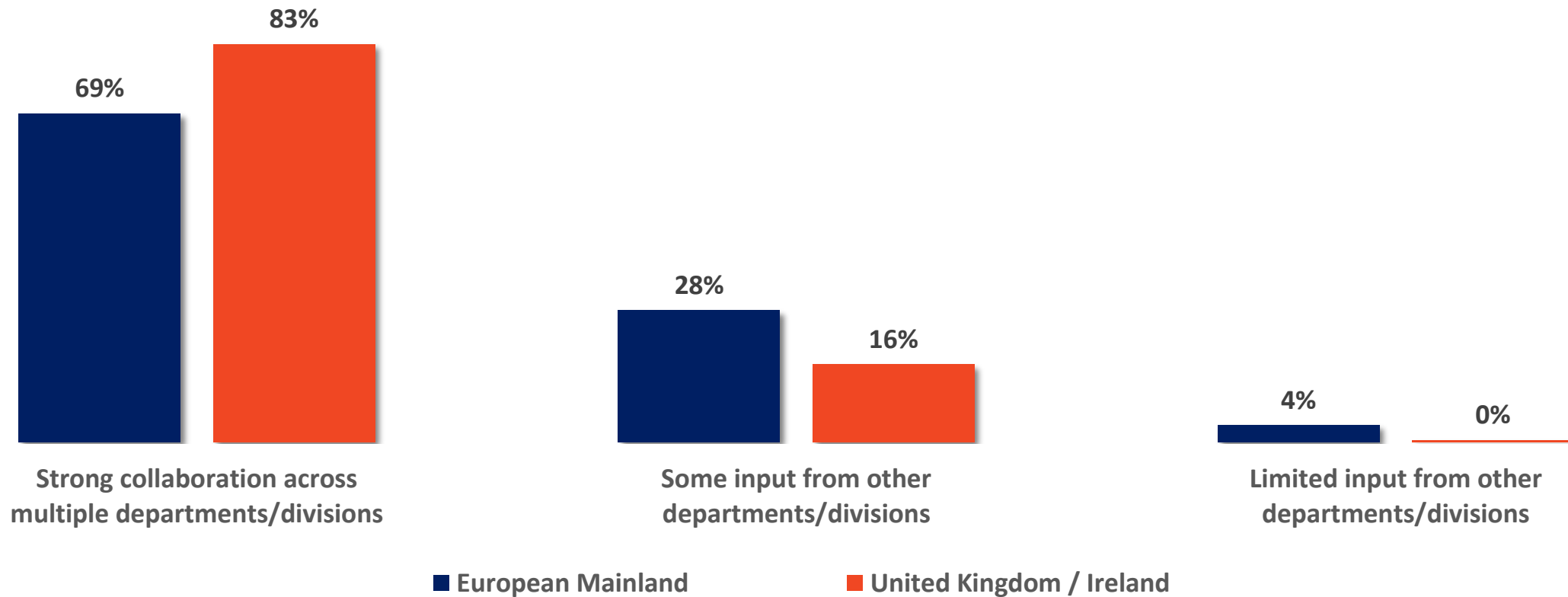
Program Design Collaboration



▶ Program Design Collaboration

Collaboration is a stronger element of incentive travel program design in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

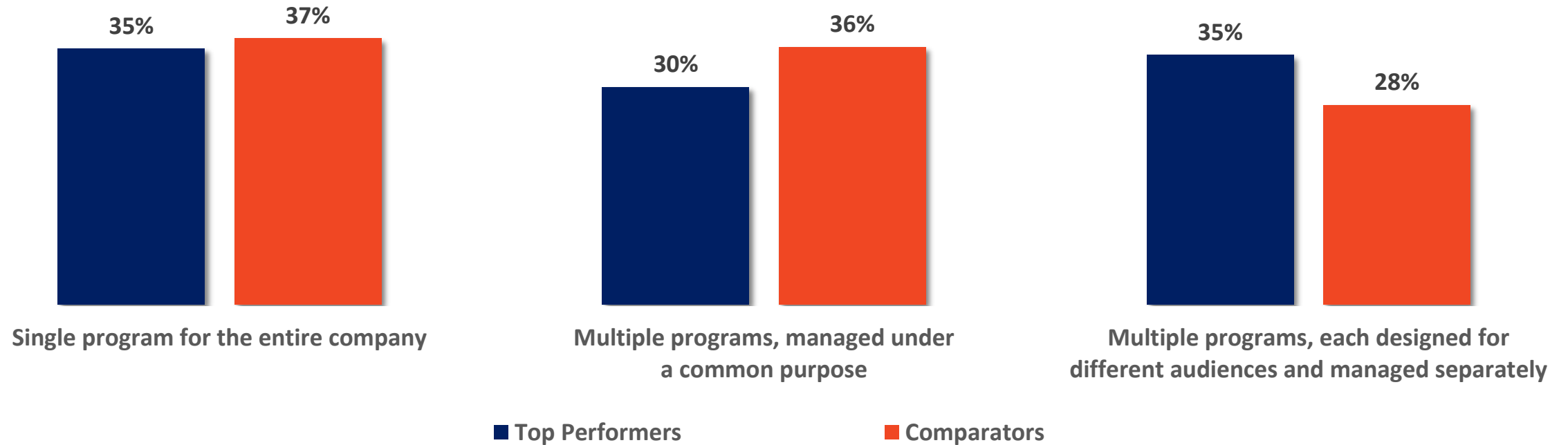
Program Design Collaboration



▶ Incentive Travel Program Connectivity

Top Performers succeed with different incentive travel structures.

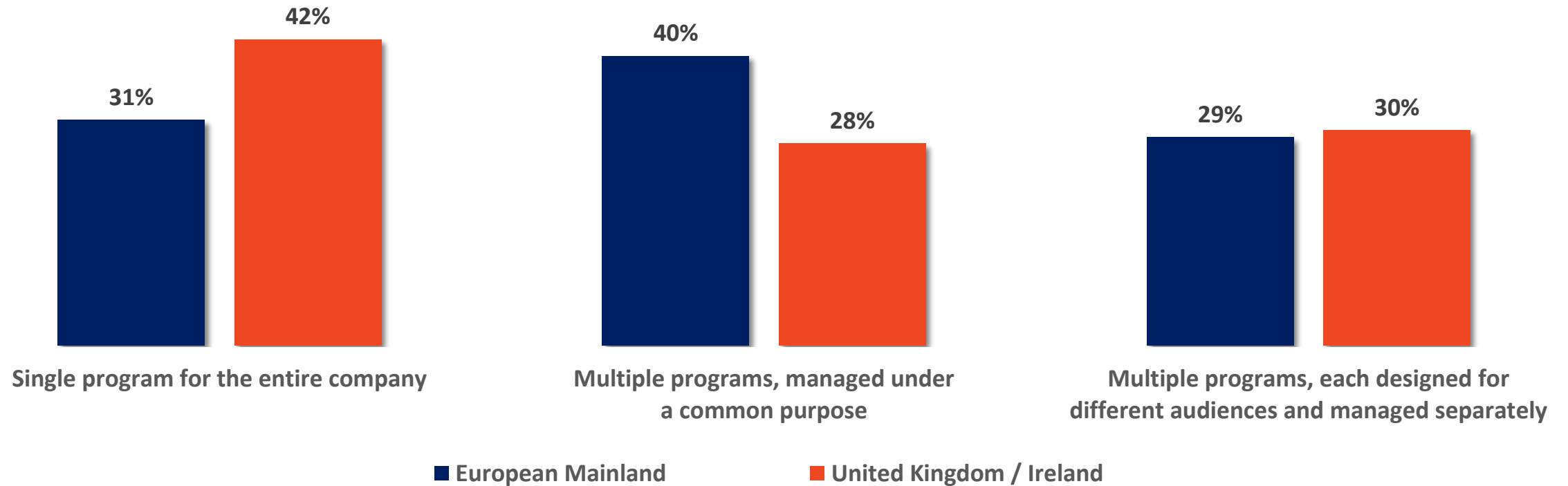
Incentive Travel Program Connectivity



▶ Incentive Travel Program Connectivity

European Mainland organizations favor centrally managed multi-program structures.

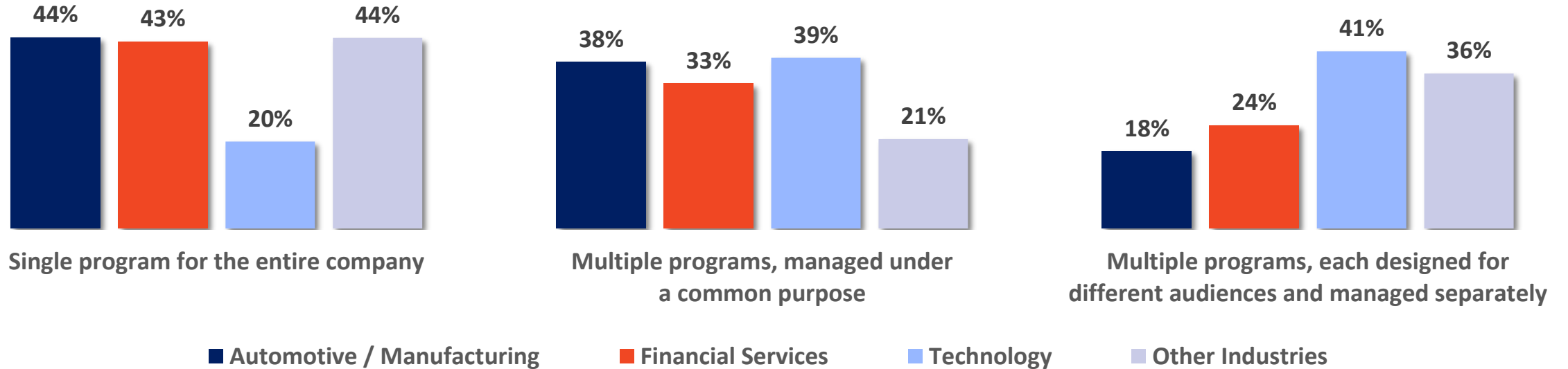
Incentive Travel Program Connectivity



▶ Incentive Travel Program Connectivity

Technology organizations are more likely to manage separate incentive programs for different audiences.

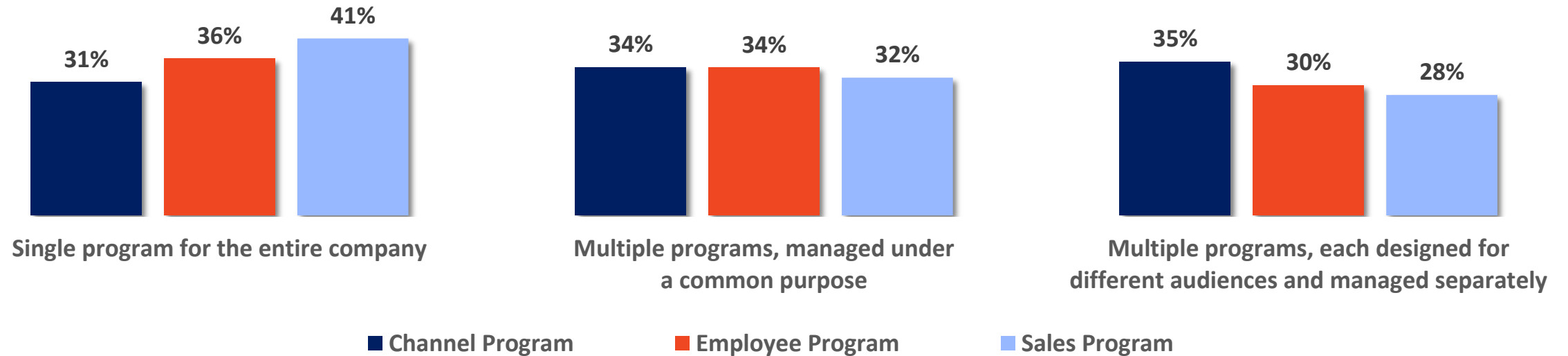
Incentive Travel Program Connectivity



▶ Incentive Travel Program Connectivity

Sales programs favor simplicity, while channel programs favor diversified incentive structures.

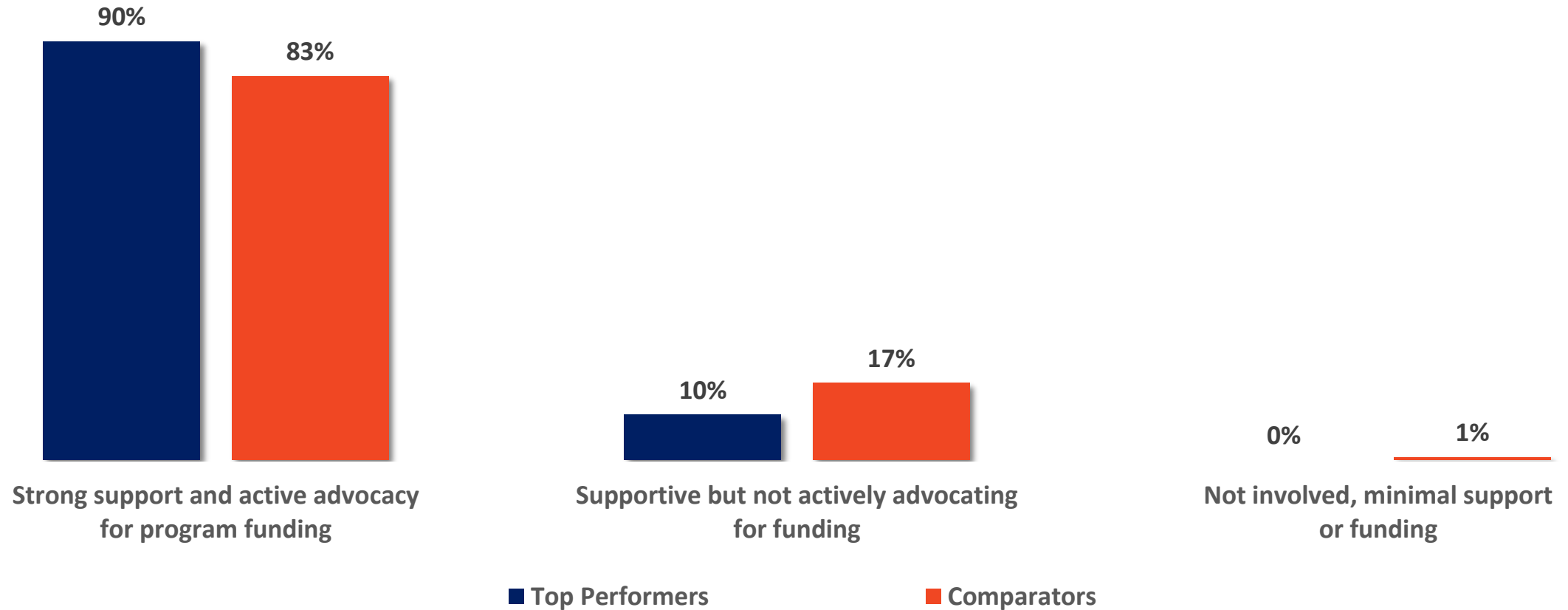
Incentive Travel Program Connectivity



▶ Executive Sponsorship

Active executive advocacy is a defining trait of Top Performer incentive travel programs.

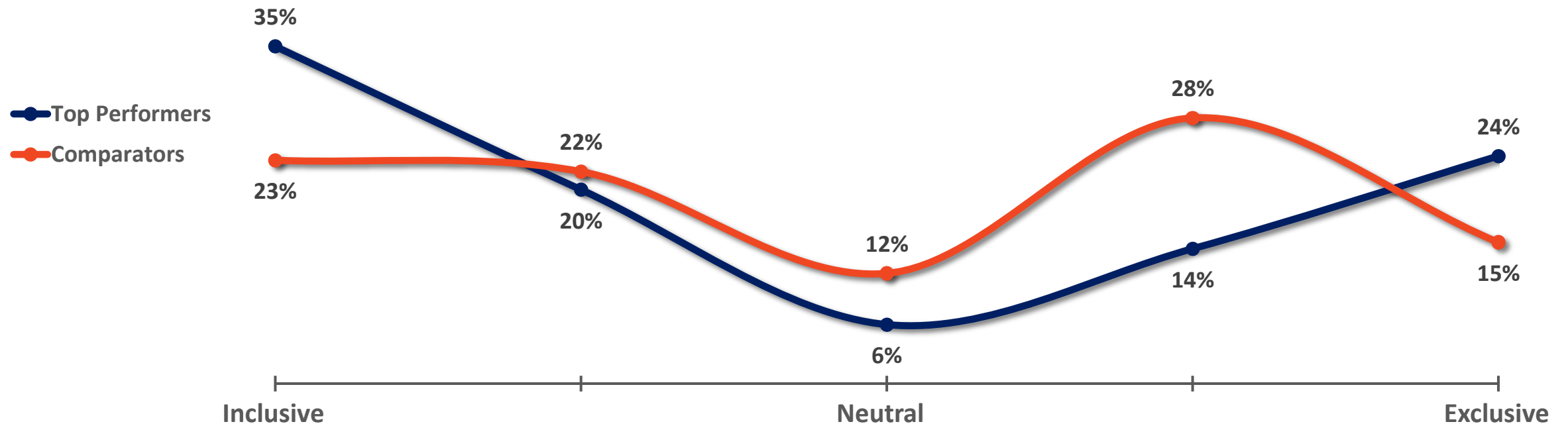
Incentive Travel Program Executive Sponsorship



▶ Incentive Travel Program Inclusivity

Top Performers favor strongly inclusive or strongly exclusive program models, avoiding neutrality.

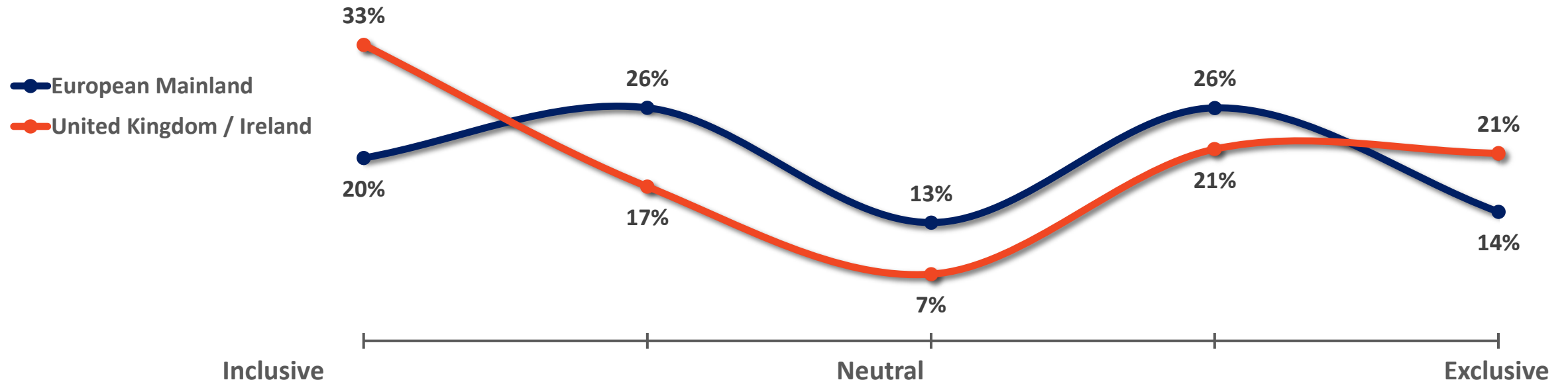
Incentive Travel Program Inclusivity



▶ Incentive Travel Program Inclusivity

United Kingdom and Ireland organizations take more extreme approaches to incentive travel program design, while European Mainland organizations approach more balanced structures.

Incentive Travel Program Inclusivity



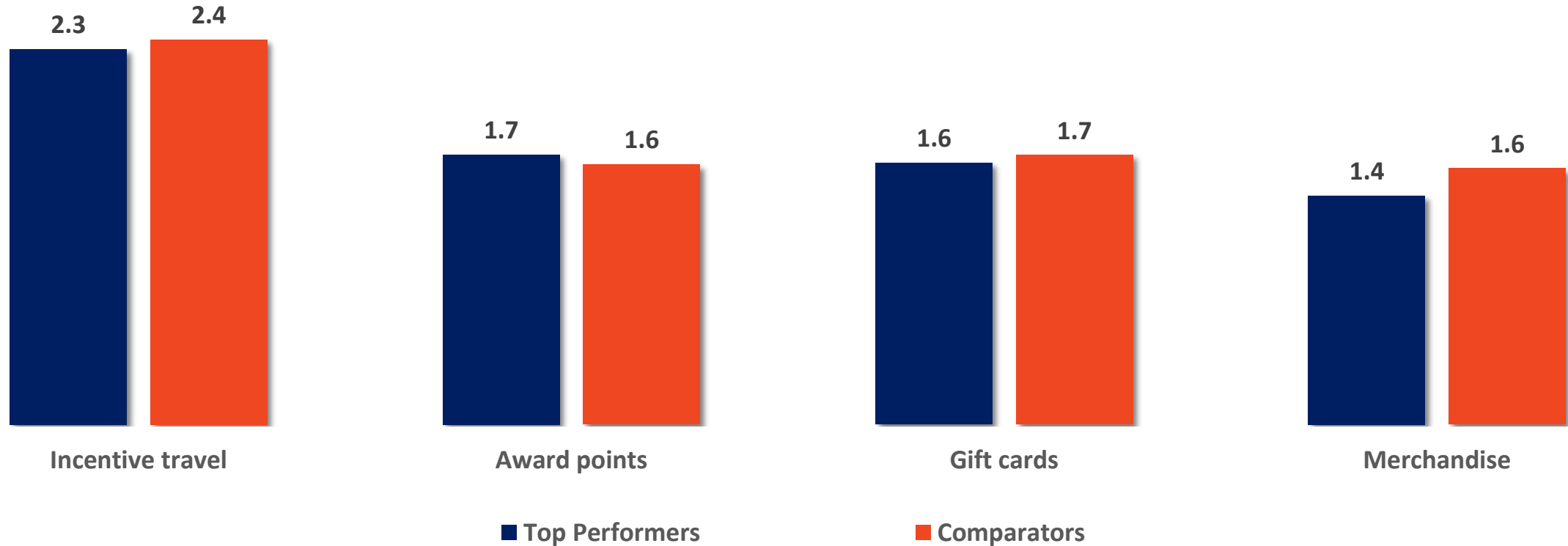


Non-Cash Rewards Program Assessment

▶ Engagement and Performance Drivers

Top Performers and Comparators report similar engagement and performance drivers, led by incentive travel.

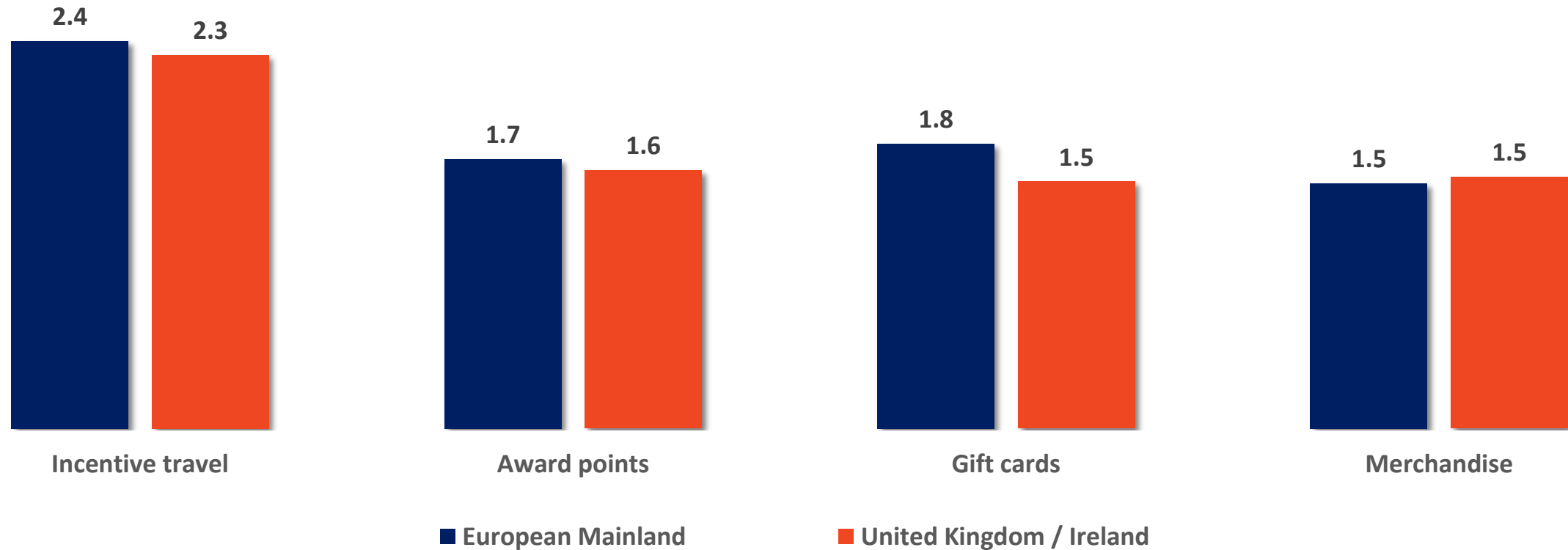
Impact on Participant Engagement and Performance



► Engagement and Performance Drivers

Gift cards are a more effective engagement tool in European Mainland organizations.

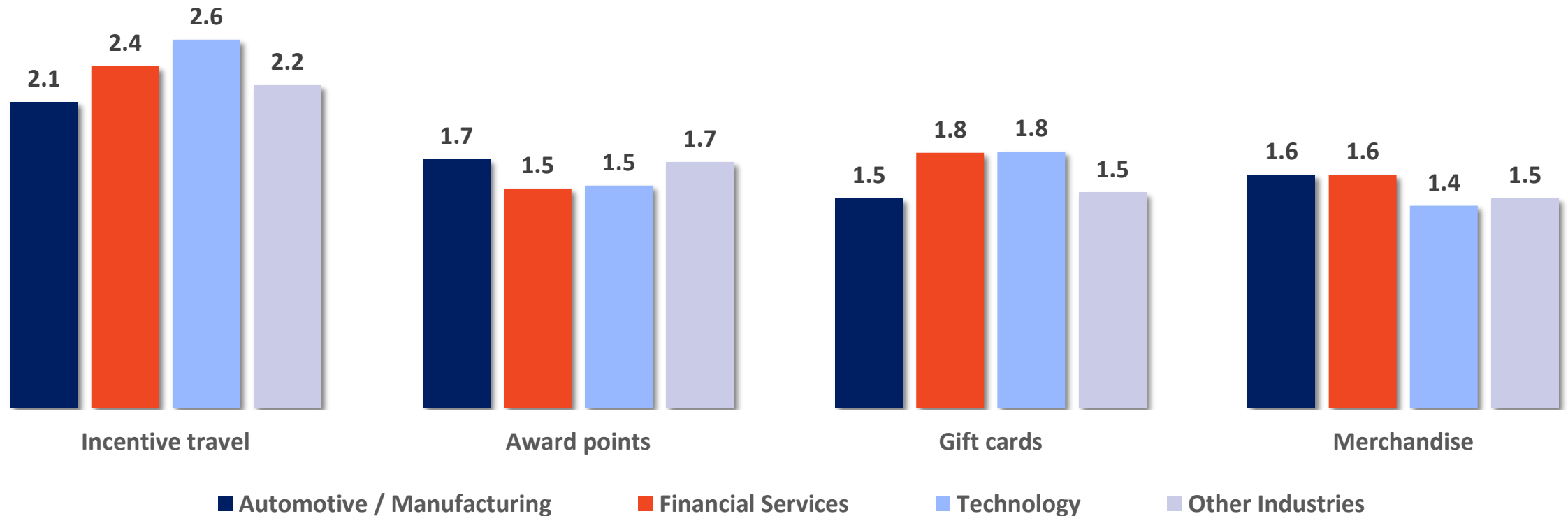
Impact on Participant Engagement and Performance



▶ Engagement and Performance Drivers

Technology and financial services organizations lean more heavily on incentive travel and gift cards to drive engagement and performance.

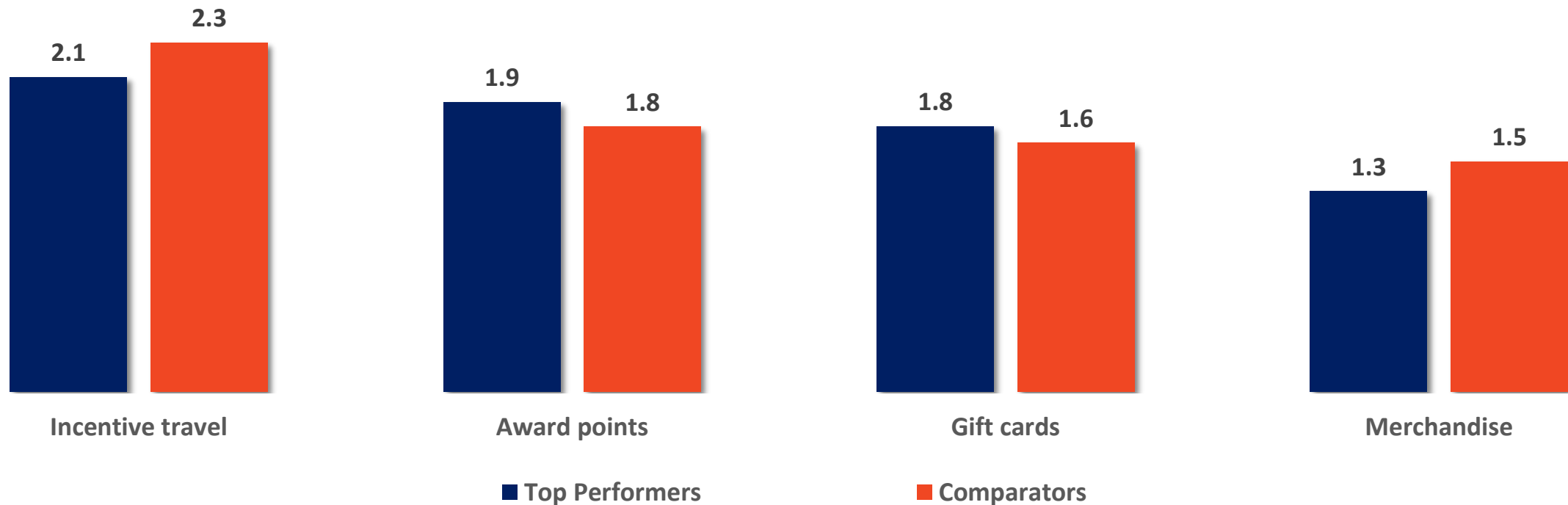
Impact on Participant Engagement and Performance



▶ Business Outcome Drivers

Top Performers are more likely to employ incentive travel, award points, and gift cards more evenly to drive business outcomes.

Impact on Key Business Outcomes



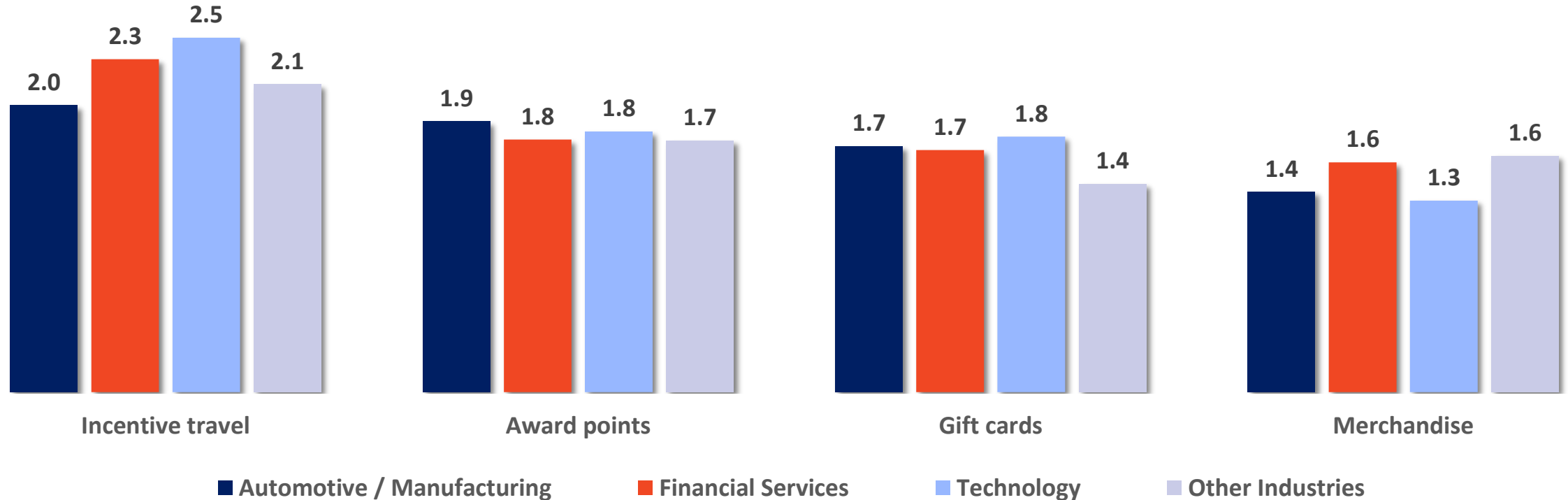
Q25: Please rank each of the following reward types in terms of impact on key business outcomes (e.g., sales growth, retention, customer satisfaction).

Scores are calculated by reversing average rank values so that higher bars reflect greater impact

▶ Business Outcome Drivers

Technology and financial services organizations also rely more heavily on incentive travel to drive business performance.

Impact on Key Business Outcomes



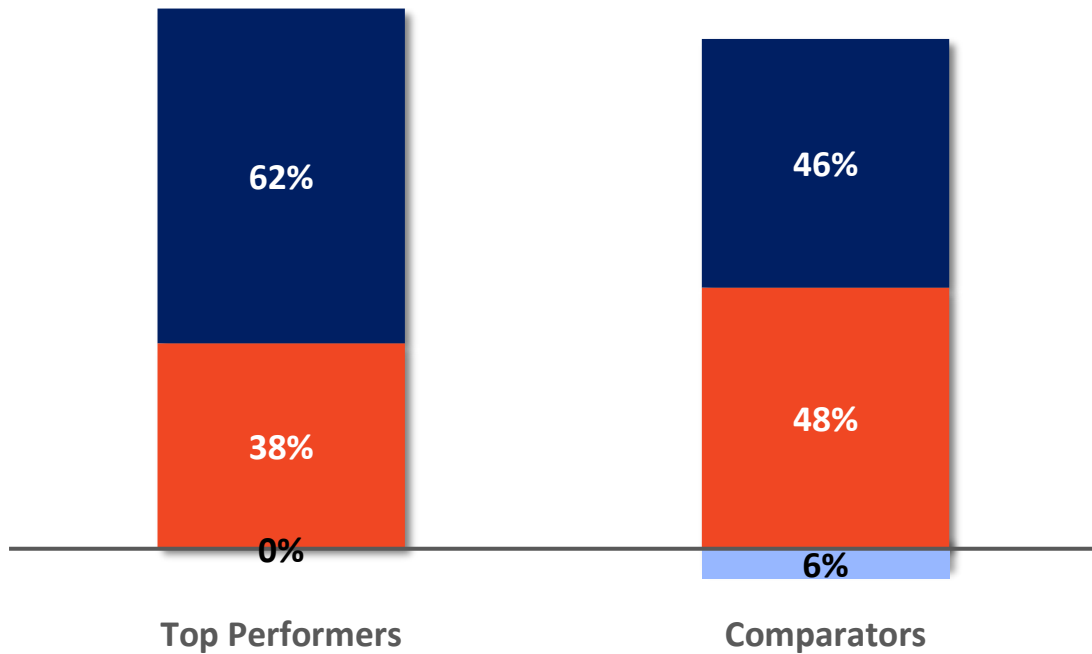
Q25: Please rank each of the following reward types in terms of impact on key business outcomes (e.g., sales growth, retention, customer satisfaction).

Scores are calculated by reversing average rank values so that higher bars reflect greater impact

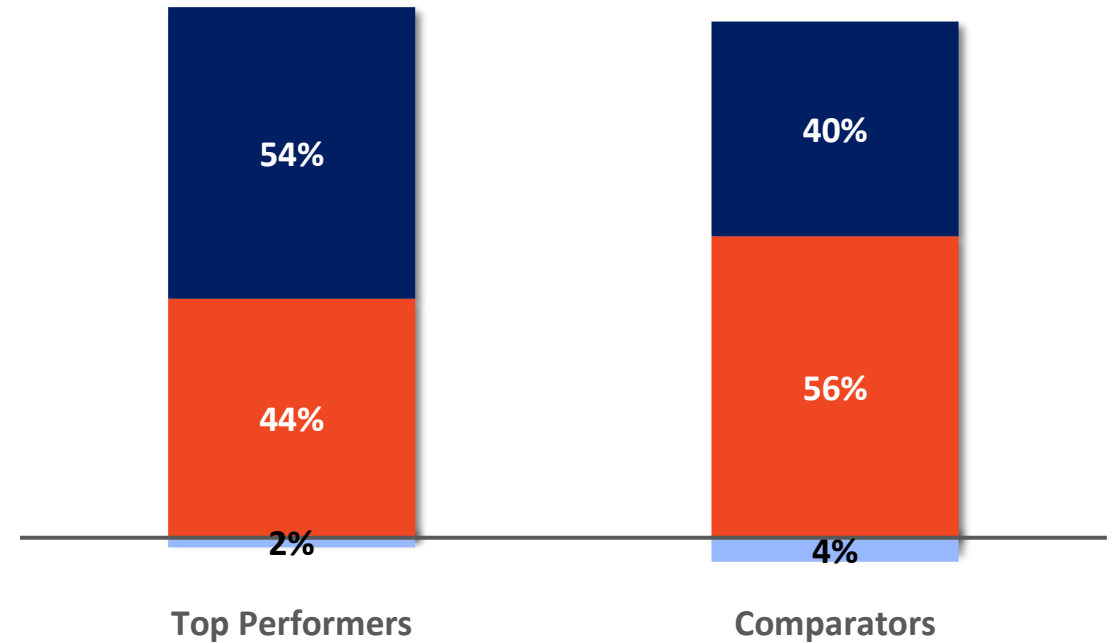
▶ Incentive Travel Program Effectiveness

Top Performers have stronger alignment to corporate goals and more robust incentive program budgets.

Alignment to Corporate Goals



Program Budget

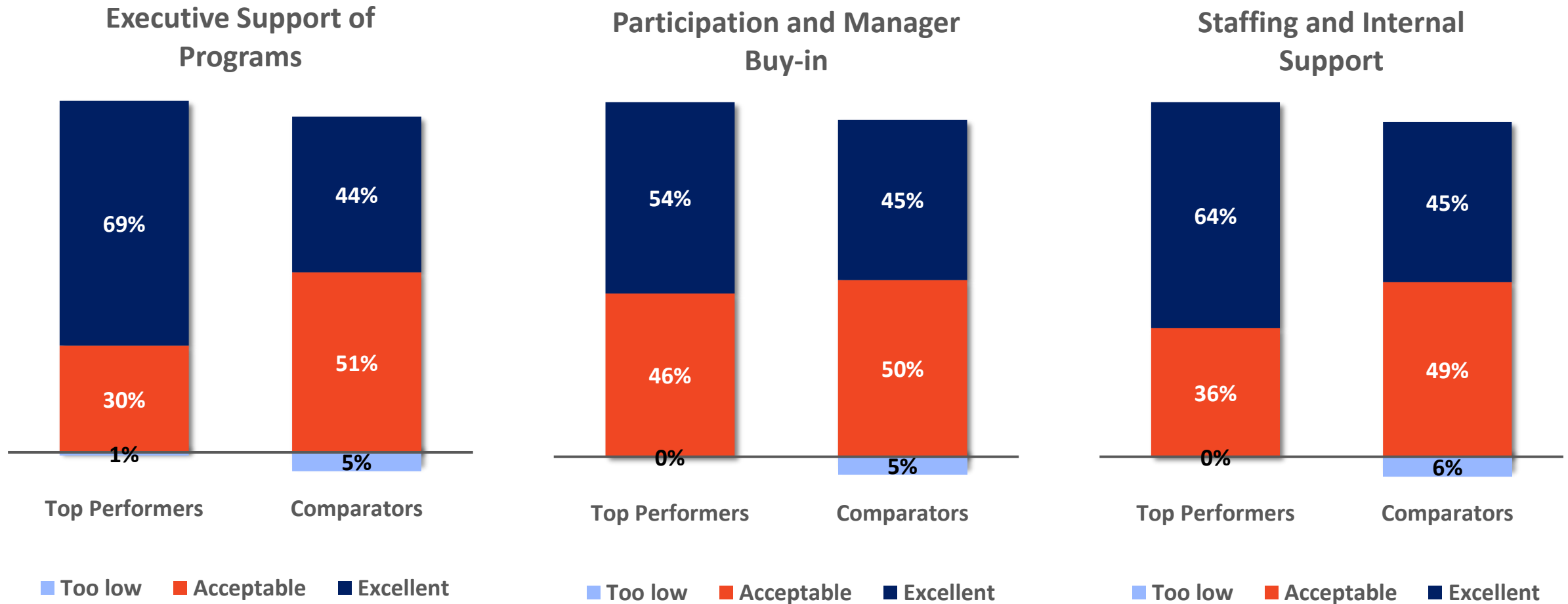


■ Too low ■ Acceptable ■ Excellent

■ Too low ■ Acceptable ■ Excellent

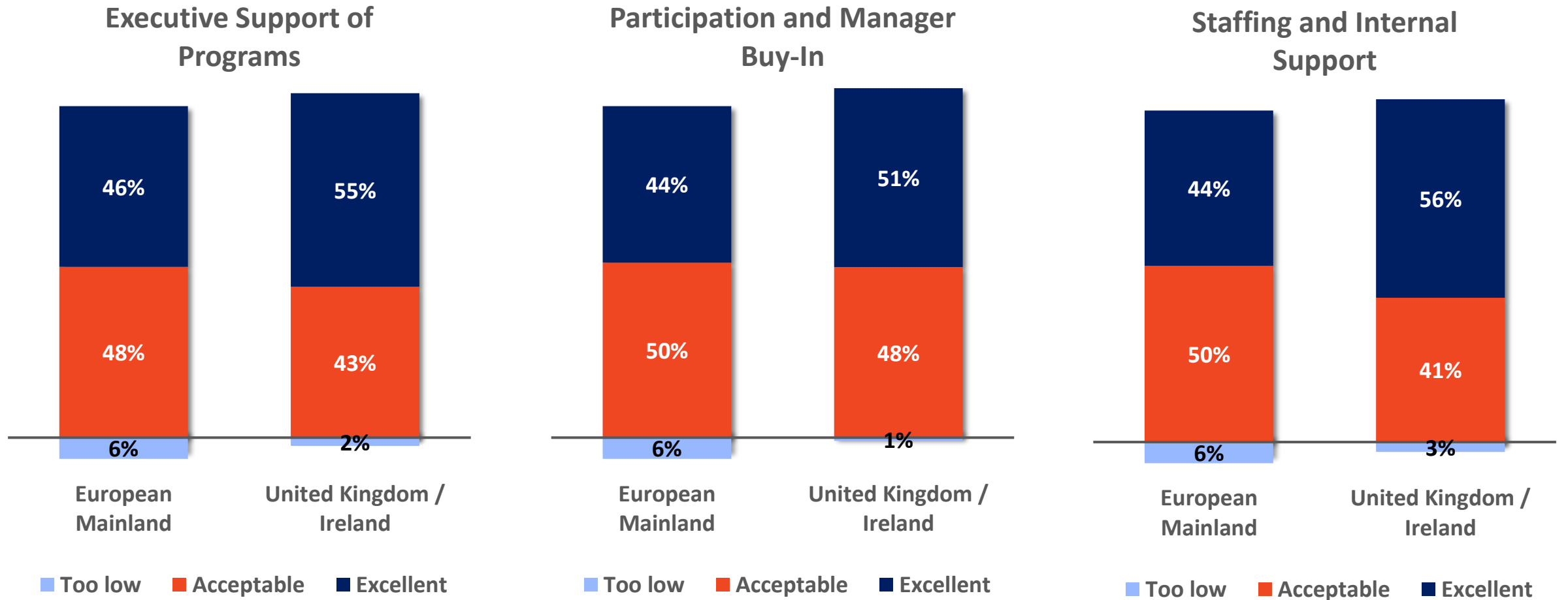
▶ Incentive Travel Program Effectiveness

Top Performers benefit from stronger leadership, internal support, and staffing.



▶ Incentive Travel Program Effectiveness

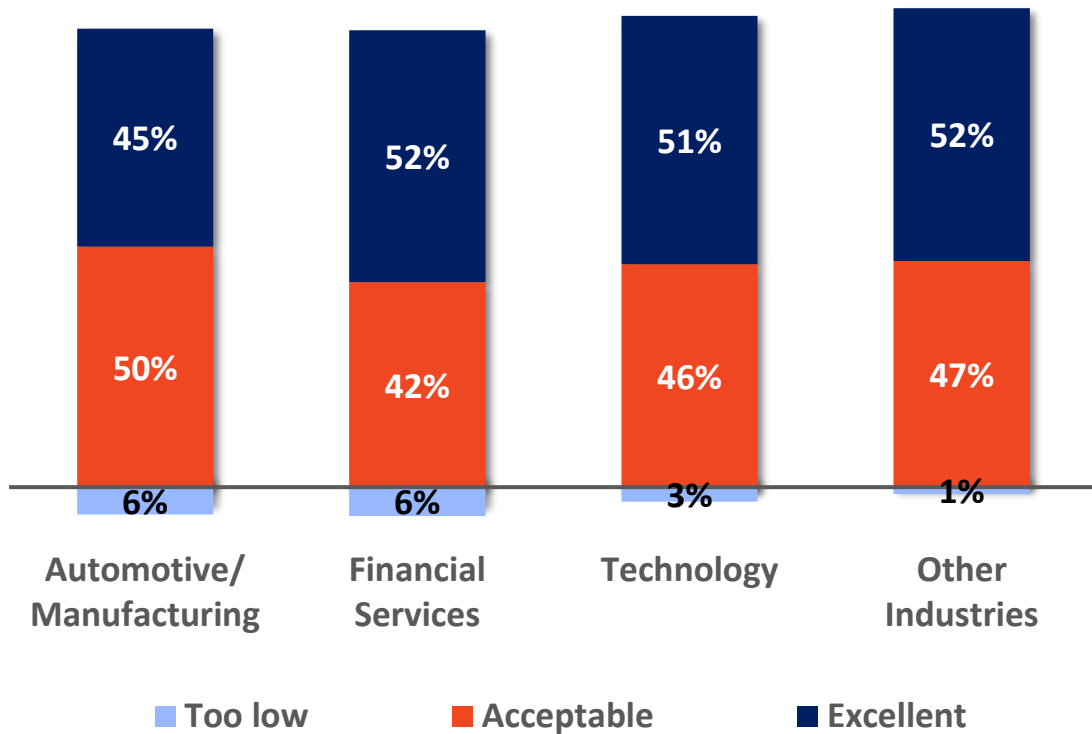
Strong leadership, internal support, and staffing is most prominent in the United Kingdom and Ireland.



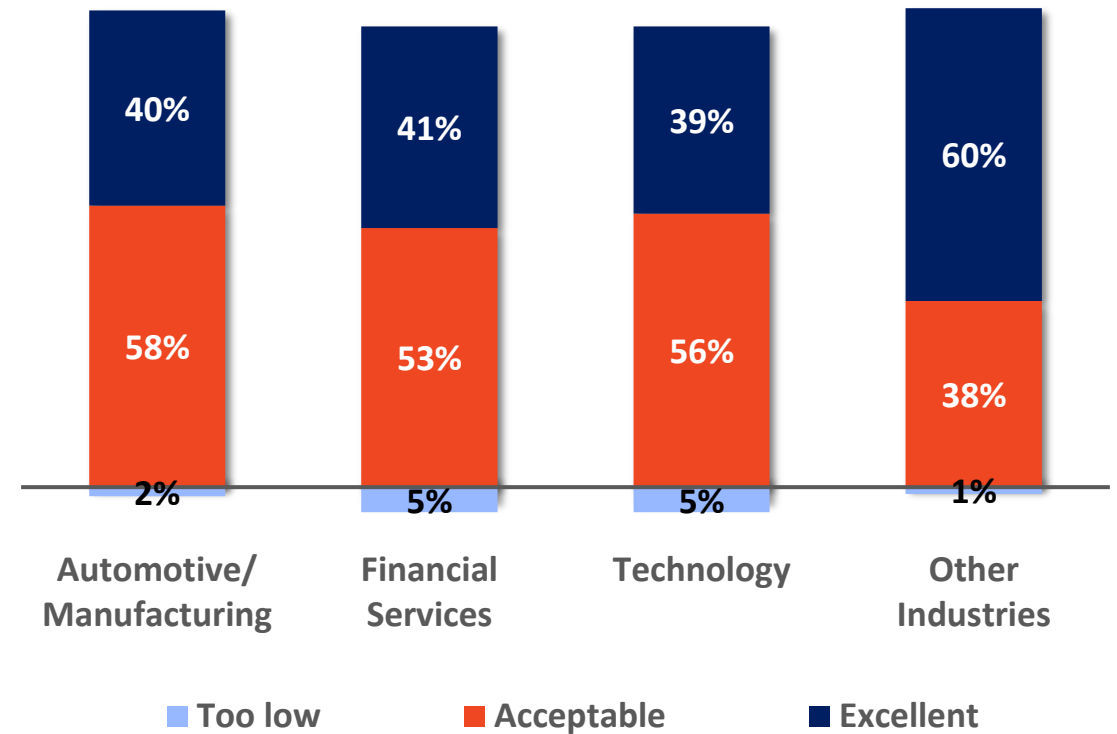
▶ Incentive Travel Program Effectiveness

Automotive and manufacturing companies less alignment between incentive travel programs and corporate goals, while other industries fund their programs at higher levels.

Alignment to Corporate Goals

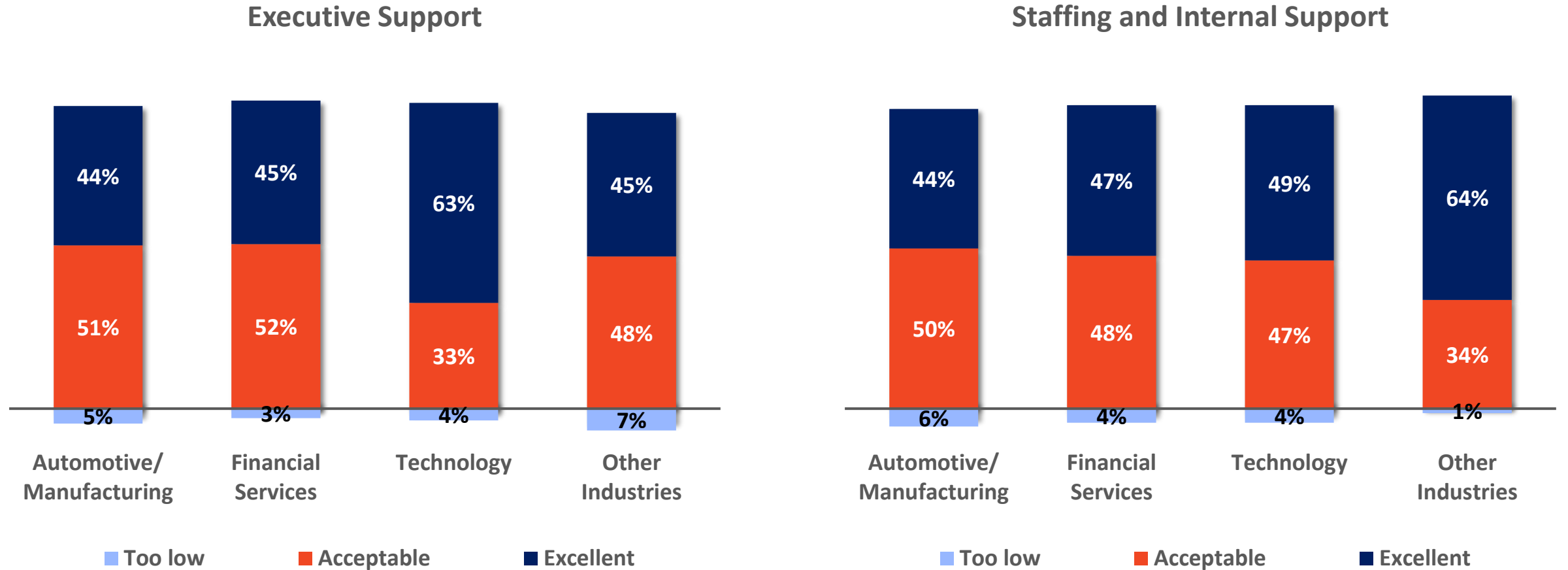


Program Budget



▶ Incentive Travel Program Effectiveness

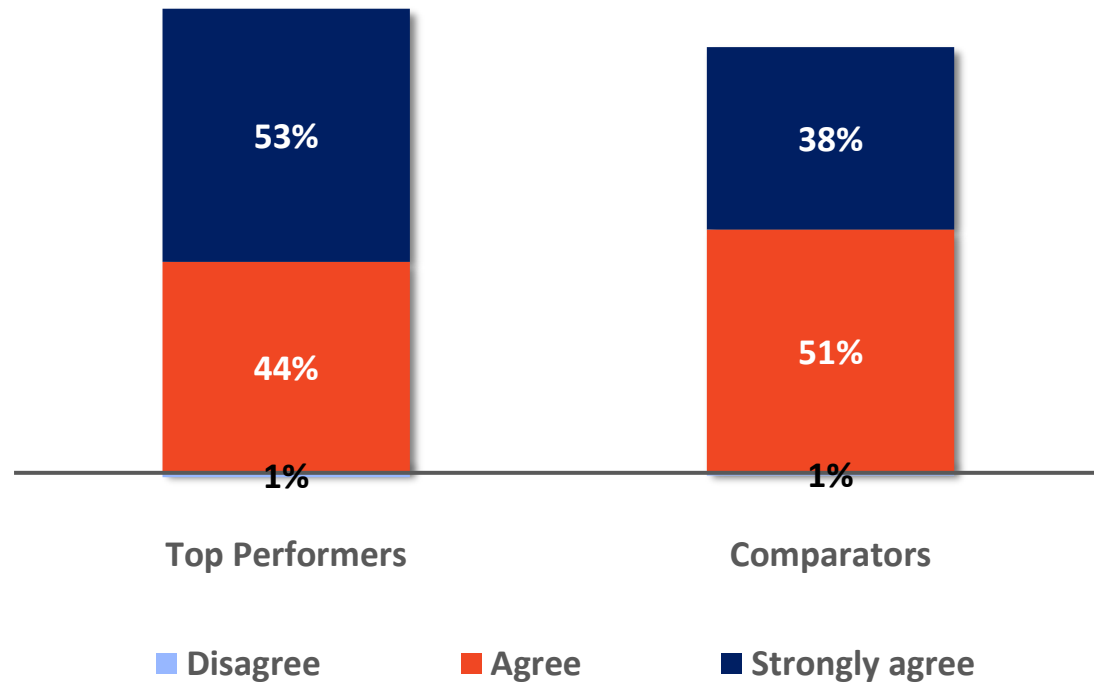
Technology companies leverage on strong executive support for incentive travel, while other industries excel in staffing and internal backing.



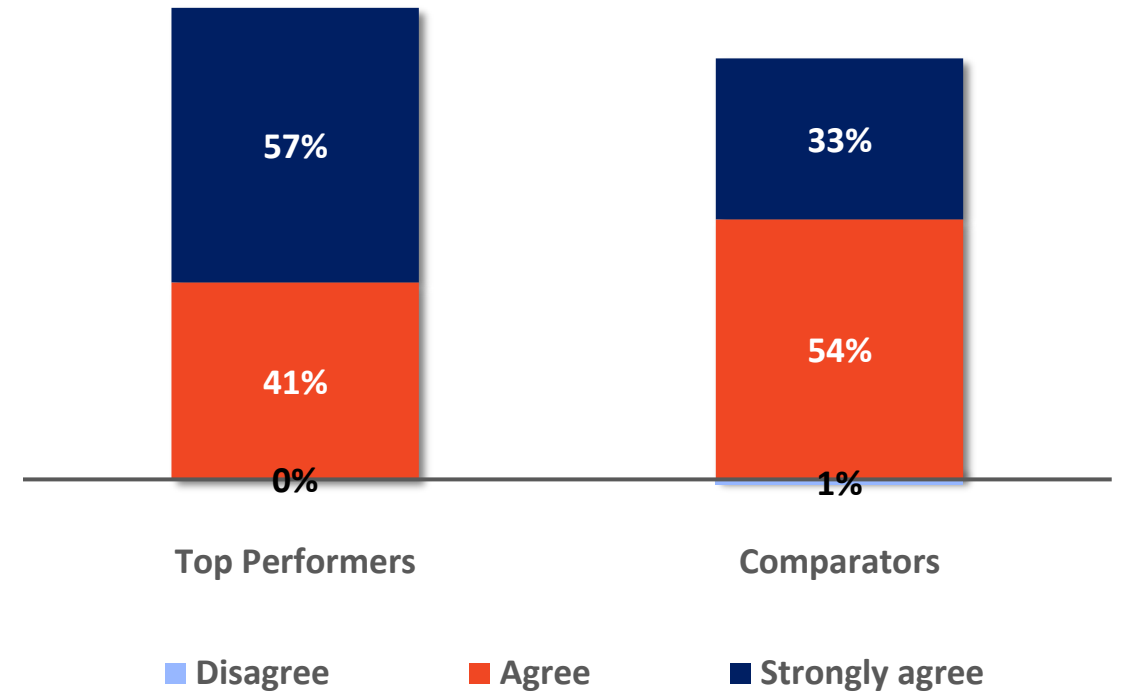
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

Top Performers express stronger confidence in leveraging technology and external expertise, and have more effective influence on participant behaviors.

Our incentive travel programs effectively influence participant behavior, engagement, retention, and recruitment



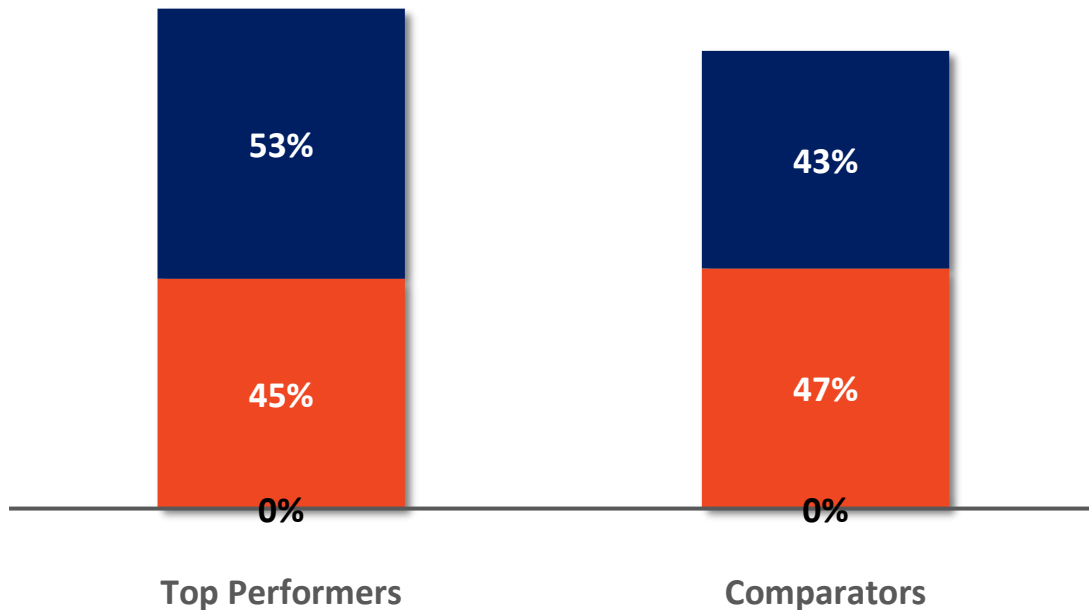
We leverage technology and external expertise effectively in our incentive travel programs



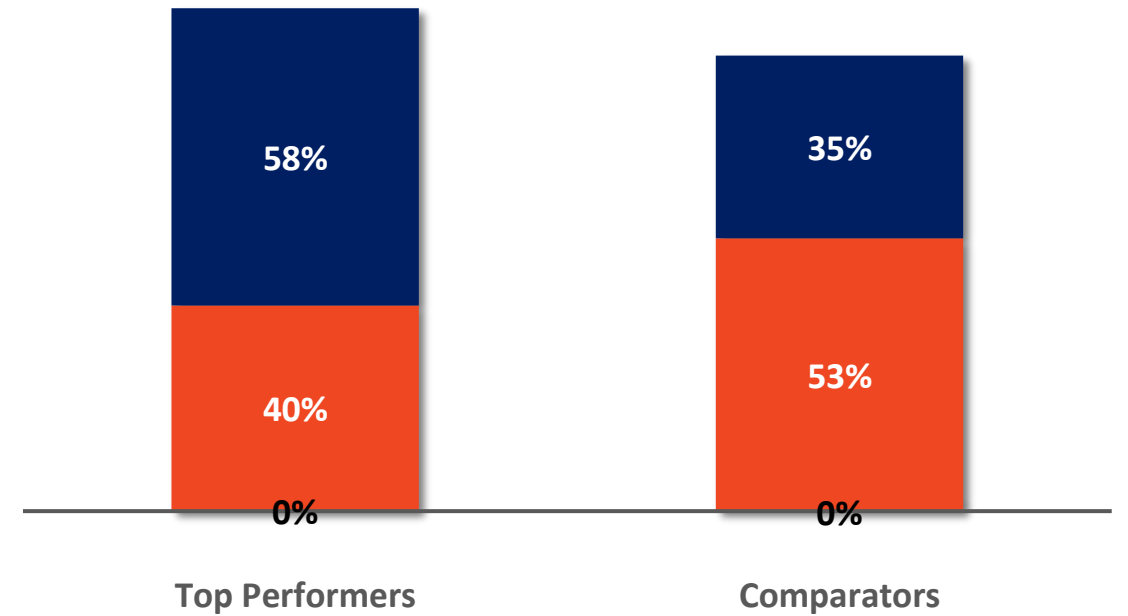
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

Top Performers express stronger conviction in aligning reward programs to company identity and driving business performance.

The incentive travel programs we design reflect our company's identity and culture



Our incentive travel programs contribute to overall company performance or commercial results



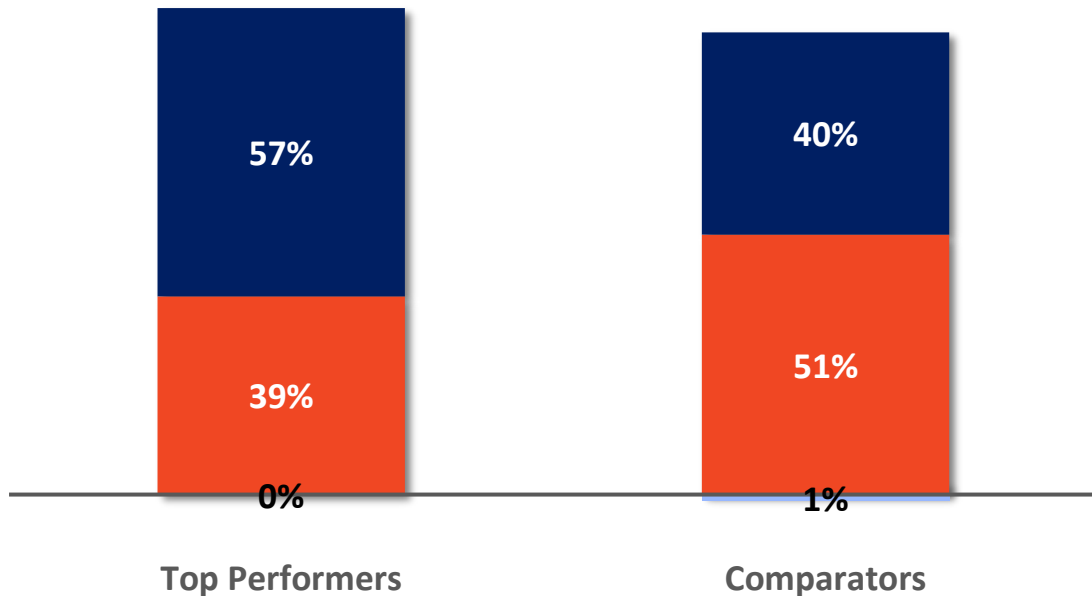
■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

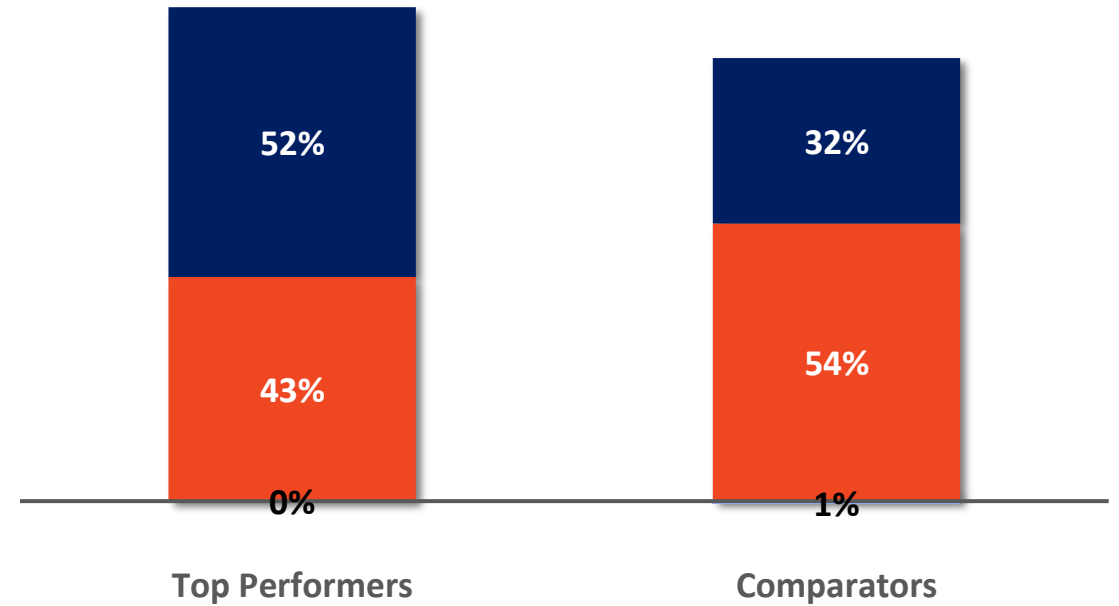
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

Top Performers are more likely to continually review incentive travel programs and track measurable outcomes to inform decisions.

We continually review our incentive travel programs to maximize their effectiveness



We systematically measure and report incentive travel program outcomes to inform decisions



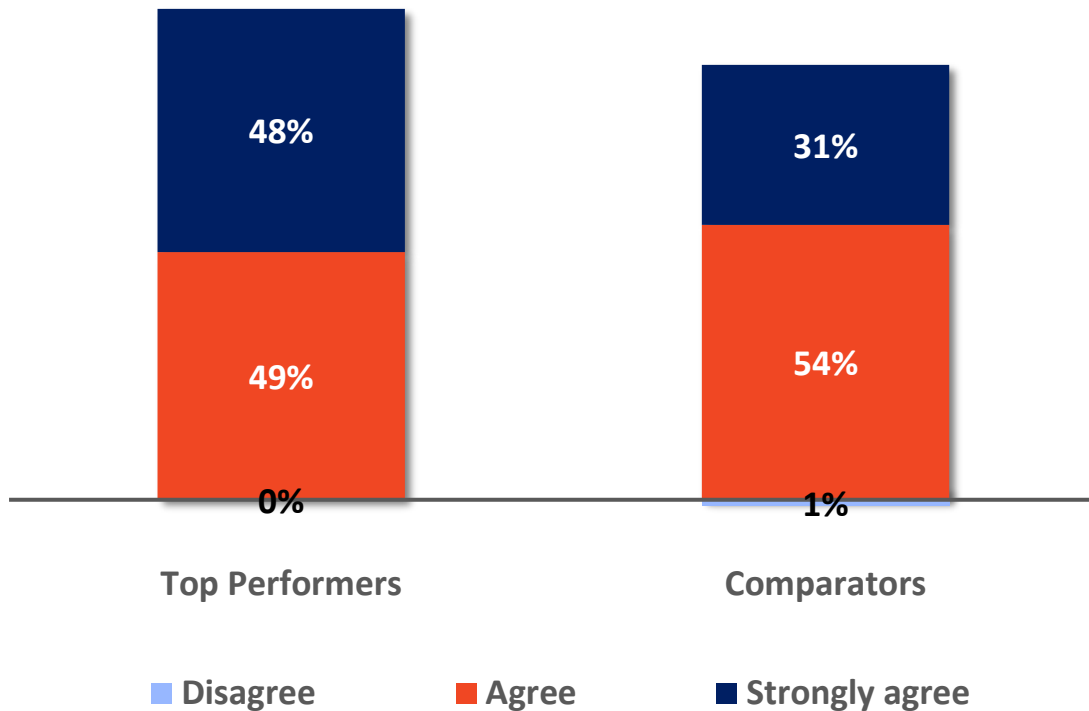
■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

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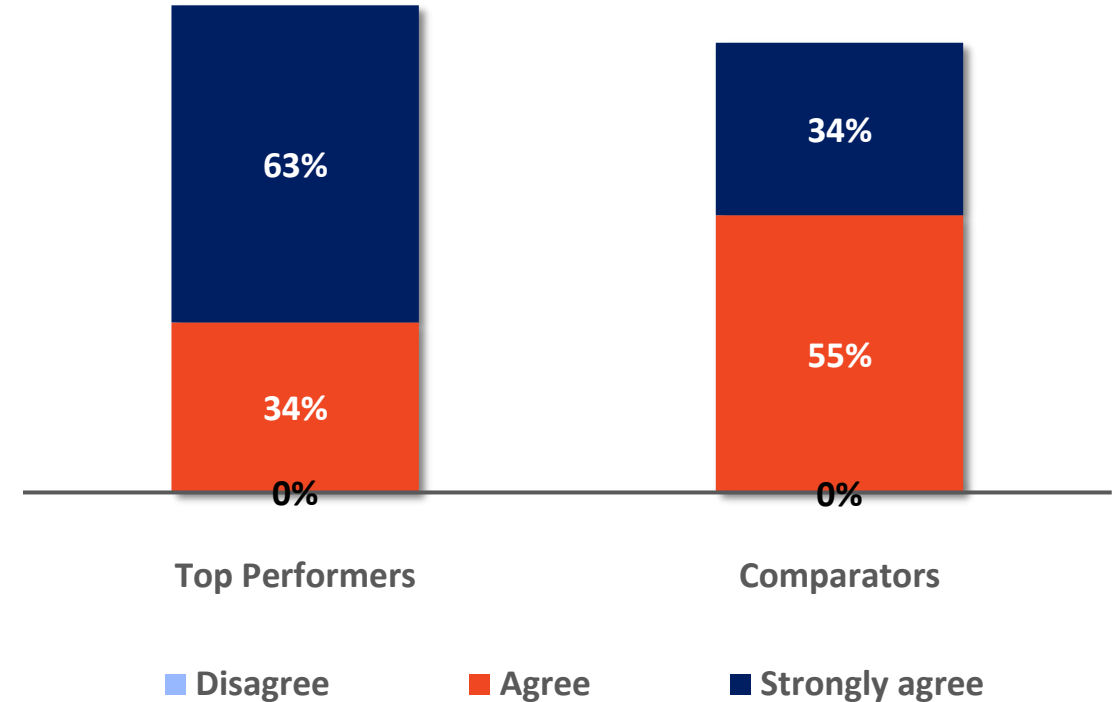
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

Top Performers more confidently demonstrate ROI from incentive travel programs and link results to long-term benefits for participants and the company.

We can demonstrate measurable ROI from our incentive travel programs



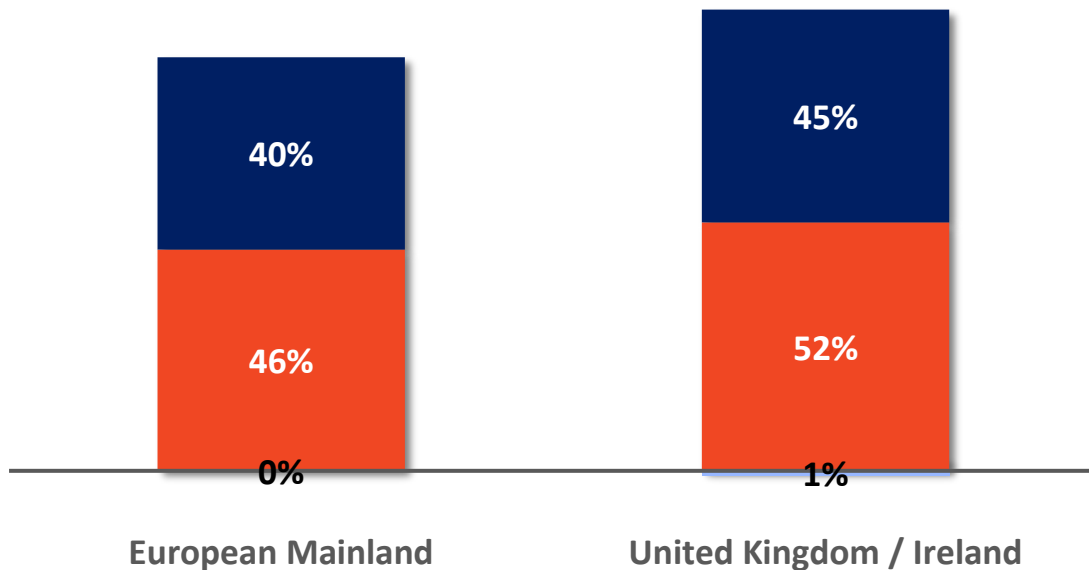
Our incentive travel programs generate measurable long-term benefits for participants and the company



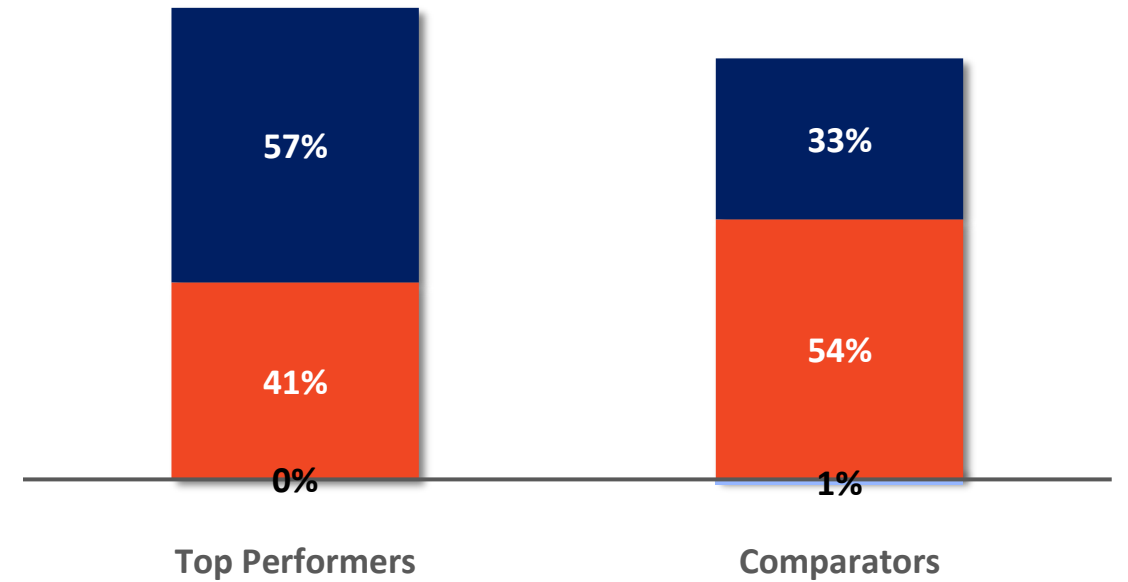
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

Top Performers express stronger confidence in leveraging technology and external expertise, and have more effective influence on participant behaviors.

Our incentive travel programs effectively influence participant behavior, engagement, retention, and recruitment



We leverage technology and external expertise effectively in our incentive travel programs



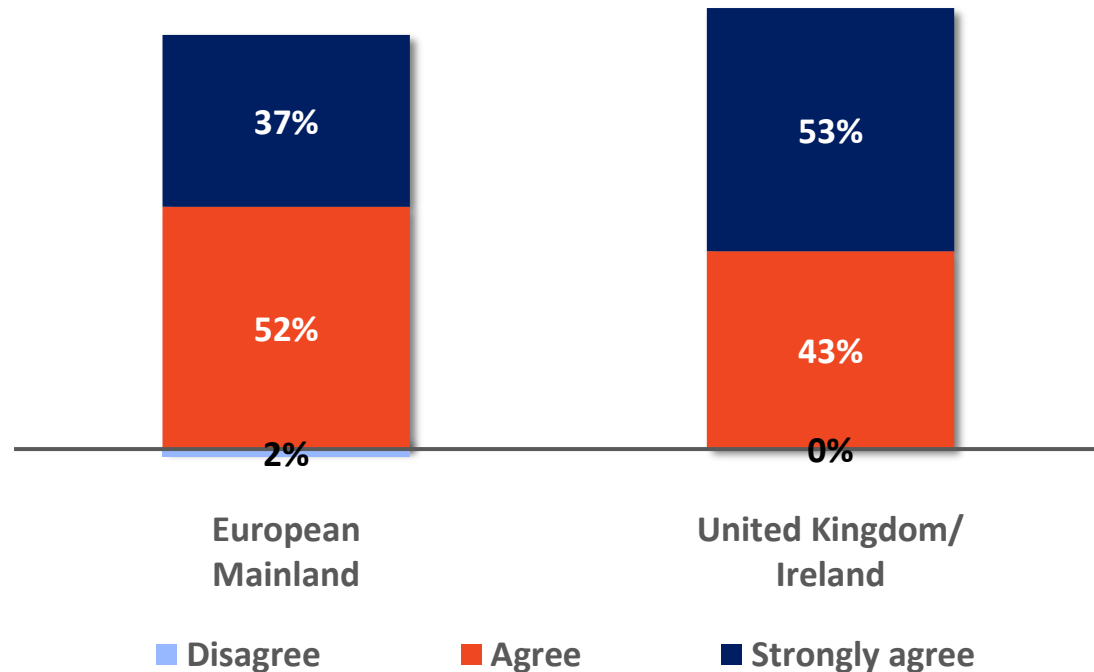
■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

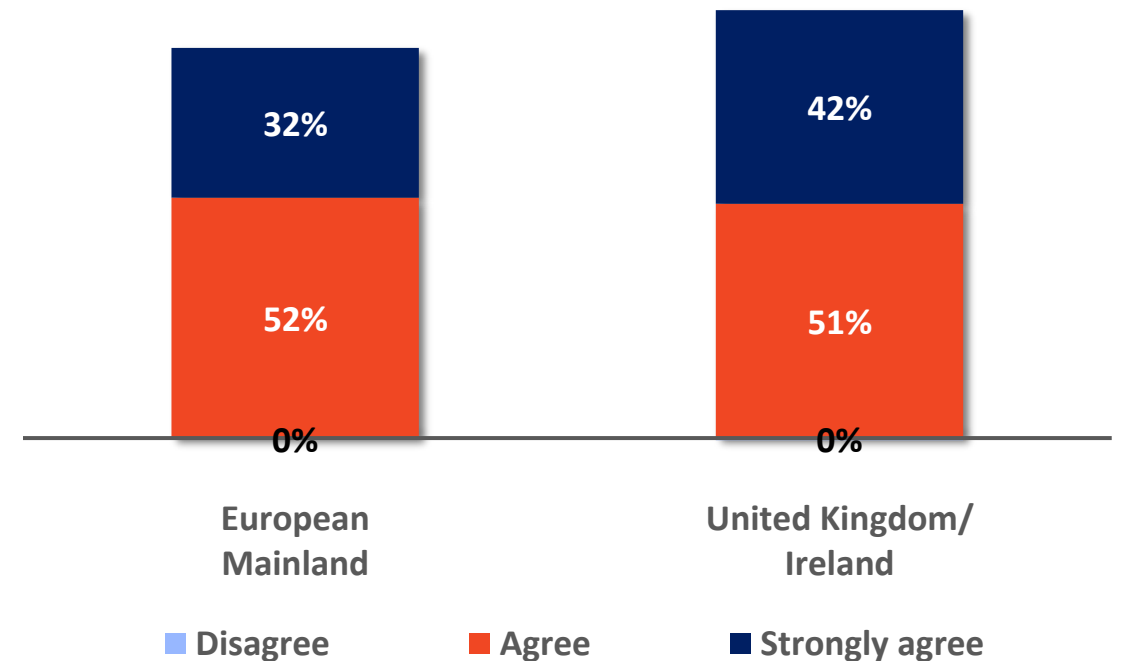
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

United Kingdom and Ireland organizations excel in reviewing and measuring incentive travel programs to drive effectiveness.

We continually review our incentive travel programs to maximize their effectiveness



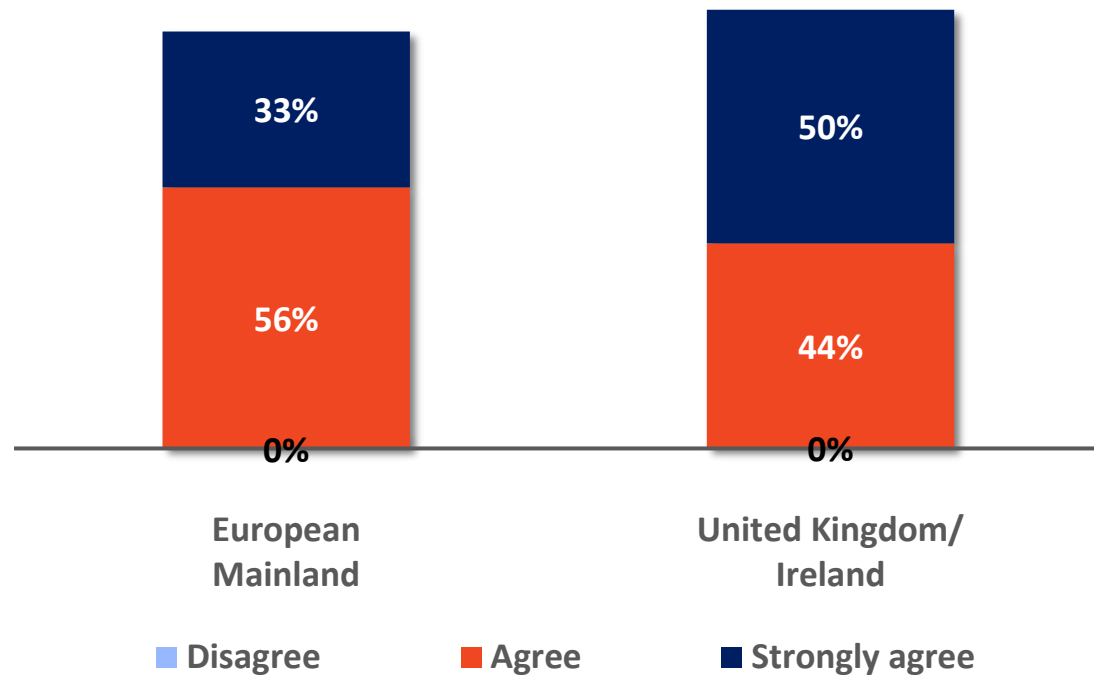
We systematically measure and report incentive travel program outcomes to inform decisions



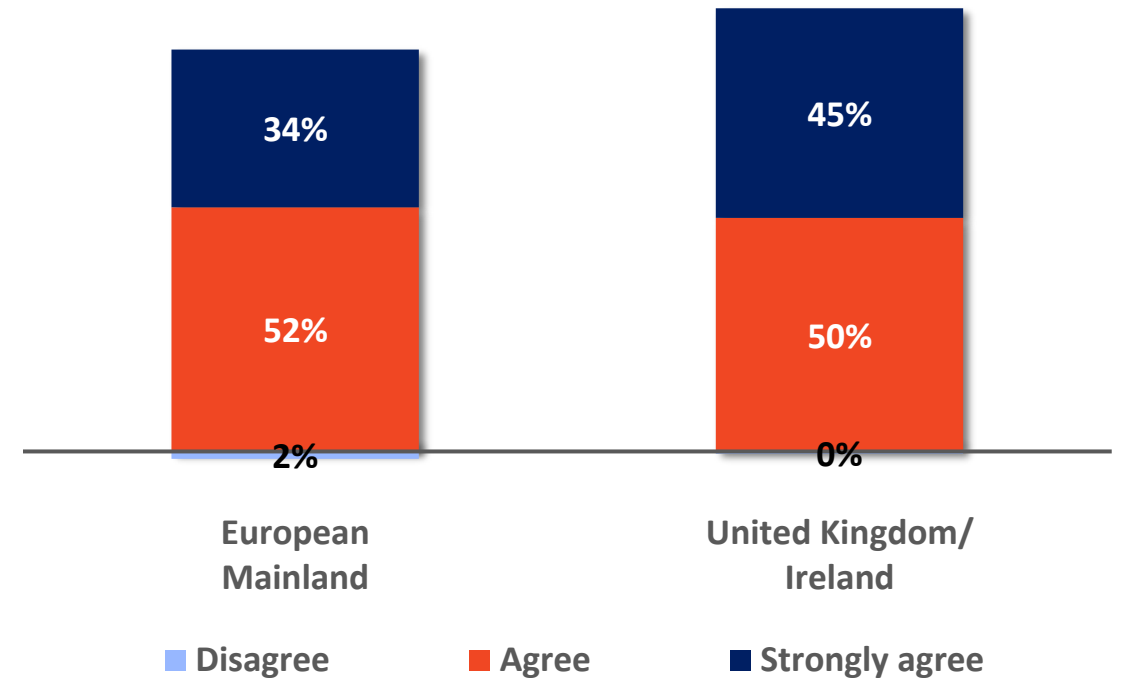
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

United Kingdom and Ireland organizations maximize incentive travel impact through measurable benefits and effective use of technology and expertise.

Our incentive travel programs generate measurable long-term benefits for participants and the company



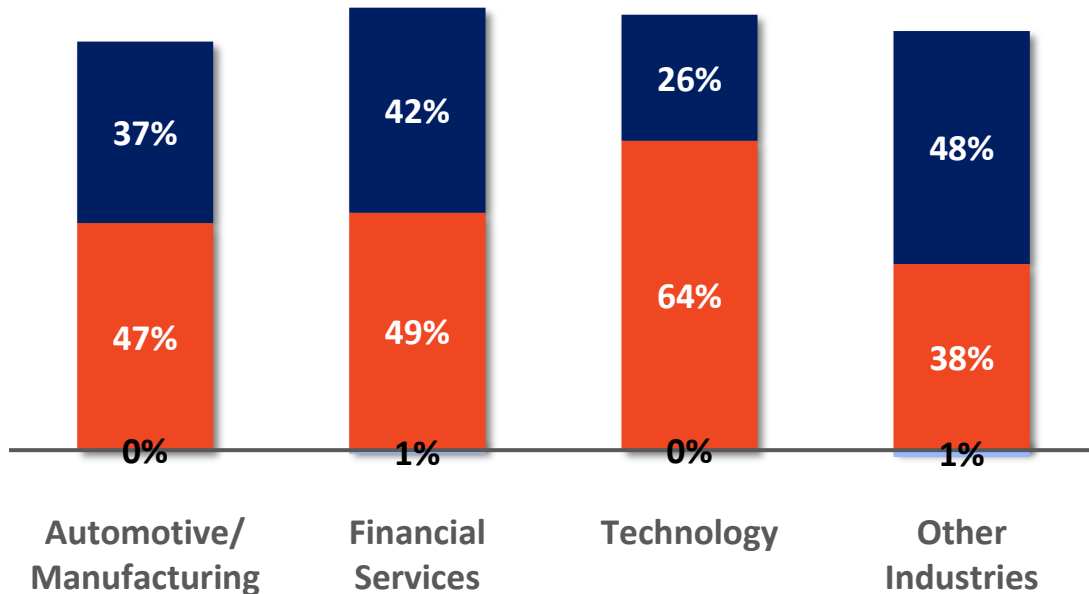
We leverage technology and external expertise effectively in our incentive travel programs



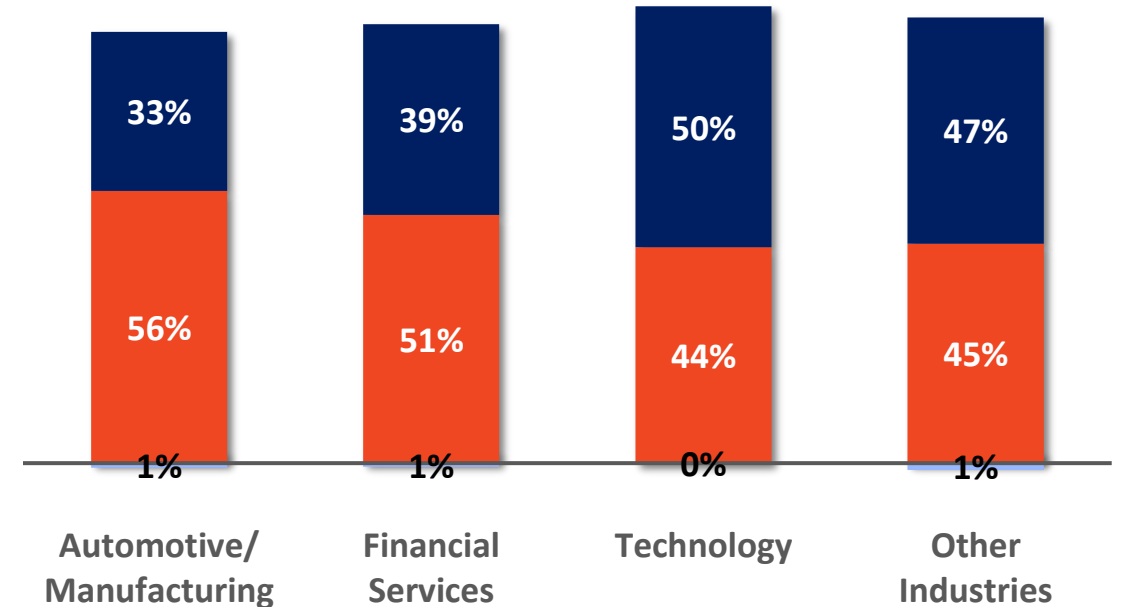
▶ Incentive Travel Program Impact

Technology and Other Industries lead in systematically measuring incentive travel outcomes and influencing participant engagement and behavior.

We systematically measure and report incentive travel program outcomes to inform decisions



Our incentive travel programs effectively influence participant behavior, engagement, retention, and recruitment



■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

■ Disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree



Q23: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about your incentive travel program(s).

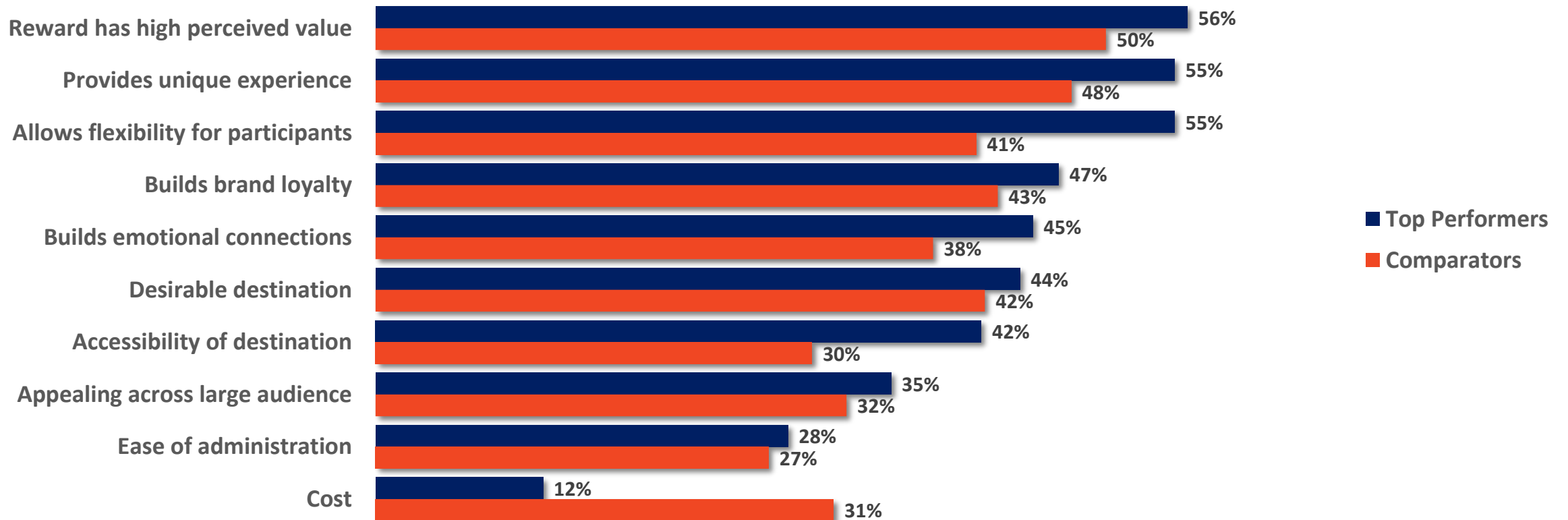


Incentive Travel Program Strategic Intent

▶ Incentive Travel Design Priorities

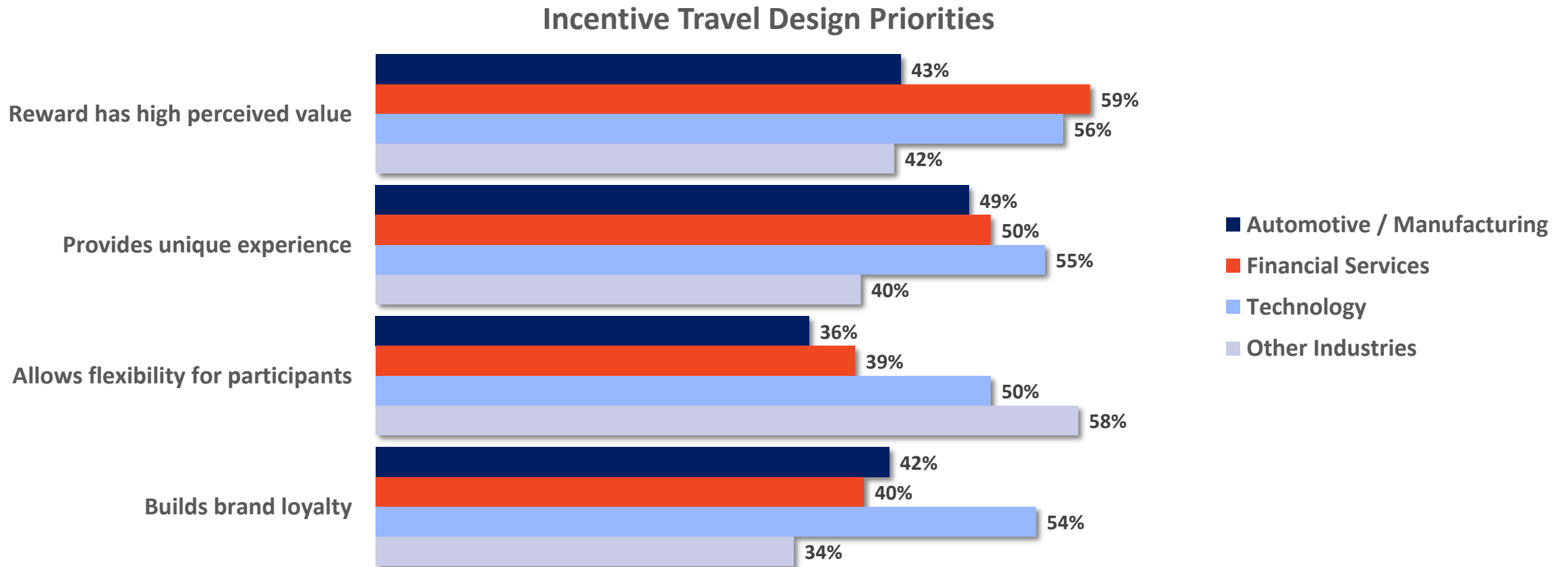
Top Performers prioritize flexibility, unique experiences, and perceived value while placing less emphasis on cost in incentive travel program design.

Incentive Travel Design Priorities



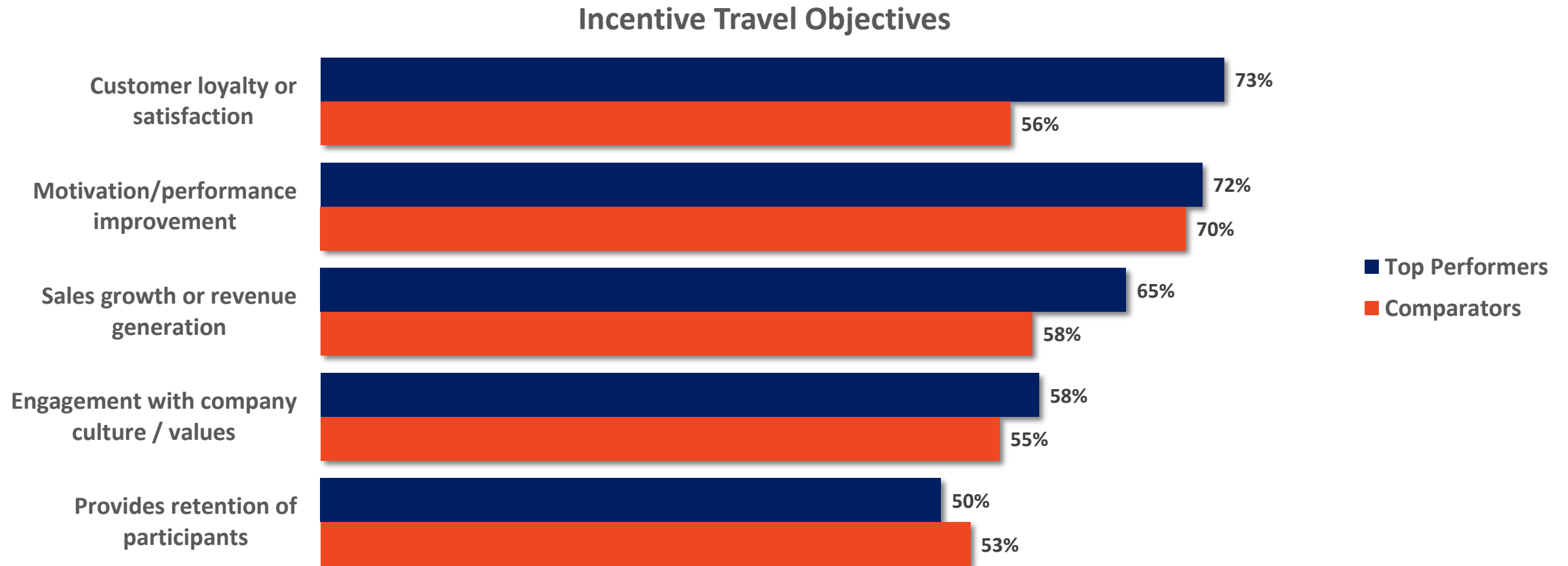
▶ Incentive Travel Design Priorities

Financial services organizations prioritize value, automotive and manufacturing emphasize unique experiences, and technology takes a more diversified approach.



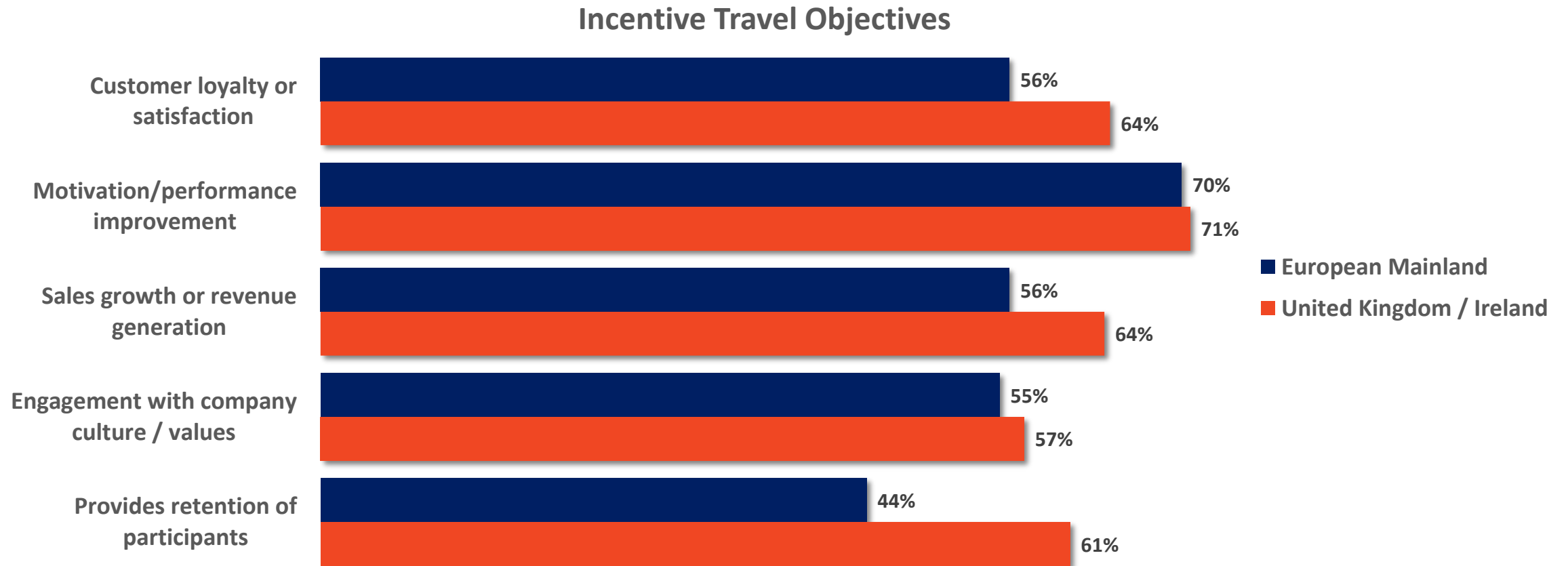
▶ Incentive Travel Objectives

Top Performers are more likely to recognize the broad business impact of incentive travel programs, particularly with customer loyalty and sales revenue generation.



▶ Incentive Travel Objectives

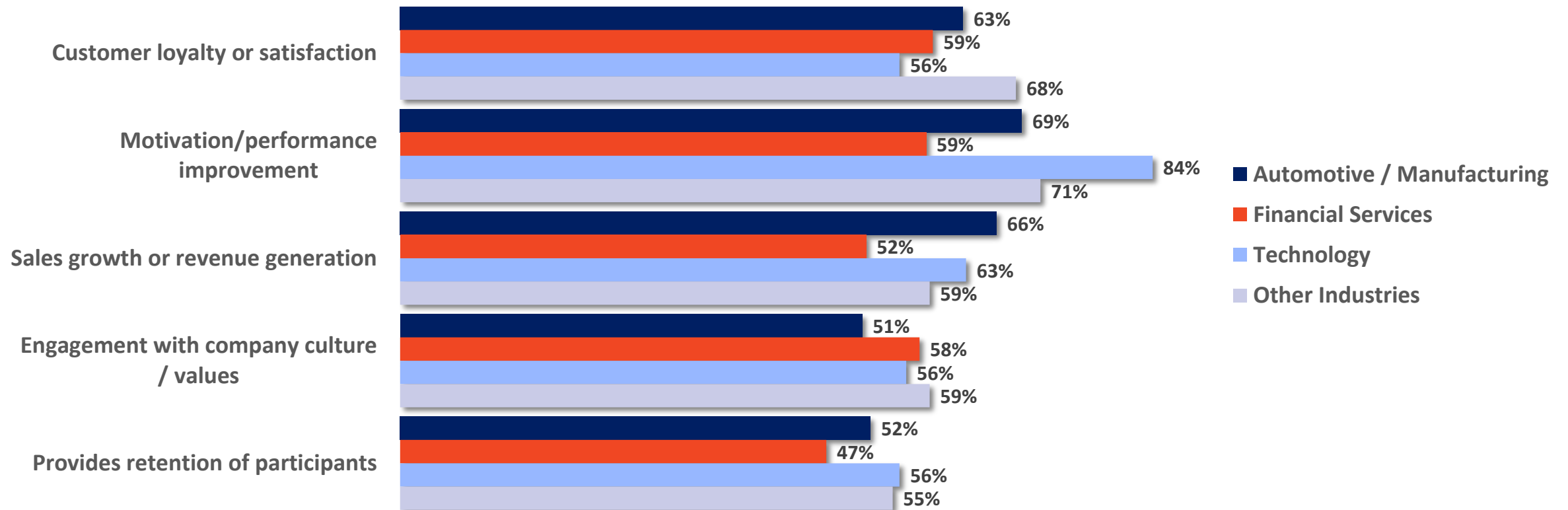
Motivation and performance are the primary objectives in both regions, with United Kingdom and Ireland programs emphasizing retention, loyalty, and sales more strongly.



▶ Incentive Travel Objectives

Business objectives for incentive travel programs vary by industry: technology emphasizes motivation and performance, automotive/manufacturing drive sales and loyalty, and financial services take a balanced approach.

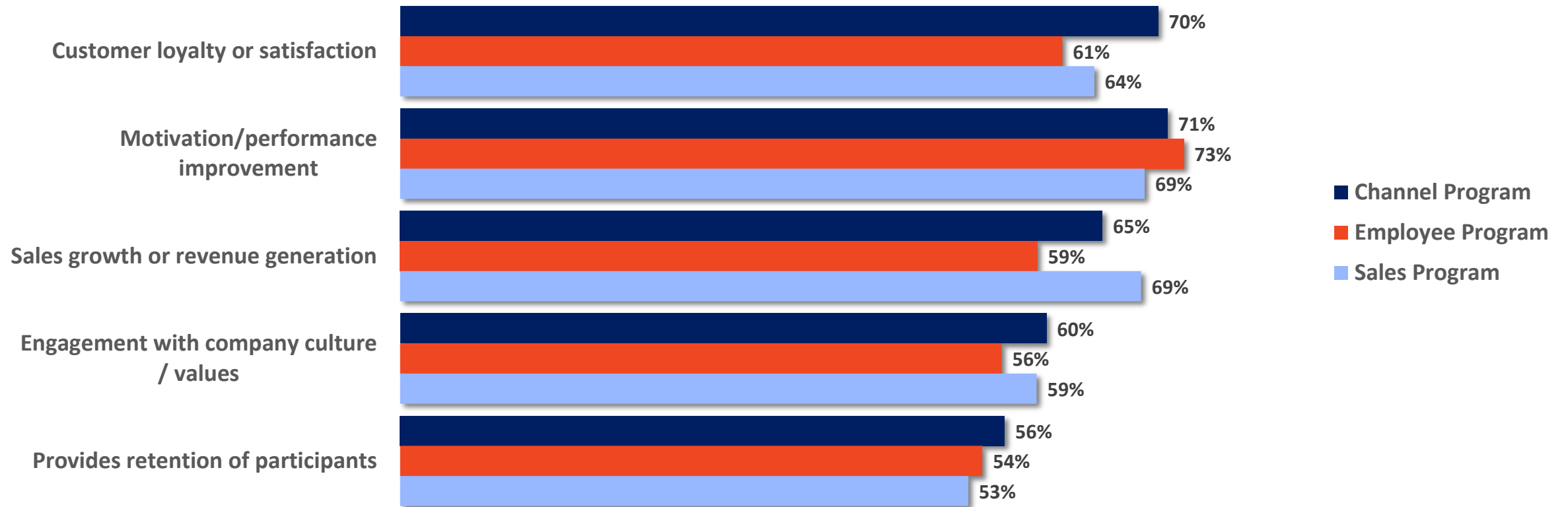
Incentive Travel Objectives



▶ Incentive Travel Objectives

Alongside motivation and performance, channel and sales programs emphasize customer loyalty and sales growth or revenue generation.

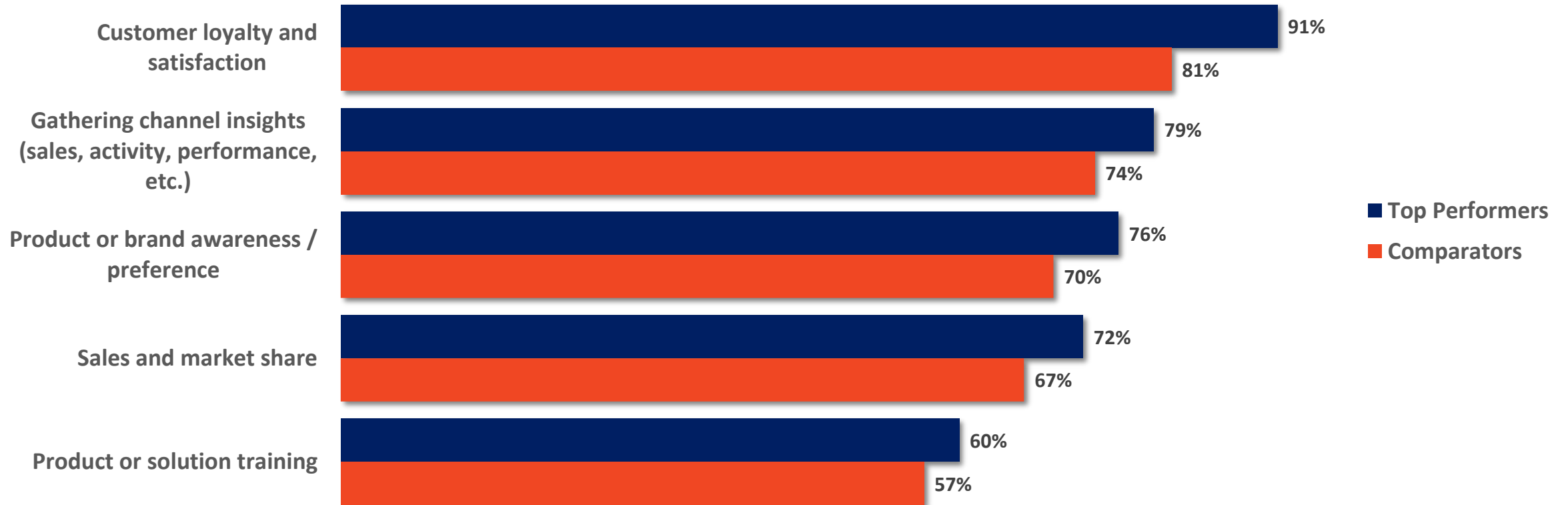
Incentive Travel Objectives



▶ Incentive Travel Objectives – Channel Programs

Top Performers leverage dealer and partner incentive travel programs to drive loyalty, while also gathering insights and elevating product or brand awareness.

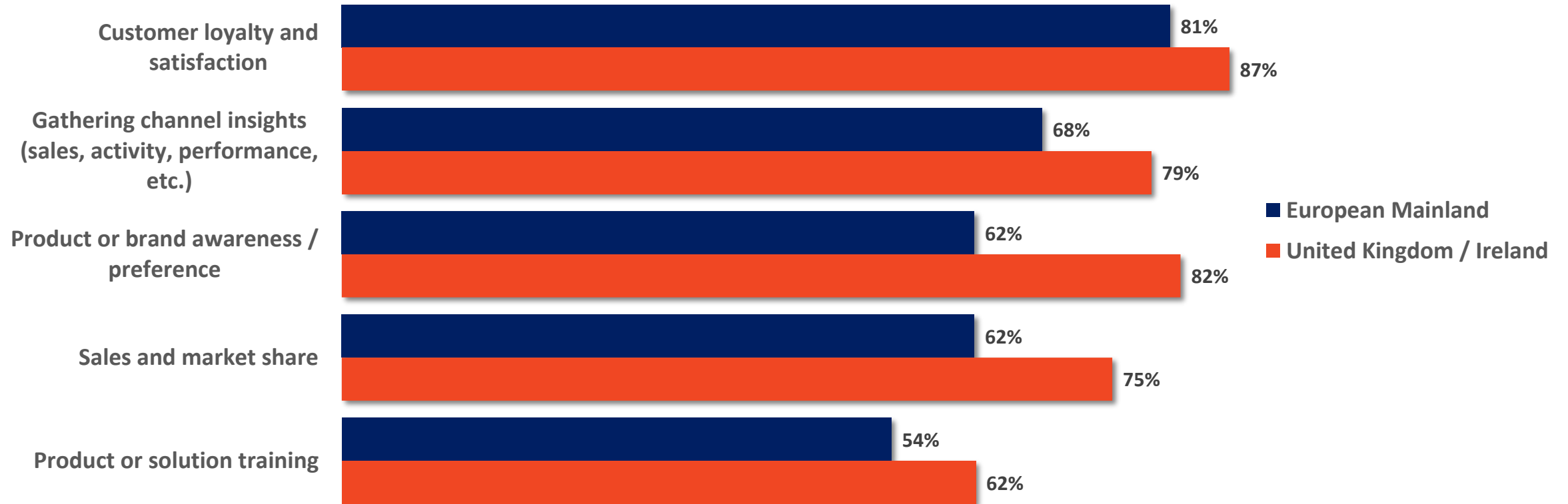
Incentive Travel Objectives



▶ Incentive Travel Objectives – Channel Programs

Dealer and partner incentive travel programs focus on customer loyalty and satisfaction in the European Mainland, while United Kingdom and Ireland programs target a broader set of business objectives.

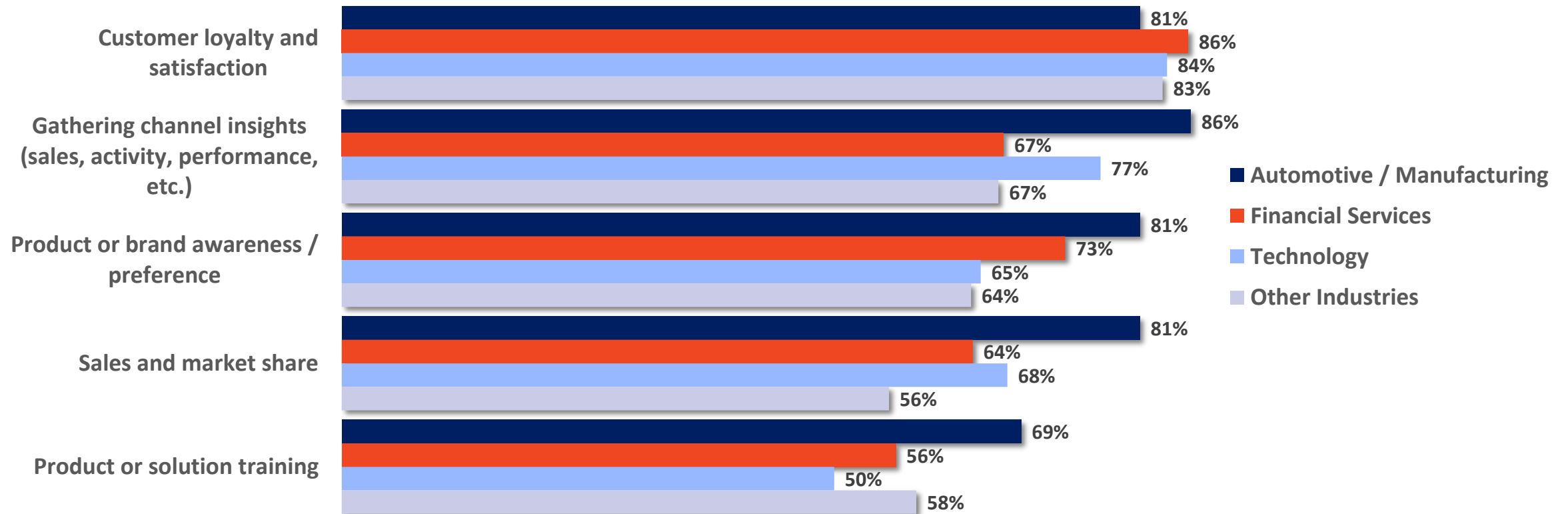
Incentive Travel Objectives



▶ Incentive Travel Objectives – Channel Programs

Automotive and manufacturing organizations place greater emphasis on a broad range of business objectives in dealer and partner incentive travel programs compared with other industries.

Incentive Travel Objectives



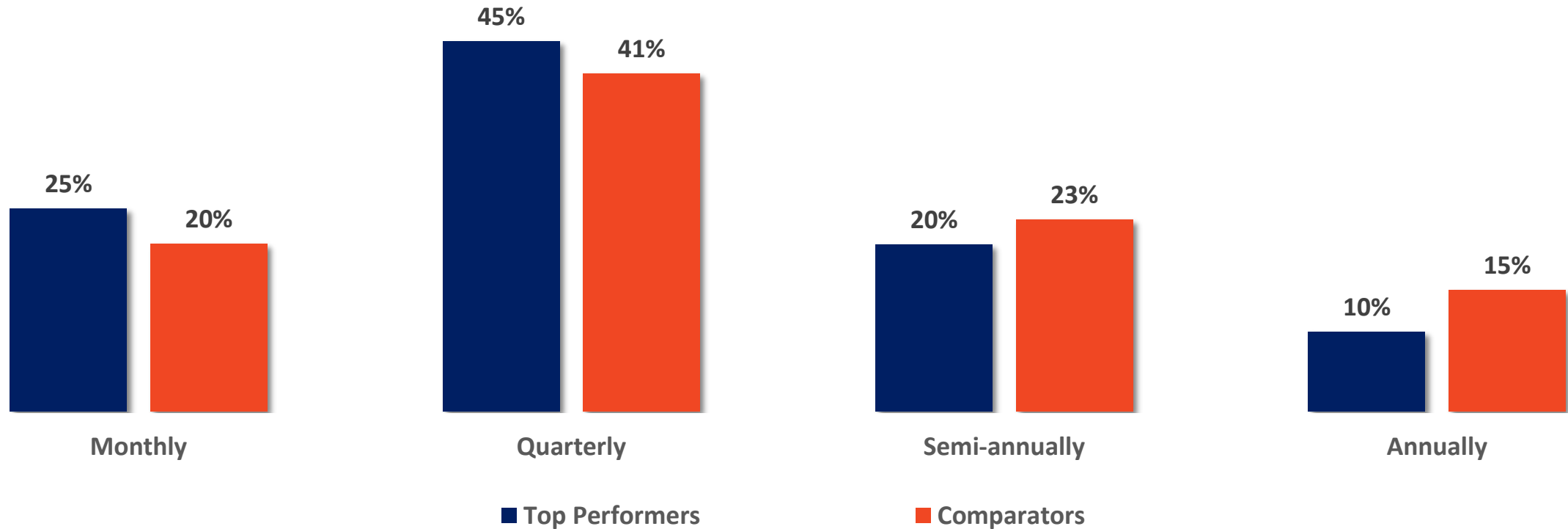


Incentive Travel Program Evaluation

▶ Incentive Travel Program Performance Review

Top Performers review their incentive travel programs frequently, generally on quarterly or monthly.

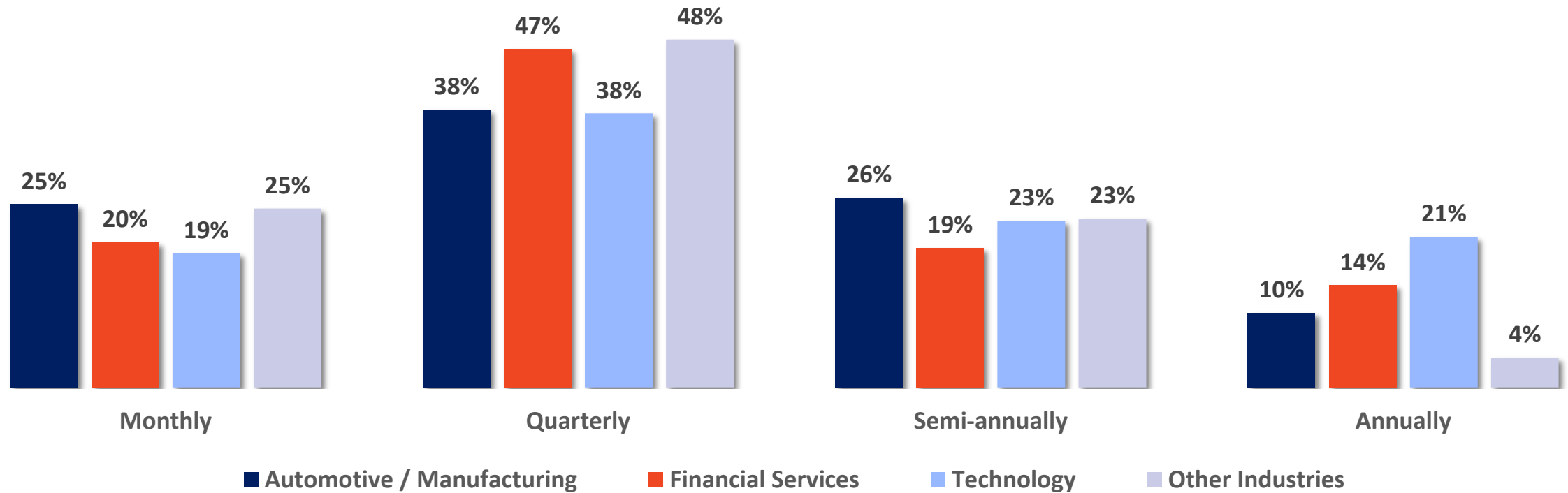
Frequency of Incentive Travel Program Performance Review



▶ Incentive Travel Program Performance Review

Financial services and other industries review programs most frequently, while the technology industry is more likely to review on a longer-term basis.

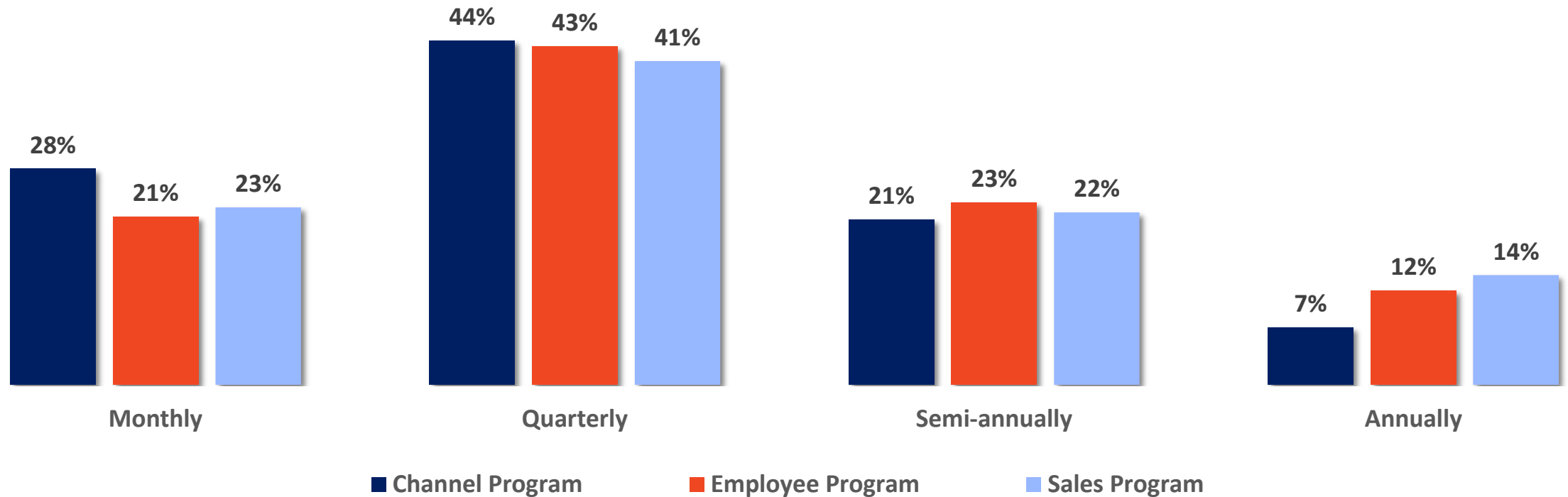
Frequency of Incentive Travel Program Performance Review



▶ Incentive Travel Program Performance Review

Organizations with channel programs review incentive travel program performance more frequently.

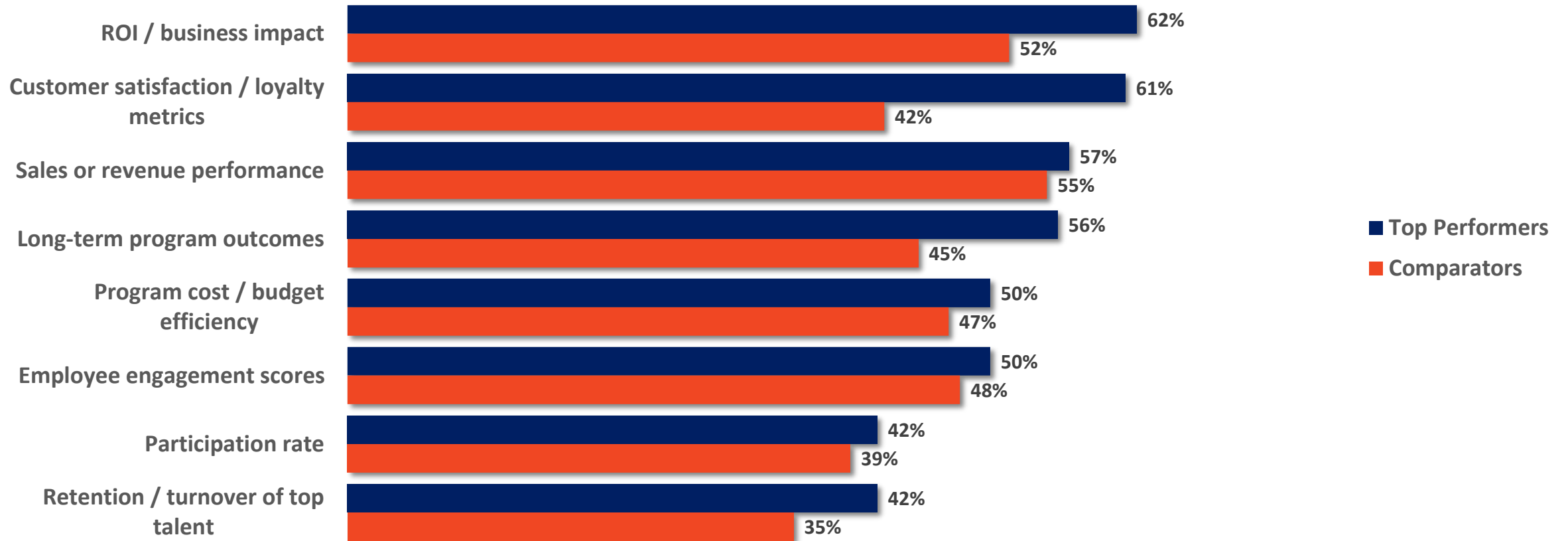
Frequency of Incentive Travel Program Performance Review



► KPIs and Metric Assessment

Top Performers prioritize ROI and customer satisfaction metrics more commonly than others.

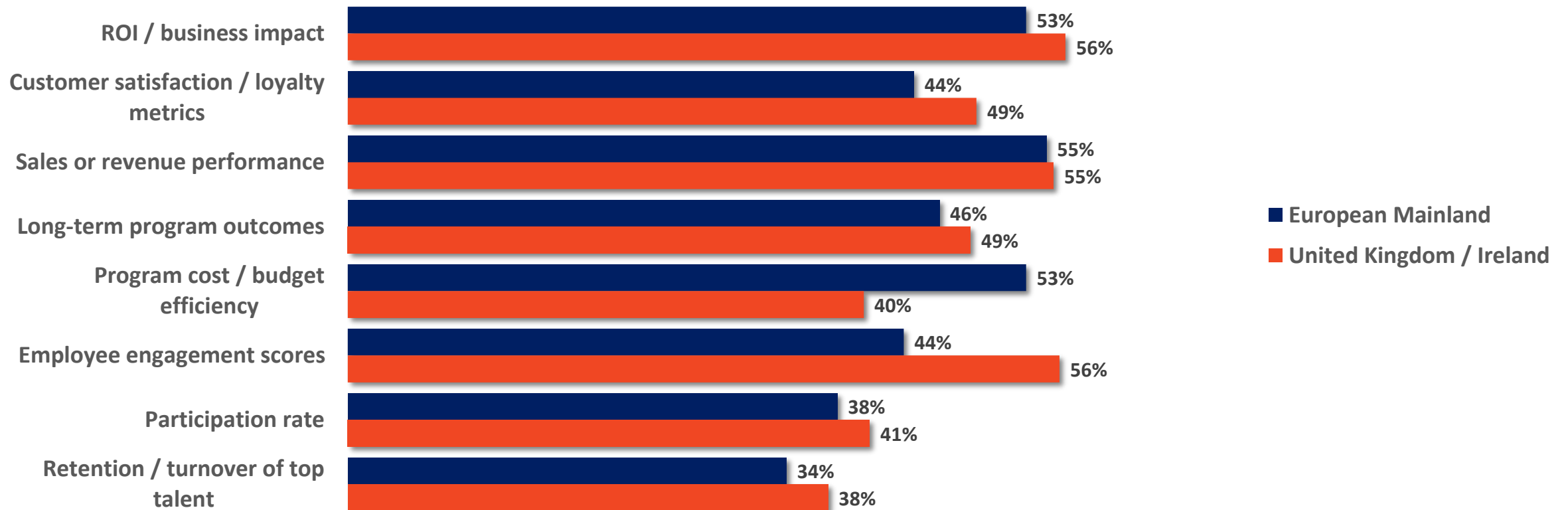
KPIs and Metrics Tracked to Assess Incentive Travel Program Success



► KPIs and Metric Assessment

ROI, business impact, and sales are commonly tracked across regions, while United Kingdom / Ireland also emphasizes engagement and European Mainland focuses on budget efficiency.

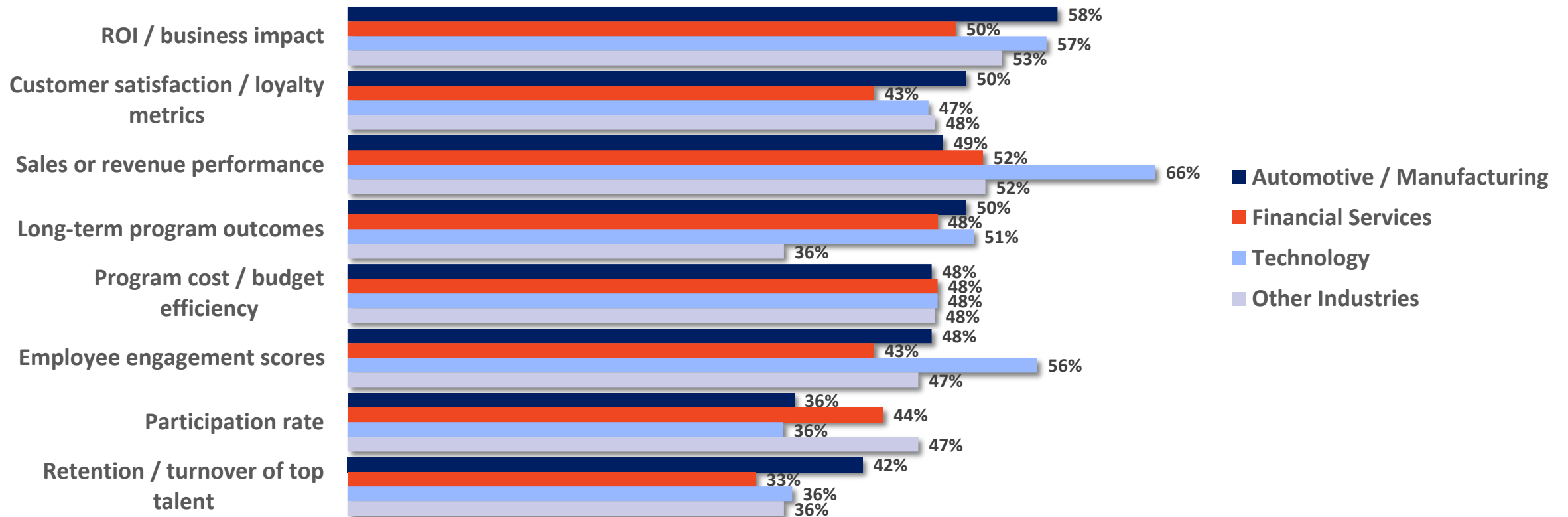
KPIs and Metrics Tracked to Assess Incentive Travel Program Success



► KPIs and Metric Assessment

Technology firms emphasize sales and employee engagement, automotive and manufacturing focus on ROI and satisfaction, and financial services take a more balanced approach.

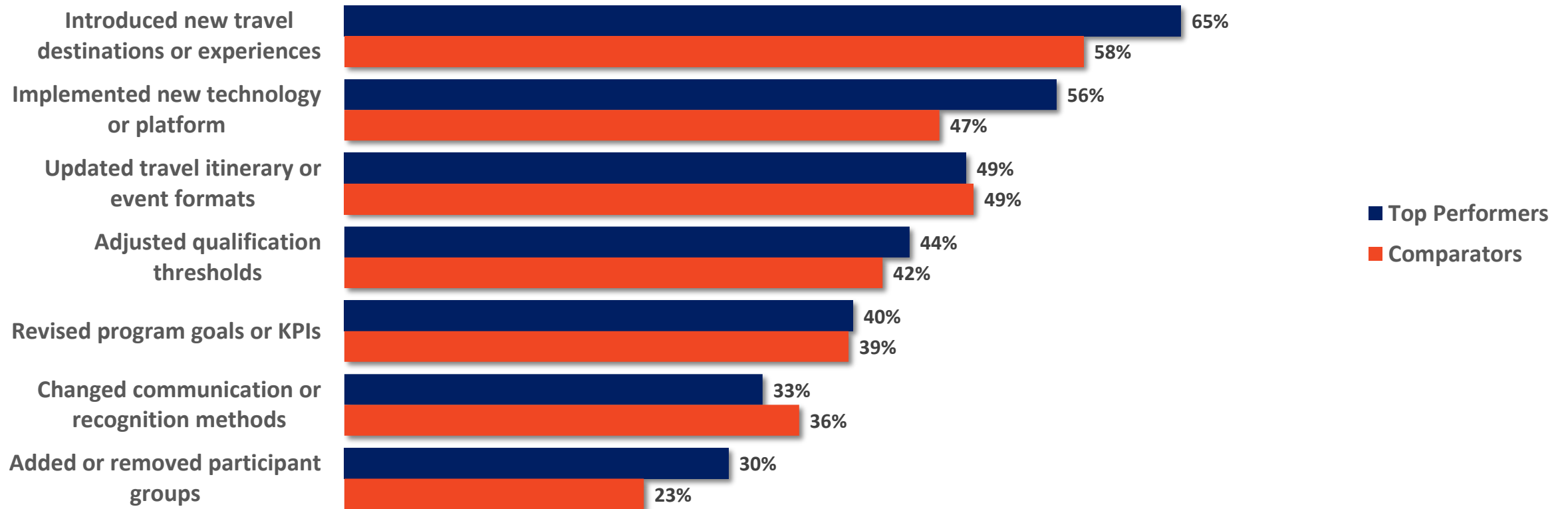
KPIs and Metrics Tracked to Assess Incentive Travel Program Success



▶ Incentive Travel Program Adjustments

Top Performers are more proactive in introducing new travel destinations or experiences and leveraging new technology to enhance their incentive travel programs.

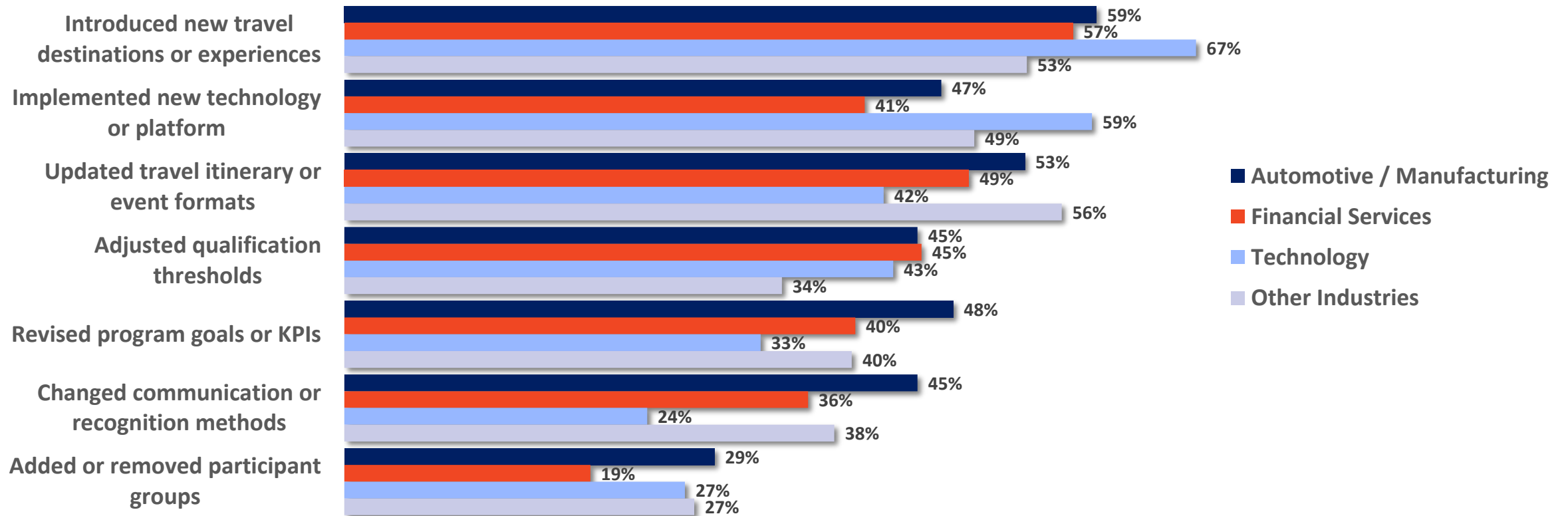
Recent Incentive Travel Program Adjustments



► Incentive Travel Program Adjustments

Alongside new travel destinations, automotive and manufacturing companies prioritize itinerary and program goal updates, financial services focus on itinerary revisions, and technology firms emphasize new technology.

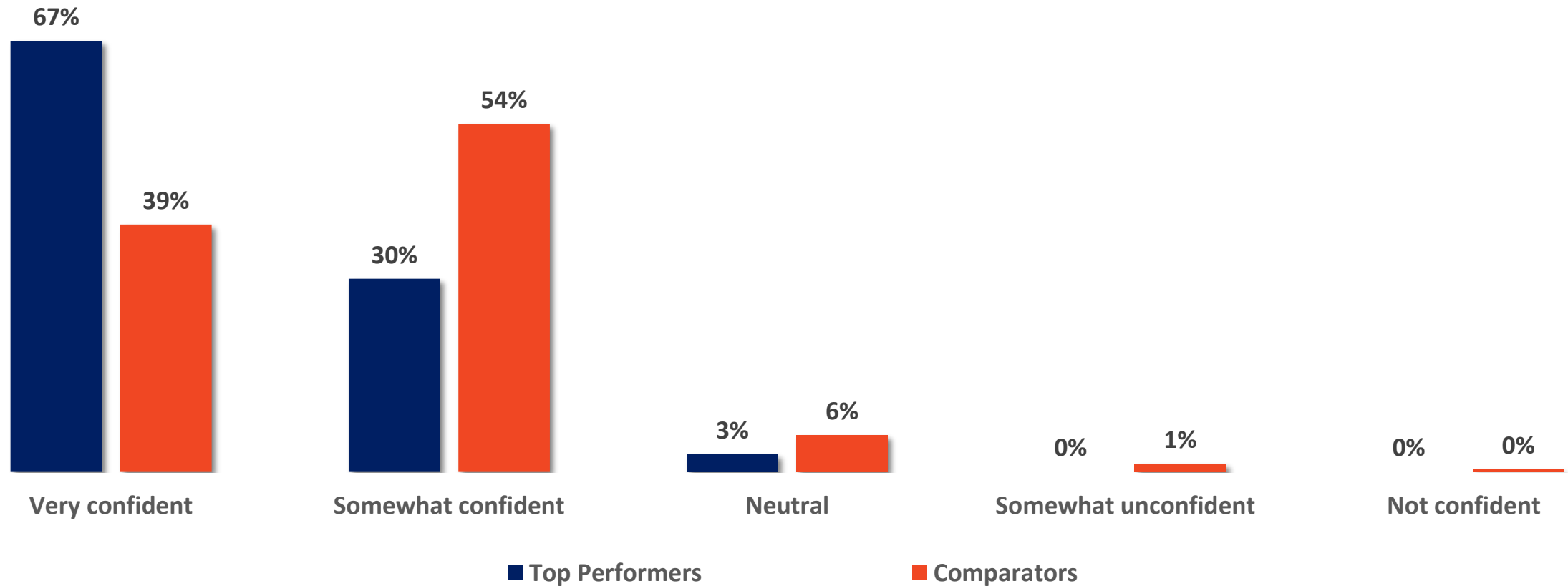
Recent Incentive Travel Program Adjustments



► Confidence in Demonstrating ROI

Top Performers are more confident in demonstrating ROI for their incentive travel programs.

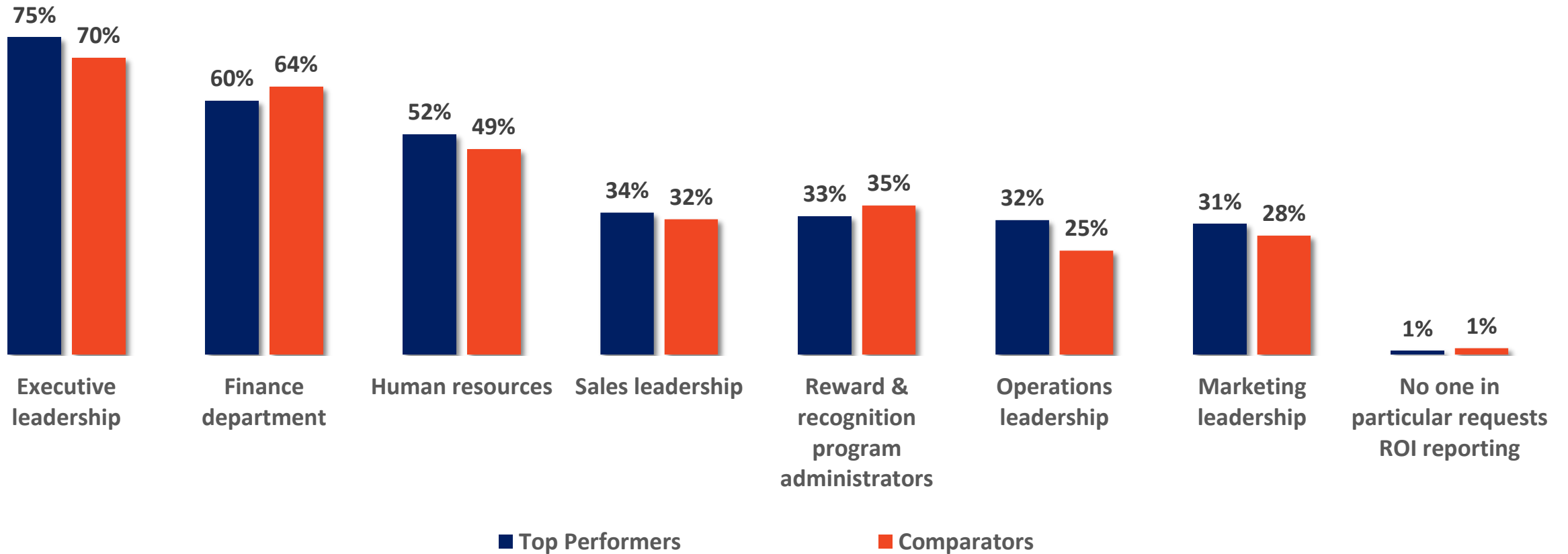
Confidence in Demonstrating ROI



▶ ROI or Impact Reporting Use

ROI and impact reporting is requested by similar stakeholders across Top Performers and Comparators.

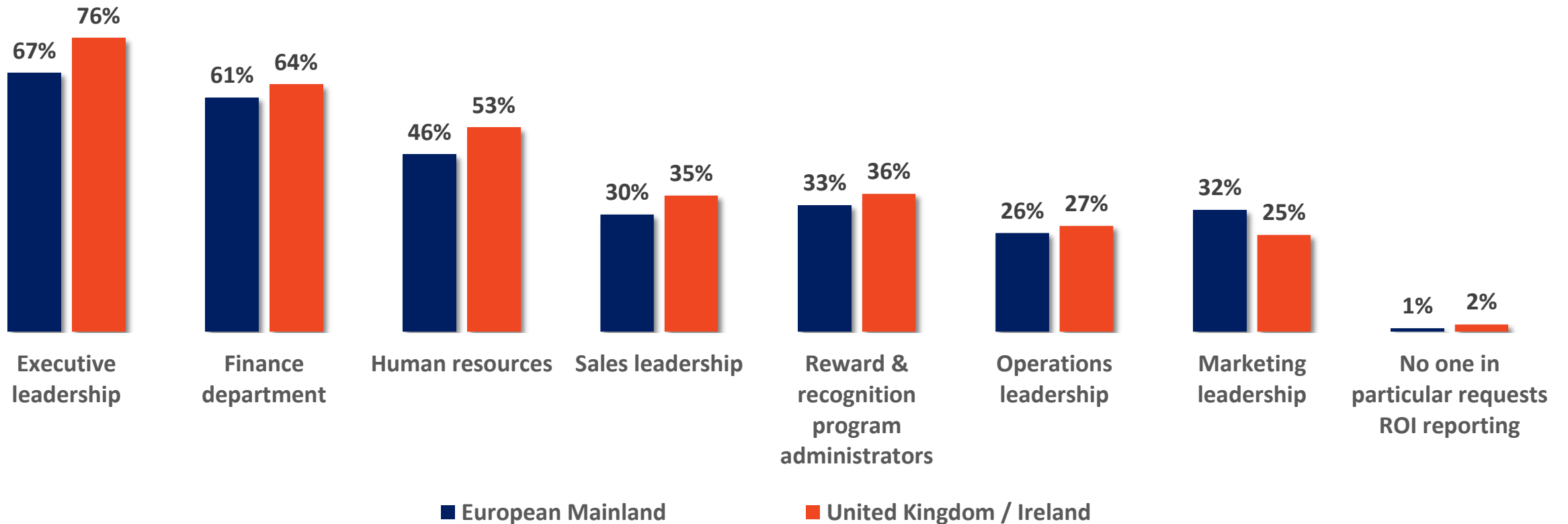
ROI or Impact Reporting Use



▶ ROI or Impact Reporting Use

Executive leadership, human resources, and sales leadership in the United Kingdom and Ireland are more likely to leverage ROI or impact reporting.

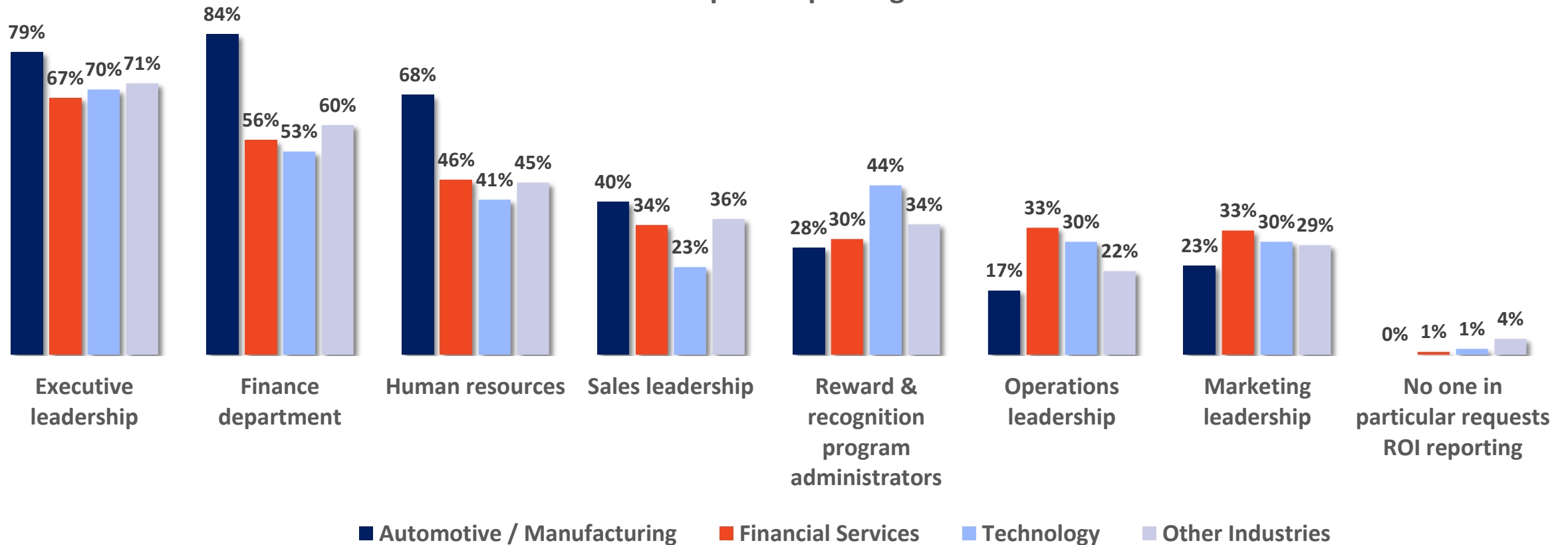
ROI or Impact Reporting Use



▶ ROI or Impact Reporting Use

Executive leadership, finance, and human resource positions within the automotive and manufacturing industry are most likely to leverage ROI or impact reporting.

ROI or Impact Reporting Use

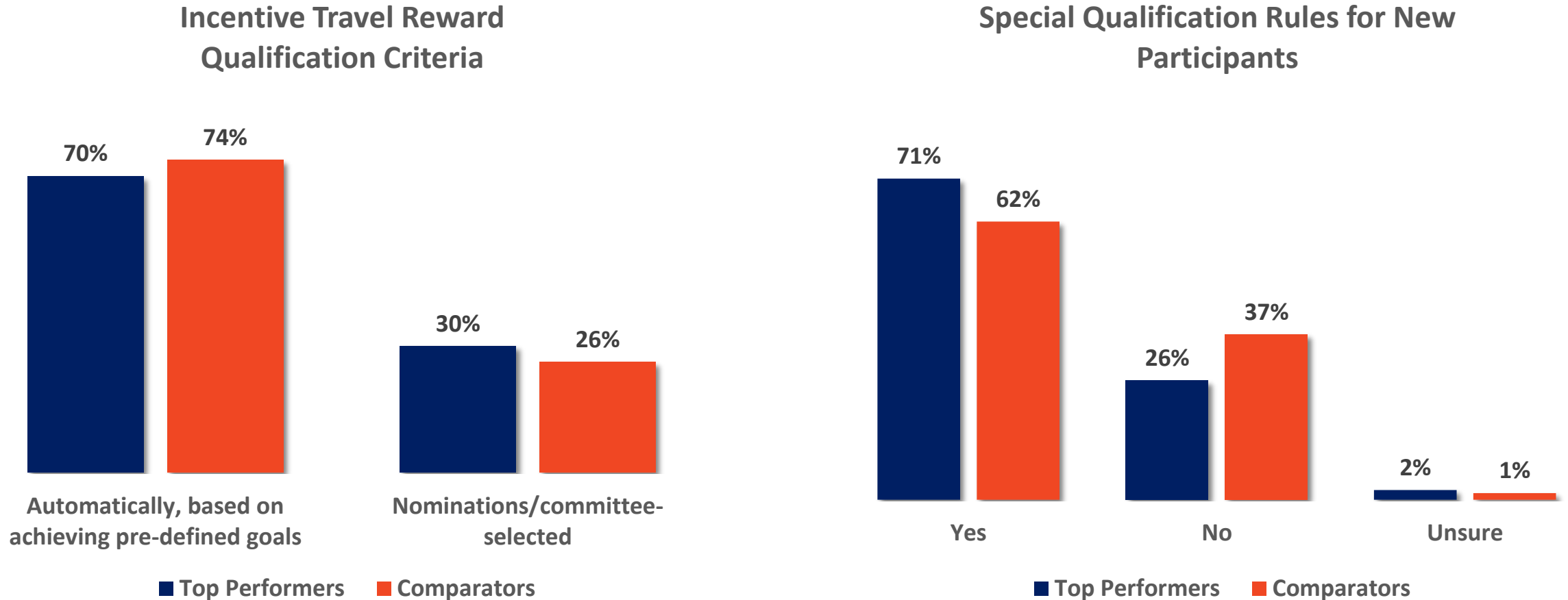




Incentive Travel Program Design

▶ Incentive Travel Reward Qualification

Top Performers prefer automatic qualification methods and often employ special rules to give new participants a better chance to qualify for incentive travel rewards.



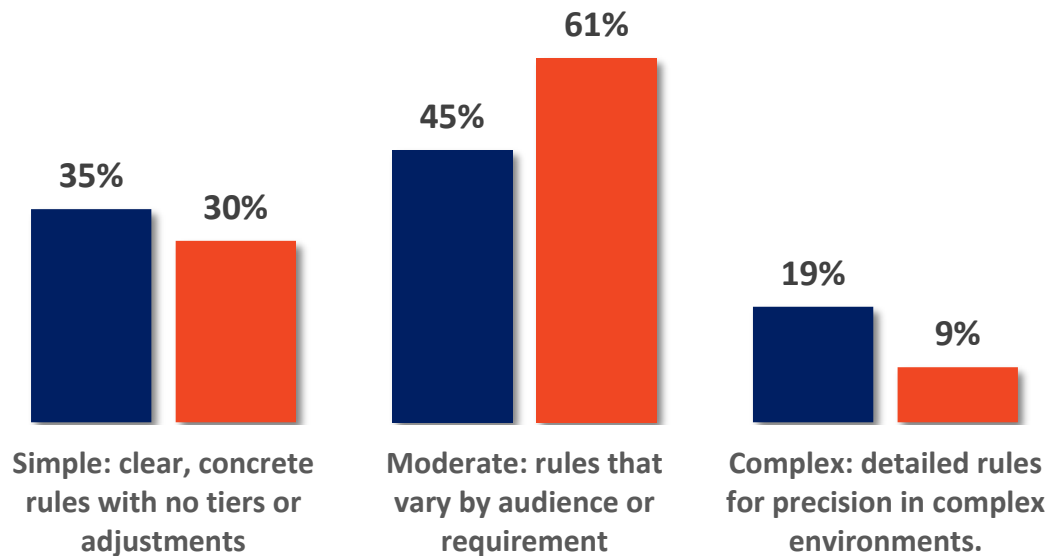
Q30: How do employees qualify for incentive travel rewards?

Q33: Do you have special rules for new [channel partners/employees/salespeople] that give them a better chance to qualify for an incentive trip?

▶ Incentive Travel Reward Qualification

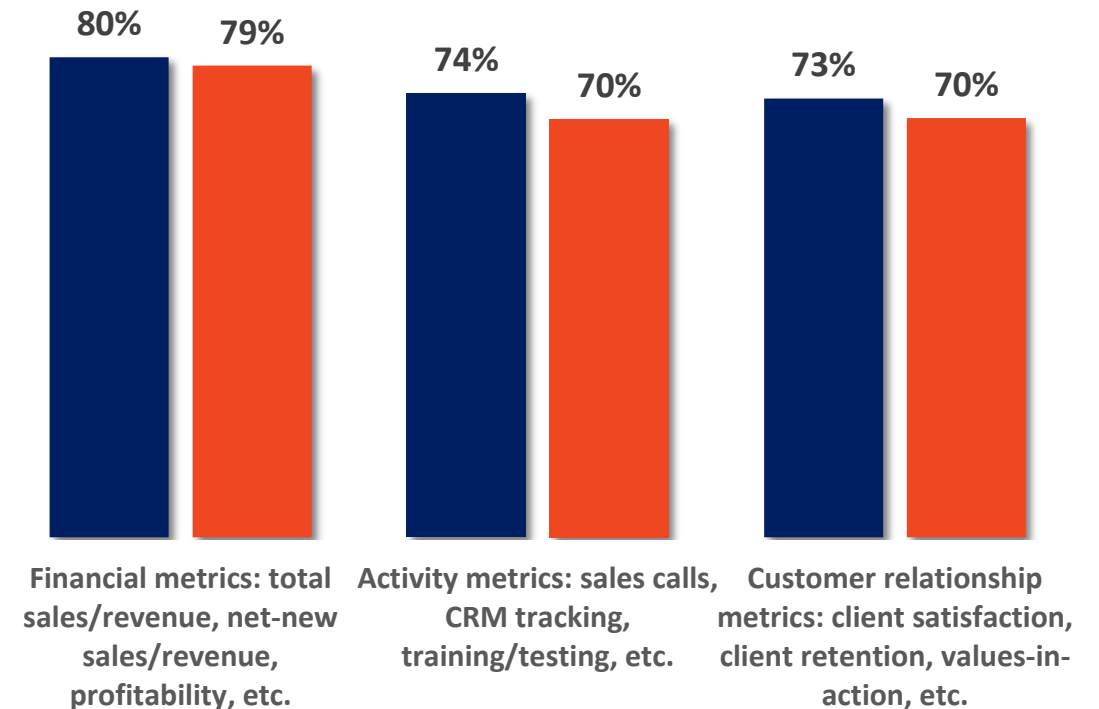
While taking various approaches to rule design, Top Performers leverage multiple metrics to determine qualification.

Incentive Travel Reward Qualification Rules



■ Top Performers ■ Comparators

Incentive Travel Reward Qualifying Metrics



■ Top Performers ■ Comparators



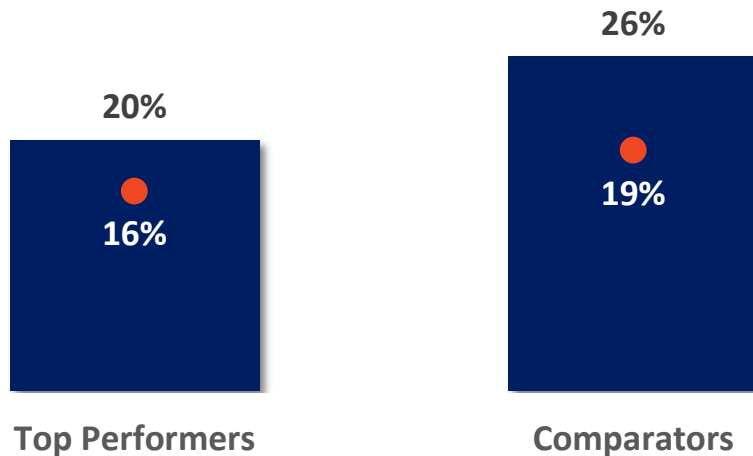
Q31: Which of the following best describes qualification criteria for your [channel/employee/sales] incentive travel rewards?

Q32: Which of the following best describes the metrics used to qualify [channel partners/employees/salespeople] for incentive travel rewards?

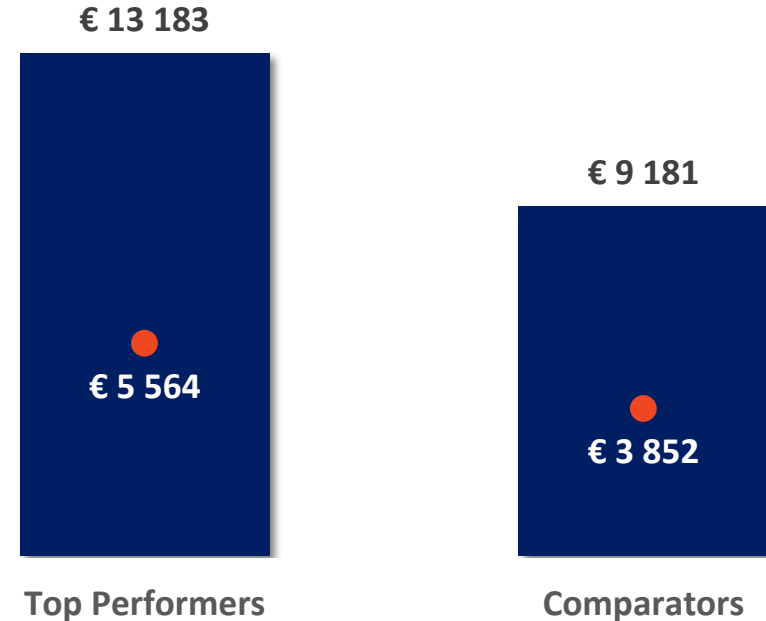
▶ Incentive Travel Qualification Likelihood and Reward Value

Top Performers select a smaller share of participants for incentive travel rewards but deliver higher value to reward winners.

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



■ Average

● Median

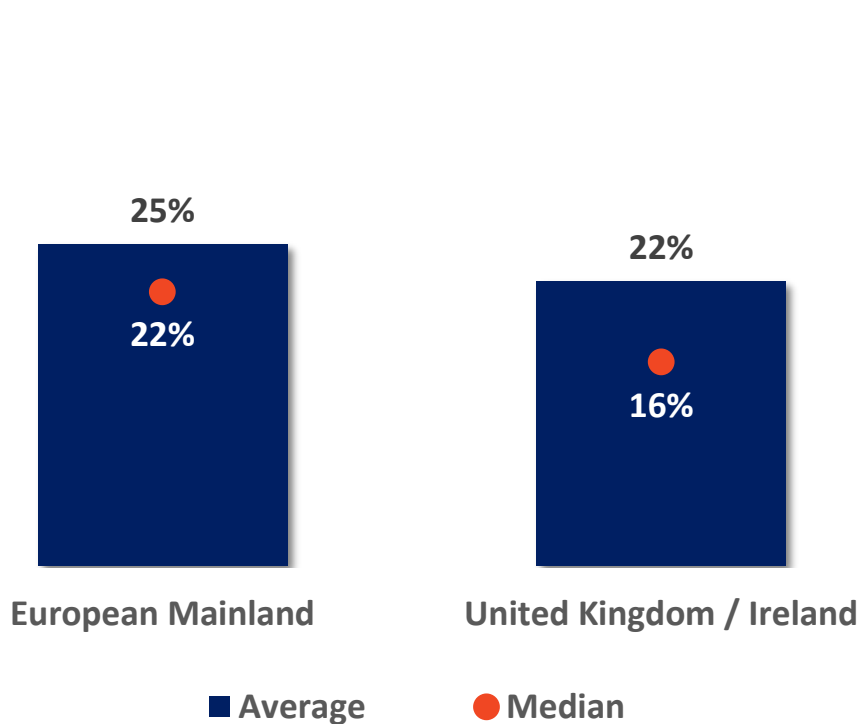
■ Top Reward Value

● Average Reward Value

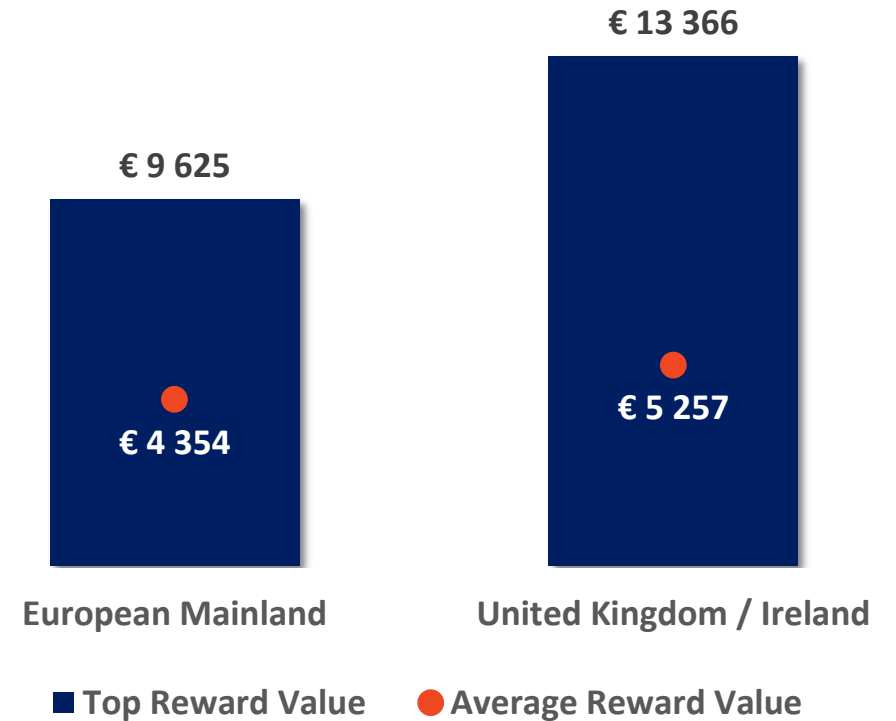
▶ Incentive Travel Qualification Likelihood and Reward Value

European Mainland firms reward participants more frequently, while United Kingdom and Ireland organizations provide higher-value rewards.

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



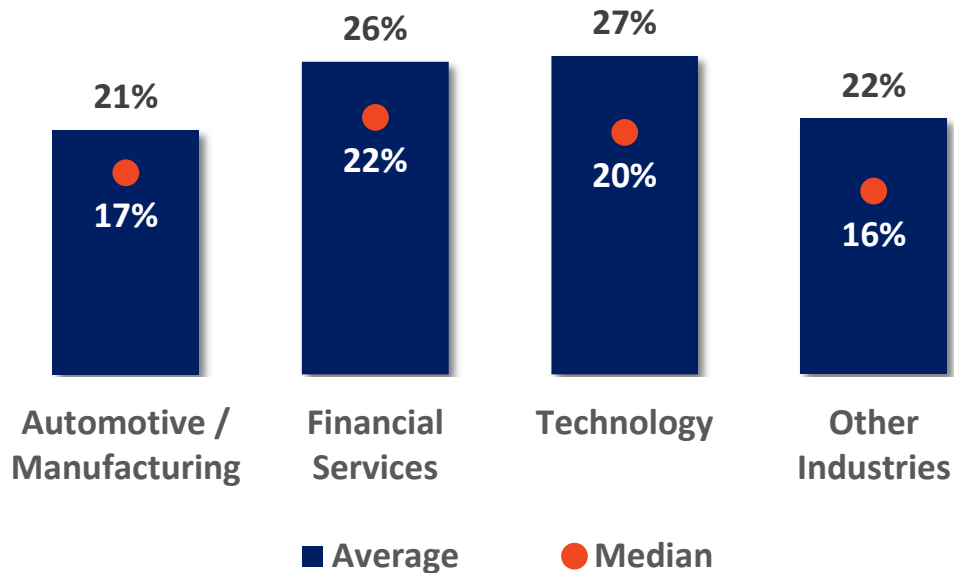
Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



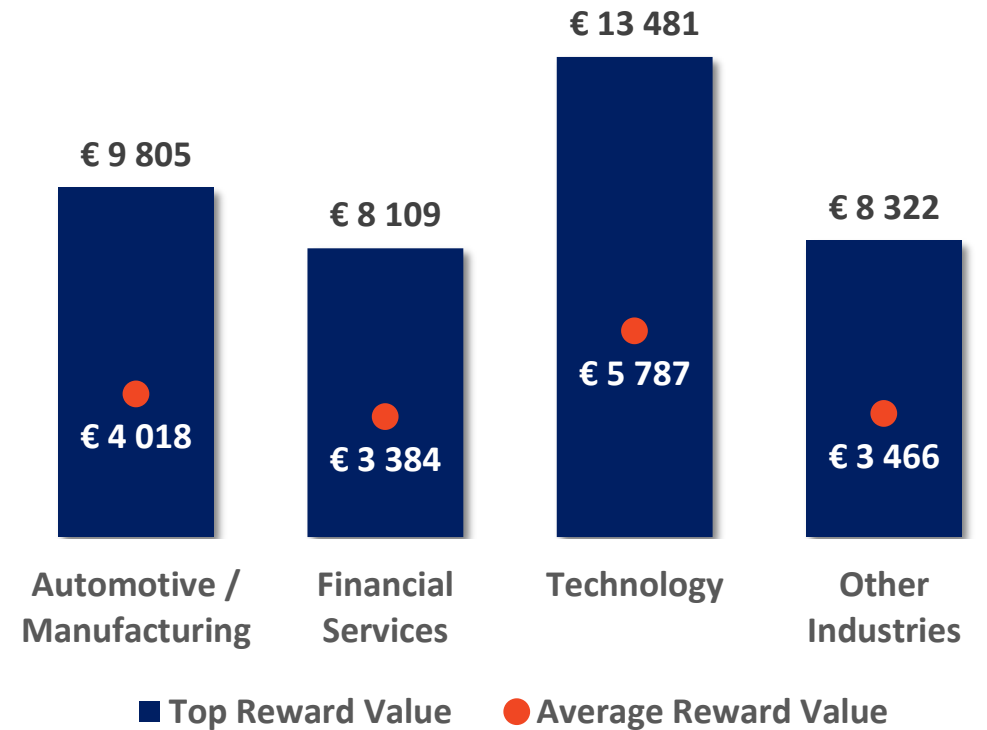
▶ Incentive Travel Qualification Likelihood and Reward Value

Technology and financial services organizations reward with incentive travel most frequently, while technology also provides the highest reward values.

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



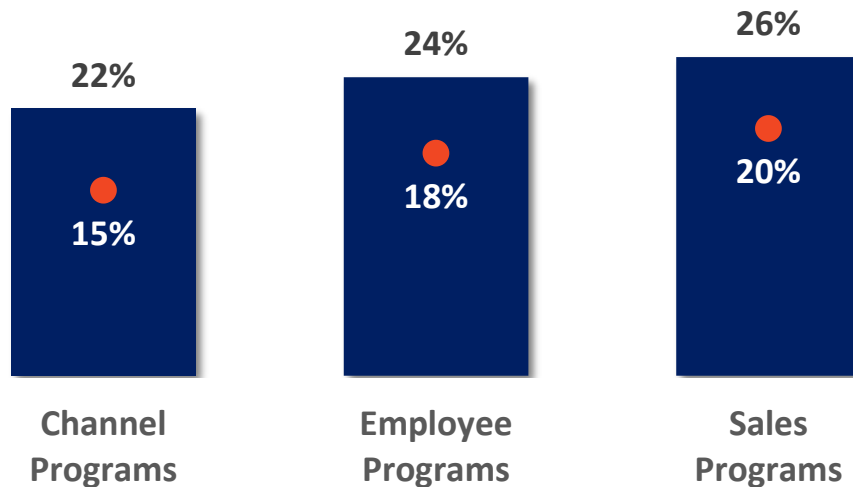
Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



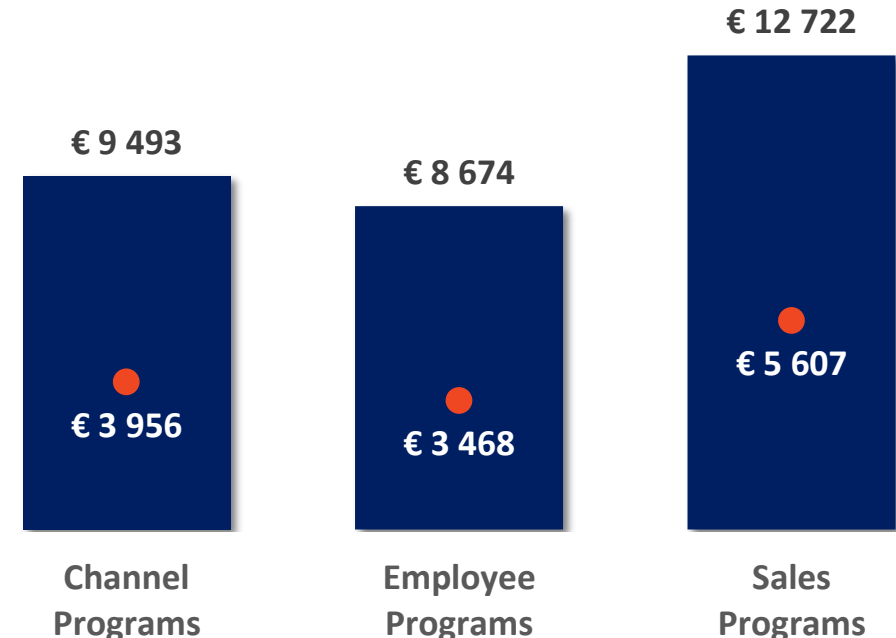
▶ Incentive Travel Qualification Likelihood and Reward Value

Incentive travel programs for salespeople offer the highest reward frequency and value.

Percentage of Participants Selected for Incentive Travel



Average Spend on Incentive Travel Rewards



■ Average ● Median

■ Top Reward Value ● Average Reward Value