



DJUNGLE
PEOPLE

Pause. Think. Move.

What 2,500+ Malaysian
Professionals Tell Us About
Moving Forward in 2026

June 2026

About D Jungle People

For over 25 years, D Jungle People has helped organisations in Malaysia and beyond build their leadership, team, and culture capability. An HRD Corp–registered training provider trusted by businesses across Malaysia, we design tailored, practical solutions rather than off-the-shelf training.

About This Paper

The intention with this paper is simple: to help leaders invest in their people more deliberately in a tighter year. Using data from over 2,500 working professionals, we share what we are seeing and offer a frame and three concrete actions, in the spirit of working differently rather than simply working harder.

Introduction

Pause. Think. Move.



Malaysians work hard.

In fact, we are one of Southeast Asia’s harder-working economies putting in more hours at work per week (44.7 hours) compared to our peers in Thailand (42.7 hours), Vietnam (41.9 hours) and the Philippines (40.0 hours)¹.

Ask Malaysians what they have been doing in the past 12-months with their 9-hour workdays and you’ll probably be greeted with a heavy sigh. Throughout 2025, corporate Malaysia have been reacting to a steady stream of pressures. From tariff volatility, to cost expansions, the proliferation of AI and shifting of workforce expectations, the pace has not let up.

OUR FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

1 **Managers (n=1,182) are wrestling with adaptive challenges:** Job Demands & Resources (27.5%), People Leadership (22.9%), and Interpersonal Effectiveness (20.7%).

2 Meanwhile, executive-level employees (n=1,216) are struggling with outcomes that **effective people leadership is expected to influence:** Interpersonal Effectiveness (24.6%), with confidence, motivation, and burnout close behind.

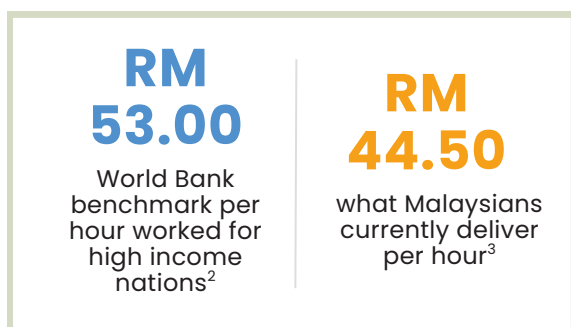
3 When asked what to train them on, 60% of **managers (n=1,399) want AI & Big Data,** ahead of communication (53%) and analytical thinking (50%).

The pressure grows in 2026 (as it has so aggressively demonstrated thus far).

D Jungle People has been collecting structured feedback from more than 2,500 working professionals across the managerial and working levels in Malaysia about their experience on-the-job. We asked what is hardest about their work, and what skills they believe they need the most. The data, collected between April 2025 and March 2026, and interpreted in the context of events along those periods, suggests that Malaysians have reacted to the pressures by doing what we do best – working hard.

However, hard work may no longer be enough.

Our data shows that the workforce is already strained working under higher demands with less resources since 2025. Economic signals indicate that the pressure is growing as of today. Despite the long hours, it seems that we are still not generating enough economic value compared to where Malaysia needs to be as a high-income economy.



Asking the workforce to “work harder” on the tails of a tumultuous 2025 is essentially inviting your best talents to find better work opportunities elsewhere.

In a market as volatile as the one we are working in today, we need to rethink what working hard looks like. Not doing more and delivering more, but working hard at different things – thinking about our value differently, learning more deliberately, and changing what needs to change.

This paper is offered in that spirit.

At D Jungle People, we recognise corporate Malaysia's current struggles amidst economic and financial uncertainty. The plays are getting harder to make, execution is harder to manage and budgets are harder to find. We hope that by sharing what our data shows along with observations collected through our training sessions, we give you a moment to **PAUSE** and take stock of the pressures, **THINK** about what needs to change in your approach and **MOVE** with sharper, more purposeful activities.



Looking Back

2025: The Reactive Year

There is a useful sports analogy here. You can be a brilliant football player – world-class footwork, surgical corner kicks, decades of muscle memory to rival Lionel Messi (or, for the Manchester United fans, Cristiano Ronaldo). But if the people around you are now playing pickleball, you are in quite a pickle.

Some of your athleticism transfers. It allows you to reach every ball and

chase every point. You can outwork everyone on the court. But! You may still lose because **effort is not the constraint.** The game has changed and the skills that made you world-class at football will not help you win at pickleball.

Something like that has been happening in corporate Malaysia. **The game has shifted under everyone's feet.**



THREE FORCES SHAPING THE FIELD

Tariff Shock and Cost Squeeze

The tariff environment has reminded businesses that external shocks become internal workload quickly.

Additionally, two domestic policy changes came into the picture; the rise in minimum wage and expansion of the SST.

Generative AI Inflection

AI is no longer a future trend. While employees report significant productivity gains⁴, they are also accompanied by increased demands.

68% of Malaysian employees report higher workloads, and 83% report insufficient time or energy to complete their work⁵.

Multigenerational Workforce

In 2025, Millennials and Gen-Z together made up more than 70% of Malaysia's workforce.

Expectations of employees in these cohorts differ in material ways from management practices that shaped earlier workforce structures.

What does this look like in practice?

Tariff Shock and Cost Squeeze. The workforce is working harder.

When margins tighten, people stretch. Priorities compete, communication frays, and developmental conversations get pushed because “now is not the time.” Everyone becomes more reactive because everything feels urgent. The game shifts from “execute the plan” to “adapt while executing.”



Generative AI Inflection. The workforce is working harder.

AI can save time at the task level, but without work redesign, role clarity, and judgement about where it fits, the saved time turns into more work. Teaching people to use the tools is not enough. The deeper capability is knowing which processes should change, where AI belongs in the workflow, and how teams should coordinate around it. AI is a leadership and systems challenge as much as a technology one.

Multigenerational Workforce. The workforce is working harder.

What used to take one conversation now takes several. The same message has to be delivered and customised to different cohorts, the same feedback received differently and the same decisions explained differently.

Managers spend more energy translating across generations, and the translation work itself is invisible and unbudgeted.

The Cumulative Effect

The three forces have operated within the same period and have compounded. Their combined effect has placed sustained pressure on the workforce, and indicators of employee experience reflect this. **Global engagement fell to 20% in 2025, and manager engagement dropped five points in a single year** (from 27% to 22%), the largest year-on-year decline Gallup has recorded⁶.

These patterns are consistent with the conditions described above. Individuals are required to maintain performance in spite of an increase in workload, expectations, and coordination. Under such conditions, strain accumulates, and performance becomes harder to sustain over time.

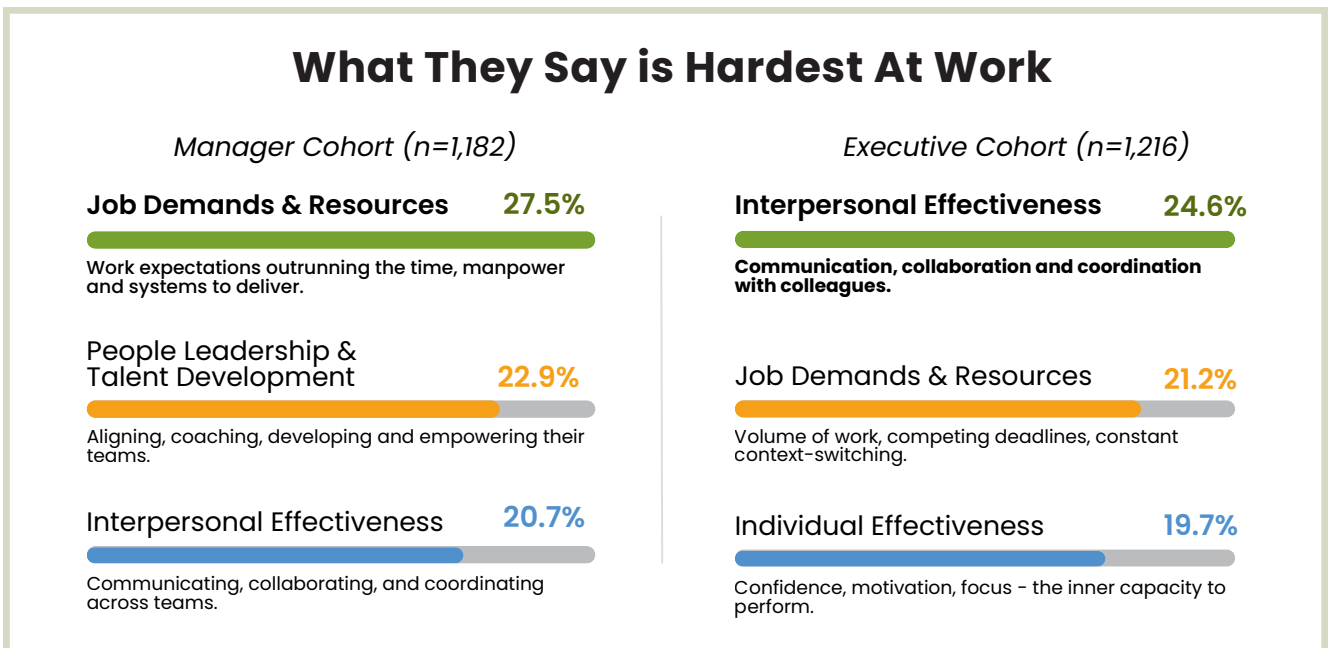
Capable people continue to perform. **They are doing so, we suspect, by knuckling down and doing more.**



The Dataset.

Thoughts for your thoughts.

DJP’s dataset should be read as a lagging indicator for how people felt between April 2025 – March 2026. They tell us how the Malaysian workforce has been responding to a year of compounded change. Taken together, they suggest some quietly important things about **where the real hard work needs to be.**



The two cohorts are connected in a coherent narrative.

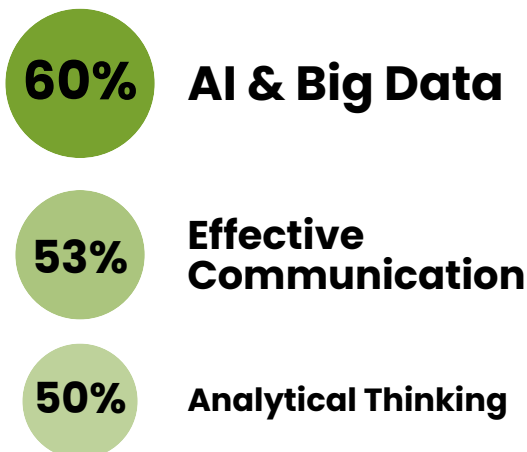
The challenges reported by executives centre on areas typically developed through effective people leadership. Managers, in turn, identify People Leadership and Talent Development as a key challenge, highlighting that there is an awareness that they need to better support, guide, and develop their teams.

The same underlying capability is being named from two ends of the reporting line.

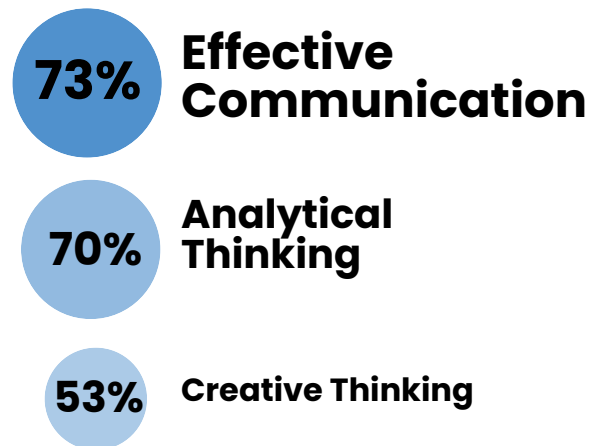
Executives are feeling the absence of it. Managers are naming the difficulty of providing it. That is not two separate findings but one from two positions. Managers need effective People Leadership Skills to support their work and the work of their team. It's a "working differently" that they have not yet mastered.

What They Want to be Trained In

Manager Cohort (n=1,399)



Executive Cohort (n=1,501)



★ A note for L&D leaders.

You can take this dataset at face value. You can deploy AI literacy programmes for your managers and communication training for your executives (which D Jungle People will gladly provide). The participation rates will be excellent (DJP's programmes are rated at a 4.60 / 5.00 on average), but the underlying challenge that produced these requests will remain because the data is telling you something deeper than its surface. Read on.

The executive cohort's requests align closely with the challenges they report. They face difficulties around communication, collaboration, and confidence, and their development priorities reflect those areas of need.

The manager pattern is more interesting. People Leadership and Talent Development is their second-largest source of pain, yet their most-requested development area is AI and Big Data. **The two do not contradict, but they do not directly correspond either.**

We think this is because AI and Big Data are the most visible and credible-looking development category in the market right now. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 identifies it as the fastest-growing skill globally, with 63% of employers citing skill gaps as a key barrier to transformation⁷. When external signals are this strong, they shape how individuals interpret their own development needs. That is an understandable response to a noisy market.

But it does raise a question worth sitting with:

If the lived challenges and the requested investments are pointing in slightly different directions, which one should an organisation follow?





What the Data Tells Us About the State of the Workforce.

When we put the two datasets together, this is how we've interpreted it.

1

The manager layer is working hard, and they are already overloaded.

Job Demands and Resources is the largest source of pain in the manager cohort by a meaningful margin. The language is unambiguous: *"insufficient time," "too many priorities," "insufficient manpower"*.

No amount of additional effort closes this gap. It reflects how the compounding challenges in the environment lands on the same people all the time.

2

Under that workload, the developmental work managers are expected to do for their people has fallen.

People Leadership and Talent Development sits at #2 in the manager cohort. The phrasing reveals that they recognise what is lost: *"coaching or inspiring people," "building capabilities in my team," "delegation and empowering people."*

These are the crucial conversations that disappear quietly when calendars compress. Nothing breaks immediately as the manager "works hard", but the absence accumulates.

3

That accumulation is now visible in the executive cohort.

The early-career professionals reporting to those stretched managers name Individual Effectiveness as their #3 challenge, at 19.7%. The phrasing is striking: *"Afraid to speak up." "Sustaining motivation." "Burnout."*

These are not technical gaps. They are the result of a hardworking cohort who are not getting managerial support. Motivation is sustained through being seen. Burnout is avoided by work management. Their absence is the downstream signal of an upstream absence.



4

The interpersonal layer between them is eroding in both directions.

Interpersonal Effectiveness is the #1 challenge for executives (24.6%) and #3 for managers (20.7%). Communication breakdown, collaboration friction, and coordination difficulties are not the cause, they are the symptoms. When everyone is working harder in parallel, the connective tissue between layers thins. Both sides feel the friction but neither has the bandwidth, opportunity or skillsets to repair it.

5

The training requests reflect what the market made visible.

Sixty percent of managers want AI and Big Data training, but we suspect it is driven by the hype in the market. It is the response a hard-working person under stretch thinking: *"If I had better tools, I would be able to do better."* The data on what is actually hurting suggests the constraint is not tool fluency but the developmental work that closes the gap between managers and the people they lead. This is work that cannot be solved by working harder. It requires working differently.



Taken together, these patterns describe a workforce entering 2026 with three unresolved tensions from 2025:

A manager population that is structurally over-extended and reaching for technical solutions to challenges that are not technical.

An executive population whose confidence, motivation, and effectiveness are eroding in the gap created by that over-extension.

An interpersonal layer between them showing measurable friction in both directions.

These challenges cannot be resolved through effort alone. **Stretched managers stretch further and friction between layers nurture conflict.** In a more forgiving market, the impact will be tolerable. In this one?

It will break your organisation from within before any external forces can.

What the Data Tells Us About the State of the Workforce.

The instinct in a year like this is to look at the data, identify the skills gap, and procure the fix. That instinct is rational. It has served organisations well for the technical challenges of the past two decades. In 2026, against the diagnosis above, it will fall short.

When people are stretched, prescribing more does not help. Prescribing **differently** might.

Rather than another classroom session, consider a facilitated application session where the team designs the solution together. While e-learning is great, consider also the developmental conversations between manager and team member that the module was meant to substitute. In addition to your high-touch offsite, include a focused action plan that names what changes on Monday morning.

The shift is from prescribing learning to facilitating it. From procuring development to enabling it. **From doing more, to doing different.**

The shift starts with the people who decide what gets implemented. In a tighter year, the investments you make in your people will not just be smaller, they will be more visible. Every ringgit spent will be examined.

Paradoxically, 2026 will be the year when the quality of capability investment matters more than the volume. The evidence from prior downturns is consistent on this point: a Harvard Business Review study of 4,700 public companies across three recessions found that organisations balancing cost discipline with continued investment in their people were significantly more likely to outperform competitors during the recovery⁸.

The ball is in your court.

The pressure your people are carrying is real. The instinct to work harder against it is admirable. The question is whether you respond the way you always have, or **whether 2026 is the year you respond differently.**



★ **A note for L&D leaders.**

Skills still matter.

The distinction worth holding onto is between **technical and adaptive skills.**

Technical skills are bounded — they have a syllabus, a curriculum, and a test you can pass. Excel, data visualisation, regulatory compliance, the syntax of a new AI tool. These respond well to traditional training because the gap between not-knowing and knowing is closeable through instruction.

Adaptive skills, on the other hand, are the capabilities that determine how a person reads a room, holds a difficult conversation or makes a judgement call under

uncertainty. They cannot be passed in an exam. They need to be practised in the real environment, with real stakes, with feedback that comes from someone who saw it land.

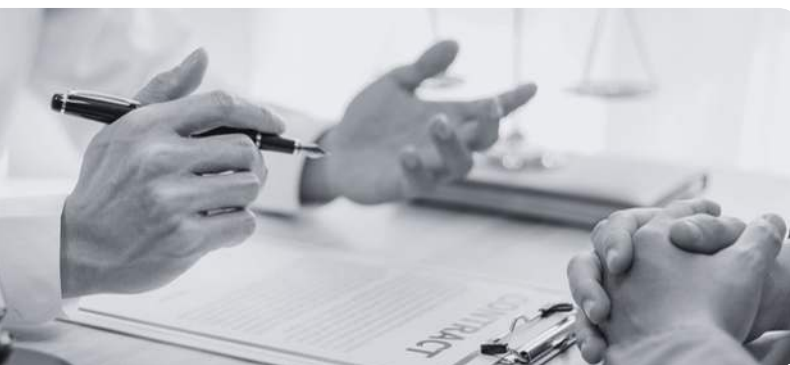
Against our data, the **highest-leverage skills for 2026 are almost entirely adaptive.**

Coaching and developmental conversations for managers; self-awareness, assertiveness, and resilience for executives; and shared communication and feedback norms across both layers. These are the skills that compound when they are practised inside the organisation, between real people, against real work. Your L&D budget will go further in 2026 if it is designed to support this practice rather than substitute for it.



The Conclusion.

Recommendations for Action.



There is no version of 2026 where the pressure eases. Sad, but true.

Tariffs remain volatile. Costs have reset upward. AI adoption is accelerating, and with it the workload it was supposed to relieve. The Malaysian data centre boom will pull skilled talent toward hyperscalers who will reward generously. Middle East tensions continue to add risk to commodity prices and supply routes. Margins will stay tight. Decisions will be faster, with less certainty, made by leaders already carrying more than they were twelve months ago.

This is the context in which leaders will be asked to invest in their people in 2026. Most will not have the budget they had in 2024. Many will be told to do more with less for a third consecutive year.

The temptation will be to defer the developmental work entirely and treat capability building as a problem for a better year.

The data in this paper suggests deferral is the wrong call. Stretched managers reaching for technical solutions to adaptive problems means the original problems persist and the stretch compounds. Executives whose confidence and motivation are eroding are the same executives you will depend on for execution in a tighter year. Interpersonal friction is a tax on every decision that has to move through the organisation. All of these costs sit on the P&L.

What follows are three actions for people who want to make things better in their organisations.



This Week:
Run The Triage

Pick one challenge that has been on your radar. It can be the team that is not coordinating, the manager who is causing a roadblock or even a conversation you have been avoiding.

Ask yourself:

- *What expertise has already been applied to this challenge?*
- *What would have to change in how people behave for this to resolve?*
- *What will support them to make this change over the next 7 days?*

This Month:
Audit Capability Investments

Look back at the last five investments your organisation has made in capability.

Analyse each investment with these gates:

- *The challenge it was meant to solve.*
- *Is the challenge still present today?*
- *If it is still present, why?*
- *What this tells you about the next investment.*

This Quarter:
Have Diagnostic Conversations

Hold one structured conversation with six to eight people across managerial and executive levels. Not a survey that you send out, but a working conversation, off the record.

Ask these questions:

- *What has been the hardest in your work in the past six months?*
- *What have you been doing to cope?*
- *If budget were not the constraint, what would you want help with?*
- *What would need to change about how we work together?*

Closing

Your Move.

The leaders in our data are not standing still, and we are not asking them to. The pressure is real, the budgets are tight, and the work is harder than it was. We are offering a dataset, a frame, and three actions that we hope are useful as the year unfolds.

The thread running through all of it is the same one running through the paper.

Malaysians have always worked hard.

In 2026, we need to be working at the right things, and investing in them well.

D Jungle People exists for organisations who want a thinking partner for that work. If anything in this paper raised something worth a conversation, our door is open.



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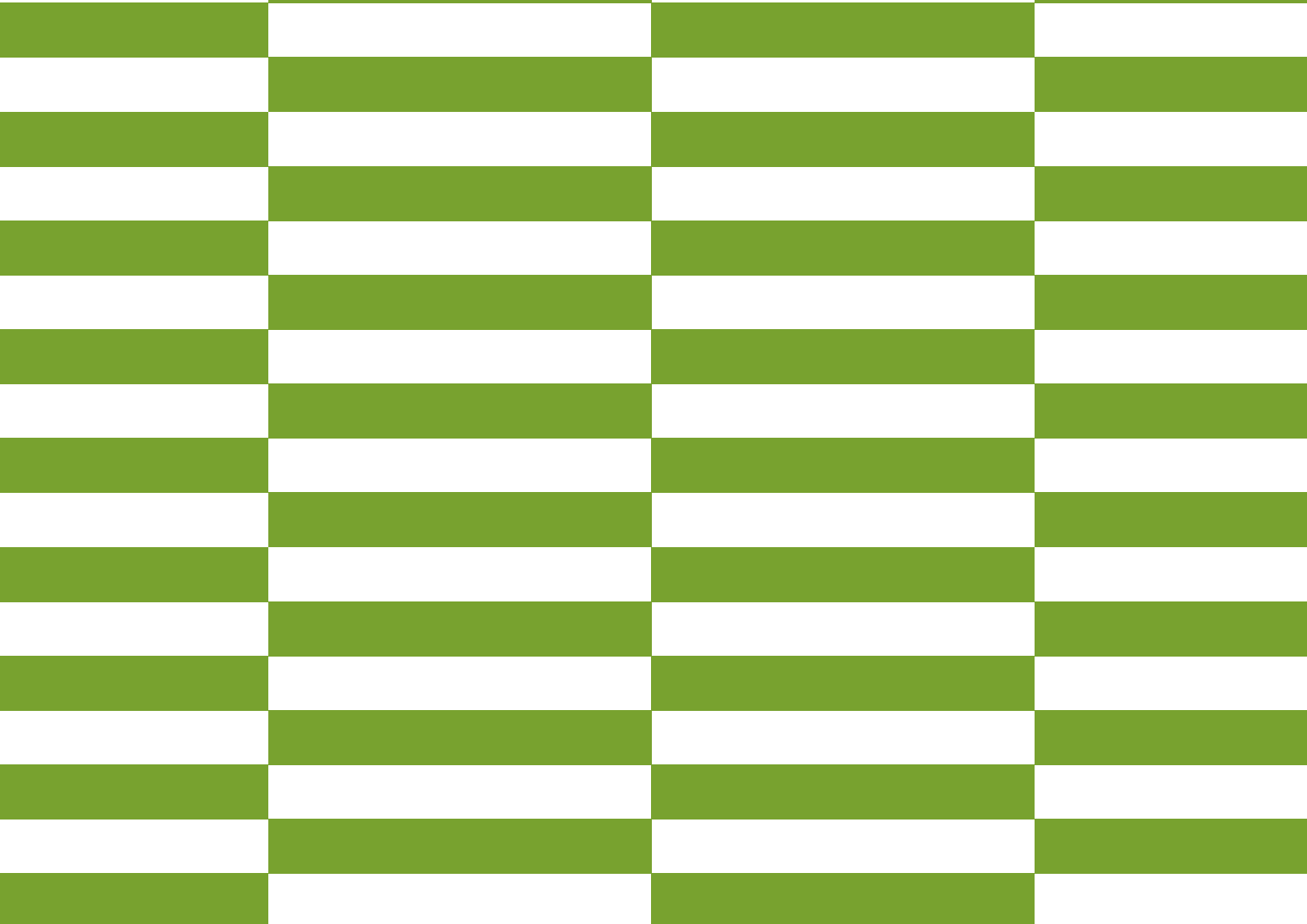
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