

Introduction

Employment professionals are at the heart of expanding competitive integrated employment (CIE) for people with disabilities. Yet, little is known about who these professionals are, what training they need, and what supports lead to better employment outcomes. To answer these questions, the [Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council \(ADDPC\)](#), in partnership with [Arizona APSE](#) (Association of People Supporting Employment First) and the University of Arizona's Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities through their [Employment First Initiative](#), launched the Direct Employment Services Professional (DESP) Survey.

With technical assistance from the Colorado Office of Employment First, this survey was designed to map out the landscape of Arizona's employment services workforce—who they are, what training they've received, and what training they actually need. The goal was not just to collect data but to inform policy, strengthen training programs, and help organizations recognize the value of investing in their staff. The results will directly shape the future of workforce development in employment services across Arizona.

Survey Purpose & Key Questions

The DESP survey was designed to answer critical questions about Arizona's employment services workforce, including:

- Who are the employment professionals in Arizona? What is their experience level, education, and certification status?
- What training and certifications are contributing to better employment outcomes?
- What training is actually needed? What do employment professionals feel confident in, and where do they need more support?
- How does training impact workforce retention and job quality?
- What barriers exist for employment professionals in accessing training, certification, and professional development?

By answering these questions, this survey provides real data to guide training development, funding decisions, and policy recommendations—ensuring that Arizona's

employment professionals have the skills, support, and investment needed to expand opportunities for job seekers with disabilities.

Survey Methodology & Distribution

The Arizona Direct Employment Services Professional (DESP) Survey was developed collaboratively by the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC), Arizona APSE, and the University of Arizona's Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities through their Employment First Initiative. The goal was to create a clear, accessible, and solution-focused survey that would capture the real-world experiences of employment professionals across the state.

To ensure accuracy, clarity, and relevance, the Colorado Office of Employment First (COEF) provided technical assistance, helping refine question wording, structure, and focus areas to align with national best practices in employment services research. The final survey design focused on:

- Workforce demographics and certification trends
- Training needs and professional development priorities
- Service delivery models and employment outcomes
- Systemic barriers and policy considerations

The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, ensuring accessibility and ease of completion. Respondents could access the survey directly via this link: [Qualtrics Survey | Qualtrics Experience Management](#)

Survey Distribution & Engagement

The Arizona Direct Employment Services Professional (DESP) Survey was shared widely across multiple platforms to ensure that employment professionals throughout Arizona had the opportunity to participate. Recognizing the importance of reaching a diverse and representative sample, the survey was distributed using a multi-channel approach, including email campaigns, newsletters, social media outreach, and direct engagement with provider networks.

To maximize participation, the survey was sent twice via email, on October 7 and December 10, 2024, to 164 recipients each time. These targeted emails, distributed through MailChimp, ensured that employment professionals working in

The Arizona Employment First initiative is funded through a partnership with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), providing crucial resources to advance Employment First's mission of achieving competitive integrated employment for all Arizonans with disabilities.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs), and related employment services received direct invitations to provide their insights. In addition to email distribution, the Sonoran Center's monthly newsletter featured the survey from October through December, generating 312 unique clicks from readers who engaged with the survey link.

Beyond digital outreach, the survey was also shared through Arizona APSE's network through private email encouraging participation. It was also shared on Arizona APSE's and the Sonoran Center's social media platforms, expanding visibility to a broader audience of employment professionals and workforce development stakeholders. Additionally, the survey link was provided to employment provider networks and Vocational Rehabilitation teams, ensuring it reached professionals actively engaged in job development, coaching, and employer engagement efforts.

The survey remained open through **December 2024**, extending the original timeline by one month to ensure employment professionals had sufficient time to participate. At the close of the collection period, 303 responses were received, with 242 responses retained after data cleaning to remove duplicate entries, automated responses, and incomplete submissions.

This layered outreach strategy ensured that a broad range of employment professionals contributed their perspectives. The strong engagement levels reflect the growing interest in professional development and the need for strategic workforce investments in Arizona's employment services field. The insights gathered from these efforts will now inform training programs, policy decisions, and funding opportunities to support the continued growth and success of Arizona's employment professionals.

Survey Response & Data Cleaning

- Total responses received: 303
- Validated responses after data cleaning: 242 (removing bot submissions and duplicate responses).
- The survey remained open from October through December 2024, ensuring ample opportunity for professionals to participate.

This collaborative and strategic approach ensured a true representative sample of Arizona's employment services workforce. The findings will inform training development, certification pathways, and policy decisions—ultimately strengthening Arizona's commitment to Employment First and competitive integrated employment.

Survey Results

A total of 303 survey responses were submitted. Of these, 242 were kept after taking steps to remove bot answers, which included removing: surveys that were submitted less than 5 seconds after being started; surveys that were submitted more than 3 hours after being started; surveys that included free text responses in non-English and Spanish languages; and surveys from the same IP address that were submitted 3 minutes or less after another one from that same IP address.

Of the 242 respondents, 86% have worked as an employment support professional for 1-3 years (54%) or 4-6 years (32%). Nearly half (48%) have a bachelor's degree, and 79% identify as female. Approximately 80% are between the ages of 25-34 (48%) or 34-44 (31%). Just over 80% of respondents were White/Caucasian, and 19% were Hispanic/Latine. Of the 219 individuals who responded to the question about which community, town, or area in which they provide employment-related services in a manner that could be categorized, 84% work outside of outside of the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas.

At least 25% of respondents reported receiving the following employment services certifications: ACRE (25%); Mark Gold & Associates (34%); and CESP (53%), with one-third respondents reporting having received their certification each of 1-2 or 2-3 years ago. Between 40% and 50% of respondents reported providing one of four types of pre-employment services: Work Adjustment Training (50%); Group Supported Employment (48%); Pre-Employment Transition Services (45%); and Center-Based Employment (43%). Slightly higher percentages reported one of five types of employment services, including: Individual Supported Employment (60%); Supported Employment (60%); Psychoeducational Services (49%); Job Development and Retention (48%); and Ongoing Support to Maintain Employment (44%). The vast majority of respondents reported that obtaining a certification influenced their decision to remain with their current organization and led to an increase in their wage (both 83%).

The top three areas in which respondents felt they needed more training to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities included: Disability Employment Policies (52%); Cultural Competency and Strategies for Supporting Underserved Populations (38%); and Transition Services for Youth with Disabilities (37%). The training most respondents believed would be most beneficial for supporting the rollout of Customized Employment included: Job Development Techniques (60%); Person-Centered Planning (53%); and Employer Engagement Strategies (50%). Of the 21 domains in which respondents were asked their confidence in implementing, approximately 90% reported feeling “Confident” or “Strongly Confident” in all of them, though the specific breakdown of each of these varied, with only 19% of respondents being Strongly Confident in Understanding and Navigating VR and DDD Systems compared with 41% being Strongly Confident in Employment First Principles. One-third of respondents reported being Strongly Confident in Customized Employment Strategies.

Respondents reported placing an average of 40% of individuals in their case load in Competitive Integrated Employment in the past year. Between one-third and half of respondents work with each of Developmental Disabilities (53%), Autism Spectrum Disorder (51%), Physical Disabilities (46%), Intellectual Disabilities (35%), and Mental Health Disabilities (33%). Lack of time (59%) and cost (54%) were the most frequently reported barriers preventing individuals from obtaining a certification, though 84% of respondents said that their organization is willing to pay for them to receive certification.

Visual representations of the survey data, including graphs and charts, can be found in Appendix A. These visuals provide a clear breakdown of key findings, such as workforce demographics, certification trends, training needs, and employment outcomes. They offer an at-a-glance view of the data of the survey results.

Key Findings

Arizona’s Employment Services Workforce: Who They Are

- Growing but Early Career – 86% of respondents have worked in employment services for 1-6 years, showing strong engagement among newer professionals.
- Diverse in Education & Backgrounds – Nearly half (48%) hold a bachelor’s degree, while others come from varied professional backgrounds.

- Majority Female – 79% identify as female, with the largest age groups being 25-34 (48%) and 35-44 (31%).
- Racial & Ethnic Demographics – 80% of respondents are White/Caucasian, while 19% identify as Hispanic/Latine.

Training & Certification Trends

- Certifications Matter – 83% of certified professionals reported that obtaining a certification increased their wages and influenced their decision to stay with their current employer.
- Certifications Held:
 - Certified Employment Support Professional (CESP) – 53%
 - Mark Gold & Associates Training – 34%
 - ACRE Certification – 25%
- Barriers to Certification:
 - 59% cited lack of time as a major obstacle.
 - 54% cited cost, despite 84% of employers stating they would pay for certification if funding was available.

What Employment Professionals Are Doing

- Employment Services Provided:
 - Individual Supported Employment (60%)
 - Supported Employment (60%)
 - Job Development & Retention (48%)
 - Ongoing Support to Maintain Employment (44%)
- Pre-Employment Services Provided:
 - Work Adjustment Training (50%)
 - Group Supported Employment (48%)
 - Pre-Employment Transition Services (45%)

Impact on Employment Outcomes

- Only 40% of job seekers in respondents' caseloads were placed in CIE in the past year, signaling a need for stronger job development and employer engagement strategies.
- Confidence Gaps in Key Areas:
 - 41% of respondents feel strongly confident in Employment First principles.
 - Only 19% feel strongly confident in navigating VR & DDD systems.

Training Priorities for the Future

- Top areas where employment professionals want more training:
 - Disability Employment Policies (52%)
 - Employer Engagement Strategies (50%)
 - Customized Employment (33%)
 - Cultural Competency & DEI (38%)

The survey revealed a notable lack of participation from employment professionals serving Arizona's tribal communities. This gap suggests several possible challenges, including limited access to training opportunities, lower awareness of certification programs, or systemic barriers preventing engagement with state-funded employment services. Additionally, it is possible that some tribal communities do not currently have access to local employment service providers, further limiting opportunities for job seekers with disabilities.

Without strong representation from tribal Direct Employment Services Professionals (DESPs), the data may not fully reflect the unique employment challenges and opportunities within tribal communities. This underscores the need to actively engage tribal employment providers, build stronger culturally responsive training pathways, and develop partnerships to ensure that Employment First efforts reflect the unique needs of the communities across Arizona.

Innovative & Actionable Recommendations

1. Create a Statewide Certification Support Fund

1.1. *Why?* Certification is a proven driver of retention and wage growth yet cost and time constraints prevent professionals from obtaining them.

1.2. *Solution:*

The Arizona Employment First initiative is funded through a partnership with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), providing crucial resources to advance Employment First's mission of achieving competitive integrated employment for all Arizonans with disabilities.

- 1.2.1. Establish a statewide Employment Professional Credential Fund to cover ACRE, CESP, and Mark Gold certifications.
 - 1.2.2. Partner with VR & Medicaid to subsidize certification costs for professionals working with high-needs job seekers.
2. Launch an Employer Engagement Initiative
 - 2.1. *Why?* Low placement rates in CIE (40%) indicate a need for stronger employer partnerships.
 - 2.2. Solution:
 - 2.2.1. Develop an Arizona Employment Champions Program, recognizing employers committed to a Employment First principles.
 - 2.2.2. Create “Employer Learning Labs” where businesses co-design customized jobs alongside employment professionals.
3. Expand Training Access Through a Digital Learning Hub
 - 3.1. *Why?* 52% of respondents requested training on employment policies, employer engagement, and Customized Employment.
 - 3.2. Solution:
 - 3.2.1. Develop an on-demand statewide training platform offering bite-sized, interactive learning modules.
 - 3.2.2. Include peer-led training from experienced professionals, sharing real strategies that work.
4. Strengthen VR & DDD System Navigation Training
 - 4.1. *Why?* Only 19% of professionals feel confident navigating VR & DDD systems, impacting service delivery.
 - 4.2. Solution:
 - 4.2.1. Develop a mentorship program, pairing new professionals with experienced VR and DDD navigators.
 - 4.2.2. Create a “VR & DDD Roadmap” Guide to simplify processes, funding pathways, and service coordination.

5. Invest in Retention Through Professional Growth & Leadership Development

5.1. *Why?* With 86% of the workforce in their first six years, we need clear career pathways to retain skilled professionals.

5.2. Solution:

5.2.1. Create an Arizona Employment First Leadership Academy, equipping professionals with advanced job development and advocacy skills.

5.2.2. Establish statewide networking events, fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and career growth.

6. Increase Tribal Representation in Employment Services

6.1. *Why?* Low participation from tribal DESPs suggests barriers to access, lack of awareness, or limited engagement with state-funded employment initiatives, risking the exclusion of Indigenous communities from Employment First efforts.

6.2. Solution:

6.2.1. Partner with tribal VR programs and workforce development offices to increase awareness and participation.

6.2.2. Create tribal-focused employment training modules incorporating traditional values and economic opportunities.

6.2.3. Offer flexible, on-demand certification pathways with funding support from tribal governments and organizations.

6.2.4. Engage tribal employment leaders to co-develop solutions for expanding CIE opportunities.

Turning Insights into Action

The Arizona Direct Employment Services Professional (DESP) Survey provides a data-driven roadmap for strengthening Arizona's employment services workforce and improving competitive integrated employment (CIE) outcomes. The findings are not just numbers—they highlight real challenges, real opportunities, and real solutions to enhance training, certification access, workforce retention, and employer engagement. Now, the next step is to turn these insights into action.

1. Sharing Findings & Engaging Stakeholders

Survey results will be presented to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), policymakers, and employment providers. Partners could host:

- A statewide webinar to discuss key findings.
- Employment First roundtables to explore training and policy recommendations.
- Provider meetings to support certification and professional development efforts.

2. Expanding Workforce Development & Certification Access

To remove barriers to training and certification, the partners could explore:

- A statewide Employment Professional Credential Fund for ACRE, CESP, and Mark Gold certifications.
- An on-demand training platform with self-paced modules.
- A Peer Mentor Network to connect new and experienced professionals.

3. Strengthening Employer Engagement & CIE Expansion

With only 40% of job seekers placed in CIE, stronger employer partnerships are critical. Planned initiatives include:

- Arizona Employment Champions Program to recognize employers committed to creating a diverse workforce.
- Employer Learning Labs to co-develop customized jobs.
- Targeted employer engagement and networking events to increase hiring opportunities.

4. Driving Policy & Systemic Change

Survey data will inform policy recommendations aimed at:

- Aligning training priorities with workforce development initiatives for sustainable funding.
- Incentivizing provider organizations that invest in staff certification.
- Improving system navigation support for employment professionals, particularly within VR and DDD.

5. Measuring Progress & Ensuring Ongoing Impact

Partners may consider tracking progress in:

- Certification rates and workforce retention.
- Employer partnerships and CIE placements.
- Adoption of new training models and system improvements.

Conclusion

Arizona is at a turning point—the need for skilled, well-supported employment professionals has never been greater. By investing in training, expanding certification access, and fostering stronger employer partnerships, we can build a more effective and sustainable employment services system.

This report is just the beginning. We invite employment professionals, providers, policymakers, and businesses to take action—whether that means advocating for funding, developing new training programs, or expanding Employment First hiring efforts.

Together, we can ensure that every employment professional has the tools, training, and support needed to help Arizonans with disabilities achieve meaningful, competitive employment. Let's move forward—as partners, as advocates, and as leaders in Employment First.

Note: Language throughout this report has been revised to reflect current federal guidelines and align with the expectations of agencies operating under the 2025 presidential administration.

*Evaluation of Survey Results by Patrick Rivers, PhD | Biostatistician
Department of Family and Community Medicine | College of Medicine | University of Arizona*

*Respectfully submitted by Lorie Sandaine, CESP, CWIC | Systems Change Liaison
Sonoran Center for Excellence in Disabilities | College of Medicine | University of Arizona*

Appendix A

Visual Data & Survey Findings

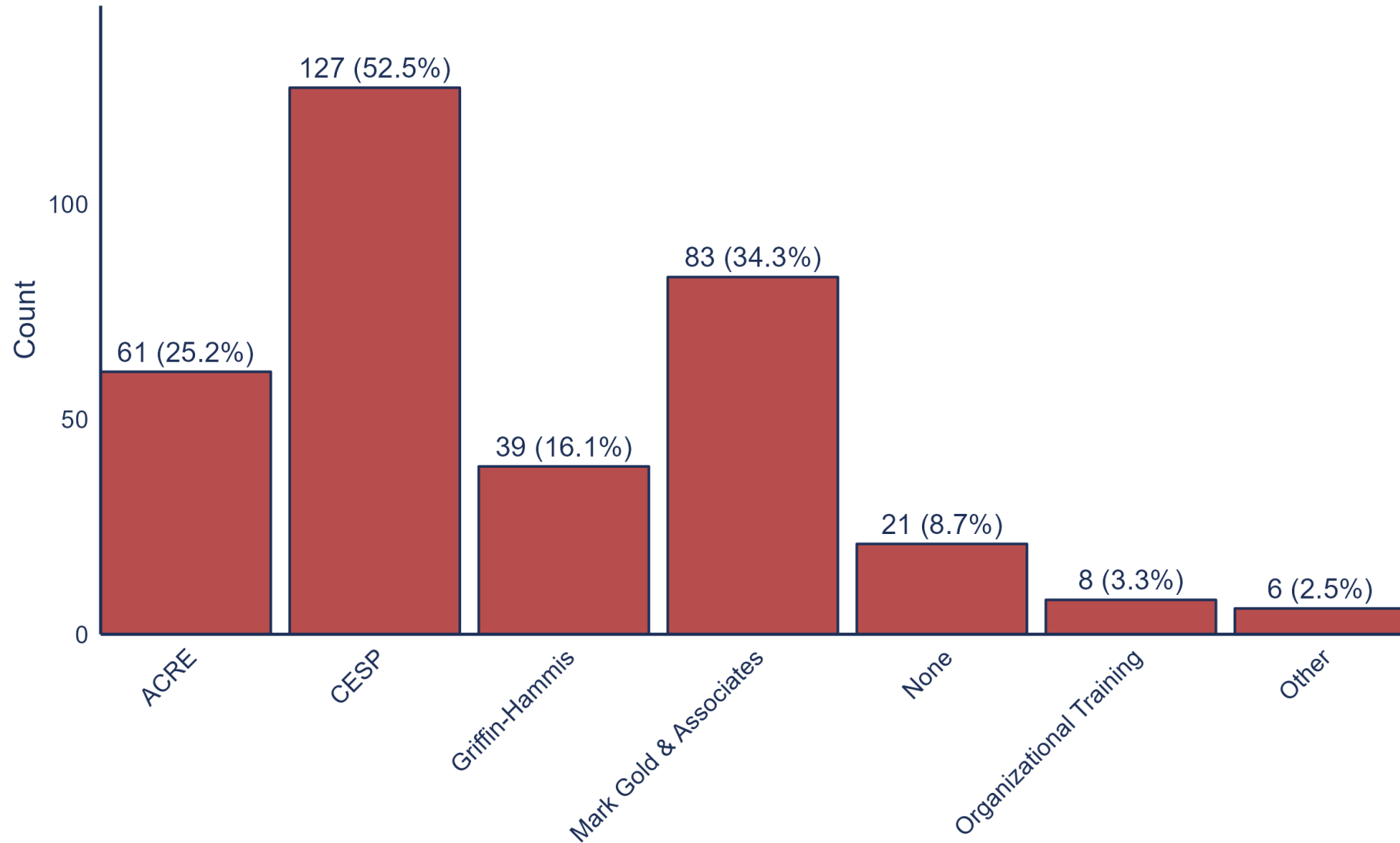
This section contains graphs, charts, and visual representations of key survey findings, including:

- Workforce demographics and certification trends
- Training needs and professional development priorities
- Employment service models and CIE placement rates
- Barriers to certification, training, and system navigation

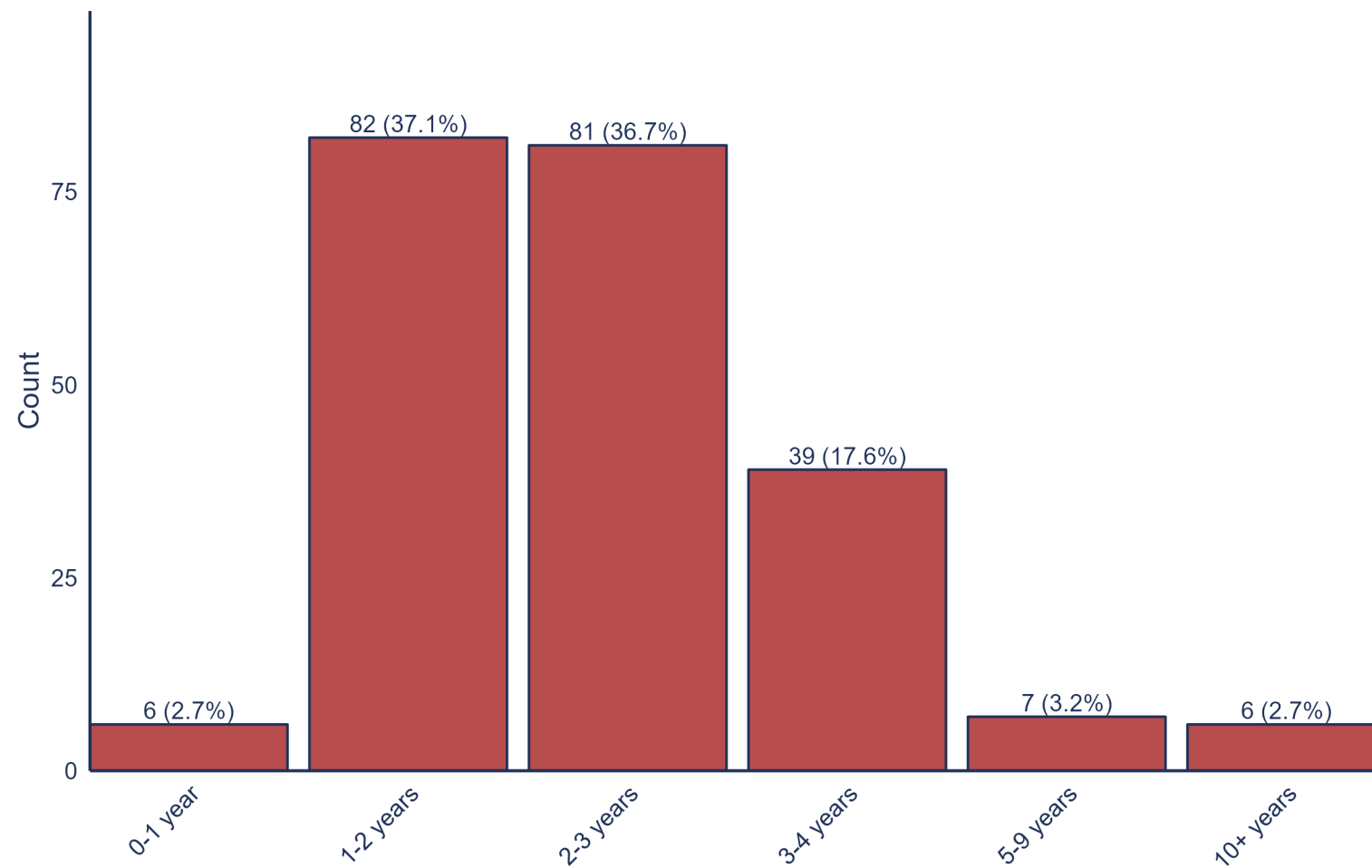
These visuals provide an at-a-glance view of the data, helping to illustrate key insights and trends identified in the Arizona DESP Survey.



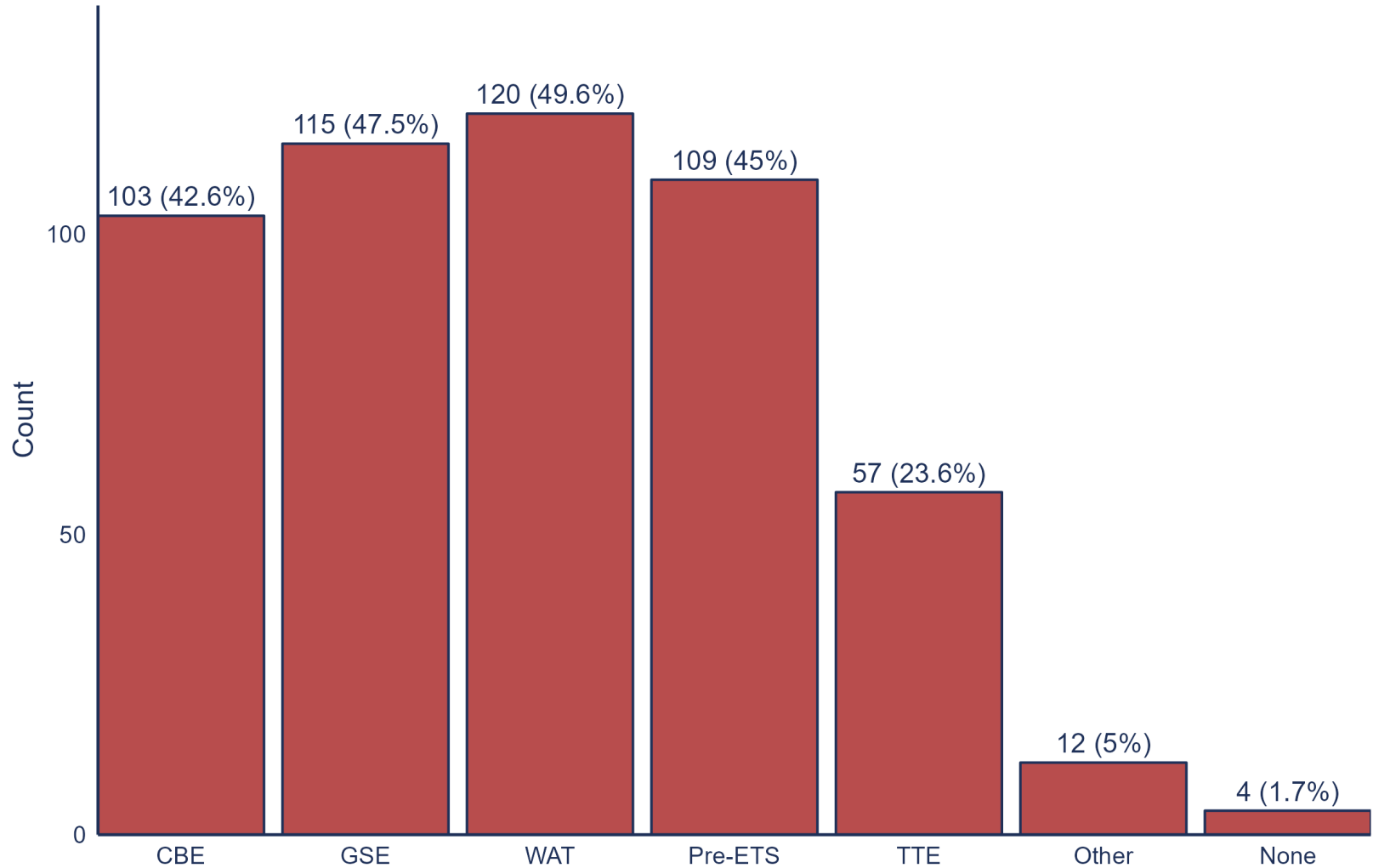
**Have you received any of the following
certifications or formal training in employment
services? (Select all that apply)**



How many years have you been working as an
employment support professional/job coach, job
developer, etc.?



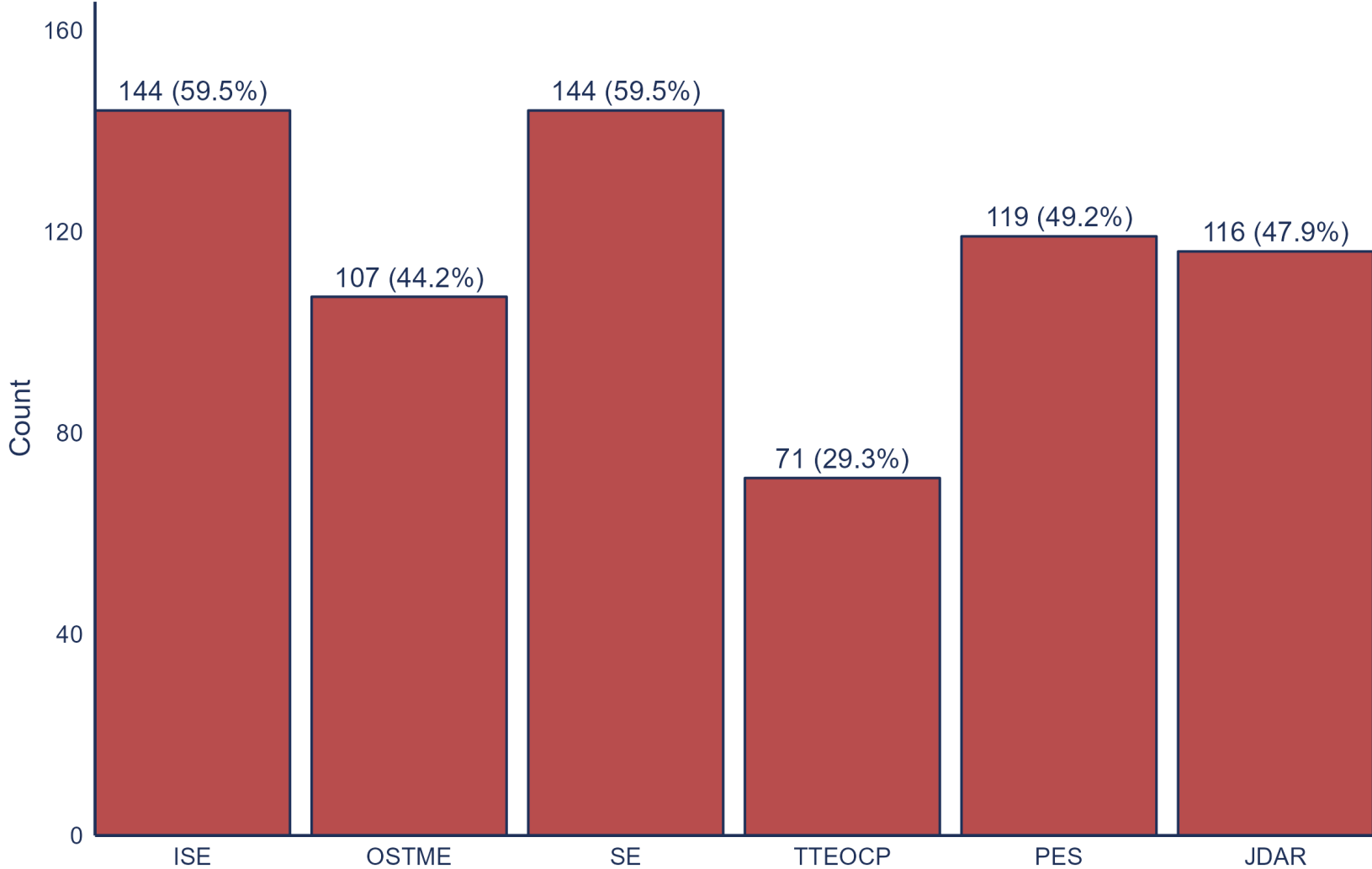
Which pre-employment services do you currently provide? (Select all that apply)



Legend:

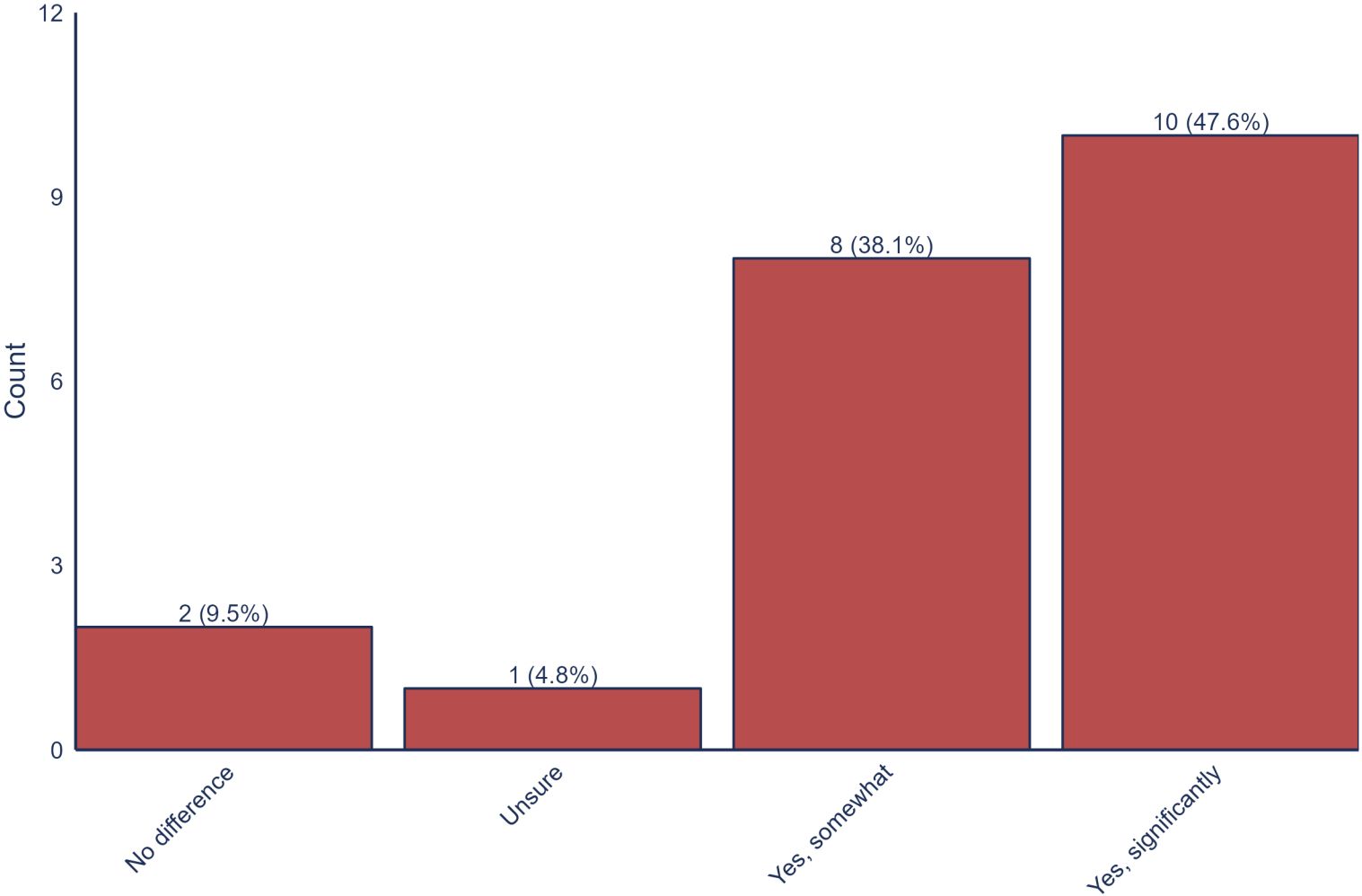
CBE = Center-Based Employment, GSE = Group Supported Employment
WAT = Work Adjustment Training, Pre-ETS = Pre-Employment Transition Services
TTE = Transition to Employment, Other = Other, None = None

Which of the following employment services do you currently provide? (Select all that apply)

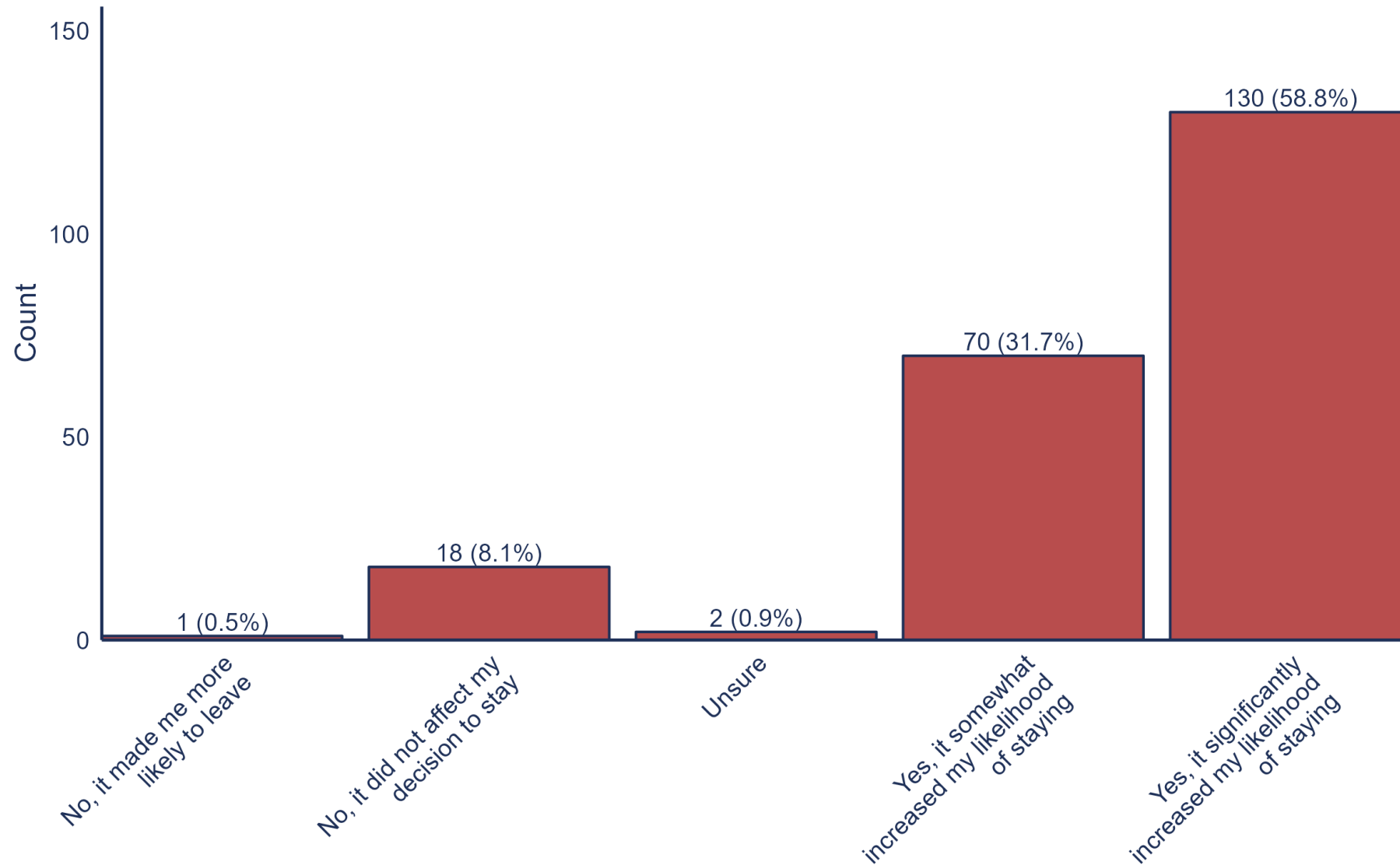


Legend:
ISE = Individual Supported Employment (DDD Funded), OSTME = Ongoing Support to Maintain Employment (AHCCCS/Behavioral Health, Post-Employment)
SE = Supported Employment (AHCCCS/DDD Employment Services, TTEOCP = Transition to Employment or Career Preparation & Readiness
PES = Psychoeducational Services (AHCCCS/Behavioral Health, Pre-Employment), JDAR = Job Development and Retention (VR Funded)

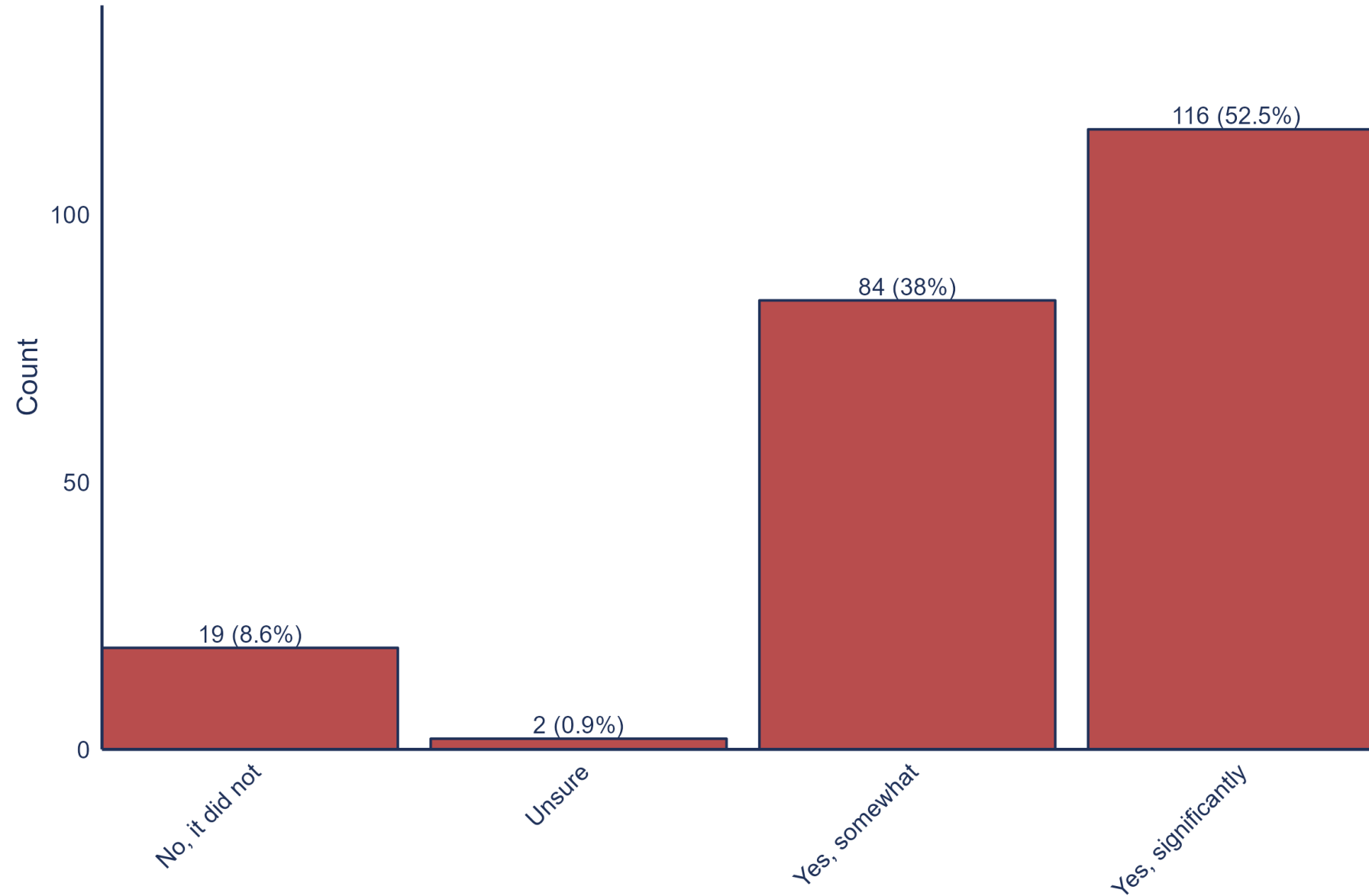
Do you believe that obtaining a certification
(e.g., CESP, ACRE) will improve your confidence?



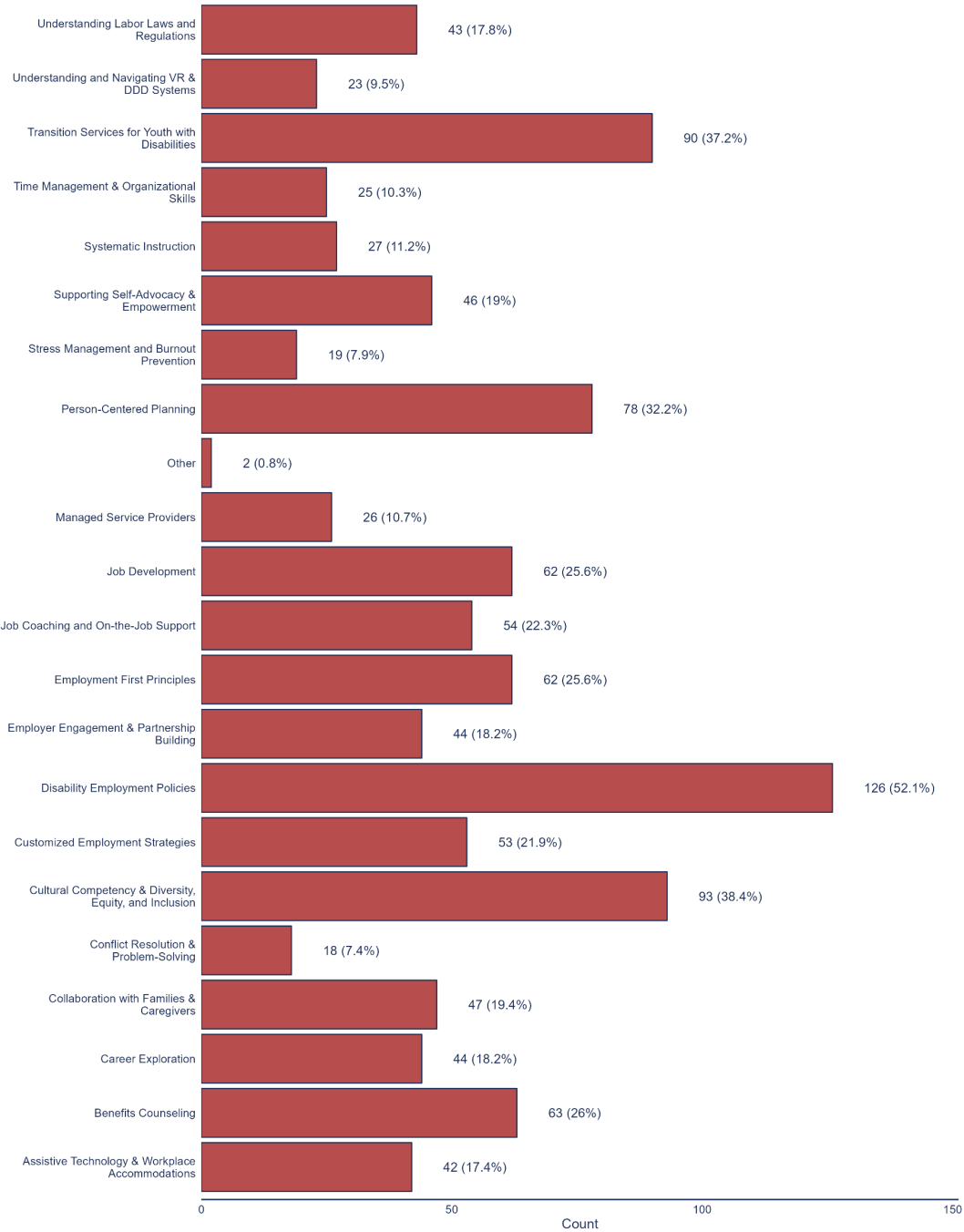
Has obtaining a certification influenced your decision to remain with your current organization?



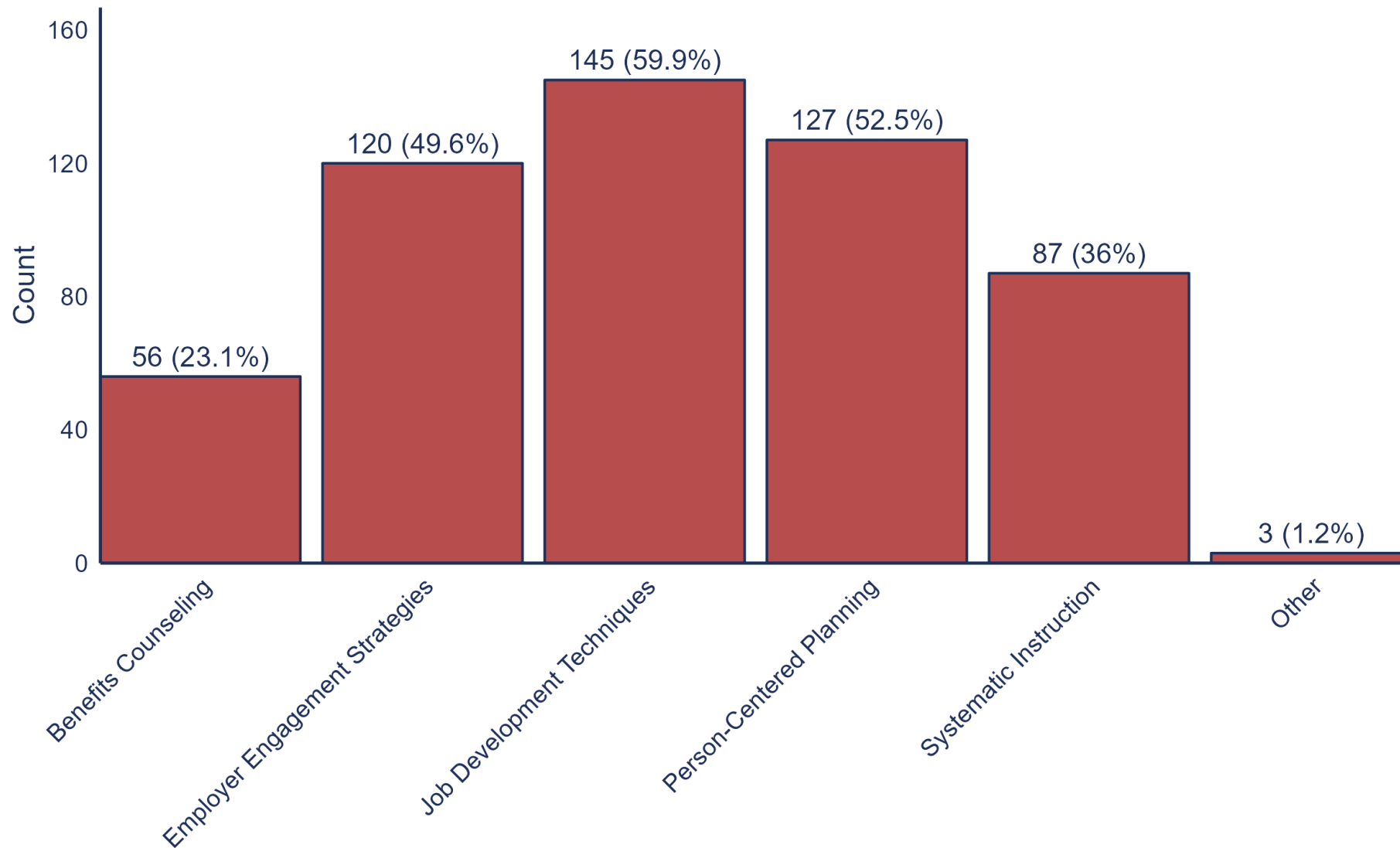
Has obtaining a certification led to an increase in your wage?



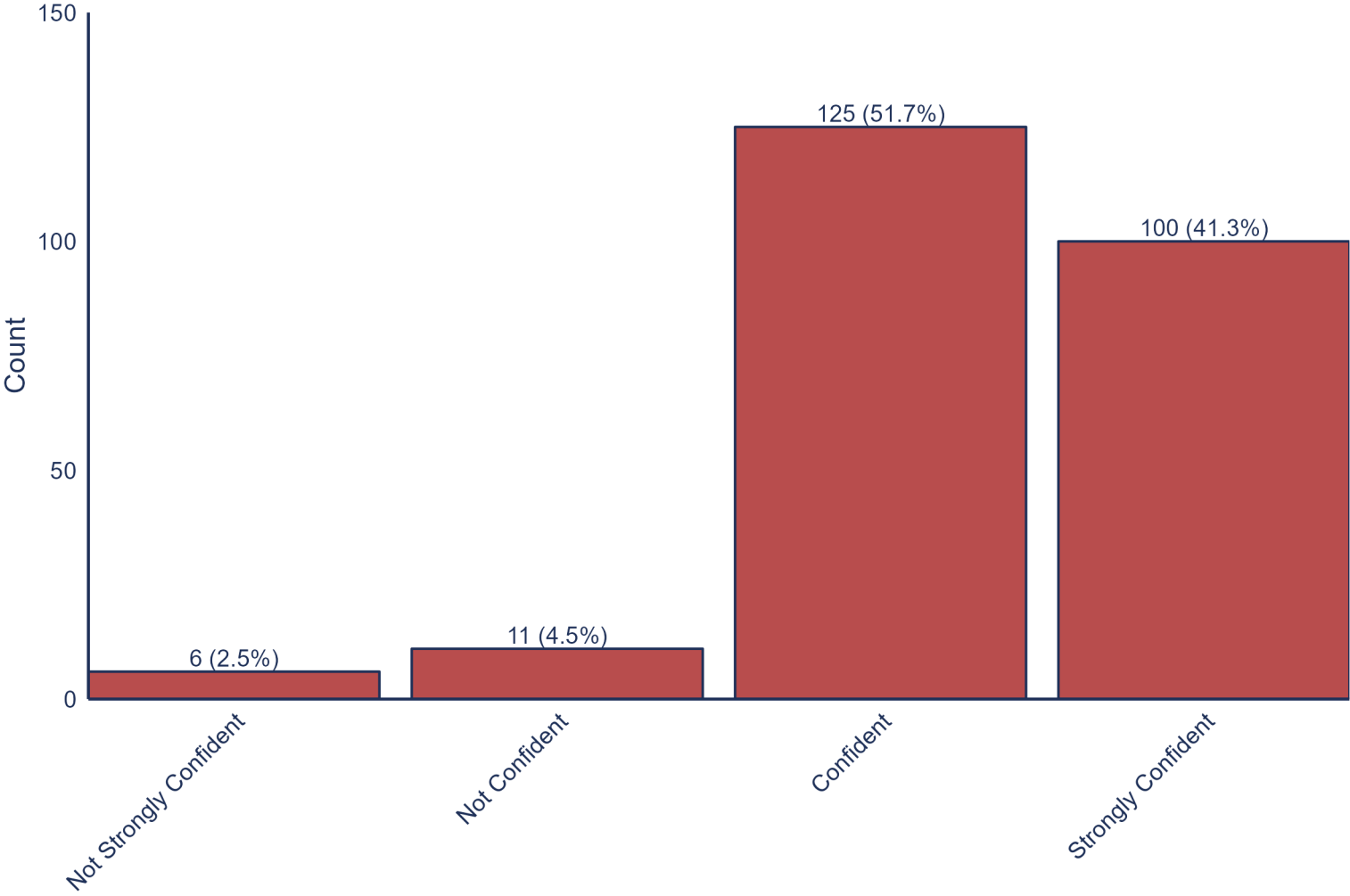
Have you received any of the following certifications or formal training in employment services? (Select all that apply)



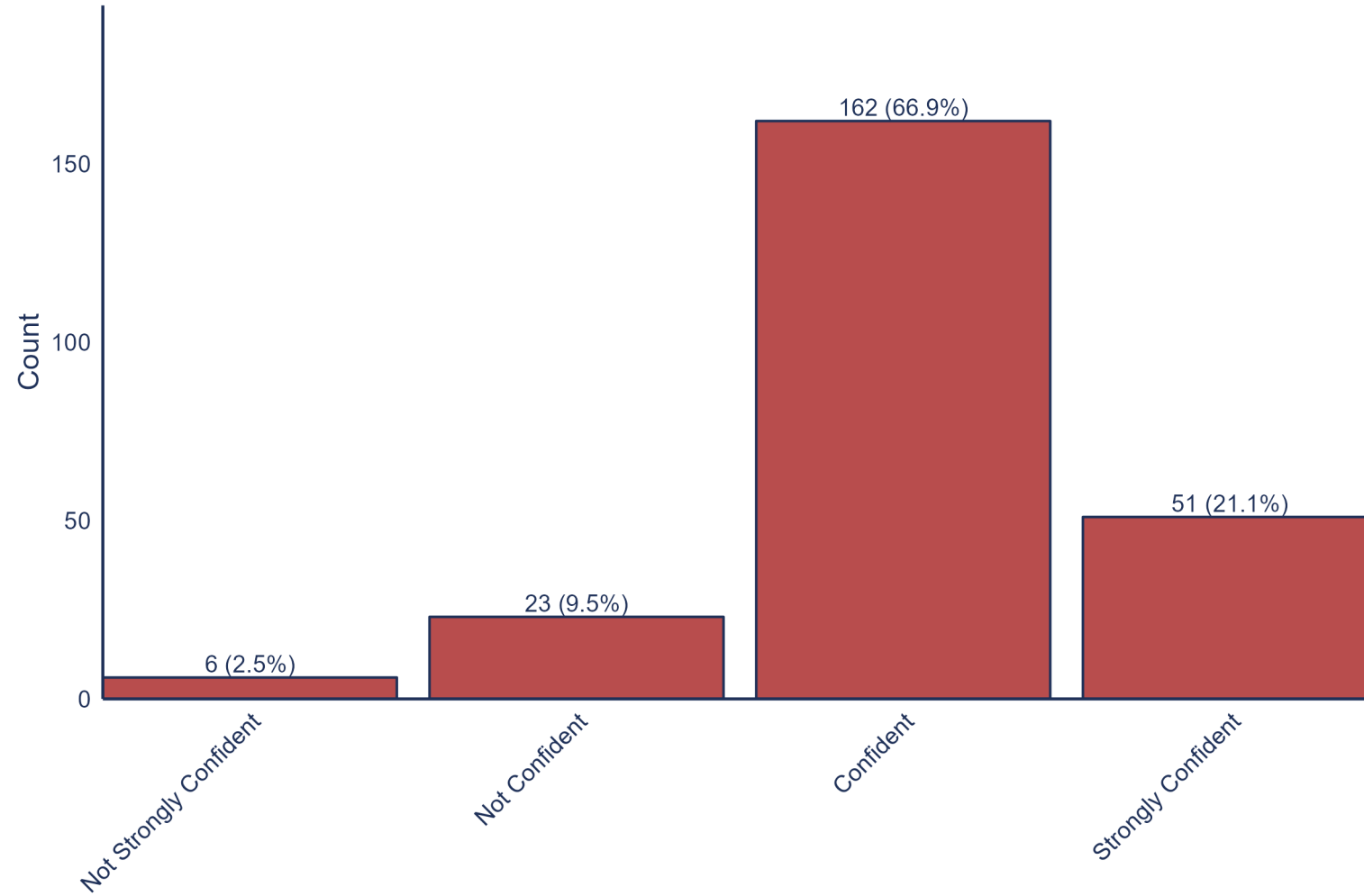
What training or resources would be most beneficial for you for supporting the rollout of Customized Employment? (Select all that apply)



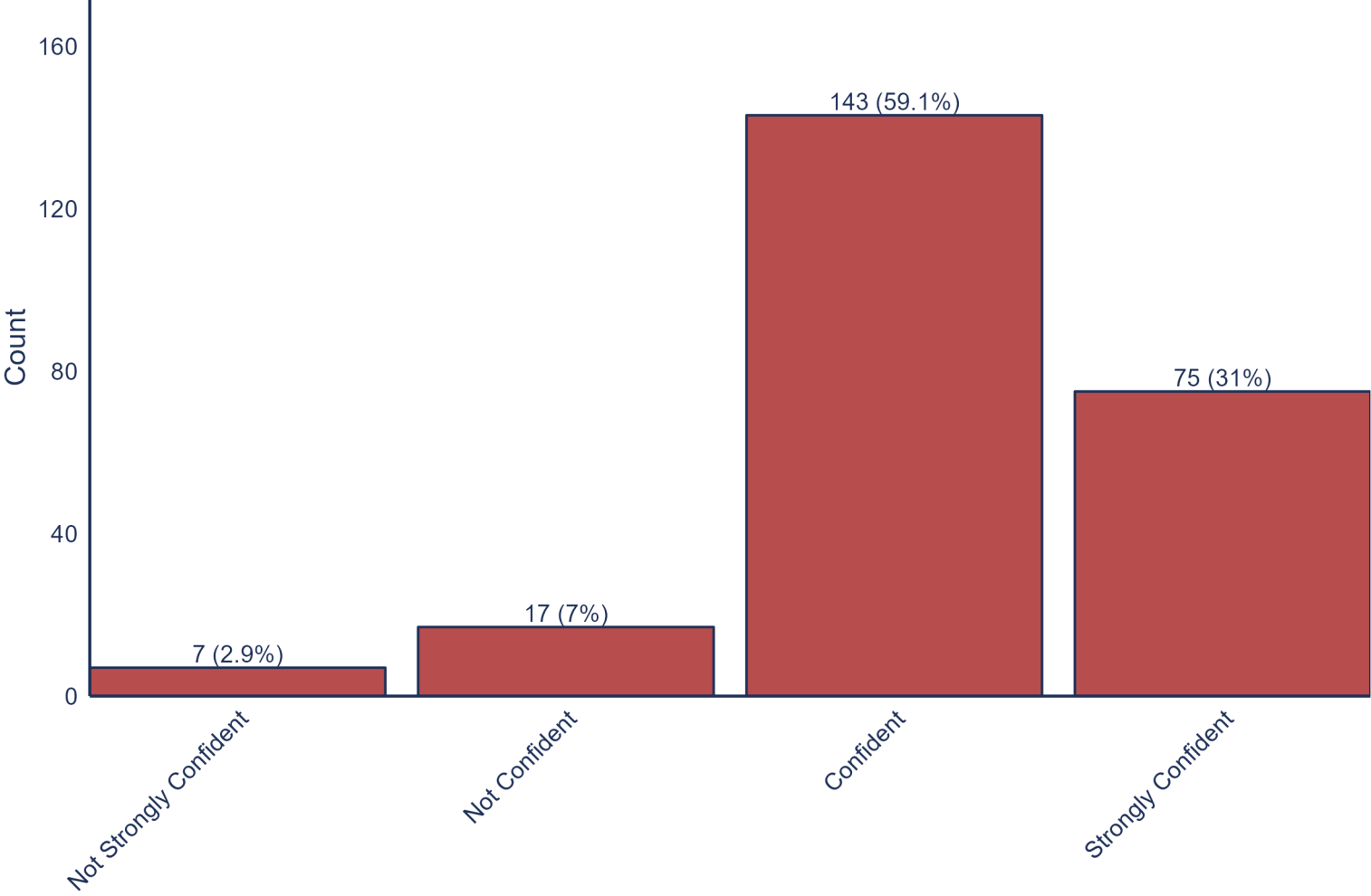
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Employment First Principles



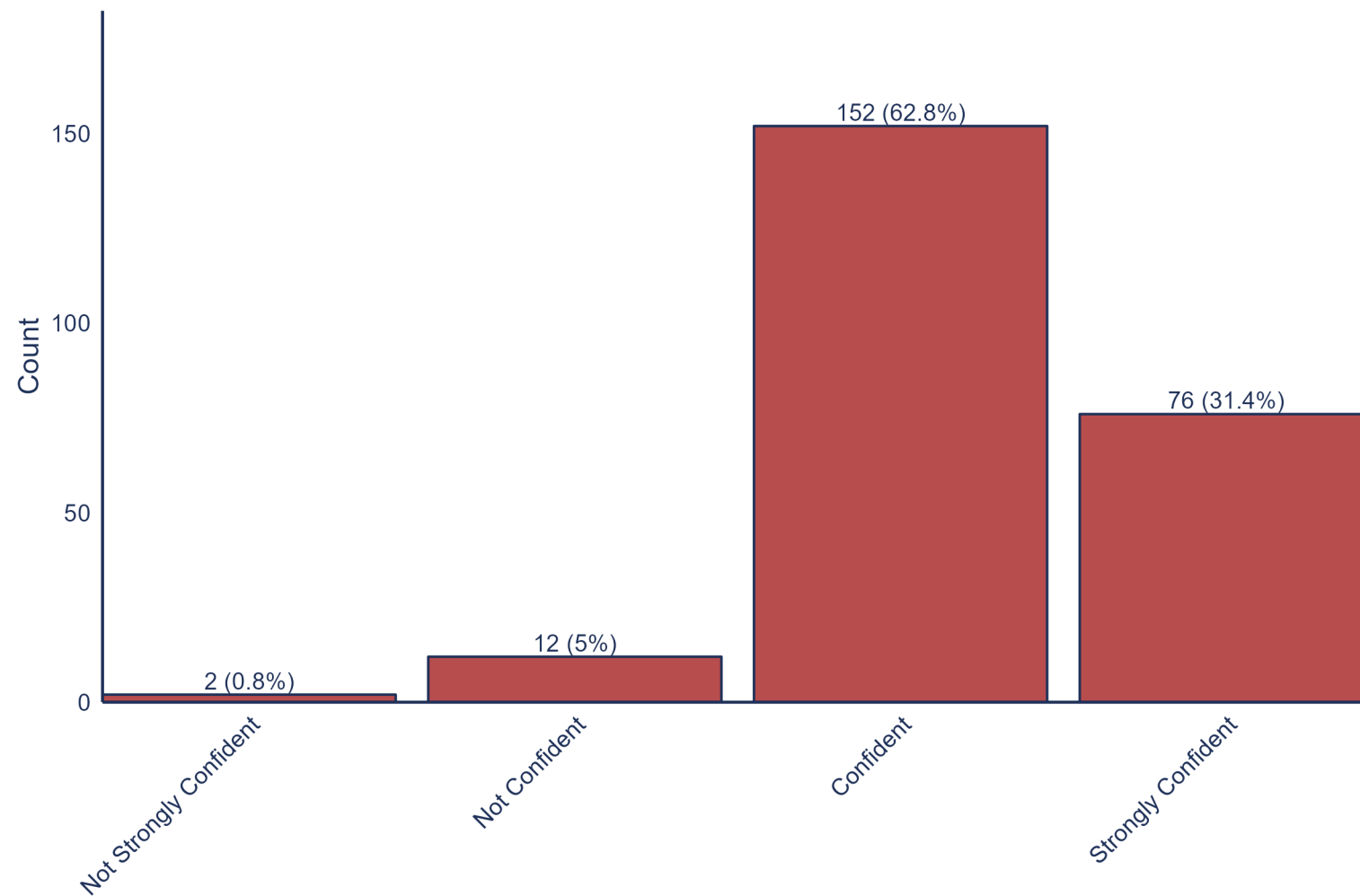
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Disability Employment Policies



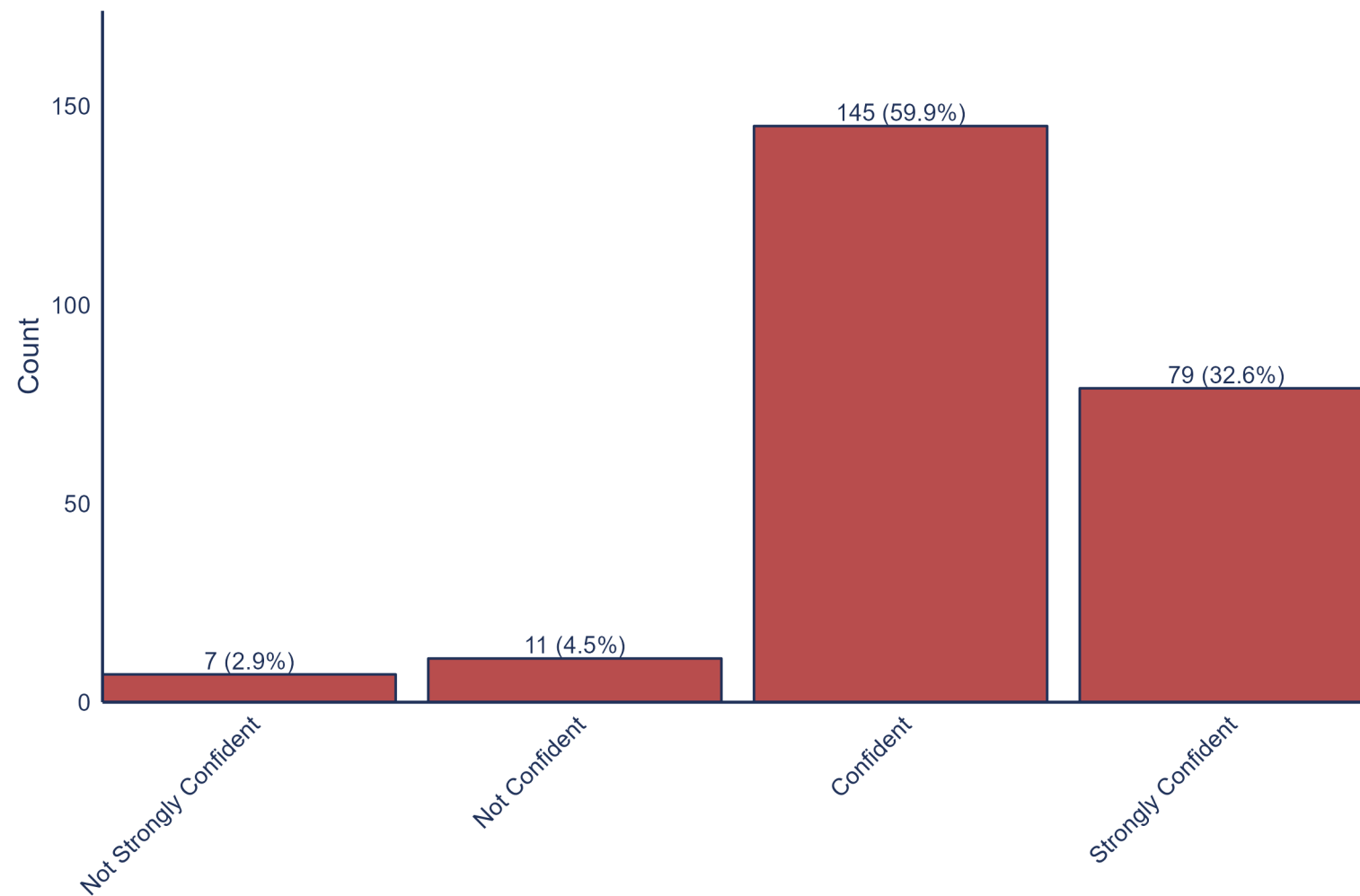
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Cultural Competency and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)



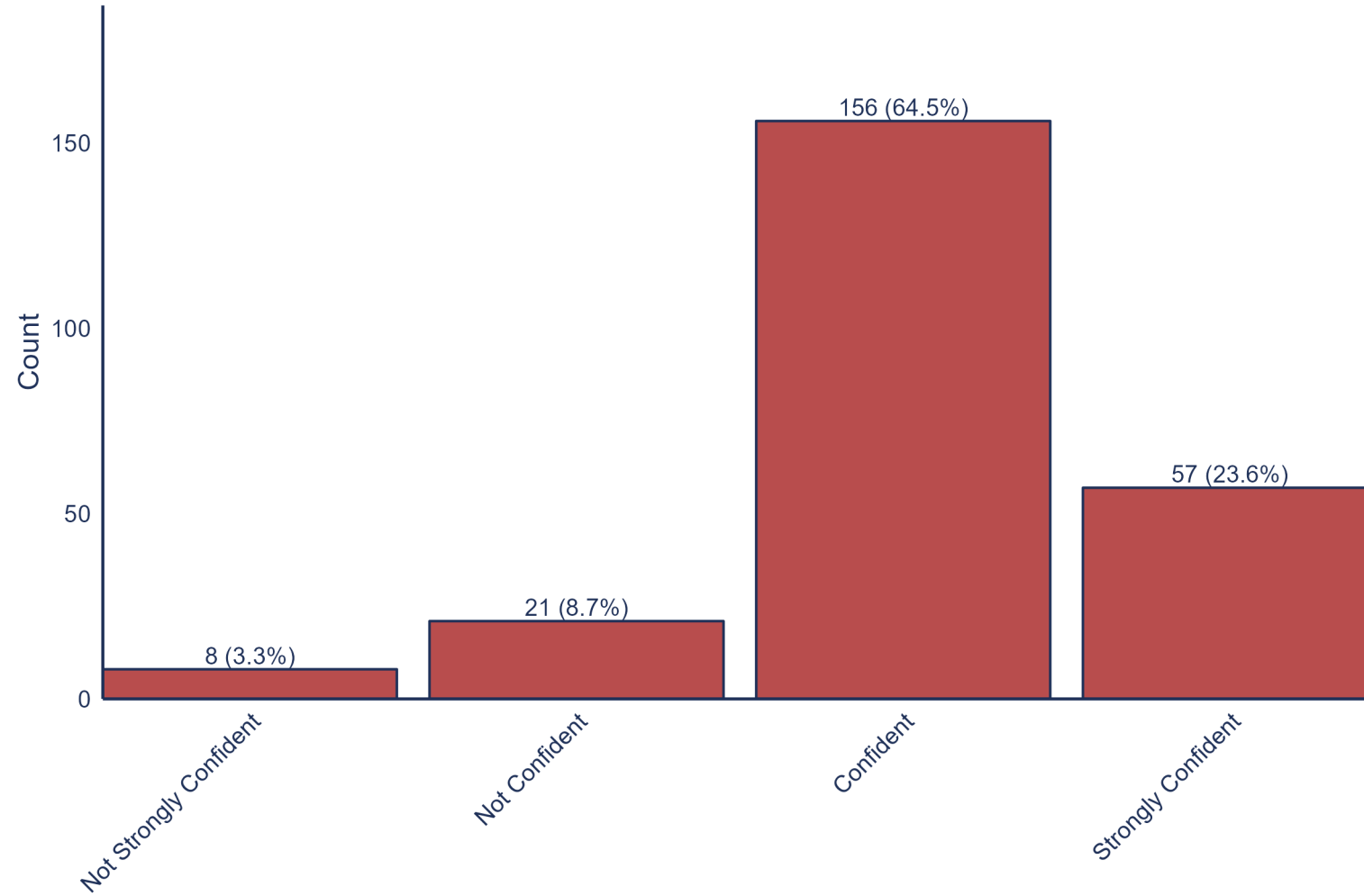
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Person-Centered Planning



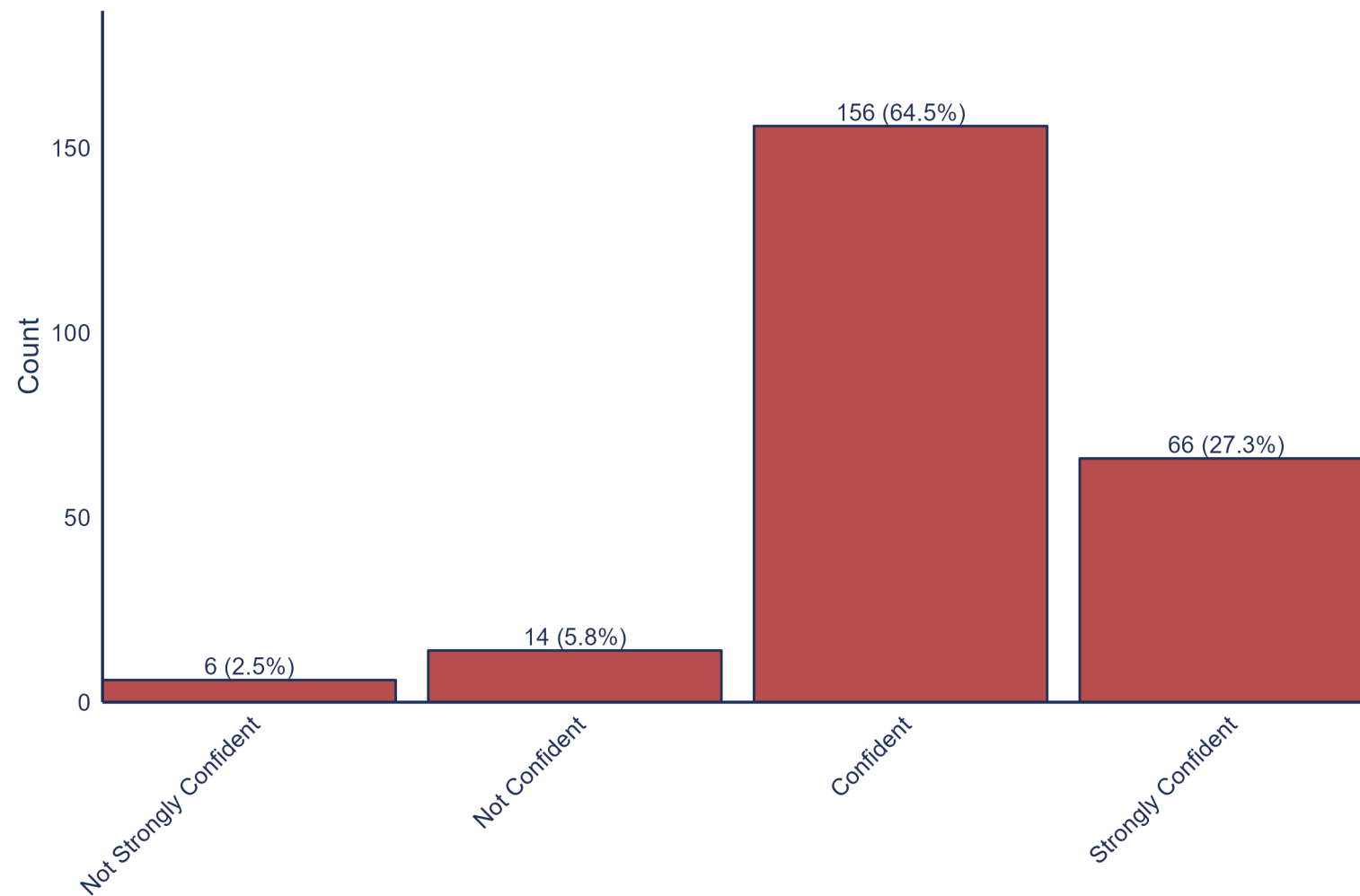
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Supporting Self-Advocacy and Empowerment



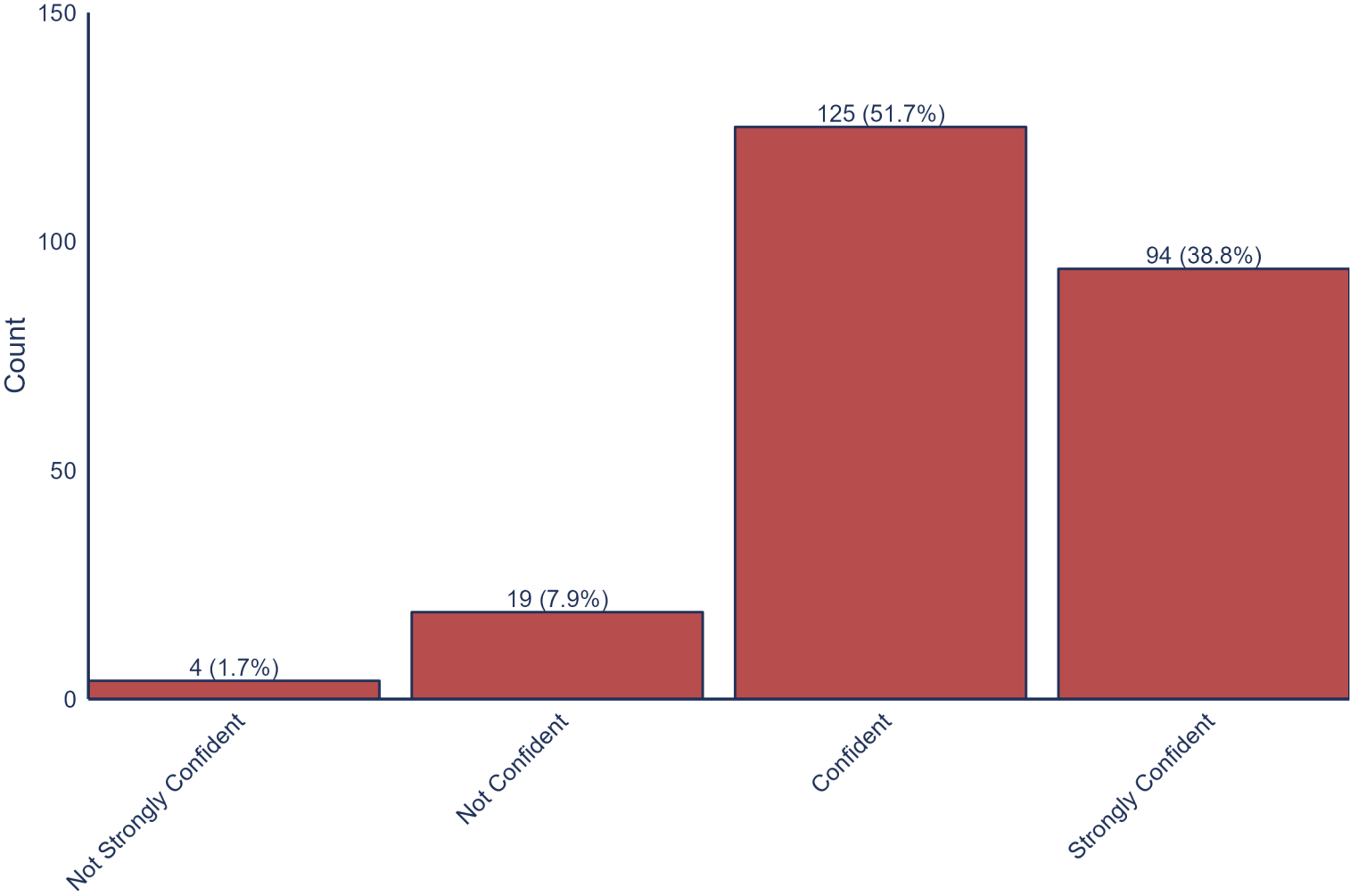
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Transition Services for Youth with Disabilities



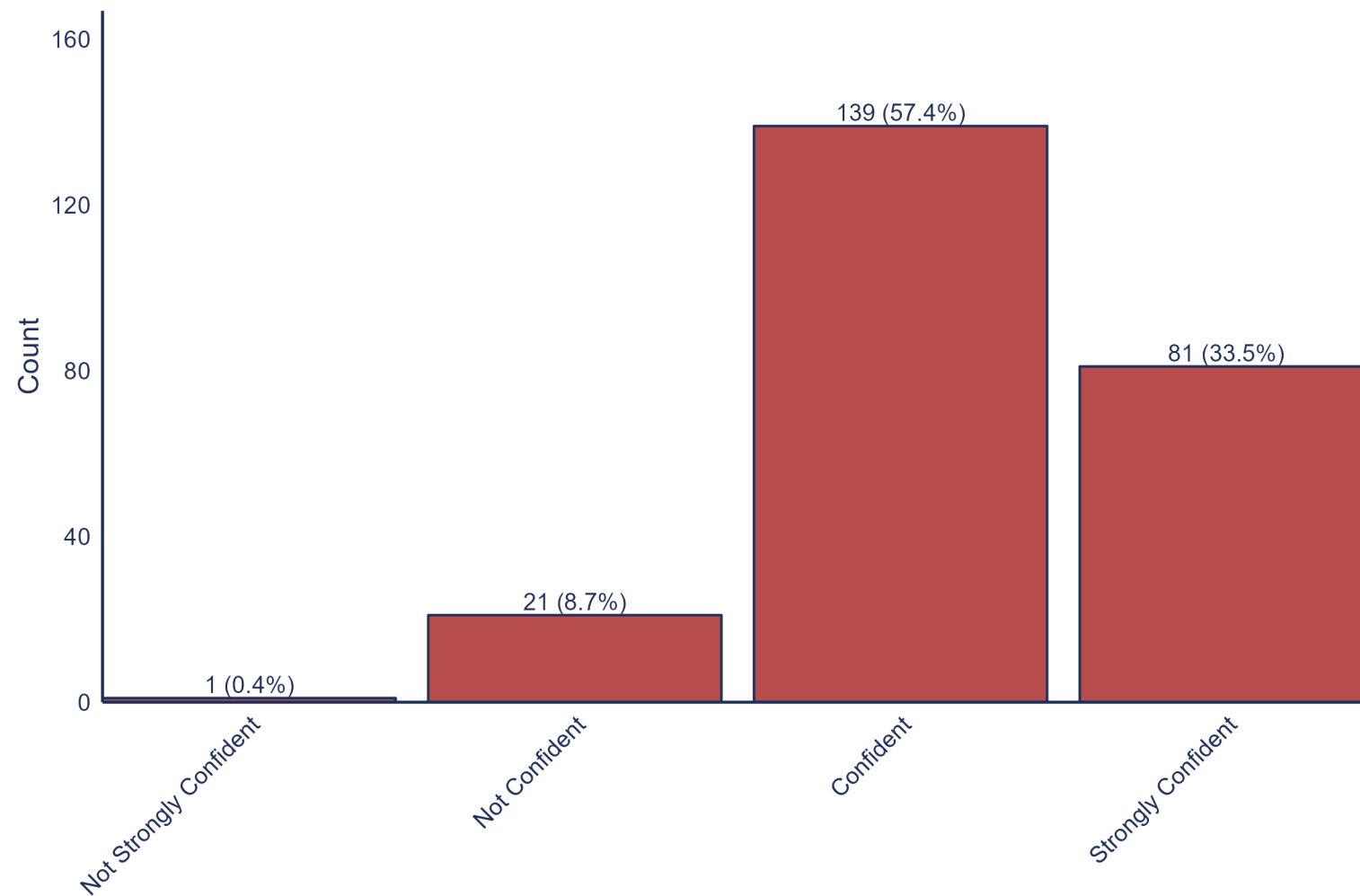
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Job Development



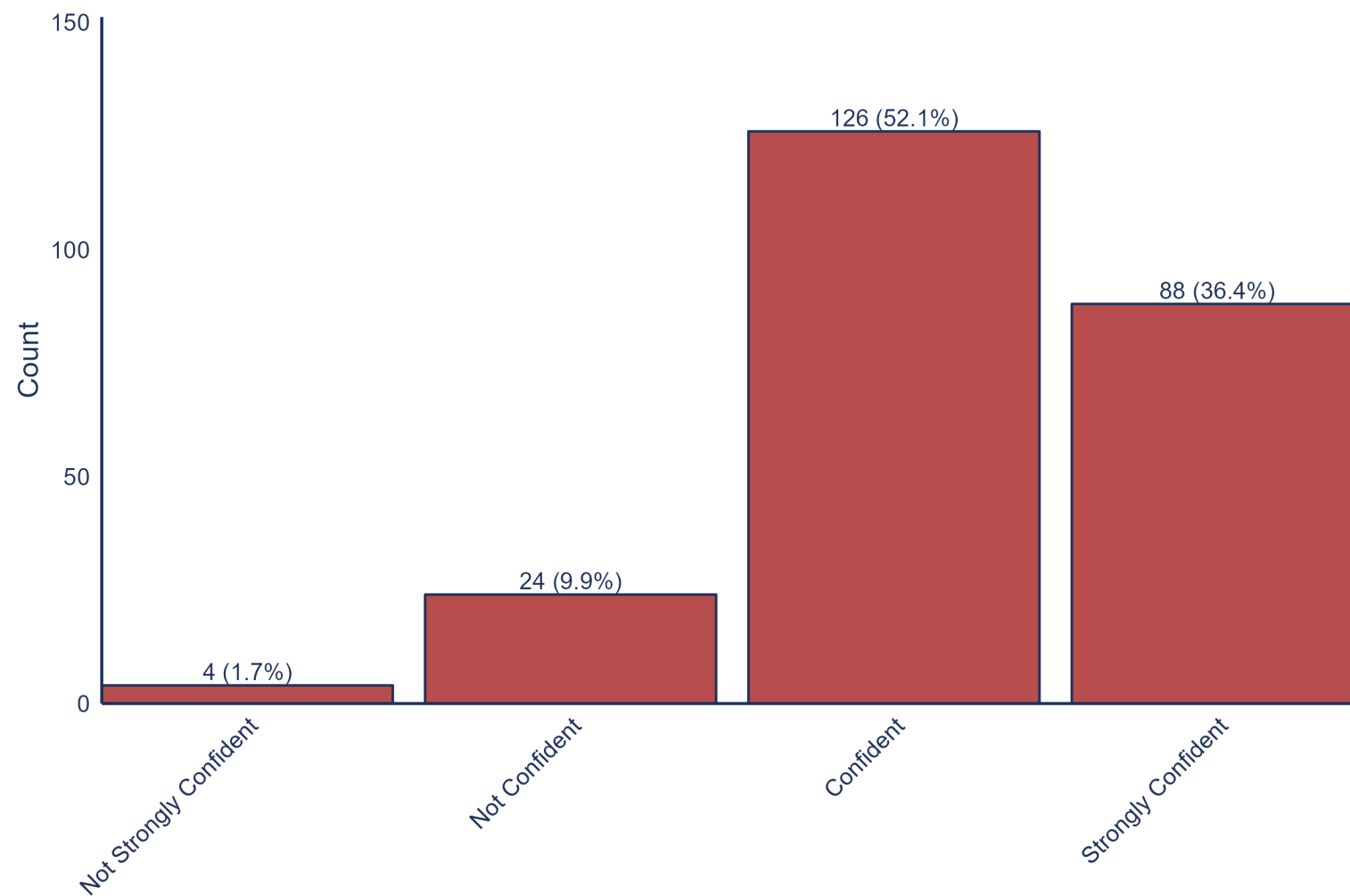
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Career Exploration



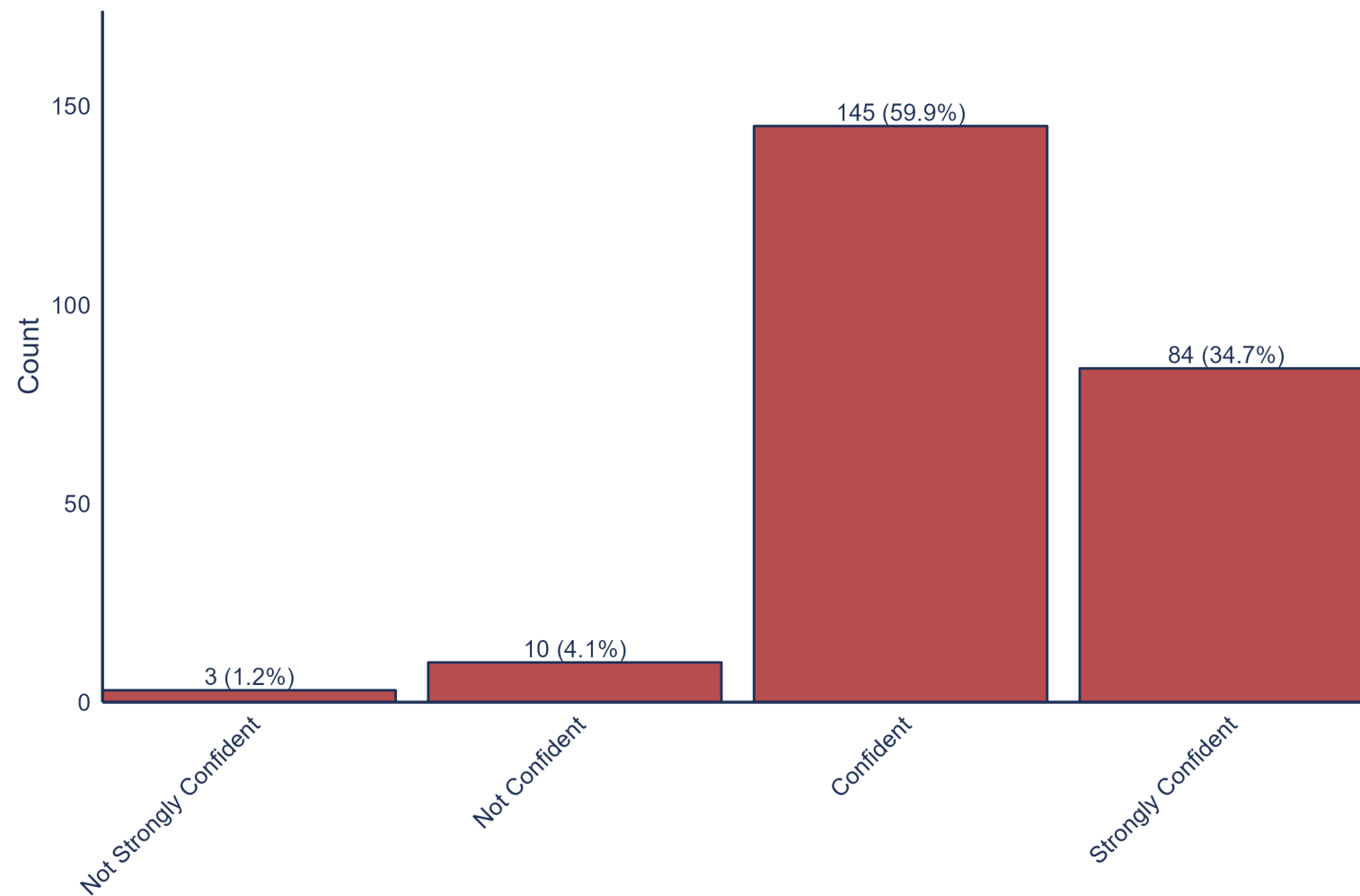
**How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Customized Employment Strategies**



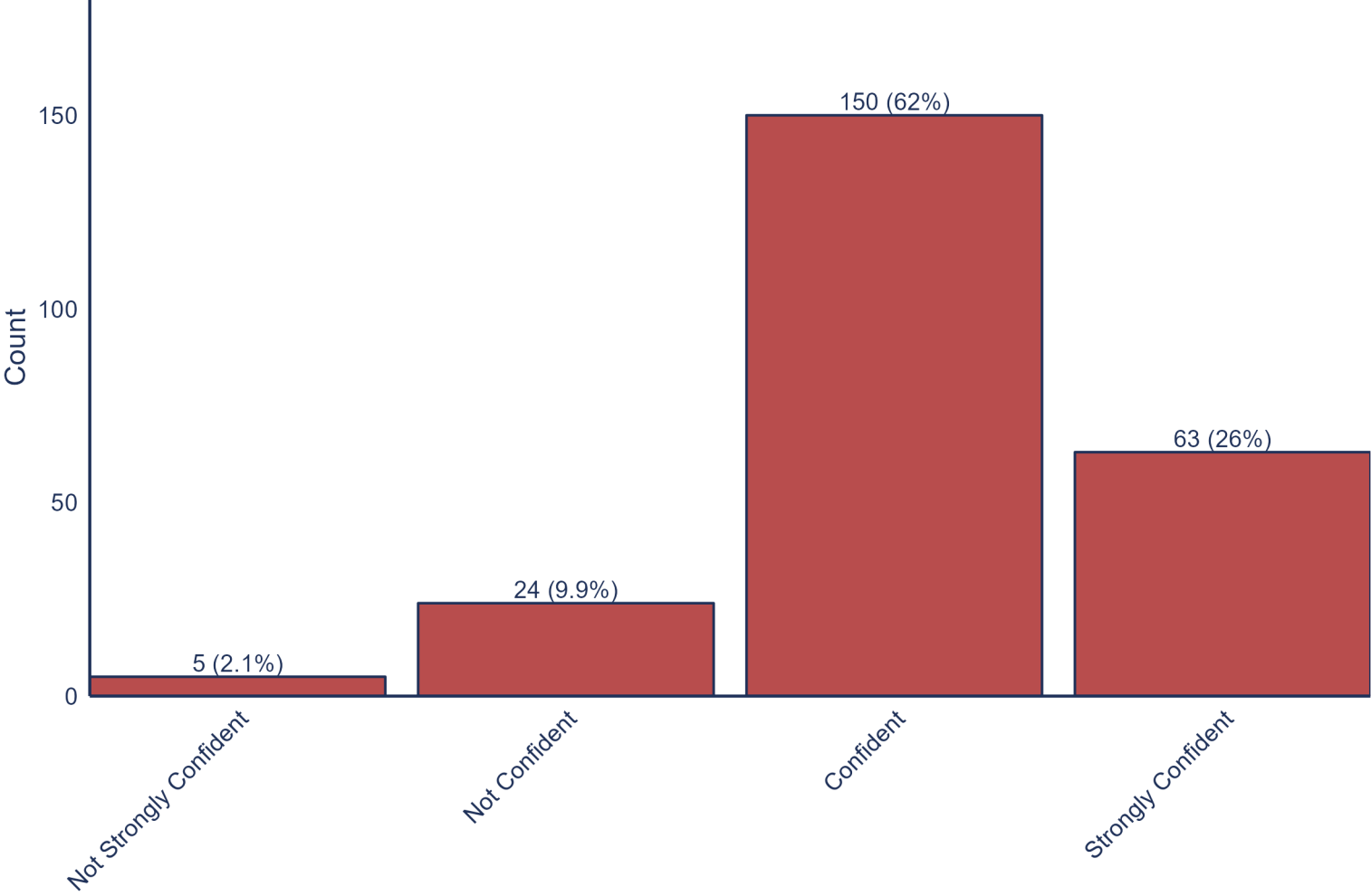
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Systematic Instruction



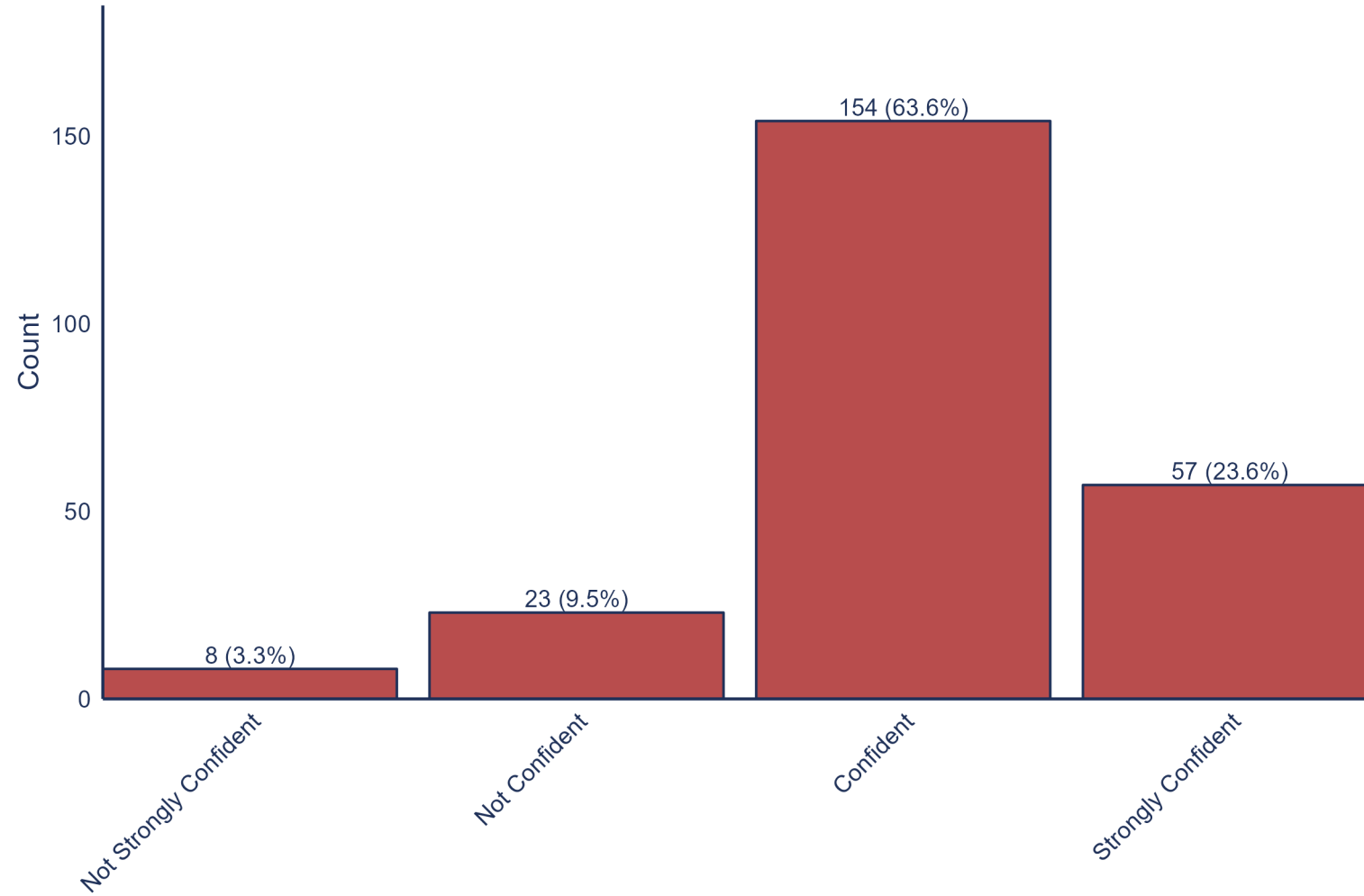
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Job Coaching and On-the-Job Support



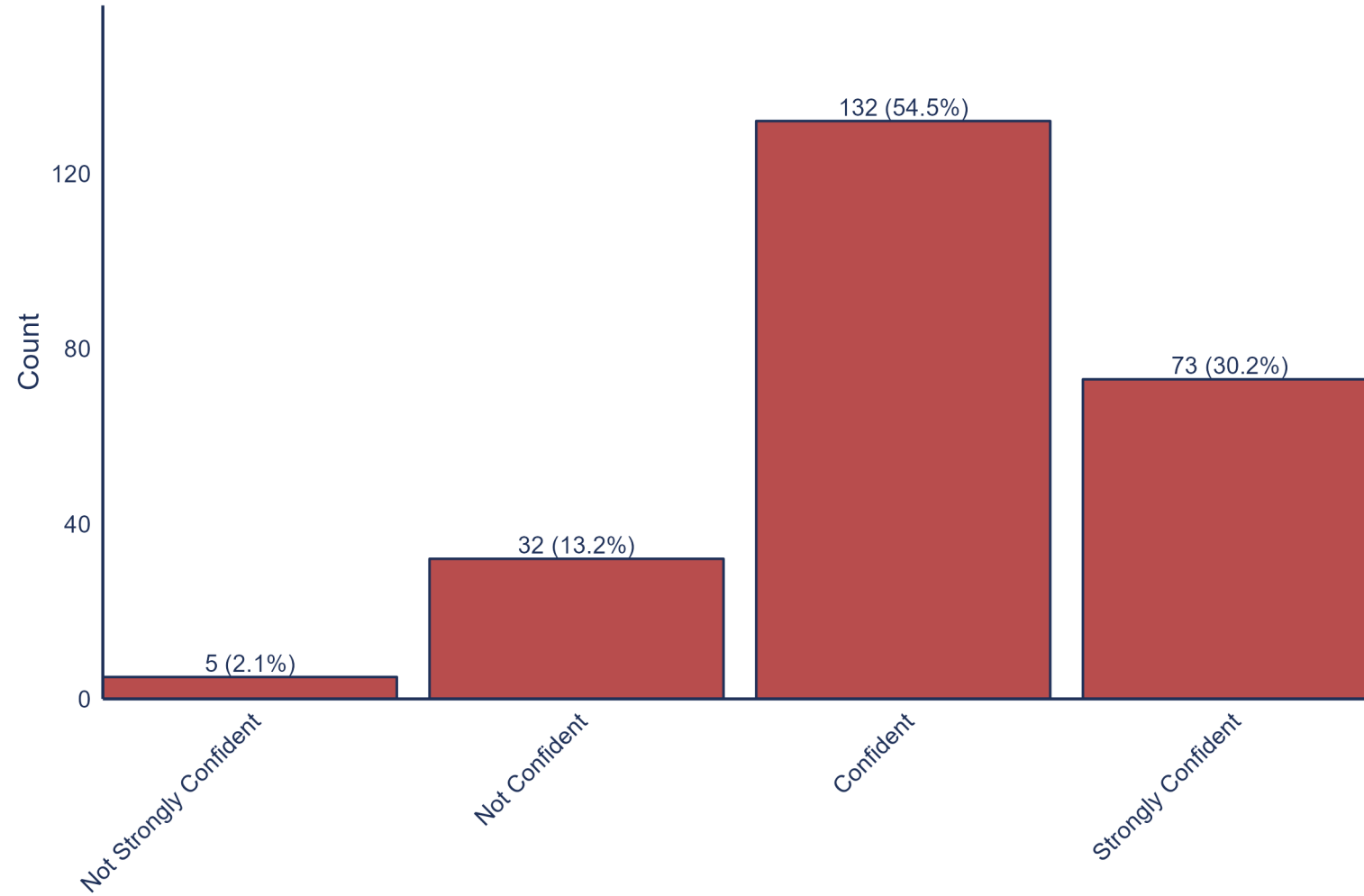
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Employer Engagement and Partnership Building



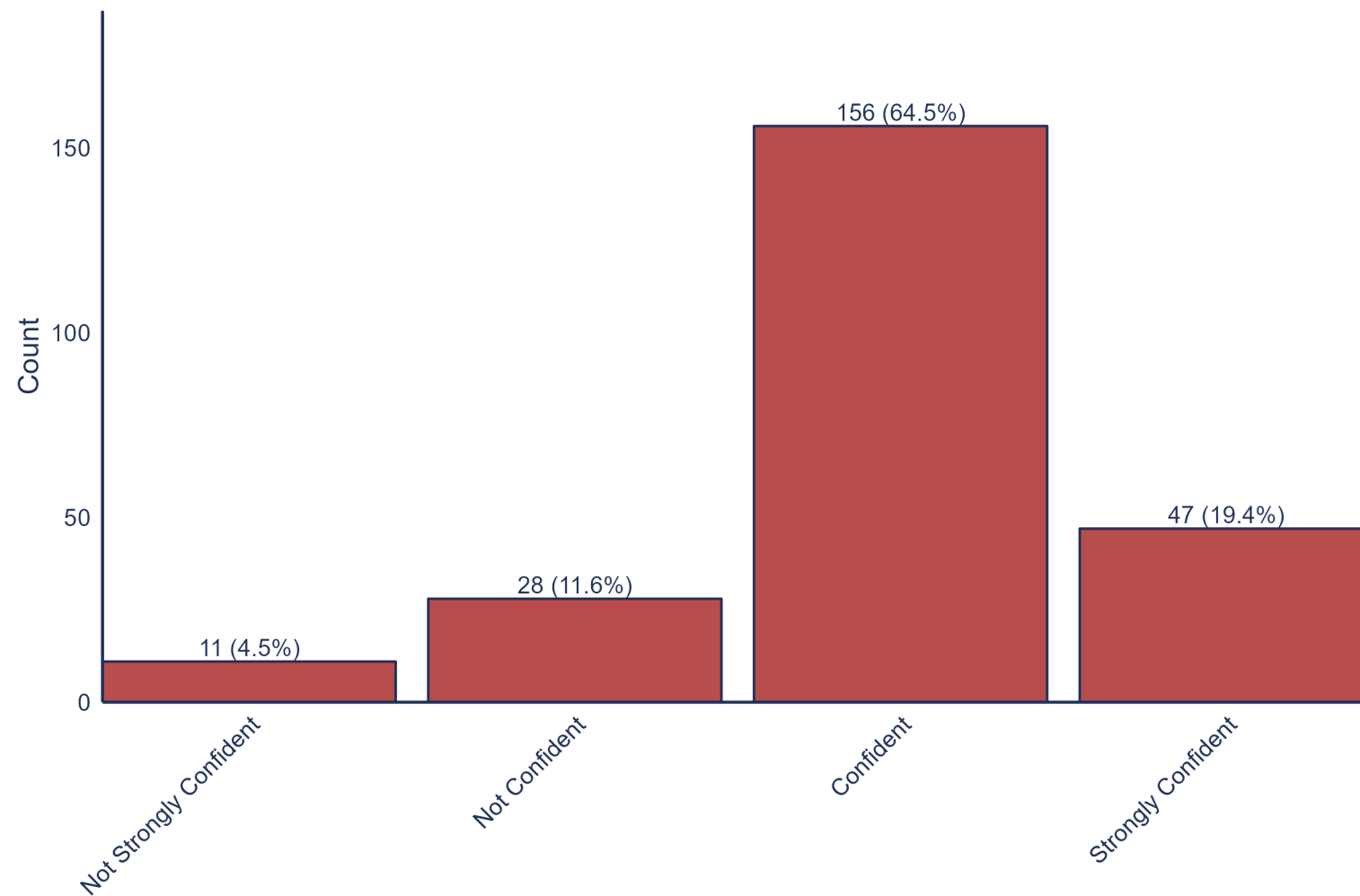
**How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Assistive Technology and Workplace Accomodations**



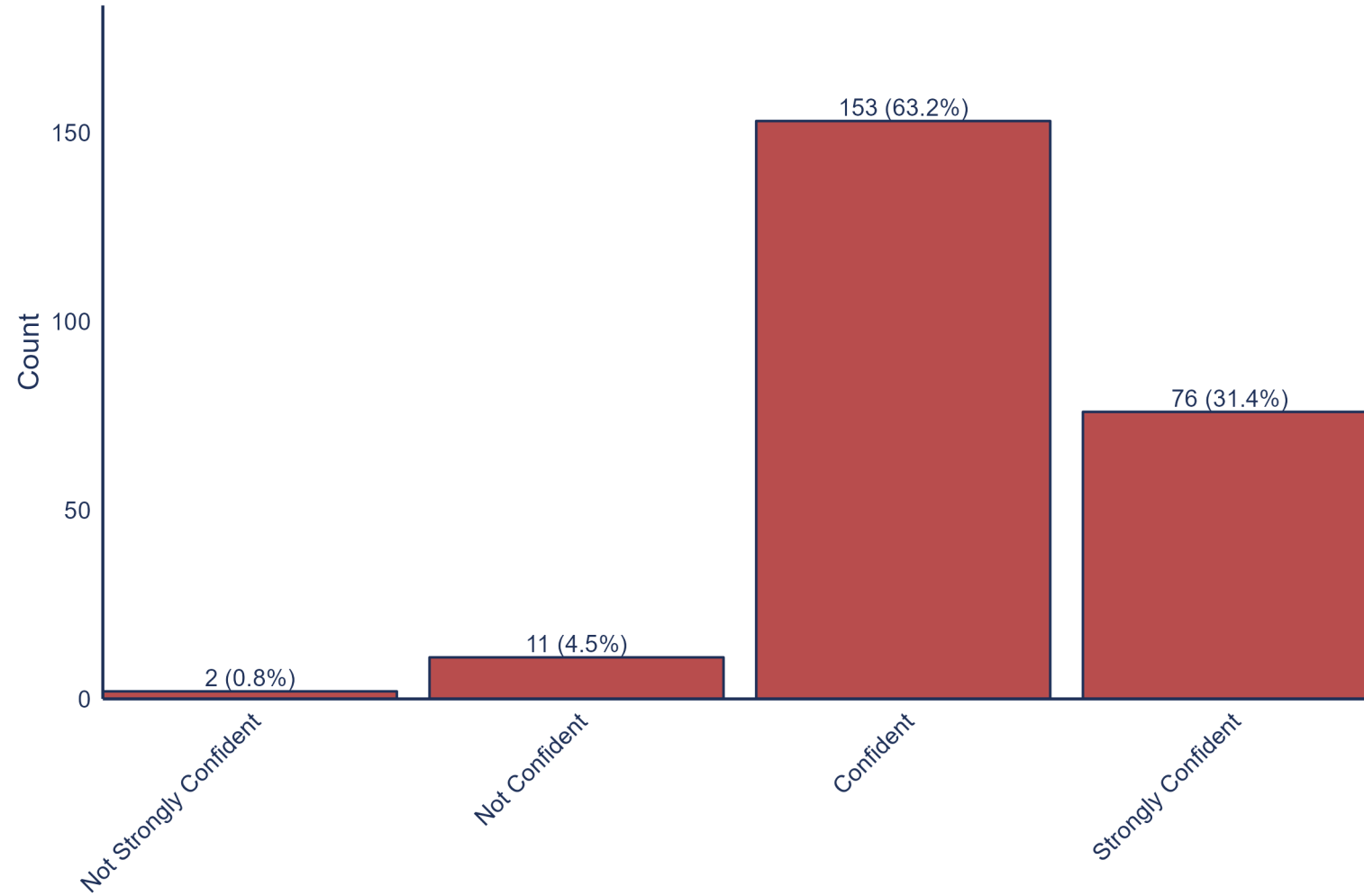
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Benefits Counseling



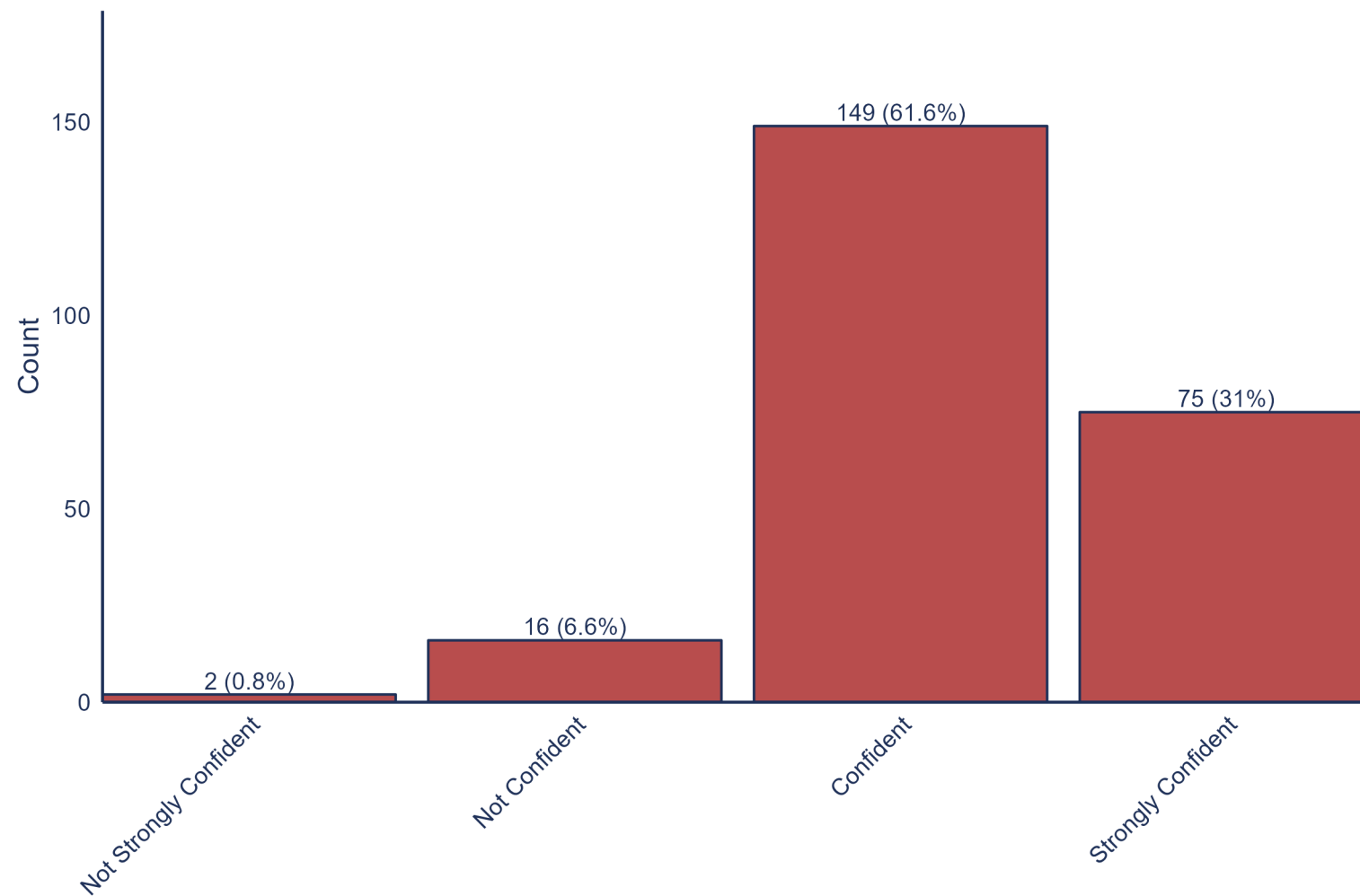
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Understanding and Navigating VR and DDD Systems



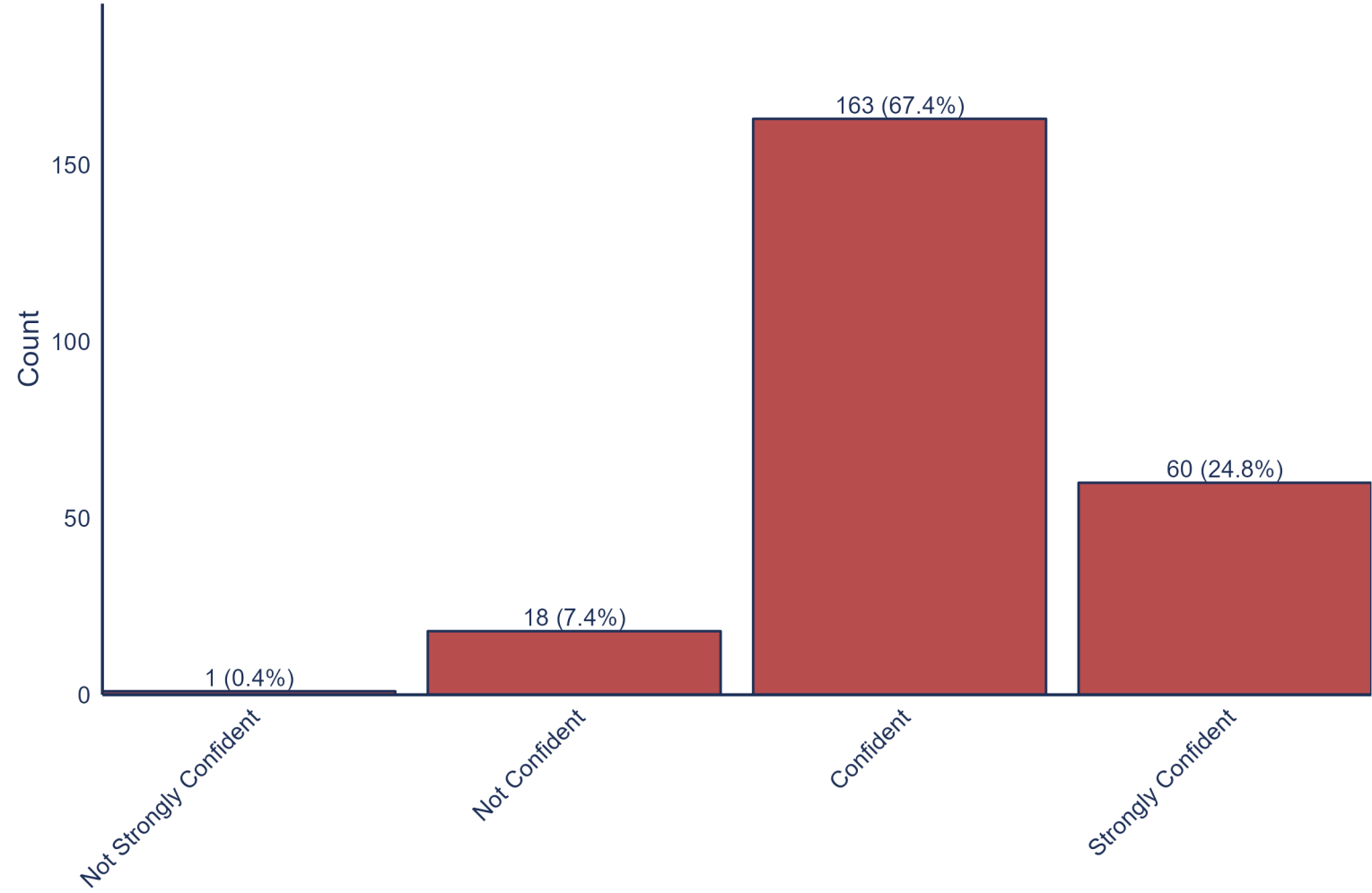
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Collaboration with Families and Caregivers



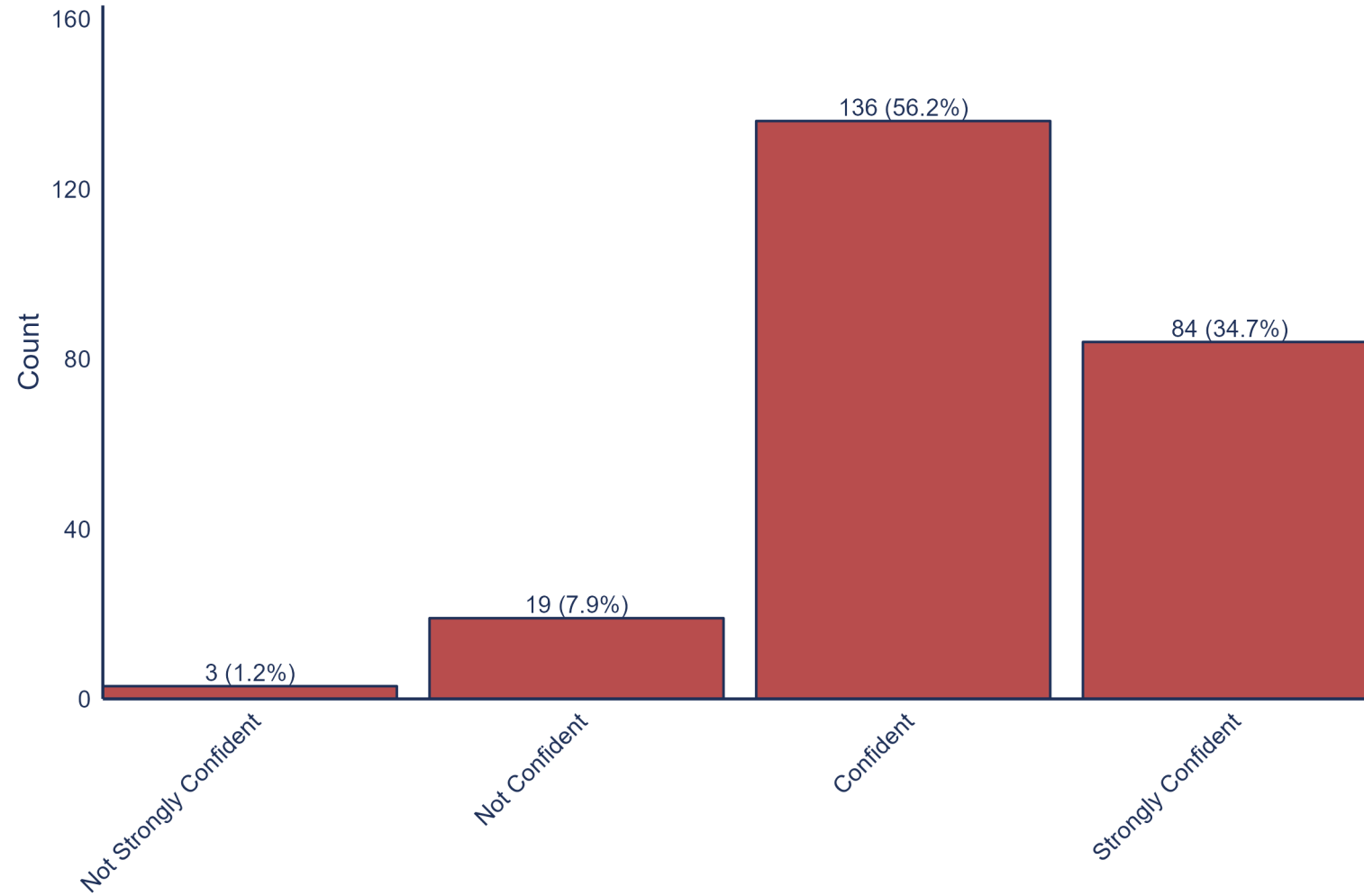
**How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Conflict Resolution and Problem-Solving**



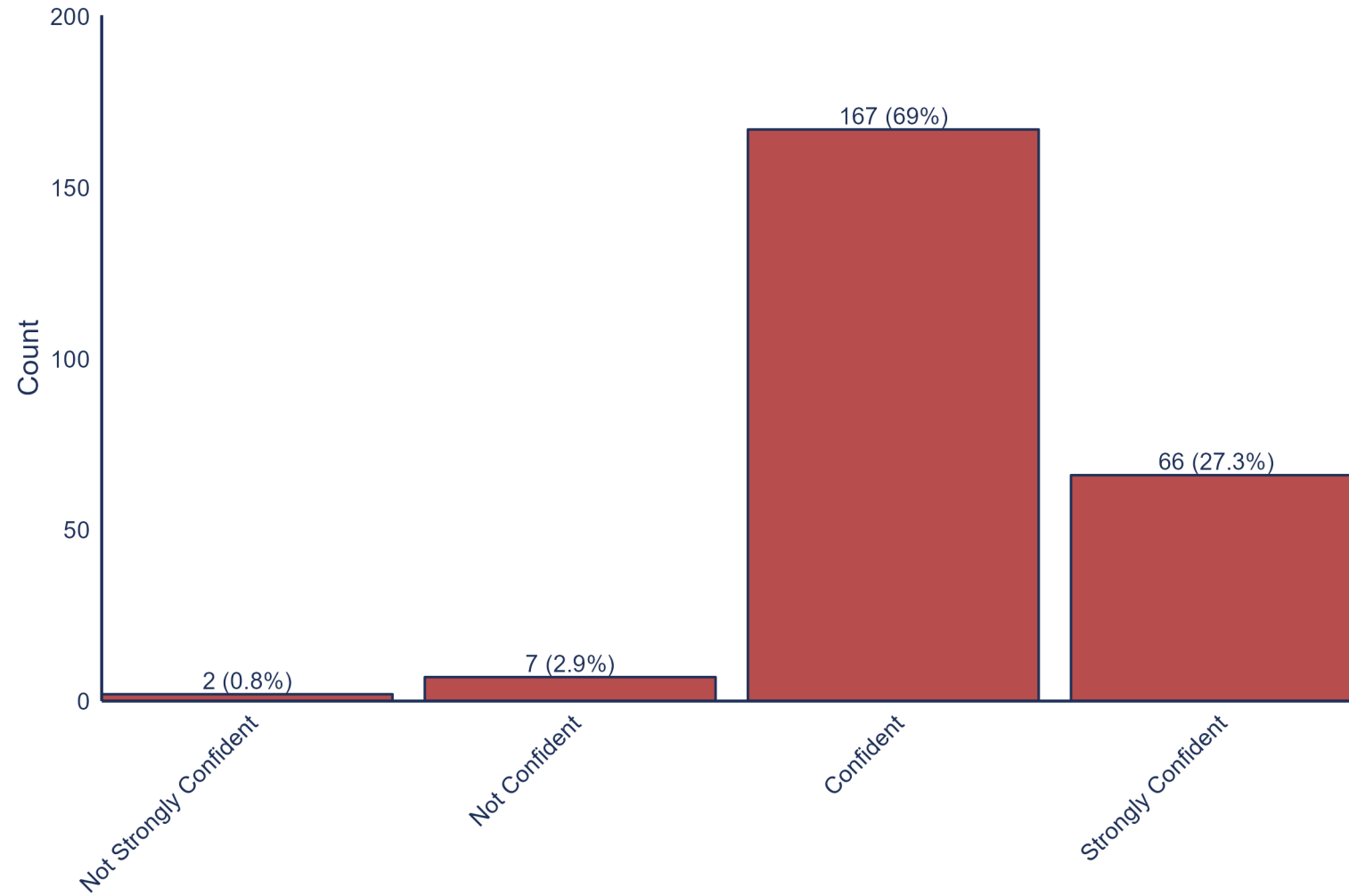
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Documentation and Reporting Requirements



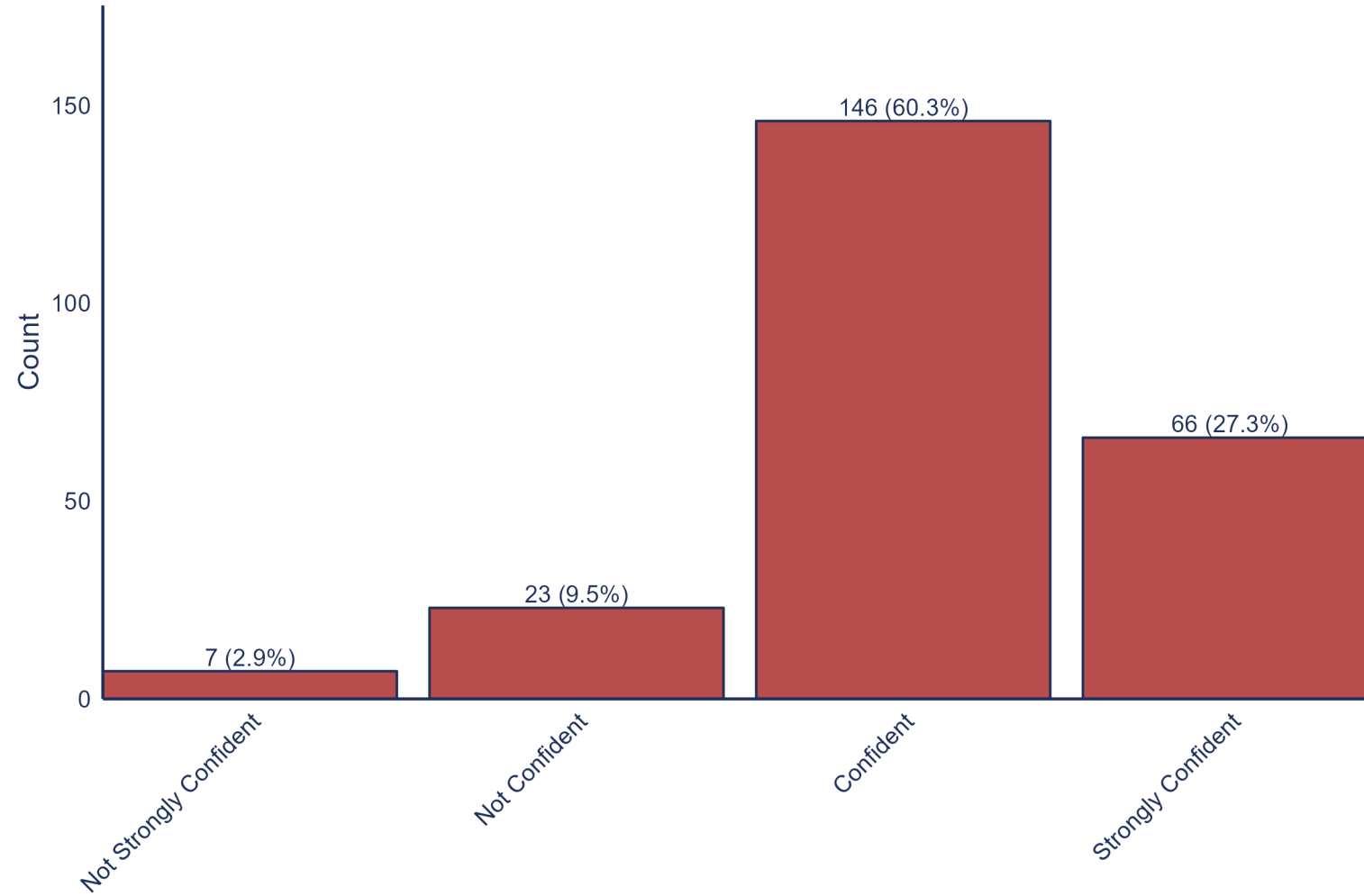
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Understanding Labor Laws and Regulations



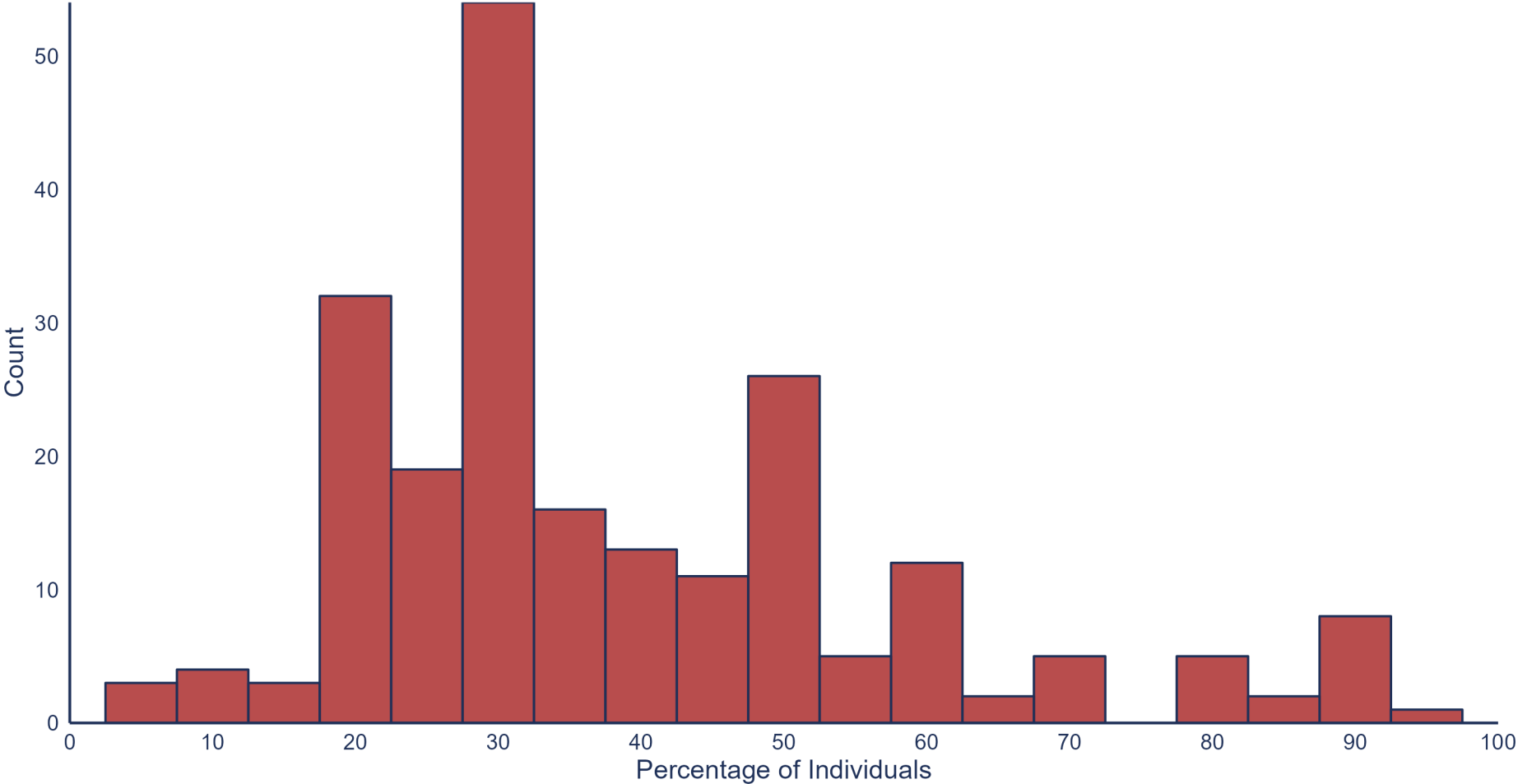
How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Time Management and Organizational Skills



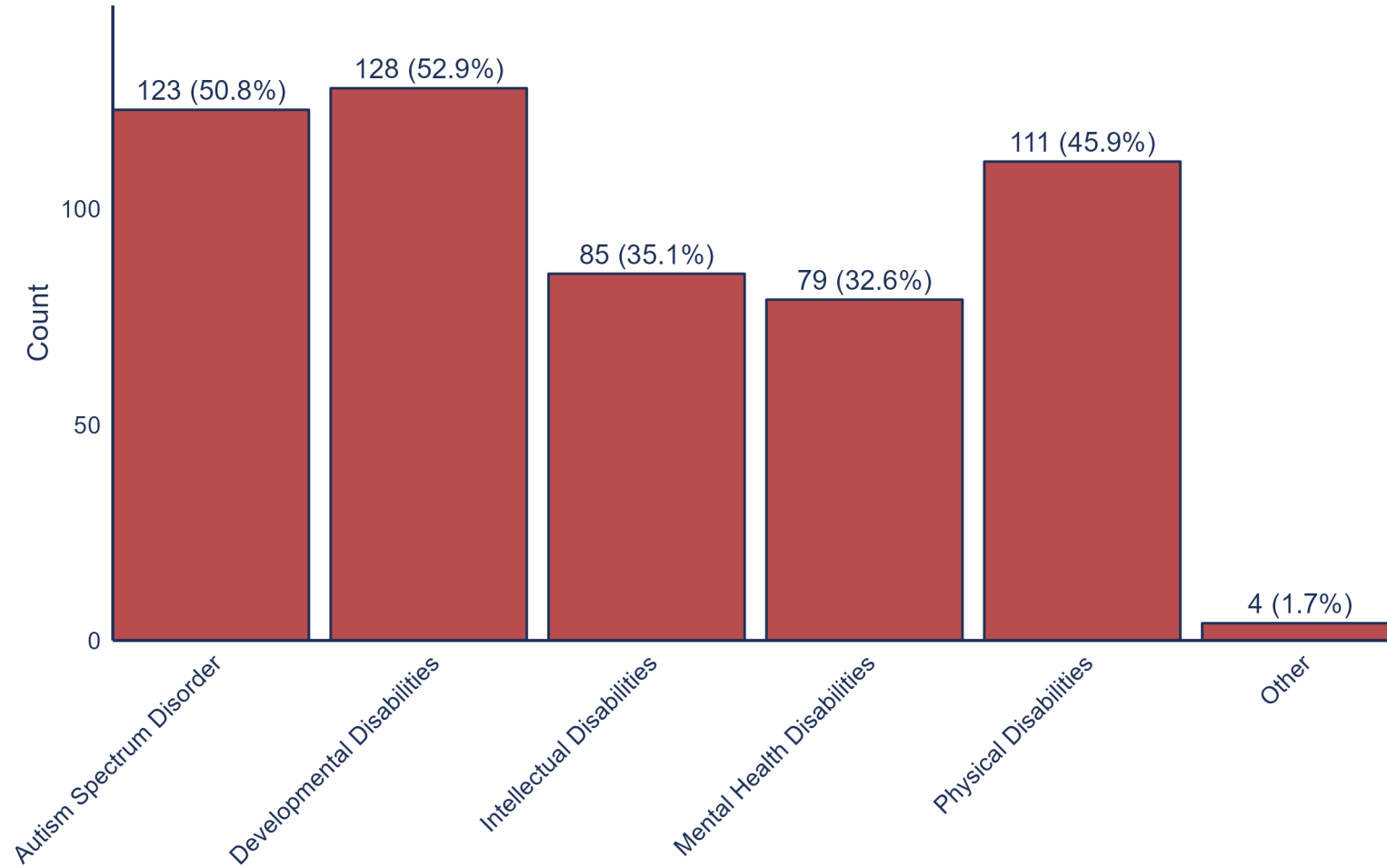
**How confident do you feel in your ability to implement the following:
Stress Management and Burnout Prevention**



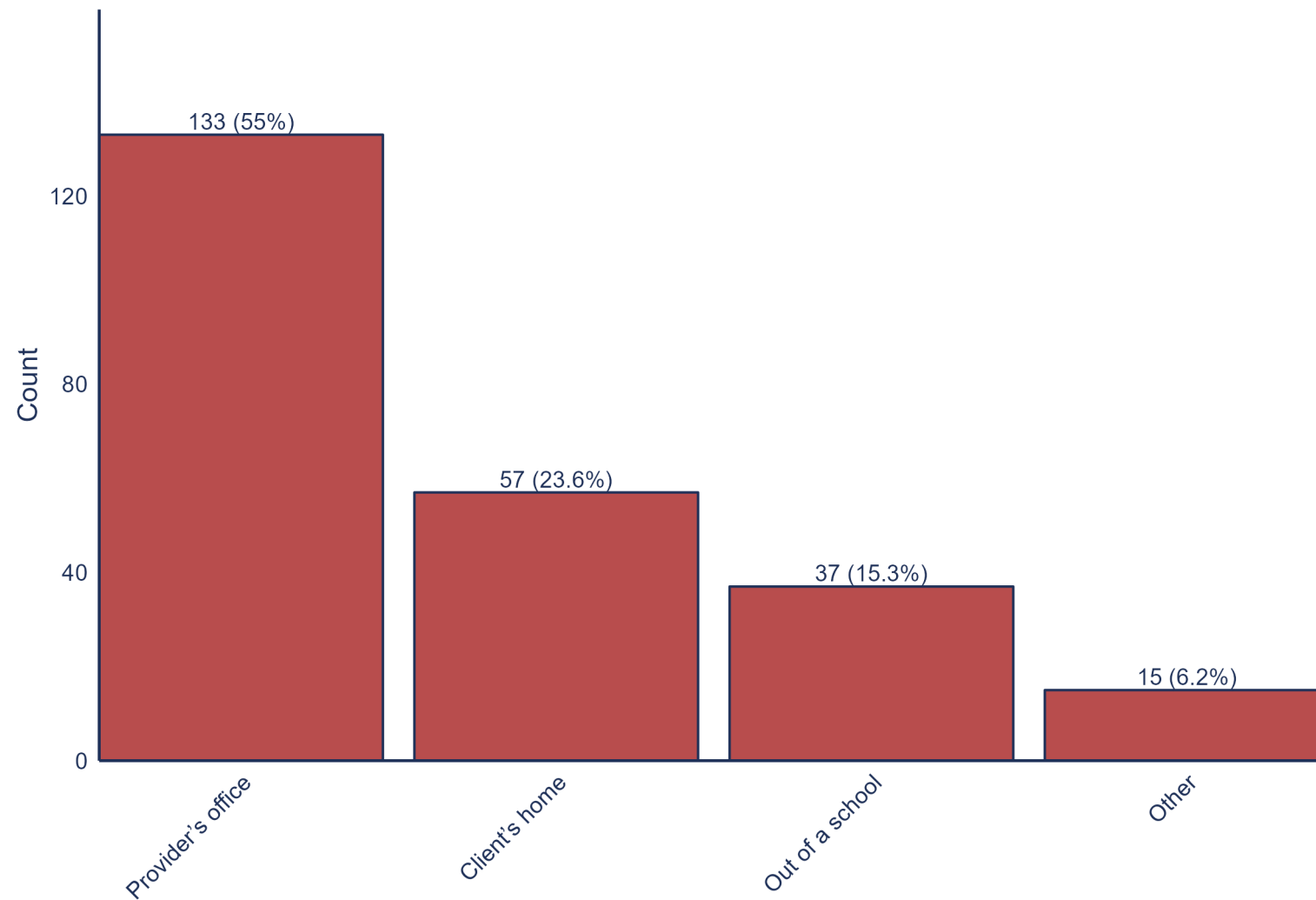
What is the percentage of individuals on your case load
that you have placed in Competitive Integrated Employment in the past year?



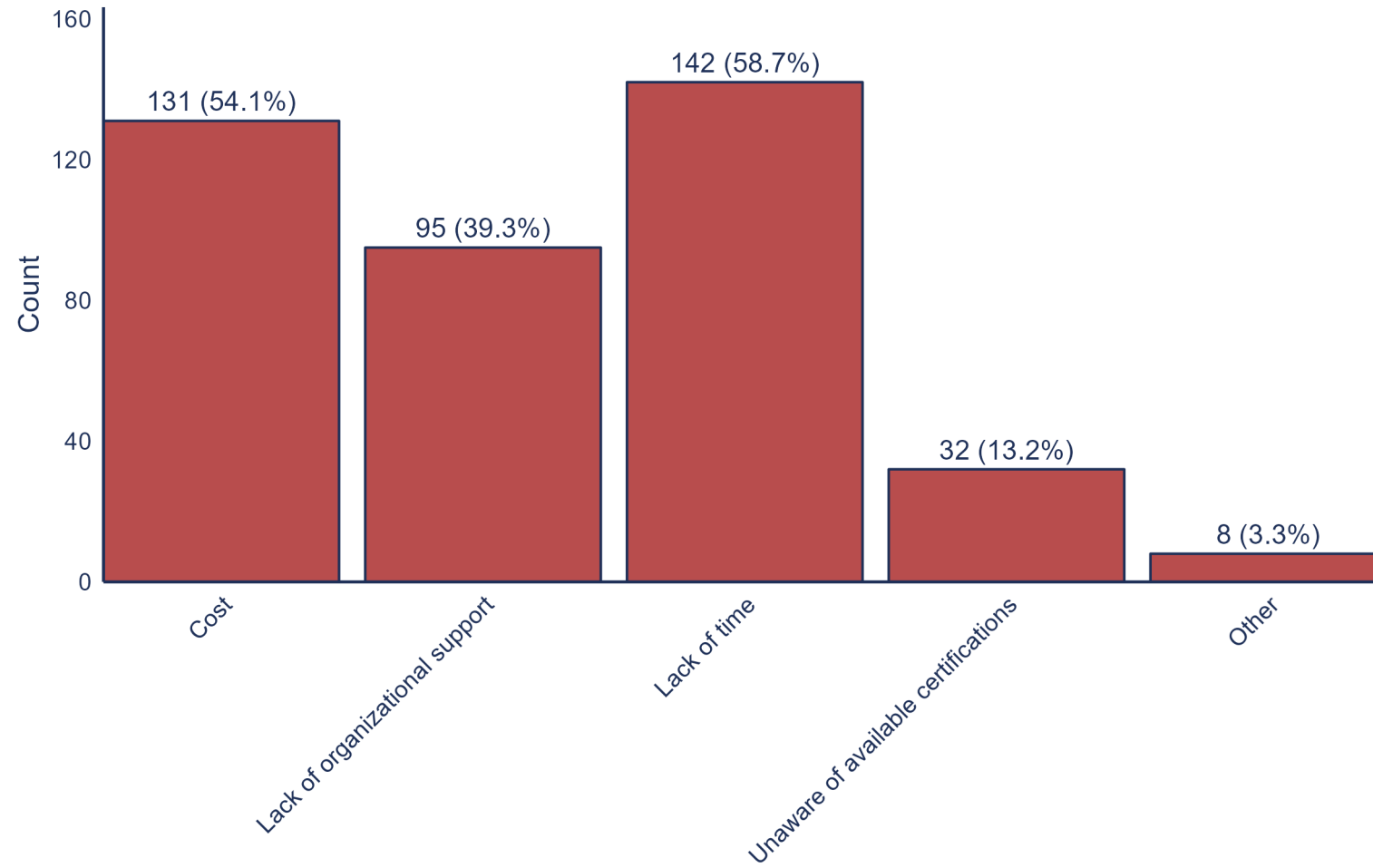
Which types of disabilities do you primarily work with? (Select all that apply)



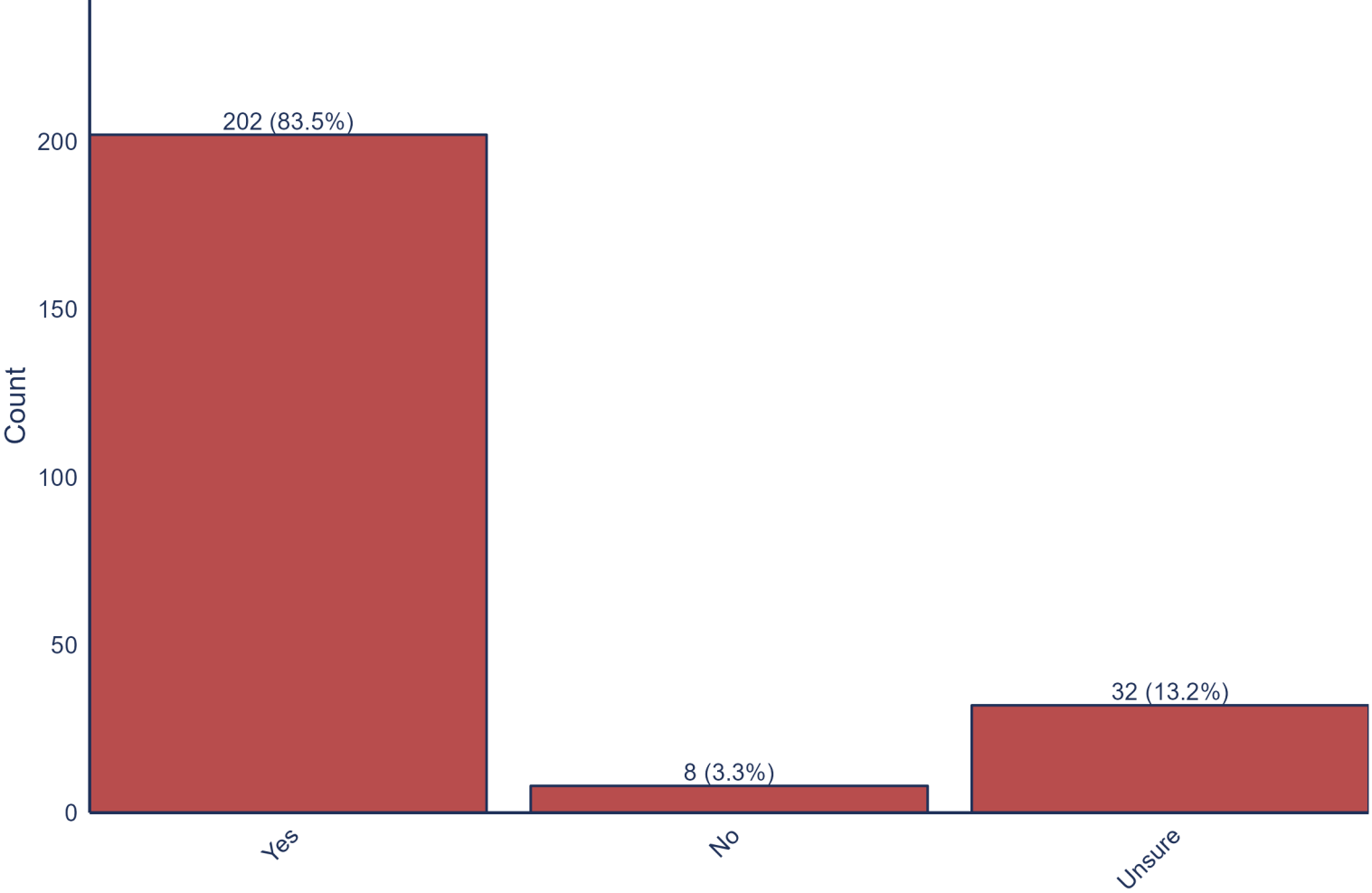
Where do you provide employment-related services to individuals?



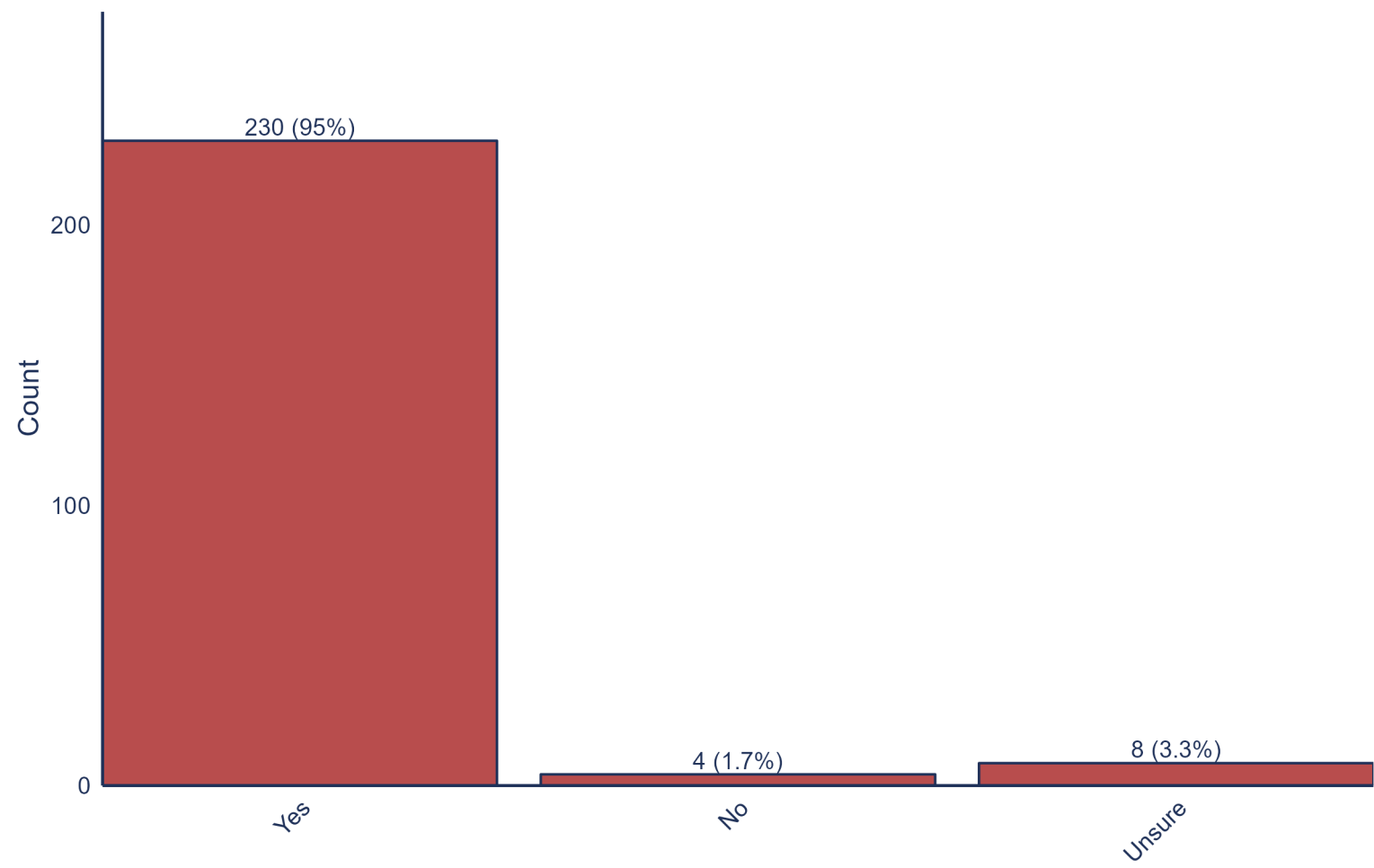
If you do not hold a certification, what has prevented you from pursuing one? (Select all that apply)



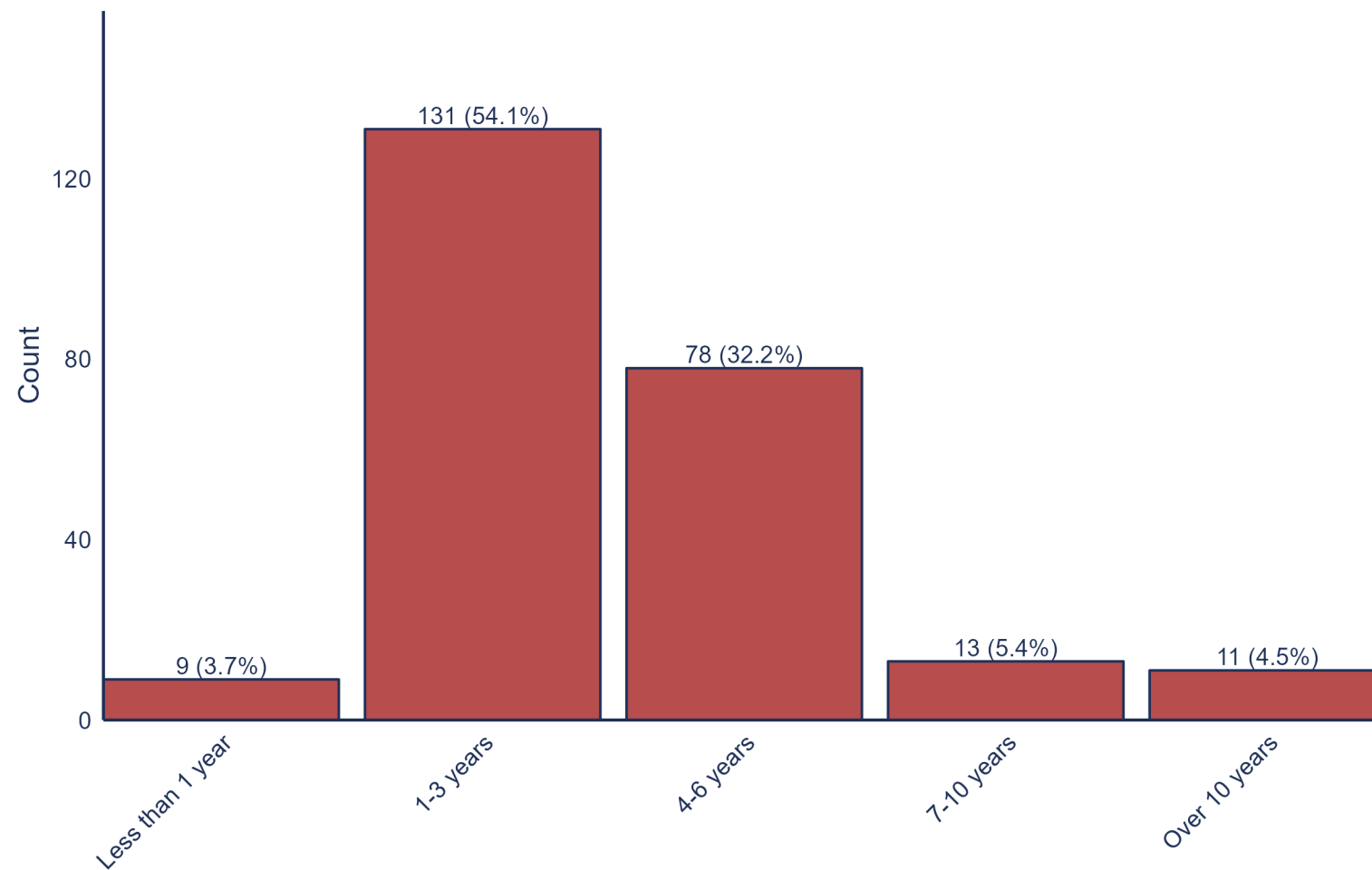
Is your organization willing to pay for you to receive certification?



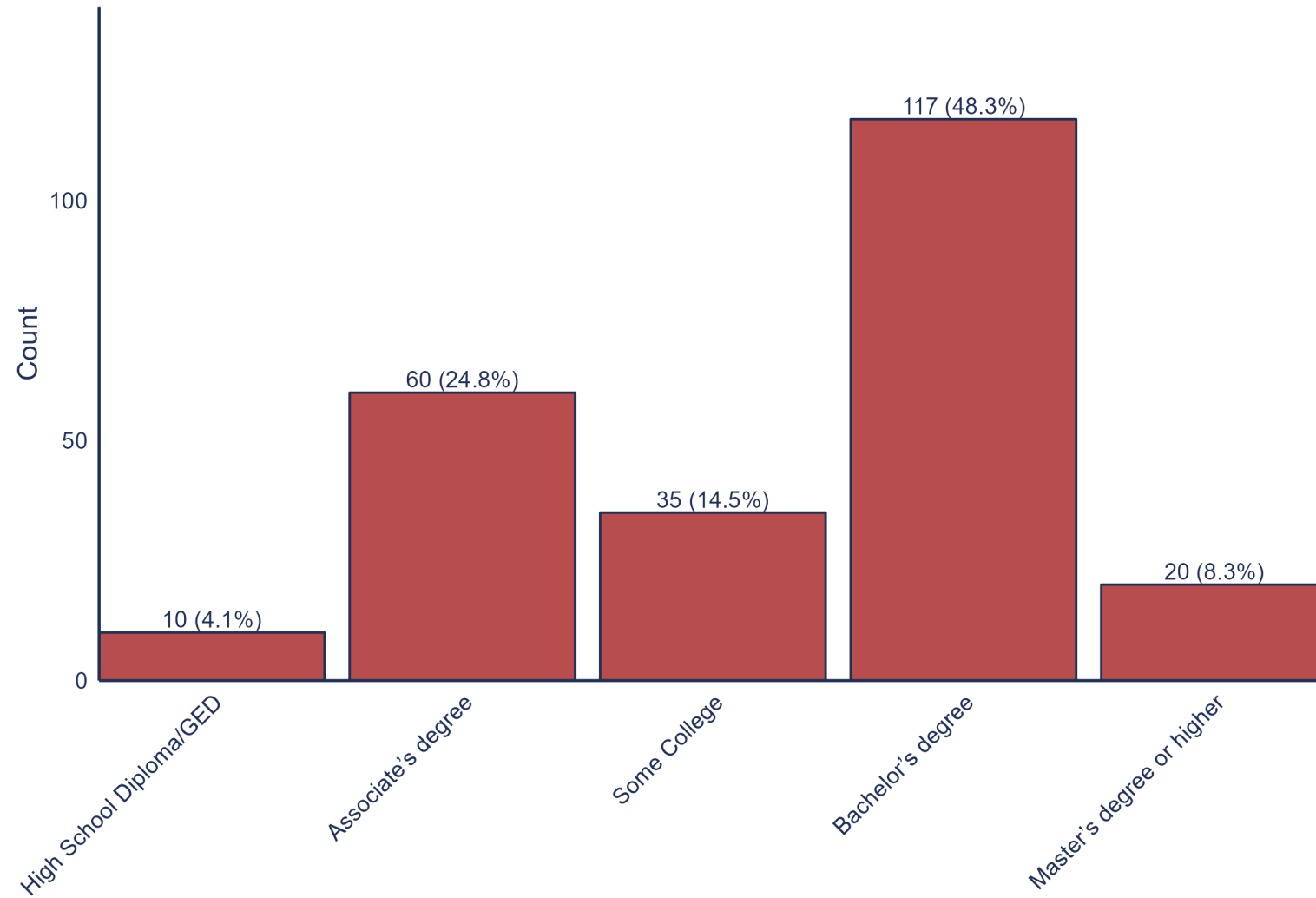
**If cost and time is not a factor, would you
commit to acquiring certification in the next
year?**



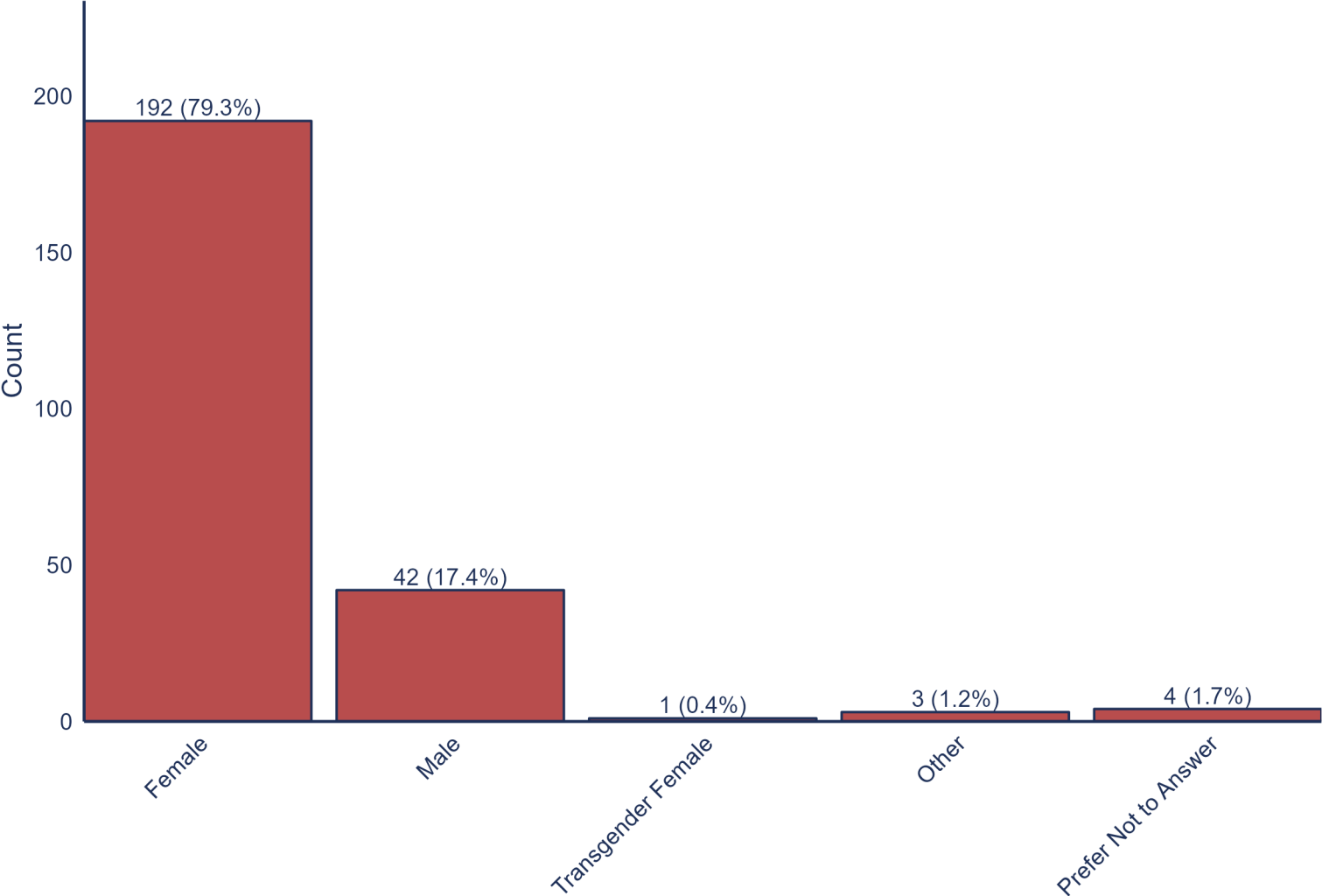
**How many years have you been working as an
employment support professional/job coach, job
developer, etc.?**



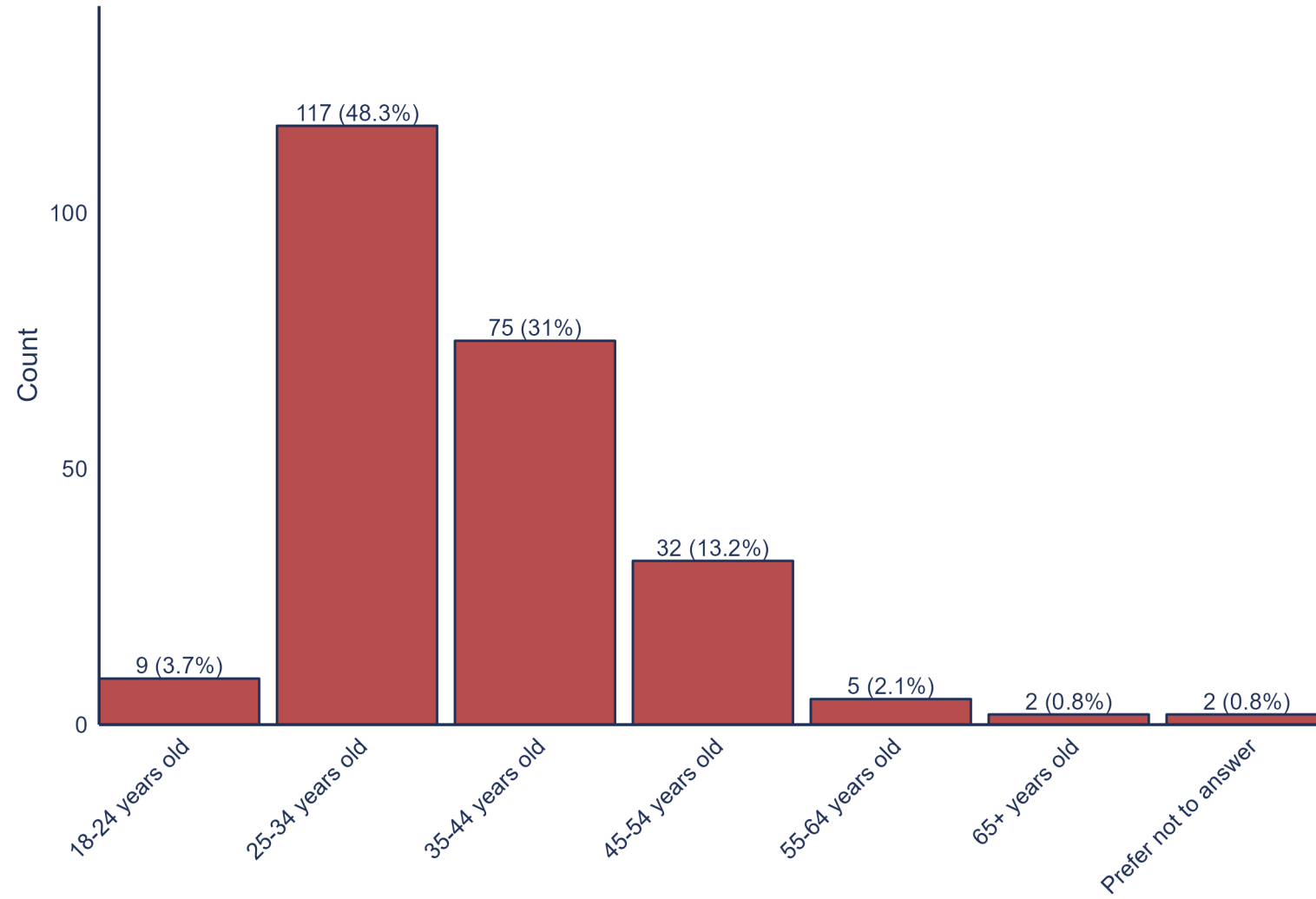
What is your highest level of education?



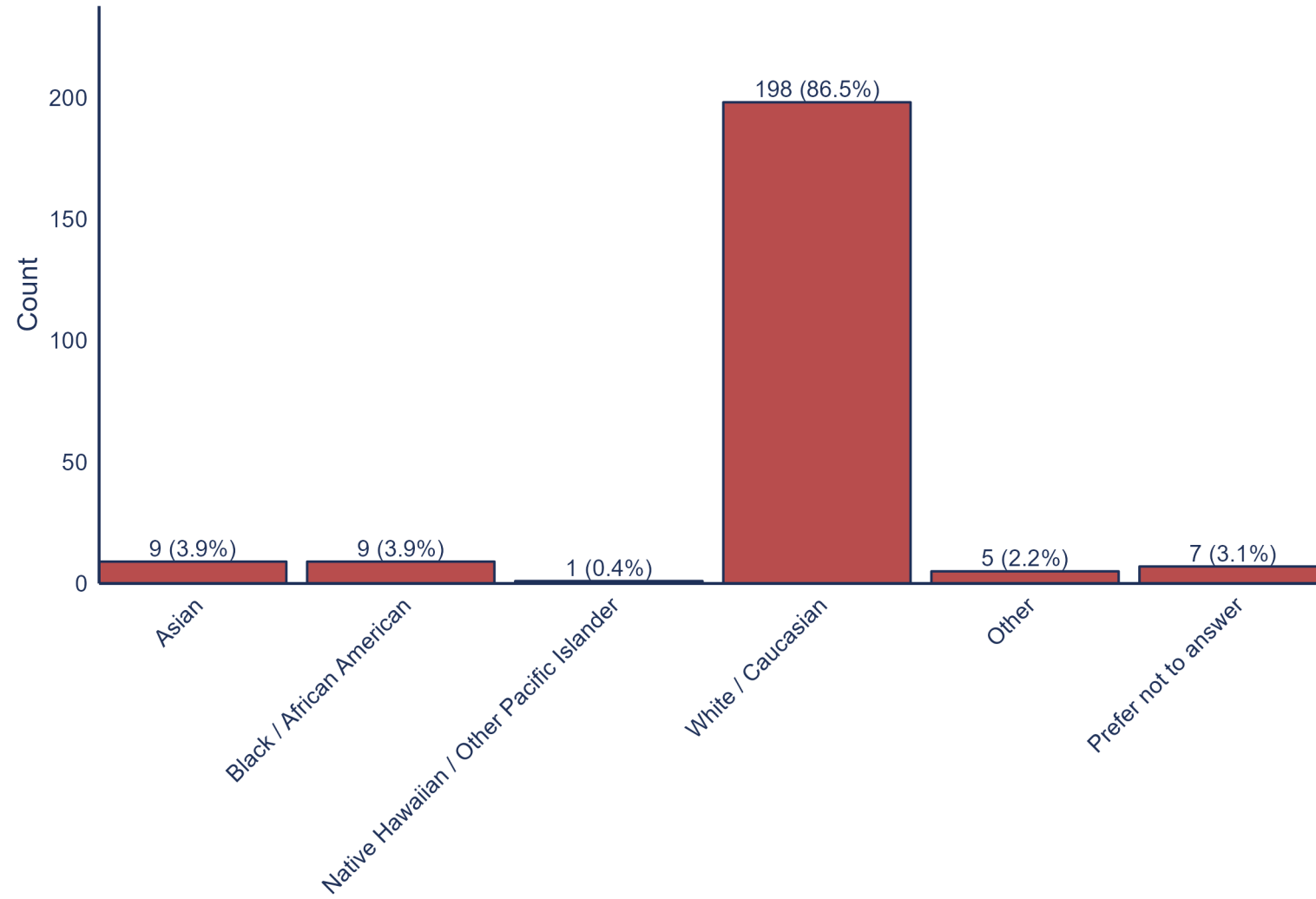
To which gender identity do you most identify?



How old are you?



How would you describe your race?



How would you describe your ethnicity?

