

SBU

Survey of Business  
Uncertainty



Federal Reserve  
Bank *of* Atlanta

# Monthly Report: May 2024

Based on survey responses from 13-24 May 2024

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# Headline Results

## May 2024 Survey of Business Uncertainty

1. Sales revenue growth expectations have returned to their pre-pandemic average. (Slides 4)
2. But firms remain more uncertain about future sales growth than before the pandemic. (Slide 4)
3. Business executives favor verbal warnings of termination or verbal reprimands for employees for failing to comply to company policy on in-person days, and they also favor written warnings for failure to complete work on time. (slides 9&10)



SBU

# Survey of Business Uncertainty

## About the Survey

The Survey of Business Uncertainty (SBU) is fielded each month by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

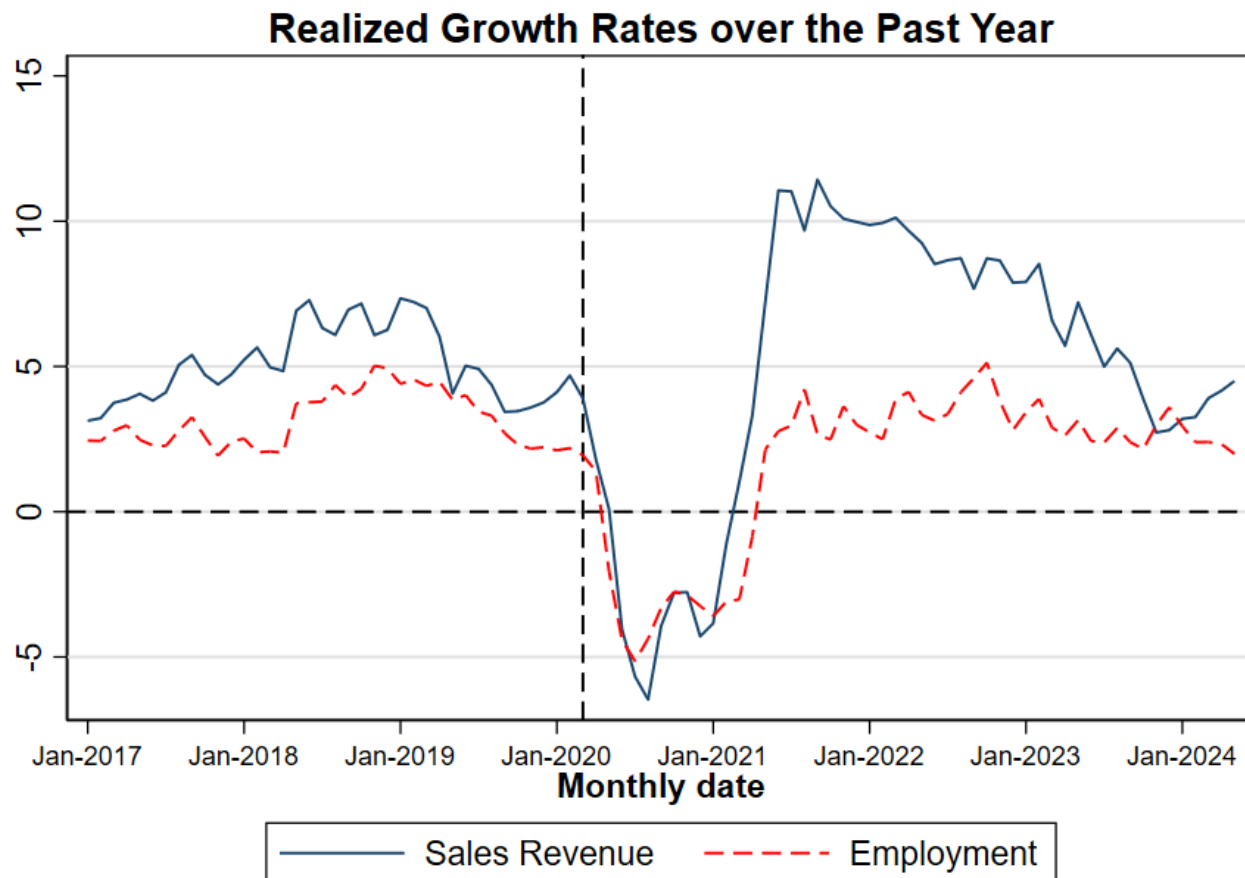
The SBU questionnaire goes to about 1500 panel members, who occupy senior finance and managerial positions at U.S. firms. We contact panel members each month by email, and they respond via a web-based instrument.

Survey questions pertain to current, past, and future outcomes at the respondent's firm. Our primary objective is to elicit the respondent's subjective forecast distributions over own-firm future sales growth rates and employment levels. We also ask special questions on timely topics.

For more information on survey design and methodology, please refer to the resources on the [SBU page](#) and "[Surveying Business Uncertainty](#)," published in the *Journal of Econometrics* and also available as NBER Working Paper [25956](#).

Nominal sales growth has slowed considerably over the past two years. Recent employment growth is in line with pre-pandemic growth.

January 2017–May 2024



NOTE: Calculated using monthly data through May 2024. Realized growth rate series for sales revenue and employment are activity-weighted averages of firms' reported (look-back) growth rates over the past year (specifically, the previous four quarters for sales revenue and previous 12 months for employment).

NOTE: The chart shows smoothed series.

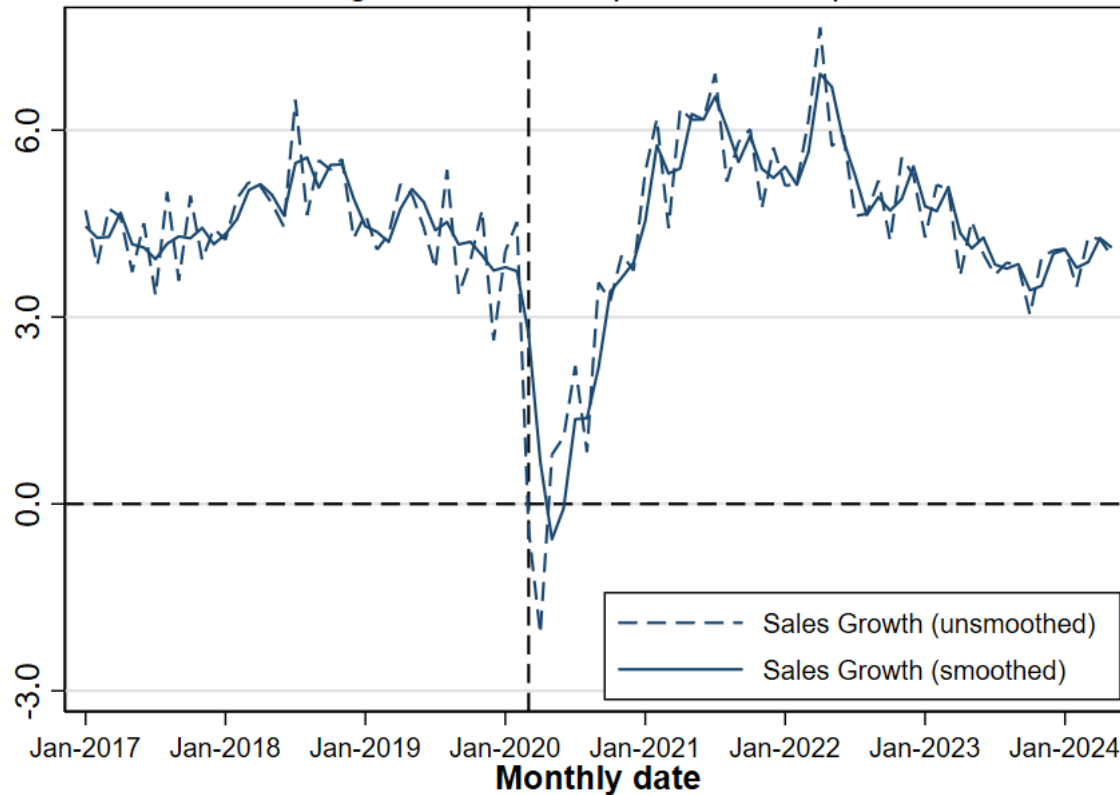
Source: Survey of Business Uncertainty conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. For more information, see "[Surveying Business Uncertainty](#)" by David Altig, Jose Maria Barrero, Nick Bloom, Steven J. Davis, Brent Meyer, and Nick Parker, NBER Working Paper No. 25956, February 2020.

Sales revenue growth expectations have returned to their pre-pandemic average. However, firms remain more uncertain about future revenue growth than they were before the pandemic.

January 2017–May 2024

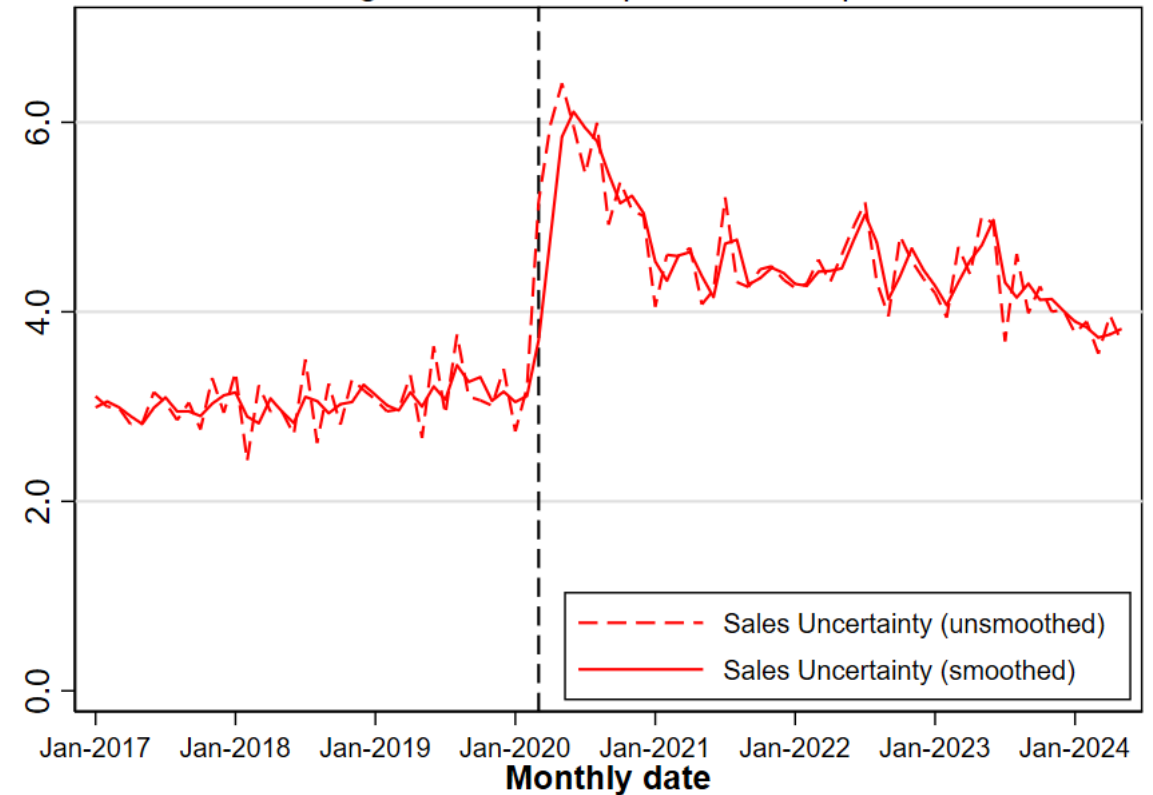
**Year-Ahead Sales Growth Rate Expectations**

Percent changes from current quarter to four quarters hence



**Year-Ahead Uncertainty about Sales Growth Rates**

Percent changes from current quarter to four quarters hence

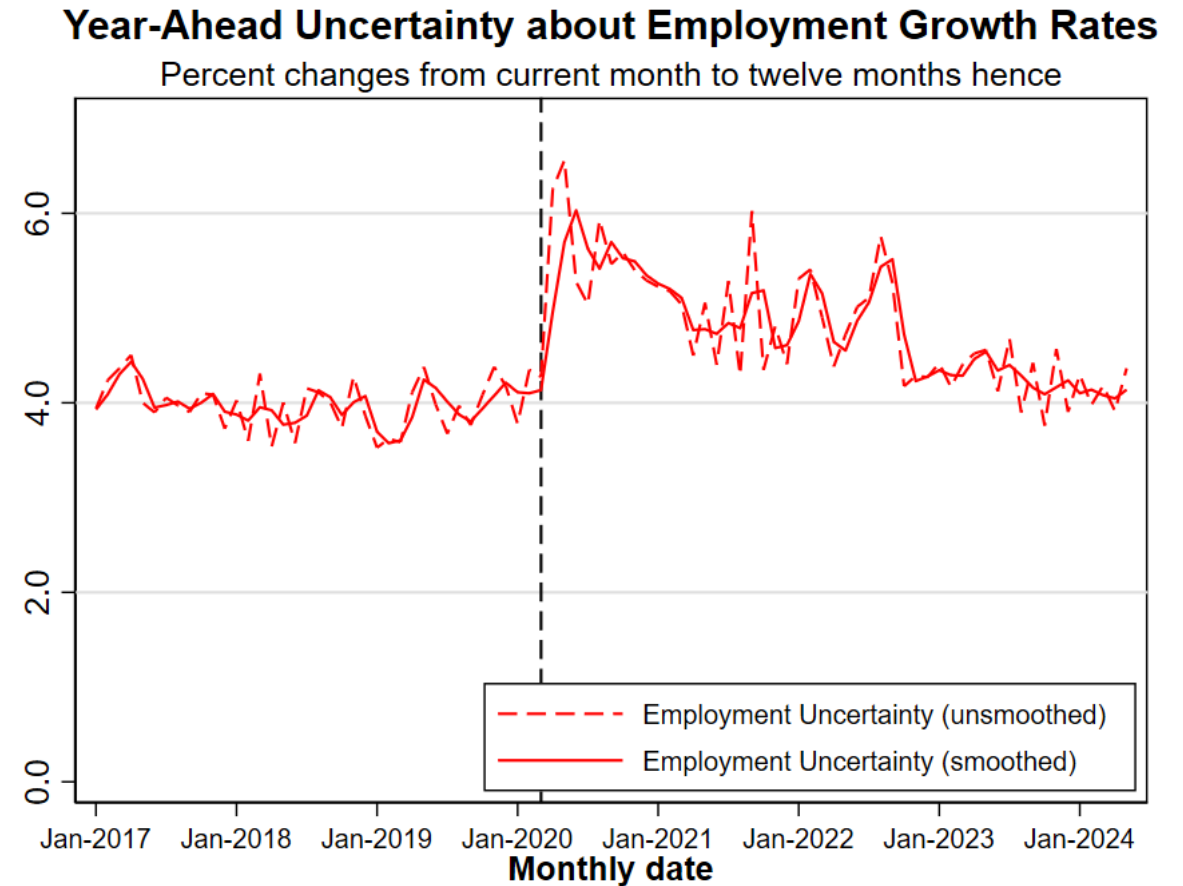
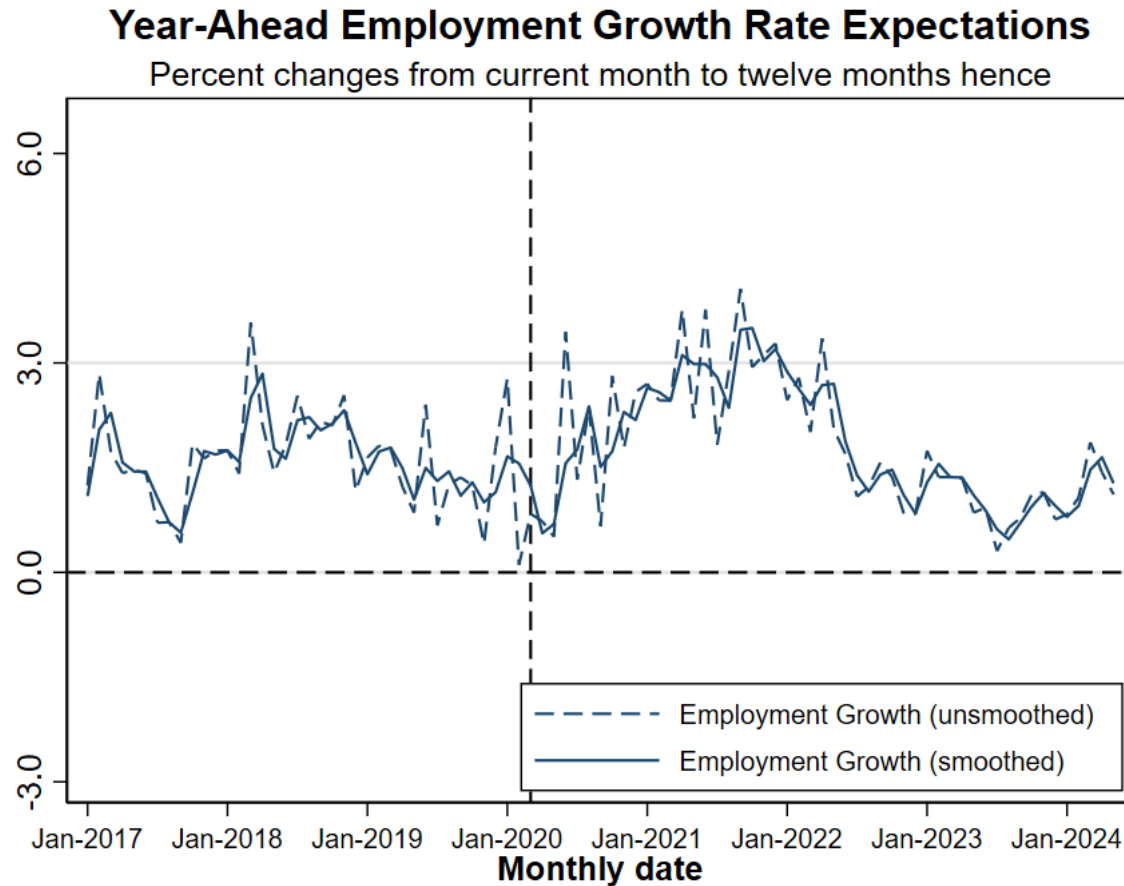


NOTE: The charts show smoothed series.

Source: Survey of Business Uncertainty conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. For more information, see "[Surveying Business Uncertainty](#)" by David Altig, Jose Maria Barrero, Nick Bloom, Steven J. Davis, Brent Meyer, and Nick Parker, NBER Working Paper No. 25956, February 2020.

# Expected employment growth has improved in recent months. Uncertainty about employment growth has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

January 2017–May 2024

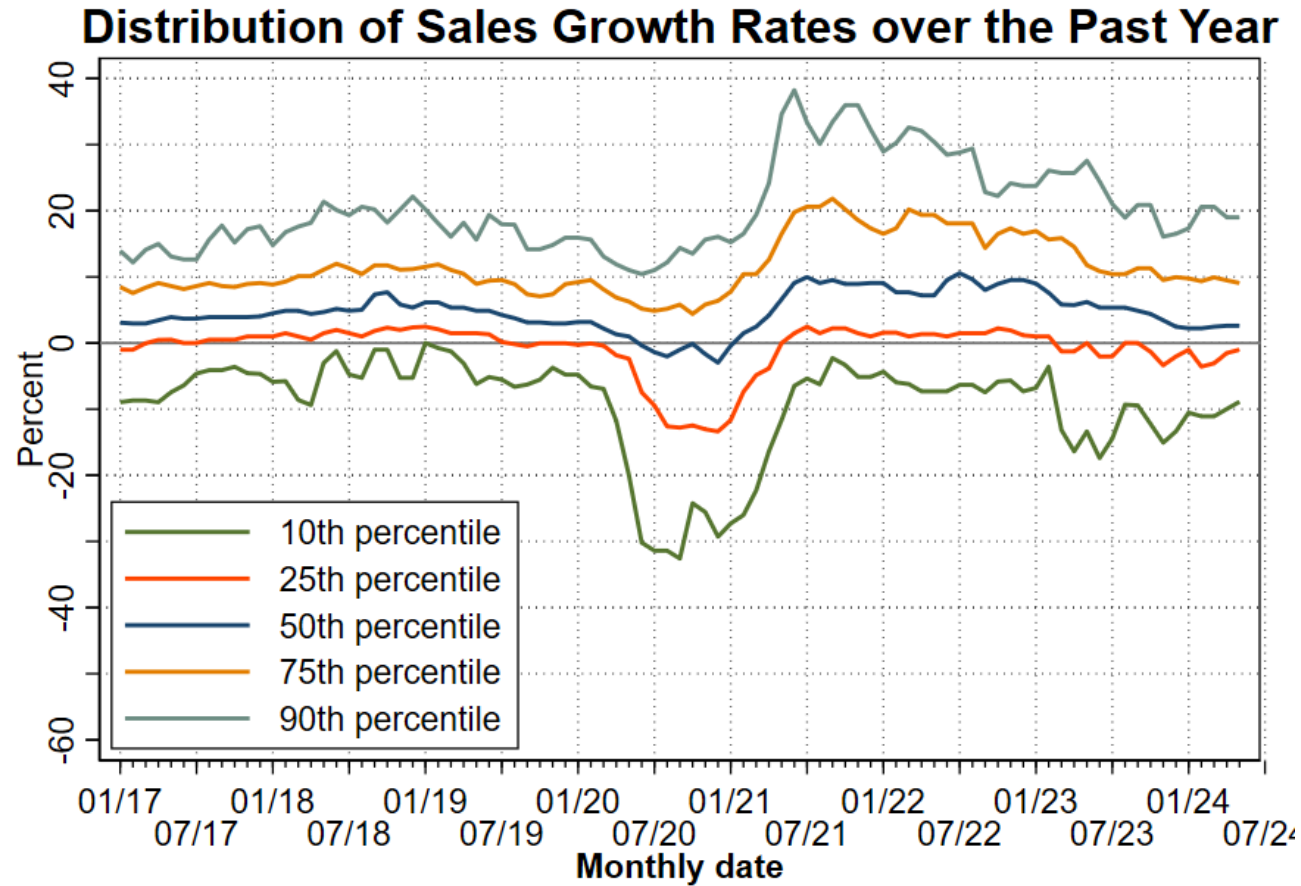


NOTE: The charts show smoothed series.

Source: Survey of Business Uncertainty conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. For more information, see "[Surveying Business Uncertainty](#)" by David Altig, Jose Maria Barrero, Nick Bloom, Steven J. Davis, Brent Meyer, and Nick Parker, NBER Working Paper No. 25956, February 2020.

# The distribution of sales growth rates across firms remains wider than before the pandemic.

January 2017–May 2024

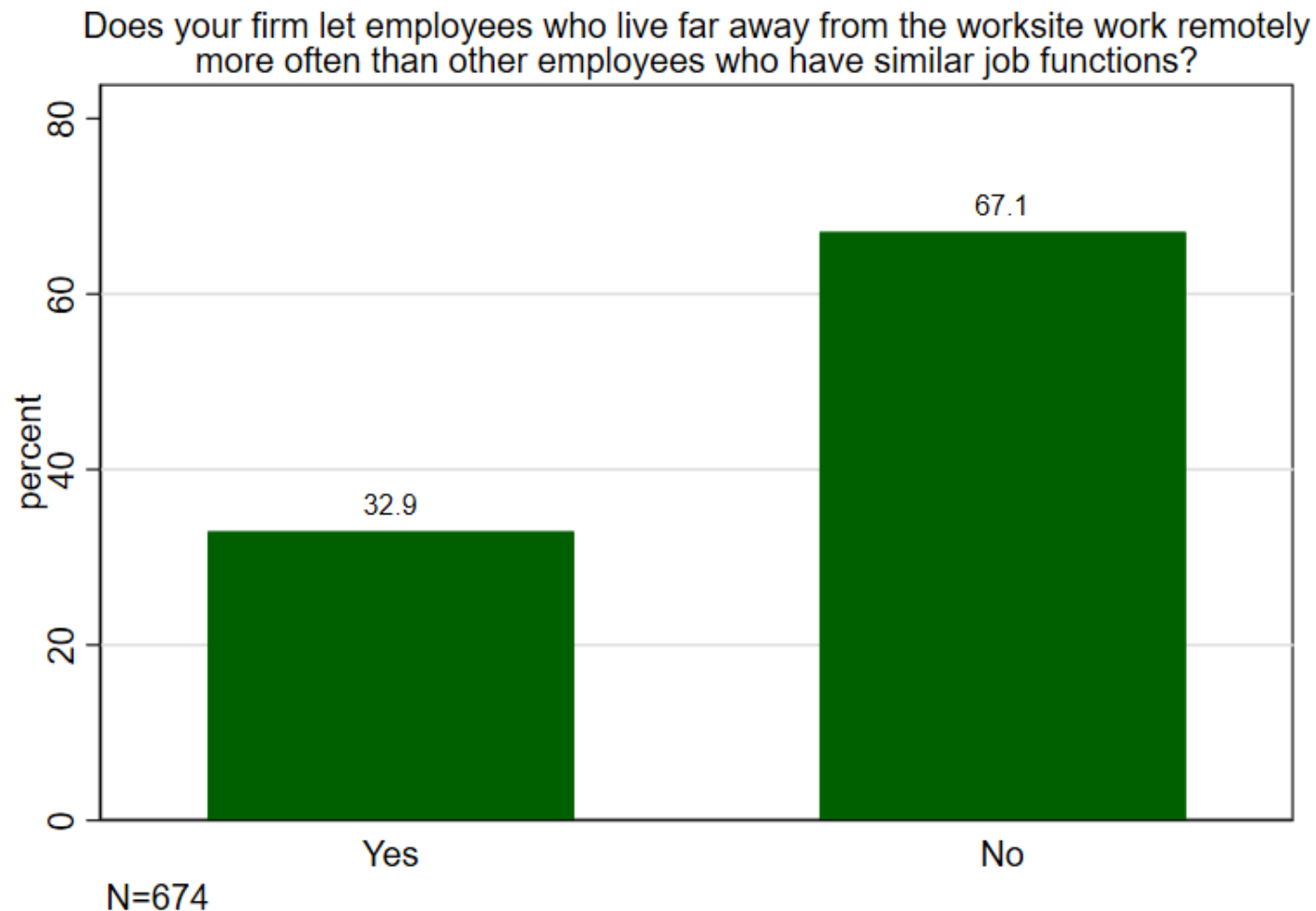


NOTES: Calculated using monthly data through May 2024. The chart shows smoothed series. Lines show percentiles of the activity-weighted distribution of firm-level sales growth rates over the past year.

Source: Survey of Business Uncertainty conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.

# About 70% of firms report that they don't let employees who live far away from the worksite work remotely more often than other employees who have similar job functions

Question: Does your firm let employees who live far away from the worksite work remotely more often than other employees who have similar job functions?

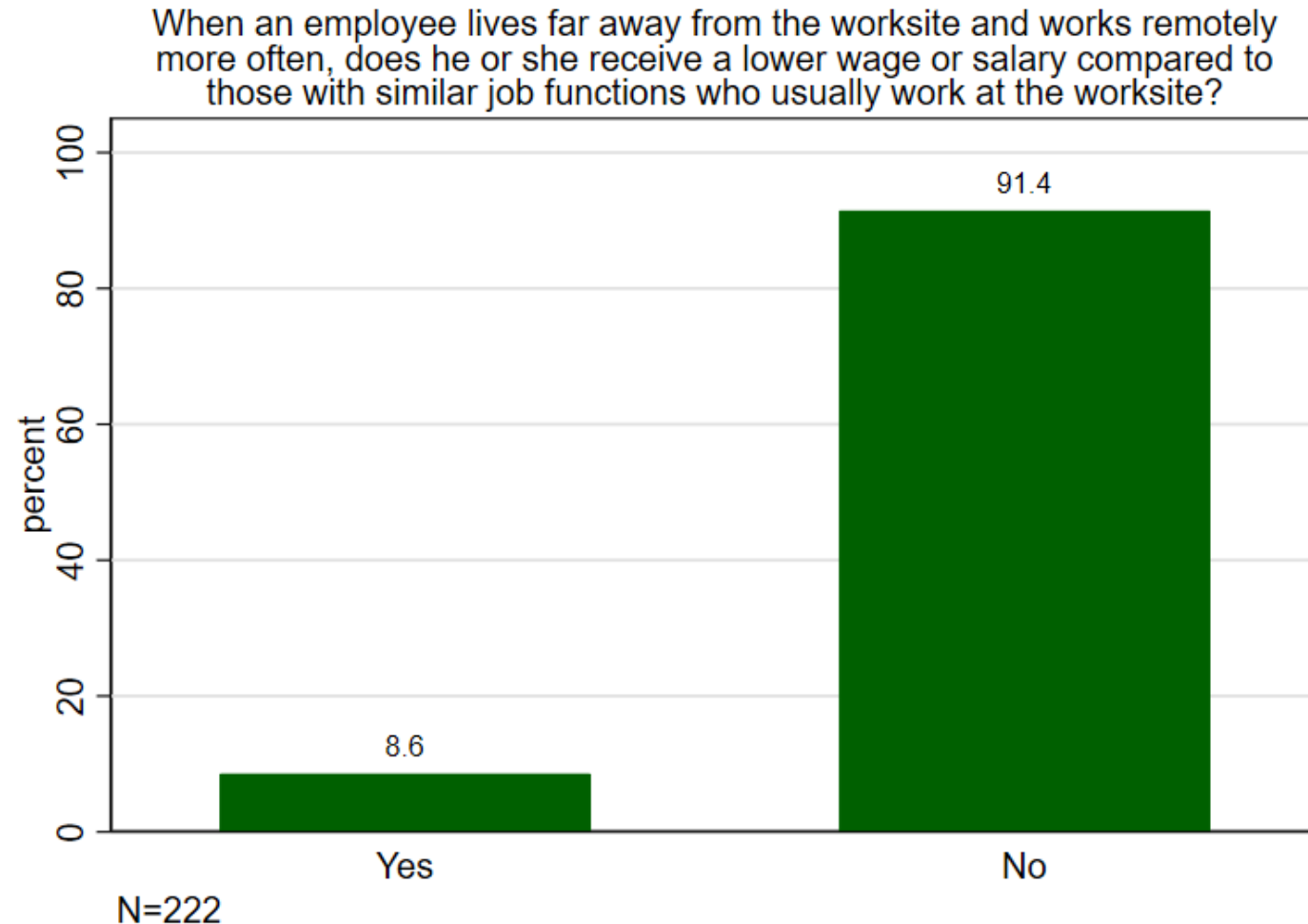


Note: Results are not weighted. The graphs show responses from the April 2024 survey wave.



# More than 90% of firms that have employees working remotely, say that they pay such employees equally as employees who work on site

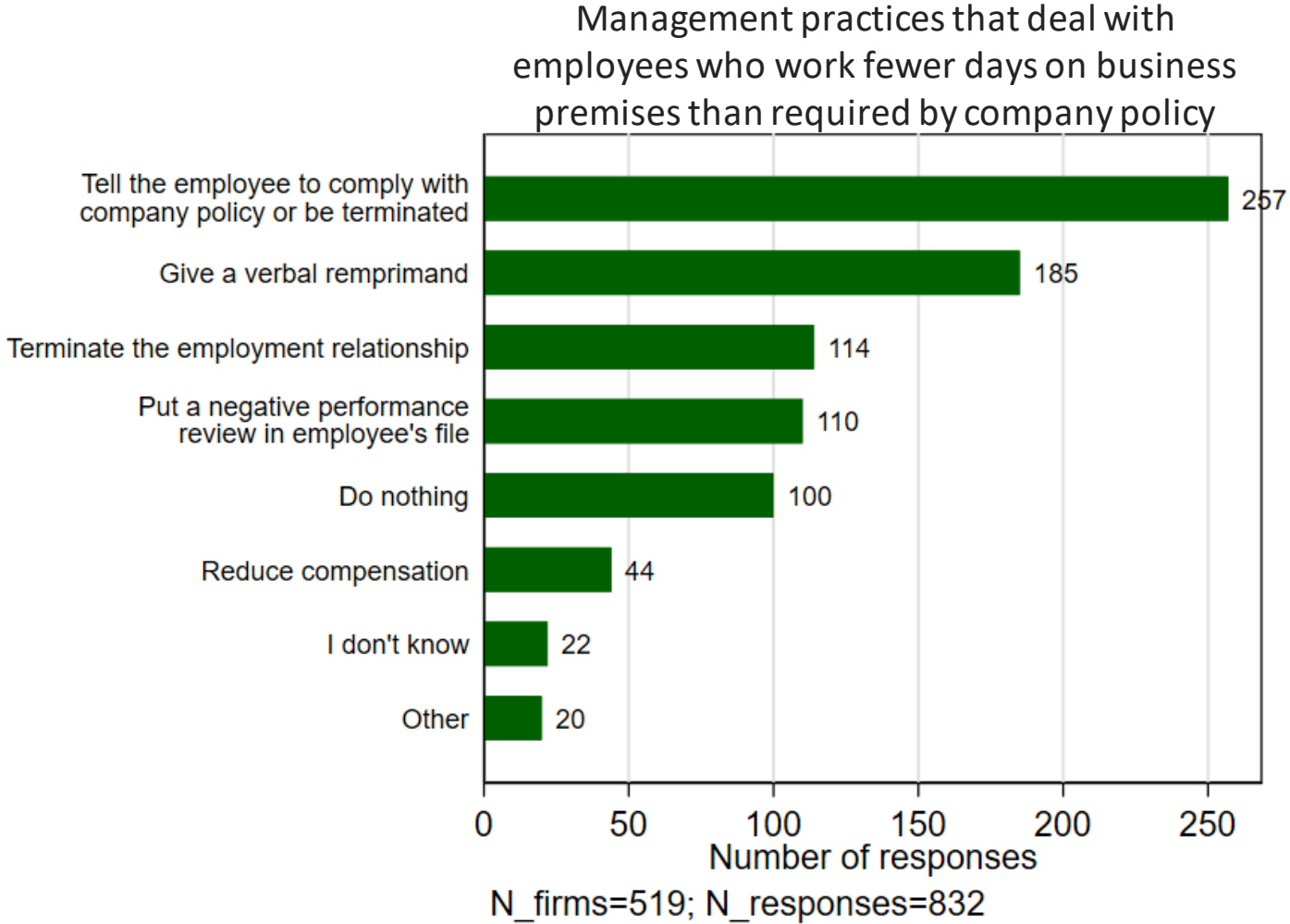
*Question: When an employee lives far away from the worksite and works remotely more often, does he or she receive a lower wage or salary compared to those with similar job functions who usually work at the worksite?*



Note: Results are not weighted. The graphs show responses from the April 2024 survey wave. This question was given to respondents who said that their firms have employees who work from home.

# Business executives favor verbal warnings of termination or verbal reprimands for employees for failing to comply to company policy on in-person days

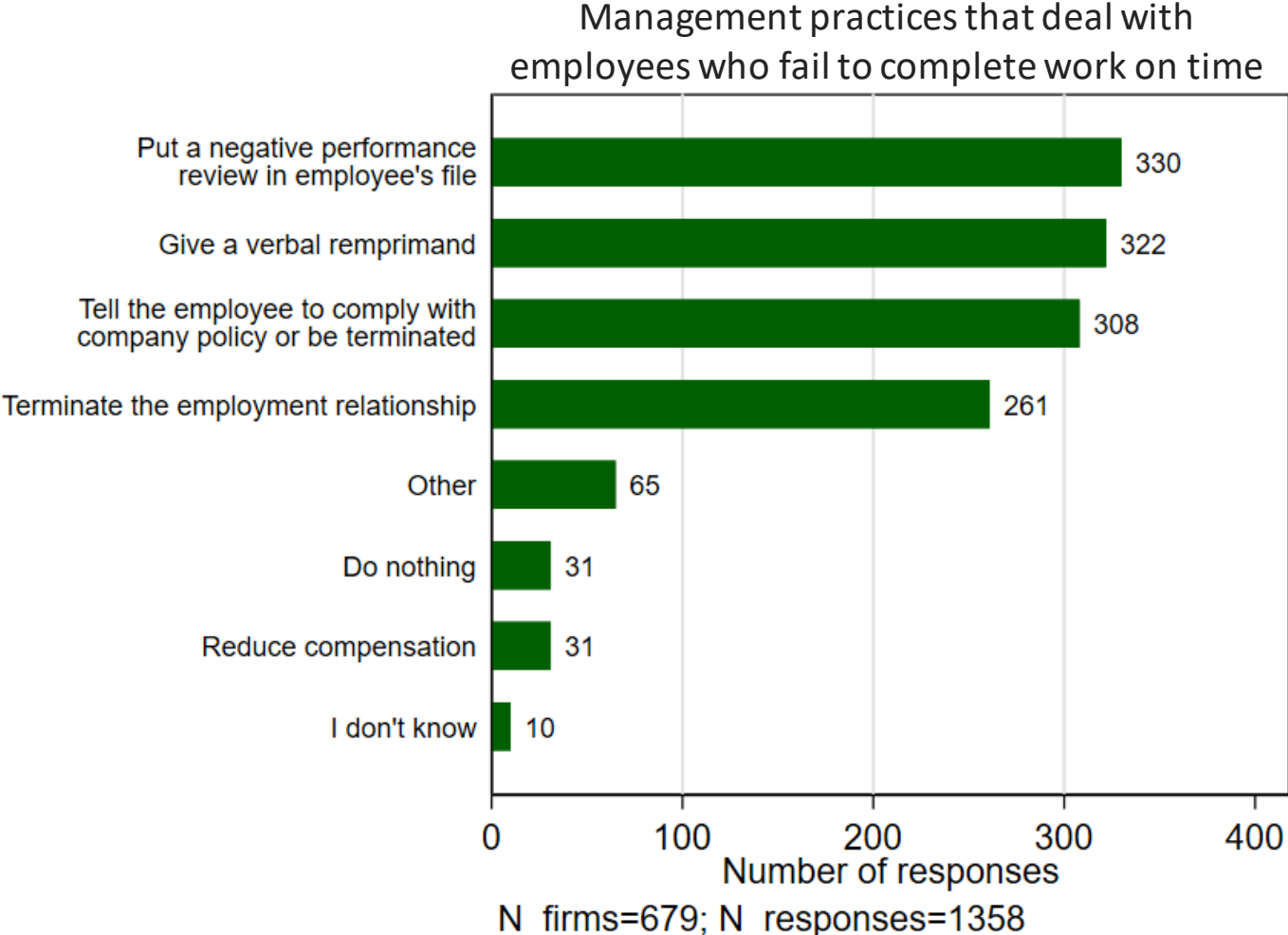
Question: Currently, how does your firm deal with employees who work fewer days on business premises than required by company policy? Please select all that apply



Note: Results are not weighted. The graphs show responses from the April 2024 survey wave. Firms who said that this question does not apply to them were excluded from the sample.

# Business executives favor written warnings for failure to complete work on time

Question: Currently, how does your firm deal with employees who consistently fail to complete work on time? Please select all that apply



Note: Results are not weighted. The graphs show responses from the April 2024 survey wave.

# Appendix: Technical Information

## Computing Moments of the Firm-Level Subjective Forecast Distributions

We calculate first and second moments of the subjective growth rate distributions of employment and sales revenue over the next 12 months or four quarters, as appropriate. Following standard practice in the literature on business-level dynamics, we calculate the growth rate of  $x$  from  $t-1$  to  $t$  as  $g_t = 2(x_t - x_{t-1}) / (x_t + x_{t-1})$ .

### Employment

$CEmp$  = firm's current employment level, as reported by the respondent

$FEmp_i$  = employment 12 months hence in scenario  $i$ , for  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

$p_i$  = the associated probabilities,  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

### Scenario-Specific Growth Rates

$EGr_i = 2(FEmp_i - CEmp) / (FEmp_i + CEmp)$ ,  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

### First and Second Moments of the Subjective Growth Rate Forecast Distribution

$Mean(EGr) = \sum_{i=1}^5 p_i EGr_i$

$Var(EGr) = \sum_{i=1}^5 p_i (EmpGr_i - Mean(EGr))^2$

$SD(EGr) = \sqrt{Var(EGr)}$

### Sales Revenue

$CSale$  = firm's sales revenue in the current quarter, as reported by the respondent

$FSaleGr_i$  = respondent's scenario-specific sales growth rate from now to four quarters hence,  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

$p_i$  = the associated probabilities,  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

### Implied Future Sales Level

$FSale_i = \left(1 + \frac{FSaleGr_i}{100}\right) CSale$ ,  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

### Scenario-Specific Growth Rates (re-expressing respondent growth rates to our growth rate measure)

$SaleGr_i = 2(FSale_i - CSale) / (FSale_i + CSale) = 2FSaleGr_i / (FSaleGr_i + 2)$ ,  $i = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5$

### First and Second Moments of the Subjective Growth Rate Forecast Distribution

$Mean(SaleGr) = \sum_{i=1}^5 p_i SaleGr_i$

$Var(SaleGr) = \sum_{i=1}^5 p_i (SaleGr_i - Mean(SaleGr))^2$

$SD(SaleGr) = \sqrt{Var(SaleGr)}$

## Subjective Expectations and Uncertainty Indices

We construct a monthly activity-weighted expectations (first-moment) index for employment growth and sales growth looking one year ahead. We also construct a monthly activity-weighted uncertainty (second-moment) index for the employment growth and sales growth looking one year ahead.

- In month  $t$ , the index for employment (sales) takes a value equal to the activity-weighted average of subjective mean employment (sales) growth rates looking one year hence ( $Mean(Gr)$ ), averaging across all firms responding that month. We compute these subjective mean growth rates as described on slide 3, and winsorize them at the first and 99th percentiles before using them to construct the index.
- The month- $t$  index of year-ahead subjective uncertainty for employment (sales) growth is the activity-weighted mean of ( $SD(Gr)$ ) values across firms responding in month  $t$ . We compute these subjective standard deviations over growth rates as described on slide 3, and winsorize them at the first and 99th percentiles before inputting them into the index construction formula.
- When constructing first- and second-moment employment growth indexes, we weight firm  $i$ 's subjective mean growth rate expectation and uncertainty by the average of its month- $t$  employment ( $CEmp_{it}$ ) and its expected employment level ( $EMp_{it}$ ). We top-code these weights at 500 to diminish the influence of outliers among very large firms.
- When constructing first- and second-moment sales revenue growth indexes, we weight firms  $i$ 's subjective mean growth rate expectation and uncertainty by the average of its month- $t$  sales revenue ( $CSale_{it}$ ) and its expected sales level ( $ESale_{it}$ ). We winsorize these activity-weights at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> percentile.
- Finally, we smooth our topic-specific indices by taking a moving average. We set the window for the moving average to 2 or 3 months, to match the panel structure of our survey.

## Topic-specific Expected Excess Reallocation Indices

We construct forward-looking indices of excess job and sales revenue reallocation. These series measure the volume of cross-firm reallocation in economic activity above the reallocation required to support aggregate growth. For ease of exposition, we often refer to these as simply "reallocation rates":

- First, in each month  $t$ , we compute the activity-weighted average of own-firm expected gross job creation and destruction rates, which boils down to the activity-weighted average of the absolute value of subjective mean growth rates  $|Mean(EGr)|$ .
- Then, in each month  $t$ , we compute the absolute value of the activity weighted average of own-firm expected employment growth  $Mean(EGr)$ . This is effectively the absolute value of the employment growth expectations index in month  $t$ .
- We then obtain the expected job reallocation rate index value for month  $t$  by subtracting the outcome of the second bullet from the first. Letting  $w_{it}$  be firm  $i$ 's activity weight in month  $t$ ,

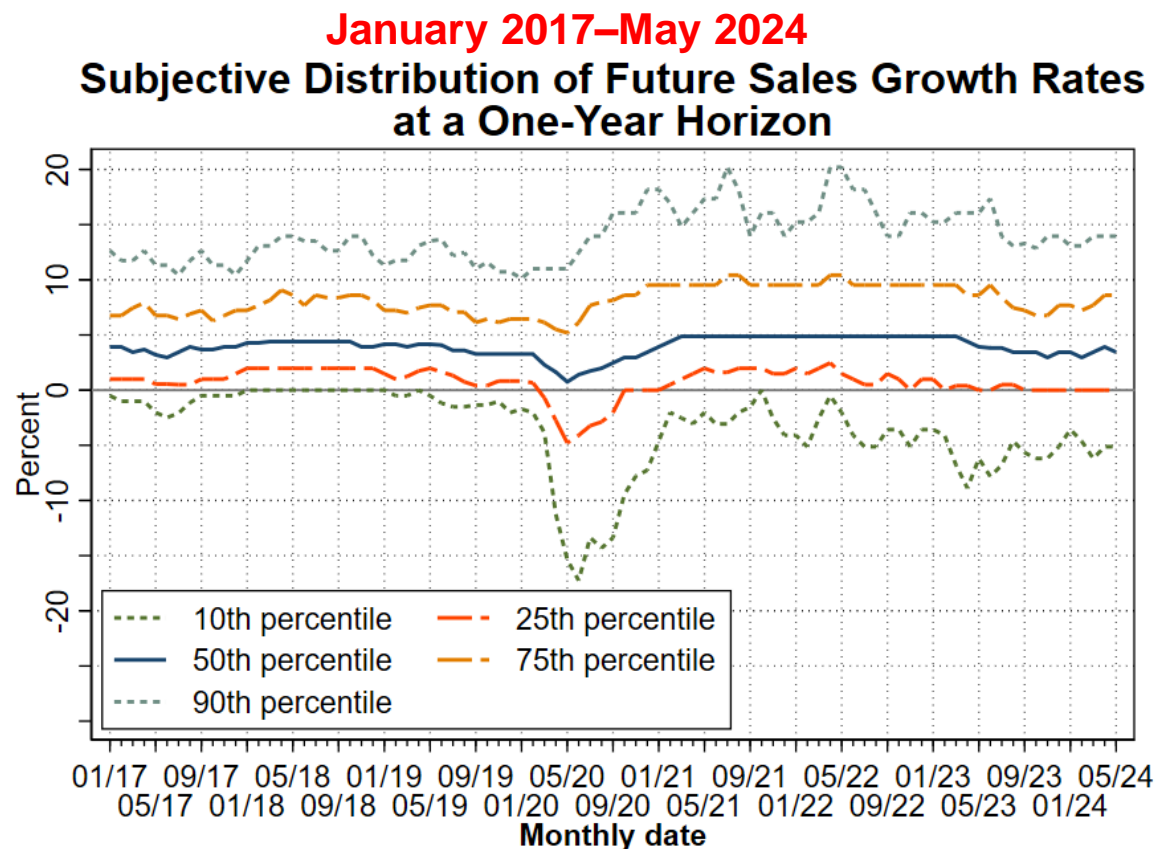
$$Expected\ Job\ Reallocation\ Rate_t = \sum_i w_{it} \cdot |Mean(EGr)| - \left| \sum_i w_{it} \cdot Mean(EGr) \right|$$

- Analogously, the expected sales revenue reallocation rate index in month  $t$  is the difference between the activity-weighted average of absolute expected sales growth rates, minus the absolute value of the average activity-weighted growth rate:

$$Expected\ Reallocation\ Rate\ For\ Sales\ Revenue_t = \sum_i w_{it} \cdot |Mean(SaleGr)| - \left| \sum_i w_{it} \cdot Mean(SaleGr) \right|$$

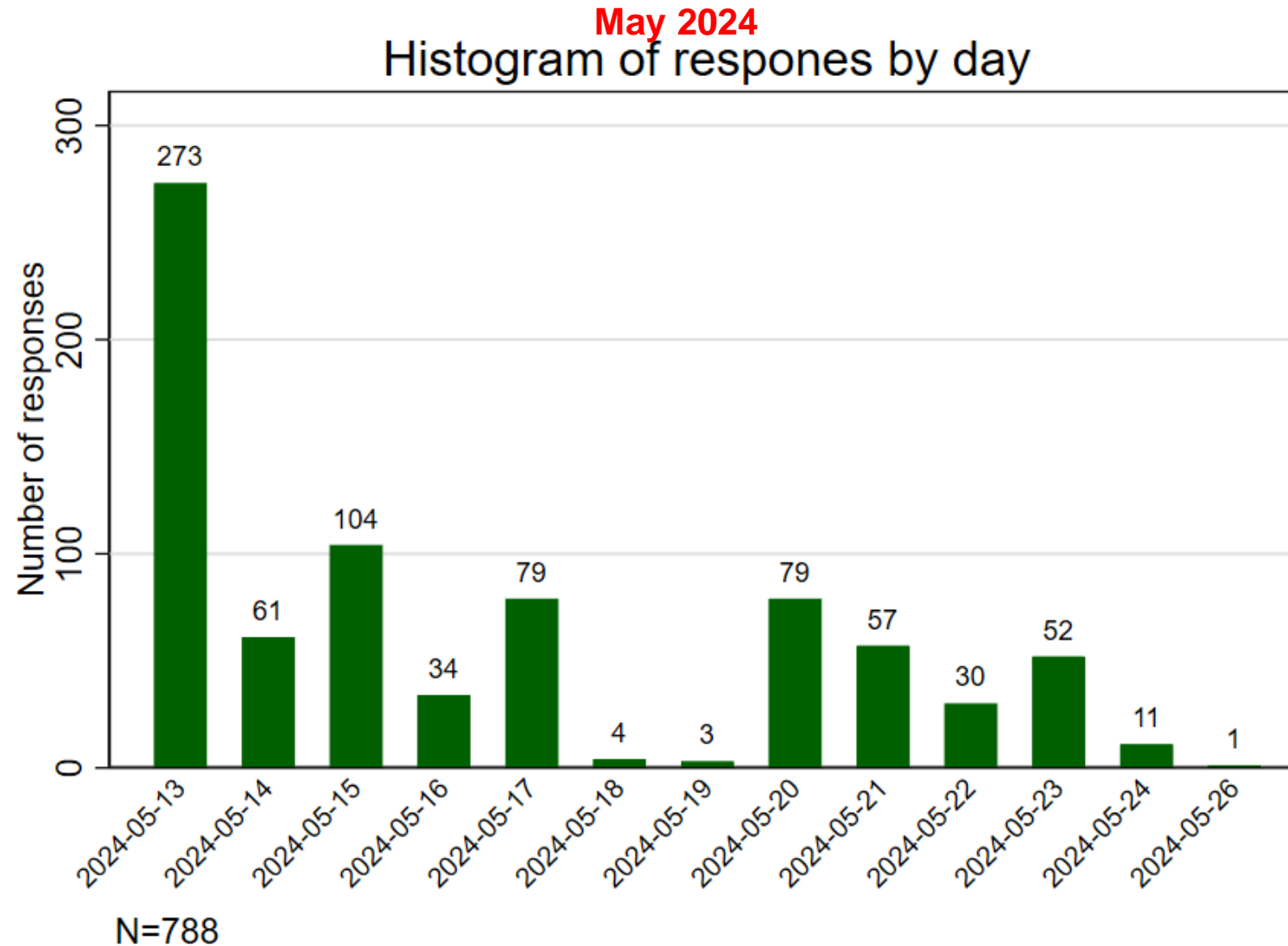
- We compute the subjective mean growth rates  $Mean(EGr)$  and  $Mean(SaleGr)$  as described on slides 18-21, and winsorize them at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 99th percentiles before using them to construct the index.
- Firm  $i$ 's activity weight  $w_{it}$  is the average of its month- $t$  employment or sales level ( $CEmp_{it}$  or  $CSale_{it}$ ) and its expected employment or sales level twelve months hence ( $EMp_{it}$  or  $FSale_{it}$ ). We top-code these weights at 500 for employment and at the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile for sales to diminish the influence of outliers among very large firms.

# Appendix: Subjective Forecast Distribution of Future Sales Growth Rates at a One-Year Horizon



NOTES: Calculated using monthly data through May 2024. The charts show smoothed series. This is a plot of the subjective distribution for the representative firm's future sales growth rates over a 4-quarter look-ahead horizon. To calculate this distribution, we pool over all firm-level subjective forecast distributions in the indicated month and weight each firm by its activity level. Then we use the probabilities assigned to each possible future sales growth rate to obtain activity-weighted quantiles of the future sales growth rate distribution.

# Appendix: Histogram of survey response frequency for the May 2024 survey wave



Source: Survey of Business Uncertainty conducted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.