

Improve Frontline Morale

3 ways HR organizations can help deskless workers be happier and more likely to stay



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Introduction

Companies in a variety of industries are having trouble holding on to their frontline employees, and it's easy to see the impact. Some mom-and-pop shops operate on reduced hours because they don't have enough staff. Some restaurants close their doors for days at a time. Larger enterprises, including retailers, hospitals, manufacturers, banks, and hotels, are so short on workers that they're accelerating their efforts to automate as much of their operations as possible.

In fact, 55% of frontline employees are thinking about leaving their jobs, according to a 2024 global study of nearly 4,500 workers across industries conducted by Catalyst.org, a nonprofit focused on improving the workplace.ⁱ As an HR leader, you understand the depth of the challenge. For one thing, finding new people is expensive. Gallup estimates that replacing frontline employees costs as much as 40% of each one's salary.ⁱⁱ

Frontline employees, also called deskless workers, aren't just leaving their employers—they're exiting industries altogether, making it difficult to find applicants with the experience required for some roles. Burnout in the healthcare industry, for example, is well documented, especially among nurses, many of whom are retiring early or pursuing different careers. Retail lags other industries in filling vacancies, according to a May 2023 McKinsey survey, in part because 72% of the US retail employees who quit their jobs within the prior three years subsequently left the industry. Other industries where burnout among frontline employees is pervasive include agriculture, education, hospitality, and construction.ⁱⁱⁱ

While job stress, lack of resources, and lack of control are among the most common reasons frontline employees cite for leaving, many times they're just tired of being forgotten when organizations make accommodations to improve the experience for desk-based workers. It's time for organizations to rethink how they approach the deskless worker's employee experience to help attract, energize, and retain these vital people.

HR leaders can help by focusing on three main areas: giving deskless workers more flexibility and autonomy wherever possible, helping managers build stronger, more engaging, and more nurturing relationships with those workers, and doubling down on a culture of safety—all while staying compliant with complex rules and regulations. Let's explore how.

Give them more flexibility and autonomy

A 2022 global survey of 7,000 deskless workers by Boston Consulting Group found that the top reason they might leave their jobs was the lack of job flexibility and work-life balance.^{iv}

Most frontline workers, whether in retail, construction, manufacturing, or other industries, can't work from home and are needed at specific times and places, limiting their job flexibility and autonomy. But employers can still give them more control over their work lives by giving them the tools to swap and pick up shifts and change their work schedules as needed (with proper authorization).

Consider this: More millennials, the largest age group in the workforce, are taking care of their kids and aging parents. Flexibility in when and how long—and in some cases where—an employee works on any given day goes a long way toward helping them attend to medical appointments, school meetings, and other responsibilities at home. The sense of control that comes with this flexibility is important in helping protect frontline workers' mental health, and it can build employee loyalty.

Even in healthcare, providers are starting to give their doctors, nurses, and other frontline workers more job flexibility, offering some of them staggered start times as well as overlapping shifts to help with coverage. Some health organizations are offering their people variable hours and part-time opportunities, and they're building their own internal staffing agencies to share people across locations. One hospital chain is letting its nurses sign up for work stints of only three, six, or nine months a year. Another is letting radiology, endocrinology, and other specialists use teleconferencing technology to work remotely on some days.



But giving frontline employees such flexibility can introduce problems if you're using outdated or disjointed workforce management applications. A delay in reconciling the scheduled hours someone was supposed to work with the hours actually worked because an employee picked up a coworker's shift at the last minute could render two inaccurate paychecks. Furthermore, different work rules may apply across different jurisdictions. Employees picking up a shift at a new location may need to be compensated differently for their time or accrue sick leave differently, potentially introducing complications.

Calculating hours worked manually, and factoring in varying rules, complex industry regulations, union contracts, and other considerations, is time-consuming and not scalable. It could also introduce all sorts of inaccuracies due to human error, creating a risk of noncompliance and fines. Another obvious concern: Most employees rely on receiving accurate, on-time paychecks, so having an issue with either accuracy or timeliness is a quick way to disgruntle them.

Sometimes organizations don't offer their deskless workers such flexibility for these administrative reasons. Fortunately, leading cloud-based workforce management applications can integrate seamlessly with your core HR system, connecting your individuals' time, labor, scheduling, and leave management data with payroll, financial, and personnel data, eliminating the need for manual reconciliations. These intelligent applications can access company policies, industry regulations, union contracts, and other pertinent documents to help you maintain accuracy and compliance. All the relevant information is shared across one cloud application suite.

Frontline workers also want access to pertinent information so they can make better decisions for themselves. For instance, production line workers, retail associates, and nurses may have different responsibilities depending on the shift. Access to a list of instructions and an outline of the tasks that must be accomplished

can help them decide if they want to pick up a specific shift. The best workforce management applications build in this capability, letting deskless workers access this information and manage their schedules from any device.

Taking steps to give your frontline employees more flexibility and the autonomy to manage various aspects of their jobs themselves is important in cultivating an engaged workforce, one that's more willing to go the extra mile—and less likely to look for greener pastures elsewhere.

Help managers engage with and nurture their frontline employees

It's commonly said that a manager has more impact on an employee's mental health and well-being than a psychologist or therapist. Most workers want to get along reasonably well with their bosses, and vice versa. Yet 50% of frontline employees and 55% of managers believe there's an "us versus them" mentality between the two parties, according to a 2024 survey of more than 10,000 workers and managers by Safety Culture.^v Clearly there's a disconnect.

The first step is to open the lines of communication. A 2023 Gallup survey of more than 1,300 employees shows that when managers have just one meaningful conversation a week with a direct report, employees are four times more likely to be highly engaged.^{vi} Conversely, 45% of survey respondents who had left their employer voluntarily said that neither their manager nor any other company leader had approached them to discuss their job satisfaction, performance, or future with the organization in the three months before they left.

But better manager-employee communication is only one factor. A 2023 PwC survey of HR and operational leaders found that the top five factors contributing to a positive work environment for deskless workers were finding a purpose in their role, getting recognition for their achievements, achieving personal growth, connecting with other employees, and getting the coaching they need.^{vii} Managers can help in all these areas, supported by the latest HCM applications.

For example, such applications can make it easier for managers to craft and send personalized career guidance based on each individual's unique background and experience. These applications also have features for creating recognition programs and for connecting employees with one another based on shared experiences, skills, interests, and accomplishments. They also make it easy for managers to field regular employee surveys and encourage feedback on ways to improve the organization or team dynamic. The goal is to nurture a culture in which managers and employees engage more regularly with each other, building a sense of belonging, camaraderie, and loyalty.

If your organization uses a learning solution, it may already have relevant courses to support your people managers' growth and skills development. If not, consider suggesting outside courses to help them develop core managerial and leadership skills, such as emotional intelligence and effective communication. Select HCM platforms can also help by reminding managers to check in with their reports. In addition, features that track employee sentiment, mostly through regular surveys, and identify troubling trends help managers and HR stay in tune with what's going on with the workforce so they can act. Lack of follow-through negates any attempts managers and HR may make to improve the deskless workforce experience.



Double down on a culture of safety

Frontline workers are more likely to be put in harm's way than workers tied mostly to their desks. Consider the most dangerous jobs in the US, based on an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data: loggers, pilots, derrick operators, roofers, farmers, and construction workers are at or near the top of the list. Add to that list frontline professionals such as healthcare and factory workers.

If frontline employees don't feel safe at work, how can you expect them to perform well and want to stay in their jobs? Yet a shocking 58% of the 1,000 US professionals surveyed by security system company Verkada believe the threat of physical harm at work is on the rise—and those respondents hail from retail, hospitality, consumer banking, and other industries not typically considered unsafe.^{viii} Couple that finding with the results of a Safety Culture survey in which 40% of frontline employees said they're concerned with slow company responses to workplace issues and risks.^{ix}



Imagine a factory worker in a fertilizer plant thinks he smells ammonia, a common and highly hazardous ingredient. However, the worker is in a hurry and has a cold, so his sense of smell is off and he second-guesses himself. After all, the ammonia is stored in double-walled tanks with leak-detection systems. No alarms are going off, so the worker decides not to take the time to walk across the factory floor to a computer to report the possible incident. But what if there was a leak and the detection system had shorted out? Had the employee been able to easily report his concern on a mobile phone app or portal, multiple stakeholders could have checked it out and prevented unnecessary harm to workers.

Relative to frontline employees in other industries, hospital workers face a high risk of on-the-job injuries, including exposure to harmful chemicals and drugs, cuts from scalpels, scissors, and other sharp objects, and back injuries from moving and repositioning patients. Then there are the continued health threats from infectious diseases. Meantime, the World Health Organization reports, healthcare workers are more likely to be physically, sexually, or psychologically injured than employees in other settings,^x and studies show these incidents are becoming more frequent.

HR teams should take note. When organizations don't have a centralized way to track accidents, near misses, and employee complaints and concerns, it's easy for safety reports to get buried under other emails or languish on someone's to-do list. Here, too, technology can help.

Cloud-based health and safety management tools let employees report safety concerns from their mobile devices—with photos, where applicable—and immediately alert HR, safety personnel, line-of-business leaders,

and other stakeholders, increasing the likelihood of a rapid response. Creating a culture that prioritizes safety and encourages employees to report a concern, even if they're not sure it's an issue, also makes a difference.



Look for a health and safety management application that lets your HR organization, working with facilities management, set a regular schedule for safety inspections, with automated alerts when dates are missed. Choose an application that helps facilitate conversations about safety, with the data, reports, images from incidents, and other relevant content all in one place to help identify and address root causes and thereby reduce accidents and workplace hazards.

Ultimately, it falls on HR to ensure that these problems and concerns are promptly addressed so frontline employees know their company takes their safety and well-being seriously.

How Oracle can help

[Oracle Workforce Scheduling](#), one of Oracle Fusion Cloud HCM's [workforce management](#) capabilities, lets full-time and contract frontline workers choose when and where they want to work, update their schedule preferences, easily swap and pick up shifts, access detailed information on expectations for different shifts and roles, and manage their schedules from any device with the same user experience.

[Oracle Time and Labor](#) is an easy-to-use, rules-based worker time tracking and management solution designed to help organizations maintain pay accuracy, keep labor costs in check, and comply with regulations.

[Oracle Workforce Health and Safety](#), another Oracle Cloud HCM application, is designed to make it easy for employees to report incidents and unsafe conditions. It also lets organizations initiate inspections and schedule follow-up reviews, and its built-in data analytics and reporting features help employers analyze workforce safety trends and comply with regulations.

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ⁱ Sheila Brassel, PhD, “Half of frontline employees at risk of leaving: What you can do about it,” [Catalyst.org](#), 2024.

ⁱⁱ Corey Tatel, PhD, and Ben Wigert, PhD, “42% of employee turnover is preventable but often ignored,” [Gallup](#), July 10, 2024.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bryan Logan, David Fuller, and Nikola Jakic, “How retailers can build and retain a strong frontline workforce in 2024,” [McKinsey](#), July 17, 2024.

^{iv} Julia Dhar, Deborah Lovich, Chris Mattey, Nick South, Tatsuya Takeuchi, and Sebastian Ullrich, “Why deskless workers are leaving—and how to win them back,” [Boston Consulting Group](#), July 7, 2022.

^v “Feedback from the field 2024,” [Safety Culture](#).

^{vi} Corey Tatel, PhD, and Ben Wigert, PhD, “42% of employee turnover is preventable but often ignored,” [Gallup](#), July 10, 2024.

^{vii} “Bringing the frontline worker experience to the forefront of your manufacturing talent strategy,” [PwC](#), 2023.

^{viii} “Verkada’s 2023 workplace safety survey reveals a frontline workforce in crisis,” [Verkada](#), June 21, 2023.

^{ix} “Feedback from the field 2024,” [Safety Culture](#).

^x Smita Kafle, Swosti Paudel, Anisha Thapaliya, and Roshan Acharya, “Workplace violence against nurses: a narrative review,” [National Library of Medicine](#), September 13, 2022.