

Supporting the **Deskless Workforce**

A New Approach to Understanding and Improving Today's Employee Experience

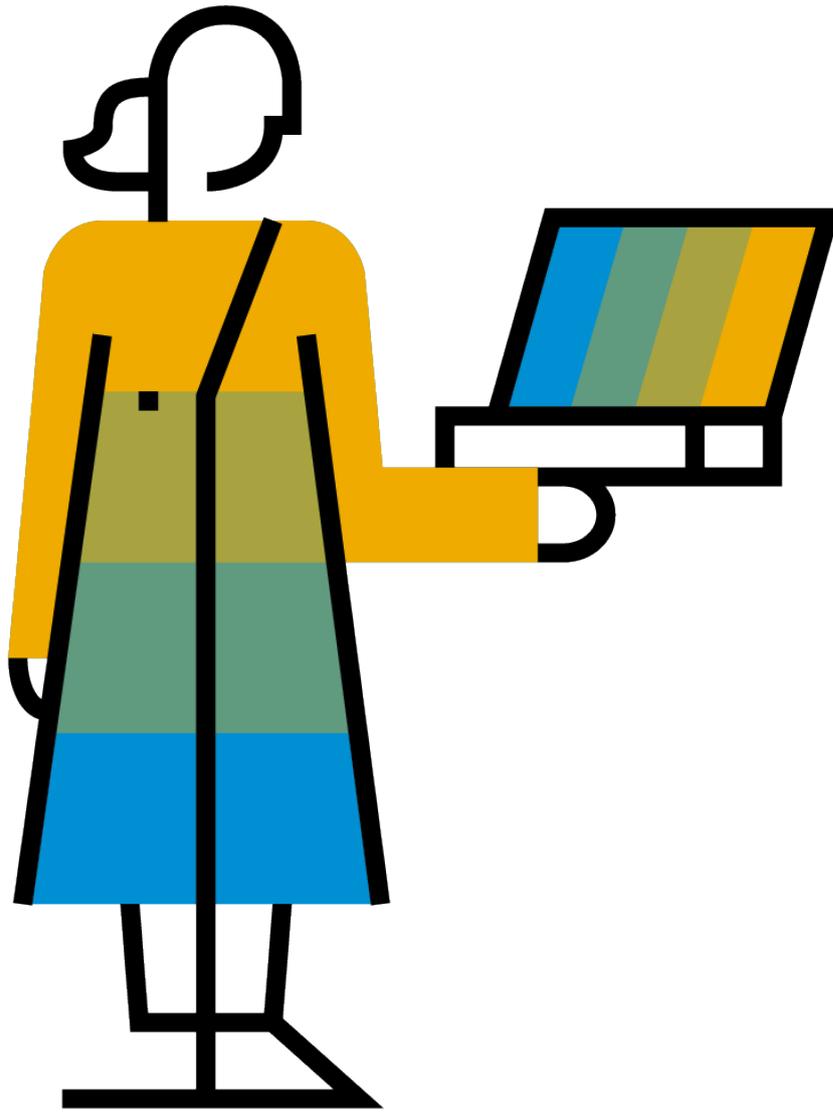


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Executive Summary

Our research confirms what HR organizations and their businesses have been fearing all along: the employee experience for deskless workers still has a long way to go. However, the problem is not a lack of effort on the part of HR leaders and managers. Instead, it's the complex nature of working outside a corporate setting that gets in the way.

Although there are no simple solutions to overcome this challenge, recent findings pinpoint some interesting trends that businesses should consider to better understand and improve the customer experience. Our mixed methods research program captured various perspectives related to the challenges associated with deskless workers by interviewing HR professionals supporting deskless workers from 39 organizations, and surveying managers of deskless workers and deskless workers themselves. We conducted one primary global survey of 1,600 deskless workers and a secondary global survey of 359 deskless and 988 desk-based workers. For more information on the study methodology, see the ["Methodology"](#) section of this paper.



THERE ARE MORE DESKLESS WORKERS THAN BUSINESSES REALIZE.

Recent research estimates that 80% of the world's workforce is deskless.¹ Of the HR professionals who participated in our study, 54% stated that more than half of their company's workforce is comprised of deskless workers.

VIEWS VARY ON THE CHALLENGES OF THE DESKLESS WORKFORCE.

According to HR professionals, the most common challenges to supporting deskless workers are the complex nature of deskless jobs, communicating and disseminating information to deskless workers, and keeping deskless workers connected to the company. Top challenges for the managers of deskless workers are adequately managing their performance, training them, supporting their well-being, and keeping them engaged in work.

Surveyed deskless workers shared even more hurdles in their everyday employee experience:

- Feelings of not being rewarded enough in terms of, for example, salary and bonus
- Manual and inconvenient completion of tasks required during the hiring processes
- Issues related to required training, promotions, and career growth opportunities
- Lack of opportunity to share ideas with managers
- Limited communication from their company

THE OVERALL DESKLESS WORKER EXPERIENCE REQUIRES IMPROVEMENT AND IMMEDIATE ATTENTION.

Only 41% of deskless workers agreed they were engaged, and only 55% indicated they were highly satisfied. Contributing to the negative employee experience for deskless workers is a perceived lack of HR and management support. As little as 40% of deskless workers agreed that they receive the help they need from HR and 39% said the same about their managers.

MOST ORGANIZATIONS USE MOBILE TECHNOLOGY TO REACH DESKLESS WORKERS IN THE FLOW OF WORK.

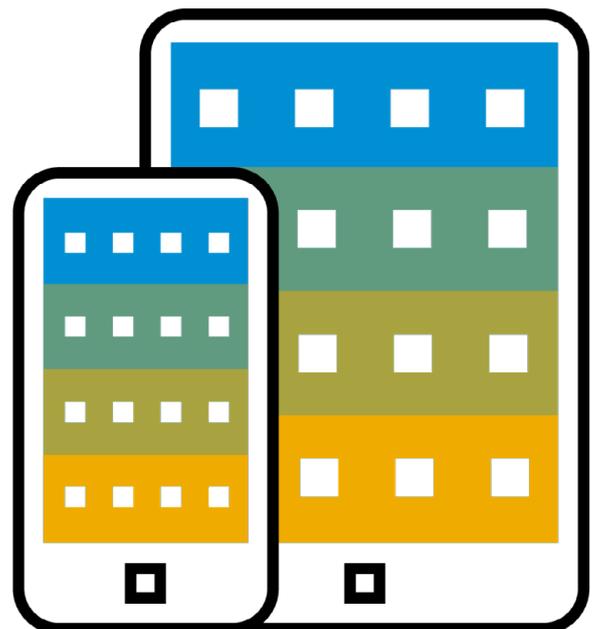
Of the HR professionals interviewed, 91% use one or more mobile technologies with their deskless workers. As both HR and deskless workers reported, the most common forms of mobile enablement are “bring your own device” (BYOD), a shared company-issued mobile device such as a kiosk, or a company-issued mobile device used just by each employee.

ONLY ABOUT HALF (49%) OF DESKLESS WORKERS HAVE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY TO COMPLETE HR-RELATED TASKS.

Although most businesses leverage mobile technology, HR professionals indicated that, within their organizations, desk-based workers typically have access to many more company and HR systems than deskless workers. Learning management systems and employee profile systems are the most common HR-related systems that deskless workers access. Nevertheless, deskless workers still exhibited positive perceptions about technology – 61% agree that technology helps them complete their work.

HR BEST PRACTICES AND TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS ARE NEEDED.

Best practices should focus on understanding the deskless workforce and the analytical differences between desk-based and deskless employees, designing HR processes with deskless workers in mind, and focusing talent development efforts on deskless workers. When selecting and implementing technologies to support deskless workers, decision makers should consider features conducive to deskless workers’ needs and deploy mobile technologies that deskless workers are comfortable with using. Additionally, technologies should allow deskless workers to learn within the flow of their work.



About the Research

In 2019, the SAP® SuccessFactors® Human Resources (HR) Research Team launched the “Supporting the Deskless Workforce” research program to better understand and improve the employee experience of deskless workers. The basis of our research was the assertion that, although they are critical to business success, deskless workers are often “left out” when it comes to HR programs, processes, and technologies. As a result, their employee experience suffers.

There is third-party research evidence suggesting that this is indeed the case. Only 1% of a business’s software investment being devoted to solutions for deskless workers.² Additionally, as much as 64% of deskless workers have considered quitting their jobs because they are dissatisfied with the quality of their work environment.³

With this in mind, the research program sought to address the following topics:

1. The current deskless worker employee experience and the factors that have the largest impact on these workers’ employee experience and performance
2. The ways organizations and HR teams engage and connect with their deskless workforce, the effectiveness of these approaches, and the gaps that need to be filled
3. The role that HR technology plays in facilitating deskless workforce management and engagement – more specifically, the solutions and digital capabilities that may improve the deskless workforce employee experience

Supporting the Deskless Workforce Research Program Methodology

Qualitative Research

- Two personas were captured through semi-structured interviews with HR senior leaders and HR functional managers
 - 39 HR senior leaders and HR functional managers were interviewed across 33 organizations, with geographic region and industry diversity
-

Quantitative Research

- Two global surveys of full-time employees with industry diversity were conducted
- Primary survey of about 1,600 deskless workers investigated deskless workers’ overall employee experience
- Secondary survey of about 1,400 desk-based and deskless employees focused on different learning and development experiences related to upskilling and reskilling

Defining the Deskless Workforce

Unfortunately, not all workers are treated the same. Organizations are rightfully focusing more on different workplace experiences based on demographics, such as gender, ethnicity, and internal employee versus external worker. However, far less attention is paid to the stark differences in the employee experience between desk-based and deskless workers.

For example, although the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered working conditions for all employees, these challenges were felt most acutely by deskless workers. Deskless workers were more likely to lose their jobs than desk-based workers.^{4,5} For those who remained employed, deskless workers were more likely to work in “essential” jobs, putting them in greater danger of COVID-19 exposure.

Deskless workers are defined as employees who complete tasks away from a desk or a company’s headquarters and have inconsistent access to internal enterprise systems and communication technology. Yet, they are not equivalent to remote workers, who work from home but still have consistent access to a desk and their company’s technological systems.

DIGGING BEYOND THE MONOLITHIC MYTH OF THE DESKLESS WORKER

Popular press and academic investigations on the deskless workforce are limited and treat this workforce as one monolith. However, our research uncovered various types of deskless workers, each with specific and unique work needs.

A deskless worker could be a retail store employee who helps customers all day, a manufacturing employee working on a production line, a long-haul truck driver delivering goods across the country, or a nurse working to save patients’ lives. Even a salesperson or consultant traveling to customer sites to give presentations is considered a deskless worker.

Each of these roles is associated with drastically different tasks, work environments, and resulting employee experiences. Differentiating between the types of deskless workers can help clarify individual work context and needs, offering vital information that can be used to improve their employee experience.



	On site		Off Site	
	Long-term duration	Short-term duration	Long-term duration	Short-term duration
High customer interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cruise employees • Flight attendants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail store employees • Nurses in hospitals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultants • Salespeople 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telecom technicians • Home health aides
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% deskless workers • 2 interviewed organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35% deskless workers • 9 interviewed organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 interviewed organizations • 9% deskless workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9% deskless workers • 13 interviewed organizations
Low customer interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miners • Oil rig operators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution center workers • Manufacturing workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-haul truck drivers • Gas pipelayers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utility line workers • Construction workers
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3% deskless workers • 2 interviewed organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20% deskless workers • 21 interviewed organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • >1% deskless workers • 8 interviewed organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4% deskless workers • 6 interviewed organizations

Figure 1. The Dimensions of Each Type of Deskless Workforce

Deskless worker survey participants were each categorized into one type best reflecting their work context. The organizations interviewed selected various kinds of deskless workers they employed.

Through this research program, we developed a taxonomy of the deskless workforce and used it to create various profiles of deskless workers based on three dimensions:

1. **Duration**, or the length of time the deskless worker is away from their home, can either be short term (one day or less, such as a typical work shift) or long term (more than one day at a time).
2. **Location** can either be on site (primarily one place of business operated by their company) or off site (across various locations, such as visiting customers).
3. **Customer interaction**, or the level of interaction between the deskless worker and the end consumer of their company's goods or services can vary depending on whether the role is customer-facing (high) or in the back office (low).

Inevitably, the prevalence of each of these dimensions of the deskless worker varies by industry. We identified those industries with the largest amount of deskless workers as well as the industry representation across the deskless workforce taxonomy. (See *Appendix A for a breakdown of which industries employ each deskless worker profile*.) The industries identified as employing the largest population of deskless workforces included aerospace and defense; automotive; banking; consumer products; engineering, construction, and operations; healthcare; industrial machinery and components; life sciences; mill products and mining; oil and gas; professional services; public sector; retail; telecommunications; travel and transportation; utilities; and wholesale distribution.

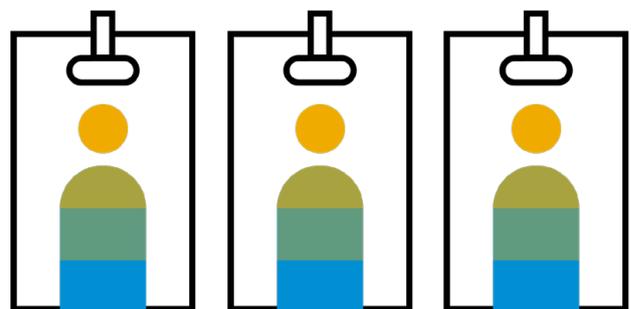
A GAP BETWEEN AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

Although 80% of the world's workforce is deskless, many interviewed HR professionals were surprised by the full scope of their deskless population once they assessed the different profiles within this talent pool.⁶ In fact, 54% stated that deskless workers comprise "more than half" of their organization's workforce.

After working through the estimation process across deskless worker types within their company, one HR professional from the media industry reflected:

"A good first **recommendation** for everyone is to be aware of the amount of deskless workers their company actually has."

While this piece of advice may appear basic, in some cases, HR professionals were unable to quickly estimate the percentage of their workforce that is made up of deskless workers. This observation demonstrates that organizations are likely not focusing enough attention on their deskless workers and their employee experience.



Critical Challenges for Deskless Workers and Their HR Teams

Most organizations possess a combination of desk-based and deskless workers and should consider the nuances in their experiences. From an organizational culture perspective, both workforces must be united and connected to avoid the perception of “two classes” of workers or an “us vs. them” mentality.⁷

Unfortunately, organizations – particularly the HR function – may find that achieving this level of cohesion is easier said than done. Since they are not usually located at their company’s headquarters, deskless workers can feel “out of sight, out of mind,” leading to a lack of prioritization and resources and a less positive employee experience.

Many operationally focused industries consider their deskless workforce a top priority, including retail, mining, and construction. However, although deskless workers are arguably “top of mind,” other constraints may still negatively impact their employee experience. For example, when deskless workers are difficult to access, developing and implementing programs to accommodate them is challenging. Also, given their distributed nature, HR teams may not fully understand the motivations, expectations, and desires of this segment of the workforce to the extent that they should. As a result, the HR function is not informed enough to cater to their needs when creating an effective employee experience.

One HR professional from the life sciences industry shared, “It is difficult to understand and manage deskless workers because we [HR] do not interact with them regularly to get a pulse on how they are feeling. With desk-based workers, HR can understand them because we are around them.”

Finally, organizations may view some types of deskless workers as disposable, given their low entry-level job requirements and notoriously high turnover. In return, the businesses may not deem these employees worth the investment to develop, which only compounds turnover. An average of 37% of deskless workers in the United States feels their employer views them as a disposable temporary worker. Only half of deskless workers in the logistics industry do not think they are considered disposable, while 45% in the retail industry and 41% in the transportation industry feel the same.⁸

In line with this thinking, an HR professional working in the engineering, construction, and operations industry who participated in the research program stated:

“Unfortunately, there is a **two-class system**; there are the people that know what is going on with the company and the people that do not [deskless workers].”

PERSPECTIVES DIVERGE BETWEEN HR PROFESSIONALS AND DESKLESS WORKERS

The overall employee experience for deskless workers’ needs improvement. But first, organizations must understand key concerns to address from two perspectives: HR challenges when supporting deskless workers and deskless workers’ obstacles in their own experience. Once the realities of both views are understood, organizations can devote their attention to specific areas that will most benefit deskless workers and the HR professionals who support them.

The HR Professional Perspective

Interviewed HR participants indicated their top challenges when supporting the deskless workers at their company – with the most common being the following.

The nature of deskless workers' jobs

By far, the most frequently cited challenge mentioned is related to the inherent nature of deskless workers' jobs. These issues include coordinating in-person training around work shifts to help ensure all deskless workers can attend. Other concerns involved proper and efficient logging of deskless workers' hours or tracking the completion of specific compliance learning requirements.

Communication and information dissemination

Many HR professionals indicated that communication and disseminating information to deskless workers was a significant daily challenge. An overwhelming majority of HR professionals relayed that their deskless workers do not receive company-issued e-mail addresses, hindering communication even more. Since a direct communication channel to deskless workers is lacking, many HR professionals are forced to rely solely on deskless workers' supervisors to distribute company-related information to them.

Key challenges in communicating with deskless workers may include:

- The use of a “one size fits all” communication model, which does not work well with deskless workers because they do not have a company e-mail address or cannot consistently access their e-mail account due to the nature of their jobs
- Mobile-based communication often is not personalized to meet the needs of deskless workers
- Infrequent communication with workers decreases deskless worker engagement, rather than improves it

Company and internet connectivity

The third most cited challenge centered on connectivity. With the lack of communication channels available to reach deskless workers, HR organizations struggle to keep deskless workers connected and engaged with the company's culture. Meanwhile, the lack of consistent and reliable access to Internet connectivity creates frustration among HR professionals and deskless workers, particularly in mining and utility industries.

One HR professional from the wholesale distribution industry stated, “Connectivity is the toughest challenge because of the lack of deskless employees' ability to interact with the organization daily. These workers are brought into the company and then never given a chance to come back again and learn about the company.”

These challenges that HR professionals encounter when supporting deskless workers are not independent of each other. Rather, they are interconnected and influence each other. Furthermore, these challenges, along with other deskless job characteristics such as the work’s psychological and physical demands, collectively impact deskless worker outcomes negatively, including engagement and retention.⁹

The Deskless Worker Perspective

In the primary deskless worker survey, participants ranked areas they would like to see improved the most at their company (See Figure 3). Response options for this question were based on the insights gathered from the HR professional interviews as well as academic and business press research.

The overall low engagement rates reported in recent years are likely heavily influenced by the deskless worker experience as a generally invisible and not well-understood population. Addressing this population’s experience could drastically improve overall engagement rates.

Which of the following are your top challenges as a deskless worker?

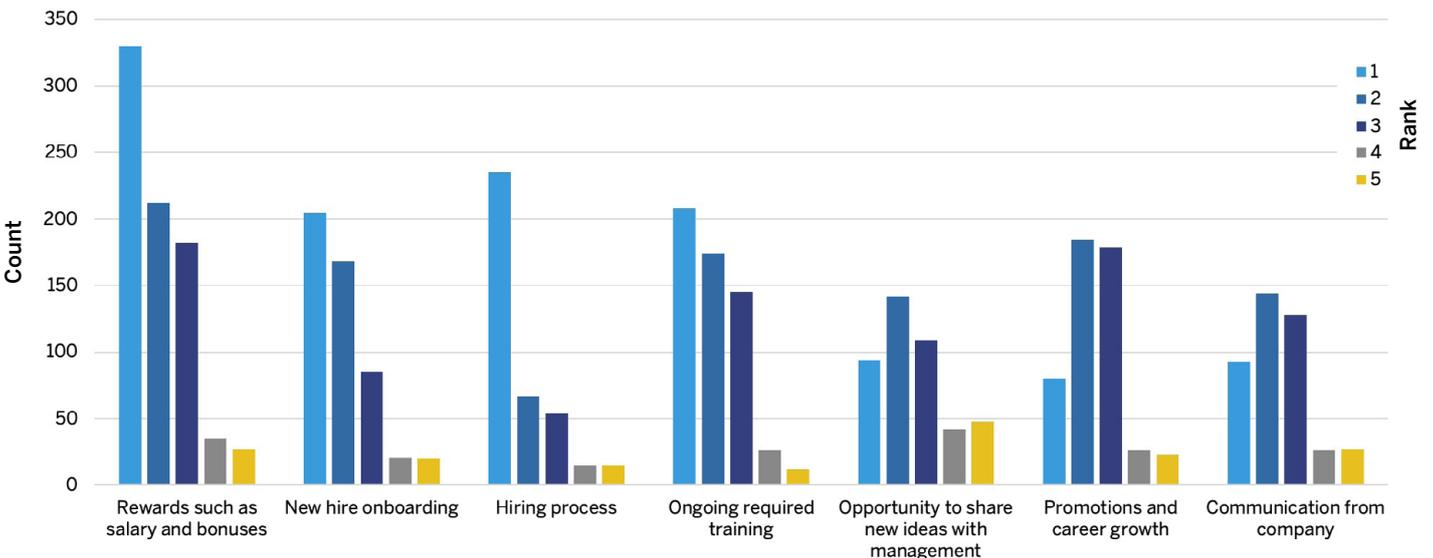


Figure 3. Deskless Workers’ Top Ranked Challenges

These seven areas represent the top challenges as ranked by deskless workers. Other options presented to the deskless workers included managerial feedback, quality of managers, appreciation and recognition received, available tools and technology to do their job, and clarity into workload and work processes.

The top challenges and most critical areas of improvement included the following aspects of the overall deskless employee experience.

Rewards

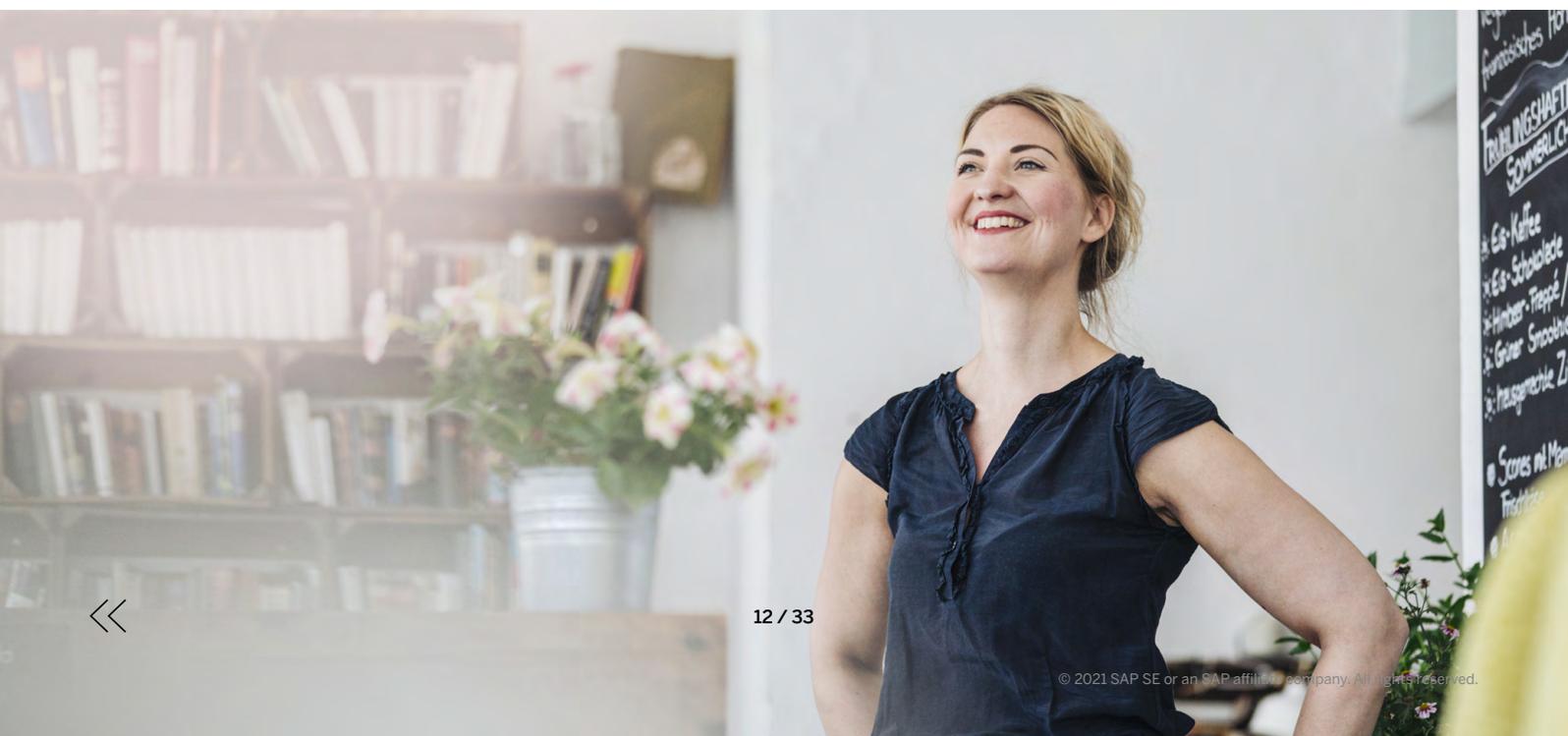
Deskless worker jobs are commonly entry-level or manual labor positions that require minimal education or skills. Therefore, these deskless worker jobs may not be well-paid. Additionally, some deskless worker jobs may be more mundane and not as inherently rewarding, leaving these employees more extrinsically motivated and most interested in the monetary benefits of their employment.

A 2020 report on deskless workers indicated that only 33% of deskless workers feel comfortable talking to their manager about their salary.¹⁰ Further related to this challenge, 74% of U.S. deskless workers have shown up for work sick before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly half (48%) of deskless workers stated they could not afford to lose the pay if they stayed home, and only 13% said they benefit from paid sick leave policies.¹¹

Hiring processes

In certain industries, such as manufacturing, hiring processes are outdated and still manual. Recruitment strategies for deskless workers may include physically posting a paper copy of the job description on the warehouse door and asking deskless workers to complete paper applications instead of an online application.

Such manual hiring processes are time- and data-intensive for HR organizations, let alone laborious for deskless workers. In response, companies are attempting to automate and digitalize their hiring processes to alleviate the amount of work on HR and improve the applicant experience. This solution may seem feasible in theory; however, since deskless workers may not have access to a personal computer or e-mail address, completing the necessary hiring processes digitally can still be difficult.



Required training and career growth

Another top challenge for deskless workers relates to training and development, with “new hire onboarding,” “ongoing required training,” and “promotions and career growth” close behind. It is not entirely clear what deskless workers specifically want to be different in their training and onboarding experience. Deskless workers may want more or less access to training or may desire the flexibility of an online onboarding or training experience.

Regarding development and career growth, research suggests that deskless workers do not feel they receive adequate access to developmental training.¹² Furthermore, up to 61% of deskless workers in the United States intend to stay within their current job for the next one to three years. This finding suggests that organizations should give deskless workers the resources to develop themselves over the long term within their company.¹³

Although deskless workers want more developmental training, it doesn't mean they can obtain it without difficulty. A desk-based worker can more easily set aside time in their workday to learn new skills that will allow them to grow in their career or get the promotion they want. This experience is not as simple for deskless workers because they are not necessarily available when developmental opportunities are scheduled.

Deskless workers who want to develop their careers are often required to do this on their own time off the clock. Yet, 52% of deskless workers state that access to more developmental training to grow their careers would make them feel better about their jobs' future security.¹⁴

Although not logistically convenient, access to career development opportunities appears to be a key area that deskless workers want to be improved, which would positively impact their employee experience.

Opportunities to share new ideas with management

Our research uncovered that deskless workers feel they are not included as much as they like and are not given a chance to share their ideas with management. A primary cause of this sentiment could stem from having managers who are somewhat removed from the day-to-day experience of deskless workers. While managers may set aside time to visit and talk with their deskless workers, it is still questionable whether they realize any value from these interactions.

If deskless workers feel their managers do not care about their input or are unsympathetic to their unique struggles, adverse organizational outcomes often arise that could have been otherwise prevented. For example, deskless workers may feel less engaged, empowered, and motivated, leaving them less inclined to share new ideas or input with their managers.

Deskless workers have arguably the most knowledge and valuable insight about the business's actual operations and their own employee experience. If they do not feel their managers are willing to hear and value their input, deskless workers are unlikely to speak up with solutions to problems that organizations desperately need to address.

Corporate communications

Deskless workers, for the most part, are receiving enough information. Our deskless workforce survey indicated that only 8% of deskless workers want more information, 49% claim to have the right amount of information, and 43% would like to receive less information. There are issues, however, with the type of information that deskless workers receive and how they receive it.

Due to the nature of their jobs, deskless workers do not have the time nor access necessary to read an abundance of communications from their company. Deskless workers may only check their e-mail, if they have one, every few days. And when they do, they may be overwhelmed with messages they need to sort and organize.

Survey results also indicated that deskless workers want their organization to share more information about business changes (30%), business performance (23%), their individual performance (22%), or their team's performance (22%). Given this relatively even distribution of preferences among survey participants, the best solution may be offering workers the opportunity to personalize their communication preferences in terms of both topics and frequency.

As far as how information is shared, unapproved communication apps – for example, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger – are used by an estimated 53% of deskless workers to communicate work-related information. In most cases, HR professionals are unaware and have little control over it, creating security concerns.

Overall, it may be in an organization's best interest to address this communication challenge. As many as 69% of deskless workers claim they would be less likely to leave their organization if their HR team could reassure them that employee communication would improve.¹⁵

Although HR is more focused on pushing out communications and information, deskless workers are more interested in communicating information back to management. Remember, deskless workers do not feel they need more information disseminated to them. Instead, they are more concerned with receiving the types of information they care most about from HR and their organizations – and in a way that is easiest for them to consume.

Furthermore, HR professionals mentioned keeping deskless workers culturally connected to the organization as a major challenge in maintaining engagement and retention. Of course, the question is which factors are critical for increasing deskless workers' connection to the company; yet the answer is surely not just Internet connectivity.

The priority areas for improvement from the deskless worker perspective can also offer potential answers to this question. They can help HR professionals look at specific aspects of the deskless worker experience – for example, rewards, development, and employee input – that are more likely to foster organizational connectivity and, as a result, deskless worker engagement.

The Current State of the Deskless Worker Experience

By recognizing the deskless staff as a segment of the total workforce with distinct nuances, businesses can consider how HR practices can accommodate and cater to the deskless worker's experience across the employee lifecycle.

Unfortunately, this is not often the case, as one HR professional from the retail industry observed during an interview:

“There is heightened **awareness around the lack of strategy** for our deskless workers. Our strategy for attracting, developing, and retaining deskless workers is not as cohesive as our strategy for desk-based workers.”

For many HR organizations, the lack of a tailored strategy for this segment is exposed in deskless workers' overall employee outcomes and their experiences specific to HR processes. They include recruiting and sourcing, onboarding, training and development, performance management.

OVERALL DESKLESS WORKFORCE OUTCOMES

In our survey of deskless workers, we asked this segment of the workforce about their overall employee experience – and results suggest there is significant room for improvement. Although 76% of deskless workers report feeling connected to their company, only 60% feel included in their company's HR programs and 40% feel adequately supported by their manager. Furthermore, their job attitudes are somewhat negative with 55% of deskless workers indicating high satisfaction and 41% reporting feelings of positive engagement.

However, when these responses are compared across the profiles in the deskless worker taxonomy, it is clear that the employee experience is different based on the specific dimensions:

- **Long-term** deskless workers have a better employee experience than short-term deskless workers
- **On-site** deskless workers have a better employee experience than off-site deskless workers
- Deskless workers who have **high customer interaction** have a better employee experience than deskless workers who have low customer interaction

A COMPARISON OF THE DESKLESS AND DESK-BASED WORKFORCE EXPERIENCE

When comparing deskless and desk-based workers' experience, one group does not necessarily have a better overall employee experience than the other. It is likely that any differences in their employee experience are more nuanced and depend on many variables that could not be controlled during our research. For example, aspects of each company's culture may influence the extent to which a participant's company caters to their deskless workers and the different types of deskless workers included in the sample. Additionally, workers may be biased about the employee experiences of their own and their desk-based peers, and how their company compares against other employers.

Results indicated that deskless workers were less engaged than desk-based workers. In the secondary survey, when comparing desk-based and deskless workers' self-reported positive feelings of engagement, the findings revealed a roughly 10% difference in engagement, with 48% of desk-based workers versus 37% of deskless workers feeling engaged.

However, deskless workers largely think they have a better employee experience than their desk-based coworkers. In the primary survey, 35% of deskless workers felt their experience was better, 34% thought it was about the same, and 31% said it was worse than their desk-based counterparts.

Overall, results from our survey of deskless workers indicate their employee experience requires substantial improvement. Our findings suggest that significant differences in the experience are based on each deskless worker's taxonomy profile (See *Figure 1*). Deskless workers with high customer interaction (such as flight attendants, cruise employees, retail store associates, nurses, consultants, and salespeople) appear to have a better-quality employee experience when compared to profiles with low customer interaction (including utility line and distribution center workers).

This difference in the overall employee experience may come down to access to more technology to get work done. Organizations must understand which elements of a deskless worker's employee experience need the most improvement and focus their immediate efforts on those areas. The following sections will outline deskless workers' employee experience across various stages of the employee lifecycle.

Recruiting and Sourcing

During our interviews, HR professionals shared that the deskless worker recruitment process takes too long and should be streamlined. Companies in industries such as construction and utilities are more likely to use unions or a form of mass recruiting to attract large numbers of deskless workers at one time. Many HR professionals also indicated that their recruiting activities were still largely manual because deskless workers may not have access to the technology and skills to succeed in a more digitalized process. Such challenges may include having no smartphone or e-mail address, limited technology experience, and language barriers.

Onboarding

Like recruiting, many HR professionals stated that their onboarding processes for deskless workers are primarily manual. Since a lot of data entry and additional time are required of HR organizations, delays can occur, leading to understaffing issues and organizational frustration. In response, many HR professionals want their onboarding process to become more automated in the future. Additionally, when comparing the onboarding of desk-based workers to deskless workers, the onboarding of deskless workers is typically much shorter and less comprehensive than what is offered to desk-based workers.

Training and Development

Results from this research program revealed that training and development is the most challenging portion of the deskless worker employee lifecycle and require the most improvement. HR professionals openly acknowledged that deskless workers do not receive the same quality of developmental training or learning compared to corporate desk-based workers.

This learning gap is attributed to the reality that deskless workers have no access to an office with a corporate-supported desktop computer or company e-mail address. These aspects of the deskless worker experience inhibit the ability to access developmental training during their workday. HR professionals stated that training is usually administered to deskless workers in person and in large groups.

In our secondary quantitative survey, desk-based and deskless workers were asked to indicate their perceptions of their company's learning climate. These learning climate factors included management relations and style, time to learn, opportunity to develop, autonomy and responsibility for learning, and learning resource availability. Results indicated that less than half of both desk-based (42%) and deskless workers (44%) perceived their organizations as having a positive learning climate.

Though perceptions related to the learning climate for desk-based and deskless workers were similar, there were significant differences in management relations and style and opportunity to develop. When asked, "My immediate manager sees my development as important," 84% of desk-based workers agreed and only 76% of deskless workers agreed. When asked "If I want to try something new at work, I am given the chance," 81% of desk-based workers agreed and only 69% of deskless workers agreed.

These differences between desk-based and deskless workers' learning climate perceptions signify the areas that organizations should consider improving in the deskless workers' learning experience. An HR professional from the retail industry further confirmed this line of thinking, "There is more of a push culture in stores for deskless workers from a learning perspective and more of a pull perspective for desk-based workers. Being a deskless worker is about doing your job; there is not much emphasis on development. For desk-based workers, we are working harder to develop them."

Performance Management

Unlike desk-based employees, many deskless workers are not receiving performance management from their company, according to interviewed HR professionals. In cases where deskless workers receive performance management, their goals tend to be results-focused and easily measurable – for example, arriving to work on time and number of safety incidents.

HR professionals also noted that, when given access to the performance management systems, deskless workers may not be using it or receiving officially assigned goals. Due to the nature of their jobs and profound communication challenges, deskless workers often experience performance management through informal interactions with their supervisors.

When asked about the outcomes they were measuring, 65% of HR professionals stated they assess overall employee engagement. However, very few said they are analyzing desk-based and deskless workers' outcomes and experiences individually. As little as 30% of HR professionals monitor deskless worker turnover, and only 22% are measuring deskless worker performance.



INDUSTRY AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE DESKLESS WORKER EXPERIENCE

Our research also analyzed deskless worker satisfaction by industry to understand which deskless worker industries have the best and worst employee experiences. Of the surveyed deskless workers in the banking industry, 66% claimed to be highly satisfied, while 63% of those in the insurance industry indicated a high satisfaction level. Such satisfaction could be attributed to having more access to HR systems and technology, which is more likely present in “white collar” positions than “blue collar” jobs.

Industries in which deskless workers are least satisfied include consumer products (59%), industrial machinery and components (56%), and healthcare (54%). These responses may be due to the manual HR processes widely used within these industries.

In terms of regional differences, **70% of deskless workers** in the Latin American region indicated they were the most highly satisfied.

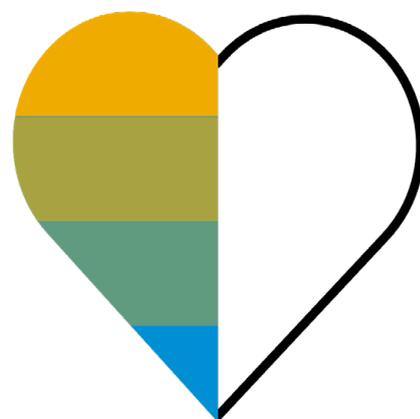
Meanwhile, 68% of deskless workers in Asia-Pacific countries and 50% of those in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa expressed low or moderate satisfaction.

MANAGERS STRUGGLE TO SUPPORT DESKLESS WORKERS

Within organizations, managers may be responsible for managing a variety of workers. A total of 36% of managers surveyed were responsible for managing both desk-based and deskless workers, while 55% of managers were managing solely deskless workers.

Based on the deskless workforce survey results, managers’ most common challenge was related to performance management of deskless workers, which is often nonexistent or informal if provided. (See Figure 9.)

Managers are also concerned about their ability to support the growth and development of their deskless workers. For example, managers in a manufacturing plant cannot easily allow their deskless workers to be away from their station for an hour to complete an optional developmental training. Additionally, managers may also struggle to provide all deskless workers access to the technology necessary to complete developmental training.



Managers cite the well-being of their deskless workers as a challenge as well. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, deskless workers were critical in helping their communities stay afloat – from grocery workers who kept their communities fed to nurses who helped ensure people’s health. Managers had no choice but to implement safety precautions to the best of their ability and ask deskless workers to continue to show up for work.

Keeping deskless workers engaged has been difficult too. As mentioned earlier, the daily work of many deskless workers is considered entry-level and manual, requires minimal education and skills, and may not be well-paid. Therefore, it is not surprising that managers struggle to keep deskless workers engaged, as deskless workers may not find their job tasks exciting or personally fulfilling.

Which of the following are your top challenges as a manager of deskless workers?

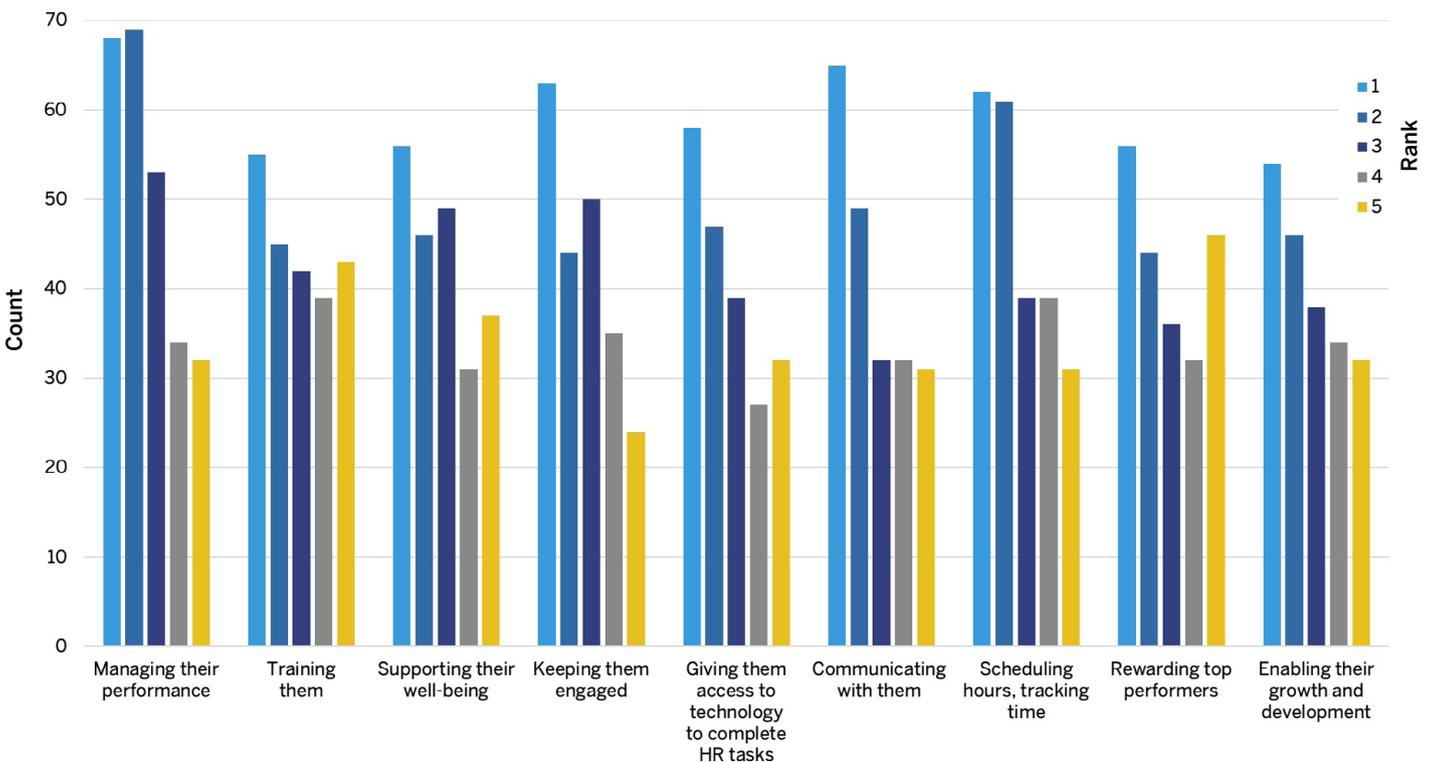


Figure 9: Top Areas of Improvement and Challenges

Only the most frequently mentioned areas that managers would like improved are displayed. Other options managers could have selected, in addition to the ones above, were “retaining my deskless workers,” “getting feedback from my deskless workers,” and “aligning deskless workers around the company’s purpose and culture.”



The Current State of the Deskless Worker Experience with HR Technology

The fact that deskless workers do not work from a desk creates significant challenges for organizations when deploying the technology necessary to complete both work tasks and HR tasks. However, the results are worth the effort: 70% of surveyed deskless workers said they use the technology frequently when it is made available.

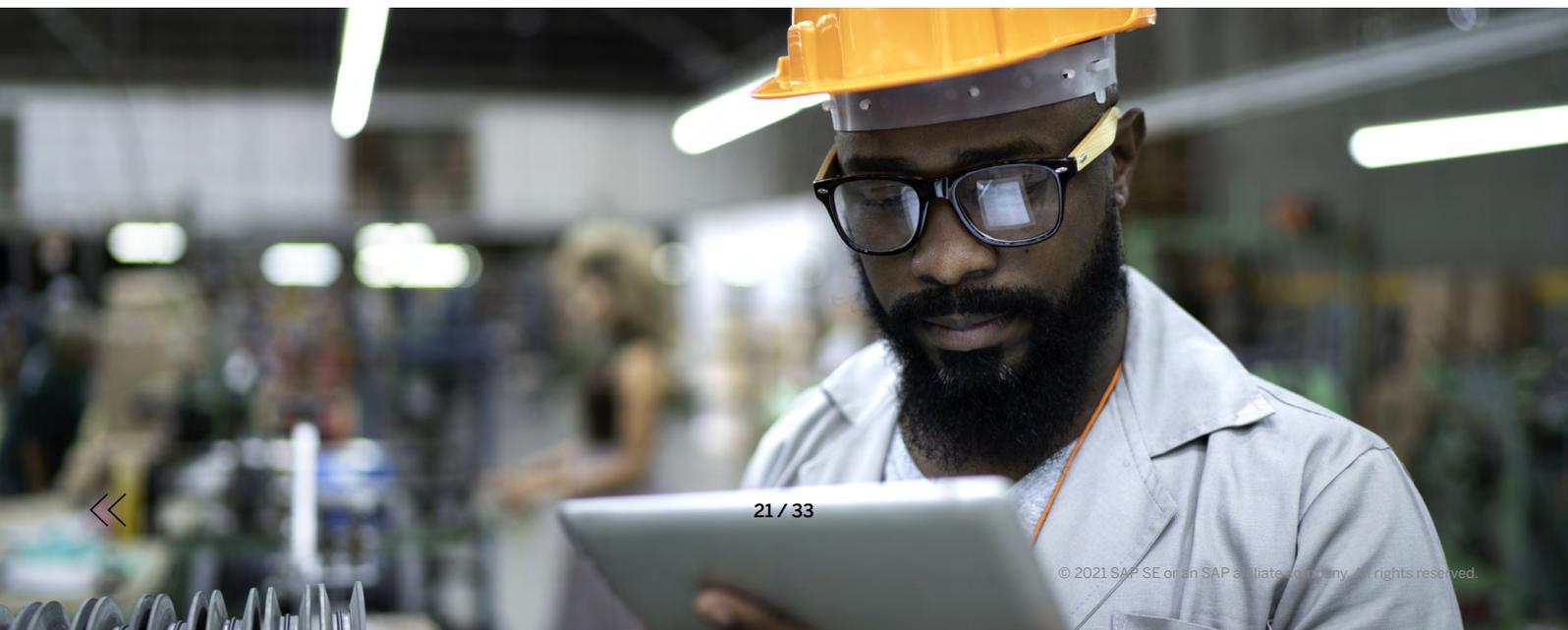
ADOPTION OF MOBILE DEVICES AND APPS

Of the HR professionals interviewed, 91% indicated their deskless workforce used one or more forms of mobile technology. The most frequent methods of enabling deskless worker with technology are “bring your own device” (BYOD) and kiosks. BYOD refers to instances in which personal mobile devices are used to complete work-related tasks, whereas kiosks are shared devices used to complete HR-related tasks during work breaks.

Consistent with HR professionals’ insights, 19% of surveyed deskless workers reported they do not use a mobile device at work, 35% practice a BYOD approach, 18% share company-provided kiosks with other deskless colleagues, and 28% are assigned their own company issued-mobile device.

Most of the taxonomy profiles of deskless workers were using their own mobile devices to some extent. However, off-site deskless workers primarily used company-provided mobile devices, which was less common for on-site workers. This finding alludes to the importance of having a company-issued mobile device for this segment of deskless workers, especially those who travel (for example, salespeople or consultants).

Although the findings point to considerable use of BYOD, several HR professionals expressed concerns with their deskless workers using their own mobile devices. These concerns include supporting internal systems across a variety of different mobile devices and ensuring security compliance.



RECONSIDERATION OF E-MAIL USE

In most cases, deskless workers are not issued a company e-mail address for work-related communication. In our survey of deskless workers, 25% indicated not using e-mail at all, 22% leverage their personal e-mail address, 18% use a company-issued e-mail address shared across workers, and 35% use a company e-mail address used just by an individual worker.

However, this arrangement could be contributing to the communication, information dissemination, and connectivity challenges that HR professionals and deskless workers experience. For example, our findings suggest that deskless workers in the taxonomy profile characterized by low customer interaction and short-term duration predominantly do not use an e-mail address in any capacity at work. This limitation further hinders communication and connectivity with their company, which may contribute to their low level of satisfaction.

ACCESS TO BUSINESS SYSTEMS

According to the deskless workforce survey results, only about half (49%) of deskless workers indicated having access to the technology needed to complete HR-related tasks. Interviews with HR professionals revealed that 52% do not give desk-based and deskless workers equal access, with deskless workers gaining far less.

However, some HR professionals stated their company provides deskless workers with access to their training or learning management system (61%) and people or employee central system (48%). Between 24% and 33% of interviewed HR professionals also said they provide deskless workers access to HR applications, such as performance management, recruiting, and onboarding.

SATISFACTION OF THE OVERALL TECHNOLOGY EXPERIENCE

The deskless workforce survey shows that approximately 64% of deskless workers believe there is room for improvement in their technology experience, while 36% are satisfied. Deskless workers who have access to the right technology to complete HR-related tasks were generally more satisfied with their employee experience than their deskless counterparts who did not have access.

Deskless workers who leverage their personal mobile device (BYOD) were more satisfied with their technology than deskless workers who do not use any form of mobile technology. However, kiosk users were less satisfied than their deskless peers not using mobile technology at all.

The findings do demonstrate that the type of mobile technology given matters. Shared mobile devices can lead to long wait times, delays, and frustration. But not surprisingly, deskless workers with access to e-mail at work reported better technology experiences than deskless workers who did not.

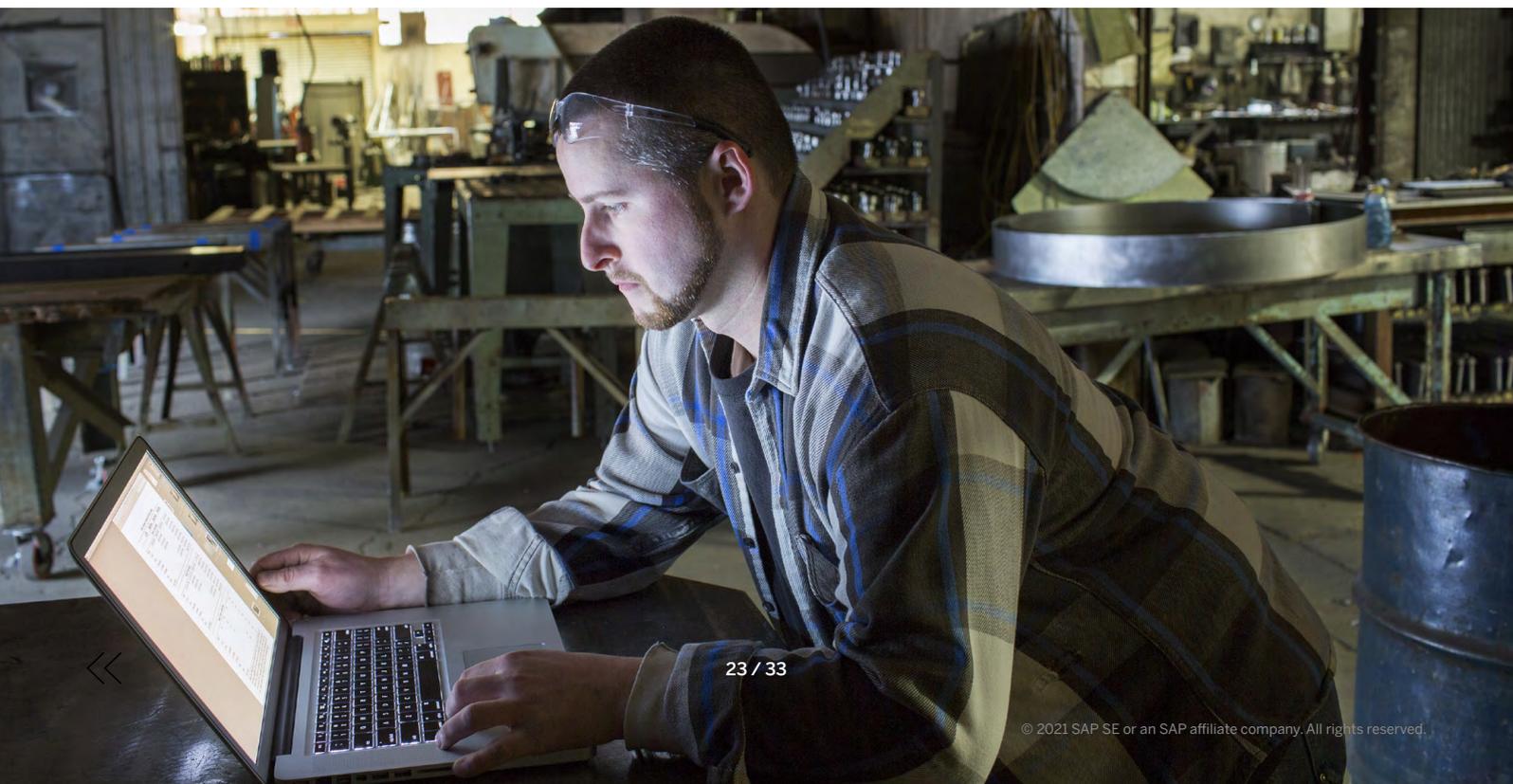
PERCEPTION OF TECHNOLOGY'S IMPACT ON THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Our survey revealed that 66% of deskless workers feel that technology makes their employee experience significantly better. Regarding the deskless workforce taxonomy, high customer interaction and long-term duration workers view technology as a more positive contributor to their overall employee experience, compared to profiles with low customer interaction and short-term duration.

Deskless workers who perceived technology to be helpful were more engaged than those who did not. Generally, deskless workers feel positively about technology, with 61% agreeing that technology helps them complete their work tasks. On-site deskless workers experiencing high customer interaction and long-term duration are more likely to share this viewpoint. They want more access in the future than their on-site deskless peers with low customer interaction and short-term duration.

Deskless workers who feel technology is important to their overall employee experience are also more engaged, feel more connected to their company, are better included in HR-led programs, and perceive technology to be more helpful to their work. On the other hand, deskless workers who stated they would like less information to be communicated to them were less satisfied with their current technology experience.

Using and implementing technologies with deskless workers comes with unavoidable challenges that will influence the deskless worker experience. Our research suggests that, in instances where technology enablement is too difficult or impossible, organizations should focus on the employee experience aspects over which they have more control. For example, organizations can ensure deskless workers feel supported by management and the HR function and included in HR-led programs.



Critical Areas of Improvement in the Deskless Worker Experience

In our interviews, HR professionals shared the initiatives they plan to implement for their deskless workers in the future. The most frequently mentioned areas of improvement were technology, training and development, and performance management.

TECHNOLOGY

When asked whether technology is the answer to communicating and engaging more effectively with deskless workers, 59% of HR professionals agreed and 41% said it depends on the situation. The latter group believed technology is only a part of the solution, and that companies cannot be completely reliant on technology to resolve all challenges in supporting a deskless workforce.

Though some HR professionals did not believe technology was the single answer for effective communication and engagement with their deskless workers, all HR professionals believed technology was at least part of the answer. Suggestions for improvement included:

- **More intelligent technologies:** Artificial intelligence can interact with applicants and handle scheduling, and chatbots can answer HR-related questions immediately.
- **Increased emphasis on mobile technologies:** Such initiatives could encourage deskless workers to use their own mobile devices at work, provide access to more mobile technology, or implement mobile communication apps.

- **Better access to essential technological systems:** Deskless workers could be granted access to company e-mail accounts or modules of the organization's HR systems.
- **Automated and simplified processes:** Organizations can implement single sign-on, make systems more self-service, and develop offline capabilities for deskless worker systems.

HR professionals believe technologies are a critical area of focus in the future; however, improving the employee experience requires understanding deskless workers' and their managers' perspectives. According to our survey, 52% of the deskless workers not granted technology and 83% of those who do have it indicated a desire for greater access in the future. Meanwhile, nearly all (87%) managers of deskless workers believed technology would help solve their biggest challenges when supporting their deskless workers. These results highlight the criticality of improving deskless worker technologies from the perspective of HR, deskless workers, and their managers.



TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

HR sees value in improving deskless workers' training and development for several reasons. Deskless workers can understand their value to the company and how to progress their long-term careers within the company. The use of developmental learning also serves as a retention incentive to keep deskless workers motivated. Additionally, developing internal talent makes the most sense in terms of workforce planning and cost.

According to our secondary survey on desk-based and deskless workers' skills, a positive learning climate is related to desired organizational outcomes, such as more engagement, awareness of employees' own current technical skills, and knowledge of the technical skills they need to learn in the future. However, findings indicate that deskless workers' learning climates are currently less than positive. Deskless workers still wish their organization knew more about their abilities, and particularly their professional and technical skills and work goals. This finding suggests that learning and development are priorities for deskless workers.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Both HR professionals and managers discussed challenges related to managing the performance of deskless workers.

HR professionals mentioned providing deskless workers adequate performance management is challenging due to existing communication issues, but they are working to resolve the challenge for deskless workers. Such approaches include providing more performance management and continuous feedback, measuring and consistently tracking outcomes to better understand their unique employee experiences, and determining how to best implement performance management technology for their deskless workers.

Consistent with HR professionals, managers of deskless workers also struggle with managing deskless worker performance and want to provide their deskless workers with more and better performance information in the future.

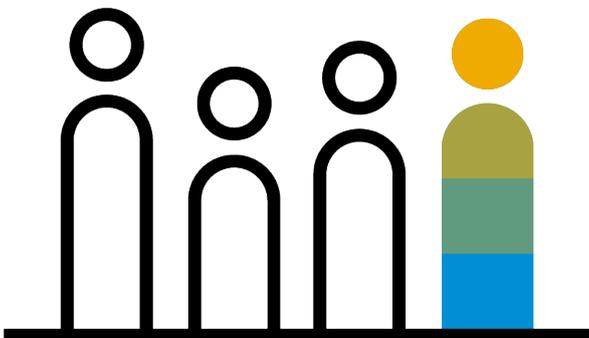
Overall, and consistent with other research results from this research program, we suggest organizations focus on improving policies and practices that empower deskless workers and provide them additional support from both management and HR.

Best Practices and Recommendations

Deskless workers are an integral and substantial part of the workforce, allowing organizations to run effectively every day. But unfortunately, our research confirms they are not necessarily considered a priority and given the resources they deserve, resulting in less positive employee experiences compared to their desk-based peers.

Successful organizations acknowledge the profound contributions and importance of their deskless workforce by strategically investing more resources into their deskless workers' employee experiences. They understand that a positive deskless worker employee experience is not the product of a single intervention, but rather a continuous and multifaceted approach. Organizations and HR teams must foster a positive organizational culture that is inclusive of deskless workers and enable their deskless workforce with policies, practices, and technology that meets their unique needs and circumstances.

Throughout this research program, several HR-related best practices and technology recommendations have emerged.



HR BEST PRACTICES

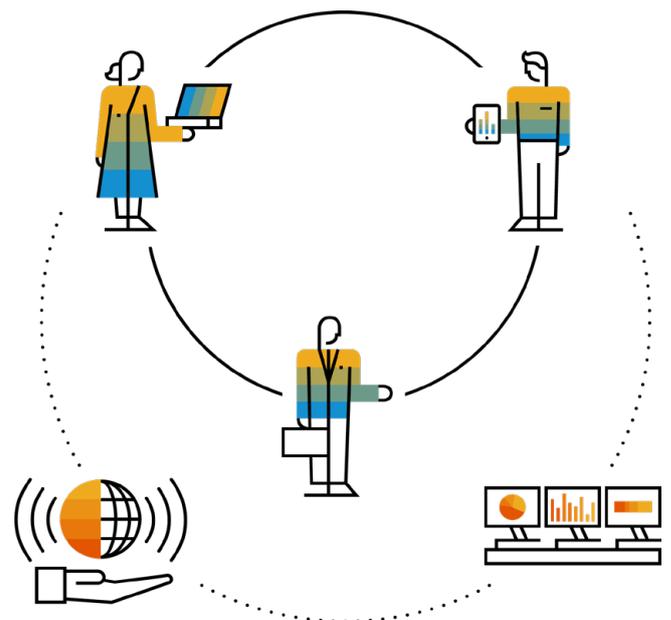
- 1. Understand the deskless workforce analytically.** To improve the employee experience of deskless workers, organizations must first understand them. HR professionals must have an accurate count of this segment of their workforce, the taxonomy profiles that describe them, their current experience, and the future state HR wishes to deliver. In addition, organizations need to understand how to measure their deskless workers' experience – more specifically, the outcomes they want to capture. In conversations with HR professionals, many indicated their organizations were looking at metrics such as overall engagement, performance, and retention, but were not analyzing these metrics between desk-based and deskless employees. Organizations, and more specifically HR teams, must continuously compute and report analytics on desk-based and deskless worker employee experiences separately to identify and remedy incongruencies between their experiences.
- 2. Design HR processes for deskless workers first, then apply them to desk-based workers.** From a strategy perspective, HR processes should be designed to meet the complex requirements of deskless workers first, and then be applied to desk-based employees' less complicated needs. According to an interviewed HR professional from the retail industry, this approach enabled its organization to realize positive differences in their deskless workers' outcomes, including higher engagement among deskless than desk-based workers.

3. Devote HR efforts to the training and development of deskless workers.

The training and development piece of the deskless worker employee lifecycle is an area that requires drastic improvement. Not only do deskless workers have a mediocre learning experience, they are aware that the organization does not provide them the same opportunities for learning and development as their desk-based peers. To improve the deskless worker learning experience, organizations must follow the “build, not buy” mentality and focus on building and developing existing deskless worker talent rather than obtaining new talent through external hires. Doing so makes deskless workers feel invested in growing a long-term career at the company. Plus, if HR can make compliance training and other required learning more efficient and easier to complete, deskless workers will have more time to develop skills that they feel are important to their future success. Then, managers can nurture high-potential deskless talent into future leaders.

4. Provide managers adequate information to manage their deskless workers effectively.

A substantial part of managing deskless workers is overseeing their performance with access to the right information and analytics. Managers in our research who received these performance management insights expressed the highest satisfaction, suggesting HR organizations should provide correct, timely, and relevant information to assess their deskless workers. Managers can help their deskless workers feel more valued by taking the time to evaluate their performance with accurate information and engaging in a discussion that reflects their performance, personal goals, and career aspirations.



TECHNOLOGY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Select and implement technologies that meet unique needs. Interviewed HR professionals stated the ideal deskless worker technology should have the following characteristics:

- Self-service support feature to receive answers in a timely manner
- Simple and engaging user experience for deskless workers to use in the flow of their work
- Offline capabilities to enable the use of business systems without an Internet connection
- Easy access on multiple platforms and compatibility with Android and iOS systems
- Integrated systems that communicate well together to provide a seamless experience with a single entry point
- Access to a communication feature so deskless workers can connect to others in the company
- Secure technologies that keep confidential company-related information out of the wrong hands while being shared across technologies from various locations

2. Know which mobile technologies deskless workers are most comfortable using.

Organizations and HR need to focus their efforts on the technologies that deskless workers prefer and are comfortable using. Our survey indicated that deskless workers are most comfortable using a company mobile app on their personal mobile device

or a personal company-issued mobile device. This preference is particularly evident when completing quick HR tasks such as reviewing pay, managing a timesheet, updating personal information, evaluating and selecting employee benefits, requesting time off, receiving communications, giving feedback, and viewing career opportunities. Conversely, they are least comfortable using mobile messenger applications to complete these tasks. When it comes to participating in official training, development, and performance management, however, deskless workers prefer a company-issued mobile device.

3. Provide mobile technology for training and development in the flow of their work.

Deskless workers are often on the go, with limited time for completing required or developmental training. Therefore, such learning should be integrated with all other operational and HR systems that are important for deskless workers to do their jobs, such as safety systems or time and attendance. This tactic helps ensure HR professionals capture and integrate all relevant data points related to the deskless worker learning experience. Training should also be in the form of micro-learning to let deskless workers quickly get the information they need. The addition of gamification can make the entire learning process more fun and engaging.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout the project, the SAP SuccessFactors HR Research Team conducted rigorous applied research to draw evidence-based conclusions and identify practical recommendations for organizations seeking to improve their deskless workforce's employee experience. The intention throughout the research program was to capture the perspective of HR professionals from organizations with large deskless worker populations and the critical point of view of deskless workers themselves.

This research program included reviews of all relevant business press and academic research literature and 39 semi-structured interviews with HR leaders from 33 organizations using SAP® SuccessFactors® solutions. From each organization, the HR senior leader (chief human resources officer and vice president of HR) and the HR functional manager (HR professionals responsible for specific HR activities, such as learning and development and talent acquisition) were interviewed. For regional and industry representation, refer to Appendix B.

We also conducted one primary global survey of 1,600 deskless workers and a secondary global survey of both deskless (359) and desk-based (988) workers, focusing specifically on their learning and development experience as it relates to upskilling and reskilling. Most of the deskless worker sample (90%) came from organizations with global operations and deskless workers operating in countries where their headquarters are located. Both surveys were international with representation from 14 countries: France, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Germany, Russia, Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Brazil, Mexico, United States, and Canada.

This white paper is the result of this extensive, cumulative research. It explains who deskless workers are and the current state of deskless workers' experience across the employee lifecycle and with HR technology. We also identify the top priorities for improvement and provide evidence-based recommendations for HR practices and technology.



Appendix A: Cross Section of Industries for the Deskless Workforce Taxonomy

	On site		Off Site	
	Long-term duration	Short-term duration	Long-term duration	Short-term duration
High customer interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Banking • Healthcare • Higher Education & Research • Retail • Travel & Transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automotive • Banking • Healthcare • Higher Education & Research • Professional Services • Public Sector • Retail • Sports • Telecommunications • Travel & Transportation 	<p>Sales-Related</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aerospace & Defense • Banking • Chemicals • Consumer Products • High Tech • Industrial Machinery & Components • Insurance • Life Sciences • Wholesale Distribution <p>Service Related</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense & Security • Healthcare • Higher Education & Research • Professional Services • Sports • Travel & Transportation 	<p>Sales-Related</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aerospace & Defense • Banking • Chemicals • Consumer Products • High Tech • Industrial Machinery & Components • Insurance • Life Sciences • Wholesale Distribution <p>Service Related</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engineering, Construction & Operations • Healthcare • Professional Services • Public Sector • Telecommunications • Travel & Transportation
Low customer interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense & Security • Mill Products & Mining • Oil & Gas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aerospace & Defense • Automotive • Chemicals • Consumer Products • Healthcare • High Tech • Industrial Machinery & Components • Life Sciences • Media • Mill Products & Mining • Oil & Gas • Public Sector • Retail • Sports • Travel & Transportation • Utilities • Wholesale Distribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defense & Security • Higher Education & Research • Media • Oil & Gas • Sports • Travel & Transportation • Wholesale Distribution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engineering, Construction & Operations • Industrial Machinery & Components • Oil & Gas • Public Sector • Telecommunications • Travel & Transportation • Utilities • Wholesale Distribution

Bolded industries are those identified as especially reflective of that profile of the taxonomy. Both the high customer interaction, long-term, off-site and high customer interaction, short-term, off-site profiles predominantly include sales roles for certain industries. Therefore, researchers separated the industries that belong in these specific profiles by whether they have more sales- or service- oriented jobs within that profile.

Appendix B: Demographic Profile of Surveyed Full-Time Deskless Workers

Industry Breakdown

Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 65% male• 35% female
Tenure of being a deskless worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 20% have been a deskless worker for 2–3 years• 36% have been a deskless worker for more than 10 years
Tenure of being employed at their current organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 24% have been at their organization for 2–3 years• 22% for 4–6 years• 27% for more than 10 years
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 29% are high school educated• 11% have an associate’s degree• 30% have a bachelor’s degree
Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9% each from healthcare, retail, and travel and transportation• 8% each from consumer products and engineering, construction, and operations• 7% from professional services• 6% from wholesale distribution• 5% each from automotive, industrial machinery and components, and public sector
Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 43% from Europe, Middle East, and Africa• 29% from North America• 14% from Asia Pacific• 14% from Latin America

Appendix C: Representation of Interviews with HR Professionals

Industry Breakdown	HR interviews	Regional Breakdown	HR interviews
Retail	5	North America	19
Automotive	4	Europe, Middle East, and Africa	7
Life Sciences	4	Latin America	4
Mill Products and Mining	4	Asia Pacific and Japan	3
Utilities	4		
Banking	2		
Consumer Products	2		
Engineering, Construction, and Operations	2		
Industrial Machinery and Components	2		
Professional Services	2		
Healthcare	1		
High Tech	1		
Insurance	1		
Media	1		
Oil and Gas	1		
Telecommunications	1		
Travel and Transportation	1		
Wholesale Distribution	1		

Persona Breakdown	HR interviews
HR senior leaders (chief HR officers and vice presidents of HR)	21
Functional manager (HR professional responsible for a specific HR process)	18

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