DESKLESS | 2024

The Deskless Report

BROUGHT TO YOU BY
Axonify

RESEARCH PARTNER
the starr conspiracy

FOR DISTRIBUTION BY
capabilitygroup

From circumstance to choice:
The frontline's new path forward

Uncertainty, reactive decisions and crisis management—these were the dominant themes when we last explored the state of the frontline in 2022. The pandemic's impact on the workplace was still acute and frontline teams were in the thick of it, navigating unprecedented challenges.

Frontline work has always been hard—while the pandemic didn't create the situation, it intensified what already wasn't working. As a result of two years of instability and chaos, 49% of managers felt burned out and overburdened. Frustrated with a lack of consistent hours and support, 39% of workers were eyeing the exit.

After all, frontline workers are skilled professionals in challenging roles, and they deserve the right support and resources to succeed every time they clock in.

Now that things have moved beyond the worst-case scenario and the daily chaos has subsided, employees are more optimistic about the future of their industries, and fewer want to quit. Burnout, too, has declined.

But let's be clear: going from full-on crisis to "less bad" isn't a win. The problems haven't disappeared—they've evolved into guarded optimism and slightly better conditions.

To get a sense of the current state of the frontline, we turned to the key players, surveying frontline employees, managers and executives across retail, supermarkets, foodservice, hospitality and distribution and logistics. We surveyed these cohorts to hear about their experiences and get executives' perceptions, uncovering the three most urgent challenges and five key insights to illuminate a path forward.

We've taken an intentional and actionable approach, focusing on meaningful changes that can be made *today* instead of advocating for large-scale transformational shifts that get attention—but rarely results.

These pages present an overview of where frontlines find themselves and insights to spark inspiration and conversation.

Executive respondents	Frontline respondents		Industries
	Managers	Employees	
110	**255**	**423**	**5**

What's in the report?

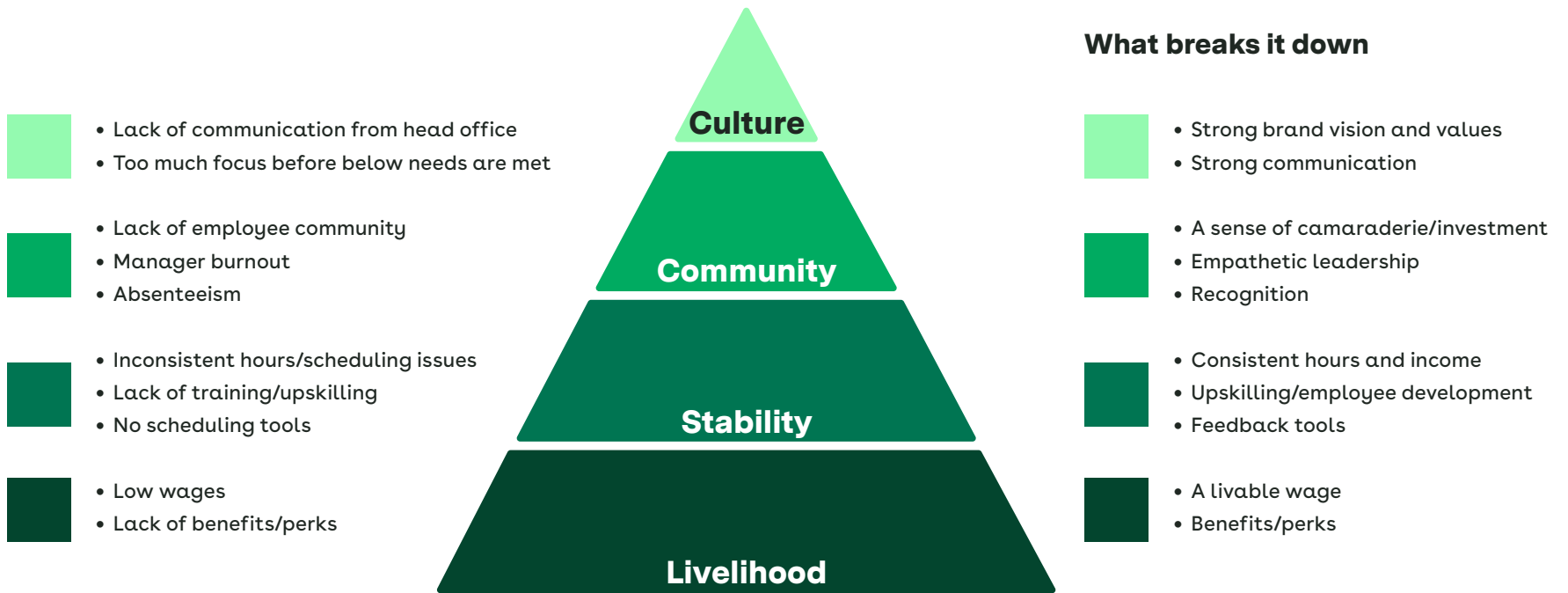# Focus on today to earn their tomorrow

Focus on today to earn their tomorrow

Success at work means more than just a wage. Frontline employees aren't simply punching a clock; they care about doing their jobs well.

When we first developed the Frontline Hierarchy of Needs, it was built directly from feedback—what workers told us they needed to feel stable, successful and satisfied on the job. Fair pay topped the list and was foundational to other critical needs that frontline employees highlighted: **communication, community and training**.

The current data paints a clear picture that what builds or breaks that experience hasn't changed—if anything, it's become more urgent. It's still rooted in people and pay, which points to a persistent need to satisfy these foundational elements before moving on to other concerns. Top of mind for frontline workers: the here and now.

Frontline Hierarchy of Needs

- Lack of communication from head office
- Too much focus before below needs are met

- Lack of employee community
- Manager burnout
- Absenteeism

- Inconsistent hours/scheduling issues
- Lack of training/upskilling
- No scheduling tools

- Low wages
- Lack of benefits/perks

Culture

Community

Stability

Livelihood

What breaks it down

- Strong brand vision and values
- Strong communication

- A sense of camaraderie/investment
- Empathetic leadership
- Recognition

- Consistent hours and income
- Upskilling/employee development
- Feedback tools

- A livable wage
- Benefits/perks
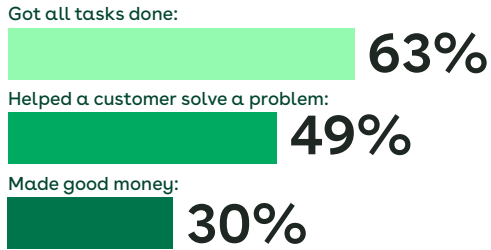
What the frontline wants

When we asked what made them feel like they had a successful day, frontline workers consistently highlighted a sense of tangible progress and helping with customer concerns.

The number one response was "getting all tasks done" (65%), followed closely by "helping a customer or guest solve a problem" (41%). Making good wages came in third at 38%.
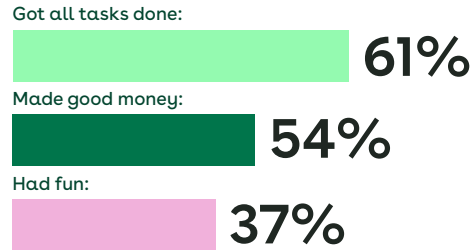
The fact that a sense of accomplishment ranked higher than earning good wages tells us that workers are motivated by **the impact they can make every day**, not just by a bigger pay packet.

This motivation is key to your business. When frontline employees feel supported and able to achieve these daily wins, they're more engaged and productive. In turn, it leads to improved customer experience and ultimately fuels the bottom line.
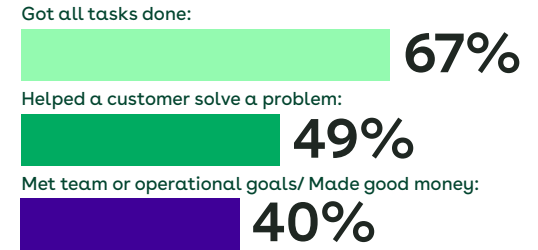
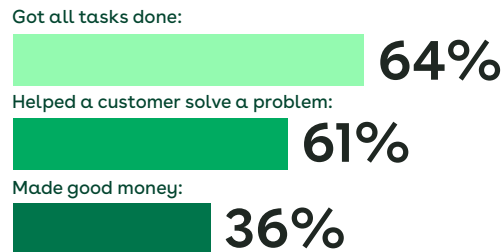## What makes a successful day for employees

Got all tasks done:
63%

Helped a customer solve a problem:
49%

Made good money:
30%

Retail

Got all tasks done:
61%

Made good money:
54%

Had fun:
37%

Foodservice

Got all tasks done:
67%

Helped a customer solve a problem:
49%

Met team or operational goals/ Made good money:
40%

Hospitality

Got all tasks done:
64%

Helped a customer solve a problem:
61%

Made good money:
36%

Supermarket

Got all tasks done:
70%

Made good money:
44%

Met team or operational goals:
40%
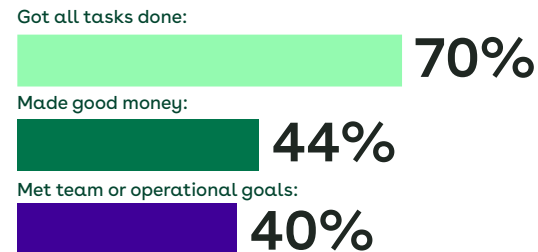
Distribution & Logistics

The unhappiness myth

The unhappiness myth:
Frontline employees aren't dissatisfied at work, but they need stability and support

Frontline jobs have a reputation for being chronically unsatisfying career choices. In sectors like supermarkets, retail and hospitality, the high turnover, absenteeism and disengagement seen in these frequently undervalued roles contribute to their unfairly negative perception.

To counter this assumption, HR and leadership teams often set up career advancement to flip the script that these are lower-status jobs for first-time workers. Companies lean into leadership programmes, upskilling and upward mobility when hiring.

But here's the twist: frontline workers aren't necessarily asking for career advancement. They're more focused on getting through the day successfully.

Over half (56%) of managers are interested in cross-training and upskilling, which ties directly to career development, and 66% feel that their organisation invests in their personal development and growth— leaving room for career pathing.
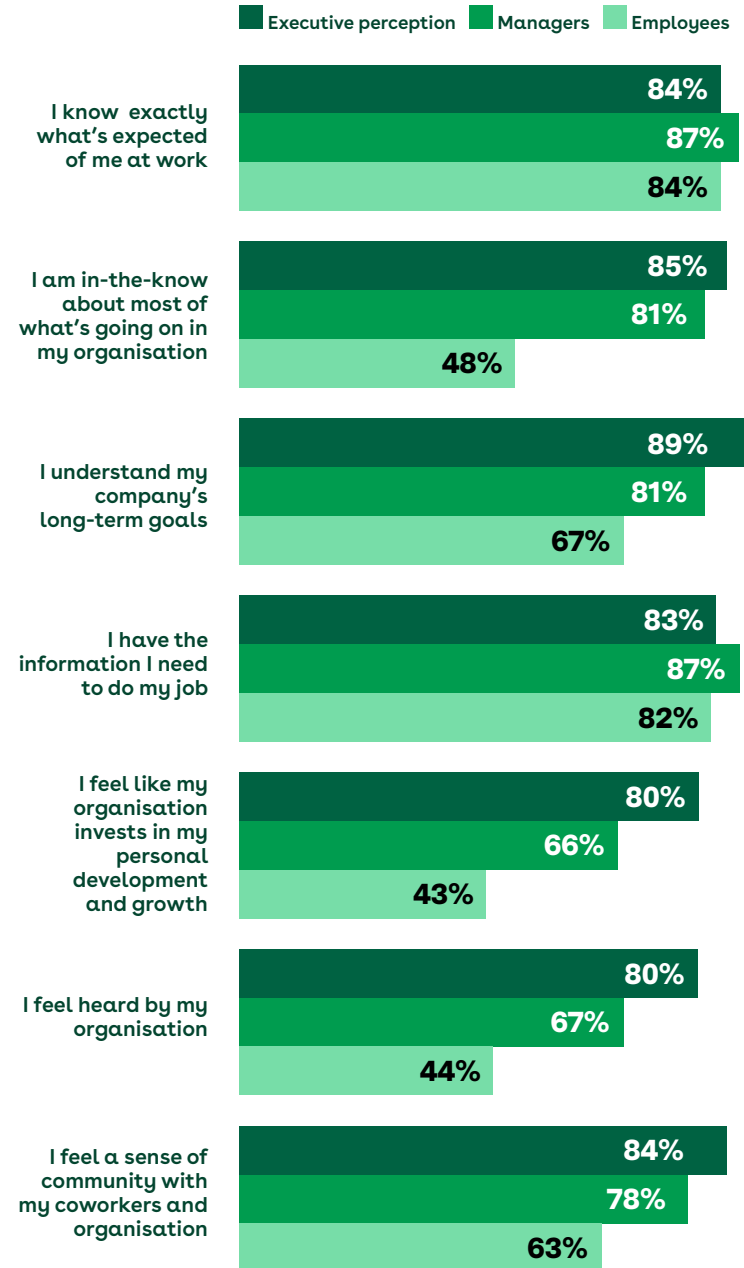
In comparison, only 41% of employees share that interest, prioritising day-to-day tasks over longer-term growth.

This doesn't mean career advancement shouldn't be a focus at all, but gearing it toward managers is a smarter bet. Executives tend to underestimate the demand for training, with only 35% recognising just how much managers want it.

But the biggest misconception is assuming that career growth is a one-size-fits-all solution for satisfaction on the frontline. For many frontline employees, stability and support in their current roles are more critical than being on a path to future promotions.

## Career growth is not the magic bullet for frontline happiness.

Work experience (Percentage agree)

Executive perception   **Managers**   **Employees**

I know exactly what's expected of me at work
- Executive perception: 84%
- Managers: 87%
- Employees: 84%

I am in-the-know about most of what's going on in my organisation
- Executive perception: 85%
- Managers: 81%
- Employees: 48%

I understand my company's long-term goals
- Executive perception: 89%
- Managers: 81%
- Employees: 67%

I have the information I need to do my job
- Executive perception: 83%
- Managers: 87%
- Employees: 82%

I feel like my organisation invests in my personal development and growth
- Executive perception: 80%
- Managers: 66%
- Employees: 43%

I feel heard by my organisation
- Executive perception: 80%
- Managers: 67%
- Employees: 44%

I feel a sense of community with my coworkers and organisation
- Executive perception: 84%
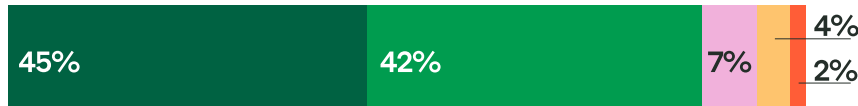- Managers: 78%
- Employees: 63%

On a big-picture level, many frontline workers are quite content with their jobs. Enough that it defies the common narrative about frontline dissatisfaction. For example, 87% of managers describe themselves as at least somewhat happy (45% are very happy), and over three-quarters (77%) of employees feel the same way, with nearly one in three calling themselves very happy.

Frontline happiness

- ■ Very happy
- ■ Somewhat happy
- ■ Neither happy nor unhappy
- ■ Somewhat unhappy
- ■ Very unhappy

Executive perception
41% | 51% | 5% | 1% | 2%
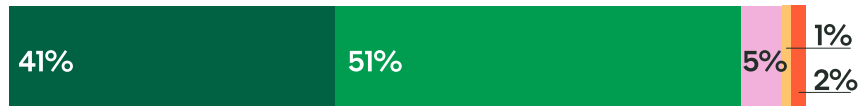
Managers
45% | 42% | 7% | 4% | 2%

Employees
31% | 46% | 13% | 5% | 5%

Frontline employee happiness by industry

- ■ Very happy
- ■ Somewhat happy
- ■ Neither happy nor unhappy
- ■ Somewhat unhappy
- ■ Very unhappy
- ■ I don't know

Retail
28% | 47% | 13% | 8% | 3%

Foodservice
40% | 39% | 13% | 6% | 1%

Hospitality
29% | 42% | 18% | 4% | 7%

Supermarket
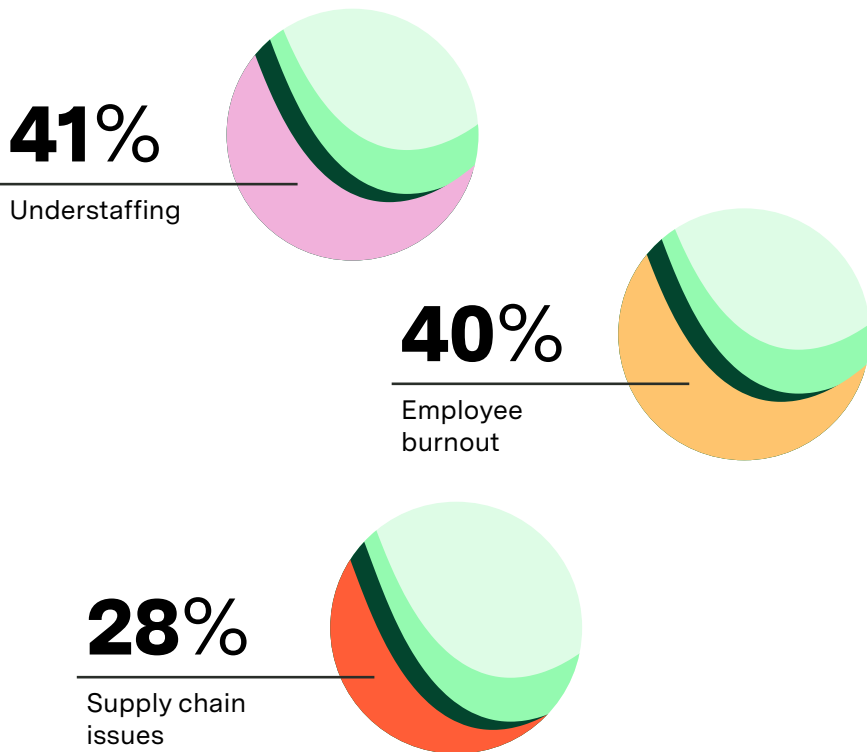27% | 39% | 15% | 15% | 3%
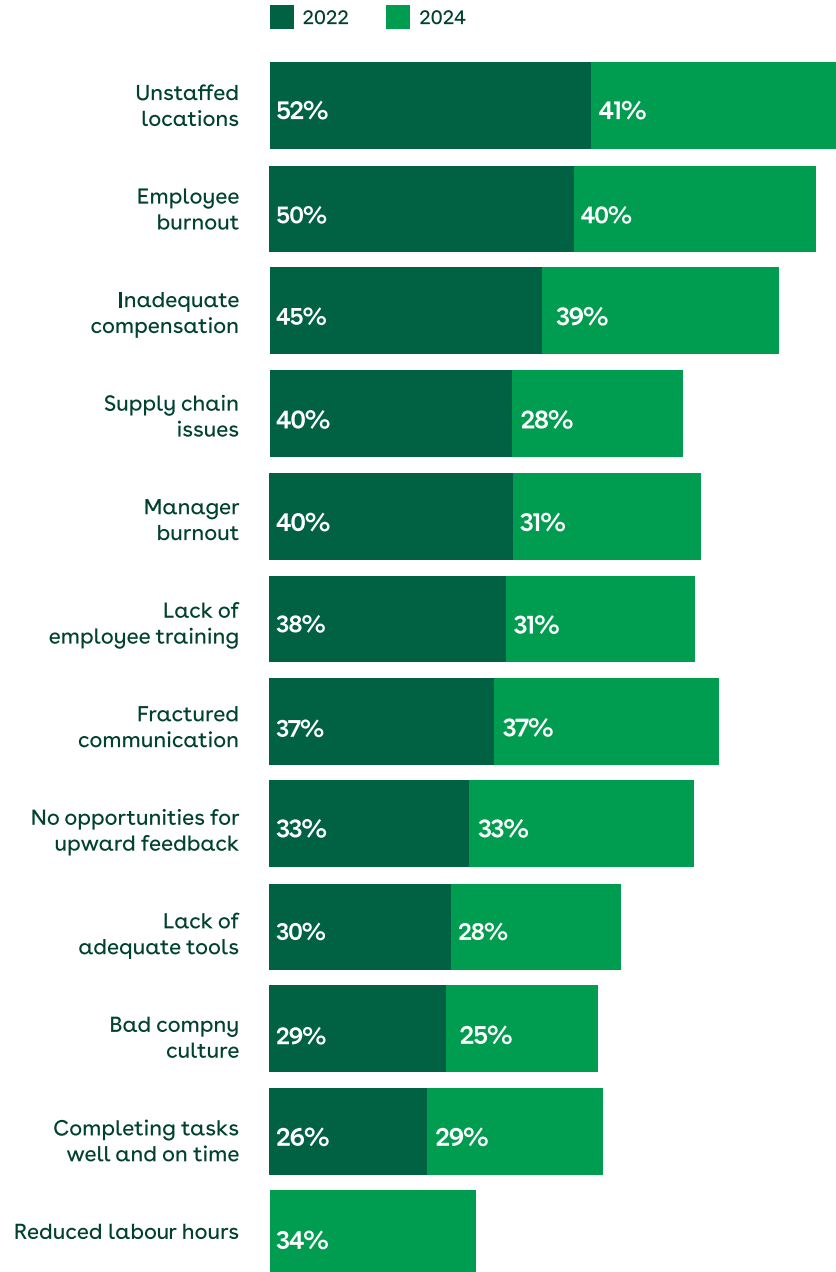
Distro
28% | 55% | 7% | 5% | 6%

While the happiness quotient is a reality (77% average for employees) executives significantly overestimate frontline happiness (a presumed 92%). This gap in perception can make the difference between complacency and action.

Frontline workers have valid reasons to feel good—2024 data shows they're facing fewer challenges on the job compared to before. Issues like understaffing and burnout remain, but they're less pronounced.

A step forward: Fewer employees are feeling the strain

41%
Understaffing

40%
Employee burnout

28%
Supply chain issues

Biggest challenges year/year

■ 2022 ■ 2024

Challenge	2022	2024
Unstaffed locations	52%	41%
Employee burnout	50%	40%
Inadequate compensation	45%	39%
Supply chain issues	40%	28%
Manager burnout	40%	31%
Lack of employee training	38%	31%
Fractured communication	37%	37%
No opportunities for upward feedback	33%	33%
Lack of adequate tools	30%	28%
Bad compny culture	29%	25%
Completing tasks well and on time	26%	29%
Reduced labour hours	34%	

So, what's really going on?

While there's been talk of frontline dissatisfaction, the story is more nuanced. Progress has been made, but the lingering challenges show there's still work to be done. A closer look reveals answers that highlight actionable ways to create a more sustainable, fulfilling frontline experience.

Frontline leaders need to solve for **today.**

While compensation and career growth are still relevant, they're not the immediate fix frontline workers are seeking. Long-term strategies like professional development don't solve the pressing issues that workers face on a daily basis. After all, traditional engagement and retention tactics alone can't keep pace with the workforce's real-time needs.

Today's focus should be on removing obstacles that make daily work harder than it needs to be. These challenges—like inconsistent schedules, lack of communication and insufficient tools—are the friction points that create frustration in the moment, impacting productivity, well-being and overall job satisfaction.

When companies address these core, day-to-day needs, it doesn't just support retention down the line; it builds immediate trust and makes work easier *right now*.

What the frontline needs from their organisations to be successful

Executive perception
1. Better pay
2. Right tools
3. More training & development

Managers
1. More money
2. More communication
3. More help

Employees
1. More money
2. More hours
3. Better communication

5 insights (and intentional changes) to improve the frontline experience

5 insights (and intentional changes) to improve the frontline experience

Insight #1: **Go all-in on empowering managers**

Insight #2: **Prepare the frontline for customer conflicts**

Insight #3: **Turn communication challenges into opportunities**

Insight #4: **Invest in building a frontline community**

Insight #5: **Lean on frontline tech: Less hype, more help**

Effecting change on the frontline isn't easy. Teams are massive, dispersed across multiple locations, regions and shifts, making consistency an ever-present challenge. Add in high turnover rates, especially at entry-level roles, and convincing stakeholders to invest in frontline development feels like an uphill battle. Then, there's the ever-present shadow of economic uncertainty—tight budgets and gloomy forecasts can make even the boldest leaders hesitant to spearhead change.

That's why smart, intentional tweaks are not only more feasible than a company-wide overhaul, they're also designed to address issues head-on.

We've developed key insights and actionable tactics you can implement now to improve the frontline experience—without reshuffling your entire operation.

Insight # 1:
Go all-in on empowering managers

Insight # 1: Go all-in on empowering managers

This year has been the year of the manager. Nearly every workplace study has zeroed in on the pivotal role managers play in employee engagement and business performance. It's a reality we can't ignore: Gallup reports that managers drive 70% of the variance in team engagement, making them the most influential factor in workplace success.
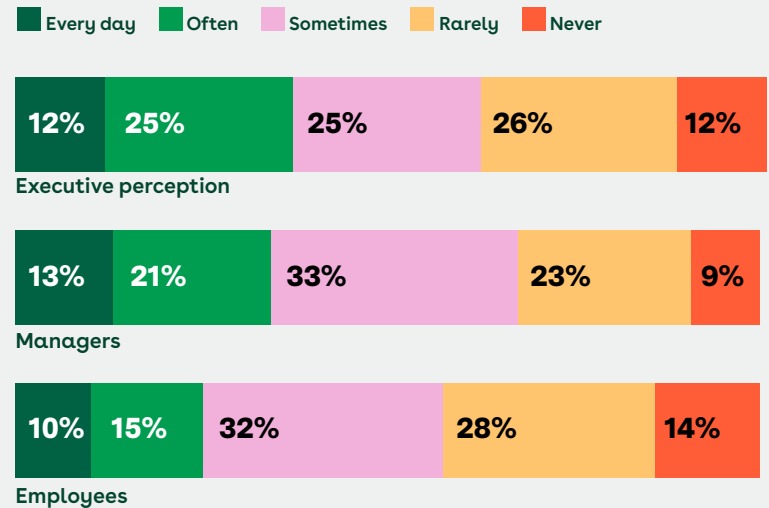
But, managers are spending a lot of time on non-managerial work, and as we uncovered, they're not feeling confident about how they're doing their jobs.

Two-thirds of managers feel like **they're making it up as they go along** at least some of the time.

Making it up

Q1 (executive perception) How often does it feel like your employees are "making it up as they go along" at work?

Q2 (managers & employees) How often do you feel like you are "making it up as you go along" at work?

■ Every day ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

| 12% | 25% | 25% | 26% | 12% |

Executive perception

| 13% | 21% | 33% | 23% | 9% |

Managers

| 10% | 15% | 32% | 28% | 14% |

Employees

Think about your own organisation: On any given day, nearly 70% of your managers could be feeling lost, overwhelmed or simply unsure of their next move. They're facing the same frontline challenges as employees—like understaffing, demanding customers and heavy workloads—while juggling the added pressure of leading a team.

Not surprisingly, it's taking a toll with 40% of managers feeling burned out on a daily basis.

The good news? Executives are aware. In fact, 62% recognise that their managers often feel like they're "making it up as they go along," signalling a key first step: understanding the issue. Acknowledging this challenge means decision-makers are already closer to finding solutions.

Inside the industries:

If we zoom into each industry, retail managers report feeling the most uncertain at work, while hospitality managers are below the frontline average (67%), with a little over half making it up as they go along.

Retail:
74%

Supermarkets:
61%

Distribution & Logistics:
58%

Hospitality:
55%

Foodservice:
60%

Managers want more training and support

Frontline managers, much like their employees, seek higher pay, better communication and stronger support. When asked what they needed to succeed, both managers and employees listed "more money" as the number-one factor. Executives were aligned here too, recognising that "better pay" is a key concern on the frontline.

However, while compensation is clearly important, it's not the only thing that matters. Once foundational needs like pay are addressed, both managers and employees are looking for something deeper— support, guidance and the resources to do their jobs well. In other words, money may top the list, but true frontline success requires more than just a bigger paycheque.

> "We are extremely understaffed at the moment. **It's very hard to keep up with demands** with how short-handed we are."
>
> –Foodservice employee

It's also important to acknowledge that higher pay is not the easiest lever for organisations to pull. Instead, they can focus on better communication, more support and the right training to help managers succeed.

Biggest challenges by industry:

Retail:
Understaffed locations

Supermarkets:
Understaffed locations

Hospitality:
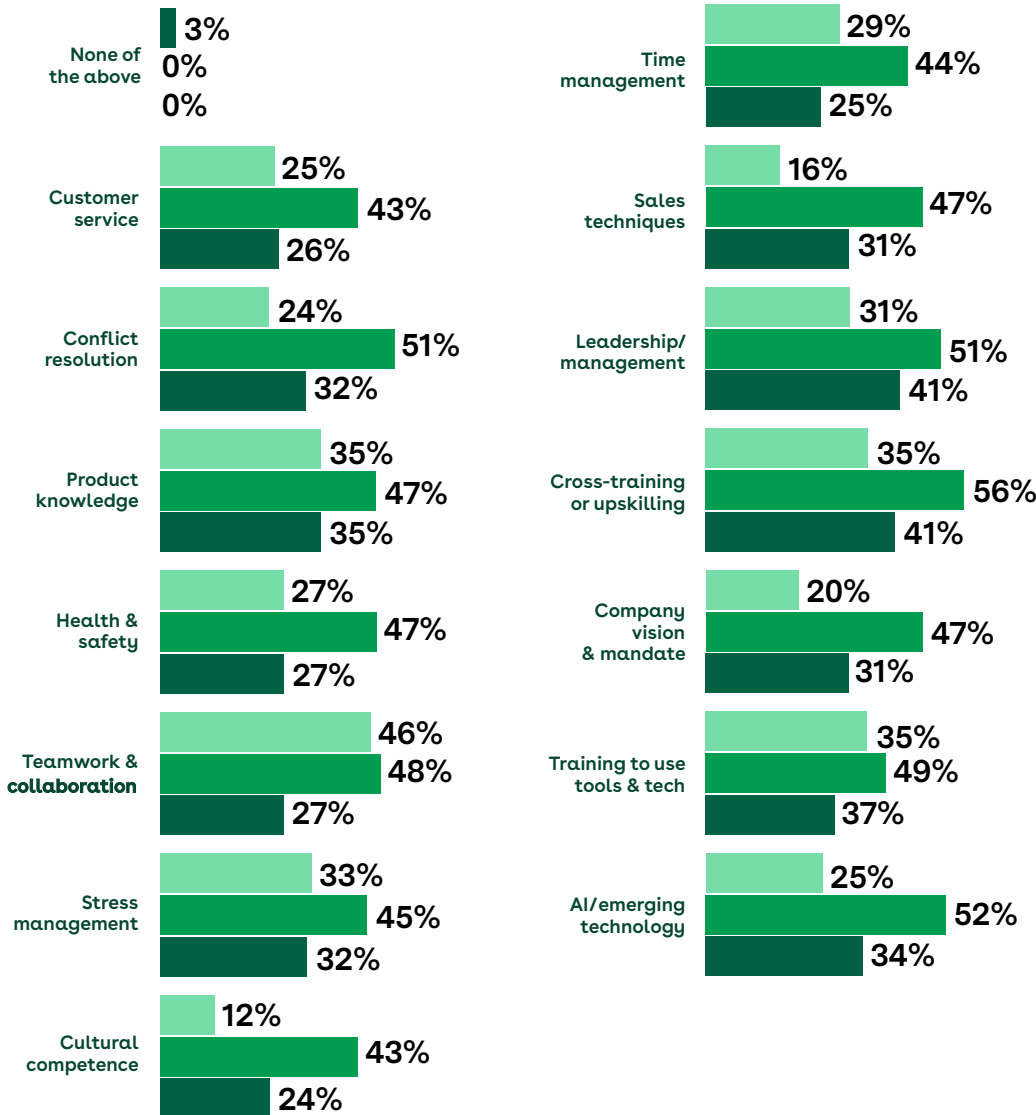Fractured communication

Foodservice:
Employee burnout

Distribution & logistics:
Tie between Inadequate compensation & employee burnout

Training the frontline wants

Executive perception **Managers** **Employees**

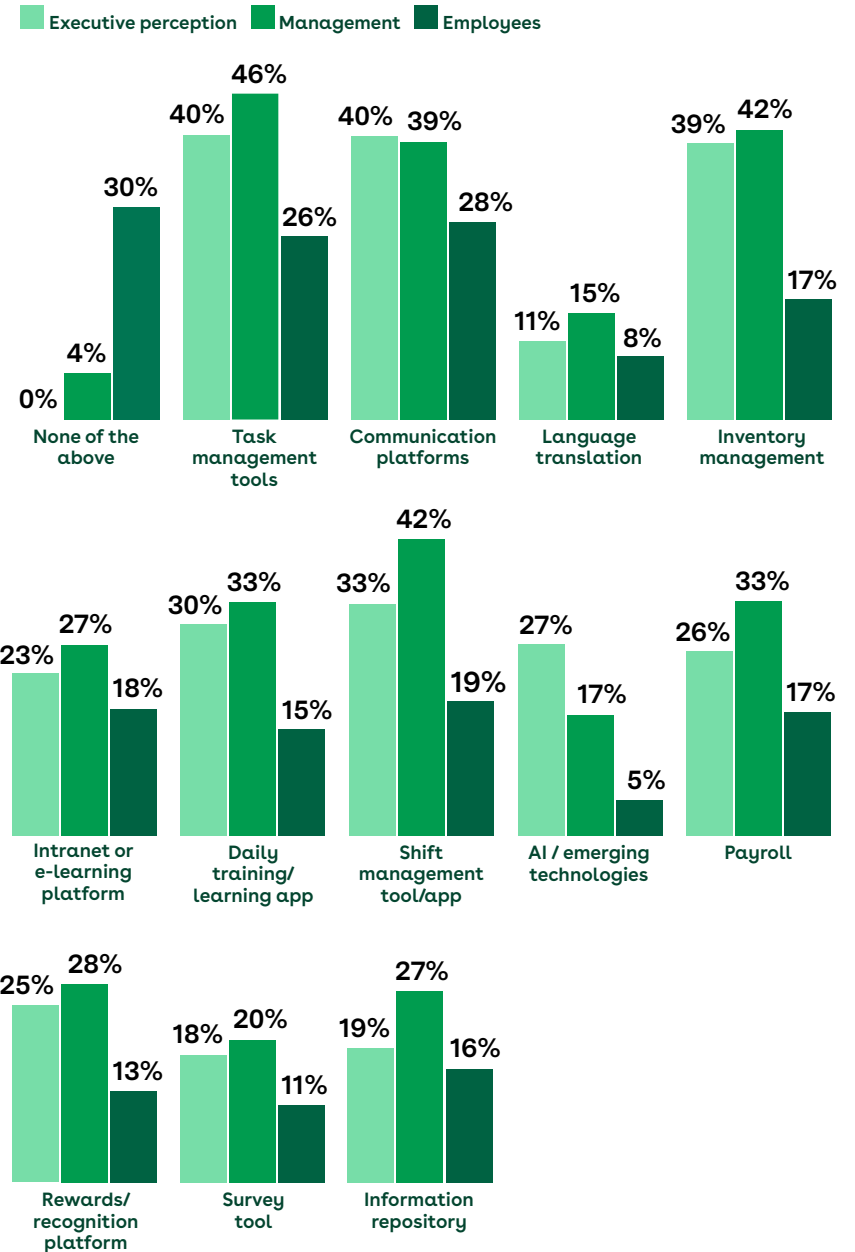| Category	Executive perception	Managers	Employees
None of the above	—	0%	0% (Employees 3%)
Customer service	25%	43%	26%
Conflict resolution	24%	51%	32%
Product knowledge	35%	47%	35%
Health & safety	27%	47%	27%
Teamwork & **collaboration**	46%	48%	27%
Stress management	33%	45%	32%
Cultural competence	12%	43%	24%
Time management	29%	44%	25%
Sales techniques	16%	47%	31%
Leadership/ management	31%	51%	41%
Cross-training or upskilling	35%	56%	41%
Company vision & mandate	20%	47%	31%
Training to use tools & tech	35%	49%	37%
AI/emerging technology	25%	52%	34%

Managers are seeking training in specific areas that executives often underestimate. They want more cross-training and upskilling, leadership and management development, AI and emerging technology and conflict resolution. For instance, 56% of managers want cross-training and upskilling opportunities but only 35% of executives see this as a need.

For instance, managers are power users of daily tech solutions—representing over 70% of tool and tech usage—yet they often lack the training to fully leverage these resources. This gap in training underscores a critical opportunity to equip managers with the right skills and fulfil their strong desire for diverse learning opportunities.

Managers should be your number one priority for tools and training.

Tools used regularly

Legend: Executive perception | Management | Employees

None of the above: 0%, 4%, 30%
Task management tools: 40%, 46%, 26%
Communication platforms: 40%, 39%, 28%
Language translation: 11%, 15%, 8%
Inventory management: 39%, 42%, 17%

Intranet or e-learning platform: 23%, 27%, 18%
Daily training/learning app: 30%, 33%, 15%
Shift management tool/app: 33%, 42%, 19%
AI / emerging technologies: 27%, 17%, 5%
Payroll: 26%, 33%, 17%

Rewards/recognition platform: 25%, 28%, 13%
Survey tool: 18%, 20%, 11%
Information repository: 19%, 27%, 16%

Here's how you can boost your manager support ASAP:

1. Foster peer networks. Make it easy for managers to connect with peers. Provide a directory of manager contact information, leverage technology to offer dedicated group chats and promote cohort-based learning programmes that offer tangible opportunities for managers to meet people outside their locations and regions. Give managers a place to go—other than their bosses—when they feel isolated, struggle with common problems or face new challenges.

2. Simplify the job. Assess the current state of the manager role. Conduct studies to determine which tasks require the most time and effort. Then, realign manager expectations to emphasise more time spent in the operation with employees and customers. Leverage technology to automate routine tasks and reduce administrative burden.

3. Offer continuous development and support. Design management training programmes to fit the everyday workflow so managers aren't forced to choose between themselves and the operation. Provide robust documentation and just-in-time resources managers can lean on to solve common problems. Offer short-form training content and microlearning campaigns that can be easily consumed in the few extra minutes managers have available in their days. Budget the labour hours needed to allow managers to step away from the operation for focused development time.

4. Include EX metrics in performance evaluations. Assess your current management performance expectations and compensation plans. Make sure employee experience metrics, like retention, engagement, development and promotions are included alongside traditional business metrics. Incentivise managers to focus on the people side of their business, and recognise managers who are exceptional people leaders.

Design management training programmes to fit the everyday workflow so managers aren't forced to choose between themselves and the operation.

Insight # 2: Prepare employees to deal with (more) customer incivility

Insight #2: Prepare employees to deal with (more) customer incivility

We've all seen the TikToks of customer meltdowns that pile stress on frontline workers. Difficult customers are a given, but properly handling these encounters is among the top three overall challenges on the frontline according to both employees and managers.

It's no wonder that hands-on customer service training, especially conflict de-escalation, was among the most requested training by employees. They're asking for real skills to handle tough interactions—not just theoretical advice.

The call for support isn't just a matter of preference—**it's a desperate need.**

Biggest challenges on the frontline, according to the frontline

Executive perception
1. Finding and keeping people
2. Workload
3. Keeping up with AI

Managers
1. Finding and keeping people
2. **Dealing with customers**
3. Workload

Employees
1. **Challenging customers**
2. Meeting goals
3. Staffing

The stakes are high: Retail and supermarket workers are seeing more hostile encounters and 40% are scared to go to work. In finance, frontline staff face rising customer tensions, with 40% citing an impact on mental health. Seventy-three percent of hospitality workers are battling chronic stress in the face of constant pressure and high expectations.

Frontline employees are professionals.

The call for support isn't just a matter of preference—it's a desperate need. Handling difficult interactions can have a range of consequences, from increased stress to performance to reduced job security or safety. In the worst cases, inadequate training can escalate bad behaviour into dangerous situations. Frontline employees are professionals who deserve relevant, reinforced training that reflects their daily challenges and prepares them for on-the-job realities.

Here's how you can prepare frontlines to deal with customer incivility:

1. Properly staff your operation. Make sure your locations have the labour budgets needed to get the job done and meet customer expectations. Provide labour flexibility so managers can handle unexpected situations, such as late deliveries, sudden volume increases or inexperienced team members. Avoid the temptation to cut costs while sacrificing both the employee and customer experiences.

2. Establish clear boundaries. Publish rules of conduct for customers and consistently hold customers accountable to these rules. Make sure frontline employees understand these rules and know the boundaries for customer behaviour. Support employees during challenging situations by adhering to these defined standards.

3. Reinforce critical skills. Provide targeted training on essential skills, such as deescalation, problem-solving, resilience and communication, rather than relying on a basic "Customer Service 101" course during onboarding. Continue to refine these skills through reinforcement, practice activities and manager coaching sessions. Go beyond the surface and account for unexpected situations in addition to common customer service situations.

4. Encourage employees to share. Highlight employees who manage difficult customer situations with positive outcomes. Ask employees to share their own customer experiences—both good and bad—during shift huddles and team meetings. Curate exceptional stories to share across the organisation and include in customer service training programmes.

Insight # 3:
Turn communication challenges into opportunities

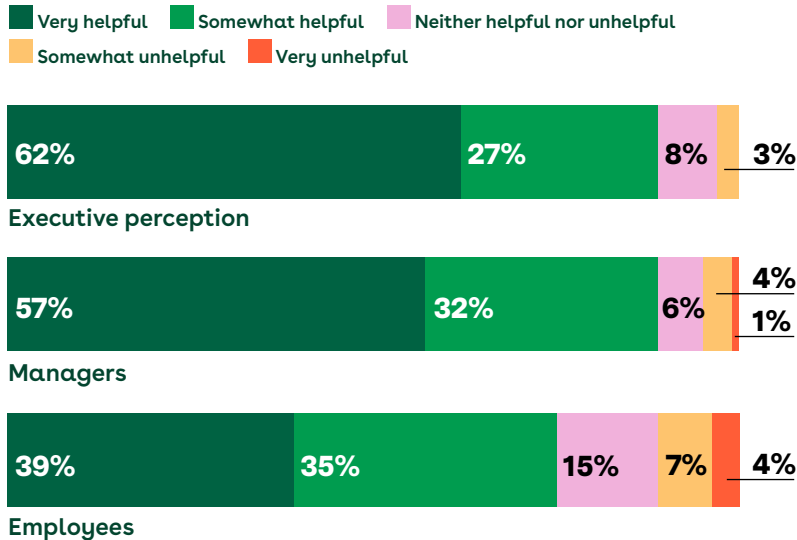# Insight #3: Turn communication challenges into opportunities

Communication gaps on the frontline aren't a new problem but their persistence highlights a deeper issue.

While 74% of frontline employees find communication in their organisation helpful, that's significantly lower than the 89% of managers and executives who feel the same. This gap represents a significant barrier to operational efficiency and employee satisfaction.

In other words, nearly a quarter of your employees feel that they lack the essential information needed to make informed decisions, close sales and perform effectively.

Q1 (executive perception) In terms of helping frontline employees do their job every day, how effective is communication in your organisation?

Q2 (managers & employees) In terms of helping you do your job every day, how effective is communication in your organisation?
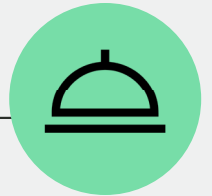
■ **Very helpful** ■ **Somewhat helpful** ■ **Neither helpful nor unhelpful**
■ **Somewhat unhelpful** ■ **Very unhelpful**

Executive perception
62% 27% 8% 3%

Managers
57% 32% 6% 4% 1%

Employees
39% 35% 15% 7% 4%

Communication breakdown

Percentage of the frontline who found communication in their organisation "very effective" (by industry)

51%
Hospitality

48%
Foodservice

40%
Distribution & logistics

39%
Supermarkets

31%
Retail

The disconnect becomes even more apparent in manager-employee communication. While 86% of managers find their communication with employees helpful, only 68% of employees agree.

This discrepancy is not just about the frequency of communication but also its quality and impact, particularly in feedback. Executives believe feedback reaches employees effectively, with 96% assuming it happens at least sometimes. Yet, employees report a stark contrast: **only 67% feel they receive feedback regularly, and just 73% believe it actually helps them improve their performance**.

Q1 (executive perception) How often does the average employee receive feedback regarding their performance from a direct supervisor?

Q2 (managers & employees) How often do you receive feedback regarding your performance from a direct supervisor?

■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

| 45% | 51% | 5% |

Executive perception

| 32% | 55% | 11% | 2% |

Managers

| 25% | 42% | 25% | 8% |

Employees
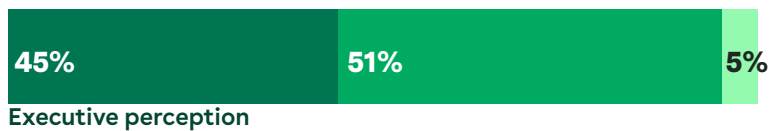
Improve effective communication by prioritising manager training.

This isn't a minor issue—it's a significant gap that affects morale and efficiency. The problem is that communication isn't just about pushing messages from the top down. It's about the everyday interactions employees have, especially with their managers.

The focus needs to shift to address this long-standing issue— rethinking corporate communication strategies alone is not enough. Organisations must also invest in supporting and training managers to improve their everyday communication with frontline employees.

After all, they are the critical link between leadership and frontline employees. Equipping them with the skills to foster effective, day-to-day communication is essential for improving overall employee satisfaction and operational success.

Here's how you can finally fix the frontline communication gap:

1. Assess manager feedback skills. Make sure your managers have the know-how and insights needed to provide effective feedback. Prioritise feedback as a critical topic within your management development programme and provide ongoing reinforcement and practice activities to improve skill application. Ask regional managers and HR business partners to observe feedback sessions and provide suggestions for improvement. Include questions about manager feedback in your frontline pulse check and engagement surveys.

2. Require regular manager check-ins. Go beyond the typical 30-60-90 process by requiring quarterly check-ins with every frontline employee. Leverage your HCM platform to automatically schedule check-in meetings for each team member and provide managers with a conversation template for planning and conducting check-in conversations. Ensure every formal check-in is documented along with performance feedback, plans for improvement and actionable steps.

3. Install two-way communication channels. Leverage communication technology to create a two-way channel between HQ and the frontline. Rather than relying on information cascades, deliver digital messages directly to employees while asking managers to reinforce key topics during shift huddles and team meetings. Collect feedback on key business practices using pulse surveys and topical forums. Ensure employee feedback is truly anonymous if it's advertised that way.

4. Leverage AI to reduce information overload. Apply AI-powered technology to streamline your communication strategy—like using GenAI to simplify and translate messages so they're easily consumed by your frontline teams. Leverage AI to schedule communication campaigns so messages are delivered and reinforced over time. Prioritise messages soemployees know where to focus their limited time and attention.

Insight # 4:
Invest in building a frontline community

Insight #4: Invest in building a frontline community

Building a community isn't just about hiring more people. It's about creating an environment where workers feel seen, supported and connected. For example, a manager might set up a coffee cart with their team members' favourite snacks and drinks every month or organise a barbecue to bring the team together for a celebration. These efforts, while far from a complete solution, are instrumental in showing appreciation and building connections.

Frontline employees rarely go at it alone. They work shoulder-to-shoulder with coworkers and this physical proximity breeds a tight-knit camaraderie— employees look out for one another and often work harder for their teammates than for the company itself.

Community means working alongside people you like, who can do the job well and who help each other through the daily grind. It's a key part of what makes frontline work more than just a job. When asked about the most important qualities in supervisor relationships, employees and managers highlighted respect, support and friendliness—the essence of a community.

And yet, this essential aspect of frontline work is under pressure.

Though understaffing and burnout have improved over the last few years, they remain pressing challenges, and employees are struggling to keep things running with fewer resources and inconsistent support. Only 31% of employees feel they have "a lot" of flexibility to handle unexpected emergencies, and just over half feel comfortable calling out sick. Constantly changing shifts and unpredictable hours create a ripple effect of stress that spills over into work.

Despite these challenges, there is resilience: Thirty-two percent of frontline employees are considering leaving their jobs this year compared to 39% in 2022. But losing even some of these committed workers would place a heavy burden on already strained teams.

Supporting the frontline community means recognising these pressures and actively working to reduce them.

The frontline experience is improving, though there's still work to be done

"I am considering leaving my current job"

32%
Frontline average

35%
Retail

33%
Supermarkets

33%
Hospitality

32%
Foodservice

28%
Distribution & logistics

Here's how you can strengthen your frontline community:

1. Decentralise rewards and recognition. Move away from corporate-driven programmes in favour of location-based efforts. Provide frontline managers with tools and resources to foster recognition programmes that align with their specific workplace cultures. Prioritise peer-to-peer recognition by giving team members options for elevating coworkers who make a difference in the workplace every day.

2. Budget for community efforts. Provide managers with the resources needed to run community programmes within their locations. This includes a budget for team meals and celebrations as well as labour hours to cover the operation while employees and managers participate in these programmes. Provide managers with tools they can use to promote community engagement, such as bartering products and services with other businesses or sponsoring local causes.

3. Delegate community leadership. Get frontline team members involved in coordinating community programmes. Handoff ownership of these efforts to respected team members, making it part of their jobs rather than an additional burden on location managers. Include frontline employees in all corporate planning activities related to employee experience initiatives.

4. Incentivise desired behaviours. Emphasise appreciation over discipline by recognising people who consistently do the right things on the job. Leverage gamification tactics to reward people who are always on time for their shifts, receive customer compliments, work extra hours or take other actions to help the team during challenging periods.

Insight # 5:
Lean on frontline tech (aka less hype, more help)

Insight #5: Lean on frontline tech (aka less hype, more help)

Improving frontline operations with even small changes can feel overwhelming—especially for managers who rank workload among their top three challenges. With over half (54%) of frontline managers feeling short-staffed, it's clear they need more support. And while additional human resources may not always be an option, technology offers an alternative.

Take self-checkout technology in retail as an example. When it first rolled out, many believed it would replace human cashiers altogether. Yet, as we've seen, it hasn't replaced these roles. Instead, it shifted workers to other areas of the business where they could provide more value, such as customer service or managing the floor. This kind of tech targeted not only efficiencies but also allowed employees to focus on more meaningful, customer-centric tasks.

On the flip side, many retailers are now scaling back due to customer frustration and increased shrinkage. It goes to show that not all technology delivers on its promises, making it even more critical to invest in tools that provide real, tangible support to frontline workers.

AI-enabled solutions are similarly positioned to help, streamlining time-consuming tasks like data organisation, scheduling and payroll, freeing up managers' time to focus on what matters most—leading and engaging their teams. But like self-checkout, AI has come with its own wave of fear: What if it automates employees out of a job?

Thankfully, these fears seem largely overstated, at least for now. When we asked frontline leaders and employees how they think AI will impact their work, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Most believe AI will make their jobs easier, not obsolete. Only 2% of executives, 5% of managers and 4% of employees felt AI would threaten jobs.

In fact, over half of managers (52%) are eager to receive training on AI and emerging tech, seeing it as a tool to simplify their workload, not replace it.

The real opportunity here isn't just adopting the latest tech for tech's sake—it's using tools that genuinely support the workforce.

While AI gets the headlines and sparks continued debate, what really matters is how it's being applied on the ground. Self-checkout machines aren't replacing jobs—they're shifting roles. Scheduling software isn't making decisions for managers—it's giving them back precious hours to spend where it counts.

Tech check

Q: What will be AI's impact?
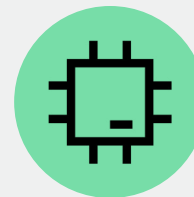
Executive perception:
"Make work easier for frontline employees"

Managers:
"Will help"

Employees:
"Will help"

Here's how you can leverage tech to make a difference on the frontline:

1. Solve meaningful problems. Frontline employees and managers don't have time to keep up with technology trends. They have jobs to do. Focus all tech conversations on solving meaningful problems for your frontline teams. Avoid the urge to try out technology without a clear value proposition which means clearly establishing requirements for piloting and implementing new technology within your frontline operation.

2. Explain the WHYs and HOWs. Be honest with your frontline teams. Explain why you're implementing a new technology and offer details about how it will impact their jobs. If the goal is to reduce costs, tell them rather than defaulting to corporate jargon. They're smart people; they know what's going on.

3. Involve employees in planning. Frontline employees know what it takes to get the job done better than anyone, so it makes sense to include them in your technology planning process. Make sure frontline workers are in the room to test new hardware and software products. Collect feedback during technology pilots and after implementations to ensure the best possible ROI for your investment.

4. Provide robust training and support. Every technology change should include right-fit training and support. This means robust documentation on how the technology works as well as use cases for how you expect it to be applied on the job. Make these resources available in the flow of work—on the devices people use—so they can refer back to what they learned during training.

52%

of managers want training on AI tools.
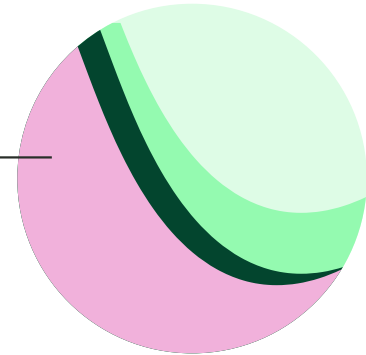
Final thoughts

Earning tomorrow

"Start now and grow with us."
"Discover a world of opportunity."
"The possibilities are endless!"

Organisations regularly use taglines like these to attract new frontline employees. You see them on store flyers, career fair banners and social media ads. This isn't just a job. This is a chance to build a career, provide for your family and do something important. You can develop new skills, get an education, become a manager and maybe even transition into a corporate role. Working here is a chance for a better tomorrow.

But what about today?

I got a part-time job at a movie theater when I was 17 years old because I wanted to see movies for free. I stayed for six years, got promoted into management and went on to build a frontline-focused career. I was able to realise the promise of tomorrow because I had a great experience doing the job every day. Of course, some days were better than others, but I always had the tools I needed to get things done. I had the flexibility to manage my school and work schedules. Most importantly, I was part of a community—a group of people who worked hard for one another in support of a common goal.

The promise of opportunity may attract great workers. But your organisation must foster exceptional everyday experiences if you hope to retain the people who will become your future managers and corporate leaders. Our research shows that frontline workers want to do a great job for your company. They want to get the work done and deliver on your brand promise. But they need your help to overcome daily challenges like difficult customers, burned-out managers, communication breakdowns and skill gaps that can quickly derail future opportunities.

Frontline workers are telling us what they need. They're not asking for the world—just a stable, supportive workplace where effort is valued just as much as outcomes. When you prioritise EX alongside CX and provide frontline employees with the tools needed to do a great job every day, you'll earn the promise of tomorrow—for your people and your business.

"We'll do our absolute best to make sure every shift is great!"

Now that's a job ad I'd like to see.

JD Dillon
Chief Learning Architect
Axonify

Methodology

This research study consisted of two surveys.

Survey 1 was sent to 110 executives of frontline businesses in the following industries: Retail; Supermarket; Hospitality (hotels, resorts, etc.); Foodservice (restaurant, fast-food, etc.); Distribution and logistics.

Survey 2 was sent to 255 frontline managers and 423 frontline employees in the same industries.

These surveys asked a parallel series of questions about the work experience and perceptions of frontline employees. Managers and employees were asked to describe their own experiences, while executives were asked their perception of the average frontline employee experience.

These surveys included a mix of multiple choice and open ended questions. Topics included everyday pain points, perceptions of success, relationships with supervisors and desired training.

Demographics

Frontline Executives

Title/Role		
19%	Chief Executive Officer	
5%	Chief Administrative Officer	
11%	Chief Human Resource Officer	
4%	Other C-suite	
11%	Vice President (EVP, SVP, VP)	
51%	Senior Director or Director	

Function		
55%	Operations	
6%	Marketing	
3%	Communications	
26%	Human Resources	
4%	Recruiting	
5%	Customer/Guest Experience	

Industry		
46%	Retail	
5%	Supermarkets	
10%	Hospitality (hotels, resorts, etc.)	
5%	Foodservice (restaurant, fast-food, etc.)	
34%	Distribution and logistics	
0%	Other (please specify)	

Number of locations		
19%	1-10	
33%	11-199	
14%	200-499	
21%	500-2000	
5%	2001-5000	
9%	5001+	

Gender		
72%	Male	
28%	Female	
0%	Non-binary	
0%	Prefer not to say	

Age		
1%	1901-1927	
0%	1928-1945	
11%	1946-1964	
33%	1965-1980	
50%	1981-1996	
5%	1997-2012	

Demographics

Frontline Managers

Title		
	15%	Store manager
	17%	Department manager
	12%	Restaurant manager
	19%	General manager
	2%	Branch manager
	5%	Sales manager
	11%	Warehouse manager
	13%	Team/store lead
	2%	FOH manager
	1%	BOH manager
	3%	Other

Industry		
	30%	Retail
	3%	Supermarkets
	16%	Hospitality (hotels, resorts, etc.)
	27%	Foodservice (restaurant, fast-food, etc.)
	24%	Distribution and logistics
	0%	Other (please specify)

Number of locations		
	11%	1-10
	42%	11-199
	18%	200-499
	15%	500-2000
	4%	2001-5000
	9%	5001+

Gender		
	53%	Male
	46%	Female
	1%	Non-binary
	0%	Prefer not to say

Age		
	0%	1901-1927
	0%	1928-1945
	6%	1946-1964
	27%	1965-1980
	54%	1981-1996
	12%	1997-2012

Demographics

Frontline Employees

Industry
- **42%** Retail
- **8%** Supermarkets
- **11%** Hospitality (hotels, resorts, etc.)
- **19%** Foodservice (restaurant, fast-food, etc.)
- **21%** Distribution and logistics
- **0%** Other (please specify)

Number of locations
- **20%** 1-10
- **25%** 11-199
- **15%** 200-499
- **17%** 500-2000
- **9%** 2001-5000
- **15%** 5001+

Gender
- **37%** Male
- **62%** Female
- **0%** Non-binary
- **0%** Prefer not to say

Age
- **0%** 1901-1927
- **0%** 1928-1945
- **17%** 1946-1964
- **34%** 1965-1980
- **34%** 1981-1996
- **16%** 1997-2012