



# Tips on Engaging and Communicating with Deskless Employees



# Table of Contents

<b>How Remote Working is Changing The Way We Do Business</b>	03
<b>How Managers Struggle to Keep Teams Connected</b>	04
<b>Understanding the Challenges of Deskless Workers</b>	06
<b>Building Team Spirit When You Have a Remote Team</b>	09
<b>Breaking Down Communications Barriers</b>	10
<b>Tools and Systems for Remote Collaboration</b>	11
<b>Engaging and Communicating with Deskless Workers</b>	13
<b>Removing the Barriers Imposed By Company Hierarchies</b>	14
<b>Common Pitfalls for Deskless Teams</b>	16
<b>Promoting Social Interaction as Your Business Grows</b>	18
<b>Why Being Physically Present Doesn't Always Mean Being Productive</b>	19
<b>Trust Your Team to Get it Right</b>	20
<b>Use Communication Tools to Facilitate and Educate</b>	22
<b>Building Cohesion Between Office and Deskless Employees</b>	23
<b>Recognize and Reward All Workers</b>	24
<b>Empower Everyone</b>	26
<b>Conclusion: The Future of the Office is Digital</b>	28
<b>Deskless Employees Shouldn't Be Voiceless</b>	29

# How Remote Working is Changing the Way We Do Business

Remote working is not a new idea. Many companies have a long history of hiring freelancers, nearshoring and offshoring to grow their teams. However, COVID-19 brought remote working into the mainstream, forcing more traditional office-focused businesses to find ways to allow their employees to work from home.

In theory, knowledge workers can do their jobs from anywhere, as long as they have access to a stable internet connection and a computer. Even frontline employees in a contact center can do their jobs remotely. In practice, many distributed teams struggle to remain productive when they have deskless employees who aren't seeing each other in person on a daily basis.





# How Managers Struggle to Keep Teams Connected

Remote working offers a lot of benefits for employees. They save time and money by not needing to commute, and many swear that on an individual level they're more productive. While this may be true for certain tasks, on a team level, remote working can be harmful because it reduces cohesiveness. When a team is working on a large or complex project, they must be able to collaborate in real-time, trust each other and communicate effectively.

If your management team is convinced remote workers are scrolling social media all day, that will show in day to day interactions and could build resentment. Relying on company emails and Skype chats may not be enough to build trust and rapport. That's why many companies are turning to mobile apps and other communication tools that offer a more connected and collaborative employee experience.

Communication can be challenging when workers don't get to meet face to face, chat at the water cooler and build a rapport. There are other challenges too, including supporting workers to maintain a good work/life balance.





39%

Employee engagement is up to **39%** as of the start of 2021, an improvement from where it was at the start of the pandemic. Yet the overall well-being of Americans has declined.

Gallup

In this guide, we'll look at the challenges of both maintaining productivity and building connection and engagement on a daily basis for remote workers, address some of the challenges that teams and individuals face when they're spending more time away from the office than in it, and explain how team leaders and managers can support workers no matter where they are.

We'll describe a variety of technical and social solutions and communication strategies that can help managers and remote workers communicate more effectively so that workers don't feel isolated or micro-managed, and the businesses can be confident that their employees are productive.

With the right communication tools, you can build a company culture that promotes better employee communication, increases productivity and reduces turnover rates for everyone in the business, not just front-line employees or the deskless workforce.

# Understanding the Challenges of Deskless Workers

Deskless workers make up a significant portion of the workforce today, but many companies are still learning how to support remote workers and how to maintain engagement with those employees.

Deskless employees face several challenges in their day to day work, both in terms of communicating with other workers and in maintaining (and proving) their productivity. Fortunately, many of these issues can be solved by the use of effective communications platforms. Some, however, need a change in the company culture.

Common challenges faced by distributed teams and deskless employees include:

- **Higher than average turnover rates**
- **Difficulty communicating with colleagues**
- **Limited access to information**
- **Lack of team trust and rapport**
- **Reduced engagement**
- **Poor work/life balance**

While many of those who are newly 'deskless' are office workers who now work from home, the definition of deskless employees includes frontline workers who serve customers in stores, restaurants, at other hospitality venues and manufacturing companies. Some of those who work in lower-paid positions such as at quick-service restaurants have a **turnover rate of 100%** over the course of a year.

That turnover rate is caused in part by the other challenges. Workers who find it difficult to communicate with their colleagues and who don't have access to information about what's going on at the company are likely to become less engaged as a result and may even become distrustful of their superiors.

This applies both to frontline workers and knowledge workers who are now working remotely.



Around **83%** of frontline workers don't have access to a corporate email address.

If your company culture doesn't make communicating with those employees a priority, it's all too easy for them to end up feeling (and being) excluded.

Communication strategies for deskless employees should focus on the practicalities of how they work. They're most likely on their feet or on the move a lot of the time, so using mobile communication tools such as quick and easy to access apps makes more sense than expecting them to sign in to slow and cumbersome desktop collaboration platforms on the rare occasions they're in the office.

Working your employee communication strategy around the way the majority of your employees do their jobs makes life easier for front line workers and will ensure they have access to the information they need, at the time they need it. A frictionless and effective app can also increase employee engagement, reduce stress and improve communication, making it easy to retain workers for longer.





# Building Team Spirit When You Have a Remote Team

Colleagues working in offices often form close bonds. Quick water cooler or break room communications, the chit-chat that happens before and after meetings and the ritual of walking to a coffee shop at lunch time all provide opportunities for bonding.

On paper, those things shouldn't matter if any important information is delivered via corporate email or an official office communication channel such as Slack. In practice, those short, unofficial meetings have a subtle effect on how we perceive those we work with, and they can make a difference when someone is being considered for promotion or an interesting project.

In addition, small pieces of information are often delivered face to face long before the official email has gone out. Remote or deskless workers are often the last to be informed about changes in processes or priorities, wasting effort, reducing productivity and harming morale.



As many as **74%** of deskless workers feel there are barriers to communication at their workplace.

# Breaking Down Communications Barriers

When front line workers don't have the communication tools they need to access information and share feedback, this creates a discouraging and difficult environment for them to work in.

Managers must make an effort to understand the way deskless workers do their jobs and to learn about the challenges those workers face. This means taking the time to visit deskless staff on the front lines to see them do their jobs and listening to the feedback those workers give about what parts of their jobs are difficult or how their daily lives could be made easier. Providing remote workers with a communications app that meets their needs and that's practical to use in the field is a big step forward. Long-form email and ticketing systems are too slow for front line workers to use as their primary means of communication.

Apps that are context-sensitive and allow them to record important information and receive relevant alerts without the need to navigate complex UIs or read through long threads make deskless workers more productive and can reduce their day-to-day stress.

Allowing workers to communicate with each other directly through official communication tools also solves other issues, including privacy and data security. Front line employees should not have to hand over their personal telephone numbers to communicate with other workers, because this is a significant privacy issue for them. In addition, they should be discouraged from recording information or sending work-related messages through personal channels to protect the privacy of your customers and reduce the risk of corporate secrets leaking.



# Tools and Systems for Remote Collaboration

Today, broadband internet is commonplace and even tablet devices are powerful enough to handle light document editing video calling and chat. This means almost all remote workers should have access to devices that can run common communications apps, letting them do their jobs from anywhere.

This means there's no excuse for relying on the slow and cumbersome workflow of using a corporate email address to send an email with an attachment of a document in an obscure proprietary format that the worker has to come into the office to be able to read.

In fact, many remote workers and deskless workers can do their jobs without having to rely on any desktop apps at all, other than their web browser.

Some popular tools and systems for remote collaboration include:

- Employee engagement via Workmates by HR Cloud
- Chat via Teams/Skype/Nextcloud Chat/Slack
- Scheduling via Slack/Trello Boards
- Document management via Google Drive/OnlyOffice
- File management via Nextcloud/Dropbox/Google Drive
- Time Tracking via Perform

With tools like these, there's little need to come into the office at all unless you want to use specialist tools or speak to someone face-to-face.

The same is true for deskless employees who work in manufacturing roles or who do customer service. If most of your time is spent in a warehouse or out visiting customers, why waste time traveling back to an office to log the work that you've done for the day, or to read your schedule for the following week on a notice board, when you can simply log in to an app on your phone to enter that data and check your schedule?

That's not to say there's no role for face-to-face communication in modern manufacturing business. It's certainly worth taking time to speak to people face-to-face occasionally but providing efficient communication solutions for deskless workers can save time, reduce stress and keep those communication channels open on a daily basis.





# Engaging and Communicating with Deskless Workers

When questioned, many managers say they're open to new ideas, and that their doors are always open. Employees, however, often feel differently. Front line workers may feel their employers' claims are simply paying lip service to the idea of open communication.



# Removing the Barriers Imposed By Company Hierarchies

Email, phone calls and even company intranet boards feel old-fashioned to many younger workers, and when someone needs to post on such a platform they might feel reluctant to be honest about their thoughts because they're acutely aware of who will be reading the message.

Smartphone apps for employee communication remove some of those barriers because they're frictionless to use. Firing off a message on the company's Nextcloud chat or via Teams feels less deliberate and calculated than sending an email to the head of your department, even though you're still speaking to the same person.

The reduction in formality may take some getting used to on both sides, but as long as these communication apps are used in a way that promotes a corporate culture of respect and company pride, the end result can be a good thing.

In a connected company:

- Everyone should feel comfortable sharing information
- Ideas should be welcome from all levels
- Asking for help should be viewed as a positive, not a weakness
- Managers and employees learn from each other

The beauty of smartphone apps for communication is that they're easy to use, and since smartphones are near-ubiquitous in the western world, managers can feel confident they won't need to invest a lot of time and effort into educating people about how to use the apps.



> 3 hours

In addition, because smartphones are such an integral part of people's day to day life, with the average person spending **more than three hours per day on their phone**, any app-based communication method is likely to see significant employee engagement.

Note that office communication apps are simply tools, and they amplify the culture that already exists. Simply letting managers and deskless workers communicate more quickly will only be of benefit if there's a commitment on both sides to form a better working relationship.

# Common Pitfalls for Deskless Teams

There are several issues that are often reported by deskless and remote workers:

- Limited access to information
- Slow, or no, feedback on how they're performing
- Impractical communication channels
- A company culture that prioritizes face-to-face communication
- Feeling less valued than office workers
- Micromanagement or unrealistic expectations from managers

Depending on the nature of the business, deskless workers may find themselves out in the field with little guidance and poor communication tools. This leads to the workers finding their own ways of dealing with issues and getting the job done.

For example, a salesperson may feel that the company's CRM system is too slow or unwieldy to use on their smartphone, so they log information in a spreadsheet. This works well enough for them, but if they don't use the spreadsheet to update the CRM system in a timely fashion, other sales agents won't have access to that information. This could mean the customer has a bad experience if they then receive repeated calls from other employees.



Another example could be a delivery driver for a takeaway restaurant. Today, it's not uncommon for takeaways to use multiple delivery services and in-house drivers too. Because those deskless workers are all using different systems, it's possible for mistakes to creep in, such as the wrong order being picked up. It may also be hard for the front-of-house worker who handles phone calls to know for sure which driver has a customer's order.

These issues are all easy to fix by using the right systems, whether that's tracking employee performance in **HR Cloud Perform**, using **Timeclock** to track hours worked, or using an in-house sales logging system to simplify the reporting of sales clouds so that everyone is tracking their calls in the same format.



# Promoting Social Interaction as Your Business Grows

In addition to improving worker performance, it's also important to make workers feel valued and promote a feeling of teamwork between office-based, remote and deskless workers. Some team building can be done at the traditional Christmas party, but when teams are geographically distributed, those physical get-togethers become less practical. Providing a social platform for workers to chat about day to day life can be useful for building engagement and team spirit.

Using an in-house platform for this kind of social interaction helps promote professionalism while still humanizing the usernames or profile pictures that employees see on their work-focused apps.

Offering a digital water cooler is of course no substitute for the real thing or the benefits of human interaction, but it can improve communication with deskless workers and combat some of the feelings of isolation that come from not having that 'water cooler experience'.



# Why Being Physically Present Doesn't Always Mean Productive

Office-based managers often operate under the assumption that employees who are working remotely are less productive than those who are in the office. Even relatively good managers who don't fall into the bad habit of micromanaging employees once they're trusted to do their day to day jobs often prefer being able to see their team members sat at their desks.

This traditional way of thinking leads to tropes such as “another meeting that could have been an email” or “the body's here but the mind isn't”. Presenteeism is a serious issue in modern companies and one that managers should address to reduce turnover rates and improve morale.



# Trust Your Team to Get it Right

A culture of presenteeism can be harmful for employees, encouraging them to show up to work when they're burnt out or unwell. In the case of burnout or mental health issues, this can lead to longer-lasting issues, making the worker less productive and potentially causing them to require time off due to stress.

In the case of more general health issues such as a cold or other infection, an employee coming into work when they're unwell could spread that infection to customers or other employees. In addition, working instead of resting may make it take longer for the employee to recover from their illness. A day off now to rest and recover could save several days worth of reduced productivity.

Many large companies are starting to recognize that presenteeism can be counter productive. Lockheed Martin, Comerica and Bank One have all acknowledged that investing in screening, treatment, training and education can improve productivity and boost worker well-being as well.





Changing the way bosses think about workers who take time off for medical issues is crucial. Historically, those who needed time off for migraines, occupational health issues, or even the common cold were treated as if they were malingering. This created a company culture where fearful employees would force themselves to come into work, in some cases making themselves sicker to the point they need to retire early or switch jobs. In the long term, this damages the company's reputation and costs money.

Rather than pushing a culture of presenteeism, focus on whether or not objectives are being met. Knowledge workers should be able to do their jobs from anywhere, and even some front-line workers have the chance to be flexible in how they do their jobs, such as scheduling video calls for a while if they're immobile due to an injury.

Trusting employees to be responsible and proactive is the first step towards building a healthy company culture and maintaining communication and engagement with everyone in your team.



# Use Communication Tools to Facilitate and Educate

One emerging trend in combatting presenteeism is tracking sick time and identifying common causes of illness or injury, then using interventions to reduce those problems in your workplace.

For example, if a warehouse notices that many employees are suffering back injuries, the manager could audit current working practices and run training to make sure warehouse workers are lifting and handling objects properly.

If a hospitality business notices many workers are taking time off due to allergies, they could look at what plants are used in the garden, and call in an allergy specialist to offer advice, or move the staff who struggle the most with allergies to indoor shifts.

Such actions can be combined with information campaigns run via the company's **communication platform**. Regular reminders about the importance of hand washing, safety precautions, or following manual handling training might seem like overkill, but those reminders could make a difference to employee attitudes.

Some businesses go slightly further, gamifying those reminders or running quizzes with rewards for employees who take part and get the answers to questions right.



# Building Cohesion Between Office and Deskless Employees

The biggest challenge HR departments and managers face when it comes to building cohesion between back office and frontline employees is that of killing the “us vs them” mentality.

It's all too easy for office workers to fall into the trap of thinking they're always “cleaning up the mess made by the customer service staff”, and for those on the frontlines to feel they are the ones who do the hard work, while the people in the office just sit around all day. A good manager knows how to work around these issues and create a culture where all employees feel like they're a part of a team.





# Recognize and Reward All Workers

One way to improve cohesion and communication between deskless employees and office workers is to build a company culture that involves rewarding effort and success, rather than punishing failure.

By publicly recognizing the contributions of all employees, regardless of their role, managers can avoid creating the feeling that one type of employee is more important than another. This is something that should be addressed at all levels of the corporate culture, including how employees are referred to in accounts and documents. Calling certain employees “legacy resources” or “non-productive resources” may seem like a clinical and simple way of describing what they do, but it also sounds cynical and dismissive to those who are classed as “non-productive”.

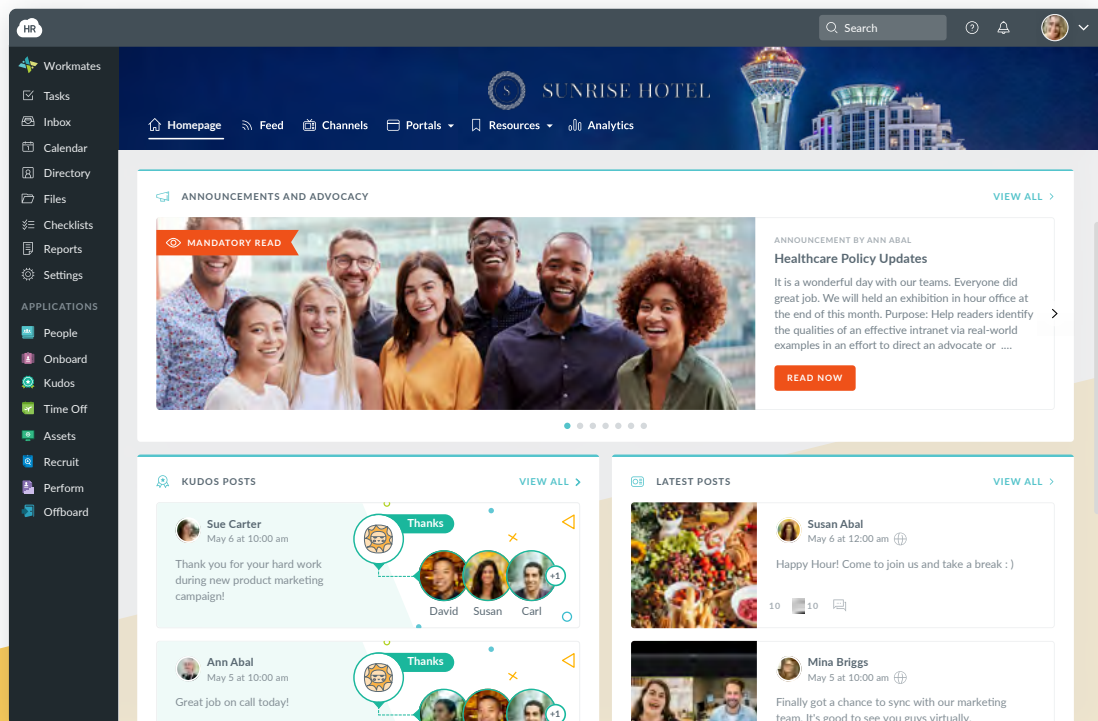




Use your company's **communications platform** to educate workers on what employees in different departments do. Put the emphasis on how every employee is important and how each job role helps the business achieve its goal.

In a positive working environment, managers know how important it is to:

- Communicate
- Listen
- Show your appreciation
- Offer opportunities for growth and progression
- Encourage a good work/life balance



# Empower Everyone

Turnover among deskless employees is high because those employees often feel disposable, and when someone feels disposable they'll stop taking their responsibilities seriously and find their job unfulfilling.

In many businesses, there's a disconnect between the owners/executive level managers, the middle managers and the front line employees. This disconnect creates a toxic environment that makes it hard for employees to do their jobs well.

Fortunately, these issues are avoidable, and it's possible to create a friendly team atmosphere by communicating effectively. This means:

- Sharing information about the company's goals
- Sharing in successes, and sharing the credit
- Openly discussing mistakes
- Inviting feedback on how to do better
- Offering feedback about employee performance
- Listening to ideas and complaints from employees at all levels

In a healthy company culture, front line employees feel respected and valued and have reasonable targets to meet. Middle management feels respected and have the autonomy to manage those under them in the way they feel is most effective. Neither of these groups are fearful of those above them because communication is clear, targets are well-defined and any incentives offered are well thought out.

When everyone, at every tier, feels empowered rather than fearful of making mistakes, each person can focus on getting their job done, rather than “avoiding getting into trouble” from those above them.

Using simple tools such as **Workmates** to engage with, recognize and reward employees can make your corporate culture healthier and massively reduce employee turnover.

The image displays the Workmates interface, which includes a sidebar with four main features: **Half the Cost** (represented by a dollar sign icon), **Seamless Integrations** (represented by a puzzle piece icon), **Employee Engagement** (represented by a speech bubble icon), and **Collaboration, Simplified** (represented by a person icon). The main content area shows a post by Maya Moore from September 4 at 10:33 am, titled "KUDOS". The post features a "Thanks" button and a list of employees: Ana, Iva, and Mike, each with a "+1" button. The post text reads: "Thanks to the employees who participated in today's workshop. We had a lot of fun today. Everyone did great job :) #hardwork #teamwork". Below the text are two photos: one of three women sitting at a table with laptops, and another of a group of people in a modern office setting. The post has 2 "Excited" reactions and a "Leave comment..." input field.

# Conclusion: The Future of the Office is Digital

Deskless employees should not be voiceless employees. Today, there are skills shortages in many industries, and the idea of a job for life is long gone. Employers understand that even if most of their workforce is unskilled, replacing an employee is not always simple.



The cost of poor communication at a large company can be as much as **\$62.4 million per year**, and the cost of replacing an employee can be as much as **one-third** of that employee's annual salary.

Training your employees well and providing them with clear lines of communication is essential.

# Deskless Employees Shouldn't Be Voiceless

Deskless workers are often the face of the company, and this means they need to have a steady flow of information available to them. Deskless workers should know what's going on back at head office, what their co-workers are doing, and how well they, and those around them, are achieving their goals.

Deskless workers will want to know if a prominent member of the office leaves, or if there's a new hire that will be working alongside them next week. They need to know about new products or policies if those things impact their ability to do their jobs.

The companies that will perform the best in the future are the ones that make an effort to communicate with their deskless employees as effectively as they do their in-office counterparts.





Even if you think your employees currently feel empowered and heard, take some time to get out and talk to them again, or send out surveys using the [Workmates app](#). Then read that feedback, think about it and reply publicly addressing those concerns.

Most managers acknowledge that good ideas can come from anywhere, but only 62% report seeing broad feedback listened to and used in their own workplace. Does your workplace truly pay attention to what front line employees have to say? Have your managers done the job of a front line employee themselves?

If not, you may find the real world employee experience is very different from what you expect it to be, and when you start listening to employees and providing them with the communication tools they really want and need, your company's productivity and profitability improve across the board.

The screenshot shows a survey titled "Employee Engagement Survey 2020" from HR Cloud. It includes an introductory paragraph about employee engagement, a "Required" field for question 1, and a rating scale for question 2.

**HR Cloud**

### Employee Engagement Survey 2020

Employee engagement is the strength of mental and emotional connection that employees feel toward their places of work. Our e9 model measures engagement using a set of nine survey items that tap into work, team, and organizational engagement. The following three questions can help you evaluate employees' connection to work. Not all employee engagement surveys are created equal.

**\* Required**

1. Which features do you value the most?

- ☒ Onboard App
- ☐ Time-Off App
- ☒ Employee Engagement Platform

How would you rate your experience with our product?

(1 - Very dissatisfied / 10 - Very satisfied)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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# The Right Platform For The Right Results

Workmates now gives you an easy-to-use, flexible, and powerful employee engagement and recognition platform that integrates with your enterprise systems.

Investing in Workmates will help you increase sales, create a positive culture, engage a happier workforce reduce turnover and improve its financial performance.

[Workmates Self-Guided Tour](#)



## About HR Cloud

HR Cloud is a leading developer of HR software and HRMS solutions with a focus on effective employee engagement. HR Cloud empowers teams to easily onboard new hires, manage employee data, create a company social network, and support employee development.

HR Cloud is a modern and powerful cloud-based HRMS solution with a complete suite of HR functionality, including core, performance, onboarding, recruitment, absence management, and time and attendance. For more information, please visit [www.hrcloud.com](http://www.hrcloud.com) or contact [info@hrcloud.com](mailto:info@hrcloud.com).

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