The Deskless Report

Retail Edition

Welcome to the Deskless Report: Retail Edition

In the following pages, we'll explore the state of the retail world by delving deeper into the associate, manager, and corporate leader experience – and what each of these groups need to thrive in the coming year.

In talking with these three cohorts, we've uncovered seven key insights that will ignite a discussion around the true definition of frontline enablement. What do retail workers need to stay happy, productive, and loyal? What do retail managers need to effectively lead their associates without daily burnout? And what do corporate leaders need to make the data-driven decisions to empower their workforce at scale?

The following pages will start to answer these questions – and spark the conversations and initiatives to continue addressing these issues through 2023 and beyond.

Enjoy!

What's in the report?

Executive Summary

54% of retail **managers** feel burned out on a daily basis

#1 Retail's frontline manager is a critical intermediary – but they're overburdened and burning out

40% of associates are considering leaving their job *(up from 37% last year)*

#2 The fundamental needs of associates aren't getting met *(because there's a misalignment on what matters most)*

#3 Ad-hoc communication is prevalent in retail frontlines – and it is negatively impacting everyone

32% of associates feel heard by their organization *(down from 63% last year)*

#4 Feedback is valued at the corporate level, but non-existent at the store level

67% of all respondents believe investing in new technologies for frontline workers will improve the success of their organization.

#5 Ineffective and overrun technology stacks have led to misalignment and skepticism

#6 Associates are fueled by training – but access is limited, and dated

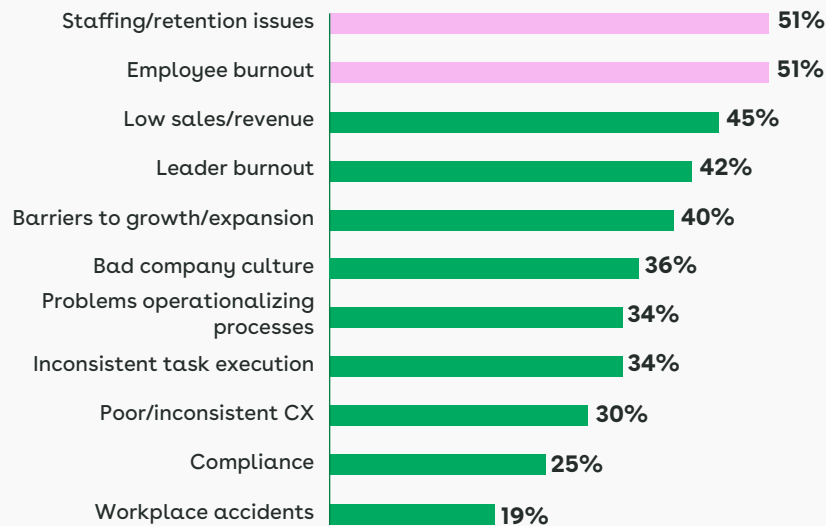**#7** Outlook is positive, but guarded *(especially at the frontline level)*
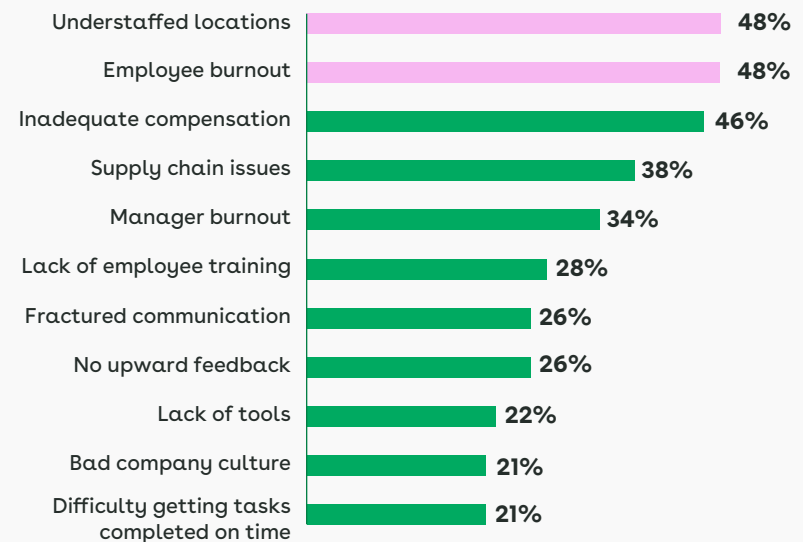
What's the state of the frontline?

What's the state of the retail frontline?

As we begin to explore the current state of the retail world, throughlines quickly appear across respondents. When asked about the current challenges facing their industries, frontline workers, frontline managers, and corporate leaders all ranked staffing issues and burnout at the top of the list. Even as the pandemic becomes a (somewhat) past-tense concern, the key disruptors are still closely linked to stability. In the following pages, we'll look at the specific experiences of each of our respondent groups:

Disruptors ranked very or extremely challenging by corporate leaders

Disruptor	%
Staffing/retention issues	51%
Employee burnout	51%
Low sales/revenue	45%
Leader burnout	42%
Barriers to growth/expansion	40%
Bad company culture	36%
Problems operationalizing processes	34%
Inconsistent task execution	34%
Poor/inconsistent CX	30%
Compliance	25%
Workplace accidents	19%

Disruptors ranked very or extremely challenging by retail managers and workers

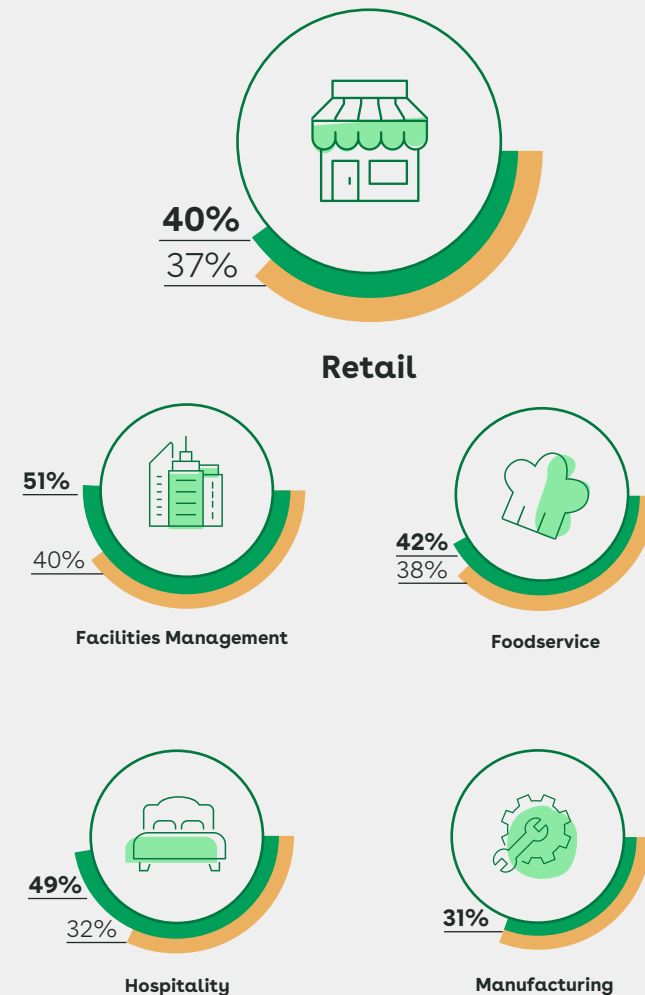| Disruptor	%
Understaffed locations	48%
Employee burnout	48%
Inadequate compensation	46%
Supply chain issues	38%
Manager burnout	34%
Lack of employee training	28%
Fractured communication	26%
No upward feedback	26%
Lack of tools	22%
Bad company culture	21%
Difficulty getting tasks completed on time	21%

The associate experience

As we'll explore in a later section, the retail associate is fundamentally looking to meet their most basic needs regarding livelihood and stability. Inconsistent or fluctuating hours can prompt a retail worker to seek additional hours from other income sources in order to make ends meet. However, these secondary jobs often have conflicting schedules with an associate's primary job, leading to further scheduling issues and absenteeism. When available hours at the primary store pick back up again, management will then hire more staff to cover all the shifts, which leads to even less hours for the original worker, thus perpetuating a never-ending cycle.

And with that cycle threatening livelihood and well-being, retail workers' desire to quit their jobs has increased. Last year's report found that 37% of retail workers wanted to quit – this year, that number rose to 40%.

40% of retail workers want to quit their job

Workers that want to quit their job, by industry

■ 2022
■ 2021

40%
37%

Retail

51%
40%

Facilities Management

42%
38%

Foodservice

49%
32%

Hospitality

31%

Manufacturing
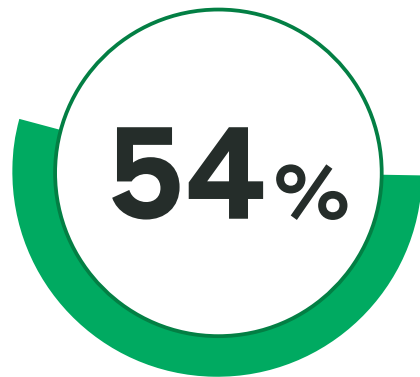
The retail manager experience

Meanwhile, frontline managers in retail feel powerless to drive the change their organizations desperately need to grow and thrive. Thanks to ill-suited or outdated communication, feedback, training, and execution systems, they're shouldering a heavy load, acting as the intermediary between corporate and staff. They're trying to bubble up feedback and customer insights, while also communicating crucial information back out to their staff, and implementing cultural, product, and promotional initiatives, all while simply trying to keep their location afloat on a day-to-day basis.

As a result, and as we'll explore later in this report, instances of burnout among retail managers is the highest across all industries polled.

54% **of retail managers** feel burned out on a daily basis

"

There's a blurred line between managers and their roles.

We're expected to take on roles we've never been trained for or that we don't really have experience in – so it's been a little bit overwhelming.

– Customer Experience Manager, National retail chain

"

The corporate experience

While retailers are trying to navigate supply chain issues, rising labor costs, and a volatile economy, there's now an even stronger need to "do more with less" as they try to deliver quality customer experiences and stay profitable. Unfortunately, they're trying to achieve this while supporting an overworked, burned-out workforce.

As we already mentioned, the top two disruptors ranked by retail corporate leaders are staffing issues and burnout. Following those are low sales, leader burnout, and barriers to growth/expansion, suggesting a strong correlation between and a clear focus on core business drivers. Interestingly, however, "bad company culture" was also a key disruptor in retail, outranking "problems operationalizing processes" and even "poor/inconsistent CX."

60% **of retail corporate leaders** said the last twelve months at their job have been especially challenging

"Workers are desperate for stability, frontline managers are overburdened and burned out, and corporate leaders are trying to look to the future."

Clearly, the frontline world is still in an incredibly volatile state. Workers are desperate for stability, frontline managers are overburdened and burned out, and corporate leaders are trying to look to the future but are unsure of how to get there. What's the solution?

As readers will see in the insights that follow, it's the workflow that needs to change. For far too long, the retail world has been on the sidelines witnessing significant investments in deskbound tools, technology, and processes, but has struggled to apply them to their own workforces. Sure, they've been tweaked or reskinned, but the processes remain deskbound by nature, purpose-built for workers in an office, at a desk, in front of a computer. Onboarding, training, internal communication, employee feedback... the modern interpretations of these words are intrinsically deskbound.

And as the retail world becomes more and more unpredictable, its capacity to derive any functionality at all from these tools (or in fact the definitions themselves) is diminishing, fast.

In other words, it's time to redefine the frontline experience once and for all. We need to strip it down to its studs and rebuild from scratch, continually asking ourselves, "What does this mean for the retail world?"

In this year's Deskless Report: Retail Edition, we have uncovered seven key insights that we hope will open up discussions around redefining the concepts of retail manager enablement, communication, feedback, training, technology, and associate experience – discussions we intend to continue in the months and years to come.

Retail's frontline manager is a critical intermediary
– but they're overburdened and burning out

The role of the retail manager in empowering and enabling associates has quickly become a trending topic. While the main Deskless Report exposed the pivotal role managers play as intermediary between corporate and workers, it's even more prevalent – and urgent – when we look specifically at the findings within the retail industry.

The Deskless Report found that across all industries polled, everything is going through the manager. But nowhere is that more true than in retail. When retail workers were asked who they receive information from, the prevailing response for every category was "direct manager." But associates aren't just leaning on managers for information. In fact, 35% of retail workers said that 1:1 support from their manager contributes to their overall success and happiness at work.

Unfortunately, despite the pivotal role retail managers have to play in associate enablement, they're overburdened. They're trying to keep their locations staffed and their store workers happy, and without the right tools or infrastructure in place, they're leaning on ill-suited or even personal tools that belie any chance at a healthy work/life balance.
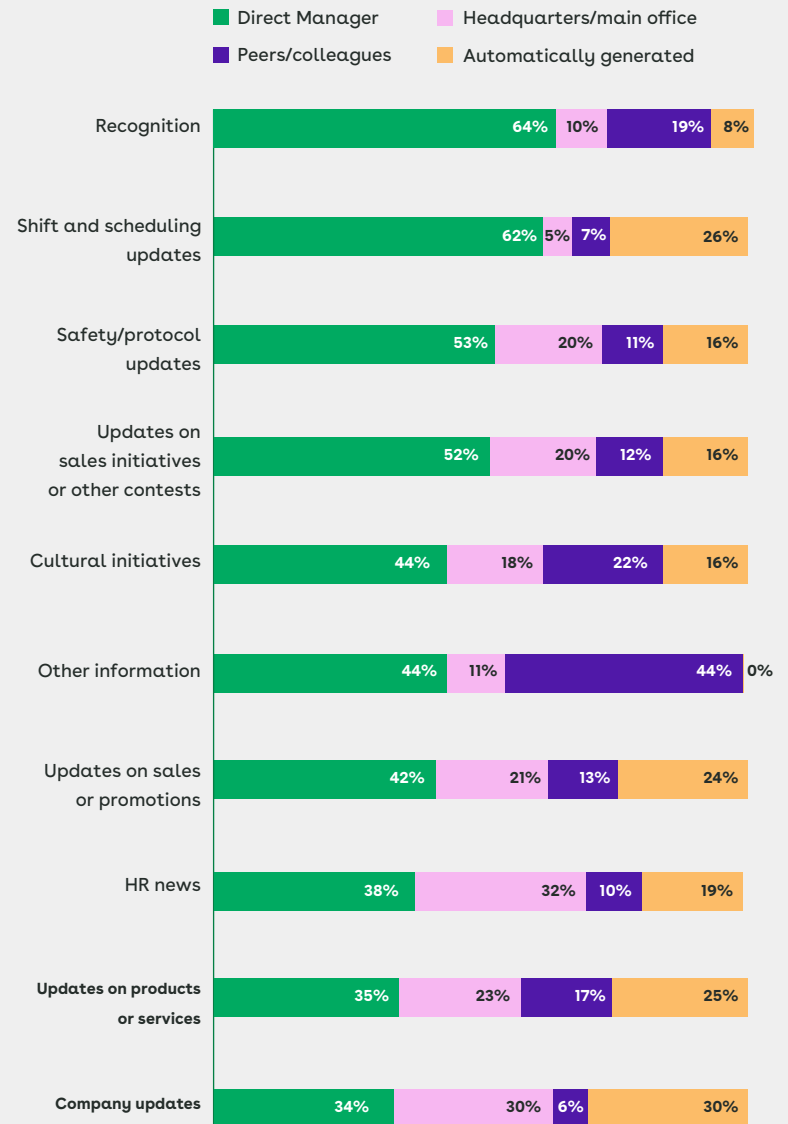
While we've established that the majority of associates are receiving information directly from their managers, our findings also indicate that this information is getting delivered from managers to workers through systems that don't allow for the standardization, optimization, and tracking required for large-scale retail workforces.

When asked how they receive information, the top three methods cited by associates were "in-person" (69%), "conversations with manager" (51%), and "texts/phone calls" (50%). While effective retail managers should of course be engaging with their store staff regularly, leaning on these ad-hoc channels for disseminating crucial information puts a huge strain on managers as they try to ensure these messages are getting through to everyone.

"Information is getting delivered from managers to workers through systems that don't allow for standardization, optimization, and tracking."

These are the same three channels that workers indicated they use to deliver feedback back to their company, meaning that while managers are getting information to their workers, they're also the intermediary trying to communicate associates' ideas, customer insights, and other valuable feedback back to corporate, which, again, leads to ineffectual information-sharing and a sense that valuable insights and feedback aren't finding their way to the right people. As a result, the knowledge gap between retail managers and workers is growing – fast.

Who are workers receiving information from?

Legend:
- ■ Direct Manager
- ■ Peers/colleagues
- ■ Headquarters/main office
- ■ Automatically generated

Category	Direct Manager	Headquarters/main office	Peers/colleagues	Automatically generated
Recognition	64%	10%	19%	8%
Shift and scheduling updates	62%	5%	7%	26%
Safety/protocol updates	53%	20%	11%	16%
Updates on sales initiatives or other contests	52%	20%	12%	16%
Cultural initiatives	44%	18%	22%	16%
Other information	44%	11%	44%	0%
Updates on sales or promotions	42%	21%	13%	24%
HR news	38%	32%	10%	19%
Updates on products or services	35%	23%	17%	25%
Company updates	34%	30%	6%	30%

While 75% of retail managers said they have access to clear communication from head office, only 55% of workers agreed. Furthermore, 74% of retail managers felt in-the-know about what's going on at their organization, but only 45% of associates agreed. Furthermore, there's a concern among retail managers about the results of the feedback they share. The large, sweeping initiatives that are implemented and shared back down to frontlines from corporate feel misaligned against the original feedback or concerns, and managers feel like corporate is out of touch with the "day-to-day chaos" of the in-store experience. Managers are provided some information and context about these initiatives, but not enough to get their buy-in, let alone arm them with the information they need to get their staff on board, so a lot gets disregarded. They're taking on the brunt of onboarding and employee training, tasked with not just skills and knowledge transfer, but engagement and retention, all while trying to operationally execute.

74%
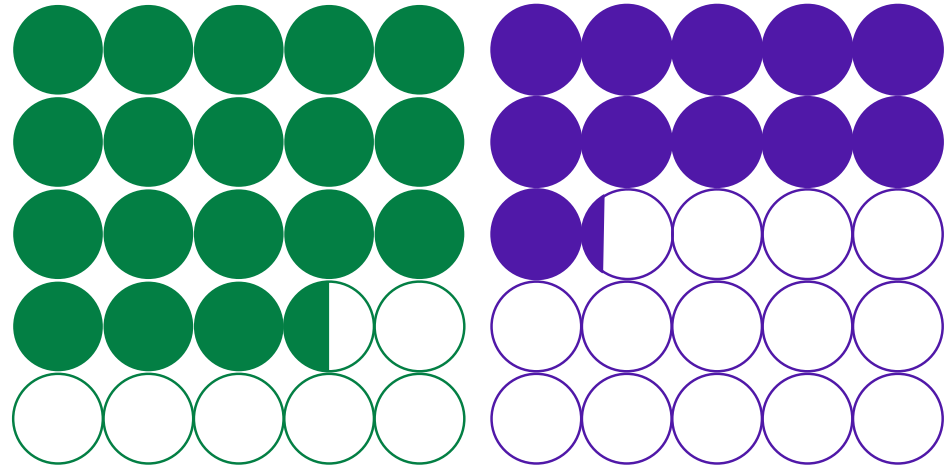
of retail managers feel in-the-know about of what's going on at their organization, while **only 45% of retail workers** agree

"54% of retail managers are feeling burned out on a daily basis."

All of this naturally leads to burnout. In the aftermath of the pandemic, retail managers are battling ongoing absenteeism and sickness, disengagement, and overall staffing concerns. They're using personal communication channels and apps (not company-sanctioned) to reach their staff and keep store shifts covered, further diminishing any balance or separation between work and life. As a result, 54% of retail managers are feeling burned out on a daily basis – the highest instance of burnout across all industries polled.

While this is worrisome, it also indicates an exciting opportunity for organizations. Retail managers are a resource that organizations can leverage to drive revenue, more efficient execution, engagement, and retention, but they need to be enabled and empowered to do so. The brunt of communication efforts seems to be placed on retail managers, showing a strong need for solutions that can ease some of these responsibilities. With the right structured approach in place – let's call it "frontline management enablement" – organizations can bolster frontline managers with the resources and tools they need to avoid burnout and optimize output.

Instances of daily manager burnout, by industry

54%

Retail

48% **Foodservice**

37% **Facilities Management**

54% **Hospitality**

52% **Manufacturing**

The fundamental needs of associates aren't being met
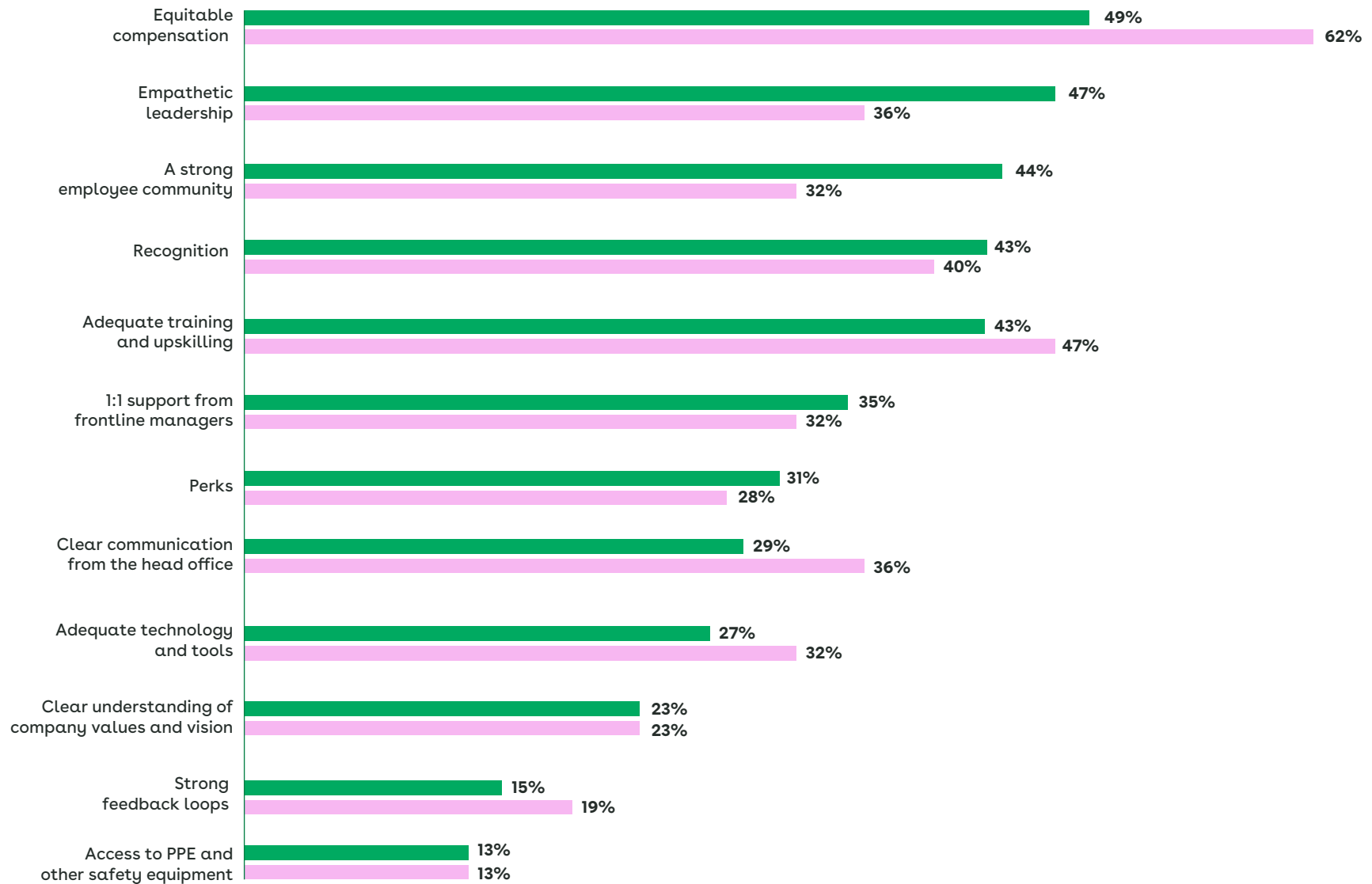## (because there's a misalignment on what matters most)

Retailers are often encouraged to start with "the why" when communicating with associates. But we're going to suggest something new: To truly engage, inspire, and retain retail staff, fundamental needs must be addressed before "the why."

While corporate is advocating for initiatives that target community and culture (both of which are crucial drivers of success and happiness), workers are still struggling with more fundamental needs around livelihood and stability. Until these more fundamental needs are met, frontline workers will struggle to participate in, accept, or see value in more peripheral initiatives.

Retail worker vs corporate perceptions on the top drivers of retail worker happiness and success

■ Retail Workers   ■ Corporate Leaders

Driver	Retail Workers	Corporate Leaders
Equitable compensation	49%	62%
Empathetic leadership	47%	36%
A strong employee community	44%	32%
Recognition	43%	40%
Adequate training and upskilling	43%	47%
1:1 support from frontline managers	35%	32%
Perks	31%	28%
Clear communication from the head office	29%	36%
Adequate technology and tools	27%	32%
Clear understanding of company values and vision	23%	23%
Strong feedback loops	15%	19%
Access to PPE and other safety equipment	13%	13%

On the following page, we'll look at associates' needs as a hierarchy. At the base of the hierarchy, associates need a Livelihood, i.e., the means to support themselves and their household. A livable wage is the most fundamental, followed by a thriveable wage. Benefits and perks are considered value-added to this, but do not substitute for the baseline. Right above the base is Stability: The confidence that your livelihood is relatively secure. This is driven by consistent income and hours, a consistent shift schedule, and the assurance that their job isn't going anywhere.

From there, we see Community, a camaraderie between associates and between retail workers and their managers that helps create a sense of belonging, mutual respect, accountability, and investment within and across stores.

Access to top 5 success drivers according to retail workers

| 29 %	52 %	53 %	58 %	66 %
Equitable compensation	Adequate training and upskilling	Empathetic leadership	Strong employee community	Recognition

The Hierarchy of Retail Workers' Needs

What breaks it down

■ 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

What builds it up
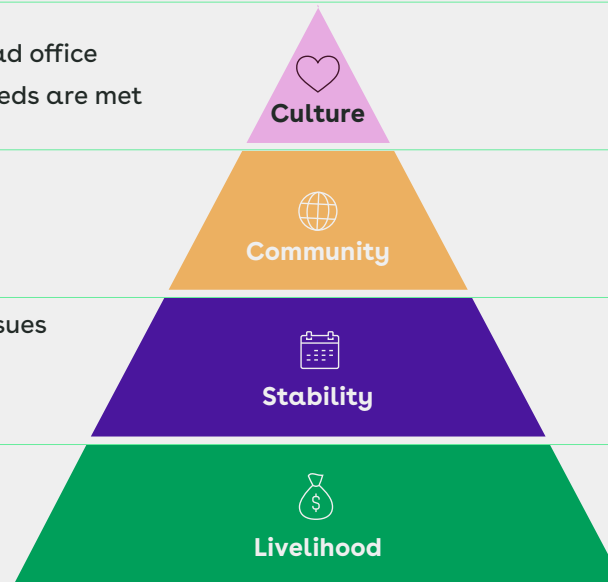
■ Strong brand vision and values
■ Strong communication

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

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

■ A livable wage
■ Benefits/perks

Culture

Community

Stability

Livelihood

56% of retail workers don't have access to equitable compensation

50% of retail workers don't have access to strong feedback loops

58% of retail workers have access to a strong employee community

71% of retail workers have a clear understanding of company values and vision

Culture is at the very top. Here's where we get into "the why" that retail workers need to execute effectively and efficiently. Culture includes a broadly shared sense of mutual values, vision, and ideals and is a nebulous and abstract concept compared to the more tangible and immediate needs of Livelihood, Stability, and Community. As such, retailers' values and mission statements only resonate when the foundations of the pyramid are provided and secure. When the above needs are not fully met in retail environments (which is the case, according to the majority of frontline interviewees), building a broader sense of company culture becomes ineffective at best and insulting at worst, especially when culture initiatives are prioritized over fundamental needs.

Worker sentiment on the employee experience

Legend: ■ Retail workers ■ All frontline workers respondants

Statement	Retail workers	All frontline workers respondants
I know exactly what's expected of me at work	90%	85%
I have the information I need to do my job	77%	79%
I understand my company's long-term goals	62%	63%
I feel a sense of community with my coworkers and organization	55%	60%
I am in-the-know about most of what's going on in my organization	45%	51%
I feel like my organization invests in my development and growth	35%	42%
I feel heard by my organization	32%	39%

Furthermore, we see what's most top of mind for retail workers when we review the biggest challenges to day-to-day work, as mentioned in the report's introduction. The top three most significant challenges to retail frontlines were understaffing, employee burnout, and inadequate compensation.

"Workers know what they need to do. That's not the problem. The problem is that they're coming to work scared, overworked, and burned out."

Meanwhile, "difficulty getting tasks done" was the least-ranked challenge among retail workers, which aligns with the fact that a whopping 90% of associates and 87% of retail managers feel that they know exactly what's expected of them at work.

In other words, they know what they need to do. That's not the problem. The problem is that they're coming to work scared, overworked, and burned out. So, how can retailers begin to build out that foundational base layer that their frontline needs? We've identified three core drivers.

90%

of retail workers feel that they know exactly what's expected of them at work, and **87% of frontline retail managers** agree

Consistency

Total worker compensation is strongly impacted by inconsistent scheduling and shortage of work. Prioritizing and investing in consistency through scheduling tools and other automated functions could reduce the strain associates are feeling around instability and inconsistency.

Upskilling

There's a strong desire (and a real ROI) for robust upskilling programs among retail workers – 43% of associates ranked adequate training and upskilling as one of the top contributors of frontline success and happiness. Upskilling builds that foundation of livelihood and stability for workers, opening up more opportunities for internal growth and career pathing.

Empathy

In the main Deskless Report, we uncovered a strong sentiment at the frontline level that corporate leadership isn't in touch with the "day-to-day chaos" frontline workers are faced with on a regular basis. This feeling is leading to resentment, which erodes workers' willingness to engage and contribute to programs that will continue to build up a foundation in their hierarchy of needs. At the retail level, the need for empathy is far stronger – it was the second-most ranked contributor to frontline success and happiness among workers. However, 47% of associates indicated that they don't currently have access to empathetic leadership, or they're not sure if they have access, indicating an opportunity for retailers to foster stronger connections with their frontlines.

Ad-hoc communication is prevalent in retail frontlines –
and it is negatively impacting everyone

When exploring retail respondent sentiment around communication tools, frequency, and effectiveness, the situation was clear: Communication is predominantly ad-hoc and verbal, with email even less prevalent among workers.

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While the full Deskless Report identified a communication cascade in frontline organizations that was similar to that of deskbound companies – a top-down approach focused on email and word-of-mouth – the retail cohort is even less structured. And as the retail world remains increasingly volatile, navigating operational changes, budget cuts, staffing challenges, and supply chain constraints at a breakneck pace, ad-hoc communication may have finally come to a breaking point.

With ad-hoc communication prevalent in retail organizations, head office loses all semblance of data that can inform senior leadership about what's being read,
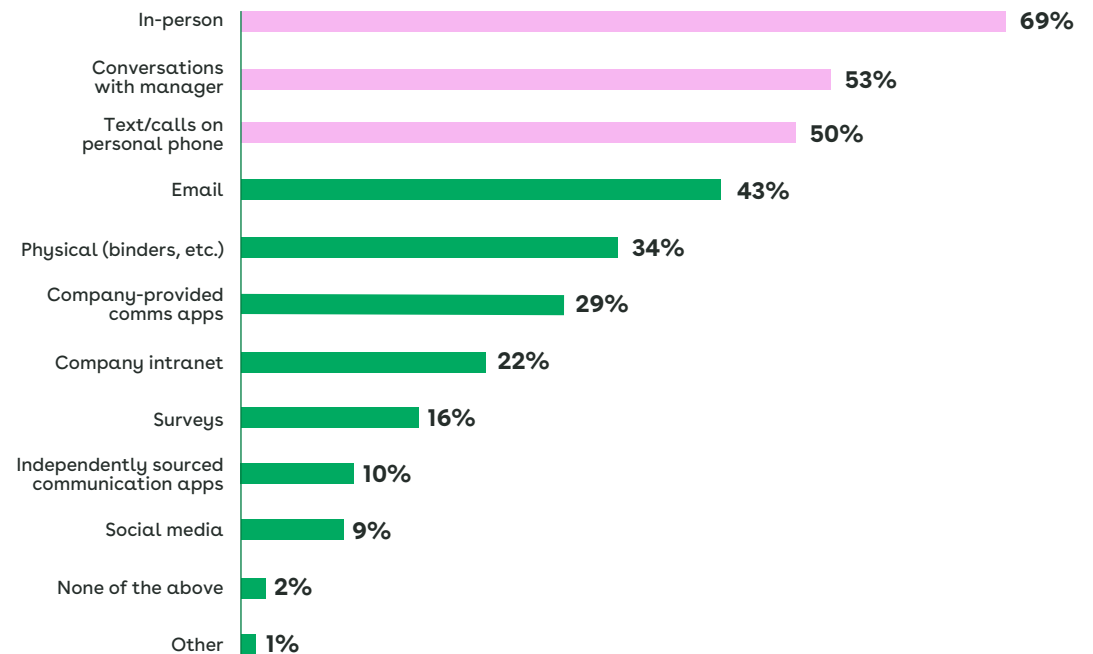
Top-down communication

Information is shared down the organization from head office to functional leadership to managers to workers via email or word-of-mouth, with little opportunity for tracking clear data on who the information has reached and whether they understood it.

Ad-hoc communication

Information is shared informally from managers to workers, or vice versa, through word-of-mouth or personal channels not sanctioned by the company, like texting or WhatsApp messaging.

what's resonating, and what's falling flat. With the large workforces that retail organizations employ, there's a wealth of information that can be used to fine-tune messaging, improve task and campaign execution, and even predict turnover. There's also a massive opportunity to tap into the associate and manager perspectives on the insights they're communicating, which can lead to continuous improvement and improved business outcomes (we'll dive more into feedback in the next section).

How retail managers and workers receive information

Channel	Percentage
In-person	69%
Conversations with manager	53%
Text/calls on personal phone	50%
Email	43%
Physical (binders, etc.)	34%
Company-provided comms apps	29%
Company intranet	22%
Surveys	16%
Independently sourced communication apps	10%
Social media	9%
None of the above	2%
Other	1%

But first, you have to be collecting it, and with ad-hoc or top-down channels, organizations are severely limited in the information they can collect. There's also a risk of "broken telephone," where information is filtered from person to person down through the organization, leading to misinterpretations and inconsistencies.

"There's a danger of top-down communication not having any confirmation that information is being read or understood. One manager called it 'sending information into the abyss.'"

At the managerial level, in-person communication and texts/phone calls are being used to "keep the business going," and "stay afloat," with managers focused on covering shifts and quickly sharing tactical information. But there's still the danger of not having any confirmation that information is being read or understood. One manager called it "sending information into the abyss."

> **[Communication] usually starts with our general manager, then it's disseminated throughout the employees. But a lot of times it doesn't get all the way down to where it needs to.**
>
> - Soft Lines Manager, National retail chain

In-person conversations

While this form of communication will always be necessary for the most urgent, real-time items (like a major spill that needs cleaning up, for example), it's problematic for anything that needs to be thoroughly understood and retained. According to the Forgetting Curve, when information is only shared once, workers will forget 50% of it within an hour, while 90% will be lost within the week.

Texts/calls on personal phone

The inherent issue with sharing critical communications on personal devices is that it's completely outside the control of the organization, meaning there's no reporting or analysis of effectiveness available. There's also a sense of this communication channel blurring the work-life balance too much, which can lead to further burnout.

Another issue is the frequency of communication. Retail respondents indicated a stronger inclination for communications to be sent monthly versus weekly, particularly around safety/protocol updates, HR news, and company updates – though there was a stronger occurrence of a want for more frequent communication around sales/promotion updates and updates on products and services.
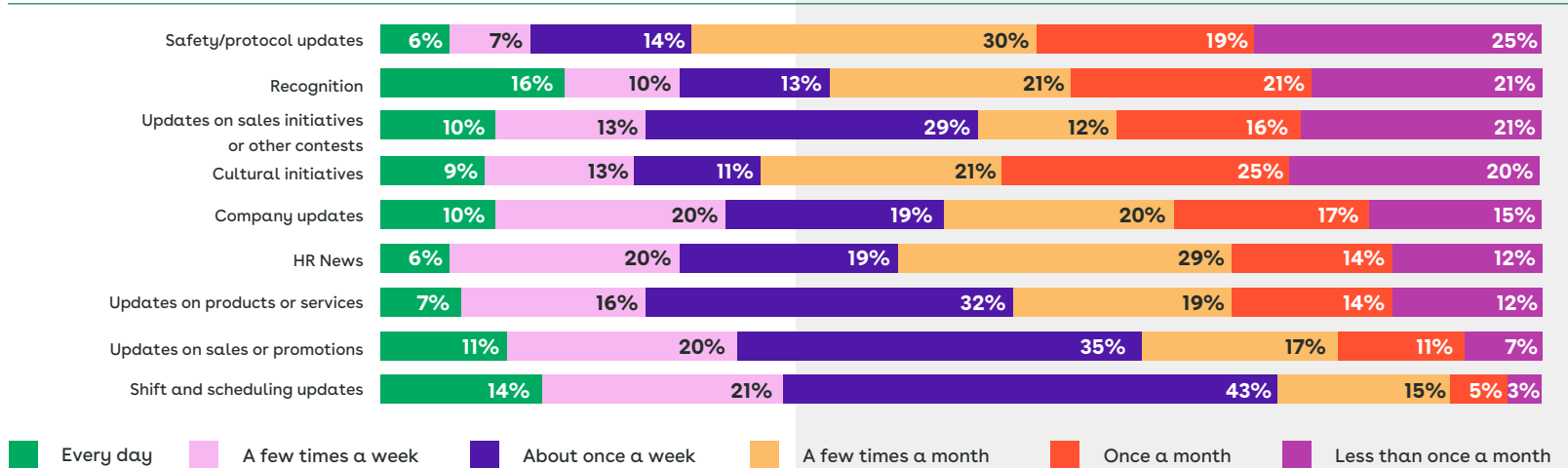
62% **of corporate retail leaders** believe their communication is effective, while **only 28% of retail workers** agree

What does this suggest? Associates might be getting the need-to-know information on a regular basis, but it's shared with them through channels that don't facilitate consistency or information retention. Also, they're missing out entirely on regular, frequent communications about the broader company or employee experience.
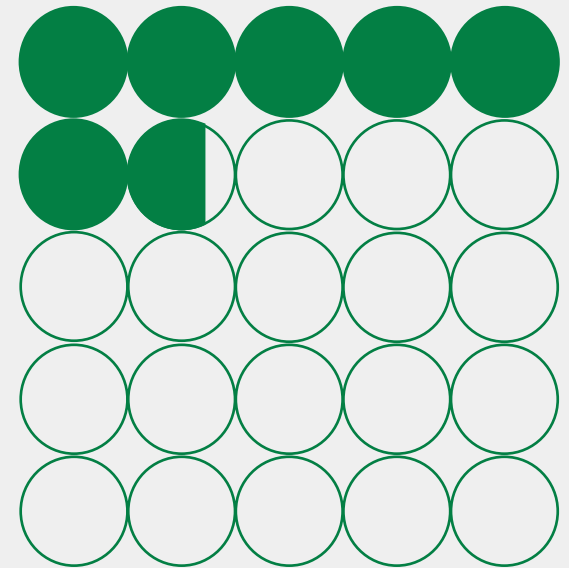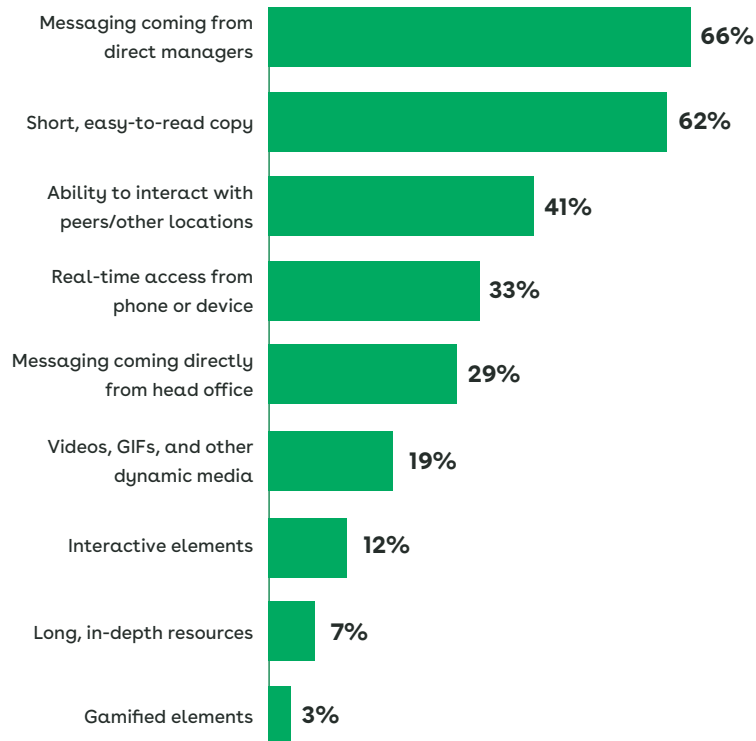
Furthermore, associates simply don't find this ad-hoc communication effective. Retail respondents on average ranked their satisfaction with their current communications lower than other respondents. But this was particularly evident with frontline associates; When asked on a scale of 1 to 10 how effective their organization's communication is, only 28% of workers scored their communication with an 8 or higher, showing a clear need for better solutions. Compare that against the 62% of corporate leaders who believe their communication is effective, which exposes a strong disconnect between workers and corporate leaders.

Frequency of communications sent according to retail workers and managers

Category	Every day	A few times a week	About once a week	A few times a month	Once a month	Less than once a month
Safety/protocol updates	6%	7%	14%	30%	19%	25%
Recognition	16%	10%	13%	21%	21%	21%
Updates on sales initiatives or other contests	10%	13%	29%	12%	16%	21%
Cultural initiatives	9%	13%	11%	21%	25%	20%
Company updates	10%	20%	19%	20%	17%	15%
HR News	6%	20%	19%	29%	14%	12%
Updates on products or services	7%	16%	32%	19%	14%	12%
Updates on sales or promotions	11%	20%	35%	17%	11%	7%
Shift and scheduling updates	14%	21%	43%	15%	5%	3%

Legend: ■ Every day ■ A few times a week ■ About once a week ■ A few times a month ■ Once a month ■ Less than once a month

What would make communication more helpful? Associates are looking for short, easy-to-reach copy, as well as the ability to interact with peers and other locations. They also favored receiving information directly from managers as opposed to head office. Compared to other respondents, retail workers also showed a stronger interest in real-time access from their phone or device.

**What retail workers and managers say make communications helpful**

Messaging coming from direct managers	66%
Short, easy-to-read copy	62%
Ability to interact with peers/other locations	41%
Real-time access from phone or device	33%
Messaging coming directly from head office	29%
Videos, GIFs, and other dynamic media	19%
Interactive elements	12%
Long, in-depth resources	7%
Gamified elements	3%

26%

of retail managersand workers believe **fractured communication** is very or extremely challenging to their day-to-day work

"Technology can embrace that ad-hoc and in-the-moment communication, but harnessed into a more consistent and scaled-up approach."

In terms of the least requested features, interactive and long, in-depth resources were at the bottom of the list, which might point to associates needing to access information quickly when on the store floor. But the lack of interest in gamification and interaction could also be simply because it isn't applicable to the prevalent communication types (like texting and in-person conversations).

The reality is that associates are filling the communications gap, at least to the frontline manager, by using their personal devices – because they are lacking a company-sponsored alternative. 73% of frontline respondents said they check their phone at work, whether or not it's allowed. A lack of investment in employee technology means that retail frontlines are making do with the personal devices they have and supplementing it with whiteboards and bulletin boards.

But there is tremendous opportunity here, because 40% of retail managers and workers said they would like to use technology to address fractured communication. Retailers willing to implement systems that are optimized for their fast-moving workforces will better enable their managers and deliver the clear, real-time messaging associates crave.
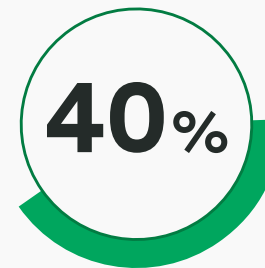
40% **of retail managers and workers** would like to use technology to fix fractured communication

Technology can consolidate these channels to allow for one fluid (company-sanctioned) channel for information to flow down – as well as back up. This allows retailers to scale up communications, delivering information to the frontline more directly, with the analytics in place to measure effectiveness and knowledge retention company-wide. Technology can also embrace that ad-hoc and in-the-moment communication, but harnessed into a more consistent and scaled-up approach, reducing the load on managers and opening up opportunities for continuous feedback loops – all in one place.

Feedback is valued at the corporate level
– but non-existent at the store level

Exploring feedback within retail organizations uncovered an interesting anomaly. At the corporate level, leaders value employee feedback and see it as a strong indicator of an enabled frontline. However, retail frontlines don't feel heard, or feel that they don't have access to the right channels to provide the feedback that corporate values.

Let's unpack this.

When asked how they know when their associates have what they need to succeed, 79% of corporate leaders said "employee feedback" – it was far and away the top response. Furthermore, 70% of corporate leaders believe that feedback platforms are effective in helping workers thrive in their roles.

Despite this confidence in feedback at a corporate level, there's a lack of effective channels at the frontline level – and it's getting worse. Only 32% of retail workers feel heard in 2022, a stat that plummeted from 63% in 2021.

Structured feedback

Structured feedback is solicited using targeted surveys or other process-driven feedback channels. It's usually a specific question, with quantifiable answers (e.g., a pulse survey on a particular topic).
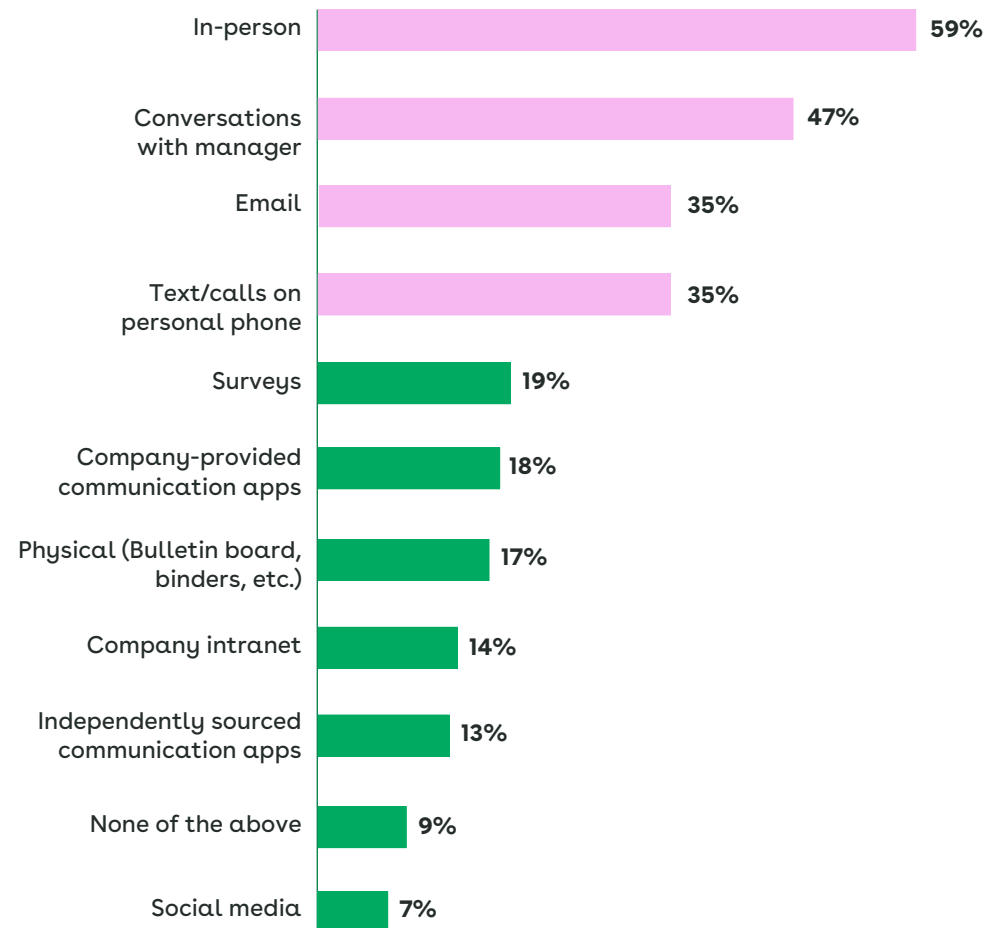
Semi-structured feedback

Semi-structured feedback involves leading questions or topics, with unlimited possible answers or comments (e.g., a virtual forum on a specific topic).

Unstructured feedback

Unstructured feedback is collected in an anecdotal, ad-hoc fashion, without any question or topic guiding the conversation (e.g., a worker telling their manager a frustration at the end of their shift).

How retail managers and workers share feedback

Category	Percentage
In-person	59%
Conversations with manager	47%
Email	35%
Text/calls on personal phone	35%
Surveys	19%
Company-provided communication apps	18%
Physical (Bulletin board, binders, etc.)	17%
Company intranet	14%
Independently sourced communication apps	13%
None of the above	9%
Social media	7%

Part of the problem is which feedback channels are used, which are similar to the communication channels explored in the previous chapter. There's a prevalence toward using feedback channels where associates share their feedback, ideas, or concerns anecdotally with their manager, who then tries to bubble up these insights to their manager, and so on, like a reverse communication cascade. As we've already explored, the manager-as-intermediary is often put in a difficult position. As the primary contact between associates and corporate, retail managers feel it is difficult to find enough time to surface feedback, not to mention source answers to questions and other necessary information.

There's also a gap between the types of feedback associates want to share and what's collected. The types of feedback collected skew toward "traditional" HR-focused feedback, like problems with co-workers or safety concerns. While these are important, they miss the breadth of valuable feedback that is available to be sourced from the retail frontline. And if retailers are only asking for HR-focused feedback geared toward compliance and mitigating liability, a lot is going to be left unsaid.

"The top types of feedback retail frontlines are motivated to give are, in fact, the ones that could truly help retailers drive revenue, improve CX, and create efficient processes."

As the following chart shows, the top types of feedback retail frontlines are motivated to give are, in fact, the ones that could truly help retailers drive revenue, improve CX, and create efficient processes. "Knowledge gaps," "best practice sharing," and "questions for senior leadership" are at the top of the list, followed closely by "efficiency/protocol feedback." Unfortunately, all these types are in the bottom half of the list of feedback that retail organizations are actually asking for.

> **"**
>
> **We call it bubbling it up to corporate, when we go up the chain and try to get some movement on things. It can be like playing telephone, since we don't have direct communication with some of our corporate higher-ups. We can communicate to our district manager, our director of store operations, but at some point they're going to pick what they feel was most important in our conversation, and they'll bubble that up. So sometimes you don't always feel your message actually gets across.**
>
> - General Manager, Regional retail chain
>
> **"**

It's not surprising to see that these outcome-focused types of feedback are less commonly collected, because they become harder and harder to surface and share through the ad-hoc systems being used in unstructured channels, especially if they rely on the already overstretched retail managers to do so. To achieve the operational benefits that can be derived from thousands of customer insights, best practices, and efficiency recommendations, retailers need the processes, tools, and technology in place that structured feedback can provide. This approach will allow them to collect, catalog, and action the feedback at scale.
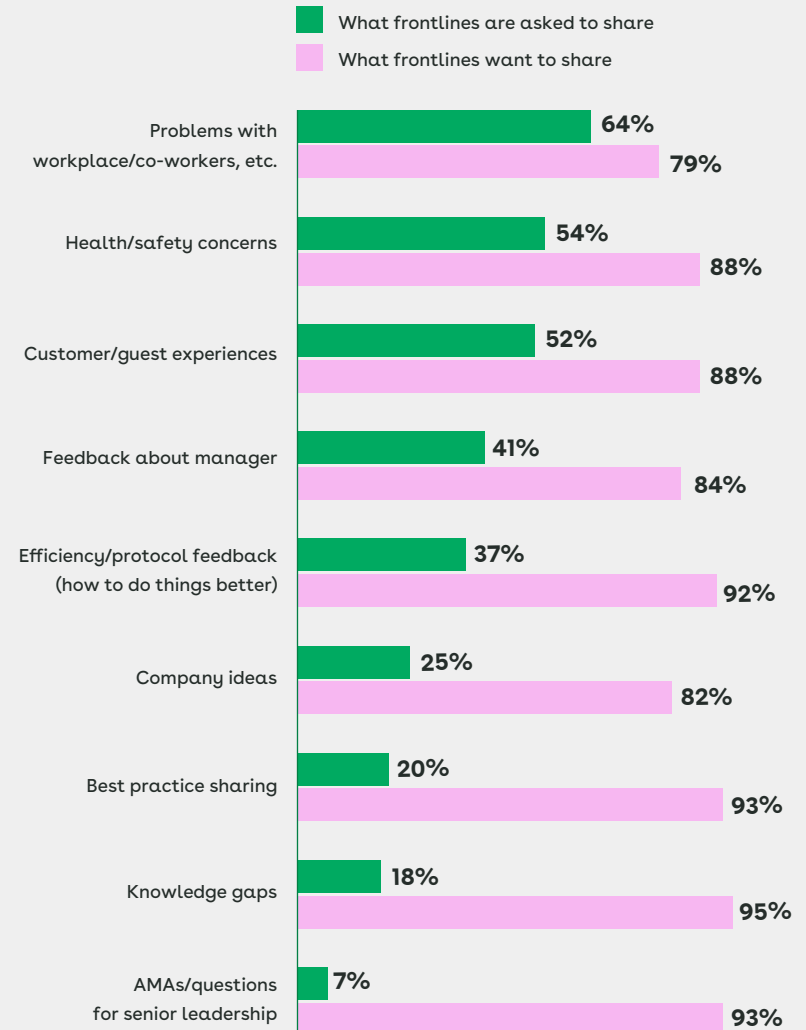
Unfortunately, the investment just isn't there.

According to retail corporate leaders polled, 19% have no budget allocated for feedback and a whopping 30% said their feedback budget has decreased, suggesting that feedback is getting deprioritized against communication, training, recognition, and other programs. Perhaps not a surprising insight, considering 90% of corporate leaders said that their retail staff has access to strong feedback loops – but only 41% of associates agreed.

32%
of retail workers
feel heard, compared
to 63% in 2021

Types of feedback retail frontlines are asked to share versus what they want to share

Legend:
- ■ What frontlines are asked to share
- ■ What frontlines want to share

Category	What frontlines are asked to share	What frontlines want to share
Problems with workplace/co-workers, etc.	64%	79%
Health/safety concerns	54%	88%
Customer/guest experiences	52%	88%
Feedback about manager	41%	84%
Efficiency/protocol feedback (how to do things better)	37%	92%
Company ideas	25%	82%
Best practice sharing	20%	93%
Knowledge gaps	18%	95%
AMAs/questions for senior leadership	7%	93%

"While 70% of retail corporate leaders believe that feedback from the frontline is valued in their organization, only 41% of associates agree."

And the disconnect doesn't stop there. While 70% of retail corporate leaders believe that feedback from the frontline is valued in their organization, again only 41% of associates agreed.

When exploring what a modern approach to frontline feedback could look like, retailers should think of structured, semi-structured, and unstructured feedback channels as they relate to two crucial factors: how easily they collect feedback and the ease at which they help organizations process that feedback into insights. Semi-structured feedback, like a virtual suggestion box, is easily captured, but it's hard to process the broad, non-targeted feedback into actionable insights.

Unstructured feedback, like ad-hoc comments from an associate to a manager, are both hard to capture and hard to process. On the other hand, structured feedback, like a targeted pulse survey, is both easy to capture and easy to process.

Types of feedback used in retail organizations

7%
Structured

12%
Semi structured

81%
Unstructured
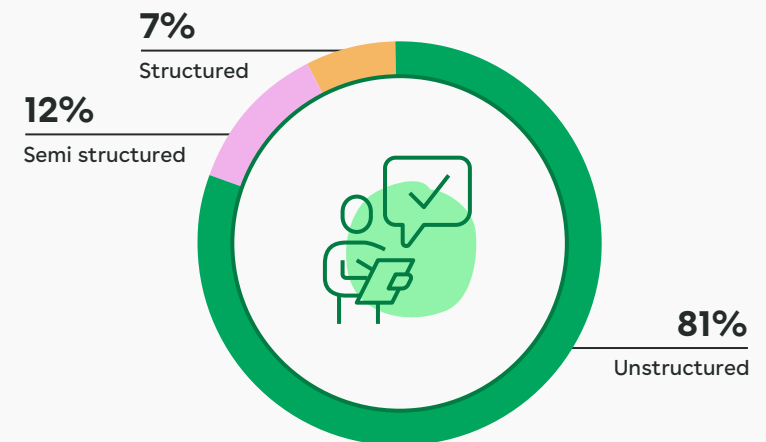
Does that mean retailers should focus entirely on structured feedback? No. Perhaps the best way to frame the usability and function of each of these feedback types is to think of one flowing into the next:

#1

First, **unstructured feedback** can be used to identify possible trending topics or insights on the frontline. This might be via an associate talking to their manager and the filtered, anecdotal feedback making its way up the chain. Currently, this type of feedback accounts for the top four channel types associates are using today.

#2

Next, **semi-structured feedback** channels could be used to further explore trending topics and identify the specific questions that could be asked of the retail frontline. This might be via a digital forum on a specific topic ("challenges to improving customer experience"), and associates have the ability to add, upvote, and comment on the shared insights.

#3

Finally, **structured feedback** can be used to quantify feedback at scale. Leveraging the language and insights collected in the less structured feedback channels, retailers can deploy pulse surveys or other structured collection channels in a way that feels relevant and relatable to retail managers and associates.

The takeaway from this approach is that while all feedback types can be valuable to retailers, it's important not to put too much weight on one type. The top four feedback channels used by frontlines are all capturing unstructured feedback, which means valuable insights are being lost or missed. There needs to be more awareness of the types of feedback that retail organizations could be using and how effectively they can each be used to quickly and easily deliver quality, actionable insights back up to the decision makers.

Ineffective and overrun technology stacks have led to misalignment – and skepticism

While digitizing the customer experience has been a steady talktrack in retail since before the pandemic, digitally enabling retail frontlines has gained less traction.

Ineffective technologies and a lack of consolidation across tools and platforms have led to a higher-than-average level of skepticism about frontline technology that starts at the corporate level and continues all the way down to the associate level.

One way we gauged confidence with technology among retail respondents was to ask corporate leaders, managers, and associates about using technology to solve the pressing challenges facing their industry today – many of which we're exploring in this report.

Retail corporate leaders on using technology to solve challenges

Challenge	Currently using	Wants to use	Doesn't think it can solve
Employee burnout	30%	40%	30%
Bad company culture	45%	26%	28%
Leader burnout	34%	38%	28%
Workplace accidents	34%	38%	28%
Staffing and staff retention issues	40%	34%	26%
Poor/inconsistent CX	47%	28%	25%
Compliance issues	47%	30%	23%
Inconsistent task execution	49%	34%	17%
Problems operationalizing processes	49%	34%	17%
Low sales/revenue	58%	30%	11%
Barriers to growth and expansion	51%	40%	9%

Retail frontline managers and workers on using technology to solve challenges

Challenge	Currently using	Wants to use	Doesn't think it can solve
Employee burnout	8%	20%	72%
Manager burnout	7%	22%	71%
Bad company culture	11%	20%	70%
Inadequate compensation	10%	24%	66%
Understaffed locations	19%	23%	58%
Supply chain issues	15%	37%	49%
No opportunities for upward feedback	18%	36%	46%
Fractured communication	18%	40%	43%
Difficulty getting tasks completed well/on time	27%	35%	37%
Lack of employee training	20%	48%	32%
Lack of adequate tools	24%	47%	29%

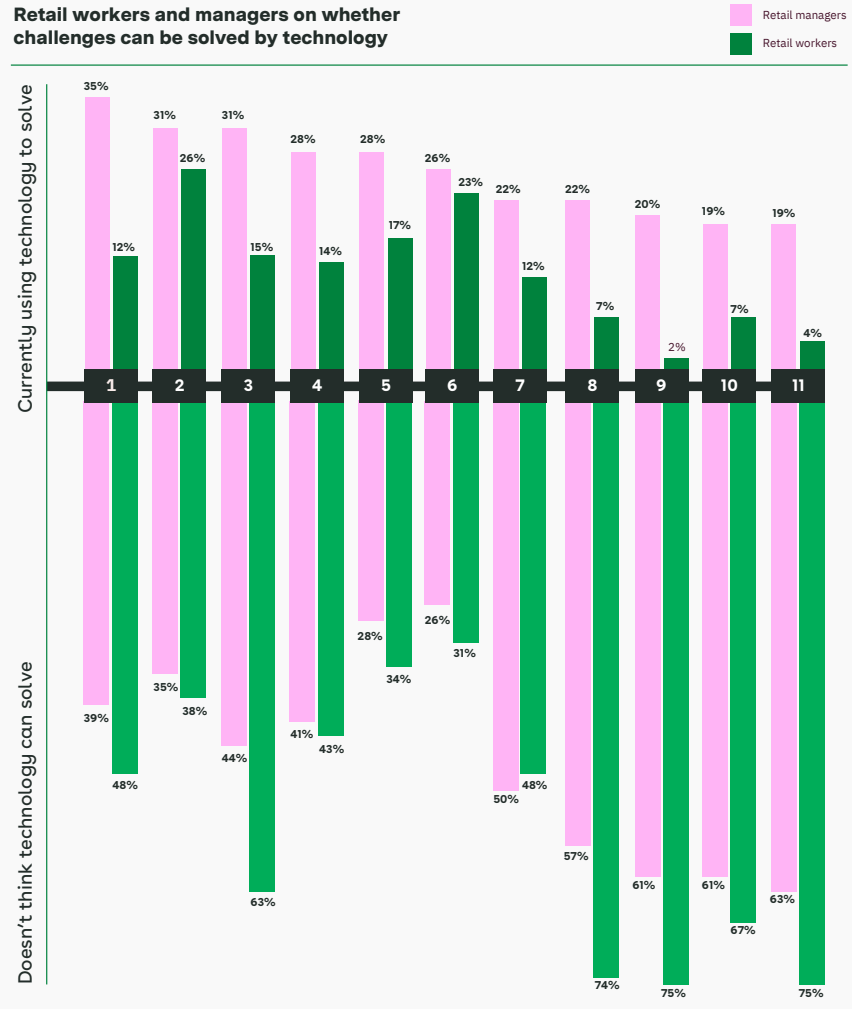Legend: ■ Currently using ■ Wants to use ■ Doesn't think it can solve

While we generally saw a higher instance of corporate leaders thinking technology could not solve challenges, we saw a much stronger sentiment among frontline respondents. For example, while 60% of all frontline respondents don't think technology can help solve employee burnout, that number leapt to 72% among retail frontline respondents. We also saw lower-than-average instances of retail frontline respondents indicating that they want to use technology to solve the challenges facing them, with two exceptions: lack of employee training (more on that later) and lack of adequate tools.

When specifically comparing retail managers and associates, there was a general consensus about what they'd like to use technology-wise, but there was a disconnect over what's currently being used (with managers indicating more widespread use of technology to solve challenges) as well as what can't solve the problems facing retail frontlines (with associates more strongly sharing this sentiment).

72%
of frontline retail respondents don't believe technology can solve employee burnout, while **30% of corporate retail respondents agree**

Retail workers and managers on whether challenges can be solved by technology

Retail managers
Retail workers

Currently using technology to solve

Doesn't think technology can solve

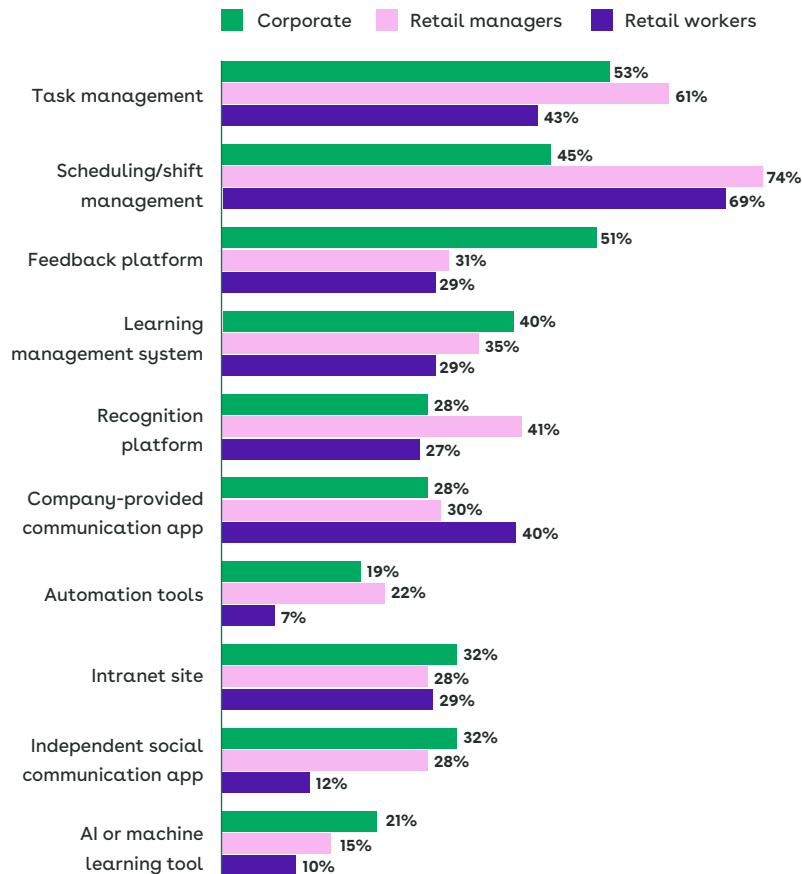|	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Managers (up)	35%	31%	31%	28%	28%	26%	22%	22%	20%	19%	19%
Workers (up)	12%	26%	15%	14%	17%	23%	12%	7%	2%	7%	4%
Managers (down)	39%	35%	44%	41%	28%	26%	50%	57%	61%	61%	63%
Workers (down)	48%	38%	63%	43%	34%	31%	48%	74%	75%	67%	75%

1. No opportunities for upward feedback
2. Difficulty getting tasks completed on time
3. Understaffed locations
4. Fractured communication
5. Lack of employee training
6. Lack of adequate tools
7. Supply chain issues
8. Bad company culture
9. Manager burnout
10. Inadequate compensation
11. Employee burnout

Overall, retail respondents reported the least number of tools or solutions utilized among all industries polled for The Deskless Report. However, when we dug deeper into what tools are being used, we uncovered something interesting.

Corporate versus frontline respondents on what tools and technology retail frontlines have access to

■ Corporate   ■ Retail managers   ■ Retail workers

Task management
- Corporate: 53%
- Retail managers: 61%
- Retail workers: 43%

Scheduling/shift management
- Corporate: 45%
- Retail managers: 74%
- Retail workers: 69%

Feedback platform
- Corporate: 51%
- Retail managers: 31%
- Retail workers: 29%

Learning management system
- Corporate: 40%
- Retail managers: 35%
- Retail workers: 29%

Recognition platform
- Corporate: 28%
- Retail managers: 41%
- Retail workers: 27%

Company-provided communication app
- Corporate: 28%
- Retail managers: 30%
- Retail workers: 40%

Automation tools
- Corporate: 19%
- Retail managers: 22%
- Retail workers: 7%

Intranet site
- Corporate: 32%
- Retail managers: 28%
- Retail workers: 29%

Independent social communication app
- Corporate: 32%
- Retail managers: 28%
- Retail workers: 12%

AI or machine learning tool
- Corporate: 21%
- Retail managers: 15%
- Retail workers: 10%

Retail managers reported much higher instances of access to tools compared to both corporate leaders and associates. For example, while 45% of corporate leaders versus 74% of retail managers reported that their frontline has access to scheduling or shift management technology. That suggests that either managers are employing their own tools, or they're the only ones using them – and both are a problem.

Retail managers also outpace corporate leaders when it comes to confidence in technology; while 74% of corporate leaders believe new technologies generally improve the success of frontline workers, that number jumps to 80% for managers.

62%
of corporate leaders feel their organization invests in new technology for frontline workers, while only **37% of frontline workers** agree

Still, though, a strong disconnect emerges when similar questions are posed to associates. Only 56% of associates believe new technologies generally improve the success of frontline workers. And while they are interested and willing to adopt technology to solve certain challenges facing their day-to-day work, they don't see the value of technology to solve the most pressing issues, like burnout and bad culture.

Part of the problem is the word "technology" itself. It can mean very different things to different people. If you ask an associate whether technology can solve for employee burnout, perhaps they'll think of a scanner or self-checkout. Can these innovations help solve employee burnout? Can technology pay staff more? Can it help staff who are working multiple jobs to ensure they have enough shifts to get by?

To answer this and to better explore what technology can mean for retail frontlines, let's go back to some of the fundamental needs of retail workers that need to be addressed in the section below.

Because individual solutions for these challenges exist across a wide field of options, retailers might struggle to make investment decisions for one particular challenge without feeling like they need to make significant compromises in other areas. For example, in order to invest in feedback channels, they might have to reduce their investment in recognition. Retail organizations want to provide a solution. But balancing budgets against associates' needs means that organizations need *consolidated* systems of frontline enablement to avoid compromise and maximize their return on investment – and to drive that confidence in technology currently lacking in retail workforces.

Compensation

Technology can play a role in achieving the livelihood and stability that retail frontlines are searching for by improving shift consistency and accelerating upskilling. Both of these benefit not only the worker, but the manager and retail corporate leaders by fostering the next generation of leaders (more on that later) and optimizing labor.

Community

A critical part of retail employee community building is peer-to-peer learning and best practice sharing. These are already being leveraged unofficially, and technology can enable, standardize, and scale up these relationship-building initiatives.

Addressing burnout

Technology can be leveraged to foster stronger two-way feedback loops between associates and corporate leaders and also automate and reduce the administrative burden, particularly on frontline managers.

Associates are fueled by training
– but access is limited, and dated

## How are associates getting the information they need to execute their job safely, effectively and efficiently?

Training programs in retail organizations still tend toward using "old school" systems built for deskbound workforces, if at all. Only 40% of corporate respondents and 30% of retail frontline respondents said they use a learning management system. The real training is happening informally and unstructured.

As a result, 37% of retail managers and 25% of associates said that lack of employee training is impacting their day-to-day work.

In retail organizations, where standardization of SOPs and operational efficiency is top-of-mind, leaning too hard on informal and unstructured training can be a problem. Not unlike top-down communication and unstructured feedback, this approach leads to inconsistencies that can be detrimental to large-scale retail workforces, if more agile training methods, like in-the-moment training and knowledge transfers, aren't approached systematically.

In addition to unstructured knowledge transfer, managers are being leveraged to onboard and train associates on a regular basis, which puts added stress on that cohort, especially during heightened periods of turnover and peak hiring seasons.
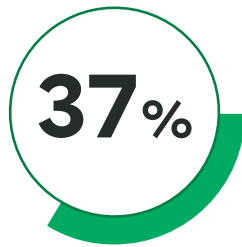
37% **of retail managers** said that lack of employee training is impacting their day-to-day work

"In retail organizations, where standardization and operational efficiency is top-of-mind, leaning too hard on informal and unstructured training can be a problem."

Furthermore, 40% of associates don't feel like their organization invests in their growth through upskilling and professional development, which is a problem, because 43% ranked "adequate training and upskilling" as one of the top drivers of success and happiness at work.

Part of that might be due to a disconnect over the availability of training and upskilling. While 31% of associates and a whopping 41% of managers said they don't have access to adequate training and upskilling, only 12% of corporate respondents agreed. The suggestion there is that whether or not retail organizations have robust training programs in place might be beside the point if up to a third (or more!) of their workforce is unaware of what training opportunities are even available to them. This not only results in inefficiencies and lost opportunities for growth and development, it costs the organization significantly.
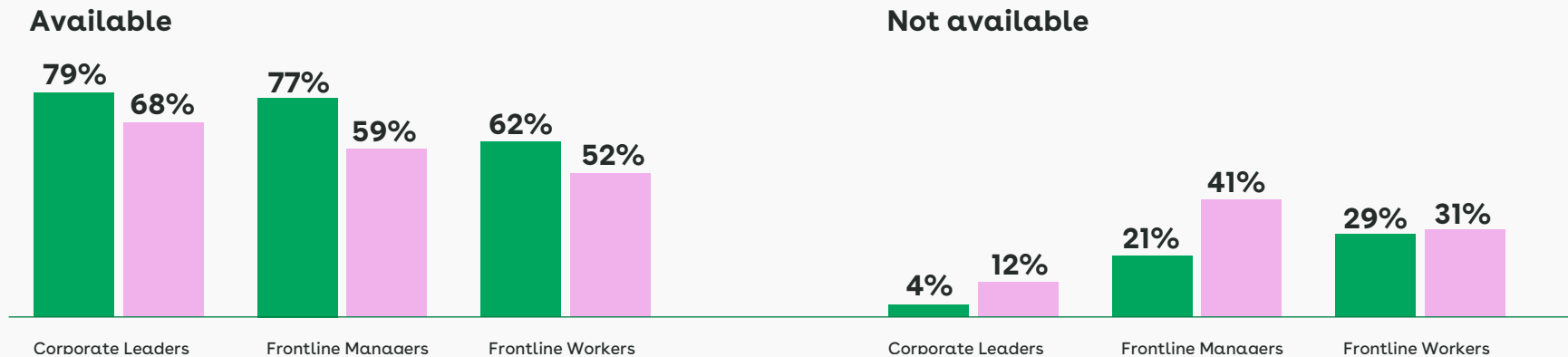
43%

of retail workers say adequate training and upskilling is one of the top drivers of success and happiness at work, but **31% of workers don't have access to it**

Comparing perceptions of the availability of adequate training and upskilling to frontline employees

🟩 All respondents
🟪 Retail respondents

Available

	Corporate Leaders	Frontline Managers	Frontline Workers
All respondents	79%	77%	62%
Retail respondents	68%	59%	52%

Not available

	Corporate Leaders	Frontline Managers	Frontline Workers
All respondents	4%	21%	29%
Retail respondents	12%	41%	31%

It might be time to rethink the definition of retail employee training. What does it include? It can't just be an annual compliance seminar. It also can't fall entirely to managers to onboard and train their associates. As retailers rethink this concept and how it lives within the frontline enablement ecosystem, the lines between traditional HR-focused L&D and more operationally focused, on-the-job training, upskilling, and knowledge transfer need to blur and create a new, holistic training ecosystem that's systematic and scalable to a retail workforce of thousands. Investing in this new frontline-focused approach to training can have myriad operational benefits.

Revisiting the approach to employee training can help work with, not against, the volatile nature of retail. For example, with the industry's high turnover rates (even at the best of times), reimagining onboarding programs to embrace automated, trigger-based systems can reduce the managerial load and improve consistency across locations and regions.

Upskilling is another potentially untapped opportunity for retail organizations looking to engage, empower, and enable associates. During periods of heightened turnover, retailers can sometimes see upskilling as a potential negative ROI, with the fear that too much investment in associates will be wasted when they move on. However, upskilling provides two strong benefits, particularly during labor shortages.

Upskilling protects against manager turnover

With a strong burnout risk, retail managers are also at a higher risk of turnover and present a higher cost to replace. With a steady stream of upward growth, there's less operational disruption when managers move on or up – or even need to focus their attention on a crisis or time-sensitive task – because there are associates ready to carry some or all of the managerial load.

Upskilling builds loyalty among top performers

Adequate training and upskilling was among the top three contributors to frontline happiness and success. However, only 43% of associates feel optimistic about their career prospects. Providing upskilling opportunities, particularly if paired with the potential for real upward opportunities (including title and compensation), can actually mitigate turnover and build long-term relationships, particularly with hard-to-replace top performers.

A critical part of this new approach to frontline training is having the right technology in place. Luckily, associates and managers are open to it. 48% of retail frontline respondents would like to use technology to help address the lack of employee training – it was ranked the highest among problems that they believe technology can solve for.

"A critical part of this new approach to frontline training is having the right technology in place. Luckily, the frontline is open to it."

This presents an exciting opportunity for retail organizations to review and revitalize their training programs by recognizing the operational value of embedding them directly into the flow of work, rather than keeping them separate. Technology can help operationalize knowledge transfer and ensure associates are aware of and are capitalizing on the training and upskilling opportunities available to them.

48%
of retail frontline respondents want to use technology to improve employee training

Outlook is positive, but guarded
(especially at the frontline level)

What does the future hold? Sentiments around the past year were somewhat aligned among retail respondents: Corporate leaders, frontline managers, and associates all agree that the past year was a struggle, though burnout and risk of turnover was more prevalent with frontline respondents.

———————

And while the full Deskless Report found a disconnect between corporate and frontline respondents on the future of their industries – with 74% of corporate respondents versus 54% of workers optimistic about the future – when we look specifically at retail, that outlook is more aligned across all respondents, with 64% of leaders, 65% of managers and 55% of associates feeling optimistic about the future of retail. Though we do still see a significant drop in optimism at the frontline worker level, as well as higher instances of turnover risk.

The cause of this discrepancy might be who is shaping the future. As we've already established, there's a misalignment on the success factors workers need to do their job versus what they have access to, as the chart on the following page illustrates.

And it's not all about compensation. For example, while empathetic leadership was ranked among the top five factors contributing to retail worker happiness and success, it's ranked close to the bottom of the list for what's actually available.

Agreement with outlook statements

Legend: Corporate (green), Managers (pink), Workers (purple)

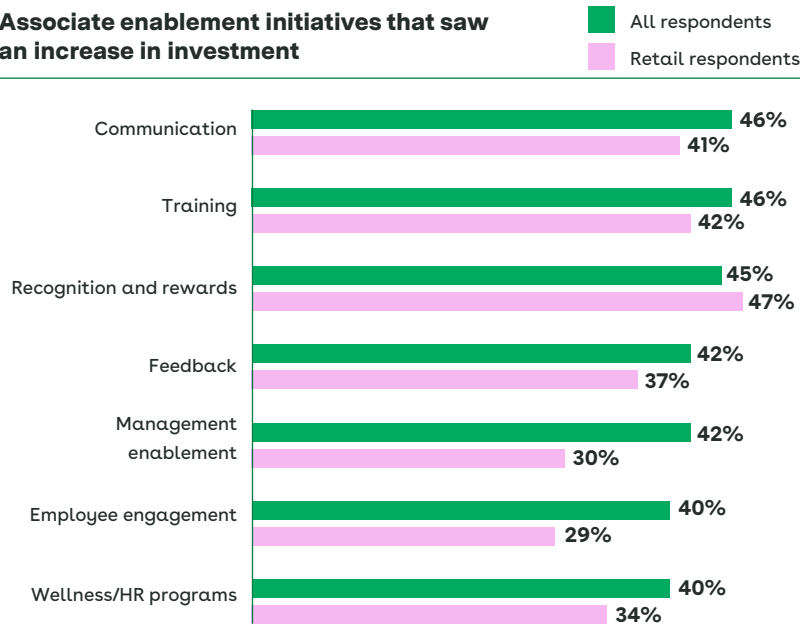| Statement	Corporate	Managers	Workers
I feel optimistic about the future of my industry	64%	65%	55%
I feel optimistic about my career prospects	51%	54%	43%
The last twelve months at my job have been especially challenging	60%	61%	50%
My industry struggled over the last year	55%	41%	38%
I am feeling burned out on a daily basis	36%	54%	42%
I am considering leaving my current job	30%	39%	40%

Success factors ranked by retail frontline need

Success factors ranked by availability (or planned availability)

Need	#	Availability
Equitable compensation	1	Adequate technology and tools
A strong employee community	2	A strong employee community
Recognition	3	Perks (e.g., free coffee, free food)
Empathetic leadership	4	Recognition
Adequate training and upskilling	5	Strong feedback loops
Clear communication from head office	6	Adequate training and upskilling
1:1 support from frontline managers	7	Clear communication from head office
Perks (e.g., free coffee, free food)	8	Clear understanding of company values and vision
Adequate technology and tools	9	1:1 support from frontline managers
Clear understanding of company values and vision	10	Equitable compensation
Strong feedback loops	11	Empathetic leadership
Access to PPE and other safety equipment	12	Access to PPE and other safety equipment

When we look at investment, we see some alignment between associates' needs and what corporate leaders plan to give them, though retail investment lags behind overall findings. Recognition saw the highest instance of investment increasing annually, followed by training and communication.

Associate enablement initiatives that saw an increase in investment

■ All respondents
■ Retail respondents

Initiative	All respondents	Retail respondents
Communication	46%	41%
Training	46%	42%
Recognition and rewards	45%	47%
Feedback	42%	37%
Management enablement	42%	30%
Employee engagement	40%	29%
Wellness/HR programs	40%	34%

Frontline enablement technology is poised to play a pivotal role in these investments. Though, again, we see workers are slightly more guarded. While 77% of corporate leaders believe that investing in new technologies for frontline workers improves the overall success of their organization, only 61% of associates agreed.

77 %
of corporate leaders

72 %
of frontline managers

61 %
of retail workers

believe that investing in new technologies for associates improves the overall success of their organization

Part of the reason for a more guarded sentiment from associates is a current lack of access to this technology, which was especially strong in retail, and was felt strongly on the frontline. While 62% of retail corporate leaders feel their company invests in new technologies for frontline workers, only 37% of associates agreed. Such a low response could be due to a number of factors, but one may be training. Only 31% of frontline retail respondents believe that they are trained on new technologies, but 66% (more than double) of the corporate respondents make the same claim. Furthermore, as we've already explored, associates are unsure of how technology can solve some of the biggest challenges disrupting their day-to-day work, like understaffing and burnout.

This brings us back to the question, "What is technology?" Here, we return to the idea of frontline enablement as a new framework for talking about technology for retail workforces.

> **"Technology can either empower workers or replace them. Workers might not be as optimistic about technology if their definition of the term focuses on automation, AI, and other optimization tools that they see as threats to their livelihood and stability."**

And because technology investment has traditionally been approached from the corporate point of view, focusing on technologies that drive customer experience or operational improvements without much frontline involvement, it's no surprise that workers would focus on this definition. By shifting the definition over to the concept of frontline enablement, associates may start to see technology as more so working to address their needs, as described by them directly, which in turn leads to the kinds of improvements the organization is seeking. They then may become more open to adopting and engaging with new technology. As a part of that process, though, retail organizations will need to be willing to invest in frontline enablement. In the coming years, we'll see a strong gap emerge between the retailers willing to embrace this new approach to frontline work – and those that do not.

62%

of corporate retail leaders believe their organization invests in new technologies for frontline workers, while only **37% of retail workers** agree

Final thoughts

"You can't build an employee experience deserving of exceptional people if you don't understand what they really do every day."

Does the job deserve the worker?

Every employer must ask this question if they hope to attract and retain great workers. This is especially true on the frontline, where employees have long been taken for granted. You can't rely on an unlimited pool of applicants to overcome 150% turnover anymore. People have more opportunities than ever thanks to low unemployment, remote work and the gig economy. If they don't see value in a job, they'll walk away without a second thought, and your customer experience will suffer.

The good news is that deskless workers are telling you exactly what it will take to keep them. They want to be kept up-to-speed with what's going on in their workplace, no matter where or when they work. They want easy access to tools that will help them do their jobs more effectively. Most of all, they want to feel heard and play active roles in helping the business be successful. That's not too much to ask from the people who do the heavy lifting, right?

I hope the insights within this report empower you to craft an employee experience that boosts people's confidence in their ability to do good work, restores a sense of fun and community to the workplace and makes deskless employees proud to represent your brand.

If you're looking for a good place to start, I have a suggestion. Get out from behind the desk, put on the uniform and try to do the job yourself. During my 10 years with The Walt Disney Company, I got back in costume and worked alongside the frontline cast as much as possible. It was a great way to establish credibility, build trust and – most importantly - understand what really happens within the operation. After all, you can't build an employee experience deserving of exceptional people if you don't understand what they really do every day.

JD Dillon
Chief Learning Architect
Axonify

Deskless Report Methodology

Corporate respondents

268 U.S. leaders polled

Title	
Chief Human Officer	20%
Chief Human Resource Officer	7%
Vice President (EVP, SVP, VP)	7%
Senior Director or Director	17%
Senior Manager or Manager	49%

Industry	
Retail	20%
Hospitality	20%
Manufacturing	20%
Foodservice	20%
Facilities Management	20%

Functional area	
Operations	51%
Marketing/communication	5%
HR/recruiting	26%
Customer/guest experience	18%

Age	
<20	1%
20-30	13%
31-40	34%
41-50	26%
51-60	16%
>60	10%

Gender	
Male	49%
Female	50%
Non binary	1%

Frontline respondents

1018 U.S. frontline workers and managers polled
6 frontline managers interviewed

Frontline managers	38%
Frontline workers	62%

Industry	
Retail	20%
Hospitality	20%
Manufacturing	20%
Foodservice	20%
Facilities Management	20%

Age	
<20	3%
20-30	24%
31-40	29%
41-50	21%
51-60	15%
>60	8%

Gender	
Male	37%
Female	62%
Non binary	1%

About Deskless

Deskless is a research hub and community created specifically for organizational leaders responsible for deskless and frontline employees, brought to you by Axonify.

About Axonify

Axonify gets frontline employees ready for anything with a training and communications solution that delivers. Why does it work so well? Because the experience is fun, fast, personalized and designed to make critical information stick. And employees love it—83% of users log in 2-3 times a week, which translates into meaningful behavior change that drives business results.

More than 200 customers in 155+ countries around the world, including Walmart, Kroger, Levi's and Merck, trust Axonify to fuel their people's performance to keep pace with their business. Founded in 2011, Axonify is headquartered in Waterloo, Canada.

For more information, please visit axonify.com

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