ENGAGING THE DESKLESS WORKFORCE

A white paper for communications professionals

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Non-desk, or deskless, workers are no new phenomenon. Consider, for a moment, farmers, mail carriers, healthcare providers, retail associates, subcontractors, and others. A majority of the world has worked this way for centuries, yet this essential portion of the global workforce is often overlooked during the development, implementation, and measurement of corporate communications initiatives. Without making a conscious effort to engage and communicate with this crucial population of employees, organizations risk a disengaged and uninformed workforce, which can lead to a negative impact on productivity, customer satisfaction, and profitability.

Since the dawn of the Information Age (or Digital Age), organizations have relied on email to communicate top-down messages to staff. Although this medium may be effective for a portion of the workforce, its efficacy is impaired when it comes to communicating with frontline, deskless workers. This white paper will address the communication challenges surrounding the deskless workforce and suggest solutions that organizations can use to reach all their employees in a way that is meaningful and efficient.

KEYWORDS: Non-desk workers, deskless workforce, internal communications, corporate communications, employee engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the world does not work at a desk. In fact, nearly 80% of the workforce, equating to 2.7 billion employees across the globe, is deskless (The Rise of, 2018). For purposes of this white paper, deskless employees are defined as employees who do not require a desk to fulfill their job responsibilities. Because deskless workers are (1) typically not in an office space, (2) do not have regular access to computers or email, (3) experience limited contact with leadership, and (4) are not as exposed to the mission, vision, and values of a company as often as deskbound employees (Burkard & Craven, 2019), engaging them can be challenging.
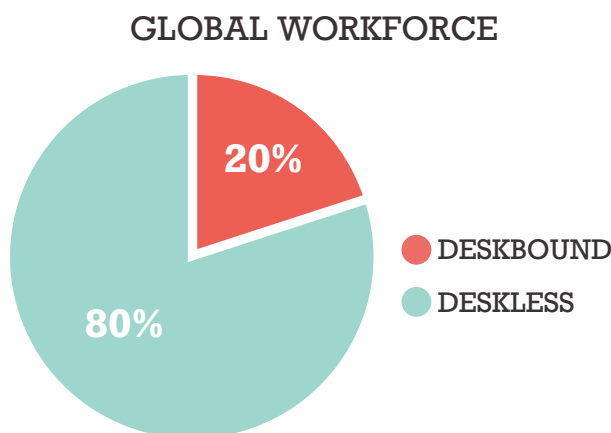
This white paper addresses the challenges organizations face in engaging and communicating with this vital and growing workforce.
Also in this white paper are six recommendations for engaging the deskless workforce, including:

1. Utilize mobile technology
2. Adopt smartphone applications
3. Make it a game
4. Keep it simple with print
5. Empower direct supervisors
6. Enlist the support of senior leadership

Additionally, this white paper will offer some guidance for selecting appropriate strategies from the above recommendations.

GLOBAL WORKFORCE

- 20%
- 80%
- DESKBOUND
- DESKLESS

Figure 1. *Breakdown of the Global Workforce*

BACKGROUND

Most frequently employed in the agriculture, education, healthcare, retail, hospitality, manufacturing, transportation, and construction industries, deskless workers are not new to the global workforce (The Rise of, 2018). This population has long been at the forefront of industry, yet corporate communications professionals seem to increasingly prioritize engaging and communicating with their deskbound counterparts.

Communicating with every employee is important, but communicating with deskless employees is arguably the most essential to business success. These employees are often on the frontlines of an organization, which makes them ambassadors for that organization's brand and, therefore, responsible for delivering (or dismantling) that organization's brand promise. Accordingly, when these employees are informed, engaged, and valued, they are better equipped to deliver a stellar customer experience.

So why, then, do organizations so often ignore this key employee population? And why is it so hard to communicate with them? Perhaps the most pressing cause is that business professionals have come to rely too much on email in recent years, a tool to which deskless employees have limited access. After all, email is the "most pervasive form of communication in the business world" today (Radicati, 2018). Although email can be an effective tool for deskbound workers, reserving company-wide communications for email can leave deskless employees in the dark.

Armed with this knowledge and the following toolkit, employers can better reach this important segment of their workforce.

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utilize mobile technology

Just as mobile technology has dramatically changed consumerism, so has it altered the nature of the workforce. Over the last decade, people have become accustomed to using their mobile devices for nearly everything: banking, shopping, entertainment, travel planning, and more. So, then, it makes sense that this mobile phone convenience should trickle into other aspects of everyday living, like the workplace.

> *"The bottom line is that mobile capabilities are making our leaves easier outside of work and could be having the same huge impact for improving our experience at work"* (Chambers, 2015).

Experts agree that mobile applications are a critical tool for reaching deskless workers, citing the ability for deskless employees to consume information when and where it is most convenient for them (Kamon, 2016). This demand for instant, interactive information lends itself well to mobile technology.

The most straightforward use of mobile technology is text messaging. Both Tsui (2017) and Richardson (2017) recommend utilizing text message alerts to reach deskless workers. This can be an effective tool because it is highly likely that employees will at least see the message, which may not be the case for email. Call-in numbers to hear recorded voice messages from senior leadership are also an effective use of mobile technology (Silberman, 2015).

TAKEAWAY: Text messages, alerts, or call-in numbers with pre-recorded messages are a great way to reach deskless employees through their mobile phones.

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adopt smartphone apps

Drawing on the trend of instant access to information, employer-specific applications and mobile-friendly intranets are gaining popularity. This type of communication and engagement tool is effective for both deskless and deskbound workers alike because it allows for what experts refer to as "microlearning." Gurchiek (2017) explains that information is more impactful when it delivered in short bursts and available at the point of need.

| internal comms | **47%** |
| satisfaction | **23%** |

Figure 2. *Increase in Internal Communication and Employee Satisfaction after Implementing Mobile Apps.*

Adding to this explanation, Duvenet & Whelan (2017) further describe microlearning as a demand-based and participant-driven approach

to communicating with deskless employees. Therefore, when thinking about what messages to include in a deskless employee communication strategy, it is critical to keep the concept of microlearning in mind and use mobile applications that offer an ability to customize information for the end-user, curate information libraries, and provide instant access to critical information. Additionally, companies who use employee apps report a 47% improvement in internal communications and a 23% increase in employee satisfaction (Hall, 2018).

TAKEAWAY: Smartphone applications allow for immediate access to important information. When using mobile apps for employee communication and engagement, consider how to implement a microlearning strategy.

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make it a game

Gamification, which is the use of gaming mechanics in non-game contexts like the workplace, is an effective strategy for engaging deskless employees. Gamification is especially beneficial in training and teaching settings, upon initial hire, and in times of organizational change (Dutton, 2015; DuVernet & Popp, 2014). Examples of gamification include point systems, progress bars, badges, and leaderboard rankings.

Another use of gamification is recognizing deskless employees for the work that they do and how their role fits into the organization's mission, vision, and values, which is a key component of deskless employee engagement. Burkard, Craven (2019), and Baskin (2018) explain that recognizing these employees for their efforts helps them understand how their job responsibilities contribute to company goals.

Recognition is especially meaningful to deskless employees who may feel

80% Workers who believe gamification is more engaging.

50% Increase in productivity as a result of workplace gamification.

60% Improvement in employee engagement because of gamification.

Figure 3. *Workplace Gamification Trends* (Parr, 2019).

ignored by leadership or corporate. Other strategies for recognition include awarding bonuses for helping the company achieve key milestones, spotlighting deskless workers in corporate publications (or on the mobile app or intranet), and implementing nomination programs that highlight excellent performance.

TAKEAWAY: Gamification is still fairly new in the workplace, but research shows it is highly effective for teaching, retention, and engagement.

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keep it simple with print

Not all communication with deskless employees has to be virtual. Printed materials, such as breakroom posters, table tents, mirror clings, brochures, and direct mail pieces are also a great way to communicate with deskless employees. Because printed materials, although tried-and-true, are a lesser-used medium in today's workplace, print can often make a strong impression on employees (Snell, 2012).

Printed materials, like a company magazine or newsletter, can also create a sense of pride in deskless employees, especially when those print pieces highlight their important contribution to the company's success (Burns, 2012). Print is also highly shareable outside the organization, allowing deskless employees to share their pride with their friends and family. However, for this reason, it is important to carefully consider the information that makes it to print. Heritage pieces and materials that describe and celebrate corporate culture are excellent choices for print.

TAKEAWAY: Print isn't dead, but it is better suited for cultural messages and employee recognition.

empower direct supervisors

Direct supervisors and managers of deskless workers are critical pieces of the corporate communications puzzle. Mishra, Boynton, and Mishra (2014) found that direct communication with managers improves employee motivation and that employees want to hear important information from those who manage them directly.

This approach may require additional communications training for supervisors or providing them with communications toolkits, but these supervisors and managers can act as effective communication channels because they can help disseminate information in a way that is useful and relevant to the deskless employees that report to them (Tsui, 2017).

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Cascading information to deskless employees is not without its challenges, however. Not all managers are created equal, and some may be better at communicating with their teams than others. Different communication styles may present issues with the timing, consistency, and thoroughness of communication, which may leave some messages lost in translation (Baskin, 2012).

To overcome this, consider developing resources to make cascading important information as simple as possible. Making this process easier for managers enhances the consistency of the message throughout the organization and the likelihood that they will deliver the messages appropriately.

TAKEAWAY: Managers and supervisors can make a big impact on deskless employee communication, but only if they are armed with the proper tools.

enlist the support of senior leadership

Deskless workers who are on the frontlines of an organization do not typically interact with C-level leadership. This is an unfortunate trend because it limits communication between crucial decision-makers and those who are in the trenches of an organization's mission, vision, and values every day.

72%
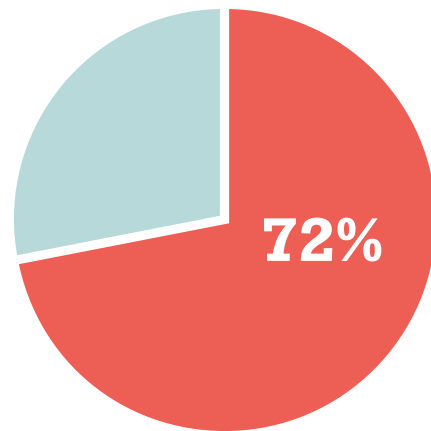
Percent of employees who say hearing from the C-suite is important to them.

Figure 4. *Employees Value Hearing Directly from Leadership.*

Communication directly from the C-suite matters because 72% of deskless employees say hearing from corporate

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is important to them (especially when the topic is change management or the company vision), and a lack of communication from leadership translates to a lack of respect for the role deskless workers play in the organization (Baskin, 2012).

To increase not only top-down communication but also bottom-up communication between the C-suite and the deskless workforce, Adelman (2012) and Baskin (2018) suggest holding regular town halls and focus groups, participating in "rounding" or site visits, and conducting all-staff meetings that are specific to the deskless workforce. Based on the breadth and depth of the organization, some of these tactics may be more feasible than others, but experts agree that the visibility and approachability of senior leadership are critical for engaging deskless workers and promoting two-way communication.

Mishra, Boynton, and Mishra (2014) also emphasize the importance of face time with the C-suite, especially in times of organizational uncertainty

or when messages are complex. Like the appeal of mobile applications, this strategy allows immediate access to critical information and the opportunity to quickly clarify concerns and questions while controlling the narrative in real-time.

Face-to-face meetings with senior leadership are also important for establishing a sense of community within an organization, and an increase in face-to-face communication with leadership has a positive effect on job satisfaction, information clarity, and perception of leader effectiveness (Braun et al., 2019; Stein, 2006).

TAKEAWAY: Senior leadership must be involved in engaging and communicating with deskless employees. A lack of involvement shows a lack of respect.

TROUBLESHOOTING: HOW TO SELECT APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

Although decades of research have found proven ways to communicate with employees, it is not easy to truly predict the preferred channels of communication for deskless employees without organization-specific research. Kamon (2016) especially emphasizes the importance of not relying on secondary research to drive an employee communications plan, instead suggesting employee surveys and focus groups to identify which communication channels would be most effective for a specific employee population.

Like Kamon (2016), Richardson (2017) also recommends employee surveys, electronic submission boxes, and focus groups (especially for large organizations). However, smaller organizations may benefit from one-on-one conversations with deskless employees to identify their needs and how to best meet them.

It is also important to choose channels that allow for two-way communication. Two-way communication is essential for deskless employees, and feedback must be a regular part of working with this employee population (Richardson, 2017; Adelman, 2012). Using communications channels that allow for feedback not only encourages meaningful engagement but also the ability to assess knowledge gaps (Krishnamurthy, 2018; Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014).

1. ASSESS
2. EDUCATE
3. ACT

Kamon (2016) emphasizes this theme further by introducing an "Assess, Educate, Act" approach. By choosing channels with two-way communication

TROUBLESHOOTING: HOW TO SELECT APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

capabilities, organizations can first assess an employee's knowledge of specific information, educate them based on their current knowledge levels while preventing information overload, and then equip employees to act appropriately based on the messages they receive.

Finally, it is important to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to deskless employee communication and engagement. It is critical to

select several different channels of communication to create multiple touchpoints between the employee and the organization they work for. Some organizations may have subgroups of deskless employees. In that case, it is especially important to choose different communication channels. Instead of using a shotgun approach to send out mass communications, consider a rifle approach to direct specific messages to the most appropriate audiences.

CONCLUSION

Despite being one of the largest groups in the global workforce, deskless workers are often left out of employee communications strategies. Fortunately, there are several tactics employers can use to engage them and communicate effectively with them. Research finds the most compelling approaches for engaging and communicating with deskless workers include utilizing mobile technology (such as text messaging platforms), developing a smartphone app or mobile-friendly intranet, employing gaming mechanics to corporate communications functions, using tried and true print media, empowering managers and supervisors to be communications liaisons for their direct deskless reports, and enlisting the support of senior leadership to increase face-to-face interactions between C-suite personnel and frontline staff.

There is no silver bullet solution for how to communicate with and e, but by conducting organization-specific research, providing channels that offer two-way communication capabilities, and ultimately, making an effort to focus on strategies that are specific to deskless workers, employers can successfully engage their deskless workforce.

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