Drive Employee Experience for Frontline Workers Using HR Technology

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The COVID-19 pandemic has increased pressures on frontline workers, increasing retention and engagement challenges. Applications and software engineering leaders must examine how best to use technology to improve the experience of these workers and to help reduce attrition.

Overview

Key Findings

- Approximately 40% of all employees are considering leaving their jobs within the next year.

- Frontline workers have borne the brunt of COVID-19 so may feature strongly in this “great resignation,” leaving organizations with the expensive and time-consuming job of recruiting replacements.

- Many stakeholders are responsible for the employee experience, including IT, HR and operations.

- A one-size-fits-all approach to employee experience won't work because organizational cultures, existing technologies and demographics differ, as do their sizes and industries.

- Because frontline workers often do not have the same level of access to technology as office workers, organizations must deliver experiences to these workers in a different way.

Recommendations

Applications and software engineering leaders responsible for transforming human capital management technology:
Introduction

More than 40% of global workers are considering leaving their employer in 2021.\(^1\) Healthcare and other frontline workers could feature strongly in this “great resignation” because the COVID-19 pandemic has placed huge additional stress on them. Replacing staff is costly. Research\(^2\) has estimated that it costs up to:

- $4,000 to replace an hourly store worker
- $21,000 to replace a call-center worker
- $23,000 to replace a registered nurse
- $34,000 to replace a grocery store manager
- $66,000 to replace a physician

Of course, cost is not the only reason organizations should work to minimize staff turnover. Employers have a duty of care to their employees and should strive to reduce the pressures on staff that can cause them to resign. One way of reducing staff attrition is by improving the employee experience, which is made up of workplace and personal experiences.
Examples of workplace experiences include the physical work environment (such as a hospital), the technology and systems employees use during their work, and the relationships they develop with, for example, colleagues, customers and patients.

For frontline workers, the workplace influence remains a defining feature of employee experience because few of these employees can work from home.

Personal experiences involve the influence of employment on the worker’s personal life. For example, the extent to which work infringes on the time an employee has to spend with family outside of normal working hours. Similarly, personal experiences may influence the employee’s work life, when for example a child is sick and they must take the day off. In this way, we see that personal and life influences have a mutual intersecting impact.

As an applications or software engineering leader, you can reduce the turnover of frontline workers by implementing technology designed to enhance the employee experience (see Figure 1). Experience technology aims to satisfy the complete experience needs of employees. Examples of this technology include applications to support employee well-being, recognize and reward achievement, deliver social interactions, and capture the voice of the employee. This research describes how to implement and use employee experience technology.
Figure 1. Employee Experience Technology for Frontline Workers

**Analysis**

**Identify Where You Need to Improve the Employee Experience**

If your organization continues to operate as it has always operated, it may be unable to adapt as conditions change. Frontline workers could become more stressed and unhappy, and the result could be significant increases in staff turnover and/or unexpected absence. This is where experience technology comes in. Much of it is completely new, so it’s not a case of fixing something that’s broken — it’s more about innovating.

Start by examining the answers to the following questions:

- What's important to your organization?
- What's important to your organization's frontline workers? (Use existing employee survey data to identify common needs. You may also need to conduct surveys and a voice-of-the-employee program to answer this question).
Once you’ve analyzed this information, assess to what extent you’re delivering what’s important. Engage with your frontline workers to understand the opportunities to improve their experience. Assess the extent to which employees feel they can meet the pressures of their work with their existing tools and processes.

You need to think big. Just looking at the physical workplace, or even the digital workplace, isn’t enough. For example, examine how the nature of work affects employees’ personal lives. Identify both the positive and negative impacts through engagement with your employees, using employee surveys/voice-of-the-employee and exit interviews. Examine how you can exploit the opportunities to improve the employee experience and remove or reduce any negative impacts that work has on employees’ personal lives. See what you can do to make frontline workers resilient, and able to adapt and withstand increased pressure. Remember that happy and healthy employees tend to work harder.

The working environment for many frontline workers is often more hazardous than an office environment, so your organization must provide even more technology and processes to safeguard them. Failing to provide adequate health and safety to this population of workers may come with higher stakes than for office workers.

You should study examples of the use of new technology relevant to your organization. Possible examples include:

1. **Wearable devices that measure anxiety**: These devices can be configured to trigger an intervention when a worker experiences moderate or high levels of stress. Such interventions can reduce overall anxiety, and help to prevent burnout, while potentially improving work performance and quality. Such apps could be valuable in the healthcare sector and for other frontline workers such as those in grocery retail, ground transport and the public sector.

2. **Apps designed to make employment more accessible for workers who are neurodiverse**: Typically, such technology is based on an app that connects the worker with a mentor or buddy in the event that the worker needs support or advice. Evaluate such technology options that deliver desired forms of employee experience for different types of frontline workers.

Has turnover of your frontline workers increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began?

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Use such examples as inspiration. They may be the catalyst to start an employee experience initiative. You may find that you need a big change. For example, your organization may have a “no mobile phones at work” policy, but you may decide that apps on a mobile phone are the best way to deliver systems to your frontline workers.

Forge Partnerships With Other Business Leaders

The average frontline worker uses applications that fall under several categories:

- Operations (such as task management, order fulfillment and patient information systems).
- HR administration (such as payroll and benefits administration).
- Workforce management (such as time and attendance, absence management and scheduling).
- Talent management (such as compliance training, performance appraisals and competency management).

Some functions may span multiple categories of applications. In such cases, it can be unclear who the business owner is, which can lead to underinvestment, poor user experience and suboptimal system performance. Frontline workers may regularly interact with many different systems, which can create tension in the user experience. Don’t waste time trying to decide who “owns” the employee experience, whether it’s IT, HR, operations or another function. We all own the employee experience. Accept that this is an initiative with shared ownership and multiple stakeholders, and strive to make other business leaders accept this notion.

Also, don’t try to improve the employee experience alone. Work to forge purposeful partnerships with other business leaders to cement that shared ownership and to propel the initiative forward.

Build on the Systems Your Frontline Workers Use Most Often

Employee experience is the culmination of many different aspects related to work, from the physical workplace, to the digital workplace and beyond. Every organization is different. Organizations’ cultures, existing technologies and demographics differ, as do their sizes and industries. So, a one-size-fits-all approach won’t work with employee experience.
No universal employee experience platform exists. Employee experience initiatives covering multiple facets of experience and multiple worker types will require multiple systems. So, plan for a strategy of systems working together, rather than in siloed, one-off deployments.

When deciding how to deliver these systems, look at the systems already in regular use with your frontline workers. For example, your workers might be well-versed with a time and attendance or scheduling system, or an order fulfillment system. If you adapt and build on the systems your workers use most often, it will have a big impact on their employee experience. If you use these kinds of systems, it will lower the barriers for change management and will capitalize on your existing technology investments.

**Deliver a Solution That Every Frontline Worker Can Use**

User adoption is a stumbling block for an employee experience initiative. Not all workers will be able to use a particular application, either because they don’t know how to, don’t have access or it’s not practical to use the technology. And the initiative will deliver the intended results only if every employee can use a solution (usually composed of several applications) that can meet that worker’s needs. You must work to deliver an overarching solution that every employee can access.

Factor the following into the design process:

- Fits into the flow of work.
- Accessibility for visual, hearing, mobility impairments and neurodiverse workers.
- Varying degrees of technical aptitude in the workforce.
- Access to devices capable of running an experience technology application.

You should strive to give all your frontline workers access to whatever applications they need to best support their employee experience. Provide training, support and access to technology on demand. Think about your different types of workers. Some may need extra support, such as those with less experience with technology. You may need to provide entry-level IT courses for some workers, and basic training such as how to navigate apps on a smartphone.

Also, work to prevent another potential problem — “overadoption.” Ensure you don’t design a system that will distract employees. Design with balance in mind to ensure that you don’t overload workers with information and notifications.
Finally, seek and examine feedback from employees, and use this to make changes if necessary. If the feedback is positive, use it to justify further investment.

**Evidence**

This research is based on interactions with Gartner clients during inquiry calls and on engagement with vendors.

1. *The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work — Are We Ready?*, Microsoft.

2. As reported in Table 1 of *There Are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees*, Center for American Progress.


**Acronym Key and Glossary Terms**

| Frontline Worker | Frontline workers can be segmented into service and task workers. Service workers primarily spend their time performing client-facing activities. They typically represent the “face” of an organization to customers. Some examples of these roles are a delivery person or a retail salesperson. They need to consume information and to communicate transactional outcomes and client needs to others. Task workers primarily spend their time performing operational activities. They typically represent the “heart” of an organization. Some examples of these roles are a warehouse or manufacturing line worker. |

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