



A DISENFRANCHISED WORKFORCE

The distorted reality
threatening your business

Desk-Free Worker
Report 2025

oneAdvanced

Introduction

If cash is an organisation's oxygen, people are its lifeblood. And in many key sectors, the effectiveness of desk-free workers can be the difference between businesses booming or flatlining.



Yet, our exclusive research reveals a startling truth: there is a critical disconnect between the perceptions of management and the lived realities of the frontline workforce. This ultimately creates an abundance of unmet employee needs, which has a direct knock-on effect on your ability to manage risk, deliver exceptional customer experience, and drive revenue growth.

Using independent data gathered by a third-party partner, we have created the OneAdvanced Desk-Free Worker Report 2025, which analyses the contrasting perspectives of workers, middle managers, and executive leaders. It focuses on key factors, like what motivates desk-free employees and what is driving high staff attrition, while also assessing their views on aspects like pay, autonomy, communication, and workload.

When your employees are given the tools they need to thrive, it maximises the value they can generate for your business. Use our insights to help shape and refine your management strategies, in order to foster a more engaged and productive workforce.

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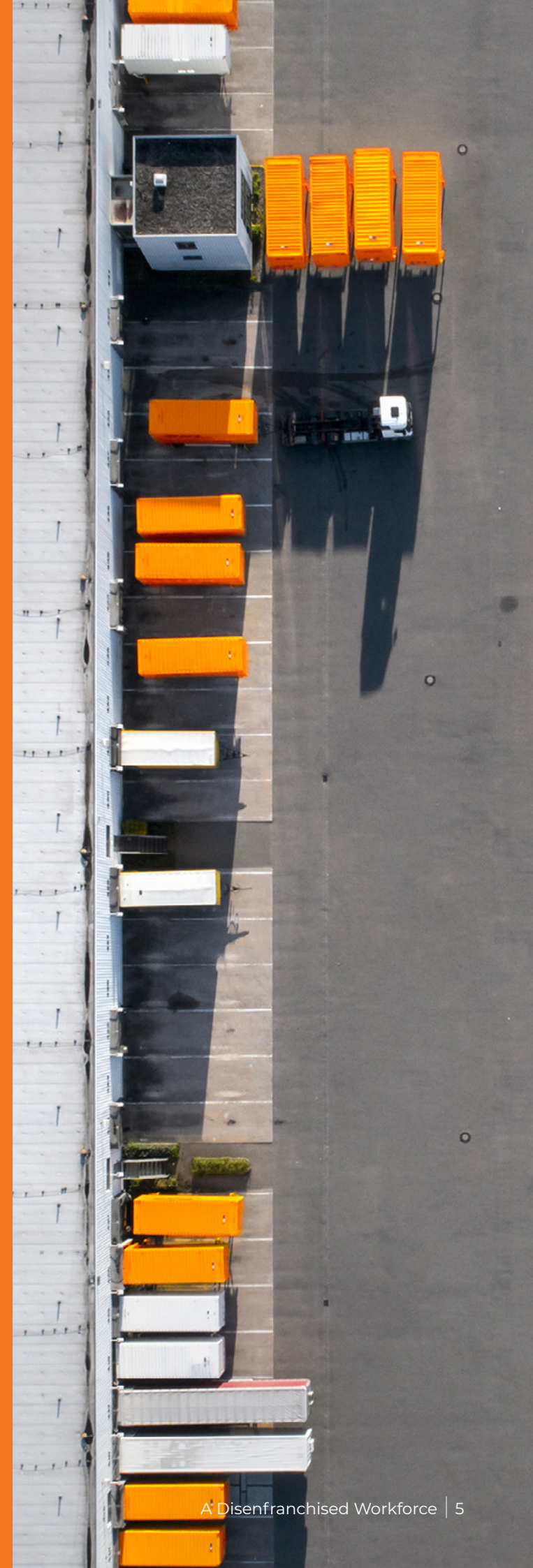
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Agentic Era with
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Anwen Robinson

SVP at OneAdvanced

Around 80% of the world's workers do not sit behind a desk. They perform critical tasks in industries including retail, passenger transport, distribution, logistics, social care, manufacturing, agriculture, estates management, hospitality, wholesale, warehousing, healthcare, and many more. The work itself is often low-paid, can be physically strenuous, may be shift-based and involve working unsocial hours, and is frequently undervalued by others.



Globally, as well as here in the UK, the desk-free workforce is indispensable for getting the job done, yet these employees often lack a voice, and the issues they have at work can be overlooked. This makes for an unsatisfying employee experience and has a significant negative impact on staff retention rates, driving up operational costs for the organisations that employ them.

There's a plethora of stats that can be found about the desk-based worker, around issues such as hybrid working, burnout, health & wellbeing, etc. But there has been a real data gap when it comes to insights about the UK's desk-free workforce. To gain a greater understanding, we commissioned a third-party expert, Research Without Barriers, to carry out an extensive survey encompassing over 500 desk-free employees, middle managers, and executive leaders (including members of the C-Suite and Director-level equivalents) in the second half of January 2025. Respondents from across the retail, wholesale, distribution, logistics, manufacturing, business services, and passenger transport sectors have helped us to uncover the stark reality of what is happening in these workplaces.





Our report explores the key issues faced by this critical workforce, including perceptions from both the worker and management regarding unfair pay, being overworked, feeling undervalued, and the ongoing struggle for clear communication and career progression opportunities.

The report also reveals a concerning gap between how desk-free workers view their employment experience and how corporate leaders perceive those same conditions. This disconnect doesn't just affect employee morale—it poses a tangible risk to key business metrics such as productivity, profitability, enterprise value, shareholder value, and customer outcomes. There are also notable differences in the perceptions of the most senior leaders – the executive leaders in our survey, and the middle managers, who, in many cases, have more direct daily contact with workers (and therefore a greater awareness of how they feel about their roles).

We have used these compelling stats to shape a comprehensive analysis of the systemic challenges, coupled with actionable recommendations to bridge this divide. By aligning business strategies with the needs of a disenfranchised workforce (and utilising the right technological tools for empowerment and efficiency), leaders have the opportunity to drive greater engagement, foster a deeper trust, and unlock their organisation's full operational potential.

The time to address these uncomfortable truths is now, because no organisation can afford to ignore the heartbeat of its processes—its people.

02

Who is the desk-free worker?

Looking at the many industry sectors that rely on desk-free employees it is immediately clear that there is no 'typical' worker due to the diverse nature of these roles.



We are referring to drivers and builders, warehouse operatives and machinists, train drivers and store assistants. In some cases, such as retail, the role is public-facing and customer service-led or requires working closely with service users (such as in health and social care settings).

Sometimes referred to as 'frontline workers', these are the people who roll up their sleeves to get the job done, often unseen in the background, performing a whole range of tasks such as packing boxes in warehouses, delivering goods, or driving passengers, and all serving as crucial cogs within the mechanism of their respective organisations.



Frontline Workers



The work itself is often shift-based, and many roles are part-time, or on zero-hours contracts

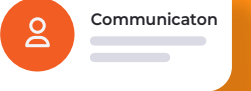
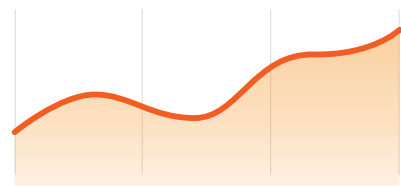
The reasons why someone chooses desk-free work can be as varied as the individuals themselves, including students using a temporary job to make ends meet, school leavers and others entering the workforce for the first time, for whom this work is a stepping stone while they seek a role with higher status, pay, or career prospects. Other desk-free workers may have hopes that their role will grow with them, providing them with a long-term career, while others are parents or adults with other family/domestic responsibilities, seeking flexibility and a living wage to support their loved ones.

It is not uncommon in the desk-free world for employees to work two or more jobs to make ends meet, particularly as the pay is low. There are also more experienced workers, some who are perhaps close to retirement and choose to stay in the workforce without too many progression ambitions. These individuals bring with them a wealth of experience. Desk-free roles can also attract people who have previously faced issues with gaining employment because of a lack of formal qualifications, missing education, previous periods out of the regular workforce due to chronic health issues, criminal convictions, and much more.

All these diverse 'types' are unified by low income, often being paid by the hour and sometimes remunerated on a weekly rather than monthly basis, making desk-free work a more hand to mouth existence than that of a salaried desk-based employee.

Sometimes referred to as 'frontline workers',

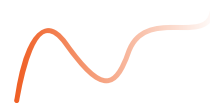
Career Growth



these are the people who roll up their sleeves to get the job done



Flexible working





The challenges faced by the frontline workforce do not only impact the workers themselves, they also correlate directly with overall business operations and outcomes. When employers find ways to drive greater engagement with staff, ensuring they feel valued and heard, this can have a positive impact on KPIs such as enterprise value, shareholder value, customer satisfaction, brand reputation, and more.

The issues faced by desk-free workers are sometimes shared by the middle managers they report to. These include store managers, warehouse managers, and factory managers, who play a key role as the bridge between frontline employees and executive leaders. Working alongside the desk-free workforce, sometimes performing some of the same tasks, or supervising and supporting the work of others, middle managers can find themselves being bogged down in the same day-to-day challenges—communication gaps, feeling undervalued, overworked, under-resourced, underpaid, and being dispensable. They may well recognise the impact these issues have on the engagement and commitment of their staff.

Unlike executive leaders who are often based in a distant office (and not privy to the prevailing sentiments), middle managers can see every scrambled fact, rumour, and feeling that permeates from the desk-free workforce. They are well placed to disseminate accurate and up to date information, dispelling myths, and have a key role in making sure any challenges are dealt with promptly, before they get out of hand and trigger walkouts.

90%

of executive leaders

Fair and timely pay

77%

of middle managers

say their workers are
paid fairly and on time

03

Headline stats



but only

57%

of **desk-free workers**
say this is the case

Headline stats

Staff retention



of desk-free workers

say increased pay and benefits would improve employee retention, compared to just 24% of executive leaders and 34% of middle managers who think this would help with keeping hold of their staff

Headline stats

Workload

42%

of **middle managers** say their employees have a manageable workload, with no issues around scheduling and resourcing

Compared to just

25%

of **desk-free workers** who say this is their experience



Headline stats

Employment rights bill

The majority of desk-free workers in our survey say they are pleased to see the end of zero-hour contracts in the UK under the Employment Rights Bill

50%

saying it will result in more commitment from their employer



37%

stating it will give them access to more benefits from day one

Headline stats

Communication

96%

of **executive leaders** believe their workers are made aware of important business updates/organisational changes

While only
58%

of **desk-free workers** say this is true



Headline stats

Autonomy

45% of executive leaders say their staff **have some flexibility around shifts/hours**, but only 24% of those within the desk-free workforce think this is the case

45%

of **executive leaders**

24%

of **desk-free workers**

04

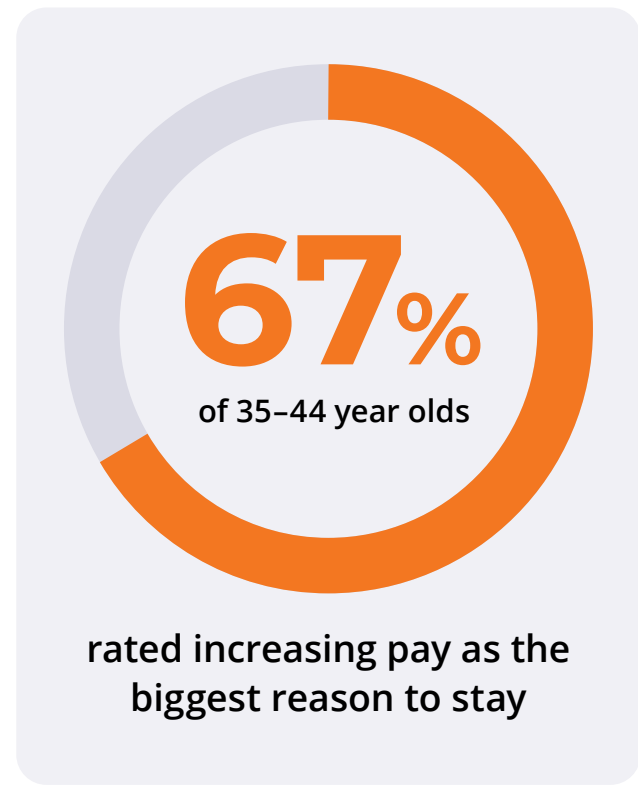
Disconnections

Our survey findings

Disconnections

Employee experience: Attracting and retaining talent

As we’ve touched upon, it’s often accepted that high staff attrition is an unavoidable occurrence across the desk-free workforce, one that leaders have come to expect and accept. The constant cycle of hiring is extremely costly for businesses and if leaders were to solve the root issue at hand, specifically operational inefficiencies and poor communication, then they could maintain a highly skilled and motivated workforce.



One of the first things to tackle in this realm is to establish what workers actually want and need from their jobs. This can then inform a well-designed and effective employee value proposition (EVP) for the workforce that helps employers attract, engage with, and retain the critical workers they need.

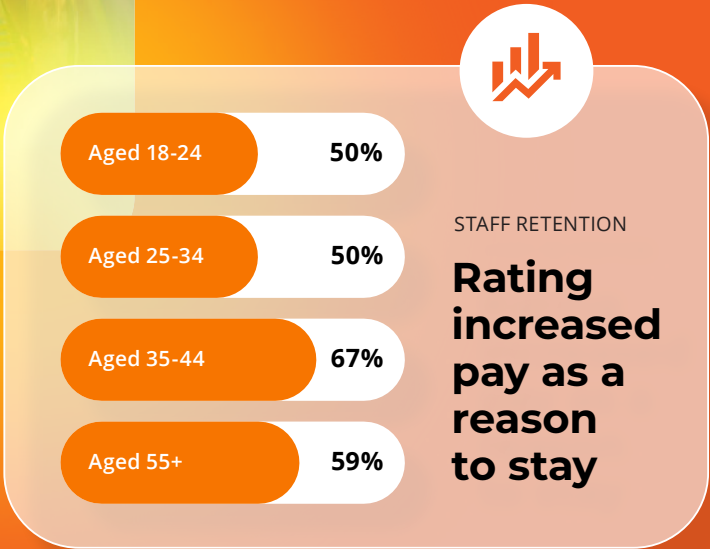
Money matters

There are many reasons why people choose to work, the most obvious being to support themselves (and those around them) financially. When asked what might help improve retention rates among desk-free workers, both the worker and leadership groups put increased pay and benefits in the number one position. What is apparent though, is the difference in degree to which each felt money mattered most, and the emphasis each group placed on the subsequent two or three motivating factors.



Looking at the age profile of respondents, increasing pay is rated as the biggest reason to stay by those in the 35-44-year-old bracket (67%). This may be because many in this age group are experiencing rapidly growing financial demands. It's possible these are the years when they're buying homes, having children, supporting their family, and striving to pay for holidays, hobbies, etc.

The next biggest emphasis on higher pay and benefits came from the desk-free workers aged 55+ (59%). We can speculate that this group may be gearing up for retirement and considering their final salary-based pension or are perhaps wanting to put some money aside while they still can. The youngest two groups, aged 18-24 and 25-34, had the lowest emphasis on increased pay, but even so, 50% of each age group respectively put this as their top recommendation to help improve staff retention.



56%

of desk-free workers tell us that increased pay and benefits would improve staff retention, compared to just 24% of executive leaders, and 34% of all middle managers in the survey

Pay is clearly important, but there are other factors at play. Much of the existing focus on employee motivation within companies centres around desk-based workers, suggesting that employers have failed to get to grips with what motivates their desk-free workforce (or have neglected them completely).

Our survey shows that while increased pay and benefits are most important, there are other aspects that can make a huge difference in helping to engage with the desk-free worker.



The role of autonomy

Much of the conversation around managing the desk-based/ office worker is about flexibility, particularly since the pandemic accelerated rates of remote and hybrid working.

While some desk-free workers might also be seeking some flexibility in relation to the shifts they work, they may be looking for more autonomy around the tasks they complete too. Very illuminating is the finding that suggests managers believe their employees have more flexibility than the actual desk-free workers say they do.

29% of desk-free workers in our survey tell us they have no autonomy at work, with no flexibility around the hours they work, or the activities they undertake. However, just 9% of executive leaders say this is the case. In fact, 45% of executive leaders say their workforce has some flexibility around schedule, while only 24% of desk-free workers say this is true in their experience.

There is variation across industries. Just 5% of desk-free workers in manufacturing say they have no autonomy at all, compared to a considerable 36% of those working in distribution, 33% in wholesale, and 32% in retail.



40%

of desk-free workers,
say they **must stick to set hours/shifts**, but
have some autonomy
around tasks

Diving into where the flexibility applies—to time or to tasks, the larger group, 40% of desk-free workers, say they must stick to set hours/ shifts, but have some autonomy around tasks. 24% say they have some flexibility around when they work, but have set tasks/targets to complete at work. This trend is mostly consistent through almost all the sectors we have surveyed, except for business services where it is flipped. 30% of desk-free workers in this sector have flexibility with working times but little autonomy over their tasks, while a larger proportion (50%) has more flexibility around the hours/times they work but very prescribed tasks and targets.

Appreciating the variety of jobs that fall into business services, we might conclude that there is more flexibility around working times and shifts because many workers are providing services on behalf of a supplier organisation, rather than being directly employed. This may mean that rosters and schedules can accommodate more flexibility in this area, while the tasks themselves are what the business services supplier is being specifically contracted for.

5%

of all desk-free workers in
our survey say they have a
lot of **autonomy** at work

Only 5% of all desk-free workers in our survey say they have a lot of autonomy at work, with flexibility over both the time they work and the targets/tasks they must focus on during the day. The figure is highest (14%) for those in distribution, while 0% of those in wholesale say this. This appears in direct contradiction to what management personnel in each of these sectors think, as 21% of managers working in the wholesale sector say their staff have this level of autonomy, while none of the managers of desk-free workers in distribution say they do.


Frontline staff aged 35-44 appear to care the least out of all the age groups about shift flexibility as a reason to stay in their job, with just 9% saying they want more flexibility with their shifts—less than half of the 22% of those aged over 55 who do. We might have expected the 35-44-year-olds to prioritise flexibility because of challenges such as childcare and other work-life priorities, but this doesn't seem to be the case.

Payday frequency

Another area where employers can offer more flexibility is in the frequency of pay. 40% of HR directors/CHROs, and 24% of general executive leaders say implementing more flexible payment options such as increased frequency of pay would help retain frontline employees.

However, the staff themselves disagree, with only 6% of desk-free workers highlighting this as an attractive solution to the attrition problem.

Having more flexible/frequent payment options does not matter at all to the 55+ age group (0%), although there may be a small incentive for some of the younger workers. 9% of the 18–24-year-olds and 10% of the 25–34-year-olds said this would be a positive change to reduce staff churn. The youngest workers are just starting out in the workplace, perhaps dealing with responsibilities such as paying rent and bills for the first time in their lives, which may lead to struggles with budgeting and making a monthly pay packet last. This is the classic hand-to-mouth existence that often characterises some of the frontline workforce, so it is intriguing to consider that frequent payment is not actually considered a big deal and is only of slight interest to the youngest workers.



**Flexible
payment
options
such as
increased
frequency
of pay**

Future focus

Besides achieving better pay and benefits, other factors that motivate employees may include feeling like they are doing something worthwhile—that benefits their local and/or wider community and planet (as well as themselves).



Many are motivated by a desire to challenge themselves, to learn new skills, use their own unique talents, to sometimes try new and scary things, and give themselves a chance to succeed. Others are motivated by recognition and the approval/validation of others. The mistake many leaders may be making is to assume the desk-free workforce only has an easy-come, easy-go approach to their jobs.

Almost one in five (19%) of the youngest group of desk-free workers, 18-24 years-old, tell us more opportunities for training and career development would make them want to stay in what they might currently perceive as a dead end job, compared to just 8% of the oldest group, 55+. The more experienced workers could perhaps be coming towards the end of their careers and may want to simply fulfil their roles without worrying about new challenges. But many younger employees will want to start building a career, and one that enables them to make some of their future aspirations come true.

25% of those in business services, and 20% in wholesale say that training and career development opportunities would be a factor in making them want to stay in their job

This view is not shared however by workers within passenger transport, with just 4% highlighting this—quite out of step with the perception of their managers. Managers in passenger transport give the highest percentage to this question—with 24% (compared to the 16% average for managers across all sectors) saying that more opportunities for promotions and career opportunities would help with retention. It appears that managers and desk-free workers in this particular sector would both benefit from laying cards on the table to establish what employees really want.

Key takeaway:

Having a reputation as one of the best payers in the sector might help attract frontline staff into your organisation, but not every business can afford to do this. There are other factors that help ensure workers become more engaged within their roles, such as being offered tangible and achievable career opportunities, training, or more autonomy over when they work and what they do during a shift. But making assumptions might result in investment going to the wrong places. Simple online employee surveys that employees can access via their own smartphones could produce more useful insights to guide decisions around an attractive EVP for desk-free workers.

Technology solutions:

Every business is different, and it pays dividends to seek out a tech-enabled workforce management strategy that's aligned to specific business objectives, driving positive cultural change and engagement with employees. Technology can also ensure accurate and timely payroll, secure record-keeping, and streamlined HR processes. With user-friendly tools for employee self-service, time-off management, and real-time visibility across teams, organisations can boost a sense of belonging, reduce their own administrative burden, and maintain a motivated workforce to drive high performance and reduce staff churn.

Disconnections

Operational efficiency: Improving productivity & collaboration

When managing a desk/office-based workforce, leaders have a variety of digital solutions at hand to help them communicate with employees, with intuitive scheduling and task allocation software, performance management, and productivity measurement tools. When managing the desk-free workforce, managers can implement real-time rostering solutions too, along with tools that align employee skills and experience with tasks. But none of this careful planning and management can be effective if communications between manager and employee are not functioning properly.

Communication is key

Ensuring that all the necessary information can be clearly and freely communicated to the desk-free workforce is crucial for a number of reasons. First of all, it ensures operational efficiency, so that workers understand what is required of them, have sight of their schedule and responsibilities, and can deliver against expectations. Secondly, effective communication fosters better engagement, ensuring that workers feel they are being kept in the loop, with the opportunity to feedback on concerns or ideas, giving them greater autonomy and control over which shifts to take, how to approach a particular task, and how they rate their own performance.

Our survey reveals a massive gulf between the level of communication that desk-free workers believe they are involved in, compared to what managers think about this. A large majority (96%) of executive leaders believe their staff are made aware of important business updates such as personnel changes, mergers, acquisitions, and more, while only 58% of the desk-free workers themselves say this is true. That is a significant disconnect and demonstrates one of the reasons these workers do not feel much of a connection with their organisations—they don't know what is going on.



80%

of all managers, including both executive leaders and middle managers, say the frontline workforce is made aware of overarching strategic objectives and ESG targets, **while only 53% of workers agree**

It can be difficult for staff to understand and work towards certain objectives and targets relating to things like reducing waste and energy consumption, when they don't know the specifics around why or how these things are being done.



90%

of the most senior leaders, those in the roles of chairman, CEO, and managing director, and 81% of all managers, say desk-free workers are made aware of personal performance expectations, and there are mechanisms in place to monitor this. In comparison, 67% of desk-free workers say this is true in their experience

It is impossible for them to deliver on expectations that are not communicated to them—as in this scenario it's not just a case of goalposts being moved, the goalposts aren't even visible.

The scale of the disconnection in relation to communications raises questions around the mechanisms being used in organisations that rely on desk-free workers. Indeed, both groups —employees and management, may be correct in their own experience. Managers may well be making information available using channels that are not easily accessible to their desk-free workforce, essentially undermining the point of sharing it at all.

Key takeaway:

Ensure workers understand expectations. One solution could be as simple as implementing a rigorously adhered-to briefing session at the start of every shift, ensuring that line managers share all pertinent information at the first opportunity, instead of hoping everyone hears through the grapevine. Physical noticeboards in the workplace and breakrooms can carry advertising for training and promotion opportunities within the organisation but they must be kept up to date if they are not to become 'wallpaper' that staff stop paying attention to. Businesses can also invest in technology that facilitates easily accessible information sharing via employees' smartphones, which is particularly helpful for communicating with employees working off-site, such as drivers, or those delivering business services at a customer's base.

Technology solutions:

Managing desk-free workers has traditionally been an admin-heavy task, made more complex as planned scheduling and rostering can be quickly thrown into chaos by unexpected absences or last-minute customer demands. These processes can be automated using technology that works in real-time, updating and allocating changes almost instantly. They can streamline scheduling, handle demand fluctuations, and automate task allocation, ensuring the right people with the right skills are assigned to the right roles, while accommodating holidays, absences, and shift swaps. Achieving optimised resource matching and route planning can result in improved productivity, reduced costs, and enhanced customer outcomes, through automated workflows and instant updates. Organisations can boost a sense of belonging, reduce their own administrative burden, and maintain a motivated workforce to drive high performance and reduce staff churn.

Disconnections

Mitigating risks: Strengthening compliance & resilience

Compliance with legislation is a core business concern for many organisations that employ desk-free workers. Specifically, those in the distribution, logistics, and wholesale sectors, as well as many in business services, passenger transport, and manufacturing will need to ensure that all driving licenses and specific operator qualifications are held by the appropriate workers, with all renewals kept up to date and recorded.

Other health and safety requirements, including first aid training, operation of fire and hazard drills, and more, must all be scrupulously managed so that the organisation is operating within the law, as well as remaining compliant for insurance purposes. Failure to do so could have disastrous financial, legal, and reputational consequences, aside from the risk to life.

A change in legislation

The Employment Rights Bill, passed in October 2024, introduces 28 significant reforms that will have an impact on many desk-free workers, as well as the organisations that employ them. The Bill will strengthen the rights for millions of

workers in the UK, protecting them from unfair practices and help keep people in jobs for longer. This is designed to assist employers by reducing recruitment costs, but some of the reforms may have little impact on frontline workers.

For example, the Bill will make flexible working the default where practical, a benefit that may not apply for many roles where staff are required to adhere to specific hours, such as retail opening hours, or required to fill unpopular overnight and weekend shifts.

Our survey shows that many employers are on board with the main objectives of the Bill, and as reputable businesses they want to support a positive company culture and working environment.

Qualifications



47%

of HR directors and CHROs, and 40% of all managers say their business welcomes the new legislation as it chimes with their company culture, built around mutual trust to get the job done and mutual respect

60%

of HR leaders and 40% of all managers tell us their business is planning to improve performance management and output measurement processes to ensure desk-free workers are delivering a fair return on the additional rights they will receive

Ending exploitation

With over 1 million people in the UK on zero hours contracts, the end of exploitative contracts is welcomed by many employees.

The majority of desk-free workers in our survey say they are pleased to see that these are coming to an end, with 50% specifying they are pleased as they want their employer to show more commitment to them, and 37% are happy because they will be able to access more benefits from day one, something that may have been a barrier to work. The Bill will outlaw previous fire and re-hire, and fire and replace practices, as well as protecting employees from unfair dismissal and

strengthening protections for pregnant workers and new mothers returning to the workplace.

In passenger transport, 46% of desk-free workers say they are pleased to see the end of zero hours contracts, compared to just 4% who say they want to keep them. The Bill will allow workers to stay on zero hours if they want to but also have the right to a guaranteed hours contract if they work regular hours over a defined period.

Only 11% of all workers in our survey say they don't want to lose zero hours, favouring these for the flexibility they provide, helping workers balance other commitments such as family and second jobs.



Implementation costs

But desk-free workers may not appreciate the cost implications of the Bill, perhaps because they are not close enough to the number crunching that goes on in the offices for those trying to balance the books.

More than half (52%) of senior financial leaders—Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) and Financial Directors (FDs), and 34% of all management respondents in our survey say their organisation relies on zero hours contracts to remain cost effective. They expect that the implementation of the Bill will mean they have to reduce staff numbers to cover the additional costs of employing staff.

Implementation of any new legislative requirement will necessitate an increase in resources – both financial and human, to prepare for, manage, and support the

changes. Just 8% of desk-free workers fear their employer is not geared up to manage the implementation of the Bill, representing half the number (16%) of managers in their organisations who fear this. CFOs and FDs, who are close to the numbers and know exactly what the impact of the wage bill and other responsibilities is on their budgets, are most aware of this consideration among the C-suite. A significant one-third (33%) of these senior financial leaders say they may not have the HR resources to support implementation of the Bill.

Management concerns around lack of HR resources to support the requirements of the Employment Rights Bill are highest among those that work in the wholesale sector (32%), followed by manufacturing (24%), and passenger transport (24%), with the lowest number worried about HR resources being those managers working in retail (11%).



A new barrier to work?

Under the new legislation, employees will have access to basic rights from day one, including paternity, parental, and bereavement leave, so employers will be making a bigger commitment to workers from the start of their employment. Covering the costs of these benefits may mean employers will exercise more caution about who they decide to employ.

Many are motivated by a desire to challenge themselves, to learn new skills, use their own unique talents, to sometimes try new and scary things, and give themselves a chance to succeed. Others are motivated by recognition and the approval/validation of others. The mistake many leaders may be making is to assume the desk-free workforce only has an easy-come, easy-go approach to their jobs.

25%

One quarter (25%) of leaders say they will hesitate more to take a chance on young or untried employees, varying from **12%** of managers in passenger transportation, **42%** in wholesale, **26%** in distribution, and **25%** in retail

The desk-free workforce may be underestimating the potential impact of the Bill for their employers, and just 15% of employees say they expect this possible outcome. While intended to strengthen the rights of workers in the UK, implementation of the Bill could mean that some of the people who rely on this type of work, particularly those without formal qualifications, with an inconsistent track record of work, or trying to make a fresh start after a prison sentence or other disadvantageous circumstance, will find it even harder to enter (and stay in) the workforce.

Key takeaway:

Although many leaders are positive about the intended aims of the Employment Rights Bill, in reality it may be costly to implement, so proper planning and preparation will be crucial. Now is the time for leaders to set the tone and expectations for their own organisations working in tandem with their HR leads to ensure outcomes match the spirit and intention of the new legislation.

Technology solutions:

Ensuring that any technology being used to support the management of desk-free workers can happen in real time, accessing all the relevant data, may require organisations to migrate systems to the cloud. Some of the best-in-class cloud-based applications have built-in compliance and automated updates to keep organisations up to speed with industry best practices. Users can be confident they are adhering to evolving regulations on a continuous basis. Secure data in the cloud protects sensitive employee information, reducing breaches and enhancing trust. Proactive risk management tools help identify and address vulnerabilities early, strengthening an organisation's resilience and safeguarding its operations.

Disconnections

Data visibility: Delivering actionable workforce insights

Leaders can use data to glean greater insights and make better decisions. By collecting the appropriate information in a structured and methodical way, they can use it to reveal instances when they may be making incorrect assumptions, and instead, gain a deeper understanding of what desk-free workers want, and therefore, how to motivate a higher number of them to stay in their roles for longer.

Being paid on time

The majority of office-based workers are paid a salary on a monthly basis, and many, particularly those in the most senior positions, might question why they would turn up for work at all if they were not paid in a fair and timely fashion for what they do. Yet these issues persist on a regular basis for desk-free workers.

90% of the most senior respondents in our survey, those in the roles of Chairman, CEO and Managing Director, say their desk-free workers are paid adequately and on time, as opposed to 57% of workers themselves who describe their experience this way. The middle managers, so often the bridge

between top leaders and the frontline workforce, sit approximately in the middle ground, and 77% of them say employee pay is fair and on time.

Coming from the perspective of being in some of the lowest paid roles, fair pay is a strong theme for desk-free workers. 39% of them say they are always paid on time, but not fairly in relation to what they do, compared to just 19% of middle managers who say their staff are not paid fairly. This drops to just 7% of those in the top jobs—Chairman, CEO, and Managing Director, or, looking at it the other way, a huge 93% think desk-free workers are paid fairly.



It is difficult to know how much this is purely about perception as the extremes in pay scales can be vast. In January 2025 the High Pay Centre stated that CEOs of the top FTSE 100 companies were earning more in less than three hours than the average worker does in a year. The same report said median annual CEO salaries for these companies were £4.22 million, compared to £37,430 for the average worker, and £23,798 p.a. for a desk-free worker on minimum wage, based on a 40-hour week. Frontline workers are clearly paid a lot less than top management, but fairness is another question.

Our survey finds that being paid late is a minor issue for most desk-free workers, as just 2% of those in our survey say they are paid fairly but often late.

In fact, workers in most sectors say they are always paid on time. However, 13% of desk-free workers in wholesale, and 10% working in business services, say late pay is an issue for them. These findings do not chime with managers in the same sectors—where only 5% of managers in wholesale and just 2% of those in business services recognise their employees are often paid late. If leaders do not believe this is an issue, they cannot get on top of it. It is therefore crucial that leaders consider ways to collect data on late payment activity and use that information to eradicate it completely.

Also, employees in the distribution sector appear to be at odds with other sector findings that show managers underestimate the existence of late payments. A notable one in ten (11%) of managers in distribution say their desk-free workers are often paid late (albeit fairly). However, none of the workers in distribution say they are not paid on time—possibly an instance of managers being more alert to a perceived issue that they do not actually have to worry about.



Only
2%
say they are paid fairly
but often late



Feeling overworked

Preventing burn-out and helping employees manage workloads are common themes in people management relating to the office/desk-based workforce, but it appears that overload can be accepted as a standard expectation for desk-free workers.

Overall, 29% of desk-free workers say they are overworked but expect this in their line of work, rising to 31% of those working in retail and the lowest, 20%, in wholesale.



Feeling overworked

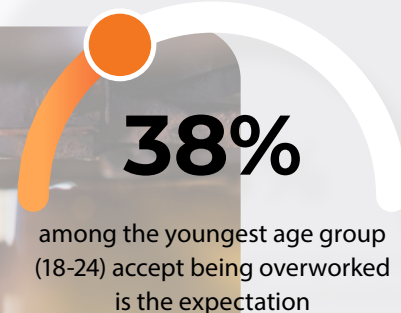
The acceptance that being overworked is the expectation is highest among the youngest age group of desk-free workers, 38% for those aged 18-24 years, and drops steadily through the older age groups to just 16% of those aged 55+.

However, when considering if they have a manageable workload with no issues around scheduling or resourcing, just 25% of workers agreed, indicating that 75% do not feel their workload is manageable. In contrast, 42% of leaders say their desk-free workers have a manageable workload, with no issues around scheduling/resourcing.

Age and experience appear to be important factors when it comes to feeling

overworked. Around 80% of the younger groups (79% of 18-24 year-olds and 81% of 25-34 year-olds) say they are overworked, compared with 67% of those aged 45-54 years and 64% of those aged 55+. It may be that older workers are just more used to dealing with the workload, and experience has taught them more effective methods for completing their tasks, as well as having developed better coping strategies.

Feeling overworked varies by sector, with 80% of desk-free workers in business services (and also in wholesale) saying their workload is not manageable, compared to 65% of those working in manufacturing and 64% in distribution.



Overload is caused by a number of factors including staff shortages—27% of desk-free workers blame it on insufficient staff numbers, compared to just 18% of executive leaders and middle managers who think this is the reason for unmanageable workloads. Other suggested causes include high levels of sickness absence, disorganised colleagues forgetting to turn up for shifts, unreliable technology, and lack of training.

One reason for overload that employees and managers completely agree on is that inconsistent levels of customer demand make planning and rostering difficult. One-quarter (25%) of desk-free workers and 25% of leaders say this is the reason staff are overworked.

Our data shows that managers underestimate the implications of overworking their desk-free workforce. One in five (21%) of all managers say that their staff are sometimes overworked but it does not seem to affect morale, rising to 32% for some of the top-level roles including Chairman, CEO, Managing director, Operations Director, and Chief Operations Officer (COO). Indeed, only 18% of all managers say that being overworked drives many workers to quit or take extra sick days.

With high employee attrition a feature of managing the desk-free workforce, we have to wonder if leaders are correct in their assessment of workloads and suggest that a good number of workers may in fact be quitting because of being overworked. One of the issues here may be that when these easy-come, easy-go employees fail to show up for work, businesses move on quickly to replace them without carrying out exit interviews or surveys. The data these collect could shine a light into the real reasons why workers quit, providing actionable insights to help leaders reverse the trend.

Key takeaway:

Assume nothing! Data tells the truth, so using exit interviews, in person or over the telephone, or sending out an exit survey can reveal issues that leaders are just not aware of. Anonymised surveys may reveal some of the more uncomfortable truths. Effectively managing a business that depends on desk-free workers entails going the extra mile to fully understand what makes them tick, including the reasons why they choose to leave your company, or factors that would make the best workers choose to stay.

Technology solutions:

Organisations need to ensure they are collecting the right data and effectively managing/storing it so it can be used to leverage the power of predictive analytics and intuitive dashboards. These can provide unprecedented visibility into workforce performance enabling smarter, data-driven decision-making. Advanced tools provide real-time insights that seamlessly align people goals with broader business strategy, transforming raw data into actionable intelligence that drives strategic growth and operational excellence.

05

The current state of play in your sectors

Given the expansive nature of the desk-free workforce, spanning numerous industries and roles, this report strategically focused on seven key sectors that represent critical components of the modern economy:



Retail



Manufacturing



Distribution



Logistics



Passenger transport



Wholesale



Business services

These sectors were chosen for their significant contribution to essential supply chains and service delivery, their reliance on a substantial desk-free workforce, and their shared experience of navigating complex operational challenges.

The interconnectedness of manufacturing, distribution, logistics, wholesale, and retail, forming the backbone of product movement, made their inclusion essential. Similarly, passenger transport and business services are crucial for enabling the efficient flow of people and supporting the operational infrastructure of other industries.

Each sector faces unique pressures in the current economic landscape, including workforce and skills shortages, which are central themes in our data. While our findings are specific to these seven sectors, the underlying issues of feeling unheard, work overload, and inadequate compensation resonate across the broader desk-free universe.

206,000

retail workers were paid at or below
the National Minimum Wage

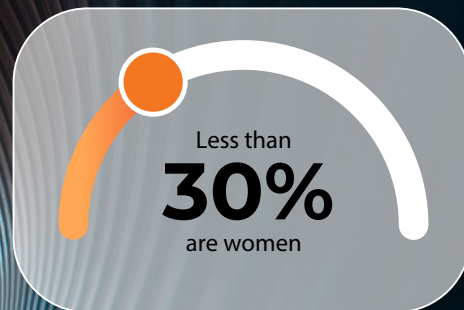


Retail

Despite the massive shock delivered to the high street by the pandemic in 2020/21, retail continues to be the UK's largest private sector employer with around 3 million employees. Around half of these work part time, with 58% identifying as female and 42% male.

Many desk-free workers in retail are working directly with customers, whether that be on a supermarket till, stocking the shelves, or as a sales assistant in a store selling anything from clothing to furniture or technology. With almost all UK shops open seven days a week, employees will rarely enjoy a standard weekend at home and may have to accommodate shifts for late night and even 24/7 opening hours. Online retail has grown rapidly, and many employees in the sector are now working behind the scenes performing order fulfilment and returns processes.

Almost one-third of retail employees are under the age of 25 years old, and low pay is particular issue in this sector. 2023-24 government data shows 206,000 retail workers were paid at or below the National Minimum Wage (NMW), equating to around 14% of all NMW jobs. Our survey corroborates this, with retail managers telling us their staff are not always paid fairly—higher than the average for managers across all sectors.



Manufacturing

Desk-free workers in manufacturing include machine operators working in a factory or workshop environment, often utilising very specific, niche skills aligned to the creation of a particular component or product, as well as those involved in packing and moving manufactured items.

One of the major challenges currently facing this sector is the growing knowledge/skills gap being created as more experienced workers retire, without sufficient numbers of skilled new entrants to take over. A report by Make UK (the Manufacturers' Organisation) says more than one-quarter of manufacturers expect to lose 10% of the workforce to retirement in the next five years. An aging workforce puts institutional knowledge at risk. Employers must act to reverse attrition rates, as well as working to engage more with younger workers and those new to the sector.

New technologies, particularly those utilising AI-powered automation, may require employees to develop different skills, accentuating the imperative to attract a new generation of factory workers whose job may look very different to those of their predecessors. This industry is still very dominated by male employees with 2024 data showing 1.9 million men were employed in manufacturing compared to 795,000 women (less than 30% of the workforce). As this industry data includes workers in offices and desk-based jobs too, there's a chance the split is even more biased towards male employees for desk-free roles.

Distribution & Logistics

Distribution and logistics roles are closely linked as both involve the organised movement of goods. Desk-free workers in logistics are more concerned with delivering planned and organised movement, storage, and inventory of goods, mostly within a warehouse or other storage setting.

Their process progresses into distribution, where workers are involved with getting goods to users or end-consumers. Their tasks may include storage, picking, packing, and order fulfilment, as well as possibly handling and processing returned goods.

The two industries are being greatly impacted by rising fuel costs, which can decimate profit margins based on previously lower costs. While both are being affected by workforce shortages and

high staff attrition, distribution also faces a specific skills shortage. The Road Haulage Association (RHA) has recently claimed that 200,000 new HGV drivers will be needed over the next five years, an average of 40,000 drivers being trained and qualified each year. This will require a massive recruitment drive by the industry, against a background of increased online shopping driving higher demand, which may not be realistically aligned with the availability of current HGV training provision.





Workforce shortages

Wholesale

Wholesale is the fulfilment of bulk orders of goods and products, mostly to other businesses (B2B). The rise in big brands—particularly those involved in fashion, selling directly to consumers and cutting out the retailer means that wholesalers are also now involved in direct to consumer (DTC) processes.

Wholesale organisations operate out of warehouses and the service they provide functions closely alongside the logistics, distribution, and transportation sectors, ensuring that goods are stored, inventoried, picked, packed, and dispatched in an efficient and cost-effective manner. This sector is experiencing similar challenges to distribution and logistics, dominated by workforce shortages, and there is a tendency for workers to move between employers, seeking better pay and conditions.

Offering training and potential career opportunities may help businesses hold onto the best people. However, as automation adoption grows, there may

be less demand for human workers with robots potentially helping organisations achieve more streamlined and efficient processes.

Sustainability is a growth area in wholesale, as well as other sectors covered in our survey, as it traditionally handles high volumes of waste packaging and transportation materials, with high energy usage too. Implementing sustainable practices such as transitioning to more energy efficient systems, reducing and recycling waste, and adopting green technologies may help this sector attract and retain the next generation of desk-free workers—and attract more environmentally conscious customers too.

Passenger transport

Sustainability is also an important metric for the passenger transport sector, and UK rail providers are quick to promote the low carbon advantages of travelling by train rather than by car.

Data issued by the Rail Delivery Group shows that using a train for the top 100 business routes produces almost nine times less carbon than driving a diesel or petrol car, and the industry is committed to achieving net zero by 2050. It makes sense then that communicating environmental objectives to staff is an important part of the process and could contribute to more effective employee attraction and retention. Passenger transport jobs include desk-free roles such as train and bus drivers, conductors, guards, and ticket collectors, as well as those working in maintaining and repairing vehicles, rolling stock, and railways. Some of the roles in this sector are notably more highly paid in relation to the rest of the desk-free universe and we will see later in this report that workers in this sector are more than averagely satisfied with pay rates.

Industry is committed to achieving

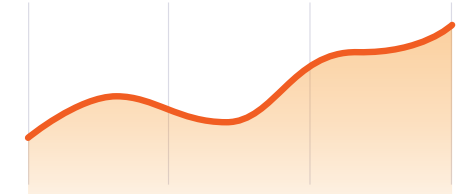
net zero

by 2050





Boosting efficiency & increasing productivity
is a priority for organisations



Business services

Desk-free worker roles in business services are highly diverse and include utilities, waste removal and recycling, pest control, cleaning, decorating, mechanical repairs, gardening, car park and access routes maintenance, security, and more.

80%

of workers on zero-hours contracts described themselves as having **'some' flexibility**

Each of these different jobs has its own challenges, but our survey has revealed that having flexibility around hours and tasks, with autonomy to direct one's own time was particularly important in this sector.

One in five workers in business services rely on zero-hours contracts to help them manage their own work-life priorities, and 80% of them described themselves as having 'some' flexibility with either hours and shifts, or tasks and targets at work—higher than the average 64% for all industries.

Some of the roles may require high levels of skills and qualifications, meaning they are comparatively well-remunerated against some of the lower-skilled jobs that fall into this category. Indeed, the diversity of roles and individual employee characteristics within the business services sector epitomises the profile of the overall desk-free workforce—there is no 'standard' desk-free worker.

Leadership challenges

The lack of a specific employee profile then raises the question of how leaders can successfully address some of the issues faced by their desk-free workforce. Individuals have so many different reasons for doing the job, and therefore multiple motivations and reasons to want to stay or leave.

Productivity remains the holy grail for many organisations—boosting efficiency & increasing productivity is the number one priority for organisations in the next 12 months, while attracting & retaining talent remains the top challenge for another consecutive year. Effectively managing employees is an integral process for helping businesses conquer these two compelling concerns.

Reducing staff attrition is crucial for optimising organisational investment in human resources. Advertising, hiring, onboarding, and training new employees is a costly endeavour—well worth the investment when an employee stays and

builds a successful, productive career within the organisation, but a rather thankless and repetitive drain on resources if there is a continual turnover of poorly engaged and unproductive workers. Yet high staff attrition seems to be accepted as the norm within many of these sectors. Turning this around and ensuring good employees want to stay, sharing their growing knowledge and experience with others, and developing into the next generation of supervisors and managers, protects the business. It ensures a good return on investment with a sustainable and successful talent pipeline.

06

What does the future hold?

2025 and beyond is going to be ripe with opportunity, driven by the transformative power of technological advancements, particularly AI.

While it's true that AI will reshape business processes, driving intuitive automation and evolving job roles, this transformation presents a wealth of possibilities for empowering both desk-based and desk-free workers.



Consider the potential

AI-powered tools that can optimise logistics routes, predict maintenance needs, and provide real-time support to frontline workers, improving their performance and safety.

These capabilities will ensure businesses are more agile and responsive in the face of ever-changing market conditions. To maximise these benefits, it will be essential to approach AI implementation strategically. This includes managing risks by ensuring data quality, mitigating bias, and providing comprehensive training to employees.

Frontline job roles are predicted to see the largest growth in absolute terms of volume over the next five years, making workforce management in the associated sectors even more challenging, but also more important, in terms of the positive business outcomes it can drive for those who get it right

We predict that AI will become a powerful ally for these employees. Imagine AI augmenting human capabilities, handling routine tasks, and freeing up desk-free workers to focus on higher-value, strategic activities. This shift allows for the development of new skills, fostering a more dynamic and adaptable

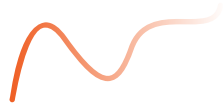
workforce. Leaders are recognising the potential of AI to address staff shortages too, not by reducing employee numbers, but by increasing productivity and efficiency. 29% of leaders already anticipate AI and automation as a key solution to this challenge.

The reality is, the future of work is still being moulded. But while full automation might seem distant, AI is already enabling remarkable advancements. Cloud-based technologies are providing unprecedented visibility, seamless systems integration, and data accuracy. This empowers employees and middle managers to achieve more, leveraging their full skillsets and making more informed decisions.

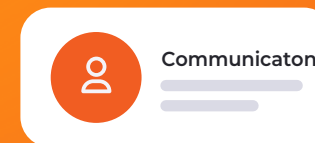
AI Assist which can respond to user requests, work alongside humans, provide automation around repetitive tasks, and ultimately improve workflows, so that workers can focus on complex problem-solving and customer interactions. AI-driven insights that can identify training gaps and personalise learning experiences, ensuring workers stay ahead of the curve. And Agentic AI, which can act independently and provide more general help around strategising, scenario mapping, and problem-solving, learning as it goes (in relation to its business environment).

Many are now changing their organisation's relationship with the technology they use for these processes, choosing to rent instead of buy, via Software as a Service (SaaS) models to access the most up to date, compliant, secure, and cost-effective applications that can scale with them as they grow. In tandem with implementing best-in-class (and AI-enabled) systems, businesses can use the findings from our survey to better understand their desk-free employees and build a work environment that is more fulfilling.

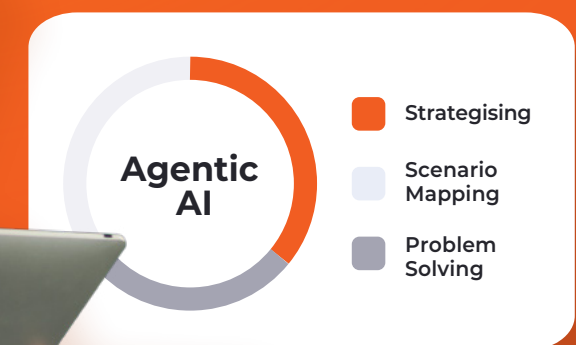
Frontline
job role growth



The reality is the future of work is still being moulded.



But while full automation might seem distant, AI is already enabling remarkable advancements.



07

Reconnection

Summary



Our survey results have highlighted a significant disconnect between the experiences and perceptions of the desk-free workforce and those of their organisational management. The data provides a welcome opportunity for leaders to get to grips with these differences and close the gaps, ensuring that reconnection is possible.

Delivering what employees want and need is not an easy task, made more complicated by the lack of a typical desk-free worker profile. There is no one size fits all solution to any of the challenges faced by these workers, but in a sense, that is the point of our survey. We have highlighted some of the challenges that do unify these critical frontline workers, to help leaders do better with attracting and retaining talent, improving productivity and collaboration, strengthening compliance and resilience, and delivering actionable insights that might eventually improve the employee experience.

Increasing pay and benefits may be the obvious solution to tackling employee churn, but it isn't possible for all organisations and there are other important factors that influence engagement, motivation, and likelihood to quit or stay. The mistake some leaders are making is to assume they know the answers, when they might be better off simply asking their desk-free workers.

A lack of flexibility with shifts and tasks is par for the course with many desk-free roles, and workers may simply accept this, while their organisation's leaders think they have more flexibility than they actually do. Some leaders mistakenly think more frequent paydays would help reduce churn, but our findings suggest that being paid fairly for what they do and not being overworked is more important to staff than the frequency of pay. Despite the inherent differences of perspective regarding pay levels, it is important that everyone feels they are being paid fairly for what they do, even if the pay itself is low in relative terms.

Being offered training opportunities, and opportunities for career progression matter to the desk-free worker, particularly the younger age groups. And since most say they are usually paid on time, this is much less of an issue for these employees than their managers believe it is. Of course, if late payments became more frequent or widespread we would expect this to be seen as a significant problem by workers.

Successfully reconnecting desk-free workers and management requires drastically improved communication mechanisms. Whether it is about their own productivity and targets, organisational strategy, overarching objectives, or job vacancies and training opportunities —frontline workers find these communications much less effective than leadership believe to be the case.

Leaders should consider these insights carefully and look to take proactive action, leveraging the recommendations from our report. After all, if workers are more productive due to a greater sense of belonging, purpose, and equality, this will ultimately contribute to greater success in terms of wider business objectives too.





08

Embrace the Agentic Era with OneAdvanced

The future of business is **intelligent, automated, and agentic.**

Mid-market businesses face challenges adapting to this shift, with traditional ERP often being expensive and monolithic.

We have the solution:

A composable ERP powered by our Workforce Management and Finance, Spend & Governance SaaS portfolios



Our unified platform integrates these core business functions, empowering you to optimise operations, connect your employees (both desk-based and desk-free), and truly get the most out of AI capabilities. Unlike rigid systems, we offer flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and seamless integration through open APIs. We understand your unique needs, delivering enterprise-grade capabilities at a mid-market price.

Partner with us to navigate the Agentic Era, unlock data-driven insights, and transform the productivity of your workforce. The future is here:

oneadvanced.com



Lead the way and unlock your business's full potential

Methodology

The research was carried out online on behalf of OneAdvanced by Research Without Barriers (RWB). The sample comprised 800 respondents in organisations with 100+ employees that employ desk-free workers. It includes responses from 500 desk-free workers and 304 managers (102 executive leaders and 202 middle managers) in all four nations of the UK, working in business services, distribution, logistics, manufacturing, passenger transport, retail, and wholesale. The surveys were conducted between 14th January 2025 and 29th January 2025.

All research conducted adheres to the MRS Codes of Conduct (2023) in the UK and ICC/ESOMAR World Research Guidelines. RWB is registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and is fully compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

A Disenfranchised Workforce

The distorted reality
threatening your business

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