

Work from home, four-day weeks and flexible hours: what about the silent, deskless majority?

Benefits often make job ads seem more glamorous, yet until recently, they usually only included the standard 'luxuries' like free breakfasts, birthday days off and cycle-to-work schemes.

Then, over the past few decades, some companies (famously Google) started using them to gain a competitive advantage in the scout for talent. Suddenly 9am start times turned into flexible working hours. Pallid city offices transformed into work-from-home arrangements.

This movement effected major changes to introduce serious benefits. Although, these were often limited to glamorous tech companies that could afford them for their desk-based workers. The idea has now expanded to include four-day weeks, which is taking its first steps towards (potential) normalisation. We're approaching the verge of real cultural change.

But there's a big problem that no one is talking about. Those who can't access such benefits as WFH arrangements have forgotten *they occupy the minority*. A whopping 80% of the workforce cannot benefit from many of these perks. The silent, deskless majority has been left out.

The silent majority

The UK's deskless workers – including those working in critical industries such as the public sector, retail and manufacturing – were the backbone of the UK economy during the pandemic and vital to seeing us through to the other end. However, they are often left out of discussions when it comes to company benefits. This needs to change, as these are the industries that are dealing with a most severe talent crisis as job vacancies hit *record highs*.

Due to the nature of deskless jobs, working from home benefits are simply not feasible, and with most working shift patterns this might also make it more difficult, or impossible, for employers to implement flexible working. This has subsequently led to the majority missing out on the perceived improved working conditions granted to desk-based workforce, with employers failing to offer alternatives.

Deskless employees need more

Employers might think they can excuse themselves from offering better working conditions to deskless workers. But following Brexit, deskless workers are too realising the opportunities to find better work with 57% of frontline workers stating they've considered quitting their jobs in the past year. In addition, two thirds believe they have more opportunities available to them now and feel confident they could find other jobs (27% higher than in 2021) – that's including 76% of those working in the hospitality sector.

Employers are going to have to offer better incentives to retain the best staff. Although flexible working arrangements may prove more difficult to implement, there are many other solutions. Automatic, predictive scheduling programmes for example, can create working schedules that suit the employers needs, while also allowing more flexibility on the employee's part. Lack of career prospects has been identified by deskless workers (41%) as a main reason why they may leave their jobs. They want a clear view of their career progression. Employers should consider investing in upskilling and retraining these employees to provide opportunities to grow in their career and learn new skills.

They are also in need of an internal communication structure which helps them efficiently and effectively manage their working day. Research has shown that businesses where employee engagement is high are 21% more profitable. A communications platform designed specifically for frontline workers, like OurPeople, where information and resources can be distributed to deskless, often remote, teams when they need it. Being actively communicated and engaged with can help eliminate some of these pain points and create a more inclusive and collaborative team.

Employee experience strategies will need to be business leaders' number one priority if they are going to retain their deskless staff, and they will need to develop a deeper, different understanding of their workforce in order to offer benefits that they will value. This shift will not come without significant challenges, it is what is necessary to ensure deskless workers feel valued, heard and supported.

Instead of offering the same benefits as desk-based peers, consider alternatives that might make up the difference. Changing your company's approach at the highest level might be the best way forward. Instead of top-down, think frontline first.

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