



Why Deskless Workers Are Leaving—and How to Win Them Back

JULY 07, 2022

By Julia Dhar, Deborah Lovich, Chris Matthey, Nick South, Tatsuya Takeuchi, and
Sebastian Ullrich

“

They’ve been called heroes during the pandemic, but many of them aren’t satisfied with their jobs. Here’s what leaders can do to change that.

BCG

Future of Work
Deskless Worker
Sentiment Survey

JULY 2022



“Deskless” workers—those who need to be physically present to do their jobs—do not have the option to work remotely. They also generally do not have the flexibility to set their hours. And more than one-third of these workers, who make up three-quarters or more of the labor force in most countries, are at risk of quitting in the next six months.

This finding, revealed in a seven-nation survey of more than 7,000 deskless workers, has potentially dire implications for fields as diverse as construction, distribution, **manufacturing**, **health care**, **retail**, and **transportation**.

Mapping the future of work for deskless workers

The survey,
conducted this spring

and covering about 1,000 employees each in Australia, France, Germany, India, Japan, the UK, and the US, found that 37% of these workers could be out the door within the next six months. Employees at risk of leaving fell into three similar-sized groups: those who are definitely leaving within six months, those unwilling to commit beyond six months, and those who are undecided.

That finding is sobering news for employers, which already have raised the wages of deskless workers and taken other measures to retain them during the pandemic. The reality, of course, is that employers often struggle to offer what many of these workers want: greater flexibility and the ability to work from home as so many knowledge, or desk, workers do.

Exacerbating the Talent Shortage

Barring a recession, **persistent talent shortages** are among the greatest challenges facing many companies. The US, for example, has millions more job vacancies than people looking for work. Germany reports record-high shortages of skilled workers. France and the other countries from the survey face similar challenges. That's why employee retention needs to be a top priority of every leader.

Japan's deskless workers indicated the weakest attachment to their current jobs, with 42% either planning to leave (11%), undecided (24%), or unwilling to make a commitment beyond six months (7%). Deskless workers in the UK followed closely behind, with a higher percentage (15%) already having decided to leave their current jobs in the next six months, 15% unwilling to commit beyond six months, and 11% undecided. Meanwhile, Germany and the US have the lowest shares of at-

risk deskless workers. Even so, more than one in ten deskless workers in those countries are already planning their exits.

Younger workers are more likely to quit their deskless jobs than older workers. Nearly half (48%) of Gen Z employees are at risk of leaving these jobs in the next six months, compared with 35% of Gen Y, 32% of Gen X, and a still-considerable 24% of the Baby Boom generation.

Among deskless workers who said they might leave their jobs, 50% cited lack of flexibility or work-life balance as the reason. Other top reasons were lack of career advancement (41%), pay (30%), lack of enjoyment in their current position (15%), and lack of recognition for their contributions (14%).

Next Steps

The BCG research suggests steps leaders can take to address the concerns of unsatisfied employees and strengthen the bonds with satisfied employees. It will take more than pay increases to reduce the number of at-risk deskless workers. Companies should also consider:

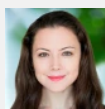
- **Flexible schedules.** Consider workers' lifestyles and needs when designing shifts; create shift marketplaces enabled by technology.
- **Expanded benefits.** Understand that not all employees value the same thing; adapt benefits to best match the needs of different workers.
- **Career growth and upskilling.** Invest in **upskilling** and retraining for managers and individual contributors; actively identify career pathways.
- **Demonstrate support and commitment.** Build a “frontline first” culture with leaders spending time listening to and acting on worker views and needs.

The world saw the importance of deskless workers during the pandemic. They allowed the rest of us to remain productive while working remotely. Today, they watch after our children and our elderly; they build our bridges and operate the trucks and trains that deliver the goods we require for work and life. If they flee their jobs, we will all pay the price.



One-third of "deskless" workers—those who need to be physically present to do their jobs—may leave their jobs within six months. Debbie Lovich explains why these employees are looking elsewhere and what organizations can do to improve work for this group.

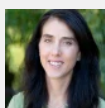
Authors



Julia Dhar

Managing Director & Partner

Boston



Deborah Lovich

Managing Director & Senior Partner

Boston



Chris Matthey

Managing Director & Partner

Sydney



Nick South

Managing Director & Senior Partner

London



Tatsuya Takeuchi

Managing Director & Partner

Tokyo



Sebastian Ullrich

Managing Director & Partner

Düsseldorf

ABOUT BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

Boston Consulting Group partners with leaders in business and society to tackle their most important challenges and capture their greatest opportunities. BCG was the pioneer in business strategy when it was founded in 1963. Today, we work closely with clients to embrace a transformational approach aimed at benefiting all stakeholders—empowering organizations to grow, build sustainable competitive advantage, and drive positive societal impact.

Our diverse, global teams bring deep industry and functional expertise and a range of perspectives that question the status quo and spark change. BCG delivers solutions through leading-edge management consulting, technology and design, and corporate and digital ventures. We work in a

uniquely collaborative model across the firm and throughout all levels of the client organization, fueled by the goal of helping our clients thrive and enabling them to make the world a better place.

© Boston Consulting Group 2024. All rights reserved.

For information or permission to reprint, please contact BCG at permissions@bcg.com. To find the latest BCG content and register to receive e-alerts on this topic or others, please visit bcg.com. Follow Boston Consulting Group on [Facebook](#) and [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#).