

An aerial night view of London, featuring the River Thames, the London Eye, Big Ben, and the Houses of Parliament. The city lights are visible in the background.

The Big Reset Playbook

Deskless Workers

Hybrid work is on everybody's mind. Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella calls it the biggest change in our generation. General Motors CEO Mary Barra suggests people should just “work appropriately,”¹ choosing their work location. And IBM's Arvind Krishna expects 80% of IBMers to morph into hybrid workers. The tech market for hybrid tools is on fire: collaboration platforms, remote tools, and work-sharing systems are sprouting up almost daily.

And hybrid work is a reality, not a possibility. In today's hypercompetitive labor market, companies that can't (or won't) offer remote work options will miss out. Our playbook on hybrid work² is one of our most popular assets, and our program about this topic gets rave reviews.

A Lopsided World

The problem? Hybrid work is only for the select few who are lucky enough to be deskbound: software engineers; finance, marketing, HR, or IT people; and most managers and leaders. But for the deskless workforce, remote or hybrid work remains a far-fetched dream.

Whether you're on a retail sales floor, caring for patients in a hospital, driving a truck with goods to be delivered, or serving guests in a restaurant, hybrid work is not an option. It's impossible to manufacture products, develop drugs, or connect a telecommunications cable from the comfort of your home or from newly minted office spaces outfitted with nap rooms and collaboration patios.

Yet, in our haste to make work appealing for deskbound employees, we neglect the vast majority of workers. Yes, hybrid work is important. But work is changing massively for deskless workers, too, and HR has a critical role in designing this new reality.

A Google search for deskless workers results in just 157,000 hits—compared to 941M for hybrid work. The trend is clear: deskless workers are the most overlooked workforce segment, yet they make up 80% of the global workforce. Winning the war for talent depends on the deskless worker experience you offer.

1 www.cnbc.com/2021/04/20/gms-simple-message-to-employees-about-return-to-work-work-appropriately.html.

2 *The Big Reset Playbook: Hybrid Work*, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

The Deskless Workforce: Essentially Left Behind

Early in the pandemic, we distinguished between “essential workers” and all others. Who are the essential workers? They are nearly all deskless workers. The CFO of Amazon was not essential, but the company's warehouse workers were. Healthcare professionals, retail employees, chefs, truck drivers, delivery staff, and telecommunication workers all made sure we could work in our cozy homes, free from exposure to infection—so cozy that we now don't want to go back to the office.

Back in Spring 2020, essential workers received little support to keep them safe and healthy. Nurses made their own masks or reused them repeatedly because there was not enough personal protective equipment. Tens of thousands of Amazon workers reported infections from COVID-19. Instacart could barely keep up, hiring more than 100,000 people to deliver our groceries so deskbound remote workers could be safe, sated, and comfortable.

Designing a New Deskless Reality

HR and leaders around the world stepped up to the challenge of designing a new hybrid work experience. Our hybrid work program in the Josh Bersin Academy is in high demand, and thousands of people download our playbook on hybrid work. But attracting and retaining deskbound workers is impossible without a well-crafted and adaptable hybrid work approach that offers more than just HR policies and procedures.

The deskless experience needs to be designed in parallel with hybrid work. This is especially critical for healthcare, consumer, manufacturing, energy, telecommunications, or pharmaceutical industries, where the majority of people closest to the customer are all deskless. But even technology, financial services, or professional services companies have some work to do. Consider their salespeople, financial advisors, or consultants who are usually deployed at the client site and are therefore “deskless,” as they don't typically work from an office building.

Winning the War for the Deskless Worker

A dedicated focus on the specific needs and requirements of the deskless workforce is indispensable in winning the war for the talented deskless workforce. In designing the approach to your deskless work strategy, you should consider three significant factors:

- 1. Your deskless work strategy is just as important as your hybrid work strategy.** Hybrid and deskless work need to be designed in parallel with dedicated teams that engage senior leadership, operations, HR, IT, and facilities in the process. It's time to start looking at both workforces more holistically and considering everything from culture to technology in building the design for both deskless and hybrid workers.
- 2. Your deskless worker approach is integral to your employment value proposition.** As the economy continues to grow, job candidates will want to know what it's like to work at your company. You will need to sell and communicate this approach openly, so design it carefully. However, don't focus solely on attracting new workers. It's easy to forget about engaging and retaining your current workforce, which is also, if not more, important. A well-designed approach will also help foster productivity, performance, collaboration, and the general health of the deskless workforce.

- 3. Listen to and communicate with your workers.** During the pandemic, employees gained a lot of power and agency over their work experience, and they may not feel comfortable returning to the commute or the office quite yet. Setting a vision and communicating is critically important. A shocking 84% of deskless workers feel they don't get adequate communication from their company.³

Our [Pandemic Response study](#) looked at the practices of adaptive companies and showed success requires more than a focus on health and wellbeing. The high performers do the following:

- Reinforce their mission and purpose.
- Explain how their reinvented business models work.
- Work in cross-functional teams to create change.

Deskless work design is the other side of hybrid work, and the next step in pandemic response. You should leverage what you've learned, rather than think about "going back" to some state you were in two years ago.

In this playbook, we go beyond HR policies and procedures for deskless workers. Instead, we define new approaches to work, people practices, the workplace, growth, health, and leadership. We cover the learnings from discussions with over 400 business and HR executives around the world about the new reality and its impact on our companies.

³ www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/04/21/dont-ignore-the-deskless-workforce/?sh=256fe69615fe.

Deskless Industries Lag in Employee Experience

In our in-depth study of nearly 1,000 companies in 83 employee experience (EX) practices, we developed a four-level Employee Experience Maturity Model (see Figure 1). Organizations fall into four levels depending on the EX practices they deploy, with Level 1 the least impactful and Level 4, the most.

Level 1: Transactional Efficiency

Companies at this level are focused on creating a transactional relationship with their employees—an exchange of work for money. When they see a direct cost impact, they remove barriers from the employee’s work life, but without much consideration for the individual that’s behind the job description. Employees are seen as a replaceable commodity: a cost factor.

Figure 1: Employee Experience Maturity Model



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

Level 2: Supportive Environment

These organizations have made the switch to a supportive environment. People trust leaders, help each other, and communicate openly. Yet these supportive actions often ignore the broader business context and can sometimes come across as “nice” rather than impactful because they lack an overarching purpose. Employees are considered friends and family.

Level 3: Purpose-Driven Business

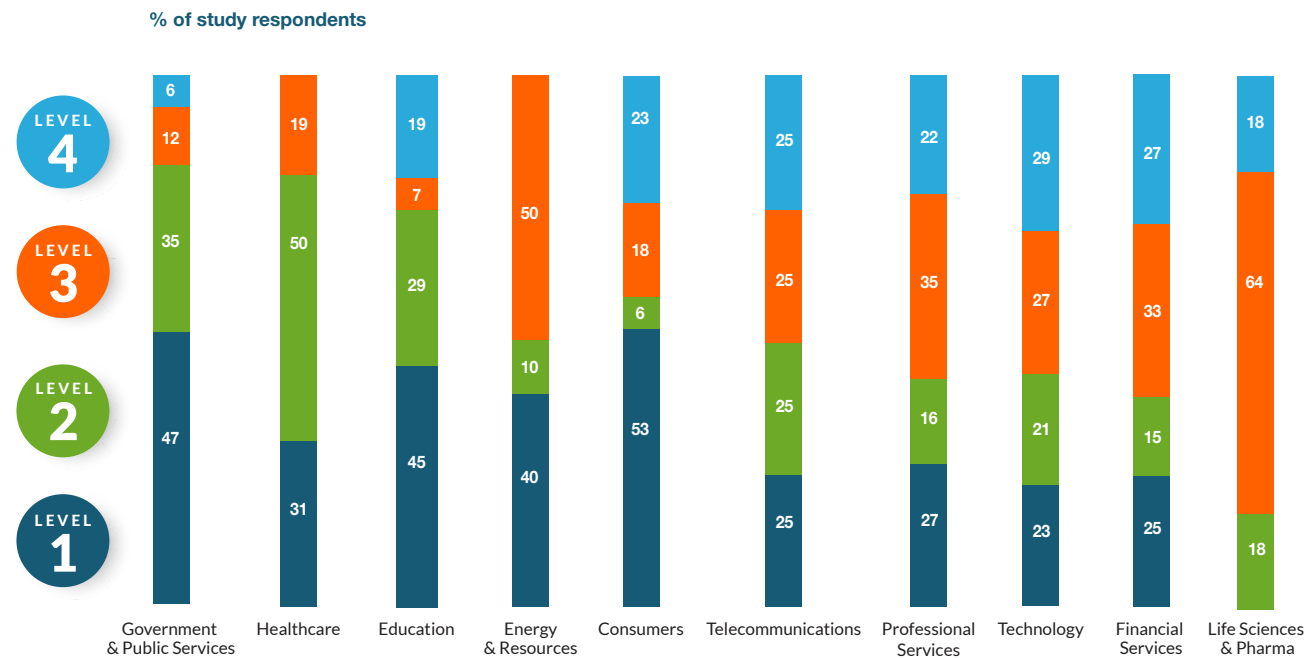
Organizations at this level get direction from the very top—the CEO—to align around a powerful mission and purpose that inspires people to do their best. The values of the company resonate in every interaction, including a strong leadership model aligned around living those values every day. Employees are seen as the key source of competitive advantage.

Level 4: Equitable Growth

When companies allow people to be who they are, value differences, encourage learning from mistakes, and enable people at all levels to grow, they empower people to be their best. Organizations at this level can move quickly, work well together in teams, and unleash creativity and innovation. Employees are seen as individuals who will bring future sustainability and success through their creativity and innovation.

These maturity levels can be encountered in any geography, organizational size, or industry, but by far, the biggest differentiator is the industry (see Figure 2). While 55% of all companies and 81% of healthcare companies are at the lower two maturity levels, only 18% of pharmaceutical and life sciences companies are at these lower levels.

Figure 2: Varying Maturity in Employee Experience among Industries



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

Industries that are primarily deskless—healthcare, education, and energy and resources, for example—score much lower than the primarily deskbound worker industries—technology, financial services, and life sciences and pharmaceutical.

The reasons for maturity among the industries are undoubtedly complex and can range from the need for innovation versus repeatable processes to the significant investments the higher-performing industries make into improving the experience of their people.

To improve the deskless worker experience, companies need to first understand the reality of deskless workers: how their experience is different from their deskbound managers and HR people, where their concerns and priorities are, and what to do to improve the deskless experience.

Understanding the Deskless Experience

Many things have changed since March 2020, and deskless workers are at the receiving end of many of the most difficult changes. In some industries like airlines or hospitality, large numbers were furloughed or laid off. Others, like healthcare or transportation workers (considered essential), had to face extreme health risks coming to work. Indeed, Paul Sanford, CEO of Wincome Hospitality, said, “Industry veterans of thirty years now chose to change professions because of the issues faced in the pandemic.”

Now that businesses have opened again and the economy is booming, HR and leaders are struggling to reengage employees

they lost. Many companies are paying extra wages only to encounter YOLO (you only live once) syndrome and having employees leave again in droves.

The phenomenon of the summer of 2021, coined “The Great Resignation,” significantly affected industries with deskless workers. Leisure and hospitality led the way in April, with 740,000 employees quitting because the job had gotten too stressful amid the pandemic, with ever-changing safety requirements, reduced staffing, and sometimes hostile guests defying mask or distancing requirements.⁴

Additionally, the prevalence of remote or hybrid work made quitting that much easier. Why not move into a new job where you can work anywhere there’s a Wi-Fi connection versus the alternative of spending hours commuting, masking up at work, stressing about infections, or dealing with combative customers who defy rules and regulations on masks and distancing? There is one reason . . .

The Need for Human Connection

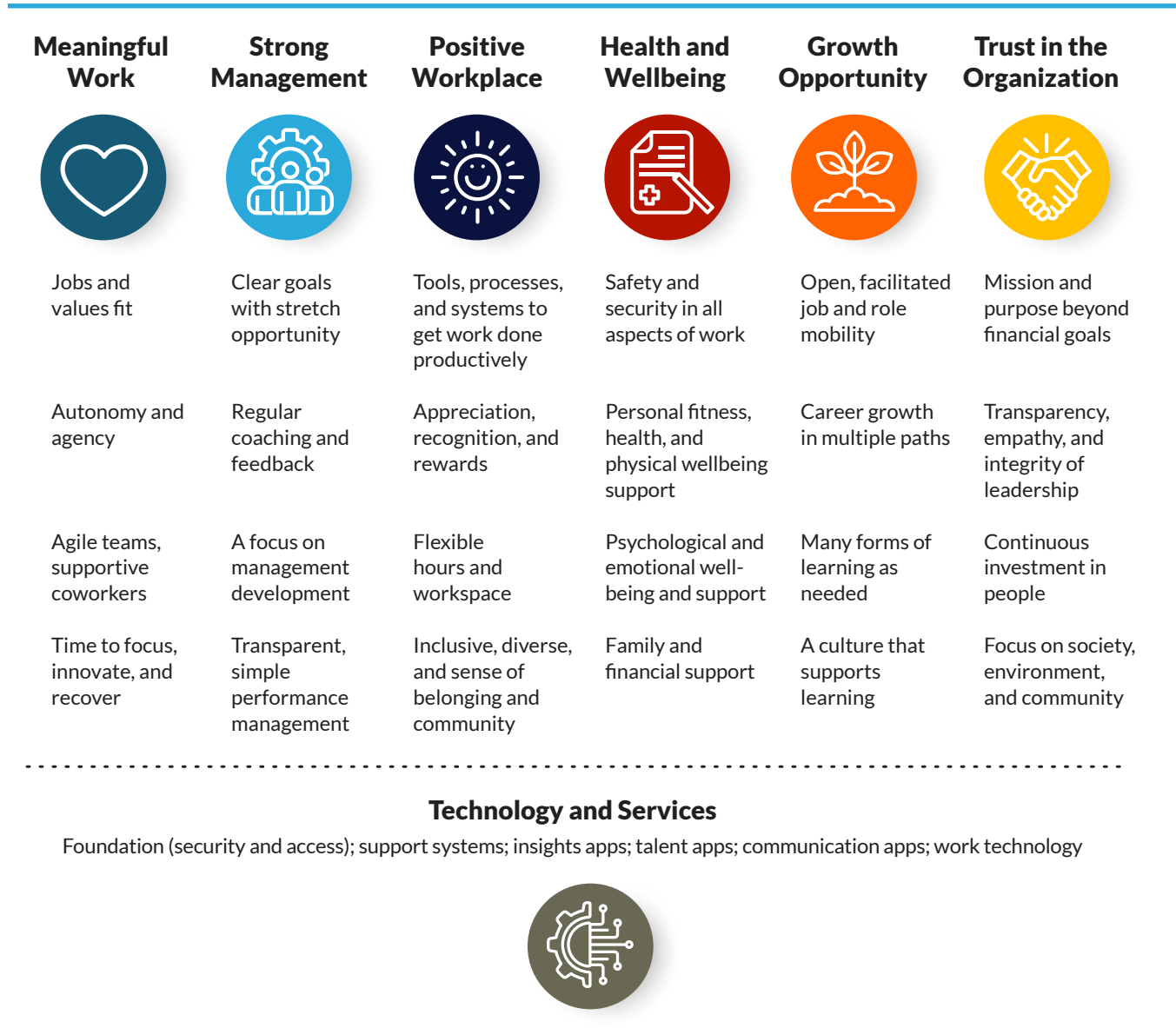
Deskless workers thrive on human interaction. They chose their profession because of the face-to-face contact with others, and work loses meaning without that contact. Ask any nurse what gets them going every day, and they will likely say the patients they care for. A retail employee likes talking with customers, helping them find the right merchandise. And a salesperson thrives on the interaction with prospects—without a screen in the middle.

⁴ www.npr.org/2021/06/24/1007914455/as-the-pandemic-recedes-millions-of-workers-are-saying-i-quit.

Creating a Great Deskless Experience

In order to capture and discuss all the elements of the deskless experience, we begin with our Employee Experience Framework (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Employee Experience Framework



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

While all elements of the EX Framework are important to creating a great experience, the specific needs and requirements vary widely between deskless and deskbound workers because jobs, work environment, family and financial situation, and the workplace are all drastically different (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Deskless vs. Deskbound Employees (Priorities)

Element	 Deskless Employee Priorities	 Deskbound Employee Priorities
 Meaningful Work	Face-to-face connections Time to rest and recover	Skills fit Autonomy and agency
 Strong Management	Coaching in the flow of work Simple performance management	Management development Goals and OKRs
 Positive Workplace	Commute support Inclusion and fairness	Productivity tools Hybrid workplace
 Health and Wellbeing	Caregiver support Financial health support	Stress support Fitness tools
 Growth Opportunity	Career pathways Performance support	Career mobility Learning culture
 Trust in the Organization	Sense of community Connection to the culture	Link work to the mission Continuous people investment
 Technology and Services	Mobile communication Mobile collaboration	Insights apps Knowledge management

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

Let's compare a day in the work life of a hotel receptionist with a day in the life of a software engineer.



Meaningful Work

Hotel receptionist: A person in this role gets energy from connecting face to face with guests as they check in. To provide the best customer service, they need to be fully engaged and open to the variable needs of the customers. Therefore, rather than a full eight-hour shift without any breaks, they need regular time to disconnect from the always-on work.

Software engineer: Their fit with the job and corresponding skills and experience is critical. Are their skills aligned with the current and future market, or are these skills no longer useful or relevant? From their perspective, work is most meaningful when they have both autonomy and agency to be creative and to do their work when and where they can do it best, including the opportunity to explore new ways to solve tough tech challenges.



Strong Management

Hotel receptionist: In this role, the employee is always on, talking with guests, helping them solve issues, and generally providing service. It's important to get feedback and coaching from a knowledgeable, supportive manager who understands the job and knows tips and tricks for improving the guest experience.

Software engineer: This employee may want to consider their upward mobility, so developing managerial capabilities is important. A connection to the overall goals and mission of the company creates line of sight, and many companies use OKRs (objectives and key results) to create that connection. Read more about OKRs in our [research report](#) on this topic.⁵



Positive Workplace

Hotel receptionist: As a deskless worker, the commute to the workplace is nonnegotiable. If the hotel is too far from home, they waste hours on the road sitting in traffic. Paying for the commute can add up, too, cutting into sometimes already tight earnings. On the cultural side, a feeling of inclusion and fairness is key, especially if they see a lack of diversity higher up in the organization.

Software engineer: This role often requires self-management, whether it's looking for answers, connecting with experts to resolve problems, or keeping on top of bug reports. Therefore, productivity tools like Slack, Microsoft Viva, or Asana and Monday are important to get work done well. Hybrid work is a reality for a software engineer, and the better the programs and tools, the more engaged this worker will be.



Health and Wellbeing

Hotel receptionist: This employee is not likely to have \$500 put aside for an emergency.⁶ So when the car breaks down, or the kids are sick and the employee must pay out of pocket for healthcare, or find emergency childcare because the school closed due to a COVID-19 case, they will have a difficult time making ends meet. And therefore, this employee's mind will be on the money side, rather than where it needs to be at work—providing a great guest experience. Additionally, their work suffers, and they may be subject to disciplinary action or even dismissal, negatively impacting their emotional health.

Software engineer: Making ends meet may not be their biggest worry. Demanding customers, meeting tight deadlines, or working all night to make that ambitious go-live date are much more likely to cause stress. "I don't need a yoga class after working 70-hour weeks; I just need to not work so much," a software engineer told us. Physical fitness might be another concern for deskbound overworked software engineers who often survive on copious amounts of caffeine and fast food.

⁵ *Managing Performance in the New Reality: Goals Matter More Than Ever*, The Josh Bersin Company, 2020.

⁶ www.marketwatch.com/story/nearly-25-of-americans-have-no-emergency-savings-and-lost-income-due-to-coronavirus-is-piling-on-even-more-debt-2020-06-03#:~:text=What's%20more%2C%20nearly%2025%25%20.



Growth Opportunity

Hotel receptionist: Serving at the hotel reception desk can be energizing but also exhausting. In-the-moment performance support tools and resources are key to help solve problems and find answers for guests who might be in a hurry or under time pressure. From hotel policies to local guidance on where to get a taxi or how to book a restaurant, tools and resources need to be available at the point of need, and easily searchable.

Software engineer: For software engineers, innovation is key. But innovation is not possible without experimentation and willingness to fail. This worker needs a learning culture that supports smart risk-taking and gives people air cover to make mistakes so they can learn from them. Processes and approaches to help derive and share learning from these experiments are all part of this learning culture. This also includes working in agile teams that are self-governed and can quickly assemble and disband around the toughest tech challenges.



Trust in the Organization

Hotel receptionist: This worker can feel like they are working all alone and not part of a team. A sense of community is especially critical when the job does not include a lot of teamwork and collaboration. The company can do a lot by stepping in to help the receptionist. For example, other hotel employees like the bell person, security guard, or hotel shop clerk can provide backup. Managers are key to fostering this sense of community. If the hotel manager creates a spirit of camaraderie where people feel inspired to support each other, everybody wins, including the guests.

Software engineer: An employee in this role is likely most inspired by building something cool and useful. But it's important for managers to help these workers translate how their work connects to the bigger picture and what the customers will get from their product. This translation is critical because the software engineer is much more removed from the customer.



Technology and Services

Hotel receptionist: Communicating, collaborating, and receiving information and news from the company via mobile platforms is key. As they don't spend their working time on desktop applications, browser-based tools or insights will be much less useful, and communication via email might not reach them. If they can communicate right from their reservation system and get updates in the flow of their work, it simplifies their work processes and allows them to be more productive and helpful to guests.

Software engineer: The typical knowledge worker spends 20% of their day looking for information, and software engineers are no exception. They need insights apps that find answers to their tech challenges quickly, connect with experts seamlessly, and access knowledge from coding languages to create better code faster and with less bugs. This may include pulling chunks of code or objects from shared directories or pinging a colleague with a quick support question.

Because the needs of deskless and deskbound employees are so different, what can companies do to create an engaging, productive, and inclusive deskless experience in the new world?

The Seven Critical Components of Deskless Work








We listened to hundreds of companies across the globe working on the deskless experience in 2021. Through all of this and our studies of employee experience, we learned there are seven critical components of deskless work, which we call the Seven Critical Cs of Deskless Work (see Figure 5).

Connections and Creativity

Enable human connections and time for creativity.

“You can see the smile behind the mask,” said Monica Diaz, Vice President, Talent Development, Diversity & Inclusion, Royal Caribbean Group, about the rejoicing of cruise ship employees when operations finally started again. Deskless workers are most driven by the need to connect with others face to face, and therefore they need that connection to thrive. Safety protocols absolutely need to be established, but there is no substitute for the direct relationship between deskless workers and customers.

Figure 5: The Seven Critical Cs of Deskless Work

Critical Component	EX Element	Practices	Why It Matters
1 Connections & Creativity	 Meaningful Work	Enable human connections and time for creativity.	Deskless workers are the closest to the customer and need time to develop the best possible solution.
2 Coaching & Development	 Strong Management	Train managers to coach deskless workers.	Deskless workers need always-on feedback to perform their best, but spans of control are often too large to do this effectively.
3 Commute Support & Belonging	 Positive Workplace	Make the commute easy and establish belonging at work.	Because remote work is not feasible for deskless workers, they need extra support with an easy commute. A feeling of belonging is especially important.
4 Care & Coverage	 Health and Wellbeing	Support the deskless worker's entire life.	Flexibility can often be difficult to accomplish for deskless workers, so they need backup for taking care of families and support for balancing finances.
5 Career Pathways & Development	 Growth Opportunity	Help deskless workers build fulfilling careers.	Deskless workers—especially those who may be in jobs ripe for automation—need pathways to future-proof careers.
6 Culture & Community	 Trust in the Organization	Build on the mission and create a deskless-first culture.	A sense of belonging and community is critically important for deskless workers.
7 Communication & Collaboration Tools	 Technology and Services	Provide tools and services geared for mobile.	Because deskless workers are not connected to devices all day long, it's important to give them alternate approaches to stay up to date with enterprise and individual communication.

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

To provide the best customer service, deskless workers first and foremost need more time to think and innovate. But that's exactly what they don't have. Deskless workers are overwhelmed and overburdened, and they can't focus on finding new ways of working and providing a great customer experience. A mere 6% of manufacturing companies and 7% of consumer companies design jobs to allow people time to rest, reinvent, and innovate, compared to 21% of technology firms and 29% of professional services companies.⁷

Examples of Excellence

A retail company staffed up with more people on the shop floor to allow each person to redesign their work for the best outcomes. People in turn redesigned the storeroom, developed better workflows, and identified unmet customer needs. As a result, store revenue increased significantly, and customer satisfaction went through the roof.

Hiring for skills and values fit is also relevant to this topic area. McDonald's radically simplified its hiring process for deskless workers, cutting down hiring times from weeks to days, while also finding candidates who were better aligned with the requirements of the job.

Qantas Airways ditched video interviews for flight attendants because of the potential for biased toward young, physically attractive people, disregarding the talent and motivation of entire groups of candidates that didn't fit the physical mold of the perfect flight attendant. Instead, they now use chat-based prehire assessments that go deep into the motivation and values fit of each candidate. With this move, they now have much higher customer satisfaction, decreased flight attendant turnover, and increased diversity.

Coaching and Development

Train managers to coach deskless workers.

Deskless workers are always connecting with customers—whether selling merchandise on the shop floor, caring for patients in a hospital, or serving food in a restaurant. Therefore, they need coaching to create the best experiences for customers. Yet managers of deskless workers are often disconnected from the work itself and have limited insights

into the interactions and behaviors of their team members because they themselves are usually deskbound.

Spans of control are often very high in healthcare; nurse managers commonly have 100 or more direct reports. And companies don't always support managers in developing people. Just 11% of hospitality companies invest in developing leaders at all levels, compared to 75% of pharmaceutical companies.⁸ Yet coaching people with vastly different work settings can be challenging, so managers need ample support systems and tools to do this effectively.

Examples of Excellence

A large U.S. healthcare company restructured their performance criteria for managers to include equally weighted business outcomes like financial performance and customer satisfaction and people outcomes like engagement and retention. In addition, they created a manager-to-manager mentoring program pairing managers of deskless patient-facing workers with others from the same work environment. Those managers with the lowest engagement and enablement scores learn from others in the same setting to foster a more productive and collaborative work environment.

To address span-of-control issues in nursing, the company instituted a team leader system in which each nurse manager—with their 100 direct reports—appointed 10 team leaders who in turn supported and coached 9 nurses each. The nurse manager then coached the 10 team leaders.

Commute Support and Belonging

Make the commute easy and establish belonging at work.

The physical workplace has undoubtedly changed a lot during the pandemic. Grocery stores now have plexiglass shields for the cashiers and floor markings where the customers should line up with appropriate distancing. Hotels are also asking their guests to distance themselves, and some facilities might remain closed. Wincome Hospitality now has testing stations as well as offers vaccinations for their employees and guests to help keep them safe.

⁷ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

⁸ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

Most companies have kept up to date with the safety requirements for their employees. But many employees who use public transportation worry about getting infected during their commute. Commuting is not an issue when working remotely, but deskless workers are less fortunate. Flexibility in the job is a given for most professional services firms. In fact, three in four let people decide where, when, and how to do their job. But only 12% of companies in the hospitality business do the same.⁹ That's why most deskless workers are forced to commute to work. Infections on public transport, however, are not the only issue. Driving has become a big hassle, too, as traffic in most major cities has returned to prepandemic levels. Getting to and from work can add a lot of time to an already long workday.

Equally as important as the physical workplace is the psychological and cultural environment, and diversity plays a huge role in supporting a diverse customer base. There are many challenges that get in the way of a truly inclusive environment where people at any level and in any setting are valued, respected, and psychologically safe. One of the most important things a company can do is listen to employees and really understand what gets in the way of such a workplace. And while almost every other financial services company does that well, only 8% of energy and resources companies do the same.¹⁰ Yet it's critically important for customers to see themselves represented in the people who serve them. Without celebrating diversity in the workforce, this is not possible.

Examples of Excellence

Honest Burgers, a high-end hamburger chain in the UK, wanted to build an app that helped employees schedule their back-to-work shifts without forcing them to take public transportation. Using Workplace from Facebook as the platform, the Honest Burgers team built a "mashup" app that lets employees send chat queries, look up their jobs and certifications, find the roles they're qualified for, identify their locations, and find shifts at restaurants within walking or bicycling distance from their homes. That way, they don't need to get on public transport to get to work. This all happens without logging into a new system or finding a new app; it's done via chat. The HR team built this

system in less than two weeks, making Workplace one of the most useful tools the company has.

Hilton sees diversity as critically important to their business success. They want every guest, from any background, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or any other dimension of diversity feels welcome in the hotel and valued for their uniqueness. To understand what this requires, they involve deskless workers from their ERGs in focus groups to design the guest experience, test out new offerings, and provide input on business approaches. Not only does this result in much improved business outcomes but also the deskless employees in the hotels feel a stronger sense of connection and belonging, and they feel valued for their diversity.

Care and Coverage

Support the deskless worker's entire life.

Financial stress is real for deskless workers. Many live paycheck to paycheck, and only 13% of the 2.7 billion deskless workers worldwide have paid sick time.¹¹ Therefore, as many as three in four of them have worked while sick. Additionally, because they often have limited flexibility in job scheduling or work location, many are left without child or dependent care if a family member gets sick. Having to worry about pay and benefits causes mental health issues, which in turn can make them get even more sick, causing a downward circle of declining health, reduced earnings, further stress, and decreasing productivity and performance.

Most companies can't increase compensation or benefits (in fact, our Business Resilience study shows only one in five did just that¹²), so helping people stretch their money further through offerings like on-demand pay goes a long way to support financial wellbeing. This means people can take the pay they already earned at any time for a minimal fee to cover expenses like car payments, gas, or home repairs as they are due. Not only does this serve as a recruitment and retention tool for companies competing for deskless workers but also employees are happier and healthier, and therefore can provide better customer service.

⁹ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

¹⁰ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

¹¹ <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/only-13-of-the-2-7-billion-deskless-workers-worldwide-have-paid-sick-time/>.

¹² Business Resilience/Pandemic Response research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2020.

Further, supporting employee emotional health and wellbeing—not just providing employee benefit—needs to be on the HR team’s radar. But while a staggering 63% of HR teams in pharmaceutical companies do just that, only 8% of their healthcare peers do.¹³

Examples of Excellence

Wincome Hospitality, a California luxury hotel group, amped their compensation by 15% to 20% when they finally opened up again but saw that many people preferred to make less with government subsidies in exchange for less stress about potential exposure at work. They also offer a \$1,000 bonus to anybody who stays for at least three months to foster retention.

Metz Culinary Management, a custom dining management service, told us they are working in a highly competitive market, and when they tell candidates they can access their pay with only a nominal fee, people are convinced the company is a great place that puts people first.

Houston Methodist, a hospital system, aims to be an employer of choice. Innovation is key to their business strategy, and so they are also innovating on pay approaches with on-demand pay. Giving people ready access to their pay has increased engagement and retention of their talent, and many believe they are now better managing their finances.

Career Pathways and Development

Help deskless workers build fulfilling careers.

Skills are on every company’s radar screen. How do you know what skills and capabilities your people have? Where do you need to prioritize skills and capabilities to build the workforce of the future? Many companies use talent marketplaces to enable a more dynamic, employee-driven approach to deploy people not just to open jobs but also to projects, mentoring, and even informational interviews. Technologies abound and the war of the skills cloud is real, with every major HR tech company creating their own skills taxonomy from which to subscribe.

But deskless workers are often excluded from these talent exchanges. Not only are most of the marketplaces set up to work for deskbound workers, but also the skills, education, and

experiences are mostly geared toward knowledge workers. To change this, big companies like Walmart or Disney support deskless workers—grocery baggers, check-out scanners, or theme park employees—to build career pathways to future-focused careers through education, experience, learning from others, and work assignments.

For example, traditional programs around tuition reimbursement expect people to pay out of pocket for a degree or certificate, to be reimbursed by the company at a later time. Since most deskless workers have less than \$500 put aside at any given time, it’s not feasible for them to advance thousands of dollars for education. Therefore, these programs usually help people who already have a degree get another one on the company’s dime, leaving deskless workers behind. Programs like Guild Education, in which the tuition is funded as a true assistance with no out-of-pocket expenses to the employee, enable a degree or certificate to be within reach for anybody. And some companies even provide insights to employees to guide them toward in-demand skills and education, to help them future-proof their career.

Encouraging employees to develop their career regardless of their role is 1 of the 15 most impactful EX practices, and 61% of technology companies do just that, compared to just 12% of companies in the energy and resources sector.¹⁴

Examples of Excellence

As all their cruise ship employees were grounded for over a year, Royal Caribbean Cruises decided to home in on supporting employee learning and development and provide them with online learning opportunities. Many companies we talked with saw a significant increase in learning demand—people were home, often without work, and looking for something meaningful to do. Sutter Health quickly redeployed people to areas of higher need during the pandemic, looking for recertification of medical staff to areas of higher need (e.g., from surgical areas to ERs).

Southwest Airlines helped their grounded flight attendants redevelop into areas like reservations that experienced a higher demand, using their Loan Your LUV program for internal gig work.

¹³ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

¹⁴ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

Disney, Walmart, and Amazon all provide tuition assistance to their deskless workers to continue their education while working, collaborating with community colleges or online universities, and supplementing with coaching for adult education, and even offering career support to help people choose which direction to go in. “Following your passion is only half the battle—what’s even more important is supporting people to find a profession that will endure automation and disruption,” an HR leader of a big retail company told us.

Culture and Community

Build on the mission and create a deskless-first culture.

Our *Definitive Guide: Employee Experience* identifies the need for a supportive, inclusive, caring culture as the most impactful driver of outcomes.¹⁵ The most important dimensions of employee experience include a culture where people trust the company and leadership and are inspired by a mission beyond financial success, as well as believe the company operates under a people-first approach. Yet deskless workers are often disconnected from the mission and values because many communication channels are designed for deskbound employees.

A people-first approach means prioritizing investments in people even when the business is not doing well, and companies that do that see higher financial performance and customer satisfaction. However, only 13% of hospitality companies do this, compared with 62% of pharmaceutical firms.¹⁶ People long for culture and community, and having a say in building it. This is especially true in jobs that might seem repetitive or tiring.

Examples of Excellence

Patagonia is a great example of a purpose-driven company that also happens to be in manufacturing. Having always been environmentally conscious, the company keeps leaning further into environmental activism. In 2019, its mission was a product/purpose hybrid: “Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.” Now the

mission simply says, “Patagonia is in business to save our home planet.” Living environmental activism doesn’t stop at the company level; it transforms the entire business and the way the company prioritizes people. “At the end of the day, go back to your values, and as you’re making all these decisions, big and small, mind them because these are the things that people will talk about in the future,” said Dean Carter, CHRO of Patagonia. When the pandemic hit, the company first and foremost focused on fostering their supportive culture—the source of a low 4% turnover—and a sense of community for deskless manufacturing employees and retail workers through communication, various ways to connect, and identifying common ground with others.

The Lego Group, an iconic toy manufacturer, decided to develop a new leadership model not by executives going into a conference room to discuss, but by sourcing a cross-functional, global, diverse team from all job roles—including deskless workers. That team was empowered to make decisions and drive the design of the new leadership model. To align with the company’s unique mission and culture, the design team defined the “leadership playground,” and identified behaviors, skills, and capabilities of leaders who can bring joy and playful learning to every employee. Rather than mere bystanders or recipients of the leadership model, deskless employees were key in making it come to life and continue to drive further adoption across the company. Read more about this in our case study on Lego.¹⁷

Communication and Collaboration

Provide tools and services geared for mobile.

Think of HR and work tech—collaboration and communication platforms, support systems and services, knowledge management, learning tech, and more. Most of these tools are geared toward browser-based access for the deskbound employee. Why? Two reasons: software developers and designers are typically deskbound (hence they develop solutions for problems they know), and HR and IT decision-makers (those that have the budget) are overwhelmingly deskbound, too (hence they buy tools for problems they are familiar with and encounter).

¹⁵ *The Definitive Guide: Employee Experience*. The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

¹⁶ Employee Experience research, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

¹⁷ *The LEGO Group’s Leadership Playground: Energizing Everyone Every Day*, The Josh Bersin Company, 2021.

Deskless workers are often left behind with no access to communication, tools, or resources. Decades ago, there were kiosks to mimic desks for deskless workers, but technology has evolved so there are many solutions with mobile-first or even better—adaptable approaches that come to the employee any way they might want to engage. Communication platforms like SocialChorus (recently merged with Dynamic Signal) can help keep people connected to key enterprise news, up to date on training needs, and engaged with others across the company—all from a simple personalized app or even in their work systems. And service delivery like HR transaction or support needs to be delivered in a similar way for deskless workers: healthcare companies, for example, have massive call centers, rather than having to fill out an online form.

Examples of Excellence

Every company we talk with has increased their communication frequency during the pandemic. But not every CEO or CHRO offers communication in a way that can be consumed. Study after study shows that deskless workers in any industry feel disconnected from enterprise communications. Decades ago, we tried things like putting communications on the printed paystub for nurses and other patient-facing employees, because they didn't have an email address and never visited the employee portal. Now, smart technologies can connect employees to communication wherever and whenever works best for them, making it much easier to communicate with deskless workers. Amazon, for example, got creative, displaying news on coffeemaker screens in break rooms for warehouses. This “surround sound communication” finds people wherever they are at.

These communication channels don't have to be limited to corporate communications people or HR. At Hyatt, 3,000 line leaders communicate with their employees through templated communication campaigns using SocialChorus, allowing them to reach their hotel employees in the way that works best—whether on a mobile app, within their work apps,

or even in their paystub. Analytics show which campaigns are most effective and help spread what really works across the company and beyond.

These easy-to-use, preconfigured, smart templates for campaigns are a great example of what we call “the creator economy for HR” and are the next-generation platforms for everything from leadership development to learning and development to career support and communication.

Operationalizing the Deskless Worker Experience

If we ran a word cloud on this playbook, we'd see the phrase “new reality” take center stage. And rightly so, not just because employers need to understand the implications of the new world of work but also because HR now has the power and responsibility to shape the charter and define what this reality could be like in the future.

The employee experience that a typical deskbound worker may cherish in the safety and confines of their own home or office, or occasionally a “coffice” (now an official term for the combination of a coffee shop and office), is only aspirational for deskless workers.

While the nature of their “essential” work limits deskless workers' ability to have the same experience as deskbound workers, organizations have opportunities to create a new and differentiated deskless experience for these workers. Based on our conversations with over 400 business and HR executives around the world, we've identified a chronology of steps that can help organizations operationalize the new deskless experience.

Let's dig into each of these steps for a fuller understanding of how to operationalize the deskless worker experience (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Six Steps to Operationalizing the Deskless Worker Experience



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

Step 1. Define your overall EX vision and how it translates for deskless workers.

The first step is to establish a North Star. Unpacking the answers to each of the following critical guiding questions will start to put together the pieces of the puzzle.

- What is the overarching vision of the employee experience you strive to create for all workers?
- How does this experience vary for different types of workers—workers who are deskbound, workers who operate in

hybrid roles, and deskless workers who are always on the frontlines?

- In each of these segments of workers, how does the experience align with your mission and purpose as an organization?

Organizations need to be fully cognizant that the experience for deskless workers is fundamentally different from that of deskbound workers, and then define what this experience will look and feel like in a day in the life of a deskless worker.

Step 2. Build a cross-functional team, including dedicated people to care for deskless workers and their unique needs.

EX leaders in the organization should assemble a governing body to create the strategy and plan for the new deskless employee experience. This governing body should steer decision-making and action-planning by engaging key players who are instrumental in optimizing the deskless experience. These key players include HR, business unit leaders, IT, legal, finance, operations, and representative deskless workers closest to the customers. This cross-functional group should collaborate to design the new experience, create an action plan, and then establish accountability for that action plan.

Organizations need to lead this change with empathy and with the knowledge that the deskless workers have gone through a lot during the pandemic. Deskless workers either did not have an opportunity to work or had to risk the safety of themselves and their families to work.

During the pandemic, many deskless workers were deprived of the recognition they deserve for being on the frontlines to keep the economy running or faced severe hardships being out of work, often without a choice. Now is the time to acknowledge and truly care for these workers. The team working on designing the deskless experience must designate team members to understand the unique needs and challenges of deskless workers, relay those insights back to the team to inform the design, and also help navigate solutions at individual employee levels.

Step 3. Segment the deskless workforce to identify personas and create journeys maps.

We already understand there are different ways of working that deliver the same results. The same is true for deskless workers. Using hospitality as an example, the chef may not always encounter guests, whereas servers would always be in direct customer contact. The safety protocols, e.g., mask mandates for the chef working behind the scenes in the kitchen, may vary from those of the servers working out on the floor.

Beyond the purview of safety and policy, the deskless EX team must segment deskless workers into cohorts of people with similar needs, experiences, behaviors, and goals. Next is creating personas based on these cohorts and gathering employee input to create journey maps for each of these personas.

The foundation for the above exercise rests in design thinking principles, essentially identifying the pain to build the muscle. But identifying these pain points requires considering the employee as a customer, having empathy, and designing solutions to address their challenges. Creating personas and corresponding journey maps can guide the ideation processes and help define both the nuts and bolts and the finer nuances of the experience for each target group of deskless workers.

Step 4. Listen to the deskless workforce and define measures.

Organizations need to design equitable experiences for deskless workers across geographical locations, business units, and levels of the organization. To do that requires not only listening continuously and capturing direct feedback but also interpreting indirect signals and observed behaviors (see Figure 7) to determine what to prioritize, as well as what

Figure 7: Types of Signals for Continuous Listening

DIRECT SIGNALS	INDIRECT SIGNALS	OBSERVED BEHAVIORS
Annual and pulse surveys, polls, idea factories, online conversations, priority cases, crowdsourced feedback	Performance reviews, number of help desk tickets, meeting records, 360 feedback, turnover rate, call, chat, and chatbot transcripts	Meeting attendance, badge tracking, PTO patterns, benefit opt-ins, volunteer activities, recognition awards, employee relations issues

Source: *The Josh Bersin Company, 2021*

to measure against once the design and roll-out of the new experience takes effect.

Designing employee experience is an ongoing iterative process. Organizations need to adopt an agile approach that will enable leaders to measure effectiveness and impact along the way. Organizations must also define success criteria and measures for business, people, and innovation outcomes to ensure it is staying on track throughout the journey.

There's a whole buffet spread of metrics from which organizations can choose, including but not limited to:

- Employee productivity
- Performance
- Health and wellbeing
- Engagement levels
- Psychological safety
- Retention

It is best to select three to five key metrics that matter the most for your deskless workers, prioritizing those areas that have maximum room for impact and improvement, and then measuring those throughout the process.

Step 5. Design across the entire experience with a focus on the seven Cs.

Take this opportunity to envision the whole spectrum of experiences for deskless workers in an organization, ranging from hiring to performance management to learning, career growth, DEI, and exit. Organizations must focus on the holistic experience for deskless workers. Our Seven Critical Cs of Deskless Work (see Figure 8) can help organizations think through all the critical components for the deskless workforce.

Organizations should think through each of these critical components for driving a great employee experience with a zoomed-in focus on deskless workers. Organizations need to ensure that designing employee experience for deskless workers is not just a response to the pandemic but a business-critical, strategic initiative to holistically drive impact and engagement for all workers who are essential to the business, customers, and the economy as a whole.

Figure 8: The Seven Critical Cs of Deskless Work (At a Glance)



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2021

Designing employee experience for deskless workers presents the opportunity to make work more meaningful, evolve leadership behaviors and practices that better support deskless workers, create a positive work environment that is conducive to holistic health and wellbeing, support growth and development, and cultivate and sustain trust.

Step 6: Test, iterate, improve.

We've said this before, and we can't say it enough employee experience is not a "once and done." This is true for any segment of workers—deskless or deskbound. The new reality is continuously evolving, particularly for deskless workers, as the pandemic ebbs and flows. Organizations need to navigate and keep moving forward and be prepared to reroute several times to get to the ultimate goal of delivering an irresistible experience for deskless workers. Companies need to roll out elements of the design in shorter turnaround times, test for impact across each stage, and rapidly iterate and improve based on real-time feedback.

Conclusion and Next Steps

As we go into the second fall and winter season of the pandemic, we've learned many lessons about leadership, empathy, human resilience, and business transformation. HR has stepped up to the plate and made heroic efforts that often literally saved lives. We've shown how we can work in agile teams, move quickly, iterate, put the employee at the center, collaborate across the company, and learn and adapt in ways we never thought possible.

Hybrid work continues to be especially important, and much work remains to be done to design a new paradigm. In parallel, we must not forget the 80% of employees around the world whose work reality may be drastically different from our own—the shop floor employees, restaurant servers, nurses, doctors, pharmacists, teachers, truck drivers, and manufacturers, to name a few.

Designing a new work reality for these deskless workers is a lesson in empathy, listening, learning, and communication. We must emerge from behind the safety of our homes and screens and venture into the real world where people engage with customers, treat patients, operate machinery, and teach our children. It's this essential world that we almost forgot about while devoting endless energy to making hybrid work function.

One of the biggest learnings of the pandemic: without essential workers, we cannot operate. We would have no food, no healthcare, no childcare, and no connection to the outside world. Let's build a new deskless reality that's not a second-class version of deskbound work but, instead, second to none. We owe it to the people who power our lives.

Let's build a new deskless reality that's not a second-class version of deskbound work but, instead, second to none.

Wincome Hospitality Creates a New Culture for an Evolving Deskless World

A Privately Owned Group of Luxury Hotels

Wincome Hospitality is a privately owned group of hotels and office properties in Anaheim and Costa Mesa, California. The company has expanded steadily since the late 1980s and has carved a niche in the luxury four-diamond market over the past decade. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the entire hospitality industry to a standstill. During the 16-month shutdown, Wincome Hospitality had to rapidly adapt and evolve new approaches to navigate these unprecedented times, especially since a large part of their workforce comprised deskless workers who by the very nature of their work, did not have an option to work remotely.

“At the core of its business, hospitality is about delivering high-touch and personalized experiences through relationship-building. Customers pay for the in-person experience, and employees thrive on delivering those experiences. While industries like consulting, IT, business administration, and marketing can embrace and rejoice the shift to remote work, the hospitality industry doesn’t work that way,” says Paul Sanford, the CEO of Wincome Hospitality.

Persevering through the Shutdown

In March 2020, in response to a pandemic-related emergency order, all hotels in California were closed to guests. The only exceptions to the order were first responders and emergency personnel. The shutdown led several organizations to close operations and lay off most of their employees.

Staying committed to its team and the community, Wincome continued operations to provide services to emergency personnel. Despite loss of several key clients and tanking revenues during the shutdown, Wincome held on to most of its managerial staff and kept them working until November. With the shutdown extending indefinitely, Wincome had to furlough several more employees with the assurance of bringing them back once the shutdown lifted and they were able to fully reopen the business.

Throughout this time, the company adopted a hybrid model. Deskbound workers such as reservations, sales, and accounting staff were given the option of continuing operations from home. While this helped keep the engine running, it wasn’t a feasible long-term approach for several reasons.

Wincome specializes in luxury hospitality, which is a service-oriented industry where employees and customers share a physical environment. Employees who choose to work in the hospitality industry are very committed to human interaction. Workers are trained to cultivate relationships with customers face to face, and not in a virtual setup. Despite the imminent dangers of returning to the hotels during the pandemic, most workers longed to come back.

Emerging Trends

The pandemic has altered the business environment, customer expectations, and employee behaviors, particularly in the hospitality industry. Wincome Hospitality observed a significant shift in trends at the hotels it manages and emerging new behaviors in each of these areas.

Business Environment: A Shift in Customer Demographics from Business to Leisure

- At one of the luxury hotels, the customer demographic changed from 70% to 80% corporate guests prepandemic to 90% emergency first responders during the pandemic.
- Peak business days were Monday through Friday prepandemic, whereas the properties were typically at significantly higher populations Thursday through Monday.
- Wincome experienced a downturn in the scale and frequency of corporate meetings. Since corporate America has the flexibility to operate remotely, a lot of money is saved in infrastructure, power, and facilities. The events discussed resulted in an increased spending capacity on corporate events, which are now even more successful than they were previously.

Customer Behaviors: Elevated Expectations for a Great Experience

- Customers have been deprived of luxury and hospitality for more than a year during extended emergency orders. Everyone's gone through a lot in different magnitudes, and travel and hospitality have become a rare privilege. Guests now have elevated expectations and require their experiences to be more exceptional than ever. They have risen from the trial of governmental orders with a need to experience exceptional service and dedicated interactions.
- Customers are more sensitive to any potential slips in safety and service.

Employee Behaviors: Amplified Autonomy and Agency

- Employees received unemployment subsidies when they were furloughed. The subsidies allowed them to make 80% of their typical salary while having ample free time at their disposal. Many people found this new setup lucrative and chose not to work.
- Many people felt victimized and penalized. A life-altering event like a pandemic has given several people the opportunity to make different life and career choices. Some hospitality veterans with as many as 30 years of experience left the industry because of the unpredictability of the pandemic and related shutdowns.
- As people felt a lack of control for so many months, they now want to feel empowered. For some, the desire to feel empowered manifests in things such as choosing not to get vaccinated or wear masks.

New Safety Protocols, Team Challenges, and Labor Shortage

As the shutdown lifted in May 2021, Wincome prepared to welcome employees back at work and guests to their properties. Employees were thrilled to be working again, and guests were looking forward to vacations in gusto. But the transition wasn't without challenges since both employees' and customers' behaviors, as well as the whole environment they were coming back to, had changed significantly. Emotions and

expectations were high. Human-to-human interactions were far more strained compared to prepandemic interactions. As a result, a mass exodus of labor from hospitality occurred. The career staff, shocked by governmental orders, left the hospitality industry in droves, stating they feared the government's powers would continually and insensitively take their livelihood away.

A Need for New Safety Protocols

Wincome needs to navigate the management of both vaccinated and nonvaccinated workers and establish new safety protocols. An entirely vaccinated population of workers would safeguard employees as well as customers but imposing a vaccine mandate can land the organization in legal suits. Getting vaccinated is a personal choice and hiring or preferring vaccinated personnel over unvaccinated people would imply discriminating against a certain group for exercising their right of choice—and therefore not an option.

Troubled Team Dynamics

When workers returned from furlough and being at home, the team connections were not as strong as they were before the pandemic. The groups that previously worked together to collectively deliver a delightful customer experience were now experiencing conflict and struggling to work together effectively. This may have been a byproduct of the frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty that workers in this industry experienced for a prolonged and indefinite time period. The pandemic forced people to protect themselves and their families first, pushing individualism to the forefront and against the spirit of collectivism or teamwork that is critical for working together. Wincome is experiencing a great number of managers wanting a hybrid model so they can work partially at home.

Labor Shortage

The U.S. is experiencing a major labor shortage, which is evident from an unprecedented [9.3 million](#) job openings in August 2021. With several people making alternative career choices or optimizing state-provided benefits, the labor shortage is predominant in the hospitality sector. Now that Wincome has reopened operations at a similar scale as prepandemic, it needs to recruit heavily to fill staff positions that no longer want to return to work.

Restoring Safety, Collaboration, and Engagement

In the hospitality industry, care and camaraderie are especially important and need to be authentic and genuine. Restoring team dynamics and creating a safe workplace are table stakes. Wincome needed to make this happen quickly and is brainstorming new ways to inspire hospitality professionals. A training program to attract a new population of hospitality workers is currently being considered with the following directives:

Create a safe workplace. Although vaccination rates are very high in California, a third of the population is still unvaccinated. To provide easy access to vaccinations without being prescriptive, Wincome leadership has liaised with a company that administers on-site vaccines. Workers who are willing to get vaccinated are presented several options for vaccination. COVID-19 testing is also made available to employees and guests at the hotel upon request.

Revisit compensation and benefits. To win in a tough labor market, Wincome Hospitality has revised their compensation and benefits offering to make it even more lucrative for workers. They now offer exceptional increases in hourly wages to certain populations of returning workers, along with employee referral bonuses and hiring bonuses for certain populations.

Prioritize team building. The leadership at Wincome Hospitality is focusing heavily on rebuilding communication and trust with workers as they emerge from the pandemic and adjust to the challenges of coronavirus variant strains. This involves an amplified focus on listening with empathy and building credibility with workers at a personal level.

Wincome Hospitality is considering scheduling a third-party provider to bring in experienced coaches who can serve as confidantes and impartial advocates to workers. The goal is to provide and create a safe space for workers to share their concerns and seek personalized guidance and recommendations without feeling vulnerable. The company is also investing in team-building trainings and bringing in motivational programs to drive engagement among workers.

Redefine the culture. The leadership recognizes that beyond the severe physical impact of the pandemic, workers' sense of psychological safety and wellbeing has been disrupted. In a new and rapidly changing environment, they need to create a culture that helps people heal and chart a new path forward together. Wincome Hospitality is reworking its culture to tie together new approaches and leadership behaviors and, ultimately, cultivate an environment where people feel committed not just to the job but also to the industry all over again.

Adapting to a Constantly Evolving New Reality

Hospitality employees are acutely aware that the pandemic isn't behind us yet. New virus variants are still emerging, and the medical system and government policies are constantly evolving in response to these changes. The world is very different from what it was before COVID-19 struck, is different now during the pandemic, and will be different again once the pandemic ebbs.

Many questions remain unanswered: Will people want to return to work once the government subsidies lapse? Are the wage increases temporary or necessary in the long run? How will other benefits and offerings get impacted if organizations continue to offer higher wages? How long will the labor shortages persist? How does Wincome overcome labor shortages?

A lot remains to be unraveled. A true commitment to employees—especially those on the frontline—and a culture of trust and credibility have helped Wincome Hospitality navigate uncharted waters. These efforts will continue to help both leadership and team members move forward in embracing the new reality of work.

“

The hospitality industry is still in troubled waters and hard to navigate. But we're working through it. We're open now, and we've started the healing process. We are committed to evolving our practices and processes to bring credibility back to the industry.

*Paul Sanford
CEO, Wincome Hospitality*

Royal Caribbean Group Embarks on New Beginnings

A North American Cruise-Vacations Company

Royal Caribbean Group is an American global cruise holding company headquartered in Miami, Florida. It is the world's second-largest cruise line operator with approximately 77,000 employees worldwide. Like most companies in the hospitality and tourism industry, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, Royal Caribbean Group's operation took a dramatic turn. While other industries could continue operations remotely, the reality for hospitality and tourism companies was very different.

A Hard-Hitting Reality for Crew

While the typical deskbound corporate employee would start working from home, thousands of crew members—for whom the ships become their “home”—faced the need to leave those ships and return to their home countries. “We couldn't just ask our crew members to grab their keys and head home. Our company navigated pandemic cross-border restrictions to safely repatriate over 45,000 employees to their home countries,” said Monica Diaz, Associate Vice President, Talent Development, Diversity & Inclusion, Royal Caribbean Group. “Their livelihoods had suddenly come to a standstill, with no certainty on return, and no work that they could do from the safety of their homes,” Diaz added.

Strategies for Sustenance During Shut Operations

Almost two years into the pandemic, the company is now ramping up to resume operations cautiously and gradually—with remarkably joyful crew members. Some strategies that Royal Caribbean Group used to support their employees and navigate an eventual return to work were the following:

Maintaining Constant Communication. Communicate regularly with care and empathy to address concerns and support wellbeing of not just employees but also their families. “Employees highly appreciated the constant communication

from senior leaders while our cruises were not in service. During this time, we've had more town halls, one-to-one conversation, and meetings than we've ever had before,” said Diaz. The company also launched Vaccines in Fifteen: a series of question-and-answer sessions with their chief medical officer, which allowed employees to learn more about vaccinations.

Caring for Employees. The lives of employees turned upside down during the pandemic. It became imperative for businesses to invest in understanding and supporting their employees' immediate needs and help them in exploring ways to sustain their livelihoods while they were not in service. At Royal Caribbean Group, this included the activation of their Employee Support Program, which provides help to employees facing significant hardships related to COVID-19. This program also included financial support for those most severely impacted including by death, hospitalizations, or housing restraints. To date, the company has provided \$21M in employee relief funds to over 33,000 employees. They also reinforced access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), offered free COVID-19 testing for employees and their families, and developed and introduced an industry-leading Depression Awareness Program during a time when mental health concerns were on the rise. A very bright spot for employees was the introduction of Employee Appreciation Days, or surprise days off, to help employees take the time to focus on themselves and their families.

Upskilling and Reskilling Workers. Engage workers with learning opportunities. During the pandemic, the employees of Royal Caribbean highly leveraged options to learn, develop, upskill, and reskill themselves and set themselves up for a successful return to work. “In 2020 alone, our employees spent approximately one million hours of learning, delivered in over 560,000 courses within our learning management systems. Topics of learning ranged from ethics and compliance, data analysis, software and tools to finance, professional development, and project management skills,” Diaz said.

Managing Employee Morale. During the most difficult times, leaders must manage morale to instill a sense of hope.

Employees must be assured there will be light at the end of the tunnel, and that the business will resume operations at some point. Prepare workers to go back in service while staying cognizant of the new realities of the work and work environment on the other side of the pandemic. At Royal Caribbean Group, some of these initiatives included listening sessions hosted by their executive committee members, as well as senior executives in smaller groups, where employees could discuss topics like inclusion and career growth. “Our CHRO kicked off a series of desk-side chats with guest speakers on topics like mental health, safety during COVID, and how to navigate a successful career at a time when isolation and quarantine were the norm,” Diaz added.

Preparing for a Constantly Evolving New Reality

Mask mandates, vaccine availability, public policies, and the surge of new variants rapidly drive volatility in the business and social environment. Organizations need to adapt with agility and prepare to manage employee and customer experience in a completely new reality. “It feels like we’re hiring a whole new workforce, all at the same time. It’s not like going back to work; it’s walking toward a new world of work,” says Diaz. Returning to work locations also requires re-creating team dynamics and fostering belonging for a group of workers that have completely changed, and in an environment that has completely changed

Seeking Differences and Cultivating Inclusion

To operate in an environment where new approaches are required, Monica Diaz uses the analogy of rock stars and rock bands. “I prefer not to build a team of *rock stars* who would rather shine by themselves, when we can build a *rock band* of people who bring different perspectives to create new rhythms when they play together,” she said. This also implies developing leaders who can manage teams with a focus on inclusion with people who bring diverse skills, experiences, ideas, and working styles to collectively deliver better customer outcomes and experiences. Cultivating a sense of belonging and making everyone feel included and valued, especially in this new reality, are of paramount importance.

Transforming the Business and the Culture

As the pandemic ebbs and flows, employees continue to get impacted in a multitude of ways. Companies will continue to reinvent processes and practices to adapt in new work environments that have changed around the world. But even with those changes in mind, the primary focus of organizations will continue to be the cultivation of an engaged workforce that can create customer satisfaction and business success.

“*Despite all the hardships the pandemic has put them through, the level of joy our crew is experiencing to be back in service is off the charts. As we bring our crew members back to work, we’re not at the end of a transformation process, we’re just getting started, and we’re excited to see how this transformation unfolds.*”

Monica Diaz

Associate Vice President

Talent Development, Diversity & Inclusion

Royal Caribbean Group

About Josh Bersin



Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. Recently published research covers topics such as hybrid work; HR technology market trends; employee experience; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. He is frequently featured in publications such as Forbes, Harvard Business Review, HR Executive, The Wall Street Journal, and CLO Magazine. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.

About Mark Spratt



Mark is senior vice president of worldwide strategic planning and sales for The Josh Bersin Company. He also leads the Josh Bersin Academy's Big Reset initiative, created to help HR leaders address the unprecedented challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. He brings 20 years of management consulting experience to his clients. In senior advisory roles at Deloitte and PwC, he worked with clients on a variety of engagements ranging from preparing workforces for the future to enterprise HR transformations to integrated learning and talent solutions. Mark has dual master's degrees in public administration and social research from the University of Southern California; he also served as an adjunct lecturer for three years at USC.

About Kathi Enderes, PhD



Kathi is the vice president of research at The Josh Bersin Company; she leads research for all areas of HR, learning, talent, and HR technology. Kathi has more than 20 years of experience in management consulting with IBM, PwC, and EY and as a talent leader at McKesson and Kaiser Permanente. Most recently, Kathi led talent and workforce research at Deloitte, where she led many research studies on various topics of HR and talent and frequently spoke at industry conferences. Originally from Austria, Kathi has worked in Vienna, London, and Spain and now lives in San Francisco. Kathi holds a doctoral degree and a master's degree in mathematics from the University of Vienna.

About Nehal Nangia



Nehal is the senior manager for research at The Josh Bersin Company. In this role, Nehal drives empirical research on key workforce-related topics and the development of actionable insights and powerful stories for today's talent executives. Nehal has almost 15 years of professional experience in human capital, with a focus on performance management; employment value proposition; workforce transformation; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Prior to joining The Josh Bersin Company, Nehal was a global advisor for clients at Deloitte and published several studies on pertinent topics such as DEI, performance management, and bias. Nehal lives and works in India and has a master's degree in psychology.

Contributors



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Vice President, Culture and Capability, Autodesk, Inc.

Linda leads culture transformations, learning and organization development, and diversity and belonging at Autodesk. An HR business partner with 20+ years' experience creating high-performing teams to achieve profitable and organizational success, Linda thrives at the intersection between employee experience and business strategy. Her passion is creating an environment where purpose-driven work can flourish. Linda holds an MBA from the University of Washington and a BA in social ecology from the University of California, Irvine.



Alex Martinez

Director of Global Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, Yum!

Alex is currently leading the global expansion of equity, inclusion, and belonging strategy at Yum! Alex also has extensive experience driving change with senior executives through previous leadership roles in Talent Management, Organizational Development, Total Rewards, and Digital Transformation. Prior to Yum!, he spent several years at Deloitte Consulting in the Human Capital practice supporting global Fortune 500 clients such as Walmart, Pepsico, AT&T, and others across many industries.



RJ Milnor

Head of People Analytics, Uber

RJ is an HR leader with about 20 years of global experience improving organizational performance through data-driven talent strategies. RJ's career started in investment banking, and he has advised Fortune 100 companies on six continents about how to optimize their talent management approaches and build analytical capability. He has launched new businesses in both executive education and people analytics.



Dr. Reza Moussavian

VP People Products, Zalando SE

Dr. Reza Moussavian was recently senior vice president (SVP) at Deutsche Telekom Group. His mission was to transform Deutsche Telekom from a telecommunications network infrastructure corporation to a digital human-centric service company. In a previous role, Reza was SVP of Digital & Innovation where he successfully supported the digital and cultural transformation of Deutsche Telekom's overall organization in general and the HR organization in specific toward customer-centricity, digital transformation, and innovation.



Ray Narine

Head of Talent Development and Deputy Diversity Officer, Consumer Reports

In January 2020, Ray Narine joined Consumer Reports, the leading consumer advocacy organization in the US, to lead its talent development, employee experience, and DEI work. Ray develops impactful solutions that apply expertise in various domains, including talent management, engagement, culture formation, and diversity and inclusion. Ray's contributions are noted for future-of-work focus and innovative practical approaches to talent-building programs, technology implementations, and operational efficiencies. Prior to joining Consumer Reports, Ray held HR and talent management roles at multiple companies, including S&P Global and American Express.



Nazneen Razi

President and Principal, NRHR Talent Consulting

Nazneen specializes in HR and talent strategies to drive business improvement. She has 25 years of experience working with leading HR organizations. Prior to her current role at NRHR, she was senior vice president and chief human resources officer for Health Care Service Corporation and executive vice president and chief global human resources officer for JLL.



Daniel Shannon

Chief Inspirational Officer, Daniel Shannon Speaks

Daniel has nearly two decades of executional and thought leadership experience with Fortune 100 companies in the CPG, financial services, and retail industries. He brings expertise in the areas of strategy, diversity/equity/inclusion, marketing, multicultural market development, sales, change management, leading through ambiguity, training and development, emotional intelligence, professional speaking, large group facilitation, and motivation. In his current role, Daniel provides leadership for Target Corporation's D&I efforts.



Jill Sochor

Global Leadership Development Manager, Ford Motor Company

Jill Sochor is an experienced talent development professional, HR business partner, strategist, and educator. She is passionate about a holistic view of leadership development that includes wellbeing, inclusion, team effectiveness, and motivation. Jill is a collaborator and innovator who enjoys shaping white space and creating experiences in which leaders grow. Previous roles at Ford include human resource business partner, developing and implementing an organizational design and change management plan to enable transformation of all aspects of customer business.



Terry VanQuickenborne

Global Head of L&OD, Autodesk

Terry VanQuickenborne is a learning and organizational development professional, and executive coach. In her role as global head of L&OD at Autodesk, she leads the design and delivery of enterprise learning strategy and organization development service offerings. She has over 20 years' experience in organization and leadership development. She holds a master of science in organization development from Pepperdine University and has served as adjunct faculty.



Nancy Vitale

Cofounder and Managing Partner, Partners for Wellbeing

Nancy Vitale was most recently the chief human resources officer for Genentech, where she was responsible for leading a team dedicated to creating a great place for the organization's 14,000 employees to do their best work. Upon leaving Genentech, she cofounded Partners for Wellbeing, an advisory and consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations create better places to work. Nancy also serves as a board member for the Make-A-Wish America Foundation.

Fellows

Bri Buhaly

Bri is an MBA student at UCLA Anderson School of Management. Over the past six years, she has worked in the tech industry across a variety of functions, including software implementation, customer success, and people and culture.

Jill Gardner

Jill is a corporate learning leader with experience in instructional design, talent development, and HR technologies. She is currently a strategic consultant and operations manager for enterprise learning and development at Farmers Insurance. Previously, she held multiple learning-related roles at The Walt Disney Company and was a human capital consultant for Deloitte.

Mareena Haseeb

Mareena is an MBA student at UCLA Anderson School of Management. Prior to business school, she worked in public accounting for venture capital and private equity clients. Her main interests include human capital, diversity and inclusion, and M&A due diligence.

Matthew Moeller

Matt has more than 20 years of experience executing human capital projects and organizational transformations. He worked for Deloitte for 14 years and held a variety of positions. Most recently, he was manager of talent development for Deloitte Services and manager of workforce transformation for Deloitte Consulting. Matt holds an MBA from San Diego State University.

Victoria Morgan

Victoria has a master's from Tufts University, where she focused on communication, intervention, and behavior change. She also holds a PHR certificate from the Human Resource Certification Institute. Victoria has been involved with many aspects of corporate wellness, including physical fitness, nutrition, psychological wellbeing, and culture change. In addition to her work with The Josh Bersin Company, she is a marketing and communications associate with the Worksite Wellness Council of Massachusetts.

Karen Romero

Karen holds a BS in business administration from the University of Southern California, where she recently completed her MBA. Prior to pursuing an MBA, she worked in retail management and human resources.

Celina Wong

Celina has an MBA from the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. She enjoys researching ways to attract and retain great talent and build an inclusive, fantastic culture and work environment for employees.