

How the global workforce's identity crisis is hurting our front-line workers

By [Drew Ehlers](#)

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How many times have you read a headline that said, "Workers want XX"? Probably at least once or twice a day since the start of the Great Resignation, right? Me too. What I haven't seen more than once or twice in the past year is a headline that said, "Front-line workers want XX." Why?



Image source: Andrea Flacquadro from [Pexels](#)

We, as a society, have made the mistake of thinking all workers want the same thing. But saying all workers want or need the same thing would be like saying all consumers want and need the same thing. They don't, and they never will. That's why I'm challenging you to recognise both the unconscious biases that exist in conversations around current labour challenges as well as the lines of difference between front-line workers and office workers.

If we want to solve for workforce attrition and increase the labour force participation rate, we need to specify which workforce we're talking about and even the type of worker in each workforce. Saying that all workers want to work remotely may be true, but most front-line workers wouldn't reasonably expect such accommodations.

Instead, they would most likely ask for flexible work schedules or tools that help them get more work done in shorter periods of time without being physically and mentally exhausted each day. Some may simply ask for the opportunity to learn more on the job so they can advance in their careers. They don't want to be stuck doing the same thing forever just because they chose to work on the front lines versus in an office job where professional development is more inherent. In fact, many have asked for these things.

Giving a voice to the front-line worker

Zebra Technologies keeps a pulse on the front-line workforce in multiple ways. We are increasing our conversations with our own front-line workforce – the hard-working people in our production and distribution environments.

And we talk with your front-line workers when we're on site at retail stores, warehouses, banks, hospitals, government agencies and factories and when we're in the field with utility technicians, firefighters, police officers, delivery drivers and others who prove every day how essential they are to our lives. We also conduct double-blind studies each year to get truly unbiased feedback about how healthcare, retail, manufacturing, field service, and warehouse associates are feeling, and we look to third-party studies to see what feedback others are receiving.



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Money is important to front-line workers, but it's not the only thing people care about. If it was, we would only be talking about the Great Reshuffling, not the Great Resignation. Nurses, warehouse workers, retail associates, and public safety professionals are leaving the workforce and not coming back. If they were only concerned about making more money, they wouldn't be walking away from a paycheck completely.

In fact, the desires most heavily influencing front-line workers' employment decisions range from "respect" and "learning opportunities" to "better mental and physical well-being" and "more technology tools."

In Zebra's latest [Global Shopper Study](#), 70% of associates said they view their employers more positively when they are provided with technology. This was a sentiment echoed by warehouse associates in a recent double-blind [Global Warehousing Vision Study](#) commissioned by Zebra. Over eight in 10 claim they are more likely to work for an employer that gives them modern devices to use for tasks versus an employer that provides older or no devices.

What's even more interesting is that we asked warehouse associates how they were feeling overall about the labour shortages and if they had been positively or negatively impacted as a result. Again, eight in 10 said they were positively impacted. When asked how they had been positively impacted, only 45% said they had received increased wages and bonuses. 57% said their employer had used technology to make their work easier, and 60% said working conditions had improved overall.

In another [analysis](#) conducted by academic researchers, we learned that "when blue-collar employees describe their schedules as predictable, they are less likely to quit." They backed up this finding with real-world data from retailers' labour performance. Though it may seem like this is counter to the notion that front-line workers want flexibility, it's not. They want to know when they will work so they have the flexibility to schedule – and follow through on – personal obligations, too.

Unfortunately, a [Meta survey](#) of 8,000+ global front-line workers and C-suite executives found that nearly half (45%) of front-line workers are planning on leaving the front line altogether in the year ahead. That means we're at risk of this situation getting much worse than it is today if we don't start giving front-line workers their own voice and doing a better job of tuning into whether what we're hearing in the market is specific to front-line or office workers.



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In the Meta study, 70% of front-line workers say they have either suffered from burnout or felt at risk of burning out. They are also worried about not having access to the proper tools to be successful at their jobs and job security as a result.

No easy way forward

Admittedly, it's not always easy to meet front-line workers' expectations – or any employee's expectations for that matter. Even here at Zebra, we have seen how difficult it is to offer front-line workers more flexibility in our production environments.

As a company, we have customer demands to meet. But we also know that we can't overlook or ignore the needs of our valued employees in the process. Will we solve every labour issue overnight or suddenly find a way to give workers everything what they want? Probably not. But we won't stop looking for solutions and you shouldn't either.

So, let's acknowledge and eliminate our tendencies – as global business leaders, HR professionals, managers, and citizens – to generalise labour as a universal entity. Let's think about people for who they uniquely are and the varied experiences they're having as front-line or office-based workers. Let's also consider how our expectations of each role differ and what we can reasonably do as employers to make each person's experience more rewarding personally and professionally.

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