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1. Improving the Frontline Employee Experience Can Unleash Productivity
2. Cracking the Productivity Code: Unleashing the Power of Digital Transformation at the Frontline

Teaser: Embracing digital transformation can solve the productivity paradox seen in this workforce segment.

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Image URL: https://unsplash.com/photos/three-men-cleaning-windows-0yL6nXhn0pI

Image credit: Victor

The last decade has seen an explosion of technological advances and disruptions which have fundamentally changed business models, products and customer interactions. It has also impacted the composition of the workforce, the type of work that gets delivered, and the ways in which it is delivered. There is no denying that technology has the potential to unlock and revolutionize worker productivity. Yet, productivity has stagnated across the globe, having not surpassed the 1% mark in the last decade.

Taking a closer look at the biggest technology investments, these have been focused on replacing labour intensive and repetitive tasks. This held enormous promise for the frontline workforce, which represents 80% of the workforce. However, for these workers this has not resulted in productivity gains. This requires a renewed focus on the productivity paradox at the frontline, and the productivity-technology interplay, which has largely been a one-sided perspective.

What Impacts Productivity At The Frontline?

Historically, the productivity of frontline workers has been measured through output per employee. This assumes that productivity is increased by finding ways to increase work outputs. However, what this mechanistic perspective fails to consider is how the overall work experience of this workforce impacts their productivity.

In reality, frontline workers face unique obstacles to their experiences at work, which hampers their productivity. Understanding these obstacles are critical to truly unlock the potential of technology to enhance worker productivity.

1. **Lack of clear expectations and autonomy to deliver**
   Frontline workers consistently report that they are unclear about what is expected of them, beyond scheduling and tracking outputs. This is because most organizations rarely think about these roles within the context of career progression or within the broader job architecture. This work design reflects the output required from workers without considering how meaningful the work is or how it builds skills. As a result, performance is measured and tracked based solely on outputs, and employees lack the autonomy to manage their work and the agency to job craft.

2. **Lack of development and advancement**
   Frontline workers tend to have little visibility of or access to development and advancement opportunities. They are often excluded from directed development efforts, and upskilling opportunities are deprioritized when it hampers their productivity or outputs. As such, frontline workers report low levels of motivation when it comes to upskilling and developing themselves. This also results in a lag in upskilling and reskilling of this workforce, as development is not considered as key to their experience or productivity.

3. **Lack of engagement and inclusion**
   Frontline workers experience higher levels of burnout than knowledge workers. There are a number of factors which impact this, including the type of support available to these employees and the lack of recognition or acknowledgement that they experience. Frontline workers also report that they feel excluded from the overall workforce, which impacts their overall feeling of engagement and belonging.

4. **Underserved in digital technology**
   For knowledge workers, technology investments such as collaboration tools, artificial intelligence and machine learning have automated manual tasks, augmented their work and have enhanced overall productivity. In contrast, these digital tools have been slow to reach the frontline workforce, if at all. For frontline workers, technology advances are focused on improving processes, production and efficiency, and not towards building digital skills and delivering a broader digital experience.

All of these factors impact the overall experience of the frontline workforce. By focusing on enhancing the experience of these workers, there is potential to unleash productivity through

an engaged and motivated workforce who are ready and able to contribute. And digital technologies have the potential to do just that.

Seizing The Opportunities Of Digital

From research within the domain of employee experience, we know that technology has the potential to deliver an engaging workforce experience that reflects the digital reality and future of work. In turn, a digitally enabled experience also builds digital dexterity and drives digital adoption within organizations, further enhancing productivity.

There are three strategies to leverage technology that have the potential to enhance the experience of this workforce and unlock productivity. These are centered around creating autonomy, enhancing work, building skills and fostering a connection with the organization.

1. ***Generative artificial intelligence (AI)***
   Generative (AI) is receiving a lot of attention as it transforms the way that workers are able to access and apply information. For knowledge workers, the benefits are obvious. However, research shows that generative AI could have a positive impact on less experienced employees that are typically within the frontline workforce. Firstly, it can easily replace tasks that do not require human intervention or are not value-adding. A good example of this is the use of chatbots in contact centers to act as a first-line response to typical customer queries. Secondly, it provides a wealth of information that frontline workers can easily access, without seeking input from team members or managers. This not only removes bottlenecks to delivering work, but creates a sense of autonomy, curiosity and encourages independence of these workers.

2. ***Move from automation to augmentation and adoption***
   Only 23% of frontline workers believe that they have access to the right technology to remain productive. This means that digitalization has to evolve beyond the automation of processes and production to augment the overall worker experience. Practically, this includes utilizing technologies as a platform to enhance work to make it meaningful. For example, companies can use knowledge management systems that are crowdsourced across teams to tap into employee knowledge and contributions. This also allows workers to develop digital dexterity and transferable digital skills, which can be utilized across various roles and business areas.

3. ***Creating a digitally connected workforce***
   The digital employee experience is a critical missing link for unlocking frontline worker productivity. For frontline workers, digital technology has the potential to connect them to the organization through simple mechanisms such as shared communication platforms, digitalization of shift arrangements and mechanisms to connect frontline workers to the broader workforce though community forums. Organizations that utilize these platforms find value in connecting workers to the tools

and support that they need, using mechanisms that align to their day-to-day ways of working (for example mobile applications).

Digitalizing the frontline workforce experience holds great potential for unlocking productivity at the frontline. Task automation is no longer sufficient and the hype of digital has to translate into productivity gains for this important workforce segment. This starts with recognizing the needs and obstacles of these workers. These needs are solved by creating a connection to the broader organization, automating for efficiencies to get rid of wasted effort, creating meaningful work through autonomy and independence and building digital dexterity through the adoption of technology.