Workplace Technology

Investing to Improve the Employee Experience

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Executive Summary

The pandemic has propelled changes in our working environment that may have taken decades to occur otherwise. Increasingly, leaders in human resources (HR) are spearheading the advancement of the employee experience as a strategic imperative for their organisations. To this end, innovation is key.

In partnership with WorkForce Software, HRD Connect asked our audience to provide information about how technology is improving the employee experience within their own organisations.

From the results of our survey, we see that deskless workers – whether they are driving, on a shop floor, in an assembly line or out in the field – are nowhere near as visible as their deskbound counterparts.

Fortunately, however, more organisations are recognising just how pivotal improving the employee experience can be. While the pandemic may have slowed down investment into this area, things are beginning to pick up once more. With greater investment and focus, new technologies are being implemented to improve the working life of all types of employees.

About the Research

The analysis in this report was compiled using responses to HRD Connect's survey of senior HR professionals conducted in Q2 2021.

The survey was carried out by HRD Connect in partnership with WorkForce Software.

The survey respondents work across a wide array of sectors, most notably:

12.4% financial services

12.2% software & telecoms

10% manufacturing and

19% services

Survey respondents also work in a mix of organisation sizes, with 23.6% of those surveyed working in larger companies (over 5,000 employees).

Key Findings

Deskless/hourly workers are often forgotten, which highlights the need for technology to improve how they communicate and collaborate with others within an organisation – wherever work happens.

Despite interest in various technologies to support a positive employee experience, organisations are not investing enough resources at present.

The majority of those surveyed said they were "evolving" their employee experience program, with over two-thirds planning on improving technology to support the employee experience over the next year.

Improved employee–manager communications and just-in-time or micro-training delivered to mobile devices were highlighted as the technologies that could most add value to the employee experience.

Empowering Deskless Workers

The pandemic posed a unique challenge for on-site or "deskless" workers across industries such as agriculture, construction, retail, manufacturing and utilities. In large part, this is thanks to the unprecedented volume of operational challenges that organisations have since faced.

As a result, channels of communication have become less effective and the gap between on-site workers and senior management has broadened. Consequently, many deskless workers have become more disengaged.

Empowering Deskless Workers

According to research from Emergence Capital, 80 percent of the global workforce does not sit behind a desk to do their jobs, and yet most technology has been developed for their desk-based counterparts.

Essentially, deskless workers are often overlooked by their employers. According to our recent survey, more than 40 percent of respondents said that 25 percent or more of their workforce was deskless. Yet despite this, less than one percent of business software spending is focused on the needs of deskless workers.

What percentage of workers in your organisation are deskless/hourly?

28%

59%

13%

—— Less than 25%

—— 25% – 50%

—— More than 50%
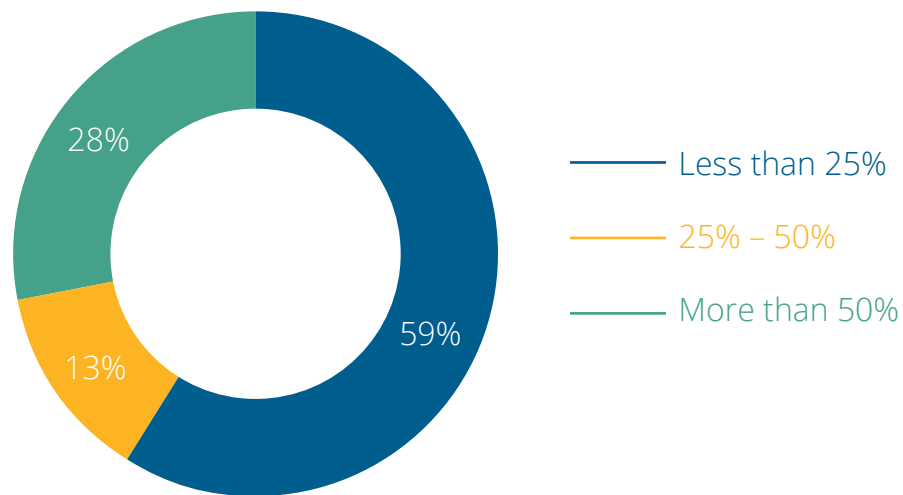
"There's a huge disconnect. Deskless workers form the backbone of many organisations, but many businesses have yet to make the investments needed in technology to ensure they are engaged, productive and supported in the workplace."

Marc Gingras,
SVP, Employee Experience Strategy at
WorkForce Software

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New Status Quo

Deskbound workers have also faced a seismic shift. The COVID-19 outbreak forced offices to close, and over a year later many employees still find themselves working from home.

New Status Quo

"During the coronavirus pandemic, we've all had to adjust to new ways of living and working. Changing how we work together has shown us that flexibility and adaptability are essential to our future success and well-being," says Mike Potter, executive director, digital transformation & group CIO at Thames Water, a large private water supply and wastewater treatment provider.

"Crucial to this will be the technology our teams use, especially those on the frontline. From engineers working at our sites to agents handling customer contacts, we need everyone to be equipped with the right tools for the job," he says.

"We're rolling out mobile devices for all our colleagues to support working from anywhere, be it offices, operational sites or at home. This could be a laptop, tablet or even just a smartphone, which will help them effectively carry out their role and stay connected."

But according to Gingras, the technology made available to deskless workers is often cumbersome to use, driving many to use consumer systems, such as WhatsApp, to communicate with their colleagues.

"When they get to a work environment that doesn't offer the same kinds of seamless experiences with their technology, they disengage right away or – perhaps worse – find unapproved workarounds."

As such, there is an urgent need for technology to fill this vacuum. Not only will this improve the productivity of deskless workers, but it will also grant them better access to senior employees within an organisation, thereby ensuring they remain as engaged and empowered as their desk-based counterparts.

"Millennials and Gen Z now comprise the majority of the global workforce. They were raised with smartphones and social media – customer-centric software and devices that are easy to use and accessible from anywhere."

Marc Gingras,
SVP, Employee Experience Strategy at
WorkForce Software

Evolving the Employee Experience

Organisations are clearly eager to improve the employee experience. Two-thirds of those surveyed said they were "evolving" their employee experience program, with plans in place to roll out more processes and systems.

Evolving the Employee Experience

Bayer, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, is one example, having rolled out a new technology suite in 41 international locations in 2020 to assist in talent acquisition and career development.

"Effectively, it's a skills-based predictive analytics platform that can match people to career paths," says Holly Quincey, talent attraction lead at Bayer. "So, we're using it for TA [talent acquisition]."

The platform also aids career development once individuals are hired and matches them with mentors within the organisation – both of which are improving talent retention. "Predictive analytics predict your next two job moves; it then suggests your skills gaps for those job moves and that can lead you into your development plan," Quincey adds.

Meanwhile, retail giant L'Oréal has also accelerated the use of technology in its HR practices.

"Over the last year we have adapted our training to be virtual, which has allowed us to offer a much greater range of immediately accessible courses to employees across our business. This has resulted in an increase of over 1000 online learning hours, which overall meant a 20 percent increase in the number of learning hours year-on-year," says Richard Cross, chief HR officer for L'Oréal UK and Ireland.

"Through the pandemic we have increased communication from our leadership through online 'town hall' style meetings and virtual drop-in sessions with senior leadership, with technology allowing us to continue to have two-way conversations in a virtual setting," says Cross.

"Hosting our events offering virtually has also meant we've been able to reach far more people at one time through not being constrained to physical room sizes."

How would you describe your current employee experience program?

- 15%
- 18%
- 67%
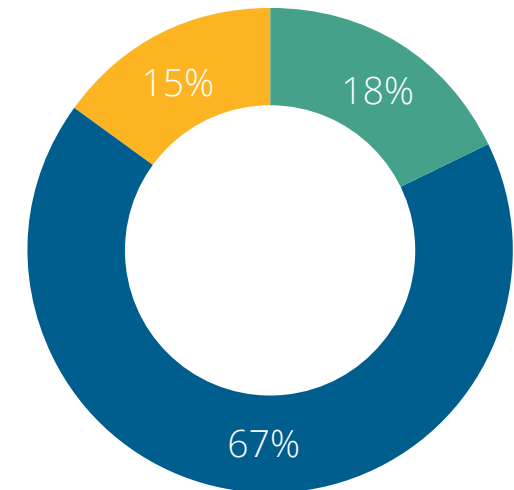
Mature – We have multiple programs, processes and systems in place

Evolving – We have some capabilities and plans to roll out more

Basic – We have limited capabilities and/or no plans to add more

Collaborative Approach Is Key

An overwhelming 81.7 percent of those surveyed said that the chief human resources officer (CHRO) and the wider HR department were responsible for spearheading initiatives related to the employee experience. But while it is logical for HR departments to take the lead, input from other members of the C-suite is essential.

Collaborative Approach Is Key

"Historically, HR departments have been the primary decision-makers and people in support of most employee experience initiatives. But really, everyone – from IT to operations to finance – needs to get involved and recognise how important it is to sustained business success."

Marc Gingras,
SVP, Employee Experience Strategy at
WorkForce Software

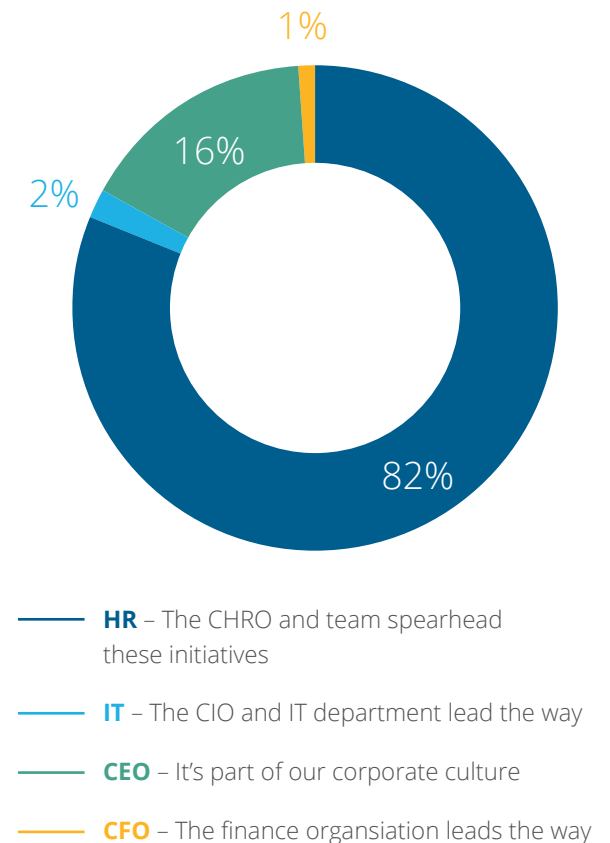"If you take care of your employees, it's going to have a huge impact on your top and bottom line," says Gingras.

Given how integral the employee experience is to the performance of any type of organisation, HR initiatives are becoming much more of a collaborative affair.

"We have a dedicated HR Systems Run and Change team who work with our Leadership team on ensuring technology across the employee experience is effective and evolving," says Darren Cornish, people services director at Aviva.

"Whilst all HR colleagues have an accountability for that technology deployment, we also have a dedicated Colleague Experience team that works with our Systems team to deliver a continuous flow of improvements."

It has become increasingly clear that there are immeasurable benefits to HR, operations, finance and IT departments working closely together. In such scenarios, the employee experience vastly improves, which in turn leads to greater levels of productivity and creativity within an organisation – and better talent acquisition and retention.

In your organisation, who is primarily responsible for employee experience?

1%
16%
2%
82%

HR – The CHRO and team spearhead these initiatives

IT – The CIO and IT department lead the way

CEO – It's part of our corporate culture

CFO – The finance organsiation leads the way

Pandemic Accelerates Digital Adoption

More than two-thirds of survey respondents said that improving technology to support the employee experience over the next 12 months is a priority. However, many of that group also said there are other initiatives within their respective organisations that are equally important to them, with the pandemic accelerating the adoption of digital technologies across all departments.

Pandemic Accelerates Digital Adoption

Speaking about the AI platform that Bayer has recently implemented, Quincey describes the effect it is already having on the business.

"It means faster time-to-hire, a greater match of individuals through skills, and the business cost per hire has gone down. It means that we've been able to focus our recruitment teams on proactively building our talent pipelines for the future based on our succession planning in capability gaps."

"We hope that by the end of 2022, we'll have fully integrated all talent modules and launched our career marketplace," says Quincey.

"And that brings all the good elements of that strategy together, whether that's projects, internal mobility, coaches [or] mentors."

L'Oréal also has more plans in place to use technology to boost its employee experience moving forward.
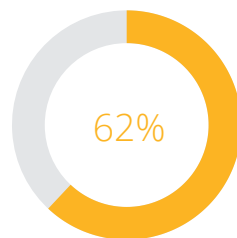
"Technology will play an important role in maintaining our culture when employees are working both at home and on-site," says Cross.

In the next 12 months, what priority does your organisation place on improving technology to support the employee experience, including for deskless workers, at your organisation?
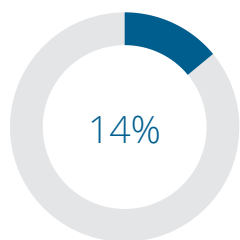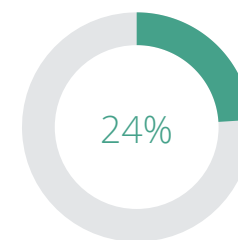
14%
URGENT
It's a top priority for us

62%
IMPORTANT
It's on our roadmap but other initiatives are equally importants

24%
LIMITED
We don't plan to specifically invest in this area

Financial Pressures

When asked about the technology their organisations currently have in place to support the employee experience, only 34.5 percent of survey respondents said they had invested in employee–manager communication, with even fewer providing employees mobile access to time-off, pay, and calendar-scheduling tools (19.9 percent).
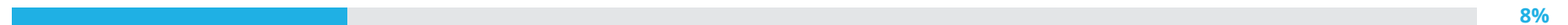
Financial Pressures

Which technology do you currently have in place to support a positive employee experience, including for deskless workers, at your organisation?
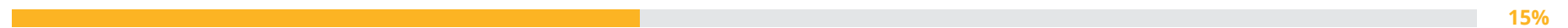
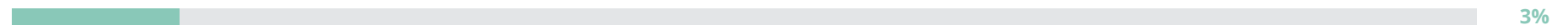**Employee – manager communications**

35%

Rewards and recognition platform

8%

Shift swapping/flexible scheduling tools

5%

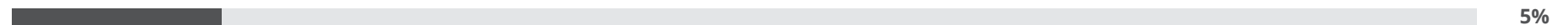**Intelligent, frequent pulse surveys that can feed our people analytics**

15%

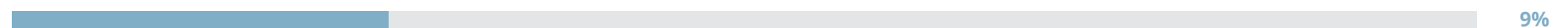**Just-in-time- or micro-training delivered to mobile devices**

3%

Employee mobile access to time off, pay, calendar and schedules

20%

Task management platform

5%

Other

9%
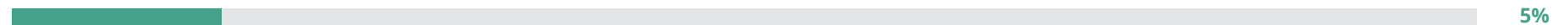
Financial Pressures

Access to such technologies is essential in today's evolving-pandemic world. However, these statistics suggest that organisations need to invest more time and resources if they wish to truly improve their employee experience. That said, the pandemic has hindered companies from prioritising investment in such areas, with businesses forced to tighten belts to weather the economic fallout.

Fortunately, as indicated by many of our survey respondents, as businesses begin to adapt to changes wrought by the pandemic, there has been renewed interest in improving the employee experience through greater investment in technology.

"Having technology do much of the heavy lifting of what have been manual time-consuming processes (such as booking holidays, absence etc) frees our employees up to do what is most important, be there for our customers," says Cornish.

"Our employee experience is becoming increasingly digital and tech-enabled. This gives us an opportunity to transform the experience, as well as deliver brilliant basics."

"Technology is enabling our employees to do what they need to do quicker and more effectively. It is enabling us to surface analytics and insight that allow us to intervene into the experience and target improvements. There is no doubt in my mind that a strong HR leader now needs to also be a strong HR technologist."

Darren Cornish,
People Services Director at Aviva

Communication and Training

Survey respondents were also asked to rate the technologies they believe will have the greatest impact on the employee experience for both deskbound and deskless workers. In pole position was improved employee–manager communications (32.5 percent), followed by just-in-time or micro-training delivered to mobile devices (17 percent). Employees have become accustomed to a variety of platforms within their personal lives that enable real-time communication. Unsurprisingly, employees expect to have the same level of connectivity with colleagues too.
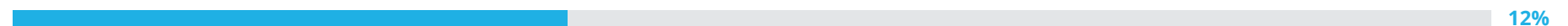
Communication and Training

Which technology do you think would have the greatest positive impact on employee experience, including for deskless workers, at your organisation if added?
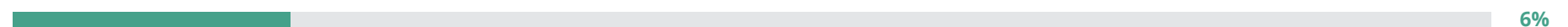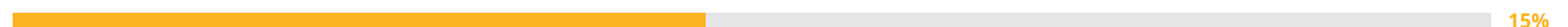
Improved employee–manager communications

32%

Rewards and recognition platform
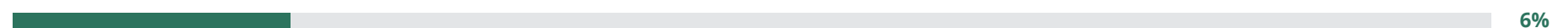
12%

Shift swapping/flexible scheduling tools

6%

Intelligent, frequent pulse surveys that can feed our people analytics
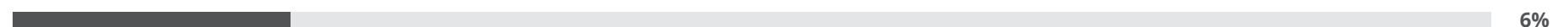
15%
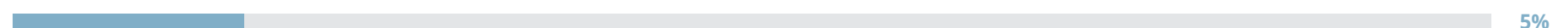
Just-in-time or micro-training delivered to mobile devices

17%

Employee mobile access to time off, pay, calendar and schedules

6%

Task management platform

6%

Other

5%

Communication and Training

> "Corporate communications are historically top-down – companies can send messages down to employees, but it's often impossible for them to communicate back up the chain to clarify directives, ask for advice, or settle any scheduling conflicts one on one."
>
> Marc Gingras,
> SVP, Employee Experience Strategy at WorkForce Software

"By removing that barrier workplaces can become more connected and save a lot of time trying to get in touch with one another."

Meanwhile, just-in-time or micro-training delivered to mobile devices helps strengthen the relationship between employees and their supervisors while also plugging any skills gaps and aiding career development. For example, if an employee has worked a considerable amount of overtime over the past fortnight, a prompt can be sent to their manager, which gives them the opportunity to reach out and check-in with staff.

"The supervisor/manager and employee bond is one of the most important relationships in any organisation," says Gingras. "Ensuring employees have the skills and support needed to do their jobs creates a healthy work environment and more engaged workforce."

Alternatively, if a project is due to commence, micro-training can be sent directly to the employee so that they can acquire the information and skills they need in the coming days or weeks. "It's very personalised and in the moment," Gingras adds.

At professional services firm PwC, it has incorporated just-in-time learning into its organisation via an app. It quizzes employees using a competitive format that is both engaging and fun, to help its people in their upskilling journey.

"It's really easy and accessible, and so people really appreciate that now; especially in the world that we work in, you can fit small-sized chunks of training around your work," says Tracey Lenthall, HR director for deals at PwC UK.

Feeling Engaged

Finally, survey respondents were asked what percentage of their workforce they believed were positively engaged. The bulk of those surveyed (59.9 percent) said 60 percent or more, with less than half of respondents believing that the majority of their staff were positively engaged at work. While the latter statistic is certainly respectable, it could be considerably higher using a multi-pronged approach, according to Gingras.

Feeling Engaged

"Closing the employee experience gap is more than just a quick fix and requires employers to really understand the role communication, technology and the day-to-day moments play in an employee's journey with an organisation," says Gingras. "Focusing on those three fundamentals is essential to improving the employee experience."

Lenthall echoes similar sentiments, stating that employees appreciate regular updates and the ability to communicate with senior staff.

"What's been really successful is our chairman and other board members communicating through live stream ... people really appreciate it, because they're getting in-the-moment communication," she says.

The pandemic, says Lenthall, has highlighted the importance of empowering employees in order to improve engagement. Technology at PwC has played a vital role in this effort, with the organisation employing a variety of mobile apps and digital platforms to empower staff.

On a scale of 0% to 100%, what percentage of employees in your organisation do you think are positively engaged at work?

3%
20%
40%
37%

- 10% to 20%
- 20% to 40%
- 40% to 60%
- 60% +
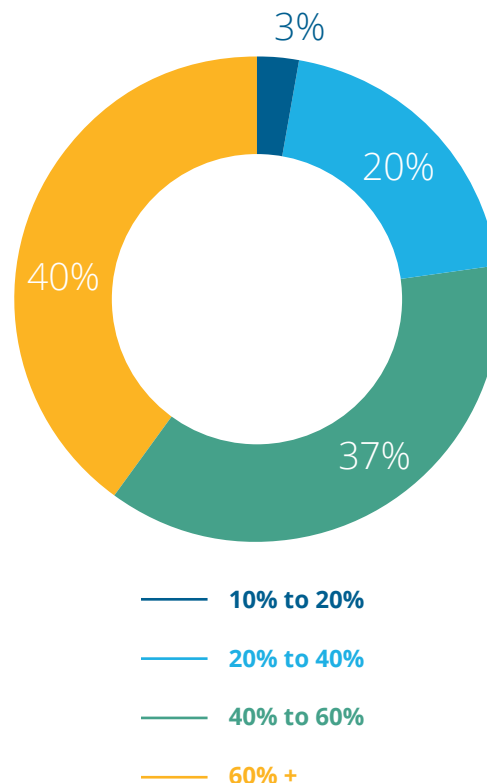
"We have our mental health app, so if you are struggling in any way you can tap straight in and get support and we have a fantastic app called Gems, which is our recognition platform; you can recognise people through social recognition or what we call points recognition."

Tracey Lenthall,
HR Director for Deals at PwC UK

Conclusion

While the pandemic has placed a great deal of pressure on organisations and their employees, it is also responsible for several positive changes in the world of work. Employers are beginning to truly understand the importance and value of the employee experience and, therefore, offer far greater flexibility and opportunities for engagement.

Businesses are also increasingly recognising that technology is the medium through which this is all made possible. As such, IT and HR departments have become more interlinked. And through their collaboration, far better levels of communication – both horizontally and vertically – can transpire throughout an organisation of any size. What's more, technology provides the opportunity to create moments that matter between an employee and their supervisor.

As our interviewees have further indicated, technology is also delivering more appropriate and timely training to employees in spite of the operational challenges presented by the pandemic. Not only does this improve productivity levels, it also boosts levels of engagement among both deskbound and deskless workers.

All in all, technology enables employers to raise the bar on the employee experience – to levels never seen before.

While there is still some way to go before the entire workforce are provided with the technology they need to feel empowered, engaged and productive, organisations of all kinds are now moving in the right direction.

About WorkForce Software

WorkForce Software is the first global provider of workforce management solutions with integrated employee experience capabilities. The company's WorkForce Suite adapts to each organisation's needs – no matter how unique their pay rules, labour regulations and schedules – to deliver a breakthrough employee experience.

Enterprise-grade and future-ready, WorkForce Software is helping some of the world's most innovative organisations optimize their workforce, protect against compliance risks and increase employee engagement to unlock new potential for resiliency and optimal performance. Whether your organisation's employees are deskless or office workers, unionised, full-time, part-time, or seasonal, WorkForce Software makes managing your global workforce easy, less costly and more rewarding.

Learn more about **WorkForce Software**.
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