



Women on the Front Line: Enabling Them to Thrive, Stay, and Perform

Catalyst in partnership with Accenture



Executive Summary

From retail sales to heavy machine operations, frontline jobs are some of the most important—and toughest—out there. As women are critical to our workforce, it's important to better understand how they really feel at work. What we found points the way toward ensuring women in these roles are fully recognized and fulfilled to give their very best.

We interviewed dozens of women in frontline roles. Again and again, women told us that while they are motivated to perform at a high level, they are too often frustrated by environments and practices that do not consider their needs.

Here's the good news: Companies have a clear opportunity to attract and retain more women. When companies address the needs of women in frontline roles, they position themselves to increase employee satisfaction, morale, and engagement—leading to improved retention and stronger performance.

So, what *do* women in frontline jobs need?

In this report, Catalyst and Accenture outline the following top four actions that would improve working conditions and provide step-by-step guidance to get there.

- 1. Invest in physical well-being.** Women's bodily safety, physical needs, overall well-being, and personal autonomy should be paramount. Facilities and policies must be designed or refreshed to accommodate women.
- 2. Adopt employee-centered scheduling practices.** Companies must remove sources of instability, unpredictability, and rigidity from scheduling systems to account for women's lives outside work.
- 3. Create and clarify growth opportunities.** Companies must clearly communicate well-structured opportunities for growth and advancement that are designed to meet the needs of women.
- 4. Enable managers to lead empathically.** Company leaders should enable managers of frontline employees to create positive environments so that employees feel valued, supported, and connected.

These steps can not only motivate women in frontline roles to stay but also enable them to thrive.

Listening to Women on the Front Line

I would feel much happier in my position if I felt like my input was valued or my work/life balance was much more balanced.

—White¹ woman, age 56, Manufacturing, Frontline Manager, Diary Entry

Women in frontline roles assemble and operate machinery on the shop floor, host and serve hotel and restaurant guests, clean rooms, prepare food in industrial kitchen operations, and sell consumer goods to the public in retail stores across the country. They work long, unpredictable, and inflexible hours, in many cases for low wages² and few benefits. They are often in physically stressful circumstances with demanding customers and workloads. Even in industries where the majority of frontline workers are women, they are disadvantaged because of their gender, and, for many, because of other aspects of their identity—such as race, ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic status.³

While women and people of color⁴ are disproportionately concentrated in the roles with the lowest pay, they still deserve workplaces that respect their talent, life circumstances, aspirations, health, and well-being. Companies that profess to care about gender equity and employee experience should address the many issues that women in frontline roles told us are exhausting, frustrating, and demoralizing. Just as employees in office-based corporate jobs have demanded, and often received, more empathy, flexibility, and trust in their workplaces,⁵ frontline employees merit the same.

But research finds that the structure of frontline work—the company-level practices that govern how work is scheduled, performed, assessed, and rewarded—often harms women. While men are also sometimes harmed, this report focuses on women, because women, and especially women of color, are overrepresented in low-paying roles.⁶ While not all frontline roles are low-paying, women are over-represented in these kinds of roles. This contributes to the gender pay gap,⁷ which, in turn, is a reason why women, along with single mothers and their families experience higher rates of poverty.⁸

What Do We Mean by “Frontline Jobs”?

For this report, we focus on frontline roles in three US industries: manufacturing; hospitality, which includes accommodation and food services; and retail.⁹ We define frontline roles as roles directly involved in production, processing, and service delivery in non-office settings that typically do not require higher-education qualifications. In these jobs, employees are required to work in person at a specific physical location (e.g., factory, hotel, restaurant, store) during shifts that may be set or variable and often include hours outside the current Monday to Friday, 9-to-5 paradigm of office work.¹⁰

The women represented in this research are essential to the daily operations of many of the world's largest companies. What do they need to be successful? Catalyst endeavored to find out.

Through one-on-one interviews and diary entries with over 70 women in frontline positions and frontline managers,¹¹ we heard that women are motivated to contribute, perform at a high level, and hit their goals—but they are also frustrated because employers have implemented a system that imposes high physical, social, and psychological costs; often fails to respect women's needs; and doesn't consistently invest in well-being and growth. Because frontline issues are not prioritized, women in frontline roles lack the work conditions they need to thrive.

Our research uncovered an imbalance of expectations and support. As companies start to turn toward stakeholder capitalism, emphasizing the interests of various stakeholders beyond traditional shareholders, it is vital to prioritize and address the needs of women in the workforce. This includes supporting their personal, physical, professional, and social well-being.

In 2022, annual separation rates in manufacturing, retail, and hospitality were extremely high at 40%, 60%, and 82%, respectively.¹² Compounding the problem, there aren't enough people with appropriate experience in the US to fill manufacturing or retail vacancies.¹³

Total 2022 Separation Rates by Industry



40%

Manufacturing



60%

Retail



82%

Hospitality

To stay competitive, companies must create an environment in which frontline employees will stay, thus unlocking cost savings in recruitment, reducing turnover, and fostering consistency among their workforce, and in turn, their customers.

We often hear about companies that simply copy and paste strategies from the corporate setting to attract and retain women to the frontline environment. But applying the same DEI strategies used in corporate settings to women in frontline roles misses the nuance of different jobs and environments.

Some companies are already trailblazing positive changes. Our interviews with women frontline employees uncovered several positives in their work experiences. They described enjoying their jobs, and mentioned team camaraderie, rewarding interactions with customers, supportive managers and supervisory staff, and/or transparent growth opportunities, all of which they particularly valued. From our research, it seems clear that frontline roles have the potential to be more respectful and more rewarding.

We feature some of these Inspirational Practices in the following sections, modeling thoughtful systemic change that can make a difference. We encourage companies and leaders to truly evaluate the current systems and structures for frontline work, and consider how they might be changed for the better. The results are bound to be good both for women and for business.

Labor Unions and the Frontline Employees Initiative

A discussion about fairness for frontline employees would not be complete without a mention of labor unions. Unions are one of several approaches that can be used to improve the experiences of workers, since they are tools for elevating employee voices and improving workplaces. This report focuses on the ways employers can create systemic, cultural shifts for frontline employees through practices and policies.

Key Opportunities

1. Invest in physical well-being.

Women's bodily safety, physical needs, overall well-being, and personal autonomy should be paramount. Facilities and policies must be designed or refreshed to accommodate women.

3. Create and clarify growth opportunities.

Companies must clearly communicate well-structured opportunities for growth and advancement that are designed to meet the needs of women.

2. Adopt employee-centered scheduling practices.

Companies must remove sources of instability, unpredictability, and rigidity from scheduling systems to account for women's lives outside work.

4. Enable managers to lead empathically.

Company leaders should enable managers of frontline employees to create positive environments so that employees feel valued, supported, and connected.

Catalyst Tools

We've created a suite of tools to help Catalyst Supporters make targeted change for women in frontline roles. We offer two tools—for executives and frontline supervisors—that are available now:

Window to the Front Line

This action-oriented digital toolkit equips corporate leaders to make progress in attracting, developing, and retaining women in frontline roles through an essentials checklist, leading practices from industry peers, and innovative solutions from Catalyst experts.

Moments That Matter

This manager-tested toolkit prepares frontline supervisors to help build rewarding and respectful environments for women in frontline roles through 24 scenario-based learning cards and a collection of video and audio micro-learnings.

Invest in Physical Well-Being

I've been a server for many years, and I don't think I've been asked once what could be improved for me as a worker. I think a lot of the decisions are made from upper-level table conversations amongst a group of men that have never served in their life. Yet they're the ones that lay out the foundations, and the do's and don'ts, and the uniform.... I would just love to be asked, "Hey, what could we do to make this easier?"

White woman, age 35, Food Services Employee, Interview



What Are the Issues?

- ✘ **Frontline women's bodily needs and well-being are often unacknowledged, unconsidered, or simply ignored.**
- ✘ **Worksites are not designed for women.**
- ✘ **Women are concerned about sexual harassment, physical security, feminine health, and other issues that may not be evident to leaders or accounted for in traditional workplace practices.**

Traditional approaches to workplace safety have tended not to recognize that the workplace experience is impacted by gender, and that gender matters when it comes to safety at work.¹⁴

For women who participated in our research, these issues include handling machinery and tools designed for a narrow set of body types; working in facilities that lack lactation rooms, locker rooms, and even restrooms for women; sexual harassment; unruly customers; the location of workplaces; wearing impractical and ill-fitting uniforms; and laboring for long hours without adequate breaks.

While most frontline jobs are physical in nature and require, for example, standing for most of a shift or manipulating equipment and products, women shared stories that illustrated the many ways their bodies are drained, taxed, and even threatened because of a failure to account for gender differences. Organizational design and policy choices can impose unnecessary physical costs on frontline employees' bodies and damage their bodily autonomy; and when these design decisions do not incorporate women's experiences, women suffer disproportionately for it.

In addition, the experiences shared by women and their managers indicate a lack of system-level support. Whether in the design or redesign of facilities, tools, or uniforms, in safety precautions (or lack thereof), or in neglectful implementation of sexual harassment policies, women's bodily needs, security, autonomy, and comfort often are disregarded by decision makers. **The consequences for business can be significant.** Employees who feel unsafe or physically uncomfortable at work are not able to give their full attention to their tasks and are likely to leave. Sexual harassment¹⁵ is especially concerning as there is a large body of work documenting its negative consequences on both employees and employers.



An unsafe and/or unhealthy work environment is among the common reasons US frontline workers quit their jobs (not related to pay and Covid).¹⁶



Based on some existing estimates, the average cost of lost productivity for workplace sexual harassment can be more than \$22,500 per person affected.¹⁷



Targets of sexual harassment are more than six times as likely to change jobs as other employees.¹⁸

Federal and state laws provide some protections as well as uniform standards, and violations of legal requirements related to breaks, sexual harassment, expressing breastmilk, and pregnancy accommodations can be costly, both financially and reputationally. But organizations need to be more proactive about creating workplaces that are physically welcoming to women.

This aligns with trends beyond the front line: Human capital issues, especially worker wellness and safety, are being called out by investors in shareholder resolutions at many companies with large frontline workforces.¹⁹ Therefore, leaders should prioritize solutions that embed attention to physical safety and well-being into leadership conversations. The sharpened focus on employee well-being in corporate offices²⁰ can be extended to the frontline workforce.

Notably, our analyses show that physical issues were not limited to the traditionally male manufacturing industry, but included hospitality and retail where women are overrepresented in frontline jobs. These findings signal that the failure to account for women's experiences in workplace design is not a question of women's representation in an industry, but rather of the inclusion of their voices in decision making.

Leaders must learn to incorporate women's physical needs into decision-making processes. Listening to, respecting, and considering how the physical environment affects women's experiences at work is key.

What Did Frontline Women and Managers Tell Us?

Workplaces Are Not Built for Women

In many locations, women are not provided with adequate restrooms, locker rooms, and lactation rooms, or they are required to make unwieldy adjustments to do their work. Legislation, including the recent PUMP Act and the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA),²¹ legally requires companies to provide certain protections to employees.²²

But real change will only happen when a wider variety of body sizes and physical realities are empathically considered during the initial design of workplaces, or steps are taken to incorporate these realities into existing physical layouts and tools.

A lot of our women are shorter, so they have to use a ladder to get to some of the places. And I think maybe if the machines were built for people of a broader height range, that would probably be a little bit more helpful.

–African American woman, age 26,
Manufacturing Manager, Interview

I do wish for my position we had a changing room/area. We often have to change quickly and [besides me] my team is all guys so sometimes [it's] a little uncomfortable.

–White woman, age 27,
Accommodations Employee, Diary Entry

My main issue with my physical location of my store is that there is no designated area for nursing mothers! I was told I had to pump in the bathroom for months until I broke down and looked up the laws and demanded there was a change....I was able to switch into a pop-up tent but assembling the tent and breaking it down each time is a pain, and my coworkers were very unsupportive and made rude remarks to me about my pumping breaks!... I did not feel valued or protected as a nursing mom trying to provide for my baby! My milk supply drastically dropped, and it really affected my mental health overall.

–White woman, age 29, Retail Manager, Diary Entry

Physical Threats Are Real

Women described several ways they are alert to possible physical aggression at work, including around certain workplace locations, taking late-night public transportation, managing disruptive customers, and being subjected to sexual harassment. Concerns about these very real threats must be taken seriously to support frontline women fully. In the case of sexual harassment, for example, there is considerable work to do:



Accommodation and food services, retail, and manufacturing are the top three industries in which sexual harassment charges were filed with the EEOC from 2005-2015,²³ and current evidence shows that complainants face retaliation, indifference, or trivialization by companies.²⁴



Sexual harassment can result in decreased productivity, increased time off taken, and negative performance reviews. Compared to other employees, those who have experienced or observed sexual harassment are less likely to be satisfied with their supervisor/manager and organizational culture, and less inspired to do their best work.²⁵

I would not allow [my daughter] to work in the restaurant industry because of my experience. Because...it was very normal to be assaulted, when they felt like it. Now as an older person, it doesn't happen as much because usually those guys like to prey on younger girls, which is happening in my restaurant right now. I've got a 35-year-old man chasing after a 17-year-old girl. And the management knows—they've pulled him in and said, this is inappropriate. And I love the way they're taking care of it. I love it because that is not always the case. [My previous workplace] wouldn't have done this.

—White woman, age 40, Food Services Employee, Interview

I know we've had certain circumstances happen at the plant that I'm at now. Some things happened with a supervisor supposedly acting or speaking inappropriately to [women] and they wouldn't write statements because they were in fear that it would come back on them, that they would get in trouble, or they just didn't want their name included in it.

—White woman, age 41, Manufacturing Employee, Interview

A person may not have a car and...they may not be comfortable getting on the city transportation late at night. So, I think it should be able to be accommodated where a person doesn't have to work so late so they can get home safely.

—Black woman, age 42, Retail Manager, Interview

We don't have cameras so it's kind of hard seeing what's going on around you. Like my surroundings, I'm in the front. I can't know what's going on around if you don't have that protection that I need. [Once there] was an older dude running in and out of the hotel saying random [things], being weird. So that's kind of scary.

—Black/African American woman, age 31, Accommodations Employee, Interview

Women's Experiences Are Not Acknowledged

A lack of concern for women's bodily autonomy was also a theme raised by many women who described workplaces where they are not allowed to take breaks, where the uniforms and workplaces are uncomfortable, and where they encounter managers with little grasp of what it's like to menstruate or be pregnant, post-partum, or perimenopausal. Companies' approaches to these issues should go beyond state laws like mandated breaks²⁶ or reliance on understanding managers. A systematic focus on physical realities and well-being of all frontline employees should be embedded in companies' approaches to design and management of their workplace and staff.

Today I have worked 13 hours, been screamed at by three clients, and haven't had a break to have breakfast or lunch. I feel physically and mentally drained and I just wish we could be given an hour to think or relax to get back into a good headspace to give the guests the best experience! I love my job, I truly do, but sometimes I feel extremely underappreciated.

—White woman, age 27,
Accommodations Employee, Diary Entry

They don't give breaks.... No matter what shift you work, you really don't get a break.... [In my previous workplaces we had] two 15-minute breaks, one 30-minute lunch. [Here] you don't get lunch breaks at all. I think one time my boss had said, you could lock the door for three minutes or something like that to go use the bathroom.

—Black/African American woman, age 32,
Retail Employee, Interview

When you have a male manager...if you ask to go to the restroom and they see that you go to the back [to pick up a pad or tampon] instead of the restroom, then they're questioning like, is she gonna go get her phone? Is she gonna go talk to the people in the back?... Understanding of our body [is important].

—Hispanic woman, age 26,
Retail Employee, Interview

A challenge [is the] uniform, and I know that sounds very silly and simple, but we can only wear shoes from a specified list of waterproof non-slip shoes. And all of them are extremely uncomfortable. We have to wear a fitted pair of pants, also extremely uncomfortable.... We wear a tuxedo type shirt, not made for women, also very hot and uncomfortable. So, I would just say the overall look of the uniform isn't really female-friendly. It's more male-friendly, even though females outweigh the males in numbers at the restaurant.

—White woman, age 35,
Food Services Employee, Interview



The Catalyst Solution



Acknowledge and respect the concerns women have about their physical experiences of work on the front line.



Create systems and processes that filter all decisions related to work sites and equipment, employee safety, and physical well-being through a gender lens.

Start Here

- ✓ Include women in decision-making processes when designing physical spaces, equipment, and practices.
- ✓ Design tools for a range of body sizes and physical attributes.
- ✓ Provide supplementary tools—and training on using them—to further facilitate design that is inclusive of a broad range of body types.
- ✓ Provide feminine hygiene products in bathrooms.
- ✓ Designate private lactation rooms that are not bathrooms and provide refrigerators for storing milk.
- ✓ Clearly communicate sexual harassment policies and enforce a zero-tolerance approach.
- ✓ Provide safe and confidential reporting mechanisms for employees to report incidents of sexual harassment.
- ✓ Provide and clearly communicate anti-harassment training and resources such as counseling services or support networks for targets of sexual harassment.
- ✓ Create feedback loops for employees to voice safety concerns.
- ✓ Consistent with law and collective bargaining agreement requirements, incorporate breaks into all scheduling, train managers on the importance of breaks, and provide comfortable rest spaces.
- ✓ Relax dress codes, ensure uniforms fit a range of body types, and/or involve women in uniform design.
- ✓ Ensure women have convenient access to employee restrooms.
- ✓ Conduct a gender audit of workplaces.
- ✓ Check out Catalyst's Supporter-only tool for frontline managers, [Moments That Matter](#), and Supporter-only digital toolkit for organizational leaders, [Window to the Front Line](#), for more actions you can take.

On the mechanical side of it...there might be some things that you need to be a little bit stronger to be able to do lifting different things.... But for the most part they provide a lot of tools that we can participate in the same things as the men are. We have [lifts] and stuff like that that'll aid us [moving] heavier components. And, we're just as capable of working on crane operations.

–White woman, age 53,
Manufacturing Employee, Interview

In the women's restrooms, they have a side room with like a kind of a comfy couch, a fridge, for like nursing mothers. They have those in many areas where I work and I'm a mother myself. And so that was very relieving to see that they offered that.

–White woman, age 30,
Manufacturing Manager, Interview

One of my bartenders here, she's only 18 and she's come into situations where guests will say inappropriate things to her being that she is only a little 18 year old standing behind a bar, [it is challenging to deal with those situations but] we have pretty much all the tools and things we need. We end up banning guests from the property. We can call non-emergency on a guest and have a guest completely evicted from the property and trespass, so they don't come back.

–White woman, age 29,
Accommodations Employee, Interview

I love the fact that this company has a pantry for the team.... I think that that is really helpful for them.

–Pacific Islander Asian woman, age 40,
Retail Manager, Interview

Our store is small so we have to share one bathroom, but we recently got the company to provide feminine pads or hygiene things for women.... We kept asking our store manager, 'Can we get that? You have to get cleaning supplies anyways, you might still just have a little budget for it.'

–African American and German woman, age 32,
Retail Assistant Manager, Interview

I feel safe in there. We have cameras everywhere. We have a security guy who's always making sure no one's suspicious, hangs around for too long.

–Hispanic woman, age 19,
Retail Employee, Interview

They have mats for us to stand on.... Anything that we need, if we don't have it...we are able to request it.... For a little while we didn't have a coffee maker, so they requested that they put that back there for everybody. They recently just added those giant bottles of water [so] we can go back there and get water anytime we want.

–White woman, age 50, Accommodations Employee,
Interview

We can wear whatever clothes we want as long as it stays within the food safety policy....You have to wear a shirt that pertains to where you're working...but that's it. [And] an apron because of food. But everything else, I can basically choose what I get to wear as long as it's safe. I have to have my hair back and closed-toed shoes, but I can wear shorts if I want. I can wear colorful pants, I can wear fun shoes. I can choose what I cover my hair with. So they're really good about leaving those kinds of options open to you where you can express who you are.

–Latina/White woman, age 17,
Accommodations Employee, Interview

★ Inspirational Practice

Dow

Dow's **Facilities for All** initiative aims to improve the quality of experience for frontline employees by upgrading physical work environments at plant sites. Funding is set aside specifically for operations managers to select and plan enhancement projects that are most needed. Examples include gender-equitable restrooms, showers, and locker rooms; wellness rooms; onsite lactation rooms; cooking and laundry facilities; and grab-and-go options to facilitate healthy meals.



Conclusion

To attract women to and retain women in frontline roles, companies must go above and beyond relevant federal and state legal protections to show women that their physical needs, security, autonomy, and comfort are important to leaders and the organization. At best, morale and productivity suffer when physical hazards and discomfort are present; at worst, a company could be risking physical harm to employees. Examining all aspects of the physical experience through a gender lens is crucial to attracting and retaining a healthy and energized staff.

Adopt Employee-Centered Scheduling Practices

When I reported for my shift, I was told that I would be required to cover a four-hour portion of another shift due to a fellow team leader being out sick. I was given no notice before my change. I asked my supervisor if I could start the next day covering the extra time and was told that was impossible because no one else could cover it. I explained that I needed time to adjust my obligations. My supervisor just shrugged and walked away. I felt very unimportant. I felt like I was not valued as a person or an employee. I just worked the additional hours and said nothing else. Two days later another team lead was fired for not working extra hours.

—White woman, age 56, Manufacturing Manager, Diary Entry

What Are the Issues?

- ✘ **Long, volatile, and unpredictable shifts are the norm in frontline work, with little control offered to employees. Shifts often are not aligned to institutional (e.g., school and childcare) schedules outside the workplace and can require ten- and twelve-hour workdays, six-day workweeks, and regular weekend work.**
- ✘ **Companies require considerable flexibility from employees with little-to-no flexibility given in return.**
- ✘ **Rigid policies and practices overlook or ignore the needs of women, who are disproportionately responsible for child- and eldercare.**
- ✘ **Managers and supervisors are not always positioned to offer solutions.**
- ✘ **The “efficiencies” of current scheduling practices contribute to employee attrition and shrink the talent pool.**

Because many frontline employees work irregular hours—either due to schedule instability or because they work outside of normative Monday to Friday, 9-5 timetables to which most institutional schedules are aligned—work hours can create challenges. These challenges, which are often associated with “just-in-time” scheduling practices designed to minimize labor costs, include negative health, financial, and emotional outcomes for employees,²⁷ but especially women who have outsized family responsibilities. The stress of constantly negotiating the logistical hurdles put up by last-minute staffing decisions affects not only women, but their children, partners, and extended families.



Non-standard work schedules, including weekend shifts and non-fixed day shifts, are associated with significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion, job stress, and psychosomatic health problems for employees.²⁸



Volatile and unpredictable schedules are associated with psychological distress, poor sleep quality and unhappiness,²⁹ and increased parenting stress and financial insecurity.³⁰

Meanwhile, companies retain the right to change schedules or require overtime with very little notice, but frontline employees have little ability to request time off for urgent needs like medical appointments or childcare emergencies. When they do take time off, they sacrifice pay and are often penalized with demerits and disciplinary action. This problem is widespread, as one in 10 US children “has a parent working in the retail or food service sectors.”³¹ Companies can help, but not many do: Only 2% of employees in retail, 7% in leisure and hospitality, and 11% in manufacturing have childcare benefits.³²

Leaders need to understand that the financial considerations behind current scheduling systems do not take into account the human costs that are ultimately passed back to the organization in turnover, disengagement, and low morale. While some elements of scheduling are not likely to change—like store and restaurant hours—much of what was described to us suggested systemic organizational indifference to how scheduling demands impact employees’ lives and needs outside work, which are issues that can be addressed.



Flexibility is the number-one driver for people considering leaving their jobs in retail.³³



Work-life balance is the number-one driver for people considering leaving their jobs in manufacturing.³⁴

Frontline managers recognize the problems of inflexible policies but struggle to find solutions, constrained by organizational procedures and systems over which they have little influence. The result is that employees experience unnecessary stress that supervisors are unable to alleviate, leaving both feeling frustrated, burned out, and demoralized.

Schedule instability and unpredictability affect employers' bottom lines through increased cost of turnover, lower productivity, and higher negative employee outcomes. In our highly competitive hiring environment, scheduling systems that rely on shift volatility and 24/7 employee availability can drive turnover since employees are more likely to consider leaving when:



Schedules are unstable and unpredictable.³⁵



They don't have the flexibility they need.³⁶

But solutions that benefit both employees and companies are possible:



A study on retail environments that provided at least two weeks' notice of all schedules and eliminated all on-call shifts resulted in increases in consistency, predictability, and worker input, and found that stable scheduling increased median sales and labor productivity.³⁷



The same study found that shifts in customer demand—which are often believed to be the primary reason for schedule volatility in retail—only account for part of schedule instability, and that headquarter-driven instability is also a contributing factor.³⁸ What this indicates is that there are steps that organizations can take to address some of the causes of schedule volatility in the retail industry.

Ultimately, any benefits gained from just-in-time staffing are likely offset by the high cost and disruption of increased turnover.³⁹ Updating scheduling practices to allow for more employee input and consideration of life circumstances can be an important driver of women's participation in the frontline workforce.

What Did Frontline Women and Managers Tell Us?

Scheduling Practices Aren't Fair or Considerate

Women described a wide variety of ways that volatility, unpredictability, and inflexibility affected their work experiences, such as getting very little notice about shifts and being expected to be available regardless; being required to be “on-call” for a shift that may not ultimately be needed and for overtime and split shifts; and “down times”—short-term line closures—called with little notice. The stresses of schedule volatility can lead to lower job satisfaction and increased likelihood of viewing supervisors as unfair⁴⁰—which can be problems for morale and engagement, and ultimately, retention. Schedule volatility also creates income insecurity for hourly workers who have no guaranteed wage because they cannot predict what they will earn in a month.

When we had down weeks and got forced either to be off work or to be forced on a new shift, that could happen as late as Friday and it would start and be effective on Monday.

—White woman, age 41, Manufacturing Employee, Interview

The hours can be terrible. I feel like when I need personal time off, even though I'm willing to come in and work for other people—like stay longer or come in earlier or things like that [to support others]—if I need time off to myself, whether it's attending something with family or even a doctor's appointment, [my relationship with my employer] does feel strained. And I don't think that's fair.

—Black/African American woman, age 31, Accommodations Employee, Interview

They're saying they don't want labor to be high, so you can't have so [many] people working and not enough customers.... So they'll tell people don't come in or go home early.... I can understand it on a business standpoint, but on a personal level, I don't like it because it affects how much you're getting paid.... The manager, he's very understanding. The company, no.... There have been times where he actually got in trouble [because] they believed he was being too lenient.

—Puerto Rican woman, age 25, Food Services Employee, Interview

Inflexible Schedules Make It Hard to Manage Family Responsibilities

Parents recounted the challenges of working their assigned shifts when childcare is expensive and hard to find,⁴¹ shifts don't align with school hours or childcare options, and taking time off for a childcare emergency carries financial and disciplinary penalties. Even when parents patch together solutions through family members or working an opposite shift from their co-parent, they often miss important milestones and family time due to overtime or weekend shifts.

Companies also forfeit revenue and talent when they don't take childcare issues into account.



Before the pandemic, estimates suggest employers lost \$13 billion in productivity a year and parents lost \$37 billion in income a year because of inadequate childcare.⁴²



Efforts to attract, retain, and invest in working moms are also hampered by a lack of concern for the misalignment between work schedules and childcare.⁴³

I work at 4:00 in the morning, so I have to leave my home at 2:45 to be able to drop [my daughter] off and make it to work in time.... For me to be able to even get six hours of sleep, we have to go to bed by 8:00 and sometimes if [my daughter] takes a late nap, she's not ready for bed until 10. So that's definitely one of the struggles.

–Hispanic and Asian woman, age 31,
Retail Manager, Interview

[Shifts] always seem to be overlapping [with] one of those childcare times... whether it's having to drop your child off super early, more early than normal just to make it to work or having to get off work and rush to go pick them up because they've already been there half an hour later than the pickup time.

–White woman, age 35,
Food Services Employee, Interview

I feel like [employers] should ask, [and] take what you say into account, like, I can't work from this time to this time because I have kids. I wanna know if you are gonna put an emphasis on making me feel comfortable within your setting. Like, [you're] gonna care about my family...because you[re] gonna want me to mean something in your company.

–Black/African American woman, age 31, Accommodations Employee, Interview

Scheduling Expectations and Practices Can Limit Managers' Capacity to Support Their Teams

While scheduling issues manifest differently depending on the organizational context, supervisors and managers consistently expressed frustration that they had little influence over the challenges that company-level decisions and processes created for frontline employees, and they noted the negative effects on both employees and themselves.

My line does have a lot of overtime, but [also] a lot of times our planning team [doesn't] necessarily plan the best. So, they can say, oh, you get us to work Monday through Friday but then it's like, oh, well [client] wants [X number of additional units], so can y'all work the weekend? I really wanted to change that for my team because I got really tired of seeing them having to work every weekend. Some of them liked it because it's a lot of overtime, but there were other people like, you want time to spend with your family.... I find myself on the floor a lot [to cover for people because] I don't want my line to be down.... HR said that should never be the case. Like your management should have you all staffed so that... you're never out of people, unless the flu goes around and no one shows up. But yeah, there's just been kind of a battle between management and what my team and our teammates feel is the right call.... At the end of the day it's about cost savings.... The decisions are made high up.

–African American woman, age 26,
Manufacturing Manager, Interview

The scheduling system...populates how many people you're supposed to have during a specific hour. So, it tells you all this information, but then you're only allowed to use X amount of hours.... It doesn't configure that you have two floors or one floor. So sometimes whole departments will not be scheduled for coverage...and then some departments will be scheduled for double coverage. I think it's based on what we sold in the past year, or three years. So, it just doesn't give us much room [to make staffing decisions].

–Asian Pacific Islander woman, age 40,
Retail Manager, Interview



The Catalyst Solution



Create systems that allow women to have some control over when and how much they work.



Reimagine staffing policies and practices to alleviate the challenges that caregivers face.



Incorporate feedback from frontline managers and supervisors into scheduling decisions.

Start Here

- ✓ Where schedules cannot be fixed, offer minimum guaranteed hours.
- ✓ Allow employees to set parameters around their availability, and then respect their availability when making schedules.
- ✓ In addition to the above, where work hours are not fixed, make shifts predictable and share them with at least two weeks' notice.
- ✓ Optimize staffing to limit the use of required overtime and "on call" shifts.⁴⁴
- ✓ Align shift times with available local childcare hours.
- ✓ Design and develop tools that monitor and optimize scheduling so it better meets the needs of employees and the business.
- ✓ Update attendance policies so employees aren't penalized for attending to their caregiving responsibilities.
- ✓ Create feedback loops that allow supervisors and managers to have input on staffing decisions.
- ✓ Give supervisors and managers leeway to respond to attendance issues with empathy and provide guidelines and training for doing so.
- ✓ Create a culture of care about employees as whole people with lives and responsibilities outside of work.
- ✓ Provide paid sick leave and leaves of absence for frontline employees.
- ✓ Check out Catalyst's Supporter-only tool for frontline managers, [Moments That Matter](#), and Supporter-only digital toolkit for organizational leaders, [Window to the Front Line](#), for more actions you can take.

The transition I've seen [here]...is that we have finally figured out that people's lives outside of work play a huge role in their happiness at work. Now we really do try to seek to understand. In fact, as a company, we even changed some of the ways we handle discipline in that we're trying to not just have a black-and-white punitive system, but it's, "Okay, let's figure out what's going on so we can try to help."... We have the ability now to say, well this is an extenuating circumstance, so we don't necessarily have to penalize somebody because they're dealing with something like an illness.

–White woman, age 43, Retail Manager, Interview

My company does an amazing job at scheduling. I am very happy and it fills all my needs.... [My shifts are] determined by an availability that I set as an individual.... It's not expected that I work outside my availability and I really enjoy that a lot.

–White woman, age 32, Retail Employee, Interview

They have a dependent care [benefit]. It's pre-taxed.... I use it for my daughter that is in daycare. You get a receipt, you put it in and they pay you back.... So that does help. They do offer [childcare] backup options. I think 10 [times] a year if you need childcare and cannot get it for any reason.

–White woman, age 30, Manufacturing Manager, Interview

Years ago, [we had] lots of fluctuation in the schedule. They would try to schedule different times, different days, and rotate people and it just was best to keep people consistent because then people can plan their lives. So if someone had a class or somebody wanted to do something with a partner or somebody had to do something with a child, it's like you knew exactly what your week was gonna look like.... It's now more consistent, which makes it a lot easier to work in.

–African American and German woman, age 32, Retail Manager, Interview

Conclusion

Treating frontline women, and all employees, as if they live in a vacuum, devoid of family and personal responsibilities, long commutes, and physical needs like sleep and medical attention is not a sustainable—or humane—business practice. When companies ask employees to shoulder an undue amount of emotional, financial, and logistical stress because of volatile, unpredictable, and inflexible scheduling practices, they create a serious disconnect between organizational practices and the realities of frontline employees' lives. Companies can close this gap by implementing solutions that recognize the benefits that come with scheduling practices that consider the realities of employees' and potential employees' outside lives.

Create and Clarify Growth Opportunities

Growth is important because I always want to learn new skills that can help me perform my duties better. I'm always excited to learn and go to training when available. There aren't many opportunities available [though], so I have to take advantage when I see them pop up. The main roadblock is management not seeing the benefit in training us on new services or equipment before we start using them. My company could offer more training, bring in experts in our field to motivate us and also offer more positions specifically hiring women for the positions because most higher up positions are filled by men.

—African American woman, age 41, Retail Employee, Diary Entry

What Are the Issues?

- ✘ Existing growth opportunities are not clearly communicated.
- ✘ The terms of higher-level jobs are not always “worth it” to women.
- ✘ Biases and stereotypes can act as barriers for women and drive gender and racial disparities.
- ✘ A lack of appealing pathways to growth drives turnover.

Constant employee churn is not a given in frontline environments; a focus on training and advancing existing staff can lead to a more stable, supported, and skilled workforce. But organizations do not always provide transparent, equitable, and structured opportunities for advancement, and as a result, women don't always have access to growth opportunities and, instead, get the message that they are not valued. In addition, when credentials are prioritized over skills in higher-level staffing decisions, the skills frontline workers have acquired on the job are effectively devalued and opportunities are closed to them.

We repeatedly heard about situations where, even when growth opportunities were available, information on how to access those opportunities was not. Women described the difficulty they face simply learning about what growth pathways are available to them and described their experiences of feedback when applying for growth opportunities as sometimes being unhelpful or unclear, and at worst, discouraging and demoralizing.

This lack of clear growth and advancement opportunities can lead to turnover.



Of “deskless” US workers who said they might quit their jobs, 41% cited “lack of career advancement” as the reason.⁴⁵



Lack of training opportunities and/or low quality of training is a driving factor for 24.8% of women considering leaving the manufacturing industry.⁴⁶

Despite a strong desire for better pay and opportunities, not all women spoke positively about existing opportunities to advance. For example, more senior positions were not always appealing for reasons including excessive hours and stress relative to income, lack of flexibility to accommodate family and childcare needs, and the fact that the de facto hourly rate of a salaried manager can be less than what they are currently earning, especially if they work overtime or receive tips.

Some women we spoke to described not wanting to advance because they felt satisfied in their current roles but did make the point that what contributed to their positive experience was knowing that their choice to remain in place was their own. Yet, even for women not actively pursuing advancement, access to training on new skills or a chance to work in a different capacity are appreciated and show women in frontline roles that they are a valued part of the company’s success.

Leaders and managers need to think about advancement and growth opportunities as not simply about advancement through the hierarchy, but as a mechanism for improving the conditions of frontline work by rewarding performance and commitment, and properly valuing traditionally devalued skill sets. Employees want to see that leadership—from their direct manager up to the CEO—cares about their growth and development, and recognizes their expertise and experience as relevant to potential advancement and overall company performance.

Leaders should engage their talent development staff to review training, lateral, and advancement pathways as well as how these are communicated transparently and regularly in ways that are relevant for and accessible to frontline employees and managers. For training programs and promotions, make sure candidates are chosen based on skills-based metrics to eliminate bias from decisions, and create opportunities to sponsor and mentor women for those roles.

In the meantime, the lack of systemic attention to creating growth pathways that women find desirable and navigable tells women that their skills and expertise are not important, and it betrays an organizational attitude of indifference to the talent already working in the company.

What Did Frontline Women and Managers Tell Us?

Women Need Clearer Growth Pathways

A lack of clear information about pathways for advancement is a barrier to growth for some women, putting the onus on them to learn about and navigate these opportunities with little formal guidance or support. Women voiced frustration with the failure of some managers and systems to facilitate opportunities for growth as well as roadblocks such as limited access to head offices or lack of support from HR that prevent them from easily obtaining the information they need.

Previous research shows that frontline employees have strong desire for pursuing promotion at work, but they are not often successful



A recent report found more than 70% of frontline employees surveyed had applied to advancement opportunities.⁴⁷



But only 4 in 10 were successful in increasing their pay or gaining new opportunities, and less than 25% actually received a promotion or new role.⁴⁸

There are roadblocks [to advancement] because if you don't know that there's room for advancement or that there's opportunities for you to job shadow then you just fall in between the cracks. You have to ask a lot of questions.... So now I'm seeing it, but in the beginning [there] was no advertisement to say, you can go from this to being this, or you can take classes to develop yourself.

—Black woman, age 40, Manufacturing Employee, Interview

There's no clear system on how you can get advanced and so it's all about your personal relationship with your boss. Among the roadblocks is also the fact we are not allowed to communicate with our head office personnel...only through our managers, which makes it more complicated because if you don't trust your manager, you can't really speak up. There should be a clear system on how you can grow and where to get the resources for this. Then, there should be more people really willing to help, or at least to assist you.

—Woman, Accommodations Employee, Diary Entry⁴⁹

In the employee handbook somewhere there's some sort of graph that shows you can start here, then become a trainer, then become an assistant manager, then become a manager, then a store manager, and, you know, all your dreams can come true. But the reality of those things actually playing out, I don't think it's been mentioned once since I began years ago..... You can draw stuff in an employee handbook all day long, but it's the implementation that makes it stick.

—White woman, age 35, Food Services Employee, Interview

I am six years in my current job but still I didn't get [a] promotion in my department. Sometimes, I feel so disappointed in myself, I feel so down and lose my confidence.... Today, I asked my manager again if I can apply [to] a position that I want, but she said that my character...that I am a shy type of person [who] is not suitable in the position that I wanted. I feel bad about that. But I will never give up.

—Filipino Woman, age 31, Accommodations Employee, Diary Entry

Promotions Need to Be Worth It

In our conversations, there was a palpable tension between increased responsibility and work hours that more senior roles demanded, and the limited improvement in terms of pay and benefits that typically accompanied them. This was particularly the case in the retail and hospitality sectors in which women are the majority of frontline employees. These jobs literally may not be “worth it” to women, who want to increase their pay, but not increase their physical and family care hardships. To make advancement opportunities appealing and reasonable for women, companies must consider the lived experiences of employees and managers when designing frontline roles.

I am not interested in growth or advancement with this company due to the work hours they expect and the physical demands of the job. This was always a survival job for me anyways, nothing long term. The only way my income would get better is if I spend five to six days of my week working at my store as a team lead, which I have no interest in after what I've experienced.

–White woman, age 38,
Retail Employee, Diary Entry

The assistant managers and store manager are scheduled 50 hours a week, and a lot of the [employees] who are under us...don't wanna promote because they don't wanna work 50, 60 hours a week. It's not appealing for them to be in management because we're scheduled so many hours and myself, I'm a single mom. I take care of my elderly mother. I have three dogs; 50 hours is a rough amount of time.

–Pacific Islander Asian woman, age 40,
Retail Manager, Interview

I don't want to advance in food service 'cause I plan on leaving food service.... It's not really feasible when I have a small child and they're not really flexible. So, I actually plan on going back to school to get a degree.

–Puerto Rican woman, age 25, Food Services Employee, Interview

Recruitment and Advancement Processes Can Disadvantage Women

Not all women felt that there was fair representation of women in their companies, or that women with experience in frontline roles had genuine opportunities to advance in their organizations. Some women, for example, noted that staff recruited to manager roles came from different pathways, creating a barrier for frontline employees to move up, and also sending the message that their experience in the field is not considered relevant for management positions. Because women, especially women of color, are not equally represented in higher-level roles across these industries, some women who were in higher-level positions faced challenges in terms of stereotypes and assumptions about what leaders look like. Overall, women are underrepresented in better-paying, more senior roles in frontline industries and instead cluster in lower-paying roles.



In manufacturing, women hold just one in seven production worker positions that pay at least \$1,000 per week, and fewer than 10% of higher-paying skilled shop floor jobs.⁵⁰



People of color, who are overrepresented in frontline industries, are underrepresented in senior frontline roles.⁵¹



The gap between desire for advancement and opportunity for advancement is larger for frontline employees of color than White employees.⁵²

I do feel that sometimes being a woman is a roadblock, because people are quick to assume that you're incapable, not cut out, or too emotional. I think that appointing more (well-deserving) women to leadership positions can do a lot for my company. They have a few women in leadership, but not enough. I hope to become one of them as I grow in the company.

—White woman, age 26, Accommodations Employee, Diary Entry

I came in for second shift to support [my team]. It was maybe an hour into second shift, and some guy came up to me and was like, "You're late, don't you work...for the temp workers? You're late for your second shift." And I was like, no, I'm a manager here. He was like, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And in the back of my head I was like, I really could have gotten upset, but there's just so few Black managers. I'm the only Black manager at this site.... I don't always think about it every day, but I'm like, "Wow... people really think that I'm a temp worker."

—African American woman, age 26, Manufacturing Manager, Interview

They [hire] management staff not from inside of the company, but they hire from outside. So really anybody that's had management experience anywhere could pick up and be a food service manager. And that's quite frustrating as well because from someone that's worked for the company in the business for many years, I would definitely know more about it than any guy coming in from college with a management degree or what have you, scooping up that position.

—White woman, age 35, Food Services Employee, Interview

Promoting [from] within. I feel like that's the best way... 'cause I work[ed] different jobs and cashier to entry level to management.... So I just feel like if you already have a person that's working in your company, no matter the store level or corporate, you could be a janitor. I just feel like you should give everybody the chance... I feel like that's how you miss a lot of great candidates. By just overlooking them.... That's the... main mistake because most people have the experience, they [are] just overlooked.

—Black/African American woman, age 32, Retail Employee, Interview



The Catalyst Solution



Create and actively communicate a culture of opportunity and growth responsive to the needs of all employees (e.g., pay growth and skills acquisition), rather than seeing development only as a way to advance a limited number of staff through the hierarchy.



Focus on creating advancement opportunities that do not disadvantage women.

Start Here

- ✓ Routinely communicate the company's commitment to nurturing growth and providing opportunities for employees at all levels.
- ✓ Train staff involved in the growth and advancement process, particularly frontline managers and supervisors, to provide clear, actionable guidance, feedback, and mentorship tailored to individual career paths.
- ✓ Develop and implement structured, company-wide growth plans specifically designed for frontline employees, outlining potential career paths, skill acquisition opportunities, and advancement tracks.
- ✓ Rethink degree-based qualification requirements for higher-level positions and implement skills-based models that recognize the variety of skills employees bring to or develop in their jobs, so more people have the opportunity to advance.
- ✓ Design frontline management roles to be more attractive, considering factors like competitive compensation, manageable workload and hours, well-defined responsibilities, and flexibility.
- ✓ Create stretch opportunities that allow employees to explore new roles and responsibilities, enabling them to assess fit while accommodating their work-life balance.
- ✓ Ensure that compensation packages align with the value and responsibilities of each role.
- ✓ Track and review compensation and promotion data for frontline employees, with a keen focus on gender, race, and ethnicity, to identify potential disparities and take corrective actions.
- ✓ Prioritize equal pay for comparable skills, not just identical job titles, ensuring that employees with similar qualifications and responsibilities are compensated fairly.
- ✓ Check out Catalyst's Supporter-only tool for frontline managers, [Moments That Matter](#), and Supporter-only digital toolkit for organizational leaders, [Window to the Front Line](#), for more actions you can take.

I think [my pursuing] this position or the wanting to essentially grow more was because it was being more vocalized in the store [with existing leaders] saying, “Hey, we're looking for more leadership,” or, “If you're interested in leadership, please come find someone to talk to.”

–Asian woman, age 22, Retail Manager, Interview

I didn't have the degrees that I thought that they were looking for. But that's why I'm glad my manager sat down and talked it out with me because they also have other things here where maybe you don't have the bachelor's degree that's needed, but if you have x years of experience in that specific field, then they will use that in place of the other [qualifications].

–White woman, age 40, Food Services Employee, Interview

Each six months we sit down with our store manager and go over different tasks and different goals that we want to set for that particular year. And we have the checklist where it lets us know if we met our goal, we need help reaching our goal, or if we didn't meet our goal at all. So we always have a year goal and...they check back [every] three months...to see how we're doing. Are we still on the right track? Once we complete that goal, we can add another goal where it would develop us more to [progress to] the next level because after Supervisor is Assistant Manager. And then after that it's Associate Manager.

–Black woman, age 42, Retail Manager, Interview

I had been offered management and advancement [at previous companies] but [those roles] made significantly less money than I did. And then you end up working 55 hours rather than 30. And so I had no desire to do that. But [here], because they care about their employees, they offered me 10 more dollars an hour to supervise. And then they guaranteed me that I'd still have three really good serving shifts. And they took away a couple things like if I didn't wanna work on the [specific dining area] anymore, I didn't have to. And then they also took away my on-call shifts.... They made it really nice and easy to transition.

–White woman, age 40, Food Services Employee, Interview

Just because I choose not to move up in my job right now, it's nice to know that it's right there for me at any time and any resource that I need. That's the one thing that I do love about my job too....So I do have to say with my company in particular, so much is offered....As a matter of fact, one of my coworkers just came back today and in the 11 years that she's been with the company, she started out as Front Desk and today she's starting as Assistant General Manager.

–White woman, age 50, Accommodations Employee, Interview

★ Inspirational Practice

Target

Target provides a range of learning and development opportunities to its frontline team members.

Prepare for Next: This internal development program readies Target team members to step into the next level, including exempt leadership roles. It is designed for hourly team members or supervisors who run a department and aspire to build a career as a frontline leader and lasts for 12-18 months. In stores, participants are selected by local leadership teams, and join a cohort facilitated by trainers. In supply chain, team members can opt into the self-paced program. Launched in 2022 and 2023, the program has received incredible reception, particularly among store and supply chain team members.



Success Profiles: Target created these standardized tools to define and create additional transparency into the skills and experiences needed and gained for roles. Success Profiles support career development conversations and focus development efforts and have been particularly beneficial in showing clear pathways for frontline career progression.

Conclusion

All frontline employees should have access to jobs that provide a decent wage and benefits, follow fair scheduling practices, and value employees' physical, social, and psychological well-being. Investment in growth and advancement opportunities should not be an alternative to any other elements of a "good" job but rather, an integral facet that requires devoted effort from companies. Investment in growth opportunities sends the message that frontline employees are valued, and, when practiced with commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, addresses inequities in representation. Both frontline jobs and the roles employees can grow into from them should be desirable and worthy of women's considerable energy and talents. High turnover is not a given in frontline environments. A focus on training and advancing existing staff can lead to a more stable, supported, and sustainable workforce—a win-win for employees and employers.

Enable Managers to Lead Empathically

Today was even worse than the rest of the week. [I had allergies to the antibiotics I received, and I panicked]. I called my manager, and she was so mad that I would miss a day, so I ended up going in. I was so uncomfortable and ended up working my whole shift covered in hives. She told me after my shift that I got a lot of complaints for not looking presentable to work with people. I was livid. At this point, I can't be treated this way anymore. Tonight was my last night. I quit.

–Filipino woman, age 43, Hospitality Employee, Diary Entry

What Are the Issues?

- ✘ Many organizations are not giving frontline managers the tools and training they need to manage their teams effectively and create a supportive working environment, especially for women.
- ✘ Frontline managers can be prevented by corporate policies from making empathic decisions.
- ✘ Managers who aren't trained to or given the authority and resources to support their employees aren't able to help them feel valued, connected, respected, and motivated.

The old adage, "People don't leave companies, they leave bosses," is true for many frontline employees.



"Bad boss relationship" was the most common reason "deskless" workers left their job, after pay and Covid-related reasons.⁵³



Frontline workers who have supportive managers are three times more likely to stay at the company.⁵⁴

Clearly, the manager-employee relationship is key. **For women employees dealing with the physical, scheduling, and growth concerns described in the previous sections, understanding and supportive managers can make or break their workplace experience.**

But managers and supervisors are not always well positioned, supported, and prepared by companies to create an environment in which their teams feel valued, connected, respected, and motivated.

While many managers—who are also dealing with many of the same issues as frontline employees—care about their employees and want to meet them with empathy and a true sense of concern for their well-being, they are also burned out from working under intense pressure to meet goals as well as dealing with understaffing and employee churn.

Many are also new in this position and although they may be skilled technically, they don't always receive practical leadership training on communicating with the team, giving feedback, and developing staff that would improve their chances of success as a team leader. In addition, they're constrained by rigid corporate policies and regulations that may tie their hands when it comes to addressing the challenges that frontline employees face regarding scheduling, physical work environments, and opportunities for growth.

Equipping frontline managers with the skills and tools they need to become the supportive managers employees want is key to fostering a workplace where women feel supported, valued, and motivated.

Leaders should be more strategic about creating systems, guidelines, and training that will equip managers to promote employee well-being through more effective management skills. This will mean different things in different industries or work settings, so corporate leaders should delve into the question of what their particular frontline teams and managers need with an open mind. It's important to bear in mind that cultural initiatives that work in the corporate setting may not deliver the same results when expanded to the frontlines, while interventions that may be discounted by upper management can in fact be effective for frontline managers and their teams.

Currently, the lack of systemic attention to positioning managers so that they can create a supportive team environment and positively impact the issues identified throughout this report leaves employees at the mercy of managers who may not have the ability or desire to support them. Worse, the managers who do want to support their teams must do so without organizational resources or in the presence of limiting organizational factors.

Systemic solutions are key so that both managers and employees know that building a positive workplace environment where everyone feels valued, appreciated, connected, and respected is an organizational priority.

What Did Frontline Women and Managers Tell Us?

Managers Want More Ways to Build Positive Team Relationships and Environments

A lack of clear information about pathways for advancement is a barrier to growth for some women, putting the onus on them to learn about and navigate these opportunities with little formal guidance or support. Women voiced frustration with the failure of some managers and systems to facilitate opportunities for growth as well as roadblocks such as limited access to head offices or lack of support from HR that prevent them from easily obtaining the information they need.

They don't care about off days or doing anything special to show appreciation for the hard work and meeting critical deadlines. I spoke to someone in HR about the "Ice Cream Treat" that is offered and explained that on my team alone there are four out of the six [who] are diabetic, and they can't participate in the event. They don't feel appreciated. No change at this point.

–White woman, age 56, Manufacturing Manager, Diary Entry

Companies, they always talk about wanting to build the relationships with their teams, [so] they should be planning things on a corporate level to bring the teams together.... Incentives, I think, is a big thing. You know, here's a \$50 gift card. Everyone, take your team out to lunch. You know, small things like that. It doesn't have to be these grand gestures, but something that specifically gets the team together in a non-work atmosphere I think is important and works.

–White woman, age 37, Retail Manager, Interview

Our corporate office rolled out this whole culture initiative thing and actually brought the managers down to the main headquarters and taught us this whole program about culture, and it was a big focus for them. But the problem was the buy-in from the management wasn't there.... I didn't understand the whys behind it. They were just forcing all this stuff at us.... I didn't see it working in my store, but that didn't matter. They were just speaking this stuff. So, it was like giving out like these postcard things that tell people, "Good job." Or, these other postcards that tell people how they can do a better job They're just not the most efficient tools I see. When it comes to rewarding people, I find one of the biggest motivators is actual verbal appreciation. How you handle them, how you speak to them, how you treat them, and then, of course, money.

–White woman, age 35, Food Services Employee, Interview

The company started streamlining and they took all the rewards [away]. Like they used to have a program where you could get points from your manager and you could buy hotel stays or, they had a whole menu of things.... They stopped a lot of those programs [like] the plant would barbecue for everybody...which was a way to unify the plant. You sit down and eat together all in the cafeteria, even managers, that was something fun.... I like a company that feels like a family. You know they care about you, they look after you, they give you bonuses, they're understanding.

–Black woman, age 46, Manufacturing Supervisor

Managers Need Team Leadership Training

Managers may not have the experience or skills to lead in an empowering, caring, supportive, and inclusive manner with their team members, especially if they are different in gender, race, or ethnicity. Several voiced a desire for formal training on interpersonal relationship-building and managing and communicating with large, diverse teams. When they haven't been offered the training they want, they try to figure it out on their own, which is stressful and inefficient.

Larger studies have also found that frontline managers want to learn how to function better as a team:



Teamwork and collaboration, people management, and communication are among the top areas where managers want training.⁵⁵

Lack of training affects employees, too, who notice when managers aren't equipped or encouraged to advocate for team members, for example by giving regular feedback, both positive and negative.



Frontline employees who wanted feedback at least weekly but only received it monthly were 2.5 times more likely to intend to leave their jobs.⁵⁶



73% of frontline employees think a supportive manager is important to their own career advancement.⁵⁷

[They don't realize] that with the proper training they can actually get much more out of their people. Instead of just relying on us to figure out the training on our own In the beginning it was very hard to manage people.... The logistics operations, it's a policy, it's very easy to follow. You read the book, it's black and white, but not everyone is the same. So, the people training and understanding how to manage different types of people with different types of personalities was a big problem in the beginning.

–White woman, age 37, Retail Store Manager, Interview

I wish there were more things about inclusion training when it comes to conversations in the workplace and things like that. I think that they could use that. But they don't really enforce anything like that. I would have to do that on my own. [It] feels like the way I'm guessing a teacher would feel the way they have to provide all their own tools and go shopping for everything.

–Black/African American woman, age 31, Accommodations Team Lead, Interview

[The main challenge of my job is] managing all different personalities in different people. I have 65 people reporting to me, so my team size is huge. And being able to understand what makes everyone tick and...what are some things that I need to avoid with people is probably the biggest challenge.... It was kind of overwhelming at first to have all these people reporting to me. I feel like I can't give all of them enough time.... I would like to spend more time with every individual, but with this big size of a team, it's really hard to do that for everyone.

–Asian woman, age 24, Manufacturing Manager, Interview

Managers Need to Be Allowed to Make Empathic Team-Level Decisions

Some corporate policies and practices limit managers' latitude to make decisions that better serve their teams and their relationships with their employees from a holistic, people-centered perspective. For example, rigid attendance and scheduling policies that penalize employees when they need to take time off to care for a sick family member force managers and employees into an antagonistic relationship. Managers described to us how they want more flexibility at the team level to help them create a more positive relationship with team members.

Managers are also challenged to develop a clear understanding of what employees actually need and want in their workplace experience. This is important because there is a positive relationship between manager understanding and employee perceptions of being supported.⁵⁸

I've seen a lot and had to bend the rules and break the rules. My function, my belief is I protect my team. My team protects me. That's my philosophy...I've had to do things for the caregivers...when your daycare closes at five or six and you're expected to work until 6:00 or 6:30, something has to be done. And typically [the office-based management] is not very concerned with people's outside lives away from work. But team leads, we know our teams and we want to keep a consistent team. So, in order to maintain that, we have to be very aware of people's day-to-day lives, what their stressors are.... I've had to manage around that. I still have to hit a number every hour. I still have to produce quality parts and I still have to follow the rules, but the rules don't really fit for some circumstances.

—Black woman, age 55, Manufacturing Manager, Interview

I do have to manage their shifts, meaning that if someone's on vacation, they have to come in and cover, and then they have to go to straight days. For example, I have to actually manually go in and modify their schedules, which is kind of painful for them and me, right? Because it requires a lot more interaction where our system in the past...gave them complete autonomy over all of that.... I don't think I need to be doing that.... I'm paying my operators to run processes. I should trust them to be able to manage their time.... I think that's a struggle.

—White woman, age 45, Manufacturing Manager, Interview

Monday after Thanksgiving when we came back and I told you my room was so, so busy. We actually couldn't leave that day until we were done.... No one that doesn't have work email is allowed to have their phones on the floor.... But [my team member] needed to go out to his car and call his babysitter 'cause he was gonna be late. Well usually they won't let us do that but I'm like, "Yeah, go ahead, just come right back 'cause you gotta tell the babysitter." [Based on company policies he would have had to] just leave them wondering [but] I'm like nah, it doesn't really work that way.

—White woman, age 42, Manufacturing Manager, Interview



The Catalyst Solution



Provide meaningful organizational resources to managers—and equip them with the skills and structures to enact those resources—so they can create a supportive workplace for employees.



Make support for frontline employees and managers an organizational priority.

Start Here

- ✓ Equip frontline managers with the resources and authority they need to support employees and communicate clear expectations for creating positive team environments and relationships.
- ✓ Create opportunities for frontline managers and employees to connect on a human level.
- ✓ Put time into managers' and employees' schedules for team-building activities.
- ✓ Train managers on increasing their empathy⁵⁹ skills so they can develop more caring and motivating relationships with team members.
- ✓ Raise managers' sensitivity to issues such as unconscious bias and discrimination through diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings.⁶⁰
- ✓ Train managers on the importance of openness and humility to improve employees' feelings of being heard, respected, and valued.
- ✓ Check out Catalyst's Supporter-only tool for frontline managers, [Moments That Matter](#), and Supporter-only digital toolkit for organizational leaders, [Window to the Front Line](#), for more actions you can take.

We get a budget to celebrate birthdays or celebrate anything. They don't say what you have to celebrate. That is up to the manager.... So for example, when I have 100 checkouts [in the] housekeeping department sometimes [I] go and buy lunch for everybody.... They appreciate that because [they] have free lunch when you have to clean all those rooms.... So we always do kind stuff to keep our associates connected with us.

–Latina woman, age 49, Accommodations Manager,

When I first started with the company, we had the opportunity to go volunteer with [a nonprofit organization]. We had opportunity to...sign up and volunteer as groups. And after the pandemic that kind of stopped because it had to, but I wish they would bring that back because something like that brings managers and employees together and it's a huge bonding experience.

–White woman, age 50,
Accommodations Manager, Interview

Train the management on working with groups of women.... More of a team, group family atmosphere within the workers would substantially help a lot of the emotional deplet[ion] that I think comes from being managed by a group of guys.

–White woman, age 35,
Food Services Employee, Interview

My manager has made a strong impact on me, and it was more negative than positive. I don't appreciate the tone he uses to speak to his colleagues. He needs to understand that he's not raising kids, he's managing adults who have been in the company long, even some longer than him. [He] also needs to respect others' opinion as well give others a chance to voice their opinions.

–Caribbean/West Indian woman, age 34,
Accommodations Employee

We have one manager [who] loves to do burger burns for us, to show the appreciation and for us to be able to get together and [increase] camaraderie [and] team building.... We all participate and get to have a little barbecue here at work. And sometimes it'll be a little extended lunch. We usually get 30-minute lunches, but they'll excuse us to have an extended lunch for maybe an hour. And we get to all team bond and enjoy a meal together.

–White woman, age 53, Manufacturing Employee, Interview

★ Inspirational Practice

Sodexo

3 Checks for INclusion was created by Sodexo Healthcare’s Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Belonging Council in response to feedback gathered in the 2021 Employee Engagement Survey and listening sessions, which indicated that employees at all levels wanted to feel a greater sense of belonging. The program encourages all employees—including frontline managers—to actively contribute to creating an inclusive culture at work where everyone feels valued, seen, and heard by asking themselves three questions at the start of each day:

- Do I show respect for others?
- Do I check my biases?
- Do I help others belong?



These three questions are conversation starters during meetings, team huddles, and staff activities, and robust resources and guides are available to all team members. Healthcare was the first division of the company to launch to over 25,000 employees, and the Healthcare 2023 Employee Engagement Survey showed significant improvements in engagement, especially for frontline employees. Since March 2023, four other Sodexo divisions have launched, and in FY24 it will be fully rolled out throughout the United States.

Conclusion

Working with managers who don’t care for, value, or respect employees was a major theme of interviews and diary entries, and the emotional toll it takes was evident when women talked about managers who don’t treat their team with “compassion,” “have their favorites,” or “don’t accept any suggestions.” To really show women that a positive workplace experience is a priority, companies need to be much more intentional in cascading resources and training to frontline managers and holding them accountable for creating the type of workplace where women can thrive.

Methodology

Format

A qualitative study was deliberately chosen for this research to give participants the opportunity to fully express their views and speak openly about their workplace experiences. Frontline employees are among the least studied groups of employees within organizational studies. Qualitative methods are most appropriate for research on understudied groups as they allow researchers to understand the lived experiences of participants without making assumptions.⁶¹ In addition, Catalyst was intentional in starting its frontline research initiative by providing an opportunity for frontline women to make their voices heard, naming and describing their workplace experiences. While there has been a great deal written about frontline employees in recent years, little of this material has included detailed accounts of women's experiences and views.

We collected the qualitative data using two methods: semi-structured interviews and a diary study. The one-on-one interviews were conducted via telephone and video conference platforms, depending on participants' preferences. The interview team was composed of Catalyst staff with expertise in in-depth interview techniques. The diary study was programmed and administered through a third-party platform.

Recruitment and Sample

A combination of snowballing sampling and targeted recruitment through an external vendor was utilized to identify research participants. For the interviews we recruited a total of 48 participants, of which 26 were frontline employees and 22 were frontline managers⁶² working across the manufacturing, accommodations and food services, and retail industries. For the diary study we recruited a total of 24 participants across the same industries; four were managers. All the frontline employees that we recruited were women. Three of the frontline managers that participated in the interviews were men, all of whom managed frontline teams that included women and two of the frontline managers who participated in the diary study did not identify their gender. See the demographics table for more details about our sample.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interview questions were purposefully designed to gain a broad understanding of the experiences of frontline employees and frontline managers. The interview guide was informed by a comprehensive literature review and included questions across a range of domains related to the workplace experience for frontline employees and frontline managers. In addition to asking participants about their experiences of work, the interviews also sought participants' views and experiences on what could be changed to improve the workplace experience. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing

participants the opportunity to offer additional insights outside of the structured questions. This approach was taken in recognition of the fact that frontline employees and frontline managers are subject matter experts and that they have an invaluable contribution to make to understanding the experience of frontline workplaces. All the interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Diary Study

In the diary study, we asked participants to journal about their workdays toward the end of their days for at least 30 minutes. Participants had access to the study for a total of 5 days and were required to complete the study during at least three different days. Day 1 included a set of demographics questions. On each day, participants were asked to journal about the things that made them feel positive or negative about their workday. They were given different follow-up questions to reflect on particular aspects of their work consistent with the interview guides. This method gave us a unique opportunity to understand how women working in frontline roles feel about work as they go about their workdays.

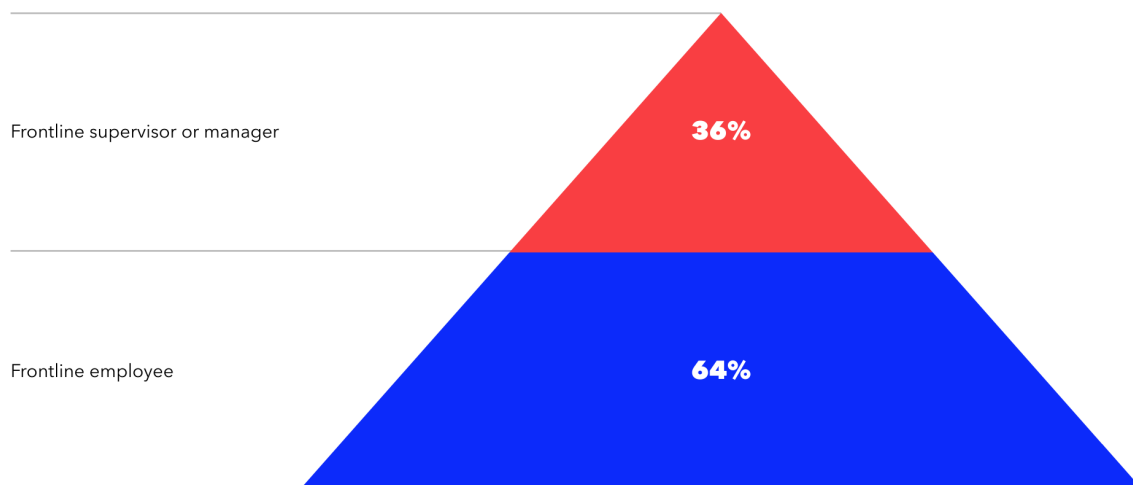
Analysis of Interview Data

The combination of interviews and diary entries provided us with a very rich dataset. The two lead researchers coded two of the interviews independently using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, and then compared codes. A codebook was developed based on this step of open coding; the two lead researchers then coded another set of transcripts using the developed codebook and ran a coding comparison. When inter-coder reliability was assured, the two lead researchers continued analysis of the remaining interviews and diary entries independently.

The analysis provided an in-depth understanding of frontline employee and frontline manager workplace experiences; highlighted the challenges and difficulties, the positive and rewarding experiences; and revealed participants' views on what measures and actions could be taken to improve workplace experiences.

Demographics

Rank



Industry



32%

Manufacturing



29%

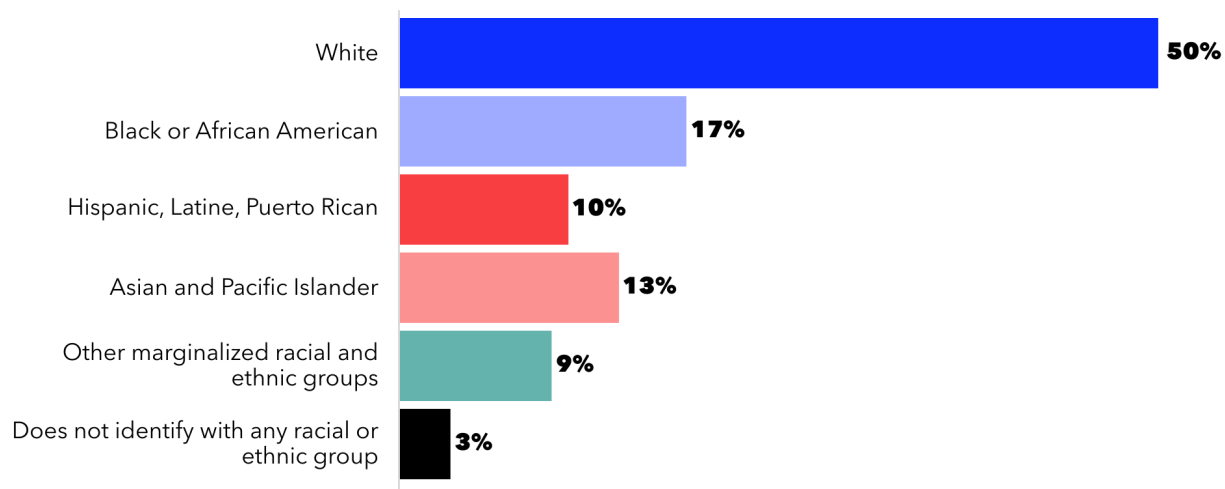
Retail



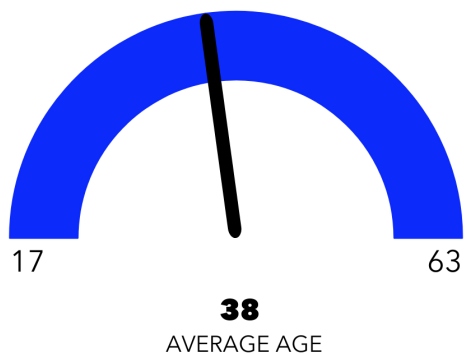
39%

Hospitality

Race & Ethnicity

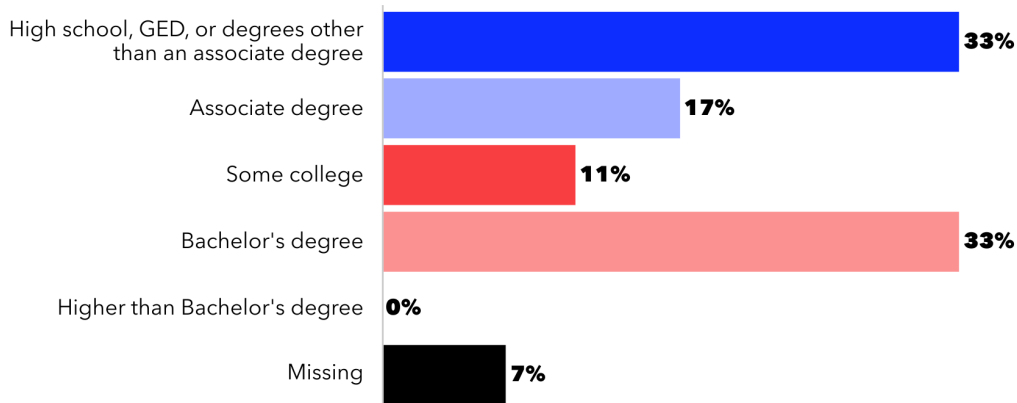


Age

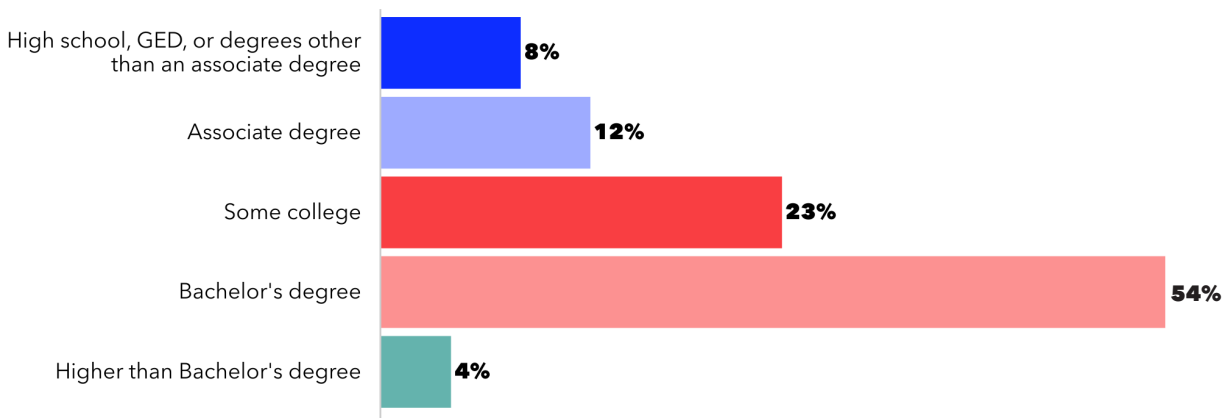


Education

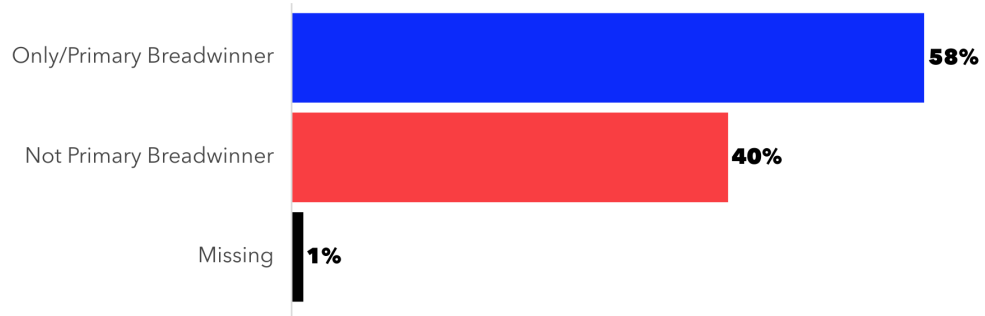
Frontline Employees



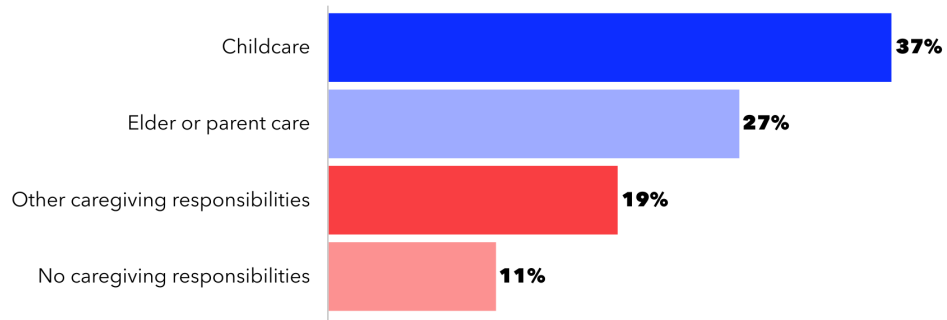
Frontline Managers



Breadwinner

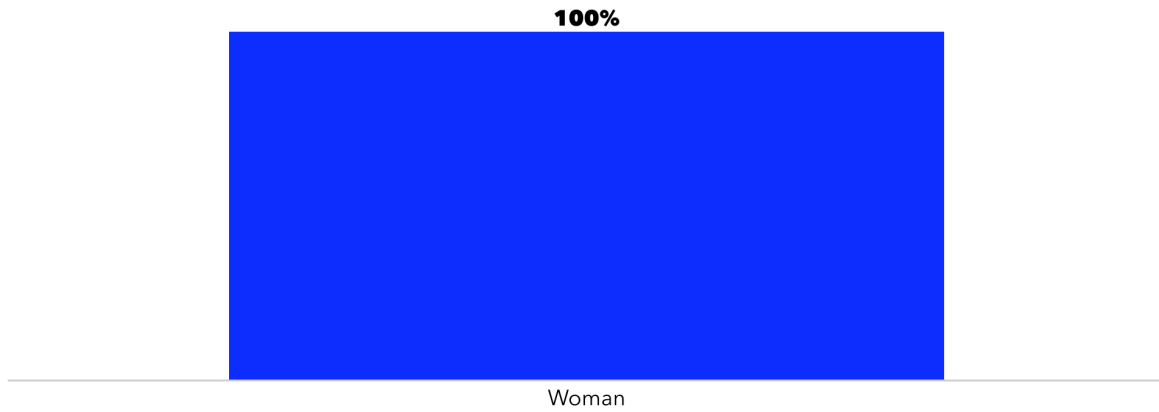


Caregiving

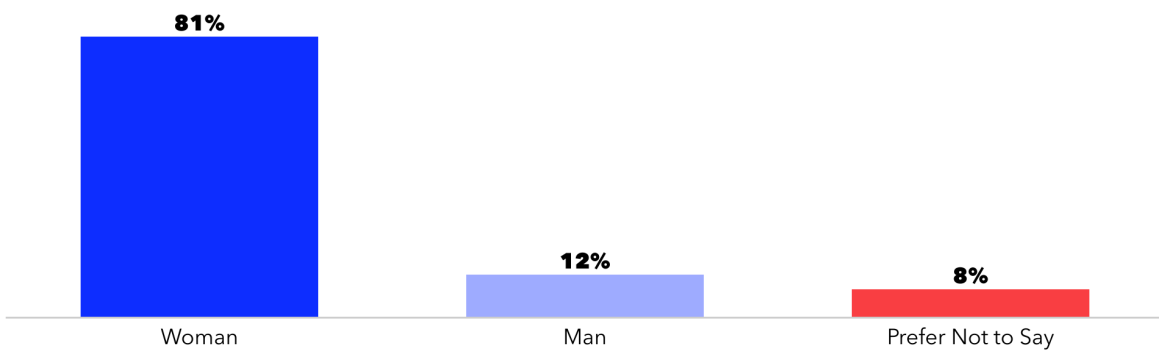


Gender

Frontline Employees



Frontline Managers



Acknowledgments

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Lead Donor



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Task Force

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Stay Informed!

Fill out this [online form](#) to receive updated information on how to enable frontline women to thrive, stay, and perform.

1. Interview participants were asked to self-identify their race and/or ethnicity. Participants of the diary study had the option to self-identify or select their race and/or ethnicity from a provided list.
2. While it is not possible to make a unique claim about income level for all employees who fit our definition of a frontline employee, current evidence suggests that the largest portion receive lower wages while some, especially in manufacturing, work with competitive wages. For more insights see, for example, Copeland, C., Williams, M., Hancock, B., Soto, S., & Yee, L. (2022, July 30). [Race in the workplace: The frontline experience](#). McKinsey; Tomer, A. & Kane, J. W. (2020, March 31). [How to protect essential workers during COVID-19](#). Brookings; Kinder, M., Stateler, L., & Du, J. (2020, October 29). [The COVID-19 hazard continues, but the hazard pay does not: Why America's essential workers need a raise](#). Brookings.
3. While an intersectional lens is not a focus of this presentation of findings, we intentionally recruited a diverse group of women especially in terms of racial and ethnic background to understand the experiences of frontline women. For more information about intersectionality, see Ramos, C. & Brassel, S. (2020). [Intersectionality: When identities converge](#). Catalyst.
4. For insights see Rho, H. J., Brown, H., & Fremstad, S. (2020, April 7). [A basic demographic profile of workers in frontline industries](#). Center for Economic and Policy Research.
5. Bush, M. & Great Place to Work. (2022, April 11). [Employee experience is as strong as ever at the 100 Best Companies](#). *Fortune*.
6. Tucker, J. and Patrick, K. (2017). [Low-wage jobs are women's jobs: The overrepresentation of women in low-wage work](#). National Women's Law Centre.
7. Chun-Hoon, W. (2023). [5 Fast Facts: The Gender Wage Gap](#). U.S. Department of Labor.
8. The Women's Legal Defense Fund. (n.d.). [Women and Poverty in America](#); Shaw, E. and Mariano, H. (2021). [Narrow the Gender Pay Gap, Reduce Poverty for Families: The Economic Impact of Equal Pay by State](#). Institute for Women's Policy Research.
9. Frontline" is mostly used in the context of "essential" industries and occupations. However, for the purposes of this research and initiative, we are using the term "frontline" more broadly and beyond the scope of what is counted as essential during a time of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. See, for example, Tomer, A. & Kane, J. W. (2020, June 10). [To protect frontline workers during and after COVID-19, we must define who they are](#). Brookings. For this research, we focused on the retail, hospitality, and manufacturing industries because an internal analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data showed that they are among the industries with highest number of women in frontline roles that fit our definition. (Education and health were not included in the analysis.) In addition, many Catalyst Supporter organizations are part of these industries.
10. Each of these industries have unique characteristics, and frontline employees working within them cannot be homogenized. Some frontline positions in manufacturing, for example, provide better pay, benefits, and security (depending on the sector, company size, relations with unions) than service sector jobs, which are often characterized as precarious work (a broad term used to describe working arrangements that are risky, temporary, part-time, insecure, uncertain, often provide low or unreliable wages, and typically lack benefits, rights, and other legal protections). These differences are critical in shaping the experiences of women working in each industry. The goal of this research is not to overlook these differences; what we are focused on is the hierarchical distance between employees and centers of decision making. Our goal is to shine a light on the real-life consequences of company-level policies and practices on the ground. Some of the women in our sample expressed high levels of satisfaction with their pay and benefits while others were underpaid and lacked sufficient or any benefits.
11. In the frontline industries from which we recruited our research participants, immediate supervisors were not always "managers" as such. Immediate supervisors were often team leaders or line leaders, roles which can also be hourly positions, with limited management authority such as the ability to set schedules, and without the capacity to work from home. For ease of writing, throughout this report we use the word "manager" to include immediate supervisor positions even though we recognize that they do not strictly fall under the same category and that, often, the experiences of immediate supervisors and team leaders are impacted and constrained by corporate managers in ways similar to the frontline employees that they supervise.
12. Reported percentages are calculated based on monthly separation and employment rates in 2022 released by US Bureau of Labor Statistics. [Industries at a Glance: Retail Trade: NAICS 44-45](#): U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; [Industries at a Glance: Manufacturing: NAICS 31-33](#): U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; and [Industries at a Glance: Leisure and Hospitality](#). U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
13. Ferguson, S. (2023, June 9). [Understanding America's labor shortage: The most impacted industries](#). US Chamber of Commerce.
14. See for example, Sjöberg Forssberg, K., Vånje, A. and Parding, K. (2022). [Bringing in gender perspectives on systematic occupational safety and health management](#). *Safety Science*, 152; Rios, F. C., Chong, W. K., & Grau, D. (2017). [The need for detailed gender-specific occupational safety analysis](#). *Journal of Safety Research*, 62, 53-62.
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26. [Minimum length of meal period required under state law for adult employees in Private Sector 1](#). (2023, January 1). U.S. Department of Labor
27. Schneider, D. & Harknett, K. (2020). [Essential changes needed for essential workers: Job quality for California's service sector](#). Shift Project/Irvine Foundation Research Brief. In addition to volatile schedules, working non-standard hours (e.g., night shifts, during weekends and holidays) is common for some frontline employees, and research shows negative implications for physical and mental health associated with these work patterns. See for example, Cho, Y. (2018). [The effects of nonstandard work schedules on workers' health: A mediating role of work-to-family conflict](#). *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 27(1), 74-87; Jamal, M. (2004). [Burnout, stress and health of employees on non-standard work schedules: A study of Canadian workers](#). *Stress and Health*, 20(3), 113-119.

28. Jamal (2004).
29. Schneider, D. & Harknett, K. (2019). [Consequences of routine work-schedule instability for worker health and well-being](#). *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 82-114.
30. Schneider & Harknett (2020).
31. It is estimated that two thirds of retail and food workers are over the age of 24 and one-third are parents. Schneider, D. & Harknett, K. (2020, April 2). [Close to the edge: Service workers and their children at the front lines of a crisis](#). William T. Grant Foundation.
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41. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce notes that a woman's annual average salary is \$48,000 a year and that the national average of "base quality" childcare for an infant is \$15,900, while "high-quality childcare" can cost up to \$41,100 a year in some areas. Ferguson, S. (2022, April 27). [Data deep dive: A decline of women in the workforce](#). U.S. Chamber of Commerce.
42. Modestino, A. S., Ladge, J. J., Swartz, A., & Lincoln, A. (2021, April 29). [Childcare is a business issue](#). *Harvard Business Review*.
43. In a recent survey 61% of mothers with children five years and under working hourly jobs indicated that they "have frequently held back from taking on greater responsibilities or hours at work as a result of my childcare responsibilities": Gitlin, S., Gummadi, A., Krivkovich, A., & Modi, K. (2022, May 9). [The childcare conundrum: How can companies ease working parents' return to the office?](#) McKinsey, see Exhibit 3, ft 1.
44. It is important to note that concerns expressed here about required overtime do not necessarily extend to other employees who voluntarily choose to undertake overtime hours, particularly in cases where doing so can supplement low standard hourly wages.
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51. Copeland, C., Hancock, B., Soto, S., Williams, M., & Yee, L. (2022, July 30). [Race in the workplace: The frontline experience](#). McKinsey, 14.
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55. [Dhar et al. \(2022\)](#).
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57. Bhaskaran et al. (2022).
58. Eubanks (2022).
59. [Leading with empathy: Knowledge burst](#). (n.d.). Catalyst.
60. It is important to note that companies should not simply expand their existing DEI programs that are designed for office-based and corporate employees to the frontlines. The content of these programs should be tailored to the realities, experiences, and needs of frontline employees for them to create real impact. Current evidence suggests that most frontline employees don't think their companies' DEI initiatives are truly focused on creating a better workplace for all. Betts, K., Hawkins, D., & Robinson, R. (2022, August 9). [Leading at the front\(line\): Diversity, equity, and inclusion imperatives](#). Deloitte.
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62. Two of the participants in this category were in more senior roles than immediate frontline managers, though not executive-level employees. We include them in the sample because they both had previous experience as immediate frontline managers and continue to serve within the identified industries. Their information, however, is removed from the demographics table.