

# The Deluge of Unhappy Workers

Uncovering the real drivers of  
employee dissatisfaction and the  
roadmap to a happier workforce.

At Firstup, we enable companies to unlock the way people work, connect, and reach their potential.

We open up two-way engagement for employees and their companies so every worker has a personalized digital experience that helps them be productive—whether or not they sit behind a desk. Where every business can reach its entire workforce and, most importantly, take the pulse of its organization.

#### METHODOLOGY

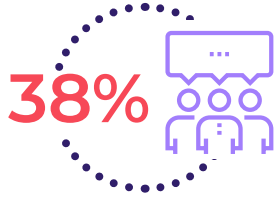
**Research Fieldwork conducted by Opinion Matters.**

Opinion Matters surveyed 23,105 workers in the UK, USA, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, of whom 11,528 described themselves as 'desk-based', and 11,577 described themselves as 'deskless'. Fieldwork was undertaken between the 9th and the 27th of July 2021. Opinion Matters abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

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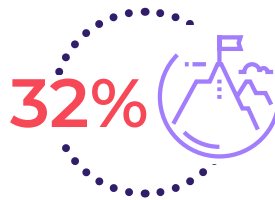
# Highlights



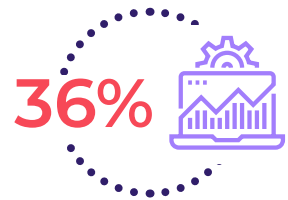
want **better communication** between executives and employees



want **information delivered to where they work**

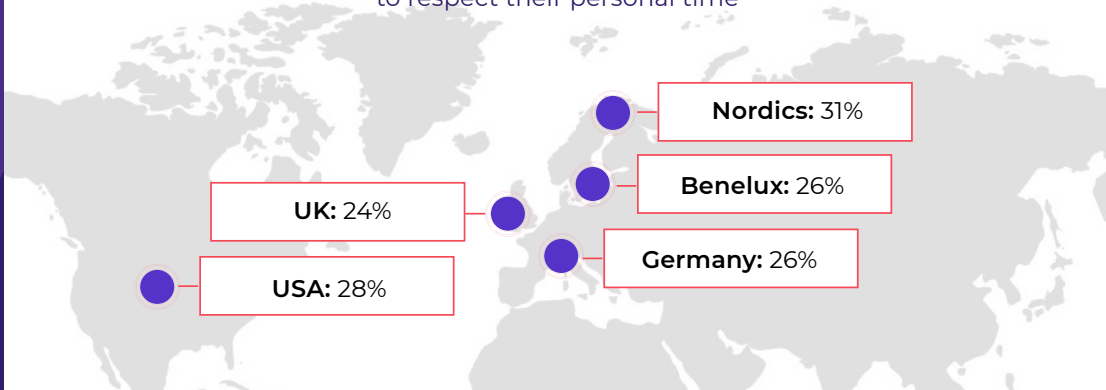


believe **visibility into company decisions** would improve productivity



believe reliance upon IT, more than the **pandemic, has caused a need for transparency**

Overall, **27%** believe their company could do more to respect their personal time



## Introduction

The average person spends over a third of their lives at work, and workplace satisfaction, or lack of it, is a common topic of conversation. However, it seems global workforce wellbeing is now reaching a tipping point, with numerous papers dubbing an influx of unhappy employees as the perpetrator of what is fast becoming known as: “The Great Resignation of 2021”.

An overarching reason for this mounting wave of unhappiness cannot be attributed to one factor. Instead, research, commissioned by Firststep, the leader in digital employee experience, and newly formed company resulting from the merger of SocialChorus and Dynamic Signal and carried out by Opinion Matters, has shown that the contributing reasons include, but are not limited to: the perceived value of workers’ roles within their organizations, an unstable work/life balance, and the mental health support received, as well as other perceived perennial problems. Only 16% of the employees surveyed in this research felt that their employer need make no changes to improve their employee experience and help them feel more valued in work, and only 12% felt that their organization had sufficient boundaries in place to safeguard their work/life balance. While workplace dissatisfaction is currently rife, so are ideas about how to improve employee experience in and out of the office.

**These findings therefore pose the question: how prominent are these challenges in the workforce, and how can organizations resolve them?**



33%

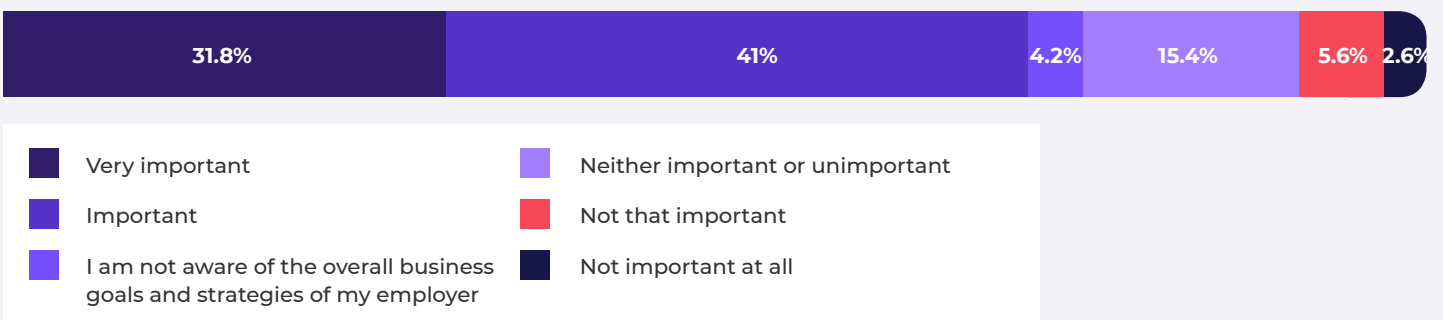
## Feeling and being valued— time to walk the talk

All of us have an intrinsic need to feel valued, and research shows that there is an increasing desire within the workforce to feel that their work is valuable to society or the organization, with 72% of respondents stating that the overall business goals and strategies of their employers are important to them.

Yet 8% of respondents view the goals of their employer as unimportant, while a further 4% are unaware of the overall business goals and strategies of their employer. These disengaged employees may find it more difficult to motivate themselves, without an understanding of how their work contributes to their employer overall.

For example, 38% of those who consider their employers' goals 'unimportant' to them do not feel that their role is important enough to contribute to these overall business goals and strategies, contributing to a sentiment of worthlessness. In fact, less than half of the 23,105 workers surveyed feel valued in their role (45%). Employers must combat this by ensuring employees understand how their role contributes to business objectives, and ensure that they feel valued for this.

**Figure 1. Importance of business goals and strategies to employees**



As well as the obvious benefits to the employee, a high level of engagement also has wide reaching business benefits, with 22% of respondents agreeing that more communication from their employers would increase their productivity. Better communication will not only boost employee engagement, but organizations will be able to provide a digital employee experience (DEX) that raises the game and sets the bar high. A recent Forbes report, The Experience Equation, further confirms this by stating that 89% of surveyed executives at companies that consider themselves revenue-growth leaders agree that better employee experience (EX) leads directly to better customer experience (CX). The survey indicates that high EX drives high CX and that CX fuels revenue growth. Among executives representing companies that regard themselves as leaders in expanding total sales, 54% strongly agree that CX leads to fast revenue growth, compared with 36% of executives representing average or below-average companies (ABAs).

**Visibility into company decision-making can also boost feelings of worth and significance in the workplace, and businesses would do well to support the 32% of respondents who called for improvements in transparency.**

The research highlights that employees must feel heard, valued and supported, with efforts to engage spread equally between both male and female employees. 18% of surveyed workers expressed that they were not sure if their colleagues would notice if they were on holiday or on leave, and 25% wanted designated mental health days for employees. This is a clear and urgent call to action for internal communications and the C-suite within organizations. They must seek to address these feelings of invaluableness and inadequacy. It is suggested that this can be accomplished by creating a true connection amongst the workforce and having visibility into where blockers exist.



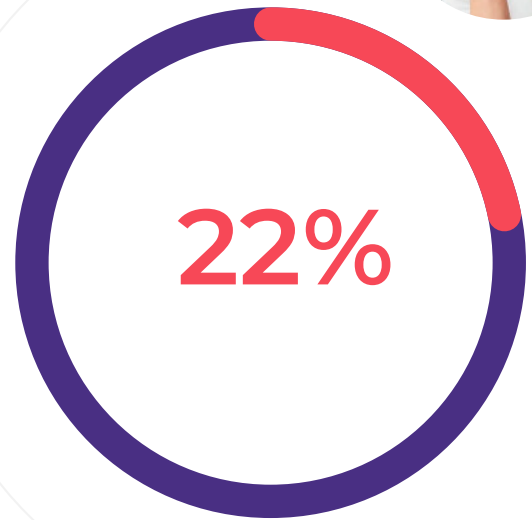
## The rise of mental health—awareness? illness? crisis?

The importance, and understanding, of mental health and mental health awareness appears to be on the rise, but data suggests that this identification alone is not enough for employees. 22% of those surveyed felt that despite recognizing their employer's intention to support the mental health of its employees, efforts so far are not enough for employees to feel supported.

**This perhaps shows a gap between the employer's intention and the end result experienced by employees.**

Clearly the sense of not being valued by the organization, or of not contributing to society through their role, will have a significant impact on mental health. On top of that a staggering 17% of employees surveyed feel that their employer does nothing to support their mental health and claim that the absence of this support further exacerbates this feeling of worthlessness. Younger employees were significantly more likely to report this; 1 in 5 employees under the age of 34 reported an absence of workplace mental health support (19%), versus 13% of employees aged 45 and over.

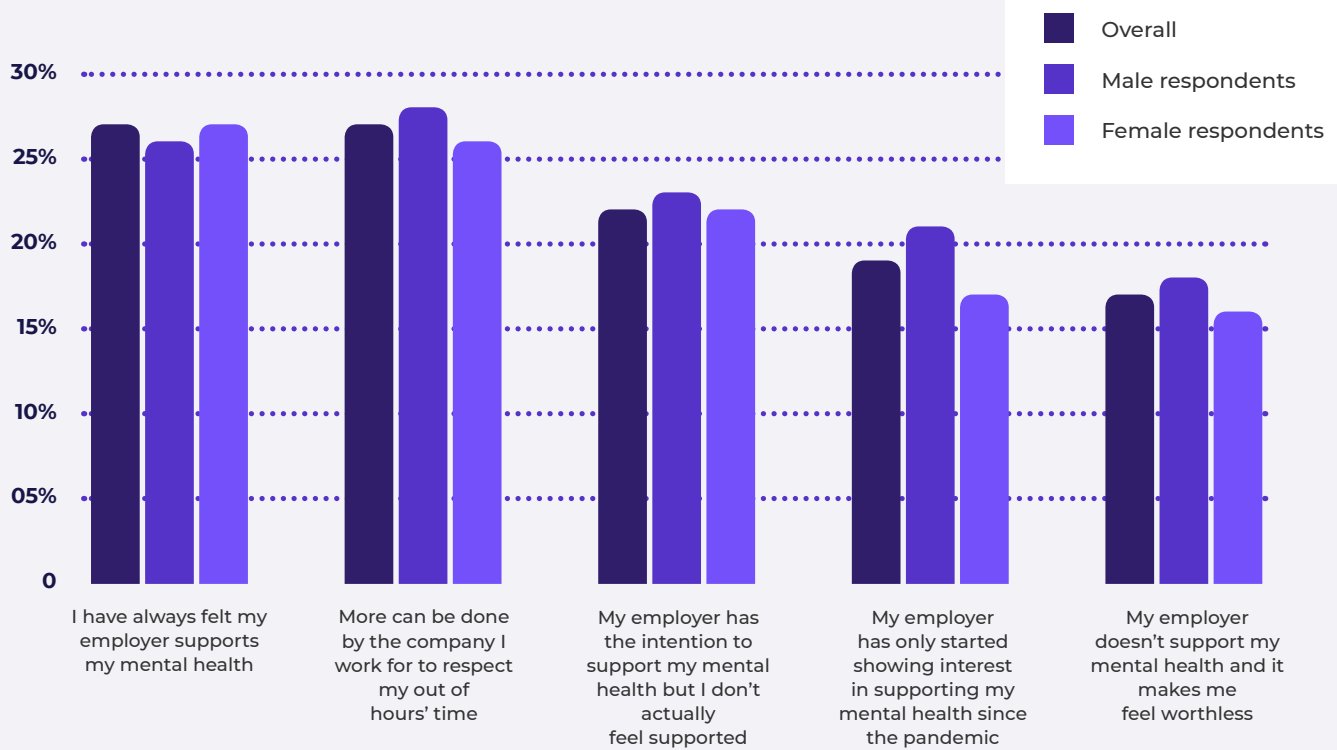
The shift in working environments was also scrutinized; nearly 1 in 5 workers (19% of respondents) report that their employer only started showing an interest in employee mental health since the onset of the pandemic. Data also found that male employees are significantly more likely to feel that their employer has only recently shown concern for employee mental health (21% versus 17% of female employees). This could perhaps be due to lower awareness of employee mental health support among men before the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps surprisingly, male respondents were more likely to feel that their employer ought to provide more effective mental health support, and more likely to state that they were dissatisfied with the support and resources currently made available to them.



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Figure 2. How supported employees feel about mental health



A quarter (25%) of respondents also wanted designated 'mental health days' for employees. Interestingly, this was most prominent within the United States, where 32% of respondents were pro 'mental health days'. There was a split in terms of gender in this area, with 28% of females wanting these designated days compared to 21% of males, highlighting either more awareness of, or openness around, mental health issues amongst women.

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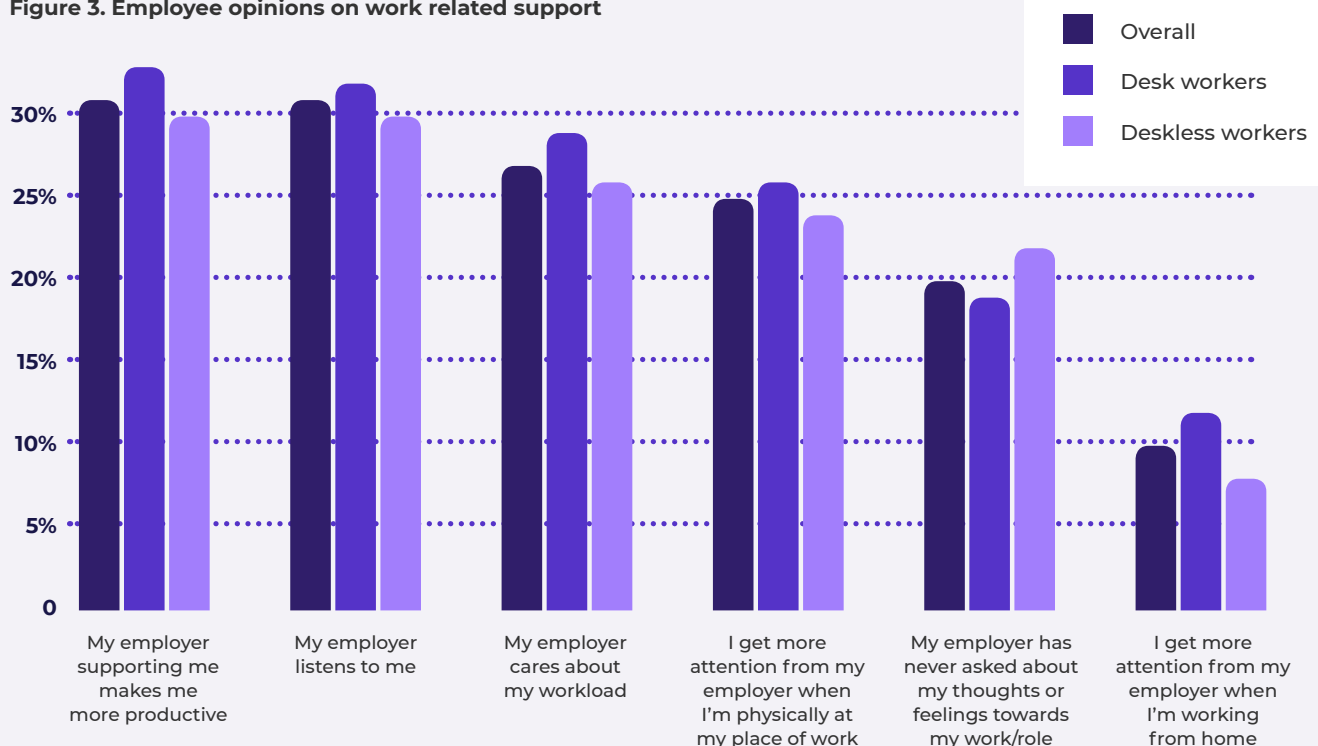


## The growing tension between in-office and deskless workers

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the proportion of deskless workers in the workforce and the disparity between in-office and deskless employees has become ever so prominent, with deskless workers feeling more neglected in terms of career progression and work/life balance compared to their desk-based peers.

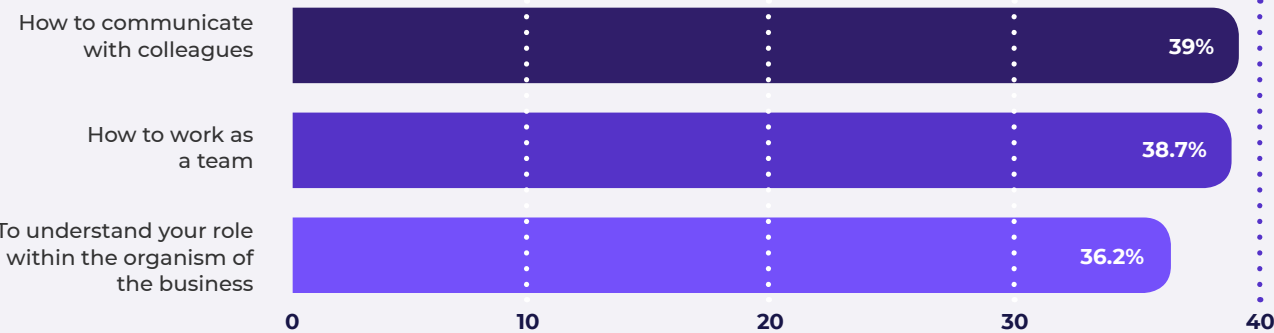
25% of respondents feel that they get more attention from their employer when they are physically at work, with deskless workers indicating lower satisfaction with the support they receive from their employers in general: 30% of deskless workers think that their employers listen to them, compared to 32% among desk-based workers; while 22% of deskless workers claimed that their employers have never asked about their thoughts or feelings towards the company, compared to 19% among desk-based workers.

Figure 3. Employee opinions on work related support

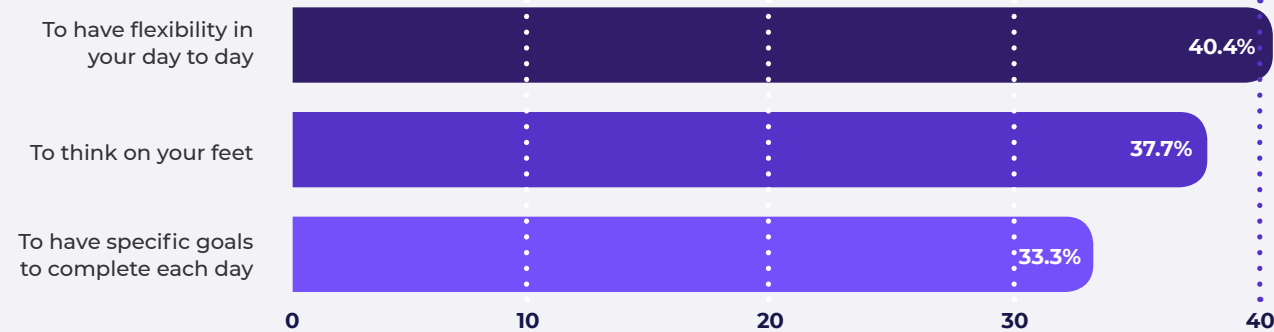


Additionally, the perception of deskless and desk-based workers by the other group reveals differences in the skill sets developed. When questioned about the skills the view was that deskless workers could learn from them, 39% of desk-based workers responded with 'how to communicate with colleagues', 39% indicated 'how to work as a team', and 36% indicated 'to understand your role within the organism of the business', showing that desk-based workers feel they are more capable of working in a team and have more awareness of the role they play in the organization. Conversely, 40% of deskless workers indicated that desk-based workers could learn from them 'to have flexibility in their day to day', while 38% responded with 'to think on your feet', and 33% with 'to have specific goals to complete each day', showing that deskless workers feel they are better organized and able to react faster.

**Figure 4. What deskless workers could learn from desk-based colleagues**



**Figure 5. What desk-based workers could learn from deskless colleagues**



**There is also an appetite for moving between the two groups, with 45% of deskless workers indicating that they would prefer to go to a place of work every day, while 32% of desk-based workers stating they would prefer to work from home every day.**

Providing equal opportunities to both groups and facilitating effective collaboration between them are new challenges organizations are facing as hybrid work models emerge after the pandemic. Listening to all employees equally and making sure that everyone feels that they play a pivotal role in workforce decisions and future plans will be crucial in bridging the gap between desk-based and deskless workers. Additionally, providing the necessary IT infrastructure for deskless workers to facilitate better integration into the organization will be crucial, with 16% of respondents indicating that they would feel more productive working from home, but that they are lacking the right DEX to do so.

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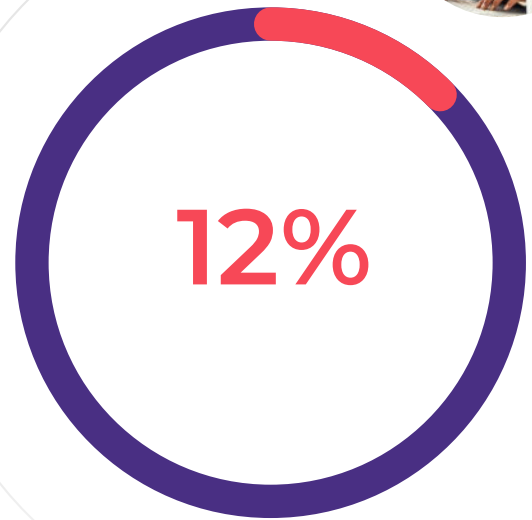


## Work-life aspirations— finding a balance

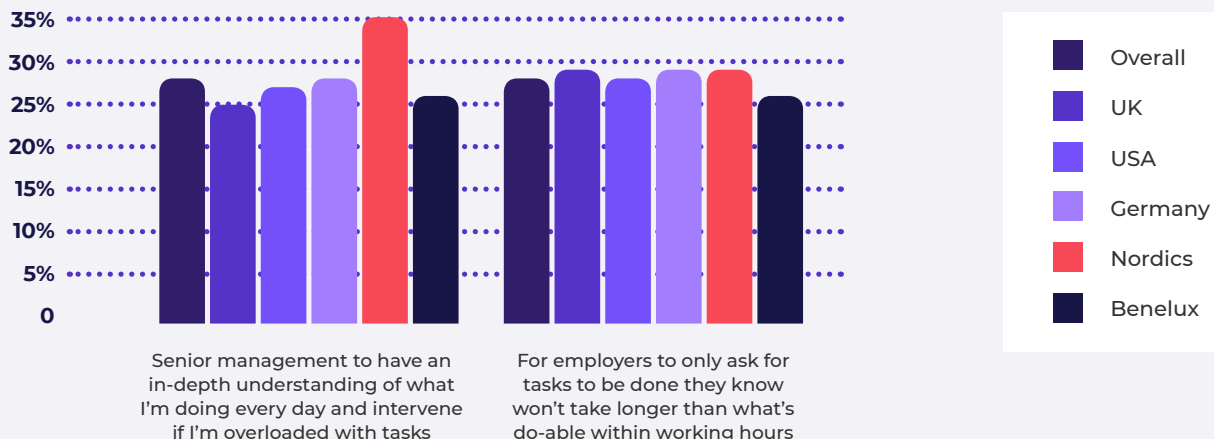
The ultimate goal of work/life balance continues to be an elusive one for most, and is a prominent factor when it comes to feelings of unhappiness at work. It will come as no surprise that maintaining the boundaries between home and work in a work from home (WFH) environment presents a significant challenge.

12% of respondents cited that there were no boundaries in place to respect their work/life balance, with the same proportion also having the desire for companies to encourage employees to put their out-of-office notifications on when they finish work for the day. One-fifth also wanted to make it obligatory that no emails were sent internally after working hours finished for the day.

There was also a clear desire for employees to feel that their managers had a greater understanding of their workload, with 25% (UK), 28% (USA, Germany, Benelux) and 35% (Nordics) of employees wanting senior management to have an in-depth understanding of what they work on every day, and to intervene if they were being overloaded. The same proportion also wanted employers to demonstrate a greater awareness of what workload was manageable within working hours. This highlights the belief amongst employees that there is a lack of respect for the work they do and how long it takes, and identifies a need for more reassurance and support from the management team.



**Figure 6. What boundaries should be introduced to better respect employees work-life balance**



Lack of respect for non-working time was prominent in the research – just under 27% of respondents thought that more could be done by the company to respect their personal time. This was most significant within the Nordic countries (31%), with Benelux (26%) having the lowest percentage. These differences could be explained by general working attitudes within these markets - Nordic countries traditionally having very strong work/life boundaries. 25–34 year-olds had the highest level of dissatisfaction within this area (29%), falling to less than one-fifth (19%) for those aged 55 and over.

Worryingly only 8% of 16-24 year-olds were happy with their current work/life balance, but this rose to over one-quarter (26%) in those aged 55 and over. This may be due to older employees being more likely to be in positions of seniority, and therefore more able to dictate their own work/life balance; or it may be due to a bigger appetite amongst younger generations to have clear boundaries between work and life. Workers between the ages of 16 and 44 were more likely to expect their employer to make proactive efforts to establish a stronger boundary between work and leisure time, suggesting that management only set tasks that can be completed within working hours, or enact a ban on out-of-hours emailing. As this demographic becomes an ever more influential presence in the workforce, employers must rise to the challenge of these higher expectations in order to stay attractive and retain talent.

While working from home can sometimes make it difficult to maintain boundaries between personal and work life, it can also enhance the work/life balance by providing more flexibility around working hours. For example, it can be easier to complete 'life admin' during traditional

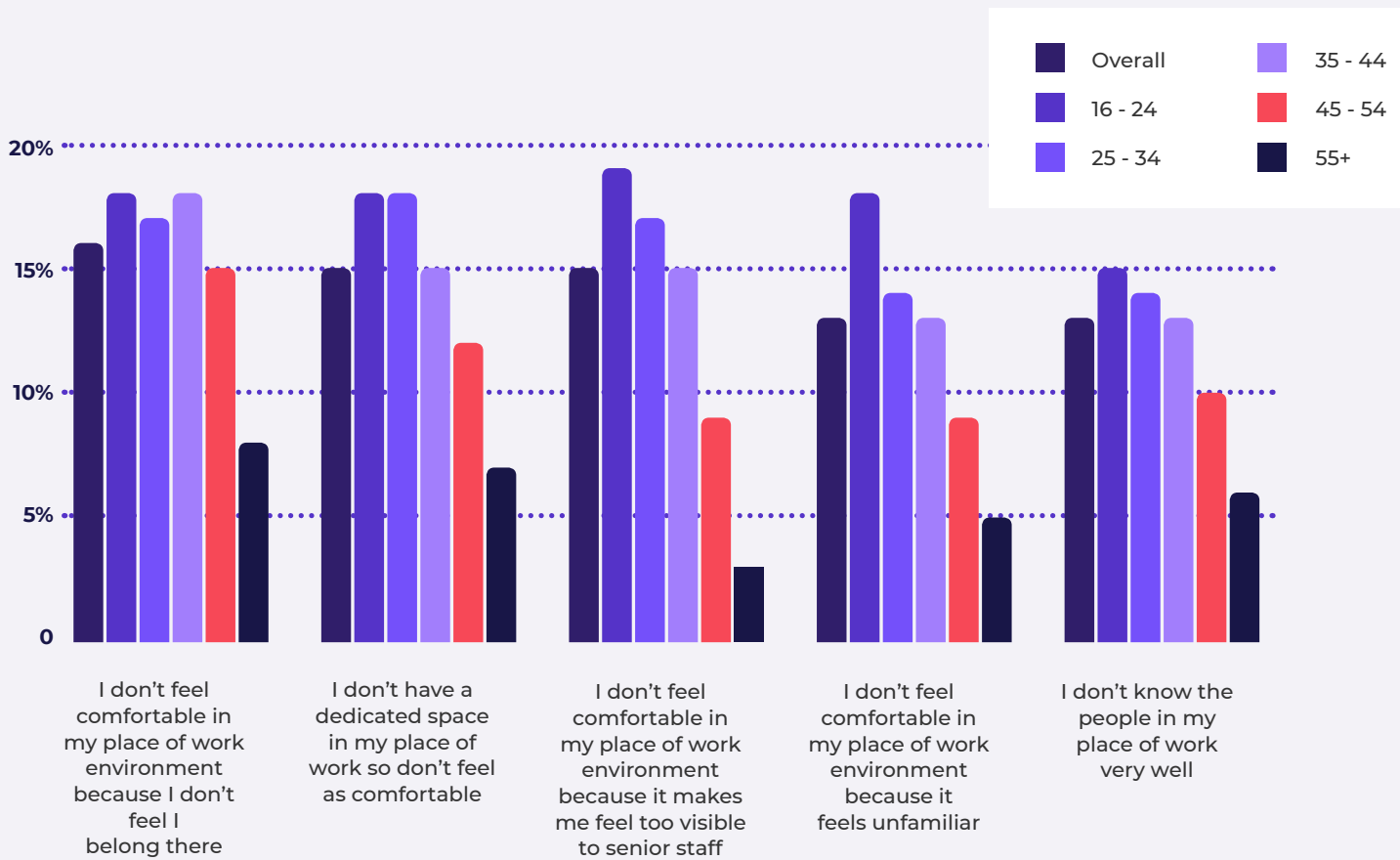
working hours, or even to work around family needs. A desire to have more flexibility around working hours was, for many, already a factor pre-pandemic, and the widespread WFH scenario has cemented this, with nearly one-third (29%) of employees wanting to have more flexible hours within the working week.



**Reasons for wanting to work from home varied dramatically by age;** while three-quarters of deskless workers aged 45 and over stated that they prefer the flexibility of working from home (76%), younger employees were more likely to be motivated by a dislike of the traditional working environment or office.

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Figure 7. 'I would prefer to work from home every day' because...



While the flexibility of working from home is still an asset to younger workers (58% of workers aged 16 to 34 agreed with this statement), for some it's merely the lesser of two evils. Some describe their place of work as uncomfortable, unfamiliar or unfriendly; others are made to feel that they don't belong in a work environment designed for a bygone era. Many young people are dissatisfied with their DEX; yet the data shows that more may be dissatisfied with the employee experience (EX) in general.

Employers need to take action to ensure that no generational divide grows among staff, between older desk-based workers and younger deskless employees working remotely. By enacting a DEX that allows individuals to collaborate and communicate wherever they're working, organizations can foster a culture that honors the work-life balance and lessens any antipathy between groups of employees. Using this as a starting point to examine EX more broadly, employers should consider modernizing in-person ways of working, to help younger workers establish a sense of belonging and invest in the company's culture.



## The pandemic is not the root cause of unhappiness

Aggravated but not caused by the pandemic, several employee gripes have become significant issues after the on-and-off lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. It is very possible that the new hybrid and WFH formats are being adopted more readily by employees in response to some of these feelings.

As a result of the pandemic, employees have had more experience with WFH and hybrid formats, and have had more time to reflect on how they would like to work. Unfortunately the lack of a good work environment is a significant contributor to dissatisfaction in the workplace and preference for remote working. Of those who said they would prefer to WFH or in a hybrid format, 17% of them cited feeling 'uncomfortable' at work, and not 'belonging' as the reason for this. While 16% said they were more comfortable at home because they do not have a dedicated space in the office.

Of course, in a WFH environment it becomes even more challenging for senior managers to keep abreast of their team's workload, which, as mentioned earlier, is a key factor in feelings of dissatisfaction. This necessitates a greater degree of communication and active engagement, in order to prevent burnout.

When asked about how they thought their companies could create a better experience and make them feel more valued as employees, the first and third highest responses were both in reference to the ways in which companies could foster better communication; 38% want employers to 'create a better line of communication between executives and employees' and 20% want 'company communications and messages delivered to the places I spend my workday'. In second place, with a score of 32%, was the idea that employees would genuinely have a better work experience if the employer were to 'improve transparency across the enterprise with visibility into company decisions and direction'. The industry-sector that this was most relevant for was IT (36%) where it seems that a rapid increase in society's reliance upon IT solutions over the pandemic has caused a need for greater transparency.

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## Conclusion—the need to feel heard, but also to know that change is happening

The pandemic has brought forth a list of challenges that organizations have to address in order to keep their workforce happy. However, it is important to understand that these challenges were not necessarily generated by the pandemic itself, but rather brought to the limelight by the lifestyle changes employees have experienced.

Organizations must act swiftly and transparently to address these issues, making sure that their actions and messages are clear and internalized by their workforce; and that everyone feels they are treated equally to their peers. Our research showed that employees believe that better communication from the senior management team would help them feel more valued and improve their work experience. Beyond this, adequate mental health support, clear boundaries between work and life, and adequate IT support for deskless workers to facilitate better integration between desk-based and deskless workers are paramount in the emergence of hybrid work models. In order to implement better communications and improve the employee experience for both the desk-based and the deskless, IT professionals want greater transparency and earlier involvement in decision making around online working and employee platforms.

These findings are a clear and urgent call to action—an organization's employees are its most valuable asset with employee satisfaction having a direct impact on the bottom line. Business, HR and Internal Comms leaders must act now to stem this workforce dissatisfaction and engage their teams with personalized information that helps them do their best work.

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## ABOUT FIRSTUP

Firstup is redefining the digital employee experience to put people first and lift companies up. We make communication solutions that build authentic engagement and create two-way conversation between employees and companies. Our powerful orchestration engine connects every worker, everywhere, on any device with personalized information that helps them do their best work. That's why 40% of Fortune 100 companies like Amazon, ABInBev, Ford and Pfizer have chosen us to power their frontline, simplify their digital workplace and unlock the potential of their workforces. Get started at [firstup.io](https://firstup.io).



### Firstup

123 Mission St., 25th Floor  
San Francisco, California, 9410