

Deskless Workers:

HR STRATEGIES FOR BENEFITS ENGAGEMENT



POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO AND SOLUTIONS FOR BENEFITS ENGAGEMENT

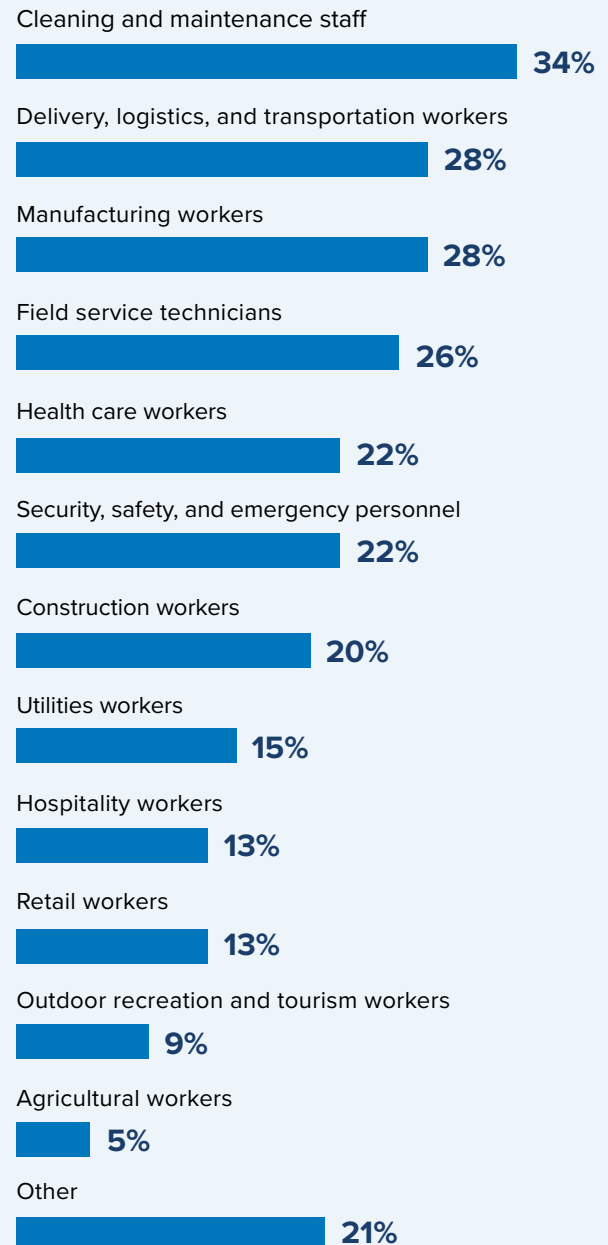
Deskless workers make up a significant portion of the global workforce, constituting **70%-80%** of all workers.¹ Operating outside of traditional desk-based office settings—from manufacturing plants to health care facilities, warehouses to retail establishments—these workers are vital to the functioning and success of countless organizations.

Deskless workers perform diverse tasks, often across multiple functions within a given organization. According to new research conducted by SHRM and Fidelity Investments, organizations that employ deskless workers manage an average of three (2.6) distinct types. The most prevalent categories are cleaning and maintenance workers (**34%**), delivery, logistics, and transportation workers (**28%**), and manufacturing workers (**28%**).

¹Making Work Work Better For Deskless Workers, Boston Consulting Group, 2022.



TAXONOMY OF DESKLESS WORKERS



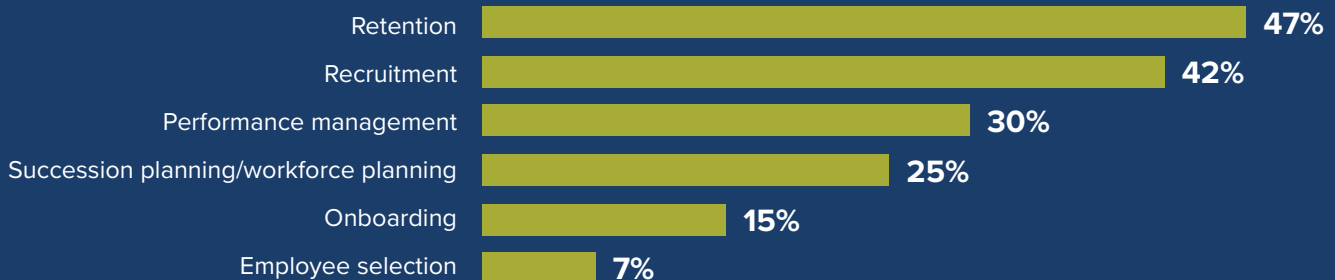
Notes: Percentage of deskless workers that organizations employ by type. Respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Although deskless workers make up a substantial portion of the U.S. workforce, managing them presents unique HR challenges. The varied nature of their work, from public interaction to physical demands and travel requirements, makes communication, training, and traditional HR practices more complex. This in turn can lead to difficulties in recruitment, engagement, attendance, retention, benefit utilization, and learning and development, just to name a few areas.

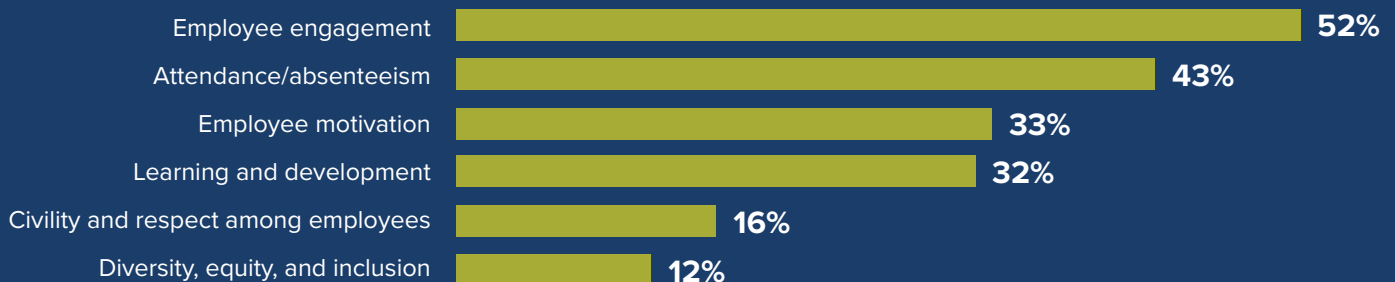
While talent management challenges exist for all employee groups, HR professionals report greater difficulty managing their deskless workforces compared to their office-based employees.

THE PERCENTAGE OF HR PROFESSIONALS REPORTING THE FOLLOWING AS CHALLENGES WHEN MANAGING THEIR DESKLESS WORKFORCE

TALENT ACQUISITION AND TALENT MANAGEMENT



EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE



EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

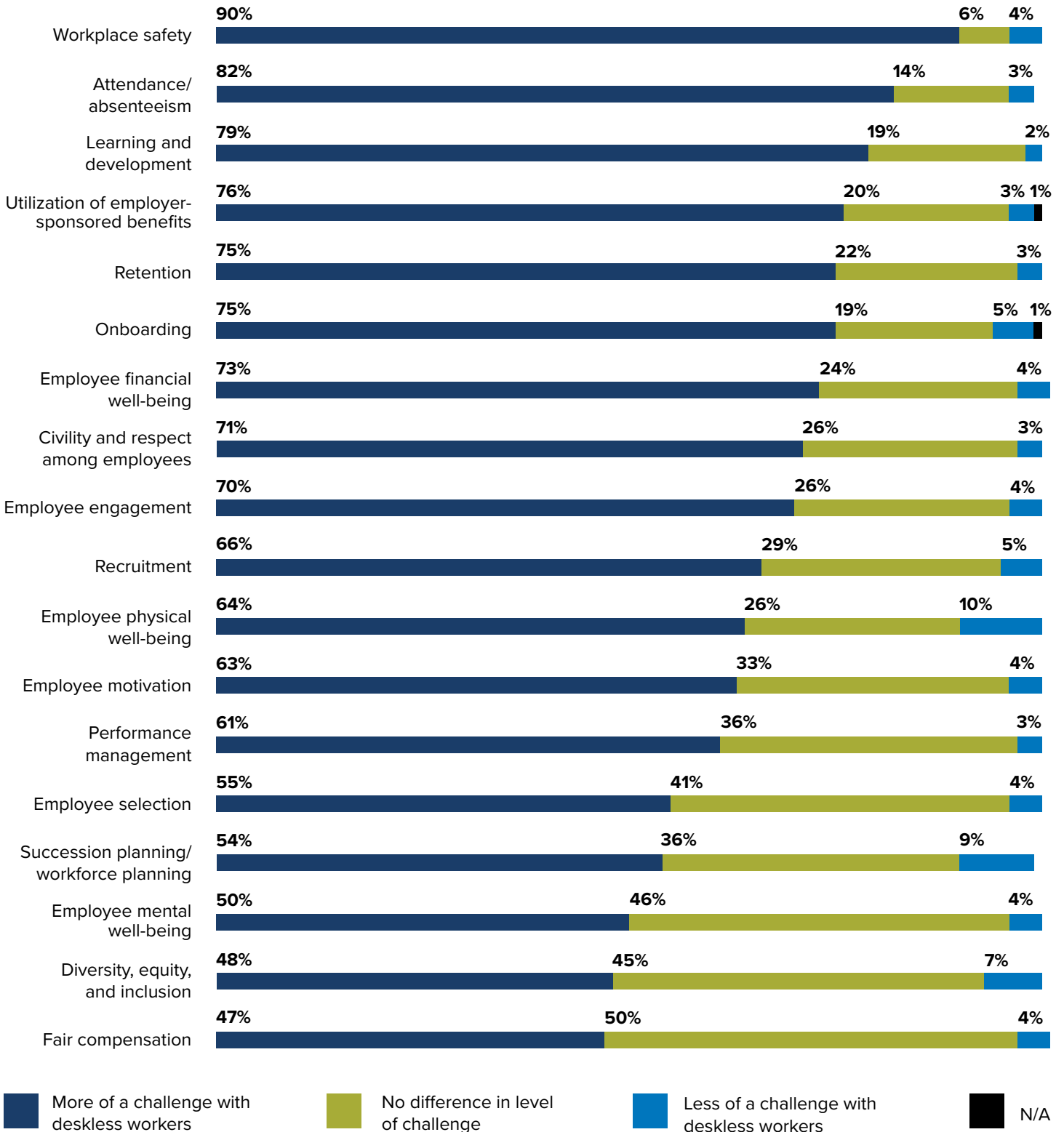


COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS



Notes: Organizations were asked to select all challenges they experience with their deskless workforce from a predefined list of challenges. Percentages may not total 100% since the number of challenges selected exceeds the number of organizations answering the question.

HR TALENT MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES BETWEEN DESKLESS AND OFFICE-BASED WORKERS



Notes: HR professionals who selected the workforce management challenges above were subsequently asked whether these issues are more or less pronounced with deskless workers. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

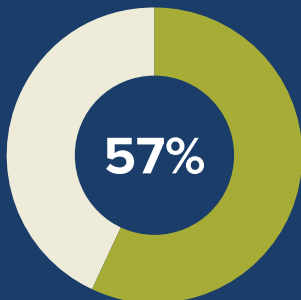


In recognition of these unique challenges, SHRM and Fidelity Investments have collaborated to conduct a research series aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the hurdles faced by organizations in managing a deskless workforce. The first installment of this research focuses on understanding the barriers that impede **benefits enrollment and utilization** among this population and the strategies currently being used to encourage enrollment and participation. We've chosen this area of focus partly because it may be a pain point for some organizations, but also because it may be considered a strategic lever for tackling broader challenges, such as recruitment, engagement, and retention.

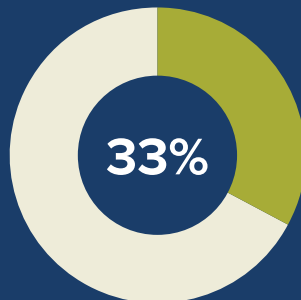
Ultimately, this research seeks to identify potential solutions for improving benefits enrollment and utilization among deskless workers.

THE BENEFITS ENROLLMENT AND UTILIZATION CHALLENGE

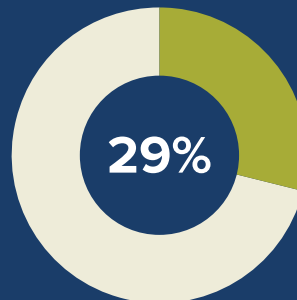
According to this research, organizations continue to face challenges with recruitment (42%), engagement (52%), and retention (47%) regarding deskless workers. After compensation, HR professionals see benefits as the next most important factor for attracting and retaining deskless workers. But offering a competitive suite of benefits may be just the start—many organizations also may face challenges with increasing benefits enrollment and utilization, particularly among their deskless workforce. In fact, this research shows that nearly half of HR professionals report moderate to extreme difficulty in reaching deskless workers about their benefits, and many report that their organizations are actively working to improve benefits enrollment (37%) and utilization (48%) among this population. Notably, 76% of those who say that benefits utilization is a challenge say it is more of a challenge with their deskless workforce than with their office-based employees. HR professionals indicated that they may be particularly focused on increasing enrollment and utilization of foundational benefits offerings such as retirement, health insurance, and professional development.



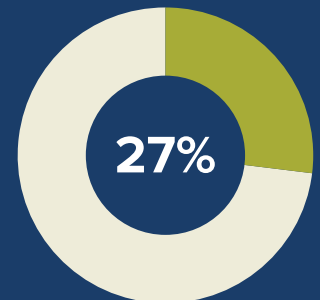
of organizations offering **401(k)/403(b) plans** would like to see higher enrollment and utilization among their deskless workers.



of organizations offering **professional development programs** would like to see higher enrollment and utilization among their deskless workers.



of organizations offering **mental health coaching/counseling** would like to see higher enrollment and utilization among their deskless workers.



of organizations offering **health insurance coverage** would like to see higher enrollment and utilization among their deskless workers.

Note: Benefits that HR professionals would like to see deskless workers enroll in and utilize more (i.e., at a higher rate).

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO REACHING DESKLESS WORKERS ABOUT BENEFITS

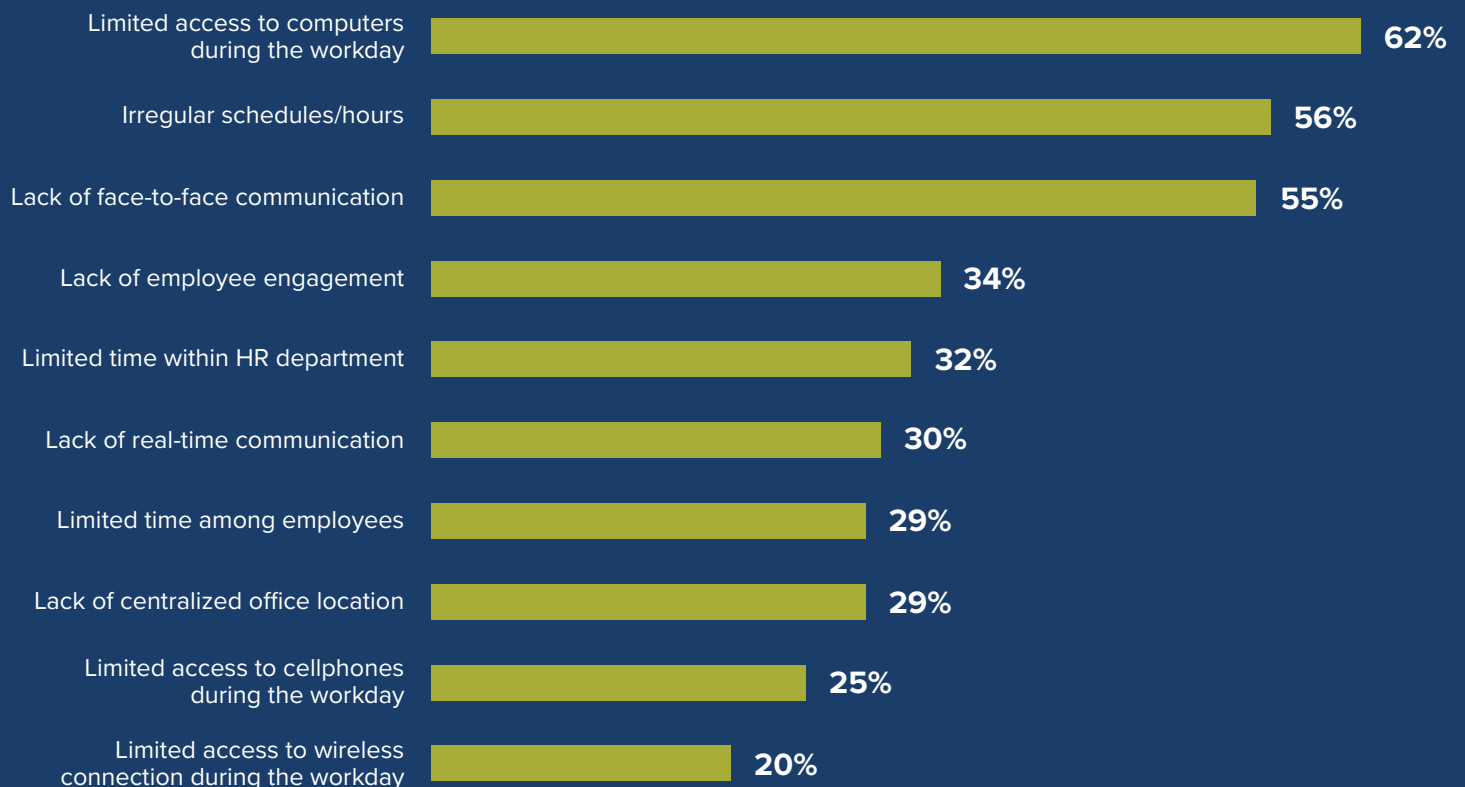
Increasing benefits enrollment and utilization may be a challenge with deskless and office-based workers alike, but there are potentially several reasons that make it even more difficult to reach deskless workers. In order to increase benefits engagement among deskless workers, it's critical to take these potential barriers into account.

Top Potential Barriers: Schedules, Technology Access, and Worksite

The primary barriers are rooted in the varied work settings and schedules that define deskless work. Limited computer access during the workday (62%), irregular schedules/hours (56%), and lack of face-to-face communication (55%) all contribute to this difficulty.

HR professionals in the service industry (65%) are more likely to say that irregular schedules/hours are a barrier to reaching deskless workers than HR professionals in physical industries (47%).

BARRIERS THAT MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO REACH DESKLESS WORKERS



In light of these factors, 61% of HR professionals report that deskless workers primarily use personal cellphones to learn about benefits information. Limited computer access during the workday means that common forms of communication—such as emails, intranet sites, and daytime learning events (particularly virtual ones)—may not be accessible to deskless workers. Conflicting work schedules may also regularly undermine attempts to communicate about benefits enrollment and utilization because deskless workers often work nonstandard hours while HR professionals tend to work from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. A lack of a centralized office location may present a particular challenge for deskless workers who are fully mobile (e.g., transportation workers) by further limiting opportunities to engage in face-to-face communication with HR. Together, these challenges mean that some common benefits engagement strategies may be less effective for deskless workers.

KEY CONSIDERATION:
DIVERSE NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

As noted above, there are many different types of deskless workers, and many organizations employ multiple groups that may have distinct schedules, working environments, and technology access. This means that—even within one organization—there might be distinct barriers at play across different groups of deskless workers. Consistent with this idea, we found that organizations that employ more than one type say that specific occupation groups (e.g., retail clerks) (40%), nonexempt hourly workers (37%), and part-time workers (27%) are the most difficult to reach about their benefits.



TAKE ACTION

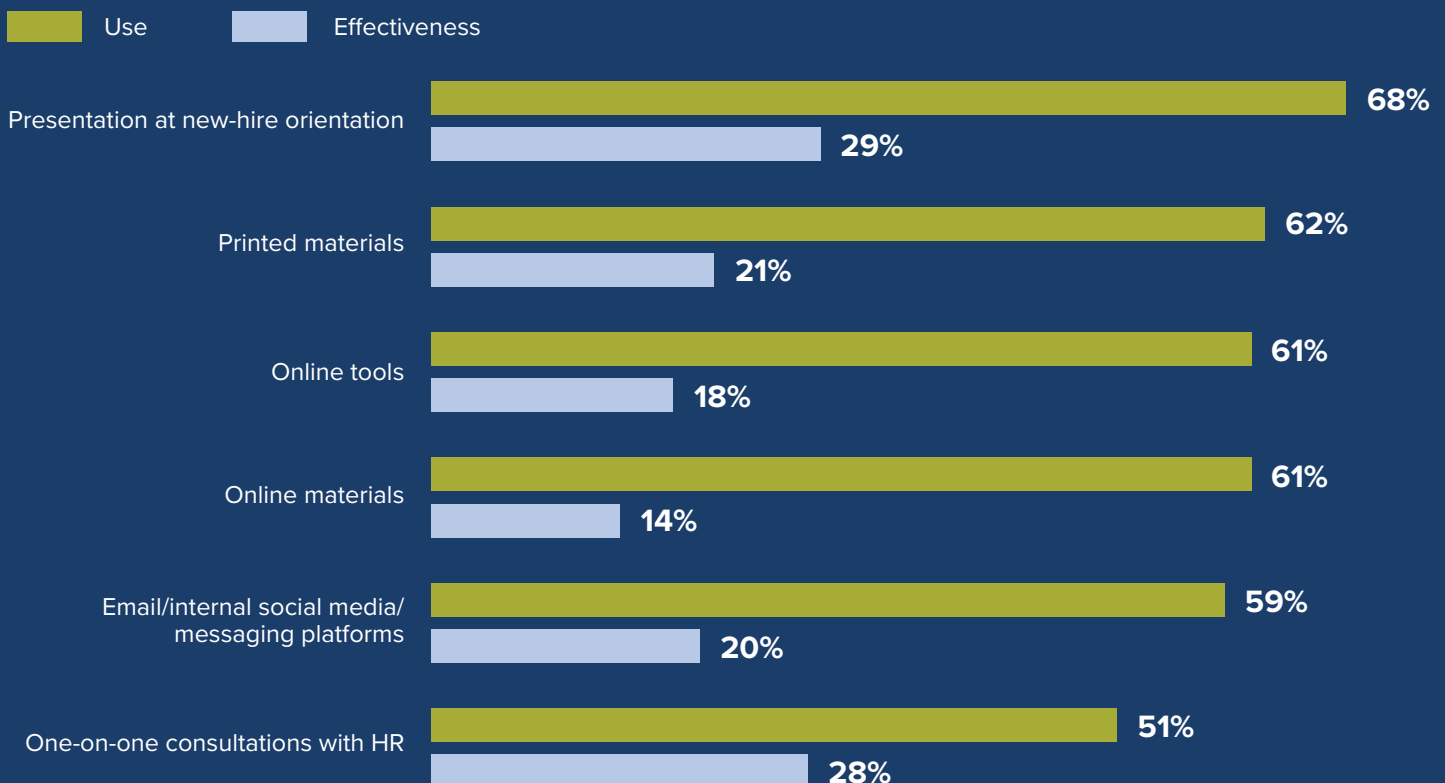
Despite these barriers, there are potential actions that organizations can take to increase benefits utilization and enrollment among deskless workers, and in turn, improve recruitment and increase retention.

Benefits Engagement Strategies

According to our research, distinct benefits engagement strategies are needed to potentially improve enrollment and utilization among deskless workers. Although there may be unique barriers that make engaging these workers a challenge, **69%** of HR professionals say they do not change their benefits engagement strategies based on whether they are trying to reach deskless workers versus office-based workers. Many organizations employ traditional strategies including giving presentations at new-hire orientation and distributing printed materials such as newsletters, brochures, and handouts. However, despite the prevalence of these strategies, only a minority of HR professionals say they are effective for deskless workers, with presentations at new-hire orientation and one-on-one consultations with HR being the most effective. In addition to these strategies, HR can leverage several tactics to drive benefits enrollment and utilization for deskless employees (see recommendations).



MOST COMMON BENEFITS ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR DESKLESS WORKERS





RECOMMENDATIONS

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR DESKLESS WORKERS.

- **Consider your deskless workers' needs.⁵**
 - Determine what deskless workers' key benefits needs and preferences are via surveys, focus groups, and interviews.
 - Consider whether your benefits offerings are aligned with deskless workers' needs and realities. Are there particular needs (e.g., emergency savings, student debt) that aren't covered by your current benefits? Offering a benefits mix that aligns with the needs of these workers may help with engagement and utilization.
 - Identify particular groups of workers or specific benefits to target by analyzing existing data on enrollment and utilization trends.
- **Consider the communication barriers that might be at play in your organization.⁵**
 - Identify the different groups of deskless workers your organization employs. Consider what their days look like—their schedules, where they work, what technology they have access to—to map out the communication barriers that may be most relevant for each group.

2. AUDIT YOUR CURRENT BENEFITS ENGAGEMENT APPROACH.

- **Map out your current benefits engagement and communication strategy.⁵**
 - Conduct an audit of your current approach to benefits engagement and communication. Consider what information is being sent, when people are receiving it, and through what channels.
- **Identify potential gaps in your approach.⁵**
 - Based on what you've identified as access issues and barriers among your deskless workers, consider where there might be gaps in your approach. Are you communicating on channels that are inaccessible to your deskless workers? Is information being sent during nonwork hours? Are there specific topics that are unaddressed that could help promote awareness of particular benefits or knowledge of how to enroll in or utilize them?

⁵Short-term actions that you can take immediately to get started.

⁴Long-term actions that may require more time and planning and may be informed by the results of short-term actions.

3. MAKE IT EASY TO ENROLL AND PARTICIPATE.

- **Use a multichannel approach.**⁴
 - Given deskless workers' diverse needs and working conditions, a multichannel approach is critical.
 - Invest in mobile-friendly platforms. 61% of HR professionals say deskless workers use their personal cellphones to learn about and use their benefits. Ensuring existing online platforms are mobile-friendly can improve accessibility for deskless workers who primarily use their phones for information. For mobile communication, consider using new forms of messages, such as brief videos or accessible infographics.
 - Consider in-person communication. In our research, HR professionals indicated that presentations at new-hire orientation and one-on-one consultations are among the most effective strategies for increasing benefits enrollment and utilization among deskless workers. Alongside more seamless mobile communication, consider opportunities for in-person communication to help people learn about their benefits and how to enroll.
- **Go analog.**⁵
 - Many HR professionals indicated that they use printed materials, including newsletters and brochures, to share benefits information. In addition to mailed materials, consider opportunities to communicate with deskless workers in settings they visit on a regular basis, such as break rooms.
- **Streamline the enrollment process.**⁴
 - Consider ways to minimize steps required for enrollment. Utilize pre-populated forms based on employee data to reduce manual entry.
 - Consider using auto-enrollment for retirement plans to increase participation, ensuring you set default contribution rates that are appropriate given the financial needs of your workforce.
- **Dedicate time.**⁵
 - Over half (54%) of HR professionals indicated that their deskless workers learn about their benefits both during and outside of their working hours. Consider helping employees engage with benefits-related information by protecting time during the workday (e.g., by leveraging existing breaks or scheduling pauses during the day) for benefits enrollment or utilization-related activities (e.g., to attend an information session or Benefits Fair).

4. INCREASE AWARENESS ABOUT BENEFITS OFFERINGS AND ENROLLMENT PROCESSES.

- **Engage in ongoing benefits education.**⁴
 - Many HR professionals reported sharing information during employee onboarding, but fewer (26%) indicated that they use more recurring forms of communication, including annual benefits fairs or events. Given the amount of information that new employees are presented with, benefits information can be hard to retain, making it less likely that employees will use the benefits available to them. Consider providing opportunities to learn on a more frequent or recurring basis.
- **Leverage benefits providers.**⁵
 - Partner with benefits providers to deliver clear explanations about benefits and encourage provider use of personalized and relevant approaches.

To ensure maximum effectiveness, adapt these recommendations to your specific industry, organization, and deskless workforce composition. Remember to regularly measure the effectiveness of your initiatives and make adjustments as needed.

CONCLUSION

By recognizing the potential challenges associated with managing a deskless workforce and implementing targeted strategies to address them, organizations can significantly improve benefits enrollment and utilization among this critical employee population. This can lead to improved recruitment, retention, and overall employee satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

This survey was fielded to a sample of HR professionals via SHRM's Voice of Work Research Panel from March 2 to March 5, 2024. In total, 1,046 HR professionals participated in the survey. Respondents represented organizations of all sizes in a wide variety of industries across the U.S.

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