BOOST WORKS

THE DESKLESS DISCONNECT

Why UK employers still recognise, reward and manage desk-based staff differently to their deskless and frontline colleagues

BASED ON INDEPENDENT RESEARCH AMONG 2,000 UK EMPLOYEES, CONDUCTED BY CENSUSWIDE



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INTRODUCTION

Every organisation says it values its whole workforce. The data says something else.

We grouped every respondent by how they mainly work, giving us three comparable populations: 631 deskless or frontline employees, in roles such as retail, manufacturing, healthcare, field-based work, operations and facilities; 765 hybrid employees, split between site and remote working; and 604 office-based employees, working primarily from a fixed office location.

That structure lets us do something most workplace research does not. We can compare the experience of recognition, reward and everyday management across these three groups side by side, rather than reporting a single national average that hides the differences underneath it.

What we found is a consistent pattern rather than an isolated statistic. On question after question, whether the topic is how often a manager checks in, how recognition is given or how reward is distributed, we found deskless and frontline employees reporting a thinner experience than their office-based colleagues. Hybrid employees typically sit somewhere in the middle, closer to the office group than to the deskless one.

We call this pattern the Deskless Disconnect. It's not that deskless workers are actively overlooked by intent. It's that recognition, reward and management attention are still built around the people who are easiest to reach, whether that's because they sit near a manager or are in the room when praise gets handed out. Deskless employees are, by definition, further from both.

The chapters that follow set out where that gap shows up most clearly, what it appears to be costing employers in engagement and retention, and, in Chapter 5, what happens when we ask HR and business leaders about it directly. The final chapter sets out what we believe a fairer experience looks like: one where no one misses out because of where they work.



MISSING IN ACTION: THE MANAGER RELATIONSHIP

For most employees, their line manager is the main channel through which recognition, feedback and support actually arrive. If that relationship is weaker for deskless workers, everything built on top of it, from recognition to reward to retention, starts from a lower base.

We found deskless employees are close to four times as likely as hybrid employees, and almost three times as likely as office-based employees, to say they have no real relationship with their line manager at all. Where 39% of office-based employees describe their manager relationship as a genuine balance of support and performance management, only 28% of deskless employees say the same.

	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
A balance of support and performance management	28.1%	40.7%	39.2%
No relationship, very little interaction	9.8%	2.5%	3.5%

The gap widens further once we look at what managers actually do rather than how the relationship is described. We asked employees to agree or disagree with four statements about their manager. On every single one, deskless employees were the least likely to agree, and office-based employees the most likely, with a gap of 14-17%.

Agree with statement (net)	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
"My manager helps me feel valued"	62.6%	73.6%	78.8%
"My manager regularly recognises good work"	64.5%	72.9%	79.0%
"My manager understands what motivates me"	58.3%	68.2%	73.7%
"My manager positively influences team morale"	63.1%	73.2%	79.6%



Frequency of contact tells the same story. We found that just over 1 in 8 deskless employees (12.7%) say their manager never checks in with them about their wellbeing or overall experience at work, more than twice the rate among office-based employees. When those check-ins do happen, deskless employees also rate them as less supportive overall. Only 31% describe them as "very supportive", against 51% of office-based employees.

Manager check-ins on wellbeing and experience	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Never checks in	12.7%	5.5%	6.1%
Check-ins rated "very supportive"	30.9%	37.6%	50.8%

None of this means deskless workers see their manager as unimportant. We found the relationship matters just as much to deskless workers. It's simply thinner in practice.

Importance of line manager to stay or leave decision	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Important (net)	86.1%	94.1%	93.5%

THE RECOGNITION GAP

Perhaps the most striking finding in our whole study is this: deskless employees say recognition matters to them more than it does to office-based employees, yet they receive markedly less of it.

26.6%

or over 1 in 4 deskless employees say that recognition matters more to them than rewards, against 19.5% of office-based employees.

Reward and recognition are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but where a choice is forced, deskless workers lean towards recognition more strongly than any other group.

Despite that, we found deskless employees consistently less likely to receive the forms of recognition that carry the most weight in organisations: recognition in team meetings, recognition from senior leaders, formal awards and public recognition on company channels.

Agree with statement (net)	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Recognition in team meetings	24.2%	38.0%	37.3%
Recognition from senior leaders	25.5%	32.4%	36.3%
Formal awards or nominations	15.7%	23.9%	25.7%
Public recognition on company channels	18.4%	20.5%	25.8%
No particular way, not recognised at all	10.1%	4.2%	7.3%

The reasons employees give for being recognised follow the same pattern. Deskless employees are recognised for achievement at roughly two-thirds the rate of office-based employees, and for innovation at roughly half the rate, even though there's no reason to think deskless roles generate fewer achievements or good ideas. What looks more likely to us is that achievements and moments of innovation are harder to see, and therefore harder to credit, in roles that are not sitting in a manager's line of sight every day.

Most common reasons for being recognised or rewarded	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Achievement	42.2%	61.2%	62.3%
Innovation	18.5%	32.0%	36.1%
Living company values	20.0%	23.1%	30.8%

Deskless employees are also almost twice as likely as office-based employees to tell us that recognition simply rarely happens where they work, and less likely to say their organisation has a formal, structured recognition programme in place. Where recognition does happen for this group, it more often falls into the informal, spontaneous category, which is welcome but leaves it dependent on an individual manager's habits rather than something the organisation can guarantee.

How recognition typically happens	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Mostly structured, formal programme	17.0%	23.0%	23.8%
Recognition rarely happens	20.9%	12.9%	11.1%



THE REWARD GAP

Reward follows recognition down the same path. We found deskless employees markedly less likely than office-based employees to say they are rewarded through bonus payments or performance-linked salary increases, the two forms of reward that tend to carry the clearest financial weight.

How employees say they are rewarded	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Bonus payments	26.6%	36.2%	41.4%
Salary increases linked to performance	20.6%	36.3%	39.9%
Professional development opportunities	20.4%	27.5%	28.1%
No particular way, not rewarded at all	28.5%	18.0%	19.4%



More than a quarter of deskless employees, 28.5%, told us they are not rewarded in any particular way, roughly 10% more than either of the other two groups, and the single largest gap in our entire reward dataset.

Interestingly, when we asked deskless employees what would be most meaningful to them, salary increases and bonuses still topped the list, much as they do for everyone else. But deskless employees place more weight on verbal praise from colleagues than office-based employees do, almost double. Where formal reward structures are less likely to reach this group, peer recognition appears to be filling some of the gap on its own, informally and without any organisational design behind it.

Most meaningful forms of recognition or reward	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
Salary increases linked to performance	31.1%	43.0%	38.6%
Bonus payments	33.4%	37.8%	38.4%
Verbal praise or thanks from colleagues	19.7%	13.2%	10.8%



WHAT THE GAP IS COSTING EMPLOYERS

A thinner experience of management, recognition and reward doesn't stay contained to how employees feel about their manager. It shows up in engagement, in performance motivation and in whether people stay.

We found both recognition and reward motivate office-based employees to perform better at a higher rate than they motivate deskless employees, but the gap is wider for reward. On recognition, 41% of office-based employees say it motivates them to perform better, against 33% of deskless employees. On reward, the same comparison is 47% against 30%; a gap of 17%, over double that of recognition.

Effects of recognition and reward	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
"Motivates me to perform better" (recognition)	33.1%	33.7%	40.9%
No effect on them at all (recognition)	20.6%	36.3%	39.9%
"Motivates me to perform better" (reward)	30.0%	39.3%	46.9%
No effect on them at all (reward)	30.0%	39.3%	46.9%

Deskless employees are also slightly more likely than office-based employees to say recognition and reward have no effect on them at all, which is the outcome we'd expect if either arrives too thinly, too rarely or too informally to register as something the organisation is genuinely doing for them.

What happens when an employee feels undervalued is also worth pausing on. Deskless employees are slightly more likely than office-based employees to respond by quietly stopping going above and beyond, and less likely to raise it with their manager. That's a harder pattern for an organisation to spot than a resignation letter, and by the time it becomes visible in performance data, the disengagement may already be well established.

On loyalty, the pattern is less clear-cut. Deskless employees rank feeling recognised and appreciated slightly lower as a reason to stay than office-based employees do, but the two groups are close, and both sit well behind work-life balance and job security as the dominant drivers of loyalty we measured in this study. Our honest reading isn't that recognition is unimportant to deskless workers. It's that recognition currently has less chance to do its job, because so much less of it is reaching them in the first place.

Most likely response to feeling regularly undervalued	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
"I would stay but stop going above and beyond"	16.8%	13.5%	13.4%
"I would raise the issue with my manager"	19.8%	24.1%	27.8%



WHAT LEADERS SAY ABOUT THE DESKLESS DIVIDE

Most of this report is built on what employees say about their own experience. This chapter looks at the other side of the conversation: the decision-makers who design recognition and reward programmes in the first place. What they told us doesn't stray far from the employee data, probably closer than most organisations would like.

Managers who are themselves deskless or frontline workers are notably less confident that they recognise their own teams in an adequately meaningful way, and notably less likely to feel adequately recognised by their own senior leadership.

Manager self-assessment	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
"I recognise my team adequately" (Yes)	24.2%	38.0%	37.3%
"Senior leadership recognises me adequately" (Yes)	25.5%	32.4%	36.3%

We asked what stops them recognising their teams as often or as effectively as they would like. Deskless managers are close to twice as likely as office-based managers to say recognition simply is not prioritised within the organisation, and close to twice as likely to say senior leaders do not role model recognition themselves.

Barriers to recognising their team	Deskless / frontline	Hybrid	Office-based
"Recognition is not prioritised within the organisation"	27.6%	16.1%	15.0%
"Senior leaders do not role model recognition"	22.8%	13.3%	12.9%

There is a sharper way to read those two barriers together. Deskless managers are, if anything, slightly more likely than office-based managers to say that recognising their team is formally part of their job. What they lack is not a mandate, it's backing: their own organisations are less likely to prioritise recognition in practice, and less likely to have senior leaders visibly model it themselves. Recognition can be written into a job description and still not be part of a culture, and that gap between policy and practice looks to be where deskless managers are struggling hardest.

Despite that, deskless managers aren't giving up on it. We found they are the most likely of any group to say they have personally spent their own time, outside their normal responsibilities, supporting their team's wellbeing - 40% of deskless managers, against 32% of office-based managers. In other words, where the organisation is not closing this gap for them, a considerable number of deskless managers are trying to close it themselves (Q25).

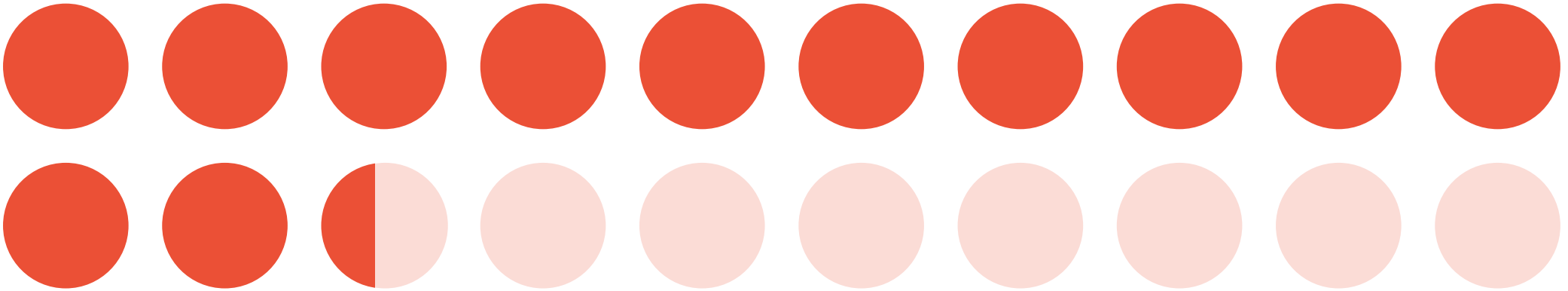


This same fault line shows up when we ask decision-makers, not managers, how much they trust the system to work. Asked how confident they are that managers are equipped to recognise and reward their teams effectively, decision-makers overseeing office-based teams told us they're very confident at 59%. Among those overseeing deskless teams, that falls to 47%. Among those overseeing hybrid teams, it's 46%.

Very confident that managers are equipped to recognise and reward well	Deskless decision-makers	Hybrid decision-makers	Office-based
Very confident	24.2%	38.0%	37.3%

This isn't managers judging themselves or employees judging their manager. It's the people who write recognition and reward policy admitting they trust the system less for anyone who isn't office-based, and it sets up the more direct admission that follows.

We then asked HR and senior decision-makers, the people who provide input into or make the final call on reward and recognition policy, a more direct question. The answer is the clearest finding in our whole study.



62% OF HR DECISION-MAKERS SAY THEIR ORGANISATION RECOGNISES AND REWARDS DESK-BASED EMPLOYEES MORE FREQUENTLY THAN DESKLESS OR FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES.

This closely reflects what we heard from employees in Chapters 1 to 4. It suggests the gap is not simply about perception, but a broader structural issue in how recognition is designed and delivered across the organisation.

At the same time, 79% of HR decision-makers believe deskless and frontline employees have equal access to recognition opportunities. That apparent tension is revealing: organisations may believe their recognition processes are designed fairly, while the way those processes operate in practice can still favour employees who are easier to reach, communicate with and recognise.

The issue isn't necessarily a lack of intent. It's that recognition systems were largely designed around desk-based workers, leaving deskless and frontline employees harder to reach and recognise.

CLOSING THE DESKLESS DISCONNECT

None of this data suggests employers are deliberately choosing to under-recognise deskless and frontline staff. What it suggests to us is **that most recognition, reward and management infrastructure was built around office-based work by default:** email announcements, desk-side conversations, meetings where praise gets shared out loud, intranets that assume a laptop and a company login. Deskless employees are structurally further from all of it, whatever their manager's intentions.

Closing the gap is less about persuading managers to care more, since our data in Chapter 5 suggests most already do, and more about redesigning how recognition and rewards physically reach people who don't work at a desk, so no one misses out. A few principles follow directly from what we found.

01 Make recognition mobile and immediate, rather than tied to team meetings, formal award cycles or company communication channels, since our Chapter 2 findings show these are exactly the channels where the gap between deskless and office-based employees is widest.

02 Give managers a consistent, low-effort way to recognise good work as it happens, rather than relying on formal award cycles that deskless employees are already less likely to be nominated for.

03 Track recognition and reward activity by work pattern, not just by department or region. Our Chapter 5 findings show that many organisations only recognise this pattern once they are asked about it directly.

04 Treat manager check-ins as infrastructure, not habit. Deskless employees are twice as likely to go without one entirely, which may be the single biggest lever behind the other gaps in this report.

We built Boostworks to solve exactly this problem. We're deskless workforce specialists, and our platform brings recognition, reward and employee benefits together in a single, mobile-first app designed for every worker, wherever they work. Every client is backed by dedicated onboarding support, ongoing adoption support and a dedicated account manager.

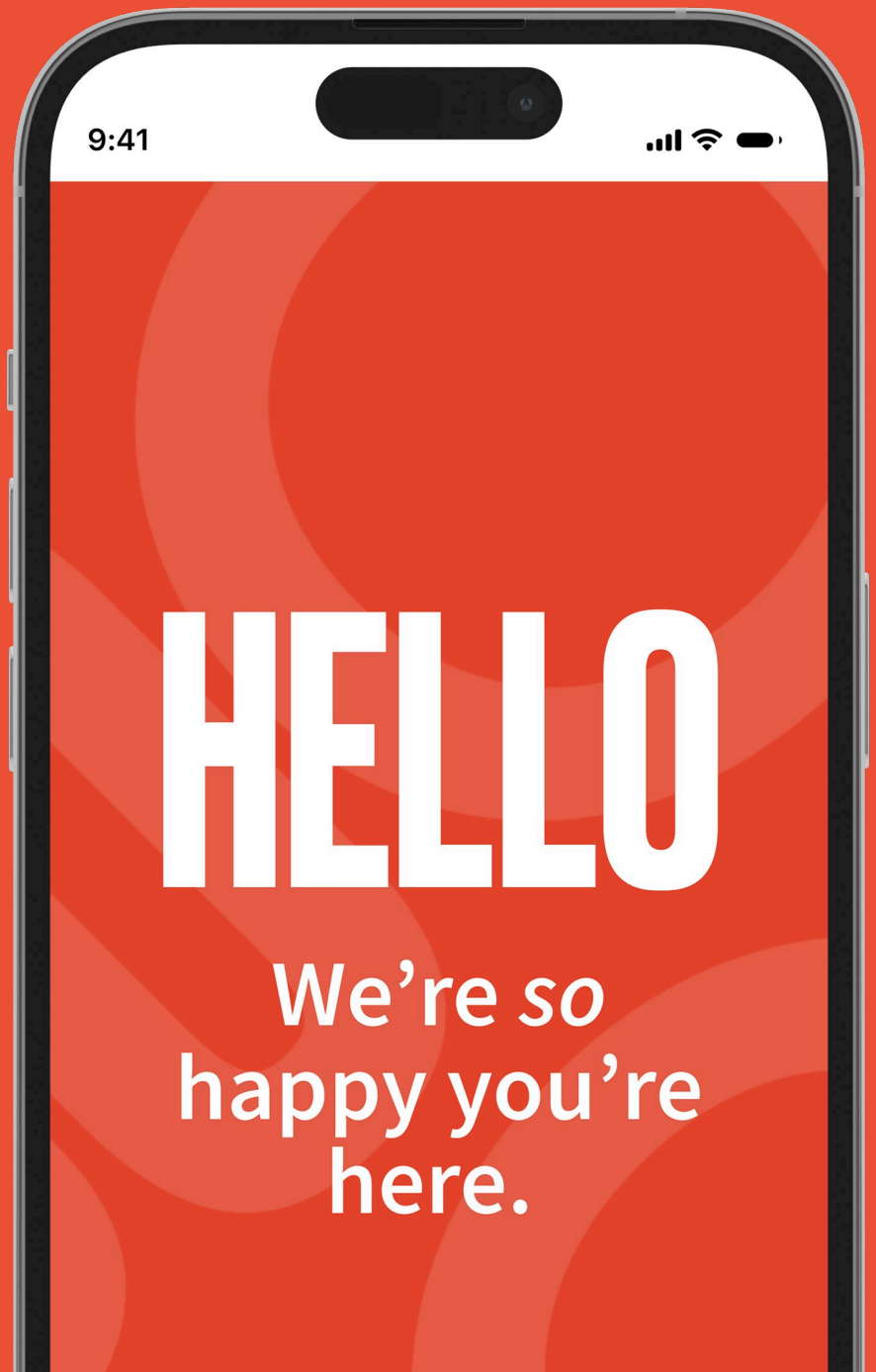
Nine in ten of our clients are organisations with a deskless or dispersed workforce, and we already support more than 600,000 deskless or dispersed workers across the UK. Boostworks is the recognition, reward and benefits app designed for every worker, wherever they work, so no one misses out.

That's the Boostworks Promise, and it's a simple one.

TALK TO BOOST WORKS

If this report reflects a gap you recognise in your own organisation, we'd love to talk. Get in touch to find out how our single, mobile-first platform brings recognition, reward and benefits to every employee, wherever they work, so no one misses out.

BOOK A CALL



ABOUT BOOSTWORKS

Boostworks is the recognition, rewards and benefits app where no one misses out.

We believe every employee deserves to feel seen, supported and celebrated, regardless of where or how they work. That's why we've spent over 20 years helping UK-based organisations create experiences that help their people thrive.

Designed for deskless and dispersed workforces, our easy-to-use mobile app helps organisations deliver meaningful recognition, rewards, discounts and benefits that employees genuinely use and value. Alongside our technology, we provide hands-on support that helps HR teams reduce admin, drive engagement and build stronger workplace cultures.

Methodology

Sample: Over 2,000 UK employees (18+), ensuring a minimum of 250 HR decision-makers, managers/line managers and deskless workers. Research carried out 24/06/26 – 02/07/26. Censuswide is a member of the Market Research Society (MRS) and the British Polling Council (BPC), and a signatory of the Global Data Quality Pledge, adhering to the MRS Code of Conduct and ESOMAR principles.