Workplace

Deskless Not Voiceless 2020

Global Frontline Research Report

from
FACEBOOK

Contents

Foreword	03
Key Findings	09
1. Communication Gap	10
2. Empowerment Gap	20
3. Culture Gap	26
4. Building a High Performance Culture	35
Conclusion	40
Methodology	43

Connect the dots of your organization to achieve better business outcomes

Foreword by Julien Codorniou,
VP, Workplace from Facebook

Last year, we spoke to frontline employees – shop assistants, delivery drivers, factory workers – for our report, **'Deskless Not Voiceless'**, which explored how frontline, deskless workers felt they were treated by their bosses at head office.

We heard hundreds of stories from all around the world of people feeling undervalued, unheard and disconnected from the business, despite headquarters' efforts to keep them engaged.

We started 2020 wanting to explore this disconnect even further, this time looking at frontline managers specifically, alongside their HQ counterparts. Our aim was to understand how they both perceive the 'frontline gap' - and each other.

Few papers have been written about this critical band of managers, with most leadership research focusing on heads of departments at the top of organizations. But there is evidence that shows frontline leadership's effectiveness "has a positive impact on employee voice and engagement"[1], making it just as crucial to the success of a business as HQ leadership.

Frontline managers oversee the operations and personnel in stores, delivery services, manufacturing plants and so on. As our research shows, as many as 80% of frontline managers aren't at a desk at all, instead spending most of their time dealing with the needs of customers and frontline employees.

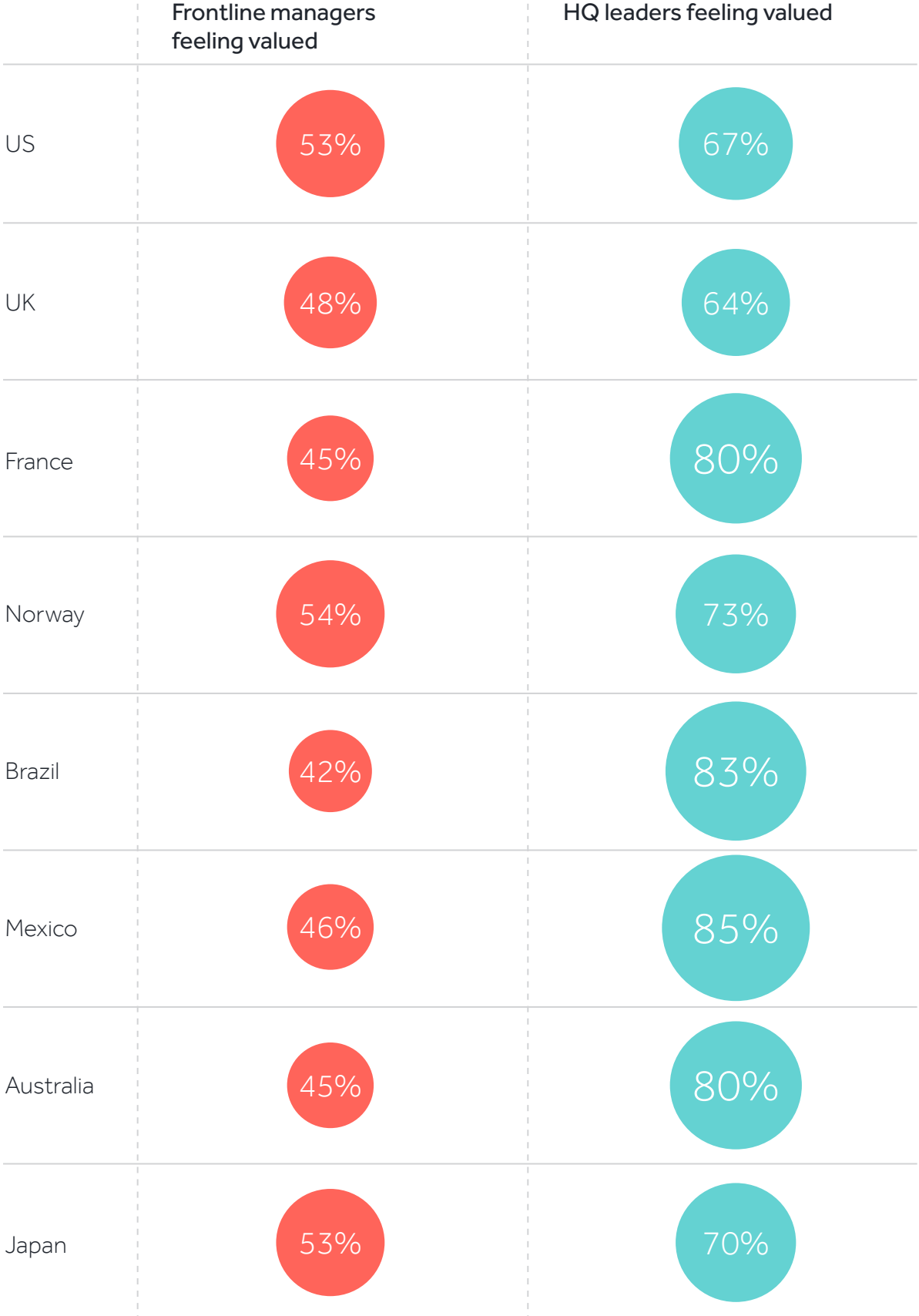
What we found were some disheartening but not entirely surprising realities about the working lives of frontline managers. But then the COVID-19 pandemic struck – and frontline employees quickly became 'heroes'.

We had to know whether this global rise in status the frontline had experienced had impacted our prior results, so we went back to frontline managers once again to find out. And yet, even after months at the forefront of both their organizations' and society's minds, only 49% of frontline managers say they feel valued.

Through these two waves of research, we've been able to uncover three major barriers that are preventing these customer-facing leaders from fulfilling their potential.

FRONTLINE MANAGERS FEEL LESS VALUED THAN HQ LEADERS

Percentage of frontline managers and HQ leaders who say they feel 'valued' by their organization



Why does this all matter? Frontline managers connect the dots between the frontline and HQ; between the customer and the organization. They are the ones that possess the skills and insights that will enable businesses to respond faster to rapidly evolving customer expectations and behaviors.

They can help businesses deliver exceptional customer experiences – but only if frontline leaders are able to share their insights and act on feedback.

Read on to explore the barriers facing frontline managers around the world.

Definitions

HQ leaders

Managers and directors – usually seated behind a desk – who are based in the head offices of their organizations.

Frontline managers

Directors, senior and middle managers who aren't based in head offices but on the frontline of their organizations, such as a factory manager. They are often dealing with customer issues and spend a lot of time away from their desks.

Frontline workers

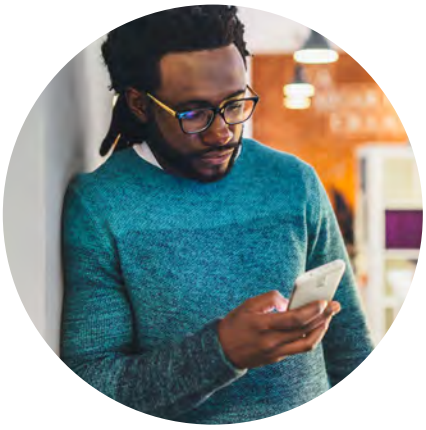
The 80% of workers who don't work behind a desk but on the frontline of their organizations, such as delivery drivers or retail assistants.

Key findings

Frontline managers play a significant role in delivering great customer experiences, but three systemic issues have left 51% of them feeling undervalued. During the pandemic, HQ leaders favored email while frontline managers used mobile messaging, resulting in a **communication gap**. Organizations may be paying lip service to insights gained on the frontline but they're failing to give managers the autonomy to make decisions, resulting in an **empowerment gap**. Finally, the experience of life outside the office hasn't made HQ leaders any more empathetic to the challenges their frontline colleagues face on a daily basis, resulting in a **culture gap**. Read on to learn more.

1

The Communications Gap



Prior to the pandemic, there was a significant gulf between head office and frontline leaders. In February 2020, practically all **(92%) of frontline managers blamed their communication challenges on a lack of adequate information-sharing tools**.

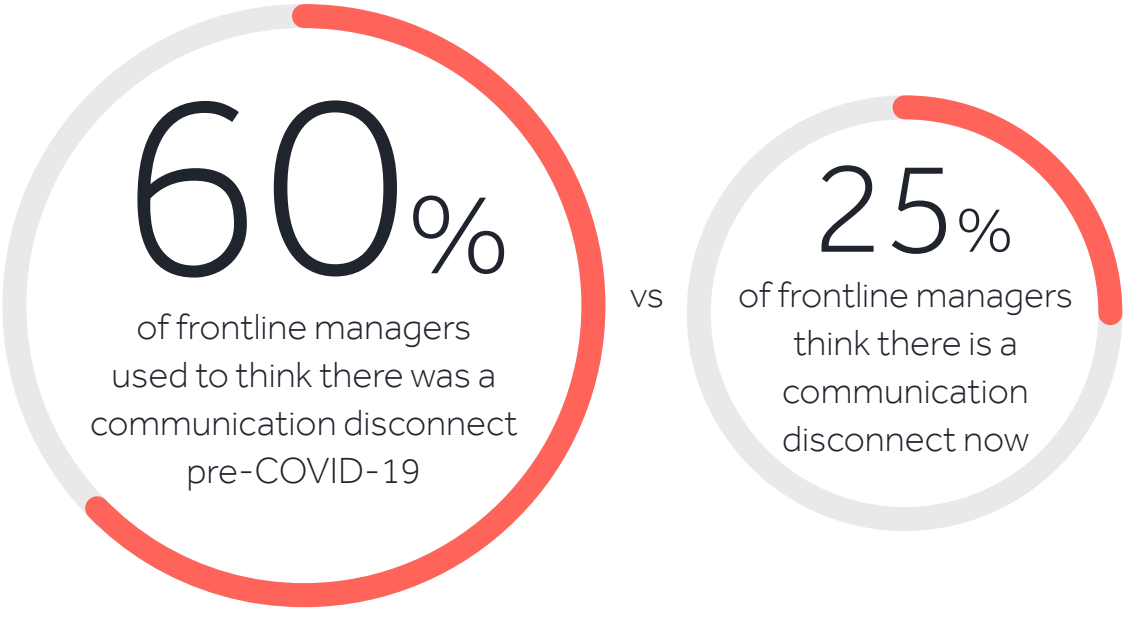
And while 40% of frontline managers were convinced HQ was aware of the problem, it nevertheless persisted.

Since the pandemic, however, HQ and frontline managers have been pushed closer together and aligned many of their views,

especially when it comes to appreciating the value of information sharing.

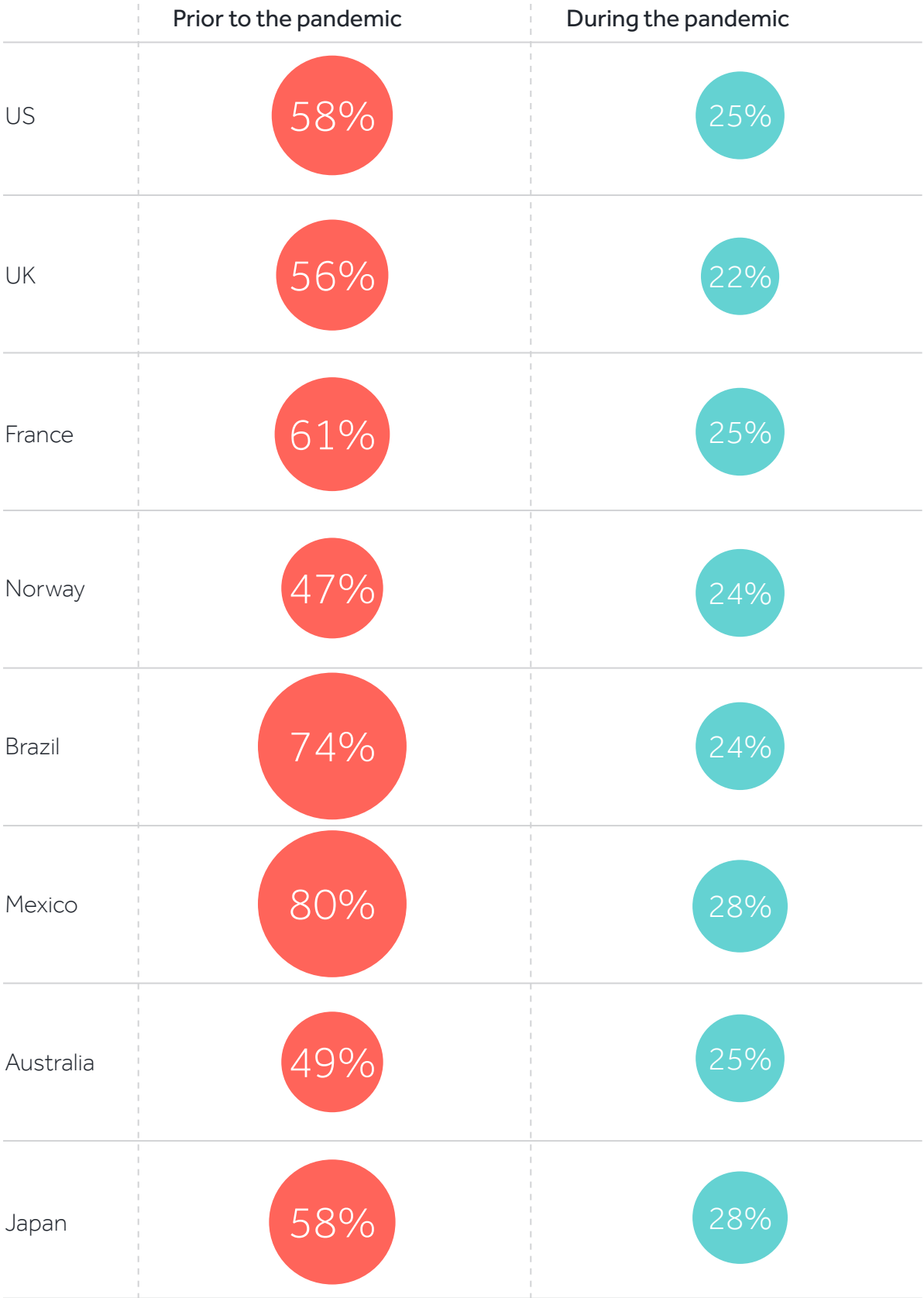
Some 57% of frontline managers and 54% of HQ leaders now agree that cross-organizational information sharing has been critical during the COVID-19 crisis. That in large part is because the crisis compelled HQ leaders to jump on communication platforms and proactively work to engage with their customer-facing peers – and it's had a positive effect.

The number of frontline managers who think there's a communication gap in their organization has dropped significantly – from 60% to 25% since the start of the pandemic.



THE COMMUNICATION GAP IS SHRINKING

Percentage of frontline leaders who say there is a communication disconnect in their organization



Productivity drain

While the pandemic has brought about greater alignment in some areas, the larger truth is this just isn't enough – frontline managers are still struggling to be heard by their HQ peers.

Before the crisis, we found that each frontline manager wasted an average of 453 hours every year due to poor communication with head office. And while this has decreased to 387 hours post-COVID, it remains high – the equivalent of **9.3 working weeks every year***.

These hours might be spent dealing with regular frustrations like ringing an HQ colleague without an answer, waiting for updates or duplicating work that's already been done by someone else.

*Based on the average US full-time employee workweek at 41.5 hours (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018)

The crisis has opened HQ leaders' eyes to this somewhat. They now believe **more time is being wasted every week (8.04 hours) than they did before the virus hit (6.99 hours)**. This could be because the pandemic has highlighted the frontline as the lynchpin of business operations – making time wastage more noticeable as a result.

With HQ workers suddenly dispersed, the efforts and importance of frontline leaders have never been clearer. From ensuring we get the food we eat to making sure key workers are transported to where they need to be, virtually everyone has relied on frontline workers, underlining their value for business and society.

The wrong tools for the job

The pandemic has highlighted the limitations of the current tools being used by leaders to communicate across the business.

Because while both parties agree on the need to communicate more regularly (65% frontline and 58% HQ leaders respectively), the tools they actually use to communicate differ wildly.

For frontline managers, texting and calling on personal devices, along with WhatsApp, have been the most reliable methods of communicating internally during the crisis. But **head office leaders predominantly rely on company email (90%), compared to only 27% of frontline managers**.

The key difference here seems to be that frontline managers are a lot less concerned with using more 'formal' means of internal communication. They value speed and responsiveness above all. Not to mention that their teams may not even have access to an email address.

Company email, on the other hand, is a lot easier to rely on when most of your team sits behind a desk (as their head office colleagues tend to).

As such, many companies are faced with the challenge of their two groups of leaders favoring drastically different communication technologies and software.

So is it any surprise that at the start of the year 58% of frontline leaders said they just don't have time to share information with their direct reports, and half (50%) of them often miss important information from head office?

These shocking numbers have basically remained the same (49% and 52% respectively) even in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Untapped knowledge

The takeaway here? The connection gap still exists. There's a clear need for entire businesses to be connected on a single platform that can be accessed by everyone, is mobile friendly and suits both leadership teams' priorities and preferences. This is the only way to ensure neither HQ nor the frontline misses out on valuable information.

Otherwise, the cracks that exist between them will lead to important information being lost, which is particularly concerning given the level of insight frontline managers hold. These leaders are responsible for meeting customer needs, driving efficiencies, receiving feedback and reporting issues to HQ.

With all the uncertainty that still exists, and a health crisis in the foreground, failing to fix communication channels between these leaders and HQ could lead to a number of devastating results.

" For Dixons Carphone, it was a major digital fast forward to ensure all of our colleagues across the UK & Ireland had easy access to the information they needed, as soon as it was available. The communications during the beginning of COVID-19 moved with such pace, we needed a way to stay connected to our colleagues in a simple and flexible way. Having Workplace rolled out to all our colleagues made it much easier to keep everyone connected and informed. "

NATALIE BAXENDALE,
INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS
& EVENTS BUSINESS PARTNER,
DIXONS CARPHONE

2

The Empowerment Gap

Being able to communicate effectively with peers is just the first step in many organizations' plan to create a more unified leadership.

Our research shows that companies are trying to give frontline employees more of a voice and use their insights to make more strategic decisions.

To do this, frontline managers not only need clear channels of communication with HQ but to feel empowered internally to make decisions about the issues they're closest to.

And it does seem like some progress is being made. Before COVID-19, **37% of frontline managers said they were regularly consulted on business decisions that affect customers – that number is now up to 43%**.

However, even if technology is put in place to help these groups communicate better and frontline managers begin to feel more empowered, it all means nothing if HQ doesn't value frontline managers' insights.

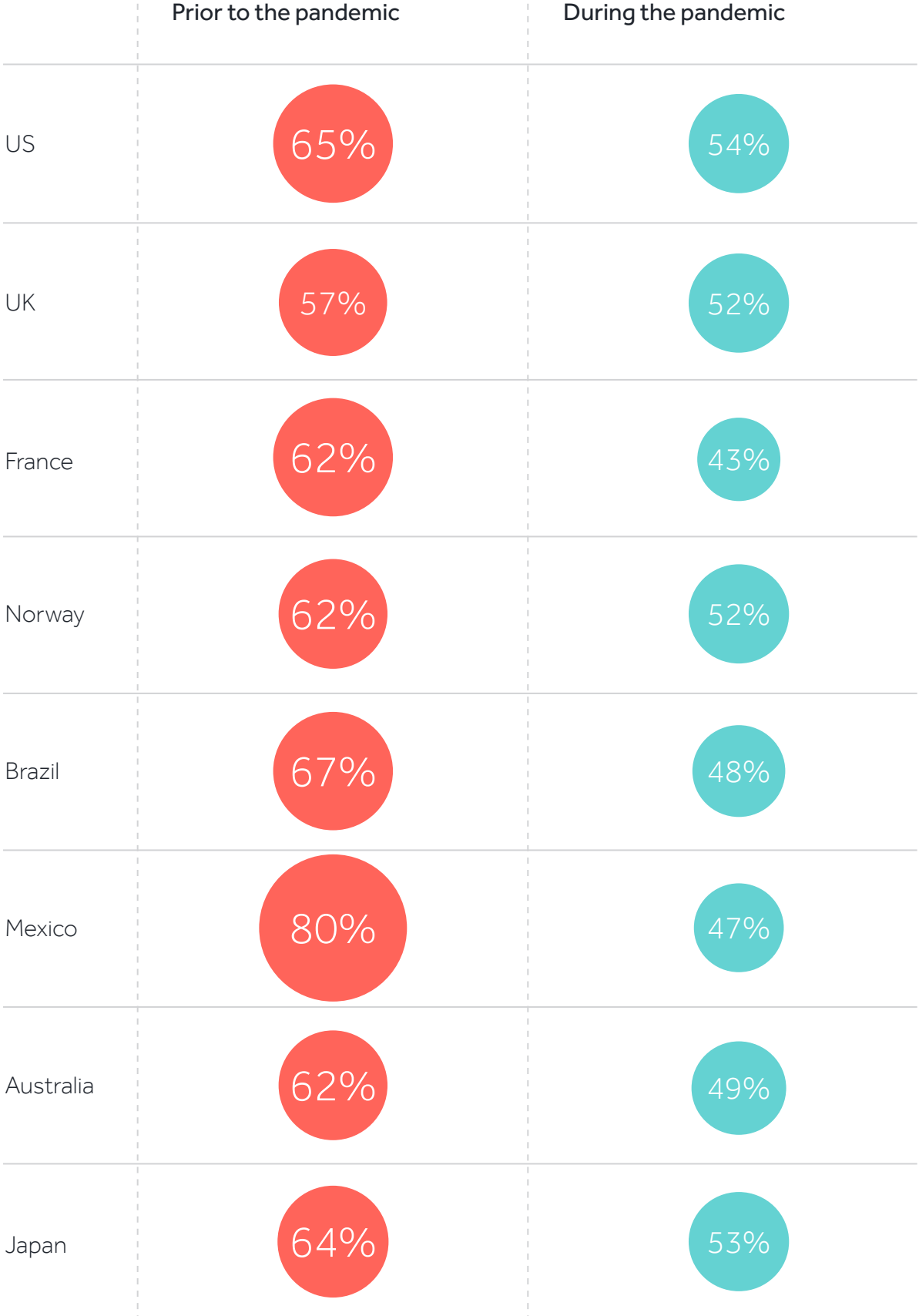
Until recently, the day-to-day challenges and experiences of frontline managers were hidden from HQ. The pandemic has pushed their efforts into full view – but they haven't been empowered to make decisions on the ground.

In fact, frontline empowerment has gone backwards since February, with **50% (down from 64%) of frontline managers saying they feel authorized to make strategic decisions, versus 78% (up from 71%) of HQ leaders**.

This could be in part due to new regulations coming from governments, but without a better understanding of the challenges frontline managers face, it's even harder for HQ to interpret how these new rules are affecting the frontline.

FRONTLINE MANAGERS AREN'T TRUSTED TO MAKE DECISIONS

Percentage of frontline managers who say they are empowered to make strategic decisions



Even more dismaying: **more than a fifth (23%) of frontline managers still say they are rarely or never consulted on strategic business decisions**. And with consumer behavior shifting so rapidly, frontline managers' insights are an incredibly valuable resource that's currently untapped.

In summary, while there are signs of a shift in thinking, more needs to be done to ensure that making strategic decisions isn't just an HQ prerogative. As businesses become increasingly fast-paced and customer-focused, not giving the managers closest to the action the trust and tools to make fast decisions will continue to have a negative impact.

" All the greatest ideas are going to come from our frontline, but until Workplace came along, frontline employees had no way to access decision-makers or influence the product development process. Today, these communities have a very thin line in terms of how they're connected. "

JIN MONTESANO,
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER,
LIXIL

3

The Culture Gap

At the root of all interpersonal challenges within an organization lies culture. And that's one more thing this pandemic has managed to shake up.

For **the majority of head office leaders (59%)**, it wasn't until the pandemic, when many of them were forced to work from home, that they finally **saw how restrictive their 'office-biased' communication approach has been**.

These office-based workers got to experience feeling disconnected from the rest of the organization for the first time – and they didn't like it one bit. Our research shows they feel less valued, less consulted and less recognized for their efforts.

COVID-19 HAS HIGHLIGHTED 'OFFICE-BIASED' COMMUNICATION

Percentage of HQ leaders who say COVID-19 has highlighted the restrictions of 'office-biased' communication

US		54%
UK		56%
France		60%
Norway		60%
Brazil		64%
Mexico		59%
Australia		65%
Japan		60%

And yet **only one in four say their empathy for their frontline colleagues has increased**. This will come as a surprise to the **59% of frontline managers who now think their colleagues in HQ better understand the challenges of frontline ways of working**. Clearly, there's more work to do to narrow this culture gap.

That's because there's a direct relationship between employee productivity and engagement. It's incredibly important for a business' success that its managers, be they customer-facing or HQ-based, feel recognized

WORKING FROM HOME HASN'T INCREASED EMPATHY FOR FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES

Percentage of HQ leaders who say they better understand their frontline colleagues in the wake of the pandemic

US		24%
UK		24%
France		24%
Norway		27%
Brazil		32%
Mexico		27%
Australia		26%
Japan		23%

and valued. Especially when they go above and beyond what's expected of them.

This is more pertinent than ever, as managers and employees are being asked to do this much more regularly during the pandemic. And while **more frontline managers say they feel rewarded for going the extra mile (46% compared to 35% before the pandemic hit)**, there's a clear difference between being rewarded and feeling like your opinion matters.

While some frontline managers may feel more rewarded, most don't feel understood. Instead, the picture that emerges is of a group of leaders desperate for their HQ peers to better understand their daily challenges and accomplishments so they can truly grasp why it's valid that they're empowered to make strategic decisions.

Spotting the next generation of leaders

One way to start bridging the culture gap and build real empathy between the two branches of leadership is for businesses to change how and where they source their next generation of leaders. It's human nature to want to hire people who remind you of yourself[2], which for HQ leaders, tends to be other employees based in headquarters.

But this creates a lack of diversity that could inhibit a company's performance. Frontline managers hold a key perspective that HQ leadership lacks – direct insight into the needs and expectations of customers. And this insight has only been made more relevant (and urgent) by the crisis.

But the economic uncertainty that has been brought about by the pandemic seems to have had the opposite effect on frontline leaders, who now feel as though there are even fewer opportunities for them to advance.

Only **41% of frontline managers believe their careers are being nurtured by head office**. And around half (formerly 49%, now 52%) don't believe their organization is willing to invest in their training and skills.

By inspiring leaders in HQ to look outside their bubbles for new talent, these new leaders will be more attuned to the concerns of the frontline. Their mere presence may breathe new ways of thinking into HQ that not only encourage head office leaders to hold their frontline peers in higher esteem, but also investigate their own unconscious biases.

" We're now able to hear some of the challenges our retail locations are facing. We can address those challenges more effectively than we have in the past because we understand what they are. We can actually see them and experience them through videos and photos that we're getting from our store employees. "

DANIEL SUNDIN,
INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR,
PETCO

4

Building a High Performance Culture

The events of 2020 - from the health crisis to the Black Lives Matter movement - have unsettled previously aligned leadership teams in HQ while creating an expectation amongst frontline managers for greater empathy. And yet the data shows that few HQ leaders are expressing more appreciation for the daily challenges faced by their frontline counterparts.

Similarly, while survey responses suggest HQ think staff empowerment is important (and, indeed, feel more empowered themselves), frontline managers actually feel less empowered than ever before. This needs to change as, ultimately, giving the frontline a voice will lead to better business performance.

THE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENTS CONTRIBUTING TO A HIGH PERFORMANCE CULTURE FOR FRONTLINE MANAGERS

	Pre-COVID		During COVID	
1	72%	Staff communication and collaboration	46%	Diversity, equity and inclusion
2	71%	Staff performance / productivity	44%	Staff performance / productivity
3	69%	Continuous business growth	41%	Continuous business growth
4	67%	Diversity, equity and inclusion	41%	Staff empowerment
5	62%	Staff empowerment	39%	Staff communication and collaboration

THE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENTS CONTRIBUTING TO A HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE FOR HQ LEADERS

	Pre-COVID		During COVID	
1	73%	Staff communication and collaboration	64%	Staff empowerment
2	73%	Staff performance / productivity	54%	Staff communication and collaboration
3	69%	Continuous business growth	53%	Continuous business growth
4	66%	Diversity, equity and inclusion	51%	Diversity, equity and inclusion
5	64%	Staff empowerment	49%	Staff performance / productivity

EMPOWERMENT HAS BECOME THE #1 PRIORITY FOR HIGH-PERFORMANCE CULTURE

Where do HQ leaders rank the importance of empowerment in building a high-performance culture

		Prior to the pandemic	During the pandemic
US		#4	#1
UK		#4	#1
France		#5	#1
Norway		#5	#1
Brazil		#5	#1
Mexico		#3	#1
Australia		#4	#1
Japan		#5	#1

Conclusion

While it's encouraging to see internal communication seemingly improving, it's clear that a lot more needs to be done if organizations want to close the communication, empowerment and culture gaps that have persisted for so long.

The reality is that frontline managers' voices aren't being heard. Office-biased communication channels are slowing the transfer of critical information, while insights from customers aren't being used to steer strategic business decisions.

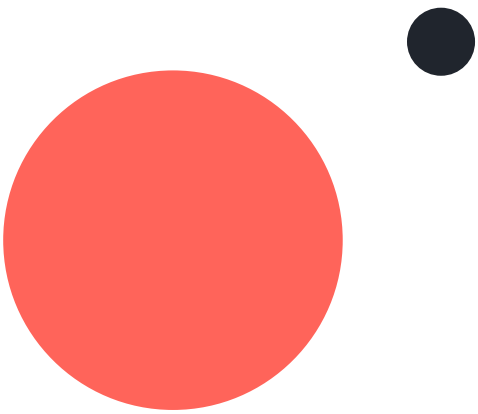
Perhaps as a result, frontline leaders still feel like their efforts and opinions are irrelevant, even as their work exceeds normal expectations and they're praised as heroes by the rest of society.

But there's clearly an appetite among both frontline managers and leaders in HQ to build closer, stronger and more productive connections. Now it's time for businesses to adopt the technology that will enable them to do just that.

By connecting frontline and HQ on a single, shared platform, businesses can start to make a dent in their communication gaps. But in order to really address the other gaps, companies must go further and ask themselves how they can begin to foster a culture where greater connection leads directly to more empowerment. Because this is the transition that will ultimately lead to better business outcomes.

Once organizations are able to figure this out, they'll be able to foster strong relationships across the entire organization and let go of archaic and unhelpful divisions.

And once HQ empowers managers to lead from the frontline, they will build a more connected business ready for whatever challenges lie ahead.



Methodology

This survey comprises 4,500 frontline managers and 4,500 head office leaders across eight countries (UK, US, France, Norway, Brazil, Mexico, Australia and Japan) and was conducted by Coleman Parkes and commissioned by Workplace from Facebook.

The research was carried out in two parts. The first part in February 2020, and again in August 2020 to better understand the reality for business leaders in frontline organizations today.

Sources

1 Gahan, P., Adamovic, M., Bevitt, A., Harley, B., Healy, J., Olsen, J.E., Theilacker, M. 2016. Leadership at Work: Do Australian leaders have what it takes? Melbourne: Centre for Workplace Leadership, University of Melbourne.

2 Forbes, Why You Mistakenly Hire People Just Like You, 2018

DESKLESS NOT VOICELESS 2020

Workplace is a communications tool that connects everyone in your organization including frontline employees - even if they don't have an email address. Use familiar features such as Groups, Chat, Rooms and live video broadcasting to get people talking and working together.

Check out our **content hub** to see how organizations are connecting their frontline employees to improve culture, communication and teamwork.