

# The State of Deskless Workforce: An Eye Opener Needing our Collective Action

I have worked within the field of Occupational Health and Safety for over 2 decades, the most interesting part of this profession is the dynamism and quick unearthing of new subject areas. I find this exciting above everything else.

A short while ago, I came across a report titled **“The State of Deskless Workforce 2021”**, the word “Deskless” caught my attention and made me read the entire report which opened my mind to a new dimension of knowledge.

To a great extent, I have lived with the knowledge that some people work in spaces where they do not necessarily sit behind a system or the luxury of having a desk, but I never knew they was an already categorised population of global workforce that falls within this bracket. According to the 2021 report from Quinyx, 2.7 billion workforces are deskless and this is nearly 80% of global workforce. These workers are so important, they are the heroes that keep our lives and economies running, they are the frontline workers found in healthcare systems, delivery drivers, bartenders, grocery store workers, security personnel, janitorial service workers and workers from manufacturing companies etc.

A deskless worker can be defined as anyone who do not sit behind a desk or computers to perform their job. These set of workers played a very crucial role during the pandemic when many countries were on lock-down, they did not have the luxury of working from homes instead they were daily on the roads serving us all and ensuring life goes on even when 22% of them do not feel safe at work because of COVID-19. They have been described in some studies as the forgotten workforce, underserved with technology and poorly managed by their employers. The deskless workforce honestly deserve to be better managed, have fair work schedules and a better work-life balance. As documented in the 2021 report, 51% of deskless workers go to work sick because they cannot afford to take time off, 21% do not feel appreciated at work, 57% said their personal care time suffer due to work schedule while 50% reported noticing understaffing issues mostly when you have to cover for a staff who did not come to work yet without an extra pay, these all put together affects these set of workers in a number of ways. These can also be linked to the high staff turnover suffered by organisations where this set of workers are employed.

As stated in this report, 29% said they had to leave their jobs because of lack of notice in scheduling changes, I have personally seen this happen severally in the years I spent managing hospitals. We should not forget; workers feel more comfortable and secured in places where they feel appreciated and cared for. Because they are mostly not considered in the use of technology in their workplaces, communication between managers, staff and colleagues can therefore suffer. One key question that should be asked is, are this set of workers also considered in the future of work? While we make apps, cloud platforms and SaaS offerings for desk-based workers, only 1% of business spending currently focus on deskless technologies. This was again validated with the 43% who said Managers do not have a tool or mobile app that makes it easy to swap shift with colleagues. It will be ideal to see more investments made in this direction towards alleviating most of the threats currently faced by the deskless work population.

Only 23% of deskless workers have paid sick time while 51% go to work sick because they cannot afford sick time off. Majority of them hardly have time for recovery from ill health because there is no paid sick time, and this has a high possibility of triggering employees' burnout and increased stress. It is high time that opinion leaders and wellbeing policy experts started lending their voices to the plight of this category of workers in terms of fair labour policies and flexibility of work. As already documented in the 2021 report, 35% of the workers said they would rather have flexible schedule than higher pay. This is the extent of these concerns.

Allowing employees to have control over their jobs is a strong ingredient towards mitigating psychosocial risks, human beings are not robots, they need that freedom to be expressive and if this is not happening, their creativity will be dampened, and this is not in anyone's best interest. Deskless workers who feel pressured to take shifts that they do not want was placed at 37%, while 32% of workers are unable to swap shifts with co-workers except they have to call their managers first as reported by 55% of the study population. I think this has a high degree of contributing to presenteeism and rate of accidents among workers, optimal performance in workplace has a lot to do with the psychological readiness of employees and this must be clearly understood by both employers and line managers.

Motivation and incentive programs are mostly found lacking in most workplace management systems where profits are prioritized over the safety, health, and wellbeing of employees. This report also shows that 50% of respondents noticed understaffing issues, mostly when you must cover for workers who are absent from work without an extra pay. This body language again shows lack of care towards employees, we must keep in mind that employees flourish and make sacrifices in systems where they feel cared for and not otherwise. Also in this report, this has clearly obvious with 21% of the workers reporting that they do not feel appreciated at work and of this percentage of workers, 58% of them further indicated that their employers see them as disposable hence they contact workers during off hours for scheduling issues as reported by 79% of the population surveyed. This has a huge negative impact on employees' morale and self-esteem leading to high staff turnover. I am happy to see some countries already putting up legislations that do not make employees accountable to respond to official emails after work hours. We have seen France being documented in 2017 as the first country to sign into law the "Right to Disconnect". Under this law, the employee is not obligated to respond to emails from employers after work hours. We have seen countries like Philippines, Spain, and a few others implement this law while countries like Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, India, Quebec, and the Federal Government of Canada have all proposed laws considering adopting this right.

We really need to draw a clear line between personal time and work time, it is disrespectful to encroach into employees' personal time which most times are done even without any consideration.

The truth is, when we read the entire Deskless Workforce Report 2021, you will agree with me that these are indeed the underserved majority who are neither considered in technological investments by organisations and in some instances, they are also poorly legislated for in most countries, yet they are a nerve in global growing economies. Can thought leaders, captains of industries, policy makers, labour administrators, technology inventors and many others sit back for once and consider these sets of people in our designs, policy formulation processes, management systems and business processes? It is better to consider their plights now and find ways around mitigating them than having an aged, retired population of over 2 billion people characterized with work related illnesses to deal with in the future.

We can be good leaders if we consider empathy in our management systems and this will go a long way in reducing the prevalence of most of these workplace conditions such as stress, burnout, poor work-life balance, understaffing and non-flexible work schedule as rightly highlighted in this report. The need for a safe and decent workplace culture that places value on humanity above everything else. The deskless workforce are people we see daily around us, if we cannot fix their issues, let's not also make their conditions more difficult for them by treating them less than humans. Empathy is placing yourself in another person's shoes, apathy is showing lack of interest or concern in another person's condition. If we must fix this growing concern, we all need to show honesty and agree that this is a workplace problem.

## References

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