



Forbes insights

**EMPOWERING THE
FIRSTLINE WORKFORCE:**

Technology, Autonomy and
Information Sharing Deliver Growth
to Forward-Thinking Organizations

IN ASSOCIATION WITH:



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INTRODUCTION

Many executives are embarking on one of the greatest journeys of their careers: the push for digital transformation. They may see themselves and their staffs as equipped and ready to go with all the latest technology, but all too often, they leave the largest and most important part of their organizations behind—their firstline workforce. These are the customer service representatives, cashiers, care providers, couriers, production line workers and technicians who meet, talk and work with customers and products every day. Some are in offices, but most can be found on retail floors, making deliveries, repairing customers' equipment, overseeing bedside care or on production lines.

Empowering firstline workers with the digital tools and platforms they need to serve customers, share information and improve productivity creates competitive advantage. Organizations leading the way are three times more likely to be seeing faster growth. They also see greater customer satisfaction, increased productivity, more innovation and better communications. "From the boardroom to the executive team and to the firstline workers, innovation and change is not something that is limited to a few select groups or business units," says Bryan Goode, general manager of Office 365 for Microsoft. "Every employee needs to be engaged, empowered and ultimately participate."

To learn more about how companies are engaging and empowering their firstline workers, Forbes Insights partnered with Microsoft to survey more than 300 executives. The results are featured in this report, and one of our primary findings was that firstline workers have not been included in digital transformation investments, are lacking in needed tools and technologies, and continue to operate in legacy technology environments. Many organizations simply haven't committed the resources and training needed to bring about technology transformation to their workforces. While executives appear to recognize that their businesses would greatly benefit from providing their firstline workers with the same advantages afforded to other professionals and knowledge workers, efforts to bring about such capabilities are lagging.

Yet the need to engage everyone across the enterprise—from the sales floor to the C-suite—has never been more urgent. Recent industry surveys suggest that the overwhelming majority of digital transformation efforts are failing. One survey of 800 IT executives found that 66% are "having difficulties executing on digital transformation initiatives," and 84% feared they would be encountering negative consequences as a result of failing to meet digital transformation objectives. Only 18% expressed confidence they could meet their digital transformation goals.¹

Why are digital transformation efforts falling short? For the most part, this is due to organizational issues, many of which could be addressed by capturing the decisions and actions of firstline workers that move organizations forward, define the customer experience and translate strategy into daily activities and tasks. Another contributing factor is the fact that, to date, firstline workers haven't been included in these efforts. Like any other majority organizational change, however, everyone must be included and be active participants to realize the benefit and vision.

WHO ARE FIRSTLINE WORKERS?



Firstline workers are employees who are the first point of contact between a company and the world it serves. They are often the first to engage customers, the first to represent a company's brand and the first to see products and services in action. They form the backbone of many of the world's largest industries.

Examples include call center representatives, cashiers, field service personnel, production workers, maintenance workers, healthcare providers, restaurant servers, housekeepers and delivery people.

¹ "2016 Connectivity Benchmark Report: The State of Digital Transformation and APIs," MuleSoft, 2016. <https://www.mulesoft.com/ty/reports/2016-connectivity-benchmark-3>

The path to true digital transformation—in which firstline workers are equipped with the latest technology tools and platforms—will require a rethinking not only of technology investments but also of the roles and responsibilities of firstline workers. To help them succeed in today's competitive digital economy, firstline workers require greater autonomy, information sharing, decision-making power and training. Technology is the enabler of these capabilities.

This report explores what executives need to know in terms of technologies and activities to help them elevate the jobs of their firstline workers, address the barriers to doing so and move their organizations forward.

Organizations that empower their firstline workers reap the benefits:

They're three times more likely to be high-growth companies



83%

see higher levels of customer satisfaction



82%

see higher levels of job satisfaction among employees



64%

see lower turnover among employees

KEY FINDINGS

Firstline Workers Continue to Be Overlooked. While an overwhelming majority of executives (more than eight out of 10) agree that empowering firstline workers with the tools and platforms they need has a direct impact on customer satisfaction, growth and worker job satisfaction, this important component of the workforce continues to be overlooked.

Empowering Firstline Workers Improves the Bottom Line. Thirty-one percent of organizations that extend full technology capabilities, greater autonomy and higher levels of information sharing to firstline workers see growth exceeding 20% a year, compared with only 11% of organizations that don't make firstline workers a priority.

Business and People Skills are Just as Essential as Technology Skills. The skills viewed as the most critical for firstline workers are quality management and communications skills, yet less than one-third of organizations say they have high levels of investment in training and development in these areas. There is an important role technology can play in addressing this shortfall: delivering video content, providing access to employee resources, and role guidance are prime examples.

Mixed Reality and Artificial Intelligence Will Shape Firstline Work in the Near Future. The employee and customer experience is no longer limited to screens and keyboards. Currently, the most prevalent way of enhancing firstline workers' jobs is through supporting their use and adoption of technology. Within the next few years, however, wearable devices and sensors will become a dominant technology for these workers, reinventing both the employee experience and the customer experience for the digital age.

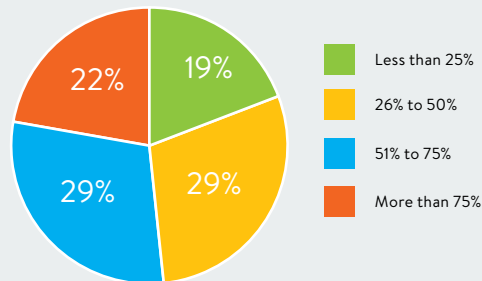
Budgets and Organizational Issues Hold Back Firstline Technology Progress. Achieving superior customer interactions will require streamlined IT management and solutions that not only empower employees, but that do so in a simple and cost-effective way. Budget constraints hold back technology deployments to firstline workforces, but organizations will increasingly gravitate to single, secure, integrated and complete services and solutions to avoid cost challenges associated with multiple providers.

WHERE ORGANIZATIONS STAND WITH EMPOWERING FIRSTLINE WORKERS

While firstline workers continue to be overlooked, organizations that commit resources and are rethinking firstline roles are reaping the benefits. It's notable that close to half of executives, 48%, report that the majority of their firstline workers are not digitally connected and empowered, meaning they do not have access and cannot interact with technology platforms and devices as a daily part of their jobs (Figure 1). There is a segment, 22% of executives, who indicate that a significant share of their firstline workforces, more than 75%, have such access. For the purposes of this survey, we identify these organizations as leaders in digitally empowering firstline workers.



Figure 1. Proportion of Firstline Workers Digitally Connected and Empowered



Note: Some charts may not add to 100% due to rounding.

At the opposite extreme, there are at least 19% of organizations with low levels of digital empowerment, with less than 25% of their workforces currently connected. Throughout this report, we will look at differences between the highly empowering organizations and those that are lagging.

FIRSTLINE EMPOWERMENT MEANS GROWTH

While organizations in the Forbes Insights/Microsoft survey vary in terms of how much they're empowering their firstline workers, one thing is clear: **Empowering this workforce improves the bottom line.** Thirty-one percent of organizations that have the highest degree of digital connectivity and empowerment—involving more than 75% of their firstline

workers—saw more than 20% growth over the past year. In contrast, only 11% of organizations with low levels of empowerment—with less than 25% of their workers connected—saw such growth (Figure 2).

Along with higher annual growth levels, organizations with higher levels of digitally empowered firstline workers are also more likely to be seeing progress on a number of other areas critical to success in today's competitive climate, such as collaboration and operational efficiency (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Corporate Growth Rates, by Level of Technology Commitment to Firstline Workers

	Proportion of Firstline Workers Digitally Connected	
	<25%	>75%
Annual Growth Greater than 20%	11%	31%

The net result is a direct connection between firstline worker digital empowerment and the ability of organizations to succeed in today's fast-moving economy. "Empowering firstline workers with technology is a relative greenfield for enterprises," says Sam Kim, assistant general counsel for Microsoft. "Capturing the opportunity will require coordinated investments and decision making to position the organization to compete effectively and manage through a noted shift in the firstline compliance landscape. But if these organizations manage to address these challenges, they can tap into the unique insights of their firstline workforce to drive product innovation, capture emerging trends and lead in the digital age."

Executives also see their firstline workers as their eyes and ears in many respects, acting as resources for spotting and forwarding information on issues, innovations and markets. Executives see their firstline workers as sources of information on competitive

intelligence and new business opportunities, and see these as opportunities to elevate engagements. Worker autonomy and information sharing are key pieces of the firstline worker empowerment equation, but this is where more work needs to be done. Organizations that elevate workers' roles in these areas will tap the potential of these employees, capturing and taking action in light of their unique insights and understanding of customer and business needs.

Enabling a high degree of firstline worker autonomy in terms of decision making and problem resolution also boosts overall enterprise competitiveness, the survey shows. The majority of executives, 81%, agree that greater levels of autonomy for firstline workers have a notable impact on their organization's overall competitiveness. However, only 22% of organizations grant their firstline workers full autonomy today.

This autonomy translates into overall annual corporate growth. Among those enterprises enabling full autonomy to their firstline workers, 46% were seeing annual growth exceeding 20% year to year. By contrast, only 4% of organizations enabling little or no autonomy were seeing such growth rates. As employees gain greater autonomy, their decisions have greater impact, and they need connections back to sources of organizational expertise to support their decisions. Firstline workers also need to be connected to the company mission, vision or strategy to provide a compass for decision making.



Figure 3. Impacts of Digitally Empowering Firstline Workers

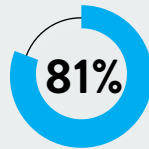


Information sharing is another powerful capability that needs to be brought to the firstline workforce. Communication down the ranks of corporate hierarchies, and the ability to pass and share information up and down these ranks, poses an obstacle to effective digital transformation. A majority of executives, 81%, say their organizations would be more competitive if there was increased sharing/elevation of data from firstline workers. At this time, only 29% of executives feel that their organization is fully effective at transmitting, sharing and acting on information provided by firstline workers. Firstline workers represent unique insight and perspective. It's their actions and understanding of customer needs, product trends and business challenges that can help unlock new growth, shift business models and improve decision making/insights at all levels.

Additionally, as organizations scale technology investments to the firstline, they will not only shorten the feedback and communication cycle between the firstline and executive teams, but they will also capture data associated with firstline worker activities, business processes and customer interactions. Such data is truly unique to the organization, and when leveraged effectively, represents a true and sustainable competitive advantage.

As with firstline worker autonomy, those organizations fully embracing open and shared communications with and between firstline workers are far more likely to be among the fastest-growing ones as well. More than one-third of the high-enabled communicators are among these fastest-growing companies in the survey, versus none of the ineffective communication organizations.

Firstline Worker Autonomy Makes a Difference but Is Not Practiced



of executives agree that firstline worker autonomy boosts competitiveness

BUT



of organizations grant firstline workers full autonomy.



are seeing above-average levels of annual growth (>20%)

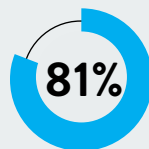
COMPARED WITH



of those with little to no firstline autonomy.

**Organizations that offer a high degree of firstline workforce autonomy.*

Firstline Worker Information Sharing Is Essential, but Not Widespread

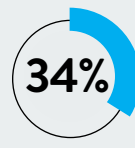


of executives agree that transmitting, sharing and acting on information provided by firstline workers boosts competitiveness

BUT



of organizations are highly effective at transmitting, sharing and acting on information provided by firstline workers.



are seeing above-average levels of annual growth (>20%)

COMPARED WITH



of those with little to no firstline communication.

**Organizations that are highly effective in information-sharing with their firstline workforces.*

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE: FIRST PEOPLE SKILLS, THEN TECHNOLOGY

Greater autonomy and empowerment raises the importance and impact of the decisions that each firstline worker is making throughout the workday—meaning it will be increasingly important to have the best talent in place. Organizations can improve their talent pool with the right training and development programs and by delivering a modern workplace that meets and exceeds employee expectations, and helps attract and retain the best talent. With today’s workforce being more diverse and multigenerational, organizations need to invest in and deliver the tools and solutions that enable all employees to work better together.

Business and people skills are seen as most critical for firstline workers going forward, amplified by technology skills. In fact, ability to use technology was not even one of the top five essential skills ranked by survey participants (Figure 4).

However, technology provides organizations the capabilities to train, develop and upskill their employees to aid the development of these soft skills. Effective training programs are critical to maintaining a competitive edge, and the programs and platforms that support a training program need to be adaptive to a range of employee needs and learning styles, such as delivering written content directly to employee devices and using immersive video content for greater engagement.

“Employer expectations are changing,” says Goode. “We’ve seen a shift away from routine tasks to a way of operating that requires every single employee to be creative and to think critically. And by creative, we don’t just mean designers and the like. We mean everyone—from the boardroom to the firstline workers, no matter what kind of creation they’re doing—everybody is being asked to be a problem solver.”

What’s troubling is that 76% of executives feel their workforces are less than fully prepared to engage in work requiring the above-mentioned skills, and only 29% state their organizations have high levels of investment in training and development. Yet to help firstline workers succeed and contribute to digital transformation, it’s vital to invest in training and help them stay current and informed.

“Traditional IT management and support processes are often not designed with these workers in mind,” says Alan Lepofsky, vice president and principal analyst at Constellation Research. “Areas like onboarding, training, compliance and governance need to be updated to include this new category of workers.” Often this means starting now, and building the foundation for an effective training program with flexible platforms that enable the development and delivery of training materials and content.

The bottom line is that simply updating employee technology skills is not enough to bring out the best in them and allow them to meet current opportunities and challenges. Organizations need to go further in enhancing employees’ abilities to adapt and change in order to deliver superior services or products to customers. Firstline workers need the autonomy to drive their own jobs, make decisions on the spot, and share information that arises and move it to the right decision makers or applications. These are essential to achieving growth and innovation.



Figure 4. Essential Skills Firstline Workers Need Over Next 3-5 Years



At the same time, it's important to provide all workers the same level of empowerment and to extend a single, secure and intelligent solution across the entire organization. No workers should be placed at a disadvantage because they lack the tools or access to data and expertise they need to do their best work and perform effectively in the digital age.

With increasing levels of autonomy, as well as developing skills in information technology and information management, firstline workers will require the same level of technology and empowerment already used by knowledge workers. "Firstline workers have always been knowledge workers, especially today," says David Giannetto, chief operating officer of Astea International and author of *Big Social Mobile*.

TECHNOLOGIES THAT MATTER

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Firstline worker involvement in digital transformation is expected to grow. About one-third of executives, 34%, say their firstline workers are full participants in digital transformation discussions/decisions, and 37% say firstline workers' input is sought to help map out digital transformation strategies. However, only about one-fourth of executives anticipate their firstline workers will be closely involved in various aspects of their digital transformation efforts over the next few years.

A successful digital transformation requires the participation of all employees, at all levels. As shown in the previous section, rethinking worker roles, along with training, are key steps to integrating firstline workers into the digital transformation process. Along with forward-looking management and support, the right technologies are required to amplify firstline workers' roles in digital transformation. Examples of how such engagements can be transformed include:



- Retail workers being kept informed of their schedules with access to online scheduling systems.
- Construction managers being able to spot project delays by accessing corporate project management systems.
- Production supervisors employing analytics to spot and correct anomalies.
- Hotel workers alerting customer service through online messaging when guests are not happy with service.
- Aircraft maintenance workers using online tools to forecast parts requirements, optimize inventory to support service, model scenarios and manage a part's life cycle from first installation to retirement.
- Field service workers tapping remote expertise through immersive technologies and experiences, such as mixed reality, to address problems in the field.

"Firstline workers continue to operate in legacy environments, defined by outdated tools and processes—in fact, most of the work is done with pencil and paper," says Goode. "A perfect example is how organizations set the schedule and assign firstline worker activities for the day. This is often written out on a single piece of paper and posted in the breakroom. We can do better, and we have the tools today to address these problems."

Executives place high importance on equipping firstline workers with the right digital tools and platforms to achieve business success over the next three to five years. The vast majority, close to nine in 10, say it's extremely important or of great importance to equip workers on the front lines of customer contact, and also see this importance among those involved in product production or delivery.



**Figure 5. Percentage of Firstline Workers Using Technology Tools on a Daily Basis**

*(Respondents with more than half of their workforces engaged)*

Today

36%

Over the Next 3 Years

54%

However, as confirmed by other data found in this survey, progress will be slow. Firstline workers represent a clear competitive advantage for organizations, but companies continue to overlook them. Currently, only 36% of executives say that the majority of their firstline workers have the tech tools they need. Three years from now, 54% hope to have this capability (Figure 5).

"Firstline technology consists of workflow, checklists and knowledge management," says Giannetto. "This combination forces strict process discipline—using workflows and checklists—while also giving workers greater access to information and collaboration tools, via knowledge management. Workers can both access and learn from this information, and they don't have to disengage from the work to engage in the solution-seeking."

Firstline workers need adaptable and flexible technologies that meet a range of firstline worker requirements, often varying significantly by industry. "Often, the tools are not designed for the specific needs of these often-anonymous employee responsibilities," says Lepofsky. "Having a dozen part-time or shift workers is very different than having a dozen full-time knowledge workers. For example, corporate communications with a dozen seasonal staff members at a retail clothing store is different than a dozen lawyers at a law firm. Only now are some tools starting to build for these frontline workers."

The changing economics of business increasingly demand the technologies that promote involvement and empowerment of firstline workers. "Technology today is oriented toward making workforces more agile and more flexible," says Stowe Boyd, futurist and advisor. "It helps involve firstline workers, so they can be used as firstline ambassadors who are in contact with customers, or very close to production and manufacturing. They're able to come up with innovation solutions to fix problems, and everyone benefits from that. Plus, their work is safer."

The importance of security cannot be overlooked when extending technology across the organization and to all employees, whether in the firstline or the executive suite. By using a single, secure solution, organizations can benefit from seamless security, protect sensitive data and manage access to corporate resources more effectively, helping to mitigate risk.

Organizations should aim to close longstanding technology gaps that separate their firstline workers from the tools, data and expertise they need to do their best work, meet customer demands and deliver a superior product or service to the market. Leaders are exploring new technologies and pushing the boundaries of productivity by piloting the application of mixed reality to truly transform the employee experience.

## TECHNOLOGY FOR FIRSTLINE WORKERS

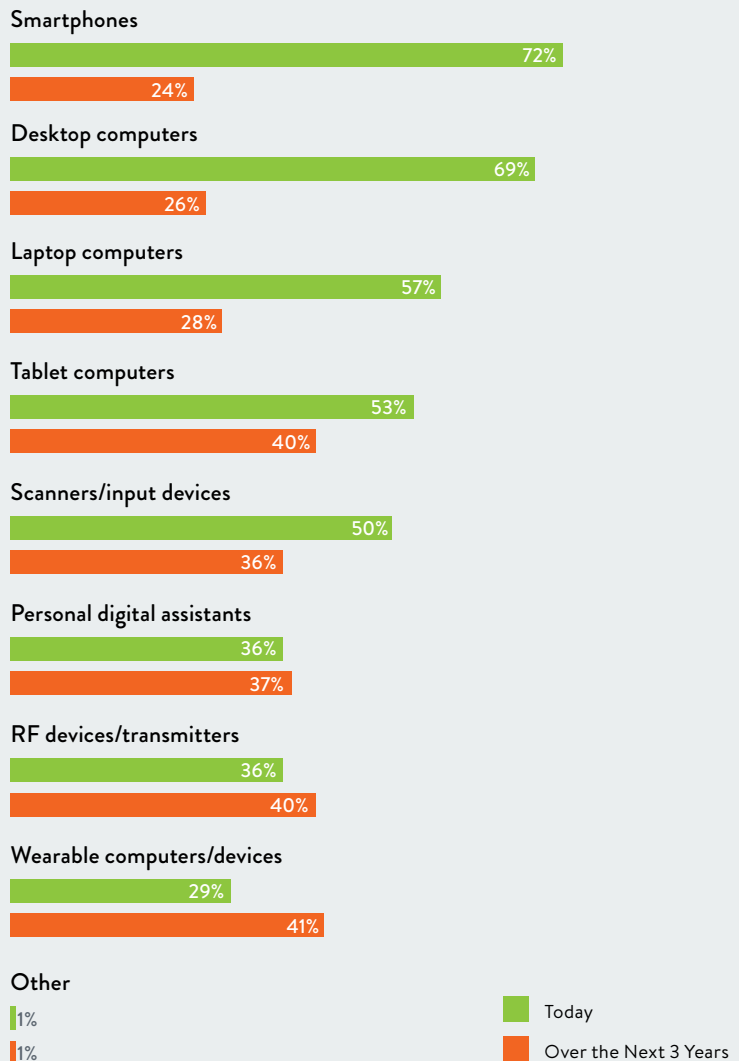
Many firstline workers have some level of access to the same tools most commonly employed by their knowledge worker counterparts, such as PCs and smartphones. However, a divergence is underway, which will make computing power less dependent on user interfaces, which is often cumbersome in field work. In terms of the types of technology tools currently provided, desktop computers rank at the top with 74%, followed by smartphones at 71% (Figure 6).

“For most frontline jobs, such as those in retail or on manufacturing lines, a dedicated purpose-built device is not needed for communication and collaboration tasks,” says Lepofsky. “In these cases, a phone or tablet provides all that is needed.” Firstline workers require solutions that integrate seamlessly within their current activities: This often requires a complete, integrated solution that is available on a mobile device or tablet, enabling them to stay connected and productive as they move through their workday.

As the Internet of Things revolution takes hold, this may shift the computing priorities of firstline workers’ roles as well. Mixed-reality devices and artificial intelligence represent the near future of digitally empowered firstline work. Over the next three years, 41% intend to outfit their firstline workers with wearable computers or devices. Another 40% say firstline workers will be employing RFID transmitters or sensors as part of their work, while 37% foresee a future with personal digital assistants. Forward-thinking organizations will continue to push the boundaries of firstline worker productivity by piloting and deploying new generations of technologies to their workforces, delivering truly immersive and empowering experiences.



**Figure 6. Technology Tools Provided to Firstline Workers**



## FUTURE TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENTS

The survey explored the top investments for firstline workers over the next three to five years. Data analytics and real-time access are the top priorities. By opening up analytics access, firstline workers will be able to measure and monitor the results of actions such as marketing campaigns or product adoption. The rise of IoT will open up trends in product adoption to employees, who may be able to proactively address customer issues, production bottlenecks or requests for service in real time. Cloud-based services are also a technology feature that executives would like to see more available to their firstline workforces (Figure 7-see next page.)

The data associated with firstline worker actions and interactions with customers and products is the richest and most valuable data in the organization. Such data represents on-the-ground facts that will help organizations spot trends and unlock new innovation and growth. While all organizations have important organizational data, it will be those that take advantage of their firstline data that achieve true and sustainable competitive advantage.

The potential automation of firstline workforce tasks was also explored in the survey. For the most part, executives don't see automation or artificial intelligence as threatening to replace their firstline workers' jobs. If anything, new technologies are providing empowerment. The largest segment, 43%, say automation is elevating the tasks of firstline workers to focus more time on higher-value activities. Only 21% say automation is outright replacing jobs. Automation and technology support and amplify worker roles and outcomes. It frees up time for workers to focus on higher-value activities, to identify customer and business challenges, and to find creative and innovative solutions that drive the organization forward and deliver a superior customer experience.



**Figure 7. Technology Investments of Value for Firstline Workforce in Next 3-5 Years**



# CHALLENGES TO DIGITALLY EMPOWERING FIRSTLINE WORKERS

Despite the bottom-line benefits of digitally empowering firstline workers, organizations face a number of challenges attempting to do so. In fact, close to half of executives, 47%, say it's going to take three years or more until their firstline workers are fully digitally enabled, meaning they are fully equipped with digital tools and platforms. One in seven (14%) don't even expect any progress for five years or more. Yet there needs to be a sense of urgency to digitally empowering firstline workers; putting off such initiatives exacerbates disruption and can even jeopardize the long-term sustainability of a business.

**What is creating this inertia? Here are the top challenges executives in the survey encountered and how to overcome each one.**



**NOT ENOUGH FUNDING.** Budgetary constraints are the leading obstacle to firstline worker technology deployments. Proponents need to demonstrate how the value of firstline worker empowerment will greatly exceed investments in technology, training and rethinking processes. A single, integrated, secure solution that spans the entire organization—from the boardroom to the firstline—would reduce IT management and support costs, and allow everyone to collaborate on a single platform.



**INADEQUATE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT.** As shown in the previous section, business-focused skills such as adaptability are considered key for firstline workers going forward, with technology supporting the development and proliferation of such skills. Proponents need to explore ways to help keep firstline workers up to date with skills, including online courses, reimbursement for off-site courses and seminars, and encouraging cross-training to build these needed skills. Technology also needs to be simple to adopt and deploy for firstline workers. It needs to fit within existing behaviors and augment worker skills, versus requiring learning new ways to operate and work.



**TURNOVER.** Turnover threatens the quality of the workforce. By providing a modern workplace that welcomes, supports and empowers all workers, organizations can address turnover and attract a higher quality of worker. To reduce turnover, conduct surveys and hold meetings with firstline workers to determine what they enjoy about their jobs, and what management can do to help to resolve any issues. Crucially, any promises must be acted upon. Addressing the need for more technology, autonomy and information sharing capabilities among firstline workers may help break this cycle.



**INADEQUATE SOLUTIONS FOR SPECIALIZED ROLES.** As discussed throughout this report, firstline workers encompass a wide variety of jobs and tasks from healthcare settings to production lines. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to empowering this wide variety of people. However, all firstline jobs have common characteristics as well. Every role can benefit from efforts to increase autonomy to encourage greater decision making and innovation at the employee level, along with opening communications channels wider with managers and other parts of organizations. These transformations are possible through rethinking of roles and provisioning of technology.



**SHIFTING REGULATORY LANDSCAPE.** A complex patchwork of mandates and regulations—from national, regional and local governments, as well as industry regulatory bodies—continue to challenge organizations to manage workforces fairly and transparently. Today's technologies equip organizations with the organizational flexibility and agility to address these changing landscapes. For example, there's a global push taking place for predictable scheduling laws, which provide many workers with variable hours—especially those in retail and restaurant environments—with advance notice of their hours. Modern tools that extend across the workforce can help organizations adapt and respond to a shifting regulatory landscape.



**LACK OF A SENSE OF URGENCY AMONG MANAGERS.** Preconceived notions about the nature of firstline work need to be overcome. "Business leaders are often slow to recognize the benefits of firstline worker technology because firstline worker technology—the mobile workforce application on the worker's smart device—is often thought of as a vehicle by which service transactions are completed; a transactional technology," says Giannetto. "It needs to also be viewed as a vehicle that connects the worker to the customer service center, the logistics supply chain, finance for contracts and warranty information, insight into asset history and even a portal through which the technician is connected to the customer, or business intelligence. Admittedly, the ROI on this way of thinking is more difficult to calculate, but much higher because everyone is focused on the critical outcomes that have a measurable impact."

## WHY YOU NEED TO EMPOWER YOUR FIRSTLINE WORKFORCE—NOW

Digitally empowered firstline workers aren't a luxury; they're a necessity for organizations to succeed in today's fast-moving digital economy. Firstline workers need to be equipped with the right technology, have a wide degree of autonomy, and have open communications and data-sharing channels with decision makers across their organizations. This is the essence of full digital transformation, which relies on the innovation and input of employees at all levels of organizations to succeed.

However, the technology requirements of firstline workers—who compose the majorities of most organizations' workforces—often have been overlooked and underfunded. Business leaders recognize that empowering these workers will not only deliver greater productivity but also contribute to customer satisfaction and corporate growth.

Preparing and enabling firstline worker participation in digital transformation requires a strategy that involves training, technology, autonomy and information sharing. Digitally empowering firstline workers enables organizations to benefit from their unique role—first with customers, first with products or services, and first to represent a brand. The data and insights from their every interaction represents tremendous potential for innovation and growth.

"Organizations need to think strategically about their entire workforce in the context of digital transformation," says Goode. "Executives need to be proactive in investing and developing the skills of all workers, approaching

it with the same rigor and discipline with which they tackle other strategic initiatives. This may include changing the firstline roles, processes, technologies and tools used today that run counter to the digital transformation they are trying to achieve. Ultimately, it will be the combination of human talent and the technologies that are used to unlock their potential, creativity and innovation that will drive organizations forward.”

Companies that lead in this space and empower these workers will open up the gates of innovation and realize new growth. By investing in these workers, and providing wide latitude in decision making and information sharing, organizations will be enhancing their true competitive advantage—their people.

## METHODOLOGY

This survey, conducted by Forbes Insights in partnership with Microsoft, is based on the responses of 303 executives based in the U.S. across key industries, including construction, healthcare, manufacturing and retail. They represent companies of varying sizes, with 33% in smaller firms of fewer than 250 employees, 12% in companies with 250 to 499 employees, 18% in companies of 500 to 999 employees, 22% in organizations of 1,000 to 4,999 employees and 15% in organizations with 5,000 or more employees.

Respondents represent senior management levels within their organizations, including CEOs, senior vice presidents, executive vice presidents and vice presidents.



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# Forbes insights

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PROGRAM DIRECTOR

**Casey Clifford**

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**Ross Gagnon** DIRECTOR

**Kimberly Kurata** SENIOR RESEARCH ANALYST

**Sara Chin** RESEARCH ANALYST

### SALES

North America

**Brian McLeod** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*bmcLeod@forbes.com*

**Matthew Muszala** DIRECTOR

*mmuszala@forbes.com*

**William Thompson** MANAGER

*wthompson@forbes.com*

EMEA

**Tibor Fuchsel** MANAGER

*tfuchsel@forbes.com*

APAC

**Serene Lee** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*slee@forbesasia.com.sg*