

Report | 2020

The State of Frontline Employee Training 2020

Arlington
Research

Axonify™



Foreword

When organizations put their frontline first—when they keep the lines of communication open, provide timely and relevant training and reinforce the behaviors that matter most—they win. It's as simple as that.

At no other time has the importance of frontline employees been more clear than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Never have we been more reliant on them, or more grateful for them—whether they've delivered essential goods to our doors and stores, stocked our shelves with groceries, or been at the end of the line listening to our fears, frustrations and frantic queries as we try to navigate the 'new normal.'

Frontline employees have been widely recognized as the heroes who help keep the world turning while the crisis plays out—and rightly so. While we applaud this, we can't help but feel it's a shame it took a global pandemic for their work to be recognized. The frontline has always been there taking care of us and has always been integral to the success of businesses around the world.

It hits home when you consider that, although hailed as heroes, frontline employees don't have a superhero-like immunity to COVID-19. When most of the world locked down, safe at home, frontline employees risked their health (and the health of their own families) by continuing to report to work each day, often dealing directly with a rattled public. Many have also had to quickly learn new skills and take on different roles and greater responsibility while under intense pressure—all without the usual training support.

The virus is still a threat, and we continue to look to the frontline workforce to help get us through. With that in mind, it's more important than ever to ensure your own frontline workers have the right support behind them in terms of workplace training.

To better understand the situation, we commissioned Arlington Research to undertake an extensive study, speaking directly to workers on the frontline—not HR professionals or management—across three countries, to hear their thoughts on the state of workplace training in 2020. We wanted to investigate what's being done, what's not, what continues to be expected of our frontline heroes and whether those expectations have been effectively communicated to them.

The resulting report provides invaluable insight to help organizations such as yours do right by your people and the communities you serve. The findings show that businesses need to do more to equip their frontline to navigate the storm of business disruption. We hope this report helps to illuminate a path forward.

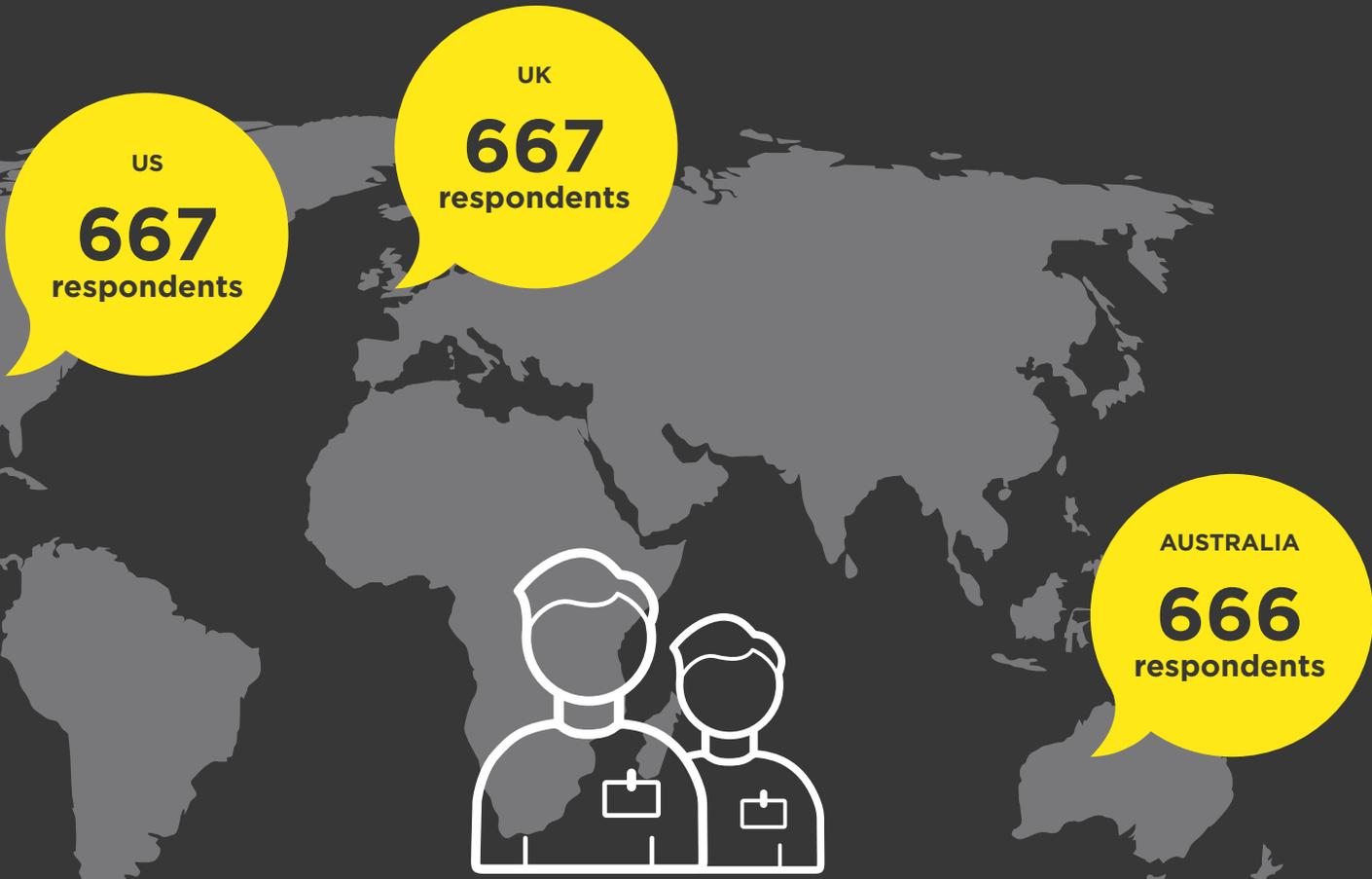
CEO, Axonify

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Methodology

Our survey was conducted online between July 27 and August 5, 2020, surveying 2,000 respondents who work on the frontline at businesses with over 1,000 employees. Respondents came from the US (667 respondents), UK (667 respondents) and Australia (666 respondents), with 500 respondents each in retail, grocery, contact center and professional sales.



500 respondents



The frontline defined

Frontline employees are often in the field or on the floor. They include grocery store clerks, retail store associates, contact center agents and distribution and logistics workers among others. Although frontline workers aren't in the corporate office making multimillion-dollar strategic decisions, they are essential to executing these strategies. This report focuses on frontline workers who are store associates in retail and grocery stores, as well as agents in contact centers and professional sales.



Key takeaways

This report is packed with insights to help you build a better frontline. Here are a few key themes we identified as we dug into the data:

01 Frontline employees are getting left behind.

Roughly one third of frontline employees say they're not getting timely information and continued coaching and training to help them do their jobs safely and productively.



02 Retail and grocery employers are lagging behind the pack.

In question after question, grocery and retail workers reported feeling less safe, supported, trained, knowledgeable and confident than the average frontline worker. There's no doubt that grocery and retail have been hit hard by pandemic disruptions, and they're dealing with more chaos than the average employer. But this is the canary in the coal mine. If they don't turn their attention to the actual training and support needs of their frontline soon, they risk getting swallowed up by competitors who are.



03 This is not about more support—it's about the *right* support.

Although many frontline employees report that they receive training often and regularly, it doesn't appear to be hitting the sweet spot. Only one third say their training is easy to understand and retain, quick to complete and contributes to their confidence on the job.



Here's the good news—in their answers, respondents spelled out exactly what they need from their employers:



In short, they want training that works with the totally unique way they work.

Frontline employees don't sit at a desk all day. They have very little time to train. But they're right in the eye of the storm. What they do, or don't do, on the frontlines every day matters—a lot. Equipping them to do the right things with confidence is critical.

Key findings

This survey sheds light on the current state of workplace training—including data on employer communications, frontline preparedness in the current environment and the typical training experience both before and after the pandemic began.

58%

Only 58% of frontline employees said they received regular training.

69%

Only 69% of frontline employees trust their employer to deliver the training they need to do their job effectively.

45%

Nearly half (45%) would like to receive more online training (including video, interactive modules and practice questions).

49%

of frontline employees surveyed had been furloughed.

Australia

59%

UK

57%

US

31%

Frontline employees were more likely to have been furloughed in Australia (59%) and the UK (57%), compared to the US (31%).

71%

71% of frontline employees reported that their employer had provided them with timely information about its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

65%

65% felt they had received proper training related to changes made by their employer that impacted their job.

40%

Only 40% believed the messages sent to them by their employer were reliable and only 39% said they were timely.

48%

Less than half (48%) of frontline workers reported that they had been provided training when taking on their new role and/or task(s) during the pandemic.

34%

A dismal one third (34%) described the training they received during the pandemic as 'easy to understand and remember.'

39%

39% of frontline workers don't feel prepared to do their job properly in the current environment.

The State of Frontline Training: Pre-Pandemic

It almost goes without saying: If you want your people to do their best work and your business to reach its full potential, you need a considered and consistent approach to workplace training—one that not only builds skills but develops people, so they can reach their own potential. But in reality, few businesses dedicate enough time to training. Typically, the approach is ‘one and done’ with little or no reinforcement afterwards.



“I trust my employer to deliver the training I need to do my job effectively.”

69%
agree overall

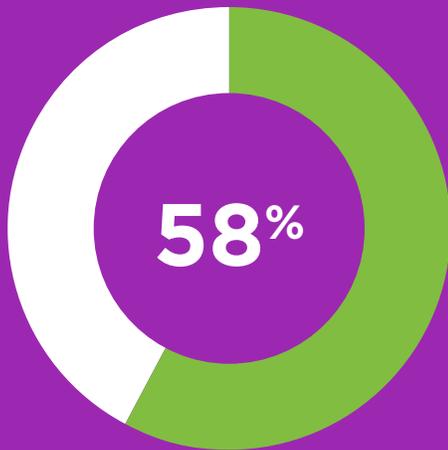
66%
agree in grocery

63%
agree in retail

When asked about general training and support (not just during the pandemic), only 69% of frontline employees trusted their employer to deliver the training they needed to do their job effectively. This figure dropped to 63% for those working in retail stores compared to 76% in professional sales—clearly, feelings of frontline support vary across industries. By country, we found that frontline workers in the US had the lowest level of trust (64%), while both the UK and Australia reported higher levels of trust (72%).

Interestingly, 86% of employees felt confident in their ability to do their job—but only 67% felt supported by their manager. This figure dropped to 61% in grocery stores and 62% in retail. Frontline employees working in professional sales (73%) and contact centers (72%) reported feeling more supported by their manager. Employees in Australia reported the lowest levels of managerial support (62%), compared to 69% in the UK and 70% in the US.



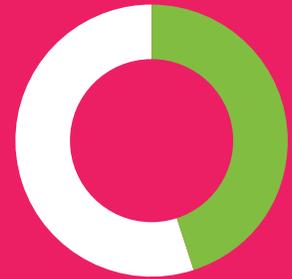


Confirming that the ‘one and done’ training approach persists on the frontlines, only 58% of respondents said they received regular training. Again, this was lowest in grocery (50%) and retail stores (52%), compared to 64% in contact centers and 65% in professional sales.

When frontline employees were asked to take on additional tasks or a new role, only 65% of those in a retail environment felt they had been provided the training and support they needed. This figure rose to 75% in professional sales and 76% in contact centers. These levels are simply too low for employees to succeed fully in their roles. Across the three countries surveyed, inadequate training and support was reported by 65% of frontline employees in the US, 72% in the UK and 74% in Australia.

The data makes it clear that too many frontline employees are missing out on vital training, especially in the retail and grocery industries. So we asked what type of training method would benefit employees most when it comes to learning new skills or information. Frontline employees consider on-the-job training to be the most beneficial, a finding which underscores the importance of role-specific support, rather than a blanket approach and ‘general’ training.





45%

of respondents said they'd like to receive more online training (including video, interactive modules and practice questions).

Surprisingly, in this digitally dependent world, only 18% of respondents chose online/mobile as their preferred training method. However, the findings suggest that this stems from a previous bad experience with virtual training, rather than a general resistance to online methods. After all, when asked if they would like to receive more online training (including video, interactive modules and practice questions), nearly half (45%) said yes. This was highest in contact centers (58%) and professional sales (55%), with retail (33%) and grocery (35%) reporting lower interest in online training, which may be a reflection of their work environment.

Overall, only 38% of frontline workers reported that they wanted to sit in a classroom for in-person, instructor-led training. This figure rose to 45% in the UK and 42% in the US, but fell to 28% in Australia. When asked if they'd like to receive more messages and training that they could access on their personal device, the vast majority (84%) said yes.

The data shows that the appetite for learning is strong on the frontlines. Employees want more training opportunities to help them do their jobs effectively, and employers need to do more to deliver that support. However, the clear preference for digital options and role-specific support means that employers need to think carefully about the types of training they offer their frontline.

The State of Frontline Training: Current Environment

Crisis calls for more action

The frontline workforce has felt the impacts of the global pandemic in full force. It's clear that training and support is needed now more than ever to overcome the challenges we face—but this training needs to take into account the current realities on the frontlines.



“My employer has provided me with timely information about its response to the pandemic.”

Frontline employees are under intense pressure, and time is tight—realistically they can only accommodate tasks that are essential to their day-to-day job. Training needs to be focused on what matters now, to help frontline workers get the job done effectively and safely.

As the world adapts, many frontline employees, even those with years of experience in their roles, find themselves relearning their jobs or taking on entirely new jobs in response to the crisis. Their workplace is changing every day—with new cleaning processes, social distancing rules, different approaches to customer interaction and new equipment like face masks and gloves. And when infection rates rise, the rules change yet again—so they've had to adapt quickly.

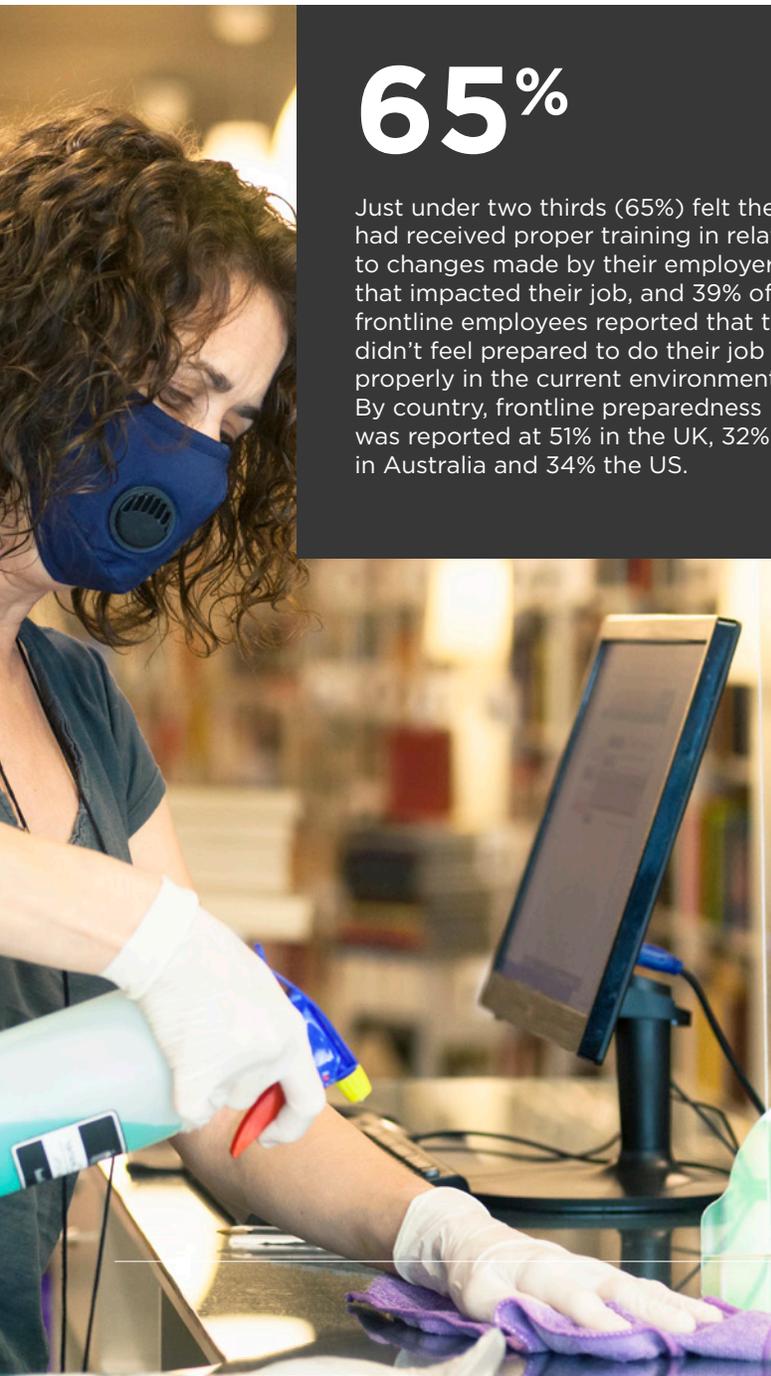
The frontline's ability to adapt to these changes depends on quick and effective communication from their employers. Reinforcement of new knowledge is also key. The 'one and done' approach is no match for the volume of new information the frontline is now expected to remember and apply on the job.

Our findings show that 71% of frontline employees felt their employer had provided them with timely information about its response to the pandemic. Diving into this stat by industry paints a slightly different picture: Only 64% of grocery and 66% of retail store workers felt they had received timely information from their employer, compared to 78% in contact centers and 75% in professional sales. The UK and Australia both recorded 74%, but the figure fell to 64% in the US.



Throughout our study, clear differences emerge between how retail and grocery store workers feel about training and support compared to frontline employees in professional sales and contact centers. Some of the differences likely come down to the different ways these industries have been impacted by the pandemic. It's worth acknowledging that furloughs were more common for professional sales (61%) and contact center staff (61%), compared to retail (45%) and grocery store workers (39%). Frontline employees in retail and grocery were largely unable to work from home and faced a greater risk daily. As a result, it's fair to deduce they would require more support and feel less adequately supported than frontline employees in other industries.

This divide was even more apparent when we asked frontline employees if they felt their employers had taken action to keep staff safe through the crisis. Grocery store workers (65%) and retail workers (68%) were least likely to agree, compared to contact center (77%) and professional sales (76%) staff. Employees in the UK felt more was being done to keep them safe with 77% agreement, while agreement fell to 69% in the US and 68% in Australia.



65%

Just under two thirds (65%) felt they had received proper training in relation to changes made by their employer that impacted their job, and 39% of frontline employees reported that they didn't feel prepared to do their job properly in the current environment. By country, frontline preparedness was reported at 51% in the UK, 32% in Australia and 34% the US.

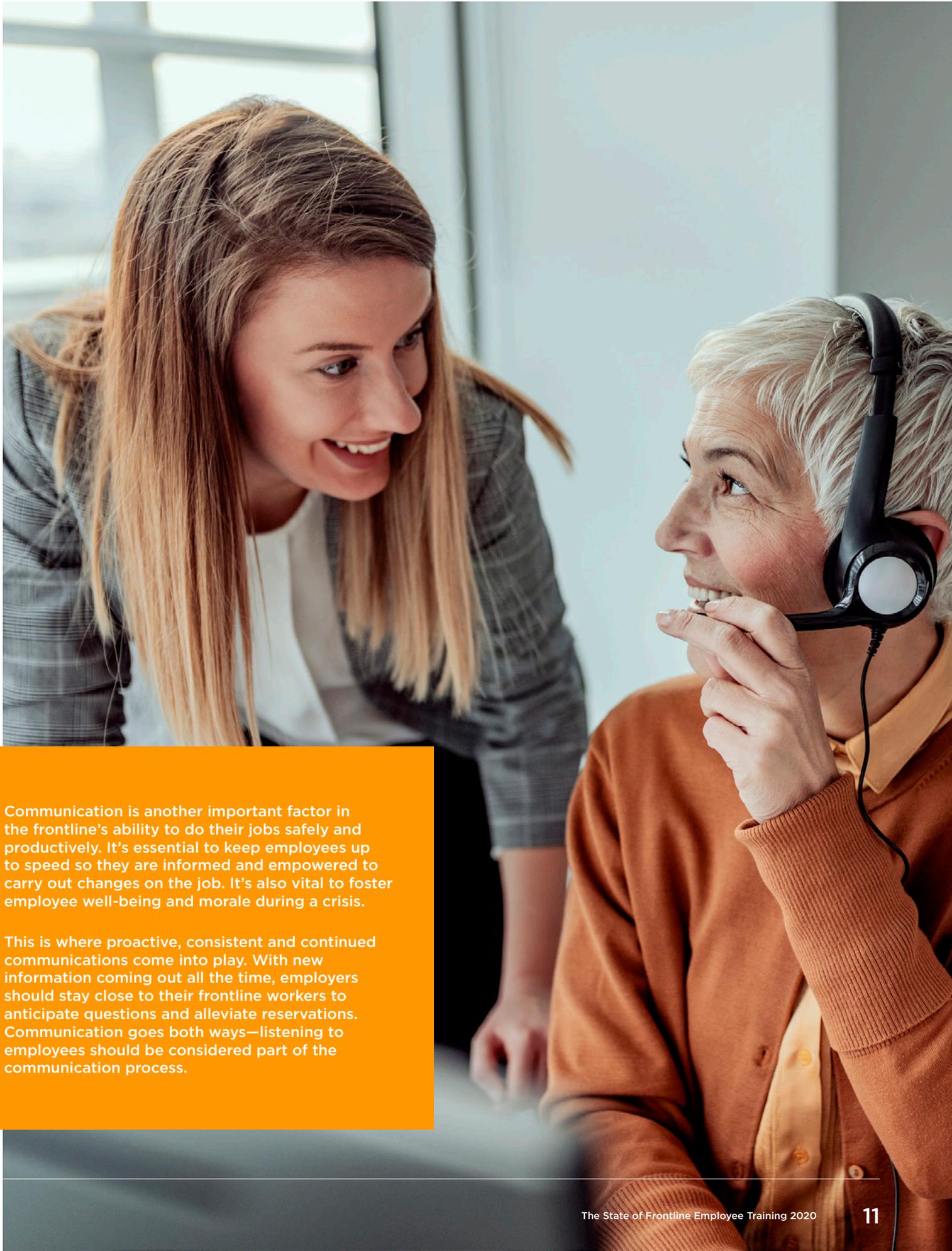
Given the pace of change on the frontlines, 'one and done' training just isn't good enough. For training to stick, critical behaviors must be continuously reinforced. But only 64% of frontline employees received continued training and coaching to make sure they were doing their job safely and productively in the current environment. Disappointingly, this was lowest again in retail (56%) and grocery (59%), compared to contact centers and professional sales (both 71%). The current crisis presents some obvious challenges—with resources already stretched, it's difficult if not impossible to pull people out of operation for extended practice sessions. Instead, we recommend encouraging employees to spend a short time challenging their knowledge every shift.

“I receive continued training and coaching to make sure I am doing my job safely and productively in the current environment.”

64%
agreed overall

56%
agreed in retail

59%
agreed in grocery



Communication is another important factor in the frontline's ability to do their jobs safely and productively. It's essential to keep employees up to speed so they are informed and empowered to carry out changes on the job. It's also vital to foster employee well-being and morale during a crisis.

This is where proactive, consistent and continued communications come into play. With new information coming out all the time, employers should stay close to their frontline workers to anticipate questions and alleviate reservations. Communication goes both ways—listening to employees should be considered part of the communication process.

98%

of furloughed staff said their employer reached out to them during the pandemic.



Communicate, communicate, communicate

Even when employees were out of sight, they were not out of mind. However, less than half (46%) of frontline workers said their employers' communications (such as emails, text messages or intranet posts) were relevant to their job. Breaking this down by industry, only 38% of retail employees, 46% of grocery workers, 45% of professional sales staff and 57% of contact center staff reported receiving communications that were relevant to their job.

Continuing in this vein, only 40% believed the messages sent to them were reliable and only 39% said they were timely. Retail consistently recorded the lowest scores in each. Looking at frontline communications by country, we can see a clear pattern: Frontline employees in the US scored their employees lowest for relevance, reliability and timeliness of messages.

“How would you describe the communications you have received from your employer?”

46%

“relevant”

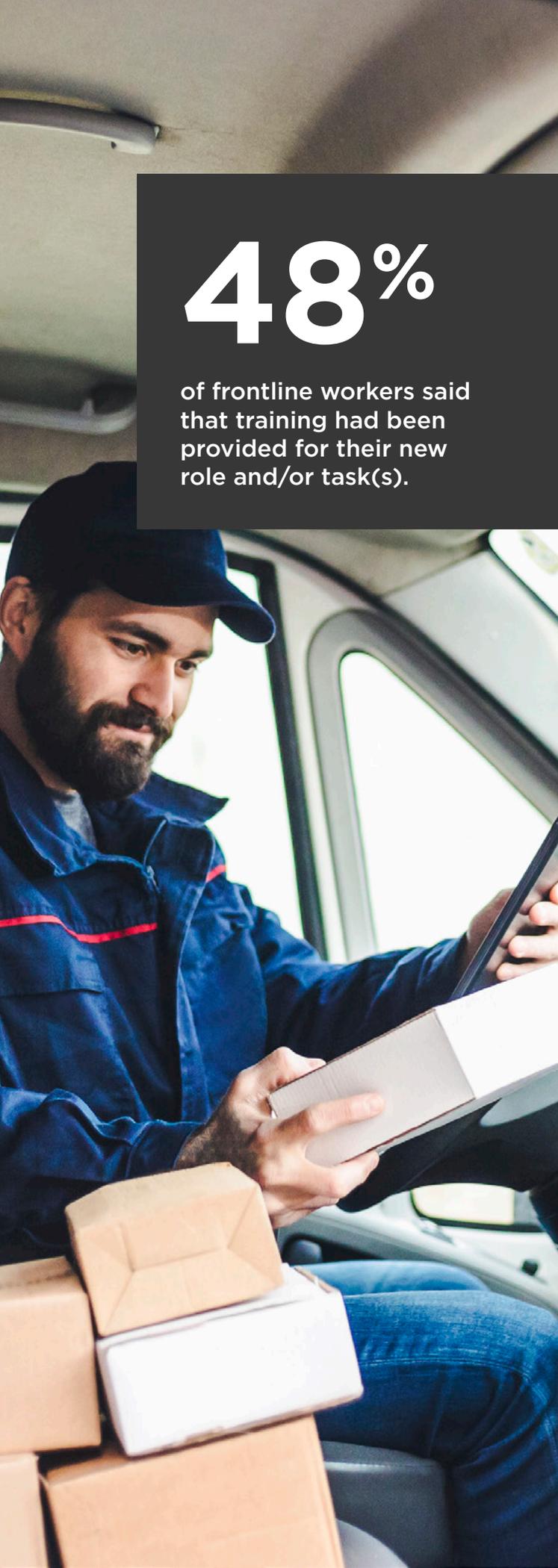
40%

“reliable”

39%

“timely”

While businesses are scrambling to deal with operational changes forced on them by the pandemic, the frontline is not getting the support and information they need. A concerning number of employees feel overwhelmed by the roles they're being asked to do, without the training and communication they need to get the job done.



48%

of frontline workers said that training had been provided for their new role and/or task(s).

On-the-go support

Operational agility is now essential for business survival. With tightened budgets and ongoing disruption, companies have looked to their frontlines, asking employees to take on new roles and tasks. Almost half of frontline employees we surveyed (46%) had taken on new tasks as a result of the pandemic, while 23% had filled a new position altogether. But only 48% of frontline workers said that training had been provided for their new role and/or task(s). This figure was highest in Australia (60%), falling to 48% in the UK and a disappointing 36% in the US. Less than a quarter of retail employees (21%) said that they had received training for new roles or tasks, compared to 27% in grocery, 46% in contact centers and 45% in professional sales.

Preparing the frontline for what comes next will require a new approach to workplace training—one which takes into account the unique challenges frontline workers face every day.

The frontline workforce is a large and dispersed group with a variety of highly personalized needs. They have limited free time at work and are often not permitted to do any type of training when they're off the clock. They need training that works with the way they work.

Our findings suggest that current training methods are falling short. Only one third of respondents (34%) described the training they received during the pandemic as 'easy to understand and remember,' and only 33% stated it was 'quick and easy to complete during a shift.' Just 32% said that training 'helped them feel confident in their ability to do their job.'



Worse still, less than three in ten frontline employees (29%) reported that they could access more information on a topic whenever they wanted after the training. This fell to 17% in retail and 26% in grocery, compared to 35% in contact centers and 37% in professional sales. Only 28% stated that training content was personalized and relevant to their role. This was highest in Australia at 35%, compared to 27% in the UK and 21% in the US.

Just 21% of frontline employees stated training was enjoyable and engaging. In the US, this was even lower at a shocking 15% (compared to 24% in the UK and 25% in Australia). Looking at each industry individually, we were disappointed to see that only 14% of retail employees and 15% of grocery employees consider training engaging and enjoyable. Professional sales (26%) and contact center (31%) employees reported more engagement, but still less than a third. It's clear that not only do frontline employees need training, it needs to be delivered in a way that's engaging and relevant to their day-to-day jobs. Otherwise, it's just a box-ticking exercise that's likely to be forgotten.

Compared to their training before the pandemic began, frontline workers say they now have more online/mobile training (44%) and less in-person classroom training (30%). No surprise there—traditional tactics such as classroom sessions and online courses just aren't an option in the current environment. Enabling frontline employees to access training or communications via their mobile device makes sense for a lot of reasons. You can ensure all staff are getting relevant and real-time support, based on the latest guidance available. You don't need to budget for training course equipment. And your employees can participate in training during off-peak times during their day, without disrupting their work day—which makes management more inclined to sign off on this type of support.

Less than

3 in 10

could access more information on a topic on demand after training.

Conclusions

Frontline workers *want* to trust in their employers during this stressful time. They want to trust that they will be kept safe, kept up to date with the latest guidance and provided with adequate training to do their job well, especially when taking on new tasks or a new role.

But many companies are letting their frontlines down, with infrequent training and poor communication. During the pandemic, two thirds of frontline employees received on-the-job training, but only a third described the training as easy to understand and recall—and two fifths didn't feel prepared to do their job properly. Employers need to do more. When the chips are down, businesses depend on the frontline to get them through—and they need the skills and knowledge to feel confident doing so.

Although communication about the pandemic response was good overall, only four in ten frontline workers received communications at least once a week and less than half said the communications were relevant to their job. Frontline employees are your greatest brand ambassadors. To ensure frontline employees feel comfortable on the job—and avoid mistakes that could reflect badly on the business—employers should prioritize internal comms just as much as external comms.

Digital training is gaining acceptance from frontline employees as a tool to help them succeed, and almost half would like more of this type of support. This reflects the frontline's desire to not just show up and do their jobs, but to improve their skills and help the business succeed in this challenging time.

Now is the time for businesses to support frontline employees and equip them with the skills to do their best work. Make sure *every* frontline employee recognizes the role they play in supporting your business and the communities you serve.



Invest in people, and they will invest in you.

Where do you
go from here?



If you want to learn more about the many ways Axonify helps to build resilient frontline workforces, you can keep exploring over at axonify.com.

Axonify is the modern training and communications solution for frontline employees that actually works. Because when you give your frontline the tools to succeed, your business will too.

Axonify™