

Weston Morris:

Welcome to the Digital Workplace Deep Dive. I'm your host, Weston Morris.

Weston Morris:

Frontline workers—according to some studies, nearly 80% of the workforce are frontline workers. And you know what? We've not focused very much attention on their needs. Think about it. During the pandemic, we deployed communication and collaboration tools, video conferencing, to anybody who could work from home, but that didn't include frontline workers. They had to stay at work, meaning staying at the manufacturing floor, caring for patients at a hospital, stocking shelves in a store, and many other frontline worker roles. However, there's some good news. There are now some really great services that are available to help improve the experience and productivity of frontline workers. I got to listen in on a fireside chat that Beth Schultz, the vice President of research from Metrigy, conducted with some of my colleagues. And in this fireside chat, she covered some really important questions. First of all, who are frontline workers? Secondly, what are some of the challenges that they face and how's that different from knowledge workers in an office? And then finally, how are some enterprises stepping up to focus on improving frontline worker experience and even enabling them to participate in the rest of the corporate environment? Enabling a culture, collaborating with others, and then even asking them to help a company achieve their business goals. So, to get started, let's listen in as Beth helps define what we mean by frontline workers and what are their needs.

Beth Schultz:

We like to think about frontline workers as any employee with a customer-facing role. Now, this can be in person such as retail clerks or bank tellers, or typically you think of the contact center or customer service professionals. There could also be a financial advisor maybe meeting with their clients virtually or a healthcare professional doing telehealth for their patients. There are a couple of really important things to keep in mind as we think about a frontline worker. First, frontline workers are the face of the company brand. So they're often the first...image that customers take away about a company. And oftentimes they don't have desks, nor do they have access to corporate email. Now, historically, many companies have left them out of their strategies around digital workplace experience.

Weston Morris:

Well, Metrigy is a research firm. And so Beth next shares some research that they've conducted with around 250 companies around the world asking questions about how enterprises are treating their frontline workers. So as she goes through these stats, please think about how your company stacks up against these statistics.

Beth Schultz:

We saw that many companies just take what they have for those knowledge workers and they extend that to the frontline workforce. And this can sometimes fall short of addressing frontline worker needs and deepen pain points. One is that feeling of being disconnected from their colleagues operating in isolated islands. And about 41% of folks who participated in another Metrigy survey last year, they cited the lack of community and culture as really being one of the primary challenges of having a frontline workforce included. Additionally, frontline workers often don't have dedicated devices, so they must access their company information in apps, maybe via kiosk or other shared terminal. Now, if this is the case, this can fly in the face of a goal for 61% of companies. We found they say keeping employees informed is their number one goal of employee experience. And so that immediacy of delivering

information is going to take a hit if you're only going to access that information periodically via a shared terminal. Another point here is that 79% use email toward that information shared purpose. But you know, many frontline workers don't have corporate email accounts. So that's a problem there. Frontline workers also tend to have limited access to corporate training, and corporate training and education is actually the second most important goal that participants of our employee experience survey told us about. So again, no regular access to a desktop. It's hard to provide digital training.

Weston Morris:

Well, let's move from statistics to some real-world examples about the problems and challenges that frontline workers are facing in the modern workplace. Stacy Harder and Rich Owen lead the Frontline Worker program here at Unisys. So I invite you to now listen in as Stacy shares some of the war stories from her experience. Her first example is of a global IT services company that has frontline workers who rarely, if ever, set foot in a corporate office. Instead, they're deployed to client offices where they spend most of their time.

Stacy Harder:

Their resources are contracted out to their clients, to their customers themselves, for long periods of time. And what we're finding is when they're working at their customer sites, they're given devices that are customer-owned and access to applications that are based on the customer's needs, and they don't actually have access to their own corporate resources. And so they're feeling very disconnected and disengaged because they can't connect with their peers or management. And they, like you said, they feel like there's no company culture supporting them. Another example is in the hospitality industry, and they have resources that actually spend a majority of their time outside of the office creating these elaborate displays, you know, for the holidays or seasonally. And so they're required to be outside in the environment and they can't carry a laptop with them. So they don't have the correct devices and the correct applications that they need to be able to not only do their job, but also stay connected with the corporate information workers that are their peers.

Weston Morris:

So in both of those examples, Stacy revealed how two different enterprises are recognizing the challenges that their frontline workers are having. Let's now listen in as Stacy shares how some of those exact same enterprises have made some big changes in their frontline worker experience.

Stacy Harder:

So actually a success story was our client that's in the service industry and for their workers that sit at, you know, remote locations for their clients and they felt disconnected. What we found out was that corporate had instituted, you know, the implementation of Microsoft Teams and their rollout was basically towards the information workers. So we suggested testing out rolling it to their frontline workforce. Now, this gave them the ability to feel part of a community. We created Viva Engage, you know, community channels for them so that they could converse with each other, they could share issues or pain points that they were having at their own customer sites. And ultimately, they found out that a few of the workers were having similar issues with some devices that they were managing or maintaining. So they went ahead and created their own Teams channels where they now can instantly chat with someone on another team for, you know, a suggestion or a helpful tip. And they've started to really embrace that application and be able to use that as sort of a hub for their working environment, even though they're disconnected from the overall corporate community.

Weston Morris:

Well, now that we've seen that it is actually possible to improve frontline worker experience with those real-world examples, I'd like you to now turn your attention to Stephen Tong, a colleague of mine who is actually the brains behind all of the data that we collect to measure and improve employee experience, translating that into insights that actually make a difference to both how the employees experience their work and how that impacts the business goals of the company. Stephen is going to share some of the things that an enterprise should be digging into if they really want to measure and improve the experience of frontline workers. Which of these suggestions might apply to your company?

Stephen Tong:

It's really not one thing. So whether you're in a business that is, say, in retail or a quick-serve restaurant, that's one class of frontline worker scenarios all the way through to convenience operators, right? And then we talked about scenarios like remote banking or healthcare. They're very, very different and nuanced use cases. And you'll see not only differences from one industry to another, but you'll also see some changes across geographies. So for instance, in some industries, you'll have a higher preponderance of Bring Your Own Devices (BYOD), in which case you'll have a workforce that you need to optimize applications for that are going to be highly connected, but that endpoint might not be something that you'll be able to manage as well, right? In other cases, it'll be a corporately provided device that's very specialized that's being carried with that employee.

Stephen Tong:

And so, as you think about it, telemetry becomes super important to understand what's going on. But the way that you can acquire that and the way that you integrate that is, it becomes quite different across these scenarios, right? And also you know, we're talking about differences in generation and work styles. You know, again, that changes by not only the industry, but you know, I think if you look at the recent studies, there's as many as five generations working in the workplace, and each of those cohorts will have a slightly different way that they want to be engaged. And so being thoughtful about how real-time support's being handled, whether there's a deferred support option and how these capabilities are handled, especially when you have employees that are traveling and not always able to work in those ways, has a huge impact on how people feel about how well they're being supported, how they're being engaged with the organization, and also how they're performing their job, right? If other things are getting in the way and so forth. So it's quite exciting because these are not static-type activities and it's a very rich but complex challenge that you would try to solve as an organization.

Weston Morris:

Okay, I think at this point in the podcast, I'm guessing that you are really thinking about who your frontline workers are, and you're probably recognizing how their needs can be quite different from your knowledge workers in the office, and maybe you're thinking about what to do to improve their experience. So let's go back to Stacy Harder, as she describes an excellent tool to help with that.

Stacy Harder:

We really wanna empower these frontline workers who, you know, traditionally have been ignored. Most of the time when there's any type of technology refresh, we wanna make sure that we provide innovative workshops ahead of time, so we'll bring them to the table. We'll also make sure to pinpoint not only business units, but specific groups from the frontline workforce, including the generational gaps that may be out there to discuss what worked best for what group. Just because a company purchased,

say, this wonderful application doesn't mean that everybody is going to use it the same way, or may even possibly not need it. So we really try to encourage these innovative workshops to deep dive into the personas for the workforce environment and really make sure everybody has the tools necessary that they need not only to work, but to also feel engaged and included within the whole company.

Weston Morris:

As I listened in on this fireside chat, you know, I really appreciated how Beth connected the dots between frontline worker programs and other initiatives that might be going on in the workplace. But one of those was employee experience programs that might use XLAs. Bobby Arbuthnot, who directs the employee experience program here at Unisys, now explains how someone can tweak their experience management program, even developing some XLAs to really focus not just on the knowledge workers and their experience, but on frontline workers.

Bobby Arbuthnot:

So the starting place is to articulate why you are measuring employee experience in the context of your business goals in the first place. You know, you went over some of that in the frontline worker pain points that you talked about that Metrigy had researched, you know, some of those common things you see, what do you intend to achieve by doing so, is it to improve job retention, to attract more talent, to retain existing talent? Stephen even mentioned we've got different situations where you may have a lot of Bring Your Own Device and then you may have company-provided devices. So you may have some diversity there, even in what you're trying to measure, you know, is there some split in what's occurring there? Then once you have that, you know, with those business goals in mind, you know, the second step is to identify what you can measure that relates to these goals.

Bobby Arbuthnot:

You know, there's many operational measures. We know SLAs, KPIs in our industry. They do give some insight into employee experience, but you have to be aware that some SLAs and some of these metrics are so focused on just the IT efficiency that they actually can have a negative impact on employee experience. With your experience data sources in mind, it's important to collect that XLA data frequently, you know, and you also wanna look at being able to get that information in an automated fashion and from many sources. Stephen talked about a few of those and Stacy. I think the last piece of that, my point would be that the XLA itself is really useless unless you also analyze the data with the intent of making changes to improve experience. You've got the data, so what are you gonna do with it? Now, you know, the changes could be for an individual, like as a reaction to an incident, or commonly we're looking for, you know, how is this impacting a large group of people or personas or that group set of frontline workers proactively?

Beth Schultz:

That's certainly something that Metrigy likes to kind of hammer home is you've gotta get the data, but more specifically, you've gotta be able to extract value from it and then take action on it, right?

Weston Morris:

<Laugh>, I tell you, I really like how Bobby and Beth just really cut to the chase there. I mean, I fully agree, it is absolutely a waste of time to put into place an experience management program for frontline workers if you aren't committed to looking at the experience data and then taking action on it to actually improve the experience. So having said that, I think we can think about all the data that we are

inundated with about employee experience and productivity. Is it too much? Can we actually process it? Can artificial intelligence help with the data collection and processing? Let's go back to Stephen Tong as he shares how he is using artificial intelligence to gather and infer actionable insights that can impact your frontline workers.

Stephen Tong:

Thinking about the end goal here, we're trying to get to a point where we can get interesting insights so that we can take action, right? Those insights and conclusions are coming across a myriad of data sources. So you're dealing with a tremendous, both diversity of information, but also volumes. So, as an example, you know, some of the tooling that we put in place, we're processing billions of records of data at a time. So working our way back, you know, as we've been developing products like PowerSuite, some of our experiences around application of AI, we're trying to get those insights to be very predictive. What's nuanced and special or more complex when dealing with frontline workers? Well, the first case is that they typically have much more dynamic job functions. So in a corporate role, right, you normally have some sort of hierarchy or reporting structure or team structure that's relatively static, right?

Stephen Tong:

As you move closer and closer to the frontline space across all the different industries, the job title and the individual and the job function that they perform varies a lot, whether you're in a shift-oriented world or whether you're in some sort of teaming world that you're working in. So that really throws traditional data analysis in for a bit of a loop, right? Because you've got this dynamic element. The other piece that's quite dynamic is, I'll just call it a geospatial umbrella— location information. People are typically remote, they may be well connected or disconnected across unmanaged networks. And so now you have this other dynamic component around location and geospatial data, which has a huge bearing on perhaps the quality of experience and what you're able to do with that type of connectivity.

Stephen Tong:

Now, where AI comes in is this progression of going from analyzing that data to getting to insights and predictive models, where typically the good practices would be taking a look historically at best practices for data analysis and correlations, moving into heuristic models, which is where most tools that you see are today, and then now to more advanced stages using machine learning and AI. And you know, you can do these things in parallel, right? And you can start with best practices and heuristic models, and you can use that to kind of cross and test and evolve your AI models and your learning models as you're growing these together.

Weston Morris:

Well, let's now connect the dots between a frontline worker program and another important program that your enterprises might already be using. Organizational change management or OCM. You see, when you're making changes to the tools and processes that any of your workers, but especially frontline workers might be using, not everyone's gonna be excited about those changes, right? You may go all to all the effort of deploying the technology and the processes, and if your people aren't going to use it, you're not gonna get the ROI, it's gonna be considered a failure. So as we've discussed more than once in this podcast it is really important in any digital transformation to include OCM, to educate, encourage, maybe even entice your workers to actually use that technology and to use it effectively. Stacy Harder now talks about connecting OCM with your frontline worker program.

Stacy Harder:

So part of our solution for frontline worker enablement is to make sure that organizational change management starts at the very beginning of the process. So as soon as we engage with a client, we have not only our consultancy team working through and project managing the workshops and the implementation, but we have OCM standing next to our client watching what they're doing, observing, but also making note of the data that is coming out or any changes that they need made. So, for example, if we implement or we suggest and implement a change to the client for, you know, their frontline worker, organizational change management will make sure and follow along with the workers and the resources to see how are they progressing. Are they having any issues? What kind of feedback do they have? Is there something that should be stopped? And if so, organizational change management will take the role of halting an implementation or pivoting it, but mostly working closely with the client to make sure that no matter what, they have a high adoption rate, and that ultimately everyone from, you know, the business units to the frontline workers are satisfied with the outcome.

Weston Morris:

Well, let's wrap up this episode of the Digital Workplace Deep Dive Podcast with Beth's final question to Stacy: What is one step that is essential when planning a program to improve the experience and productivity of frontline workers?

Stacy Harder:

I would say that the number one ask is to make sure that the frontline worker representatives are part of the discussion. There are a lot of times where we're approached by clients asking for assistance because they know that they have issues, but they are guessing or they're assuming what those issues may be. And unless we really have those, you know, stakeholders in the discussion, it's just like throwing a dart at a board. We really need the actual, you know, folks involved from the very beginning.

Weston Morris:

Well, there you have it. The pandemic focused a bright light on the importance of frontline workers. That was all those people who didn't have the luxury of working from home, who had to stay at the factory or provided in-person support or stocked a shelf or provided patient care, or really many other scenarios, frontline workers didn't go away. They are actually more important to your business now than ever. So what percentage of employees at your company are frontline workers? As you roll out technology and services for your knowledge workers, how many of those same services are available to your frontline workers? That's a great question to think about. It's really important to include your frontline workers in your digital workplace planning.

After the fireside chat finished, Stacy Harder let me know that she is just thrilled to talk with any of you, our loyal listeners to this podcast, about your frontline worker questions. So in the podcast notes, we'll include contact information for both Stacy and her colleague Rich Owen, and we'll include links to the Metrigy site where you can access some of the research that Beth Schultz referred to in our introduction. Well, that wraps up this episode of The Digital Workplace Deep Dive. I'm your host, Weston Morris. Thanks for listening.