

Communicating the needs of the frontline workforce

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Technology

By Rick Bell

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Cristian Grossman may be a newly minted author with the recent release of his first book, “The Rise of the Frontline Worker: How to Turn Your Frontline Workforce Into Your Biggest Competitive Advantage.”

But the co-founder and CEO of Beekeeper, a mobile collaboration platform, also has toiled as a frontline worker. A former waiter, factory worker and chemical engineer, Grossmann meshes his time in the trenches with his entrepreneurial savvy to argue that technology is imperative to making frontline workers more effective employees.

From health care to manufacturing to retail employees, Grossmann deftly addresses the importance of frontline workers. Since the pandemic began, millions of North America's frontline workers found themselves in the spotlight for the first time, with appreciation initiatives in almost every city. Despite the recognition, Grossmann argues that the reality is many frontline workers don't have the support and tools they need to do their jobs.

Workforce caught up with Grossmann for an in-depth Q&A in the days leading up to his company's "Frontline Future" virtual conference on May 6.

Workforce: Define a frontline worker.

Cristian Grossmann: Frontline workers are employees who do not sit at desks or work at computers. Their jobs are most often mobile, like sales associates, first responders, construction workers and restaurant servers. As their name implies, they are on the frontlines of their company, either in a customer-facing role or a hands-on role, like a production worker in a manufacturing facility.

What many people don't realize is that frontline workers actually make up the vast majority of the world's workforce. In the United States alone there are approximately 50 million frontline workers. Worldwide there are about 2.7 billion frontline workers, which is 80 percent of the world's workforce.

Workforce: So, the book title — “The Rise of the Frontline Worker” — are you saying these employees have been overlooked and now employers are coming to understand how valuable they are?

Grossmann: Early into the pandemic, frontline workers were thrust into the public spotlight. Beneath their masks, they put on a brave face and continued providing the services that society needs to sustain itself and its people. Now, frontline workers are appropriately recognized as essential workers, because they are vital to our economy. In fact, according to the Department of Homeland Security, essential workers are now officially recognized as part of our critical infrastructure operations.

When office employees transitioned to remote work, many frontline teams continued to work onsite throughout the duration of the pandemic. Without these essential workers, many companies and industries would not have been able to operate. Hospitals are filled with frontline workers, as are grocery stores, manufacturing facilities and delivery services. These are the workers that society relies on most and the pandemic highlighted just how important they are.

When it comes to workplace technology, frontline workers have been underserved for a long time. Companies typically spend most of their IT budget on desk workers while frontline employees often rely on outdated, inefficient communication channels. Paycheck stuffers,

break room bulletin boards and word of mouth are just a few examples of outdated communication channels many companies still use to reach their frontline employees.

Now, with the rise of the frontline worker in the public spotlight and advances in mobile collaboration technology, business leaders are stepping up and investing more into productivity and collaboration technology that will reach and connect their frontline teams.

Workforce: It seems like an overarching theme is, by enhancing frontline workers' access to technology, employers can gain a competitive advantage. Is that accurate?

Grossmann: I believe that digitally empowering frontline employees will be one of the single most important competitive advantages for businesses in the new post-pandemic normal. A high-performing workforce can only be cultivated when every worker is included and digitally enabled. If a company is only connecting with a small portion of their workforce and not including their frontline teams, they're missing out on a huge opportunity to improve the safety, agility and overall productivity of their business.

Access to cutting-edge workplace technology creates a frontline workforce that is more productive, collaborative and ultimately happier. A connected workforce experiences fewer on-the-job accidents, sees higher retention rates, and is more innovative. All of these factors ultimately improve the customer experience and the bottom line of the business.

Let's consider the hotel industry. Almost every guest interaction customers have occurs with frontline workers — they are the *de facto* brand ambassadors of the business. The happier these employees are and the more empowered they are to do their jobs with the right collaboration tools and access to information, the better guest experience they will create.

When companies digitize their frontline workers they are boosting productivity, safety and agility of their workforce, which fuels their competitive advantage.

Workforce: How can digitalization bring out the best in frontline workers?

Grossmann: When companies invest in their employees, it helps build a more engaged, committed workforce and lays the groundwork for a more collaborative, productive company culture.

This cultural transformation brought about through digitalization happens for a few reasons. First, simply connecting with workers and getting their input and feedback not only dramatically improves morale, but it also makes their jobs easier. The average frontline worker spends three hours each week just searching for information they need to do their jobs.

With a mobile collaboration and productivity tool, they have all the information they need at their fingertips. It streamlines operations by making their day-to-day tasks and work lives easier. They become more productive and more engaged. According to [Gallup](#), a connected workforce leads to a 17 percent boost in productivity, 21 percent profitability increase and a 40 percent decrease in [turnover](#).

And on a human level, just connecting workers to the company and to each other, creating space for team members to build social connections at work goes a long way in driving engagement and boosting morale.

***Workforce:* Talk about the technology divide that you've seen between desk-based workers and frontline workers.**

Grossmann: Historically, companies have invested most of their technology budget in desk-based workers while not really knowing how to connect with the frontline. It's created a digital divide within the workplace. While desk workers have access to IT systems, email, telephones and much more, frontline workers lack the digital identity that desk-based workers are used to. It favors one group by giving them a voice while frontline workers are left without a way to contribute and connect.

Companies often resort to adapting an existing platform in their tech stack designed for desk-based workers for their frontline teams. But frontline workers have their own set of unique needs that often require different technology solutions.

***Workforce:* Many organizations with hourly employees still use manual, paper-based processes like scheduling and onboarding. Why should they digitize?**

Grossmann: COVID-19 has accelerated the need for unified productivity and collaboration tools and the process of digitization that comes with them. If there was ever a moment to invest in frontline worker enablement, this is it. Companies are realizing just how much more efficient they are when they digitalize workflows and empower their teams with mobile technology.

First, paper-based processes are inefficient and are more likely to lead to miscommunication, which costs small companies about [\\$460,000 a year](#). What's more, completing this paperwork is repetitive and time consuming for staff. Automating routine tasks can free up employees' time to spend on value-add tasks.

For example, if HR used a digital platform to automate the onboarding process and digitize employee paperwork, they could then spend more time on high level initiatives like recruitment and retention. This is also true of shift management. With a digital tool, [creating schedules](#) and communicating changes with employees is streamlined through one hub.

Also read: [The future of automated employee scheduling](#)

Workforce: Is HR resistant to digitization?

Grossmann: At Beekeeper, we have actually seen HR departments initiate the digital transformation journey in their own organizations. However, no matter who gets the ball rolling, it's critical that top leadership supports and invests in digital transformation to set the tone for the project. If the CEO is passionate about progress, then frontline workers will follow their lead and support it, too.

From automating the onboarding process to digitizing payroll, HR teams can dramatically benefit from productivity tools, too. We have one customer, a casino with over 600 workers, that saved nearly \$100,000 by digitizing paper-based processes, including HR forms that once had to be filled out manually.

Workforce: So, I am a manager. We've just digitized our employee communications through a smartphone app. And I see my employee on the floor checking their phone instead of restocking the yogurt and sour cream. How should I react?

Grossmann: I realize that letting employees use their phones at work can be a sensitive subject. Objections such as: they're too distracting; they negatively affect productivity; they just simply "don't belong" at work. I get it. It can be tempting to throw your hands up and banish the use of cell phones at work once and for all.

But the truth is that a "no tolerance" take on cell phone policies may not be the best solution, except for highly sterile procedures or risky production processes. In the modern day workplace, cell phones are a needed resource to facilitate internal collaboration, especially for employees who don't have computer access or a company email account and allow them to better serve customers

I believe that the benefits of allowing employees to use phones at work greatly outweigh the risks if implemented properly. The key to successfully allowing cell phones in the workplace lies in creating a clear BYOD policy and making sure everyone understands what's expected of them. Proactively addressing the key concerns is the first step to creating a solution that fits your company's needs. Don't let fear of change cause your organization to miss out on all the advantages of mobile communication in the workplace.

Workforce: You make a really interesting point about employees taking communications into their own hands by using commercial products like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger for workplace communications. Why is that wrong?

Grossmann: Aside from security concerns, another problem with using WhatsApp for workplace communication is that it can sometimes create more confusion and chaos for workers. Juggling multiple group chats, no user management, and unprofessional user

names make managing business communication through WhatsApp very difficult.

All this confusion ultimately leads to unclear, disjointed and disconnected workplace communication. In the end, WhatsApp can hurt productivity more than it helps. If managers are spending 15 minutes of each shift trying to figure out which group chat the closing checklist was sent to, then it pretty much defeats the purpose.

Don't get me wrong. WhatsApp is fine for social communication. But when it comes to business, workers need a robust, collaborative platform with features and capabilities (like integrations) that streamline workflows and communication and enable them to be more productive.

I like to compare social media apps to the Wild West: they're unregulated, out of control, and carry potential security consequences for a business. Companies have no control over consumer-grade communication apps.

Workforce: Communicating with your employees through an app is all well and good. But with an hourly workforce, aren't you treading on potential wage and hour or overtime violations if they are "on" 24/7?

Having access to employees around the clock does not mean they should be accessible and available to the company 24/7. With Beekeeper, employees can set the app to the "Do Not Disturb" mode that can also be linked to their shifts automatically and mute push notifications outside of work hours. This respects the free time of off-duty frontline workers and also reduces a company's legal risks around wage and hour labor laws that can arise when contacting employees when they're not working.

Fair play rules are also essential when it comes to integrating workplace technology. Employees must understand that they may only use employer-provided communication technology, such as an app, during work hours.

Workforce: While we're on that subject, talk about avoiding potential compliance violations when you digitalize employee communications.

Grossmann: On top of labor laws and data security, each industry has regulatory agencies who have specific standards and rules for companies. For example, manufacturing and construction must comply with OSHA. Health departments and the FDA have rigorous laws that govern the restaurant industry. It's a lot for companies to keep track of and a workplace platform can help make sure they stay compliant on all levels.

Also read: Wage and hour violations cost restaurant \$697,000

Another topic that must be considered when discussing employee communications compliance is privacy and how data is treated. GDPR, CCPA, and other regulations have clear guidelines on how personal data of employees must be handled. It's crucial to have the

proper certified systems in place to address this.

Workforce: You are the CEO of Beekeeper, but you've also spent considerable time as a frontline worker. Talk about your experiences, and how that helps you shape your company's mission and goals.

Grossmann: Before I got into technology, I was actually a frontline worker myself. I was a factory worker, a waiter, and a chemical engineer. I started very early on learning how frontline industries work as one of my grandfathers worked in a copper factory and the other one in a paint production factory. Also, my father worked with a team of electricians and blacksmiths to produce and automate garage doors in Mexico City. I was fortunate to spend a lot of time with them learning how those businesses worked, and especially how crucial it was to have clear and simple systems in place — at that time many of their processes were all paper based! I draw on that perspective and experience to inform the ways we have been and continue to evolve and improve Beekeeper to support more frontline workers.

We serve some of the largest frontline-powered companies in the world and I also rely on what our customers want and need in a mobile productivity platform. We're honored that companies rely on Beekeeper to support and connect their frontline workers.

From “happy birthday” to “have you clocked out?” share key updates, celebrate milestones and make everyone feel part of the team through [Workforce Chat](#). Sign up for your [demo](#) today.

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