THE

FRONTLINE WORKFORCE REPORT 2026

How Leading Employers Hire, Engage, and Grow Hourly Talent

















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Executive Summary

Frontline workers are roughly 73% of US employment, more than 100 million people *(Josh Bersin Company, 2026)*. 80.3 million of them are paid by the hour *(BLS)*. They are the majority of the workforce, and for much of the last decade they received less attention than corporate employees.

That has changed. 60% of employers now say talent acquisition or HR owns frontline hiring *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. In 2020, fewer than 30% of hourly focused organizations had a dedicated function at all. 84% let candidates apply on a phone. 84% use AI somewhere in hiring. 61% fill a frontline role in two weeks or less.

Workers describe a different experience. 79% of hourly workers have abandoned a job application in the past 12 months because it took too long, and 74% have abandoned one because it was too difficult *(Aptitude Research hourly worker survey, 2026)*.

Half of frontline workers say their company has not changed in three to five years *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. 52% do not expect it to. Every job attribute tested in that study shows a double digit gap between what workers say matters and what they say they get.

Three data points illustrate the gap.

63%
of employers offer earned wage access.

55%
of workers say they have none.

Aptitude Research, 2026;
DailyPay and Workday, 2026.

53%
of employers let workers view a schedule.

12%
let them swap one.

Aptitude Research, 2026.

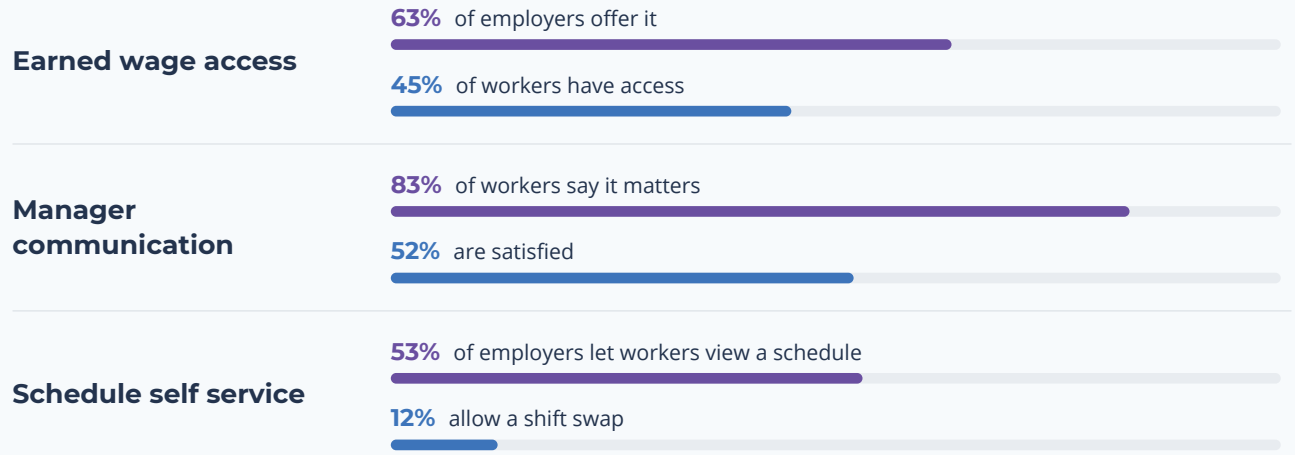
83%
of workers say manager communication matters.

52%
are satisfied with it.

DailyPay and Workday, 2026.

Comparing what employers report with what workers report:

Figure 1: The expectation gap



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026; DailyPay and Workday, 2026

Employers have invested heavily in hiring technology. Fewer of those investments have reached the day to day experience of frontline workers.

This report covers six areas

- Hiring
- Promotion
- Engagement
- Pay
- Retention
- Shift scheduling

Two areas have barely moved. Post hire communication still runs on channels half the frontline cannot open. And scheduling is almost entirely manual. Seven in ten employers build schedules by hand. 65% have unfilled shifts every week. These are also the two areas workers say matter most, which makes them the clearest opportunity for employers while the labor market remains stable.

Research Methodology

Primary research, worker sentiment, and industry operator evidence.

363
EMPLOYER RESPONDENTS

Aptitude Research survey. Roles across TA, HR, operations, workforce management, finance, and location management. August 2026.

324
U.S. HOURLY WORKERS

Aptitude Research hourly worker survey. Fielded in 2026.

2,208
WORKER SENTIMENT

U.S. hourly workers, ages 18-45. DailyPay and Workday Frontline Worker Study, conducted by The Harris Poll. April 23 - May 2, 2026.

Independent samples. Employer data describes what organizations provide; worker data describes what people receive. The differences between them are a central focus of this report.

WHO RESPONDED

Aptitude Research employer survey

ROLE



LEVEL



INDUSTRY



66%
Say half or more of their workforce is frontline.

57%
Say most frontline roles require certification, a license, or trade qualification.

41%
Report annual frontline turnover above 60%.

22%
Report annual frontline turnover above 80%.

OPERATOR RESEARCH & SECONDARY SOURCES

Operator research: National Restaurant Association, Research Insight: Hiring and Staffing, April 2026, supported by Workday and Paradox. Operator survey plus interviews with leaders at Biaggi's, Captain D's, Chipotle, Golden Corral, JRI Hospitality, Lehigh Valley Restaurant Brands, The Saxton Group, Southern Rock Restaurants, Slatebridge Restaurant Group, and Taco John's. Cited as National Restaurant Association, 2026.

Secondary data: Bureau of Labor Statistics; CDC National Center for Health Statistics; Congressional Budget Office; National Retail Federation; Lightcast; Josh Bersin Company.

Industry note: The research reports little variance across industries. Companies hiring for different frontline roles face many of the same challenges and transformation.

Key Findings

Frontline hiring finally has an owner

60% of organizations put frontline hiring under talent acquisition or HR. TA alone owns it at 38% *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. Six years ago most of this work sat with operational managers who were already stretched. Clear ownership makes many of the other improvements in this report possible.

Mobile apply is table stakes

84% of employers let a candidate apply entirely on a phone *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. In 2020 it was 41% of hourly candidates. This is the largest single improvement since 2020.

AI is inside the process, and workers are fine with it

74% of organizations use AI somewhere in frontline hiring, led by sourcing at 53% and screening at 47% *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. That figure reflects larger, technology enabled employers. Among restaurant operators, AI adoption is 26% *(National Restaurant Association, 2026)*. Candidates have already met it. 78% of hourly workers have used an AI assistant or chatbot when applying for a job, and 67% said it made the experience better *(Aptitude Research hourly worker survey, 2026)*. Where AI is already in use at work, 64% of workers report a positive impact *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. Half also fear replacement. How organizations introduce AI will shape how workers respond to it.

The response gap is the last real hiring problem

22% of employers respond to 90% or more of frontline applicants. 55% say they always notify rejected candidates *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. The difference suggests many organizations count an automated acknowledgment as notification.

Offering a benefit and delivering it are different things

63% of employers offer earned wage access *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. 55% of workers say they have no access to on demand pay *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. Some of that distance reflects the two samples. The rest reflects a benefit that exists on paper without reaching every site or worker classification. Among workers with six or more years of service, 81% want it and 29% have it. Awareness and enrollment, rather than availability, appear to be the barrier.

Flexibility now recruits at near wage strength

45% of frontline workers rank their schedule among the top three reasons they took the job, behind only pay at 62% *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. 43% say flexibility makes them want to do their best work. Competitive pay scores 49%. Employers can treat schedule control as part of the total rewards offer.

Internal mobility is working

56% of organizations fill most frontline manager roles from within. 62% give frontline workers a system built for them to see internal openings. The top barrier is managers who do not want to lose good performers, cited by 48% *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

Pay clarity matters almost as much as pay

84% of frontline workers say clear pay information is important. 88% say the same about a good hourly wage *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. 57% are satisfied with the clarity they get. 61% live pay-check to paycheck. Most of the information workers want already exists in payroll systems.

Scheduling is the next frontier

49% of employers still build schedules on a spreadsheet or on paper. 55% of frontline managers spend three or more hours a week on them. 65% of organizations have unfilled shifts weekly. 12% let a worker swap a shift *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. Meanwhile 78% of workers price out every shift before accepting it and 28% hold more than one job *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

AI is already part of frontline hiring.

74%

using AI in frontline hiring

67%

of hourly workers said AI made applying for a job better.

Source: Aptitude Research, 2026



CHAPTER 1:
THE FRONTLINE ECONOMY



Demand for frontline workers is steady. The supply of new workers is shrinking. These two trends shape the findings throughout this report.

The labor market in numbers

HOURLY WORKFORCE

80.3M

U.S. workers paid by the hour in 2024. 55.6% of wage and salary workers.

Source: BLS

JOB OPENINGS

7.3M

Open jobs in July 2026. Roughly one for every unemployed person.

Source: BLS JOLTS

BIRTH RATE

53.1

Births per 1,000 women ages 15–44 in 2025. The lowest on record.

Source: CDC

TURNING 65

4.1M

Americans turning 65 each year through 2027.

Source: Alliance for Lifetime Income

A stable labor market

In 2019 there were 0.84 unemployed people for every open job. In March 2022 it hit 0.49, close to two open jobs for every available worker. It has been at or just above 1.0 since February 2025, roughly one worker per opening.

Parity is not slack. Employers can be selective again for the first time since 2019, and there is no reserve of unemployed workers to draw on when demand returns.

Year	Unemployed	Openings	Per opening
2019	6.00M	7.15M	0.84
2020	12.95M	6.35M	2.04
2022	5.99M	11.20M	0.54
2024	6.76M	7.66M	0.88
2026 YTD	7.33M	7.26M	1.01

Frontline industries still move fastest

Accommodation and food services hired and separated workers at 5.2% a month in July 2026. Across all industries both rates were 3.2%. Across 2025, leisure and hospitality averaged 952,000 hires and 937,000 separations every month.

Demand is moving between sectors. Retail openings grew 155,000 over the year to 731,000. Leisure and hospitality openings fell 187,000, the steepest drop of any sector. Health care and social assistance holds the highest openings rate at 5.7%.

Workers cross those lines easily. A cashier becomes a patient care tech. A line cook moves to a warehouse. 65% of employers named competition across industries as a top hiring challenge *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

Fewer births, fewer future workers

The general fertility rate fell to 53.1 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44 in 2025. That is a record low and 23% below 2007. Births totaled 3.6 million, down 1%. The teen birth rate also hit a record low.

CBO projects deaths will outnumber births starting in 2030. From that point immigration accounts for all population growth. Without it, the population shrinks.

Restaurants see it coming first. The shrinking population of 16 to 24 year olds is the industry's central long term labor challenge. This group has traditionally been the entry point to frontline work.

The largest retirement wave in history

More than 4.1 million Americans turn 65 every year from 2024 through 2027. 2025 set the record at 4.18 million, about 11,400 a day.

This affects frontline employers in two ways. Retirements pull experienced workers and supervisors off the floor. And many of those workers cannot afford to leave. More than half the Boomers turning 65 between 2024 and 2030 have $250,000 or less in assets. Our 2020 research found one in three hourly workers was over 50.

Older workers represent an underused talent pool. Employers who design schedules, roles, and applications with them in mind can expand their available workforce.

Slower growth, smaller labor supply

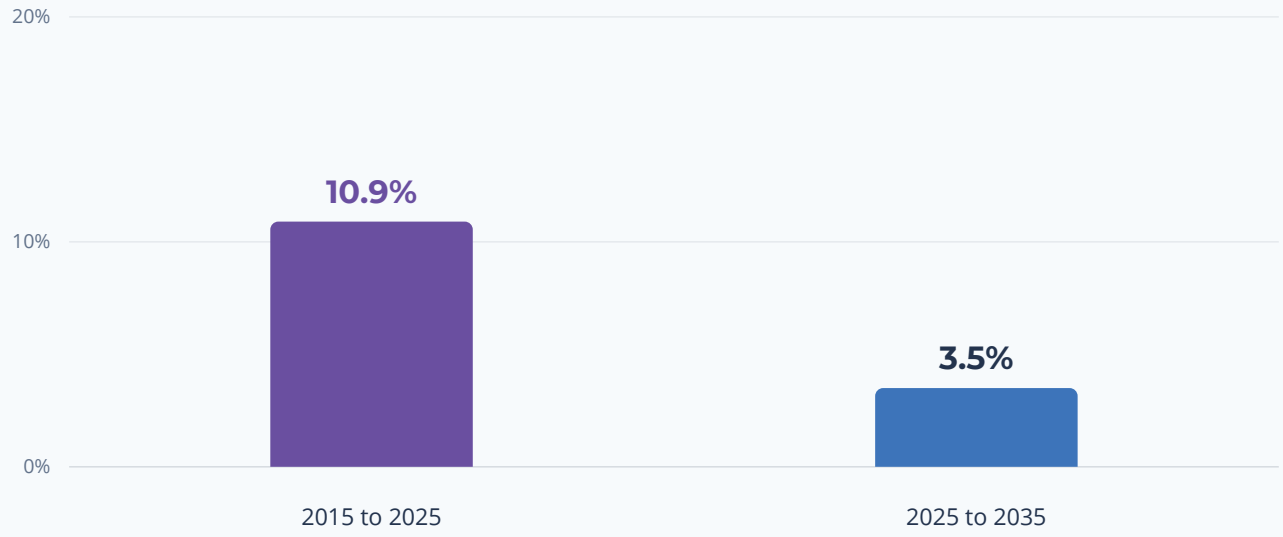
Immigration has filled the gap between labor demand and a slowing native born workforce. That flow has slowed. CBO projects population growth averaging 0.3% a year over the next decade and 0.1% after that. Its September 2025 update put most of the projected reduction on people under 55, the core of the frontline workforce.

Participation is falling too. Penn Wharton projects labor force participation dropping from 64.5% in 2026 to 62.2% by 2056.

BLS expects 5.9 million new jobs between 2025 and 2035. That is 3.5% growth, against 10.9% the prior decade. Slower growth in both jobs and workers increases the value of every hire.

Projected U.S. job growth by decade:

Figure 2: Employment growth, prior decade compared with next decade



Source: BLS Employment Projections, 2025 to 2035

A focus on immigration

Immigration has historically closed the gap between a slowing native born workforce and steady labor demand. That flow has reversed. Net immigration fell from about 2.3 million in 2024 to an estimated 410,000 in 2025, and CBO projects 570,000 in 2026. CBO attributes most of the change to administrative actions taken since January 2025, with enforcement provisions of the 2025 reconciliation act adding to it. Foreign born workers are 19% of the labor force but have supplied roughly half of its growth. With that contribution gone, the Federal Reserve Board estimates the economy now needs fewer than 10,000 new jobs a month to hold unemployment steady, down from 150,000 or more two years ago.

The scale of frontline industries

Retail is the largest private sector employer in the country, supporting 55 million jobs, more than one in four. NRF forecasts sales growing 4.4% in 2026 to $5.6 trillion.

Restaurants and foodservice are second, with 15.7 million jobs, 10% of the U.S. workforce. Employment reaches 15.8 million in 2026 and 17.3 million by 2035.

Pay policy is moving at the edges

The federal minimum wage is still $7.25. In 2020 we noted it had not moved in ten years. It has now been seventeen. Twenty two states raised their own minimums in 2026.

The real change is in the tax code. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act created deductions for tax years 2025 through 2028: up to $25,000 in qualified tips and up to $12,500 in qualified overtime premium pay. Starting in 2026 employers must report those amounts on the W-2. Payroll accuracy is now part of the frontline value proposition.

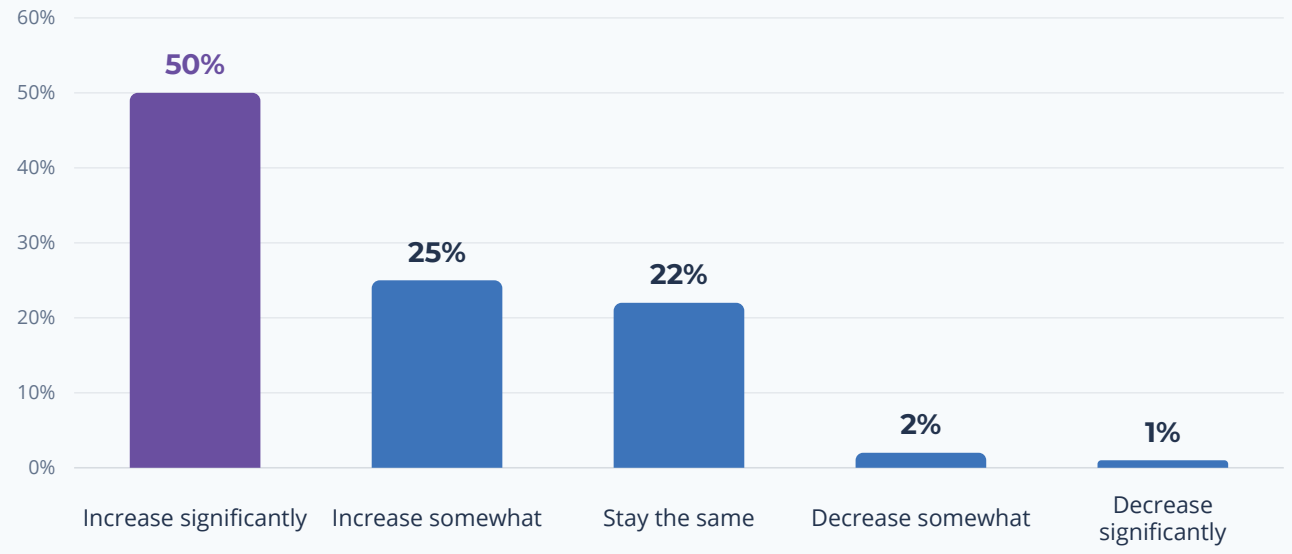
What this means

Demand for frontline workers is steady while the supply of new workers is shrinking, experienced workers are retiring, and immigration is slowing.

Frontline talent strategy is becoming a source of competitive advantage. Employers that hire faster, communicate better, promote from within, pay with flexibility, and give workers more control over their time will be better positioned to build and keep the workforce they need.

When asked how their frontline hiring volume will change over the next 12 months, employers said:

Figure 3: Expected change in frontline hiring volume, next 12 months



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

CHAPTER 2:
SIX YEARS LATER



We wanted to look at what has changed from 2020 to 2026 and a few observations stood out.

Access improved. Ownership improved. Communication did not. Where the 2020 number came from workers rather than employers, that is noted.

Figure 4: The frontline workforce, 2020 compared with 2026

Measure	2020	2026	Read
Dedicated TA or HR ownership	Under 30% of hourly focused organizations	60% (TA 38%, HR 22%)	Frontline hiring has a home
Mobile apply	41% of hourly candidates had the option	84% of employers offer it	Standard practice
Applications over an hour	Called out as common	4% of employers	Solved
Hearing back after applying	62% of candidates never heard back	22% of employers respond to 90% or more	The biggest gap
Rejection notice	86% of hourly workers dissatisfied	55% of employers say they always notify	Perception gap
Text as a candidate channel	8% to 18% by industry	48%	Text is mainstream
Chatbot or AI assistant	2% to 3% by industry	5% as a named channel, 38% use AI for engagement	AI moved behind the scenes
Candidate experience	Only 8% had a dedicated role	55% call it a top three hiring challenge	On the agenda
The worker view	Dissatisfied at every stage of hiring	50% say their workplace has not changed in 3 to 5 years	Barely moved

Source: Aptitude Research, 2020; Aptitude Research, 2026; DailyPay and Workday, 2026

Two themes stand out. Challenges with a clear technology answer have largely been addressed, including mobile apply, application length, and text communication.

Challenges that depend on process and priorities remain open. Only 22% of employers respond to 90% or more of applicants, even though the tools to do so are widely available.

What employers report compared with what workers report

The same pattern appears across the report. Employer and worker data come from independent samples, so the comparison is directional, but the direction is consistent. In every case the worker number is lower, and the distance is widest where a benefit requires enablement at the site level rather than a decision at the corporate level.

Figure 5: What employers report compared with what workers report

Measure	What employers report	What workers report
Earned wage or on demand pay	63% offer it	55% have no access, 80% want it
Schedule self service	53% let workers view a schedule, 12% allow a shift swap	23% say adjusting a shift would be hard
Manager communication	60% communicate through managers daily	52% satisfied, against 83% who say it matters
Digital tools	43% offer a mobile self service app	13% have no access, 51% satisfied with workplace technology

Source: Aptitude Research, 2026; DailyPay and Workday, 2026

The next step in scheduling:
flexibility.

ONLY 12%
of employers allow workers to swap a shift.



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

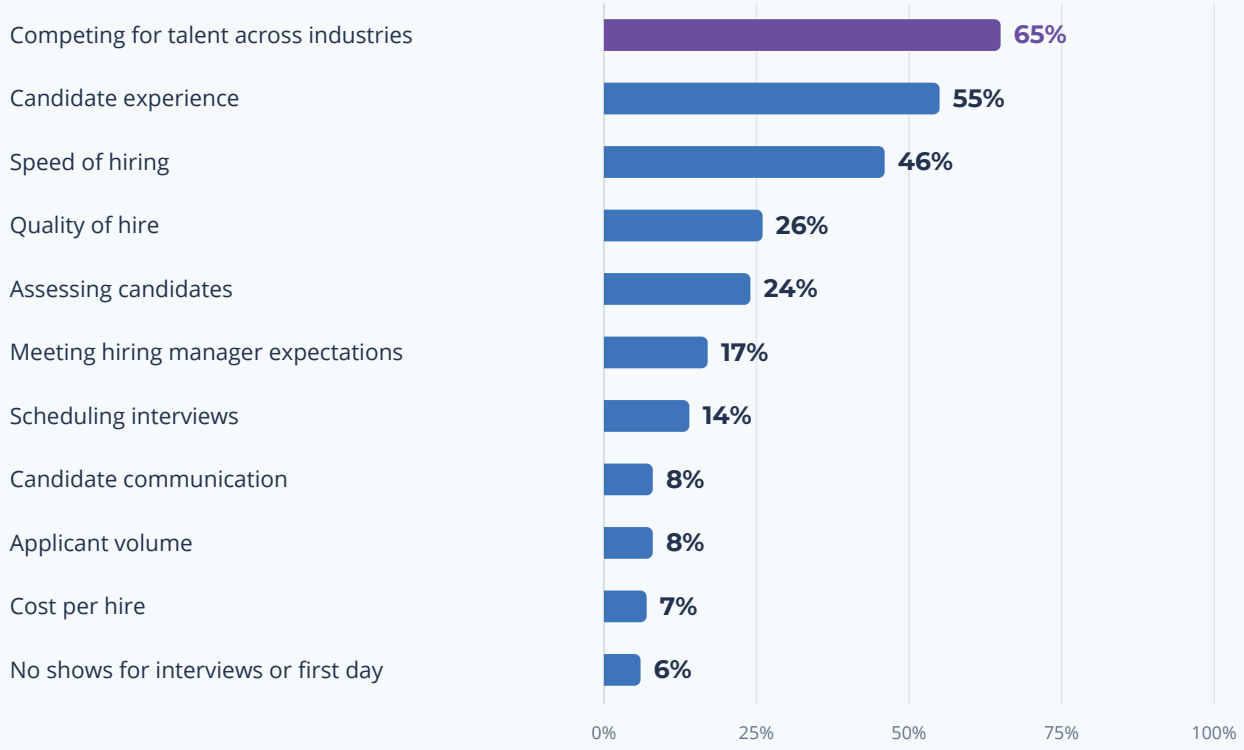
CHAPTER 3: HIRING



In 2020, speed was the primary focus. In 2026, employers increasingly treat speed and candidate experience as connected priorities.n65% of employers name competition across industries as a top three hiring challenge. Candidate experience follows at 55%. Speed of hiring is third at 46% *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked to name the top three challenges in hiring frontline workers, employers said:

Figure 6: Top challenges in frontline hiring (select up to three)



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

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Who owns frontline hiring

In 2020, fewer than 30% of organizations that predominantly hire hourly workers had a dedicated TA or HR function. Most hiring ran through managers who were already running a store. The move to professional ownership is the most significant structural change since 2020. Talent acquisition owns it at 38%. HR at 22%. Operations leaders at 16%, store or location managers at 13%. 11% call it shared. 1% outsource to an RPO *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

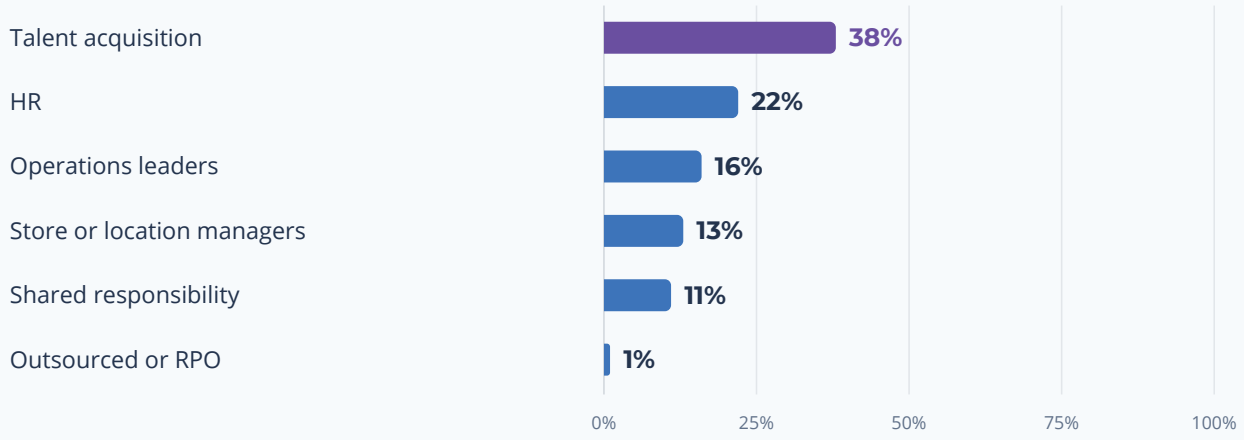
In 2020, fewer than

30%

of organizations that predominantly hire hourly workers had a dedicated TA or HR function.

When asked who has primary responsibility for frontline hiring, employers said:

Figure 7: Primary responsibility for frontline hiring



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026 (n=240)

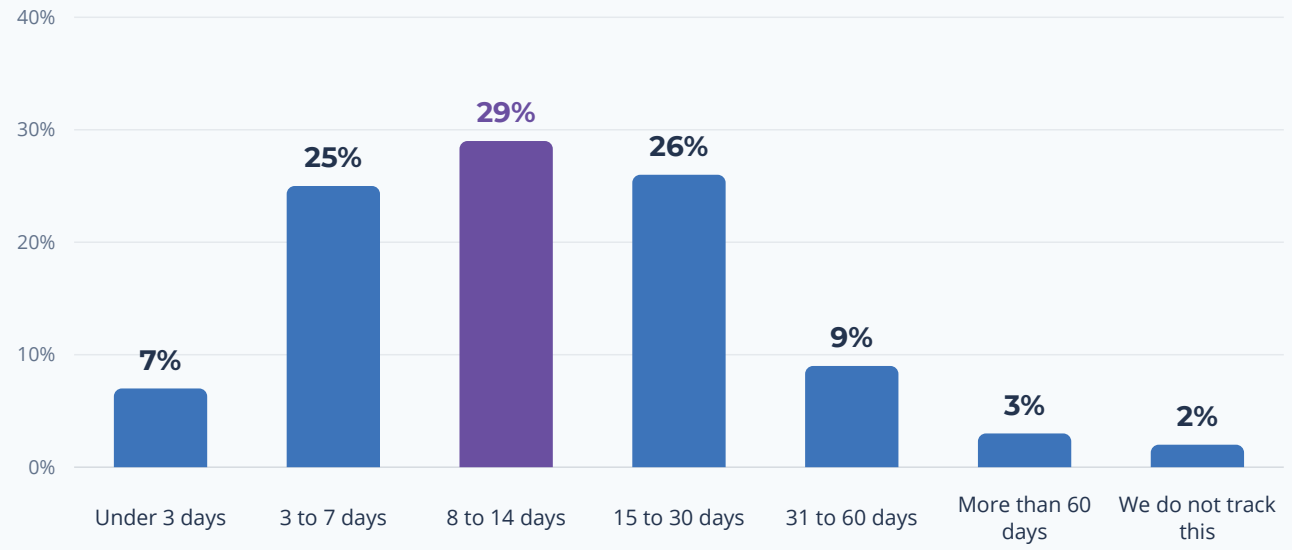
29% still run it through operations or location managers. In those organizations, hiring competes with many other demands on manager time.

Speed

61% of employers fill a frontline role within 14 days. 32% do it in under a week. 7% in under three days. 12% take more than 30 days *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked how long it takes to fill a frontline role from requisition to accepted offer, employers said:

Figure 8: Average time to fill a frontline role



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Restaurant operators report an average of 16 days for an hourly role and 46 days for a manager or salaried role *(National Restaurant Association, 2026)*.

The operators who automated are far below that. Southern Rock Restaurants, running 160 McAlister's Deli locations, went from about two weeks to roughly one day. The Saxton Group went from more than a week to three days. JRI Hospitality went from two or three weeks to under eight days. Chipotle cut application to start date from 12 days to 4, nearly doubled applicant flow, and raised application completion from about 50% to nearly 88%.

Each day a role stays open is a day the location operates short staffed.

Cost to Apply

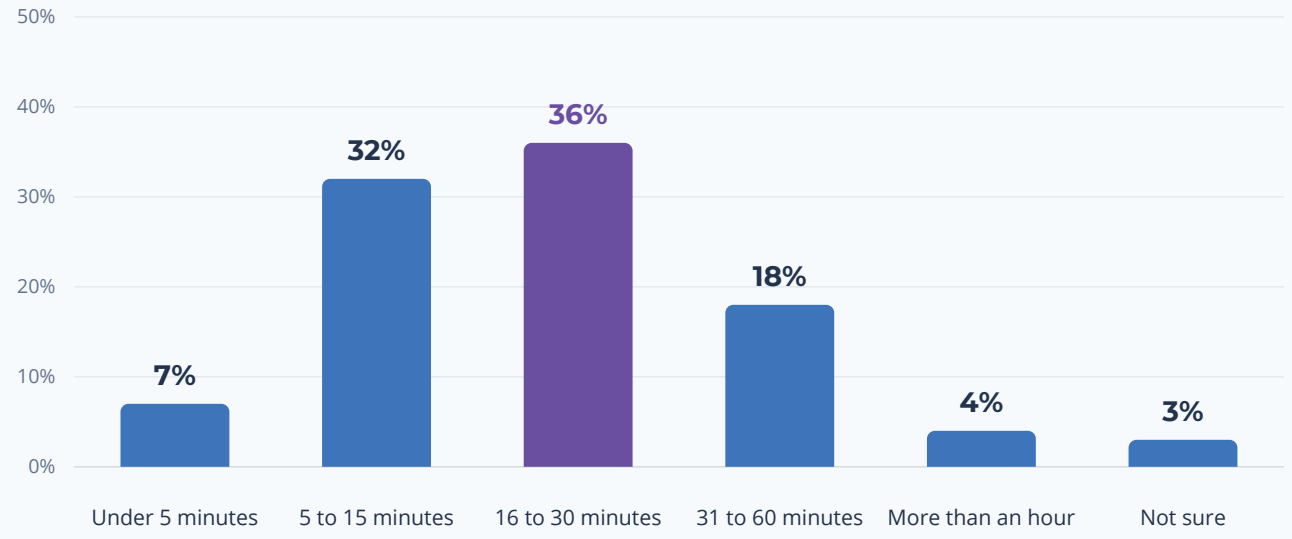
Median cost per application is $16.87 and 75% of applications come from mobile devices (Appcast). Every abandoned application is a paid click that produced nothing.

Applying

84% of employers let candidates apply entirely on a phone. 10% do not. 6% are not sure *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. Length came down with it. 39% of applications take under 15 minutes. 36% take 16 to 30. 22% still run over 30 minutes and 4% run over an hour.

When asked how long a typical frontline application takes a candidate to complete, employers said:

Figure 9: Time to complete a frontline application

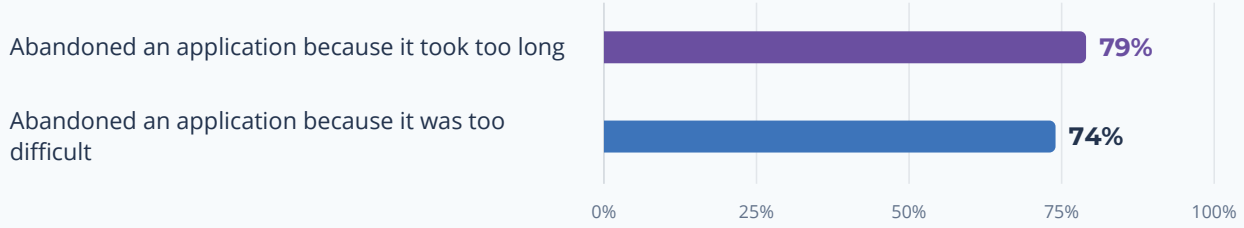


Source: Aptitude Research, 2026 (n=240)

79% of hourly workers have abandoned a job application in the past 12 months because it took too long, and 74% have abandoned one because it was too difficult *(Aptitude Research hourly worker survey, 2026)*. Frontline candidates apply to several jobs at once, on their own time.

When asked whether they had abandoned a job application in the past 12 months, hourly workers said:

Figure 10: Why hourly workers abandon job applications



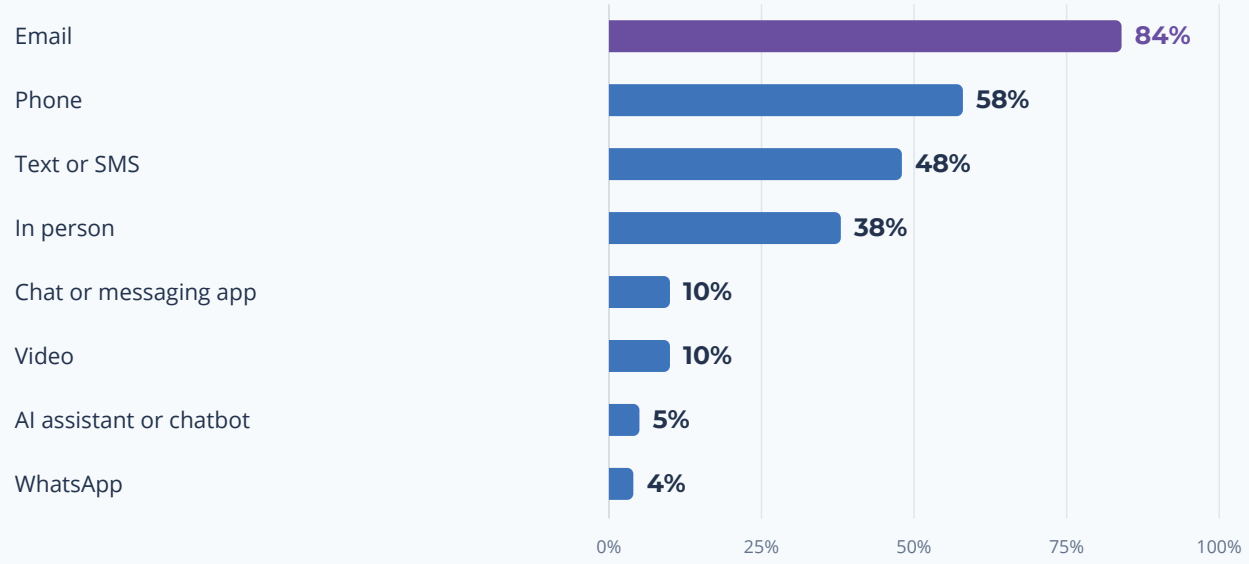
Source: Aptitude Research, Hourly Worker Survey, 2026

Communicating with candidates

Email leads at 84%, phone at 58%, text at 48%. 38% still communicate in person. Chat and video sit near 10%. 5% name an AI assistant. 4% use WhatsApp *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked how they communicate with frontline candidates during the hiring process, employers said:

Figure 11: Candidate communication channels (select all that apply)



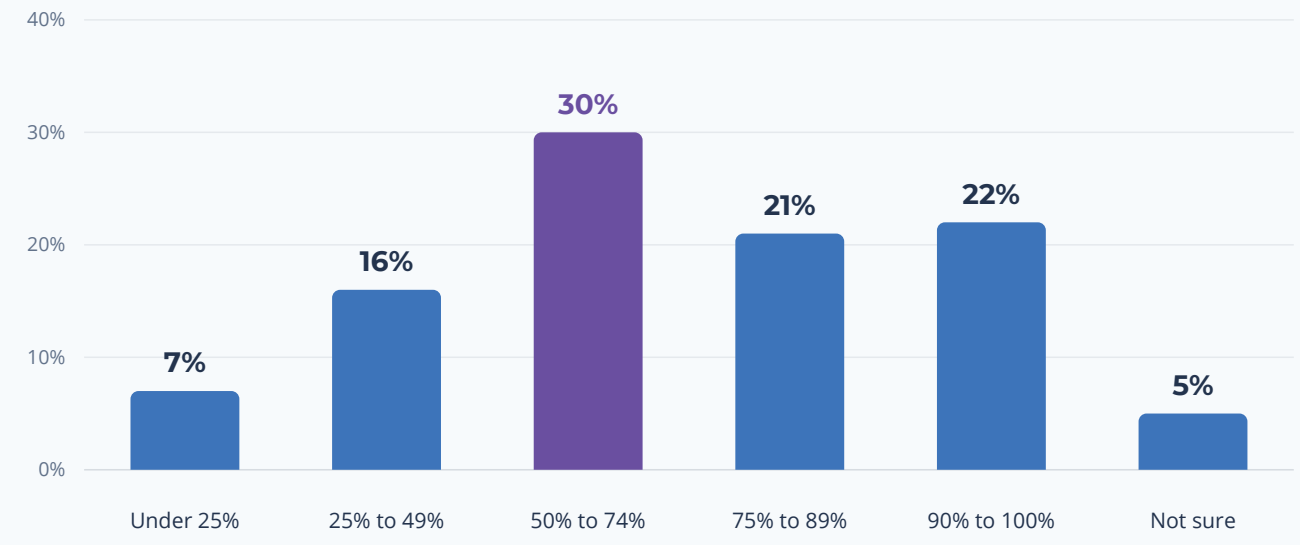
Source: Aptitude Research, 2026 (n=240)

Text shows the most growth. In 2020 it ranged from 8% in restaurants and hospitality to 18% in retail. Text is now the third channel and closing on phone.

The response gap remains. 22% of employers respond to 90% or more of applicants. 30% respond to between half and three quarters. 23% respond to fewer than half.

When asked what share of frontline applicants receive a response after applying, employers said:

Figure 12: Share of frontline applicants who receive a response



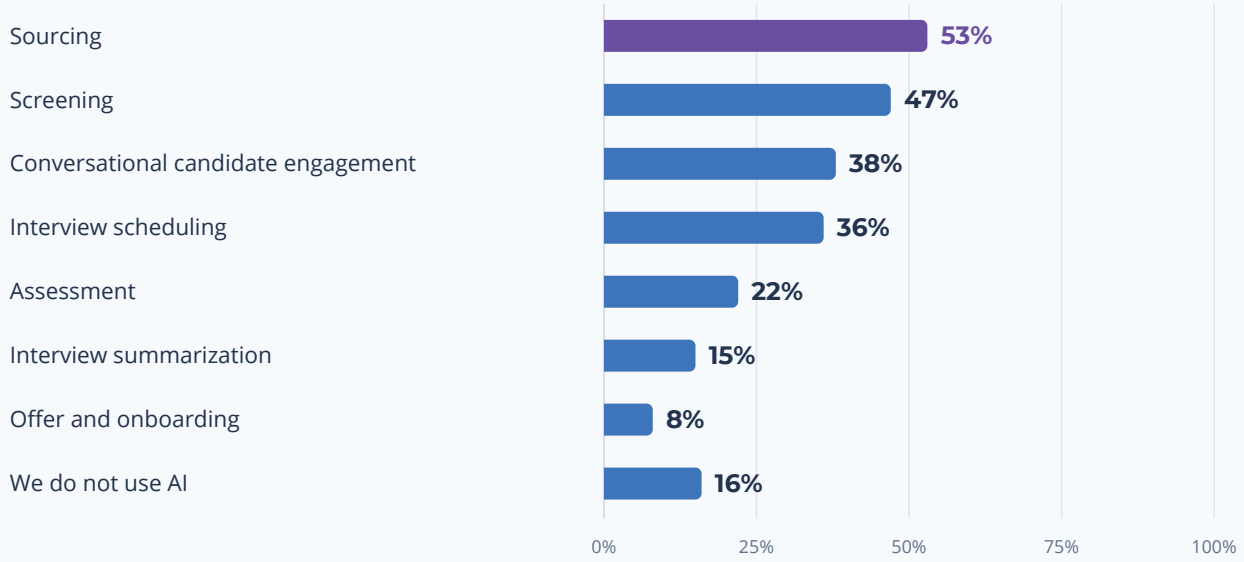
Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

AI in frontline hiring

74% of organizations use AI in at least one part of frontline hiring. Sourcing leads at 53%, screening at 47%, conversational engagement at 38%, interview scheduling at 36%. Assessment is at 22%, interview summarization at 15%. Offer and onboarding trails at 8%. 16% use none *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked where they use AI or agentic AI in frontline hiring, employers said:

Figure 13: AI use across the frontline hiring process (select all that apply)



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026 (n=240)

Adoption is concentrated at the start of the hiring process. Organizations have automated finding and filtering candidates, where volume is highest. Fewer have automated the later stages where candidates are most often lost.

Adoption also depends on who is answering. Only 26% of restaurant operators use any AI enabled tool, and inside hiring it is thinner: 12% for initial screening, 9% for interview scheduling, 6% for assessments *(National Restaurant Association, 2026)*. Our sample skews toward larger multi location employers with professional TA functions. The difference reflects company size and sample composition. Larger, technology enabled employers have adopted AI faster than smaller operators.

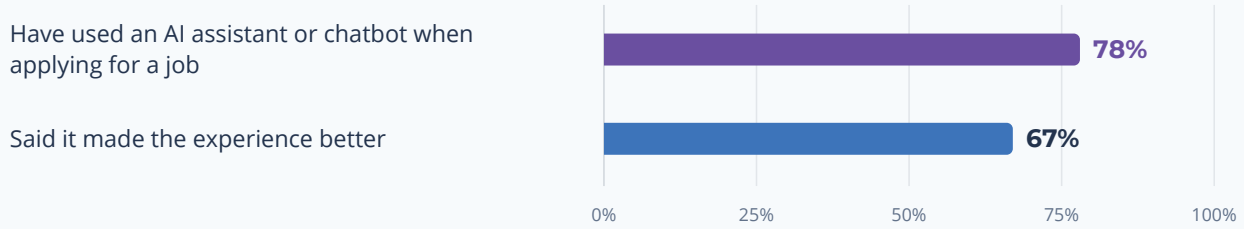
How workers view AI

64% of frontline workers whose employers already use AI report a positive impact, including higher productivity at 34% and better quality work at 32% *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. 69% say AI reduces daily frustrations. 68% support it if it increases productivity.

Candidates have more experience with AI than the employer channel data suggests. 78% of hourly workers have used an AI assistant or chatbot when applying for a job, and 67% said it improved the experience *(Aptitude Research hourly worker survey, 2026)*. Only 5% of employers name an AI assistant as a candidate communication channel, which suggests workers are encountering AI inside text, chat, and scheduling rather than as a labeled tool.

When asked about their experience with AI in the application process, hourly workers said:

Figure 14: Hourly worker experience with AI when applying



Source: Aptitude Research, Hourly Worker Survey, 2026

Transparency matters. Half worry AI will replace their job. What earns trust is specific: 43% want assurance it makes their job easier, 42% want protection from replacement, 40% want employers to be transparent about how it affects their role.

Workers also identified where AI would help them most. 38% want step by step work guidance. 32% want help understanding pay, benefits, and deductions. 32% want everyday HR questions answered. 31% want help finding open shifts that fit their schedule.

Employers have focused AI on sourcing and screening. Workers see the most value in support for pay, HR questions, and scheduling, an area few employers have addressed so far.

Key strategies for hiring

- Get the application under 15 minutes and make sure it finishes on a phone at midnight
- Close the loop with every applicant, not just the ones you hire
- Push AI past sourcing and screening into scheduling, offer, and onboarding
- Point AI at what workers asked for: pay questions, HR questions, open shifts
- Treat days open as an operating cost, not an HR metric

CHAPTER 4: ENGAGEMENT



An hourly employee becomes net positive to the business after 31.8 days. A manager takes 72.2 days *(National Restaurant Association, 2026)*. Employees who leave before that point represent a net cost.

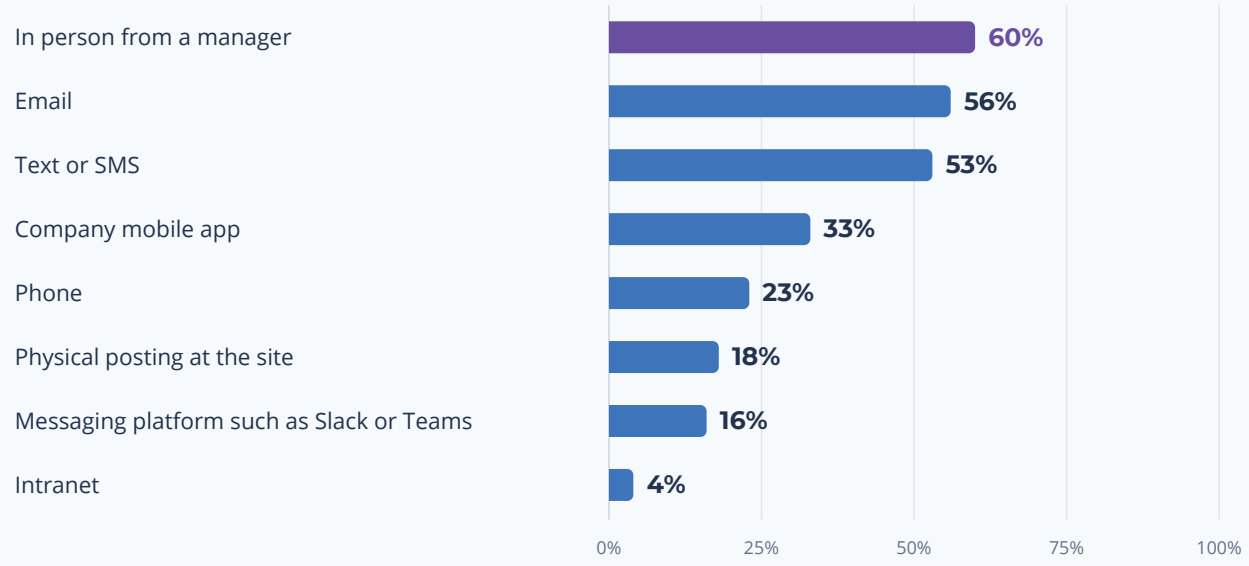
That number makes the first month the highest leverage period in frontline employment. It also makes everyday communication an operational priority.

How organizations reach frontline workers

Managers remain the primary channel. 60% of employers communicate with frontline employees in person through a manager *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. Email follows at 56%, text at 53%, a company mobile app at 33%, phone at 23%, physical postings at 18%, Slack or Teams at 16%. Intranets are used by 4%.

When asked how they communicate with frontline employees on day to day operational matters, employers said:

Figure 15: Day to day communication channels with frontline employees (select all that apply)

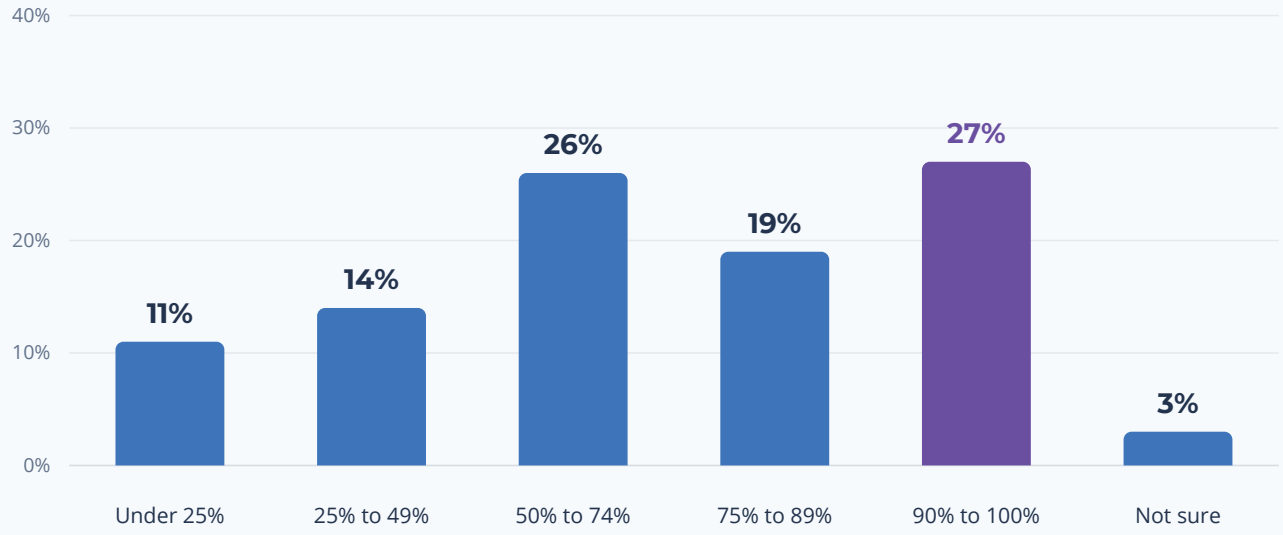


Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Email use raises a question of reach. 51% of employers say fewer than three quarters of their frontline workers have a company email or login. 11% say fewer than a quarter do.

When asked what share of frontline employees have a company issued email address or login, employers said:

Figure 16: Frontline employees with a company email or login



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Many employers rely on a channel that a large share of frontline workers cannot access. Only a third use a mobile app. Text fills part of the gap and works well for quick updates, but it does not support schedules, pay detail, recognition, or development.

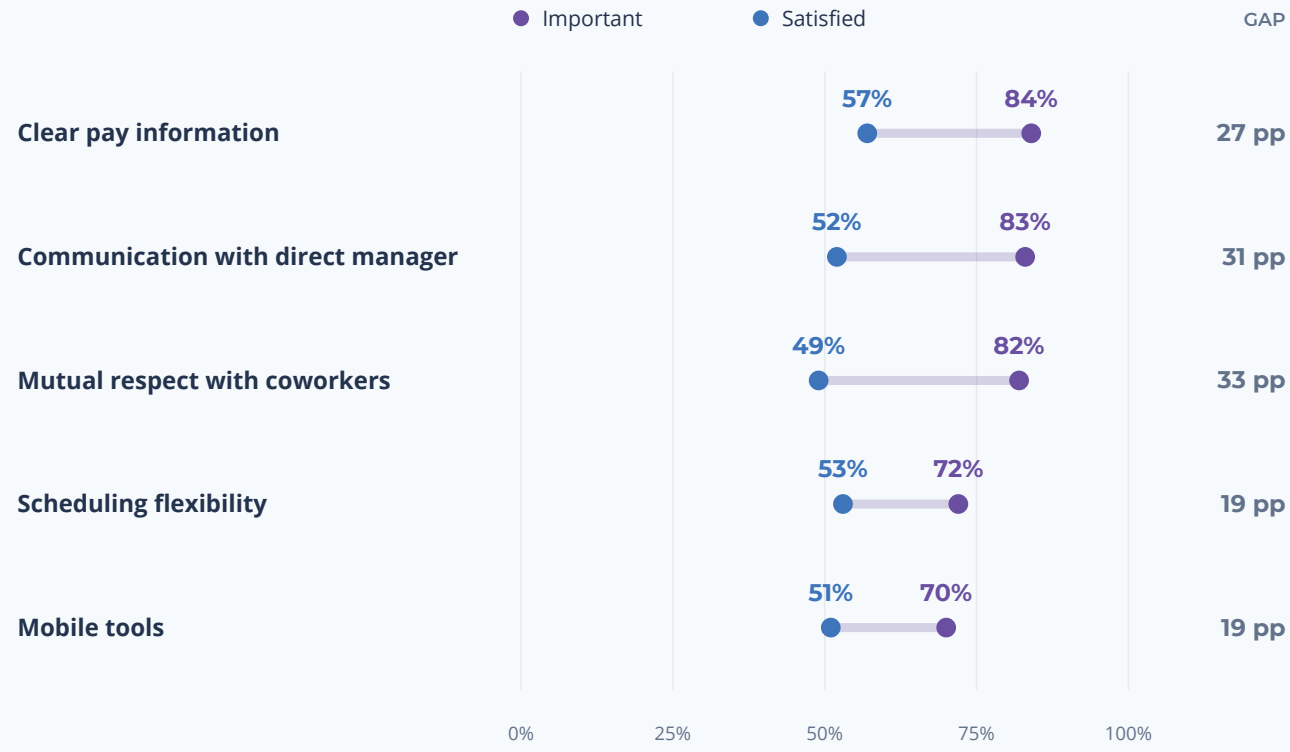
What workers say about that communication

83% of frontline workers say open and honest communication with their direct manager is important. 52% are satisfied with what they get *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. That is a 31 point gap.

Mutual respect with coworkers runs the same way. 82% say it matters deeply. 49% are satisfied. A 33 point gap.

When asked to rate the importance of job attributes and their satisfaction with each, frontline workers said:

Figure 17: Importance compared with satisfaction, frontline workers



Source: DailyPay and Workday, 2026 (n=2,208 hourly workers)

Close the Respect gap.

82%

say mutual respect with coworkers is important.

49%

are satisfied.

Source: Aptitude Research, 2026



The pattern across worker data is consistent. Every job attribute tested shows a double digit gap between how important it is to frontline workers and how satisfied they are with what they receive, and the largest gaps sit in things employers control without raising pay *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

The digital divide

86% of frontline workers say the right digital tools make their lives easier. 51% are satisfied with the technology they get. 13% have no access at all to a digital tool for pay, scheduling, recognition, or training *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

The requests are practical. 46% want mobile access to pay stubs and tax forms. 35% want to request time off digitally. 27% want to see their schedule.

These capabilities are common for corporate employees and far less available to frontline workers.

Workers see clear benefits. 36% of workers say digital tools make them more productive. 37% say tools improve work flexibility. 34% say tools improve communication with managers. 23% say the right tools make them more likely to stay.

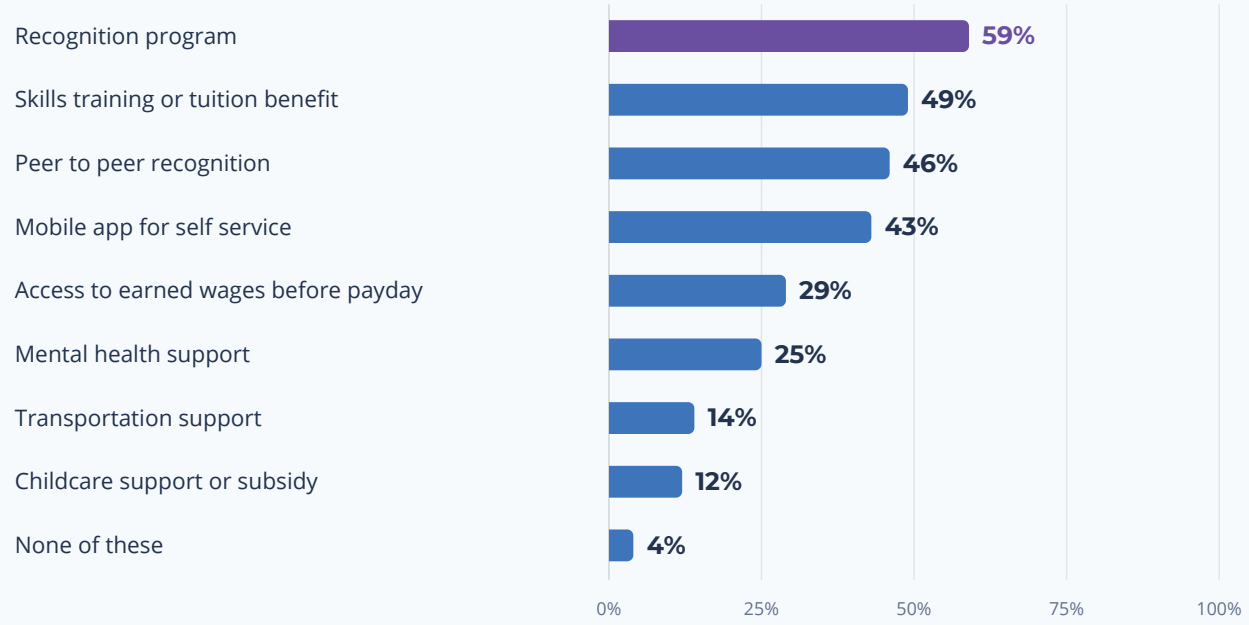


What organizations offer

Recognition leads. 59% of employers offer a recognition program, 46% peer to peer recognition *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. 49% offer skills training or tuition. 43% offer a mobile self service app. 29% list earned wage access. 25% offer mental health support. Transportation sits at 14%. Childcare at 12%.

When asked which programs they offer frontline employees, employers said:

Figure 18: Programs offered to frontline employees (select all that apply)



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Childcare and transportation are the two benefits that determine whether a worker can physically take a shift. They are also the two least offered. These benefits are an opportunity for employers looking to differentiate beyond wages.

Why the manager is the engagement strategy

Every engagement finding in this chapter runs through the frontline manager. Managers are the primary communication channel, the main source of recognition, and the reason workers cite most often for leaving. 25% of frontline workers name coaching or mentorship from their manager as what motivates their best work *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

Managers are hired to build culture but, as Chapter 7 shows, are typically evaluated on financial results. Chapter 8 shows how much of their week goes to building schedules.

Key strategies for engagement

- **Match the channel to the workforce.** If half the frontline has no login, email is not a channel
- Treat the first 30 days as the highest risk period in the employment lifecycle
- Give managers tools that remove communication work rather than adding an inbox
- Start with the three tools workers actually asked for: pay stubs, time off, schedule

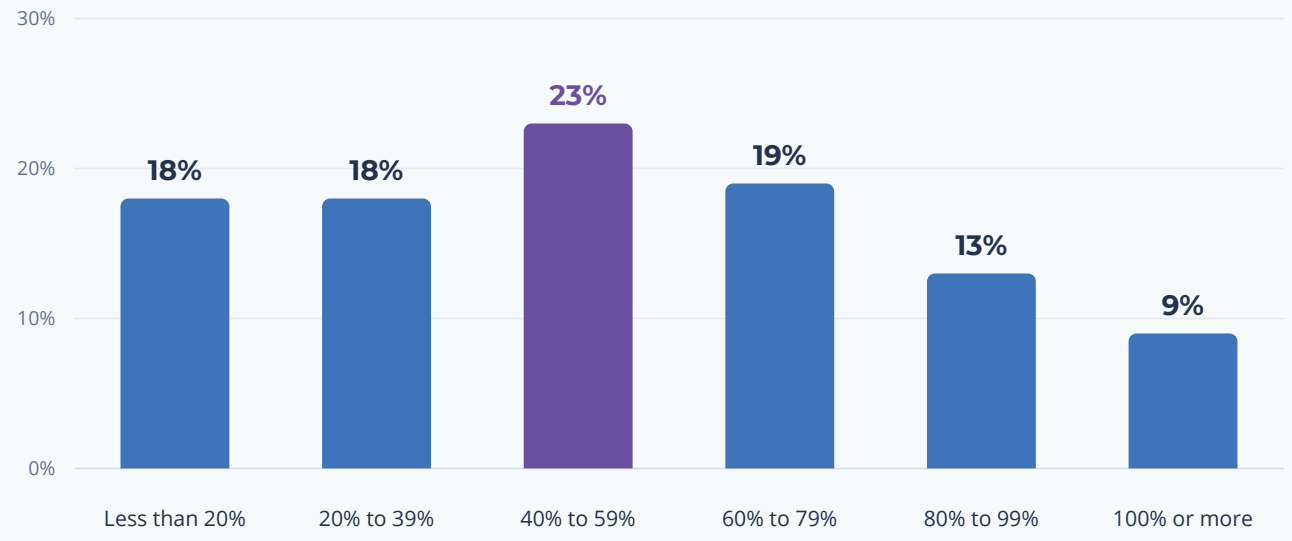
CHAPTER 5: RETENTION



41% of employers report annual frontline turnover above 60%. 22% report above 80%. 9% report above 100% *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked to estimate their annual frontline turnover rate, employers said:

Figure 19: Annual frontline turnover rate

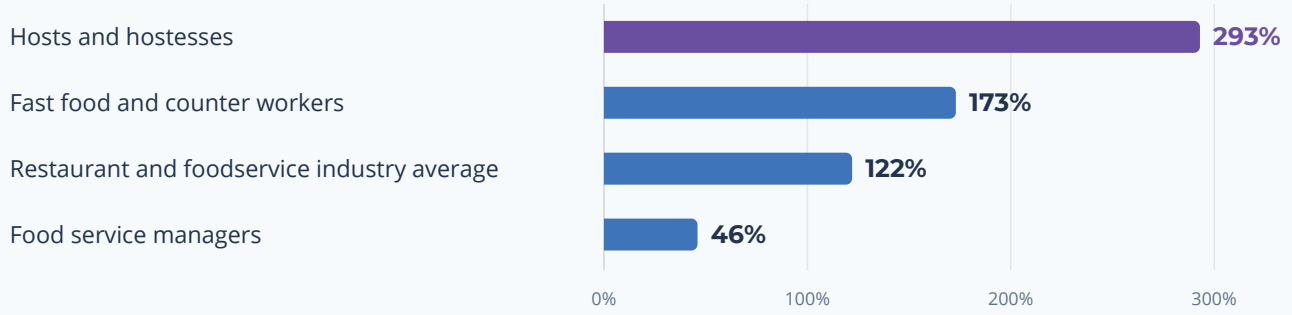


Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Industry benchmarks run higher. Lightcast put 2025 restaurant and foodservice turnover at 122% using BLS data. Fast food and counter workers turned over at 173%. Hosts reached 293%. Food service managers, by contrast, turned over at 46% *(National Restaurant Association, 2026)*.

Restaurant and foodservice turnover by role, 2025:

Figure 20: Annual turnover by restaurant role



Source: Lightcast analysis of BLS data, published by the National Restaurant Association, 2026

Understanding frontline turnover

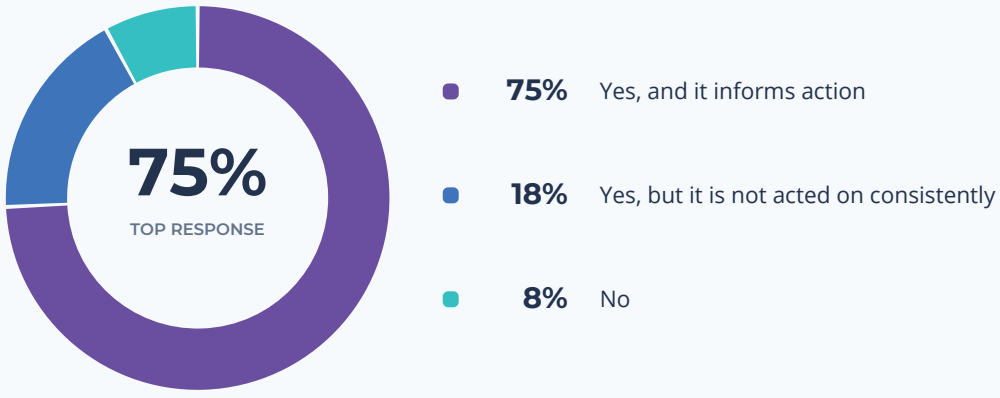
Not all frontline turnover is negative. Frontline industries employ a high share of students and part year workers, and every part year employee produces a separation by definition. Upward mobility also counts as turnover. In frontline industries a promotion often means moving to a different brand or location. It is recorded as turnover. A more useful measure is how much turnover occurs before an employee becomes net positive, at roughly 32 days. Early exits carry the highest cost.

What organizations are doing

Measurement is in place. 75% of employers track frontline turnover by site and say it informs action *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. 18% track it and do not act consistently. 8% do not track it by site.

When asked whether they track and report frontline turnover by location, employers said:

Figure 21: Tracking frontline turnover by site



Reported percentages total 101%.

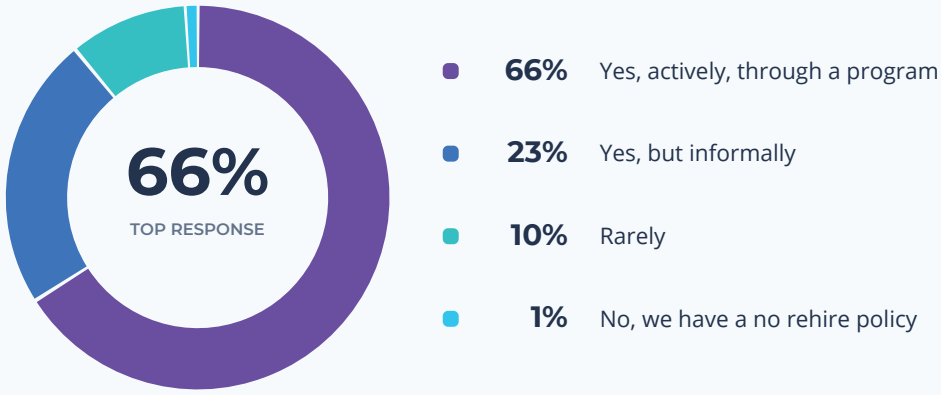
Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Exit data is in place. 64% conduct exit interviews with every departing frontline employee. 32% with some. 5% with none.

Rehiring is a strength. 66% run an active rehire program. 23% do it informally. 1% have a no rehire policy. Former employees are the fastest, cheapest hires available and they clear the net positive line faster than anyone.

When asked whether they rehire former frontline employees, employers said:

Figure 22: Rehiring former frontline employees



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

The gap is between measurement and incentives. 93% of employers track turnover by site. 20% tie any part of manager pay to retention.

Key strategies for retention

- **Measure first month turnover separately from annual turnover.** They are different problems
- Turn site level turnover data into site level action with a named owner
- Build the rehire pipeline deliberately
- Put retention on the manager scorecard

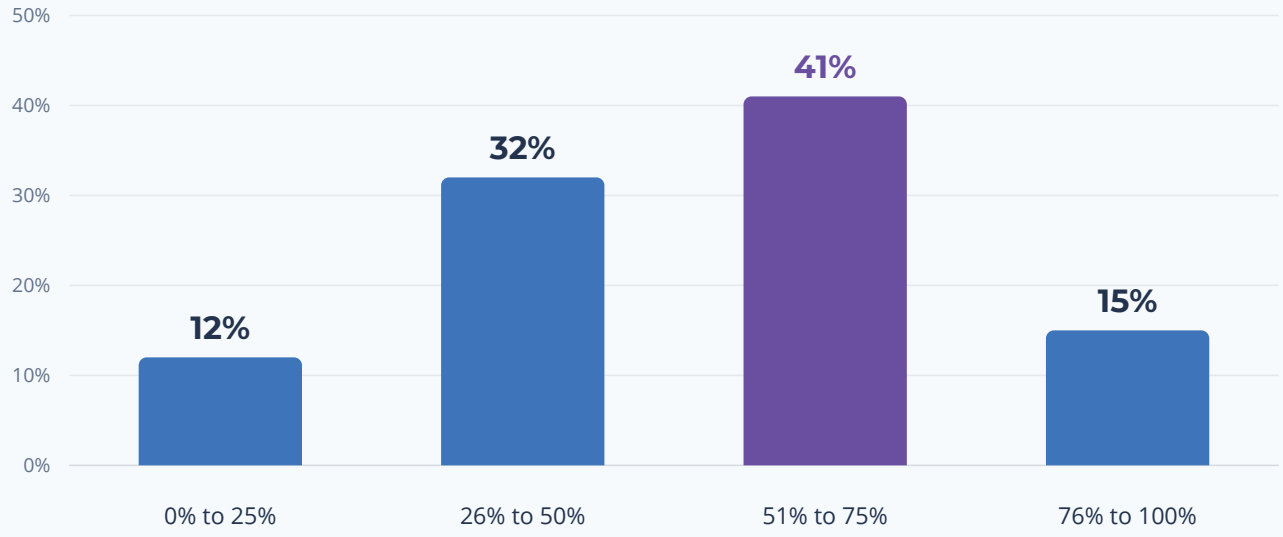
CHAPTER 6: PROMOTION AND MOBILITY



56% of organizations fill more than half of their frontline manager roles from within. 15% fill more than three quarters internally. Only 12% fill a quarter or less *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked what share of frontline people manager roles were filled by internal promotion in the last 12 months, employers said:

Figure 23: Frontline manager roles filled through internal promotion



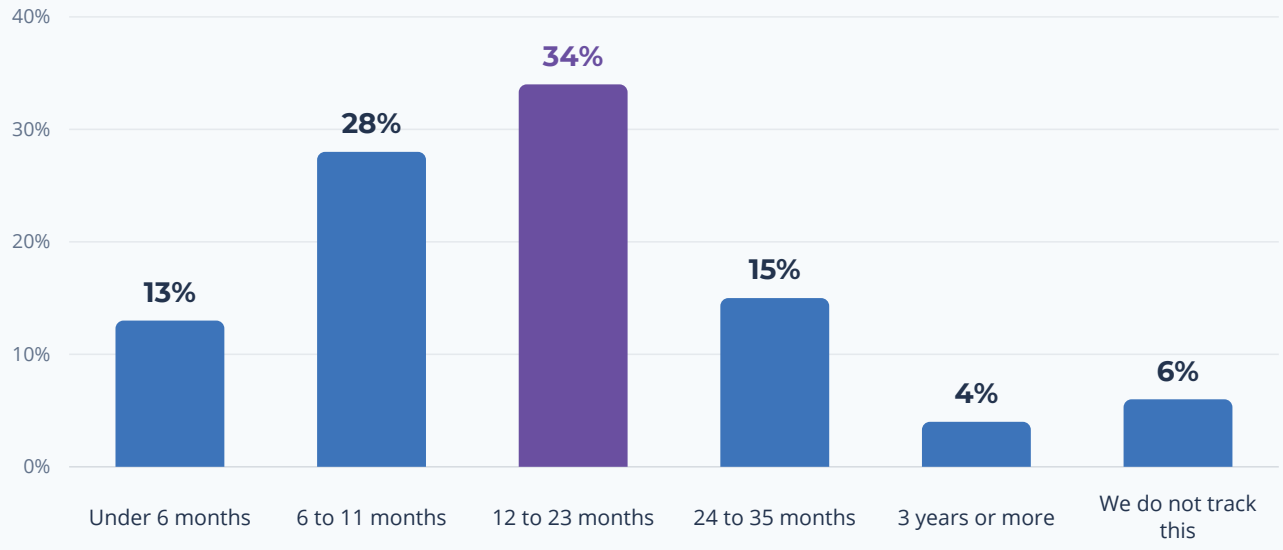
Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Time to promotion

41% of organizations say a frontline employee reaches a first promotion within 12 months. 13% say under six months. 34% say 12 to 23 months. 6% do not track it.

When asked how long a frontline employee typically works before a first promotion, employers said:

Figure 24: Time to first promotion



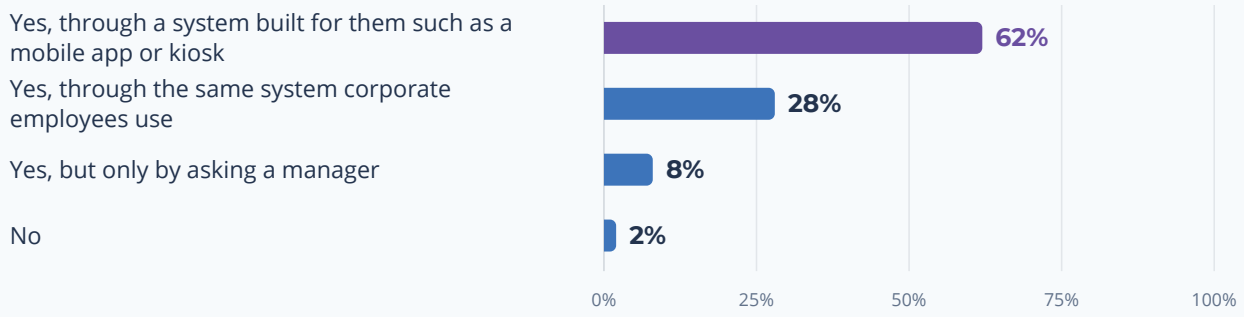
Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Visibility is largely solved

62% of employers give frontline workers a system built for them, a mobile app or kiosk, to see and apply to internal openings *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. This is one of the figures most likely to run ahead of the broader frontline market, given the sample composition described in the methodology. 28% use the corporate system. 8% make workers ask a manager. 2% offer nothing.

When asked whether frontline employees can see and apply to internal openings, employers said:

Figure 25: Frontline access to internal job openings



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

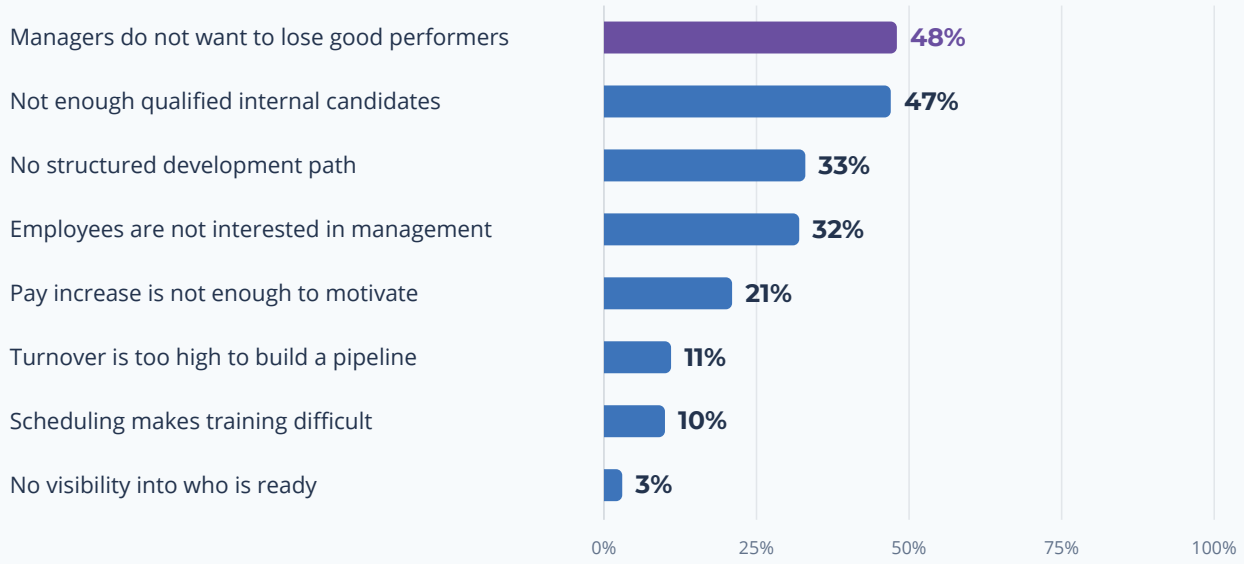
The frontline worker who cannot see the job board was a defining problem in 2020. For most organizations it is no longer the constraint.

The constraint is the manager

48% of employers name managers who do not want to lose good performers as a top barrier to promoting frontline employees *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. Not enough qualified internal candidates follows at 47%. No structured development path at 33%. Employees are not interested at 32%.

When asked about the biggest barriers to promoting frontline employees into management, employers said:

Figure 26: Barriers to promoting frontline employees into management (select all that apply)



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

aptitude research

Only 3% say they lack visibility into who is ready. The challenge is less about systems and more about incentives.

Talent hoarding is rational under the incentives most organizations set. A manager paid on revenue and labor cost loses twice when a strong performer is promoted away. 20% of organizations tie manager pay to retention. 11% tie it to engagement.

Worker interest in management

32% of employers say frontline workers do not want management roles. 21% say the pay increase is not enough to motivate them. Those may be the same answer.

Worker data suggests a third reading. 28% of frontline workers hold more than one job and 45% rank their schedule among the top three reasons they took the one they have *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. A management role that trades schedule control for a modest raise may not appeal to someone working two jobs.

Redesigning supervisor roles to preserve schedule flexibility may increase interest in management.



28%

of frontline workers hold more than one job.

Key strategies for mobility

- Reward managers for the people they develop and export, not only the ones they keep
- Build a structured path from hourly to supervisor with named milestones
- Make readiness visible with skills data instead of manager nomination
- Design the supervisor role so it does not cost a worker their schedule

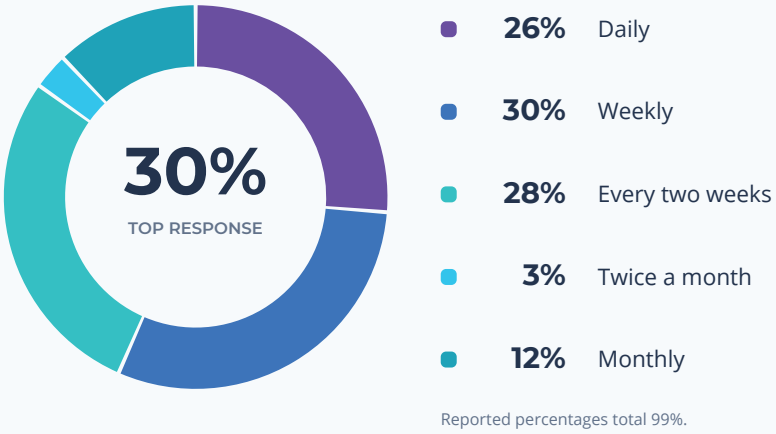
CHAPTER 7: PAY



57% of employers pay frontline workers weekly or daily. 26% pay daily *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. Pay practices have changed quickly, though manager incentives have not kept pace.

When asked how frequently frontline employees are paid, employers said:

Figure 27: Frontline pay frequency



Reported percentages total 99%.

Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

63% of employers offer access to earned wages before payday. 14% are considering it. 19% have no plans *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

Workers do not report the same access

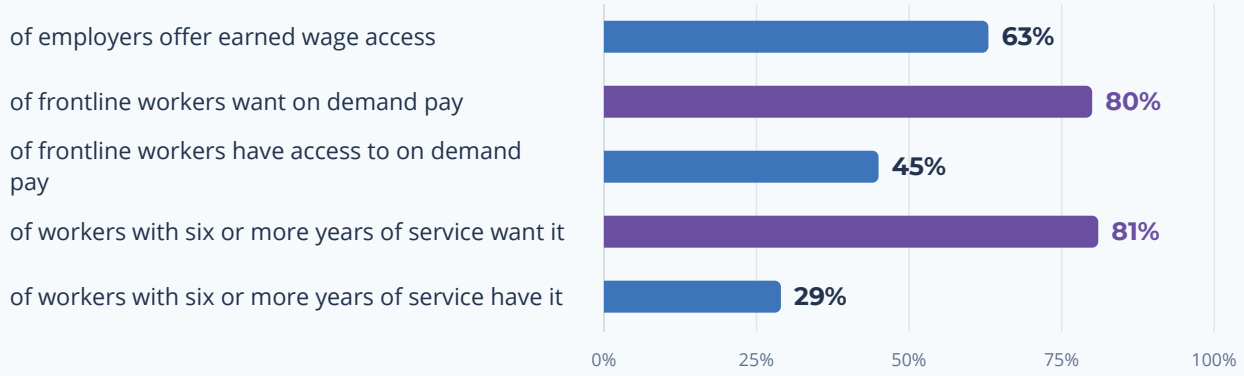
80% of frontline workers want on demand pay. 55% say they have none *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

Set that against the 63% of employers who say they offer it. Some of the difference reflects the two samples. It also suggests that a benefit that sits in the HR system but is not communicated, not enabled at every site, or not extended to every worker classification does not reach workers.

This is the clearest expectation gap in the study, and employers can verify it by reviewing enrollment rates. The gap is larger among tenured workers. Among workers with six or more years of service, 81% want on demand pay and 29% have it. Many experienced workers are not accessing a benefit they want.

Earned wage access, employer provision compared with worker access:

Figure 28: Earned wage access: what employers offer and what workers have



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026; DailyPay and Workday, 2026

Pay remains the strongest driver of movement. 80% of hourly workers would change jobs for better pay *(Aptitude Research hourly worker survey, 2026)*. Pay access does not replace a competitive rate, but it differentiates employers who are already at market.

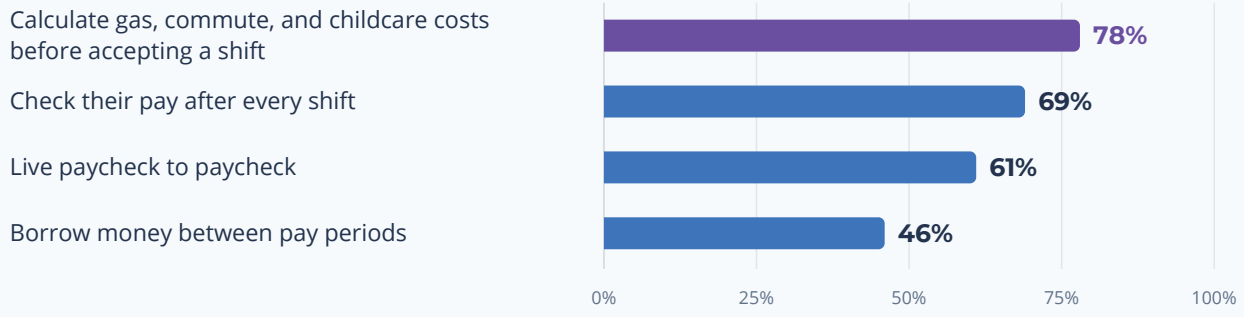
Earned wage access also supports recruiting. 77% of frontline workers say earned wage access would sway their decision between two competing offers *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*. Among those who would use it, 42% say it helps with expenses, 40% say it reduces financial stress, and 32% say controlling when they get paid would make them more motivated at work.

Why pay timing matters this much

61% of frontline workers live paycheck to paycheck. 46% borrow money between pay periods. 76% set a budget and stick to it. 69% check their pay after every shift *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

How frontline workers manage their money:

Figure 29: Frontline worker financial behaviors



Source: DailyPay and Workday, 2026

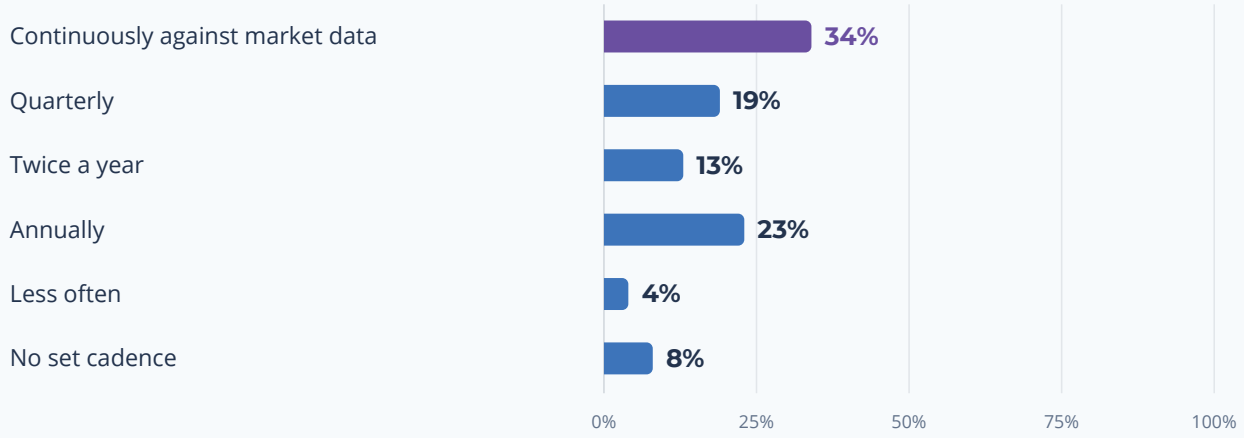
Frequent pay checks reflect how closely frontline workers manage their earnings. 78% price out gas, commute, and childcare before deciding whether to accept a shift. When the math does not work, workers may decline the shift.

How pay gets reviewed

34% of organizations review frontline base pay continuously against market data. 19% review quarterly, 13% twice a year, 23% annually. 8% have no cadence.

When asked how often they review frontline base pay, employers said:

Figure 30: Frontline base pay review cadence



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

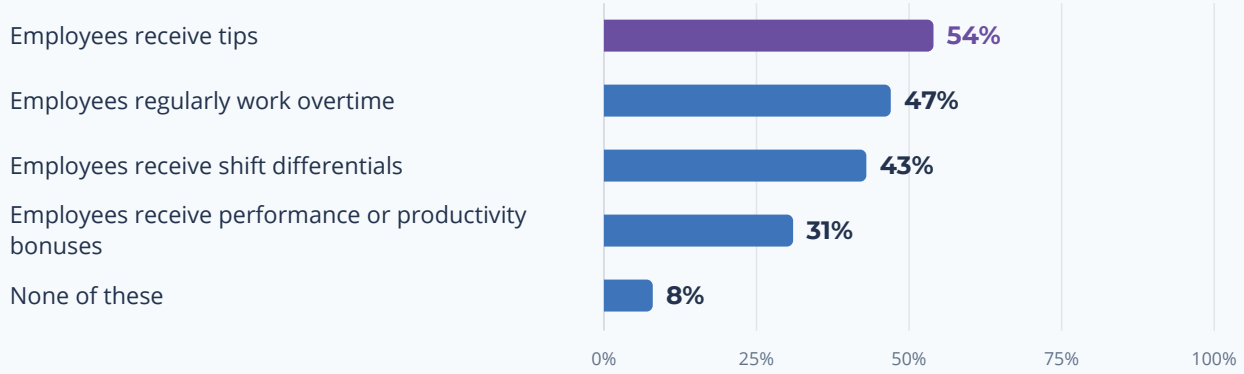
Continuous review at 34% is a real break from the annual merit cycle. Frontline wages are highly visible, which makes regular market review important.

What makes up frontline pay

54% of employers say frontline employees receive tips *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. 47% say employees regularly work overtime. 43% pay shift differentials. 31% pay performance or productivity bonuses.

When asked which pay components apply to their frontline workforce, employers said:

Figure 31: Frontline pay components (select all that apply)



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

That puts the new federal tax treatment in front of most frontline employers. 70% say payroll is fully able to identify and report qualified tips and the qualified overtime premium for tax years 2025 through 2028. 15% are partially able. 6% say no or do not know.

The 21% who are not fully ready have a reporting problem landing on the 2026 W-2. Systems that lump all overtime together have to separate the FLSA required portion from everything else.

The pay stack is changing what a frontline job is worth.]Stack the pieces and the competitive picture changes. Solid base pay, a tip pool, schedule control, access to earned wages before payday, and benefits now compete against a higher advertised rate with none of those. Employers who cannot offer tips should know what they are competing against. Those who can should post total earnings rather than the base rate.

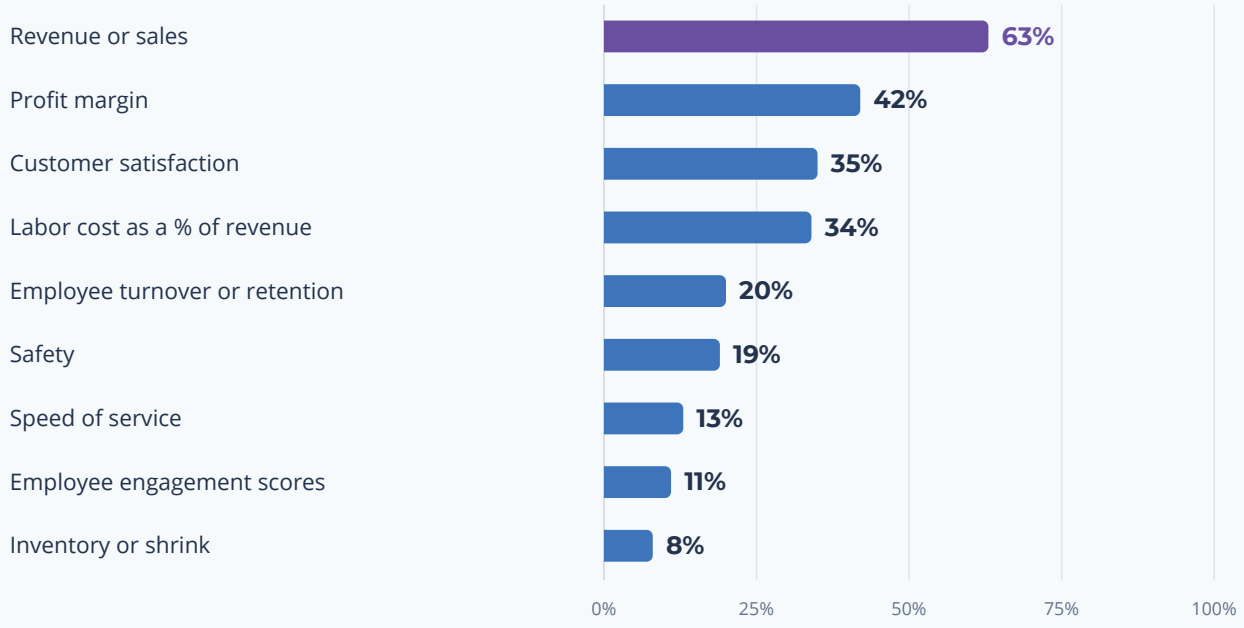
Manager incentives focus on financial results

79% of organizations tie part of frontline manager pay to the performance of their store or site *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. The measures are heavily financial. Revenue or sales at 63%. Profit margin at 42%. Customer satisfaction at 35%. Labor cost at 34%.

Employee turnover or retention: 20%. Safety: 19%. Engagement scores: 11%.

When asked which performance measures determine frontline manager variable pay, employers said:

Figure 32: Measures that determine frontline manager variable pay (select all that apply)

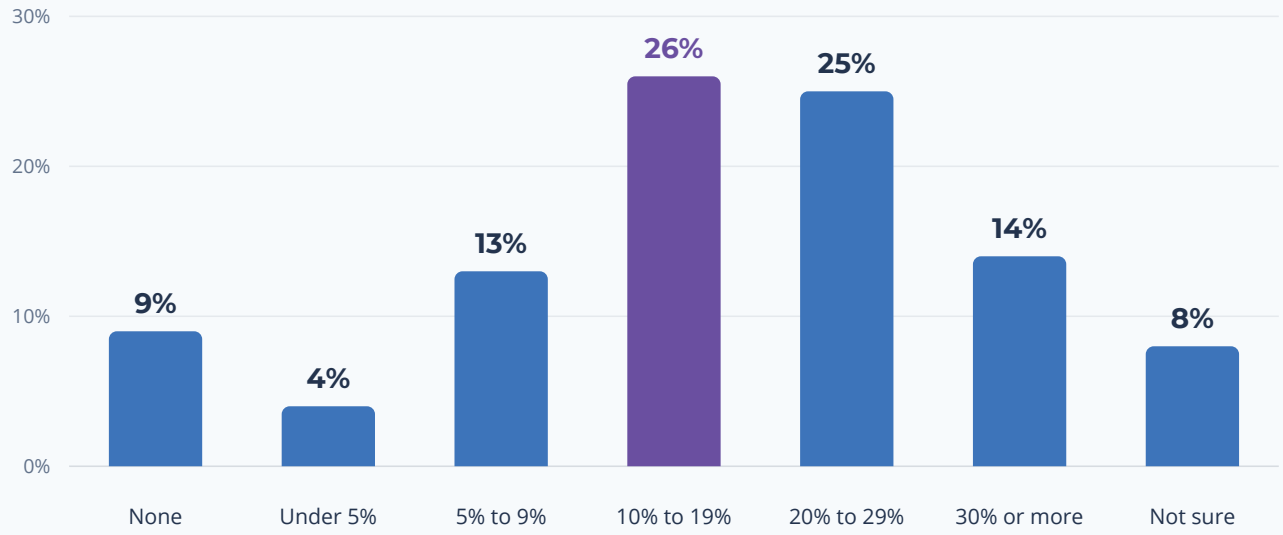


Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

40% of organizations put 20% or more of a frontline manager's total pay at risk.
26% put 10 to 19% at risk.

When asked what share of a frontline manager total annual compensation is variable, employers said:

Figure 33: Variable share of frontline manager compensation



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

A meaningful share of manager pay is tied to revenue and labor cost, while little is tied to retention. This may help explain why managers are reluctant to release strong performers for promotion and why four in ten organizations report turnover above 60%.

Key strategies for pay

- **Check the enrollment rate on earned wage access.** Offering it and having it are different numbers
- Publish pay clarity: deductions, rates, and how a role compares to the market
- Add retention, internal promotion, and engagement to the manager scorecard with real weight
- Treat pay access and pay frequency as recruiting levers, because candidates already do
- Audit payroll now for the tips and overtime reporting arriving on the 2026 W-2

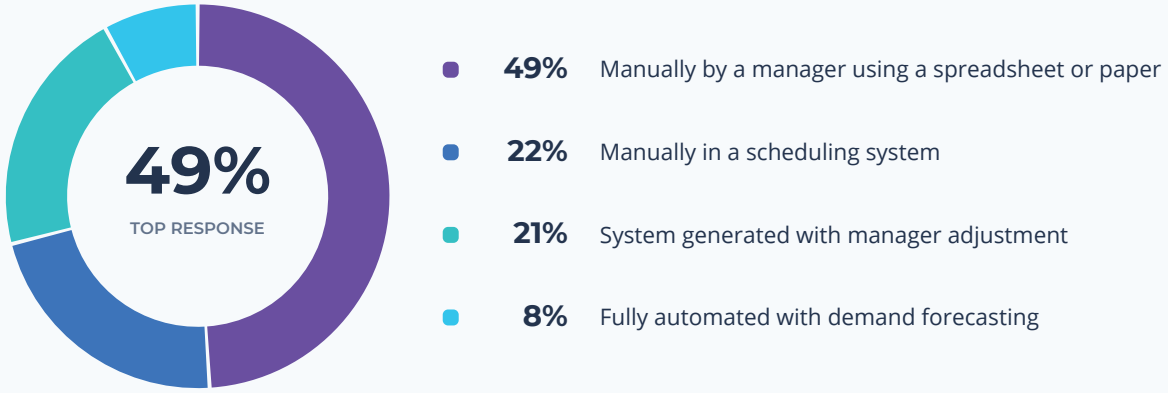
CHAPTER 8:
SHIFT SCHEDULING



49% of employers build frontline schedules on a spreadsheet or on paper. Another 22% build them manually inside a system. 21% use system generated schedules with manager adjustment. 8% are fully automated with demand forecasting *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked how frontline schedules are created, employers said:

Figure 34: How frontline schedules are built



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

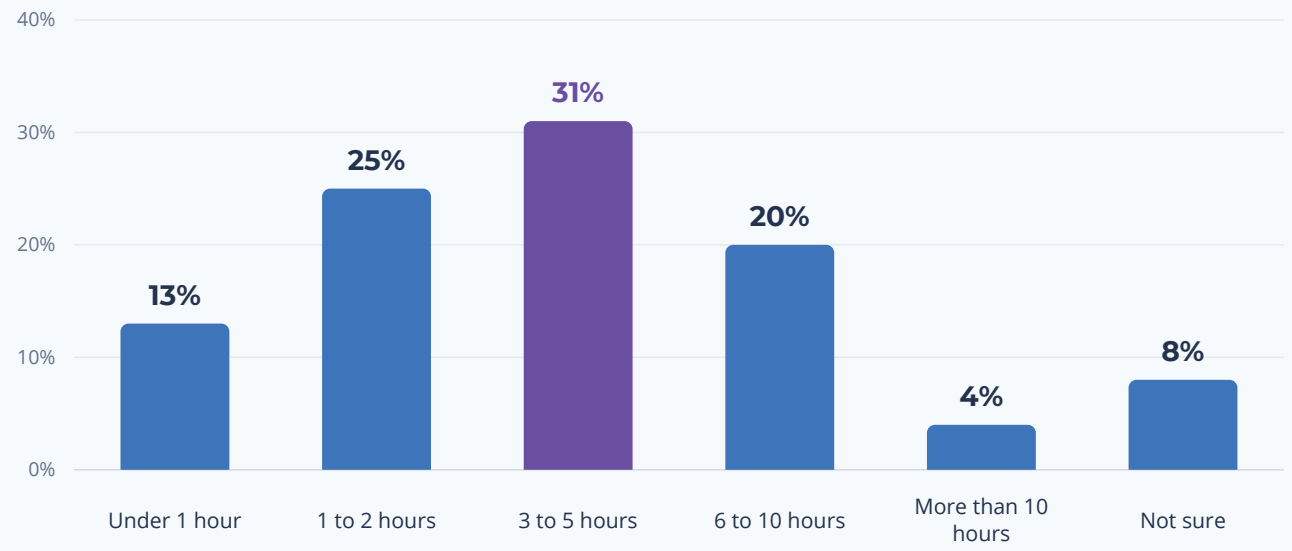
Seven in ten frontline schedules are built manually. Scheduling is the least modernized part of frontline work and one of the largest opportunities in this report.

What manual scheduling costs

55% of organizations say a frontline manager spends three or more hours a week building and adjusting schedules. 24% say six or more. 4% say more than ten *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked how much time a frontline manager spends building and adjusting schedules in a typical week, employers said:

Figure 35: Manager time spent on scheduling each week

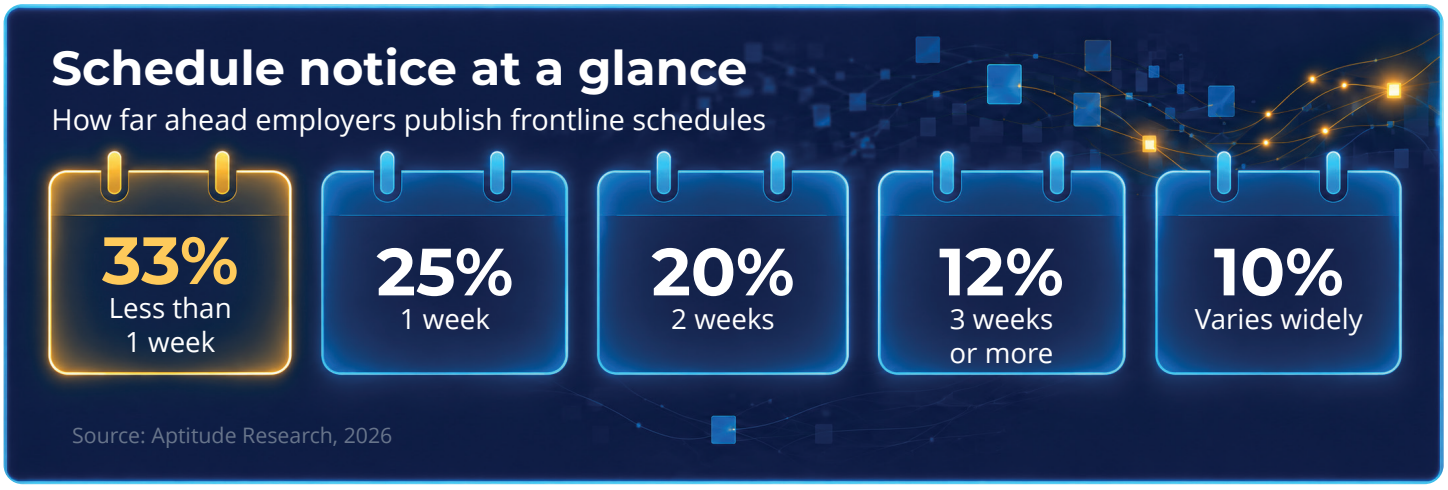


Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

That is time not spent coaching, training, hiring, or serving customers, in a job where the top ranked attribute for a new manager is building team culture, and where 25% of workers name manager mentorship as what motivates their best work.

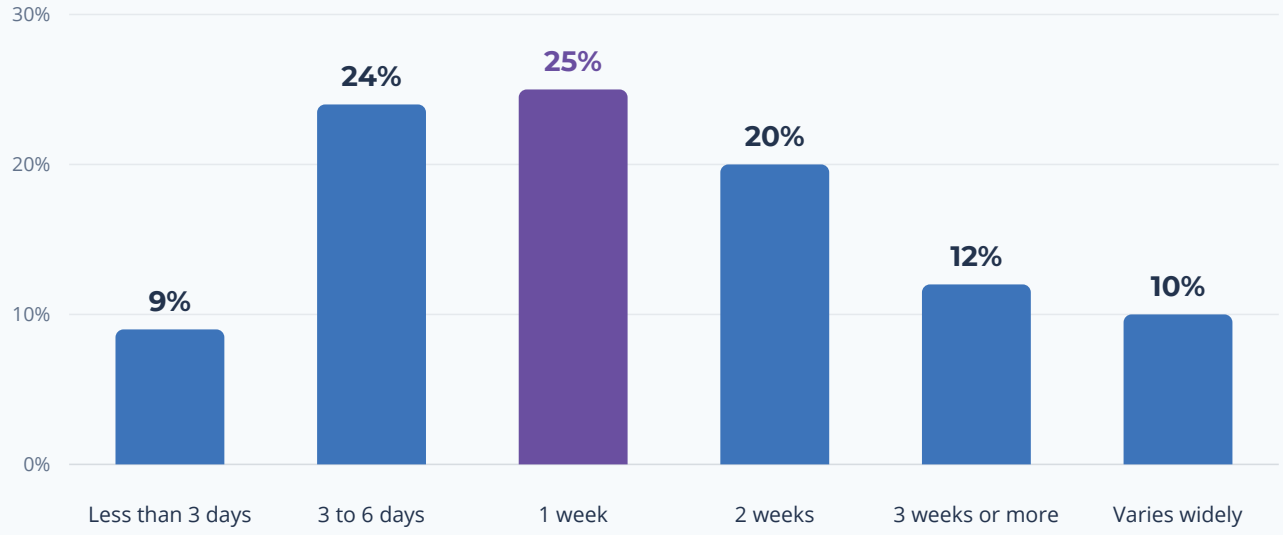
Schedule notice and changes

33% of employers publish frontline schedules less than a week out. 25% publish one week out. 20% publish two weeks. 12% publish three weeks or more. 10% say it varies widely *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.



When asked how far in advance frontline schedules are published, employers said:

Figure 36: Schedule notice



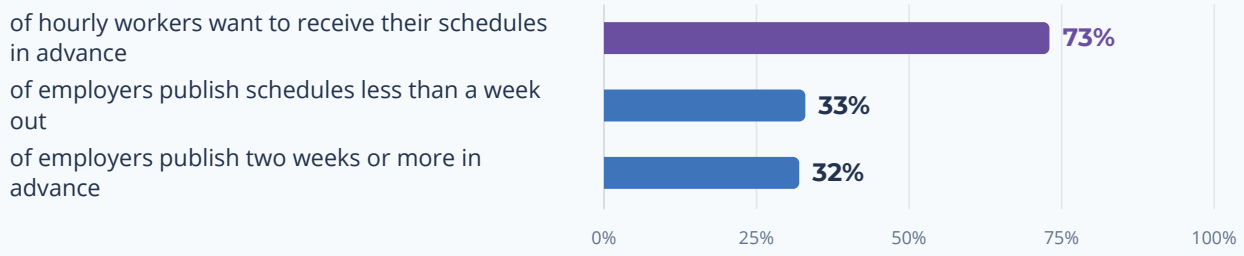
Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Schedules also change after publication. 58% of employers say 15% or more of published shifts change. 22% say a quarter or more change.

Frontline workers build childcare, transportation, school, and second jobs around these schedules. Short notice and frequent changes make that planning difficult. 73% of hourly workers want to receive their schedules in advance *(Aptitude Research hourly worker survey, 2026)*, while one in three employers publishes less than a week out.

Comparing what workers want with what employers provide:

Figure 37: Schedule notice: worker expectation compared with employer practice



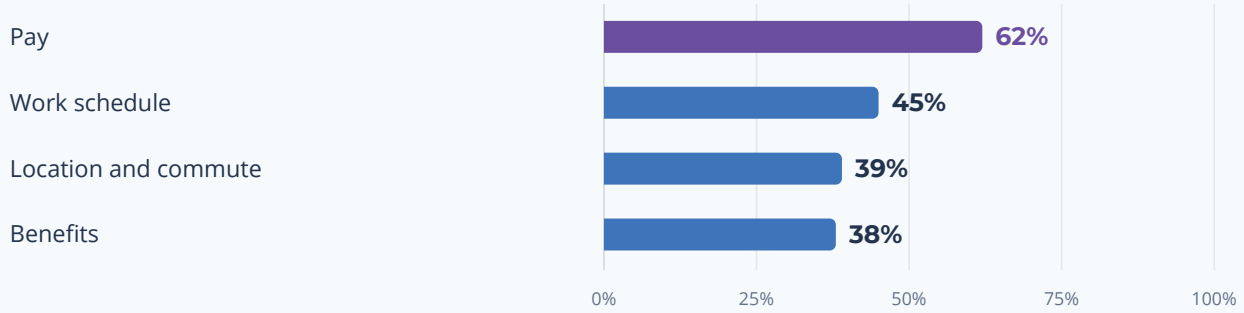
Source: Aptitude Research, Hourly Worker Survey, 2026

What schedule control is worth to workers

45% of frontline workers rank their work schedule among the top three reasons they accepted their current job. Only pay ranks higher at 62%. Location and commute follow at 39%, benefits at 38% *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

When asked for the top three reasons they accepted their current job, frontline workers said:

Figure 38: Top reasons frontline workers accepted their current job

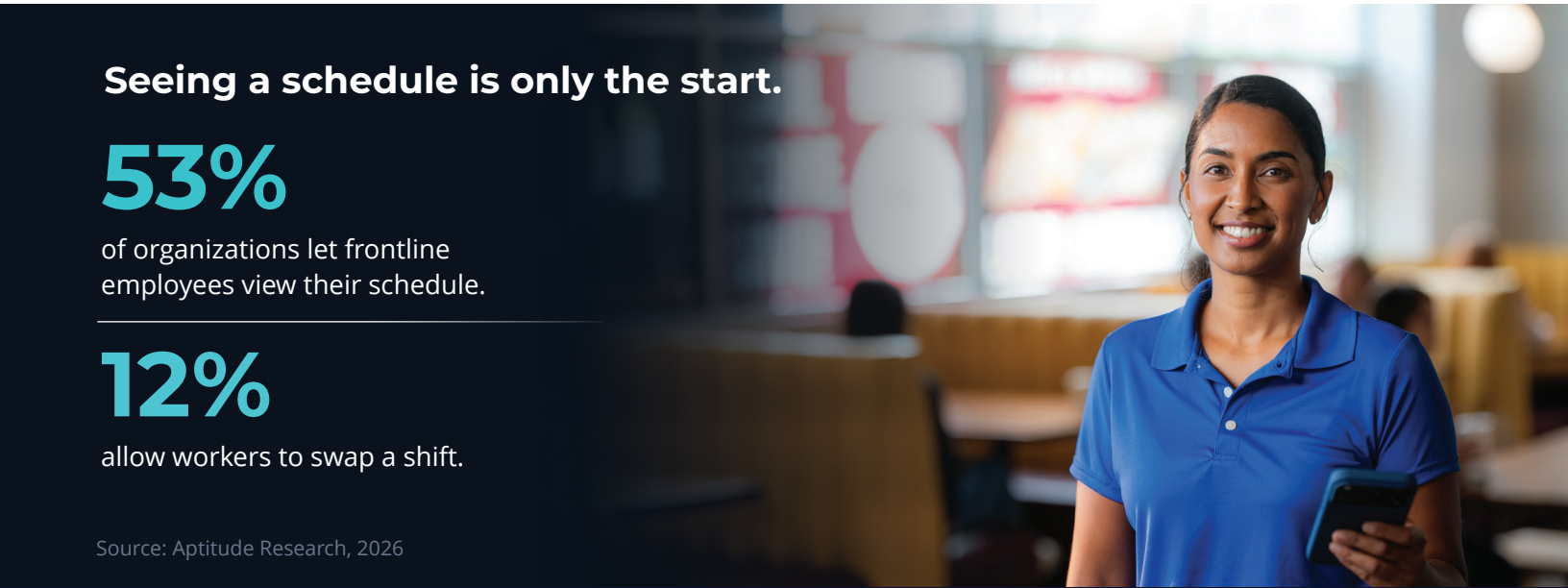


Source: DailyPay and Workday, 2026 (n=2,208 hourly workers)

It holds after the hire. 43% say schedule flexibility for work life balance makes them want to do their best work. Competitive pay scores 49%. Flexibility influences both recruiting and motivation.

Limited worker self service

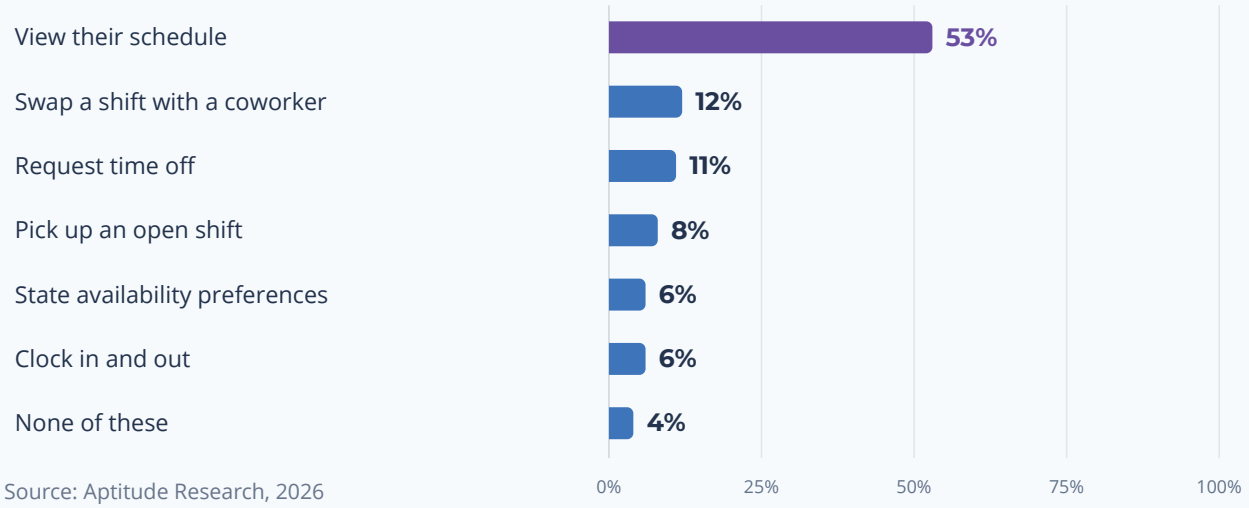
53% of organizations let frontline employees view their schedule in a system. Other self service options are far less common. 12% allow a shift swap. 11% allow a time off request. 8% allow picking up an open shift. 6% allow stating availability. 6% allow clocking in and out *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

When asked what frontline employees can do through a system rather than by asking a manager, employers said:

Figure 39: Frontline scheduling self service (select all that apply)



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

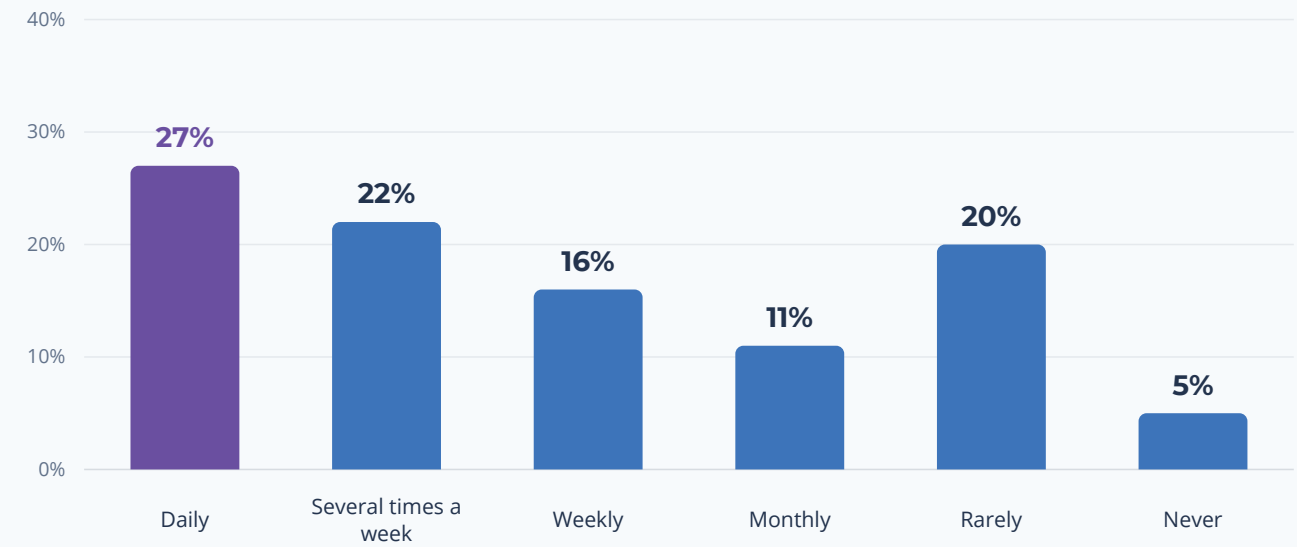
Most changes still route through a manager. Every swap, every pickup, and every time off request routes back through the manager who is already spending six hours a week on the schedule.

The cost shows up as unfilled shifts

27% of organizations have shifts go unfilled daily. 22% several times a week. 16% weekly. 65% at least weekly. 5% never *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*.

When asked how often they have shifts that go unfilled, employers said:

Figure 40: Frequency of unfilled shifts



Source: Aptitude Research, 2026

Operators have quantified the cost. Among restaurant operators who were short staffed, 79% said it significantly limited their ability to grow. 60% reported higher employee stress and turnover. 59% reported higher overtime costs. 50% reported lower service quality and customer satisfaction. 48% lost sales. Nearly half could not operate at full capacity and 43% postponed expansion *(National Restaurant Association, 2026)*.

One operator put the cost of missing a single frontline worker at $3,000 to $5,000 over three months. Another estimated that being down a server cut sales 7 to 8% per meal period.

Understaffing can become a cycle. Short shifts create overtime and stress, which create turnover, which create more short shifts.

There is a worker side to those unfilled shifts. When 78% of the workforce calculates gas, transit, and childcare against expected earnings before accepting extra work, some unfilled shifts reflect the cost of working the shift rather than an unwilling employee. Employers who show available earnings, allow a swap from a phone, and give access to pay already earned are changing the inputs to that calculation.

Scheduling technology adoption

Scheduling software is widely adopted. The gap is in what it does. In many organizations, software digitizes a manual process. The manager still builds the schedule and the employee still asks permission to change it.

The largest opportunity is moving from manual entry in a system to schedules generated from demand. Few organizations have made that shift, and it is where the greatest savings in manager time and unfilled shifts are likely to be found.

Key strategies for scheduling

- Move managers from building schedules to reviewing them
- Let workers swap and pick up shifts without a manager in the middle
- Publish two weeks out and hold it
- Treat schedule control as compensation, because workers already do
- Track shift fill rate as an operating metric next to sales and labor cost

CHAPTER 9: WHERE TO ACT



Every finding in this report maps to a decision. Not every decision is worth making now. The framework below sorts the strategies by impact and effort so leaders can sequence them.

Figure 41: Impact and effort matrix

Quick wins

High impact, low effort

- verify earned wage access enrollment
- respond to every applicant
- enable shift swap and open shift pickup
- publish pay clarity
- shorten applications
- publish schedules two weeks out
- audit tips and overtime reporting

Strategic bets

High impact, high effort

- demand based scheduling
- manager scorecards tied to retention
- structured hourly to supervisor paths
- AI for pay, HR, and shift questions

Foundations

Necessary, ongoing

- mobile communication
- pay frequency and access
- site level turnover action
- rehire pipelines

Quick wins: high impact, low effort

- **Verify earned wage access enrollment.** 63% of employers offer it and 55% of workers say they have no access
- **Respond to every applicant.** The tooling exists in most stacks already. Only 22% of employers reach 90% of applicants
- **Turn on shift swap and open shift pickup.** Only 12% of organizations allow it today
- Publish pay clarity using data payroll already holds: deductions, rates, and how a role compares to the market
- **Get the application under 15 minutes.** 22% still run over 30
- **Publish schedules two weeks out.** 33% publish less than a week out
- **Audit payroll for tips and overtime reporting.** 21% are not fully ready

Strategic bets: high impact, high effort

- **Move from manual to system generated scheduling with demand forecasting.** Only 8% have done it
- **Rebuild the manager scorecard around retention and internal promotion.** Only 20% include retention today
- **Build a structured development path from hourly to supervisor.** One third say they have none
- **Extend AI into the parts of the job workers say confuse them:** pay, benefits, HR questions, and open shifts

Conclusion

In 2020, Aptitude Research described the frontline as the forgotten workforce. In 2026, it receives far more attention. Frontline hiring has an owner, a budget, and a technology stack. Candidates apply on their phones in minutes. AI screens, sources, and schedules. Workers can see their schedules and see open jobs. Pay moves faster than it ever has.

Progress has been slower in areas that depend on process and priorities. A little more than one in five employers responds to nearly all of its applicants. One in eight lets a worker swap a shift. One in five pays a manager anything for keeping a team together *(Aptitude Research, 2026)*. And half of frontline workers say nothing about their workplace has changed in five years *(DailyPay and Workday, 2026)*.

The labor market is giving frontline employers a window right now. Quits are at a post pandemic low. Applicant flow is strong. Operators report being the pickiest they have been in a decade. Deaths outnumber births in 2030. More than four million Americans a year are aging out of the workforce. The population of younger workers who have traditionally filled frontline roles is shrinking.

Workers have identified where to start. They want control over their time, clarity about their money, and tools as simple as the ones they use everywhere else. Half of them do not expect to get any of it. That creates a real opportunity for employers.

Organizations that use this period to improve scheduling, communication, and manager incentives will be better positioned to compete for frontline talent in the years ahead.







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APPENDIX

The Frontline Workforce Is Not One Workforce

Frontline workers share many of the same challenges, but employment status and skill requirements shape what they value most. The differences are particularly visible in scheduling, retention, development, and hiring.

Full-Time vs. Part-Time Frontline Workers

Measure	Full-Time	Part-Time
Rank pay among top reasons for accepting a job	68%	56%
Rank work schedule among top reasons	39%	58%
Say schedule flexibility motivates their best work	38%	52%
Hold more than one job	18%	43%
Say career growth/promotion is important	61%	42%

WHAT STANDS OUT

Part-time workers place significantly more value on schedule flexibility and control, while full-time workers place greater emphasis on stability, pay, and career growth. This suggests employers should not design one employee value proposition for the entire frontline workforce.

APPENDIX / CONTINUED

Skilled vs. Non-Skilled Frontline Roles

57% of employers in the study say most of their frontline roles require a certification, license, or trade qualification.

Measure	Skilled / Certified	Non-Skilled
Competition for talent is a top hiring challenge	72%	59%
Quality of hire is a top hiring challenge	34%	20%
Speed of hiring is a top hiring challenge	39%	52%
Fill frontline roles within 14 days	49%	70%
Fill most manager roles through internal promotion	64%	49%
Offer skills training or tuition support	58%	41%
Report annual frontline turnover above 60%	31%	50%

WHAT STANDS OUT

Skilled frontline employers face a talent scarcity and retention challenge. Non-skilled employers face a speed and turnover challenge. The strategy changes accordingly: skilled employers benefit most from development, mobility, and retention, while high-volume employers need to remove friction from hiring and make it easier for workers to stay.

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Tim Sackett
Founder, HRU



Madeline Laurano
Founder, Aptitude Research

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Hosted by Madeline Laurano, founder of Aptitude Research, and Tim Sackett, founder of HRU, talent acquisition leader and author, the show brings together real leaders and real workers to talk about how organizations attract, hire, and keep their frontline workforce.

Each episode looks at what is changing on the ground, including hiring speed, candidate experience, scheduling, retention, and the growing role of AI.

Presented by Workday Paradox, The Frontlines offers a practical view for anyone responsible for the workforce that keeps business running.

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