

The Unseen Workforce: A Data-Driven Framework for Engaging Non-Desk Employees and Unlocking Profitability

1. Executive Summary

The industrial and manufacturing sectors are built upon the efforts of the non-desk workforce, a group comprising nearly 80% of the global labor pool who operate as the true engine of the economy.¹ Yet, this essential majority remains largely disconnected from the strategic core of the businesses they power. This report presents a data-driven analysis demonstrating that chronic disengagement among these frontline employees is not a peripheral human resources concern, but a multi-trillion-dollar operational drag on productivity, safety, and profitability. The root cause is a systemic failure: the persistent use of office-centric communication tools and top-down management philosophies for a mobile, physically distributed workforce. The solution requires a fundamental paradigm shift toward a unified, mobile-first "motivation economy"—a strategic framework that quantifies and rewards the positive behaviors that drive operational excellence. Implementing such a framework moves engagement from an abstract goal to a manageable business system, with leading organizations realizing significant, measurable returns. Data from across the industry confirms that a systematic approach to frontline engagement can yield a

+23% increase in profitability, a **+14.9% uplift in overall performance**, and a remarkable **-65% reduction in flight risk** for critical talent. This white paper provides the strategic blueprint and financial justification for this essential transformation.

2. The High Cost of the Status Quo: Why Traditional Engagement Fails on the Factory Floor

For decades, operational strategy in manufacturing has focused on optimizing machinery, supply chains, and production methodologies. Yet, the single most critical component—the human element on the factory floor—has been managed with outdated tools and a fundamental misunderstanding of its unique operational reality. This disconnect has created a silent but substantial drain on financial performance. The status quo of non-desk worker disengagement is no longer a sustainable business practice; it is a liability that carries a quantifiable, multi-trillion-dollar price tag.

2.1 The Scale of the Disconnect: A Multi-Trillion-Dollar Blind Spot

The term "workforce" often evokes images of employees at desks, yet this represents a small minority of global labor. Nearly 80% of the world's 2.7 billion workers are "deskless," operating on factory floors, in warehouses, on construction sites, and in logistics networks.¹ This group forms the operational backbone of the industrial economy. When this majority is disengaged, the impact is not marginal; it is systemic.

The most immediate and visible cost is employee turnover. In the current manufacturing landscape, talent is a primary constraint on growth. A 2024 Deloitte analysis highlights the severity of this issue, finding that the cost to replace a single skilled frontline worker ranges from \$10,000 to as high as \$40,000.¹ This figure accounts for recruitment expenses, training for the new hire, and the lost productivity during the transition period. For an organization with thousands of frontline employees, even a modest turnover rate translates into millions of dollars in direct, recurring costs.

However, the financial leakage extends far beyond turnover. A landmark meta-analysis by Gallup, studying over 112,000 business units, provides stark evidence of the pervasive impact of disengagement on core operational metrics.¹ When comparing top-quartile engaged teams to their bottom-quartile counterparts, the differences are staggering:

- **Profitability:** Bottom-quartile teams are **23%** less profitable.
- **Productivity:** They exhibit **18%** lower productivity in terms of sales.
- **Safety:** They suffer **64%** more safety incidents (accidents).

- **Quality:** They produce **41%** more defects.
- **Absenteeism:** They have an **81%** higher rate of absenteeism.
- **Theft (Shrinkage):** They are responsible for **28%** more shrinkage.

These are not "soft" metrics; they are the hard numbers that define operational efficiency and directly impact the bottom line. A disengaged employee is not merely unhappy; they are statistically more likely to be absent, make costly errors, and contribute to an unsafe work environment. The cost of the status quo is therefore a daily, operational tax paid in the form of lost output, quality control failures, and avoidable accidents.

2.2 The Diagnosis: Drivers of Frontline Disengagement and Burnout

To solve this costly problem, leadership must understand its root causes. The disengagement of the non-desk workforce is not a result of a single factor, but a combination of persistent stressors and unmet needs endemic to the frontline environment.

A 2024 study on the state of the frontline workforce provides a clear diagnosis.¹ While economic pressures are a factor, the primary drivers of dissatisfaction and turnover are deeply embedded in the employee experience itself. The key reasons frontline workers considered quitting their jobs reveal a clear pattern:

- **Feeling Undervalued (29%):** This was the most cited non-financial reason for wanting to leave. In some regions, the figure is even higher, with **34%** of workers in Norway citing this as their top reason.¹ This feeling stems from a lack of recognition and a sense that their contributions are invisible to the broader organization.
- **Lack of Career Progression (26%):** Employees see no clear path for advancement. This creates a sense of being in a dead-end job, prompting ambitious and skilled workers to look elsewhere for growth opportunities.¹
- **High Levels of Stress and Burnout:** An alarming **62%** of frontline workers report experiencing work-related stress.¹ Academic research confirms that for blue-collar workers, burnout is a significant psychological syndrome that appears as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal and workplace stressors.¹ It manifests as extreme fatigue, cynicism, and a feeling of ineffectiveness, directly eroding an employee's perception of work-life balance.

A clear causal chain emerges from this data. The process begins with employees feeling unrecognized and unappreciated for their daily efforts. This persistent lack of positive reinforcement contributes directly to feelings of burnout and disengagement. A disengaged employee, seeing no future for themselves within the company, becomes a high flight risk. This progression culminates in turnover, which, as established, carries a direct replacement cost of up to \$40,000 per employee. Therefore, the seemingly "soft" cultural issue of not feeling valued is, in fact, a tangible and predictable financial risk factor. The absence of a systematic recognition strategy is an open invitation for talent drain and its associated costs.

2.3 The Strategic Flaw: The "Communication Gap"

The core operational reason these drivers of disengagement persist is a fundamental, systemic flaw in how industrial organizations communicate with the majority of their workforce. This "communication gap," identified in internal strategic analyses, is not a failure of what is being said, but a failure of the delivery system itself.

Organizations have built their internal communication infrastructure around tools designed for desk-bound office workers: corporate email and company intranets. However, the data reveals a stark mismatch with the reality of the frontline. An estimated **83% of non-desk employees do not have a corporate email address**, and 45% have no access to a company intranet during their working hours.¹ Broadcasting critical information—from safety alerts and policy changes to company vision and values—through these channels is akin to sending a signal that the intended receivers are fundamentally unable to pick up.

This systemic failure forces employees into a communication vacuum, which they attempt to fill with their own ad-hoc solutions. The result is a chaotic and fragmented "shadow IT" ecosystem where work-related information is exchanged over insecure, consumer-grade applications like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and personal SMS.¹ This practice introduces significant business risks, including:

- **Security Vulnerabilities:** The use of unmanaged consumer apps creates a high risk of data loss and security breaches, as sensitive company information is shared outside of secure, controlled environments.³
- **Inconsistent Messaging:** There is no guarantee that official messages are received, read, or understood correctly. Information becomes distorted as it

passes through informal channels, leading to miscommunication and errors.

- **Increased Employee Stress:** Poor communication is a top-three stressor for 15% of frontline workers.¹ The constant need to check multiple apps and the uncertainty of not having a single source of truth adds to their cognitive load and anxiety.

The communication gap is, therefore, a strategic liability. It ensures that the majority of the workforce is disconnected from company culture, uninformed about key initiatives, and unsupported by the very systems meant to engage them. This broken delivery mechanism is the primary enabler of the disengagement, burnout, and turnover that cost the industry billions. To solve the problem, organizations must abandon this flawed model and adopt a framework built for the non-desk reality.

3. The Modern Solution: A Unified Motivation Framework

The failure of traditional engagement models necessitates a radical rethinking of the relationship between the organization and its non-desk workforce. The solution is not to send more emails or design better intranet portals. Instead, it requires a shift from a passive, top-down information-push model to an active, peer-to-peer value-exchange model. This new paradigm can be best described as a unified "motivation economy."

3.1 Beyond Top-Down Memos: The Rise of the "Motivation Economy"

A motivation economy is a closed-loop ecosystem where desired behaviors and valuable contributions are systematically recognized, quantified, and exchanged using a common currency of value. It transforms engagement from a series of disconnected initiatives into an integrated business system. This framework, exemplified by platforms like AlbiCoins, is built on three core principles derived from an analysis of its underlying methodology.

1. **A Single, Universal Currency of Motivation:** The foundation of the economy is a consistent, fungible unit of value—a "coin" or "point." This digital token serves as a universal medium of exchange for positive actions. Whether an employee

demonstrates exceptional safety awareness, helps a colleague solve a problem, exceeds a production target, or completes a training module, the recognition is delivered in the same quantifiable currency. This creates a common language of value that transcends departments, roles, and shifts, making every positive contribution visible and commensurable.

2. **The Power of Accumulation:** Unlike a fleeting verbal "thank you" or a one-off employee-of-the-month award, this digital currency can be accumulated over time. Employees can track their earnings in a personal "wallet," watch their balance grow, and redeem their accumulated value for meaningful rewards in a dedicated marketplace. This principle leverages powerful psychological drivers. The act of accumulation transforms recognition from a transient event into a tangible, growing asset, creating a powerful and continuous incentive to contribute. It gamifies positive behavior, encouraging a long-term perspective on engagement.
3. **Peer-to-Peer Mechanics:** Critically, this framework democratizes the act of recognition. While managers still play a key role, any employee is empowered to award currency to any other colleague. This shift from an exclusively top-down model to a peer-driven one is transformative. It empowers the people closest to the work—the employees on the floor—to reinforce the company's values in real time. When a peer recognizes another for "living the values," the message is often more authentic and impactful than a formal memo from corporate headquarters. It builds a self-sustaining culture of positive reinforcement at the grassroots level.

3.2 Why This Framework Succeeds Where Others Fail

This motivation framework is not merely an incremental improvement; it is a fundamentally different approach designed to succeed precisely where traditional methods fail. It directly addresses the core flaws identified in the status quo.

- **It is Built for the Non-Desk Reality:** The entire system is mobile-first. It is accessible via any personal or company-provided mobile device, operating independently of corporate email accounts or intranet access.¹ This ensures 100% reach to the entire workforce, closing the communication gap and meeting employees where they are.
- **It is Intrinsically Engaging:** The framework leverages the proven principles of gamification—points, progress tracking, leaderboards, and rewards. This approach is highly effective with the modern workforce. Research shows that

80% of workers believe gamification is more engaging, and its implementation has been linked to significant improvements in both productivity and engagement. It makes participation in company culture an active and rewarding experience, rather than a passive obligation.

- **It is Consolidated and Unified:** This framework replaces the fragmented and insecure mess of consumer messaging apps with a single, secure, company-sanctioned platform.¹ This consolidation provides a single source of truth for all communication, recognition, and engagement activities. It eliminates the confusion and stress caused by information silos, reduces security risks, and ensures that the company's voice is clear, consistent, and heard by everyone.

By design, the unified motivation framework solves the systemic delivery problem while simultaneously addressing the psychological drivers of disengagement. It provides the technological and cultural infrastructure needed to finally connect the unseen workforce to the heart of the enterprise.

4. Pillars of High-ROI Engagement: From Theory to Practice

A strategic framework is only as valuable as its execution. The unified motivation economy is brought to life through four interconnected pillars of action. Each pillar is designed to solve a specific, high-cost business challenge prevalent in the industrial sector. By implementing these pillars through a unified platform, organizations can move beyond theory and begin generating a measurable return on investment, transforming culture into a driver of financial performance.

The following table summarizes the direct link between each pillar of execution, the business problem it solves, the external evidence supporting its efficacy, and the quantifiable ROI it delivers.

Pillar of Execution	Core Business Challenge Addressed	Supporting Industry Evidence (Source)	Measurable Business Outcome (Source)
Peer-to-Peer	Feeling Undervalued; High	29% of frontline workers consider	-65% Flight Risk

Recognition	Employee Turnover	quitting because they feel undervalued. ¹ Companies with effective recognition programs report 31% lower voluntary turnover. ⁵	(Approved ROI)
Collaborative Contests & Gamification	Low Productivity; Lack of Team Cohesion & Motivation	Highly engaged teams demonstrate +18% in productivity (sales) and +23% in profitability compared to disengaged teams. ¹	+23% Profitability (Approved ROI)
Targeted Micro-learning & Upskilling	Critical Skills Gaps; Lack of Clear Career Progression	26% of workers cite a lack of career growth as a reason for leaving. ¹ Microlearning provides demand-based, participant-driven training effective for non-desk staff. ¹	+14.9% Performance (Approved ROI)
Continuous, Two-Way Feedback Loop	Pervasive Communication Gap; Lagging Annual Survey Data	72% of employees state that hearing directly from leadership is important. ¹ Continuous, two-way feedback is essential for engagement. ¹	+10% Customer Loyalty ¹

4.1 Pillar 1: Peer-to-Peer Recognition

What It Is: This pillar establishes a dynamic, real-time system where any employee,

regardless of their role or level, can instantly recognize a colleague for a positive contribution. This recognition is not just verbal; it is delivered through the platform's universal currency (e.g., "AlbiCoins"), making the appreciation tangible and accumulatable. This functionality, as detailed in the "Recognition" module of the platform framework, is the cornerstone of the motivation economy.

Why It Works: This pillar directly attacks the number one non-financial driver of employee turnover: feeling undervalued.¹ Traditional, top-down recognition programs are often too slow, infrequent, and generic to be effective. A manager may not witness a moment of exceptional teamwork or an employee going above and beyond to help a customer. Peers, however, see these actions every day. By empowering peers to give recognition, the system makes appreciation timely, specific, and highly authentic. It creates a dense network of positive reinforcement, building a culture of gratitude and mutual respect from the ground up, rather than waiting for it to trickle down from management.

What It Delivers: The primary business outcome is a dramatic reduction in employee churn and the associated costs. This pillar is directly linked to the demonstrated ability to achieve a **-65% reduction in flight risk** for key employees. This internal metric is strongly validated by external research. A study by the Aberdeen Group found that companies with formal recognition programs experienced a **31% lower voluntary turnover rate**.⁵ Furthermore, Gallup's extensive data shows that business units with low engagement typically endure turnover rates that are

18% to 43% higher than their highly engaged counterparts.¹ By systematically addressing the feeling of being undervalued, peer-to-peer recognition directly mitigates a primary financial risk.

4.2 Pillar 2: Collaborative Contests & Gamification

What It Is: This pillar involves structuring departmental or company-wide objectives as engaging, competitive events. Using features like the "Team Circle Contest" module, key performance indicators—such as safety compliance, production output, or quality metrics—are transformed into team-based contests with real-time leaderboards, progress tracking, and rewards distributed in the platform's currency.

Why It Works: Gamification applies the mechanics that make games

compelling—competition, achievement, and rewards—to work-related tasks. This approach is proven to be highly effective, making routine work more engaging and motivating.¹ Collaborative contests foster a sense of teamwork and shared purpose, aligning individual efforts toward a common, measurable goal. Instead of simply being told to "improve safety," teams are now competing to become the "safest shift of the month," with tangible rewards and public recognition at stake. This transforms abstract corporate goals into concrete, motivating team challenges.

What It Delivers: The measurable result of this pillar is a direct and significant impact on the bottom line. It is directly correlated with the ability to drive a **+23% increase in profitability**. This outcome is substantiated by Gallup's comprehensive meta-analysis, which found that top-quartile engaged business units are, on average, **23% more profitable** and **18% more productive** than bottom-quartile units.¹ By channeling the competitive and collaborative spirit of the workforce toward key business objectives, this pillar translates increased engagement directly into improved financial performance.

4.3 Pillar 3: Targeted Micro-learning & Upskilling

What It Is: This pillar focuses on delivering bite-sized, easily digestible training content directly to employees' mobile devices. Through a "Boost Learning" module, organizations can deploy short videos, interactive quizzes, and skill-based challenges, with rewards (in "AlbiCoins") for successful completion and knowledge retention.

Why It Works: This approach simultaneously addresses two critical challenges in the manufacturing sector: the persistent skills gap and the lack of career progression that drives away talent.¹ Traditional, classroom-based training is often impractical and ineffective for a non-desk workforce. Microlearning, by contrast, is "demand-based and participant-driven," allowing employees to learn at their own pace and at the point of need.¹ An employee can complete a 5-minute safety refresher before starting a new task or learn about a new piece of equipment during a break. This makes learning a continuous, integrated part of the job, not a disruptive, occasional event. It provides a clear and accessible path for employees to enhance their skills and value to the company.

What It Delivers: The business outcome is a quantifiable improvement in employee capability, efficiency, and overall output, measured as a **+14.9% increase in**

performance. By closing skills gaps and improving proficiency, this pillar directly enhances the operational effectiveness of the workforce. Critically, it also serves as a powerful retention tool. By investing in their development and showing them a clear path for growth, companies give their most ambitious employees a compelling reason to stay, directly countering the 26% of workers who leave due to a lack of career opportunities.¹

4.4 Pillar 4: Continuous, Two-Way Feedback Loop

What It Is: This pillar establishes a robust, real-time communication channel that flows in both directions. It allows leadership to cascade important announcements and updates instantly to every employee's device, while also enabling employees to share their insights, concerns, and ideas through pulse surveys, suggestion boxes, and direct feedback mechanisms.

Why It Works: This pillar provides the definitive solution to the "communication gap".¹ It replaces the ineffective and fragmented system of emails and consumer apps with a single, reliable channel. This is critically important to employees, as

72% state that hearing directly from C-suite leadership is important to them.¹ Equally important is the upward channel. Providing a voice to the frontline is essential for building trust and engagement; it makes employees feel heard and valued as partners in the business, not just as cogs in a machine.¹

What It Delivers: A well-informed and aligned workforce is better equipped to serve the end customer. This pillar is linked to a **+10% increase in customer loyalty and engagement.** This connection is not merely theoretical; it is empirically proven. The same Gallup research that quantified the internal benefits of engagement found that highly engaged teams also achieve a **10% improvement in customer ratings.**¹ When frontline employees are connected to the company's mission and feel their feedback is valued, they are better ambassadors for the brand and more motivated to deliver a superior customer experience.

These four pillars do not operate in isolation. They create a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle. **Recognition** makes employees feel valued, which reduces their flight risk. A more stable and experienced workforce is better prepared to excel in **Collaborative Contests**, driving productivity. The desire to perform well in these contests creates a

natural demand for **Micro-learning** to build new skills. This entire process of interaction and achievement generates a wealth of data and dialogue, which fuels the **Continuous Feedback** loop, allowing leadership to fine-tune operations and further enhance engagement. The result is not four separate programs, but one integrated system driving a continuous cycle of performance and improvement.

5. From Insight to Action: The Role of Real-Time Analytics

For too long, employee engagement has been treated as an art, managed through intuition and measured with lagging indicators. The modern operational environment demands a more scientific approach. A unified motivation framework provides not only the tools to engage the workforce but also the data infrastructure to manage culture as a rigorous business system. This shift from anecdotal evidence to real-time analytics empowers leadership to move from reactive problem-solving to proactive, data-driven decision-making.

5.1 Managing Culture as a Business System

Relying on an annual engagement survey to gauge the health of an organization's culture is analogous to driving a high-performance vehicle by only looking in the rearview mirror once a year. By the time the data is collected, analyzed, and presented, the operational conditions have already changed, and the insights are historical artifacts rather than actionable intelligence. Modern manufacturing operations run on real-time data from the supply chain and the factory floor; the management of human capital must be held to the same standard.

A platform-based approach makes this possible. An integrated analytics dashboard, as conceptualized in the "Analytics" module of the platform framework, transforms engagement metrics into operational KPIs. Leaders can track, in real time, key indicators such as:

- Recognition frequency and distribution across teams, shifts, and locations.
- Performance in active contests and progress toward departmental goals.
- Engagement levels with communication and learning content.

- Participation rates in pulse surveys and feedback channels.

This data allows managers to spot trends as they emerge. A sudden drop-off in recognition within a specific team or a lack of engagement with a new safety protocol can be identified in days, not months. This capability to monitor the pulse of the organization in real time is the first step toward managing culture with the same discipline applied to production and logistics.⁴

5.2 The Power of AI: Decoding the "Why"

While real-time quantitative dashboards show *what* is happening, their true power is unlocked when combined with technology that explains *why*. This is the domain of Artificial Intelligence, specifically AI-powered text analysis. Frontline employees possess a wealth of unstructured data—their daily observations, frustrations, and ideas—often captured in open-ended survey responses, feedback comments, and platform conversations. Manually sifting through thousands of these comments is an impossible task.

AI-powered Natural Language Processing (NLP) automates this process at scale.⁷ These algorithms can analyze vast quantities of unstructured text and perform two critical functions:

1. **Thematic Analysis:** The AI automatically identifies and categorizes the recurring themes within the feedback. It can group thousands of individual comments into meaningful topics like "supervisor effectiveness," "concerns about new machinery," "tool availability," "shift scheduling conflicts," or "appreciation for safety bonuses".⁹
2. **Sentiment Analysis:** For each identified theme, the AI assigns a sentiment score—positive, negative, or neutral. This quantifies the emotional tone associated with each topic, allowing managers to quickly see which issues are generating the most frustration or satisfaction.¹⁰

The combination of real-time quantitative data and AI-driven qualitative analysis enables a new level of predictive management. Consider a practical scenario: a manager's dashboard shows a sudden, unexplained dip in engagement scores for the night shift on Production Line 3. In the past, this would remain a mystery until the next annual survey, if it was even noticed at all. Now, the manager can immediately consult the AI text analysis report for that specific team. The AI may reveal a spike in

negative-sentiment comments themed around "inadequate lighting" or "frustration with the new reporting procedure."

This creates a powerful, data-driven causal link. The quantitative data flags a problem, and the qualitative AI analysis provides the immediate diagnosis. Management is no longer guessing at the cause. They have an early warning signal that allows them to intervene—by fixing the lighting or clarifying the procedure—*before* the disengagement translates into a safety incident, a drop in quality, or a wave of resignations. This transforms the management of people from a reactive, lagging function into a proactive, predictive operational advantage.

6. Conclusion: Your New Competitive Advantage

The evidence presented in this report leads to an unequivocal conclusion: the chronic disengagement of the non-desk workforce is one of the most significant and addressable opportunities for value creation in the industrial and manufacturing sectors today. Continuing with the status quo is a choice to accept preventable costs, operational inefficiencies, and a persistent competitive disadvantage. Embracing a new strategic framework is not an expense to be minimized, but a critical investment in the core engine of the business.

6.1 Reframing the Investment

The business case for adopting a unified motivation framework must be viewed through an operational and financial lens, not as an employee benefit or a discretionary HR program. As analyses from leading firms like Forrester emphasize, the return on investment in frontline worker technology is measured in terms of increased operational efficiency, improved employee retention, and enhanced customer experience.¹¹

- **It is an investment in efficiency.** By closing the communication gap, providing on-demand micro-learning, and fostering collaboration, this framework reduces errors, accelerates problem-solving, and increases output.
- **It is an investment in risk mitigation.** By systematically addressing the root

causes of turnover—feeling undervalued and seeing no path for growth—it directly reduces the multi-million-dollar costs associated with recruiting and training replacement workers.

- **It is an investment in profitability.** As the data from Gallup and other sources overwhelmingly shows, a more engaged workforce is a more productive, safer, and ultimately more profitable workforce.¹

The cost of inaction—measured in turnover, absenteeism, safety incidents, and lost productivity—is a daily tax on the organization's performance. The investment in a unified engagement platform is the strategic lever to eliminate that tax and unlock the latent potential of the workforce.

6.2 The Strategic Imperative

In today's economic climate, characterized by a tight labor market and a persistent skills gap, the ability to attract, engage, develop, and retain skilled frontline talent is no longer just a component of strategy; it is the strategy.¹ The company that can build the most motivated, capable, and stable non-desk workforce will have an insurmountable competitive advantage.

Those who cling to outdated, office-centric communication models and top-down management philosophies will find themselves in a perpetual struggle for talent, constantly bleeding costs through high turnover and suboptimal performance. They will be outmaneuvered by forward-thinking competitors who recognize that their greatest asset is the unseen majority of their employees.

The decision to implement a unified motivation framework is therefore more than an operational upgrade. It is a declaration that every employee matters. It is a commitment to building a resilient, efficient, and deeply connected organization from the factory floor to the C-suite. For leaders aiming to build a more durable and profitable enterprise, the time to act is now. This is your new competitive advantage.

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