

The 'State of the Deskless Workforce 2021' report: an eye opener, needing our collective action

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I have worked within the field of occupational health and safety for more than two decades. The most interesting aspect of this profession is its dynamism and the continuous unearthing of new subject areas. I find this really exciting, above everything else. A short while ago, I came across a Quinyx report titled 'The State of the Deskless Workforce 2021'.¹ The word 'deskless' caught my attention and the report opened my eyes to a new dimension of knowledge.

To a great extent, I have lived with the knowledge that some people work in spaces where they do not necessarily sit behind a system or have the luxury of a desk. I did not know that there is a population of the global workforce that is already categorised as deskless. According to the 2021 report from Quinyx, 2.7 billion workers are deskless and account for nearly 80% of the global workforce.¹ These workers are important – they are the heroes and heroines who keep our lives and economies running. They include frontline workers in healthcare, delivery drivers, bartenders, grocery store workers, security personnel, janitorial service workers, and workers from manufacturing companies.

A deskless worker is defined as anyone who does not sit at a desk or computer to perform his/her job.² These workers are playing a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic, while many countries are in lockdown. Everyday, they serve us all and ensure that life goes on even though an estimated 22% have expressed that they do not feel safe at work because of COVID-19.¹ Some studies have described deskless workers as the 'forgotten workforce' – underserved with technology and poorly managed by employers.³ This workforce deserves better treatment with fair work schedules and a better work-life balance. The 2021 Quinyx report states that 51% of deskless workers go to work sick because they cannot afford to take time off; 21% do not feel appreciated at work; and 57% say that their personal care time suffers due to their work schedules.¹

Half of the workers reported understaffing issues – mostly when covering for absent staff without additional pay. There also tends to be high staff turnover in organisations where these workers are employed. According to the report, 29% said that they had to leave their jobs because of lack of notice in scheduling changes.¹ I observed this often during the many years that I spent managing hospitals. We should not forget that workers feel more comfortable and secure in places where they feel cared for and appreciated.

Due to limited or no access to technology in the workplace, there is poor communication between managers, staff and colleagues. One key question that should be asked is, "Are these workers also considered in the future of work?" While apps, cloud platforms and software as a service (SaaS) offerings are available for desk-based workers, currently, only 1% of business spending focuses on deskless technologies.¹ Forty-three percent of the deskless workers stated that managers do not have tools or mobile apps that make it easy to swap shifts with colleagues.¹ Investments in developing technologies to improve communication with deskless workers would improve scheduling.

Only 23% of deskless workers have paid sick leave while 51% go to work sick because they cannot afford to take time off.¹ The majority hardly have time for recovery from illness because there is no paid sick leave, and they therefore have a high risk of burnout and stress. It is time that opinion leaders and wellbeing policy experts started lending their voices to the plight of deskless workers in terms of fair labour policies and flexibility of work. As documented in the 2021 report, 35% of the workers said that they would rather have flexible schedules than higher pay.¹

Allowing employees to have control over their jobs is a key ingredient of mitigating psychosocial risks. Human beings are not robots; they need the freedom to be expressive and, if this does not happen, their creativity may be dampened. This is not in anyone's best interest. It was estimated that 37% of deskless workers feel pressured to take shifts that they do not want, while 32% are unable to swap shifts with co-workers, and 55% have to call their managers to do so.¹ I think that this contributes greatly to presenteeism and the high rate of accidents among workers. Optimal performance in the workplace is associated with the psychological readiness of employees, and this must be clearly understood by both employers and line managers.

Motivation and incentive programmes are lacking in most workplace management systems, where profits are prioritised over the safety, health and wellbeing of employees. Twenty-one percent of the workers reported that they do not feel appreciated at work.¹ Of these, 58% indicated that their employers see them as disposable, and contact them during 'off' hours for scheduling issues. It is reassuring to note that some countries have legislation to protect employees from having to respond to official e-mails after working hours. In 2017, France became the first country to sign into law the 'right to disconnect'.⁴ Under this law, the employee is not under any obligation to respond to e-mails from employers after work hours. We have also seen the Philippines, Spain and other countries implement this law, while countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, India and the Federal Government of Canada have all proposed laws adopting this right.⁵

'The State of the Deskless Workforce 2021' report highlights many issues that need to be addressed by, amongst others, leaders, captains of industries, policymakers, labour administrators, and technology inventors. This is important to prevent work-related illnesses in the future. We can be good leaders if we consider empathy in our management systems, which will go a long way in reducing the prevalence of most of the workplace conditions such as stress, burnout, poor work-life balance, understaffing and non-flexibility of schedules as highlighted in the report. There is a need for a safe and decent workplace culture that places value on humanity above everything else. The deskless workforce comprises people we see around us daily. Even if we cannot fix their problems, let us not make their conditions more difficult.

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