



Remotely Interested?

2023



**Redefining
Communications**



SocialOptic
WorkTogether



Introduction

Four years ago we carried out extensive research into non-desk based workers...



Non-desk based workers, or deskless workers, are those employees who work in an environment that isn't office based or work that requires them to be at a computer or connected. It includes people who work in hospitality, manufacturing, retail, healthcare, transport, construction, public service and more. While limited research exists on the number of deskless workers there are, it's suggested that around 80% of the workforce is in this category.

Since the pandemic, it's important to make sure we avoid the term 'remote worker' as this is now used more to define those who are desk-based, but not in an office.

The research in 2019 resulted in the first Remotely Interested? report.

Redefining Communications, working in partnership with SocialOptic, explored why deskless workers were cited as one of the biggest barriers to effective internal communication, and why it wasn't being made a priority. The findings have been referenced widely and we have spoken about the research to global audiences.

Back then, the data told us that only 63% of deskless workers believed they had all the information they needed to do their job well. Only 36% believed their manager to be an accurate source of information, and 27% had too little information about their organisation.

Little did we know that just a couple of years later, many of us would be working from home during a global pandemic. The world and the technology we use has quite obviously shifted since then, and that's why we're bringing the research back to investigate the current situation.

Our hypothesis was that the pandemic would have changed things, partly due to the adoption of technology by large organisations and the apparent importance placed on internal communication and the employee experience. We also know that there is more technology for organisations today compared to 2018/2019.

So we set off to find out...



In total nine organisations took part and over 350 deskless employees gave their views on communication in the workplace.

We used a variety of collection methods with each organisation. This included a survey link shared online via email and on-site researchers with the survey on tablets. The organisations used one or both of these options to gather responses. Every researcher provided a report on their insight into the environment, stories of the lived experiences of the individuals taking part, and even whether or not the people knew we were coming!



The (data) science bit:

- Quantitative data and qualitative context.
- Fast and visual capture of answers in SurveyOptic.
- Multi-choice and Likert questions (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree).
- Linked question design enabling cross tabulation to delve into the details.
- Rapid analysis and data visualisation – “questioning the data”.
- Factors covered
 - **Channels** – Face to face, traditional and digital.
 - **Quality of content** – Informative, accurate, useful, interesting.
 - **Frequency** – Daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly or annually.
 - **Category** – Department, Organisation or Industry.



Key stats

Using a company app on my phone organisation content

2019 **2023**
17% **33%**

The most (perceived) accurate content is the content shared face to face

WhatsApp/text message use Department/area content

2019 **2023**
18% **47%**

Email newsletters are on the rise, regardless of access to emails while at work

We have less team meetings than we did before, either online or in-person

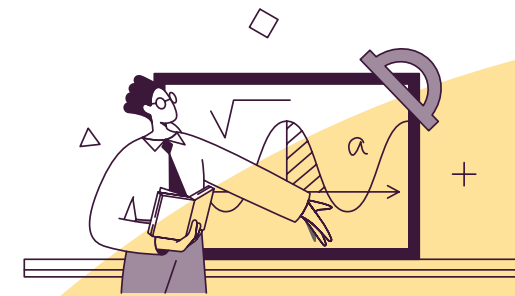
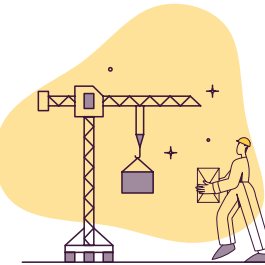
83%
feel part of the team they work in

Communication teams don't know their workforce well enough yet

49%
think senior leaders are good communicators

Relevance and manager communication skills have both improved since 2019

Use of Noticeboards hasn't really changed, and are as useful as WhatsApp



Were we right?



Not much has changed

It turns out our hypothesis of what has changed was a little off. There have been shifts in some areas but other things have come into the spotlight showing how much more there is to do.

While we might not have found what we were expecting, we have uncovered some root causes to the challenges we face with communication with deskless workers.

Compared to 2019, there has been a positive shift in the core questions we asked:

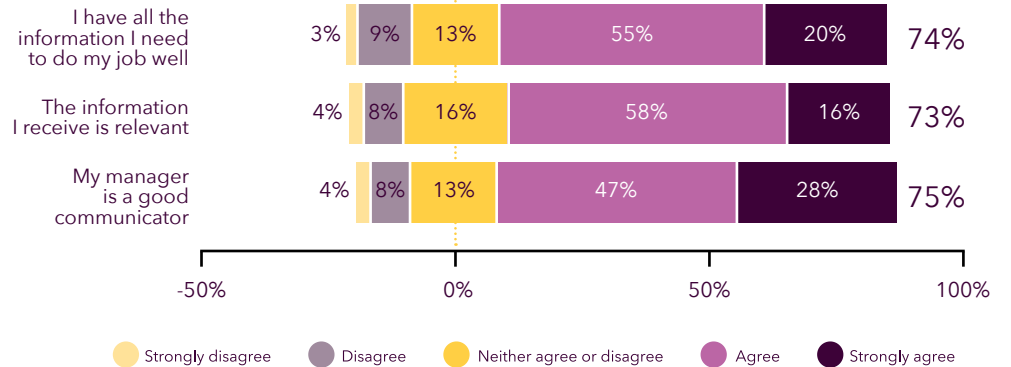
- Do you have all the information you need to do your job well?
- Is the information you receive relevant?
- Is your manager a good communicator?



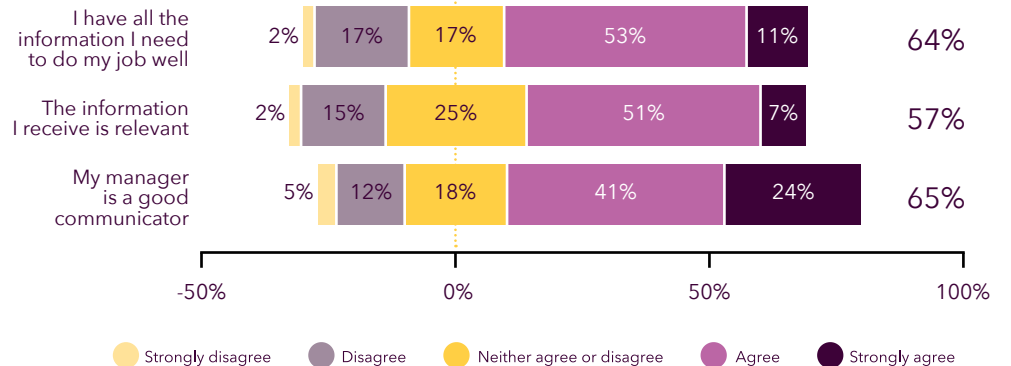
In 2019 relevance and line manager skills were core areas of focus, and both have seen a positive change.



2023



2019



**We haven't
gone digital
yet...**



It's on the rise but we aren't where we thought we'd be

Digital has not made the progress we were expecting. This is because people are spending over 90% of their time doing the work, on the ground. Unlike office workers, deskless workers don't have time to check emails, use technology or carry out general admin tasks.

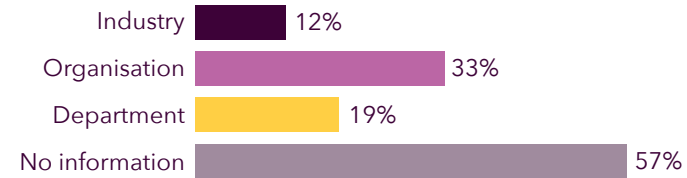
They will prioritise the information they hear from colleagues or their line manager. It's all about word of mouth, which we will come to later.

What we have seen with digital tools is that the use of company apps has changed. While we can't prove a correlation between the two, the use of employee websites/intranets has gone down.

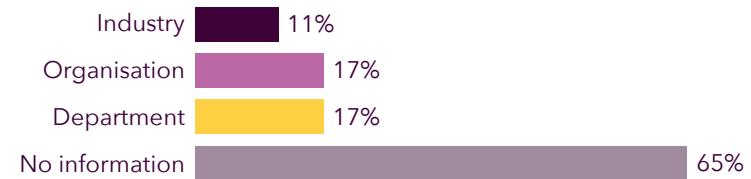
There have been continued challenges with IT, Communication and HR teams working together to create solutions for the employee experience. Deskless workers lack understanding and support from IT, and IT is then unable to provide the right tools for their work. Is IT failing to deliver? It's a possibility.

Company App

2023

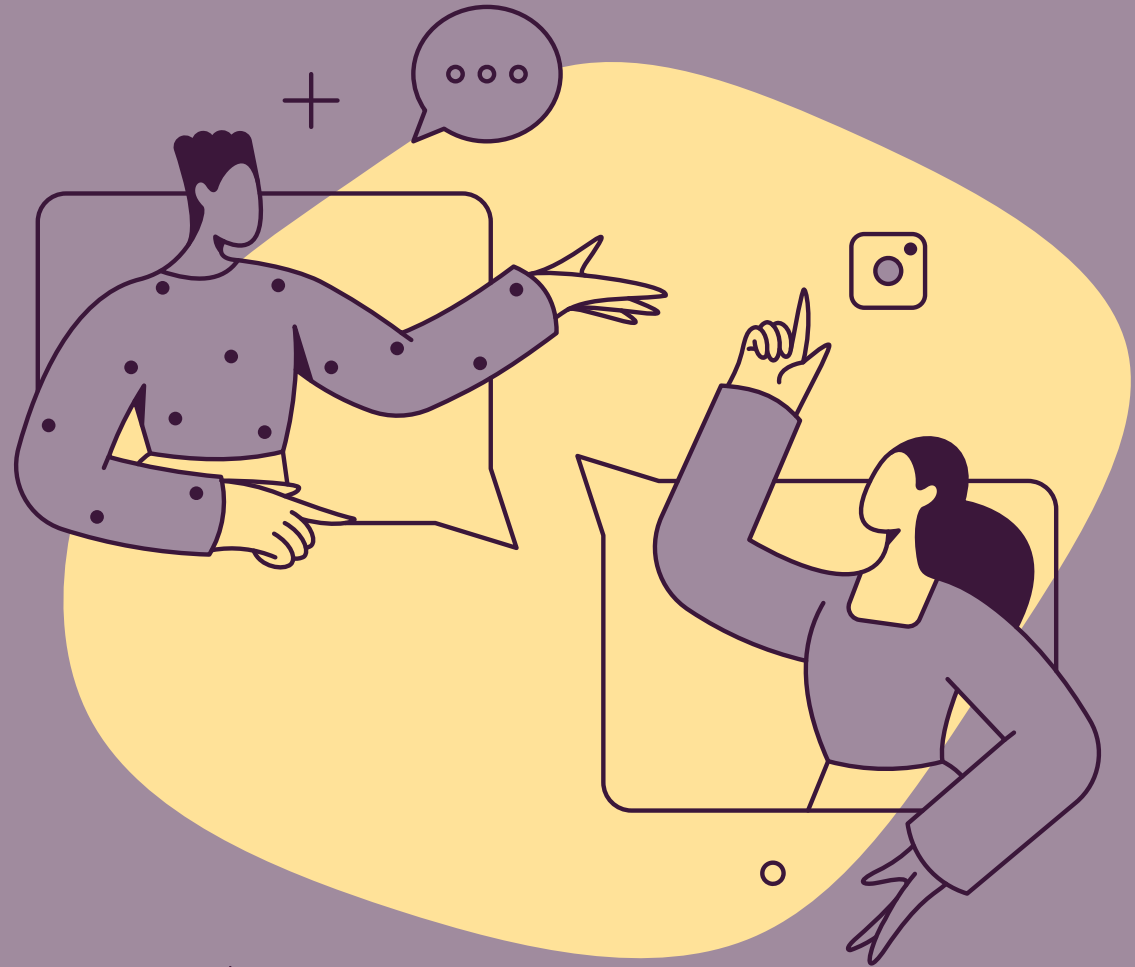


2019

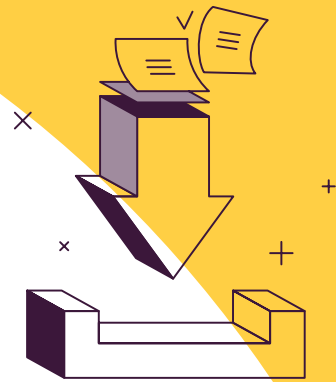


This is a positive move in the shift to digital, but the content isn't quite where it needs to be. Only 9% of people felt the content was accurate, claiming it's mainly useful and informative. This does suggest some broader links to accuracy and trust being a common challenge in organisations.

The rise of WhatsApp

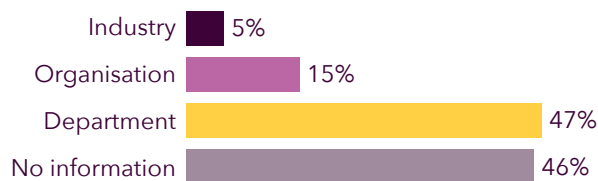


WhatsApp is filling the gap left by the organisation

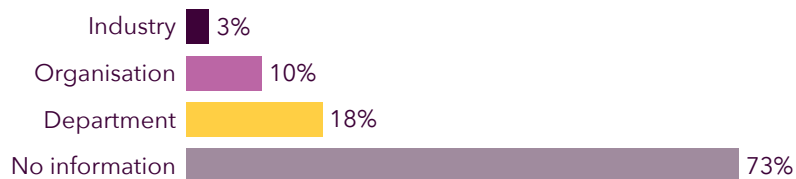


If you don't give them something, they will use what they already have... and the risks here are big.

2023



2019



This is a staggering rise from 18% to 47% for department/area communication and it means that people are using texts or WhatsApp a lot more than they were in 2019. While this isn't a surprise, the risks here are big when it comes to data and security.

- The data, messages and conversations are only as secure as someone's phone - which is likely to be less secure than the organisation requires
- Data might be stored outside of your country and that has implications under UK GDPR
- Messages in WhatsApp cannot be shared as evidence in a tribunal as there is no consent given
- Messages can be deleted by users, making it difficult to retain business-critical information or capture/prove misconduct. This also means content cannot be archived and historical data can be lost
- Taking a screenshot of a WhatsApp message and sharing with others is a data and communications confidentiality risk. The behaviour is something that could lead to workplace disputes
- The risk of workplace bullying and harassment is higher with WhatsApp due to the 'need' to be in the group for work reasons
- Boundaries can blur between professional and personal without agreeing on explicit expectations
- People who don't want to share their number could be excluded from group chats, which could cause lots of challenges around inclusion, teamwork and communication
- WhatsApp doesn't offer robust admin controls to manage users, data, and permissions
- Shadow communications: Shadow IT has been a common phrase for years, but this is extending into broader communication areas. Using WhatsApp is a form of 'Shadow communication' - where employees use non-approved products, leading to security risks and complicating IT management. People need to communicate so they will find a way
- Information shared on WhatsApp could easily be forwarded to non-employees or other unauthorized individuals, risking data leaks or PR issues
- In some countries WhatsApp chats are not considered admissible evidence in legal disputes, as messages can be edited or deleted.

Is your content WOMable?

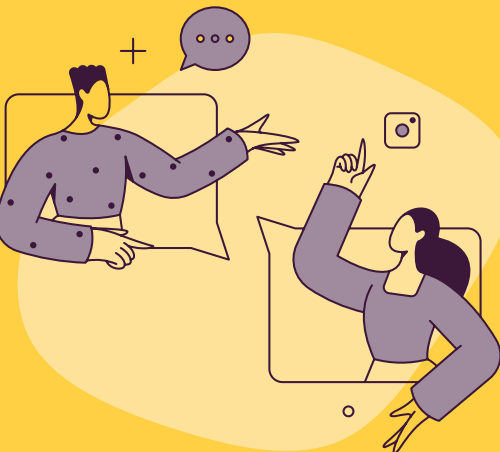


Word of mouth is everything

'Content is king' is a phrase we have heard for years. In 2019 we talked about the importance of relevance of content for the audience, and while this has shifted a little, we are still seeing content that is 'for the organisation' rather than 'for the audience'.

What we mean by this is that the content being shared is because somewhere in the head office it's been decided that it needs to be, regardless of the audience needs.

Deskless workers are a verbal culture. Content is shared quickly and briefly. This is different to those in an office who work in a written culture using email and reports to communicate. We know from recent research, **The IC Index**, that shorter form,



'snackable' content is preferable, and for the deskless workers this has never been more true.

There has been a lot of speculation around attention spans getting worse, yet people can binge on their favourite Netflix series for a day. Maybe it's not about attention, but more about an impatience for things to be available when they want or need them.

Verbal cultures and written cultures are different

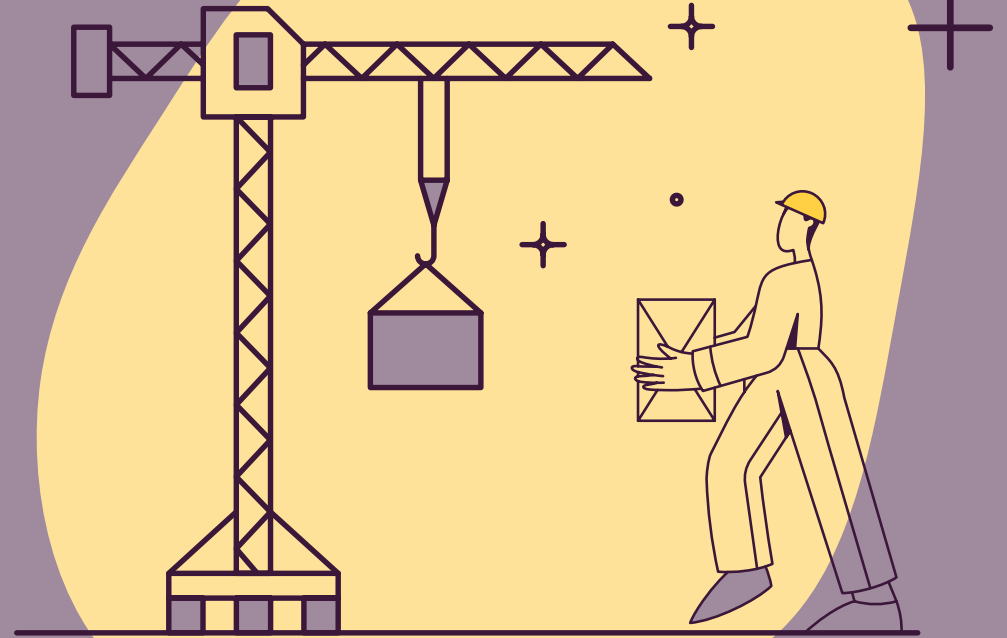


Creating content that can be shared verbally isn't about making the content more informal or relaxed. To make something easy to share verbally requires us to cross two different cultures: the written culture of the knowledge worker and the verbal culture of the frontline employees.

Shop floor



VS



factory floor

Shop floor vs factory floor

In 2019 we identified the different types of deskless workers: Team, Mixed and Solitary.

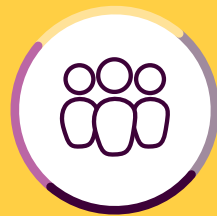
Solitary:

These are workers who don't need anyone else to do their job. Their work is carried out on their own and they only see people they work with during breaks or at the start/end of their working day.



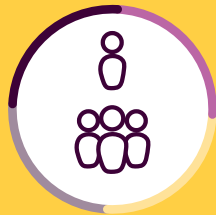
Team:

Working in a team and being reliant on each other to complete a task is very different to other ways of working. A true team brings different skills together to complement each other and overcome a challenge.



Mixed:

Working in hospitality is often mixed. The individual might work in a team at times and on their own in others. It means that their interactions with others are a mix of work and social.



In 2023, we have identified further insight into the different types of deskless workers focussing on factory floor or shop floor. The difference is their degree of customer contact and the reason for the relationship with the customer. In factory floor we include people who have little customer interaction but also need-based customers - for example, patients or services users of the NHS.



Factory floor

- Tend to be higher paid
- Tend to be more securely employed and longer term
- Connected to the tasks
- May have additional qualifications (not likely to be degree level on average - but will usually have sector specific training)
- Usually requires specific technical knowledge
- Little customer interaction, or need-based customers



Shop floor

- Tend to be lower paid
- More likely to be on part-time or zero-hours
- Connected to the brand
- Service, sales and interpersonal skills
- Lots of customer interaction, choice-based

**Are you solving
the right
engagement
problem?**



Are you solving the right engagement problem?

Organizations have been focussed on engagement for a long time, increasing scores and climbing higher up the leader boards of global rankings. But for the frontline workers, connection isn't the problem.

The data tells us that they feel connected to their team and the organisation.

So if people feel connected to the organisation, what problem does improving communication solve? What do deskless workers get frustrated about? What should the communication teams in today's organisations focus on?

Internal communication and employee engagement are not the same thing. Employee engagement is an outcome of good internal communication (along with several other factors) but the purpose of internal communication inside organisations is not always linked to engagement. For some, it's more about risk and reputation. Defining the purpose of internal communication is important to make sure strategy and activity is aligned to support the overall organisational objectives.



83%



I feel like I'm part of the team here

71%



I feel like my team is part of the organisation

Communication is the tangible representation of culture, and that's what needs to be the focus for deskless workers. How is the communication team in your organisation doing this?

Some ideas to get you started...

- Share content they need to do their job - safety, product information, training
- Show them you care - supportive leadership, showing up during a crisis, being interested in their

perspective and actively listening - have a clear purpose for the communication, site visits and events and make sure you're clear on the success criteria

- Make sure managers know what is important, what needs to be shared, why and how - get really specific and keep it simple so that it can be shared verbally
- Stop sending out stories and information that is for the organisation. Everything should be for the employee

Conclusions

One of the biggest themes to take away from the research this year is the cultural differences between office workers and frontline workers. Coupled with the differences in the shop floor and factory floor worker on the frontline, it means that relationships, behaviours and digital communication (both written and digital body language) are the things to focus on.



The risks around shadow IT and channels like WhatsApp need serious consideration from a variety of teams inside the organisation and the solution of just introducing digital tools without a clear strategy for this segment of the workforce just won't work.

There needs to be a clear purpose for the communication activity with this group. Their connection, and therefore engagement, is not being driven by the content and channels that are available.

It's driven by the relationships with their managers, the senior team when they visit and how the organisation as a whole behaves when it really counts.

Invest in the time to understand your audience here more, make sure managers at every level understand the impact they have when they communicate in-person or using digital tools and help office workers learn the cultural differences needed to make the connection.

Want to apply some of this learning to your organisation?

We have three ways we can work with you to help you delve deeper into understanding the deskless workers in your organisation:

Applying the results to your organisation

Do you want to explore how this insight can be applied to your team? We can host a workshop with you, exploring these findings and applying them to your channels and strategy and working together to see what you can do differently to make a difference. We can do this online or in person with different workshop lengths to suit you.

Your investment starts at

£1,600

Finding out more about your deskless workers

You can carry out this research in your own organisation. This means you can amend the questions so that they are right for your channels and job roles and we can add in some tailored questions for you too.

Your investment starts at

£7,500

Understanding your whole organisation better

Want a full organisational survey or census? Segmenting your employees and finding out what they really need to make the employee experience great is important if you're looking at your culture and employee engagement. As a partnership, Redefining Communications and SocialOptic can do this using some of the best technology in the market.

Your investment starts at

£9,600



Drop us an email at info@redefiningcomms.com and we can arrange a time to chat.

Acknowledgments

Huge thanks to the organisations who took part in this research, our researchers who helped us get to locations far and wide, and Nicky Taylor, who project managed the whole thing - never underestimate the logistics that go into this sort of research!

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