



Bridging the advancement gap: What frontline employees want—and what employers think they want

Executive Summary

Employers are out of touch with the needs of their workforce. It doesn't have to be this way. To close this gap, Cara Plus executed one of the largest national studies on frontline worker upward mobility, thanks to analysis from McKinsey & Company and with support from Walmart.

Overview

Millions of Americans have ambitions to advance their careers and move out of frontline roles; yet, many do not see a pathway to get there (e.g., promotions, shifts in responsibilities, rotational opportunities, and pay increases). Our study found a significant gap between what frontline workers prioritize with career advancement, and how employers respond to those needs.

As employers seek to attract and retain talent amid urgent labor shortages and demands for diversity, it is vital that they prioritize the needs and wants of their frontline staff.

Design

For this study, 2,154 frontline employees were surveyed. We define frontline employees as hourly workers making less than \$22 per hour. Survey respondents were employed in customer service, financial and professional services, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, retail, shipping, and logistics and transportation. The sampling process used quotas based on demographics to achieve representation across gender, age, race and ethnicity, and geography. It also included historically underrepresented populations like workers without a four-year degree and those who have been justice involved.

305 employers split between large organizations (more than 1,000 employees) and small to medium-size organizations were also surveyed.

Key Findings

- 70% of frontline employees have applied for advancement opportunities; yet, only 25% have received a promotion.
- 65% of frontline workers are unaware how to advance – and the number is even higher among women, younger employees, and those without a high school degree.
- Only 17% of frontline employees report having frequent career advancement discussions, although nearly 40% of employers say the same – despite evidence that advancement is closely linked to an awareness of opportunities and regular manager-led advancement conversations.
- Employers report a significantly higher availability of resources than workers report, including training (18-point difference), tuition reimbursement (14-point difference), and written descriptions of expectations (9-point difference).
- Individuals who have been involved with the criminal justice system are most likely to apply for advancement opportunities and successfully be promoted – this holds true across race and gender. Justice-impacted individuals and those who have experienced homelessness are also most likely to invest in upskilling outside of the workplace (14 and 16 points higher, respectively).

“ Career development for me means the improvement of my personal ability and also more jobs to choose from.”

– Frontline worker, Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STAR)

To take advantage of the untapped opportunity presented by frontline employers, employers have many ways they can better engage with their frontline employees, such as:



Communicate career pathways for frontline employees more clearly in every stage of the employee's career journey



Invest in career-advancing skill building and professional development for frontline workers



Equip managers of frontline employees with information, resources, and continuous training and incentives



Collect feedback from frontline employees to develop attractive advancement opportunities



Recognize and invest in motivated workers who are eager to advance and grow

Conclusion

Through these findings, we now have the opportunity to help frontline employees achieve their career goals. We know that frontline employees are highly motivated, with more than 70% applying for advancement opportunities internally and externally. By investing in frontline employees throughout their career journey, employers can reach an untapped talent pool and solve complex hiring challenges.

Read the full study at www.caracollective.org/frontline