



The Art and Science of Communicating with the Hourly Manufacturing Workforce

Best practices to drive engagement, performance,
and better business outcomes



Introduction

Effective communication is essential for achieving sustained business success across industries. In manufacturing, clear, timely, and meaningful communication, especially between management and hourly workers, can impact productivity, safety, teamwork, conflict resolution, and engagement. On the flip side, poor communication can be costly — resulting in lower productivity, quality issues, and customer dissatisfaction. According to a recent study, U.S. businesses lose an estimated \$1.2 trillion annually due to poor communication.¹

In the manufacturing sector, where hourly workers account for 78% of the workforce on average,² communication is especially challenging. In some plants, hourly employees may not have a company email address or ready access to a computer at work. This can make it difficult to engage in timely, ongoing communication with employees and foster a sense of community that drives engagement and loyalty.

Given that nearly one-quarter of the manufacturing workforce is age 55 and over,³ attracting and retaining employees has become a top priority. Today, an aging workforce combined with an ongoing skills gap and a tight labor market is making it 1.4 times harder than it was in 2018 for manufacturers to find qualified talent with the right skills.⁴ By taking steps to improve communication, your manufacturing organization will be better positioned to find and keep qualified talent, achieve production targets, and realize better business results.

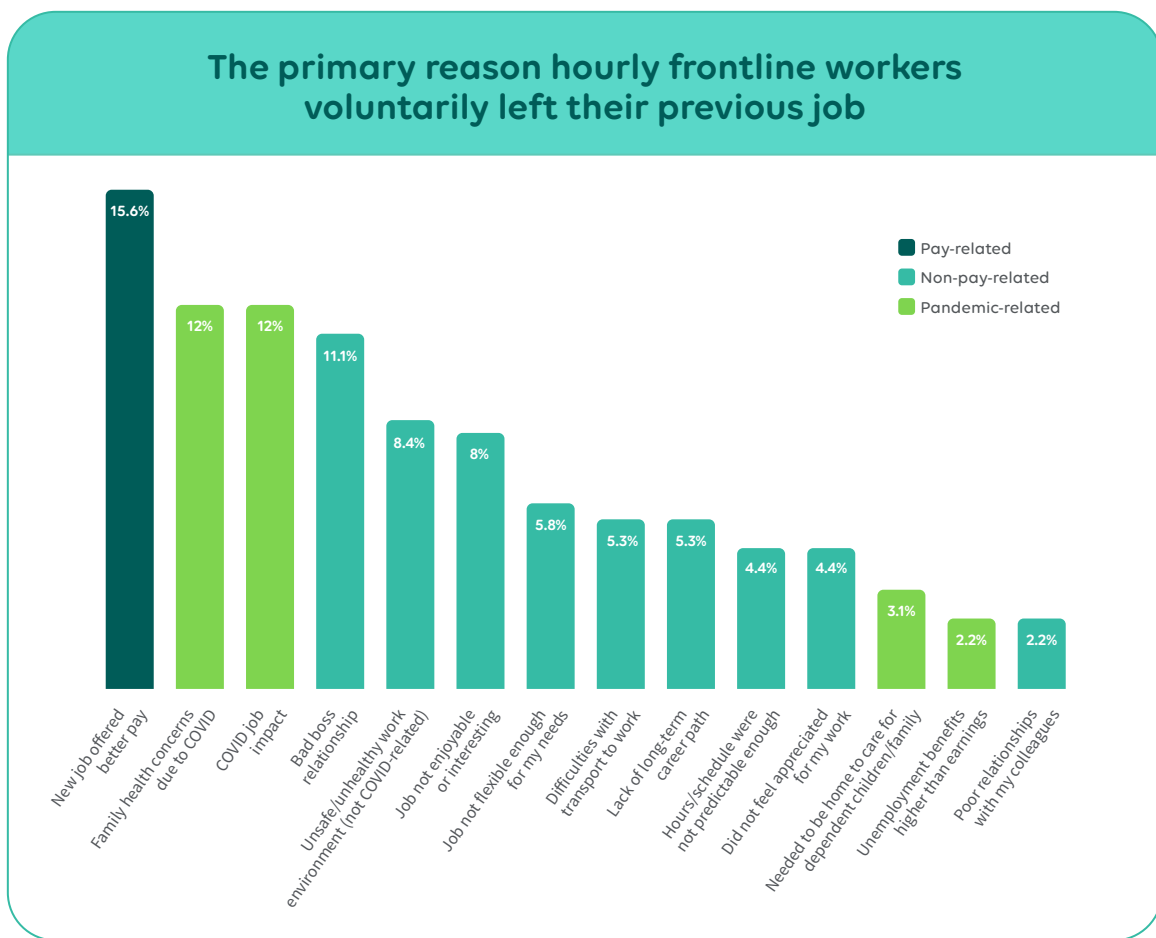
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Top barriers to effective communication in manufacturing

Improving communication with your hourly workforce starts with identifying obstacles that may be standing in your way. There are several common barriers that hamper the kind of meaningful, ongoing communication that makes hourly workers feel connected, appreciated, and prepared to excel on the job.

1. There's not enough focus on employee engagement

In the high-stress manufacturing environment where hitting operational targets is priority one, management is focused first and foremost on process and production. As a result, communicating with and developing hourly employees can take a back seat — often preventing them from feeling valued, being engaged, and doing their best work.



Source: Boston Consulting Group survey of 1,100 current and former hourly U.S. workers in the retail, distribution, travel, and food service industries who had left jobs since March 2020. The survey was conducted August 26–31, 2021.

In recent research, Gallup has identified a strong link between engagement and performance outcomes.⁵ Studies show that only 21% of employees are engaged at work.⁶ In Gallup's latest State of the American Workplace report, manufacturing workers reported lower engagement by occupation.⁷ These are alarming statistics given that low engagement costs the global economy an estimated U.S. \$7.8 trillion and accounts for 11% of GDP globally.⁸

These low engagement numbers appear to correlate with high attrition. Manufacturing has experienced the biggest surge in workers quitting — a nearly 60% jump compared with pre-pandemic rates, more than any other industry.⁹

What's causing this low engagement and high attrition? A Boston Consulting Group (BCG) survey of U.S. hourly frontline workers who left their jobs between March 2020 and August 2021 may provide some insight. Survey respondents cited a bad relationship with their boss as a key reason for turnover, right behind pay and COVID-related issues.¹⁰

In its research, BCG also shadowed the best frontline managers at a metal manufacturing organization and identified several behaviors and communication patterns that set them apart:

- Stopping when something looked amiss instead of heading directly to their original destination or task
- Asking workers exploratory questions rather than correcting or scolding
- Leading problem-solving discussions that encouraged workers to arrive at solutions themselves
- Following up with and recognizing those workers who came up with solutions and successfully applied them¹¹

With employee retention top of mind, companies should recognize the significant role communication can play in improving employee-manager relationships and nurturing a culture of trust, appreciation, and belonging.

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2. Leaders don't foster meaningful communication

Effective communication starts at the top. Your executive leaders need to set the example for communicating with employees and require managers at all levels to follow suit. Hourly employees are people first — workers second — and your management must connect with them as human beings.

In research conducted with the teams of successful leaders, respondents said these exemplary bosses were able to connect at an authentic, human level with their people.¹² They work to understand people's needs, address fears that may be holding them back, and connect them to a sense of purpose.¹³

This kind of authentic leadership requires ongoing dialogue with your employees to understand what drives them, what would help them be successful in their jobs, and what they need to truly achieve work-life balance. Plus, you need to replicate this people-first approach at all levels of management — including with your production line supervisors who manage hourly workers — through a continuous commitment to coaching, training, and communication.

Saying thank you or complimenting a job well done can make an employee feel appreciated, but creating a culture of recognition requires a more formal and sustained effort. From peer-to-peer recognition and social media shoutouts to paid time-off rewards and special events, more companies are investing in employee recognition and reward programs that help their people feel valued every day. In fact, in a recent survey, 80% of organizations reported having some type of employee recognition program.¹⁴

3. Language barriers impede communication

Nine out of 10 U.S. employers report some level of reliance on U.S.-based employees with language skills other than English, and 32% report a high dependency on non-native speakers.¹⁵ When managers and employees cannot communicate with each other due to language barriers, an organization is at risk of safety, quality, or compliance issues. It can also create hiring challenges. In a recent study, respondents said that if more managers were able to communicate in another language, it would open new labor markets for hiring.¹⁶

It's imperative that your organization consider language when developing your HR and employee communication strategies. HR staff and frontline managers may be able to get by using software like Google Translate and Microsoft Translate for simple conversations and basic instructions, but truly overcoming language barriers requires an organizationwide effort that includes:

- Leveraging interpreters (whether hired professionals or trusted employees) when giving complex instructions, providing feedback, or addressing conflict
- Translating all key documents — from onboarding forms and employee handbooks to equipment manuals and training materials
- Posting information — from new policies and daily production goals to birthdays and work anniversaries — on video boards or bulletin boards throughout your facilities in all relevant languages
- Employing visual aids, demonstrations, and repetition when communicating to ensure greater clarity
- Offering language classes that teach employees key phrases and job-related terminology in the primary language used within your workplace
- Hiring managers who speak the primary language of the workplace and the native language(s) of the hourly employees they supervise



4. Your communication strategy doesn't fully leverage mobile

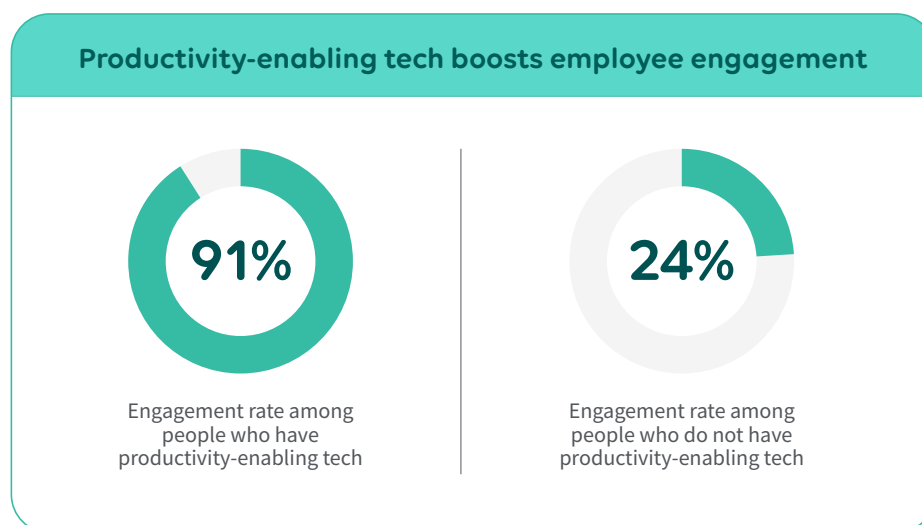
While hourly workers in manufacturing plants may not have ready access to a computer or email, the overwhelming majority own a smartphone that they bring to work every day. According to Pew Research, most Americans (97%) now own a cellphone of some kind.¹⁷ Of those phone owners, 85% own a smartphone — up from just 35% in 2011.¹⁸

Research shows that smartphone ownership is especially prevalent among younger generations. Ninety-six percent of U.S. adults ages 18-29 say they own a smartphone, followed by 95% of those ages 30-49, 83% of those ages 50-64, and 61% of those age 65+.¹⁹ As your older employees retire and younger people make up a higher percentage of your workforce, smartphone usage will be a given.

Widespread use of smartphones opens tremendous opportunities for you to connect with your hourly employees. While you may limit or prohibit smartphone use on production lines, workers actively engage with their devices during meal and rest breaks and, of course, outside of work. Communicating with your hourly workforce via smartphone — whether through apps, push notifications, or surveys — helps everyone feel empowered and connected. At the same time, it enables you to build a sense of community across the entire organization.

Improve communication with connected workplace technology

While manufacturers are making significant technology investments to improve process automation and enable smart factories, many have not yet extended their digital transformation to all areas of the organization. In a cross-vertical McKinsey & Company survey, less than 20% of respondents reported that their organizations have scaled automation technologies across multiple parts of the business.²⁰ When it comes to communicating with the hourly workforce, this is a missed opportunity.



Source: Qualtrics 2022 Employee Experience Trends Report

The time to digitally empower your hourly employees is now. Providing more connected workplace tools and mobile-friendly communications is vitally important for helping your workers feel engaged with the workplace — even when they're away from the job. Research shows 91% of employees who have access to productivity-enhancing technology are engaged — compared to 24% among those without such tools at their disposal.²¹

Empowering the hourly manufacturing workforce with digital tools — delivered via any device — will help your organization improve internal communication and streamline business processes while mitigating risks and reducing costly errors. It's an ideal way to connect hourly employees to organization news, updates, policies, and protocols; onboard new hires; motivate employees; and celebrate achievements and milestones. Simply put, it keeps employees connected to management and each other for enhanced collaboration.

At work and beyond, modern, mobile communication technology offers a platform where employees can be themselves and engage in conversations around common interests and hobbies. Employees can use this technology to coordinate carpools, participate in one-on-one or group chats, and receive alerts about events inside and outside of work. In addition, employers can solicit feedback, offer up employee recognition, or share ideas, creating a two-way communication pathway that builds a more inclusive sense of community.

Developing and executing an inclusive communication strategy

Once you've identified the technological and cultural hurdles to effective communication with your hourly workforce, it's time to develop and implement a cohesive communications strategy that connects people at all levels of the organization and fosters an organizational culture built on community and belonging.

Here are some things to consider as you embark on your strategic communications planning:

What

Take a holistic approach to ensure continuous, bidirectional communications between your managers and employees, including hourly workers. Possible tactics may include:

- Employee engagement and feedback surveys
- Weekly, monthly, and annual check-ins
- Monthly or quarterly company communications about overall performance, job opportunities, learning and development offerings, and more through town hall meetings, roundtables, and newsletters
- Employee recognition via social media or mobile apps

Who

Make sure your company communications, including those related to business goals and performance, are geared for the whole company — not just management. You can tailor communications with targeted messages for specific employee demographics and communicate through appropriate channels, including social media, employee-centric apps, text, and email.

Where

Mobile technology enables instant communication across a hybrid or dispersed workforce, including your hourly manufacturing workers. You can supplement mobile communications by leveraging intranets as well as video boards, learning workstations, and other on-site touchpoints.

When

Establish appropriate communications patterns so employees know when to expect certain information and feel a sense of ongoing connection. For example, you can share specific types of information at different cadences to keep your people motivated, engaged, and informed.

- Daily (production performance, employee reminders, shift changes)
- Weekly (special recognition of specific efforts, inspections)
- Monthly (employee anniversaries, birthdays, recognition, monthly organizational performance)
- Yearly (organizational performance, plant updates, organizational goals for the following year)

Why

Better communication is good for your people — and good for business. It creates the foundation for a more inclusive culture; deeper employee trust and loyalty; and higher individual, team, and business performance. When your hourly employees feel connected to their work, coworkers, and company, they are more likely to feel engaged, motivated, and heard — which in turn leads to a happier workplace and higher retention rates.

Start a conversation with your hourly workforce

In manufacturing, the talent crisis and pervasive burnout aren't going away anytime soon. Effective communication can serve as a key tool for understanding your hourly employees, keeping them engaged, and retaining them over time. The cost of replacing employees will continue to rise, so you need to focus on building a people-centric culture that empowers and inspires the entire workforce.

Too many businesses fear that empowering the hourly workforce will result in a loss of control. On the contrary, implementing a connected, technology-enabled communication strategy breaks down barriers, improves performance, and advances workforce agility, helping the business thrive.

With open, ongoing communications and a better understanding of your hourly employees' needs, you can cultivate a culture that elevates the work experience and supports the life-work journey — creating a better future for your people and your business.



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