From Boomers to Zoomers:

How to bridge the frontline generational skills gap

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Investigating the frontline skills gap

The **frontline skills shortage**, exacerbated by an onboarding and training gap, **is impacting everything** from employee retention and productivity to health and safety and company margins.

Add a looming retirement boom and it's clear that **urgent action is required** if organisations are going to maintain or improve performance in the years to come.

To understand the issue and what can be done to address it, Flip partnered with research firm Workplace Intelligence to **survey 1,500 global frontline managers and employees** in the U.S., U.K., and Germany. We asked about their skills, onboarding and training experiences, and access to technology to **help retail and manufacturing employers prepare their workforce for the future.**

Key findings

Looming retirement boom will hit bottom line

▶ **59%** of retail and manufacturing workers over 55 years old will retire in the next five years
▶ **81%** of frontline managers say when experienced workers leave it reduces overall productivity

Managers and young workers are misaligned on the generational skills gap

▶ **89%** of managers say Gen Z employees don't have all the technical skills they need
▶ **50%** of Gen Z say their work skills aren't recognised because of their age
▶ **43%** of Gen Z say they have better work skills than their older coworkers

Lack of onboarding and training already impacts profit and turnover

▶ **90%** of managers miss targets each year due to a lack of skills on their team
▶ **30%** of employees are likely to leave their current job because their employer doesn't provide the training and skills development they need

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'Industries that make up the backbone of our economies are staring down a critical skills vacuum. It's vital that businesses capture the invaluable expertise of retiring employees and make meaningful investments into developing the Gen Z employees who make up their future workforce. Without seamless knowledge transfer between generations, productivity will stall, and these essential industries will suffer.'

Benedikt Brand,
CEO & Co-founder, Flip.

'The new generation gap isn't just about age — it's who has essential work skills and who doesn't. The research shows many employers aren't doing enough to pass knowledge on to younger workers before older employees retire. There's a lot of good will, with experienced workers wanting to support new hires, but no one has the time or tools they need to train effectively.'

Dan Schawbel,
Managing Partner, Workplace Intelligence.

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The frontline retirement crisis is coming

A looming retirement boom represents a serious problem for frontline industries.

59% of the most experienced retail and manufacturing workers, those over 55 years old, will retire in the next 5 years. This includes 64% of retail workers and 51% of manufacturing workers over 55 years old.

Overall, 89% of frontline workers over 55 years old will retire within the next 10 years, by 2035.

Retirement Projections for Retail and Manufacturing Workers Over 55 years old

Retiring within:

🔴 5 years

🟡 6 – 10 years

⚪ 10 years+
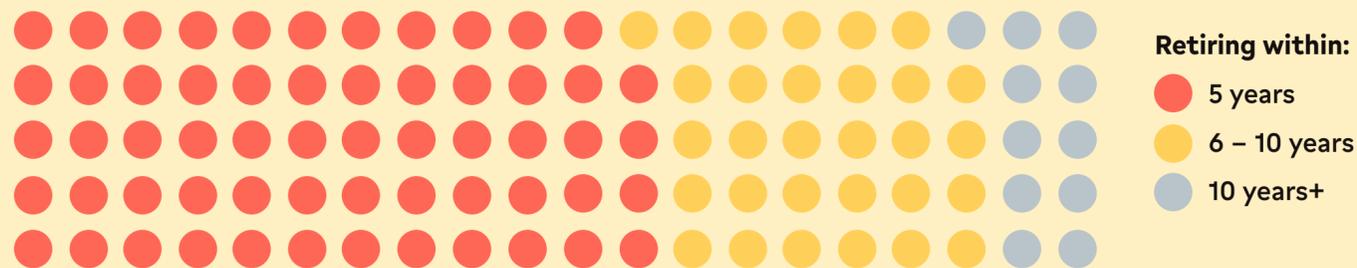
This coming retirement wave could mean severe brain drain as experienced workers leave en masse, taking valuable knowledge with them.

Companies urgently need to retain this expertise, but managers don't have faith in that happening.

82% of managers say most technical expertise is held by **workers over 55 years old.**

72% of managers are **not very confident** that organisational **knowledge will be retained** by the company as the older generation exits the business.

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The knowledge transfer challenge is real

Frontline managers are already struggling to onboard and upskill their teams, with 96% saying there are skill gaps in their workplace.

79% spend a lot of **time onboarding new team members.**

58% **rely on experienced team members** to do most of this onboarding and upskilling.

However, many frontline employees don't have the resources they need to support managers in onboarding and training.

47% don't have time to train others.

44% lack the tools they need to do so.

The good news:

Workers over 55 years old want to help the new generation of workers.

83% of workers over 55 years old want to pass on their skills and knowledge to younger workers before they leave their job.

The bad news:

Many workers over 55 years old say younger workers aren't interested in their support.

43% say younger workers don't recognise or value their skills and experience.

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Failure to close the gap will impact productivity

Experienced employees are pulling the weight for newer workers, and as these employees retire it will be harder and harder for teams to hit their targets.

81% of managers say when **experienced employees leave, it reduces** their team's overall **productivity.**

79% of frontline employees say experienced **workers have to pick up the slack for new employees** to ensure their team hits its targets/goals.

'Us older workers really do have to work a lot of overtime to make up for the younger workers not hitting production goals.'

– Gen X manufacturing employee, U.S.

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Upskilling Gen Z:

A challenge and an opportunity

Businesses must upskill their less experienced workers before the retirement boom hits. But many are not doing enough, according to frontline managers.

76% of managers are **not very confident** their company **can reduce current skills gaps.**

75% are **not very confident** their company can prepare its workforce **for future skill demands.**

Gen Z, currently aged between 13 and 28 years old, will play an increasingly important role in frontline companies and industries as they replace retiring workers. However, many companies don't know how to train, engage, and retain the newest generation in the workforce.

'Without proper training… it creates a cycle where experienced team members are constantly interrupted to explain things, reducing overall productivity. I wish there were structured resources to help new employees get up to speed faster.'
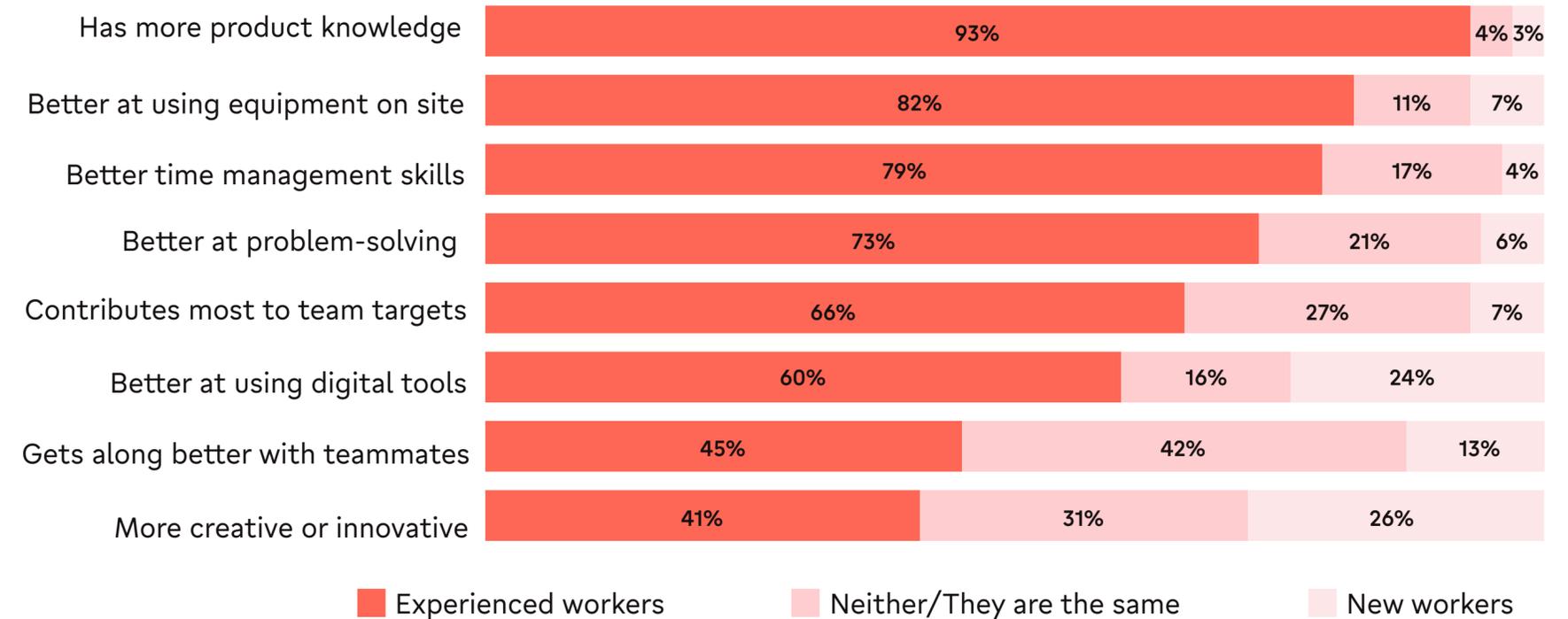
– Manufacturing manager, Germany

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Experienced employees outperform new workers on every front

Managers overwhelmingly agree that experienced workers – those with at least 20 years of industry experience – are more capable than new workers at everything from product knowledge and problem-solving to using site equipment and even digital tools.

In addition, two-thirds (66%) say experienced workers contribute more to team targets, underscoring the importance of consistently passing knowledge on to less experienced employees to maximise the performance of the team overall.

Which employee group is the most capable?

	Experienced workers	Neither/They are the same	New workers
Has more product knowledge	93%	4%	3%
Better at using equipment on site	82%	11%	7%
Better time management skills	79%	17%	4%
Better at problem-solving	73%	21%	6%
Contributes most to team targets	66%	27%	7%
Better at using digital tools	60%	16%	24%
Gets along better with teammates	45%	42%	13%
More creative or innovative	41%	31%	26%

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Gen Z:
Underappreciated or overconfident?

Gen Z workers don't agree that they're less capable than other generations. In fact, half say their abilities are overlooked because of their age – and most believe they've got more of what it takes than their older coworkers! Frontline managers and Gen Z employees clash on missing skills.

50% of Gen Z say **their work skills aren't recognised** because of their age.

89% of managers say Gen Z employees **don't have all the technical skills** they need.

Battle of the generations?

61% | of Gen Z workers say they have better skills at work than their older coworkers.

47% | of workers over 55 say the new generation is not willing to learn.

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Will Gen Z stick around long enough to learn?

Despite the clear business case for upskilling Gen Z, their job-hopping tendencies might leave some companies wary. These younger workers are feeling impatient. Many believe they will have to change industries to progress and build a career.

39% of Gen Z say they're likely to **leave their current role due to a lack of training.**

Can companies close the knowledge gap before losing the trust of the newest generation in the workplace? The question is pressing for frontline organisations, where more than half of Gen Z say they don't see long-term career opportunities.

57% of Gen Z say if they **want to progress** in their career, they **need to leave their current industry.**

'I do not have time to step away from my daily duties to take the time to strictly learn/train... It has put me behind my own developmental goal timeline.'

– Gen Z manufacturing employee, U.S.

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Starting on the wrong foot:

Lack of onboarding sets teams up to fail

The knowledge gap between experienced and new workers may seem too wide to bridge, but many companies aren't clearing the first hurdle.

Clear, consistent onboarding is the best way to upskill new hires and reduce the knowledge gap. Yet the majority of employees (55%) say their company has no formal process for onboarding.

30%
of frontline workers say their company **doesn't have the right technology** in place to support new hires.

What's more, many Gen Z frontline workers know they have some catching up to do, but say the resources aren't there for them to learn.

Half of these younger workers say they don't have all the technical skills they need, and more than a quarter (26%) say they frequently struggle at work because they haven't received the right training or onboarding.

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# Overwhelmed managers can't solve onboarding challenges on their own

Managers are already under pressure to hit targets, control costs, and maintain productivity – they don't have the time or resources to consistently onboard new staff.

79%
of managers **spend a lot of time onboarding** new team members.

73%
say a **lack of onboarding support** makes it hard to get new hires to full productivity quickly.
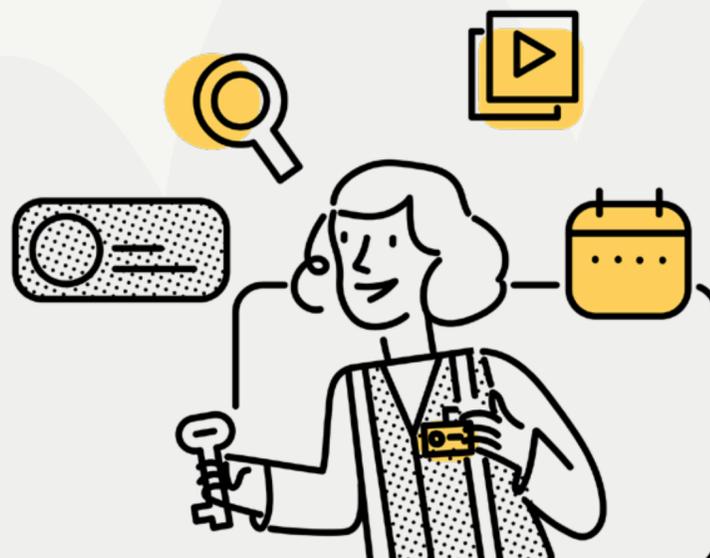
'I am overworked and understaffed. I cannot effectively train and develop my teams due to having to prioritise urgent last-minute tasks from head office.'

– Retail manager, U.S.

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Missed margins and more:

The cost of the training gap

A shortage of onboarding and training resources isn't just holding back Gen Z from learning key skills – it's having a direct impact on business margins.
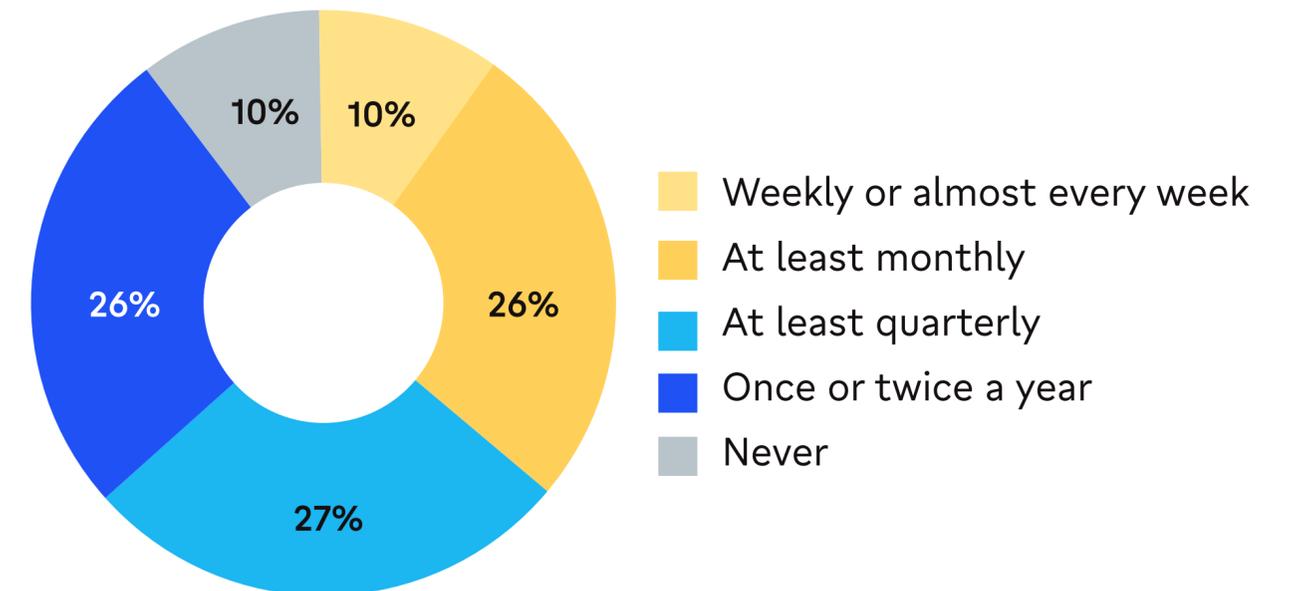
Nine out of ten frontline managers miss targets every year because of a lack of skills on their team, and nearly two-thirds (63%) miss targets at least quarterly.

Closing the training and onboarding gap may feel daunting, but the cost of doing nothing is steep.

▶ 'Not having the ability to train new hires correctly and efficiently is a direct link to not being able to hit daily targets. Without proper onboarding it takes longer for the workers to gain the skills they need.'

– Manufacturing manager, U.S.

How frequently does your team miss targets or goals because they don't have the level of skills needed to be effective?

10% Weekly or almost every week
26% At least monthly
27% At least quarterly
26% Once or twice a year
10% Never

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The lack of skills hits where it hurts — literally

In addition to the direct cost of incomplete onboarding and training, this gap has a number of indirect costs, including increasing the risk of employee injury.

75% of managers say **poor onboarding creates health and safety risks.**

Health and safety matters in every workplace, but frontline industries have additional risks to contend with. Incomplete onboarding is putting employees, work sites, and companies at risk.

Workplace accidents have direct costs to employers and the government that add up to billions of dollars a year. That's not counting the reduction in productivity from missed work, and the human impact on morale and motivation from seeing a coworker get injured.

Number of worker injuries and illnesses in 2023 by industry and country

	Manufacturing	Retail
U.S.	355,800	353,900
U.K.	427,000	59,000
Germany	62,900	23,190

US Bureau of Labour Statistics   Health and Safety Executive via Statista   Deutsche Gesetzliche Unfallversicherung

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Productivity loss: How many hours are spent on sellotape training solutions?

Frontline workers are taking the initiative to address skill gaps every day. But without enough organisational support, they do so on a case-by-case, piecemeal basis.

Workers spend an average of 14 hours a week helping coworkers, from teaching them how to do specific tasks to correcting their mistakes.
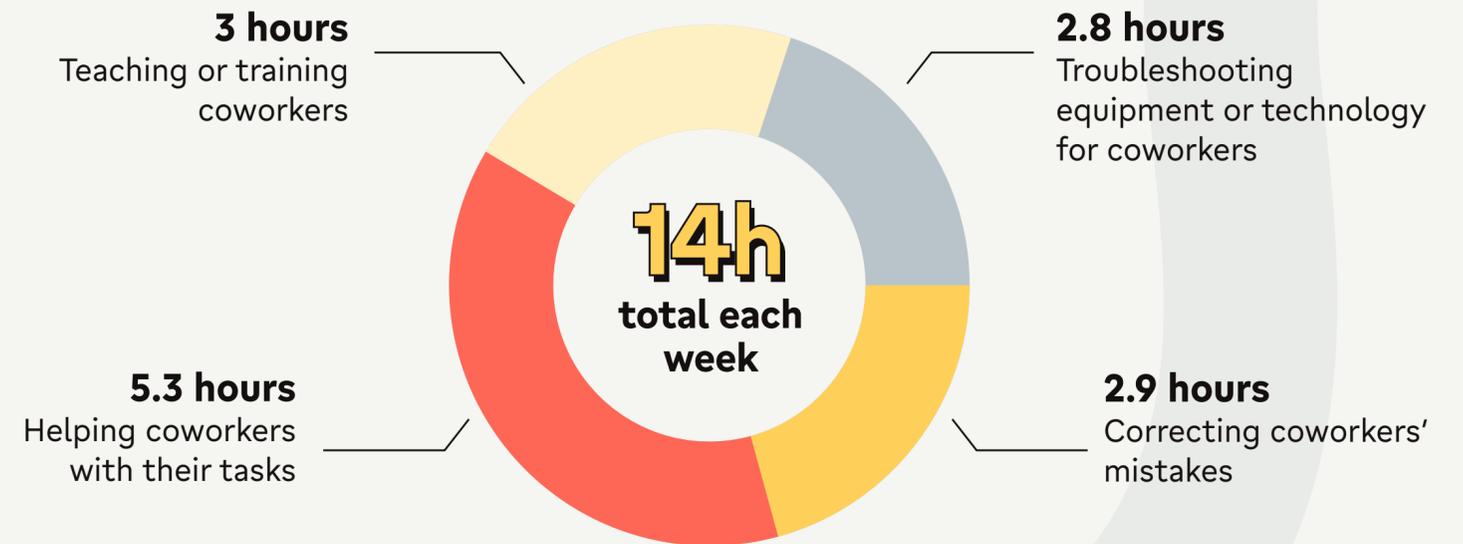
That's **728 hours – or more than 18 weeks – of lost productivity** a year for every full-time employee.

Time taken away from revenue-driving work may be an invisible cost to your company. But it's a very real one.

Average annual cost of supporting under-trained coworkers, per full-time worker[1]	Manufacturing	Retail
U.S.	$20,624	$11,386
U.K.	£13,650	£11,204
Germany	€12,374	€10,192

[1] Calculated based on an employee working 40 hours a week, earning the average hourly wage for each country and industry

Average time spent helping coworkers every week

3 hours
Teaching or training coworkers

2.8 hours
Troubleshooting equipment or technology for coworkers

14h total each week

5.3 hours
Helping coworkers with their tasks

2.9 hours
Correcting coworkers' mistakes

'[Lack of training] has made it more stressful as I am constantly rechecking work that has already been completed, adding to my workload.'

– Retail manager, U.K.

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Millennials: Giving more than they get?

Millennials are spending more than two days a week picking up the slack for their coworkers.

While workers over 55 years old may have the most technical skills and experience, it's chiefly Millennials who are stepping in to close the training gap. This generation, currently aged 29 to 44 years old, report the most time spent helping others: **16.7 hours a week.**

This could be because they're seen as more accessible by other generations in the workplace – Gen Z may not be comfortable asking someone over 55 years old for help, compared to asking coworkers just one generation older than them.

More than half (54%) of Millennial frontline workers say training coworkers is not their job, but 79% say they're happy to do it anyway – they just need the time and tools.

'I feel pressured to help coworkers... there's never enough time to train and perform properly. If there was more time allocated, I wouldn't mind training.'

– Millennial manufacturing employee, U.K.

52%
of Millennials **don't have time to train** or teach others.

48%
of Millennials **don't have the tools to train** others.

Is helping others costing Millennials their own development opportunities?

More than half (51%) of Millennial frontline workers say their organisation doesn't effectively address their individual training needs and 37% are likely to leave their current job because of a lack of training and skills development.

Closing the training gap for Gen Z workers with scalable access to the right resources will lift the burden from Millennials, as well as managers and workers over 55 years old.

'I've felt stuck in my current role because the company hasn't provided training support to help me grow...It's as if I'm treading water instead of advancing my career.'

– Millennial retail employee, Germany

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The future of frontline onboarding and training:

Universal access to resources, anytime, anywhere

The data is clear: Frontline organisations must improve resources for onboarding, training, and upskilling to address current skill gaps and reduce the impact of the coming retirement boom.

Three-quarters of managers (75%) and more than two-thirds of employees (68%) say their company needs to update the digital tools and technology available to employees.

Few companies are meeting the needs of their managers or employees in terms of training and upskilling.
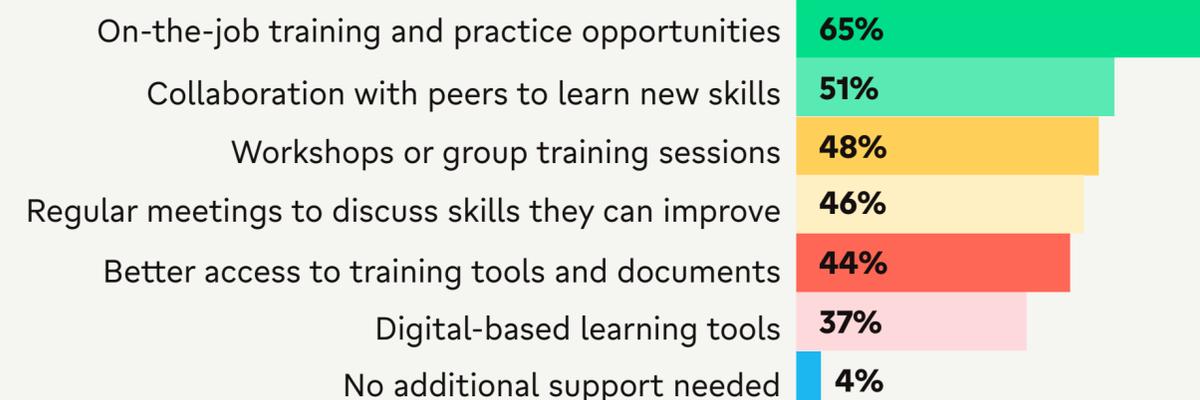
▶ 'Without proper training, team members often struggle... Investing in comprehensive training programmes would not only enhance individual performance but also improve overall team productivity and satisfaction.'

– Manufacturing manager, U.K.

96%

of managers say **their teams** need **better skill development** support.

Which of the following supports or tools would help your team members with skill development?

|	
On-the-job training and practice opportunities	**65%**
Collaboration with peers to learn new skills	**51%**
Workshops or group training sessions	**48%**
Regular meetings to discuss skills they can improve	**46%**
Better access to training tools and documents	**44%**
Digital-based learning tools	**37%**
No additional support needed	**4%**

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Empowered from day one: Increasing speed to productivity with consistent onboarding

Consistent, tech-enabled onboarding lifts the burden from managers and experienced employees, putting the power in new starters' hands to learn at their own pace from their first day on the job.

Managers want more tools to increase speed to productivity.

More than half (51%) of managers say it takes more than three months for a new hire to become fully productive. This adds additional pressure on experienced employees to ensure the team hits their targets.

How long does it take for new hires on your team to become fully productive?

■	Less than 1 month
■	1 – 3 months
■	4 – 6 months
■	7 – 12 months
■	More than a year

9% 40% 34% 12% 5%
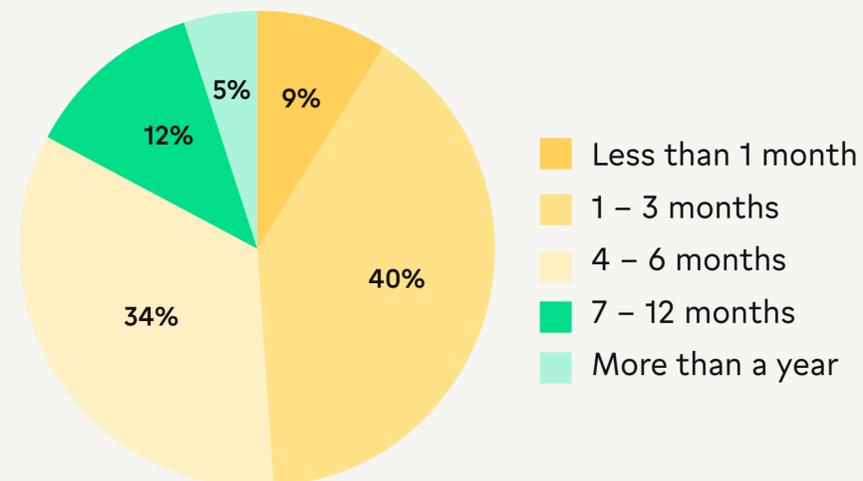
92% of frontline managers say their company **does not provide everything they need** to increase speed to productivity for new employees.

'Every single time that we have a new hire it slows production down for 3 weeks on average. Everyone else has to pick up the slack in their designated areas until the new hire has adjusted to their position.'

– Retail manager, U.S.

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Making a great first impression

Employees with the right technology to support new hires feel more empowered and enabled by great onboarding.

Workers who say their company has this support in place are **one-third as likely to say they struggle at work** due to lack of training or onboarding (13%) compared to those without this technology (36%).

**Gen Z in particular call out onboarding as a pain point.**
Half of Gen Z workers (50%) say they did not get enough onboarding and training when they started their job, compared to just 39% of Millennial frontline workers.

More than one-third of Gen Z employees (35%) say their company doesn't have the right technology to support new hires.

But when Gen Z say they have this technology, it makes an impact beyond week one. They are twice as likely to report that they've received training beyond initial onboarding (68% with the right tech vs 34% without).

> '**I feel like they just threw me to the wolves without the proper training.'**
>
> – Gen Z retail employee, U.S.
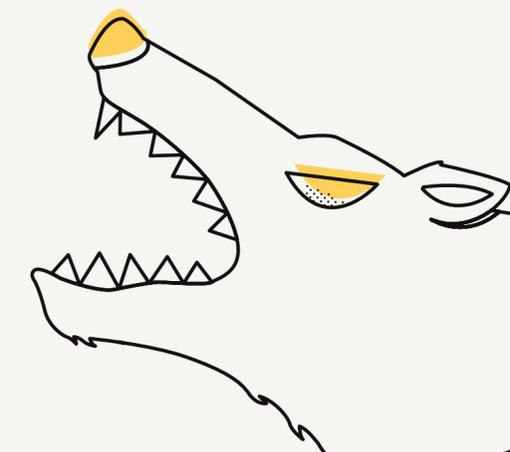
Onboarding best practices
A successful onboarding process is clear, relevant, and comprehensive.

▶ **Clear:** Structured, with ongoing steps for employees to follow
▶ **Relevant:** Tailored to each employee's job role
▶ **Comprehensive:** With further resources clearly signposted

Scaling clear, relevant, comprehensive onboarding is no easy feat.

Technology and automation can reduce workloads, improve individual access, track employees' onboarding progress, and even automate collection of onboarding feedback.

The power of centralised resources: Goodbye to information goose chases

A centralised repository for internal best practices and organisational knowledge sharing is key, making it easy for employees to access necessary information such as manuals and training resources.

61% of managers say necessary training **resources are not centralised** or accessible, adding to the challenge of onboarding.

Younger employees are even more impacted by this gap, as they don't have existing organisational knowledge to fall back on.

Centralised resources empower frontline workers to develop their own skills and knowledge at their own pace, and reduce the need to rely on more experienced coworkers.

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Easier access empowers employees

To help, organisations need to use technology to ensure consistent access to training documents, policies, and other key information.

83% of employees say **access to the right digital tools** and technology **improves their productivity** at work.

43% say it is **difficult to find the right information** when they need it.

38% often **struggle to find or contact the right person** to **help them with a specific problem** when they have one.

Centralised training best practices
An effective training repository is searchable, tailored, and accessible.

▶ **Centralised and searchable:** reducing the time to find documents and resources.

▶ **Tailored to user roles:** employees can easily find the information they need, without gaining access to irrelevant or sensitive information.

▶ **Accessible from anywhere:** enable self-guided learning by putting resources on employee devices.

The latest knowledge base solutions include AI-enabled search and recommendation features so employees are served the most relevant information — in some cases, before they even know what to ask!

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Closing the knowledge gap once and for all

In the final section of this report, we'll examine some of the approaches organisations can take to keep and share employee knowledge. From site-specific programs to company-wide tools, the right approach today will prevent skill gaps tomorrow.

More than half of workers over 55 years old will retire by 2030, taking important knowledge and expertise with them. But managers aren't confident their company can retain this knowledge. And although older workers want to pass on their expertise, many aren't sure how.

Fostering intergenerational knowledge-sharing can ensure organisations are keeping the wisdom of experience to pass on to new hires, even when these workers have moved on.

77% of **Gen Z workers** want more **support from older coworkers.**

69% of **workers over 55** are expected to **teach younger workers.**

'I'm a machine maintenance technician of 37 years. I personally don't mind teaching youngsters. The more they know, the less I have to cover for them.'

– Baby Boomer manufacturing employee, U.S.

Scalable ways to enable knowledge sharing

There are many options to improve internal knowledge transfer, with varying levels of time commitment from employees and managers.

Low staff time commitment

▶ **Shift-start knowledge sharing:** Introduce a 5-minute skills sharing session at the start of each shift to target specific skill gaps.

▶ **Weekly top tip:** Send a tip-of-the-week to employees to reduce errors.

▶ **Targeted micro-learning:** Gather videos and quizzes for employees to access on their own device at any time, showing how experienced employees solve common problems.

Medium staff time commitment

▶ **Job shadowing:** Have junior workers observe experienced employees for an hour at a time.

▶ **"Office hours":** Ask experienced employees to take turns leading 15 minutes of Q&A time each week.

▶ **FAQs or 'Skill 101s':** Maximise knowledge sharing by earmarking time for experienced employees to capture and store best practices in a centralised digital hub.
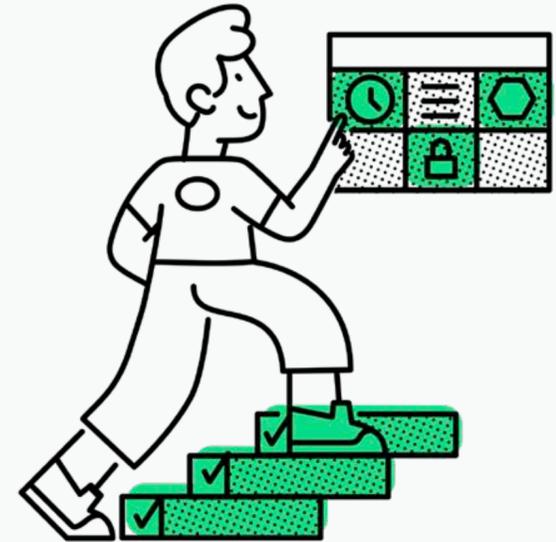
High staff time commitment

▶ **"Train the trainer" workshops:** Teach senior employees and managers how to efficiently pass on knowledge to improve site-specific training.

▶ **Formal mentorship programs:** Match experienced workers with new hires for their first 3 – 6 months to enable rich knowledge sharing.

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Get managers on board

Managers are your biggest allies in the success of new programmes or tools. However, as discussed, overwhelmed and overworked managers are already sceptical about whether their company can retain key knowledge and close the skills gap.

Win them over by making knowledge transfer programmes easy to implement and targeted to team needs.

Give them input into what their teams need to learn and outline the process in clear, easy steps.

For example, they can self-manage a shift-start knowledge sharing programme by identifying knowledge gaps and on-site experts, then ask experienced employees to take turns sharing best practices.

Managers want their teams to succeed and many are already taking steps to bridge onboarding and training gaps. Offering the right technology and processes will ensure managers feel empowered and supported, instead of stressed and overwhelmed.

'We don't receive all the training support we need, but my team takes care of it internally to make sure everybody is trained properly. It might take a little longer, but we get it done.'

– Retail manager, U.S.

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Building tomorrow's workforce today

These research findings reinforce what many frontline leaders know or suspect. There is a **stark and growing skills gap** lurking in the frontline workforce that a looming retirement boom **could turn into a true productivity crisis.**

It's a multipronged challenge: More than half of retail and manufacturing workers over 55 years old will retire in the next five years, managers are feeling overwhelmed, and under-supported Gen Z workers could leave the industry entirely. To navigate these risks, companies must **use technology to scale access to training and onboarding.**

Few organisations are getting it right. Those that can solve this problem will **gain the market advantage** in employee productivity and retention.
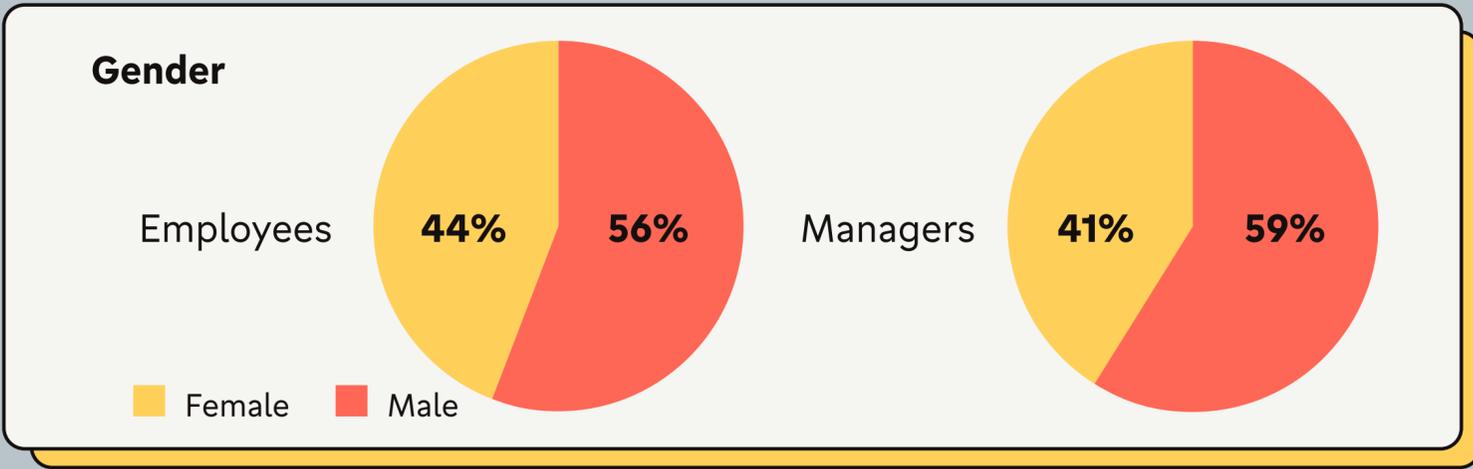
The call to action for employers is clear:
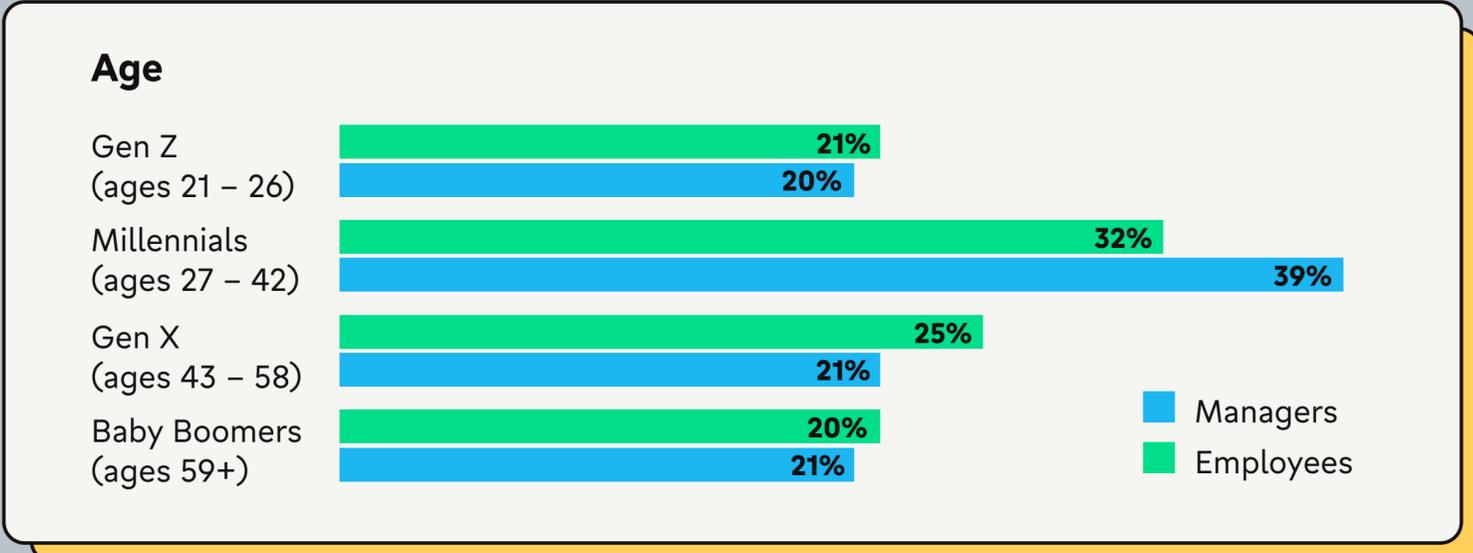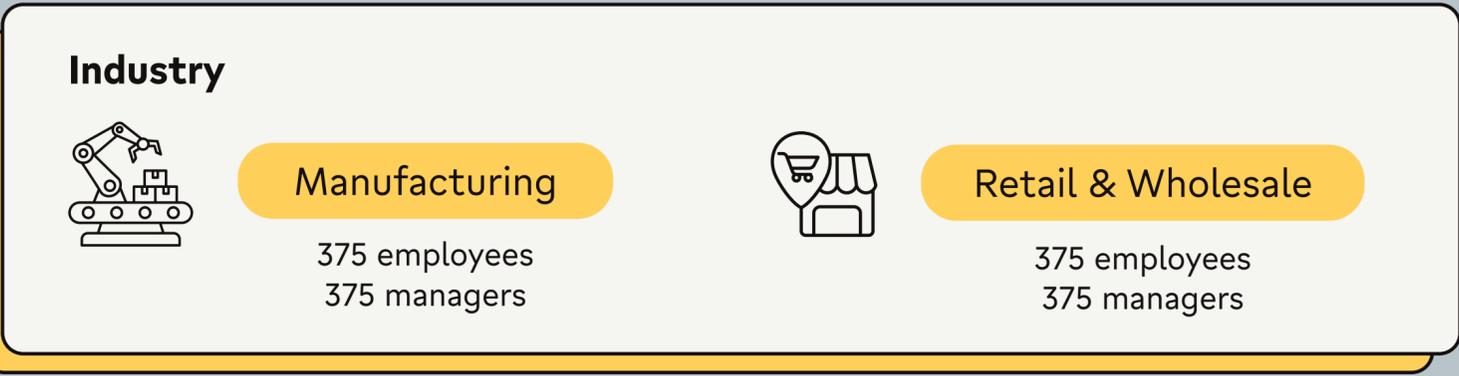
1 Empower new hires with **clear, consistent, relevant onboarding** at their fingertips.

2 **Centralise access** to best practices, training documents, and manuals to reduce employee frustration and time lost to fruitless searches.

3 Close generational knowledge gaps with **tailored, self-guided learning experiences** that don't overburden managers or workers.

Research methodology

Research findings are based on a survey conducted by Flip and Workplace Intelligence between January 16 – 22, 2025. In total, 1,500 global employees between the ages of 21 – 79 completed the survey. This included 750 frontline employees and 750 frontline managers.

Country

U.S.	U.K.	Germany
250 frontline employees 250 frontline managers	250 frontline employees 250 frontline managers	250 frontline employees 250 frontline managers

Industry

Manufacturing
375 employees
375 managers

Retail & Wholesale
375 employees
375 managers

Company size (by number of employees)

Legend: Managers, Employees

- 1,000 – 4,999: Employees 239, Managers 301
- 5,000 – 9,999: Employees 160, Managers 155
- 10,000+: Employees 351, Managers 294

Age

	Managers	Employees
Gen Z (ages 21 – 26)	20%	21%
Millennials (ages 27 – 42)	39%	32%
Gen X (ages 43 – 58)	21%	25%
Baby Boomers (ages 59+)	21%	20%

Gender

Employees: Female 44%, Male 56%
Managers: Female 41%, Male 59%

Legend: Female, Male

About the research sponsors

About Flip

Flip is the employee experience platform that heavyweights like Bosch, Ben & Jerry's, Porsche, and McDonald's Germany use to reach and rally their whole company, from head office to the shop floor.

Its super easy-to-use app connects employees with the right people, news, and knowledge in an instant, and makes everyday tasks like coordinating shifts and sharing success effortless.

Get to know Flip →

About Workplace Intelligence

Workplace Intelligence is an award-winning thought leadership and research agency focused on the world of work. We help companies, and their executives, tell their workplace story in a meaningful, relevant, and impactful way using primary data, insights, and interviews.

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