

CATALYST

Half of Frontline Employees at Risk of Leaving: What You Can Do About It (E-book)

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By Sheila Brassel, PhD

“The workplace is a vital aspect of survival, and it’s where we spend the majority of time, even more than time spent with families. It should be made bearable.”

- BLACK AFRICAN WOMAN, 37, CANADA, UTILITIES



Organizations with frontline employees are struggling to attract and retain valued talent—and with over half of frontline employees considering leaving their jobs, industries stand to lose billions of dollars annually on turnover alone.¹

While organizations can strive to address this costly problem through table-stakes improvements in compensation, benefits, and growth opportunities,² it is essential that they also pay attention to the bigger picture of frontline employees’ experiences at work. Recent Catalyst research showed that a wide range of negative factors can contribute to a revolving door of talent.³ To further understand how frontline employees are doing at work, we collected data from nearly 4,500 employees in the manufacturing, retail, hospitality, banking, extraction, utilities, and transportation and warehousing industries in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁴

Our data show that **across the board, frontline employees are not thriving.** Many lack psychological safety and the ability to manage their health without risk of backlash. Most are burned out and fed up—but they are also ready and willing to get involved in efforts to make their workplaces more fair.

This data is a cry for change from the very people who keep our economies running. If businesses don’t take action, they risk prolonging high levels of chronic turnover, as well as incurring the high costs associated with absenteeism, illness and injury, and decreased engagement and productivity.⁵ Improving frontline working conditions is an imperative for both business and employee success.

Frontline employees are not thriving.



Over Half of Frontline Employees Are Considering Leaving Their Jobs

Considering leaving their jobs

55%

WOMEN: 57%
MEN: 53%⁶

45%

Not considering leaving their jobs

Not psychologically safe at work

47%

WOMEN: 46%
MEN: 47%⁷

Nearly Half of Frontline Employees Are Not Psychologically Safe at Work

53%

Psychologically safe at work

Discouraged from taking time off

67%

WOMEN: 67%
MEN: 66%⁸

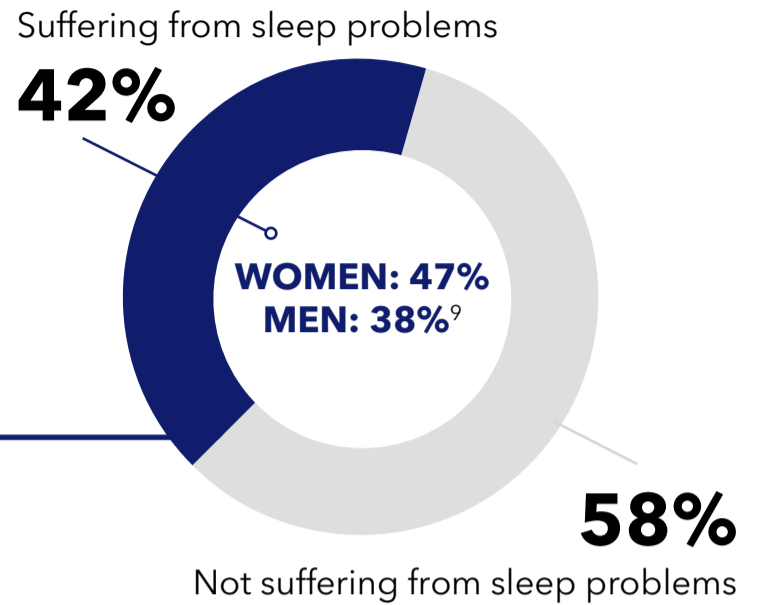
Two Thirds of Frontline Employees Are Discouraged From Taking Time Off for Any Reason (*Including Sick Days, Parental Leave, and Vacation*)

33%

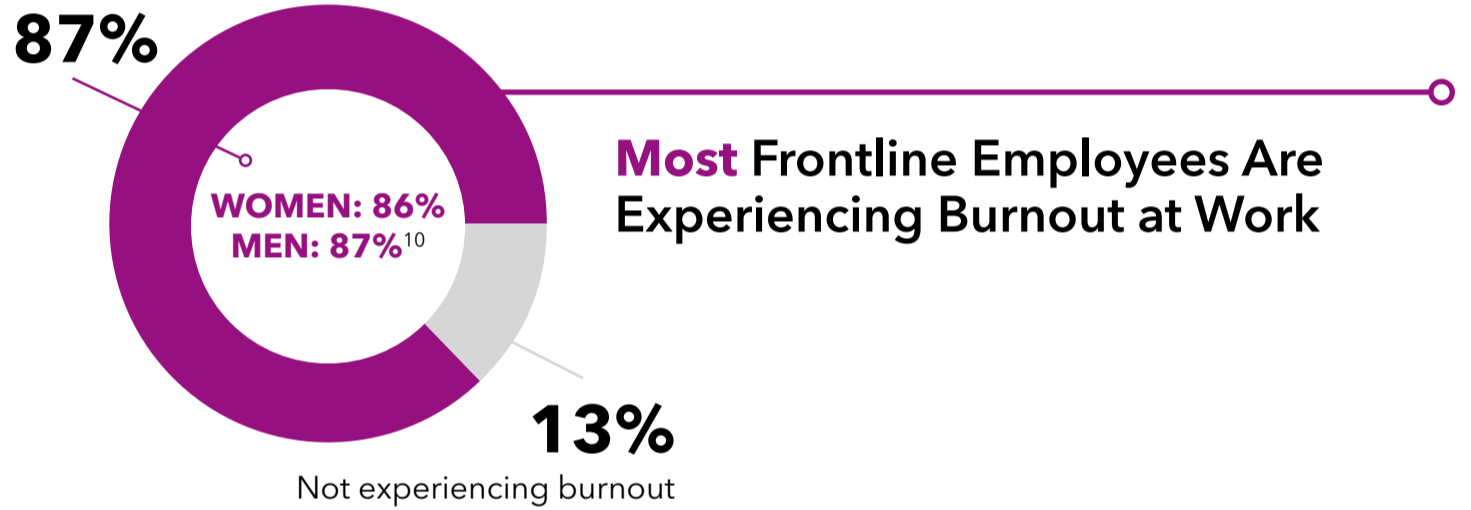
Encouraged



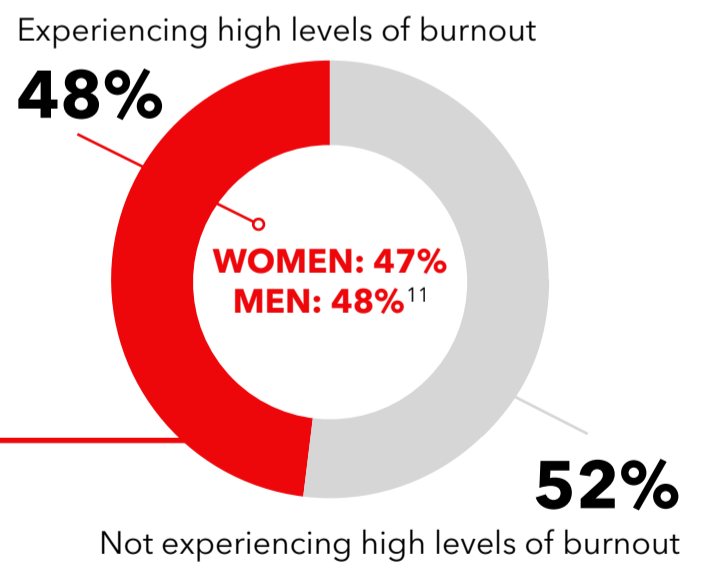
Nearly Half of Frontline Employees Suffer From Regular Sleep Problems



Experiencing burnout



Nearly Half of Frontline Employees Report High Levels of Burnout at Work



Frontline employees want fair and equitable workplaces.

Two in Three Frontline Employees Want to Get Involved in Efforts to Make Their Workplace More Fair

Want to get involved

64%

WOMEN: 64%
MEN: 64%¹²

36%

Don't want to get involved

Personally value fair treatment

84%

WOMEN: 86%
MEN: 83%¹³

A Majority of Frontline Employees Say It's Personally Important to Them That Their Workplace Treats Employees of All Genders Fairly

16%

Don't personally value fair treatment

In a recent Catalyst report, 40% of frontline employees said their manager does not treat employees fairly, as defined when manager decisions are consistent and impartial. The report also found that **the more managers are unfair, the more likely frontline employees are to intend to leave their jobs.**¹⁴

"[My] immediate supervisor is fair. His supervisor has favorites... all men. There are no female supervisors even though they make up two-thirds of the workforce in this organization."

- WHITE WOMAN, 58, CANADA, UTILITIES





3 Ways to Take Action

Build workplaces where frontline employees thrive.

There is much that companies can do to enhance the frontline workplace and to create opportunities for employees to be a part of building a more equitable work environment.

1. Aim for Partnership, not Perfection

Culture change requires intentional action from managers and organizations—and it doesn't happen overnight.

- ✓ **Examine your areas of opportunity:** Research by Catalyst and others has identified senior leader empathy,¹⁵ manager support,¹⁶ inclusive leadership,¹⁷ and genuine DEI policies¹⁸ as critical for creating a workplace where valued employees want to stay.
- ✓ **Start talking about equity:** When frontline teams engage in discussions and activities related to equity and fairness, employees experience greater psychological safety and are more likely to value



"At my job, people and coworkers are nice, work hard, and help each other out. It's the company that just does not care about the employees."

-LATINA WOMAN,
48, US, RETAIL

diversity on their teams (e.g., actively listening to and enjoying engaging with team members from different genders and racial or ethnic backgrounds).¹⁹ Catalyst tools can help set up frontline [leaders](#) and [teams](#) for success in these conversations.

- ✓ **Invite people of all genders:** Catalyst's [gender partnership framework](#) lays out how people of all genders can be part of making the workplace better for all.
- ✓ **Strengthen team dynamics:** Catalyst's [frontline research](#) shows that frontline employees who have more positive coworker connections are nearly 2.5x more likely to experience high levels of job satisfaction.²⁰ Try building these connections through a [gender partnership](#) approach.

2. Break the Silence

Organizations can take action to build psychological safety and boost coworker connections by reducing a [climate of silence](#) and ensuring equal treatment of employees.

- ✓ **Name barriers to speaking up:** Take stock of the implicit (and explicit) rules and penalties that employees fear if they speak up about the issues they're facing at work.
- ✓ **Listen:** Train frontline leaders to encourage employees to break through the silence by practicing active listening and assuring employees that their voices matter.²¹
- ✓ **Dismantle harmful gender norms:** One way to combat implicit or explicit gender norms—which can stifle employee voices²²—is to make space for [flexible masculinities](#) by recognizing which traits and behaviors are valued in your

workplace.²³ Make sure that there's space for people of all genders to express their full selves at work—rather than being boxed into gender stereotypes.

- Does your organization prioritize traits that are stereotypically masculine (e.g., risk-taking, competitiveness, stoicism)?
- To what extent are people of all genders, including men, rewarded or punished for conforming to masculine stereotypes?
- When someone makes a sexist comment or suggests that women aren't suited for certain types of jobs, how do employees react? How do leaders respond?
- Lead by speaking out against sexism and rigid gender norms.²⁴

3. Help Managers Help Employees

Organizations must provide frontline managers with the skills and tools they need to effectively manage their teams.

- ✓ **Cascade accountability to managers:** [Research shows](#) that frontline supervisors can be a real “make or break” in the employee experience.²⁵
- ✓ **Equip managers to be supportive:** Many frontline managers want to support their teams by addressing tough issues like rigid scheduling practices, but are constrained by corporate policies and regulations.²⁶ They need access to [tools](#) like leadership training and/or the authority to support employees so they can create environments that help employees feel valued, connected, and motivated.²⁷

“I’m a leader in my workplace; I set an example...I make sure that the women who work in my department are treated fairly and with respect.”

- MÉTIS AND WHITE MAN, 48, CANADA, MANUFACTURING





Invest in your workplace today.

Catalyst works with companies to provide them with the solutions necessary to build healthy work environments for frontline employees. **Explore Catalyst's Supporter-only tools below.**

Corporate Leaders:

- ✓ Attract, develop, and retain women in frontline roles with **Window to the Front Line**, an action-oriented toolkit containing a worksheet, checklist and leading practices. **Watch the demo.**

Frontline Managers:

- ✓ Build rewarding environments for women with **Moments That Matter**, 24 scenario-based learning cards and a collection of video and audio micro-learnings.
- ✓ Tune into these **3 ways** that you can improve workplace culture, build essential **inclusive communication skills** and start taking actionable steps to **promote gender partnership.**

WANT ACCESS? →

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Endnotes

1. Catalyst & Accenture. (2024). [Team dynamics on the front line: How managers and organizations impact this overlooked key to retention](#). Catalyst.
2. Fuller, D., Logan, B., Suarez, P., & Valkova, A. (2022, August 17). [How retailers can attract and retain frontline talent amid the Great Attrition](#). McKinsey.
3. Catalyst & Accenture. (2023). [Women on the front line: Enabling them to thrive, stay, and perform](#). Catalyst.
4. We surveyed 4,452 employees in the manufacturing ($n = 924$), retail ($n = 845$), hospitality ($n = 776$), banking ($n = 616$), extraction ($n = 269$), utilities ($n = 348$), and transportation and warehousing ($n = 674$) industries in Canada ($n = 1,299$), the United Kingdom ($n = 1,335$), and the United States ($n = 1,818$). Our sample comprised women (49%; $n = 2,174$), men (50%, $n = 2,237$), and trans and nonbinary employees (1%, $n = 38$). Most respondents identified as White only (71%, $n = 3,139$) and our sample included representation from other racial and ethnic identities as well (e.g., Black, Indigenous, Asian, Multiracial, Latine employees; 29%, $n = 1,270$). Most respondents identified as heterosexual/straight (86%, $n = 3,702$), and our sample represented other sexual identities as well (e.g., asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, queer employees; 14%, $n = 606$). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 73, with an average age of 41 years. All participants were in non-management roles and worked in positions that required them to be physically present at a work site (as opposed to working remotely). Note that participants could skip demographic questions, so the number of participants who answered these questions may not add up to the total sample size.
5. [Poor health costs US employers \\$575 billion and 1.5 billion days of lost productivity per Integrated Benefits Institute](#). (2020, December 8). *Integrated Business Institute*; [Business case for safety and health](#). Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
6. Turnover intentions were measured on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). Scores of 3 to 5 (sometimes, often, always) reflect employees that are considering leaving their jobs. A chi-square analysis determined that women (57%) were significantly more likely than men (53%) to be considering leaving their jobs: $\chi^2(1) = 8.01, p < .005$.
7. Psychological safety was measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores of 4 through 6 reflect experiencing psychological safety at work.
8. Company encouragement to take time off for parental leave, sick days, and vacation was measured on a scale of 1 (highly discouraged) to 6 (highly encouraged). Scores of 1 to less than 4 reflect that employees are discouraged from taking time off.
9. Sleep problems were measured on a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (always). Scores of 4 through 6 reflect employees routinely experiencing sleep problems. A chi-square analysis determined that women (47%) were significantly more likely than men (38%) to experience sleep problems: $\chi^2(1) = 34.84, p < .001$.
10. Burnout was measured on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 6 (extremely). Scores of 2 through 6 reflect experiencing burnout at work.
11. Burnout was measured on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 6 (extremely). Scores of 4 through 6 reflect experiencing high levels of burnout at work.
12. Desire to get involved with efforts to make their workplace more fair was measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores of 4 through 6 reflect a desire to get involved in these efforts.
13. Personal value of fair treatment for employees of all genders was measured on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores of 4 through 6 reflect personally valuing fair treatment.
14. Catalyst & Accenture. (2024). [Team dynamics on the front line: How managers and organizations impact this overlooked key to retention](#). Catalyst.
15. Van Bommel, T. (2021). [The power of empathy in times of crisis and beyond](#). Catalyst.
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17. Travis, D., Shaffer, E., & Thorpe-Moscon, J. (2019). [Getting real about inclusive leadership: Why change starts with you](#). Catalyst.
18. Van Bommel, T., Robotham, K., & Jackson, D. M. (2022). [Words aren't enough: The risks of performative policies](#). Catalyst.
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