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

Improving opportunities for low-wage hourly employees to advance their careers can raise US workforce skill levels and give a powerful boost to inclusion.

by Swathi Bhaskaran, Andrew Davis, Christophe Desbrière, and Sara Wasserteil



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Millions of Americans are employed as retail store associates, nursing aides, customer service representatives, administrative assistants, housekeeping staff, and many similar jobs. These frontline employees are ambitious and eager to climb the career ladder; in our survey of more than 2,100 frontline employees, we found that more than 70 percent have applied to career advancement opportunities either with their current employers or with different companies. However, many often struggle to overcome the barriers to professional growth.

Among these barriers is a stark disconnect between what frontline employees want and what employers think they want. We define frontline employees as hourly workers, primarily individual contributors, making less than $22 per hour across select industries. Many frontline employees aren't getting the right resources or support to advance their careers. By addressing what matters to their frontline workforce, employers can harness the untapped potential of a large and motivated talent pool—an urgent priority amid labor shortages and challenges in attracting and retaining talent. And when employers do more and do better to support the advancement of frontline employees, they create opportunities for their employees to meaningfully improve their lives and livelihoods.

Voices of frontline employees are largely missing from the discourse on career advancement, which tends to focus on other segments of the workforce, such as manager-level employees. Frontline employees are a distinct population with a unique set of needs and preferences. Yet most employers have an incomplete picture of their preferences, needs, and experiences with career advancement. McKinsey, in collaboration with Cara Plus, a part of Cara Collective, embarked on a large-scale research effort to understand frontline employees' perspectives on career advancement (see sidebar "About the research").

Widening the aperture for frontline employee advancement has a far-reaching effect beyond individual well-being and talent retention. Upward economic mobility for frontline employees is a critical building block of an inclusive and resilient workforce. America's frontline employees are disproportionately women and people of color. Many are skilled through alternative routes (STARs)—instead of being graduates of four-year colleges—or have previously experienced homelessness, addiction, or involvement in the criminal justice system. At the same time, frontline employees across all demographics are more vulnerable to automation-driven job displacement. Promoting career advancement of frontline employees is an important way that employers can reduce gender, racial, and skill-biased inequalities as well as contribute to a more sustainable, inclusive, and growing economy.

This article explores frontline employee career advancement in four parts: first, what frontline employees say they need; second, what employers perceive as the career advancement priorities of frontline employees; third, the common barriers to career advancement; and last, how employers can bridge the differences, with a focus on tactical actions to meaningfully improve career advancement outcomes.

What frontline employees want

When we asked frontline employees what career advancement means to them, their answers revealed a constellation of desires, motivations, and priorities (Exhibit 1). By weaving together their individual perspectives, our research reveals a clearer picture of what frontline employees need and want from career advancement opportunities.

About the research

To better understand frontline employee perspectives, McKinsey, in collaboration with Cara Plus, conducted separate surveys of frontline employees and managers of frontline employees across the country in March 2022. Frontline employees are defined as hourly workers, primarily individual contributors, making $22 per hour or less and employed in the customer service, financial and professional services, healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing, retail, shipping, and logistics and transportation industries.

The survey of frontline employees included 2,154 individuals, comprising both currently employed people and job seekers. Our sampling process included deliberate screening criteria and quotas based on demographics to achieve representation across gender, race and ethnicity, age, and geography. Most individuals in our sample are skilled through alternate routes (STARs), including 902 individuals with high school degrees or GEDs; 856 with some college education; and 312 with technical, vocational, or skills training. In addition, our survey included 268 respondents who have been involved in the criminal justice system. These talent pools make up a large part of the labor force, yet there has been relatively little quantitative research on their career advancement needs to date.

The survey of managers of frontline employees included 305 people who specialize in frontline talent management, including HR decision makers and direct supervisors of frontline employees. These participants were split roughly between large organizations (more than 1,000 employees) and small to medium-size organizations.

Exhibit 1

What does the term 'career advancement' mean to you?

Our survey asked low-wage frontline employees and job seekers in the United States about their perspectives on career advancement. Here is a sampling of their responses.

Employees with adverse experiences[1]	"Career advancement means more knowledge, new skills, and additional responsibility—a step toward my ultimate goal."	"It is an opportunity to make more money for more hours and responsibility."
	"It means moving forward and taking on further responsibilities in a field of choice."	"Career advancement means to be successful in your life and to learn a lot more than what you know now."
Black and/or Hispanic employees	"Career advancement to me means I can advance to a higher position within my current company."	"The term career advancement means to achieve higher goals in your career."
	"Career advancement is the ability to take advantage of job training (on the job, off-site training, etc.) and coaching to effectively pursue higher positions within the organization I work for."	"It means moving up the career chain to a higher level of responsibility and financial compensation."
Parents	"Career development can effectively improve my life. It'll make my life better for me and my family."	"To me, that means furthering my education. I had taken time out of the workforce to raise children, and I need to get back into a career that is not just a job."
	"It means gaining responsibility and new knowledge and training to be able to handle more work and gain more pay."	"Career advancement to me means getting better at what I do so I can move up and become a supervisor."
	"It is when you get to move up the ladder in the career you have been in and get a higher position and higher pay. It means being rewarded for the work that you have done for your company."	
Employees skilled through alternative routes (STARs)	"It means to be given the opportunity to grow and expand your knowledge in a career."	"Career development for me means the improvement of my personal ability and also more jobs to choose from."
	"It means that I step up into a higher role at my job, such as management."	"It means to use available training offered at your job to move up in the company."

[1] Adverse experiences include addiction, involvement in the criminal justice system, domestic violence, and homelessness.

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

Pay, job growth, a supportive work environment, and learning opportunities

Most frontline employees view career advancement primarily as a means toward more income and financial security. Tangible benefits—specifically, higher pay—are one of the most important factors for frontline employees hoping to advance their careers (Exhibit 2). This is hardly surprising. For those making $22 an hour or less, a wage increase can materially improve quality of life and ability to provide for a family. And indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, material questions have become even more important (see sidebar "Many frontline employees reconsidered their priorities during the pandemic").

However, employees are motivated by a number of factors beyond compensation. In fact, Exhibit 2 also shows that the opportunity for job growth or promotion is an even higher priority for frontline employees than pay or benefits alone—and is significantly more important to frontline employees than their employers think. Rounding out the top five attributes for frontline employees are learning opportunities, an aligned skill set, and a supportive manager. Employees desire jobs that make the most of their current skills and allow them to learn and build new ones (for example, through paid training). And among frontline employees, 73 percent cited a manager who supports their career progression as key to career advancement.

Personal gratification from work is relatively less important to frontline employees than to the broader employee population. While previous research shows that 70 percent of all employees define their sense of purpose through their work,[1] this factor seems to be less important for those on the front line. Less than one-third of frontline employees in our survey ranked fulfillment, excitement, or purpose among their five most important job attributes for career advancement.

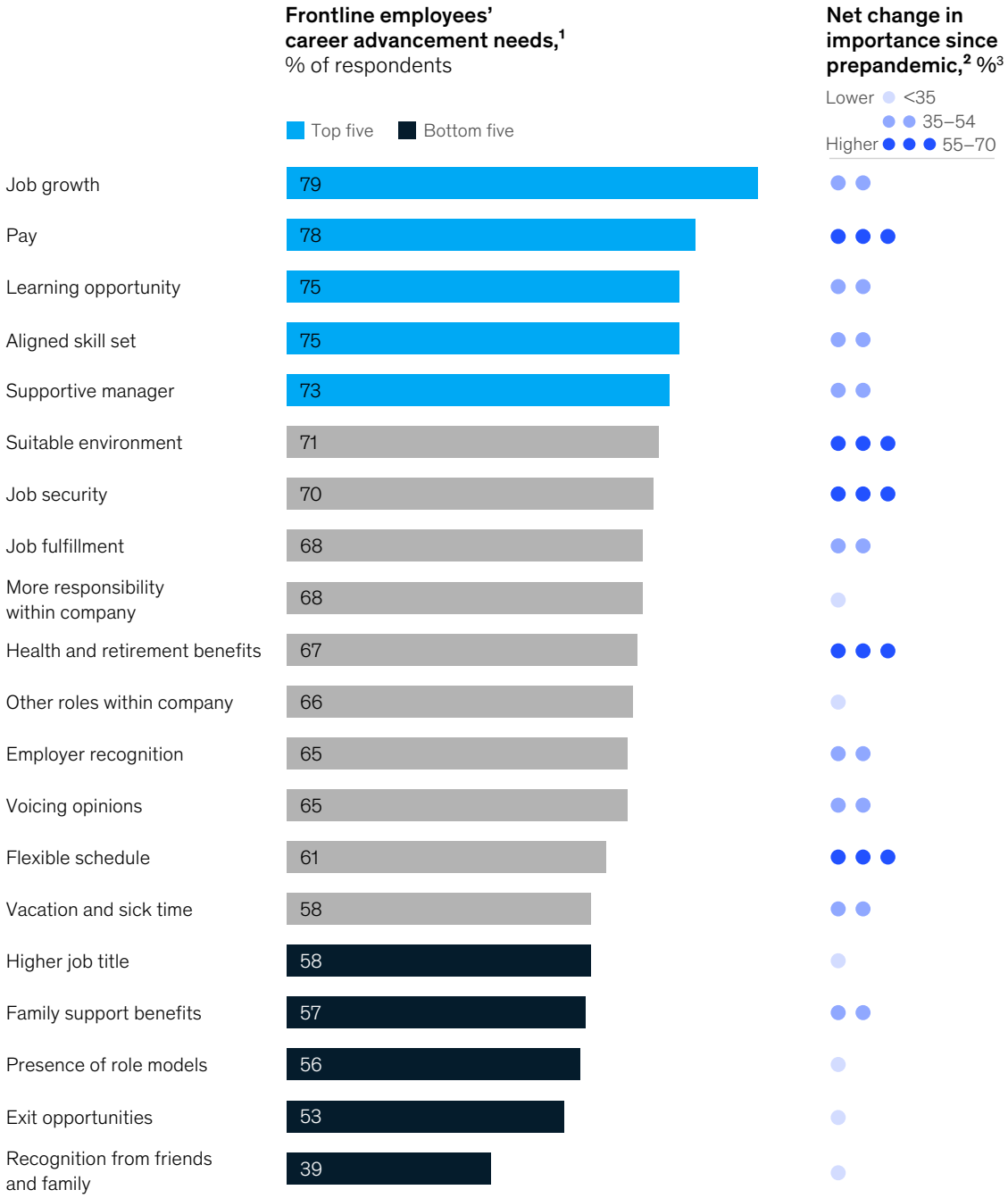
[1] Naina Dhingra, Andrew Samo, Bill Schaninger, and Matt Schrimper, "Help your employees find purpose—or watch them leave," McKinsey, April 5, 2021.



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Exhibit 2

The top five career advancement attributes focus on growth, compensation, and a supportive work environment.



[1] Question: "Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree that each of the following are important aspects of 'career advancement.'"
[2] Question: "Please think about your needs before the COVID-19 pandemic (prior to March 2020) versus now. How much more or less important have each of the following aspects of a job become now that the pandemic is nearing the end/lessening?"
[3] Percentages reflect top 2 ("significantly/much more important") minus bottom 2 ("significantly/much less important").

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

Many frontline employees reconsidered their priorities during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic aftermath have had an outsize impact on employees on the front line, forcing many to reconsider their priorities and needs. Among all career attributes, pay, job security, and health and retirement benefits have increased the most in importance since the onset of the pandemic, followed closely by a flexible schedule and a suitable work environment. Of the 35 percent of frontline employees who switched or considered switching industries during the pandemic, an overwhelming majority cited making more money as the rationale. This is in stark contrast to higher-wage employees, who mostly prioritized workplace flexibility as a result of the pandemic.[1]

Beyond the pandemic, our survey suggests that there is a considerable diversity of opinion among frontline employees across demographic groups and industries. For example, women place higher value on having a supportive manager than men do (76 percent compared with 64 percent),[2] while Black and Hispanic employees care more about having a clean, safe, and easily accessible work location.[3] The youngest employees (aged 18 to 24) are more focused on having a higher job title, with a difference of 22 percentage points compared with those over the age of 55. Parents prioritize family support benefits (such as parental leave and childcare) more than employees without children; however, these benefits still rank among the bottom five, below other growth and environmental attributes.



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[1] For more about the impact of the pandemic on higher-wage employees, see Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Marino Mugayar-Baldocchi, and Bill Schaninger, "'Great Attrition' or 'Great Attraction'? The choice is yours," *McKinsey Quarterly,* September 8, 2021.
[2] For more about women in the workplace, see "Women in the Workplace 2021," McKinsey, September 27, 2021.
[3] For more about race in the workplace, see *Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector*, McKinsey, February 21, 2021.

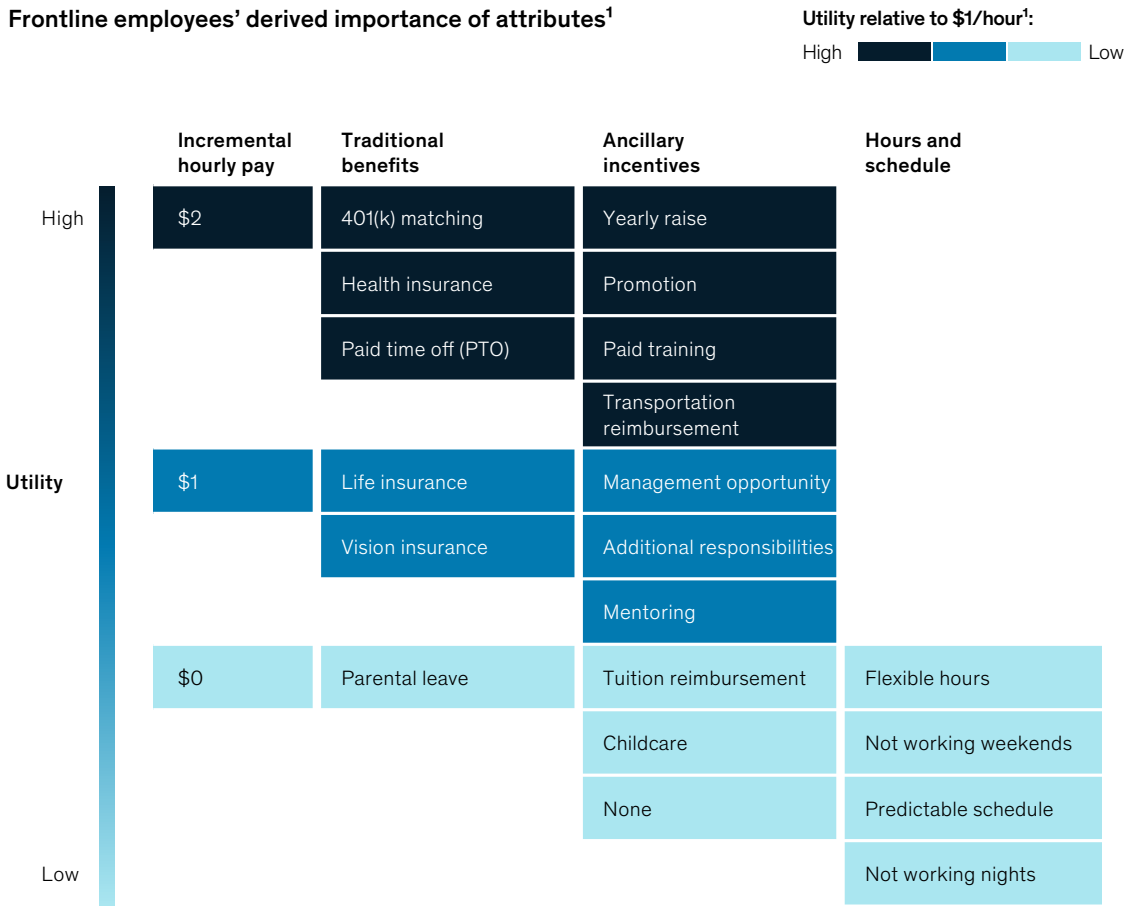
A job profile that meets their needs

Frontline employees' preferences play a significant role in their decisions to apply for promotions and new roles, both within and outside the organization. Because most frontline employees would rather stay and grow with their current employer than pursue external roles, employers that can align their job profiles with their employees' career advancement needs stand to retain and develop a greater share of their frontline employees.

To better understand the preferences of frontline employees, we asked them to make trade-off decisions across a series of job profiles by selecting the combination of attributes that would most encourage them to apply. Our analysis provides a view into the relative importance of job attributes across four categories: incremental pay, traditional benefits, ancillary incentives (such as the opportunity for a yearly raise or promotion), and work schedule and flexibility. The findings suggest that compensation, growth through promotion, paid training, and high-value traditional benefits have the largest impact on frontline employee preferences among job profiles (Exhibit 3—see this in action in the job profile interactive).

Exhibit 3

Compensation, growth, and select traditional benefits have a large impact on frontline employee preference.



[1] Utility estimated based on share of preference change for attribute relative to baseline of $1, parental leave, no ancillary incentive, and not working nights.

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

Advancement: A pervasive issue across industries

Career advancement preferences and practices vary by industry (exhibit). For example, job security is relatively more important for frontline employees in manufacturing and shipping, logistics, and transportation, whereas employees in customer service place a much higher value on flexible schedules. For healthcare workers, the top-ranked career attribute is having a job in line with their skills, while for retail workers, it is job growth.

Across industries, frontline employees report low levels of awareness of, and information about, career advancement opportunities, though each industry has its own challenges and strengths. For example, many hospitality and healthcare workers are unaware of their career prospects from day one: 36 percent say they receive little to no information on career advancement opportunities upon hiring, the highest share among industries. Meanwhile, this number falls below 30 percent for employees in manufacturing and retail. Frontline experiences with HR also vary by industry. Hospitality and customer service employees report the least frequent HR engagement, while employees in manufacturing and shipping, logistics, and transportation report the most.

When it comes to employer-provided learning resources, healthcare outperforms other industries in the availability of training, tuition reimbursement, and certification and testing. This makes sense given the regulated nature of the industry. Manufacturing and customer service, on the other hand, rely on informal learning methods, with almost 30 percent of employees reporting doing the job before being promoted. Employers in both customer service and shipping, logistics, and transportation provide more career-pathing resources relative to other industries; however, only one in five employees is aware of the availability of these resources.

Exhibit

There is room for improvement in employer-offered advancement practices across industries.

Customer service

- Flexible schedule is more important relative to other industries
- Relatively high availability of career-pathing resources (~20%)
- Highest promotion application and success rates (~30%)

Hospitality

- Low employee awareness—HR least engaged (11%)
- High application rates for raises and more responsibility, with highest success rate for raises

Retail

- Most important attribute is job growth
- Higher communication during interviews (38%)
- Low employee resource usage (e.g., training outside workplace, tuition reimbursement)

Healthcare

- Most important attribute is an aligned skill set
- Lowest level of employee awareness (30%)
- High provision of education, tuition reimbursement, and certification and testing

Manufacturing

- Job security is more important relative to other industries
- Relatively high HR engagement (23%)
- Strong reliance on informal learning (~30% of employees report doing the job before being promoted)

Shipping, logistics, and transportation

- Highest employee awareness (43%)
- Strongest HR engagement (25%)
- High likelihood of switching industries for more money, safer environment, and health benefits (45%)

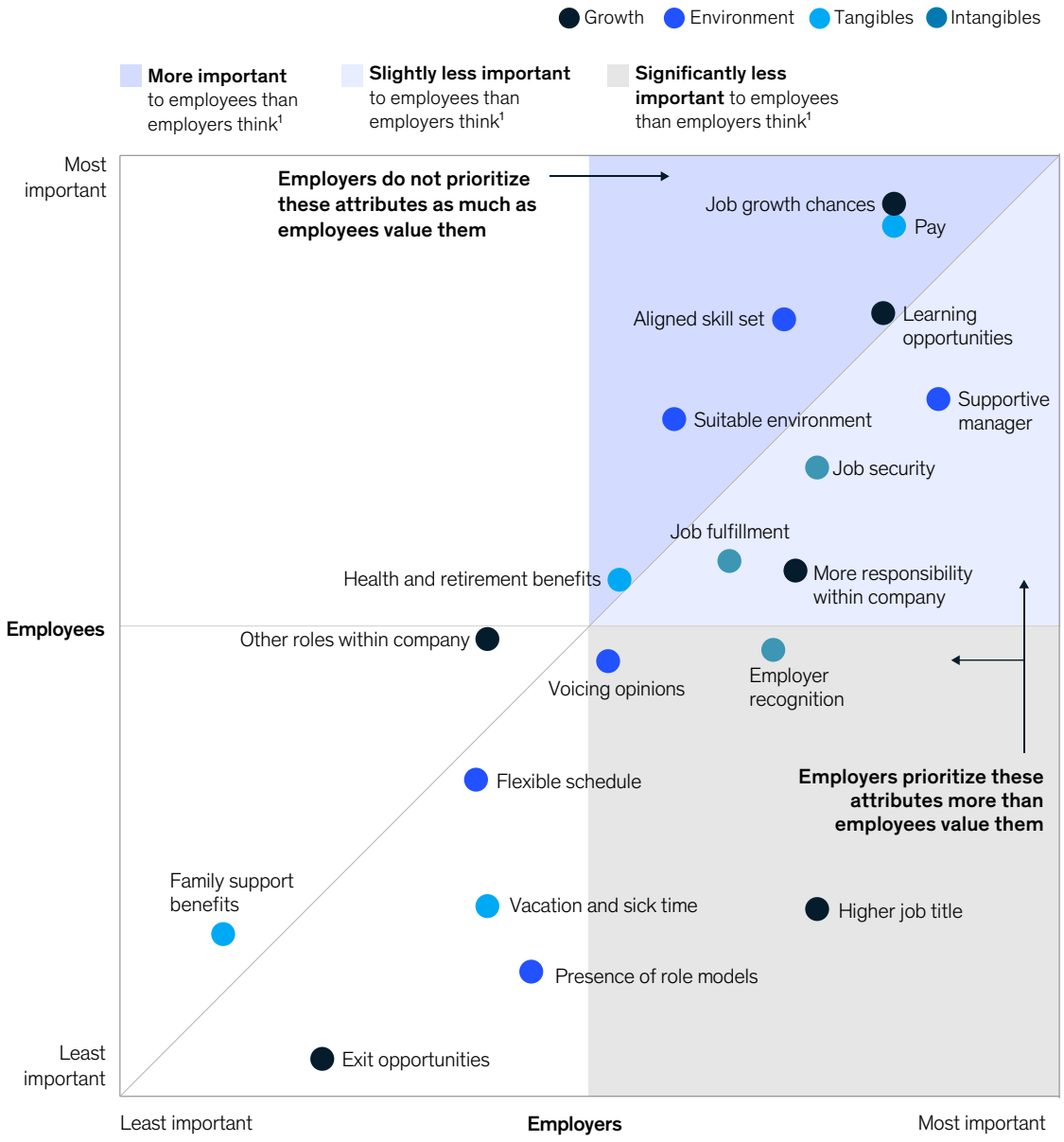
Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

What employers think frontline employees want

Our research highlights discrepancies between the career advancement needs of frontline employees and their employers' perceptions of those needs (Exhibit 4). Employers tend to put a premium on intangible benefits, such as recognition and job fulfillment, relative to their importance to frontline employees. These relational and intrinsic motivators may be important for certain segments of the workforce but are less relevant drivers for the frontline population. They may nonetheless become more important as basic needs, such as sufficient

Exhibit 4

Employers have an incomplete understanding of the advancement needs of frontline employees.



[1] Question: "Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree that each of the following are important aspects of 'career advancement.'"

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154) and Frontline Employer Survey (n = 305)

pay and skills alignment, are met and as employees have greater choice in the roles for which they can be considered.

At the same time, employers often overlook the job attributes that would have the most meaningful impact on the frontline-employee experience. For example, our research suggests that among tangible benefits, employers do not value pay as highly as frontline employees do, whereas they overvalue vacation and sick time. When it comes to growth-oriented attributes, employers tend to emphasize a higher job title (among the bottom five attributes for frontline employees) over job growth and learning opportunities (both top-five attributes), which may help explain why frontline employees cite a lack of employer-provided development opportunities as a primary barrier to their advancement. Of the attributes related to working environment, employers underestimate the importance to frontline employees of having an aligned skill set and a suitable work environment. Many employees—especially women, single parents, and those who have faced adverse experiences (such as addiction, involvement in the criminal justice system, domestic violence, and homelessness)—may be weighed down by a relatively stressful home life. An accommodating, stable work environment can support these and other frontline employees on the job.

Barriers to career advancement

Frontline employees are highly motivated. More than 70 percent have applied for advancement opportunities. While most of these opportunities involve a raise or additional responsibility, at least a quarter of frontline employees apply for promotions or new roles. Of those who apply for advancement opportunities, only 40 percent achieve the raise or incremental responsibility, and less than 25 percent get a promotion or new role (Exhibit 5).

Employees who advance are more likely to be aware of opportunities and receive information about them, especially when it comes to career-pathing resources and expectations. They also tend to report strong levels of support from their managers. Frontline employees who advance are more likely to have frequent manager-led career advancement discussions (23 percentage points higher than their peers) and receive positive feedback from their managers (15 percentage points higher than peers).

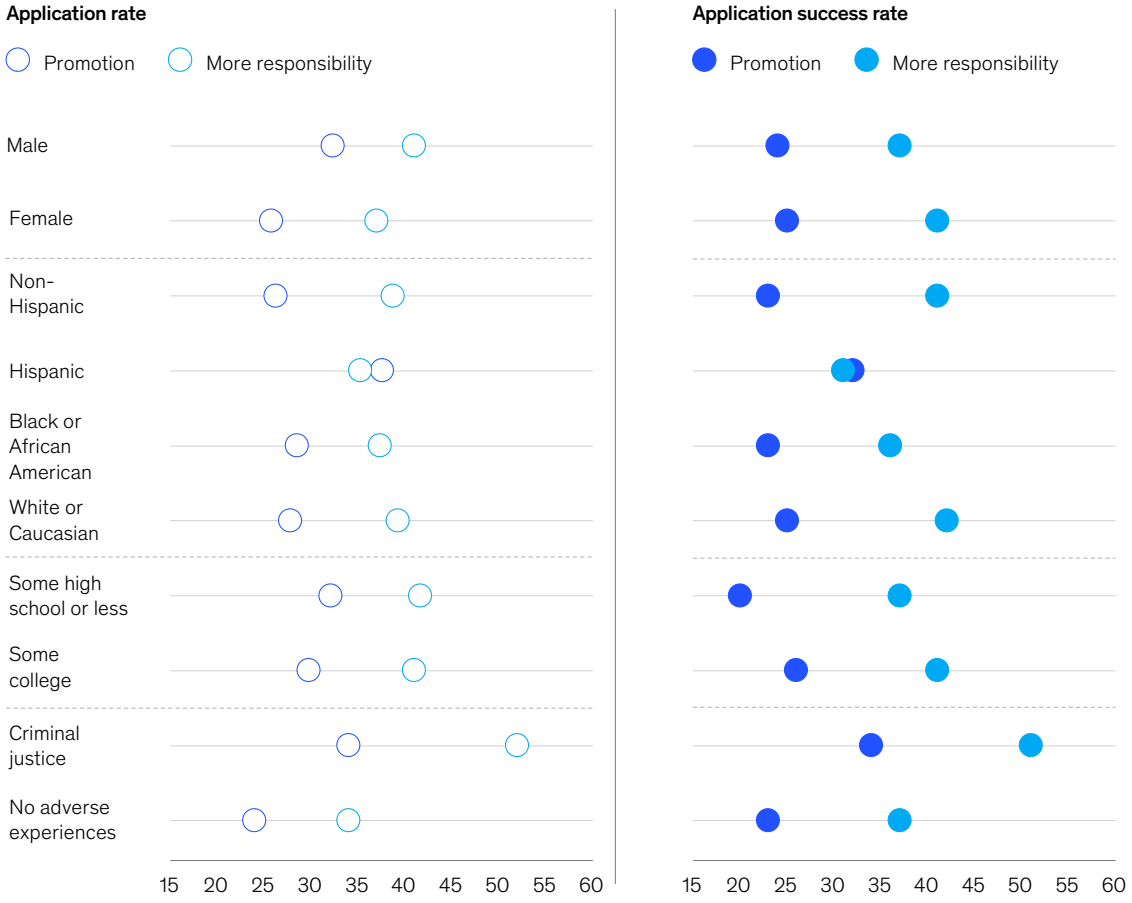
However, this is not the typical experience for frontline employees. Sixty-five percent are unaware or unsure of how to achieve advancement—and the number is even higher among women, younger employees, and those without a high school degree. There may be an opportunity for employers to increase awareness, communication, and manager support to help their frontline employees overcome these barriers to career advancement.

Frontline employees are highly motivated. More than 70 percent have applied for advancement opportunities.

Exhibit 5

More than 70 percent of frontline employees apply to advancement opportunities, though their success is limited.

Advancement opportunity application and success,[1]
% of respondents



[1] Question: "Have you ever applied for any of the below opportunities with a job (application rate)?"; "For these opportunities that you have applied for, select which ones you were successful in achieving (application success rate)."

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

Credentialing and background criteria

Our research shows that most frontline employees seek out new responsibilities and roles to advance their careers. However, many employers still emphasize formal credentials in their hiring criteria—a practice that excludes as many as 70 million people who are STARs.[2] Such requirements rule out a large talent pool of individuals who may possess the skills (or the potential to acquire the skills) necessary for the job. This group of employees is highly diverse—in fact, the majority of Black, Hispanic, rural, and veteran employees do not have a four-year college degree.[3] Employers that hire for skills, not credentials, can open up advancement opportunities for diverse employees, tap into new and highly motivated talent pools, and build a more inclusive workforce.

[2] "'Look for skills, not credentials': Beth Cobert on tapping into US talent," McKinsey, February 26, 2021.
[3] "STARs: Skilled through alternative routes," Opportunity at Work, accessed April 21, 2022.

Frontline employees who previously have been involved in the criminal justice system or who have experienced homelessness also demonstrate high motivation, despite historical underinvestment in their career advancement. For example, they are more likely to dedicate nonwork hours to upskilling (14 percentage points higher for respondents with involvement in the criminal justice system and 16 percentage points higher for respondents with a history of homelessness) and to apply to advancement opportunities (as much as nine percentage points higher). While these employees in our survey have slightly higher success rates compared with the overall population, they continue to face difficulty in landing advancement opportunities, in part due to background policies and other formal employment criteria.[4]

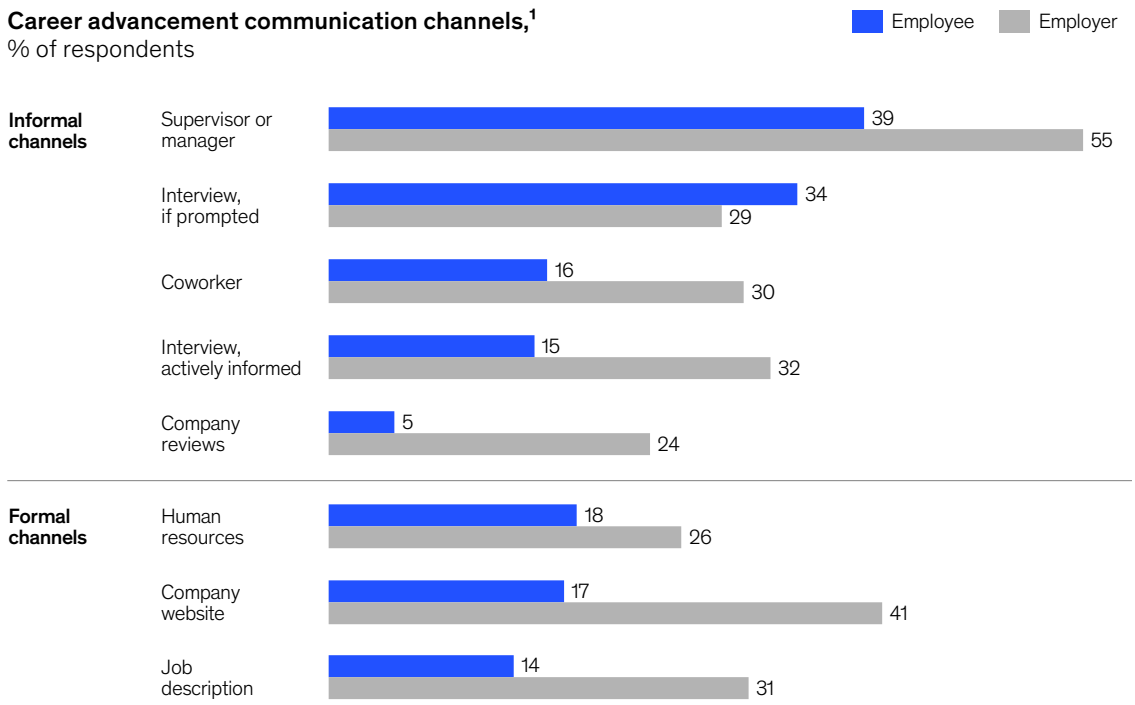
Unclear prospects

Frontline employees are often unaware of potential advancement opportunities. One-third receive little to no information about such opportunities upon hiring, suggesting that many employers do not recognize advancement as a central objective for their front lines. However, 77 percent of frontline employees believe it is important that job descriptions refer to career advancement. By their own admission, employers seldom highlight opportunities for advancement through formal channels such as HR, company websites, or job descriptions. Less than 20 percent of employees use these sources to learn about advancement opportunities (Exhibit 6). Instead, employees primarily rely on informal communication from supervisors or managers and during the interview process.

[4] Dylan Minor, Nicola Persico, and Deborah M. Weiss, "Criminal background and job performance," *IZA Journal of Labor Policy*, September 2018, Volume 7, Number 8.

Exhibit 6

Informal channels dominate how career advancement information is communicated.



[1] Question: "How did you receive/provide information regarding potential for 'career advancement'?"

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154) and Frontline Employer Survey (n = 305)

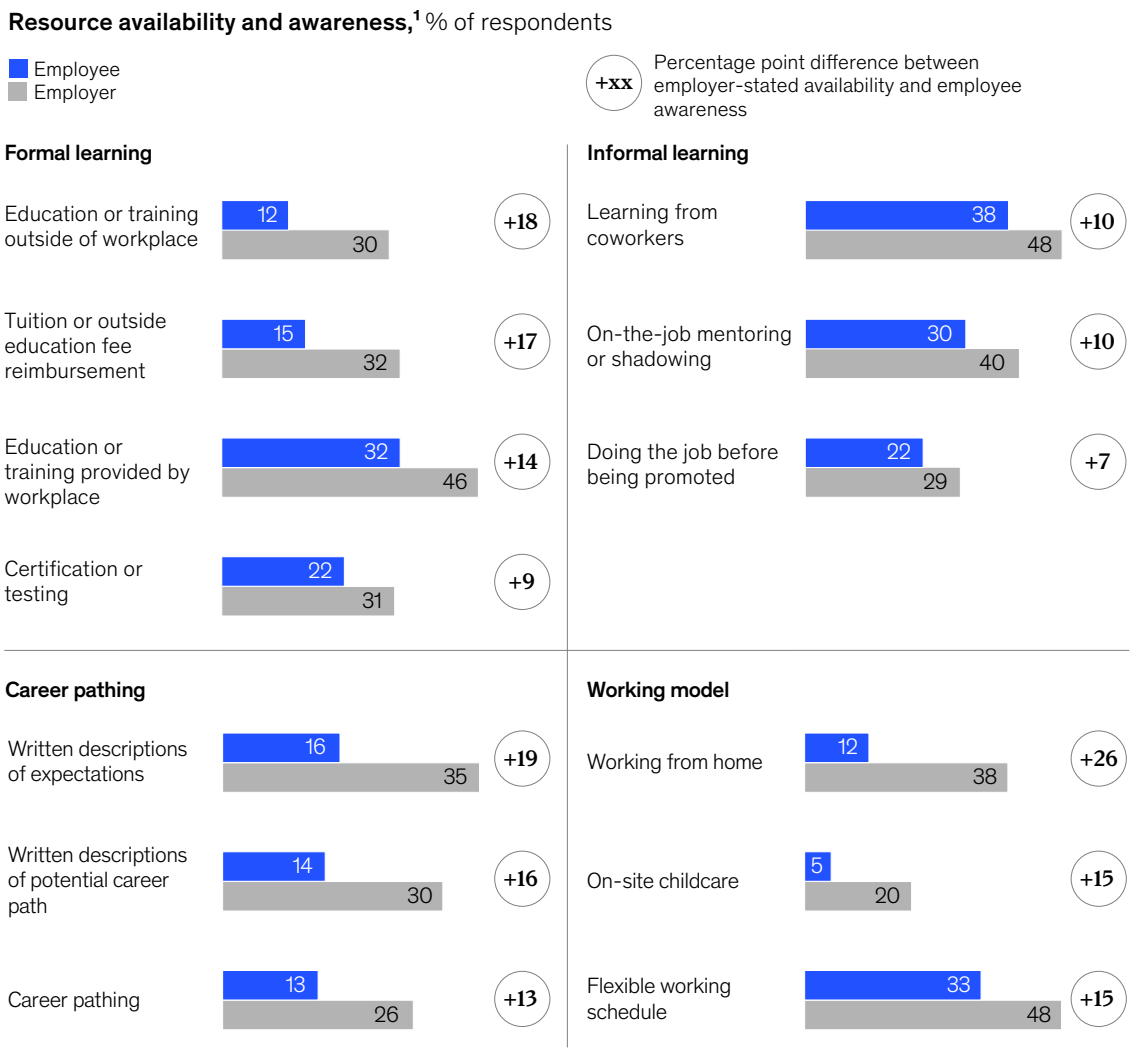
Lack of awareness and resources

On the job, employees often lack the resources they need to pursue professional development. One in five says that their employer offers no resources to adequately prepare them for advancement opportunities. Here, too, employee and employer perceptions diverge sharply—with employers reporting much higher availability of resources than employees (Exhibit 7). Only 17 percent of frontline employees report having frequent discussions about career advancement, though nearly 40 percent of employers say the same. Among formal learning opportunities, 30 percent of employers say they offer education or training outside of the workplace, but only 12 percent of employees say this is available to them.

Employers should not assume that their perceptions of resource availability are shared by their frontline employees. Indeed, our research shows that the perspective of frontline employees about such resources is often more accurate than the

Exhibit 7

Advancement resources are lacking, with discrepancies between employer-stated availability and employee awareness.



[1] Question: "Which of these resources does your company currently provide?"

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154) and Frontline Employer Survey (n = 305)

employers' perceptions. However, some resources (such as tuition reimbursement) are still underused relative to employee awareness. In these cases, employers can focus on closely aligning their offerings to the needs of their employees while also considering the specific challenges and context of their industry (see sidebar "Advancement: A pervasive issue across industries").

A potential road ahead for employers

In light of these realities, frontline employees may represent an untapped opportunity. Many not only demonstrate high degrees of competence but also express a strong desire to advance their careers. More than 75 percent are confident of reaching their career goals, and nearly all are confident of being successful in their next position. This also holds true for employee segments that have historically received less investment, including people of color, STARs, and those with previous involvement in the criminal justice system.

To successfully harness this potential—and hold on to valuable talent—employers can help their frontline employees overcome barriers to advancement. To achieve this, employers can learn from what frontline employees care about most, as well as from what we see when employees do advance.

These learnings, along with subsequent recommendations, can be broken down into five distinct categories: communicating clearly and frequently; investing in skill building and professional development to align advancement with the skills of frontline employees; equipping managers of frontline employees to support and grow their teams; prioritizing frontline employees' preferences when determining incentives; and investing in motivated workers who are eager to advance and grow.

Communicating clearly and frequently

To be effective, employers must clearly communicate career pathways for frontline roles—such as promotions, shifts in responsibilities, external or rotational opportunities, or pay increases—and the steps to get there. They can do so throughout the different stages of a frontline employee's engagement.

In job postings, employers can describe typical career advancement pathways, the types and highest level of professional development available, and the roles to which previous employees at that level have ascended within the firm. On a corporate website and at job fairs, employers can showcase profiles and photos of growth trajectories of those who have successfully advanced—especially those from underrepresented populations.

During onboarding, employers can highlight different opportunities for advancement, the paths to getting there (including the skills needed), and the average time it takes to move up. If possible, connecting new frontline employees with others who have successfully advanced can provide a model for potential paths to success.

In the first 30 days, connecting new employees with an internal mentor who can provide formal or informal coaching can be powerful, especially in cases where frontline employee mobility is low or managers are not equipped to support their professional development. These mentoring "staff ambassador" roles can also serve as a unique skill-building opportunity for incumbent employees.

In the first 90 days, employers can ensure that frontline employees have a solid understanding of available opportunities, the skills they need to demonstrate in order to advance, and the preparatory resources at their disposal. Managers will need to be provided with the tools, information, and discussion guides to help them have advancement and coaching conversations on a quarterly basis.

Investing in skill building and professional development to align advancement with the skills of frontline employees

Employers have a range of options for building the skills of frontline employees who are eager to advance in their careers. These can include the following:

— *Stretch assignments.* These include on-the-job training projects that give frontline employees a chance to learn new skills through their work.

— *Cross-training opportunities.* These can teach employees job functions other than those that are normally assigned. In addition to motivating employees, these opportunities can also illuminate skills that can help the employee contribute to different departments.

— *Lateral opportunities.* Employers can offer opportunities to move laterally according to frontline employees' interests and skill sets. Such lateral moves have been shown to be a powerful predictor of retention.[5]

— *Learning and development programs.* Employers can regularly inform and remind employees of the existence of such programs through multiple channels.

Equipping frontline managers to support and grow their teams

Managers need to be aware of the particular ambitions and challenges of frontline employees. Awareness can start immediately with hiring: a manager's potential and proven ability to create a supportive environment for direct reports can be made an important part of recruitment criteria.

Supervisors of frontline employees need to undergo continual training to be effective people managers. In cases where frontline employees themselves grow into these supervisory and managerial roles, employers can offer support prior to or early in their journeys as people managers.

People-management metrics can be built into performance reviews and incentives. To be effective, these metrics—and the importance of people management in general—need to be modeled and emphasized by all ranks of leadership.

Finally, companies can implement certain policies and guidelines to help decision makers understand their individual biases in their assessment of talent—and keep track of who advances and who does not.

Prioritizing frontline employees' preferences when determining incentives

As we have noted, frontline employees tend to have different preferences concerning their work and advancement opportunities than other types of workers. For employers, dealing with this difference requires both a mindset shift and a potential reprioritizing of incentives.

Our surveys highlight the premium that frontline employees place on compensation. Offering additional pay, both in an incremental increase in hourly wages and an opportunity for performance-based raises, will resonate strongly as an advancement pathway.

Employers can also focus on other growth and environmental benefits that cater to workforce demographics to better align incentives to the preferences and motivators of frontline employees. For example, our research shows that parents place more value on transportation reimbursement, while younger workers prefer a higher job title.

Periodic feedback from frontline employees can help employers gain a more nuanced understanding of needs and aspirations. For example, in cases when benefits are not being used, it is important to understand why. Asking for feedback will help employers understand the root cause, such as a lack of awareness on behalf of the employee, the employee not seeing the benefits as being aligned with their priorities, or the employee not having enough time to make use of them.

[5] Donald Sull, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig, "Toxic culture is driving the Great Resignation," *MIT Sloan Management Review,* January 11, 2022.



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Investing in motivated workers who are eager to advance and grow

Employers can consider eliminating college degree requirements for skills that can be learned on the job. They could likewise accept experience as an alternative to educational requirements. As noted, educational credentials can be misleading about an employee's capabilities and act as a constraint on employability. Changing educational requirements can improve access for 70 million adults in the United States—and create opportunities for a motivated and ambitious frontline workforce.

Extending opportunities for job seekers from nontraditional backgrounds can also open doors. For those previously involved in the criminal justice system, this could mean more explicitly communicating what backgrounds are tolerated, as well as instituting background policies that do not look back further than five to seven years. Increasing access to this talent pool will open up opportunities to 79 million adults who have been affected by the criminal justice system. In our survey, individuals with previous involvement in the criminal justice system reported higher success rates than any other demographic group when applying to career advancement opportunities (Exhibit 5).

For employers that do take such steps, publicly spotlighting employees who have advanced from frontline roles to other positions in the company can give other employees and prospective recruits a constant reminder of what is possible.

For millions of frontline employees in America, who are disproportionately women and people of color, career advancement is the most important path to upward economic mobility. However, their career prospects are often hampered by an incomplete understanding of their needs, a lack of resources and support, and limited opportunities for professional growth. By understanding frontline employees' experiences, lowering the barriers to advancement, and investing in the longer-term future of their frontline employees, employers can build a more resilient workforce and contribute to sustainable and inclusive growth for the future.

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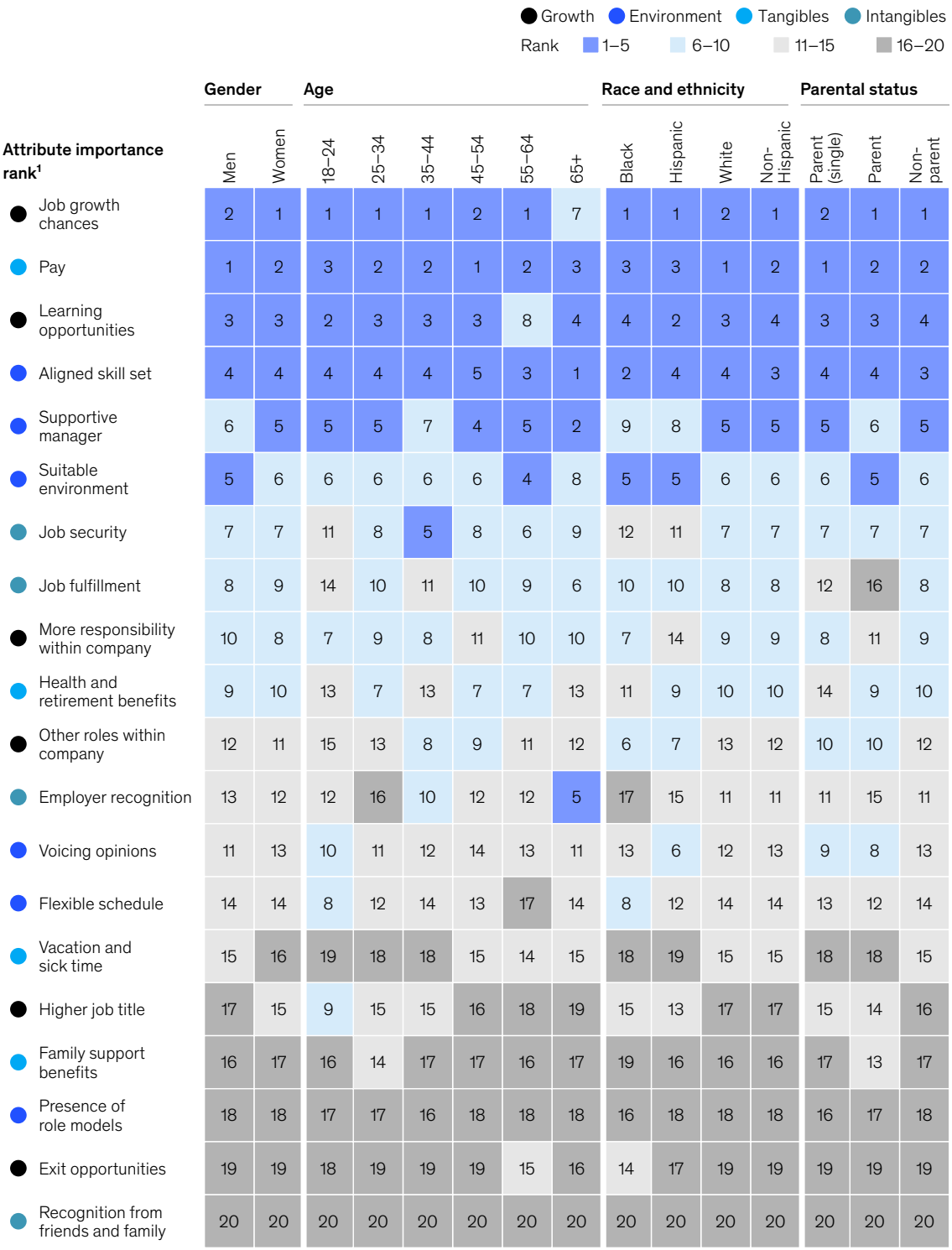
The authors wish to thank May Anthony at Cara Plus for her contributions to this article.

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Appendix

Exhibit A1.1

The importance of top career advancement attributes holds across demographics, with slight variations.



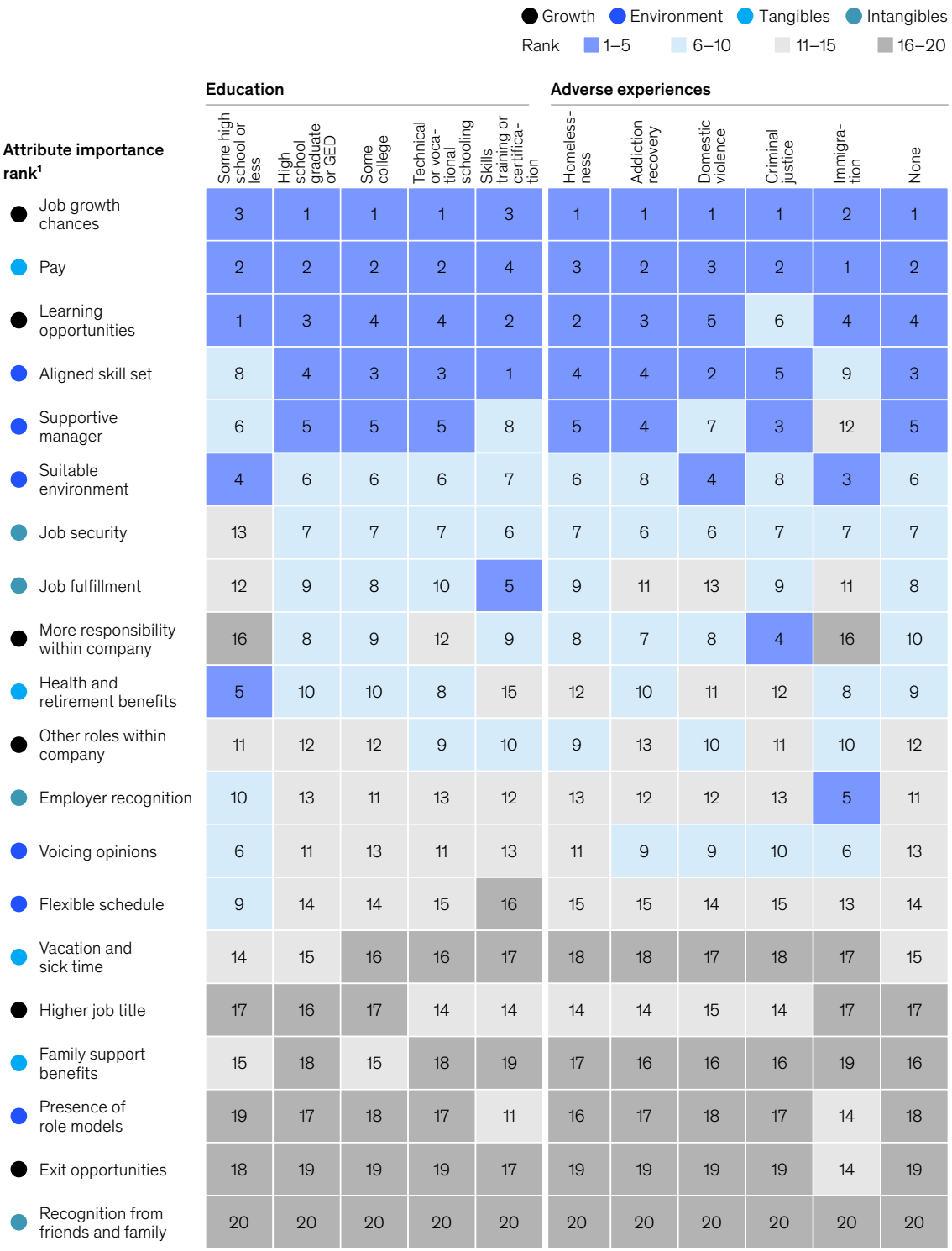
Attribute importance rank[1]	Gender		Age						Race and ethnicity				Parental status		
	Men	Women	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+	Black	Hispanic	White	Non-Hispanic	Parent (single)	Parent	Non-parent
Job growth chances	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	7	1	1	2	1	2	1	1
Pay	1	2	3	2	2	1	2	3	3	3	1	2	1	2	2
Learning opportunities	3	3	2	3	3	3	8	4	4	2	3	4	3	3	4
Aligned skill set	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	1	2	4	4	3	4	4	3
Supportive manager	6	5	5	5	7	4	5	2	9	8	5	5	5	6	5
Suitable environment	5	6	6	6	6	6	4	8	5	5	6	6	6	5	6
Job security	7	7	11	8	5	8	6	9	12	11	7	7	7	7	7
Job fulfillment	8	9	14	10	11	10	9	6	10	10	8	8	12	16	8
More responsibility within company	10	8	7	9	8	11	10	10	7	14	9	9	8	11	9
Health and retirement benefits	9	10	13	7	13	7	7	13	11	9	10	10	14	9	10
Other roles within company	12	11	15	13	8	9	11	12	6	7	13	12	10	10	12
Employer recognition	13	12	12	16	10	12	12	5	17	15	11	11	11	15	11
Voicing opinions	11	13	10	11	12	14	13	11	13	6	12	13	9	8	13
Flexible schedule	14	14	8	12	14	13	17	14	8	12	14	14	13	12	14
Vacation and sick time	15	16	19	18	18	15	14	15	18	19	15	15	18	18	15
Higher job title	17	15	9	15	15	16	18	19	15	13	17	17	15	14	16
Family support benefits	16	17	16	14	17	17	16	17	19	16	16	16	17	13	17
Presence of role models	18	18	17	17	16	18	18	18	16	18	18	18	16	17	18
Exit opportunities	19	19	18	19	19	19	15	16	14	17	19	19	19	19	19
Recognition from friends and family	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

[1] Question: "Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree that each of the following are important aspects of 'career advancement.'" Rank based on percentage of respondents indicating attribute importance.

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

Exhibit A1.1 (continued)

The importance of top career advancement attributes holds across demographics, with slight variations.

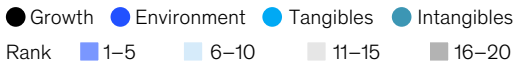


[1] Question: "Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree that each of the following are important aspects of 'career advancement.'" Rank based on percentage of respondents indicating attribute importance.

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)

Exhibit A1.2

The importance of top career advancement attributes holds across industries, with slight variations.



Attribute importance rank[1]	Customer service	Healthcare	Hospitality	Manufac-turing	Retail	Shipping	Other[2]
Job growth chances	2	2	2	2	1	2	1
Pay	1	4	1	1	2	1	2
Learning opportunities	3	3	5	4	3	6	3
Aligned skill set	4	1	3	3	4	3	4
Supportive manager	5	6	4	9	5	6	6
Suitable environment	7	5	7	6	6	4	12
Job security	6	7	6	5	10	5	7
Job fulfillment	9	8	11	8	9	8	10
More responsibility within company	14	10	8	11	7	11	5
Health and retirement benefits	11	9	12	7	8	13	14
Other roles within company	10	12	13	10	11	9	11
Employer recognition	13	11	10	12	12	12	9
Voicing opinions	12	13	9	13	13	10	8
Flexible schedule	8	14	16	17	14	17	13
Vacation and sick time	17	18	15	14	15	16	17
Higher job title	16	16	14	19	16	15	16
Family support benefits	18	15	19	15	18	13	15
Presence of role models	15	17	18	18	17	18	18
Exit opportunities	19	19	17	16	19	19	19
Recognition from friends and family	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

[1] Question: "Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree that each of the following are important aspects of 'career advancement.'" Rank based on percentage of respondents indicating attribute importance.
[2] Includes professional services, financial services, and commercial cleaning.

Source: McKinsey and Cara Plus Frontline Employee Survey (n = 2,154)