



Engaging Frontline Workers in the Airline Sector: Challenges and Imperatives Post-Pandemic

Designing an elevated workforce experience, centered on human values and enabled by programs and technologies, drives market performance. At Deloitte, we define ‘Workforce Experience’ as the sum of a human’s lived experiences at work and how they feel about their organization and believe there are eight key relationships that influence a worker's experience at an organization. These elements include a worker's relationship with the work they do, the people they work with, the places they work, the technology they use, their connection to the company mission, their sense of belonging, and the growth that delivers value to their career. In this eminence series, we will explore the three elements that are top of mind for the airline sector: the workplace, the workforce, and the work itself.

The airline industry was among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in many ways it was the industry's frontline workers (such as flight attendants, baggage handlers, caterers, gate agents, and pilots) who bore the brunt of the crisis. The pandemic exposed many safety, health, and well-being challenges, all of which made it difficult for these workers to remain engaged, supported, and connected at work. Elevating the workforce experience can help the airline industry's frontline workers create meaning and connection to their work through meaningful interactions, human-centered design programs and technologies to address their individual needs.

Overview of current challenges

According to the International Air Transport Association, 2020 was the worst year in aviation history.¹ Overall traffic declined by 65%, and losses from U.S. carriers alone topped \$35 billion.² However, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only threatened airlines' financial stability; it has also placed in jeopardy the health and well-being of the industry's frontline workers. Flight crews are reporting "the lowest morale [they've] ever seen,"³ workers are struggling with unprecedented rates of mental health issues,⁴ and flight attendants and other personnel have expressed concerns surrounding their safety in dealing with unruly passengers and individuals who refuse to comply with mask guidelines⁵ (indeed, the TSA resumed crew member self-defense training amid an increase in passenger incidents on flights).⁶

As the demand for travel increases, airlines are presented with an opportunity to address the issues facing their frontline workers. By taking a human-centered approach to their workforce experience, these organizations can improve the relationships their workers have with the people with whom they work, the work they do, and the organizations themselves. Moreover, airlines can improve their workers' well-being and help them feel more connected to their work and to each other.

Workplace – A new look at safety

It goes without saying that the "workplace" for frontline workers in the airline industry is rather unique. Although there is relatively little opportunity for flexibility in this context, there is tremendous opportunity for airlines to improve the relationships their workers have with their physical workplaces, with most of these opportunities falling within the realm of safety. Frontline workers in the airline industry

(specifically flight attendants) were considered to have the highest COVID-19 Occupational Risk Score of all non-healthcare jobs,⁷ and during the pandemic many flight crew members have reported feeling unsafe and unsettled by airlines' unclear health and safety policies.⁸

To address safety concerns and improve the relationship workers have with their workplaces, airline leadership must first monitor and listen with compassion to the safety needs of workers, understanding that designing a safe workplace may not be a one-size-fits-all endeavor.⁹

Airlines must then craft a physical and cultural environment that attracts and retains frontline talent creating long term commitment to the organization.

DELOITTE PERSPECTIVE: Reengage the workforce and reinvent the workplace experience

Reinforce Commitment to Well-Being: As airlines begin the recovery process, they should reinforce their commitment to employee well-being with a focus on physical, psychological, and financial concerns.

Re-think the Airport Experience to Improve the Safety of Customers and Workers: Airlines have an opportunity to re-think all aspects of the airport experience, particularly touchpoints that lend themselves to touchless self-service. Given the new environment, customers are more willing to engage with technology, and airlines can once again re-think the airport experience curb-to-curb.

Start Today: Evaluate how employees are feeling about the culture and environment they're working in. Use the pandemic as an opportunity to reengage with the workforce and reinvent their workplace.

Workforce – Fostering connections

A key part of elevating the workforce experience is facilitating connections within it. By fostering connections among frontline workers and their unions, airlines can help to ameliorate some of the challenges brought on by the pandemic. By creating opportunities for frontline workers to build their personal and professional networks—and to share their insights and also their struggles with their

peers—airlines will help members of their workforces feel included, valued for who they are, and connected to their organizations.¹⁰

Most major airlines have equipped gate agents, flight attendants, pilots, ramp agents and tech ops with digital devices, but they continue to be challenged with fostering meaningful connections for a workforce whose workplace is in the air, at the airport, and on the ground. This is where airlines can draw inspiration from [digital workplace](#) and [work from anywhere](#) (WfA) concepts.

As the pandemic subsides, there is now a much more urgent call to action to reimagine the digital workplace which will require employers to reengineer the way their people connect, communicate, collaborate, and support each other within and across various functional areas. Digital workplaces must be designed to operate in synchrony and connect all workers to what they need, when they need it, and who they need to work with, regardless of location, device, and time zone.

To operationalize these concepts, organizations should focus their efforts in two areas:

1. **Business outcomes, not technical solutions.** Without an outcome focus, organizations risk simply bolting on technologies without truly delivering intentional, meaningful, and measurable business results.
2. **Human-Centered Design.** The Digital Workplace should enhance the experience of the work we do; connect people and teams; infuse well-being into every day; and elevate organizational essentials, such as values, purpose, culture, and behaviors.

DELOITTE PERSPECTIVE: Focus on business outcomes and human centered design

Start today: [What to ask, What to do](#)

What to ASK:

1. What are the business outcomes you are trying to achieve?
2. What are the experiences you want to deliver and to whom?
3. What specific capabilities do you need to enable those outcomes and experiences?

What to Do:

- **Clearly define a North Star vision and strategy** that includes the specific business outcomes to be achieved and the workforce experiences to be delivered.
- **Define the required capabilities** and ultimately the ecosystem of solutions your organization needs to achieve those outcomes and experiences.
- **Build a road map and execute against it**, but plan to adjust it as new or better information, insights, or opportunities are uncovered.
- **Employ a release schedule to roll out new experiences** and enable new business outcomes and workforce experiences on a regular basis.
- **Never stop listening and innovating**, for the work is never done. It is a journey with no defined end, so you must have a North Star vision to help you navigate the decision-making process along the way.

Work – Focusing on meaning

In addition to addressing urgent safety needs and fostering connections within the organization, airlines can also elevate the experience of their frontline workers by connecting their personal values to the greater mission of the organization. Many workers today want work that is meaningful, fulfilling, and contributes to something bigger than themselves.¹¹ They seek to identify with an organization's purpose and to align their personal wants with the organization's mission.¹² When workers can see how their contributions lead to positive impacts on their organization, their work feels more meaningful.¹³

In order to further improve the experience of their frontline workers, airlines should dedicate themselves to communicating the ways in which frontline workers' efforts serve the greater mission of the organization, and how these employees are helping to achieve something greater than themselves. During times of great hardship, emphasizing the tremendous contributions from frontline workers is extremely important.

RESEARCH INSIGHT: The Future of Work in airlines¹⁴

Recent Deloitte research sheds light on ways in which frontline workers in the airline industry can be made aware of the meaning and significance of their work. For customer-facing frontline workers such as flight attendants and customer service agents, the heavy role they play in customers' travel experience has been made even more apparent by the challenges of the pandemic, and should be communicated, emphasized, and celebrated. For non-customer facing employees such as maintenance technicians and crew chiefs, the new ways of working that have been adopted have allowed these individuals to deliver high-quality work in extremely unfamiliar circumstances.

DELOITTE PERSPECTIVE: Embrace *purpose* and *meaning* into every aspect of work to create a purpose-driven culture

Design Work with Purpose: COVID-19 demonstrated that people are motivated by their connection to work and contributions to a greater purpose. Airlines have an opportunity to re-ignite passion for purpose, drawing a clear link between daily work and the ability to connect people. Whether in specifically redesigning teams and work, or simply in leadership language, airlines can help employees feel motivated through the mission and vision of the organization.

Start Today: Focus on the language leaders are using. Provide a playbook to help them encourage the right behaviors and skills in the organization, rethink the work that gets done, and employ purpose-driven messaging. Help them cascade those messages through the organization and reward positive changes as they occur.

In summary, the airline industry has been among the most deeply impacted by COVID-19. The pandemic has created a variety of profound

challenges, not the least of which is threats to the health and well-being of frontline workers.

Airlines made it through a challenging summer, now is the time to take action before business travel returns and the holiday peak is upon them.

Airlines can elevate their workforce experience by urgently and carefully addressing the pressing safety needs of their frontline workers, fostering genuine connections between those employees, and developing programs that help these frontline workers feel more connected to the work they do and the mission of their organization.

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¹ <https://www.airlineratings.com/news/industry-news/2020-worst-year-aviation-history-says-iata/>

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/01/us-airline-2-losses-expected-to-top-35-billion-in-dismal-2020-from-pandemic.html>

³ <https://abc7ny.com/southwest-airlines-canceled-2600-flights-in-june;-crews-say-theyr/10854710/>

⁴ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.581496/full>

⁵ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/heres-what-flight-attendants-want-you-to-know-about-flying-during-covid>

⁶ <https://abcnews.go.com/US/tsa-resume-defense-training-flight-crew-members/story?id=78471440>

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/occupations-highest-covid19-risk/>

⁸ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/heres-what-flight-attendants-want-you-to-know-about-flying-during-covid>

⁹ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/blog/human-capital-blog/2020/workplace-experience-design.html>

¹⁰ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/blog/human-capital-blog/2020/workforce-experience-people.html>

¹¹ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/blog/human-capital-blog/2020/workforce-experience-people.html>

¹² <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/blog/human-capital-blog/2020/workforce-experience-well-being.html>

¹³ <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/blog/human-capital-blog/2021/workforce-experience-organization.html>

¹⁴ <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/Consumer-Business/gx-cb-the-future-of-work-in-airlines-recover-and-thrive-in-the-next-normal.pdf>