

Introducing the

WORKFORCE CHAMPION

The hero changing how organizations connect
comms strategy and execution to drive powerful
business outcomes

first[↑]up



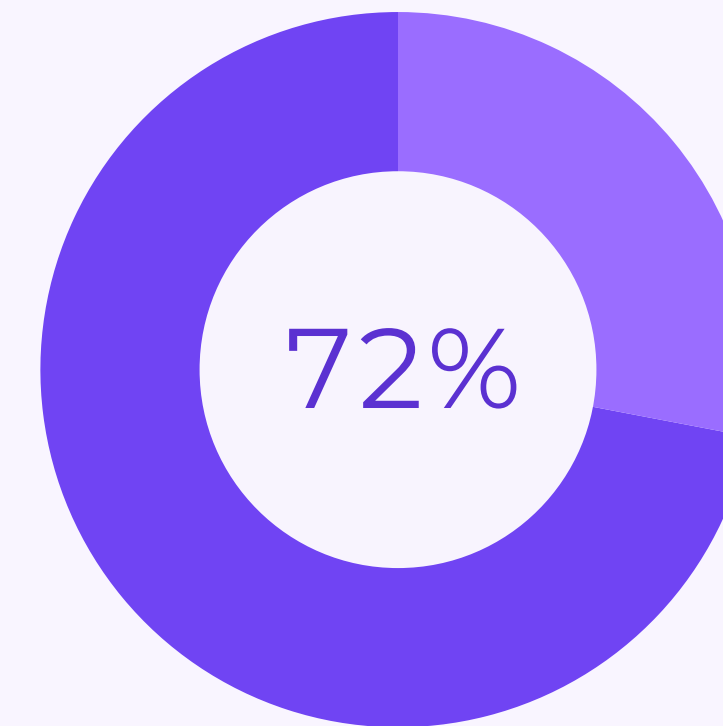
First: The contradiction nobody talks about

Look at the engagement numbers coming out of most organizations right now, and you'd think workforces have never been in better shape.

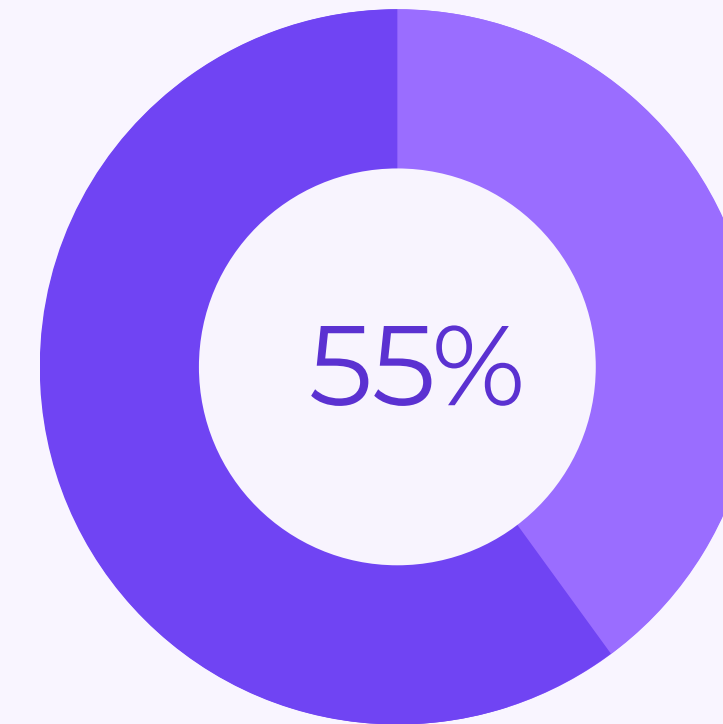
According to a recent report from Firstup, 89% of managers in North America say they're engaged at work. In the UK, that figure is 83%. Even among hourly, frontline employees, the group organizations have historically struggled hardest to reach, an **average of 72%** describe themselves as engaged.

Now look at the numbers sitting right next to them.

Of those same engaged managers in North America and the UK, an average of 65% plan to leave their jobs within the next 12 months. Among engaged hourly workers in both regions, it's an **average of 55%**.



average NA and UK
frontline workers say
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Engaged and exit-ready

The same people. At the same time.

It's tempting to write this off as a culture problem, a compensation problem, or simply just assume the labor market has changed. It's none of those, at least not primarily.

The real issue is that the way most organizations measure workforce health has stopped forecasting as it's supposed to. Underneath a number that was meant to show stability sits real risk: operational exposure and eroding trust that the score never picks up on.

The root cause traces back to critical communication breakdowns. Surveys ask how people feel. They don't check whether critical updates actually reach employees, get understood, or change what people do next. When we asked employees what happens when a manager or leader fails to communicate clearly, they didn't describe a minor inconvenience. They pointed to more stress, less productivity, and, in some cases, wanting to leave.

Gallup's 2026 State of the Global Workplace shows just how high the stakes are: global engagement fell to 20% in 2025, its lowest level since 2020, costing the world economy an estimated \$10 trillion in lost productivity. The primary driver, according to Gallup, was a steep decline in manager engagement—which cascades directly into team performance and output. That's the same bottleneck showing up in our data: managers are the most trusted source of information, and also the most overloaded.

Most leaders miss this because the dashboard doesn't surface it.

The survey goes out, the score comes back healthy, and the meeting moves on to the next agenda item.

Meanwhile, nearly half of that same “engaged” workforce is already planning their exit.

A few brave people are changing this.

They're not simply treating information-sharing as messaging—they're treating it as the bridge between strategy and execution, activating the workforce with relevant, personalized information delivered at the right time, through the right channel.



There's a name for the
person who won't accept the
communication status quo

Meet the Workforce Champion

It's not a job description. It's a mindset.

The Workforce Champion is the person in the room who asks a different question than everyone else.

A typical communications review asks, “Did we send it?” The Workforce Champion asks, “Did the right message reach the right person at the right time, and did it move the metrics that matter—retention, safety, productivity?” That’s a much harder thing to answer, and a much more useful one.



As Paul Baltes, Interim VP of Marketing and Communications at Nebraska Medicine, puts it:

“Don’t lose sight of the value of communication. It’s not a ‘nice to have,’ it’s a ‘need to have.’ It’s in the bloodstream of every business objective.”

That’s the Workforce Champion’s core conviction: communication isn’t a support function sitting off to the side of the business. It’s part of the infrastructure the business runs on, in the same category as payroll or safety compliance: the thing that turns strategic intent into operational reality. When it fails, the business feels it, whether or not anyone can pinpoint exactly where it broke.



Why the Workforce Champion is critical right now

Three pressures are converging to make this role more urgent than it's ever been.

1

Workforces are more distributed than the systems built to reach them.

Most communication infrastructure was designed around a desk, a company email address, a traditional intranet, and a predictable workday. Today, many employees have none of those things. They're on a shift, on a floor, in a truck, or in a patient's room.

The result shows up in the data: 61–67% of North American employees and 62–76% of employees in the UK report missing an important policy or procedural update despite receiving communications at least weekly.

Manufacturing tells a similarly stark story. Even though 72% of factory workers receive workplace updates at least once a week, nearly eight in ten say they've found out about a policy change, procedure update, or safety protocol only after it had already taken effect.

Healthcare shows the same pattern, with higher stakes. Ninety percent of hospital nurses have learned about policy changes after they've already taken effect, and for nearly half, it's a repeated occurrence. Sixteen percent have missed an updated safety protocol; 10% have

missed HIPAA or compliance information outright. When the information arriving late is a dosing protocol instead of a policy memo, "found out after the fact" isn't an inconvenience, it's a patient safety issue.

Half of North American managers and hourly workers go further, saying their employer simply doesn't have an effective way of sharing information with them at all.

2

Change is accelerating faster than most communication systems can absorb.

New policies. New safety protocols. New AI tools. New compliance requirements.

The volume and pace of what organizations need their people to know and do have outstripped the cascade-and-hope model most of them still rely on.

Gallagher's 2026 State of the Sector found that operational infrastructure and measurement remain top barriers for internal communications teams, and that the teams that solve for those barriers consistently show stronger business impact than those who don't.



3

The cost of getting things wrong is no longer abstract.

It shows up in safety incidents, compliance failures, and the kind of quiet attrition that doesn't reveal itself until the exit interview.

For example, Firstup's State of Nursing Communications Report shows that "compliance failure" can make things uncomfortable quickly. HIPAA violations are up to \$1.5 million annually for the most severe cases.

But let's look at the positives. The Forrester Total Economic Impact™ study of Firstup, conducted in June 2026, put real numbers against what happens when organizations close this gap: a 398% ROI, \$8.9 million in total benefits for organizations with 10,000 employees, and payback in under six months.

The composite organization in the study:

- Retained skilled frontline employees who would otherwise have left, avoiding \$4.7 million in replacement costs
- Saved 69,000 hours across frontline and desk workers, worth \$2.3 million in productivity
- Reduced serious safety incidents by 30% by Year 3, avoiding \$1.1 million in costs
- Saved communications teams more than 12,000 hours of manual work

This is the environment the Workforce Champion operates in: distributed people, accelerating change, and real dollars on the table depending on whether the message actually lands.

It's also worth noting what makes this harder than it should be. Gallagher's research found that only about one in five internal communications teams have data literacy skills in-house. That means most teams don't just lack the mandate to measure outcomes—they also lack the tooling and training to do it, even if the mandate showed up tomorrow.

That's not a knock on the people doing the work. It's a structural gap the Workforce Champion has to close before any of the other four Tenets can matter.

Let's explore those Five Tenets and the advantages of mastering them.

The Five Tenets of the Workforce Champion: A brief introduction to each

There's a pattern here

It shows up most clearly in industries with large hourly and frontline populations—retail, hospitality, healthcare, manufacturing, logistics—but it holds just as well across financial services and other office-heavy sectors.

Regardless of title, the people driving real outcomes are doing five things differently.

TENET 1

They prove impact.

Workforce Champions don't stop at open rates. They connect communication to the outcomes that matter—retention, safety, productivity—and show the business exactly what that connection is worth.

A *Forrester Total Economic Impact™ study of Firstup* found that a composite organization of 10,000 employees cut frontline turnover by 4%, reduced serious safety incidents by 30%, and recovered 69,000 hours of lost productivity; a 398% ROI worth \$8.9M in total value over three years.

TENET 2

They personalize at scale.

A message sent to everyone reaches no one in particular. Workforce Champions build audiences that reflect who actually needs the information.

Iron Mountain reaches 26,000+ frontline employees across 60 countries by design, not by accident.

“The Firstup platform enables us to target employees with the right information at the right time.”

– Neil Jenkins, Senior Director of Corporate Communications

TENET 3

They make communication actionable.

There's a real difference between a message that informs and one that moves people to act. Workforce Champions design for the latter.

The stakes are high in healthcare. 81% of nurses attribute patient care issues—inefficient handoffs, treatment delays, patient complaints—directly to organizational miscommunication. That's not a message problem you fix by sending more emails; it's a behavior problem you fix by making the right action obvious and rewarding it.

Cooper University Health Care is a case in point. Its “Good Catch” program uses Firstup to publicly celebrate staff who flag possible medical errors before they reach patients, turning recognition into a call to action. The result was a 30% increase in near-miss reporting, a Leapfrog “A” Hospital Safety Grade, and recognition as a top-performing regional hospital.

As Dr. Michael Kirchhoff, Cooper's Chief Innovation Officer and Patient Safety Officer, put it: celebrating those Good Catches “builds an understanding and culture around the importance of reporting.”

TENET 4

They close the execution gap.

Workforce Champions don't leave frontline workers dependent on a cascade model that breaks the moment someone misses a shift.

Wellstar increased flu vaccination compliance from 54% to 99% in two weeks before a critical deadline, avoiding as much as \$500,000 in travel nurse costs.

As one healthcare leader interviewed by Forrester Consulting put it:

“We're able to reach nearly 90% of our workforce that is frontline, which we couldn't do before.”

TENET 5

And they use AI to empower every employee.

Workforce Champions apply AI to reach every employee, on every shift, in every role, at the moment it matters.

This is not a novelty, but is the only realistic way to personalize communication for tens of thousands of people at once.

Swissport now reaches 45,000 employees across 300 airports in 45 countries through one unified system.

McKinsey estimates the economic potential of generative AI at \$4.4 trillion in productivity gains across the enterprise; a number that only materializes when the underlying communication infrastructure is built well enough to put those tools in front of the people who can actually use them.

None of these five tenets is a nice-to-have on its own.

Each one solves a different piece of the same underlying problem: reaching the right people, with the right message, at the right time, on the right channel, and knowing whether any of it actually worked.

It's about getting people to act, including the hardest-to-reach among them, at a scale no manual process can sustain.

Together, these Five Tenets are what separates an organization that talks about engagement from one that can actually prove its impact.



TENET 1

Prove Impact

Turn communication into measurable business results—from stronger retention, and fewer safety incidents, improved productivity and efficiency, resulting in proven ROI.



TENET 2

Personalize at Scale

Deliver the right message to the right person at the right time, via the right channel, leading to fewer missed updates and a better employee experience.



TENET 3

Make Comms Actionable

Replace announcements with activation. Clearly define what changed, who must act, and by when.



TENET 4

Close the Execution Gap

Bridge the gap between strategy and execution with intelligent communications.



TENET 5

Use AI to Empower Every Employee

Give every employee faster answers, smarter communication, and the support they need to thrive.

To learn even more, visit the [Five Tenets](#) information site.

The execution gap: What happens when Workforce Champions are absent

The cost of not having this heroic role isn't hypothetical.

It shows up in the numbers organizations are already sitting on

- Between 22% and 25% of North American employees say miscommunication is a specific reason they're considering leaving. Not compensation. Not career growth. Communication.
- Miscommunication is driving up stress and burnout for nearly half the workforce—43% on average across roles in North America, 44% in the UK—and cutting directly into productivity, with losses running 32–40% in North America and 32–38% in the UK.
- Between 9% and 12% of North American managers and hourly workers say miscommunication has created safety risks in their own work environment. In the UK, 5–12% of employees report the same.

These aren't soft, sentiment-driven numbers. They're operational and financial exposure sitting inside an engagement score that looks, on paper, perfectly fine.

The organizations that close this gap see it reflected directly in the business. The Forrester Total Economic Impact™ Study found a 30% reduction in serious safety incidents and significantly fewer frontline departures, worth \$4.7 million in avoided replacement costs alone for a company with 10,000 employees.

The absence of a Workforce Champion isn't neutral. It's expensive, measurable, and, for now, largely invisible to the leaders who most need to see it.

The Workforce Champion
movement is growing

Workforce Champions already exist inside every organization.

Most of them just haven't had a name for what they're doing, or a framework to build on

That's what this series is for.

Over the coming months, we'll be taking a deeper look at each of the Five Tenets with guides, ebooks, and customer stories. Be sure to check them out to learn how to:

- Prove communication's impact in terms that the business already respects
- Personalize at scale without a data team
- Make every message actionable
- Close the execution gap for good
- Use AI to reach every worker, not just the ones with a corporate email address

The contradiction between engagement and attrition isn't going away on its own. But the people willing to name it, measure it, and fix it—our Workforce Champions—are already showing what's possible when someone finally does.



Explore the Five Tenets

See them in action.

[firstup.io//workforce-champion](https://firstup.io/workforce-champion)

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