



# MIND THE GAP:

Maximizing Frontline Performance and Well-being with Resilience



**BY: BRAD SMITH, PH.D., SHEA LEMLEY, PH.D., TAMARA McELROY, AND SHAKIRA MacLYONS**





## INTRODUCTION

Frontline workers are the backbone of many industries, carrying out essential, public-facing jobs across sectors like manufacturing, hospitality, healthcare, and more. However, the nature of their work can have a negative impact on their mental well-being and, consequently, employee experience, productivity, retention, and other outcomes which impact a company's ability to perform. Frontline roles tend to be high-stress with little control, decision latitude, or support systems. Employees face pressure to meet productivity quotas, regularly interact with frustrated customers, work irregular shifts, lack paid time off, and have minimal autonomy over duties assigned by managers. These dynamics contribute to higher rates of burnout, anxiety, depression, and secondary traumatic stress among frontline staff compared to corporate positions.

Despite having generally greater need, frontline workers tend to underutilize workplace benefits like employee assistance programs (EAPs), digital tools, and medical plan offerings. Barriers contributing to this underutilization include irregular hours impeding appointment scheduling, on-site supervisors less attuned to possible symptoms, and general lack of awareness about available options. Given both the elevated risk factors and participation obstacles frontline employees face, organizations reliant on these essential workers must prioritize promotion and access to needed benefits across this vulnerable population.

Drawing on multimethod research conducted by meQ, this report details evidence showing the link between frontline work and heightened risk of poor mental well-being outcomes, and discusses the gap between need and use of relevant benefits. The report also outlines opportunities and proven strategies for bridging this gap, improving outcomes, producing a more positive employee experience, and reducing workforce risks.

### WHAT IS A FRONTLINE WORKER?

**meQ CONSIDERS FRONTLINE WORKERS TO BE THOSE EMPLOYEES WHO DIRECTLY PRODUCE GOODS OR DELIVER SERVICES.** In general, they are paid hourly and eligible for overtime compensation, regardless of job title. Frontline workers work across a variety of settings including healthcare, education, call centers, warehouses, construction, and hospitality. Most frontline workers must be physically present to do their jobs.

# THE FRONTLINE CHALLENGE: HIGHER DEMANDS AND NEEDS PAIR WITH LOWER HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

Frontline roles tend to be physically and mentally demanding. meQ’s in-depth interviews revealed that many of these jobs require intense focus and demand high energy levels to make it through grueling shifts. Maintaining energy, alertness, safety precautions, flexibility, and winding down routines are all cited as key demands. The actual work environments are also chaotic, often involving heat and noise.

Data from the meQ Frontline Study echo the message that frontline jobs experience higher than average levels of strain. Frontline employees were 2.3 times more likely than non-frontline staff to report physical strain from their positions. The strain extends to autonomy as well, with 22% fewer frontline staff reporting that they have influence over decisions impacting their work compared to non-frontline peers.

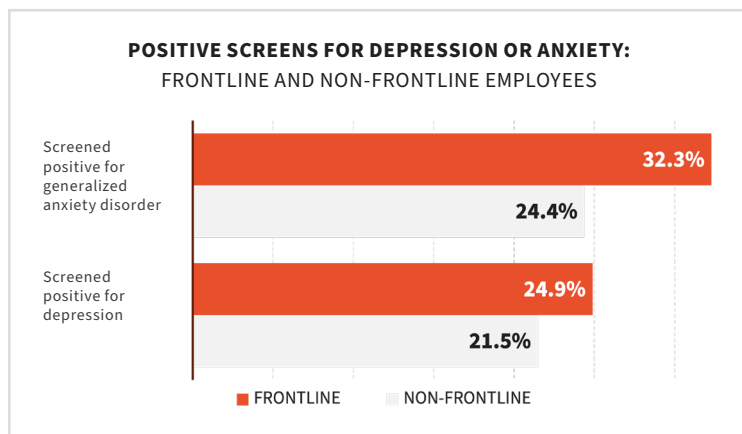


FIGURE 1

## THIS SUBSTANTIAL WORKLOAD AND STRAIN MANIFESTS CLEARLY IN FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES' SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RISK LEVELS.

Rates of anxiety and depression are 33% and 61% higher, respectively, among frontline versus non-frontline workers (FIGURE 1).

## THE PATTERN OF STRESSORS ALSO TENDS TO BE DIFFERENT BETWEEN FRONTLINE AND NON-FRONTLINE POPULATIONS.

Perhaps the most striking difference is seen in expressions of financial stress. FIGURE 2 shows that frontline workers are 19% more likely to express stress about maintaining their standard of living in the future and express 33% more stress around paying normal monthly bills.

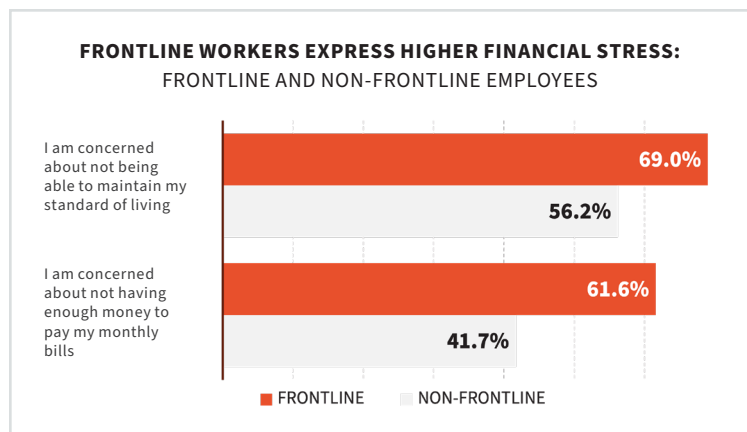


FIGURE 2

**DESPITE GRAPPLING WITH MORE DEMANDING ROLES AND THE ASSOCIATED IMPACTS ON MENTAL WELL-BEING, FRONTLINE STAFF PRESENT A CHALLENGE REGARDING BEING OPEN TO SUPPORT.** They are 64% more likely than non-frontline peers to state that they do not have an issue with stress. Even those recognizing they need help are 62% more prone to admitting they require assistance but have not tried accessing it (FIGURE 3).

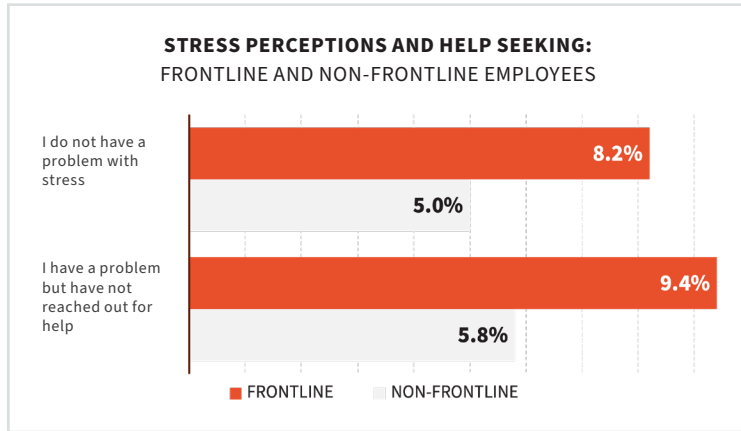


FIGURE 3

Additionally, compared to non-frontline counterparts, meQ’s 2023 Frontline Study revealed that stressed frontline workers tend to show signs suggestive of avoidant coping strategies. When facing high stress, they are 10% less likely to find family/partners helpful, 17% less likely to ask for support from friends, 30% less likely to seek out professional assistance, and half as likely to go to organizational leaders or management.

In summary, those in frontline functions appear to face something of a contradiction—extremely demanding roles tied to a higher degree of stress, yet paired with lower acknowledgment of stress and more limited help-seeking behaviors. This mismatch calls for targeted solutions addressing frontline employees where they are regarding support for mental well-being.

**“THE FASTER I GO, THEY JUST GIVE ME MORE AND MORE AND MORE WORK TO DO EVERY DAY, SO THEY JUST ADD ON. THE ONLY WAY THAT I SUCCESSFULLY MOTIVATE MYSELF IS JUST TREAT IT LIKE A WORKOUT. IT’S A LONG 8 HOUR WORKOUT EVERY DAY SO I TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IT.”**

**— JOE, AGE 38  
DRIVES A DELIVERY VAN**



# FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES ARE LESS AWARE OF MENTAL WELL-BEING BENEFITS

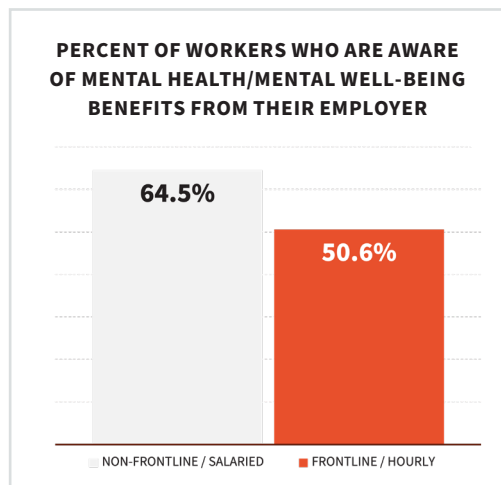


FIGURE 4

**meQ'S RESEARCH ALSO CONFIRMED A SIGNIFICANT KNOWLEDGE GAP BETWEEN FRONTLINE AND NON-FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES REGARDING BENEFITS THEIR EMPLOYER MAY OFFER RELATED TO MENTAL WELL-BEING.**

Awareness of relevant employer-provided benefits was 22% lower among frontline staff compared to non-frontline staff (FIGURE 4). This gap was most pronounced among younger employees where research suggests need is highest. In all, 73% of non-frontline Gen Z staff report feeling well-informed about available mental well-being benefits. However, a concerning 41% fewer frontline Gen Z staff feel similarly well-informed, with only 43% saying they are aware of relevant benefits.

Qualitative data from meQ's in-depth interviews with frontline employees suggest that the lower levels of awareness may be in part rooted in stigma. Several participants reported that they perceive no real need for mental well-being support. These workers associated mental well-being benefits with "times of crisis" and not something that would be used when they felt down or nervous. **MOST EMPLOYEES INDICATED THAT THE FIRST LINE RESPONSE TO TROUBLESOME LEVELS OF STRESS, ANXIETY, OR BURNOUT WOULD BE TO TAKE TIME OFF FROM THE JOB WHICH THEY DO ONLY RELUCTANTLY AS IT REPRESENTS A DECREASE IN PAY.** Using mental well-being benefits to seek out help with a professional of any kind would only be a move of last resort.

The overall difference in benefits awareness between frontline and non-frontline employees likely results from a combination of frontline staff lacking time to fully explore their options and differences in priority placed on mental well-being between employee groups. Regardless of exact causes, the gap presents a clear opportunity for employers to better target information to frontline employees, particularly younger demographics which represent an increasing proportion of the workforce. Proactive outreach and education focused on this group could significantly improve benefit awareness and utilization around mental well-being. Given the powerful connection between mental well-being and performance, closing this knowledge gap can lead to a healthier, more productive workplace culture and enhance employee engagement.



# STRATEGIC OUTREACH TO FRONTLINE STAFF

Building on our [global outreach success](#) and insights from research and customer interviews, meQ's team has crafted a targeted strategy to boost frontline engagement with digital resilience tools. Connecting with frontline employees requires a focused outreach strategy based on three core principles:

1

## OPTIMIZE CHANNELS AND TACTICS

We create multiple touchpoints that meet employees daily routines in the flow of work, including:



**WORD-OF-MOUTH AMPLIFICATION** via managers, wellness champions, and team standups. This creates authentic sharing from trusted voices.



**PHYSICAL TOUCHPOINTS** like TV monitors in break rooms, events, kiosks, on-site clinics, and home mailers. This exposes employees to messaging during their workday routines and off-hours.



**MEDIA OUTREACH** like videos with QR codes, text messages, and internal social channels for immediate access.

2

## LEAD WITH SIMPLE MESSAGING

A relatable voice and examples help build a connection with frontline workers. Our approach focuses on highly relevant stress triggers like sleep, family, and finances using plain, easily accessible language. We lead with employee stories over corporate catchphrases. And we prompt open dialogue about stress rather than resilience expectations.

### SAY THIS:

#### TELL ME...

- about the tangible benefits
- how it will help me in my day
- where my information is going, and how it will be used

#### ACKNOWLEDGE EVERYTHING I'M JUGGLING

#### MAKE IT ACTIONABLE!

### NOT THAT:

#### DON'T...

- be abstract or fluffy
- dive into feelings too soon
- assume I understand what resilience means
- tell me what I'm doing/not doing is wrong

3

### USE REALISTIC IMAGERY

Photos and videos should authentically reflect frontline life—showcasing realistic working conditions, daily life, family experiences, and influential employee advocates as spokespeople. This “seeing is believing” visual content makes the offering more approachable.

#### ✓ SHOW THIS:

- ✓ Real people
- ✓ Work clothes: plaid, flannel
- ✓ Product images
- ✓ Body diversity

#### ✗ NOT THAT:

- ✗ **NO** collared shirts or dress sweaters
- ✗ **NO** unrealistic bodies
- ✗ **NO** environments that seem too perfect

With meQ  
**I LEARN HOW TO...**

- ✓ prioritize myself
- ✓ be less stressed
- ✓ protect my energy
- ✓ make better decisions
- ✓ focus on what I can control

**TAKE THE FIRST STEP TODAY:**

This framework for dialing in channels, words, and depictions grounds our outreach in an understanding of frontline teams. Meeting unique needs fosters stronger initial interest, builds trust, and leads to ongoing engagement.

# REWARDS OUTWEIGH CHALLENGES IN FRONTLINE POPULATIONS

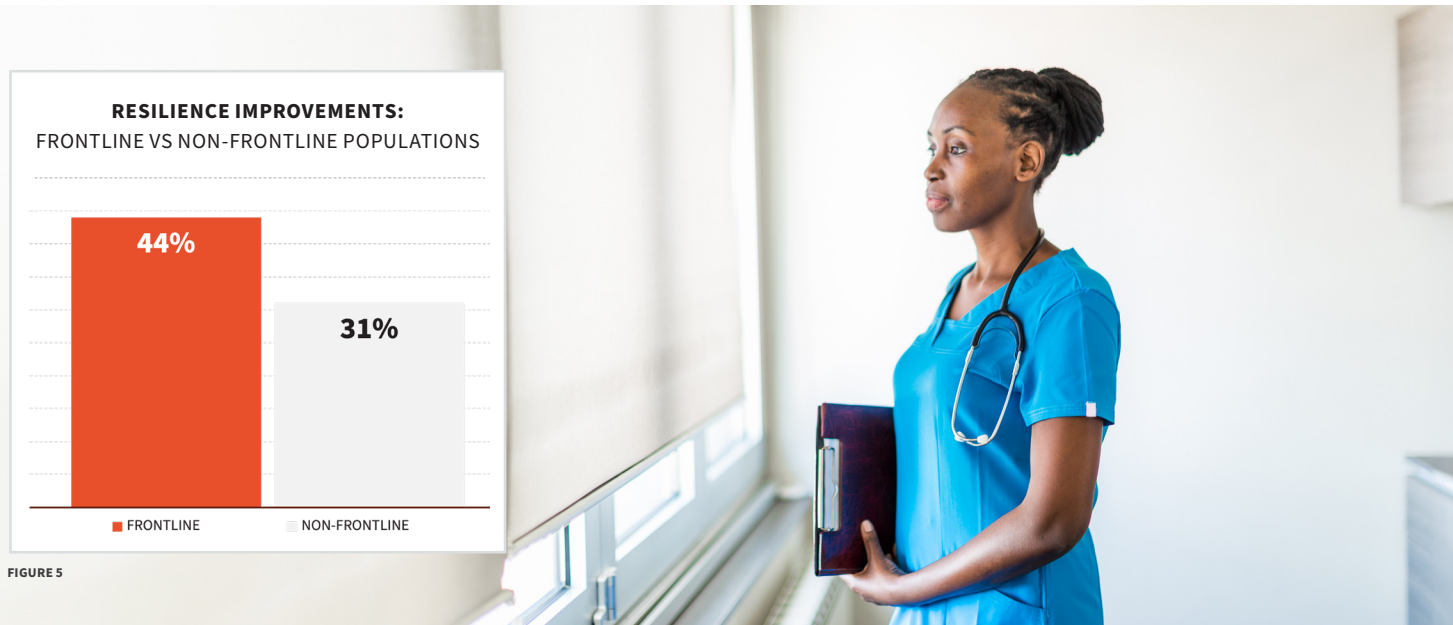
Despite the challenges in reaching and engaging frontline populations, evidence from across the meQ book of business demonstrates the tangible rewards when frontline workers engage with meQ’s digital resilience program.

Frontline employees show a high propensity to engage with mental well-being content. Across the meQ book of business over a recent three month period, engagement rates were virtually indistinguishable between frontline and non-frontline populations (**TABLE 1**)

**TABLE 1: THREE MONTH ENGAGEMENT RATE TREND**

	MONTH 1	MONTH 2	MONTH 3
<b>FRONTLINE</b>	45%	42%	41%
<b>NON-FRONTLINE</b>	45%	43%	42%

SOURCE: meQ DATA WAREHOUSE



Moreover, outcome data show that frontline populations demonstrate significantly larger improvements in resilience than non-frontline populations. **FIGURE 5** shows change over baseline in meQ’s Resilience Indicator Index for frontline and non-frontline populations. In a sample of more than 18,000 employees across the two populations, these data show that frontline staff have 42% greater improvement in resilience than non-frontline populations.



# CLOSING THE FRONTLINE MENTAL WELL-BEING GAP

This examination of current research makes clear that frontline workers shoulder greater burdens from highly demanding roles yet remain less likely to seek support. Employers relying on these essential employees have a vested interest in closing this gap.

Fortunately, opportunities exist to promote underutilized mental well-being benefits to frontline staff more strategically. Specifically, tailored outreach delivered through frontline communication channels, relatable messaging, and authentic visual content proves effective. When these employees do engage with solutions like meQ's digital resilience coaching, the rewards are substantial, with this vulnerable group demonstrating significant resilience improvements.

In an increasingly tight labor market with growing reliance on frontline workers across industries like transportation, healthcare, manufacturing, and hospitality, organizations cannot afford to overlook this discrepancy in the promotion of mental well-being. The well-documented link between psychological health, engagement, and performance argues for prioritizing frontline support as a smart talent strategy with multiplier effects.

meQ stands ready to partner with employers seeking to create a more equitable workplace experience for frontliners. Our data-driven combination of assessed need, focused outreach communications, and evidence-based digital solutions empowers organizations to make sound investments in their frontline workforces' well-being. Executed effectively, these efforts pave the way for healthier, happier, and more productive frontline employees and organizations alike.





## METHODOLOGY

The insights detailed here are derived from three key sources. meQ’s user research team has conducted extensive work among frontline workers, exploring the needs, knowledge about, and barriers to uptake of mental well-being benefits provided by employers. Comprising more than a dozen in depth interviews with frontline workers across a variety of industries and positions, this qualitative work details the challenges these employees face on the job and in accessing benefits.

The research also draws upon a large-scale quantitative study of frontline workers, conducted in a nationally-representative sample of 1,183 US-based workers. The study also included a comparison group of non-frontline employees.

Finally, the insights presented here also draw from data pulled from the meQ data warehouse on enrollment, assessment, engagement and outcomes across tens of thousands of meQ-member frontline workers across numerous industries.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS:



**BRAD SMITH, PH.D.** is Chief Science Officer at meQ, leading efforts to harness data to improve the product, enhance reporting to clients and establish the value proposition. His career includes roles ranging from policy-focused work with the US Government Accountability Office to evaluation-related work for dozens of state, federal and private sector clients. He has served on the faculties of Drexel University and McDaniel College and is the author of more than 25 peer-reviewed articles on health and well-being.

**DR. SHEA LEMLEY** is a Data Scientist at meQ, where she works on the Science Team creating actionable insights and developing predictive models with meQ's data. Before joining meQ, Shea earned her Ph.D. in Behavioral Psychology and then completed postdoctoral training in digital health at the Dartmouth Geisel School of Medicine.



**TAMARA McELROY** is a Senior UX Researcher in Design at meQ. She conducts qualitative research with meQ members, customers, and other key audiences to inform product and service enhancements. With a social science and visual arts background, Tamara brings a human-centered perspective to her work, creating solutions that improve business outcomes and individual experiences.

**SHAKIRA MacLYONS** is VP of Customer Marketing at meQ. She works with customers to understand their populations and create strategies, tactics, and messaging that will educate, activate, and engage their employees across the globe. Before meQ, Shakira worked at C Space and Hill Holliday, partnering with brands to launch into new markets and introducing services and products to populations across cultures and languages.



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