ELC 091: Rethinking How We Support Frontline Workers

The eLearning Coach Podcast

Connie: Hello learning people, and welcome to episode 91 of The eLearning Coach podcast.

Frontline workers make up most of the workforce. They include professionals like store clerks, delivery drivers, servers, and healthcare workers we encounter every day. Their jobs are often fast paced, physically demanding, unpredictable, and tightly constrained by time. So how can learning professionals design best-fit solutions that support and enable frontline workers to help them perform at their best?

In this episode, JD Dillon answers that question. We discuss the realities of frontline work and what organizations need to understand to better support the people who keep everyday operations running.

JD started on the frontline, managing movie theaters and theme parks. After 20 years leading operations and L&D at Disney, AMC, and Kaplan, he's become a trusted expert in frontline enablement. JD now advises organizations on enterprise enablement strategy, performance technology, and applied AI. He is the author of *The Modern Learning Ecosystem* and *The Frontline Enablement Playbook*.

Connie: Hi, JD. Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

JD: How you doing, Connie?

Connie: I'm doing pretty well and looking forward to talking about frontline workers with you. To make sure people really understand who these frontline workers are, can you talk about some of the industries where they work, the most common ones?

JD: The great thing about talking about frontline and deskless workers is that we encounter them every day in just our lived experience in our communities, right? So, when you go to the retail store, you go to the grocery store, you make a phone call because you're upset with your cable service, the person who picks up the phone on the other side after you get through the robot and say agent repeatedly, that person.

JD: The people who deliver stuff to your house, the people who manufacture the stuff that is delivered to your house. When you go to an urgent care facility or a hospital and you meet with the healthcare team, or you go to the doctor's office or the dentist office. So, it's all the people that we rely on, the 80% of the global workforce that kind of keeps not just our businesses, but our communities moving forward.

JD: And it's the people that you and I rely on every day if we want to go to a restaurant and have a nice meal or go to a hotel room and check in on time. It's all of those people.

Connie: They are important. These are the people who are really carrying a lot of the weight. So, when you wrote the book and as you go out there and speak, what are some of the myths and misconceptions you'd like to change?

JD: First, the idea that any of this is about unskilled work. Anytime someone says that I, I don't like the delineation between knowledge worker, skilled work, and all of those types of things. And anytime someone pushes back on that notion, I challenge them to go serve tables for 12 hours without taking a meal or a restroom break, and let's talk about who has skills when it comes to their ability to execute these jobs.

JD: In the book, I share several stories from people who are doing these jobs every day, and one of the stories that I tell is a flight attendant who on their first day out of training, so they went through three weeks of training, and on their very first flight, they had to physically take down and restrain a passenger.

JD: This person had to open the door 30,000 feet in the air. Spoiler, you can't open an airplane door at 30,000 feet in the air. Air pressure doesn't work that way. On their first day, so they had to take a passenger down. And I asked them, "How do you know, how do you know what to do? They didn't teach you how to do that."

JD: They did teach you about safety. They drilled into people's heads that above all else, protect the aircraft. And then he applied the skills that he had picked up over a lengthy career in hospitality and customer service. That's how he knew how to respond in an unexpected situation, how to call additional people for help, and how to just make it work and solve the problem, because that's what a lot of people do in these types of jobs, is they figure it out because the SOP and the guideline doesn't meet the moment per se.

JD: So, one, it's not about unskilled work, it's about a different type of work and people who do their jobs differently. And then the other one that I- I'd like to push on, and I ask people to do this when I do sessions about deskless workers, I ask people to close their eyes and picture a frontline employee and then ask people who they see.

JD: And I think a lot of people see a young person who doesn't have a ton of professional experience, who's just getting started. And there's this notion that frontline work is like starter jobs or high school jobs. You hear people talk a lot about, their first job before they got a career. And I push on that to say, "No, that was the beginning of your career."

JD: You picked up a lot of things in that experience if you were working in a fast-food restaurant or you're working in a retail store that you're still applying today. But that's also not the demographic of frontline work, because not all of these positions are introductory jobs. People who work in manufacturing facilities are engineers in a lot of cases, right?

JD: Healthcare workers go through 12-plus years of education in order to become, the professional that they are today. So frontline workers are professionals, too, and

to understand who we're talking about, all you have to do is go to the grocery store, stand in the middle of the store, and spin around for a moment, and you're going to see everybody who works in that store.

JD: You're going to see someone who is a 16-year-old kid. This is their first job, and they're bagging groceries to make some extra money. Then you're going to see someone who works in the deli, and they've been working in that deli for 25 years, and they're very good at what they do. And then you're going to see someone who works in the seafood department, and they're part of a union.

JD: This is their profession, right? So, it's a large, varied group of people doing different types of work in similar conditions. So, I always remind people that the frontline's not one thing. But there are commonalities to how the job is done and the challenges and opportunities that people face that allow us to have a broader conversation about practices that can help people do their best.

Connie: Sounds good. For people who are new at supporting frontline workers, they're in L&D but they've never done that before, what do you think they'll need to add to their analysis for frontline workers that they didn't need for office workers?

JD: The most important factor beyond the things we talk about, like understanding business priorities and metrics and these types of ideas, is understanding the workflow. How is this job done every day? Especially because if you consider a lot of these businesses have a lot of different types of frontline work environments. So, if you consider a telecommunications company, they have field service workers who are the people who come to your house in order to install your cable.

JD: They have the contact center agent who's on the phone when you're calling about your bill, and then you have retail associates who are in retail stores trying to upsell you additional devices and additional plans and whatnot. So, understanding how each of those individuals does their job every day, where they do their job, what tools and devices especially that they use to do their job, and then where inside of that workflow can we help them do the job better?

JD: Because the consistent reality across all of these frontline spaces is that these folks are working on limited time. They have little to no autonomy to make decisions about how they spend that time. When I worked in contact center operations, rule number one of a contact center is don't take people off the phone, because that's where the work is done.

JD: So, I had to start thinking about my job in terms of minutes instead of in terms of content and courses, because I had minutes in between phone calls or the phone call period itself to do anything to try to help this person do their job effectively. And when I worked in theme parks, if I scheduled people for training, not only do I have to schedule them out of the operation and disrupt the operation, which means we had to figure out coverage so that you don't wait in line longer for your favorite attraction, we also had to think about things like walk time, because if we take people to an

instructor-led session, they might actually have to walk for 15 minutes to get to the facility where that is taking place.

JD: So, I have to schedule the time allotment for that activity as well as time around it to allow them to get to and from their work location. So, an hour-long instructor-led session becomes an hour and a half expense that I then have to justify the value of. So, understanding and getting as close to and staying as close to the day-to-day reality of the work, because that's going to help shine a light on not necessarily what the problem, the priority, the business goal is going to be, because that's going to change, but we have to fit whatever that solution is into that reality.

JD: So, the more that we understand it, the more we can shape solutions and support how the job is actually done.

Connie: I call that an environment analysis. I don't know, I just made it up. I remember w- I was designing a course for nurses, And I was like somewhat far along, and then I just started hanging out with them and interviewing them, and I found out that on the floor there is no audio in the computers because it would disturb the patients.

JD: Yeah.

Connie: That was a rude awakening. Oh, there are still computers without audio. I didn't even think of that.

JD: There are case studies in the book, which I think is unique, that don't have answers. because usually when you have a case study, you have here's the problem, here's what we did, here's the solution, here are the results, right?

JD: There are so many of those, but there are also several case studies, especially early, where the person is just kind of laying out their reality.

JD: Like, "I am struggling to be able to provide effective support because I'm up against these hurdles, and these things are really difficult." One person is in the wood manufacturing space, and they talk about, "If I want to do anything digital, well, one, I don't have a dedicated platform, so I have to consider how would I track anything that I push towards these folks?

JD: Two, workstations are often limited in the facility, and they're shared, so how am I going to get people to these various workstations that are used as part of the job? If I want to insert any type of hardware, like put a computer anywhere in the manufacturing facility, we'll have to think about where am I going to drop the power from, because I have to drop the power from the ceiling in order to power any type of workstation that I might add.

JD: And we can't use personal devices or any mobile devices because they're not allowed on the manufacturing floor." So just walking through the unique challenges and kind of environment, like you said, of each space because supporting contact centers where people are sitting in front of a screen, meaningfully different than

supporting a manufacturing facility with all those considerations versus that telecommunications store where everyone has a mobile device in their hand because they sell mobile devices in that store.

JD: So really understanding those intricacies, especially if you don't come from the space, you haven't done the job yourself or haven't done it for a while, or you're brought into the department, as a learning and development professional from another space. And I know we often have this debate around expertise, right?

JD: Like, do you need to know how to do the job to help other people do the job? It depends, in my opinion, on the job that we're talking about, but you definitely have to understand how people do the job. You don't necessarily need to go in there and be an engineer to support engineers. You definitely need to understand and build a relationship and trust with the people who do the job, so they know that when you're trying to help, you're doing it with an understanding of their reality and not trying to add something to their already overflowing list of stuff.

Connie: And there can be so many different audience groups, as you're mentioning, and each group has a different workflow. Big challenge. Speaking of challenges, what are some of the unique challenges and constraints that frontline workers face when compared to people who work at a desk?

JD: When I ask this question of frontline audiences, it doesn't matter what industry we're from or what part of the world we're in, the answer is universally time.

JD: Everyone's busy, but when you combine lack of autonomy with lack of time and the fact that people who work in frontline often hourly jobs have to complete all work-related tasks while they're on the clock It knocks out basically anything considered extra from someone's workday. And I, I'll often talk to folks who support frontline teams who are struggling to overcome the challenge of time, and they don't necessarily talk about time as much as they talk about things like, "We schedule these classes, people don't come."

JD: Right? Or "We provide this content and, and it's really useful information, people don't engage in it." And I think we're, we m- mistake the idea that people are not motivated or they don't want to learn how to do something. And in my experience, because my first half of my career is in frontline operations, of course I ran into people with different levels of motivation that were interested in different ways about what we were doing every day.

JD: I never really ran into anyone who said, "You know what I don't want to ever do? I don't want to ever learn anything. I'm good. I don't want to keep up with how things are changing or do my job a little better, so I don't get hurt or yelled at today." But when you consider the reality of the people you're supporting, what types of job do they do?

JD: How physically and emotionally demanding is the work itself? How much freedom and autonomy do they have to decide to engage in any type of development

activity? If you schedule that activity before or after shifts, how tired are they? Right? If you work all day in an automotive shop repairing vehicles and then you schedule some additional training after that shift, are those people realistically going to be able to engage in that conversation?

JD: Okay, it's before the shift. Do they have to get additional coverage at home for childcare? Does someone else have to take their kids to school that day? Do they work a second job? So yeah, their job here ended at 7:00 last night. What happened after 7:00 last night that's going to impact their ability to do something extra the next morning?

JD: So there's just, I think, a, a bigger story when you consider the dynamics of this part of the workforce that takes familiar challenges, like people are busy and don't have time, and shifts the way we need to consider how to help people overcome that type of challenge, and it forces us to have to completely, in a lot of cases, rethink our methods and strategies.

JD: I think the key is understanding you're not looking for the perfect solution, you're looking for the right one. So, the perfect solution to helping people learn a particular skill or how to complete a particular task may be, a robust instructor-led training program with these reinforcement and practice activities, and these particular support tools.

JD: It might be the perfect learning experience. If any of it doesn't fit into the reality I just laid out, it's not the right experience. So, we have to reshape our perspective and approach to fit their reality, because I have yet to meet the frontline operations going to change how they do business to suit what I am trying to accomplish.

Connie: Absolutely. In your research for the book, just in your career, what surprised you the most about the kinds of challenges that frontline workers have to deal with every day?

JD: I think there's the unfortunate surprise in the research I did for the book. So, I come from this space. My entire career is wrapped around supporting and working with frontline workers in various capacities.

JD: I did something that I thought was going to be a gimmick at first, because one, I have a hard time writing in one seat. I don't like writing in silence, so I usually do a lot of writing out in public instead of writing at, at home. And I thought, "Okay, I'm going to write the book in frontline spaces, and that's going to be a gimmick.

JD: I can say I wrote the book in the frontline." And then I started doing it. So, a lot of this book is written in restaurants, in hotel lobbies, in airport lounges just wherever I was over the course of two years of writing. And that experience very quickly turned into this kind of inspirational reflective activity, where sitting in the space and watching people do the jobs started to trigger memories I hadn't thought of for a long time, shifts in perspective.

JD: And there's one story I tell in the book where I'm sitting in a restaurant booth on New Year's Eve, and I'm sitting right behind the restaurant manager. I sat there for five hours watching the restaurant manager, and for five hours, that manager tried to complete the schedule for the next week. I could tell what she was doing.

JD: She was doing the staff schedule. And every couple minutes when she sat down, something else happened. Someone called for her, someone came in, she needed to talk to a guest someone who was out of uniform, who was clearly off that day, came in to talk about their shift. Just stuff happened to this person for five hours while I was watching, and I sat there and thought, "This is what it's like to do this job."

JD: Right? She came in with a plan. "I'm going to do the staff schedule today." If she's going to get that accomplished, she's going to have to be here for 10 hours because of what happened to her during the middle of her shift. And w- all of that said, the unfortunate surprise was that frontline work is still a lot like it was when I experienced it.

JD: So, when I was a frontline employee and I was a frontline manager, it's been 15 plus years since I was in role in that way. It hasn't changed very much. In fact, what I learned is it got harder.

JD: And you would think with the introduction of different types of tools and technology, and a lot more devices in frontline operations, especially since the pandemic, that something would've gotten easier.

JD: But you counter that with the fact that labor hours are way down. Staffing is way down. More and more is asked of frontline managers, especially through and coming out of the pandemic. I never had a camera shoved in my face when I was a frontline manager. Smartphones existed, but we hadn't gotten to the point yet where people started recording things and trying to, get you in that regard, which is a whole other level of consideration when you're engaging with the public.

JD: It is harder to do these jobs than it was when I did these jobs. So, I think the fact it felt so familiar, and the stories were so familiar, and then you just kind of add complexities on top of it, was the unfortunate surprise that I uncovered through the process.

Connie: I think it's so important that we appreciate how difficult it is to do so many frontline jobs.

Connie: And in terms of support and enablement, can you talk a little bit about your framework for a modern learning ecosystem, and then give us a story, an example of when you've seen it be effective?

JD: Sure. I talk a lot about the idea of in order to enable frontline work, because it, it's about enabling outcomes for the organization through the performance of people.

JD: In order to do that effectively, we have to provide support in the moments that matter, and understanding the workflow helps us understand where the moments are that matter in terms of people's ability to do an effective job. A big part of that is upfront, so onboarding, someone coming into the workspace.

JD: A lot of people, despite the fact that it is a, a varied audience we're talking about, there are a lot of people who are doing this for the first time, so they're learning how to do this job, how to work in this industry, how to work at all, because this is their first job. That was true of me when I got my first frontline job.

JD: I didn't know how to handle money or talk to people or cook food or any of these types of things. So, we have to consider the structured side of training because we have to scaffold people. The best training experience I've ever had was my first training experience, because my trainer at that movie theater really got it.

JD: Like, understood I was scared, put scaffolding around me, gave me a lot of opportunities to practice before I went out there on my own, and then he was standing right there during my first shift. Like, when I first served a customer on a cash register, he's standing right there to make sure that I get this right, and then I quickly picked it up on my own and went and spent five years in that industry So we have to provide the scaffolding where it's important, but then how do we wrap around the employee what I call the operating system of enablement?

JD: So, it's not just about, oh, you got training. Remember everything that you were taught while you were still, like me, scared of how to do this job, trying to figure out when do I get my schedule? What kind of shoes do I have to wear? Do I like the people here? Is my manager nice? Like, all the things that come into the experience of getting a job or starting in a new space or a new department.

JD: So the idea of the framework I represent in the book is the idea that, well, how do we prop up structured training with support that's going to help not only support transfer so that you,, can safely and comfortably and confidently apply what you've learned in structured training, but we can also help you solve your way through the problems that are going to come up that we didn't cover during training, or the things that you might have forgot during training.

JD: So, it begins with how do you make sure people have access to reliable information in a timely way so that customer comes up to me and says, "Where can I find this product?" Or "Can you tell me about these ingredients?" Or whatever question you might get or problem you might run into, you know how to solve that problem, where to go.

JD: And the answer is not asking the person next to you, who may be clueless, or ask your manager, who may be busy or clueless, depending on the situation. How do I find information which, when you t- start to talk about AI on the frontline space, this is one of the areas where there's tremendous opportunity because my ability to just ask that question using whatever device is available to me and get an answer

back that I can understand in my preferred language is huge when it comes to people who do these jobs.

Connie: Huge.

JD: So, one, can I find information quickly? Two, if I can't find the information, can I raise my hand and ask for help? because maybe I don't understand the answer I got back from a digital assistant. That information's not currently available. So, what does raising my hand look like? It could be knowing who to ask, knowing that there's a subject matter expert in the building.

JD: I worked with one automotive retailer who has a literal Bat phone in the store. They don't call it a Bat phone, but let's just imagine it's the Bat phone for those Batman fans out there. They can pick up that phone, and it connects them directly to someone at corporate who's an expert in automotive knowledge.

JD: So, if a customer comes in and asks about a part or a car, and this person's like, "I don't know," and the people in the store are like, "I don't know," there's someone they can call that does know, because they have that expertise in-house. So, it's making sure people can raise their hand, and then the kind of two critical layers before you get to the structured training piece are, well, reinforcement.

JD: How do we make sure you can remember, because you're overwhelmed with the amount of potential information, the number of SOPs that you have to execute in these jobs? Well, how do we make sure you remember what you need to know when it's time to apply it? So, giving you a chance to practice., something I've done a lot for the past 10 years in my role in technology was just giving people these kind of moments.

JD: If you have two minutes in a shift, well, let's use those two minutes to give you a practice activity or to ask you a scenario-based question and see how you would handle that situation, so we can make sure you're ready to go, because you may learn something today, and that situation or that process doesn't come up, or you're not scheduled a shift in that area for six weeks.

JD: Well, how do we make sure you remember that six weeks later? And then the last layer before we get to structured training is coaching, the role of the manager, the role of the peer trainer. How do we make sure someone is there observing performance and providing feedback in the moment to make sure that you know, are you executing to the standard, and what can you do to improve so that you're not starting to develop habits, or this is how we really do it here, and those types of things.

JD: That especially can happen when you think about the scale and distribution of frontline workforces, right? because you may be a, a small but mighty training team of 10 people at the corporate office, but you have 200 locations distributed across the country. You're never going to see most of the people that you support.

JD: Who do you need in that story to make your strategy work? It's the managers and the trainers on site, so making sure that they're included in the story. So making sure that we're supporting structured training when it's the right thing to do with all of these other tools and tactics that can help people execute effectively day to day, so that learning becomes, and support becomes part of the everyday experience, not just something that pulls me away or disrupts the operation and the day-to-day experience.

Connie: Where do you think apprenticeship would fit in that framework?

JD: It leans more towards the structured side because it is a programmatic experience, right? It's something that's huge in the skilled trades area, right? You're going to be partnered with a coach or someone who knows how to do the job, and they're going to-- we're going to spend dedicated time.

JD: You're not going to be in the operation trying to figure out how to do the job, which is what a lot of people face in frontline roles. In those more kind of skilled trades roles, you're working with somebody. They're going to walk you through the process and help make sure that you're ready to go when it's time for you to take on or you're maybe going to learn an additional skill.

Connie: That's a good system. You know, I've worked with frontline workers quite a bit, from installing mufflers to medical, and one statistic that really surprised me was that 83% of frontline workers don't have a company email address. So how do they get communication?

JD: People underestimate the barrier that the lack of corporate email address is, because it's not even just about email.

JD: Email addresses are often login credentials. It's not that you're not just provisioned an email address, you're not provisioned access to a bunch of things. You might also not have access to the intranet and SharePoint. You might not have access to Microsoft Teams, right? Like, you're just taken out of the digital equation in a lot of ways.

JD: And for a lot of organizations, communication to their frontline team is still a game of broken telephone. Corporate tells someone at corporate communications or subject matter experts. They send an email to district or regional management. They forward the message to the location management.

JD: Location management tells you during a shift huddle, prints out that email, highlights some things on it, posts it near the time clock. And if you question the story I just told, go to any grocery store, find the time clock. You're going to find postings that look exactly like I just said next to them, because there's just a technology gap when it comes to the everyday frontline experience.

JD: It starts with that kind of provisioning story, but it also follows through to a part of the story we don't talk a lot about in the profession as well, which is hardware. When

we talk about digital anything in learning and development, we often just make an assumption that the screen exists.

Connie: Mm-hmm.

JD: And let's go back to the grocery store.

JD: If you work as a bagger, you're a cart person. Can't think of the right name for that. But a person who goes out and gets carts out of the parking lot, maybe works on the front end, cleans things up, bags groceries. There's no screen in that person's life Right? They, they never touch a screen. They might when they clock in and clock out.

JD: If you work as a cashier, you're standing in front of the point-of-sale system, there's a screen in your life. If you work in the deli department, most people don't know that deli scales are internet-connected devices with touchscreens. You usually can't see the screen because you're on the other side of the counter.

JD: The scale knows how much the meat costs. It's because it's connected to the internet. So, there are screens throughout the operation, but they're just not part of everyone's workflow in that way. So, when we think about, how do we reach people, we have to think about the hardware side as well as the software side of that story.

JD: And the answer is different depending on the workflow and hardware availability, and all of these different factors that influence people in different jobs. But the answer's usually a combination of factors. If we can find a way to reach people directly, whether it's through a certain device or...

JD: Oftentimes I talk about choose-your-own-device. So, it's not a one-device strategy, it's an every-device strategy, and you can use your personal smartphone, you can use a device you use in the workflow. Well, now we can reach you with certain information. But we should not create an avalanche of information heading towards a frontline worker who does not have time to check their messages as they're working with your customers throughout the day.

JD: Well, we also have to add in the manager role, because I do think the manager shouldn't be the conduit for all information, but those daily huddles are critical, not just for moving information through the business, but having a conversation, and that sense of connection and prioritization, and the explanation of why things are important, and contextualization to, well, how does it work here?

JD: because the message from corporate says one thing, but how does it work in this store because things are different as compared to other locations. So, it's usually kind of a campaign-based strategy that activates all of the different tools and touchpoints you have, depending on what the message is, right?

JD: Is it a, a timely quick update? Is it something we want to deploy that's going to help people change how they do the job, shift behavior? Is it about a new promotion or a new product? So in the book, and there's a collaborator I work with in the

financial services space who talks a lot about campaign-based communication and campaign-based learning, and activating all of these different touchpoints that are available so that we give people as much of a chance as possible to reach information, and to get the message, and to have access to the content.

Connie: And I think the why is so important because if people don't understand why, then it just seems like these rules and regulations are coming from above for no rhyme or reason. The conversation is so important.

JD: If I was going to get a tattoo associated to the book, which I currently don't have, the tattoo would say, "Frontline workers don't work for your company, they work for their manager."

JD: Mm-hmm. The second tattoo would say something to the effect of, "They don't work in service of your corporate goals and KPIs. They work in service of shared success of one another." Because a lot of people, and this was true in all of my frontline roles, I never saw the corporate office, right? I worked in, in a lot of cases thousands of miles away from the people who are making the decisions, and maybe I saw regional management show up once in a while on store visits and, and things like that, but I wasn't connected to the broader story, and I also didn't share in the broader success of the organization.

JD: I didn't get bonused because corporate reached their goals, like a lot of people in the corporate office do. So, I think it's a mistake if we assume that frontline workers are going to care. People do want to do a good job. They want to be proud of what they do, and especially in a tight-knit, community-driven environment like a great frontline workplace, they want to do right by one another.

JD: The best teams I ever worked with or supported all had one thing in common. They did different types of work in different locations for different companies. They all liked working with one another, and they all had supportive managers that they were willing to go that extra mile for. So that's, I think, something that we have to take into account when we shape any type of training or enablement strategy for frontline teams, is that the motivation is local.

JD: Community sets the kind of environment for performance. If we don't take that into account and try to enable that local community and that local sense of connection in the way that we design solutions, we're going to run into problems when it comes to engagement and motivation that often kind of stop performance from getting to that end goal.

JD: Community and connection's a critical part of the story that I don't think we talk about a lot, and we, we think about it as a cultural thing and recognition. That's HR's departments. I think it's critical to both learning and performance that we understand that sense of community connection, and we design for it because they understand people work in service of one another, and shared success, and the importance of that manager connection.

JD: And if we, we wrap our kind of solutions around that, that's when we'll be successful in driving outcomes.

Connie: Those are some really good insights. I'd like to ask you a question about AI before we wrap up. What are some ways you think AI can be used to support frontline workers?

JD: Considering the, the fact that a lot of frontline employees have a different relationship with technology than people who sit at desks and are using LLMs in the course of their workflow or engaging with agents, it's not reality for a lot of people who do these jobs.

JD: However, there are meaningful applications of AI that already exist and have existed for a while that have an oversized impact on people's experience of work and their ability to perform. Outside of the performance conversation, let's take scheduling as an example. Using technology to more effectively schedule shifts and adapt workflows to operational demands, and doing it in a way where people can, one, get a more reliable schedule and get that schedule earlier, and not have to engage in a back-and-forth conversation with management in order to trade shifts because the technology understands, am I able to hand this shift to this other person without a formal approval process?

JD: All of that is huge. Yeah. So, advancing scheduling technology has an oversized impact on people's stability in the jobs and their ability to do these w- this work and work for your company. Right. On the performance side, we mentioned the kind of digital assistant chatbot conversation where one, I can ask a question, get an answer, not have to surf my way through a knowledge repository or SharePoint site to figure out where information is and then try to interpret it.

JD: I can just ask and get the answer back. Language translation in all forms of content is huge for this part of the workforce, because we have a lot of people in these jobs. When I was a custodial manager, a lot of the people who worked with me were, um, from Haiti. I do not speak Haitian Creole. They did not have great English.

JD: Why should they? So, I had to talk through intermediaries if I wanted to have any type of a heavier conversation with folks. Now, I could put on a set of AirPods and have a real-time conversation with people. So, language translation in all of these different tools is huge. And the last one I'll add is, you kind of take that digital assistant conversation to the next level.

JD: A lot of SOPs are written by lawyers for lawyers, so it's hard to understand, okay, what do I do with this based on the situation that I'm facing right now? Add on top of that the fact that a lot of people working frontline jobs for various reasons might not be great readers. So even if the digital assistant can provide the information back in a language that I prefer, I might not be able to understand that information.

JD: Mm. But now with natural language processing and what AI can do, I can talk to the machine, and it can talk back. So just the fact that now I can engage with information in a way that makes sense to me, it gives me the opportunity, a fair opportunity, to do my best work. In a previous existence, there were just obstacles in my way of understanding, let alone applying information.

JD: That's huge as well. So, it's... I think we sometimes take for granted or don't want to talk about those types of applications of AI, because I didn't just say agentic a bunch of times, or talk about huge automation stories, or that there's a team of agents that are working for every frontline worker. It's not that story in most cases.

JD: But all of those applications are significant in terms of removing obstacles that get between people and their ability to feel confident in their ability to do the job.

Connie: Absolutely, and it makes their life easier So to wrap things up, JD, if any directors, supervisors, managers are listening, what would you like to tell them about frontline workers?

JD: Everyone deserves a chance to do their best and feel proud of the work they do every day. And at the same time, this and the Frontline story is not a story about altruism. It's not a story about what people deserve because it's simply not how organizations tend to make decisions. So if we want to do right by the frontline workforce, we also have to do right by the business, and that's the balance I tried to hit in all of the work I do, and especially in the book that I wrote with, , 50-plus collaborators from around the world, is that these practices are going to help you execute against corporate priorities by enabling and equipping your frontline teams in ways that make sense based on how the job is actually done.

JD: But I think that's the critical balance to keep in mind. You know, this isn't an HR story. It's an operations story. It's not a book written for L&D and HR professionals. It's a book that includes L&D and HR professionals but is written for anyone whose job is to help frontline workers do their job better, which includes a wide variety of different types of professionals.

JD: So, my hope is that the story kind of lives up to its, its tagline. So, on the back of the book, there's the term every shift counts. It's a play on the word shift because a shift is a period of hours that people work every day, and the idea that, one, every shift's an opportunity to solve a problem, to learn something new, to help someone out, and to feel proud about what you do.

JD: And every shift that we can make to help people do their jobs a little bit better, it doesn't have to be a monumental change, small iterative improvements that have outsized impact on people's confidence and capability on the job that's meaningful. If you go to... There are two websites to check out. One, frontlineplaybook.com is where the book lives, and then everyshiftcounts.com is where the Every Shift Counts initiative lives, which is where I'm going to host additional resources.

JD: There's a swag shop if you want some f- front, frontline swag. There's information about the book there as well, and then just some calls to action and recommendations that people can apply both in their work and their everyday life to help frontline workers be more successful.

Connie: Thanks a lot for being here. It was great.

JD: Thanks for having me.

Connie: Frontline workers serve customers, solve problems, manage difficult situations, and keep operations moving, often under intense time pressure and with little room for error. I hope this conversation gave you a greater appreciation for the challenges they face and new ideas for how organizations can better support them.