

A woman with short dark hair, a nose ring, and large hoop earrings is smiling warmly at another person whose back is to the camera. She has extensive tattoos on her arms and is wearing a dark, patterned top. She is sitting at a desk with a laptop and a white cup. The background shows a modern office environment with large windows.

accenture

Why belonging matters now more than ever

Fostering a sense of belonging among public
service employees makes all the difference

Right across the globe, public service employees have had to cope with tremendous upheaval as they have continued to provide support during the pandemic. In line with ever-changing COVID-19 related restrictions, they've switched between remote, hybrid and office-based working. And they've had to do more with fewer people.

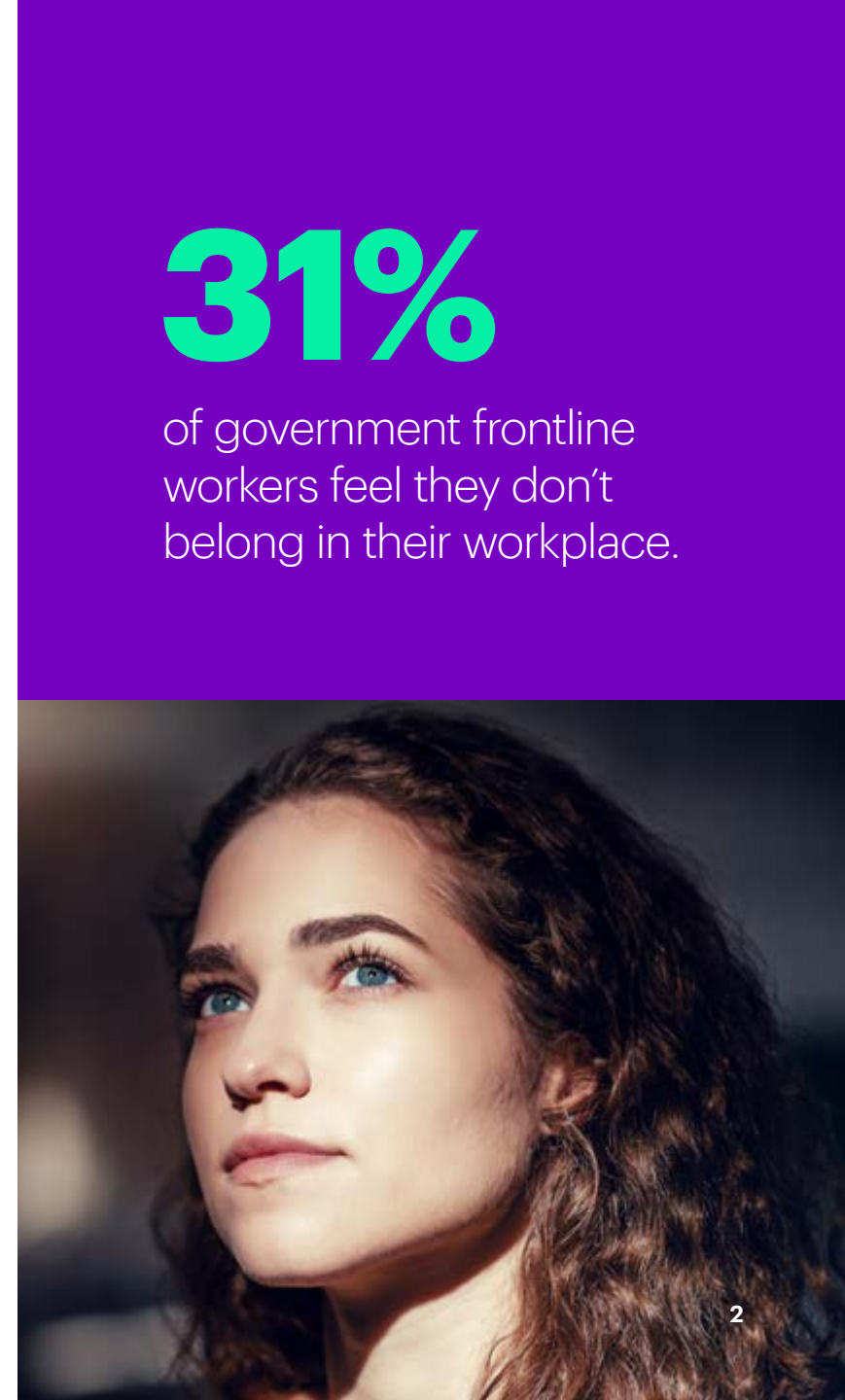
But it's not just how they work that has changed decisively. Some public sector employees—in common with those in other sectors—are re-examining their personal priorities. As a result, in some countries we're seeing a 'great resignation', as employees reevaluate their careers and leave their jobs in record numbers. Indeed, one recent report shows that **nearly 50% of employees** across genders and age groups are considering quitting in the next six months.

As this happens, and given shortages in the labor market in almost all developed countries, the private sector is trying to hire more and more public sector employees, in most instances paying higher salaries.

Against this backdrop, Accenture research has found that a third (31%) of government frontline workers¹ feel they don't belong in their workplace. Unless public service employers can persuade them that they do belong, there's a risk that these employees may lose motivation, productivity or potentially even leave their organization altogether.

31%

of government frontline workers feel they don't belong in their workplace.





To retain and motivate staff, employers and managers must foster a sense of ‘belonging’ at work. And they need to do so with a sense of urgency. The rewards for getting this right are huge: Government leaders can unlock up to five-times more human potential by improving the everyday experience of their employees and making them feel that they truly belong.

To explore how public service employers can foster a greater sense of belonging, we conducted research based on a cross-industry global study—**Better to Belong:**

spanning
more than

1,200

government
workers

and over

600

consumers of
government services

based on a larger
global study of

7,000

individuals

and

3,500+

customers

in

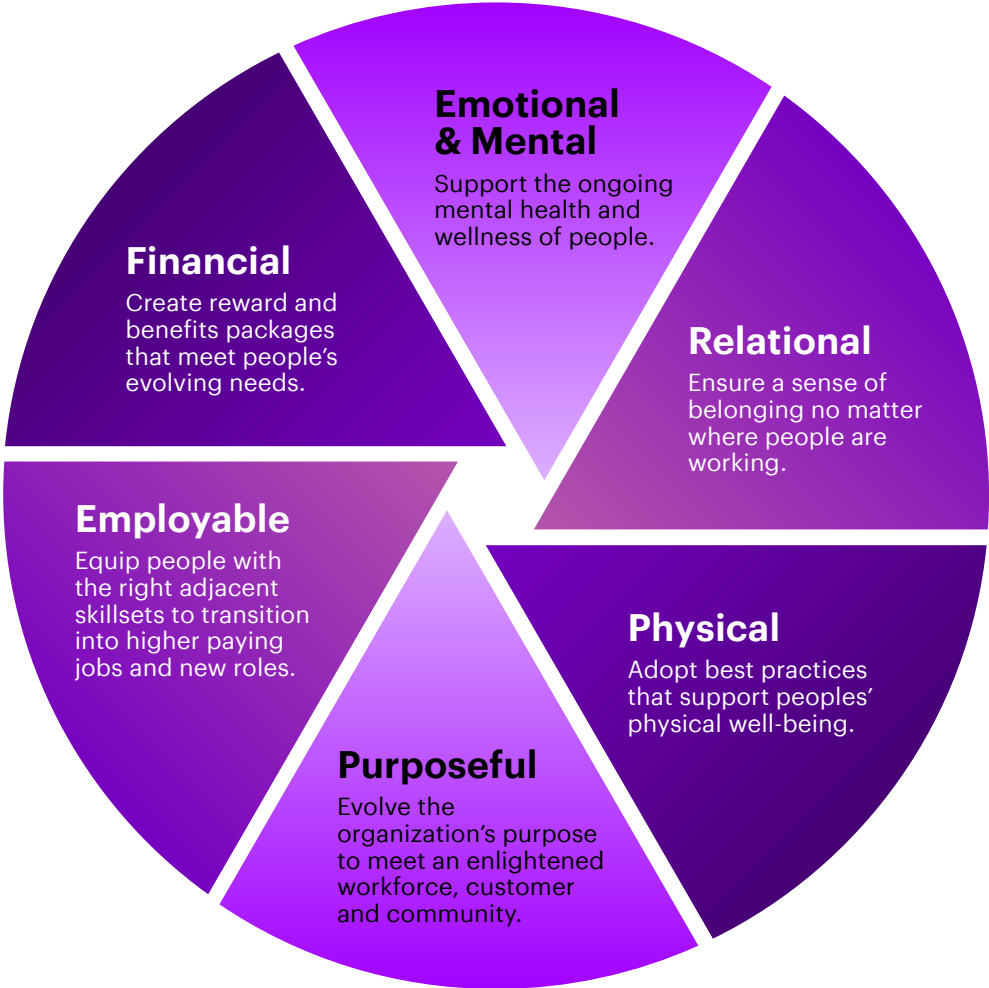
14

countries across
seven industries

Why belonging hinges on employees feeling **Net Better Off (NBO)**

We know from earlier **Accenture research** that 64% of employee potential is influenced by employers meeting six fundamental human needs: Emotional & Mental, Relational, Physical, Financial, Purposeful and Employable. We used these findings to create a framework that we call **Net Better Off (NBO)**. And it has **huge ramifications for how public service employers should think about their talent** management.

Our latest Better to Belong study underscores the importance of NBO, showing that when public service employers deliver equitable experiences at scale, they **increase workers' sense of feeling Net Better Off. And when employees feel that, they're twice as likely to have a sense of belonging at work.**



Belonging: making everyone feel **recognized and valued**

So what does a truly inclusive sense of belonging feel like? There's clearly a strong element of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). But it's about more than just recruiting talent from different backgrounds. Belonging also means ensuring that everyone in the public service workforce has a fair chance to have their voice heard, do interesting work and learn new skills, as well as progress up the career ladder.

People's work-related experiences have a crucial influence on their sense of connection to their organization and co-workers. This includes everything from the onboarding process to the degree of autonomy and responsibility they enjoy, and the extent to which they have a voice at the table. Why does this matter so much?

In our research, we measured this sense of belonging among government frontline workers across four key dimensions:

Feeling comfortable speaking up (felt by **76%** of government frontline workers)

Being respected by your peers (**73%**) and managers (**71%**)

Having influence over decisions (**64%** average), and

Receiving sponsorship from a senior leader who can help you advance and grow (**62%**)

Although at first glance these numbers might look positive, they show that roughly a third of government frontline workers feel like they don't belong at their workplace because of factors related to the human experience they have at work.



Delivering **tangible impact**

When workers feel a sense of belonging, their employers benefit too. For example, a study by BetterUp (a B2B and B2C online coaching platform) found that a strong sense of belonging was linked to a 56% increase in job performance, 50% lower staff turnover, and a 75% reduction in sick days. **The researchers calculated that for a 10,000-person organization, this would result in annual savings of more than \$52 million.**

So, how can public service employers realize similar benefits by increasing their people's sense of belonging and helping them to feel Net Better Off? Our research shows that this can be accomplished by focusing on two key areas:

“Moments that matter,”
which can generate a **4.3x**
increase in NBO scores

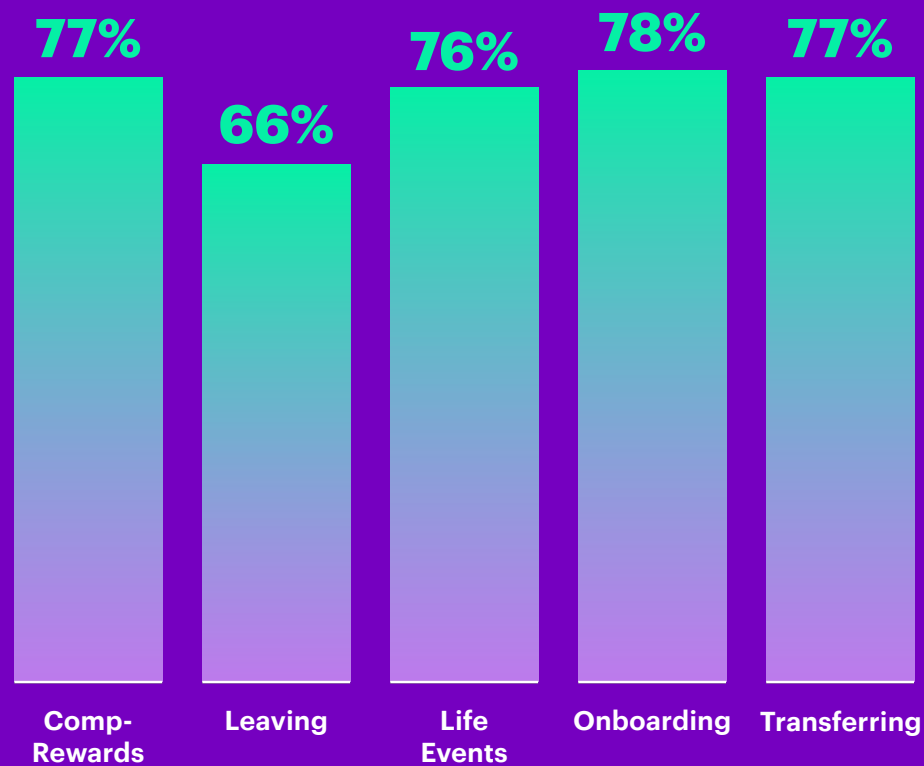
“Everyday moments,”
which can deliver a **5x**
increase in NBO scores



Moments that matter include the big, decisive occasions during an individual's career. They span everything from the person's onboarding experience, to how the organization treats life events such as births and bereavements, to compensation and even what happens when a worker exits the organization. We found that when it comes to these moments that matter, approximately 25% of government frontline workers don't feel supported by their employers.

Moments that **matter**

How supported government frontline workers feel across different moments that matter



By getting the moments that matter right, public service leaders can increase NBO scores by up to 4.3x (vs. 3.2x across all industries). So making significant improvements here can help public service employers compete more effectively against their private-sector peers.

Crucially, it's not just significant personal moments that matter. Employees' everyday experiences have a huge impact on their sense of belonging and their NBO scores.

Everyday moments

Ten everyday experiences that public-service employers must get right

We identified 10 everyday experiences that can foster a greater sense of belonging among workers. They include issues related to people skills, organizational factors, and individual factors. The table at right shows how well public service workers feel supported in each of these areas on a scale of 1-5, with one being lowest and 5 being highest. **The quality of these experiences can increase workers' NBO scores by up to 5x.**

	Lever	Definition	Average Support (1-5)
Essential People Skills	A. Empowerment	Making people feel that they have the autonomy to support advancement	4.03
	B. Communication	Sharing relevant information when people need it and delivering with empathy and transparency	4.20
	C. Diversity	Holding leaders accountable for welcoming, progressing and valuing the contributions of all people at all levels	4.10
	D. Citizen-Centric	Valuing and rewarding behaviors that drive a positive citizen experience	4.07
Organizational Factors	E. Skilling	Providing opportunities for skill building to meet organizational objectives	4.06
	F. Dependence	Rules and processes that limit people's contribution to achieving desired outcomes	3.22
	G. Governance	Practices and processes that impede people's agility	3.19
	E. Technology	Providing the appropriate infrastructure and real-time digital support which keeps people connected	4.16
Individual Factors	H. Self-Efficacy	Believing in one's own ability to meet work demands	4.24
	I. Growth Mindset	Enabling people with greater ownership and influence over organizational outcomes	4.24

The essential people skills—**empowerment, communication, diversity** and being **citizen-centric**—are the most important to improving NBO scores and a sense of belonging, both across the public sector and other industries.

That's not all. When public service employers deliver excellent everyday experiences, the employees on whom they're likely to have the greatest impact include women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ employees, and workers without traditional education qualifications. And when these employees feel Net Better Off, and reach their full potential, they deliver greater productivity. In short, these groups stand to gain the most—and deliver the greatest increases in human potential and productivity to their organizations.

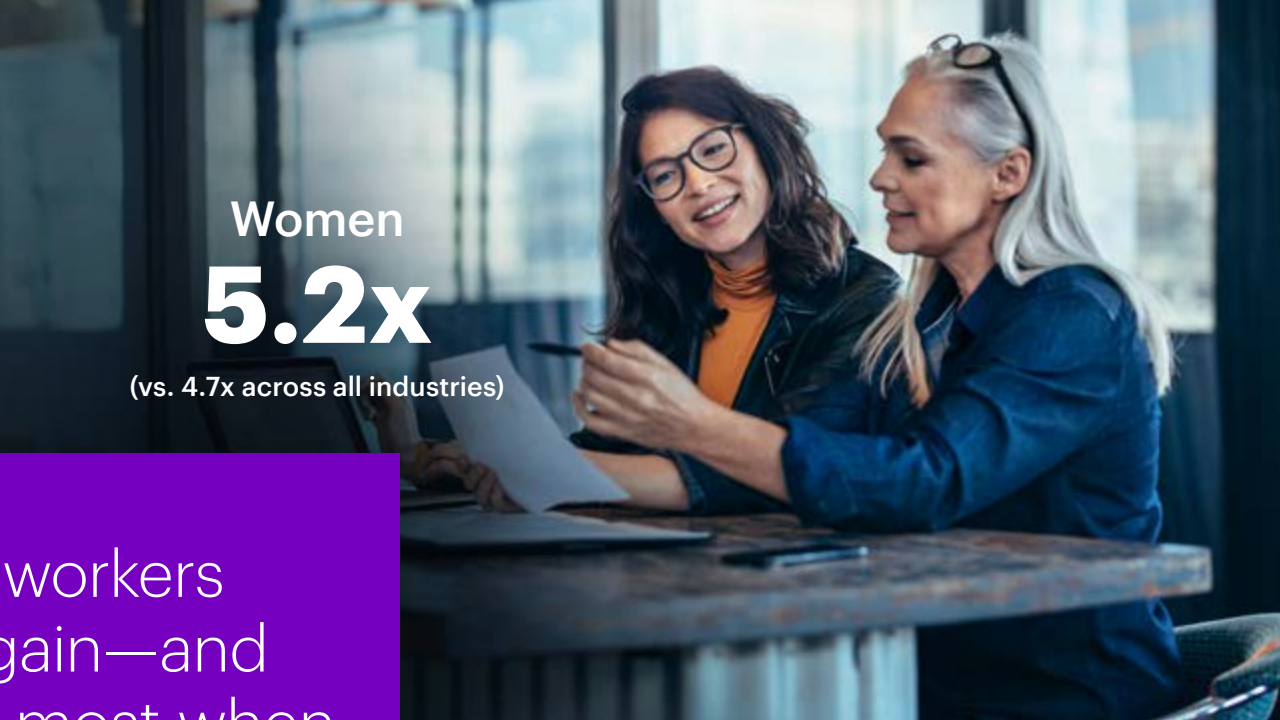




Workers with less education

4.1x

(vs. 3.6x across all industries)



Women

5.2x

(vs. 4.7x across all industries)

Diverse workers stand to gain—and deliver—the most when employers **excel at everyday experiences**



Racial & Ethnic Minorities

3.8x

(vs. 4x across all industries)



LGBTQ+

2.4x

(vs. 3.7x across all industries)

A man with a beard and glasses is smiling while talking on a mobile phone. He is wearing a dark jacket over a grey turtleneck sweater. The background shows the interior of a car, including the headrest and window.

Belonging in practice

To bring belonging to life, employers need to focus on areas including **empowerment, diversity** and **skills development**.



Empowerment

When employees feel empowered, they're more likely to feel a sense of connection to the organization. So how should public-service employers empower their people? By giving them greater autonomy in determining how they work, allowing them to have more control over their work products and outcomes, and giving them opportunities to succeed. These recommendations are reinforced by our **Future of Work** research, which shows that empowering people by giving them greater autonomy increases their overall wellbeing.

To see empowerment in action, look at MakerLabs at the Ireland National Health Service.

Case study

Launched in 2017, the Spark Innovation Program at the Irish Health Service² was designed to empower junior doctors to innovate and make positive changes within the public health system. The national healthcare program was suffering from a workforce crisis, hemorrhaging junior doctors at a much higher rate than it could train them. One of Spark's many initiatives is to provide workers with a mobile MakerLab so they can fix their own issues on the spot. In healthcare circles, people often say that staff create at least 30 'workarounds' per day. The mobile workstation is equipped with various tools and materials that allow employees to quickly develop a product or improve a process on the spot. This helps create a greater sense of ownership and empowerment, while delivering creative solutions.

Diversity

Organizations' diversity efforts should cover the entire employee lifecycle. It starts with widening talent pools to recruit people from a broader range of backgrounds. But it's also about conducting parity studies to ensure that everyone has a fair opportunity to progress. Diversity programs shouldn't just focus on meeting targets. For employees to thrive, public service organizations should tailor employee experiences to make them more inclusive, and celebrate diversity within the workforce.

Case study

Inclusive hiring has delivered excellent benefits in Australia. In a two-year pilot called "Recruit Smarter," University of Melbourne³ researchers found that simple strategies like changing the language in job advertisements can have a huge impact on overcoming unconscious bias. The program was implemented in 46 organizations, across public, private, and NGO sectors, including the Victorian State government. Researchers also found that when diversity-friendly language and information was included in the job advertisement, the number of applicants with disabilities more than doubled during the trial period at the Transport Accident Commission.





Skilling

To foster a stronger sense of belonging, public service employers should enable people to upskill and reskill as demands change. Online courses and external credentials can help here. But employers should also offer people on-the-job training in different parts of the organization where they're keen to gather more experience.

Case study

In 2020, the US Air Force (USAF) launched its Digital University (Digital U) to increase digital fluency among its workforce and truly democratize technical training across the Air Force. As the USAF increasingly operates from desktops and servers and web applications, Digital U offers access to more than 12,000 courses, with customized learning and career pathways designed for users with varying degrees of digital fluency. The USAF also offers incentives—including badges and nanodegrees—to encourage employees to complete courses. Financial bonuses for course completion are also under consideration. The pilot has been expanded to include additional career pathways beyond cybersecurity and IT professionals⁴.

Looking to **the future**

Increasing a sense of belonging among employees is a 'must do' for public service organizations. The good news? There is no shortage of addressable opportunities to help achieve that goal.

Most countries have introduced legislation around diversity in their government workforces. There are targets and strategies focused on increasing representation and career progression for women, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ employees. However, equity continues to remain elusive. Pay gaps persist. Equal representation is lacking across the upper echelons of organizations. And some groups of workers continue to suffer from incidents of harassment and bias.

Recent events are putting greater pressure on governments to address unfair treatment. For instance, the racial justice movement has drawn increased attention to inequalities. And it's been widely reported that the pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on women, people with disabilities and racial and ethnic minorities. In light of this, governments are making stronger commitments to creating workplace equality.

What's more, private sector companies are stepping up their commitments to DEI and generating a stronger sense of belonging at work. Public service employers will need to improve in these areas to compete effectively for top talent.





Finally, there's a **huge opportunity to improve employees' key career moments and day-to-day experiences**. This can help instill a greater sense of belonging, and create a future of work that's more equitable.

The benefits are far-reaching. Employees can reach their true potential, and deliver greater productivity to their organizations.

In other words? When public service workers feel a sense of belonging, everybody benefits.

About Accenture

Accenture is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, we offer Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services—all powered by the world’s largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centers. Our 674,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. We embrace the power of change to create value and shared success for our clients, people, shareholders, partners and communities. Visit us at www.accenture.com

Authors / Contributors



Rainer Binder

*Managing Director—Public Service,
Social Services Lead*



Marni Poropat

*Director—Consulting, Public Service,
Australia and New Zealand*



Sarah Berger

*Manager—Accenture Research,
Global Thought Leadership Lead, Public Service*



About Accenture Research

Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data-driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients’ industries, our team of 300 researchers and analysts spans 20 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research—supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations such as MIT and Harvard—guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients. Visit us at www.accenture.com/research

References

- 1 Note that frontline workers are defined as government workers who directly engage with and provide help to citizens/customers. Those that provide direct support to frontline workers were also included in this study.
- 2 Ireland Health Service, 2021
- 3 University of Melbourne, 2018
- 4 Air Force announces new ways of learning digital skills, 2019

Copyright © 2022 Accenture. All rights reserved.
Accenture and its logo are registered trademarks of Accenture.

This content is provided for general information purposes and is not intended to be used in place of consultation with our professional advisors. This document refers to marks owned by third parties. All such third-party marks are the property of their respective owners. No sponsorship, endorsement or approval of this content by the owners of such marks is intended, expressed or implied.