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RESEARCH PAPER

An Analysis of Employee Experience Feedback

What Millions of Employees Want You To Know

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The Story of the Data

Plainly, the past couple of years have been unlike any in our lifetimes. All of society was deeply affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Now, more than two years after the onset of the pandemic, the intersection of work and home life blends even further. As organizational life continues to settle into a “new normal,” we have learned a great deal about the evolving employee experience. And we feel a great sense of duty to join other researchers and professional firms in sharing what we have learned.

With Crisis Comes Uncertainty

During the past three years, WSA has administered over 1,100 projects, surveying more than 10 million employees across 200+ countries around the globe.

The current global pandemic is not the first major crisis that we have experienced in our 40 years of employee research. In the last two decades, we have felt the tragedy of terrorism with 9/11 – an event that continues to have consequential impacts on virtually every aspect of our lives. We also experienced the drastic decline of a worldwide economy in 2008. The housing crash that initiated a devastating market crash led to unprecedented levels of layoffs, downsizing, and restructuring activity. And just when it felt like that long recovery and economic boom was going to be our new normal, we encountered a global healthcare crisis of magnitudes not suffered in over 100 years. As if that alone wasn't enough of a disruption, we have also experienced social justice movements we've not seen since the 1960s. Diversity and inclusion has arguably never been more top-of-mind for organizational decision makers. *The Great Resignation* has become a reality, and this includes women exiting the workforce in disproportionate numbers. A central question now is, "What will these unique sets of crises teach us?"

Recently, we have sought to understand how the unprecedented events of the past two years have impacted the psyche of our clients' workforces, specifically, employee engagement and experience. Workforce Science Associates (WSA) has built one of the most comprehensive databases of employee research in the world. During the past three years, WSA has administered over 1,100 projects, surveying more than 10 million employees across 200+ countries around the globe. We have added over 116 million individual responses to this three-year rolling database. Leveraging this relevant and robust data, WSA has been able to identify, explore, and attempt to explain multiple trends affecting the global workforce.

This paper will attempt to shed light and explain key questions related to the workforce and organizational performance.

Key questions related to the workforce and organizational performance.

- Has engagement reacted to this crisis in similar ways to previous crises?
- Do key drivers of engagement differ during times of difficult changes caused by a crisis?
- How have evolving attitudes about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging affected engagement and the factors that drive it?
- How and why have women responded differently than men to the circumstances of the past two years?

Understanding Workforce Engagement

Over the last decade leading up to the pandemic, engagement had been gradually improving. Interestingly, between 2015 and 2019, employee engagement enjoyed an all-time high and stayed relatively consistent during this period, hovering at about 72%. However, once the reality of the pandemic became evident, what we witnessed was like no other point in the last decade. Engagement increased sharply in Q2 of 2020. It might seem contradictory to have high scores at the onset of a pandemic, but our conversations with clients at the time revealed that leaders were making employee safety and well-being a top priority. It was an unprecedented time to be sure. In most instances, employees saw

their leadership doing the best they could in an extremely challenging environment. And, in a parallel with 2009, those who received a survey in the second quarter of 2020 responded favorably to the fact that their organization cared enough to survey them for their up-to-date thoughts and opinions. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate these long- and short-term trends. Figure 1 provides a historical summary of engagement scores for the past decade. Figure 2 shows a deeper dive of engagement scores by quarter from the fourth quarter of 2019 through Q4 2021 in the WSA normative database. A close examination of this figure shows a spike to all time high engagement scores in Q2 2020.

Annual Engagement

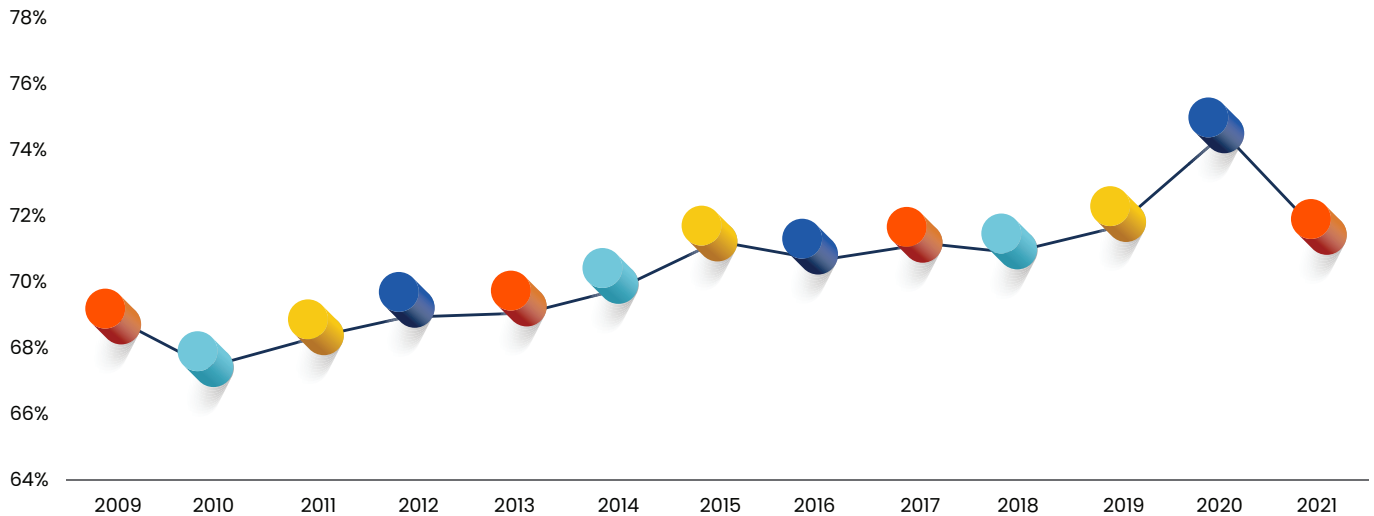


Figure 1: Historical summary of engagement scores for the past decade calculated from WSA's normative database.

Quarterly Engagement

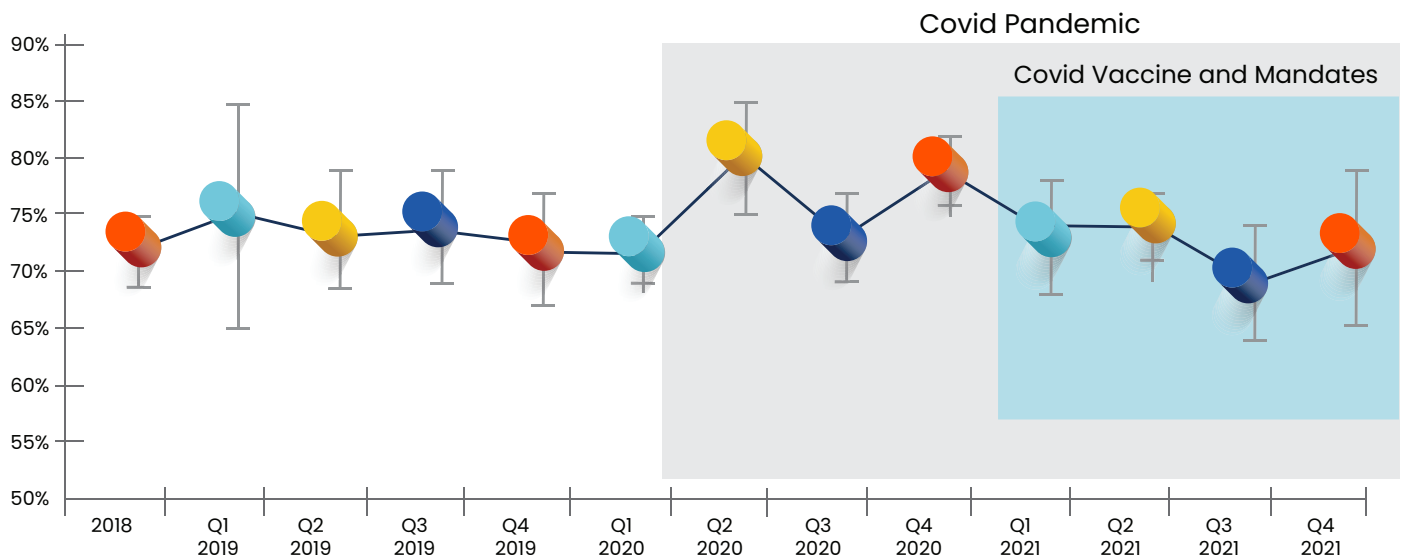


Figure 2: Engagement scores by quarter from Q4 2019 through Q4 2021 calculated from the WSA normative database.

In 2020, we saw scores increase about three points on average. Based on what was seen in the prior decade, this annual average rise was significant. While unusual, the nature of the change in scores is consistent with the drastic changes that were implemented to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. For some industries, such as travel and hospitality, the pandemic forced them to forgo their annual surveys. Some organizations made the decision to postpone regularly scheduled surveys, hoping that work environments would make a quick return to “normal.” Further, organizations experiencing significant strain were compelled to execute workforce reductions. Employees lucky enough to have retained their jobs were those represented in the database.

Based upon the employee feedback data we were able to collect, the results indicate that employees were reacting similarly as they had reacted with the previous crises. Our hypothesis is that:

When major crises occur, those who remain employed have higher levels of motivation, commitment, and conscientiousness in their work.

In short, at the start of the pandemic, employees felt more grateful than usual to have a job and were thus slightly more engaged. In addition, employees were also experiencing increased amounts of communication from the organization regarding safety protocols, how work would be accomplished, and how the company was going to survive—leading to a sense of care from the company. Employees generally gave their leaders credit for doing what they could in an unprecedented pandemic. As a result of continuing to work throughout the onset of the pandemic, employees felt valued and appreciated for enduring the risks and challenges of the pandemic.

Given our knowledge of previous crises, we anticipated that at some point employee engagement would begin to decline as pandemic fatigue set in and work obligations became taxing. Also, with vaccines widely available to those who want them and at the the absence of any conclusion for key social justice issues, WSA predicted that engagement levels would begin to erode. The question was, when? As we initially gathered anecdotal and limited data from clients in the second half of 2020, we became aware that there was some decline in engagement followed by a steep increase yet again toward the end of 2020. Only after analyzing our full database were we able to validate the significant peaks and valleys which painted the picture of 2020 and into the beginning of 2021.

As the pandemic continued, organizations with proactive leaders at the helm were given credit by their employees for their efforts at being transparent, demonstrating care, and taking action to ensure employees and their families were made as safe as possible. Essentially, companies whose leaders were willing to listen to their employees in tough times and act on what they heard were significantly more likely to come out of this crisis stronger than when they went into it.

Conversely, in organizations where communication failed to directly address employee worries, the feeling of being the focus of special attention wore off, and what was once an opportunity to work from home

to stay safe, turned into a constant challenge to overcome work barriers. Just as others have observed, WSA also found in measurements of employee engagement that employees are “languishing” (Grant, 2021; Keyes, 2002). With low unemployment and a somewhat uncertain economic outlook, we expect the decline in overall engagement to continue. However, companies whose leaders rise to the new challenges and communicate appropriate ways to help employees find additional meaning in their work may well be the exception. WSA remains committed to reporting on engagement trends on at least an annual basis to assist organizations in understanding how their workforces compare against others. Even more importantly, to identify the key areas where business leaders and HR practitioners can take focused action to create a more positive and engaging experience for their employees.

Analyzing Engagement Key Drivers Pre- and Post-Pandemic

To analyze change pre- and post-pandemic, one must draw a line marking the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We chose March 2020 as the time when travel slowed to a trickle and many organizations shut their doors, immediately adjusting how and where work was performed, and for many companies, becoming a fully remote workforce nearly

overnight. Having our finger on the pulse of engagement globally, WSA sought to understand what the greatest motivators for employees have been to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more. The question we wanted to answer was, “What can every leader, from the boardroom to the front lines, do to take action to create more motivation, commitment, and conscientiousness?” As we learned in 2008, it was the combination of the poor economic conditions – with leadership’s response to those conditions – that most affected employee engagement and the company’s effectiveness during the crisis.

We have found that Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a useful lens through which we can

examine employee engagement and the fundamental drivers that generally influence employees’ motivation and commitment during this crisis. During times of prosperity, people tend to focus on their own development in much the same way as one works towards self-actualization as more of one’s foundational needs are met. With disruptions and major crises threatening higher-level needs, the focus shifts to satisfying more basic needs. During a crisis, employees want to trust that they are safe and secure; that they feel like they are included and that they belong; that their voice matters; and that they can find real meaning and purpose in their work. Our most current research investigating the fundamental drivers of engagement support this hypothesis.

Parallels to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs



Figure 3: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

WSA's decades long research has shown that there are fundamental tenets to the employee-employer relationship. People want to work for leaders who they trust and who inspire them; and for managers who foster a sense of teamwork and inclusion; and organizations which provide opportunities to learn and grow and be a part of something bigger than themselves. WSA's refreshed database

(2019 to 2021 data) revealed 30 potential key drivers which could influence employee engagement. Next, WSA studied the key drivers of engagement, both pre- and post-pandemic, as well as the three-year overall drivers, to explore if there were any shifts or changes in the drivers' rank order and/or if there were any significant changes to engagement and the actual scores.

Pre-Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Drivers

		Pre-Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Consistent Global Top Drivers of Engagement	Future/Vision	Employees want to be a part of an exciting future, and they want to be inspired by senior leadership.	When employees believe leadership is navigating uncertainty and continuous change well, they are more optimistic about the future.
	Communication	People are more apt to listen once they feel listened to.	Transparency and multi-directional communication is key.
	Trust	Leadership who earn the trust of employees are rewarded higher confidence in their abilities.	Confidence in local leadership (i.e. business unit) level, became more important to employees post-pandemic.
	Recognition	Employees want to know they are important to the organization's success and that their contributions are noticed.	Feeling valued took on a broader context during and post-pandemic and contributes to a sense of belonging.
	Growth & Development	Employees want opportunities to learn, grow, and advance in the organization.	Employees want to be rewarded for their efforts during the pandemic — they are looking for opportunities.
	Support & Involvement	Employees want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and they want to know they have support behind them.	Employees want more of an individualized approach to their experiences. They want to know the organization is proactively helping them to navigate uncertainty.

Figure 4: Pre- and post-pandemic, top drivers of engagement

Even though the priorities remained constant over the past three years, further examination of the individual items, which constitute the drivers of engagement post-pandemic, revealed that when employees are confident that leadership is making the necessary changes to be successful and that employees are an integral part of the success of the business, employees feel a sense of being cared for and secure, even in the face of the global pandemic. Leadership who met the moment and were nimble in navigating the uncertain waters were generally rewarded with a higher level of optimism for the future. These leaders instill confidence in employees that they are the right team to lead their organizations out of the crisis. Some have even come through the crisis even stronger and better than before the crisis. It should be noted: Three drivers (culture, belonging, and well-being) have increased importance, and we will continue to monitor these potential key drivers of employee engagement in the future.

In summary, we found the fundamental drivers of engagement remain generally unchanged, and they continue to be a driving force in improving the employee experience and workforce performance. With ever-changing circumstances, it is critical to maintain focus on the most consistent drivers of engagement and basic tenets of the employer-employee relationship listed in Figure 4. In times of both crisis and tranquility, these core drivers serve as a guidepost for organizational leaders across industries and geographic locations.

A Spotlight on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

In addition to a global health pandemic that has changed the course of and where work happens, a historical social justice movement has also fundamentally altered the way everyday people see themselves in relation to their communities and to their organizations. These social justice movements appear to have not only energized individuals who have been historically marginalized but have also raised the awareness across employee populations in general.

The number of organizations investing in opportunities to better understand employees' sense of inclusion and belonging, as well as understanding how company diversity policies and practices, or the lack of them impact their workforce has increased dramatically over the course of the last two years. While diversity and inclusion has been a part of the conversation in many organizations for some time, those conversations have not consistently resulted in meaningful actions. We are finding that an increasing number of organizations are making real efforts to understand and track the extent to which various groups feel like they are experiencing a strong sense of belonging and inclusion.

As WSA refreshed its normative database in 2022, one of the most significant findings is the extent to which belonging has emerged as an even stronger driver of engagement. The concept of belonging appears to have taken on a broader meaning and appears to play a more critical role in how employees experience their workplace. That finding is timely, with WSA having spent the last few years studying diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in greater detail than ever before. Out of this research, we have established a concise analogy for how we think about DEIB, as well as a three-item, validated belonging index.

A Seat at the Table

A Practical Analogy for DEIB



Diversity is having a well-balanced group of people at the table.

Equity is making sure that everyone has the right chair height, line of sight, is able to hear, is at a time when they can attend etc.

Inclusion is making sure that everyone is welcomed at the table.

Belonging is feeling psychologically safe to participate in the discussion.

Leaders who met the moment and were nimble in navigating the uncertain waters were generally rewarded with a higher level of optimism for the future.

A true understanding of belonging in the workforce relies heavily on analyzing key demographic data – particularly, looking at how intersections of various demographics can amplify the trends that we are seeing. This research will be included in a larger study that will focus solely on DEIB, and it will be released later this year. For the purposes of this paper, we took a close look at engagement and belonging through the lenses of gender identity and race and ethnicity.

In general, we found that employee belonging is driven by similar constructs as engagement, with the top drivers of belonging being recognition, communication, growth and development, and change management. Employees with the highest belonging scores feel respected, seen, and heard. They have opportunities for career growth and feel supported during turbulent times.

When analyzing the data by gender and race, scores and drivers of belonging are also relatively consistent. However, there were a few key areas where there are differences. Women, historically, have marginally higher engagement scores. This trend continues: Engagement scores for women are 1.5 points higher than men. The difference is statistically significant ($P \text{ value} < 0.05$). However, we found that women are one point below men in belonging. We also found that items that relate to psychological safety are slightly lower for women, and that these items have slightly higher correlations with belonging for women. For women, belonging is more dependent on feeling that they are safe to contribute and that their voice matters. For men, being seen and recognized has a stronger relationship to belonging than it does for women.

For race or ethnicity, we did find some significant differences in belonging scores between groups. Black or African Americans, on average, are five or more percentage points lower on their sense of belonging compared to other larger race or ethnicity groups. Interestingly, the general majority group of Whites is also often not the group who feels most like they belong (see Figure 5). Other demographic trends and the factors driving these differences in feelings of belonging will be explored in more detail in an upcoming DEIB paper released later.

Belonging Scores for Non-Managers in the U.S. and Canada

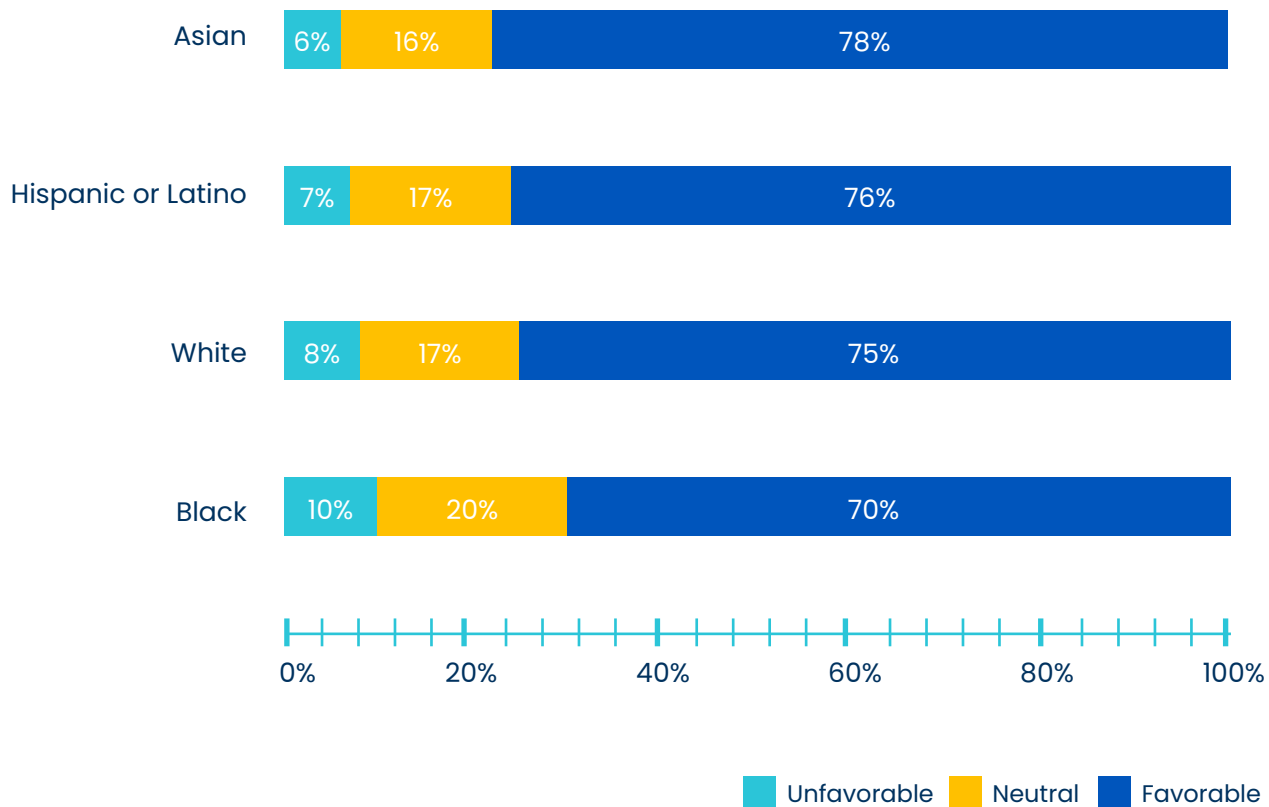


Figure 5: Differences in belonging scores for non-managers in the U.S. and Canada

Conclusion

As we have seen, engagement and experience trends are simultaneously quite stable but also not totally immune to the abrupt shifts taking place in society. In fact, rapid societal change in the last few years has led to some new observations that are worthy of our attention. These observations include the rising importance of belonging as a driver of engagement and the impact that leaders can have by more effectively navigating the ever-changing landscape. A steady focus on established drivers of engagement will serve many organizations well. Yet, when massive displacements alter our experience at work, it is not uncommon to see temporary shifts in perceptions of engagement and experience. It will be particularly interesting to see whether some of the most recent trends are lasting and remain a part of the “new normal,” as we hopefully move past the worst consequences of the global pandemic.

Authors



CAMERON KLEIN
Executive Consultant

Cameron Klein, Ph.D., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2019. Previously, Dr. Klein worked at PwC as a manager in the people analytics group, and prior to that he served as a senior managing consultant with IBM Kenexa. Throughout his career, he has partnered with organizational stakeholders across multiple industries to cultivate lasting business value via the delivery of thought leadership, products, and services spanning the areas of employee engagement, organizational culture, individual assessment, team performance, leadership assessment and development, individual and team training, and interpersonal skills. He has been a trusted business partner for clients that have included some of the largest retail organizations in the world, as well as global finance, technology, hospitality, healthcare, and manufacturing organizations. He has also partnered with several government and military institutions, including the Army Research Institute, NASA, and the Naval Air Warfare Center. Klein is an accomplished author and presenter, with numerous publications and professional presentations to his credit. Though consulting, service, and solutions, Cameron has leveraged available solutions to impact, streamline, and strengthen his clients' human resource and organizational development processes, with measurable impact on business outcomes.

Education

Doctor of Philosophy in Industrial and Organizational Psychology,
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RANDY STERNS
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Randy, M.B.A., joined WSA in 2019. Previously, he worked at IBM/Kenexa as director of consulting. He has more than 25 years of strategic consulting experience in performance measurements and organizational transformation. Mr. Sterns has an extensive consulting history of working with Fortune 500 organizations to implement change and measure progress. He has assisted numerous organizations in achieving their strategic goals by developing innovative solutions. Mr. Sterns has built programs for organizations of all sizes and all industries. He is passionate in helping organizations achieve their goals by implementing practical solutions.

He serves his community as an executive member of the Greater Lincoln Workforce Investment Board.

Education

Master of Business Administration, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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KRIS ERICKSON

Co-Founder and
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Kris Erickson currently serves as co-founder and executive consultant for Workforce Science Associates. In this role, she empowers organizations to discover the unique drivers and motivational aspects that drive performance in their workforce and use these to accelerate a high-performance culture.

Prior to this role, Kris was a member of the leadership of IBM/Kenexa's workforce sciences practice. She was responsible for ensuring client relevance related to behavioral science solutions including employee engagement research, leadership development, and assessment tools and consulting. She also served as an executive consultant for the assessment and survey practices within IBM. She was an integral part of strategic discussions with senior executives focusing on HR needs and using survey benchmarks, best practices, case studies, and other IBM research initiatives.

She has also served as the senior vice president of HR for a healthcare company and was instrumental in designing leading-edge human capital strategies that fueled the sustained 30% growth of the organization.

Kris has over 25 years of consulting experience with Fortune 500 companies. In this capacity, Erickson worked at both the strategic and tactical levels to develop and deploy comprehensive workforce solutions.

Education

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ELLIE ERICKSON

Research Consultant

Ellie, M.B.A., joined WSA in 2019 and currently serves as a research consultant. Previously, Erickson worked at Community Works West, a nonprofit that works with people impacted by incarceration and violence, serving as CFO/COO. Erickson has a demonstrated history of working in the social services and arts sectors and is skilled in nonprofit consulting and organizational management, policy and financial analysis, social services, and fund development. She is a trusted advisor to organizations that are working to enhance the experience of their employees through research-driven, employee-engagement programs and workforce analyses, particularly through a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens.

In addition to her work at WSA, Ellie is currently the treasurer for OUTsider Film & Arts Festival.

Education

Master of Business Administration, University of California, Berkeley, Haas School of Business

Bachelor of Arts in Neuroscience & Behavior, Wesleyan University



ROBERT WELDON
Senior Data Scientist

Dr. Robert Weldon currently serves as senior data scientist for WSA. In this role, he oversees the daily management, collection, analysis, and strategic output of all data and insights related to the employee experience.

Prior to WSA, Dr. Weldon worked at IBM/Kenexa as senior managing consultant where he managed a team of programmers and research consultants who maintained and updated the employee engagement normative relational database.

Dr. Weldon worked to produce thousands of custom normative data reports for clients while conducting research on employee opinions and leadership competencies. Additionally, he worked with an international group of consultants to identify appropriate benchmarking comparisons for clients and use a variety of statistical techniques to produce normalized client survey scores that enabled clients more clearly identify areas of strengths and weaknesses within their business.

Education

Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center

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About WSA

WSA, Workforce Science Associates, offers expertise to maximize the employee experience, enhance leadership effectiveness, and hire the very best talent. This expertise is rooted in ongoing research and behavioral science backed by 40 years of implemented experience. In short, WSA improves workforce performance.

WSA believes in the power of applying the right science that is proven to make people and organizations successful. This includes measuring what matters and equipping leaders with the right solutions to motivate their people to want to work harder, stay longer, and care more. WSA has workforce performance down to a science.

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