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2023

RESEARCH PAPER

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# State of the Workforce Engagement Trends

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# The “New Normal” Looks Different For Every Organization

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A “new normal.” What does it look like? Are we there yet? Will we know it when we arrive? Over the past few years, we have all been wondering about what a “new normal” would look like, particularly from a work perspective. There are many organizations that have successfully adjusted and thrived in their version of a “new normal.” Likewise, there are organizations that remain lost, and undeniably, there is a substantial percentage of companies that are still finding their path.

What we have come to understand with certainty is that the “new normal” looks different for everyone and every organization. That said, one fundamental goal that should unite the efforts of organizations across the globe is to continue fostering a culture that engages, motivates, inspires, and retains their most important asset—their people.

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## Engagement is Adjusting and Stabilizing

Leaders have eagerly awaited to see what would happen to engagement levels after observing a massive spike in engagement during 2020, followed by a subsequent roller coaster decline during 2021. The question became whether engagement would continue to fall or whether it would stabilize as this “new normal” becomes established. And perhaps more importantly, what are likely key levers that managers and leaders can pull in order to optimally engage their workforce and drive organizational performance within the current landscape?

Workforce Science Associates (WSA) has continued to curate one of the most comprehensive databases of employee research in the world (*WSAdata*). During the past three years, WSA has administered 586 census survey projects, capturing 153 million survey responses across 151 countries around the globe. Each year, we continue to add tens of millions of individual responses to this three-year rolling database. WSA has leveraged this data to analyze the most recent engagement trends as well as identify the most relevant factors that are driving engagement—these key drivers motivate your workforce to want to work harder, stay longer, and most importantly care more for your customers.

[We have heard the story of how engagement declined in 2021](#), as this was both predictable and inevitable based on the anomaly year that was 2020. Some may have interpreted the decline in 2021 as a negative sign; however, after integrating what we know from 2022 engagement data we find that engagement trends were merely adjusting to the “new normal.” From an engagement perspective, this means regressing back to pre-pandemic levels.

Just as employee engagement had been stable between the years 2015 to 2019, we are seeing a similar pattern emerge again in 2021 and 2022. Engagement, while increasing ever so slightly from 2021 to 2022, has so far held relatively steady. When reviewing bi-annually, we found that engagement hit its lowest level in the second half of 2021 after declining from the peak experienced in the second half of 2020. Since bottoming out in the second half of 2021, engagement has increased slightly and appears to have

stabilized within pre-pandemic levels. While many organizations have improved slightly during 2022, 2023 brings new uncertainty which will be closely monitored as credible sources tout an impending recession and many large brands have been in lock-step announcing workforce reductions to right-size their ships. The Manager Effectiveness trend displayed in the graph below will be discussed briefly in this paper, and it will also be the sole topic of a future Workforce Performance Lab research study coming later this year.

## Trends in Engagement and Manager Effectiveness

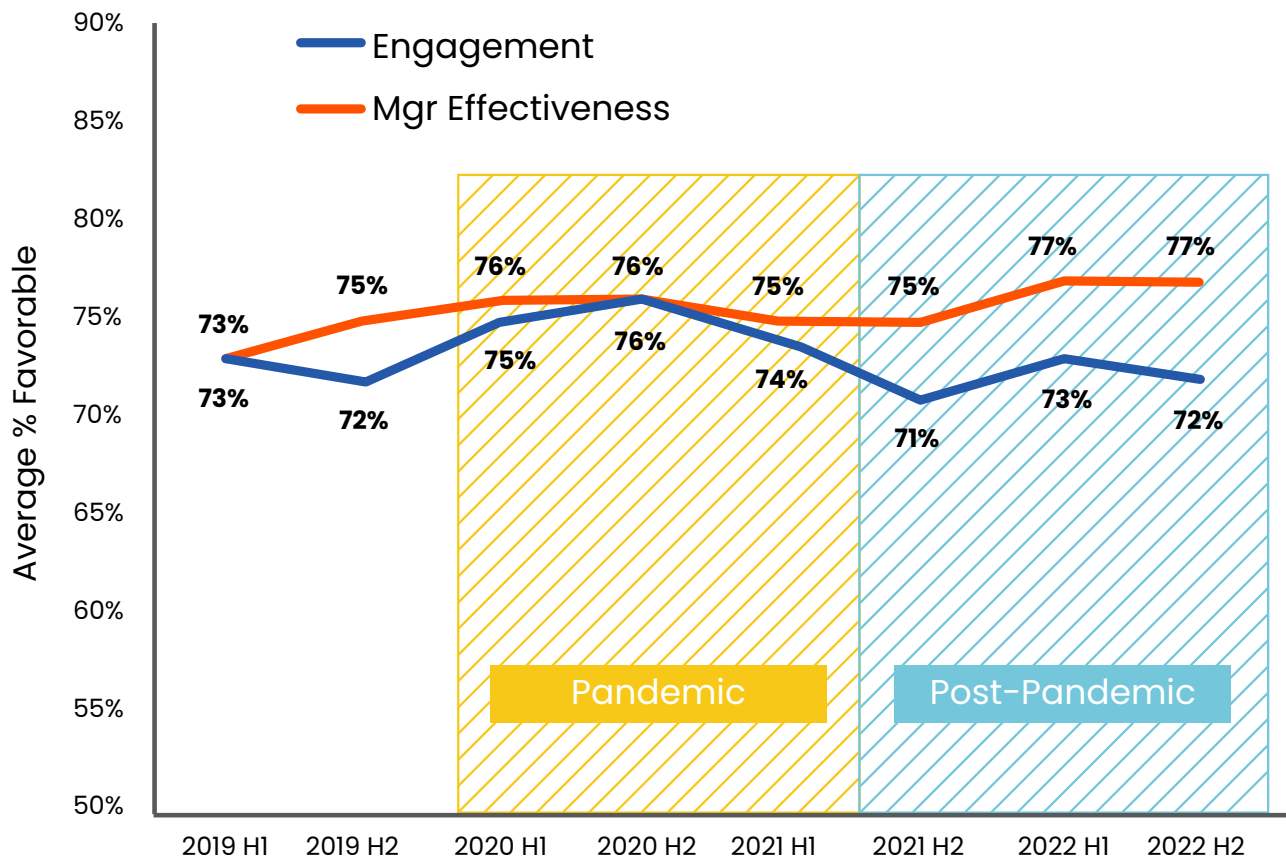


Figure 1. Half-yearly engagement trends.

We were also curious if the pre-, during, and post-pandemic engagement trend had any differences when looking at the identity groups of race and gender. Our analysis revealed that, in general, employees of different races demonstrated a similar engagement trend. However, there were some noteworthy differences (Figure 2). For instance, employees

who identified as two or more races showed a negligible increase in engagement during the midst of the pandemic, but experienced a steeper decline post-pandemic, dropping 4.4 percentage points as compared to 2019 levels. White employees also experienced a decline in engagement levels, with a 2 percentage point drop from 2019.

## Engagement

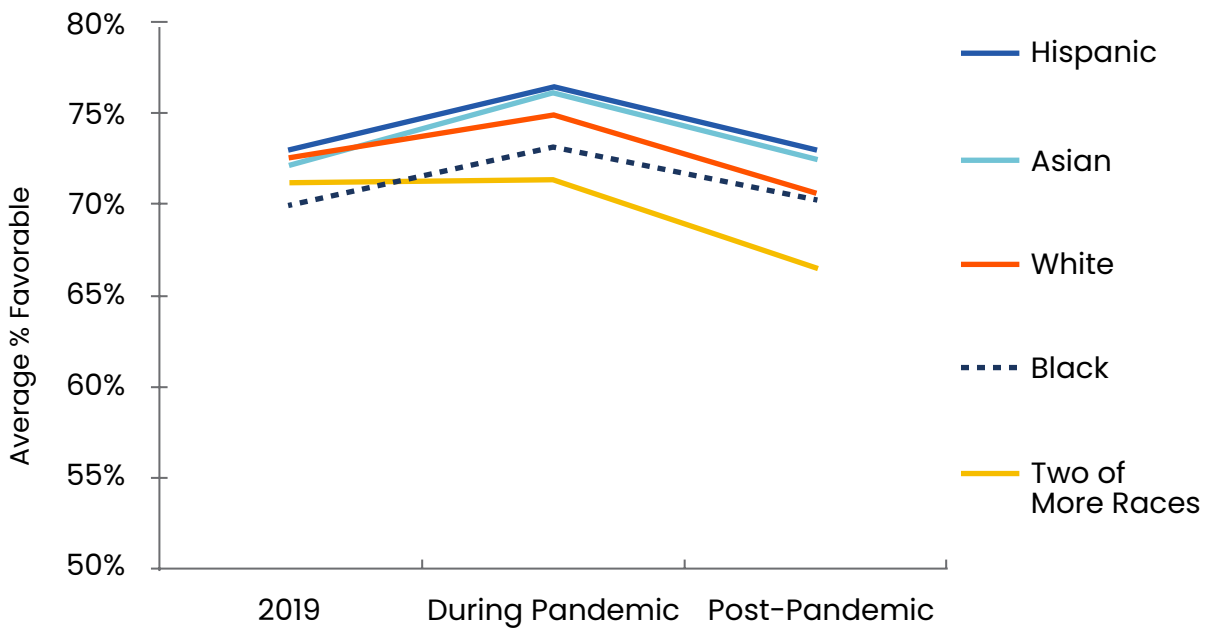


Figure 2. Engagement trends by race. During Pandemic consists of results from January 2020 through June 2021, Post-Pandemic is July 2021 to Nov 2022.

When we examined engagement levels by layering gender and race, we discovered additional compelling results. WSAdata showed that Black women, while still having the lowest engagement scores, had the biggest improvement of all groups, with a 1.3 point increase since 2019 (Figure 3). This progress

is especially noteworthy given the historical disenfranchisement of this group. On the other hand, White women experienced a 2.3 point drop in engagement levels, and White men and men identifying as two or more races experienced respective drops of 1.2 and 3.4 points (Figure 4).

## Engagement: Women

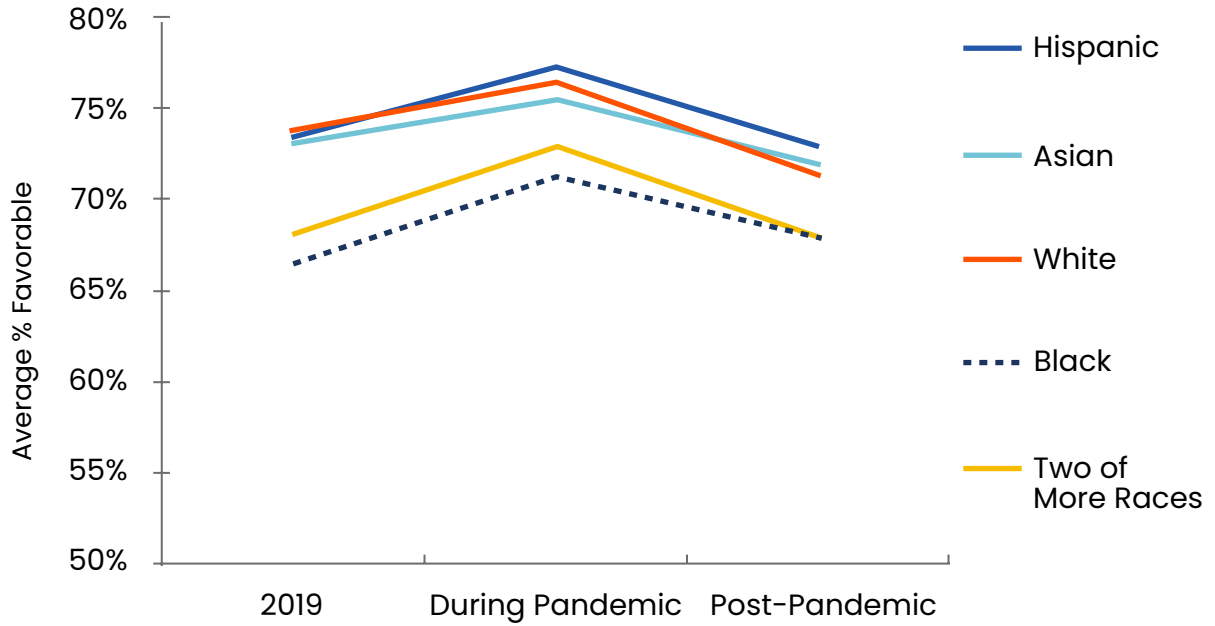


Figure 3. Engagement of women by race.

## Engagement: Men

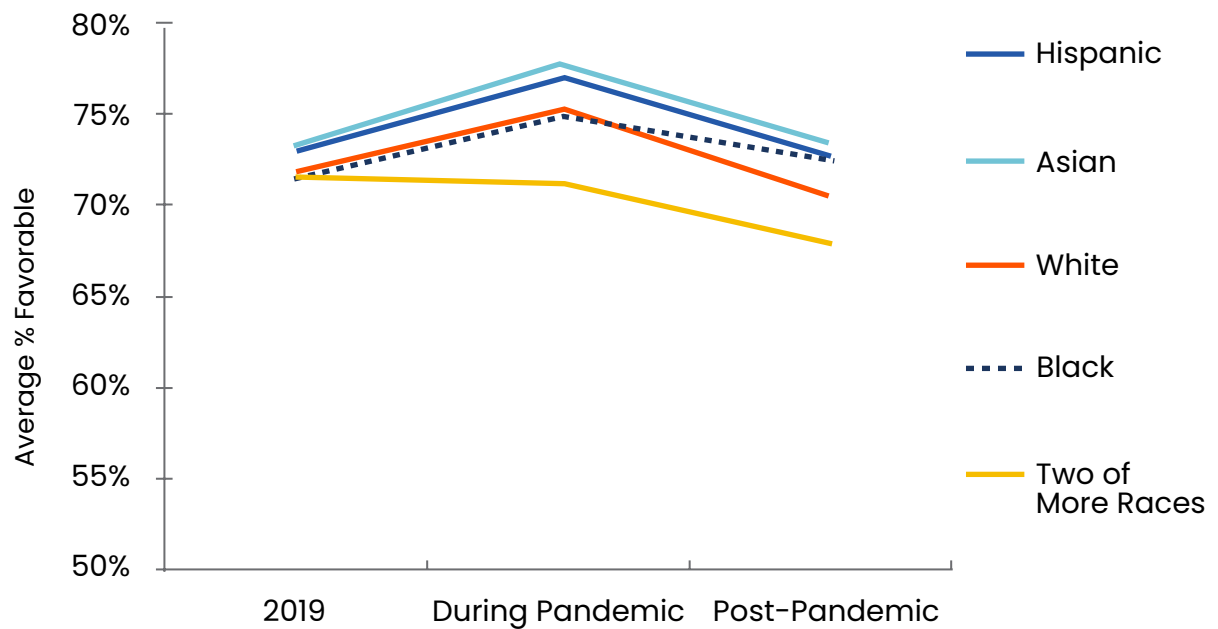


Figure 4. Engagement of men by race.

When looking at engagement by management level and gender, we found that the trends are consistent across these groups, with an increase during the pandemic and a decrease back to 2019 levels post-pandemic (see appendix for Figures 8-10). However, we discovered one exception at the most senior level (defined as Executive Vice President and above) (Figure 5). WSAdata showed that engagement scores for male senior leaders have continued to increase since 2019, while women at this level have continued to decline during that same timeframe, with a significant

decline since the pandemic resulting in an increase in the gap between these genders post-pandemic. Upon closer inspection, we found the source of this engagement decline for women leaders, specifically those who have been with their organization for 2-10 years, was due to the predominant decline in the commitment to stay item: *I rarely think about looking for a new job with another company*. In contrast, new and legacy women leaders are not experiencing this same drastic decline, and this decline was not present during or before the pandemic.

## Engagement

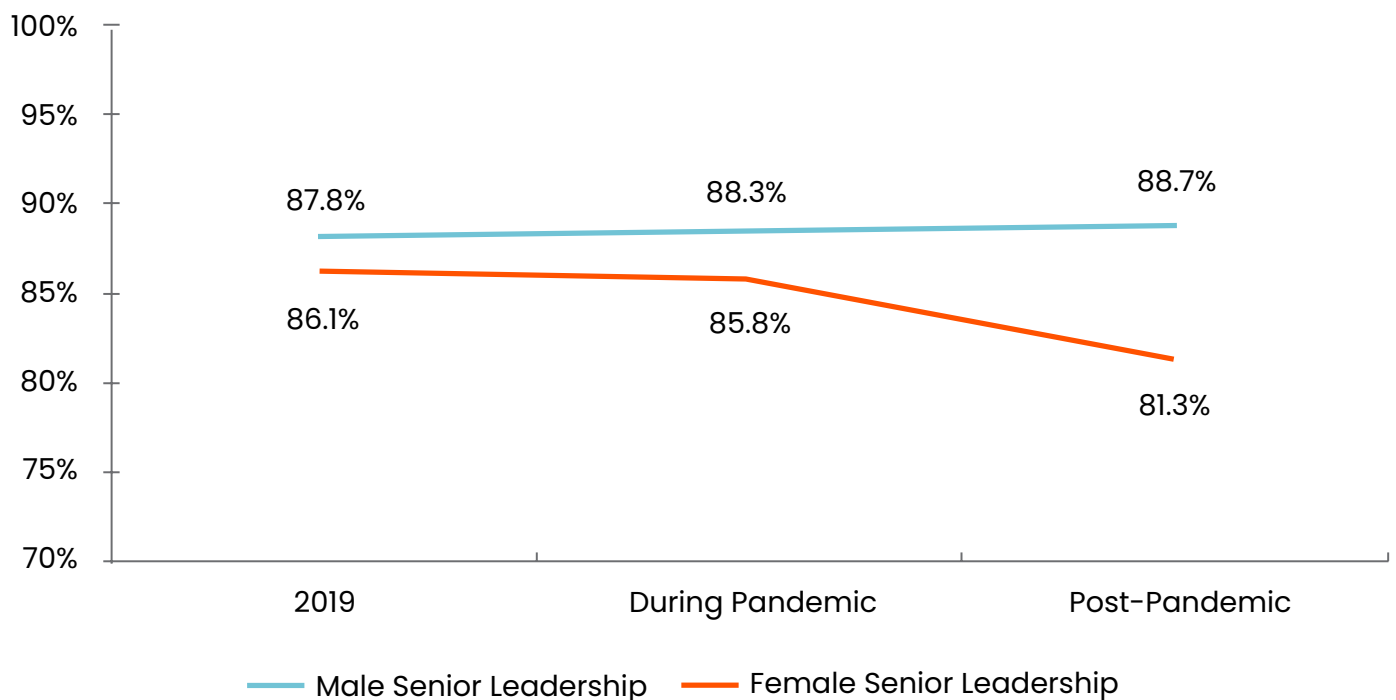


Figure 5. Senior leader engagement by gender.

Curious about what is driving this change in commitment for women leaders, we investigated a few hypotheses. Our analysis revealed that women senior leaders scored significantly below their male counterparts on work/life balance, and interestingly, this pattern was also found pre-pandemic. Diving deeper to see if diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) were a part of the issue, we found that there were significant **increases** in scores for women senior leaders regarding their organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion. However, when we examined the top drivers of engagement, we found that the scores for the majority of the top drivers decreased after the pandemic for women senior leaders, while all of these items increased for male senior leaders. The themes that rose to the top as drivers are associated with recognition, future vision, and leadership trust. The top driver of engagement for women senior leaders is, *This company values my contribution*. Post-pandemic, women leaders were significantly lower on this particular item compared to their male counterparts. Knowing this, it is critical that senior leaders reflect on new ways of working to ensure that everyone, especially women leaders, feel recognized and valued for their contributions and hard work. WSA will be releasing a more detailed analysis of the trends we are seeing across women leaders later this year.



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## Analyzing Key Drivers of Engagement

Regardless of the times and the economic conditions, our decades of research has consistently shown that there are fundamental drivers of engagement that generally show up regardless of organization size, industry, or country/culture. These fundamental drivers of engagement continue to be the foundational tenets of the employee-employer relationship. While a comprehensive description of these aspects is beyond this work's scope, we know that the relative importance and nuances of these drivers are what tend to shift over time based on the prevailing environment. A particular pattern we have observed time and again is the shift in order of priority for key drivers during more or less turbulent and uncertain times.

While current global conditions would certainly not be described as “easy,” “ideal,” or perhaps even “prosperous,” it is safe to say we are not in the same “crisis mode” as we were just a few short years ago.

Just as key drivers in the recent past were identified as being consistent with what we tend to see during times of crisis, WSA hypothesized that key drivers of engagement post-pandemic are likely to be more reflective of what they were prior to the onset of the pandemic—the key drivers that focus more on the “self” when it comes to those aspects that make us more motivated, conscientious and committed. Employees want to see, know, and consistently feel “what is in it for me” as they put forth their efforts day in day out.

The World's Top Drivers of Engagement	During Pandemic Rank	After Pandemic Rank	+/- Change
Overall, I feel that my career goals can be met at this company.	6	1	+5
Senior leadership demonstrates that employees are important to the success of this company.	9	1	+8
This organization's management shows genuine interest in the well-being of employees.	2	1	+1
I feel as if I belong here.	3	4	-1
I believe this company has an outstanding future.	4	5	-1
I trust the senior leadership of this company.	1	6	-5
Senior leadership of this company has communicated a vision of the future that motivates me.	8	7	+1
This company values my contribution.	5	8	-3
There is open and honest two-way communication at this company.	11	9	+2
The behavior of our senior leadership team is consistent with this company's values.	12	10	+2
I have confidence in the leadership team to make the right decisions for this company.	6	11	-5
My work gives me a feeling of personal accomplishment.	14	12	+2
I can see a clear link between my work and this company's vision.	10	13	-3
I feel supported in my efforts to adapt to organizational changes.	13	14	-1
The senior leadership of this company is committed to ethical business practices and conduct.	16	15	+1

During = Pandemic Time frame: Jan 2020 – June 2021  
After = Post Pandemic Time frame: July 2021 – Dec 2022

Figure 6. Drivers of engagement during and post-pandemic.

Figure 6 shows the current top drivers of engagement now, post-pandemic, compared to what they were during the pandemic. While most items are included in both lists, we can see that the priority order has shifted in terms of what is most important to employees. Currently, employees feeling that their career goals can be met, being shown by senior leaders that they are important to the company's success, and that their well-being is a focus of leaders are the predominant factors influencing engagement. *Senior leadership demonstrating that employees are important to the success of the company* went from the ninth-ranked key driver to being tied for first—an item directly linked to how valued an employee feels. *Overall, I feel that my career*

*goals can be met at this company* increased from the sixth-ranked driver to also being tied for first, which is another concept focused solely on the “self.”

Over the past several years, employees have stepped up to the plate and delivered for their organizations in a time of crisis. They were asked to work longer hours and in many cases, carry heavier workloads or do more with less due to some of the highest levels of attrition the workforce has ever experienced. Employees gave organizations their all, and throughout this time, some of the most critical factors driving engagement were about employees' trust and confidence in senior leaders to successfully navigate the turbulence—concepts more related to the

broader organization's viability than the individual self. While these factors are most certainly still important (especially as people are watching to see how leaders manage workforce reductions), they are not at the very top of the list. As seen in Figure 6, *I trust the senior leadership of this company* was the top driver of engagement previously, though it is now ranked sixth. Similarly, the item *I have confidence in the leadership team to make the right decisions for the company* has moved from the rank of number six to now eleventh.

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## Manager Effectiveness: The Year for Front Line Leaders

In contrast to engagement levels declining from the peak observed during the pandemic, WSA's most recent data shown in Figure 1 reveals that managers are actually being perceived more favorably post-pandemic. In today's workplace environment, the importance of connecting employees to the organization is priority number one for managers. When employees feel like they are part of something larger than themselves and can see themselves having a bright future working for the organization, the manager has been successful in a few key areas:

- Communicating the cause/purpose of the organization in a way that emotionally connects to the employee
- Being respectful to others and treating everyone fairly/equitably
- Understanding the personal skills, talents, and goals of each team member so they can be exposed to work that excites and challenges them

The behaviors and actions driving manager effectiveness have changed very little over the years; it is still about employees perceiving their managers as a trusted advocate who cares for them as a person. Figure 7 represents an overview of the key

areas that have the greatest impact on manager effectiveness. With the rise of remote or hybrid working models over the past few years, there has been a decrease in the breadth of opportunities for managers and direct reports to have casual, yet invaluable, interactions that focus on the individual employee. In the current environment, managers need to be more intentional with their behaviors and communication to ensure that employees see a clear path for the future that connects to their individual goals, feel valued for making important contributions to the organization's success, as well as feel a sense of inclusion and belonging. Bottom line: leaders who put the success of their employees first, including helping employees clearly see "what's in it for me," will likely have the greatest success moving forward.



Figure 7. Global drivers of manager effectiveness.

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## The New Way of Working

No one would argue that the pandemic has drastically changed the way in which and where people work. This remains a trivial piece of the puzzle that companies are still trying to piece together as they decipher where work can and should happen, and how teams can best collaborate with and support one another.

In a recent study by Gartner (2022), it was reported that 31% of companies set no minimum requirements for days in office/week, while 5% required 5 days/week, 26% required 3 days/week, 17% required 2 days/week, and 4% required 1 day/week. Such data only further illustrates the variance in strategies.

We are often asked by our clients how other companies are approaching the new way of work, particularly those who have been successful in their efforts. While we are aware of the conundrum, and anecdotal client stories do exist, no one has the exact data to show what does and does not work best. And perhaps that will always be the case because a successful future of work strategy looks differently for each organization.

A key recommendation for identifying what may work best for your organization is to gain insight directly from your employees. Informing your strategy based on employee feedback is critical to building/maintaining trust, as well as retaining your workforce, particularly your high performers. There are a few factors to consider in doing this correctly. One of those factors is to accurately capture a “work arrangement” demographic within your employee surveys to ensure that you understand the different experiences and needs of your

employees based on where work gets done. WSA's database informs us that organizations are doing this inconsistently. Only 18% of clients within our database capture a "work arrangement" demographic at all, and for those that do, there is quite a variance in the types of arrangements that are identified. WSA recommends going forward to utilize consistent measurement methodology to gain valuable insights that take into account where employees work. That recommendation involves the inclusion of a "work arrangement" demographic to your employee surveys to identify employees in the following categories: Full-time Remote, Hybrid, Full-time In Office.

A second recommendation involves asking the right survey questions with the right intention and frequency. For instance, organizations are hiring in a new landscape and many are looking for talent anywhere, often in novel talent pools. Organizations cannot afford to lose sight of the ways in which they onboard new, remote employees in key roles. From a tactical perspective, organizations need to understand how equipped they are to train and provide resources to those who are remote and may never step foot in a physical office space. Do employees have what they need to perform?

From a psychological perspective, it is key to understand employee needs/desires based on the aforementioned key drivers of engagement. For both new and existing employees, connection and communication are key, and this is likely to look different based on work arrangement. Do employees feel connected with the organization, their team, and their leader? Are employees receiving strong local leadership communications that keep them informed and inspired around the direction they are headed? Do they feel as if their manager understands their individual needs and aspirations? Maintaining a pulse on employee sentiment in this regard is key to informing a future of work strategy that capitalizes on strengths and closes the gap on opportunities that are critical to engaging and equipping your workforce.

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## Conclusion

While engagement has appeared to stabilize, attitudes of employees toward work and their role within organizations have shifted. After examining the key drivers of engagement, both during and post-pandemic, the story is quite clear—employees are ready to shift the focus back to themselves. They want to feel valued and cared for, vividly sense that they are an important part of the company, as well as see a clear path where their career goals can be realized. As employees have always and still need to be inspired by a compelling future vision, that vision must be clearly linked to “what’s in it for me.”

We also know that women senior leader engagement has declined since the pandemic, widening the gap between their engagement and that of their male counterparts. Notably, women senior leaders are considering leaving their organizations at a much higher rate than male senior leaders. Therefore, retention and new ways of working strategies must include a focus on this critical group.

Lastly, front-line managers are going to be key in the “new normal,” as they are the closest link to employees within organizations. Managers carry with them an important responsibility of helping employees adapt to the new way of working within their own organization. They are also the individuals who can bring the greatest level of personalization to the employee experience—through regular career conversations that focus on individualized goals and consistent, meaningful individualized recognition. Managers are also given the regular opportunity to demonstrate care for employees, translating people-focused principles and values derived by senior leadership onto employees every single day. With the renewed focus on “self” when it comes to employee engagement, as well as the need for helping employees thrive in the new way of work, there has never been a more important time to ensure the most effective managers are in place to play this pivotal role.

## Authors



**SHEENA LYONS**  
Executive Consultant

Sheena Lyons, M.S., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2021. Previously, she worked for Talent Plus for over eight years as a senior leadership consultant. In that role, she consulted with C-Suite and executive level client partners to guide their people selection strategies to achieve business outcomes. As an expert on behavioral leadership assessments, she analyzed assessment data to formulate insights that drove selection, development, and succession decisions. She served as a trusted resource to both internal and external clients in her role as a coach. Sheena is passionate about partnering with clients and providing insight into ways to elevate their organization's employee experience.

Sheena is also passionate about helping her community and served six years on the Board of Directors for Lincoln-Lancaster Child Advocacy Center. She continues to support community organizations that focus on helping youth thrive.

### Education

M.S. in Marriage and Family Therapy/Counseling, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Director of Consulting  
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James Longabaugh, Ph.D., joined WSA as an executive consultant in. Previously, Dr. Longabaugh worked at IBM for four years as a senior managing consultant, serving as a trusted advisor to organizations for enhancing the experience of their employees through research-driven employee engagement programs. In addition, Dr. Longabaugh has extensive experience developing pre-employment assessment and selection programs for organizations to hire their unfair share of high-quality talent, employing assessment and coaching programs to develop the next generation of leaders, and leveraging workforce analytics and artificial intelligence to discover meaningful insight to drive change.

James is an active member, contributor, and peer-reviewer of SIOP (Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology).

### Education

Ph.D., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Seattle Pacific University

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B.S., Psychology, Washington State University





**ROBERT WELDON**  
Director of WSAdata

Dr. Robert Weldon currently serves as director of WSAdata. 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., Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center

M.S., Microbiology, Oklahoma State University

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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

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln



**ELLIE ERICKSON**  
Executive Consultant

Ellie, M.B.A., joined WSA in 2019 and currently serves as an executive consultant. Previously, Erickson served as CFO/COO at Community Works West, a nonprofit that works with people impacted by incarceration and violence. 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**

M.B.A., University of California, Berkeley, Haas School of Business

B.A., Neuroscience & Behavior, Wesleyan University



**BOB BERGMAN**  
Executive Consultant

Robert Bergman, Ph.D., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2018. Previously Dr. Bergman was with IBM Kenexa for twenty years and served as an executive consultant. From 2008 through 2013, Dr. Bergman served as a managing director of consulting for IBM Kenexa Survey Enterprise Practice in EMEA working out of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Dr. Bergman has over 25 years of experience in survey research, including multi-rater and employee engagement surveys, customer research, and linkage research. Applying his extensive knowledge of survey best practices, Dr. Bergman has served many of our survey enterprise premier clients in the financial services, healthcare, manufacturing, insurance, and retail industries.

**Education**

Ph.D. in Quantitative and Qualitative Methods, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

M.S. in Quantitative, Qualitative and Psychometric Methods, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

B.S. in Psychology, Nebraska Wesleyan University



**KRIS ERICKSON**  
Co-Founder and  
Executive Consultant

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**

Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Management,  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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## **References**

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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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## Appendix

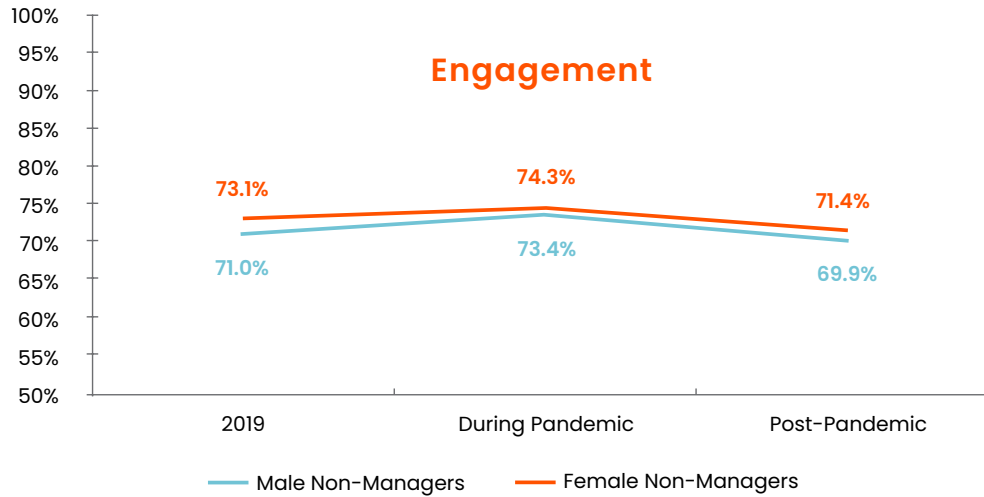


Figure 8. Non-manager engagement by gender.

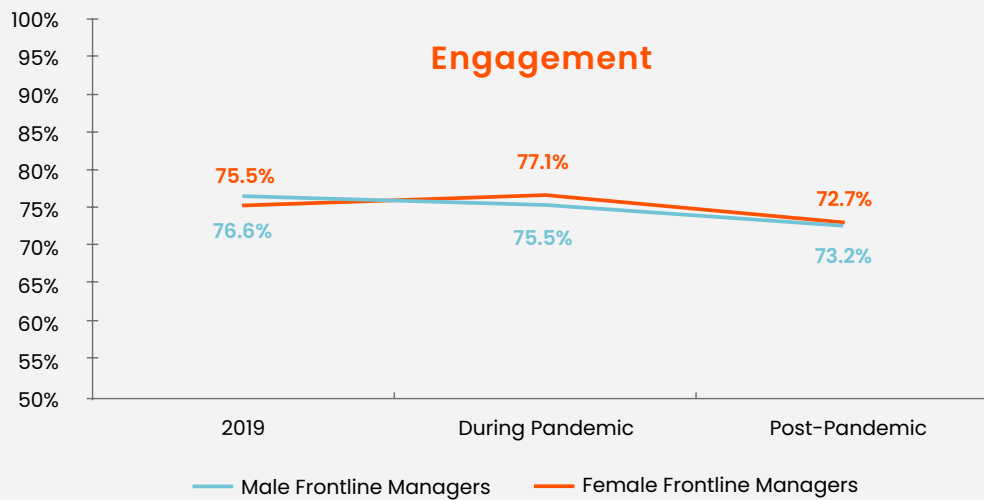


Figure 9. Frontline manager engagement by gender.

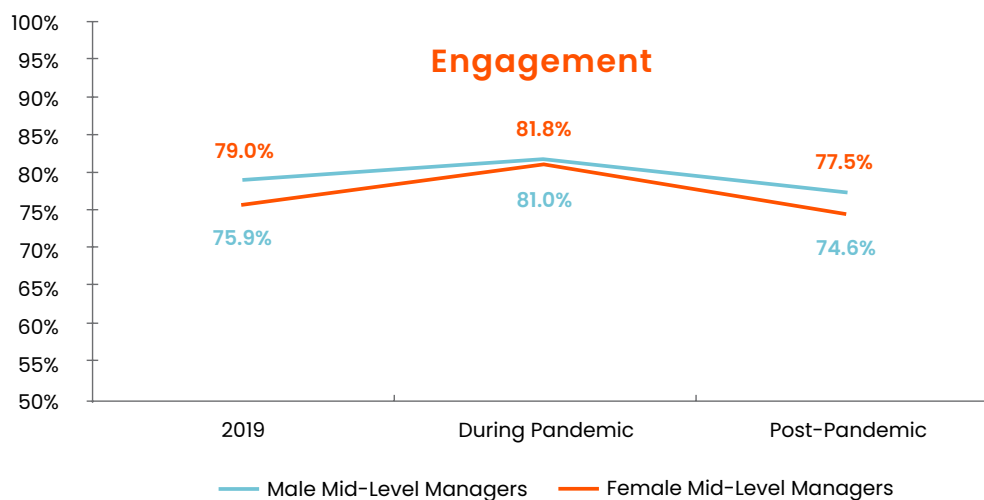
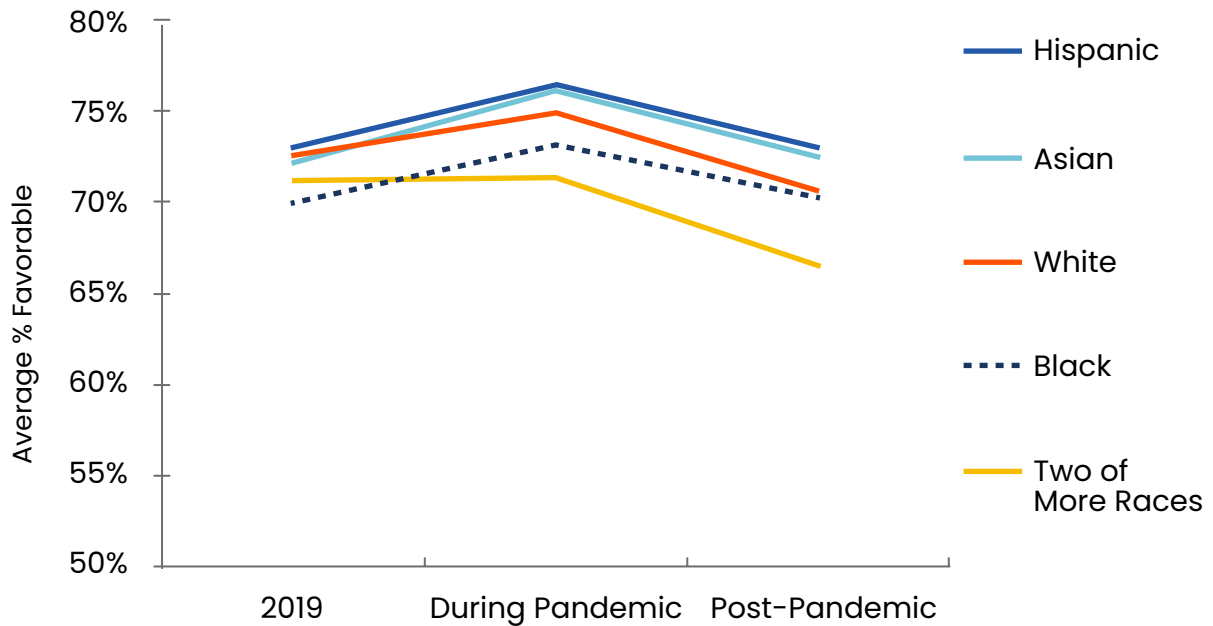


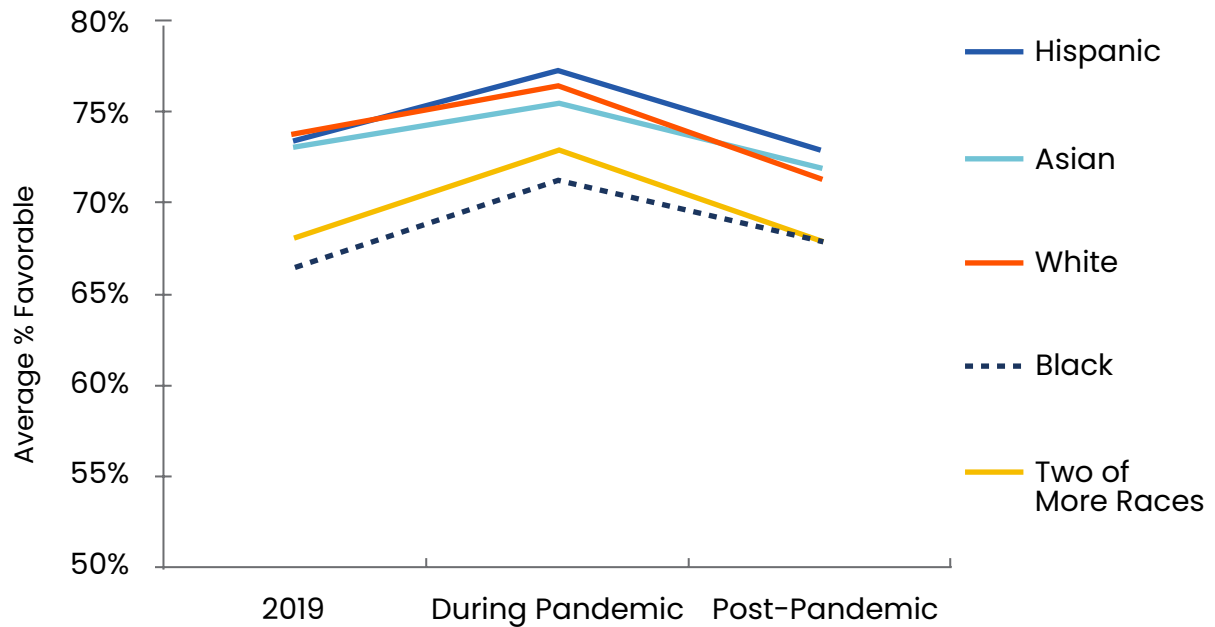
Figure 10. Mid-Level Manager engagement by gender.

## Engagement



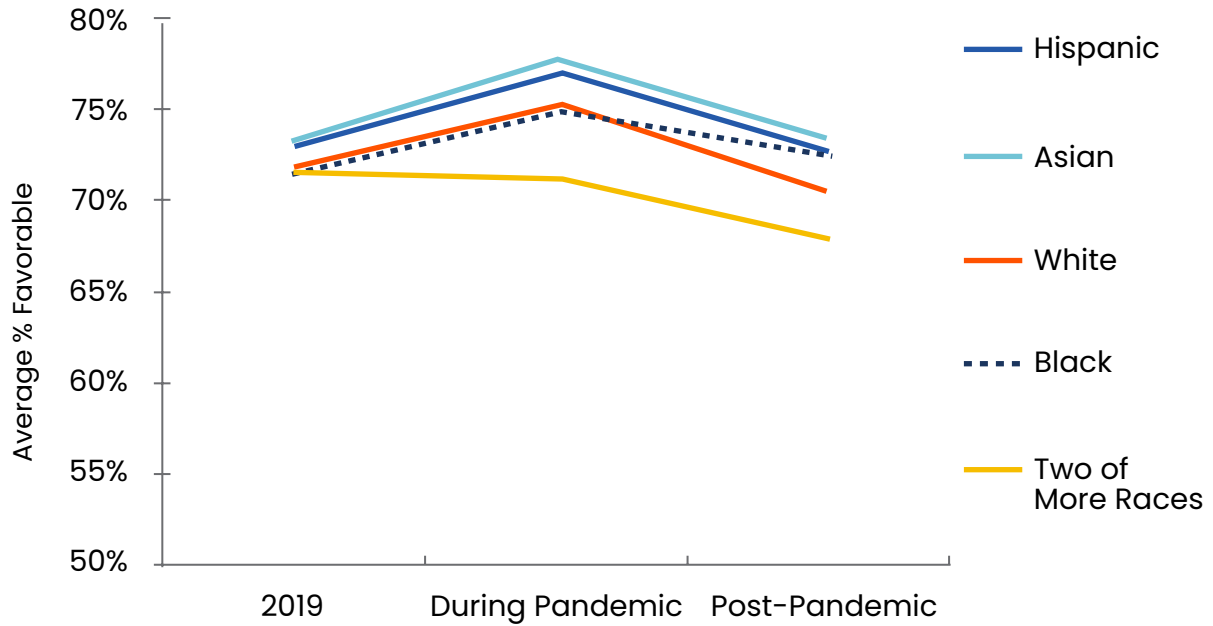
Race/ethnicity	% Favorable		
	2019	During Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Hispanic	72.9%	76.4%	73.0%
Asian	72.2%	76.1%	72.4%
White	72.6%	74.9%	70.6%
Black	69.9%	73.0%	70.2%
Two or More Races	71.0%	71.3%	66.6%

## Engagement Women



Race/ethnicity	% Favorable		
	2019	During Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Hispanic Female	73.2%	76.9%	72.7%
Asian Female	72.9%	75.4%	71.7%
White Female	73.5%	76.1%	71.2%
Black Female	66.4%	71.0%	67.7%
2+ Races Female	67.9%	72.7%	67.8%

## Engagement Male



Race/ethnicity	% Favorable		
	2019	During Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Hispanic Male	73.1%	76.6%	72.8%
Asian Male	73.2%	77.5%	73.3%
White Male	71.7%	75.1%	70.5%
Black Male	71.3%	75.1%	72.2%
2+ Races Male	71.4%	71.1%	68.0%