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RESEARCH PAPER

An Examination of Belonging Trends in the Workplace:

Understanding a Key
Component for a
Successful Diversity &
Inclusion Strategy

Ellie Erickson, MBA, Executive Consultant, WSA

Karen Moriarty, Ph.D., Executive Consultant, WSA

Cameron Klein, Ph.D., Executive Consultant, WSA

Robert Weldon, Ph.D., Director of WSAdata, WSA

James Longabaugh, Ph.D., Director of Consulting Services, WSA

Belonging is Part of Our Nature

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, observed that man is by nature a social animal, and research continues to show that our need to belong to a social group is hardwired into our DNA (Macdonald & Leary, 2005; Young, 2008). The fact that we spend nearly a third of our lives at work lends support to the idea that this need to belong applies in the workplace as well. Belonging in the workplace is not a one-time event or a single achievement; rather, it is the accumulation of experiences and interactions with managers, coworkers, and customers that make a person feel valued, accepted, and needed. Both George Floyd's murder and the COVID-19 pandemic, each in different ways, reinforced the importance of belonging in 2020.

Over the past several years, WSA has been able to closely study belonging both within and across real-world work organizations. WSA's ongoing research program is dedicated to uncovering insights that build better workplace experiences for all employees. WSA released general belonging trends in [An Analysis of Employee Experience Feedback](#) as part of a larger employee experience trends study from earlier in 2022. We found that belonging is a top driver of engagement. In addition to its effects on individuals, it also has implications for the success of the organization as a whole. You can read more about WSA's model and approach in [Belonging: The Missing Piece of Diversity and Inclusion](#).

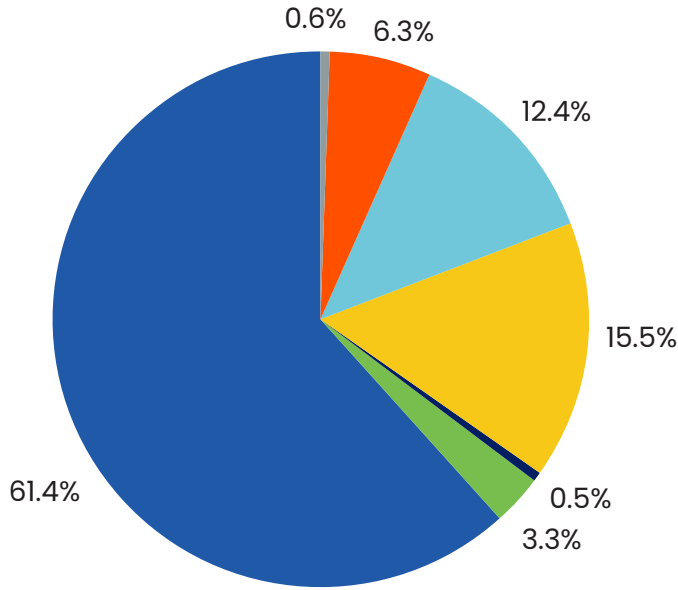
Study Methodology

Our current research focused on the single survey item: I feel as if I belong here. It is a core component of our three-item Belonging Index (which also includes the items, I feel as if I am part of a team, and I can be myself [authentic self] at work). The focus on a single item was due to the fact that being part of a team can be quite broad in nature, while being my authentic self is still used in too few projects to conduct reliable analyses. The results that follow are derived from our larger normative database (*WSAdata*), but the focus here is the United States and Canada. These countries represent a majority of the database, score relatively similarly, and have projects that usually include personal demographic information that is central to the current focus of study.

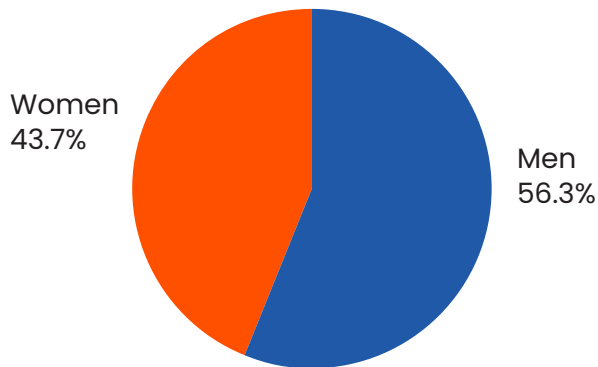
The resulting dataset includes information from 329 client census surveys conducted from 2018 to 2021, and includes over 2,000,000 employee respondents. Every major North American industry is represented, with the most prevalent being manufacturing (21%) and finance/insurance (12%).

The demographics of these respondents closely align with U.S. census data. The main exception is a higher representation of men, which is likely an artifact of the most prevalent industries (i.e., manufacturing and finance/insurance) also being generally composed of a greater proportion of men (Figure 1). Our focus was keenly placed on the various intersections of belonging with race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and management level.

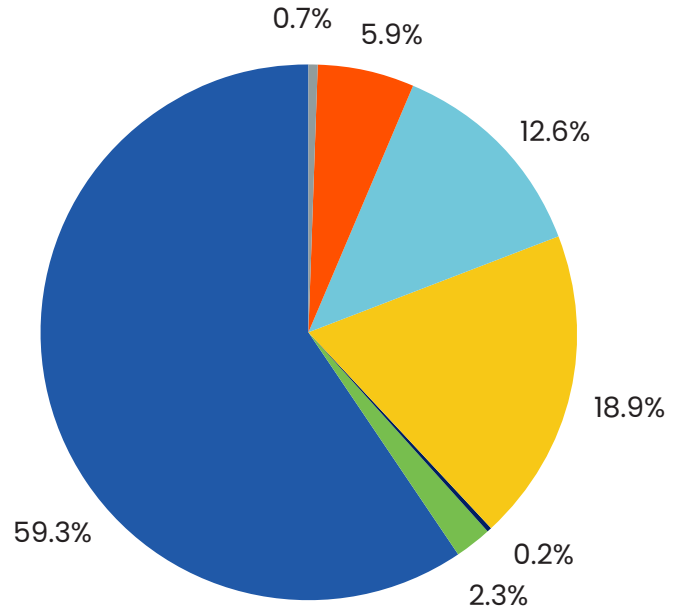
WSAData Combined U.S. and Canada



- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- White



2021 U.S. Census Data



- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- White

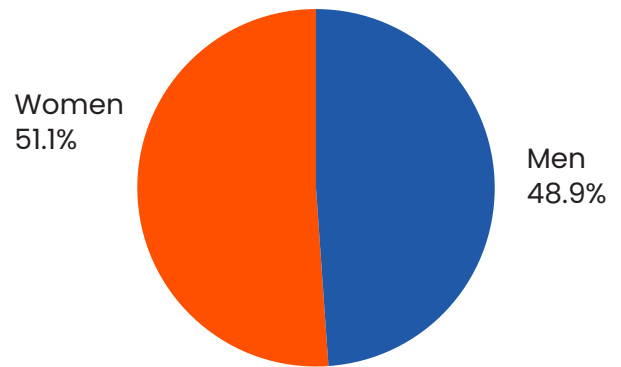


Figure 1. Comparison of WSAData to U.S. Census data

Race/Ethnicity Differences in Belonging

The collective witnessing of George Floyd's murder in May 2020 led to protests against the treatment of Black Americans by police, which brought discussions about Black Americans' treatment from social justice circles to our broader society, including the workplace. Research has shown that Black employees generally report lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of adverse treatment in the workplace (Bloomberg.com, 2022; Garrett, 2021; Hancock, Manyika, Williams, & Yee, 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019). In a 2021 McKinsey & Company report, Hancock and colleagues reported this inequality has resulted in a trust deficit for Black employees who feel much less like they can "be themselves" at work than their counterparts. Employees feeling they can be themselves is central to one's sense of belonging.

WSA research is consistent with the report from Hancock and colleagues and further supports the existence of an adverse experience for many Black employees in the workforce. WSAdata shows that belonging for Black employees (71% favorable) is significantly lower than for Asian (78%), Hispanic/Latino (77%), White (77%), and Indigenous North American (76%) populations. These differences reflect a substantially inconsistent workplace experience between the groups. In other comparisons, means testing revealed no significant differences in belonging between Indigenous North American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, or White employees. Figure 2 shows belonging differences by race/ethnicity.

I Feel As If I Belong Here

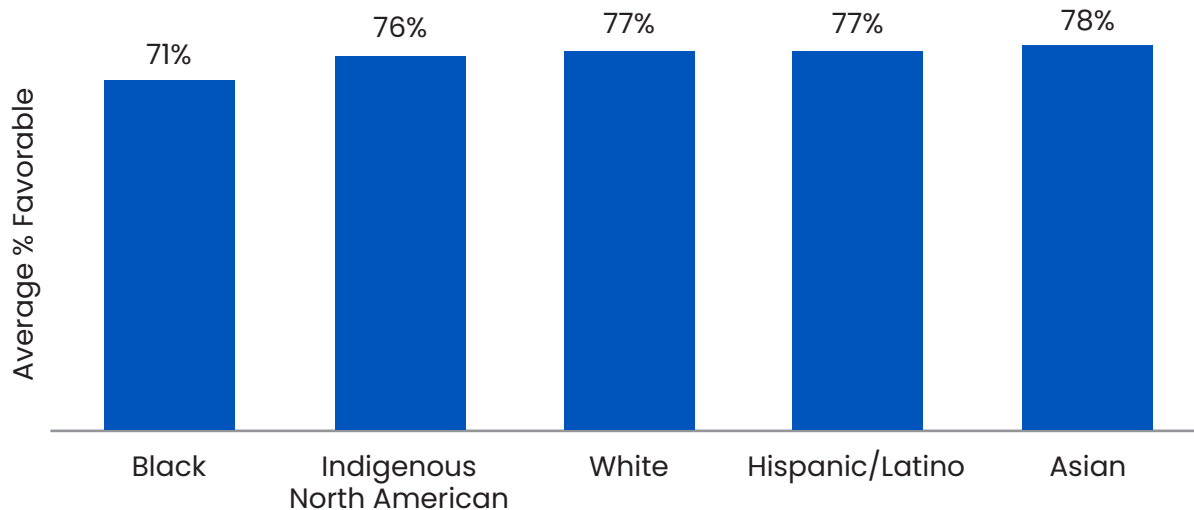


Figure 2. Belonging by race/ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity & Gender Differences in Belonging

Differences in belonging are further amplified for Black women, who also face compounding discrimination due to their gender (see Figure 3). While there are small differences by gender and race/ethnicity for Asian, Hispanic/Latino and White populations, there is a substantial 4-point difference on belonging between Black men and women.

An examination of key drivers of belonging revealed that similar to other employees, Black women's belonging is impacted by how valued they feel and whether they feel they are

a member of the team. And similar to what we saw with Black men, whether they can “be themselves” at work is not as important to a sense of belonging for Black women as it is for other groups. Perhaps, this is a protective measure taken as a result of experiencing high levels of microaggressions as explained by Holder and colleagues (2015). In one key area, WSA's research has found that compared to other groups, belonging for Black women is more impacted by the belief that their employer provides an environment where people with diverse backgrounds can succeed.

I Feel As If I Belong Here

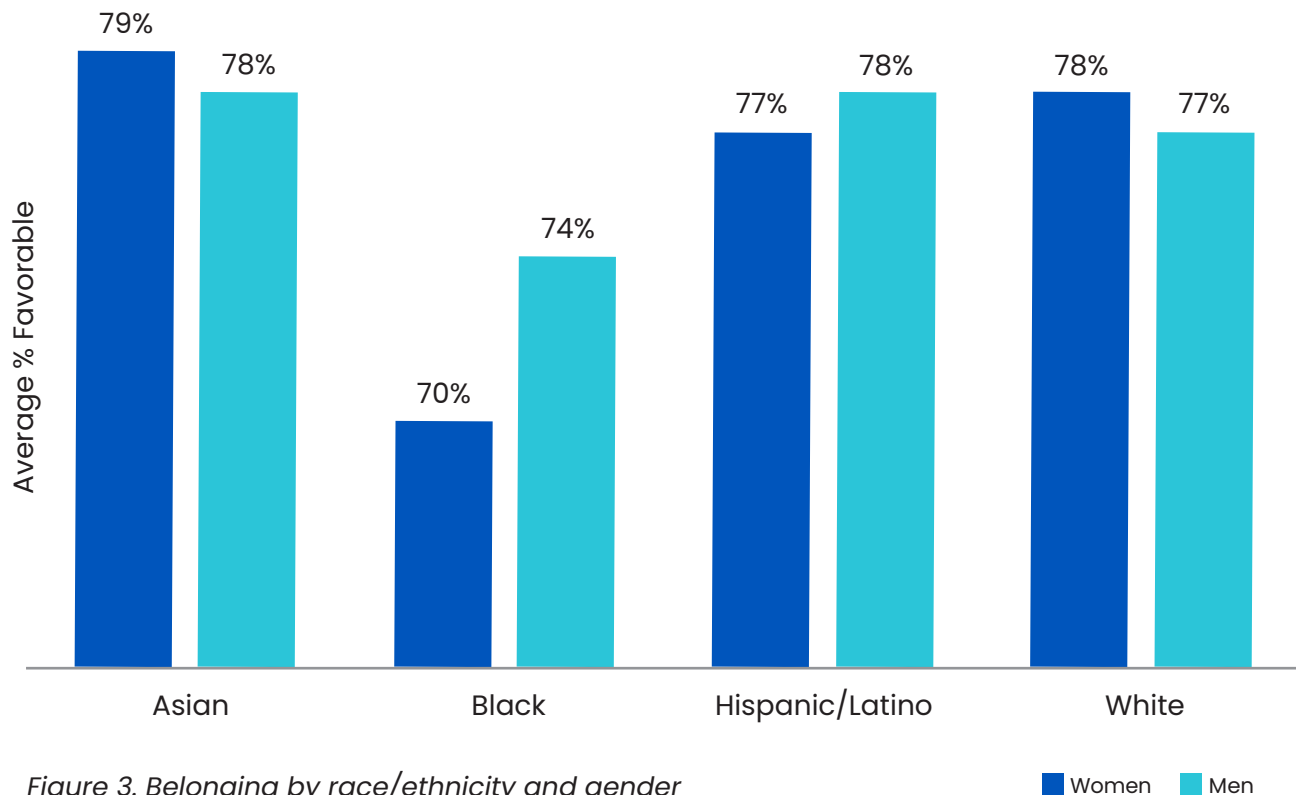


Figure 3. Belonging by race/ethnicity and gender

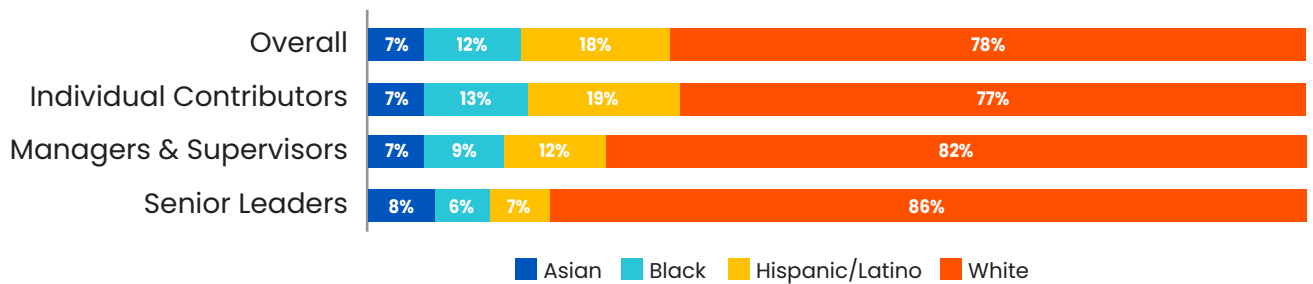
■ Women ■ Men

Race/Ethnicity by Management Level

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2019) shows a large gap in representation of minority employees as management level increases. Figure 4, which details recent BLS data, shows Asian, Black, & Hispanic/Latino employees comprise 7%, 12%, and 18% of the US workforce, respectively. Meanwhile, White employees account for 78% of the workforce (Figure 4). When viewed across individual contributor and leader levels, White employees are over-represented in manager and above ranks, while Black and Hispanic/Latino employees are underrepresented.

WSAdata shows a similar composition. Where management level was provided, White employees comprise 67% of the workforce in the database overall.^b This number rises to 86% at the senior leader level. The only other group that had increased representation at higher levels is Asian employees, who comprise 5% overall, and 6% of senior leaders. In WSAdata, Black employees make up 12% of employees overall, but only 3% of senior leaders. Similarly, Hispanic/Latino employees are 15% overall, and represent only 4% of senior leaders in WSAdata.

Bureau of Labor Statistics Data^a



WSAdata Combined Managerial Level for US and Canada

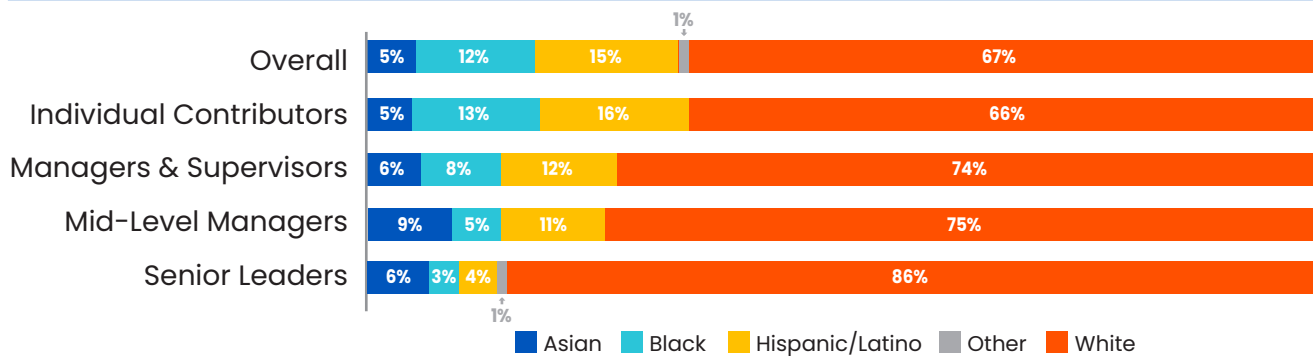


Figure 4. BLS and WSA representation for race by organization level

- BLS data contain respondents who selected multiple race/ethnicity categories, so the totals are above 100%.
- Because only respondents with managerial level information were included, the Overall percentages are different from Figure 1.

We also wanted to investigate how belonging changes as management level increases. Unfortunately, our analysis was limited to individual contributors versus supervisors/managers, as the representation of most groups is too small to reliably measure in higher management levels. WSA did, however,

find that belonging generally increases with management level. Further, White employees experience the largest increase in belonging from individual contributor to manager roles with an increase of five points, versus a more modest 3-point difference for Asian and Hispanic/Latino employees (see Figure 5).

I Feel As If I Belong Here

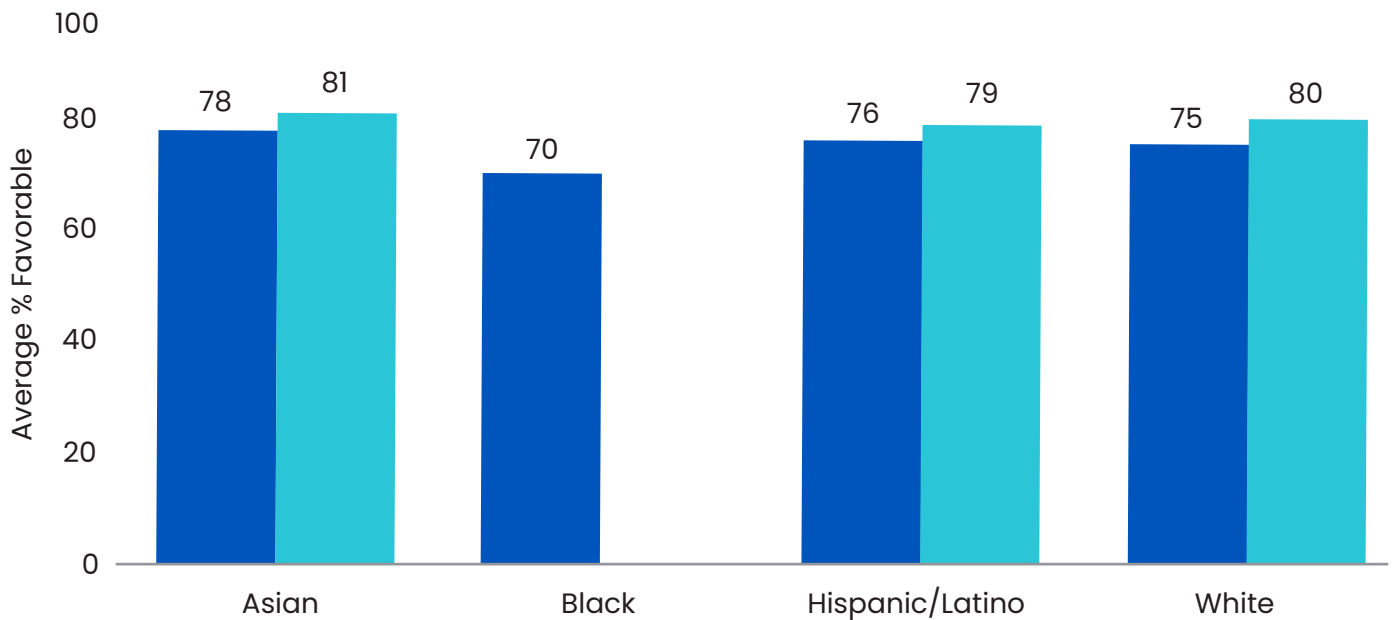


Figure 5. Belonging by race/ethnicity and organization level ■ Individual Contributor ■ Manager/Supervisor

Gender Differences in Belonging

Our previous belonging trends paper examined gender differences in experiences of belonging within their organization ([An Analysis of Employee Experience Feedback](#)). In general, we found generally consistent drivers of belonging for men and women. This finding was presented in conjunction with the understanding that women traditionally have significantly higher engagement scores than men (1.5 points greater), but are 1-point

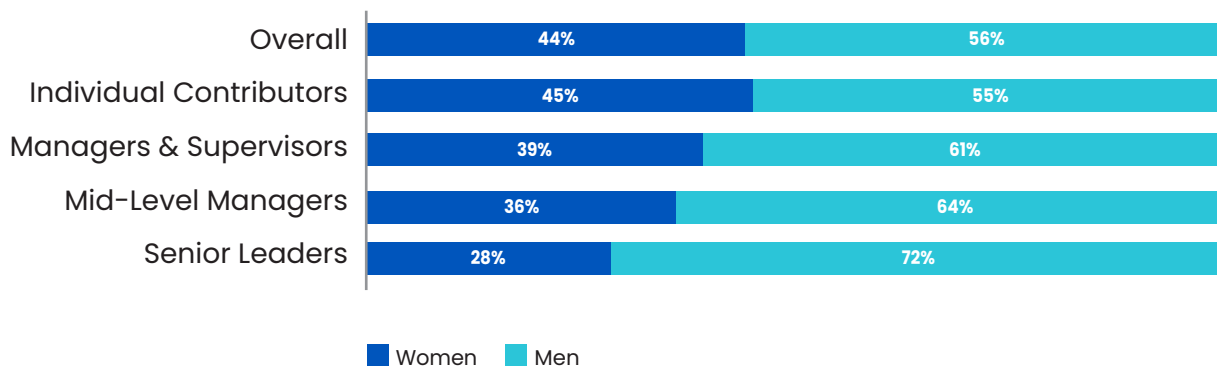
lower on belonging. Previous research also showed that items that relate to psychological safety were slightly lower for women, and that these items have slightly higher correlations with belonging for women. For women, belonging appears more dependent on feeling that they are safe to contribute and that their voice matters. For men, being seen and recognized has a relatively stronger relationship to belonging.

Gender Differences by Management Level

While it is known that increasing representation of women at the uppermost levels of an organization may have many positive downstream impacts (Latura & Weeks, 2022), WSA was curious to see what the current representation of women looks like, and if their experiences of belonging differ from their male colleagues at four organizational levels: Individual contributors, managers and supervisors, mid-level managers, and supervisors, mid-level managers,

and senior leaders. As shown in Figure 6, WSA data follows a similar trend to BLS data; women’s representation declines as you progress through higher organizational levels. Unfortunately, WSA had insufficient data at this time to investigate the experiences of individuals who identify as nonbinary but this is something we plan to study when enough data becomes available.

WSA Dataset



Bureau of Labor Statistics Data

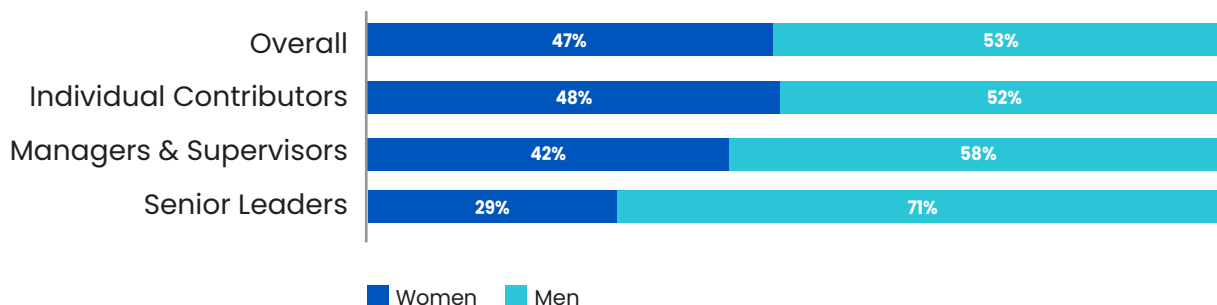


Figure 6. WSA and BLS representation for gender by organizational level

Consistent with the race/ethnicity data, belonging scores by gender increase with management level. At the same time, we found that while scores differed slightly, there were no significant differences in the experience of belonging between genders within any of the

four management levels (see Figure 7). At the individual contributor level, women's belonging is slightly higher than men's, whereas women in manager and above roles have slightly lower belonging than men.

I Feel As If I Belong Here

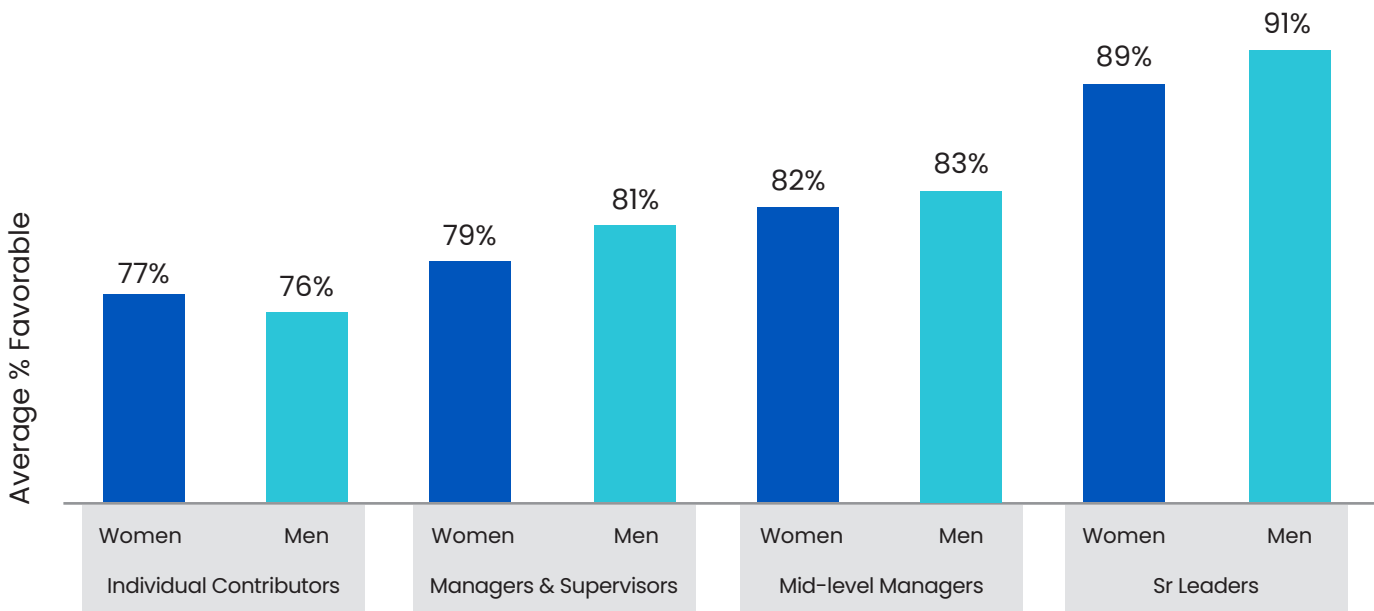


Figure 7: Belonging by gender and management level

Although the overall analysis reflects little differences between gender populations at each level, there are hints at a general dissatisfaction for women at the top. Of the 91 survey items of which WSA has senior level data on (with topics ranging from engagement to safety to diversity to future vision), women at the senior level score lower than their male counterparts on 76% of those items. However, women in general score lower on only 47% of the items. A deeper dive shows that senior level women are five points lower than senior level men on 43% of the items, while more than

five points higher on just 3% of the items compared to their male colleagues. Not only are women in upper levels having an inferior experience, it is a significantly inferior experience in some areas. The items where women are most below senior level men measure perceptions of health and wellness, accountability/expectations, and diversity/equity. The items where senior men are more than five points lower concern trust in business unit leadership, belief that their manager is an effective listener, and feeling supported to balance work and personal responsibilities.

Sexual Orientation Differences in Belonging

In addition to race/ethnicity, and gender, WSA was curious to see if LGBTQ+ employees have differing experiences of belonging, as compared to their heterosexual counterpart. This is especially critical in the current environment where, after having won significant human rights gains over the past few decades, new laws are challenging or eliminating those rights in many U.S. states. Unfortunately, most organizations do not currently have data on the sexual orientation of their employees. Yet increasingly, they are realizing the importance of capturing this information so they can monitor the experiences of this often-marginalized group. With the data on hand, we found that LGBTQ+ employees score six points lower on belonging compared to their heterosexual colleagues (see Figure 8). Due to insufficient data, WSA was not able to determine the top drivers of belonging for the LGBTQ+ population, but we remain hopeful this will change in subsequent years so that we may better understand what factors most greatly influence inclusion and belonging for this group.

I Feel As If I Belong Here

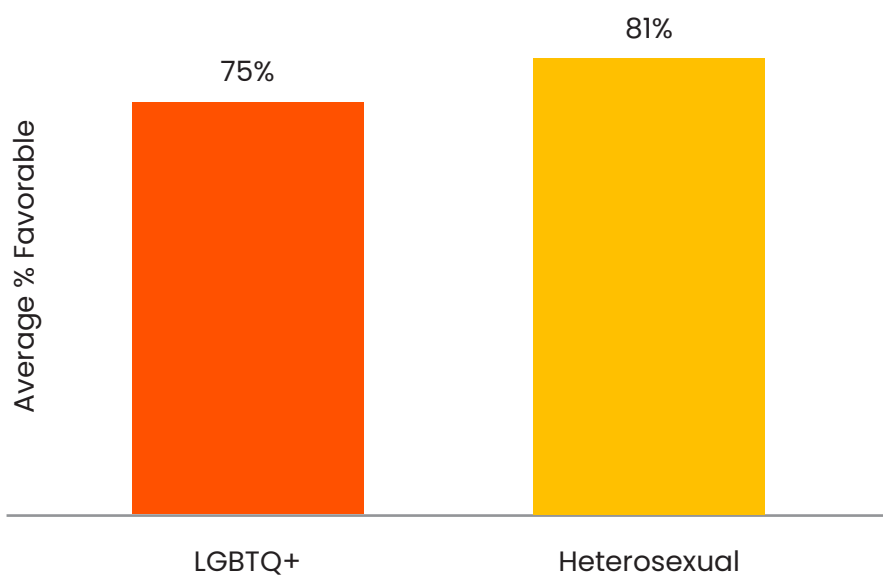


Figure 8. Belonging by sexual orientation

Overall Key Drivers of Belonging

While it's important to understand the differences regarding the extent to which employees feel like they belong to an organization, it's also an imperative to identify what key topics are contributing to that sentiment. By running a key driver analysis, WSA found that regardless of identity group, feeling valued and being treated with dignity and respect are two of the top drivers of belonging. Whereas feeling valued is substantially less favorable for Hispanic/Latino employees, being treated with dignity and respect is scored much lower for Black employees compared to the other race/ethnicity groups (though near equally important). Helping employees who have not traditionally had a seat at the table feel valued and ensuring they are treated with respect regardless of background will likely lead to a significant positive impact on belonging for all employees.

Further investigation of the data reveals meaningful differences across groups regarding the factors that are most influencing their sense of inclusion and belonging. For example, diversity and inclusion-related items are generally more important drivers for Black and Asian employees, such as the organization having a climate in which diverse perspectives are valued. While Black employees are found to be the least favorable regarding organizations valuing diverse perspectives, Asian employees are the most favorable. The result is a substantial 13-point difference in the perceptions of these two groups. Compared to White and Hispanic/Latino, Black employees are generally less favorable in their perceptions that the company values their contributions. Interestingly, Asian employees also tend to be more favorable across several of the key drivers of belonging compared to other race/ethnicity groups.

Upon investigating the key drivers of belonging by gender, WSA found that for women, belonging is more dependent on feeling they are safe to voice their ideas and opinions, even when different from others, as well as feeling like anyone on their team can meet their full potential. For men, having the company recognize their contribution has a stronger relationship to belonging than it does for women. While there may be modest differences in rank ordering of key drivers of belonging by gender, there tend to be small differences in perceptions. The key driver with the greatest difference between genders is feeling that the individual differences they

bring to the workplace are valued, with women scoring 7 points lower compared to their male colleagues.

Overall, WSA found that while there are many similar drivers of belonging between race/ethnicity, and gender groups there are also meaningful and important differences. For some key drivers, they are important regardless of identity. Yet there are also key drivers specific to each group that tend to impact their experience. Organizations can leverage the findings to take action on focused topics that will likely result in specific groups feeling more like they are included and belong.

Top Belonging Drivers by Race/Ethnicity

Most important for everyone: Feeling valued and being treated with dignity and respect

White	Asian	Black	Hispanic/Latino
Career goals can be met	Work gives feeling of personal accomplishment	Contribution is valued	Work gives feeling of personal accomplishment
Contribution is valued	Climate where diverse perspectives are valued	Climate where diverse perspectives are valued	Supported during changes
Supported during changes	Open expression of different ideas/opinions is encouraged	Company is committed to providing equal opportunity*	Leadership demonstrates employees are important to company success
Work gives feeling of personal accomplishment	Supported during changes	Leadership is committed to attracting, developing and keeping a diverse workforce*	Contribution is valued

*Item that is least important for employees in the White majority

Figure 9. Drivers of belonging by race/ethnicity

Recommendations

Organizations should actively and consistently work to increase employees' sense of belonging as it not only has personal benefits for employees, but also overall benefits for organizations through its relationship to engagement. For most organizations, the capacity to act on survey results is not unlimited. Therefore, WSA recommends (where possible) identifying key drivers of belonging that are important across race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other groups. BLS and WSA data each show that White employees generally comprise the majority of the workforce for most organizations. As a consequence when reviewing data at a company overall level, the results may be disproportionately weighted by this group. This realization should be kept in mind, particularly when deciding upon the right actions to take. Conducting key driver analyses for each population can reveal common focus areas, and WSA data demonstrates that it is indeed possible to identify general key drivers of belonging to act on that will help move the needle forward for all groups.

Most WSA clients routinely include measures of belonging as part of their annual engagement census survey. Another way to maximize the impact of this measurement is to search for drivers that impact both belonging and engagement across employee groups. However, before moving from analysis to action, it is important to take the additional step of involving employees in the discussion of potential action areas wherever and whenever possible. In some cases, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) may be leveraged to assist in the process of building and maintaining a strong sense of belonging among employees.

Conclusion

Over the past couple of years, WSA has observed a significant shift and greater emphasis in understanding how various groups within organizations feel regarding inclusion and belonging. This is true not just for front-line employees, but more noticeably for senior leaders. Where diversity and inclusion was once a compliance and check-the-box exercise for many organizations, it has now evolved to where not just the CHRO is concerned, but the entire C-suite (including the Board). Recent research by WSA has revealed many novel and important findings for how various groups tend to differ on their sense of inclusion and belonging within an organization, as well as evidence for what is most greatly impacting employees' experience.

Belonging shares many characteristics with how recognition best practices are applied in the workforce: We know it makes a big difference, but the way it is improved is different for everyone. Across race, gender, and managerial level, WSA sees a variety of belonging drivers, but they generally can be summarized as people want to feel valued. For employees of color, perceptions of equity and an effort to include diverse voices are more important than for White employees. Beyond that, differences tended to be small. To increase belonging, leaders need to get to know their employees, find out what is important to them, and discover ways to support employees to experience fulfillment and deliver their most valuable contributions to the success of the organization.

Authors



ELLIE ERICKSON
Executive Consultant

Ellie, M.B.A., joined WSA in 2019 and currently serves as an executive 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

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

B.A., Neuroscience & Behavior, Wesleyan University



KAREN MORIATY
Executive Consultant

Karen O. Moriarty, Ph.D., joined WSA as an Executive Consultant in 2019. She has over 20 years of experience helping organizations maximize efficiency through engaging, hiring, and promoting the right employees. Dr. Moriarty has partnered with both large and small organizations across multiple industries, including the Federal government and US and UK militaries in the areas of pre-employment, promotion, and certification assessments; employee engagement; performance management; and applying analytics to improve talent-related decisions. Throughout her career Karen has served as a trusted advisor to organizational leaders as they consider and implement employee listening, selection, promotion, and talent analytics strategies. She is a published researcher and has presented at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's annual conference.

Education

Ph.D., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of South Florida

M.A., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of South Florida

B.B.A., University of Kentucky

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

Ph.D., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of Central Florida
M.S., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, University of Central Florida
B.S., Psychology with a Minor in Business, Kansas State University



JAMES LONGABOUGH
Director of Consulting
Services

James Longabaugh, Ph.D., joined WSA as an executive consultant in 2019 and currently serves as executive consultant. 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
M.A., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Seattle Pacific University
B.S., Psychology, Washington State University

Authors



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

B.S., Microbiology, Oklahoma State University

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.

Contact us



info@workforcescience.com



workforcescience.com



[linkedin.com/company/workforce-science-associates/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/workforce-science-associates/)



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