

workhuman*

Evolution of Employee Resource Groups





Work has fundamentally changed in the last few years, and one of the more dynamic shifts is in the overall expectation of the workplace experience.

Recent years have included profuse pledges from organizations to be more empathetic, more equitable, more diverse, more inclusive, and more supportive.

In our latest Workhuman® iQ survey, we polled more than 4,100 full-time employees in the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, and Canada. The goal was to understand the kaleidoscope of the employee experience in today's workplace environment. It was also to answer the question, "How have those pledges affected the experiences of employees of color, caretakers, and LGBTQIA+ employees?"

These employees, some of the most stressed and historically marginalized in the workplace, are also some of the most likely to comprise employee resource groups (ERGs). ERGs are voluntary, employee-led groups that build community and a sense of belonging in an organization. They're also company-sponsored and became a key initiative for many organizations looking to make improvements in their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts.

One of the primary findings from our report (spoiler alert) was the need for an employee-first approach to the workplace. There are too many intricacies to the employee experience for a one-size-fits-all approach to be effective. This is especially true of the experiences of ERG members.

A custom employee experience can seem daunting to a large organization. But employers of any size can lean on proven methods of communication and recognition to build a culture of belonging and gratitude. Together, they create a more connected, inclusive, and equitable workplace.

Here we'll discuss the makeup of ERGs, the specific challenges that members face, and what employers can do to give these groups the continued support they need to initiate positive change in the workplace.

ERGs at a glance



Employee resource groups have existed in the workplace for decades. In fact, the first one sprung up in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In the last few years, they've had a mainstream surge as one of the primary ways organizations are supporting marginalized or overlooked employees. The aim of ERGs is to educate and support employees and address inequities in the workplace.

Based on our survey, we found the most and least likely ERG members.

Highest participation rates	Lowest participation rates
Individual contributors – 38.6%	Senior leaders – 14.9%
Black and Hispanic employees – 30% & 29%	White employees – 17%
Hybrid workers – 27%	100% remote workers – 8.7%
LGBTQIA+ workers – 35%	Non-LGBTQIA+ workers – 20.4%
Caretakers – 33%	Non-caretakers – 14.5%

In addition to higher psychological safety, our data show those who participate in ERGs are more engaged in the organization's culture.



There's so much good that comes from participating in an ERG, but that's not the full story. Employees in ERGs also report higher levels of stress and burnout than those who don't participate.

And then there's this: One-third of employees in ERGs report being treated unfairly for their participation in the group. This feeling of unfair treatment increases sharply for Black employees and LGBTQIA+ employees. This finding is especially remarkable for what is meant to be a company-sponsored resource.

These wide-ranging experiences indicate, as mentioned previously, that the experiences of those who participate in ERGs require specific attention and support to maximize the positive outcomes and minimize the negative ones.

How organizations can support ERGs



It bears repeating, ERGs are supported by the organization as they play a key role in building a culture of inclusion. This support is best achieved with the three-pronged approach of communication, recognition, and check-ins.

Employees want to feel like they matter.

That desire compounds when employees are going above and beyond (often with no additional pay) to improve the workplace. Appreciating the efforts of these employees and supporting them when needed are easy actions any organization can take to improve the experiences of all employees, especially those in an ERG.

Encourage communication and connection.

The findings of our research are clear: People are more connected to their colleagues than the company they work for. For anyone reading who just gulped, this isn't a bad thing. Your company culture is not some amorphous entity people can cling to; your company culture is *defined* by people. Lean into that!

Employees are more connected to each other than their organization's culture.

56%

I feel connected to my **organization's culture**.

67%

I feel a sense of connection with **my colleagues**.

Here are some easy, actionable steps you can take to make sure that ERGs have the space, tools, and avenues to talk with one another.

1. Open up meeting rooms to give groups the chance to meet face-to-face.
2. Make sure these groups have the right channels – tools like Slack allow members to coordinate and communicate with one another and the broader company so that more people are aware of discussions.
3. Create time and space for these groups to meet consistently with senior leaders so that the latter may be informed of and can act on the work and discussions taking place.

Recognize and appreciate.

It's vital for any organization to show all employees that their work is being seen, valued, and appreciated. This takes on heightened importance with employees in ERGs as they are taking on more work that is often behind the scenes.

When it comes to recognition, consistency is key. Recognition is most effective when it is specific and as close to the moment as possible. A formal recognition program can quickly help make it a habit. Soon, it will be second nature for everyone in the business to be on the lookout for moments of recognition and gratitude.

Employees involved in ERGs at companies with a recognition program are more likely to say their work is visible to the organization (65% vs. 57%). Employee recognition has the power to strengthen ERGs because it provides more attention to and appreciation for the people doing the work. Further, it shows that the organization supports these groups' missions.

Employees who partake in recognition programs are:

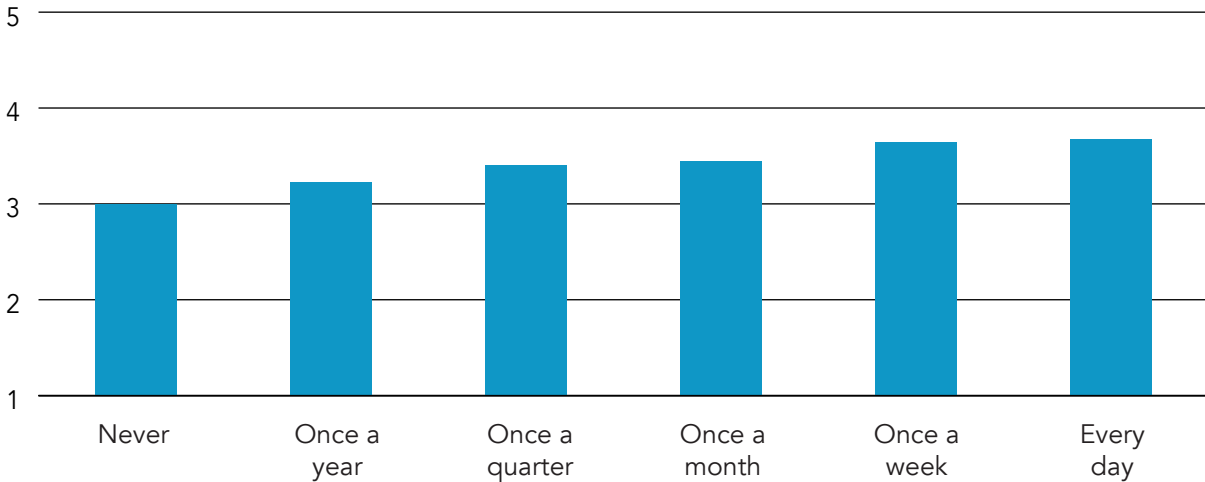
- 1.5x** more likely to feel **connected to their organization**
- 1.3x** more likely to feel **connected to their colleagues**
- 1.2x** more likely to feel like their **workload is manageable**
- 1.4x** more likely to **recommend their company to a friend**

Check in.

This is a more formal spin on communication, but it deserves its own section. A regular check-in is one of the best ways to know how employees are doing and how managers and the organization could be supporting them.

The employee-manager relationship is one of the most pivotal at work. At its best, this relationship is typified by consistent conversations about what’s challenging, what’s motivating, and what’s stressing employees. With the additional responsibilities ERG members regularly take on, the conversations increase in impact.

The more recently an employee has been recognized for their work, the more psychologically safe they feel.



Relationship between frequency of check-ins and psychological safety rating (1-5 scale)

Conclusion

The evolution of work has yielded empowered employees. For the first time in decades, wide swaths of the workforce are demanding more of their employers. More equity, more empathy, more humanity.

Members of employee resource groups are helping turn those demands into demonstrable actions employees can take. Employers hoping to elevate those efforts and create a greater sense of belonging in their workplace would be wise to spotlight these groups and ensure they have the support they need.

To learn more about how to empower ERGs and build a more human workplace, visit workhuman.com/solutions.

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Or read more on our blog: workhuman.com/blog

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