

The Case for Belonging

HOW SOCIAL SUPPORT
DRIVES EMPLOYEE INCLUSION

workhuman*



Humans have a need to belong, and a big part of that is a need to belong at work. After all, we spend one-third of our lives at work.¹ It should be no surprise that a survey by Ernst & Young found that more than one-third of people (34%) feel their greatest sense of belonging at work – more than at their church or in their neighborhood – and second only to their sense of belonging at home (62%).²

THE SCIENCE OF BELONGING

One in three people look for their greatest sense of belonging not at home, but at work. On Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, belonging is our third motivating need, after basic physical and safety needs.³ Our fundamental need to belong is our intrinsic desire to create and nurture positive, long-lasting interpersonal relationships with other human beings. That means before we try to build self-esteem or self-actualization, we seek to be included – and a lot of us are seeking that feeling of belonging from the people we spend much of our waking days with: our colleagues.

We expect to breathe at work. We expect to be safe there, too. So why wouldn't we expect to also feel like we belong when we are there?

Organizational psychologists tell us that most of our interactions at work involve exchanges of social capital and social support. These are the interactions that form our feelings of belonging. In order to create feelings of inclusion, therefore, we must continually connect with people at work in a holistic and positive way. Or, as one scholar put it: show "genuine concern and interest in the lives of co-workers, willingly helping and sharing information, listening and respecting each other, and including each other in discussions and critical decisions."⁴

According to the scholarship around belonging, companies that operate this way are able to build reserves of goodwill required for productivity when work demands and stress levels go up. And the heart of this is building a culture of positivity and social support that embraces the whole employee.

THE RECIPE FOR BELONGING & SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support is considered by many D&I practitioners as table stakes for belonging, and because of this, social support is usually flat-out classified as a job resource. In fact, in one UCLA study on how people react to positive and negative social stimuli, researchers found that people react to a threat to their social needs (such as a sense of belonging) in the same way they do to physical pain.⁵

In order to feel we belong, we must first work in an environment that is conducive to a sense of belonging and inclusion. Here are some prerequisites.



A culture of safety and equity

One of the pre-conditions of belonging is meeting those first two tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy. Air and water aren't usually too much trouble for companies, but some organizations have more trouble in establishing the psychological condition of safety. Employees must trust that they will not suffer negative consequences for expressing their true selves at work. They will be looking for a sense of fairness and orderliness, in which equal, equitable treatment matters.

A culture of celebration

A big part of providing this kind of support is by marking special occasions and life events (whether happy or difficult) and allowing employees to bring their whole selves into the workplace. According to Lee Bolman in his book, "Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership": "Significance is built through the use of many expressive and symbolic forms: rituals, ceremonies, stories, and music. An organization without a rich symbolic life grows empty and barren. The magic of special occasions is vital in building significance into collective life. Moments of ecstasy are parentheses that mark life's major passages. Without ritual and ceremony, transition remains incomplete, a clutter of comings and goings; 'life becomes an endless set of Wednesdays.'"⁶

In the 2017 Workhuman® Analytics & Research Institute Survey Report, our researchers found that employees were 10% more likely to say they felt they belong at their company if they had five or more life events celebrated at work, and 14% more likely to say they felt their company had a very human work culture.

A culture of generosity

One way to avoid that endless set of Wednesdays and amplify belonging is through social exchange: the giving of gifts. This is why we bring a gift to a wedding shower or send one at the birth of a new child, or likewise bring gifts to someone who is experiencing sickness or grief. This kind of exchange underscores the connection between colleagues, and through repetition, helps trust grow, say scholars.⁷ Interestingly, it's been known for some time that social exchange has a power that pure economic exchange does not. In other words, when we give gifts accompanied by sincere emotions, it tends to create feelings of personal obligation, gratitude, and trust that a bonus check could never hope to duplicate.⁸



A positive work environment is vital to an engaged workforce.

A culture of positivity & inclusion

A positive work environment is vital to an engaged workforce. According to Gallup's Tom Rath: "99 out of 100 people report they want to be around positive people and nine out of 10 report being more productive when they're around positive people."⁹ Gallup has also conducted years of research that shows having a best friend at work can make a huge difference in engagement. This might be partly due to the fact that employees who have a best friend at work are "43% more likely to report having received recognition and praise for their work in the last week."¹⁰

THE IMPACT OF BELONGING & SOCIAL SUPPORT

What are the actual benefits of feeling like you are included, are accepted, and belong at work? They are significant, according to scholars. Here's a brief summary of the current literature, just to highlight some of the benefits.

Higher engagement: Co-worker social support is a job resource that has been shown to significantly impact engagement.¹¹

Higher productivity: Employees who feel they belong as part of a group and are working toward shared goals report increased motivation, positivity, and overall productivity.¹²

Reduced conflict and improved relationships: Social exchange has benefits that include "reduced conflict, improved performance, enhanced knowledge sharing among peer employees, increased affinity for employees, greater

understanding of employee interests and values which leads to more pleasant and efficient pattern of exchanges, and increased trust and tolerance of imbalance in exchange relationships."^{13 14}

Higher levels of learning and performance: A culture of psychological safety and inclusion leads to better learning and performance outcomes.¹⁵

Reduced stress: When co-workers provide social support, it can ameliorate the impact of a large workload – buffering the impact of burnout.¹⁶

Increased resilience and trust: A consistent flow of relational exchanges raises levels of commitment, concern for the reputation of oneself and others, and levels of trust and resilience.^{17 18 19}

Better health: When belonging has been established, it contributes to improvements of the physical body system. Likewise, those who are deprived of it may experience both psychological and biological illness effects and even a weakened immune system.^{20 21 22 23}

Happier, more productive employees: According to one study: "participants stated that organizational celebrations made them happier in their job, improved diversity and workplace knowledge, reduced isolation, and cultivated relationships, which all contributed to their desire to be more productive in their job."²⁴

Greater affective commitment: Reward and perceived social support are direct contributors to affective commitment (and thereby intent to stay).²⁵



6 WAYS CELEBRATING LIFE EVENTS CREATES A CULTURE OF BELONGING

How can you move from theory to practice in your organization – increasing employees' access to feelings of belonging and inclusion? One way to facilitate inclusion and belonging is to create a companywide, employee-led initiative to share and broadcast life events and milestones. Employees who are empowered and encouraged to come together to celebrate, congratulate, and show support are able to activate social exchange and social support.

Here are six ways shared life events contribute to an inclusive organizational culture:

ONE

Create opportunities for social exchange.

Celebrating life milestones such as an educational achievement, new child, new union, new home, or significant goal attainment gives your employees the opportunity to give to one another in a meaningful way and reinforce their relationships.

TWO

Leverage the power of stories.

Sharing life events reinforces the power of authentic emotional connections by allowing employees to tell and share text and visual stories about their experiences inside and outside of work and invite co-workers into their shared emotional space.



THREE

Make work a safe, inclusive place to bring the whole self.

Sharing life events can help create a safe place for people to share their personal milestones, as well as professional ones. Plus, making this platform available to all ensures that employees have socially safe, equal, and fair access to celebrations.

FOUR

Establish a buffer of positivity.

Sharing personal milestones helps ensure that positive interactions outweigh negative interactions at work by creating a flow of celebratory, emotionally heartfelt, empathetic, and positive interactions across diverse workgroups.

FIVE

Encourage friendships.

Having a best friend at work makes a significant difference in levels of employee engagement. Sharing life events lays the groundwork for more authentic, genuine relationships by enabling both social exchange and social support.

SIX

Activate support networks.

Sharing life events increases levels of empathy and establishes an infrastructure that empowers co-workers to provide emotional and tangible support for co-workers, both during happy milestones and during times of sickness or bereavement.

ENDNOTES

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Are you able to tap into the power of belonging in your organization? Talk to us about Workhuman Life Events® and how you can empower employees to connect with one another in a continuous, positive, inclusive way.

ABOUT WORKHUMAN

Workhuman® is the world's fastest-growing integrated Social Recognition® and continuous performance management platform. Our human applications are shaping the future of work by helping organizations connect culture to shared purpose. With a consistent stream of gratitude fueling unparalleled, provocative workplace data and human insights, Workhuman® Cloud is a critical software engine for global companies seeking to motivate and empower their people to do the best work of their lives. Workhuman (formerly known as Globoforce) was founded in 1999 and is co-headquartered in Framingham, Mass., and Dublin, Ireland.

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