



The Driving Workplace Equity Series

How to Hear Unhappy Employees (Before It's Too Late)

Actionable data and insights from the experts, employers, and advocates raising the bar for all women in the workplace

About the Series

WORK180's Driving Workplace Equity Series is designed to provide regular data and guidance to help organizations better understand, identify, and remove barriers for women and marginalized individuals in the workplace.

About the data

Supported by external data, the reports present transparent findings from WORK180's platform, network of experts and employers, and — crucially — voices from a wide range of women* in our community.

About the author

WORK180 promotes organizational standards that raise the bar for women* in the workplace. It does this by endorsing and supporting great workplaces for all women, and making it easy for women to find them.

**by women, we mean all who identify and/or experience oppression as a woman (including cis, trans, intersex, non-binary or gender non-conforming individuals).*

It's all about enabling workplaces to do better, while empowering women to expect better



Empower women to expect better

100% of women surveyed for the [WORK180 What Women Want Report 2021](#) stated that they consider gender equity a workplace priority.



Enable workplaces to do better

According to [McKinsey & Co](#), companies with more women at the top outperform those with few or no women in their leadership teams.



The world will be better, for everyone

McKinsey & Co also report that unleashing the full potential of all women who wish to work could add **11% (USD 12 trillion)** to our GDP by 2025.

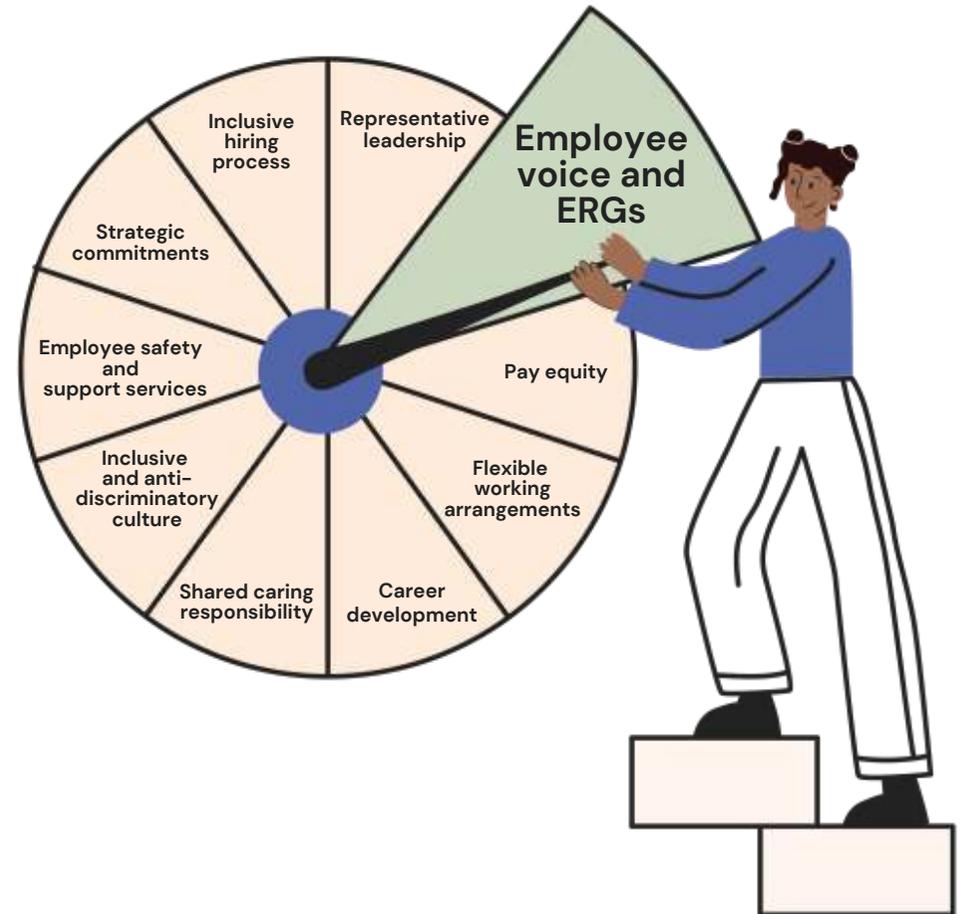
Each monthly report focuses on one or more of WORK180's 10 key standards for driving workplace equity.

These standards are informed by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) experts; our community of women and employers; and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. As a result, they provide a clear focus for any company committed to creating a workplace where all women can thrive.

For a clear understanding of how each of these standards helps drive equity in the workplace, please visit the [WORK180 website](#).

This month's focus: Employee Voice

Employee voice refers to the collective insights and opinions of a workforce, which companies can and should use to optimize their employee, candidate, and customer experience. As explored in this report, to truly gain from this voice, employers must actively ensure it's as diverse, equitable, and inclusive as possible.



While listening to employees was once considered a “nice-to-have”, hard data proving its positive impact has turned it into a business imperative

According to [The Workforce Institute's 2021 survey](#) of over 4,000 employees across 11 countries, when people feel their voices are heard...



Unsurprisingly, the institute's research revealed that this positive impact goes on to benefit a company's bottom line:

88% of employees whose companies financially outperform others in their industry feel heard.

This is in comparison to financially underperforming companies, in which just **62%** of employees feel heard.

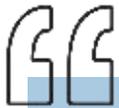
And data from a wide range of sources continues to tell us that the employers reaping the highest rewards are those listening to voices from a rich array of backgrounds, identities, and experiences:

- The [Harvard Business Review](#) revealed that diverse companies are **70% more likely to capture new markets**.
- Research by the intelligence suite providers [Cloverpop](#) found that decisions made and executed by diverse teams delivered **60% better results and maximized business performance**.
- [McKinsey and Company](#) also found a positive correlation between ethnic/cultural diversity and value creation, with highly gender-diverse companies being **27% more likely to have superior value creation**.

All you have to do is ask, right?

Wrong. From low participation rates in employee surveys (the average [ranges between 65–85%](#)) to the provision of false information ([one-in-four employees admit to lying on pulse surveys](#)), most HR teams are all-too-aware that gathering a company's employee voice is rarely straightforward.

And the challenge becomes even greater when we consider the barriers that have long been silencing the voices of women and marginalized groups in the workplace.



“I am one of three women in a leadership team of 11. When I speak, 90% of what I say is dismissed or ignored. A male colleague will say what I said and be celebrated. Or he will directly counter what I said and be acknowledged.”

Feedback from a participant in [WORK180's What Women Want 2021 survey](#)

Compared to mothers of young children who regularly work with other women, those within male-dominated teams [are often less comfortable opening up](#) about personal challenges at work. We also know that [women with disabilities are more likely to feel judged](#) for requesting flexible working options. There are also reports that [women from historically marginalized races, ethnicities, and cultures feel forced to monitor their words and behavior](#) in order to avoid contributing to stereotypes.

These are just a few examples of the countless complex and compounding barriers that employers must remove before being able to access their team's rich array of perspectives, insights, and ideas.

To achieve this, workplaces must create a fundamental shift in their current culture and approach, and this report is here to help you do just that.

First, employers must create a sense of inclusion and belonging in which everyone feels safe, secure, and motivated to share their voice

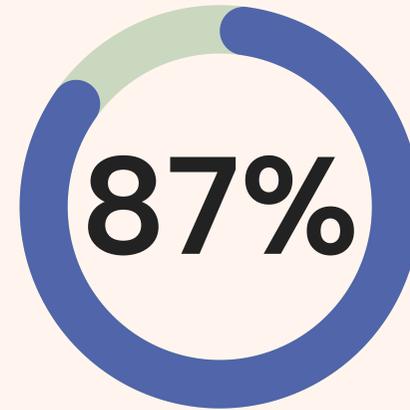
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Employees with a very high level of belonging are four times more likely to say they feel heard than those with a very low level of belonging, according to [The Workforce Institute's 2021 survey](#).

What does this feel like?

Here are some common examples of the responses when we asked team members of leading employers to describe what an inclusive workplace feels like:

- Having a voice that is sought after, respected, and valued
- Feeling a sense of connection, security, and support
- Knowing the company cares about employees' unique strengths and experiences
- Knowing the company cares about employees' aspirations for growth and development
- Having access to support from managers, employee resource groups (ERG), and wellbeing resources



Inclusive teams have been proven to make [better business decisions up to 87% of the time](#). What's more, they do this in half the time and with half as many meetings as other organizations.



Employers must also provide all employees with ~~equal~~ equitable opportunities to raise their voices

With a focus on equality for all, many teams pride themselves on providing every employee with the same tools and opportunities to share their voices. While well-intentioned, this approach can often serve to simply amplify the thoughts and opinions of those who shout the loudest.

Here's why employers should take an equitable approach:

Equality focuses on fair treatment

- ✓ Equal access for everyone
- ✓ Provides overall view of engagement

Example: Every employee is invited to provide anonymous feedback via an internal employee engagement survey

Overall engagement score = 95

Equity focuses on a fair outcome

- ✓ Equal access for everyone
- ✓ Provides overall view of engagement
- ✓ Removes barriers, such as fear of being recognized
- ✓ Actively raises the voices of those who may not advocate for themselves

Example: Every employee is invited to provide anonymous feedback via a third-party engagement survey, with questions encouraging the intersectional experiences of women and marginalized individuals to be shared.*

Overall engagement score = 95

Overall engagement score for women and marginalized individuals = 65

Warning: Without applying this intersectional* lens when asking for employee voices, organizations are unable to gain the full context needed to identify and solve problems.

*What do we mean by intersectional?

Intersectionality describes the interconnected and interdependent nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender. It acknowledges how a person's social and political identities combine to create unique experiences of discrimination and oppression.

For instance, in the US alone, it's projected it will take White women until 2059 to reach gender parity with men. Meanwhile the data shows for Black women [this date is pushed out to 2130](#), and even further to [2224 for Hispanic women](#). In fact, the pay gap between White women and women of color is the fastest-growing wage gap, according to the [Economic Policy Institute](#).

To learn more, read [our workplace guide to intersectionality](#).





“If diversity is being invited to the party and inclusion is being asked to dance, then equity is ensuring everyone at the party has the right dancing shoes.”

Jacynta Clayton,
Author of [WORK180's Ultimate Guide to Inclusion](#)



Wondering where to start? Here are eight expert-recommended approaches to gathering employee voice

1. ‘Town Hall’ forums, ‘All Hands’ meetings, or similar full company engagements

A regular, transparent, company-wide meeting in which teams provide news or project updates, celebrate wins together, and allow employees to ask questions and/or voice concerns.

Benefits to equity and inclusion

While the meetings alone may not offer all employees the safe space they may need to share their specific voice, they will play a crucial role in creating an open and transparent culture. This contributes to the creation of psychological safety that will support the individual to feel comfortable sharing their voice in another setting.



Top tip

To ensure the meetings are engaging, effective, and contribute to an inclusive environment, ensure that all employees are provided with an equitable way of sharing their voice. For example, this is often done with a digital solution that allows employees to submit questions or participate in polls anonymously, whether in the office or at a remote location.

2. 'Ask Me Anything' (AMA) sessions with senior stakeholders

AMAs are full-company meetings in which a member of the leadership team openly answers questions from employees at all levels of the organization. Sessions usually last around one hour and questions can range in topic, from personal ambitions to their perspective on company policies and procedures.

Benefits to equity and inclusion

AMAs are a win-win, providing employees with direct access to the company's decision-makers and affording leaders insight into their team's experiences and priorities. Culturally, AMAs also provide leaders with the opportunity to connect with their team and establish a sense of trust and open communication, which is essential to an inclusive environment.

Top tip

'Tell Me Anything' sessions are a great alternative to AMAs for leaders who are hesitant about being the sole focus of a session. This variation provides the audience of employees the opportunity to take the spotlight and tell the leadership team about issues or experiences impacting them within the organization.



3. Exit interviews

Commonly conducted on an employee's last day, these one-to-one structured conversations invite individuals to share feedback about their experience at the company.

Benefits to equity and inclusion

Relatively free from the concerns of repercussions, participants are likely to share honest and open insights about your company's strengths and weaknesses as an employer. This is particularly important for companies that have yet to establish an environment in which the current workforce feels able to share such valuable information.

Top tip

To ensure you make the most of the opportunities exit interview pose for your DEI strategy, be direct in your questions. Here are some examples of questions to ask:



- Do you think we're a great workplace for women and marginalized groups? If not, please explain why.
- Do you feel the leadership team is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts? If not, please explain why.
- Did our benefits, policies, and procedures support you to thrive in the organization? If not, please explain why.

4. Listening groups

Similar to focus groups, listening groups facilitate discussions with different cohorts of people within your organization. Their primary function is to create a safe space in which individuals with similar backgrounds and experiences can support each other to share their voices.

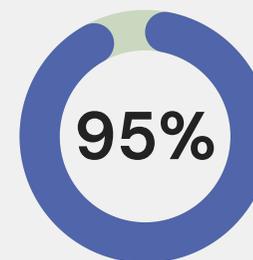
Benefits to equity and inclusion

While they don't offer the complete anonymity some individuals may require to be totally transparent, listening groups can provide a comfortable space for employees to open up. They also communicate a company's commitment to the long-term establishment of an inclusive culture.



Top tip

The success of listening groups relies on the facilitator's ability to structure and conduct the conversation, and actively listen to responses. For this reason, all facilitators should be adequately trained before running such sessions.



of respondents to a global WORK180 poll said they would leave a workplace if they didn't feel listened to.

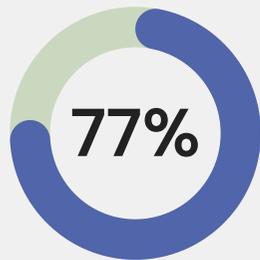
*Note: When citing this information, please link to and credit Edition Six | How to Hear Unhappy Employees (Before It's Too Late)

5. Pulse surveys

Akin to taking someone's pulse, these surveys are a quick and easy way to monitor the health of an organization, identify trends, and flag any potential dangers. The surveys are a series of short questions presented in an easy-to-answer and anonymous format, which are changed and circulated regularly.

Benefits to equity and inclusion

The anonymous nature of these surveys offers the safe space many marginalized groups need in order to share their voices. The regularity helps build a culture of continuous feedback — both of which are crucial to the creation of an inclusive workplace.



Top tip

77% of participants in a global WORK180 poll said they have previously not provided feedback due to a heavy workload. It's therefore important that employees are permitted adequate time in their diaries to participate in these surveys. And while it can be tempting to gather as much data as possible, it's best to keep surveys short.

*Note: When citing this information, please link to and credit [Edition Six | How to Hear Unhappy Employees \(Before It's Too Late\)](#)

6. Digital suggestion boxes and/or emails

Collecting the ideas, feedback, or criticisms from employees all year round, suggestion boxes (or email addresses dedicated to this function) are an affordable and popular way of encouraging and collecting employee voice.

Benefits to equity and inclusion

Anonymous, accessible to all, and available all year round, digital suggestion boxes are an easy way for everyone to share their voice. As well as contributing to a sense of belonging, these boxes are a rich source of ideas and inspiration to stay ahead of the competition.



Top tip

Unlike pulse surveys and listening groups, the always-on nature of suggestion boxes means they can be easily forgotten. For this reason, be sure to regularly remind employees of this tool and the benefits it offers to everyone.

7. Employee engagement surveys

Employee engagement refers to how employees think and feel about their work and workplace. Understanding the impact of these feelings on behavior and performance, organizations circulate regular surveys designed to measure and improve this sentiment.

Benefits to equity and inclusion

As well as measuring employee engagement and identifying areas for improvement, the surveys themselves contribute to a greater level of engagement; the regular and anonymous format gives employees equitable opportunities to feel heard in their organization.

Top tip

Far too many employee engagement surveys fail to take representation into consideration, which can skew results and be counterproductive when it comes to raising the voices of marginalized groups.

As a basic example, a 90% response to the answer “I feel a high sense of belonging” can seem impressive on the surface. However, this response is futile if marginalized individuals currently represent 10% of your organization.



Experience180

What makes your company a good, bad, or great employer for women and marginalized groups, and how can you improve?

Our specialized engagement survey makes it quick and easy to find out by expertly raising the voices of marginalized groups already in your organization:

- Designed by DEI experts, our ready-made surveys are easy to implement and ask the right questions, in the right way
- As a known advocate for women, our surveys build the trust needed for high engagement and transparent answers
- Using your team’s unique insights, we’ll also provide recommendations around all aspects of your DEI strategy — including hiring and retention

[Find out more](#)



Experience180
ENGAGEMENT SURVEYS FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Here's how one team member would describe your workplace to a friend...

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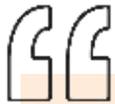
Experience180
ENGAGEMENT SURVEYS FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

“The company is making steps to be more inclusive, but sometimes it feels like it’s just for show.”

WORK

8. What: Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) (Also known as networks, inclusion or affinity groups)

ERGs are employee-led groups that unite team members who share dimensions of their identity. More often than not, these identities are underrepresented, undervalued, and under-voiced within their industry.



“These groups can be as simple as a Slack channel to share resources and stories, or larger groups bringing in speakers and creating partnerships with organizations in our ecosystem. All activities big and small work towards promoting diversity and equality by raising awareness of different perspectives and areas of growth towards a more inclusive workplace.”

Charissa Samaniego

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Specialist
ConsenSys, a WORK180 Endorsed Employer



Benefits to equity and inclusion

Offering a safe space in which they feel understood and supported, ERGs help to empower and amplify the voices of those who have often gone unheard. Not only does the organization itself contribute to the creation of an essential feeling of inclusion, but the collective voice can be a powerful and positive influence on decisions across the company.



Top tip

While employee-led, ERGs require the full support of companies to ensure the activities are a benefit — as opposed to a burden — for those involved. This means ensuring participants have the time, space, and resources they need.

Want to hear how leading employers are successfully setting up their ERGs? Read our seven-minute guide.

[Read now](#)

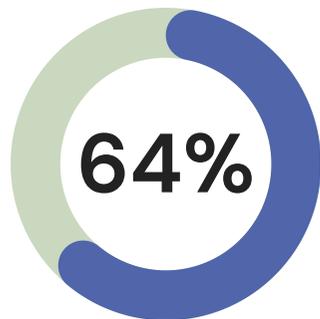


Bonus: Five expert tips for empowering the voices of women and marginalized groups



1. Always give the option of anonymity

Remember, one of the biggest barriers to marginalized voices is the fear of negative repercussions. As such, offering anonymity and making this clear from the start can have a big impact on uptake.



64% of respondents to a global WORK180 poll said a fear of being identified put them off providing their workplace with honest feedback.

*Note: When citing this information, please link to and credit [Edition Six | How to hear unhappy employees \(before it's too late\)](#)

2. Make it clear why you're asking them to contribute

Why should employees from historically marginalized groups make the effort to share their voice now, particularly if it means overcoming a range of barriers? Again, it's up to employers to make this clear. One way to do this is by opening surveys or sessions with a statement that outlines the purpose of collecting this data and conveys the importance of their unique perspective. Here's an example you can use:

<insert company name> is committed to creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization in which people from all backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives can thrive. Your unique experience and perspective is crucial to the creation of this productive environment. This is a safe space for you to be honest and open about your insights and ideas for **<insert company name>**, and influence positive changes within the organization.



3. Don't forget to collect quantitative data (even if it isn't easy)

Quantitative data around people's identities plays a crucial role in ensuring you're listening to and learning from a holistic employee voice and identifying any specific barriers to DEI. However, as discussed by employers during a [WORK180 Employer Think Tank](#), social and structural restrictions around collecting personal data make this difficult — but not impossible.

Here are some successful strategies, shared by one Think Tank participant whose team saw an impressive 74% response rate to its first DEI data collection exercise:

- **Sharing real stories:** Sharing the stories of internal ambassadors (often found within ERGs) is a great way of catching people's attention while normalizing the sharing of personal experiences and information.
- **Leadership support:** Having the buy-in from individuals in positions of power is an obvious advantage and worth investing time in. If this is an area you and your team are currently struggling with, be sure to [take a look at our free Business Case For DEI Toolkit](#).
- **Try different tactics:** The successful campaign in question even saw the company send fun, themed care packages to the homes of employees. These worked to remind them of the importance of their participation in the project.



4. Take action

When asking employees to share their voices, employers are implicitly offering a promise of action. If this promise has been broken in the past, you may struggle to gain momentum again. If this is the case, trust must be rebuilt by admitting previous failures to follow up on feedback and you must ensure a future action plan is communicated, committed to, and circulated regularly.



“Gathering data, and having employees share sensitive information with you is pointless if you don't do anything with it. Be clear on the action, reporting lines, and regularity of updates. This means people are clear on what's happening and why.”

Sheree Atcheson
WORK180 DEI Board
Member in her Forbes
article [Your Inclusion
Strategy is Biased: Here's
what you can do about it](#)



5. Make sure you're measuring progress

To ensure your employee voice initiatives continue to receive company-wide participation, support and have a real impact, progress must be measured. This is something HR professionals have long seen as impossible. However, as [Sheree Atcheson explores in one of her insightful Forbes articles](#), these DEI metrics can and must be measured.



“

“Inclusion can be measured. People’s perceptions around diversity, inclusiveness and non-discrimination are key, ensuring the overlay of underrepresented groups to slice this data [...] Listening and capturing perceptions cannot be done in 1:1’s, facilitated or group sessions only.

Invest in a tool which enables you to have a clear touch point and temperature check on how people feel from all different backgrounds (using the overlay of anonymised protected characteristic data). Do not assume that your workplace is inclusive because you get an overall positive perception – again, digging deeper is key.”

Sheree Atcheson

Award-winning thought leader and member of the WORK180 DEI Board

Dig deeper and do better with WORK180’s Equity Audit

The foundation of our offering, our Equity Audit offers a holistic view of your organizational commitment to equity, adopting an intersectional lens to highlight your gaps and strengths. This is supported by an action plan and unique benchmarking data for assessing your employer value proposition.

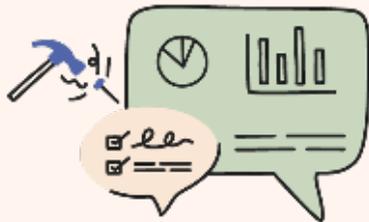
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“The Equity Audit has helped highlight what gaps we need to close before we can expect candidates to apply.”

WORK180 Endorsed Employer

[Find out more](#)

Ready to break down workplace barriers and have a real impact?



For more great guidance on creating a workplace where all women can thrive, explore our [employer resources library](#).



Keep an eye out for next month's report to learn all about creating an inclusive hiring process.



Take five minutes to find out whether your workplace is ready to receive WORK180's support and be endorsed as a great workplace for all women.

[Find out today](#)

Never miss an update

To ensure you and your team are kept up-to-date with this topic and receive our next report straight in your inbox, sign up to our HR mailing list today.

[Join our HR mailing list](#)

Want to lend your voice as a woman in the workplace? Join our community to have your say, feel supported, and help create a working world where all women can thrive.

[Join our community mailing list](#)



Find out more by visiting the [WORK180 website](#).