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The Value of Belonging at Work

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Social belonging is a fundamental human need, hardwired into our DNA. And yet, 40% of people say that they feel isolated at work, and the result has been lower organizational commitment and engagement. In a nutshell, companies are blowing it. U.S. businesses spend nearly 8 billion dollars each year on diversity and inclusion (D&I) trainings that miss the mark because they neglect our need to feel included.

From this 10,000-foot perspective, the costs associated with this drought of workplace belonging are eye-catching. Zooming in a bit helps focus on the reality of the problem. Exclusion is damaging

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because it actually hurts: the sensation is akin to physical pain. And it's a sting we've all experienced at one time or another. To feel left out is a deeply human problem, which is why its consequences carry such heft and why its causes are so hard to root out of even the healthiest workplaces.

Humans are so fundamentally social that we can even bond with strangers over the very experience of not having anyone with whom to bond. Consider this recent story in *The Guardian*, which prompted people to share their own experiences of feeling left out at work. More than 800 wrote in. One anonymous worker in the United Kingdom lamented, "I get paid well to do something I enjoy, and…[I'm] surrounded by clever, funny, like-minded people. And for 45 or 50 hours every week, I feel isolated."

To better understand this basic need to *belong* — a key missing ingredient in the D&I conversation — BetterUp conducted research to investigate the role of belonging at work and the outsized consequences of its absence. For this project, defining belonging became our first, and in some ways, trickiest, task. Our data showed that belonging is a close cousin to many related experiences: mattering, identification, and social connection. The unifying thread across these themes is that they all revolve around the sense of being accepted and included by those around you. We set out to study how that develops — or doesn't — in the workplace, what it means for employees and organizations, and whether it's possible to turn a bad situation around.

The research is novel in two ways: First, it quantifies the value of workplace belonging, both with correlational and experimental findings. Second, it offers new, evidence-based interventions to boost inclusion. Following earlier BetterUp studies on loneliness and purpose, we first surveyed 1,789 full-time U.S. employees across many industries and then conducted a series of experiments with more than 2,000 live participants to observe and measure the costs of exclusion. Here's what we found:

Belonging is good for business

If workers feel like they belong, companies reap substantial bottom-line benefits. High belonging was linked to a whopping 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days. For a 10,000-person company, this would result in annual savings of more than $52M.

Employees with higher workplace belonging also showed a 167% increase in their employer promoter score (their willingness to recommend their company to others). They also received double the raises, and 18 times more promotions.

Exclusion leads to team (and self-) sabotage

Our survey findings reveal workplace exclusion as a systemic issue that generates hefty financial losses. But does exclusion actually *cause* measurable hits to team performance?

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To address this question, we conducted a series of experiments. Initially, workers were assigned to a team with two other "participants" (bots programmed to act like teammates), using a collaborative virtual ball-toss game. *Included* workers had teammates that consistently threw them the ball, whereas *excluded* workers only got the ball a couple of times. After this, participants completed a simple task where they could earn money either for themselves or for their entire team. The longer participants persisted in the task, the more money they earned.

What differences did we see between the excluded and included teammates? When participants were told the payouts would be shared with the team, the excluded people worked less hard than the included ones even though it meant sacrificing earnings. When participants were told the payouts would benefit them and them alone, excluded team members worked just as much as included ones. We replicated this effect again and again, across four separate studies. We can now say that feeling excluded *causes* us to give less effort to the team.

The harmful effects of exclusion can be reversed

These findings beg the question: Can exclusion be *fixed*? Many solutions have been proposed, but few are based in experimental evidence.

As such, a new round of our experiments tested three interventions, each designed to mitigate the costs of exclusion: (1) *Gaining perspective*: Previous participants shared reflections with current participants on their exclusion experience and how they coped; (2) *Encouraging mentorship*: Participants imagined how they would coach someone else through exclusion; and (3) *Finding empowerment*: Participants planned out how they would restructure this team experience to make it more inclusive and enjoyable.

All three interventions succeeded in causing excluded team members to behave more like included ones. Notably, the mentorship and empowerment tools were so powerful that those excluded participants worked *even harder* for their team than their included peers.

Having an ally protects workers from exclusion

It might be difficult to identify exclusion on the spot as it's happening, so another valuable intervention strategy would be to buffer workers against the negative effects of exclusion in the first place. One possibility is that having an *ally* might take the sting out of being excluded by other team members.

We tested this in another experiment, wherein an ally bot was programmed to signal inclusion by throwing the ball to the participant, while the other bots ignored them. Importantly, the ally only threw the ball to the participant as much as anyone else did; that is, the ally offered equal (not special) treatment. We found that having one fair-acting ally made people more willing to work for their entire team, protecting group performance from the negative effects of exclusion.

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How do we create a workplace of belonging?

Our research demonstrates clear, actionable paths forward to help resolve the epidemic of workplace exclusion. Even the most effective recruiting strategy for diversity won't lead to long-term change if new talent isn't supported to succeed. Fortunately, our findings show that we are not powerless in the face of exclusion.

Individuals coping with left-out feelings can adapt these new evidence-based tools of gaining perspective from others, mentoring those in a similar condition, and thinking of strategies for improving the situation. For team leaders and colleagues who want to help others feel included, our research suggests that serving as a fair-minded ally — someone who treats everyone equally — can offer protection to buffer the exclusionary behavior of others. They can also share stories about how they have coped with similar challenges and see what suggestions teammates have for improving the situation. These strategies would help workers not only navigate tricky workplace dynamics,but also drive their own version of change, especially when the system isn't working for everyone. Leaders and organizations should invite employee feedback, and take it seriously; this behavior is a cornerstone of inclusive companies. Workers need to feel like they belong to something they value — and that they have the power to bring about change when it's needed.

Evan W. Carr is a quantitative behavioral scientist at BetterUp.

Andrew Reece is a behavioral data scientist at BetterUp.

Gabriella Rosen Kellerman is the chief innovation officer at BetterUp and head of BetterUp Labs.

Alexi Robichaux is co-founder and CEO of BetterUp.

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