



The Power of Belonging: What It Is and Why It Matters in Today's Workplace

Q&A with Lead Researchers

Julia Taylor Kennedy and Pooja Jain-Link

- **Why did you undertake this study?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Belonging is a term you hear in psychology, sociology, and social justice movements. In recent years, it's become buzzy in corporate diversity and inclusion. In some companies, chief diversity officers are even being renamed chief belonging officers. But no one had really defined it or quantified it related to the workplace. That's what we did in this report.

- **Amid all the upheaval in the world right now, how does belonging help people and organizations move forward as we return to work?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: The importance of belonging has taken on a life of its own in the last month, as protestors march against systemic racism and police brutality, and as we cope with the coronavirus pandemic. As a society, we're going through waves of grief and trauma. In a follow-up survey in May, we found a slight uptick in belonging compared to our February survey. We think that during COVID, people are turning to workplace colleagues more for support. We're engaged in a new way of being together at work--and employers shifted to remote work incredibly quickly. If that radical change was possible, many are saying, fixing racial inequality is also possible. Of course, the two issues--working from an office building and addressing systemic racism--are different, but our society's swift reaction to the threat of COVID-19 does indicate we are capable of change. And because we've grown closer as colleagues and workplace communities, and because of the stresses we are under, these issues are being raised loudly and persistently.

Pooja Jain-Link: In many ways, it's an awesome moment because there's potential for real change. Structures that promote inequity may get torn down and rebuilt. Belonging has an important place in this process. We need to feel like we belong to each other and belong to this new world so that we're willing to listen, contribute, work together, and be authentic.

- **Is belonging just a way to soft-pedal the tough issues of diversity and inclusion at work?**

Pooja Jain-Link: No. Belonging means you think of your company as “us,” not “them.” To build company cultures that are inclusive, and that boost diversity, we know how important co-creation is. To get those co-created cultures, we need people to be a part of the “us”—we need them to belong.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Belonging is a human need *all* of us share. At work, we all want to be seen, connected, supported, and proud to work for our organizations. Focusing on belonging can be an opening for people who aren’t sure they have a place in the diversity and inclusion movement, such as White men. And because belonging scores vary—for example, they were much lower for Black and Asian women than for White men and women in our survey—it’s also further evidence of the inequities in our systems, and prompts us to examine how to fix them.

- **Can a sense of belonging steer workplaces to become more equitable?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Employees are looking to their employers to be social justice activists in this moment. Organizations and leaders are running fast to get comfortable privately and publicly with the reality of systemic racism in the US and in workplaces—and to assure employees that despite the pandemic, they can work safely and collaboratively. As our country remains polarized and fractious, employers must create spaces where employees can be themselves: productive, collaborative, accepted, and with realistic hope of building a successful career. That kind of community culture-building is extremely complex work. It requires *both* equitable policies and procedures to establish inclusive behavior *and* the actions, rooted in good will, that signal all employees belong.

- **Are there day-to-day benefits for employees?**

Pooja Jain-Link: If you feel like you belong, you’re more likely to feel engaged at work and want to stay at your company. If you have a lower sense of belonging, you’re more likely to feel stalled in your career. If you and your colleagues feel you all belong, work is better and more enjoyable. You’re ready to get up in the morning and connect with your colleagues, not just punch the clock and sit in the corner rolling your eyes at company leaders.

- **Tell us more about the belonging score.**

Pooja Jain-Link: The score measures four elements of belonging: Feeling seen, connected, supported, and proud. It’s based on an extensive literature review, looking at validated scales that measure belonging in other contexts and adapting them for the workplace. The scoring tool has 24 questions, but one of the most powerful findings for me is simply whether people say “we” or “they” when talking about their organization.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: The score is based on a set of questions asking employees if they agree with statements like “My organization adequately rewards my accomplishments,” “I’m treated with as much respect as other employees,” “I can be myself at my organization,” and “Other employees at work seem to like me the way I am.” It speaks to whether you are connected as your authentic self to others at work; recognized for your unique contributions; supported in your day to day work and life; and proud of your organization and the values it upholds.

- **Workplaces could be very different after the coronavirus pandemic. Does belonging matter for employees working remotely?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Yes. We were very curious about belonging scores in survey respondents working remotely. People who worked remotely felt their company supported them, fostering belonging.

Pooja Jain-Link: Working remotely tears down all sorts of boundaries—we see each other’s homes, hear coworkers’ kids, see them without makeup and wearing shorts. But not everyone wants their whole identity revealed in this way. Organizations can use the four elements of belonging to steer this change respectfully.

- **Tell us about the finding that employees without children have lower belonging scores.**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: We’ve heard a lot from parents and nonparents about ways they’ve felt included and alienated in the workplace. Talking about your kids is often a way to build trust with colleagues and clients. Non-parents don’t have that point of connection with others. Plus, some organizations also may more readily understand the need to care for a sick child at home than the need for a personal mental health day. Nonparents can have a harder time getting away from work as a result.

Pooja Jain-Link: As a new mom, I wholeheartedly understand this insight. I’m an introvert. Before I became a parent, I struggled a bit with office small talk. I’ve discovered that parenting and children create a connection regardless of coworkers’ backgrounds or level in an organization. It’s an easy way to bring the walls down. People who are not parents don’t have that.

- **What were some of the most surprising findings?**

Pooja Jain-Link: I was intrigued by our data that showed people whose political views differ from their colleagues had much lower belonging scores than those who feel they share political views with coworkers. The political is increasingly the personal. I don’t think it’s something diversity and inclusion departments have considered.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Belonging scores were low for Asian women and men, which perhaps is not surprising because of coronavirus-related biases and all kinds of headlines about whether Asian-Americans feel they belong in US society. But I think that this data highlights the fact that othering happens for many groups in the workplace.

- **How can companies use this information?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Start by understanding where you are today. Companies that conduct an annual employee engagement survey can get a pretty good read by adding one question: Do you feel you belong at work? If you see variations by race or gender, do something more in-depth to understand why.

Pooja Jain-Link: Our report includes 20 actionable steps and recommendations. For example, companies should hold people accountable for violations of company policies regardless of seniority, and they should hire leaders who are inclusive and listen to all voices on their teams. Managers should empower their staffs to make decisions. And we can all boost our colleagues' sense of belonging by providing timely and honest feedback, praise, and thanks for one another's contributions.