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In the World's Workplaces, Belonging Is Now a Critical Need

Organizations and workers around the globe thrive when all employees feel like “insiders,” especially as the pandemic deepens. But companies can't build it with a one-size-fits-all approach, new Coqual studies find.

NEW YORK, December 7, 2020: Amid the crisis of COVID-19, prolonged isolation, economic downturn and ongoing political polarization, new research from Coqual (formerly Center for Talent Innovation) finds that employee belonging strongly correlates with measures of career and business success, according to research conducted in six leading global markets on three continents. The findings call upon companies to address the unique forces that unite and divide employees around the world.

Presented in two reports, ***Belonging Matters Everywhere*** measures employees' sense of belonging in three European markets (Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom) and three growth markets (China, India, Mexico), through a survey of 3,001 full-time, college-educated professionals and through focus groups and interviews involving more than 200 employees and experts. The reports are the culmination of a yearlong, four-part study drawing on multiple surveys of over 7,000 employees in seven nations, including the United States. Rooted in four core elements of workplace belonging—feeling **seen, supported, connected, and proud** of your organization—Coqual used its 24-question metric to calculate a belonging score of 0 to 10.

“We’ve known for a long time that corporate culture determines whether companies can fully activate talent in the workplace,” says Coqual President Lanaya Irvin. “Now, with this new research, we’ve provided the hard data and insights to show that belonging brings tremendous value for employees and companies doing business globally. These reports provide a practical guide that calls leaders to action.”

In all markets studied, employees with high belonging scores were more likely to report positive career indicators, though the specifics differed by country. For example, in China, where the economy produces new job opportunities at a rapid pace, 97% of professionals with the highest belonging scores say they're very loyal to their employer. And in the European markets, these professionals are up to 3.4 times as likely as professionals with the lowest scores to be very engaged at work. In Mexico, 96% of employees with the highest belonging scores intend to stay with their current company for two years or more.

By contrast, employees in groups that are “othered” at work are often less likely to feel trusted, respected or connected to coworkers and managers, and more likely to experience increasing alienation since the pandemic began.

“As COVID-19 surges around the world, all employees are increasingly stressed, isolated and in despair,” says Julia Taylor Kennedy, Coqual executive vice president and primary lead researcher on the report. “Work, even when it’s remote, is one of the few places where employees experience ongoing belonging to a community right now. That also delivers a key competitive advantage in crisis. Companies need a loyal, united workforce to innovate their way out of an economic downturn. They need employees who can come together across divides.”

The reports reveal those divides and the ways the pandemic widens the gaps, which are unique to each market. For example:

- **LGBTQ identity.** In Poland, LGBTQ workers are less likely to feel respected than their non-LGBTQ colleagues (39% vs. 55%). but also said in focus groups that remote work during COVID relieves their fear of violence. In India, where work is sometimes a haven for LGBTQ professionals, moving back home since COVID has meant losing that safe space for some. LGBTQ professionals in India are more than four times as likely as non-LGBTQ employees to regularly feel lonely (25% vs. 6%) and more than twice as likely to regularly feel alienated (13% vs. 6%).
- **Hindu and Muslim coworkers in India.** Compared with Hindus, Muslim professionals in India are less likely to feel respected (54% vs. 73%) and much more likely to feel alienated (20% vs. 6%) on a regular basis.
- **Polarized politics in the UK.** In the UK, those who see themselves as political outsiders at work are less likely than their counterparts to trust their colleagues (40% vs. 66%) or managers (46% vs. 58%).
- **Hukou in China.** Professionals whose *hukou* (“official” residence, based on family and birthplace) matches their current residence hold advantages in China. Those whose *hukou* does not match their residence are more likely to be outsiders, less likely to trust colleagues (47% vs. 64%) or managers (38% vs. 66%), compared with those whose *hukou* matches their current residence.
- **Immigrants in Germany.** Professionals born outside Germany were significantly less likely than German-born professionals to trust their colleagues (60% vs. 78%) or managers (42% vs. 68%). Since the start of the pandemic, they’re about half as likely to report that relationships with senior leaders have improved (14% vs. 29%).
- **Introverts in Mexico.** Introverts are less likely to regularly feel appreciated (32% vs. 56%) or motivated (59% vs. 72%) than their extrovert coworkers in Mexico; introverts are nearly three times as likely to describe their employers’ approach to their work schedules during COVID-19 as insensitive (14% vs. 5%).

“Though belonging is a universal human need, the ways to build it vary by culture,” says Pooja Jain-Link, Coqual executive vice president and secondary research lead for the report. “Leaders cannot assume, based on their own experiences in their home country or in other markets, that they understand who the insiders and the outsiders are in an individual market and what kinds of approaches will drive a greater sense of belonging. What works best in India, for example, may not work as well in China. Cultural competency is crucial.”

The new reports provide targeted, data-backed solutions that multinational organizations, leaders, managers, and colleagues can use to successfully build belonging in workplaces, including a country-by-country guide.

Methodology: The research consists of a survey; focus groups and Insights In-Depth® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus group) with 120

participants; and one-on-one interviews with more than 80 people in China, Germany, India, Mexico, Poland, the UK, and the United States. The survey was conducted online in June 2020 with 3,001 respondents (500 in each China, Germany, India, Poland, and the UK, and 501 in Mexico) between the ages of 21 and 65 currently employed full-time in white-collar occupations, with at least a bachelor's degree. Data were weighted by gender using available benchmarks for each country. The base used for statistical testing was the effective base.

This survey was conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago under the auspices of Coqual, a nonprofit research organization. NORC was responsible for the data collection, while Coqual conducted the analysis

Research Advisors: Lynne Oldham, Chief People Officer, Zoom; Prof. John A. Powell, Haas Chancellor's Chair in Equity and Inclusion, Professor of Law, African American Studies, and Ethnic Studies, Director of the Othering and Belonging Institute, UC Berkeley; Aneeta Rattan, PhD, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, London Business School; Michael Welp, PhD, Co-founder, White Men as Full Diversity Partners (WMFDP | FDP Global).

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Previous Reports in the Belonging Series: *The Power of Belonging: What It Is and Why It Matters in Today's Workplace*, Part 1, June 2020; *What Majority Men Really Think About Diversity and Inclusion (and How to Engage Them in It)*, Part 2, August 2020.

About Coqual: Coqual (formerly The Center for Talent Innovation) is a nonprofit think tank dedicated to helping leaders design diverse and inclusive workplaces where every person belongs. Founded in 2004, Coqual's data and thought leadership have been frequently featured in leading media outlets, such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Harvard Business Review*, and the *Washington Post*. Coqual's Task Force and consulting practice serve corporations that impact millions of employees globally. For more information, visit www.coqual.org.