



Belonging Matters Everywhere

Q&A with Lead Researchers

Julia Taylor Kennedy and Pooja Jain-Link

- **Why did you undertake this research now -- and why look at belonging in China, Germany, India, Mexico, Poland and the UK?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Coqual's recent research in the US that belonging matters at work. Professionals with higher belonging scores are more likely to be engaged, loyal, satisfied with their career advancement and likely to plan to stay for the next two years. People who feel they belong to each other are more willing to work together, contribute, listen and be authentic at work -- especially important during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. But what about workplaces around the world? We wanted to measure belonging, look at how it matters and see how it works in different nations with vastly different cultures. Our research answered these questions: Belonging matters a lot, and it works a bit differently country-by-country. Multinational companies need to understand the nuances in order to successfully create belonging in the many countries where they have employees or their efforts could fall flat.

Pooja Jain-Link: Work is one of the few places where people come together across lines of difference. But what, exactly, are those differences? You can't assume you know based on experiences in your home country, or based on what you've learned in another country in the same region, such as Asia. We had a hunch that the insider and outsider groups and their experiences would vary by market. We chose to look closely at three growth markets (China, India and Mexico) and three European markets (Germany, Poland and the UK) because they're strong economies with vastly different cultures.

- **What's your most significant finding?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Belonging is universal; culture is not. We tested Coqual's 24-question belonging metric in a survey of 3,001 college-educated professionals in the six nations and found that the four core elements of belonging -- feeling seen, connected, supported and proud of your organization -- were the same everywhere. Belonging is a global human need at work. And even small increases in belonging are associated with major increases in career-boosting indicators like loyalty, engagement, trust, motivation and connection.

Pooja Jain-Link: In every market, belonging is built very differently. In China, there's great respect for authority and hierarchy, but workplace culture is highly social. Professionals put in

long hours and want coworkers to be like a second family. They feel included when colleagues share personal stories and senior leaders attend social events. In Mexico, professionals felt more like insiders when they had a lot in common with senior leaders. So senior leaders need humility. Otherwise their high status, with perks like special parking spots and separate elevators, could wall them off from employees. In Europe, workers in all three markets said managers who praised their work boosted belonging. But U.K. professionals warned that too much loud praise could come off as disingenuous. Instead of American-style enthusiasm, a quiet, personal word might work better. In one focus group, for example, a UK professional told us that a personal letter of gratitude from his manager meant a great deal to him.

- **Why does belonging matter amid the upheaval in the world right now?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: Belonging is a powerful tool for strengthening employees and organizations. Our surveys took place in June 2020, during the first COVID-19 surge. Employees were feeling increasingly isolated and stressed. Work is one of the few places where we're engaging regularly with others outside of our households as we experience lockdowns and social distancing around the globe. Since we all need belonging, suddenly the relevance of our workplace communities skyrocketed. For employers, they need employees who are able to bring their best to work in a really shaky economy.

Having that sense of belonging drives employee fulfillment in a few ways. High-belonging employees are more likely to be engaged and loyal. They're more likely to plan on staying in their current organization for the next two years. A high-belonging workforce has a higher capacity for collaboration, innovation and productivity that can pull an organization through economic downturns and recession.

- **What about outsiders at work. Who are they? How are they faring?**

Pooja Jain-Link: Outsider groups face more difficulties, especially during the pandemic. We found that:

- In India, Muslim professionals were more likely than Hindus to say they felt alienated at work.
- In Germany, where immigration status fuels stark insider/outsider distinctions, professionals born outside the country were significantly less likely than German-born workers to say their relationships with senior leaders have improved since the pandemic.
- In Poland, where the vast majority of residents are Roman Catholic, non-Catholic employees were less likely say they've felt more connected to their managers since the onset of COVID.
- In Mexico's very social workplaces, introverts are less likely to regularly feel appreciated or motivated than extroverts. During COVID-19, introverts are nearly three times as likely to describe their employers' approach to their work schedules as insensitive.

- In China, employees whose *hukou* (official household registration, usually based on birthplace) doesn't match their actual home address were less likely to trust their manager than those with a local *hukou*.

- **What surprised you?**

Pooja Jain-Link: The experience for LGBTQ workers felt lonelier, less respected and less connected in several nations we surveyed, but their experiences varied in unexpected ways. In Poland, LGBTQ professionals in our focus groups said working remotely during COVID-19 reduced their fear of violence. In contrast, LGBTQ workers in India who moved back to their family home during the pandemic felt they'd lost the safe haven of work where they could be their true selves. They feared saying something during a virtual meeting with coworkers that might "out" them to their family members.

Julia Taylor Kennedy: We were impressed by the consistently high median belonging scores in growth markets. There are lessons we can learn from these cultures, where relationships matter so much, in terms of building belonging and community in the workplace.

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- **Does political polarization, a major issue in the US impact global belonging?**

Pooja Jain-Link: Yes. In the UK, employees told us that political conversations simply don't happen at work. But professionals whose views differ from most of their coworkers' felt less likely to trust their colleagues or managers. In China, where political discussions are rare, those with non-majority opinions told us they're more likely to feel anxious or alienated at work than those who share views with the majority of coworkers.

- **How can organizations apply this research?**

Julia Taylor Kennedy: There's no one-size-fits-all playbook, no list of five magic-bullet strategies that will foster belonging everywhere. You have to question your assumptions, listen carefully and collaborate with colleagues in each market. Learn all you can. Without cultural competency, efforts to foster belonging won't resonate or feel authentic.