

Report Preview

What It Means to Belong @ Work

Building a workplace that is warm, welcoming and inclusive takes careful forethought, conscious planning and effective execution. Here are six key insights into what matters most to employees when it comes to creating a professional culture of belonging, according to our recent research.

Produced in partnership with



Microsoft

Executive Summary

As social scientist Brene Brown wrote, “... belonging is an irreducible need of all people.”¹ In fact, when asked who we are, we often reply by describing our relationships with the people and places that are important to us: our families, friends, communities, countries — and employers.

Despite “belonging” being a universal human need, though, it is often overlooked by employers — almost as if we believe it happens automatically, without any effort on the employer’s part. In fact, though, belonging needs to be cultivated.

To reinforce this notion, we conducted a global study of over 10,000 respondents to find out what it means to belong at work, across genders, generations, geographic regions and workplace hierarchies (see methodology, page 10). In what ways can we nurture belonging? What are the challenges in doing so? Here are six takeaways gleaned from our initial analysis. (The full report will be available in late March 2020.)

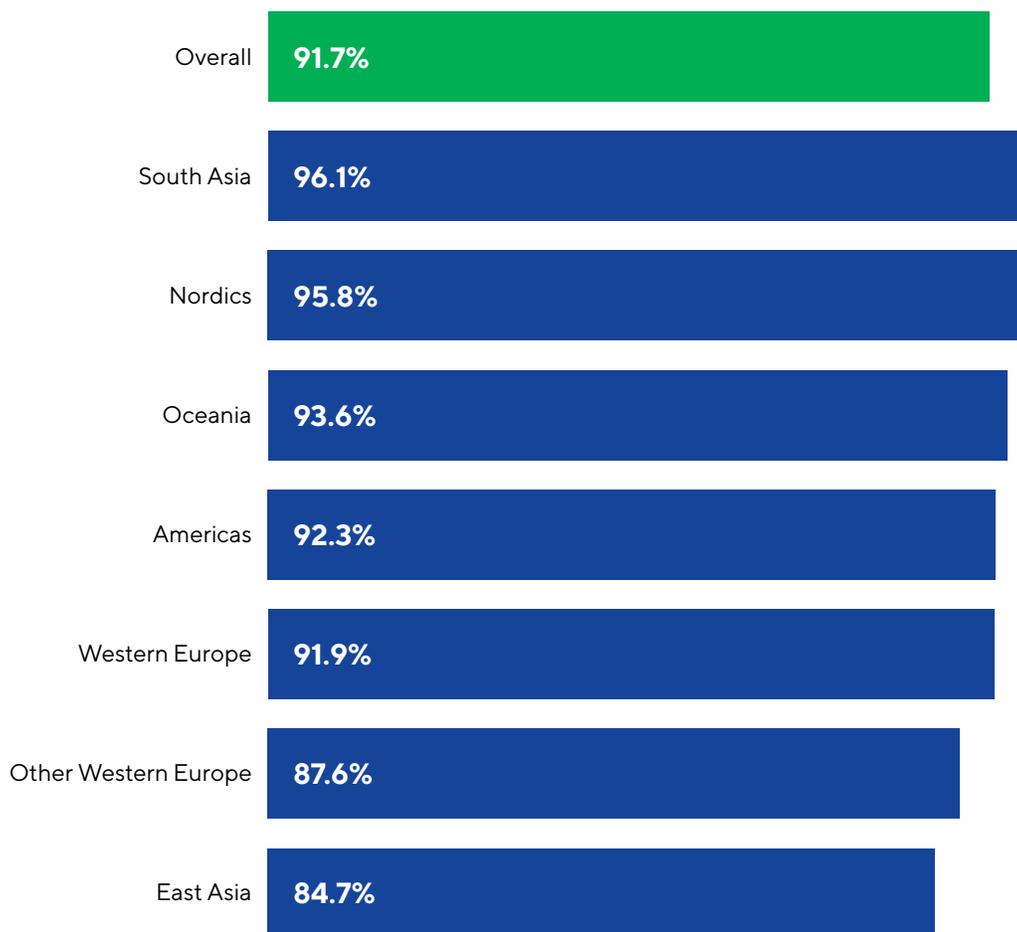
1. Belonging is a universal human need

We asked respondents about the importance of belonging at work.

While there is some regional variation, 92% of respondents overall said it was important to “feel like you are appreciated for who you are and what you can contribute.” Given that most people will spend a substantial portion of their adult lives in a professional work environment, it should come as no surprise that, globally, we have a consuming need to feel a sense of belonging at our place of work.

The importance of belonging

At work, how important is it that you feel like you belong?



Note: Percent of respondents who said “very important,” “important” or “somewhat important.”

Response base: 10,799

Source: Cognizant & Microsoft

Figure 1



The people speak

"I feel very blessed to work where I do because the environment and community is one of the best I've found."

– *Gen Y manager, Americas*

"Allow me the freedom to do my job."

– *Gen X individual contributor, Oceania*

"A simple chat and recognition would increase each one's belongingness."

– *Gen Y individual contributor, Oceania*

"[My workplace] makes me feel like I belong. ... We are all like family."

– *Gen Y individual contributor, Oceania*

2. Workplace belonging is not a fuzzy concept – it's concrete

It's not enough to be employed by an organization that mirrors our own values.

Respondents told us that the feelings generated by being welcomed, included, valued and connected all contribute to their sense of belonging. These feelings are nurtured by work teams and operationalized by specific behavior patterns of leaders and co-workers.

As part of our research, we created four scales reflecting the different aspects of belonging. On a global basis, each scale showed strong correlations with each other and with reported feelings of belonging. The four scales include:

- I Feeling welcome:** The need for social acceptance influences almost everything we do, including our willingness to be connected to our employer. Factors that contribute to an inviting organizational culture include seeing people who are similar to ourselves, sensing that we could be successful based on what we see and hear, and feeling that the company fits with our "personality." The act of being welcomed into an inclusive organization signals that we are wanted.
- I Feeling included:** Our self-confidence and motivation are heavily influenced by whether we are included in the processes and decision-making that directly affect our work. Feeling included is about having the resources we need to do our work, as well as having our ideas and opinions actively solicited and acted upon. The act of being included signals that we are important – that our work matters.
- I Feeling valued:** How do we know we are valued for who we are at work? When we can authentically be ourselves. When we think it's safe to take risks. When our co-workers and managers respect and care about us as individuals. And when there is an environment of trust. If we can bring our differences to work, and those differences are valued – that's when we can contribute our personal best.
- I Feeling connected:** Our personal connections with colleagues and managers are an important part of feeling like we belong. It is about forming a unique human bond that signals we are part of a community – a place where we fit in, in a job we enjoy, with people we want to be around.

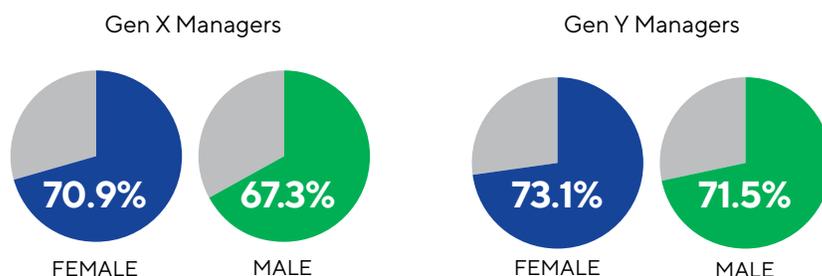
3. A sense of belonging may be more valuable than pay

It’s clear that belonging is important – but just how important is it, particularly in the context of the work environment?

We asked respondents to choose the more important factor in making a job choice: feeling appreciated and that you could contribute or the specific salary offered. Overall, 62% of respondents said belonging was more important than salary. The issue of belonging is significantly more important for Gen X and Gen Y managers. For these groups, it’s not enough to have a seat at the table or even to have a voice; it’s about knowing their voice is valued and that they can contribute.

Feeling valued outshines pay

When making a job choice, feeling like I will be appreciated and can contribute is more important than the salary offered to me.



Note: Percent of respondents who said they “agree” or “somewhat agree.”
 Response base: 2,723
 Source: Cognizant & Microsoft
 Figure 2

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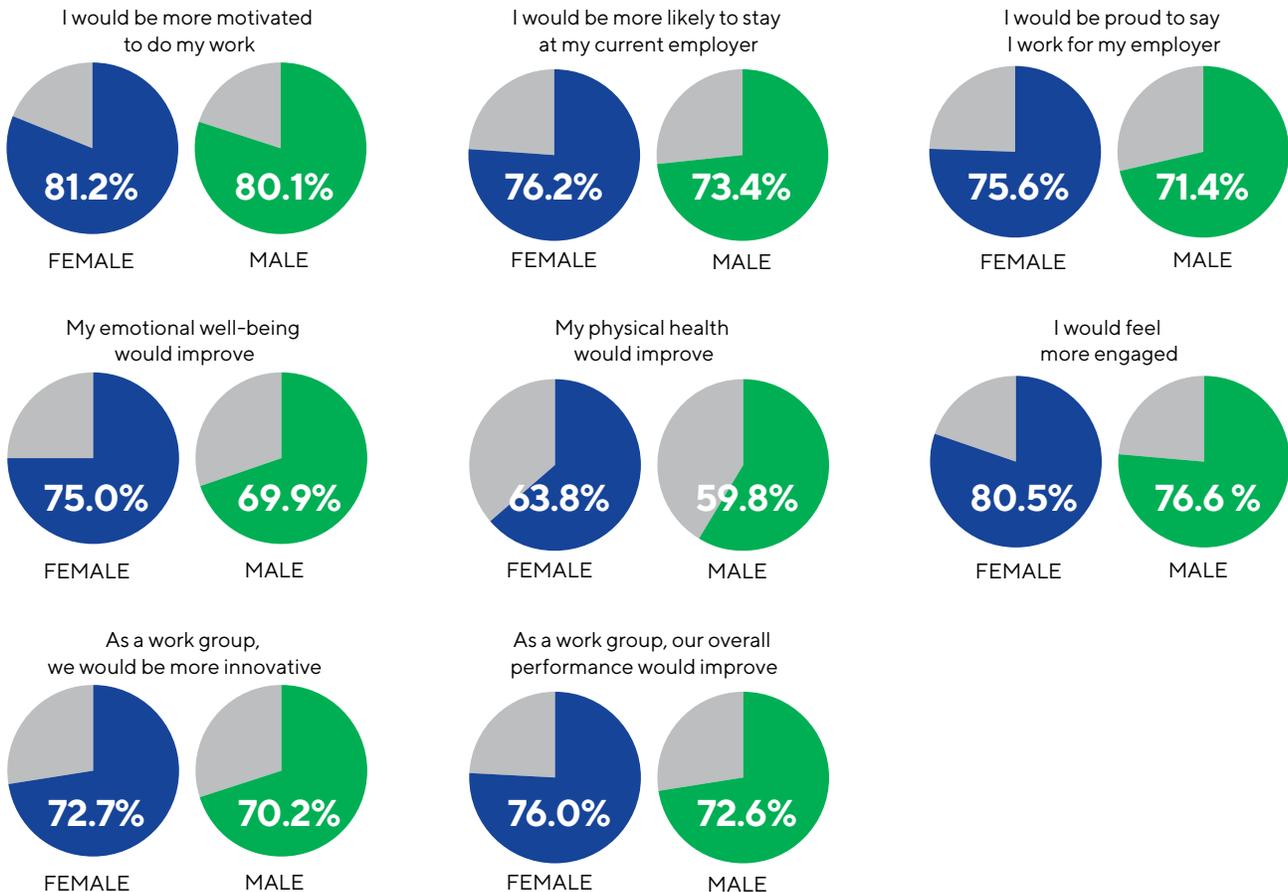
4. Belonging is tied to performance

When organizations create a culture of belonging, the resulting environment can be transformative for employees and the organization as a whole.

In our study, respondents reported that fostering a sense of belonging would significantly increase their motivation, commitment, pride, emotional and physical well-being, and overall engagement. Ultimately, respondents said these feelings of belonging would lead to not just greater innovation but also increased productivity.

The business advantage of inclusivity

In what ways do you think your employer would benefit most by fostering a sense of belonging for employees?



Note: Percent of respondents who said they “agree” or “somewhat agree.”
 Response base: 10,799
 Source: Cognizant & Microsoft
 Figure 3

5. Organizational size is not a factor in developing strong employee bonds

When we looked at organizational size, we found no material difference in the feelings of belonging between those who worked in large vs. small organizations.

Providing a sense of belonging is not the sole province of small organizations; it can be actively cultivated in even the largest of businesses. No matter what size organization they worked for, 71% of respondents said they feel like they belong.



6. Even in the digital work world, belonging still starts with a human face

The internet has not only made us more flexible, efficient and productive; it has also changed how we relate to each other.

But while there are lots of opportunities to share interests and exchange ideas in online communities, how can technology facilitate feelings of belonging at work?

We asked respondents to rate the effectiveness of a range of communication techniques when it comes to building relationships with members of their work group.

Globally, all generations pointed to the importance of face-to-face communication, underscoring that connections start with a human face. But 65% of respondents said that technology – broadly – can help facilitate a feeling of connection with co-workers by creating more points of contact between people. Specific technologies can strengthen and enhance existing face-to-face relationships as well as enable new connections between those who may never have an opportunity to meet in person. And for the youngest generations of workers, work-based technologies like text, instant messaging, social messaging, chat and collaboration hubs open new possibilities for connections.

Using tech to build bonds

How effective is each of the following ways of communicating when it comes to building relationships with members of your work group?



Note: Percent of respondents across all generations who answered “effective” or “somewhat effective.”
 Response base: 10,799
 Source: Cognizant & Microsoft
 Figure 4

The bottom line

Creating a culture of belonging is not just a moral mandate – it's a business imperative.

What has always moved the world forward is the energy of highly motivated and energized people who believe strongly in who they are and what they are doing.

Just as the full potential of diversity can only be reached with full inclusion, so can the power of inclusion be fulfilled only with true belonging. Now is the time to release our employees' expansive capacities by doing everything we can to encourage and enable belonging within our organizations.

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Methodology

Our survey was conducted in cooperation with Tammy Erickson Associates in November and December 2019. Our intent was to develop a better understanding of employee perceptions about belonging at work across geographic regions, genders, job titles and generations. Our 10,799 respondents represent 17 countries across seven regions. Respondents included full-time employees ranging in age from 18 to 72 and both individual contributors and managers. In all but one case, we used a five-point Likert scale ranging from “agree to disagree.”

Region	Countries	# of responses
Americas	U.S., Canada	1,567
Oceania	Australia, New Zealand	1,556
East Asia	Japan, China	1,561
South Asia	India, Singapore	1,546
Western Europe	Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands	1,541
Other Western Europe	UK, France	1,551
Nordic	Norway, Sweden, Denmark	1,477
Total		10,799

Endnotes

- ¹ Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, Aug. 27, 2019, www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/234254/braving-the-wilderness-by-brene-brown-phd-lmsw/.

Additional inquiries

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