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Cultivating an Inclusive Culture Through Personal Networks

Analyzing employees' network connections can show whether they have the access and relationships they need to be most effective.

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Many organizations have ramped up their investments in diversity, equity, and inclusion — largely in the form of anti-bias training, employee resource groups, mentoring programs, and

added DEI functions and roles. But gauging the effectiveness of these measures has been a challenge.¹ To get an accurate read on the progress that has been made so far, it's not enough to look for representation across demographic categories in recruitment and hiring, although that's a start. Organizations must also assess employee experience. If people aren't equitably developed and promoted once they come on board, they're not as likely to stay.² And even if they do stick around, engagement may suffer, and the organization may struggle to reap diversity's potential benefits, such as increased creativity and improved business performance.³

Efforts to capture employee experience usually involve self-reporting via engagement questionnaires or pulse surveys. These provide insights about individuals' feelings — asking, for instance, “Are you inspired by the goals of the organization?” or “Would you recommend our company as a great place to work?” But they offer a limited view, because they typically don't reflect the presence or absence of work relationships that lead to positive or negative feelings, or the extent to which the organization and its people are building connectivity that yields high engagement.

We're finding that organizations can get a clearer picture of employee experience by analyzing people's network connections. They can begin to see whether DEI programs are producing the collaboration and interactions needed to help people from various demographic groups gain their footing quickly and become truly integrated.

In particular, network analysis reveals when and why people seek out individuals for information, ideas, career advice, personal support, or mentorship. In the Connected Commons, a research consortium, we have mapped organizational

networks for over 20 years and have frequently been able to overlay gender data on network diagrams to identify drivers of inclusion.⁴ Extensive quantitative and qualitative research on this front has helped us understand behaviors that promote more rapid and effective integration of women after they are hired. For example, research reveals the importance of fostering collaboration across functional and geographic divides (while avoiding collaborative burnout) and cultivating energy through network connections.⁵

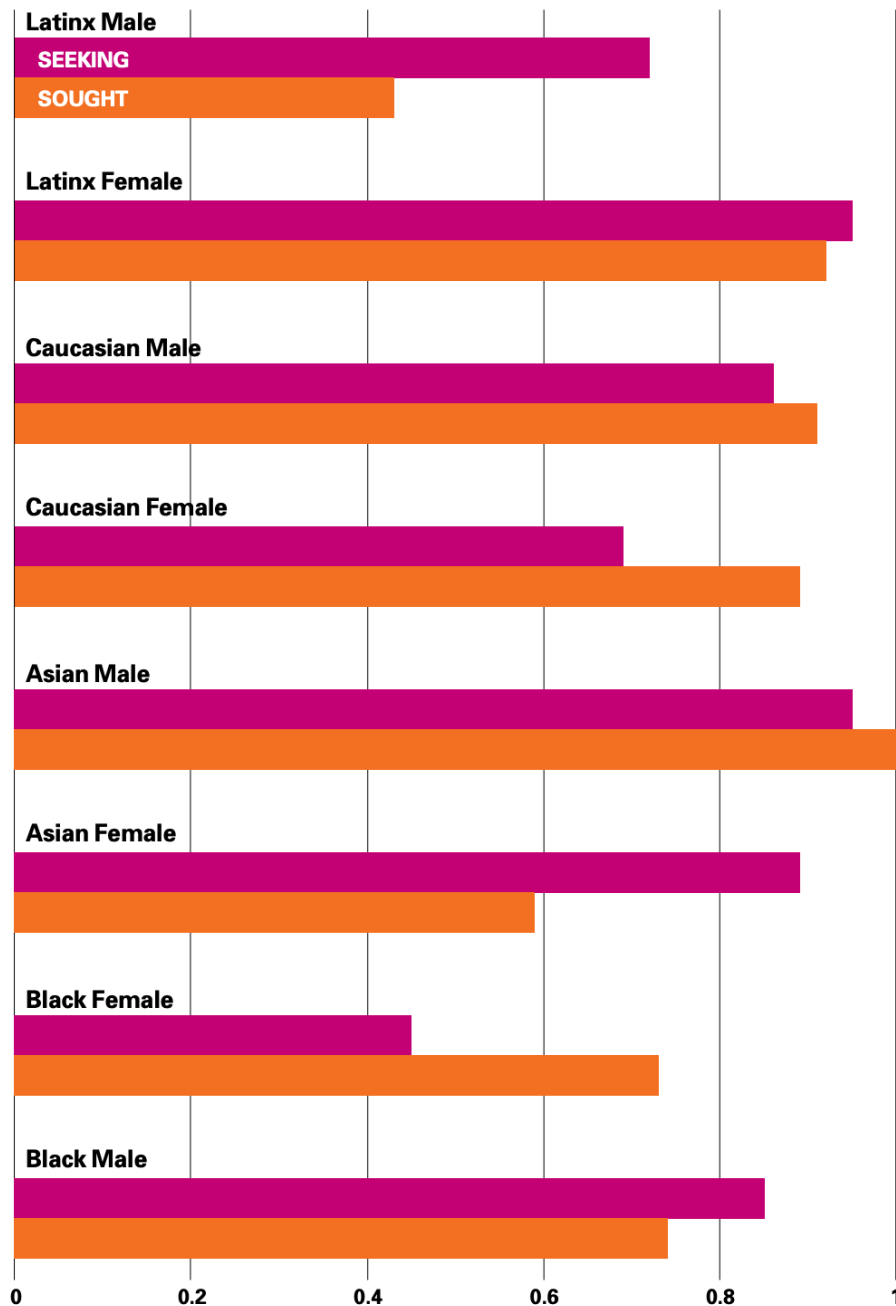
Just recently, we also gained access to race and ethnicity data in 10 organizations, for groups ranging in size from roughly 1,800 to 16,000 people, so we are now starting to explore drivers of inclusion for people of color. Companies were long reluctant to share such data, but in the wake of protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, they're now keenly aware that they must be more transparent about DEI outcomes beyond gender to make real progress.

This view gave us a more granular understanding of the integration of new hires into the workplace and of inclusion in networks across sub-populations of color. For example, Black women and Latinx men in our sample established, on average, fewer early network ties within their functional or project groups and sustained fewer connections across functions and geographies than people in other subgroups. In contrast, Asian males made more of those connections, reaching out to key stakeholders in ways that got them drawn into workstreams and created trust. (See “Relative Network Connectivity by Race and Gender.”)

In the 10 organizations we analyzed, we saw some striking differences in network connectivity across demographic subgroups. Although each organization's breakdown was unique (largely because subgroup sizes varied from company to company), we found it useful to look at how subgroups compared on average.

Overall, people seeking ties with colleagues and stakeholders early on tended to stimulate larger networks where they were sought out for their knowledge and expertise. Being sought out over time was strongly associated with faster promotion and longer tenure.

In the index shown here, we assigned a value of 1 to the most connected group (Asian men, sought) and charted the others in relation to that.



Some populations, like Black men and Asian women, were more likely than others to create cohesive internal communities with members of their subgroup. Other subgroups did not create such affinities and sometimes showed avoidance of specific sub-populations. And some groups, like Latinx and Asian women, tended to reach out fluidly across all ethnic and gender categories. Such targeted insights about subgroups' particular inroads and obstacles provide opportunities to promote inclusion throughout the workforce.

In each organization, we also collected promotion and attrition data. This allowed us to see which types of network connections and behaviors are associated with faster promotions and longer tenures for people of color — signs that organizations are developing them, not just hiring them. We discuss the most highly correlated behaviors below. But we also urge organizational leaders to remember that individuals can't simply create an inclusive working environment for themselves. Though we're still very early in our exploration, we're seeing that colleagues, leaders, and talent processes all play important roles in promoting inclusion.

Three Ways Networks Can Make a Difference

In our quantitative analyses and our follow-up interviews, three factors consistently correlated with faster rates of promotion and longer tenures in the hiring organization:

- 1. Early ties.** Most critically, we found that — among all people of color, regardless of gender — employees who enjoyed rapid promotion and those who stayed with the organization longer

were, on average, more likely than others to reach out early to key stakeholders to understand their needs. The insights people gained allowed them to apply their expertise to address those needs, which in turn made their skills more visible in the organization and created demand for their contributions.

These individuals were then distinguished not by connections to powerful people within the organization but rather by the number of times they were *sought out* by local networks (after establishing early ties) to provide expertise, ideas, and other types of support. Interviews revealed that they had rapidly built competence-based trust and reputations for reliability. As one Black male employee put it: “People want to know they can give you a problem and be safe to take it off their plate. The more you do this for people and reliably produce, the more you get pulled into bigger and bigger opportunities.”

How did people quickly build others’ trust in their abilities? By showing prototypes, for example, or by describing steps they had taken to solve problems in previous projects. That made it easier for new colleagues to gauge the potential application of the idea rather than make a snap judgment about the individual. People who developed trust early on were also quick to admit what they did not know, so others were more likely to turn to them in areas where they did have expertise. Over time, they followed through on commitments and thus proved reliable. And the interpersonal connections they built along the way through shared experiences or common interests created *benevolence-based trust* — the belief that these employees care about their colleagues and have their interests in mind.

Understanding network connections in detail has enabled some of the organizations in our research to make targeted changes to their talent development processes. In several, for example, managers now engage newly hired or promoted

individuals in a series of activities designed to cultivate key connections in their first three to six months. Other organizations, acknowledging that employees must trust as well as be trusted if they want to establish early ties, aim to develop shared understanding and joint accountability by pairing people from different subgroups in immersive projects. The goal here is to create psychological safety through extended interaction.

2. “Bridging” ties. In all 10 organizations, higher promotion and retention rates also correlated with less insular networks that allowed people to produce more creative and comprehensive solutions over time. This is consistent with the pioneering findings of sociologist Ronald Burt.⁶ Burt showed that networks with more bridging ties — or greater structural diversity — enabled people to solve problems more innovatively and to create reputations that subsequently brought them more opportunities to display their skills.

This observation is significant in the context of inclusion because it suggests that organizations should promote a wider breadth of connectivity in their talent programs — not just vertical access to senior people in the hierarchy or connections to similar peers through employee resource groups. Indeed, cultivating and maintaining ties across functional and geographic lines was the largest network-related predictor of advancement and retention in the organizations we analyzed.

3. Mentoring from colleagues. Finally, people of color with higher promotion and retention rates were more likely to have sought and received mentoring and career advice from others in their networks. But again, connections with senior folks weren’t as important as you might think. The constructive feedback that helped people move into roles they wanted often

came from bridging ties — with individuals in other units, geographies, or roles — and from peers or colleagues who were at most one level up in the organization. In fact, when we looked at the degree to which mentoring and advice flowed from very senior levels, we got quite a surprise. It turned out that people who had *more* mentoring and career-support interactions with senior people were less connected in the network overall and *more* likely to leave the organization.

Although people in power can be valuable connections, they can't offer the same kind of feedback that those who work more closely with the individual can. Several of the organizations in our analysis are now revising their mentoring processes to foster connections not just with organizational leaders and decision makers but also with more junior-level employees who have a clearer view of what the individual does day to day and are well connected in networks.

A Broader Notion of What Organizations Can Do

Looking at DEI through a network lens can help organizations think more expansively about how to make progress. For instance, they might try to do the following:

Mitigate implicit bias after it occurs. Psychology and neuroscience research consistently shows the rapid and robust effects of *implicit bias*: the strong tendency of people in power to trust and favor those who look like them.⁷ In response, an entire industry has evolved to train managers to avoid this psychological impulse. Unfortunately, fighting implicit bias before it occurs is very difficult, because it operates beneath

our awareness. Perhaps that's why, on their own, diversity training programs have produced mixed results and sometimes even been found to make things worse.⁸

Reducing the *effects* of implicit bias, in addition to increasing awareness of the traps we all fall into, may be a more realistic way to attack the problem. Organizations can do that by helping employees enrich their networks through rapid cycles of experience. Although initial impressions based on demographic stereotypes can be formative, people can and do change their opinions of others over time through repeated exposure. Creating opportunities for employees to regularly engage in small but substantive interactions, such as frequent project reviews and one-on-one meetings, can help them gradually form competence-based trust and then develop benevolence-based trust.⁹ Both types of trust are critical for building networks that promote knowledge transfer and learning.¹⁰

Use network data to build more effective employee resource groups. Employee resource groups (ERGs) are workplace communities designed to promote belonging and cohesion by connecting people on the basis of shared identities such as race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. By analyzing networks, organizations can identify informal opinion leaders and work with them to strengthen these communities — by having them organize and lead events, for instance, or asking them to engage with peripheral ERG members to get them more involved.

But let's not forget a core finding from our analysis: the importance of structurally diverse personal networks. While ERGs can boost feelings of inclusion, they may have the unintended side effect of promoting insular personal networks

over time. A better approach is a balanced one: facilitating some connections that feed the need for affiliation and belonging, along with others that nurture performance. Several organizations in our analysis are beginning to help employees deliberately make both kinds of connections by embedding network-building activities into talent development programs.

Restructure mentoring programs. All 10 organizations in our analysis had invested significantly in mentoring programs for people of color. And, to be sure, these were appreciated and sometimes valuable. But relying too heavily on formal sponsorship by senior leaders assumes that inclusion is largely about power and thus best served by providing access to influential others. Rather, we're finding that people might be better served by mentors who are closer to their work and are well connected in local networks. In our sample, having authentic interactions with such colleagues correlated with faster promotions and higher retention rates, whereas more formal senior-junior mentoring relationships did not. Some organizations are creating peer-mentoring programs that pair people with well-connected colleagues around work objectives. In a couple of the organizations we analyzed, participants in these trial programs were two to three times more likely to be sought out by others and pulled into their networks. In addition to boosting employee engagement, this increased "pull" is likely to fuel innovation and productivity.

As hierarchies continue to flatten, and work becomes more agile, network analysis allows organizations to consider two key questions with a fresh lens: What kinds of relationships foster inclusion, and how can they be facilitated? Our initial results suggest that people of color advance through the ranks more rapidly and stay with their organizations longer when they have opportunities to apply their skills and build trust early on in

local networks. Employers can help by facilitating rich interactions among colleagues, creating more chances for people to shine.

Topics

Workplace, Teams, & Culture

Culture

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