THE POWER OF BELONGING

What It Is and Why It Matters in Today's Workplace

BELONGING SERIES | PART 1

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AN OPPORTUNITY AMIDST CRISIS

Belonging is a fundamental human need. Psychologist Abraham Maslow recognized this by placing "belonging" in his hierarchy of human needs—and recent scholarship stresses its primacy.[1]
In every sphere of our lives, we seek connection with, and acceptance from, one another. The concept of belonging is increasingly used in diversity and inclusion (D&I) work, but hasn't been well-defined.

As we write this report in 2020, companies are grappling with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in addition to the toll in human lives, has exposed systemic racial and economic inequities and fundamentally disrupted the professional workforce. We see this reach a fever pitch in the uprising about racism triggered by the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, which kicked off global protests and, amidst CEO and company statements denouncing racism, employee demands for fair workplace treatment of Black professionals.

In order to heal, move forward, and create better workplace communities where every employee feels they belong, we need to better understand how to create those communities. For too long, workplace belonging has been created through shortcuts: common schools, common neighborhoods. In this study, we uncover what truly creates belonging for all employees.

THE ELEMENTS OF BELONGING

Belonging at work means you feel seen for your unique contributions, connected to your coworkers, supported in your daily work and career development, and proud of your organization's values and purpose. We constructed a ten-point scale that measures belonging, rooted in four elements.

Se Seen — **When you are seen** at work, you are recognized, rewarded, and respected by your colleagues.

Co Connected — **When you are connected** at work, you have positive, authentic social interactions with peers, managers, and senior leaders.

Su Supported — **When you are supported** at work, those around you—from your peers to senior leaders—give you what you need to get your work done and live a full life.

Pr Proud — **When you are proud** of your work and your organization, you feel aligned with its purpose, vision, and values.

"These are complex issues, but also quite intimate: Everyone has some need to belong, and, in that sense, belonging touches every aspect of our lives. The question, then, is, 'How do you take this area that's both intuitive and complex and make it operative at work?'"

Prof. john a. powell, Haas Chancellor's Chair in Equity and Inclusion,
Professor of Law, African American Studies, and Ethnic Studies, University of California, Berkeley

Dividing employees into quartiles based on their belonging scores, we found most employees do have some sense that they belong at work—half of them score between 6.25 and 8.54. Their median belonging score: 7.40.
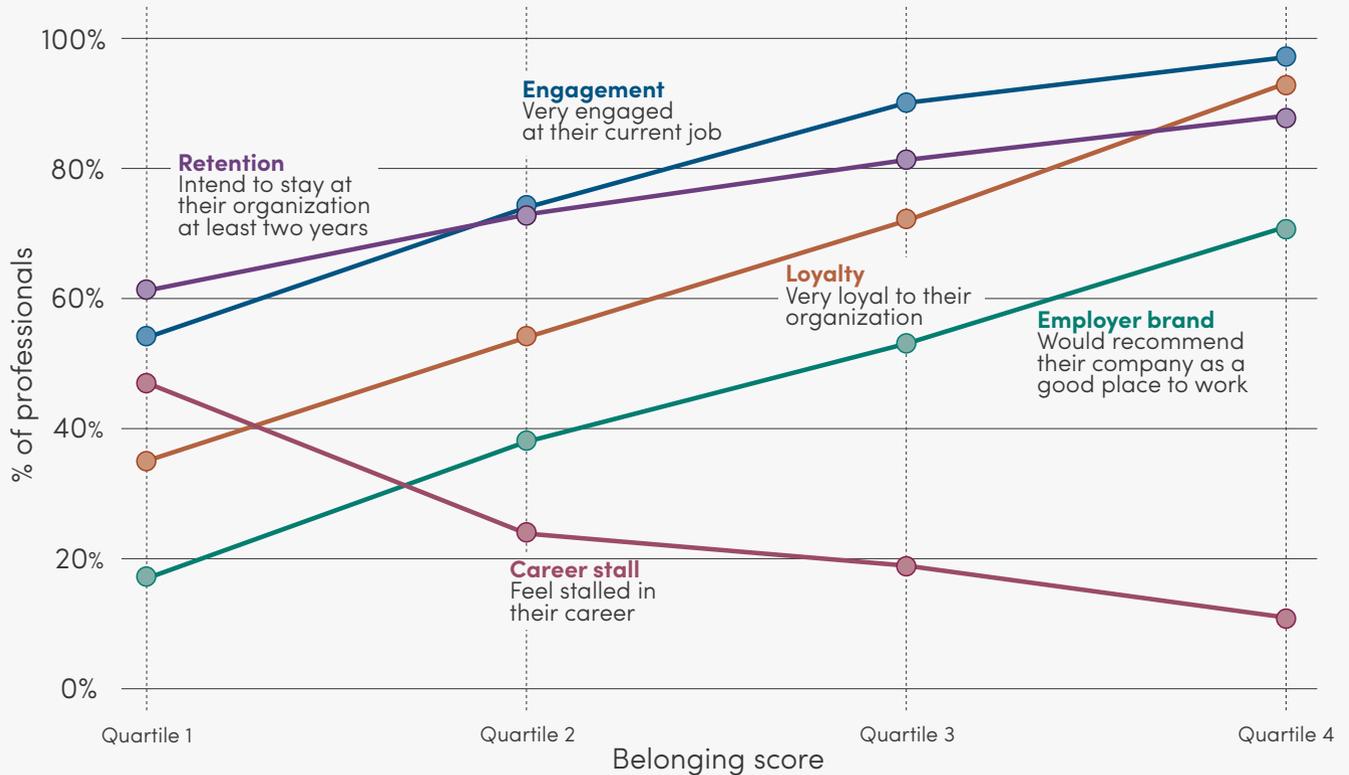
Distribution of belonging scores
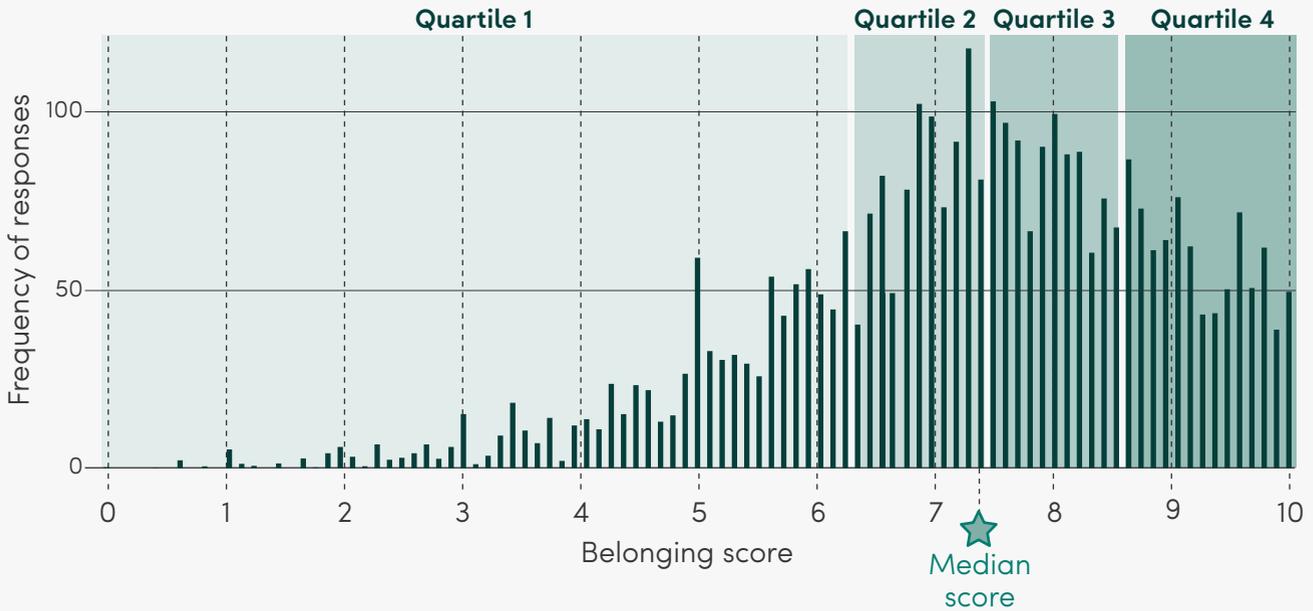
PAYOFFS FOR HIGH BELONGING

As this chart reveals, moving from one quartile of belonging to the next corresponds to a remarkable boost in outcomes for employees and their employers.

Key career indicators for professionals

IDENTITIES CORE TO D&I

When we examine median scores across lines of race and gender, who belongs? White men and White women top the ranking. Psychologists Shannon Brady and Greg Walton write that a critical hidden benefit of being in the majority is you can think of yourself as an *individual*, rather than as a White person.[2] Employees of color do not have this luxury: nearly one in three Black employees (32%) and one in four Asian employees (23%) say they have felt out of place at work because of their race or ethnicity— more than one in seven Latinx employees (15%) say the same.

Professionals' median belonging scores
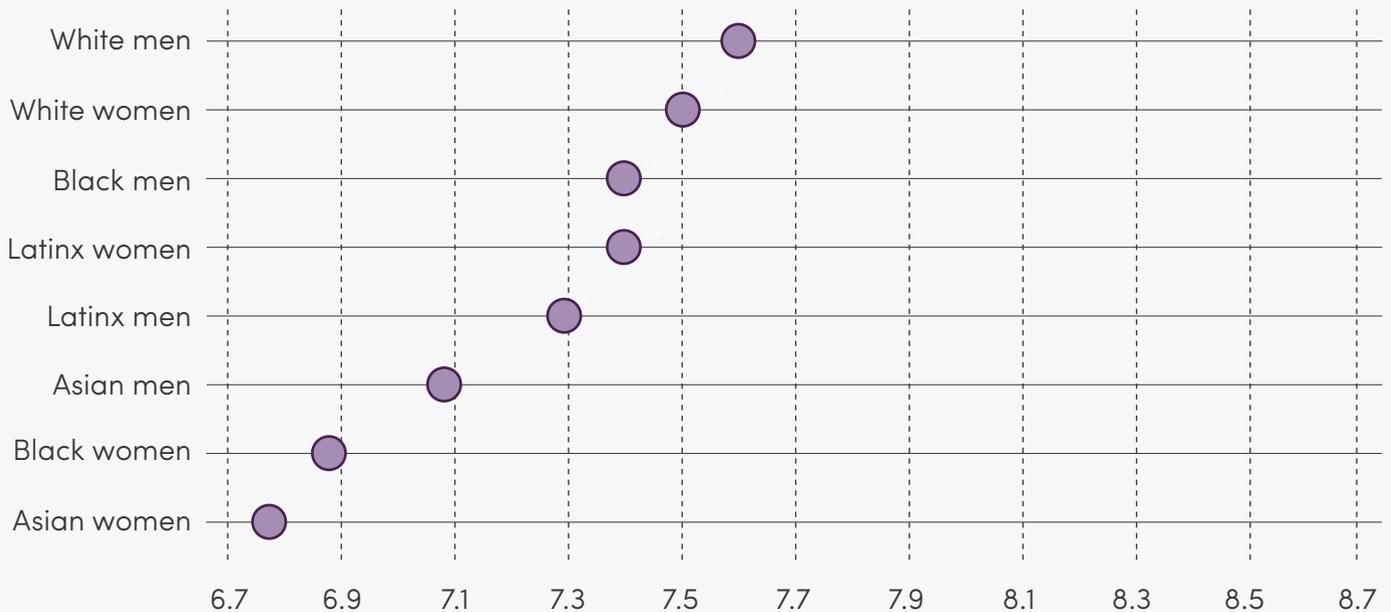

IDENTITIES ON THE D&I RADAR

When we consider generation, we find Baby Boomers have relatively high belonging scores.[3] Though Millennials make up the largest portion of the workforce today, Baby Boomers are more likely to hold senior positions where they can shape company cultures.[4] It's no wonder, then, that they are more comfortable working within them.

Professionals' median belonging scores
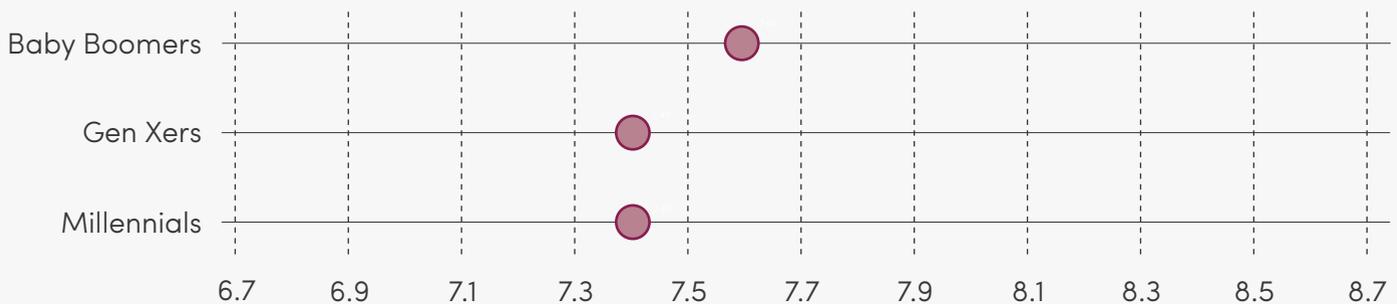
Veterans, meanwhile, have been trained to build tightly bonded military communities—and we find they have high belonging in their civilian careers, too. Employees born outside of the US face challenges to a sense of true belonging. In focus groups, we heard that a different accent or cultural perspective can mark them as "other." The LGBTQ belonging score is higher than may be expected. This may speak to the recent gains of the LGBTQ movement in US society.[5] Also, while LGBTQ colleagues do experience "othering," they often have outlets to share their experiences.
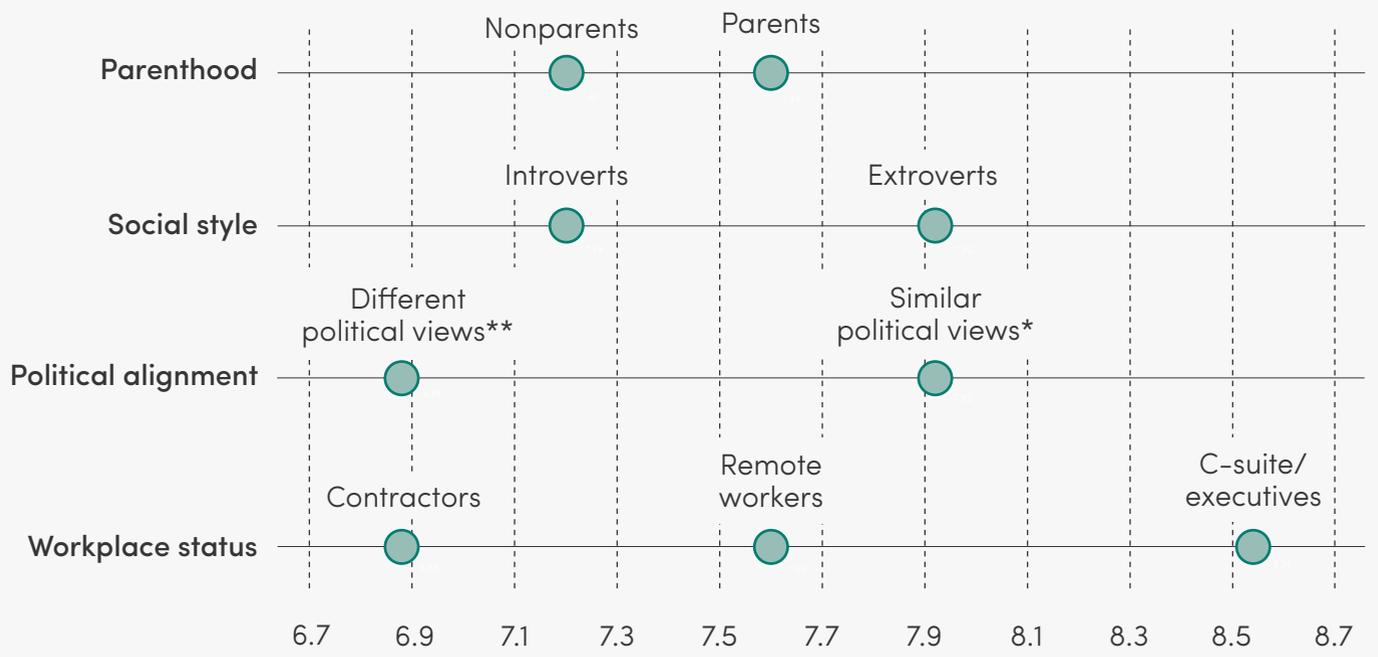
Professionals' median belonging scores
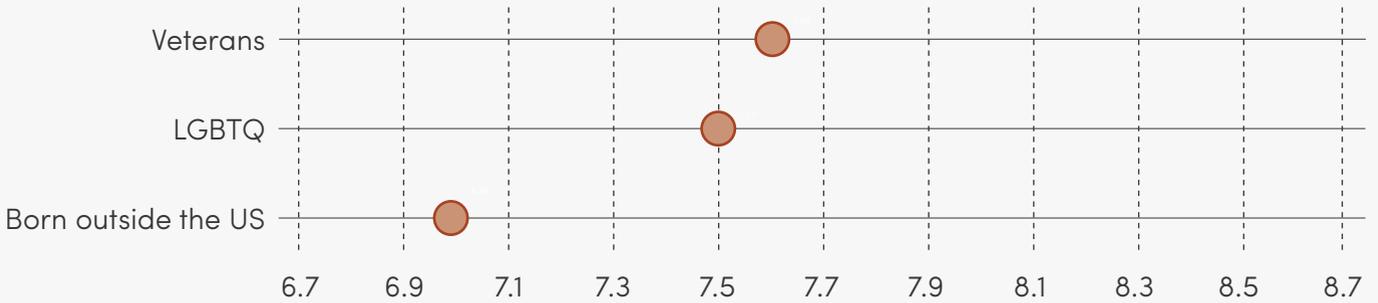
UNDEREXPLORED IDENTITIES IN D&I

Many experiences and identities shape our sense of belonging. Your title, the way you work, even the way you relate to your colleagues, matter. These other "outsider" markers can be a gateway to empathy among colleagues.

Professionals' median belonging scores

*Professionals who share political views with most of their colleagues
**Professionals who do not share political views with most of their colleagues

TAKING THE PULSE

As we began our research, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, impacting all employees (but some more than others). To capture attitudes about the crisis, we fielded a pulse survey among college-educated professionals. During COVID-19, among parents with childcare responsibilities, mothers are over four times as likely as fathers to be taking on the majority of the childcare for their household (53% vs. 12%). Among parents with homeschooling responsibilities, mothers are over five times as likely to be doing the majority of the homeschooling for their household (61% vs. 11%).

More than one in five (21%) Asian women have changed their behavior outside of work to avoid racial harassment. Finally, compared to 2% of White employees, 4% of Asian, 8% of Latinx, and 11% of Black employees told us that a member of their family has died as a result of COVID-19—pain that is not easily shaken off before sitting down to work, and that is deepened by the police violence that has driven tens of thousands to the streets in protest.

As companies consider their ongoing messaging to employees, they must adjust to and empathize with the unique trauma populations face, and plan long term—with an equity lens—for the different modes of support employee groups will need.

HOW TO BUILD BELONGING FOR ALL

What can companies do to level the playing field and foster high belonging for all of their employees? Turns out, companies can do quite a bit. We find that employees with high belonging scores (in Quartile 4) are far more likely than those with low belonging scores (in Quartile 1) to get certain things from their colleagues, managers, senior leaders, and organizations. Read on for the top five things that employees with high belonging scores are more likely to get from each of these stakeholders.

ORGANIZATIONS LAY THE FOUNDATION

Respondents with high belonging scores are far more likely to have senior leaders with whom they have a lot in common, or who serve as role models for them. You can see yourself connected and valued at an organization that supports leaders like you. This is why companies cannot afford to get distracted from efforts to diversify top leadership, and must embed D&I priorities into succession planning and other initiatives. Other conditions for belonging echo employee activist movements—#MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Equal Pay—professionals feel seen and supported by organizations that enforce consequences for misbehavior.

1 Senior leaders who are role models for me

2 Senior leaders with whom I have a lot in common

3 Accountability for violations of company policy regardless of seniority or performance

4 Clear and trustworthy mechanisms for reporting violations of company policy

5 Budgets for celebratory events

SENIOR LEADERS SET THE TONE

It's up to human resources (HR) and the leadership team to hire and promote a diverse set of inclusive leaders. Once in role, those leaders need to signal *across* the organization their values-driven, human approach. HR systems and performance reviews can incentivize leaders by embedding the right expectations into criteria for leadership selection, promotion, and compensation. The company can make clear to senior leaders that making employees feel supported, seen, and connected is part of their job responsibilities.

1 Embody the organization's values

2 Model inclusive leadership (listen to all voices on their team)

3 Be transparent about their values

4 Seek to connect with employees across the organization

5 Share personal stories

MANAGERS CARRY THE CULTURE

From managers, employees who belong are far more likely to be getting much-needed praise, feedback, responsiveness, and autonomy. These crucial management approaches should not be considered above and beyond. Yet, they can be difficult to establish in the middle ranks of an organization, when managers rarely have access to the development and training offered to those at the top.

1 Praise my work

2 Provide regular, honest feedback to improve my work

3 Respond to my concerns

4 Publicly credit me for my contributions

5 Empower team members to make decisions

PEERS DRIVE BELONGING

The differentiators we see from colleagues of those who belong illustrate a supportive colleague culture, where individuals can feel seen and connected, regardless of their backgrounds. Gratitude is crucial, as are colleagues who support work-life balance for one another. Some of these behaviors build the base for inclusive leadership, too—peers can practice open communication and feedback as they ready themselves for the next big steps in their careers.

1 Respect my commitments outside of work (e.g., caregiving, volunteering, social engagements)

2 Provide timely and honest feedback on my work

3 Praise my work

4 Thank me for my work

5 Communicate openly and honestly with me about our working relationship

METHODOLOGY

The research consists of two surveys; in-person focus groups and *Insights In-Depth*® sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups) with over five hundred participants; and one-on-one interviews with more than 40 people. The first national survey was conducted online and over the phone in February 2020 among 3,711 respondents (2,096 men, 1,593 women, 18 who identify as something else, and 4 who did not identify their gender; 2,276 identify as White, 441 as Black, 421 as Hispanic, 415 as Asian, 118 as two or more races, and 40 as another race or ethnicity). The second national survey was conducted online in May 2020 among 627 respondents (300 men, 326 women, and 1 who identifies as something else; 311 identify as White, 106 as Black, 94 as Hispanic, 105 as Asian, 6 as two or more races, and 5 as another race or ethnicity). For both surveys, all respondents were between the ages of 21 and 65 and employed full time in white-collar professions, with at least a bachelor's degree. Data was weighted to be representative of the US population on key demographics (age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, and census division). The base used for statistical testing was the effective base. These surveys were conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago under the auspices of the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), a nonprofit research organization. NORC was responsible for the data collection, while the CTI conducted the analysis. In the charts, percentages may not always add up to 100 because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple responses from respondents. In this study, "Latinx" refers to those who identify as being of Latino or Hispanic descent.

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ENDNOTES

1. Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–396, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346; Douglas T. Kenrick, Vladas Griskevicius, Steven L. Neuberg, and Mark Schaller, "Renovating the Pyramid of Needs: Contemporary Extensions Built upon Ancient Foundations," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 3 (May 2010): 292–314, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610369469.

2. Gregory M. Walton and Shannon T. Brady, "The Many Questions of Belonging," in *Handbook of Competence and Motivation: Theory and Application*, 2nd ed., edited by Andrew J. Elliot, Carol S. Dweck, and David S. Yeager (New York: Guilford Publications, 2018), 273–274.

3. We define Baby Boomers as those born between 1946 and 1964, Gen Xers as those born between 1965 and 1981, and Millennials as those born between 1982 and 2000.

4. "Creating and Maintaining Organizational Culture," in *Principles of Management* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), https://open.lib.umn.edu/principlesmanagement/chapter/8-5-creating-and-maintaining-organizational-culture-2/; Richard Fry, "Millennials Are the Largest Generation in the US Labor Force," Pew Research Center, April 11, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/11/millennials-largest-generation-us-labor-force/.

5. Tina Fetner, "US Attitudes toward Lesbian and Gay People Are Better Than Ever," *Contexts* 15, no. 2 (June 2016): 20–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504216648147.