



Equity at the Workplace: A Moment in Time and Place

Work Equity Research Highlights 2021

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BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Social Work

WORK EQUITY



United Way
of Massachusetts Bay
and Merrimack Valley

Work Equity is an initiative sponsored by the Center of Social Innovation at Boston College. Work Equity aims to advance equity in the workplace by developing solutions to the root causes of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination and biases built into the structure of jobs and employment systems.

With a focus on small and medium-sized organizations, we uphold the commitment of social work to “evidence-based practices by collecting national and regional data about the state of equity at work.”

For more information, please visit our website: bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/ssw/sites/center-for-social-innovation/work-equity.html

The **Center for Social Innovation** (CSI) is a schoolwide project incubator and research-to-practice accelerator to encourage new curricula, novel approaches, and cutting-edge research methods that advance social interventions and confront system challenges in the U.S. and across the globe.

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Work Equity partnered with the **United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley** to conduct the Boston Workplace Equity Study. The mission of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley is “... to create positive, lasting change for people in need. We call it **harnessing the power of people working together**. And that means everyone – individuals, nonprofits, companies, and government agencies. We work everyday to achieve our vision and mission by focusing on two foundations of better lives: Financial Opportunity and Educational Success.”

Please visit our website: unitedwaymassbay.org/covid-19/covid-19-family-fund/

Contents

Section I Introductionpg.2

Section II Equity of Organizational Systems pg.3

Section III Equitable Access to Flexible Job Structures and Organizational Equity..... pg.6

Section IV Organizational Resilience and Equity of Organizational Systems.....pg.7

Conclusionpg.8

Appendix A..... pg.9

Section I: Introduction

A number of incidents which occurred during 2020-2021 propelled a reckoning with regard to social, economic, and racial disparities that exist in American organizations, communities, and institutions. For example:

- The pandemic has taken a disproportionate toll on members of communities of color.¹
- According to Moody's, nearly 22 million U.S. jobs have been lost since the beginning of the pandemic, disproportionately affecting people of color, women and older Americans.² And, for employees of color who have been able to keep their jobs over the past year, job insecurities remain.³
- Black and Latinx employees are much less likely to have employer-provided healthcare, directly or through their spouses, or a reliable source for medical care in comparison to whites.⁴
- When compared to younger workers, higher percentages of older workers have lost their jobs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵ In today's world of work, older workers may face substantial stigma, in part due to their reluctance to return to a workplace and be exposed to the Covid-19 virus. The unanticipated exits of older workers from the workplace can threaten not only their income, but also their access to health insurance.⁶

- Women, a majority of whom have worked full-time, are now more apt than men to leave the labor force. Working parents, particularly mothers, have continued to grapple with the demands of work and child care.⁷
- Low-wage workers may be disadvantaged because their limited access to technology and broadband access constrain their abilities to work remotely.⁸

It is clear that many of society's inequities have crossed the threshold of the workplace. Employers are facing new challenges such as staffing shortages, and organizational leaders have raised questions such as:

- How can our organization begin to assess the extent to which equity has been embedded in our job structures, policies, practices, and value systems that shape employees' everyday experiences?
- What factors seem related to equity at our workplace?
- Are there relationships between equity at our workplace and outcomes that are important to our organization, such as organizational resilience?

¹ "There is increasing evidence that some racial and ethnic minority groups are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19... Inequities in the social determinants of health, such as poverty and healthcare access, affecting these groups are interrelated and influence a wide range of health and quality-of-life outcomes and risks." CDC. (2021). Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

² Duffy, K. (2021). It could take 4 years to recover the 22 million jobs lost in the US during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Moody's warns. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/covid-job-losses-unemployment-recovery-years-moodys-covid-2020-12> Groeger (2020) explains: "Part of the reason for this disparity is that many workers of color, especially Black workers, didn't come into the crisis on equal footing. At the beginning of 2020, when the U.S. was at what most would have considered peak economic prosperity, the unemployment rate for Black workers was more than double that of their white counterparts." Groeger, L. (2020). What Corona Job Losses Reveal about Racism in America. Available at: <https://projects.propublica.org/coronavirus-unemployment/>

³ Jones, J. (2021). A more inclusive economy is key to economic recovery. Available at: <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/02/09/a-more-inclusive-economy-is-key-to-recovery>

⁴ Available at: <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/nonelderly-employer-coverage-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colld%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

⁵ Agovina, T. (2020). COVID-19 deals a dual threat to older workers. All Things Work. Available at: <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/covid-19-deals-a-dual-threat-to-older-workers.aspx>

⁶ Jacobson, G., Feder, J., & Radley, D.C. (2020). COVID-19's Impact on Older Workers: Employment, Income, and Medicare Spending. The Commonwealth Fund. Available at: <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2020/oct/covid-19-impact-older-workers-employment-income-medicare>

⁷ Bateman, N., & Ross, M. (2020). Why has COVID-19 been especially hard for working women? The Brookings Gender Equity Series. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/why-has-covid-19-been-especially-harmful-for-working-women/>

⁸ Waldman, (2020). COVID-19 deepens a digital divide that has long impacted long-income, Black and Hispanic, Tribal and rural, and older householders, according to recent reports. Pro-bono.net. Available at: <https://www.connectingjusticecommunities.com/digital-divide-part-1/2020/08/>

Definitions of Terms

Diversity-Equity-Inclusion: “Diversity or representational diversity ... has been defined as “the representation ... of people with distinctly different group affiliations... Inclusion is “the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes ... Finally, equity, refers to “the absence of systematic disparities. ... Equity calls for the righting of systemic and structural injustices. To achieve equity and other benefits of inclusion, it is important to discuss and elevate practices that can move us from diversity to equity.”⁹

Organizational Systems: Organizational systems include policies, practices, programs, tacit understandings that define how an organization operates, and the assignment of roles and responsibilities.

Flexible Job Structures: The options regarding the time and place structures (“when,” “where,” and “how/how much”) of employees’ work, as well as the employment contract which specifies whether a worker is considered a full-time employee, a part-time employee, or a worker who is not an employee and is, for example, a self-employed independent contractor.

Organizational Resilience: Organizational resilience refers to the ability of an organization to withstand adversity and bounce back to perform effectively and sustainability.

The 2021 Boston Workplace Equity Study

Working in partnership with the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, Work Equity at the Boston College Center for Social Innovation invited leaders from for-profit (n = 298) and non-profit (n = 733) organizations to respond to the Workplace Equity Survey in September and October of 2021. Key informants (one per organization) from 178 organizations completed the survey for a response rate of 17%.¹⁰ 87% of the organizations were nonprofit, 3% were government public agencies, 7% were for profit, and the remainder were “other” types of organizations.

The Boston Workplace Equity Survey included questions about a number of important issues, including the pressures on their organizations, the perceived equity of their organizational systems, the availability of flexible job structures and organizational resilience.

This research highlights the respondents’ perspectives about equity at the workplace.

We first discuss some of the findings related to questions about equity and consider possible relationships with organizational characteristics as well as workforce characteristics (Section II). In Section III, we explore the relationship between the availability of flexible job structures (i.e., arrangements that might enable employees to fulfill their work as well as their personal/family responsibilities) and workplace equity. In the last section (Section IV), we examine the relationship between organizational resilience and workplace equity.

Section II: Equity of Organizational Systems

Measuring Equity in Workplace Systems? Well, it’s complicated.

The Work Equity initiative of Boston College focuses attention on the equity of both organizational systems as well as the equity of job structures.

While there are many different types of systems that organizations develop to support business success, for the purpose of the Workplace Equity Study, we focused on five components of organizational systems:

1. Formal Policies Related to Employment – Formal organizational policies are typically written down. These may relate to employment systems such as recruitment and benefits. It is common for formal policies to be implemented on an organization-wide basis.
2. Practices + Procedures – Practices and procedures refer to the “ways things are done.” Practices and procedures might be either “formal” or “informal” (that is, unwritten). Practices relevant to employees’

⁹ Bernstein, R.S., Bulger, M., Salipante, P., & Weisinger, J.Y. (2020). From diversity to inclusion to equity: A theory of generative interactions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 167, 395–410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04180-1>

¹⁰ This convenience sample provides important insights about the experiences of organizations and their employees during 2020-2021. However, the respondent organizations do not constitute a representative sample of firms in the greater metropolitan area.

work experiences might include the ways that supervision and mentorship are implemented. Differences in the types of work done in different departments and units can result in some variation in practices and procedures across the organization.

3. Programs, Resources, + Employee Supports – Organizations may offer a range of resources that support the well-being of employees and their families.
4. Values, Culture, and Climate – Organizational values provide a compass that guide decisions and behaviors at the workplace. It is important to remember that some aspects of the social environment are “strong” and widely shared whereas other values might seem weak and have limited influence. Furthermore, there can be a gap between “espoused values” and “values as they are expressed in every day practice.”¹¹
5. Structure of Organizational Roles + Responsibilities– The last component of organizational systems refers to the assignment of responsibilities for coordination, communication, and accountability to one or more people.

Fairness of Organizational Systems

Equity is often understood to be “fairness” at the workplace. Among the respondents to the Workplace Equity Survey, 46.1% said that (overall) their workplace policies were “very fair.” (See Figure 1).

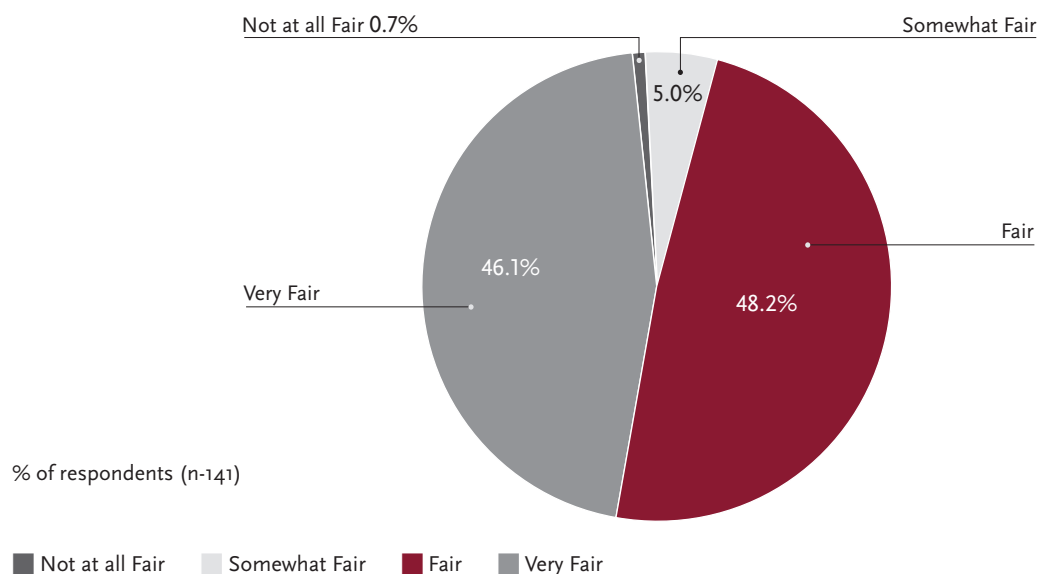
What equity-relevant components of organizational systems are present “to a great extent?”

We also asked the respondents to assess the equity of 16 specific aspects organizational systems (a total of 28 items. See Appendix A):

1. Core Values of the Organization
2. Planning and Assessment Practices
3. Recruiting and Hiring
4. Job Structures
5. Employee Benefits
6. Training
7. Separation
8. Performance, Promotion, Rewards, and Recognition
9. Accountability
10. Grievance Procedures
11. Workplace Relationships
12. Communication
13. Participation
14. Structural Responsibility
15. Employee Well-Being
16. Organizational Reputation

Figure 1: Overall Fairness of Organizational Policies and Practices

How would you rate the fairness of the policies and practices at your workplace, overall?



¹¹ For example, see Schein, E. H. (1990). Organizational culture. *American Psychologist*, 45(2), 109–119. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.45.2.109>

The list below identifies those aspects of organizational systems that the **highest** percentage of survey respondents indicated were present in their organizational systems “to a great extent.”

1. **Relationships:** Set expectations that managers and team leaders should treat employees with respect, without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age = 80.5%
2. **Relationships:** Set expectations that co-workers treat one another with respect, without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age = 76.1%
3. **Performance, Promotion, Rewards, Recognition:** Set expectations that supervisors will make promotion decisions based on employees’ experience and competencies, regardless of such factors as race, age, sex, or social background = 64.4%
4. **Performance, Promotion, Rewards, Recognition:** Set expectations that supervisors will give feedback to employees and evaluate them fairly, regardless of such factors as race, age, sex, or social background = 64.4%
5. **Separation:** Ensure that decisions about furloughs and lay-offs are made in a fair and unbiased manner, without regard to employees’ demographic or social identities = 62.4%

The list below specifies those aspects of organizational systems that the **lowest** percentages of respondents indicated were present in their organizational systems “to a great extent.”

1. **Planning and Assessment:** Set expectations that the organization will routinely collect and analyze data which could provide insight into possible inequities at the workplace = 20.1%
2. **Communication:** Inform employees about resources available to them that address **inequities** at the workplace = 27.3%
3. **Employee Benefits:** Ensure that employees have equitable access to a plan for **long-term care** = 29.2%
4. **Well-Being:** Affirm that different types of opportunities and supports may be sought/needed by **different groups** of employees = 31.5%

5. **Communication:** Inform employees of resources available to them for managing work and family responsibilities = 32.8%

We combined the responses to the 28 items by taking the mean of all equity items available for each respondent organization, creating an Organizational Systems Equity Index, with scores that could range from 1 to 4. The average (mean) score was 3.18, with higher scores indicating higher equity.

Are there relationships between organizational characteristics/characteristics of the workforce and organizational equity?

Our analyses examined relationships between organizational characteristics, workforce characteristics and scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index.

- **Size of the Workforce:** Comparing the size of organizations’ workforces to their scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index, we found that **medium-sized organizations** (50-249 employees) were more likely than either small or large organizations to have **higher scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index.**
- **Percent of Permanent Full-time Employees:** Employers make strategic decisions about the types of employment contracts they offer to their workers who might be hired as permanent full-time employees, permanent part-time employees, temporary employees (either full-time or part-time), or consultants.

We found that organizations with **larger percentages of permanent full-time employees** were more likely to have **higher scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index.**

- **Percent of Workforce People of Color:** Employers with a commitment to the diversity of their workforces pay attention to changes in their employees’ identification as being a person of color.
- We found that organizations with **larger percentages of employees of color** were more likely to have **higher scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index.**
- **Percent of Workforce Women:** We did not find any relationship (positive or negative) between the percentage of women in the workforce and scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index.

Section III: Equitable Access to Flexible Job Structures and Organizational Equity

Recognizing the importance of viewing flexible job structures as an integral part of workplace equity, we examined employee access to different types of flexible job structures. For the purpose of this study, we defined job structures as “when,” “where,” and “how/how much” employees work as well as the employment contract which specifies whether a worker is considered to be a full-time employee, a part-time employee, or a worker who is not an employee (for example, a consultant).¹²

Flexible job structures can be an important resource for employees as they attempt to manage their roles and responsibilities at work and at home. We were, therefore, interested to explore the extent to which employees have equitable access to flexible job structures.

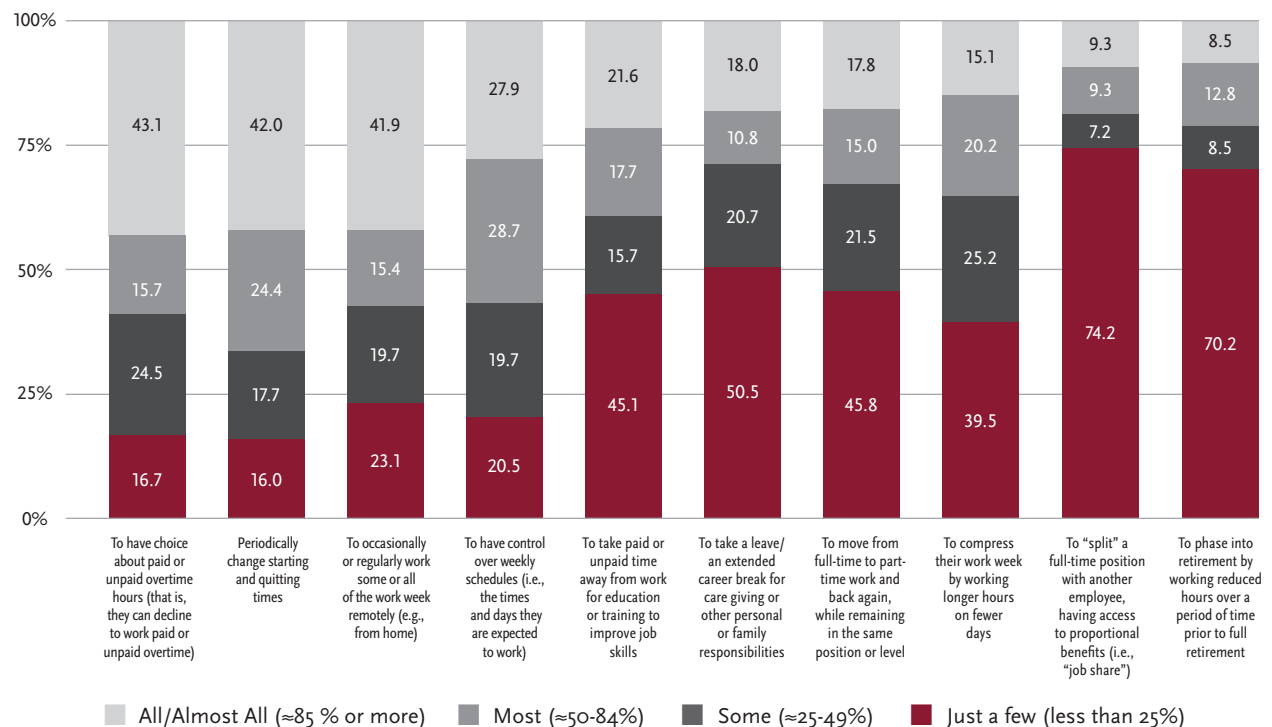
The survey asked the respondents the extent of access that their employees have to ten specific types of flexible job structures. We summarize their answers below. (See Figure 2).

The top three flexible job structures reported to be available to 50% or more of the workforces at the organizations participating in the study were:

- (1) **Periodically** change starting and quitting times (66.4%)
- (2) To have choice about **paid or unpaid overtime hours** (that is, they can decline to work paid or unpaid over time) (58.8%)
- (3) To **occasionally or regularly** work some or all of the work week remotely (e.g., from home) (57.3%)

Figure 2: Extent of Employee Access to Flexible Job Structures.

% responding organizations by extent of access



¹² See Hill, E.J., Grzywacz, J.G., Allen, S., Blanchard, V.L., Matz-Costa, C., Shulkin, S., & Pitt-Catsoupes, M. (2008). Defining and conceptualizing workplace flexibility. *Community, Work and Family*, 11(2), 149-163. DOI: 10.1080/13668800802024678; Bal, P.M., & Izak, M. (2021). Paradigms of Flexibility: A systematic review of research on workplace flexibility. *European Management Review*, 18, 37-50. DOI: 10.1111/emre.12423

We created a “Flexible Job Structure Index” by taking the mean of up to 10 flexible work options, depending on how much data was available by organization. The final index ranged from 1-4. The average (mean) score was 2.32, with higher scores indicating more flexibility.

Is there a relationship between flexible job structures and equity of organizational systems?

We explored the relationship between the Organizational Systems Equity Index and the Flexible Job Structure Index. We found that, controlling for the other variables discussed in this research highlight (percent employees of color, organizational size, nonprofit status, percent full-time, and percent women), organizations with higher Organizational Systems Equity Index scores were more likely than other organizations to offer **more flexible job structures to a greater portion of their workforces.**¹³

Section IV: Organizational Resilience and Equity of Organizational Systems

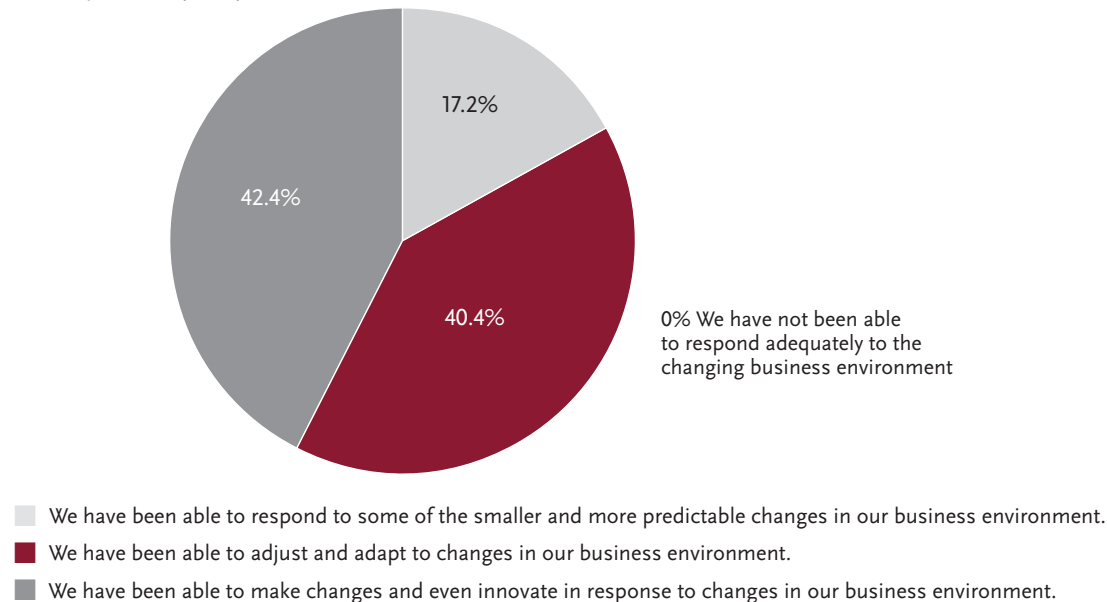
Organizational Resilience

The disruptions experienced by workplaces across the country in 2020-2021 augmented the importance of resilience for many organizational leaders. We used data from the Boston Workplace Equity Study to examine the relationship between workplace equity and organizational resilience.

At Work Equity, we use the following definition of organizational resilience, “Organisational resilience ... involves the ability of the organisation to **withstand significant adversity and yet bounce back from the disturbance to perform effectively and sustainably** for the future and remain on track with its desired future in accordance with its articulated mission and strategic goals”¹⁴

Figure 3: Assessment of Overall Organizational Resilience during the Past 1.5 Years

% of respondents (n=151)



¹³ Employees' ability to choose a flexible job structure can be affected by several factors. First, as indicated above, organizations which offer flexible job structures may not offer them to all employees. Secondly, employees' ability to use flexible job structures can be constrained either because of the type of work that an employee does (for example, some jobs need to be done onsite making remote work impossible). Finally, many organizations specify that supervisors have decision making control over which employees are able to actually use flexible work structures that are technically available. The complex dynamics between “access”, “ability to use”, and “supervisor approval” can affect employees' perceptions of equity with regard to their ability to use flexible job structures. See Daverth, G., Cassell, C., & Hyde, P. (2016). The subjectivity of fairness: Managerial discretion and work-life Balance. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 23(2), 89-107. doi:10.1111/gwao.12113; Williams, P. (2019) Support for supervisors: HR enabling flexible work. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 41(5), 914-930. DOI 10.1108/ER-03-2018-0077; Lopez-Cotarelo, J. (2018). Line managers and HRM: A managerial discretion perspective. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 28, 255-271. DOI: 10.1111/1748-8583.12176 ; and Op de Beeck, S., Wynen, J., & Hondeghem, A. (2016). HRM implementation by line managers: Explaining the discrepancy in the HR-line perceptions of HR devolution. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 27(17), 1901-1919. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1088562>

¹⁴ Bui, H., Chau, V.S., Degl'Innocenti, M., Leone, L., & Vicentini, F. (2019). The resilient organisation: A meta-analysis of the effect of communication on team diversity and team performance. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 68(4). 621-657. doi: 10.1111/apps.12203

“Organizations need to be increasingly nimble and responsive as we consider how policies within our organizations must be flexible to provide more autonomy to our staff in equitable ways, providing supports that meet them where they are at and considers their unique needs.”

— Karen Groce-Horan

Sr. Director, DEI Priorities

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

In the context of the turbulence of 2020-2021, we asked the respondents to summarize the resilience of their organization over the past 18 months. Their responses provided an indication about whether their organizations were either: on the verge of collapse, struggling, resilient, or thriving.¹⁵ While none of the respondents reported that their organizations were “on the verge of collapse”, 40.4% of the organizations reported that, “...we basically feel we are resilient” and 42.2% expected that their organizations would thrive in the future. (*See Figure 3*).

Is there a relationship between assessments of organizational resilience and scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index?

Comparing the scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index with the respondents’ assessment of their organizations’ resilience (overall) and controlling for other factors discussed in this research highlight, we found that organizations with higher scores on the Organizational Systems Equity Index were more likely to assess their organizations as being either “resilient” or “thriving.”

Conclusion

The findings of the Workplace Equity Study provide evidence that high percentages of organizations who responded to the survey have adopted strategies and tactics to create and sustain equity at the workplace.

The respondents reported that two dimensions of the equity of organizational systems – “Relationships” (2 items) and “Performance/Promotion/ Reward/Recognition” (2 items) were strong components of equity at their workplaces. This finding offers some insight about “levers” that employers might use to strengthen overall equity.

Comparatively low percentages of the respondents rated “Communications” as a strength. Employers might find it possible to introduce innovations that augment internal communications related to equity-related policies and procedures as well as the equity of access that employees have to flexible job structures.

We found that a number of organizational factors are related to equity in organizational systems, including the extent of access that employees have to flexible job structures and organizational resilience. These findings suggest that employers might find it useful to re-conceptualize flexible job structures as being an integral part of their overall DEI initiatives. ■

¹⁵ See Ruiz-Martin, C., López-Paredes, A., Wainer, G. (2018). What we know and do not know about organizational resilience. *International Journal of Production Management and Engineering*, 6(1), 11-28. <https://doi.org/10.4995/ijpme.2018.7898>

Appendix A:

Survey Items Included in the Organizational Systems Equity Index

%: “to a great extent”

Core Values: Affirm the critical connection between the organization’s diversity initiatives and its strategic/operational plans = 38.1%

Planning and Assessment: Set expectations that the organization will routinely collect and analyze data which could provide insight into possible inequities at the workplace = 20.1%

Recruiting + Hiring: Specify the steps the organization will take to ensure that recruitment and hiring for open positions is fair and unbiased, without regard to demographic or social identities = 44.3%

Recruiting + Hiring: Specify that the compensation system of this organization is fair, without regard to employees’ demographic or social identities) = 51.4%

Job Structure: Set expectations that supervisors will use an equitable process when considering employee requests for flexible work arrangements and other alternative work options = 39.9%

Job Structure: Set expectations that employees who work remotely or who work non-traditional hours will have access to technical assistance and advice = 35.0%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to health insurance for themselves = 61.3%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to health insurance for family members = 56.5%

Employee Benefits; Ensure that employees have equitable access to paid family and medical leave with job guarantees when returning to work = 62.3%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to disability insurance coverage (also called temporary disability insurance or sickness and accident insurance) = 50.7%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to a plan for long-term care = 29.2%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to dental insurance = 58.7%

Manager Training: Set expectations that managers will participate in training relevant to equity and inclusion at the workplace = 36.3%

Employee Training: Specify that formal and informal training opportunities will be available to all employees without bias so that they can advance their careers = 48.5%

Separation: Ensure that decisions about furloughs and layoffs are made in a fair and unbiased manner, without regard to employees’ demographic or social identities = 62.4%

Performance, Promotion, Rewards, Recognition: Set expectations that supervisors will give feedback to employees and evaluate them fairly, regardless of such factors as race, age, sex, or social background = 64.4%

Performance, Promotion, Rewards, Recognition: Set expectations that supervisors will make promotion decisions based on employees’ experience and competencies, regardless of such factors as race, age, sex, or social background = 65.4%

Accountability: Hold leaders at the organization accountable for diversity, equity, and inclusion at the workplace = 49.6%

Grievance: Clarify how the organization will handle grievances and disputes related to employees’ work experience = 47.4%

Relationships: Set expectations that managers and team leaders should treat employees with respect, without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or age = 80.5%

Relationships: Set expectations that co-workers treat one another with respect, without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age = 76.1%

Communication: Inform employees of resources available to them for managing work and family responsibilities = 32.8%

Communication: Inform employees about resources available to them that address inequities at the workplace = 27.3%

Participation: Support employee participation in networks/affinity groups/employee resource groups = 34.6%

Structural Responsibility: Explicitly assign responsibilities for equity and inclusion to at least one person = 34.3%

Well-Being: Affirm that employee well-being is a core priority = 53.3%

Well-Being: Affirm that different types of opportunities and supports may be sought/needed by different groups of employees = 31.5%

Reputation: Establish the organization’s positive reputation as a leader for equity and justice = 49.2%