The National Study of Workplace Equity

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BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Social Work

WORK EQUITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past few years, organizations and employees alike have turned their attention toward addressing the social inequities in the workplace made starkly visible by the pandemic. While much progress has been made in this space, this increased attention has also led to increased recognition that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs can stall, fail, or even backfire if not implemented thoughtfully. Too often, when implementing DEI programs organizations place more

> "In today's evolving world of work, fair policies and practices together with strong and deliberate DE&I strategies are integral to breaking the barriers of bias and inequity that can be present in the workplace," said SHRM Chief Knowledge Officer Alex Alonso, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP. "We must continue to address the root causes of bias, whether it be gender, age, race, sexual orientation or disability, while building greater equity to lead workplaces into a better tomorrow."

emphasis on diversity and inclusion than on equity despite the fact that the majority of U.S. workers (88%) believe fairness is extremely important or very important in the workplace.[1] What's more, equity often serves as the foundation for successful DEI strategies, improving employees' job satisfaction, work engagement, perceptions of inclusion, as well as the retention of diverse talent.[2] In this context, there is new urgency for innovative perspectives that bring equity front and center in U.S. workplaces.

In an effort to reframe fundamental perspectives of DEI, Work Equity, an initiative of the Center for Social Innovation at the Boston College School of Social Work, partnered with SHRM, the largest global membership organization of HR practitioners, to conduct the National Study of Workplace Equity. One of the first of its kind, the study aimed to understand the state of equity in U.S. workplaces using a nationally representative sample of 1,062 workplaces in the United States. Rather than conceptualizing the level of equity as being constant across the workplace, this study recognizes that equity can vary across employment systems. As such, this study takes a more targeted approach to DEI by focusing on the root causes of inequities in the workplace – and explores where these inequities are most likely to be embedded across 10 different employment systems (1) job structures[3]

(2) recruitment and hiring, (3) compensation and benefits, (4) orientation and onboarding, (5) supervision and mentoring, (6) training and career development, (7) performance assessment and feedback, (8) employee resources and supports, (9) promotions, and (10) separations.

By addressing inequities within and across employment systems, organizations can identify where most inequities occur and identify the action steps needed to rectify these inequities on an employment system-by-system basis. This has been a challenge for decades, as organizations have struggled to translate research findings into actionable steps to strengthen equity. To aid in this effort, this study also identified seven pathways to change (or "Levers for Change") that employers might pursue to strengthen each of the employment systems: policies, practices, planning and evaluation, roles and accountabilities, culture, climate, and communication.

Through recognizing and identifying the breadth and depth of inequities in the workplace, the National Study of Workplace Equity provides organizations with a framework and detailed roadmap to address inequities and help their workplaces thrive.

Key Findings

There is progress to be made in DEI.

- 28% of organizations reported that their employees have experienced gender bias in the past two years.
- 27% of organizations reported that their employees have experienced racial bias in the past two years.
- 26% of organizations reported that their employees have experienced bias against older workers in the past years.

DEI initiatives do not always get the resources they need to succeed.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of organizations say DEI is important or very important, yet nearly the same percentage (62%) indicated that no resources or limited resources have been devoted to DEI.

Organizations often struggle to maintain equity throughout the employee lifecycle.

- The three employment systems with the most equity are:
  - Recruitment and Hiring (#1 Most Equity)
  - Compensation and Benefits (#2)
  - Orientation and Onboarding (#3)
- The three employment systems with the least equity are:
  - Resources and Supports (#10 Least Equity)
  - Job Structures (#9)
  - Supervision and Mentoring (#8)

Organizational resilience: Equity matters

- Organizations with higher overall equity are more resilient – they are adaptable, agile, and are thriving amid the turbulent business environment of the past two years.

What Can Organizations Do?

Organizations can strengthen equity in their workplaces by both 1) leveraging strengths and 2) addressing weaknesses within key Levers for Change.[4]

Leveraging Strengths

1. **Create a climate of inclusion across employment systems.**

- The findings of this study suggest that many organizations are fostering a climate of inclusion, especially during recruitment and hiring and orientation and onboarding.
- While first impressions matter and it is important to set the tone for what employees can expect moving forward, organizations should also weave this climate of inclusion throughout other areas of the employee lifecycle to maximize their ability to provide a positive and equitable employee experience.

Communicate fairly across employment systems.

- The findings of this study suggest that many employers are devoting time and resources to ensure that employees have fair access to information about their organizations' employment systems, especially during the initial stages of the employee lifecycle.
- Employers should carry these clear and con-

sistent communication practices throughout different employment systems to avoid introducing inequities later in the employee lifecycle.
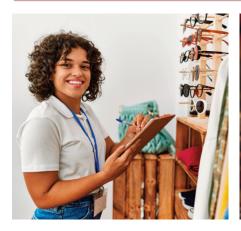
Addressing Weaknesses

1. **Conduct equity audits across employment systems.**
   - The findings of this study suggest that few organizations regularly audit the equity of each employment system, especially job structures – which is especially concerning amid a pandemic that has changed when, where, and how work gets done.
   - Organizations cannot improve what they don't measure. Organizations should regularly audit the equity of employment systems to ensure they target their efforts in the right places to achieve the greatest impact.

Assign roles and accountabilities across employment systems.
   - The findings of this study suggest that across employment systems, few organizations are holding someone accountable for monitoring fairness, especially regarding job structures and supervision and mentoring.
   - If organizations do assign the role of DEI to one or more people, these responsibilities are often designated for the organization overall rather than for specific employment systems. Organizations should ensure someone is responsible for monitoring the fairness of each employment system.

In sum, organizations who are committed to making real progress in DEI must recognize that equity can vary across employment systems and take a more targeted approach to equity by leveraging strengths and addressing weaknesses within key Levers for Change. To learn more, please read the full National Study of Workplace Equity research report. Download here >

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[1] SHRM Research Institute. (2018). November omnibus, Unpublished.

[2] For example: Le, H., Zheng, C., & Fujimoto, Y. (2016). Inclusion, organizational justice and employee well-being. *International Journal of Manpower, 37*(6), 945-964. DOI 10.1108/IJM-12-2015-0212; Iftikhar, U., Shams, M., &Raja, A.A. (2019). The influence of organizational justice on organizational effectiveness: Mediating role of trust. *International Journal of Psychology, 54*,(3), 15-25. https://www.qurtuba.edu.pk/jms/default_files/JMS/13_1/02%20JMS%20XII03%202018,15-26,%20Maryam%20Shams%20NBEAC%20IHTESHAM.pdf; Babic, A., Stinglhamber, F., & I. Hansez, I. (2015). Organizational justice and perceived organizational support: Impact on negative work-home interference and well-being outcomes. *Psychologica Belgica, 55*(3), 134–158. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pb.bk; Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C., & Ng, K. Y. (2001). Justice at the millennium: A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*, 425-445. DOI: 10.1037/0021-9010.86.3.425

[3] Job structures are defined as when, where, and how much people work, as well as whether people have a choice over when, where, and how much they work.

[4] See full report for a list of actions organizations can take to strengthen equity in the workplace.