

# Do you feel like you belong at work? Here's why it's so important for your health, happiness and productivity

May 10 2024, by Nilufar Ahmed

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We all want to feel like we belong. Psychologists have known this for a long time, describing belonging as a [fundamental human need](#) that brings

[meaning to our lives.](#)

Traditionally, this need was filled by family and community networks. But as society becomes more [individualized](#), with many people moving away from their community and family, the workplace has become an increasingly important source of meaning, connection and friendship.

Many employers know the value of belonging, boasting that their organization is [like a family](#)—a place where everyone is welcome and takes care of each other. But in reality, just being hired isn't necessarily enough to feel like you belong. Belonging is about feeling [accepted and included](#). This might mean feeling "seen" by your colleagues and manager, and that your work is recognized, rewarded and respected.

Most people want to do [meaningful](#) work, and belonging and feeling [connected](#) with others is part of this. Meaning in work may come from the job itself—doing something that aligns with our purpose—or from the relationships and roles people create in the workspace. Consider someone who has a (formal or informal) position of offering support to their colleagues. This sense of connection and belonging can make the job feel more meaningful.

Belonging is also good for business. Feeling excluded and lonely can lead people to disengage, negatively affecting their work [performance](#). Surveys have found that over 50% of people who left their jobs did so in [search of better belonging](#), with [younger workers](#) more [likely to leave](#).

The exclusion that comes from not belonging can be as painful as [physical injury](#), and feeling isolated can have a range of [negative health impacts](#). In contrast, when employees feel they belong, they are happier and less lonely, [leading to](#) greater productivity, fewer sick days and higher profits.

In my role as a psychotherapist, I work with countless people who feel unsupported and alone in the workplace due to direct or indirect discrimination and exclusion. The instinctive response can be [to work harder](#) to be accepted and belong—but this can lead to burnout, trying to get the approval that might never come.

The pandemic altered how we [think about and engage with work](#). Some businesses may feel that bringing people back into the office is the answer to building connections and fostering belonging. But the truth is such actions alone could have the opposite effect.

People [may withdraw](#) and become less connected in such spaces. Those who prefer working from home may feel unsupported by their workplace if they have to come in to the office to deliver work they can do equally, if not [more productively, at home](#).

On the flip side, for some people, being in the office offers a sense of belonging and connection that can be missing when working from home. Ideally, enabling a balance between the two allows people to benefit from [the advantages of both spaces](#) and work in a way that maximizes productivity and connection. But it may be some time before employers figure out how to get the balance right.

## **Finding belonging**

Belonging is particularly important to consider as workplaces become more diverse. Workplace discrimination is more likely to be experienced by marginalized groups, and is a [major barrier to belonging](#).

Employees in [organizations that are more diverse](#), particularly in senior leadership positions, are more likely to feel a sense of belonging. Diversity is also related to [greater productivity](#) and [profitability](#). But organizations must consider the [diversity distribution](#). While grand

statements of inclusion may attract new workers, if the senior leadership team is predominately white and [middle class](#), these statements have little meaning.

For diversity to effectively create belonging, it has to go hand-in-hand with [psychological safety](#). This means that everyone—not just those who share characteristics with the majority or the leaders—feels they have a voice and are listened to. A workplace where people feel nervous about raising concerns, are worried about making mistakes, or feel there is a lack of transparency is one that is lacking in psychological safety.

When people feel unable to bring their authentic selves to work, they may end up [performing different identities](#) or [codeswitching](#)—adjusting their language—to become more "acceptable" and fit in. These strategies initially help workers create a sense of safety for themselves in the workplace, but can result in exhaustion and [burnout](#).

Creating ways that people can express their authenticity—for example, through [employee resource groups](#) such as women's staff networks—can create a safe space to share with others who have similar experiences in the workplace. For those who are self-employed or work mostly from home, to combat isolation, consider finding online groups or local coworking spaces that mirror the social benefits of a workplace community.

Employees feel more connected with the wider team when their efforts are [recognized and rewarded](#). But this does not have to be through a pay rise or promotion—even an [email from a manager](#) can boost someone's sense of belonging. The more recognition and appreciation for the work we put in, including from [our colleagues](#), the more positive the benefit.

Not everyone has the opportunity to leave workplaces that make them feel unsafe or unhappy. If you are in this position, you can minimize the

negative impact by finding connection and belonging outside of work, and reconnecting with people and activities that bring you meaning and joy.

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