

WORKPLACE BELONGING

A practical toolkit for building workplaces where people feel respected, heard, recognized, and able to contribute.

RESEARCH -> PRACTICE

Developed from an independent mixed-methods workplace study with 273 survey responses and five confidential cross-sector leadership interviews.

273	5	30 DAYS
survey responses	leadership interviews	simple pilot plan

For small businesses, managers, team leaders, and first-time workers.

Inside the Toolkit

Use one section at a time. The point is not to launch a giant culture initiative - it is to notice what employees experience and test small, specific improvements.

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Note: This is an educational toolkit, not a validated diagnostic instrument or substitute for professional HR, legal, or mental-health advice.

01 What My Research Suggests

The project started with a simple question: **what makes people feel like they belong at work?** Across the survey responses and leadership interviews, the same ideas kept showing up in different forms.

Relationships matter

Coworker relationships stood out strongly in the survey. In practice, that means belonging is partly built through reliability, respect, clear roles, and everyday interaction - not just social events.

Growth matters too

Positive relationships and growth opportunities tied as the largest categories in the forced-choice satisfaction question. A workplace can feel friendly and still lose people who cannot imagine a future there.

People notice leadership

Across qualitative responses and interviews, employees described culture through what managers actually do: whether they listen, explain decisions, keep promises, handle mistakes fairly, and recognize contributions.

Safety to speak matters

Psychological safety appeared repeatedly. Employees need to be able to ask questions, admit mistakes, disagree, and raise concerns without expecting humiliation or inappropriate retaliation.

THE SIMPLE IDEA: Culture is what employees repeatedly experience.

This toolkit turns those themes into behaviors a manager can actually try. It does not claim that these actions will cause a specific outcome; it gives teams a structured way to test, listen, and improve.

02 Five-Minute Belonging Check

Rate each statement from 1 (rarely true) to 5 (consistently true). Your lowest area is the place to start.

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Employees know where to go with a concern.	■	■	■	■	■
Managers explain important decisions clearly.	■	■	■	■	■
Good work is noticed in a specific way.	■	■	■	■	■
People can raise mistakes without being embarrassed.	■	■	■	■	■
Employees understand what success looks like.	■	■	■	■	■
Employees have a real way to contribute ideas.	■	■	■	■	■
Team members treat one another with respect.	■	■	■	■	■
Managers follow through on commitments.	■	■	■	■	■

Pick ONE low-scoring area. Small changes are easier to test than a complete culture overhaul.

03 Communication + Recognition

Communication works when employees know what is happening, why it matters, and where they can ask questions. Recognition works when it is specific enough to tell someone what they contributed.

Communication: try this

- Hold a 10-minute weekly update: what changed, what is coming, and what people need to know.
- End important announcements with: “What questions does this create for you?”
- If you do not know an answer yet, say when employees should expect an update.
- After a change, check whether people understood the message instead of assuming they did.

Recognition: try this

- Replace “great job” with action + impact: say exactly what the person did and why it mattered.
- Notice invisible work: helping a coworker, preventing a problem, training someone, or speaking up.
- Ask employees how they prefer to be recognized; not everyone wants public praise.
- Use clear reasons for recognition so appreciation does not feel like favoritism.

A useful test: Could the employee tell exactly what they did well after hearing your feedback?

04 Employee Voice + Psychological Safety

A team cannot fix problems employees are afraid to mention. Psychological safety does not mean avoiding accountability; it means people can raise concerns, ask questions, disagree, and admit mistakes without unnecessary humiliation.

Try this

- Ask one standing question in meetings: “What are we missing?”
- When someone identifies a problem, thank them for raising it before debating the solution.
- After a mistake, ask what happened, what made it possible, and what should change next time.
- Offer a private route for concerns employees may not want to raise in a group.
- When an employee disagrees respectfully, do not punish the disagreement by shutting them out later.

Manager reflection

- When was the last time someone disagreed with me openly?
- What actually happens here when someone admits a mistake?
- Which problems do employees tell each other about but avoid telling management?

If nobody ever disagrees with the manager, that does not automatically mean everybody agrees.

05 Relationships + Leadership Consistency

Healthy workplace relationships are not forced friendship. They are built when people can rely on one another, understand their roles, and see leaders apply standards consistently.

Relationships

- Clarify who owns what during busy periods so employees are not guessing.
- Build short handoffs into shifts: what is done, what is unresolved, and what the next person needs.
- Give new employees an experienced point person for practical questions.
- Address recurring disrespect early instead of treating it as a personality issue everyone must tolerate.

Leadership consistency

- Pick one promise you make often - feedback, scheduling, follow-up, availability - and track whether you keep it.
- Explain exceptions to rules so they do not look like favoritism.
- Before changing a process, identify who will be affected and what they need to know.
- Ask once a month: "What is one thing I could do differently that would make your work easier?"

06 The 30-Day Belonging Pilot

Choose one team and one focus area. Keep the test simple enough that employees can tell what actually changed.

Week	What to Do
Before	Use the anonymous pulse check. Choose one focus area.
Week 1	Explain the focus and one behavior the manager will test.
Week 2	Keep doing it. Ask what feels useful or awkward.
Week 3	Adjust based on real feedback. Do not add five new initiatives.
Week 4	Repeat the pulse check and discuss what should continue.
After	Record what was tried, what people said, and what you would change next time.

Real feedback only. If three employees respond, report three - not the number you hoped would respond.

07 Anonymous Employee Pulse Check

Use before and after the pilot. Keep it anonymous when possible and avoid collecting identifying information you do not need.

I know what is expected of me at work.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

I feel comfortable asking questions or raising concerns.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

My work is recognized when I make a meaningful contribution.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

Important information is communicated clearly.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

I feel respected by the people I work with.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

My manager follows through on commitments.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

I believe my ideas are taken seriously.

1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■

One small change that would improve my day-to-day experience:

08 Manager Conversation + Action Plan

Questions worth asking

- What helps you do your best work here?
- What creates unnecessary frustration?
- What kind of recognition actually feels meaningful to you?
- Is there anything people tend not to say because it feels uncomfortable?
- What is one process you would change if you could?
- What should we keep doing because it genuinely helps?

One-page action plan

Focus area: _____

One behavior we will test: _____

Who is responsible: _____

Start: _____ Review: _____

What employees said before: _____

What happened: _____

What we will keep/change: _____

09 For Teens: Getting Your First Job

A first job is not only about getting hired. It is often a teenager's first chance to learn what a workplace expects, how managers communicate, and what kind of environment helps them do good work. Research on youth employment also suggests that early paid work can matter for later employment and financial pathways, although outcomes depend on the quality and intensity of the work.

THE FIRST-JOB FORMULA: be easy to trust, easy to train, and specific about when you can work.

Before you apply

- Make a one-page resume even if you have never had a formal job. Include babysitting, coaching, volunteering, clubs, sports, and responsibilities.
- Write down your exact availability. Employers care about when you can reliably show up.
- Ask adults you know about local businesses that hire teenagers; warm introductions can help you find openings.
- Apply to several realistic places instead of waiting on one dream job.

When you reach out

- Say who you are, your age/grade if relevant, what role you want, and when you can start.
- Give one reason you would be useful: reliability, customer service, childcare, coaching, organization, or willingness to learn.
- Follow up politely after several days if you have not heard back.

Once you get the job

- Ask questions early instead of hiding confusion.
- Show up on time and communicate before a problem becomes a surprise.
- Notice what good managers do - and what makes employees feel ignored, respected, trusted, or supported.

This section is practical guidance, not a finding from the 273-response survey itself. It extends the project's focus on workplace experience to teenagers entering work for the first time.

10 About the Research

The Workplace Belonging project is an independent mixed-methods study examining how communication, recognition, leadership, workplace relationships, growth, and psychological safety shape employee experience. The quantitative component included 273 survey responses; the qualitative component included open-ended responses and five confidential leadership interviews across different industries.

The study was descriptive rather than experimental. Its sample was not randomly selected, so the findings describe patterns within this respondent group rather than the entire workforce. The toolkit is the practical extension: it turns recurring themes into small actions teams can test.

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

[Click here to jump to the complete research paper included at the end of this PDF.](#)

For emailed copies, the full paper is also attached separately so editors, employers, and reviewers can read or save it on its own.

Suggested project description

Independent workplace-belonging research project examining employee experience through survey responses, qualitative themes, and cross-sector leadership interviews; translated findings into a practical manager toolkit and 30-day workplace pilot.

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

The complete original paper begins on the following page.

WORKPLACE BELONGING AND EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

**How Communication, Recognition,
Leadership, and Workplace Structure
Shape Employees' Experiences**

**An Independent Mixed-Methods Study of Workplace Culture
Across Industries**

Researcher: Reese Marrow

Sample Size: 273 respondents

**Research Design: Quantitative survey, qualitative responses, and
cross-sector leadership interviews**

Primary Research Question:

How do communication, recognition, leadership, and workplace relationships shape employee experience?

ABSTRACT

Employee experience is shaped by more than compensation or formal job responsibilities. The everyday conditions of work—including communication, leadership, recognition, coworker relationships, autonomy, safety, flexibility, and opportunities for growth—can influence whether employees feel respected, motivated, supported, and connected to their organizations.

This study examines how workplace culture shapes employee experience through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data from 273 respondents, qualitative responses to open-ended questions, and five leadership interviews spanning enterprise technology, industrial manufacturing and logistics, creative services, healthcare, and business leadership.

The quantitative findings point most strongly to the importance of interpersonal relationships. Of the respondents, 83.15% selected the highest rating when asked whether positive relationships with coworkers improve workplace satisfaction. In addition, 61.90% reported noticing differences between younger and older employees. When respondents were required to select the single factor contributing most to workplace satisfaction, positive relationships and growth opportunities each received 33.33% of responses, while compensation received 16.85%

The qualitative responses provided additional context. Respondents described appreciation events, shared meals, psychological safety, transparent communication, merit-based decision-making, work-life boundaries, and inclusive leadership as experiences that shaped their understanding of healthy workplace culture.

The leadership interviews demonstrated that these themes can take different forms depending on the workplace. Technology leadership focused on autonomy, psychological safety, and digital friction; manufacturing leadership focused on safety, scheduling predictability, and frontline presence; creative-services leadership focused on autonomy and protection from burnout; healthcare leadership focused on staffing, psychological safety, and moral injury; and the business-leadership perspective focused on accountability, character, preparation, humility, and culture through example.

Taken together, the findings suggest that employee experience does not come from a single workplace perk or management program. It develops through the interaction of interpersonal trust, organizational systems, leadership behavior, recognition, meaningful work, and the actual conditions under which employees perform their jobs.

The study concludes that organizations seeking to strengthen employee experience should treat culture as an operating system rather than simply a statement of values. What an organization rewards, tolerates, communicates, and repeatedly practices may ultimately matter more to employees than what the organization claims to value.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A workplace is more than a physical location where employees complete assigned tasks. It is also a social and organizational environment in which people communicate, solve problems, receive feedback, interact with leadership, develop relationships, and decide whether their contributions matter.

For that reason, employee experience can be understood as the cumulative result of an employee's interactions with an organization.

A technically skilled employee may still become disengaged if a manager constantly micromanages them. A highly compensated employee may still leave if they feel disrespected. A manufacturing employee may meet productivity expectations while working under unsafe conditions if leadership prioritizes output over safety. A healthcare professional may care deeply about patients but experience burnout when staffing or administrative systems prevent them from providing the quality of care they believe patients deserve.

These examples show why employee experience is multidimensional.

This study focuses primarily on four areas:

1. Communication
2. Recognition
3. Leadership
4. Workplace relationships

It also considers related factors including compensation, growth opportunities, flexibility, psychological safety, safety, autonomy, workplace belonging, and perceived differences among employees at different stages of their working lives.

My interest in this subject developed partly through my own experiences in coaching, childcare, youth programming, and other work environments. I became interested in how people performing similar responsibilities could have very different experiences depending on the manager, team, expectations, and workplace around them.

Rather than relying only on those observations, I wanted to examine the question more systematically.

The project therefore combines numerical survey data with open-ended employee responses and interviews with leaders from different industries. The mixed-methods design makes it possible to examine not only what respondents reported, but also how people explained those experiences and how leaders operating in very different workplaces thought about similar problems.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

Primary Research Question

How do communication, recognition, leadership, and workplace relationships shape employee experience?

Secondary Research Questions

1. How strongly do employees associate positive coworker relationships with workplace satisfaction?
 2. To what extent do employees feel valued and respected at work?
 3. How do employees perceive managerial support?
 4. Do employees perceive differences between younger and older workers?
 5. Which workplace factors do employees identify as most important to satisfaction?
 6. What experiences most strongly influence employees' perceptions of workplace culture?
 7. What behaviors do employees associate with effective leadership?
 8. How do employee perspectives compare with leadership perspectives across industries?
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3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study has five primary objectives.

Objective 1

Measure employee perceptions of workplace value, respect, managerial support, coworker relationships, and workplace satisfaction.

Objective 2

Identify the workplace factors respondents consider most important to satisfaction.

Objective 3

Examine qualitative descriptions of experiences that have shaped respondents' views of workplace culture.

Objective 4

Identify recurring characteristics associated with effective workplace leadership.

Objective 5

Compare employee survey findings with leadership perspectives from multiple industries.

4. HYPOTHESIS

The central hypothesis of this study is:

Employees who experience positive workplace relationships, supportive leadership, effective communication, recognition, and opportunities for growth will be more likely to report positive workplace experiences and stronger perceptions of workplace satisfaction.

A secondary hypothesis is:

Although the specific conditions employees value will vary across industries, broader principles—including trust, respect, communication, consistency, recognition, and leadership accountability—will appear across different workplace settings.

Because this study is primarily descriptive rather than experimental, these hypotheses are evaluated through patterns and convergence across the collected evidence rather than through claims of causation.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study treats employee experience as a multidimensional outcome.

For the purposes of this research, **workplace belonging** is defined as a psychological state that can emerge when employees experience interpersonal respect, supportive management, coworker trust, recognition, and a sense that they can contribute meaningfully within an organization.

This definition is important because the survey did not directly ask participants to rate “belonging” as an isolated variable. Instead, it measured several experiences that may contribute to it.

Workplace Inputs

- Communication
- Leadership
- Recognition
- Coworker relationships
- Compensation
- Growth opportunities
- Flexibility
- Safety
- Autonomy
- Organizational fairness

These conditions can influence employee perceptions including:

- Feeling valued
- Feeling respected
- Psychological safety
- Trust
- Motivation
- Satisfaction
- Belonging

Those perceptions may, in turn, relate to broader organizational outcomes such as:

- Engagement
- Collaboration
- Retention
- Productivity
- Willingness to contribute
- Organizational stability

The leadership interviews also suggest that this relationship can work in both directions. Organizational systems affect employee experience, while employee behavior and experience can influence organizational performance.

6. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative evidence.

The quantitative component consisted of an electronic survey completed by 273 respondents. The survey was available over a multi-week data-collection period and was distributed through direct outreach, personal and professional networks, referrals, and broader cross-sector connections in order to reach respondents with different ages, industries, and levels of work experience.

The qualitative component consisted of open-ended survey responses, five leadership interviews, and a cross-sector thematic comparison.

A mixed-methods design was selected because numerical data can reveal broad patterns, while qualitative evidence can help explain how those patterns appear in actual workplace experiences.

Sample

The total survey sample was:

N = 273

Respondents represented multiple age groups, work-experience levels, and industries.

Participation in the survey was voluntary, and survey responses were collected anonymously. Personally identifying information was not used when analyzing or presenting individual open-ended responses.

The sample was not randomly selected and therefore should not be treated as statistically representative of the entire workforce. The results describe patterns within this particular respondent group.

The survey also relied on self-reported experiences. It therefore measures perceptions of workplace experience rather than independently verified workplace conditions.

Recruitment and Confidentiality

Survey participants were recruited through direct outreach, personal and professional networks, referrals, and connections available through my family, including my father's professional network. This approach allowed the study to reach employees working in different industries and at different stages of their careers.

Leadership interview participants were identified through direct outreach and professional connections. Because the interviews included discussions of internal workplace practices, leadership decisions, employee concerns, organizational culture, and workplace challenges, the participants requested that their names and specific employers not be identified in the final research project.

For that reason, interview participants are identified only by their professional role, industry, and general organizational context.

The interviews were therefore confidential and de-identified rather than anonymous, since I knew the identities of the people I interviewed. Survey responses, by contrast, were collected anonymously.

The same confidentiality principle was applied throughout the project. Individual open-ended survey responses were used without identifying information, and interview findings were presented in a way intended to preserve participant privacy while retaining the substance of their professional perspectives.

Sampling Considerations

Finance/business accounted for a large portion of the quantitative sample. The leadership interviews, however, were intentionally drawn from substantially different operating environments.

This purposive cross-sector approach was used to explore whether similar workplace principles appeared under very different conditions. For example, the daily concerns of a technology employee may differ considerably from those of a manufacturing employee or healthcare professional.

Comparing these environments made it possible to examine which workplace themes appeared context-specific and which appeared more broadly.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Open-ended responses were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach.

Responses were systematically reviewed for repeated ideas, experiences, and language. Similar concepts were grouped into initial codes. For example, responses involving mistakes and fear of punishment were considered in relation to psychological safety, while responses involving shared meals or informal gathering spaces were considered in relation to social connection.

Those initial codes were then grouped into broader themes that appeared repeatedly across the qualitative material.

This process was interpretive rather than fully automated, which introduces the possibility of researcher judgment. The themes should therefore be understood as a structured synthesis of the qualitative responses rather than as perfectly objective categories.

Leadership Interviews

Five leadership perspectives were included:

1. Enterprise technology
2. Industrial manufacturing and logistics
3. Creative services
4. Healthcare and clinical operations
5. Business leadership across multiple organizations

The interviews followed a common framework focused on employee experience, communication, recognition, leadership, trust, organizational problems, and culture.

To protect confidentiality, interviewees are identified throughout this paper by role and industry rather than by name or specific employer.

The interviews were not treated as statistically representative evidence. Their purpose was to provide depth, context, and a way to compare survey patterns with professional perspectives.

Data Analysis

Quantitative results were summarized using respondent counts and percentages.

Qualitative evidence was analyzed thematically.

The final stage compared quantitative findings, qualitative employee responses, and leadership interviews. Where similar ideas appeared independently across these sources, they were treated as areas of convergence or mixed-methods triangulation.

This convergence can strengthen an interpretation, but it does not by itself establish causation.

7. RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Age

Age Group	Respondents	Percentage
Under 18	37	13.55%
18–25	91	33.33%
26–40	73	26.74%
41–37	54	19.78%
Over 37	18	6.59%
Total	273	100.00%

The largest age group was 18–25, representing 33.33% of respondents.

The broad age distribution allowed the study to include perspectives from people at different stages of working life.

8. WORK EXPERIENCE

Work Experience	Respondents	Percentage
Less than 1 year	18	6.59%
1–3 years	73	26.74%
4–10 years	146	53.48%
10+ years	36	13.19%
Total	273	100.00%

The largest group consisted of respondents reporting 4–10 years of work experience, representing 53.48% of the sample.

Many respondents reported multiple years of workplace exposure. However, the work–experience data should be interpreted alongside the age data.

The study included 37 respondents under 18 but only 18 respondents reporting less than one year of work experience. Because the responses were self-reported, some younger respondents may have counted informal or part-time work, including childcare, youth programming, gig work, family employment, or other recurring responsibilities.

For this reason, the categories should be understood as respondents' own descriptions of their work experience rather than verified years of full-time professional employment.

9. INDUSTRY DISTRIBUTION

Industry	Respondents	Percentage
Finance / Business	133	48.72%
Other	55	20.15%
Technology	40	14.65%
Healthcare	25	9.16%
Retail / Customer Service	14	5.13%
Education / Childcare	6	2.20%
Total	273	100.00%

Finance/business was the largest category, representing 48.72% of respondents.

Technology represented 14.65% healthcare 9.16% retail/customer service 5.13% and education/childcare 2.20% An additional 20.15% selected "Other."

The unequal distribution is important when interpreting the results because aggregate findings may reflect the experiences of finance/business respondents more strongly than those of less represented industries.

10. FEELING VALUED AND RESPECTED

Respondents rated the statement:

“I feel valued and respected in my workplace.”

Rating	Respondents	Percentage
3	95	34.80%
4	123	45.05%
5	55	20.15%
Total	273	100.00%

The most common response was 4, selected by 45.05% of respondents.

Combined, 65.20% selected either 4 or 5.

This suggests that a majority of respondents reported relatively positive experiences of feeling valued and respected. At the same time, 34.80% selected the midpoint rating of 3, meaning the experience was not uniformly strong.

The distinction matters. An employee may feel generally respected while still experiencing problems involving management, recognition, communication, workload, or advancement.

11. MANAGERIAL SUPPORT

Respondents rated:

“My manager or supervisor supports my success.”

Rating	Respondents	Percentage
3	91	33.33%
4	91	33.33%
5	91	33.33%
Total	273	100.00%

Unlike the question concerning value and respect, managerial support did not produce a dominant response.

The sample was almost evenly divided across ratings 3, 4, and 5.

This suggests that respondents could have generally positive perceptions of their workplaces while still experiencing considerable variation in the support they receive from direct supervisors.

That difference reinforces an important idea: employees often experience an organization through their immediate manager.

A company may have strong policies at the organizational level while individual teams experience those policies very differently.

12. COWORKER RELATIONSHIPS

Respondents rated:

“I believe positive relationships with coworkers improve workplace satisfaction.”

Rating	Respondents	Percentage
4	46	16.85%
5	227	83.15%
Total	273	100.00%

This was the strongest quantitative pattern in the study.

A total of 83.15% of respondents selected the highest rating of 5, while the remaining 16.85% selected 4.

Within the recorded responses, 100% therefore selected one of the two highest ratings.

This does not prove that positive coworker relationships cause workplace satisfaction. It does, however, show exceptionally strong agreement within this sample that coworker relationships contribute to satisfaction.

The qualitative responses support this interpretation. Respondents independently described shared meals, team events, informal gathering spaces, and interpersonal connection as meaningful parts of workplace culture.

13. PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES BETWEEN YOUNGER AND OLDER EMPLOYEES

Respondents were asked:

“Have you noticed differences between younger and older employees?”

Response	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	169	61.90%
No	72	26.37%
Unsure	32	11.72%
Total	273	100.00%

A total of 61.90% reported noticing differences.

Open-ended explanations mentioned differences involving work ethic, attitudes toward work, professional experience, management ability, scheduling, and expectations.

Importantly, respondents did not consistently describe one generation as superior to another.

Some described younger employees as highly motivated and willing to learn. Others described experienced employees as bringing valuable professional judgment and leadership ability.

The results therefore should not be used to support broad generational stereotypes.

A more useful interpretation is that leaders may need to manage differences in experience, career stage, expectations, communication preferences, and individual priorities rather than assuming age itself determines performance.

14. FACTORS CONTRIBUTING MOST TO WORKPLACE SATISFACTION

Respondents were asked:

“Which factor contributes most to workplace satisfaction?”

Factor	Respondents	Percentage
Positive relationships	91	33.33%
Recognition	0	0.00%
Compensation	46	16.85%
Growth opportunities	91	33.33%
Flexibility	0	0.00%
Other — flexibility-related responses	45	16.48%
Total	273	100.00%

Positive relationships and growth opportunities tied for the largest share at 33.33% each.

Compensation represented 16.85%

At first glance, this result appears to suggest that respondents valued relationships and growth substantially more than compensation. However, the question's forced-choice format creates an important limitation.

Respondents could select only one factor as the **most important** contributor to satisfaction.

Recognition and flexibility both received 0.00% in their listed categories, even though the qualitative responses repeatedly discussed recognition, work-life boundaries, scheduling, and autonomy.

The zero values therefore should not be interpreted to mean that respondents considered recognition or flexibility unimportant.

Instead, the result demonstrates a limitation of single-selection survey design. A respondent may consider flexibility essential while still selecting growth as the single most important factor. Similarly, recognition may function as a baseline expectation without becoming a respondent's first choice when directly compared with relationships, growth, or compensation.

The qualitative evidence makes this distinction particularly important. Recognition and flexibility appeared repeatedly in descriptions of healthy workplace culture despite receiving no selections in their corresponding forced-choice categories.

For that reason, this result is best interpreted as a ranking of **primary preference under forced choice**, not a complete measure of how much respondents value each factor.

15. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The open-ended responses provided context that the numerical results alone could not capture.

Eight major themes emerged.

Theme 1: Social Connection

Several respondents described workplace activities that created opportunities to interact outside formal job responsibilities.

One respondent described staff-appreciation events as opportunities for colleagues to spend time together and develop stronger relationships.

Another described daily team lunches as a way to learn about coworkers beyond their immediate work responsibilities.

These responses closely align with the quantitative finding concerning coworker relationships.

Theme 2: Individual Recognition and Being Heard

One respondent described respecting leaders who “treated their employees as individuals and listened to them.”

The response illustrates an important distinction between managing employees collectively and recognizing them individually.

Communication is not only the transmission of information from management to employees. It also requires listening.

Theme 3: Informal Spaces

One respondent described a relatively plain office in which a ping-pong table became a central gathering place.

The importance of the response is not the table itself.

Instead, it demonstrates how informal spaces can create opportunities for social interaction that may not occur through formal organizational structures.

Theme 4: Sustainable Performance

One respondent described an early-career workplace characterized by “hustle culture,” in which late-night emails and weekend work became normal.

The respondent watched talented employees burn out and eventually leave.

That experience changed their understanding of healthy workplace culture. High performance could not be separated from whether the pace of work was sustainable.

Theme 5: Psychological Safety

Another respondent described making a serious operational mistake and expecting severe consequences.

Instead, the manager focused on what could be learned and how the same mistake could be prevented in the future.

The experience demonstrates psychological safety in practice: accountability was maintained, but the mistake was treated as an opportunity for learning rather than humiliation.

Theme 6: Merit and Organizational Humility

One respondent described a cross-functional meeting in which leadership selected a junior intern's idea over a vice president's proposal because the intern's idea was stronger.

The respondent viewed this as evidence that ideas could be judged on merit rather than hierarchy.

The example suggests that employees may become more willing to contribute when they believe status does not automatically determine whose ideas matter.

Theme 7: Transparency

Another respondent described a major corporate restructuring during which executives held weekly unscripted question-and-answer sessions concerning layoffs and financial conditions.

The information itself was difficult, but the respondent believed direct communication reduced rumors and helped preserve trust.

Transparency therefore does not necessarily make difficult circumstances easier. It can, however, reduce the additional uncertainty created when employees believe information is being hidden.

Theme 8: Incentive Alignment

One respondent described a workplace in which departmental goals encouraged teams to compete for resources.

Communication became siloed and conflict increased.

When leadership redesigned goals around shared outcomes, the respondent reported that friction decreased.

This example shows that culture is shaped not only by personalities and interpersonal behavior but also by the systems that reward particular behaviors.

16. QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE WORKPLACE LEADERS

Open-ended responses identified several recurring leadership qualities.

Transparency

Employees valued leaders who communicated honestly, including when information was difficult.

Strong Communication

Respondents valued leaders who could clearly explain expectations while also listening.

Delegation

Effective leadership was associated with trusting capable employees rather than controlling every decision.

Trust

Employees wanted to feel that leaders trusted them to perform their responsibilities.

Approachability

Respondents valued being able to raise questions and concerns.

Leading by Example

Employees noticed whether leaders demonstrated the same behaviors they expected from others.

Patience

Strong leadership included giving people the time and guidance required to develop.

Collaboration

Respondents valued environments in which employees could contribute ideas.

Organization

Leaders who could manage competing responsibilities without creating unnecessary confusion were viewed positively.

Positive Attitude

Leadership behavior can influence the emotional environment of a workplace.

Resilience

Leaders need to navigate setbacks without unnecessarily destabilizing the people around them.

Creativity

Effective leaders should be willing to consider new approaches when established methods are not working.

Taken together, these responses suggest that respondents did not define leadership simply as authority. They tended to define it through behavior.

17. LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW COMPONENT

Five leadership cases were used to compare workplace experience across substantially different operating environments:

1. Enterprise technology
2. Industrial manufacturing and logistics
3. Creative services

4. Healthcare and clinical operations
5. Business leadership across multiple organizations

All five interview participants requested that their names and specific employers remain confidential. They are therefore described by professional role, industry, and organizational context.

This comparison was useful because employee experience does not occur under identical conditions.

An engineer, manufacturing employee, healthcare professional, and creative employee can face dramatically different operational pressures.

The central comparative question was therefore:

Which principles remain consistent even when the workplace itself changes?

18. CASE STUDY 1 – ENTERPRISE TECHNOLOGY

Industry: Enterprise Software and Cloud Infrastructure

Respondent: Chief People Officer

Organizational Footprint: 15,000+ global employees

The technology perspective prioritized autonomy, psychological safety, communication transparency, recognition, leadership accountability, employee retention, and the quality of internal tools.

A particularly important issue was **digital friction**: the unnecessary difficulty employees experience when inefficient internal technology makes otherwise straightforward work harder.

This matters because a company can offer attractive benefits while still frustrating employees every day through poor systems.

Communication practices focused on transparency and regular question-and-answer sessions. Leaders were expected to explain not only what decision had been made but also why it had been made.

Recognition was described as a behavioral signal. Public acknowledgment can communicate what an organization values, but career-building opportunities may sometimes be more meaningful than generic rewards.

The interview also identified micromanagement, moving goalposts, and **HiPPO (Highest Paid Person's Opinion) dominance** as damaging leadership behaviors. HiPPO dominance occurs when hierarchical status overrides evidence or the expertise of people closer to a problem.

The broader lesson from this case was that technology-sector employee experience depends not only on compensation or perks but also on autonomy, psychological safety, and the removal of unnecessary operational friction.

19. CASE STUDY 2 — INDUSTRIAL MANUFACTURING AND LOGISTICS

Industry: Heavy Industrial Manufacturing and Logistics

Respondent: Chief Operating Officer

Organizational Footprint: 8,500 shift-based operations personnel

The manufacturing perspective prioritized physical safety, scheduling predictability, functional equipment, frontline leadership, fairness, recognition, and fatigue.

Unlike an office environment, workplace culture in manufacturing cannot be separated from the physical conditions under which employees work.

Communication relied heavily on face-to-face shift meetings and visible leadership. Executives were expected to spend time on the plant floor rather than communicating exclusively through organizational layers.

Recognition included monetary bonuses, preferred shifts, and public appreciation.

Trust was connected strongly to visible behavior. A manager who follows the same safety requirements expected of employees demonstrates that organizational rules apply consistently.

This case suggests that manufacturing culture depends heavily on operational consistency, safety, fairness, and frontline leadership.

20. CASE STUDY 3 — CREATIVE SERVICES

Industry: Marketing, Branding, and Digital Advertising

Respondent: Founder and Creative Director

Organizational Footprint: 45 hybrid personnel

The creative-services perspective highlighted creative autonomy, client alignment, work-life boundaries, psychological safety, protection from unreasonable client demands, recognition of creative work, and sustainable workloads.

Collaborative project debriefs were used to identify problems without automatically assigning blame.

Recognition could include industry award submissions, ownership of creative work, high-profile accounts, and paid mental-health days.

Leadership also involved protecting employees from destructive external pressure.

This case demonstrates that employee support does not always mean making work easier. Sometimes it means creating enough protection and autonomy for employees to perform difficult work well.

21. CASE STUDY 4 — HEALTHCARE

Industry: Tertiary Academic Medicine and Clinical Research

Respondent: Director of Human Resources and Talent Strategy

Organizational Footprint: 5,000+ multidisciplinary clinical personnel

The healthcare perspective prioritized staffing ratios, psychological safety, professional growth, patient safety, administrative transparency, burnout prevention, and moral injury.

In this context, **moral injury** refers to the psychological distress that can occur when systemic barriers or resource constraints prevent professionals from providing the standard of care they believe is ethically necessary.

Communication practices included structured town halls and accessible clinical leadership.

Recognition could include peer-nominated awards, research funding, advanced certifications, and investment in employee rest facilities.

Leadership also involved active rounding: physically visiting clinical areas and listening to frontline employees.

This case demonstrates that healthcare employee experience is closely tied to whether workers have the resources and organizational support required to perform their responsibilities safely and ethically.

22. CASE STUDY 5 — BUSINESS LEADERSHIP AND TEAM CULTURE

The fifth perspective came from an experienced business leader with a professional sports background and extensive experience building companies.

The discussion focused on teamwork, accountability, preparation, hiring, character, leadership development, organizational culture, humility, and delegation.

Professional football shaped the respondent's view that talent alone does not determine team success.

Preparation and reliability also matter.

The respondent's view of leadership similarly challenged the idea that authority depends on volume or intensity.

Trust develops when leaders communicate honestly, place people in positions where they can succeed, accept responsibility when things go wrong, and establish clear standards.

The perspective also connected hiring with culture. A technically capable employee can still damage an organization if that person's behavior consistently undermines teammates.

The broader lesson was that high-performing organizations need both competence and character.

23. CULTURE AS BEHAVIOR

One of the strongest ideas across the leadership interviews was the distinction between stated culture and actual culture.

Culture becomes visible through:

- What organizations reward
- What organizations tolerate
- Who gets promoted
- How mistakes are handled
- Whether standards apply equally
- What leaders do when stated values become inconvenient

This pattern appeared differently across the interviews.

The technology case considered the damage caused by protecting a toxic high performer.

The manufacturing case considered favoritism and ignored safety concerns.

The creative-services case highlighted the responsibility to protect employees from unreasonable client pressure.

The healthcare case emphasized conditions that can prevent professionals from providing appropriate care.

Although these situations are different, the underlying principle is similar:

Employees learn what an organization truly values by watching what leadership does when values conflict with performance, convenience, hierarchy, or profit.

24. CROSS-SECTOR COMPARISON

Workplace Context

Particularly Important Conditions

Technology

Autonomy, psychological safety, digital efficiency

Manufacturing

Safety, scheduling, equipment, consistency

Creative
Services

Autonomy, boundaries, protection from client pressure

Healthcare

Staffing, psychological safety, professional support

Business
Leadership

Character, accountability, preparation, trust

The operational needs differ substantially.

However, several themes appeared across sectors: trust, respect, communication, consistency, meaningful recognition, appropriate autonomy, and psychological safety.

The comparison also revealed a broader common variable.

A technology employee struggling with an inefficient internal system and a nurse struggling with an inadequate staffing ratio appear to face completely different problems. Operationally, they do.

At a deeper level, however, both situations can represent **operational friction created when organizational systems fail to reflect frontline realities.**

The same pattern can appear when manufacturing employees work with unreliable equipment or creative employees face workloads that leadership has allowed to become unsustainable.

This does not mean every workplace problem has the same solution.

It means effective leadership requires understanding how organizational decisions are actually experienced by the people doing the work.

25. DISCUSSION

The quantitative, qualitative, and interview findings converge around a central conclusion:

Employee experience is fundamentally relational, but relationships operate inside organizational systems.

The strongest quantitative pattern concerned coworker relationships. A total of 83.15% of respondents selected the highest rating when asked whether positive relationships with coworkers improve workplace satisfaction.

The qualitative evidence independently reinforced this result through descriptions of team lunches, appreciation events, informal gathering spaces, and interpersonal connection.

This convergence represents a form of mixed-methods triangulation. Different forms of evidence pointed toward a similar conclusion even though they approached the question differently.

However, the evidence should not be overstated. The study does not demonstrate that coworker relationships cause satisfaction, nor was a correlation coefficient calculated.

Instead, the results provide strong descriptive evidence that respondents perceive social relationships as an important part of workplace experience.

The interviews further complicate the picture in a useful way.

Relationships matter, but employees also need systems that allow them to perform their work.

Trust cannot compensate indefinitely for unsafe equipment.

Friendly coworkers cannot eliminate chronic understaffing.

Recognition cannot fix an impossible workload.

Workplace culture therefore has both an interpersonal and an operational dimension.

26. THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

The managerial-support results were more evenly distributed than the results concerning respect.

Approximately one-third of respondents selected each of ratings 3, 4, and 5 when asked whether their manager supports their success.

This suggests that a generally positive organizational environment does not necessarily translate into an equally positive relationship with every manager.

The immediate supervisor may be one of the most important points at which organizational values become real.

A company can say it values communication. An employee tests that statement when their manager responds to disagreement.

A company can say it values work-life balance. An employee tests that statement when they decline an unreasonable request.

A company can say it values safety. A manufacturing employee tests that statement when a production target conflicts with a safety concern.

Culture is therefore implemented through repeated behavior.

27. RECOGNITION AND MOTIVATION

Recognition appeared repeatedly throughout the qualitative material and leadership interviews, although its most meaningful form differed by context.

Technology employees may value public acknowledgment, career advancement, or high-visibility projects.

Manufacturing employees may value bonuses, preferred shifts, or public appreciation.

Creative professionals may value ownership, awards, autonomy, or time away from work.

Healthcare professionals may value professional development, peer recognition, research support, or institutional investment.

This helps explain why recognition should not be treated as a single universal reward.

The strongest recognition communicates something more specific:

“We noticed what you contributed, understand why it mattered, and value it.”

This interpretation is particularly relevant to the 0.00% recognition result in the forced-choice survey question. Recognition’s absence from that single item does not erase its repeated presence elsewhere in the evidence.

28. WORKPLACE GROWTH

Growth opportunities represented 33.33% of responses to the forced-choice workplace-satisfaction question, tying positive relationships for the largest category.

The result suggests that employees may evaluate a workplace not only according to their current experience but also according to whether they can imagine a future there.

Employees may ask:

- Can I learn here?
- Can I develop here?
- Can I take on greater responsibility?
- Can my work lead somewhere?
- Does leadership recognize my potential?

A workplace can be socially supportive while still losing employees who feel professionally stagnant.

Retention may therefore depend on combining connection with development.

29. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

A total of 61.90% of respondents reported noticing differences between younger and older employees.

The qualitative responses mentioned work ethic, attitudes, experience, management ability, scheduling, and expectations.

At the same time, those responses contradicted simple stereotypes.

Some respondents viewed younger employees as highly motivated. Others emphasized the judgment and leadership abilities developed through experience.

The findings therefore suggest that differences may be better understood through experience, career stage, expectations, individual personality, and workplace context rather than age alone.

30. PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety appeared repeatedly across the research.

It was present in employee descriptions of supportive managers, the operational-mistake example, the technology case, the healthcare case, and the business-leadership interview.

Psychological safety does not mean employees are never held accountable.

It means employees can raise concerns, ask questions, challenge assumptions, and admit mistakes without automatically expecting humiliation or inappropriate retaliation.

This matters because hidden problems are difficult to solve.

Organizations need employees to be willing to communicate problems while those problems are still manageable.

31. COMMUNICATION AS A FOUNDATION OF TRUST

The research identified several forms of effective communication:

- Transparent financial communication
- Unscripted question-and-answer sessions
- Face-to-face shift meetings
- Accessible leadership

- Collaborative debriefs
- Clear expectations
- Individual listening

The most effective communication is therefore not necessarily the most frequent.

Across the responses and interviews, effective communication tended to be described as:

- Honest
 - Clear
 - Relevant
 - Two-way
 - Consistent
-

32. OPERATIONAL CONDITIONS MATTER

One of the most important findings from comparing industries is that employee experience cannot be separated from the actual work employees perform.

For a technology employee, digital friction can create daily frustration.

For a manufacturing employee, unsafe equipment or unpredictable scheduling can undermine trust.

For a creative professional, unreasonable clients and excessive workloads can contribute to burnout.

For a healthcare worker, inadequate staffing can affect both employee well-being and patient care.

This is why workplace culture should not be reduced to social events, motivational language, or employee-appreciation programs.

Those things may matter, but they cannot substitute for functional working conditions.

A healthy workplace must also give employees a reasonable opportunity to perform their jobs effectively.

33. IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

The findings suggest several practical principles.

1. Listen Before Problems Become Crises

Employees may communicate dissatisfaction before formally reporting a serious problem.

Organizations should pay attention to patterns involving:

- Feedback
- Turnover
- Absenteeism
- Safety reports
- Participation
- Collaboration
- Employee questions

2. Make Leadership Visible

The manufacturing and healthcare cases particularly emphasized leadership presence.

Employees should have opportunities to interact with decision-makers rather than experiencing leadership only through organizational layers.

3. Explain the “Why”

Transparency does not eliminate difficult decisions.

It can, however, prevent uncertainty from becoming unnecessary distrust.

4. Recognize Employees Meaningfully

Recognition should reflect what an employee actually values.

For one person that may be public acknowledgment. For another it may be professional growth, autonomy, scheduling flexibility, or increased responsibility.

5. Protect Psychological Safety

Employees need reasonable freedom to:

- Report problems
- Ask difficult questions
- Admit mistakes
- Challenge assumptions

- Suggest improvements

without inappropriate fear of humiliation or retaliation.

6. Align Incentives

Organizations should examine whether performance systems unintentionally encourage departments or individuals to compete when collaboration is the desired outcome.

If collaboration matters, incentive structures should support it.

7. Protect Sustainable Performance

Long hours can sometimes produce short-term output while simultaneously increasing burnout and turnover.

High standards and unsustainable expectations are not the same thing.

8. Treat Culture as an Operational System

Culture should appear in:

- Hiring
- Training
- Promotion
- Compensation
- Performance evaluation
- Conflict resolution
- Leadership behavior
- Daily management

Culture becomes credible when organizational systems reinforce the values leadership claims to hold.

34. LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that are important when interpreting its findings.

Self-Reported Data

The survey measures participants' reported perceptions.

Responses may have been influenced by personal experiences, interpretation of questions, or current workplace circumstances.

Work-Experience Inconsistency

The age and work-experience distributions contain a notable inconsistency.

There were 37 respondents under 18 but only 18 respondents reporting less than one year of work experience.

Because the data were self-reported, younger respondents may have interpreted "work experience" broadly and included informal employment, childcare, youth programming, gig work, family work, or other recurring responsibilities.

This may have increased the reported work-experience totals among younger participants and means that years of experience should not automatically be interpreted as years of formal full-time employment.

Reconciled Percentages

The quantitative percentages used during analysis were reconciled to the stated total sample of 273 and displayed percentages were calculated from the corresponding respondent counts to maintain internal consistency.

Forced-Choice Survey Design

The workplace-satisfaction question required respondents to select a single primary factor.

This creates an important interpretive limitation.

Recognition and flexibility each received 0.00% in their listed categories despite appearing repeatedly in the qualitative findings and leadership interviews.

Their zero values therefore should not be interpreted as evidence that respondents considered them irrelevant.

Instead, the result may reflect the difference between asking whether something matters and forcing respondents to identify only the single factor that matters most.

Industry Distribution

The sample was not evenly distributed across industries.

Finance/business represented 48.55% of respondents, so the aggregate findings may disproportionately reflect experiences associated with that category.

The cross-sector interviews broaden the analysis but do not statistically correct the survey imbalance.

Recruitment and Selection

Participants were reached through direct outreach, referrals, and personal and professional networks rather than through random sampling.

This approach made it possible to build a large cross-industry sample but may also have introduced selection bias because people connected through similar networks may share certain demographic or professional characteristics.

Qualitative Coding

The thematic analysis involved researcher judgment.

Although responses were reviewed systematically for recurring ideas, another researcher might group or label some responses differently.

Correlation Versus Causation

This study identifies patterns in employee perceptions.

It does not establish that any individual factor directly causes workplace satisfaction, engagement, or retention.

No experimental manipulation or longitudinal causal analysis was conducted.

Interview Representation

Five leadership perspectives cannot represent every organization within their respective industries.

The interviews were included to add depth and cross-sector context rather than statistical representation.

Generalizability

Because the survey sample was not randomly selected, the results should not be generalized to all employees or all workplaces.

The findings are best understood as patterns within this particular dataset.

35. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could improve upon this study in several ways.

First, a future survey could intentionally recruit more balanced numbers of respondents across industries and age groups.

Second, the survey instrument could separate informal, part-time, and full-time professional experience to avoid ambiguity in the work-experience question.

Third, instead of forcing respondents to choose a single workplace factor, a future study could ask participants to rate each factor independently and then rank them. This would provide a clearer picture of the relative importance of recognition, flexibility, compensation, growth, leadership, and relationships.

Fourth, future research could examine relationships between specific leadership behaviors and measurable outcomes such as:

- Turnover
- Absenteeism
- Promotion rates
- Productivity
- Safety incidents
- Employee engagement scores

Fifth, employees and managers within the same organizations could be surveyed using parallel questions. Differences between their responses could reveal gaps between leadership intentions and employee experiences.

Finally, longitudinal research could examine whether changes in workplace practices are followed by changes in employee satisfaction over time.

36. CONCLUSION

This study began with a relatively simple question:

What makes people feel like they can belong and succeed at work?

The findings suggest that the answer is more complicated than compensation or workplace perks.

Across 273 survey respondents and five leadership perspectives from different industries, several themes appeared repeatedly.

Employees want to feel:

- Heard
- Respected
- Valued
- Supported
- Connected
- Trusted
- Able to grow

The strongest quantitative pattern concerned coworker relationships. Of respondents, 83.15% selected the highest level of agreement that positive relationships with coworkers improve workplace satisfaction.

The qualitative responses reinforced this pattern through examples involving team meals, appreciation events, informal spaces, and social connection.

The leadership interviews broadened the conclusion.

A technology organization may need to eliminate digital friction.

A manufacturing organization may need to protect safety and scheduling stability.

A creative agency may need to protect autonomy and prevent burnout.

A healthcare institution may need to address staffing and moral injury.

These problems require different solutions.

Yet beneath those differences are similar questions.

Do leaders listen?

Are promises kept?

Can employees acknowledge mistakes?

Do standards apply equally?

Who gets rewarded?

What behavior is tolerated?

Do stated values survive difficult decisions?

The most important conclusion of this research is therefore that culture is not primarily what an organization says.

Culture is what employees repeatedly experience.

A healthy workplace does not require every employee to have the same personality, job, motivation, or expectations.

It requires organizational conditions that allow different people to do meaningful work with reasonable levels of trust, respect, communication, accountability, and opportunity.

This research ultimately changed the way I think about employee experience. I began the project expecting workplace culture to be mainly about how people treat one another. Relationships did emerge as extremely important, but the research also showed me that relationships operate inside larger systems.

A supportive manager cannot fully compensate for unsafe equipment. A friendly team cannot permanently solve understaffing. Recognition cannot repair a system that prevents employees from doing their jobs.

Strong workplace culture therefore requires both human connection and organizational competence.

The organizations most capable of sustaining positive employee experiences may be those that recognize that supporting employees and achieving strong organizational performance are not necessarily competing objectives.

They are interconnected.

37. RESEARCHER REFLECTION

My interest in workplace culture developed through my own experiences in coaching, childcare, youth programming, and other work environments.

I became interested in how two people could perform similar responsibilities while having completely different experiences depending on the way they were managed and the people around them.

A manager who communicates clearly can make a difficult job feel manageable.

A manager who dismisses employees can make a manageable job frustrating.

A team that recognizes each other's contributions can create connections.

A team built around distrust or unnecessary competition can make employees feel isolated.

I wanted to know whether those observations were limited to workplaces I had personally experienced or whether similar patterns appeared more broadly.

That question became this project.

The research changed my understanding of organizational culture.

At first, I thought culture was mostly about interpersonal behavior. That turned out to be only part of the answer.

Culture also includes incentives, physical working conditions, technology, staffing, professional development, recognition, workload, communication systems, and what happens when something goes wrong.

The cross-sector interviews were especially useful because they showed me why there cannot be one universal formula for a good workplace.

A technology company and a hospital cannot create employee experience in exactly the same way. Their employees face different pressures and need different forms of support.

At the same time, both can build environments based on trust, accountability, listening, respect, and meaningful support.

The project also taught me something about research itself.

Some of the most useful parts of the analysis came from results that were not perfectly clean.

The mismatch between age and reported work experience forced me to think about how respondents may interpret survey questions differently.

The 0.00% results for recognition and flexibility made me reconsider what a forced-choice question actually measures.

The differences among industries made it clear that a result that makes sense in one workplace may operate very differently in another.

Those issues did not make the research less valuable. They made me think more carefully about what the evidence could and could not support.

Most importantly, comparing employee and leadership perspectives taught me to see workplace culture as a system.

Employees often experience organizational decisions from the bottom up.

Leaders often understand those same decisions from the top down.

Understanding organizations requires paying attention to both.

That is the question I am most interested in continuing to explore: how organizations can build systems that accomplish their goals without losing sight of the people who make those goals possible.

APPENDIX A — SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Workplace Experience Survey

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age range?

- Under 18
- 18–25
- 26–40
- 41–60
- Over 60

2. How many years of work experience do you have?

- Less than 1 year
- 1–3 years
- 4–10 years
- 10+ years

3. Which industry do you primarily work in?

- Finance / Business
- Technology

- Healthcare
- Retail / Customer Service
- Education / Childcare
- Other

Workplace Experience

4. I feel valued and respected in my workplace.

Scale: 1-5

5. My manager or supervisor supports my success.

Scale: 1-5

6. I believe positive relationships with coworkers improve workplace satisfaction.

Scale: 1-5

7. Have you noticed differences between younger and older employees?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

8. Which factor contributes most to workplace satisfaction?

- Positive relationships
- Recognition
- Compensation
- Growth opportunities
- Flexibility
- Other

Open-Ended Questions

9. Describe an experience that influenced how you view workplace culture.

10. What qualities make someone an effective workplace leader?

11. If you answered yes to the age-difference question, what differences have you noticed?

APPENDIX B — LEADERSHIP INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK

Each leadership interview used a consistent set of questions:

- 1. What factors most strongly influence employee experience?
- 2. How does your organization measure employee engagement?
- 3. How can companies tell when employees feel unheard?
- 4. What communication practices improve employee trust?
- 5. How does recognition affect employee motivation?
- 6. What types of recognition are most meaningful?
- 7. What leadership behaviors create problems?
- 8. What leadership behaviors build trust?
- 9. How does HR respond when employees report workplace problems?
- 10. How do companies balance employee needs with business objectives?
- 11. What workplace issue do organizations frequently underestimate?
- 12. What advice would you give future leaders about creating a healthy workplace culture?

The fifth leadership interview additionally examined:

- 1. Teamwork and professional sports
- 2. Sports versus business leadership
- 3. Hiring and culture
- 4. High-performing employees
- 5. The evolution of leadership philosophy

APPENDIX C — FINAL DATA TABLES

Table 1. Age

Variable	n	%
Under18	37	13.55

18-25	91	33.33
26-40	73	26.74
41-60	54	19.78
Over 60	18	6.59
Total	273	100.00

Table 2. Work Experience

Variable	n	%
<1 year	18	6.59
1-3 years	73	26.74
4-10 years	146	53.48
10+ years	36	13.19
Total	273	100.00

Table 3. Industry

Variable	n	%
Finance / Business	133	48.72
Other	55	20.15
Technology	40	14.65
Healthcare	25	9.16
Retail / Customer Service	14	5.13
Education / Childcare	6	2.20
Total	273	100.00

Table 4. Feeling Valued and Respected

Rating	n	%
3	95	34.80
4	123	45.05

5	55	20.15
Total	273	100.00

Table 5. Managerial Support

Rating	n	%
3	91	33.33
4	91	33.33
5	91	33.33
Total	273	100.00

Table 6. Coworker Relationships

Rating	n	%
4	46	16.85
5	227	83.15

Total	273	100.0 0
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Table 7. Perceived Age Differences

Response	n	%
Yes	169	61.90
No	72	26.37
Unsure	32	11.72
Total	273	100.0 0

Table 8. Primary Factor Contributing to Workplace Satisfaction

Factor	n	%
Positive relationships	91	33.33
Recognition	0	0.00
Compensation	46	16.85

Growth opportunities	91	33.33
Flexibility	0	0.00
Other — flexibility-related responses	45	16.48
Total	273	100.00

Note: Table 8 represents a forced-choice question requiring respondents to identify a single primary factor. A 0.00% value should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that respondents considered that factor unimportant.

APPENDIX D — RESEARCH WEBSITE CONTENT

HOME PAGE

Workplace Belonging

How Communication, Recognition, Leadership, and Relationships Shape Employee Experience

273 respondents. Five leadership interviews. Multiple industries. One central question: **What makes people feel like they belong at work?**

This independent mixed-methods research project examines employee experience through quantitative survey data, qualitative employee perspectives, and cross-sector leadership interviews.

Research Question

How do communication, recognition, leadership, and workplace relationships shape employee experience?

ABOUT

Workplace culture is often described through company values, mission statements, and employee perks.

This research examines something more fundamental:

What do employees actually experience?

The study explores communication, leadership, recognition, coworker relationships, growth, psychological safety, and workplace satisfaction.

DATA

273 respondents

The sample includes respondents across:

- Finance/business
- Technology
- Healthcare
- Retail/customer service
- Education/childcare
- Other industries

KEY FINDINGS

83.15%

of respondents selected the highest rating when asked whether positive coworker relationships improve workplace satisfaction.

65.20%

selected a 4 or 5 when rating whether they feel valued and respected at work.

61.90%

reported noticing differences between younger and older employees.

33.33%

selected positive relationships as the primary contributor to workplace satisfaction.

33.33%

selected growth opportunities as the primary contributor to workplace satisfaction.

LEADERSHIP

The study included confidential leadership interviews spanning:

- Enterprise technology
- Industrial manufacturing
- Creative services
- Healthcare
- Business leadership

Although their workplaces were dramatically different, recurring themes included trust, communication, accountability, recognition, psychological safety, and employee support.

Interview participants requested that their names and specific organizations remain confidential, so they are identified by professional role and industry.

RESEARCH CONCLUSION

Employees do not experience culture through a mission statement.

They experience it through what happens every day.

Who listens.

Who gets recognized.

Who gets promoted.

How mistakes are handled.

Whether promises are kept.

Whether employees can speak honestly.

Whether leadership's stated values are reflected in actual decisions.

Culture is what employees repeatedly experience.

APPENDIX E — APPLICATION MATERIALS

Full Project Description

Workplace Belonging: How Communication, Recognition, Leadership, and Workplace Relationships Shape Employee Experience

Independent mixed-methods research study examining survey responses from 273 participants and five confidential cross-sector leadership interviews. Designed a workplace-experience survey, analyzed quantitative results, coded open-ended responses for recurring themes, compared employee and leadership perspectives across industries, and developed a research paper and digital presentation examining belonging, leadership, communication, recognition, growth, psychological safety, and employee experience.

Common App Activities Description

Independent Researcher — Workplace Culture & Employee Experience

Conducted mixed-methods study of 273 respondents and 5 cross-sector leaders; designed survey, analyzed workplace data, coded qualitative themes, compared industries, and presented findings through research paper/site.

Resume Entry

Independent Researcher — Workplace Experience & Organizational Culture

- Designed and conducted an independent mixed-methods study examining how communication, recognition, leadership, relationships, and growth shape employee experience.
- Collected and analyzed survey responses from 273 respondents representing multiple industries and career stages.
- Examined quantitative measures of workplace respect, managerial support, coworker relationships, generational perceptions, and workplace satisfaction.
- Conducted and synthesized five confidential leadership interviews spanning technology, manufacturing, creative services, healthcare, and business.

- Identified recurring themes including psychological safety, transparency, autonomy, recognition, sustainable performance, and leadership accountability.
- Produced a formal research paper and digital presentation translating quantitative and qualitative findings into organizational insights.

One-Sentence Project Summary

A mixed-methods study of 273 respondents examining how communication, recognition, leadership, relationships, and organizational systems shape employee experience across industries.

Final Research Thesis

Strong workplace cultures are not created by perks alone. They develop when employees repeatedly experience trust, respect, meaningful recognition, supportive relationships, psychological safety, opportunities for growth, and leadership whose actions match its stated values.