

| **SEEK**

# Belonging at work

Australian workplace insights  
and solutions designed to  
inspire a sense of belonging

May 2021



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

- > SEEK proudly acknowledges Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's first peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities to Australian life and how this enriches us.

## Belonging is becoming an increasingly important area of focus for organisations in Australia's current employment landscape.

Belonging is a feeling. In the world of work, belonging can be described as a positive emotional connection a person feels with their employer or organisation, resulting from their experience as an employee or volunteer. Belonging has been linked to engagement, wellbeing and retention<sup>1</sup>.

This report explores contributing factors that combine to create a sense of belonging in employees, and more broadly, organisations.

SEEK continually conducts extensive research amongst employers and employees to gain insight into the current state of play as it relates to working lives. More recently, this has involved deep diving into the subject of belonging with both employees and employers.

Informed by this research, this paper provides suggestions as well as best-practice examples from leading Australian brands. It aims to provide organisations with a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to belonging, so that they can work towards ensuring this emotional connection is as positive as it can be.

### Belonging in the workplace

Successfully inspiring a sense of belonging among employees is complex and will differ across organisations. But broadly speaking, there are key elements that underpin belonging.



#### Elements of belonging: organisational trust, inclusion, company culture, purpose and values

This paper will focus on organisational trust and inclusion, as well as the importance of values and the role they play in company culture.

Employees who form a positive emotional connection with their employer are likely to have higher engagement and an optimised contribution to the business<sup>2</sup>.

SEEK Group Human Resources Director **Kathleen McCudden** says belonging will be a crucial area for employers to focus on in 2021 and beyond.

"For many people, the global pandemic has led to personal and professional introspection, with people taking stock and evaluating their lives. Given the amount of time we spend at work, it seems even more important for people to enjoy what they do and know that their contribution matters."

McCudden says creating a sense of belonging in a workplace is best fostered by building a strong sense of community and connection amongst people.

"In our experience, when our people feel connected with our company purpose and the people that they work with, they are more engaged in their work. One of our core beliefs at SEEK is creating an environment where individuals feel valued, so belonging is an essential ingredient to the culture we want to create here," McCudden says.

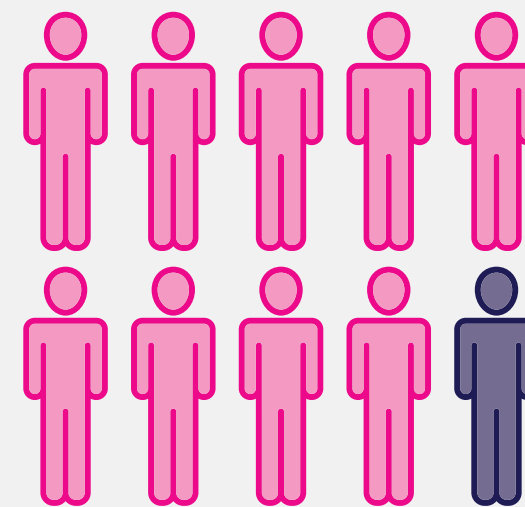
"In an anthropological sense, the need to belong is one of our most significant human drivers. Throughout history, if we didn't belong, we would be excluded from our tribe and unable to survive alone."

- Sabina Read, SEEK Resident Psychologist

"Based on the feedback from our graduate intake this year, one of the key differentiators as to why the graduates chose SEEK over other competing offers, was due to the warmth and personal connection they experienced during our hiring process. This made the graduate candidates feel valued and gave them an idea of what it would feel like to belong at SEEK."

"This illustrates how connecting on a human level and demonstrating the culture in a tangible way, can attract the best talent and make people feel valued, even before they join."

SEEK conducted a bespoke study entitled *Fostering belonging within organisations* (Feb-Mar 2021). This study surveyed 234 HR professionals in Australia on the topics of diversity and inclusion, belonging and their organisation's related initiatives. The SEEK Belonging study provided a broad outlook of how organisations currently perceive, understand and build belonging in the workplace.



**9 in 10** HR professionals feel it is important for employees to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in the workplace.

Source: SEEK Belonging study, 2021

### Belonging as an individual

Belonging is also a personal perception, **SEEK** Resident Psychologist, **Sabina Read** explains.

"Belonging is the perception of acceptance, inclusion and identity. It is the subjective assessment of the strength of our connections and the significance of the contribution and value we have to those around us."

While it is subjective, there are common factors that can contribute to an individual's sense of belonging.

According to research<sup>3</sup>, three mutually reinforcing attributes help people to feel a sense of belonging at work:

- **COMFORT:** I feel like I am treated fairly and respected.
- **CONNECTION:** I feel connected to people I work with as well as the teams I am part of.
- **CONTRIBUTION:** I contribute to meaningful outcomes and play a part in achieving common goals.

Read expands on these attributes and how they interact, enabling individuals to be their 'whole self' at work:

"In many ways, it's an artificial delineation to separate the 'working self' and the 'personal self' in a person, and it's often difficult to say where one starts and the other one ends," she explains.

"If we don't know who we are, or we feel as though we can't bring our whole selves to the working table, then we live and work with a sense of discomfort."

"If we're not comfortable as individuals then it affects our ability to connect with other people because we feel the need to wear some kind of mask, or we edit ourselves and our behaviour."

"These hurdles can create a barrier to both connection and contribution, which often means we live with an impeded sense of belonging."

## Why belonging matters now

The importance of instilling a sense of belonging in organisations has been amplified, with two key factors at play: the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic upon many workplaces, and increased attrition that is anticipated to occur as the economy continues to stabilise.

Put simply, providing an environment where employees truly want to work and where they feel that they belong is an advantage to organisations in competitive times marked by instability and disruption.

### COVID-19's impact on belonging at work

The pandemic deeply disrupted Australia's economy and workforce, with complex and varied impacts felt across industries.

Looking broadly, detrimental impacts of the pandemic to employees and workplaces may include:

- Physical isolation
- Redundancies, reduced hours and pay
- Forced leave
- Reduced focus on inclusive initiatives
- Reduced 'staff perks'

McCudden expands on the far-reaching and deeply felt consequences of COVID-19: "The impact of the pandemic extends beyond the realm of work – for many people, there is a fundamental shift in how we view our lives and the world we live in. It's prompting questions about where we want to work, who we work with and the contribution we're making. People have high expectations of their employers and of executive leaders – this has become even more important to our sense of security and connection in the world today."

SEEK conducts regular research<sup>4</sup> among candidates and hirers. In November 2020, research revealed the following insights illustrating employee sentiment in the wake of COVID-19:

**57%** of Australian candidates feel secure in their current role

**50%** of Australians feel optimistic about future job prospects

On an individual level, Read says many people found that their sense of comfort, connection and contribution – key elements of belonging – were ruptured in the wake of the pandemic. "Many of us feel uncertain about the future, our role, or where we fit in the world. Our confidence and capacity to contribute have been challenged and as a result our sense of belonging can take a hit."

SEEK research<sup>5</sup> also illustrates an opportunity for Australian organisations to prioritise a sense of belonging and connection following an unprecedented period of uncertainty:

**68%** of active job seekers agree that looking for a job is overwhelming (November 2020)

**49%** of Australian employees feel in control of their working life (October 2020)

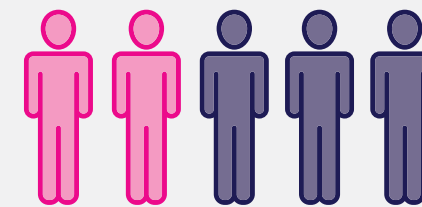
**57%** of employees believe that finding new ways to 'bond' with the team in this new environment is challenging (September 2020)

**56%** of employees believe that 'team bonding' has become more important since COVID (September 2020)

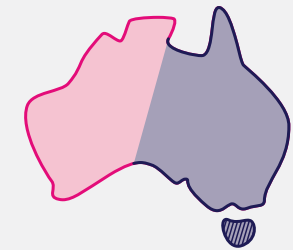
SEEK research also found that an organisation's response to COVID-19 is more likely to be taken into consideration by employees whose working situation was negatively impacted by the pandemic (July 2020).

## Anticipated attrition

It is expected that in late 2021, attrition levels may rise and there may be increased employee movement as the economic impact of COVID-19 stabilises.



**2 in 5** Australian employees say they are likely to change jobs this year



**41%** of Australian employees agree that COVID has made them rethink their career

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

### Significant contributors to this expected increase in attrition include:

**Increased demand for candidates:** March 2021 saw the highest ever number of job ads posted on SEEK in its 23-year history.<sup>6</sup> While April 2020 saw job ads on SEEK plummet 64% year-on-year, November 2020 delivered a return to positive year-on-year national job ad growth and job ad levels have continued to rise. Consequently, there is now more opportunity for Australians in the job market.

**A shift in employee priorities:** SEEK research<sup>7</sup> reveals for many people, security overtook salary when considering a new job, with 39% of Australians agreeing they would consider moving to an industry/job that is less likely to be impacted by events like COVID-19 (July 2020).

**Delayed attrition:** As of January 2021, 31% of employees surveyed were planning to leave their current employment though decided to stay because of COVID-19. Adding to this may be delayed natural attrition and movement from employees who 'settled' for less suitable roles to secure employment.

**Reflection:** People have had the opportunity to reflect on major life decisions and experiences and this has prompted reconsideration, with 41% of Australian employees agreeing that COVID has made them rethink their career (July 2020).

Additionally, it's likely there will also be **a less risk-averse environment** as we head toward 'COVID normal'.

With these factors combined, retention is likely to be a key challenge for employers to address in 2021, therefore bringing the importance of belonging into the spotlight.

## The current belonging landscape

The sense of belonging in organisations isn't universally measured in Australia. The SEEK Belonging study found that 9 in 10 HR professionals identify belonging as important, though only 4 in 10 note that their organisation specifically measure it.

This could be an untapped opportunity in many instances, as belonging is an influential factor in retention.

While the current status of belonging is hard to define, insights on the adjacent page paint a picture of the landscape in which employers must work to address belonging.

SEEK research<sup>8</sup> (August 2020) found a majority of Australian employees surveyed see opportunity for positive change in their

workplace, with 65% believing there is something that could be improved in their current role.

There also appears to be room for improvement around identity and the ability to express oneself within Australian organisations. **When asked, only 19% of employees strongly agree with the statement, "I feel accepted at my workplace". Even less, 17% of Australian employees strongly agree with the statement, "I can truly be myself at my workplace".** (January 2021)

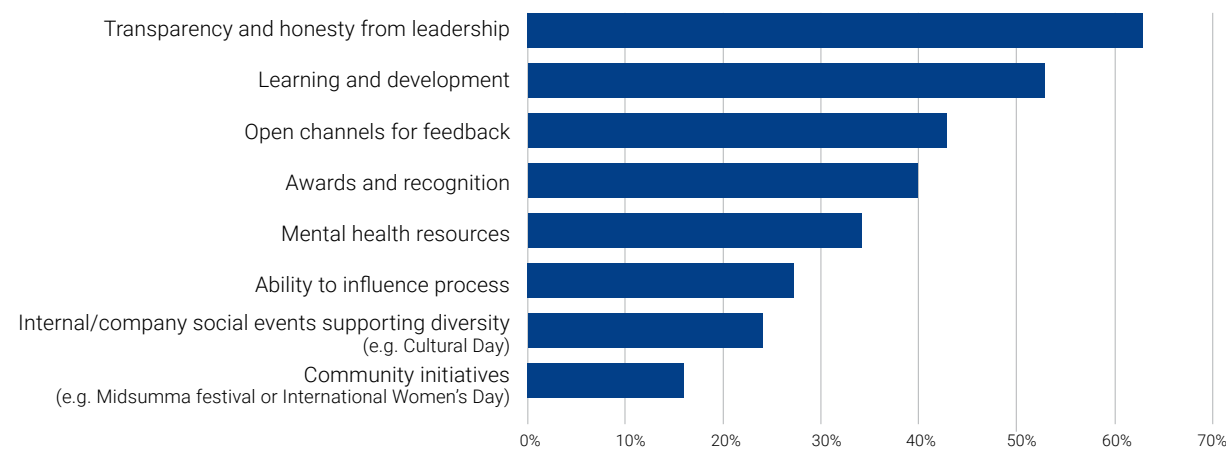
As inclusion, acceptance and comfort are key to an individual's sense of belonging in an organisation, SEEK research highlights opportunity for organisations and their leaders to create more accepting and inclusive workplaces.



### Perspectives on belonging

In January 2021, SEEK asked employees which attributes they believe contribute most when establishing a sense of belonging in the workplace. 'Transparency and honesty from leadership' is perceived as the most influential factor to establishing a sense of belonging, followed by 'learning and development', 'open channels for feedback' and 'awards and recognition'.

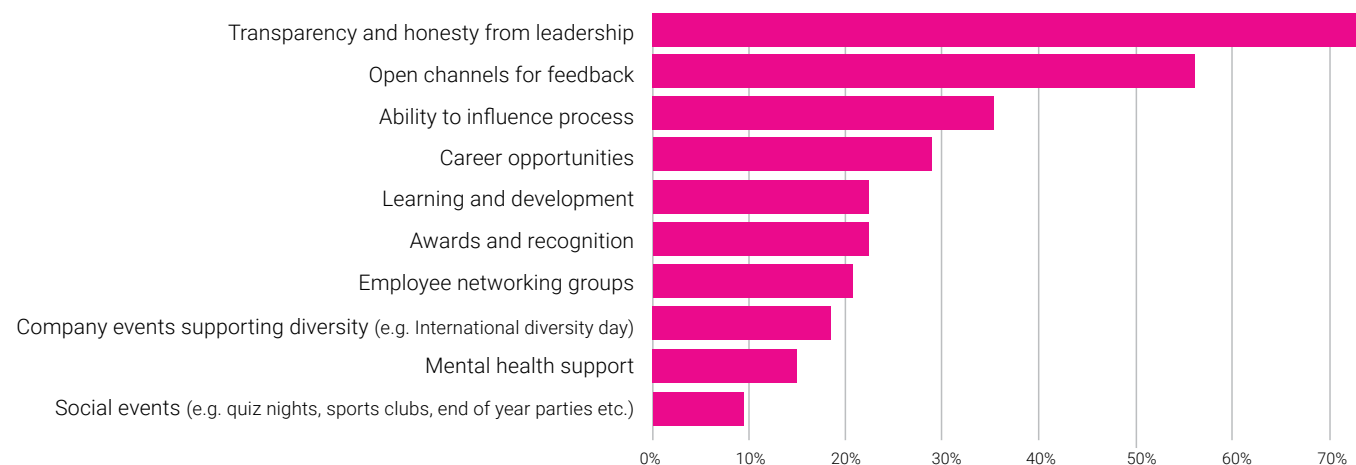
#### WORKPLACE ATTRIBUTES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ESTABLISHING BELONGING ACCORDING TO EMPLOYEES



Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4800 Australians annually. January 2021.

This is largely consistent with the beliefs of HR Professionals, who similarly identified 'transparency and honesty from leadership' and 'open channels for feedback' as the most important contributors when establishing a sense of belonging at work.

#### KEY ATTRIBUTES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO A SENSE OF BELONGING ACCORDING TO EMPLOYERS



Source: The SEEK Belonging study

some of the employee sentiment and insights related to belonging detailed throughout this report may seem discouraging, it is positive to see that perception of what constitutes belonging in the workplace is for the most part consistent between employees and employers. This alignment may indicate a clearer path forward towards increased belonging in the workplace.

### Measuring belonging

Belonging is the key contributor to an employee's sense of inclusion, according to **Culture Amp** Director of Equitable Design, Product & People, **Aubrey Blanche**.

"The largest driver of inclusion is belonging, which is a complex construct," Blanche says.

Typically, organisations say that they measure inclusion through an engagement survey. The SEEK Belonging study found that two thirds (67%) of HR professionals identified that their organisation uses an engagement survey to measure the sentiment of inclusion among their employees.

However, while belonging is closely linked to engagement, engagement doesn't necessarily indicate a strong sense of belonging.

Culture Amp separates engagement and belonging as being from different perspectives. "Belonging is the feeling that someone is seen and valued as a part of a community, according to an individual," Blanche says. "Engagement is the amount of investment an individual has in their company and is measured from the perspective of the organisation."

Culture Amp and Diversity Council Australia (DCA) suggest that both an engagement survey and inclusion index could be used to measure the holistic employee experience more accurately.

## THE DCA INCLUSION INDEX

- > **Diversity Council Australia (DCA)** developed Inclusion@Work to help organisations measure inclusion, which provides insight into the potential for belonging.

"We started off looking at how to define inclusion so we could then effectively measure it," says **Dr Jane O'Leary**, **DCA** Director of Research. "Inclusion occurs when the collective staff experience results in being respected, connected, progressing and being able to contribute at work."

DCA then created the Inclusion@Work survey, which measures these elements to deliver a picture of the state of play of diversity and inclusion in organisations.

"Another benefit of the survey is that organisations that participate are provided with their own particular business case," O'Leary says. "This can show, for instance, the extent to which inclusion in their workplace is linked to innovation, effectiveness, effort, customer satisfaction, job satisfaction, and retention."



Both employees and employers believe that **transparency and honesty from leadership** is the most influential driver in belonging at work, the SEEK Belonging study found.

### Why trust matters

Trust is fundamental within organisations – not least because it is an influential factor in retention. Employees who trust their organisation, and feel that the organisation is genuine and authentic in its actions and intentions, are more likely to build strong positive emotional connections and want to stay.<sup>9</sup> Trust enables comfort and connection; expanding on the notion of comfort, connection and contribution, trust is therefore a foundation for belonging.

SEEK Resident Psychologist **Sabina Read** expands on the fundamentals of cultivating trust in the workplace:

### Openness and vulnerability

“Trust is a complex construct, and in many ways its complexity sits in the fact is that it’s a subjective feeling based on our experiences, expectations, beliefs and values,” Read says. “In order to cultivate trust, we need to have some vulnerability and show something of ourselves. As a leader, manager or recruiter in the employment market, if we show nothing of ourselves then it’s very difficult to invite or ask someone to share with us.”

### Transparency and delivering on intent

“It’s important to acknowledge that vulnerability and transparency aren’t enough on their own to constitute the building of trust to build constructive relationships,” Read says. Reliability and integrity – or delivering on intent – are also key, she explains.

“Reliability, consistency and competence are key to fostering trust – the idea that someone has the capability and capacity to act in the way that you expect they would, or the way in which they tell you they can,” Read says.

“Trust starts with honest communication and can be cemented by delivering on what has been expressed. As an employer, you should never promise something that you don’t know for certain you can deliver on. Instead focus on what you know: ‘This is what we can do at this time, these pieces are in our control and we will stand by it’. It takes time to cultivate trust, though it takes much longer to rebuild trust once it is lost or questioned.”

The importance of transparent communication is further reinforced when considering employee sentiment on how organisations responded to COVID-19, with 70% of employees saying a well-received response to COVID-19 can boost a company’s desirability (July 2020).

### CASE STUDY

## SEEK: Trust and transparency in a time of upheaval

For many organisations, COVID-19 highlighted the importance of maintaining trust and communicating openly with employees.

SEEK’s approach was to focus on frequent communication and transparency, not only in response to the impacts of the pandemic but also the sense of uncertainty it created, according to **SEEK** Group Human Resources Director **Kathleen McCudden**.

“During the pandemic our people were anxious about job security, adjusting to remote working and dealing with family challenges. This made it made even more important to listen to people and understand how their personal situation may affect their work,” McCudden says.

Several factors made the response to COVID more complex, such as getting people set up to work from home and ensuring teams stayed connected. “It was an extraordinary time, with personal and work lives intertwined to a level we had not seen before. People were looking for reassurance from the leaders at SEEK, as well as practical and emotional support from their work environment,” McCudden says.

Some key principles guided SEEK’s approach during this time:

- **Ensuring regular two-way communication.** “We needed to create forums for everyone across the business to hear from our leaders and create an opportunity for two-way communication. It was important to hear about the significant issues playing on people’s minds.”
- **Being vulnerable.** McCudden explains that a simple but powerful action was to start these forums by asking each leader, ‘How are you?’, giving them the chance to share their own feelings and experiences. “We also ensured that we normalised responses,” she adds. “There was no right way to be reacting, some people felt overwhelmed where others were taking it in their stride. We reinforced the message that however each of us was coping was perfectly OK and appropriate.”
- **Being open and transparent.** “When decisions were made, it was essential to share the context about ‘why’ a decision was made, as well as the ‘what’ about the decision itself,” McCudden says. SEEK also made clear what was and was not being considered in response to the pandemic. “For example, despite the impact to revenue, we made sure that people knew that we were not planning to make any roles redundant, reduce salaries or cut back people’s work hours. We were upfront about wanting to protect people’s roles and their earnings, but other measures involving reducing discretionary spend were implemented, and the logic for decisions was shared so that people understood.”

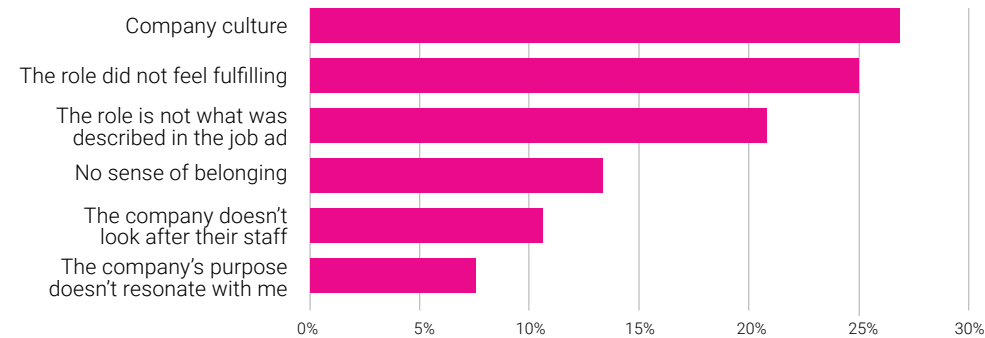
While this approach was taken in response to the pandemic, McCudden notes that SEEK has a similar approach in its day-to-day core business. “It is vital that we continue to listen to our people’s feedback to adapt and improve our workplace and our work practices.”

## Authenticity from the outset

Communicating with authenticity is crucial from the first point of contact with a candidate – not just once they join the organisation. This includes authentic promotion of the role and genuine representation of the organisation's Employee Value Proposition (EVP). A lack of authenticity during the hiring process may lead to issues in an employee's experience during their first few months in an organisation.

SEEK research<sup>9</sup> found that among Australians who recently changed jobs, more than 1 in 2 participants (56%) stated that they were already searching for alternative employment, with the reasoning as follows:

### WHAT TRIGGERED YOU TO WANT TO LEAVE YOUR CURRENT JOB AND LOOK FOR ANOTHER ONE WITHIN 6 MONTHS OF STARTING?



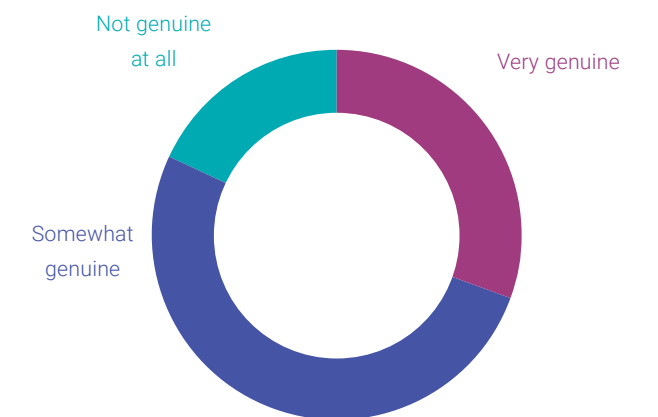
Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually. January 2021.

Among the reasons, 'The role is not what was described in the job ad' and 'Company culture' stand out as linked to authenticity. These findings highlight the importance of representing an accurate EVP. If an organisation is authentic during the hiring process, promising only what it truly can deliver, it may save wasted resources and time on a candidate who wasn't right for that role, and may be able to reduce attrition related to these reasons.

The research also highlighted the importance of authenticity in actions and initiatives. SEEK asked employees across multiple industries and organisation sizes whether they felt that business leaders addressed Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) genuinely within their organisation. Just 27% of employees felt that business leaders in their organisation were very genuine when addressing D&I, with 16% flagging that leaders didn't seem genuine at all.

It is important to acknowledge that organisations may face challenges in appearing authentic or genuine when it comes to addressing D&I. Firstly, whether something is genuine can be subjective. The adjoining insights reflect the view of employees, rather than the intention of their leaders. Secondly, it may be that leaders are still learning how to approach D&I effectively. The SEEK Belonging study found that 64% of HR professionals interviewed were either developing or implementing their organisation's D&I strategy in the next 12 months. See more about the challenges that organisations face around approaching D&I in the following section on page 14.

### WHEN DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IS ADDRESSED AT YOUR WORKPLACE, HOW GENUINE DOES IT FEEL?



Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually. January 2021.

# 03

## THE NEED FOR INCLUSION

As highlighted earlier in this report, a feeling of being included – and able to be one’s whole self at work – is integral to establishing a sense of belonging.

Examining results of the SEEK Belonging study, Australian HR professionals are aware of the significant role that inclusion plays in retention, engagement and satisfaction.



**90%** of HR professionals believe that an effective D&I approach can increase staff engagement and satisfaction



**78%** believe that it affects attrition

SEEK asked Australian employees<sup>10</sup> about how they feel in relation to several components that contribute to belonging, including their sense of value, acceptance and inclusion at work. The results showed that there is room for growth in these areas.

**only 17%** of employees strongly agree with the statement, **I can truly be myself at my workplace**

**only 19%** of employees strongly agree with the statement, **I feel accepted at my workplace**

**only 16%** of employees strongly agree with the statement, **my employer values and celebrates diversity**



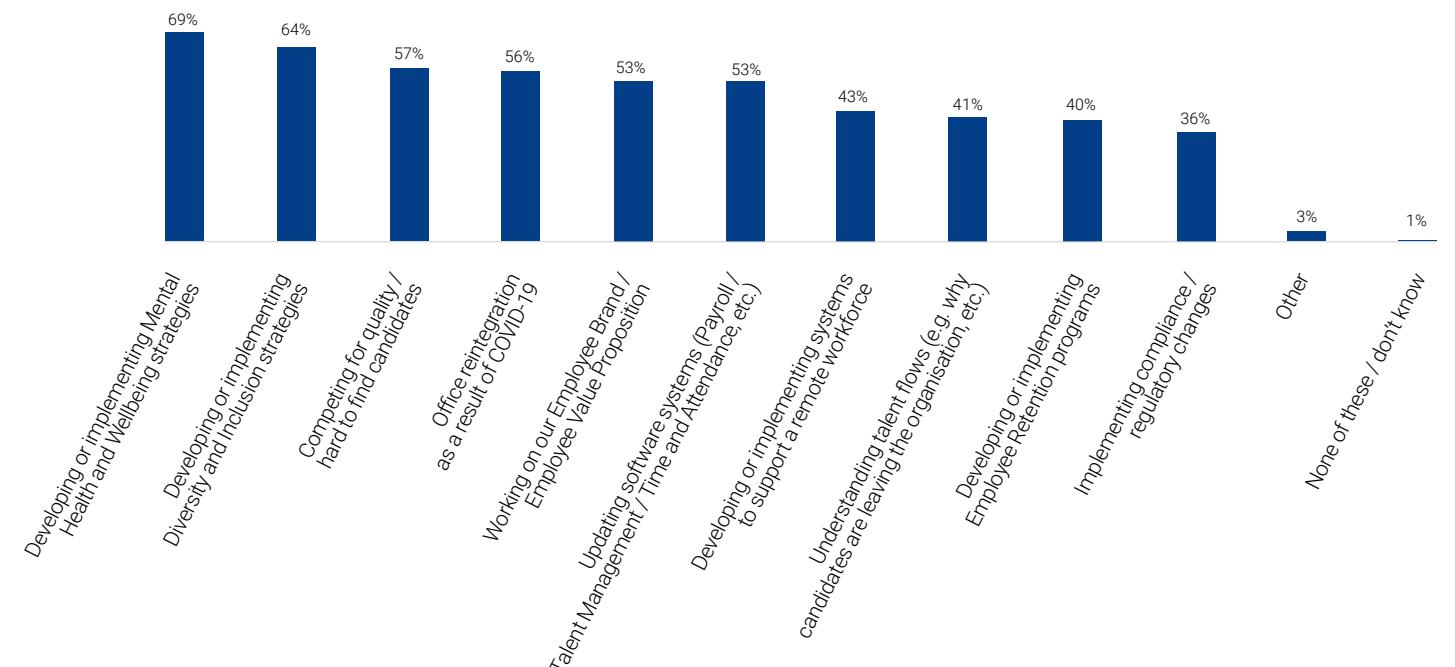
### The current state of play

Among organisations, the SEEK Belonging study uncovered a sense that workplace inclusion is a process of constant improvement rather than an end point, with 1 in 6 HR professionals noting that there is significant work to do in their company in relation to D&I.

COVID-19 appears to have prompted a period of review and development: 64% of Australian HR professionals noted their organisations are either developing or implementing strategies in the next 12 months, which is promising for the progress of inclusion in Australian workplaces.

In terms of focus areas for organisations, inclusion strategies (specifically with a focus on mental health and wellbeing), were noted as top priorities this year. This is also promising, as creating an environment where employees feel supported and safe to share is fundamental to building a sense of belonging. Wellbeing and belonging will be addressed further in the next section of this paper.

### HR INITIATIVES WITHIN ORGANISATIONS



Source: The SEEK Belonging study



### Key challenges to inclusion and belonging in Australia

In order to establish solutions, it's important to understand the common challenges faced by organisations in their approach to inclusion, and by extension the potential for belonging. Dr Jane O'Leary from Diversity Council Australia (DCA) suggests organisations step back and review their D&I strategies to ensure they're looking at the big picture and real issues, rather than rolling out independent initiatives without a structured strategy and action plan to make authentic change.

"What we often see is that people are passionate to make positive change and they can be so focussed on jumping to action that they may not take the time to identify what the real issue is, and what action is really going to address this issue. That's the clarity that DCA provides, we identify the real issues and draw on the research to reveal the solutions that work. This is DCA's unique position, providing evidence-based guidance to organisations on how to create diversity and inclusion in organisations."

Three of the key challenges faced are highlighted below.

#### 1 LACK OF EXPERIENCE

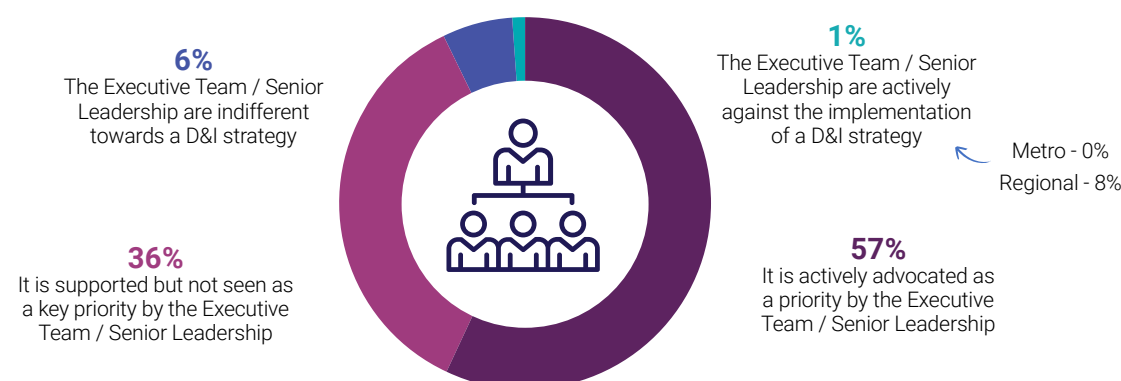
According to Australian HR professionals, lack of experience – or not knowing how to discuss D&I in the workplace – is a main challenge to meaningful progress.



Source: The SEEK Belonging study

#### 2 SUPPORT FROM SENIOR STAFF VARIES

Another significant challenge faced by Australian organisations is prioritisation. While many organisations are in the development stage and have identified D&I as a key focal point, prioritisation varies across these organisations.



Source: The SEEK Belonging study

#### 3 CONSIDERING IDENTITY

O'Leary also references a challenging component emerging in Australian D&I strategies around identity.

She says it is important to acknowledge that identity can be fluid when considering inclusion and belonging, which can challenge traditional management approaches. "Our identities often change based on the context – where we are and who we're with," O'Leary says. "This shifting contextual identity is a real complexity in addressing diversities within the workplace."

"We also see complexity because some parts of our identity can be visible and others invisible," O'Leary adds, noting that for some people, cultural background may not be apparent, while others may have an invisible disability.

Incorporating how a person identifies is key to establishing and appreciating the diversity they bring, and ensuring that they feel included in a way that encompasses their full identity.

#### CASE STUDY

### BHP: Broadening the focus of inclusion

A 130-year-old organisation with more than 80,000 people working across its global locations, BHP is committed to building diverse and inclusive teams that represent the communities it is part of.

"For us, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) is much broader than equal representation in the workplace," says **Rachael Jamieson**, BHP Global Head of Talent Acquisition.

"As much as we're focused on attracting diverse candidates, we are equally focused on building a whole life experience for our people, where everyone feels they belong and are supported to realise their full potential.

"To do this, we know we have to invest in our leaders to build their capability to create inclusive cultures.

"Not just because it's the right thing to do but because we know it brings real value to our business. Our own data shows that inclusive and diverse teams are safer, more productive and more engaged. There is a deep appreciation of this across our global business."

Jamieson explains that for BHP, inclusion and diversity is an ongoing process.

"Being a truly inclusive and diverse workplace is an ongoing aspiration – we will always strive to be better. It is a constantly evolving journey that requires regular input from BHP's people," Jamieson says.

"Our people will always have a voice in helping us get better as an organisation and to co-create a culture where everyone feels safe to bring their full selves to work."

D&I is not just an internal focus for BHP. This showed through during COVID-19 with the BHP Labour Market Outreach program, which sought to support industry partners who were in the difficult position of having to reduce jobs.

"Through this process we were able to partner closely with people who found themselves without a job unexpectedly and offer them opportunities at BHP," Jamieson says.

"These could be people who were new to the industry and had never considered a career in mining before who found a career and purpose, until those industry partners were able to resume operations." An example includes cabin crews from the aviation industry becoming support team members in BHP's operations and offices.

"Our focus on D&I does not end with our operations. We are part of a bigger ecosystem; the communities, governments, industry and society where we live and work. Working in partnership with others is key to achieving progress at a regional, national and international level," Jamieson says.

The importance of wellbeing support within organisations has emerged clearly, particularly in the area of mental health. For many organisations, 2020 changed the perception of what can and should be spoken about in the workplace, and opened up a dialogue around mental health, providing an opportunity to strengthen and continue the conversation.

**SEEK** Resident Psychologist **Sabina Read** explains that the link between employee belonging and mental health centres on creating an environment where employees feel safe to admit they are struggling or are experiencing a shift in their mental state, free from stigma or fear of judgement.

Read says three experiences are key to this environment:

- **Confidence:** Confidence is about being accepted, whereas belonging is having that known and shared within the team.
- **Comfort:** Being able to bring your whole self to work whatever that self, experience or thoughts are.
- **Support:** Understanding that if you needed it, there is acknowledgement of and support for your mental health in your workplace.

## Strengthening wellbeing support in times of crises

**SEEK** Group Human Resources Director **Kathleen McCudden** says **SEEK**'s approach to wellbeing is founded on providing employees with opportunities to enhance their own mental health and wellbeing, as well as supporting their workmates. "The events of 2020 meant that we had to elevate our focus on people's wellbeing to a whole new level," McCudden explains. **SEEK** responded by expanding the wellbeing support available to its people, guided by a three-tiered approach focused on the individual, leaders, and the organisation. This included providing access to and encouraging the use of practical resources and support, while ensuring that individuals who needed specialised support received it.

### > Creating a safe space to share

Part of **SEEK**'s approach included ensuring an open dialogue with the time and space for people to share what they are feeling, and to validate and normalise these feelings. "Ultimately, our goal has been to create an environment where people take individual responsibility for their wellbeing, are comfortable to discuss their personal circumstances and feel well supported and cared for by **SEEK**," McCudden says.

### > Increasing what 'flexibility' means

Access to flexible work arrangements were a critical part of supporting employee wellbeing through this time. **SEEK** extended the existing carer's leave policy to cover remote education and caring for children at home. This saw a strong uptake, with 75% of employees reporting they had accessed flexible work arrangements more frequently since the beginning of the pandemic. "When the juggle between trying to work remotely, home schooling and caring for family members became all too difficult – we encouraged people to take time out," McCudden says. "We updated and promoted our workplace flexibility guidelines and materials to reflect COVID-19 circumstances, with employees supported to work in a way that best suited their unique circumstances."

## How leaders can make others feel comfortable

Extending on her advice about the experiences of comfort, confidence and support in relation to mental health and belonging, Read explains that there are actions leaders can take to make their people feel more comfortable.

"The way to build comfort in ourselves, and in the presence of others, is to connect with vulnerability, safety, and authenticity," Read says.

"Someone has to make the first move to inspire comfort and trust. We do this by sharing something honest of ourselves,

whether that's a perceived flaw or perhaps something personal, which elicits the same in those around us. When we reveal our true self and we feel accepted, we deem the environment to be safe enough to be vulnerable again, which inspires comfort, and connection, and the feeling of belonging."

When it comes to managing or leading teams, Read says it's important to note that while there is a universal human experience in wanting to belong, not everyone's experiences are the same. "We need to acknowledge that any individual who is part of a minority group has probably had numerous very real experiences of not belonging, and it's important these are validated, not minimised," she says.

## CASE STUDY

## ESTA: Proactive wellbeing support for employees

With the crucial role its people play in emergency situations, supporting employee wellbeing is paramount for Victoria's Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority (ESTA). The organisation's wellbeing approach comprises a combination of proactive initiatives as well as reactive mental health services and support.

"We want to create an ecosystem that supports and protects our people in a challenging environment," says **Shannon Pigram**, **ESTA** Manager of Talent and Organisational Development. "Ultimately, we understand the need to create a culture where it's ok to talk about anything and seek support."

**ESTA** provides a vital service to Victorians 24 hours a day, connecting the community with emergency services agencies through call-taking and dispatch. Its crucial role in Victoria's community requires assessment, resourcing and logistics. "Our call-takers are regularly exposed to traumatic and stressful situations as they help people on what is often the worst day of those individuals' lives," Pigram says.

Proactive wellbeing support is one element of **ESTA**'s approach. Accelerated wellbeing services were provided in response to COVID-19, with a content and education program focused on a new topic each month in 2020. "This included information and services on financial wellbeing, mindfulness, nutrition, sleep and shift work," Pigram says. An Active August month and random acts of coffee program have also been popular initiatives.

As well as these proactive initiatives, **ESTA** is committed to providing a strong in-house mental health support program. It offers Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselling, an on-site psychologist and an early intervention program.

A peer support program is also instrumental to **ESTA**'s approach and will be grown over the coming year, Pigram says. "This program provides an additional layer of help to our people, through a group of passionate volunteers with mental health training and lived experience in the triple zero environment, who can identify, acknowledge and refer any mental health concerns or issues."

At **ESTA**, supporting wellbeing is also about recognising an employee's whole self beyond their role, Pigram explains. "We don't accept our people as 'only' employees; we understand they have complex and busy lives." Encouraging and supporting employees to be their whole selves can ultimately contribute to building belonging, he adds. "We want people to be their authentic selves and to be connected to our purpose. We believe that if we achieve those two aims, we're well on the way to establishing a strong sense of belonging."

Purpose and values often shape an organisation's culture – an element that plays a crucial role in building a sense of belonging in the workplace.

For many employees, working at an organisation with clearly defined purpose and values has become increasingly important. This is especially the case with the growing portion of millennials in Australia's workforce who are more likely to prioritise purpose over profit, to contribute to a cause which reflects their personal values in order to 'make a difference'.<sup>11</sup>

If an employee is having a positive experience at an organisation, and contributing to a purpose that they believe in, they will be more loyal and effective in working towards business outcomes.<sup>12</sup>

An organisation's purpose – and the process of developing this purpose through broader team engagement – can also improve an employee's experience and contribute to retention.<sup>13</sup>

## TESTING YOUR PURPOSE

➤ Testing a purpose should be considered to optimise buy-in of the organisation to best represent their beliefs and aspirations. The following four steps can be considered when evolving your organisational purpose.

1. Explore: working group to capture qualitative sentiment.
2. Prioritise: quantitative review within the organisation.
3. Communicate: update employees as to the result and feedback.
4. Implement: deliver on intent and be open to feedback and ongoing evolution.

Source: PwC Putting Purpose to Work: A study of purpose in the workplace, 2016

### CASE STUDY

## Bunnings: How values shape experience and belonging

An iconic Australian brand – named the country's most trusted in 2020 – Bunnings is known for its community focus. A sense of connection and community is also fundamental to how the organisation operates, with its team of more than 50,000 team members across Australia and New Zealand including warehouses and trade and distribution centres.

"We operate our stores on the idea that 'we live here too' – so a strong connection with, and contribution to the local community is a priority," says **Mark McLaren, Bunnings** Head of Talent. "Whether that's through our famous sausage sizzles, local employment, community projects in local primary schools and scout associations, we are really dedicated to this community connection."

"Our authenticity in these actions means we attract people who also want to help and contribute. It helps our connection with our team, being able to deliver on that community contribution and it also helps our engagement, culture and retention."

Bunnings values – referred to internally as its guiding principles – are also key to the experience and engagement of team members, McLaren says. "Our team's guiding principles are integrity, respect, teamwork, achievement and innovation. These principles are the keys to our culture and to achieving our vision."

These guiding principles are instilled across its multiple locations and teams in unique ways. McLaren says this is achieved through enabling local leaders to own their own community connection and culture. "From a local perspective, we really like to empower our store leaders, they really feel like they run their own business and their own team," he says. "In each store, there are lots of independent initiatives to instil some fun and support Bunnings culture."

In line with the principles of integrity and innovation, the organisation is also focused on ensuring open channels for communication, McLaren says. "From a broader business-wide perspective, we always want to hear from our team, we've found feedback channels and two-way communication has been really key to maintaining engagement and understanding our community members."

Ultimately, anchoring to these guiding principles, building community connection and ensuring authentic communication also contributes to building a sense of belonging at Bunnings. "Belonging has to come from our team, they have to feel it," McLaren says. "What we can do is ensure they feel valued, through growth opportunities, development, instilling team spirit and providing a workplace which feels like a family, part of a winning team both culturally and professionally."



## Millennials in the workforce

Millennials are set to make up 75% of the workforce by 2025<sup>14</sup> – which should be a trigger for organisations to review and challenge their purpose and implementation to optimise employee experience in line with shifting expectations. Millennials as a generation are more focussed on community and values, for the most part driven by contributing to a cause that resonates with them.

### Attracting millennials

Considering millennials' significant representation in the workforce and unique priorities, organisations should be incorporating these key drivers into recruitment and EVP.

SEEK research reveals that in 2021, the top considerations for millennials when looking for new jobs are:

- 1 Work-life balance
- 2 Work environment/culture
- 3 Salary/bonus scheme

Millennials are also a group focused on setting themselves up for their future, so whether the role fits into their career plan and career progression opportunities within the company are also key considerations.

SEEK research also reveals additional considerations for employers when attracting millennials to shape roles or opportunities to best appeal to them:

**Flexibility:** Most millennials (75%) would like to work from home for at least one day per week – this can be promoted in job descriptions where industry allows. Millennials are the most likely group to make a tree change, with 1 in 5 (21%) indicating that they are considering moving to a regional area in the next two years. As such, offering flexibility and mobile solutions would be favourable (November 2020).

**Acceptance:** One third of millennials (33%) noted that they don't feel accepted in their workplace. This may highlight an opportunity for organisations to include a description of inclusive culture where it is true, perhaps including a testimonial from a current employee (January 2021).

**Progression:** More millennials listed their 2021 New Year's Resolution as stepping up in their career compared to other age groups, showing they are more focussed on progression and growth than other generations. Opportunity for development and growth is important to note when recruiting millennials (December 2020).

SEEK research found 2 in 5 Australian employees are likely to change jobs in 2021. The figure is even higher for millennials, with almost 1 in 2 (44%) in this cohort stating they plan to leave their jobs in 2021 (November 2020).

## CASE STUDY

## Canva: Anchoring to purpose and values in a changing environment

Visual communications platform Canva has made its name as one of Australia's most compelling start-up success stories. It now has a team of more than 1500 people working across the globe. And along this journey, Canva's culture has gained praise and recognition, too.

It's a culture that is underpinned by values – both in its foundation, and its continued growth, says **Crystal Boysen**, **Canva** Head of People. "To us, these values are far more than words on a page – they're the north star in guiding every action we take and every decision we make."

Boysen says Canva's six core company values are intentionally embedded in daily practices, and include:

1. *Set crazy big goals and make them happen*, which encourages taking on new challenges through setting 'audacious' goals.
2. *Be a good human*, which refers to individuals doing all they can to support each other and the wider community.
3. *Empower others*, based on supporting others to be their best selves and do their best work.
4. *Pursue excellence*, which encourages maintaining high standards and striving towards continuous growth.
5. *Make complex things simple*, encouraging intuitive and effective solutions, from products to team structure.
6. *Be a force for good*, which is brought to life initiatives such as paid time off for volunteering, and the newly created Canva Foundation.

Values have been key to uniting Canva's increasingly global workforce, Boysen explains. "While each office has a unique vibe and microculture, they're all very much aligned to our overall cultural values and the intentional ways in which we bring these to life," she says. "A celebration in Sydney might look slightly different to a celebration in Beijing and it's important we're able to bring these to life in a localised way while championing a cohesive global culture and sense of community across the globe."

Canva's values and culture have also been central to maintaining an engaged workforce during the pandemic, Boysen says. Various initiatives helped to bring these values to life in a remote environment. Canva worked with its 400+ employee clubs to enable them to continue running events virtually and moved health and fitness programs to an online format. An internal website was created as a "one-stop-shop" for employee remote working needs, and featured COVID-19 related communications and updates as well as play books, ideas and inspiration for team celebrations, fitness activities, weekly movies and at-home meals.

"We also introduced 'vibe champions' who are directly embedded into different areas of the business and work with team leads on fostering a strong sense of belonging, inspiration and connection," Boysen says. "Our vibe champions help coordinate remote events and celebrations, team activities and work to adapt the culture from our physical offices into an online world."

Boysen says Canva's values-driven culture has helped it to navigate more complex environments, first the challenges of remote working and now a transition to a 'hybrid' working world, while focusing on belonging along the way. "To us, culture is about far more than the gimmicky perks – it's about creating an environment of belonging, empowerment and inclusion where our team love coming to work each day."

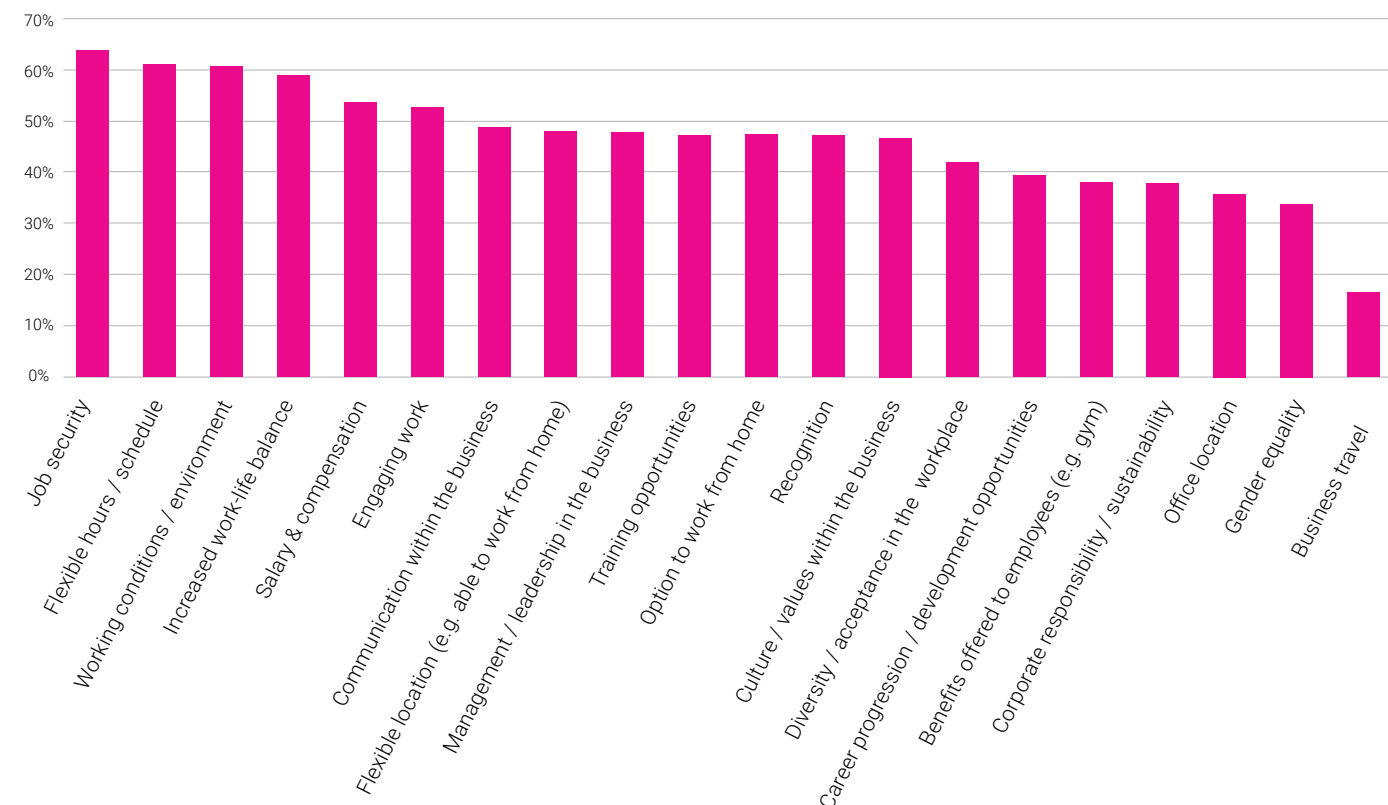


Following the unprecedented and challenging impacts to the way we work – and live – it is important for employers to understand how to reinforce connection and inspire a sense of belonging among their team members. Doing so may support efforts to increase retention and productivity, as well as helping individuals to feel more confident and positive.

Even before the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, stress levels in Australia had reached among the highest ever recorded, and this reinforces the need for security and stability in the workplace.<sup>15</sup>

SEEK asked employees how has the importance of each of the following factors changed when looking for a new job, compared to before the COVID-19 outbreak:

#### POST-COVID EMPLOYEE PRIORITIES



The above chart shows the % of employees who noted these factors were more important now than what they were pre-COVID when looking for a job.

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually (January 2021).

### What do employees want now?

The months ahead will be a time of trial, transition and experimentation for many organisations as they adjust to a new 'hybrid' model, mixing remote and on-site working.

As the country moves into this new phase – which may coincide with a period of increased attrition – understanding employee expectations and motivations may assist organisations in shaping the most effective model.

SEEK research reveals employee preferences and expectations relating to 'hybrid' working:

- 2 in 3 employees would choose to work at home at least once per week if they had the choice, with two days per week being the most popular choice (June 2020).
- When asked whether employees would apply for a job which doesn't allow working from home, 1 in 5 (23%) stated they were unlikely to consider the job if it didn't offer a flexible working model (July 2020).

SEEK Resident Psychologist **Sabina Read** says now is an opportune time for employers, HR leaders and organisations to consider what belonging means for their people and how they can best enable it in this new environment.

"People work differently and thrive under various conditions," Read says.

"Part of belonging, and particularly returning to the office after long periods of working from home means we need to acknowledge that not everyone is going to thrive in the traditional office setting.

"Now is the time to ask big questions. Talk to your people and listen to their concerns and needs. And ask yourself, do we need the whole workforce back in the office like they once were? For those who do choose to return, how can we meet their needs in new and innovative ways? And what ingredients will best foster a sense of belonging?"

### TOP CONSIDERATIONS TO INSPIRE BELONGING AT WORK IN 2021

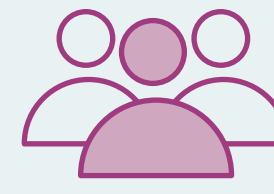
Of the organisations and experts who shared their experiences and insights on belonging at work, the following key takeaways emerged:



- **Frequent communication and transparency from leadership** can help to drive security and trust within an organisation – which can contribute to a sense of belonging. Establishing two-way communication and the opportunity for employees to provide feedback and voice concerns can further strengthen this trust in an organisation.



- **Proactive wellbeing initiatives** and reactive mental health support programs both play an important role in enhancing an employees' sense of acceptance. Creating an environment where employees feel safe to discuss mental health, free from stigma or judgement, is also key to building belonging.



- **Inclusion is intrinsic to belonging.** Progressive organisational approaches to inclusion are ingrained across employee experience, services, customers and industry. Considering the complexity of identity is also key when working to build an environment where everyone can belong.



- **Meaningful contribution inspires a sense of belonging.** Facilitating employee connection to a shared purpose and sense of community can help them to feel that their contribution is valued. This will be especially important as we continue to heal from the effects of the pandemic and navigate new working environments.

## About the research

SEEK dedicates resources to identifying trends and delivering insights on the Australian workforce and employment market.

SEEK's purpose is to help people live more fulfilling and productive working lives and help organisations succeed.

We are a market leader in online employment marketplaces, and we deliver world-class products informed by proactive research initiatives.

Get in touch with our research team to learn more about SEEK's current projects and where you can access further exclusive insights to optimise your business.

[Research@seek.com.au](mailto:Research@seek.com.au)

Generation definition used in this report:

- Gen Z, iGen, or Centennials: Born 1998 – TBD
- Millennials or Gen Y: Born 1980 – 1997
- Generation X: Born 1965 – 1979
- Baby Boomers: Born 1946 – 1964

Experts:

[Culture Amp – Leading People & Culture Platform](#)

[Diversity Council Australia – Leading Diversity & Inclusion in the workplace](#)

**Sabina Read** – SEEK Resident Psychologist

**Kathleen McCudden** – SEEK Group Human Resource Director

This report is informed by research conducted by and on behalf of SEEK:

**SEEK candidate and employee research:** Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

**SEEK Belonging study:** SEEK conducted a bespoke study entitled *Fostering belonging within organisations*<sup>16</sup>, independent research conducted by Honeycomb Strategy interviewing 234 Australian HR Professionals (February 2021).

## References

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Business Review reference to Better Up research:

<https://hbr.org/2019/12/the-value-of-belonging-at-work>

Belonging is good for business: "Belonging is good for business. If workers feel like they belong, companies reap substantial bottom-line benefits. High belonging was linked to a whopping 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days."

Full research report here:

[https://get.betterup.co/rs/600-WTC-654/images/BetterUp\\_BelongingReport\\_091019.pdf](https://get.betterup.co/rs/600-WTC-654/images/BetterUp_BelongingReport_091019.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> 2020 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends survey:

<https://www2.deloitte.com/cn/en/pages/human-capital/articles/global-human-capital-trends-2020.html>

<sup>4</sup> Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

<sup>5</sup> Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

<sup>6</sup> SEEK Employment Report, April 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

<sup>8</sup> Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

<sup>9</sup> Harvard Business Review reference to Better Up research:

<https://hbr.org/2019/12/the-value-of-belonging-at-work>

Full research report here:

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<sup>10</sup> Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4,800 Australians annually.

<sup>11</sup> [PwC – Digital Pulse – Millennials on the rise](#)

<sup>12</sup> 79% of business leaders surveyed by PwC believe that an organisation's purpose is central to business success:

<https://www.pwc.com/us/en/about-us/corporate-responsibility/assets/pwc-putting-purpose-to-work-purpose-survey-report.pdf>

ALSO: When organisations get employee experience right, they can achieve twice the customer satisfaction and innovation, and generate 25% higher profits, than those that don't:

<https://www.avanade.com/en-us/thinking/workplace-experience/mit-cisr-research>

<sup>13</sup> Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends 2014: Engaging the 21st-century workforce:

<https://documents.deloitte.com/insights/HCTrends2014>

<sup>14</sup> PwC, Millennials at work: Reshaping the workplace: <https://www.pwc.com/co/es/publicaciones/assets/millennials-at-work.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> According to the 2017–18 ABS NHS, an estimated 13% or 2.4 million Australians aged 18 and over reported high or very high levels of psychological distress, a 12% increase from 2014–15 (11.7% or 2.1 million Australians):

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/stress-and-trauma>

<sup>16</sup> SEEK Belonging Study.

