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BELONGING IS THE NEW ENGAGEMENT

Collaboration with **Ulster University** and **inclusio**, the science-based Culture and DEI experts.



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Sandra's career spanned 20 years in the global telecoms industry and five years at Dublin City University, where she established the DCU Centre of Excellence for Diversity and Inclusion and in 2020, spun-out **inclusio**. Sandra is an Organisational Psychologist and NLP Master Practitioner. Over the past 18 years she has championed and driven diversity and inclusion practice across industry and is considered a leading expert.

In 2014, she was involved in establishing the EU Diversity Charter Ireland. In 2020 Sandra was a member of the Expert Advisory Group for Ireland's Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality and is on the Leadership Advisory Council for An Garda Síochána.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

inclusio in collaboration with Ulster University launched this study in the new Research Series which looks at organisational culture, equality, diversity, and inclusion. The first in the series focuses on the sense of 'belonging' within organisations and how it relates to other key factors such as engagement, team involvement, problem solving around work related barriers, and levels of organisational commitment. The aims of the study were to understand 'belonging' in the workplace culture and how it affects employee performance and wellbeing.

This is the first of the **inclusio** Research Series published in a cross-border collaboration with Ulster University Business School. The research was undertaken in response to a growing workplace trend that shows employees who

feel a sense of belonging are 50% more likely to contribute to their team's success. The evidence suggests that a sense of 'belonging' plays an important role in understanding how individuals work in teams and how they work through barriers and problems. More importantly it can have a key role, along with both team involvement and problem solving, in understanding how individuals feel connected or committed to their work.

inclusio in partnership with Ulster University assessed three years of scientific data that **inclusio** has captured on organisational culture from employees across Ireland and globally; and includes analysis of other published belonging research from across the globe.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE:

- Employees who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to be engaged and committed to their organisation.
- Evidence suggests that a sense of 'belonging' has an important role in understanding how individuals work in teams both in-person and virtually
- The definition of belonging has expanded to encompass virtual connections and a sense of inclusion despite physical distance

inclusio puts science into culture change by levelling the playing field for all employees. We help organisations adapt to meet regulatory, investor, customer, and employee expectations on culture and diversity. Employees get to develop themselves and build the organisations they want to work for. This important collaboration with our academic partner Ulster University is a real example of how data can be used to understand some of the more challenging aspects of workplace culture.

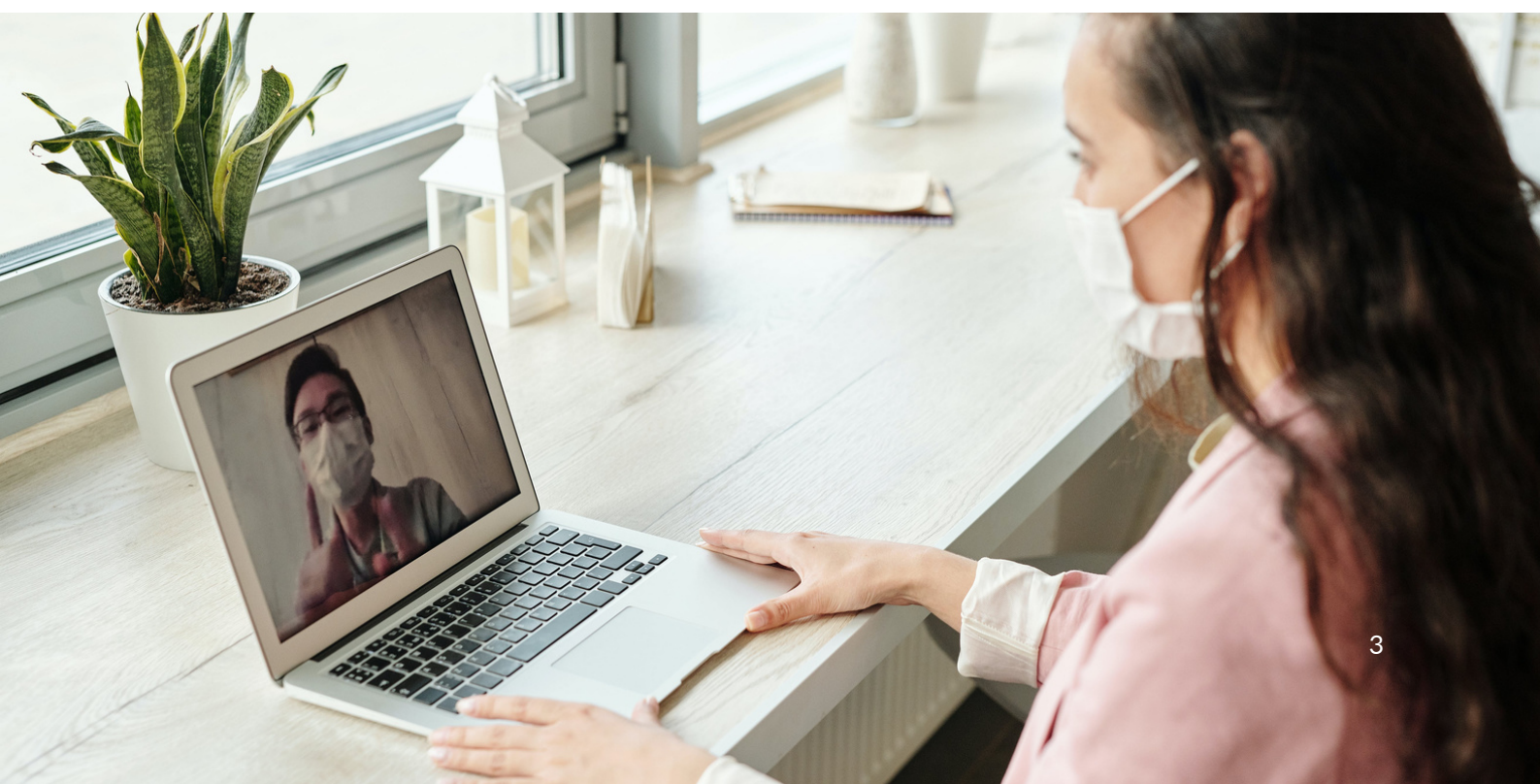
KEY CONTEXT: POST-COVID AND REMOTE/ HYBRID WORKING WORLD

The concept of belonging has undergone significant evolution in the post-COVID remote/ hybrid workplace. Previously, belonging was often associated with physical presence in a shared office space – employees could gain a sense of belonging through organic interactions, participating in team activities, and being part of a cohesive work environment. However, with the shift to remote and hybrid work arrangements, the definition of belonging has expanded to encompass virtual connections and a sense of inclusion despite physical distance.

Additionally, the post-Covid remote/ hybrid workplace has seen a greater emphasis on inclusivity and diversity in fostering a sense of belonging. Organisations are recognising the importance of creating an inclusive work environment where employees from diverse backgrounds feel valued, respected, and included. By prioritising inclusivity, organisations can ensure that all employees feel a sense of belonging, regardless of their physical location or work arrangement.

By engaging with these external communities, employees can access resources, share knowledge, and build relationships that contribute to their overall sense of belonging and professional growth – effectively supporting their overall workplace engagement in an expansive and unprecedented way.

Now, the concept of belonging in the post-COVID remote/ hybrid workplace extends beyond the boundaries of the organisation. Employees have the opportunity to connect with a broader network of professionals through virtual conferences, industry forums, and online communities. This expanded network allows individuals to find a sense of belonging within their professional field, even if they are physically isolated from their immediate colleagues.



BELONGING



Belonging refers to a sense of being accepted, valued, and included as a member of the team or the larger organisational community.

[Research has shown that employees who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to be engaged and committed to their organisation.](#) It is the feeling of being an integral part of the organisation, where individuals feel a strong connection and identification with the group.

This sense of belonging is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment, as it creates a foundation of trust, respect, and collaboration among team members. When employees feel like they belong, they are more likely to actively participate, engage, and contribute to the organisation's goals and objectives.

While belonging is not a new concept, research has suggested that belonging is a fundamental element of inclusion, as it sets the stage for individuals to bring their authentic selves to work and feel supported and empowered to make meaningful contributions – bringing it back to the forefront of workplace conversations as diversity, equity and inclusion become a priority for leaders around the globe.

Further, in the post-COVID remote/ hybrid workplace, belonging was often fostered through digital platforms and tools that enabled virtual collaboration and communication – including video conferencing software, project management tools, instant messaging platforms, and virtual team-building activities. These technologies became essential in creating a sense of belonging by facilitating real-time interactions, maintaining team cohesion, and providing opportunities for employees to connect and engage with one another. This also pushed belonging to the forefront of the discussion – as it became a matter of inclusion for everyone in the office, rather than specific groups or people – which some found alienating.

The need to re-build belonging was widespread and what many organisations discovered during this effort was that creating mechanisms to foster belonging for everyone – from in-office to virtual – created a ripple effect that served as a belonging boost for the entire company. As a result of this, data began to suggest that people who struggled with feeling a lack of belonging pre-COVID in an in-person office were generally experiencing positive mental health benefits in the post-COVID remote/ hybrid environment.

Research has consistently shown that a sense of belonging is a key driver of employee engagement and organisational commitment. When individuals feel like they belong, they are more likely to develop a strong emotional connection to the organisation and its mission. They feel motivated to contribute their best efforts, go above and beyond their role, and support their colleagues. When individuals feel a strong sense of belonging, they are also more likely to actively participate in team activities, share their ideas and perspectives, and collaborate with others.

This high level of engagement and commitment leads to increased productivity, improved teamwork, and higher levels of job satisfaction. Inclusion is greatly influenced by the level of belonging within an organisation, as it creates a positive work environment where individuals feel valued, respected, and supported. It fosters a culture of inclusivity, where everyone's contributions are recognised and celebrated, and where diversity is seen as a strength rather than a barrier.

Studies have found that diverse teams, where individuals feel included, are more likely to outperform homogeneous teams. Belonging also fosters a sense of psychological safety, where individuals feel comfortable taking risks, expressing their opinions, and challenging the status quo. It encourages open dialogue, constructive feedback, and the exploration of different viewpoints, leading to better problem-solving and decision-making processes.



ENGAGEMENT

[Engagement is the level of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment that employees have towards their work and the organisation.](#)

[High levels of engagement have been linked to increased productivity, job satisfaction, and overall organisational performance.](#)

[Inclusive organisations have been shown to have higher levels of employee satisfaction, creativity, and collaboration.](#)

Engagement is a critical factor in promoting inclusion within an organisation. To foster engagement, it is important to create a culture that values and encourages open communication, collaboration, and employee involvement. In practice / action this often looks like:

01.

Clear communication channels:

Establishing transparent and accessible communication channels allows employees to voice their opinions, concerns, and ideas. This can be done through regular team meetings, suggestion boxes, or digital platforms that facilitate open dialogue.

02.

Empowering employees:

Providing employees with autonomy and decision-making authority empowers them to take ownership of their work and feel valued. This can be achieved by delegating responsibilities, involving employees in decision-making processes, and recognising their contributions.

03.

Recognition and rewards:

Acknowledging and rewarding employees for their efforts and achievements fosters a sense of belonging and motivates them to continue contributing. This can be done through performance-based incentives, public recognition, or opportunities for career growth.

04.

Training and development:

Offering opportunities for skill development and career advancement demonstrates a commitment to employee growth and encourages engagement. Providing training programs, mentoring, and coaching can help employees feel supported and motivated to contribute their best.



TEAM INVOLVEMENT

[Team involvement refers to the active participation and collaboration of team members in decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting processes.](#)

Teams that encourage and value the involvement of all members tend to be more innovative and effective in problem-solving.

Ideal team involvement is when all team members are actively encouraged to contribute their ideas and perspectives during team meetings and discussions. In an inclusive team, everyone's input is valued and considered, regardless of their position or seniority. This can be seen when team leaders create a safe and respectful environment where individuals feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.

By actively involving all team members in decision-making processes, organisations can tap into a diverse range of ideas and experiences, leading to more innovative and effective solutions.

In practice, high team involvement is when teams are given opportunities to collaborate and work together on projects and initiatives. In an inclusive organisation, teams are formed based on diverse backgrounds, skills, and perspectives, ensuring a well-rounded and comprehensive approach to problem-solving. By encouraging cross-functional collaboration and fostering a sense of teamwork, organisations can harness the collective intelligence and creativity of their teams. This can be observed when teams are given the autonomy to make decisions collectively, share responsibilities, and achieve shared goals.

High team involvement also looks like actively seeking and incorporating feedback from all team members. In an inclusive team, feedback is not only welcomed but also valued as a means of continuous improvement. This can be exemplified when team members are encouraged to provide constructive feedback to one another, fostering a culture of open communication and growth. By creating a feedback loop within the team, organisations can ensure that everyone's voice is heard and that individuals have the opportunity to contribute to the team's development and success. Furthermore, an inclusive team actively promotes equal participation and involvement in team activities and initiatives. This can be observed when team leaders ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to take on leadership roles, contribute to decision-making processes, and participate in team events. In an inclusive team, individuals are not excluded based on their gender, race, age, or any other characteristic. By promoting equal participation, organisations can create a sense of belonging and empowerment among team members, leading to increased engagement and commitment.





PROBLEM SOLVING

[Problem solving involves identifying, analysing, and resolving issues or challenges that arise within the organisation.](#) Inclusive problem solving also helps to break down barriers and build relationships within the organisation. When employees work together to solve problems, they have the opportunity to collaborate and learn from one another. This collaboration can help to bridge gaps between different departments, teams, or individuals who may have had limited interaction before.

By bringing people together to solve problems, organisations can create a sense of unity and teamwork, where everyone feels like they are part of a larger collective effort. This can lead to increased engagement and a stronger sense of community within the organisation.

Furthermore, problem-solving in an inclusive environment encourages open communication and transparency. When employees feel comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions, it fosters a culture of trust and respect. In an inclusive problem-solving process, all ideas are considered and evaluated based on their merits, rather than the status or background of the individual presenting them. This creates a fair and equitable environment where everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute and be heard. By promoting open communication and transparency, organisations can build a culture of inclusivity and ensure that all employees feel valued and respected.



ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT

[Organisational commitment is the extent to which employees are dedicated to the goals and values of the organisation.](#)

[Organisational commitment has been found to be positively associated with employee retention and reduced turnover rates.](#)

Organisational commitment is the extent to which employees are dedicated to the goals and values of the organisation. One indicator of organisational commitment is the willingness of employees to go above and beyond their job requirements. This can be seen when employees voluntarily take on additional tasks or responsibilities, showing their commitment to the success of the organisation. For example, an employee who consistently stays late to help a colleague complete a project demonstrates a high level of commitment to the team and the organisation.

Another indicator of organisational commitment is the level of employee engagement. Engaged employees are those who are fully involved in and enthusiastic about their work. They are committed to the organisation's goals and values and actively contribute to its success.

One way to measure employee engagement is through surveys or feedback mechanisms that assess employees' level of satisfaction, motivation, and willingness to recommend the organisation as a great place to work. For instance, if a survey reveals that a high percentage of employees feel proud to be part of the organisation and are motivated to perform at their best, it indicates a strong sense of organisational commitment.

Team involvement is also a significant indicator of organisational commitment and inclusion. When employees feel included and valued as part of a team, they are more likely to be committed to the organisation. This can be observed through the active participation and collaboration of employees in team projects and initiatives. For example, in a meeting where team members openly share ideas, provide constructive feedback, and work together to solve problems, it demonstrates a high level of team involvement and organisational commitment. This inclusive team dynamic fosters a sense of belonging and encourages employees to contribute their best efforts. Problem-solving is another indicator of organisational commitment. When employees are committed to the organisation, they are more likely to actively engage in problem-solving and contribute their ideas and expertise.

This can be seen when employees proactively identify and address challenges, propose innovative solutions, and collaborate with others to overcome obstacles. For instance, if a team encounters a complex issue and employees from different departments come together to brainstorm ideas and find a resolution, it demonstrates a strong sense of organisational commitment and inclusion in action.



CONCEPTUALISING AN UNDERSTANDING OF BELONGING – WHERE IT FITS IN?

Over the past three years **inclusio** has gathered scientific data on organisational culture through employees' self-report as they engage with **inclusio**'s software.

The data insights captured informed research into the area of employee “Belonging” within global organisations and how it relates to other key factors such as Engagement, Team Involvement, Problem Solving around work related barriers, and levels of Organisational Commitment. Evidence from our research has indicated that employee “belonging” is significantly related to each of these factors, more specifically:

- 1. Belonging was significantly related to Engagement, thus employees who rated themselves as being more engaged with their work were more likely to feel more favourable sense of belonging within their organisations**

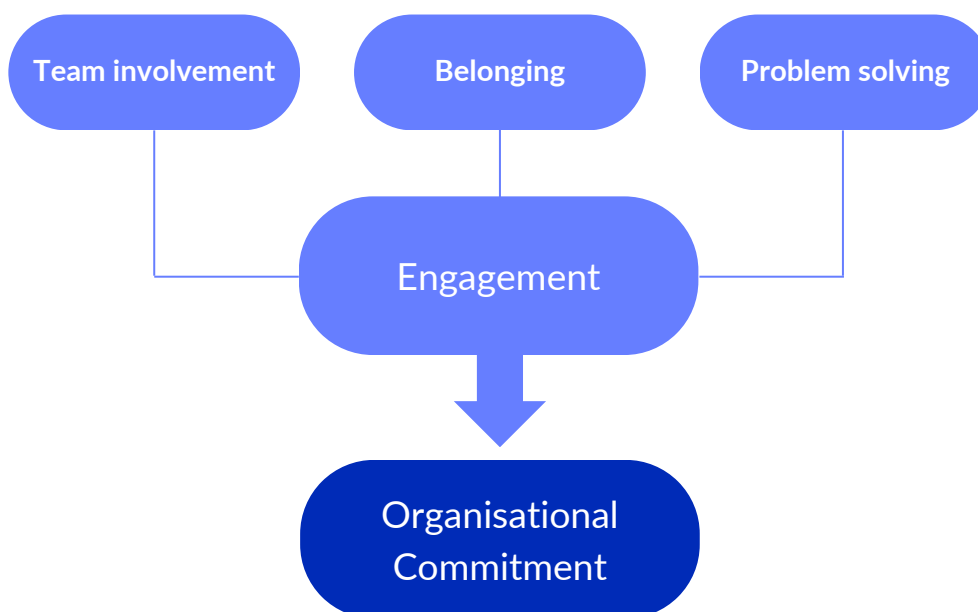
2. Team Involvement was also related with Belonging, meaning that the more the individual is involved with their team and able to work within team dynamic, then they are more likely to feel a greater sense of Belonging in their organisation.

3. Individuals Problem Solving was also related to Belonging. Here, individuals who were more likely to be able to work through key work, task and team related barriers feel more like they Belong to their place of work

4. Lastly, Organisational Commitment was also highly related with Belonging. Here, those individuals who are more likely to feel they Belong to their workplace, demonstrate significantly more commitment to that organisation.

With this evidence, we were able to explore the role Belonging has in how individuals deal with working in teams, but also how they address problem solving and barriers at work; and how each of these factors all impact upon an individual's sense of Organisational Commitment.

Thus, we have conceptualised the framework below (see Figure 1).



The evidence suggests that a sense of Belonging has an important role in understanding how individuals work in teams and work through barriers or problems, but more importantly it can have important role, along with both team involvement and problem solving, in understanding how individuals feel connected or committed to their work.



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