



# Reinventing Gender Diversity Programs for a Post-Pandemic World

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When money no longer buys happiness, companies must rethink their approach to DEI.

US companies have serious work to do to heal the US female workforce that has been so badly fractured by the COVID-19 pandemic. And although it may be tempting to turn to traditional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, those programs were not designed to address the current challenges.

DEI programs have long been the corporate “home” for strategically driving better outcomes for women. They tend to focus on eliminating discriminatory behaviors, achieving workplace equity, and increasing the representation of women in leadership positions. Complementary human-resources policies and benefits have also aimed to level the playing field and nurture high-potential talent on the path to the executive suite.

These programs and policies are insufficient to solve the wide-scale attrition and hiring difficulties of the so-called great resignation. As the pandemic unfolded, the soaring demands of work and home strained women’s roles as primary caregivers in most families. Even as of November 2021, women’s participation in the workforce remained at a 33-year low. The great resignation forced a reckoning among all employees, not just mothers, and not just women. In November 2021, 4.5 million workers quit or changed jobs—the fourth time in 2021 that the number of workers quitting set a record.

As we look forward to a post-pandemic workplace, strong signals suggest that workforce challenges will persist longer term. Recent surveys have found that only 35% of working mothers say that they are planning to work as they did before the pandemic. More than half of female knowledge workers have said that they are open to looking for a new job in the next year. Armed with new-found clarity about priorities and values, many women have fundamentally altered their expectations of their work, employers, and lives.

Companies need to find new ways to address the breadth and magnitude of today’s challenges. They need to understand women’s motivations and how they make decisions about jobs and careers. Companies must also reach far more women across the organization and broaden their objectives and actions. (See Exhibit 1.) As the chief diversity officer of a financial services organization said, “We’ve been working diligently to put all of the best practices in place, but they aren’t going to be enough to deal with what we’re seeing now.”

## Exhibit 1 - To Address New Workforce Challenges, Companies Must Reset Their Focus, Objectives, and Actions

	Before the pandemic	After the pandemic
WHO	Focused workforce efforts mainly on high-potential talent	Focus on women across the organization to address the systemic talent risk in the post-pandemic world
WHAT	Addressed bias and advanced the representation of women at senior levels	Create a motivating work environment for all women that prompts them to stay
HOW	Continuously improved benefits, training programs, and policies	Develop interventions that address the needs of women and influence their job decisions

Sources: BCG's US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

## Reinventing the Foundation for DEI

DEI programs have made progress in reaching their original goals, but they need to be far bolder and more ambitious to address the new mandate of the post-COVID-19 environment. In seeking to understand how to advance these programs, we surveyed 3,345 US female employees and 4,019 US male workers, and we started with five hypotheses:

- Employees have agency, as they are demonstrating vividly today. Companies need to understand and address the underlying causes of employees' departures and discontentment.
- Employees will make career decisions that satisfy both their functional needs (such as work-life balance and compensation), as well as their emotional needs (such as feeling challenged, secure, or valued at work).
- A broad set of drivers—demographic identities, life context, work context, and attitudes—can all potentially be important in influencing needs. An

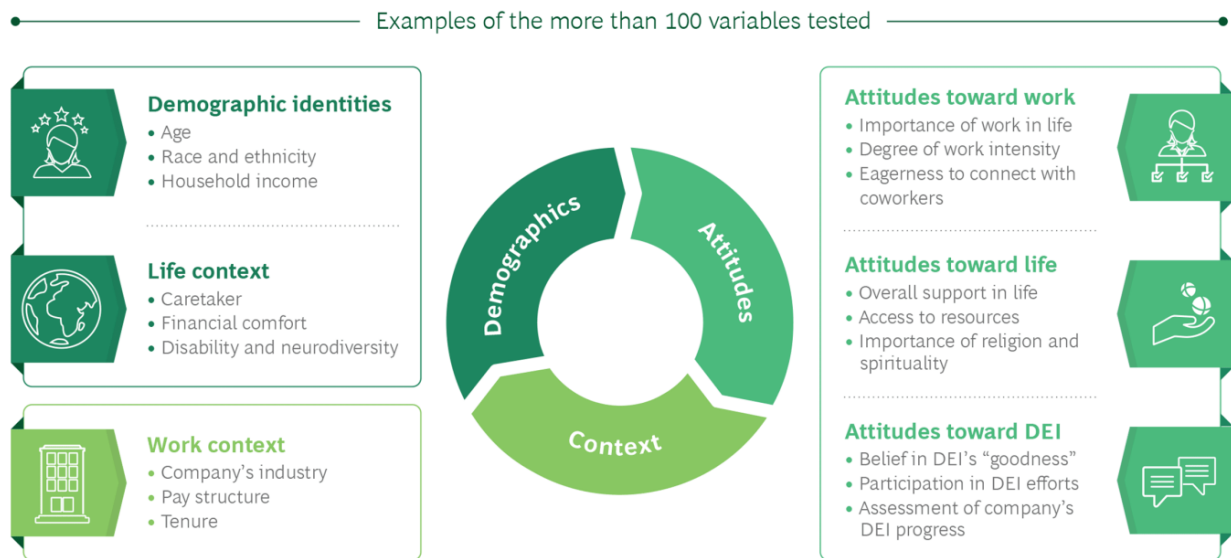
employee's diverse demographic identities may not be the most important or even a significant driver of needs. And needs will almost certainly change over time.

- By identifying patterns in combinations of needs and isolating the drivers of needs, we can unlock a new segmentation of the workforce that is grounded in commonality and relevancy, rather than outside-in assumptions or essentialism.
- This needs-based segmentation can serve as the foundation to create employee value propositions that improve employees' happiness, create a motivating work environment, encourage them to stay, and, ultimately, boost employee outcomes.

In testing these hypotheses, we drew inspiration from BCG's state-of-the-art consumer research methodology: **demand-centric growth**. The DCG methodology breaks away from the simple, insufficient consumer-segmentation approach that uses broad demographic groups (such as millennials, women, and Asians). Instead, DCG uses a comprehensive segmentation approach that factors in additional drivers (such as attitudes) that emerge from quantitative research and are examined using advanced analytics. By understanding individuals' needs, DCG uncovers what truly drives decision making in different circumstances.

We adapted the survey-based DCG methodology to understand the workplace needs of our representative sample.<sup>1</sup> Applied to an organizational context, the DCG approach allowed us to assess the importance and interplay of a comprehensive menu of potential demographic, attitudinal, and contextual drivers in creating discrete patterns of functional and emotional needs. (See Exhibit 2.) And because the methodology recognizes human complexity, we were able to determine that not all dimensions that shape an employee's identity, beliefs, and life situation are equally important in driving the person's functional and emotional needs at work.

## Exhibit 2 - A Broad Set of Drivers Influence Workplace Needs

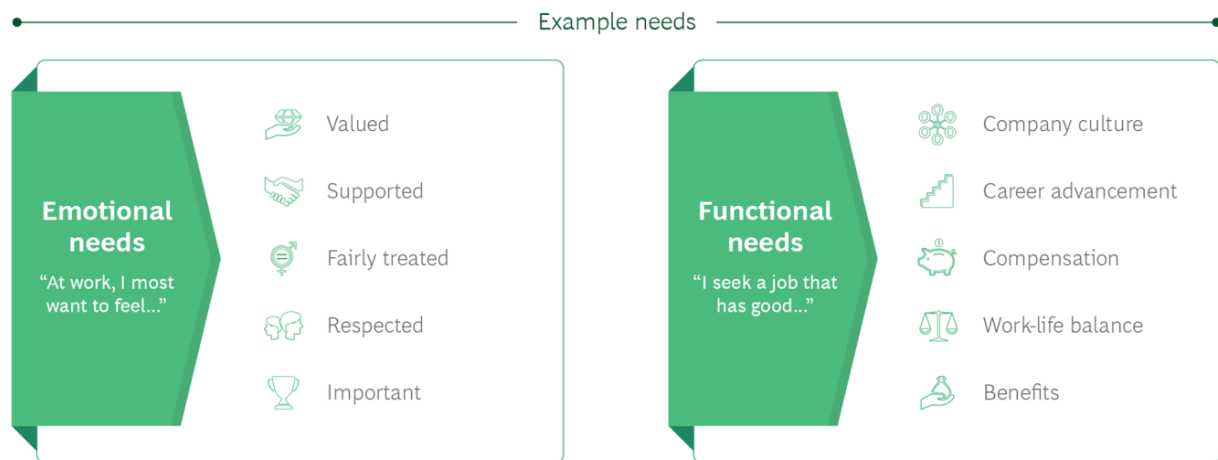


Sources: BCG's US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

Note: DEI = diversity, equity, and inclusion.

We then delved further into human motivation and behavior by establishing the relative importance of more than 20 potential functional and emotional needs in decision making. (See Exhibit 3.) We conducted a series of statistical tournaments in which participants were asked to make a series of tradeoffs. For example, would they rather connect with coworkers or have better benefits, and would they rather have better benefits or feel valued and appreciated. This technique uncovered the real drivers of choice that can be impossible for employees to determine and articulate directly.

## Exhibit 3 - Our Research Assessed the Importance of Both Emotional and Functional Needs



Sources: BCG’s US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

The analysis has three implications for **women in the workforce**. First, the new segmentation enables companies to de-average their female population into segments that are grounded in what women revealed as the real reasons for the differences among them. Second, by surfacing both the functional and emotional needs that affect decision making, companies can tap into the broader set of issues that underlie the great resignation of women—issues that are much harder to articulate than a desire for more money or other functional benefits. And third, as organizations wage the indefinite battle between aspirations and resources, they can balance nuance with executional pragmatism, target the needs that matter most, and build programs that will be more successful at attracting, retaining, and advancing women. (For a summary of the insights that we derived from this analysis, see “Six Quick Takeaways.”)

### SIX QUICK TAKEAWAYS

Our approach to DEI is fundamentally different from what companies have done in the past.

**Addressing needs matters.** There is a strong statistical correlation between satisfying women's needs and improving leading indicators of positive employee outcomes, specifically, happiness, motivation, and retention.

**Emotional needs matter more.** Although more difficult for women to articulate than functional needs, emotional needs correlate more strongly with leading indicators of positive employee outcomes.

**One size does not fit all.** While a core set of mostly functional needs are generally shared among women, their emotional needs are diverse. A nuanced approach to segmentation is needed.

**Needs are not static.** The primary variables that drive diverse needs are dynamic in nature; the needs for any individual will shift over time.

**Intersectional identities other than race generally are not discrete drivers of needs.** Most traditional intersectional identities do not drive unique needs but rather affect women's abilities to fulfill the needs that they share with others.

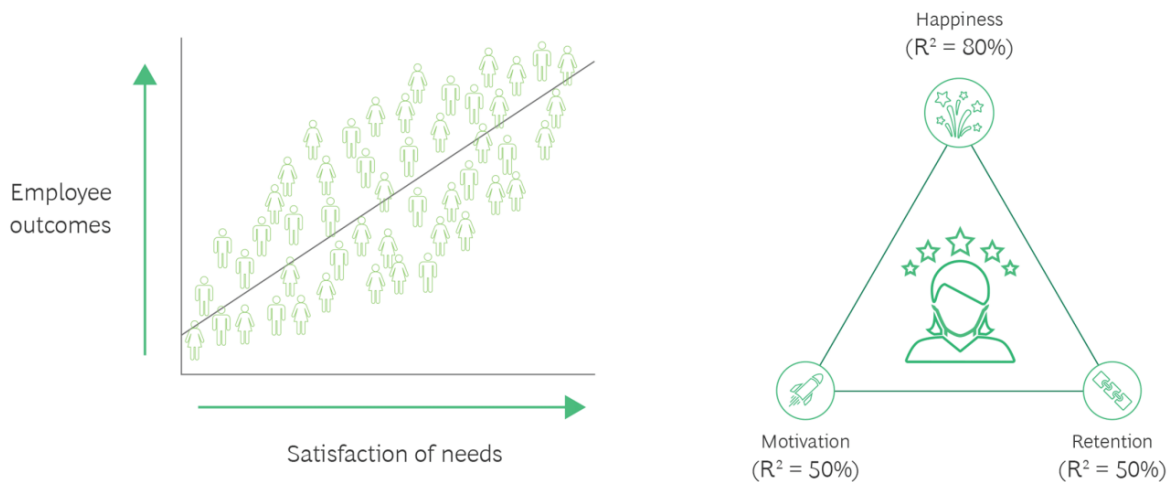
**The programs that companies have aren't the ones they need.** The traditional DEI focus on eliminating discrimination, improving equity, and increasing the representation of women in leadership won't alone deliver what is needed today. To address the great resignation, companies need programs that influence the work and career choices of many, not just a select few.

## Addressing Needs, Especially Emotional Ones, Matters

Our research suggests that a needs-based DEI strategy has the potential to significantly improve outcomes for women. Across our survey population, we found a strong statistical correlation between the satisfaction of needs and the key

indicators of positive employee outcomes: happiness (R-squared of 80%), motivation (R-squared of 50%), and long-term retention (R-squared of 50%). (See Exhibit 4.) In other words, the more likely female employees were to say that their most important needs, especially emotional ones, were being met, the more likely they were to be happy and motivated at work and to stay in their jobs. Among women who expressed the strongest satisfaction of needs, they were 15 percentage points (pp) more likely to say they were very happy than the average respondent, 33 pp more likely to say they were highly motivated, and 9 pp more likely to say that they would definitely be at their company in three years. Stated simply, by focusing on satisfying women’s needs, companies have significant potential to influence their decision making and drive positive employee outcomes.

### Exhibit 4 - Satisfying Needs Strongly Correlates with Improved Employee Happiness, Motivation, and Retention



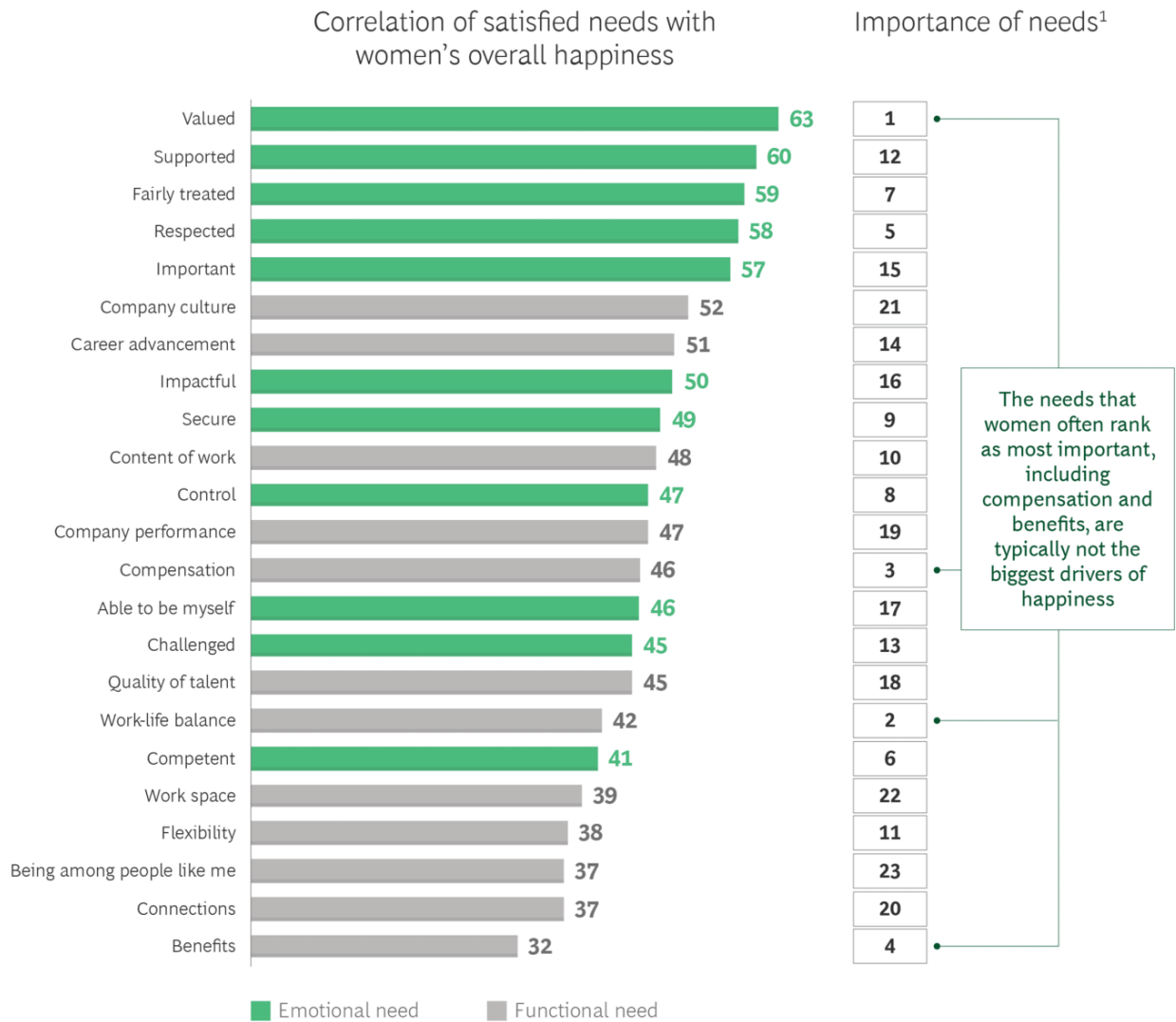
Sources: BCG’s US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

A great deal of DEI work is unsurprisingly focused on addressing women’s functional needs—including compensation, benefits, and work-life balance. In a world in which pay and caretaking responsibilities remain unequal, this is to be expected. Satisfying functional needs is also easier to do and measure, and women often rank these needs as most important. But our analysis shows that the



fulfillment of emotional needs—such as feeling valued, supported, and respected—correlates more strongly with women’s happiness at work and in shaping positive employee outcomes. In other words, money can’t buy happiness. (See Exhibit 5.)

## Exhibit 5 - Emotional Needs Are Harder to Articulate, but They Correlate More Strongly with Women’s Happiness



Sources: BCG’s US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

Note: n = 3,345 full-time working women.

<sup>1</sup>Average MaxDiff scores.

## One Size Does Not Fit All When Needs Are Diverse and Dynamic

The systemic challenges of pay equity, leadership representation, and day-to-day discriminatory experiences demand ongoing focus. But companies must do more. They must ask whether today's approaches and interventions are tapping into the diverse sets of needs that influence outcomes across the women in their workforce. (See "Looking Beyond the Woman Label.")

## LOOKING BEYOND THE WOMAN LABEL

Tanya is a Black woman who was recently hired out of a top college by a prestigious investment bank. "I'm incredibly ambitious—I'm the first person in my family to go to college, and this is my chance to change things for my whole family," she said. "But I didn't grow up rich. A senior recently made fun of my [urban] accent. It is just so hard to fit in."

Barbara, a middle-aged white woman, works as a financial analyst at a major industrial goods manufacturer. "What am I going to do with a workshop on building my executive presence? My family depends on my salary and my health insurance. How about instead helping me not worry that I was going to get laid off during the pandemic?"

Julie is a relatively junior executive on the fast track. "I came here because of the program for emerging leaders. I'm barely out of business school, and I'm already working on an initiative that is one of our CEO's top strategic priorities. I've got a very clear goal to be the chief marketing officer of a major corporation," she said.

Finally, Sara, a senior executive in the health care industry, was recently named to lead a large corporate function after a career in line roles. "I couldn't be more thrilled. Some of my colleagues were surprised by the move. They interpreted it as a step back in my career. But I'm ready to put in the work to learn something new, and it's a part of the business that could really use the dedicated energy of somebody who is excited to be there," she said.

The experiences of these four women (we are not using their real names)

illustrate the wide variety of contexts and needs that women bring to the workplace—and the limitations of current DEI programs. Most DEI programs are designed to drive greater representation of women in leadership and are aimed at the Julies of the workforce—young, ambitious, and on the fast track. For the Tanyas, Barbaras, and Saras—the vast majority of working women—these programs are much less accessible and effective.

Therefore, reshaping DEI programs so that they drive different outcomes depends on de-averaging female workers into segments. A one-size-fits-all approach will be insufficient. This is especially true because needs are dynamic, changing over the course of a woman's life and career.

So, what factors lead to the most significant differences in needs among women?

**Age and Seniority.** Our research found that age and relative seniority drive the most significant differences in needs among women. Put simply, 25-year-old women are likely to have different needs from 50-year-old women, just as junior staff are likely to have different needs from senior executives. In other words, the trajectory of a woman's life and career is central in shaping a woman's workplace needs.

While these findings may seem intuitive, few DEI programs recognize and support this evolution of needs as women move through the stages of life. As the chief human-resources officer of a consumer packaged goods company said, “We focus a great deal on young high-potential employees, but rarely do we think about how we should be supporting the older employee in a nonmanagement role, or even our most senior executive women once they've made it to the top.”

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DEI programs rarely address the needs of older women who are senior empty nesters or hourly workers.

**The Importance of Work in a Woman’s Life.** Is work a day job or a mission? Is a profession a central part of a woman’s identity, or is receiving a paycheck most critical? Answers to these questions can influence the tradeoffs that a woman is willing to make for a job, for public signals of success (such as a company’s reputation), and for the content of the work. As with age and seniority, these answers can change over time.

**Motherhood.** Motherhood naturally surfaces important differences in needs between women with and without children at home. Many DEI programs address motherhood but often stop short of recognizing the changing needs of older women. With more free time, senior empty nesters are often eager to find new purpose and experiences at work, yet traditional DEI programs emphasize the needs of younger women and generally do not provide ongoing support.

**Salaried Versus Hourly.** How women are paid and, often by extension, their economic position within the company are the fifth variable. Current DEI efforts rarely address the needs of women who are hourly and frontline workers—needs that are very different from those of women who are emerging leaders. The desire for safety and security has been especially acute among hourly female employees during the pandemic, as it ravaged key sectors of the US economy—such as retail, service, and travel—that are heavily represented by women. Some women were forced to work when the virus was widespread and unchecked, while others found that their economic security was suddenly at risk.

**Race.** The one intrinsic variable that drove significant differences in needs among younger women is race, reflecting the broader challenges of achieving gender and

racial equity in the US. In general, all women place outsized emphasis on fair treatment. Additionally, younger women of color disproportionately seek the opportunity to get ahead but are skeptical that they have an equal chance to succeed. This intersectional cohort clearly has discrete needs and deserves focus. (See “The Role of Intersectionality.”)

## THE ROLE OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Many factors that may seem to be important in influencing discrete needs turn out not to be as critical as age, seniority, and the other four major drivers. For example, women in different industries and in different types of companies (such as startups and incumbents) within the same industry expressed similar functional and emotional needs.

Perhaps most notably, a set of common intersectional identities, such as LGBTQ+ and having a disability, also did not emerge in aggregate as primary determinants in driving the needs of women in the workforce. These identities, of course, matter, and many organizations are working to increase their representation in the workforce, but our analysis suggests that other factors are often more important in shaping needs for these individuals.

This may explain why women-specific LGBTQ+ programs, for example, successfully serve a general purpose of affiliation or advocacy, but they often struggle to maintain the long-term engagement of these employees. In the words of a young manager in the tech industry, “At this point in my career, I’m well past the point of it being worth my time to talk about how to come out as a lesbian at work. Help me figure out how I’m going to keep my career on track when I become a mom later this year.”

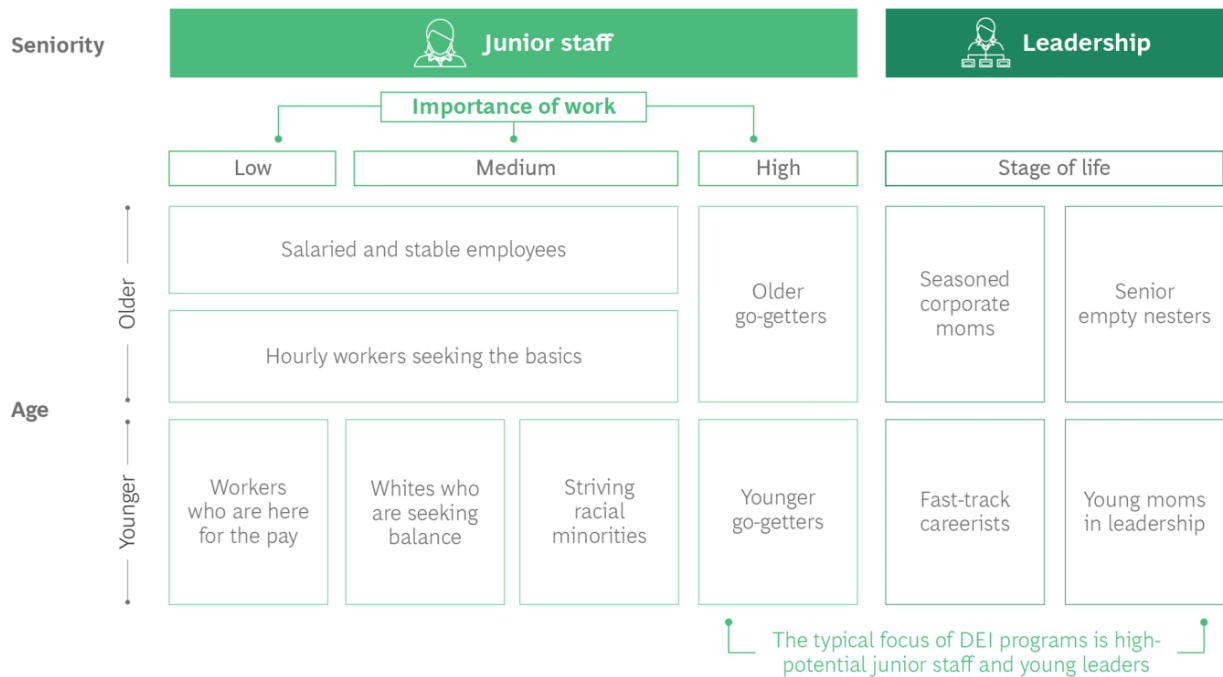
The variation in the needs of LGBTQ+ women are too great to be treated as if they are similar. It makes more sense to address the basic experiences shared by LGBTQ+ women, but then to serve these groups within the broader framework of the needs that they share with others.

Individuals with intersectional identities often do experience different barriers in realizing important needs. For example, a woman who grew up in a different socioeconomic environment than her peers did may find it more difficult to realize a need to connect with colleagues. Groups of intersectional women may also confront increased incidences of unconscious bias or discriminatory behavior.

## A New Needs-Based Segmentation

Collectively, the most significant factors generate 11 key segments of women. (See Exhibit 6.) Each segment is based on a hierarchy of needs unique to the individuals who populate it. Since we determined this needs-based segmentation by conducting a broad survey of women in the US workforce, it describes patterns and archetypes in the general working population and yields valuable universal insights. Contrasting the needs of women in two demographic groups helps to demonstrate why companies need this new segmentation.

## Exhibit 6 - Eleven Segments Emerge from an Analysis of the Needs of the Female Workforce

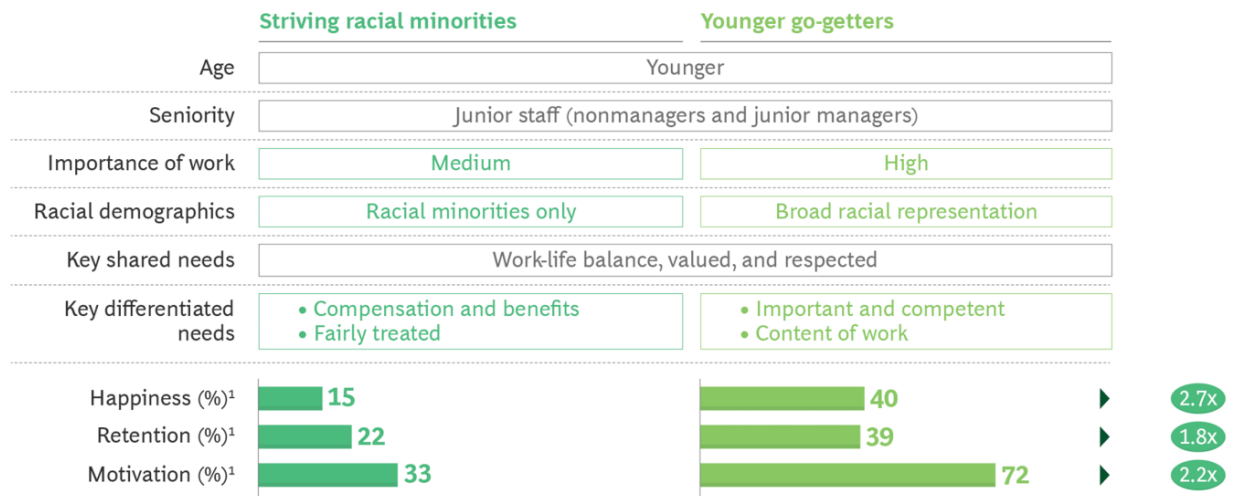


Sources: BCG's US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

Note: DEI = diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Younger, Junior Women.** This broad grouping of women occupying nonleadership roles breaks down into four distinct segments based on the women's needs. It's instructive to look at two segments in particular. (See Exhibit 7.)

## Exhibit 7 - A Comparison of Two Segments of Younger, Junior Staff



Sources: BCG's US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

Note: n = 207 striving racial minorities; n = 247 younger go-getters.

<sup>1</sup>Percentage of the sample responding that they are very happy, they will definitely still be at the company in three years, and they are very motivated, respectively; the participants responded on a scale of one to five.

The first segment (striving racial minorities) comprises women of color who see work as important, but it does not define their lives. Their differentiating needs are more functional than emotional. Relative to their go-getter counterparts, they care disproportionately about compensation, benefits, and fair treatment. Work may not be central to their identity—it's not what they lead with at a party of strangers—yet they want to advance in their careers, often articulated as a desire to go beyond the world in which they grew up. They give poor scores to their company's DEI efforts and are skeptical that they have an equal chance to succeed. These women also reported among the lowest levels of happiness and motivation at work as well as likelihood of staying at their company.



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Younger go-getters are more likely to value feeling important and having the opportunity to do work that they care about.

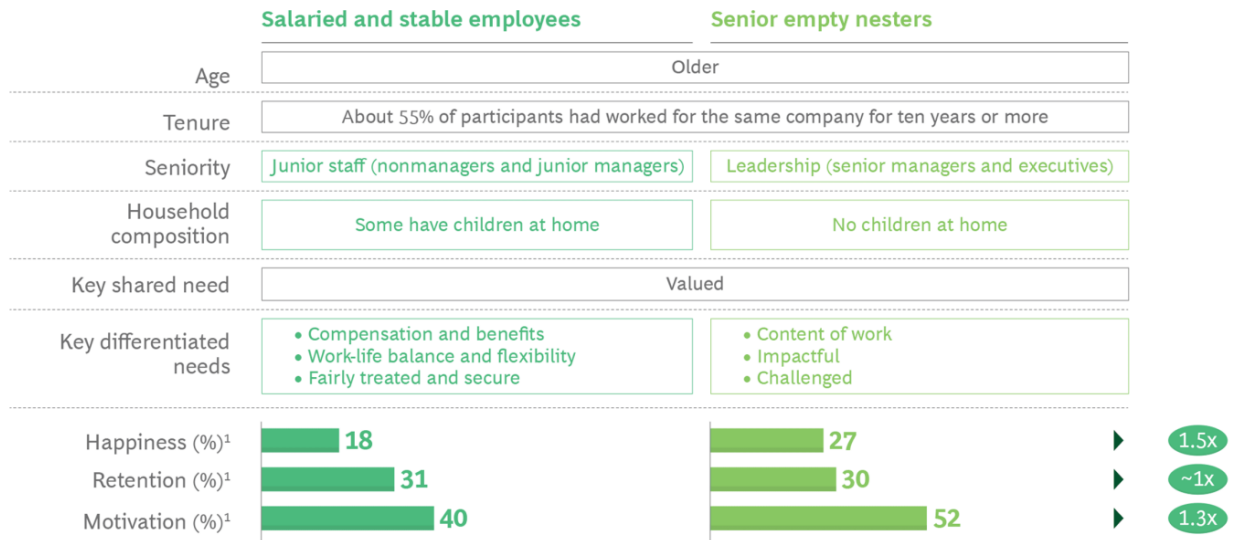
These findings suggest that racial equity initiatives established in the wake of George Floyd’s murder are not working as intended. “We were under a lot of pressure from our board to make public statements, but as a black woman, I can tell you that all the statements and book clubs in the world don’t change the fact that our younger employees look up and see that there aren’t many people that look like me at my level,” said the chief diversity officer of a major retailer. “We have a lot of work to do to fix some fundamental problems in how we recognize and support people of color moving up through the organization.”

By contrast, younger go-getters are more likely to value feeling important, successful, competent, and confident and having the opportunity to do work that they care about. This group, which includes both white women and women of color, unsurprisingly reports higher overall sentiment than most other segments. Most current DEI programs, which have been designed to drive greater representation of women in leadership, often address the needs of the go-getters through access to executive leaders and mentors, coaching and development programs, and the opportunity to take on high-profile assignments. These programs work specifically because they are directly targeting the most important needs of these women.

**Older Women.** This broad grouping of women, covering frontline workers to CEOs, breaks into five segments using the new approach. Two segments vividly show the contrast in needs of women of similar ages: senior women in leadership who no longer have children at home (senior empty nesters) and junior older

women in salaried positions (salaried and stable employees) working in nonmanagerial roles such as analysts and administrative assistants. (See Exhibit 8.)

### Exhibit 8 - A Comparison of Two Segments of Older Staff



Sources: BCG's US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

Note: n = 524 salaried and stable employees; n = 143 senior empty nesters.

<sup>1</sup>Percentage of the sample that responded they are very happy, they will definitely still be at the company in three years, and they are very motivated, respectively; the participants responded on a scale of one to five.

Senior women in leadership demonstrate a significant shift in needs as their children leave home. These women want to focus their time and energy on work that delivers impact. For many, the chance to write a third act of their careers energizes them as they seek new knowledge and challenges at work.

A great many of today's DEI initiatives targeting senior women in leadership focus on networking opportunities or leveraging them as mentors for younger go-getters. This role does not go over well. Only 21% indicate that they personally benefit from their company's gender programs, and only 31% believe that leadership is held accountable for their company's DEI outcomes. Older women do not want to carry the load of solving their company's challenges.

Although the needs of less-senior older women are different, they also often go unrecognized and unresolved. The cohort grades their company's DEI efforts poorly—just 8% indicate that they benefit from their company's gender programs, and they have the lowest participation in these programs across all women, potentially in part due to a lack of relevance or even eligibility.

Not surprisingly, these women care more about the functional basics—pay, benefits, work-life balance, flexibility, and control—than do executive women at a similar life stage. They also want to feel secure and fairly treated, and they want to feel valued. An administrative assistant from a professional services firm said, “Over the last month, I’ve worked around the clock to support my manager and his team on a major deal. I went well beyond what’s expected of me in my job, spending my evenings and weekends with my computer in my lap. But then when the team had a big dinner to celebrate the deal closing, I wasn’t invited. I felt completely invisible.”

**Applying This Methodology in the Real World.** In order to be actionable for individual organizations, more targeted research must be done to determine where and how best to subdivide segments. Furthermore, there is a pragmatic tradeoff in terms of how deeply to subdivide segments; while each additional segmentation may bring further granularity, DCG methodology is designed such that those nuances are increasingly less significant in shaping outcomes and thus less likely to be worth the added implementation complexity. Each company will have its own unique answers to these questions.

## A New Approach to DEI

The great resignation provides companies with a crisis too valuable to waste. The systemic talent risk across industries is large and lingering. We need to find ways to motivate women and encourage them to stay. Companies cannot continue doing what they are doing because their DEI programs were not designed to serve this purpose. Instead, companies need to take steps toward a new DEI approach that

tackles the bigger talent challenge—giving women what they are currently missing at work.

- **Customize the needs-based segmentation.** Companies need to analyze their own workforce to understand which segments apply to their female employees. Companies also need to determine if different segments or subsegments are needed, identify any gaps relative to key needs, and determine the starting points for addressing them.
- **Broaden core DEI offerings so they satisfy functional and emotional needs.** Traditional solutions—such as expanding benefits, providing training programs, implementing codes of conduct, and adopting policies—must also address emotional needs. For example, a part-time option that provides the functional needs of flexibility and work-life balance may not serve a woman’s emotional needs if the company does not respect her off-hours or if it does not provide meaningful, secure, long-term career options for part-timers. In other words, organizations need to understand how women experience the solutions to ensure that a full ecosystem of support maximizes their efficacy.
- **Expand beyond the scope of traditional DEI.** A woman’s workplace experience is shaped by millions of daily touch points, grounded in a company’s invisible yet powerful corporate culture and amplified through its leadership model. A woman’s emotional needs will be met in myriad ways—through interactions with a supervisor, the milestones and events that the company chooses to celebrate, the company’s response in times of crisis, and the opportunities employees have to excel. Factors outside of a woman’s diverse demographic identity influence these experiences. As such, truly addressing emotional needs will require stepping outside the boundaries of what has historically been considered DEI and focusing on the broader employee value proposition.

This powerful approach can solve underlying emotional needs, unlock happiness and motivation, and improve retention—and not just for women. It also has the

potential to be applied to the male workforce as well. (See “What About Men?”)

## WHAT ABOUT MEN?

How different is a segmentation of the male workforce? Without diving too deeply into the needs of men, and recognizing the limitations of broad generalizations, several grounding insights are worth mentioning.

As with women, age and seniority are the two most important drivers generating diverse needs in the male workforce in the US. The importance of work in life and the stage of life are also important drivers of men’s needs, just as they are of women’s needs.

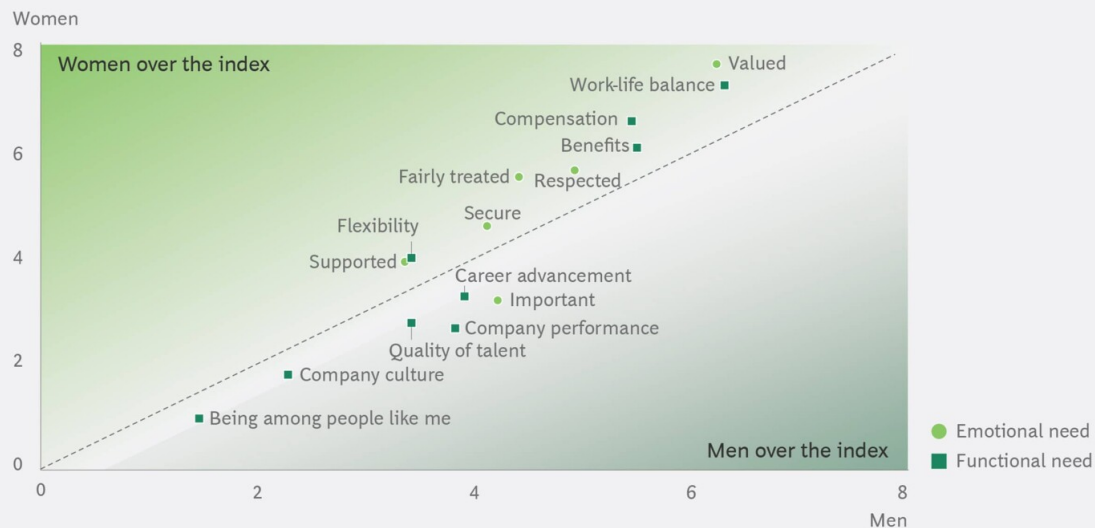
Upon closer inspection, however, important differences emerge. First, race does not drive differences in workplace needs among younger, junior men to the same degree that it does for their female counterparts. But while white men and men of color share a common set of fundamental needs, the barriers to fulfilling those needs can be profoundly different.

Second, unlike for women, having a disability influences the needs of younger men in leadership roles. Our hypothesis is that a strong presence remains important to career and leadership success for men, as described extensively by other researchers.

Beyond these two key differences, the importance of some needs looks different across genders, on average, even when the drivers that generate a discrete segment are the same. For example, women generally place more importance on wanting to feel valued and appreciated, respected, and fairly treated. Among functional needs, work-life balance (likely a reflection of their traditional role as caregiver) and compensation (likely owing to the legacy of the gender pay gap) stand out for women. Meanwhile, on an emotional level, men value feeling important and successful more than women do. Men also place a higher value on the company’s performance as a functional need, reflecting the larger proportion of men in leadership

roles. (See the exhibit below.)

### Some Notable Differences Emerged Between Women and Men, on Average



Sources: BCG's US Workforce Survey, 2021; BCG analysis.

Note: n = 3,345 full-time working women; n = 4,019 full-time working men. Average MaxDiff scores are shown.

Recognizing these differences is critical, especially in companies where a gender imbalance persists at the leadership level. What may be resonant, motivating, and meaningful for male leaders and managers may not be so for their female counterparts or direct reports.

Though our findings may seemingly complicate efforts to improve gender diversity, they chart a powerful path for companies seeking to support women in a way that stretches beyond the boundaries of traditional DEI functions. By de-averaging women into segments that are grounded in the real drivers of needs, organizations can begin to reinvent their DEI efforts to improve happiness, motivation, and retention for far more women than is done today.

By recognizing the limits of money, flexibility, and other functional benefits as organizational glue that retains women, companies can start to develop more

meaningful interventions, programs, and employee value propositions and make a difference in the work lives of many more women. And in doing so, they will start to humanize the work experience and work itself.

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- 1 The survey consisted of 8,805 full-time female and male workers in nongovernment, for-profit companies with 500 or more employees. The sample was balanced at the population level for representation, with key demographics balanced to within 3% of US labor statistics. A subset of 1,433 respondents were oversampled to ensure sufficient representation for Black and LGBTQ+ workers, and 8 participants identified as other, rather than women or men.

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