

Employment

What Do Women Want (at Work)?

There isn't a single key to keeping women engaged at work, but a common theme is that they need to feel their contributions are valued.

It's very important that when a woman speaks up at work, "the people around them lift up what she says," Toni Van Pelt, president of the National Organization for Women, told Bloomberg BNA Sept. 14. Managers can help by "calling out" behavior in meetings in which a man talks over a woman, or a woman makes a point that goes unacknowledged until a man repeats it a few minutes later as if it's his own idea, she said.

"What drives female engagement is opportunities to be successful," Janine Yancey, president of San Francisco-based online workplace compliance training company Emtrain, told Bloomberg BNA Sept. 14. "That can mean, for most women, 'are my contributions going to be valued? Am I going to get promoted and paid the same as my male peers?'"

What helps women stay engaged is whether they feel respected, that they "can make a contribution at work," and that they respect their bosses, Ariane Hegewisch, program director, employment and earnings at the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington, told Bloomberg BNA Sept. 13.

Don Rheem, CEO of Arlington, Va.-based E3 Solutions, a provider of employee workplace metrics and manager training, has an overlapping perspective on this question. While he comes at it from the vantage point of neurobiology and the brain's capabilities, he told Bloomberg BNA in a Sept. 15 email that "engagement killers in the workplace include a lack of fairness, predictability, and consistency. Typically validation, recognition and constructive feedback are also lacking."

Rumbles of Disengagement The widespread feeling among women that their contributions at work are not in fact respected has empirical support in a recent sur-

vey by consultancy Mercer, which found that "globally, only six out of 10 female employees believe that employees can get a fair hearing for their complaints," Megan Connolly of the Chicago office of Mercer/Sirota said in a Sept. 12 webinar to discuss the survey results.

The survey, which took in 3,010 full- and part-time workers at U.S. for-profit companies, found gaps that were significant though not enormous in how female and male employees view key issues related to engagement. For example, 51 percent of men, but only 41 percent of women, agreed that "when I do a good job, my performance is rewarded," and 51 percent of men, but only 43 percent of women, felt that their employers do an adequate job of matching pay to performance.

Not surprisingly, NOW's Van Pelt cited "equal pay for equal work" as a key driver of engagement for women employees. Van Pelt, Yancey, and Hegewisch also pointed to the importance of family-friendly work flexibility, which Van Pelt and Hegewisch added is also crucial to men with family responsibilities.

Besides that, Van Pelt cited long-standing NOW positions as crucial to keeping women engaged at work, including safety from sexual harassment, diversity encompassing "LGBTQIA+" women and women of color, and health insurance that pays for pregnancy, abortion, and birth control services, as well as breast-feeding facilities at work.

"Employers need to be conscious of and responsive to the unique ways factors like fairness and recognition are perceived by female employees," Rheem said. "Perception is our behavioral reality, so asking questions, being curious about how the workplace may impact women would be time well spent."

By MARTIN BERMAN-GORVINE

To contact the reporter on this story: Martin Berman-Gorvine in Washington at mbermangorvine@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Tony Harris at tharris@bna.com

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