

eliminating racism  
empowering women



Eos  
Foundation

# FRONT AND CENTER

Workplace Inclusion Reflections and Recommendations  
from Hourly Workers of Color of Marginalized Gender  
Identities in Greater Boston



## The YW Boston and Eos Foundation Partnership

YW Boston is grateful to the Eos Foundation for its work, research, and support of YW Boston over the past several years. We both work to dramatically increase the number of women from diverse backgrounds in leadership positions.

YW Boston is focused on creating more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations and the Eos Foundation has been a key partner in this work. Most recently, the Eos Foundation funded a YW Boston Engagement Fellowship to research and share experiences of workers of color in Greater Boston with marginalized genders.

**This report would not have been possible without the generous support of Eos.**

The [white paper](#) and this accompanying report inform our advocacy and programming. We hope this work provides a platform for historically excluded voices to be heard and connect with one another.

# Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	4
<b>Welcome</b>	6
A Note from the Researcher	7
<b>Background</b>	9
<b>Methods</b>	12
Participant Demographics	18
<b>Research Findings</b>	20
<b>Theme 1:</b> Challenges and Opportunities for DEI at Work	24
<b>Theme 2:</b> Autonomy, Expertise, and Respect for Hourly Workers	36
<b>Theme 3:</b> How Managers Can Impact Staff Well-being and Development	46
<b>Conclusion</b>	62

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**Thank you to the YW Boston team for supporting the development and application of this work.**

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Do you have questions or feedback?  
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# YW Boston

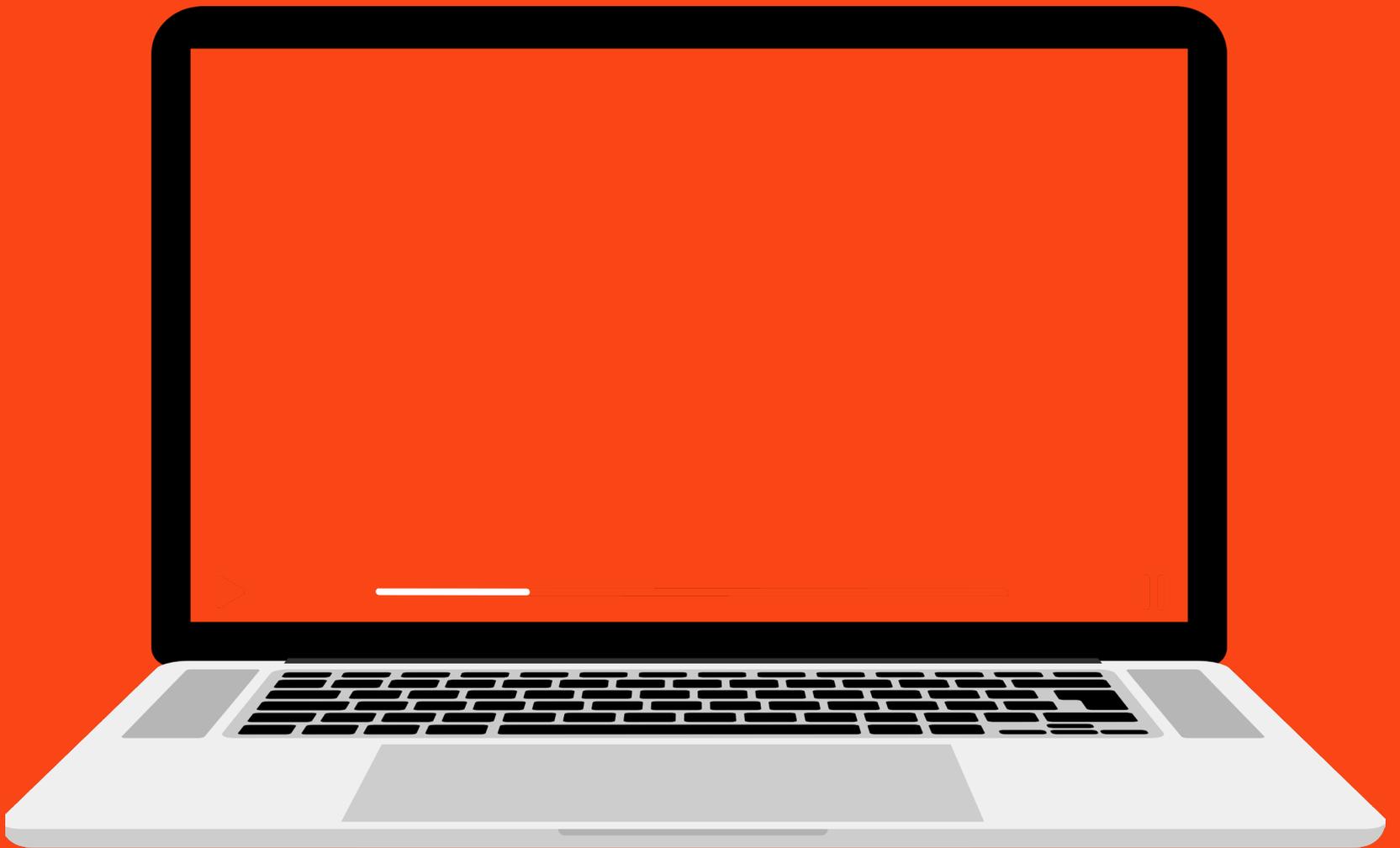
As the first YWCA in the nation, YW Boston has been at the forefront of advancing equity for over 150 years. Through our [DEI Services](#), such as [InclusionBoston](#) and [LeadBoston](#), as well as our [advocacy work](#) and [F.Y.R.E. Initiative](#), we help individuals and organizations change policies, practices, attitudes, and behaviors with a goal of creating more inclusive environments where women, people of color, and especially women of color can succeed.

As part of that work, we are helping organizations prioritize Diversity Equity & Inclusion (DEI) by providing organizations with programming and [workshops](#) (now available both virtually and in person) as well as resources to help them better understand the challenges faced by their employees. [Join us](#) in creating a more equitable Boston.

# EOS Foundation

[The Eos Foundation](#) is a private philanthropic foundation. They seek an equitable and just society where the basic human needs of all individuals are met, where children grow up well-nourished and healthy with opportunities for high quality education and the tools to achieve economic self-sufficiency, and where leadership equitably represents society's rich gender and racial diversity.

**Welcome**



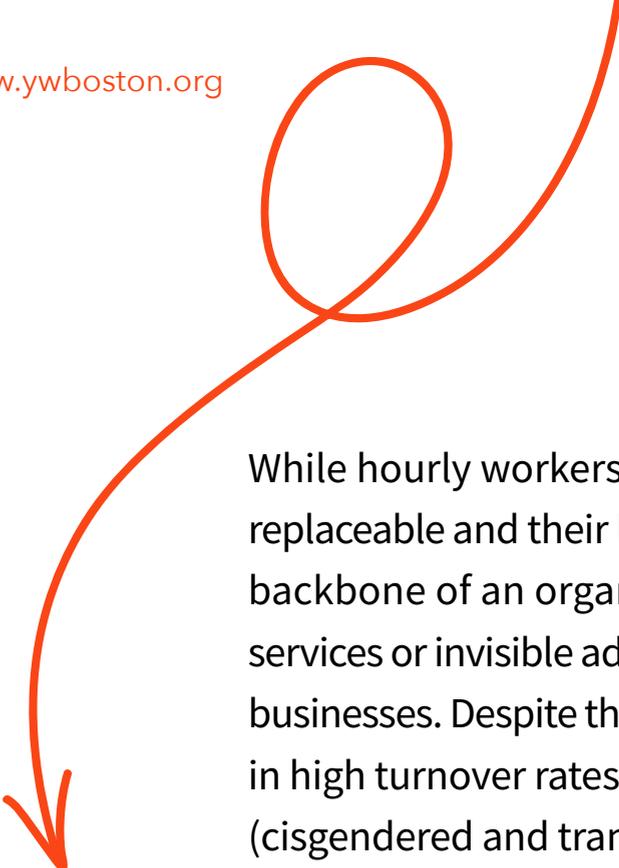
# A Note from the Researcher

As the initial chaos and panic of COVID-19 gave way to the “[Great Resignation](#)<sup>1</sup>”, labor strikes, and national organizing for worker unionization, there has been added focus on the rights and welfare of what too many consider “low-level” employees—those who are frontline, service-working, and typically paid by the hour. During the pandemic, and despite the health risks they faced, hourly staff prepared and served meals, provided transportation services, scheduled appointments, sanitized hospital rooms, cared for members of vulnerable populations, filled prescriptions, and delivered essential items. Their work demonstrated that during the most trying times our community depends on hourly workers. The services they provide are vital for the wellbeing, safety, and joy of society more broadly.

In the wake of ongoing disruption in all types of labor markets, YW Boston set out to understand the experiences and needs of hourly workers of color of marginalized gender identities.<sup>2</sup> In collaboration with community members, and through the generous support of the EOS Foundation, this report documents YW Boston’s effort to better understand the realities of workplace equity and inclusion as described by frontline, entry level, and shift workers. We centered these workers’ experiences and identities because they have too often been ignored. We intend this research to amplify the voices and experiences of these valuable employees so that workplaces can be more equitable and inclusive.

<sup>1</sup> [Great Registration](#) The mass movement in recent years of people leaving the workforce.

<sup>2</sup> Marginalize refers to the act of treating a person or group as though they are insignificant by isolating and/or disempowering them. The term marginalized describes to the person or group that is treated insignificantly, pushed to the margins of society and rendered powerless. People of color refers to any person who is not white and emphasizes the common experiences of systemic racism. [What Does Marginalized Mean and Why Does it Matter?](#) — CultureAlly



While hourly workers are often considered infinitely replaceable and their labor unskilled, their work is often the backbone of an organization. Whether they provide direct services or invisible administrative work, what they do sustains businesses. Despite this, they often feel undervalued, resulting in high turnover rates. Through dialogues with local women (cisgendered and transgendered), non-binary<sup>3</sup>, and gender-queer community members of color employed in hourly roles, we learned what makes some in this group feel recognized in their work environments.

This report is not a one-dimensional narrative of hopelessness nor burnout, despite real challenges in the work and lives of many participants. In fact, they are so hopeful, and devoted to making work environments where they can grow and thrive. Their courage is both palpable and energizing, and they want action. This report is a platform for future intersectional<sup>4</sup> community collaborations for workplace equity. It is also a reminder that great ideas and solutions to workplace challenges with DEI exist in all positions and positionalities in organizations – if we only take the time to listen.

*Aminata Kaba*

**Aminata Kaba**  
YW Boston | *Engagement Fellow*

<sup>3</sup> Individuals who do not identify as either men or women. Other terms include genderqueer, agender, bigender, genderfluid among others. [Link](#)

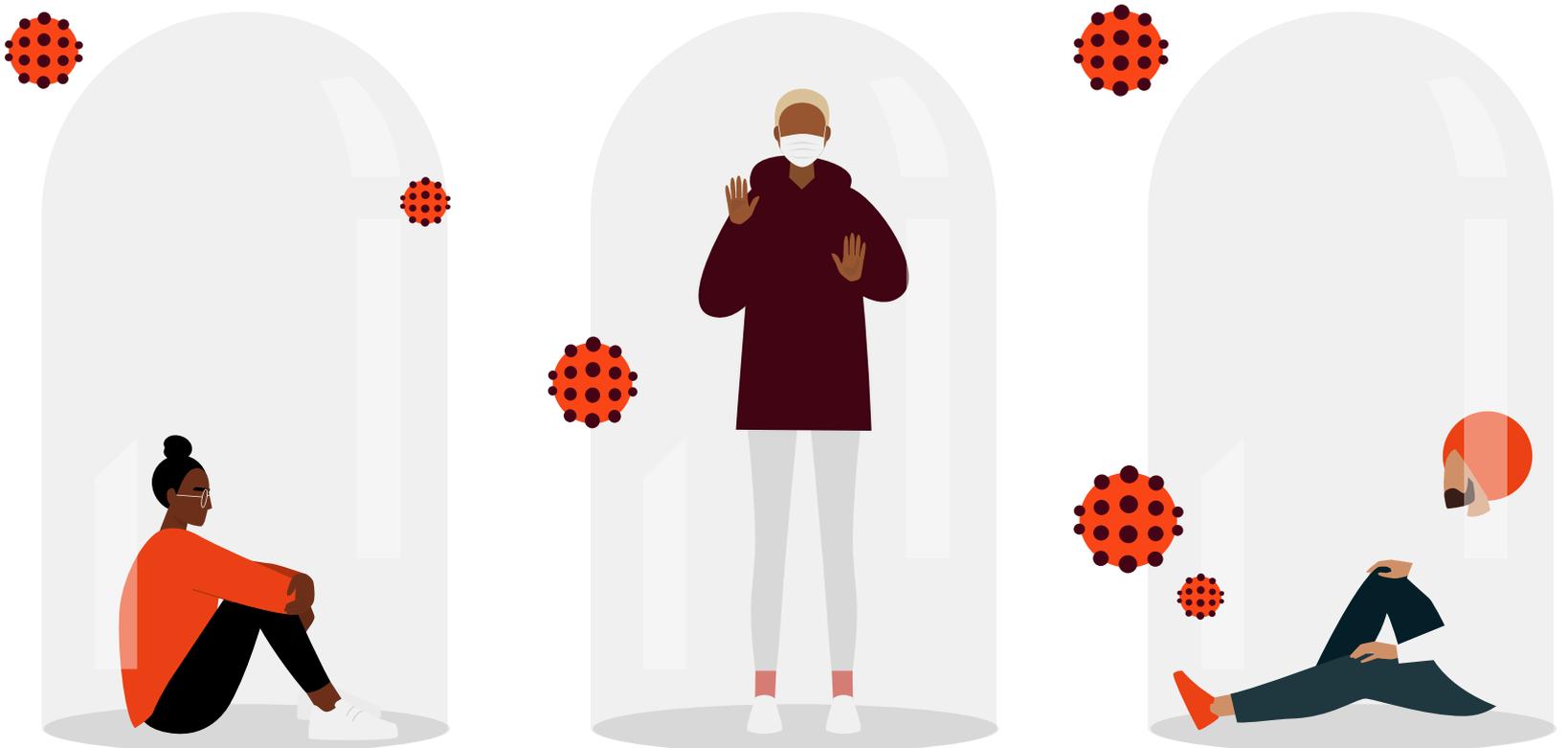
<sup>4</sup> [Intersectionality](#) is a key concept coined by critical race theorist and Columbia law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw.

# Background



# Previous Research That Supported This Project

YW Boston is one of many local organizations working to support marginalized workers, although our intersectional focus on race and gender appears to be unique. In preparing for this research, we reviewed other Boston-area studies on the impact of COVID-19 on the labor forces, the status of women workers and workers of color, and equity in the workplace. The next page showcases the four key assertions from across the studies that influenced the structure and analysis of this project.



## Assertion #1

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted women of color (WOC) more than any other group. WOC were already behind in earnings, education, and health due to preexisting societal inequities.<sup>5</sup> During COVID, these inequities got worsened.<sup>6</sup>

## Assertion #2

Occupational segregation is evident and persistent in Boston's workforce, especially in its leadership and upper management structures. There aren't enough women or people of color leading Boston's businesses.<sup>7</sup>

## Assertion #3

Societal inequities are mirrored and in some cases amplified in the workforce. Current labor shortages experienced by area employers are exacerbated because of unequal access to institutions like healthcare and education.<sup>8</sup>

## Assertion #4

Increasing trans visibility has not yet translated to increased resources and trans-affirming policies in MA workplaces. This means that trans people are still discriminated against at work, even when their employer does not mean to do so.<sup>9</sup>

At the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, this report explores personal testimonies of DEI successes and failures experienced within a variety of employers, industries, and sectors. In the next section, we describe the methods we used for this research, including the challenges we faced that provide lessons for the future.

<sup>5</sup> <https://apps.bostonglobe.com/spotlight/boston-racism-image-reality/>

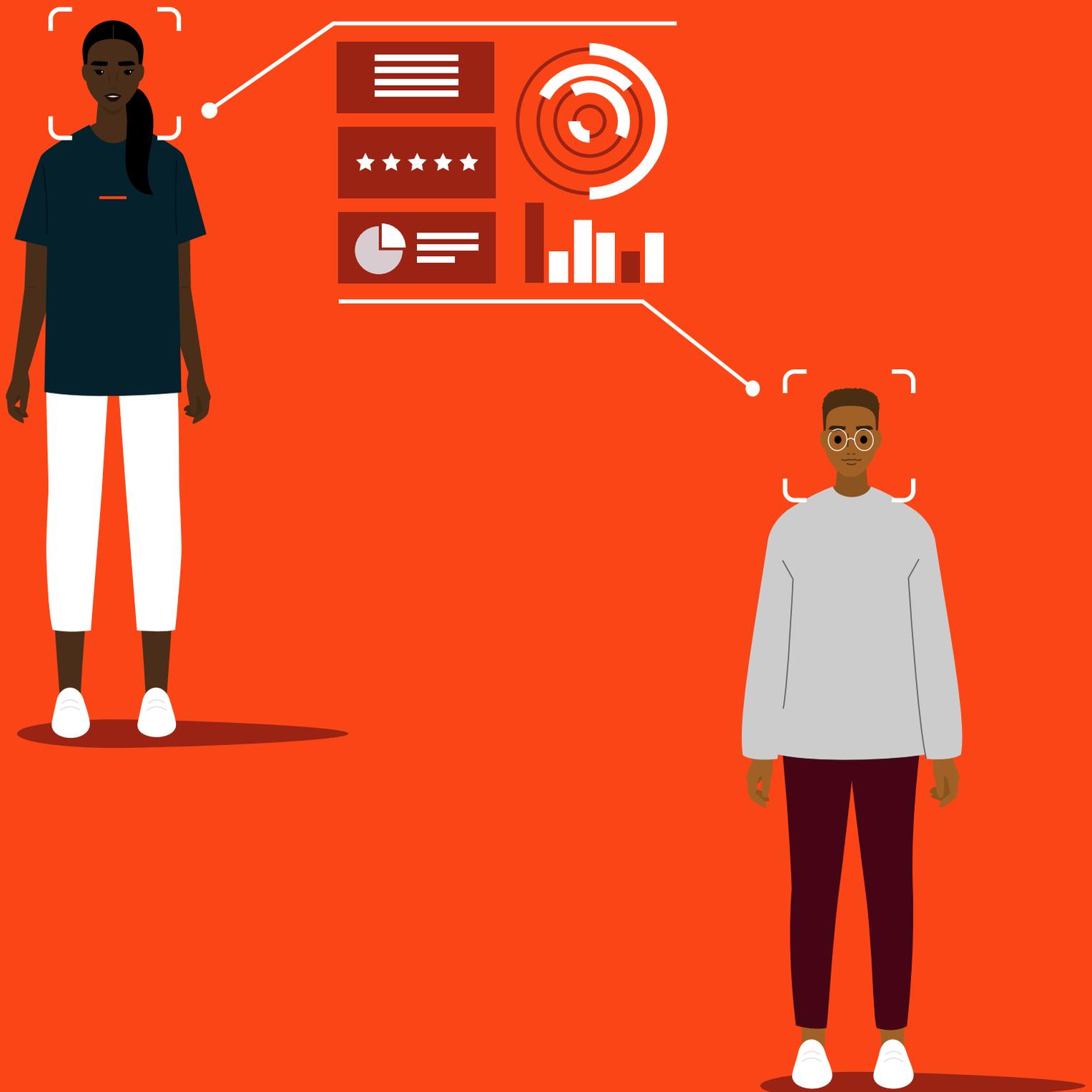
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/14/opinion/minority-women-unemployment-covid.html>

<sup>7</sup> Zhavoronkova, Marina, and Rose Khattar. "[Occupational Segregation in America](#)." Center for American Progress, March 29, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Health of Boston Special Report: The COVID-19 Experience Among Boston Residents: Findings from the COVID-19 Health Equity Survey Boston Public Health Commission Research and Evaluation Office Boston, Massachusetts 2021

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.masstpc.org/discrimination/>

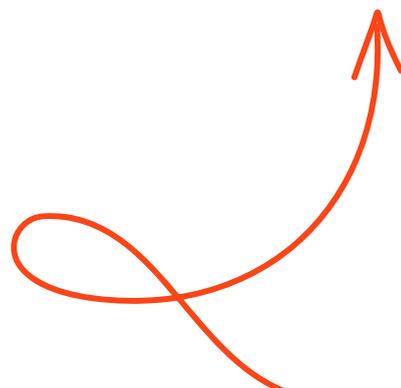
# 3 Methods



# Studying the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Hourly Workplace Experiences

At YW Boston, we strive to improve the experiences and opportunities of people with marginalized race and gender identities in particular. We use this intersectional approach to focus on the dual impact of race and gender on workplace experiences. While we know some identities afford more privilege by society (e.g. whiteness, maleness), a person's experience is shaped by all of their identities, all at once.

In this project, we wanted to understand the experiences of hourly workers with marginalized racial and gender identities. We conducted five focus groups and two one-on-one interviews with a total of 25 people for this project. While most reports (see p. 10-11) examine the experiences of leadership and full-time salaried workers (and, in fact, that is the focus population of most of YW Boston's programming), for this project we intentionally sampled hourly and wage workers. This allows us to focus on a group that is less likely to have access to high-level positions and to better grasp the impact of DEI efforts at all levels of the workforce.



# Recruitment Efforts, Dissemination, and Criteria for Participation

Approximately 400 physical flyers in multiple languages were circulated in and around Boston. In addition, and dozens of digital recruitment images were circulated across communities in Greater Boston via social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter) and via non-profit and community email list-serves like [Young Nonprofit Professionals Network](#) (YNPN) and [Mission-Based Massachusetts](#).

The physical and digital flyers described the study, a \$75 e-gift card for participation, and provided a weblink for an intake survey. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions to collect demographic and personal perspectives related to their workplace experiences. 207 eligible respondents completed the intake survey.<sup>10</sup>

**Ultimately, 25 were available to meet and met the study requirements:**

1. Identifying as non-White (if monoracial)
2. Currently living or working in Greater Boston<sup>11</sup>
3. Employed in an hourly capacity
4. Willing to participate in a focus group

<sup>10</sup> The survey received over 760 responses, but of those responses many were spam, computer generated, or from participants not meeting the demographics of the intended participants.

<sup>11</sup> Local residency was verified by the researcher through review of a piece of mail addressed to them or an image of their work badge (if applicable).

All flyers and communications were offered in Cape Verdean Creole (Kriolu), Chinese, Haitian Creole (Kreyòl), Spanish, and Vietnamese. Although we tried to recruit participants with limited English language fluency or in their native tongue, we were ultimately unsuccessful. Therefore, all conversations were conducted in English. Future research should attempt to increase the linguistic diversity of participants.

## AN NOU TRAVAY ANSANM



YW Boston ap chèche kounye a moun ki nan pi gwo zòn Boston yo pou patisipe nan yon gwoup konsantre diskisyon ak konpansasyon ki santre sou enklizyon nan espas travay. Nan yon efò pou gen konvèsasyon **ki pi efikas n ap chèche moun ki satisfè kritè sa yo:**

Anplwaye ap lentan etan nan zòn Boston, ak moun ki gen koulè, ki idantifye kòm fanm, lèt sèks, oswa, ki pa binè.



**Touche \$75 pou patisipasyon ou nan gwoup diskisyon konsantre!**

Lè w pataje eksperyans ou, ou ka ede YW Boston pran etap ki nesèsè yo pou kreye mezi sipò pou enklizyon nan òganizasyon Boston yo.

**Pou aplike, eskane kòd QR la oswa vizite:** [empower.ywboston.org/focus-group-cr](https://empower.ywboston.org/focus-group-cr)

**Pou plis enfòmasyon, tanpri kontakte:** [akaba@ywboston.org](mailto:akaba@ywboston.org)

# Qualitative Data Collection

We initially planned to conduct only focus groups, both for efficiency and so that everyone could make connections and learn from each other in real time across sectors and employers. However, given the unexpected challenges with recruitment and scheduling (see more on the next page) it made sense to include individual interviews as well. Altogether, five focus groups and two individual interviews were conducted. Group interviews ran for 90 minutes and individual interviews ran for 45 minutes; both covered the same topics and were conducted via Microsoft Teams.

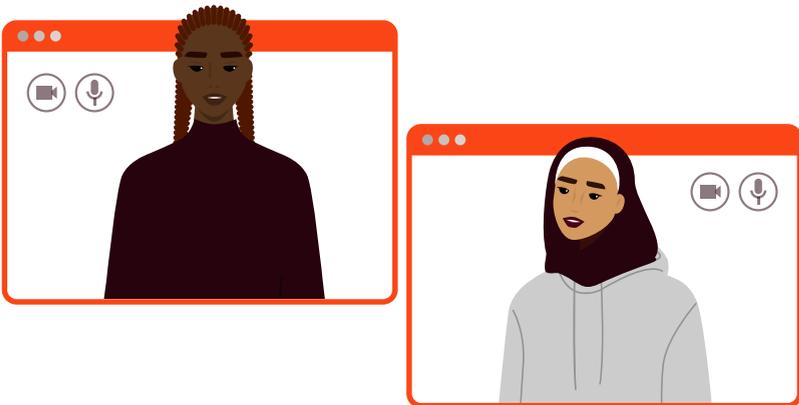
Participants received a description of the project at the start of the discussion. They then agreed to participate and to be recorded by affirming orally, physically (by raising a thumbs up), digitally (with a thumbs up reaction tool), or by writing in the chat. All focus groups and interviews were conducted by the lead researcher, a Black woman from Boston. She worked to establish trust between herself and the participants by acknowledging the inherent power dynamic between herself and participants, assuring them that her goal was to listen, and talking about the efforts of YW Boston within the community. At the end, participants were asked to complete a short debrief survey reflecting on their experiences and hopes for research outcomes.

# Analysis

Transcripts and qualitative survey responses were analyzed by the lead researcher using thematic coding. Descriptive statistics were also calculated where appropriate.

All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities and employer names were omitted for privacy.

# Recruitment Challenges



- ✓ Accidental ambiguity of eligibility language: “hourly worker”
- ✓ Digital divide limited access to recruitment materials
- ✓ High number of ineligible responses to intake survey forced additional barriers to participation via residency or work verification
- ✓ Language issues:
  - ✓ Only oral languages available
  - ✓ No response from non-English speakers

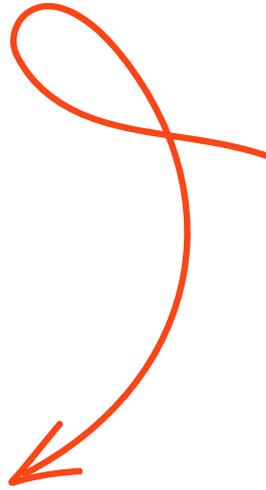
# Participant Demographics

Participants identified across seven different racial and ethnic categories, and five identified themselves as multi-racial. 68% identified as Black or African American. 84% identified as women, three identified themselves as non-binary, and one preferred not to say. Their ages ranged from 23 to 52 years, with the majority under 35. 40% identified as LGBTQIA+. While this is not always a visible category of difference

Pseudonym	Title	Sector	Age
Valerie M.	Graduate Research Assistant	Educational Services	32
Jordan A.	IT Technician	Information Technology	29
Divya G.	Course Assistant	Educational Services	29
Destiny C.	Desktop Technician	Information Technology	41
Ciara W.	Case Manager	Healthcare/Social Assistance	27
Renee N.	Clinical Manufacturing Assoc.	Chemical Manufacturing	27
Miriam M.	Tech Support Analyst	Information Technology	26
Olivia P.	MBTA Youth Pass Specialist	Healthcare/Social Assistance	23
Natasha J.	Fin. Coach/Empl. Specialist	Healthcare/Social Assistance	52
Shane R.	Barista	Food Services	25
Ana L.	Visitor Services Assistant	Educational Services	30
Sydney C.	Secretary	Admin. and Support Services	52
Tatiana B.	High Risk Case Manager	Healthcare/Social Assistance	38
Nicole L.	Patient Registrar	Healthcare/Social Assistance	49
Isabel C.	Coordinator	Retail (Clothing)	48
Amira K.	Substitute Teacher	Educational Services	35
Nancy O.	Front of house	Admin. and Support Services	44
Tessa M.	Paraprofessional	Educational Services	25
Leslybeth M.	Tech Aide	Information Technology	35
Dreya H.	Bus Operator	Transportation	35
Chanel B.	Sales Installation Specialist	Healthcare/Social Assistance	31
Mary S.	Community Advocate	Healthcare/Social Assistance	43
Hong P.	BIPOC Coordinator	Arts, Entertainment and Rec.	33
Alex G.	Peer specialist	Healthcare/Social Assistance	24
Helen A.	Customer service	Admin. and Support Services	--

<sup>12</sup> Jourian, T-J. (2019). [Working for Lived Equity: Community Needs Assessment](#). Trans\*Formational Change, LLC.

<sup>13</sup> MENA - Middle Eastern or North African



to employers, previous research notes the ways sexuality is important in thinking about organizational culture of belonging.<sup>12</sup> All but eight participants lived in Boston neighborhoods at the time of this study. Age, neighborhood, and sexual orientation were rarely discussed by participants, but are provided below for context.

	Race	Gender	LGBTQIA+	Residence
	Black	Woman	No	Waltham
	Black & Latinx	Non-binary	Yes	Dorchester
	Asian	Woman	Yes	Somerville
	Black	Woman	No	Mattapan
	Black	Woman	No	Mattapan
	Black	Woman	No	West Roxbury
	MENA <sup>13</sup>	Woman	No	East Boston
	Black	Woman	Yes	Medford
	Another race	Prefer not to say	No	Allston
	Black	Non-binary	Yes	Dorchester
	Black	Woman	No	Dorchester
	Black	Woman	No	South End
	Latinx	Woman	No	Roxbury
	Black	Woman	No	Medford
	Latinx & White	Woman	No	Hyde Park
	Another race & MENA	Woman	No	Mattapan
	Indigenous	Woman	Yes	Jamica Plain
	Black	Woman	Yes	Dorchester
	Black & Latinx	Woman	Yes	Somerville
	Black	Woman	Yes	Dorchester
	Black & Indigenous	Woman	Yes	Abington
	Black	Woman	No	Cambridge
	Asian	Woman	No	Dorchester
	Black & Latinx	Non-binary	Yes	Jamica Plain
	Black	Woman	No	Cambridge

# Research Findings

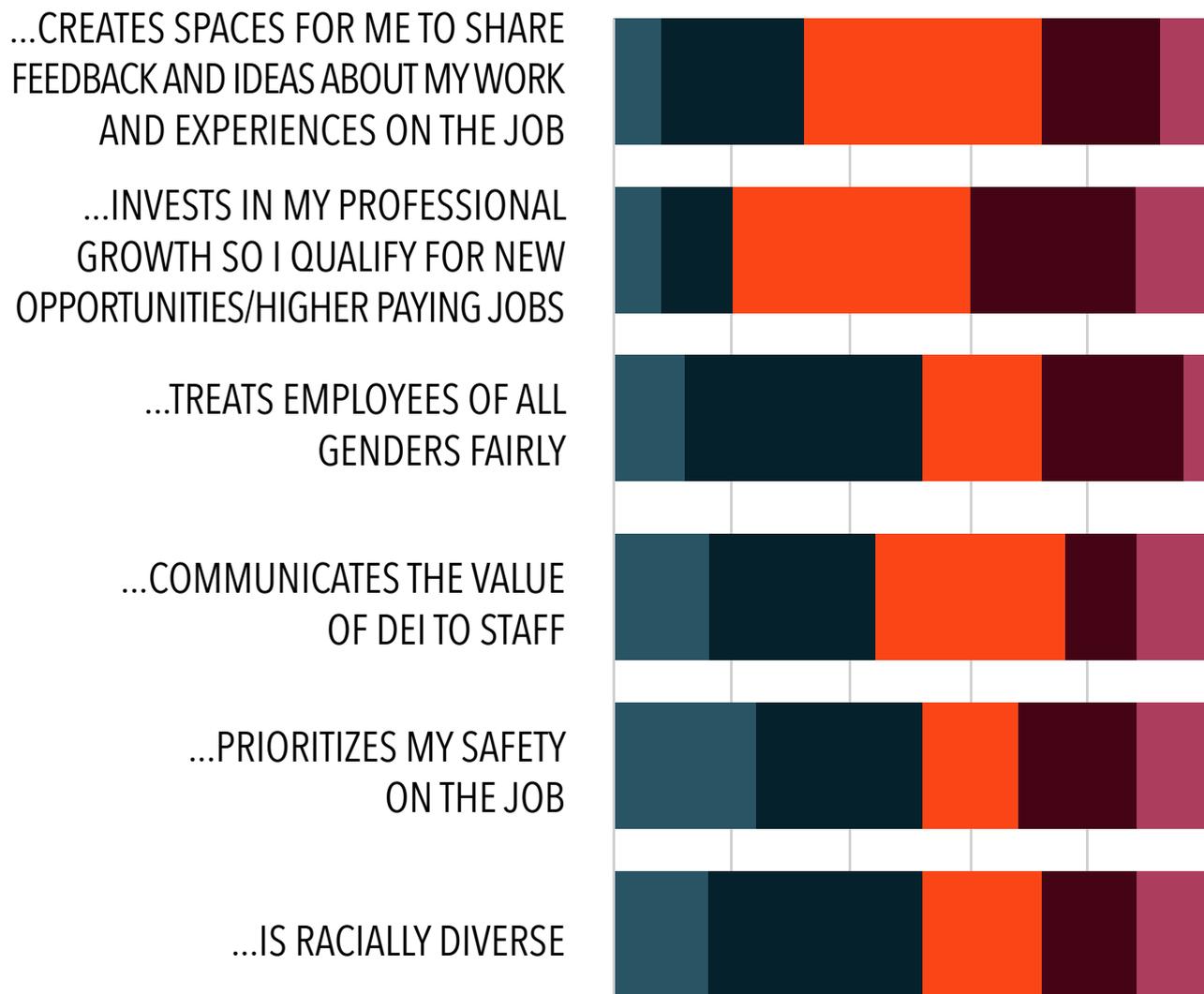


# Diverse Experiences at Work

Prior to their involvement in the workplace inclusion conversations, prospective participants were asked to respond to six statements about equity and inclusion at their current sites of employment.

In both the chart below and the thematic analysis that follows, study participants provide a window to a wide range of experiences at work. As a result, the thematic analysis illuminates both challenges and preliminary solutions across workplaces, managers, and sectors.

## My workplace...



STRONGLY AGREE
  AGREE
  NEUTRAL
  DISAGREE
  STRONGLY DISAGREE

# An Overview of the Thematic Analysis and the Power Within Shared Experiences

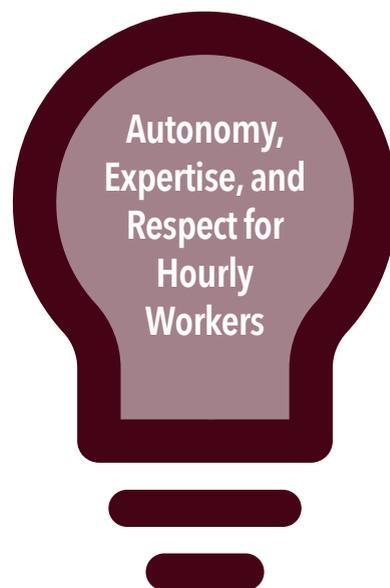
In the Fall of 2022, participants were asked to come together and be vulnerable in a discussion of workplace equity and inclusion in the current labor market. We asked participants to be vulnerable in these conversations. While their identities would be protected, it can be scary to talk about your livelihood with strangers. The lead researcher facilitated the discussion by encouraging trust, and the participants responded in kind.

Every focus group call ended with participants extending gratitude to one other, in recognition of the safety they established and sustained for and with each other.

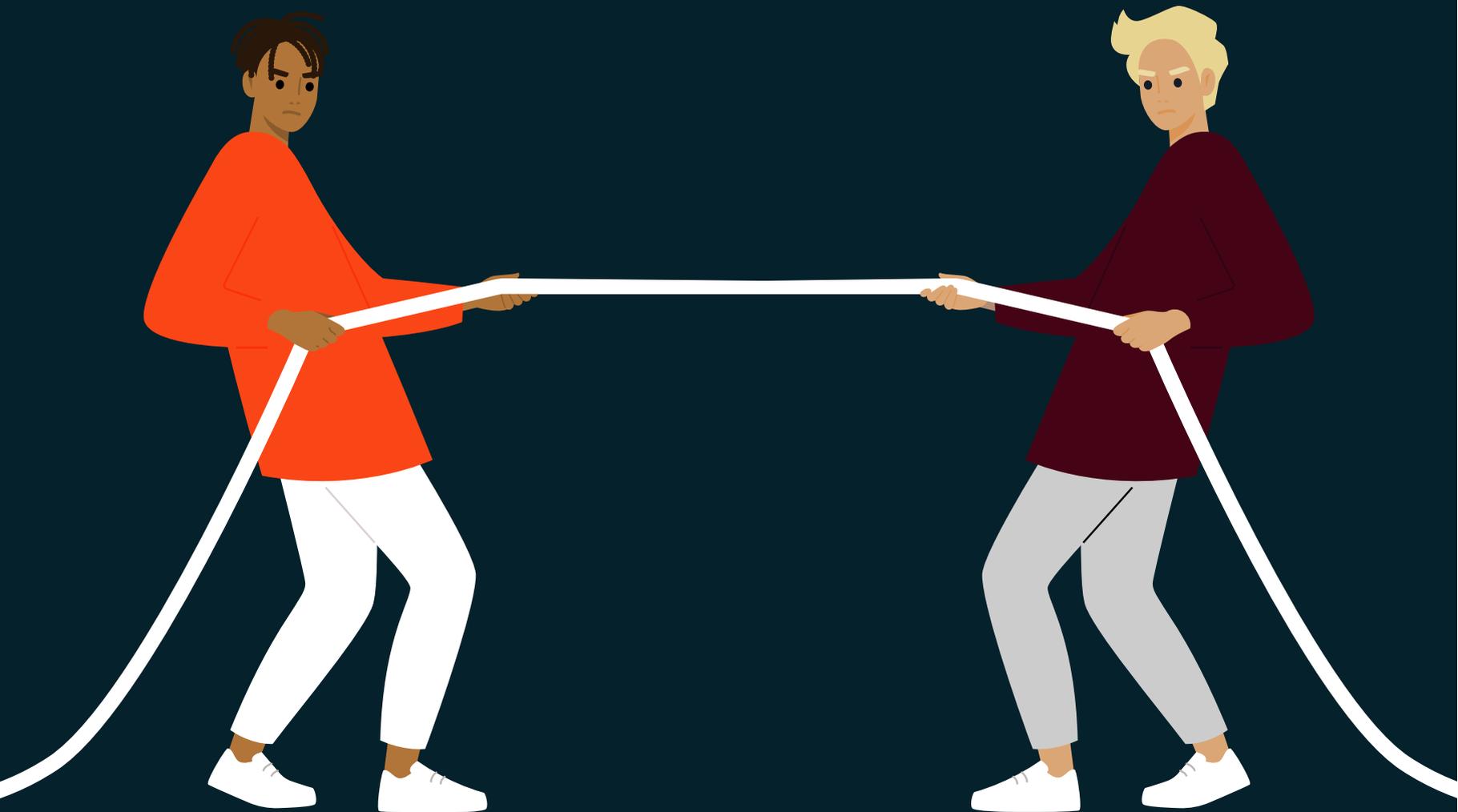
Some participants even went on to share contact information and ways to stay in touch as they honored the spirit of community and coalition building. There was power in shared experiences, backgrounds, and hopes for liberation that knocked down any doubt or fear that may have existed in the space at the start of the conversation. The verbal affirmations, snaps, and digital reactions exchanged from participant to participant communicates their collective affirmations of one another. The conversations were captivating and raw, balancing heaviness and joy.

The themes that emerged from these conversations, organized and informed by the problems and solutions raised by participants. Of the three highlighted in this report, only one overtly connects to racial and gender equity. However, because we know that entry-level or hourly workers are more likely to be women and people of color and executive-level employees are more likely to be White men, we want to emphasize that each of these challenges *is* an equity issue in the workplace.

## Our Key Findings

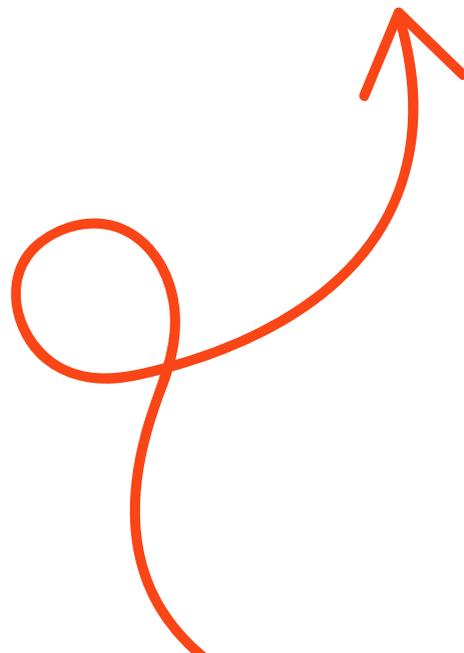


# Theme 1



# Challenges and Opportunities for DEI at Work

In 2023, we are living in a time where there are resources and opportunities to not only make diversity, equity, and inclusion a part of our work but to see how efforts (or lack thereof) impact culture and practices in the workplace. There are resources, organizations (like [YW Boston](#)), and research that can pave the way for a more inclusive workplace. More importantly, there are calls to action, knocks on the doors, and squeaky wheels of workers – both historically marginalized and not – demanding this change.



## CHALLENGE #1

# The Reality of Inequitable and Opaque Pay

The reality is that for most of us, even if we love our jobs, we work because we need to. Pay matters in our lives, and for our participants pay emerged as an issue for several reasons:

1. Participants weren't paid enough given their added value
2. Participants were paid less than others in the same position
3. Raises and advancement opportunities were unclear

When participants were asked "if you had all of the power at work, how would you make things better for yourself and your coworkers?" pay equity and transparency came up about half the time. Some participants disclosed their pain, sense of betrayal, and fear upon learning that they were not earning what their peers were earning for the same work. Others shared their dreams of no longer living paycheck to paycheck.

Despite having a college education, comparable work experience, and regularly recognized by their manager, Natasha is paid less than their peers. They now have difficulty engaging with their colleagues and feel undervalued. When they leave their current position and organization, this will likely cost their employer more in recruitment, hiring, and onboarding than increased pay would have.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Lytle, Tamara. "[Closing the Gender Pay Gap.](#)" SHRM. SHRM, August 16, 2019.



This is what frustrates me because I'm definitely looking for another [work] opportunity, right? But I love my job. I love the job.



**Natasha J.**

*Financial Coach and Employment Specialist,  
Healthcare and Social Assistance Sector*

PREFER NOT TO SAY GENDER; IDENTIFIES AS HAVING ANOTHER RACIAL/  
ETHNIC IDENTITY

OPPORTUNITY #1

# Invest in *all* Staff, Especially Those Who Are Paid Hourly

Prioritizing pay equity is an important lever for DEI in the workplace because people of color and those with marginalized gender identities are often in lower-paying jobs, suffer from pay discrimination, and make less money than their peers for the same job.<sup>15</sup> However, as we saw with the example of Natasha above, pay equity is a mutually beneficial practice as it can support businesses in retaining valued employees. An increase in pay can even work as compensation for an otherwise disappointing and unsatisfactory work reality. Pay equity is a restorative measure for tense and stressful employment experiences that could recover and reenergize existing talent.<sup>16</sup>

"Pay better. You know, think about inflation. Proactively try to compensate your employees well. People have rent to pay, food to pay, childcare. [...] just make sure your employees are getting paid well; that will retain your employees. It would be nice if you can come home and have extra money for a play and not have to pay your bills and then have nothing left over afterwards."

## **Sydney C.**

Secretary, Administrative and Support Services  
BLACK WOMAN

<sup>15</sup> Bleiweis, Robin, Jocelyn Frye, and Rose Khattar. "[Women of Color and the Wage Gap](#)." Center for American Progress, March 29, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Bhaskaran, Swathi, Andrew Davis, Christophe Desbrière, and Sara Wasserteil. "[Bridging the Advancement Gap: What Frontline Employees Want--and What Employers Think They Want](#)." McKinsey & Company. McKinsey & Company, July 22, 2022.



## What can I do?



### **Conduct a pay equity audit.**

Consider, are there inequities or inequalities by race, gender, or other identities that you could rebalance?

### **Review policies around cost of living increases and bonuses.**

Do they adequately account for inflation? What do employees need to do to qualify? Is that clearly communicated?

### **Reflect on your most successful workers at all levels.**

What would it cost to replace them if they were to leave? Is their current salary competitive and/or commensurate with their contributions to the company?

### **Consider benefits that directly serve hourly workers.**

Not all staff are equally at risk to get sick or hurt at work, and typically those most vulnerable have the fewest benefits. Consider additional sick or personal days for those on the front line.

### **Document and share your pay and benefit policies.**

Do all employees have access to and know where to find information

## CHALLENGE #2

# Making Inclusion a Reality

Belonging is not only a social need but also a workplace one. Studies show that feelings of exclusion and isolation are comparable with physical damaging pain.<sup>17</sup> The absence of belonging and identity-safe workplaces repels prospective talent and drives existing talent to seek other opportunities. Without belonging, there is lower organizational commitment and engagement from employees. This study alone proves that “checking in” and creating a space for discussion about the workplace can nurture a sense of bonding and connection.

Unfortunately for those with marginalized identities, the experience of having others “like them” can be a rare experience. The power imbalances and identity stratification created and reinforced by occupational segregation impact hourly workers ability to feel empowered to be their full selves at work. This was clear in Alex G's response about a memorable moment at work (see next page).

<sup>17</sup> Carr, Evan W., Andrew Reece, Gabriella Rosen Kellerman, and Alexi Robichaux. “[The Value of Belonging at Work.](#)” Harvard Business Review. HBR, December 21, 2021.



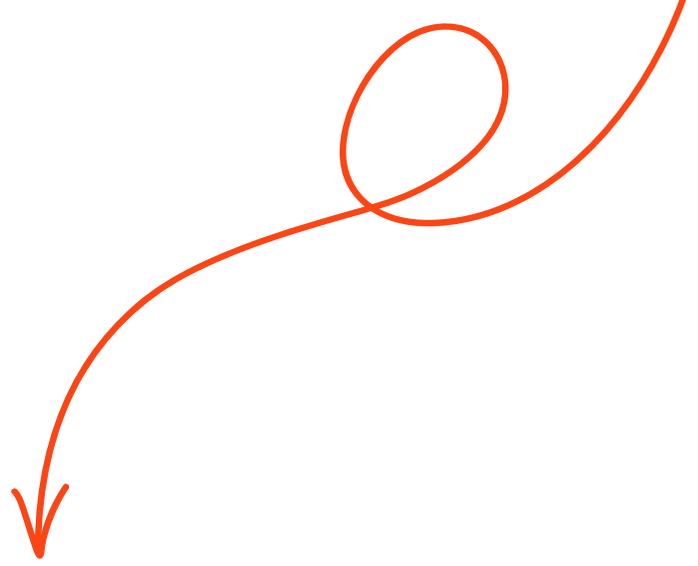
It has always involved my other coworkers or my other coworkers who identify as LGBT being there. Other memorable moments is when I've supported clients who have similar identities with me, and they were just like 'it' was really nice to just talk to somebody who gets 'it'. So those are always really nice days for me.



**Alex G.**

*Peer Specialist, Healthcare and Social Assistance Sector*

NON-BINARY/GENDER NON-CONFORMING; BLACK & LATINX



OPPORTUNITY #2

# Prioritizing Racial and Gender Identity Inclusive Environments

With an increasingly diverse local workforce, it is imperative for Greater Boston's businesses to make workplace belonging and acceptance part of their business plans. Participants communicated a need for safety and connection through regular efforts and intentions by their colleagues and employers.

The prioritization of racial and gender identity inclusive environments lets workers know they are valued.

An intentional investment in identity-safe employee resource groups and spaces can attract, develop, and retain enthusiastic talent.

Belonging is a result of both equity and inclusion that employers can leverage to operate productively and nourish their forces holistically. Equity, inclusion, and belonging fosters creativity and improves employees' production and thus can improve business performance.



The job had rolled out like pronoun pins for people like she/her, he/him, they/them. And then there's one that's like 'ask me about my pronouns'. They said that they will roll out more eventually for people that use others. People will correct themselves if they use the wrong pronoun for me, people will remind other people.



**Shane R.**

*Barista, Food Services*

NON-BINARY/GENDER NON-CONFORMING; BLACK





## What can I do?

### **Create opportunities for employees to share their pronouns.**

Consider introductions in meetings, email signatures, pins, business cards, bios on company websites, etc. This may also include learning opportunities (such as signage or orientations) that help educate different clients, guests, or volunteers to pronouns so that staff are affirmed in all facets of their work.

### **Conduct a culture audit of key organizational committees, policies, and practices.**

Who do your current approaches center? Are they reflective of the needs of your full workforce? Begin to grasp the different backgrounds that may make up your organization – these may be different cultural groups, generations, or those with accessibility needs.

### **Evaluate how supervisors, colleagues, and the overall workplace contribute to belonging.**

Conduct an annual culture survey, 360 feedback, or other opportunities for staff to name the factors that are supportive or barriers to belonging. Evaluate employees explicitly for how they contribute or impede belonging in the workplace.

## **Interested in learning what moves the needle on diversity, equity and inclusion?**

YW Boston has done the research and developed a toolkit to get you started on your equitable evaluation journey.

**[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE](#)**



# Theme 2



WE **HAVE**  
**EXPERTISE**



WE **NEED**  
**AUTONOMY**



WE **DESERVE**  
**RESPECT**



# Autonomy, Expertise, and Respect for Hourly Workers

Participants expressed a clear desire for increased autonomy in their workplace experiences. Decision making, especially around where and how work is conducted, increases workers' self-efficiency. When there are opportunities to support or solve problems, all employees should be brought into the discussion in order to add diverse and valuable perspectives. Participants in this study wanted their employers to respect their knowledge, trust their independence, and listen to them when they had issues to raise. The conversations with participants raised several key questions for both workers and employers:

1. What are the practices in place to both hear and process employee insight and considerations?
2. How are employee voices being sought out and integrated in strategies and decisions to come?
3. What kind of influence do workers have over their own schedule and work environment?

Inclusion in employee voice means that individual workers, who are experts in their duties and functions, are routinely and thoughtfully engaged.

## CHALLENGE #1

# Distance from Decision Makers

Many participants said that they were neither consulted nor considered in decisions about their workplaces. They described a hierarchal imbalance in organizations based on the presumed value and the knowledge associated with particular roles. This often included operational decisions like schedules but also included broader DEI conversations or company culture initiatives. Without a seat at the table or an opportunity to communicate their point of view to higher-ups, participants found it hard to be confident in their leadership. This lack of trust was especially the case when it came to DEI initiatives and strategies.

Almost unanimously, interviewees found their connections with and distance from management to be disheartening, dismissive, and disingenuous. Several described feeling dehumanized and like they were “just a paycheck.” Jordan A. described bonding efforts as fake and wished that instead they could “give us our time back and allow us to do other things [...] like take care of our kids or getting some of that extra sleep time we’re not getting.”

“At my company, there's salaried workers, and then there's hourly workers, so you can kind of guess who gets listened to more. [...] I'm the one who's out there [on the frontline] every single day... and the people who are listened to more are the ones that haven't done that in years.”

### **Alex G.**

*Peer specialist, Healthcare and Social Assistance  
NON-BINARY/GENDER NONCONFORMING; BLACK & LATINX*

“

Most [transportation workers], their voices aren't heard. They speak, they speak, they speak, and they feel like they're talking to a brick wall.

”

**Dreya H.**

*Bus Operator, Transportation*

WOMAN; BLACK

OPPORTUNITY #1

# Uplifting Diverse Perspectives

As more organizations create DEI and culture committees to address the racial inequities highlighted in 2020<sup>18</sup>, there is a unique cross-sector opportunity for engaging staff of color and with marginalized gender identities. Several participants in this study stated that they joined DEI committees specifically to have their voices heard. Participants who felt included and heard were more engaged in all parts of their jobs, and more committed to their organizations.<sup>19</sup>

If organizations are serious about workplace equity, they need to make sure that all employees are involved in workplace conversations, including but not just for DEI work.

For example, who attends advisory committees, council opportunities, or other key organizational meetings? If unpaid, inconvenient, and exclusive committees shape the decisions at organizations, employers are guaranteed to miss out on the ideas of many key voices in their companies.

“I bring in a perspective because a lot of these people who are downtown in [...] offices do not know what we're dealing with on the front lines. So, I feel like my voice is being heard and I feel like I'm being the voice of the [hourly workers] who feel like they're not being heard.”

**Dreya H.**

*Bus Operator, Transportation*  
WOMAN; BLACK

<sup>18</sup> Carter, Evelyn R, and Natalie Johnson. “[To Sustain Dei Momentum, Companies Must Invest in 3 Areas.](#)” Harvard Business Review. HBR, November 4, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, Stephen. “[Employee Resource Groups Create a Sense of Belonging, Foster Engagement.](#)” SHRM. SHRM, June 29, 2022.



## What can I do?



### **Create opportunities for cross-team, cross-role connection.**

Consider how schedules and spaces at your workplace do or do not foster engagement across teams, roles, and identities.

### **Encourage all staff to consider joining key committees.**

Consider whose voices are missing from your current committees. How might time/location impact access to participation? Are these conversations considered “work” and compensated?

### **Invest in a workforce development organization.**

Supports like YW Boston’s [InclusionBoston](#) offer comprehensive DEI solutions designed for organizations seeking measurable and lasting results.

## CHALLENGE #2

# Rigid Requirements for Frontline Hourly Workers

The move to remote work as a result of the pandemic increased pressure on frontline workers. Frontline workers and hourly workers in particular were more likely to stay working “in person” and were sent back to work during the height of the pandemic. Their roles proved to be essential and could not be performed remotely. They included jobs in retail, restaurants/service, hospitality, government, and civil service. At the same time, other workers gained more control over their schedules, shortened their commutes, and increased trust from managers that they could do their jobs remotely.

This resulted in a divide between those who were trusted to work independently and those who were not - and participants noticed.

Even with a fixed work location, some participants were not given their work schedule in advance, making it hard to schedule doctors' appointments, childcare, or social activities. Focus group participants desperately wanted flexibility in the workplace such as: more flexible project deadlines, flexible in and out times, and hybrid and remote work options.

Those who were able to benefit from work-from-home arrangements in early COVID were met with resistance from their employers when they wanted to continue that arrangement. This is worth emphasizing, as several participants described having to go back to work even when their roles could be done remotely. All because they were hourly. An extreme example of this was Olivia P.



Last [winter] season there were two really bad snow storms. I was still homeless at the time and he [supervisor] forced me to come into the office. [...] And I was the only person who was required to be in the office while everyone else in my department got to work from home and I felt that was [...] unfair because like, I'm quite literally homeless. And you have me trekking through dangerous snow storms to come, sit at a desk and stare at a computer for seven to eight hours a day, when I could easily be doing that, you know, from the comfort of, you know, the shelter, at least.

**Olivia P.**

*MBTA Youth Pass Specialist, Healthcare  
and Social Assistance*

WOMAN; BLACK

## OPPORTUNITY #2

# Utilizing Flexibility as a Tool

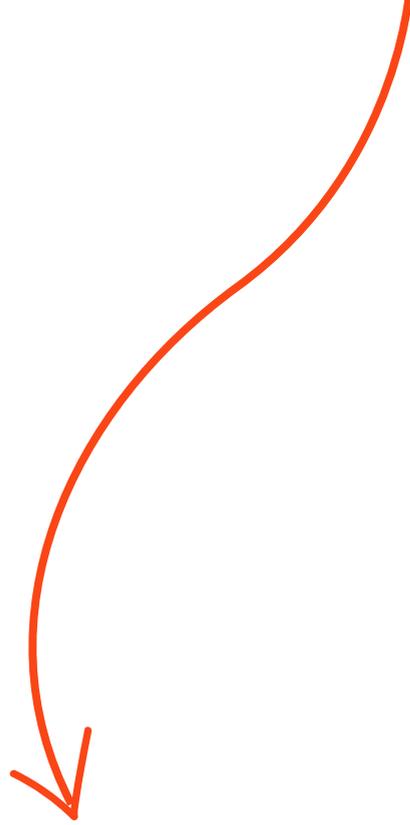
Organizations have ample opportunities to give their workers flexibility and can consider doing so in service of workplace DEI efforts. Giving schedules in advance and providing flexible work arrangements means employers are accomplices in workplace equity: supporting otherwise marginalized workers in moving from surviving to thriving in their personal and professional lives. Even in roles that must be in-person, employers should consider other ways to be flexible. In a review of the duties and responsibilities for a specific role, what opportunities are there for employee choice and autonomy, while making good on the deliverable?

Asking questions and listening to employees' responses, can create a partnership between organization and employee that means longer-tenured, happier, more invested workers. This is good for the organization and the employees, at all levels. Participants named that increased flexibility had the positive impact of: supporting mental health, decreasing distractions, increasing creativity, increasing productivity, decreasing tardiness due to weather or issues with transportation, and the ability to manage caregiving responsibilities, to name a few.

"I really love the hybrid option. And that's something that I'm not willing to go back on. I need that option for myself, for my sanity. [...] being there for family and, like that flexibility, I think is something that I didn't realize I needed but now that I have it, I'm not willing to give it up.

### **Valerie M.**

*Graduate Research Assistant, Educational Services*  
WOMAN; BLACK



## What can I do?



### **Be creative and partner with your employees for solutions.**

What work must be done in the office vs not? What are your concerns for letting employees be remote or hybrid? How can you work with them to find alternative systems of project management, supervision, and/or time tracking?

### **Consider disability justice when designing office policies.**

Working from home had positive impacts for those with many mental and physical disabilities – how can you continue those accommodations in your workplace today?

# Theme 3



# How Managers Can Impact Staff Well-being and Development

Managers make a significant difference on an employee's well-being. Consistent, positive management can therefore be a key lever in changing an organization's culture of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Supporting worker development, growth, and skill building can be a powerful way to break down workplace segregation. Our participants discussed three primary ways managers can impact the professional well-being and development of their staff (and therefore an organization's ability to retain and promote workers of color of marginalized genders): people-driven management, built-in professional growth opportunities, and recognition when work goes well.

## CHALLENGE #1

# A Deficiency in Leadership and an Absence of Authority

The participants in this project were ambitious and hardworking; they wanted to do well at their jobs. They faced challenges when they did not have clear objectives or guidance from their managers about what their job was, or how to do it well. Some participants discussed the frustration with a lack of commitment from managers to manage their employees, and a lack of options to resolve problems. For participants, this showed up as:

- ✓ Unresponsive and unavailable managers
- ✓ Cancelled or deprioritized supervisory meetings
- ✓ Absent or untrusted HR
- ✓ No respect for hourly workers as key team members

Unfortunately, self-advocacy was insufficient to fix these situations. Participants described their frustration with not knowing where to turn for support when managers and HR were unsupportive or absent. Some participants (particularly non-union ones) openly questioned whether they were legally protected at work. Renee N. even went as far as saying that HR was the very last place she'd go if she needed support in the workplace. Nicole echoed this, saying, "I can tell you I have no voice. If something were to occur at work, like racially, I wouldn't know where to go."



I sort of do have the space to create change for the culture at my organization but one thing that I would do is like wave a magic wand over middle management that is [...] stuck in their ways so that they can get it [DEI]. The entry level employees get it, senior leaders get it all the way from our CEO, he gets it. But middle management does not get it. And when I say get it, I mean get diversity, equity and inclusion. My definition of inclusion [is] it's valuing difference and creating value through difference and they [middle management] don't get it.



**Chantel B.**

*Sales Installation Specialist, Healthcare  
and Social Assistance*

WOMAN; BLACK & INDIGENOUS

## OPPORTUNITY #1

# Focusing on Quality and People-Driven Support

A two-pronged approach of educating managers about management as a skill and DEI efforts as a framework would make a big difference in the quality of participant's work experiences. When managers took the time to provide clear, realistic expectations and help employees get there, it instilled pride in the employee and motivation to perform even better. When people-driven managers provide workers with their guidance and expertise, and use a holistic, humanizing approach, encourages eagerness and commitment from employees.

This support does not always (or only) need to be top down to be effective. Across interviews, hourly staff who were aware of employee resources and internal supports chose or attempted to utilize them. This included Employee Resource Groups, trainings and professional development such as [resources](#) offered by YW Boston, mental health services, tuition reimbursement, and HR departments. YW Boston's [own research](#) sees the act of sharing information and resources with culturally different colleagues as evidence of equitable behavior change - and the more that all staff provide this support, the more equitable and inclusive workplaces can be.



## What can I do?



### **Review measures of success with managers and employees.**

This could include professional development plans, DEI strategies, and opportunities for growth in work plans, policies, or management guides.

### **Provide management training to all managers.**

Too often managers are given professional development for their “work” in ways that overlook their work as managers. What professional development resources, leadership opportunities, or other trainings could support their growth? For example, YW Boston offers a [Implicit Bias for Managers workshop](#) and our [LeadBoston](#) program equips mid- to senior-level professionals with the knowledge, skills, and network necessary to increase equity within their organizations and communities.

### **Make Human Resource's role clear.**

If your organization has HR (or a similar function), then it’s important to understand and agree on their role in mediating conflict, whether specifically about equity or not.

### **Increase transparency and access to employee resources.**

Use a variety of mediums to communicate and share resources. If employees speak multiple languages, consider having them translated. Use and refer to key resources regularly so all employees have access: in all-staff and department meetings, in supervision meetings, in staff newsletters, etc.

## CHALLENGE #2

# Invested and Loyal Employees With No Pathway to Promotion

In every conversation, participants were eager to make bigger contributions to the overall success of their organizations through new and challenging responsibilities. However, professional development desires and needs of staff (especially hourly staff) too often went unaddressed. Ana L. described the impact of this on her experience. Despite doing a great job and asking for more complex tasks, she was not given any and felt ignored. She felt like her lack of a college degree was holding her back, despite her ample work experience. As a result, though she was interested in the work, she was increasingly less interested in performing at her best for her organization.

Participants named a desire for employer supported and sustained professional growth. They wanted to work with their supervisors to identify next steps for development so that they could excel at their organization, improve their skillsets, and advance their careers. Participants instead described vague dialogues with supervisors, a lack of resources for professional development, and little to no investment from their organizations in their development. When workers took it upon themselves to increase their skills, they were often surprised that it did not change their positions or pay. Instead, it felt like extra work for nothing in return.



If there is structure, a ladder, you can see people grow in. They [the employer] will tell you there's a lot of chance, [and] opportunities, but I can't see [it]. It's not structured and they didn't work on that ladder to make it easy. You can't see yourself in five years or if I do this, I can be there. You can't see that structure so I have to double think and figure out where I have to be within [the] upcoming five years.



**Helen A.**

*Customer Service, Admin and Support Services*

WOMAN; BLACK



OPPORTUNITY #2

# Recognize and Cultivate Experience

Another theme among participants was their joy, pride, and satisfaction when learning and growing – often despite the lack of formalized investment and support from their employers. When resources were available, as was the case for participant Dreyah H., she was able to leverage her self-efficacy and love of learning to grow both her skills and her contributions to her employer.

Making organizational resources available to all employees, including hourly workers, is a great way to develop and retain talent.

Another way to support hourly workers is by recognizing the depth and breadth of their experience, irrespective of formal education levels. While on the job training is customary for many employers, participants also named that employers could increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace by reevaluating hiring requirements and practices around the requirement of a college degree or postsecondary education.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Small, Matt. [“Council Post: Three Ways to Invest in Skills-Based Hiring to Improve DEI.”](#) Forbes. Forbes Magazine, December 12, 2022.



I love to learn. [At my workplace] we have a portal where you can go on and like find out what's going on and sign up for different things that are going on that can help you move up within the organization. I started doing that and I've gotten very involved to the point that my manager was like, 'wow, I didn't know you were doing all of this'.



**Dreya H.**

*Bus Operator, Transportation*

WOMAN; BLACK



## What can I do?



### **Review position requirements in job postings.**

Consider replacing formal higher education requirements with equivalent professional experience. These could be based on projects or years.

### **Review job-descriptions and work plans.**

Is skill-building valued as part of the job? How can professional development opportunities be collaboratively identified between employers and employees? Encourage managers to also both receive and provide professional development.

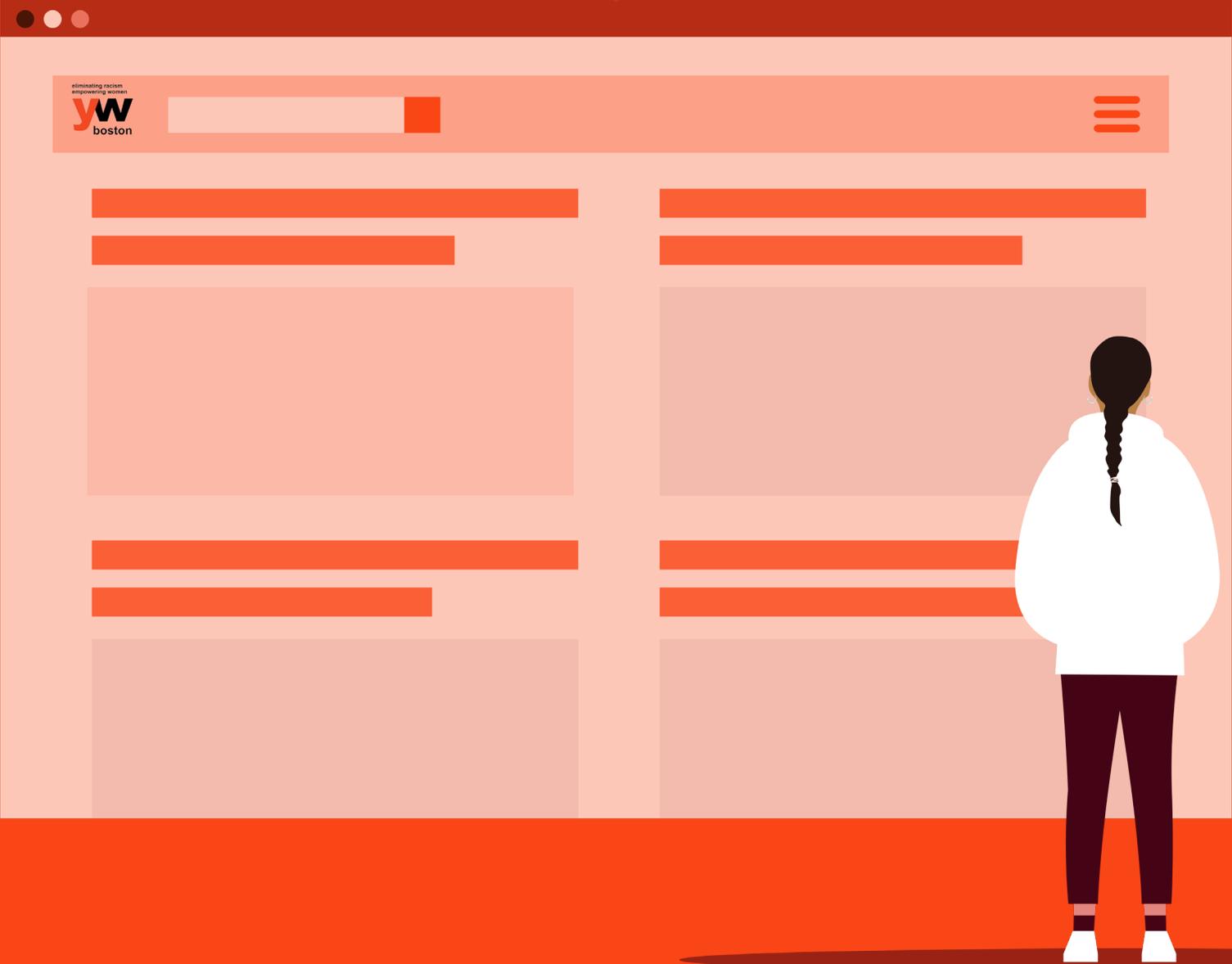
### **Provide clear pathways to promotion.**

Often “on the job” learning can increase the value of employees to the organization. How is that, alongside institutional knowledge, considered in promotion opportunities and pathways? How can you make these opportunities more explicit to workers, including hourly ones?

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### CHALLENGE #3

# Inadequate Praise and Biased Systems of Recognition

Recognition for effort and quality of work are important components of employee engagement, morale, and retention. Participants described that too many of them either did not have opportunities to be recognized or they found that the same people were recognized all the time: mostly White and/or male staff.

At one workplace, a participant noted that their system allowed each employee to send points to others for a job well done, with a monetary bonus. Unfortunately, recognition was not distributed equally, and who was even eligible to give/receive points was unclear. As a result, her morale dropped. Her hard work felt invisible because the lack of communication around this well-meaning system and initiative, and because of who is more likely to give and receive praise (even when anonymous).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Schawbel, Dan. "At Companies Where Recognition Incorporates Diversity & Inclusion, 3X as Many Employees Are Highly Engaged." Achievers. [LinkedIn](#), December 29, 2022.



When I had first started out, to be honest, I was actually the only person of color on my team and I felt like it was always the same people getting recognition. It was people giving the same people recognition time in and time out. It came to a point where I felt like I was yearning to be recognized in some sort of way. As a side note, I would never want to work just for the point of being recognized. I don't think that's beneficial to oneself, but I think it's nice to get a pat on the back every now and then.

***I think it's nice to be seen.***



**Renee N.**

*Clinical Manufacturing Associate,  
Chemical Manufacturing*

WOMAN; BLACK

OPPORTUNITY #3

# Commit to Increasing Morale Through a Culture of Feedback

Workplace recognition and appreciation tend to be in response to measurable or noteworthy work outcomes, but that does not have to be the only time. One hallmark of an inclusive team is the embedded nature of feedback and recognition. This culture can cultivate higher quality work, deeper relationships between colleagues, and decrease silos and inefficiencies amongst teams.

Conversations with hourly workers revealed that there are lots of modes, frequencies, and reasons that employers can be recognized, appreciated, and incentivized. Oftentimes, it was informal credit and acknowledgement from clients, colleagues, and supervisors rather than a centralized system. To achieve this, however, takes a culture of feedback and acknowledgement of how biases can creep in. There is great potential for increased morale at an organization with institutionalized opportunities for feedback.

" For a while I didn't feel like I was getting recognized for all the work I was doing until [a coworker used my advice when working with a trans client, and they both] had the best experience ever. My coworker credited me for that. And like I swear to God, guys, I like cried. [...] Knowing that the work that I was putting in was being put into work, first of all, a client felt seen and my coworker felt confident, and gave me credit for it. And I was just like... tears. The day was very memorable for me."

**Alex G.**

*Peer Specialist, Health Care/Social Assistance*  
NON-BINARY/GENDER NON-CONFORMING; BLACK & LATINX



## What can I do?



### **Assess the culture (or lack of) of feedback in your organization.**

How and when are praise, recognition, and feedback provided formally? What about informally?

### **Train employees on inclusive feedback practices.**

Often the issue is not an unwillingness, but a lack of knowledge and practice that are preliminary barriers. Consider tools like the “ladder of feedback” and “inclusive communication” as places to start.

### **Create more opportunities for feedback.**

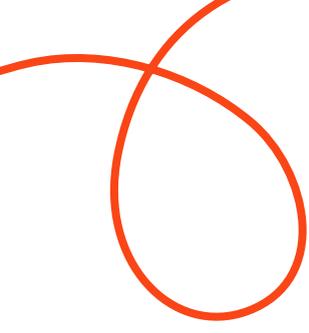
Consider scheduling meetings or adding agenda items explicitly on providing two-way feedback in supervisory meetings. All-staff meetings could recognize employees living into company values, irrespective of role.

### **Look out for bias.**

Be mindful that those who typically feel most comfortable giving feedback, and those who are most likely to receive feedback, are not distributed equally.

# Conclusion

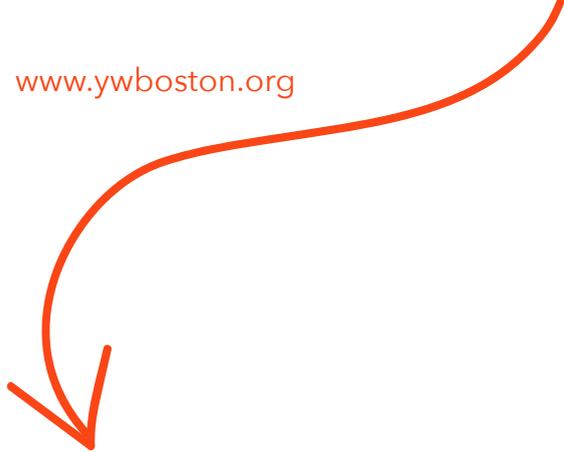




As our research shows, although there are many problems there are always solutions and quick wins available to us so that we can improve our workplaces now. Those who participated knew their perspective had value and that they deserve more and believe their employers can deliver. *Participants want you to know that inclusion is not only a possibility but a necessity in Greater Boston workplaces.*

Most DEI efforts focus on middle and upper management, but the impact of equity and inclusion work (or lack thereof) is felt through all levels of an organization. We encourage employers and decision-makers to include marginalized workers at the center of designing and adjusting workplace policies and practices. As many social movements have taught us, *often those closest to the problems are also closest to the solutions.*

We hope that this study allows employers, workers, and funders alike to join us in a call to action, rooted in principles of equity and inclusion, to advance and transform the region's labor force by dismantling systemic barriers and tools of oppression. We again insist that future research and conversations center marginalized experiences. If we do so, we can collectively ensure that Greater Boston employers lead state and national efforts for workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion.



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