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A Report on Employee Values and Satisfaction

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## INTRODUCTION

“ I DON'T GET WHAT'S VALUED ”

In 2018, Salt Lake County Office of Regional Economic Development conducted a research project to better understand the needs of businesses in Salt Lake County. The intent of that study was to assess how local businesses of all kinds experienced economic operations in the county, both through government policy and in hiring from the local workforce. Nearly 500 business owners and managers were interviewed, offering a wealth of data about workplace history in the county, business connections in other locations, long-term plans, diversity in the workplace, organizational associations, and challenges for and contributors to success. In particular, the data gathered regarding workforce, particularly recruiting and retention of employees, was interesting to the Office of Regional Economic Development and generated important questions about the employment experience of the workforce in Salt Lake County.

To answer some of these questions, the Office of Economic Development chose to pursue a similar qualitative project in 2019, this time gleaning data from employees rather than employers. Focus groups were selected as the method of data collection, as this method allows for a great deal of rich data for consideration. Nine focus groups were held during the summer of 2019. Companies selected for focus groups were deliberately different from one another in an effort to diversify the voices included in this project. However, exploratory projects such as this are not intended to provide generalizable data. Rather, qualitative data like these gathered here are intended to offer rich, descriptive insights and possibilities to consider.

NEARLY 500 BUSINESS OWNERS AND MANAGERS WERE INTERVIEWED, OFFERING A WEALTH OF DATA ABOUT THEIR WORKPLACE HISTORY IN THE COUNTY

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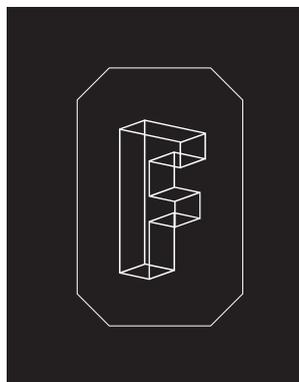
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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The focus group guide developed for this project was informed by a conceptualization of work values that identifies different types of motivations and considerations for those in the workforce (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). These work values offered a theoretical framework through which to organize this project as well as this report. Similar to Twenge et. al., extrinsic values were conceptualized as tangible results of work. These included pay, benefits, titles, position in company hierarchy, and the perceived prestige of the company. Intrinsic values were conceptualized as intangible rewards, and were often internal. These related to the process of work and how participants may experience the work they did as interesting and rewarding in its own right. Self-motivation, pride in ones work, and opportunities to learn and be creative were examples of intrinsic work values. Altruism was conceptualized in terms of doing good for society and company values such as organized charity work and justice orientations. Also included in altruism was the value placed on helping others through ones work, both in the community and at the office. Social values were conceptualized

as opportunities to build camaraderie with ones colleagues and experience beneficial social relationships in the workplace. This included both organized social events with colleagues and opportunities to meet like-minded people who could become friends outside of work hours. Leisure was conceptualized as having enough time off to pursue personal interests outside of work, personal availability to care for and connect to ones family and social circles, and the ability to achieve a healthy work-life balance.



These work values proved to be an exceptionally helpful framework for this study. Focus groups were purposefully structured to offer general questions first, allowing these work values to emerge or not according to participant experience and personal values. Almost without exception, each focus group spontaneously referred to these values in answering those first open-ended questions. When a work value did not emerge organically in a focus group, probing the value with more specific questions revealed particularly illustrative results, all of which inform this report.

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## SAMPLE

The sample from which these data are drawn represent a particular slice of the workforce in Salt Lake County. Most notably, with only two exceptions all focus groups were conducted with employees whose jobs afforded them the flexibility to leave their work for 90 minutes. These participants tended to occupy relatively higher positions in company hierarchies and have internal control of how they spent their time at work. Attempts to schedule focus groups of individuals whose experience differed from that proved challenging. The parameters of qualitative study were unable to accommodate the section of the workforce whose jobs demanded they perform particular functions during particular hours. Thus, some segments of the workforce, such as food service workers, teachers, and those who work in retail stores, were largely inaccessible. We were able to

incorporate only two focus groups who more closely mirrored the experience of employees whose work does not usually offer the kind of flexibility our sample had. Their voices were vital to this study, and led to richer and more applicable data here. However, we hope to address our limited access to this population in further studies.

Our sample (n=77) was largely white (89.5%), male (62%), heterosexual (92.5%), and self-identified as not having any disabilities (92.5%). Ages ranged from 23 to 65, with most participants in their late 30s or 40s. A vast majority of participants (90%) had received at least some higher education, which was roughly on par between genders. The lack of diversity in this sample is another limitation we hope to address in further studies.

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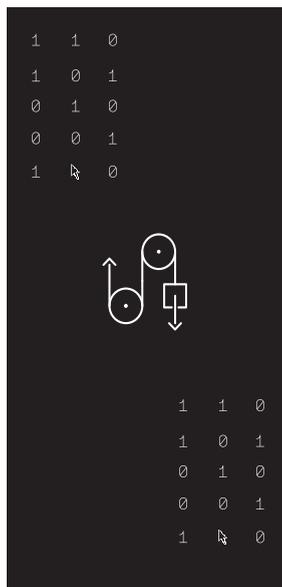
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## FINDINGS

In addition to the qualitative work generated by the focus groups, participants were asked to rank the importance of Extrinsic Values, Intrinsic Values, Altruism, Social Values, and Leisure. Their rankings mirrored the data they offered during focus groups, and rankings varied only slightly by gender. Female-identified participants ranked Extrinsic Values and Leisure as equally important, followed by Intrinsic Values, Social Values, and Altruism. Male-identified participants ranked Leisure as most important followed closely by Extrinsic Values, which differed by only one participant. Leisure and Extrinsic Values were followed by Intrinsic Values, Social Values and Altruism. For all genders in this sample, Leisure, likely related to flexibility, and Extrinsic Values were nearly too close to be indistinguishable in primary importance. Altruism was last in importance for almost everyone in this sample.



participants, particularly when they were seeking a job. Intrinsic Values were also highly motivating during a job search, but most participants sought a job for extrinsic motivations and loved their job for other reasons. With a few notable exceptions, participants in this sample rarely sought a job for altruistic reasons. This is likely a feature of this sample, which did not include justice industries such as non-profit organizations, but altruism should not be discounted in this context. While relatively fewer, those who were motivated by Altruism were exceptionally enthusiastic, viewing the “good” they were able to do as a vital and integral part of their corporate experience. Even participants who did not express altruism as a personal value enjoyed and took pride in the altruistic pursuits of their companies.

Social Values were incredibly important to this sample, and one particular finding should be noted here. By far, all focus groups spent the most time talking about the “culture” in their companies, which had strong associations with social values as they had

Data from this sample revealed that in general, Extrinsic Values such as pay, benefits, hours, and paid time off (PTO) were highly motivating for these

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been conceptualized here. However, participants also described company culture as a result of norms, policies, practices, working environment, and “tools” ranging from internet service and software to office supplies and screwdrivers. Company Culture clearly extends beyond social interactions. For this reason, it has been considered in its own section. When considering these data, it is important to understand that Social Values and Company Culture inform each other in crucial ways, and should be contemplated together.

After Company Culture, Flexibility was the most common discussion item in almost every focus group,<sup>1</sup> regardless of the question that prompted the discussion. The value of Leisure was indeed important, but our original conceptualization of leisure as work-life balance and time away from the office proved too limiting for this sample. Rather, this sample valued the ability to remain fully com-

mitted to both their jobs and their families. Even the adage “work to live, don’t live to work” proved too limiting for this sample; in every case, they spoke of a blending of work and life in ways they could not -and did not necessarily want to- separate sharply. Rather, participants wanted “time at work to take care of home stuff, because [they] use time at home to take care of work stuff.” A flexible comingling of work and life allowed participants the freedom to care for all of their varied responsibilities, and greatly contributed to their satisfaction and sense of personal wellbeing. To honor this complex and important nuance, the remainder of this report, with the exception of direct quotes, will refer to “life balance” as a term that more accurately reflects participants’ attitudes and experiences. Like Company Culture, Flexibility will be considered in its own section, and should be recognized as closely associated with Leisure as a work value.

<sup>1</sup> The single exception to the prevalence of discussions regarding flexibility was a focus group comprised of manual laborers whose job required their bodies to be present on certain days during specific hours to accomplish particular tasks. While recognizing that flexibility of work was less likely in their occupation, they still expressed a desire for flexibility in hours (e.g., more flexible shifts) and days off.

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## EXTRINSIC VALUES

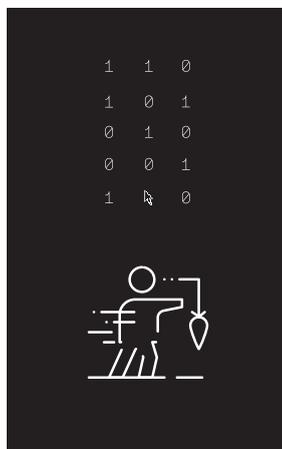
For our sample, extrinsic motivations included pay, benefits, PTO (including compensation time and vacation buyback), tuition reimbursement, promotional opportunities with associated pay increases, company prestige, stability, and recognition of a job well done. Extrinsic motivations proved extremely important to our sample, and they emerged organically even in response to a question specifically intended to probe intangible benefits of the workplace. This finding is unsurprising, and reiterates the importance of pay and benefits as particularly salient for both job seeking and employee retention. Benefits were spoken of in broad terms, with good benefits, particularly health insurance and reasonable PTO, sometimes compensating for lower pay.

Participants hoped that their continual improvement on the job would translate into more pay. Titles were less important, more often cited as a way to mask discrimination than a significant feature of promotion. Rather, participants expressed a desire to have the value they added be fairly represented in their pay. Additional skills, degrees, and certifications were

described by many participants as important to their own career advancement but also in terms of value to their employers. Several spoke of the difficulty in “escaping [their] pay band” as a result of company policies. For these participants, leaving the company and hoping to be re-hired was a less challenging way to be fairly compensated for the additional value they offered as they gained skills and education.

Relatedly, tuition reimbursement was mentioned as a vital part of compensation in more than half of the focus groups. In two companies, tuition reimbursement for job-related courses functioned in a way employees experienced as rewarding. Participants described having taken advantage of tuition reimbursement and enjoying subsequent promotion with their new credentials combined with company-specific skills: “I took

advantage of tuition reimbursement for both my bachelor’s and my master’s, and that’s why I’m here.” Others felt they were not compensated for their scholastic effort: “It’s not like you can go say, ‘I have [this degree], I should be promoted.’” One group, whose employer offered tuition reimbursement,



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wished the offer extended to industry certifications, a more applicable need in their line of work: “We have to do continuing education to keep our [certifications] up, but they will only reimburse college tuition.”

All groups expressed appreciation for official and unofficial recognition of their job performance. Official recognition was seen as vital to career building: “I think it’s important to be recognized for the work you are doing.... What matters to me is career growth.” Others echoed this sentiment, expressing that official recognitions helped build their resumes in the event they needed to find a new job. However, participants from almost every group more often voiced appreciation for small, unofficial acknowledgments of a job well done. Gratitude and praise were often cited as motivations to go above and beyond the call of duty, as well as a welcome acknowledgment during difficult situations. Describing a particularly challenging and discouraging experience, one participant said, “Even a two-sentence email from my boss would have changed the way I felt about everything.” These small, unofficial gestures did not necessarily need to be accompanied by any monetary reward. One participant joked, “You don’t want a gift card anyway because they tax you on it.” However, small monetary tokens such as gift cards were appreciated by many participants,

particularly those who spoke of peer recognition programs in which they were able to recognize and be recognized by their colleagues.

More philosophically, the groups who had the most challenging time articulating intangible work benefits were those whose pay was relatively lower. In addition to this difficulty, these groups were more likely to express a desire for tangible benefits when asked about changes they would like to see in their places of employment. In keeping with psychological literature regarding workplace experience, meaning-making and expectations differ between blue- and white-collar workers (Hu, Kaplan, & Dala., 2010), an observation echoed by these data. These differences are worth understanding when considering employee satisfaction in various occupations. An application of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs within organizational settings (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Hall & Nougaim, 1968) makes an interesting analytic here.

Recommendations for improvement proved insightful regarding extrinsic rewards on the job. A common theme among all participants was a desire for a clear, fair promotional path that would enable them to achieve their career goals. Many participants were happy in their current position and had no desire to climb the corporate ladder, but those who did wanted to better understand how best to pursue

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their goals. One participant, who was feeling frustrated by the process of purposeful development at the beginning of their career said:

*I feel confused a lot. I don't know if they value education, if they value seniority...do they value loyalty, do they value how much work you produce, do they value teamwork? I don't get what's valued and so I don't know how to move up. I'm not sure where to go, and I've gone out of my way to ask.*

No participant expressed a desire to find new employment. Rather, they hoped for better ways to fulfill their career goals in the company they worked for. Many expressed gratitude for the job security offered by a stable company, and sought to excel in that secure space.

“I DON'T GET WHAT'S VALUED”

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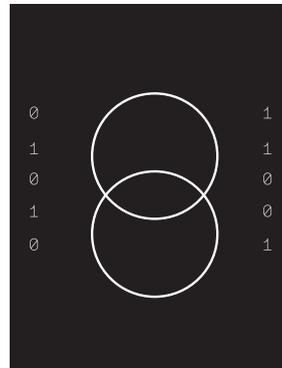
PARTICIPANTS HOPED THAT THEIR CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT ON THE JOB WOULD TRANSLATE INTO MORE PAY.

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## INTRINSIC VALUES

Intrinsic motivations mattered a great deal to our sample. Participants continually spoke of taking pride in their work, being motivated by high expectations of themselves, and having a desire to grow and be creative. “Interesting work” was cited as particularly valuable, especially when they had variety and opportunities to learn: “I enjoy learning something new every day.” The term “challenging” was most often used with a positive connotation within this sample. Intrinsic values as they have been conceptualized in this project were greatly appreciated aspects of work for most of the sample. Participants understood that enjoying the intrinsic benefits of their employment added significantly to job satisfaction, and that things like “stagnation” and “being limited” would “send people out the door.”



ora of different capacities. You can try out whatever you'd like to pursue.” When asked about the possibility of making mistakes while learning new skills, another enthusiastic participant said, “No, there is [no reprimand]. You go back to the drawing board, and you grow.” For this participant, as well as many others, the opportunity to learn new skills while pursuing beneficial work was markedly positive. For a few groups in particular, being able to do their jobs “right” was spoken of in especially empowering terms:

*There is some stuff that you work on that you know will make such an impact and such a difference that you get excited about it. It's when I want to do it so well and I want to involve other people and do it right. We get to do some really cool stuff and I get really hyped up.*

Participants particularly enjoyed having challenging work within a framework of support and boundaries. Opportunities to learn and grow were seen almost exclusively as positive, contributing significantly to job satisfaction. In response to a question about intangible benefits in their company, one participant said, “There are plenty of opportunities in a pleth-

They did not want to go back and “fix something twice” because they were unable to do their job well for any reason. When combined with supportive company policy and sufficient resources, participants were willing and excited to demand a great deal from themselves to produce work they could be proud of.

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No participant enjoyed being limited or siloed, and some did experience that. Rather, there was a strong preference for creative collaboration, self-direction, and the opportunity to exceed expectations: “If I’m allowed to take ownership of my work project, I am much more willing to go above and beyond.” This meant not only recognition of a job well done upon completion, but also the chance to work without being micromanaged. No participant enjoyed being micromanaged, and conversations regarding the topic were always lively. Participants wanted to be trusted to do their jobs and given the tools to excel. They worked hard to be trustworthy, and assumptions that they weren’t trustworthy were frustrating and demoralizing: “I had a situation where I was micromanaged, and I didn’t like that. Now I have a sense of accomplishment.” The ability to observe tangible results from seeing a project through to the end was also quite satisfying: “I like that when I finish a project, I am able to turn around and see what I did.”

Even when difficulties occasionally arose as a result of competing intrinsic motivations, participants expressed willingness to be generous with their colleagues: “Sometimes the challenge is a coworker, a person who wants to do things a particular way and it’s different than the way you want to do it. You are both right, but you want to head different directions. You work it out.” In the words of another participant, “It’s about different visions and valuing different

things, but [the different visions] are both right.” They offered support to one another and often referred to the self-motivation of a mutual job well done: “I want to make [my managers] look well. I want to make them look good while I look good and the team looks good.”

Occasionally, company policies and practices interfered with a participant’s pursuit of their intrinsic values. They experienced this as frustrating, particularly when the reasons given were hard to understand: “There are these boundaries [draws box in the air] around what you can do, and it’s not clarity – it’s limiting.... I want to work outside that box.” Entrenched ideas without sufficient justification were often experienced as a hindrance: “Sometimes that’s how it feels here. You are shuffling your feet going nowhere and it has to do with that culture of, ‘That’s just the [company] way.’” Participants recognized that change could be difficult, but were usually willing to sit in the discomfort required to overcome entrenched thinking. They recognized it could be hard but hoped it would work. “I’ve seen some change in great ways. But some people have asked for change and trying to train them has been a battle. You want it but you don’t want to learn it. I’ve seen both sides.”

Several participants expressed a desire for protected creative time. However, for these participants, company policies were prohibitive to creative

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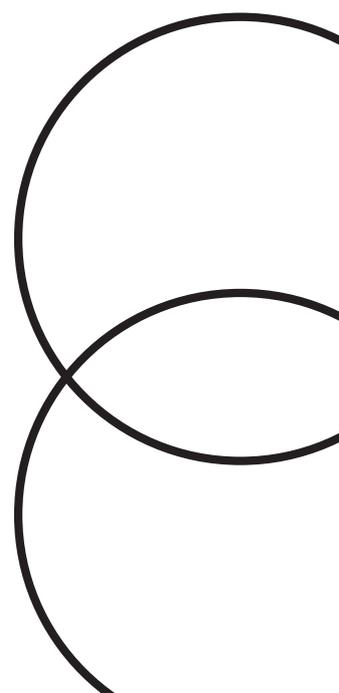
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time, as policies often didn't recognize creative time as "productive." For these individuals, the ability to invest in intrinsic motivators such as creativity and self-governed growth was vital to both their job satisfaction and their overall contributions. When policies were made that did not recognize the value of creative exploration, it became an adverse challenge for these participants. To the contrary, they wished success could be measured in creativity as well as productivity.

“I DON'T GET WHAT'S VALUED”

SEVERAL PARTICIPANTS  
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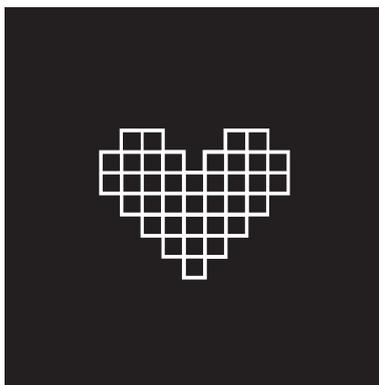
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## ALTRUISM

Relative to other work values, questions about altruism generated the least data from this sample and was less-often cited as an intangible benefit. However, for several focus groups, altruistic pursuits of "doing good," "making a difference in the community," and "having a purpose that matters" were absolutely integral to their experience. "I purposefully searched for a company that matches my values.

Hard work, integrity, stewardship, doing good for the community. They mirror what I want and what my personal values are." Another participant echoed this statement: "I want to mirror what was said to me about the values. That was sold to me during the interview process and that's something I could hold onto." Altruism allowed many participants to create positive meaning in their jobs. In the words of one participant, "As long as you can take care of your family, the next thing you're looking at is, 'What's the purpose of what I'm doing? Can I look at myself in the mirror and feel good about it?'"

Specifically, altruistic participants were invested in environmental and social justice concerns. Envi-



ronmental responsibility was discussed in all of the focus groups whose work had the potential to negatively impact the environment. Deliberate, environmentally-conscious company policies mattered a great deal to participants in these focus groups. "These [environmental policies] are not required and they don't contribute to the bottom line. We do this because we have a responsibility." Environmental

justice was mentioned organically by several participants regarding the intangible benefits of their jobs. Long-standing commitments mattered: "We have always been [environmentally conscious]. We don't even really talk about it anymore because it's not new. We just do it." The depths of company environmental ethics were observed and appreciated by participants: "I've worked for companies that don't have [environmental] ethics and don't care about their employees.... Here there is buy-in all the way up the chain." Many groups spoke of appreciating company benefits that encouraged or paid for public transit, recognizing that air quality is a particular concern in Utah. After a merger with a bigger company in a different location, one participant went to bat

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to keep local public transit benefits so as not to contribute to air quality concerns. Several participants were specifically interested in the environmental work their companies were doing, and found their contributions important beyond intrinsic value. Several participants specifically sought jobs with the potential to impact Utah's environmental quality: “I am excited to do something that matters [environmentally], directing Utah in that way.”

Social justice was often mentioned in connection with environmental justice. When considering how one company impacted equality through social justice, one participant said, “What we are trying to accomplish [in social justice] is why I stay. [Speaks of specific benefits to marginalized communities as a result of their job.] It's great to see how many lives we are affecting.” Company programs dedicated to doing good were appreciated (e.g., democratizing access to technology and developing technology specifically for non-profit organizations).

Participants often spoke of social justice as investment in and responsibility to communities: “To work somewhere that is meaningful to my community is important to me.” Legacy justice work was mentioned several times, with participants viewing long-range social justice concerns as vital to their meaning-making and job satisfaction: “There is the opportunity to make a difference not just here but also in the community. People have a desire to leave

a positive legacy for future generations.” Community contributions were often seen as ethical contributions that stemmed from gratitude: “We rely on the community for so many things, [the work] needs to contribute to the community.” Participants specifically appreciated when community engagement was “not selling anything” and admired when their companies would forgo work “because it would have a negative impact on the community.”

Organized opportunities to participate in altruistic work were mentioned by several participants. This included having company-wide service days, being allowed to volunteer a few hours a month “on the clock,” and having company-facilitated ways to donate money to non-profit organizations, particularly when it was matched by a commensurate company donation. Big, company-wide donations were spoken of with gratitude and admiration: “This is integral. It's just who we are.”

The altruistic value of “helping others” was mentioned frequently in this sample. It mattered to participants who sought particular kinds of jobs, and also when going above and beyond the call of duty: “I like being able to help other people, especially when they have been needing something for a while.” One participant was not willing to do work that did not help others, saying, “I'm a sucker for helping people. I like providing customer service... it's important to me that I help someone who has a need versus someone

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who is just shopping or whatever.” Having company policies that interfered with helping new coworkers was cited by many participants as frustrating. This was most often spoken of in terms of training: “I want to help my coworkers. I want to be a resource to them that they can lean on and depend on. It’s mainly for them.” During one focus group, a conversation took place in which multiple participants expressed their willingness to help coworkers even when taking time to do that negatively impacted their own jobs, and also expressed frustration at company policies that led to that negative impact.

“I DON’T GET WHAT’S VALUED”

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## COMPANY PROGRAMS DEDICATED TO DOING GOOD WERE APPRECIATED

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## SOCIAL VALUES

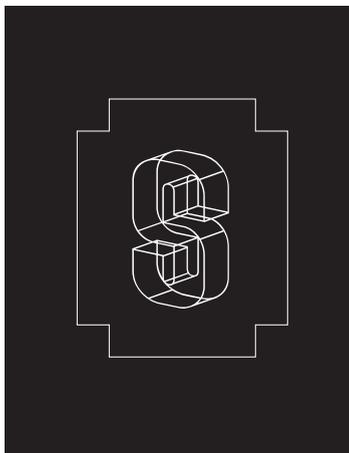
In this sample, social values were not only expressed by participants but observed by the researcher. Focus group participants were colleagues, often from the same department or teams. In some cases, their camaraderie lent a great deal of weight to their words. They often spoke of their coworkers in terms of “family” and described working together to navigate both tasks and company policies in ways that were mutually beneficial. In a particularly collegial group, one participant said, “My professional life enhances my personal life.... I’m just grateful to be here and work with these people.” Coworker camaraderie was seen as not only fulfilling and enjoyable, but absolutely vital to productivity and job retention: “I would leave if I didn’t like the people I worked with.”

Empathetic understanding between coworkers was observed in all focus groups, some with great poignancy: “I feel your pain so bad right now” and “I see [a coworker] thrown in with no background knowledge and no applicable training, and I can only imagine the depth of his despair.” Colleagues were seen

as vital resources on the job. In one case, a participant described an issue he could not get resolved, and a coworker in the group explained the solution and indicated that they were the person who could make the change. They made plans to resolve the problem together as soon as the focus group was over. Simply having access to each other in the focus group brought resolution in real time for an issue that had been long-standing.

Collegiality was a common response to questions about both intangible benefits of a job and motivations to go above and beyond the call of duty: “For me it’s being part of a team that wants to succeed, not just in my department but in the whole company. If I’m doing my job to the best of my ability, I’m contributing to the success of everyone else.” The

high esteem of colleagues was exceedingly valuable to this sample: “I want to be the person [my teammates] come to. I like seeing other people succeed.” Participants appreciated being recognized by and being able to recognize their peers in official capacities. Friendly team competitions were motivating to



“I DON’T GET WHAT’S VALUED”

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many groups, and good teams were often seen as a way of making the best of situations that were less than ideal: “We learned to advocate for each other.” Through relying on each other and having social connections, teammates were likely to become friends. “It’s just a great job to come to. I like it. It’s a great group... I talk to [coworkers] face to face every day. I see them as friends.”

Having fun together was important to all the groups, and all appreciated the social opportunities offered to them by their companies. Participants also sought other opportunities to bond socially, and one participant cited the silly fun of karaoke at an out-of-state conference as a turning point in team functioning. Several groups spoke of the value of being able to “play” together as integral to team cohesion and job satisfaction. One participant, who worked at a company that ostensibly valued play and provided in-office opportunities for it, spoke of a chilling effect on his team when a new manager asked them to stop playing together.

Participants also recognized that social interactions were valuable to their careers. Networking was seen as vital to professional success: “[Promotion] is a little bit of luck mixed with who you know and what you know.” It was appreciated when networking took place in a casual setting, particularly with managers from other areas in a company, but strategic networking was also appreciated: “This group

is intended to provide training, to give you the skills and social network to progress in leadership.”

Personality conflicts and the challenges associated with working in teams were fully acknowledged by this sample. Participants appreciated opportunities to learn teambuilding skills, and it was recognized that this was important when personalities or visions clashed. Sometimes, moving teams was the solution and resulted in a vast increase in job satisfaction. Occasionally, company policies, or lack thereof, exacerbated tensions between teammates. Participants recognized the difficulty in navigating feelings of resentment toward colleagues as a result of company policy. This was seen as hard on everyone, and participants wished their companies would be proactive and fair in creating and administering policies that alleviated challenges that could lead to resentment. In one participant’s example, cross-training multiple individuals so one person’s duties did not always fall to only one other person (who then had two jobs to perform) would have alleviated a great deal of frustration.

Diversity mattered when speaking of social values at work. The groups who had it valued it deeply: “We have so much diversity here. Diversity of lifestyle, thought, religion. It’s not typical but I love the inclusion.” This was also seen as valuable to creativity and progress: “Everything is diverse.... They are inclusive to every gender, sexuality, ethnicity, everything. I

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enjoy working in that kind of environment. I think it really helps push things forward.” When diversity was not present, it was wished for: “I wish we had more diversity. We need more diversity in this company.” It was hoped that diversity would be achieved organically: “If we are inclusive, the diversity will come.” However, participants recognized this was a challenge. “[The company] is just becoming aware of diversity issues. [A particular manager] didn't even know what this meant. Then we got someone in the company who was able to teach us some things, but it's baby steps. It doesn't happen overnight.” Some participants expressed frustration that they themselves represented the diversity their companies claimed to value, but were kept at a distance: “I keep earning my spot at the table and being asked to leave the table. I keep earning it but I don't get to stay at the table.... Where's our inclusion then?” These participants recognized diversity as a rewarding challenge that must be sought and cultivated with purpose, understanding that lip-service to inclusivity was not enough to encourage diverse voices.

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DIVERSITY.  
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that was “piling up,” because there were others to step in and help: “The size of the company means you have other people to take over. It’s a big enough company where if you have to leave, it’s not going to hurt.”

Conversely, it was upsetting to participants when their vacation or personal time was not respected. This was experienced as inappropriate: “My manager contacted me when I was walking into a church for my grandmother’s funeral.” It also contributed a great deal to pressure felt outside of work hours: “I have to see every single email. I can decide what to respond to, but I have to see everything as soon as I can. I’m the [person] who fires up their phone at play intermissions, just to see what emails there are.” What one participant called “email creep” was recognized as a managerial issue. For these participants, this was partly due to additional pressure to respond to managers at all hours: “I need to be Johnny-on-the-spot.” It was also because participants felt managers should be more conscientious about when they sent texts or emails: “It’s not the employee’s job to set those standards, it’s the manager’s job. It needs to come from the top down. Managers need to do a better job of not encroaching on our personal time or interrupting time off.”

More detrimental to time off than email creep was the experience of employees who were the only person trained to do their particular job:

*If I’m gone, nothing gets done. There is no backup; it’s just me. If I walked out, I’m not sure who would take over. I’ve been pretty verbal that we need a backup because it’s a scary situation for the company. But nothing has come to fruition with that. When you take a vacation, it’s not a vacation because now you have to be here on weekends. Nobody did anything while you were gone and there’s nobody to help you.*

Having only one other person trained to do a job was not considered a solution, as participants did not want to overburden their colleagues: “There is someone else on my team who can do my job.... But she already has a full-time job, and so I feel guilty leaving her with everything when I leave because she already has her hands full.” Every participant who rated their life balance as low mentioned some aspect of this as they discussed the difficulties they faced in this area. Participants had excellent ideas about how these difficulties could be addressed in their particular company contexts. They spoke of succession plans and business continuity plans for parental leave or unexpected illness. One participant observed, “Cross-training would help. Our department is one manager with four beneath him. We could all learn each other’s job and take care of things for a couple of weeks if something happened.” They recognized the complexities involved in this, but the problem was significant enough they spent a good deal of time in lively conversation as they considered the problems and solutions.

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A few miscellaneous findings related to leisure are important to consider. Several participants expressed gratitude that their job was “strictly 9:00 – 5:00” with no chance for email creep or extra hours on the weekend. These were coveted positions everywhere. Some participants spoke of losing the Pioneer Day holiday on July 24th and how difficult it was for them to give up their family traditions on that day. One salaried participant, who did not receive comp time after working late hours in preparation for a project was told, “You are salary so you need to be here [this Friday] and I’ll find something for you to do” which was discouraging and felt unfair. Others disliked being on call, and discussed various ways of making that experience fairer and more palatable. Others enjoyed being able to work out every day on the clock, and many participants enjoyed that they had the freedom to attend school events for their children or take care of the needs of elderly or sick family members. In every case, leisure time was important to this sample, from choosing where to seek employment to job satisfaction once they were employed.

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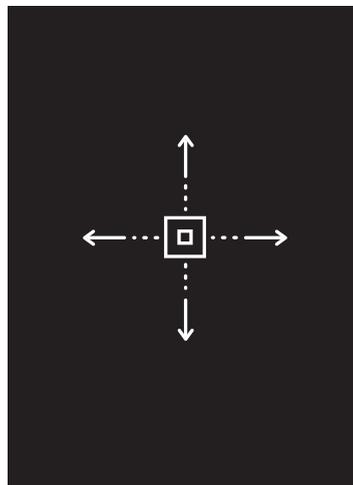
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## FLEXIBILITY

The most common first response when asked about intangible benefits of the job was, “Flexibility.” Job satisfaction related to flexibility in this sample would be hard to overestimate. Similarly, dissatisfaction related to rigidity was a common theme. No question on the focus group guide was intended to probe flexibility, nor was flexibility anticipated by the researcher to have the impact it did. Still, flexibility was cited over and over again as a direct contributor to positive life balance, job satisfaction, and the desire to remain loyal to a company. Several participants went so far as to refer to flexibility when accepting their slightly lower salaries compared to others in their industries. Those who did not have flexibility were vocal about their desire for it, even in cases where they understood that the parameters of their job meant they were tied to an office: “In my role it doesn’t make sense. I have to be face to face. Personally, I would love to work from home... but I need to be here.” Flexibility was cherished by those who had it and envied by those who did not. One participant put it succinctly,

“[Our company] underpays compared to equivalent positions in other companies, but I stay for these perks [of flexibility]. If someone didn’t have that, I don’t know why they’d stay around.” This sentiment was echoed over and over throughout this project. For example, in one focus group, “having more flexible schedules” was the only thing mentioned during a question about what could make the workplace experience better.

Flexibility was broadly defined by this sample, and encompassed myriad different aspects. Many spoke of the ability to work from home. Others spoke of being fortunate enough to choose different shifts, while others spoke of their desire to do so. Some felt that flexibility was the ability to “work to task, not to time.” Several participants connected flexibility with creativity, speaking of how flexibility in expectations afforded them the opportunity to explore creative solutions. One group discussed flexible thinking as integral to their longevity because “rigidity of thinking is hard in our field. Moving from books to the



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cloud was hard, but if you can get used to the idea that nothing stays the same then you're going to be okay.” One participant recognized that flexibility helped them manage comp time when taking evening calls from overseas. Some felt that flexibility combined with salary to provide opportunities that would not be present based on salary alone: “When you have both, it's not just making ends meet.” Several participants “purchased” job satisfaction during overwhelming projects through meeting their obligations flexibly. Flexibility was thought of as employer “understanding” about life in many different ways, including taking care of sick relatives, managing family emergencies, attending school events for children and grandchildren, personal safety on snow days, navigating the demands of single parenthood, managing doctor's appointments, reducing air pollution, and accommodating extended travel. The positive impact of flexibility for managing life balance by loosening time, place, expectations, and tasks was discussed at length in this project, in unanticipated ways.

Flexibility was often spoken of as a matter of trust. One participant observed that “trust in letting us work from home was ingrained in the culture at the outset.” After a change in management, one participant said, “The mentality has changed. They trust people more and we aren't anchored to the office.” Similarly, flexibility was seen as offering respect in some ways:

*My boss now recognizes that maybe he can't compensate us the way we were compensated at previous jobs, so he gives us more flexibility. I get home for dinner every night.... It's having a boss that understands that you have a personal life outside of work. He recognizes that there are things in your family that sometimes have to take priority over your work.*

In many cases, flexibility was seen as part of a compensation package, not merely a preference about how, when, and where to work.

Managers and supervisors mattered when it came to flexibility. When opportunities for flexibility varied widely across a focus group, as it often did, the conversation inevitably turned to managerial style. These discussions exposed a broad range of thinking in managers, sometimes in the same company:

*My boss would drop her daughter off at school every morning so she would arrive at the office at 9:00 or 10:00 instead of 7:00 or 8:00. And sometimes she'd leave early, and other leaders would do that as well. There is good support for that flexibility because everyone uses it.*

Some managers only allowed flexibility “as long as it was scheduled in advance” which was humorous to all present. One participant felt that managers used flexibility discursively as a perk: “This is all going to depend on who your supervisor is. If they are trying to

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“ I DON’T GET WHAT’S VALUED ”

retain you, they make sure you have what you need.” Others felt that unseen pressures stopped their managers from allowing even the flexibility ostensibly offered through company policy. At one company with unlimited PTO, a participant said, “Taking time off is easy. There is no approval process or anything, but working from home is weird. It’s ambiguous. My boss gets worried that people will notice we aren’t here.” When pressed on who the “people” were who may notice, the participant was unsure. After a bit of silence they answered, “Probably my boss’s boss” and the room agreed. One team chose to utilize the flexibility officially offered in their company’s policies and work remotely three days a week. Due to what the participant described as “the perception of upper echelon people” this decision did not last. “The work didn’t suffer, but the perception was off. We wound up back in the office.” One other participant experienced the flexibility they were afforded as a means of surveillance. They were continually reminded that people were watching to be sure they

were productive. Because of that, they often worked more than 40 hours per week to ensure they didn’t lose the flexibility.

Regardless of how the issue of flexibility was raised during a focus group, participants spoke of it at length and often. Experiences of flexibility ranged widely in this sample, even between participants in the same company. However, the emphasis placed on the importance of flexibility, both in terms of life balance and symbolic meaning, was strong and unanticipated. Because of this, the first recommendation of this report is that companies take an honest look at both policies and practices regarding flexibility to ascertain how fair, accessible, and generous they are. It is a near-certainty that employees have already done so.

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## FLEXIBILITY WAS OFTEN SPOKEN OF AS A MATTER OF TRUST.

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## COMPANY CULTURE

By far, company culture was mentioned more times than any other single thing during this project. Most questions in most focus groups generated spontaneous reflection about how company culture related to the issue at hand. Similar to broad conceptualizations of flexibility, “culture” meant many different things to the sample. It was closely tied to social values and motivations, but also extended far beyond that. Culture certainly incorporated social connections and camaraderie at work, but it also included things like company policies and practices, the workspace, and tools and equipment needed to perform tasks. In general, it can be thought of as the way things were typically done within a company and how employees usually experienced various facets of their jobs.

Positive company culture was a common response when participants were asked about intangible benefits of their jobs: “This is one of the greatest companies to work for.... The culture here is just amazing.” Statements like these were often echoed by other participants in the group, like this follow-up to the previous statement, “I don’t ever want to leave. This is the best place I’ve worked

by far. People stay for decades. This is indicative of our culture... and that longevity is a humongous plus.” The value of a positive company culture for this sample was significant in terms of job satisfaction and employee retention: “Our culture here is amazing. It’s hard to imagine leaving. When I’ve gotten job offers from other companies it’s really hard for me to want to leave. It’s hard for them to compare to what we have here.” It was often recognized that pay may be higher at other companies, but employees chose to stay where there was a positive company culture.

As one participant said, “I am on a lot of job boards. I know what I could make \$30,000 more in some [other] places, but I wouldn’t leave this culture.” Another observed that their company “bought” satisfied employees not only with pay but also with wonderful company culture. When a company culture had negative aspects, it was clear that participants struggled a great deal to find job satisfaction. Across the board, company culture mattered to this sample to a compelling degree.



Negative company culture was challenging for everyone who experienced it: “There is a culture here of being afraid.... We could work to change

“I DON’T GET WHAT’S VALUED”

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that.” There was agreement across the group when this was expressed. Some participants described difficulties in using some perks of flexibility because of company culture:

*I have experienced a culture here where... because I've made a choice to work from home more [which was within company policy], I'm viewed as not as dedicated to my job, that I don't care about others as much. I'm not going to get advancement opportunities like other people.*

Negative culture surrounding gender was seen as particularly problematic. Many female-identified participants recognized their company cultures as male-dominated in ways they experienced as burdensome. One frustrated participant said, “[Our industries] are very male-dominated, and they are very aware of that. They don't want to shift. Then women who want to climb the corporate ladder don't know how to move up.” In reflecting on this within the context of stated company goals of inclusivity and diversity, another female-identified participant followed up by saying, “It's true. What kind of diversity are they trying to include? Gender diversity? I am diversity.”

Many participants had applied for their jobs based on knowledge of positive company culture: “I have a friend who works here, so I knew [about the culture].” Others asked about company culture during

their interviews: “I knew before I got here that [the company] was an awesome place to work. I asked about [company culture] during my interview. After two years, I can say it's true.” Often, people were speaking of intangible parts of social culture such as inclusivity and diversity, and being surrounded by generous and kind colleagues with similar work values: “We have a cool culture here. I like the people I work with.” They spoke of enjoying their work days and being motivated by a company culture of encouraging like-minded people to perform their best. Several companies in our sample offered specific opportunities for employees to get to know their colleagues, emphasizing inclusivity and offering resources so employee groups could hold small events or have meals together. Participants greatly enjoyed easygoing social norms in their companies that allowed them to get to know and become friends with their colleagues.

Equally as important were cultural norms in the workplace of excellence, flexibility, trust, fun, and generosity. One participant spoke of an incident that had occurred only the day before in which they had a family emergency to take care of first thing in the morning. They felt comfortable reaching out to their supervisors because there was a “culture of trust and flexibility.... In some places, they would frown upon that and you might not even want to ask because the culture wouldn't allow you to.” Another participant had left a company culture they defined as

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“toxic.” They described how cultural norms in that toxic environment had encouraged employees to claim sole responsibility for projects, whereas cultural norms in this new environment encouraged employees to “call others out who had worked on a cool project.” Participants often described positive company culture in terms of respect, such as one participant who said, “They treat us like adults. They don’t micromanage us. We are told what needs to be done and then we are left to do it.... When I think about the culture and the adult community here, there is a fair amount of respect.” Another participant described having their abilities trusted and being able to ask for what they needed for optimal performance: “There are a lot more ‘yeses’ than there are ‘nos’ around here.” Others pointed to a generally positive sense of support that pervaded company culture, such as one participant who said, “We are a ‘glass half-full’ company. We are always looking for positives.”

Participants strongly felt that company culture came “from the top down” and tone was set by managers and supervisors. Explicitly stated cultural values of respect and inclusivity were not seen as enough. One participant described this concept in an apt comparison: “I worked at another company that had the same kind of stated goals, but it was kind of a parallel universe version to what I see here at [our company]. It’s our executive leadership team.” In general, this was experienced as positive,

but several participants described a willingness by their managers to encroach on their personal time through email creep and expectations of response outside of work hours. One participant, who was a manager, described their practice of protecting against email creep by saying, “I will take my laptop home to catch up on emails at night, but I always tell people they don’t need to respond until work hours.” Participants generally acknowledged their own role in creating a positive company culture, but realized that managers and supervisors had much more power to influence company culture.

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## PARTICIPANTS OFTEN DESCRIBED POSITIVE COMPANY CULTURE IN TERMS OF RESPECT

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of this project, several broad themes emerged that are good considerations for every company. The following recommendations are intended to offer the opportunity for honest reflections about company policies, practices, and culture. While no qualitative work can be representative, these findings offer a few places to begin a thoughtful assessment of workplace satisfaction in the interest of improving retention of talent, encouraging excellence, and being accountable for company culture. These recommendations will be described in more detail below:

- **View employees as a resource**
- **Be prepared for constructive criticism and communicate with employees about their feedback**
- **Have reasonable expectations with a clear understanding of what employees are being asked to do**
- **Manage bureaucracy**
- **Be intentional with change**
- **Ensure sufficient onboarding**
- **Offer ongoing, applicable, appropriate training**

**View employees as a resource.** First and foremost, participants in this project were experts, not only in their fields but also regarding the intricacies of their companies. Employees had expended time and effort in every place to understand how to do a better job. They are an excellent resource for any compa-

ny interested in improving. Participants expressed a great deal of appreciation when managers and supervisors recognized and sought their expertise:

*[My boss] is really open-minded and really respects my experience.... I [offered feedback] to my manager, and he respects my opinion and values what I have to say. It's so refreshing! I came from a place where I was viewed as a dissenter when I would speak up, and I was shut down.*

Many times during the course of this project, it was clear that employees had thought smartly about solutions and had a great deal to offer anyone who sincerely asked:

*When changes happen [without talking to employees] you can miss a crucial piece. If we think of it as a giant machine, the wheels are still there, the engine is there, but you missed this belt over here. This is something that you did not think through and it's actually a crucial piece to making things run.*

Without exception, every focus group had wonderful, specific insights to offer. Often, these insights would have been difficult to gather through an employee satisfaction survey. But employees were usually anxious to offer valuable, specific expertise from their perspectives.

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**Be prepared for constructive criticism and communicate with employees about their feedback.** Many focus groups indicated that their companies solicited various kinds of employee feedback. Some participants, such as the one quoted above, had good experiences offering feedback or, if they had not personally done this, had faith in the process: “I’ve heard of people doing it, going straight to managers. And it worked.” When this process was constructive, it contributed to participants’ perceptions of intangible benefits in their jobs.

Far more participants experienced offering feedback as frustrating: “There is a LOT of frustration in offering feedback and having nothing happen.” There appeared to be a disconnect between the intentions of soliciting employee feedback and actually utilizing that feedback in visible ways that made sense:

*We do the survey, we fill it out, but then what happens? Are there meetings? What is the process? I’ve filled them out and nothing happens.... They should say, “This is what we are doing with this information” but that never happens.*

One participant whose job was in Human Resources had excellent suggestions, such as forming one action item based on the feedback and ensuring that all employees received communication about both the process and the decisions.

Most importantly, companies should ensure that feedback will be appreciated and handled appropriately before asking for it. Participants in this project spoke directly to this concern: “I guess you could talk to your manager if you wanted to. But that rolls back downhill, and [expletive] stops at the bottom.” Another participant described the experience of being asked for feedback: “My manager asked for feedback but has guilted me for [what I said]. It hurt his feelings. Now I’m worried that he won’t take me seriously.” Yet another has withheld honest feedback out of concern for their team: “I feel safe to provide feedback personally, but sometime my hesitance comes from being a representative of my team and not knowing how [feedback] will land politically with [my manager].” Participants recognized how difficult it was for everyone at every level in a company hierarchy to navigate criticism, even constructive, kindly given criticism. They understood the process had to be managed with care on all sides. That challenge notwithstanding, most participants valued the chance to offer feedback and were anxious to share their expertise. Those who had positive and transformative experiences offering and receiving feedback were exceptionally grateful.

**Have reasonable expectations with a clear understanding of what employees are being asked to do.** Many sentiments related to reasonable employer expectations were expressed during the gathering of these data. Never did any participant express a

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“I DON'T GET WHAT'S VALUED”

desire to do less than their job – on the contrary, every focus group spoke to taking pride in their accomplishments and not shirking responsibility. Rather, there were certain specific points of stress that were extremely challenging for participants to navigate. The most common of these was being understaffed. Reasons for being understaffed ranged from simple bad luck, such as key employees having personal emergencies and consequently being out of the office for several months, to poor company policy, such as applying the same assessment rubrics to vastly different departments with no recognition that the rubrics were inappropriate in some contexts. For example, one participant described receiving workload based on the number of people in their department without a recognition that their teams work was more complicated than other team's work:

*They look at the numbers and think this team has x amount [of work] so they only need x number of bodies. But we have different elements. [The work] has complex issues, is more demanding, has more loopholes... it takes longer to accomplish things, longer to jump through the hoops. Other areas don't have to do that as much. There are so many days you go home and think it's just too much. You have people working right alongside you and we are all overwhelmed. We need more bodies.*

Some participants had dollar values associated with their time per project, but no time was given for necessary administrative duties in those projects. Oth-

ers had seen their teams shrink, and tasks absorbed by employees who were not given commensurate pay increases for these additional responsibilities. In particular, participants who were constrained by lack of cross-training felt a great deal of stress, particularly with regard to PTO. Having a clear understanding of what employees are being asked to do and carefully considering whether these expectations are reasonable holds the potential to alleviate the kinds of stress that demoralizes employees and could encourage them to find new employment.

**Manage bureaucracy.** No participant in this study had a clear idea how to eliminate bureaucracy, but many had solid ideas about how their companies could manage it. When handled well, bureaucracy did not feel stifling: “[The bureaucracy] feels appropriate. It's a lot more difficult to coordinate [hundreds of] people and have it feel equitable with zero rules. So the addition of red tape makes it feel like I'm having a fair experience.” When bureaucracy interfered with efficient functioning, participants often bore the brunt of frustration from customers: “We get the blame but there's nothing we can do about it.” Some bureaucracy was seen as simply ridiculous, as one participant pointed out when speaking about the difficulty in offering gift cards as small tokens of gratitude: “Gift cards are a huge hassle. It has to do with procurement policies at various levels.... Who is going to buy them? Who is going to keep them? What if someone uses one [when they shouldn't]...?”

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It's just not worth it." Participants recognized this as a significant challenge, especially with big and growing companies, but most had legitimate, feasible ideas about how to manage bureaucracy.

**Be intentional with change.** Company changes, especially surrounding growth, were challenging to employees and were often discussed as times of heightened stress. Similar to bureaucracy, participants understood that change was inevitable and did not resist it: "When the dust settles, I think the changes will have been good." Many participants spoke of benefits from corporate changes, citing new policies that offered more autonomy, cultural shifts they enjoyed, new colleagues who had specialized skills, and the ability to pursue projects that had previously been out of reach. However, participants wished there had been better communication during major changes, and that titles and salaries would align more closely after mergers. When the change added a great deal of complexity, participants recognized that a second stage of onboarding could be helpful, even for current employees.

**Ensure sufficient onboarding.** Without exception, onboarding became a lively topic of discussion in every focus group. Official onboarding practices ranged to a great degree in this sample, but every group had high-quality, reasonable, and smart suggestions for how onboarding could be handled better. Some suggestions were as simple as allowing

employees to access their benefits information from home before they were required to make a decision, so they could speak with their spouse about details that would matter to their family. Others appreciated the general, company-wide onboarding process but received very little team-specific onboarding. Still others had taken it upon themselves to onboard new teammates, knowing the challenges of the "firehose effect" of onboarding during the first few days of a new job. This was particularly challenging for contractors who were hired full-time; they often did not have onboarding at all. In every case, employees would be a fantastic resource to assess and improve company onboarding practices.

**Offer ongoing, appropriate, applicable training.** In more than half of the focus groups, participants spoke at length of the need for ongoing, appropriate, applicable training offered with effective teaching techniques. Here again, employees would be able to offer specific ideas that would map directly onto job requirements in any given company. Training during onboarding was seen as important, but so was continual training in association with various changes, either company-wide or job-specific. One participant received multiple days of training during onboarding, but most of it was not associated with their job requirements:

*My department is small, so I guess they thought it was no big deal, but my training didn't match up with my*

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*job.... Sometimes you feel like your life is a dumpster fire. I'm a smart person but I felt completely handicapped in my own product. Sometimes my customers know more than I do.*

One participant, who was tasked with training new employees, felt that poor training was disrespectful in addition to being counterproductive:

*It's really hard to give the training that [new employees] deserve and that they need to do the job.... The managers are trying to get people in here because we need them, but almost nobody stays because they haven't been properly trained. And I can't help them because I have a whole new set of [trainees].*

Similarly, cross-training was seen by many participants as essential to respectful treatment of employees, since individuals who were the only ones to do their job were unable to take vacations or keep up with demands. In general, participants were eager to learn and wanted trainings that would help them be better employees and coworkers who were better at their jobs.

“I DON'T GET WHAT'S VALUED”

- » VIEW EMPLOYEES AS A RESOURCE
- » BE PREPARED FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM AND COMMUNICATE WITH EMPLOYEES ABOUT THEIR FEEDBACK
- » HAVE REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS WITH A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT EMPLOYEES ARE BEING ASKED TO DO
- » MANAGE BUREAUCRACY
- » BE INTENTIONAL WITH CHANGE
- » ENSURE SUFFICIENT ONBOARDING
- » OFFER ONGOING, APPLICABLE, APPROPRIATE TRAINING



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