

HOW TO BE A TOP EMPLOYER

A GUIDE FOR U.S. EMPLOYERS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper serves as a comprehensive guide for employers in the United States aiming to position themselves as top employers amid ongoing skilled labor shortages. It outlines the essential attributes and best practices that characterize top employers, focusing heavily on attracting and retaining talent in a fiercely competitive job market. Key attributes include offering competitive benefits, such as comprehensive healthcare and flexible work arrangements, along with a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The paper identifies actionable strategies for organizations to enhance their employer brand, including transparency in compensation practices, robust professional development opportunities, and the promotion of a positive organizational culture. It also discusses how leveraging technology and data analytics can enhance employee experiences and engagement. Additionally, the white paper emphasizes the significance of corporate social responsibility and highlights various external certifications, like the USIQ Top Employer Certification, that can elevate an organization's reputation. Consequently, the implementation of these insights enables employers to align their values with employee expectations, paving the way for long-term business success and establishing themselves as employers of choice in an evolving labor landscape.



Table of

Contents

04	Introduction
05	About Us
06	What Exactly Is a Top Employer?
08	How Do I Become a Top Employer?
17	Tips for Employers on How They Can Be Perceived as Top Employers
22	Conclusion
23	References

01

INTRODUCTION

This white paper will discuss what it means to be a top employer in the US, drawing from recent studies and industry reports, and explore in-depth the attributes and practices that define such organizations. It also pinpoints the benefits employees want most, such as health care, flexibility, and opportunities for professional development, together with ways employers can improve what they offer. Certification programs, such as Top Employer, offer quantifiable standards to attain top employer status based on employee surveys and HR assessments. By embracing this knowledge, U.S. employers can develop a working environment that meets or exceeds modern expectations of the workforce, thus becoming more viable in their respective labor markets.



02

ABOUT US

PhDr. Oliver Scharfenberg holds several degrees, such as an MBA from Middlesex University in London and a doctorate in philosophy (PhDr.) in economics and management from DTI University. In his master's thesis, he analyzed the evaluation of quality seals in marketing, while in his doctoral thesis, he conducted a market analysis of existing quality seals in the context of employer branding. He is an expert in employer branding and marketing. Hundreds of companies already rely on the expertise of PhDr. Oliver Scharfenberg and have reduced employee turnover, increased their visibility, and attracted more applications from qualified candidates.

With USIQ United States Institute for Quality LLC, he provides various services, including employee surveys based on current scientific standards. He helps employers understand what their employees want by conducting representative employee surveys. Successful employers may then gain recognition as a top employer or a family-friendly employer, along with a thorough evaluation. An effective marketing package can enhance employers' visibility. This employer certification follows this process: survey and analysis, award and communication.

Oliver Scharfenberg



03

WHAT EXACTLY IS A TOP EMPLOYER?

A top employer is a workplace that attracts talent through innovative policies and practices designed to create an environment where people want to stay. Employers in the top ranks consistently invest in their employees' well-being and professional growth, as shown in the figure below. These organizations have cultivated cultures where individuals feel valued, engaged, and connected. Many top employers offer competitive compensation alongside comprehensive benefits and a strong commitment to diversity and equity inclusion.

Figure 1: Top 5 career advancement attributes

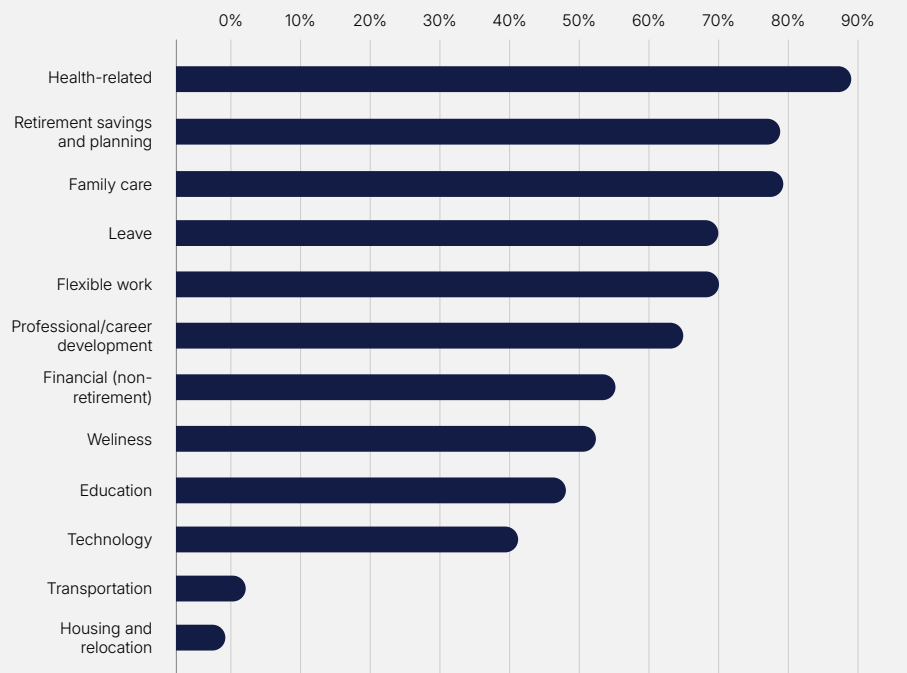


Source: Bhaskaran et al. (2022)

Such accreditation initiatives from organizations like the Top Employer initiative at USIQ set a standard for identifying and evaluating companies. This process consists of several components: an employee survey that captures a snapshot of workforce sentiment, a structured HR interview, and an assessment based on scientific criteria. According to USIQ, organizations that attain this status see increases in employee satisfaction, retention rates, and other positive metrics compared to their peers (USIQ, 2024).

Research identifies several key factors that contribute to being a good employer. Health and wellness benefits rank first, as shown in the figure below; research indicates that comprehensive health care plans are among the most valued benefits in various surveys conducted (Mahoney, 2022). Additionally, flexibility in work arrangements, such as remote or hybrid conditions, has gained importance, especially in the post-pandemic era (Wigert, 2022). Furthermore, fostering an inclusive culture where employees feel a sense of belonging has become a key factor in employer branding today (Horowitz and Parker, 2023).

Figure 2: Employees rank importance of benefits categories



Source: Mahoney (2022)

Being the employer of choice entails much more than simply offering competitive remuneration. This holistic approach recognizes that the diverse needs and aspirations of the workforce must align organizational values with employee expectations. It enhances not only the employer brand but also contributes to long-term business success.



04

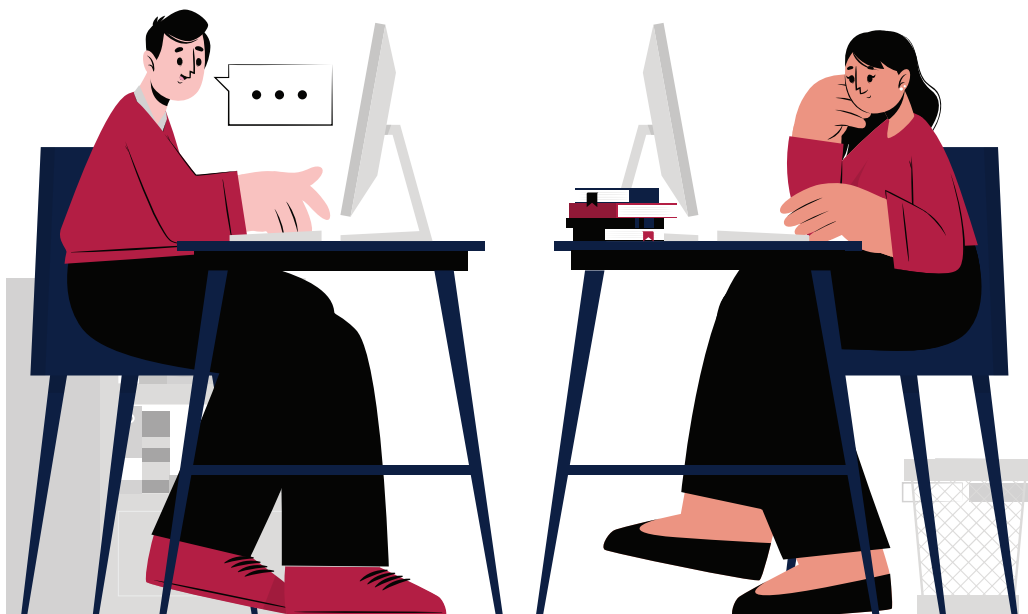
HOW DO I BECOME A TOP EMPLOYER?

COMPETITIVE BENEFITS AND COMPENSATION

Benefits and compensations are crucial elements that make an employer a desirable choice. According to SHRM (2024), 70% of workers in the U.S. consider health and wellness benefits to be very important. Comprehensive healthcare, flexible spending accounts, mental health support resources, and retirement savings options are essential for attracting and retaining talent. Furthermore, companies that offer parental leave, childcare support, and fertility benefits demonstrate their commitment to valuing employees at every stage of their lives (Mahoney, 2022). While these initiatives are significant, an increasing number of organizations recognize the need to balance these offerings with fiscal sustainability. Ultimately, competitive benefits should be tailored to the demographics and needs of the workforce to enhance the value employees receive. Younger recruits may have a greater interest in student

loan assistance and professional development compared to traditional retirement savings options; therefore, segment-based benefit design could be very effective.

Another crucial factor is transparency in compensation. According to Wigert (2022), employees want open communication regarding salary structures, performance bonuses, and equity compensation. Transparency in pay fosters employee trust in the organization, demonstrating that it values their contributions, thus creating a more engaged and retained workforce. However, implementing this transparency is challenging, as addressing pay disparity and consistency across all levels and departments requires significant organizational introspection and adjustment.



BUILDING STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

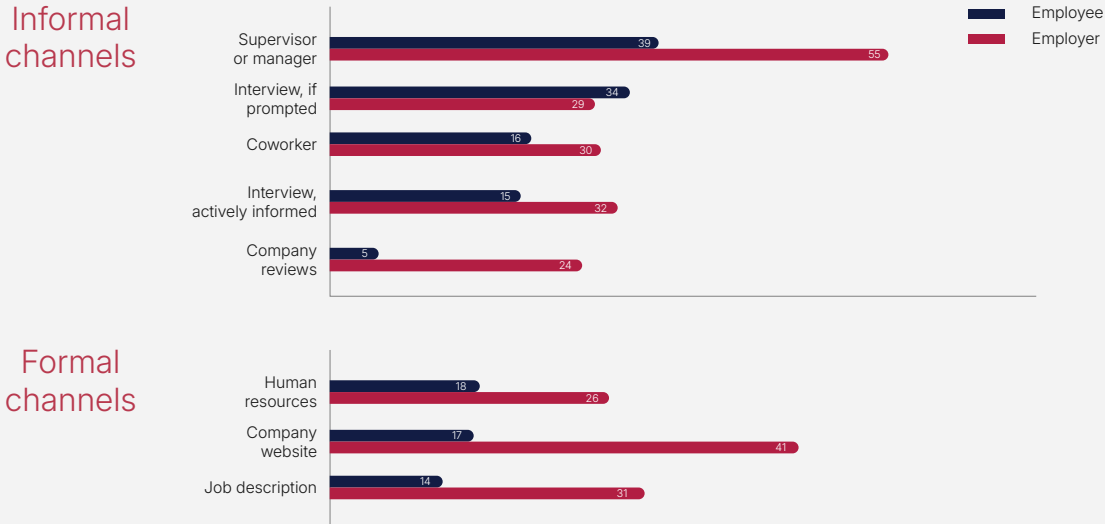
The core of employee satisfaction is a strong organizational culture. Top employers nurture diversity, equity, and inclusion, thus making all employees feel their value and be equal in this context. According to Horowitz and Parker (2023), diverse hiring, DEI training, and employee resource groups are critical to an inclusive culture.

But to create a truly inclusive culture, tokenistic initiatives will not suffice. Rather, organizations must undergo some soul-searching with regard to the effectiveness of their DEI programs by measuring meaningful outcomes around representation in leadership, pay equity, employee satisfaction of underrepresented groups, and more. Further, they need to break down systemic barriers in the organizational structure and decision-making processes for sustainable progress.

The role of leadership in shaping an organizational culture cannot be emphasized enough. This is in regard to attributes such as transparent communication, empathy, and active listening on the part of the leadership toward building trust and teamwork. Bhaskaran et al. (2022) support this view that a commitment to the employees will lead them to stay in their respective organizations, underlining again the importance of leader-employee engagement. However, leadership development tends to be either underfinanced or inconsistent in its implementation, given the potential leadership development is supposed to contribute toward any cultural shift. Moreover, this may explain why the informal career advancement communication channels dominate the formal channels as seen in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Career Advancement Channels

Career advancement communication channels, % of respondents



Source: Bhaskaran et al. (2022)

CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

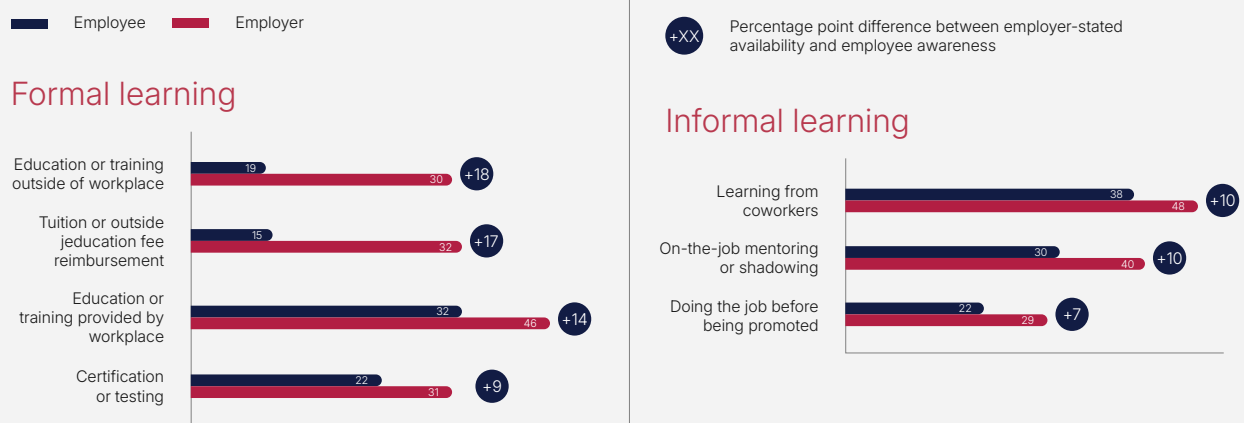
Investing in employee development is a sure sign of their being among the best companies to work with. From Pavlou (2024) study, it became clear that 75% of employees say upskilling is a critical choice factor when deciding on an employer. To such an end, every organization will have to implement appropriate blended learning mechanisms, featuring on-the-job training supported by virtual course work to advance the leadership prospects. LinkedIn (2022) Workplace Learning Report further underlines customized training opportunities and mentorship programs that must be tuned to the ways and expectations of Gen Z employees.

Regardless of this, many organizations do not understand how to align the development process to business goals. For instance, generic training programs might also not focus on developing any particular skills that the employee needs for career growth or organizational objectives. This could be a reason why employers have to conduct frequent

skill-gap analyses and have a mutual design of the development plan with the employees in order to benefit mutually from it.

The other very important area is leadership development. The programs that spot high potentials and prepare them for leadership contribute to long-term organizational success. In fact, the programs at General Electric have constantly generated executives to lead the ranks in whatever industry, thereby proving that structured development really works. However, the companies still have to get rid of unconscious bias in selecting future leaders for their companies in order to achieve full and fair representation. Nonetheless, in order for any of this to be successful, there is a need for the employer to effectively communicate the availability of such opportunities given the discrepancy between the level of awareness among employees and the resource's availed by employers as seen in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Resource Availability vs Awareness



Source: Bhaskaran et al. (2022)

EMPHASIZING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING

Employee engagement and well-being are very key in becoming a top employer. In a finding by Gallup (2024), highly engaged employees were found to be more productive, committed, and loyal. In creating a highly engaging environment, organizations should conduct regular surveys and town hall meetings to understand feedback and proactively fix issues. Krekel (2019) shows how well-being initiatives, like programs on mental health, gym membership, and access to counselling, have gained momentum as an integral facility for employee support.

While these programs are remarkably valuable, consistency in delivery and follow-through is what determines success. Employers need to break down the stigma of reaching out for mental health support and make services accessible to all employees, whether working remotely or in a hybrid capacity. This is especially so given that most workers irrespective of education level and income perceive their job as their identity (as seen in the figure below) and every time they feel that they are failing at their jobs, their mental health is at stake. Generic wellness programs with no choice or cultural consideration result in poor utilization and overall lower impact.



Figure 5: Proportion of adults perceiving their job as central to their identity



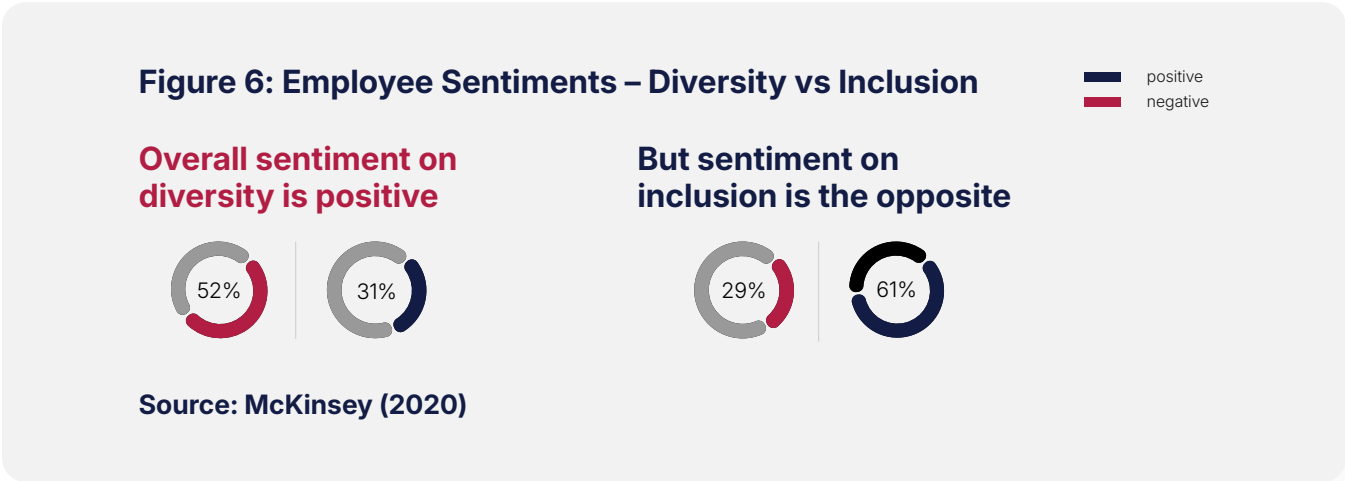
Source: Horowitz and Parker (2023)

Work-life balance has also become pivotal, especially post-COVID-19. Flexible working conditions, including remote and hybrid models, are a given rather than a benefit nowadays. SHRM (2024) reports that **60%** of employees place flexibility at the top when considering job offers, while a Buffer (2023) showed that **98%** of workers want to continue with some form of remote work. This helps the working professionals manage their time for personal and professional demands, hence increasing satisfaction and improving productivity. However, these organizations have to balance these possible downsides—reduced collaboration and equity between remote and in-office employees—to make this work successful in the long run.

FOSTERING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Diversity and inclusion are not only a matter of ethics but also of business advantage. In a study, McKinsey (2020) concluded that companies with greater ethnic and gender diversity were more likely to deliver above-average financial performance than their less diverse peers. Innovation and problem-solving capabilities from teams are key reasons for this dynamic.

While other organizations may be content simply with compliance, the top employers push beyond compliance to drive real D&I results. This is especially so given that although **52%** of employees in the US and UK perceive the workplace to be diverse, only **29%** perceive it to be inclusive as seen in the figure below.



Blind recruitment practices, employee resource groups, and unconscious bias training are a number of effective strategies that result in an inclusive environment in which employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to offer diverse thoughts. However, to make such initiatives have a more enduring impact, systemic inequalities within the organization need to be tackled, and accountability across its entire hierarchy needs to be nurtured. The most useful policies involve regular audits, openness about diversity metrics, and leadership buy-in that stimulates such change.



PRIORITIZING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Socially responsible companies are more important to employees, especially for younger generations. Deloitte (2021) survey reported that nearly half of all Gen Z and Millennials say they would select an organization that reflects their personal values. Patagonia has been one of those companies that successfully built a strong employer brand by integrating environmental advocacy and ethics in business practices into its operations (Chouinard, 2016).

Communities benefit due to CSR, which helps make an organization sustainable and shows ethical behaviour. However, CSR programs should be thoroughly genuine and aligned with a specific core value of the corporation if it is to move the employees and stakeholders and make them buy into or appreciate such a culture. Such shallow or misaligned initiative bounces back in the worst ways, creating sceptics and harming reputations.

LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY AND DATA ANALYTICS

Technology, especially for improving employee experiences and providing an organization with recognition for being among the best, plays an instrumental role in enhancing and embedding reputation among desired employers. Advanced HR information systems rationalize and handle administrative routines of a great deal, freeing human resource teams' time and minds towards strategic matters. As a real example, pulse surveys along with other feedback mechanisms do much to help their owner get immediate insight into attitudes and trends among personnel through real-time input so an employer could undertake appropriate follow-up measures on time in accordance with employees' reactions (Minahan, 2021). More importantly, AI-powered platforms can provide customized engagement strategies by identifying employee behavioural patterns and nipping them in the bud (Guenole and Feinzig, 2018).

Employee recognition platforms go a step further in fostering appreciation culture by making it easy to recognize peers and allow peer-to-peer reward programs. Recognizing and celebrating employee achievements bolsters morale, reinforces positive behaviours, and strengthens engagement. However, organizations should make sure that digital tools are user-friendly and accessible for all employees to avoid digital fatigue or inequity in access.



CERTIFICATION AND INDUSTRY RECOGNITION



External validation in the form of certifications and industry recognition bolsters an employer's brand. Some of the programs, such as the Top Employer Certification, use a scientific approach in evaluating organizations on aspects like employee satisfaction and HR practices. Such certification aids an organization in its recruitment and retention efforts (USIQ, 2024).

Recognition in prestigious rankings such as "World's Best Employer" enhances an organization's recognition as a leader in workplace excellence. These recognitions make the organization more attractive, showing potential employees that a given organization truly values its human assets and is determined that standards are upheld within. This should not, however, insinuate that such intent diminishes the focus or urgency for authentic change within. Over-reliance on external validation can indeed elicit performative and symbolic changes rather than substantive ones.

SUCCESS MEASUREMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Becoming a top employer is an iterative process that requires regular evaluation and adaptation. Organizations should establish key performance indicators (KPIs) such as retention rates, engagement scores, and diversity metrics to measure success. Publishing these metrics in sustainability or annual reports demonstrates accountability and commitment to transparency.

Continuous improvement means being informed about emerging workplace trends. The insights for practice refinement come from industry research, conferences on HR, and networking with other top employers. Soliciting employee feedback regularly will make sure strategies remain aligned with workforce expectations. But to retain this credibility and trust, organizations have to be ready to act on feedback and tackle systemic issues.



05

TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS ON HOW THEY CAN BE PERCEIVED AS TOP EMPLOYERS

IMPROVE BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYEES

Organizations have to provide comprehensive and competitive employee benefits if they want to be employers of choice. For example, health benefits are the most important to employees, according to 88% of the respondents in a recent survey by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Mahoney, 2022). Comprehensive health plans, including medical, dental, vision, and mental health support, may contribute a great deal to employee satisfaction and retention (SHRM, 2024). Other key benefits in this context are the retirement plans, 401(k) programs, and employer matching that address long-term financial security concerns. Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health benefits comprising counselling and wellness programs started to take centre stage and reflect the new priorities of workers (SHRM, 2024).



PRIORITIZE FLEXIBILITY

The flexible work arrangement is another crucial element of a top employer. This hybrid model, working both in offices and homes, provides the best service to workers in their preferences as they try to balance their work-life balance issues (Forbes, 2024). The flexibility in work hours means that an employee can do his personal and other relevant activities without jeopardizing or compromising his job. Wigert (2022) states that flexibility in work arrangements tends to be the key drivers in choice for 72% of employees. Providing such options not only attracts talent but also boosts morale and productivity.

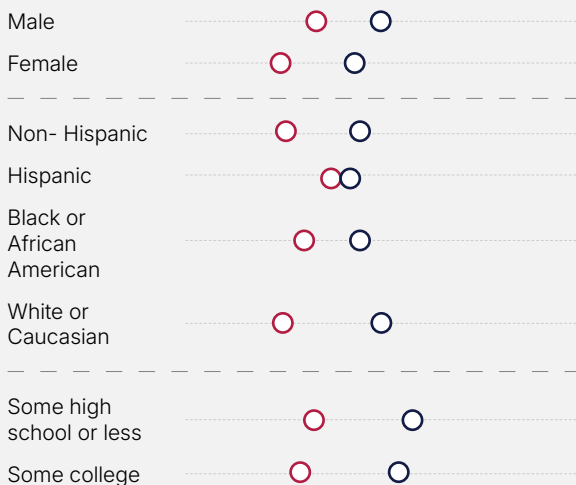
INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Nurturing a continuous learning culture involves creating opportunities for career growth through professional development programs. Training programs, workshops, and certifications help employees enhance their skills and further their careers (Pavlou, 2024). In addition, mentorship initiatives may offer the employees personal guidance to help them through their career path.

Figure 7: Advancement opportunity and success rates

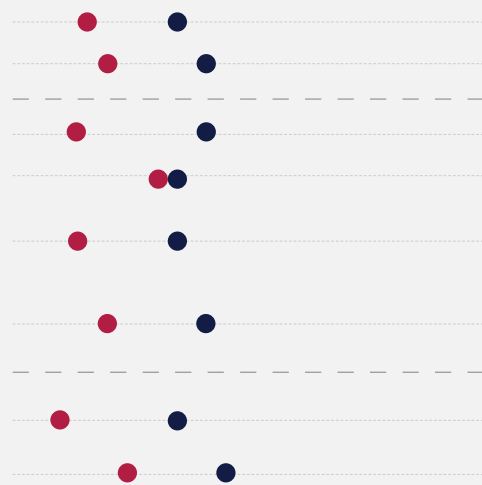
Application rate

○ Promotion ○ Mure responsibility



Application success rate

● Promotion ● Mure responsibility

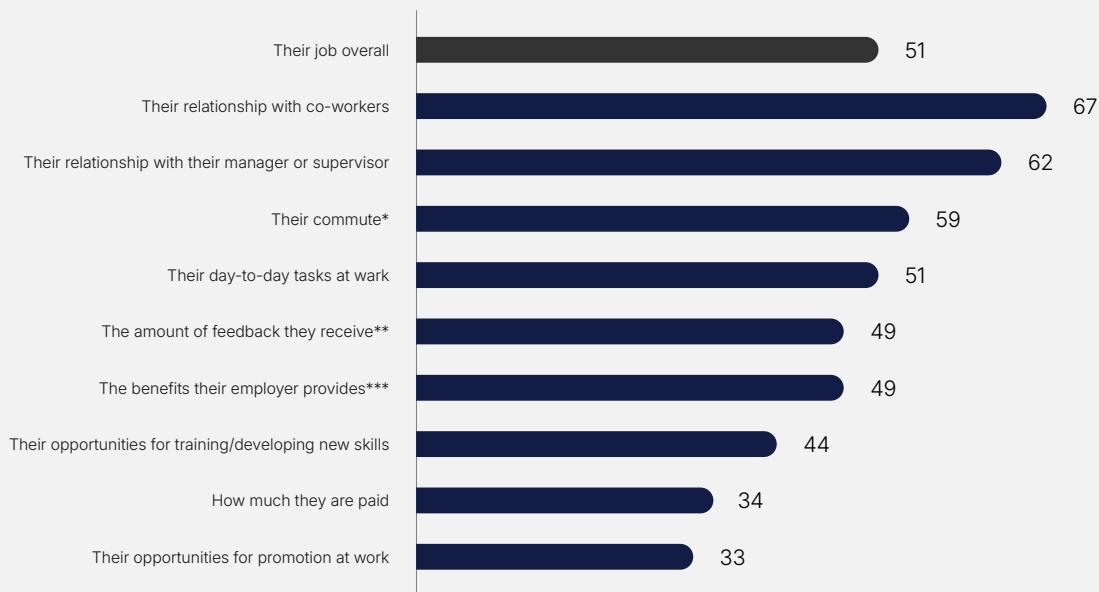


Source: Bhaskaran et al. (2022)

Bhaskaran et al. (2022) highlight the fact that there is this perception of frontline employees' exclusion from most promotion and advancement opportunities (as seen in the figure above where over 70% of employees apply for advancement opportunities but with limited success); plugging up this gap holds the greatest promise for retention of superior talent.

This was further confirmed in the figure below where Horowitz and Parker (2023) established that among the most important issues that employed adults in the US are satisfied with, opportunities for job promotion at work rank lowest.

Figure 8: Top Issues that American employees are satisfied with at work
% of employed adults saying they are extremely or very satisfied with...



Source: Horowitz and Parker (2023)

FOSTER INCLUSIVITY

The strategic benefits of promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace go beyond their moral imperative. In this view, pay equity, anti-discrimination policies, and policies on representation throughout all organization levels make for a more inclusive environment (Minahan, 2021). Workers are more likely to stay committed to those companies that enthusiastically embrace diversity and equality, as research has documented that the more inclusive a workplace is, the higher its rate of innovation and employee engagement compared to others (Horowitz and Parker, 2023).



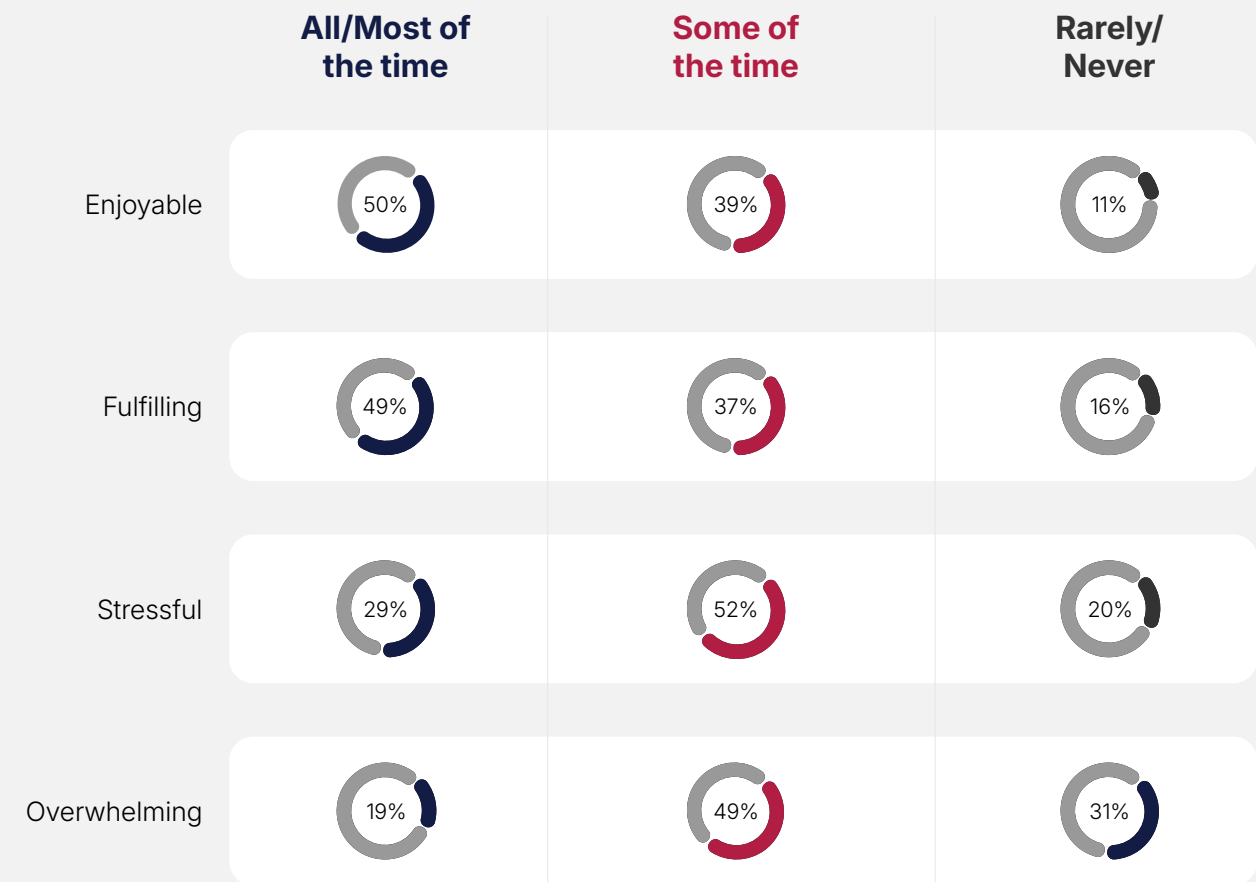
DEMONSTRATE APPRECIATION

Great employers are characterized by the acknowledgment of employee achievement. Programs that recognize employees with genuine rewards—be they monetary or experiential in nature—have a great chance of improving both motivation and satisfaction (Nolan, 2024). Other forms of personal recognition, including shout-outs during meetings and handwritten notes, go a long way in influencing feelings of belonging and personal worth within an organization (Wigert, 2022).

ALIGN VALUES

The workplace is changing in that employees are seeking congruence between their personal values and the mission and culture of their employer. This may explain why most of the employees are finding their jobs more enjoyable than those who find it stressful as seen in the figure below. Organizations will have to ensure that their values align with the expectations of the employees in areas related to sustainability, social responsibility, or ethical practices (Anders, 2023). The values will need to be communicated through internal and external channels for building a strong employer brand.

Figure 9: How employees perceive their jobs



Source: Horowitz and Parker (2023)

06

CONCLUSION

Becoming a top employer in the highly competitive landscape of the U.S. labor market requires a multidimensional approach: prioritizing employee well-being, encouraging employee participation, and fostering a sense of belonging within teams. Companies must invest in comprehensive benefits, transparent compensation practices, and robust professional development opportunities to attract and retain top talent. A strong corporate culture will enable organizations to embrace the diversity of their workforce.

Employees should be actively involved in the company's development. Regular employee surveys and communicating the results to employees are essential in this regard. As a top employer, you should address employee concerns more vigorously and express appreciation for their contributions.

Studies show that when organizational values align with employee expectations and there is transparency regarding a genuine commitment to social responsibility, companies not only enhance their employer brand but also achieve long-term business success.

Ultimately, becoming a top employer is a process that requires ongoing evaluation and adaptation to address the changing needs of the workforce.

Certification as a top employer provide a scientific, representative employee survey to assess and measure current employee satisfaction consistently. Being recognized as a top employer also offers a marketing package and enhances your visibility and credibility as an employer, backed by a press release and other means indicating that you have undergone independent certification.



07

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