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ADVISORY

Employers Boost Efforts to Increase Respect and Dignity at Work

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Amid growing recognition of a connection to business performance, more employers plan to bolster their efforts to build a culture of “workplace dignity,” according to new research by [Willis Towers Watson](#), a global advisory, broking and solutions company, in collaboration with Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. The research also revealed a great disparity between employees’ perspectives on how they are treated in the workplace and those of employers.

“Human rights don’t give way at the workplace door,” said Kerry Kennedy, president of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. “People spend countless hours at work, and ‘just and favorable conditions of work’ are elemental to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

A culture of workplace dignity promotes an environment in which employees can experience a sense of self-respect, pride and self-worth, and it influences an organization’s ability to foster wellbeing, engage talent and drive business results. The Willis Towers Watson [Workplace Dignity Survey](#) examined barriers employers face in building a culture of dignity over the next three years.

Virtually all employers (94%) recognize workplace dignity will be important to their future success, including their ability to attract and retain talent, promote employee wellbeing, engage employees and boost productivity. That’s a big increase from 70% over the past three years; however, three in 10 employers (30%) have experienced difficulties in building and maintaining a culture of dignity. One in three employers (34%) cited a lack of diversity as a barrier to a culture of dignity while one in four (26%) cited abuse of power (e.g., not holding employees accountable for their actions) as a barrier.

In response, the vast majority of employers (87%) plan to take steps to overcome barriers and build a culture of dignity over the next three years, up sharply from only 59% in the previous three years. Among the key barriers they plan to address are lack of diversity (89%), discrimination (88%), exclusion (86%), abuse of power (85%) and bullying (82%) within the workplace.

“Employers increasingly recognize that providing a culture of workplace dignity truly matters,” said John Bremen, managing director, Human Capital and Benefits, Willis Towers Watson. “The concept of workplace dignity has many facets starting with respect and relationships at work. Yet it also extends to a sense of meaning and pride in one’s work, and ensuring the resources to thrive physically, emotionally, financially and socially. It’s very encouraging to see more employers making this a high priority.”

Indeed, nine in 10 employers (91%) say psychological safety — allowing employees to speak up without fear of negative consequences — will be an important priority in building or maintaining a culture of dignity in the next three years, compared with 50% over the past three years. Providing employees with learning and growth opportunities will also receive heightened attention in the next three years (90%), compared with the past three years (59%), which will be critical given the focus on job reskilling. Almost as many employers (88%) said they will make inclusion and belonging — fostering a work environment in which employees are valued and heard — a top priority the next three years, versus 58% over the past three years.

Gap between employers' and employees' perspectives

Results from the [Workplace Dignity Survey](#) and the Willis Towers Watson 2019/2020 Global Benefits Attitudes Survey found significant gaps exist between U.S. employees' and employers' perspectives in several key workplace areas:

- Four in five employers (81%) believe their employees are treated with dignity and respect regardless of their job, role or level, compared with 65% of employees who feel the same.
- Almost four in five employers (79%) report encouraging their employees to speak up; only half (51%) of employees agree.
- Eighty-six percent of employers believe their senior leaders have a sincere interest in their employees' wellbeing; only half of employees agree.
- Nearly two-thirds of employers (65%) believe they make it possible for employees to have a healthy integration of work and personal life, compared with less than half (46%) of employees who feel this way.

“Employers agree that a greater focus on dignity can create a positive impact on multiple stakeholders,” said Steve Nyce, senior economist at Willis Towers Watson. “And with a keen understanding of the key dimensions of dignity, they can set priorities and develop strategies to overcome the barriers to workplace dignity. With a culture of dignity, employees will feel more respected, less likely to leave and more likely to be highly engaged — all of which can help improve employee and company performance.”

“These results affirm that a thriving workplace honors the dignity — the inherent value and worth — of all workers,” Kennedy concluded, “and responsible leaders must take specific actions both to advance workplace dignity and to close the perception gap between what their employees report they are experiencing and what employers think their workplace cultures are delivering.”

The Willis Towers Watson [Workplace Dignity Survey](#) was conducted in August and September 2019. Respondents included executives from 129 large and midsize U.S. companies representing 1.4 million employees across a wide range of industries. The survey was conducted in collaboration with Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights.

The Willis Towers Watson 2019/2020 Global Benefits Attitudes Survey measured attitudes of over 40,000 employees at medium and large private sector companies in 27 countries. A total of 8,000 U.S. workers participated in the survey, which was conducted between July and September 2019.

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