

Creating more
equitable workplaces
through gender-
centered design



INTRODUCTION

Women in the U.S. workforce have long faced work environments that systematically disadvantage them. Those with intersectional identities, such as women of color, LGBTQIA+ women, and women with disabilities face even more challenges. Pay disparities, a lack of advancement opportunities, and penalties for pregnancy and caregiving are just some of the indicators that work environments are rarely designed to be inclusive and equitable.

Women faced structural barriers well before the pandemic, such as an extra month each year of unpaid and non-promotable tasks at work, and asymmetric household responsibilities at home.¹ The onset of COVID-19 has exacerbated these inequities, especially for women with young children and women of color.² Women have experienced outsized pressure to manage the social impacts of the pandemic and subsequent shutdowns, leaving the workforce in droves to manage caregiving, virtual schooling, and extended quarantines.

The Supreme Court ruling in July 2022 overturning *Roe v. Wade* has created another seismic shift for women, who now must navigate complex and ever-changing health care realities and the impact that this has on their careers. A University of California San Francisco study found that six months after they were denied an abortion, women were less likely to be employed full-time than those who received an abortion, and this difference continued for at least four years.³ This gap in employment can seriously impact a woman's lifetime earning potential.

These issues are front and center for women, and increasingly for men as well. Many employees and their families are struggling with the mental and physical health impacts of the pandemic and the evolving American legal landscape. Caregivers who struggled to find quality care before the pandemic are finding it more difficult to find caregiving support.

In 2020, employees saw their organizations turn on a dime to adapt their workplaces for the realities of a global pandemic. This opened the eyes of employees to what is possible. The creativity and adaptability that employers offered in response to the pandemic is something that employees do not want to give up.

Employers are now facing a job market where millions have exited the workforce to maintain the flexibility to care for their families, and workers are switching jobs in search of virtual options. This, along with other drivers, has left employers struggling to find workers.

In this paper, we will explore how employers can attract and retain talent by creating a more humane work environment for all through gender-centered design.



80%

of U.S. workers that had exited the workforce by choice or due to job disruption as of September 2020 were women.



22%

more net jobs have been lost by women than men since the start of the pandemic due to impacts on service industries.



37%

more time is spent by women than men on unpaid household and care work on an average day.





Pillars of Gender-centered Design

Organizations that recognize their employees as whole people, rather than just workers, are more effective at attracting and retaining talent.⁴ Humane workplaces consider the holistic needs of their employees to create equitable work environments where everyone feels they are included and belong, regardless of their gender identity, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability.

These work environments prioritize five basic principles, including:



Employee mental and physical health



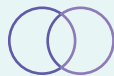
Caregiver support



Consistency, predictability, and flexibility



Intersectionality



Cultivation of allies

We will examine each of these pillars and explore how organizations are currently applying them to create humane work environments that are more equitable, inclusive, and productive.

Employee Mental and Physical Health



A 2021 study showed that women were more burned out than they were a year earlier. In fact, the gap in burnout between women and men has almost doubled, and one in three women have considered either leaving the workforce entirely or downshifting their career. This is an increase from one in four pre-pandemic.⁵

The Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* will add additional mental and physical burdens on people who can get pregnant, who must now keep up with an ever-changing legal landscape and limitations on medical care. Those who will be forced to carry unwanted or dangerous pregnancies to term will suffer even greater mental and physical trauma. Dozens of companies have already committed to helping their employees gain equal access to health care they may no longer be able to get in their state.

Organizations must make it a priority to develop strategies that address burnout and trauma starting with leadership buy-in at the top, and continuing with consistent and intentional practices to support employees. This focus on mental and physical health must be a long-term preventative strategy rather than short-term crisis intervention.



Organizations can begin to address this need with employee assistance programs (EAPs) that provide access to health screenings, mental health resources, and educational materials and incentives to help employees make healthy choices. Employee health and wellness programs may also include financial education, onsite or online fitness classes, and even flexible and remote working schedules to help employees reduce stress through greater work-life balance.⁶

In addition to health and wellness programs such as these, organizations must also understand the importance of being trauma-informed, which is the awareness of the negative impacts of trauma on employees and communities and the creation of systems and processes that are aligned with trauma-informed best practices. Many employees have dealt with trauma related to the pandemic. The racial reckoning that for many began with the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 has brought into focus the racial trauma many employees of color have long been carrying with

them and that may be triggered with each new incidence of racial hate crime and injustice. The impact of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* may also elicit traumatic responses in employees who are survivors of sexual abuse and assault. Trauma can have a significant impact on an employee's ability to focus on work and perform effectively, resulting in poor work outcomes, absenteeism, and burnout.⁷

Trauma-informed organizations work to mitigate these effects by employing specific strategies to support employees experiencing trauma. This requires organizations to embrace open, honest, and transparent communication, regular manager check-ins with all employees, and established procedures for employees to request accommodations and resources. Employees should feel safe to request these resources without fear of reprisals or impact on future advancement opportunities.

PRIORITIZATION OF EMPLOYEE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH IN ACTION

An example of this pillar can be found at Unilever. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Unilever has taken immense strides to protect the mental and physical health of their employees. With the launch of the global Employee Assistance Program (EAP), the company was able to provide mental health resources via phone, text, or virtual chat 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. These resources include counseling services, stress reduction courses, financial wellbeing training, and life coaching.⁸ Knowing that the majority of workers would also be spending an increased amount of time working in various home situations, Unilever implemented a clear domestic violence policy and provided education on the subject to make employees aware of all resources at their disposal.⁹ The chart below showcases Unilever’s four-pronged approach to mental health at work as one of the founding partners of [Heads Together](#)¹⁰, the [Mental Health at Work Commitment](#),¹¹ and [The Global Business Collaboration for Better Workplace Mental Health](#)¹²: [Better Workplace Mental Health Action Plan](#).¹³

Another example can be found at food and beverages company Nestlé. Nestlé takes a holistic approach to employee wellness that encompasses physical, mental and emotional wellbeing through a comprehensive and personalized benefit framework for employees. The company’s THRIVE Ability Network Employee Resource Group (ERG) encompasses four pillars: critical illness, disability, caregiving, and, at the suggestion of group members, mental wellness.

The group has grown from just four members in 2019 to over 600 employees, and has expanded across Nestlé operating companies and all levels of the organization. It offers many employee benefits, including a Lifestyle Spending Account for wellness activities, free subscriptions to meditation and wellness tracking apps, and free access to a counselor by text message, phone, chat or video conference. Employees also receive a reduction in health insurance premiums when they participate in health-focused activities.¹⁴





Caregiver Support

Historically, women have often exited the workforce when they do not have the flexibility to care for their families. Women often bear the majority of home and childcare duties, along with care for aging relatives. Pandemic realities have added the additional tasks of managing in-home virtual classrooms or quarantined sick children, which also tend to fall on women. With the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, women who are denied abortions will need additional support to care for children who may be unplanned.

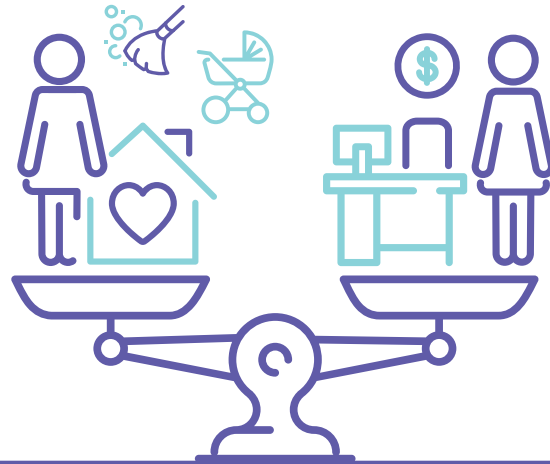
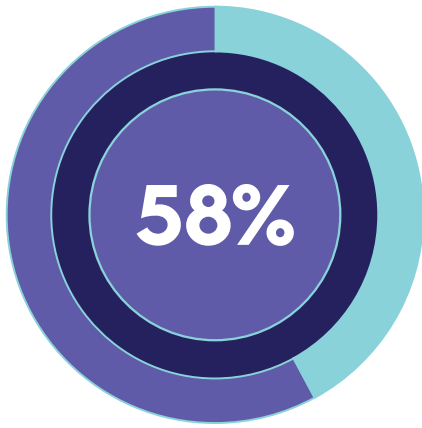
Data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis shows that mothers of young children are exiting the workforce at much higher levels than others, and this is especially pronounced among women without a college education, who are less likely to be in administrative roles they can complete remotely.¹⁵

A 2021 study found that among survey respondents who left their jobs, 45 percent did so due to the need to take care of family, and a similar proportion of people thinking of quitting cited the demands of family care as an influential factor in that decision.⁴ While many of the short-term shifts were driven by the realities of the pandemic, research shows that the childcare industry as a whole is struggling to provide quality services and pay workers a competitive wage while keeping prices affordable.¹⁶

Before the pandemic, American women were spending 1.6 times the amount of time on unpaid care and work as their male partners, according to the UN.¹⁷ This was true even across families where both adults worked full-time in 44 percent of households with children. “Among these couples, mothers provide about 60 percent of childcare. Men perform 7.2 hours of childcare per week versus 10.3 hours for women.”¹⁸ When childcare responsibilities became more demanding due to social disruptions and the loss of childcare services outside the home, this unequal division of labor became even more pronounced. An April 2021 survey from researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, New York University and the University of Texas at Austin found that “79 percent of mothers stated they were primarily responsible for housework in their household during the pandemic, compared with 28 percent of fathers. Similarly, 66 percent of mothers stated being primarily responsible for childcare compared with 24 percent of fathers.”

This trend was especially acute with employed mothers, with 77 percent of employed mothers reporting being mainly responsible for housework, 61 percent reporting being mainly responsible for childcare, and 78 percent reporting taking the lead on helping with their children’s remote learning.¹⁹

Caregiving support also includes those caring for parents, the sick, the elderly, and dependents with disabilities. Sixty-five percent of older adults with



Women feel that they work longer hours virtually and 52% feel they are doing more domestic household work.²⁰

long-term care needs exclusively rely on family and friends for assistance according to the [Family Caregiver Alliance, National Center on Caregiving](#). Women provide most of the caregiving and are more likely to experience negative effects on their health, finances, employment and relationships.

The financial impact caregivers experience can be significant. The monetary cost to women due to lost wages and Social Security benefits because of caregiving is, on average, \$324,044. When 52 percent of lower-income women spend at least 20 hours per week providing care, the long-term career trajectory and earning power of these women is negatively impacted.

Women also face health impacts, with research showing that female caregivers face doubled risk

for coronary heart disease, chronic stress, and other chronic health conditions.²¹

Organizations that embrace the pillar of caregiver support focus on providing benefits that help keep employees from leaving, while promoting work-life balance and supporting employee health. Some such programs include expanding and/or providing stipends for childcare, nursing services, and other home- and family-focused benefits.



CAREGIVER SUPPORT IN ACTION

Consumer goods manufacturing company **Kimberly-Clark** provides a robust network of caregiver support for its employees. Their employee resource group ‘Family Caregivers Network’ “provides information, support, and advocacy for family caregiving issues to improve the attraction, retention, and efficacy of our employees”.²² This robust network provides support and information for all stages of caregiving, from newborn to elder care, and developed a ‘Caregiver Starter Kit’ for Kimberly-Clark professionals. Workshops and forums happen multiple times a year, but materials are also easily accessible through a video library, reducing the burden of attending live events.

Kimberly-Clark has also demonstrated its commitment to caregivers through its partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to promote the health and wellbeing of all caregivers.²³

Consistency, Predictability, and Flexibility



The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth a host of challenges to women in hourly positions who were not given the choice to transition their work online. An April 2020 study showed women’s employment is more concentrated in industries that tend to be in-person, including restaurants and other retail establishments, hospitality, and health care.¹⁸

Prior to the pandemic, the needs and priorities of these hourly workers were not so different from those of the women now working in a virtual or hybrid model. We have now witnessed a never-before-seen shift in the balance of both flexibility and career choice.

Virtual and hybrid models have allowed many women the flexibility required to keep up with the demands of work and home. Those expected to return to fully in-person work are left to balance these demands on their own – which could potentially result in a mass exodus of both women and men across such industries. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, the number of American job openings increased to 11 million in October 2021, the second highest on record. The message is clear: Many employees are seeing the benefits of virtual work and, if not afforded similar benefits, will likely continue to leave the workforce in droves.

The industries mentioned above are not the only ones feeling the strain of in-person versus virtual

work environments; in fact, both women and men in many sectors, such as CPG, manufacturing, and industrial, have also been impacted.

It is critically important that we do not take shifts in strategy to virtual-first or hybrid models at face value – often, even within the same company, there is a divide between those with the option to return to work and those with a mandate to return. All businesses need to determine their strategy for offering similar flexibility and access to wellbeing resources for those in front-line positions as they do for those in virtual-first or hybrid positions.

Different strategies are needed to help ensure that hourly and front-line workers are empowered to take time off to take care of loved ones and manage schedules according to expectations at both work and home, to prevent the workforce that supports these industries from transitioning to ones that offer virtual work opportunities.

Only 3 of the top 10 occupations for women in the U.S. provide an opportunity for virtual work.²⁴

Virtual Opportunity



Limited Virtual Opportunity



CONSISTENCY, PREDICTABILITY, AND FLEXIBILITY IN ACTION

American Express supports women in the workplace by offering a culture focused on consistency, predictability, and flexibility. Through its Amex Flex program, employees have the option to work in the office, at home, or a hybrid approach that combines both. This allows employees to take advantage of purposeful in-person interaction in the office when needed, but also provides the flexibility to focus on other priorities instead of commuting. The company has also upgraded its physical workspaces with technology that seamlessly enables virtual and in-person colleagues to work together. More than 40 percent of the American Express workforce have opted to be fully virtual through the program.

As part of Amex Flex, American Express allows ‘Work from Anywhere’ where all employees (hybrid, virtual, and most onsite) may work up to four calendar weeks from a location other than their primary worksite. These policies allow employees the ability to balance work along with other tasks because of a company commitment to consistency, creating employee autonomy and control over their own schedules while supporting company goals to maintain the organization’s culture.²⁵

Companies can also benefit by offering increased consistency, predictability, and flexibility to their front-line workers. Research has shown that stable scheduling is not only good for retention, but also improves the bottom line. The clothing retailer Gap participated in a research study conducted by the University of California Hastings College of the Law, The University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, and the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School. It examined the impact of stabilizing schedules on company results. The results showed that stable scheduling sharply increased median sales by 7 percent (increases of 1-2 percent are average) and return on investment was high. It also significantly increased labor productivity by 5 percent, for an additional \$6.20 of revenue per hour of labor, which is attributed to retention of more seasoned sales associates due to more stable scheduling.²⁶

Intersectionality



Organizations that are committed to creating an inclusive work environment must understand the concept of “intersectionality” and how it relates to their workforce. Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the legal limbo of a woman named Emma DeGraffenreid who, along with several other black women, sued General Motors for discrimination in 1976. Since the company hired black men to work on the factory floor and white women to work as secretaries, the court dismissed the case, citing a lack of evidence for race-based and gender-based discrimination. There was simply no legal framework that allowed the courts to assess discrimination based on both race and gender.²⁷

Similarly, organizations with Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEI&B) initiatives that segment groups based on just one element of identity, and create programs around that, may unwittingly exclude others and fail to address the experiences of employees that belong to multiple groups.^{28, 29} Today, many organizations recognize the importance of taking an intersectional lens to DEI&B work.

For example, many organizations are already collecting EEO-1 data through an intersectional lens that provides a more accurate picture of the organization. The EEO-1 Component 1 report is a mandatory annual data collection in the United States that requires all private sector employers with 100 or more employees, and federal contractors with 50 or more employees meeting certain criteria,

to submit demographic workforce data, including data by race/ethnicity, sex and job categories. Increasingly, companies are not just collecting but also making public this intersectional data. The share of the Russell 1000 that disclose their intersectional EEO-1 data more than doubled between January and September 2021, from 4 percent to 11 percent, with a notable increase in the financial services sector.³⁰

While companies have made progress in intersectional data analysis, there is an opportunity to ensure DEI&B solutions are intersectional as well. One way to do this is to provide employees with learning opportunities exploring the intersections of backgrounds and experiences. Another approach is to create structures and processes to encourage ERG collaboration. Organizations can also create specific solutions focused on intersectional populations, such as women who identify as LGBTQIA+ and women of color.



INTERSECTIONALITY IN ACTION

One organization that has encouraged close collaboration among its 10 employee resource groups is HSBC. Led by high-performing, diverse employees, these groups connect employees through discussion of the workplace issues they face, promote professional development through networking and career development events, and connect with communities through volunteer events. To increase the effectiveness of these efforts, ERGs are encouraged to collaborate – to plan events together and invite employees from across all ERGs to attend as appropriate.

This collaboration has increased ERG membership, and enabled employees in smaller locations, where there may not be a local chapter of an ERG, to participate in ERG events. It has also led to employees who lead one ERG to step up to take on leadership roles in other ERGs. This cross-pollination helps ensure that individuals who identify with more than one marginalized identity don't fall through the cracks.³¹

Cultivation of Allies

Marginalized groups are almost universally underrepresented in leadership positions within organizations. Yet these diverse perspectives and experiences are critical to creating workplaces that are equitable and welcoming, and these voices must be represented in leadership. To improve the inclusion of people from minority groups, “the majority must help, support and advocate for [them]. If engaged correctly, allies hold the power and the key to stimulate positive change.”³²

Allies actively promote and advance the culture of inclusion within an organization. They intentionally make efforts to promote and benefit employees from historically marginalized groups by proactively calling out biases, mentoring and sponsoring individuals, and creating opportunities for them.

“Everyone has the ability to be an ally as privilege is intersectional - white women can be actionable allies to people of color, men can be allies to women, cis people can be allies to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, able-bodied people can be allies to those with different abilities, economically privileged people can be allies to those who are not and so on.”³²

Organizations that seek to create equitable and inclusive workplaces should provide allyship and bystander awareness training to ensure that employees have the awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge of techniques to provide meaningful allyship.

A recent study from McKinsey on women in the workplace found that while more than three-quarters of white employees consider themselves allies, they are no more likely to speak out against bias or discrimination, or to mentor or advocate for women of color. It is necessary for organizations to provide the training and support that all employees need to recognize their own biases, challenge the biases of others, and know what to do to demonstrate true allyship.⁵



CULTIVATION OF ALLIES IN ACTION

Technology leader Microsoft supports women in its organization by creating a strong culture of allies. This commitment is felt throughout the organization, starting at the top with the Chief Diversity Officer role. Microsoft prides itself for having diversity and inclusion embedded throughout its Human Resources teams.³³ The HR team at Microsoft builds a culture of allyship through tactics like onboarding buddies and resource groups. Critically, Microsoft also includes diversity and inclusion as a factor in its performance management system, so all employees have a responsibility for fostering a culture of equity.³⁴

Microsoft's allyship program plays a large role in developing an inclusive culture and is composed of 10 segments developed across media types to reach a broader employee audience. These include 'exercise curiosity,' 'practice willful awareness,' and '[see] mistakes as an invitation to learn'.³³ To learn new skills and practice inclusive behaviors, employees can either self-pace through online classes and scenarios or join live sessions.³⁴

Employees can take online, self-paced classes, watch video scenarios with actors portraying and discussing various work situations, and participate in facilitated sessions focused on building skills and practicing behaviors.

The Coca-Cola Company also invests in allyship. Coca-Cola implemented a multi-year development and learning program beginning with the "Together We Stand, Together We Must" Allyship Guidebook in response to the widespread social justice movements preceding 2020. The guide was created entirely by volunteers within the Coca-Cola organization, and offers learning resources, communication tools, and other content. The guide is designed to help reframe employees' perceptions on topics like racial equity, and kickstart meaningful conversations among coworkers.³⁵

In addition to this internal guidebook, Coca-Cola partnered with the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, The King Center, Civic Dinners, and Equitable Dinners to host 'Together We Must: The Conversation.' This initiative, launched in October 2020, focused on bringing people together via a series of virtual dinners to discuss various social justice issues with celebrities from Bernice A. King, CEO of The King Center, to Elaine Welteroth, Team USA Paralympic Track and Field athlete.³⁶ Each dinner was free and open to the public, resulting in an overall attendance of nearly 5,000 people across six events.³⁷



IN CONCLUSION

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts by organizations are a key element of creating equitable workplaces that prioritize the health and wellbeing of all employees. The challenges that women have traditionally faced in the workplace have been exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and it will take systematic, thoughtful leadership by organizations to develop a new way of working that is inclusive and meaningful.

The pillars of gender-centered design create a framework that organizations can use to begin this work. It is important to recognize, however, that this process is iterative, and investment must be longterm to show positive and lasting results. Additionally, organizations must do this work with an intersectional lens, inviting the participation of women from traditionally underrepresented groups within the workforce to the planning process, and truly listen to them, to identify the unique challenges and barriers that exist.

Technological and social advancements, in conjunction with pandemic recovery efforts, have shed light on the many unique challenges to women in the workplace. They have also galvanized a renewed urgency across industries to address these inequities. An unprecedented number of companies are taking positive steps toward increased gender-centered workforce support. Continued candid conversations on these topics will only accelerate the pace of change.

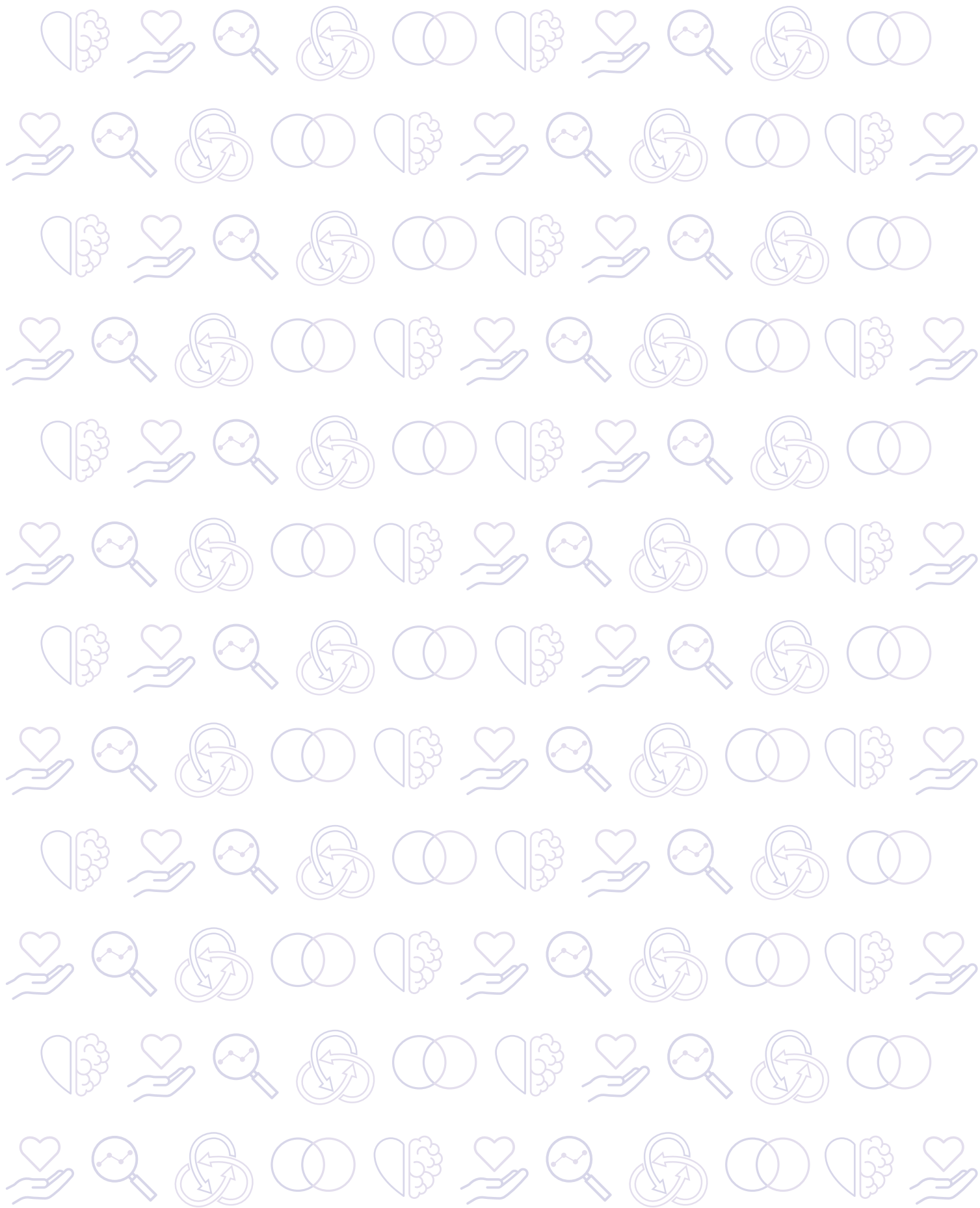
With the right strategy, companies have an opportunity to reframe their employees' experiences for the better and develop inclusive workplaces that take the holistic wellbeing of all employees into account. This, in turn, will help organizations retain employees and better compete for talent.



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