

U T O
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BIPOC employees in the workplace

“The research shows the Black community in particular is faced with the pressure of forming faux identities because employers are orchestrating an environment that expects workers to ‘act white’. And because of these ‘White cultures’ Black employees are not progressing as fast as their White colleagues. To overcome these systemic challenges, businesses must create inclusive cultures that demonstrate ethnicity is not a barrier to success in the workplace, whether that be virtual or physical.
Tolu Farinto, change-maker at culture change business Utopia



Foreword

Tolu Farinto, Utopia

The emphasis on education has been prioritised by most organisations when approaching the conversation of race in the workplace. It's important to learn about the systemic barriers faced by BIPOC (black, Indigenous and people of color) people in wider society but more importantly the nuanced ways in which they show up in the workplace. Only by identifying and understanding these barriers can real change be brought about to enable them to thrive and unlock the potential diversity has to offer us.

In my experiences of being a BIPOC professional in the UK I have faced several challenges, some of them I couldn't articulate in the moment; the microaggressions, the excessive code switching, covering and the gas-lighting that often led me to believe workplaces were not for me. My role as ethnicity and social mobility lead at Utopia is often to leverage those experiences to help businesses understand the impact of exclusion. Employing empathy as well as the business case is important and my hope is that this report enables businesses to understand both and create meaningful change.

Executive Summary

Original research we conducted reveals that BIPOC workers feel under immense pressure to uphold a standard of professionalism that favours their white colleagues, many still feel excluded by their workplace culture and they are compelled to adapt their behaviour to cope.

The survey shows that although a high proportion of BIPOC workers (67%) felt their company was doing something to further inclusion, they nonetheless face unsustainable pressures in their current workplaces.

This report offers insight into how BIPOC workers are feeling the workplace and explores findings that reveal:

- **BIPOC employees feel disproportionately pressured to over-achieve**
- **BIPOC women continue to be doubly disadvantaged by their gender and ethnicity**
- **the pressures of masking to fit in**
- **some concerning findings about BIPOC men's attitude to wellbeing**

The potential benefit to the UK economy from full representation of BIPOC individuals across the labour market is estimated to be £24bn a year or 1.3% of GDP (1), and in 2019 the top quartile companies on ethnic and cultural diversity outperformed those in the fourth one by 36% in profitability (2).

While diversity and inclusion is about far more than the bottom line, the case not only for equity and equality but also for business is crystal clear.



Hiring diverse talent isn't enough - it's the workplace experience that shapes whether people remain and thrive.

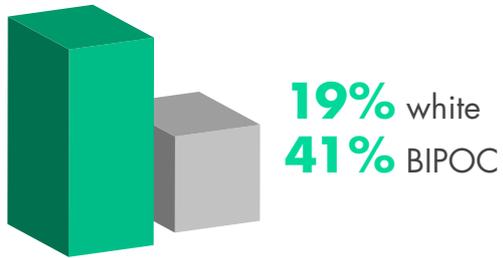
[Diversity Wins: How inclusion matters, McKinsey, 2019](#)

Employers need to create work cultures in which everyone can thrive and demonstrate that ethnicity is not a barrier to success but our research exposes a level and breadth of discomfort felt by BIPOC employees which is deeply concerning.

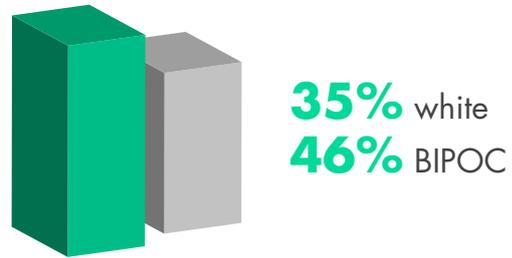
To that end we also offer some solutions, including the three hacks you can bring into your business today to accelerate change.

■ = BIPOC ■ = White

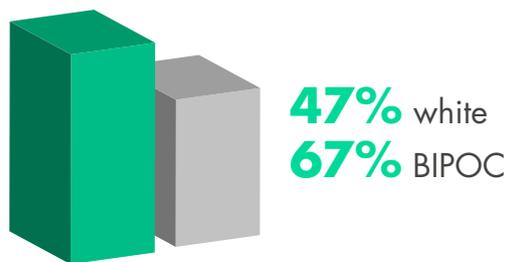
Think the workplace is exclusive



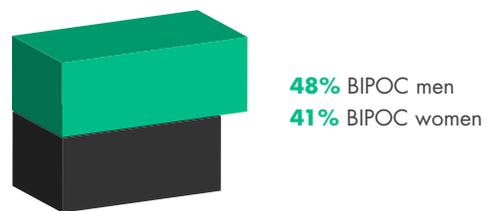
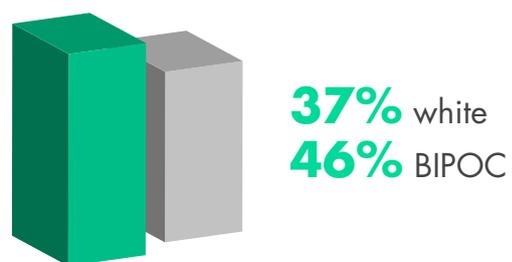
A focus on winning all the time is important for career success



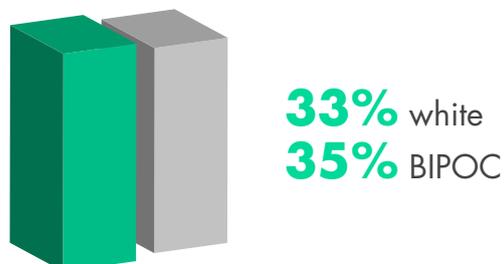
Pressure to over-achieve



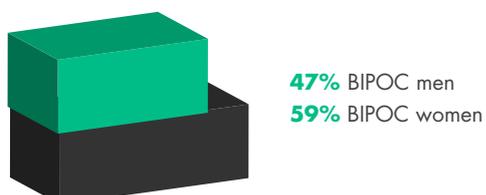
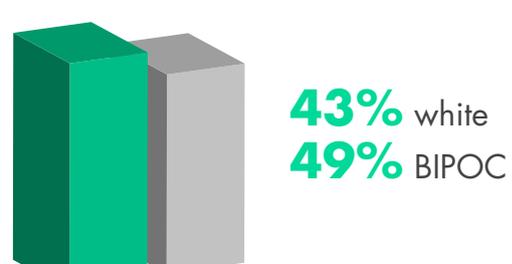
Working long hours has a positive impact on career prospects



Ensuring family and social life doesn't interfere with work has a positive impact on career prospects



I mask parts of myself at work to fit in



Methodology

The survey carried out for us by insight agency Opinium in late 2019 asked a representative sample of more than 2,000 workers across a range of industries and throughout the UK about their views on the workplace.

Originally commissioned to coincide with the Masculinity in the Workplace conference, the questions ranged across a number of subjects including: how employees are feeling in general in their jobs, aspects of masculinity in the workplace and how inclusive they felt their workplaces to be.



Exclusive workplaces - white and male by design

The pressure BIPOC workers feel to over-achieve is intense - 67% overall felt they had to go "above and beyond" at work and this spiked for women at 69%. And the fear of failure is ever-present - with 63% of women and 49% of men scared to fail at work.

Meanwhile 41% of BIPOC respondents reported exclusive workplaces compared with 19% of their white counterparts.

44% of BIPOC men felt their workplace had an exclusive culture, while 51% of BIPOC women felt excluded occasionally or often by their workplace culture, with 47% feeling excluded or marginalised at work because of their identity, beliefs or personal circumstances.

BIPOC men and women felt an equal pressure to be a financial provider for the family (69% respectively) compared to 55% of their white female counterparts, which confirms older stereotypes of white women more often having the privilege of not having to work while BIPOC women are more often in lower socio-economic groups with greater pressure on them to provide. BIPOC women's socio-economic position makes them more susceptible to poverty (10), they tend to be clustered in

Methodology Exclusive workplaces - white and male by design 2001 responses 64% male 34% female 2% other South 26% North 29% Middle 27% W,S,NI 16% Non UK 2% White 90% BAME 10% LGBTQ+ 6% Hetero 94% 20% under 35 48% 35-54 32% over 55 56% with dependents lower-paying occupations and households from ethnic minorities tend to have lower incomes overall (11), which puts a greater pressure on them to provide.

A high proportion of BIPOC workers (67%) said their company had a formal strategy in place to create an inclusive culture. But while this number may be high, perhaps boosted by this group having a stronger awareness of their company's inclusion policy, it seems these employees are not feeling the effects of these programmes in practice.

Conversely 44% of white workers didn't think their workplace was doing anything in particular to further inclusivity but nonetheless felt themselves included, with white male workers the most "comfortable" group in the majority of responses on inclusion. This seems to confirm the picture of a workplace that is both predominantly white and male by design.

This is a problem because if "you don't see what you don't see" change can't happen.

Feeling that they have to work harder for less, often being excluded and simultaneously under pressure to provide, it is perhaps unsurprising that 41%

“You have to be twice as good to get half as far’. This is a saying many black people have heard from friends and family when it comes to succeeding in the workplace. This definitely puts unnecessary stress on black women. And I have been in work situations where my work output has far exceeded everyone else on my team but yet found out my wages were lower and I was being overlooked for promotion.
[Annika Allen, co-founder, The Black Magic Awards](#)

Suppressing feelings and “trading off”

The research reveals the workplace is inhibiting employees' willingness to be vulnerable in general but the survey revealed this view is particularly entrenched for BIPOC workers. Since we know that vulnerability is one of the key drivers of inclusion, innovation and creativity (3), this could be costing businesses dear.

The survey shows BIPOC men (44%) and women (43%) were equally uncomfortable sharing emotions at work, with 38% of the men also believing the most respected people in the workplace don't show emotions.

And both feared being judged for being vulnerable at work, although the picture was even starker for women (59% BIPOC women, against 50% BIPOC men).

Anecdotally at least, one BIPOC employee told us this could be ascribed to a fear of being judged or not heard when showing emotions in the workplace or of seeming less competent in your job. More than half of BIPOC respondents believed men not showing vulnerability had positive implications for success.

Furthermore BIPOC men were additionally afraid to be judged for showing vulnerability at home. When we dig deeper into the statistics, BIPOC men also returned a more complex response to the positive or negative associations of working long hours, always putting work first and feeling pressure to be the breadwinner.

Nearly half of BIPOC men felt working long hours and a focus on winning all the time were synonymous with success in the workplace. They were also more likely to be afraid of asking for emotional support at work when they needed it - only 24% felt comfortable doing so.

But when it came to how this might affect their own mental wellbeing their reaction was less clear cut. They did not necessarily agree that men suppressing emotions at work had a wholly negative effect on wellbeing and many thought it had positive implications for career progression and relationships inside and outside of work. This could be explained by BIPOC men feeling they have more to lose from not conforming with the dominant culture or that they have to work harder to mitigate the bias against them.

However, more than half agreed that not showing vulnerability had a negative effect on their ability to be inclusive and acknowledged that empathy was a critical work skill.

The combination of a long-hours culture and suppressing emotions at work and at home comes at a cost - we know one of the risk factors for poor mental health is not being able to seek the emotional support of friends and family for example.

It is unclear whether this group were less aware of the emotional cost to themselves or prepared to accept the trade-off. It may be that trade-offs are tolerated out of necessity but either way this is potentially negative for their mental health.

“We were brought up by an older generation who had to face a much harsher working environment and more open prejudice. They instilled in us not to complain, so to a certain extent sometimes there is a trade-off, things like working long hours can be seen as a necessary evil to get to where you want to go.

Theo Streete, Senior Technology Manager,
Inspirational Development Group

Speaking at the Masculinity in the Workplace conference in 2019, Marvyn Harrison of Dope Black Dads underlined socio-economic factors presenting barriers in the workplace and at home for BIPOC employees.

When lower executive income is overrepresented in the BIPOC community this in turn exerts extra pressure. Consequently the trade-offs between the domestic sphere and work life, such as tolerating a long-hours culture, become all the more stark for employees.

It is clear that employees associating suppressing emotion either with positive mental health or career advancement is problematic.

If employees say they are afraid to be vulnerable at work and at home this may be storing up problems for the future - employers must take responsibility to open up a dialogue around vulnerability at work.

“The fact that a suppression of feelings anywhere is seen as positive is deeply worrying. Groups that have been made to feel unwelcome for so long, now being pressured into believing that they cannot express how they feel in the workplace is upsetting. That BIPOC men see this suppression as being beneficial to their development only adds to the case that there are still deeply rooted issues that need addressing.
Simon Docking, CSR Team leader, CCEP

Masking: to fit in or to survive?

While there was evidence to suggest throughout the research that all survey respondents sometimes suffered from imposter syndrome at work or felt they were “not enough” (smart enough, vocal enough, strong enough), BIPOC women agreed most strongly with this statement (49%) and, furthermore, felt most intensely that they had to actively mask parts of themselves to fit in (59%, against 47% BIPOC men).

Furthermore 45% of BIPOC women felt they didn't belong in their workplace culture and were the highest responders in terms of believing that their ethnicity was a barrier to career success - 41% BIPOC people overall feel less likely to progress professionally because of their ethnicity while only 9% of white employees felt this way.

Indeed BIPOC women seemed to suffer the most from the dominant culture, with more than half saying they feel excluded occasionally or often by their workplace culture (51%) while 43% of BIPOC men felt the same. And they are doubly disadvantaged by the intersection of their gender and ethnicity, with 45% of BIPOC women believing their ethnicity limited their career prospects and 39% their gender - higher than all other respondent groups.

BIPOC employees find themselves forced to employ strategies such as covering (spending a disproportionate amount of energy covering up an aspect of who you are in order to fit in at work) and code-switching (in this case defined as the specific practice of adjusting the tone or cadence of your voice, your behaviour or

mannerisms in majority-white spaces) and in doing so face unique workplace pressures.

But this begs the question: are they masking to “fit in” with majority white workplaces or merely to survive them? And at what cost to their own mental health and to business?

In their 2018 book *Slay In Your Lane* Elizabeth Uviebeniné and Yomi Adegoke describe a host of “stressors” at work affecting black women particularly acutely. Describing the phenomenon of code-switching, Adegoke comments:

“It can be difficult constantly flitting between faces (and voices), but at work in particular people - and arguably black women more than anyone - are forced to be inauthentic due to the prioritising of white-created protocols. Learning to read rooms and code-switch are often key factors to navigating different worlds, but you need to ensure you don't lose who you are altogether. What must be truly prioritised is authenticity.
Elizabeth Uviebeniné and Yomi Adegoke, authors of ‘Slay your lane’

In her recent podcast *Code-switching (5)* for Radio Four's *Seriously* documentary strand, Lucrece Grehoua unpacks the concept of the phrase coined originally to describe the experience of bi-lingual people and later, in the 1970s, the experience of African American students.

But Grehoua also highlights that the mentally draining effects of “double consciousness” - of having to continually regard oneself through the eyes of a majority white society - were written about by WEB Dubois about African Americans as far back as the early 1900s.

Meanwhile, a recent *Forbes* report (6) outlines the “emotional tax” of being a minority worker and warns that constantly being “on guard” against potential bias and discrimination can take its toll.

Put simply, if BIPOC employees don't feel comfortable being themselves at work this can lead to a reduction in job satisfaction, increase stress and mental ill health and ultimately affect employee retention.

What next?

So BIPOC employees are feeling pressured to over-achieve, women still feel they have to mask themselves to fit in and more often feel marginalised than their white colleagues.

BIPOC men, especially, are feeling the pressure to suppress their feelings at work and at home, subscribe to a long hours culture, and could be storing up problems for the future in terms of mental health unless employers push for change.

This survey was carried out in late 2019 and we have yet to see how the added pressures of a global pandemic, the profound reckoning over racism triggered by the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement will play out (7).

The systemic health and wealth inequalities which meant the BIPOC community was hit disproportionately hard by COVID-19 and its subsequent economic downturn have been thrown into sharp relief.

What's clear is that although many feel their workplaces are doing something to further inclusion, many BIPOC workers are yet to fully feel the positive effects of these programmes.

As much of the UK workforce continues to work from home, there is a possibility that the more empathetic working practices used by many businesses to navigate the pandemic could translate to lasting change for BIPOC workers.

Now more than ever it is vital managers and business leaders are accountable and spearhead change. Ultimately, the mental and physical wellbeing of their BIPOC employees may depend on it.

“The research shows the Black community in particular is faced with the pressure of forming faux identities because employers are orchestrating an environment that expects workers to ‘act white’. And because of these ‘white cultures’ Black employees are not progressing as fast as their white colleagues. To overcome these systemic challenges, businesses must create inclusive cultures that demonstrate ethnicity is not a barrier to success in the workplace, whether that be virtual or physical.
Tolu Farinto, change-maker at culture change business Utopia

3 things businesses can do now

1 Listening sessions

The first thing we have to do is to listen. We have been running listening sessions and they are a good way to get a qualitative insight into the experiences of your employees and how they navigate the workplace every day. This insight is fundamental to identify the nuanced challenges employees are facing and to begin to create solutions and drive change.

2 Address ethnicity pay gaps

Black African, Caribbean or Black British, Other and White Other ethnic groups earned 5% -10% less than their white counterparts on average between 2012 and 2018. (8) As we have already heard, when there is a ceiling on BIPOC executive income the pressure on employees both at work and at home is further compounded. Businesses know that including a wide range of talent not only delivers equality but also competitive advantage. Therefore companies must be transparent about ethnicity pay gaps, collect data on them and publish it for the benefits of diversity to be fully realised.

3 Don't just prioritise diversity and inclusion, practise belonging

Recognise the barriers employees of different ethnicities face and seek to understand how to overcome them. Identify a framework for talking about these barriers at work and allocate time and resources to ensuring this happens safely and meaningfully within your organisation.

Annika Allen, co-founder, The Black Magic Awards suggests:

- giving more air space to underrepresented groups in meetings
- encouraging people to share their stories and experiences and creating a safe space for them to do so
- enabling different ways of working for colleagues to balance their work and home life

To learn more about how to embed these changes within your business, and the programmes to enable you to do so, please contact Tolu Farinto at Utopia (tolu@weareutopia.co).

References

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Thanks

This report would not have been possible without the following amazing organisations who helped fund the research and ensure that we delivered an incredible Masculinity in the Workplace event.

All our MIW 2019 partners:



Thanks for your incredible support and we look forward to working together again in 2020.

Also a massive thanks to Roxanne Hobbs and The Hobbs Consultancy who are our wonderful partners on the Masculinity in the Workplace event.

U T O P I A

Utopia is a culture change business. In a business landscape where creative thinking is the primary driver of growth, our changemakers help organisations build more inclusive, more entrepreneurial and healthier cultures.

We do this by disrupting, inspiring and rewiring - from the intern to the CEO, through workshops and hacks - to create happier, inclusive, more productive workforces that deliver competitive advantage. And we've done it for businesses across the board, including Coca-Cola European Partners, D&AD, Google, KP snacks, Nestlé, Schneider Electric, Spotify and Universal Music.