



MEETINGS CAN PROMOTE INCLUSION AT WORK

BUT THEY CAN ALSO BACKFIRE INTO EXCLUSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report brings together the findings from a study that FSCB Insights has conducted using thousands of free-text responses from the 2021 FSCB Survey. The analysis highlights the critical importance of team meetings in fostering feelings of inclusion or exclusion among employees. It also provides simple and effective ways that meetings can be used to promote a more inclusive culture in firms, informed by behavioural science.

FEELING EXCLUDED AT WORK IS NOT JUST A FEELING

When one hears that an employee feels excluded at work, the reference to *feelings* may give the impression that they are airing an opinion or a subjective emotion.

However, feelings do not happen in a vacuum. They can be the result of very material practices in the workplace: things that, for example, keep employees silent when they have something to say, keep them out of the loop on key decisions or mean they miss out on development/ progression opportunities. Sometimes, employees' feelings of exclusion can relate to situations that would not necessarily come to mind when they are asked to think about whether or not they feel *included* (see [why measuring exclusion matters](#)).

Over the last few years, FSCB Insights has been focused on developing clearer measures of employee inclusion/exclusion and practical insights about how firms can do more to create more inclusive cultures.

These developments are long-overdue in the financial services sector as a whole. A recent report from the Inclusion Initiative from the London School of Economics found that despite high levels of investment, concrete progress on diversity and inclusion initiatives has been glacial (Lordan and Siddiqi, 2021).

In 2021, the FSCB Survey found that 5% of the 35,000+ financial services employees who responded, felt excluded by their colleagues at work. These employees were then asked to elaborate on what contributed to these perceptions of exclusion and to share an example. About 2,000 free-text responses shed light on various organisational practices and interactions among colleagues that have excluded employees from realising their full professional potential.

'Meeting' was one of the most used words. In particular, 185 employees detailed how team meetings and the social dynamics surrounding them could turn into a forum where exclusion materialises.

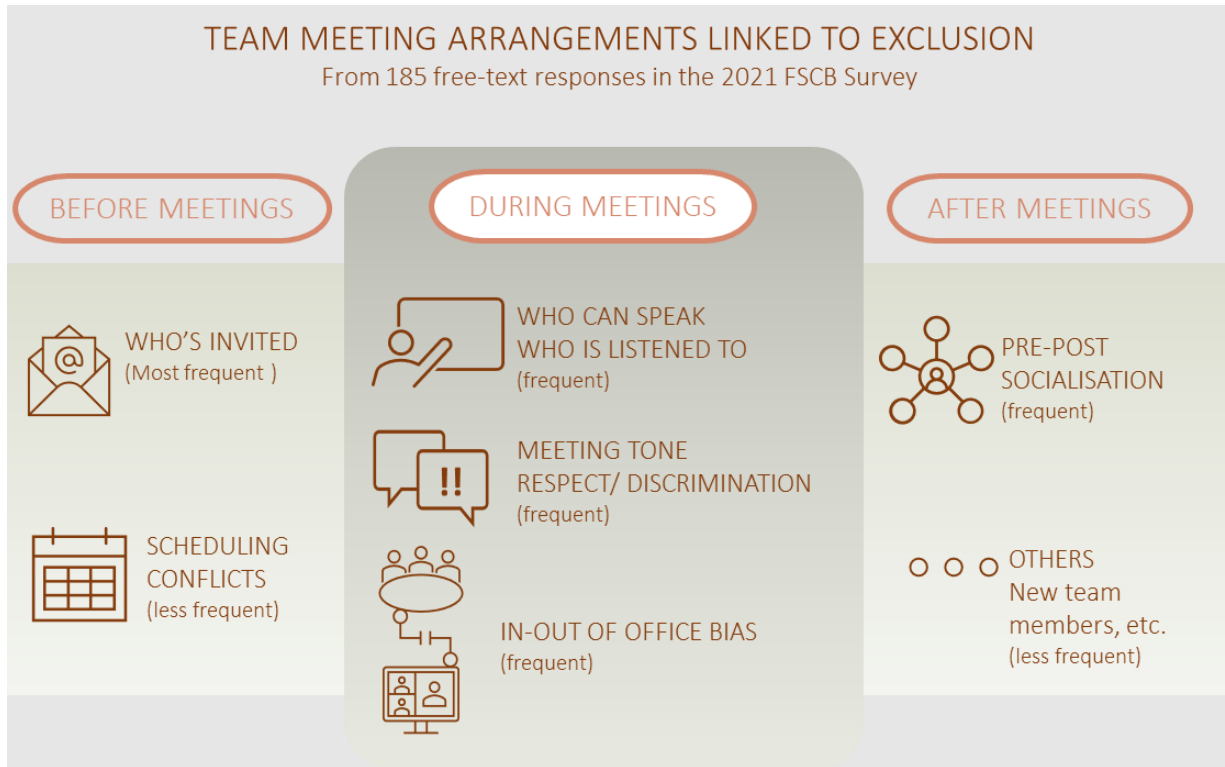


Figure 1: Overview of findings from free-text analysis

WHO'S INVITED TO MEETINGS Frequency of mentions: high

The most prevalent issue was related to how meetings are planned and the invitation list. About one third of the responses mentioned being kept out of the loop in decisions that impacted their role or team. In most cases, this was the result of not being invited to relevant meetings or copied into emails. When that happened, their views were not factored in, and they had to chase key information to be able to do the work. Below are some representative (collated) answers from the sample.

“ I am not included or removed from meetings and email trails relating to my work and then have to chase up”

I am excluded from meetings where decisions about my role are taking place, therefore there are no mechanism to factor in my views”

Three other problems were then cited in almost equal frequency to each other (and lower than the item above) and involved team dynamics and colleague interactions inside and outside meetings.

PRE/POST MEETING SOCIALISATION Frequency of mentions: medium

Informal discussions were sometimes carried out by a smaller group of colleagues to pre-emptively coordinate opinions before the team meeting began. Colleagues who knew



each other longer or had similar personalities or interests would sometimes get advanced buy-in on specific projects and expand the discussion with the team only afterwards.

Similarly, informal relationships among some colleagues can exclude others when they become aware that they have not been invited to socialise outside of work – in meals, coffee chats, birthday or retirement parties. Some examples were shared about a ‘selective concern’ for individual wellbeing, with some colleagues constantly asked in meetings how they were doing and offered support, while others were never asked. Some said that they are only contacted when someone in their teams needs something.

- “ I am excluded from talks that go before the meetings commence”*
- “ I am never invited to chat after meetings or to social events after work”*
- “ Instant messaging in the background of video calls by colleagues, the content of which is not shared with the group”*



WHO SPEAKS – WHO IS LISTENED TO

Frequency of mentions: medium

When some voices carry more weight than others in meetings, employees may feel ‘invisible’ in the room and not listened to. This category includes examples like suggesting ideas or raising concerns and these being ignored or dismissed. Their frustration rises further when ideas and challenges from other colleagues are welcomed and taken into consideration.

Unequal opportunities or manager favouritism were mentioned commonly. Some managers exercise subjective and non-transparent judgement of who should be assigned to high profile projects or benefit from development and progression opportunities, without providing explanation to those who were not given the same opportunities.

- “ When I offer new ideas, I am told it is outside the scope of the meeting”*
- “ I can have meetings on Teams and not say one word. No one notices”*
- “ I am ignored when I make a point in a meeting then someone else makes the same point after and gets the credit”*

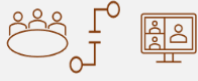


MEETING TONE AND RESPECT

Frequency of mentions: medium

Examples were given of people raising ideas or challenges and then being ridiculed, or made to feel alienated by team leaders and teammates. Others were talked over, bullied, or discriminated against for having a different point of view. In some cases, raising grievances through formal channels only made matters worse.

- “ As one of the few females it’s tough getting yourself heard when all the men in the call do their best to talk over you or dismiss your opinion”*
- “ I have challenged decisions and then been called names for doing so. When I raised this with higher management, I was ignored”*
- “ People talk over in meetings, hierarchical view: will not be given advice from someone the same grade, only higher”*



PROXIMITY BIAS

Frequency: medium

Proximity bias is a contemporary problem exacerbated by flexible working arrangements. It happens when employees who work in the same physical office are treated differently from (better than) those working remotely. 11% of the responses mentioned that working remotely resulted in being excluded from meetings.

Proximity bias can worsen problems relating to pre-post meeting socialisation (e.g., when remote workers are not invited to coffee or chats) and listening (e.g., when they feel 'invisible' in meetings, or that their contributions are less valued). Additional difficulties may come from having connectivity issues. Colleagues with disabilities can be particularly impacted when reasonable adjustments are not actioned in hybrid meetings, for example, by giving enough time for colleagues who need to speak slower.

“ Being remote from colleagues, you miss the across desk conversations which build team spirit”

I am not included in some of the meetings from the branch due to working from home, the branch makes feel like I'm not cared about”

Other problems cited include team meetings being scheduled when employees were not available due to working part-time or having caring responsibilities. Adapting to a new team after restructuring or being a new to the organisation, were also cited as causes for exclusion.



SCHEDULING CONFLICTS

Frequency: lower

“Team meetings are scheduled when they know that I'm not in the office”



OTHERS

Frequency: lower

Uncommunicated restructures, abrupt transfer to new team, onboarding of new employees, etc.

WHAT ACTIONS CAN BE TAKEN?

Exclusion in the workplace is not only an individual experience but also a group event. Actions that cause the exclusion of a single employee can produce a cascading effect for others in the team.

Observing a colleague receiving preferential attention or unfair opportunities or being dismissed and bullied is likely to affect everyone's assessment of trust in the team. To prevent that, organisations and managers should send unambiguous signs that everyone is subject to the same rules and entitled to the same level of respect. Leaders are crucial role models for behaviours which are both appropriate and inappropriate (Isaksen & Akkermans, 2011).

Whilst some cases of exclusion may require more structured initiatives, sometimes simple changes can have a profound impact in promoting more inclusive team dynamics.



BEFORE MEETINGS

Thinking carefully and consciously about attendee lists at meetings is one such action.

Every colleague who will be affected by the decision being discussed is a *candidate* to receive an invitation. Alternatively, teams may consider creating a channel to have their views factored in, either before the meeting or as feedback. Managers should avoid scheduling meetings when key participants are not available and when this is not possible, make sure that they are kept in the loop.

Recent technological advances allow the inclusion of multiple people in different locations, either to speak or simply learn about the decision-making criteria and stay informed. Technology can also be used to collect the opinions of many stakeholders before decisions are taken and to keep colleagues updated. One example is to record a meeting for those who could not attend. Likewise, copying invested people in email exchanges has no extra cost, although it should be done mindfully to avoid overloading colleagues' mailboxes with excessive detail.

DURING MEETINGS

A recent study conducted by FSCB Insights interviewed a representative range of managers in UK banks and building societies to identify some of the organisational challenges in a post-pandemic world ([Future of the Workplace report](#)). A consistent point raised in those discussions was the increased responsibilities of line managers in relation to employee wellbeing and development and how to do this effectively, either through in-person or virtual interactions. A simple question like "How are you holding up?" or "How can we help?" can go a long way to demonstrate concern for people's wellbeing. This can be especially impactful if the person asked is not one who the manager usually talks to outside of meetings.

Another managerial responsibility is to ensure that even the quietest colleague has the chance to speak and be listened to. Solicitation of voice is critical in creating a positive voice climate and needs conscious effort from managers ([Speaking up – an interview with Elizabeth Morrison](#)). Doing this requires good time management and the deliberate decision to prioritise speaking up and listening. A good idea is to reserve the last 10 minutes to go around the room (or the small online windows) and invite those who have not yet spoken to share their thoughts or concerns.

Managers should welcome constructive challenge (critical for responsible risk management) and new ideas (critical for innovation) without being defensive or 'pulling rank'. When someone uses their hierarchical position to silence an employee who is raising challenge, this will send an undesirable message to the whole team that speaking up, offering ideas or constructive challenging are not welcomed in their teams. If colleagues see that only those who please the manager will be heard, their willingness to challenge or raise new ideas will dampen.



Participation rates in meetings are often unevenly distributed, which can undermine information sharing (Gibson, 2003). For example, a scientific study documented a group of eight participants in a work meeting and found that only two people accounted for 60% of the talking and some members hardly talked at all. Another study found that higher levels of participation in meetings are not necessarily correlated with greater expertise (Littlepage et al., 1995)

Research in behavioural sciences suggest that immediate choices are likely to be based on more intuitive and relatively automatic decision processes. For example, Hoffman showed in 1979 that the first suggestion that receives a moderate degree of support in a team meeting is generally accepted as 'the group solution', while subsequent and potentially better options are then rarely discussed.

These findings suggest that effective solutions are more likely to emerge if multiple ideas are introduced before the evaluation phase of the meeting initiates. Ideally, important work decisions should follow reflection and logical processes.

For example, team members may benefit from having a designated safe space where ideas and opinions can be shared with colleagues without judgement, prior to their being shared in more formal settings.

One of the benefits of the recent changes in the way that offices work, and in particular in the technology that underpins office communication, is that most platforms for remote meetings allow the creation of virtual breakout rooms. They allow employees to spend a short amount of time discussing opinions and new ideas with a smaller group of peers before sharing them with their managers and the wider team.

This meeting structure may help raise ideas from quieter voices earlier in the process. Another advantage of using breakout rooms is that these critical interactions will happen during working hours instead of outside of work and among a smaller group of colleagues.

Finally, the ability to listen and respond constructively to employee input is a behaviour that can be taken for granted by leaders themselves. Managers and employees may benefit from training opportunities to improve their listening repertoire. And on a routine basis, it may be enlightening to just ask colleagues and team members for suggestions on how to be a better listener.

AFTER: SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital is a form of goodwill derived from social interactions and social networks that bond similar people and bridge diverse people (Claridge, 2004). Social capital can promote both inclusion and exclusion in the workplace.

Organisational inclusion can be fostered through affinity or employee resource groups which enable employees to bond over a common issue or element of identity. Equally however, social capital can come from cliques; inclusion at the expense of those excluded from such groups ([D&I initiatives cannot ignore informal networks](#)). While it is



understandable that people will develop personal friendships that spill over outside the workplace, it is also important to be aware of the impact this can have on team dynamics.

Conscious favouritism may be avoided by increasing decision transparency. Unconscious favouritism may require putting feedback mechanisms in place, so employees who feel excluded may say so without the fear of repercussion or – even better – a psychologically safe team where constructive challenge is welcomed, instead of being received grudgingly or avoided altogether.

Employees who are new to their roles, teams or organisations can experience particular challenges in building the social capital required to learn and progress effectively. This can be more prevalent in environments that have traditionally relied on informal learning from colleagues over those that take a more formalised learning approach such as in contact centres ([Future of Workplace – what's next?](#)).

Before finishing, it may be worth stating the obvious truth. Ensuring that the general tone in all work interactions is respectful to all should be the case in any organisation. Bullying, rudeness, name-calling, are simply unacceptable behaviours. Organisations must ensure that there are safe channels in place to protect employees who were disrespected in the workplace and other mechanisms to quickly identify when this happens, trigger remediating actions and prevent recurrences.

CONCLUSION

The free-text responses received in the 2021 FSCB Survey helped identify areas where firms may need to improve if they genuinely seek to create a more inclusive work environment. Perhaps the most time sensitive contribution is that the respondents list some concerning issues that call for immediate action (listed in Figure 1 and below), and at the same time they offer some simple and easily implemented ideas that may help address much of these problems (in the section “What actions can be taken?”).

Cultural improvement may sometimes require deep structural interventions and strong managerial commitment. But there are also some impactful, low-cost, and long-lasting ‘quick wins’ that can be achieved with small and meaningful changes. These include careful rethinking about the usual way that things are done in firms (like the usual way that meetings are done), and constantly asking oneself: how can we do this better?

Firms may choose to simply implement some of these ideas and see what happens. They may also consider testing the impact of these changes more rigorously, using behavioural trials to quantify their effects, facilitate escalation and help identify overall best practices.

CITED REFERENCES FROM ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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