

WHY MERITOCRACY NEEDS INCLUSION

How to get the best person for the job



WELCOME TO THE GENDER INTELLIGENCE REPORT 2025

The Gender Intelligence Report is a collaboration between Advance and the Competence Center for Diversity, Disability and Inclusion at the University of St. Gallen (CCDI). The annual report creates transparency about the development of gender equality in the Swiss workplace and appears for the 9th time.

The 2025 edition is based on analyzing 376,000 anonymized employees' HR data¹, 131,000 of which are in management positions, from over 90 companies and organizations located in Switzerland. This is a unique data set in quantity and quality, corresponding to approximately 7% of the Swiss workforce.

In addition this year, CCDI and Advance conducted a dedicated employee survey on Swiss workplace culture in spring 2025 to generate insights on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) from the perspectives of talent. The survey included 608 participants (472 female, 130 male, six non-binary or with other gender identity) across large and mid-sized companies and all hierarchy levels. Quantitative analysis was complemented through qualitative feedback.

This year's edition focuses on the topic of "meritocracy". It explores how meritocratic Swiss business is today and how we can move towards inclusive and genuinely meritocratic systems for the benefit of all.

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¹ As organizations largely record the gender category in binary form, the analysis in this report needs to follow this logic. We strongly encourage companies to build the structures needed to be able to include all genders in their statistics in the future.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's representation in management is progressing – but slowly

Compared to 2024, the share of women has slightly increased at most management levels, with middle management showing a 2-point rise. The critical mass of 30% in women's representation has been reached in lower management, an important cultural milestone. Cracking the 30% mark in middle management is the next step.

Advance member companies continue to lead

The Glass Ceiling Index (GCI) remains unchanged overall but reveals contrasts: Advance members show a much thinner Glass Ceiling with a GCI of 1.8 compared to 2.8 for non-members. This confirms that the deliberate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts of the Advance members pay off.

Industry differences are striking

Healthcare has the thickest Glass Ceiling (GCI 4.8) despite many women in its workforce, while tech (1.2) and pharma/med-tech (1.4) show thinner Glass Ceilings. These industries are able to better utilize their female talent pipeline through conscious talent management.

Meritocracy is already broken on the first promotion rung

While men and women are equally represented in non-management, women's promotion rates to lowest/lower management lag behind. This fact suggests that today's business world doesn't fully operate on meritocratic principles.

Employees call for stronger DEI – the key for real meritocracy

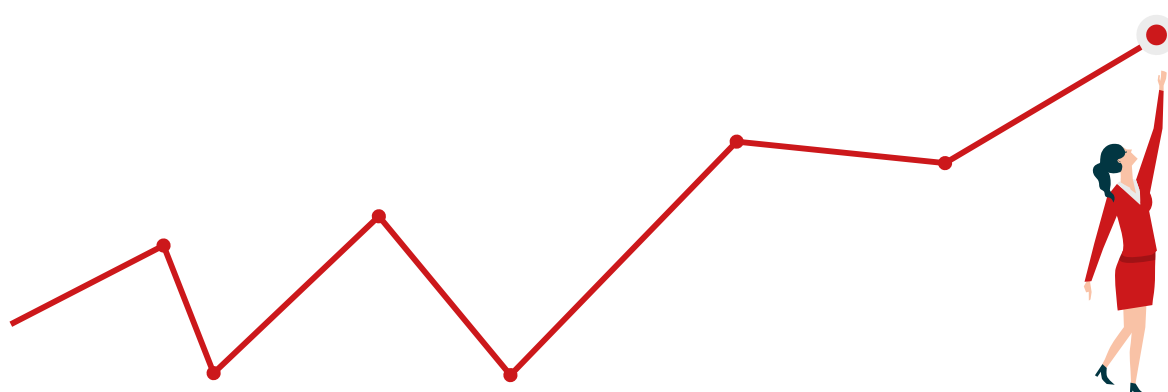
61% of employees consider DEI very important, but only 23% strongly agree their organization is committed to it. Women in particular lack sufficient chances for career advancement, with 56% perceiving they don't have fair, transparent development opportunities.

The lack of meritocracy hurts loyalty and costs billions

27% of employees would switch their organization for one more committed to DEI. Extrapolated on the report's sample, non-inclusive and non-meritocratic practices could cost companies up to CHF 5 billion annually.

Inclusive meritocracy is the way forward

True meritocracy requires inclusion: fair access, transparency, and unbiased criteria at every career stage. Companies that integrate DEI widen their talent pools, improve loyalty, and ensure the best talent advances.



NEW BEST PRACTICES FROM ADVANCE MEMBER COMPANIES

ABB

- The Power of We Starts with You – Resilient Together: How Wellbeing and Inclusion Empower Everyone

Alpiq

- Co-Creating our Future: Secure Base Leadership @ Alpiq

Axpo

- Smart Targets, Stronger Business: Using Data Simulation to Drive Gender Equality Actions

DSM Firmenich

- Mental Fitness Champions Community

KPMG

- She Advises: Discover Your Career with KPMG

MSD

- Inclusive Practices in Recruitment

SBB

- "Netzwerk der Netzwerke"
- OneSBB Meeting Points (Leadership Dialogues) on Diversity and Respect

Swiss Re

- Embedding Pay Transparency at Swiss Re
- Career Returnees at Swiss Re



Discover New Best Practices

For inspiration on what works in other companies, visit the rich selection of Best Practices published with the Gender Intelligence Report. [Read](#)



HOW GENDER-EQUAL IS SWISS BUSINESS TODAY?

Compared to the previous year, the share of women at most management levels has slightly increased.²

The critical mass of 30% in women's representation has been reached in lowest/lower management. When a group reaches this level, it is able to influence organizational culture, policies, and decision-making. For this reason, cracking the 30% mark in middle management is an essential next milestone.

Gender representation by management level

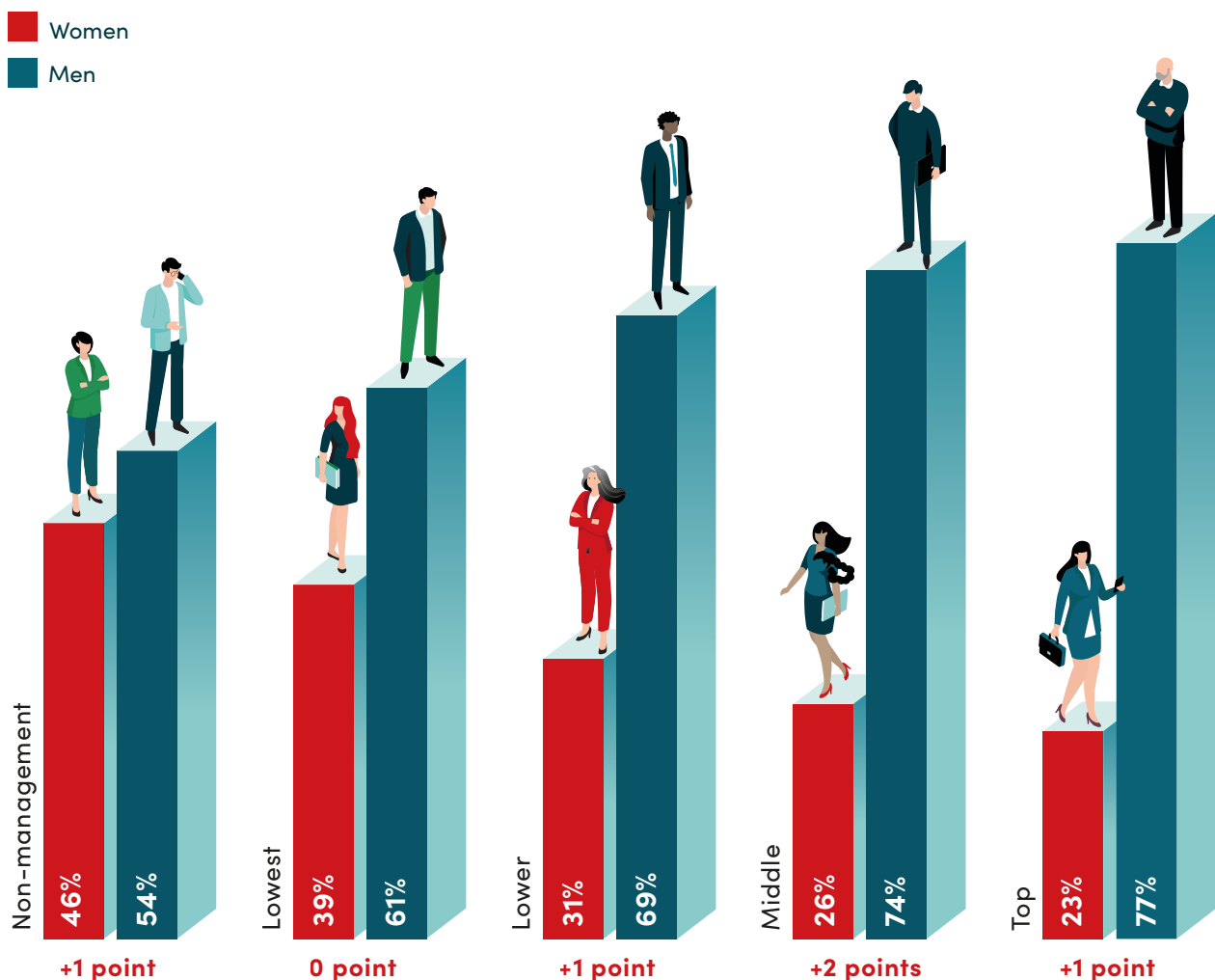


Figure 1: Gender representation by management level 2025 and evolution compared to previous year

² Progress figures are based on a comparison sample comprised of all companies that deliver data year by year.

The Glass Ceiling Index shows that men are heavily overrepresented in middle and top management.

The Glass Ceiling Index (GCI) of the full sample remained unchanged compared to the previous year. The current index of 2.1 means that men are more than two times overrepresented in middle and top management compared to their share in the workforce.

Glass Ceiling Index – middle and top management

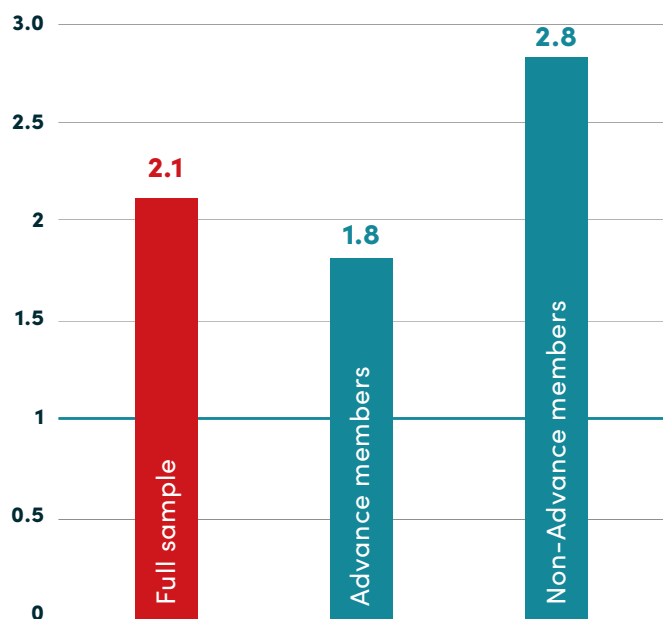


Figure 2: Glass Ceiling Index – middle and top management, 2025

What is the Glass Ceiling Index?

The GCI shows whether women and men have the same opportunities to reach a management position. The higher the index, the thicker the Glass Ceiling and the more pronounced the overrepresentation of men. Ideally, the gender distribution will be the same at all management levels as it is in the overall workforce. In this case, the GCI would be 1.

Advance member companies are ahead of the game.

Women advance better in companies that are part of the association than in non-member companies. With a GCI of 1.8 points vs. 2.8 points, Advance members do considerably better than non-members. Deliberate DEI efforts pay off!

A detailed overview of all key figures by industry is available in the Gender Intelligence Report online:
www.advance-hsg-report.ch



The Glass Ceiling is thickest in healthcare and insurance, thinnest in tech and pharma/med-tech.

The GCI of 4.8 in healthcare³ indicates that relatively few women reach the top, even though women comprise a high overall share of employees. In other words, men are overrepresented by almost five times in healthcare's middle and top management compared to their share in the workforce.

The opposite is true for the tech industry: The relatively few women in tech overall are comparatively well represented in top management, whereas men, compared to their share in the overall workforce, are only slightly overrepresented at the top. Yet another case is pharma/med-tech: Here, we have a high share of women in the pipeline, of which a comparatively high percentage is also represented in middle and top management. Other industries with a high overall share of women don't utilize their female talent pipeline as effectively as pharma/med-tech.

Please note:

With their sector-specific talent pipelines, industries have different starting points. The GCI takes this into account.

Glass Ceiling Index by industry – middle and top management



Figure 3: Glass Ceiling Index by Industry – middle and top management, 2025

³ This report distinguishes between healthcare and pharma/med-tech. The former comprises treatment and care centers such as hospitals, and the latter includes companies in research, innovation, and marketing.

Companies remain committed to DEI.

Approximately half of the companies in the sample anchor inclusion and diversity in their corporate strategies. Slightly below half also includes equity. Inclusion has increasingly been recognized as a success driver for productivity, innovation, and retention. Consequently, the percentage of companies that anchor inclusion in their HR strategy has increased by 12 percentage points. Yet overall, companies are still more likely to prioritize diversity over inclusion. This indicates that companies have not yet fully internalized that the benefits of diversity cannot be reaped without inclusion.

How companies anchor DEI

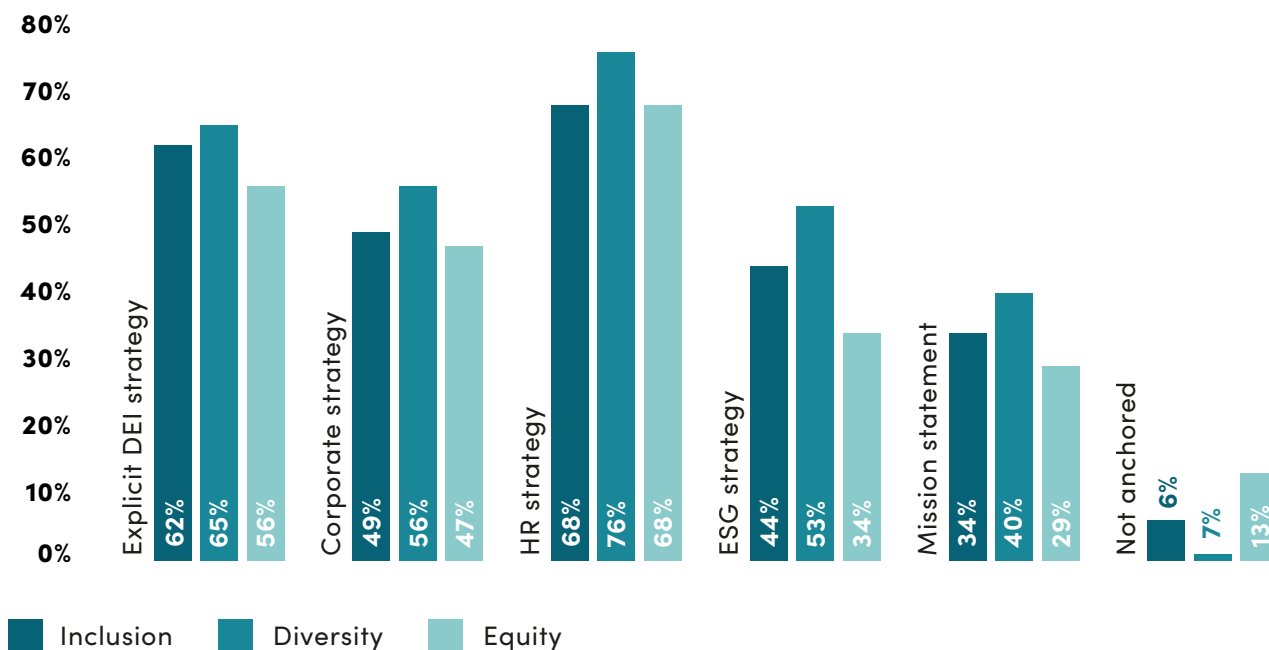


Figure 4: Percentage of companies that have anchored DEI in their organization, 2025

What does it mean to champion DEI?

Diversity: The company aims to build a workforce that mirrors broader society regarding gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, cultural background, and perspectives through hiring, fostering talent from diverse backgrounds, and promoting underrepresented groups.

Inclusion: Companies that champion inclusion want to create a workplace where everyone feels they belong and are valued, empowering them to contribute their best and to be themselves.

Equity: In a company committed to equity, everyone should have a fair shot, regardless of where they started. This includes recognizing and addressing systemic barriers, transparent processes, and consideration of individual needs.

The three concepts work together as the following effective analogy shows: **Diversity** is being **invited to the party**. **Inclusion** is being **asked to dance**. **Equity** is making sure **everyone has the skills and equipment they need to dance**.

Having a diverse workforce is not enough – employees also need to feel included and supported in a fair environment to thrive.

Both female and male talents perceive DEI in the workplace as essential.

For the first time, CCDI and Advance conducted a dedicated employee survey on Swiss workplace culture (spring 2025) to generate insights on DEI from the perspectives of talents. The survey included 608 participants (472 female, 130 male, six non-binary or with other gender identity) across large and mid-sized companies and all hierarchy levels. Quantitative analysis was complemented by qualitative feedback, which was overwhelming in amount, with over 430 text comments – this is an insight into how relevant the topic is to employees.

The business case for championing DEI remains strong from an employee perspective.

93% of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that DEI in the workplace is important to them. Looking at the response by gender, it's 97% of women and 79% of men.

Importance of DEI to employees and perceived company commitment⁴

DEI is important to me



My organization is committed to advancing DEI in the workplace



0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

Figure 5: Importance of DEI to employees and perceived company commitment, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025

There is a 38-percentage-point gap between DEI's attributed importance by employees and the perceived company commitment.

Although 61% strongly agree that "DEI is important" to them personally, only 23% strongly agree that "their organization is committed to DEI". Companies are called upon to either increase their DEI commitment and/or to ensure that employees feel the effects of this commitment in their daily working lives.



While top management has ambitious DEI goals, middle managers fail to implement those values and initiatives into daily practice. The problem lies with the supervisors and their behavior.⁵

Survey participant, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025

⁴ Due to mathematical rounding, values of .5 and higher are rounded up, while values below .5 are rounded down. Thus, the total in a figure sometimes adds up to 99% or 101%.

⁵ The quotes are reproduced analogously so that no conclusions can be drawn about individuals.

Almost two-thirds of employees agree that their organization should strengthen its DEI efforts.

61% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organization should strengthen its DEI efforts. Among them, 67% believe that their company should specifically strengthen its inclusive workplace culture (see Figure 12).

My organization should strengthen its DEI efforts.

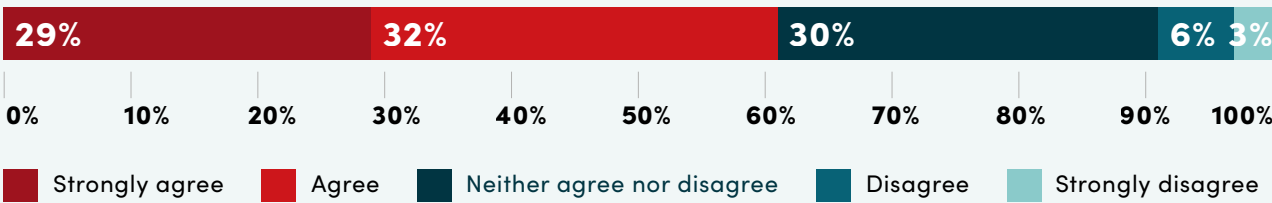


Figure 6: Employee perception of the scale of the company's DEI efforts, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025



Talking about DEI is different than living it, and the latter is where our organization should strengthen its efforts, as a full organization. This includes proper change management.

Survey participant, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025

Companies remain committed – though there is room for improvement.

As recent new narratives around DEI question whether such efforts would benefit or undermine meritocratic principles, this year's edition takes the opportunity to focus on the success factors of truly meritocratic systems and to explain how DEI and meritocracy relate.

UNLEASHING MERITOCRACY'S FULL POTENTIAL

The concept of "meritocracy" has recently gained popularity. Its promise to ensure the rise of the best and most deserving talents paints an ideal business world. Yet, what exactly is meritocracy, and how can companies unleash its full potential?

WHAT IS MERITOCRACY?

In a meritocracy, hiring, evaluation, advancement, promotion, and rewards are based on merit – typically defined as performance, talent, and/or potential. In practice, "merit" is not an objective or universal standard, but a socially constructed concept shaped by cultural norms and experiences.

What constitutes "merit", and who defines it?

If merit is not an objective standard, there is much room for subjectivity. Most companies interpret merit based on quantitative and qualitative performance, personal qualities, and potential.⁶ Individual biases about match, aptitude, and potential will likely skew evaluation and cloud judgment.

As long as there is room for subjectivity, the paradox of meritocracy remains at play.

Without deliberate effort to remove inherent subjectivity and bias, pseudo-meritocratic systems can reinforce privilege and existing biases rather than eliminate them. This is the "paradox of meritocracy" – and this is also where DEI becomes a vital ingredient for change.

True meritocracy requires high objectivity, transparency, fair access, and opportunity – inclusion is the enabler that makes it happen.

Perceptual and structural barriers must be eliminated to ensure that the best talents can advance.

Otherwise, too many potential candidates could be overlooked at every stage of the talent cycle: They need access to be considered for recruitment, to be fairly evaluated as talent even if they don't "look like" or fit the image of the typical manager and to be treated fairly and respectfully to maintain their loyalty.

Unbiased and equitable strategic merit systems are impactful success drivers.

Sensitizing and training leaders and recruiters to reduce bias is not enough, as Iris Bohnet and Siri Chilazi compellingly show in *Make Work Fair* (2024).⁷ What works? A strategic, unbiased, and transparent system where merit contributes to the overall success of the organization, based on a shared understanding of what constitutes performance and inclusive behaviors.

Companies that champion DEI already have the requisite tools.

Inclusive leadership offers proven tools and practices to ensure everyone has what they need to succeed. Companies committed to DEI likely already have the transparent processes and equitable structures required for a meritocratic system.

⁶ Castilla, E. J., & Ranganathan, A. (2020). The Production of Merit: How Managers Understand and Apply Merit in the Workplace. *Organization Science*, 31(4), 909–935.

⁷ Bohnet, I., & Chilazi, S. (2025). *Make Work Fair: Data-Driven Design for Real Results*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Why does inclusive meritocracy matter more than ever for the continued success of Swiss business?

Exacerbating skills shortages, demographic change, and the evolving needs of an increasingly diverse workforce are putting businesses under immense pressure today. Therefore, creating optimal conditions to enlarge the talent pool, attract, retain, and advance the "best person for the job" is a business imperative. Truly meritocratic systems do precisely that, and inclusive leadership delivers the perfect tools.

The dramatic demographic shift, with its increasing skills shortage, is a loud call to action to enlarge and fully utilize the (diverse) talent pool.

By 2040, the Swiss labor market will have a shortage of around 431,000 people, representing around eight percent of the current working population (Economiesuisse, 2023). In 2029, the number of people reaching retirement age will exceed the number of young people entering the labor market by over 30,000. In the next ten years, the share of retirees will grow by 26%, and that of employees by 2% (Economiesuisse, 2024).

Annual difference between 20-year-olds entering and 65-year-olds leaving the Swiss labor market

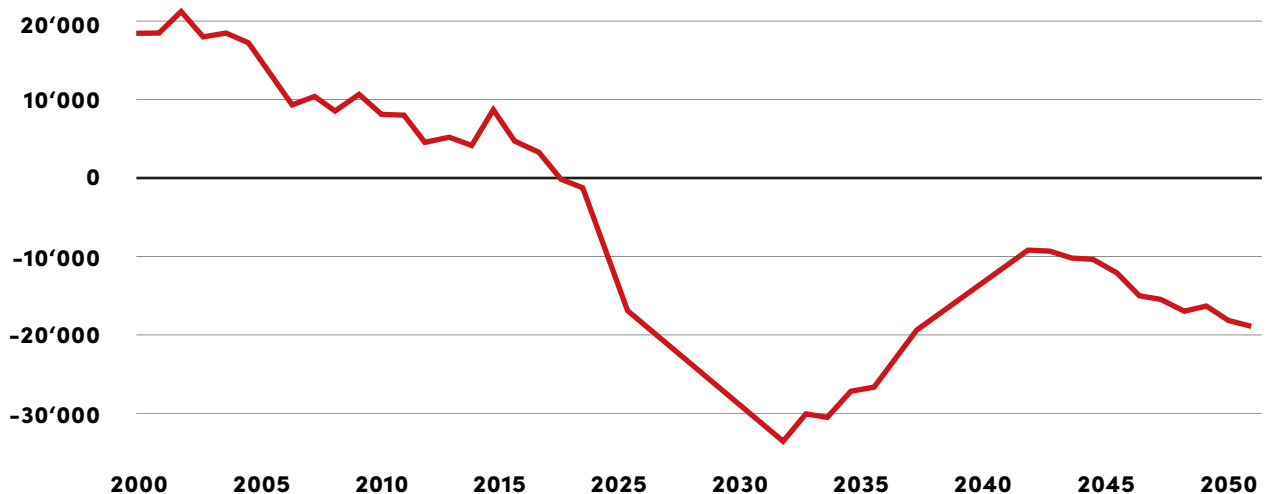


Figure 7: Annual difference between 20-year-olds entering and 65-year-olds leaving the Swiss labor market (Economiesuisse, 2024)

Steep increase in retirees and a decrease in career starters

The share of over-65-year-olds will significantly outpace the share of 20-year-olds, which is a massive challenge for our economy. The most likely compensation mechanisms are utilizing the existing talent pool more effectively, increasing productivity (with AI), and immigration. – It's high time we created optimal conditions and built thriving meritocracies.

HOW MERITOCRATIC IS SWISS BUSINESS TODAY?

Claiming to hire or promote the "best" only works if one can access the broadest possible talent pool and rely on objectivity and a level playing field.

Are we hiring meritocratically?

Evidence with identical resumes shows that hiring is not meritocratic.

Evaluating the degree of meritocracy in hiring requires evidence-based comparative studies. A recent meta-analysis examining over 300 audit studies on hiring shows that when employers receive two identical resumes, where only the candidates' race is different, white applicants are more likely to get invited to an interview than applicants of color. That's not meritocracy. Various studies using applications devoid of any demographics indicate similar results.⁸ Recruiters tend to spot what they consider to be talent and potential more easily where they expect to find it – a bias.

Looking at promotions, meritocracy is already broken on the first rung.

The first promotion step from non-management to lowest/lower management is an interesting place to evaluate if meritocracy is at play. Gender representation is close to 50:50, and the first promotion level is often reached earlier in one's professional life in the younger age groups, which is when the genders are the most equal regarding education levels and employment percentages.

With such a level playing field, one would expect promotion rates that reflect the talent pool's potential, indicating that promotions are meritocratic. However, women's promotion rates in most industries are far below the talent pool's potential – i.e., they are not meritocratic.

Internal talent pipeline development from non-management to lowest/lower management – by industry

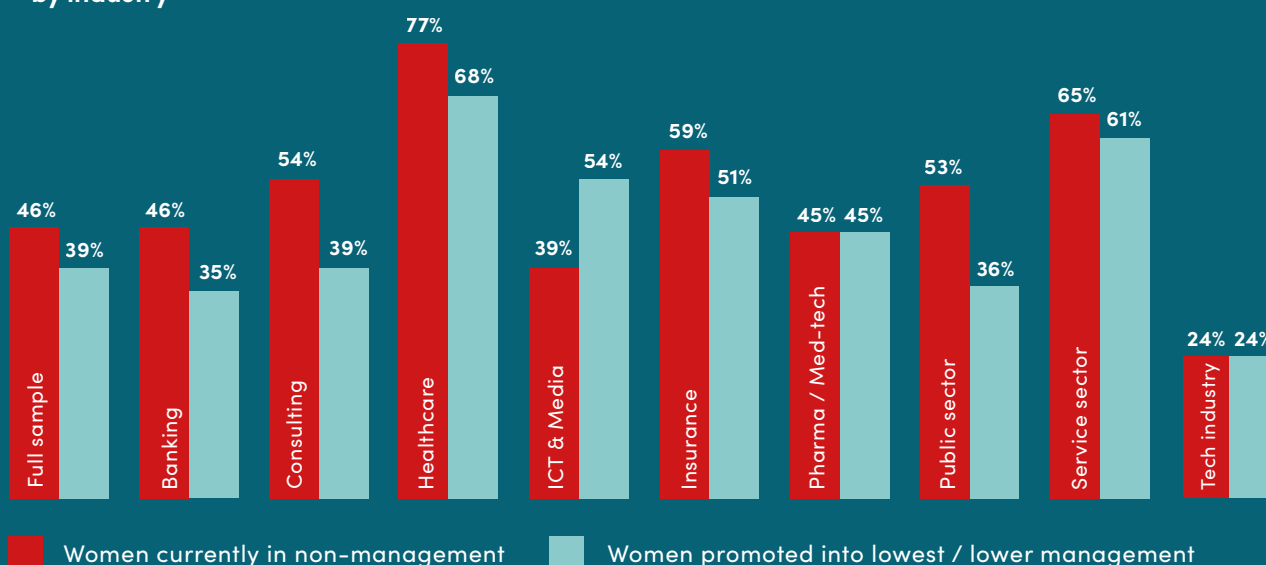


Figure 8: Internal talent pipeline development from non-management to lowest/lower management – by industry, 2025

In the full sample and in six out of nine sectors, the percentage of women among promotions to lowest/lower management is lower than their share in non-management.

⁸ Hangartner, D., Kopp, D., & Siegenthaler, M. (2021). Monitoring hiring discrimination through online recruitment platforms. *Nature*, 589(7843), 572–576.

Part-time under 80% is a merit barrier.

Another case where it becomes clear that the current business world is not meritocratic: Employees working less than 80% are less likely to get promoted. In other words, the system fails to recognize performance and impact beyond hours logged.

Internal talent pipeline development by employment percentage

Employees in middle / top management



Promotions to middle / top management



Employees in lowest / lower management



Promotions to lowest / lower management



Employees in non management

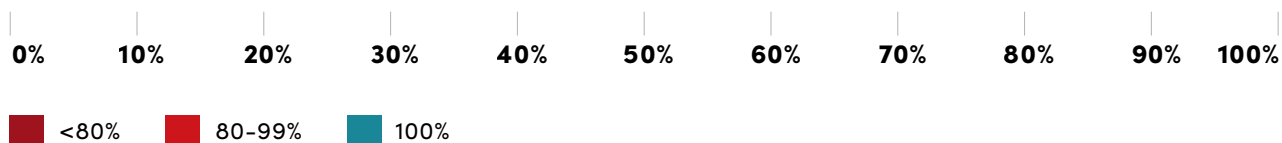


Figure 9: Internal talent pipeline development by employment percentage, 2025

Socio-cultural issues accentuate the lack of meritocracy in the business world.

Persistent systemic inequalities around pay, unpaid work (of which women still do 12.1 hours more than men),⁹ and parental leave slow the development of gender equality in Swiss Business, as has been analyzed in previous reports¹⁰ and the Advance whitepaper series.¹¹

The (unwritten) rule of working (near) full-time to be perceived as meritorious of career advancement and promotion remains a barrier, mainly to women.

Realizing genuine meritocracies will remain elusive as long as women and men have to operate under unequal conditions regarding managing career and care.

⁹ Balancing work and family and unpaid work (2025). Federal Statistical Office

¹⁰ Previous editions of the Gender Intelligence Report xxx Previous editions of the Gender Intelligence Report

¹¹ Advance whitepapers

When having the "right" age counts as merit, "best" talent can be overlooked.

Looking at promotions by age shows that the age groups 31-40 and 41-50 are over-proportionally considered for promotions to lowest/lower and middle/top management, compared to their share in the talent pool: Employees between 31 and 40 only make up 25% of non-management, but with 46% almost half of all promotions to lowest/lower management. The age group 41-50 makes up 30% in lowest/lower management, but 44% of promotions to middle/top management.

Pipeline development by age group

Employees in middle / top management



Promotions to middle / top management



Employees in lowest / lower management



Promotions to lowest / lower management



Employees in non-management



Figure 10: Pipeline development by age group, 2025

Fostering and investing in talent relatively early in their career cycle makes sense for an organization, as it may expect a long-term return on investment. Work experience is often a factor, but this is not always linear with age. Some people may be in the army for a few years, others take time off to travel, and others work part-time because of care responsibilities, an engagement in politics, or voluntary work. Therefore, expecting and spotting "best" talent in certain age groups rather than in others is also a bias that can get in the way of finding the "best person for the job". Perhaps it is a woman in her fifties who had a career break earlier in her life and therefore a slower career progression than her male peers, or it might be a young talent under 30.



The promotion processes are hard to navigate because they are so non-transparent. Some mindsets are: "If you have to ask for a promotion, you are not ready for it."

Survey participant, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025

Only 44% of female and 61% of male talents agree or strongly agree that they have fair, transparent, and attractive development opportunities.

In other words, 56% of female talents lack concrete perspectives to advance. Even worse, 26% of women and 22% of men disagree or strongly disagree that they have fair, transparent, and attractive development opportunities. If a quarter of the workforce feels excluded from access and opportunities, chances are high that meritorious talent will be overlooked. Reaching meritocracy is still a long way off.

I have fair, transparent, and attractive development opportunities in my organization.

Women



Men



Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree

Figure 11: Perceived fairness and transparency of development opportunities by gender, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025

Employees perceive that equal opportunities for career advancement should be improved.

What can companies do better regarding DEI, according to their employees? With 74%, which is by far the most mentioned and ranked as number one for women, and in third place for men, are equal opportunities for career advancement. This indicates that women are being impacted more by the lack of meritocracy than men, though it affects all genders.

Employees mention what companies can do better regarding DEI

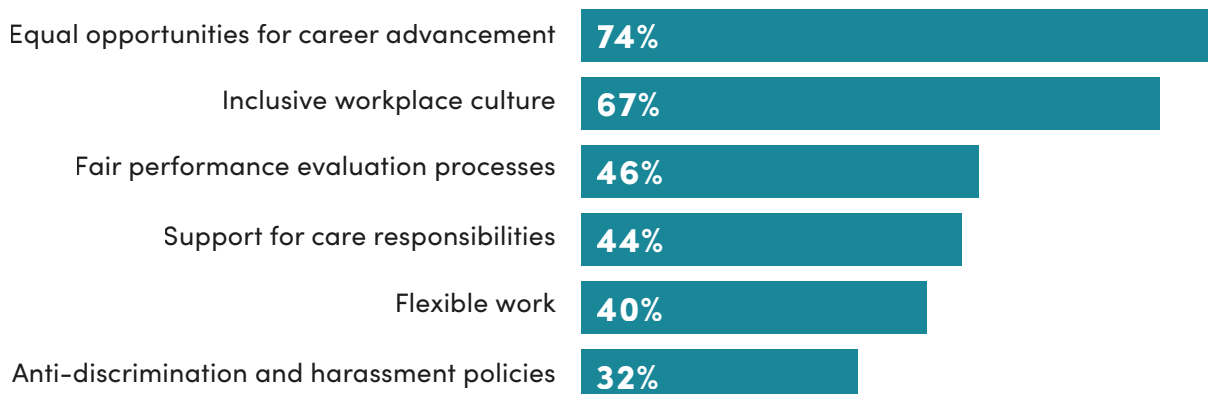


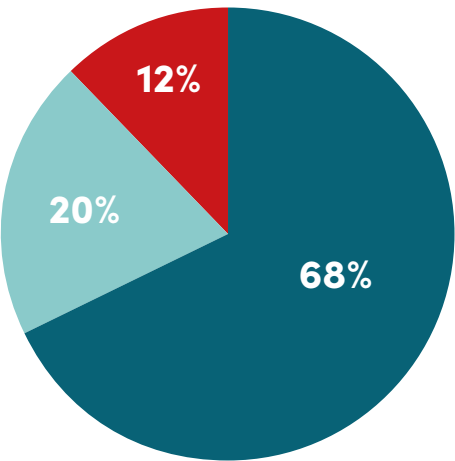
Figure 12: Employees mention what companies can do better regarding DEI, 2025

How about inclusion? 24% of male and 32% of female talents feel excluded.

In other words, only 75% of men and 68% of women feel included in their organizations. This is a problem, as inclusion and belonging drive employee engagement and loyalty. Clearly, inclusive leadership is relevant for all employees. Of the respondents, 83% of men agree or strongly agree that they feel valued and respected by their managers, compared to 76% of women.

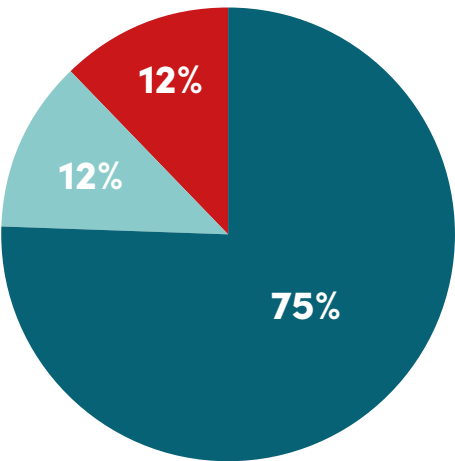
I feel included in my organization.

Women



- Agree/Strongly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree/Strongly disagree

Men



- Agree/Strongly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree/Strongly disagree

Figure 13: Perceived inclusion by gender, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025



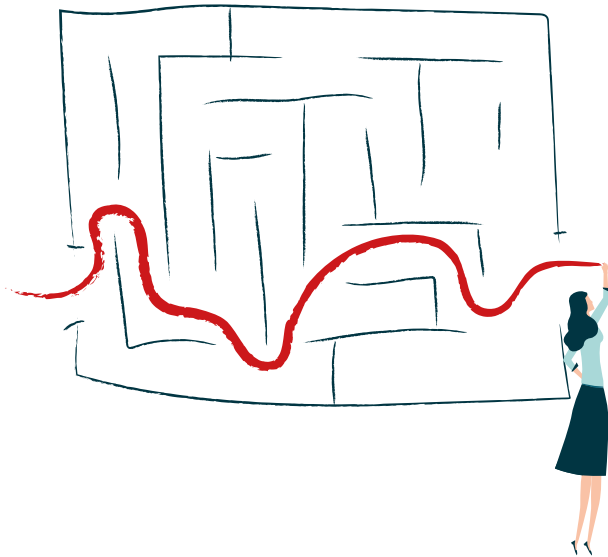
➔ INCLUSIVE MERITOCRACY PAYS OFF!

Companies championing inclusive meritocracy get the best of all business worlds: They hire and promote the best and have engaged and loyal employees.



While terms like diversity, inclusion, and flexibility are often highlighted, deeper structural issues are rarely addressed. For instance, competitive elbow-culture or the systemic reliance on unpaid care work to sustain family life is seldom questioned. In my experience, workplace culture is shaped far more by hierarchies and competition than participation or care.

– Survey participant, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025



Unless we fix our systems and truly level the playing field so that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, meritocracy will remain a myth.¹²

Siri Chilazi, Co-Author of "Make Work Fair"

¹² *How to make fairness work in the workplace | Harvard Kennedy School.*

WHAT IS THE COST OF BEING NON-MERITOCRATIC?

27% of employees would consider leaving the current organization for another one more committed to DEI.

An inclusive workplace culture significantly impacts employees' engagement, productivity, and loyalty. As a regression analysis shows, companies with equity anchored in their mission statement show a lower fluctuation rate compared to companies without. Further analysis of the Workplace Culture Survey reveals that employees who do not feel included, do not perceive themselves as having fair, transparent, and attractive development opportunities, do not feel respected and valued by their supervisor, and who experienced or observed discrimination are significantly more likely to consider leaving their employer for another one more committed to DEI.

A recent study conducted by Bain & Company in collaboration with Advance analyzed why women leave tech jobs at alarming rates: The study found that every second woman is considering changing their employer or leaving the industry altogether.¹³ As the main reason, the authors identify a non-inclusive workplace culture. Women often feel isolated and lack a sense of belonging and support.

I would consider leaving my current organization and moving to another that is more committed to DEI.

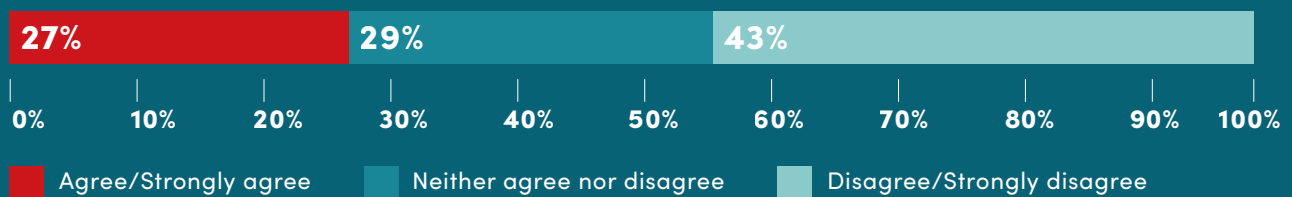


Figure 14: Share of employees who would consider leaving their current organization and moving to another that is more committed to DEI, Workplace Culture Survey, 2025

Being non-inclusive and non-meritocratic could cost companies up to 5 billion Swiss Francs!

Let's do the math!

27% of the survey respondents agree or strongly agree that they would consider leaving their current organization and moving to another that is more committed to DEI. Assuming there are additional reasons for changing one's employer, let's deduct a general turnover rate of 10 percentage points and use 17% for the calculation.

What could the cost of being non-inclusive be at your company?

For this year's report sample, 17% corresponds to 64,000 employees. The cost of replacing an employee usually amounts to the yearly salary of the role. If we multiply the number of change-willing employees with the annual median income of CHF 81,000 in Switzerland (2022), being non-inclusive could cost companies up to 5 billion Swiss Francs.

Creating equal stakes for all is key to unleashing meritocracy's full potential!

It takes a joint effort and collaboration between politics, companies, business associations, and forward-thinking leaders to accelerate progress toward inclusive meritocracy based on firm values like equality, common ground, and partnership.

¹³ "The Code of Belonging – Why Women Leave Tech and How to Build an Inclusive Workplace Culture That Retains Them", Advance whitepaper in collaboration with Bain & Company Switzerland (2025)

LET'S TAKE ACTION TO CREATE INCLUSIVE MERITOCRACY

Building a truly merit-based organization requires intentional strategies and a consistent and transparent merit system that integrates DEI into every stage of the talent lifecycle. Here's what organizations and leaders can do to drive progress.

ACTIONS ORGANIZATIONS CAN TAKE

Ensure a strategic and holistic merit system where merit contributes to organizational success. A good starting point is to review the current organizational merit system for consistency, transparency, and productivity regarding contribution to the overall success. Main areas to pay attention to are:

- required skills and behaviors, especially for management and leadership positions, performance and behavior measures
- criteria that talents need to fulfil to count as high potentials and qualify for development programs that provide support
- criteria that employees and managers need to fulfil to be rewarded and promoted
- incentives and rewards

Systematically apply the tools of inclusive leadership to remove visible and invisible hurdles, promote objectivity and transparency, and ensure access so everyone has a fair chance.

HIRING

Widen the talent lens and broaden access to job opportunities.

Companies often rely on recruitment strategies that replicate their existing employee pool, likely missing out on promising talents.¹⁴ Consciously expand your sourcing channels, including community networks and platforms serving underrepresented groups.

Debias your hiring assets such as job ads, processes, and assessment tools to include all meritorious candidates.

Humans will always remain biased to a certain degree, no matter how aware they are. Therefore, aim to remove as much subjectivity as possible from your hiring process. Options entail anonymized applications, structured interviews, standardized scoring rubrics, diverse interview panels, and objective assessment tools.

Apply (gender-)inclusive language consistently across corporate and visual communications.

Inclusive language is a must for job ads and is recommended everywhere. It goes beyond pronouns and word endings (though this is crucial). It is about communicating the company's inclusion values and choosing words that attract a vast, diverse candidate pool.

¹⁴ Campero, S., & Kacperczyk, A. (Olenka). (2024). Network Referrals and Self-Presentation in the High-Tech Labor Market. *Organization Science*, 35(4), 1342–1362.

Hire for inclusive behaviors, especially regarding leadership positions.

New hires represent a huge opportunity to strengthen inclusive workplace culture. Ensure that respective behaviors are part of assessment criteria and that recruiters are trained to apply them.

Let Artificial Intelligence (AI) help, not hinder you!

When using AI in hiring, apply human oversight to validate fairness and critically assess AI-generated recommendations. Rather than replacing human judgment, AI should enhance and assist the recruitment process.¹⁵ AI can be very helpful for creating inclusively written job ads or evaluating CVs based on clearly defined criteria. HR must review the suggestions and check for biases. AI can widen the talent pool if done well and trained correctly thanks to a more objective process.

PROMOTIONS

Publicize criteria for promotions, rewards, and role changes to avoid ambiguity and favoritism.

Transparency in career development builds trust and ensures fair access to growth opportunities. Establish transparency toward employees regarding their talent status in the talent management system, including the reasons for the designation. This will boost morale, fairness, recognition, and appreciation, and help you achieve a diverse talent pipeline.¹⁶

Define and promote inclusive leadership skills as key criteria for promotions.

Apart from measurable qualifications and performance, behaviors and expectations unconsciously influence promotion decisions. Behaviors traditionally associated with leadership are more easily spotted where we expect them: in men. This is a widespread bias, often blind to what can turn out as overconfidence or even arrogance.¹⁷ Make behavioral criteria explicit for promotions and ensure they are inclusive. "Resilience", for example, is often observed in the willingness to work overtime and the stamina that "going the extra mile" signals. The skills of part-time employees to optimize work processes and their use of time prove that they can cope with a high work intensity. However, this is rarely recorded under "resilience."¹⁸

Get the best out of balanced evaluation methods.

Combine quantitative key performance indicators (KPIs) with qualitative feedback, such as peer reviews and 360° check-ins, to account for both performance and potential, and to create accountability. Research highlights that vague definitions of "merit" often reinforce existing inequities; structured frameworks prevent such disparities from compounding over time.¹⁹

Review leadership skills, traits, and current leadership development programs to detect and correct bias and/or narrow assumptions.

When companies define leadership skills, they usually pull from traditional, often more masculine leadership archetypes, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, self-reliance, or competitiveness. This can "force" women to assimilate in order to have a chance to rise to the top. However, when women are evaluated based on typically "male" attributes, they often face a double standard, as male attributes can be perceived as negative when appearing in women. Get curious! Ask women in your company what they need and want to feel empowered and take charge. Experiences of empowerment are personal. Asking employees what they need to feel more empowered may provide you with new insights and ways to move forward.²⁰

¹⁵ Find the most up-to-date research inspiration here: Marabelli, M., & Lirio, P. (2023). AI and the metaverse in the workplace: DEI opportunities and challenges. SSRN.

¹⁶ Kost, S., Pletscher, M., & Sender, A. (2025). *The Talent Challenge: A snapshot on how organizations identify and manage talent*. Lucerne, Switzerland: Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Bohnet, I. (2016). *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*. Harvard University Press.

¹⁷ Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2019). *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?: (And How to Fix It)*. Harvard Business Press.

¹⁸ Schambach, G., & Nentwich, J. (2021). *Meritocracy and new performance criteria for Businesses. Leaders for Equality*. OPSY, University of St. Gallen

¹⁹ Dijk, H. V., Kooij, D., Karanika-Murray, M., Vos, A. D., & Meyer, B. (2020). Meritocracy a myth? A multilevel perspective of how social inequality accumulates through work. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 10(3-4), 240-269.

²⁰ Tolan, C. (2024). Leadership education in allied healthcare graduate programs: What does the curriculum reveal? *Journal of Leadership Education*.

RETENTION AND INCLUSION

Establish an inclusive leadership culture – this starts at the top!

The top management needs a shared understanding of the leadership culture, which they are ambassadors and role models of. Too often, this is based on implicit (and not always shared) knowledge rather than an explicit and shared commitment. This matters because traits associated with leadership that are strongly represented at the top tend to influence the leadership archetypes prevailing throughout the company. If those traits are strongly male-connoted, this narrows the lens on where potential will be spotted – if left unchecked.

Create insights into your inclusion status and how it relates to employee loyalty and retention.

Ensure you regularly ask your employees if they feel included in the organization, in their teams, and by their direct manager. The CCDI has developed a scientifically validated survey to measure inclusion, focusing on authenticity, belongingness, diversity of perspectives, and equal opportunity. Take a look at the "St.Gallen Inclusion Index" for more information.²¹ Measure and communicate progress toward your leadership and beyond wherever relevant. Relate KPIs like a "better retention rate" or "higher loyalty rate" to saved hiring costs and consciously connect progress to the business case. Visit the online report for inspiration on relevant KPIs: www.advance-hsg-report.ch

Hold your managers accountable for inclusion.

Empower your managers to apply inclusive leadership and implement inclusion goals for managers. Only what counts gets paid attention to and has value. Tie reaching inclusion goals to the rewards system. The most common measures are specific employee feedback and general team satisfaction rates. Typical dimensions are "I feel appreciated, respected, and heard", "my contributions are valued", "I feel supported, and psychologically safe". Additional measures include internal benchmarking of units on collaboration, team diversity, and retention rates across demographic lines. Such an integrated evaluation supports cultural change at scale.²²

Create platforms for connection and make belonging visible – involve Employee Resource Group(s) (ERGs).

Credibly show and convey across the organization that everyone belongs and has the opportunity to gain merit, i.e., successfully advance in their careers and thrive in their professional lives. ERGs can support such internal awareness campaigns and actively strengthen the sense of belonging in collaboration with leadership via their exchange platforms.

Ensure equal pay and fair rewards – aim to get certified!

Nothing stirs the sense of unfairness more than suspecting or having evidence of unequal pay. The fact is that there is still a so-called unexplained wage gap of 7.8% in Switzerland (Federal Statistical Office, FSO)²³ – this is not meritocracy. According to a recent report, approximately 55% of the companies in Switzerland do not (yet) comply with the equal pay regulations.²⁴ This is sobering. At the same time, it is an opportunity to tackle equal pay now – and make a difference! If your company is not certified yet, consider collaborating with the CCDI for the "We pay fair" certification or the Equal Salary Foundation.²⁵

²¹ St.Gallen Inclusion Index | Measuring and Promoting Workplace Inclusion

²² Park, C. H., Park, S., & Kwon, B. (2025). Forty-five years of research on diversity, equity and inclusion in management. *Management Decision*, 63(13), 66–95

²³ Wage gap (2024), Federal Statistical Office

²⁴ Lanfranconi, Herrmann et al. (2024). Zwischenbilanz zum Vollzug von Art. 13a–13i Glg (Lohnvergleichsanalysen)

²⁵ Equal Pay Analysis, CCDI

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE AS A LEADER

Develop a high self-awareness of inclusive merit.

Become aware of what merit means to you personally and how it aligns with how merit is constituted in your organization. Ask yourself: What merit(s) are you striving for? Where, or in whom, do you easily spot merit? Where have you potentially overlooked merit or merit potential in the past? What tools do you have to measure merit? Are they standardized?

Embrace inclusive leadership – bring its benefits to life!

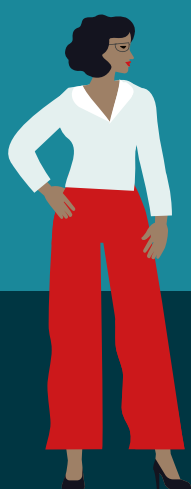
Ensure you understand the benefits of inclusive leadership for you and your team. Inclusive leadership offers tested and proven tools and techniques to maximize your team's potential. Advance and CCDI have respective educational offers available.

Actively sponsor meritorious talents from an underrepresented talent pool.

Support promising talents – also from an atypical or underrepresented group – in succeeding with their development plans. Allow your diverse talents to showcase their skills, voice their opinions, and get a fair shot at promotions. Open up opportunities for them to lead high-visibility projects, take the stage at management meetings and key public events, and credit their contributions whenever possible.

Exchange with peers – find inspiration across company and industry borders!

Building an inclusive meritocracy and bringing it to life is an ongoing endeavor as notions of what constitutes merit change over time. Yet, as much as merit does not have to be the same forever and for everyone, it does have to be clearly defined and transparent. Regular cross-company exchange among peers is an ideal way to keep on top of the game. Advance and CCDI offer various platforms for peer-level exchange, including the annual Advance CEO breakfast, the regular "Best Practice Exchange" roundtables and many other platforms for cross-company exchange.



TAKE THE MERITOCRACY CHECK [HERE](#)

Find out how meritocratic your organization is today and where to start to raise the bar!

JOIN THE MOVEMENT!

– Together, we #advance faster!

Advance and the University of St. Gallen continuously cooperate to develop insights and resources to support companies in creating an inclusive workplace, making the most of their talent pool, and leveraging the power of gender equality in business.

Find valuable in-depth guidance in the full version of the Gender Intelligence Report, and check out the rich selection of Advance member companies' best practices.

Explore the Advance program, which includes cross-company C-level exchanges, leadership trainings, skillbuilding workshops, best practice exchanges, a mentoring program, and many more membership benefits.

Consider participating in the HSG Diversity Benchmarking for deeper in-company analysis and cross-company comparison.

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