INCLUSIVE ADVANTAGE

Socioeconomic Status Affects the Workplace, Too. Here’s How to Make Sure Everyone Succeeds.

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In the race to attract top talent, an inclusive workplace offers a competitive edge. But one group often goes unnoticed: individuals who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In a BCG survey of nearly 28,000 employees in 16 countries, we found that employees from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds report the lowest sense of workplace belonging. And this disparity persists even when they rise to senior leadership.

But there are powerful business incentives to address it. When an inclusion gap persists, companies leave untapped potential on the table: people whose resilience, motivation, and loyalty can translate into stronger performance and retention. The companies that recognize and nurture this untapped talent stand to gain a true competitive edge. What's more, greater workplace inclusion benefits other employees, regardless of their background, leading to higher job satisfaction, stronger engagement, and reduced attrition.

In this article, we quantify the inclusion gap for this cohort, explore key barriers faced by this often-overlooked group, and offer concrete actions that companies can take to unlock the full potential of talent from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

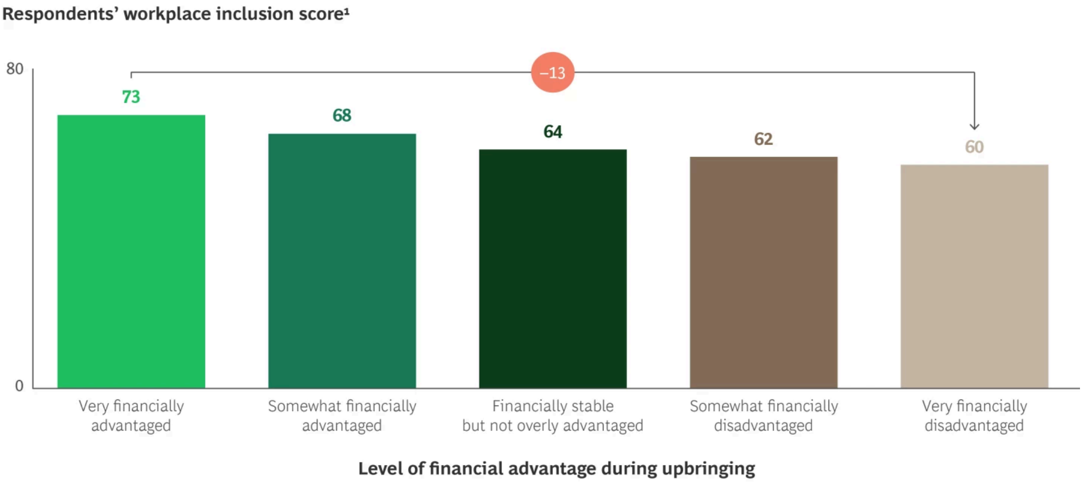
An Overlooked Demographic

BCG's workplace inclusion tool allows us to precisely quantify the experience of employees who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The results are clear.

People who grew up financially disadvantaged feel the least included at work. In our survey, socioeconomic status (SES) was gauged by asking employees this question: How financially comfortable were you during your upbringing? On average, those who said they grew up very financially disadvantaged have an inclusion score that is 13 points lower than those who said they grew up very financially advantaged. (See Exhibit 1.) In all the countries surveyed, the difference ranges from 8 to 16 points. This gap holds true for both desk-based and nondesk-based employees. (See the sidebar "About Our Research.")

EXHIBIT 1

People from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds Feel Less Included in the Workforce



Source: BCG's workplace inclusion survey, 2024.
¹Inclusion score ranges from 0 to 100.

— About Our Research

BCG's research on workplace inclusion is based on survey responses from 27,800 employees across 16 countries (Australia, Brazil, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Norway, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US) and 19 industries (including construction, education, health care, industrial goods, public sector financial services, retail, technology, and transportation and logistics).

Using our inclusion tool, we defined workplace inclusion as employees feeling valued and respected; believing their perspectives matter; feeling happy, motivated, and like they belong; and feeling that their mental and physical well-being is supported. BCG's index scores inclusion on a scale of 0 to 100 using a rigorous statistical model. We found that when done right, inclusion improved outcomes across all groups in our study—regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, or socioeconomic background.

This article also draws upon the experiences of BCG employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds and is authored by leaders of BCG's local SES-focused employee resource groups in Australia and New Zealand, Central Europe, and the UK.

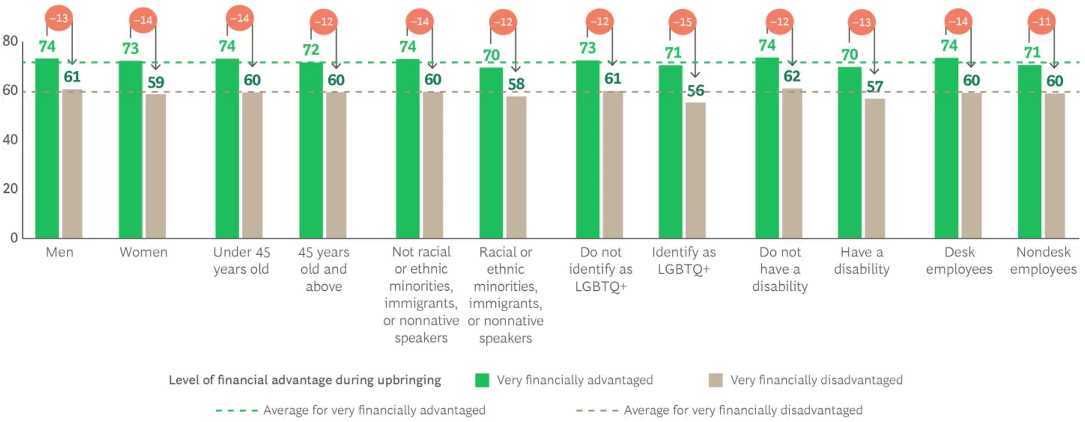
While our survey language focused specifically on financial background, it is important to acknowledge that SES encompasses a person's experiences of wealth, income, education, occupation, and the occupations of their family and social circle. Low socioeconomic status can also intersect with race and ethnicity in ways that compound its negative effects on an employee's sense of inclusion at work.

The inclusion gap holds true across the demographic groups in our survey. (See Exhibit 2.) Socioeconomic background remains one of the least visible yet most consequential influences on how included people feel at work. The gap in inclusion between those from very advantaged and very disadvantaged financial backgrounds underscores why organizations should widen their focus to include this critical dimension.

EXHIBIT 2

A Low Socioeconomic Background Is a Significant Barrier to Inclusion

Respondents' workplace inclusion score[1]



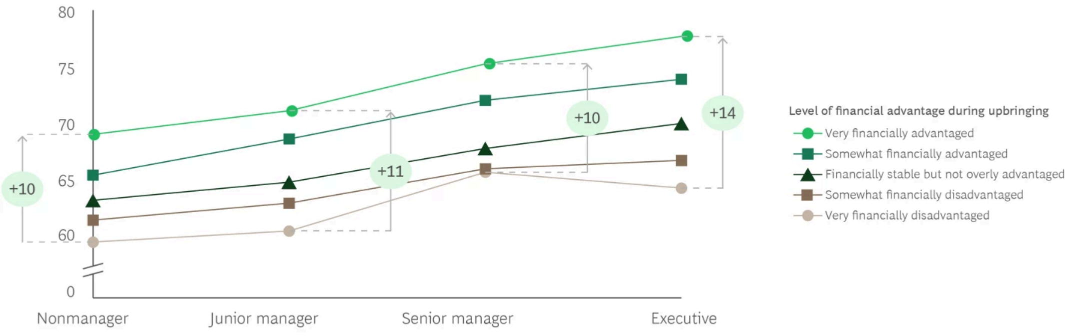
Source: BCG's workplace inclusion survey, 2024.
[1]Inclusion score ranges from 0 to 100.

As people from low socioeconomic backgrounds rise through the ranks, the inclusion gap widens. In every role, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds have inclusion scores that are 10 to 14 points lower than their peers who grew up very financially advantaged. While a sense of inclusion for most employees tends to improve with seniority, the gap for employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds persists and even increases at the senior manager level. This widening leaves them at a continuing disadvantage that career advancement doesn't close. (See Exhibit 3.)

EXHIBIT 3

Across Roles, Cohorts from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds Perceive the Lowest Inclusion, and the Gap Widens with Seniority

Respondents' workplace inclusion score¹



Respondents' role

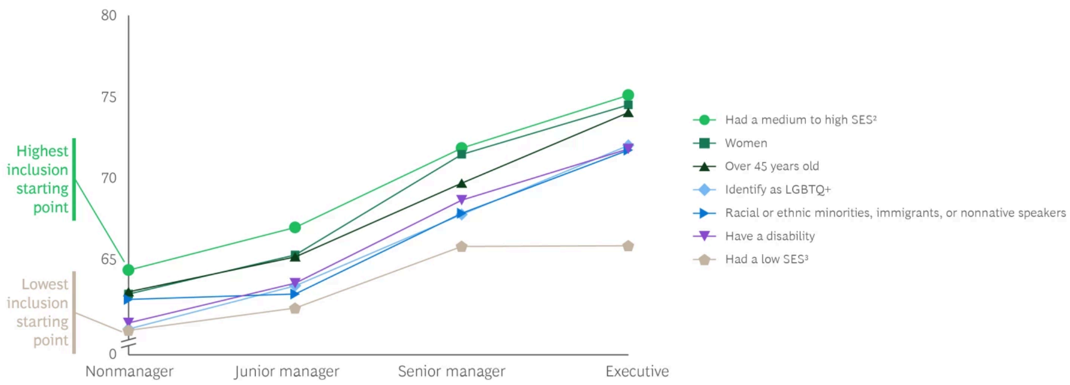
Source: BCG's workplace inclusion survey, 2024.
Note: Thirty-one executives answered that they were very financially disadvantaged, a smaller sample size, and should be interpreted as directional insight.
¹Inclusion score ranges from 0 to 100.

The same cannot be said for other underrepresented groups, such as women and racial or ethnic minorities. By and large, these employees feel a greater sense of inclusion as they advance. In contrast, employees who grew up economically disadvantaged start with the lowest sense of belonging, see the least improvement over time, and remain the least included even at senior levels. (See Exhibit 4.)

EXHIBIT 4

Among Underrepresented Groups, Employees with a Low Socioeconomic Status Maintain the Lowest Levels of Inclusion

Respondents' workplace inclusion score¹



Respondents' role level

Source: BCG's workplace inclusion survey, 2024.
Note: SES = socioeconomic status.
¹Inclusion score ranges from 0 to 100.
²Respondents who reported being financially advantaged or financially stable in their upbringing.
³Respondents who reported being financially disadvantaged in their upbringing.

Key Factors Driving Lower Levels of Inclusion

Employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds face compounding challenges throughout their careers because they continually bump up against the class ceiling. (See Exhibit 5.)

EXHIBIT 5

Many Factors Drive Lower Levels of Inclusion Throughout Employees' Careers

	Journey to recruitment	Hiring	Advancement
Not feeling a sense of connection and belonging	• A lack of guidance and information to identify education, employment, and extracurricular opportunities • Societal pressures to stay within one's socioeconomic group	• Limited personal and professional networks that open doors to job opportunities and build the skills needed to succeed in interviews	• Difficulty building and sustaining networks • Pressure to constantly prove competence or conceal parts of one's background to fit in
Not understanding the strategies for success	• A tendency to follow familiar education and career paths rather than choose higher-paying alternatives	• Limited knowledge of job roles and pathways and the unwritten rules of hiring	• Fewer mentors to help navigate unwritten workplace norms • Struggling to adapt as seniority and expectations rise
Unconscious bias from other professionals	• Missed opportunities at career events due to indicators of a low socioeconomic background, such as clothing or home address	• Potentially perceived as less capable based on address or appearance	• Possibly encountering bias from colleagues based on perceived socioeconomic markers and lifestyle differences
Financial constraints	• Less time for study and extracurricular activities because of the need to work • Limited access to quality education • Unable to take unpaid internships	• Unable to take roles with long hours, travel, or costly locations due to current housing situation or family responsibilities	• Less willing to take risks because of the higher consequences of failure • Heightened pressure to succeed when family members depend on their financial support • Limited financial literacy to invest, save, and manage money effectively

Sources: Expert interviews; BCG analysis.

Early on, individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have less access to the experiences that employers value, such as participating in extracurricular activities, attending elite educational institutions, and taking unpaid internships, limiting their exposure to opportunity from the outset.

With limited access to professional networks, individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds don't have as many connections who can make job referrals, offer career guidance, or support them in seeking promotions. Mentorship is especially critical, as these individuals may be more hesitant to pursue advancement and often lack exposure to the unwritten rules of hiring: how to present themselves, communicate effectively in interviews, or navigate the application process. These challenges are often made worse by interviewers' or managers' assumptions based on biases about a person's appearance, educational background, or home address—which can significantly impact hiring and promotion decisions.

After entering the workforce, employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds often face an uphill climb. They are less likely to have mentors who can help navigate unspoken expectations in the workplace, and many feel pressure to downplay their background in order to fit in. At the same time, financial constraints may limit an employee's ability to relocate and make it harder to justify taking career risks.

Throughout their careers, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds report significantly fewer opportunities for professional growth. In comparison with their peers, our survey shows that employees from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are 38% less likely to feel they benefited from personal and professional networks, 30% less likely to develop soft skills, and 24% less likely to feel comfortable taking risks. What's more, only 20% of those who grew up very financially disadvantaged said that they can be their authentic self at work—while 43% from financially advantaged backgrounds felt similarly.

This presents an inefficiency in the workplace—an uneven playing field that leaves capable individuals questioning whether they belong and, ultimately, prevents organizations from harnessing the full potential of resilient, motivated talent.

The Benefits of Closing the Inclusion Gap

A financially disadvantaged upbringing can instill powerful strengths, and companies have much to gain by enabling employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds to succeed and show up as their authentic selves. BCG research shows that employees who feel free to be their authentic selves at work are happier, more engaged, more likely to feel heard, and nearly 2.4 times less likely to leave.

However, low levels of workplace inclusion often prevent these employees from reaching their full potential. Across every dimension of the inclusion experience, employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds report satisfaction levels that are 7 to 12 percentage points lower than their more affluent peers. The widest gaps appear in daily interactions with management and in feedback, promotion, and career advancement processes. The smallest gap is in daily interactions with coworkers, suggesting that while peer relationships may feel inclusive, the broader system and leadership engagement are falling short.

How to Unlock Employees' Full Potential

Organizations can explicitly recognize SES as a critical dimension of their inclusion strategies. The good news is that meaningful progress on SES inclusion often requires minimal additional investment and can build on practices already in place. Here's how organizations can embed SES inclusion across the employee life cycle.

Demonstrate leadership's commitment to SES inclusion.

- **Integrate the SES dimension into the inclusion framework.** Give SES the same level of attention and priority as other inclusion pillars, such as race, gender, and disability.
- **Appoint champions.** Assign senior leaders to take ownership of this agenda—ideally individuals who also grew up financially disadvantaged.
- **Communicate.** Clearly articulate the commitment to being more inclusive of individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Rethink hiring to attract and fairly assess high-potential candidates from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

- **Aim to attract a broader pool of candidates.** Partner with a variety of universities for on-campus recruiting and clearly state in job postings that applicants from all socioeconomic backgrounds are encouraged to apply. Strive to make interviews and internships more accessible by offering flexible times and locations and reducing the hurdles tied to travel or scheduling.
- **Design a bias-free recruitment and selection process.** Equip recruiters and hiring managers to recognize and counter common socioeconomic biases. De-emphasize signals that may reflect privilege more than potential, such as elite internships or educational pedigree, since these opportunities are often inaccessible to individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Instead, recognize the resilience, skills, and work ethic shown by candidates who balance work responsibilities alongside their education.
- **Create a welcoming experience for prospective employees.** Ensure that every stage of the recruitment process is inclusive of individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Involve interviewers with similar experiences, design recruitment events that are accessible and relatable to a wide variety of social backgrounds, and offer candidates a buddy who shares a similar background.

Remove barriers and put support systems in place to promote the inclusion of employees from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

- **Provide new hires with information that levels the playing field.** Clearly communicate workplace norms, expectations, and tips for success, including those that are often assumed to be common knowledge. This could include a training session on unspoken rules such as workplace culture, dress codes, and professional etiquette, ideally led by individuals from financially disadvantaged backgrounds who can share their own history, challenges, and advice.

- **Build employee networks and support systems.** Create and fund affinity groups where employees from all backgrounds, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, can connect, share experiences, and access resources. To lower barriers, offer flexible participation options, including online forums that allow for anonymity when appropriate. These groups can help in many ways, such as by mentoring, supporting recruitment, fostering a sense of belonging, improving retention, and raising awareness about the impact of SES in the workplace. Because employees' socioeconomic background is often hidden, visible role models are essential. When leaders share their own stories, they normalize socioeconomic diversity and remind junior employees that career success is not limited to any single background.

- **Offer SES-focused inclusion training.** Educate employees about the unique challenges faced by those from low socioeconomic backgrounds in order to promote awareness, allyship, and more inclusive day-to-day interactions.

These are not just HR initiatives—they are strategic levers that can fuel innovation, reduce attrition, and unlock untapped market and talent potential. By fostering inclusion, removing structural barriers, and providing support throughout the employee journey, companies can unlock the full potential of a resilient, motivated talent pool eager to contribute and thrive.

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