

# Identity Insights: Insights Into Action

VA



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Experience Office

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Human Resources and Administration  
Operations, Security and Preparedness

*Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion*

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# ***Project Background***

## Identity Insights Background

In 2021, the Veterans Experience Office's (VEO) Employee Experience & Organizational Management Directorate (EXOM) and the Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion (ORMDI) partnered to launch **Identity Insights**, an **intersectional approach to improve employee experience (EX)**.

The project sought to achieve two experiential research objectives:

- Identify pain points that employees attribute to one or more of the identities that they hold
- Gain insight into focus areas – thematic and intersectional – for VA to conduct further exploration and service design to improve EX

# Identity Group Selection

Conducted over the course of two phases, Identity Insights engaged individuals from seventeen identity groups.

## PHASE I (SEPTEMBER 2021 – JUNE 2022)

Phase I engaged seven identity groups – American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN); Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI); Black/African American; Hispanic; Individuals with Disabilities (IWD); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+ (LGBTQ+), and Women – that have either been historically underrepresented and/or faced discrimination and bias in the workplace. These seven identity groups directly align with existing Special Emphasis Programs at VA. The eighth group, individuals born between 1946 and 1964 (Baby Boomers), was selected as the first cohort of an EX generational analysis to be expanded upon in Phase II.

## PHASE II (SEPTEMBER 2022 – MAY 2023)

Phase II engaged an additional eight identity groups. Individuals born between 1965 and 1980 (Generation X), individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (Millennial), and individuals born between 1997 and 2005 (Generation Z) were selected to complete the generational analysis. The additional five identity groups – Gender Non-Conforming (GNC), *Middle Eastern and North African\** (MENA), Religious / Non-religious, employees who are Veterans, and White – represent protected classes. Additionally, a deep dive into employees who identify as Jewish was selected to align with the White House priority to counter antisemitism.

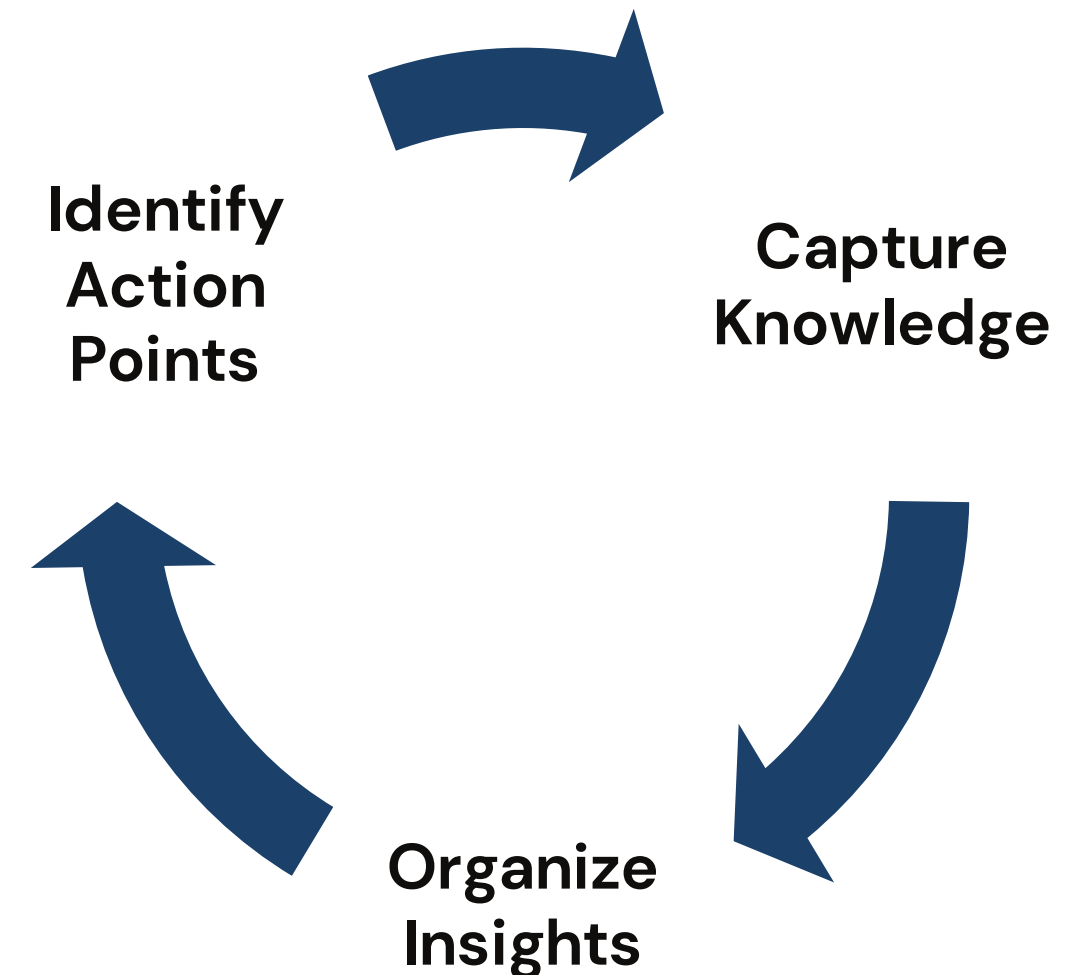
\*The project team was unable to meet the data saturation point for the MENA identity group. More information on the data saturation point and data from the Identity Insights: Phase II Cumulative Report can be found in the [findings report](#).

# Data Collection

Grounded in human-centered design (HCD) best practices, the project team engaged VA employees through interviews and focus groups to **identify pain points, needs, and opportunities for VA to address impediments to belonging and improve EX at VA.\***

Pain points were:

- Recorded in each interview and focus group;
- Coded and tabulated according to identity attribution and alignment with the [EX Relationship Framework](#); and
- Examined through an intersectional lens that built cumulatively throughout the project.



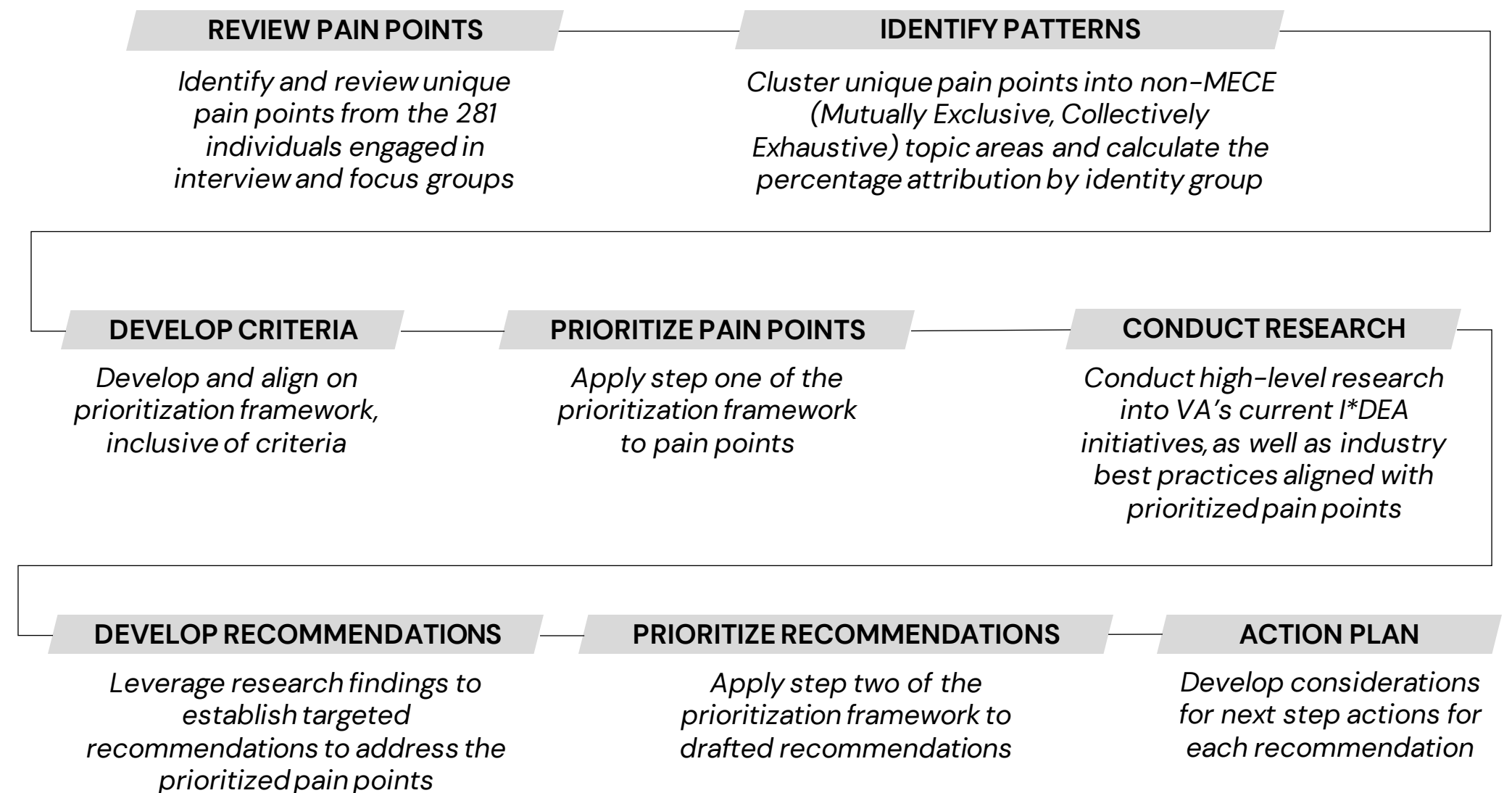
*\*Sign-up and participation in the project was completely voluntary. All participants gave consent to participate, understanding that the findings will be anonymous (ensuring the removal of all identifying information) but not confidential (enabling stories to be shared in the reporting process).*

***Recommendations***  
***Methodology***

# Recommendations Methodology

While intended to be a research rather than solutioning project, Identity Insights findings provide directionality in terms of where VA can initially turn **insights into action** and deploy resources to improve EX.

Recommendations for next step actions were established through a multi-step methodology.





# Review Pain Points and Identify Patterns

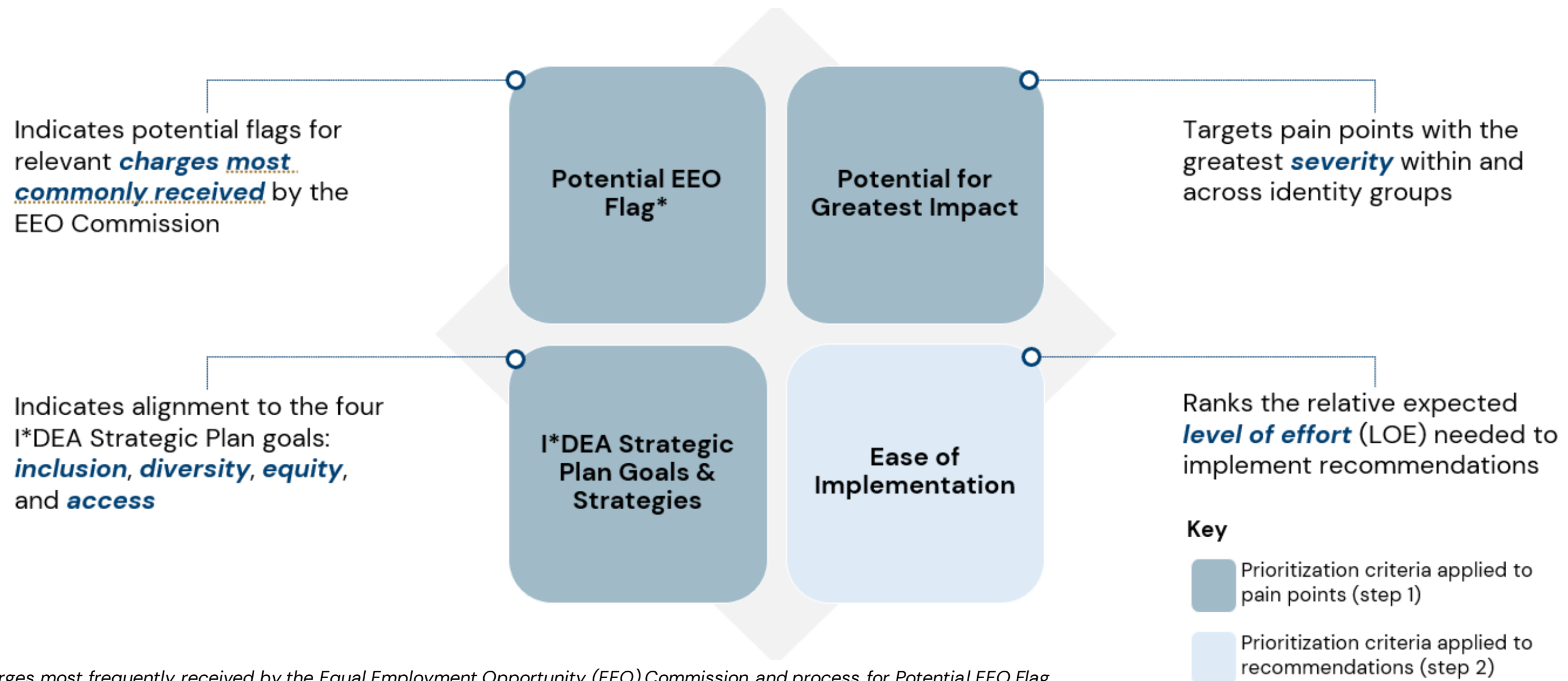
Thirty-nine (39) unique pain points were included in the analysis from a total dataset of ~350 unique pain points.

## *Digging deeper...*

- **Thirty-five** unique pain points met the 20% attribution threshold
- **Four** unique pain points met the 10% attribution threshold
  - Superior/Supervisor: Denied adequate accommodations (self or colleague) (IWD: 16%)
  - Feel lack of support based on identity (IWD: 14%)
  - Feel undervalued in their position (Boomer: 11%; IWD: 10%)
  - Culture: Insufficient military culture (Veteran: 10%)
- **Two** unique pain points rose to the top within an identity group but did not meet the inclusion criteria and are not represented
  - Cultural/Religious beliefs do not align with office practices (Religious: 4%)
  - Lack of identity-based celebrations/activities/recognitions (Religious: 4%)
- **Three** identity groups had no pain points meeting the inclusion criteria
  - Religious (not including Jewish) (81 Participants)
  - White (125 Participants)
  - Generation X (131 Participants)

# Develop Criteria for Prioritization Framework

The prioritization framework identified four key areas for analyzing and prioritizing the pain points that were applied in two steps. Step one identified pain points that were potential EEO Flags, aligned to I\*DEA Strategic Plan Goals & Strategies, and had the greatest potential for impact. Step two ranked the anticipated level of effort for each recommendation.



\* Data showing charges most frequently received by the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Commission and process for Potential EEO Flag identification can be found [here](#).

# Step One of the Prioritization Framework

In order to have the potential for greatest impact, pain points meeting / exceeding the 20% attribution rate across or within identity groups were included for consideration. Additionally, To increase representation across identity groups, for identity groups where no pain points met the 20% threshold, the inclusion criteria was dropped to a 10% attribution rate.

| Step 1: Prioritization of Pain Points   |   |         |
|---|---|---------|
| Potential EEO Flag                      |   |         |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point indicate <b>retaliatory behavior</b> took place?  | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point indicate <b>disability discrimination</b> and / or discrimination affecting the Any or IWD identity groups?   | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point indicate <b>race discrimination</b> and / or discrimination affecting Any, AIAN, AAPI, Black/AA, MENA, or White identity groups?  | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point indicate <b>sex discrimination</b> and / or discrimination affecting Any, Woman, LGBTQ+, or GNC identity groups?  | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point indicate <b>age discrimination</b> and / or discrimination affecting Any, Millennial, Gen X, or Baby Boomer identity groups?  | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point indicate <b>religious discrimination</b> and / or discrimination affecting Any, Religious, Non-religious, or Jewish identity groups?  | Yes (1) |
| I*DEA Strategic Plan Goals & Strategies |   |         |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point relate to <b>inclusion</b> (i.e., ensuring VA's work environment is free from all discrimination, retribution, or harassment and all employees feel safe and empowered to be their authentic selves)? | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point relate to <b>diversity</b> (i.e., building a diverse, high-performing VA workforce reflective of all segments of society and valuing all aspects of human diversity)?                                 | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point relate to <b>equity</b> (i.e., eliminating barriers to EEO at all levels and in all occupations to advance equity for VA employees)?  | Yes (1) |
| No (0)                                  | Does the pain point relate to <b>access</b> (i.e., instituting physical or technological solutions to empower all employees to advance the VA's mission)?   | Yes (1) |

Deprioritize

PRIORITIZATION CRITERIA

Prioritize

# Pain Point Prioritization in Action

After pain points were filtered to those meeting / exceeding the attribution rate inclusion criteria, they were prioritized based on the aforementioned criteria.

AS OF 5/10/2023

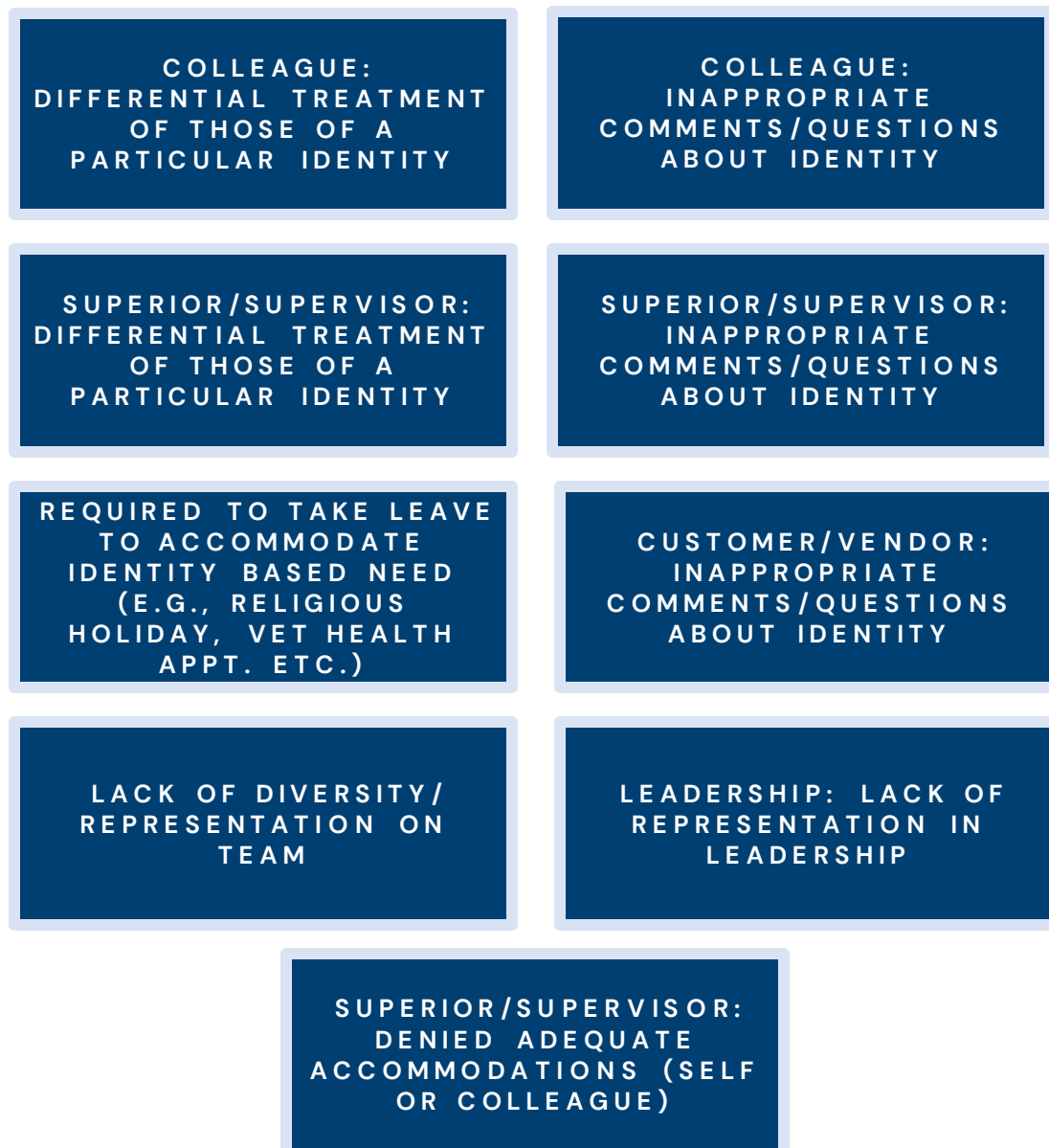
| IDENTITY INSIGHTS: PAIN POINT PRIORITIZATION   |  |  |                           |                     |                    |                    |                          |                                       |           |        |               |                           |   |             |                    |
|--|--|--|---------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|--------|---------------|---------------------------|---|-------------|--------------------|
| Pain Point Name  | Identity Groups Meeting Inclusion Criteria | Potential EEO Flag Discrimination Type |                           |                     |                    |                    |                          | I*DEA Strategic Plan Goals & Strategy |           |        |               | Total Potential EEO Flags | Total I*DEA Strategic Plan Goal Alignment | GRAND TOTAL | PRIORITIZE D (Y/N) |
|  |  | Retaliatory Behavior                   | Disability Discrimination | Race Discrimination | Sex Discrimination | Age Discrimination | Religious Discrimination | Inclusion                             | Diversity | Equity | Accessibility |                           |   |             |                    |
| Colleague: Different treatment of those of a particular identity   | Any, Black/AA                              | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 5                         | 3   | 8           | Y                  |
| Lack of diversity/representation on team   | Any, AAPI, Black/AA, GNC, Hispanic         | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 5                         | 3   | 8           | Y                  |
| Leadership: Lack of representation in Leadership   | Any, AAPI, Black/AA, GNC, Woman            | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 5                         | 3   | 8           | Y                  |
| Superior/Supervisor: Differential treatment of those of a particular identity                              | Any, Black/AA, IWD, Woman                  | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 5                         | 3   | 8           | Y                  |
| Colleague: Inappropriate comments/questions about identity   | Any, Black/AA, GNC, Hispanic, IWD, LGBTQ+  | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 0      | 0             | 5                         | 2   | 7           | Y                  |
| Customer/Vendor: Inappropriate comment/question about identity   | Any, GNC, Hispanic, LGBTQ+                 | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 0      | 0             | 5                         | 2   | 7           | Y                  |
| Superior/Supervisor: Inappropriate comment/question about identity   | Any, Black/AA, IWD                         | 0                                      | 1                         | 1                   | 1                  | 1                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 0      | 0             | 5                         | 2   | 7           | Y                  |
| Superior/Supervisor: Denied adequate accommodations (self or colleague)                                    | IWD  | 0                                      | 1                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 0                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 1             | 1                         | 4   | 5           | Y                  |
| Required to take leave to accommodate identity-based need (e.g., religious holiday, vet health appt. etc.) | Jewish                                     | 0                                      | 0                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 1                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 1                         | 3   | 4           | Y                  |
| Colleague: Comments/actions unsupportive of I*DEA efforts  | GNC  | 0                                      | 0                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 0                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 0                         | 3   | 3           | Y                  |
| Experience and knowledge are unrecognized and accepted   | Gen Z                                      | 0                                      | 0                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 0                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 0                         | 3   | 3           | Y                  |
| Feel lack of Support based on identity   | IWD  | 0                                      | 0                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 0                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 0                         | 3   | 3           | Y                  |
| Identity is explicitly perceived as impediment to career advancement                                       | Any, AAPI, Black/AA, IWD, Boomer           | 0                                      | 0                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 0                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 0                         | 3   | 3           | Y                  |
| Lack of leadership participation in and/or advocating for I*DEA work                                       | GNC  | 0                                      | 0                         | 0                   | 0                  | 0                  | 0                        | 1                                     | 1         | 1      | 0             | 0                         | 3   | 3           | Y                  |

# Prioritized Pain Points: A Clustered Approach

Pain points were prioritized based on a Clustered approach, detailed below, and drove development of recommendations.

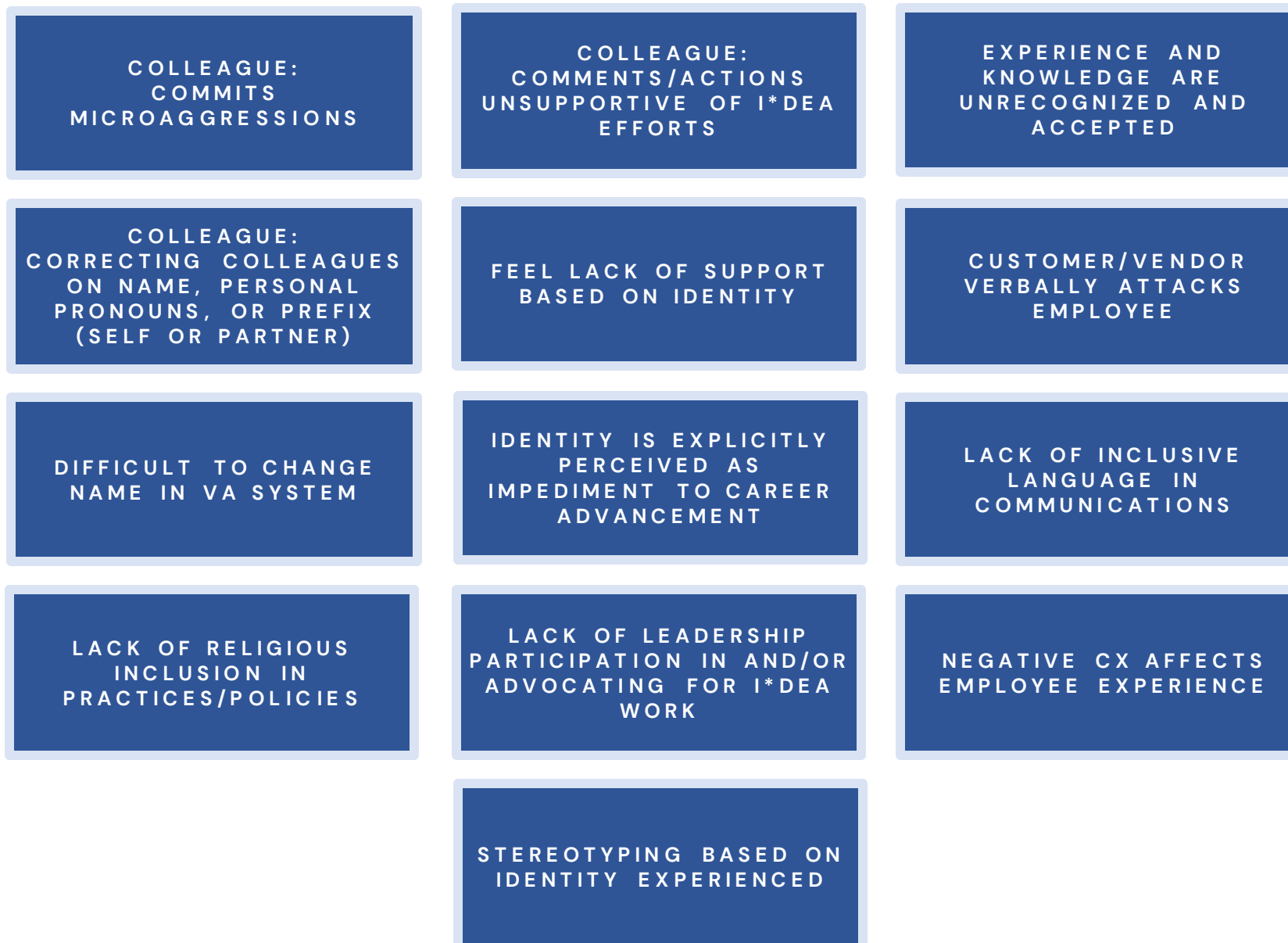
## Cluster 1:

Rose to the top across all three pain point prioritization criteria (i.e., met the attribution rate and 4+ criteria across Potential EEO Flags & I\*DEA Goals & Strategies)



## Cluster 2:

Pain points that were not captured in Cluster 1, but met the attribution rate and demonstrated alignment to either 1+ Potential EEO Flags or 3+ I\*DEA Goals & Strategies



# Conduct Research and Develop Recommendations

Based on the prioritized pain points and industry best practices, the project team has developed twelve high level recommendations for VA to consider. Each recommendation details industry insights, considerations for action, anticipated level of effort, and potential impact. The colors of the recommendations align with the anticipated level of effort.

## Launch “Authentically Me” Communications Campaign

Develop and launch a social and behavior change communications campaign that leverages the power of positive storytelling to provide perspective into employees’ lives – offering visibility into the interplay between identity and employee experience as a means of strengthening awareness and understanding and building empathy. The campaign should include mixed media content (e.g., videos, written stories, etc.) paired with a toolkit for offices and teams to effectively navigate voluntary conversations as part of their I\*DEA work.

## Develop an Employee Toolkit for Upstander Intervention

Build a streamlined escalation pathway for employees to leverage in the event of mistreatment including reporting I\*DEA issues, harassment, and general concerns with conduct in the workplace. This could include not only challenges with colleagues and superiors / supervisors, but also the complex challenges at the intersection of employee and customer experience (e.g., *negative encounters employees have with customers, or the impacts of negative customer experiences on employees such as health practitioners providing additional coverage when LGBTQ+ Veterans are denied care by a colleague*).

## Create Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Create spaces for employees of specific identity groups to come together with their peers for support, to connect on their shared experiences, and to advance VA’s I\*DEA efforts through support of intra-ERG innovation, resource sharing, and engagement. Establish opportunities to promote awareness of available ERGs, commit engaged executive sponsors, and provide time and funding to enable ERGs to meaningfully bring employees together and measure the effectiveness of each group for continuous improvement.

## Expand and Incentivize Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

Increase targeted recruitment and engagement of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups for mentorship and sponsorship programs at VA to expand professional networks and increase career opportunities for employees in the short-term and increase diversity composition of future VA leaders.

## Conduct an EX / CX Intersections Deep Dive

Launch a follow-on mixed-methods (survey and HCD interviews and/or focus groups) research project to strengthen understanding of the experiences of employees who are eligible to receive VA benefits and develop participant-centered solutioning recommendations for VA consideration.

## Predict and Alleviate Pain Points Using Data Science

Through the input of employee demographic information and predictive analytics, VA can predict the most likely to occur identity-attributed pain points for a specific employee. Pairing these insights with prescriptive analytics can enable VA to alleviate pain points unique to an employee. VA should consider using these analytical approaches to strengthen the experience of employees beginning during their onboarding phase with the Department and/or in a new role.

# Conduct Research and Develop Recommendations

## Update VA's Human Resources Database

Currently, the HR Smart system used by VA to track all personnel demographics and workplace attributes is structured in a way that limits employees' expression of their whole, authentic identities. The three most pressing data fields that would benefit from a redesign as having emerged from the Identity Insights project include "gender," "sexual orientation," and "race," as these categories either do not exist or do not exhaustively provide inclusive options for employees to holistically and accurately self-identify.

## Pilot Rotational and Cross-Training Programs

Introduce short-term rotational exchange or cross-training programs to enable employees to experience diverse team environments and working styles and to expand VA-sponsored professional development opportunities available to staff. These programs differ from formal detail assignments as they are shorter in duration and grounded in job shadowing to help staff gain exposure to a broader network and experience working in different issue areas in the VA.

## Develop and Implement Inclusive Communications Guidelines

Draft guidelines focused on the incorporation of inclusive language in day-to-day interactions and formal operations, conduct a VA-wide audit of language and terms used in existing written resources and documents, and revise language in accordance with the guidelines.

## Incorporate "Blinded" Processes for Internal Hires and Promotions

Add "blinded" (i.e., de-identified) components to VA's internal advancement and leadership development processes, such as removing demographic identifiers and names, to help mitigate the effects of unconscious biases and ensure more equitable treatment of employees regardless of identity.

## Increase Options for Employees to Take Religious Time Off

While the VA Compensatory Time Off for Religious Observances 2020 Policy expanded opportunities for employees to take time off, there is an opportunity to both elevate awareness about the policy and to expand options for employees to take time during observance days to maximize inclusion across VA roles.

## Update Existing Systems to Allow Naming Customization

Coordinate with the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) and HRA/OSP to put systems in place that allow for an employee's preferred name and personal pronouns as well as name pronunciation to display in all visible platforms and on relevant forms.

# Step Two of the Prioritization Framework

Based on an understanding of VA's current initiatives and resources (e.g., time, money), each recommendation has details the anticipated level of effort, as defined below.

| Step 2: Prioritization of Recommendations   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Anticipated Level of Effort   |  |  |
| <b>Easy:</b> Low level of resources are needed to implement; there is a significant opportunity to build on ongoing efforts; initial implementation can reasonably be expected within 6-9 months. | <b>Moderate:</b> Some additional resources are needed to implement; there is a limited ability to build on ongoing efforts; initial implementation is expected to take 9-18 months | <b>Hard:</b> Significant additional resources are needed to implement; there is little to no ability to build on existing work (i.e., net new area of effort); initial implementation is expected to take 18+ months |



***Recommendations &  
Considerations for Action***

# Recommendations and Pain Points Crosswalk

Informed by industry-leading practices, the project team developed 12 targeted recommendations in response to the 22 prioritized pain points.

This crosswalk depicts how prioritized pain points align with each recommendation.

The chart can be reviewed in further detail [here](#).

| RECOMMENDATIONS<br><i>Sorted by Level of Effort</i> | Launch "Authentically Me" Communications Campaign  | Develop an Employee Toolkit for Upstander Intervention | Create Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) | Expand and Incentivize Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs | Conduct an EX / CX Intersections Deep Dive | Predict and Alleviate Pain Points Using Data Science | Update VA's Human Resources Database | Pilot Rotational & Cross-Training Programs | Develop and Implement Inclusive Communications Guidelines | Incorporate "Blinded" Processes or Internal Hires and Promotions | Increase Options for Employees to Take Religious Time Off | Update Existing Systems to Allow Naming Customization |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| Cluster 1 Pain Points                               | Colleague: differential treatment of those of a particular identity                      |  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Superior differential treatment of those of a particular identity                        | ✓  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Required to take leave to accommodate identity-based need                                |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  | ✓   |   |  |
|   | Lack of diversity / representation on team   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      | ✓  |   | ✓  |   |   |  |
|   | Superior denied adequate accommodations (self or colleague)                              |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Colleague: inappropriate comments/questions about identity                               | ✓  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Superior inappropriate comments/questions about identity                                 |  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Customer/vendor: inappropriate comments/questions about identity                         | ✓  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Leadership: lack of representation in leadership   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      | ✓  |   | ✓  |   |   |  |
|   | Colleague: commits microaggressions  | ✓  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  | ✓   |  |   |   |  |
| Cluster 2 Pain Points                               | Colleague: correcting colleagues on name, personal pronouns, or prefix (self or partner) |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  | ✓   |  |   | ✓   |  |
|   | Difficult to change name in VA system  |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   | ✓   |  |
|   | Lack of religious inclusion in practices/policies  |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  | ✓   |   |  |
|   | Stereotyping based on identity experienced   | ✓  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Colleague: comments/actions unsupportive of I'DEA efforts                                |  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Feel lack of support based on identity   |  |  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Identity is explicitly perceived as impediment to career advancement                     |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   | ✓  |   |   |  |
|   | Lack of leadership participation in and/or advocating for I'DEA work                     |  |  |  | ✓  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Negative CX affects employee experience  |  | ✓                                      |  |  | ✓  | ✓                                    |  |   |  |   |   |  |
|   | Experience and knowledge are unrecognized and accepted                                   |  |  |  |  | ✓  | ✓                                    |  |   | ✓  |   |   |  |

# How to Read the Recommendations

**Recommendation**  
The title of the recommendation

**Considerations for Actions**  
Potential actions and steps to consider to operationalize the recommendation

## Launch “An Authentically Me” Communications Campaign

Develop and launch a social and behavior change communications campaign that leverages the power of positive storytelling to provide perspective into employees’ lives – offering visibility into the interplay between identity and employee experience as a means of strengthening awareness and understanding and building empathy. The campaign should include mixed media content (e.g., videos, written stories, etc.) paired with a toolkit for offices and teams to effectively navigate voluntary conversations as part of their I\*DEA work.

### INDUSTRY INSIGHT

Empathy is a powerful predictor of what we consider to be positive behaviors that benefit society, individuals, and relationships.<sup>1</sup> A study of 889 employees in the U.S. found that empathetic leaders foster greater productivity, bolster positive work experiences, and foster inclusion. Specifically, 50% of people with highly empathetic senior leaders report often or always experiencing inclusion at work, compared to only 17% of people with less empathetic senior leadership.<sup>23</sup>

One method of building empathy is through exposure to the lives of others – from spending time in another community to consuming diverse media and stories. Exposure is demonstrated to enable people to gain insight into the perspectives and lived experiences of others, building empathy that can ultimately decrease bias and spark deeper understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Storytelling is one method to build empathy and exposure, and it’s proven to be effective. In fact, a prominent global business school examined the power of story and found that when information is “presented as neutral statistics or facts,” individuals retain between 5% and 10% of the content as compared to a 60% to 70% retention rate when using a story.<sup>49</sup>

Harnessing storytelling as a means of building exposure and empathy, using behavior change communication (BCC) principles and a positive psychology approach, will enable VA to release content that meets employees where they are, emphasizes talent and fulfillment, rather than barriers and negative emotions, and promotes positive behaviors (caring, connecting, committing, communicating, and celebrating).<sup>36</sup>

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

EASY

Identify themes emerging from identity groups experiencing the greatest severity in pain points. Engage employees from these groups to participate in HCD sessions to ideate around positive shared experiences and stories aligned to this theme that could be built into content to strengthen awareness and understanding, and build empathy (e.g., Jewish participants identified pain points associated with taking leave for holidays. One content segment could include a day in the life of a Jewish employee taking time to attend Rosh Hashanah services.)

Develop mixed media content with employees who volunteer to share their stories.

Disseminate mixed media content paired with a discussion toolkit across the Department. Incorporate a feedback mechanism for the campaign to enable responsiveness to key themes that emerge.

### POTENTIAL IMPACT

Building awareness around the lived experiences of others through enterprise-wide communications as well as facilitated dialogue with voluntary participants will help to increase empathy and understanding across diverse groups. Furthermore, using storytelling as the conduit for this work may be more compelling than previous methods of mandatory trainings.

This recommendation will also build on the I\*DEA Task Force’s recommendation to “revamp VA’s communications strategy to appeal to and become representative of underserved communities.”<sup>3</sup>

### EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-Being



Work



Places

### Anticipated Level of Effort:

Depicts the predicted level of effort based on the following:

**Easy:** Limited resources are needed to implement; there is a significant opportunity to build on ongoing efforts; initial implementation can reasonably be expected within 9 months

**Moderate:** Some additional resources will be needed to implement; there is a limited ability to build on ongoing efforts; initial implementation is expected to take 9-18 months

**Hard:** Significant additional resources will be needed to implement; there is little to no ability to build on existing work (i.e., net new area of effort); initial implementation is expected to take 18+ months

### EX Tag

Tags highlighted align with the EX Relationships Framework

**Description**  
Detailed description of each recommendation

**Industry Insight**  
Industry study, use case, or example supporting the recommendation with external evidence



Identity Insights | Recommendations & Considerations for Action

28

### Potential Impact:

Describes the potential impact to the VA, the stakeholders, and ties in I\*DEA goals to the recommendation

# Launch An “Authentically Me” Communications Campaign

Develop and launch a social and behavior change communications (SBCC) campaign that leverages the power of positive storytelling to provide perspective into employees’ lives – offering visibility into the interplay between identity and EX as a means of strengthening awareness and understanding and building empathy. The campaign should include mixed media content (e.g., videos, written stories, etc.) paired with a toolkit for offices and teams to effectively navigate voluntary conversations as part of their I\*DEA work.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*Empathy is a powerful predictor of what we consider to be positive behaviors that benefit society, individuals, and relationships.<sup>1</sup> A study of 889 employees in the U.S. found that empathetic leaders foster greater productivity, bolster positive work experiences, and foster inclusion. Specifically, 50% of people with highly empathic senior leaders report often or always experiencing inclusion at work, compared to only 17% of people with less empathic senior leadership.<sup>23</sup>*

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*Harnessing storytelling as a means of building exposure and empathy, using behavior change communication (BCC) principles and a positive psychology approach, will enable VA to release content that meets employees where they are, emphasizes talent and fulfillment, rather than barriers and negative emotions, and promotes positive behaviors (caring, connecting, committing, communicating, and celebrating).<sup>36</sup>*

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION ■ EASY

- Identify themes emerging from identity groups experiencing the greatest severity in pain points. Engage employees from these groups to participate in HCD sessions to ideate around positive shared experiences and stories aligned to this theme that could be built into content to strengthen awareness and understanding, and build empathy (e.g., Jewish participants identified pain points associated with taking leave for holidays. One content segment could include a day in the life of a Jewish employee taking time to attend Rosh Hashanah services.)
- Develop mixed media content with employees who volunteer to share their stories.
- Disseminate mixed media content paired with a discussion toolkit across the Department. Incorporate a feedback mechanism for the campaign to enable responsiveness to key themes that emerge.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

Building awareness around the lived experiences of others through enterprise-wide communications as well as facilitated dialogue with voluntary participants will help to increase empathy and understanding across diverse groups. Furthermore, using storytelling as the conduit for this work may be more compelling than previous methods of mandatory trainings.

This recommendation will also build on the I\*DEA Task Force’s recommendation to “revamp VA’s communications strategy to appeal to and become representative of underserved communities.”<sup>3</sup>

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Develop an Employee Toolkit for Upstander Intervention\*

Build a toolkit for employees to leverage in the event of witnessing mistreatment of colleagues, vendors, and/or customers, including training resources; key information on harmful interactions and corresponding boundaries; tactics for responding (including scripts on what to say/do, as appropriate); and channels for reporting and escalating I\*DEA issues, harassment, and general concerns with conduct in the workplace.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

Research shows that bystanders to micro- and macroaggressions often do not intervene because they are afraid that they'll embarrass themselves or suffer negative consequences for doing so, or because they simply don't know how to respond.<sup>38</sup> This aligns with the most frequently cited pain point in the Identity Insights project: 43% of all employees interviewed cited feeling like they cannot, speak up, interject, and/or assert themselves.

Social psychology findings demonstrate that the roles witnesses play through their action or inaction can influence the way negative acts (e.g., bullying and harassment) are perceived and carried out. For this reason, witnesses have a tremendous opportunity to curb workplace micro- and macroaggressions.<sup>36</sup> Research also finds that employees who are the recipients of these aggressions are more likely to confide in witnesses who step in and respond than their supervisors.<sup>36</sup>

Equipping employees with the training, tools, and resources to address and respond to mistreatment in the workplace can empower them to act as upstanders instead of bystanders.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

EASY

❑ Train employees on upstander interventions strategies to empower team members to learn how to safely intervene in the moment of a difficult situation (i.e., Right to Be Training course suite, particularly "Bystander intervention 2.0: Conflict De-escalation," and "Conflict De-escalation in the Workplace").

❑ Create boundaries for what behaviors are unacceptable and the subsequent consequence of the behavior (i.e., the three-strike rule for customers or vendors who are consistently abusive to employees or have received multiple complaints or create a no tolerance policy for certain types of threats related to violence).

❑ Create a manager/supervisor escalation path<sup>26,27,28</sup> so that employees know who in their chain of command they should go to for specific reasons and provide step-by-step scripts or action plans for how to address concerns.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

Companies that promote a fairer, flexible, and transparent process for victims may be better equipped to both address deep-seated problems in their workplaces and lower the likelihood that they will be the targets of highly visible discrimination or harassment lawsuits.<sup>29</sup> Empowering employees to safely intervene will allow for greater accountability for their colleagues and a more socially responsible culture. Having a defined escalation path with defined consequences will make employees feel safe and valued, and set a standard of respect at VA.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

\* This recommendation could be conducted as a standalone series of activities or as elements of the SBCC "Authentically Me" campaign.

# Create Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Create spaces for employees of specific identity groups to come together with their peers for support, to connect on their shared experiences, and to advance VA's I\*DEA efforts through support of intra-ERG innovation, resource sharing, and engagement. Establish opportunities to promote awareness of available ERGs, commit engaged executive sponsors, and provide time and funding to enable ERGs to meaningfully bring employees together and measure the effectiveness of each group for continuous improvement.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

The VA currently has only one ERG, PRIDE VA, which was called out in the I\*DEA Strategic Plan 2022 as a "successful initiative / program." Creating additional ERGs would align to the Inclusion strategy: "Increase access to resource groups for Employees."<sup>4</sup>

A survey of 138 companies designed to research the structures, operations, and impact of ERGs found a strong correlation between diversity, equity, and inclusion (I\*DEA) and ERGs, with nearly all respondents reporting that ERGs boost company culture and champion I\*DEA initiatives.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, an industry leader identified that employees in effective ERGs cite higher positive inclusion scores in their organization than those who are not in ERGs.<sup>40</sup>



*Employee resource groups for people with special needs, for Asian Americans, for Hispanic individuals, etc., those can be a real pipeline towards fostering a much more inclusive environment... The trouble with creating these groups is you need champions at the agency director level. That's where the support is missing.*



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

EASY

- Access best practices, success areas, and learnings from the PRIDE VA ERG:
  - How has the ERG achieved its goals and objectives? What impediments has it experienced?
  - How have promotion, funding, and sponsorship needs been met?
  - How has participation impacted individuals' employee experience?
  - What has the group identified as its greatest successes to date? Learnings?
- Create the infrastructure and resources for identify groups and allies that show a strong interest in participating in an ERG to establish one, and continuously assess the need to create additional groups.
- Measure the effectiveness of the ERGs
  - ERG activities:** # of ERG events hosted (i.e., cultural, educational, etc.), average attendance at events
  - Employee engagement:** Satisfaction with ERG programming, % of participating in at least one ERG
  - Governance:** % of leaders sponsoring an ERG, percent of organizational budget that goes toward ERGs
  - EX KPIs (including Belonging, Trust, and Recommendation Score):** ERG demographic, ERG participants

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

Belonging to an ERG can help an employee feel that they can be authentic at work and derive more meaning and purpose from the work that they do. Within the workplace, ERG systems and infrastructure strengthen acceptance, camaraderie, and fairness across groups and help members build allyship. ERG's can also increase retention and attract underrepresented talent into an organization.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Expand and Incentivize Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

Increase targeted recruitment and engagement of historically marginalized and underrepresented groups for mentorship and sponsorship programs at VA to expand professional networks and increase career opportunities for employees in the short-term and increase diversity composition of future VA leaders.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*Mentoring programs make companies' managerial echelons significantly more diverse. On average they boost the representation of Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American women, and Hispanic and Asian-American men by 9% to 24%.<sup>13</sup>*

*Codified mentorship and sponsorship initiatives – and specifically those that target underrepresented communities – are critical. In fact, data shows that while white men tend to find mentors on their own, women and minorities more often need help from formal programs. A large academic business school dean discovered one such reason in their research on mentoring<sup>14</sup>: Women and minorities are often first to sign up for mentors, and while white male executives cite not feeling comfortable reaching out informally to young women and minority men, they are eager to mentor assigned protégés.*

*A second study found that “connecting employees of color with role models, mentors, and sponsors is one way that organizations can pursue identity safety, particularly when they lack a critical mass of minorities.”<sup>30</sup>*

## VA EMPLOYEE JOURNEY MAP ALIGNMENT

- “Navigating the need for a mentor” (Making Connections career stage)<sup>44</sup>
- “Seeking guidance from others” (Developing My Career career stage)<sup>44</sup>

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

■ EASY

- ❑ Expand mentorship and sponsorship programs by creating initiatives specifically targeted to engage historically marginalized and underrepresented groups. Within these initiatives, equip mentors and sponsors with resources and tools to enable them to most effectively support participants.
- ❑ Conduct specific targeted outreach to individuals from historically marginalized and underrepresented groups as well as those who can serve as liaisons to specific communities (e.g., SEPMs; office-level I\*DEA liaisons; ERG leaders).
- ❑ Incentivize, without mandating, manager and leader engagement in these mentorship and sponsorship initiatives by placing value on participation in I\*DEA initiatives in performance evaluations.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

The implementation of mentorship and sponsorship programs that specifically target historically marginalized and underrepresented communities is critical to increasing employees' sense of value and belonging, reducing feelings of being an “outsider,” supporting participants' career advancement, and expanding representation in leadership. Additionally, motivating active engagement by managers and leaders in I\*DEA initiatives through voluntary and positively framed opportunities (e.g., mentorship and sponsorship programs) is one predictor of an effective diversity program.<sup>13</sup>

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Conduct an EX / CX Intersections Deep Dive and Solutioning

Launch a follow-on mixed-methods (survey and HCD interviews and/or focus groups) research project to strengthen understanding of the experiences of employees who are eligible to receive VA benefits and develop participant-centered solutioning recommendations for VA consideration.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*While Identity Insights was focused on gathering insights into employees' experiences, research uncovered unique challenges associated with the interplay between employee and customer experience for those team members who are eligible to receive benefits from VA. Specifically, participants who are Veterans noted several pain points at the intersection of EX and CX including colleagues being care providers/patients, exclusion from customer activities, feeling uncomfortable accessing care at the VA, and superior/supervisor accessed private information about employee tied to identity).*

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION EASY

- Develop and implement a mixed-methods approach to engage employees who are eligible to receive VA benefits as a means of identifying pain points along their journey that are unique to the interplay between the dual employee and customer roles that they hold. Include preliminary findings from Identity Insights in considerations for follow-on research.
- Engage employees who are eligible to receive VA benefits in solutioning sessions to identify both new and preferred existing opportunities to address pain points that they have experienced along their EX / CX journey.
- In response to a repeated EX / CX pain point that emerged during Identity Insights regarding medical records being accessed by a supervisor or superior, work with OIT to identify and update systems where there may be privacy gaps for employees who work at and receive care from the same facility.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

By strengthening understanding of the pain points associated with the dual identities of employee and customer that some team members hold, VA has the opportunity to improve the experiences of those who both work and are eligible to receive care at VA and build trust across EX and CX with the Department.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places



# Predict and Alleviate Pain Points Using Data Science

Through the input of employee demographic information and predictive analytics, VA can predict the most likely to occur identity-attributed pain points for a specific employee. Pairing these insights with prescriptive analytics can enable VA to alleviate pain points unique to an employee. VA should consider using these analytical approaches in the future to strengthen the experience of employees beginning during their onboarding phase with the Department and/or in a new role.

### INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*With an already ~83% accurate predictive model that uses employee demographic information and Identity Insights findings, VA is on track to predicting an individual employee's five greatest identity-attributed pain points and prescribing focused actions to alleviate them.*

*Building off of this preliminary model, VA has the opportunity to follow the lead of corporate industry leaders in the tech sector. Notably, predictive analytics with a focus on data including pay, performance, and promotions is used by one major company to predict who is likely to leave the firm – with corresponding actions taken to improve employee retention. Another leading technology firm uses interview questions and other relevant metrics in recruiting to predict a new hire's success, strengths, and weaknesses to improve workplace and employee satisfaction.<sup>39</sup>*

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION ■ MODERATE

- Conduct additional analysis on Identity Insights data to develop a robust catalogue of discrete prescriptive actions that can be taken that map across the pain points.
- Conduct HCD testing on solutioning catalogue.
- Pilot test the use of predictive and prescriptive analytics on a cohort of at least 30+ new employees onboarding at VA with attention to improving their experience during their first 90-days and setting them up for success in the long-term. Compare findings from this test group to a control group of new employees onboarding during the same period.

### POTENTIAL IMPACT

Accurately predicting workplace pain points and prescribing actions to address them is a focused, resource-efficient way to alleviate potential issues and improve elements of the employee experience, especially during discrete phases of an employee's journey with the Department.

### EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Update VA's Human Resources Database

Currently, the HR Smart system used by VA to track all personnel demographics and workplace attributes is structured in a way that limits employees' expression of their whole, authentic identities. The three most pressing data fields that would benefit from a redesign as having emerged from the Identity Insights project include, "gender," "sexual orientation," and "race," as these categories either do not exist or do not exhaustively provide inclusive options for employees to holistically and accurately self-identify.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*Identity Insights findings confirm that those who identify their race as Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) are systematically excluded from representing their authentic identity in federal race self-identification questions. One study cited the impact of this exclusion as follows: "MENAs' official designation as White may not correspond to their lived experiences nor to others' perceptions. As long as MENA Americans remain aggregated with Whites, potential inequalities they face will remain hidden."<sup>41</sup>*

*Furthermore, as first identified in VEO EX and ORMDI's Women Employees' Career Seasons initiative, the current HR Smart conflation of gender and sex precludes accurate accounting for individuals by gender identity. By resolving this systemic gap and by adding a currently uncaptured demographic (sexual orientation), VA has the opportunity to "improve identification of sexual and gender minority populations and understanding of the challenges they face"<sup>42</sup> and to target interventions accordingly.*

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

MODERATE

- ❑ Align the HR Smart field options to recommendations outlined by the Interagency Technical Working Group led by the Office of Management and Budget focused on this subject matter with respect to MENA as a self-identification option for race, separate from the "White" option.<sup>38</sup>
- ❑ Include a "gender identity" category inclusive of binary, non-binary, and "other" self-identification options, and separate this category from "sex" (male/female). Currently, the HR Smart system conflates gender with sex by only providing sex options for the gender field.
- ❑ Add a single "sexual orientation" question in order to enable future equity analyses, as recommended by the Administration's *Recommendations on the Best Practices for the Collection of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Data on Federal Statistics Surveys*.<sup>43</sup>
- ❑ Launch an enterprise-wide communications campaign once the HR Smart system is revamped to socialize the improvements to the file and encourage employees to update their records. This could double as an overall data update campaign for all other fields within employees' personnel files as well.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

Maintaining accurate records is paramount to ensuring all employees are acknowledged by their whole, authentic identities, a major component of I\*DEA initiatives.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Pilot Rotational and Cross-Training Programs

Introduce short-term rotational exchange or cross-training programs to enable employees to experience diverse team environments and working styles and to expand VA-sponsored professional development opportunities available to staff. These programs differ from formal detail assignments as they are shorter in duration and grounded in job shadowing to help staff gain exposure to a broader network and experience working in different issue areas in the VA.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*Implementing strategies to increase contact across identity groups has been shown to increase diversity within management and decrease unconscious biases. This is because specialties / functional teams within organizations are often still divided along racial, ethnic, and gender lines (e.g., men are more likely to be in tech jobs).*

*In a study of more than 800 midsize and large U.S. firms, it was found that those who rotated management trainees through departments achieved an increase of 3% to 7% in White women, Black men, and women, and Asian American men and women in management positions.<sup>13</sup>*

## VA EMPLOYEE JOURNEY MAP ALIGNMENT

- "Engaging with other teams" (Collaborating with Others career stage)<sup>44</sup>

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

■ MODERATE

❑ Develop infrastructure and tools for a Department-wide short-term rotational or cross-training program that high-performing employees can sign up to participate in through application or nomination and for which offices can volunteer to participate. (Note: Selection and matching criteria should be outlined in the process to ensure that employees are appropriately and effectively engaged.)

❑ Recruit participants through Special Emphasis Program Managers and engage two offices to participate in a pilot program to test the program model and evaluate whether it has achieved its intended outcomes. Refine the model based on participant and office feedback and expand deployment.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

Rotational exchange and cross-training programs allow employees to expand their professional networks and skillsets by allowing them to interact with colleagues of various identities, expand their visibility and reputation across the Department, and increase their impact and performance by gaining new relevant skills. Additionally, individuals may be more likely to reach out to other offices and collaborate on work since they have a better understanding of their mission. This will increase information sharing across the department.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Develop and Implement Inclusive Communications Guidelines

Draft guidelines focused on the incorporation of inclusive language in day-to-day interactions and formal operations, conduct a VA-wide audit of language and terms used in existing written resources and documents, and revise language in accordance with the guidelines. Coordinate with the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs (OPIA) to disseminate the new guidelines as a VA Directive and inclusion in the VA Handbook.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*In March 2023, VA revised its long-standing motto to include gender-neutral language. As shared by veteran Mary Tobin in an article discussing the change, “in the places and spaces [like VA] that committed to helping me heal my visible and invisible wounds from war, I never expected to feel unseen. Today, in the words reflected in this new motto, all those who served and sacrificed for this country can finally feel seen.” Through adoption of inclusive language in day-to-day interactions as well as formal operations, VA has the opportunity to build bridges of inclusivity with employees and customers alike.<sup>24</sup>*

*Research has captured the power of inclusive communications for employees – and specifically those who are historically marginalized or underrepresented. For example, one study found that “efforts to foster inclusive language at work can yield substantial, positive effects on trans people’s feelings of belonging and inclusion.”<sup>22</sup>*

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

MODERATE

- ❑ Draft guidelines on inclusive language and communications. This includes the consideration of, but is not limited to:
  - Using non-gendered language and alternatives to male default exclusionary phrases (*i.e., Chairman, manpower, ladies and gentlemen, husband/wife*)
  - Replacing stereotypical and culturally appropriative phrases (*i.e., gyped, Guru, Tribe, spirit animal, blacklist/whitelist, peanut gallery*)
  - Supporting racial identify or equality (*i.e., avoid problematic terms like Hispanic when used to refer to all Spanish nationalities, minority or minority group*)
  - Using person first alternatives avoiding ableist language (*i.e., do not use disabled person or handicapped instead a person with a disability*)
- ❑ Develop and release awareness-building communications to elevate the new guidelines, inclusive of background information regarding the changes and documentation around frequently asked questions.
- ❑ Engage offices to conduct a full and complete audit of language across all formal communications, trainings, resources, policies, etc. and revise language according to the guidelines.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

Institutionalizing and operationalizing inclusive language can build awareness of and mitigate the ways in which language can influence and propagate unconscious biases – thus positively impacting workforce diversity. Additionally, incorporating inclusive language into daily organizational practices will increase awareness of the ways in which the words we use can impact employees’ experiences and positively reinforce appropriate language and terms.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Incorporate “Blinded” Processes for Internal Hires and Promotions

Add “blinded” (i.e., de-identified) components to VA’s internal advancement and leadership development processes, such as removing demographic identifiers and names, to help mitigate the effects of unconscious biases and ensure more equitable treatment of employees regardless of identity.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

There is demonstrated evidence of the ways in which blinded processes can help promote inclusion, diversity, and equity. For example, a hiring software platform for employers aims to remove hiring and resume evaluation bias by designing a blind intervention for the hiring process. The platform works with companies to create a list of skills required for a relevant job and helps to design a targeted task or challenge that applicants for that job complete online. Candidate performance and de-identified / gender-neutral resumes are then reviewed to replicate a “blind audition.” An analysis of 6,000 blind interviews performed using the platform found that while only 17% of women were invited to interviews when traditional resume evaluation methods were used, this number jumped to 59% when the platform was used.<sup>9</sup>

## VA EMPLOYEE JOURNEY MAP ALIGNMENT

- Applying career stage<sup>44</sup>
- Applying & Interviewing for a New Role career stage<sup>44</sup>

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

■ HARD

- ❑ Ensure that there are hiring and promotion policies in place that include:
  - Neutral selection criteria that don’t create barriers to protected categories
  - Interview and promotion procedures
  - Safeguards against adverse impact on protected groups
  - Procedures for internal communication of positions before a public announcement
  - Documentation of who is interviewed and why they did/did not get the promotion
  - Compliance with EEOC laws and guidelines
- ❑ Update the application process for internal advancement by removing demographic information as well as other identifiers (e.g., address, educational affiliation, etc.) and enact a multi-review process of leaders outside of the individual’s immediate leadership group that is inclusive of a diverse panel of participants.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

While VA has noted that it cannot de-identify applicants on the USA Staffing job portal as one of their key Human Infrastructure challenges,<sup>4</sup> it may still be impactful to implement this recommendation in internal processes. This internal-facing recommendation will allow VA to build on and scale the National Cemetery Administration’s initiative to pilot anonymized applications for leadership programs by removing demographic information.<sup>4</sup>

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Increase Options for Employees to Take Religious Time Off

While the *VA Compensatory Time Off for Religious Observances 2020 Policy* expanded opportunities for employees to take time off, there is an opportunity to both elevate awareness about the policy and to expand options for employees to take time during observance days to maximize inclusion across VA roles.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

*Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on religion. This includes refusing to accommodate an employee sincerely held religious beliefs or practices unless the accommodation would impose an undue hardship (more than a minimal burden on operation of the business). A religious practice may be sincerely held by an individual even if newly adopted, not consistently observed, or different from the commonly followed tenets of the individual's religion.<sup>32</sup>*

*A survey of HR and benefits professionals from 20 industries found that 53% of employers offer floating holidays. This level of flexibility contributes to an inclusive culture that promotes creativity, productivity, and innovation.<sup>33</sup>*

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION ■ HARD

- ❑ Expand the existing policy that enables time off for religious observances to include up to two (2) floating holidays as paid days off outside of an employee's allocated personal time to celebrate religious and cultural observances. Additionally, provide the option to exchange a holiday (i.e., an employee chooses to work remotely on Christmas in exchange for another holiday off). Create clear guidelines for employees on how to take this leave and for supervisors on their responsibilities associated with the policy.
- ❑ Highlight policies for both employees and supervisors in advance of major religious observances (i.e., the *VA Compensatory Time Off for Religious Observances 2020 Policy*) and encourage staff to refrain from scheduling major meetings and events on these dates.
- ❑ At the beginning of each fiscal year, push calendar notifications for major religious and cultural observance days across the VA network to both raise awareness (by including information about the day) and to remind staff not to schedule major meetings and event on these dates.
- ❑ Acknowledge cultural and religious holidays publicly (i.e., Yom Kippur, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, etc.) regardless of whether VA provides official time off these observances.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

When an organization values diversity of identities and differences, it must also prioritize inclusion by creating a culture of belonging. Offering employees, the opportunity to celebrate their religion, heritage, or culture is an imperative piece of recognition of identity. Additionally, visibility around policies will encourage team members to take the time they need and allow staff to present at their whole selves.

## EX TAG



Technology



Organization



People



Well-being



Work



Places

# Update Existing Systems to Allow Naming Customization

Coordinate with the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) and HRA/OSP to put systems in place that allow for an employee's preferred name and personal pronouns as well as name pronunciation to display in all visible platforms and on relevant forms.

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

A 2021 study confirmed the critical role that “appropriate language toward individuals with diverse genders” plays as a “stepping stone toward their workplace inclusion” while also highlighting the need for systemic attention within organizations.<sup>35</sup>

One such systemic intervention is the 2022 example of a large consulting firm’s launch of Pronouncelt – a name pronunciation tool developed internally and embedded in the firm’s email and calendar systems. Pronouncelt enables professionals to share both the name they prefer to be called and how to pronounce it as well as their personal pronouns. The organization’s professionals can view and listen to this information to connect more confidently and authentically with their colleagues.<sup>34</sup> The tool has strengthened respectful engagement amongst colleagues from around the globe and has demonstrated to the organization the importance of someone’s chosen name and personal pronouns.

“ I changed my name, and I get that the VA systems are complicated so getting everything changed was a bit of a process. It took about a month to change, then a year later the pronouns became available. When I added my pronouns to my account, everything reverted to my dead name. I’m not necessarily trying to hide what my sex assigned at birth was, but I would prefer that people didn’t conceptualize me with my dead name. So, it was pretty upsetting to have it revert back to that. ”

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION ■ HARD

- ❑ Work with OIT and HRA/OSP to identify all systems that display an employee's legal name to ensure:
  - All communications sent from systems allow for one to two click ability to change one’s name. If the communication is addressed to a name, one should be able to quickly change that name from the communication itself.
  - Self-ID should be available in systems. Employees should be able to select Gender Identity, Sex, and Personal Pronouns (this field should be open).
  - Preferred name should be available in all systems and should display instead of legal name.
  - Exceptions may include employees W2, federal security clearance documentation, and insurance and retirement forms.
- ❑ Implement a Pronouncelt-like tool via email and Teams system to enable colleagues to learn the correct way to pronounce each others’ preferred names. This should include the ability to update the displayed name, record the correct way to say their own name (i.e., my name is Jonathan Doe, please call me Jon), and display the phonetic pronunciation of one’s name.

## POTENTIAL IMPACT

This effort will reduce the incidence of Gender Non-Confirming individuals being referred to by the wrong pronouns or called by their deadname (the name a transgender person was given at birth but no longer uses upon transitioning) which can positively impact their sense of belonging at VA. Using the correct name and pronouns for someone is a crucial way to show that you recognize, acknowledge, and accept their identity.

VA can further champion allyship by facilitating proper pronunciation of names – an important step given that names are central to each person's identity, with deep ties to culture, family, and how people see themselves.

Taking the simple but meaningful action of using a colleague’s personal pronouns and preferred name, and pronouncing that name correctly can allow colleagues to make more confident and authentic connections.

## EX TAG



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Work



Places

# Next Steps

As you review the findings and recommendations of this study, consider the following to successfully implement an impactful strategy to support identity insight goals.

## 1 – REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Review and socialize findings with key stakeholders and decision makers to gain buy-in to the goals of Identity Insights initiative.

## 2 – ACTION PLAN

Prioritize and action plan recommendations that include cluster 1 pain points (the pain points that rose to the top across all three pain point prioritization criteria).

*These include:*

- *Launch “Authentically Me” Communications Campaign*
- *Develop an Employee Toolkit for Upstander Intervention*
- *Predict and Alleviate Pain Points Using Data Science*
- *Pilot Rotational and Cross-Training Programs*
- *Incorporate “Blinded” Processes for Internal Hires and Promotions*
- *Increase Options for Employees to Take Religious Time Off*

Develop an action plan for all prioritized recommendations to include: *objectives, key actions, timeline, outcomes/deliverables*. Consider all stakeholders, leadership, and technology considerations needed to operationalize the recommendations.

## 3 – OPERATIONALIZE

Pilot initiatives / finalize policies and operationalize them with the appropriate stakeholder groups. Some initiatives may require small test group while others may be immediately implemented enterprise wide.

## 4 – MEASURE

Develop key performance indicators to measure the success of each recommendations and leverage existing survey and data tools to understand impact of implemented recommendations.



# *Appendix*

# EX Relationship Framework

Employee Experience is holistic and cross-functional and is impacted by six core relational attributes: one's relationships to the **work** they do, the **people** they work with, the **places** they work, the **technology** they use, the **organization** they work for and its mission, and their personal **well-being**.

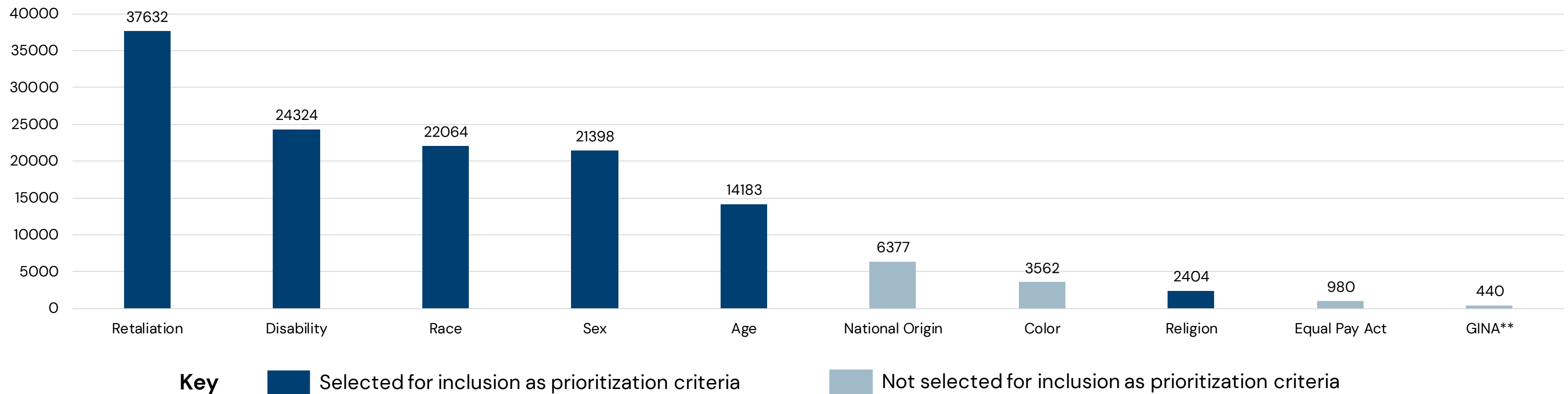


# ***Developing the Prioritization Criteria***

# Selection of Potential EEO Flags

The following categories were selected based on charges received by EEO in FY2020\* as the focus of analysis: **retaliation, disability discrimination, race discrimination, sex discrimination, age discrimination, and religious discrimination**. These categories can either apply across identity groups and fundamentally impact EEO rights (i.e., retaliation) or closely relate to the identity groups explored in the Identity Insights interviews. More information potential EEO Flags can be found [here](#).

FY20 Charge Receipts by Basis



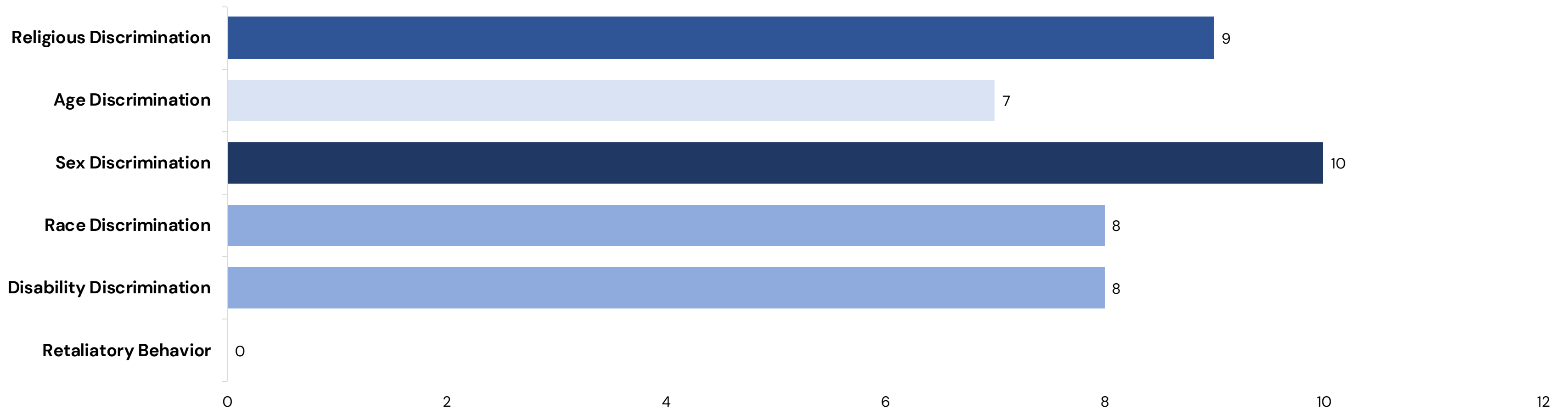
\*Note: Charge data includes all charges filed by individuals in the private sector and state and local government workplaces; it does not include discrimination complaints in the federal sector

\*\* Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008.

Data source: [https://www.eeoc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-12/CORRECT\\_All%20Charges\\_FY%202020.pdf](https://www.eeoc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-12/CORRECT_All%20Charges_FY%202020.pdf)

# Number of Potential EEO Flags Identified by Category

Of the potential 234 EEO flags investigated, 42 (~18%) were captured in Identity Insights interviews or focus groups. A breakdown of the distribution of these flags by category is provided below. Sex discrimination was the most frequently flagged EEO category, with three of the 10 pain points exclusively attributed to gender non-conforming respondents. Additionally, while retaliatory behavior was the most common category of charges received by the EEO in FY2020\*, no pain points indicating retaliatory behavior crossed the attribution threshold for any of the identity groups in focus.



*\*Note: Charge data includes all charges filed by individuals in the private sector and state and local government workplaces; it does not include discrimination complaints in the federal sector.*

*Data source: [https://www.eeoc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-12/CORRECT\\_All%20Charges\\_FY%202020.pdf](https://www.eeoc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-12/CORRECT_All%20Charges_FY%202020.pdf)*

# Definitions: Potential EEO Flag

## RETALIATION

Retaliation occurs when an **employer takes a materially adverse action because an applicant or employee asserts rights protected by the EEO laws**. Asserting EEO rights is called "protected activity." "Materially adverse" actions include more than employment actions such as denial of promotion, non-hire, denial of job benefits, demotion, suspension, discharge, or other actions that can be challenged directly as employment discrimination. Retaliation can be an employer action that is work-related, or one that has no tangible effect on employment, or even an action that takes place exclusively outside of work, **as long as it may well dissuade a reasonable person from engaging in protected activity**.

## DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION

Disability discrimination occurs when an employer or other entity covered by Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (which protects private and state and local employees) or the Rehabilitation Act (which protects federal employees) **treats a qualified employee or applicant unfavorably because of disability**. It is illegal to harass an applicant or employee because of a current or past disability, an actual or perceived physical or mental impairment that is not transitory and minor, or for association with an individual with a disability. **Harassment can include offensive remarks about a person's disability**.

## RACE DISCRIMINATION\*

Race discrimination involves **treating someone unfavorably because they are of a certain race or because of personal characteristics associated with race (such as hair texture, skin color, or certain facial features)**. It is unlawful to harass a person because of that person's race. **Harassment can include racial slurs, offensive or derogatory remarks about a person's race, or the display of racially-offensive symbols**. An employment policy or practice that applies to everyone, regardless of race, can be illegal if it has a negative impact on the employment of people of a particular race and is not job-related and necessary to the operation of the business.

\*Note: Since color discrimination is reported separately in the chart on the previous slide, it will be viewed as a separate topic for the purposes of this analysis. Since age discrimination is limited to those above the age of 40, discriminatory actions reported by Generation Z will not fit the Age Discrimination criteria.  
Data source: <https://www.eeoc.gov/discrimination-type>

# Definitions: Potential EEO Flag

## SEX DISCRIMINATION

Sex discrimination involves ***treating someone unfavorably because of that person's sex, including the person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy.*** It is unlawful to harass a person because of that person's sex, including the person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy. ***Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, and can include offensive remarks about a person's sex,*** including the person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy. An employment policy or practice that applies to everyone, regardless of sex, can be illegal if it has a negative impact on the employment of people of a certain sex and is not job-related or necessary to the operation of the business.

## AGE DISCRIMINATION\*

Age discrimination involves ***treating an applicant or employee less favorably because of their age.*** The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) ***forbids age discrimination against people who are age 40 or older.*** It does not protect workers under the age of 40, although some states have laws that protect younger workers from age discrimination. It is not illegal for an employer or other covered entity to favor an older worker over a younger one, even if both workers are age 40 or older. ***It is unlawful to harass a person because of their age.*** Harassment can include, for example, offensive or derogatory remarks about a person's age. ***An employment policy or practice that applies to everyone, regardless of age, can be illegal if it has a negative impact on applicants or employees age 40 or older and is not based on a reasonable factor other than age.***

## RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

Religious discrimination involves ***treating a person unfavorably because of their religious beliefs.*** The law protects not only people who belong to traditional, organized religions, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, but ***also others who have sincerely held religious, ethical or moral beliefs.*** ***It is illegal to harass a person because of their religion*** (e.g., offensive remarks about a person's religious beliefs or practices). ***Title VII also prohibits workplace or job segregation based on religion*** (including religious garb and grooming practices), such as assigning an employee to a non-customer contact position because of actual or feared customer preference. ***The law requires an employer to reasonably accommodate an employee's religious beliefs or practices,*** unless doing so would cause more than a minimal burden on business operations.

\*Note: Since color discrimination is reported separately in the chart on the previous slide, it will be viewed as a separate topic for the purposes of this analysis. Since age discrimination is limited to those above the age of 40, discriminatory actions reported by Generation Z will not fit the Age Discrimination criteria.  
Data source: <https://www.eeoc.gov/discrimination-type>

# Definitions: I\*DEA Strategic Plan Goals

## GOAL 1: INCLUSION

VA's inclusive work environment is *free from all discrimination, retribution or harassment* and *all employees feel safe and empowered to be their authentic selves*. Strategies include:

- Commit to establishing safe workplaces
- Commit to improving data collection and analytics
- Commit to taking actions to advance inclusion in the workplace
- Improve I\*DEA training and learning
- Increase access to resource groups for employees
- Improve professional development and increase opportunities for advancement

## GOAL 2: DIVERSITY

VA builds a *diverse, high-performing workforce reflective of all segments of society* and *values all aspects of human diversity*. Strategies include:

- Improve data collection and analytics
- Expand partnerships and recruitment
- Improve professional development and increase opportunities for advancement
- Improve I\*DEA training and learning

## GOAL 3: EQUITY

VA *eliminates barriers to EEO* at all levels and in all occupations to *advance equity for employees*. Strategies include:

- Advance equity for employees
- Increase engagement
- Increase availability of paid internships
- Improve professional development and increase opportunities for advancement
- Create financial equity

## GOAL 4: ACCESS

VA will *institute physical and technological solutions to empower all employees* to advance the Department's mission. Strategies include:

- Advance equity for employees with disabilities
- Provide reasonable accommodations



# ***Recommendations***

|  | <b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b><br><i>Sorted by Level of Effort</i>                               | Launch “Authentically Me” Communications Campaign | Develop an Employee Toolkit for Upstander Intervention | Create Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) | Expand and Incentivize Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs | Conduct an EX / CX Intersections Deep Dive | Predict and Alleviate Pain Points Using Data Science | Update VA’s Human Resources Database | Pilot Rotational & Cross-Training Programs | Develop and Implement Inclusive Communications Guidelines | Incorporate “Blinded” Processes or Internal Hires and Promotions | Increase Options for Employees to Take Religious Time Off | Update Existing Systems to Allow Naming Customization |
|--|--|---|--|--|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|---|---|
| Cluster 1 Pain Points                                  | Colleague: differential treatment of those of a particular identity                      |   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Superior differential treatment of those of a particular identity                        | ✓   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Required to take leave to accommodate identity-based need                                |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  | ✓   |   |
|  | Lack of diversity / representation on team   |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      | ✓  |   | ✓  |   |   |
|  | Superior denied adequate accommodations (self or colleague)                              |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Colleague: inappropriate comments/questions about identity                               | ✓   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Superior inappropriate comments/questions about identity                                 |   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Customer/vendor: inappropriate comments/questions about identity                         | ✓   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Leadership: lack of representation in leadership   |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      | ✓  |   | ✓  |   |   |
| Cluster 2 Pain Points                                  | Colleague: commits microaggressions  | ✓   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  | ✓   |  |   |   |
|  | Colleague: correcting colleagues on name, personal pronouns, or prefix (self or partner) |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  | ✓   |  |   | ✓   |
|  | Difficult to change name in VA system  |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   | ✓   |
|  | Lack of religious inclusion in practices/policies  |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  | ✓   |   |
|  | Stereotyping based on identity experienced   | ✓   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Colleague: comments/actions unsupportive of I*DEA efforts                                |   | ✓  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Feel lack of support based on identity   |   |  | ✓                                      | ✓  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Identity is explicitly perceived as impediment to career advancement                     |   |  |  |  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   | ✓  |   |   |
|  | Lack of leadership participation in and/or advocating for I*DEA work                     |   |  |  | ✓  |  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
|  | Negative CX affects employee experience  |   | ✓  |  |  | ✓  | ✓  |                                      |  |   |  |   |   |
| Experience and knowledge are unrecognized and accepted |  |   |  |  |  | ✓  |  |                                      |  | ✓   |  |   |   |

# Summary of Recommendations by Level of Effort

## EASY LEVEL OF EFFORT

Limited resources are needed to implement; there is a significant opportunity to build on ongoing efforts; initial implementation can reasonably be expected within 6 months.

- Launch an “Authentically Me” Communications Campaign
- Develop an Employee Toolkit for Upstander Intervention
- Create Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
- Expand and Incentivize Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs
- Conduct an EX / CX Intersections Deep Dive

## MODERATE LEVEL OF EFFORT

Some additional resources are needed to implement; there is a limited ability to build on ongoing efforts; initial implementation is expected to take 6-12 months

- Predict and Alleviate Pain Points Using Data Science
- Update VA’s Human Resources Database
- Pilot Rotational and Cross-Training Programs
- Develop and Implement Inclusive Communications Guidelines

## HARD LEVEL OF EFFORT

Significant additional resources are needed to implement; there is little to no ability to build on existing work (i.e., net new area of effort); initial implementation is expected to take 12+ months

- Incorporate “Blinded” Processes for Internal Hires and Promotions
- Increase Options for Employees to Take Religious Time Off
- Update Existing Systems to Allow Naming Customization

***Current Snapshot of I\*DEA  
Initiatives at VA***

# Education & Training

VA ORMDI fosters prevention of workplace disputes by ensuring that managers and staff are educated on the elements of a healthy working environment.

## **Instructor-Led (ILT) and Virtual Instructor-Led (VILT) Training<sup>15</sup>**

- Applying Cultural Competence in A Multicultural VA (TMS ID: VA 4210735)
- Combatting Incivility in the Workplace (TMS ID: VA 4191763)
- Diversity Tension in the Workplace (TMS ID: VA 4207813)
- Managing Gender Diversity in VA (TMS ID: VA 4207827)
- Managing Generational Diversity in the Workplace (TMS ID: VA 4207831)
- Managing Implicit Bias in VA (TMS ID: VA 4208792)
- Valuing Workforce Diversity and Workplace Inclusion (TMS ID: VA 4208719)
- Practicing Effective Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace for Managers, Supervisors and Team Leads (TMS ID: VA 4207833) \*Under Development
- Understanding Micro-Behaviors in VA Work Environment (TMS ID: VA 4558435) \*Under Development
- Barrier Analysis Training (TMS ID: VA 3844925)
- VHA Support Service Center (VSSC) Training (TMS ID: VA 3823179)
- Note: Additional virtual instructor-led training (VILT) may be requested by emailing your requirement to “VA ORMDI Training Request and Customer Feedback”

## **Employee Mandatory Training<sup>15</sup>**

- Harassment Prevention and Accountability Training (VA 45224) – required for completion by all employees within 90 days of hire and annually thereafter; trainings were updated to include bystander intervention techniques<sup>4</sup>
- No FEAR Act Training (VA 45316).
- EEO, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training for Executives, Managers and Supervisors (VA 45049) – mandated within 90 days after launch and biennially thereafter. In FY21, this training hosted 2000 participants and provided information to ensure EEO personnel had the knowledge, skill, and ability to affectively advise, and give guidance to leadership and appropriate EEO services<sup>4</sup>

# Education & Training Continued

VA ORMDI fosters prevention of workplace disputes by ensuring that managers and staff are educated on the elements of a healthy working environment.

## **Executive Women in Motion (EWIM) Pilot<sup>25</sup>**

- EWIM provides information and guidance for individuals who have interest in a leadership role in the Federal Government.
- EWIM's mission is to promote the advancement of women in the Senior Executive Service through interagency mentoring, collaboration and knowledge-sharing. EWIM objectives are to motivate Federal women to enter the Senior Executive Service (SES), expand EWIM program Governmentwide, and increase leadership capacity
- The U.S. Office of Personnel Management partners with Federal agencies and Federal Executive Boards to host each event.

## **Other<sup>15</sup>**

- ORMDI has compiled a list of diversity, equity and inclusion resources relevant for all VA employees. These, and many other learning resources, can be accessed in the Talent Management System (TMS).
- VHA transitioned to a universal application methodology for leadership development programs to deemphasize reliance of essay-based frameworks and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has experimented with anonymizing applications for leadership programs by removing demographic information<sup>4</sup>

# Conflict Resolution & Disciplinary Processes

The VA offers the below programs to support the prevention and resolution of conflicts between employees.

## **Harassment Prevention Program (HPP)<sup>15</sup>**

- The Harassment Prevention Program is an enterprise-wide department within the Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion. This program provides centralized tracking, monitoring and reporting processes to proactively respond to allegations of harassment, whether accompanied by an EEO basis. This team is responsible to report harassment allegations to VA leadership in order to ensure that prompt corrective measures are taken to decrease harassing behavior in the workplace. The HPP is responsible for providing education and awareness training on the harassment program.
- The Harassment Prevention Coordinator (HPC) for each specific office serves as the local Point of Contact (POC) for all allegations of harassing conduct. The HPC will record allegations and assist managers and supervisors with addressing each allegation.

## **VA Sub-council on Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention/ Survivor Care and Support (SHAP/SCS)<sup>4</sup>**

- SHAP/SCS is organized to support activities related to sexual harassment; sexual assault prevention; survivor care; and support efforts. It creates a forum to unify agency efforts across four workstreams: proactive culture, accountability, survivor care and support, and strategic engagement. It accelerates progress and implements specific requirements and policies to inform the development of new or revised policies, as needed.
- A sub-council workgroup was stood up by the Secretary to evaluate VA policies and procedures to eliminate sexual assault and harassment in VA facilities. More specifically, the workgroup is charged with developing an action plan for addressing changes at all levels of VA to reduce harassment and sexual assault, and developing standardized media for VA, Veterans Service Organizations and other stakeholders to use in print and on the internet to reduce sexual assault and harassment and developing bystander intervention training for Veterans.

# Data & Insights

Data-driven decision-making is a critical component of implementing effective interventions. The VA uses the below methods to gather data & insights into the current state of VA's I\*DEA initiatives.

## All-Employee Survey<sup>4</sup>

- We incorporated survey questions for employees to measure inclusion within the All-Employee Survey (AES) framework to better understand inclusion across the enterprise.

## Workforce Analysis and Diversity Reporting<sup>15</sup>

- Includes established strategies and guidance for achieving diversity Department-wide.
- Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, the Workforce Analysis team conducts Barrier Analysis of the VA workforce. Barrier Analysis consists of three steps; Workforce Analysis, Root Cause Analysis and Solution Development. The Workforce Barrier Analysis workgroup seeks to identify and eliminate barriers to leadership advancement and professional development. The group concluded an analysis on the outreach and recruitment of Hispanic employees in the VA and will soon begin an analysis on employees with disabilities and employees with targeted disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

## ESignals<sup>4</sup>

- VA is offering new ways for employees to provide feedback through pulse surveys as part of the Government-wide "Employee Voice" pilot initiative and has launching Employee Signals (ESignals), a continuous listening measurement channel to drive employee experience improvements, as well as the quarterly Employee Trust & Experience (ETE) survey. Among the key performance indicators measured in the ETE is the belonging metric – a central measurement in I\*DEA efforts at VA.

## Equal Employment Opportunity Field Audits<sup>4</sup>

- The diversity and inclusion (D&I) staff conduct thorough, accurate and effective field audits of the EEO programs in field offices. Technical Assistance Review (TAR) evaluate the VA's EEO and D&I program infrastructure and organizational impact and ensure that progress is made to achieve model EEO and D&I program status. To achieve this goal, EEOC requires that periodic reviews be conducted throughout the organization. The review framework was transitioned to a virtual platform due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic; creating a virtual methodology which allowed the Office of Resolution Management, Diversity and Inclusion (ORMDI) to perform 10 TARs per year, an increase from 6 held in FY 2021.



# Special Emphasis Programs

By establishing and utilizing Special Emphasis Programs (SEP) and engaging with affinity groups, VA raises employee awareness of the importance of diversity and demonstrates the Department's commitment to a model EEO workplace.

## Special Emphasis Programs<sup>15</sup>

- Designed to develop and implement strategies to identify potential employment barriers in the areas of recruitment, hiring, promotion, career development and retention affecting the full participation of all race, ethnicity, and gender. groups in VA's workforce. There are specific programs for:
  - American Indian and Alaska Native
  - Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander
  - Black/African American
  - Federal Women's Program
  - Hispanic
  - Individuals with Disabilities
  - LGBTQ+
  - Veterans (VA for Vets)

## Observances Toolkit<sup>15</sup>

- Guidance provided to field facilities on implementing activities for special observances (e.g., National Black History Month, Women's History Month, etc.)

## External Affinity Conferences Approved for VA-wide Participation<sup>15</sup>

- A list of external affinity events that are approved for VA-wide participation in fiscal year 2023 (e.g., Blacks in Government Inc. (BIG) Annual National Training Institute), in support of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (I\*DEA). All the events listed are hosted by affinity organizations with which VA has established relationships based on recommendations by the Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion.

# Diversity & Inclusion

The below diversity & inclusion efforts have been undertaken by VA to make progress on their I\*DEA priorities.

## **Diversity & Inclusion in VA Council (DIVAC)<sup>15</sup>**

- Serves as an independent executive level body that provides advice and recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on areas related to diversity and inclusion. The Council comprises representatives from each of the Department's major organizations, staff offices, and stakeholders.

## **National Diversity Internship Program (NDIP)<sup>15</sup>**

- The VA National Diversity Internship Program (NDIP) provides internship opportunities to diverse undergraduate and graduate students who are currently enrolled, full-time or part-time, in a degree-seeking program at an accredited post-secondary institution.

## **Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP)<sup>15</sup>**

- VA participates in the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP), a government-wide program co-sponsored by the Department of Defense and the Department of Labor. The goal of the program is to increase the representation of individuals with disabilities, especially severe disabilities, in the Federal and private workforce.

## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work Group (I\*DEA Work Group)<sup>16</sup>**

- The mission of the I\*DEA Work Group is to develop a diverse pipeline of VA investigators from underrepresented backgrounds in medical science; stimulate research on minority health and health disparities; promote inclusion within the Office of Research & Development and across the enterprise; and promote equity in all scientific activities. The I\*DEA Work Group has 8 subcommittees including ones focused on training, professional development, and minority health & health disparities.

## **Disabled Veterans Affirmative Action Program (DVAAP)<sup>17</sup>**

- DVAAP supports and promotes the recruitment and hiring of returning injured service members and disabled Veterans to increase employment opportunities for Veterans with disabilities throughout the Department of Veterans Affairs. The program also recently submitted their annual Accomplishment Report & Certification.<sup>3</sup>

# Diversity & Inclusion Continued

The below diversity & inclusion efforts have been undertaken by VA to make progress on their I\*DEA priorities.

## **VA I\*DEA Sub-council<sup>4</sup>**

- The I\*DEA Sub-council is comprised of dedicated subject matter experts and representatives from across VA Administrations and Staff Offices. The sub-council is currently assessing the 20 recommendations from the I\*DEA Action Plan. Half of those recommendations are focused on integrating I\*DEA into our human infrastructure capabilities.

## **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)<sup>4</sup>**

- PRIDE VA is an ERG developed to care for LGBTQ+ individuals, both within VA and in the community. It is comprised of a 10-week health education program focused on reducing health care disparities among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Veterans.
- Additional potential ERGs being explored by VA include those targeted to military spouses, as well as an ERG focused on antisemitism.

## **Pronouns Pilot Program<sup>4</sup>**

- VA is currently piloting a program to include pronouns in email headers and in the global address list, run by the Office of Information and Technology (OIT).

## **Disability Status Reporting Processes<sup>4</sup>**

- VA automated the forms that employees complete to update their disability status. This provides better information on the types of disabilities that the workforce has and informs considerations regarding the types of accommodations that may be required.

## **Women Employees' Career Seasons**

- A project in support of and coordination with the VA Federal Women's Program Coalition (FWPC); will identify "career seasons" for women employees at VA and develop corresponding personas segmented by key characteristics.
- Insights from the project can be used to address the needs of the current VA women workforce, and posture the agency to strategically tailor policy and other EX solutions for women, which will potentially lead to increased retention and advancement of women employees at VA.

# I\*DEA Strategic Plan Challenges

The below challenges were outlined in the 2022 I\*DEA Strategic Plan.

## **Infrastructure<sup>4</sup>**

- Limited bench strength and budgetary considerations make it imperative to seek economies of scale when designing the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) governance structure across the Department.
- The approval process for staffing new I\*DEA-related roles takes a considerable amount of time and requires that Administrations and Staff Offices rely on existing staff members to fulfill these responsibilities as collateral/ancillary duties.

## **Resources<sup>4</sup>**

- Ensuring that all VA Administrations and Staff Offices have dedicated resources to carry out I\*DEA initiatives.
- Data collection, especially with respect to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer plus (LGBTQ+) employees, is heavily reliant on existing Office of Personnel Management (OPM) forms which often do not provide the level of detail that would enable VA to perform more in-depth analysis.

## **Human Infrastructure<sup>4</sup>**

- There is a lack of diversity in the SES talent pool.
- The inability to de-identify applicants on the USA Staffing job portal limits VA's ability to scale promising practices related to applicant anonymization, which aims to reduce recruitment bias.

# I\*DEA Task Force Recommendations

On 4/1/21, SECVA chartered a Task Force to identify strategic opportunities across VA's vast I\*DEA ecosystem. They developed 20 recommendations for VA to consider from 2021-2025.

## Recommendations<sup>3</sup>

- Approve and integrate the definitions of I\*DEA into organizational philosophy.
- Build trust with conscious outreach and create new institutional access points for underserved communities.
- Promote the cultural transformation of I\*DEA from Field to VA Central Office (VACO).
- Conduct VA Stand-down to address I\*DEA related topics for VA workforce and Veterans we serve.
- Design new programming and engagement strategies to conduct outreach to underserved communities.
- Develop a VA I\*DEA Dashboard.
- Develop a workforce plan to integrate I\*DEA into hiring, position management, talent development and executive coaching.
- Recruit at and review VA's partnerships with Minority-Serving Institutions.
- Leverage VA benefits and services to increase financial equity for underserved communities.
- Evaluate institutional symbols, mottos, expression of values displayed and used by VA to ensure inclusiveness and diverse representation.
- Conduct a feasibility study to evaluate the creation of an I\*DEA Office and a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) position reporting directly to the Office of Secretary of VA (OSVA).
- Add sexual orientation, gender identity and preferred pronouns across VA systems, including VBA's dataset and VHA's medical record.
- Revamp VA's communications strategy to appeal to and become representative of underserved communities.
- Review training and resources centered on I\*DEA to ensure alignment with core principles of cultural competency and humility.
- Provide support for and track reports of discrimination-based trauma.
- Strengthen Federal Advisory Committees (FAC) and mandate report on I\*DEA initiatives.
- Examine feasibility of creating "Know your Rights" Training.
- Operationalize VA's findings from 200-day equity assessment in accordance with E.O. 13985.
- Stand up I\*DEA Sub-Council to elevate visibility and sustain efforts at the OSVA level.
- Conduct feasibility assessments on I\*DEA Action Plan recommendations by January 1, 2022.

***Leading Practices in  
I\*DEA Interventions***

# Leading Practices in I\*DEA Interventions

Leading practices in I\*DEA interventions come from cross-industry research and inform the recommendations within the deck.

## VOLUNTARY AND POSITIVELY FRAMED OPPORTUNITIES

Motivating active engagement with I\*DEA issues through voluntary and positively framed opportunities (e.g., mentorship, recruitment) is one predictor of an effective diversity program.

Experiments show that people have a strong tendency to “correct” dissonance by changing either the beliefs or the behavior. So, if you prompt them to act in ways that support a particular view, their opinions shift toward that view. When managers actively help boost diversity in their companies, something similar happens: They begin to think of themselves as diversity champions. One example is college recruitment programs targeting women and minorities that offer leadership a chance to help build a strong cadre of promising employees. Data shows that five years after a company implements a college recruitment program targeting female employees, the share of white women, black women, Hispanic women, and Asian-American women in its management rises by about 10%, on average.<sup>13</sup>

## INCREASED CONNECTION POINTS

Increasing interactions (e.g., rotational programs, cross-training, etc.) has been shown to increase diversity within management.

Evidence that contact between groups can lessen bias first came to light in an unplanned experiment on the European front during World War II. The U.S. army was still segregated, and only whites served in combat roles. High casualties left General Dwight Eisenhower understaffed, and he asked for black volunteers for combat duty. When Harvard sociologist Samuel Stouffer, on leave at the War Department, surveyed troops on their racial attitudes, he found that whites whose companies had been joined by black platoons showed dramatically lower racial animus and greater willingness to work alongside blacks than those whose companies remained segregated. The key, for Stouffer, was that whites and blacks had to be working toward a common goal as equals.<sup>13</sup>

## SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Embedding social accountability (e.g., review panels, task forces) into organizational processes can help drive equity.

In 1992, half of one of a leading accounting firm’s hires were women, but nearly all of them left before making partner. The CEO assembled a high-profile task force that relied on transparency to get results. The task force got each office to monitor the career progress of its women and set its own goals to address local problems. When it became clear that the management was closely watching, women started getting their share of premier client assignments and informal mentoring. In eight years, turnover among women dropped to the same level as turnover among men, and the proportion of female partners increased from 5% to 14%—the highest percentage among the big accounting firms. By 2015, 21% of the firm’s global partners were women, and the firm appointed a woman as CEO—making her the first woman to head a major accountancy.<sup>13</sup>

# Leading Practices in I\*DEA Interventions

## COMPREHENSIVE HARASSMENT POLICIES/PROCESSES

Ensuring strong and comprehensive harassment policies as well as trusted and accessible complaint procedures are recommended by EEOC.

In 2017, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission released a report on the core principles that have generally proven effective in preventing & addressing harassment. It was determined that a comprehensive, clear harassment policy that is regularly communicated to all employees is an essential element of an effective harassment prevention strategy. Additionally, the report stated that an effective harassment complaint system welcomes questions, concerns, and complaints; encourages employees to report potentially problematic conduct early; treats alleged victims, complainants, witnesses, alleged harassers, and others with respect; operates promptly, thoroughly, and impartially; and imposes appropriate consequences for harassment or related misconduct, such as retaliation.<sup>6</sup>

## INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Building awareness of and mitigating the ways in which language can influence and propagate unconscious biases can positively impact workforce diversity.

The language we use can impact the equitable recruitment and advancement of employees. For example, A study at Duke University found that employment ads often perpetuate gender roles through gender-based wording. It was found that when “masculine” ads were written for more traditionally female-dominated jobs, the jobs became more appealing to men.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, a study of performance evaluations by a Fortune 500 tech company found that 61% of the time when communal terms (e.g., helpful) were being used, they were being applied to women. These communal descriptors were not as highly valued as agentic terms (e.g., assertive) and thus, did not translate into higher ratings / pay.<sup>8</sup>

## BLIND EVALUATIONS

Incorporating de-identified processes for hiring and advancement may help mitigate the effects of unconscious biases.

GapJumpers, a hiring software platform for employers, aims to remove hiring and resume evaluation bias by designing a blind intervention for the hiring process. The platform works with companies to create a list of skills required for a relevant job and helps to design a targeted task or challenge that applicants for that job complete online. Candidate performance and de-identified / gender-neutral resumes are then reviewed to replicate a “blind audition.” An analysis of 6,000 blind interviews performed using the GapJumpers platform found that only 17% of women were invited to interviews when traditional resume evaluation methods were used – this number jumped to 59% when the GapJumpers platform was used.<sup>9</sup>



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