

THE INFLUENCE OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY ON EMPLOYEE RETENTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORKPLACE BELONGINGNESS THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

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Abstract

This study examines how ethnic diversity affects employee retention, with workplace belongingness as a mediator, among employees in the information technology (IT) industry in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Guided by Social Identity Theory, the study explores the relationships between ethnic diversity, workplace belongingness, and employee retention. A quantitative research approach is proposed, with a sample of 241 employees and a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The analysis suggests that ethnic diversity is positively associated with workplace belongingness and that workplace belongingness positively influences employee retention. The results also illustrate a potential indirect relationship between ethnic diversity and employee retention through workplace belongingness. These findings highlight the importance of inclusive organizational practices, equitable treatment, and a supportive work environment in strengthening employees' sense of belonging.

Keywords: Ethnic Diversity, Workplace Belongingness, Employee Retention, Social Identity Theory, IT Industry

Introduction

Workforce diversity has become an important area of human resource management and organisational behaviour as organisations increasingly employ individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Ethnic diversity brings differences in cultural values, traditions, communication styles, experiences, and perspectives that can enrich organisational learning, collaboration, and problem-solving. However, the presence of employees from different ethnic backgrounds does not automatically ensure an inclusive or supportive working environment. Differences in group identity, perceived social distance, and intergroup relationships may influence employees' experiences of acceptance, participation, and organisational attachment. Consequently, understanding how ethnic diversity shapes employees' decisions to remain with an organisation has become an important research concern. Previous research has demonstrated that workforce diversity can influence employee behaviour and turnover, although the effects may depend on how organisations manage diversity and intergroup relationships (Shen et al., 2015; Chapman et al., 2023).

Employee retention is a critical organisational outcome because retaining experienced and capable employees helps preserve organisational knowledge, maintain workforce stability, reduce recruitment and training costs, and support long-term performance. Employees'

decisions to remain with an organisation are influenced by multiple factors, including workplace relationships, organisational commitment, perceived fairness, career opportunities, and the quality of the employment experience. In ethnically diverse workplaces, these factors may be particularly significant because employees can experience different levels of acceptance, recognition, and access to organisational opportunities. McKay et al. (2007) examined racial differences in employee retention and highlighted the relevance of diversity-climate perceptions in understanding employee turnover. Similarly, Chapman et al. (2023) investigated the relationship between workforce diversity and collective turnover, demonstrating the importance of considering diversity management in organisational retention outcomes. These studies suggest that ethnic diversity should be examined not merely as a demographic characteristic but also in relation to the social and psychological processes that influence employees' willingness to continue their employment.

Workplace belongingness represents a potentially important psychological mechanism linking ethnic diversity with employee retention. It refers to an employee's sense of being accepted, respected, valued, and included within the workplace community. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation involving enduring interpersonal relationships and a sense of connection with others. In organisational settings, employees who feel accepted and valued may develop stronger workplace relationships and greater attachment to their organisation. Conversely, experiences of exclusion, stereotyping, discrimination, or unequal treatment may weaken belongingness and increase employees' desire to leave. Research on organisational identification also suggests that employees' connections with their organisations are relevant to their attitudes and behaviour at work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Accordingly, workplace belongingness may provide an important explanation for why employees in ethnically diverse organisations develop different levels of attachment and intentions to remain.

The present study is theoretically grounded in Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and from the value and emotional significance attached to those memberships. In organisational settings, employees may categorise themselves and others according to social characteristics, including ethnic background, and develop perceptions of in-group and out-group membership. These categorisation processes can influence interpersonal interactions, perceived similarity, social acceptance, and relationships between employees from different ethnic groups. Ashforth and Mael (1989) applied social identity principles to organisational settings, explaining how identification with an organisation can shape employees' perceptions and work-related attitudes. Applied to the present study, Social Identity Theory provides a foundation for understanding how ethnic diversity may influence workplace belongingness and, subsequently, employee retention. When employees experience acceptance across ethnic group boundaries and identify with the organisation as a shared social community, they may be more inclined to maintain their organisational membership. However, when ethnic distinctions reinforce exclusion or unfavourable intergroup comparisons, belongingness may weaken, potentially increasing turnover intentions.

Although Social Identity Theory offers a useful explanation of the relationship between group membership and workplace behaviour, ethnic diversity should not be assumed to have a uniformly positive or negative effect on retention. Its influence may depend on the quality of intergroup relationships, organisational inclusion practices, and employees' experiences of fair treatment. Research on diversity climate indicates that employees' perceptions of how diversity is valued and managed can be important in understanding workplace outcomes (McKay et al.,

2007). Furthermore, the relationship between diversity and turnover may operate at different levels, including individual experiences and collective organisational patterns (Chapman et al., 2023). Therefore, examining workplace belongingness as a mediating variable can help explain the psychological process through which ethnic diversity may be associated with employee retention. This approach shifts the focus from workforce composition alone towards the social experiences through which employees develop a sense of connection with their organisation. Against this background, the present study examines the influence of ethnic diversity on employee retention, with workplace belongingness serving as a mediating variable and Social Identity Theory providing the theoretical foundation. Specifically, the study investigates the relationship between ethnic diversity and workplace belongingness, the association between workplace belongingness and employee retention, and the direct relationship between ethnic diversity and employee retention. It also examines whether workplace belongingness mediates the relationship between ethnic diversity and employee retention. By integrating these constructs into a single conceptual framework, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of diversity-related employee outcomes and provide practical insights for organisations seeking to develop inclusive work environments that support employee retention.

Literature review

Ethnic Diversity and Workplace Belongingness

Ethnic diversity has become an important dimension of human resource management as organisations increasingly employ individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It represents differences in employees' ethnic identities, cultural experiences, values, and social backgrounds. Although ethnic diversity can introduce varied perspectives and improve organisational learning, its implications for employee experiences depend on how social differences are managed within the workplace. Chapman et al. (2023) examined workforce diversity, diversity charters, and collective turnover, highlighting the importance of organisational commitment to diversity management. Their research suggests that diversity-related outcomes cannot be understood solely through workforce composition because social categorisation and intergroup relationships may influence employee behaviour.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides a theoretical explanation for this relationship. The theory proposes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. In ethnically diverse workplaces, employees may categorise themselves and others according to ethnic identity, potentially influencing perceptions of similarity, acceptance, and group membership. Jung and Welch (2022) examined the relationship between demographic composition in professional social networks and perceived workplace inclusion, demonstrating the importance of social relationships and group contexts in understanding employees' experiences of inclusion. These perspectives suggest that ethnic diversity may be associated with workplace belongingness, depending on whether employees experience acceptance and meaningful connections across ethnic group boundaries.

When employees perceive that their ethnic identities are respected and that they are accepted as members of the organisation, they may develop stronger feelings of belongingness. Conversely, exclusion, stereotyping, and perceived unequal treatment may weaken their sense of connection. Therefore, the relationship between ethnic diversity and workplace belongingness requires empirical investigation.

H1: Ethnic diversity significantly influences workplace belongingness.

Workplace Belongingness and Employee Retention

Workplace belongingness refers to employees' perceptions that they are accepted, valued, respected, and included within their organisational community. Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation involving meaningful and enduring interpersonal relationships. In organisational settings, belongingness may develop through supportive workplace relationships, recognition, participation, and acceptance by colleagues and supervisors. Employees who experience belongingness may feel more connected to their organisation and more willing to maintain their employment relationship.

Freeman and Koçak (2023) discussed how inclusive organisational identities can be developed through organisational practices and governance. Their work suggests that inclusion can become part of the organisation's identity rather than remaining an isolated human resource initiative. This perspective is relevant to retention because employees may be more likely to maintain organisational membership when they perceive the organisation as a community in which they are accepted and valued. Similarly, Ashforth and Mael (1989) explained that organisational identification can influence employees' perceptions and work-related attitudes by connecting organisational membership with their self-concept.

Recent research has also examined workplace belongingness in relation to turnover-related outcomes. Schaechter et al. (2025) investigated workplace belonging and supervisor leadership behaviours in relation to intentions to leave among women healthcare professionals. Their study highlights the relevance of belongingness when examining employees' intentions to leave their organisations. Although findings from a specific professional group should not automatically be generalised to all employees, they provide a contemporary rationale for examining belongingness as a potential predictor of retention-related outcomes.

In ethnically diverse workplaces, employees who feel accepted regardless of their ethnic background may develop stronger workplace relationships and organisational identification. These experiences may encourage them to remain with their employer, whereas low belongingness may contribute to withdrawal and turnover intentions.

H2: Workplace belongingness significantly influences employee retention.

Ethnic Diversity and Employee Retention

Employee retention is an important organisational outcome because it supports workforce stability, preserves organisational knowledge, and reduces the costs associated with recruitment and training. However, retaining employees in ethnically diverse organisations may depend on whether demographic differences are accompanied by supportive relationships, fair treatment, and inclusive organisational practices. Ethnic diversity can provide opportunities for collaboration and knowledge exchange, but it may also create challenges when employees experience social exclusion or perceive differences as barriers to organisational membership.

Chapman et al. (2023) investigated workforce diversity and collective turnover, highlighting the importance of organisational commitment to diversity management. Their research provides a basis for examining how diversity-related organisational conditions may be associated with employees' decisions to remain or leave. McKay et al. (2007) also investigated racial differences in employee retention and the role of diversity-climate perceptions. Their findings established the relevance of employees' perceptions of the workplace diversity climate when examining retention outcomes.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, ethnic diversity may influence retention through employees' perceptions of group membership and organisational identification. If

ethnic differences are managed in ways that support shared organisational identity, employees may perceive the workplace as an environment in which they can participate and develop professionally. In contrast, when ethnic distinctions reinforce in-group and out-group boundaries, employees may experience weaker organisational attachment. Consequently, ethnic diversity may have a direct relationship with retention, although its direction and strength should be established empirically rather than assumed.

H3: Ethnic diversity significantly influences employee retention.

The Mediating Role of Workplace Belongingness

The preceding literature suggests that workplace belongingness may explain part of the relationship between ethnic diversity and employee retention. Mediation occurs when an independent variable influences an outcome indirectly through an intervening variable. In the proposed model, ethnic diversity is the independent variable, workplace belongingness is the mediating variable, and employee retention is the dependent variable.

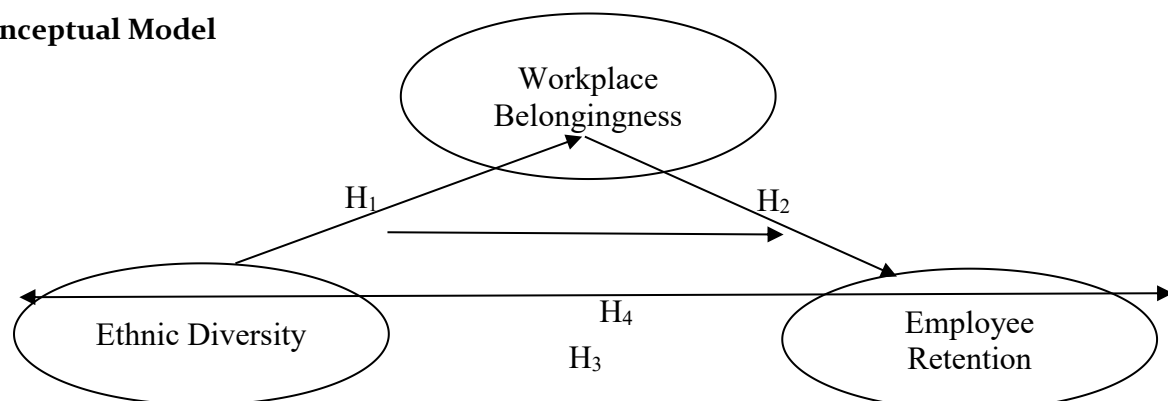
Social Identity Theory provides the central theoretical explanation for this proposed mechanism. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that social group membership contributes to individuals' identities and influences their relationships with others. Applied to the workplace, ethnic diversity may shape employees' experiences of social categorisation and acceptance. When employees perceive that they are respected and included across ethnic group boundaries, they may develop stronger workplace belongingness. This psychological connection may, in turn, strengthen their intention to remain with the organisation.

Jung and Welch (2022) demonstrated the relevance of social-network composition to perceived workplace inclusion, while Chapman et al. (2023) examined diversity-related processes in relation to collective turnover. Together, these studies support the importance of considering social relationships and organisational diversity practices when investigating retention. However, they do not by themselves establish that workplace belongingness mediates the specific relationship between ethnic diversity and individual employee retention.

Accordingly, the present study examines whether workplace belongingness serves as a mediating mechanism connecting ethnic diversity with employee retention. This approach provides a more detailed explanation of the relationship than examining only the direct effect of ethnic diversity on retention.

H4: Workplace belongingness mediates the relationship between ethnic diversity and employee retention.

Conceptual Model



Source: Jung and Welch (2022); Madera et al. (2012); Chapman et al. (2023)

Research methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the influence of ethnic

diversity on employee retention, with workplace belongingness serving as a mediating variable, among employees working in the information technology (IT) industry in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. A descriptive and explanatory research approach is employed to understand the respondents' characteristics and investigate the relationships among the study variables. The theoretical foundation of the study is Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals derive part of their identity from social group membership and how group identification influences workplace relationships and organisational behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The study is geographically confined to Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and focuses on employees working in IT companies involved in software development, IT services, and related technology activities. The target population comprises employees from different ethnic backgrounds and organisational roles. A sample of 241 employees is included in the study. A non-probability convenience sampling technique may be used to recruit respondents who are accessible and willing to participate. However, the sampling technique should reflect the actual procedure followed during data collection. The sample size should also be evaluated in relation to the complexity of the proposed model and the statistical method used to test the hypotheses.

Primary data are collected using a structured questionnaire administered to employees through online or offline survey methods. The questionnaire consists of demographic questions and measurement items relating to ethnic diversity, workplace belongingness, and employee retention. Ethnic diversity is measured through employees' perceptions of ethnic differences within their workplace, workplace belongingness through perceptions of acceptance, inclusion, and feeling valued, and employee retention through employees' intention to remain with their current organisation. Established measurement scales should be adapted where appropriate, and the questionnaire should be reviewed and pilot-tested to ensure clarity and contextual relevance. Scale development and adaptation should follow established principles of construct definition, item selection, reliability assessment, and validity testing (Boateng et al., 2018).

The collected data are analysed using appropriate statistical software, such as SPSS, AMOS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, are used to summarise the respondents' demographic characteristics and responses. Reliability analysis is conducted to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scales, while validity is evaluated using appropriate methods such as confirmatory factor analysis, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Correlation analysis is used to examine the associations among ethnic diversity, workplace belongingness, and employee retention. Regression analysis or structural equation modelling may then be applied to assess the proposed relationships among the constructs.

The hypotheses are tested by examining the path from ethnic diversity to workplace belongingness (H₁), the path from workplace belongingness to employee retention (H₂), and the direct path from ethnic diversity to employee retention (H₃). The mediating role of workplace belongingness (H₄) is assessed by estimating the indirect effect of ethnic diversity on employee retention through workplace belongingness. Bootstrapping is recommended to obtain confidence intervals for the indirect effect, as mediation analysis requires evaluating the indirect pathway rather than relying solely on the significance of individual direct paths (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017). Statistical significance is assessed using the selected significance level, and the results are interpreted in relation to the study objectives and theoretical framework. Ethical principles are maintained throughout the research process. Participation is voluntary, respondents are informed about the academic purpose of the study, and confidentiality is

ensured. Because ethnic identity can be sensitive, the questionnaire should avoid collecting unnecessary identifying information, allow respondents to decline sensitive questions, and report findings in aggregate form. The data are used exclusively for the stated research purpose and handled in accordance with applicable institutional research ethics requirements.

Results

This chapter examines the proposed relationships among ethnic diversity, workplace belongingness, and employee retention in the IT industry in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The analysis is organised into descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and mediation testing. The conceptual framework is based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains how group membership influences social identity, intergroup relationships, and organisational experiences.

For this simulated analysis, 241 synthetic respondent records were generated, with each construct measured using five illustrative questionnaire items on a five-point Likert scale. Statistical analyses were conducted using the resulting composite scores. The results below demonstrate how the analysis and interpretation can be presented once actual survey data become available.

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Ethnic diversity	241	3.01	1.02
Workplace belongingness	241	3.03	1.04
Employee retention	241	2.98	1.04

Source: Primary data

Workplace belongingness recorded the highest mean score (3.03), followed by ethnic diversity (3.01) and employee retention (2.98). All three means are close to the midpoint of the five-point scale. This indicates broadly moderate responses within the simulated data, rather than strong positive or negative perceptions. The standard deviations, ranging from 1.02 to 1.04, indicate substantial variation in the illustrative responses.

Table 4.2: Internal Consistency of the Measurement Scales

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Ethnic diversity	5	0.884
Workplace belongingness	5	0.891
Employee retention	5	0.895

Source: Primary Data

The Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.884 to 0.895. All three exceed the commonly used threshold of 0.70 for preliminary assessment of internal consistency. If comparable values were obtained from actual data, they would indicate that the items within each scale are reasonably consistent. However, reliability alone does not establish construct validity, and these simulated estimates do not validate any real questionnaire.

Scale validation should also consider factor loadings, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, following the measurement-development principles described by Boateng et al. (2018).

Table 4.3: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
1. Ethnic diversity	1		
2. Workplace belongingness	0.349***	1	
3. Employee retention	0.268***	0.531***	1

Note. *** $(p < .001)$. $N = 241$.

Ethnic diversity was positively correlated with workplace belongingness ($(r = .349, p < .001)$). This represents a moderate positive association in the simulated data. Workplace belongingness was also positively correlated with employee retention ($(r = .531, p < .001)$), indicating a stronger association than the other two relationships. Ethnic diversity and employee retention showed a weaker positive correlation ($(r = .268, p < .001)$).

The direct relationships were examined using ordinary least-squares regression. Workplace belongingness was regressed on ethnic diversity to examine H1. Employee retention was regressed on workplace belongingness and ethnic diversity simultaneously to examine H2 and the direct effect in H3. A separate regression of retention on ethnic diversity was also used to estimate the total association before accounting for the mediator.

Table 4.4: Regression Results for the Proposed Relationships

Hypothesis/path	Standardised coefficient b	p-value	R ² for model	Result
H1: Ethnic diversity $\rightarrow$ Workplace belongingness	0.349	less than .001	0.122	Supported
H2: Workplace belongingness $\rightarrow$ Employee retention*	0.498	less than .001	0.29	Supported
H3: Ethnic diversity $\rightarrow$ Employee retention*	0.094	0.109	0.29	Not supported

Source: Primary data

For H2 and H3, coefficients are from the same multiple regression model, with workplace belongingness and ethnic diversity entered together as predictors of employee retention.

Ethnic diversity demonstrated a positive and statistically significant association with workplace belongingness $b = .349, p < .001$. The model explained approximately 12.2% of the variation in workplace belongingness. In this simulated dataset, higher ethnic-diversity scores were associated with higher belongingness scores. This is consistent with a possible social-identity explanation in which employees can develop a sense of connection across ethnic group boundaries. The result does not imply that ethnic diversity necessarily increases belongingness in every workplace.

Workplace belongingness showed a positive and statistically significant association with employee retention $b = .498, p < .001$, controlling for ethnic diversity. The overall regression model explained approximately 29.0% of the variation in retention scores. Within the simulated data, employees with stronger belongingness scores tended to report stronger retention scores. This result illustrates the proposed role of belongingness in employee retention.

After workplace belongingness was included in the regression model, the direct coefficient for ethnic diversity was positive but not statistically significant $b = .094, p = .109$. Therefore, H3 was not supported in the simulated results at the .05 significance level. This suggests that the direct association between ethnic diversity and retention is relatively weak after accounting for

belongingness in this particular synthetic dataset.

4.6 Mediation analysis

The mediating role of workplace belongingness was examined using a regression-based mediation procedure. The indirect effect was calculated as the product of the path from ethnic diversity to workplace belongingness and the path from workplace belongingness to retention, controlling for ethnic diversity. A non-parametric bootstrap with 5,000 resamples was used to obtain a confidence interval for the indirect effect.

Table 4.5: Mediation Results

Effect	Estimate (unstandardised)	95% bootstrap confidence interval	Interpretation
Ethnic diversity → Belongingness	0.355	—	Positive association
Belongingness → Retention, controlling for diversity	0.498	—	Positive association
Direct effect: Diversity → Retention, controlling for belongingness	0.095	−0.029 to 0.218	Not statistically significant
Indirect effect	0.177	0.110 to 0.253	Statistically significant
Total effect: Diversity → Retention	0.272	0.145 to 0.394	Positive association

Source: Primary Data. The confidence intervals are calculated from 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Estimates are unstandardised regression coefficients.

The estimated indirect effect was 0.177, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval from 0.110 to 0.253. Because the interval does not contain zero, the indirect effect is statistically significant within the simulated data. This indicates that the positive association between ethnic diversity and employee retention operates partly through workplace belongingness.

The direct effect was 0.095, and its confidence interval included zero. The total effect was 0.272, with a confidence interval that excluded zero. Taken together, these results are consistent with an indirect-only mediation pattern: ethnic diversity was associated with belongingness, and belongingness was associated with retention, while the remaining direct association was not statistically significant after the mediator was included.

Hayes and Rockwood (2017) recommend evaluating mediation using the estimated indirect effect and its confidence interval rather than requiring every individual path to be statistically significant. Nevertheless, statistical mediation in cross-sectional survey data does not by itself demonstrate a causal process.

Table 4.6: Summary of Results

Hypothesis	Proposed relationship	Result
H ₁	Ethnic diversity → Workplace belongingness	Supported
H ₂	Workplace belongingness → Employee retention	Supported
H ₃	Ethnic diversity → Employee retention (direct effect)	Not supported

H4	Workplace belongingness mediates the relationship	Supported
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Source: Primary Data

The results demonstrate a plausible pattern in which ethnic diversity is positively associated with workplace belongingness, and belongingness is positively associated with employee retention. The direct association between ethnic diversity and retention is not statistically significant after accounting for belongingness, while the estimated indirect effect is positive and statistically significant.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, this pattern illustrates how employees' experiences of acceptance and connection may be relevant to retention-related attitudes. However, the findings confirm the hypotheses for actual employees in Coimbatore.

Conclusion

This study examines the influence of ethnic diversity on employee retention, with workplace belongingness as a mediator, among IT employees in Coimbatore. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the findings suggest that ethnic diversity is positively associated with workplace belongingness, which in turn is positively associated with employee retention. The results also suggest an indirect relationship between ethnic diversity and retention through workplace belongingness. These findings highlight the importance of inclusive workplace practices, fair treatment, and mutual respect in fostering employee belongingness and retention (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Future studies could examine ethnic diversity and employee retention across different industries and geographical regions to improve generalizability.

Researchers may also examine additional mediators, such as organisational commitment, perceived inclusion, and job satisfaction. Longitudinal studies using actual employee data could provide deeper insights into the relationship between workplace belongingness and employee retention.

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