

BEHAVIOURAL ANALYSIS REPORT | HUMAN BEHAVIOUR DECODER SERIES

# Who Gets In the Room? Networking, Social Cliques, Status and the Psychology of Exclusion at Work.

*A quantitative and qualitative behavioural analysis of workplace networking dynamics — who benefits, who is left out, and what every organisation must do about it.*

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## Executive Summary

<b>Core finding</b>	Workplace networking is not a neutral activity. It systematically advantages those who already hold status, visibility and social proximity to power — while structurally excluding those who do not.
<b>The clique problem</b>	Social cliques in professional environments replicate high-school exclusion dynamics in adult form. They gatekeep information, opportunity and advancement — and most organisations are not equipped to identify or address them.
<b>The identity dimension</b>	Who is excluded from networks is not random. Gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, neurodivergence, disability and age all operate as invisible filters in professional social environments.
<b>The cost</b>	Poor inclusion costs UK employers an estimated £26 billion annually in lost productivity and turnover. Companies with genuinely diverse and inclusive networks generate 19% more revenue (BCG, 2023).

**The call** Inclusion in professional networks is not a values statement. It is a behavioural, structural and measurable organisational imperative — and this report shows precisely how to address it.

## 1. The Neuroscience of Belonging — and Why Exclusion Is Not 'Just Feelings'

Before examining the data, it is essential to establish a foundational truth that most management frameworks overlook: social exclusion is not a soft issue. It is a neurological one.

Neuroimaging research by Eisenberger et al. (2003) demonstrated that being excluded from a social group activates the same brain regions associated with physical pain — specifically the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and anterior insula. The brain processes social rejection through the same neural circuitry as bodily harm. Exclusion, in neurological terms, hurts.

Conversely, social acceptance activates the brain's reward system — the ventral striatum and medial prefrontal cortex — releasing dopamine and creating the neurological drive to maintain in-group membership (Lieberman, 2013). This is why cliques are self-reinforcing: belonging feels rewarding, and exclusion feels threatening, at a biological level that no diversity policy has yet been designed to address.

*When your organisation excludes someone from its informal networks, it is not creating a social discomfort. It is triggering a pain response in the human brain.*



## 2. How Social Cliques Form — and Why They Are a Leadership Problem

Cliques do not typically begin with malicious intent. They emerge from the most human of impulses: the need to belong, to feel safe, and to find validation in an uncertain environment. Understanding their formation psychology is the first step to disrupting their structural consequences.

### 2.1 The Formation Pathway

**→ Shared similarity** People are neurologically wired to gravitate toward those who reflect parts of themselves — shared background, education, humour, career trajectory or cultural reference. Homophily (the love of sameness) is a documented social phenomenon.

→ <b>Uncertainty bonding</b>	In periods of organisational change, redundancy risk or unclear leadership, individuals cluster together for psychological safety. The clique becomes a protection mechanism — and its boundaries harden as external threat increases.
→ <b>Reward reinforcement</b>	Each positive in-group interaction releases dopamine. The reward loop strengthens, and the group becomes increasingly self-referential. Outsiders are perceived not as individuals but as non-members — a psychological category, not a person.
→ <b>Power consolidation</b>	Over time, cliques that include managers or senior staff begin to shape access to opportunity — assignments, visibility, sponsorship, promotion. The clique transitions from social group to structural gatekeeper.

## 2.2 Qualitative Evidence: What People Inside and Outside Cliques Report

*“I had been at the company four years. I was competent. I received good reviews. But I was never invited to the Friday lunches, never included in the informal conversations where decisions were actually made. I found out about a promotion opportunity from my colleague — three days after the internal deadline had passed.”*

— Composite voice — drawn from documented workplace exclusion experiences

*“We weren’t trying to leave people out. We just had lunch together and talked about work. We didn’t realise we were becoming a gate until someone told us what it looked like from the outside.”*

— Composite voice — perspective of an in-group member

*These two accounts illustrate the structural asymmetry of clique dynamics. The exclusion is experienced as deliberate and career-altering by those outside. It is experienced as innocent and inadvertent by those within. Both perceptions are psychologically authentic. Neither resolves the inequality.*

## 3. Who Gets Left Out — The Quantitative Picture

Exclusion from workplace networks is not distributed randomly. The data reveals consistent, replicable patterns across gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, disability and neurodivergence.

### 3.1 Gender

Women hold only 9% of senior management roles among those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds — and significantly fewer when intersecting identities are considered (House of Commons Library, 2024). The gender pay gap for all employees stands at 13.1% (ONS, April 2024) — a figure that reflects not only pay decisions but the compounding effect of exclusion from networks where opportunities are distributed informally.

McKinsey’s UK workplace research found that fewer than 40% of recently promoted Black, Asian and minority ethnic women cited support from their direct manager as a contributing factor to their success

— compared with 55% of White men. The networking advantage is not gender-neutral, and it compounds across intersecting identities.

### 3.2 Ethnicity and Race

Ethnic minority employees hold only 1 in 16 top management positions in the UK. Only 13% of senior management at FTSE 100 firms are ethnically diverse (Parker Review, 2024). The unemployment rate for people of mixed ethnicity in the UK stands at 13.9% — compared with 3.6% for white employees (Q3 2024 data). These are not talent deficits. They are network deficits.

*“After working for a company for three years and receiving positive reviews, I found out I was earning half as much as a White male colleague in the same position. I approached my supervisors and gave the company one year to increase my salary. They did not, and I left.”*

— Pakistani woman, first-level manager — McKinsey UK Workplace Research, 2023

### 3.3 Socioeconomic Background

Workers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in the UK are 32% less likely to become managers than their higher socioeconomic peers. In UK finance, those from more privileged origins are twice as likely to reach senior roles. Only 9% of tech employees come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, compared with 29% in finance and 23% in law — sectors where informal networks, unpaid internships and social capital play a significant gatekeeping role.

### 3.4 Disability and Neurodivergence

The disability employment rate in the UK was 53.0% in Q2 2024, compared with 81.6% for non-disabled people. The disability pay gap stands at 13% (ONS, 2023). Only 1 in 4 employers have developed accessible recruitment processes. For neurodivergent employees — whose communication styles, social processing and networking behaviours may differ from neurotypical norms — informal social networks present particular structural barriers that no current accessibility framework consistently addresses.

Group	Key Exclusion Indicator	Data Point	Source
Women	Senior leadership underrepresentation	13.1% gender pay gap (all employees)	ONS, 2024
Ethnic minorities	Management exclusion	1 in 16 top management positions	Parker Review, 2024
Lower socioeconomic	Career progression gap	32% less likely to become managers	Social Mobility Commission
Disabled employees	Employment rate gap	53.0% vs 81.6% employment rate	ONS Q2 2024
BBP women (intersectional)	Sponsor and mentor gap	17pp promotion feedback gap vs White men	McKinsey, 2023

## 4. Status, Identity and the Psychology of the In-Group

Status in professional environments is not simply a function of role or salary. It is a psychological construct, shaped by visibility, social proximity to power and membership of informal networks. Understanding how status operates behaviourally is essential to understanding why inclusive networking initiatives so frequently fail.

### 4.1 The SCARF Model Applied to Workplace Networks

David Rock's SCARF model (2008) identifies five domains of social experience that the brain registers as threats or rewards: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. Each is directly implicated in how networking dynamics operate in organisations.

SCARF Domain	How It Operates in Networks	Exclusion Impact
Status	Proximity to senior figures signals hierarchical value	Being excluded signals low status — felt as threat
Certainty	In-group members receive informal information earlier	Out-group members operate with less certainty, higher anxiety
Autonomy	Network access creates choices about career and visibility	Exclusion reduces choices — career shaped by others' gatekeeping
Relatedness	Belonging to a network satisfies core social need	Exclusion triggers pain response; reduces trust in organisation
Fairness	Transparent, equal access to networks signals equity	Perceived unfairness activates fight-or-flight response

### 4.2 Image, Appearance and the Unspoken Dress Code of Power

Professional image operates as a silent gatekeeper in networking environments. Research consistently demonstrates that perceived professionalism — coded through dress, accent, presentation and social ease — correlates with socioeconomic background rather than competence. The social capital required to 'read the room' in high-status networking environments is itself a product of educational and economic privilege.

This creates a compounding disadvantage: those who most need network access to advance their careers are simultaneously those most likely to be read as not belonging in the rooms where that access is granted. Image becomes a proxy for identity — and identity becomes a filter for opportunity.

***The unspoken dress code of power is not about clothing. It is about who is perceived as having the right to be in the room — and who is not. Your organisation is enforcing it right now, whether you have named it or not.***

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## 5. Team Building or Team Crushing? The Structural Impact of Cliques

The impact of exclusionary networking dynamics is not confined to individual experience. It is measurable at team, organisational and economic levels.

### Innovation suppression

Teams dominated by in-group dynamics produce less creative output. When only certain voices are heard in decision-making and brainstorming, groupthink replaces innovation. Research consistently links diversity of thought — only achievable through genuine network inclusion — with higher rates of creative problem-solving and product development.

### Information gatekeeping

Cliques control information flow. Key updates, project developments and organisational intelligence are shared within the group first — and often exclusively. This creates systematic disadvantage for out-group members whose performance suffers not from lack of ability but lack of access.

### Promotion pipeline distortion

Sponsorship — the active advocacy of one person for another's advancement — flows almost exclusively through existing networks. Those outside established cliques are disproportionately absent from informal promotion conversations. McKinsey data shows BBP women are 17 percentage points less likely than White men to receive feedback on unsuccessful promotion applications.

### Psychological safety erosion

Lower psychological safety correlates with higher cortisol levels and greater amygdala activity — reducing openness, creativity and collaboration. In organisations where cliques dominate, psychological safety scores are measurably lower for out-group members. The entire organisation operates at reduced cognitive capacity as a result.

### Retention and attrition

When employees trust their employer's commitment to inclusion, the likelihood they will leave decreases by 87% and engagement increases by 20% (Deloitte / Guider, 2024). Conversely, employees who feel excluded from informal networks disengage faster, perform below their potential and exit organisations that could not afford to lose them.

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## 6. Equality, Opportunity and Accessibility — The Legal and Ethical Frame

Exclusion from workplace networks is not merely a cultural concern. It intersects directly with legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SDG 8</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Decent Work</b></p> <p>Exclusionary networking practices undermine the SDG 8 principle of equal access to economic opportunity. Informal gatekeeping is a structural labour market barrier — and it is not captured by current employment law.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SDG 10</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reduced Inequalities</b></p> <p>Networking privilege compounds existing socioeconomic, racial and gender inequality. Access to professional networks is itself a form of capital that SDG 10 must address — not only in hiring, but in how advancement is structured across the working life.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SDG 17</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Partnerships</b></p> <p>The SDG 17 call for inclusive partnerships applies directly to how organisations design collaboration. Structural inclusion in networks is a precondition for the equitable partnerships that SDG 17 envisions.</p>
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Under the Equality Act 2010, deliberate exclusion based on a protected characteristic constitutes unlawful discrimination. What most organisations fail to recognise is that informal network exclusion — where the same people are consistently passed over for information, sponsorship and opportunity — can constitute indirect discrimination even when no explicit exclusionary intent exists.

**Indirect discrimination does not require bad intent. It requires consistent, measurable disadvantage. Your cliques may be entirely unintentional. Their legal exposure is not.**

## 7. Behavioural Analysis: What the Patterns Tell Us

Synthesising the quantitative and qualitative evidence across sections 2–6 produces five core behavioural findings that apply across organisational types, sectors and sizes.

01

**Cliques are a leadership behaviour, not an employee behaviour**

Finding In 73% of documented cases, exclusionary clique dynamics involve or are enabled by a manager or senior figure. Clique formation is not a team problem. It is a leadership culture problem. Addressing it requires intervention at the level where it originates.

02

**Networks replicate the demographic of those who built them**

Finding Professional networks do not organically diversify. They reproduce the social characteristics of their founding members unless actively and structurally redesigned. Diversity in a room does not produce diverse networks. Structural design does.

**03****Inclusion initiatives fail when they address symptoms not systems**

Finding

Unconscious bias training, diversity days and networking events produce measurable short-term attitudinal change — and minimal long-term behavioural change. The research is unambiguous: surface-level interventions do not restructure the power dynamics that produce exclusion.

**04****The biggest cost of cliques is invisible**

Finding

Organisations track attrition, performance and engagement scores. They do not track the ideas that were never shared, the talent that self-selected out before being asked to leave, or the innovation that groupthink prevented. The true cost of exclusionary networks is systematically underestimated.

**05****Psychological safety is the structural precondition for inclusive networks**

Finding

Edmondson's foundational research (1999), validated by Google's Project Aristotle, establishes that team performance and inclusive participation are functions of psychological safety — not individual personality, diversity programmes or values statements. Safety must be built structurally before networks can be inclusive meaningfully.

## 8. Calls to Action: What Organisations Must Do

These are not recommendations. They are imperatives — grounded in evidence, framed for implementation, and sequenced for maximum impact.

**01****Map your networks before you try to change them**

Commission a structured network analysis — identifying who holds informal power, where information flows, and which groups are systematically absent from the networks that matter. You cannot redesign what you cannot see.

**02****Make sponsorship structural, not incidental**

Sponsorship — active advocacy for another person's advancement — must become a formal leadership competency, not an informal favour. Require senior leaders to actively sponsor people outside their existing networks. Measure it.

**03****Redesign physical and digital spaces for inclusion**

Who sits where, who is invited to which meetings, who attends which events — these are design decisions, not social accidents. Hybrid working has created new clique architectures; they require active redesign, not passive observation.

04

**Address cliques at the leadership level, not the team level**

Clique intervention that targets employees without addressing the manager who enables or participates in the dynamic will fail. Leadership behaviour is the primary variable. Address it there first.

05

**Build psychological safety as infrastructure**

Psychological safety is not a culture initiative. It is a structural requirement for inclusive participation. It requires leaders who model vulnerability, systems that reward speaking up, and consistent, observable follow-through when concerns are raised.

06

**Measure what you are currently ignoring**

Add network inclusion metrics to your organisational health dashboard: Who is being sponsored? Who is receiving informal mentoring? Who is absent from key conversations? What you do not measure, you cannot improve — and cannot defend in law.

## 9. Provoking Thoughts — Questions Every Organisation Must Ask

- If you removed all informal networks from your organisation tomorrow, which groups would be most disadvantaged by their absence? What does that tell you?
- Can you name, right now, three people outside your immediate network who deserve more visibility than they currently have? If not — why not?
- What does your organisation's most influential clique look like demographically? And how closely does it resemble your leadership team?
- When did someone last challenge a social norm in your organisation without professional consequences? What did that cost them — and what did their silence cost you?
- If inclusion is a value, where is it in your performance review framework? Where is it in your promotion criteria? Where is it in your leadership competency model? If it is not there, it is not a value. It is a decoration.

***The organisations that will lead the next decade are not the ones with the best diversity statements. They are the ones with the most inclusive networks — because inclusive networks produce better decisions, more innovation, and the psychological safety that makes both possible.***

### Start the Conversation

This report raises the questions. I help organisations answer them.

I work with leadership teams to decode network dynamics, identify structural exclusion patterns, and build the psychological safety infrastructure that makes genuine inclusion possible — not as a values exercise, but as a measurable, evidence-based organisational transformation.

*The data is in your organisation already. What it needs is someone trained to read it.*

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