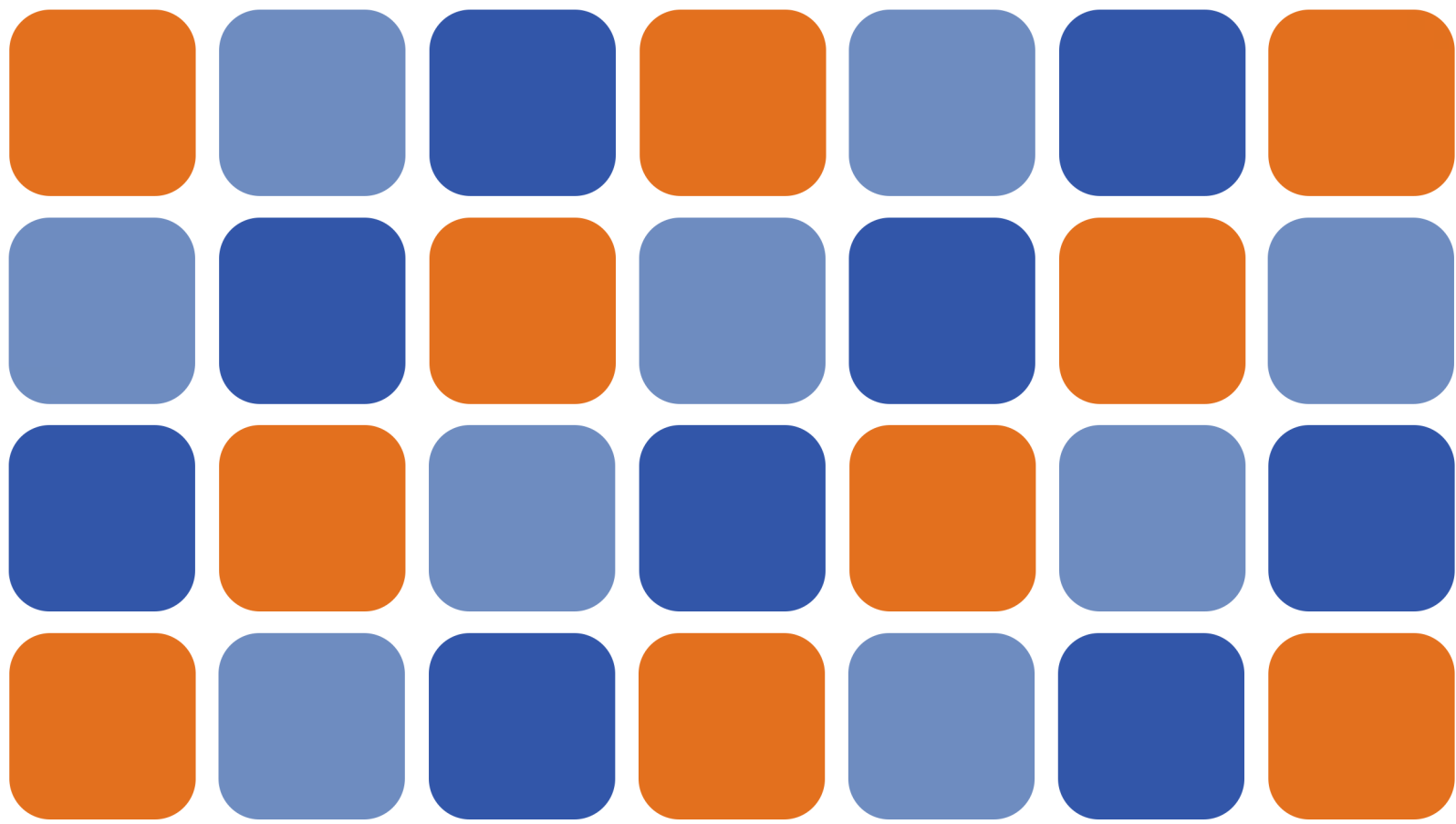




Creating Inclusive Workplaces

A Toolkit for Belonging, Access, Equity & Inclusion

A Practical Guide for Small Businesses

Produced by Women's Fund of Rhode Island

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Executive Summary

Creating a workplace where people feel respected, supported, and able to succeed is good for employees—and good for business.

Today's employers face workforce shortages, increased competition for talent, changing employee expectations, and a rapidly evolving economy. At the same time, employees are looking for workplaces where they feel valued, have opportunities to grow, and can balance work with the realities of everyday life.

This toolkit was developed by the Women's Fund of Rhode Island to help small businesses create workplaces that foster belonging, access, equity, and inclusion. While every organization is different, the goal is the same: to remove barriers that may prevent employees from reaching their full potential.

Research shows that organizations with inclusive workplace cultures are often better positioned to recruit talent, retain employees, encourage innovation, and respond to change. Many of the practices highlighted in this toolkit, including clear communication, professional development, flexible scheduling, accessibility, mentorship, and transparent compensation practices- benefit all employees, not just specific groups.

Many improvements can be implemented through small, intentional actions that strengthen workplace culture and improve employee experiences.

This toolkit provides practical guidance in eight key areas:

- Understanding why inclusion matters
- Building a workplace where people belong
- Finding and hiring talent
- Helping employees learn and grow
- Supporting employees through life's changes
- Promoting fair pay and benefits
- Improving accessibility and disability inclusion
- Measuring progress over time

You do not need to implement every recommendation in this guide. Instead, we encourage you to identify one or two opportunities for improvement, develop a plan, and build from there. Creating an inclusive workplace is not a destination. It is an ongoing process of learning, listening, and improving. By taking small steps today, Rhode Island employers can build stronger workplaces, support employee success, and contribute to a more vibrant and resilient economy for everyone.

Introduction

The workplace has changed dramatically over the past decade.

Employers today face workforce shortages, changing employee expectations, increased competition for talent, and a rapidly evolving economy. At the same time, employees are looking for workplaces where they feel respected, supported, and able to grow.

While conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion have become increasingly polarized, most employers agree on a simple goal: creating workplaces where people can do their best work.

This toolkit focuses on practical strategies that small businesses can use to create cultures of belonging, access, equity, and inclusion. Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution, it provides a menu of ideas that employers can adapt based on their size, resources, and workforce.

The recommendations in this guide are designed to support people from many backgrounds and experiences, including:

- Women and girls
- People of color
- LGBTQ+ individuals
- People with disabilities
- Veterans
- Immigrants and refugees
- Caregivers
- Employees across generations

Most importantly, these recommendations benefit everyone.

When people feel valued and supported, businesses are more likely to attract talent, retain employees, improve morale, and strengthen performance.

You do not need to implement every recommendation in this toolkit. Start where you are, choose the strategies that make sense for your organization, and build over time.

Progress matters more than perfection.

Who Is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit is designed for Rhode Island employers of all sizes, with a particular focus on small businesses, nonprofits, and organizations that may not have dedicated human resources staff.

Whether you employ five people or five hundred, creating a workplace where employees feel respected, supported, and able to succeed can strengthen recruitment, retention, morale, and organizational performance.

You do not need a large budget or a specialized team to make meaningful progress. Many of the ideas in this toolkit can be implemented through small, practical changes that fit your organization's size, culture, and capacity.

Whether you are just getting started or looking to strengthen existing practices, this guide offers practical strategies you can adapt to your workplace.

This Toolkit May Be Especially Helpful If You:

- Want to attract and retain talented employees.
- Are experiencing workforce shortages or turnover.
- Want to improve workplace culture and employee engagement.
- Are looking for practical ways to support employees with different backgrounds, experiences, and needs.
- Want to create more accessible and inclusive workplace practices.
- Are interested in strengthening opportunities for employee growth and advancement.
- Need ideas that are realistic for small businesses and nonprofits.

What You Will Find Inside:

This toolkit provides practical recommendations, examples, worksheets, and resources related to:

- Workplace culture and belonging
- Hiring and recruitment
- Professional growth and advancement
- Family-friendly workplace practices
- Fair pay and benefits
- Accessibility and disability inclusion
- Measuring progress over time
- The recommendations are organized into *Quick Wins*, *Next Steps*, and *Bigger Investments* so you can choose the approaches that best fit your organization.



How to Use This Toolkit

Every workplace is different.

A ten-person family-owned business will have different resources than a regional employer with hundreds of employees. This toolkit recognizes those differences and encourages employers to focus on practical actions that fit their capacity.

Throughout the toolkit, recommendations are organized into three categories:

Quick Wins

Ideas that require little financial investment and can often be implemented immediately.

Next Steps

Strategies that require planning, discussion, or modest resources.

Bigger Investments

Longer-term initiatives that may require additional staffing, budget, or infrastructure.

You may choose recommendations from all three categories. The goal is not to complete every item. The goal is to make steady progress toward a workplace where everyone has an opportunity to succeed.

Section 1: *Why Inclusion Matters*

The Business Case

Creating a workplace where people feel welcomed, respected, and supported is more than a moral value—it is a business strategy.

Organizations with inclusive cultures are often better positioned to recruit talent, retain employees, solve problems, and adapt to change. Employees who feel respected are more likely to stay with an organization, recommend it to others, and contribute their best ideas.

For small businesses, where every employee plays an important role, workplace culture can have a significant impact on productivity, customer satisfaction, and long-term success.

Inclusion Benefits Everyone

Inclusive workplaces do not benefit only one group of employees. Flexible scheduling helps caregivers, parents, older workers, and employees managing health concerns. Accessible workplaces support employees with disabilities while often improving experiences for customers and visitors. Clear promotion practices help reduce confusion and create transparency for all employees. When organizations focus on removing barriers, everyone benefits.

Real-World Example

A small accounting firm introduced flexible start and end times to help employees manage family responsibilities and commuting challenges. While the change was initially intended to support working parents, it also benefited employees taking college classes, caring for aging relatives, and managing medical appointments. Employee satisfaction improved, and turnover decreased.

Quick Wins	• Review your organization's values and mission. Add language that emphasizes respect, airness, and opportunity for all employees. • Ask employees what helps them feel included and supported. Include a few questions about workplace culture in staff meetings or anonymous surveys. • Ensure workplace policies apply fairly and consistently. Review attendance or scheduling policies to make sure they are applied the same way across departments.
Next Steps	• Conduct an employee engagement survey. Use a free online survey tool to gather feedback about communication, trust, and workplace culture, such as those found at https://positiveleader.com/culture-survey-toolkit/? • Identify one barrier that may be preventing employees from succeeding. Employees may report that meetings are scheduled at times that conflict with caregiving responsibilities.
Bigger Investments	• Develop a workplace inclusion plan. Set goals related to recruitment, retention, accessibility, and employee engagement. • Establish measurable goals related to culture and employee experience. Track employee retention rates, promotion rates, or survey results over time.

Bigger Investments

- Develop a workplace inclusion plan. Set goals related to recruitment, retention, accessibility, and employee engagement.
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Rhode Island Spotlight: Everyday Equity

Small Actions Can Create Meaningful Change



Creating a workplace where employees feel respected, supported, and valued does not always require major policy changes or large budgets. The United Way of Rhode Island's Everyday Equity video series highlights simple, practical ways employers can embed equity, belonging, accessibility, and inclusion into everyday workplace practices.

Topics explore how small actions can influence:

- Hiring and recruitment
- Workplace culture
- Leadership practices
- Communication
- Employee engagement
- Professional development

The series is designed to help employers understand that creating more equitable workplaces often begins with small, intentional changes that can be implemented immediately. You can find it at <https://youtu.be/jZGDUBYblqg?si=upm3gyNpUpcXIYZ0>.

Section 2: *Building a Workplace Where People Belong*

Why Belonging Matters

Belonging is the feeling that you are welcomed, respected, and valued for who you are. Employees who experience a sense of belonging are more likely to be engaged, productive, and committed to their workplace. They are also more likely to share ideas, collaborate effectively, and remain with an organization over time.

Belonging does not require everyone to think alike. In fact, strong organizations benefit from different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. Creating a culture of belonging begins with everyday actions.

Respectful Communication

Every employee deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Organizations can support respectful communication by:

- Establishing clear expectations for workplace behavior.
- Addressing inappropriate conduct consistently.
- Encouraging active listening.
- Promoting constructive disagreement and problem-solving.



Leaders play an important role in modeling these behaviors.

Example

A supervisor begins team meetings by encouraging employees to share ideas and ask questions. When disagreements arise, the supervisor focuses the discussion on solving the problem rather than assigning blame. Over time, employees become more comfortable speaking up and collaborating.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to an environment where employees feel comfortable asking questions, admitting mistakes, offering ideas, and raising concerns without fear of embarrassment or retaliation. Employees who feel psychologically safe are more likely to:

- Report problems early.
- Contribute innovative ideas.
- Participate in discussions.
- Seek help when needed.

Psychological safety is built through trust, consistency, and open communication.

Example

After a project deadline is missed, a manager asks the team what can be improved rather than focusing on who made a mistake. Employees openly discuss challenges and identify solutions that prevent similar issues in the future.

Intergenerational Workplaces

For the first time in history, many workplaces include employees from four or five generations. Different generations may have different communication styles, technology preferences, and workplace expectations.

Rather than viewing these differences as challenges, organizations can view them as opportunities for learning and growth. Encouraging mentorship across generations allows employees to share skills, knowledge, and perspectives.

Example

A newer employee helps a longtime colleague learn a new software platform, while the experienced employee shares industry knowledge and customer relationship strategies.

LGBTQ+ Inclusion

Small actions can help employees feel welcomed and respected. Examples include:

- Using an employee's chosen name.
- Respecting pronouns.
- Maintaining anti-harassment policies.
- Providing equal access to benefits and opportunities.



Employers do not need to become experts in every identity. They simply need to create an environment where all employees are treated fairly.

Example

An employer updates personnel records and email systems so employees can use their chosen names. This simple change helps employees feel respected and reduces confusion in workplace communications.

Disability Inclusion

Disability is often overlooked in workplace conversations about inclusion, despite affecting more than one in four adults in the United States.

People with disabilities continue to face barriers in employment, education, and economic opportunity. **Section 7** addresses this topic in more depth.

Section 3: *Finding and Hiring Talent*

Why Hiring Matters

Hiring is one of the most important decisions a business makes. Every job posting, interview, and hiring decision shapes the future of an organization. Small businesses often compete with larger employers for talent, making it important to create hiring practices that help attract the strongest candidates.

Inclusive hiring is not about lowering standards. It is about making sure qualified candidates have a fair opportunity to be considered.

Many talented individuals are overlooked because of unnecessary barriers in job descriptions, recruitment practices, or interview processes. Removing these barriers can help employers access a broader talent pool while improving hiring outcomes.

Expanding Your Recruitment Efforts

Many employers rely on the same recruitment methods year after year. While these approaches may feel familiar, they can unintentionally limit who learns about available opportunities.

Consider building relationships with:

- Community colleges and universities
- Workforce development organizations
- Veterans' programs
- Disability employment organizations
- Professional associations
- Community-based organizations serving diverse populations

Building these relationships can help employers connect with qualified candidates who may not otherwise learn about available opportunities.

Example

A manufacturing company partners with a local community college and a workforce development organization to promote open positions. As a result, the company receives applications from candidates with relevant technical training who had not previously considered careers in manufacturing.

Writing Inclusive Job Descriptions

Job descriptions are often a candidate's first impression of an organization. Clear and welcoming job descriptions can encourage a wider range of applicants to apply.

Consider:

- Using plain language
- Focusing on essential qualifications
- Avoiding unnecessary jargon
- Using AI or online tools like <https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/> to remove gender bias from job descriptions and employment ads
- Clearly describing job responsibilities
- Including salary ranges when possible
- Sharing information about workplace flexibility and benefits

Whenever possible, focus on the skills needed to perform the job rather than requiring credentials that may not be necessary.

Skills-Based Hiring

Many workers gain valuable skills through community college programs, military service, apprenticeships, workforce training programs, volunteer work, and on-the-job experience.

Skills-based hiring focuses on what candidates can do rather than where they learned to do it. Employers may want to consider:

- Work samples
- Practical exercises
- Skills demonstrations
- Problem-solving scenarios

This approach can help identify talented candidates who may have taken nontraditional career paths.

Conducting Effective Interviews

Interviews should help employers understand whether a candidate can succeed in a role. Structured interviews often lead to better hiring decisions because every candidate is asked similar questions and evaluated using consistent criteria.

Consider:

- Asking all candidates the same core questions
- Focusing on job-related skills
- Using practical examples and scenarios
- Avoiding assumptions based on appearance, background, age, disability status, or family circumstances



The goal is to identify potential, not perfection.

Supporting Young People and Career Exploration

Employers can help build future talent pipelines by introducing young people to different career paths. Examples include:

- Job shadowing
- Career fairs
- Workplace tours
- Internships
- Guest speaking opportunities

These activities help young people explore careers while helping employers build awareness of their industry.

Example

A healthcare provider hosts high school students for a one-day job shadowing program. Students learn about clinical and non-clinical careers, while the employer builds awareness of future workforce opportunities.

Quick Wins	• Review job descriptions for unnecessary requirements. • Include salary ranges in job postings. • Build relationships with one local workforce partner.
Next Steps	• Introduce skills-based hiring practices. • Offer job shadowing or internship opportunities. • Review the accessibility of your application process.
Bigger Investments	• Develop apprenticeship programs. • Create long-term workforce development partnerships. • Establish paid internship programs.

Section 4: *Helping Employees Learn and Grow*

Why Growth Matters

Most employees want opportunities to learn, develop new skills, and advance in their careers. When employees can see a future within an organization, they are more likely to stay, remain engaged, and contribute their best work. Professional growth does not always mean promotion. It can also include learning new skills, taking on new responsibilities, or exploring different career paths.

Mentorship

Research consistently shows that employees who have mentors are more likely to feel supported, develop new skills, and advance in their careers. Mentorship can be especially valuable for employees who may not have access to professional networks or role models in their field. It is one of the most effective and affordable ways to support employee growth. A mentor can provide:

- Guidance
- Encouragement
- Career advice
- Professional connections
- Problem-solving support



Example

A small accounting firm pairs new employees with experienced staff members for monthly check-ins. New hires gain confidence more quickly and report feeling more connected to the organization.

Sponsorship

While mentors provide advice, sponsors actively advocate for employees. Sponsors may:

- Recommend employees for opportunities
- Encourage participation in leadership roles
- Support advancement discussions
- Help employees gain visibility

Organizations can encourage leaders to identify and support emerging talent throughout the workplace.

Professional Development

Professional development helps employees build confidence and prepare for future opportunities. Examples include:

- Industry conferences
- Certifications
- Technical training
- Leadership programs
- Public speaking workshops
- Financial literacy training
- Negotiation skills training

When possible, provide employees with dedicated time to participate in professional development activities.

Learning Styles and Accessibility

People learn in different ways. Whenever possible, provide learning opportunities through multiple formats, including:

- Written materials
- Videos
- Group discussions
- Hands-on activities
- Self-paced learning

Accessible learning environments help all employees participate fully.

Career Conversations

Many employees leave organizations because they do not understand what opportunities are available to them. Managers can help by having regular conversations about:

- Career goals
- Professional interests
- Skills employees would like to develop
- Future opportunities

These conversations can help employees see a path forward.

Transparent Advancement Practices

Employees are more likely to trust promotion decisions when expectations are clear. Consider communicating:

- Skills required for advancement
- Promotion processes
- Leadership expectations
- Available development opportunities

Transparency helps employees prepare for future opportunities and reduces confusion.

Example

A nonprofit organization creates a simple career pathway chart showing the skills and experience needed for each role. Employees report a better understanding of advancement opportunities and professional expectations.

Quick Wins	• Discuss career goals during performance reviews. • Connect employees with mentors. • Share available training opportunities.
Next Steps	• Create individual development plans. • Offer professional development stipends. • Establish regular career conversations.
Bigger Investments	• Create leadership development programs. • Develop succession planning processes. • Establish formal mentorship or sponsorship programs.

Section 5: *Supporting Employees Through Life's Changes*



Why Support Matters

Employees bring their whole lives to work. At different points in life, employees may be raising children, caring for aging parents, managing health conditions, pursuing education, or navigating major life transitions.

Workplaces that recognize these realities are often better able to retain talented employees and build long-term loyalty. Supporting employees through life's changes is not simply a benefit for workers. It is also a smart investment in recruitment, retention, and organizational culture.

Flexible Scheduling

Flexibility looks different in every workplace. For some employers, flexibility may mean remote work options. For others, it may mean predictable scheduling, shift-swapping opportunities, or adjusted start and end times.

Whenever possible, employers should provide employees with advance notice of schedules and clear expectations regarding time off and schedule changes. Predictable scheduling helps employees manage transportation, childcare, eldercare, education, and other responsibilities.

Example

A retail business begins posting employee schedules two weeks in advance and allows staff to swap shifts through a supervisor-approved process. Employees report less scheduling stress and fewer last-minute absences.

Supporting Caregivers

Many employees provide care for children, aging parents, spouses, or family members with disabilities. Organizations can support caregivers by:

- Offering flexibility when possible
- Providing clear leave policies
- Encouraging open communication
- Connecting employees with community resources

Caregiving responsibilities affect employees of all genders, ages, and backgrounds.

Pregnancy and Parenting

Under Rhode Island law, pregnant employees and job applicants are protected from workplace discrimination, entitled to reasonable workplace accommodations, and guaranteed job-protected leave for pregnancy, childbirth, and related conditions.

Whether your business is in RI or not, supporting employees during pregnancy and early parenthood helps businesses retain experienced workers and build positive workplace cultures. Examples of support include:

- Reasonable workplace accommodations
- Flexible scheduling
- Private lactation spaces
- Clear communication about available benefits
- Return-to-work planning



Many accommodations cost little or nothing to implement.

Childcare and Family Supports

Childcare remains one of the largest expenses many families face. While not every business can provide childcare assistance, employers may wish to consider:

- Flexible schedules
- Childcare referral resources
- Childcare stipends
- Emergency childcare support
- Family-friendly workplace policies

Even small supports can make a meaningful difference.

Employee Wellbeing

Employee wellbeing affects productivity, engagement, and retention. Organizations can support wellbeing by encouraging employees to:

- Take earned time off
- Use available benefits
- Access mental health resources
- Maintain healthy work-life boundaries



Employees who feel supported are more likely to remain engaged and committed to their work.

Paid Leave

Employees may need time away from work for a variety of reasons, including:

- Welcoming a new child
- Caring for a family member
- Recovering from illness
- Managing significant life events



Employers should ensure employees understand available state and federal leave protections. Organizations with greater capacity may choose to offer additional paid leave benefits beyond legal requirements.

Rhode Island's Paid Sick & Safe Leave law allows workers to accrue 1 hour of leave for every 35 hours worked for personal illness, medical appointments, or to address domestic violence/stalking. Employers with 18 or more employees must provide paid leave. Employers with 17 or fewer employees must provide the time off, but it can be unpaid.

Example

A professional services firm introduces quarterly wellness check-ins and regularly reminds employees about available mental health resources. Employee engagement scores improve, and turnover declines over the following year.

Tracking the Long-Term Impact of Leave and Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible schedules, caregiving leave, parental leave, and other workplace supports help employees remain attached to the workforce during important life transitions. These benefits can improve retention, reduce turnover, and strengthen employee well-being.

At the same time, employers should periodically review compensation and advancement practices to ensure that employees who utilize these supports are not unintentionally disadvantaged over time. Research has found that career interruptions, reduced schedules, and caregiving responsibilities can sometimes contribute to lower wages, slower promotion rates, or reduced access to leadership opportunities, even when performance remains strong.

Employers can help reduce these unintended consequences by:

- Reviewing compensation and promotion decisions regularly for potential disparities.
- Ensuring employees returning from leave have access to professional development and advancement opportunities.
- Applying performance evaluation criteria consistently.
- Monitoring whether employees utilizing flexible work arrangements receive the same opportunities for high-visibility assignments and career growth as their peers.

Supporting employees through life's changes and maintaining fair compensation practices should work hand in hand. Employers may find it helpful to revisit these issues during annual compensation reviews, as outlined in Section 6 and Appendix E.

Quick Wins	• Review leave and scheduling policies. • Ensure employees understand available benefits. • Encourage supervisors to discuss flexibility options.
Next Steps	• Improve scheduling practices. • Expand caregiver supports. • Develop return-to-work plans for employees on extended leave.
Bigger Investments	• Childcare assistance programs. • Expanded paid family leave. • Comprehensive employee wellbeing initiatives.

Section 6: *Fair Pay and Benefits*



Why Compensation Matters

Fair pay and benefits are key factors in attracting, retaining, and motivating employees. Compensation is about more than a paycheck. Employees want to know that their work is valued and that compensation decisions are fair, transparent, and based on objective criteria. Fair pay practices help businesses attract talent, retain employees, and build trust within the workplace.

When employees understand how pay decisions are made, they are more likely to feel respected and engaged.

Understanding the Wage Gap

In Rhode Island as of 2026, women working full-time earn approximately 83 cents for every dollar earned by men working full-time. While the causes of wage disparities are complex, research shows that differences in pay can accumulate over time and affect long-term financial security. The impact extends beyond individual workers. Lower earnings can affect a person's ability to:

- Afford housing
- Pay for childcare
- Build emergency savings
- Save for retirement
- Invest in education and training

The wage gap is even larger for many women of color and exists across a variety of occupations.

Rhode Island Snapshot

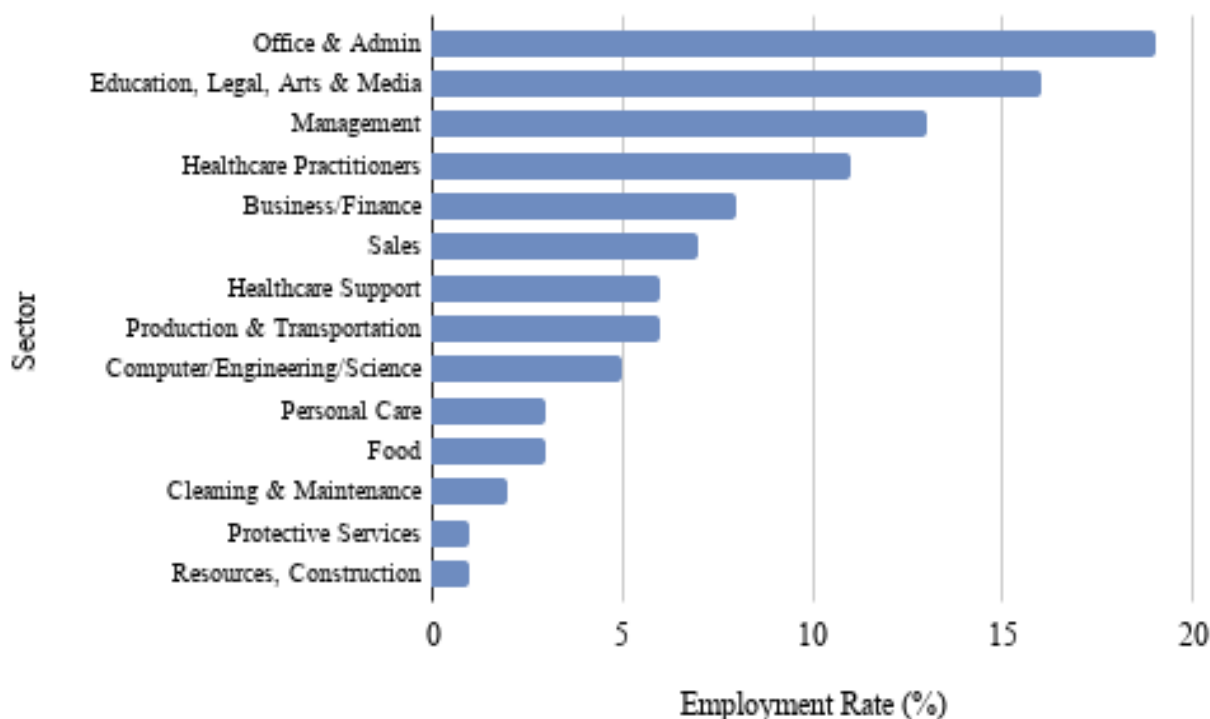


While Rhode Island has made progress, many workers still face barriers to opportunity and economic security. Women working full-time in Rhode Island earn about **83 cents for every dollar earned by men working full-time**. In practical terms, men working full-time typically earn about **21% more than women**.

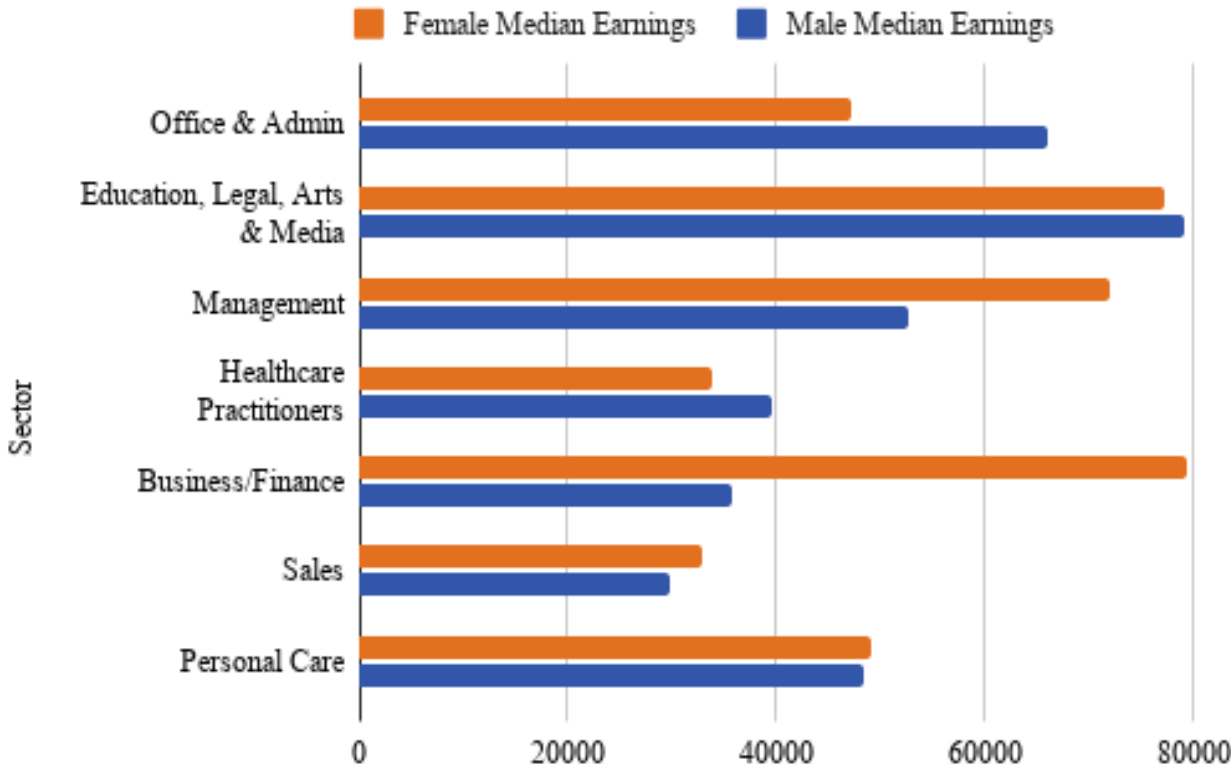
The wage gap is even larger for many women of color, meaning some workers face multiple barriers based on both gender and race. Pay differences also exist across occupations. For example:

- Women working in management occupations earn a median salary of approximately \$84,249, compared with \$102,305 for men.
- Women working in business and finance occupations earn approximately \$75,245, compared with \$91,995 for men.
- Women working in management occupations earn a median salary of approximately \$84,249, compared with \$102,305 for men.
- Women working in business and finance occupations earn approximately \$75,245, compared with \$91,995 for men.
- Women working in computer science, engineering, and science occupations earn approximately \$83,694, compared with \$99,270 for men.

Employment Rate (%) vs. Sector



Female Median Earnings & Male Median Earnings



Creating workplaces where people have fair access to opportunity, advancement, and compensation benefits employees, businesses, and the Rhode Island economy as a whole.

Pay Transparency

Pay transparency helps employees understand compensation expectations and can reduce confusion about how pay decisions are made.

Employers may wish to consider:

- Including salary ranges in job postings
- Sharing pay ranges for existing positions
- Explaining how compensation decisions are made
- Providing employees with information about advancement opportunities

Transparency helps employees make informed decisions and can reduce misunderstandings.

Example

A small business begins including salary ranges in job postings and develops written pay bands for existing positions. Managers report spending less time negotiating compensation, and applicants arrive with clearer expectations.

Starting Pay Matters

Research shows that starting salaries can influence earnings for years to come.

Employers can promote fairness by:

- Evaluating candidates based on skills and experience
- Using market data to establish compensation ranges
- Avoiding assumptions based on previous earnings
- Applying compensation practices consistently

The goal is to ensure that compensation reflects the value of the position and the qualifications of the candidate.

Reviewing Compensation Practices

Even well-intentioned employers can develop pay disparities over time.

When reviewing compensation practices, employers should pay particular attention to employees who have taken parental leave, caregiving leave, medical leave, military leave, or who have transitioned to part-time or flexible work arrangements. These employees may experience slower wage growth, reduced bonus opportunities, fewer advancement opportunities, or delayed promotions over time—even when these outcomes are unintended. Regular reviews can help identify and address patterns before they become long-term disparities.

- Starting salaries
- Raises
- Bonuses
- Promotions
- Access to overtime opportunities
- Leadership compensation

Small businesses do not need sophisticated software to begin this process. Even a simple spreadsheet review can help identify trends.

Example

A business owner reviews employee compensation annually and discovers that long-term employees in similar positions are earning significantly different wages. After evaluating experience, responsibilities, and performance, the owner develops a plan to address the discrepancies over time.

A Rhode Island Snapshot



The Rhode Island Fair Pay Act ensures equal pay for “comparable work” regardless of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, or country of ancestral origin. It prohibits asking applicants for wage history, mandates pay transparency, and stops employers from punishing employees who discuss their compensation.

Key provisions include:

- Comparable Work Standard where employers must pay equal wages for work that requires substantially similar skill, effort, and responsibility under similar working conditions.
- Permissible Pay Differences are those that can be objectively justified by seniority or merit system, production based earnings, education/training, or geographic location.
- Salary History Ban whereby employers CANNOT ask about an applicant’s wage history prior to an employment offer.
- Wage Transparency whereby employers must provide wage ranges for employment roles to applicants and current employees upon request.

Benefits Matter Too

Compensation includes more than wages. Employees often consider benefits when deciding whether to accept a job or remain with an organization.

Benefits may include:

- Health insurance
- Retirement plans
- Paid time off
- Flexible scheduling
- Professional development opportunities
- Wellness programs
- Employee assistance programs

Small businesses may not be able to offer every benefit, but even modest investments can improve employee satisfaction and retention.

Financial Wellness

Financial stress affects employees at every income level.

Employers can support financial wellbeing by providing access to:

- Retirement planning resources
- Financial education workshops
- Employee assistance programs
- Information about public benefits and tax credits
- Student loan and savings resources



Helping employees strengthen their financial wellbeing benefits both workers and employers.

Example

A company partners with a local financial institution to offer lunchtime workshops on budgeting, retirement planning, and debt management. Employees report increased confidence in managing their finances.

Quick Wins	• Include salary ranges in job postings. • Review compensation policies for consistency. • Ensure employees understand available benefits.
Next Steps	• Conduct a basic compensation review. • Develop written pay ranges for positions. • Provide managers with guidance on compensation decisions.
Bigger Investments	• Conduct a comprehensive pay equity analysis. • Expand employee benefit offerings. • Develop long-term compensation and retention strategies.

- Include salary ranges in job postings.
- Review compensation policies for consistency.
- Ensure employees understand available benefits.

Section 7: *Accessibility and Disability Inclusion*

Why Accessibility Matters

Disability is a natural part of the human experience. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than one in four adults in the United States lives with a disability. Many people will experience a disability themselves at some point in their lives or care for a family member with a disability. Yet people with disabilities continue to face barriers in employment, education, transportation, housing, healthcare, and community life.

Accessibility is not only about compliance with laws. It is about creating environments where people can fully participate and contribute. Accessible workplaces often benefit everyone. Features such as flexible work arrangements, clear communication, ramps, captions, and accessible technology can improve experiences for employees, customers, and visitors alike.

Understanding Disability

Disabilities can be visible or invisible. Examples include:

- Mobility disabilities
- Blindness or low vision
- Deafness or hearing loss
- Intellectual disabilities
- Learning disabilities
- Mental health conditions
- Chronic illnesses
- Neurodivergence, including autism and ADHD



Not all disabilities are immediately apparent, and employees may choose whether or not to disclose a disability. Employers should focus on creating environments where employees feel comfortable requesting support when needed.

The Business Case for Accessibility

Accessible workplaces can help businesses:

- Attract a broader pool of talent
- Improve employee retention
- Increase productivity
- Enhance customer experiences
- Reduce barriers to participation
- Strengthen workplace culture

Accessibility improvements often benefit many people, not just those with disabilities.

Example

A business begins adding captions to training videos to support employees who are deaf or hard of hearing. Managers later discover that employees working in noisy environments and employees whose first language is not English also find the captions helpful.

Nothing About Us Without Us

A guiding principle of the disability rights movement is:

“Nothing about us without us.”

This means that decisions affecting people with disabilities should include input from people with disabilities. Employers do not need to have all the answers. They can learn by listening to employees, job candidates, customers, and community members with lived experience.

Example

Before purchasing new workplace software, a company invites employees with disabilities to test the system and provide feedback. Their input helps identify accessibility issues before implementation.

Accessible Communication

Clear communication helps everyone. Consider:

- Using plain language whenever possible
- Providing materials in accessible formats
- Using captions for videos
- Describing important visual information
- Sharing meeting materials in advance
- Making digital documents accessible to screen readers



Accessible communication can improve understanding, participation, and engagement across the workforce.

Example

A nonprofit begins providing agendas and presentation materials before staff meetings. Employees report feeling better prepared and more comfortable participating in discussions.

Accessible Hiring and Recruitment

Accessibility should be considered throughout the hiring process.

Employers can:

- Include accommodation information in job postings
- Offer multiple ways to apply
- Ensure online applications are accessible
- Provide accommodations during interviews
- Train hiring managers on accessibility and inclusion

The goal is to ensure candidates can demonstrate their skills and qualifications without unnecessary barriers.

Example

A candidate requests interview questions in writing due to a disability that affects information processing. The employer provides the questions in advance, allowing the candidate to fully demonstrate their qualifications.

Workplace Accommodations

A workplace accommodation is a change that helps an employee perform their job successfully. Examples include:

- Modified schedules
- Flexible work arrangements
- Assistive technology
- Ergonomic equipment
- Alternative communication methods
- Modified training materials
- Changes to workspace layout

Many accommodations cost little or nothing to implement. Employers should focus on finding practical solutions that allow employees to succeed.

Example

An employee with a back injury requests an adjustable desk. The accommodation allows the employee to work comfortably and continue performing their job effectively.

Universal Design

Universal design means creating environments that work well for as many people as possible from the beginning. Rather than waiting for someone to request an accommodation, employers can proactively design spaces, technology, and processes that are accessible to a wide range of users.

Examples include:

- Automatic doors
- Adjustable workstations
- Accessible websites
- Captioned videos
- Flexible meeting formats

Universal design often reduces the need for individual accommodations.

Accessibility and Inclusion: Connected but Distinct

Accessibility is an important part of creating an inclusive workplace, but it should not be treated as interchangeable with broader workplace culture or inclusion efforts.

Organizations may find it helpful to evaluate hiring practices, communications, policies, and employee experiences through both an accessibility and inclusion lens. However, accessibility also requires focused attention on physical spaces, technology, workplace equipment, and accommodations. These issues can be overlooked when accessibility is addressed only as part of broader workplace culture discussions.

The most effective organizations recognize that accessibility and inclusion are interconnected goals that require both shared and distinct strategies. By evaluating each intentionally, employers can create workplaces that are both welcoming and fully usable for everyone.

Accessibility Audits

Employers may find it helpful to incorporate accessibility reviews into broader workplace culture, hiring, and inclusion assessments rather than treating them as separate initiatives.

Organizations that want to improve accessibility may wish to conduct an accessibility review of:

- Physical spaces
- Technology systems
- Websites
- Policies and procedures
- Hiring practices
- Employee training materials

The purpose is not to identify every issue at once, but to develop a plan for continuous improvement.

Example

A small business conducts a basic accessibility review and discovers that its online job application cannot be completed using a keyboard alone. Updating the application improves accessibility for both applicants and current employees.

Employers may find it helpful to incorporate accessibility reviews into broader workplace culture, hiring, and inclusion assessments rather than treating them as separate initiatives.

Connecting Accessibility Reviews with Workplace Inclusion Efforts

Many employers approach accessibility reviews and workplace inclusion assessments as separate projects. In practice, they often overlap significantly. For example, when reviewing hiring practices, employers can simultaneously evaluate whether job descriptions are inclusive, application systems are accessible, and recruitment efforts reach a broad range of candidates.

Similarly, reviews of workplace communications can assess both accessibility for people with disabilities and language access for multilingual employees. Evaluating physical spaces can help identify barriers affecting employees, customers, and visitors with a variety of needs.

Combining these efforts can save time, reduce duplication, and provide a more complete understanding of how employees experience the workplace. Rather than asking whether a workplace is accessible or inclusive, employers can ask a broader question: **“What barriers might prevent people from fully participating and succeeding here?”**

This approach encourages organizations to consider accessibility, belonging, equity, language access, workplace culture, and employee experience as interconnected parts of a single goal: creating workplaces where everyone has the opportunity to contribute and thrive.

Building a Culture of Inclusion

Accessibility is not only about buildings and technology. It is also about workplace culture. Employees should feel comfortable:

- Requesting accommodations
- Sharing concerns
- Asking questions
- Participating in workplace activities
- Contributing ideas



Leaders play an important role in setting the tone and demonstrating that accessibility is everyone’s responsibility.

Quick Wins	• Add accommodation language to event invitations. “Please let us know if you need accommodations to participate.” • Caption workplace videos. Enable automatic captions for virtual meetings and recorded trainings. • Review commonly used documents for accessibility. Ensure PDFs can be read by screen readers.
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Next Steps	• Include disability inclusion in employee training. Discuss respectful language, accommodations, and accessibility best practices. • Review hiring and onboarding processes. Identify potential barriers for applicants and new employees. • Gather feedback from employees with disabilities. Include accessibility questions in employee surveys.
Bigger Investments	• Conduct a formal accessibility audit. Evaluate facilities, technology, communications, and policies. • Develop an accessibility improvement plan. Establish priorities, timelines, and budget considerations. • Invest in accessible technology and infrastructure. Upgrade websites, software, entrances, or meeting spaces to improve access.

Real-World Example

A small professional services firm begins by adding captions to meetings, improving document accessibility, and updating accommodation procedures. Over time, the company reviews its hiring process, website, and office space. What began as a few small changes evolves into a culture where employees feel comfortable requesting support and participating fully in workplace life.

Section 8: *Workplace Inclusion Scorecard*

How to Use This Scorecard

This scorecard is designed to help employers assess their current practices and identify opportunities for improvement. It is not intended as a pass-or-fail evaluation. Rather, it provides a snapshot of where your organization is today and where additional attention may be needed.

For each statement, rate your organization on a scale of:

Score	Description
1	Not Yet in Place
2	Beginning
3	Partially in Place
4	Mostly in Place
5	Fully in Place

Leadership & Culture

Statement	Score
1. Leaders communicate the organization's values and expectations clearly.	_____
2. Leaders model respectful behavior and hold others accountable.	_____
3. Employees feel comfortable sharing ideas, concerns, and feedback.	_____
4. Workplace policies are applied consistently and fairly.	_____
5. The organization regularly seeks employee feedback and acts on what it learns.	_____
6. Employees have opportunities to participate in decision-making and workplace improvements.	_____
7. Leaders demonstrate a commitment to accessibility, belonging, and inclusion.	_____
8. Leadership reflects the diversity of the workforce and the community the organization serves.	_____
9. The organization actively develops leadership pathways for employees from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.	_____

Leadership & Culture Score: _____ / 45

Recruitment, Hiring & Advancement

Statement	Score
1. Job descriptions focus on essential qualifications and skills.	_____
2. Recruitment efforts reach a broad range of candidates.	_____
3. Application and interview processes are accessible.	_____
4. Hiring decisions are based on objective, job-related criteria.	_____
5. Employees have equitable access to professional development opportunities.	_____
6. Promotion criteria are transparent and consistently applied.	_____
7. Mentorship or sponsorship opportunities are available to employees.	_____
8. Advancement data is reviewed for potential disparities.	_____

Recruitment, Hiring & Advancement Score: _____ / 40

Workplace Policies & Benefits

Statement	Score
1. Flexible work arrangements are available when feasible.	_____
2. Employees have access to paid leave benefits.	_____
3. Workplace policies support employees with caregiving responsibilities.	_____
4. Employees understand how to request accommodations.	_____
5. Benefits are administered fairly and consistently.	_____
6. Policies are reviewed regularly to ensure they meet employee needs.	_____
7. Workplace expectations are communicated clearly.	_____
8. Employees returning from leave receive support and equitable opportunities.	_____

Workplace Policies & Benefits Score: _____ / 40

Accessibility & Inclusion

Statement	Score
1. Physical workspaces are accessible to employees and visitors with disabilities.	_____
2. Digital tools, websites, and documents are accessible.	_____
3. Employees know how to request accommodations.	_____
4. Accommodation requests are handled promptly and respectfully.	_____
5. Accessibility is considered when planning meetings, events, and communications.	_____
6. Safety procedures and emergency information are accessible.	_____
7. Key workplace information is available in languages commonly spoken by employees.	_____
8. Employees with disabilities are included in workplace planning and decision-making.	_____

Accessibility & Inclusion Score: _____ / 40

Belonging & Employee Experience

Statement	Score
1. Employees feel respected and valued.	_____
2. Different perspectives are welcomed and encouraged.	_____
3. Employees feel comfortable reporting concerns without fear of retaliation.	_____
4. Team members collaborate effectively across differences.	_____
5. Managers foster psychological safety.	_____
6. Employees feel they have opportunities to contribute and grow.	_____
7. Workplace celebrations, communications, and events are inclusive.	_____
8. Employees report a sense of belonging within the organization.	_____
Belonging & Employee Experience Score: _____ / 40	

Compensation & Equity

Statement	Score
1. Compensation practices are reviewed regularly.	_____
2. Employees performing similar work are compensated fairly.	_____
3. Salary ranges are applied consistently.	_____
4. Raises and bonuses are awarded using clear criteria.	_____
5. Compensation reviews consider potential disparities related to race, gender, disability, caregiving responsibilities, or other factors.	_____
6. Employees who utilize leave, flexible schedules, or accommodations are not disadvantaged in compensation or advancement.	_____
7. Promotion decisions are reviewed for fairness and consistency.	_____
8. The organization takes action when disparities are identified.	_____
Compensation & Equity Score: _____ / 40	

Total Score

Add all six category scores:

Leadership & Culture _____

Recruitment, Hiring & Advancement _____

Workplace Policies & Benefits _____

Accessibility & Inclusion _____

Belonging & Employee Experience _____

Compensation & Equity _____

Overall Score: _____ / 245

Reflection Questions

1. Which areas received the highest scores?
2. Which areas present the greatest opportunities for improvement?
3. What is one action your organization could take within the next six months?
4. What longer-term goals should be incorporated into organizational planning?

Remember: creating an inclusive workplace is an ongoing process. Progress is often achieved through consistent, incremental improvements rather than large-scale changes all at once.

Action Planning Worksheet

What are our strongest areas?

What are our biggest opportunities for improvement?

What is one change we can make in the next three months?

What is one larger goal we would like to achieve in the next year?

Who will be responsible for leading this work?

When will we review our progress?

Remember

You do not need to improve everything at once.

Choose one or two meaningful actions, build momentum, and celebrate progress along the way. Small changes, implemented consistently, can have a lasting impact on employees, customers, and your organization.

Appendix A: Rhode Island Resources

The following organizations provide information, services, training, and support related to workforce development, accessibility, employee wellbeing, and workplace inclusion.

Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI)

Offers workforce training, certificate programs, apprenticeships, and continuing education opportunities.

Diversity and Inclusion Professionals (DAIP)

Diversity and Inclusion Professionals (DAIP) is a Rhode Island-based network of professionals committed to building workplaces where people from all backgrounds can thrive. Through our consultancy arm, Diversity Access and Inclusion Partners, DAIP provides organizational consultation using our 5D Framework (Discover, Diagnose, Design, Deploy, Sustain), along with sector-specific engagement packages for businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and educational institutions. DAIP also offers:

- Professional development
- Peer learning
- Resource sharing
- Networking
- Workplace inclusion education

DAIP co-hosts the Annual Inclusion Conference with RI SHRM. Small businesses may benefit from DAIP's practical guidance, educational programs, and opportunities to learn from employers across industries.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

Provides federal guidance on workplace discrimination laws and reasonable accommodations.

Governor's Commission on Disabilities

Provides information on accessibility, disability rights, and inclusion initiatives throughout Rhode Island.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

Offers free guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues.

Local Credit Unions and Community Banks

Many offer financial literacy workshops, retirement planning assistance, budgeting tools, and homeownership education.

RAMP Real Access Motivates Progress

RAMP works to advance accessibility, disability inclusion, and equitable opportunities throughout Rhode Island. The organization provides training, education, technical assistance, and resources that help employers identify barriers and create more accessible workplaces.

Employers interested in improving accessibility practices, disability inclusion, and workplace accommodations may find RAMP's resources particularly valuable.

Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights

Investigates employment discrimination complaints and provides information about workplace rights and responsibilities.

Rhode Island Department of Labor & Training (DLT)

Provides workforce training programs, labor market information, apprenticeship resources, and employment services.

Rhode Island Parent Information Network (RIPIN)

Provides resources, support, and advocacy for people with disabilities and their families.

Rhode Island Pride

Provides education, advocacy, and community resources that support LGBTQ+ individuals and families.

Skills for Rhode Island's Future

Connects employers with qualified job candidates and workforce development opportunities.

Women's Fund of Rhode Island

Provides research, advocacy, leadership development programs, career advancement resources, and workplace equity tools. Programs include:

- Women's Policy Institute
- Salary Negotiation Workshops
- Elevate Your Career
- Career Circles
- Workplace Equity Resources

Appendix B: Sample Stay Interview Questions

Stay interviews help employers understand why employees remain with an organization and what improvements may help retain talent.

Consider asking:

About Their Experience

1. What do you enjoy most about working here?
2. What motivates you to stay with our organization?
3. What part of your job is most rewarding?

About Growth and Development

1. Do you feel you have opportunities to learn and grow?
2. Are there skills you would like to develop?
3. Is there anything we can do to better support your professional goals?

About Workplace Culture

1. Do you feel respected and valued?
2. Do you feel comfortable sharing ideas and concerns?
3. What helps you feel a sense of belonging at work?

About Improvement Opportunities

1. What is one thing we could do to improve your experience?
2. Have you ever considered leaving? If so, why?
3. What would make this an even better place to work?

Appendix C: Sample Employee Survey Questions

Employee surveys can help organizations understand workplace culture and identify opportunities for improvement.

Rate each statement on a scale of 1-5:

1 = Strongly Disagree 5 = Strongly Agree

Workplace Culture

- ☐ I feel respected at work.
- ☐ I feel comfortable sharing ideas.
- ☐ My contributions are valued.
- ☐ I feel a sense of belonging.

Communication

- ☐ Communication from leadership is clear.
- ☐ I receive useful feedback.
- ☐ My manager listens to my concerns.

Growth and Development

- ☐ I understand opportunities for advancement.
- ☐ I have opportunities to learn new skills.
- ☐ I receive support for professional growth.

Accessibility and Inclusion

- ☐ I know how to request accommodations if needed.
- ☐ Workplace communications are accessible.
- ☐ People from different backgrounds are treated fairly.

Wellbeing

- ☐ I am able to maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- ☐ I understand available benefits and resources.
- ☐ My wellbeing is supported by the organization.

Open-Ended Questions

What do we do well?

What could we improve?

What is one change you would recommend?

Appendix D: Accessibility Quick Check

This checklist can help organizations identify opportunities to improve accessibility.

Physical Space

- ☐ Entrances are accessible.
- ☐ Meeting rooms are accessible.
- ☐ Restrooms are accessible.
- ☐ Parking includes accessible spaces.
- ☐ Signage is easy to read.

Communication

- ☐ Important information is written in plain language.
- ☐ Videos include captions.
- ☐ Meeting materials are shared in advance.
- ☐ Employees know how to request accommodations.

Technology

- ☐ Websites are accessible.
- ☐ Online applications are accessible.
- ☐ Documents can be read by screen readers.
- ☐ Virtual meetings include captioning options.

Policies and Practices

- ☐ Accommodation procedures are documented.
- ☐ Accessibility is considered during hiring.
- ☐ Employees receive information about accommodations.
- ☐ Feedback regarding accessibility is welcomed.

Appendix E: Annual Compensation Review Worksheet

Purpose

Regular compensation reviews help organizations identify and address potential pay disparities before they become long-term problems. Compensation reviews are not only about compliance—they are an opportunity to ensure that pay, promotion, and advancement practices align with organizational values and support employee retention.

This worksheet can help employers evaluate whether employees performing similar work are compensated fairly and whether workplace policies are producing unintended disparities over time.

Step 1: Gather Information

Collect relevant information for employees performing similar work, including:

- Job title
- Job responsibilities
- Years of experience
- Education or certifications
- Performance evaluations
- Current salary or hourly wage
- Bonus or incentive compensation
- Promotion history
- Employment status (full-time, part-time, temporary, etc.)

When possible, review information across different employee groups, including:

- Gender
- Race and ethnicity
- Age
- Disability status (when voluntarily disclosed and appropriate to review)
- Employees who have taken parental, caregiving, medical, military, or disability-related leave
- Employees utilizing flexible schedules, hybrid arrangements, or reduced-hour schedules

Step 2: Look for Patterns

Review the information and consider the following questions:

- Are employees performing similar work paid similarly?
- Are salary ranges being applied consistently?
- Are raises applied consistently?
- Are bonuses or incentive compensation distributed fairly?
- Are promotion opportunities available to all employees?
- Are there unexplained compensation differences between employees performing comparable work?
- Are compensation decisions documented and based on objective criteria?
- Are employees who have taken parental, caregiving, medical, military, or disability-related leave advancing at similar rates as comparable employees?
- Are employees utilizing flexible schedules, hybrid work arrangements, or part-time schedules experiencing unexplained differences in compensation, bonuses, or promotion opportunities?
- Have any compensation disparities emerged following extended leaves of absence or schedule changes?
- Are employees returning from leave receiving equitable access to professional development, high-visibility assignments, and advancement opportunities?
- Are employees who receive workplace accommodations experiencing similar opportunities for growth and advancement as their peers?

Step 3: Review Policies and Practices

Consider whether organizational policies may unintentionally contribute to compensation disparities. Questions to consider:

- Are starting salaries determined using clear, consistent criteria?
- Are salary negotiations handled consistently?
- Are promotion criteria transparent and communicated to employees?
- Are performance evaluation processes applied consistently across teams?
- Are employees aware of opportunities for advancement?
- Do flexible work arrangements affect eligibility for raises, bonuses, leadership development, or promotions?

- Are employees discouraged—formally or informally—from taking leave or requesting accommodations because of perceived career consequences?
- Are compensation decisions reviewed by more than one person when appropriate?

Step 4: Take Action

If potential disparities are identified:

1. Investigate the causes.
2. Correct compensation differences when appropriate.
3. Review policies that may contribute to disparities.
4. Train managers on equitable compensation and promotion practices.
5. Establish timelines for corrective action.
6. Monitor progress during future compensation reviews.

Notes and Observations

Remember

Compensation equity is an ongoing process, not a one-time review. Pay disparities often emerge gradually through routine decisions related to hiring, raises, promotions, leave, flexible work arrangements, and access to career development opportunities.

Regular reviews help organizations identify patterns early, strengthen employee trust, improve retention, and ensure that all employees have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Appendix F: Sources

This toolkit references:

- U.S. Census and American Consumer Survey data
- Wage gap data
- Mentoring research
- RI employment laws
- Disability Statistics

Final Thought

Creating a workplace where people feel respected, supported, and able to succeed is an ongoing process. The goal is not perfection. The goal is progress.

By taking small, intentional steps over time, organizations can build workplaces that benefit employees, customers, and communities alike.

Acknowledgements

Women's Fund of Rhode Island extends its sincere appreciation to the individuals and organizations whose expertise, collaboration, and commitment helped make this toolkit possible.

This resource reflects the contributions of advocates, educators, students, employers, and community leaders who share a common goal of creating workplaces where everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

Special thanks to:

- **Tina Guenette**, Executive Director, RAMP Real Access Motivates Progress
- **Valerie Ann Leduc**, Lecturer, Bryant University
- **Kevin Matta**, Senior Director of People, Culture, and Operations, United Way of Rhode Island
- **Kelly Nevins**, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Fund of Rhode Island
- **Dana Oscar**, Bryant University Class of 2026
- **Megan Tancrede**, Intern, Women's Fund of Rhode Island
- **Vanessa Vigil**, Vice President, Diversity & Inclusion Professionals (DAIP)
- **Students in the Fall 2025 Bryant University Capstone Program**, whose research and recommendations helped inform the development of this toolkit

We are also grateful to the **New York Women's Foundation** for its support through a Disability Justice Grant, which helped strengthen the accessibility and disability inclusion content incorporated throughout this resource.

Together, these contributors have helped create a practical guide to support Rhode Island employers in building workplaces where belonging, access, equity, and inclusion can thrive.

About Women's Fund of Rhode Island

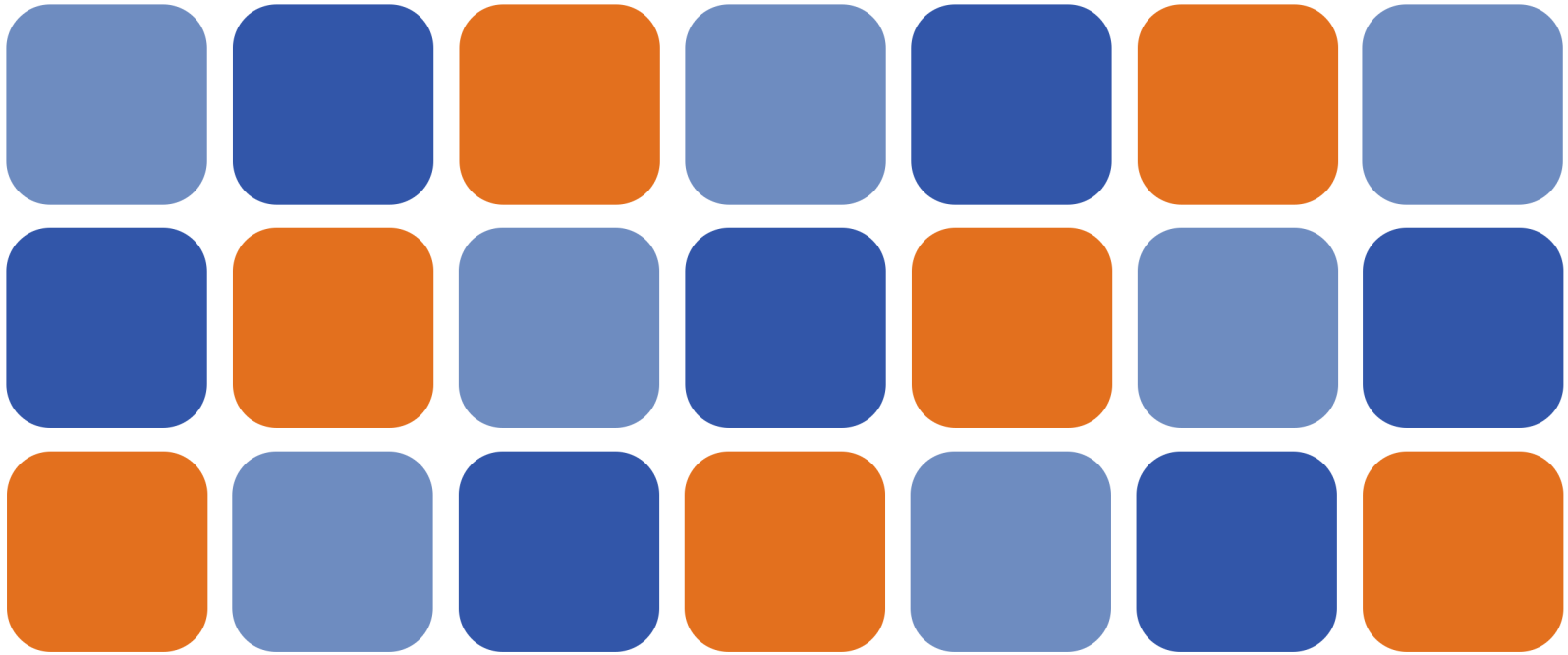
Women's Fund of Rhode Island invests in women and girls through research, advocacy, grant-making, and strategic partnerships to achieve gender equity through systemic change.

For more information, resources, and programs, visit www.wfri.org.

Start Where You Are.

Creating a workplace where people feel respected, supported, and able to succeed does not happen overnight. It happens through small decisions, thoughtful conversations, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

You do not need to implement every idea in this toolkit. Choose one action. Build from there. Listen, learn, and adjust along the way. Progress matters more than perfection.



Women's Fund of Rhode Island

Women's Fund of Rhode Island invests in women and girls through research, advocacy, grantmaking, and strategic partnerships to achieve gender equity through systemic change. Through leadership development, public policy advocacy, research, and community partnerships, WFRI works to create a Rhode Island where every person has the opportunity to thrive.

Learn More

Website: www.wfri.org

Email: info@wfri.org

Follow us on social media to stay informed about upcoming events, resources, research, and opportunities for engagement.

Our Vision

A Rhode Island where gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, economic status, or background do not determine opportunity—and where all people can participate fully in their workplaces, communities, and civic life.