

Policy and strategy guidance: Employee consultation

Disclaimer:

The ideas and suggestions contained within this guide are used or adopted entirely at the discretion and own risk of employers. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency cannot accept any responsibility or liability for outcomes resulting from the use of this document, either directly or indirectly.

About this guide

This guide refers to [Gender Equality Indicator \(GEI\) 5: Employee consultation](#). The GEIs represent the key areas where workplace gender inequality persists and where progress towards gender equality can be achieved through focused action. This guide is designed primarily to help employers develop an employee consultation **policy** or **strategy** that supports gender equality in the workplace.

Please see WGEA's [Reporting Guide](#) for general information on policies and strategies.

Key terms

Employee consultation

Consultation with employees on issues concerning gender equality in the workplace is one of the six GEIs that relevant employers are required to report against under the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* (Cth). Engaging employees through consultation on gender equality issues helps employers to understand employee experience, take meaningful action and generate solutions that are practical and relevant to their organisation.

Organisations can use consultation methods, such as employee surveys, exit interviews, focus groups and committees, to:

- understand employees' views and experiences of gender equality in the workplace, including on specific issues such as flexible working arrangements, and sexual harassment
- better understand their performance in relation to workplace gender equality and determine priorities for action
- gain insight into the factors which influence gender equality in the workplace
- gather ideas and data for their gender equality strategy
- signal leadership commitment to achieving gender equality

- evaluate the impact of gender equality strategies.
- include employees in workplace change.

Why is workplace consultation important for workplace gender equality?

Consultation can improve employee involvement in gender equality practice and decision-making (Glennie et al., 2023) and signal an organisation’s commitment to improving gender equality. It serves as a forum for raising awareness of employee experiences and brings attention to gender equality issues. In addition, understanding employee experience through consultation is a feature of contemporary approaches to diversity and inclusion, which recognise the need to move beyond metrics like the gender pay gap and workforce composition to include more qualitative data (Risse, 2023).

Consultation plays a crucial role no matter where an organisation is on its journey to gender equality:

- For those who are **starting out** with their gender equality initiatives, consultation can help to understand the current “state of play” and where to start in taking action.
- For those who are currently **developing** gender equality initiatives, such as a gender equality strategy, consultation can provide ideas for action as well as a better understanding of issues and priorities.
- For organisations who are currently **implementing** gender equality initiatives, consultation allows for feedback about the experience and impact of the initiatives, providing an opportunity to course correct their initiatives if needed.

Why is employee consultation beneficial to organisations?

Meaningful and ongoing consultation is an essential component of successful change in organisations (Cortis & Hill, 2016). It helps to ensure that organisations’ policies, strategies and initiatives are informed by and meet the needs of those that they impact, and generates practical insights and solutions to gender equality issues.

Note that, under the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (Cth)*, all relevant employers must report if a formal policy or strategy on employee consultation is in place in their organisation. Organisations with 500 employees or more are **required**, per the *Workplace Gender Equality (Gender Equality Standards) Instrument 2023*, to have a policy or strategy that addresses employee consultation on gender equality.

Employee consultation policy inclusions

The below table lists potential policy inclusions by topics relevant to an employee consultation policy.

Topic	Inclusions
Consultation objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Objectives for employee consultation on gender equality in the workplace, i.e. what are you seeking to find out and how will you

	<p>use the information? See Employee consultation above for examples of objectives</p>
Stakeholder engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The number and type of stakeholders to consult and on what issues, with consideration of available resources and the time that will be required for consultation → Whether existing mechanisms can be used to access key stakeholders, e.g. internal committees, governing bodies → Representativeness of the stakeholders consulted, e.g. in terms of geography, organisational unit, gender → Who will lead the consultation
Consultation methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The range of consultation methods that will be used, noting that use of more than one method is considered better practice (see Better practice in employee consultation below for further information) → Note that methods selected for consultation will be based on the purpose of the consultation as well as the stakeholders to be consulted and how best to engage them
Consultation timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Commitment to consulting early in any change, planning or decision-making process → Acknowledgement that the time allotted to consultation will reflect the complexity and sensitivity of the issue employees are being consulted on → Guidelines on consultation timelines, for example, how long to keep employee experience surveys open or when to hold exit interviews)
Record-keeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Standards of documentation for all consultation processes → Use of a consultation log that captures consultation details and feedback received across the consultation process, including decisions made to include or exclude information provided in feedback
Risk management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The risks involved in employee consultation, addressing the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How will those conducting consultation create an environment in which participants feel safe enough to share critical feedback? Note that in some instances, safeguards (including anonymising information) will need to be considered. ○ How will those conducting consultation ensure that they respond appropriately to receiving critical feedback? ○ Are there processes in place to avoid consultation fatigue for particular individuals or groups?
Additional considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Expectations for communicating to employees what has been heard through consultation and what action will be taken as a result

Better practice in employee consultation

Organisations at every stage on the journey to gender equality would benefit from establishing a comprehensive gender equality consultation process that includes a **dedicated employee body** (for example, a consultative committee, diversity committee or employee reference group – see below) and incorporates multiple types of consultation (for example, employee surveys, focus groups and exit interviews).

To learn more about how organisations can make an active commitment to workplace gender equality, and to become a WGEA Employer of Choice for Gender Equality, visit the Employer of Choice citation program's [application page](#).

Employee reference groups

Employee reference groups (ERGs), sometimes referred to as diversity taskforces or employee networks, can support an organisation's commitment to diversity and equity. These groups are involved in developing and implementing initiatives designed to increase diversity and equity and are a crucial [mechanism for meaningful consultation](#). They also serve as a [channel of communication](#) between employees and leadership.

ERGs can promote inclusion and influence diversity and equity initiatives and strategies, including through providing [representation for employees from under-represented groups](#). As a [collective workforce voice](#), an effective ERG can act as a catalyst for positive change.

Organisations looking for guidance on establishing an ERG should visit the following resources:

- [Employee Resource Groups, Networks and Affinity Groups | Diversity Council Australia](#)
- [A Guide to Establishing Staff Networks | CIPD](#)
- [Guidelines for Employee Networks | NSW Public Service Commission](#)

For guidance on establishing a dedicated gender equality committee or council (that can operate independently or form a part of broader diversity mechanisms), see [Consulting employees on gender equality](#).

References

Cortis, N & Hill, T (2016), *Drivers of organisational change for gender equality outcomes*. Prepared for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. University of New South Wales: Social Policy Research Centre.

Glennie, M, Weaving, M, Furman, S, Stephenson, E, Fisher, A, Risse, L, Sojo, L & Ryan, M (2023), *Target setting implementation*. Prepared for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Australian National University: The Global Institute for Women's Leadership.

Risse, L (2023), *Formulating a target menu for WGEA's gender equality indicators: A review of the literature*. Prepared for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. RMIT University.