



# **Building an Inclusive Culture to Support Retention: A Delta Air Lines Case Study**

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## Executive Summary

The American Opportunity Index analysis shows that Delta Air Lines is a leader in *Retention*, defined as employees who remain at the company at least five years after their initial hire date. While there are a number of factors that contribute to strong retention in the workplace, results from Grads of Life's Opportunity Identifier tool reveal this could be related to a number of best practices Delta has in place to foster a strong and inclusive culture. Delta is also continuing to support employees' opportunity and mobility through recent investments in skills-first talent management.

## Background

In 2022, Delta ranked #8 in the Transportation Sector on the [American Opportunity Index \(AOI\)](#). This corporate scorecard analyzes publicly available data from job postings, salaries, and career histories to assess how well those in the Fortune 250 provide economic mobility for their employees. The AOI rates companies across a range of outcomes associated with worker advancement and opportunity creation in Access, Pay, and Mobility.

Delta Air Lines also rated highly across several areas of the analytical tool the [Opportunity Identifier \(OI\)](#). Created by [Grads of Life \(GOL\)](#), the OI allows companies to self-assess their adoption of over 300 evidence-based talent practices organized by 5 key pillars that contribute to the hiring, retention, and advancement of underrepresented talent.

Delta Air Lines completed GOL's OI tool in 2021 as part of its membership in [OneTen, a coalition of 65 companies committed to closing the opportunity gap for Black talent and others who do not have a four-year degree](#). As a leader in the skills-first movement, OneTen supports its member companies in adopting skills-first talent management practices.

This case study seeks to share initial observations about some of the best practices Delta Air Lines has in place from the OI that may have contributed to the outcomes evidenced in the AOI's metrics for Mobility, Pay, and Access. Adopting the talent practices highlighted in the OI can lay an important foundation for companies seeking to add value to their employees' experience and business.

## Observations

### Framing the Area of Focus for the Case

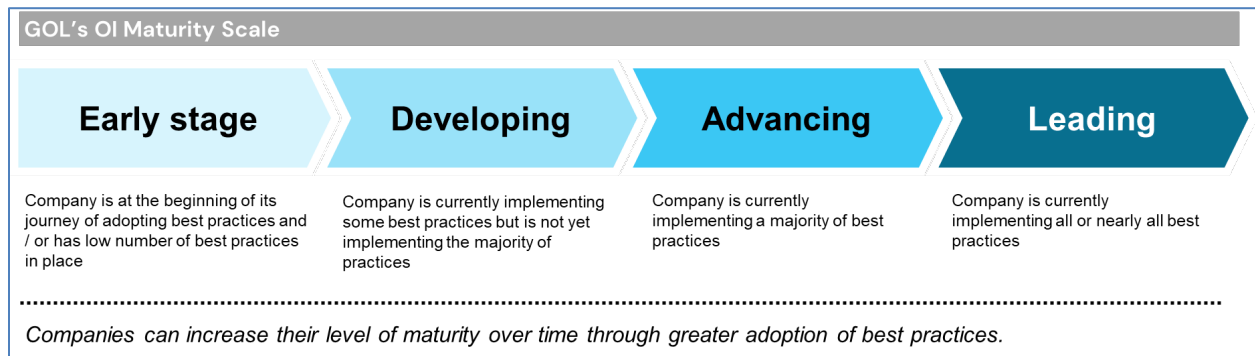
The AOI aims to evaluate how well companies are creating pathways of opportunity for their entry-level and front-line employees. The first release of the AOI looks at Mobility, Pay, and Access through the lens of nine metrics; of these, Delta scored highest in the metric of *Retention*.

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AOI Metrics
<b>Access</b>
1. Entry-level Hires
2. Barriers to Work
<b>Pay</b>
3. Wages
<b>Mobility</b>
4. Job Level
5. Velocity of Growth
6. Promoting Up
7. Promoting Out
<b>8. Retention</b>
9. Home-grown

The *Retention* metric examines the percentage of the workforce that is still at the same employer after five years. For this metric, AOI identifies all employees that started a job with a Fortune 250 employer between 2013 and 2016. AOI then counts five years forward from their recorded start date and identifies their employer and occupation. If an employee has changed jobs multiple times within the same employer but is still employed by the same company after five years, this positively contributes to the company’s retention score.

The purpose of GOL’s OI is to help employers understand the inclusive human capital practices and policies they have in place to manage talent. The practices captured are not exhaustive, but do reflect a holistic set of best-in-class practices informed by academic research that link practices to improvements in retention as well as recruitment, representation, engagement, belonging, and internal promotion. These practices also value a skills-first talent management approach, (i.e., relying on person’s skills and competencies – rather than their degrees, job histories or job titles – when attracting, hiring, developing, and redeploying talent). The tool rates a company’s maturity based on the number of best-in-class practices and policies they have in place. “Advancing” and “Leading” are the two highest ratings.



Results from Delta’s 2021 OI self-assessment show that they have adopted a wide range of best practices in areas that support *Retention*, achieving Advancing or Leading practice maturity in multiple areas.

## Best Practices from the Opportunity Identifier

There are many factors that contribute to employees’ retention in the workplace. The OI suggests Delta’s approach to managing its talent is rooted in regularly encouraging and capturing employee feedback and actively fostering inclusion. These types of best practices are linked to improved retention rates.

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**Valuing Employee Feedback:** Delta actively seeks feedback from its employees through sentiment surveys and focus groups, a best practice that can surface crucial insights about culture. Delta also disaggregates these results by race, ethnicity, job levels/ career bands, location, and divisions/ departments, enabling them to identify any variations between groups and take more targeted actions for addressing possible inequities. For Delta Air Lines, their sentiment surveys cover a range of topics including whether employees feel a sense of belonging and ability to be their authentic selves at work and if they think Delta's approach to reviews, ratings, and promotions is fair. Companies that take their employees' feedback seriously and act on it, as Delta does, can strengthen their culture, contributing to reduced attrition.

**Leadership Engagement:** Delta's leadership is actively involved in encouraging employee feedback and taking action on the input they receive. Employees are encouraged to express their voice by providing ideas for operational improvements, regardless of their level within the organization. Delta also intentionally leverages Business Resource Groups (BRG) that are sponsored directly by a member of the senior leadership team. As Delta sets organization-wide priorities, it leans on its BRGs to raise relevant issues with leadership and influence resolution. These best practices increase leaders' proximity to the employee experience, providing opportunities for them to better understand and directly address needs in a way that strengthens trust and culture.

**Fostering a Culture of Inclusion:** In addition to fostering inclusion through hearing and actioning feedback, Delta Air Lines celebrates the cultures of their employee base through a wide variety of activities including providing opportunities for employees to learn about other cultures and ethnicities. A culture of inclusion is further fostered via frontline and people manager training on

### What are employees saying?

Employee sentiments captured from Glassdoor validate Delta's inclusive culture where feedback is regularly encouraged by leaders.

*"The culture is truly amazing and they are **always making improvements based on our feedback.**"*

*"Constantly evolving local leadership are **always willing to receive feedback and spark two-way conversations**...Awesome work celebrations; Diverse and inclusive environment; Supportive leaders and team leads"*

*"The company actively promotes diversity through various initiatives and **encourages employees to embrace differences, creating a sense of belonging for all.**"*

*"**Inclusive and supportive culture; Free to speak mind;** Empowered to make decisions; Innovative and open collaboration; Amazing benefits"*

*"Delta Air Lines is the best company I have ever worked for; **inclusive, transparent, family-first, equal opportunity, and accessible leadership**"*

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inclusive management behaviors and tools for investing in their teams' development through an equity lens.

### Public Recognition for Fostering a Strong Culture

Delta Air Lines is consistently recognized for their culture, being named on influential lists including: TIME Magazine's inaugural list of the [World's Best Companies](#), [Forbes' list of Best Workplaces for Women in the U.S.](#), [Best Employers for Diversity](#), [America's Best Employers for Veterans](#), the [nation's Best Places to Work for Disability and Inclusion](#), and the best place to work lists by [Fortune](#) and [Glassdoor](#).

Fortune Best Places to Work press releases from [2017](#) and [2019](#) further confirm Delta's priority of fostering a strong culture where senior employees value feedback from all levels of the organization. The press releases highlight Delta Air Lines' *Velvet 360* program which, in 2016, facilitated nearly 8,000 frontline employees meeting directly with senior executives to ask them about the state of the business. In 2019, Delta's culture was tied to their impressively low 2% annual turnover rate.

Executive Vice President (EVP) and Chief People Officer, Joanne Smith, in a [Delta News Hub article](#) published in October 2022, spoke to the connection Delta strives to foster between retention and a culture where feedback is both heard and actioned upon:

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*As leaders, it's our job to care for our people and help them be at their best – from hire to retirement. Active listening and two-way dialog are key. At Delta, we focus on forging personal connections between leaders and employees. We do this through regular one-on-ones, station visits, and town halls. We use robust listening tools like our employee engagement and wellbeing surveys to gather feedback. And when we listen and act on that feedback in meaningful, tangible ways, we deepen and strengthen those connections.*

Smith celebrated employee feedback's role in fueling investments in wellbeing, wage increases and benefits that better support employees' needs.

## Conclusion

There are many factors that contribute to the retention of employees. Delta Air Lines shows that one factor that positively impacts retention rates is fostering a culture of inclusion that values the employee voice.

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## Looking Ahead

Since taking the Opportunity Identifier in 2021, Delta Air Lines has adopted a number of additional best practices that further contribute to strong employee retention. Notably, Delta has focused on adopting key skills-first practices that prioritize its employees' skills and experience rather than their college degrees when sourcing, hiring, retaining, and advancing talent.

As Delta continues its skills-first journey, they will refine their skills-first strategy and evolve its skills-first initiatives (e.g., talent system enhancements, career pathways, sponsorship, apprenticeship, performance management). Delta Air Lines is also developing two key skills-first learning series and integrating skills-first education within their core leader training to enable their leaders to adopt a skills-first mindset and use skills-first practices to attract, hire and develop their talent. In addition, Delta will deliver the learning series at scale to all recruiters, hiring managers and HR Business Partners as part of several change management efforts.

The shift to a skills-first mindset, combined with key skills-first practices, aims to enable equitable opportunities and access to all of Delta's employees, with an added advantage of helping employers benefit from recognized efficiencies in hiring, access to a broader talent pool, and increased retention. As Delta and other companies focus on advancing their skills-first transformation, Grads of Life will remain at the helm to help companies assess their talent practices and identify strategies to anchor and implement progress.