



DiversityInc



MEETING IN A BOX: Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month takes place in May to celebrate the strength, tenacity, resilience and contributions of Asian Americans from around the world. AAPI individuals are diverse, with different backgrounds, sexual orientations, identities and abilities. This month, we aim to celebrate all of them.

This Meeting in a Box is designed to serve as a valuable tool to continue your employees' cultural competence education, open conversations about race and ethnicity and spotlight the accomplishments of the AAPI community. This month, we'll examine disparities in the Asian American work experience, a timeline of historical events, data from DiversityInc outlining Asian Americans in leadership and the achievement gaps that exist for Asian Americans.

A Closer Look at the Disparities in the Asian American Work Experience

Michelle Lee knows first-hand about the bamboo ceiling – the limitations that Asian Americans experience when trying to ascend in the workplace.

In 2022, the attorney sued her former employer for allegedly passing her over for promotions and paying her less than her white peers. While Lee said the matter is resolved and wouldn't comment on the case, she is vocal about the barriers Asian Americans often experience at work.

"I have a Yale undergrad degree and a Yale Law degree," she says. "I'm 44. I should be at the peak of my contribution to the U.S. economy, to the U.S. workforce, but because of all of these forces I've had to deal with at work that's not related to the actual work itself, I have pulled myself out of that."

Lee left corporate America behind and has dedicated her life to volunteering at Stand with Asian Americans, a non-profit organization that protects Asian Americans against discrimination and violence.

“My career has always been a huge part of my identity,” she says. “Since graduating from law school, I’ve worked 17 years and never taken a break. I have three boys and have always wanted to show that their mom is a strong, independent, working mom. Yet, in some ways, I feel like I couldn’t fight.”

Leadership Gap

The model minority myth paints Asian Americans as hard-working and intelligent but also quiet and unassertive, stereotypes that can prevent them from climbing the corporate ladder.

“It suggests that Asian Americans have a certain place in our society,” says John Yang, President and Executive Director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice. “Typically, the stereotype is that we’re hard-working. We’re quiet, but we’re not leaders.”

Asian Americans are the least likely of any racial group to be promoted to management, have role models at their company, have strong networks or have a sponsor.

“Asian professionals still have a lack of opportunities when it comes to promotions, still don’t have any opportunities when it comes to leadership opportunities on an executive level – you see percentages dropping off when it gets to that C-suite,” says Sy Stokes, Vice President of Research at Coqual, a non-profit think tank.

“These are things that have been happening for generations even though there’s this model minority myth claiming that Asian professionals are doing the best out of all categories and don’t need any support.”

That support is elusive for Asian women.



Of the average top 10 companies on the DiversityInc 2022 Top 50 Companies for Diversity list, Asian women have the lowest percentage of senior management positions compared to all Asians, Asian men and people of color. They are also less likely than other groups of women to receive positive feedback on their leadership abilities, even when their performance ratings are strong. As a result, they are more likely to be unhappy at their company. But not all Asians experience the bamboo ceiling in the same way.

Take the tech industry as an example. That’s where you’ll find Indian-born CEOs like Microsoft’s Satya Nadella, Vimeo’s Anjali Sud, Google’s Sundar Pichai and Flextronics’ Revathi Advaiti running some of the best-known companies in the world. Nadella has been the CEO of Microsoft for almost a decade. Before his promotion, he held leadership roles across Microsoft’s enterprise and consumer businesses.

Jackson G. Lu, Professor at Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, co-authored a study that found that East Asians (e.g., China) are less likely than South Asians (e.g., India) and whites to attain leadership positions in the U.S. and it has nothing to do with prejudice or motivation. While East Asian cultures perceive humility and non-assertiveness as steady personality traits, the U.S. interprets those characteristics as a lack of confidence or motivation.

“Their low verbal assertiveness is incongruent with American norms concerning how leaders should communicate,” says Lu.

Income Disparities

Asian Americans are the fastest-growing racial and ethnic group in the U.S., but they also have the highest income inequality of any racial group.

“Racial wealth inequality is much larger among Asian Americans than against whites, and that means that the bottom is much larger and much poorer,” says Christian Weller, Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress (CAP).

While 10% of Asian Americans live in poverty, the median household income of Asian Americans was \$85,800 in 2019, higher than the \$61,800 median among all U.S. households. The typical Asian American household also has a higher level of educational attainment than the typical white household.

The CAP says the disparity is most likely a combination of factors, including access to quality employment with benefits and high wages. Asian Americans tend to be overrepresented in high-paying occupations like computer programmers and low-paying jobs like cooks and skin care specialists.

“For instance, dependence on social assistance in old age is larger among Asian Americans than among any other subpopulation in the country,” says Weller. “There is a huge share of Asian Americans that are struggling and they don’t have much wealth.”

The CAP notes how income inequality varies between Asian American subgroups. In 2019, Mongolian and Burmese Americans had the highest poverty rates among all Asian-origin groups. Employment and wage data also suggest Vietnamese Americans are economically more vulnerable than other groups, but that’s not true for all Asian Americans.

“Groups of populations are doing relatively well with lots of qualifications,” says Weller. “Those tend to be Chinese American, Japanese American and Korean American, but it depends a little on when they came. With Chinese Americans, whether they came from the mainland or Taiwan and so on, it’s not as clear cut.”

Stressed at Work

Anti-Asian hate crimes soared a record 224% in 2021. Sixty-two percent of Asian and Asian American respondents in a Coqual study say the violence has negatively affected their feelings of safety commuting to work.

“When something tragic happens and you’re trying to go about business as usual, but your entire life just got flipped on its head — you fear going outside to go to and from work,” says Stokes. “You’re trying to figure out whether or not you should be with your community right now. How do you cater to your needs?”

The violence has affected the mental and physical health of Asian Americans, their ability to focus at work and their relationships with managers and colleagues.

“When you come into an office where your manager is treating everything as business as usual, it makes you feel as though being a human doesn’t matter,” says Stokes. “And the same with your co-workers. When they say, ‘how was your dinner last night’ when something tragic just struck your community? You start to question your place in the workplace.”

Lee shared how her husband commutes into New York City to work every day but has stopped taking the subway.

“I’m constantly in fear of him getting randomly attacked,” she says. “I live close to New York City but never take public transportation anymore. Even though parking costs an arm and a leg, I always drive to the city and park near where I’m supposed to go. I don’t walk around and enjoy the city anymore because I’m constantly looking around like, ‘am I going to get attacked?’”

Asking Asian Americans where they’re “really” from or assuming all Asians are good at math can seem harmless, but microaggressions can be damaging. Lee says her discriminatory experience took a toll on her mental health, an issue often underreported in Asian American communities.

“Companies have to realize they are losing good people,” says Lee. “I’ve been so physically ill from what I’ve experienced that it’s not worth it. The money’s not worth it.”

Insufficient Support

Only one in four Asian and Asian American professionals in the Coqual study feel that their company is very vocal about violence against their community.

Yang says when tragic events occur in the Asian community, a company’s public statement can go a long way in helping employees feel recognized. CEO-led town halls and employee resource groups (ERGs) can also allow workers to discuss their feelings. In addition, Yang says companies have begun offering bystander intervention training.

“If you see an act of hate, what can you do at that moment? This training is not self-defense. It’s not telling people to fight back necessarily, but it’s to give people options,” he says.



Stokes is challenging companies to improve workplace experiences for Asian Americans by having frank conversations with them, reviewing talent processes for inequities and building solutions like flexible work options. He says creating a more inclusive work environment for Asian Americans is imperative, especially when productivity is at stake.

“If there were anything else within the workplace that affects someone’s ability to work or be productive — every single company, every single manager would jump at every possibility to nip it in the bud to do everything they could to address that issue and provide any resources necessary.”