



## **SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE EQUALITY INDEX**

### **2026 NATIONAL REPORT**

Driving LGBTQ+ Inclusion in South African Workplaces

*Infrastructure. Lived-Experience. Capability. Accountability. Shared Responsibility.*

Published by the SA LGBT+ Management Forum

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## About the Forum

The South African LGBT+ Management Forum (“the Forum”) is a non-profit company (registration 2016/311001/08) working to advance safe, equitable and inclusive workplace environments for LGBT+ people in South Africa. The Forum is also a registered section 18A public benefit organisation.

Officially launched in 2017, the Forum works with employers, government, employee networks, allies, researchers, community organisations, and LGBT+ business stakeholders engaged in workplace inclusion and organisational transformation. Its flagship initiative is the South African Workplace Equality Index (SAWEI), launched in 2018.

The Forum’s original mandate focused on workplace inclusion and the organisational infrastructure most directly within an employer’s control. The 2018, 2019 and 2021 SAWEI cycles, together with the stakeholder network that has engaged the framework since 2017, were developed within this scope.

That foundation continues to shape the Forum’s work while informing the ongoing evolution of SAWEI as a broader systems-oriented inclusion framework. Workplace inclusion remains the Forum’s central domain of practice, but the 2026 cycle reflects a wider recognition that LGBT+ inclusion is experienced across interconnected institutional systems extending beyond the workplace itself.

## Acknowledgements

The Forum thanks its independent advisory panel for the time and oversight contributed to the Index, and its qualified independent auditors for their work in supporting the integrity of the 2026 cycle. The Forum also acknowledges MambaOnline as Official Media Partner; the participating organisations that submitted to independent scrutiny; the freelance contributors who supported the research, writing, design and production of this report; the community organisations that partnered with the Forum; and the researchers whose published work forms part of the wider evidence base on which this report draws.

## Disclaimer

This report presents the findings of the SAWEI 2026 cycle. It is published for benchmarking, learning and engagement on LGBT+ inclusion in South Africa and does not constitute legal, financial, regulatory, employment or other professional advice. Readers using the report in these contexts are encouraged to obtain appropriate professional guidance.

Findings are based on information submitted by participating organisations during the 2026 cycle together with the wider evidence base referenced throughout the report. Submissions were moderated by the Forum and independently audited in accordance with the methodology set out in the Methodology Note. Findings reflect participating organisation’s position at the time of assessment and may evolve as organisations progress through the 2025–2030 accreditation period.

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## 1. How to Read This Report

**SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE EQUALITY INDEX**  
**2026 NATIONAL REPORT**

**How to Read This Report**  
*A practical note on structure*

**1** **WORKPLACE FINDINGS**  
Practical organisational guidance

- Cohort findings**  
Validated participant observations
- Theme-level data**  
Eight-theme maturity analysis
- Recommendations**  
Practical workplace guidance
- Action roadmap**  
30-day, 6-month and 12-month actions

**2**

**3** **CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS**  
Systemic context for interpretation

- Operating environment**  
Legal, economic and labour-market context
- National participation**  
Where SAWEI reaches and where it does not
- Multi-identity analysis**  
Women, age, disability, race and sub-community
- Education and pipeline**  
Transformation programmes and access

**READ EITHER PATH, OR BOTH TOGETHER**

The Cycle Architecture reflects the **six SAWEI elements** and the **maturity** journey.  
It translates inclusion commitment into **measurable practice** and **meaningful impact**.

**SAWEI** | EQUALITY INCLUSIVITY BELONGING

This report is written for multiple readers, each entering it from a different position, with diverse levels of LGBT+ literacy and at distinct stages of institutional engagement. These positions are distinct from the administrative roles within SAWEI itself, which are set out in About SAWEI and the 2026 Cycle and in the Methodology Note.

Five reader groups are addressed. The first is the LGBT+ person navigating South African systems across the lifecycle as employee, jobseeker, customer, patient, dependant, retiree, and citizen. The second is the employer responsible for workplace systems, including leadership, boards, transformation structures, human resources, transformations functions, employee networks and operational management. The third is government, understood in its roles as employer, regulator and basic needs service provider. The fourth is the broader sector of researchers, civil society, media platforms and institutions engaged in transformation work. The fifth is the ally operating within workplace, service and community contexts where inclusion is enacted in real time.

SAWEI measures organisations. Its existence is grounded in the lived reality of LGBT+ people who move through multiple institutional systems across their lifecycle. The workplace chapters therefore address organisational systems and their outputs; the context chapters describe the broader environment in which those systems operate. The two are kept analytically separate to preserve attribution of findings.

The 2026 cycle introduces a more explicit recognition of the internal diversity of the LGBT+ community. Lived multiplicity refers to the fact that LGBT+ people are not encountered uniformly across systems, and that inclusion outcomes vary depending on how identity is read in each institutional interaction. The community is therefore internally differentiated across gender identity, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, race, class, geography, age and generation, and is unevenly served across these dimensions. Where inclusion infrastructure has developed unevenly across these groups, the report identifies the pattern rather than assuming uniform effect.

The report uses “LGBT+” when referring to the community as a whole. “Sexual orientation” refers specifically to lesbian, gay and bisexual persons and describes one dimension of identity rather than the whole. Where relevant, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are treated as distinct analytical axes. Findings are not generalised across these axes where the underlying mechanisms differ. Where similar outcomes arise from different structural causes across sub-communities, the report distinguishes the mechanism rather than collapsing the result into a single category.

## 2. Key Definitions

The terms set out below are used throughout the report with the meanings indicated. They are defined here for ease of reference and applied consistently in subsequent chapters. The South African Constitution provides the foundational legal framework from which the rights of LGBT+ persons in South Africa are derived.

TAB 1: SAWEI FRAMEWORK TERMS (Institutional & Measurement System)

Term	Definition
SAWEI	The South African Workplace Equality Index. An independently assessed benchmark for LGBT+ workplace inclusion in South Africa, published by the South African LGBT+ Management Forum. SAWEI is currently in its 2025–2030 accreditation cycle.
The Forum	The South African LGBT+ Management Forum. The Forum administers SAWEI, facilitates engagement on workplace inclusion, and conducts stakeholder engagement work. It supports inclusion practice but does not represent the LGBT+ community as a whole.
Validated submission	A completed SAWEI submission assessed by qualified independent auditors and verified against the framework methodology to produce a published tier outcome. Seven validated submissions were received in this cycle.
Tier	The published recognition level under SAWEI: Platinum (Leading), Gold (Progressive), Silver (Emerging), Bronze (Foundational), Entry (Grassroots). Tiers reflect calibrated assessment outcomes rather than raw scores; percentage scores are not published.
Foundation Gate	A scoring constraint whereby an organisation's maximum possible tier is capped at Bronze if three or more baseline structural practices score zero. The rule ensures progression requires minimum structural inclusion capacity.
Integration failure	The gap between inclusion infrastructure (policies, systems, networks, training) and its consistent activation in day-to-day organisational practice.
Silent discrimination	Exclusionary or discriminatory practices that are not captured in formal reporting systems. Includes informal exclusion, proxy evaluation bias, and system design gaps affecting access and progression. Recognised in organisational behaviour and inclusion literature.
Barrier to access	A point in an organisational system where an LGBT+ employee or customer cannot engage with the system as intended. Used as a diagnostic measure of structural exclusion.
Consistency	The degree to which inclusion practice is embedded across the year rather than concentrated in specific periods such as Pride Month.
Multi-identity	The principle that LGBT+ employees hold multiple intersecting identities (race, gender, disability, class, faith, geography, etc), and that no single identity defines experience across systems.

Employee network	Employee-led inclusion groups (also known as ERGs or forums) that support community, advocacy, and organisational change. Assessed by governance, resourcing, and year-round activity, not existence alone.
Lived multiplicity	A principle describing that LGBT+ individuals experience organisational and social systems differently depending on context, and that identity dimensions are not additive or uniform across environments.

TAB 2: LEGAL AND STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (South African Rights Framework)

Term	Definition
Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996	The supreme law of South Africa. Section 9 prohibits unfair discrimination, including sexual orientation. Sections 10, 14, and 36 establish dignity, privacy, and lawful limitation of rights. This is the foundational legal source of LGBT+ rights in South Africa.
Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA), 2000	Operationalises Section 9 of the Constitution. Prohibits unfair discrimination, hate speech, and harassment, and establishes Equality Courts. Applies beyond employment contexts.
Employment Equity Act, 1998	Governs non-discrimination and affirmative action in employment. Section 6 prohibits unfair discrimination, including on sexual orientation. Gender identity and expression are addressed through gender, sex, and arbitrary grounds provisions.
Labour Relations Act, 1995 (LRA)	Regulates labour relations, unfair dismissal, collective bargaining, and dispute resolution. Protects employees against unfair labour practices, including on listed grounds.
Basic Conditions of Employment Act, 1997 (BCEA)	Establishes minimum employment standards including leave, working hours, and termination conditions. Applies equally to LGBT+ employees and families through recognised legal relationships.
Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (B-BBEE), 2003	Framework for economic transformation across ownership, management, skills development, and enterprise development. Does not explicitly include LGBT+ classification but intersects through existing designated categories.
Civil Union Act, 2006	Enables legal recognition of same-sex and opposite-sex civil unions with equal legal consequences to marriage. Underpins spousal, family, tax, and benefit recognition in employer systems.
Marriage Bill	Proposed consolidation of South African marriage-related legislation into a unified framework. Does not introduce new rights but harmonises existing recognition structures.



Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act, 2003	Enables legal alteration of sex description for transgender and intersex persons under defined conditions. Operationalises dignity, privacy, and identity recognition in legal and administrative systems.
POPIA (Protection of Personal Information Act), 2013	Regulates processing of personal information. Sexual orientation is classified as special personal information. Gender identity and sex characteristics are treated under heightened privacy and protection standards.
Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act, 2023	Criminalises hate crimes and hate speech on listed grounds including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, and sex (including intersex status).

TAB 3: CONCEPTUAL &amp; LITERACY CONSTRUCTS (Interpretive Framework)

Term	Definition
LGBT+ Literacy	The applied knowledge required to engage LGBT+ inclusion as a transformation domain. Includes terminology, systems understanding, lived experience awareness, and implementation capability across organisational contexts.
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics. Four distinct dimensions describing different populations and system interactions. Sexual orientation (LGB persons), gender identity (transgender and non-binary persons), gender expression (how gender is presented), and sex characteristics (intersex persons). Each dimension operates independently and is not interchangeable.
Pride Month	In South Africa, observed in October, marking the country's first Pride march in 1990. June is International Pride Month. Both are referenced in the report. Participation data indicates concentrated organisational activity during these periods compared to the rest of the year.
DEIB / DEI	DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging) is used when referring to South African organisational practice. DEI is used when referring specifically to international contexts where "Belonging" is not structurally included. The terms are not interchangeable.
Pay parity	The extent to which LGBT+ employee earnings are comparable to demographically similar peers. Research (Nyeck et al., 2019) indicates significant earnings gaps for certain LGBT+ groups in South Africa. Disaggregated data for transgender, intersex, bisexual, lesbian and pansexual women remains limited in national datasets.

### 3. Foreword

The 2026 cycle marks the third decade since the adoption of the 1996 Constitution, which establishes the foundational rights protecting LGBT+ persons in South Africa, including the equality clause that lists sexual orientation among prohibited grounds of unfair discrimination, and the broader dignity and equality framework that extends to gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Each decade since has further defined how that constitutional baseline is operationalised in workplace and civic systems, and how LGBT+ inclusion is understood across an evolving generational and identity context.

SAWEI exists because the distance between constitutional promise and lived experience remains measurable. What is measurable is, by design, capable of being closed. The 2026 cycle therefore assesses workplace inclusion within the wider set of systems an LGBT+ person engages across a lifetime, enabling organisations to track progress across the 2025–2030 accreditation period.

The 2026 cycle is the most demanding cycle the Forum has conducted. The instrument moved from 17 questions to 110, with evidence required in place of declarative responses. Qualified independent auditors assessed submissions against declared organisational responses. This resulted in a smaller number of completed submissions relative to earlier cycles: seven validated submissions and four incomplete submissions withdrawn during the process. Of the seven validated submissions, four organisations consented to public identification and three are published anonymously, with all data included in aggregate findings.

Across validated submissions, several organisations demonstrate established workplace infrastructure: Employee Network groups are active, anti-discrimination policies are explicit, and HR and identity systems increasingly support chosen names and pronouns. However, across the cohort, the relationship between infrastructure and day-to-day experience remains uneven. The activation of policies and systems at management and operational levels remains a key area for development across the 2025–2030 period.

This report is not an evaluation of any individual organisation. Participating organisations form part of a benchmarking cohort and are encouraged to read findings as a basis for development rather than judgement.

The Forum facilitates measurement, learning and engagement on LGBT+ inclusion across the systems an LGBT+ person encounters over a lifetime. The Forum provides a benchmarking framework, an independently assessed comparative dataset, and a structured entry point for organisations participating in future cycles.

## 4. About SAWEI and the 2026 Cycle

### Purpose of the Index

The South African Workplace Equality Index is an independently assessed benchmark for LGBT+ workplace inclusion in South Africa. It enables organisations to measure inclusion against an evidence-based standard and against peer practice and provides externally validated recognition for use in stakeholder engagement.

SAWEI is comparable in design to international workplace inclusion indices in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia, Hong Kong, Canada, India, and Mexico. It is locally grounded in South African legislation, transformation frameworks, and community evidence, while drawing on international standards of workplace inclusion practice.

The framework is anchored in the South African Constitution and aligned with national labour and equality legislation, the United Nations Standards of Conduct for Business on Tackling Discrimination Against LGBTI People (2017), and five Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 16 and SDG 17. This alignment is descriptive rather than derivative; South Africa's constitutional protections precede the SDG framework and remain the foundational reference point.

### How the 2026 cycle is different

The 2026 framework represents a structural revision of earlier editions. Previous cycles used 17–18 questions to assess stated commitment. The 2026 cycle uses 110 questions and assesses whether commitment has been translated into systems, evidence and consistent operational practice.

It is also the first cycle within a five-year accreditation period (2025–2030), introducing annual checkpoints. Participating organisations are therefore engaged in an ongoing benchmarking process rather than a single assessment event.

### Scope: the whole person across the lifecycle

The 2026 cycle measures organisations within a framework that positions the workplace inside the wider systems an LGBT+ person engages across a lifetime. Earlier cycles treated the workplace as a contained domain. The 2026 framework treats it as one system among many, including education, recruitment, identity and benefit administration, healthcare, financial services, travel systems, and retirement structures.

The implication is direct: the same LGBT+ person in the workplace is also a customer, patient, beneficiary or client in other organisational systems. While many organisations have developed internal inclusion infrastructure, the 2026 framework assesses whether that infrastructure extends consistently across these intersecting roles.

### Inside the transformation architecture

South African organisations operate multiple transformation agendas, including gender, youth, disability, racial transformation, and B-BBEE compliance frameworks. The 2026 SAWEI cycle positions LGBT+ inclusion as a cross-cutting dimension within these existing structures rather than a standalone pillar.

A women's programme designed inclusively includes lesbian, bisexual and trans women; a youth programme includes LGBT+ youth; and disability programmes include LGBT+ persons with disabilities. The cohort analysis identifies where this integration is operational and where it remains under development within existing transformation systems.

## The eight themes

### Cycle architecture

8 themes. 110 questions. 5 tiers. 5-year accreditation journey from 2025 to 2030.

**8**  
Themes

→

**110**  
Questions

→

**5**  
Tiers

→

**2025–2030**  
Accreditation journey

The Cycle Architecture reflects the six SAWEI elements and maturity journey.

EQUALITY | INCLUSIVITY | BELONGING

The WELCOME theme also incorporates transitional questions mapped from the previous framework. The question count reflects the full 2025 to 2030 instrument.

## SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE EQUALITY INDEX

# 2026 NATIONAL REPORT

### Cycle Architecture

8 themes. 110 questions. 5 tiers. 5-year accreditation journey from 2025 to 2030.

**8**  
Themes

**110**  
Questions

**5**  
Tiers

**2025–2030**  
Accreditation journey

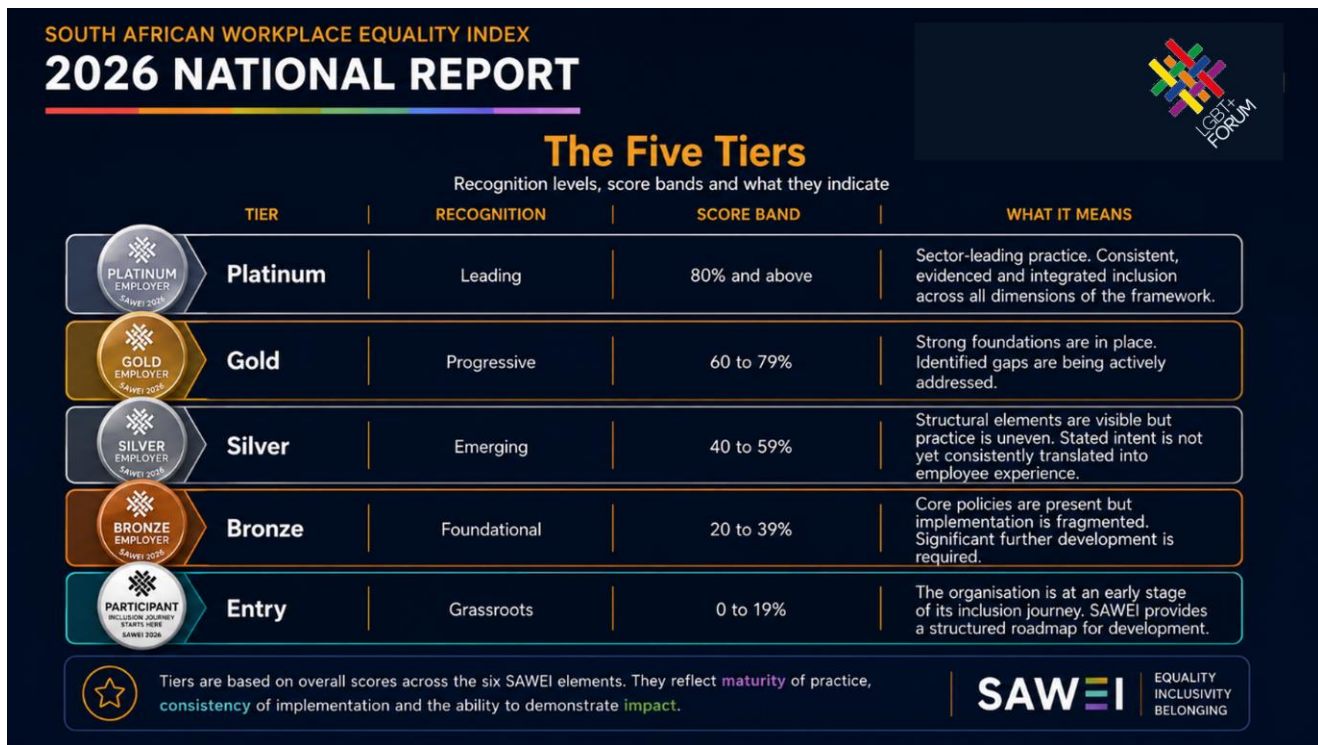
#### The eight themes

<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>LEAD</b></p> <p><b>Strategy, Governance and Transformation</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">Governance committees, executive sponsorship, alignment with Employment Equity, B-BBEE, the wider transformation framework and accountability.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 11</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>DESIGN</b></p> <p><b>Privacy, Self-ID and Inclusive Systems</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">POPIA-compliant SOGIESC data, HRIS configuration, physical workspace, AI review.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 8</p> </div> </div>
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>WELCOME</b></p> <p><b>Talent Attraction and Inclusive Hiring</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">Job adverts, recruiter literacy, candidate-facing systems, onboarding for early-career hires.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 13</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>BELONG</b></p> <p><b>Culture, ERGs and Belonging</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">ERG resourcing, ally programmes, dress code, year-round culture.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 29</p> </div> </div>
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>GROW</b></p> <p><b>Capability, Literacy and Development</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">Mandatory and role-based learning, training outcome measurement, leadership pipeline.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 11</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>SUPPORT</b></p> <p><b>Benefits, Wellness and Affirmation</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">Civil Union Act benefits, EAP capability, gender affirmation, wellness, security.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 15</p> </div> </div>
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>PARTNER</b></p> <p><b>Supplier Diversity and Community</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">LGBT+ supplier diversity, community partnership, CSI, crisis referral.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 12</p> </div> </div>	<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div> <p><b>INFLUENCE</b></p> <p><b>Brand, Customer and External Advocacy</b></p> <p style="font-size: 10px;">Brand presence, customer-facing systems, executive visibility, year-round consistency.</p> <p style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid #f9a825; border-radius: 5px; padding: 2px 5px;">Q 11</p> </div> </div>

The Cycle Architecture reflects the **six SAWEI elements** and the **maturity** journey. It translates inclusion commitment into **measurable practice** and **meaningful impact**.

EQUALITY  
INCLUSIVITY  
BELONGING

## The five tiers



## 5. Limitations and Confidence

The findings in this report are based on the validated SAWEI 2026 cohort and do not represent a national census of South African employers. The cohort reflects organisations that progressed through a higher-resolution evidentiary assessment under the 2026 framework and therefore constitutes a bounded population defined by participation and completion under the SAWEI methodology.

The 2026 framework requires substantiated evidence across a significantly expanded question set compared to earlier cycles. As a result, participation reflects not only organisational interest in LGBT+ inclusion measurement, but also readiness in terms of internal sponsorship, governance capacity, and availability of verifiable documentation required for independent audit.

The cohort is therefore interpreted as a function of both measurement design and organisational readiness under increased evidentiary demand, rather than as a proxy for the broader South African employer landscape. This limitation is structural to the methodology and is addressed through the five-year accreditation cycle, which allows organisations to enter, pause, or re-enter as internal capability develops.

## The cohort that engaged the framework



Outreach for the 2026 cycle engaged approximately 300 employers across South Africa through direct engagement, campaign communication, relationship outreach, and submission support. Eleven submissions were received during the cycle.

Seven submissions were completed and validated by qualified independent auditors. Of these, four organisations have consented to public identification. Three organisations are published anonymously, with their data included in aggregate findings and protected from identification at sector level.

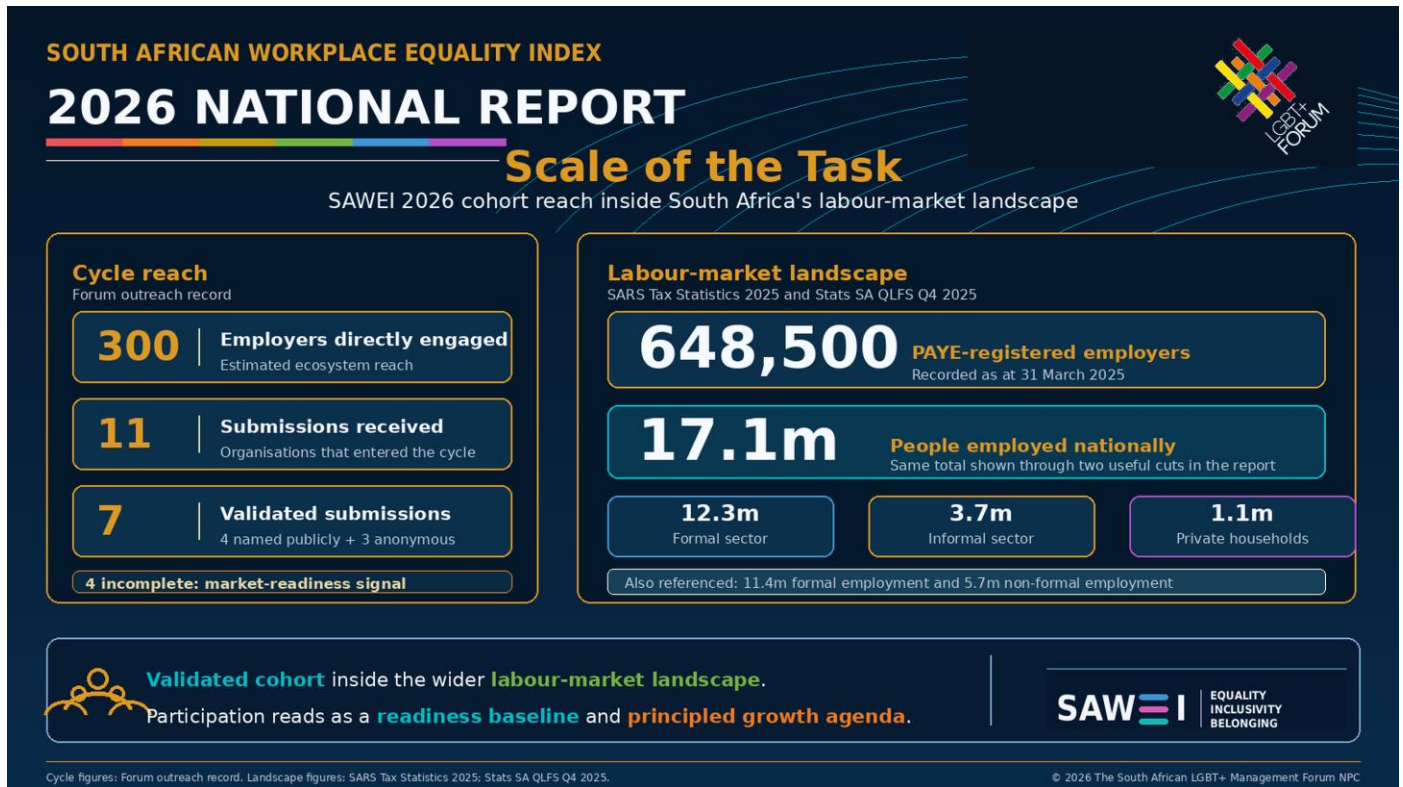
Four submissions were not completed and are recorded as a readiness signal under the SAWEI framework. These instances reflect where participation did not progress to full evidentiary assessment due to constraints in internal sponsorship, evidence availability, governance capacity, or organisational readiness for external measurement. They are not scored and are not interpreted as commitment failures.

The anonymous submissions and the non-completed submissions reflect different participation conditions within the cohort. Anonymity is understood to reflect contextual sensitivities affecting public DEI visibility in certain organisational or jurisdictional environments outside South Africa, rather than differences in substantive participation during the assessment process.

Across the cycle, a subset of organisations that had previously engaged the Forum regarding upcoming SAWEI participation between 2022 and 2025 proceeded to submit in the 2026 cycle, while others elected not to participate at this stage. The relationship between expressed intent and completed submission is recorded as part of the readiness signal under the

SAWEI framework. The five-year accreditation structure is designed to accommodate this variation without converting it into a performance judgement.

## The scale around the cohort



The 2026 results must be read against the scale of South Africa's employer and labour market landscape. SARS Tax Statistics 2025 recorded 648,300 PAYE-registered employers as at 31 March 2025 (South African Revenue Service, 2025). Statistics South Africa's Q4 2025 Quarterly Labour Force Survey recorded 17.1 million people employed nationally (Statistics South Africa, 2025), comprising both formal and informal employment across multiple measurement cuts.

At different levels of aggregation, this population is described as 11.4 million in formal employment and 5.7 million in non-formal employment, or alternatively 12.3 million in the formal sector, 3.7 million in the informal sector, and 1.1 million in private households. These figures describe the same labour market through different statistical lenses and are used where each level of granularity is analytically appropriate.

The SAWEI 2026 cohort of seven validated submissions sits within this broader employer landscape. The cohort does not represent a national sample of employers. Instead, it reflects organisations that progressed through a higher-resolution evidentiary assessment under the revised 110-question framework. The participation profile is therefore interpreted as an output of measurement design and organisational readiness under increased evidentiary demand, rather than as a proxy for national employer behaviour.

The reduction in completed submissions relative to the 2021 cycle reflects the structural change in the framework rather than a change in underlying organisational interest. Earlier cycles assessed stated commitments and foundational inclusion infrastructure using a 17–18 question instrument. The 2026 cycle assesses implementation depth and systems evidence across 110 questions, with independent audit validation applied to submitted material. The two instruments are not directly comparable due to differences in measurement resolution.

The five-year accreditation structure is designed to accommodate variation in organisational readiness for evidence-based assessment and to enable re-entry in subsequent cycles where organisations continue to develop internal systems and documentation.

## The framework demand

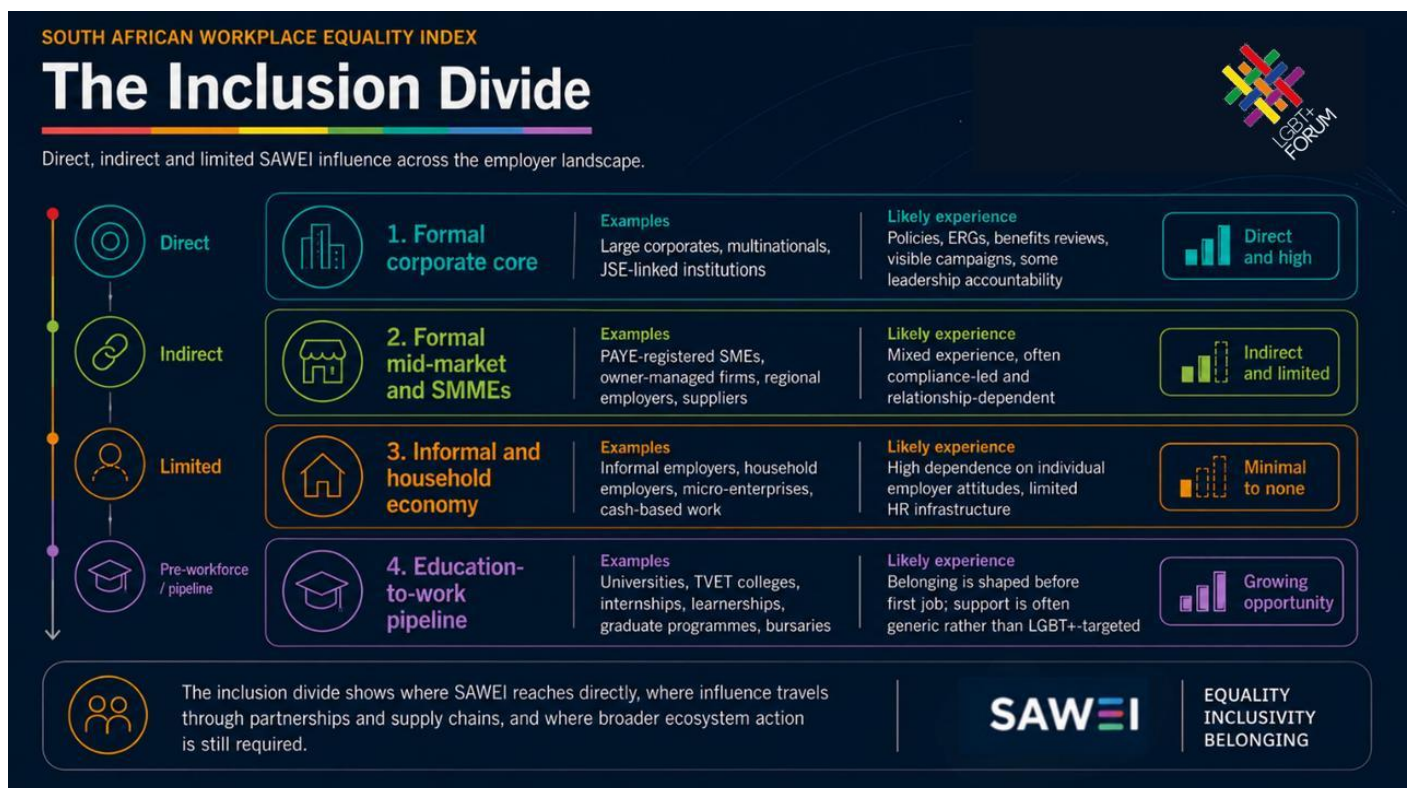
The lower participation rate compared with the 2021 cycle reflects a change in the evidentiary requirements of the SAWEI framework. Earlier cycles consisted of 17–18 questions and accepted declarative responses. The 2026 cycle comprises 110 questions and requires substantiated evidence across all assessment dimensions. Qualified independent auditors, working under the oversight of the Forum's independent advisory panel, assessed submitted material against declared organisational claims.

As a result, the cohort reflects a higher-resolution measurement environment rather than a directly comparable continuation of earlier cycles. Differences in participation outcomes should therefore be interpreted in relation to changes in framework design and evidentiary depth, rather than as linear progression or decline in organisational engagement.

The five-year accreditation structure is designed to accommodate variation in organisational readiness for evidence-based assessment and to allow organisations to re-enter in subsequent cycles as internal systems, documentation capacity, and governance maturity develop.

## 6. National Participation Context

The scale of the 2026 cohort and the labour market context in which it sits are addressed in the Limitations and Confidence section. This chapter focuses instead on the scope of SAWEI's measurement within the South African employer landscape, and the boundaries of what the framework captures and does not capture in its 2026 cycle.





## The inclusion divide

For LGBT+ talent in South Africa, the scale gap described in the preceding chapter produces a structural inclusion divide. A relatively small group of employers—primarily large corporates, multinational firms and JSE-listed institutions—operate with sufficient systems maturity to support formal LGBT+ inclusion infrastructure. This includes employee networks, benefits governance, reporting systems, EAP standards and participation in external benchmarking frameworks such as SAWEI.

By contrast, the broader employer base, including mid-market firms, SMMEs and informal employers, typically does not operate with comparable institutional infrastructure. In these settings, inclusion is less system-mediated and more dependent on individual discretion: the views of managers, owners, clients, or customer-facing gatekeepers often determine lived workplace experience.

The result is not a uniform national standard applied unevenly, but a segmented inclusion system in which access to formal protection, and structured inclusion mechanisms is unevenly distributed across the labour market.

## The wider context for corporate allyship

This structural reality is shaped further by changes in the external legitimacy environment for corporate inclusion practice.

The Ipsos Pride Survey 2025 recorded a decline in support for brands actively promoting LGBT+ rights, from 49 per cent in 2021 to 41 per cent across 23 countries (Ipsos, 2025). The same survey recorded 38 per cent support, across 26 countries, for employer programmes or policies that explicitly support and celebrate LGBT+ employees.

The trend indicates that LGBT+ inclusion strategies that rely primarily on visibility or brand signaling face increasing variability in public support. In contrast, inclusion approaches grounded in structural domains—legal compliance, workforce risk management, talent systems, product, and service design, ESG reporting, supplier development, and customer protection—remain more stable in their institutional legitimacy.

## 7. Context: The Operating Environment

The findings in subsequent chapters are based on organisational observations. This chapter situates those findings within the legal, economic, and demographic environment in which South African employers operate, insofar as it affects LGBT+ workplace inclusion.

### Legal framework

South Africa's Constitution establishes the foundational rights protecting LGBT+ persons. Section 9 of the Bill of Rights prohibits unfair discrimination on grounds including sexual orientation, alongside race, gender, sex, pregnancy, and marital status, with gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics protected through the listed grounds of gender and sex read with the right to dignity (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

These constitutional protections are operationalised in employment through the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 and extended beyond employment through the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 (PEPUDA).

The Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 gives statutory effect to the recognition of same-sex and opposite-sex civil unions, with direct implications for employment benefits, taxation, and dependent recognition. The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status

Act 49 of 2003 provides the administrative mechanism for legal recognition of changes to sex description in official identity documents, with downstream implications for HR, payroll and financial systems.

The Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act 16 of 2023 establishes criminal liability for prejudice-motivated offences and hate speech on listed grounds including sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex characteristics.

## Implementation environment

Despite the strength of the legal framework, implementation within organisational systems remains uneven.

The Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPIA) governs the lawful processing of personal data, including SOGIESC-related information. In practice, many organisations have not yet established voluntary, confidential, and fully compliant mechanisms for collecting such data, resulting in limited visibility of LGBT+ representation in workforce datasets.

Compliance with the Civil Union Act in employee benefits design is inconsistent across the cohort. Application of Employment Equity Act protections in day-to-day HR practice is also uneven in relation to LGBT+ employees.

These gaps are structural rather than exceptional and are reflected in the cohort findings that follow.

## Economic context

Available evidence indicates that LGBT+ workers in South Africa experience measurable economic disadvantage in the labour market. A study by the Williams Institute (Nyeck et al., 2019) found that the monthly earnings of gender-nonconforming heterosexuals and gay and bisexual men in South Africa were approximately 30 per cent lower than those of gender-conforming heterosexual men, after controlling for socio-demographic variables and job type. Comparable magnitude gaps are observed in relation to established gender and racial pay disparities in the South African economy.

Additional research from the Institute of Race Relations (2023) indicates that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals are overrepresented in part-time and informal employment relative to the general population, suggesting differentiated access to stable formal employment and progression pathways.

Across these findings, the scale of participation matters. Because LGBT+ identity was not captured in the 2022 national census (Statistics South Africa, 2022), and is inconsistently captured in employer datasets due to capability, governance and privacy constraints, economic outcomes for LGBT+ populations are not consistently visible at system level. This creates a measurement limitation in which both disadvantage and participation are partially under-recorded in formal labour statistics.

Within this constraint, pay parity cannot be interpreted solely as an income differential. It is also a function of incomplete visibility across labour-market systems, including recruitment, progression, and disclosure-linked outcomes. This limitation is consistent with the broader implementation environment described in this chapter, where inclusion-relevant data is not yet systematically captured across employers.

Within SAWEI, pay parity is therefore treated as a structural transformation indicator and is positioned alongside existing gender and racial pay gap disclosures in integrated reporting frameworks.

## Transformation architecture gap

Existing South African transformation frameworks, including Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), Employment Equity, enterprise development and supplier development systems, do not yet include explicit LGBT+ designation.

As a result, LGBT+ inclusion is currently embedded indirectly through adjacent categories (race, gender, disability, youth) rather than measured as a standalone transformation dimension.

This has implications for how organisations design benefits systems, supplier frameworks, customer access mechanisms, and workforce reporting structures. The cohort findings that follow engage this gap at system level rather than at policy intent level.

## SDGs - Sustainability, and international frameworks.

LGBT+ inclusion intersects with established sustainability and corporate responsibility frameworks already used by South African organisations. The United Nations Standards of Conduct for Business on Tackling Discrimination Against LGBTI People define corporate responsibility across workplace, marketplace, and community domains, including supply chain accountability (OHCHR, 2017).

UNDP's LGBTI Inclusion Index links inclusion outcomes to Agenda 2030 priorities, particularly in relation to education, health, economic participation, and civic inclusion (UNDP, 2024). For South African employers, these frameworks align LGBT+ inclusion with existing ESG, integrated reporting, procurement systems, enterprise development strategies, and data governance structures. The most directly relevant Sustainable Development Goals are SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10, SDG 16, and SDG 17. The Constitution remains the primary legal foundation; sustainability frameworks provide an additional reporting lens for assessing the same underlying systems.

## Sector, community, sub-community

The report uses three terms that refer to distinct but related concepts, and the distinction between them is material. The LGBT+ sector refers to the network of organisations, businesses, professionals, advocates, employee networks, media platforms, and institutions whose work centres LGBT+ human rights as a domain of practice, including entities such as the Forum, MambaOnline, sector-focused researchers, NGOs, and LGBT+ business owners.

The LGBT+ community refers to the broader population of people in South Africa who hold LGBT+ identity. This includes people who are out and visible, people who are not publicly visible for legitimate reasons, and people who do not engage with the sector at all. Membership of the community is not defined by participation in the sector, and the community is not represented by the sector in its entirety; rather, it is served by the sector where trust, access, and relevance have been established.

A sub-community refers to a meaningful grouping within the broader community - this includes, for example, trans women, Black lesbian women, gender-nonconforming young people, bisexual employees, LGBT+ people of faith, and LGBT+ persons with disabilities. Each sub-community carries distinct lived realities that can be flattened by broad-brush framing if not held with precision.

## The differential of safety

Safety is not distributed evenly across the LGBT+ spectrum. Bisexual employees, lesbian women, and gay men whose presentation is read as gender-conforming may experience a relative form of access, often described as passing privilege, that is not equally available to colleagues whose presentation is not read as gender-conforming. This form of privilege is conditional and unstable. Passing is not equivalent to safety; rather, it depends on the management of visibility at work and on an unspoken baseline assumption that the room is heterosexual until evidence forces a different interpretation.

Transgender, non-binary, intersex, and gender-nonconforming employees often cannot pass. Their visibility is not always a choice. The systems that ask each employee for a pronoun, a name, a gendered restroom, or an identity document interact with these employees differently, and the interaction compounds across each touchpoint in a working day.

The Williams Institute (2019) recorded that 14.9 per cent of gender-nonconforming LGB individuals in South Africa are in the paid labour force, compared with substantially higher participation rates for gender-conforming peers. The same study estimated that wage discrimination and underemployment related to sexual orientation and gender expression cost the South African economy approximately US\$316.8 million each year, with health-related disparities adding further cost (Nyeck et al., 2019).

The report holds these differences without ranking them. The experience of a gay man in a corporate office is distinct from the experience of a Black trans woman in the same building, and the report describes each accordingly. The cohort findings reflect what infrastructure produces for the most visible members of the workforce, and infrastructure has the furthest to travel for those whose visibility is not a choice.

## Job security as the first concern

For many LGBT+ South Africans, job security is the first concern that shapes every workplace decision, including the decision to be out at work, to participate in an employee network, to use a benefit, to report an incident, or to apply for a promotion. The reason is structural. Unemployment in South Africa is among the highest in the world, and unemployment for an LGBT+ person without family or community backup is a different category of risk than unemployment for someone who can return to a household that holds them.

Many LGBT+ South Africans have been pushed out of family or community support structures earlier in life. The household does not function as a fallback. The savings buffer that absorbs a job loss for someone with intact family support is not always present in the same way. The cost of being read at work, of being outed at the bank, or of being labelled by a manager is both emotional and financial. It changes the calculus of when to disclose, when to push back, and when to accept treatment that a colleague with backup might not accept.

The Forum names this because workplace inclusion strategies that assume the LGBT+ employee will speak up when something goes wrong are designed for an employee whose social and economic context allows the cost of speaking up to be absorbed. For many LGBT+ employees, that support is absent. Inclusion systems must therefore be designed to surface harm independently of the individual being required to initiate exposure to risk.

## Multi-generational diversity

The South African workforce in 2026 includes employees whose careers began before the 1996 Constitution and employees who entered the labour market within the constitutional era. The two cohorts approach disclosure, visibility and inclusion

from different starting points, and inclusion infrastructure designed primarily for one register may not serve the other equally well.

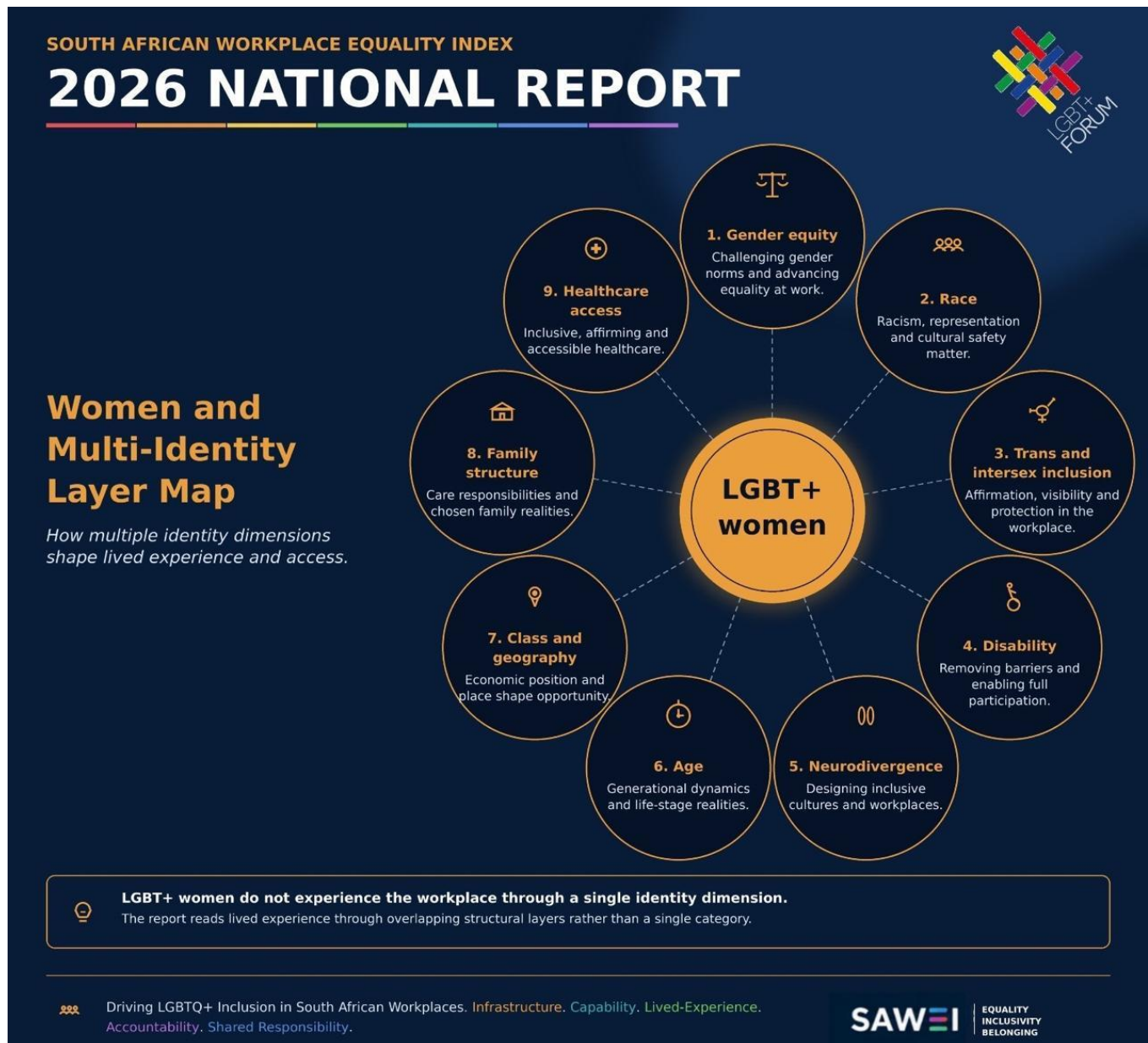
This dimension is observed across the wider workforce and is not only specific to the LGBT+ talent. For LGBT+ employees, however, the generational dimension intersects with safety considerations. Senior employees may have managed workplace risk by minimising disclosure and may be more cautious about visibility than younger colleagues. The 2026 data records that most participating organisations have not yet differentiated their inclusion practice across generational cohorts.

## **Historical access within the community**

The South African LGBT+ movement has its own history of uneven access. Workplace inclusion infrastructure in South Africa has historically been most accessible to those segments of the LGBT+ community with the closest proximity to the corporate sector, including employees in metropolitan areas, employees with English-language and professional networks, and, in many cases, cisgender lesbian and gay employees with racial and class proximity to corporate access structures. The infrastructure that SAWEI measures was largely developed within that context.

The observation is provided as context for the 2026 cycle, which assesses whether inclusion practice extends across the full spectrum of gender identity, race, class, geography and generation within the LGBT+ community. The findings indicate that this extension is incomplete in most participating organisations. The Forum considers this an area for further development rather than evidence of intentional exclusion. The framework does not weigh or rank identities within the community. Its measurements are intended to assess whether organizational systems are capable of serving the full range of employees within their scope.

## 8. Women, Gender Identity, and the Layers Within



The 2026 cohort data is consistent on a point earlier SAWEI cycles did not have the instrument to surface fully: LGBT+ women experience the workplace differently from LGBT+ men, and the differences within the category of LGBT+ women are themselves significant. A single phrase such as "LGBT+ women" can compress lesbian women, bisexual women, pansexual women, queer-identifying women, intersex women whose identity or social experience is read through womanhood, transgender women, and gender-nonconforming people who may be read as women in workplace contexts. The protections, barriers, visibility costs and cumulative load each group carries are not uniform.

LGBT+ women are part of wider gender-equity work. Their workplace experience is shaped, regardless of race, by dimensions that gender-equity frameworks built for cisgender heterosexual women do not always capture. They may navigate the gendered labour-market dynamics that women in the wider workforce navigate, including pay inequity, senior representation gaps, caregiving assumptions, safety risk, and unequal informal labour, while also navigating disclosure

costs, partner recognition gaps, misgendering, family invisibility, and benefit-system friction. The two layers compound rather than add.

## **Women across the LGBT+ spectrum**

For lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and queer women, workplace inclusion is often shaped by whether the organisation can hold both gender and sexual orientation at the same time. A women's leadership programme that assumes heterosexual family structures is not fully designed for all women. A gender-equity strategy that names women broadly but does not address same-sex partner recognition, family benefits, safety, identity disclosure, and sexual-orientation bias will not reach all women equally. The same applies to pay equity, leadership development, mobility, mentoring, and early-career sponsorship. If the programme is not designed to ask whether LGBT+ women can access it safely and visibly, then its reach is uneven even where its intent is inclusive.

The Institute of Race Relations 2023 quality-of-life study on LGBT South Africans, drawing on the Inclusive Society Institute, recorded that an estimated two-thirds of LGBT women surveyed described experiencing discrimination in job creation and employment, a higher proportion than the overall LGBT sample in the same study (Institute of Race Relations, 2023). The 2026 Kantar, DIVA Charitable Trust and Curve Foundation study recorded that approximately 42 per cent of LGBTQIA+ women and non-binary respondents in South Africa had delayed or avoided healthcare because of how they had been treated by providers (Kantar, DIVA Charitable Trust and Curve Foundation, 2026, as reported by MambaOnline, 24 April 2026). Healthcare finding is also a workplace finding. Health is a foundation of workforce participation. The employee who cannot safely access healthcare is not arriving at work on equal terms.

## **Black women and racialised workplace experience**

The report names the structural conditions that shape Black LGBT+ women's workplace experience without reducing Black LGBT+ women to a single profile or to an outcome variable. Black LGBT+ women occupy different class positions, professional levels, geographies, languages, family structures, faith backgrounds, and degrees of visibility. Where race, gender, sexuality, class and geography interact, the workplace system requires the capacity to recognise the interaction rather than forcing each person into a single diversity category at a time.

The Other Foundation's Size Matters research (2024), as reported by MambaOnline, recorded that South Africa's LGBTI market is valued at R250 billion or more annually and that economic experience within the community is uneven when disaggregated by race, gender, sexuality and gender identity. Respondents identifying as Black, LBQ women, transgender or gender-nonconforming were recorded as being in more financially vulnerable positions than white, male and cisgender counterparts. Stephens and Boonzaier (2020) develop the structural reading of this pattern through a decolonial feminist analysis of Black lesbian women's lived experience in South Africa, locating the everyday workplace and civic interaction within the longer history of coloniality and within the contemporary intersections of race, gender, sexuality and class.

The Tshisa and Van der Walt (2022) study in the SA Journal of Human Resource Management documented emotional cost and withdrawal among Black African queer employees in South African organisations where workplace policy is absent or ineffective and where colleagues, managers, and clients read multiple identity dimensions simultaneously.

The implication for employers is direct. A women's programme, youth programme, leadership programme, graduate intake, bursary campaign, or supplier-development pathway that is designed without LGBT+ visibility may reach some LGBT+ women by accident but will not reach them by design. Transformation maturity is the difference between accidental access and intentional access.

## Transgender and intersex women

Transgender and intersex women carry specific workplace barriers because many organisational systems remain built around binary sex markers, assumed gender presentation, legal-name alignment, and standardised identity-document logic. These barriers often appear at points the rest of the workforce experiences as administrative routine: onboarding forms, HR system records, payroll, building access, travel booking, medical-aid administration, uniform policy, restroom access, security escalation, leave classification, and customer-facing identity verification.

For transgender women, the relevant question reaches beyond whether a policy exists to whether the system can operate without exposing, questioning or misclassifying them at each touchpoint. For intersex women, the relevant question includes whether the system renders them visible at all, given that many systems assume bodies, medical histories, identity documents and benefit structures fit binary categories. Intersex inclusion remains at an earlier stage in most South African workplace practice than gay, lesbian and bisexual inclusion. The gap should be named without treating intersex people as an afterthought.

The practical test is whether a trans or intersex woman can join, work, travel, access benefits, seek support, use facilities, interact with security, and progress in the organisation without being required to educate the system at every point. Where the answer is no, the infrastructure is not yet integrated.

## Disability, neurodivergence and intersection

LGBT+ employees who live with disability or who are neurodivergent often encounter inclusion infrastructure that has been built as separate programmes. The disability programme and the LGBT+ programme do not always communicate. The women's network and the LGBT+ network may not communicate. The youth programme and the LGBT+ network may not communicate. The result is that the person whose experience sits across more than one dimension carries integration work the organisation has not done.

For an LGBT+ employee with disability, this may be visible in workspace privacy, assistive technology, EAP referral pathways, flexible work, employee network participation, performance expectations, transport, medical disclosure, or safe leave access. For a neurodivergent LGBT+ employee, it may be visible in communication norms, social pressure, sensory load, manager interpretation, or the expectation to explain identity and access needs separately at each interaction. The pattern reflects a governance and design gap rather than a question of intent.

## LGBT+ mature-age and retirees

LGBT+ South Africans in mature-age and retirement have not yet had a dedicated register inside SAWEI's reporting. The 2026 framework treats this as a gap to be addressed in subsequent cycles. The relevant population includes employees approaching retirement, retirees engaging with former employers' benefit and medical-aid structures, and older LGBT+ people interacting with the same organisations as customers, dependants, policyholders, and pensioners.

Older LGBT+ people experience compounding effects: the discrimination patterns the wider community navigates, layered onto age-related healthcare and economic vulnerability, layered again onto a generational history of having survived earlier workplace and social environments by remaining invisible. The implication for South African employers is that retirement-related products, pension administration, and benefit configurations carry the same design considerations that working-age products carry, and the same governance discipline applies.



Some mature-age LGBT+ employees-built careers before the language of SOGIESC was common in workplaces, before Pride was visible in most South African cities, and before many organisations had any LGBT+ policies. For some, remaining private was a survival strategy. For others, visibility was a political and personal choice made at significant cost. Inclusion practice should be designed for privacy, dignity, partner recognition, retirement security and safe access for those who have spent decades navigating differently, as well as for the visibility expectations younger employees may bring.

### **What this asks of organisations**

These dimensions are not addressed by a single employee network, a single women's network event, or a single training module. They require infrastructure that holds intersection as a default rather than an exception. Organisations may wish to test every major transformation programme, including women's leadership, youth development, disability inclusion, graduate recruitment, internships, learnerships, supplier development, CSI, ESG, customer inclusion and leadership succession, by asking whether LGBT+ women, trans women, intersex women, mature-age LGBT+ persons, retirees, and multi-identity employees can see, access and benefit from the programme without being required to self-expose or self-advocate at every step.

## **9. Observations on Lived Experience and Workplace Visibility**

This chapter presents observations on the relationship between organisational inclusion infrastructure and employee experience. The observations are drawn from the cohort data, supported where appropriate by reference to the academic literature on workplace inclusion. The chapter is intended to provide context for the theme-level findings in the chapters that follow.

### **The limits of grievance and exit data**

Cohort participants generally rely on grievance records, EAP referral data and exit interview data as principal sources of information on employee experience. The 2026 framework records that these sources are limited in their ability to capture forms of exclusion that do not result in formal complaints or recorded incidents. Examples include exclusionary informal interactions, the use of "cultural fit" as a proxy in performance assessments, and benefits and HR forms that do not accommodate same-sex partnerships or non-binary gender identities. Such forms of exclusion are typically reflected in retention and progression data over time but are not separately identifiable in those datasets.

Silent discrimination is observed in the gap between what an organisation's policy promises and what an LGBT+ person navigates on an ordinary Monday morning in February, when nobody is watching and Pride is months away. The cumulative effect of silent discrimination on retention and progression is consistent with findings in the broader academic literature on workplace inclusion. In the present cohort, none of the participating organisations is currently in a position to disaggregate retention or progression data for LGBT+ employees, as the relevant headcount data is not consistently collected. The gap in measurement is itself a finding of this cycle, rather than a feature of any individual participating organisation.

### **Visibility across layers of power**

Visibility of LGBT+ employees is not uniform across the layers of an organisation. The 2026 data records that, in the majority of participating organisations, peer-level inclusion is more developed than structural inclusion. Specifically, employees report or are observed to experience higher levels of acceptance at team level than at the level of board reporting, succession planning, executive committee composition and senior leadership performance contracting.

Peer-level inclusion is recorded as a positive indicator in the framework. It is treated as distinct from structural inclusion, which requires that LGBT+ representation, voice and accountability are present at the levels of the organisation at which strategic decisions are made. The 2026 framework assesses both layers separately.

<b>Where inclusion is observed: peer layer</b>	<b>Where inclusion is less developed: structural layer</b>
Team acceptance and social inclusion.	Board-level reporting of LGBT+ representation and inclusion metrics.
Active employee network membership and visible employee community.	Succession planning that incorporates LGBT+ representation.
Manager support in individual cases.	Inclusion key performance indicators (KPIs) in senior leader performance contracts.
Use of inclusive language in team settings.	Pay equity analysis disaggregated for LGBT+ employees.

## **Performance, psychological safety, and innovation**

Existing research on team performance records that psychological safety is a significant predictor of innovation and team effectiveness (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety, as defined in the literature, refers to the shared belief among team members that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Where employees consistently allocate cognitive capacity to the management of disclosure or to compensating for perceived workplace risk, the conditions for psychological safety are weakened. The implication for organisations whose LGBT+ employees report or display such patterns is that the integration gap documented in this cycle is associated with measurable effects on team-level performance, in addition to its direct implications for inclusion.

The Forum notes this dimension as relevant context for the cohort findings rather than as a separately scored framework element. Participating organisations may wish to consider engagement and innovation indicators alongside the inclusion measurements set out in subsequent chapters.

## **10. Culture, Employee Value Proposition and Belief-based Resistance**

Organisations that score relatively well across the framework demonstrate a set of cultural characteristics that are not fully captured by individual question scores. These characteristics should not be read as uniform organisational maturity across all dimensions of LGBT+ inclusion. In most cases, higher scores reflect more developed capability in policy design, procedural infrastructure and LGBT+ literacy in relation to sexual orientation inclusion, while maturity across gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics remains more variable. This chapter sets out the most consistent of these characteristics and notes a category of resistance that is not directly scored by the framework but is consistently reflected in cohort observations.

### **Characteristics of higher-scoring organisational cultures**

Higher-scoring participating organisations tend to demonstrate greater continuity in LGBT+ inclusion activity across the calendar year. Inclusion communications, employee network activity and leadership engagement are more likely to be

distributed across multiple quarters, indicating that inclusion has been incorporated into routine organisational processes rather than treated solely as an event-based initiative.

Within this group, the most developed forms of organisational maturity are generally observed in formal infrastructure, including policy frameworks, HR processes, benefits administration and inclusion-related communication practices. In many organisations, this reflects three decades of constitutional protection in South Africa together with sustained organisational exposure to workplace diversity discourse, particularly in relation to sexual orientation inclusion. As a result, organisational capability and LGBT+ literacy are often more developed in areas relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual employees than in areas requiring active adaptation for transgender, non-binary, intersex and gender-nonconforming employees.

The findings indicate that the existence of formal infrastructure does not consistently translate into equivalent lived experience across the full LGBT+ spectrum. While higher-scoring organisations are generally more likely to apply inclusion standards beyond formal policy environments, implementation remains uneven where systems require practical adaptation to gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics in operational settings.

### **Belief-based resistance**

The framework does not directly assess privately held beliefs of individual leaders. However, cohort observations indicate that the implementation of inclusion commitments is, in some cases, influenced by such beliefs.

Where leaders hold views on gender or sexuality that are not fully aligned with organisational commitments, variability is observed in the consistency of policy implementation, resource allocation, and operational follow-through. The LEAD theme captures the structural mechanisms such as KPIs, governance routines and accountability frameworks intended to stabilise implementation regardless of individual belief systems.

The Forum recognises that workplace inclusion in South Africa exists alongside multi-diverse personal, cultural and faith-based perspectives. The framework therefore assesses organisational consistency in operationalising commitments, rather than adjudicating personal belief systems.

### **Characteristics of an inclusive Employee Value Proposition**

An inclusive Employee Value Proposition is characterised by explicit reference to LGBT+ identity in job advertisements, onboarding materials, benefits documentation and leadership communications, framed in operational rather than symbolic language. It is also reflected in the sustained integration of inclusion-related activity across the calendar year, with visibility distributed across quarters rather than concentrated in Pride month. In addition, it is supported by clearly defined ownership structures for inclusion programmes, which are formally documented and maintained through changes in leadership or in the responsible DEIB function.

However, these characteristics primarily indicate the presence of organisational infrastructure and inclusion literacy rather than uniform effectiveness across all dimensions of LGBT+ inclusion. In many contexts, EVP maturity is more developed in relation to sexual orientation inclusion and formal policy environments, while translation into consistent operational experience—particularly for transgender, women, non-binary, intersex and gender-nonconforming employees—remains uneven.

## 11. Cohort Findings

The findings in this chapter are drawn from the seven validated submissions. They describe the cohort of participating organisations and are not intended to constitute a national census of South African employers.

### Participation

Submissions received	Validated	Of which
11	7	4 named publicly. 3 anonymous. 4 incomplete (used as market-readiness signal).

The 2026 cohort is smaller than the cohort recorded in the 2021 cycle, in which 23 organisations completed submissions in full (SA LGBT+ Management Forum, 2021). This reduction reflects the increased scope and evidentiary requirements of the revised 110-question framework. The 2026 instrument assesses implementation depth and systems evidence at a significantly higher resolution than earlier cycles, which focused primarily on the presence of stated commitments and foundational inclusion infrastructure.

Four organisations did not complete the full assessment. Their partial participation is retained in aggregate analysis as an indicator of organisational readiness under the revised framework rather than as an exclusion from the cohort.

Three participating organisations completed the full assessment and requested anonymity. Their data is included in all cohort findings, although individual tiers are not published. The Forum understands these requests to reflect external pressures on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practice in certain jurisdictions outside South Africa and treats them as contextual signals rather than indicators of reduced commitment to inclusion.

### Recognized employers

The following organisations completed the full assessment and have consented to public recognition. Tiers are published without individual percentage scores.

## SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE EQUALITY INDEX


## 2026 NATIONAL REPORT



## Recognised Employers

SAWEI 2026 validated cohort, named public recognition

ORGANISATION	SECTOR	TIER
McKinsey & Company South Africa	Management Consulting	 Gold / Progressive
Vodacom South Africa	Telecommunications	 Silver / Emerging
PricewaterhouseCoopers South Africa	Professional Services	 Silver / Emerging
Absa Group	Financial Services	 Silver / Emerging

 Tiers are published without individual percentage scores.

**SAWEI** EQUALITY INCLUSIVITY BELONGING

## Headline findings

The following table summarises the principal cohort-level findings and indicates the themes in which they are most evident. Findings are addressed in detail in the Theme Findings chapter.

Finding	Themes where visible
Stated values and policy commitments are widely present. Evidenced governance and accountability structures are less consistently in place. The differential between these two represents a primary maturity distinction observed across the cohort.	LEAD, BELONG
Inclusion infrastructure is present in most participating organisations. Activation of that infrastructure at management and operational levels is less consistent. Employee networks, policies and identity systems are present but are not uniformly integrated into day-to-day practice.	GROW, SUPPORT, BELONG
Concentration of LGBT+ inclusion activity in Pride month, previously observed in earlier cycles, continues to be present across the 2026 cohort. More consistent year-round practice is associated with more consistent distribution of resourcing across the calendar year.	BELONG, INFLUENCE

In a majority of participating organisations, employee benefits do not fully reflect Civil Union Act 17 of 2006 entitlements. The finding has both compliance-aligned and inclusion implications.	SUPPORT
Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) providers are not consistently confirmed as LGBT+-affirming across the cohort. This affects the reliability of the primary mental health support pathway available to employees.	SUPPORT
Investment in internally facing digital inclusion infrastructure is not consistently extended to customer-facing systems. This creates discontinuity between internal inclusion systems and external user experience environments.	DESIGN, INFLUENCE
Anonymous participation reflects external geopolitical constraints affecting DEI practice in some multinational organisations. These constraints originate outside South Africa and operate alongside domestic organisational commitments.	Participation pattern
Four organisations commenced submissions but did not complete the full assessment. These instances are retained as indicators of organisational readiness under the SAWEI framework rather than as exclusions from participation.	Readiness signal

### Three cross-cutting patterns

#### Pattern 1: Infrastructure without consistent activation

The most consistent observation across the cohort concerns the gap between the existence of inclusion infrastructure and its consistent activation in day-to-day practice. Participating organisations have, in most cases, invested in policies, ERGs, identity systems and governance commitments. Activation is observed to be less consistent in ERG resourcing, mandatory training, onboarding, EAP provider readiness, benefits administration, customer-facing systems and leadership accountability.

The observed gap reflects a distinction between structural capability and operational integration. The Forum considers this integration gap a primary area for development across the accreditation period.

#### Pattern 2: Concentration of activity in Pride month

The concentration of LGBT+ inclusion activity in particular periods, including June and October, is observed in all four SAWEI cycles since 2018. The pattern appears across ERG activity, brand presence, leadership visibility and community engagement. Participating organisations that score relatively well on consistency are those that distribute activity across all four quarters. Cohort observations indicate an association between distributed activity and more consistent performance across BELONG, INFLUENCE and GROW themes.

#### Pattern 3: Differences between infrastructure and employee lived experience

The 2026 cycle assesses the relationship between organisational inclusion infrastructure and employee experience outcomes at scale. Across the cohort, this relationship is incomplete in most participating organisations. Inclusion infrastructure is most likely to translate into lived experience where operational actors—managers, HR business partners, recruiters, customer-facing employees, security teams, facilities teams, and EAP providers—are sufficiently equipped and

accountable to implement inclusion principles in practice. However, mandatory LGBT+ literacy, role-based capability building, and systematic measurement of training outcomes are not consistently embedded.

The primary gap is located between the design intent of inclusion systems and their operational execution in day-to-day employee experience. This is observable in the divergence between policy availability and practical access, as well as between structural inclusion design and consistent service delivery across organisational touchpoints. The report conceptualises this as a systems activation gap, rather than a deficit in stated commitment or policy formulation.

#### **Pattern 4: Support systems are where the integration gap becomes most consequential**

The SUPPORT theme records the most direct lived-experience consequences of uneven implementation. Benefits, EAP access, gender affirmation pathways, wellness programmes, GBV referral routes, security protocols and facilities practice determine whether LGBT+ employees can access support when it matters.

#### **Pattern 5: Internal inclusion is more developed than external-facing inclusion**

Across the cohort, internal systems are generally more developed than customer-facing, supplier-facing and brand-facing systems. HRIS, internal policy and ERG infrastructure have advanced further than customer platforms, contact centres, product design, procurement scorecards, supplier development, and year-round external advocacy. This creates a consistency gap between internal inclusion commitments and external lived experience.

## **12. Theme Findings**

The strength of an organisation's practice is measured by what employees experience rather than by what the policy describes. An organisation can be mature on paper and still produce uneven lived experience for employees, customers, and clients. The Employee Value Proposition communicated externally is not always identical to internal experience. The cohort observations below therefore reflect both structural conditions and lived execution.

### **LEAD: Strategy, Governance and Transformation**

#### **Cohort signal**

Most participating organisations have visible governance commitments to LGBT+ inclusion, including policy statements, Executive Committee (EXCO) sponsorship arrangements. Fewer participating organisations have embedded supporting accountability mechanisms such as KPIs in senior leader performance contracts, risk registers covering LGBT+-related barriers, and internal surveys capturing LGBT+ employee experience.

<b>Indicators of strong practice</b>	<b>Areas requiring further development</b>
Policy statements and EXCO sponsorship arrangements for LGBT+ inclusion are present across most participating organisations.	Senior leader performance contracts rarely include explicit LGBT+ inclusion KPIs across the cohort.
Employment Equity (EE) plans in some participants reference inclusion intent for LGBT+ employees, typically at a declarative level	EE processes does not consistently include structured identification, documentation, and tracking of LGBT+ workplace barriers across the cohort.

Formal governance linkage between LGBT+ employee networks and leadership structures is observed in higher-scoring organisations.	Internal surveys capturing LGBT+ employee experience are present in a minority of participants.
	Strategy, Governance and Transformation - Public-sector and state-facing inclusion signaling is not consistently aligned across protected characteristics. Government-led observance and awareness activity is more visible for some equity categories than for LGBT+ inclusion.

## Concluding observation

The cohort data indicates that the gap between stated governance commitments and the operational accountability mechanisms intended to give effect to those commitments is the principal area for development under this theme. The inclusion of explicit LGBT+ KPIs in senior performance contracts is associated with stronger scores in adjacent themes.

## DESIGN: Privacy, Self-ID, and Inclusive Systems

### Cohort signal

DESIGN is the strongest theme across the cohort. The level of practice observed in data architecture aligns with the broader compliance investment associated with POPIA. The principal area for further development under this theme concerns the extension of internal inclusion practices to customer-facing systems.

Indicators of strong practice	Areas requiring further development
POPIA-compliant self-identification processes with documented privacy safeguards are observed in higher-scoring organisations.	Customer-facing digital systems (contact centres, billing, application systems) lag internal HR systems in supporting chosen names and pronouns.
HRIS, email directories, and internal digital systems increasingly support chosen names and pronouns across most participants.	Voluntary self-identification through anonymous surveys or statistical estimation of LGBT+ headcount remains inconsistent across the cohort.
Limited physical workspace accommodations exist in a small number of participants, including reliance on existing single-occupancy or disability-access bathrooms as an informal inclusion workaround.	Purpose-built inclusive or all-gender restroom infrastructure is not consistently available across the cohort, resulting in reliance on ad hoc or repurposed facilities.
Limited review of AI systems and chatbots for inclusive language is emerging in a small number of organisations.	Customer-facing systems remain structurally less inclusive than internal systems, limiting consistency of experience.
Some organisations demonstrate emerging consideration of inclusion in mobility and travel policies, though this is not systematic across the cohort.	International assignment and travel-risk policies do not consistently address LGBT+ safety in hostile environments,



	leaving employees exposed to jurisdictional and situational risk variation.
	National labour-market and population data infrastructure does not yet provide consistent LGBT+ visibility through safe, voluntary, and privacy-conscious SOGIESC data approaches, limiting broader benchmarking and evidence development.

### Concluding observation

Internal system design is more advanced than external-facing systems, creating a divergence between employee experience infrastructure and customer experience infrastructure.

### WELCOME: Talent Attraction and Inclusive Hiring

#### Cohort signal

Talent attraction systems show increased inclusive language and process adjustments. However, post-hire integration and early employment experience remain weaker than entry-point design.

Indicators of strong practice	Areas requiring further development
Inclusive language is included in job advertisements across majority of participants.	Pipeline partnerships (LGBT+ recruitment agencies or platforms, universities, TVETs, YES programmes, internships, and LGBT+ sector channels) remain underdeveloped.
Recruiter and hiring manager bias training is more widely implemented than in prior cycles.	Onboarding programmes do not consistently include explicit LGBT+ inclusion content, and customized onboarding pathways
Recruitment systems increasingly support chosen names and pronouns during hiring processes.	Formal coaching mentoring or sponsorship for early-career LGBT+ hires is present in a minority of participants.
Inclusive benefits are communicated in candidate-facing materials across most participants.	Early-career pathways do not consistently address intersecting risks for LGBT+ women and LGBT+ youth (housing, disclosure, identity documentation, safety).

### Concluding observation

Practice in the talent attraction space is more developed than practice in the period immediately following the point of hire. The cohort data indicates that the design of the first year of employment is an area in which further investment is likely to support retention.

## BELONG: Culture, Employee Resource Groups and Belonging

### Cohort signal

BELONG is the largest theme by question count. Structural investment is observed across the cohort. Activation of that investment in day-to-day practice is less consistent, and the differential between investment and observed employee experience is the most pronounced in this theme.

Indicators of strong practice	Areas requiring further development
Active LGBT+ employee networks are present in almost all participants.	Employee network budgets with formal KPIs linked to business strategy are observed in a minority of participants.
Formal ally programmes are increasingly structured around documented learning pathways rather than sign-up arrangements alone.	Employee network activity is concentrated in Pride month in the majority of participants. The pattern is consistent across all four SAWEI cycles since 2018.
Dress code and gender expression policies are more frequently explicit and affirming than in the 2021 cycle.	Formal incident-reporting routes specifically for LGBT+ discrimination and misgendering are not consistent.
	Internal survey mechanisms capturing LGBT+ employee experience remain limited and inconsistently deployed across the cohort.
	National awareness, observance and social-cohesion environments do not consistently include LGBT+ inclusion alongside other recognised equity and constitutional inclusion priorities, affecting broader cultural normalisation and visibility.

### Concluding observation

The cohort data indicates that the establishment of inclusion structures is more developed than the resourcing and integration of those structures into year-round practice. Resourcing arrangements for employee networks are associated with higher scores in adjacent dimensions of the framework.

## GROW: Capability, Literacy and Development

### Cohort signal

There is a measurable gap between organisation's ability to track representation and their ability to build capability to act on that information. Management-layer capability remains inconsistent across the cohort.

Indicators of strong practice	Areas requiring further development
LGBT+ career progression data collection is improving across the cohort.	Mandatory training on LGBT+ inclusion is absent in the majority of participants.

Representation tracking and scorecard at leadership level is present in higher-scoring organisations.	LGBT+ Score card need to be put in place in order to drive consistent transformation that aligns with the organisation purpose and goals. Senior leadership and board level reporting needs to be put in place.
Targeted leadership development programmes for LGBT+ talent exist in a minority of participants.	Targeted leadership development programmes for LGBT+ talent need to be developed and made available.
Limited examples of training effectiveness evaluation frameworks exist in a small number of organisations.	Training outcomes (behaviour change, incident trends, complaints, EAP utilisation, and manager confidence) are not systematically or consistently measured across the cohort.
Some development pathways for early-career talent exist but aren't explicitly inclusive or targeted.	Development programmes are not consistently linked to LGBT+ sector or community pipelines.
Executive sponsorship structures for LGBT+ inclusion exist in most participants, typically in informal or non-performance-linked forms.	Senior leadership accountability mechanisms (including structured performance linkage) are not consistently embedded across organisations.

## Concluding observation

Capability development for implementation roles is the strongest predictor of whether inclusion infrastructure translates into lived experience.

## SUPPORT: Benefits, Wellness and Affirmation

### Cohort signal

SUPPORT is the theme in which the cohort observations are most consequential. Structural investment in inclusion is not consistently matched by benefits, wellness, and support systems. This theme reflects the most direct lived-experience gap in the cohort.

Indicators of strong practice	Areas requiring further development
Gender affirmation pathways and case management flows are documented in higher-scoring organisations.	Employee benefits do not consistently recognise all family structures and sub-community benefits across the majority of participants.
Safe reporting routes for SOGIESC-based harassment are increasingly present across participants.	EAP providers are not consistently confirmed as LGBT+-affirming across the cohort.
	Wellness programmes do not consistently address minority stress, HRT access, HIV/STI prevention, or PrEP/PEP awareness.

In a small number of organisations, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) campaigns include LGBT+ inclusion content and related referral pathways.	GBV programmes across the cohort do not consistently or systematically integrate LGBT+ inclusion, with most remaining cisgender-focused in design and delivery.
Some structured support pathways exist for transition-related needs.	Security and facilities teams are not consistently trained on LGBT+-specific risk scenarios.
	Access to affirming public services, including healthcare, identity-document processes, safety services and social support systems, remains inconsistent across operating environments, affecting employee experience beyond the workplace itself.

## Concluding observation

The integration gap is most visible in support systems, where structural intent does not consistently translate into accessible, affirming employee experience.

## PARTNER: Supplier Diversity and Community

### Cohort signal

Observations indicate that community engagement intent is widely present across the cohort, but the supporting process discipline required to consistently document, measure, and scale this activity is uneven. Community-facing work is occurring in most participating organisations; however, visibility, governance, and reporting of that work are less consistently institutionalized. Community co-design approaches are observed in higher-scoring participants. Crisis referral pathways (including GBV support, legal assistance, mental health services, housing support, emergency funding, and hate-crime response mechanisms) are absent in most participating organisations.

Indicators of strong practice	Areas requiring further development
Formal partnerships with LGBT+ community organisations are observed in most participants.	Formal contracts and transformation partnerships between participating organisations and LGBT+ community-sector organisations are limited. Support is often informal, seasonal, employee-network-mediated or dependent on individual relationships.
Supplier diversity policies increasingly identify LGBT+-owned businesses as an explicit category in higher-scoring participants.	LGBT+ supplier diversity is not yet supported by a procurement scorecard architecture comparable to the structures used for women-owned, youth-owned and persons-with-disability-owned businesses.
Community co-design approaches are observed in higher-scoring participants.	Crisis referral pathways including GBV support, legal support, mental health, housing, emergency funds and hate-crime response are absent in most participating organisations.

	Enterprise and Supplier Development pipelines rarely include LGBT+-owned SMMEs as a named category, even where those businesses are otherwise B-BBEE compliant.
	CSI and ESG portfolios do not consistently name LGBT+ inclusion as a transformation outcome.
	Public education and awareness regarding LGBT+ inclusion is not consistently reinforced across broader institutional and service-delivery environments, contributing to uneven customer, community, and workplace experience.
	Existing transformation architecture, including B-BBEE, enterprise development and supplier diversity frameworks, does not yet consistently recognise LGBT+ economic inclusion explicitly, limiting structural pathways for supplier and community participation.

### Concluding observation

The principal gap under this theme is not the absence of activity, but the absence of consistent structural embedding. Community and economic-inclusion work is occurring across the cohort, but is not yet consistently formalised through procurement systems, supplier development frameworks, CSI/ESG reporting structures, or transformation scorecard mechanisms.

As a result, LGBT+ economic inclusion is more often expressed through informal support, seasonal initiatives, employee-network facilitation, or individual partnerships than through governed, measurable, and sustained institutional systems. The UN Standards of Conduct for Business on Tackling Discrimination Against LGBTI People frame non-discrimination across customers, suppliers, and distributors as a core business responsibility rather than a discretionary social activity (OHCHR, 2017). Within this framing, the next phase of development requires shifting from relational and episodic engagement toward structured integration into procurement, supplier development, and community investment systems, including the identification and enablement of LGBT+-owned SMMEs where appropriate and lawful, and the alignment of supplier codes, CSI portfolios, and ESG frameworks with consistent non-discrimination standards.

### INFLUENCE: Brand, Customer and External Advocacy

#### Cohort signal

INFLUENCE is the lowest-scoring theme across the cohort. The observations indicate that internal inclusion systems have not yet been consistently extended into brand, customer experience, and external advocacy domains. This gap represents one of the most material opportunities for improvement in the next phase of the accreditation period.

<b>Indicators of strong practice</b>	<b>Areas requiring further development</b>
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Some organisations are beginning to incorporate LGBT+ inclusion into external brand, communications, and customer-experience frameworks.	Brand and Corporate Identity (CI) guidelines do not consistently include explicit LGBT+ representation, inclusive language or intersectional visibility across the cohort.
Documented backlash preparedness and external communications response planning are observed in a small number of organisations.	Customer-facing systems, including digital platforms, application systems and contact-centre processes, do not consistently support chosen names and pronouns.
Limited LGBT+ customer research, usability testing and audience insight work is emerging in a minority of organisations.	LGBT+ inclusion is not consistently embedded into customer experience design, service-delivery standards, or customer journey mapping.
Some organisations demonstrate year-round external engagement rather than Pride-period visibility alone.	Executive and leadership visibility in external LGBT+ advocacy, sector dialogue and public inclusion forums remains limited across the cohort.
External communications in a minority of organisations increasingly align with internal inclusion positioning.	External LGBT+ brand visibility remains seasonal rather than sustained through year-round engagement and operational practice.
Some participating organisations are beginning to align external Employee Value Proposition (EVP) messaging with internal inclusion commitments.	The LGBT+ Employee Value Proposition communicated externally is not consistently reflected in lived employee experience, particularly across subcommunities, sectors and operational environments.
A small number of organisations are moving beyond symbolic Pride-period messaging toward operational and customer-facing inclusion practice.	Campaign-led visibility is not consistently supported by underlying operational practice, policy implementation, customer systems or employee experience.
Some organisations are beginning to assess reputational and stakeholder risk associated with inconsistent inclusion positioning.	Forms of “new age” pinkwashing are emerging across parts of the cohort, where inclusion signaling, brand positioning or Pride visibility exceed the organisation’s demonstrated operational maturity, employee experience or accountability structures.

## Concluding observation

The cohort pattern indicates that seasonal visibility in external brand and advocacy activity closely mirrors the seasonal concentration observed in internal engagement (BELONG). Where inclusion is embedded as a year-round operational capability, external expression also stabilises into year-round practice. Conversely, where internal systems remain unevenly activated, external-facing inclusion tends to concentrate into symbolic or calendar-linked periods rather than sustained operational delivery.

### 13. The Employee Lifecycle: Capability and Allyship

Workplace inclusion outcomes are produced through the interaction between employees and the systems designed by the organisation. Across the cohort, inclusion infrastructure exists in varying degrees across policies, systems, and training frameworks, but its activation is inconsistent. As a result, employee experience depends heavily on role, manager capability, and the operational environment in which interactions occur. Allyship and capability are therefore treated in this framework as organisational infrastructure rather than individual disposition.

#### System-enabled vs system-constrained interactions

Where inclusion systems are functional, employees are supported through clear workflows, language capability, and escalation routes. This includes, for example, HR systems that support identity consistency, recruitment processes that anticipate identity-document variation, and line managers who have received role-based guidance on handling disclosure or transition-related conversations.

Where these systems are not consistently in place, employees operate with discretion in the moment. This produces variability in outcomes across similar scenarios, depending on individual awareness and confidence rather than organisational design.

The cohort does not indicate uniform absence of capability, but rather uneven distribution of capability across roles and business units.

#### Allyship as organisational responsibility

Colleagues who intervene in exclusionary or inappropriate interactions may experience informal organisational cost, including reputational risk within teams or reduced access to informal influence networks. This risk is not consistently mitigated through formal recognition, escalation protection, or leadership reinforcement mechanisms across the cohort.

#### Where allyship programmes exist, they are often not consistently linked to:

- Formal escalation pathways,
- Leadership sponsorship structures, or measurable organisational accountability mechanisms.

This limits their protective function and can shift risk to individual employees rather than the organisation.

### 14. Digital Systems and Artificial Intelligence

Digital systems increasingly shape both employee and customer experience across the lifecycle, particularly in recruitment, HR administration, and customer service environments. The cohort indicates that internal inclusion improvements are more developed than their extension into advanced digital systems, including AI-enabled tools.

#### Artificial intelligence and bias risk in employment systems

AI-enabled systems used in recruitment screening, candidate matching, or content filtering are typically trained on historical organisational datasets. Given that SOGIESC data is not consistently captured across participating organisations, these datasets are incomplete with respect to LGBT+ populations.

As a result, bias risks in AI systems are primarily structural rather than intentional, arising from incomplete representation rather than explicit exclusion.

A small number of organisations report having initiated review processes for inclusive language and bias in AI tools. However, across the cohort, AI governance related to SOGIESC inclusion remains an emerging area rather than a mature control environment.

The framework therefore treats AI inclusion risk as a governance and assurance gap rather than a confirmed systemic failure.

### **Privacy, POPIA, and SOGIESC data capture**

POPIA defines sexual orientation as personal information and includes categories such as health or sex life within special personal information requiring enhanced protection and lawful processing conditions (Republic of South Africa, 2013).

Within the cohort, interpretation of these requirements varies. In some organisations, POPIA is treated as a constraint on SOGIESC data collection, limiting visibility of LGBT+ representation. In higher-maturity environments, POPIA is operationalised as a framework enabling voluntary, confidential, and consent-based self-identification processes.

As a result, LGBT+ representation data remains incomplete across most participating organisations, limiting the ability to conduct fully representative analysis of outcomes such as pay equity, progression, or experience differentials.

### **Interaction between data absence and system design**

Where SOGIESC data is not captured, it is not consistently possible to validate whether downstream systems (including AI-enabled tools, analytics platforms, or reporting dashboards) reflect the full population distribution.

### **The cohort therefore indicates a reinforcing relationship between:**

- Incomplete voluntary data capture mechanisms, and limited ability to audit or correct bias in automated or semi-automated decision systems.

The most developed practice observed links POPIA-compliant self-identification frameworks with early-stage review of digital and AI systems. This remains limited to a small number of participants.

## **15. Barriers to Access**

If an individual must educate a system in order to use it, the system is not yet operating as an inclusive design environment. Across the cohort, barriers to access emerge not as isolated incidents, but as recurring friction points across multiple operational touchpoints in the employee, customer, and economic lifecycle.

These barriers are not uniform across organisations, but they are consistently shaped by gaps between formal policy, system configuration, and frontline operational capability.

The lifecycle below identifies six operational touchpoints most frequently encountered within a working week. The broader lifecycle map extends beyond weekly interaction points to include additional touchpoints covered across this report and mapped against the SAWEI themes.





**Six operational touchpoints are most frequently encountered inside a working week:** Identity; Recognition and Benefits; Wellness and EAP; Recruitment; Travel and Security; Banking and Finance.

## Identity

Identity-related friction occurs where systems require alignment to a single, static identity construct that does not reflect lived identity. Across the cohort, HRIS and digital identity systems are more developed internally than externally, but inconsistencies remain between internal HR systems and customer-facing platforms.

Common friction points include:

- Inability to consistently maintain chosen name and pronouns across systems.
- Misalignment between identity documentation and lived identity during verification processes.
- Inconsistent application of identity fields across HR, payroll, and customer systems.

Where internal systems are configured, external systems often lag, particularly in customer service environments.

## Recognition and Benefits

Recognition systems determine whether an individual is treated as a legitimate participant in organisational or economic structures.

Across the cohort, benefit recognition does not consistently reflect all family structures or partnership configurations. While formal policy intent may exist, operational interpretation varies across HR administration and benefits providers.

This results in inconsistent recognition in:

- Medical aid dependency structures,

- Leave and family responsibility frameworks,
- Administrative recognition of civil partnership or equivalent arrangements.

The gap is not primarily policy absence, but implementation variability.

## Wellness and EAP

Wellness systems and Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) function as primary access points for psychosocial support. Across the cohort, EAP provision is widely available, but LGBT+ competence and affirming capability are not consistently specified, embedded, or evidenced in practice. This creates variability in trust, perceived safety, and utilisation.

Where LGBT+ inclusivity is not explicitly defined in provider capability, employees may avoid or delay engagement with support services, particularly in situations involving identity disclosure, mental health strain, or experiences of workplace discrimination. The constraint is not access to the service itself, but confidence in the quality, relevance, and safety of the interaction once accessed.

## Recruitment

Recruitment systems function as the first formal access point into the organisation.

Across the cohort, candidate-facing systems show partial advancement in inclusive design, particularly in job advertising language and application workflows. However, gaps persist in:

- Consistency of chosen name usage across recruitment stages,
- Onboarding alignment with identity systems,
- Structured early-stage belonging design.

The early employment phase remains a transition zone where inclusion is more variable than policy suggests.

## Travel and Security

Travel and security systems govern physical safety and mobility across locations, particularly in cross-border or client-facing work.

This is a developing area across the cohort. While general duty-of-care policies exist, LGBT+-specific risk considerations are not consistently embedded in:

- international assignment policies.
- travel risk assessments.

This creates uneven protection depending on geography and role exposure.

## Banking and Finance

Financial systems influence both personal and organisational participation in economic life.

Barriers in this category are less consistently addressed within organisational control, but emerge through:

- Documentation mismatch challenges. (fraud false positives)

- Administrative identity verification processes.
- Administrative recognition of civil partnership or equivalent arrangements.

These barriers often sit at the intersection of organisational systems and financial infrastructure.

## Concluding observation

Across all six touchpoints, the cohort indicates a consistent pattern: inclusion is more advanced at the level of policy articulation and internal system design than at the level of end-to-end operational consistency. Barriers to access therefore arise less from the absence of inclusion intent and more from fragmentation between systems, uneven implementation across business units, and limited integration between internal operational environments and external-facing service environments. This results in variability in how inclusion is experienced in practice, depending on the touchpoint, function, and channel through which an individual engages the organisation.

## Barrier touchpoints across the lifecycle and the SAWEI framework

The table below maps the barrier touchpoints addressed in this report against the lifecycle stages set out in About SAWEI and the 2026 Cycle and against the SAWEI framework's eight themes. The six operational touchpoints shown in the visual above sit within the wider set. Capability and allyship infrastructure runs across all touchpoints and is held as a cross-cutting layer, addressed in the closing sub-sections of this chapter and developed further in Chapter 13.

Touchpoint	Lifecycle stage	Themes	Where addressed
Education and pipeline access	Education and early-career pipeline	GROW	Chapter 18
Recruitment and candidate experience	Recruitment and entry to formal employment	GROW	Chapter 15 (Recruitment and first contact)
Identity in the system: onboarding, forms, HRIS, chosen name and pronouns	Identity and benefit administration	BELONG, SUPPORT	Chapter 15 (Identity in the system)
Day-to-day workplace culture: dress code, gender expression, team interactions, manager conduct	Identity and benefit administration, daily working life	LEAD, GROW	Chapters 9, 10 and 12 (BELONG)
Recognition and benefits: spouse, family, dependants, beneficiary, parental leave	Identity and benefit administration	DESIGN	Chapter 15 (Recognition and benefits)
Wellness, EAP and healthcare access	Healthcare and wellness access	DESIGN, INFLUENCE	Chapter 15 (Wellness and the EAP) and Chapter 16
Travel, security and identity-document interface	Travel and identity-document interfaces	DESIGN	Chapter 15 (Travel, security, and the identity-document interface)

Customer and consumer interface: banking, insurance, healthcare provision, retail, telecommunications, hospitality	Banking and consumer services, healthcare access	SUPPORT	Chapter 15 (Banking, finance, insurance) and Chapter 16
Procurement and supplier diversity for LGBT+-owned businesses	Cross-cutting: the LGBT+ person as supplier or business owner	INFLUENCE, LEAD	Chapter 15 (Procurement, supplier diversity)
Retirement and pension administration	Retirement and pension administration	INFLUENCE	Chapter 8 (mature-age and retirees), flagged for development in subsequent cycles
Capability and allyship infrastructure (cross-cutting layer)	Cross-cutting: every touchpoint above	LEAD, BELONG	Chapter 15 (Employee who wants to help) and Chapter 13

The sub-sections below walk through the touchpoints inside the working week and the adjacent customer and supplier interfaces with illustrative use cases. Education, retirement, and capability infrastructure are treated in their respective chapters as indicated above.

### **Identity in the system: onboarding, forms, and the digital identity layer**

Onboarding is the point at which the system first assigns identity. Where systems are designed around identity-document defaults without alternative fields, the recorded identity is often structurally misaligned with lived identity. This mismatch propagates across dependent systems such as payroll, access control, email, and HRIS.

A trans employee whose lived name differs from their identity-document name may find multiple systems updating from a single source record, resulting in inconsistent naming across workplace platforms. A non-binary employee is often constrained by binary gender fields (M/F) during HR and benefits enrolment, resulting in forced classification. A same-sex relationship may require manual escalation during spouse registration where system validation rules assume heterosexual pairing structures.

### **Recognition and benefits: spouse, family, beneficiary**

Recognition functions as a validation test of whether family structures are processed equivalently across all employees. While South African law recognises civil unions, same-sex marriage, and same-sex parenting (Republic of South Africa, 2006), benefit systems do not consistently reflect this alignment in operational processing.

A same-sex married employee may experience delayed medical aid activation due to underwriting systems not aligned with broker or employer inputs. A beneficiary nomination for a same-sex partner may trigger manual review due to mismatched identity fields, delaying activation. Parental leave processes may not consistently recognise non-traditional parental configurations without escalation or clarification requests.

## Wellness and the Employee Assistance Programme

An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) functions as a primary access point for psychosocial support, but across the cohort LGBT+ competence and affirming capability are not consistently specified or evidenced. This affects trust, perceived safety, and utilisation.

Where LGBT+ inclusivity is not explicit in provider capability, employees may avoid or delay engagement with support services, particularly in situations involving identity disclosure, mental health strain, or experiences of workplace discrimination. A bisexual employee may disengage after an initial call where the counsellor lacks LGBT+ literacy. A trans employee may be unable to obtain procedural guidance for gender-affirming care pathways. A same-sex parent may encounter heteronormative framing in parenting-related support interactions, reducing relevance and trust.

## Recruitment and first contact

Recruitment systems function as an early diagnostic point for organisational inclusion. Algorithmic screening, job description language, and reference practices shape access before human interaction occurs.

A candidate may be screened out by automated systems without human review. Gender-coded job descriptions may reduce application rates from non-binary or gender-diverse candidates. Reference checks may unintentionally disclose identity information without consent, affecting candidate experience and perceived safety.

## Travel, security, and the identity-document interface

The interaction between identity documents and lived identity becomes operationally material in travel and security contexts. Where procedures are not designed for identity mismatch scenarios, the burden is transferred to the employee.

A mismatch between presentation and passport gender marker may trigger secondary screening at airports. Travel to jurisdictions with hostile legal environments for LGBT+ individuals requires structured pre-departure risk briefing, which is not consistently present. Hotel booking systems may not accommodate same-sex couples without manual intervention by the traveler.

## Banking, finance, insurance, and the daily consumer interface

South Africans interact continuously with financial and insurance systems, which frequently rely on identity verification structures that assume alignment between legal identity markers and lived presentation. Where systems are not designed for variance, service interactions become identity-validation events rather than transactional service moments.

Reporting in the Mail & Guardian (2013) and submissions by the Wits African Centre for Migration and Society (2023) document recurring friction at branch level for trans, intersex, and gender-nonconforming customers, including escalations where identity documents and presentation do not align. In practice, frontline employees often operate without sufficient procedural guidance for these scenarios, leading to inconsistent customer experience and avoidable escalation.

Use case	Barrier	What should change
A trans customer at a branch is asked to wait while the teller calls a manager because the identity document and the bank profile do not align with presentation. The interaction becomes public.	Identity-verification system assumes one stable relationship between legal name, gender marker, and presentation.	Train branch teams. Add respectful escalation scripts. Enable chosen-name display while preserving legal KYC compliance.

A same-sex couple's home-loan or insurance application triggers manual review because the system assumes opposite-sex household structures.	Underwriting and household models do not treat same-gender couples as standard customers.	Audit underwriting logic, relationship fields, beneficiary structures, and product rules.
A frontline employee wants to assist an LGBT+ customer but does not know how. The employee improvises, escalates unnecessarily, or asks intrusive questions.	Goodwill is present; role-based training, scripts, system support, and escalation routes are not.	Equip customer-facing staff through mandatory role-based LGBT+ customer literacy.
A same-sex female couple engaging a financial or insurance product weighs service quality alongside safety, loss of income, death, misgendering and whether their family will be recognised.	Customer journeys are built around assumed heterosexual, cisgender, and binary family structures.	Redesign customer journeys around real family, safety, identity, and beneficiary scenarios.

The risk these customers manage is not abstract. It includes loss of safety, loss of income, misrecognition of family, and in the most severe cases, threats to life. A product or service journey that does not anticipate these risks cannot be treated as a neutral interaction; it is structurally misaligned with the realities of the users it serves.

### Procurement, supplier diversity, and economic inclusion



South Africa’s transformation architecture, including the Employment Equity Act, B-BBEE, Enterprise Development, Supplier Development, and the Preferential Procurement framework, does not yet carry an explicit LGBT+ designation. Black-owned, women-owned, youth-owned, and persons-with-disability-owned enterprises have clearer recognition routes

inside procurement and transformation scorecard logic. LGBT+-owned enterprises do not yet have an equivalent designation.

The result is that LGBT+ supplier inclusion is not consistently visible in formal tracking systems, which creates conditions where inclusion may depend on discretionary interpretation rather than structured procurement logic. Many LGBT+-owned businesses are also Black-owned, women-owned, youth-owned, disability-owned, or township-based, and those categories remain important and materially relevant within the current transformation framework. The gap is not the existence of transformation categories, but whether they fully capture LGBT+ economic exclusion as a distinct dimension or account for the specific barriers faced by LGBT+ business owners within procurement systems.

<b>Use case</b>	<b>Barrier</b>	<b>What should change</b>
An LGBT+-owned business loses recurring corporate work after ownership becomes visible through public identity or community association. No formal reason is given.	Procurement decisions are vulnerable to informal bias because LGBT+ supplier inclusion is not formally tracked.	Add LGBT+-owned supplier identification, confidentiality safeguards, and procurement review mechanisms.
A B-BBEE-compliant LGBT+ business owner cannot find an Enterprise or Supplier Development category that recognises LGBT+ ownership.	The transformation infrastructure exists, but the relevant designation is missing.	Create an internal LGBT+ supplier-diversity category in advance of national policy alignment.
An employee wants to help route work to LGBT+-owned SMMEs but does not know whether this is allowed, how to find suppliers, or whether procurement will recognise the category.	Allyship is present, but the procurement pathway is not operationalised.	Create a supplier directory, capability-statement process, procurement guidance note, and scorecard logic.
An LGBT+ community organisation is engaged for Pride Month exposure but is not contracted for sustained education, research, advisory, or support work.	Community partnership is treated as activation rather than transformation infrastructure.	Move from once-off visibility to formal contracts, CSI allocation, ESG reporting, and multi-year partnership structures.
Scorecard area	Minimum practice	Mature practice
Identification	Organisation allows voluntary identification of LGBT+-owned suppliers with confidentiality protections.	LGBT+ supplier category appears in procurement dashboard and supplier-development strategy.
Access	LGBT+-owned suppliers can register and submit capability statements.	Active sourcing, mentoring, and procurement-readiness support are provided.

Spend	Spend is not yet tracked.	Spend with LGBT+-owned suppliers is tracked alongside other transformation categories.
Development	No targeted support.	LGBT+-owned SMMEs are included in Enterprise and Supplier Development, mentoring, financing-readiness, and market-access programmes.
Governance	Ad hoc employee network referral.	Procurement, Transformation, ESG, CSI, and employee network governance jointly review progress.

### Role-Based Capability and Frontline Execution Gap

SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE EQUALITY INDEX

# 2026 NATIONAL REPORT

## Equipped vs Unequipped Employee

Goodwill without tools versus capability with scripts, escalation routes, system fields and training

UNEQUIPPED EMPLOYEE

Goodwill without tools

- 1 Wants to help

Intent is positive, but confidence is limited.
- 2 No script

The employee does not know what respectful language to use.
- 3 No escalation route

There is no clear process for pausing and routing the issue.
- 4 System does not support the moment

Forms, fields or workflows do not fit the lived situation.
- 5 No role-based training

The employee has not been equipped for this touchpoint.
- 6 Improvises under pressure

The outcome can become intrusive, inconsistent or harmful.

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EQUIPPED EMPLOYEE

Capability with tools

- 1 Wants to help, and can

Goodwill is supported by organisational capability.
- 2 Scripts available

The employee has respectful language and guidance.
- 3 Clear escalation route

There is a defined process for resolution and support.
- 4 System fields are inclusive

Forms and workflows support chosen name, pronouns and family structure where relevant.
- 5 Role-based training

The employee has training designed for the point of use.
- 6 Resolves with dignity

The outcome is more consistent, lawful and respectful.

The objective is not to make every employee an expert.

It is to make respectful, lawful and safe behaviour possible at the point of use.

EQUALITY  
INCLUSIVITY  
BELONGING

A material share of the daily friction LGBT+ employees and customers absorb is delivered by colleagues who would have acted differently if they had been equipped with the right training, language, and system support.



Most participating organisations have not yet extended LGBT+ literacy beyond employee networks, HR, DEIB functions, and a small cohort of trained allies. Frontline employees, line managers, contact-centre agents, branch staff, claims handlers, recruiters, security officers, facilities teams, medical-scheme administrators, brokers, travel desks, and reception teams all routinely interact with LGBT+ people in ordinary service moments. Inclusion is therefore not a specialist function; it is embedded in general service delivery roles.

In the absence of role-based capability, the default behaviour of systems is reproduced: binary classifications, opposite-sex assumptions, single-name identity structures, fixed gender markers, and family definitions that do not reflect lived reality. Employees who intend to act appropriately often lack scripts, escalation pathways, reference materials, or organisational permission to pause and resolve ambiguity safely. The pattern reflects a systems and capability gap rather than individual intent or performance.

LGBT+ literacy is therefore necessarily role-specific. A teller, claims handler, recruiter, branch manager, HR Business Partner, security officer, and team leader each require different operational tools. The objective is not universal expertise, but consistent, safe execution at the point of interaction.

## **What does this mean for employers**

The barriers described in this chapter are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Each represents a system point where infrastructure exists but does not consistently accommodate the LGBT+ person engaging with it. While employers cannot redesign external systems, they can determine whether those same failure modes are reproduced internally.

This begins with capability: ensuring that customer-facing and people-facing roles are trained, that system fields are reviewed for embedded assumptions, that benefits and service providers are briefed on real use cases, and that leaders are able to recognise and correct gaps before they manifest as employee harm. Where organisations cannot prevent external friction, they can ensure that LGBT+ employees are not left to absorb it again within the workplace environment.

Across all touchpoints in this chapter, the underlying pattern is consistent. Barriers emerge where systems have not been designed with LGBT+ users in mind, and they can be addressed at the point of design rather than at the point of failure. Where design has been addressed, engagement is routine and functional. Where it has not, the cost of system mismatch is transferred to the individual. The 2026 framework captures both conditions as distinct and measurable states.

## 16. Products, Services, and the LGBT+ Customer Experience



### Customer experience and the service gap

LGBT+ South Africans interact with organisations as customers, clients, dependants, applicants, account holders and policyholders, alongside the workplace roles addressed elsewhere in this report. The Other Foundation's *Size Matters* research (2024) records that South Africa's LGBTI market is valued at least R250 billion annually (as reported by MambaOnline). The market is not visible in most participating organisation's customer architecture, and the cost of that invisibility is paid by customers, frontline staff, and brand consistency.

A bank may build an LGBT+ marketing campaign and run it during Pride month. The same bank's branch teller may not be trained on how to verify the identity of a trans customer respectfully. The advertising recognises the customer; the service does not yet. The gap is recorded by the customer and shared through community channels, affecting trust and brand credibility.

This pattern is consistent across telecommunications, retail, insurance, fast-moving consumer goods, hospitality and professional services. The marketing layer often runs ahead of the operating model. Closing this gap is simultaneously a customer-experience, commercial, and inclusion requirement.

Where customer-facing employees are not equipped, outcomes vary from seamless service to complaint escalation, regulatory exposure, or permanent customer loss. Where they are equipped, the same interaction becomes a trust-building moment. The differentiator is infrastructure: training, system fields, scripts, escalation pathways, and managerial reinforcement—not individual intent.

### Healthcare, benefits systems, and risk exposure

Healthcare and benefits systems represent a high-sensitivity segment of the customer experience. The Kantar, DIVA Charitable Trust and Curve Foundation 2026 study recorded that 42 per cent of LGBTQIA+ women and non-binary

respondents in South Africa had delayed or avoided healthcare due to prior treatment experiences (as reported by MambaOnline, 24 April 2026). This has direct implications for medical schemes, brokers, employee assistance providers, and corporate wellness programmes.

Emergency care, gender-affirming care, mental health support, parental healthcare for LGBT+ families, and HIV and STI care all contain specific design dependencies. Where these are not addressed, the burden shifts to the customer to interpret, explain, or navigate the system at the point of need. This creates both clinical and operational risk.

## **Product and service design layer**

The core question is not only whether customers feel welcome, but whether products function correctly for them.

A medical-aid product whose family categories assume opposite-sex relationships excludes same-sex households in its structure. A funeral policy whose beneficiary logic assumes binary gender markers creates administrative friction for trans and intersex customers. A retirement product designed around a narrow household model excludes non-standard family configurations.

Product design audits across the cohort indicate that this layer of inclusion is still emerging. In most participating organisations, inclusive employee experience has advanced further than inclusive product architecture. This creates a structural inconsistency between internal and external inclusion maturity.

Product design therefore becomes a cross-functional responsibility spanning Product, Risk, Compliance, Underwriting, Actuarial, Marketing, and DEI functions.

## **System alignment: internal and external inclusion**

Internal inclusion and external customer experience are not separate domains. They are different expressions of the same operating model.

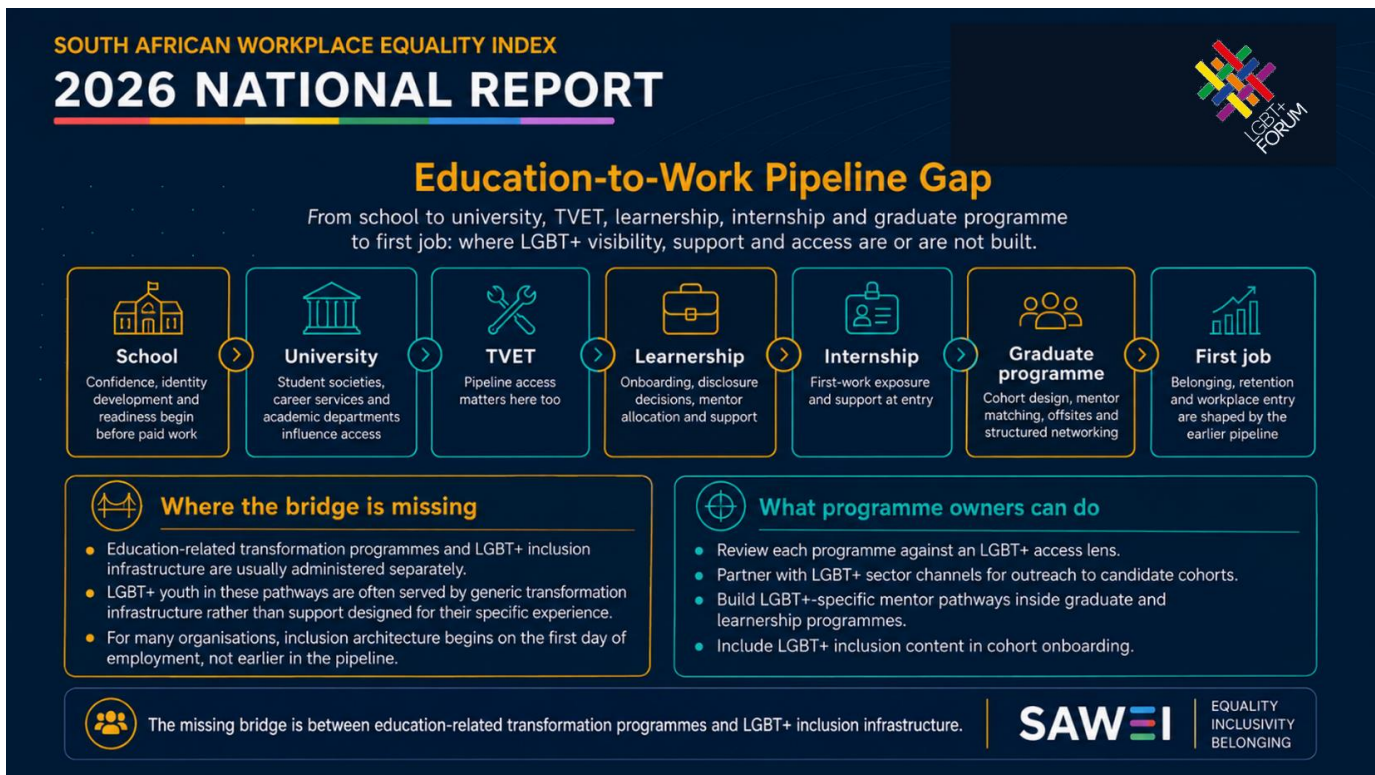
An employee whose benefits do not recognise their family is unlikely to confidently support a customer in the same situation. A frontline team that is not trained reflects gaps in workforce capability design. Brand narratives that are inclusive externally but unsupported internally generate credibility risk.

The system either aligns across layers or exposes inconsistencies at the point of interaction.

## **What this requires**

Closing the gap requires: redesign of customer journeys to reflect real family and identity structures, capability-building for customer-facing roles, escalation pathways for identity-related incidents, systematic product audits, and continuous customer-experience testing with LGBT+ users included in design processes.

## 18. Education, Transformation Programmes, and the Pipeline Gap



Workplace inclusion outcomes are shaped before employment begins. The education-to-employment pipeline including school, university, TVET colleges, learnerships, internships, graduate programmes, bursaries and YES placements determine the extent to which LGBT+ individuals enter the labour market with access, confidence, and identity stability.

### Pipeline Integration Gap: Education-to-Employment Continuity

The cohort indicates a structural separation between general transformation pipelines and LGBT+ inclusion infrastructure. While most participating organisations run bursary schemes, internships, learnerships, graduate programmes and YES placements, these are typically not designed with explicit LGBT+ inclusion parameters or linked to internal DEIB systems.

As a result, LGBT+ participants in these programmes are generally absorbed into generic transformation structures rather than supported through programmes designed for identity-related risk, disclosure dynamics, and early-career vulnerability.

Evidence from North-West University (2025) presented at the LGBTQ+ Workplace Inclusion Conference confirms that workplace inclusion outcomes are materially shaped by pre-employment experiences, particularly during identity formation and first employment transitions. This reinforces the need for inclusion architecture to extend upstream into pipeline systems rather than beginning at point of hire.

## Programme design implications

Programme area	Barrier	What is missing in current design
Bursaries	Identity disclosure risk, family dynamics, and identity-document mismatch are not explicitly accounted for	LGBT+ inclusion safeguards and support structures within bursary administration and alumni systems
Internships and learnerships	First employment exposure includes identity disclosure decisions without structured support	Onboarding and mentorship structures do not include LGBT+ transition-to-work support
Graduate programmes	Cohort design does not account for identity safety in networking, relocation, or social integration	No structured LGBT+ inclusion lens in cohort design or mentor matching
YES placements	Short-term placement creates heightened vulnerability with limited support continuity	Lack of structured support pathways and inclusion continuity mechanisms
University/TVET partnerships	Engagement is generic and not linked to LGBT+ student networks or support systems	No formal linkage between employer pipelines and LGBT+ student structures

## What programme owners should do

Transformation programmes function as operational pipelines, not standalone social initiatives. The gap identified is not absence of programmes, but absence of design specificity.

Addressing this requires:

- Mapping each talent pipeline (bursary, internship, graduate, YES) against LGBT+ access risks
- Embedding inclusion design criteria into programme governance, not HR policy alone
- Building structured mentorship pathways for LGBT+ participants across early-career programmes
- Integrating LGBT+ inclusion content into onboarding for all pipeline cohorts
- Linking pipeline programmes to internal DEIB systems (so support does not end at programme exit)

This aligns primarily with WELCOME, GROW and BELONG, with operational dependency on DESIGN for system enablement.

## 19. Shared Responsibility

Workplace inclusion outcomes emerge from a multi-actor ecosystem. While the SAWEI framework measures employer practice directly, several adjacent systems shape the conditions under which those outcomes are produced. This chapter identifies the principal actors whose actions influence cohort-level findings and the areas in which their engagement affects system performance.

## Actor mapping

Actor	Principal area of influence
<b>Employers</b>	Design and operate workplace systems measured by SAWEI. Responsible for aligning stated inclusion commitments with operational practice across HR, operations, customer-facing systems and governance structures. Accountable for day-to-day employee experience outcomes.
<b>Government (policy and regulatory system)</b>	Maintains the legal and regulatory architecture governing employment, procurement, and transformation. Relevant levers include Employment Equity, B-BBEE, Enterprise Development, Supplier Development, and public sector transformation policy. The absence of explicit LGBT+ designation within these frameworks is identified as a structural gap affecting measurement and procurement visibility.
<b>Public sector as employer</b>	National, provincial, and local government, state-owned enterprises, and public entities collectively represent a significant employment system. Their participation in inclusion measurement frameworks would materially expand national benchmarking coverage and comparative analysis.
<b>Leadership, managers, and HR practitioners (implementation layer)</b>	Line managers, HR Business Partners, recruiters, and operational leaders translate policy into practice. Cohort findings indicate that capability at this layer is a primary determinant of whether inclusion infrastructure is activated or remains declarative.
<b>Allies and colleagues (workforce layer)</b>	Employees who operate within systems that shape day-to-day inclusion experiences. Their impact is mediated by organisational design, training, escalation routes and managerial reinforcement rather than individual intent alone.
<b>Community channels and civil society media</b>	Community organisations, employee networks, sector forums, and community media platforms contribute to visibility of lived experience and external accountability. This includes LGBT+ community media that documents workplace and societal experience.
<b>Researchers and data providers</b>	Academic institutions, survey organisations, and research bodies generate the evidence base informing cohort analysis. This includes organisations such as NWU, the Williams Institute, the Other Foundation, Stats SA, Kantar, and Ipsos, among others.
<b>LGBT+ persons</b>	End users of workplace, public and commercial systems. Represent a heterogeneous population with varying levels of visibility and engagement across workplace, research and public systems. Inclusion frameworks are designed to operate without requiring disclosure as a precondition for access.

<b>Funders, CSI, and ESG actors</b>	Allocate and structure resources for research, community programmes, employee network infrastructure, supplier development, and pipeline initiatives. Their decisions influence the sustainability and scale of inclusion interventions across sectors.
<b>SMMEs and LGBT+-owned businesses</b>	Participants in procurement, enterprise development, and broader economic systems. Their visibility within formal transformation frameworks is influenced by the presence or absence of explicit classification and tracking mechanisms.
<b>Education and training institutions</b>	Schools, universities, TVET colleges and programme administrators shape pre-employment access and early identity-related workplace preparedness. They influence the baseline conditions of entry into the labour market.

## 20. What To Do Next

**SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE EQUALITY INDEX**

# 2026 NATIONAL REPORT



## Stakeholder Action Map

Seven stakeholder groups paced across three tempo bands  
60 days, 6 months, and 12 to 18 months

STAKEHOLDER	60 DAYS <i>Visible signals, audit</i>	6 MONTHS <i>System, policy, build</i>	12-18 MONTHS <i>Measured, embedded</i>
 <b>Employers</b> <i>HR, EXCO, ERG sponsors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audit identity systems</li> <li>• Confirm executive sponsor</li> <li>• Signal ERG support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roll out role-based training</li> <li>• Align benefits with Civil Union Act</li> <li>• Review onboarding scripts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed in performance frameworks</li> <li>• Pursue SAWEI accreditation</li> <li>• Report sub-community outcomes</li> </ul>
 <b>Government</b> <i>Departments, regulators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirm departmental owner</li> <li>• Issue clarifying guidance on existing protections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed inclusion in public service training</li> <li>• Align policy with PEPUA, EEA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate hate crimes implementation</li> <li>• Publish enforcement data</li> </ul>
 <b>CSI / ESG teams</b> <i>Sustainability, community</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Map current LGBT+ investment</li> <li>• Align reporting frameworks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource community partners on multi-year grants</li> <li>• Report SOGIESC-disaggregated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate inclusion into ESG strategy</li> <li>• Report against SAWEI elements</li> </ul>
 <b>Procurement and ESD</b> <i>Supplier development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add LGBT+-owned supplier identifier</li> <li>• Review supplier code of conduct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build sourcing path for LGBT+-owned SMMEs</li> <li>• Align the ESD scorecard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track LGBT+ supplier spend</li> <li>• Integrate into transformation reporting</li> </ul>
 <b>Education and programme owners</b> <i>Bursary, learnership, graduate</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review bursary, learnership and graduate programme materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with LGBT+ sector channels</li> <li>• Include inclusion in onboarding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build sector-specific mentor pathways</li> <li>• Measure pipeline by sub-community</li> </ul>
 <b>Allies and leaders</b> <i>Senior leaders, sponsors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal capability audit</li> <li>• Commit to one ally action per quarter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsor inclusion measurement</li> <li>• Speak publicly with substance</li> <li>• Resource the ERG</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed in leadership succession</li> <li>• Influence sector peers</li> <li>• Hold the line publicly</li> </ul>
 <b>Researchers and funders</b> <i>Foundations, donors, academia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audit research and funding portfolio for LGBT+ visibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund inclusion infrastructure, not project-by-project</li> <li>• Commission lived multiplicity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish standardised metrics</li> <li>• Coordinate cross-funder infrastructure</li> </ul>



Action moves at three tempos. **60 days** for visible signals and audit work. **6 months** for system, policy and partnership build. **12 to 18 months** for measured outcomes and embedded practice across the cycle.



EQUALITY  
INCLUSIVITY  
BELONGING

Proposed action map across employers, government, CSI/ESG actors, procurement systems, education and programme owners, leadership structures, researchers, and funders. The actions below reflect minimum priority moves derived from the 2026 cohort findings. They are not exhaustive implementation plans. They are designed to stabilise system gaps identified across the SAWEI themes.

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Within 60 days</b>	<b>Within 6-12 months</b>	<b>Within 18 months</b>
<b>Employers</b>	Complete Civil Union Act compliance and benefits mapping. Confirm whether EAP providers are explicitly LGBT+-affirming. Escalate findings to EXCO/leadership.	Implement mandatory LGBT+ literacy in onboarding and core role-based training. Formalise employee network governance (budget, mandate, reporting line). Introduce inclusion expectations into leadership scorecards.	Embed inclusion KPIs into leadership performance systems. Extend inclusion design into customer-facing processes. Prepare for 2027 SAWEI participation cycle.
<b>Government (policy system)</b>	Initiate structured engagement on inclusion visibility within transformation frameworks (EE, B-BBEE, supplier development). Define scope for public-sector SAWEI participation.	Publish formal position on LGBT+ inclusion within transformation architecture. Pilot selected public-sector participation in SAWEI.	Integrate agreed designations into applicable transformation instruments. Expand public-sector participation in measurement frameworks.
<b>CSI / ESG actors</b>	Map current LGBT+ allocation across portfolios. Identify single-point and informal community dependencies.	Convert at least one LGBT+ community relationship into a multi-year contracted partnership. Include LGBT+ inclusion within ESG reporting structure.	Formalise LGBT+ inclusion within CSI/ESG strategy with outcome tracking and disclosure.
<b>Procurement &amp; supplier development</b>	Add voluntary LGBT+-owned supplier identification option with confidentiality safeguards in supplier systems.	Pilot structured LGBT+ supplier development cohort and begin spend tracking.	Formalise LGBT+ supplier diversity category within procurement governance and reporting systems.
<b>Education &amp; programme owners</b>	Audit bursary, internship, learnership, graduate and YES programmes for LGBT+ access risks.	Introduce LGBT+-aware mentorship pathways and onboarding modules within programmes.	Build sustained pipeline partnerships with universities, TVETs and student structures including LGBT+ networks.
<b>Leadership, managers &amp; HR layer</b>	Identify immediate behavioural interventions (manager conduct, escalation clarity, frontline decision points).	Implement structured role-based training across managers, HR, recruiters and customer-facing roles. Sponsor at least one cross-functional inclusion initiative.	Hold inclusion outcomes in performance systems and ensure accountability mechanisms are operational, not symbolic.



<b>All stakeholders (cross-cutting)</b>	Identify one system-level friction point in own area of control.	Implement one measurable design correction addressing that friction point.	Demonstrate sustained operationalisation rather than policy-level change only.
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## 21. The Road Forward: 2026 to 2030

The 2026 cycle establishes the baseline for the 2025–2030 accreditation period. Across the cohort, inclusion infrastructure is largely present in policy form but uneven in operational execution. The principal constraint is not absence of systems, but fragmentation between systems and inconsistent activation across roles, channels, and touchpoints.

### Workplace-level priorities

Five workplace-level priorities are indicated by the cohort observations. They are presented in the order in which they are most directly associated with the activation of inclusion infrastructure already in place across the cohort.

Priority	SAWEI Theme	Rationale
<b>Civil Union Act benefits alignment and remediation</b>	SUPPORT	Structural compliance gap affecting core employee lifecycle. High frequency, high impact, system-level correction required.
<b>EAP and wellness provider competency assurance</b>	SUPPORT	Primary psychosocial support mechanism. Effectiveness is currently variable across providers and cohorts.
<b>Mandatory role-based LGBT+ literacy across workforce layers</b>	GROW	Highest leverage capability gap affecting activation of all other systems.
<b>Employee network governance and resourcing model</b>	BELONG	Converts informal support structures into operational inclusion infrastructure.
<b>Leadership accountability via inclusion KPIs</b>	LEAD	Primary mechanism linking stated commitment to measurable operational outcomes.

### Sector-level priorities

Sector-level priorities reflect system design gaps beyond individual employer control:

- Integration of LGBT+ inclusion within national transformation architecture (EE, B-BBEE, procurement, supplier development)
- Structured participation of public-sector employers in measurement systems
- Development of longitudinal data infrastructure (representation, pay equity, progression, access barriers)
- Formalisation of LGBT+ supplier visibility within procurement ecosystems
- Extension of inclusion design into education-to-employment pipelines

These priorities function as system enablers rather than organisational interventions.

## For the 2027 cycle

The 2027 cycle functions as the first structured recalibration point in the 2025–2030 period. It will be used to:

- Reassess organisational progress against baseline findings.
- Extending participation into public-sector and broader employer categories were feasible.
- Refine measurement constructs based on implementation evidence from the 2026 cycle.
- Publish updated methodology adjustments where required.

The intent is to continue to partner and measure end to end transformation over time.

## 22. Framework Structure, Legal Alignment and Assessment Methodology

The SAWEI framework is grounded in South African constitutional, labour, and equality law. It uses these instruments as its primary legal foundation and then assesses organisational practice against them through a structured scoring methodology. The framework is subsequently mapped against selected international reference systems to enable comparability and alignment where applicable. Legal instruments are mapped to SAWEI themes based on functional relevance to workplace design, employment governance, service delivery, and identity recognition systems.

Legal instrument	Framework alignment
Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Section 9)	Foundational equality and non-discrimination principles underpinning all themes
Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998	Basis for LEAD theme and organisational transformation obligations
Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 (PEPUDA)	Extends non-discrimination obligations to service delivery, customers, suppliers and public interface
Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act 49 of 2003	Basis for identity recognition, gender affirmation and identity-document interface under DESIGN and SUPPORT
Civil Union Act 17 of 2006	Basis for family recognition, benefits design and beneficiary structures under SUPPORT
Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPIA)	Governs voluntary self-identification, SOGIESC data handling and privacy safeguards under DESIGN
Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Act 16 of 2023	Informs safety design, incident response and workplace protection systems under SUPPORT

## International reference alignment

The framework is mapped against three external reference systems for alignment and benchmarking:

1. United Nations Standards of Conduct for Business on Tackling Discrimination Against LGBTI People (OHCHR, 2017)
2. United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development  
The framework aligns with SDGs 5, 8, 10, 16 and 17 as interpretive reference points for equality, decent work, reduced inequality, institutional strength, and partnerships.
3. Comparative economic and workplace research literature  
Includes Open for Business (economic and business case propositions) and Coqual (2025, Pride Under Pressure). These sources are used to contextualise workplace and economic inclusion dynamics, not to define scoring criteria.

## Cohort, evidence, and validation model

Submissions are received through a structured reporting process and assessed by independent auditors against the SAWEI scoring rubric and documented evidence requirements.

Where evidence cannot be validated, the submission is recorded as an indicator of organisational readiness but is not included in the outcomes scored.

Where anonymity is requested, organisational data is included in aggregate analysis but excluded from identifiable reporting. Tier placement is published without disaggregated percentage scores to preserve confidentiality while maintaining comparative integrity.

## The Foundation Gate

An organisation that scores zero on three or more of the framework's thirteen baseline structural practices is ineligible for a tier above Bronze, regardless of overall percentage score.

This rule functions as structural integrity control. It ensures that tier classification reflects baseline operational readiness rather than aggregated high performance in isolated domains.

## Cohort and anonymity

Submissions are received from participating organisations through a structured submission process. Each submission is assessed by qualified independent auditors against documented evidence requirements and the SAWEI scoring rubric.

Where evidence cannot be validated, the submission is recorded as an indicator of organisational readiness and is excluded from the results scored.

Where a participating organisation requests anonymity, its data is included in aggregated cohort analysis but is protected from sectoral identification. Tier allocations are published without organisation-level percentage scores.

## Independence and Funding Disclosure

The Forum is the publisher of the SAWEI report and the steward of the assessment framework. Funders do not have access to organisation-level submissions, scoring outputs, or draft findings prior to publication. All submissions are assessed by qualified independent auditors appointed for the cycle.

## 23. Media Summary

This section provides a condensed overview of key aggregate findings for media use. It does not attribute results to individual organisations unless explicitly named elsewhere in the report.

### Key aggregate findings (2026 cycle)

- More than 500 employers were engaged through outreach, campaigns, and direct participation efforts across the 2026 cycle.
- 11 submissions were received in total.
- 7 submissions were validated by independent auditors and included in scored results.
- 4 submissions were incomplete and recorded as market-readiness signals.
- Of the 7 validated submissions, 4 organisations consented to public recognition.

South Africa's labour market is estimated to employ approximately 17.1 million people across formal employment, informal employment, and private households (Stats SA, 2025).

The South African LGBTI market is estimated at a minimum value of R250 billion annually (Other Foundation, 2024, as reported by MambaOnline).

### Contact and attribution

Media enquiries relating to this report are managed by MambaOnline, the Official Media Partner for the 2026 cycle. Interview requests, media statements and commentary on behalf of the Forum should be directed to:

General queries regarding SAWEI participation or future cycles: [members@lgbtforum.org](mailto:members@lgbtforum.org)

Partnership and collaboration enquiries: [partners@lgbtforum.org](mailto:partners@lgbtforum.org)

Attribution: South African Workplace Equality Index 2026 National Report, published by the SA LGBT+ Management Forum.

Available at: [www.lgbtforum.org](http://www.lgbtforum.org)

## 24. Acknowledgements

### Forum leadership

The Forum acknowledges its directors for their leadership of the 2026 cycle and for the work that brought it to completion. The Forum's Co-Founders and Steering Committee members are acknowledged for their contribution to the establishment and development of the Forum, and for the foundation on which the 2026 cycle is built.

## **Independent advisory panel and auditors**

The Forum's independent advisory panel provided governance oversight of the 2026 framework. The Forum's qualified independent auditors assessed each validated submission against the framework's evidence requirements. The Forum thanks both groups for their contribution to the integrity of the cycle.

## **Participating organisations**

The Forum thanks the seven organisations that completed validated submissions for the 2026 cycle. The four named organisations are identified in the cohort findings chapter. The three organisations that requested anonymity are recognised here without identification.

## **Earlier-cycle participants**

The Forum acknowledges every organisation that completed SAWEI submissions in the 2018, 2019 and 2021 cycles. Their willingness to be measured during the years the instrument was in its early stage is part of the foundation the 2026 cycle stands on. The 2026 framework asks more of participants than any earlier cycle, and the 2027 checkpoint is the next structured opportunity to re-engage it. The Forum's invitation to earlier-cycle participants to return is explicit, and the five-year accreditation period is built to absorb participants at the pace at which their evidence base develops.

## **Funding partners and sponsors in kind**

The 2026 cycle was supported through both funding and in-kind partnership contributions that helped carry the work across the year. The Forum acknowledges The Other Foundation for its funding support of the 2026 cycle.

MambaOnline served as the Official Media Partner for the 2026 cycle, extending the reach of the SAWEI story across the sector, stakeholders, and the broader LGBT+ community. Nonkosi Creatives hosted the launch of the SAWEI 2025/26 Index, while Qrate Non-Profit Company supported the cycle through ongoing practical partnership and collaboration.

The Forum recognises these partners and sponsors in kind alongside financial supporters, acknowledging that the 2026 cycle would not have reached its present form without their contribution.

## **Sector partners**

The Forum acknowledges the Office of the Deputy Minister Steve Letsike for engagement on LGBT+ transformation environment, the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities for its leadership of the Revised National Strategy on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics 2023 to 2027, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development for its stewardship of the human rights portfolio within which the framework operates, and the South African Human Rights Commission for its role in upholding the constitutional rights on which the framework's foundations rest. The Forum acknowledges the Human Sciences Research Council for its contribution to the national evidence base on which the broader inclusion sector draws.

## **Sector, Community organisations and allies**

The Forum acknowledges the contribution of community organisations, sector partners and allies whose work informs this report and supports the broader inclusion sector across South Africa. Specific organisations are referenced inline in the chapters where their work appears.

## Closing

This report is dedicated to the LGBT+ people in South Africa who continue to move through workplaces, institutions and systems that were not consistently designed with their lived realities in mind; to the people who would act with greater confidence and care if the infrastructure to support them existed; and to the organisations that submitted themselves to scrutiny because they intend to do better.

The 2026 cycle is a baseline, the work continues...

## 24. References

References below are cited inline throughout the report. Where a reference is to a community-trusted media platform reporting on a primary research source, the primary source is named first and the reporting platform second.

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