Understanding Class at Work

“Social class is a little like ‘swagger’. It is hard to define, and tough to measure, but you know it when you see it”.[[1]](#endnote-1)

# What is class?

Class refers to a person’s social standing compared to other people in Australia, based on factors such as their wealth, income, education, occupation, connections, networks, hobbies and leisure activities. All these factors combine to determine a person’s status, power and/or position – that is, their social standing or social class.

Diversity Council Australia uses “class marginalised”, “middle class”, and “class privileged” to describe people’s class background – though many other terms are commonly used, such as:

* **Class marginalised:** lower class, working class, blue collar, battlers, lower SES, poor, the working poor
* **Class privileged:** upper or higher class, posh, white collar, elite, aristocratic, monied, affluent, ruling class, high society, ‘bougie’

# Does class count at work?

Yes. We found that class marginalised workers are:

* **4 times more likely** to be in a **non-inclusive team** than class privileged workers. 21% of class marginalised employees reported being in non-inclusive teams, (compared with 9% of middle class and 5% of class privileged employees).
* **3 times more likely** to have a **non-inclusive manager.** 29% of class marginalised employees reported having a non-inclusive manager (compared with 16% of middle class and 10% of class privileged employees).
* **3 times more likely** to work in a **non-inclusive organisation.** 26% of class marginalised employees reported working in a non-inclusive organisation **(compared with 14% of middle class and 8% of class privileged employees).[[2]](#endnote-2)**

# Which class am I in?

Use the lists[[3]](#endnote-3) below to explore your class background. Which class do you think you fall into based on the factors listed in each-section? Some factors may change over time while others can stay the same. For example, even if you mostly identify with the middle class section, you might find that you have also had experiences of class marginalisation or privilege throughout your life.

Class marginalised employees:

* Have the lowest household incomes
* Least likely to have disposable income
* Least likely to own property
* Live in lower status suburbs, further from well-paid work
* Have less access to education
* Likely to have attended public school, TAFE, or a non-elite university
* Have the lowest income and job security
* Work in lower status/prestige jobs
* Have the least access to influential people who can create work and career opportunities
* Participate in hobbies that are considered ‘lowbrow’; affordable e.g. (e.g. rugby league, reality and sports shows, commercial TV)
* Least likely to have access to generational advantages

Midde class employees:

* Have household incomes between the bottom 20% and top 20%
* Have some disposable income
* More likely to own property
* Live in wealthier, higher status suburbs, closer from well-paid work
* Have higher access to education of different types, e.g. public school, private school, TAFE, university
* Have higher incomes and job security
* Work in higher status/prestige jobs
* Have some access to influential people who can create work and career opportunities
* Participate in hobbies associated with both class marginalisation and privilege
* More likely to have access to generational advantages

Class privileged employees:

* Have the highest household incomes
* Most likely to have disposable income
* Most likely to own property
* Live in the wealthiest, highest status suburbs, further from well-paid work
* Have most access to education
* Likely to have attended private school or an ‘elite’ university
* Have the highest income and job security
* Work in highest status/prestige jobs
* Have the most access to influential people who can create work and career opportunities
* Participate in hobbies that are considered ‘highbrow; expensive, e.g. art, classical music, wine tasting, golf, cycling, sailing
* Most likely to have access to generational advantages

1. J Sheppard and N Biddle, *Social Class in Australia: Beyond the ‘working’ and ‘middle’ classes*, ANU Poll, 19, The Australian National University, Canberra, September 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Findings drawn from DCA’s 2025-2026 Inclusion@Work Index. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lists constructed based on data from DCA’s 2025 Class Inclusion at Work consultation survey, and the following sources: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia’s welfare 2023 data insights*, catalogue number AUS 246, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 14 July 2025, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/contents/uni-participation. A Leigh, ‘Australian Mobility Report Cards: Which Universities Admit the Most Disadvantaged Students?’, *Australian Economic Review*, 2021, 54(3):331–342, doi:10.1111/1467-8462.12430. D Carter, ‘Jane Austen, Monet and Phantom of the Opera – middlebrow culture today’, *The Conversation*, 2020, accessed 23 April 2025, https://theconversation.com/jane-austen-monet-and-phantom-of-the-opera-middlebrow-culture-today-145176. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)