Harnessing the power of diversity

EY Lane4
Workforce Transformation

About EY Lane4

The combination of EY and Lane4 focusses on harnessing the power of people.

Powered by technology, EY puts humans at the centre of business transformation. Lane4 takes people beyond performance, giving them the skills and mindset to achieve things they never thought were possible.

We've come together to deliver on our purpose – to build a better working world.

We believe that organisations need to put people at the heart of their decision-making. Not only will this create long-term value for stakeholders inside and outside the business, but it will help ensure success across large-scale business transformations. At EY Lane4, we bring together some of the biggest and influential leaders around the world, drawing on their insight to shape how we support our clients with their people and transformation challenges.

Understanding the psychology of learning and knowledge retention is at the heart of our approach. Our people also bring a wealth of experience from performing at the highest level such as in Olympic sport, the military, the arts and business. This unique combination allows us to walk alongside leaders, acting as trusted advisors to challenge and support them throughout their transformation journeys.

However, at EY Lane4 it isn't just about senior leaders. We believe that everyone deserves access to world-class learning and development. Our global reach, digital learning solutions and innovative service delivery allows for consistent development across multiple levels of the organisation.

This means people can develop behaviours that will not only help them to perform at work, but in all parts of their life. It gives people the confidence and belief to try new things and truly thrive.

All this combined allows us to build a better working world.

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Introduction

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) training has long been a multi-billion-pound industry. Despite this, diversity within organisations has barely improved in the past twenty years. So, what can you do to transform your organisation and harness the power of a diverse workforce?

Society is causing seismic shifts in the contemporary workplace context. Movements such as #MeToo #LGBTQRights, and Black Lives Matter have catapulted D&I to the top of the agenda for many organisations. In an age of rapid social reform, diversity and inclusion is no longer a nice gesture, it is imperative for business to get right. Society, your employees and the talent pipeline expect it. Figures show that 67% of job seekers believe workplace diversity to be a highly important factor when considering applying to an organisation.[1] Employees show similar views with 57% believing that their senior leaders could do more to increase internal diversity and inclusion.[1] Some employees actively monitor diversity and inclusion efforts with 13% reporting that they observe how frequently senior management discuss D&I.[2] As underrepresented groups, millennials and Generation Z account for more of the workforce. These figures and sentiments surrounding the importance of D&I in the workplace are set to starkly increase.

The business case for harnessing a diverse workforce is well established. However, the spotlight and pressure are now on organisations to make true progress in D&I. It's not like companies haven't been investing in D&I previously. For years, the lucrative D&I industry has been booming, with diversity and inclusion initiatives bolted on to learning programmes and diversity professionals appointed and promoted at astronomical rates. Despite this investment, attempts to harness the power of diversity have fallen flat. Levels of diversity in leadership roles and talent pipelines remains very low. For example, the latest Parker Review Report, a governmentbacked initiative aimed at increasing the cultural and ethnic boardroom diversity of FTSE 100 companies, suggests that diversity at senior levels is poor, with only five women CEOs and a mere 12% of board members identifying as an ethnic minority, none of which are from black ethnic groups.[3]

These figures have remained relatively stable or regressed since the collection of this data in 2017, which showed that 8% of board members identify with being an ethnic minority and six FTSE 100 CEOs were women.[4,5] The latest UK employment rates paint an even bleaker picture, with ethnic minorities' unemployment rates being 12% higher than their white counterparts and recent reports show that only one in five neurodiverse individuals are in employment.[6] Harrowingly, ONS statistics indicate that these figures have remained unvarying since 2004.[7] Considering the amount of money being funnelled into D&I training, these grave statistics paint a gloomy picture. They are suggesting that traditional D&I programmes are failing organisations, as well as continuing to marginalise the individuals they are supposed to serve.
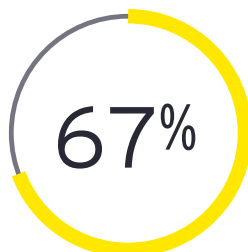
67% of job seekers believe workplace diversity to be a highly important factor when considering applying to an organisation

Section 1: Barriers to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace

Old paradigms in new clothes: systemic challenges to D&I initiatives

Barriers to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace

Diversity programmes have a long history of being side-lined rather than integrated into business strategy. The initial paradigms that created diversity and inclusion training explain many of the failings in today's D&I programmes.[8,9]

1960s – Compliance to legislation

From its conception, D&I training has missed what creates positive change. Diversity training was propagated in response to the civil rights movement to ensure that organisations were compliant with new legislations around race-based discrimination.

The problem
Organisations do the minimum integration necessary to meet legal requirements.

1980s – Assimilation of minorities into the workforce

Diversity training primarily targeted at underrepresented groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, supporting them to assimilate so that they can overcome challenges, easily adapt to, and effectively work with, the dominant group.

The problem
An approach taken by employers who regard diversity as crucial but still a 'side issue' in business. It can feel like offering equitable support, but in fact it just places the ownership on underrepresented groups to solve the challenges they face – rather than addressing the root cause of why these challenges exist.

1990s – Attainment of competitive advantage

Organisations began to view diversity as a benefit, due to the competitive advantage a diverse workforce offered, rather than viewing D&I as a hindrance mandated by the law or problem to be fixed.

The problem
Even within this paradigm, D&I initiatives are seldom integrated into wider business strategy and often delivered as stand-alone programmes. There remains a focus on 'doing' (i.e., revising tactics) with not enough focus on 'knowing' (i.e., understanding the systemic challenges and identifying what the right goals are to be pursued) and 'being' (transforming the fundamental nature and fabric of the business).

Being rooted in the prevention of discrimination and assimilation to the majority group, the past paradigms that D&I training is built on continue to have negative implications on the success of today's programmes.[10] The outdated thinking of previous D&I paradigms leech into many of today's programmes, just in more palatable forms. For example, our modern-day obsession with inclusion set within the context of cultural fit could be argued to be a watered-down version of assimilation to the majority group. Programmes of the future must strive to forge a fresh perspective on D&I and leave behind the ideologies that fail to result in long lasting behaviour change.

Common pitfalls: what to avoid when approaching D&I

Although well-intentioned, current D&I programmes do not deliver and can often leave an organisation worse off.[11] Here are some watchouts you must avoid for a D&I approach:

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More diversity will automatically create more inclusion in our workforce.

Diversity and inclusion are separate challenges that are often conflated. Diversity is the spectrum of difference represented within a team or workforce. Inclusion is the act of embracing these differences. Organisations often fall into the common trap of trying to achieve inclusion by recruiting for diverse talent without investing in cultural change that creates an inclusive culture. To achieve diversity, you must diversify your talent pool. To be inclusive you must transform cultural norms at an individual, team, and organisational level to create an inclusive environment. Only in achieving these simultaneously do you retain your diverse talent pool and foster an inclusive workplace.

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D&I is important, but not a business imperative.

Treating diversity and inclusion as auxiliary business objectives only scratches the surface of the structural and systemic issues entrenched within an organisation that allows non-inclusive behaviours and processes to persist. To see change, it is imperative that your business views D&I as an integral part of your business strategy. Recent studies have shown that the most successful diversity and inclusion programmes are baked into business strategy and lived through day-to-day operations and decisions. Conversely, programmes that only focus on the manifestation of structural issues such as unconscious bias training but do not act as part of a wider D&I strategy, will falter.[12]

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We need to focus on improving our D&I metrics.

Diversity and inclusion metrics often focus on improving the symptoms of a non-inclusive workplace such as; representation of minority groups in the workforce. These symptoms are easy to see. However, the cause of diversity and inclusion challenges, which are often systemic and fused into an organisations culture is far harder to discern. Many organisations will attempt to tackle their D&I challenges by offering sub-par interventions that focus on the symptoms, as opposed to dismantling the structures in place that allow inequity to endure.

To deliver long term change, businesses must opt to eradicate the inequitable systems and practices entrenched within an organisation. Research shows that using a range of evidence-based interventions such as action learning groups, mentorship, sponsorship and development programmes that form part of a wider D&I initiative can be incredibly beneficial as it develops your people, whilst simultaneously increasing their engagement and organisational commitment behaviours.[10,17]

It's good for performance to recruit people who fit.

It is common practice for talent acquisition strategies to aim to find people who display the core values or beliefs within an organisation. Moreover, we have a predisposition to favour candidates who are like ourselves. This is due to the 'like me' bias, a social bias in which we disproportionately favour individuals who share similar qualities, such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, career history, and educational background. In this way, organisations are set up to deeply value sameness rather than difference. However, valuing sameness in excess often results in gaping cultural blind spots within an organisation.[18] Not only does it act as a diversity blocker, but it can also stifle creativity and innovation within an organisation.[19] Instead of focusing on culture fit, switch your focus to culture add. Every employee and potential recruit will have unique experiences and ideas that enable them to give fresh insight and perspective. Make it known that these differences are valued by the organisation. When hiring, those involved in the recruitment process should seek out differences that can positively disrupt the stagnant sameness within the organisation.

Diversity and inclusion is an HR issue.

Often D&I is seen as a challenge HR professionals need to tackle. Two things are wrong here. Firstly, D&I isn't a problem to solve but an opportunity all areas of the business need to bring to fruition. Secondly, HR isn't responsible for this change. Whilst HR professionals play a key role in curating relationships with senior stakeholders and engaging other teams across your organisation, everyone is accountable for implementing this change. Research shows that 70% of executives view D&I as an important challenge (a statistic which also highlights the prevailing view of D&I as a challenge/'problem to overcome' rather than a business opportunity), however, 41% of middle managers feel they have higher priorities than D&I.[20] This disparity in the importance of D&I is cause for concern, as research indicates that managers have some of the greatest influence in creating an inclusive and diverse workplace.[19] If D&I is not on the agenda for managers and their capabilities in this space are not developed, investments and initiatives will be done in vain.
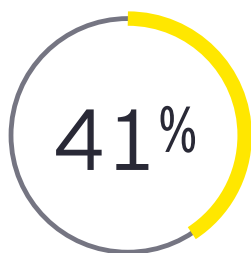
41% of middle managers feel they have higher priorities than D&I

Key takeaway

To make real progress, it's likely you'll have to rethink your approach to diversity and inclusion. The traps discussed are ones even the most well-intentioned leaders can and have fallen into. To navigate this tricky terrain effectively: watch out for solutions based on archaic D&I paradigms, make harnessing diversity a business imperative (not a side project), and strive to go beyond diversity and inclusion. As we'll discuss in the next section, it's important to aim to promote equity, value difference and create belonging.

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70% of executives view D&I as an important challenge

Section 2: Going beyond diversity and inclusion

To harness the power of a diverse workforce, it is vital leaders go beyond striving for diversity and inclusion alone. Instead, seeking and investing in radical restructure of their practices so they create a system and environment which promotes equity, places increased value on the difference a diverse workforce brings and helps everyone to feel that they belong.

For too long organisations have invested in the surface-level, quick-fix solutions and had the expectation of seeing long lasting transformation. This is best put by civil rights lawyer Cyrus Mehri: "When you keep choosing the options on the menu that don't create change, you're purposely not creating change." To create the culture change within your organisation that allows people to achieve their full potential go beyond striving for inclusion, diversity and equality.

Defining terms

Equity: everyone is supported to reach their full potential. The organisation levels the playing field, ensuring all individuals have access to the support, information, resources, and opportunities they need to progress.

Difference: everyone can sustain and express their identity, adding the full range of their unique and valuable contribution to their team and the business.

Belonging: everyone feels secure and supported as an important, full member of their team and organisation.

Equity

To unlock the performance potential in all employees, organisations must have equity within their processes and decision making. Equity is the notion of creating proportional access to resources, support, information, and the opportunities that are essential for progression. Providing proportional access is attained by considering people's unique needs, which are dependent on individual differences such as gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic background.

It's important to note that equity is different from equality. Equality, while well-meaning provides opportunities irrespective of an individual's unique needs and therefore disregards what is accessible for an individual. To illustrate, being part of an organisation requires everyone to be united to achieve a common purpose. Equality is bringing everyone on this journey and providing everyone with the same size pair of shoes. For some, the shoes will fit, but for others they will be a hindrance, making the journey strenuous or seemingly impossible. But, everyone is expected to move in the same direction, towards the same goal at the same pace. Equity is ensuring that everyone is equipped with the right size pair of shoes that enables them to arrive at that goal without strife. Through equity, organisations can level the playing field and dismantle the barriers that stop their people from excelling.

Valuing difference and fostering belonging

Research suggests humans strive to satisfy two basic needs: uniqueness and belonging.[21]

- Need for uniqueness refers to our drive to remain authentic and ourselves, seeking individuality in comparison with others.

- Need for belonging refers to our drive to 'blend in' and be the same as those around us, seeking similarities with, and validation by, others.

To help people perform at their best, it's therefore vital to create an environment which simultaneously values difference and creates belonging.[22]

Individuals, teams and leaders need to value the uniqueness (in thought, experiences, and ideas) that is brought to an organisation when someone who does not fit the organisation or team's typical mould joins. This is not about valuing people despite their differences or being blind to difference, it's about seeing and deeply appreciating the value people bring to an organisation because of their individual differences. It's about acknowledging what diversity brings to a team and organisation's culture and performance.

Humans are social beings by nature. Thus, enabling people to feel that they belong and that their individuality is an asset, is crucial for a high performing workplace. Fostering belonging for all your employees aids you to harness the power of diversity, as it enables people to challenge each other, share controversial ideas and collaborate to deliver the best results.[23]

The inability to cultivate an environment where everyone feels they belong can have detrimental ramifications on your employees and your business. Social exclusion within the workplace has been demonstrated to result in psychological malaise such as stress, depression and anxiety, as well as physical ailments such as cardiovascular disease and poor immune system functioning.[24,25,26] These physical and psychological ailments result in decreased performance, higher absenteeism and employee turnover.

Valuing difference and creating belonging is therefore important for people's health as well as individual, team and organisation performance.

Business case study: Apple's 'Different Together' approach

Apple epitomises the philosophy of valuing difference and creating belonging to harness the value of diversity. Their 'different together' approach states that "At Apple, we're not all the same. And that's our greatest strength. We draw on the differences in who we are, what we've experienced, and how we think. Because to create products that serve everyone, we believe in including everyone."[27] This is an example of an organisation that's striving to create an environment where their people's differences are valued, whilst simultaneously creating an environment where everyone feels they belong without forcing people to assimilate into a homogenous group.

Key takeaway

Dare to be bold in your approach. Transform your organisation into one which harnesses diversity by applying equity to all practices, creates belonging and where difference is revered. In going beyond diversity and inclusion to create equity, belonging and positive attitudes towards difference in your business strategy, you avoid adopting temporary solutions to a deeprooted issue and your people and organisation will thrive.

Section 3: What a successful diversity, inclusion and equity strategy looks like

Harnessing the power of diversity so everyone can reach their full potential is more than just a leadership or a HR challenge. It requires a transformation that permeates throughout an organisation.

Two best practice D,E&I principles

A successful strategy follows these two best practice principles:

▸ **Integrated into the core business strategy.**

It is critical that your D,E&I transformation is embedded into your core business strategy. Studies show that the challenges of harnessing diversity being a mere talking point or sitting outside of your organisation's core values does more harm than good and is also a huge waste of resources.[10] True progress is only achieved through the transformation of beliefs, behaviours, and relationships within the organisation. To attain this change, leaders, teams and individuals will have to challenge themselves to interrogate their practices, privilege, identity, and values system.[28] This will require the review of systems, processes, and policies to ensure that these shifts are seen in day-to-day practices and lived throughout the organisation.
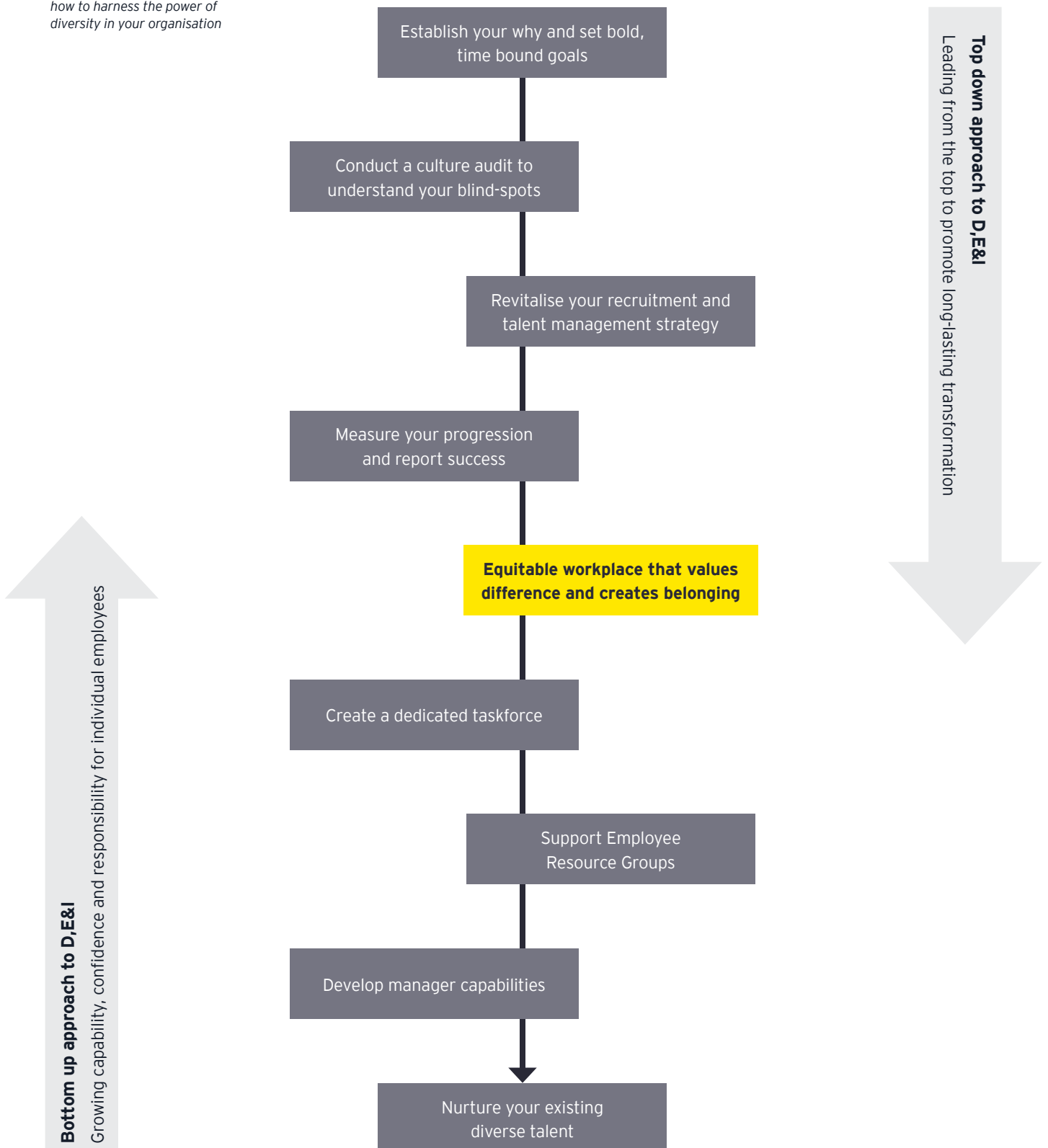
▸ **A promotion focused approach is adopted.**

A 'promotion focused' approach to D,E&I is one which strives towards creating an environment which values difference, creates belonging, and supports everyone to reach their potential. This is opposed to a 'prevention focused' approach, where effort and goals are focused on reducing or minimising issues. For example, aiming to reduce the instances of exclusion by managing micro-inequities and micro-aggressions is a prevention focused approach. Whereas, aiming to achieve workplace equity in five years by intentionally forming new talent pipelines and transforming the culture of your organisation — that's a promotion focused approach.

Studies show that the approach that an organisation takes toward D,E&I shapes how any form of training or initiative is received.[10] Adopting a promotion focused lens, seeking to positively unlock and enable talent, will increase the successfulness of your D,E&I initiatives. However, many organisations tend to take a prevention focused approach, aiming to target non-inclusive practices through enforcing compliance policies and removing autonomy from managers, this often leads to resistance to change.[11,12] In taking a promotion orientation to D,E&I, everyone is brought on this journey and business leaders articulate a clear and authentic rationale for undergoing this change.

A roadmap to harnessing diversity

Our Trans4mation methodology suggests that, like with any change programme, D,E&I projects are best mobilised using top-down and bottom-up approaches. This ensures that this ethos is lived throughout your business. Figure 1 shows our roadmap to harnessing the power of diversity in your organisation.

Figure 1: D,E&I roadmap showing how to harness the power of diversity in your organisation

Establish your why and set bold, time bound goals

Conduct a culture audit to understand your blind-spots

Revitalise your recruitment and talent management strategy

Measure your progression and report success

Equitable workplace that values difference and creates belonging

Create a dedicated taskforce

Support Employee Resource Groups

Develop manager capabilities

Nurture your existing diverse talent

Top down approach to D,E&I
Leading from the top to promote long-lasting transformation

Bottom up approach to D,E&I
Growing capability, confidence and responsibility for individual employees

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to D,E&I. Every organisation and its people are unique. Therefore, your D,E&I solution must reflect this. Here are some tools you can use as a starting point for your strategy:

Top down
approaches

Establish your why and set bold, timebound goals

When it comes to D,E&I, establishing and articulating your rationale for undergoing this change is critical. It highlights the authenticity in your approach and enables you to make informed strategic decisions that are tailored to your organisation. Studies suggest that the most effective D,E&I strategies are those which have ambitious and bold goals, that are specific to the company and its purpose, are time-bound and measurable.[29,30] Doing this creates accountability, commitment, and a clear pathway to success.

Conduct a culture audit to understand your blind spots

If you have the privilege of not experiencing inequity, you won't be aware of it. Engage with people via focus groups and feedback forums to assess the processes, practices and deeply embedded aspects of your organisation's culture which may be overlooked, and that could be negatively impacting people's working lives. Gaining insight into people's lived experiences and uncovering the unique barriers and strengths within your organisation in relation to equity, difference and belonging will be vital for informing your D,E&I strategy. Without this insight into the deep roots of your current culture, you'll struggle to see any significant shifts towards D,E&I, as these 'unseen' or unidentified forces will continue to keep the current system in place.

Revitalise your recruitment and talent management strategy

Instead of waiting for diverse candidates to come to you, proactively source talent from underrepresented groups that add creative insight and difference to your organisation. Interrogate your recruitment processes; does it attract a specific type of person? Can your job descriptions be more inclusive? Solutions to this may be recruiting from more diverse universities or getting involved with institutions that support people from underrepresented groups to broaden your company's networks. Adding an equity statement to your job advertisements, that encourage candidates of all backgrounds to apply, are all quick wins in your bid to be an organisation at the forefront of harnessing diversity.

Measure your progression and report success

Seeing the progress of your D,E&I journey plays an essential role in achieving transformation. This helps to ensure you remain accountable and on track for D,E&I success. Achievements and progress can be tracked through an equity report, that investigates diversity and equitable practices at all levels of leadership. Quantifying the extent to which difference in value and belonging is felt can also be achieved through tailoring your current employee engagement surveys. For example, by including items around whether people feel that the different aspects of themselves are utilised and valued in the company. Similarly, investing in bespoke surveys and pulse focus groups are great ways to collect D,E&I data. Tracking and reporting your progress enables everyone to see the value and importance of D,E&I, boosts employee engagement, helps you to address your cultural blindspots and encourages people to continue to forge an equitable workplace.

↑ Bottom up
approaches

Support Employee Resource Groups

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), are internal groups of people that come together based on a shared characteristic or interest with the intent of providing support, career and personal development. They create a safe space for honest discussion and social learning. ERGs are an extraordinary resource that helps build a more equitable workplace, especially when senior leaders are engaging with and championing the efforts of these groups. By pairing engaged senior leaders with passionate ERGs, these groups also provide valuable insight and direction around how to support underrepresented groups, ensuring that underrepresented communities within your organisation are heard and that the decisions senior leaders make are informed as well as tailored to the needs of your people.

Create a dedicated task force

Having visible company representatives is a great first step to show you are committed to D,E&I transformation. Moreover, D,E&I task forces enable you to mobilise your strategy. For example, they can set up safe spaces of discussion to diagnose and identify the barriers that still exist within the workplace to D,E&I. Task forces are a great tool to use to keep senior leadership accountable for D,E&I change, as well as bridge the gap between top and middle management. Task forces are different from ERGs as their goal is specifically to deliver the change and often includes a mix of external experts, executives or company alumni. Due to this, task forces help stop D,E&I becoming the sole responsibility of underrepresented groups or ERG members. However, it should still be clearly communicated that D,E&I is not the sole responsibility of the dedicated task force either, they are facilitating the change, but everyone in the business has a part to play to make the change happen. By investing in an D,E&I task force it highlights your dedication and authenticity to nurture an equitable workplace; instilling confidence in your people to be a part of this important change that's occurring.

Develop manager capabilities

Research shows that team leaders hold some of the greatest influence in creating a culture within their teams that's equitable, values difference and fosters belonging.[2,19,20,31] Moreover, managers who create an environment that values the differences people bring to the workplace see an increase in team knowledge sharing, collaboration, and overall performance.[16,17,18] While one day in the future, D,E&I will hopefully just be the way things are done in business, for now, being equitable, valuing difference and creating belonging requires intentional effort and skill. Managers must take the time to incorporate specific leadership capabilities to ensure D,E&I success. Specifically, managers need to be upskilled on the following four capabilities: being an active ally to underrepresented groups, staying openly curious about the experiences of others, making equitable decisions, and enabling people to feel free to be themselves.[32,33,34,35]

Nurture your existing diverse talent

Chances are a portion of the diverse talent you are looking for already exists in your talent pool, all you need to do is support them in unlocking their potential. This could be done through supporting internal sponsorship programmes for underrepresented individuals or helping to develop and stretch their capabilities. This process will also encourage you to evaluate the systems and practices in place that stopped you from seeing the potential in your people before. For instance, research shows that women and minority groups are more likely to be assigned clerical tasks within a team as opposed to stretching or developmental tasks. Inequitable practices are also seen at leadership level. For example, women are 69% more likely to experience the glass cliff effect. This is when individuals from underrepresented group are more likely to be appointed to senior positions during times of organisational crisis, or given high risk projects, making them less likely to succeed.[36]

Key takeaway

To reap the most benefits of a diverse workforce, D,E&I must be at the core of your business. D,E&I isn't something separate to business-as-usual, it is about changing business-as-usual. It isn't an add-on to your strategic objectives, it's an integral part of achieving them. Use a mixture of top-down and bottom-up approaches to help your organisation harness the real power of diversity. Promote long-lasting culture transformation, grow capability, and increase confidence, responsibility and ownership, and inspire people to embrace and drive change across the organisation.

Conclusion

Seeing diversity as a tick box, hiring people to fill a quota, or aiming for inclusivity is not enough. It is a business necessity to ensure equity in your systems and processes, value the difference individuals bring and create belonging for people.

Creating a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace requires a transformation at the core of your organisation. Select the options that are evidenced-based and proven to make a difference, not those that act as a band-aid solution to a deep-rooted issue. Only then can you harness the power that resides within a diverse workforce.

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