

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion White Paper

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Transforming Engagements Ltd.

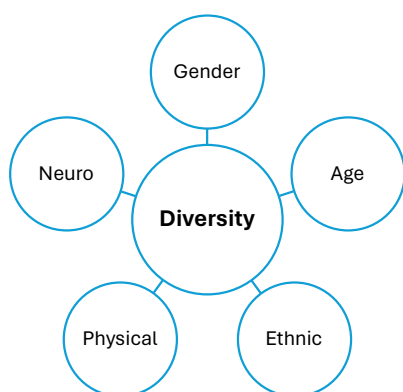
The shocking murder of George Floyd in 2020 had far-reaching consequences in the US. It spurred a national conversation on police discrimination & brutality and added huge impetus to the Black Lives Matter movement. It also led many businesses to redouble their efforts to address systematic racism and power imbalances through Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs.ⁱ

More recently we've seen an increasingly noisy backlash against DEI. This reached a crescendo in January when Elon Musk claimed on X that DEI was somehow responsible for the door plug blowing off an Alaska Air Boeing 737.ⁱⁱ But even left-of-centre opinion leaders like Stephen Pinker have expressed concerns about how diversity programs are being implemented and the negative impact this is having in the US education sector.ⁱⁱⁱ

DEI covers some of the most important issues that organisations and their employees have to navigate, including fairness and respect. Handled well, DEI programs can improve employee cohesion and organisational performance. But they also carry the risk of entrenching past grievances and making an organisation's culture less constructive. The implementation of DEI would need to be particularly sensitive in countries with a history of recent trauma like Rwanda.

This brief aims to help HR professionals develop a better understanding of DEI and how it can improve their workplaces. It starts by defining what DEI is and then expands on the DEI experience in the US, including recent efforts to broaden its relevance and impact. Reflections are then provided on DEI's applicability in Rwanda. Finally, some practical ideas are shared on the sorts of activities that could be useful in launching and enhancing DEI programs.

1. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion



Business writers usually provide two key reasons for companies to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion.^{iv} The first is that these are universal values that most people hold dear. Companies therefore have an obligation to commit to DEI because it is the right thing to do.

The second reason is that embracing DEI makes economic sense. Diverse teams make better decisions and are better equipped to help organisations succeed in complex environments. In addition, equity & inclusion can improve employee engagement, collaboration, talent acquisition, and external reputation. We will explore these points later but first let's take a closer look at DEI's three elements.

Diversity speaks to the need for employees in an organisation to reflect the broader population that the employee base is drawn from, at all levels of the organisation. So, if half the population

are women, then, all other things being equal, half the senior leaders in the organisation should be women as well. The dimensions usually covered in discussing diversity are:

- Gender diversity – this includes diversity between men & women, but also covers diversity representing the non-binary or LGBTQ+ community
- Age diversity – ensuring that organisations include both younger and older people
- Ethnic diversity – ensuring that people of different heritages & backgrounds are represented
- Physical and neurological diversity – making sure that people with physical or mental disabilities can participate within the organisation.

HR policies play a critical role in embedding diversity by ensuring that recruitment, development and career & succession planning support the creation of an increasingly representative organisation.

Equity is the principle that everyone has a fair chance of succeeding within the organisation. This differs from equality which says everyone should be treated equally. Equity says that everyone should have the same chance of success, and that the organisation should assist in addressing any structural disadvantages that may limit an employee's development.

A good example of such assistance comes from Harvard Business School which identified that MBA students with a military background (veterans) were less likely to excel academically than other students. Specialized review sessions were provided for veterans and their performance improved. This initiative didn't reduce the performance of other MBA students, it may even have helped them: as veterans became more confident, they brought a wealth of military experience into the classroom, enhancing the learning experience for everyone.^v

Inclusion refers to diverse employees' experience of the workplace and whether employers are taking steps to help them contribute to the company and feel heard⁵. Processes like onboarding, coaching, grievance handling, communication, opportunity allocation, performance evaluation and promotion will all affect feelings of inclusion.

2. DEI in the US

The political controversy that has followed DEI in the US was mentioned earlier. One obvious reason for the backlash against DEI is that privileged people do not want to have uncomfortable conversations about systemic and enduring inequities. David French sees this as a sign that "white Americans are content with their vastly disproportionate share of wealth and power".²

But there are also legitimate concerns about how DEI has been implemented in the US. French argues that in trying to drive through DEI-focused policies, universities have restricted free speech and also not followed due process in sanctioning students & staff accused of DEI-related transgressions. In his view "virtuous goals should not be accomplished through illiberal means".

Another development worth mentioning is US Supreme Court's decision to ban race-conscious university admissions in June of 2023. While this is limited to government and educational institutions, it has generated much discussion on its implications for DEI in business. Right-wing think tanks claim that DEI programs are now illegal, while legal experts say that programs that do not consider race, gender or other characteristics could continue (assuming the ruling is ever extended to business). While this would prevent the use of race or gender-based recruitment targets, many other DEI-related activities would not be affected.^{vi}

Even before the Supreme Court ruling, concerns were being expressed about the implementation of DEI in US corporations. A 2021/22 survey of 18 companies found that while the roll out of DEI programs did address important issues, it also created resentment and hostility, exacerbating existing divisions.ⁱ

One adjustment that companies are making to address this is to include a focus on belonging in DEI, so that employees that have not experienced historic discrimination have the opportunity to participate and learn through companies' DEI activities, rather than feeling judged and excluded. Employees are encouraged to recognize and counteract defensive thinking and embrace the idea that everyone can rise together by making their companies feel fairer and more respectful.ⁱ

3. DEI in Rwanda

The context for considering DEI in Rwanda is completely unique given the devastation caused by the 1994 genocide against the country's Tutsi population, and the painstaking steps taken to rebuild the country since then. The principle of "never again" has led to a singular focus on economic development as a way to build social cohesion and reduce the risk of future conflict.

Rwanda has also made good progress in advancing gender diversity and has one of the highest levels of participation by women at the most senior leadership levels of politics and commerce. The economy's rapid growth has also, inevitably, led to income inequality and disparities in development between rural and urban areas. A concerted effort has been made to close this gap, particularly in nutrition and health, and further actions are being taken.

Companies have a critical role to play in creating opportunities that will help Rwanda sustain its economic and social momentum. HR professionals are well placed to create the safe environment that employees need to embrace the positive aspects of DEI and to help their organisations to rise together. However, in the same way that DEI has been shaped by particular political and cultural forces in the US, any diversity initiatives attempted in Rwanda should be informed by local realities. A recent DEI workshop with the HR Professionals' Peer Group Learning identified that the biggest challenges faced with DEI in Rwanda centre on inclusion, particularly low awareness amongst senior leaders on the importance of making all employees feel valued.

4. DEI in practice

For companies wanting to implement a DEI initiative, the first step would be to understand the context and sentiment of employees, and to articulate what the initiative aims to achieve. Once this purpose has been clarified, HR professionals can consider a range of different tactics to encourage actions and discussions that can take the DEI agenda forward, including:

- **Review entry-level recruitment practices**
 - Encourage managers to *broaden the field of candidates* they would normally recruit from. Existing routines and habits might unconsciously bias the candidate pool. If recruitment only focuses on elite universities, also consider very strong candidates from second tier institutions. By looking at a larger pool of candidates, managers are able to make better decisions that can enhance both the diversity but also the performance of their teams.
 - *Entry requirements* should also be closely scrutinized. Are the qualifications and experiences listed in the job description really necessary to do this role well, or are they just a means of limiting the candidate pool?

- Finally, *formal onboarding* is valuable for every new recruit, but may be especially important for new employees from diverse backgrounds. Onboarding seminars can give these employees the opportunity to connect with peers and leaders and to learn what resources are available to support their success at the company.
- **Support employees from diverse groups**
 - *Accommodations for employees with physical or mental disabilities* are the most basic support that every workplace should be providing for diverse employees. Buildings, meeting rooms, washrooms and workstations must meet their needs. Flexible working arrangements can also be provided to ensure they can participate fully in the company.
 - *Employee resource groups* have been an effective way of fostering inclusion and belonging in the US.ⁱ These groups are a common feature of most large US corporations and multinationals. Their aim is to provide information, encouragement, affiliation and sponsorship for identity-based communities. In the US this usually includes groups for women, LGBTQ+ communities, Hispanic employees, African American employees and for employees with disabilities. These groups are allocated a sponsor from the executive team and meet regularly to discuss topical issues.
 - *Mentoring Programs* are another common approach to supporting diverse employees but targeted at individuals rather than groups. These are formally structured with training provided to both mentor and mentee, so that there are clear expectations of what will be discussed and at what frequency. Common topics covered in mentoring discussions are career planning, development, interpersonal conflict and managing work / life balance.
 - *Family friendly policies* are another way of supporting diverse employees, particularly women and employees with family responsibilities. Nursing rooms, flexible work options & parental leave are the kinds of benefits that can be useful.
- **Encourage objective performance reviews and diverse career progression**
 - *Performance reviews* are an activity that all employees watch closely to ensure that their work is evaluated objectively. Ensuring that reviews are formalised and conducted consistently will go a long way in preventing feelings of discrimination, particularly in groups of employees that may otherwise feel marginalized.
 - All employees are also understandably concerned that promotions occur in a fair manner. Companies should implement formal *succession planning* programs and wherever possible communicate to aspiring leaders on the expectations they would need to meet to be considered for roles with higher responsibilities.
 - Likewise, *high profile projects* should be allocated in a fair and thoughtful manner, so that a broad group of employees have the chance to learn from them and to be seen, rather than always passing them to the same people.

References & further reading

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- ⁱ Miller, Jennifer. (2023, May 14). *Why Some Companies Are Saying 'Diversity and Belonging' Instead of 'Diversity and Inclusion'*. The New York Times.
- ⁱⁱ French, David. (2024, January 14). *This Is the Actual Danger Posed by D.E.I.*. The New York Times. Opinion.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Pinker, Stephen. (2023, December 11). *Steven Pinker's Five Point Plan to save Harvard from itself*. Boston Globe.
- ^{iv} McKinsey & Company (2022). *What is diversity, equity, and inclusion?* McKinsey Explainers.
- ^v Elkins, C; Frei, F & Morriss, A. (2024, January 21). *Critics of D.E.I. Forget That It Works*. The New York Times.
- ^{vi} Yoshino, K & Glasgow, D (2023, July 12). *What SCOTUS's Affirmative Action Decision Means for Corporate DEI*. Harvard Business Review.