

## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace (September 2023)**

We've heard from business professionals for the past few years that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a top business trend impacting workplace culture, hiring practices, marketing and communications, and even innovation and a company's bottom line.

In recent focus panels across all career areas, businesspeople reinforce the need for workers to have skills in [cultural competency](#), as well as an appreciation for diversity and inclusion because of the value it brings to the workplace. A supply chain management (SCM) professional in Kentucky shared in a recent focus panel that "the working world today is global and diverse, and employees and employers need to be able to communicate with people who are different from them."

To support our secondary research into this topic, we recently attended a DEI webinar series hosted by New Directions Career Center in Columbus, OH and presented by three DEI professionals working in different fields. To give the topic the space and time it deserves, we are presenting our primary and secondary research findings as a series of three Action Briefs. This first Action Brief—*Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace*—will break down key terminology and explain why DEI is important for business.

### **Moving From Anti-Discrimination Laws to Today**

Before we learn about what's happening with DEI in the workplace today, it may help to look at how DEI began and how diversity initiatives have evolved over the years in the United States. While it may seem like DEI efforts arose in recent years following the social and political unrest sparked by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN, its roots are in the 1960s and the civil rights movement.

Equal employment legislation, known as [Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), states that it is unlawful for employers to discriminate against someone based on their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Title VII also established the [Commission for Equal Employment Opportunity](#) (EEOC). The EEOC enforces laws that make it illegal to discriminate in employment and hiring practices.

Since the enactment of Title VII, companies have evolved in their understanding of diversity and its impact and benefits. Businesses have moved from compliance with anti-discrimination laws in the 1960s to recognizing [the positive business benefits of having a diverse workforce](#). Continued efforts to diversify along with business-based studies have led companies to see that diversity alone is ineffective without addressing equity and inclusion. For a decades-based timeline of these changes, see the LinkedIn article [Evolution of Diversity in the Workplace](#) by Stacey Williams.

## **Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

### **Diversity Is About Identity**

DEI webinar presenter Alyvia Johnson (Sr. Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at American Electric Power) explained that diversity is all about identity. [Diversity](#) is defined as different characteristics that are present within individuals and groups that make up our identity, such as our religion, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status, among others. DEI efforts in

the workplace focus on diversifying organizations in these areas through hiring and workplace practices that support employees across different identities and social groups to achieve success at work.

There are many best practices for DEI implementation in the workplace, and one of these is diversifying specifically within leadership roles. Johnson explained, “When people see others in leadership roles who look like them, they feel like they belong in that space and that there are possibilities for advancement.” Diversifying in leadership roles is not only good for employee growth and retention, but also for business. A McKinsey & Company [study](#) found that increasing diversity, specifically by adding more women and ethnically diverse people in leadership (executive roles and board of directors), has a clear correlation with increased profitability.

A diverse workforce can help expand a company’s customer base through marketing and communications as well. Participants in a 2021 Digital Marketing Futuring Panel echoed the importance of diversity in their business practices, saying, “DEI is a principle in everything we do. In terms of what we do, why we do it, and how we do it, we must be thinking about DEI, thinking about audience, thinking about messaging.”

### **Equality Is Not the Same as Equity**

*Equality* means that everyone receives the same resources regardless of an individual’s needs. *Equity* means meeting people where they are and making it possible for everyone to have a fair chance to participate and thrive.

When companies initially diversified their workplaces, they did not provide the specific tools or support those hires needed to be successful. Equity in the workplace therefore addresses unfair practices regarding [pay, workplace practices, and mentoring](#) that historically gave some groups of people an advantage over other groups in these areas. Companies implementing DEI practices offer more equitable resources that may include flexible schedules for parents with childcare needs, [pay equity practices](#) that provide transparency in salaries, and employee resource groups (ERG) to provide professional mentoring and connections for specific social groups.

To visualize the difference between equality and equity, the following illustration shows how a few people in the image on the left (Pink: Equality) are unable to utilize or take part in the exact same (equal) resources needed to cross the street. The images on the right (Blue: Equity) show how a few adjustments support everyone in crossing safely and equitably.

**EQUALITY:**

Everyone gets the same – regardless if it's needed or right for them.



**EQUITY:**

Everyone gets what they need – understanding the barriers, circumstances, and conditions.



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### **Inclusion, Belonging, and Connecting**

Finally, inclusion is an important part of the DEI strategy that aims to help everyone feel that they belong at a company or organization. In a recent supply chain management focus panel, discussion centered around the need for giving and receiving constructive feedback as a critical workplace skill for everyone. When prompted to provide more information, participants explained that sometimes this feedback doesn't happen for marginalized populations due to implicit bias.

[Implicit bias](#) is defined as unconscious prejudices that we all have about certain social groups that drive our decision-making and actions. These biases can prevent us from stepping outside the comfort of our own social groups to connect with someone who doesn't look or act like us. In a work setting, this limits professional mentoring opportunities for the person or people who are excluded from feedback. And if constructive feedback is what allows an employee to get to the next level, a person who never receives it cannot attain new skills and knowledge to be set up for promotion.

In recent focus panels, SCM professionals shared that these conversations can be challenging and that it's okay to lean into the discomfort because "being honest will lend itself to more dialogue."

Stay tuned for our next Action Brief, where we will take a closer look at implicit bias, see how it impacts the workplace, and identify best practices for mitigating our biases and expanding our social networks and connections.

### **Links for Further Reading:**

- ["Board Diversity Increased in 2021. Some Ask What Took So Long"](#)
- ["Diversity and Inclusion Build High-Performance Teams"](#)
- ["Paving the Way for Diversity & Inclusion Success"](#)
- ["How Diverse Leadership Teams Boost Innovation"](#)

**Recommended Books:**

- [\*Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High\*](#) by Joseph Grenny, Kerry Patterson, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, and Emily Gregory
  - This book provides tips for improving your communication skills, including how to map out a conversation in advance when offering constructive feedback.
- [\*The New One Minute Manager\*](#) by Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson
  - The authors recommend starting your constructive feedback with what is going well, then sharing what can be improved and offering ideas for moving forward.

**Classroom Activities:**

- What are some of your personal beliefs that shape your identity? These can be things you've learned from your parents or other family members, maybe values or principles that they've shared with you that have contributed positively to who you are as a person. Write a short reflection on one or two of these principles or beliefs and how it supports you in your life.
- Get into small groups and share some of your social affiliations. Ask people what makes the groups that they belong to important to them. Do you wear the colors of your favorite hometown sports teams? Can you imagine moving to another school or state and supporting a rival team? Have you ever joined a friend at their church or religious service for a special event? Did you enjoy it, or did you feel like an "outsider"?
- Using an [identity wheel](#) can help us understand dimensions of our identity across different areas such as race, education, gender, physical or cognitive ability, mental health, language, and more. The wheel helps us see how identity can impact our experiences in the world as well as the skills and perspectives we bring to a social environment.
  - Find your identity dimensions on the wheel and write a short reflection on how one or more has affected your experiences at school or work. Are some aspects of your identity more, or less, important to you? What skills or unique perspective have you developed through your identifications or affiliations?

**Sources:**

- ["Delivering Through Diversity"](#)
- ["Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Key Terms and Definitions"](#)
- ["Does Workplace Diversity Actually Impact a Business?"](#)
- ["Evolution of Diversity in the Workplace"](#)
- ["How Diversity Can Drive Innovation"](#)
- ["Implicit Bias: How Unconscious Attitudes Affect Everything"](#)
- ["Leading the Way With Inclusive Marketing"](#)
- New Directions Career Center Webinar: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging: Why It Matters in the Workplace, presented by Alyvia Johnson, American Electric Power
- ["What Is Cultural Competence and Why Is It Important?"](#)
- ["What Is Pay Equity and Why Is It Important?"](#)
- ["Workplace Equity: The "E" in DEI and Why It Matters"](#)