



Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace Series

Part Two: Inclusive Workplace Policies (October 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.

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.

Continuing our own series of Action Briefs on this topic, DEI Action Brief Part Two: *Inclusive Workplace Policies* looks at the specific initiatives and practices that companies are implementing to support more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces today. If you missed [Part One of this series](#), it is available on our website.

The Role of Human Resources Management in Creating Inclusive Workplace Policies

Human resource leaders generally play a big role in organizations to operationalize DEI goals and objectives. DEI webinar presenter Sherrice Sledge-Thomas (Vice President of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access at the Columbus Chamber of Commerce) defined inclusive workplace policies as "a framework for standardizing employment conditions that considers the needs of all employees, particularly those populations whose needs have historically not been recognized or supported."

Ms. Sledge-Thomas explained that like other aspects of HR management, DEI efforts can be woven into talent management (attracting, recruiting, and retaining staff), leadership, culture, and professional development.

Attracting and Recruiting a Diverse Workforce

Inclusive workplace policies are usually one aspect of a company's broader set of initiatives to attract, recruit, and retain a more diverse workforce. When considering a company's attraction, it's important for leaders to understand how they are perceived in the marketplace and why someone would want to work at the organization.

Ms. Sledge-Thomas says, "Consider attraction as a lived recruitment—how everyone shows up each day is how companies attract people to their workplace and, once hired, how they keep them. Everyone in the company can be involved in attracting people."

As was discussed in Part One of this series, diversity is about more than just race. Diversity includes personal, socioeconomic, and cultural attributes such as gender, age, wealth, religion, and physical and neurodiversity. These are just a few examples of populations companies might consider attracting to diversify their workforce.

In a recent business management [focus panel in Nebraska](#), participants shared their efforts in attracting more women into construction jobs. They explained that it's not enough to say they want more women to apply; they needed to have women speak at hiring events, show women in leadership roles when

advertising open positions, and generally create a female-friendly environment to incentivize women to stay once they're hired.

Inclusive Policies to Support Employee Retention

A diverse workplace inherently has greater differences in needs than a more homogenous workplace. Taking these needs into account when designing [workplace policies](#) equips everyone with the tools they need to be successful at work. To meet these diverse needs, companies are offering retention benefits like floating holidays, flexible schedules, hybrid work, and unlimited paid time off (PTO) to give employees options for managing work-life balance.

In a recent business focus panel in Kentucky, manufacturing employers described a pay-per-shift app they implemented for hourly workers who wanted more control over their paydays. Shane Grayson, Technical Supply Chain Specialist at Stober Drives Inc., told us, "The app allows shift workers to pay themselves immediately following a shift. We see workers logging into the app in the parking lot as they leave work each day."

This benefit addresses the importance of cash flow for entry-level, part-time, and gig employees and was identified by asking the workers what was important to them. As companies compete for employees today, polling current employees on preferences for benefits is important.

Inclusive Healthcare and Employee Benefits

Companies are incorporating additional benefits into their compensation packages to attract and retain diverse hires and be competitive in the job market, including:

- Domestic partner benefits
- Emergency childcare assistance
- Employee assistance program/Mental health care coverage
- Floating holidays (e.g., birthdays, religious holidays of choice)
- Gender-affirming care or gender transition coverage
- Gym memberships or reimbursements for exercise equipment or classes
- Maternal/Paternal childbirth leave
- Adoption/Fertility/Contraception coverage
- Pet insurance
- Unlimited PTO for full-time employees

You can learn more about these benefits in [this article](#).

Leadership and the Art of Connecting

Ms. Sledge-Thomas cautioned, "Policies don't replace good old-fashioned leadership and the art of connecting." She stresses the need for "creating an environment that is focused on learning, where everyone knows everyone, uses their names, uses positive reinforcement, supports peer-to-peer discussion, sets clear objectives, motivates people, and makes them feel valued."

We received similar feedback in recent supply chain management [focus panels](#) this year as hiring managers emphasized the need for empathy and open communication among workers and between supervisors and team members.

Culture: The Impact of Psychologically Unsafe Work Environments

When people feel unsafe or that they don't belong in a particular environment, the brain responds to these emotional threats by [fawning, fleeing, freezing, or fighting](#). An unsafe work environment can create a cycle of continuous hiring and training, as the company is unable to retain quality employees. Because hiring processes are often labor-intensive, expensive, and morale-draining for workplace culture, they tend to reduce time and resources for productivity and block innovation.

Companies can attract and *retain* talent by creating psychologically safe work environments. According to this [LinkedIn article](#), there are four stages of engagement that Timothy Clark outlines in his book, [The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation](#). Clark posits these stages are necessary to experience fulfillment at work and for employees to feel empowered to innovate. They're what keep people coming back with energy and enthusiasm and what fuels things like passion and purpose. Without them, employees can feel excluded or exploited for their work.

Four Stages of Psychological Safety

1. Inclusion safety: Feeling welcome and included
2. Learner safety: Feeling safe to ask questions to learn and grow at work
3. Contributor safety: Feeling safe to collaborate and contribute in a team setting
4. Challenger safety: Feeling safe to challenge the status quo and innovate without fear of risk or punishment

Professional Development: Mentors and Sponsors

Finally, DEI professionals know that to have diverse voices and perspectives at the table, professional development is a key piece of supporting and advocating for those who haven't always had the opportunities to gain access to these roles.

A McKinsey & Company [article](#) describes the importance of DEI organizational systems to support "connection opportunities" that foster "interpersonal relationships across the organization."

Seeking out mentors and sponsors can help expand a person's skills and networks, opening opportunities that cannot be accessed without support. This Intuit [article](#) sheds light on the difference between the two: "A mentor is someone who helps you grow in your craft and skill set, while a sponsor is someone who advocates on your behalf to help you achieve a desired goal."

DEI webinar presenter Alyvia Johnson (Sr. Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at American Electric Power) defined mentors and sponsors in this way: "Mentors are people who talk with you to share advice or knowledge. Sponsors are people who talk positively *about* you to those in positions of power when you're not in the room."

Seeking out mentors and sponsors can begin at any point in a career, including in high school. Students can start building a network of mentors and sponsors with teachers, coaches, counselors, or employers. It's never too early to build a network of [personal advocates](#).

Links for Further Reading:

- [“Can Blind Hiring Improve Workplace Diversity?”](#)
- [“Importance of Diversity and Inclusion Policies at Work”](#)
- [“Inclusive Language Guidelines”](#)

Discussion Questions:

- Which employee benefits would be most important to you when pursuing a new job? Are there other benefits that would be more appealing to you?
- If you have a part-time job now, what attracted you to work there? What employee benefits do you enjoy most? Did you understand these benefits when you were hired?
- Imagine you are an outside consultant who has been hired to assess the environment at your school. Would you say everyone is included and welcomed, feels safe to ask questions and collaborate on projects with others, and can respectfully challenge or share new ideas?
 - How could your school be more inclusive or welcoming to a more diverse group of students or learners? How could students get involved in designing some student-focused benefits at your school?
- Make a list of three possible mentors or sponsors in your life. How could you start to learn more from them or ask them for help in connecting you with a new opportunity? Do you need a recommendation letter for college or a reference for a job application? Are there any current volunteer opportunities that could help you expand your network of support?

Sources:

- [“Inclusive Workplaces Focus on Management Practices That Matter, Not Fluff”](#)
- [“How to Grow Through Mentors and Sponsors”](#)
- [“Mentoring in the Workplace: Benefits & Best Practices”](#)
- [“Inclusive Workplace Policies for Retention”](#)
- New Directions Career Center Webinar Series:
 - *What Are Inclusive Workplace Policies?*, presented by Sherrice Sledge-Thomas, Columbus Chamber of Commerce
 - *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) in the Workplace and Why It Matters*, presented by Alyvia Johnson, American Electric Power
- [“The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety”](#)
- [“What Is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?”](#)