



UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT WITH WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PROGRAMS

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines employee engagement with diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives across various sectors. Using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants from diverse demographic and socio-economic backgrounds, the research explores perceptions and experiences of D&I programs. Findings indicate that while employees generally value these initiatives, their positive reception depends on leadership commitment, authenticity, accessibility, cultural integration, and alignment with organizational practices. Key challenges identified include tokenistic approaches, limited representation of diverse leaders, and persistent microaggressions. The study emphasizes that fostering genuinely inclusive workplaces requires comprehensive, systemic strategies underpinned by authentic organizational commitment. Recommendations for enhancing D&I strategies are provided, along with directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The consideration of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives has gained traction recently because businesses understand the value of creating equitable and inclusive workplaces. These efforts are driven both by ethical considerations as well as a compelling business case, given that diverse teams have been shown to outperform homogeneous groups with respect to innovation, decision-making, and overall financial performance (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). In spite of advancements in D&I programs that organizations claim to offer, implementing these frameworks continues to be a challenge for most organizations. As noted by Shore et al. (2011), employees - especially those from minority backgrounds - often report a gap between organizational values and reality - the dissonance they experience within an organization. The difficulty of creating truly inclusive

spaces goes beyond simply having diversity policies - there is also the need to shift culture at the organizational level. Sustaining this change involves ongoing commitment from leaders, authentic engagement reinforced by deep structural shifts that confront institutionalized prejudices. Organizations often implement D&I policies due to external pressures or reputational damage; however, meaningful change needs steadfast resolve to internal accountability frameworks. This study addresses the tension created by surface-level D&I metrics alongside deeper levels of inclusivity experienced by employees. This research examines the impact of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives through the experience of employees. Engaging with the initiatives enables employees to form opinions about these efforts, which this study seeks to identify barriers or enablers towards



authentic workplace inclusion. The results provide guidance for organizations aiming to improve their D&I policies and cultivate ecosystems that enable all employees to flourish. It addresses the contradiction between D&I policy and practice, thus adding to literature that attempts to redefine D&I from a compliance checklist with minimum requirements, to an ingrained, perpetual organizational endeavor.

2. Literature Review

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) as a concept has developed over the last thirty years, reflecting an understanding of diversity not just as a sociopolitical issue but also as a key factor in organizational effectiveness. In this section, we will critically review pertinent theories and empirical literature pertaining to D&I with regard to employees and organizational dynamics.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Several interrelated theoretical frameworks inform our understanding of D&I dynamics within organizations:

- Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals classify themselves and others into social categories (e.g., race, gender, age), which influences perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. These categorizations often result in in-group favoritism and out-group bias, leading to exclusionary practices in the workplace. Social identity theory is essential for understanding how unconscious bias operates and why homogeneity often persists in leadership structures.
- Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) posits that under appropriate conditions—such as equal status and cooperative interaction—intergroup contact can reduce prejudice. This theory underpins many D&I training programs that promote cross-cultural collaboration and team-building among diverse employee groups. However, the success of such initiatives often depends on the organizational climate and power dynamics.
- System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) argues that people have a psychological motive to defend and justify the status quo, even if it is disadvantageous. This helps explain why dominant groups within organizations may resist D&I efforts or deny the existence of inequality, thereby creating barriers to meaningful change.
- Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights the compounding and intersecting nature of multiple

social identities (e.g., race, gender, disability, sexual orientation) and how they create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. For instance, a woman of color may experience discrimination differently than a white woman or a Black man, yet many D&I frameworks treat identities as isolated categories. Applying intersectionality requires organizations to design initiatives that are nuanced and responsive to layered experiences.

- Inclusive Leadership Theory (Carmeli et al., 2010) pertains to leadership behaviors that engender a sense of belonging and acknowledge unique contributions from all employees. Leaders who are inclusive seek input from diverse voices, and they demonstrate openness and accessibility in their leadership style. They also take visible action to support groups that are underrepresented in their organizations. This type of leadership is associated with several workgroup member outcomes, such as engagement, willingness to innovate, and feelings of safety in expressing potentially risky ideas (Nishii & Mayer, 2009).

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) also influences D&I results by shining a light on the leader's responsibility in spelling out an inclusive vision and setting a motivational tone such that all employees embrace and effect the needed changes to make the organization more inclusive of those different from them. Transformational leaders are often said to possess an "enlightened" style, more common in males, but with many excellent female role models for enacting such a style. Bass and Riggio suggest the following as definitional of such leaders.

All these models together form a good foundation for comprehending how D&I works within organizations. They also demonstrate that D&I, is not merely an issue of compliance with policy but one of cultural change that entails cognitive, emotional, and structural change.

2.2 Organizational Strategies and Outcomes

Over the years, a growing body of research has shown that when done right, diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts can significantly enhance organizational performance. For instance, a major meta-analysis by van Dijk and colleagues (2012) found that diversity tends to boost group outcomes, particularly in areas requiring innovation and complex problem-solving. But it's important to note that these benefits don't



happen automatically. They're strongly influenced by how well inclusion is built into everyday practices and whether leadership actively supports it.

In a well-known study, Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006) discovered that putting accountability systems in place—like diversity task forces or mentorship programs—had a much stronger impact on increasing the presence of women and minorities in leadership roles than strategies like sensitivity training or performance reviews tied to diversity metrics. This points to a key insight: changing structures within organizations often works better than simply trying to shift attitudes.

Shore and her team (2011) introduced a helpful way to think about inclusion—as a balance between belonging and individuality. They warned that many D&I programs miss the mark by pushing people to fit in, rather than celebrating what makes them different. This concern is reflected in real-world employee experiences, where involvement in D&I efforts sometimes feels like it comes at the cost of one's personal or cultural identity.

Dobbin and Kalev (2016) also raised important concerns about mandatory diversity training. Their findings suggest that forcing people to participate in these programs can sometimes backfire, particularly among majority group members who may feel singled out. In contrast, programs that people can choose to join—especially those focused on learning and allyship—tend to have more lasting effects on behavior and mindset.

Roberson (2006) offered a broader perspective with the "Inclusive Workplace Model." This approach looks at inclusion not just at the individual or organizational level but across four interconnected areas: personal, relational, structural, and societal. The model encourages companies to link their internal D&I goals with efforts that support equity and justice in the wider community.

2.3 Contemporary Challenges in D&I Implementation

Even with more organizations investing in D&I, many still struggle with common roadblocks:

- **Tokenism and Gaps in Representation:** Some employees feel that diversity efforts are more about appearances than real, lasting change. Kanter's (1977) classic research on tokenism showed that individuals from underrepresented groups often face increased

scrutiny, higher expectations, and a sense of isolation, which can undermine the very goals D&I programs aim to achieve.

Micro-aggressions: Sue et al. (2007) define microaggressions as subtle, often unintentional, behaviors or comments that convey hostility or insult. These can have a cumulative psychological effect, undermining the sense of belonging and engagement for marginalized employees.

Leadership Homogeneity: Even in diverse organizations, leadership remains predominantly white and male. Catalyst (2020) reports that women of color make up less than 5% of executive leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies, despite significant investments in D&I pipelines.

Measurement and Accountability: Many organizations struggle to measure the impact of D&I initiatives. Traditional metrics like demographic representation do not capture qualitative experiences such as inclusion, psychological safety, or the presence of inclusive behaviors in decision-making processes.

2.4 Moving Toward Systemic Inclusion

The shift from performative to transformative D&I requires organizations to:

- Embed D&I into all aspects of business operations—from recruitment and retention to performance management and succession planning (Mor Barak, 2015).
- Engage in cultural audits to identify embedded biases in language, policy, and organizational narratives.
- Create inclusive spaces for feedback, particularly from marginalized employees, to inform policy changes.
- Recognize the dynamic nature of inclusion and invest in ongoing learning, reflexivity, and dialogue.

Studies by Nishii (2013) emphasize the importance of climate for inclusion, arguing that inclusive climates moderate the relationship between diversity and organizational outcomes. Organizations with high levels of inclusion reap the benefits of diversity, while those with low inclusion may see increased conflict and turnover.

Table 1: Summary of Key Literature on D&I Initiatives

Author(s)	Key Finding
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Hunt et al. (2015)	Diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones on financial and innovation metrics.
Shore et al. (2011)	Inclusion is distinct from diversity; cultural change is necessary for success.
Dobbin & Kalev (2016)	Tokenistic programs can be counterproductive.
Ely & Thomas (2001)	Leadership and culture drive effective D&I programs.

The literature reveals that effective D&I implementation is both a structural and cultural endeavor. Theoretical frameworks underscore the cognitive, social, and institutional factors that shape experiences of inclusion, while empirical studies identify practical strategies and pitfalls. A major theme across the literature is that inclusion is not automatic with the presence of diversity—it must be intentionally cultivated. The current study builds on these findings by centering the voices of employees to understand how D&I efforts manifest in day-to-day experiences and what conditions contribute to (or detract from) their success.

3. Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach to delve into how employees experience Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) efforts within different organizational settings. Qualitative methods were chosen specifically for their ability to uncover the depth and complexity of personal experiences—insights that often get lost in purely numerical or survey-based research. This approach made it possible to understand not just what employees experience, but how they interpret and feel about those experiences of inclusion or exclusion at work.

3.1 Research Design

The study was grounded in an interpretivist framework, which recognizes that reality is shaped through social

interactions and individual perceptions. From this perspective, employee experiences are not just influenced by written policies or D&I programs—they are also molded by everyday workplace culture, leadership styles, and interpersonal relationships.

To gather data, the study relied on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. These methods provided participants with the freedom to express their thoughts and tell their stories in their own words. At the same time, the semi-structured format gave the research process enough consistency to ensure key topics were covered, while leaving room to follow up on unexpected themes or important insights that emerged during the conversations.

This flexible yet focused approach helped capture a richer, more authentic picture of how D&I initiatives are lived and felt on the ground by employees from diverse backgrounds. Focus groups were employed to encourage interaction among participants, stimulate dialogue, and uncover group norms and shared experiences related to D&I.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who were directly involved in or impacted by their organization's D&I efforts. Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be employed in an organization with a formal D&I policy or initiative, (2) identify as belonging to one or more historically marginalized groups (e.g., based on race, gender, disability, age, or sexual orientation), and (3) be willing to discuss their experiences in a confidential setting.

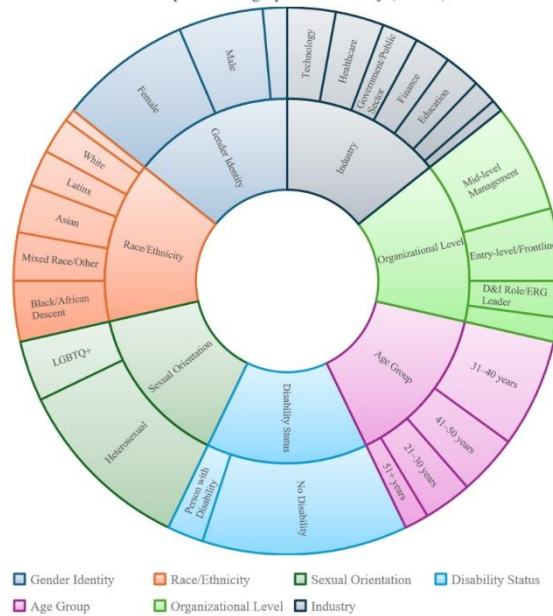
Table 2: Participant Demographics Summary (n = 20)

Demographic Variable	Category	Number of Participants
Gender Identity	Female	11
	Male	7
	Non-binary / Gender non-conforming	2
Race/Ethnicity	Black/African Descent	5
	White	3



	Asian	4
	Latinx	3
	Indigenous	1
	Mixed Race/Other	4
Sexual Orientation	LGBTQ+	5
	Heterosexual	15
Disability Status	Person with Disability	3
	No Disability	17
Age Group	21-30 years	4
	31-40 years	9
	41-50 years	5
	51+ years	2
Organizational Level	Entry-level/Frontline	6
	Mid-level Management	9
	D&I Role/ERG Leader	3
	Senior Manager/Executive	2
Industry	Healthcare	4
	Technology	4
	Education	3
	Finance	3
	Government/Public Sector	3
	Media/Communications	2
		1

Participant Demographics Summary (n = 20)



Nonprofit



A total of 20 participants were recruited, representing a range of sectors including finance, education, healthcare, technology, and government. Demographic diversity was a priority, and the final sample included individuals identifying as Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, white allies, LGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, and religious minorities. This diversity ensured that the findings would reflect a broad spectrum of experiences and not be limited to a single demographic lens.

Participant roles ranged from entry-level staff to middle management and included both frontline employees and individuals involved in D&I committees or Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). This allowed for multiple vantage points on how D&I initiatives are implemented and perceived within hierarchical structures.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through interviews (n=12) and focus groups (n=2). Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were conducted via video conferencing. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was used for coding and data management.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered strictly to ethical guidelines for studies involving human subjects:

- **Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval:** Prior to data collection, the research protocol received approval from the university's ethics committee.
- **Informed Consent:** All participants received an information sheet detailing the study's aims, procedures, risks, and benefits. They signed a consent form before participating.
- **Confidentiality:** Data were anonymized using pseudonyms. Any identifying information (e.g., company names, job titles) was removed from transcripts.
- **Data Security:** Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participants were reminded they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Given the sensitive nature of D&I topics, the researcher took extra care to create a psychologically safe environment. Participants were offered the opportunity to debrief after their sessions, and support resources were shared in case of distress.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus group data revealed a range of experiences with Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives. Although participants recognized the intent behind such programs, many highlighted a disconnect between policy and lived experience. The findings are organized into five major themes: leadership commitment, inclusion beyond hiring, accessibility and equity, micro-aggressions and resistance, and impactful practices and future directions.

4.1 Leadership Commitment: Symbolism vs. Substance

Participants emphasized the importance of visible and sustained leadership engagement in driving inclusive culture. Leadership support was seen as a necessary condition for authentic D&I implementation, yet many described it as inconsistent or symbolic. One of the participant stated: *"Our CEO gave a speech about diversity, but we never saw him in any ERG meeting afterward. It felt like a PR move."* (Participant 3, Tech Industry).

While some organizations had appointed Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs), participants noted that these roles often lacked the authority to enact systemic change. *"Our CDO is passionate, but she reports to HR, not the executive board. Her suggestions often get ignored."* (Participant 7, Healthcare Sector).

In contrast, organizations where top executives actively participated in D&I initiatives were seen as more credible and inclusive. *"When our VP mentors junior women of color and attends allyship workshops, it changes how others behave too."* (Participant 14, Financial Services)

4.2 Inclusion Beyond Hiring: The Myth of the Pipeline

Many participants acknowledged improvements in recruitment processes and demographic representation at entry-level roles. However, they also expressed frustration at the lack of career advancement opportunities for underrepresented groups. *"We've got diversity at the bottom, but the boardroom still looks the same. They keep talking about the pipeline, but maybe they*



should look at the ceiling." (Participant 9, Government Agency).

Promotion pathways and leadership development opportunities were seen as limited or opaque. A sense of stagnation was common among employees who had spent years in the organization without upward mobility, despite good performance reviews. *"My manager says I'm a great team player but has never nominated me for leadership training. Meanwhile, my white colleagues get those invites."* (Participant 12, Education Sector).

Additionally, participants noted that inclusion should not stop at recruitment; it must extend to decision-making, policy influence, and recognition of diverse work styles.

4.3 Accessibility and Equity: Structural and Cultural Dimensions

A recurrent theme was the limited understanding of accessibility beyond physical accommodations. While some organizations provided assistive technology or remote work flexibility, others failed to engage with disability inclusion meaningfully. *"They installed a ramp, but they never thought about closed captioning or screen readers. Inclusion for them stops at the entrance."* (Participant 5, Marketing Industry).

Beyond disability, participants raised concerns about equity in policies related to caregiving, religious expression, and mental health. *"I was penalized in performance reviews because I took time off for my child's therapy. But that's not something my colleagues with no kids deal with."* (Participant 17, Non-profit Sector).

Employees valued when organizations considered diverse needs in their benefits, leave policies, and support systems.

4.4 Micro-aggressions and Cultural Resistance: The Invisible Burden

Nearly all participants reported encountering **microaggressions**—subtle, often unintentional expressions of bias that undermined their sense of

belonging. These included backhanded compliments, exclusion from informal networks, and assumptions about competence. *"I'm the only Muslim woman on my team. During lunch, they made jokes about my hijab and called it a fashion statement. I didn't feel safe speaking up."* (Participant 6, Legal Sector).

Participants also described the emotional labor of constantly needing to represent their identity group or educate others about bias. *"Every time something racist happens in the news, people ask for my opinion—as if I'm the spokesperson for all Black people. It's exhausting."* (Participant 10, Media & Communications).

Resistance to D&I also manifested in passive forms, such as minimal participation in training sessions or dismissal of D&I efforts as "political." *"My manager said D&I is just a trend and not worth investing in. That told me everything I needed to know about our culture."* (Participant 15, Manufacturing). Such sentiments indicate that even when structural policies exist, organizational climate can significantly undermine their effectiveness.

4.5 Impactful Practices and Future Directions

Despite the barriers, participants identified several organizational practices that had positive effects:

- **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** These offered a safe space for connection and advocacy.
 - **Mentorship Programs:** Especially those matching across demographics, were viewed as empowering.
 - **Allyship Training:** When interactive and reflective, training sessions improved awareness and empathy.
 - **Feedback Loops:** Anonymous surveys and open forums where feedback was acted upon built trust.
- "Having a space to talk openly about inclusion—and knowing leaders actually listened—made me stay with the company."* (Participant 20, Consulting). Participants expressed hope that D&I would become more embedded into everyday operations, including team norms, decision-making, and performance evaluation criteria.

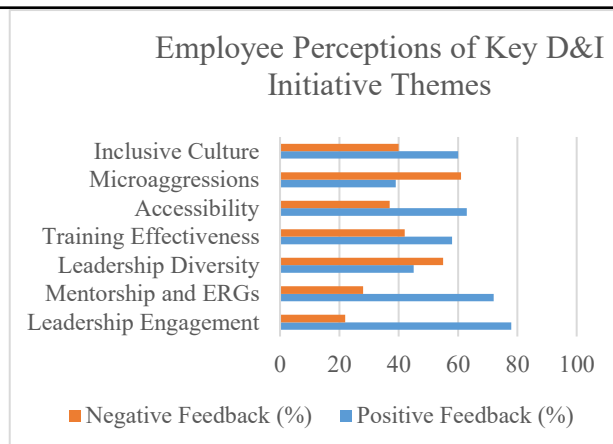


Figure 1: Employee Perceptions of Key D&I Initiative Themes

Overall, employee experiences with D&I initiatives revealed a landscape where intentions often outpaced impact. While some organizations demonstrated genuine progress through leadership involvement, inclusive policies, and cultural awareness, others fell short by limiting efforts to superficial measures. Participants emphasized that inclusion is an ongoing practice, not a one-time intervention, and called for more systemic, responsive, and courageous organizational approaches.

5. Discussion

This study explored employee experiences with Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives across a range of organizational settings and sectors. The findings reveal both progress and persistent challenges in implementing D&I in ways that are authentic, systemic, and impactful. This discussion connects those findings with existing literature, highlights the study's contributions, and outlines practical and theoretical implications.

5.1 Reaffirming the Gap Between Policy and Practice

One of the most salient findings was the gap between formal D&I policies and employees' lived experiences. These findings are in line with earlier research highlighting the often symbolic nature of many D&I initiatives (Kulik, 2014; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Although organizations are increasingly allocating resources to diversity programs, these efforts don't always lead to genuinely inclusive environments. Participants in this study noted that while D&I policies were present on paper, leadership involvement

frequently felt performative. Genuine inclusion—particularly in areas like decision-making and career advancement—remained out of reach for many.

This reinforces the perspective offered by Ely and Thomas (2001), who argued that effective D&I work demands more than just diverse representation. It requires organizations to move past “surface-level diversity” and commit to a deeper, cultural shift. Inclusion cannot be reduced to a set of compliance tasks; it involves a critical reassessment of the organizational systems, everyday norms, and leadership behaviors that influence how people experience belonging and opportunity at work.

5.2 The Role of Leadership: Catalyst or Constraint?

In line with Inclusive Leadership Theory (Carmeli et al., 2010), the findings of this study highlight just how important visible leadership commitment is to the success of D&I efforts. Participants expressed significantly more trust in their organizations when they saw senior leaders actively involved—whether through mentoring, attending employee resource group (ERG) events, or publicly championing the voices of underrepresented employees. These actions gave employees a sense that inclusion was more than just a corporate talking point.

On the other hand, when leaders were distant or minimally involved, participants were quick to question the authenticity of their organization's D&I agenda. This supports Martins' (2020) argument that leadership behavior can either reinforce or weaken the culture of inclusion. Leaders, in many ways, set the tone; their engagement—or lack thereof—sends a powerful message



about how much inclusion truly matters within the organization.

The implication here is clear: organizations must integrate D&I into leadership performance metrics and hold senior leaders accountable for creating inclusive environments—not just delegating responsibility to human resources or diversity officers.

5.3 Inclusion Beyond Representation

While representation was recognized as a step forward, participants emphasized that true inclusion goes beyond recruitment. This resonates with Shore et al.'s (2011) model of inclusion, which balances belonging and uniqueness. In the current study, employees frequently reported that their ideas, contributions, and career aspirations were not taken seriously, despite visible diversity in the workforce.

This finding reflects the limitations of the “pipeline problem” narrative, which blames the lack of diversity in leadership on insufficient talent availability. As participants noted, many underrepresented employees are already present in the organization—but structural and cultural barriers limit their upward mobility. These barriers include biased promotion practices, exclusion from informal networks, and limited access to mentorship or sponsorship—challenges also discussed in Roberson's (2006) inclusive workplace model.

Organizations must therefore reframe their understanding of inclusion from being merely about “who is in the room” to “who is heard, supported, and promoted within the room.”

5.4 Micro-aggressions, Emotional Labor, and Climate for Inclusion

Participants in this study shared frequent experiences of micro-aggressions and the emotional toll of managing subtle bias in the workplace—stories that strongly align with Sue et al.'s (2007) concept of racial micro-aggressions and their damaging effect on psychological safety. These behaviors, often unintentional but persistent, contributed to a sense of isolation and, over time, emotional exhaustion and burnout.

In workplaces where such actions were ignored—or worse, silently accepted as part of the culture—the broader climate for inclusion suffered. As Nishii (2013) noted, an organization's inclusion climate plays a critical role in whether diversity leads to positive

outcomes. Without a foundation of mutual respect, open feedback, and real accountability, diversity initiatives can inadvertently lead to tension and conflict rather than cohesion.

Many participants also found themselves stepping into the role of “educator,” often having to explain bias to others or push for change—efforts that demanded emotional resilience but were rarely acknowledged or supported by the organization. This highlights the often invisible labor carried by marginalized employees and points to a clear gap in how responsibility for inclusion is distributed. To create truly inclusive workplaces, organizations must not only address bias proactively but also establish formal structures that share the work of inclusion more fairly.

5.5 Effective Practices: Learning from What Works

Despite the challenges they faced, participants pointed to several practices that had a meaningful and positive impact on their workplace experience. These included Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), mentorship programs that spanned different demographic groups, open forums for dialogue, and systems that allowed for ongoing, actionable feedback. These insights are consistent with earlier studies (Kalev et al., 2006; Thomas & Ely, 1996), which emphasize the value of accountability-driven and employee-focused strategies in advancing inclusion.

Participants also noted that allyship training—when designed to be interactive and reflective—was far more effective than traditional compliance-based or mandatory sessions. This observation echoes the findings of Dobbin and Kalev (2016), who argue that voluntary, growth-oriented programs are more successful in fostering genuine behavioral shifts, particularly among members of dominant groups. These more personal and engaging approaches were seen not only as more respectful, but also more likely to lead to lasting change.

Furthermore, organizations that embedded D&I into operational decision-making—such as through inclusive hiring panels or reviewing vendor policies—were perceived as more serious in their commitment. The key insight is that D&I must be embedded into systems, not just championed as standalone programs.



5.6 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the growing literature on intersectionality in organizational settings. While the concept is increasingly cited, few empirical studies explore how overlapping identities affect employees' engagement with D&I programs. Several participants in this study highlighted how their experiences as, for example, Black women or disabled LGBTQ+ professionals, did not fit neatly into single-identity categories. Thus, one-size-fits-all D&I programming often failed to meet their needs.

The study also reinforces the importance of inclusive leadership as a mediating factor between policy and experience. Leaders who foster trust, psychological safety, and equitable participation are essential to creating cultures of inclusion.

5.7 Practical Implications

Organizations seeking to enhance their D&I efforts should consider the following actionable steps:

- Institutionalize accountability: Link leadership performance to D&I goals and outcomes.
- Center employee voice: Create regular, safe opportunities for diverse employees to provide feedback that leads to visible change.
- Invest in intersectional analysis: Design programs that acknowledge and respond to overlapping identities and experiences.
- Proactively address micro-aggressions: While training is important, it's not enough on its own. Organizations need clear, accessible mechanisms for reporting incidents, ensuring timely intervention, and creating pathways for restoration and healing.
- Go beyond representation metrics: True inclusion can't be measured by numbers alone. To get a fuller picture, organizations should track inclusion indices, analyze promotion and career progression data, and gather insights from exit interviews to understand why people stay—or leave.

Although many organizations have made progress in crafting D&I policies, the more difficult and ongoing task is shifting the organizational culture itself. This requires more than good intentions. Leadership must be visibly engaged, structures of accountability need to be in place, and inclusive practices must be embedded into daily operations and decision-making processes.

At the heart of this transformation are employee voices—especially those from underrepresented and

marginalized communities. Their lived experiences offer invaluable guidance for shaping meaningful change. Inclusion isn't a one-time goal to be checked off a list; it's an evolving process that demands continuous learning, honest reflection, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. It calls for institutional courage and a long-term commitment to equity at every level.

6. Limitations and Future Research

As with all qualitative research, it's important to acknowledge certain limitations when interpreting the results of this study. These limitations don't diminish the value of the insights gained but rather provide context and highlight areas where future research can build upon the findings.

6.1 Methodological Limitations

Sample Size and Generalizability: The study drew on in-depth interviews with a purposively selected group of 20 participants. While this approach allowed for a rich, detailed understanding of individual experiences and themes, the relatively small sample means that the findings aren't meant to be statistically generalized to all organizations or industries. Instead, the aim was to uncover meaningful patterns and perspectives that can inform both theory and practical application.

Self-Selection Bias: Because participation was voluntary, those who chose to be involved may have had a stronger interest in or awareness of D&I issues. This introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as individuals who are disengaged from—or even skeptical of—D&I efforts may have opted not to participate. As a result, the findings might reflect more engaged or invested viewpoints, which is an important consideration when interpreting the themes that emerged.

Reliance on Self-Reported Data: The data are based on participants' subjective accounts, which may be influenced by memory recall, emotional states, or social desirability. Although measures such as member checking and peer debriefing were employed to enhance credibility, the potential for bias remains inherent in qualitative research.

Researcher Positionality: Despite efforts to maintain reflexivity and limit bias, the researcher's own identity, values, and prior experience with D&I work may have influenced interpretations. While reflexive journaling



and external auditing were utilized, complete neutrality is impossible and not the aim in interpretivist research.

6.2 Contextual Limitations

- **Organizational and Sector Diversity:** While participants represented various industries—including healthcare, finance, education, and technology—the number of participants per sector was limited. As such, sector-specific dynamics may not have been fully captured. Organizational culture can vary widely across sectors, and findings may manifest differently in unionized workplaces, small businesses, or multinational corporations.
- **Geographic and Cultural Context:** The majority of participants were based in urban areas in a single national context. Cultural norms, legal requirements, and public discourse around diversity can differ significantly across regions or countries. Thus, the findings may not reflect the experiences of employees in rural or international settings.
- **Cross-Level Representation:** Although this study included participants from different hierarchical levels, it primarily focused on the experiences of frontline employees and middle management. Perspectives from top executives, HR decision-makers, and board-level leaders could provide valuable additional insights into the implementation and challenges of D&I strategy.

6.3 Conceptual Limitations

- **Focus on Perception Over Outcomes:** This research prioritized perceptions and narratives of inclusion rather than measurable outcomes such as promotion rates, retention, or performance. While this aligns with the study's qualitative nature, future research could incorporate quantitative measures to examine whether reported experiences align with institutional data.
- **Temporal Scope:** The cross-sectional design captured experiences at a single point in time. However, organizational D&I efforts are dynamic and may evolve in response to internal and external events (e.g., social movements, crises, policy changes). A longitudinal approach could track how perceptions and experiences shift over time.
- **Limited Attention to Intergroup Dynamics:** While this study surfaced experiences of marginalization, it paid less attention to the experiences of majority group members or how intergroup relations influence inclusion. Future research could examine how

dominant and non-dominant group members experience, resist, or co-create inclusive environments.

6.4 Future Research Directions

Building on the limitations noted above, several directions for future research are recommended:

Longitudinal Studies: Investigate how employee experiences with D&I initiatives change over time, particularly in organizations undergoing transformation or cultural change.

Mixed-Methods Approaches: Combine qualitative narratives with quantitative data (e.g., retention rates, engagement scores, promotion statistics) to provide a holistic understanding of D&I effectiveness.

Comparative Studies Across Sectors and Countries: Examine how industry-specific dynamics, legal frameworks, and cultural contexts influence the implementation and outcomes of D&I initiatives.

Focus on Intersectionality: Explore in more depth how intersecting identities (e.g., race and disability, gender and religion) shape employee experiences differently and require tailored D&I strategies.

Examine Leadership Perspectives: Study the experiences, challenges, and motivations of organizational leaders tasked with implementing D&I, including Chief Diversity Officers, HR executives, and team leaders.

Explore Backlash and Resistance: Investigate how and why some employees resist D&I efforts, and identify strategies that organizations can use to address such resistance constructively.

D&I and Organizational Performance: Explore how perceptions of inclusion correlate with organizational outcomes such as innovation, productivity, and profitability to build a stronger business case.

While this study provides important insights into employee experiences with D&I initiatives, it also highlights the complexity and multidimensionality of workplace inclusion. To deepen our understanding of diversity and inclusion, future research should adopt an interdisciplinary lens, combine multiple methods, and remain closely attuned to specific organizational and cultural contexts. By addressing current limitations and expanding the scope of inquiry, both scholars and practitioners can contribute to developing more effective, equitable, and enduring strategies for fostering inclusion in the workplace.



7. Conclusion

This study set out to understand how employees actually experience Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives in their workplaces—going beyond stated policies and intentions to uncover the lived, day-to-day realities of inclusion. The findings reveal that while many organizations have implemented formal D&I structures—such as policies, committees, employee resource groups (ERGs), and training programs—their real-world impact is shaped less by their presence and more by the surrounding organizational culture and structural support. Key factors like leadership engagement, authenticity, accessibility, and sensitivity to intersectionality emerged as central to fostering meaningful inclusion.

At its core, this research reinforces the idea that diversity without inclusion falls short. Representation may be the first step, but it must be followed by intentional, ongoing efforts to embed inclusion across all facets of organizational life—from policy-making and leadership to performance evaluations and workplace relationships. Inclusion isn't achieved through checklists or symbolic gestures; it requires continuous, strategic, and participatory processes that center the voices and experiences of those most affected.

The qualitative insights in this study provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges employees face—especially those from historically marginalized communities. Despite well-meaning D&I strategies, many still encounter microaggressions, tokenism, and exclusion. However, the research also points to clear pathways for progress: visible leadership commitment, active allyship, cross-demographic mentorship, and mechanisms for accountability all contribute to creating a workplace where inclusion is both practiced and felt.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study builds on frameworks such as Social Identity Theory, Inclusive Leadership, and Intersectionality. It highlights how individuals' overlapping identities interact with workplace systems and cultures, shaping how inclusion is experienced. These findings support earlier scholarship emphasizing the importance of leadership and culture (Shore et al., 2011; Ely & Thomas, 2001), while also drawing attention to the emotional and often invisible labor carried by marginalized employees in sustaining inclusion efforts.

Practically, the study underscores a need for organizations to evolve beyond compliance-driven approaches to D&I. Transformational inclusion requires aligning D&I strategies with the organization's core mission and values, embedding equity into everyday operations, and equipping leaders at all levels to model inclusive behaviors. Success must be measured not only by demographic metrics but also by indicators such as psychological safety, employee engagement, and fair career advancement.

Crucially, this research highlights the importance of centering employee voice in D&I design and implementation. Too often, initiatives are created without meaningful input from the very individuals they are meant to support. By listening to and amplifying these voices—through open feedback channels, participatory design processes, and transparent leadership—organizations can begin to co-create cultures that are genuinely inclusive.

While this study provides valuable insights, it also acknowledges its limitations. The sample size and qualitative approach mean the findings are not generalizable across all sectors or geographies. Future research should broaden the scope to include varied industries, organizational levels, and cultural contexts. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative and longitudinal research could offer a fuller understanding of how D&I strategies evolve and what long-term impact they have.

In conclusion, inclusion is not a destination but an ongoing journey. It requires critical self-reflection, sustained commitment, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. For organizations that truly aspire to equity and excellence, employee experiences should not only inform strategy—they should shape it. Bridging the gap between intention and impact is not just good practice; it is essential for building workplaces where diversity is respected, equity is advanced, and inclusion is genuinely lived every day.

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