

Record: 1

Title: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

Source: Salem Press Encyclopedia, 2021. 4p.

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: Diversity & inclusion policies
Diversity in organizations

Abstract: Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a phrase used when describing the state of diversity and inclusion in organizations and other groups. Some people use the individual terms diversity, equity, and inclusion interchangeably, but each term means something different. Social science research indicates that DEI helps groups and individuals succeed, which is why many groups and organizations have DEI initiatives. Many people use the term DEI in the context of increasing a group's diversity, ensuring inclusion for all different members of the group, and achieving equity in the group. Groups use various methods toward achieving these goals. DEI initiatives have developed a great deal since the idea of diversity first became recognized as a worthwhile goal of workplaces and other organizations in the 1960s.

Full Text Word Count: 2584

Accession Number: 152755127

Database: Research Starters

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a phrase used when describing the state of diversity and inclusion in organizations and other groups. Some people use the individual terms *diversity*, *equity*, and *inclusion* interchangeably, but each term means something different. Social science research indicates that DEI helps groups and individuals succeed, which is why many groups and organizations have DEI initiatives. Many people use the term *DEI* in the context of increasing a group's diversity, ensuring inclusion for all different members of the group, and achieving equity in the group. Groups use various methods toward achieving these goals. DEI initiatives have developed a great deal since the idea of diversity first became recognized as a worthwhile goal of workplaces and other organizations in the 1960s.

Overview

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are individual, but related, topics. In its simplest form, diversity means having difference in a group. Diversity in groups deals with people's experiences and backgrounds. People's identities are multifaceted, reflect their experiences and backgrounds, and are strongly influenced by their traits. People's identities include factors such as gender identity, race, age, nation of origin, religion, and veteran status.

Individual people are not themselves diverse. For example, it would be wrong to label an individual person who is an ethnic minority as being diverse. Labeling individuals in this way identifies the dominant group as being the norm or the default. When one group is labeled the norm, people outside it are considered others. When people view people this way, they do not view them as unique individuals. Groups, organizations, and institutions can be diverse. They are diverse when they are made up of people with different backgrounds and experiences. The range of experiences found in diverse groups is one reason why many believe that diverse groups are stronger.

Equity is treating people fairly and justly. In an organization this often means ensuring that individuals have access and opportunity. An important aspect of equity is identifying and eliminating barriers that prevent individuals from fully participating in a group. Equity is not the same thing as equality. For example, treating all employees equally would be giving all employees stairs to use to access a building. All the employees are being treated equally because they all have stairs. However, a wheelchair user, an individual with arthritis, or someone with leg braces may struggle to access the building using the stairs. A ramp with treads could help make the building accessible to more people. The ramp ensures equity for all employees because it eliminates a barrier that some members of the group face. This simplistic example shows how equity differs from equality.

For a group to get close to achieving equity, the people creating systems and processes must understand the root causes of unequal access. Because people have different experiences and understanding, groups are more likely to achieve equity when they include people with varied backgrounds. The input from people of diverse backgrounds can help the group identify more barriers to access. They can also help the group think of unique ways of eliminating those barriers. When a group achieves equity, individual outcomes cannot be predicted because all the members of the group have the same access. If a group does not have equity, it might be easier to predict outcomes. When a person does not have access, the individual cannot contribute. In the simplistic example, one might predict that the wheelchair user would be able to contribute less to the group because the individual first has to contend with the accessibility of the building and overcome this obstacle.

Inclusion is something that happens when all members of a group feel and are included and welcomed. Inclusion allows all people in a group to make meaningful contributions that help the group or organization. Inclusion also means supporting members of the group and giving them tools they need to succeed. Because of social and institutional biases and other factors, some members of groups are less likely to experience inclusion. The people who do not feel inclusion will differ depending on the society and the group. In the United States, women and racial minorities have historically been excluded from groups. This can cause these individuals to feel a lack of inclusion or feel they must change

themselves to be included in a group. For example, a 2020 study indicated that 72 percent of Black women (compared to 44 percent of white women) in the United States felt that they needed to compromise their authenticity to be leaders in their workplaces (Kennedy et al., 2020).

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are related to each other. A group that has diversity will include people who have a variety of backgrounds and experiences. The differences among members of the group will inform the way the members view opportunities, solve problems, and develop systems. Implementing programs and initiatives that encourage people of varied backgrounds to join a group can help increase the group's diversity. Inclusion is also necessary for people of different backgrounds to have the opportunity to discuss processes and equity. A diverse group will most likely not be able to retain its diversity if it does not practice inclusion or does not try to achieve equity.

DEI became a popular phrase to use when talking about diversity in the late 2010s and early 2020s in the United States, but organizations including governments, school districts, corporations, and community groups have been discussing diversity and its merits since the 1960s. The civil rights movement and the women's rights movement in the United States brought about discussions of diversity and fairness in the workplace, in schools, and in other groups. Some workplaces began what they called diversity training in the 1960s. This training was meant to increase diversity and inclusion in workplaces, but it had numerous flaws. For example, many of the trainings would establish white men as the norm and otherize women and people of color. This training ingrained the idea that white men were the standard, which is not an effective way to meaningfully include all members of a group. Over time, ideas about diversity and inclusion changed. In the 2010s, equity became an important part of the conversation because researchers and group leaders realized that without equity, diversity and inclusion were ineffective and would not last. In the 2020s, accountability has also become an important concept when discussing DEI work. Accountability is important because members of a group should be able to discuss and question a group's DEI work.

Applications

Understanding a group's diversity, or lack of diversity, can help leaders of groups seek out members with different backgrounds. For example, consider human relations professionals who are trying to attract new employees to their businesses. They choose to recruit at specific schools or in specific communities where they can find qualified potential employees who have backgrounds that are different from the majority of people who already work at the organizations.

Talking about and valuing DEI is not the same as implementing processes that ensure DEI. People inside organizations must make choices and create systems that will ensure DEI is achieved and maintained. Individual organizations have different methods of ensuring DEI. Some methods are more successful than others. Organizations can assess their success through data collection and analysis. Furthermore, all the factors of DEI are separate, so organizations have to work on achieving each factor of DEI individually. For example, an organization that has a diverse membership and has achieved equity might assume that it also has inclusion. Nevertheless, inclusion happens only when members feel comfortable and able to participate. An organization might still have to take steps to ensure inclusion.

Groups achieve diversity in various ways. In the United States, workplaces have achieved some level of diversity because of equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws at the federal and state levels. These laws mandate that most workplaces cannot discriminate when hiring based on protected classes, such as race, sex, age, and religion. Some groups, including some workplaces and schools, use affirmative action (AA) to help increase diversity. AA is a plan or system for hiring workers or recruiting students who have certain identities. For example, some employers recruit from veterans' groups because they want to increase the number of veterans on their staffs. Diversity initiatives can be similar to AA, but they also focus on maintaining diversity and increasing positive outcomes for all group members.

Organizations that value DEI must also protect equity and inclusion. Organizations and systems within organizations change over time. Organizations concerned with DEI should continue to think about equity in as many ways as possible, and they should question how certain changes in an organization could affect equity and inclusion. If diversity decreases, then fewer varied backgrounds will be represented when making decisions. Therefore, it could be more likely that inclusion and equity would decrease. If equity and inclusion decrease, members who feel as though they are not included or who realize they do not have equal access might leave the group. For that reason, all the elements of DEI are intertwined and dependent on each other.

Discourse

People who believe that DEI is important in groups often use two types of arguments to support their positions. The first type of argument is about fairness. Some people believe that DEI helps ensure fairness in groups and in society. People who argue in favor of DEI in organizations based on fairness often point out that injustices against people with specific identities have existed historically and still exist. These injustices can be legal or social. For example, women in the United States were legally prevented from voting until 1920. That is an example of a historical legal injustice that prevented women from influencing laws and becoming elected officials. An example of current social injustice is that some groups are discriminated against in the hiring process. For example, a 2017 study indicated that Black Americans face discrimination during the hiring process (Quillian et al). People who support DEI based on fairness argue that making certain groups have diversity and inclusion helps to ensure that these organizations are fair, which may help address social and legal injustices.

Other people support DEI initiatives in groups because they believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion promote stronger, more capable groups. Studies have indicated that diverse groups are generally more resilient than homogeneous groups (Parikh, 2021). Furthermore, demographics in

the United States have been changing for decades. In the twenty-first century, more Americans identify as nonwhite, and immigration is increasing the number of residents who were not born in the country (Shelton, 2021). Proponents of DEI often point out that a more diverse population will require organizations to be more diverse themselves and to have the tools to make all the members of the organization feel included and have their contributions recognized.

People who support DEI initiatives have different views about how they should work and what their goals should be. For example, simplistic views about diversity in a workforce may include the belief that groups and organizations should have specific demographic makeups so that they can be considered diverse. However, modern DEI efforts have focused more on goals of creating a diverse group, rather than a group with certain demographics.

Some people who criticize DEI efforts claim that such programs can fail for numerous reasons. One argument against these programs is that when advocating for diversity, some organizations focus only on physical and biological differences. Some opponents of DEI measures argue that other types of diversity, including variety in political beliefs and religious beliefs, are sometimes overlooked by organizations focused on DEI. Another argument made by opponents of DEI is that it can cause groups and organizations to recruit members who are not a good fit for them. For example, opponents believe that some higher education institutions are so focused on DEI efforts that they recruit and accept students who are not equipped for the rigors or atmosphere of the institutions and eventually leave, which is bad for the students and the schools (Vedder, 2021).

Another criticism of DEI programs is that they otherize people who are outside the majority in a group. In the United States, that often means nonwhite people and, depending on the organization, women. Some groups' focus on diversity can cause them to see individuals as diverse, which as noted is not appropriate or accurate. Furthermore, some groups can lean too heavily on members seen as being outside the majority (e.g., women and people of color) to do most of the group's DEI work (Asare, 2021). The idea that people outside of the majority should contribute to DEI work is a good one because that is inclusion. Nevertheless, some DEI programs push the brunt of DEI work on people outside the majority, and the group may even cast blame on them for any failures of DEI work—even when those individuals were not given the tools they needed to succeed.

About the Author

Elizabeth Mohn earned a BS in communications in 2006. She has developed social sciences content for more than a decade.

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