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Abstract

Organizations must dramatically pivot in a post COVID environment. Social pressures and changing work habits will shift corporate directives and strategies. The demands and challenges of this increasingly important corporate initiative (Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity) has been elevated and accelerated post COVID. Organizations and subsequently, leaders are in search of strategies and tactics to instill DEI as a core value in their enterprises. This is deemed critical for internal operations but also for external relationships. Increasingly, the best and the brightest will align with organizations that value the virtues of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This research interviewed key executives to discuss their strategies for the future. Relevant research on the topic has been presented to provide a comprehensive view on DEI imperatives for organizations with employees. The findings of this research indicate it is a priority and there are core elements to be considered by every leader. The research specifically explores three core concepts: Culture, Communication, and Courage.

Introduction

The dynamics of politics, globalization, changing workplace definition, and societal shifts have placed increased awareness and responsibility for leaders of all organizations. This research seeks to define and articulate the challenge for leadership in the future more precisely. According to Hawley (2021), there has been a shift of worldwide perspective, since the start of the pandemic, on how diversity, equity, and inclusion are viewed in the workplace. While society in the USA has evolved, it still must seek to evolve and develop further with an understanding of contemporary standards for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Location has become an increasingly important variable given a shift into a “remote” environment. Research indicates shifting patterns of how and when work is accomplished in organizations post COVID. DEI initiatives must be sensitive and be created with a “remote workforce” consideration. Employers will not be able to overlook employees that are “out of sight and out of mind.” Future companies will need to focus on this aspect to recruit and retain the best and the brightest to their organization. This research provides salient review of the current literature, in-depth executive leadership interviews, and recommendations for leaders to consider and implement, as they scale the new workplace horizon.

The business environment and society have undergone acute and extreme changes in the way we think about the practice of leading and organizing businesses. The impact of social unrest coupled with the ramification of a

global pandemic has given pause to leaders allowing them to rethink their structure and people initiatives. To be clear, the concepts of DEI and remote workforces were present prior to the last few years of economic and societal challenges, but there is no doubt the prioritization and awareness has accelerated because of the recent events. This research is needed as the potential of these variables will have a global impact with a causal effect on an organization's performance and productivity. Additional areas of influence will include the proliferation and refinement of Artificial Intelligence tools and resources. What the global business environment might look like in the upcoming decade could be a radical departure from the world we operate in today. As organizations seek to hire and retain the best and the brightest of talent, a growing importance of an organization's DEI and remote workforce policies will be a competitive advantage if done correctly or an obstacle for an apathetic organization.

Many business leaders have anticipated these issues independently, but I suggest they must be evaluated and strategically incorporated into the DNA of any organization. This research intends to inform and start the conversation of how best to synthesize and migrate DEI initiative within a remote work environment. The growing awareness and sense of need is demonstrated in Urban Institutes report "The New World of Work" when they detail concern across multiple platforms in the future. Their research mandates that all employees need to be put on "equal footing in a hybrid work environment." The stakes are high for organizations and the time is now. Kearny reports the shift to hybrid and remote work will set diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts back by decades if not designed with intention and care (Prasad & Harris, 2021).

This research will serve as a foundation for executives and leadership to be prepared for a growing importance on the topic. It is also expected that local, regional, and national governance will become more involved. It is presented that organizations that have existing policy and focus will help inform future policy and process for DEI. As our economy continues to expand and become global, these issues at independent times will become more widespread for all industries. The internal respect and investment in people will become external in focus too. Leaders that prepare for the shifting workforce will navigate the globalization of their industries with proficiency.

Method

A desire to survey multiple perspectives was paramount to this research. To discover ideas and promote understanding the survey was designed to inventory insights from a diverse group of senior leaders with varying sizes and industries to draw from (see Addendum for the survey questions). The range of organization revenue was at a low of three million US dollars per year to a high of multi-billion US dollars. The span of employees for the organizations was 50-2000 dispersed nationally. The design of the study was for a better universal understanding of the topics, which could be beneficial in exploring how the future of work will be influenced by current societal forces. Significant effort was given to select a diverse group of participants. The methodology was designed to uncover common issues and socialize various approaches to addressing or incorporating an informed strategy to DEI and a remote workforce.

Each leader was provided a detailed questionnaire to review and respond. Individually participants were

interviewed for deeper exploration and discovery. The estimated time invested for each research participant was approximately one hour. All participants were informed of the study topic and expressed an understanding and experience in a corporate setting. Participants were interviewed independently to ensure depth of focus for the research. Further exploration and questioning occurred as needed based upon individual responses. All participants were “for profit” organizations. The leaders represented both private and public entities.

Participants

Research participants come from various industries and backgrounds. A brief bio is included for each below:

Name	Title	Industry
Maya Madsen	CEO	Gourmet Food
Noreen Ippolito	President	Communication & Entertainment
Melissa Ninegar	Senior Director of People	Food & Nutrition
Josh Hostenpiller	CEO	Professional Services
Shannon Pope	Director of DEI & B	Consumer Electronics & Tech

Maya Madsen is a minority women entrepreneur. She started a vegan cookie business and had recent rapid growth in revenue and employees. The company has regional representation and in discussion for national expansion. The business operated brick and mortar and online operations based in San Diego California.

Noreen Ippolito is the President for iHeart Media San Diego Region. She is a media and entertainment executive with over 25 years’ experience. She has been a key leader in the transformation of traditional radio to multimedia platforms including digital and broadcast. She is responsible for a large hybrid workforce. She is on multiple community committees and boards in the southern California region.

Melissa Ninegar is an HR professional, and executive based in San Diego. She has worked in tech and consumer food and beverage industries for more than 15 years. She is responsible for the “People and Culture” of the national brand, Once Upon a Farm. She has developed insight, strategy, and the execution of policy and practice for DEI. She works remotely and manages a national hybrid workforce.

Josh Hostenpiller is the CEO of a software and service start up based in San Diego (Juno). He has experience having started and successfully scaled numerous companies. He has established remote and dispersed workforces at every level of his organizations. He is a sought-after speaker and advocate for employee development and training. He advises multiple national brands on issues of DEI, Women in Leadership, and empowerment.

Shannon Pope is the Director of DEI & B for Sony Consumer Products North America. She is by education an engineer but has been identified as a change agent for issues of DEI within a large global organization. She is an advocate for people and instrumental in strategy development at Sony. She collaborates directly with a diverse

workforce located in remote offices as well as in physical location. She brings a unique and qualified insight and helps inform Sony global on issues of DEI &B.

Results

Culture

To fully understand the dynamics and implication of DEI and remote work, we must look closely at the culture of the organization. Commitment and execution to an integrated plan must be more than a slogan or a press release. The complexity of both priorities is unique and intricate. Combining a strategy integrating both could be daunting. Organization leaders must first assess the need and embrace of these ideas in the culture of their people and their operations. It is far more complex than simple metrics and targets. To be successful and optimize execution, it must be an ongoing process of understanding and conscious actions. The depth and degree that these ideas are embraced by both the senior leadership and the entry level is fundamental to success.

The challenges to integrate into culture must be more than directives. According to Velardo (2021), in his research in the medical profession, he found “DEI initiatives focused on compliance tend to backfire” Organization leaders need to focus on commitment more than compliance, as they consider how to facilitate and strategize DEI initiatives for in-person and remote workers. Further research by Ellington states, “one of the biggest issues that is facing leaders is that often DEI strategies are viewed as a “check box.”

Viewing this cultural challenge, we are reminded of the recent global forces that create additional obstacles. “Workplace factors that most notably worsened since the pandemic were poor communication practices and a low sense of connection to or support from one’s colleagues or manager perhaps unsurprising in a predominantly remote workforce (Greenwood & Anas 2021). The dynamics of technology and the sudden unexpected workflow interruptions in recent years has given leadership a reason to pause and fully consider the future. Nurturing and development of the organization’s DEI culture must be implemented and communicated for success. These efforts are not easy and will require a disciplined process to embed a new broader corporate culture that lives in the organization and not just in the physical office. Shannon Pope, Director of DEI & B at Sony Consumer explains it best “Ingrain the concept so it is not separate, make it the culture and not an initiative.” Changing culture is difficult even at a diverse ownership corporation. Diversity spans a host of variables including race, gender, and age. Madsen, CEO of Maya’s Cookies, in her organizations uses these challenges to educate by bringing in guest speakers from diverse backgrounds to present their perspective and issues at company meetings.

The people in the office must embrace that the people outside of the office have equal standing and input. It needs to be automatic in the thinking. That will be a challenging task and take time to form muscle memory. However, leaders and caretakers of the organization culture will have no option. It was particularly insightful how integrating DEI into company culture at Once Upon a Farm is addressed. They review and ask simple but direct questions: Are these things truly inclusive? Is the language accessible to all? Are we truly achieving what we intended with the purpose of the policy? According to Ninegar, Director of People Once Upon a Farm, these questions focus leaders to think about how to improve or make better every aspect of their strategy. Simply stated, culture matters

when implementing a defined DEI strategy. In the future we have to build a culture of belonging, despite the impact of COVID on our organizations (Parker, 2020).

Communication

In a world connected where the speed of information flows instantaneously, the message and channel matter more than ever. Corporate leaders need to access in real time the most effective channel to use, along with the message content. Leaders from every segment of the economy realized the impact of communication during the pandemic. Employees facing uncertainty and lack of proximity forced the evolution of corporate communication. Challenges presented themselves at every step. Motivation, instruction, and feedback all had to be modified in the “heat of battle” during COVID. As we scope out the future of organizations, we see the crossroads of two imperatives: DEI and remote employees. How will leaders identify, provide opportunities, and develop those who are remote and fall into an underrepresented segment is the question to consider for the future of our organizations and businesses. Clearly, leadership has a challenge on their hands. The impact of connectivity and communication was dramatically affected by the pandemic. Workplace factors that most notably worsened since the pandemic were poor communication practices and a low sense of connection to or from one’s colleagues or manner perhaps unsurprising in a predominately remote workforce (Greenwood, 2021).

Multiple issues occur when a critical percentage of employees are no longer in the office and available for spontaneous communication. This makes the task of communicating ideas, issues, and vision more complex. The new reality facing many organizations was highlighted “In person interactions are fewer and communication outside real time is more common. As a result, it can be harder to feel connected to colleagues and easier for miscommunication to occur” (Goldstein, 2022).

In my interviews with key leaders, the need for pure and intentional communication was echoed by many. For example, Hostenpillar, CEO of Juno, recounted his approach; “Tell your story.” Be genuine and authentic. Use social media i.e., Slack. In previous research the central issue shared by all the participants was the heightened need for information. Employees now have multiple communication streams for good and bad information. Thus, the expectation or rather requirement for leadership is transparency and frequency. When implementing a strategy around DEI for remote workforces, communication must be a foundational component in any strategy.

Additionally, examples provided by Pope from Sony highlights employee resource or affinity groups as a key element for communication. According to Bircher, Chone, Crumley, and Jarque (2021), employee resource groups can drive employee engagement and performance. This according to Pope assists in the communication process to communities in the organization. DEI policies must be communicated to all stakeholders, but the conversation cannot stop with policies (Velardo, 2021). Leaders will have to act and embrace the difficult tasks of living out DEI for remote workers in their organizations if they intend to make a lasting impact. It should also be noted that transparency and authenticity must be respected by everyone for DEI initiatives. There appears to be the knowledge of importance of DEI, as well as business operation and productivity. Kurpius (2021) in conducting DEI research in Chicago advertising firms found that everything does not have to be a DEI focused event for

organizations. Exploring methods to inject DEI initiatives into workplace cultural events or entertaining can be perceived and result in higher information retention.

Courage

As many will attest, leaders faced formidable issues during the last 3 years of operation in the USA, but also in a global context. Society is not unified, and great divisions remains on the topic of DEI, nor is it unified on the concept of work with a remote option. This may also overlap issues that are generational, which is yet another conceptual connection to DEI. Leadership will need to exemplify courage to advance innovative ideas and concepts to their organizations. Fundamentally this is not just an internal discussion. Leaders will need to focus on both shareholders and stakeholders. The challenge leaders will face are not new, but the compounding and integration of two critical issues will certainly be a potential path to success and profits or a lost opportunity. It is reasonable to expect that many organizations are and will continue to be on the forefront. Organizations cannot ignore or provide window dressing, as employees and customers will also differentiate based upon an organization's integrity and strategy for DEI and remote work. Leaders will have to consider their full organization. Advocating for those not in front of the leadership committee or hiring managers will require courage of the leader. The trust and integrity of the leader will be the force that paves the way for others in the organization to "buy-in" and advocate. Leaders will need to make the case why this is good for the organization. In an economy and environment that rewards and celebrates innovation, we cannot ignore the creative just because they are not in the office or are a different race, age, culture, faith, physical ability, or gender. This will take courage from leaders in the boardroom, backroom, and in the public square.

As the focus becomes refined and ideas are implemented, DEI will agitate the status quo. This can present challenges for leaders and followers. In addressing the issue of DEI and more specifically DEI for remote workers, we must deal with some real and unpleasant realities. "Everyone has room for improvement, but for people in positions of leadership, competencies such as recognizing and addressing bias in the workplace are essential" (English, 2022). Talking about individual and collective biases in a workplace is only a possibility if a true sense of trust exists coupled with a sincere desire to change. It may be best stated by Melissa Ninegar from Once Upon a Farm, "Meet people where they are and acknowledge you yourself are a work-in progress." Lastly, leaders must demonstrate courage in not letting DEI initiatives for remote workers turn into a "checkbox" (Ellington 2021). It will take leadership courage to not just talk about the initiative, but also act consistently with a sound strategy.

Summary

The findings of this research all point to a common conclusion, leadership is aware and thinking about DEI for a hybrid/remote workforce. Leaders are struggling to create and adapt policy and process changes in their own organizations to facilitate learning, education, and valuing of all employees. It is recognized by all participants that this is a necessity for their organizations long term success. The focus included performance and productivity but more importantly employee satisfaction and engagement. The data indicates activity and focus as accelerated post COVID and is increasingly becoming a key strategy for all organizations interviewed.

Conclusion

This research just touched on an increasing area of discovery. As society and organizations recover and reevaluate from the pandemic, undiscovered areas of impact will be identified. This research is an example of the continuing challenges for the awareness and implementation of DEI initiatives. As the workforces shifts to remote or hybrid being a larger component for many organizations, so will the need to rethink and reframe efforts and initiatives to be inclusive and diverse for those individuals not working in a physical location. There has been ample evidence of this trend presented and supporting commentary from leaders of the importance for future success in their organizations. Ellsworth, Imose, Mader, and van den Broek (2021), summarize the need best “an inclusive environment is created in equal parts by the behavior of individuals (leaders and peers), who make conscious inclusion a daily practice. Effective people management demands inclusive behavior, not the least because inclusion leads to better outcomes and can support foundational business goals. The embrace and integration of DEI initiatives consistently rolled out and directed to every member of the organization is evident in organizations like iHeart Media where they do extensive training for everyone in the organization, field, HQ, executive and entry level employees alike. However, Ippolito, president of iHeart Media states they go much further to implement a full embrace in their culture, communication, and courage by implementing a 24-hour hotline open to everyone with questions about DEI. This is clearly opening the conversation to everyone in a real and safe environment.

While remote workers will expand and need to be a core consideration, as companies seek to expand DEI for their organization, we need to remember that the percentages of employee composition will be an influence in any policy or strategies. The demographic variables coupled with industries and segments of the economy will constantly need to be monitored and understood. If all the focus moves to the remote DEI agenda, then what is left for those that are not able to work remotely? What the future requires is equal access and opportunity to become the benchmark for all organizations. Leadership must think about all their employees, not just those in the office or those that are out of sight.

Additional research is needed in this area, and it will continue to evolve. The impact and timing will depend on multiple variables in our economy and society. This research hopes to inform but also inspire leadership for the future to actively embrace and define DEI for their organizations.

Recommendations

Business leaders, academics and scholars will need to consider the changing landscape for organizations in the future. Societal pressure will have a bigger impact on the way leadership creates structure, define policy, and engage their organizations. The recommendation is to expand the topic to a broader perspective. Leaders will be well advised to consider the global economy, shareholders, and stakeholders. This focus will heighten awareness of the internal and external drivers of change. Given the radical and unprecedented change to organizations in modern times, they should look to advocacy groups to form consensus and shared doctrines. It is believed this collective approach will accelerate change. Those on the forefront will not only bring in a diverse set of workers

but will have higher satisfaction and engagement. Research would indicate this is key for innovation. The future economy will reward those who innovate in product, services, and people leadership. In the future additional research will be needed

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Addendum. Survey Questions

DEI Research Questions.

Please answer as you determine best. Your response is not intended to be statement of policy but rather informed opinions on the topic and the future of organizations for senior leaders. Please use as much space as you want, the more detailed your reply the better for the research findings and conclusions. The hope there is sufficient details to identify trends and common elements, or issues form all participants. Thank you again for your participation.

Culture

1. How would you access DEI as a part of your corporate culture?
2. What challenges have you witnessed, or expect to witness, in the future with a (expanded) focus on DEI topics and strategies?
3. Have you considered/implemented training initiatives for employees on the topic of DEI? Can you expand on methods and formats of training? Are there any special accommodations for employees that are primarily remote?
4. Can you explain the impact of remote, hybrid, or in-person location roles in your organizations as it relates to future DEI strategy/culture?

Communication

5. How will you include DEI initiatives in your organization's communication strategy (internal and external)? Frequency/methodology/process?
6. Have you prepared systems and processes to communicate to remote employees for DEI discussions-communication?
7. In your opinion, are remote employees disadvantaged based upon proximity (out of sight out of mind)?
8. Will you have a feedback loop or communication channel for employees to express concerns or questions about DEI? What and how? Who will be receiving these communications (HR, Divisional leadership, C-Level)?

Courage

9. DEI can be an emotional topic for some. How do you plan on dealing with resistance or lack of execution on initiatives? Will that be impacted based upon work role location?
10. How do you or plan to measure success for DEI initiatives? Will that be different for primarily remote individuals?
11. What is the most important aspect of DEI for your organization? Why?
12. Any additional comments you would like to share on the topic of DEI and organizations?