




Innovation from Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Research: An Implementable Model for Equitable Talent Acquisition and Retention

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Abstract

Individuals from diverse minority backgrounds in the United States represent a one-of-its-kind collaboration in understanding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) challenges in workforce staffing and representation per Equal Opportunity norms. This study involved primary and secondary research in the realm of DEI to develop an implementable model from lessons gleaned from the findings of the research and gaps found in contemporary hiring and staffing practices. The study and model development are grounded in Rawls's 1971 theory of justice and predicated on the premise that opportunities are usually based on merit, and are generally well-intended, although often constrained by the frailties of human nature. The United States is in dire need of practical solutions, for despite well-intended U.S. laws and mandates on employment, equitable hiring practices are far from satisfactory. In a changing world order, many employers in the United States, and even to some extent globally, acknowledge they are duty-bound to ensure a harmonious, equitable, and safe work environment, devoid of any form of discrimination, harassment, or intimidation. Although easier said than done, achieving this equality requires a systematic approach to investigative organizational/institutional auditing, mapping, and diagnosing the ills that constrain collaboration and reduce productivity. The model is based on research and strategic practitioner design in its orientation, with practical implementation utility, flexible and customizable specifically for DEIB initiatives change, and suitable for educational and other industry settings. A skilled and scientific approach is needed to ensure equitable practices in professional and academic spheres.

Keywords: *DEIB, talent acquisition, retention*

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The U.S. laws on discrimination, and by default the law on equal opportunity, are explicit. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) articulates succinctly their responsibility to enforce federal laws, denoting that it is illegal for employers to discriminate against job applicants or employees based on race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, transgender status, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). In important cases, for instance, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court (1954) forbade intentional segregation of students based on race and warned that this violates Amendment XIV of the U.S. Constitution, as endorsed by subsequent federal legislation and court decisions. Thus, discrimination of students in an educational context cannot be based on color, sex, national origin, language barrier, religion, or disability in elementary, secondary, or institutions of higher education.

The recourse to infringements of a discriminatory nature is enshrined in different bodies of legislation, which are briefly touched upon here. For example, Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is clear that its provisions provide the attorney general with the authority to address complaints of discrimination alleging denials of equal protection to students in public schools and institutions of higher learning. The Equal Educational Opportunities Act 1974 also included remedies to overcome language barriers. While Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibit disability-based discrimination, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, denotes the illegality of gender-based discrimination in education by recipients of federal funds.

Evolution and Change From Social Unrest and the Pandemic

The need to ensure equitable practices in professional and academic spheres requires practical solutions, for despite well-intended U.S. laws and mandates on employment, equitable hiring practices are far from satisfactory. The concern is such that even global law firms have brought the legal issues affecting diversity, equity, inclusion, and immigration into focus in global platforms and conferences (Greenburg Traurig LLP, 2023). The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor caused lawmakers and corporations to enact Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (“**DEIB**”) in corporations; however, the affirmative action reforms face difficulties (Brummer & Strine, 2022). The incidents of 2020 have awakened the country to the continued persistence of inequalities for which there may be human-centric solutions to bridge deficits and charter a course of positive inclusiveness for all sections of society. The winds of change from the dissent and turmoil are already having an impact and have influenced steadfast commitment and improvements for more equitable HR, legal, and organizational approaches. Newer practices are visible in staffing and appear oriented toward enhancing DEIB overall (Loh et al., 2022). The widespread belief, nevertheless, is that inequality, although under microscopic review by organizational think tanks and broadly, society at large, still exists. Arguably, inequality is receding a little in a post-pandemic world with diminished virulence, although the events of 2020 and a lingering pandemic are still fresh in memory. George Floyd’s death and COVID have, however, spawned a plethora of social reengineering and genuine DEIB initiatives consequent to the altered dynamics of organizational life, in recovery from the devastation and social upheavals. The study of DEI by scholars and practitioners since 2021 has ranged from immigration to assessing the interplay of diversity issues in employment, recruitment, and the different facets of organizational life (Hoey, 2023)

Of Change, DEI, and Belonging

Many organizations have now earnestly invigorated and initiated stronger measures to reduce racial and other inequities, which have often manifested in subtle forms and have been labeled as systemic racism. Systemic racism is considered the unequal treatment meted out to Black, Hispanic, and Asian Americans with the deprivation of opportunities. This is, however, now seemingly in decline (Bell, 2023). Some contend that racism is entrenched in organizational functioning and solutions to overcoming the frailties of human nature (Seijts & Milani, 2021) include strengthening the consciousness of character for improved equity, diversity,

and inclusion. The internet and instantaneous communication, with something “going viral,” present the ever-present danger of showing DEIB lapses and violations in a poor light; however, on the other side, the positive stories, and strategies of DEIB can have image enhancements for organizations as global corporate citizens, demonstrably committed to equality.

In a changing world order in the United States and to some extent globally, many employers acknowledge that they are duty-bound to ensure a harmonious, equitable, and safe work environment devoid of any form of discrimination, harassment, and intimidation. Globally, businesses, universities, nonprofits, and governmental agencies have now dedicated DEI programs with strategies, training, hiring and promotion metrics, and monitoring with metrics and audits (Koenig & Naughton, 2023). Although easier said than done, achieving this equality requires a systematic approach of investigative organizational/institutional auditing, mapping, and diagnosing the ills that constrain collaboration and reduce productivity. Several firms are engaging in deliberate and realistic constant improvements, from identifying gaps that the realities have brought to the fore, to the necessary and appropriate training of employees and management respectively.

A Diversity Model, Amenable to Demographic and Evolutionary Trend Customization

The White-de Souza DEIB model is implementable by first diagnosing the existing environment in an organization through a series of diagnostic steps and mapping. Thereafter, the focus is to enact actionable DEIB strategies based on the collected data that are prioritizable and specific to small and large organizations. The development of the model was prompted by a need and a belief, as many contend, that enough has not been done to enact change for the better. The authors/researchers are from diverse backgrounds, and we undertook this qualitative study by first ensuring researcher neutrality and making no prior assumptions of any kind as to the existence of embedded and systemic racism, as the sole purpose of finding DEI solutions, using innovation in organizational management approaches. We used “bracketing” and other techniques to set aside any possible pre-held assumptions. Bracketing is a method often used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process. We used this technique in this model development, introspectively making a note of possible personal assumptions, and then reviewing the data analysis and interpretation to carefully assess if that had in any way crept in and intruded into undertaking an unbiased review and analysis of the data.

The historical and philosophical roots of bracketing have been widely dissected and analyzed concerning the invocation of bracketing in terms of its definition and utility in the research process. Several researchers have integrated bracketing within the underlying theoretical lens of a conceptual framework in studies to ensure the mitigation of researcher and other biases with those in proximity to the phenomenon studied (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

A Model Developed From Research

As academic and professional practitioners in learning and development, training, and DEIB, with pertinent and extensive experience in academic and professional spheres, our focus was on using the science of these disciplines, grounded in research, to strive to make a difference. For us as the authors and researchers, we wanted to design a blueprint for developing a genuinely diverse workplace and remedy inequities while preparing for better organizations of the future with a view to the eradication of inappropriate and unfair employment practices and ingraining DEIB in the true spirit of the law and legislation from a human-centric approach of equal opportunity.

As qualified and experienced educators and trainers with extensive experience in learning and development, DEIB, and training, we developed a study that involved eight qualitative interviews of minorities who shared their experiences in hiring for a job and the opportunities for advancement thereafter. In summary, the

findings from the analysis of the interview transcripts using a process of data reduction and constant comparison of the frequently occurring themes and expressions of the interviews reflected the common sentiments of being passed over for advancement, loss of opportunities, and other forms of inequality and being disadvantaged. Although with full assurance of confidentiality, the interviewees felt insecure in divulging information about personal experiences. The interviewees also admitted the opportunities for their development and felt that a level playing field by an organization, with opportunities for learning and development, through coaching, mentoring, and employee development for all would likely project genuine employee interest in creating a greater sense of inclusion and belonging.

The model is research-based and of strategic practitioner design in its orientation with practical implementation utility, flexible and customizable specifically for DEIB initiatives change, and suitable for educational and other industry settings. The model has evinced interest from academic institutions and corporations and is of potential relevance to government organizations and other entities of all sizes, persuasions, and dimensions, vital in a diverse society. This proprietary diversity, equity, and inclusion model comprises the following distinct phases of diagnosis and audit, from which strategy formulation and skilled implementation, with collaboration, astuteness, and empathy are feasible:

Phase I: Diagnosing and mapping to determine existing levels of DEIB

Phase II: Developing custom learning and training programs/curricula and solutions

Phase III: Bridging the gap between current and desired states for key stakeholders and conditioning audiences of hiring managers and employees

Phase IV: Testing: Assessing the difference between learning and development training in the change in employee behavior, attitude, and performance

Phase V: Evaluation and implementation: Using designed qualitative/quantitative assessments to discern difference/indifference, with reward (psychological) or remedial actions

The study and model development are grounded on our interpretation of Rawls's 1971 "**theory of justice**" and some of the **authors'** prior writings. Rawls's political philosophy emphasized the promotion of fairness in society, including beneficial economics, with the application of theoretical concepts into practical social policies and solutions (Rawls in reply to Colander 1974a), and represents the theoretical underpinning of the White-de Souza model, consistent with the positive social justice outcomes postulated by Rawls. The model is also predicated on the premise that opportunities are usually based on merit and are generally well-intended. The aim was to use this research-based model, which is amenable to customization to current and emergent organizational hiring, retention, and employee development needs in workshops, training, national symposia, conferences, and DEIB projects within the United States and internationally.

Positive transformation in the realm of DEIB is a possible outcome of the model and its implementation, as it is based on the application of theory, practice, and existing realities, as well as the optimism of positive transformational change in an advanced and informed society. Overcoming societal challenges such as diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) needs the implementation of systematic and scientific approaches in initiatives by a cross-section of people and perspectives (Smith, 2022). Diversity and inclusiveness are vital for a progressive environment. The global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and the events of 2020 brought into focus the spectrum of diversity and inclusion failings across the spectrum of healthcare, education, and industry (Nwokolo et al., 2022).

Diversity training (DT) is considered vital and effective in augmenting inclusion in the workplace (Thakur & Dhar, 2022). The model must be implemented by setting aside the recognized systemic and inequity

pervasiveness and aiming at a new beginning in achieving equality. Contemporary researchers have suggested collaboration and reflexivity to overcome social issues of race, power, privilege, and inequity (Anderson et al., 2022). The culmination of primary and secondary research in the realm of DEIB led to the development of this implementable model, derived from lessons gleaned from the findings of the research and discernment of gaps in contemporary hiring and staffing practices from analysis and reviews of peer-reviewed journal sources and EEOC data. Its astute implementation holds the promise of a better tomorrow.

Further Discussions on Where **There's** a Will, **There's** a Way

Brummer and Strine (2022) asked whether there is a true will of American corporations to reduce and prevent racial and gender inequality and increase inclusion, tolerance, and diversity. Good DEIB practices add to a firm's reputation, image, and business sustainability, yet creating a level playing field has been a mirage, as many would contend. The inequity manifestations appear in the forms of bias, toxic masculinity/patriarchy, colorblind racism, and abstract liberalism while the adverse impact is on the underrepresented, marginalized, and those from diverse backgrounds (Cooper et al., 2020). The advice to overcome disparities includes the use of dedicated counselors, to the training of stakeholders and human resource personnel (Kulkarni, 2022).

An Analysis and Short Review of the Evolution of Laws

Looking back at the earliest origins and evolutions of nondiscrimination laws, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 stands out. The focus and prohibitory imperatives of the 1960s were on equality concerning race, color, sex, national origin, and religion; ostensibly the inequities hurt sensitivities at many levels. In the subsequent years, factors driving changing demographics were and continue to be an aging American workforce and greater diversity brought upon by the forces of globalization, information technology, the migration of technical, scientific, and healthcare professionals and others from Asia and Africa, while the attractiveness of the United States for better opportunities overall and for those from Latin America have all created a greater and more diverse work environment.

Several indisputable trends are responsible for the changing face of a more diverse population at large, and the workforce in particular. Diversity infringements, when they can be proven or otherwise, are no longer confined to race, color, sex, national origin, or religion. The prevalence of such discriminatory practices is prevalent. Amidst those factors are ageism and an aging population, who are often qualified and talented, yet face hurdles in securing employment and must face their share of woes because less trained and qualified hiring managers frequently make staffing decisions. The script of DEIB must therefore be rewritten and re-evaluated from a holistic perspective to include diversity and cognizance of different generations, cultures, and varied and diverse persuasions, orientations, work styles, and preferences.

The shift towards realizing intellectual wealth and creativity with diversity has possibly been in our consciousness for some time; however, the actual desire to do something has only genuinely surfaced and emerged as something urgent and vital after the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The grief and anguish caused pointed to more than what transpired on that day to a reflection in the mirror of what happens in the workplace and in professional, academic, and other organizations. An organization does itself a favor by making a concerted effort to nurture and integrate heterogeneity and derive the benefits of potential harmonious collaboration in positive organizational output and in respect of the customers and communities the organization serves (Lang, 2020).

For a long time, the feeling of DEIB pretense, rather than genuineness, has been felt, which has led to a lack of trust in the system. With several DEIB programs in 2022, authenticity within justice, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging initiatives, the multiplicity of backgrounds are more apparent (Verry, 2021) in DEIB initiatives to remedy what was often deemed as disingenuous, artificial, and construed as "lip

service.” Companies with committed diversity programs and statements were perceived as genuine by employees, rather than disingenuous (Wei et al., 2022).

Success in a hitherto elusive equity strategy can yield great dividends in improved institutional performance. Implementing a human-centered design by incorporating positive behavior change principles means no longer treating it as unwanted, but rather fostering camaraderie and realizing the positive gains of using the positive and unique strengths of employees for greater inter-organizational collaboration; however, this necessitates raising awareness of systemic bias and a reorientation to achieve better outcomes (Bopaiah, 2021).

The fatigue in relentlessly pursuing DEIB, yet falling short of its genuinely demonstrable intent, inevitably sets in as the lack of progress in visible results is the lament of many, endorsing the importance of genuine DEI and supporting all workers as critical (Haar, 2023). The exhortation by organizational management practitioners and those on the theoretical side of the aisle is for immediate action. As frequently expressed, long-term and sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives may deliver greater gains, with better communication approaches and in using prioritized action, timelines, and caring and empathy, all of which are seen as potential solutions to ensure that recent tragic incidents and affronts to social and racial equity, do not rear their heads in the future (Nayani, 2022).

The White-de Souza model may reflect a systematic approach, involving a gentle, yet socially skilled human resource science strategy of internal audits, that will inform and guide and entail an approach of phased training, with a focus on optimizing the diverse talents that exist in all organizations, through judicious and skilled implementation. Slogans and rhetoric in a company’s position statement can give way to increasing awareness of unconscious bias, yet they require simultaneous strategies involving active listening and offering employees a voice to express how their value from individual uniqueness and diversity can enhance greater organizational functioning and output (Green, 2022). The dissemination of the potential attributes of this model has included outreach to commercial organizations, federal institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and others.

In arguing the importance of awareness and education in achieving positive change in improved DEIB and belonging, it may be important to note that the murder of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic have also seen a rise in other incidents. The abhorrence and condemnation of anti-Asian violence, antisemitic incidents, and destruction of properties are valid in an advanced society, and the conduct is inexcusable. The problems of racial inequities did not occur overnight, and neither will the solutions as the country continues to be on the path of healing the racial divide (Cooper, 2022).

It is time for U.S. organizations to permanently put to rest petty, yet destructive undercurrents in terms of the subtle factors that often constrain and impede DEIB. The collective efforts to create long-lasting inclusivity and positive change are for all (White, 2021). The immense intellectual wealth that resides in almost every organization cannot be squandered with narrow-mindedness, for therein lies the tremendous capabilities of business and organizational members, those who hold the keys to innovation and creativity, which are truly the pathway to sustainability, profitability, and competitiveness in a globalized world. The recent events described on the failings and opportunities in DEIB have recently caused us to dwell upon, examine, and introspectively assess our ethical and moral compasses, while the consequent awakening and search for greater inclusiveness have begun in earnest across the country. As groundbreaking as the upheavals and the rude awakenings have been, shocking our sensibilities concerning inequalities and DEIB shortcomings. The dire need is for genuine commitment to DEIB as driving meaningful change will be achievable by nurturing and developing authentically diverse talents and communities (Veery, 2024)

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