

# Drivers and Barriers of Diversity and Inclusion in Business: Interviews with Nine Field Experts

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## Abstract

In an ever-diversifying world, Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) strategies must exist in organizations to achieve the potential of positive business and employee outcomes. Businesses must understand how to get diversity and inclusivity in their organization, and how to mitigate the barriers they will face in doing so. Inclusion, “the degree to which individuals feel a part of the critical organizational processes”<sup>1</sup> is crucial for employees and organizations to receive the benefits of diversity. In a climate where inclusion is valued, employees show better affective states (e.g. engagement and belonging) and higher organizational commitment<sup>2</sup> leading to improved business outcomes. To address a gap in the D&I field, a literature review and interviews with nine field experts were conducted to identify actual drivers and barriers of D&I in business. These responses suggest that inclusion must be looked at through multi-level organizational scrutiny and requires a continual process of analysis. This research contributes business thoughts, strategies, and barriers to fostering inclusion in organizations to the D&I field. These findings are not only compelling for the case for inclusion, but in addition, provide supported D&I practices for businesses that foster inclusion.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Society is becoming more diverse and systemic barriers in organizations are being broken down to allow for the workforce to follow in this trend. Organizations have long endorsed the benefits of diversity, but the current research all points to the fact that diversity alone is not sufficient to realize the potential benefits. To achieve the full potential of diversity, a climate of inclusion must be felt by employees, and some experts say that diversity management must occur to create this climate. This thesis reports an in-depth analysis of the drivers and barriers for diversity and inclusion (D&I) in business today. More specifically, it examined the following questions: why is D&I important in business, how do businesses drive D&I, and what barriers exist? To answer these questions, this work presents a literature review on the previous research on D&I management and data gathered from in-depth interviews with nine field experts.

By conducting a literature review, this investigation seeks to understand the history and effects of both inclusion and diversity management. It begins by distinguishing between the terms diversity and inclusion by using definitions created by Mor Barak, a D&I expert. Studies done by other D&I experts such as Shore and Findler examine the shortcomings of solely focusing on

diversity. Equally important, the literature review looks at studies that identified positive employee and business outcomes—such as ones completed by Ferdman<sup>3</sup> and Wheeler<sup>4</sup>. This research also explores models created by Jackson and Holvino<sup>5</sup> to understand how we can measure diversity and inclusion in organizations. By combining expert studies on inclusion and diversity, this research presents the “business case” for D&I as well as exploring its critiques.

To gather in-depth observations and opinions about the state of D&I in businesses, eight interviews were conducted with nine field experts. These interviews focused on D&I initiatives the company has already implemented or are working to implement. One objective for this research was to find out what the actual drivers and barriers for D&I are in businesses. To understand how the literature on D&I work compares to the on-the-ground situation, this study also investigated the experts’ understanding of the terms inclusion and diversity management.

Ultimately, this investigation led to the key conclusion that D&I is integral to create successful employees and businesses. The work of D&I practitioners is never done and must constantly be reevaluated within business. Doing so, allows businesses to identify the drivers and barriers for D&I. Through the initiatives that are used by real practitioners’ barriers that create exclusive

environments are mitigated. The practitioners' insights differed in some ways from the literature which will be considered in the following section.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW: DIVERSITY, DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT AND INCLUSION

Diversity and inclusion are terms that are often used together and while interrelated, are perceived distinctly and lead to distinct outcomes. This section will attempt to define each individually, but it should be noted that there is often overlap and correlation.

### 2.1 Diversity and Diversity Management

Globally, the population is becoming increasingly diverse and this includes demographic changes in the workforce. Diversity is the representation of multiple identity groups and their cultures<sup>3</sup>. Mor Barak, a leading researcher, has defined workforce diversity as, "the division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and that (b) impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace, and promotion prospects—irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications"<sup>6</sup>. This definition will help to understand the significance of diversity management and inclusion in the following sections. Workforce diversity can lead to positive outcomes, but the studies show that diversity alone is not enough. It was found that being part of the minority group in a diverse organization has significant negative effects on the affective experiences of employees<sup>2</sup>. It can also lead to negative results in the organization—such as, increased conflict and turnover, lower cohesion, and poorer performance<sup>6</sup>. Growing diversity in the world and more diverse workforces make evident the importance of addressing and mitigating these negative outcomes. These studies show that when diversity of employees is not managed well, it hinders business and hurts employees.

Notably, diversity management was a term that started being used in the 1990s as a result of the increased diversity in the workforce. Simply put, diversity management is how organizations manage diversity. In an investigation by David Pitts<sup>7</sup>, he historicizes the concept, explains the different understandings of the definition of diversity management, and tests the outcomes of diversity management. Diversity management practices vary between organizations and investigations. There are primarily three views on diversity management: traditional with a focus on recruitment, representation, and numbers; management-orientated with a focus on the employee and their experience; and a combination of both in a more comprehensive approach<sup>7</sup>.

Pitts' investigation in 2009 was the first large-N study using public sector data that linked diversity management with work related outcomes. Their main findings were that diversity management matters and it matters particularly for employees of color<sup>7</sup>. Particularly, it was found that (1) people of color do not report good performance or job satisfaction as often as their white counterparts and (2) that with strong diversity management, people of color have more positive perceptions of their organization and higher job satisfaction<sup>7</sup>. Through this study, it indicates that diversity management does have positive outcomes on employees and organizations.

Increased diversity and businesses' focus on these diverse employees means that diversity management causes a shift in the organization's climate. In an empirical test of diversity climate by Buttner, Lowe, and Bilings-Harris, they examined two dimensions of diversity climate, the perceived fairness in employment decisions with respect to the ethnicity of employees and fulfillment of diversity promises to employees of color as they related to employee outcomes (organizational commitment and turnover intentions)<sup>8</sup>. This research suggests that it is most important to focus on perceptions of diversity climate and human resource decisions that directly affect employees of color<sup>8</sup>. Human resource decisions are often management decisions such as hiring, promotion, feedback and performance evaluations. This leads to the importance of diversity management as a tool to create a positively perceived diversity climate.

Although diversity management has sometimes been critiqued for not doing enough, it shows potential when used to create a climate of inclusion. In a meta-analysis by Mor Barak & co., they found that diversity management efforts that promote inclusion lead to increased positive outcomes and negate negative consequences. The implications for diversity management were: management actively recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce, fostering a sense of belonging in the organization, constantly assessing the climate to provide a diagnosis, and analyzing inclusion at all levels in the organization<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, diversity management is a key aspect in creating perceived inclusion which is critical for realizing the beneficial outcomes of diversity in the workforce.

Conversely, diversity management has seen push back from organizations and received other critiques. In one article, John Wrench argues that diversity management can be harmful by raising up critical opinions of the practice. Critics believe that it is a "soft option" by taking the focus away from racism and ignoring that some groups have more systemic marginalization<sup>9</sup>. He also argues that it replaces the moral argument behind diversity with a business argument, and takes away from equality measures and anti-discrimination strategies<sup>9</sup>. While it does use examples of the TUC Black

Workers Conference voting against diversity management, it lacks empirical evidence on the negative effects of diversity management. The lack of critiques in the D&I field may suggest that there are still holes in the current pool of analysis on inclusion and diversity management.

## **2.2 Inclusion**

More and more, the research points to the importance of inclusion over and above diversity to achieve beneficial results. Mor Barak's<sup>1</sup> definition of inclusion was used to guide this research which states, "the degree to which individuals feel a part of the critical organizational processes, such as access to information, connectedness to co-workers and ability to participate in and influence the decision-making processes." Ferdman's book<sup>3</sup> explains that inclusion is what organizations must do to receive the benefits of diversity, and states, "inclusion involves how well organizations and their members fully connect with, engage, and utilize people across all types of differences"<sup>3</sup>. This book and the other studies in the literature review conducted show that inclusion can increase positive effects on employees and organizations. Inclusion can enhance performance by leading to greater engagement, stronger teams, and more creativity<sup>4</sup>.

However, without this climate of inclusion, the opposite occurs and there are significant negative effects on employees and organizations. Findler et al investigated diversity in Israel and found that the experience of exclusion, due to belonging to a minority group in an organization, affects employee outcomes and leads to negative affective experiences<sup>2</sup>. In an analysis of existing research it maintains that an employee's perception of inclusion affects the employee's wellbeing, satisfaction, and organization commitment<sup>2</sup>. The Findler et al. study found that management practices directly impact perceived inclusion and exclusion, organizational structure must be constructed to view inclusion at all levels, and that organizational norms must be assessed and changed to promote an inclusive culture.

One method proposed for analyzing inclusion in organizations is the Multicultural Organization Development Model developed by Jackson and Holvino as an assessment and developmental tool. This is a change model that supports the movement of an organization from monocultural (an exclusionary organization) to multicultural (an inclusive, diverse, and equitable organization)<sup>5</sup>. With this model, organizations can identify where they are on the spectrum and utilize the key organizational dimensions given to direct goals<sup>5</sup>. Once an organization reaches multicultural, this signifies that it shows, acts, and changes so that it actively includes and integrates people and perspectives from diverse identities into the organization<sup>5</sup>. This tool contributes

to analyzing inclusion throughout organizations and is one of the first of its kind to be developed. While originally created to analyze inclusion in higher education, it has the potential to translate well into the business world where there is currently no standardized model for analyzing inclusion.

While inclusion can be analyzed at various levels, much of the current existing research focuses on how leaders affect inclusion. Perceived inclusion is felt by the individual, but is largely affected by the leadership and climate of the organization. In another study by Cottrill et al, they found that authentic leadership can promote inclusion which leads to employee benefits—such as, organization-based self-esteem and organizational citizenship behavior<sup>10</sup>. Authentic leadership theory believes that these types of leaders foster open communication and encourage follower's ability to be their self. In this study, it showed the importance of authentic leadership as it fosters inclusion by making employees feel important, valued, and trusted which leads to positive employee outcomes<sup>10</sup>. In addition to exemplifying the positive impacts of certain leadership types, this study also demonstrates the importance of organizational leaders in affecting inclusion.

With the rise in Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, it begs the question of what barriers exist that halt progress in organizations. Michael Wheeler, a corporate diversity leader, presents some of these key barriers: complexity, competing issues, lack of history and credentialing for D&I, untapped resources, lack of inclusion, programmatic and simplistic approaches rather than strategic and systemic ones, lack of clarity on "it"<sup>4</sup>. D&I is a complex issue that is only beginning to be understood and valued by organizations and employees. Due to this, there are many ideas about inclusion, but not as much empirical evidence for methods on how to ensure inclusion<sup>6</sup>. These challenges also present opportunities for more research.

## **2.3 Summary of Literature Review**

The literature review found that there is extensive research on the benefits of managing diversity to create an inclusive climate for employees and the business. The literature not only introduced the positive benefits of inclusion on employees and business, but also established that negative effects exist when inclusion is not felt by employees. It explored studies conducted national and internationally, and throughout, a clear business case was presented for inclusion. One model (the Multicultural Organization Development Model) is also introduced as a potential tool for analyzing Diversity and Inclusion. However, there is a current gap in knowledge on how organizations are creating inclusive environments and what barriers are inhibiting it. This presented an opportunity for this research to add

to the D&I literature and provided the framework for interview questions. For primary research, eight interviews were conducted with nine field experts to explore whether the literature is applied and valued in business. While it was found that there are similar perceptions around the importance and impacts of D&I, there is also some disagreement among priorities and terms.

### 3 INTERVIEW METHODOLOGY

For field expert interviews, a mix of organization types were chosen in order to present an analysis of D&I that has a larger scope. To work with human subjects, the proposed study went through an ethical review and was approved in the IRB process (IRB#1536601-1). Using the DU network, recruitment emails were sent to field experts that were either alumni or professionals who were referred to the study by faculty in the Daniels College of Business. All interviewees gave consent to record the interviews and use their name in this thesis.

To start, one of these eight interviews was conducted with a joint pair working with D&I in the same organization which brought my number of interviewees up to nine. Of this number, six worked in human resources in various businesses, one worked in the University of Denver Cultural Center, one owned her own consulting firm for D&I for businesses and organizations, and the last one worked as an engagement specialist for a P.R. firm that works with progressive, nonprofit organizations. Eight of the nine interviewees work in Colorado and one worked in New York. Eight are currently still working and one is retired after more than 20 years in the field. Eight were female and one was male. My subjects worked in a wide variety of organization sizes, from being part of a small team of 4 full-time staff serving the local area to the Vice President of HR for a global company and everything in between. Some of them had very established D&I initiatives while others were in the grassroots stages. This variety allowed for a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Overall, interviews typically lasted from thirty-minutes to an hour with eight questions. From the interview transcripts, two tables were created to analyze the data. The first allowed for side-by-side comparison of responses for each individual question and person. After examining this data, a second table was created that divided the questions into six categories: Experience and Importance, Inclusivity, Diversity Management, Diversity Management and Inclusivity, Barriers and Challenges, and Overarching Themes. For each category, keywords, similarities in responses, and differences in responses were examined. For ease of presentation in this thesis, five categories are used to organize and report interview findings in the following section. Each section starts with a word cloud visualization of the keywords (exact words or synonyms)

found repeated throughout various interviews. The size of the words correlates to the amount of interviewees who mentioned it during that section. For example, the larger words were mentioned by more people which suggests a higher importance. Following keywords, responses are presented using a chart to compare similarities and differences in responses. In the discussion section, key takeaways and their impact on the D&I business field are considered.

### 4 INTERVIEW FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Experience and Importance of D&I

Interviewees shared their own experiences with D&I, and the importance they attached to the subject.



Figure 1. Experience and Importance of D&I Word Cloud

Topics (Questions)	Keywords (#/9)	Similarities in Responses (#/9)	Differences in Response (Subject Initial)
Experience and Importance (1,4)	Human Resources (6) Personal Experience (6) Business (5) Community (4) Priority/Important(4) Perspectives (4)	Work Role (9)  Want places where people done look alike or are a representative mix (7) Academics (5)  Business case, good business, money standpoint (5) Better employees (ex. innovation, connection with customers, engagement, retention, less conflict, better decisions and performance, perspectives) (5) Candidates want to work in a diverse environment (3) Requires work (3) Legal case (2)	All work in different areas of business. Pay equity, emotional intelligence (MH)  Leveling the playing field, structural inequity, colonization (J) Moral case (KN)  Creating space (M)  Process to raise issues on diversity and inclusion (S)  Different factors of diversity (G)

Table 1 Experience and Importance of D&I Response Chart

Notably, all of the subjects have experiences through their job related to D&I. Many of them also mentioned personal experiences in relation to D&I and five of them mentioned encountering D&I through academics or in the academic field. A lot of the interviewees cited the importance of D&I as it related to better employees, better businesses, and maintaining a representative mix of people and opinions.

While most of the responses were quite similar, there were some unique examples mentioned that are important to highlight. The importance of D&I was brought

up in relation to the failings of Western civilization, lasting impacts of colonization, and structural inequalities. The moral case for D&I was also brought up in addition to the importance of having many types of diversity.

### 4.2 Inclusion

This section looked at what inclusion meant for each interviewee and how their organization created an inclusive environment.



Figure 2. Inclusion Word Cloud

Topics (Questions)	Keywords (#/9)	Similarities in Responses (#/9)	Differences in Response (Subject Initial)
Inclusivity (2,5)  +Extra Comment (M)	Differences Valued (6) Participation or Voices (5) Bias (5) Everyone or Everybody (5) Active, Intentional, Aggressive (5) Included or welcomed (3) Skills/Qualified (3) Opinions/thoughts (3) Pronouns (2) Training (2) Contributions (2)	Allusion to a spectrum of not ever done learning to be more inclusive (8) Diversity gets to impact (6)  Empowered to be authentic or express diversity (5) Operating against inequitable landscape in American Business (5) Values (5) Educational Programming (5) Celebrations (4) Expand sourcing to hire diverse candidates (4) Providing equal opportunity (4) Employee resource, affinity groups (4) Physical accessibility, visual cues (3) Representative of community (3) Non-visual diversity factors (3) D&I group (3) Buy-in, importance in top/leadership level (3) Intentional decisions to fill leadership with diverse candidates on early career side, searching for diverse candidates (top and bottom idea) (3) Accessible language (2) Performance management system (2)	Well-being, ability to be a decent human being, swift to act (A) Affirmative action, curriculum, context, or history (J) Diversity in leadership fades away (MH) Fully informed (KN)  Bias Interrupters (KN) Active learning (M) Accommodation (G) Affirmative Action (J)  Non-mandatory training (K)

Table 2 Inclusion Response Chart

Right away, there are some common themes among the key words related to describing inclusion. Inclusion was often related to the idea of having differences valued, all people welcomed, and platforms to participate and share opinions. In terms of strategies implemented, many of them mentioned active and intentional decision making, permeation of D&I as a value throughout

the organization, and policies and structures to support diversity.

As for drivers of D&I, many of the interviewees agreed upon similar themes. All of them reported that the organization must recognize the value of diversity. All of them said the organization had to provide structural support through policies and procedures. Some specific initiatives mentioned were pay equity and identity-based groups. There were some differences in responses that did not correlate with the common themes mentioned above.

### 4.3 Diversity and Diversity Management

These questions related to the interviewees understanding of diversity management and ways their organization uses it.



Figure 3. Diversity and Diversity Management Word Cloud

Topics (Questions)	Keywords (#/9)	Similarities in Responses (#/9)	Differences in Response (Subject Initial)	Other Comments
Diversity Management (3,6)  + EC S	Active, intentional (6) Policy/process/procedure (4) Metrics/Data (4) Recruitment (4) Open/honest/transparent (3) Qualified (3) Community (2) Impact (2)	Unfamiliar with the term diversity management (4) Don't like the term (3) Unsure (1)  Supportive or a diverse community (5) Talk about senior levels (5) Proactively recruit (5) Representation in team (3) Succession/Promotion (3) Homogeneous in leadership (3) Structural support (2) Don't specifically pursue anything, organic recruiting process, intentional decisions at the top (2) D&I council (2) Termination (2) Better employees (2) Talk/communication (2)	Affirmative action and misconceptions, level the playing field, chief diversity officer (J)  Need Inclusion for diversity to be sustainable, diversity is getting people in the door (KN) Performance management rely on trust and confidence of the employee (A&B) Pay analysis (K) Policy is like a bandaid, reverse discrimination (MH) D&I structure and strategy tied to performance bonuses, affinity groups, anonymous process where employees could bring issues up in the organization (S) Location posting(G)	Disconnect among academia and practice (MH) Quotas (J)

Table 3 Diversity and Diversity Management Response Chart

Interestingly, there was more unfamiliarity and negative connotations around the term diversity management. Many mentioned that they shy away from creating specific policies dealing with diversity. For those who did mention policies, a lot of them were in relation to the recruitment process and internal data analysis. When Affirmative Action was mentioned, it was often alluded

to as the earlier stages of D&I strategy and the large misconceptions around it.

Four people were unfamiliar with the term diversity management. Two of them did not like or criticized the term. One was unsure if they understood the term correctly. The two who did not mention something along the lines of this came from the same organization in which I conducted the joint interview. Despite the unfamiliarity with the term, all still tried to answer the questions to the best of their abilities.

#### 4.4 Diversity Management and Inclusivity

This question looked at whether diversity management is used as a tool for inclusivity.

Topics (Questions)	Keywords (#/9)	Similarities in Responses (#/9)	Differences in Response (Subject Initial)	Other Comments
Diversity Management + Inclusivity (6.b)	Yes (6)	Can't do one without the other (2)	Diversity sustainable only with inclusion (KN)  Inclusion not a conversation yet; employee engagement surveys, innovation, recognition of new ideas, budget, trainings, affinity groups, holidays, newsletters (A&B) Challenge ourselves (G) Structures make progress for more inclusive environment (J) Evaluated on diversity of team, used as coaching tool, bias-awareness training	Employee engagement (A&B)

Table 4 Diversity Management and Inclusivity Response Chart

From the keywords, I can conclude that the majority of people believed diversity management is used for inclusivity. There were many more differences in the responses for this question. It was emphasized that diversity is only sustainable with inclusion.

#### 4.5 Barriers and Challenges

These questions dealt with barriers and challenges the interviewees thought existed or had witnessed for D&I in business.



Figure 4. Barriers and Challenges Word Cloud

There were some barriers and challenges identified

Topics (Questions)	Keywords (#/9)	Similarities in Responses (#/9)	Differences in Response (Subject Initial)	Other Comments
Barriers/Challenges (7,8) +EC G +EC MH +EC M +EC S	Bias (7) Communication (5) Resistance (4) Takes work (4) Survey (3) Perspective (3) Context (2) Threat (2)	Resources (time, budget) (4) Common goals/values (4) Bring awareness (4) Hiring well-qualified people (4) People who are promoted/punished for doing well/bad in D&I (3) Different elements of diversity (3) Transparency (3) Serious about need for D&I (2) Organizationally challenged in how it is structured (2) Can do things within sphere of influence (2) Broadening lens/perspective (2) No flexibility (2)	Mental health and well-being (A&B)  Gender diversity, options, challenge getting diversity into organizations; pushback from customers, coach employees (G) Not prioritized by leadership, no space; Ability to be authentic, not having context or understanding realities student of color live (J) Mindsets, positive intelligence, D&I needs to step back and do education and mitigation for employees to be more inclusive; Expect resistance, use inclusion nudges and other strategies to get around it (KN) Equivalencies/skills/cultural (M) Obsession on quotas; diversity of thought (MH) Visibility, addressing gaps (S) Learn from mistakes, better to individually follow up because of biases and threats, just ask to be allies (K)	Make better employees (MH)

Table 5 Barriers and Challenges Response Chart

various times by interviewees. As shown in the keywords, bias came up throughout almost all of the interviews. Many of them also mentioned resistance, lack of resources, and inflexibility within their organization structure as barriers. While there was a lot of diversity within the specific barriers mentioned, all of the interviewees' answers included solutions to mitigate these different barriers.

## 5 DISCUSSION



Figure 5. Themes Throughout Word Cloud

Throughout the interviews, each person brought their own perspectives and experiences working in D&I to the table. Nevertheless, all of them recognized the importance and value in having a diverse, inclusive organization. Except for one person, all alluded to the idea of a spectrum for D&I work in an organization. This is further demonstrated by the diverse stages of D&I strategies all the subjects' organizations were in. This point is easily related to the Multicultural Organization

Topics (Questions)	Keywords (#/9)	Similarities in Responses (#/9)
Throughout Interviews	Talk/Communication (8) Spectrum/Still Learning/Improving (8) Recruitment/Retainment (5) Affirmative Action (4) Bias-Awareness Training (3) Engaged/Engagement Survey (3)	Structural support through policies/procedures (9) Recognizing the value of diversity in org (9) Diverse perspectives/opinions (8) Drivers of Inclusion and Diversity: Intentional recruitment (7) Reflected in leadership/Buy-in from leadership (7) Diversity gets to impact (7) Education/trainings(7) Open and honest communication (6) Work environment (6)

**Table 6** Themes Throughout Response Chart

Development<sup>5</sup> model that analyzes organizations on a spectrum from exclusionary to multicultural. None of them use this specific model, but the observation of D&I as a spectrum (as in D&I work never being finished) within an organization was touched on in-depth by various practitioners. Some of them had very established D&I strategies while others were in the grassroots stage. Interestingly, while interviewees reported varying degrees of D&I in their organizations, they identified similar sets of drivers to move their organizations to a more inclusive, diverse organization.

In all but one interview, the importance of having diverse perspectives and opinions in the organization was mentioned. The interviewees talked about the value this brings to the organization including employee engagement, innovation, and better solutions. This correlates to the research on inclusivity done by Wheeler<sup>4</sup> and Findler, et al<sup>2</sup> that found inclusion can lead to greater engagement and more creativity. Five of the interviewees mentioned that there is a huge business case for D&I and that it makes better employees. This is impressive because it shows the importance of D&I permeating throughout the organization. For an organization to be successful in today’s world, it must value diversity and actively pursue inclusion.

Interestingly, the term diversity management is found to be a relatively unused and uncommon word in the D&I field in business. There were only two people who did not have a reaction to the term, while the rest either had not heard it, did not like it, or were unsure about it. This difference in the terminology between the literature and interviewees may illustrate a large disconnect between academia and actual business practices. Pitts’ investigation<sup>7</sup> also explained that diversity management has changed connotations throughout the years which could have impacted the subjects’ feelings and knowledge about the term. Despite unfamiliarity with the term, interviewees were encouraged to answer the question to the best of their abilities. As a result, many of them did mention strategies that would fall under diversity management (e.g. recruitment, promotion, policies) even without completely understanding the term.

Many of interviewees identified communication in their organization as a key driver for D&I. For inclusivity to happen, they believed open and honest communication on why D&I is valued and essential in business must permeate throughout the organization. Therefore, many of them correlate D&I into the values their organization has established. Interviewees also identified the importance of leadership buy-in. This is consistent with the studies mentioned previously by Cottril et al<sup>10</sup> in which they identified the leader and authentic leadership as key components for fostering open communication that creates a more inclusive environment.

Additionally, a majority of interviewees attribute the progress in D&I to the structural support they have in place through policies and procedures. Included in these policies and procedures: intentional recruiting for diverse and qualified candidates, affinity groups, specific budgets, D&I councils, and education or training around unconscious biases. Most of the comments around recruitment, promotion, feedback, and performance evaluation are all part of diversity management and contribute to a positively perceived diversity climate<sup>8</sup>.

Many of the interviewees mentioned that the work environment has a critical impact in building an inclusive organization. Stating that it is not enough to have diversity, but that organizations must create channels for diverse people to impact operations or voice their opinions. The interviewees also cited internal analyses as a way to identify gaps and exclusive behavior. By communicating these findings, they can be used as coaching tools. Many believed that termination and corrective action can play a large role in portraying that the organization values diversity. The research Findler et al,<sup>2</sup> did coincide with this finding and found that an organization needs to constantly strive to assess and change its norms to promote an inclusive culture.

Even though interviewees recognized numerous drivers of D&I, all of them also identified many challenges for creating a diverse and inclusive organization. All of them mentioned either resistance, bias, or feeling threatened as a barrier. This coincides with Wheeler’s<sup>4</sup> reports that lack of inclusion, people not wanting to be inclusive, is a barrier. Interviewees offered more specific reasons for why that happens and how it presents a challenge. Many of them also mentioned that the organization itself can act as a barrier due to how it is structured, lack of flexible options or working in an inequitable landscape and lack of resources like time and budget. While they all shared challenges, they also all mentioned ways to mitigate these barriers using the tools mentioned above as drivers of inclusivity.

Overall, this research took an in-depth look at the real field of D&I in business as it relates to the literature. While there was overlap between real practices and challenges, there was also some disagreement. The method-

ology and integrity of the research was sound. By creating two tables, it allowed direct comparison. Since the second table used short-hand, each interview transcript was examined to verify keywords. This study looked at a broad-scope of business to further contribute to general D&I knowledge. These findings suggest real-world strategies to impact D&I within business. Notwithstanding, there is still a lack of research on real business initiatives and challenges in D&I. There is also further research to be done that looks at D&I strategies among the same industry or even in the same business which was not done here. This research looked at a wide scope of business with some having a global reach—the D&I field would additionally benefit by focusing new research on international companies. While this research contextualizes and looks at D&I strategies mentioned in literature with real-life practices, there is still a lack of research on empirical evidence of D&I methods and strategies. More research is necessary in this field for businesses to continue along the spectrum of attaining a truly diverse and inclusive organization.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This study is one of the first of its kind in the D&I field to study the demonstrated drivers and barriers of D&I, and suggests discrepancies between the literature and real-world practices. It also provides key takeaways for business practitioners as D&I was identified as crucial to the success of employees and business in both the literature review and interview study. In particular, practitioners emphasized the importance of D&I being clearly communicated as crucial and valued in the organization. Furthermore, the interviewees alluded to the idea of D&I as a spectrum and emphasized the importance of continued learning—suggesting the use of internal processes and surveys to evaluate gaps in where their organization is failing at D&I. The majority of discrepancies were found in the terminology used by practitioners and encountered barriers in the D&I field.

The in-depth interview study conducted in this research allowed for comparison between the D&I methods and models used in literature and those implemented in real business practices. Many of the findings in interviews correlate with the literature. According to the field experts interviewed, the principal drivers of D&I include: structural policies and procedures, intentional recruiting, affinity groups, D&I councils, education and training, and promotion consideration. D&I in their organizations is often looked at through retention, promotion, and at the employee level. Leadership and communication has been found to be one of the key approaches for fostering a climate of inclusion in organizations. Still, common sets of barriers for building inclusive organizations persists in many organization such as bias, resistance, lack of resources, and structural

problems. These barriers can be overcome by a commitment to D&I through the mentioned processes and procedures.

An organization's commitment to D&I creates better work environments and makes a particular difference for people from marginalized communities. Prior research suggests that positive effects of D&I practices increase in magnitude when looking at employees of color<sup>7</sup>. This thesis outlines common strategies used in business, and the barriers these field experts have encountered when attempting to create a diverse and inclusive environment. By using this research as a guide, businesses at any stage of a D&I plan can draw from the experiences of experts. It implies that organizations are largely responsible for their employee's perception of inclusion while providing practices that foster the positive benefits of diversity.

## 7 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer reviewed.

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