

Improving Your Equality and Diversity Culture



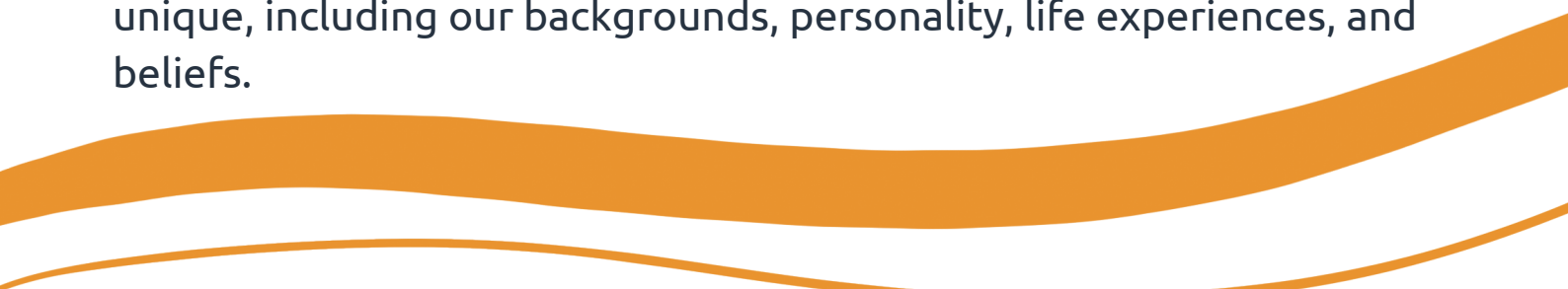
What does equality and diversity mean, really?

Equality and diversity are important topics for businesses to take into account, no matter their size or sector. When we use the term 'equality' at work (or indeed anywhere else!), we mean making sure that everyone is treated fairly, given equal opportunities, and is protected from being discriminated against. This does not mean treating everyone the same but refers to giving everyone the best possible chance to succeed; whatever their background, special needs, or identity.

In other words, equality is about recognising the differences in our employees and meeting their diverse needs fairly and sensitively, ensuring that everyone is given the same opportunity for the same outcome. If we don't take these differences into consideration, then we could be putting someone at a disadvantage and denying them equal opportunities - for example, a job opportunity or ability to access certain services.

In the UK, our laws provide protection against discrimination based on a number of different characteristics. For example, it protects people from being discriminated against because of their gender, race, disability, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, pregnancy and maternity status, or because they are married or in a civil partnership

It's important to remember that 'diversity' is not just another word for equality, but refers to the necessity to recognise, respect, and value the differences in people. It's about the things that make each of us unique, including our backgrounds, personality, life experiences, and beliefs.



Valuing difference and bearing diversity in mind when we approach our work environment will help us to support all our employees to reach their full potential. It will also help eliminate bullying, victimisation, harassment and discrimination – all areas which spell bad news for businesses, obviously.

Welcoming diversity as a workforce means that we will value each other, treat each other fairly, and ultimately work better together. In turn, this means that we will do a better job and provide the kinds of services that our customers want and have a right to expect.



What makes equality and diversity so important?

Equality and diversity are important factors that organisations need to prioritise in order to thrive and be successful.

This is because - along with equality and diversity - come strength and innovation. Tapping into the power of a diverse workforce can help organisations build a competitive edge since doing so brings different perspectives, communication-styles, and problem-solving skills to the table.

Additionally, promoting equality and diversity is good for business because it's very likely your target market is made up of a diverse, non-homogenous, range of people. Employees from different cultures and backgrounds can help organisations access a wider range of consumers, ensuring their message is appropriate and appealing to all types of people with different backgrounds and beliefs.

More than this, however, who wouldn't want to work with and for a company that promotes values such as fairness, respect, and tolerance? In this way, equality and diversity help organisations attract new and gifted talent, as well as retaining their top staff with a thriving, employee-focused company culture.

Equality and diversity are all about energising and empowering your workforce. They're about creating balance that boosts performance, increases productivity, and nurtures an environment wherein people feel appreciated and valued.

When this happens, your employees are far more likely to stay with the company long-term (reducing recruitment and training costs), feel safe and happy (reducing turnover and sick leave), and bring their best selves to work every day.

What does a culture of equality and diversity look like?

Before we can assess our own equality and diversity cultures, it's helpful to be able to recognise what success in this area looks like. Breaking down what behaviours, practices, and daily habits make up a solid culture of equality and diversity will help us to gauge the impact that work in this area can have.

It also helps us see clearly the tangible business benefits on offer for organisations that embrace equality and diversity for what it is: so much more than an annual box-ticking exercise.



Strong leadership

A robust culture of equality and diversity begins with a bold and dedicated leadership team. This team are, themselves, diverse and inclusive – and are aware of their own potential to influence others through their own respectful and supportive behaviours.

Setting the right tone from the top cannot be overestimated when it comes to your management team; it's perhaps the single most important element to get right. After all, your company's leaders set the cultural tone, norms, and behavioural framework for the organisation at large. They act as role models for other staff members and emotionally engage their team members with the values and vision of the business.

Sending the wrong message via management's attitude or actions could devastate the harmony and collaborative culture of the organisation, even landing the company in hot water with legal issues to contend with.



Equality as standard

Within a culture of equality and diversity, business leaders understand the impact organisational systems, processes and cultures have upon staff and advocate for them, ensuring to meet their needs respectfully and responsively. They also take accountability for equality and diversity outcomes, understanding that – along with diversity – comes strength and innovation, helping to future proof the business. Unconscious bias training is given to all staff to help them recognise and mitigate how it could affect their judgements.

Here, equality is engrained within the business's goals (research from McKinsey & Company indicates that inclusive teams tend to make better decisions for the company up to 87% of the time, leading to higher profits) and the company's policies and practices are family-friendly and bias-free, making the business attractive to work for (and to remain working for!) and enhancing loyalty, performance, and commitment from employees.

Inside this culture of equality and diversity, staff have access to the mandatory training they require, ensuring they understand and comply with the company's and the law's regulations. Understanding their rights under the Equality Act 2010, and the ways the legislation benefits and protects them, helps employees feel informed and empowered, and they're able to spot and report red flags should they need to.

Staff also have equal access to other non-mandatory training resources, e.g., for career development or succession planning, and enjoy company benefits which reflect the needs of all staff members (examples may include flexible and/or remote working, enhanced parental leave, wellness programs, and healthcare insurance).

A united front

A strong and inclusive culture of equality and diversity motivates employees to engage with the business, since they aren't treated as 'outsiders' and so don't feel emotionally distant from the organisation.

Regular employee updates further enhance this interaction, helping to build trust and encourage two-way communication between departments and staff at differing levels of seniority.

Employees, whilst diverse and each bringing different skillsets to the table, work from a shared vision, towards the same goals, and with a clear roadmap of expectations and values laid out before them. In this way, the company's employee-focused culture aligns with its collective mission, fostering collaboration and soft skills such as adaptability, interpersonal skills, communication, and curiosity.

Staff here celebrate and learn from their creative differences rather than feel frustrated by them.



Zero tolerance

Finally, a true culture of equality and diversity takes a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination or harassment of any kind. All employers have a duty of care to their employees and offering staff access to training materials to understand their rights, and setting out clear procedures for reporting any concerns (in the company's code of conduct, e.g.), is the first step in protecting your employees' health, safety, and wellbeing.

Additionally, the organisation must stand by its convictions when it comes to reports of discrimination or harassment, listening to concerned members of staff, taking complaints seriously, and actioning appropriate disciplinary procedures against perpetrators.



Under the spotlight: assessing your equality and diversity culture

When it comes to cultures of equality and diversity, it's not enough to just say your organisation supports equal opportunities, roll out the same old equality and diversity training once a year, and call the job done.

Whilst mandatory training is a highly useful tool for laying the groundwork when it comes to inclusivity (we would, however, recommend shorter, more engaging, refresher-type training for long-term employees), cultures of equality and diversity are about so much more than this – as demonstrated in the previous chapter.

Indeed, in order to achieve true equality, diversity, and inclusion in your workplace, it's important to assess (and regularly re-assess) what behaviours, management-practices, and processes run through the organisation right now.

Doing so will tell us a lot about your current culture and help leadership teams diagnose which areas are most in need of improvement. In turn, this information assists in identifying the type of tools or learning interventions necessary to achieve the desired behavioural change.



Key questions to ask about your equality and diversity culture might include:

- Does your workforce represent wider society (think age diversity, people with disabilities, gender and gender identity/reassignment, race, religion and beliefs, and sexual orientation), including underrepresented communities?
- Is your leadership team diverse and representative of your workforce and community?
- Does your workforce reflect your client base?
- Have you assessed your gender pay gap and actioned change if necessary?
- Do you offer enhanced parental leave?
- Does your recruitment strategy reach and attract a diverse talent pool?
- Do you have an equality and diversity policy? And are staff aware of it?
- Does your brand and brand-communications represent the company's stance on equality and diversity?
- Does your brand advocate for equal rights?
- Do you offer flexible working opportunities?
- Are training sessions structured in an inclusive and accessible way?

- Are your company's policies family-friendly and bias free?
- Are your company benefits beneficial and accessible to and for everybody?
- What are you doing to make employees feel included and emotionally engaged with the company and its goals?
- Do you regularly talk openly with members of staff about the company's vision and goals? Do staff members have the opportunity to ask questions?
- Are your team leaders/managers advocating for their team members?
- Do they talk openly with employees and model inclusive behaviour?
- Do employees express their ideas freely, without fear of rebuttal or ridicule?
- Do you have a discrimination and harassment policy? Do staff know how to report instances of discrimination or harassment?
- What do employees say about their workplace culture to their managers? To each other? On social media?
- Do you catch up with employees and ask them how they feel in their team, their work, and the organisation at large? Do they have the chance to suggest improvements?
- Do employees feel valued and understand how their work contributes to the success of the company?

Steps you can take now to improve your equality and diversity culture

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Apart from simply being the right thing to do, we know by now that companies with strong cultures of equality and diversity are more likely to be innovative, have high-performing, well-motivated teams, and yield higher financial returns.

Below we'll consider ways to improve equality, diversity, and inclusion in your workplace. Bearing in mind that establishing a strong culture in this area is a 'living' project, never truly complete, but always striving for excellence and learning from past mistakes.

Achieving equality and diversity is a continuous, ever-changing goal and its endeavors should be observable and measurable throughout every department in the organisation, beginning - of course - from the top down.



Create a sense of belonging at work

All human beings desire a sense of belonging to a group. Social connection is in our DNA and – when we feel like we belong – we're likely to enjoy a more meaningful life and reach our full potential personally and professionally (indeed, not having this need met can cause terrible physical and psychological pain for people).

In order to create a sense of belonging for all employees, business leaders can look out for opportunities to be an ally, particularly to groups typically underrepresented and potentially facing injustice.

Allyship means managers and senior staff helping to promote inclusivity and equality by building supportive relationships and engaging in public acts of advocacy. The aim of these actions is to drive systemic improvements to corporate policies, practices, and cultures – reshaping them so they benefit and speak for everyone.

Managers might also make it their business to regularly check-in with employees (professionally and personally, if appropriate), ask for team input on various projects and ideas, and lend their voice to quieter team-members who might be struggling to speak up.

Companies can also organise employee-led committees, featuring staff members of differing seniorities and positions in the business (small groups of 7 or less work well, allowing everyone to get their say), and encouraging them to engage with various corporate issues affecting the company – equality and diversity, for instance! The organisation can help support these group meetings by offering the use of company communications, technology and conference rooms, e.g.

Examine recruitment processes

It's a good idea to keep a critical eye on your recruitment processes and challenge any non-diverse shortlists honestly, with an open mind.

It's important that recruitment managers have undergone unconscious bias training and can understand and spot all types of hiring biases, including confirmation bias (60% of interviewers will make a decision about a candidate's suitability within 15 minutes of first meeting), and expectation anchoring (when one piece of information about a candidate influences or 'anchors' the entire hiring process, making it unfair). An example of expectation anchoring might be believing a younger candidate can do the job better than an older candidate, or favouring an interviewee because they attended one university over another.

Take steps to ensure you are recruiting, and indeed accessing, interested job seekers from a diverse talent pool (for example, not just 'friends of friends', or people who followed the same career path as their predecessor). Moreover, your recruitment managers should be representative of the wider community, helping to mitigate the likelihood of conformity bias (interviewers going along with the majority vote for ease) and showcasing the company's commitment to a diverse workforce.



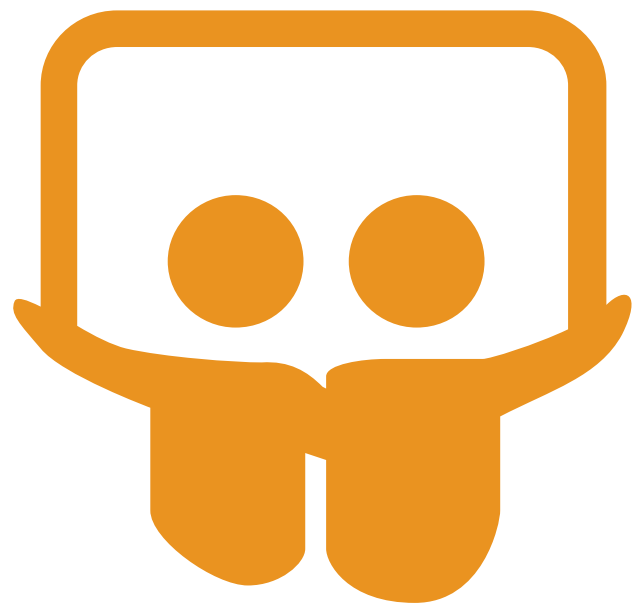
Share your experiences

Make sure your company's leaders are ready and equipped to share their own experiences when it comes to equality and diversity matters.

Sharing personal stories in this manner can improve your equality and diversity culture because it helps to create a safe psychological space where employees and managers can talk openly and empathetically with one another.

Additionally, hearing people we respect or admire talk about why they care about equality and diversity, and why it matters to them, is inspiring for others who may be facing their own struggles and allows leaders to set the cultural tone for their team.

Whether executed formally or informally, talking exercises like this help to create trust and forge bonds between leaders and their employees – and they're a good opportunity to lend some context to processes and regulations that otherwise might feel a little impersonal.



Encourage open and respectful debate

Strong cultures of equality and diversity don't shy away from creative differences and variations. That's why it's a good idea to encourage your employees to talk openly about their ideas in groups and empower them to (respectfully) challenge each other; perhaps making suggestions about ways to approach things differently or introducing new tools into the company workflow.

The more this takes place, the less likely it is that employees will react to such challenges with fear and distrust (which can narrow their perspective and dampen the creative process). Allowing employees to engage in healthy debate inside a safe and respectful environment means everyone can leave their egos at the door and work together for the common good rather than for 'victory'.



Offer ongoing training

Organisations should never approach equality and diversity training as a 'once and done' exercise that simply ticks a legislative box. Indeed, companies that view equality and diversity as simply a legal 'obligation' and nothing more, might well be left wondering why their employees seem disengaged or disillusioned about the concept. Their staff may also appear distant from the company's vision and goals and show signs of discontent themselves. The staff churn-rate is also likely to be high in such an environment.

It helps to approach mandatory training as the framework for your equality and diversity culture. As such, its job is to teach employees about their rights under the law, enhance awareness and understanding about the value of an inclusive workplace, and lay out best practices for diversity and inclusion practices.

However, once this framework is built, it's a good idea to investigate more comprehensive, ongoing initiatives to engage employees with equality and diversity; think scenario-led, problem-solving exercises (this can be done digitally through immersive eLearning formats if preferred) aimed at uncovering/challenging workplace prejudice and unconscious bias.

Indeed, training ought to be part of a wider solution, including leaders that take the issue seriously, review their culture and turnover regularly with a critical eye, and model anti-discrimination behaviours themselves.

Track success

To help tackle the problem of accountability when it comes to equality and diversity, organisations might choose to follow the lead of companies like Intel and Pinterest, which, by implementing various initiatives, metrics, and guidelines for hiring, appear to be following the old adage 'what gets measured, gets done'.

Indeed, without clear and robust measures to track diversity and inclusion efforts, organisations can quickly find themselves reverting back into their 'comfort zone', where ingrained thinking and unconscious biases that promote homogeneity hide-out.

Using metrics can help employers committed to diversity and inclusion stay on track by encouraging the identification and management of bias blind spots, identifying risk areas, and informing targets and goals.



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