NEW TRENDS IN BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

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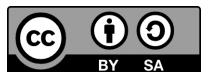*Małgorzata Myszkowska*

Cover design
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The book uses images from Adobe Stock

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The Perception of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Case Study

Quote as: Baran, M. (2024). The Perception of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Case Study. In J. Radomska, A. Witek-Crabb (Eds.), *New Trends in Business Management* (pp. 64-79). Wroclaw University of Economic and Business.

Abstract: The topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are gaining increasing attention in the modern work environment. In international corporations, employees encounter diversity and multiculturalism daily. That motivates companies to implement norms and policies aimed at creating an inclusive workplace, where all employees, regardless of their identity, cultural differences, sexual orientation, or disabilities, are treated fairly and respectfully within the company community. This research aims to understand employees' perception of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Polish branch of an international company. It seeks to explore the initiatives taken by the company to create an inclusive workplace by examining its policies and practices. The research adopts a case study research design and employs surveys and analysis of internal company documents as data collection tools. In the evaluated branch of the company, the results suggest that employees are satisfied with the current level of company actions. However, many employees are unaware or uninformed about the responsibilities and initiatives undertaken by the company.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, equal opportunities, inclusive workplace

1. Introduction

In today's dynamic and diverse work environment, the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) has gained significant attention. While diversity refers to recognizing people's differences and unique perspectives that individuals bring to a group or organization, equity focuses on defining equitable access, opportunities, and growth for all diverse people, the main goal of inclusion is creating an environment that welcomes and respects people of all needs and backgrounds.

The significance of DEI in the workplace has been widely acknowledged as it contributes to a more innovative and productive work environment. Many international corporations have embraced DEI as part of their organizational

culture, integrating it into their core values and internal policies. However, the effectiveness and impact of these efforts need to be assessed to ensure they are truly benefiting employees and stakeholders. The key purpose of this research is examining a perception of DEI among workers, the influence of DEI on employees and the effectiveness of communication regarding DEI policies in order to provide recommendations to create inclusive and equitable workplaces.

This research employs a case study design to explore the influence and perception of diversity, equity, and inclusion within a Polish branch of an international corporation. Data has been collected through a combination of methods, including survey and document analysis. The survey has been conducted with employees at various levels within the organization to gather their perspectives and experiences related to DEI initiatives. The document analysis involves examining internal policies, and other relevant documents.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Challenges of Today's World of Work

The world of work has been rapidly changing throughout past years. The increased mobility caused by globalization led to the interpenetration of cultures and through it, to increasing diversity among organizations. The COVID pandemic that spread since 2020 unfolded the remote world of work which helped with creating multicultural teams. In addition, since the fourth industrial revolution started, new technologies emerged helping to decrease the barriers between marginalized groups. Globalization is a term describing the worldwide integration and interpenetration of societies, governments, and economies. The concept was recognized and defined in the 1980s (Balcerowicz-Szkutnik and Szkutnik, 2015). It is one of the consequences of opening borders between countries and making travelling accessible for people of different social statuses. The result of such a phenomenon is an intensification of migration movements that leads to increased ethnic and cultural diversity among employees and citizens. It turned out that the peak of globalization was in 2008 (PWT, 2021). Since that year, the trend shifts toward deglobalization which refers to the tendency of countries and regions to become more self-sufficient and less integrated with the global economy. This happens for numerous reasons, including political shifts, economic pressures, and social factors. Nowadays, it comes from a view that globalization failed developing countries allowing only the developed ones to benefit (Irwin, 2020). Additionally, the global financial crisis in 2008 encouraged countries to implement protectionist measures in order to shield themselves from the economic crisis. Since then, the trend toward deglobalization has been increasing as the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many countries implementing travel restrictions, trade barriers, and

other measures to control the spread of the virus (Irwin, 2020). Similarly, Russian aggression in Ukraine resulted in changes in the interdependencies of states.

Automation of work has a significant influence on the topic of diversity. It is observed that new technologies help to decrease or remove barriers for marginalized groups. At the same time, they are responsible for creating new limitations (Mulder, 2021).

One example of lifting barriers thanks to devices is introducing so-called assistive technology for people with disabilities (Edyburn, 2004). For instance, blind and visually impaired people are encouraged to use special computers designed to meet their needs. They use screen readers or refreshable Braille displays to carry on independent life with possibilities for employment. Deaf people can benefit from programs that put a live caption to video conferences. Additionally, the machinery is able to replace human weaknesses. That way, the work traditionally performed by men (due to the stereotypical view of their strength) can be done by women with the help of machinery. The listed examples show that people can be strengthened by machines to create an equal society, which leads to increased diversity in the job market.

As mentioned before, new technologies are also responsible for creating boundaries. Since not everyone can have access to all hardware due to high cost, people with real talent but no access to equipment are excluded while applying for jobs. What is more, technologies created new stereotypes that are harmful to marginalized groups. To give a clear example, there are many myths concerning women in the tech industry. One of them is the belief that the tech industry is dominated by men as they are wrongly perceived to be more technically gifted than women (Niazi, 2020).

2.2. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in an Organization

The concept of diversity management is relatively new and hence is still in development. It emerged in the United States in the 1980s after social equality policies were formed significantly reducing racism and segregation (Rakowska, and Gocół, 2021). Following the trend, during second-wave feminism (Rosenstock, 2021) one of the demands was equal opportunities both in jobs and education for men and women. In the 1990s, the idea entered Europe, and at the end of the 20th century, the term "diversity" in the context of the workforce reached Poland.

Diversity refers to recognizing people's differences and respecting them. Traditionally, people perceive and distinguish diversity based on ethnicity, culture, gender, age, and sexual orientation. However, diversity can be still understood and described broader than all those characteristics, especially in the context of employees. It might include people of different political preferences, marital statuses, lifestyles, talents, or even eating habits.

All characteristics of the current world of work that were mentioned in the first paragraph influence the diversity of the workforce. Therefore, they challenge organizations as they observe both the positive and negative impacts of diversity. Diversity should include all stakeholders of the organization which means not only employees, but also all suppliers, clients or customers, and the local community. Nowadays, diversity management is one of the common aspects of corporate social responsibility strategy as it builds engagement and brand recognition while helping benefit society.

While diversity refers to the numerous ways in which people differ, equity focuses on defining equal access, opportunities, and growth for all these diverse people. The main issue with the concept of equity is understanding the difference between equity and equality. Equality proclaims giving everyone the same amount no matter their background or limitation. Not only does equality disregard the former unfairness but can preserve them (Fortgang, 2022). Equity, on the other hand, focuses on achieving the same results by providing everyone with different resources helping them to reach this goal. Even though the difference is significant, people tend to use these words as synonyms.

Systems based on equity rather than equality are already in use in many aspects of life. For instance, people pay taxes based on their income group. Instead of imposing the same rate for all, income and background are taken into consideration to create a sense of fairness. It needs to be remembered and repeated that equity should be introduced in more and more aspects of life to address the needs of diverse groups in society. The main discussion today is equitable access to health and education.

The Cambridge Dictionary provides the definition of inclusion as "the idea that everyone should be able to use the same facilities, take part in the same activities, and enjoy the same experiences, including people who have a disability or other disadvantage" (Inclusion, n.d.). When diversity focuses on what makes people different and equity on understanding the needs of differentiated people, the main goal of inclusion is creating an environment that welcomes and respects people of different needs and backgrounds. People in an inclusive environment feel valued and accepted, and are more willing to participate and engage in work.

If inclusion is perceived as belonging, Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation comes to mind. Maslow issued a theory in which he described a source of motivation as the hierarchy of needs. These needs are five steps that a person reaches progressively starting with satisfying the physiological needs, through safety, love and belonging, esteem, and finally self-actualization (Gawel, 2019).

The first two levels are satisfied by the proper salary that ensures food and shelter (physiological needs) and physical and emotional stability (safety). Nonetheless, if a company wants to go further and develop, they need to gain loyal and motivated. Thence, they need to take into consideration additional (higher) needs. Inclusion is one of them as it satisfies the social need by giving the feeling of belonging and

acceptance. Therefore, inclusion is a foundation to build the employee's self-esteem and lead them to achieve job satisfaction.

If diversity within an organization is managed duly by offering equitable opportunities and creating a strong feeling of inclusion, the company can benefit from it to varying degrees.

- The well-implemented and properly communicated diversity management brings not only internal value to a company but also improves the external image of the company (Ferraro et al., 2023).
- Openness to diverse hiring widens the opportunities for talent recruitment. As the organization is not bound to one specific location or characteristic but rather willing to hire people of different backgrounds, the pool of qualified candidates increases.
- Companies that embrace diversity build teams with a differentiated workforce to increase adaptability. All team members offer unique expertise that results in a wider range of solutions that meet customer demand and respond to the changing markets flexibly (Greenberg, 2004).
- The research published by Buckingham (2010) recognizes the correlation between diversity management (meaning policies and processes) and employee satisfaction. According to this research, employee satisfaction is greater when diversity is promoted by policies and practices in an organization. Satisfied employees are more willing to stay loyal to a company and thence, increase the retention rate (Gregory, 2011).
- Having established a position of diverse yet inclusive organization helps with managing external stakeholders who might feel represented by minorities and better understood.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are concepts that concern people and that is why it includes various complications and resistance. People dislike change and prefer familiarity which stands in opposition to diversity.

One of the biggest costs that an organization needs to pay is the price of the creation and implementation of a diversity management strategy. It includes onboarding people responsible for aligning company values and strategy (by adjusting policies and processes) to assist diverse stakeholders of a company (Wziątek-Staśko, 2012). Diversity and inequality are sensitive topics that without proper training and understanding can be confused. Too broad classification of diversity could be a high cost for a company as they would need to create access to accommodate all. On the other hand, the classification of differentiated groups that is too narrow could cause a sense of discrimination and a perception of an exclusive workplace as employees would feel forgotten (Thomas and Plaut, 2008). The key is to find a balance and create differentiation categories that would be widely communicated and accepted within an organization.

Another negative outcome of diversity management in a workplace is the resistance of employees to accepting and improving the workplace by introducing

a culture of inclusion and acknowledging differences. Resistance may be manifested overtly by verbal or/and physical harassment, violence, or by creating discriminatory company policies and processes. Furthermore, resistance may appear more subtle in a form of avoidance, silence, exclusion, or distancing (Thomas and Plaut, 2008). The resistance to diversity may result in internal conflicts between co-workers. Watson and Hoffman research (1996) indicates that up to 42% of their time, managers spend on workplace conflict resolution. Therefore, the productivity of a company is decreased. The atmosphere of discrimination and harassment or even the subtle distancing can cause employees disengagement, dissatisfaction, and hence, increased absenteeism at work.

Lastly, the term rainbow-washing (often known also as Pinkwashing) is nowadays used to describe the strategy of a company that expresses support to the LQBT+ community only to exploit its position financially. Rainbow capitalism suggests that companies use the symbol of the rainbow to increase their brand recognition and image without taking actions or with taking minimum action to enhance improvements for LGBT+ communities or employees within the company (Suomio, 2022).

As stated before, diversity, equity, and inclusion can bring benefits when managed appropriately. However, if the company is not assessing and addressing the matter in a proper manner, it can cause disorientation and dissatisfaction among employees, and, consequently, lead to a higher turnover rate. Thence, numerous companies are introducing diversity, equity, and inclusion policies often referred to as DEI Policies.

DEI Policies sets the company's approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion. DEI Policies are being introduced to ensure an inclusive work environment that advocates respect and dignity among not only employees but all stakeholders (e.g. customers, and partners) (IRPM, n.d.). They regulate the company processes to ensure that all people are being treated equitably. The scope varies among the companies but the focus is usually put on organizational values, recruitment and selection of new candidates, compensations, development, promotion possibilities, and workplace inclusiveness.

3. Research Methodology

This research aims to examine employees' perception of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the Polish branch of an international company. It seeks to explore the initiatives taken by the company to create an inclusive workplace by examining its policies and practices. The key purpose is to assess if the company's stated commitment to DEI and its actual actions are aligned. Furthermore, the study aims to identify employees' expectations and experiences related to DEI.

To provide an in-depth analysis of a company, a qualitative method has been adopted in this research. To be more specific, this research follows a case study

research design (Gerring and McDermott, 2007). The case selection was based on its relevance to the research objectives. The research consists of multiple data collection techniques that are used to gather comprehensive data and information. These methods include document analysis of company policies, reports, communication materials related to DEI, and a survey conducted among employees at various levels in the organization. The survey employs a 6-point Likert type scale (1 means "strongly disagree", 6 stands for "strongly agree"). Anonymity and privacy were maintained throughout the research process.

The survey was filled by 18 respondents of various statuses, genders, ages, and job experiences (out of 62 workers employed in the unit). The documents that were taken into consideration were: Cultural Behaviour Guidebook, Corporate Governance Guidelines, Code of Business Conduct and Ethics, Supplier Code of Conduct, and materials provided on the company website.

4. Research Findings

As the company wished to remain anonymous, for the purpose of this research it is referred to as "Company X". Company X is part of a global corporation that provides advanced fuel dispensing equipment, systems, and technologies. Company X hires more than 2800 employees all over the world, therefore it classifies as a large enterprise (Eurostat, n.d.). Their headquarters are based in Texas. This study focuses on the Polish branch of company X located in Cracow that deals with software production and testing for the broadly defined fuel industry.

Company's Commitment to DEI in Documents

Company X has established detailed frameworks to ensure ethical conduct and diversity, equity, and inclusion in its operations. The Corporate Governance Guidelines emphasize the board's commitment to diversity in director qualifications and succession planning. This commitment is ensured by employing third-party search firms to include candidates from diverse backgrounds. The Code of Business Conduct and Ethics extends accountability for fostering inclusive workplace to all employees, directors, and external stakeholders. It demonstrates a commitment to addressing misconduct transparently by providing a reporting mechanism and global hotline for ethics concerns. The Code is available in multiple languages, and it showcases dedication to a fair and safe workplace. Additionally, Company X follows The Supplier Code of Conduct. It emphasizes ethical business practices, human rights, and workplace equality. Suppliers who fail to comply face the potential termination of the business relationship, reinforcing the significance of ethical standards throughout the supply chain.

Employee's Review on DEI Efforts

The study surveyed 18 out of 62 employees at Company X, representing a 29% response rate. Participants included diverse age groups, job levels, and lengths of experience. The results concerning DEI recognition, management effort and employees' view are presented in Tabs 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Table 1. Survey results concerning DEI recognition

Statements concerning DEI recognition	Average
My organization hires people from all backgrounds and communities	5.33
The top management in my company is diverse	4.83
Diversity is implemented into the company structure	4.61
Diversity initiatives are commonly seen in the organization	4
Inclusion initiatives are commonly seen in my organization	3.56
The topic of diversity is covered in my training/development plan	5.06
Diversity is discussed during company's meetings	3.72
My trainings include topics of equity and equality	5.33
My training programs include inclusion	5.11

Source: own work.

Company X adapts diversity, equity, and inclusion as a strategic advantage. As evidenced by the survey findings presented in Tab. 1, the company demonstrates a profound respect for individuals valuing their unique backgrounds and experiences. Survey suggests an overall positive sentiment regarding diversity within the organization. The organization's commitment to hiring individuals from diverse backgrounds received a high average score of 5.33. Satisfaction levels with top management and company structure diversity were particularly high among long-term employees with the average score of 4.83. Despite this positive trend, a potential area for improvement was identified as lower and middle-level management's satisfaction with diversity is significantly lower. It might indicate a need for a deepened evaluation of senior management structures. While gender equality initiatives were recognized and positively evaluated, there was a notable lack of awareness for inclusion initiatives.

The survey highlighted the success of the company's DEI communication and education efforts as the average rating for the inclusion of DEI topics in training and development programmes was notably high. Training on equity and equality received the highest score of 5.33, showcasing positive feedback across genders, seniority levels, and lengths of experience within the company. This indicates the success of the company's efforts in communicating and educating individuals on DEI topics.

When examining the statement *Diversity is discussed during company meetings*, mixed responses were observed with a slightly lower average score of 3.72. While a majority agreed with the statement, two respondents explicitly mentioned the absence of discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion during company meetings. The divergence in responses may be attributed to varying levels of employee interest in DEI topics. Some individuals actively engage in these conversations, while others may not perceive or prioritize them during meetings.

Table 2. Survey results concerning management efforts to support DEI

Statements concerning management effort to support DEI	Average
Top management and/or HR support people with disabilities within my company	4.94
The executive team promotes an inclusive workplace	5
I can comfortably share my concerns with my managers/ supervisors	5.5
Inclusion is a priority for my company	4.17
The management team handles the matters related to equity issues satisfactorily	4.94

Source: own work.

Respondents indicated a satisfactory level of support for individuals with disabilities as shown by the average score of 4.94. Notably, during company's relocation in 2018, the amenities for individuals with disabilities were considered, which resulted in a new office on the ground floor with wheelchair-accessible features. What is more, employees mostly agreed that the executive team promotes an inclusive workplace (average 5.0). According to workers' personal experiences, they generally feel comfortable sharing concerns with managers and supervisors, indicating positive perceptions of management's commitment to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the organization.

Table 3. Survey results concerning employees' view on DEI

Statement concerning employees' view on DEI	Average
I am comfortable discussing my social and cultural background with my teammates	5.5
I have always been treated fairly in my company	5.39
The promotion is awarded fairly among employees	5.06
I can recognize the long-term consequences of ignoring diversity and inclusion in my company	3.72
Diversity, equity and inclusion topics influence me personally	3
Implementing diversity, equity and inclusion policies by my organization influenced me on personal level	2.72
Diversity, equity and inclusion practices benefit my organization	3.94

Source: own work.

In considering DEI as a part of the company's strategy, participants acknowledged the presence of inclusion within company values. However, they are perceiving it as a lower priority compared to other organizational objectives (reflected in the average score of 4.17). Despite this, inclusion was recognized as a significant element in the company's overall strategy.

Respondents generally feel at ease discussing social and cultural backgrounds (average score 5.5), indicating a positive and inclusive workplace. Satisfaction with fair treatment is high with a score of 5.39, with one outlier expressing dissatisfaction with the promotion policy. As this person is in an age group 59-68, it might indicate an age discrimination and should be further reviewed. Awareness of the long-term consequences of neglecting DEI varies among participants with an average score of 3.72. Newer employees demonstrate lower knowledge of repercussions resulting from ignoring DEI policies. A noteworthy number of respondents feels DEI has not personally impacted them.

DEI perception analysis reveals higher satisfaction among women, which is potentially linked to personal experiences with DEI initiatives. Among generations, Gen X reports the highest satisfaction. Staff members exhibit slightly higher satisfaction than management. Furthermore, longer tenure correlates with higher satisfaction, which emphasizes the need for ongoing awareness-building especially for newer employees.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

To strengthen inclusion in an organization, it is crucial to prioritize its DEI training programmes for all employees. These training programmes should focus on educating employees about the significance of diversity and equip them with tools to address unconscious biases and promote inclusive behaviours. By investing in training, every company can provide its employees with a deeper understanding of DEI concepts and their individual role in fostering an inclusive workplace environment. Such training initiatives will contribute to creating a culture where diversity is valued, biases are challenged, and inclusive practices are applied by all. The survey indicates a positive outlook on the effectiveness of training programs. Employees express high satisfaction with the inclusion of DEI topics in training and development, giving the highest rating to training on equity and equality.

Additionally, all organizations can leverage their company meetings as a platform for communication. By including DEI content (such as success stories, case studies, and real-life examples) in these meetings, companies can effectively show the positive impact of DEI on the organization and its employees. This approach allows employees to witness how diversity and inclusion contribute to innovation, collaboration, and overall business success. Moreover, these meetings provide an opportunity to address any misconceptions or concerns that employees may have.

To ensure the strength of its inclusive culture, Company X and others who would like to be leaders in the DEI field should focus on clear communication of consequences related to non-compliance with DEI policies. While the Code of Conduct in Company X outlines general consequences, it is essential to ensure that employees have a clear understanding of these actions. Organizations can achieve this by clearly communicating the disciplinary actions and measures that may be taken in response to violations.

Company X is a great example of engaging all stakeholders in the DEI commitment. This includes suppliers, vendors, and other external partners. By promoting DEI principles across all interactions, companies can create a more inclusive system that aligns with its core values. Engaging stakeholders in DEI efforts not only boosts the company's message of inclusivity but also creates the so-called ripple effect inspiring others to embrace diversity and inclusion in their own practices.

To create a truly inclusive workplace, it is important for companies to emphasize that DEI initiatives are a shared responsibility and involve every employee even if they do not belong to a minority group.

Every strategy to be efficient needs to be evaluated. DEI efforts are not different. To ensure their effectiveness, companies should establish a process for assessing their progress. This involves implementing regular surveys or feedback mechanisms that allow employees to provide input on their experiences and perceptions related to DEI. By collecting and analysing this data, the company can identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.

In the world where the word "equality" plays a crucial role, companies should use diversity, equity, and inclusion to create competitive advantage and build an inclusive world of work.

Limitations

As this research followed the case study approach, there are certain limitations. The findings and conclusions drawn from the data provided may have limited generalizability. Factors such as the company's industry branch, size, location, and organizational culture can significantly influence diversity and inclusion efforts. Even though the insights gained from this research can still provide valuable information and perspectives that contribute to the understanding of DEI practices and their impact, they might not apply to all companies.

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Postrzeganie polityk różnorodności, równości i inkluzywności: studium przypadku

Streszczenie: Tematy związane z różnorodnością, równością i inkluzywnością (*diversity, equity and inclusion*) zyskują coraz większe znaczenie w kontekście współczesnego środowiska pracy. W międzynarodowych korporacjach pracownicy spotykają się z różnorodnością i wielokulturowością na co dzień, co skłania firmy do wprowadzania norm i polityk, które mają na celu tworzenie inkluzywnego miejsca pracy, czyli środowiska, w którym wszyscy pracownicy, niezależnie od swojej tożsamości, różnic kulturowych, orientacji seksualnej czy niepełnosprawności, są traktowani sprawiedliwie, szanowani w społeczności firmowej i uwzględniani w procesach decyzyjnych. Badanie opisane w artykule ma na celu zrozumienie opinii pracowników polskiego oddziału międzynarodowej firmy dotyczących działań podejmowanych przez firmę w zakresie różnorodności i równości. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone w formie studium przypadku. W celu zebrania danych zastosowano takie narzędzia, jak ankieta oraz analiza dokumentów wewnętrznych firmy. Wyniki uzyskane w badanym oddziale firmy sugerują, że pracownicy są zadowoleni z obecnego poziomu działań firmy. Wielu natomiast jest nieświadomych lub niedoinformowanych w zakresie odpowiedzialności i działań, jakie podejmuje firma.

Słowa kluczowe: różnorodność, równość, inkluzywność, równość szans, inkluzywne miejsce pracy