

IMPROVING WORKPLACE CULTURE THROUGH

Evidence-Based Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Practices

By Stephanie Creary, Ph.D., Nancy Rothbard, Ph.D., and Jared Scruggs

Overview

Due to the impact of a global pandemic and a worldwide movement to end systemic racism and police brutality, more than ever, company leaders are realizing the need to commit to greater investment and progress in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). While company leaders for decades have spoken of the “business case for diversity,” as it relates to spurring innovation, better decision-making and stronger financial outcomes, DEI is now a business imperative: Employees and consumers alike are now demanding it, firms increasingly need to reach more diverse audiences, and they have acknowledged that recent world events have had a disparate impact on women, people of color and front-line workers.

With DEI’s importance now assumed as a matter of course, there is greater urgency for assessing company effectiveness at creating a workplace culture that emphasizes diversity, inclusion, belonging, equity and respect. Many companies have implemented a robust set of practices, including recruiting initiatives, training, mentoring and employee resource groups; but it has become clear that few are assessing the extent to which these practices are achieving the desired outcomes. This research was developed with the goal of understanding:

- **How companies were defining the key concepts** of diversity, inclusion, belonging, equity and respect.
- **The relationships between these outcomes and seven DEI practices:** diversity recruiting initiatives; education and training; internal diversity partners; managerial involvement; mentoring and sponsorship; physical visibility, and workplace policies.
- **Developing actionable recommendations** for how companies can use the findings to create “medicines” that effectively treat the “ailments” they seek to alleviate.
- **Many of the recommendations are focused on middle managers** because they play a central role in employees’ work experiences. In order for DEI and talent strategies to work, middle managers must see them part of their core job functions, and shift their focus from just recruitment to recruitment and retention.

Findings

The findings were developed through a survey of 1,628 adults on the relationships between DEI practices and outcomes that was conducted across more than 15 industries in the U.S. Between May and December 2020, individual companies were recruited to act as case studies — the experiences of employees at those companies clearly showed how there is no “one size fits all” approach to changing workplace culture to embrace DEI. Rather, companies must consider the unique characteristics of their employees and the right “formula” of practices that will achieve the hoped-for outcomes.

Summary

The business world and the world of academia have come a long way since they first began addressing DEI-related topics more than 50 years ago. This study provides a different vision for DEI research and practice in that it brings both groups together without sacrificing rigor or relevance. The next step of this study is to produce academic articles that contribute to diversity scholarship more broadly and identifying company partners to do further “deep dives” into how these questions are playing out in individual organizations.