**University of Alberta**

Examining Leadership Support, Hiring of DEI Practitioners and Learning Opportunities in Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace
by

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**Abstract**

This capping paper delves into the multifaceted landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace, focusing on three critical dimensions: leadership support, the work of DEI practitioners, and the effectiveness of learning opportunities. With DEI gaining prominence in organizational agendas, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis based on an extensive literature review. The paper explores how organizations define and prioritize DEI, emphasizing the pivotal role of leadership in shaping and sustaining inclusive environments. It delves into the responsibilities and challenges faced by DEI practitioners, providing insights into the dynamics that influence their work. Additionally, the paper evaluates the impact of DEI training initiatives, aiming to discern their effectiveness in fostering behavioral change. Through a comprehensive literature review, this paper contributes nuanced perspectives to the ongoing discourse on DEI, offering valuable insights for scholars, practitioners, and organizational leaders.

**Introduction**

Most organizations today have a statement on their commitment to building a diverse, equitable and inclusive (DEI) workforce. What outcome are these organizations aiming for when committing themselves to the work of DEI? Is it more related to improving the bottom-line productivity, innovation, and collaboration that leads to financial returns? Or is it more related to equal access to opportunities, dignity, respect, and social justice for all? Or is it possible to achieve both? There is an inherent contradiction created between the philosophy and aims of DEI and institutional objectives. Using universities as an example, Kelley (2016) argues that the "racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by 'simply' adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions" (para 11). According to Kelley, universities are not engines of social transformation; rather, activism is. This inherent contradiction is potentially the biggest obstacle to the realization of DEI's importance within institutions. Some ways that institutions are trying to push the needle forward is through getting leadership support, hiring DEI practitioners, and providing learning opportunities in advancing DEI work. The question is how effective these strategies are in accomplishing the goal of creating an equitable and inclusive work environment.

**Theoretical or perspective framework**

I will approach this capping project with an interpretivist paradigm. In this approach, researchers are "working out theoretical explanations to actual events experienced by them" (Sears & Cairns, 2015, p. 66). In other words, I am interested in utilizing my own observations of DEI initiatives and practices such as leadership support, hiring DEI practitioners, and providing learning within public and private sectors to better understand the complexities and challenges in

their implementation and effectiveness. The underlying question to explore here is how organizations and its people attribute meaning to DEI and the strategies related to it. I will interpret the literature based on my social location and lived experience as an immigrant, person of color, and gay man. My lived experience will shape my understanding of this phenomenon that needs to be further researched to formulate a theoretical explanation. Beyond this paradigm, I am also interested in looking at this phenomenon from a critical perspective. Specifically, I want to utilize Meghji's (2022) racialized social system as a framework within which lies the concept of racialized organizations. It will assist me in understanding how organizations (i.e., the meso) shape both the policies of the racial state (i.e. the macro) and individual prejudice (i.e., the micro) (p. 150).

## Purpose

The purpose of this capping project is to assess DEI in the workplace using existing literature and analyze it through the three areas of leadership support, hiring DEI practitioners, and providing learning/training opportunities. The purpose of this paper is twofold:

1. To provide critical and comprehensive narrative reviews of the literature related to getting leadership support, hiring DEI practitioners, and providing learning in advancing DEI in the workplace (Association, 2020).

2. Based on the findings of the literature review, I will also capture the trends, identify relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature (Association, 2020).

## Capping Project Design

I will utilize a narrative review of the literature which aims to identify and synthesize the literature reviewed for this project. This will be achieved by collecting published scholarly

literature on this topic that addresses one or more of the following research questions across the three focus areas of leadership support, training, and DEI practitioners.

*Leadership support*

I want to explore the *why* behind the various DEI initiatives by summarizing what the literature tells us about how organizations define DEI, why it is important to organizations, and what is the influence of leadership on the success of DEI initiatives?

*Providing learning/training opportunities*

I want to explore *what* is being taught to employees about DEI by reviewing what the literature tells us about the effectiveness of such learning/training opportunities in changing behaviours.

*Hiring DEI practitioners*

I want to explore *how* the work of DEI is performed by exploring what the literature tells us about who is responsible for doing the work and what barriers are encountered by these practitioners.

Based on the findings of the above questions, I will discuss whether DEI is the right strategy for institutional change, as well as what evidence is available on the positive impact of doing DEI work for the people and the larger institution.

## Findings

The findings from the literature reviewed for this project are grouped across the three areas of leadership support, hiring DEI practitioners, and providing learning/training opportunities. Before diving into the findings from the literature review across the three areas,

let's explore the concept of diversity management and how it has evolved to become diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

**From diversity management to DEI**

The terms that we come to understand today as diversity, equity, and inclusion as defined in the table below have evolved from the concept of diversity management. To better understand the importance of DEI today, it is helpful to do an overview of the concept of diversity management, its business case, and its critique in the literature.

| Diversity | Equity | Inclusion |
|---|---|---|
| "is about the individual. It is about the variety of unique dimensions, qualities, and characteristics we all possess, and the mix that occurs in any group of people. Race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, economic status, physical abilities, life experiences, and other perspectives can make up individual diversity" (*Glossary of IDEA terms* 2023) | "Is where everyone is treated according to their diverse needs in a way that enables all people to participate, perform, and engage to the same extent" (*Glossary of IDEA terms* 2023) | "is creating a culture that embraces, respects, accepts, and values diversity. It is a mindful and equitable effort to meet individual needs so everyone feels valued, respected, and able to contribute to their fullest potential. Where diversity occurs naturally, creating the mix in the organization, inclusion is the choice that helps the mix work well together." (*Glossary of IDEA terms* 2023) |

The concept of diversity management originated in the US in the 90s (Bendl et al, 2015, p. 255). At the core, paradigms such as "positivism and interpretivism view diversity as a problem to manage rather than a resource for stimulating political, social, and ethical changes reflective of the tradition of social justice" (p. 84). With this understanding and the increasingly diverse workforce, organizations have made "the assumption that by properly managing workforce diversity they can improve business performance through greater utilization of

different talents and attracting a broader and more diverse customer base" (p. 233). This is achieved through "implementation of policies and procedures to create a more inclusive and positive work environment that values the diversity of the workforce" (*Glossary of IDEA terms* 2023). This approach is best described as the business case that is managerially driven with a focus on improving organizational outcomes through investment in diversity management initiatives (Bendl et al, 2015, p. 255). It is "economic in nature related to the increasingly competitive and global marketplace that pushed organizations to embrace and manage diversity or perish at the hands of competitors who were already ahead of the game" (p. 257). In this realm, diversity management initiatives are required to be "sold as a business not social work" to the top management (p. 257). A key aspect of the business case is to convince others, especially those who hold power and have control over resources to see it as essential (p. 258).

To understand where DEI stands today, I attended a webinar on "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Trends in the Canadian Post-Secondary Sector" hosted by the University of Calgary (Smith, 2023). Leaders within the DEI post-secondary space from across Alberta were invited to share their perspectives. Today, there are several institutions that have appointed senior leaders in leading the work of EDI (Smith, 2023). This signals at least a commitment and intention to enact EDI as a strategic priority aligned with the mission of the institution. There has been an increased focus on EDI because of the collective racial reckoning since George Floyd's murder in 2020, emergence and re-emergence of attacks towards gender and sexual diversity, and the ongoing navigation of uncertain times with political and social unrest (Smith, 2023). Organizations have been dealing with EDI issues since mid-late 80s and still today we are confronted with challenges we sought decades ago (e.g. women's rights, Roe v Wade, LGBTQ rights, etc.) (Smith, 2023). One of the speakers raised the question, "Do we continue to move

forward with advancing an inclusive institution or succumb to the backlash?" (Smith, 2023). An overview of the trends seen in the post-secondary environment with EDI was shared. This included:

1.  rise in senior equity leaders where 80% of U15 institutions have a senior leader position dedicated to EDI (Smith, 2023);

2.  the readiness level of institutions was discussed which questioned whether institutions are set up for success with appropriate infrastructure, people, knowledge, and resources to do EDI work (Smith, 2023);

3.  there is an ongoing call to decolonize EDI which raises the question of how does Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing fit within the call for inclusive and equitable institutions (Smith, 2023);

4.  the changing and expanding vocabulary of EDI and its various acronyms were discussed to raise questions about what needs to be done to ensure there is equity among equity seeking, deserving, and previously denied groups (Smith, 2023);

5.  the concept of performative EDI was discussed to expose how institutions need to walk the talk by using data and evidence to shift from activities to systemic change (Smith, 2023);

6.  the need for incorporating EDI in research and teaching was discussed (Smith, 2023);

7.  the need for collecting EDI data to make evidence-based decisions; mental health and the future of work were considered as other trends that need to be addressed with the principles of EDI in mind (Smith, 2023);

8.  lastly, the ongoing backlash towards EDI was identified as another trend where false claims and misinformation rooted in white supremacy is leading to claims like merit over

equity, book banning under the guise of protecting children, defunding DEI offices in

universities in the USA, banning theories like critical race theory and intersectionality,

and efforts to reverse human right gains for racialized minorities, LGBTQ2S+, gender

identity, gender expression and so on (Smith, 2023).

These trends indicate that there is still a lot of work to be done but also prove "the importance of

embedding EDI into operational processes and not only seeking the work as one-off large-scale

initiatives" (Smith, 2023). One of the speakers best described it as "not something one does in

addition to, but instead what just one does" (Smith, 2023).


**Business case of diversity management**

   The context for this paper is situated within the workplace. I have worked in both the

public and private sectors. For this paper, I will be summarizing the literature to identify the core

principles and philosophy of doing the work of DEI by gleaning on examples from both the

public and private sector organizations. There are certainly differences in how this work is

approached and its outcomes between the two sectors. To comment on it further, Bendl et al

(2015) conducted a study exploring the discourses (business case and social justice) being used

by organizations when talking about diversity (p. 269). They found the dominant discourse was

business case among both profit and not for profit organizations. The social justice discourse is

strongest in non-profit organizations, but they are forced to apply a business-like approach for

efficiency and professional management (p. 271). The authors found that some organizations

(including for profit) carved out the business case for social justice issues but the tension

between the two discourses was always present (p. 272). They concluded that the business case

was the most instrumental aspect of managing diversity. Therefore, it makes sense to dive deeper

into the business case discourse to understand how organizations typically manage diversity

initiatives. The "business case attempts to quantify the benefits of effectively managing diversity and links diversity management initiatives to improvements in productivity and profitability as a result of various strategic and human resource initiatives" (p. 258). It relies on "managing people by encouraging them to embrace differences and changing the organizational culture" (p. 258). Overall, the benefits of effectively managing diversity allows the organizations to attract and retain top talent by expanding their reach beyond the local context (p. 259). It helps save cost by preventing litigation and complaints related to discrimination if diversity is effectively managed (p. 259). It helps expand an organization's consumer base by hiring individuals who represent this base (p. 260). Lastly, there is enhanced creativity and innovation due to diverse teams and their ability to problem solve and make decisions (p. 261). The authors argued that "trying to quantify the benefits of workforce diversity is questionable as there have been mixed and inconclusive studies" (p. 233). The research is incomplete and contradictory as organizations fail at measuring the impact of their diversity initiatives (p. 261). They used diversity training as an example "where only 30% of the organizations actually measure the impact of such training on the behaviours at work" (p. 261).

My interest is in exposing this contradiction to show how the capitalist agenda of diversity management lacks the moral value of creating an inclusive and equitable workplace. By dismissing the social justice lens of diversity management, organizations are "depoliticizing these issues and shying away from more political concerns of inequality and discriminating norms of difference" (Plotnikof, 2021, p. 466). Also, to raise the concern that organizations need to be clear on their outcome for committing to the work of DEI. Diversity researchers and scholars argue there is a relationship between the business case and social justice discourses (Bendl et al, 2015, p. 266). Ahmed (2007 as cited in Bendl et al, 2015) suggests that diversity

practitioners can utilize the business case for diversity management when appealing to senior managers to enable social justice and transformation in organizations (p. 266). Ahmed advises practitioners to use their own judgment to decide which works when and for whom between the two discourses (p. 266). The authors still argued that the business case approach to diversity management "absolves organizations of their moral responsibility and other worthwhile endeavours that do not directly tie to financial performance and labour market conditions" such as equity, fairness, and social justice (p. 270). There is an underlying force for the business case approach which "favors individual needs over equalizing differences amongst groups" (p. 270). This begs the question of whether the "social justice discourse is being co-opted to achieve business case ends" (p. 273). Some lingering questions to consider include what are the intended and unintended consequences of the business case for diversity management? Do we always need a business reason to address issues related to injustice, inequality, and discrimination? At the helm of making some of these key decisions is leadership support which is examined next to determine their role and influence in advancing DEI in the workplace.

**Leadership support**

To understand the role of organizations in tackling the phenomenon of DEI "requires an examination of social structures, institutions, and ways of knowing and being" (Ortiz & Jani, 2010, p. 190). This requires examining the institutional fabric designed by its leadership who are heavily involved in making important decisions about what can and cannot be weaved in. Meghji's (2022) concept of racialized organizations which are described as "racial structures which connect organizational rules to social and material resources" clarifies the role organizations and its leadership plays in the progress of DEI work (p. 150). They are "an essential medium through which racialization happens and racial structures evolve" (p. 156). By

studying racialized organizations, it allows us to "examine how the unequal distribution of resources is legitimated" and "how organizational hierarchies are one of the ways that agency is actually expressed (or constrained) in the contemporary era" (p. 157). The author referred to agency as "ability to express subjectivity and have one's subjectivity recognized by others" (p. 159). In the workplace, "agency can refer to the type of work you are (or are not) allowed to do in the organization, the ability to set organizational norms, culture and goals, and the ability to organize other people's labour." (p. 162). The author suggested that looking at the organizational hierarchy and the top management can help explain how the dominant group "gain unequal shares of resources in a manner that becomes institutionalized across the whole racialized social system." (p. 167). The reality is that there is still a lack of diversity within the top management where "Black people make up just 1 percent of CEOs and Latinos less than 2 per cent" (p. 167). The CEO of a company has immense power and privilege that allows them to "shape organizational culture not only because of their economic status, but also by virtue of their wielding larger amounts of symbolic capital than other members in their localized area of social space." (p. 167). The lack of understanding that comes without lived experience of inequality, discrimination, and injustice within the top management can inhibit the progress for the work within the DEI space. There is another piece to this argument where racialized minorities are sometimes expected to be the ones to lead DEI work in their organizations. This will be further explored in the section about the role of DEI practitioners. For now, let's turn to the importance of having leadership support to advance the work of DEI in the workplace.

Pemberton and Kisamore (2022) shared survey results from "an expert panel of 32 diversity and inclusion professionals and found that 93.33% of them agreed that leaders' buy-in, commitment, behavior and demonstrated support was among the most important factors in

evaluating the success of an organization's diversity program" (p. 65). Without their support

advancing DEI initiatives within the organization is equivalent to "an uphill battle of competing

for resources and credibility within the organization" (p. 65). They expressed that top

management needs to be committed to funding and advocating for initiatives to promote

diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within the organization (p. 47). Without a deep level of

commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusivity, real organizational change cannot occur (p. 47).

Auger-Dominguez (2020) shared "while 27% of chief diversity officers find themselves still

having to make the case for diversity, inclusion, and belonging in the workplace, the good news

is that the majority of top leaders already understand how critical these efforts are" (p. 112).

Many leaders are eager for actionable frameworks and advice to create more-inclusive cultures

(p. 112). This is also seen in the study performed by Fife et al (2021) where they found leaders

"overwhelmingly feel that they should be proactively responsible for diversity, inclusion, equity,

and justice in their organizations" (p. 3). They found leaders believed they were "most capable of

influencing diversity (92%) within their organizations, then inclusion (90%), equity (79.73%),

and finally, justice (79.71%)" (p. 4). The challenge they are met with is a lack of clarity in

defining the terms DEI (p. 2). This lack of clarity creates risk as explained by Ahmed (2007 as

cited in Fife et al, 2021) "If diversity is not tied down as a concept or is not even understood as

signifying something in particular, there are clearly risks, in the sense that people can then define

'diversity' in a way that may actually block action" (p. 2). Beyond clarifying the terms and what

it means for an organization, Jin et al's (2017) study suggested to develop a strong culture of

inclusion, "leaders must practice inclusive leadership from being sensitive to the needs of each

follower to recognizing their performance in a meaningful way, regardless of their social,

cultural, and/or physical backgrounds" (p. 314). Further, they claimed that "inclusive leadership

can help transform demographic differences into more of a symbol of innovation than of organizational hindrances" (p. 314). Green (2018) perfectly describes the need for inclusive leadership when they describe how "diversity is a reality and inclusion is a choice" (p. 186). The author argues that "too often executive leaders view DEI work as either a numerical problem or a problem of compliance that needs managing" (p. 186). In the author's opinion, "to actively put EDI values into practice, leaders must make it a choice" (p. 186). They must practice "inclusive leadership to help others acknowledge current reality and frame the conversation in such a way that people can choose to act on the inclusion imperative" (p. 186). The author urges the importance of "leadership and advocacy to make inclusion a reality" (p. 189). There is a need for leaders to clearly "articulate and advocate the importance of EDI for the organization and do so on an ongoing basis" (p. 189). Most importantly, the author states that "EDI must be seen as an asset that adds value to the leader's portfolio" (p. 197). The question then is what can leaders do to influence the work of DEI in their organizations?

Auger-Dominguez (2020) offers some practical tips for leaders to consider when leading DEI initiatives in their organization. The author claims that often fear prevents many leaders from taking action (p. 112). The author urges that "leaders not put the work of trying to solve for diversity, equity, and inclusion in their workplaces on employees of color but rather be visible doing this work themselves" (p. 112). It requires them "to be careful in the words they use, but don't let their fear replace their curiosity" (p. 113). To stay curious requires educating themselves on various social issues and facing the reality of today's world that is ever so complex with "trying to understand human dynamics that can feel untranslatable, conflicting, and painful" (p. 113). Leaders need to be more vulnerable in their ability to communicate candidly about difficult topics (p. 113). They need to be more humble by "accepting they are

never going to be perfect and should apologize and admit their mistakes and blind spots, express gratitude when someone corrects them, listen to those who have been injured or silenced, and commit to doing better" (p. 113). At the end, actions speak louder than words so leaders must walk the talk. Moreover, Bourke & Titus (2021) offer suggestions on how to become an inclusive leader. To make the case of inclusive leadership, they share some benefits of having an inclusive leader whose team is "17% more likely to report that they are high performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions, and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively" (p. 2). To achieve these results, they offer six traits for leaders to practice including "visible commitment, humility, awareness of bias, curiosity about others, cultural intelligence, and effective collaboration" (p. 3). These traits require an inclusive leader to be open in sharing their personal weakness, acknowledge people's individuality, and learn about cultural differences (pp. 4-5).

**Providing learning/training opportunities**

There is no shortage of training offered within an institution whether it is mandatory or optional. In my work, training is often seen as an easy solution by leaders to show that something is being done to address the problem. In my opinion, it is a band-aid solution that does not address the root cause of the problem. I am interested in reviewing the literature to better understand what DEI learning strategies are being utilized and whether they are effective in behavioural change. The question that lingers for me is whether it is possible to change people's mental models to achieve a diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environment.

Education, training, and raising awareness play a vital role in making inclusion a reality (Green, 2018, p. 191). Effective diversity education allows people to learn about DEI based on their level of understanding or "from where they are." (p. 191). Campbell (2019) states that

"institutional EDI strategies typically integrate two strands: a first focused on prevention, and a second focused on responding to incidents of discrimination" (p. 51). The educational programming falls under the prevention strategy "as they seek to raise participants' awareness of behaviours that might have discriminatory effects, even when those effects are not intended" (p. 51). Through reviewing the literature, scholars and researchers have shared various perspectives on the definition and purpose of such training programs. Cox (2022) explains that "DEI trainings have proliferated under a variety of labels (e.g. "Diversity Training," "DEI training," "Sensitivity Training," "Cultural Competency Training," "Anti-Racism Training")." (p. 1039). At the core, the purpose of these training programs is to "create positive changes related to bias, diversity, equity, and inclusion" (p. 1039). McGuire and Bagher (2010) "define diversity training as the process by which a workforce is educated about cultural, socio-economic, racial and religious differences among employees and taught how to embrace those differences so as to create and maintain an effective work environment" (p. 494). To relate it back to the organization, they explain these training programs are being positioned as a competency with the expectation that all employees need to be diversity-competent (p. 495). This will assist with "incorporating new worldviews into their problem solving and decision-making activities" (p. 495). Lastly, Alhejji et al (2015) described diversity training as "a distinct set of programs aimed at facilitating positive intergroup interactions, reducing prejudice and discrimination and enhancing the skills, knowledge and motivation of people to interact with diverse others" (pp. 95-96). DEI training is estimated to be an $8 billion industry (Lipman, 2018 as cited in Cox, 2022, p. 1040) and is becoming a more pressing priority for human resource development professionals (McGuire and Bagher, 2010, p. 494). But the question remains whether it is effective in affecting organizational and individual change.

There is consensus across several scholars and researchers that there is a distinct lack of research examining the effectiveness of diversity training (McGuire and Bagher, 2010, p. 497). Yap et al (2010) noted the lack of focus on addressing the structural or systemic practices that perpetuate inequitable work experiences and outcomes within these training programs. Alhejji et al (2015) argued that "the evidence of its positive impact on organizational performance is far from conclusive" (p. 96). Green (2018) mentioned that mandatory diversity training is counterproductive and can hurt what organizations are trying to achieve (p. 192). Campbell (2019) raised concerns about the typical audience at these training programs, which is commonly those easiest to bring together and are already willing to learn and accept the philosophy and principles of EDI (p. 52). Further, the author claims these educational initiatives are presumed quick fixes to institutional discrimination which is likely to fail when it neglects the systemic forces that drive inequities (p. 53). It is considered a band-aid solution when organizations are pressed to demonstrate their commitment towards EDI (p. 53). It is likely utilized as a strategy for "deflecting liability, protecting the organization from litigation, which gives the perception that training is lip service to EDI" (p. 53). Nguyen (2014) claims that diversity training lacks the ability to go beyond the awareness level, organizations fail at conducting proper needs assessments, there is no proper evaluation conducted for these training offerings, and leadership support for it is varied (p. 15).

There were many critiques pointed out in the literature about the diversity training programs. I want to highlight some key areas that are worth noting and should be taken into consideration when developing such programs. Campbell (2019) and Cox (2022) share that there is too much focus on the individual as opposed to organizational culture and leadership. This approach suggests that "there is something 'wrong' with the recipients, which is predestined to

make people feel defensive and to decrease motivation to change" (Cox, 2022, p. 1041). This comes from the information deficit approach towards designing these training programs. This approach assumes recipients lack key information, then try to correct that deficiency (p. 1039). This is a "highly ineffective approach to creating cognitive-behavioral change" (p. 1040). Along the same lines of the training design, the training was critiqued for the lack of understanding about the various diversity training interventions (Alhejji et al, 2015, p. 132); it is rooted in Anglo-Saxon perspective that cannot be generalized to non-western groups (p. 96); it is difficult to draw conclusion from the diversity training programs as they all utilize a variety of training techniques (p. 96). They are most often "based on one-off or regular seminars, periodic interventions over weeks or months, workshop interventions, and/or self-paced e-learning" which lack "providing work-based, participatory learning to work with different employees" (Fujimoto & Hartel, 2017, p. 1123). The critique related to lack of evaluation was echoed by everyone. McGuire and Bagher (2010) claimed "greater attention needs to focus on the evaluation of diversity training initiatives" (p. 497). Alhejji et al (2015) emphasized the "poor use of diversity-training measures, too much reliance on self-report measures and little longitudinal investigation of outcomes" (p. 131). Fujimoto and Hartel (2017) shared that "diversity training is often limited to short-term affective evaluation or self-reported behavioral change with little evidence of objective behavioral change that results in improving work relationships among different employees" (p. 1123). Many scholars offered solutions that would help improve the effectiveness of these diversity training programs.

There was agreement amongst the scholars that there is a need for express support and a clear EDI commitment from institutional leaders to have educational efforts be embedded into larger efforts that focus on cultural and systemic reform (Campbell, 2019, p. 53). If these training

programs are designed well then, they have "the potential to elevate individual and group consciousness, and this can have lasting, positive EDI outcomes for an institution" (p. 55). They need to shift away from a remedial approach that presumes that something or someone is flawed and towards a more proactive approach that furthers the commitment of making EDI a core value (p. 56). It is ineffective when "it is mandated, top-down, as a mode of redress for a problem" (p. 56). Some ways to improve the effectiveness of these training programs include "raising consciousness and reducing complacency through self-reflection and critical thinking at the individual level, which can be meaningfully complemented by collectively oriented strategies that build more inclusive communities" (p. 55). The author believes this "can cultivate participants' courage to change their conduct and may prompt them to influence one another to promote and sustain change" (p. 55). They framed EDI education efforts as forward looking that imagines what a more inclusive institution can and should look like (p. 56). This requires individual participants to recognize their capacity and responsibility for change. Beyond gaining self-awareness through these training programs, Cox (2022) goes a step further and suggests "an empowerment-based approach that respects people's autonomy and equip them to be effective, self-motivated agents of change within themselves and within their institutions" (p. 1039). This centers the individual as the primary driver of the change process (p. 1041). Instead of approaching the learning and change process as something that is done to people, the author suggests working with people (p. 1041). It requires engaging with the "participants' pre-existing values, motivations, social connections, and other psychological processes" (p. 1041). But the goal is not to correct a deficit in their knowledge, but instead enhance their existing knowledge and experiences (p. 1041). To achieve this meaningful lasting change, the author who is an EDI practitioner and scientist suggested exploring "the use of cognitive behavioral change theory

(CBT) to be the foundational approach for the DEI training" (p. 1042). The author claims that it "is one of the oldest and most widely applied behavioral change frameworks" (p. 1043). It helps participants "to identify maladaptive cognitions and behaviors, teaching them to understand the impact of those cognitions and behaviors, and giving them concrete cognitive and behavioral tools to help them change" (p. 1044). The author suggests applying this framework to DEI training to "teach generalizable and customizable skills, so recipients can identify and address the infinite variability of biases and inequities they may encounter" (p. 1044). The author argues that often people coming to these training programs have good intentions of doing better but intentions alone cannot effectively create change (p. 1052). This approach requires adopting a scientific method that will help in understanding, predicting, and changing human behavior (p. 1053). This means that DEI training cannot be a one-off exercise in a year but instead an ongoing sustainable learning that is multidimensional and is part of a long-term institutional strategy with senior leadership commitment, accountability, and measures. It requires thorough needs assessment to identify the right interventions for addressing the relevant issues and gaps in people's learning and development and establishing metrics that will evaluate its effectiveness to identify what efforts work or don't (Nguyen, 2014, p. 16).

By reviewing the literature on the DEI training's effectiveness or lack thereof within organizations shows the power and agency that organizations have in shaping the narrative of the social structures and individual agency (Meghji, 2022, p. 147). Organizations are not race neutral but instead shape the policies that impact how people behave and treat one another through the various activities and opportunities afforded to them like training opportunities as one example. They can constrain (or expand) individual agency which refers to the ability to express subjectivity and have one's subjectivity recognized by others (pp. 157 and 159). The training

programs are one way that individuals would get the opportunity to express their subjectivities and have it recognized by others if it is built effectively. Now the question lies about who has the responsibility to lead the daunting task of doing the work of advancing DEI within the organization and whether they are afforded the agency to affect change.

**Hiring DEI practitioners**

One of the most interesting things I have observed in working within the public and private sector is the uncertainty around who is responsible for doing the work of DEI. Some of the initiatives I have seen implemented include creating committees, employee resource groups, hiring a diversity practitioner, adding DEI as a department within human resources, among others. I am interested in researching and exploring the environment that these practitioners must work within, how their work is defined, and what obstacles they encounter in implementing policies, practices, and educational initiatives related to DEI.

With the dual effects of globalization and workforce mobility increasing, (McGuire and Bagher, 2010, p. 494) neoliberal principles have become the ideological framework and dominant discourse in the operation of many profit and non-profit organisations (Henry et al, 2017, p. 8). Henry et al (2017) argue the presence of "discourses of liberalism, meritocracy, neutrality, and objectivity that mask the stubborn persistence of inequity and unacknowledged biases" (p. 8). Their research uncovered the prevalence of covert and more subtle forms of racism, racial bias, racial harassment, and bullying within the post-secondary institutions context (p. 9). This has led to utilizing performative indicators to combat these issues including "more performance indicators and matrices, and more auditing and reporting" (p. 12). This asks DEI practitioners to spend more time making a case for the need of certain projects than doing the work (p. 185). This is the environment that DEI practitioners currently operate within their

organizations which will help in defining the work they are expected to do and the obstacles they face.

Ahmed (2012) poses serious questions about what it means to do diversity within institutions and how it gets co-opted to become a compliance measure. More specifically, the author explores the role of diversity practitioners in higher education institutions and shares the challenges they face in doing DEI work. The work of DEI practitioners can be best described as "banging your head against a brick wall" because DEI work is often an afterthought for the institution (p. 26). This leads to practitioners doing diversity by circulating information about it and tagging it with important existing valued places (pp. 30-31). In other words, they become "institutional plumbers" and "document churners" who must identify gaps in written policies and sort out the blockages where DEI work gets stuck because of lack of institutional will to change (pp. 26 and 90). Henry et al (2017) claim that "under neoliberalism, the most important measure of the effectiveness of equity policies is not their ability to address racism and other forms of inequities but rather the extent to which the presence of these mechanisms leads to the perception that universities are efficient, competitive, and leaders" (p. 238). Ahmed (2012) describes the goal of a DEI practitioner as removing the necessity of their existence, so their existence becomes necessary for the task (p. 23). Their responsibility is "to be persistent to make EDI an automatic thought of consideration" (p. 25). Unfortunately, most institutions see it as a way of "rebranding", something to be managed and valued as a human resource (p. 53). This is like the business case described earlier. It requires DEI practitioners to switch between business and social justice models depending on who they are working with (p. 75). Another role that DEI practitioners play includes leading committees and advisory boards. Ahmed (2012) described the work of such committees as making decisions about decisions (p. 122). In addition, "institutions

can 'do committees' as a way of not being committed, of not following through" (p. 124).

Without institutional and leadership support, such initiatives appear as lip service rather than

transformative change (p. 131).

  Bertone and Abeynayake (2019) explored the transient nature of the role, which is

described as "taking up the role for a period and eventually moving back to one's original

domain of expertise or exploring a new function" (p. 87). Or as described in the corporate world

"on the side of your desk" work project with limited resources and support. This paper explores

questions that I have been thinking about since my work in HR within both public and private

sector organizations: "can the D&I role be viewed as an agent of social change that is able to

enact further major changes? Or is the role just another arm of human resource management

serving the aims of corporate strategy?" (p. 87). The authors examine the role of D&I

practitioners through two concepts - tempered radicals and liberal reformers (p. 93). Tempered

radicals are "people who work within mainstream organizations to change them from within" (p.

93). Whereas "liberal reformers do not seek to transform the system, rather they seek to refine

and enhance the system to create a "level playing field" through changes to rules and

procedures" (p. 93). The author concluded that D&I practitioners were best described as

tempered radicals who "used mandated positions and/or the support of senior people in their

organizations to influence organizational processes, culture, and outcomes in a manner that

sought to transform organizational culture to promote diversity and inclusion" (p. 93). Similarly,

Plotnikof et al (2021) used the concept of "embodied critique" to describe the work of D&I

practitioners, which is writing or acting from within organizations instead of writing or talking

about them (p. 480). Therefore, suggesting that DEI workers within organizations "embody

change by placing themselves on the organizational margin while critically questioning and

problematizing organizational practices" (p. 480). This requires individuals to speak up against societal/organizational consensus which is not comfortable work to do (p. 481).

Swan and Fox (2010) comment further on the placement of D&I practitioners within the human resources realm. They argue DEI work is stripped of its political purchase where "HR-based DEI workers channel more progressive diversity claims into preset organizational priorities and their own limited instrumentalizing preoccupations" (p. 572). This is what the authors called the professionalization of DEI work which leads to its de-radicalization (p. 573). It limits critique and constraints dissent within organizations (p. 573). The authors described practitioners involved in this type of DEI work within HR as professionalized activists who "engage in a politics of the possible" and "creep into the neoliberal fold" (p. 573). This leads to DEI work being co-opted or resist managerial and organizational urges to render diversity a tool to control 'the other' (p. 574). Similarly, Bertone and Abeynayake (2019) point out that "the often-fragmented role of D&I specialists situated within the HRM function can cause tensions and conflicts for the individual incumbent, who may need to juggle D&I with other, operational or HR tasks" (p. 94).

Green (2018) shares their experience working as a chief diversity officer to shed light on the expectations of the role and challenges faced. They point out that typically such leadership positions in the DEI space are established because of one of two reasons. It is either prompted due to a form of unrest caused by an incident or the senior leadership finally somehow sees the need for it (pp. 187-188). According to the author, the scope of this role is very ambiguous due to the variability of their responsibilities and authority in enacting change (p. 188). Their role is often described as "change agent" where they are expected "to exercise inclusive leadership to challenge and change the culture of the organization through developing key relationships,

educating, and building consensus" (p. 190). In part by doing this they are setting a course that allows others to be a part of it and infuse the principles of EDI within their respective parts of the organization (p. 190). They are heavily involved in advocacy where they need to strike a balance between being a member of the senior leadership and being a critic as well (p. 190). Beyond their core operational duties, the author shared that from a symbolic perspective they are to provide hope and symbolize the organization's commitment toward the values of EDI (p. 197). This is often problematic as they have no real power or authority to change anything (p. 197). Ahmed (2012) best summarizes the work of D&I practitioners as encountering resistance (i.e. the wall) and then countering that resistance (p. 175). Their aim is "to transform the wall into a table, turning the tangible object of institutional resistance into a tangible platform for institutional action" (p. 175).

Beyond the challenges mentioned above, there are some specific obstacles that are unique to the work of DEI practitioners. Ahmed (2012) expressed that the institution sees DEI practitioners as posing a problem because they keep exposing problems that the institution doesn't want to bear hearing (p. 63). Their work is within a tick box approach in which doing well is presumed to be something that can be measured, distributed, and shared (e.g.: 100% staff diversity-trained means having met the target is a "good practice") (p. 107). The best way to put it is that "DEI work is like a catch-up game between what organizations say and what they do" (p. 140). Another obstacle faced by these practitioners that is echoed by several scholars is the limited staff, resources, and authority. Green (2018) points out that these positions are set up to fail because of the inadequate backing, funding, staff, and space to succeed (pp. 196-197). Henry et al (2017) agree with this sentiment stating poor staffing and lack of resources makes it challenging for practitioners to conduct their work within post-secondary institutions (pp. 183-

184). More seriously, these practitioners are "hired to 'not rock the boat'" (p. 226). This non-performativity of DEI cannot be divorced from neoliberalism as described earlier where it focuses more on providing a perception that institutions are inclusive and equitable. Zheng (2022) also argued that "much of the problem rests with the extreme lack of standards, consistency, and accountability among DEI practitioners" (p. 2). There is a lack of agreement on "what actual skills and competencies are necessary to become a "good" practitioner" (p. 2). In the end, these obstacles can have negative consequences on the practitioners doing this work.

Pemberton and Kisamore (2022) looked at the experience of burnout among D&I professionals and the reasons for it. They found that there is "a lack of clearly defined role responsibilities and, to some extent, competing role objectives" (p. 46). These roles are still new to most organizations so the "job descriptions and task expectations of D&I professionals are still ill-defined and vary based on the needs of their employer" (p. 40). There is a high likelihood that they are establishing their role as they are working in it due to the lack of previously existing structures (p. 40). The authors pointed out that "D&I professionals are overwhelmingly women and people of color" (p. 40). This makes them more susceptible to tokenism in the workplace as they are expected to educate leaders and employees about the relevance and importance of issues related to EDI potentially using their past experiences of discrimination and harassment to dismantle destructive systems and behaviors in the workplace (p. 40). The authors claim that this "could be viewed as a job demand that results in burnout, most notably emotional exhaustion" (p. 40). Meghji (2022) conceptualizes this experience as performing racial tasks, which is defined as "work minorities do that is associated with their position in the organizational hierarchy and reinforces Whites' position of power within the workplace" (p. 164). This is another instance that shows the constraining of agency by dictating the type of labour certain

groups are expected to perform (p. 164). By performing these tasks, racialized people in an organization are trying to fit into the culture which becomes an obstacle that is typically not something that non-racialized individuals have to maneuver (p. 165). The question remains on how practitioners tackle these obstacles and what is needed for them to be successful.

To create meaningful change through the work of DEI practitioners, there are several best practices that were mentioned in the literature. Many scholars agreed senior leaders need to become DEI champions (Ahmed, 2012, p. 131). Ahmed (2012), Bertone and Abeynayake (2019) and Green (2018) all agreed that doing DEI work should not be the sole responsibility of one office or individual. Instead, it should be a collective and shared responsibility of everyone within the institution. Ahmed (2012) suggested making use of diversity/equality champions (p. 134). Green (2018) argued that "authority, power, and resources are required to integrate EDI into the organization's DNA" (p. 196). Bertone and Abeynayake (2019) suggested embedding "responsibility for D&I within managerial roles and attaching KPIs to the achievement of D&I outcomes" so DEI practitioners can share the load and responsibilities (pp. 94 and 97). They described this strategy as "growing the pie" (p. 94). Beyond these suggestions, other scholars mentioned making "changes in procedural rules and mandates, more resources, greater input from equity activists, greater monitoring, and more administrative support" (Henry et al, 2017, p. 237). Bertone and Abeynayake (2019) suggested providing enhanced status, resources, and formal power to DEI practitioners within organizations (p. 99). The reality is that this work can take significant time as shared by Green (2018) who took three to five years in setting up a diversity office (p. 197). This requires patience and ongoing support from leadership and the people within the organization. Moreover, this requires organizations to consider "structural factors, training needs, and expected responsibilities of D&I professionals to minimize role

ambiguity and role conflict" before imposing such work on them (Pemberton & Kisamore, 2022, p. 47). This is largely to help prevent occupational burnout and contribute to the success of professionals in this field (p. 47). More strategically, Zheng (2022) suggested moving beyond using "the rationale of an imperfect intervention (like a one-off training seminar) that might not work is still better than nothing at all" (p. 2). Instead, the author suggested identifying DEI challenges before prescribing solutions, conducting DEI audits through surveys, focus groups and other interventions that will help in collecting relevant data to take effective action, and creating tangible outcomes that are data driven and have clear indicators and metrics to know whether the outcomes were achieved or not (pp. 3-4).

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

The literature review offers various insights for scholars, practitioners, and organizational leaders to consider when implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. I will highlight and summarize recommendations that are key to consider in creating meaningful change and moving beyond the performative measures.

### Clarify outcomes for engaging in DEI efforts

It is evident from the literature review that there is a prevailing emphasis on the business case for diversity management in both profit and not-for-profit organizations. There is a need for clear organizational outcomes and commitment towards DEI work, whether it is driven by financial goals, social justice imperatives, or a balanced combination of both. The paper highlights potential contradictions between the business case and social justice discourses. This requires organizations to be transparent about their objectives and to articulate their motivations for engaging in DEI efforts. But the question remains on how organizations can foster alignment between business objectives and social justice aspirations. One approach to consider for

organizations and its leaders is to critically evaluate the potential consequences of exclusively adhering to a business case approach, recognizing potential conflicts with social justice and moral imperatives.

Another key area to focus on is to clarify how an organization and its people define the terms of diversity, equity, inclusion, and the evolving vocabulary associated with it. As described in Fife et al's (2021) study, the absence of clear definitions poses risks, hindering cohesive actions and potentially obstructing genuine progress in DEI efforts. This requires the organization and its leadership to establish a shared understanding of DEI terms and the associated vocabulary to promote acceptance and adoption of its principles amongst the workforces.

**Leadership's pivotal role in DEI success**

The literature suggests that leadership support is a critical factor in the success of DEI initiatives within organizations. It is important to get leadership commitment by demonstrating inclusive leadership principles and behaviors in advancing DEI. Bourke and Titus (2021) offered suggestions on how to become an inclusive leader, which includes adopting traits like visible commitment, humility, awareness of bias, and effective collaboration. This will help foster high performing teams that embrace diversity and inclusion. Adopting such behaviors as a leader does not come easy as described by Auger-Dominguez (2020) where the author shared fear often hampers leaders from taking decisive action on DEI. To overcome this barrier requires leaders to educate themselves on social issues, embrace humility and vulnerability, communicate openly about difficult topics, and demonstrate commitment through tangible actions. This will enable organizations and leaders to navigate the complexities with clarity, commitment, and a genuine dedication towards DEI efforts in the workplace. Another key concern identified in the literature

was related to the need to examine the role of leadership in perpetuating racialized structures

(e.g. lack of diversity in top management) and the challenges faced by racialized minorities

leading DEI efforts. Leaders should address systemic barriers to diversity in leadership and be

cautious about placing the burden of DEI efforts solely on racialized minorities.

**Shift away from training as a band-aid solution**

Training is often perceived as a quick fix to demonstrate action on DEI issues within

organizations. This may fail to address the root causes of DEI challenges. The literature

emphasized the ineffectiveness of such training initiatives due to the lack of proper needs

assessment and evaluation. Organizations should view training as part of a comprehensive

strategy, avoiding a solely symbolic commitment to DEI. This may include designing training

programs that align with organizational goals, emphasizing awareness, prevention, and

competency-building tailored to diverse employee needs. Cox (2022) suggested shifting away

from an information deficit approach to an empowerment-based approach which involves

engaging participants to form habits that are aligned to DEI principles by using human

behavioral science approaches like cognitive-behavioral theory (CBT). Overall, organizations

should adopt a multidimensional, sustainable approach to DEI training, incorporating senior

leadership commitment, accountability, and continuous evaluation.

**Empower DEI practitioners to effect meaningful change**

One of the key issues observed in the literature was highlighting the ambiguity around

who is responsible for doing the work in advancing DEI initiatives. Some of the approaches

taken by organizations included committees, resource groups, and hiring DEI practitioners. The

work performed by DEI practitioners is complicated by neoliberal principles, with a focus on

performative indicators rather than addressing systemic inequities. There is a need for clearly

defined roles and responsibilities for DEI practitioners that lead to genuine transformation in the organizational culture. DEI practitioners often encounter challenges, including a lack of institutional will, a role perceived as an afterthought, and the need to navigate conflicting expectations and roles. Their work involves addressing subtle forms of racism, biases, and inequities, with the added challenge of insufficient resources, staffing, and support. Burnout stems from limited resources, tokenism, and the burden of educating others on DEI issues. Organizations must provide adequate support, resources, and institutional commitment to empower DEI practitioners to effect meaningful change. Bertone and Abeynayake (2019) concluded that D&I practitioners were best described as tempered radicals who "used mandated positions and/or the support of senior people in their organizations to influence organizational processes, culture, and outcomes in a manner that sought to transform organizational culture to promote diversity and inclusion" (p. 93). Their role involves challenging and transforming organizational culture, requiring persistence and a delicate balance between being a member of leadership and a critic. Organizations should recognize and value the transformative potential of DEI practitioners. They should guard against the de-radicalization of DEI work, ensuring it remains aligned with its original transformative objectives. Leadership support is crucial for the success of DEI initiatives, and DEI work should be a collective responsibility rather than solely the duty of DEI practitioners. This may include creating diversity champions, embedding D&I responsibilities in managerial roles, and allocating resources and formal power to DEI practitioners. This requires taking a strategic approach for effective implementation of DEI initiatives. This involves identifying DEI challenges, conducting audits, and creating data-driven outcomes with clear indicators and metrics.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this comprehensive review of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) literature offers valuable insights and recommendations for organizations aiming to navigate the complexities of fostering diversity and inclusivity. The prevalence of a business case for diversity underscores the need for organizations to critically assess the implications of prioritizing financial gains, emphasizing the importance of aligning business goals with social justice imperatives. The lack of clarity in DEI definitions poses a significant challenge, urging leaders to work towards a shared understanding within organizations to facilitate cohesive and effective action. Leadership emerges as a pivotal factor in the success of DEI initiatives, emphasizing the importance of senior leaders championing DEI and fostering a collective commitment across the organization. Inclusive leadership practices are identified as catalysts for organizational success, urging leaders to actively cultivate traits such as visible commitment, humility, and effective collaboration.

Examining challenges faced by DEI practitioners and the role of racialized organizations highlights systemic barriers, urging organizations to address diversity in leadership and avoid placing the entire burden on racialized minorities. Overcoming fear through leadership action is emphasized, encouraging leaders to engage in DEI work, be visible in their efforts, and embrace vulnerability. Shifting focus to DEI training, the literature recognizes the limitations of treating it as a superficial fix. Instead, organizations are advised to view training as part of a comprehensive strategy, integrating it into larger cultural and systemic reforms. The effectiveness and critiques of DEI training emphasize the importance of proactive strategies that address systemic issues and embed DEI education into broader organizational goals. Lastly, uncertainty in DEI responsibility and challenges faced by practitioners underline the need for clearly defined roles, institutional support, and resources. Acknowledging DEI practitioners as tempered radicals emphasizes their

transformative potential, urging organizations to foster environments that encourage, rather than hinder, their efforts. Overall, the literature encourages strategic, data-driven approaches, emphasizing the long-term, multidimensional integration of DEI efforts into organizational culture and practices.

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