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Anthropologists, Meet DEI

DEI stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. DEI's purpose is to create cultural and structural changes in an organization so that 1) it is diverse, 2) all employees are treated equitably, and 3) those employees feel they belong in social and work events, initiatives, and processes—given their role.

- **Diversity** is a term used to characterize the presence of differences in people in particular contexts. Diversity can be used to describe differences across race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class, religion, disabilities, as well as personalities, work preferences, parental and caretaking status, and other differences that may impact the workplace in a meaningful way.
- **Equity** is a term used to describe fairness and justice efforts that aim to provide the same benefits and opportunities to all people. It differs from equality in that it recognizes differences in the ways people are treated by others and seeks to redress any imbalances so that people can thrive as members of society.
- **Inclusion** refers to practices enacted to create a sense of belonging in a particular space or among a particular group of people. It means being intentional about who is invited to participate and engage in certain activities and initiatives. When individuals feel like they belong, they express a feeling of appreciation, acceptance, and willingness to express their perspectives, identities, and talents. Some organizations have incorporated belonging goals into their DEI efforts, branding them as DEIB.

Background

DEI efforts in organizations, and the diversity management field, can be traced to the late 1980s. Management consultants and scholars in the United States advocated for doing more than meeting basic anti-discrimination legal requirements; they created tangible efforts to promote women and people of color in the workplace, claiming that doing so would be good for business. The focus was both achieving concrete business goals (e.g., employee engagement, productivity, innovation) and implementing DEI processes and strategies.

Diversity Management

Initially, DEI was part of a Human Resource function. Today, organizations may continue to promote and resolve DEI issues through Human Resources, or a dedicated Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion or People and Culture Department.



DEI organizational work processes, strategies, and policies typically involve:

- Providing education on DEI topics and issues (e.g., implicit bias, anti-racism)
- Establishing talent pipeline programs to diversify the applicant pool through internships, community training, and workshops for potential employees to develop skills (e.g., coding bootcamps, relocation programs)
- Creating policies, standardizing processes, and implementing procedures to create equity and mitigate bias—which can impact diversity in hiring and promotions
- Organizing events and initiatives to create a sense of belonging within organizations
- Creating accountability and a long-term strategy for DEI efforts by developing and administering internal employee engagement surveys and external assessments around DEI “best practices.”

Training

Despite its strong foothold in business schools, many DEI practitioners may not have formal training or schooling in how to approach DEI work. Historically, it has been common for organizations to appoint an existing employee from a marginalized background into a DEI position as a result of social and business pressures. Appointments have frequently been made based on perceived or expressed interest in DEI work. These individuals may find much of their time spent on developing key competencies which can be acquired through on-site experience or certification programs, such as the [Cornell Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Certificate Program](#) or the [National Diversity Council Diversity First Certification Program](#). Professionals learn about the differences between affirmative action and diversity management, implicit biases, how norms can perpetuate exclusion, and how to align DEI initiatives with the organization’s mission, among others.

Anthropologists as a “Great Fit”

Demand for diversity management and for professionals who know how to navigate the complex—and sometimes competing—demands of legal and business institutions, continues to grow. Anthropologists are not typically engaged in this work. And yet, DEI work draws on theoretical areas in which anthropologists are trained:

- Culture, systems, and interactions
- Holism, structures, and structural biases
- Historical and structural inequities
- Small-scale societies
- Identity
- Material culture
- Community-building



Ethnographic and qualitative research skills are also useful for conducting organizational culture assessments and developing metrics to track DEI implementation.



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