

DE&I interventions that deliver:

What works across multiple characteristics
January 2025

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1. Acknowledgements

This report considers diversity, equity, and inclusion workplace interventions that work across multiple characteristics. Through literature reviews, evidence-based suggested action to take, and selected resources, we highlight which actions are most impactful to take to improve workplace equity for many different people.

This work was researched and authored by EY, working in collaboration with diversity campaigns and DE&I specialists, to bring together a wealth of knowledge. A list of these contributors can be found below.

Special acknowledgements go to:

FTSE Women Leaders – **Vivienne Artz**

The Parker Review – **Amy Winepress**

Change the Race Ratio – **Richard DeNetto**

Progress Together – **Sophie Hulm, Mona Vadher, Esther Kwan**

Business Disability Forum – **Diane Lightfoot**

The 30% Club – **Laura Whitcombe**

Moving Ahead – **Liz Dimmock, Vanessa Rushton**

Women in Banking and Finance – **Anna Lane, Nicky King**

25x25 – **Tara Cemlyn-Jones, Tommy Mount, Boel Ferguson**

LGBT Great – **Matt Cameron, Lauren Cahill**

The Bridge Group – **Nicholas Miller**

Behavioural Insights Team – **Leonie Nicks, Shoshana Davidson**

King's Business School, King's College London – **Ylva Baeckström**

New Financial – **Yasmine Chinwala**

Business In the Community

Fimatix – **Birgit Neu**

EY – **Sally Bucknell, Minna Lewis, Isabelle Ellis, Dr Fatima Tresh**

Additionally, thank you to BT; Autotrader; Linklaters; Premier League; M&G; Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR); UK Power Networks; Sciensus; Home Group; and Govia Thameslink Rail (GTR) for the insights on their DE&I journeys.

2. Opening remarks

Across British businesses, there is sustained under-representation of women and minority groups. The higher the managerial level, the lower the representation. For almost two decades, companies have been increasingly addressing this inequality by introducing a range of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) interventions across different characteristics. Many started by focusing on gender and have expanded their efforts to include race and ethnicity, disability, LGBTQ+ identities, socio-economic background and age among other aspects of diversity. The new UK government's focus on driving inclusive economic growth and a New Deal for working people will require businesses to play a key role in creating opportunities for all.

A company's greatest asset is its people, and analysis frequently reveals that younger generations want to work for companies that align to their values and treat staff well¹. Fostering a culture of inclusion is, therefore essential, for companies not only to attract but also to retain talent. Other stakeholders, such as clients, investors, and regulators, continue to ask for businesses to operate responsibly and inclusively. However, this is becoming an increasingly significant investment as DE&I impacts all areas of a business and its people.

The past few years have been mired by economic slowdown and uncertainty – significantly impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed the world of work for employers and employees alike. With companies under greater pressure to boost performance, DE&I is now being more closely examined than ever before – by business leaders, politicians, and the media – as a way of improving productivity and growth. This provides an opportunity for organisations to reassess their progress towards building a more diverse and inclusive workplace, and re-focus on what is having the most impact. Indeed, the steps towards positive change must be contextual, data-backed, and work in conjunction with the existing business strategy. Whilst this message is clear, the 'how' is not always as obvious; businesses are still looking for advice on the best approach to take, regardless of how mature their DE&I work may be.

A recent Harvard Business Review paper highlights that to achieve success in DE&I efforts, it is most important for leaders to be able to identify what is and isn't working². A lack of integrated initiatives, poor messaging surrounding interventions, and failure to measure the most important metrics, are noted as the main areas that need to change to increase impact. With these areas in mind, moving the dial on diversity, equity and inclusion can be triggered by focusing on a just handful of interventions, provided they are evidence-based and backed by leadership accountability. Evidence of impact from DE&I initiatives across some characteristics is still developing. We urge employers to focus on this, adding to the evidence base through tracking their data closely, and treating DE&I as a business initiative with appropriate resource and rigour.

The current landscape of DE&I highlights that collaborating for a better future is more important than ever. In light of this, the following diversity campaigns and DE&I specialists have come together, with support from EY, to add insight for businesses on which interventions actually work, and not just for one characteristic but for many: The Parker Review; FTSE Women Leaders; Change the Race Ratio; Progress Together; Business Disability Forum; 30% Club; Moving Ahead; Women in Banking and Finance, 25x25; LGBT Great; and The Bridge Group, with additional input from Kings College London, New Financial, Business In the Community, and Fimatix.

To help businesses (both small and large) understand where to start, and how to have the greatest impact for their investment, this paper explores what DE&I interventions work best across multiple characteristics. This is about embracing an intentional approach toward a more holistic strategy that considers a range of characteristics and interventions that benefit many individuals. Specifically, the goal of this paper is to provide practical recommendations to assist businesses with the 'how', focusing on the interventions most likely to deliver real and lasting progress, both in terms of representation and inclusion. All organisations should consider DE&I as part of their wider business strategy, contribute to the compelling narrative on the importance of workplace DE&I, and take effective action to bring about systemic change.

The interventions

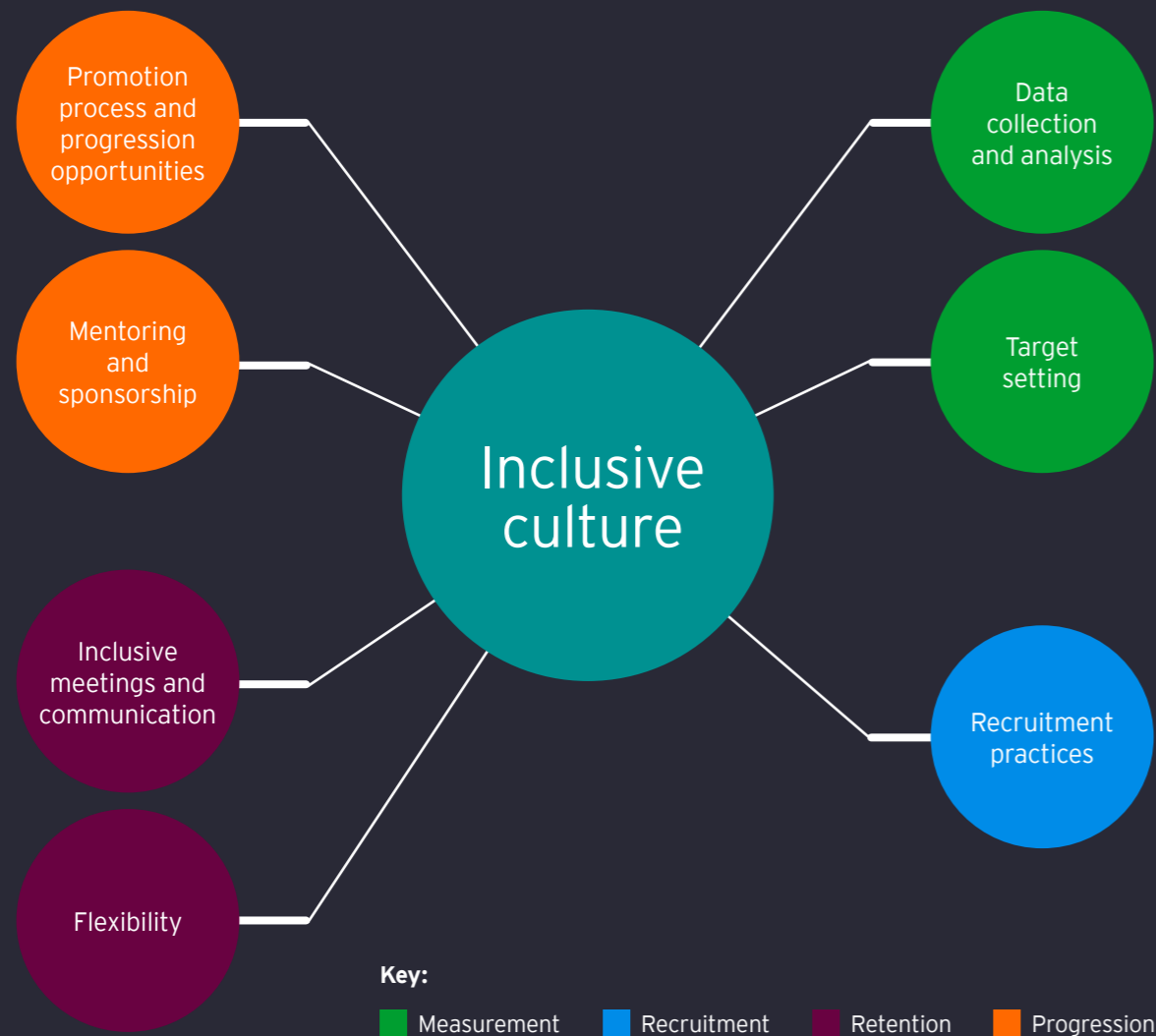
Taking an evidence-based approach, we have reviewed numerous industry papers and academic articles (see references section for details) to evaluate the common interventions which have the biggest positive impact, and combined this with insights from a range of employers who are currently implementing these interventions. It is worth noting that while data and evidence of impact for gender is stronger across the board, evidence for other characteristics is still very much in its infancy. Nonetheless, there are promising findings that point to positive impacts across multiple characteristics. DE&I impacts can take many forms, but in this paper, we have largely focused on impact in terms of workplace inclusion and belonging, as well as representation, for the following characteristics: gender; race and ethnicity; disability; LGBTQ+ identity; and socio-economic status.

We focus first on **inclusive culture**, which we see as the central goal that businesses should be working towards, using the interventions as mechanisms to get there.

We then discuss the following interventions:

Measurement	Recruitment	Retention	Progression
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data collection and analysis Target setting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexibility Inclusive meetings and communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentoring and sponsorship Promotion processes and progression opportunities

Figure 1 – the relationship between inclusive culture and the interventions



Importantly, this list of interventions is not exhaustive; by no means is a company's DE&I journey 'complete' when all these interventions have been addressed. Instead, these interventions are underpinned by evidence that demonstrates where the most impact can be made, and so provide a plan through which to make meaningful progress.

Although often targeted to specific under-represented groups, effective DE&I interventions will create an inclusive working environment that will benefit every employee, whatever their demographics or background. Additionally, remember that whilst this journey is iterative, interventions will be most successful when embedded in a culture that is open to change, and where leaders are motivated and accountable. The most impactful interventions form part of a wider ecosystem of DE&I activities that benefit each other. Indeed, every intervention implemented should be considered in relation to one another, built off past learnings, and intentionally embedded into the everyday workings of the business.

This paper is divided into four broad areas with sections for the interventions within. Each section covers what the intervention typically entails; existing research on the impact of the intervention to date; a checklist of recommended actions; and highlights from employers across different sectors that give examples of leading practice.

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We have found that setting strong foundations and focusing on things that we can change the most first, whilst providing our staff the tools to then embed this in their day-to-day processes, has been the most successful.

Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)

3. Inclusive culture

3.1 Inclusive culture

Before diving into the specific DE&I interventions, we must first focus on the broader topic of inclusive culture. This is about people behaving towards each other, and making decisions about each other, in an inclusive way – which should be the overarching goal for organisations focusing on DE&I. While it can be tempting for businesses to concentrate purely on ‘the numbers’ and increasing the diverse representation in their workforce, largely because this is simple to measure, it is critical to recognise that DE&I efforts must address underlying behaviours if they are to create lasting impact and harness real benefits.

What we mean

This section is about creating a culture that is made up of inclusive behaviours at all levels in your workforce and shifting mindsets towards a positive view of difference. This means managers and leaders having the appropriate understanding and support to properly implement inclusive policies, to challenge poor behaviours, to share stories, and to encourage inclusive practices in their teams.

Why it matters

Building an inclusive culture can spark business growth and innovation, encouraging harmony, creativity, and business success.^{3,4} A BetterUp study found that a sense of belonging can increase job performance by up to 56%.⁵

The importance of an inclusive culture goes beyond improved job performance, and speaks to the workplace experience itself. Data on employee experiences shows how important it is to foster a supportive culture that values difference, helps all employees to thrive, and protects them from harm. For example, one study showed that employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds often feel that they need to ‘change’ to fit into their professional workplace, by avoiding certain topics or changing their accent.⁶ Others have highlighted Black female employees experiencing racist microaggressions,⁷ and lower levels of psychological safety for LGBTQ+ employees, with trans employees experiencing higher levels of workplace conflict.⁸ Business Disability Forum’s recent survey of employees with disabilities found that even after adjustments had been made, 56% still experienced barriers, such as poor behaviours from colleagues including bullying, harassment and putting them down.⁹ The latest Sexism in the City enquiry report from the House of Commons Treasury Committee highlights that a zero-tolerance culture needs to be embedded to tackle bullying and inequality, and notes that cultural change as the most important factor in improving diversity.¹⁰

A sense of belonging can increase job performance by up to **56%**



An inclusive culture can be measured by the extent to which employees feel their organisation’s practices and policies encourage acceptance of diverse employees through three main pillars:^{11,12}

<h1 style="margin: 0;">1</h1> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognising their unique attributes 	<h1 style="margin: 0;">2</h1> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providing them with a sense of belonging 	<h1 style="margin: 0;">3</h1> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encouraging their involvement in organisational communication, decision-making processes, and informal interactions
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Many feel that culture should be set by company leaders role modelling to those in lower managerial levels (for example, this is the approach taken by the 30% Club which was set up as a network of exclusively board chairs and CEOs committed to making their leadership teams more gender diverse).¹³ However, often leadership teams find it difficult to know how this change is manifesting at more junior levels – if they are not proactively canvassing views from across the whole organisation, they may not have an ear to the ground when it comes to the sense of belonging felt by all employees. With a more comprehensive understanding of the current culture and the differing experiences existing in the workplace, organisations can appreciate and value difference in a way that enhances both employee experience and business success.¹⁴ Therefore, it is important to build a deep insight into the ‘blind spots’ and ‘unidentified forces’ that prevent an inclusive culture from continually embedding, such as with a culture audit.¹⁵ This focus on culture can be supplemented by other interventions that can target key areas of weakness.

Alongside assessing the culture, organisations can focus on upskilling managers and leaders to ensure they can properly implement inclusive policies and lead diverse teams effectively.¹⁶ For people with disabilities, the Business Disability Forum found that while there are mixed views on the impact of specific interventions such as ‘adjustment passports’, good line managers are consistently pivotal to creating a positive experience.⁹ The Good Finance framework also highlights the positive impact that an empathetic leadership style can have on the experience of women, including women of colour, in their careers.⁷ Finally, awareness toolkits for managers on specific diversity topics can help to build confidence in discussing and navigating these effectively.

The box below with ‘What actions to take’ summarises the key actions to take specifically on culture. The remaining sections of this report cover the interventions that are shown to be effective for increasing diversity and inclusion across multiple groups and will support your efforts to build an inclusive culture for all your people.

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We have some great initiatives at Home Group which help us recognise and celebrate employee difference. For example, our Life Swap Sessions where an employee “goes live” sharing their life stories during their day-to-day, answering lots of questions and sharing tips and insight from their diverse perspective. This has been really good because people with similar stories or from similar backgrounds know that there is support there. We also have an Action Panel which can signpost and support employees with any issues they may have, without having to go through a formal process or raise a grievance. Both of these initiatives encourage employees to tap into the lived experience and create a culture of trust and support.

Home Group

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We focus on general inclusion and allyship and do a lot on the social side of inclusion, such as planning different events. We also have a D&I taskforce made of senior leaders from different teams who have a mini-series of videos talking to each other or employees on different “controversial” topics. This always strikes up interesting conversations, encourages people to tap into their biases, and gets senior people advocating for DE&I.

UK Power Networks

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Our inclusive culture is underpinned by a very successful colleague-led approach to DE&I; leadership actively encourages colleagues to share their views on what they need or how things might change. None of our people policies are set in stone and so they can evolve over time to meet the changing needs of our colleagues. We bring working groups together to assess the changes needed. Story-telling helps our interventions come to life, by relating them to real colleague experiences and needs. We focus on the packaging of our DE&I interventions from beginning to end, sharing proof-points of success, and encouraging peer-to-peer learning to ensure that what we implement is successful.

M&G

Inclusive culture – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Analyse organisational culture to understand workforce experiences and where there may be ‘hotspots’ of issues to be addressed
- Train managers and leaders on inclusive behaviour, focusing on practical knowledge (e.g., how to support someone with a disability who requires an adjustment), day to day inclusive management of a team, building confidence to discuss sensitive topics, language, and leading with empathy

4. Measurement

4.1 Data collection and analysis

What we mean

This section is about collecting quantitative demographic data from your workforce (e.g., sex, gender identity, ethnicity, socio-economic background, disability, sexual orientation, age, caring responsibilities etc.), analysing it, and combining it with qualitative data to understand the different experiences of these groups. For example, differences in terms of representation at managerial levels of your organisation, feelings of inclusion and belonging, experiences of bullying and harassment, and whether there are equitable outcomes for Human Resource (HR) processes such as recruitment, appraisals, promotions and disciplinarys.

Why it matters

Taking a data-driven approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion helps organisations understand where to focus their efforts for maximum impact. There are numerous key business drivers for collecting data on diversity and inclusion, including engagement with internal and external stakeholders; having a better understanding of the workforce to make better decisions; and to ensure fairness in internal processes such those linked to progression and pay.¹⁷ Regulators are also increasingly asking businesses for data – for example the new requirements being proposed by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA)¹⁸ in the financial services sector. Regulations such as gender pay gap reporting – which is compulsory for all UK organisation with over 250 employees¹⁹ – are another driver for businesses to collect and report on data. Additionally, voluntary ethnicity pay gap reporting has started to gain pace in recent years (for example, around 70% of Change the Race Ratio signatories with more than 250 employees are reporting their ethnicity pay gaps).²⁰ The new government will introduce mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting, which will prompt increased data collection of these characteristics.

Companies commonly collect gender data but are increasingly collecting data on other characteristics, to have a broader understanding of their workforce. For example, in addition to gender, signatories to the HM Treasury Women in Finance Charter, most commonly collect ethnicity (74%), disability (55%), and sexual orientation (54%) diversity data. Socio-economic background data is less commonly collected, with the same report showing that 31% of signatories collect it.²¹ Progress Together have highlighted a lack of clarity among financial services employers on how best to collect this data. In response, it provides practical guidance and introductions to peers who have collected socio-economic background data. In sectors where data is required by the regulator, for example the legal sector, collection is high. In summary, many employers are still underprepared to collect data on less visible characteristics.²²

70% of Change the Race Ratio signatories are reporting their ethnicity pay gaps

Whilst companies are moving towards collecting data on more characteristics, they still face some key challenges. A CIPD report found that the main reason for low levels of data disclosure by employees is related to the lack of trust that they have in their employers. The report highlights that employees were particularly concerned about how their data may be used, and many feared that disclosing their personal information would harm their prospects.²³ These feelings are most apparent for those with less visible characteristics. For example, research from LGBT Great found that LGBTQ+ employees were 28% more likely to have concerns about sharing their diversity data compared to non-LGBTQ+ employees.²⁴ Despite these concerns, research also shows that LGBTQ+ people are more engaged on the issue of data and are more likely to submit demographic data than non-LGBTQ+ people.²⁵ These statistics demonstrate data disclosure is important and that conditions of success need to be a serious consideration for employers when developing a data collection strategy. When it comes to socio-economic background, Progress Together also notes the importance of trust and fostering a good level of psychological safety so that employees feel comfortable to share details of their identities and sense of belonging.²⁶ The story is similar for people with disabilities, who are much more likely to disclose their data if they trust their employer and feel their needs around adjustments are being met.²⁷ So how can employers build this trust? The research indicates two key things to focus on: firstly, having a process that ensures data will be stored securely and used responsibly, and reassuring employees about this through communications; and secondly, creating a supportive and inclusive culture, especially between line managers and their direct reports, that gives employees confidence their data will not be used against them. Finally, employers need to demonstrate that by providing data, employees are helping to inform positive changes in the organisation (e.g., policy or process changes) which lends essential credibility to data collection exercises.

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We have seen that our leadership team is reliant on numbers and facts, so comprehensive data collection is important. Backing from the numbers helps us get bigger DE&I projects over the line, secure resource, and overall strengthen our business case for implementing interventions. However, we are always careful not to make direct assumptions from the data without proper due diligence, to ensure we have the full picture. Overall, we have noticed that progress towards our DE&I goals is contextual, and what sits behind the numbers is critical.

UK Power Networks

Data – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Refer to guidance on collecting and analysing diversity data here: [Personal data an employer can keep about an employee – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#). When considering what questions to ask, the UK government recommends using those in the census for consistency: [Question development – Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)
- Run regular communications campaigns to build trust and psychological safety among employees, and an understanding of why and how data will be used. Support this with line manager and leadership involvement and accountability, and communicate what impacts the collection of the data has had i.e., changes in policy, structure, behaviour etc.
- Draw data from multiple sources (such as quantitative representation data, qualitative experience data, and data across a range of people processes), cross reference these and take time to draw conclusions on the real issues
- For information on data collection for different characteristics, see:
 - Ethnicity: [Collecting ethnicity data – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
 - Gender and LGBTQ+ identities: [Gender and LGBTQIA+ Data Collection Best Practice \(warwick.ac.uk\)](#)
 - Socio-economic background: [Collecting socio-economic background data: Practical guidance for employers – Bridge Group \(thebridgegroup.org.uk\)](#)
 - Disability: [Disability workforce reporting | CIPD](#)

4.2 Target setting

What we mean

This section is about setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals to improve your current levels of representation and inclusion, thereby reducing inequality. These may be for the whole organisation, or specific to certain teams or role types. Here we are referring to voluntary targets rather than imposed quotas, but which are supported by accountability.

Why it matters

Targets are widely considered as one of the first key steps to implementing an effective DE&I strategy. Setting targets can promote transparency and accountability; address discrimination; and provide a framework for achieving impactful change.²⁸ Indeed, research by EY states that step one on the roadmap to harnessing diversity is to “establish your why and set bold, time bound goals”.¹⁵ This is underpinned by studies that show that the most effective strategies are supported by targets that define a clear pathway to success and encourage commitment and accountability,²⁹ which is more likely to occur when targets are co-created rather than simply imposed. Additionally, in some sectors regulators are asking businesses to set diversity targets (e.g., in Financial Services, the latest FCA/PRA consultation proposes that firms should determine their own targets and in line with their needs).¹⁸

Leaders in all sectors should be empowered to better understand their workforce and create the conditions for targets to work. Despite the benefits of targets, putting them in place without a concrete strategy to achieve them and a receptive culture can cause issues. A notable example of this arose in a Ministry of Defence review into the Royal Air Force (RAF), which found that pressure to meet gender and ethnicity targets led to “unlawful positive discrimination” against white men.³⁰ On the flipside, target setting without a supportive cultural backing can lead to “divisive diversity”³¹ whereby underrepresented groups are further discriminated against and lack the practical support to succeed in their roles. The key point to take away is that targets must be underpinned by data which is used to identify specific gaps, that can then be addressed through positive action (in line with the Equality Act 2010).

Targets need to be contextual, well informed, grounded in evidence and tracked for progress in order to be impactful. The implementation of realistic but stretching voluntary targets, for example such as those set for UK business by the government supported and business sponsored FTSE Women Leaders, has been pivotal in increasing the representation of women in the UK’s workplaces, aiding a focus on succession and the talent pipeline. From just 9.5% women on boards in the FTSE 350 in 2011, and through the use of progressive targets, women now make up over 40% of those who sit on boards, although more needs to be done at the leadership level to achieve 40% by 2025. This has been supported by the 30% Club campaign, which began in 2010, at which time there were just 12% women on the boards of the FTSE 100. The campaign’s initial goal of 30% – the level at which research suggests minority voices become heard – was reached in 2018 and further yearly progress has resulted in more women holding key leadership roles.³² Similarly, the HM Treasury Women in Finance Charter has been working with its 400+ signatories to increase female representation in senior management. 67% of signatories have increased the proportion of senior women over the past year.²¹ This increase is evidence of the importance of setting internal targets, publishing annual progress publicly, and having an accountable executive, as the signatories pledge to.

Target setting is also a proven impactful action for increasing race inclusivity, especially if the targets are informed by data and are regularly monitored.³³ Specifically, the McGregor-Smith Review, and Change the Race Ratio campaign both recommend that organisations should ideally publicly publish aspiration targets, in this case for race in the workplace, and board-level sponsors should be held accountable for their delivery.³⁴ Additionally, the Parker Review have set a target for FTSE 250 companies to have at least one ethnic minority director on the board by December 2024.³⁵ Achievement of this target has gone up 10% in just one year between 2022 and 2023 and the positive changes to the UK listed boards’ ethnic composition since 2017 are in part due to the approach recommended the Parker Review. Whilst public targets are likely to be the most impactful, the Behavioural Insights Team found that having internal targets for representation and equality are promising for people with disabilities and those from visible minorities, as well as being particularly effective for women because of the consistent positive effect it has on improving behaviour in a range of workplace settings.³⁶ The 25x25 campaign encourages organisations to set targets aligned to their business strategy, with a 3-5 year horizon to ensure accountability from the Executive team, and make these public once ready to do so.³⁷

Setting targets based on socio-economic background to improve workplace diversity less common – Progress Together’s recent Impact Report, for example, highlights that just 10% of its members have introduced socio-economic background-related diversity targets. However, the campaign considers target setting a key step in its 5-point plan

to help companies towards socio-economic parity. Once firms have data on the makeup of their workforce at all levels, Progress Together recommends that targets are set to ensure senior leadership (Exco and two levels down) mirror the rest of the workforce.²⁶ It may be helpful to use national benchmarks when setting targets for the broader workforce.

Target setting across a range of characteristics encourages leadership accountability and ensures that the less commonly measured characteristics, such as socio-economic background, are integrated into a company's DE&I strategy.³⁸ The box below with 'What actions to take' shares some guidance on how to set targets successfully.

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If companies develop appropriate targets using the right approach, those targets become really useful. They help the team know where to go and what to focus on, but they also help to build a case for DE&I work internally. This requires some effort upfront but saves a lot of time, money and energy in the long run.

Premier League

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Our targets are based on our EDI pillars, and we set a short-term and long-term target for each characteristic, both for the whole workforce and for leadership. Additionally, we work to identify any specific problems we may have and adopt targets in those areas, such as a specific target to increase women in IT. We think it's important for our targets to be contextual so we look at external data to see what our workforce should look like according to the make-up of society, as well as internal and industry data to understand what is achievable.

Sciensus

Target setting – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Gather external (e.g., census or industry-specific) and internal data to inform your representation targets
- Set representation targets at senior levels as well as for the business overall
- Focus on driving the right behaviours through your targets. To do this, consider using process goals (e.g., fair allocation of high-profile projects, building the pipeline of talent from underrepresented groups), and work closely with your leadership team to build understanding of the targets and how to achieve them
- Use progress against targets to identify specific areas where positive action is needed
- Communicate extensively with your workforce on the purpose and benefits of your targets
- Make your key targets public if possible. If not, consider making a public statement
- Report progress – or lack thereof



5. Recruitment

5.1 Recruitment practices

What we mean

This section is about putting strategies in place that allow you to access diverse candidates in the job market, attract them to apply to your organisation, give equity when it comes to preparing for assessment processes, and fairly assess their competence and suitability for a role.

Why it matters

Beyond the measurement pieces we've looked at so far, using recruitment to drive organisational change is another key action – it's an opportunity to create a new narrative and to change your representation fairly quickly, especially when focusing on high volume roles. However, studies have demonstrated that the truth of your organisational culture and make-up must match the story you tell job applicants³⁶ if you want to retain diverse talent and secure your return on investment.

Work to enhance inclusivity in recruitment tends to focus on implementing transparent and structured approaches. However, there is also a need to humanise the recruitment process and importantly ask questions centred around adjustments, the use of technology, and what prospective talent is looking for, so that organisations can bring in the best talent.^{15,39} Understanding how and where to target recruitment should be underpinned by insightful data; for example, if an employer is considering positive action based on a specific characteristic, it needs evidence of this underrepresentation in its workforce. Implementing recruitment strategies is more effective if they are contextualised by the needs and the relative diversity of the company and of prospective talent.

The Behavioural Insights Team found that using clear role requirements, structured interviews, skills-based assessments and anonymous applications are effective actions for increasing diversity in recruitment as they can help reduce bias for a variety of characteristics. Additionally, having an appropriate target for including underrepresented groups in shortlisting can be impactful, especially if employers set ambitious targets. They also highlight the positive impact of traineeships on the careers of people from underrepresented groups (but it is important for these to be paid and recruited fairly). However, implementing diverse selection panels has inconsistent results, sometimes reducing the number of women recruited, and is dependent on the type of role.^{36,40} Targeted job advertisement (such as using channels that are more likely to be seen by underrepresented groups) and highlighting flexible working offerings are also shown to be impactful at attracting applicants from underrepresented groups.⁴¹

HM Treasury's most recent Women in Finance Charter review found that DE&I concepts are often introduced into recruitment practices and are then rolled out in other areas, such as 50:50 between men and women new hire shortlists, which is then integrated into succession planning.²¹ This common approach demonstrates the importance of making sure that recruitment processes are equitable, to have a positive multiplier effect on interventions that utilise similar strategies down the line.

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Using targeted attraction and inclusive recruitment, we have significantly increased our female hiring for train drivers in quite a short period of time. Prior to these efforts, most cohorts were a maximum of around 12% female; by 2020 that had increased to 25% and today we typically achieve cohorts that are 40% women or more. The female talent was there, we just needed to find ways to access it. We did this by changing the language in our job descriptions and adverts, advertising on specialised boards with higher access to women, and starting a career returners programme, which predominantly caters to women.

Govia Thameslink Rail (GTR)

Recruitment – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Provide alternative routes to employment, e.g., through apprenticeships, internships and returner programmes
- Employ targeted attraction techniques (such as advertising in specialised boards, using specific agencies or headhunters) to attract applications from underrepresented groups
- Create adjustments to the process for people with disabilities and other diverse needs
- Publish salary information
- Create job descriptions that clearly reflect the genuine requirements of the role, reducing the number of criteria where possible
- Remove identity information from applications before sharing with hiring managers
- Use positive action (e.g., outreach sessions, open to all) to increase understanding of expectations and comfort with the recruitment process for underrepresented groups
- Assess candidates through a combination of tasks that reflect the skills and requirements of the role
- When using interviews, make sure they are structured, with clear assessment criteria

6. Retention

6.1 Flexibility

What we mean

This section is about providing flexibility (as much as practically possible for different role types) in when and how jobs are performed, according to individual employee needs, such as creating opportunities for remote work and flexible hours. This includes your hybrid working policy, how you respond to your employees' right to request flexible working, and how you respond to requests for flexible working as a 'reasonable adjustment' to remove a barrier related to disability.

Why it matters

Flexible working can be a cornerstone for encouraging an inclusive culture in a diverse workplace. The option to work flexibly is becoming increasingly attractive to employees. Some form of flexible working model is now considered the "mainstay" of working practices and research shows that it has a direct positive impact on individuals accepting a new position.³⁹

Flexibility can take many forms (it is not just about working from home), with organisations choosing to implement it dependent on employee demand, industry expectations, and workforce make-up. Ways of working flexibly include staggered hours, remote or hybrid working, compressed hours, flexitime and flexible bank holidays – at least one of which can be built into most jobs, regardless of organisation size or sector.⁴²

Whilst flexible working can benefit all employees, research suggests that it is particularly important for some characteristics. Mothers with young children, for example, are particularly likely to see flexibility as a top benefit, with 38% saying they would be forced to leave or reduce their hours without such allowances.⁴³ A study into the UK's flexible job offering found that health and social services, when it comes to offering flexible arrangements, are significantly ahead of other sectors – perhaps due to the working patterns of the largely 'feminised' roles of care workers and nurses. The same research found low rates of flexibility in engineering, construction, and manufacturing sectors, which may also be a consequence of gender issues.⁴¹ Whilst organisations may encourage flexible working with female employees in mind, The Behavioural Insights Team found that men tend to privately support other men working flexibly despite thinking that their male counterparts think differently.⁴⁰ Flexible working can be attractive to everyone, so embedding into everyday practices can be key to reducing the gender gap in the workplace.

Flexible working does not come without stigma and challenges. A Business in the Community study found that the stigma of flexible working is 8% higher for women than it is men.⁴⁴ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a study found that employees who worked from home were less than half as likely to be promoted as their counterparts.⁴⁵ However, as hybrid and flexible working becomes more commonplace the negative impact appears to be reducing, for example several signatories to the Women in Finance Charter found no negative differences between male and female colleagues due to hybrid working.²¹ It is important for employers to be diligent in monitoring for any unintended negative impacts of flexibility by closely reviewing data on pay, promotion and redundancy and taking steps to address any disproportionality identified. Ultimately, rather than being deterred, employers should focus on challenging and improving their culture of flexibility and finding ways for senior roles to be undertaken in a flexible manner.

Research by the CIPD found that a growing number of companies see the importance of offering flexible working (66% in 2023, compared to 56% in a similar 2022 survey) and that employees are consistently more satisfied with their job if they have these arrangements available to them.⁴⁶ The ability to work flexibly is valued by people across all characteristics. Specifically for many trans employees, working from home is positive as it allows them freedom and autonomy to be their authentic selves, as well as providing the opportunity to engage more in learning and personal development with friends and family.⁴⁷ A flexible working culture has also been identified as a critical success factor to support those with disabilities, for example.³⁶ Both managers and disabled employees agree that workplace adjustments are less necessary if flexibility is part of how a company's culture is designed. Indeed, the Business Disability Forum suggests that identifying standard and 'simple' ways of working, that do not require formal adjustment processes or assessments, will be helpful for disabled employees, but also the workforce as a whole.⁹ Additionally, research from the World Economic Forum found that the culture created from technology company SAP's supportive flexible working options has increased voluntary neurodiversity disclosure. Whilst offering flexibility and adjustments tend to be low cost or free and support productivity, employees with disabilities often hold back from requesting what they need – in the 2019 Great Big Adjustments survey 34% of respondents said they hadn't asked for adjustments that would have helped them due to fear that their manager would treat them differently,⁴⁸ which again highlights the importance of focusing on creating an inclusive culture and encouraging the right behaviours among line managers. It is important for organisations to consider the range of needs and positive impacts for different groups, and the systemic reasons behind this.⁴⁹ Allowing employees to balance work, personal commitments, and health needs, for example, will aid the attraction and retention of workers from a more diverse and broader pool.²⁷



We find that our flexible working offering (including hybrid and remote working contracts) is a big pull for prospective employees, and we have seen it become as important as offering a competitive salary or healthcare, for example. Flexibility comes in many forms and benefits many different employees. For example, we offer flexible bank holidays where employees can mix and match, choosing when they want to take them, because we recognise that they are typically centred on Christian holidays. Not everyone wants or needs to take time off for these.

Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)

Flexibility – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Consult with employees to understand their preferences for hybrid working. Consider consulting with additional stakeholders to gather their perspective (e.g., clients, if relevant)
- Create guidelines that allow teams to operate based on their specific needs, rather than a standard approach across the whole organisation which could create further gaps
- Communicate the level of support for flexible working in teams and get leaders to role model this
- Ensure that policies are clear and encourage widespread adoption
- Clearly describe your flexible work offering in recruitment communications to attract the largest volume and broadest pool of applicants
- Identify ways to add flexibility for a diverse range of needs, e.g., including managing health, and religious observances, such as allowing flexibility in how bank holiday allocation is used

6.2 Inclusive meetings and communication

What we mean

This section is about creating simple habits that encourage all participants to contribute in meetings and providing adjustments to allow equal access, as well as designing broader communications in an inclusive way.

Why it matters

Employers can implement inclusive meeting and communication practices to foster inclusivity in day-to-day operations. Indeed, a company may have a diverse workforce, but if it is unable to encourage contribution from all, it may struggle to harness the power of their voices.⁵⁰ Meetings typically fall into the same patterns, whereby important information known by some attendees is less likely to be shared more broadly; majority-demographic, more senior, and extroverted individuals take the most airtime; and the first few attendees to speak tend to set the direction and tone of the conversation.⁵¹ If left unaddressed, these common meeting practices will continue to marginalise many employees.

Research shows that some groups with diverse characteristics are most negatively affected by these poor meeting practices but a concerted effort to encourage inclusive communication can enable everyone to contribute equally and feel like they belong.⁵² A Harvard Business Review study of over 1,000 female executives found that women tend to be less comfortable speaking up in meetings, and two times as likely to be interrupted in group dialogues. This is particularly the case in male-dominated organisations and industries.⁵³ The study mentions that many of these findings can be applied to members of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as to men with 'more-reserved personalities'. The Good Finance Framework study found similar issues, especially for Black women.⁷ The same has been found for men from minority groups.⁵⁴

Additionally, another study found that a lack of gender-sensitive language was the most common issue cited regarding formal communication.⁵⁵ Inclusive communication practices are necessary for a culture of diversity and inclusion because of employees' positive involvement in organisational communication holistically, decision-making, and informal interactions.¹¹

Regarding neurodiverse employees, research shows that higher management and neurotypical colleagues typically hold the power to acknowledge and address the access barriers and additional labour that neurodiverse professionals face.⁵⁶ For example, study participants emphasised that having access to necessary documents and an agenda before a meeting is a "critical access need" for them, but this is often at the discretion of more senior, and often neurotypical, colleagues who may not consider these a necessity. This is often the case for most people from underrepresented groups – overrepresented groups tend to hold the most power to positively influence everyday practices, yet they are often not the ones who would benefit from change. Therefore, embedding inclusive communication practices will ensure that everyone can positively benefit from conscious positive change.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a notable example of the importance of encouraging inclusive meetings and communication as standard. Colleagues and workplaces were slow to understand and implement accessibility features in online meetings, meaning that many employees, such as those with hearing related conditions, waited months, in some cases, to participate in meetings again.⁹ Whilst the pandemic is just one extreme example, it highlighted the challenges that many employees across multiple characteristics face daily. Implementing a few simple actions to encourage inclusive meetings and communication in the workplace can be an impactful first step to ensuring all employee voices are heard and respected. This in turn can benefit teams by hearing different perspectives to aid decision making. A recent study also demonstrated an increase in individuals' satisfaction and engagement when leaders encouraged their contributions.⁵⁷

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Having a workforce that reflects our customers is mission critical for BT Group to ensure our products and services are accessible and inclusive by design. That’s why we aspire by 2030 to have a workforce that is gender balanced, 25% from an ethnic minority background and 17% disabled.

On the topic of inclusive meetings, we’re strengthening our inclusive management capability by integrating new content into our management training. This includes concepts that managers can apply to running meetings such as creating the conditions for psychological safety, active listening, and specific techniques to draw out contributions from different people.

To create more inclusive communications, we have focused on two areas: 1) identifying the teams involved in communications and events and ensuring they can design these to be fully accessible, taking adjustments into account, and 2) publishing an inclusive language guide for employees to educate and help people consider the context and impact of gendered and racialised language, so they can adapt their interactions.

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Inclusive meetings – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Find out if attendees need adjustments for the meeting
- Send materials in advance
- Encourage everyone to input. This may mean noticing who is less likely to speak during a meeting and sensitively inviting their input
- Enable captions in virtual meeting platforms, as needed
- Identify yourself each time you speak during a meeting
- Avoid idioms and use complete words when using acronyms for the first time
- Describe meaningful graphics in general terms
- Meeting chairs should set the tone and encourage the inclusive behaviours above

For further detail, refer to EY’s All in Moment framework ([All in Moment \(AIM\) team meeting practice \(ey.com\)](#))



7. Development and progression

7.1 Mentoring and sponsorship

What we mean

This section is about providing structured, time-bound development programmes to mentor and/or sponsor individuals, to close gaps in access to career progression opportunities and create reciprocal learning about the experiences of underrepresented groups. Mentoring typically involves sharing knowledge to aid learning, growth, and increased understanding of barriers faced by underrepresented groups, while sponsorship involves a senior person advocating for the employee to increase their opportunities e.g., for high-profile projects or progression.⁵⁸

Why they matter

Mentoring and sponsorship programmes are two different ways that organisations can nurture talent. There is evidence of their positive impact for employees from a range of groups. Mentored employees report higher levels of job satisfaction and often demonstrate enhanced performance due to the skills they develop and consistent constructive feedback that they receive.⁵⁹ Unlike with mentoring, sponsors often use their 'political capital' (which often comes with experience and seniority) to advance those they sponsor through advocacy. Perhaps most importantly, when done right, sponsorship can realise a company's recruitment investment and really emphasise the difference that psychological safety, presence, and personalised feedback can make.⁶⁰

For both types of programmes, research indicates that even just the "vote of confidence" derived from participating in a mentoring or sponsorship programme can enhance the performance of those from minority groups.⁶¹ Employees in organisations with these programmes are 8% more likely to believe that everyone, despite their background, has an equal opportunity for success.²² Ideally, both sponsorship and mentoring should help both parties to learn from the opportunity and thereby contribute to a more diverse and inclusive working environment in a mutually beneficial way.^{33,62} Similarly, there is positive evidence of a reciprocal benefit from Moving Ahead and 30% Club's mentoring programme where, as a result of having a mentee, more than a third of mentors said they felt motivated to create change in their organisations.⁶³ Whilst different in how they are organised and run, effective sponsorship and impactful mentorship are likely to positively benefit all parties involved through mutual education and personal development.

Recent research by Delta for the 'CEO Action for Black Equality' initiative⁶⁴ identified conditions for success for both mentoring and sponsorship programmes. Specifically, mentoring works best when organisations have a clear definition of allyship and mentoring, strong leadership support, and a formalised approach; but impact is limited when there is a lack of clarity surrounding the "why" and the "whom" when mentoring programmes are set up, particularly if communication focuses on 'fixing' minority colleagues. Sponsorship works best when champions and sponsors are formally identified, belong to a diverse group themselves, and they work closely with Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and steering committees to ensure they are informed. However, sponsorship is less impactful when there isn't a long-term commitment to systemic change, accountability of sponsors is minimal, and there is scepticism and insufficient support to address historical cultural barriers that undermine minorities' success.

Research has noted that informal sponsorship and networks can widen inequalities, as people tend to informally sponsor people like themselves⁶⁵ and those who are more 'visible' (e.g., physically present, go to social events, are outgoing), which puts at a disadvantage those who can't or don't do this. For example, white men tend to find their own sponsors as there are often more people 'like them' in the organisation, whereas women and minorities often need formal programmes to make those connections initially.⁶⁶ As a result, it is generally recommended that programmes should be implemented formally. Although it is commonly cited that it is difficult to replicate the informal networks that can generate the most successful mentor/sponsorship relationships through formal processes,⁶⁷ a structured approach paired with an inclusive culture can counter this effect.

Moving Ahead and 30% Club's cross-company mentoring programme is a good example of an effective approach to workplace mentoring. Their recent Mission Gender Equity (MGE) 68 programme resulted in one in five women promoted within the nine-month programme (double the yearly average promotion rate for women) and within the following two years, a third of MGE mentees were promoted within the same organisation they started. 70% of mentees also felt more confident and empowered at the end of the programme and nearly half said their mentor empowered them in development and salary conversations. Whilst mentoring primarily tackles mentee's personal barriers, the impact on mentors creates better understanding of the barriers faced by systemically disadvantaged groups. 52% of mentors who took part in Moving Ahead's Mission Include mentoring programme⁶³ said their mentee has heightened their awareness of barriers for others in the workplace, and the programme enabled more than 40% of mentors to develop how they manage others' emotions, through their meetings with their mentees. Similarly, 23% of mentors agree mentoring has changed the way they lead in their organisation for the better. It is clear that implementing structured programmes, such as these, can be beneficial for employees and employers alike.

70% of mentees
felt more confident at the
end of the programme

“

Our Diverse Talent Accelerator (DTA) programme, which has been running for three years, includes a sponsorship element which has been very successful. 62% of participants have moved into new roles or been promoted in their existing roles following the programme. The programme itself is for everyone (we have defined ‘diversity’ in its broadest sense), but we ensure there is overrepresentation in the participants for characteristics where our leadership teams are currently underrepresented. It is aimed at employees in their mid-career stage, and is designed to aid personal and professional development, including identifying and overcoming barriers to progression. Its strength lies in the fact it helps participants to build a strong network of colleagues across the business. Sponsorship is one element of the programme, and this involves a senior leader being assigned to each participant at the end of the programme and providing guidance and mentoring, connecting to their networks, getting the participant involved in high profile projects, and advocating for their career progression.

Autotrader

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Participating in the DTA Programme really helped my confidence and self-belief. The programme was so empowering and helped guide me through personal barriers and reinforced that I have a voice and I can use it. It showed me how the power of building a solid network across the business is invaluable when increasing my knowledge of all things Auto Trader and in building my confidence by being supported by like-minded people to achieve my goals. The power is in the people! Best experience to date, it changed my life for the better.

Autotrader

Mentoring and sponsorship – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

Both mentoring and sponsorship

- Use a structured programme with clearly defined expectations
- Consider the content of the programme and provide provocation for participants to include in their discussions
- In setting up the participants for success on the programme, explain why a formal partnership is needed, and consider how to educate both parties on unspoken rules and informal processes that take place around career progression
- Communicate that the programme supports the change of organisational systems to be more inclusive (e.g., is not about ‘fixing’ mentees)

Mentoring

- Consider your organisation DE&I strategy and select mentoring and development programmes that speak directly to these areas, e.g., different target groups and levels
- Ask mentees to provide insight into their lived experience and barriers to progression
- Communicate that the purpose of the programme is to educate both mentee and mentor and will be most successful if reciprocal in nature
- Work to define the objectives and goals of the relationship and set up a plan to work towards them

Sponsorship

- Ensure that the sponsorship relationship focuses on utilising the sponsor’s experiences and capital to open doors, effectively advocating for their sponsee, and to take action outside of their 1-1 meetings
- Ask sponsors to provide access to senior networks and guidance on career progression
- Ensure that sponsors have clear and measurable goals as well as insight into best practice



7.2 Promotion process and progression opportunities

What we mean

This section is about putting strategies in place that encourage underrepresented talent to apply for a promotion at the right time, that ensure organisations give equal access to promotion opportunities, and to fairly assess candidates' competence and suitability for promotion.

Why it matters

In many organisations, promotion and internal recruitment is the primary mechanism for recognising talent. It can also be a great way to demonstrate that diverse voices are both utilised and valued, which can increase job satisfaction and an overall sense of belonging.⁶⁹ It is important that the processes in place are fair, equitable, and shine a spotlight on the progress the organisation is making towards reducing inequality.

Despite the importance of fair promotion processes, inequalities for underrepresented groups are still commonplace. The McGregor-Smith review found that 35% of Pakistani, 33% of Indian and 29% of Black Caribbean employees feel that they have been overlooked during promotion cycles due to their ethnicity,³⁴ and Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) data from employees in the NHS demonstrates that 85% of people with disabilities do not believe they have equal opportunities for promotion.⁷⁰

In its research report, 25x25 highlights gender disparity at executive level across UK corporates, and interestingly notes that there is no correlation between the number of women in these organisations and the number of women in senior executive positions, suggesting a lack of proportional promotions and problems with succession planning.³⁷ They stress the importance of robust talent planning and monitoring the pipeline to executive positions closely. Research from the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) found that, with an opt-out promotion process, the gender gap can be significantly reduced, and more women are selected for leadership roles. This is because 76% of the promotion gap between men and women can be put down to women being less likely to put themselves forwards.³⁶ Additionally, more transparent, and targeted processes, as well as a strong culture of inclusion that focuses on tackling bias, are important for multiple characteristics. Indeed, a study found that women are typically promoted based on past achievements, whereas, for men, it is based on future potential.⁴³ Similarly, data shows that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds took 19% longer (over a five-year study), to progress to the next grade, than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds.⁷¹ A strategic and transparent approach to promotions and progression will be more able to tackle these inconsistencies.

Transparent processes are vital – employees scored their companies 6% higher on 'openness and honesty' when the company had clear progression processes.²² Additionally, a Harvard Business Review study found that if employees believe promotions are fair, they are twice as likely to see a long-term future with their company and put in additional effort at work; employees are also five times more likely to feel that leadership acts with integrity.⁷² Finally, having authentic role models at senior levels can have a positive impact on employees' belief that they can progress and desire to do so.⁹ These findings align with the idea that transparency around the potential for career advancement is important to an employee's sense of inclusion and belonging.

It is necessary for businesses to examine the promotion processes that they currently have in place; this is a key area that can have a big positive impact but requires significant improvement.



We collaborated with external consultants, Pearn Kandola, to comprehensively review our Managing Associate (MA) promotion process in the UK. This initiative originated from our Race Action Plan and is also aligned with our broader strategy to inspire, develop, and support our high-performing teams in realising their full potential. The project entailed a thorough process review and included in-depth research interviews with MAs who had previously undergone the promotion process, as well as discussions with Partners. The review highlighted the need for greater consistency and transparency for those navigating the promotion process. A significant recommendation was to provide earlier feedback to candidates to help them understand their progress and make necessary adjustments. In response to the findings, we introduced a revised promotion process in 2022. The feedback from those who have experienced the new process has been overwhelmingly positive, noting a marked improvement in clarity and understanding throughout the promotion journey.

Linklaters

Promotion – What actions to take

Focus on these actions to positively impact diversity, equity and inclusion across a range of characteristics:

- Create a clear and structured promotion process
- Analyse data on tenure/ time to progression for underrepresented groups vs majority groups to understand if people are getting 'stuck', and examine the reasons for this
- Set targets for representation within the processes of succession planning and promotion shortlisting
- Set targets for representation in promotion outcomes (e.g., proportionality)
- Use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data to examine disproportionality in promotions and uncover the issues to be addressed (e.g., accessibility)
- Review the behaviours that are rewarded through progression to see if there is an 'archetype' for success that may be excluding certain groups or personality types
- Highlight authentic role models from a range of underrepresented groups to inspire employees
- Consider implementing a structured succession and talent planning approach to support promotion and progression processes, for example, the [Pathways to CEO analysis](#)



8. Conclusion

As this report has highlighted, under-representation of women and minority groups and inequalities in their workplace experiences continue to persist across UK businesses. Whilst diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are on the agenda for many companies, they often fail to be impactful across more than one or two characteristics. Additionally, while evidence on gender impacts is now strong, research on impacts for other characteristics is still developing. For example, Progress Together in partnership with the Bridge Group is working to collect socio-economic data and has now gathered data representing 200,000 employees across UK financial services – so in time its analysis will play an important role in evidencing what works on the socio-economic dimension.

There has been a lack of evidence on how to encourage change that positively influences many people across a range of demographics. In response, this report has focused on taking an evidence-based approach to filling these gaps to help businesses of all sizes, across all sectors, know where to start. Specifically, we have explored which DE&I interventions work across multiple characteristics (which include: gender; race & ethnicity; disability; LGBTQ+ identity; and socio-economic background).

This paper places inclusive culture at the forefront of all initiatives. As we have demonstrated, by considering inclusive culture as a central, overarching goal, companies will be better equipped to implement DE&I interventions that will be impactful, go beyond 'the numbers' and focus on affecting change to create a more diverse and inclusive working environment. The subsequent interventions that have been covered span four areas:

- **Measurement** (including data collection and analysis, and target setting)
- **Recruitment** (which covers recruitment practices)
- **Retention** (considering flexibility, and inclusive meetings and communications specifically)
- **Progression** (which consists of mentoring and sponsorship, and promotion processes and progression opportunities)

Importantly, companies must consider all interventions explored in this paper as part of a mutually beneficial DE&I ecosystem that supports their wider business strategy. Indeed, there is no 'right' way of instigating change, nor a quick and easy 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Therefore, when embarking on their DE&I journey, companies should work to build a company culture that is a strong platform to embed interventions, ensure that leadership is accountable, and consider where efforts can be most impactful for multiple characteristics. Even the smallest of steps forwards can make a big difference for businesses and their employees.

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