

Advantages and Challenges of Diversity and Inclusivity

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will consider the strengths and challenges of an organization that is diverse and includes people of diverse backgrounds in all levels of the organization. Specifically, you will learn:

1. [Advantages of Diversity and Inclusivity](#)
2. [Challenges of Diversity and Inclusivity](#)

1. Advantages of Diversity and Inclusivity

If you went to grade school in the United States, you might remember learning about the great American melting pot. This is the idea that the U.S. is the place where people come from all over the world, and all melt together into a single unified culture that is uniquely American. In recent years, this illustration of national American diversity has fallen out of favor because it implies that people abandon their cultures and backgrounds in the process of becoming American. Many prefer to think about integration and assimilation using the image of a salad bowl, where each of the component ingredients retain their distinct form, but all the ingredients together make one delicious whole.

Whether melting pot or salad bowl, valuing diversity and multiculturalism is a core American value and a source of national pride and strength, even though America has historically and systemically fallen short of these ideals. Inclusivity remains the foundation of our belief in opportunity and a key factor driving engagement in our social, business and political process.



Surveys indicate that both consumers and employees expect businesses to take a stand on and be transparent in their performance relative to social diversity issues. As technology and globalization accelerate the pace of change, companies sometimes even step in before the government in shaping policy and practice with regards to diversity, equality and other issues.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Many corporations extended benefits to same-sex partners before the 2012 Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage. The recognition of same-sex marriages by major corporations pressured government to do the same.

In the workplace, employee diversity can be a source of competitive advantage. Here are a few specific advantages.

- Leveraging cross-cultural teams to appeal to a broader audience.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** An advertising agency with a diverse creative team can better create messages that appeal to different audiences and better avoid messages that alienate some audiences.

- Increasing the productivity of employees who feel valued.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A longtime human resources director accepts a position at a new, diverse company, where he is no longer the only queer person of color on staff. Because the team is diverse, he doesn't feel dismissed or tokenized like he did at his last job, which allows him to create better relationships with his new team and to communicate more effectively with his peers.

- Improving an organization's brand as an employer and, therefore, ability to recruit and retain talent.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A youth-focused magazine is trying to diversify and grow their readership and writing staff. They begin by reaching out to writers with a wide variety of backgrounds and inviting them to submit pitches. Once it is known that the magazine is actively recruiting more diverse writers, they begin to receive more and more pitches from writers of different backgrounds. Marginalized and minority readers see themselves represented more in the magazine, and some begin to dream of writing for the magazine themselves when they're older.

- Improving the market relevance and market value of a company/organization.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A grocery store chain is well known for their great work environment and for their diversity initiatives. Many shoppers care about supporting a company that is doing good things for the community, and they become very loyal to the brand and do all their shopping there.

- Improved insight into the world beyond the company walls.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A health-tracking app is developed with the goal of giving people a low-cost way to count steps, calories, and other data in their daily lives. Before the initial release, a team member who is testing the app for bugs notices that there's no way to indicate her disability in her profile in the app. She realizes that without this information, the app is going to sometimes give her recommendations for activities that will be impossible for her. She alerts her colleagues to this issue, and they are able to make the change before inadvertently releasing an app that would not be useful to people with disabilities and that might receive poor reviews or publicity as a result.

There is data showing that companies with better records on diversity are more likely to have positive financial results above industry medians, and companies with poor diversity are more likely to be *below* industry medians. In their 2018 publication, “Delivering Through Diversity,” McKinsey & Company reported a “positive, statistically significant correlation between executive team diversity and financial performance.” These are the positive consequences of building an organization that is diverse and inclusive.



THINK ABOUT IT

What was a time that you contributed something important to a job, team, or project that only you could have contributed, because of your unique identity, background, or skills?

Source: [McKinsey & Company: Delivering Through Diversity](#)

2. Challenges of Diversity and Inclusivity

The things that make us different can also make it challenging for us to work together. People with different backgrounds will have different experiences, different vocabularies, and different values. These are likely to result in different perspectives and different priorities. This can make it more difficult for the group to find the cohesion and comfort necessary to work together. The team may spend more than the usual time finding common ground, or struggle to maintain momentum as they move toward their goals. They may even have trouble picking a direction. For these reasons a diverse work group needs exceptional leadership and team

members who are ready to put in more effort and take more risks than they might be used to. It also takes exceptional communication skills.

Further, some team members may feel uncomfortable if they are afraid they will be judged on the basis of their identity, or that their ideas will be dismissed due to bias. This can lead to a lack of confidence and assertiveness in the workplace, both of which are needed for solving difficult challenges. Ongoing training and awareness-building exercises can help, as well as regular group outings or rotating members across different teams. It is important for leaders to understand that there may be some awkward moments, but these are all part of an organizational learning process as team members become more comfortable working with people who are different from themselves.

IN CONTEXT

A company is developing multimedia training for hospital orderlies. The creative team has representation across age groups and cultural backgrounds. There is representation by men and women, straight and queer, cisgender and transgender people, and people with and without disabilities. At first they are very productive because the needs of the training are clear—a set of self-paced tutorials to help orderlies perform their daily tasks. But as they get past the early stages, the group finds a lot of conflict over the delivery of the training

For example, there will be hundreds of illustrations showing orderlies with patients and workers, and some people on the team feel stronger than others that these illustrations need to be inclusive. Moreover, their opinions differ on what it means to be inclusive. Is it showing a mix of skin colors? Is it showing women as doctors and men as nurses? Is it showing people of different ages and abilities? If it is all of the above, it becomes a much bigger process to describe the needed pictures and send them to the illustrator. Somebody will need to create a spreadsheet to make sure all groups get equal representation.

Another issue is accessibility. The project must meet legal requirements for accessibility such as image descriptions and transcripts for videos, but one of the team members wants to go beyond the basics and consider cognitive styles and neurodiversity.

Yet another issue is language. One person feels strongly about using singular “they” any time there is an unspecified person doing tasks. Others don’t like it grammatically. There are also disputes about whether to use the term “disabled people” or “people who are disabled.” There are a dozen other terms the group also can’t find consensus on.

A few people on the team further feel that the team is wasting too much time on these discussions. They have a tight deadline, and the important thing is the content and learning objectives. The team meetings turn into long conversations where few decisions are made. Though they all share the desire to create an inclusive and accessible curriculum, the specific sensitivities and priorities of each member make it difficult to reach consensus as a team and proceed with the project.

If you were the leader of this group, how would you help the group regain momentum and reach its goals without anyone feeling their concerns were dismissed?

In the next tutorial, you will explore strategies to capitalize on the strengths of diversity and inclusivity while overcoming these challenges.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned some of the advantages to diversity and inclusion. You learned that diversity and inclusivity enables a more collaborative and healthy work environment, resulting in higher performing teams and organizations. As with anything, however, there are inevitable **challenges to diversity and inclusion** as people with different perspectives and priorities work together. Moreover, some members of the team may not feel fully confident communicating in a diverse workgroup. This can be addressed by ongoing training and development, in addition to group outings as well as team member rotations; allowing time for team members to become more comfortable and adept at being a member of a diverse work team.

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