

**CIPD**

Report  
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# Resetting EDI and reaffirming inclusion

The CIPD has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With over 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

## Report

# Resetting EDI and reaffirming inclusion

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# Executive summary

Diversity and inclusion initiatives and practices have been an important part of HR and business thinking for many decades but have been emphasised in recent years through social change as well as through wider efforts to address discrimination with an aim of creating fairer opportunities for all. However, this area has become increasingly complex, under pressure to show clearer positive business outcomes, and politicised. Recent pressures from the Trump administration led a lot of US-based businesses to reset or restate their position and goals on diversity and inclusion initiatives, but also encouraged businesses generally to review their practices and principles.

The CIPD has long seen inclusion as a golden thread that should run through all HR and people management practices. For some, the moral arguments about fairness and equality of opportunity are enough to make the case for resources and effort on diversity and inclusion. But there is a fundamental case for organisations to focus on inclusion in order to access and retain the breadth of skills, talents and experience they need, as well as to reflect the customers and communities they serve or are part of.

It is important therefore to understand where EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) is headed and what changes or resets are happening to help businesses of all kinds to understand the issues and find the right balance going forward. The CIPD has drawn on its own networks and body of knowledge and experience, and conducted interviews and roundtables with 50 HR leaders and EDI specialists in a programme starting in the middle of last year.

The findings in this report offer practice perspectives to consider and actions to improve outcomes for employers and employees alike.

The report identifies eight key lessons in EDI for organisations, managers, and those in the people profession:

- 1 Realign EDI activity with business strategy and outcomes.** In some organisations, EDI activity was performative rather than demonstrating added value to delivering business priorities. The 'case' for EDI must be rooted in and integral to business goals inclusive of the legal, social and ethical drivers.
- 2 Ensure strong governance, accountability and measurement.** Organisations need robust structures and governance to support the effective delivery of EDI, threading it through people and business practice, and not be seen as 'stand alone'.
- 3 Simplify language and ground EDI messaging in business realities.** The language around EDI needs to be simplified, focusing more on the principles of inclusion and prioritising what is most relevant to the business context.
- 4 Strengthen and integrate capability around EDI.** Enthusiasm and lived experience should not be seen as a proxy for expertise. Practitioners should be better trained and supported to deliver effective EDI that improves business and individual outcomes.

- 5 Strengthen manager and leadership competence and confidence.** Managers need better training and support in good people management, understanding how to work with increasingly diverse teams and ways of working, including on managing conflict. This is key to delivering on the promises of inclusion and creating the supportive cultures that help everyone to thrive.
- 6 Focus on inclusion for all.** While representational diversity is important, it can tip over into being exclusionary and becomes complex on the many issues of intersectionality. More organisations are now focusing on the principles and practices of inclusion for all, emphasising shared goals and outcomes. Demographic data collection must be proportionate and lead to meaningful action and outcomes.
- 7 Manage conflict by reviewing workplace rights and responsibilities.** Organisations must address conflict, harassment and discrimination, including environments for respectful disagreement and establishing appropriate 'speak up' cultures. This may require a resetting or restating of the social contract, being clear on individual responsibilities for inclusion, alongside rights and an understanding of shared responsibilities in the workplace.
- 8 Address the challenge and opportunity of AI.** Artificial intelligence (AI) can both positively and negatively impact diversity, for example with the concerns around building in bias. HR and EDI leaders need to keep abreast of developments and proactively influence the responsible use and development of AI tools, both within the HR function and across their organisations.

This report explores each of these areas in turn, bringing together prior research with the inputs from the roundtables and interviews conducted as part of this review. It aims to focus on the challenges and issues, but also to show the way forward for this vital business theme of diversity and inclusion. We hope exploration of these themes will spark further dialogue on the considerations and actions needed to improve outcomes for employers and employees alike.

# Introduction

Diversity and inclusion has become a key theme for the people profession and for business over the last couple of decades. It has been driven both by the need to access all the skills and talent required, but also in acknowledgement of growing societal demand to recognise disadvantage and discrimination and seek greater fairness and access for all to good work. Business operates in a social context, and the make-up of our workforces are more diverse and their expectations have been changing, frequently reinforced through social movements highlighting social injustices, such as the Black Lives Matter and the MeToo movements.

Diversity of people has many different dimensions, which are not always readily visible or apparent. People don't fall into single categories, and within characteristics that are protected under law there are many variations, such as forms of disability, sexuality or beliefs. The law itself and its interpretation evolves as cases citing discrimination or injustice come through our legal systems. Just recently the UK

Supreme Court had to rule on clarifying the legal definition of woman in the Equality Act 2010, but this has also raised other questions. People also want their voice to be heard, to feel they are treated fairly, with respect and valued for their differences and what they bring to work.

In reality, we can't always accommodate or reconcile all the differences that people want to express, and inclusion will require us all to give a little in order to work together collectively. Furthermore, diversity and inclusion has become increasingly politicised, with so-called 'anti-woke' sentiment suggesting that it has gone too far, sometimes linking it to immigration concerns and growing nationalist politics. The recent challenges coming from the Trump administration to organisations to remove their diversity and inclusion programmes if they want to do business with the US Government have forced many into a reset or restatement.

This makes this space complex, and it continues to evolve as language and perspectives change. At the CIPD we use the acronym EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion), but others will use DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) or other ways to describe the practices and initiatives. But challenges have been growing for a while as business leaders and managers try to navigate this shifting landscape and then question the outcomes and value of these initiatives to their businesses. At the same time, in too many cases it is not clear how much these initiatives have helped with reducing discrimination, unfairness or progression of minority groups or what it is we should most be measuring.

Businesses will be responding to these pressures in a variety of ways, so this is a critical time to reassess and reset what the core principles of diversity and inclusion initiatives are, what is working and what needs change.

As the professional body for the people profession, we recognise our role in helping to navigate the way forward. Over the years we have provided a lot of guidance on EDI, and it has been a key theme across many of our events and how we see professional capabilities. But we also have to keep learning, be open to reasonable challenge and adapt where we need to, to provide well-evidenced guidance in response to our members and the profession's needs and priorities.

To understand the current issues and perspectives around EDI, we initiated a review in mid-2024. As part of this we spoke to 50 HR leaders and EDI specialists in a series of interviews and roundtables. They reiterated their beliefs in the core drivers for investing in and committing to EDI. These drivers included:

- remaining competitive in their markets
- brand differentiation
- legal and regulatory requirements
- corporate and brand reputation and image
- finding talent and skills in a challenging market
- keeping pace with social trends and developments.

Our evidence assessment *Building inclusive workplaces*, published in 2019, showed that inclusive workplaces enhance team knowledge-sharing, innovation and creativity, and link to positive team outcomes, job commitment and reduced absenteeism. Attracting, recruiting and retaining the diversity of talent every business needs is a central issue, and being able to serve and reflect a diverse customer base is

increasingly linked to corporate reputation and growing expectations of responsible and sustainable business. As business is also part of society, inclusive organisational cultures and working practices create positive societal outcomes and the values that most modern democracies speak to and seek to enshrine in their laws.

At present, EDI's vital role risks being derailed if we cannot better articulate and demonstrate value, respond to criticism and focus on the interventions that count. It is important to recognise and address these challenges if EDI is to be effective in achieving its goals to deliver business value and improve fairness and equality of outcomes.

# The external context and effect on EDI perspectives in business

As noted, over the last year or so, the topic has become increasingly politicised. It's easy to find headlines tearing down EDI,<sup>1</sup> with an establishment of what has been labelled the 'anti-woke' agenda. But how are organisations reacting to this, and is the media discourse leading to significant course corrections?

Some organisations have made headlines for apparently rolling back on their EDI programmes, particularly in late 2024 and early 2025 in response to the pressures in the US, and there has been some repositioning and renaming of these programmes, to talk more of culture and inclusion for example. However, many high-profile organisations have used the opportunity to recommit and reinforce their principles and goals.

Data suggests that while the noise may be loud, the reality in many organisations is far quieter. [A 2024 study](#) by The Conference Board found that while more than 60% of US-based executives view the current political and social climate for corporate EDI as very or extremely challenging, less than 10% of firms planned to reduce EDI resources over the next three years.

Employer interviews and roundtables conducted by the CIPD in the second half of 2024 for this review showed clear awareness of and concern around negative narratives. Most employers said this was not causing them to withdraw from EDI efforts but that they were rethinking how they articulate their EDI proposition overall, and clarifying the outcomes and evidence base. In the last two years, according to a CIPD survey of over 2,000 employers, only 2% of employers reported a decreased focus on EDI, while 34% had increased their efforts.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside media reports of large organisations including Meta and Amazon rowing back from EDI,<sup>3</sup> there are also reports of significant organisations, such as Apple and Costco,<sup>4</sup> remaining committed, despite some external pressure from activist shareholder groups.

Although leadership commitment was not universal, most chief people officers reported that in their organisation the 'case' for EDI from both a business and moral perspective remains well established and continues to be backed by leaders. It also has to be recognised that there are legal obligations and that without EDI policies companies would struggle to demonstrate they have taken 'all reasonable steps' to prevent discrimination.

Most governments will also continue to want to encourage businesses to provide opportunities to employ people who find it harder to access work, for example through reasons of disability or for young people, both groups having significantly lower levels of employment. This is being called out directly by the UK Government, which will be looking to find the carrots and possibly the sticks to encourage business action.

From an employee standpoint, social attitude survey data paints a positive picture of British views around diversity and inclusion. The [2022 British Social Attitudes Survey](#) found a 'near revolution' in public opinion on most social and moral issues, while a [2020 Ipsos survey](#) found British people have become more open-minded in their attitudes towards race since the mid-2000s. Moreover, two-thirds of UK workers (66%) say that the acceptance and inclusion of employees from all backgrounds is important to them when searching for jobs, according to one significant [YouGov survey](#) conducted in 2023. Meanwhile, a [2024 report](#) co-led by the University of Oxford found that most British people supported EDI initiatives, but believed improvements were needed to ensure they are relevant to their everyday experiences.

In the US, the Pew Research Center found that the majority (52%) of employees viewed their organisation focusing on EDI as 'a good thing', compared with 21% seeing it as a bad thing (26% were neutral),<sup>5</sup> whilst a [survey from the scientific journal \*Nature\*](#) found that actual levels of support for diversity and inclusion amongst Americans were higher than most of those living in the US perceived them to be. This stands in contrast to more recent headlines seen around the EDI debate in the US and is an important reminder that most people remain positive or neutral on the topic, although it must be noted that US workers' views on EDI have grown slightly more negative since 2023.

One EDI consultant who works with a range of organisations told us: "When you speak to employees, you don't hear the backlash in the same way. If anything, there's an even stronger piece around needing to do the right thing and that inclusion really matters."

When considering the EDI teams that are scaling back, when organisations are operating within a tough economic climate, people-related costs are often among the first to be cut due to low perceived value in the short term. As one EDI consultant put it: "As soon as organisations are looking at their bottom line, they stop recruiting, they stop training, they stop anything that's seen as a 'nice to do'." And sadly, cost-cutting can disproportionately impact those from ethnic minority backgrounds. Research from non-profit People Like Us and Censuswide found ethnic minority workers are almost twice as likely to have a pay rise or promotion rescinded due to the current economic climate.<sup>6</sup>

### **Ensuring concerns are heard**

External narratives, even if not always agreed with, require consideration and response, as they will impact internal behaviour. Several organisations we spoke with faced the challenge of dealing with employees who had been involved in the anti-immigration riots in the UK last summer, while also ensuring they were fully supporting ethnic minority staff who felt anxious and unsafe.

Meanwhile, some employers reported an increase in individuals' concerns that they are missing out due to an increased focus on protected characteristics and misunderstandings about positive action. This reflects concerns from some about EDI undermining meritocratic principles, which must be addressed.

One CPO (chief people officer) said: "The negative part is the influence that this 'anti-woke' rhetoric has... there's a big majority... that get influenced by what they hear. I think it's important for the company to be providing proper information rather than misinformation... so that [people] can make their own judgements."

There are also some specific areas of conflict within the EDI space to be addressed, notably the tension between rights and beliefs, evident for example around trans inclusion and gender-critical beliefs. Many organisations are also wrestling with increasing employee and stakeholder expectations that they should have a point of view on social and geopolitical issues, despite most workforces being made up of individuals with a wide range of views.

CPOs are also alert to the rise of far-right parties and populism across the US and Europe. "I am concerned about the far right... and some of the views and opinions of public figures in influencing people, and that [some] people take that as their source of the truth," one told us.

The case for reconsidering how organisations position and embed EDI is not just related to external commentary and reports of pushback, but this is an important driver leading organisations to assess how they approach EDI strategy.

### **Addressing challenges around EDI**

Our research uncovered common themes in employers' challenges around EDI and the steps they are taking to overcome them. The key areas of action are:

- 1 Realign EDI activity with business strategy and outcomes.
- 2 Ensure strong governance, accountability and measurement.
- 3 Simplify language and ground EDI messaging in business realities.
- 4 Strengthen and integrate capability around EDI.
- 5 Strengthen manager and leadership competence and confidence.
- 6 Focus on inclusion for all.
- 7 Manage conflict by reviewing workplace rights and responsibilities.
- 8 Address the challenge and opportunity of AI.

The following sections examine each area in turn.

## 1

# Realign EDI activity with business strategy and outcomes

In some organisations EDI has become too disconnected from business strategy and outcomes. This can manifest, for example, in focusing on isolated initiatives or celebration days, rather than taking a strategic and systemic approach to improving equality of outcomes for individuals and driving better business outcomes. Celebration has its place, but EDI efforts need to be substantive, not merely performative. As one CPO said: "What I'm interested in is getting EDI embedded in everything we think about, as that is what makes it most sustainable."

Recent challenges<sup>7</sup> to the widely referenced McKinsey data<sup>8</sup> on the correlation between demographic diversity and financial outcomes have led to some confusion and defensiveness around business cases for EDI focus and investment. Many organisations admit to struggling with meaningful data and measurement. One CPO noted: "The people profession and businesses haven't helped themselves, because there's a lot done that doesn't add value and generates no return on investment."

In a tough economic climate, taking an evidence-based approach to articulating the value of EDI is critical. "When you're asking for money and things start to get tight, you have to justify your existence in terms of business case and impacts," one interviewee noted, an opinion which many will recognise.

*"EDI has lost its way in some organisations because it's been unrooted from the business. In organisations that do it successfully, EDI is completely rooted into the business."*

**Former CPO and managing director of an HR consulting company**

This same organisation had run a talent programme for staff from ethnic minority backgrounds, only to find that after completing the course, a third of participants left the organisation. "The investment and will was there, but we weren't thinking about how to support them [after] the programme," the organisation's head of EDI said. It has since extended the programme to include a secondment into particular roles, which

has led to a considerable rise in retention. "That shows if you invest in your talent and they feel included, they will stay, and that is saving us a lot in recruitment costs."

## A moral case or a business case for EDI?

Whether a business case for diversity is required or whether the moral case should be sufficient (both views came up during research and they are not mutually exclusive), being able to explain exactly why your organisation is focusing on EDI is vital to understanding the purpose and value, and addressing issues such as perceived tension between EDI and meritocracy, something several employers reported hearing increasing concerns about.

According to the CIPD's *Inclusion at work 2022* report two key motivations for organisations focusing on personal characteristics are improving people's working lives and the benefits this focus will bring to their organisation. There was still clear recognition from most employers we spoke to that an emphasis on the business drivers of EDI really does matter.

HR leaders in interviews and at roundtables spoke of the positive link between EDI and talent attraction and retention, the importance of aligning with customer demographics (thus improving understanding and service of the customer base), guarding against reputational risk, improving decision-making thanks to cognitive diversity, and the integration of EDI into public and other procurement policies, making it a non-negotiable for winning contracts.

Others strongly felt the moral case should be enough. One CPO said: "We should be reflecting society, and we should be a place where people feel they can belong."

However, this is not a binary choice. Many organisations now think in terms of the triple bottom line (people, planet and profit) and aim to act as socially responsible businesses. The case for EDI can be holistic and inclusive of the legal, social, ethical and moral, as well as commercial, drivers.

LBS Professor Alex Edmans and colleagues have found in [their own research](#) that diversity, equity and inclusion is associated with higher future performance, although demographic diversity alone is not.

A [2018 CIPD report](#) concluded that the business case for EDI needed to be made clearer; "inclusive and diverse environments are likely to have a multitude of beneficial effects not captured in traditional research, for both individuals, their employers and wider society". It adds: "Any business case for diversity should hold these outcomes in balance and recognise the benefits at not only an organisational level but from an individual and societal perspective."

## 2

# Ensure strong governance, accountability and measurement

The CIPD's *Inclusion at work 2022* report found a disconnect between what leaders said and did in terms of governance and accountability around EDI. While 78% of leaders said it was vital, only 48% of employers had any EDI strategy or action plan (either stand-alone or embedded in people strategy).

While all the employers we spoke to for this report had a strategy around EDI, some were more stand-alone and others were threaded through people strategy. In organisations further along their EDI journey, it was more likely to be integrated through people and even business strategy. This may also be true for smaller businesses that won't have the resources or capacity to focus on specific EDI interventions but should see it as integral to how they operate as an organisation.

Several employers spoke of the ambition to thread EDI throughout people and business practice. One CPO said: “Rather than having another EDI programme and raising awareness, [it’s more about] how we weave it into being a good leader.” Another added: “You want more people trained in having the right conversations about EDI across your frontline services. It should be central to the delivery model of EDI, not separate.”

Another CPO echoed the need for EDI to be owned by the business, rather than seen as solely an ‘HR responsibility’. They noted that their advertising agency needed to embed EDI into client interactions and client work delivery. “For all the will in the world, I can’t influence that,” the CPO said. “I can ensure that people have the training, but it needs to be owned by a business lead.”

### **Creating strong EDI governance**

Wherever EDI sits, governance and alignment of accountabilities and execution is vital. This extends to initiatives such as employee resource groups (ERGs), or areas that organisations choose to support through social impact work (volunteering or charitable associations), which should align with the organisation’s positioning, priorities and strategy.

Measurement is central to good governance, but many employers said that targets for demographic diversity were imperfect – a blunt instrument – but one of the most used tools to try to understand progress or to set goals around EDI. Some of these overt goals are being quietly dropped in response to recent pressures, but inclusion is significantly about cultures, mindsets and behaviours which need to be understood. When organisations get this right then other statistics should follow.

Organisations continue to struggle to collect demographic data as employees can choose not to disclose certain characteristics. “Where good data exists, we can do clever things with that: rates of progression, pay comparisons, recruitment comparisons. But it’s largely limited to gender,” said one CPO. “I’d love it to be wider. But the only way we can get that data is by people choosing to self-declare and, at the moment, we’ve lost that battle.”

Some organisations are making strong progress on gathering inclusion-related data (by asking direct inclusion questions in staff engagement surveys, cutting engagement data by various characteristics or embedding EDI data through all people data), but this is not a given. Data gathering needs to be proportionate, focused on information that can be acted on or that is seen as priorities for the organisation, otherwise it can raise concerns about being intrusive. People not providing data on diversity characteristics can also be an indicator of concerns about the potential use of that data and maintaining privacy, pointing to issues of trust.

There is an appetite among employers as well as some external stakeholders for more standardised metrics of inclusion, and for the CIPD to work with others on developing practical guidance for effectively measuring inclusion.

## 3

# Simplify language and ground EDI messaging in business realities

EDI or DEI? Inclusion or belonging? Equality or equity? The language used around diversity and inclusion can be confusing because it keeps changing and it can be seen as complex. How to refer appropriately to different groups or characteristics, or terminology such as 'woke' which have moved from a positive principle to being used as a pejorative, all can put people off engaging. Concepts such as psychological safety and intersectionality, while meaningful and useful to experts, can come across as complex or impractical to other stakeholders. Other concepts like privilege and critical race theory can be subjects of heated debate and, if raised, need to be treated with awareness and sensitivity.

This complexity, particularly challenging for smaller businesses, can impede open communication through a fear of saying and doing the wrong things. A lack of shared understanding of the language and concepts can also contribute towards ineffective or poorly designed interventions. "It's difficult to be able to challenge and act when you don't know if you're saying the right thing," said one roundtable participant. Beyond language simplification, within reasonable bounds people also need to feel they can use the 'wrong' language without blame or shame, and be prepared to be corrected, if the intent is not to cause harm.

*"We use acronyms, and I don't think people always understand the terms. My belief is that if we can get people understanding what we mean, and therefore why it's important, then they will start to naturally incorporate it into the work that they do."*

**Global DE&I partner for a large business software company**

"We must stop talking about this in HR speak," one CPO told us. "We must talk about this in the everyday language of leadership and the everyday language of business. People don't need to and don't want to learn a whole new language." However, recognising that others may raise questions about using language around, for example, particular beliefs indicates that at least awareness of concepts and language that others may use is important.

## Demystifying concepts and rhetoric

Clearly explaining what EDI means to someone's role has proven an effective approach in some organisations. "We repositioned it to say: we do EDI for our colleagues, our customers and the consumers we serve," explained one head of EDI, adding that for a customer service assistant, an understanding and awareness of diversity and EDI concepts might be seen as helping them better interact with their customers.

Several HR leaders spoke about taking language 'back to basics'. "It needs to be relatable," said one leader. Another said: "We do have a programme of EDI training when you first join or get promoted to manager, but we [also] have workshops

on respect in the workplace. We've found that people start to open up about their experiences [in those sessions]."

But simplifying language shouldn't come at the cost of disregarding important changes in terms and speech. Attempts to oversimplify how people choose to refer to themselves and their identity could bring its own problems. Simplistic rhetoric that denies the complexities inherent in the topic could carry as many risks as language that's too complicated.

## 4

# Strengthen and integrate capability around EDI

Developing diversity and inclusion initiatives requires specific skills and knowledge even if delivery is driven through the business and embedded in day-to-day practice. Interviewees and roundtable participants believed that success requires EDI capabilities with a clear understanding of strategy, business and commercial knowledge, as well as subject-matter expertise.

A lack of understanding around EDI can see some leaders give responsibility to individuals, or appoint external consultants and partners without properly scrutinising their capabilities in strategic EDI or even foundational knowledge, such as having a working understanding of the Equality Act.

HR professionals are often assumed to have the required expertise, but organisations need to ensure that they can develop the knowledge to deliver EDI strategies effectively or bring in the expertise needed.

"Are we equipping practitioners to do this stuff properly?" asked one leader. "I'm not sure that we are. We should be equipping people better so that more of them can be having these conversations and understanding how to move this agenda forward."

*"When you've got people with real expertise, they can make an impact on improving the outcomes for the business. Too often, it seems to be something people think anyone can do."*

**People and culture director for an NHS-run children's hospital based in London**

### **Creating a supportive system**

Foundational and effective HR and people management means thinking and working inclusively, and EDI should be integral to good people practice. Inclusion should be threaded through all people-related practices, including recruitment, line manager training and health and wellbeing approaches, which means that a good understanding of EDI and, for example, awareness of

issues of bias is essential. This approach has been recognised through the CIPD's [Profession Map](#), which describes the range of competencies and capabilities for the people profession.

HR teams need 'cultural competency' that allows them to recognise systemic inequality or unfairness. Other core professional skills, most notably organisational

development, can also play a role in effective EDI delivery and creating spaces for robust and open discussion.

Outside of formal job roles, organisations should understand that enthusiasm and lived experience is not a substitute for expertise, and viewing EDI as a professional skillset applies to both the selection of partners (such as consultants) and for those leading EDI-related interventions, including areas like employee resource groups (ERGs). As one CPO put it: “[EDI] requires much more intellect and leadership than having enthusiastic amateurs. You need to support your [ERGs] so that you don’t have people saying yes to everything, and so that you are choosing your strategic partners carefully.”

## 5

# Strengthen manager and leadership competence and confidence

Managers can often lack the skill, confidence and support to meaningfully engage with the topic of EDI and to provide consistent and appropriate support to their teams. Related to the earlier point around language, in some organisations managers have become fearful of saying the wrong thing, so instead say nothing.

Managers may not understand how to balance individual requests with perceptions of fairness, for example rejecting a flexible work request without full consideration over concern it may be ‘unfair’ to other team members. This fear to tackle issues, alongside a lack of training, tools and guidance in many organisations, can lead to increased conflict, which many managers also don’t have the skills to manage.

Research on US workplaces cited in a [CIPD report](#) found that many EDI practices don’t achieve their objectives because they restrict managers, limiting their autonomy or discretion. The answer lies in better training and support to managers to overcome resistance or reluctance, promoting inclusion in ways that feel understandable, good for them and their teams, and more empowering than restrictive.

Employers could do more to help with this. The CIPD’s [Inclusion at work 2022](#) report found that only 23% of organisations are training managers in fair and inclusive people management. This needs to change to help create more inclusive cultures and get the best out of our increasingly diverse workforces.

Scenario planning and roleplaying in a safe space can give managers the confidence to have conversations about inclusion and diversity and allow them to better understand terminology, language and behaviours. Training in conflict management and being able to listen and engage effectively with team members will help managers recognise and avoid issues becoming heated and escalating to formal grievances, and will reinforce the principles of inclusion. These approaches are generally proving more effective than some of the practices of the past that tended to focus on understanding particular groups or diversity characteristics.

Training on unconscious bias has also had very mixed results, and on its own won't change cultures of bias, which requires a more systemic approach. [A review led by the UK Government's Behavioural Insights Team](#) found that traditional awareness-raising models alone, in particular unconscious bias training, are insufficient to deliver long-term change. Types of training that employers could turn to in this area can be allyship training, inclusive leadership development training and cultural competency and communication training.

[Research-based guidance](#) from the CIPD identifies the ability to prevent and manage conflict effectively as one of five core competency areas for line managers. Managers need to proactively and impartially deal with employee conflict to improve inclusivity in organisations. This includes the need for managers to act fairly and consistently, to manage their emotions effectively, and to spend time getting to know the people they manage.

The research in this report uncovered examples of good practice, with many organisations supporting managers in understanding inclusive people practices. One such example was measuring disparity in recruitment data, the likelihood of a candidate going from application to shortlisting, shortlisting to interview and interview to outcome, and "giving data to managers to drive behavioural change".

*"Some of the issues come down to line managers not feeling confident in this space, which comes from this group not feeling like they have the skills, and therefore not feeling confident in their competence, and organisations are not consistently investing enough in their line managers to have these types of conversations."*

**HR leader of global business process management company**

Another was helping to reduce the fear factor for managers by using data to explain when and why positive action might be appropriate. "You don't want people to positively discriminate, but you do want people to take positive action," explained one CPO. "So, what is the data that you put in the hands of senior leaders that enables them to take positive action but doesn't put them at risk of positive discrimination? We're working on the data, the nuance and helping teams to have a useful conversation about that."

It is important, though, that any positive action is done with full awareness of different legal requirements in different jurisdictions, but also that there is a clear understanding and narrative around actions taken. It has been linked to concerns raised, not least in political forums, about inconsistency with views of meritocracy, and misunderstandings of the meanings of equality versus equity.

### **Role of the executive**

Many HR leaders reported their CEO and executive team as genuinely committed to EDI, but others spoke of a lack of buy-in and shared concerns that commitment was performative rather than truly embedded.

This was reflected in *Inclusion at work*, which found that while 75% of respondents felt their leadership was either completely or fairly committed to having an inclusive workplace, a notable 17% said senior leaders were not very, or not at all, committed.

The fear of saying the wrong thing extends to the top of organisations. “As a leader it’s a bit scary,” one CPO admitted. “Everybody thinks I should know everything... and I don’t. The danger is we don’t talk about the important subjects because people are scared.”

More recently, CEOs are facing higher levels of scrutiny in this area, as NYU Stern Professor Alison Taylor noted in her book *Higher Ground*:

“When critical stakeholders push companies to take on more overt social and political roles, it’s tempting to meet this emerging demand. Many CEOs now pitch themselves as activists and their organisations as agents of social change.”<sup>9</sup>

For some, this presents an exciting opportunity, with one CPO saying that leaders needed to be “more vocal” because “our people need to know what their leaders believe in and what they’re prepared to take a stand on”. Another cited the 2024 UK riots as a chance to affirm the “standards of expectations in the workplace, which are probably higher than the societal bar. We have colleagues facing racism (from customers), so to know that your organisation has got your back is really important.”

But one CPO described the situation as a “minefield”, while a head of EDI felt it wasn’t the place of the organisation to make “political statements”, adding that: “We are a values-based business, but that doesn’t mean we need to respond to everything.”

This is a complex issue, and leaders are likely to have differing views on what, if anything, their organisation should stand for. Several organisations reported developing a social response framework to help decide how to respond to external shocks, based on values and organisational purpose, with saying nothing being a valid response. Deciding not to make a public or internal statement doesn’t mean you can’t have a transparent, honest and respectful discussion with colleagues who ask about why you haven’t made one.

## 6

# Focus on inclusion for all

Historically, most organisations have relied on representational diversity to deliver EDI goals. While representation is important, some recognise that a holistic and impactful EDI strategy needs to build on representational diversity with inclusive cultures that help deliver fairness of outcomes for everyone.

There are several reasons for this. One is the disputed research<sup>10</sup> that linked demographic diversity (gender and ethnicity) to financial outcomes. Professor Edmans explained that these studies “suggest you can ignore the complexity of human life and reduce everything to gender and ethnicity... You can see why regulators and investors like the simple message that they can just focus on the proportion of minorities in a company, rather than having to get their hands dirty and examine a company’s culture.”<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, there can be a feeling that an over-focus on singular protected characteristics may have inadvertently led to exclusion elsewhere. With this can come conflict, concerns about tokenism and misunderstandings about EDI’s influence on meritocracy.

Some observed a 'hierarchy' of protected characteristics within organisations, with disability often relegated to a lower priority. Further, a lack of data for certain groups led organisations to focus solely on gender and race rather than looking more widely. Knowledge gaps in effective, intersectional EDI approaches can lead to certain individual or personal characteristics being overlooked, such as being of mixed race, neurodivergent or being from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which could risk people being categorised rather than being treated fairly as individuals.

Bullying and harassment sadly persists in many organisations, with concerns that diversity-led approaches alone are not addressing systemic and institutional barriers and biases. Diversity alone may not improve the experiences of and outcomes for marginalised and disadvantaged employees. You can hire diverse talent, but without an inclusive culture and equality of opportunities, there is little reason for them to stay.

It should be noted that certain groups in the workforce continue to face increased barriers, discrimination and systemic disadvantages. Numerous academic studies have found that people with 'non-English-sounding' names receive far fewer responses to job applications than those with 'English' names.<sup>12</sup> Embedded and genuine inclusion requires cultural change and is more than just looking at diversity.

*"There's been this tipping point, where we've become so inclusive and focused on groups that we've become exclusive of some people."*

**Chief people officer at a multinational insurance company**

Good practices that support inclusion for all groups and individuals include wellbeing support, cultures that help people to speak up when they see bad practices or discrimination, and support for flexible working. Providing for more flexible working arrangements in all its forms, including homeworking and hybrid working, will provide

opportunities for people to balance their work with other life commitments or constraints, helping them to get into and get on in work. These practices can be particularly supportive of those with caring responsibilities or disabilities, or older workers who want to reduce their workloads. [Our research](#) has also shown that support for flexible working is therefore good for attraction and retention of people, and it is good for their wellbeing. But we also need to make sure we can understand outcomes and productivity to ensure the case is made, particularly in tougher economic times.

### **Representational diversity as a helpful tool**

Despite its limitations, representation still plays an important role. To quote one black female CPO: "It's important we all enter organisations with a level of hope. If we didn't have hope and a belief it was possible to achieve our potential and aspirations, it would be a sad place for anyone to be. Representation matters, because it's about visibility."

Additionally, representation is critical in ensuring a workforce that is reflective of customers and the communities of which organisations are a part, perhaps especially for public sector institutions. "I think that representational diversity is an important obligation for institutions, particularly when they're situated at the heart of the community," a university HR leader noted.

The CIPD evidence assessment *Building inclusive workplaces* also makes the point that while inclusion is for everyone, organisations still need to pay attention to representational diversity: “Current employees may feel the business is inclusive, but if the current employee base appears relatively homogeneous, measures of inclusion may not tell the whole story.”

Several other HR leaders said representation diversity data may be a blunt tool, but in many cases it’s the best tool they’ve got. “The truth is, if you don’t find and look at things from a data perspective, then you can’t tell if you’ve got a problem in the first place and you can’t tell if the things that you’re doing are having an impact,” said one CPO.

However, representational data has its limits. Only larger organisations will have statistically significant data across a range of protected characteristics, and many employers collect EDI data but don’t use it to improve HR or people management practices.

One CPO interviewed for this report said that while they believed many organisations were gathering data, there was a “relatively small percentage of organisations who are deriving any insights out of that data”. This point is reinforced by [CIPD analysis](#) which has shown that there has been a decline in recent years in organisations’ publishing narratives and action plans when reporting on their gender pay gap.

There is little point in generating EDI or other workforce data unless time is spent properly analysing it and understanding what it means in terms of making changes to how the organisation recruits, manages and develops people to improve outcomes. Organisations should prioritise what they see as most relevant and actionable in their context, and not just collect data for the sake of it, which will always raise questions as to why the data was asked for in the first place.

Previous [CIPD research](#) shows the collection, analysis and use of workforce data across a range of key areas such as diversity, skills development and employee health and wellbeing remains a weakness for many organisations.

It concluded that the gap between the amount of data collected and that reviewed is concerning. It emphasised the need for HR leaders to make sure workforce data is meaningful, translated into commercial impact where appropriate, and linked to organisational priorities. It also showed that areas of people data are often inextricably connected and interdependent, meaning that people professionals and leaders reviewing this information need to take a systems thinking approach that extends beyond the numbers to the wider context and related impacts.

In recognition of the need to help improve practice in this area, the CIPD has developed representative metrics in many practice areas but is conducting further research during 2025 on the use of workforce data, analytics and reporting, which will help further inform the development of guidance and support for the people profession to raise capability in this area.

# 7

## Manage conflict by reviewing workplace rights and responsibilities

According to the *CIPD Good Work Index 2024* (an annual survey of more than 5,000 workers that gives a snapshot of job quality in the UK), 25% of people experienced conflict or abuse at work in the previous 12 months, with 20% of those reporting experiencing discriminatory behaviour because of a protected characteristic.

Although conflict and EDI are usually seen as separate matters, it's not too surprising that bringing together people with different experiences, backgrounds and beliefs could lead to conflict. "Conflicts can arise amid different interest groups," said one CPO. "Sometimes we risk reinforcing rather than resolving division."

There are particular challenges in understanding 'belief' as a protected characteristic, perhaps playing out most potently in regard to gender-critical beliefs and trans rights, but it can also play out in opposing political or social beliefs, for example. [The recent Supreme Court ruling in the UK](#) has clarified the legal definition of woman, but it has raised other practical and legal questions and has not eased the tensions and conflicts of views that exist in this increasingly politicised space.

Several employers in interviews and at roundtables noted an increasing 'sensitivity' in the workforce, particularly among younger workers with discomfort in interacting with those with opposing views. HR leaders also noted the potential negative ramifications this has for cognitive diversity.

One CPO reflected that shutting down debate was "the enemy of diversity of thought". "If you don't have openness today, in the same way as we needed openness to bring around change years ago, what chance have you got of continuing to evolve?" he added. "That's my biggest fear from an EDI perspective: that closedness. [In a business], everybody can have different views about what markets you should be in, your price point, your revenue goals, how much risk you take. Why would D&I be any different?"

Another added that in her view some people were "confusing offence with harm". "We have to think about how we allow the space for people to hold different views that legally and morally need to be upheld," she added. "We're entitled to have different views."

Conversations around EDI itself can fan conflict. Specific and targeted support including positive action measures to tackle systemic barriers and biases can seem 'unfair', despite data telling a clear story about inequalities and the need for action. Hence the need for a clear narrative and raising understanding among managers about where and when some positive action may be appropriate to better support the more marginalised groups and support the idea of equity.

Conflict management has scope outside of EDI and HR, but conflict and misunderstandings about the purpose and impact of EDI should be addressed. Otherwise, EDI and HR managers may lose valuable time, or more sceptical leaders may question the net value of EDI as a whole. At a roundtable, one head of EDI shared that the requirement to deal with conflicting perspectives and tensions around protected beliefs was taking time away from “interventions that give equality of outcomes”, although they acknowledged the need to engage in challenging discussions with those of opposing views.

According to the *2022 Inclusion at work* report, only 25% of organisations train managers in how to address conflict in their teams and deal with concerns or complaints, despite conflict management being a foundational skill.

This risks limiting positive outcomes, as managing conflicting viewpoints and friction can aid problem-solving and innovation. As one CPO put it, the workplace is perhaps the only place where people with a wide range of experiences, backgrounds and opinions are “thrown together”, unlike in our personal lives, where we tend to gravitate to those like ourselves. This recognises why some of the challenges exist, but it gives employers a huge opportunity to “help with inclusion societally”, if they can bring people together in meaningful ways.

*“It used to be about fixing the equity... Now it’s more about the conflict because you have to give weight to different perspectives. Not enough time is being spent on the interventions that give equality of outcomes. But you need to have the guts to sit down and listen to some opposing positions.”*

**Head of EDI, FTSE 100 financial services organisation**

### **Creating a safe environment**

Creating spaces to enable employees to have respectful disagreements, ask questions and sometimes get things wrong from a place of positive intent, without being blamed or shamed, is vital. As one CPO said: “You have to create a psychologically safe space for people to have the conversation.”

This requires alignment to agreed principles. One organisation had found that the idea of being ‘safe’ to express views had, at times, “turned into a right

to be rude”, resulting in conflict. “Conflict is quite good at work, but it has to be the right sort,” said the organisation’s head of EDI, describing how they were bringing things back to values, and running respect in the workplace sessions to address it.

There is a case for organisations resetting or restating the social contract in the workplace and considering the kinds of discussions appropriate for work. This includes a consideration of individual rights and responsibilities or obligations. Cambridge philosopher Onora O’Neill observed that when discussing ‘rights’, we often don’t consider our responsibilities and obligations to each other: “Individuals are commonly seen as having rights – but little is said about their duties.” In the workplace, these duties should include behaving respectfully towards those whose views we may disagree with and recognising where some things are just better being left outside a place of work. In reality, organisations can’t address everything about everyone at work.

Organisations often speak about their values, and there has been pushback from some about adherence to values being too demanding. Although organisations can't tell people how to think, it is fair to expect that when someone is at work or representing their employer, they behave in a manner that reflects organisational values or does not contradict agreed positions of the organisation. Employees' personal beliefs can't necessarily be influenced, but an organisation can influence how they behave and show up for their colleagues. In this sense, it is less bringing your 'whole self' but rather your 'professional self' to work.

## 8

# Address the challenge and opportunity of AI

The potential EDI implications of AI have been well noted. For example, in 2018, Amazon made headlines for scrapping a 'sexist' AI recruitment tool, after discovering that as the AI system had been trained on applicant data more likely to be from men, it had effectively taught itself that male candidates were preferable.<sup>13</sup> A recent study from the University of Washington found significant racial and gender biases in how three large language models ranked CVs, with the systems preferring white-associated names 85% of the time.

AI tools are only as effective as the data the algorithms have been trained on. As the data comes from historical practice, it often reflects existing inequalities in an organisation and society. "AI is only as good as what it's been fed," said one CPO. "If it's being fed by one predominant group, then what's spat out at the other end is going to be influenced by that."

*"I think we've got challenges around AI. We know that AI is coming hurtling towards us... [It's about] making sure that we're using an EDI lens in the application of AI."*

**CPO of a communications and public relations agency**

This can lead to bias (both conscious and unconscious) influencing outcomes across HR practices, including talent attraction, recruitment, performance management, and training and development.

AI applications and systems must be audited to eliminate bias and to ensure they improve and enhance EDI delivery.

In doing this, bias can be better understood for all of us, and with proper training AI should have the potential, and the goal, to become less biased than people.

As AI is integrated into more organisations' processes, leaders, HR and EDI professionals must keep pace with the speed of developments, recognising the risks and proactively influencing their responsible use and uptake. HR must be 'at the table' when strategic decisions are being made about the use of AI, to help mitigate risk but also to ensure good outcomes from the use of technology in enhancing work and working cultures for people and for organisations.

# 9

## Conclusion

It has been said that diversity is a reality, but inclusion is a choice. Our workforces and populations are diverse across many different characteristics, but how we recognise, value, attract and retain people with diverse experiences and characteristics takes effort and focus. It has to begin with clarity of why this is important and how it brings value to all our organisations.

“We know that to make change in organisations, you’ve got to be clear about your strategy, where you’re going. You need to be clear about your processes that need to change. You need to be clear about the culture. Let’s apply the same sensible, logical, human principles we would apply to other areas.” said a CEO and lead inclusion director at a DEI consultancy.

Promoting and delivering impactful EDI in the workplace should be foundational to good people management. Growing individual and organisational competency, and understanding evidence of the benefits and opportunities of EDI are critical in communicating the business, legal, social and ethical drivers.

Perhaps the longer-term goal should be that diversity and cultures of inclusion are so integral to how businesses operate that separate EDI initiatives are not needed – and some organisations already see themselves in this space.

The challenging operational context for organisations, mixed with the drift of some EDI practices into ineffective or tokenistic initiatives, has led to a critical juncture that risks derailing what should be uncontentious: decency, respect and value given to every individual, together with the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In the words of one CPO: “The challenge is maintaining energy on this topic until you get where you want to be.” Right now, energy for many is being diverted to the wrong places, whether that’s arguing with opposing viewpoints online or delivering interventions with limited impact and value, which does little to improve equality of outcomes for those facing systemic barriers.

We should all remain committed to recognising and embracing diversity and driving towards inclusion in all its aspects, both within organisations and more broadly across society. We can all be inclusive without being intrusive, disagree without being disagreeable, hold strongly held views more lightly, and be allies to those who are less represented or need more support. That has to be good for individuals, for organisations, and for our economies and societies.

# 10

## Appendix

### Case studies

#### **Case study: When lack of capability derails EDI**

"The board and executive were passionate about EDI, but it had become toxic, about exclusion, not inclusion. I commissioned an independent investigation. The organisation was not found to be institutionally racist, but lots of people experienced racism on a day-to-day level. So even though people did understand the ethical, moral arguments about EDI and felt passionate about it, when it came to the execution, they were fearful, and they got it wrong.

"There wasn't a culture of curiosity, of knowing you will get things wrong. They had created an EDI team, separate to the people directorate and headed up by a director simply because he was a man of colour. They were well meaning, but they didn't have the tools or techniques. Race became the dominant issue to the detriment of everything else. And that made it worse for all groups, including the people suffering racism who didn't feel like they were being heard.

"I disbanded the EDI team. It shouldn't be a separate team, but part of the people directorate. I spent weeks with the network groups, listening and co-creating a new strategy. The groups felt there'd been lip service, but no targets. We came up with a new vision, something to hold leadership accountable for.

"One of the issues was people not being trained. We had two EDI business partners who were essentially well-meaning advocates, passionate and with their own lived experience, but not rooted in the reality that this is an organisation. You're not here to be a warrior for social justice: you need to be delivering what the business needs. That's been my big learning. It's easy to go, 'I know something about this topic, that makes me a practitioner.' It doesn't."

**Former CPO and managing director of an HR consulting company**

### **Case study: Value of data-informed strategy in the NHS**

The foundational principles of the NHS have the 'E' in EDI built into their core: providing equal access to healthcare, free at the point of need, for everyone. "The NHS wasn't meant for sections of society, it was meant for everybody, so we have an explicit duty to drive out inequity to serve the population and meet their needs," says a people and culture director for an NHS-run children's hospital based in London.

The case for EDI within the NHS is indisputable, they explain. "It sits at the heart of patient experience," they say. "Looking at patient outcomes, we know there's a correlation between how we treat our staff and how they deliver care, and the outcomes. We know we have disproportionate outcomes for different groups." (For example, this can be seen through data that shows that black women have far worse maternal outcomes than white women.)

But the fact that the NHS is not diverse at senior management levels has an impact on decision-making around EDI matters, in their view. "It means there are people that don't recognise barriers and because they don't see them, they're not able to plug them at that strategic level, so we're almost designing in inequality, as opposed to seeking to design inequality out. That's why it's important that we become more diverse at senior leadership, where we're making decisions."

A data-informed EDI strategy focused on reducing unfair treatment due to race as its biggest component can have a positive impact more broadly and impact the wider workforce and population. Examples of impactful practice include a triage system for staff entering the formal disciplinary process, trying to "positively interrupt the process" given data showing that there are more staff from ethnic minority backgrounds entering the formal disciplinary process compared with their white colleagues.

"Anybody who wants to bring disciplinary action against anybody has to present their case to an independent Just Culture Panel, who determine whether it should proceed to disciplinary or not as sometimes more information is required, or alternative resolution may be more appropriate," they say. "In recognition of human bias, it is clear that in some cases, you've got managers who have decided to bring disciplinary action straight away for someone [black], but for someone [white] who has done something similar, they had an informal conversation. In the NHS as a whole we have evidence through the Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) metrics that illustrates the disproportionality by race, which is why we have an intentional focus on positively disrupting the pattern of inequality." Rather than shaming, this process leads to self-reflection, learning and improved people management practice.

### **Case study: Inclusion for all at a financial services firm**

This multinational insurance company has long been known for its progressive approach to EDI. It was a leader in equal parental leave, encouraging equality in caring responsibilities. More recently, it has evolved its approach to EDI to become more multifaceted, focused on inclusion of all, and less focused on singular protected characteristics. "Inclusion means something different to every single person," says their diversity, inclusion and resourcing director. "It might be around my age or my faith or my socioeconomic background. Historically it's been too one-dimensional."

In practice, the evolution of approach has meant scrutinising all programmes to ask whether the programmes are being fair for everybody. "Equity means you help somebody, but it doesn't mean you disadvantage somebody else," their diversity, inclusion and resourcing director says.

That means shifting from separate talent and recruitment programmes for certain groups to working closely with managers to ensure those from underrepresented groups are put forward for leadership development programmes and expecting all recruitment partners to offer diverse shortlists. "[Organisations shouldn't say] you can only be developed here if you have a particular characteristic," says their CPO. "The goal should be for an inclusive workplace where everyone feels appropriately represented and supported in broader talent programmes."

The company has six thriving communities (its term for ERGs) and has also focused on making them "as broad and intersectional as possible", their CPO says, rather than just for one characteristic, with colleagues encouraged to join more than one.

The future of EDI means "absolutely everybody being included", says their diversity, inclusion and resourcing director.

# 11

## Endnotes

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