

Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives Risk Excluding Staff if Not Managed Correctly, New Research Shows

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New research reveals that the diversity and inclusion efforts employed by organisations can have the adverse effect of alienating employees when employers fail to consider the needs and perspectives of all staff.

The study, conducted by researchers at Durham University Business School (<https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/>), the University of Birmingham Business School and Leeds University Business School explored the engagement and satisfaction levels of staff working across the UK for a major British high-street retailer, in regards to diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Professor Jackie Ford (<https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/our-people/jacqueline-ford/>) of Durham University Business School says;

“We believe that an understanding of the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion strategies needs to be fundamentally informed by considering exactly what ‘inclusion’ means, and how it is felt by employees. This can only occur by engaging with employees’ understanding of organisational culture and their place within it. Without this consideration, many well-intentioned diversity initiatives may go awry.”

To that end, the researchers adopted a multi-method approach to their study. First they analysed existing research on diversity to identify where gaps in evidence might occur, and used these findings to shape their case study. Interviews were then conducted with the company’s staff, across all levels and positions, over a three year period. Finally, the researchers shadowed senior members of the company, observing their work and interactions.

The researchers identified five key drivers for inclusion;

- Visible commitment from the top to an inclusive culture
- A responsiveness to individual concerns
- Going beyond protected characteristics
- Interventions designed to include those traditionally excluded
- The support of diverse networks

Having such drivers in place led to employees considering their work a “second home” and colleagues a “second family”. It also led to the company in general having a greater commitment to the local communities where stores were located, with researchers observing employees becoming passionate about supporting local charities and feeling a sense of duty by offering employment opportunities.

However, the researchers noted that, in efforts to provide support for all, the organisation often unintentionally excluded members of their workforce from certain projects or support networks, which caused doubt amongst those employees to the worth of such schemes.

In regards to the identifying further barriers to inclusion, Professor Ford and her colleagues

highlighted;

- A perceived lack of accountability for maintaining and developing an inclusive culture
- Difficulty accessing certain groups
- Company culture and the need to “fit in”
- A lack of inclusive role models
- Organisational priorities competing with high pressure workloads

There was also evidence of inclusion initiatives having an adverse effect on those they were designed to support. Testimony from employees working with a disability revealed frustration that employers did not seem to give them the same opportunities as their able-bodied colleagues, often passing over them for additional projects or responsibilities, for worry it might cause the employee too much stress or difficulty. Though employer intentions were kind, as a result, disabled staff felt their professional progression was hindered.

Professor Ford says the findings should be of particular importance to HR managers and senior level leaders who might not be aware of the limitations or potential downsides of the inclusion activities they choose to adopt.

Professor Ford says,

“Instead of taking the view that a lack of diversity policies may present barriers to broadening the employee community, our findings suggest that those that make up the “majority” of employees can also be impacted by exclusionary practices. For example, a lack of ethnic minority or female colleagues taking on senior positions might not only dissuade such individuals pursuing a career with a company, it might also raise concerns with a wider range of staff across the organisation who then draw their own conclusions as to the extent their employer is either inclusive or exclusive.”

The trick, Professor Ford suggests, is to undertake all inclusion efforts with input from the majority of workers, in order to gain a holistic view of the company, understand where such measures might work best and build greater engagement.

She continues;

“Our work supports the idea that the best inclusive cultures are those which can effectively manage the tension between belongingness and uniqueness, and are adapted regularly with input and commitment from every level.”

The paper “Understanding inclusion in the retail industry: incorporating the majority perspective” has been authored by Professor Ford, in collaboration with; Professor Catherine Cassell (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/business/cassell-catherine.aspx>) of Birmingham Business School, Dr Juliet Keele (<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/our-staff/k/juliet-kele/>) of Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University, and Dr Kathryn Watson (<https://business.leeds.ac.uk/faculty/staff/233/dr-kathryn-watson>) of Leeds University Business School.

The paper is available to be read via the Emerald Insight journal (<https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/issn/0048-3486>).

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The School attracts considerable levels of external research funding and enjoys extensive links within both the business and academic worlds.

The School is an internationally renowned research-led institution with a network of over 25,000 alumni from more than 140 countries.

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