How Are We Fulfilling the Human Need for Social Belonging in the Workplace?

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Social belonging is an essential human need, deeply ingrained in our nature. However, 40% of individuals report feeling isolated at work, leading to decreased organizational commitment and engagement. In the U.S., businesses invest nearly $8 billion annually in diversity and inclusion (D&I) training, yet these efforts often fall short by overlooking the crucial need for genuine inclusion. In this paper we review the importance of belonging and evolution of various methods and research studies in this field.

INTRODUCTION

"Social belonging is a fundamental human need, hardwired into our DNA. And yet, 40% of people say that they feel isolated at work, resulting in lower organizational commitment and engagement. U.S. businesses spend nearly $8 billion each year on diversity and inclusion (D&I) training that miss the mark because they neglect our need to feel included," (Carr, Reece, Kellerman, Robichaux, 2019) and in this paper, we will review possible reasons why this might be the case.

According to Glassdoor, job openings related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in the United States surged by a remarkable 245 percent in December 2020 compared to June 2020 (Stansell & Zhao, 2020). This spike is particularly noteworthy considering the substantial sixty percent decline in DEIB job openings during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Interestingly, DEIB job openings in the U.S. decreased at twice the rate of overall job openings for the entire economy during the same period (Stansell & Zhao, 2020).

The aftermath of George Floyd's tragic killing and subsequent racially motivated events brought the spotlight back to workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion at a national level (Dreyer et al., 2020; Eichstaedt et al., 2021; Reny & Newman, 2021). Despite decades of research and efforts emphasizing the business case for diversity, the sudden surge in DEIB job interest suggests that organizations are still reactive in addressing workplace diversity (Garg & Sangwan, 2021). While many organizations express the belief that a diverse workforce brings competitive advantages (Barak, 2022; Wagner III & Hollenbeck, 2020), their DEIB efforts often fall short, and investments in creating an inclusive workplace seem driven

more by national pressure than a genuine commitment to diversity benefits. Even after years of government mandates and anti-discrimination laws, the persistent resistance to workplace diversity raises questions about why organizations are hesitant to embrace diversity wholeheartedly (Lee, 2023; Ng & Sears, 2020).

Claudine Gay, Harvard University's first Black president, resigned her position just months into her tenure. She faced plagiarism accusations and criticism over a testimony at a congressional hearing where she was asked if genocide comments violated the university's code of conduct policy (LeBlanc & Binkley, 2024). While Gay received support from her university, activists pointed to several instances of alleged plagiarism in her 1997 doctoral dissertation. According to the Harvard board, there were a few instances of inadequate citation but no violation of Harvard's standard for research misconduct (Lawrence, 2024). As a result, Gay wrote in a letter,"it has become clear that it is in the best interests of Harvard for me to resign so that our community can navigate this moment of extraordinary challenge" (LeBlanc & Binkley, 2024).

By adopting a broader perspective, such as saying,"Our goal is to create a great culture for everyone, and we will seek to identify and address any areas where we're failing to do that, for any group," (Emerson, 2017) organizations can more effectively convey that their efforts are inclusive of all. This approach also lays a strong foundation for initiatives that specifically address barriers faced by groups who experience them.

BACKGROUND

On March 6, 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 (Ladson-Billings, 2021), mandating that all projects financed with federal funds must take"affirmative action" to ensure that hiring and employment practices are free of racial bias (Farrell, 2019; Taylor, 2018). Affirmative action was to establish equality, fairness, and access of opportunities in the workplace (Crosby, Iyer, & Sincharoen, 2006; Deo, 2021; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2020). Sixty years after this mandate was established, there continues to be a deep divide and debate as to whether affirmative action creates equity or violates the basic principle of equality (Anand & Winters, 2008; Thomas Jr, 1990).

Affirmative action is often reduced to a hypothesis about quotas and preferential treatment based on gender or race. Strict quotas were banned in 1978, while today eight states have enacted measures prohibiting preferential treatment in public university admissions, state employment and state contracting, and only twenty-eight states still require affirmative action plans in public employment (Alsan et al., 2023). This unevenness in regulations creates lots of confusion among participating organizations, especially those operating in different states with different laws (Lee, 2021; Niederle, Segal, & Vesterlund, 2013).

For several decades, American organizations have been left with a loosely defined mandate, and a multitude of new discrimination laws that have been litigiously challenged and defended. Landmark laws such as The Civil Rights Act of 1964, made it illegal for employers with more than fifteen employees to discriminate in hiring, termination, promotion, compensation, job training, or any other term, condition, or privilege. Title VII amendments of the Civil Rights Act have been adapted several times to expand who is protected against discrimination (Conklin, 2023; Reed, 2022; Vaas, 1965). Without a guiding principle, or a clear definition of what guarantees equity in the workplace, American organizations continued to operate by trying to follow the ever-changing rules set forth by the government regarding discrimination (Coleman, Joyner, & Lopiano, 2020).

In 1987, the Hudson Institutes report, *Workforce 2000,* declared that the American workforce demographic would significantly change in the years ahead (Johnston, 1987; Riccucci, 2021). *Workforce 2000* predicted that an influx of workers from diverse identity groups would change the formerly white male dominated workforce (Johnston, 1987). The term"workplace diversity" suddenly gained national prominence, and various models, research methods and theories on how to effectively manage workplace diversity were introduced. The findings from *Workforce 2000* suggested that the outflow of retirees and the input of immigrants, women and ethnic minorities would require organizations to implement workplace assimilation strategies (Anand & Winters, 2008). American workplace diversity efforts that had been historically prompted by compliance with anti-discrimination laws and regulations governing recruitment, selection, and separation had to change their understanding of workplace diversity (Riccucci, 2016).

By the time *Workforce 2000* was published, it was becoming apparent that affirmative action alone had not worked to increase the number of traditionally underrepresented employees in organizations that had been male and white-dominant. Anti-discrimination diversity training were often met with resentment and a lack of understanding as to how these laws and training were truly helping the organizations improve (Anand & Winters, 2008).

The 1990s brought a new workplace diversity term to national awareness,"*The Business Case for Diversity"* (Dickens, 1999; Robinson & Dechant, 1997). The business case for diversity is seemingly simple- organizations that manage for diversity create better-performing teams; organizations with better performing teams will reap the benefits of competitive advantage (Kellough & Naff, 2004; Naff & Kellough, 2003; Pitts & Recascino Wise, 2010; Rangarajan & Black, 2007; Riccucci, 2016; Thomas Jr, 1990). The business case for organizational investment in a diverse workforce maintained that when a workforce is managed effectively and the work environment supports and values inclusivity of employees from all demographic backgrounds, workers feel included within their organization and believe that their ideas, opinions, and suggestions are welcome (Barak, 2013; Konrad & Linnehan, 1999). This feeling of inclusion increases the sense of cognitive resources and the workers' ability to engage in more complex problem solving and thinking (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Page, 2007). A diverse workforce could ultimately lead to higher sales, greater innovation, and better problem-solving skills (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Joshi, Liao, & Jackson, 2006).

Greater cognitive resources, higher sales, and increased innovation for all! The business case for diversity provided organizations with a solid and valuable reason for increasing the numbers of employees with various identities and backgrounds in their organizations, a reason that the affirmative action mandate or anti-discrimination laws did not deliver (Mc Manus, 2020; Schwellnus, 2008). Why then, are we here in 2025 and organizations in the United States have overwhelmingly failed to increase representation. Why is the market for organizational diversity, equity and inclusion positions influenced by the current state of nation's attention to the issues of diversity? And will the public case of Claudine Gay create more pushback and resistance to diversity?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on workplace diversity underscores the vast history of the United States administration of efforts to provide equitable opportunities in the workplace (Liswood, 2022). The commitment to being inclusive in the workplace is simple in concept but difficult in action (Mor Barak, 2000; Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018). And despite all the effort there is still plenty of resistance to diversifying the workplace (Jones & Stablein, 2006; Malhotra, Zietsma, Morris, & Smets, 2021).

The Definition of Diversity

As we enter 2025, the definition of"diversity" remains ambiguous, as reflected in the multiplicity of denotations in the literature reviewed (Table 1). The concept of diversity aims to recognize that everyone is unique and composed of differing elements.

TABLE 1

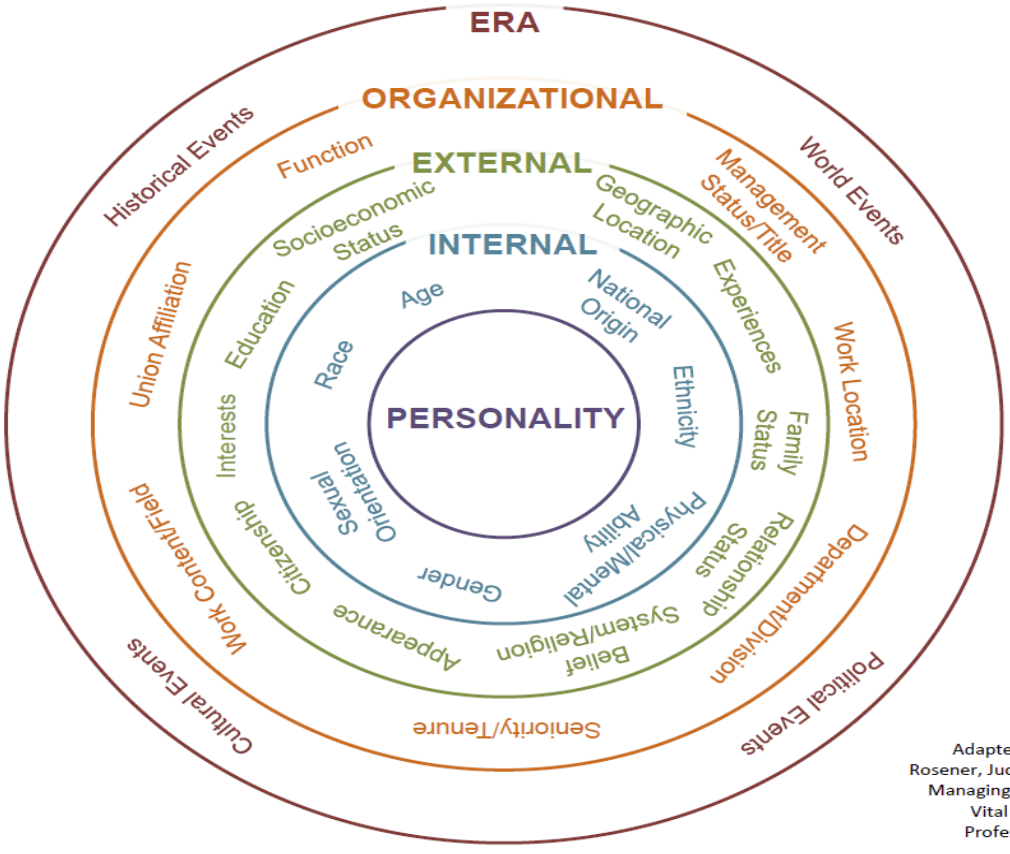
Definition	Source
Diversity is a tough concept to define. Perhaps the most restrictive definition is held by organizational behavior scholars, who consider diversity to be a concept of variation or heterogeneity (Pitts & Recascino Wise, 2010).	**Workforce Diversity in the New Millennium: Prospects for Research**
Diversity encompasses a range of differences in ethnicity, national, gender, function, ability, language religion, lifestyle or tenure (Bassett-Jones, 2005)	**The Paradox of Diversity Management, Creativity, and Innovation**
Diversity is a set of conscious practices that involve understanding and appreciating interdependence of humanity, cultures, and the natural environment; practicing mutual respect for qualities and experiences that are different from our own; understanding that diversity includes not only ways of being but also ways of knowing; recognizing that personal, cultural, and institutionalized discrimination creates and sustains privileges for some while creating and sustaining disadvantages for others; and building alliances across differences so that we can work together to eradicate all forms of discrimination (Patrick & Kumar, 2012).	**Managing Workplace Diversity: Issues and Challenges**
Any attributes that humans are likely to use to tell themselves"that person is different from me" (Triandis, Kurowski, & Gelfand, 1994).	**Workplace Diversity**
The definition of"diversity" is unclear, as reflected in the multiplicity of meanings in the literature. For some, the term provokes intense emotional reactions, bringing to mind such politically charged ideas as"affirmative action" and"quotas." These reactions stem, in part, from a narrow focus on protected groups covered under affirmative action policies, where differences such as race and gender are the focal point. Some alternative definitions of diversity extend beyond race and gender to include all types of individual differences, such as ethnicity, age, religion, disability status, geographic location, personality, sexual preferences, and a myriad of other personal, demographic, and organizational characteristics. Diversity can thus be an all-inclusive term that incorporates people from many different classifications. Generally,"diversity" refers to policies and practices that seek to include people who are considered, in some way, different from traditional members. More centrally, diversity aims to create an inclusive culture that values and uses the talents of all would-be members (Herring, 2009).	**Does Diversity Pay? Race, Gender, and the Business Case for Diversity**
Diversity defined in terms of primary and secondary dimensions is as follows: primary--age, ethnicity, gender, physical ability/qualities, race, and sexual/affectional orientation. The six primary dimensions serve as interdependent core elements which shape our basic self-image and our fundamental world view; our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are inextricably linked to them. Secondary dimensions of diversity are those that can be changed. Included, but not limited to these dimensions are: educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, military experience, parental status, religious beliefs, and work experience. Secondary dimensions affect our self-esteem and self-definition (Byrd, 1992).	**Byrd, Scott M."Workforce America!: Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource." *Human Resource Planning*, vol. 15, no. 3, Sept. 1992, p. 98+. Accessed 10 Apr. 2021**

Often the term diversity prompts strong positive or negative reactions, suggesting such politically charged references to affirmative action, bias, or preferential treatment (Mangum & Block Jr, 2022). Over the past three decades the definition of workplace diversity has extended beyond race and gender to include all types of individual differences, such as ethnicity, age, religion, disability status, geographic location, personality, sexual preferences, and a myriad of other personal, demographic, and organizational characteristics (Herring, 2009).

The definitions of diversity from pioneer workplace diversity researchers Taylor Cox (Cox, 1994), Ely and Thomas (Ely & Thomas, 1996), and Konrad and Linnehan (Konrad & Linnehan, 1999) have been altered, expanded or edited over the past three decades. In their 2008 article *A Retrospective View of Corporate Diversity Training from 1964 to the Present*, authors Anand and Winters wrote"Rooted in social justice philosophy, civil rights legislation, and more recently, business strategy, diversity has evolved into a rather amorphous field where the very word itself invokes a variety of meanings and emotional responses" (Anand & Winters, 2008).

In the early 1990s, the diversity wheel was introduced by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener to organizations. Author Marilyn Loden, an author, diversity advocate and management consultant, best known for coining the term"glass ceiling" about the role of gender discrimination in the workplace wanted to create a tool that would help illustrate identity-based differences in groups. In partnership with Rosener, the diversity wheel was developed as a framework for thinking about the different dimensions of diversity within individuals (Figure 1) (Byrd, 1992; Loden & Rosener, 1991). Thirty years later the Loden and Rosener diversity wheel continues to be used as a principal model for organizational diversity management training (Loden & Rosener, 1991). Research, data, information about compliance training, ineffectiveness of mandatory training and the dimensions featured on diversity wheel have been questioned.

FIGURE 1
DIVERSITY WHEEL



Adapted from: Loden, Marily & Rosener, Judy, "Workforce America! Managing Employee Diversity as a Vital Resource," McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing, 1990.

Diversity Training Is Not Effective

Organizations have long relied on compliance and diversity training as a show of commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace (Morales, Hubbell, & Armfield, 2023; Stinson-DaCruz, 2020). A vast majority of these initiatives are designed to preempt lawsuits and increase the representation of members from different identity groups. Yet organizational and human behavior studies often show that force feeding training can activate bias rather than reduce it (Morales et al., 2023).

Diversity training is often designed to help organizations educate their employees on the do's and don'ts of expected behaviors (Perales, 2022; Sue, 1991). Mandatory or required training that subtly or not so subtly educate the employees on examples of discrimination in other organizations resulting in millions of dollars in legal fees (Carter, Onyeador, & Lewis Jr, 2020; Dover, Kaiser, & Major, 2020; Marr et al., 2021).

Diversity training focus on race and gender, there is research to suggest that one forgotten dimension that has significant impact is an individual's social class (Devine & Ash, 2022; Haley, Kennedy, Pokhrel, & Saunders, 2021).

A person's social class origins leave a cultural imprint that has a lasting effect, even if the individual gains money or status later in life (Cole, 2022; Crossley, 2014; Warner, Meeker, & Eells, 2019). Class origins certainly have an effect in the workplace. U.S. workers from lower social-class origins are 32% less likely to become managers than are people from higher origins (Warner et al., 2019). This disadvantage is even greater than that experienced by women compared with men (27%) or Blacks compared with whites (25%) (Ingram, 2021). According to Ingram, the Forgotten Dimension is social class. U.S. workers from lower social class origins are 32% less likely to become managers than people from higher social-class origins (Ingram, 2021).

Representation Has Not Guaranteed Equal Status Or Influence

Despite many organizations investing resources to increase the number of diverse identity groups in the workplace there continues to be a lack of inclusion of members from non-dominant groups. In 1996, scholars Robin Ely and David Thomas published *Making a Difference Matter: A New Paradigm for Managing Diversity*, they argued that"companies adopting a radically new way of understanding and leveraging diversity would reap the full benefits of a diverse workforce (Ely & Thomas, 1996). Their research suggested that organizational effectiveness increased when employees from underrepresented"identity groups'' worked together and drew on their identity-related experiences, and knowledge (Ely & Thomas, 1996). The argument that increasing representation from various groups will guarantee competitive advantage, innovation, and creativity is an appealing promise, yet the research overwhelming proved that this was not enough.

Transition Information About the Business Case

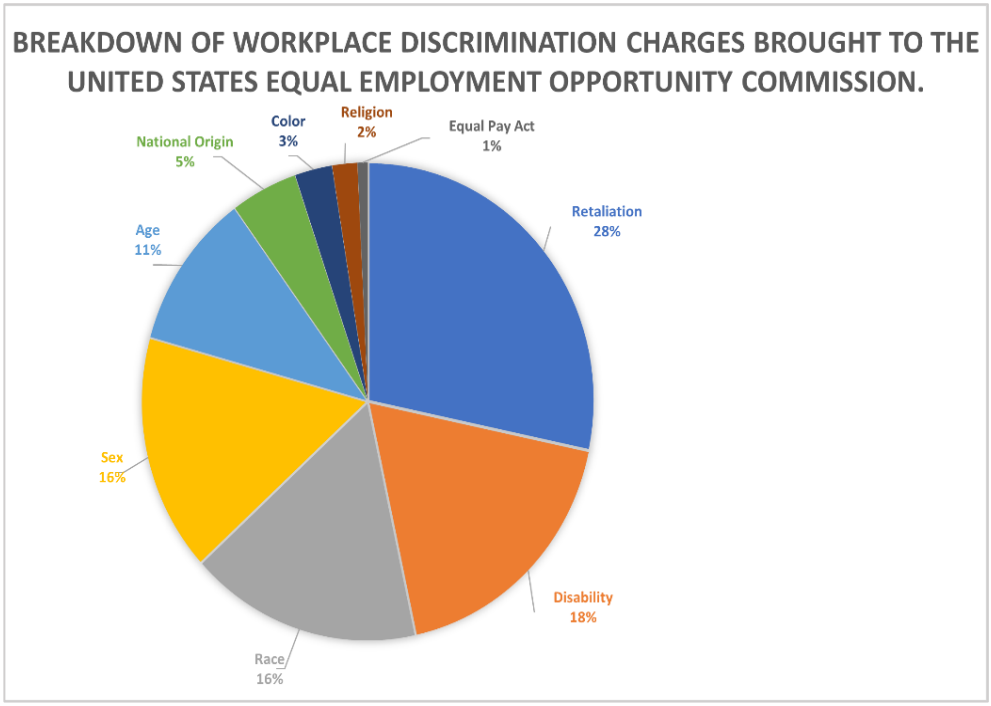
Thomas and Ely originally presented research conclusions that supported this business case for diversity. However, in their subsequent 2020 publication, *Getting Serious about Diversity, Enough Already with the Business Case*, Thomas and Ely presented a counter statement that after 25 years, there is no empirical evidence that simply diversifying the workforce, absent fundamental changes to the culture, makes a company profitable (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Notably, one of the challenges they acknowledge, is that diversity within a team or organization may increase tensions and conflict (Ely & Thomas, 2020). Ely and Thomas present a critical flaw in the business case. They state that contrary to expectation, inter group diversity does not guarantee an exchange of diverse ideas, and sparks of creativity and source of innovation (Ely & Thomas, 2020).

One of the critical flaws in the business case for diversity presented by Ely and Thomas is that diverse representation does not guarantee equal status or influence. In the 1990s, organizations began to move away from the concept of diversity in the workplace to *diversity and inclusion* in the workplace (Ely & Thomas, 2020). The introduction of inclusion is based on the reality that just increasing the representation of team members from various identity groups is not meaningful if group members do not feel valued, heard and respected (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Lee, 2023). 2019 there were less than five black Fortune 500 Chief Executive Officers (CEO). That number decreased from seven black Fortune 500 CEOs with the last ten

years. According to the Korn Ferry report *The Black P & L Leader*, nearly 60% of the black executives who oversaw major lines of business at Fortune 500 companies felt they had to work twice as hard—and accomplish twice as much—to be seen on the same level as their colleagues. When interviewed, they stated that they had often faced microaggressions, were judged on performance, not potential, were often overlooked due to preconceptions and were given more difficult assignments to prove their worth (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Ferry, 2015; Johnson, 1987).

Philosophies and views about the importance of diversity in the workplace often contradict the policies and practices to manage a diverse workplace. In 2020, there were 67,448 charges of workplace discrimination charges brought to the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Bishu & Headley, 2020).

FIGURE 2
WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION CHARGES



Organizations increasing the number of employees from different identity groups without exploring perceptions, and assumptions have led to chronic devaluing of members who are different from the dominant group. Historically, employee perceptions regarding workplace diversity have included the following assumptions:

- Otherness is seen as a deficiency that poses a threat to the organization's effectiveness (Jeffries, 2018; Prasad & Prasad, 2003; Wilmot, Vigier, & Humonen, 2024).
- Expressing discomfort with the dominant group's values is oversensitivity (Brannon, Carter, Murdock-Perriera, & Higginbotham, 2018; Woo, 1997).
- Others want to become, and should become, more like the dominant group (Brannon et al., 2018).
- Equal treatment means the same treatment (Bruchhagen et al., 2010; Kawahata, 2020; Woodward, 2012).
- Managing diversity requires changing the people, not the culture (Loden & Rosener, 1991).

Faultlines Theory

The dimensions of diversity within a group can influence the team's behavior and reduce the team's overall performance. Studies have shown that organizations with diverse teams may have lower collaboration and increased conflict due to the emergence of faultlines within the workforce teams. According to the Faultline theory, diverse teams often fail or achieve reduced productivity due to the homogeneous subgroups or coalitions that emerge naturally within departments or groups (Gratton, Voigt, & Erickson, 2007). The expectation to diversify an organization with members from different identity groups, leaves organizations with the challenge of finding ways to minimize the faultlines created within diverse teams and departments while capitalizing on the benefits of diversity (Gratton et al., 2007).

Research on faultlines in diversity literature argues that, when multiple demographic attributes align, differences across group members create a partition that may potentially cause group disruptions (Bezrukova, Jehn, Zanutto, & Thatcher, 2009). These partitions are dividing lines based on social categories. Characteristics of social category faultlines are attributes such as race, ethnic, background, nationality, sex and age (Cummings, Zhou, & Oldham, 1993).

Authors Ezra W. Zukerman, Associate Professor of Strategic Management at Stanford University and Ray Reagans, Assistant Professor of Management at Columbia Business school studied a sample of 224 research and development teams from 29 companies. The study found that the diversity of the team members was not directly linked to productivity, but rather that"network density", the number of connections team members make, and"network heterogeneity" the proportion of communication that exists between members of differing backgrounds were linked to increased productivity (Gratton et al., 2007; Yu, 2002).

This linkage to network heterogeneity and density supports criticism of Ely and Thomas's business case for diversity. Diverse representation alone does not reap the benefits of workplace diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2020). During World War II, Harvard sociologist Samuel Stouffer researched the racial attitudes of white and black soldiers. He found that the white soldiers who fought alongside black soldiers showed lower racial opposition because of their contact with the soldiers and because they had worked as equals towards a common goal (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016, 2017, 2022).

DEIB Under the Trump Administration

DEIB stands for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and belonging and has been at the forefront of many organizational hiring processes in the recent future. Many companies and organizations want to diversify their employees and teams to improve collaboration and reduce groupthink by having people from different backgrounds.

After taking office on January 20th, 2025, President Trump instituted many new laws and regulations and eliminated many previous policies. One of these policies that has been reworked and eliminated were the DEIB initiatives. The United States Department of Education has started taking action to eliminate these initiatives by removing them in"public facing communication". The Department of Education has removed and archived hundreds of documents and files that include mentions to DEIB (Ed.Gov, 2025). This includes discontinuing The Departments Diversity and Inclusion council, cancellation of DEIB training and administrative leave for employees tasked with implementing DEIB initiatives. The newly formed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) announced that over $1 Billion dollars have been saved after the cancellation of 104 federal DEIB contracts (Creitz, 2025). More than 2 million jobs could be at risk with the changes being made to DEIB initiatives. Workers were given an ultimatum to either resign before a midnight deadline on Thursday February 6th and receive up to 7 months of pay or risk the chance of being fired afterwards (Charter and Tomlinson, 2025).

Non-governmental organizations have now started to follow Trump's new regulations by eliminating their own personal DEIB policies and procedures. Alphabet, Google's parent company, removed any references to diversity in their most recent annual reports and eliminated hiring processes based on diversity, equity and inclusion (Jiménez, 2025). Some companies are sticking with their policies but others are erasing them completely, or at least pausing them for the time being.

CONCLUSION

The elimination of DEIB at the federal level has put its employees in a unique spot moving forward to either quit or risk staying. All of these changes have been made in hopes of eliminating programs the government did not see as important, to create governmental spending savings. These changes have formed public facing communication organizations to change current processes and language on their websites and social media. DEIB initiatives have been at the forefront of many debates when hiring because there has been a fine line between hiring the best talent available and hiring someone to fulfill your requirements. After decades of research, there is no factual evidence to support the idea that merely diversifying the workforce or implementing simple training initiatives without implementing significant changes to the company culture, results in the higher sense of belonging or corporate profitability.

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