The Future of Inclusion in an Evolving Workplace
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In the years leading up to the pandemic, U.S. companies spent about $8 billion annually on diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. Starting in 2020, the need to identify and address overt and unconscious bias in the workplace, while long overdue, was finally receiving the additional attention it deserved.

Beyond training and awareness efforts, company leaders were beginning to look closer in the mirror, digging deeper into metrics around hiring, pay, promotions and bonuses to surface race and gender discrepancies within the workforce. Almost simultaneously, COVID-19 hit, disrupting every aspect of business worldwide and adding another complex layer to companies’ D&I efforts.

Now, the pandemic-spurred hybrid-and remote-work models are becoming the new normal, and global business leaders are considering the impact on all aspects of their businesses, including D&I.

In September 2021, Intel commissioned a survey that interviewed 3,136 business leaders across 17 countries and several industries to learn how they currently view D&I, and how they plan to build inclusive and diverse companies going forward. This is part of Intel’s commitment to:

- Improve D&I research transparency in the tech industry.
- Create a more inclusive culture for employees.
- Drive better business outcomes and innovations for customers.
- Drive collective industry action.
- Scale impact of D&I initiatives.

In sourcing feedback from business leaders globally, the study paints a clearer picture of the impact COVID-19 has had on inclusion in the workplace. The data also provides a view into how business leaders are assessing hybrid, remote and on-site work options through the lens of driving business outcomes and ensuring equitable access to the systems, resources and opportunities employees need to thrive and perform their best.

Intel is using the data to help inform planning around D&I — and today the company is sharing the global and regional findings publicly so others can reference and apply these insights at their own workplaces.

Survey Respondents Include:

$8 billion is spent by U.S. companies annually on diversity and inclusion initiatives.

3,136 business leaders

17 countries

21+ industries
Committing to D&I amid COVID-19

The pandemic has drastically shifted nearly all facets of life — from the way we work, interact with our colleagues, and prioritize aspects of work and personal time. Sixty-three percent of survey respondents said that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on D&I in their organization, underscoring that new ways of working, enabled by technology, are clearly contributing to a more inclusive experience for employees globally.

Leaders who indicated a positive impact found that remote working and digitalization made it easier to recruit employees from underrepresented groups (46%) and the pandemic-related acceleration of digital transformation encouraged the adoption of new tools that support inclusivity, connectivity and engagement (45%). Additionally, leaders are making a connection between hybrid work and D&I, with 43% of this group indicating that a hybrid workforce enables companies to adopt a wider variety of D&I-informed practices.

Organizational leaders agree that D&I remains an important business priority, and that different thinking and resources are required today versus two years ago to make impactful progress.

The data Intel collected shows that many companies across industries and regions were already capturing metrics on underrepresented groups in their organizations. For instance, nearly half (47%) of global business leaders cited gender equality as the top area of inclusion investment, with race and ethnicity (at 39%) and disability and accessibility (at 37%) also receiving notable focus. While other areas of D&I such as sexual orientation ranked lower as a top focus area globally (27%), it remains a larger area of focus for certain countries, including Israel (43%), the United Kingdom (35%) and Brazil (34%).

Similarly, only 22% of business leaders globally said they focus on religion and religious beliefs most as a part of their D&I initiatives, while this was much higher in Malaysia (38%), United Arab Emirates (36%) and Israel (33%).

The commitment to D&I in a new hybrid-first work model requires unique investment. Fifty-seven percent of business leaders said there’s room for improvement when thinking about how much their company invests in systems and initiatives that promote D&I, with 20% saying that ensuring remote workers and in-office workers are equitably benefiting from business practices that support D&I is their top priority in the next 12 months.

Leaders also cited exploring how technology can help bolster D&I commitments (17%) and ensuring existing initiatives are effective (16%) are key priorities within the next year.

However, while 64% of participants who have set D&I goals say they want to achieve them in the next two years, one-third of those still have doubts that their company is prepared to do so, suggesting that further investment will be required.

63% of leaders said that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on D&I in their organization.
A Work in Progress

Despite the progress toward D&I goals, many business leaders observed amid the pandemic, 28% of leaders reported seeing a negative impact on their D&I progress during the pandemic. Of those, one-third of respondents said that investment in new initiatives stagnated, while 32% indicated that other challenges have taken attention away from D&I.

Along these lines, 30% of leaders who cited a negative impact noticed a reduction in the number of employees in underrepresented groups since the beginning of the pandemic. More than half of that group (54%) said employees with disabilities experienced job loss or left the workplace at a higher rate than other groups during the pandemic, despite disability and accessibility being a primary area of D&I investment. This group of leaders also echoed the pandemic’s much-reported negative impact on working parents — particularly on working mothers — with over a third stating that women and parents were the most reduced cohorts following people with disabilities. Globally, 38% of respondents who saw a negative impact indicated women were the most reduced underrepresented group, but many countries saw a far more significant reduction of this group: 75% of business leaders in Egypt cited it as the most reduced employee group, 71% in Canada and 70% in United Arab Emirates.

At many companies, digital transformation of critical systems is a barrier to getting greater representation of these groups and broader D&I initiatives back on track. While only 31% of surveyed business leaders said a lack of investment in the right tools to innovate is a significant challenge to reaching company goals overall, 52% said the need to adopt new technology will hinder their D&I goals specifically with a hybrid workforce in mind.

But the data uncovered one key challenge to implementing the right set of tools and technologies to successfully achieve D&I goals: stakeholder buy-in. Low levels of interest from senior stakeholders or having no dedicated D&I senior lead ranked as the No. 1 challenge (32%) that could prevent companies from achieving their goals.

This disconnect illustrates the importance of business leader buy-in for resources and technology to make inclusion possible.
Supporting Diversity and Inclusion Through Technology

As they embark on a hybrid way of working, business leaders will need to reiterate and reinforce their companies' commitments to D&I. The good news is that most won't be starting from scratch: 97% of respondents say their organizations already have rolled out D&I initiatives with a hybrid workforce in mind.

To stay on course, they’ll need more efficient ways to track progress and effectiveness. With 89% of executives indicating technology will make achieving D&I goals easier and 35% saying technology that bolsters D&I is critical to achieving them, it’s clear technology and resourcing will be key to unlocking successful D&I initiatives for a distributed workforce. Whether it’s an increased use of AI to limit bias in hiring or data and analytics that help showcase the success of initiatives, technology is crucial to the life cycle of an effective D&I program.

Combining a flexible D&I model with the right technology will help global companies move forward in a hybrid world. Among leaders surveyed, 29% identified a digital-first approach to D&I as the right way forward, and 44% said more innovative technologies that help inclusion will be critical to achieving goals. Recognizing that technology costs money, one-third of business leaders indicated that increased budget will be vital.

As technology has helped organizations globally stay connected during the pandemic, increased feelings about its role in enabling D&I may not be surprising. They do, however, showcase the mindset of business leaders as we enter a hybrid work world: The right technology is no longer a nice-to-have; it’s critical for the future of inclusion.

97% of respondents say their organizations already have rolled out D&I initiatives with a hybrid workforce in mind.
Looking for Collaborative Solutions

While technology can help bolster the D&I experience, achieving an effective and sustainable program will require wider industry investment. About half of the executives (51%) cited an increase in awareness, dialogue and industry-wide change for inclusive language in products and documents as being helpful in meeting organizational D&I goals.

The value of industry-wide progress in D&I — aside from creating a more respectful, representative workplace — is in the clarity and consistency that can be leveraged to new initiatives. This thinking aligns with the 37% of business leaders who said they would welcome global benchmarks/industry standards for D&I, the 37% who want more collaboration across the industry as it relates to inclusion and the 34% who would like more shared best practices.

This desire for industry benchmarks showcases the importance of a cross-organizational mission toward diversity and inclusion, such as the Alliance for Global Inclusion, which seeks to set industry standards for tracking diversity and inclusion improvements, to share current best practices and to highlight opportunities that improve outcomes across industries.

As leaders enter the next phase of hybrid work, they are targeting improvement to workplace culture in a few key areas, with 51% focused on ensuring fair career progression for all employees, whether remote, hybrid or in-office. This focus area was even higher in countries like Vietnam, where 78% of business leaders indicated it as an investment area. Furthermore, 49% of leaders are focused on training/workshops for successful hybrid work, and 40% are focused on supporting employees with disabilities and 36% are focused on building diverse teams.

When looking more broadly at the opportunities an effective D&I program can provide to an organization, business leaders haven’t lost sight of the bigger picture. With the right mindset and technology, leaders can accelerate the journey toward a more diverse and inclusive workforce that they expect will deliver a positive working environment (34%), increased employee trust and loyalty (32%), better employee health and well-being (30%), and higher productivity and engagement levels (30%).
The Road Ahead

For years, the tech industry, business visionaries and corporate leaders have talked about what the future of work could be. The past two years have shown us all what it may actually look like. With the recent past as prologue, we can assume that no matter what we plan for, we'll continuously find ourselves adapting to cultural impacts that are impossible to anticipate — some good, some not so good.

Intel’s study suggests that we’re at a tipping point. Major shifts in the ways people work will most likely have unintended consequences on corporate cultures in ways that may put D&I initiatives at risk, but there’s also a great opportunity for change. Beyond continued investment and leadership buy-in to support D&I efforts, companies will need to keep diversity and inclusion as high-priority components of business planning around the future of work — in turn creating D&I initiatives built for wherever and however people work.

METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted among 3,136 business decision makers or influencers of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Policy, in organizations employing 100+, across 17 countries, including Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Germany, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam and Taiwan. Participants were employed across a number of industries, including accounting, agriculture, architecture, automotive, carpentry, education, energy, engineering, electrical, fashion, government, healthcare, hospitality, IT, law, manufacturing, marketing, pharmaceuticals, property, and retail. The interviews were conducted online by Sapio Research in September 2021 using an email invitation and an online survey.

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