

# Charting The Course - The Road Ahead

*Today, there are many tools to help build up a repository of DEI initiatives. Organisations have also started drawing up metrics so that they can progressively measure the effectiveness of DEI in the environment.*

BY DEBJANI ROY



I recall the time, around 3 years ago when I had walked into the McDonald's Colaba outlet with office colleagues on a humid Friday evening. The first thing that struck me was the fact that despite the huge crowd that thronged the place, the decibel levels inside were significantly low. That was truly surprising, and I chose to dig deeper. What I happened to discover in the process left me spell-bound, and set me thinking. It was my very first and close encounter with what we know as Diversity and Inclusion (D&I).

This outlet was completely managed by staff who were physically handicapped - speech and hearing impaired. It was a near surreal experience. Not a single customer went unattended,

not a single order was dropped. The smiles on the faces of the young ushers as well as the staff behind the counter were magical. The smiles spoke of the supreme confidence with which the men and women had been trained. The conviction with which they applied themselves to the job was nothing short of a miracle. It was also obvious that the team members themselves had also been trained on sign language to converse amongst themselves - and it all looked seamless. I also stole a few short moments with the restaurant manager, the man who was relentlessly covering the length and breadth of the restaurant in his zest to provide superlative services to the customers. In his way, he described his job, his team, and his pride at setting an example for others to follow, and a stickler for adhering to and celebrating the company's philosophy on D&I.

That humid night in Mumbai made me comprehend the true meaning of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in a substantive way. We are into 2021, and a lot of organisations are yet to understand the true essence and application of D&I at the workspace. It is not as

though they are unaware or do not understand the concept - they do not see any obvious rub-offs other than getting some mileage at forums or improving their employee branding. One look at the manpower composition or people demographics of such companies makes it apparent that they do not walk the talk. It is also a fact that none of the team leads or people managers have received any sort of formal training to promote and manage diversity. Boardrooms are still a distant dream for diverse candidates, given that so many of them struggle to even get due recognition for performance or voice out their opinions in team meetings.

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So, is it all a dismal story for D&I in our country today? Not at all. Rather, it would not be wrong to say that slowly, steadily and most definitely the industry seems to be moving towards segmented, targeted and hyper-specialised D&I initiatives. Leading diversity practitioners in the country are beginning to adopt very focussed approaches towards D&I.

## Women

It would be significant to *create career stage differentials for women*. And even better to put in place targeted and customised Leadership Development programmes for every band of women leaders. For instance, SAP Labs has a comprehensive policy to support working mothers, with initiatives ranging from generous maternity leave (20 weeks plus 16 weeks of extended leave) to work-



**SUSHMITA MAJUMDAR**  
Human Resource Lead, mPokket

“To build a good work culture, it is important for organisations to strive for a good balance of equality and equity. Considering, every employee comes from a different background, education or career path. Benchmarking employees based on their capabilities and providing the right platform for career progression is very crucial. In today’s times, the concept of equity in DEI has taken a front seat. HR professionals will need to identify the right framework to create leadership solutions and approaches to identify gaps, disparity, unintentional biases. This will help create practices for a more equitable and inclusive work environment.”



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from-home options, flexible working hours and an in-house state-of-the-art childcare centre. With these initiatives, the company reduced its attrition rate among women who take maternity leave from 40% to 4% in 2015. Also, SAP Labs, in order to meet its objective of increasing women in leadership positions, realised that there is a need to begin grooming highperforming talent right from the entry-level while balancing the aspirations and needs of women employees at different stages in their career. As a result, they partnered with behavioural scientists to assess the needs of women employees at SAP, and subsequently, designed customised leadership development programmes to meet the needs of women at each grade level in India.

In its business principles, Goldman Sachs has very clearly laid out its commitment to maintaining a diverse workforce. As part of this commitment, the firm continues to focus on increasing and retaining its women employees, including reducing

attrition among those returning from maternity leave. The firm has on-site childcare (full-time and backup care) and lactation rooms, which are well utilised. To further build on the success of these initiatives, and to increase its support for women employees, the firm launched a comprehensive Maternity Management Programme, which aims to offer a range of services to support women before and during their maternity leave and their subsequent return to work.

## PwDs

The Inclusion of PwDs is another significant area of progress, specially charted by the ITBPM sectors. Organisations today are reaching out to include people who are visually challenged, hearing impaired, those with locomotor disability, multiple disabilities, epilepsy, autism, and profound disabilities. To foster the inclusion of PwDs, organisations are adopting the following approaches:

- Creating targeted and customised sourcing tie-ups with NGOs, job

fairs and tapping into other sourcing channels

- Deploying unique technology and infrastructure investments to meet the needs of each category of disability
- Identifying the right roles and fitment
- Designing need-based training and development
- Rolling out focussed sensitisation initiatives

EMC has been a pioneer in putting in place a robust PwD Internship programme that has become a milestone in not only 'hiring diverse', but in the process has also created a highly inclusive culture within.

Wipro happens to be another of the stalwarts in the IT industry that has designed a holistic programme



**SUZANNE KINNER**

Vice President, Human Resources, Blackhawk Network

“Committing to diversity, inclusion and belonging is not a destination—it’s an endless journey. Equity in the workplace is about fostering a culture of being impartial. Enacting equity is to provide all individuals with fair access to opportunities regardless of their background, race, or gender. In this fast-changing world, millennials seek all aspects of diversity to be recognized by their company; inclusivity is already hard-coded within them. Therefore, creating a safe environment where individuals do not have to 'mask' their authentic selves is essential. Advocating this requires the ability to listen, which sometimes is more difficult than talking for a high-performing culture.”

for its PwD recruits who are 415 in number and constitute 0.38% of its total workforce.

**What still ails**

Corporate ironies do not stop here. And D&I has continued to prove itself to be the biggest dichotomy in recent times. While the above trends happening across organisations have indicated heart in taking D&I initiatives ahead, research and management studies have also shown a simultaneous withdrawal/reticence of efforts aimed at D&I, around the same time. Management scientists have been at loss to explain the same till very recently. Reasons put forward for the same include:

**1) Diversity fatigue:** This is real. The topic is everywhere and people are tired of talking about it. And much like compassion fatigue, caring hurts. You get frustrated by all the conversation not turning into meaningful action. It is almost a battle that takes resources and energy, and it is hard to stay committed when you are barely seeing results. That is when one sees interest and passionate advocacy slowly turning into passivity and tuning out.

**2) Complexity overwhelms:** The sheer number of issues that need to be addressed is daunting. From sexism to racism, genderism to naturalism, ableism to ageism – the fight for D&I is a battle on many fronts. The matters can be further complicated by internal disagreements on what to focus on.

**3) Engaged in the wrong conversations:** When it comes to discussing D&I, we are setting ourselves up to be disappointed. We are worried about representation and neglecting distribution. We are over-indexing on getting underrepresented individuals in the door and under-indexing on including them once they are here. But most of all, we do not really have a shared understanding of what D&I even means, and people



**MEGAN ACKERSON**

Chief People Officer, Brillio

“Pre-pandemic people were embarrassed if a child or animal made noise in the background and now we accept it as a norm. It has humanized how we see the people we work with – making people more empathetic towards the complexities that women and/or others face in their personal lives. Likewise, I think the virtual environment puts more of a spotlight on the quality of work – and has the potential to level the playing field by removing some of the unconscious biases related to gender or how person might dress or look.”

have really strong, often negative reactions to these words.

Given these obstacles, it is easy to feel a little discouraged or hesitant to take on D&I initiatives. And while the confidence in the industry’s ability to solve these thorny, systemic issues may not be at a high, this is all the more reason for start-ups to double down on their D&I efforts.

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## Post-Pandemic trends

Today, it will also not be wrong to say that the COVID-19 Pandemic has ensured that DEI remains on top of the mind for HR and L&D professionals. A focus on DEI as a strategic principle behind organising the workplace culture as well as being a singularly critical strategic business advantage – it is no longer the HR fraternity alone since the entire senior business community has come to understand the relevance of DEI today. In that sense, 2021 promises to be a watershed year, especially with new norms coming into practice at the workplace, as well as new forms of manpower at work. Recognising the workplace as a community for a diverse workforce has made us greatly attuned to the need for continued discourse, education, and HR training around DEI.

## 4 distinct DEI trends for 2021

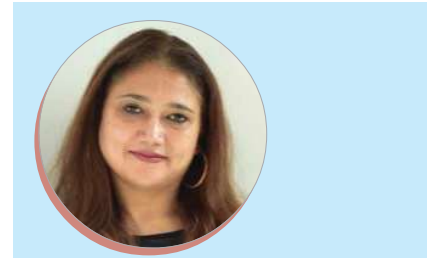
### 1. Focus on Multigenerational Workforce

The generations in the workplace range from

- The Silent generation (born between 1928 and 1945; some holding full or part-time jobs)
- Baby Boomers (1946 and 1964)
- Generation X (1965 and 1980)
- Millennials or Generation Y (1981 and 1996)
- Generation Z (since 1997)

The employee expectations in each of these generations are around

- Reskilling/upskilling in times of automation
- Holistic employee wellness programmes (focusing on mental wellness) linking work with social impact and purpose



**RUHIE PANDE**

Chief Human Resources Officer,  
Godrej Housing Finance

“Equity level the playing field and encourage both identity and cognitive diversity. The "business case" for diversity - the view that more diversity would increase performance effectiveness - is gaining momentum because of talent shortage and an increasingly diverse customer base. Teams with a high deviation from the "standard" perspective are more likely to solve a problem than non-diverse teams, according to an experiment run by the Harvard Business Review. Creating a level playing field is about ensuring that no group is in advantage or disadvantage owing to historical precedence, past experiences or biases. Organisations, however, do have to be judicious of taking practices that drive equity are positioned appropriately internally to avoid any hindrance to the cause.”

- Flexible work model
- Social media outside the workplace
- Crystallising the meaning of “bring your full self to work”

### 2. Unconscious Bias at the Workplace

Unconscious bias is always around in the workplace. One can anticipate an emphasis on how the biases, particularly of managers and leaders, have an impact on an organisation’s culture and the progress towards a diverse and inclusive workplace.

Uniting a workforce of perspectives, experiences, and is representative of the communities



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that organisations serve is the comparative advantage of diversity.

### 3. Gender Identity and Expression

Gender identity and gender presentation are largely discussed these days, and the challenges for employees who do not associate with their sex assigned at birth have also surfaced.

Organisations are contending with issues such as gender-specific restrooms, many simply offering gender-neutral options. HR departments are focused on providing healthcare benefits that are inclusive of transitioning employees. Managers need to be made aware of the language and their responsibility related to an employees' gender identity and expression.

As the movement to recognise and accept transgenders and gender non-binary employees continue, one will see more focus on updating diversity, equity, and inclusion training along with a need to have internal conversations and education around gender-inclusivity.

### 4. Shifting to DEI

The past few years have brought the focus on diversity to the fore, and increasing the representation of people from various backgrounds,



**RAGHU CHANDRASHEKHAR**  
Senior Vice President & Head  
Human Resources, Siemens  
Healthineers

“Diversity is the inclusion and collaboration of different thinking, backgrounds, experience, expertise and individual qualities across all organisational levels and dimensions. Diversity is a fact, Inclusion is a choice!”

perspectives, and experiences, is only a part of the equation. Inclusion, making space and amplifying the voices of everyone in the workplace, equally, is another. Both these concepts will remain a top focus for organisations in the years to come.

Several forward-leaning companies are focusing on the idea of ‘Equity’ as a component of their overall strategy. Equity in the workplace manifests in various ways from unpacking decision points that lead to

- Pay inequity

- Exploring equity in talent development investments
- Leveraging initiatives like Business Resource Groups (or Affinity Groups) as a vehicle to address equity succession planning

The focus on equity in the workplace will be an amplified topic as businesses are being called to operate with a deeper level of transparency around compensation reporting, board representation, harassment reporting, advancement, and other talent management practices.

It would not be wrong to say that not only is DEI a move in the right direction morally – for organisations, it is also a smart move with respect to hiring, rewarding, defining company culture and finally fostering company growth. Today, there are many tools to help build up a repository of DEI initiatives. Organisations have also started drawing up metrics so that they can progressively measure the effectiveness of DEI in the environment. In all – the stage is set for onward surges in the horizon of DEI not only for large organisations, but also for small and medium sector enterprises. 

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#### About the Author

**Debjani Roy** is a domain expert in the field of Human Resource with over 25 years of functional experience across companies such as HCL, Bentley Systems and SRL Diagnostics. Currently, she is the Chief HR Advisor to Mind Your Fleet (a software start-up), and a visiting professor to many reputed B-Schools. Debjani is a sought-after speaker, author, and an education-activist, among others.

