

# Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

## The Changing Landscape



# FOREWORD

“

*Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) have long been at the heart of efforts to create fairer, more representative workplaces in the UK. Over decades, organisations have made significant strides in building cultures that celebrate difference, foster belonging, and ensure equal opportunities for all. Yet, as we look at the current landscape, we find ourselves facing a concerning shift. So as part of our ongoing series of investigative HR reports, we wanted to address this with our own local client base and see what is really going on at ground level, rather than simply accepting what we are told by what can sometimes be a divisive political landscape.*

*With increasing economic pressures, shifting business priorities, and tightening resources, DE&I risks losing momentum. Organisations that once championed inclusive cultures are now having to justify continued investment, and in some cases, progress is stalling or even regressing. But now is not the time to step back. The work of building truly inclusive workplaces is far from done, and any loss of focus threatens to undo the hard-won progress of previous decades.*

”

*We publish several reports each year on topics you tell us are important to you but didn't simply want to regurgitate what is already out there promoting the DE&I agenda. We like to tell it how it is and show you what our research really tells us about what's happening on the ground in your organisations. As well as this, we have highlighted actionable steps that organisations can take to keep DE&I firmly on the agenda—because making the UK a truly great place to work means ensuring that every individual, regardless of background, can thrive.*

*The challenge ahead is clear: we must continue striving for better. Let's not allow short-term pressures to derail a movement that has taken decades to build. The future of our workplaces depends on it!*

# contents

---

- > Introduction
- > The Reality of DE&I in Business
- > Who is Responsible for Driving DE&I
- > The Benefits of a Diverse Team
- > Measurement & Communication
- > DE&I in Recruitment
- > Authenticity of DE&I Efforts
- > The Role of Training in DE&I
- > Greatest Impact on DE&I
- > Conclusion
- > Sources

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (**DE&I**) has been a key focus for organisations for many years, yet progress remains inconsistent. While most businesses recognise its importance, there is ongoing debate over whether DE&I initiatives are truly embedded into workplace culture or remain largely symbolic. The global conversation around DE&I has been shaped by varying political and social viewpoints perspectives, including opposition in some regions.

In the United States for example, President Trump has recently criticised corporate DE&I policies, arguing they interfere with business efficiency, and has gone as far as removing DE&I programs from federal departments. These differing viewpoints highlight the challenges organisations face in implementing and sustaining meaningful DE&I strategies. Worryingly for the UK, we could start to see the impact of this in US owned organisations with a UK base downgrading their efforts to create inclusive cultures.

This report examines the current state of DE&I in UK businesses, drawing on survey responses from HR professionals across small, medium, large, and blue-chip organisations across the Thames Valley and the wider South East.

It explores key questions such as who holds responsibility for DE&I, how progress is measured, and whether businesses are moving beyond policy statements to create truly inclusive environments.

The findings offer a comparative analysis of different organisational approaches, providing insight into the extent to which DE&I is prioritised and resourced.

\*We surveyed over 100 HR leaders across the Thames Valley and the wider South East. Understanding the professional backgrounds of survey respondents is essential in assessing the results. The majority of participants came from HR leadership roles, with Chief People Officers (CPOs) and HR Directors accounting for 41% of responses, and HR Managers a further 37%. Dedicated DE&I professionals made up 3% of the sample, while 10% were in generalist HR roles, and the remaining 6% represented functions such as Learning & Development (L&D) and Reward.

This distribution reflects the perspectives of those most directly involved in shaping and implementing DE&I policies within their organisations.

# THE REALITY OF DE&I IN BUSINESS

Despite widespread recognition of DE&I's importance, the fact that just **3% of our respondents were dedicated DE&I professionals** could be indicative of the fact that it's on the agenda but not enough of a priority to invest in expertise, and maybe organisations have yet to fully integrate it into their strategic priorities.

Only **14%** of blue-chip firms describe DE&I as critical and fully embedded in their culture, with a further **32%** stating it is important but balanced alongside other business objectives.

In large businesses, just **20%** claim full integration, while **38%** acknowledge that it is merely one of several competing considerations. Medium-sized firms report even lower levels of commitment, with only 17% embedding DE&I into their core operations, while nearly half (**48%**) say it is important but not their top priority.

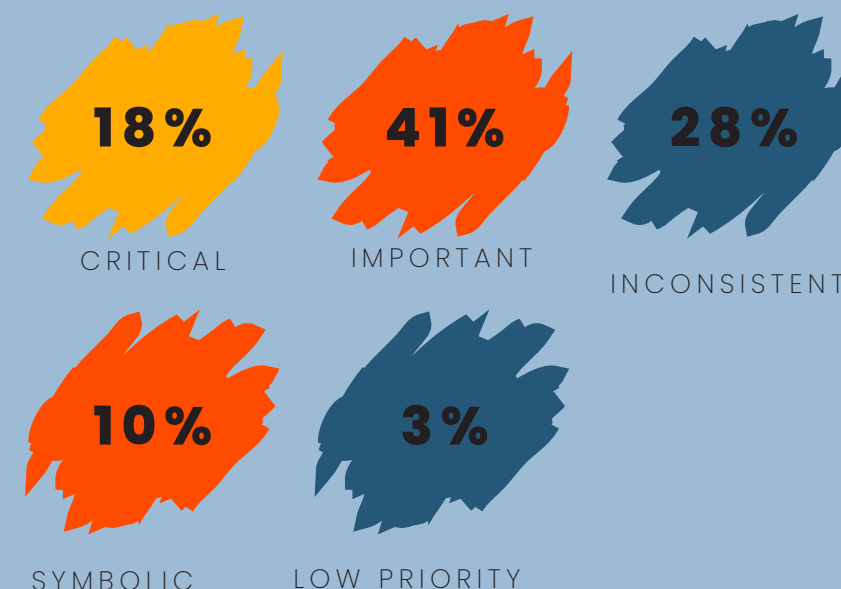
“ — The CIPD puts it perfectly...

*Promoting and delivering EDI in the workplace is an essential aspect of good people management. It's about creating working environments and cultures where every individual can feel safe, experience a sense of belonging, and is empowered to achieve their full potential. However, an effective EDI strategy should go beyond legal compliance and take an intersectional (that a person's different intersecting identities can advantage or disadvantage them) approach to EDI, which will add value to an organisation, contribute to the wellbeing and equality of outcomes and impact on all employees.*

— ”

Perhaps the most surprising result comes from small businesses, where **14%** claim DE&I is fully embedded, and **57%** say it is important. At first glance, this seems positive, but smaller organisations often lack the formal structures, dedicated resources, and governance needed to translate good intentions into sustainable, impactful change.

These figures paint a concerning picture. Despite **DE&I** being a focus for over two decades, fewer than one in five businesses claim to have successfully embedded it into their culture. Even among larger corporations with greater financial resources and infrastructure, inclusion is still often treated as a secondary concern rather than an essential business function. This raises fundamental questions about whether **DE&I** is a genuine commitment or merely a corporate talking point.



**FIG 1 |**  
How important is DE&I to your organisations overall strategy?

“

*Things to consider include: accent, age, caring responsibilities, colour, culture, visible and invisible disability, gender identity and expression, mental health, neurodiversity, physical appearance, political opinion, pregnancy and maternity/paternity and family status and socio-economic circumstances, amongst other personal characteristics and experiences.*

”

*“Statistically 20% of the UK population have a disability therefore it would make sense for companies to create steering groups of people that have a genuine affinity with the challenge of inclusion and allow them to discuss the challenge and create the solutions.”*

Steve Carter, Co-Founder and Director at The Ability People



## CAN YOU TRULY EMBED DE&I WITHOUT EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP?

The question of who leads DE&I within organisations provides further insight into how seriously it is taken at a strategic level. Across all company sizes, HR teams are still seen as the primary drivers of DE&I strategy, which is probably what we would expect to see but we would hope that it would be in conjunction with board sponsorship or executive leadership to really have the backing it needs.

In blue-chip firms, **46%** of respondents stated that HR was responsible for DE&I, with only **10%** saying that executive leadership took ownership. The figures are even more concerning in large businesses, where **68%** report that DE&I is led by HR, while just **18%** point to executive leadership. Medium-sized businesses follow a similar pattern, with **52%** identifying HR as the main driver, while only **17%** claim leadership is actively involved.



We have long seen EDI as integral to HR practices and business strategy and outcomes. We stand for better work and working lives and helping people from all backgrounds get in to work and get on.

**Peter Cheese, Chief Executive, CIPD**

Interestingly, small businesses show the highest level of executive involvement, with **28%** reporting that leadership teams, rather than HR, drive DE&I. While this is promising, it could also indicate that smaller organisations are less structured in their approach, meaning that DE&I efforts may be well-intentioned but lack the governance and oversight needed for long-term success.

The fact that HR remains the main driver of DE&I is not in itself a problem but if inclusion were truly a business priority, it would be led from the top at executive level, and not simply delegated to HR departments to manage without sponsorship. Moreover, the survey found a low number of dedicated DE&I professionals, even in large and blue-chip firms.

Only **14%** of large businesses and just **8%** of blue-chip companies report having a dedicated DE&I role. This raises concerns about how well-resourced these efforts are and whether businesses are truly investing in DE&I beyond rhetoric.



## THE BENEFITS OF A DIVERSE TEAM

Without stating the obvious diverse and inclusive team offers numerous advantages to organisations, so we have included some thoughts below based on our research and studies conducted by Shaw Trust, Accenture and gov.uk\*

### Enhanced Innovation and Creativity

Diverse teams bring together varied perspectives and problem-solving approaches, fostering innovation. A report by the Inclusion at Work Panel in March 2024 highlighted that drawing on a wide range of experiences and backgrounds improves organisational effectiveness and is conducive to innovation and creativity.

### Improved Financial Performance

A study by Accenture in 2018 shows that a diverse team can lead to higher revenue, greater profit margin and higher net income

### Better Decision-Making

Inclusive teams are more agile and better able to navigate change. Diverse perspectives help businesses respond to market shifts, crises, and challenges more effectively.

### Enhanced Employee Engagement and Retention

When employees feel valued and included, engagement and retention improve. The Inclusion at Work Panel's 2024 report emphasised that fostering an inclusive culture leads to higher job satisfaction and reduced staff turnover.

### Strengthened Employer Brand and Talent Attraction

Companies known for their commitment to diversity and inclusion are more attractive to top talent. A strong employer brand that emphasises these values can differentiate a company in a competitive job market. A recent study found that 86% of job seekers factor in a company's diversity, equity, and inclusion reputation when making employment decisions

### Broader Market Reach

A diverse workforce can better understand and serve a diverse customer base. For example, with around 14 million disabled people in the UK, representing a spending power of £247 billion annually, having employees who can relate to and understand this demographic is crucial.

### Increased Compliance and Reduced Risk

Investing in DEI helps organisations stay ahead of legal and regulatory requirements related to workplace equality, minimising the risk of discrimination claims and reputational damage.

In summary, cultivating a diverse and inclusive workforce is not only ethically sound but also delivers tangible benefits, driving innovation, financial success, and a positive organisational culture.



**FIG 2 |**  
Accenture, 2018



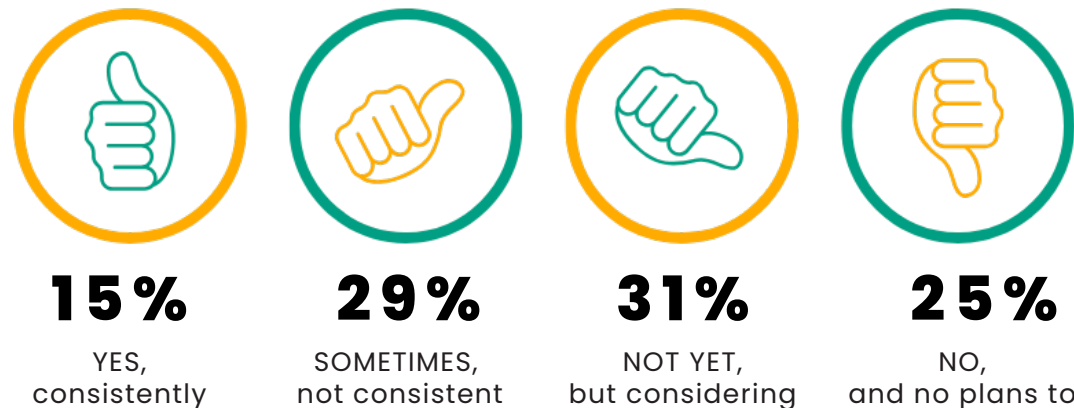
## BARRIERS TO MEASUREMENT

## MEASUREMENT & COMMUNICATION

### ARE WE SEEING REAL COMMITMENT?

One of the most telling indicators of a company's commitment to DE&I is whether it measures progress and communicates its efforts transparently. Unfortunately, the survey results reveal a significant gap in measurement and reporting, with many businesses failing to track or share their DE&I progress.

Among blue-chip organisations, **43%** track DE&I progress through internal reporting, but only 10% publish their findings externally. Alarming, **46%** admit they do not track or communicate DE&I efforts at all. Given that these companies often have the resources and influence to lead by example, this lack of transparency is disappointing. Public reporting not only demonstrates accountability but also builds trust with employees, customers, and investors—yet the vast majority of large organisations avoid this level of scrutiny.



**FIG 3 |**  
Does your organisation measure the impact of DE&I initiatives on employee engagement and retention

### MASSIVE IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

The situation is even worse in large businesses, where just **39%** conduct internal DE&I reporting, only **3%** publish findings externally, and **57%** do not track DE&I progress in any structured way. Medium-sized firms fare slightly better, with **61%** reporting progress internally, though none publish externally. Small businesses perform the worst in this area, with **79%** admitting they do not track DE&I at all.

This lack of measurement raises serious concerns. Without data, how can businesses identify what's working, where challenges remain, and whether their DE&I efforts are driving real change? If DE&I is not measured, it becomes impossible to assess whether initiatives are simply performative or truly making an impact.

We have to recognise though that the measurement of DE&I can be challenging, and one key factor is the increasing reluctance of individuals to share personal data. Several reasons could contribute to this:

#### Increased Privacy Awareness

People are more conscious than ever about how their personal information is collected, stored, and used. High-profile data breaches and growing discussions around data ethics have made individuals more cautious about disclosing sensitive details, such as race, gender identity, disability status, or socioeconomic background.

#### Fear of Bias or Misuse

Even within organisations committed to DE&I, employees may worry about how their data will be used. Concerns about unconscious bias, discrimination, or even tokenism can lead to hesitation in self-reporting demographic information.

#### Lack of Trust in Organisational Intentions

If employees don't believe their company will use DE&I data to drive real change, they may be less inclined to participate in surveys or disclosure initiatives. Transparency around how the data will inform strategy is crucial to building trust.

#### Complexity of Intersectionality

People don't always fit neatly into predefined categories, and some may feel that standard demographic questions fail to fully represent their identity. This can lead to lower engagement in DE&I data collection efforts.

#### Legal and Regulatory Constraints

While the UK has robust equality laws, including GDPR, companies must handle personal data carefully to remain compliant. Some organisations may be hesitant to collect detailed demographic information for fear of inadvertently breaching privacy regulations.

## SO HOW DO ORGANISATIONS OVERCOME THIS?

### Communicate Purpose Clearly:

Employees are more likely to share personal data if they understand how it will be used to drive meaningful change.

### Ensure Anonymity and Security:

Confidential, aggregated reporting reassures employees that their individual responses won't be traced back to them.

### Foster a Culture of Trust:

A strong DE&I strategy needs to be more than just data-driven—it should be backed by visible actions that demonstrate commitment.

### Use Alternative Metrics:

Qualitative feedback, employee sentiment surveys, and inclusion-focused engagement data can supplement traditional demographic tracking.

While privacy concerns make DE&I measurement more complex, they also reinforce why a thoughtful, transparent approach is essential. If organisations can build trust and demonstrate genuine intent, they stand a much better chance of gathering the insights needed to drive real progress.

## DE&I IN RECRUITMENT

A company's approach to recruitment is one of the clearest indicators of its commitment to DE&I. If hiring processes are not inclusive, diversity at all levels will suffer, making it difficult to build a genuinely inclusive culture.

The survey found that while some businesses have integrated DE&I into recruitment, many still fail to apply structured, bias-free hiring practices.

Among blue-chip firms, **26% reported that DE&I was fully embedded** in recruitment and actively measured, while **39%** stated that it was a priority but inconsistently applied across teams.

“

*“Hire people who can actually do the job, instead of perform well.”*

Director & ADHD Coach, Leanne Maskell

Large businesses showed similar patterns, with only **28% saying DE&I was fully embedded** into hiring decisions.

Some common initiatives include **structured interview processes** (73% in blue-chip firms, 77% in medium-sized firms) and **inclusive job descriptions** (81% in blue-chip firms, 69% in large businesses).

However, more advanced practices such as **blind CV reviews** (23% in blue-chip firms) remain underutilised, allowing unconscious bias to persist.







# IDEAS TO ENSURE A FAIRER, MORE INCLUSIVE HIRING PROCESS

## RETHINK JOB DESCRIPTIONS & ADVERTISEMENTS

**Use Inclusive Language:** Avoid gendered or biased wording that might deter certain candidates. Tools like Textio can help detect biased language.

**Focus on Skills Over Background:** Avoid unnecessary criteria like specific university degrees or years of experience if they aren't truly essential.

**Highlight DE&I Commitment:** Explicitly state the organisation's commitment to DE&I in job postings to encourage underrepresented candidates to apply.

## EXPAND TALENT SOURCING

**Look Beyond Traditional Talent Pools:** Partner with organisations that support underrepresented groups, such as Black Professionals Network, Women in Tech, Disability Rights UK, or LGBTQ+ recruitment networks.

**Leverage Blind Applications:** Remove personally identifiable information (e.g., names, ages, universities) during initial screening to reduce bias.

## IMPROVE THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

**Structured Interviews:** Use a consistent set of questions and evaluation criteria to reduce subjectivity.

**Diverse Hiring Panels:** Ensure interview panels include individuals from different backgrounds to minimise unconscious bias.

**Flexible Interviewing Options:** Offer remote interviews or adjustments for candidates who may need them due to disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or other factors.



# IDEAS CONT'D

## USE AI & DATA DRIVEN ASSESSMENTS (CAREFULLY)

AI can help identify skills-based matches, but it must be monitored to prevent algorithmic bias.



## ADDRESS UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

**Provide Bias Training:** Train hiring managers on recognising and mitigating unconscious biases.

## FOCUS ON EMPLOYER BRAND & CULTURE

**Showcase Real Representation:** Use diverse imagery and authentic employee testimonials in career pages and social media.

**Foster an Inclusive Culture:** Candidates are more likely to apply if they see that diversity and inclusion are ingrained in company values.

## REVIEW AND MEASURE PROGRESS

**Track Diversity Metrics:** Collect (anonymised) data on applicant diversity at each hiring stage to identify barriers.

**Gather Feedback from Candidates:** Ask candidates about their experience to refine the process.

**By embedding DE&I into every stage of recruitment, we believe organisations can build stronger, more representative teams and create truly inclusive workplaces.**





## AUTHENTICITY OF DE&I EFFORTS

A striking theme from the survey is the disconnect between corporate messaging and real action. While most organisations publicly support DE&I, the data suggests that many fail to translate words into tangible, meaningful efforts.

Only **15%** of respondents believe their organisation takes genuine, meaningful action on DE&I, making proactive investments in inclusion. A further **36%** acknowledge that while their company is making efforts, progress is inconsistent and fragmented across departments.

More concerningly, **19%** admitted their DE&I efforts were largely symbolic, with little substantive action behind the rhetoric.

This credibility gap presents serious risks to employee engagement, trust, and retention. When employees perceive DE&I initiatives as performative rather than meaningful, it leads to cynicism, disengagement, and a reduced sense of belonging.

A company cannot claim to champion DE&I if it lacks leadership commitment, accountability, and structured implementation.

Employees and external stakeholders are becoming increasingly discerning—empty promises are no longer enough.

## CHALLENGES IN ADVANCING DE&I

Despite **widespread recognition of DE&I's importance**, organisations continue to face significant barriers in embedding it into their operations.

One of the biggest obstacles is **Leadership buy-in**, with **26%** of businesses identifying this as a challenge. This aligns with earlier findings that DE&I is still viewed as an HR responsibility rather than an executive-led initiative. If senior leaders do not actively champion inclusion, efforts will remain fragmented, underfunded, and deprioritised when other business pressures arise.

**Resource constraints** are another major hurdle, cited by **29%** of respondents. Many organisations claim to prioritise DE&I, yet when budgets are tight, it is often one of the first areas to suffer cuts. This raises an important question: If DE&I is truly a business priority, why is it still treated as a discretionary initiative rather than a strategic investment?

“

**29% stated a lack of Resources including Budget & Headcount was the biggest challenge their organisation faced in achieving it's DE&I goals, closely followed by 26% citing Leadership Buy-in & Accountability**

”

Another key challenge is **measurement**, with **23%** of organisations struggling to track DE&I progress effectively. Without structured accountability mechanisms, businesses lack clarity on whether their efforts are actually making a difference. If DE&I remains unmeasured, it risks becoming a series of well-intentioned activities rather than a strategic, results-driven approach.

Cultural resistance also remains a barrier in some workplaces, with 9% of respondents citing pushback from employees or specific teams as a challenge. This suggests that DE&I is still seen as controversial or unnecessary in certain corporate environments, highlighting the need for better education, awareness, and leadership-led culture shifts.



## THE ROLE OF TRAINING IN DE&I

One of the most effective ways to drive real cultural change is through **ongoing education**, yet the survey reveals a serious gap in training provision.

Among blue-chip organisations, **41% offer company-wide unconscious bias or inclusive leadership training**, which is promising.

However, an alarming **42% provide no training at all**, meaning nearly half of the largest businesses fail to equip employees with the tools to foster an inclusive workplace.



*42% of respondents said their organisation DID NOT provide unconscious bias or inclusive leadership training*

Large and medium-sized businesses show similar gaps, with training either limited to leadership or entirely absent. Small businesses fare the worst, with most either offering ad-hoc training or none at all. Given that unconscious biases influence hiring, promotion, team dynamics, and leadership decisions, a lack of structured training significantly weakens DE&I progress.

Without continuous education, companies risk reinforcing existing biases and exclusionary practices. Training should not be treated as a one-off exercise but as an ongoing commitment to equipping employees at all levels with the skills to create an inclusive work environment.



## WHAT WOULD HAVE MOST IMPACT?

**Survey respondents identified several key actions that would drive meaningful improvement in DE&I efforts.**

One of the most impactful measures is **flexible working**, which helps attract diverse talent. Offering hybrid and remote work opportunities expands access to candidates from underrepresented groups, particularly those with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or socio-economic barriers. By removing geographical and logistical constraints, businesses can build a more inclusive workforce.

**Leadership accountability** is another crucial factor. DE&I should be owned by executives, not just HR, with inclusion metrics integrated into performance reviews. When senior leaders are directly responsible for driving progress, inclusion becomes a strategic priority rather than a secondary initiative.

Investing in **more structured DE&I training** is also essential. Bias awareness and inclusive leadership development should be embedded into professional learning at all levels. Without regular and comprehensive training, unconscious bias will continue to influence workplace decisions, hindering DE&I progress.

Beyond training, **greater investment in resources and time** is necessary. DE&I must be treated as a core business priority, with dedicated budgets and long-term strategies, rather than as an optional or reactive initiative. Sustainable progress requires consistent funding, leadership commitment, and organisational-wide engagement.

A **stronger focus on workplace culture** is equally important. Moving beyond compliance-driven policies, businesses should create environments where diverse employees feel valued, heard, and supported. Genuine inclusion requires cultural shifts, not just policy changes.

Finally, **more frequent DE&I surveys** can help organisations measure progress, identify gaps, and refine initiatives based on real workplace experiences. Employee feedback is a powerful tool in shaping DE&I strategies and ensuring that inclusion efforts remain relevant and effective.

By prioritising these actions, organisations can drive lasting and meaningful DE&I progress.

## CONCLUSION

To drive meaningful and lasting change, organisations must elevate DE&I from a secondary HR initiative to a leadership-driven business priority. DE&I should be embedded into corporate strategy, executive KPIs, and performance reviews, ensuring accountability at the highest levels. Leadership teams must take direct ownership of DE&I efforts, supported by dedicated professionals who ensure initiatives are consistently and effectively implemented. Without this shift, inclusion will remain an aspiration rather than a reality.

Transparent measurement is essential for meaningful progress. Organisations must set clear KPIs to track hiring, promotion, and retention of underrepresented groups, regularly publish DE&I data, and leverage employee feedback surveys to assess and refine their approach. Without structured measurement and accountability, even the most well-intentioned DE&I initiatives risk being ineffective.

Fair and inclusive hiring practices must be prioritised, with structured, bias-free recruitment processes, diverse interview panels, and clear DE&I hiring targets. Businesses should also invest in bias training for hiring managers to mitigate unconscious discrimination. Without a consistent and structured approach, organisations risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

Beyond performative commitments, businesses must integrate DE&I into measurable objectives, holding leadership accountable just as they are for financial performance and customer satisfaction. Dedicated budgets, data-driven decision-making, and open dialogue are critical to overcoming obstacles and ensuring sustained progress. Additionally, unconscious bias and inclusive leadership training should be mandatory and ongoing, tailored to different levels of the business, to embed DE&I into workplace culture.

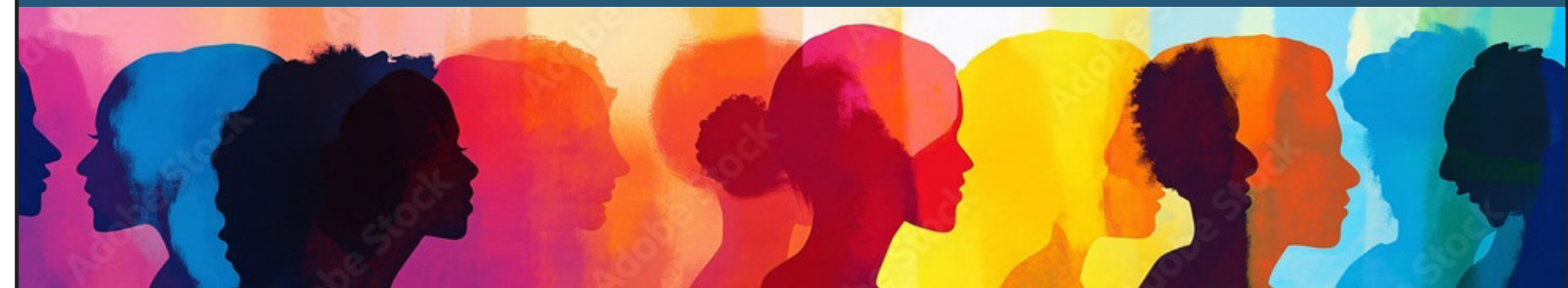
Ultimately, DE&I is not just a moral imperative but a business-critical factor influencing talent attraction, innovation, and long-term success. Companies must decide whether they are truly committed to change or merely using DE&I as a branding tool—because without structured, accountable, and well-resourced efforts, inclusion will remain an unfulfilled promise rather than a reality.





**\*Sources:**

- <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/factsheets/diversity-factsheet/#Equality>
- <https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/2018/companies-leading-in-disability-inclusion-have-outperformed-peers-accenture-research-findshttps://dys-praxiafoundation.org.uk/>
- <https://www.theabilitypeople.com>
- <https://shawtrust.org.uk/2024/08/19/the-benefits-of-a-diverse-work-force-and-inclusive-hiring-practices/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-report-2024-to-2025https://>



Wade Macdonald  
Greyfriars Gate  
7 Greyfriars Road  
Reading, Berkshire  
RG1 1NU

01189 560 600

[www.wademacloud.com](http://www.wademacloud.com)

[admin@wademacloud.com](mailto:admin@wademacloud.com)

