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Discourses, Methods and Practices of Diversity, Equity,
Inclusion and Belonging: Towards a Global Shared Framework

Discorsi, metodi e pratiche di diversità, equità, inclusione
e senso di appartenenza: verso un quadro condiviso globale

*Edited by
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Inclusive AI Technologies and Discourses for Better DEIB and Organizational Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the way we work, and as technology continues to outpace workplace management, this is a call-for-action to global organizations to re-evaluate their discourses, strategies and operations on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) frameworks that can potentially help solve organizational challenges and increase their productivity. Global workforces are not yet meaningfully trained in understanding the extent to which AI can impact their careers as well as ethical issues such as fairness, equity, accountability, and governance (Hauer 2022; Polyportis and Pahos 2024). What makes this scenario even more murky is the lack of opportunities available for non-specialist training in AI for workplace management. This lack of transparency and knowledge around the discourses and workings of AI, if left unexamined, could lead to the deterioration of workplace DEIB initiatives. The inherent clarity and commitment of DEIB to improve the lives of all people and organizations can be used as guidance towards building inclusive AI technologies and positive discourses around an inclusive AI. As a technologically dependent society, we have to do better to create more humane and ethical technologies that serve those who have access to less education, privileges, opportunities than us. We need to create continuous and consistent governance systems to oversee the development of inclusive AI and monitor its use. Guiding the development of inclusive AI technologies and discourses using DEIB frames holds the potential of creating powerful, transformative processes where humans and technology can interface and collaborate to bring forth positive outcomes for people, organizations and societies.

Keywords: accountability; AI; DEIB; inclusive technology; technology and ethics; workplace ethics.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the way we work, and as technology continues to outpace workplace management, this is a call-for-action to global organizations to re-evaluate their discourses, strategies and operations on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) frameworks that can potentially help solve organizational challenges and increase their productivity. Global workforces are not yet meaningfully trained in understanding the extent to which AI can impact their careers as well as ethical issues such as fairness, equity, accountability, and governance (Hauer 2022; Polyportis and Pahos 2024). What makes this scenario even more murky is the lack of opportunities available for non-specialist training in AI for workplace management. At this point in time there are two groups of people: those who are using AI without understanding the ethical implications of it on themselves and the planet and, on the other hand, those who reject AI as being an unethical, technocratic tool. Both sides can benefit from the creation of transparent AI discourses on the ways in which such powerful technologies can reshape global democracies (Fan 2024). Jaffer (2024), executive director at the Knight First Amendment Institute, states in his interview that the approach to developing an inclusive AI is “interdisciplinary by necessity”, which is the reason his organization has partnered up with Columbia University Engineering to connect the social with AI. He adds that the complexity of the development and implementation of AI “will require many different kinds of knowledge and many different kinds of expertise” (Fan 2024).

This lack of transparency and knowledge around the discourses and workings of AI, if left unexamined, could lead to the deterioration of workplace DEIB initiatives – as creating a harmonious, equitable and inclusive social is at the heart of DEIB. There is a symbiotic relationship here between AI and DEIB: on one hand, DEIB frameworks can provide foundational ethical parameters on which an inclusive and fair AI could be built to benefit large, diverse groups of people and subsequently large, diverse organizations. On the other hand, without the ethical orientation provided by DEIB initiatives, AI could exacerbate many societal problems such as widening the technological gap as well as deepening bias towards people and communities, to name just a couple of negative outcomes. The discourse and application of DEIB, by contrast, are “typically accompanied by an axiological orientation toward procedural and distributive justice in organizations and institutions” (Arsel *et al.* 2022).

The inherent clarity and commitment of DEIB to improve the lives of all people and organizations can be used as guidance towards building inclusive AI technologies and positive discourses around an inclusive AI.

To track the origins and evolution of DEIB in the US workplace over the decades, a useful place to start is mentioning that over the years many organizations have attempted to create a diverse environment that welcomed into the workforce individuals who were traditionally under-represented in those spaces. Initially this was with regard to gender, and later to race and ethnicity. Over time, other social identities like an individual's sexual orientation or their physical ability status were considered as well. In most cases, these efforts were initiated in response to governmental laws and legislation (Jenkins and Moses 2014; Pant and Sharma 2024). As a result, DEIB efforts have become ingrained in many organizations as a way of operating based on changing demographics and trends in our society, but not without their share of starts and stops. The introduction and use of AI is a shift of mammoth proportions for organizations, one that needs to be observed, studied, analyzed and acted upon. The spread of AI (and so far the lack of understanding on how it works) in workplace operations and management generates more of an urgency to understand the ways in which workplaces can create ethical and inclusive DEIB practices that aid in making sense of workplaces enhanced by technology to benefit all members of the workforce.

This article takes a prescriptive, multi-industry approach to summarize the challenges, obstacles, failures and potentials around the visioning of DEIB programs and policies in private and public organizations in the United States of America in the advent of AI. It looks at the ways in which DEIB and AI can inform and impact each other in positive and negative ways if they are not examined jointly in a global workplace context. We specifically look at the ways in which DEIB can inform the creation of more inclusive, nuanced and constructive AI technologies that benefit large groups of people without perpetuating inequities and also how DEIB can aid in the creation of more ethical and transparent discourses and narratives of AI for critiques. We urge organizations to create pathways to fully realize their DEIB goals to develop a stronger and sustained sense of inclusion and belonging for all members, versus only some – which leads to increased wellbeing, organizational loyalty, employee retention, higher productivity, higher innovation, higher trust, better performing teams and, subsequently, higher profits (Woetzel *et al.* 2015; Lorenzo and Reeves 2018; Lorenzo *et al.* 2018). The article comes full circle, giving structural recommendations on how organizations can

incorporate DEIB principles more effectively and holistically in their strategies, policies, programs and overall operations and management at a time of heightened technological flux in the workplace.

DEIB work in the United States in its many shapes and forms and across industries is not a new phenomenon – it has been in the works in varying avatars for decades. However, the attention on DEIB efforts found a unified global platform in 2020, after the unjust killing of George Floyd by US law enforcement officers (Jackson *et al.* 2023). Despite DEIB initiatives finding a global platform in 2020, it is currently finding itself in the news and American workplace culture in a divisive space – it is one of the most significant points of contention amongst the polarized political leaders and business elite in the US (Stephenson 2022). As McGee (2023) writes, “The constitutionality of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies remains a complex and contentious issue. While some argue that these policies violate the principles of equal protection and fairness, others contend that they serve compelling government interests and are necessary to address historical disadvantages and promote diversity”.

More recently there has been political backlash against educational institutions promoting ideas around DEIB and the law around it, namely, Affirmative Action (Cheney-Rice 2023). In some states there has been either state legislation or governmental executive orders to eliminate resources, programming, and offices focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion citing that it is exclusionary of those who do not see themselves as “diverse” or part of an underrepresented group. Even before this recent trend, notwithstanding the polarization on this issue, an increasing number of global organizations (Clarke 2024; McGlaulin and Abrams 2024) expressed their commitment to DEIB goals, despite conservative backlash from over-mediatised, global, anti-DEIB billionaire technocrats (Gonzalez 2024; Ingram 2024). There is a need for organizations to self-reflect on their organizational values and commitments and act swiftly to solve DEIB goals by connecting business and society. Due to the permeating influence of AI technologies and the lack of training in understanding how AI works and its impacts, now more than ever, it is important for organizations that believe in the value of DEIB frameworks, to re-evaluate and re-charge their ways of implementing DEIB strategies supported by the unprecedented AI expansion in the workplace.

This paper is written with the intention of providing recommendations on building constructive, structural pathways for DEIB in organi-

zations in the era of AI. The sections below are laid out in the following ways:

1. We first lay out the imperfect *status quo* of the state of DEIB in multi-industry organizations today in the United States and the ways in which unregulated and unchecked AI can make those ethical and inclusion issues worse for people and organizations.
2. We then follow up each section on the imperfect *status quo* with possible solutions and positive outcomes related to a better, more inclusively designed AI, that incorporates DEIB frameworks in its designs and uses. We will be using the terminology “Inclusive AI”, henceforth, to encourage the paradigm shift to where algorithms can be used to benefit all, rather than some.

While the observations and analysis are based on researching organizations in the United States and their DEIB and AI status, we are confident that these recommendations can be used in other transnational contexts as well, as institutions seek to find an ethical new normal in the midst of fast-paced technological shifts and intense political polarizations. We are laying out solutions to an ongoing challenge of building a more DEIB focused world, where technology works for us and not against us – and we invite our readers to propose innovative solutions to add to the discussion.

1. STATUS QUO:

NOT SETTING CLEAR GOALS OR EVALUATION METRICS BECAUSE OF FEAR OF LEGAL CHALLENGES

Organizations without clear goal setting and evaluation metrics cannot accurately determine if an initiative is successful or not (Carpi *et al.* 2017). When there is fear of goal setting in an organization, it is more difficult to reach milestones or accomplishments since there is no clear original target to begin. The problem is made worse when there are no methodologies in place to assist with organizational management, transitions and growth as well. For example, some organizations do not set clear goals of diversification as they fear legal backlash over not hiring “majority candidates” or for having quotas for “underrepresented candidates”. Also, sometimes there are no methodologies in place to analyze the workplace on relevant metrics that will guide them in taking research-backed decisions on diversification.

Most organizations fail at achieving success with regard to DEIB because they do not track their current state and do not establish clear

goals based on organization targets. A 2018 white paper published by Russell Reynolds found that, after surveying over 200 Chief Diversity Officers in the Standard & Poor's 500 index of companies, only 35% of those organizations measure demographic data. Doing so would provide a wealth of information to leadership on many aspects of operations and management. Also, it is important to note that tracking, assessments, evaluations and research require an organizational budget line dedicated to these functions, which some organizations do not have and/or do not prioritize, which prevents this work from being developed, implemented and sustained.

1b. SOLUTION:

DEVELOPING AND USING INCLUSIVE AI FOR COLLECTING
INCLUSIVE DATA AND EVALUATION METRIC BUILDING

AI certainly has a cost-effective opportunity in this area in the workplace. Inclusive AI systems can effectively be created and used alongside DEIB focused workers to research, track, evaluate and assess organizations across various intersectionalities that can provide nuanced data on the demographic composition and needs of workplaces. Inclusive AI can provide an opportunity for better time-management and increased scope for organizations who intend to recruit and attract diverse and historically marginalized talent through wider outreach using inclusive algorithms and various convergent social media platforms. However, the key to using it ethically is dependent on creating technologies that do not perpetuate the same inequities and discriminatory practices of previous search engines and technologies, that have been designed on aggregate data sets that prioritize certain groups over others by way of algorithms. AI could potentially also be used to design and conduct more inclusive interview processes by way of eliminating much of human bias errors in the process as well as creating more equitable job descriptions that encourage the diversification of the applicant pool (Wu *et al.* 2020; Talay *et al.* 2023). Developing and implementing inclusive AI to do this work in a continuous and consistent way over time will allow organizations to spend less funds and energy in creating evaluation metrics and more time in implementing the findings of these assessments and evaluations for positive DEIB shifts in building a robust organizational culture and outcomes.

2a. STATUS QUO:

DIVERSITY IS OFTEN REGARDED

AS A “NICE TO HAVE” VERSUS A “BUSINESS IMPERATIVE”

While there has been some improvement in most organizational cultures around DEIB initiatives compared to 50 years ago, many organizations struggle with a consistent balance of DEIB strategies and implementations due to multiple factors (Clarke 2023; Tucker 2023; McGlauflin and Abrams 2024). Examples of the inconsistencies can be the loss of the Chief Diversity Officer to another organization, overall retention issues with populations that diversify the organization, or a decision not to continue to invest in diversification programs due to political pressure or budgetary constraints, to name a few (Tucker 2023). The latter scenario (stopping or stalling the investment in diversification) is usually based on the investment seen as “nice to have” strategy versus a “business imperative” strategy. McKinsey & Co. has done research evaluating companies that were the most and least ethnically diverse and gender balanced within the same industry and found that the most diverse organizations financially outperformed the least diverse organizations by as much as 36% (Hunt *et al.* 2020).

This indicates that organizations should consistently invest in diversification efforts, even in difficult financial times, since the investment may lead to better business performance – which makes the investment a business imperative. It brings forth the importance of evaluating the true mission of organizations as it intersects with business financial outcomes. Milton Friedman’s (1962) model of business and society being disconnected is widely accepted as being irrelevant and obsolete in a time where companies are under scrutiny of measuring up against various recognized global standards such as ESG metrics, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to name just a few. We are in an era where business and society are increasingly interdependent, where the identity and mission of organizations is not devoid of its impacts on and responsibilities towards society (Friedman 1962; Taylor 2024).

2b. SOLUTION:

SETTING THE “BUSINESS IMPERATIVE” ORGANIZATIONAL
INTENTION

At its bare bones, inclusive AI needs to be built to help organizations move beyond using DEIB for just window-dressing purposes. AI tech-

nologies should be created with the goal of moving beyond cosmetic purposes and truly building equitable and inclusive workplaces that have accountability as their core mission. Intention setting relates to what an organization envisions for itself and they can assist their workforce with implementing the intentions and value systems that they embrace by investing in inclusive AI technologies. Multi-industry organizations need to work with and challenge the creators of large-model AI to work with social scientists that can guide them in ethics and inclusion in building new technologies. Also, there needs to be an emphasis on developing an organizational mindset that moves away from the narrative of DEIB as “the right thing to do” to DEIB as “the right approach to improve our organization”. This shifts the strategy, decision making, and execution because it moves the ethical DEIB and Inclusive AI goals from optional to expected. This mindset allows organizations to look at every step in the human resource process rather than just hiring, similar to the way a manufacturing company looks at every step of the production process and gives the opportunity to use Inclusive AI technologies in a mindful, assistive, generative capacity that helps all people in the organization.

3a. STATUS QUO:

SUCCESS IS MEASURED ON DIVERSE NEW HIRES VERSUS BUILDING RETENTION AND PROMOTION PATHWAYS

Most organizations in the last decade have prioritized diversifying entry level jobs, by typically having a strategy of hiring a diverse population into these positions. These type of organic diversification plans, while being well meaning are not structured to aid those same diverse individuals to move up in those organizations into high-impact, leadership roles. Employees that are considered diverse, from various intersectional identities, such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) women, often have unique set of challenges in finding their way in organizations and need equitable programs that support their growth in those settings (Wingfield 2020; Azhar and McCutcheon 2021; Linos *et al.* 2024). On the other hand, the belief that over time those individuals who help diversify the organization will organically move up the ladder of workplace seniority if they are qualified and do a good job is one that has been proven to be not true across numerous intersectional groups over a span of many decades of organizational research (Hunt *et al.* 2020; Wingfield 2020; Linos *et al.* 2024). Organizational research

demonstrates there are structural factors in place in workplaces that prevent workers from historically marginalized groups from advancing to leadership positions, despite their personal efforts and efficiency in the workplace (Hunt *et al.* 2020; Wingfield 2020; Linos *et al.* 2024).

Organizational success is many times celebrated prematurely by referring to the diversity of the new hires who may have just graduated from college or graduate school, but the statistics of corporate organizational leadership indicate that the diversity of new hires does not proportionately make it to the top of these organizations. For example, research shows that according to the Crist Kolder Associates *Summer 2024 Volatility Report*, only 9.4% of the 671 Fortune 500 and Standard & Poor's 500 CEOs identify as women and only 13.5% identify as non-white.

3b. SOLUTION:

FOCUS ON RETENTION, PROMOTION AND INQUIRY BY BUILDING DEIB INITIATIVES

Typically, organizations stop tracking what happens to the new groups of workers that started together in organizations due to lack of investment in understanding workplace culture and building a positive and inclusive work culture. The focus needs to be on creating holistic, equitable systems of tracking and support for new and old employees in organizations that create inclusion, belonging and retention for employees. Inclusive AI can be a champion in this process if designed with caution, care and inclusivity. To create inclusion and belonging in the workplace diversification process, Anderson *et al.* (2024) write, "AI can also monitor employee sentiment and performance – and even guide management to better serve and retain talent from underrepresented groups". For example, data shows that workers of historically underrepresented groups in the workplace are more likely to fear retaliation, job loss, violence, etc. in the workplace for speaking up on challenges and discrimination they are facing in the workplace (Nguyen 2021; Jean 2024).

In the spirit of developing more Inclusive AI that serves all workers in organizations, the focus needs to be on anonymously tracking and checking in on employee well-being, where workers share their thoughts, feelings and workplace experiences without the fear of retaliation. To reach this goal, a multi-step action plan that combines humans and technology working together in humane ways is necessary to build more

inclusive and better systems for larger groups of people and the planet. This is a radical change in the discourse of workplace monitoring. This use of AI technologies can be a bonus for organizations that are struggling with retention challenges amongst their workers. However, ultimately inclusive leadership training and management perspectives will be needed for those in leadership roles, to enhance their cultural competency in leading diverse workplaces and reducing blind-spots. Another key trend in DEIB for 2024 is the emphasis on fostering inclusive leadership and allyship at all levels of the organization. Leaders play a critical role in championing DEIB efforts and creating a culture where all employees feel valued and supported (Crist Kolder 2024).

4a. STATUS QUO:

IMPLICIT/SYSTEMIC BIAS PREVENTS PROGRESS

It is estimated that as much as 85% of professional positions are gained through networking (Ton 2020). However, all forms of professional networking rewards a certain type of person with an established social network (Carnahan and Moore 2023). Most individual's networking outcomes are based on many factors such as personality type, introvert versus extrovert, international versus national and other visible and invisible intersectional identity markers. Also, for many people in workplaces, their networks are homogenous and informed by the similar-to-me-effect cognitive bias – meaning they look like the owner of that network and share similar experiences (same university, neighborhood, religious beliefs, etc.) (Krastev 2024). This impacts the way recruiters bond with and trust those that they meet in networking environments, which eventually impacts the way in which they hire, promote, and eventually retain in an organization. People of historically marginalized groups, such as international candidates, religious minorities, etc. have a much smaller social network due to various factors; this plays an active role in the process of limiting their successes in networking environments, so that they often have to work harder to gain the trust and attention of recruiters due to implicit and overt bias. To overcome this barrier, it is important that discourses explicitly addressing the issue of implicit and explicit bias be more widely circulated.

Current AI models are created by data sets that are not adequately addressing such issues, and in many cases perpetuate the biases found in the training data, algorithms and other inputs that guide it (Anderson *et*

al. 2024). It is now coming to the forefront that AI tools like *Midjourney* and *ChatGPT* were trained on a wealth of online data, including harmful and biased content which has been included in their outputs (Polyportis and Pahos 2024). Thus, they effectively perpetuate bias that is inscribed in discourse. Company data can also capture historically biased decisions, which make it difficult to only rely on those outcomes to build future models that are more inclusive (Anderson *et al.* 2024). Additionally, people from certain groups may have been hired at lower rates for a variety of factors and/or received less positive feedback than others due to employer bias; hence, the creation of intentional and inclusive AI models is a priority to use technology to solve the issues of trust, bias and discrimination in the workplace. Current AI models are not trained on diverse, high-quality data and are not designed to flag concerns, which could simply result in repeating those patterns of bias from non-representative company records that do not match the demographics that are in workplaces in 2024 (*ibid.*). In addition, bias is also present in other AI applications. Facial recognition and analysis tools that are trained mostly on images of white men, for instance, can misread photos of women and BIPOC communities. And flaws in development can drive a host of predictive algorithms to make unfair, adverse decisions for marginalized groups on everything from loan applications to criminal sentencing. At no time as in the current age of AI has bias in discourse had the opportunity to be endlessly reproduced and strengthened, unless counter-measures are put in place.

4b. SOLUTION:

RECOGNIZE THAT MOST SYSTEMS HAVE SYSTEMIC BIAS
AND INVEST IN BUILDING INCLUSIVE SYSTEMS

Until organizations recognize that there is systemic bias present with an effort to eliminate it, true sustainable progress in DEIB and in building Inclusive AI will be challenging. An example of following a flawed model of perceived diversification in organizations is the following on how they recruit new hires: typically, they choose a set of colleges and universities based on past hiring success, the number of alumni in the organization, or other biased measures of selectivity. The problem with these approaches is that new members of an organization enter with a predetermined bias from the organization – some more than others.

Furthermore, in many cases, there is no analysis done that factors in whether the collective set of institutions will deliver the right exposure to gender, race, or ethnic diversity that is needed to further diversify the organization that is looking to shift its demographics.

This is just one example of systemic bias. Many organizations have implicit bias training or diversity and inclusion workshops to help address this. The main problem with this approach is that it sends the message that one or two workshops can eliminate these issues when in reality DEIB efforts should be seen as an ongoing process and journey that everyone participates in from their own departments and roles within the organization. Also, organizations need to partner up with large model AI creators to create more ethical, unbiased and inclusive technologies to serve diverse communities of people and invest financially to support research and innovations in knowledge building on issues of AI, DEIB, sustainability and other social impact issues. These Inclusive AI technologies need to be built on fresh, inclusive data sets that are created and collected using decolonial research and data collection methodologies of diverse groups of global people with intersectional identities.

5. TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AI AND DEIB WORKING IN HARMONY

The community responsibility to integrate DEIB across different departments in organizations need to be established through shared mission building over continuous periods of time. Many organizations rely on their Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) to drive the strategy and execution of their DEIB efforts, while other departments in the organization operate in silos and often without having any understanding of their initiatives and in worst case scenarios creating conflicting output that goes against the work of the CDOs (Williams and Wade-Golden 2023). Often CDOs are operating like an island, far removed from the centralized leadership process of bringing about sustained organizational change. It is rare when a CDO has a full team or operating unit reporting to them to execute and implement the DEIB initiatives in unison with other departments. Due to the isolation, complexity and weight of this work, it is commonplace for many DEIB leaders in organizations to suffer from burnout due to lack of human capital and other resources like adequate budget, and most importantly, a community approach to

DEIB that builds a shared and united organizational mission (*ibid.*). For an organization to truly succeed in DEIB, it has to be a collective effort where everyone plays a role, and Inclusive AI technologies could potentially be used to create unity and ease, by helping out an under-resourced field and by breaking down the silos between departments. This requires effective, inclusive communication strategies and discourses to replace ones that are still steeped in a culture of inequality and exclusivity.

The benefits of this holistic approach towards improving DEIB in an organization is that it develops a stronger sense of belonging for all members, versus only some. Inclusive leadership strategies can be very powerful in building a thriving and deeply felt cultural shift in the workplace that embraces difference and nurtures it for creating belonging, retention and workplace innovation and growth. It is hard enough to create sound DEIB strategies and implement them in organizations, with the frequent lack of resources, teams and budgets. Still, in addition, we are also urging for the creation of new, inclusive technologies that do not create more divisiveness and discrimination in an already fractured world.

We all must rise to meet the storm in the eye and do our part to build better, more equitable, more inclusive futures. One of the greatest challenges that Inclusive AI design must solve is that of digital inequity and building inclusive, ethical discourses around AI that empowers global users with the knowledge needed to create a better world. Much like computers, the internet and mobile devices, AI reveals new resources and capabilities – and those who cannot use it will not benefit from it, and those who do not have a say on how it is designed risk being stereotyped, discriminated against and negatively impacted by it. As a technologically dependent society, we have to do better to create more humane and ethical technologies that serve those who have access to less education, privileges, opportunities than us. We need to create continuous and consistent governance systems to oversee the development of inclusive AI and monitor its use. Guiding the development of Inclusive AI technologies and discourses using DEIB frames holds the potential of creating powerful, transformative processes where humans and technology can interface and collaborate to bring forth positive outcomes for people, organizations and societies.

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