

Insights...from our 2018 D&I Stakeholder Interviews

About the *Insights...* series

AmCham Women's Research and Publications Committee presents a series of short articles sharing promising practices to promote gender diversity.

Background

In early 2019, AmCham Women interviewed representatives from a sample of member organizations as a complement to its [Gender Diversity and Inclusion Survey](#). The interview protocol asked open-ended questions of those with oversight of diversity and inclusion (D&I) agendas, to better understand where these organizations were on their D&I journey.¹

These structured conversations confirmed that some well-known promising practices are being implemented. But they also revealed an ongoing tension between stated intention and level of investment with regard to D&I. Insights from these interviews, as well as the quantitative survey, highlight additional support that our broader member community might need to further regional D&I progress.

Findings

Bright Spots

I. Diversity as a business imperative

All of the organizations we spoke to had strategic or business imperatives underpinning their D&I efforts, e.g., leveraging differences to help change their global competitive ranking, promoting the organization's commitment to inclusion to differentiate in "the war for talent," or to demonstrate empathy with customer needs and understanding of market trends.

What we asked about:

- 1. D&I Approach.** Organizational goals to be achieved through D&I efforts, and programs and practices to achieve them; Existing gaps and help needed to move ahead
- 2. Engagement.** Methods to capture the employee experience with regards to D&I, and levels at which D&I support is strongest
- 3. Sustainability.** Levels of staffing and investment in D&I
- 4. Effectiveness.** What's working well and not working well. Support / resources required from within the organization to move ahead on the D&I journey

Diversity vs. Inclusion

- Whereas **diversity** refers to the spectrum of human differences, **inclusion** refers to the extent to which a team, group, or organization integrates differences into "the way we do things."
- Diversity-focused organizations might emphasize recruiting talent across different demographics and identity groups; inclusion-focused organizations might focus on creating an environment where all employees can contribute and be rewarded equitably.

¹ AmCham Women interviewed eight representatives from six member companies. Four of these self-identified as heads of D&I.

2. Diversity on global and regional agendas

Most of the organizations had specific efforts to progress women in their organizations. Most tended to take cues from a global agenda, then adopt specific regional or local strategies to address important challenges faced on the ground.

However, the focus on women seemed to come at the expense of other diversity dimensions or, more broadly, inclusion: While a few of the organizations were trying to expand to other traditionally protected diversity dimensions such as sexuality, disability, and age, the majority maintained a focus solely on improving outcomes for women, especially at the management and senior management levels.

3. Diversity management as BAU (Business as Usual)

Interviewees confirmed that investment in D&I efforts has been increasing in the region and is much better than in the past. They also reported that many best practices for diversity management, e.g., D&I training and events, D&I councils, flexible working, parental leave, employee resource groups, and mentoring, were in place within their organizations. Issue areas such as diversity hiring and closing gender pay gaps were also gaining traction.

Most organizations had feedback mechanisms to gauge employee experiences with regards to D&I, commonly through employee surveys and informal loops.

4. Bright ideas for D&I

Interviewees were actively looking for ways to build momentum for D&I. One organization had converted its traditional employee resource groups into **business resource groups (BRGs)**—groups that support employee identity but also have business outcomes to accomplish. BRGs were sponsored by high-level executives, and their performance was measured by pre-established metrics. Another organization encouraged active promotion of its D&I efforts externally—successes as well as challenges—specifically via **social media**. This approach is in marked contrast with organizations' typical intention to control the narrative about D&I.

Gaps and Issues

Alignment

Interviewees expressed concern that their organizations' D&I efforts (global and regional) were neither cohesive nor well connected to the organization's strategic priorities. Some observed that their customers, board, leadership, and employees were all in different places regarding D&I. Most described an approach that had been initiated but subsequently stalled at the leadership level, thus hindering the cultural or systemic changes necessary to achieve desired objectives.

Inadequate investment in and lack of accountability for D&I were also attributed to loss of momentum. Interviewees described: having either no budget or 'light' budgets with which to realize D&I goals; having few, but more commonly just one, dedicated staff to resource D&I regionally; and having either a lack of key performance indicators, or ones that were poorly enforced.

Data and ROI

Some organizations had embedded specific D&I questions into their employee engagement surveys, but most relied primarily on informal loops to capture employee sentiment. Interviewees expressed a desire for more robust data to better inform programs, policies, and investment; and to evaluate D&I efforts.

Innovation

Interviewees exhibited passion for D&I and expressed a desire to benchmark against other organizations for emerging models or practices. However, when asked what more they might need

to progress D&I within their organizations, interviewees' responses tended to focus on incremental improvement (more of the same), or new takes on traditional approaches to diversity management. This could be reflective of the need—conscious or otherwise—to align to their organizations' existing D&I agenda.

Discussion

Is momentum for D&I dying?

D&I is one of the oldest “emerging” conversations in management science: the relationship between D&I and organizational performance was first posited in the 1960s. However, modern organizations still find it difficult to gain traction. We continue to see the same operational limitations as a decade ago; gaps and issues identified by the interviewees are consistent with observable trends across the globe.

On the plus side, organizations are increasingly recognizing they have to *do something* regarding D&I. Greater awareness of bias and inequity is helping to drive this, especially as social media connects unusual constituencies and mobilizes champions. Research that points to inclusion as an important differentiator for millennials, who stand to become the majority workforce in the not-too-distant future, is also a driver.

However, millennials and other stakeholders are becoming increasingly able to discern when organizations are either disingenuous in the promises they make about inclusion or incongruous in achieving them (or both).

As covered in [AmCham Women's first Insights article](#) progress on D&I can be mapped along a spectrum rather than a linear path, movement along the spectrum can be fluid rather than fixed, and the journey to inclusion requires consistent and systemic effort. After speaking with representatives of organizations large and small, with differing levels of complexity to their approach to D&I, it was clear that maintaining D&I as an organizational priority is a common concern.

In our professional experience, the challenges and dynamics described by the interviewees can likely be ascribed to a fairly typical root cause: lack of buy-in. We have an opportunity to change that.

We've reached a new frontier for D&I. Information about D&I is abundant! The business case for D&I has long been established, and academic research and professional resources are readily available. What's required now is a focus on shifting mindsets: to move beyond policies and training towards daily collaborative interactions that actively examine whether ways of working (and the underlying beliefs they represent) are in service of purpose and strategy. This capability is well within reach for all organizations...if they are serious in their pursuit of inclusion.

Practical Next Steps

Get (external) help

- For sensitive or critical conversations, for subject matter expertise; and program design.

Engage multiple disciplines

- Engage resources who specialize in culture change, systems thinking, and organizational design, as well as D&I specialists.

Live your walk

- Encourage your leaders and employees to not only talk about D&I, but demonstrate your D&I values inside and outside of the organization.

Get inspired!

- There is room to innovate beyond traditional approaches to diversity management. Learn from others.

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