

IMPACT BRIEF

BRIEF #14 / NOVEMBER 2006 / ILR SCHOOL / WWW.ILR.CORNELL.EDU

Diversity and Inclusion: Is There Really a Difference?

Research question: Do the terms “diversity” and “inclusion” correspond to distinct sets of policies and practices that reflect organizational strategies for managing diversity?

Conclusion: Although the two words are conceptually distinct — diversity refers to workforce demographics and observed and unobserved worker characteristics while inclusion refers to human resource initiatives that increase employee participation and leverage workforce heterogeneity — in practice they seem to overlap. Word usage may express a rhetorical preference within organizations despite some evidence suggesting the two terms describe subtly different approaches to diversity management.

Workplace impact: Regardless which term organizations adopt, the findings highlight the importance of demographic diversity in combination with policies and practices that promote fair treatment, collaboration, and empowerment. The attributes of diversity and inclusion identified through this study can help managers specify strategies and techniques that could enhance their diversity and inclusion practices. The instrument developed for this research can also be used to assess how employees perceive diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

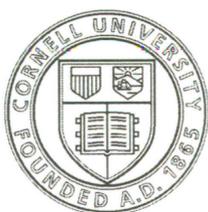
Abstract: By almost any measure, workforce heterogeneity is increasing. With more women, ethnic and racial

minorities, and people with different lifestyles and learning styles holding down jobs, employers are searching for strategies that effectively and efficiently put these varied skills and perspectives to maximal use. Traditional approaches to diversity management include targeted recruitment, career development, mentoring, and education and training. Some organizations, however, take a broader view and seek to eliminate barriers to full utilization of varied worker competencies. This latter approach stresses inclusion, rather than diversity, and typically involves initiatives that focus on employee participation, enhanced communication, and stronger community relations. Despite the apparent distinction between diversity and inclusion strategies, employers may use the words interchangeably.

Academic researchers, meanwhile, have only started to explore the theoretical and practical differences between the terms. Some study the degree of diversity within organizations and the integration of diversity into organizational structures, strategies, and practices. Others assess the climate for diversity within organizations, emphasizing topics such as demographics and perceptions of the value accorded diversity, workers’ and managers’ comfort with diversity, and fairness and inclusion. One research track, zeroing in on inclusion, discusses decision-making influence, access to information, and job security. For the most part, researchers have yet to address the specific policy and practice indicators of either diversity or inclusion.

The research presented here, however, fills in some of the gaps. It builds on several existing paradigms of di-

The ImpactBrief series highlights the research and project-based work conducted by ILR faculty that is relevant to workplace issues and public policy. Please visit <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/impactbrief/> for full-text pdfs.



Cornell University
ILR School

iversity and inclusion while adding structural and conceptual supports. Discrimination and fairness, access and legitimacy, and learning and effectiveness have already been identified by other researchers as approaches to, and outcomes of, strategies and practices that promote diversity and inclusion. This study uses three discrete but interconnected surveys to first distinguish diversity from inclusion, then elicit policies and practices that characterize each, and finally develop and evaluate a scale that measures and groups these attributes. The end result is the identification of five dimensions of diversity and/or inclusion that exist within organizations to greater or lesser degrees.

The findings indicate a conceptual distinction between diversity and inclusion. The former encompasses workplace demographics, or worker and customer heterogeneity, and is characterized by attributes such as equal access to opportunity, equitable systems for recognition and reward, fair treatment for all internal and external stakeholders, and representation of different demographic groups at all levels of the organization. Inclusion relates to employee involvement and the degree to which diversity fits into organizational processes and systems. Attributes of inclusive workplaces, according to the study, range from a focus on innovation and creativity to participatory work systems, tolerance for differences, accommodation for disabilities, and leadership commitment to diversity. Several indicators, such as fair treatment and affirmative action initiatives, show up as elements of both diversity and inclusion. Given that the list of attributes was generated through a survey sent to human resource and diversity officers, this result indicates overlap in the way organizations — or at least managers — perceive and apply these terms.

Further analysis of the data reinforces this conclusion. Statistical techniques enabled the researcher to group the survey responses into five categories that encompass both diversity and inclusion indicators. The categories include fair treatment issues, representation of diverse groups among stakeholders, top management support for diversity, employee involvement and learning and growth outcomes for diversity, and employee involvement and learning and growth outcomes for inclusion. This final part of the study suggests that inclusive work practices and diversity-related outcomes go hand in hand; i.e., both characterize organizations that are diverse and/or inclusive. Practitioners may use the terms “diversity” and “inclusion” to describe similar sets of policies and practices even though academic researchers make theoretical distinctions between the two.

Methodology: Three surveys were sent to different populations of human resource and diversity officers, each yielding a different response rate. The first survey was used to develop the definitions and attributes of diversity and inclusion; the second was used to construct a scale that would test the reliability of the attributes; and the third was used to validate and group the results into a model that describes diverse and/or inclusive organizations. The study design had some limitations, including sample bias (professionals familiar with the topic, and large public organizations with resources to undertake diversity/inclusion initiatives).

Source publication: “Disentangling the Meanings of Diversity and Inclusion in Organizations” appeared in *Group & Organization Management*, April 2006, Vol. 31 No. 2:212-236.

by QUINETTA M. ROBERSON
Professor of Human Resource Studies (ILR)



ADVANCING THE WORLD OF WORK