We know that diversity matters. In addition to being the right thing to strive for, having a diverse workforce helps companies acquire and retain the best talent, build employee engagement, increase...
innovation, and improve business performance. Yet corporate diversity still lags, especially at the top levels, which continue to be dominated by white, heterosexual men.

It’s not that effort isn’t being made. As a senior partner at the Boston Consulting Group and head of our firm’s diversity efforts, I know companies are investing in diversity programs. In fact, our research in 14 countries shows that 96-98% of large companies (above 1,000 employees) have such programs.

And yet, despite this investment, we’ve found that around three quarters of employees in underrepresented groups — women, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ employees — do not feel they’ve personally benefited from their companies’ diversity and inclusion programs.

So what should companies do to make real progress?

We surveyed over 16,000 employees in 14 countries around the world to see what obstacles they face, which diversity and inclusion interventions are used at their workplace, and which they find most effective for women, racial or ethnic minorities (this data is from the U.S., UK, and Brazil only), and LGBTQ employees.

We found that members of majority groups continue to underestimate the obstacles – particularly the pervasive, day-to-day bias – that diverse employees face. Half of all diverse employees stated that they see bias as part of their day-to-day work experience. Half said that they don’t believe their companies have the right mechanisms in place to ensure that major decisions (such as who receives promotions and stretch assignments) are free from bias. By contrast, white heterosexual males, who tend to dominate the leadership ranks, were 13 percentage points more likely to say that the day-to-day experience and major decisions are free of bias.

It’s no surprise then that when employees ranked the efficacy of diversity interventions, there was consensus about getting back to basics and rooting out bias. The top-ranked interventions included robust, well-crafted, and consistently followed antidiscrimination policies; effective training to mitigate biases and increase cultural competency; and removing bias from evaluation and promotion decisions. These should be priorities for any organization that wants to improve diversity.

In addition, we identified a set of “hidden gems” for each diverse group – policies they thought were effective, but were undervalued by employees in the majority group. Since most corporate leaders fall in this latter category, this may mean that corporations are prioritizing the wrong initiatives.

For female employees, “hidden gem” interventions are those that provide a viable path forward and give them the tools to balance career and family responsibilities. They wanted to see visible role models in the leadership team (this was ranked 5th in terms of efficacy by women, but 17th by men). And they wanted practical tools that would help them progress regardless of their family status: parental leave (ranked 3rd by women but 10th by men), appropriate health care coverage (6th vs 11th),
and childcare assistance, such as backup or onsite childcare (11th vs 22nd). The importance of flexibility programs for both women and men (ranked 2nd by women and 5th by men) is also worth noting. Yet in spite of its relevance, flexibility is only available in a third of workplaces according to our survey.

Across the employee lifecycle, most male leaders saw recruitment as the biggest obstacle to racial and ethnic diversity. But for employees of color, who have first-hand experience of the daily biases that keep them from rising through the ranks, the top obstacle they reported was advancement. Their “hidden gem” interventions included eliminating bias from the day-to-day, such as in how teams are staffed or how meeting attendance is decided (ranked 8th in terms of efficacy by employees of color but 14th by white men). Formal sponsorship programs (which has been shown to boost representation for underrepresented groups) and individual roadmaps for advancement were also valued highly by employees of color (ranked 14th vs 28th), who may lack informal networks among the senior ranks of their companies.

Our survey found that approximately half of LGBTQ employees are still closeted at work, so making efforts to create an inclusive day-to-day experience is key for this group. They ranked it 5th in terms of efficacy, on average, vs a rank of 15th by heterosexual men. LGBTQ employees also placed greater importance on structural interventions to accommodate a broader gender orientation than simply male and female (such as gender-neutral bathrooms, or non-binary gender choices in surveys and HR data), ranking this 7th vs heterosexual men’s ranking of 24th.

For leaders who want to make a difference but aren’t sure how, the measures above are a good starting point. But to make them stick, companies need to apply the same methodology as they would to any other business priority.

Our work with corporations looking to boost their diversity and inclusion points to three organizational aspects of implementation. The success of each of these initiatives requires leadership commitment, a tailored approach based on the unique needs of the organization, and metrics and tracking for gauging progress.

**Leadership commitment:** Superficial words and platitudes are insufficient – as evidenced by the 75% of employees we surveyed who see diversity programs in place but feel no effect. Leaders must build a clear case for change and set concrete goals, prioritized in concert with their diverse employees.

**A tailored approach:** The interventions we’ve discussed must be tailored to each company, using its specific culture and starting point to determine the best course of action. Employing both top-down approaches (for example, corporate-level training, programs to track promotion and pay across diversity cohorts) and bottom-up approaches (for example, measures to help managers think about who is invited to and runs important meetings) in concert typically leads to the best outcomes. Critically, companies should involve affected employees – minority and majority, frontline
employees and managers – in the design and assessment of the programs to ensure they will work and take hold.

**Metrics**: Last, top-performing companies measure progress over time and use key performance indicators (KPIs) to refine their approach and to hold leaders accountable for results.

There’s still a lot of room for progress in achieving corporate diversity and inclusion. But the good news is that there are many measures that diverse employees already find effective in promoting a more diverse workplace. Now is the time to put them into place.

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