



INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
RESEARCH PARTNERS

*International Economic  
Development Council*

# DEIA for Economic Development Organizations

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# About the International Economic Development Council (IEDC)

IEDC is a non-profit, non-partisan membership organization serving economic developers. With more than 4,300 members, IEDC is the largest organization of its kind. From public to private, rural to urban, and local to international, IEDC’s members engage in the full range of economic development practices to promote economic well-being and quality of life for their communities. Learn more at [iedconline.org](http://iedconline.org).

# About Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP)

The Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP) program is an exclusive membership level of IEDC, which supports practice-oriented research. Through EDRP, IEDC excels at its mission everyday: to assist practitioners in successfully competing in the global economy, increasing prosperity for communities at an accelerated pace, and empowering economic development professionals to better define their vision and value. Learn more about membership at [iedconline.org/edrp-membership](http://iedconline.org/edrp-membership).

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## Executive Summary

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DEIA initiatives are not only important for cultivating a positive work environment but also for enhancing overall organizational performance. By implementing DEIA practices, economic development organizations can ensure that decision-making processes incorporate a wide range of perspectives and ideas. This inclusive approach helps organizations adapt to the evolving needs of their employees, stakeholders, and communities, fostering sustainable growth and prosperity. In addition, a commitment to DEIA can lead to improved employee engagement and productivity.

When employees feel valued and included, they are more likely to be motivated and satisfied in their roles, resulting in higher levels of performance. Furthermore, embracing diversity and inclusion can also enhance an organization's reputation and brand image, attracting both customers and business partners who value socially responsible practices. DEIA initiatives not only benefit the internal dynamics of an organization but also have a positive impact on external relations.

By prioritizing diversity and inclusion, economic development organizations can position themselves as leaders in the industry, setting an example for others to follow. This can attract potential investors, collaborators, and clients who appreciate and support socially responsible practices. As a result, the organization can build strong partnerships, expand its network, and unlock new opportunities for growth and success. We use the DEIA transformation from IEDC as a case study at the end of the paper.

## Methodology

In this report, we utilized literature review and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders from various industries. The literature review examined existing research on the relationship between DEIA initiatives and economic development organizations. It identified gaps and areas for further investigation, such as the long-term impact of diversity and inclusion on organizational success and the specific strategies and mechanisms that contribute to positive outcomes.

Additionally, the review highlighted the importance of considering intersectionality in DEIA efforts, recognizing that individuals may face multiple forms of discrimination based on their various social identities. The qualitative interviews, on the other hand, allowed us to delve deeper into the experiences and perspectives of key stakeholders, providing rich, nuanced narratives that complemented the quantitative findings.

## Introduction

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As the world becomes increasingly diverse and interconnected, economic development organizations recognize the importance of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives. EDOs, which focus on promoting economic growth and opportunity within communities, can be powerful examples of how DEIA practices can enhance organizational performance and impact.

For economic development organizations, embracing DEIA is a holistic approach to creating and sustaining a workplace culture that values and celebrates all employees' unique perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds. By fostering an inclusive environment, these organizations can attract and retain a diverse pool of talented professionals who bring a wide range of skills, knowledge, and ideas to the table.

Moreover, by prioritizing DEIA, economic development organizations can better understand and serve the diverse communities they work with. Inclusive teams are better equipped to identify and address different groups' unique challenges and opportunities within their communities, leading to more effective and equitable economic development strategies.

In addition to improving community outreach and impact, embracing DEIA can drive innovation and enhance overall organizational performance within economic development organizations. Diverse teams have been shown to be more creative, adaptable, and effective at problem-solving as they bring together various perspectives and experiences to tackle complex challenges.

By serving as local champions for DEIA, economic development organizations can improve their own performance and impact and inspire other businesses and organizations in their communities to

adopt similar practices. This, in turn, can contribute to creating more inclusive, equitable, and thriving local economies.

## What is DEIA?

DEIA stands for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility. It is a comprehensive framework that guides organizations in creating and maintaining a workplace culture that celebrates and embraces all employees' unique backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Diversity encompasses the visible and invisible differences among people, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and more. Equity ensures that everyone has access to the same opportunities and resources, regardless of their differences. Inclusion means fostering an environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and able to participate fully. Accessibility refers to the design of products, services, and environments to be usable by people with a wide range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics.

At its core, DEIA is about creating a workplace where everyone can thrive. By embracing these principles, organizations can unlock the full potential of their workforce, drive innovation, and better serve their diverse customer base. DEIA is not just a nice-to-have but a strategic imperative for businesses to remain competitive and responsive in today's global and rapidly changing landscape.

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) have become increasingly important topics in organizational performance. As economic developers seek to strengthen their organizations, understanding the impact of DEIA on various aspects of organizational success is crucial. This brief literature review integrates findings from recent studies to explore the relationship between DEIA and organizational performance, identify barriers to DEIA adoption, and highlight effective managerial practices for implementing DEIA initiatives.

## DEIA and Organizational Performance

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of DEIA on various organizational performance measures. Mayer et al. found that corporate policies promoting a pro-diversity culture, particularly in the treatment of women and minorities, enhance future innovative efficiency as measured by patents and citations per R&D dollar spent. This effect was more pronounced in innovative, financially constrained, and undervalued firms, and firms with stronger governance. Also, they found that pro-diversity policies are positively related to the number of new product announcements per R&D dollar spent, with the relationship being particularly strong during economic downturns.

Vargas-Solar et al. (2022) discuss how organizations increasingly recognize the value of embracing diversity as an opportunity for research and innovation, arguing that DEIA should be integrated into an organization's thinking, projects, and activities. Croitoru et al. (2022) found that cultural diversity, employees' perceptions, and conflicts significantly influence diversity, and that diversity, along with teamwork, significantly influences organizational performance. Sharma (2023) and Nautiyal (2023) support these findings, noting that diversity positively affects individual and organizational performance, fostering productivity, innovation, and creativity.

## Barriers to DEIA Adoption

Despite the potential benefits of DEIA, organizations face various barriers to adopting and implementing DEIA practices. Mayer et al. (2018) highlight the perception among some that DEIA policies are merely designed to improve the company's image without creating tangible value, with some seeing these initiatives as managerial indulgences that can destroy shareholder value. Newburry et al. (2022) emphasize that influences on DEIA occur across multiple, often embedded levels, from global influences down to within-firm team dynamics and even within individuals, creating different forms of pressure and tensions that need to be reconciled. Caldwell et al. (2023) note that the complex nature of diversity and inclusion is rarely fully understood, making it challenging to address these issues effectively.

## Managerial Practices to Implement DEIA

To successfully implement DEIA initiatives, managers can employ various strategies. Mayer et al. (2018) suggest creating a culture and environment of diversity and inclusion to build greater innovative efficiency, attracting and recognizing talent from a larger and more diverse pool of job candidates. Vargas-Solar et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of senior leadership commitment and the role of dedicated political figures in promoting DEIA, as well as establishing monitoring bodies and publishing gender balance reports. Croitoru et al. (2022) recommend creating a motivated environment and discovering specific methods for improved innovation from employees to increase workplace diversity. Mullin et al. (2021) propose infusing traditional leadership competencies with DEIA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility)'s values, principles, and commitments to strengthen efforts in addressing discrimination and fostering inclusion.

## Summary of the Literature

The reviewed literature demonstrates the positive impact of DEIA on various aspects of organizational performance, including innovation, productivity, and creativity. However, organizations face multilevel barriers in adopting and implementing DEIA practices, such as perceiving DEIA as a mere image-enhancing tool and the complex nature of diversity and inclusion. To overcome these barriers and realize the benefits of DEIA, managers should employ a range of strategies, including creating an inclusive culture, securing senior leadership commitment, establishing monitoring bodies, and infusing leadership competencies with DEIA values. As economic developers seek to promote thriving business environments, understanding and leveraging the impact of DEIA on organizational performance will be essential for long-term success.



# The Importance of DEIA

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## Drives Innovation

A diverse and inclusive workforce brings together people with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. This diversity of thought and ideas fosters creativity and innovation, helping organizations stay competitive and responsive to evolving market needs. When employees feel empowered to share their unique insights, it leads to developing innovative products, services, and solutions that better serve a diverse customer base.

## Improves Business Performance

Studies have shown that companies strongly committed to DEIA outperform their less diverse peers. Embracing DEIA principles help organizations attract top talent, improve employee satisfaction and retention, and enhance their reputation as an employer of choice. A diverse and inclusive workforce is also better equipped to understand and cater to the needs of an increasingly diverse customer base, leading to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty.

## Fosters a Sense of Belonging

When employees feel their unique identities and perspectives are valued and respected, they are more likely to feel a strong sense of belonging and commitment to the organization. This, in turn, leads to higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and overall well-being, which positively impact productivity, collaboration, and overall business success.

## Promotes Equity and Social Justice

DEIA initiatives are not only good for business, but they also play a crucial role in promoting equity and social justice. By actively addressing biases, barriers, and systemic inequities, organizations can create a more level playing field and provide equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of their background or identity. This supports the broader societal goal of creating a more just and equitable world.

# Diversity in the Workplace

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Embracing diversity in the workplace is essential for fostering innovation, driving business performance, and creating an inclusive environment where all employees can thrive. By actively recruiting and retaining a workforce that reflects the rich tapestry of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, organizations unlock the full potential of their teams and gain a competitive edge in the market.

Diversity encompasses a wide range of visible and invisible dimensions, including race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and more. When people with diverse backgrounds come together, they bring unique insights, problem-solving approaches, and creative ideas that can lead to groundbreaking solutions. This diversity of thought fuels innovation and helps organizations better understand and serve their increasingly diverse customer base.

Furthermore, a diverse and inclusive workplace fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment among employees. When individuals feel respected, valued, and able to bring their authentic selves to work, they are more engaged, productive, and committed to the organization's success. This, in turn, positively impacts employee retention, job satisfaction, and overall well-being, all of which contribute to the organization's bottom line.



# Equity in Hiring and Promotion

Achieving equity in hiring and promotion is critical to a comprehensive DEIA strategy. It requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond simply ensuring equal opportunity. Organizations must actively work to build a diverse talent pipeline, implement inclusive practices throughout the employee lifecycle, and base all hiring and promotion decisions solely on merit and qualifications.



This starts with setting clear diversity representation goals and holding leaders accountable for progress. Companies should also examine their recruitment, interviewing, and selection processes to identify and address any biases or barriers that may be hindering the advancement of underrepresented groups. Implementing measures such as structured interviews, skills-based assessments, and diverse hiring panels can help to level the playing field and ensure that the most qualified candidates are identified and promoted, regardless of their background.

Beyond the hiring process, organizations should also focus on providing equitable access to development opportunities, mentorship, and leadership roles. This helps to create a fair and inclusive path for career growth and advancement, empowering all employees to reach their full potential. Ongoing monitoring, transparent reporting, and clear accountability mechanisms are also crucial to sustaining progress and driving sustainable change.

## Inclusion for All Employees

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Inclusion is the heart of a successful DEIA initiative, as it ensures that all employees, regardless of their background or identity, feel valued, respected, and empowered to participate fully in the workplace. An inclusive culture goes beyond simply having a diverse workforce—it requires actively fostering an environment where everyone feels a true sense of belonging and can bring their authentic selves to work.

At the core of an inclusive workplace is a deep commitment to ensuring that all employees have equitable access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making processes. This means implementing policies, programs, and practices that remove barriers and biases and provide the necessary support and accommodations to empower all individuals to thrive. From accessible technology and inclusive communication to mentorship opportunities and employee resource groups, organizations must take a multifaceted approach to cultivating an environment where everyone can contribute and succeed.

### Fostering Psychological Safety

Equally important to creating an inclusive workplace is establishing a culture of psychological safety, where employees feel comfortable voicing their ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of judgment or retaliation. This requires a strong leadership commitment to open communication, active listening, and a willingness to address and resolve any instances of discrimination, harassment, or microaggressions. When employees feel that their voices are heard and their experiences are validated, they are more likely to engage, collaborate, and innovate, ultimately driving the organization's success.

### Ongoing Education and Awareness

Sustaining an inclusive culture also requires a continuous focus on education and awareness-building, both for employees and leadership. This includes regular DEIA training, workshops, and

communications that help to address unconscious biases, promote cross-cultural understanding, and build empathy and allyship. By empowering all organization members to become champions of inclusion, companies can foster a shared sense of responsibility and accountability for creating a more equitable and welcoming workplace.

## Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities

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### Physical Accessibility

Ensuring that the workplace is physically accessible to employees with disabilities is a key aspect of DEIA. This includes features such as wide doorways, height-adjustable desks, ergonomic furniture, and unobstructed pathways. By creating a barrier-free environment, organizations demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and enable all employees to fully participate in their roles.



### Digital Accessibility

In today's digital-centric world, digital accessibility is crucial for providing equal opportunities to employees with disabilities. This means designing websites, applications, and digital tools that are compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers, voice control software, and text-to-speech functionality. Proactively addressing digital accessibility needs ensures that all employees can access the information and resources they need to succeed.



### Communications Accommodations

Effective communication is essential for fostering an inclusive workplace. Organizations should provide accommodations such as sign language interpreters, real-time captioning, and alternative formats for printed materials to ensure that employees with hearing, vision, or cognitive impairments can fully participate in meetings, trainings, and other work-related activities. Tailoring communication methods to individual needs demonstrates a genuine commitment to inclusion.



### Assistive Technologies

Providing access to assistive technologies, such as screen readers, speech-to-text software, and specialized input devices, can be transformative for employees with disabilities. By empowering them with the tools they need to thrive, organizations create a level playing field and enable their diverse workforce to contribute their unique skills and perspectives fully.

Accessibility for persons with disabilities is critical to a comprehensive DEIA strategy. By proactively addressing the physical, digital, and communicative needs of employees with disabilities, organizations can create a truly inclusive workplace that enables all individuals to reach their full potential.

From ensuring that the physical work environment is barrier-free to providing digital tools and communication accommodations, a holistic approach to accessibility demonstrates a genuine commitment to inclusivity. By empowering disabled employees with the resources and support they

need, organizations unlock their workforce's full diversity of talent and expertise, fostering a culture of belonging and driving innovation.

Implementing accessible practices also has the added benefit of cascading into other business areas, such as better serving customers with disabilities and enhancing the organization's overall reputation as a leader in DEIA. Ultimately, focusing on accessibility is not only the right thing to do, but it also yields tangible business benefits and positions the organization as a champion of inclusivity in the marketplace.



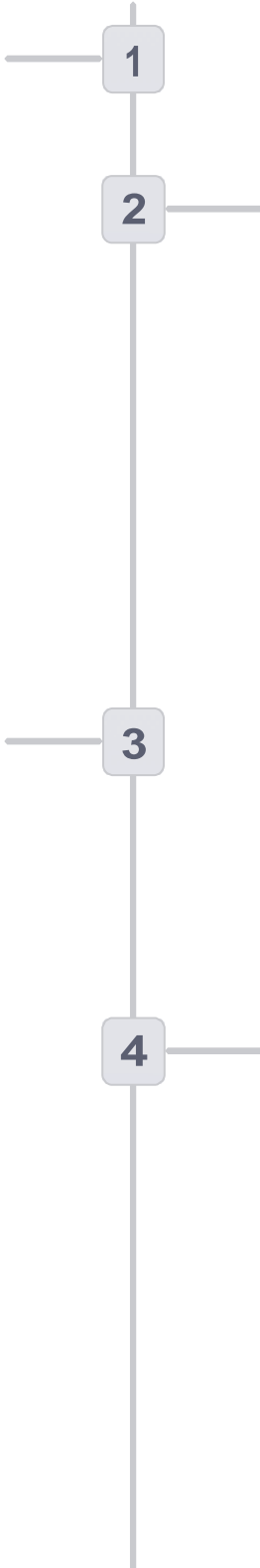
# Unconscious Bias and How to Address It

## Understanding Unconscious Bias

Unconscious biases are the subtle, ingrained prejudices and assumptions that we all hold, often without realizing it. These biases can influence our perceptions, decisions, and behaviors, leading to unfair treatment and exclusion of certain individuals or groups. Recognizing and addressing these biases is a critical step in creating a truly inclusive workplace.

## Implementing Bias Mitigation Strategies

Once unconscious biases have been identified, organizations can implement a range of strategies to address them. This may include implementing blind hiring practices, providing comprehensive DEIA training, and encouraging regular self-reflection and feedback. Leaders can also set the tone by role-modeling inclusive behaviors, promoting diverse representation in decision-making, and holding themselves and their teams accountable for progress.



## Identifying Unconscious Biases

The first step in addressing unconscious bias is to become aware of the various forms it can take. Common types of unconscious bias include affinity bias (favoring people similar to us), confirmation bias (seeking out information that confirms our existing beliefs), and gender bias (making assumptions about someone's abilities or interests based on their gender). Understanding these biases and how they manifest in the workplace is essential for developing effective strategies to mitigate their impact.

## Fostering a Culture of Awareness and Empathy

Ultimately, addressing unconscious bias is an ongoing journey that requires a sustained, organization-wide effort. By fostering a culture of awareness, empathy, and continuous learning, companies can empower their employees to recognize and challenge their own biases, while also creating an environment where diverse perspectives and experiences are valued and celebrated. This, in turn, leads to more equitable and inclusive decision-making, better problem-solving, and enhanced business performance.

# Fostering a Culture of Belonging

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Creating a culture of belonging is a crucial aspect of DEIA, as it ensures that all employees feel valued, respected, and able to fully participate in the workplace. At its core, a culture of belonging is characterized by empathy, trust, and a genuine celebration of diversity. When employees feel that they can bring their authentic selves to work without fear of judgment or exclusion, they are more engaged, collaborative, and committed to the organization's success.

To foster a culture of belonging, organizations must actively work to build interpersonal connections, promote inclusive behaviors, and create opportunities for meaningful interactions among employees. This may involve initiatives like team-building activities, employee resource groups, mentorship programs, and regular open dialogues where individuals can share their experiences, perspectives, and concerns in a safe and supportive environment.

- Encourage open and honest communication: Provide avenues for employees to voice their ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of retaliation or dismissal. Foster a culture of active listening and empathetic understanding.
- Celebrate and recognize diversity: Acknowledge and commemorate the unique cultural, ethnic, and personal backgrounds of employees through company-wide events, recognition programs, and inclusive marketing and branding.
- Promote allyship and advocacy: Empower employees to be champions of inclusion, educating them on how to recognize and address microaggressions, bias, and other exclusionary behaviors, and providing them with the tools to be effective allies.
- Foster a sense of community: Facilitate opportunities for employees to socialize, collaborate, and build meaningful connections beyond just their immediate work responsibilities, such as employee resource groups, volunteer initiatives, and social events.
- Lead by example: Ensure that organizational leaders and managers consistently model inclusive behaviors, actively seek out diverse perspectives, and hold themselves and their teams accountable for cultivating a culture of belonging.

By prioritizing the creation of a culture of belonging, organizations not only enhance employee satisfaction and retention but also unlock the full potential of their diverse workforce. When people feel that they can bring their authentic selves to work and that their unique identities and experiences are valued, they are more likely to feel empowered, engaged, and motivated to contribute to the organization's success.



# DEIA Training & Education

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## Comprehensive Curriculum

Effective DEIA training and education goes beyond a one-time workshop or presentation. It requires a comprehensive, multifaceted curriculum that addresses the core principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, as well as practical strategies for building an inclusive workplace culture. This may include modules on understanding unconscious bias, developing cultural competence, fostering psychological safety, and creating accessible work environments.

## Tailored to Diverse Needs

DEIA training should be designed to meet the unique needs and learning styles of a diverse workforce. This may involve offering training in multiple languages, providing accommodations for employees with disabilities, and tailoring content to address the specific challenges and perspectives of different demographic groups. By making the training accessible and relevant to all employees, organizations can ensure that the message of inclusivity resonates and translates into meaningful change.

## Ongoing Reinforcement

Fostering a culture of inclusion is an ongoing process that requires continuous learning and development. DEIA training should not be a one-time event, but rather an integral part of the organization's learning and development strategy. This may include regular refresher sessions, job-specific DEIA modules, and opportunities for employees to engage in open dialogues and interactive workshops to reinforce the core principles and keep the conversation alive.

## Leadership Commitment

Effective DEIA training and education must have the full support and commitment of organizational leadership. Leaders should not only attend and participate in the training themselves but also actively champion the DEIA agenda, allocate resources, and hold their teams accountable for implementing inclusive practices. This top-down approach sends a clear message that DEIA is a strategic priority and helps to drive sustainable change throughout the organization.

DEIA training and education are crucial components of a comprehensive DEIA strategy, as they equip employees at all levels with the knowledge, skills, and tools to create and maintain a truly inclusive workplace. By providing a robust and tailored curriculum, reinforcing the learning through ongoing activities, and securing the unwavering commitment of organizational leadership, companies can empower their workforce to become champions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, ultimately driving sustainable change and unlocking the full potential of their diverse talent pool.

# Leadership's Role in DEIA Initiatives

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Successful DEIA initiatives in the workplace require unwavering commitment and leadership from the top. Organizational leaders play a crucial role in setting the tone, allocating resources, and driving sustainable change across the organization. By actively championing DEIA as a strategic priority, leading by example, and holding themselves and their teams accountable, executives can foster a culture of inclusion that empowers all employees to thrive.

At the forefront of this effort, leaders must demonstrate a deep understanding of the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. They should educate themselves on the various forms of bias, discrimination, and systemic barriers that underrepresented groups face, and then leverage their influence to address these issues head-on. This may involve revising policies, modifying recruitment and promotion practices, and ensuring that DEIA principles are embedded throughout the employee lifecycle.

Equally important is the role of leaders in setting the tone and modeling inclusive behaviors. By actively seeking out diverse perspectives, empowering employees to speak up, and addressing any instances of exclusion or disrespect, executives can create an environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and able to contribute their unique talents and experiences. This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging and trust, which are essential for driving innovation, enhancing employee engagement, and achieving business success.

To sustain progress, leaders must also hold themselves and their teams accountable for DEIA outcomes. This includes setting clear goals, tracking metrics, and regularly reviewing the organization's performance. By making DEIA a key performance indicator and tying it to compensation and career advancement, leaders can ensure that inclusion remains a top priority and that all employees are invested in driving positive change.

# Measuring and Tracking DEIA Progress



## Set Measurable Goals

Establish clear, data-driven goals for your DEIA initiatives, such as increasing the representation of underrepresented groups in leadership roles, improving employee engagement and satisfaction scores across diverse demographics, or achieving higher ratings on external inclusion and diversity assessments. Ensure these goals are specific, time-bound, and aligned with your organization's strategic priorities.



## Collect Relevant Data

Implement processes to gather comprehensive data on the diversity of your workforce, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, and other relevant factors. Conduct regular employee surveys to gauge perceptions of inclusion, belonging, and fairness. Analyze this data to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement and use it to inform your DEIA strategy and initiatives.



## Track Key Metrics

Identify a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the progress and impact of your DEIA efforts. This may include metrics such as representation at different levels, promotion and retention rates, employee satisfaction scores, and the number of DEIA-focused training programs completed. Regularly monitor and report on these metrics to ensure accountability and drive continuous improvement.



## Analyze And Iterate

Continuously analyze the data you collect to gain insights and identify areas for further development. Use these insights to refine your DEIA strategies, adjust your goals, and implement new initiatives as needed. Foster a culture of learning and adaptation, where setbacks are viewed as opportunities for growth and improvement rather than failures.



## Communicate Transparently

Regularly communicate your DEIA progress and achievements to your workforce and broader stakeholders. Celebrate successes, acknowledge challenges, and demonstrate your commitment to building a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization. Transparency and accountability will help to build trust and keep your DEIA efforts at the forefront of your organizational culture.

Measuring and tracking the progress of your DEIA initiatives is essential for ensuring sustainable change and driving continuous improvement. By setting clear, measurable goals, collecting comprehensive data, and regularly monitoring key performance indicators, organizations can gain

valuable insights into the effectiveness of their efforts and identify areas that require additional focus or resources.

Data-driven decision-making is crucial for DEIA, as it allows you to make informed, evidence-based choices and allocate your resources in the most impactful way. Regularly analyzing and communicating your DEIA metrics not only fosters accountability but also helps to build trust and engagement among your workforce, demonstrating your commitment to creating a truly inclusive and equitable workplace.

Importantly, measuring and tracking DEIA progress is not a one-time exercise—it requires a continuous, iterative approach. As your organization's DEIA initiatives evolve and new challenges arise, you must be prepared to adjust your goals, refine your metrics, and adapt your strategies accordingly. By embracing a culture of learning and adaptation, you can ensure that your DEIA efforts remain relevant, impactful, and responsive to the needs of your diverse workforce and broader stakeholders.



# Supplier Diversity and Inclusive Procurement

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## Partnering with Diverse Suppliers

Inclusive procurement goes beyond simply meeting diversity targets—it's about actively seeking out and engaging with a wide range of suppliers, contractors, and vendors from underrepresented backgrounds. This includes minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned, and disability-owned businesses, among others. By building relationships with these diverse suppliers, organizations can not only support the growth and success of these enterprises, but also infuse new perspectives, ideas, and capabilities into their own supply chains.

## Fair and Equitable Evaluation

To ensure that supplier diversity initiatives are truly effective, organizations must implement fair and unbiased procurement processes. This includes providing clear and transparent criteria for bid evaluation, offering equitable access to contracting opportunities, and actively mitigating any unconscious biases that may influence decision-making. By creating a level playing field and focusing on the merits of each supplier, companies can unlock the full breadth of talent and innovation that diverse suppliers bring to the table.

## Capacity-Building Support

In addition to fair evaluation, organizations can further support the growth and success of diverse suppliers by providing capacity-building resources and mentorship opportunities. This may include access to training programs, networking events, and technical assistance to help these businesses navigate the procurement process, improve their operations, and scale their offerings. By investing in the development of diverse suppliers, companies not only strengthen their own supply chains but also contribute to the broader economic empowerment of underrepresented communities.

## Celebrating Supplier Diversity

Ultimately, supplier diversity and inclusive procurement are not just about meeting compliance requirements or checking a box—they are about creating tangible, meaningful impact. By showcasing their successes, highlighting the contributions of diverse suppliers, and celebrating the positive outcomes of these partnerships, organizations can inspire others to follow suit and further promote a culture of inclusion and empowerment throughout their industry and beyond.

Supplier diversity and inclusive procurement are essential components of a comprehensive DEIA strategy, as they enable organizations to harness the full breadth of talent, innovation, and perspectives available in the marketplace. By actively seeking out and engaging with diverse suppliers, companies can not only support the growth and success of underrepresented businesses but also infuse new, valuable capabilities into their own supply chains.

Achieving true supplier diversity, however, requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond simply setting diversity targets. Organizations must implement fair and equitable procurement processes, provide capacity-building support to diverse suppliers, and foster a culture of inclusion and celebration around these initiatives. This holistic approach not only drives meaningful impact for the suppliers themselves but also positions the organization as a champion of DEIA, enhancing its reputation and competitiveness in the marketplace.

Ultimately, supplier diversity and inclusive procurement are not just about doing the right thing—they are strategic business imperatives that can unlock significant value for organizations. By tapping into the full diversity of the supplier ecosystem, companies can access new sources of innovation, improve their service delivery, and better reflect the diverse communities they serve. As such, this critical aspect of DEIA should be a key focus for organizational leaders who are committed to driving sustainable change and creating a more equitable, inclusive, and prosperous future.

# Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

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Employee resource groups (ERGs) are an invaluable tool for fostering a culture of inclusion and belonging within an organization. These voluntary, employee-led groups provide a platform for individuals with shared backgrounds, identities, or interests to come together, build community, and advocate for their needs and perspectives. By empowering employees to connect, learn, and support one another, ERGs play a crucial role in advancing DEIA efforts and driving meaningful change.

Effective ERGs are more than just social clubs or affinity groups—they are strategic business partners that help organizations better understand and serve the diverse needs of their workforce. Whether it's a women's ERG, an LGBTQ+ ERG, a disability ERG, or a group focused on racial/ethnic diversity, these employee-led initiatives offer valuable insights, feedback, and recommendations to leadership on key issues affecting underrepresented or marginalized employees.

## Cultivating Belonging and Empowerment

At their core, ERGs foster a sense of belonging and community, providing a safe, supportive space for employees to connect, share their experiences, and find camaraderie. This sense of belonging is essential for empowering individuals to bring their authentic selves to work, participate fully in the organization, and feel valued for their unique perspectives and contributions. By nurturing these connections, ERGs help to combat isolation, build allyship, and amplify the voices of underrepresented groups.

## Driving Organizational Change

Beyond cultivating community, ERGs also serve as powerful change agents within the organization. Through their advocacy, ERG members work closely with leadership to identify and address systemic barriers, inform policies and practices, and recommend impactful DEIA initiatives. This collaborative approach not only ensures that the unique needs and concerns of diverse employees are heard, but also positions ERGs as key strategic partners in the organization's DEIA efforts.

Ultimately, employee resource groups are a vital component of a comprehensive DEIA strategy as they empower employees, drive organizational change, and contribute to the creation of a truly inclusive workplace culture. By investing in the growth and development of these grassroots initiatives, companies can unlock the full potential of

their diverse workforce and position themselves as leaders in DEIA.

## Celebrating Diversity and Inclusion

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### Commemorating Cultural Traditions

Celebrating the diverse cultural traditions of your employees is a powerful way to foster a sense of belonging and appreciation. This could involve hosting events that showcase different cuisines, music, dances, and customs from around the world. By providing opportunities for employees to share and experience each other's rich heritage, you create a workplace environment that values and respects the unique identities and backgrounds of your workforce.

### Inclusive Observance of Holidays

Recognizing and observing a diverse range of holidays and observances, beyond just the dominant cultural celebrations, demonstrates your commitment to inclusion. This may involve offering paid time off or flexible scheduling for employees to observe religious, ethnic, or cultural holidays that are meaningful to them. It also means educating the broader workforce about the significance of these celebrations and encouraging participation and allyship.

### Employee Recognition and Appreciation

Actively celebrating the achievements, contributions, and milestones of your diverse employees sends a powerful message of inclusion. This could take the form of award programs, recognition events, or simply acknowledging individual accomplishments in team meetings or internal communications. By shining a light on the unique strengths and successes of your workforce, you reinforce the value and significance of each person's role in the organization's overall success.

### Visible Symbols of Inclusion

Incorporating visible symbols of diversity and inclusion throughout your workplace can have a profound impact on fostering a sense of belonging. This may include displaying artwork, signage, or imagery that celebrates different cultures, identities, and perspectives. It could also involve offering gender-neutral restrooms, providing prayer or meditation spaces, and ensuring that your marketing and branding materials are reflective of the diversity within your organization and the communities you serve.



Celebrating diversity and inclusion is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing, intentional effort to recognize, honor, and uplift the unique identities, experiences, and contributions of your diverse workforce. By creating opportunities for cultural exchange, observing a range of cultural and religious holidays, acknowledging individual achievements, and incorporating visible symbols of inclusion, organizations can foster a workplace culture that truly values and celebrates the diversity of its employees.

These celebration efforts serve not only to create a sense of belonging and empowerment for underrepresented groups, but also to educate and engage the broader workforce, promoting allyship, cross-cultural understanding, and a shared commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. When done effectively, these celebrations can become a powerful driver of organizational change, demonstrating the organization's values, strengthening employee engagement, and positioning the company as a leader in DEIA within its industry and community.

## Challenges and Barriers to DEIA Implementation

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### Resistance to Change

Deeply ingrained organizational cultures and existing power structures can create resistance to DEIA initiatives, as some employees may feel threatened by the prospect of change or perceive it as a zero-sum game.

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### Lack of Leadership Commitment

Successful DEIA implementation requires unwavering commitment and accountability from organizational leaders, who must be willing to allocate resources, role-model inclusive behaviors, and hold themselves and their teams responsible for progress.

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### Inadequate Funding Resources

Effective DEIA initiatives often require significant investment in areas such as training, data collection, supplier diversity programs, and employee resource groups, which can be challenging to secure in resource-constrained environments.

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### Unconscious Bias and Microaggressions

Deeply ingrained, often invisible biases and subtle forms of exclusion can undermine DEIA efforts and create a sense of alienation for underrepresented employees, even in well-intentioned organizations.

Implementing a comprehensive DEIA strategy is a complex and multifaceted challenge that organizations must be prepared to navigate with a clear vision, unwavering commitment, and willingness to address deeply rooted systemic issues. One of the primary obstacles is the resistance to change that can arise from deeply entrenched organizational cultures and power structures, as some employees may feel threatened by the prospect of a more equitable and inclusive workplace.

Another significant barrier is lack of leadership commitment, as DEIA initiatives require active sponsorship, resource allocation, and accountability from organizational leaders. Without this top-down support and role-modeling of inclusive behaviors, DEIA efforts can quickly lose momentum and fail to gain the necessary traction throughout the organization.

Insufficient funding and resources can also hamper DEIA implementation, as effective initiatives often require significant investment in areas such as comprehensive training programs, robust data collection and analysis, supplier diversity efforts, and the cultivation of employee resource groups. In resource-constrained environments, securing the necessary budget and personnel can be a significant challenge.

Finally, deeply ingrained unconscious biases and subtle forms of exclusion, often manifested through microaggressions, can undermine DEIA efforts and create a sense of alienation and disengagement for underrepresented employees, even in well-intentioned organizations. Addressing these invisible barriers requires a sustained, multifaceted approach that involves education, accountability, and a genuine commitment to fostering a culture of belonging.

## Case Study: IEDC's Journey to Embrace Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility

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The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) has focused on fully embracing DEIA principles and practices. This case study explores the organization's evolution and key learnings through the perspectives of IEDC members, leadership, and partners. The case study intends to show how IEDC has evolved concerning DEIA, how intentional and constant DEIA actions and consideration is—and will continue to be—imperative for the organization, and how these efforts can hopefully influence IEDC's members and the economic development profession at large.

### Early DEIA Efforts

In previous years, a major observation was that IEDC's DEIA focus was primarily at the leadership level. Dr. Eloisa Klementich, president and CEO of Invest Atlanta and current IEDC board chair, notes, "I do think there was a recognition, and there was a thought process in terms of trying to bring people of color within IEDC leadership...But did it filter

down much more? No. Did it come in policy or practice?" While an important first step, the organization recognized more pervasive change was needed.

According to Todd Greene, vice president and executive director of WorkRise and former IEDC board chair, IEDC has made significant strides in this area, though challenges remain. "I would say that IEDC, among the associations that I've been involved with, has always been one of the most inclusive ones," says Greene. "This includes diversity in terms of race, age, and the types of communities represented, from rural to urban areas."

Greene notes that IEDC's understanding of the importance of DEIA issues has evolved, just as the economic development field has changed. In the past decade especially, tragic national events have brought issues of racial inequity to the forefront. "IEDC has been on the journey well before that, about what does this mean for our profession," says Greene. "Both in terms of our policies and programs, and how we can create an inclusive environment and economies that work for everyone."

## Catalyst for Meaningful Change

The catalyst for IEDC's DEIA transformation came from the country's political and social climate. Dr. Klementich explains, "I think the economic, the political climate, the situations that occurred in several of our cities really put us to the test in terms of, if we're supposed to be here supporting economic development and growth, what are we doing as a profession?"

Former IEDC board chair Kenny McDonald, president and CEO of One Columbus, points to IEDC's 2019 annual conference in Atlanta as an inflection point, with strong equity-focused programming and visibility. Some key developments McDonald notes include:

1) Explicitly naming and discussing racism. "We never really used the word racism at all," McDonald said. "It became okay to actually talk about racism...and direct some of the programming at the root problem."

2) Equipping economic development leaders with tools to have productive DEIA conversations with staff, boards, and community partners who hold a "wide range of opinions."

Kevin Dick, president and CEO of Carolina Small Business Development Fund, who became an IEDC member in 2009, has witnessed a marked transformation in the organization's demographics and priorities. "IEDC looks and feels tremendously different from when I started," he notes. "It was older. It was more male and whiter when I started." But this shift extends beyond age, race, and gender, encompassing a broader

perspective on what economic development entails. Dick highlights the gradual inclusion of workforce development and other aspects that were not traditionally a focus for IEDC.

From Dick's perspective, a pivotal moment for IEDC came in 2017 when the organization hosted a workshop session on equitable economic development at its annual conference in Toronto. Dick, who participated in the panel alongside colleagues from the National League of Cities, recalls, "I was like, man, there is racism in economic development. We need to address it, you know? That conversation wouldn't have happened in 2009."

The tragic events surrounding George Floyd's death in 2020 further catalyzed IEDC's commitment to DEIA. The creation of the Racism in Economic Development (RED) Committee, headed by McDonald, demonstrated the organization's recognition of the need to tackle systemic issues head-on. "It's trying to infuse it into our DNA," Dick explains, emphasizing that DEIA is not an aside but an integral part of IEDC's mission and activities.

## Embedding DEIA Principles Into IEDC's Internal Culture

Under new leadership with Nathan Ohle—who took the helm as president and CEO in 2022—and with an updated strategic plan, IEDC has embarked on a journey to weave the principles of DEIA into the fabric of the organization. According to Ohle, this focus on DEIA is "part of every decision that we're making as an organization."

When Ohle started in his role two years ago, he observed that IEDC's DEIA efforts were, "much more external than it was internal to the organization." While IEDC was doing impactful work through initiatives such as the RED Committee and publishing an Equitable Economic Development playbook, Ohle noted that "there was not a process in place to actually address DEIA internally as an organization."

Recognizing the need to look inward, IEDC has taken several key steps to build DEIA into its internal policies, practices, and culture, including:

- making DEIA one of three guiding principles in its strategic plan, alongside organizational excellence and stakeholder engagement;
- forming an internal DEIA working group to lead efforts, ensuring a "bottom-up" approach rather than just top-down;
- engaging an external consulting firm that specializes in DEIA to guide the organization's journey;
- updating the employee handbook and HR policies and procedures with a DEIA lens, such as allowing most positions to be located outside of D.C. to "find the best talent and be closer to the communities, to our members";

- rethinking board representation, outreach, and engagement to bring more diverse voices to the table; and
- engaging both board members and staff and modeling a growth mindset.

TJ Wright, principal and chief executive officer of Whelhaus Co., who has served as an external DEIA consultant to IEDC, highlights the importance of getting organization-wide buy-in and engagement on DEIA. Wright notes a transformation in how DEIA is approached now, as opposed to in the past. "That's the biggest then to now—IEDC has brought in its board and staff, and it seems [leadership] is now at a place where they can accelerate that change." "The board agreed that in order for this work to move forward, it really needs board support," Wright said. "For IEDC to have even just a two-hour training and for that training to feel very receptive and for the board to walk out and be energized—very huge win."

Wright also observed how a new approach to engaging staff has improved the mindset. "You're showing what's under the hood, and you're saying we don't have it figured out and we still want to talk about it," Wright said. "That is incredibly brave and incredibly impactful." However, he cautioned IEDC to approach DEIA with intention, so it doesn't come across as performative.

Dr. Klementich hopes IEDC will continue to embed DEIA principles in everything it does, serving as a role model for the profession. Her vision is for IEDC to leverage its network and unique access to primary data from EDOs to become the go-to expert and thought leader. By collecting and sharing real-time insights on business and economic trends across the U.S., IEDC can be relevant, at the table and advance the field.

## Recognizing the Long Haul and Staying Focused

Todd Greene emphasizes that fully embedding DEIA is a long-term endeavor requiring sustained commitment, nuanced navigation of challenging issues, and a steadfast focus on expanding economic opportunity for all. "Keep the eyes on the prize," he advises.

Wright also emphasized that DEIA work cannot be done on a typical project timeline and requires a long-term commitment. "If you think whatever month timeline you've put this on, add 12 more months to that because that's truly what it's going to take," he advised. DEI progress is also impacted by external events. "Sometimes you have to slow down to speed up," Wright said.

As the corporate world's emphasis on DEIA has faced some dilution and backlash in recent years, McDonald believes IEDC's role is to continue advancing the field's capabilities. "If we are here to change the status quo, that's our job as economic development leaders," he said. "Either we make the good better or the bad better. So how do we do that?"

## Looking Ahead

Today, Dr. Klementich sees positive changes taking root within IEDC. "I think there's a commitment to DEIA and you can see Nathan's done a lot of things. One of the things that I think he's done really well is surround himself with people that look different than him, that think different than him, and therefore provide him with the ability to address more issues and be more inclusive of the people that we represent and the country we are now." She notes that IEDC itself is now much more diverse, with intentional efforts to bring in individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives.

In the future, IEDC aims to be a thought leader and authority on equity in various spheres of economic development. Dick envisions that "if we can look back five years from now and say, 'alright IEDC was able to be the go-to organization on issues of equity,' that's going to be big."

McDonald hopes IEDC will be a key factor in moving the needle on DEIA in communities across the U.S., pointing to examples of sustained improvements in minority unemployment rates and workforce participation as signs of progress. He also outlined other aspirations, including requiring Certified Economic Developers to demonstrate they can articulate and address inequities in their communities, disseminating emerging best practices and data to equip the field to close equity gaps, and tying the closure of equity gaps to overall economic development success. "It's our job at IEDC to make sure economic developers are equipped to take advantage of what's worked somewhere," McDonald said. "If we get more people doing those things more consistently, I think you could move some pretty big national numbers, not just local."

## Summary of the Case Study

Ohle acknowledges that IEDC still has "a lot of work to do" and is "very close to the beginning" of its long-term DEIA journey. But he believes these intentional actions are laying the groundwork for lasting change.

"My hope is that every single person in the organization will be able to say that DEIA is woven into the fabric of the organization and that each part of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility is critical," Ohle says.

As IEDC continues this path, Ohle emphasizes the importance of honest reflection, hard conversations, and a willingness to confront challenges. At the same time, he wants to lift successes and progress.

"It's important to recognize that organizations will be all the way across the DEIA spectrum, and that's not a bad thing," he says. "It's just a recognition that that's how

organizations work and that's how this journey is. It's really critical for every organization to think about DEIA in a very intentional way."

"This will be continuous for the rest of my generation, the next generation, and future generations," Dr. Klementich aptly states. "The focus has to be the people. The end goal, in my humble opinion, is, are we impacting community? Are we, as a profession, making a difference for the people we serve? And are they living the best lives that they could possibly want and desire as a result of our programs, policies, and initiatives?"

## The Future of DEIA in the Workplace

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As the world of work continues to evolve, the future of DEIA in the workplace holds immense promise and potential. Driven by shifting societal expectations, technological advancements, and a growing emphasis on corporate social responsibility, DEIA is poised to become an integral and indispensable part of the organizational landscape.

**43%**

### Increased Representation

People of color represented 43% of the total U.S. population in 2020, up from 34% in 2010, underscoring an imperative for organizations to prioritize DEIA initiatives to attract, retain, and empower this diverse talent pool (U.S. Census, 2020).

**85%**

### Improved Financial Performance

Studies have shown that companies with diverse and inclusive workforces are 85% more likely to outperform their less diverse competitors, highlighting the clear business case for investing in DEIA as a strategic priority (McKinsey report on 366 public companies; Rock, D. & Grant, H., 2016).

**90%**

### Enhanced Innovation and Creativity

Diverse teams have been proven to be up to 90% more innovative than homogeneous groups, as the intersection of different perspectives, experiences, and problem-solving approaches leads to breakthrough ideas and solutions (BCG study; Lorenzo R. et. al., 2018)

The future of DEIA in the workplace will be characterized by a multifaceted and holistic approach, with organizations seamlessly integrating inclusive practices into every aspect of their operations. From the recruitment and hiring process to talent development, performance management, and procurement, DEIA will become a fundamental driver of business success, workplace culture, and employee engagement.

Emerging technologies will play a crucial role in enabling this transformation, with AI-powered tools and data analytics helping organizations to identify and mitigate biases, personalize the employee experience, and measure the impact of their DEIA initiatives with greater precision. At the same time, the workforce of the future will demand more transparency, accountability, and tangible progress on DEIA, pushing organizations to go beyond surface-level initiatives and embed inclusion into the very fabric of their organizations.

As the future of work unfolds, the success and sustainability of organizations will be inextricably linked to their ability to create and maintain truly diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible workplaces. By embracing this paradigm shift and leading the way in DEIA, forward-thinking companies will not only unlock the full potential of their workforce but also position themselves as beacons of progress, innovation, and social responsibility within their industries and communities.

If you would like to evaluate your organization on DEIA, you can take Harvard University's assessment survey:  
[https://harvard.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_d4GTe0K2rqtgQT3](https://harvard.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_d4GTe0K2rqtgQT3).





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