Guest editorial: Ineffectiveness of diversity management: lack of knowledge, lack of interest or resistance?

Societies have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure that historically underrepresented groups do not face discrimination and enjoy the same socioeconomic opportunities as majority groups. In the West, laws have been passed to address the discrimination that many demographic groups, including women, people of colour, persons with disabilities, mature workers and individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2S +) have long faced in the workplace. Over the past decade, the rhetoric around equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) has intensified in various forums. The importance of EDI and the benefits of imprinting it on the DNA of organizations are being repeatedly and insistently touted. Policy makers, organizations, unions and civil society are actively working to institutionalize equity, diversity and inclusion norms and practices in the workplace.

Despite all the research efforts and organizational and policy initiatives to promote diversity, inequalities persist. Workplaces claim to be paying more attention to diversity, yet the results are not forthcoming. Institutional and organizational change processes are often uneven and contested, producing both positive and negative outcomes: reinforcing or reducing inequalities, worsening or improving working conditions, increasing or reducing power asymmetries between actors, or making workplaces more or less inclusive, democratic and participatory. It is clear that in many ways, institutions and organizations are not effective at addressing the challenges of creating a diverse workforce.

This is the first of two special issues that emanate from a discussion that emerged at the 2018 EDI Conference where scholars explored the advances, setbacks, drifts and transformations brought about by strategies and actions to promote equity, diversity and inclusion.

In this first issue, we examine, through different lenses, the social, organizational and individual reactions to the implementation of EDI strategies and actions. We have selected articles that cover a variety of themes. Taken together, they broaden and deepen our understanding of the foundations of EDI and provide an analysis of the impact of its practices and policies, which have been developed by actors from different organizations and at different levels.

The 21st century is well-underway, with a workforce that reflects socio-demographic diversity, and an economy whose growth depends on the ability to harness the potential of each and every individual. However, the reality only serves to illustrate the failure of social, organizational and individual goals and capacities to make EDI a cornerstone of economic and social development.

While efforts made to promote EDI seem to be substantial, the results failed to meet the intended goals and the lived experiences of those who are marginalized remain dismay. Although the reasons for this failure are difficult to pinpoint, our research has revealed three trends that seem to impede progress on achieving EDI in the workplace. First, there is a lack of knowledge and expertise when it comes to designing and implementing EDI programmes. Many managers conscripted to implement EDI initiatives are ill equipped and lack the preparation necessary to make meaningful and material improvements. Second, there is strong resistance to EDI initiatives emanating from a fear of losing power and privilege by

dominant group members. In this regard, EDI initiatives are often stalled or terminated due to strong opposition by majority group members who feel threatened. Finally, the complexity of the task and an unwillingness to recognize the existence of discriminatory biases in systems and on the part of individuals instill apathy towards EDI initiatives.

EDI management: a lack of knowledge of the basics and what needs to be done

To understand the slow progress in achieving EDI objectives, we must first understand the challenge with a lack of knowledge about EDI and the role of resistance from dominant group members, who hold an uninformed view that EDI threatens their power and privilege rather than enriches the entire organization and society in general.

The ongoing exclusion of diverse minority populations goes against the principles of social justice and comes at a high cost to the labour market, especially in the context of an ageing population. Research demonstrates that workforce diversity can lead to increased business performance, especially in knowledge intensive, high skill, innovation-driven sectors. The impact of failing to leverage the benefits of diversity has been more challenging to illustrate in more traditional sectors.

Studies that focus on showing the impact of EDI on organizational performance provide little information about the processes that can guide the day-to-day management of diversity. If diversity is not a productivity driver in some sectors, it may be because companies have not yet figured out how to effectively bring together and leverage on different perspectives, ideas and networks into a cohesive framework to maximize the potential of a diverse workforce.

Leveraging diversity is not a "numbers game" of simply increasing the representation of minority groups in organizations. It requires expertise and knowledge in multiple fields that combine an understanding of labour market inequities, sources of discrimination, the foundations of EDI interventions, actions that address gaps, supportive organizational practices and sound career management. Achieving EDI goals requires fair management that allows all employees to feel respected and valued, provides for appropriate and effective sanctions for discriminatory actions and offers incentives and rewards to promote equal opportunity.

Achieving EDI: clear resistance induced by increasingly difficult to detect patterns

The challenges to achieving EDI and promoting fair treatment in the workplace and organizations are significant but not insurmountable. In recent years, openly discriminatory language and behaviour that used to be socially acceptable have become less tolerated at work and condemned in the public arena, thanks to social movements that shaped the moral landscape in social and organizational life (Özbilgin and Erbil, 2021). Despite the shift in public attitudes, behaviours that have discriminatory effects remain prevalent. They often take the form of more subtle, less visible and more insidious treatments but are nonetheless as harmful in excluding marginalized groups. The desire to appear "politically correct" and the performance culture strongly associated with White privilege continues to distort true efforts to improve the outcomes for marginalized groups (Ng and Lam, 2020). Moreover, resistance by dominant group members denies organizations the opportunity to find innovative ways to realize the less tangible benefits of workforce diversity.

EDI policies are rarely designed at a granular level, which would allow for the consideration of individual barriers specific to each equity-seeking group. Consequently, many policies fail to account for the different possible combinations of disadvantages or are watered down to achieve broad appeal but also risk being ineffective. In this regard, stakeholder engagement is crucial to better understand the challenges faced by different groups, and the consultation and evaluation process should systematically include representative civil society organizations and social partners.

Continuing efforts in achieving EDI: apathy stemming from resistance and lack of knowledge

Many organizations have adopted an approach to diversity that focuses primarily on compliance with anti-discrimination regulations (i.e. lawsuit prevention) (Klarsfeld and Cachat-Rosset, 2021). However, this is a restrictive approach that does not consider the potential value that a diverse workforce has to offer. Recent trends suggest that there is room for optimism regarding attitudes toward women and some minority groups. Views about gender equity and LGBTQ2S + people, for example, have become more favourable in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the past decade. The labour market outcomes for women have improved in certain sectors, considering the economic growth of the pre-COVID-19 years, the introduction of disruptive technologies, and the scarcity of skills, the gaps in labour market activity rates between men and women and for mature workers. At the same time, attitudes toward immigrants and ethnic minorities have also become more polarized (OCDE, 2020).

The challenges of conducting research on these topics remain considerable, and research findings suggest that employers struggle to implement effective EDI initiatives. Employers may be reluctant to introduce EDI initiatives to deny the existence of systemic discrimination in their organizations. Some employers cite a lack of required skills possessed by minority group members to avoid costly EDI integration initiatives, and some fear the backlash from dominant group members who object to EDI practices (Saba, 2019).

In sum, full economic and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups remains an elusive goal. Progress in the labour market has been uneven, and in many countries, gaps in representation remain for women and mature workers and are more significant for people with disabilities, immigrants and even the children of immigrants.

Essays in this first special issue

In this issue, EDI-related issues are addressed at the institutional, organizational and individual levels. A variety of approaches are examined, both in different contexts and in relation to different dimensions of diversity. The analyses underscore the importance of overcoming misinformation and lack of knowledge, as well as resistance and apathy, and evaluating actions that mobilize all stakeholders to overcome barriers in the achievement of EDI goals.

The first article examines the actors and discourses shaping new Canadian legislation designed to promote diversity in corporate governance. Cukier *et al.* focus on the complex and contradictory discourses surrounding diversity and inclusion in the texts of parliamentary debates. The authors strongly believe that understanding the discursive environments of organizations and the processes surrounding the promotion of diversity and equity in policy making is a critical site for understanding equity promotion, one that is often neglected in organizational studies. Their argument highlights tensions surrounding the definitions of diversity, its importance to boards and the preferred mechanisms for its implementation. Despite a weaker opposition in official discourses around EDI issues, the debates and positioning of actors still point to conflicting views and the role of non-traditional power bases in determining outcomes.

In the second article, Lir addresses gender bias in the context of the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia and explores the various interconnected barriers that inhibit women from editing content on the website. Based on action research, the author concludes that two categories of barriers perpetuate gender bias: pre-editing barriers, i.e. negative reputation, lack of recognition, anonymity and fear of being erased; and post-editing barriers, i.e. experiences of rejection, alienation, lack of time and profit, as well as obstacles related to ownership of knowledge. The article describes the creation of a "vicious cycle," showing how five of these elements – negative reputation, anonymity, fear, alienation and rejection – act as mutually reinforcing barriers that discourage women from contributing to the website.

Adams-Harmon examines the topic of the career progression of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics disciplines), focussing on women in the pharmaceutical sector. She highlights the setbacks, challenges and advances that these women experienced along their career paths. The author reveals successful strategies that contributed to career progression, such as having access to sponsors, mentors, leadership development, workplace flexibility, branding and networks, and that helped to create a form of resilience in the face of setbacks experienced by women executives in this sector. The author also highlights the barriers that hindered their rise, such as gendered structures, personal attitudes, peers, direct managers, family and society.

Esposito's article illustrates more subtle and perverse barriers that take hold in workplaces, namely the "glass cliff." The glass cliff phenomenon puts women in the upper echelons and riskier roles than men. The author first examines the competing and contradictory perspectives on the glass cliff and links them to social norms and implicit biases. Equally important considerations, often overlooked, are the need to feed the pool of candidates from underrepresented groups into leadership positions.

In an attempt to illustrate the adverse effects of homogeneity, Blount and Smith use an original approach to study its impact on the financial performance of minority business enterprises (MBEs). The authors establish that MBEs tend to hire members of the same minority group or ethnicity as the founder(s) because several benefits. The practice reduces unemployment amongst themselves, eases with managing culturally similar organizational members on account of homophilly and offers in group members new opportunities. The results of this qualitative and quantitative research reveals that as homogeneity increases, the financial performance of the firm decreases, and this effect is more pronounced the longer the firm has been in operation. The authors conclude by reiterating that it is strategically important for these firms to diversify their employee base in order to improve long term performance.

In their study, Bryant-Lees and Kite aim to experimentally determine whether disclosing one's sexual orientation when applying for a job would have an impact on hiring decisions. They were able to detect a distinct pattern of discrimination against gay/lesbian applicants who were significantly rated in terms of competence, social skills and employability compared to heterosexual applicants. By identifying the underlying mechanisms of discrimination in hiring, this study underscores the need for diversity training that goes beyond general approaches to diversity management and explicitly targets the conscious and unconscious biases that can influence the hiring process. The critical need for organizations to provide top-down support and mechanisms for LGBT people to express themselves, reduce psychological pressure and feel comfortable in their work environment is discussed.

The final article in this issue addresses the situation of ageing workers as retirement has become a central issue in academic, professional and government discourse. There is an emerging consensus that favours the idea of delaying retirement in order to promote active ageing. With this in mind, Dufour *et al.* draw on work-role attachment theory and fulfilled expectations theory to focus on the pre-retirement period and aim to better understand how certain individual factors and expectations explain expected retirement age. Workplaces play a critical role in fostering work engagement and creating expectations of certain working conditions and adjustments. This, in turn, builds stronger attachment to work for mature workers. In the context of a labour market with a relatively high number of workers aged 55 and over, and an increasingly critical need for skilled labour, a consideration of workers' expectations about retirement could help employers better prepare for mature workers' end-of-career phase and to create an ageism-free work environment.

In closing, we have sought to understand how existing institutions facilitate or impede change and how and why organizational EDI policies and programmes fade or prevail over

time and in different contexts. Particular emphasis was placed on the development of new practices, norms, mechanisms, capacities and resources that promote EDI initiatives and outcomes.

This special issue project was initiated before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it addresses many of the issues that the pandemic has exacerbated. Indeed, with COVID-19, there is a real risk that the significant progress made over the past decade in promoting diversity and equity in the labour market may be lost. We cannot sufficiently emphasize the importance of preventing this and underscoring the necessity of increasing our efforts to better identify and improve the effectiveness of EDI systems.

Tania Saba
Université de Montréal, Montreal, Canada

Mustafa Ozbilgin
Brunel University, London, UK

Eddy Ng
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada, and

Gaëlle Cachat-Rosset
Université Laval, Quebec City, Canada

References

Klarsfeld, A. and Cachat-Rosset, G. (2021), "Equality of treatment, opportunity, and outcomes: mapping the law", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*, available at: https://oxfordre.com/business/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.001.0001/acrefore-9780190224851-e-315 (accessed 2 September 2021).

Ng, E.S. and Lam, A. (2020), "Black lives matter: on the denial of systemic racism, White liberals, and polite racism", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, Vol. 39 No. 7, pp. 729-739.

OCDE (2020), "All hands in? Making diversity work for all", *Éditions OCDE*, Paris, doi: 10.1787/efb14583-en.

Özbilgin, M.F. and Erbil, C. (2021), "Social movements and wellbeing in organizations from multilevel and intersectional perspectives: the case of the# blacklivesmatter movement", *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Wellbeing*, pp. 119-138.

Saba, T. (2019), "La gestion de l'équité, de la diversité et de l'inclusion: remettre les pendules à l'heure, Revue RH, juillet-août-septembre", available at: https://ordrecrha.org/ressources/revue-rh/volume-22-no-3/gestion-diversite-equite-inclusion-gedi.