

TALKING TALENT

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

This document was inspired by an exclusive cross-sector roundtable hosted by All Things People & Talent for DEI leaders.

WHEN: Thursday March 12th, 2024

WHERE: Covent Garden Hotel, London



This roundtable couldn't have been timelier, considering the recent unacceptable racism faced by Diane Abbott, the reduction of investment into DEI, and the sharp critiques and outspoken scepticism from some high-profile names on DEI; I felt now was time to have a private forum for internal DEI leaders to explore and unpick the impact of the backlash, the challenges, explore solutions, network, and collectively exhale – albeit momentarily.

The range of industries around the table and the willingness to openly share perspectives and experiences reinforced the need for People, Inclusion, and Culture leaders to connect and collaborate. I'm looking forward to hosting more roundtables soon.

This document outlines our key takeaways. Two themes resonated deeply with me: the critical need for accountability measures for leaders and managers and greater partnership between HR leaders and their counterparts leading DEI.



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Navigating Fatigue in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

The term “DEI” often carries a heaviness and sense of duty that can overshadow its true purpose, turning what should be an opportunity for growth into a heavy obligation.

While simply changing the term won't solve the underlying challenges and the need to do the work, recognising the impact language has on us personally and those leading these efforts is a step towards making DEI work feel more inviting and less burdensome.

An important consideration for all of us in the workplace, whether we're leaders, managers, or team members: How can we adjust our approach to DEI to make it more energising and inclusive rather than something that feels overwhelming or exclusionary?

DEI is a journey not a destination.

Leaders and managers often equate DEI success through quick fixes or performative activity that increases visible diversity, particularly when hiring. This approach neglects the equally crucial aspect of fostering an inclusive culture built on psychological safety. It risks reducing diversity to a checklist item, followed by a sense of defeatism and fatigue when they recognise there is still much more work to be done.

Communicating regularly about the progress and impact of DEI initiatives and being transparent about successes and challenges fosters trust and maintains momentum.

However, change takes time and is hard. It involves every staff member, from the most junior to the senior.

Taking a 'change management' and a 'culture-first' approach to DEI involves strategically planning and implementing DEI initiatives to ensure they are integrated into the organisation's culture and operations. This approach recognises DEI as a fundamental change in an organisation's culture and operations rather than a set of standalone initiatives.

Collaboration not competition.

There's a common perception that HR focuses more on the business side - ensuring everything ticks along and meets compliance standards. This viewpoint can sometimes sideline DEI, treating it as an extra task rather than a core component of creating a positive employee experience.

Shifting this dynamic is blending HR's operational savvy with DEI's people-first approach, transforming them into a unified voice. This involves arming HR with the skills and insights needed to integrate DEI into every aspect of their work. It's not just about adding DEI tasks to HR's plate but embedding these principles into the fabric of everyday processes, making DEI and HR joint architects of a culture where everyone feels included and valued.

Doing so can tackle the misconception that DEI is separate from HR's goals. Instead, we'll see how inclusive practices enrich the workplace, leading to happier, more engaged employees keen to grow with the company. This approach not only enhances the employee experience but also supports the business by fostering a sense of belonging,

boosting productivity, and reducing turnover. It's a win-win, where DEI becomes a natural part of HR's strategy in nurturing a vibrant, inclusive work environment.

Accountability is key.

DEI comes alive when embedded into the accountability framework of leadership and management directly influencing the people, inclusion and cultural performance metrics of leaders and managers.

By embedding DEI into how a business operates and measures success, it affirms the organisation's commitment to valuing its people – not just paying lip service but rather committing to meaningful, accountable actions that cultivate a genuinely inclusive workplace.

Communicating regularly about the progress and impact of DEI initiatives and being transparent about successes and challenges fosters trust and maintains momentum. Celebrating successes recognises progress and reinforces the value of DEI efforts.

A FOCUS ON

the people perspective

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After the unprecedented boom in DEI specialist appointments between 2020 and 2022, the jobs market has been unusually quiet over the past year. This is despite DEI remaining very much part of the strategic goals and business values of most companies within the creative industries.

It's safe to say that less investment and unrealistic expectations have left many in my network feeling DEI fatigue. This fatigue is beyond just tiredness, but the mental and emotional drain felt by those holding DEI responsibility. Especially those that have had the responsibility added to an already over stretched remit.

Against a backdrop of negative media coverage focused on 'woke culture' and polarising views, there is a wider fatigue around how people view DEI. Many feel that DEI might be best served with a rebrand!

When Arit discussed hosting a round table for DEI leaders and providing a safe space for sharing ideas and offering support, I jumped at the chance to be involved and to explore the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

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The breadth and complexity of the DEI dialogue.

DEI continues to evolve with a broader focus on intersectionality and the compounded discrimination that people experience. For anyone responsible for articulating DEI messaging, this is much more challenging to communicate succinctly.

Effective comms and branding of DEI activity on People, Culture, and Inclusion has never been more important and at the top of many must-have skills for a progressive DEI leader.

Whilst the priority of creating and delivering a strategy that prioritises a psychologically safe culture, are the right people in place, with the support and time, to make this a reality?

DEI is not an island – the rise of the DEI influencer.

Historically DEI leaders were expected to be the primary implementer. Echoing Arit's earlier summary, long-term success is driven within organisations where DEI is truly woven into the wider business culture and visible action from leaders is central to building a sense of “moving together”.

To make this a reality, there is an increased focus on the value of influencing and helping to implement change across multiple functions and specialisms, from Reward and Talent Acquisition to Sales and Marketing.

This approach requires exceptional influencing skills and



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whilst sharing the workload and accountability helps to reduce DEI fatigue, it also requires a high level of project management and reporting.

Expectation vs reality.

With the increased urgency of the last few years, there is a clear need to address the approaches or initiatives that might not have been implemented effectively, or just not delivered on expectations. Especially when the people that may have set overly ambitious targets are no longer present.

There is a common concern that business leaders are seeking 'quick fixes' focused on recruitment instead of buying into the longer-term solutions that get to the root of DEI issues. At the same time experienced DEI professionals are trying to establish a culture first approach, an approach that is more nuanced and less focused on linear metrics and a budget skewed towards performative activity. I was delighted to hear first-hand how resources that are spent on performative DEI are being better used for initiatives that have a tangible impact on creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment.

If you or your organisation are facing a reduction in investment, does the DEI leader, or lead, have the resources and support they realistically need? If not, now is the time to reset expectations based on the current resources available.

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