Inclusion in India Inc.

Diversity, the Core of Our Cultural Fabric

Executive Summary[1] of Research Report by Neharika Vohra[2], Rashmi Mandloi[3], Sarika Bhattacharya[4], and Vijayalakshmi Chari[5].

Introduction

As a nation, given that diversity has been the core of our cultural fabric, one often finds a naturally created diverse workforce in India Inc. However, simply ensuring or having diversity through, gender, age or geographies is not adequate to reap the benefits of having a diverse work force. The clincher is, given a diverse workforce, how are organizations today striving to promote quality, respect, and trust across multiple teams and geographies composed of heterogeneous people in terms of age, gender, sexual preferences, physical abilities, and national cultures? What does it take to go beyond the tokenism as necessitated by social or legal demands and to create a culture that celebrates diversity in its truest essence? What is India Inc. doing today to create not just a diverse but an inclusive organization?

These were some of the questions that this research proposed to investigate further. The research had modest aims:

- Collate the practices of various organizations in the space of diversity and inclusion
- Understand why they were doing what they were doing
- Share pointers with new entrants in this journey on diversity and inclusion about the dos and don'ts in the field.

Methodology

Given the objectives of the study and the nascent state of knowledge about diversity and inclusion in Indian organizations, it was decided to use the qualitative method to answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews with D & I practitioners was a natural starting point for collecting data. To add richer perspectives, data was also collected from the business heads from the organization and from a few members of the minority groups represented in the organization. It was envisaged that the study include organizations diverse in as many ways as possible. The final sample included 21 companies that represent 8 industries. This included 15 MNCs and 6 Indian organizations (that may or may not have international presence). The largest organization in terms of headcount is 56000 and the smallest has 260 employees.

The interview schedule was designed to capture:

- Identification of the focus areas and business imperatives driving D & I
- Policies & Practices put in place by the organization to drive the inclusion agenda
- Monitoring Inclusion formally and informally to see impact of the different measures
- Behaviours of business leaders in creating an inclusive culture beyond the policy or practice.
- Views on the alignment of the diversity strategy and the feelings of inclusion in decision making, execution or policy/process making.

Approximately 74 hours of interviewed material was generated- 25 hours of interviews with diversity and inclusion

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[1] For full report please refer to http://www.bizdivas.in/Inclusion-in-India_Web.pdf

[2] IIM Ahmedabad

[3&4] Biz Divas

[5] Magic Puddles

/HR leads, 21 hours of interviews with line managers or business heads (preferably not HR), and 25 hours of interviews with 50 members of minority groups spread in participating organizations. In addition there were three hours of interviews with practitioners from supporting organizations.

The data was analysed using grounded theory approach and frequency counts were made to find answers to questions such as who is sought to be included, why are they sought, what challenges they face and what practices are put in place to succeed at inclusion.

Our Findings

a) D & I Journey for Organizations

The D & I journey for most organizations surveyed in this study started a maximum of 5 years ago. Several factors such as search and induction of talent in large numbers, median age in organizations shifting down, and glaring absence of women in the middle and senior positions have made diversity discourse find a foothold in organizations. The focus from ensuring diversity to looking at inclusion seems to be a more recent one, gaining momentum only in the last two years for most companies.

b) Bringing Diverse People In

In our study it was found that 51% organizations have consciously chosen to bring more women into the organization to start their diversity and inclusion journey. Regional and cultural diversity was the next factor followed by age and differently abled people. Diversity in terms of LGBT was a language that only 2% of the organizations surveyed (only MNCs) seemed comfortable speaking about. Else, it tended to get completely dismissed. Like a participant accurately explained the situation, "Exclusion is usually unintentional because of lack of exposure to the LGBT category. People do take a step back the moment they hear the word gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender.

c) Identifying Champions

It was found in our study that identification of champions of diversity and inclusion, gives D & I efforts the much needed focus and sustained implementation. In the organizations surveyed, we only found that 24% organizations had a designation and sole responsibility to drive the D & I initiative. In the absence of that, one of the members in the HR function had been designated as the diversity champion in organizations. Interestingly in 68% percent of the cases women are leading the D & I initiative. All the D & I leads (irrespective of whether it was their primary or secondary role) were passionate about the issue and convinced of the need to drive diversity. Though women and HR seem to be driving the D & I initiative, we believe that for a change in culture and mind-set of the entire organization there is greater need for the majority groups from different functions to be part of the team driving the change. In successful change efforts the change initiators find allies and use them to get people within their circles of influence to buy in and change.

d) Highlighting the Business Imperative to Support D & I

Several reasons that were given for focus on D&I are shown in the chart below.

e) How Senior Management Champions Diversity & Inclusion

This was seen as one of the most significant factors contributing to the success of the D & I efforts in organizations. Tangible efforts being made by the senior management included highlighting the D & I agenda in formal forums and also informally, spearheading D & I councils, taking on specific goals to promote inclusion (recruitment, mentoring) and creating mechanisms to ensure diverse views are taken into consideration for decision making.

f) Creating Organization-wide Awareness Through Sensitization & Communication

The first step to inclusion, is acknowledging that inclusion requires work at the level of uncovering biases and changing accepted social norms. Of the organizations surveyed, a total of 71% had some form of sensitization training. Larger organizations (88%) were more likely than the medium sized (63%) or the small organizations (60%) to have sensitization programs. These could range from mandatory ones to special sessions (focused on specific issues such as biases during recruitment, being sensitive when working with differently abled groups). Our data additionally indicated that sensitization sessions are currently skewed towards gender sensitization and often sudden growth in the size of the organization, makes it a challenge to drive these efforts in a sustained and impactful way.

g) Having a Mechanism to Handle Issues on Exclusion/ Discrimination

86% of the organizations had an appointed ombudsperson to deal with issues being raised. In some cases, HR leaders were also accessible for people to raise their issues. In several of the organizations, the existing processes used to report unethical actions are also used to receive complaints on exclusion. Only in some of the organizations, there were separate forums / tools created especially for women to raise issues that they faced at the work place. Analysis of these needs and concerns, helped organizations decide areas in which efforts needed to be shared

h) Communication & Messaging

Clear communication around how the organization values D & I – be it through vision statements, value frameworks, internal newsletters and external stakeholder communication helped promote the D & I agenda. The survey revealed that compared to the 76% organizations that focused on internal communication, only 57% focused on external messaging.

i) Recognizing, Accepting & Accommodating Unique Needs

In the organizations surveyed, reasonable accommodation was extended through work place adjustments, specific provisions and facilities, creating special roles and work structures to support need for mobility and policies around granting of leave and work timings. Many of the efforts seemed to be directed in ensuring safety for women and accommodating women managers in senior levels. Higher costs and the fear of being accused of positive discrimination were the most common challenge mentioned in ensuring that needs were accommodated.

j) Helping Employees Succeed

Supporting those have been hired to increase diversity is one key way in which inclusion can be achieved. In out study we found the use of mentoring, training programs, creating support groups as ways to bolster the minority groups. About 71% of the organizations interviewed said that mentoring was important, 52% (11 of 21) of them had robust programs on mentoring and/or sponsorship. In our data it was found that MNCs, as compared to Indian organizations seemed to be more focused on creating mentoring processes. Having support groups (mainly for young mothers, women leaders, rarely for the LGBT community) was seen as a powerful process with 67% among the organizations surveyed having this intervention.

k) Use of Assessments to Reflect Diversity and Inclusion

63% organizations surveyed focused on internal benchmarking which was mostly to track their own metrics over a period of time or compare with their global offices in some diversity and inclusion metrics. In addition to internal surveys, 38% of the organizations also did external benchmarking which involved comparing their trends with other organizations within their industry or by participating in national surveys. While most audits were focused on gender based issues (women recruited, progression of women), other dimensions looked at were accessibility of physical infrastructure, impact of exclusion on decision to quit, or diagnostic study to check how all employees are experiencing diversity and inclusion in the organization.

l) Celebrating Diversity & Inclusion

Interestingly, among the organizations interviewed, 81% celebrated the festivals of different faiths and religions. The 19% that did not were the MNCs. 100% of Indian organizations surveyed, irrespective of size had this practice. In addition to celebrating festivals, 90% of the organizations surveyed, in the recent past had begun marking special days such as International Women's Day and World Disability Day on their calendars.

In conclusion:

Over our interviews, the following seem to be coming through strongly and clearly:

- There is a recognition of inclusion being a journey and not an outcome – that it means staying persistent mainly by addressing the age-old biases and traditional ways of thinking in a largely patriarchal society
- Given the legacy of reservation systems that we carry, the organizations we surveyed seem sensitive and alert to the fact of not projecting efforts towards D & I as yet another "quota". There is a rightful and adequate focus on competencies –from recruitment to grooming people showing potential for senior positions.
- Organizations are looking at a multi-pronged approach to promote inclusion – be it through communication, polices, sensitization efforts and support mechanisms to help people succeed.
- Gender does seem to be a primary area of focus across all the organizations interviewed.
- Attempts at inclusion, have varying levels of reach and focus. At one end of the spectrum is perhaps finding occasions to represent that diversity (for e.g. ensuring representation of the minority groups in different committees and decision making processes) or celebrate the diversity (marking all religious events, ensuring policies are in place for maternity benefits, equal pay and equal opportunities). At the other end is the broadening of understanding of diversity and differences beyond the labels of language, gender and age to ensure respect for all.
- Inclusion is a matter of passion and is driven by few people.

To further anchor the D & I efforts, there were some aspects which we felt needed to be focused on. These included:

- More open and tough confrontations of the biases that come in the way of inclusion. Organizations are yet to experiment with more widespread, informal and creative ways of having conversations around these biases.
- Using the language of D & I more naturally rather than feeling constrained.
- Organizations that are focusing on D & I, could benefit by disseminating the positive stories and the challenges faced in pockets where D & I practice has reached a certain maturity.
- Organizations need to challenge the premise that D & I efforts are something that can only be focused on when the going is good.
- While in several organizations, there is senior management commitment seen in formal and informal ways, D & I remains a pet project of a handful of people. Thus making inclusion everyone's priority and not just of specific individuals is definitely one aspect where a big shift is needed.

Some realities of our socio-cultural fabric seem to not find adequate visibility in the conversations and efforts that India Inc. with respect to D & I – such as how the inherently rich diversity brings in a certain ingrained acceptance and absorption of differences, the premium we put on relationships and our attitude to life being a continuum with not a destination. The 5000 years of history of handling diversity, the unconscious competence of being inclusive, are perhaps what India Inc. could consciously weave into its focus and efforts towards building a truly inclusive organization.

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http://www.bizdivas.in/inclusion-india-report-full

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