

Behind the curtain: corporate DEI

1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions and then share your answers with the rest of the class.

- What diversity, equality and inclusion initiatives have been rolled out in your organisation in the last four years? Do you know of any others that have been launched nationally or globally?
- How do these DEI programmes generate positive change? What are their opportunity areas?
- What do you know about legal action being taken against companies with DEI programmes benefiting specific minority groups?

2 Key words

a. Read the definitions and find keywords in the article that match them. The paragraph number is given in brackets to help you. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then, read the complete article to see how the words are used in context.

1. a strong feeling in reaction to a change in recent events or policies _____

(subtitle)

They did not foresee the _____ against their latest ad campaign. It was branded sexist on social media.

2. the preference by a government or an organisation given to minority groups that are often treated unfairly _____ (paragraph 1)

_____ policies are controversial, but this study concluded that these programmes served to improve diversity outcomes.

3. the process of giving someone, who usually has less experience, advice or help

_____ (paragraph 3)

Now CEO, she believes that _____ is part of her career success and encourages all staff to find someone with whom to forge this kind of relationship.

4. change something _____ (paragraph 4)

Following the meeting with our client, we will _____ the paperwork as agreed before the day of the final transaction.

5. ask people for their opinion as part of a general study of views about a subject

_____ (paragraph 5)

Most people _____ incorrectly believed that the economy is currently in a slump.

6. a new plan to solve a problem _____ (paragraph 5)

HR announced that they would be launching new wellness _____, which includes walking meetings, wellness ambassadors, and other mental and physical health resources.

7. unharmed and without damage _____ (paragraph 6)

Despite the fire in the building, all our employees emerged _____.

8. cut or reduce dramatically _____ (paragraph 6)

We are about to unveil our latest strategy to _____ emissions in our manufacturing and distribution processes.

9. a time in which a country's economy is not successful, and conditions are bad for business

_____ (paragraph 6)

In times of _____, inflation and unemployment tend to be high while growth is low.

10. relating to the study of different groups that make up populations _____

(paragraph 7)

Many countries are going through a _____ transformation in which the population is getting older.

11. brave _____ (paragraph 10)

I think £2 million is a _____ but attainable target.

12. continue having something _____ (paragraph 11)

Our main challenge is attracting and _____ design talent.

13. new and modern, encouraging social change _____ (paragraph 13)

Most of our customers self-identify as _____ and liberal.

14. in progress, to be finished in the future _____ (paragraph 14)

Several new products, including a promising weight-loss drug, are _____.

Is the corporate DEI panic finally over?

IN THE US, THE DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION PUSH HAS QUIETLY ROLLED ON DESPITE POLITICAL BACKLASH

- 1 Since the Supreme Court overturned the use of affirmative action in college admissions last summer, it seems like corporate America has been consumed by panic over diversity and inclusion.
- 2 But last month, a diversity executive told me that it had not affected her work at all. I have to confess that I wondered if she was delusional. Had she not heard that conservative activists were threatening legal action against dozens of large companies running programmes for specific ethnic groups? Was she unaware that her colleagues in Silicon Valley were laid off by the dozen last year?
- 3 The executive, from a southern energy company, knew about it all. Yet the word she used to describe her office was “quiet.” Her mentorship programmes and cultural celebrations went on like any other year. That is the case in most human resources and diversity departments, save for a small group of high-profile companies, she insisted.
- 4 She is not the only one. While conservative lawmakers and billionaires try to undo the inclusion programmes that US corporations rolled out after George Floyd’s murder in 2020, nearly every one of the dozen executives I have interviewed recently tell me they are not altering their diversity plans.
- 5 The research group The Conference Board surveyed far more chief human resources officers than I did and found the same thing. Of the 194 executives they polled late last year, none said they planned to scale back their diversity initiatives in 2024. The likes of Bill Ackman and Elon Musk may say that such programmes discriminate against white people and men, but few executives seem to be listening.
- 6 That is not to say that the diversity discipline will escape from the current backlash unscathed. Several large Silicon Valley corporations slashed their diversity budgets last year amid recession fears, while lawsuits from conservative activists prompted Pfizer, Comcast, Goldman Sachs and Bank of America to expand programmes that were once reserved for specific racial minorities to people of all races.
- 7 Yet companies’ own demographic data shows that they are continuing to diversify their workforces even as they promote their modified programmes, according to Ken Janssens, cofounder of Windō, a platform that aggregates social responsibility data from hundreds of companies.
- 8 Disney, which became a primary target of anti-DEI campaigners for featuring minority and queer characters in its films, reported that it had increased the share of its executives that identified as people of colour from 21 per cent to 28.5 per cent over the past five years.
- 9 Nike still publishes its targets for the ethnic and gender diversity of its workforce, reporting that the representation of ethnic minorities among their US staff has steadily grown from 56 per cent to 63 per cent over the past seven years.
- 10 “It is quite bold of them, considering how much legal action is being taken against companies, so my hat’s off to them,” Janssens says. “While [other companies] might tout DEI less publicly, they will stay the course.”
- 11 Most companies seem to be far more worried about how a lack of diversity programming could make it more difficult to recruit and retain staff than getting sued, he added.
- 12 Renita Mollman, the chief administrator of Kansas City-based engineering consultancy Burns & McDonnell, says she was not feeling any pressure to alter her DEI plans. She’s too worried about the country’s shortage of engineering talent.
- 13 “We aren’t going to be the company with the most progressive, forward looking policies,” says Mollman, noting that they only organised employee resource groups, workers who join together based on shared identities or life experiences, in 2021. Such groups are a commonly accepted diversity initiative that were popular in many large companies before 2020.

Continued on next page

14 “I’d say we are neck-and-neck with most of our clients, [who are] airlines, consumer product manufacturers,” Mollman added. Burns & McDonnell also sponsors science, technology, engineering and maths programmes in local high schools and partnered with historically black colleges to diversify its talent pipeline.

15 “People may not be jumping up and down and screaming ‘DEI’ from the rooftops,” says Heather Foust-Cummings, a researcher at workplace-focused non-profit Catalyst, “but the work continues”.

FT

Taylor Nicole Rogers, 04 May, 2024

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3 Understanding the article

a. Are these sentences true or false according to the information in the article? Tick (✓) the sentences that are correct and rewrite and correct any that are false.

1. Since the Supreme Court approved the use of affirmative action in university admissions, corporate America has focused more on diversity and inclusion.
2. According to a diversity executive from a southern energy company, her work has not been affected.
3. According to the diversity executives interviewed by the writer, almost everyone is modifying the inclusion programmes launched after George Floyd's murder in 2020.
4. Of almost 200 executives polled in 2023, none stated intentions to reduce their diversity initiatives in 2024.
5. Diversity executives don't seem to be listening to those who say that their programmes discriminate against white people and men.
6. The diversity discipline might still be affected as many Silicon Valley corporations cut their diversity budgets due to fears of being sued.
7. Disney became a primary target of anti-DEI campaigners because it featured minority and queer characters in its films.
8. Disney reported that the share of its executives who identified as people of colour stood at 63 per cent, 7 per cent higher than five years earlier.
9. Janssens thinks that what Disney is doing is commendable.
10. Mollman says she is changing her DEI plans to find engineering talent.
11. Burns & McDonnell also sponsors STEM programmes in local high schools and partnered with historically black colleges to diversify its future talent pool.
12. Foust-Cummings says that the DEI work continues, but no one boasts about it.

4 Business language – idiomatic language and collocations

a. Find idiomatic phrases from the article that match the definitions below. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. in large numbers (paragraph 2)
2. admire someone for an achievement (paragraph 10)
3. continue doing something until you have achieved what you planned to do (paragraph 10)
4. considering future developments and planning for the future (paragraph 13)
5. equal likely to win (paragraph 14)
6. trying their best to be heard (paragraph 15)
7. say something publicly (paragraph 15)

b. Complete the collocations from the article with the nouns below.

action backlash budgets characters colleges
panic programmes staff workforce

1. be consumed by _____
2. threaten / take legal _____
3. alter / roll out / run / sponsor / undo diversity _____ or plans
4. escape from the _____
5. slash _____
6. diversify a(n) _____
7. feature minority _____
8. recruit / retain _____
9. partner with (historically black) _____

c. Rewrite the sentences using some of the idiomatic expressions and collocations.

1. We were extremely concerned as they continued to reduce the money available to our department.
2. They are very vocal about the increasing diversity of their employees.
3. They are hiring so many new employees.
4. They have said they might sue the film company for the way they have shown minority characters.
5. I would say these last two candidates have equal chances of landing the job.
6. I admire how they started their first DEI programme ten years ago and how they continued until they reached their targets.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Which minority groups in your country could most benefit from inclusion programmes? Do you know any organisations that have initiatives to increase the number of executives who identify as one of these minority groups?
- What are some of the “unintentional” positive consequences of diversity and inclusion programmes?
- How do DEI programmes generally impact companies’ value and profitability? Provide examples.
- Can you give an example of a controversial corporate DEI decision? Why was it controversial?

6 Wider business theme – controversial DEI decisions

a. Research a controversial DEI decision a company has made and its effect on its business. Use the questions below to guide you.

- What did they decide to do? Why?
- What were the financial implications?
- What were the implications for employees?
- What were the implications for investors and customers?

b. Take turns sharing your findings. After each case, discuss whether you think it was a success or not. Give reasons for your answers and say if you agree or disagree with others.

Which companies make the best case study to showcase a successful DEI programme?

Useful language

I'd like you to reflect on ... / The significance of this is ...

What are the implications for ...? / Let's consider ... / I'd like to point out that ...

Considering ... / On the whole, ... / Consequently, ...

My point of view is that ... / As far as I'm concerned, ... / I am convinced that ...