THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN FOSTERING WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN DIGITALLY ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to emphasize the role and importance of employee education and training in digitally oriented organizations so that they can recognize, comprehend, and accept diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Digitally oriented organizations have the advantage of remote work and flexible working hours, which allow for the inclusion of individuals who may not meet the requirements of traditional work environments, involving physical presence for eight hours a day. Conducted desk research shows that education and training on diversity and inclusion in digitally oriented organizations have an important role in raising awareness, promoting understanding, and supporting positive behaviors within all employees. The main advantages of workplace diversity and inclusion are a more diversified and high-quality pool of candidates, a better organizational reputation among employees, increased innovation, and higher profitability. To fully realize these benefits, it is essential that all employees wholeheartedly embrace and foster diversity and inclusion. This paper's theoretical implications include a systematic review and analysis of existing literature on the topic, while practical implication is in providing key recommendations to leaders and managers for achieving high levels of diversity and inclusion in the workplace through education and training.

Keywords: workplace diversity, workplace inclusion, digitally oriented organizations, education.

INTRODUCTION

Digitally oriented organizations that embrace remote work and flexible employment are increasingly adopting diversity and inclusion as core principles of their functioning and business. This shift offers opportunities to individuals who may face challenges securing employment in the traditional, office-bound model that requires physical presence for eight hours a day. In digitally oriented organizations, diversity and inclusion policies are not merely optional; they are deemed essential for survival, growth, and development (Garg & Sangwan, 2021). In recent years, the European Commission has been actively encouraging companies to implement diversity and inclusion practices to meet the requirements of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement (Confetto et al., 2023). A diverse workforce is of

great importance for the organization's progress and development (O'Donovan, 2018). Diversity encompasses not only factors such as ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and gender but also considerations like age, physical and mental abilities, social status, marital status, parental status, place of residence, and work experience (Loden & Rosener, 1991; Champoux, 2011). Diversity, in essence, pertains to any characteristic that distinguishes one individual from others.

Within the realm of human resource management, diversity and inclusion have become increasingly prominent and represent pivotal concepts in contemporary business. The way these concepts are approached can greatly influence a company's success. Human resource management involves diversity management, which is defined as harnessing differences to create business advantages, realizing the potential of all employees, promoting equality, and providing equal opportunities (Greif, 2015). Diversity encompasses the collective mix of differences and similarities, including individual and organizational characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, preferences, and behaviours. Inclusion, on the other hand, signifies the creation of a work environment where all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully, have equitable access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute fully to the company's success (Talent Intelligence, 2014). Inclusion entails empowering each employee to make their maximum contribution, irrespective of their unique individual attributes. Therefore, inclusion is linked to how employees perceive their importance within the organization, including participation in the decision-making process, involvement in group tasks, and access to information and resources (Mor Barak, 2008). Nowadays, in a digitally oriented world of work, it is of significant importance to offer students and graduates crucial knowledge regarding diversity and inclusion as important aspects of organizational success in the long run (Aškerc Zadravec, 2023). Furthermore, all employees face the challenge of upgrading their existing knowledge and skills, as well as obtaining completely new knowledge and skills suited for the requirements of the digital age (Gigauri, 2020). The ongoing digital transformation involves the adoption of new technologies, which leads to completely new work possibilities in all industries and sectors (Ciderova, Rutkay & Sirotka, 2023).

This paper points out the role and importance of training and education of employees in order to promote and foster diversity and inclusion in digitally oriented organizations. The paper is organized as follows. Following the introduction, an applied desk research method was presented and discussed. The following title focuses on research results and discussion of research findings. Finally, the important findings, implications for the academic community and practice, limitations, and recommendations for future research were discussed.

METHODS

The key goals of the research are: (1) to identify the key benefits of diversity and inclusion in digitally oriented organizations; (2) to assess the current state of diversity and inclusion, and (3) to emphasize the importance of employee education and training in promoting and nurturing diversity and inclusion.

To accomplish the imposed research goals, this paper used desk research of published secondary data to provide a broad and more comprehensive perspective on the topic while also confirming existing theoretical foundations and research findings. The topic was examined and

evaluated through analyzing existing literature such as books, journals, articles, conference proceedings, business and research reports. The major goal was to highlight the results of prior study findings addressing the relevance and value of education and training in promoting workplace diversity and inclusion, particularly in digitally oriented organizations.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Benefits of Diversity and Inclusion in Digitally Oriented Organizations

There are numerous advantages for digitally oriented organizations in embracing diversity and inclusion, which contribute to business success and desirable outcomes. Upon reviewing literature, some of the key benefits identified include (Chaudhry, Ymbong Paquibut & Nawaz Tunio, 2021; Hofhuis, van der Rijt & Vlug, 2016; Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008):

More diverse and talented candidates: Digitally oriented organizations that adopt remote work access significantly more diverse candidates from any part of the world. Consequently, these companies can focus on candidates with the best competencies. Furthermore, in the digital era, an increasing number of candidates are seeking employment in organizations that promote diversity and inclusion. A Glassdoor survey revealed that 57% of employees and 67% of job seekers regard diversity and inclusion as important elements of the work environment, influencing the recruitment process and employee retention. The survey also found that 72% of women, compared to 62% of men, consider diversity important (Glassdoor, 2014).

Improved reputation of the organization among employees: A Deloitte Australia study in 2013 showed that up to 80% of employees feel they work in a highly successful organization when it is committed to diversity and inclusion. This perception among employees positively impacts overall performance and the attraction of a higher-quality workforce. Employees satisfied with their organization tend to promote a positive image of its culture and values, leading to an enhanced reputation and attracting a wider range of job candidates. In digitally oriented organizations, employees often share their positive experiences and opinions about the work atmosphere and organizational culture on various social and professional networks, thereby positively influencing the organization's reputation and image.

Greater degree of innovation: Research published in the *Harvard Business Review* investigated the effects of diversity on innovation. The study involved surveying 1,800 professionals, conducting 40 case studies, and numerous focus groups and interviews. It explored two types of diversity: innate and acquired. The former includes traits such as gender, ethnic origin, and sexual orientation, while the latter encompasses traits acquired through experience, like working in a different country or with diverse groups. Companies with leaders possessing at least three innate and three acquired diversity traits, termed two-dimensional diversity, were found to outperform others in innovation and performance (Hewlett, Marshall & Sherbin, 2013). A BCG study in 2018 showed a significant positive correlation between diversity and organizational innovation. It surveyed diversity managers, HR executives, and directors of 171 German, Swiss and Austrian companies with up to 10,000 employees and operations in various industries, such as chemistry, technology, goods, finance and healthcare.

The study highlighted that innovation benefits from various types of diversity. The presence of diverse managers, including women or individuals from different countries, industries or companies can boost innovation. This is particularly beneficial for innovation in complex companies with multiple product lines or operating in various industry segments. In addition, it should not be lost sight of the fact that employees with different educational backgrounds have distinct perspectives on observing problems, which can contribute significantly to finding the best solution.

Higher profits: Ethnically diverse organizations are 35% more likely to achieve higher profits, while organizations with gender diversity have a 15% greater chance of the same, as demonstrated by a McKinsey Institute study (Hunt, Layton & Princeet, 2015). According to this study, while diversity does not automatically equate to higher earnings, organizations with rich gender, racial and ethnic diversity within their workforce benefit from varied attitudes and ways of thinking. This diversity contributes to greater productivity, innovation, and reputation through better service provision, leading to improved business results.

Certainly, an inclusive work environment, where employees have the right to vote and express their opinions regardless of the mentioned differences, positively influences business results. Not only are employees more motivated in their work and in contributing to the success of the organization, but this inclusive image is also reflected externally among co-workers, partners and consumers. Many studies have confirmed the positive economic impact of diversity and inclusion. For instance, companies that lack diversity are 1.32 times less productive than those with pronounced diversity (Kasinathan, Mallu & Bozinski, 2024).

Results on Diversity and Inclusion at the Global Level

A large number of organizations and institutions analyse the state of diversity and inclusion at the global level. Additionally, an increasing number of organizations consider diversity and inclusion important topics in their business practices. The results of the research involving over 247,000 students from the 12 largest world economies as reported by Universum (2019), pointed out the following:

- In 2019, 85% of over 2,000 of the world's most desirable employers considered diversity in employment a high priority.
- When asked what diversity means to them, 93% of global talent described workplace diversity and inclusion as cultural diversity, which transcended age, ethnicity or gender.
- Companies in consumer goods, technology, professional services, engineering and manufacturing, and consulting were seen as those investing the most in and communicating their diversity and inclusion initiatives effectively.
- Authentic communication of a company's efforts to create a more inclusive environment is key to gaining a better position in rankings.

A survey of 107 participants about the top priorities of human resources in 2018 showed that for only 8% of them, diversity and inclusion were among the leading concerns. The first place was taken by the digitization of human resources (28%), followed by continuous performance management (26%), then employee experience (24%), adapted organizational design (11%), and only then diversity and inclusion (Gartner, 2018). However, one should consider the limitation of this research - a small sample size that prevents generalizing the

results. On the other hand, the key advantage of this research is that it provides a general picture of diversity and inclusion.

Many studies conducted in the field of human resources by various global consulting organizations indicate that diversity and inclusion are important factors. McKinsey points out that organizations with a gender-diverse executive team are up to 21% more likely to achieve above-average profits and up to 27% more likely to create long-term value than organizations where one gender predominates in leadership roles (Hunt et al., 2018).

Although the promotion and representation of diversity are significant steps towards business improvement, if the entire organization is not ready and able to adopt and incorporate this diversity into its daily operations, the end results will be suboptimal. It is essential for all organization members to practice tolerance towards their colleagues and associates, embrace and respect diversity, and conscientiously avoid any form of discrimination or exclusion in collaborative projects and activities, particularly based on individual characteristics.

Commitment to diversity and fostering an inclusive culture within an organization is just the beginning. It is crucial for all employees to embrace and embody these values. Often, there are individuals within organizations who may not fully understand the repercussions of discrimination and intolerance and may continue to treat colleagues and associates unfairly based on their differences. Therefore, it is imperative to actively raise awareness and provide comprehensive education and training on diversity and inclusion to all employees, ensuring a truly inclusive and respectful work environment.

The Role of Education in Promoting Diversity and inclusion

Training is a planned organizational activity aimed at enabling employees to acquire the knowledge, skills, and behaviours necessary to perform daily activities and tasks (Noe et al., 2016). The outcome of training is the development of intangible assets, namely human capital, which encompasses knowledge (knowing what), skills (knowing how), systemic understanding and creativity (knowing why), and the motivation to produce high-quality products and services (sincere concern for quality). (Campbell, Coff & Kryscynski, 2012). Diversity training specifically seeks to increase awareness, understanding, or action regarding diversity and inclusion, emphasizing the need to clearly define its purpose and goals. There are two key training models: awareness training and skills training (Roberson, Kulik & Tan, 2013).

Awareness training focuses on developing awareness and understanding of diversity through an informal or emotional approach. This approach draws attention to diversity issues as a foundation for behavioural change. One approach to awareness training involves providing information on topics such as company diversity strategies, the significance of various identities, and the mechanics of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Another approach involves educating about group dynamics and social categorization processes. A third approach emphasizes increasing self-awareness of personal biases and their impact on behaviour towards others. While this can lead to conflict and negative emotions due to challenging established ways of thinking, it can also motivate positive attitude and behaviour changes, though it may sometimes be stressful or even cause negative reactions.

Skills training is a model designed to equip participants with new skills that enhance diversity and inclusion. A notable shortcoming of this model is the lack of a universally recognized, empirically backed catalogue of diversity skills. Nonetheless, skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and listening are essential to fostering understanding and cooperation. Among the various frameworks for this training, the most renowned is social learning theory, which emphasizes modelling appropriate behaviour, practice and feedback, positive outcomes, and developing self-efficacy - the belief in one's ability to learn and perform new behaviours. This model requires time and significant investment, leading many organizations to prefer the simpler awareness training model.

When designing a training program, it is important to start with a needs assessment. This process, as outline by Hays-Thomas (2016), included three levels of analysis:

- Individual analysis: Identifying and analysing individuals who need training, considering their education level, habits, and motivation.
- Analysis of knowledge, skills, and abilities: Determining training content based on the required characteristics, knowledge, skills, and abilities for job tasks.
- Organizational analysis: Assessing organization support or resistance to training, alignment with organizational goals, and available resources like funding, time, and personnel.

After conducting the assessment, the information obtained is used for further steps in training design. This involves setting appropriate goals or learning outcomes, detailing what employees will learn or be capable of after training. These outcomes will ultimately be used to evaluate the quality and success of the training. This phase also includes selecting the training environment, methods, schedules, and trainers. After the completed training, it is necessary to collect data in order to identify whether the training met its intended goals. This assessment checks if the results are attributable to the training or other factors. Evaluating the effectiveness of the training is vital to decide whether it should continue, be modified, or be adapted for others. Additionally, it is important to verify if the training has been effectively learned and applied in the workplace, ensuring that participants integrate the learned content into their daily activities.

Digitally oriented organizations are proactive in designing varied learning activities related to diversity. These activities help to enhance collaboration among employees with differing characteristics. Furthermore, keeping in mind the rapid progress of modern technologies, it is crucial to continuously adapt and update the content and strategies of training programs. This adaptation is necessary due to the increasingly diverse skills, knowledge, learning styles, and languages of employees. Decisions about the implementation of training (whether in printed form, traditional lessons, online classes, etc.), should align with the capabilities and preferences of the employees. It is important for managers of digitally oriented organizations to differentiate between diversity training and broader diversity and inclusion programs. While training is a component of these programs, it alone is not sufficient for achieving true diversity and incorporation of these values into the organization. Many organizations require specialized programs to effectively foster and support diversity and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the key benefits of diversity and inclusion in digitally oriented organizations, assesses the current state of diversity and inclusion, and emphasizes the importance of employee education and training in promoting and nurturing diversity and inclusion.

Conducted desk research showed that workplace diversity and inclusion are crucial for survival and business success of any organization, especially of those organizations who are digitally oriented. Modern information technologies facilitate diversity and inclusion, making them integral to organizational practices. Digitally oriented organizations leverage the benefits of diversity and inclusion by enabling remote work and flexible working hours. This broadens their talent pool and maximizes the advantages of diversity. The key advantages of workplace diversity and inclusion include a more diverse and high-quality pool of candidates, enhanced organizational reputation among employees, increased innovation, and greater profitability. To fully realize these advantages, it is essential to provide education and training on diversity and inclusion, aiming to raise awareness, promote understanding, and encourage positive practices and engagement by all employees.

The theoretical implications of this paper include an extensive review of current literature and a broadening of theoretical knowledge in a contemporary organizational environment shaped by digital technologies. This provides researchers with a foundation for future research on the topic. This paper's practical implications include providing crucial recommendations and guidance to leaders and managers in digitally oriented organizations on how to provide organizational culture, as well as the overall organizational climate and atmosphere, in order to achieve high levels of diversity and inclusion.

The paper's main limitation was its focus on desk research and secondary data sources. Future study proposals on this topic include conducting empirical research and collecting primary data to gain real insights about the role and significance of employee education and training in fostering and nurturing diversity and inclusion.

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