Colliers

Spring 2021

Workplace Strategies, Practices and Layouts that Help Drive EDI

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Understanding Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The first part in understanding equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is being aware they are not interchangeable and then delving into their differences. While many do well at diversity, they fumble with inclusivity and equity.

Diversity references differences such as thought, identity, culture or gender within a workforce.

Inclusion involves creating an environment where everyone feels heard and valued. For example, "Diversity is an invitation to a party, whereas inclusion is being asked to dance."

Equity acknowledges these differences and gives individuals the resources they need to reach their full potential. Your office can act as an inhibitor or enabler of your EDI strategies based on the culture it inherently creates.

More than 1 in 4 women (2 million women) are contemplating leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers due to the impacts of COVID-19. This is the first-time women have left the workforce at higher rates than men, which could potentially wipe out any progress that has been made.

This challenge presents an opportunity for employers to restructure their workforce in terms of both their internal strategies and office design, to support EDI.

Source: McKinsey Women in the Workplace Survey 2020

<5% the total number of CEOs within Fortune 500 companies are female

Hiring and Promoting a Diverse Workforce Including All Genders

A survey by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) examining Fortune 500 companies found there were only 24 female CEOs within these companies, representing less than 5% of the total number of CEOs within these firms. The findings further revealed that **senior-level women were almost twice as likely to be "Onlys"**, meaning they are the **only or one of the only women in the room** at work. Frequently, these women feel an increased pressure to work and be available compared to their peers. These feelings lead to a staggering **three-quarters of women in senior roles experiencing burnout**. This population is also 1.5 times more likely to consider downshifting or leaving their organization. To reduce this increased pressure or feeling of needing to "always be on", an office should include a variety of seating arrangements such as open areas, private offices and lounge areas with desks.

According to previous studies, women likened open-office plans to a fishbowl where they're on display for perimeter offices consisting of typically more senior males. Not only did women feel more uncomfortable, but risks of sexual harassment also increased.

Changing the Hierarchy on Paper and within the Office

Tara Kemes, General Manager at Cinesite, emphasized the importance of the entire organization committing to the whole effort; it is better to pivot and grow rather than do nothing at all. While doing this, it is vital to be open to gaps that may emerge. For instance, Marc Benioff, the CEO of Salesforce, received information on the pay gap between men and women. Instead of reacting, he asked Human Resources for the data and subsequently took action to close the gap.

While beloved corner offices with waterfront views may be something senior-level professionals want to hold onto, such an arrangement can reinforce a "gap" between divisions and ranks. Having higher floors, special meeting rooms (think lawyers lounges) or corner offices designated for certain divisions or employee ranks can signal a hierarchy. A senior leader in Vancouver emphasized a few key questions to ask: Who sits on your highest floors? Who has an office? Which employees have the largest ones? Your answers are most likely those in executive positions, signaling that they are viewed as the "most important." With such a practice, silos emerge among teams, boundaries develop and individuals gain rank. A local example of a firm whose office layout does not reflect hierarchy is Whitelaw Twining. Working with architecture firm Gensler, Whitelaw Twining transformed its corner offices into collaborative areas reinforcing a culture of inclusivity and togetherness.

Providing Childcare Options and Amenities
Including All Life Stages

76% of mothers with children under 10 years old identified childcare as their top challenge throughout COVID-19 (Source: McKinsey Women in the Workplace Survey 2020. Situating an office close to **childcare options and providing nursing rooms for new mothers are important in creating a space where women can balance being both a mother and employee**. Alley implemented a world-class mothers' room that includes basic nursery items such as a changing station, refrigerator, first-aid kits, water and essential sanitary supplies. The agency then created a sense of home in the space through serene soundscapes, lightly scented decorative sticks and soft, calming tones. M Moser followed, naming its New York office's lactation room "MLQ", which stands for mind, lounge and quiet. The room includes all the above, along with specific lighting and a zero-technology policy to allow mothers to detach from work demands.

Alley's Lactation Room in Chelsea, New York which is open 24/7 is used by on average 7 women a day.

PwC Mother's Room in Columbus, Ohio is one of the 80 Mother's Rooms located across their US offices, allowing women to balance being both an employee and mother.

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Offering Stipends for Equal Ergonomic Setups

Including All Economic Backgrounds

The office should accommodate staff and blend teams through increased use of technology. However, the use of technology can be a barrier to certain demographics. Technology depends on one's economic level and for equity to be maintained, it is vital to ensure everyone has the same access. Jason Santeford and Jessica Golding from Gensler Vancouver discussed how some companies provide employees with ergonomic chairs, internet stipends and laptops, which allow employees to have equal, livable setups. In McKinsey's report, companies have not only adjusted performance measures to account for COVID-19 challenges, but have also begun adjusting or incorporating the use of stipends to offset the costs of working from home. It was noted 11% of the companies reviewed maintained the stipends they had already been providing, and 33% began incorporating them.

Undergoing Unconscious Bias Training

Unconscious bias awareness means understanding the blind spots of an organization. It entails asking ourselves: Where are the gaps in our thinking and how do we ensure we have a different point of view? All of the individuals we spoke with, such as Bridgitte Anderson, CEO of The Greater Vancouver Board of Trade, noted the value of engaging in unconscious bias training with leaders. Anderson ascertained that she takes away something new every time. Every individual has a bias and the more we are aware of it, the more we can counteract it.

> Some companies provide employees with ergonomic chairs, internet stipends and computers, which allow employees to have equal, livable setups

> "How can we leverage our lease to give back to employees? Can we find a building with more amenities that will make our employees happier and more productive?"

Jessica Golding, Design Manager at Gensler Vancouver

Lighthouse's room signage featuring oversized room numbers that contrast with the wall, enabling easier viewing for those who are vision impaired.

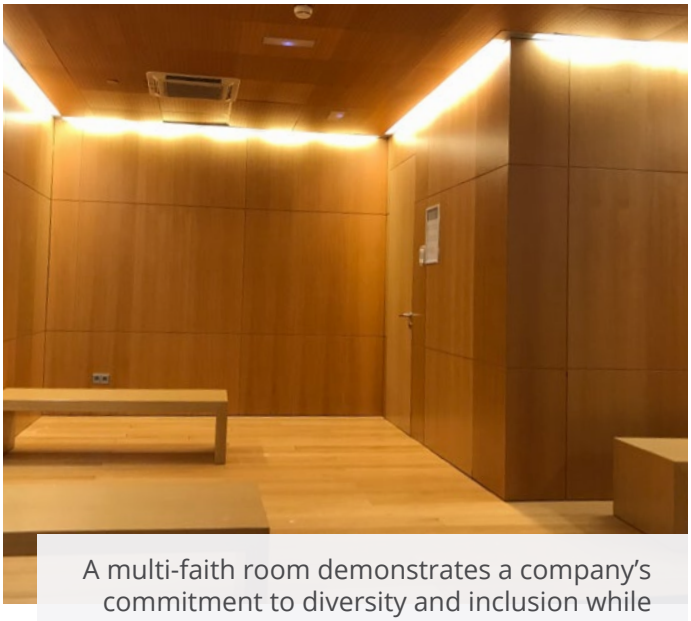
Providing Accessibility Features Including All Impairments

Gensler Vancouver's inclusive design practice has grown enormously to account for the increasing demand in this area. Accessibility features that are purposely part of the design versus being an add-on are key. Visually impaired employees can be made more comfortable with certain types of lights or colours that contrast with skin tones to help individuals better read facial expressions and hand movements. Using different colours for horizontal and vertical surfaces, including elevation changes, can also help those who are vision-impaired avoid falls or injury. Specialty floors and kitchens are best suited for those with auditory impairments, while door openers have an enormous impact on a physically impaired employee's feeling of comfort and belonging in a space.

Creating Space For All Faiths and Religions

Including All Faiths

Wellness spaces, including prayer and multi-faith rooms, allowing the practice of all faiths, have become increasingly popular. These rooms include sound, speakers, foot washing stations and kneeling benches. Religious icons should be discouraged to avoid offending members of other religious groups. Showing this commitment to diversity can boost employee morale, productivity and engagement, as well as attract new high-calibre talent.



A multi-faith room demonstrates a company's commitment to diversity and inclusion while increasing loyalty and decreasing absenteeism.

Soundcloud's HQ in Berlin, Germany features a tech-free zone where employees can recharge or quite literally have a "fireside chat".

"Treehouses" at Microsoft's Redmond Campus allows employees to work in nature and find quiet time to focus.

Designating Space to Mentally Disconnect And Recharge

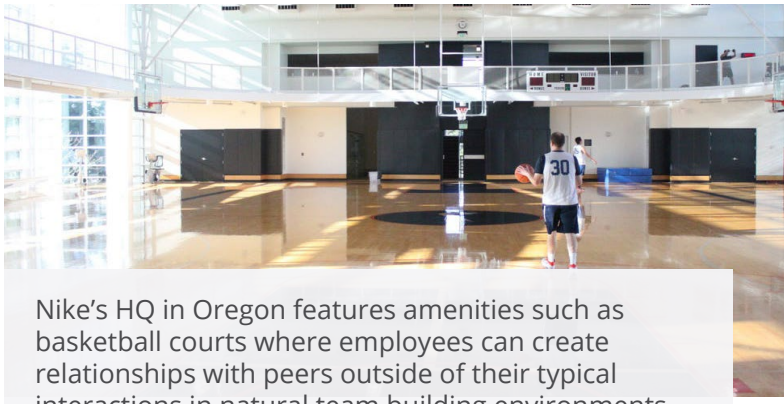
Including All Personality Types and Privacy Preferences

Providing spaces that allow employees to disconnect and recharge helps with privacy issues from an open office design and in ensuring all personality types are given a space that allows them to bring their full selves to work. Balancing the mix of introverted and extroverted personalities in an office can be challenging, but is important for maximum efficiency, productivity and happiness. This can be done by providing open areas where extroverts are comfortable, as well as small phone rooms, inconspicuous workstations or private pods that cater to introverts. Small breakout rooms or pods give employees areas to step out after a long day, or introverts a place to recharge.

Providing Amenities and Spaces Where Employees Can Connect with Others from Different Backgrounds

Providing Opportunities to Create a Sense of Belonging and an Inclusive Culture

COVID-19 has reduced employees' interactions with people from different backgrounds, creating a feeling of disconnect, not only from their firm, but from their coworkers. Recent studies have found that **two-thirds of the workforce feel disconnected,** with 82% of Gen Z and 81% of Millennials experiencing this sentiment. Bumping into a colleague over coffee has been replaced by scheduled online meetings and day-to-day interactions have become limited to direct team members or close peers who are most likely of similar demographics such as experience or age. These **informal interactions offer people a way to be seen, heard and appreciated**. As employees are brought back to the office, companies should focus on providing opportunities to create a sense of belonging (inclusiveness that cannot be 'remoted'. Gensler discussed recent projects wherein offices incorporated gaming rooms, a life-sized shuffleboard and video games, providing natural opportunities for employees to connect and socialize with others from diverse backgrounds in a team setting, while also fostering company culture.



Nike's HQ in Oregon features amenities such as basketball courts where employees can create relationships with peers outside of their typical interactions in natural team building environments.

Foursquare's HQ in New York features themed rooms designed around the digital badges users earn from checking in at various locations using their service to foster a fun culture and connect employees.

Challenges in Incorporating EDI

In the words of a Vancouver leader, “Some of the biggest challenges are time and budget. It’s hard to move the needle forward without these two.” Without efficient planning and incorporating EDI goals into a firm’s budget, it is easy for them to get lost or pushed to the side. Another challenge is the difficulty in changing old behaviours, which requires change management and shifting one’s mindset and actions.

Bridgitte Anderson emphasized the importance of being open, transparent and vulnerable while undergoing an independent journey, one in which employees are likely at different parts along the path. It is important to create space where employees feel comfortable engaging in the discussion and ensuring under-represented groups are part of the conversations.

How Can We Overcome These Challenges?

Building metrics for EDI and how it directly affects revenue can help companies stay committed to their EDI goals and ensure they meet them.

Business plans should capture how a company will use key resources, such as time and money. In our discussions with experts, some believe in straying from the use of quotas and steering towards targets instead. Having a set of targets can allow companies to track their progress and note potential gaps. However, companies should handle quotas carefully, as they can work against diversity and inclusion efforts by creating a stigma that employees were hired to reach certain numbers rather than for their capabilities.

Tracking EDI

Tracking EDI should involve measuring recruitment, promoting and attrition. One way to track EDI is by measuring your current workforce and **tracking gender through benefits** when employees self-identify for these. Ethnicity can be more difficult to track as it depends on the openness of the employee. A firm can track promoted employees and look at the resulting breakdown to check potential imbalances. **Turnover** is another important factor to consider, since a **high rate could signal a toxic environment** and serve as a red flag to make the workplace more inclusive.

"Inclusivity means not just 'we're allowed to be there,' but we are valued. I've always said: Smart teams will do amazing things, but truly diverse teams will do impossible things."

Claudia Brind-Woody,
Managing Director at IBM

Why EDI Matters and How Real Estate Can Help

There's Demand and Desire for Change and Understanding

The Greater Vancouver Board of Trade's Diversity and Inclusion certification program has successfully certified 220 people and is on track to have 500 individuals certified by the summer of 2021. There is a broad spectrum of individuals across the business community who are signing up, from C-suite executives to people just beginning their career. People at all levels and industries are seeking knowledge, change and understanding.

Better Decision-Making

We are only going to make the best decisions when we have the most diversity of thought. Stanford Professor David Daniels and Erik Larson from PM Editorial found **diverse teams outperform individual decision-makers up to 87% of the time** when making business decisions.

More Innovation

Diversity enables the sharing of "out-of-the box" ideas and increased adaptability that innovation requires. A study by Josh Bersin found inclusive companies are **1.7 times more likely to be innovation leaders** in their market and 1.8 times more likely to be change-ready. Companies can capture market opportunities and react to market changes by being innovative, which is more important than ever as we have seen through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Better Understand Your Clients

A 2013 Harvard Business Review found that a team with a member who shares a client's ethnicity is **152% more likely than another team to understand that client**. No matter what space you are in, your customer base is most likely a diverse set of individuals. To win in a diverse market, your team must have enough insight to empathize with the customers they are trying to service.

Diversity Divisions in Architectural Firms are Growing and it is for Good Reason

Hire third party experts who can assist in the design process to avoid bias, while incorporating accessibility features within your design versus as a secondary "extra".

Childcare Considerations

When choosing an office location, consider its proximity to childcare options and the possibility of incorporating a nursing room. By making it easier for mothers to balance both work and family responsibilities, companies can both attract and retain strong talent.

Focus on Amenities

Creating spaces where employees feel like they are a part of a team outside of their day-to-day work fosters a sense of belonging and inclusiveness. Through this, employees feel a sense of increased comfort in bringing their full selves to work.

Convert Underutilized Space into "Unplug" Zones

If you want a diverse workforce, it is vital to create environments where all personalities can shine and feel welcomed. This can be done by providing quiet spaces such as pods or library areas, where employees, especially more introverted personalities, can unplug.

Restructure Your Floor Plan

Having large corner offices dedicated to the most senior staff or a completely open office can counteract a company's diversity and inclusion initiatives. Providing a multitude of environments within one space, such as breakout rooms, open areas and closed offices, allows employees to choose where they work and thus, feel their best. If large corner offices must stay, ensuring an authentic "open door policy" is maintained can help break down disconnection amongst executives and employees.

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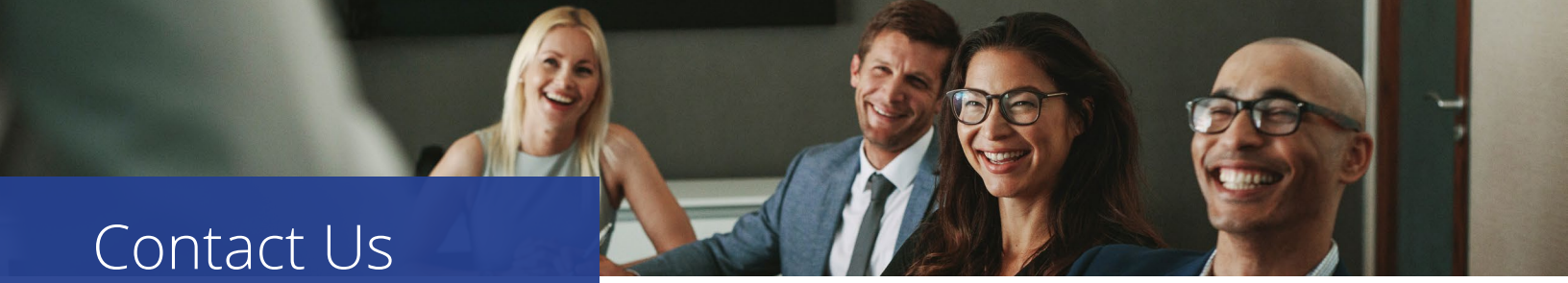

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Jennica's Background

I began working in Finance in Espirito Santo, Brazil, and Manhattan, New York, where I helped businesses through their growth. I joined Colliers' Property Management team in 2019, transitioning to Advisory in 2020. While in NYC, I was nominated to support Wall Street's WE NYC program which educates 300+ women/minority entrepreneurs on financial literacy. I serve on the Boards of My Artist's Corner and MADD Canada, is the current Co-Chair of Community Volunteer Connections, and is part of the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade's Outreach Committee.

Colin's Background

For over 25 years, I've specialized in finding real estate solutions for business challenges, with a focus on technology and professional services firms. I use an exclusive methodology to truly understand my clients' businesses and industries, giving them unique insights into their operations and positively impacting business drivers, including productivity, culture, engagement, retention/attraction, brand and operational efficiency. Not only that, I do it on the very best financial terms.

I've traveled to 20 cities around the world to research the future of office space, and to study workplace design trends that increase employee engagement. I speak regularly at conferences about my findings, and contribute to reports and white papers.

I am one of five people on Colliers' National Advisory Board which advises Colliers' Canadian CEO on key national business issues, am a regular faculty member at Colliers University in the Netherlands where I teach Colliers' leading professionals from around the world and have been awarded the Business In Vancouver Top Forty under 40 Award.

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