

DIVERSITY CONCEPTS

# INTERSECTIONALITY: THE COMPLEX KEY TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The concept of intersectionality is now making its way from the halls of academic discourse to the offices of businesses and nonprofits working to improve diversity and inclusion (D&I). Intersectionality moves away from categorizing individuals according to a single identity group. As a result, it reveals the complexity of identity within organizations and calls for a more nuanced approach to D&I.

A lack of equity in the organizational culture affects how resources are prioritized. Looking at how – or if – various groups have access to resources such as funding, space, contact with leaders, or opportunities for advancement can help break cycles that perpetuate inequity. Addressing the issues can boost peoples' chances for success. No matter the organization, the work of diversity and inclusion cannot be successful without a focus on equity.

## TANGIBLE BENEFITS

This white paper:

- defines intersectionality
- explains the importance of an intersectional approach to D&I
- offers real examples of how intersectional identities impact the workplace
- introduces the importance of intersectional leadership, giving readers an improved understanding of how intersectionality impacts their organizations.

## APPLICABLE ROLES

D&I practitioners and advocates at various stages in their careers will benefit from reading this white paper.

- D&I practitioners and advocates – both individuals and groups – who are charged with leading initiatives within their organizations.
- Leaders who want to better understand the various impacts and needs associated with D&I initiatives.
- Individuals interested in how intersectionality might impact them as employees and leaders.

# INTRODUCTION: DEFINING INTERSECTIONALITY

In its most basic definition, intersectionality is the interrelatedness of multiple identity categories, such as age, gender, class, race, and ability. However, the concept is most often raised in discussion of the negative impacts of those interrelated identities. As a result, most definitions resemble something like the following:

*The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.*  
(Google Dictionary)

*The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.*  
(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Intersectional theory has been mostly developed in the sociology world over the past several decades. Among the academic arenas that have most actively expanded upon intersectionality are women's and gender studies, race studies, and cultural studies.

At the same time, larger societal movements such as the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, and Black Lives Matter have also highlighted intersectionality in their activism. In all of these arenas, the principal argument is that correcting inequity requires a multifaceted view of how members of the target group experience the world.

## **Why does intersectionality matter for D&I?**

Although it has taken some time for the concept of intersectionality to break out of academic circles, it is now finding its way into major business conferences and individual organizations.(1) While all have a natural human tendency to assign individuals to simple categories, the reality is that identities overlap, compound, and even evolve over time.

## DEFINING INTERSECTIONALITY (CONT.)

International consulting firm Deloitte lays out one business-focused explanation of why one-dimensional D&I efforts don't cut it:

*Any attempt to bucket groups for D&I initiatives is incomplete as a diversity framework, because any such effort forces the choosing between identities and the privileging of one identity over others. Put another way, the very act of naming or categorizing group identities has the paradoxical effect of excluding or downplaying other intersecting identities of the individual members of that group.(2)*

However, the powerful fact that identifying with one category excludes other parts of your identity is constantly overlooked or minimized when it is acknowledged. While people are often able to recognize and discuss the complexity of their own identities, they are much less likely to recognize or acknowledge the same in their coworkers. This can make it difficult to understand problems on your team, and it can blind you to hidden potential among groups and individuals.

Adopting an intersectional lens might call for a radical reframing of D&I within an organization or within your own mind. It calls for questions such as:

- In an atmosphere where everyone appears to look alike, does that mean there is no diversity?
- When more people who look different are brought in, does that mean the work is done?
- Can affinity groups truly serve people if they are based on single categories?
- Are affinity groups inadvertently or inherently exclusive?

At the same time, recognizing intersectionality creates a wealth of opportunities for understanding how people can be their very best by bringing their whole selves to work. When we understand the multifaceted strengths and challenges that people bring to our organizations, we also gain a better picture of how our teams can excel because of these individuals.

# USING YOUR INTERSECTIONAL LENS

The numerous categories of difference in the workplace can intersect in countless ways. It can depend on everything from the type of industry to the makeup of the personnel. Below are some examples that illustrate the complexity that becomes apparent when examining inequity through an intersectional lens. In each case, consider the ways in which certain identity realities can heighten the experience of marginalization in the workplace, as well as the opportunities they open up for unlocking the power of inclusion.

- **Age, Gender, and Technology**

One study in the health-care industry found that as workplace technology changed, older workers prone to experiencing age bias had to compensate in additional ways that were invisible to their employers.<sup>(3)</sup> For instance, they might spend extra time working at home to complete tasks, or spend more time outside of work exercising in order to keep up with the physical demands of their jobs.

Others either sought early retirement or moved into positions where being older was no longer a disadvantage. At the same time, lower-level managers were making accommodations so that older workers could remain on the job. In contrast attitudes higher up the chain, they found little issue with accommodations such as having daytime-only rotating shifts, or shorter shifts, or allocating tasks.

The intersectional examination in the study also uncovered a gendered aspect of age and technology changes. While age impacted everyone, different accommodations were made for positions that were dominated by men versus positions that were dominated by women. Specifically, aging doctors (mostly male) received more accommodations than aging nurses (mostly female).

INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES CAN HEIGHTEN MARGINALIZATION, AND ALSO UNLOCK OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSION.

# USING YOUR INTERSECTIONAL LENS

- **Nationality and Ethnicity**

Intersectionality is also important in examining compounding identities related to nationality and ethnicity. One study found that when looking at immigrant populations, the nature of their immigration to the country made a difference in how effective unions could be when advocating for the group.(4)

Because trade unions tend to consider migrants primarily as workers rather than as migrant workers with particular and overlapping forms of oppression, they tend to see workplace and migration issues as separate. Failing to realize the intersectionality of the experiences of migrant workers affected recruitment strategies and activities, hindering the effective involvement of diverse and marginalized workers in unions.

Another study examined how ethnicity and class or economic status can have significant compounding effects at many stages of employment. One study in the United Kingdom found that ethnic minorities were less likely than white majority group members to have jobs that provided them with pensions. What's more interesting is that the study revealed that even when ethnic minorities do gain employment with pension benefits, some groups – specifically Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Polish individuals – were much less likely to participate, and therefore fewer receive the long-term benefits for various reasons.(5)

Viewed through a conventional lens, whites or white men would have been viewed as a monolithic group. But the intersectional lens the researchers took recognized that the Polish were an ethnic minority group within that society. As a result, differential impacts and experiences among this subgroup were revealed. (And, when broken down even further, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Polish women had significantly different outcomes from their male counterparts.)

# USING YOUR INTERSECTIONAL LENS

- **Race and Gender**

The compound impacts of racial minority status and gender can leave women of color at the farthest edges among marginalized or underserved groups. Organizations generally acknowledge that women of color face compound challenges when trying to break into environments dominated by white males. One black woman explained why black males have more access than people like her: “We’re not guys and we don’t look like them, so it’s hard for white men in tech to empathize with us.”(6)

Silicon Valley software company Slack was famously one of the first among its peers to publicly examine intersectionality. In its 2016 report, the company stated:

*Often not reported among tech companies is the intersection of race and gender. Looking at women within underrepresented people of color (Native, Black, Hispanic/Latina, also frequently referred to as underrepresented minorities or “URMs”) we found that 9% of our engineering organization in the US report in these categories.(7)*

That recognition was only the beginning. Since then, the company and its peers in the tech sector have continued to work on maintaining an intersectional approach, and responding accordingly has been an ongoing work.

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# USING YOUR INTERSECTIONAL LENS

- **Gender and Class**

While sexual harassment is a well-known problem throughout the working world, women with lower-status jobs within an organization can be much more susceptible and unprotected than others. Despite this reality, women's experiences can vary across industries. As one author discussing the hospitality industry put it, "The dynamics of harassment against women breaking into the 'bro' culture of Silicon Valley are not exactly the same as the hostile working conditions for women pioneers in construction."(8)

Through anecdotal evidence, the author found that women in roles such as housekeeper, server, and casino card dealer often wield a very small amount of power to address problems in the workplace, due in part to biases against people with "low-skill" jobs. People tend to consider women in such jobs as lower-class as well, compounding the unbalanced power dynamic between men and women in a way that women in corporate roles in the same companies would not experience.

- **Disability, Race, and Gender**

People with disabilities are usually lumped together as a single group when, in fact, individuals can have significantly different workplace experiences depending on their specific type of disability. Using data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Research Project, researchers discovered that intersections among disability, gender, race, and age made a significant difference in the risk of experiencing disability harassment.(9)

The researchers examined how individuals who file charges of harassment differ from individuals who file other types of disability discrimination charges (e.g., hiring, firing, or reasonable accommodation). Their results showed that women minorities are more likely to file harassment charges. Additionally, people with behavioral disabilities were more likely to complain of harassment than those with physical disabilities.



# CONCLUSION: INTERSECTIONAL LEADERSHIP

## Developing new mindsets

Intersectionality reveals D&I work to be more challenging than it might seem at first; however, developing an intersectional mindset can be a hugely valuable leadership competency. Not only does it allow you to better understand problems on your team, it can open your eyes to unrealized potential among groups and individuals.

Now that we know how an intersectional lens works toward better seeing and addressing D&I issues for all groups, what does it do for those of us charged with fixing those issues?

For one, it makes us more able to assess and build upon our own experiences. Leaders' efficacy is determined precisely by their intersectional realities, which include education, work experience, and values, as well as their lived diversity experiences – race, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.(10)

## Assessing intersectionality

Because leadership development is crucial, an intersectionality assessment can and should be tied to leadership. For example, a particular team leader's results might show the following: Everyone on her team has the same Myers-Briggs profile; individuals on her teams forfeited most of their vacation time last year; no requested flexible work arrangements or stretch assignments were granted; and everyone she is mentoring is a straight white female who went to an Ivy League school—just like her.(11)

Analytics will reveal the multidimensionality of a team and provide direction for the self-regulation quality described earlier. Much of the work described here involved detailed research, but even an examination of how your organization treats identity categories can be a significant first step. Intersectionality should help inform planned or ongoing D&I initiatives where there might be gaps in service or opportunities for improvement. In the best-case scenario, it can reveal a whole “new” landscape in which individuals at all levels can do and be their best.

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## Owning our intersections

What's more, Deloitte argues that "to move the dial with respect to traditional D&I and create a more inclusive corporate culture, it is important to train our leaders to recognize intersectionality by becoming more emotionally mature."<sup>(12)</sup> Intersectionality requires a high level of self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation, qualities that help us look out for bias, redirect disruptive impulses, and be mindful of invisible identities. As an important part of the solution, the authors call on leaders to reflect on their own compound identities and share their own stories.

THE FIRST PERSON YOU  
LEAD IS YOU.

YOU EARN THE RIGHT TO  
LEAD OTHERS WHEN  
THEY SEE YOU LEAD  
YOUR OWN LIFE WELL.

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