Demystifying Diversity and Inclusion

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As we enter women's month, discussions around gender inclusivity in the workplace will undoubtedly become more prevalent. Given the extent to which women are still marginalised in society, and are in short supply in civil engineering (particularly at more senior levels), this is certainly an important discussion. However, creating inclusive work environments goes well beyond the narrow distinctions of gender or even race. The buzzwords "diversity" and "inclusion" are thrown around with increasing frequency. What do these words actually mean?

Defining diversity

Diversity in government generally centres around 'affirmative action', both in terms of education and the workplace. This includes policies and laws defining illegal discrimination and aiming to redress past and present discrimination, increasing opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups. Investopedia defines affirmative action as when "an individual's colour, race, sex, religion or national origin are taken into account to increase opportunities provided to an underrepresented part of society." The reference to 'underrepresented parts of society' suggests that the goal is to make organisations or professions more representative of the makeup of the wider population by opening doors and eliminating structural barriers. The motivation appears moral and is related to the rights of individuals.

Corporate diversity literature takes a much broader view, centring around 'diversity of thought'. Policies look at how to attract and recruit diverse talent, and create inclusive work environments to retain these people. Google claims to need "a workforce that's more representative of the users they serve". Thomson Reuters believes "an inclusive workplace where all employees are valued and have the opportunity to reach their full potential is also a successful one." Vodacom aims to "celebrate and harness our differences to enrich collaboration, innovation, creativity and productivity". By increasing their pool of talent, companies can leverage diversity to generate new ideas, increase creativity and innovation, and better empathise with a diverse client or customer. Inclusive workplaces allow all voices to be heard and the potential of the employees to be maximised.

The motivation in the corporate case appears monetary - diversity of thought creates better products, better teams and better business. With very public and potentially damaging lawsuits, related to discrimination and sexual harassment, companies must at least appear to support diversity. Nike, for example, is currently being sued over gender pay discrimination, but have also released an inspirational advert in support of women and the US women's national soccer team during the soccer world cup.

Generational definitions of diversity also diverge. According to a Deloitte report, Millennials more often think of diversity as "the blending of unique perspectives within a team, known as cognitive diversity" (Deloitte, 2018). This aligns with the corporate diversity approach, encompassing "the ability to combine different ideas and approaches to better overcome challenges and achieve business goals." Generation X and baby boomers, on the other hand, tend to align with the government definition, viewing diversity through a moral lens "as representation of and fairness to all individuals and their various identifiers of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation" (Deloitte, 2018). This distinction explains why discussions about diversity often become clashes between old and young. It seems we aren't even talking about the same thing!

How do organisations approach diversity and inclusion?

Despite different definitions and different motivations, the end product remains the same: a workplace that is no longer homogenous in terms of race, gender, culture, sexuality, ability, religion, personalities and ways of thinking. If the end product is the same, one would expect there to be some consensus on strategies that work for improving diversity. As Wadors (2016) puts it "diversity and inclusion initiatives are necessary to win the war for talent, to find and hire a diverse workforce, and to ensure fair practices". However, there appears to be much disagreement about the best approach, with two distinct schools of thought.

The first approach is focused on supporting and empowering the individuals in minority groups through programmes like targeted recruitment, preferential hiring and promotion, creating affinity or support groups, specialised mentorship and training programmes and task forces. The emphasis is on noticing and celebrating differences and treating each person as unique and different. Companies aim to "explore and identify the range of barriers holding these individuals back and can then formulate plans and programs that offer options and provide signposts to help people find the path that is right for where they are in their lives and careers." (Sherbin & Rashid, 2017)

The second school flips this around, focusing instead on the majority group and how to change discriminatory perceptions and biases. The emphasis is on equality, fairness, and creating a uniform work experience for everyone, focusing on sameness rather than difference. Deloitte, for example, has ended its women's network and affinity groups and instead will "offer all managers — including the white guys who still dominate leadership — the skills to become more inclusive, then hold them accountable for building more-balanced businesses" (Wittenberg-Cox, 2017).

What works? What doesn't?

Elements from both approaches seem to work well in certain contexts but have little effect in others. For example, conducting auditions behind a screen has resulted in a dramatic improvement in gender diversity in orchestras. But when Yelp applied the approach of blinding resumes and using a voice disguiser for first round phone interviews, they experienced no change in the gender composition of hires (Williams et al., 2017). Similarly, not all groups face the same discrimination, so strategies that assist one group may disadvantage another. There is no silver bullet. Apfelbaum (2016), for example, found that the more firms adopted the first approach, emphasising the value in difference, the lower the rates of attrition were among women. However, the more firms adopted the second approach, emphasizing the value of equality, the lower the rates of attrition were among racial minorities.

What is, unfortunately, clear from the literature is that many of the most commonly applied diversity practices simply do not work. As Dobbin and Kalev (2016) explain regarding the traditional approaches, "studies show that this kind of force-feeding can activate bias rather than stamp it out." Adding further difficulty, the proven benefits associated with diverse teams, like increased creativity and innovation, can be hampered by increased conflict and decision-making challenges if not properly managed (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2017). As Jang (2018) explains, "[Culturally diverse] teams often suffer from conflicting norms and differing assumptions between members, which can keep them from reaching their full creative potential. When managers don't know how to spot and address these situations, cultural diversity may actually inhibit a team's creative performance."

Diversity alone does not work. It must be coupled with an inclusion strategy which equips managers to facilitate collaboration and manage teams of diverse thinkers. Wittenberg-Cox (2017) puts it well: "Today's diversity challenge […] is to get all managers — and especially

current leaders — skilled and ready to lead vastly more-diverse businesses and respond to increasingly diverse customer groups."

Where to from here?

What is clear from the above is that the waters are muddy with much conflicting evidence. Williams et al (2017) explain it perfectly, "Currently, too many approaches are based on intuition, anecdotes, and evidence from contexts that don't directly map to the [specific] industry. This means we don't really know what the best way to increase diversity is, leaving too much guesswork in the process."

Part of our aim as the SAICE Diversity Panel is to demystify diversity and inclusion. We understand that the typical engineering brain wants to see facts, figures and evidence. We plan on presenting the research, what is being done in industry, what the science says and to share best practices and recommendations. To do this we need your feedback because, as illustrated above, like all things to do with people - it is complicated! Most of the research appears to be US- or European-based, with limited exploration of the engineering sector. It is going to take a collaborative effort to adapt this to our context.

We certainly don't have all the answers, so tell us what your company is doing, what has or has not worked, and whether the views expressed in our pieces reflect your reality. We will include very short anonymous surveys with every piece which you can access by clicking on the following link. Over time these results can build on the foundation of literature to create a strategy that works for us civil engineers living at the tip of Africa, cognisant of all our unique challenges. Please complete the survey, join the conversation, and help us shape a vibrant, diverse and inclusive industry.

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