Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Roadmap

VertueLab
Green Technologies for Good
At VertueLab, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and issues of Environmental, Social, & Governance (ESG) are critically important to our organization. From internal policies, to external practices, it is part of our mission to support and aid the growth of diversity and inclusivity across cleantech industries.

In early 2020 VertueLab had the opportunity to apply for a grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust, an organization that has paved the way by dismantling barriers to equity and promoting equitable practices in Oregon.

Through this process we were introduced to their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Spectrum Tool which helps organizations assess where they are on their DEI journey and to identify potential areas for future work. Utilizing this tool helped us to outline the following assessment and roadmap for improvements. VertueLab understands and recognizes the critical importance of these organizational improvements and education. As with anything worth doing, this is a constant journey that is never fully complete. We continue to diligently and humbly work to build consciousness and operationalize equity, diversity and inclusion across our organization. We seek the advice and counsel of experts like the Center for Equity and Inclusion and the Center for Diversity and the Environment to guide us. We invite you to learn more about our journey and take part in your own.

We recommend that you read the following in tandem with the DEI Spectrum Tool to understand each of the following 12 dimensions.
While our mission and vision statements include “shared economic prosperity” and “solve environmental and social challenges”—we do not currently have a separate DEI statement. We did incorporate a section to our strategic plan and pitch deck that describes why we see DEI as being critical to our success. This vision has not yet been integrated consistently throughout our programs and operations. Our strategic plan refresh which incorporated this language, completed in February of 2020, is to be implemented in the remaining portion of the strategic planning period, ending July 1, 2022.

VertueLab’s interest in DEI is reflected in our mission, vision, and our strategic plan as well as the strategic plan’s key activities and timeline. Staff are all committed to executing on all aspects of our strategic plan, but there is not a comprehensive or formal structure in place to ensure consistent implementation or to hold ourselves accountable to the DEI objectives specifically.

VertueLab has non-discrimination policies, and an ESG policy that lays out a commitment to minimum 50/50 gender representation on leadership boards, to use ESG to inform decision-making and our oversight of investees, to encourage and support the adoption of ESG practices by our investees and our peers, to be transparent about our impact, and to screen suppliers of goods and services, such as vendors, for their social sustainability performance. The commitments laid out in this ESG policy are relatively generic (based on the UN Principles for Responsible Investing) and are unaccompanied by specific goals, strategies, or indicators. We recognize the need for a thoughtful and comprehensive DEI strategy and implementation plan, including measures to enable accountability.
The DEI effort is largely participated in by staff, but a more comprehensive set of tools and processes need to be put into place connecting all programs and operations activities to the larger strategy.

In 2018, the entire VertueLab staff participated in a 2.5-day Reframing Racism workshop led by Portland’s Center for Equity and Inclusion. Two of the staff that have come on board since then have gone on to participate in the same workshop offered through Prosper Portland. To ensure that our whole team has a shared language for speaking about race, we seek out opportunities for new hires to experience the same program.

As stated in our ESG Policy, “VertueLab is committed to achieving and supporting a diverse Staff and Board of Directors. Historically, the organization has been successful at achieving a 50/50 gender representation within Staff and Board membership. While we are proud of that legacy, we are aware of our need to also increase the representation of racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of our Board as the organization grows and our leadership transitions.

Increasing our Board diversity is a critical element of ensuring our future success as an organization. Staff and board recruitment committee members actively seek diverse candidates through extended networks, and welcome recommendations for potential candidates that share a passion for our mission and who can help us better value and integrate diverse perspectives.”

Additionally, we have strengthened our hiring process by prioritizing the promotion of the opportunity specifically to networks of diverse job seekers (including but not limited to the Urban League job board, National Association of Multi-ethnic Diversity in Communication, Pink Jobs, and the African American Chamber of Commerce’s job board). This is a great area of potential growth for our organization and we are interested in seeking support to identify blind spots and surface implicit bias, gender discrimination, or racism in our processes. We are evaluating the augmented writing tool, Textio, as a means for identifying ways to make our job descriptions and other communications inclusive of a wider audience. We need to increase our understanding of strategies to counteract those forces in our hiring and in the elements of our operations and culture that impact retention and employee health and satisfaction.
Operations: VertueLab just conducted its first annual demographic survey of members of our Board of Directors, Fund Advisory Board, and staff, using the Guidestar-recommended best practices for DEI data collection. We intend to pursue benchmarking of our intercultural competency (possibly using the IDI), and engage in regular employee engagement surveys.

PROGRAM

We currently record our own assessment of the racial and gender identity of our portfolio companies’ founders (the founders of the companies that we gave grants or investments to in the past). We would like to survey them about founder demographics in the future so that the information could be self-reported rather than relying on our assumptions. For the companies that we support in the future with our Climate Impact Fund I, we intend to conduct surveys using the Guidestar method during the screening process, and then to ask for ongoing reporting of founders, staff, and board of directors during annual impact surveys.

COMMUNITY

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DATA

Professionalize our demographic data collection process to enable decision-making, planning, and accountability
Benchmark current intercultural competency
Establish a regular schedule for surveying employee engagement
Systematize data collection and set schedules

Next Steps for Improvement:

DECISIONS

Our Climate Impact Fund I has three criteria for screening companies for possible investment: Climate impact potential, commercial success potential, and additionality. The additionality screen is met if the company is unable or unlikely to attract private capital investments at its current stage of development or private capital will not invest without intervention by VertueLab. Given the abysmal rates of traditional venture investment in diverse entrepreneurs, VertueLab considers companies to be more likely to meet our impact and additionality screens for investment if they have diverse founders, have diversity represented on their board of directors, and/or have technology intended to directly benefit minority communities disproportionately impacted by climate change.

Our holistic assessment tool, which we use to screen all new companies approaching VertueLab for funding or support, includes not just standard elements of business success (value proposition, team, market, etc.), but looks at those alongside their potential for environmental impact and how they perform from a DEI perspective. We are eager to adopt some of the concepts from the DEI Spectrum tool by Meyer Memorial Trust to better inform the DEI dimension of the team’s assessment.

We have long had tacit policies (recently codified in our policy handbook) around ensuring diverse representation in the speaking roles at our events, refusing to participate on panels that are entirely comprised of white males at conferences hosted by others, and prioritizing vendors (including but not limited to HR consulting, accounting, event planning, graphic design, catering, etc.) who are minority or women owned businesses.

Next Steps for Improvement:

Formalize our currently unwritten policy of pursuing representative diversity in all of the following: events, staff, boards, contractors, beneficiaries (startups), and partner organizations
Refine our holistic assessment tool’s DEI dimension
Ensure policies in place to ensure DEI lens applied in decision-making
ACCOUNTABILITY

Today we are evaluating the diversity of our companies’ founders as a measure of our success at reaching and serving founders from underserved populations. We also look at their relative success at achieving traditional VC investment and seek to exceed the national averages as a way of gauging whether we are meeting the unique needs of women and minority founders with respect to earning traditional capital. We report our DEI outcomes on our website, to our board of directors on a quarterly basis, and to donors and supporters of our programs. All of this reporting and accountability is performed at the organization or program level, and there is no individual accountability. VertueLab is committed to exploring best practices that it can adopt at the individual level.

INCLUSION

VertueLab does not currently have a way to gauge inclusion, aside from having staff individually and anonymously assess where we should be assessed on the DEI Spectrum. We have a great deal of exploration yet to do with respect to addressing the transition from a dominant culture to an inclusive/multicultural one. We would like to pursue an inventory to get an accurate, unbiased baseline, potentially using the Intercultural Development Inventory, or IDI.