Measuring Inclusion: A case study in cybersecurity

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Abstract

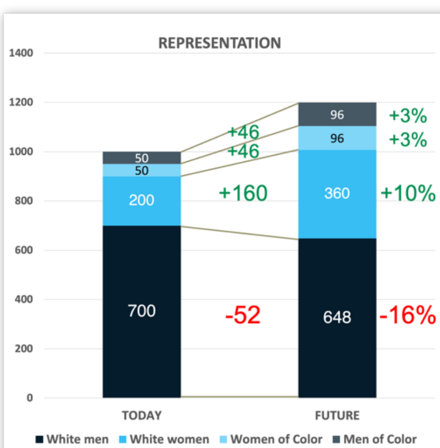
We have recently developed a unique way of measuring inclusion within organizations. The methodology is grounded in a novel, quantitative way of thinking about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). This unique methodology provides invaluable data and insights about the situations within an organization that impact employee experiences, resulting in different levels of satisfaction, productivity and retention rates. This makes it possible to quantify the impact of inclusion on the financial success of a company and on its level of diversity. Best of all, this approach completely avoids the zero-sum-game mindset that is behind the current backlash against DEI. This paper begins by discussing some of the likely causes of the backlash. It then summarizes our approach and methodology, and describes a specific case study: a collaboration between a private-sector startup and a nonprofit organization to establish the first-ever industry-wide State of Inclusion Benchmark. *The white paper closes with some reflections on the many benefits of measuring inclusion.*

Introduction: the DEI backlash

After enjoying a few years of increased popularity, the field of DEI is now the subject of significant backlash across many parts of society. Accusations of reverse discrimination and discontent with common approaches to DEI have led to strong criticism and the undoing of past progress, including the US Supreme Court striking down Affirmative Action in college admissions, and several states passing a range of anti-DEI measures.

We believe that a key reason for the backlash is that the vast majority of DEI metrics, initiatives and targets focus almost exclusively on diversity. One of us has argued for several years that the single-minded focus on diversity would lead to strong backlash[4]. Specifically, we argued that focusing on overall diversity targets would inevitably lead white men to feel that they were being discriminated against because of their race and gender, which of course would be illegal.

While some DEI experts scoff at the idea of reverse discrimination, when diversity is applied as a blanket across the entire organization, it is not an unreasonable complaint.



To understand this reasoning, imagine a company of 1,000 employees, consisting of 20% white women, 5% men of color, 5% women of color, and the rest white men. Imagine that one day the CEO announces that, to support DEI, the leadership has decided to set three-year targets of 30% white women, 8% men of color and 8% women of color. Because diversity is so valuable, the CEO anticipates a healthy 20% growth in the size of the company. The before-and-after situation is depicted in Figure 1

Figure 1: diversity level before and after a DEI initiative for a hypothetical company.

As the figure shows, the only way to achieve these objectives is for the number of white men to decrease significantly while the other identity groups increase in number. Clearly, this is unlikely to please the white men in the organization.

If the CEO also announces that everyone in the company has to undergo diversity training to learn to recognize their own biases and privileges, the resulting backlash is even less surprising.

The fundamental problem with setting diversity targets is that is trying to fix symptoms rather than fixing the underlying causes. This is equivalent to walking in the house one day, feeling very cold, noticing that the thermostat only reads 50 degrees Fahrenheit, and deciding to "fix it" by lighting a match under the thermostat. The reading may go up, but the house will still be cold, and you may accidentally burn it down.

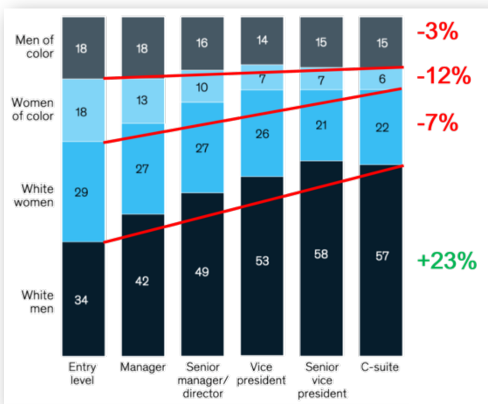


Figure 2: Changes in representation with increasing seniority in typical organizations. Source: McKinsey, 2023 Women in the Workplace[3].

Instead of focusing on the overall levels of diversity, we need to understand what is happening inside organizations that leads to low levels of diversity. Consider the data in Figure 2, which is based on data reported by McKinsey and LeanIn.org[5], showing the representation of the same four identity groups as employees progress through increasingly senior positions.

The chart shows clearly that, with each successive advancement, white men gain representation, to the point that by the time they reach the C-suite, their representation has gone up from 34% to 57%, while the other identity groups are obviously losing representation by the same total amount.

Hence the real problem is not with the overall lack of diversity: it is due to the fact that employees who identify as women or people of color are less likely to get promoted and retained within in the organization than white men.

In fact, our team has previously published the results of a research project using a computer simulation to capture the impact of biases in promotions[6]. We were able to show that a bias that favors one group during promotions leads to exactly the kind of imbalances that are seen in Figure 2, and were able to match data from various industry sectors with high accuracy.

The question then becomes, what is happening inside organizations that is causing historically underrepresented groups (HUGs) to be less likely to advance in their careers than white men?

As we will describe in this white paper, our work shows conclusively that the level of *inclusion* of different groups within the organization is a key to promotion and retention rates, and thus to the overall levels of diversity.

Inclusion is what you do, diversity is what you get

Another significant problem in the field of DEI is that definitions for even the most basic terms are unclear and inconsistent. We can all agree more or less what we mean by "diversity" – something about an individual having one or more characteristics that are somehow different from the same characteristics in other individuals. However, the word "inclusion" has not been defined very clearly or consistently. Try searching for a definition of the word, and you will find a dizzying array of definitions.

Our research and consulting work has led to a very simple, intuitive definition: "inclusion is what you do." More specifically, inclusion is the collection of all the things that an organization does, which impact the experiences of individual employees.

Different experiences lead to different levels of satisfaction, and thus different levels of productivity. This, in turn, has an impact on promotion and retention rates, which influence representation. Hence, while inclusion is what you do, "diversity is what you get."

Each employee's workplace experiences are the result of everything that people in the organization are doing. And if different people have different work experiences because of personal traits (*e.g.*, race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, age, religious beliefs, body type, socioeconomic status, education, …), they will have different levels of satisfaction, and therefore different levels of performance. In a truly inclusive organization, all employees have the same work experiences regardless of their personal traits.

Why should this matter to the leaders of an organization? Because it is well known that satisfaction is linked to the productivity, work quality, and retention of employees. Hence if a company is not inclusive, it means that some of its employees have lower productivity, lower work quality, and lower retention rates than others, simply because of their personal traits. This means that a company that is not inclusive is literally throwing money out the window.

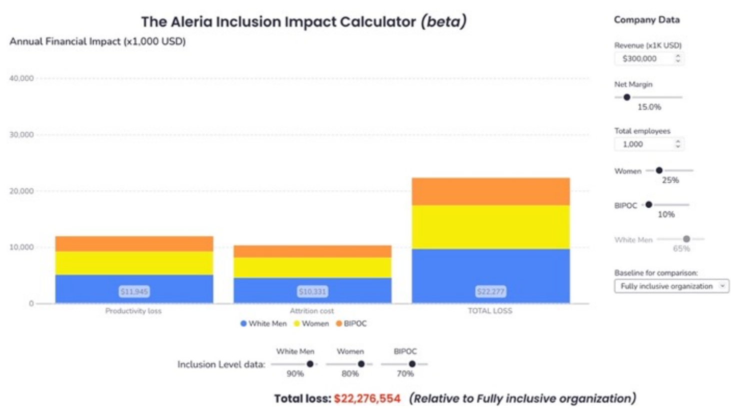


Figure 3: Screenshot of Aleria's Inclusion Impact Calculator. See text.

Our team recently published a simple calculator to estimate just how much money an organization is likely to lose[7]. As seen from the screenshot in Figure 3, the calculator estimates the impact of low inclusion on productivity loss and on the cost of unwanted churn. The reality is that organizations can be losing a significant portion of their profit margin, in line with a recent report showing that Amazon estimates the annual loss of unwanted employee turnover at a whopping $8 billion[8].

Measuring inclusion

If inclusion is so important, why have organizations only been focused on measuring diversity? One reason we mentioned earlier is that inclusion has been difficult to define consistently. But our research has uncovered another fundamental reason why inclusion has been difficult to define, and even more difficult to measure: *inclusion is invisible*.

To explain what we mean, we like to draw an analogy between inclusion and health. Think about the last time you introduced yourself to someone. Did you say, "Hi, I am Maria, and I am healthy"? Probably not. But imagine you had just had an accident and were walking around with crutches and had a cast on your leg. Then you might say "Hi, I am Maria" and then add "I just recently had an accident" as you point to your cast.

The point is that, in general, we tend to notice our health when we are missing it. In other words, we tend to notice when we are sick, not when we are healthy.

Inclusion works in a very similar way. We tend not to notice when we are being included, but we are very likely to notice when we are being excluded[9]. In other words, *inclusion itself is invisible*.

This realization, as it turns out, is the key to figuring out how to measure inclusion: rather than trying to measure inclusion directly, measure exclusion. We now explain how this is done.

Diagnosing exclusion through *Experience Categories*

We can extend the health analogy by reflecting on how we deal with health issues. Suppose that one day you are not feeling well, and you decide to go see a doctor. Imagine that the doctor simply asks you, "on a scale of one to ten, how healthy do you feel?" and then prescribes you a medication based on your answer. Would that be useful?

Unfortunately, this is essentially what most companies do when it comes to inclusion: they simply ask employees how included they feel. Knowing that a certain group of employees feels less included than another group is not useful unless you know what is happening that makes them feel that way.

Thankfully, this is not what doctors do. Instead, they ask you to describe what issue you are having, and then ask you about specific types of symptoms you may be experiencing. Do you have any pain? Are you having difficulty breathing? Is it a digestive issue? They ask you about symptoms because if they see a particular set of symptoms, they can identify what health problem you have, and figure out how to cure it.

To diagnose workplace exclusion, we can do the same thing: we can ask employees to describe specific workplace experiences that impact their satisfaction, and then to tell us what type of experiences they are. Is it about your compensation and benefits? Is it about your career and professional growth? Are you struggling to balance work and personal life? We can then look for clusters of experiences to reveal specific ways in which the organization is not being inclusive.

The *Aleria*[10] team has developed an online platform where users can describe specific workplace experiences that have interfered with their ability to work. After providing a brief description, the platform asks them to select one or more *Experience Categories* that best match their experience:

- Access & Participation
- Career & Growth
- Compensation & Benefits
- Information Sharing
- Respect
- Recognition
- Skills use & Assignments
- Work-life Balance

These Experience Categories reflect common types of situations we face in the workplace, which have an impact on how satisfied—and included—we feel in our jobs. Each time we have a negative experience in one of these areas, it will decrease our satisfaction, which in turn will impact our productivity and it will make it more likely that we may leave for a different job.

Identifying the Sources of Experiences

Asking employees to describe and categorize workplace experiences gives a clear idea of *what* is happening in the organization that impacts employee satisfaction. Equally important is trying to understand *why* these experiences are happening.

Drawing again from the health analogy, doctors may also ask you about possible sources of your health issues. If you feel pain, did you fall down? If you have difficulty breathing, were you exposed to a sick person? If you are having digestive issues, did you eat something unusual?

Similarly, we need to understand the *sources* of workplace experiences that impact satisfaction. These experiences do not happen in a vacuum. We sometimes talk about how "company culture" impacts the experiences of employees. We also hear people talk about problems resulting from "systemic discrimination" or "structural barriers." But none of these are tangible things that cause specific experiences! All these terms reflect macroscopic patterns that we observe when we analyze a large number of experiences across the organization.

Everything that happens to us at work ultimately is shaped by a handful of possible sources. To identify the sources, after a user has described an experience and selected the closest Category they are asked to select one or more of the following *Sources of Experiences*:

- Policies, Processes & Systems
- Top leadership / executives
- HR staff
- Direct managers
- Peers
- Reports
- External contacts (customers, suppliers, partners, …)

Depending on the type of organization, the specific list of sources may vary. For instance, in an academic environment the sources might distinguish between department leadership and leadership at the institutional level. However, the list should always be focused on people, policies or systems that can actually cause or influence experiences.

Understanding the what, the why and the who of inclusion

As we mentioned, the selection of categories helps us to understand what is happening to employees, while the sources help us understand why it is happening. In addition, when users first visit Aleria's platform for measuring inclusion, they have the option to provide some identity and job-related information[11].

The identity and job-related information makes it possible to perform detailed analysis to understand *who* is impacted. As long as sufficient data have been collected, this process helps organizations uncover some disparities in the experiences of different groups. For instance, one can compare levels of inclusion for different identity groups, or different job-related factors such as division, role or seniority.

Filtering the category and source data based on identity and job-related data provides extremely valuable, quantitative insights that help organizations pinpoint the greatest opportunities to increase inclusion.

What makes this methodology even more valuable is when the quantitative insights are coupled with the actual, detailed experiences shared by the employees[12]. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data tells organizations exactly what is happening—and therefore what needs to be done to improve the situation.

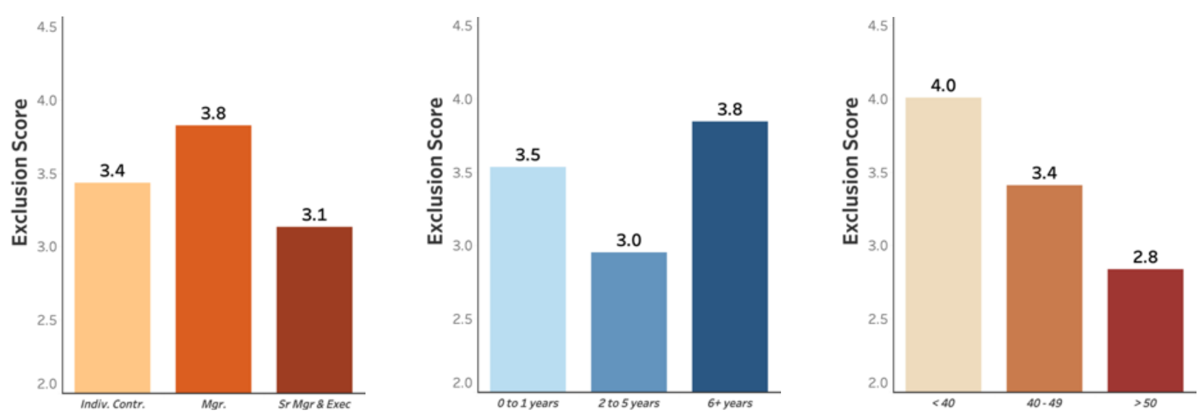
The Aleria team has conducted dozens of “Inclusion Assessments” for a wide range of organizations, ranging from startups to global corporations, across multiple industry sectors and different geographical areas. In the next section we describe one particular project that shows the power and wide applicability of our approach to measuring inclusion.

Case study: an inclusion benchmark for the Cybersecurity sector

In early 2023 our teams (Aleria and *Women in Cybersecurity*, or WiCyS[13]) partnered to conduct a study on the level of inclusion of women working in cybersecurity.

The WiCyS leadership had expressed interest in a pioneering study to measure the “State of Inclusion of Women in Cybersecurity.” While other organizations had previously measured the representation of women in Cybersecurity, WiCyS recognized the importance of trying to understand why the representation of women in cybersecurity is not where it should be, and how that can be changed.

We embarked on a multi-year collaboration in early 2023, when we conducted a few workshops for WiCyS individual members, collecting data from roughly 300 participating women. In late March of 2023 we published an executive summary with some preliminary results[14]. In addition to confirming some of the well-known problems faced by women in cybersecurity, we reported on a number of interesting findings.

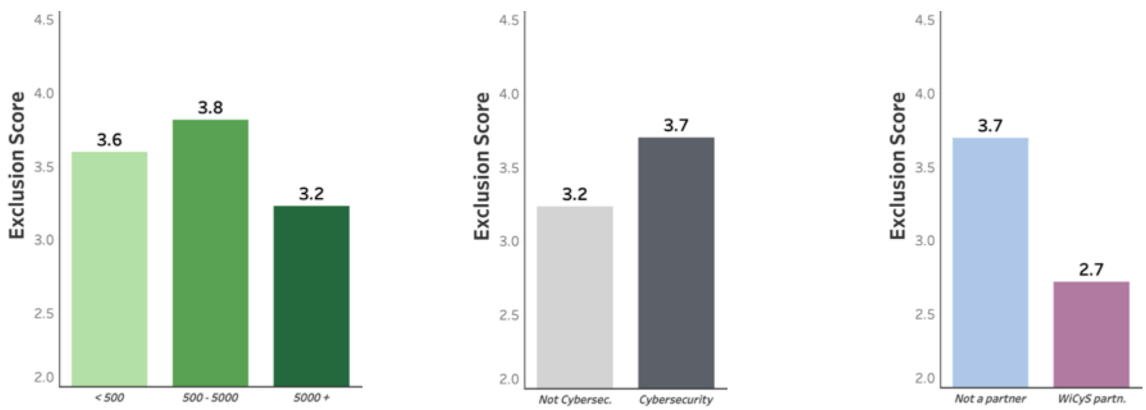


(A) Role ***(B) Years w/Organization*** ***(C) Age Bracket***

Figure 4: The impact of individual characteristics on exclusion scores.

First, when we analyzed the level of exclusion as a function of seniority, tenure and age (as shown in Figure 4), we found some interesting patterns:

- **Women at the Manager level bear the brunt of exclusion**, reporting exclusion levels (chart A) 12% higher than those of individual contributors, and 23% higher than those reported by senior managers and executives.
- **New hires struggle with exclusion**, reporting exclusion levels (chart B) 17% higher than women who have been with the organization 2-5 years, however…
- **…women experience a "glass ceiling"** of sorts, showing the highest exclusion after 6+ years with the same organization (also chart B)[15].
- **Age seems to help**, as shown by the steadily declining pattern in chart C. In reviewing the shared experiences, several women described situations in which they were not taken seriously because of their young age. This suggests a sort of "reverse-ageism."



(D) Organization Size ***(E) Organization Type*** ***(F) WiCyS Partner Status***

Figure 5: Impact of employer characteristics on exclusion scores.

We also explored the impact of factors related to the participant's organization, as shown in Figure 5. Several additional observations can be made:

- **Larger organizations (5,000 or more employees) seem to be more inclusive** (*i.e.*, have lower exclusion score) than smaller companies, as seen in chart D.
- **Cybersecurity firms have a significantly higher level of exclusion than non-Cybersecurity firms**, as seen in chart E. This finding aligns with similar studies showing that technology companies tend to have higher overall exclusion scores than companies in other sectors, especially for women.
- **WiCyS partner firms enjoy greater inclusion**. Chart F shows that organizations that are not WiCyS partners exhibit a level of exclusion that is 36% higher than organizations that are WiCyS partners.

Regarding the last finding, one might ask which is the cause and which is the effect: are the firms that join WiCyS more likely to be inclusive, or are the firms that are more inclusive more likely to join WiCyS?

When we first uncovered this result, we suspected that it may be a bit of both: while it makes sense that organizations that care about women are likely to want to join an organization that supports their women, the act of joining WiCyS is likely to provide a boost to the level of inclusion (or, equivalently, a reduction in exclusion), not only because it sends a clear message to the women in the organization that the leadership cares about them, but also because WiCyS programming provides specific, tangible opportunities to improve matters.

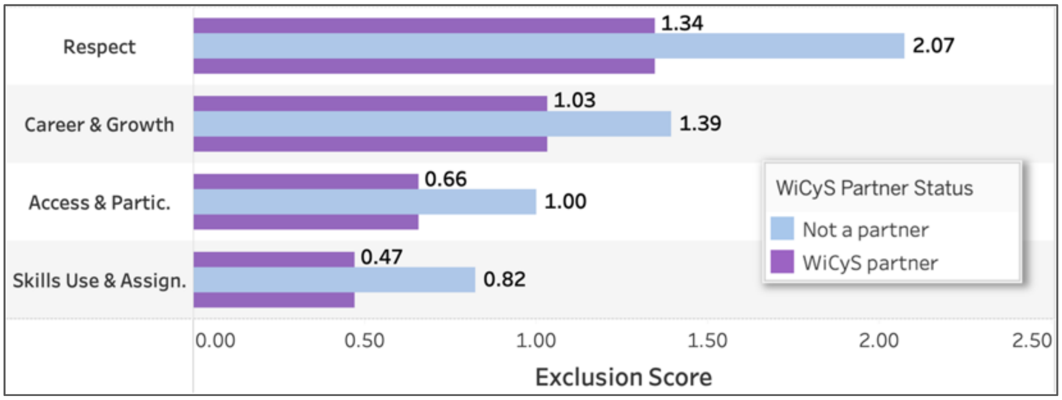


Figure 6: Exclusion scores for top categories by WiCyS partner status.

To explore this point further, we decided to compare the exclusion scores for WiCyS partner and non-partner firms across the Respect, Career & Growth, Access & Participation, Skills Use & Assignments categories. We chose these categories because they were the top categories across the entire dataset, and also because they reflect the focus on the programming and activities that WiCyS offers to its members. The results are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6 shows clearly that **WiCyS partners have a dramatically lower exclusion score across these important categories**: the exclusion scores for non-WiCyS partners relative to WiCyS partners is 57% higher for Respect (2.07 vs. 1.34), 35% higher for Career & Growth (1.39 vs. 1.03), 52% higher for Access & Participation (1.00 vs. 0.66), and 75% higher for Skills Use & Assignments (0.82 vs. 0.47).

Beyond the numbers: some of the shared experiences

Beyond the statistics, the detailed experiences shared by participants offer poignant examples of the kinds of day-to-day workplace experiences that impact individuals. To provide some examples, Table 1 shows two representative "sharable" experiences drawn from each of the top four categories.

Respect	"After introducing myself, I have had individuals ask to speak to a 'guy who works in IT' instead of me." "Colleagues would play pornographic movies as I arrived to meetings. One time a colleague played a movie like this when we were meeting with a customer."
Career & Growth	"I was told that there was not a need for someone of my career level on a large customer account. Three months later promoting a male was an "imperative" to serving that account." "I am not given opportunities to advance into a leadership role due to age."
Access & Participation	"Male peers would have important work conversations at lunch when I was not with them... ignoring my absence, hence my potential contribution." "I was not invited to lunch, whereas other white colleagues were included."
Recognition & Appreciation	"When you come up with an idea, its met with silence, then someone else repeats your idea and everyone gets all over it." "My male peers received more pats on the back for far lesser accomplishments than me."

Table 1: Sample shared experiences organized by category. We only include examples that participants gave explicit permission to share as part of reports such as this one.

These are but a small sample of the experiences shared by participants. Overall we collected over 420 experiences, more than 360 of which included explicit permission to be shared. Some of the experiences described specific situations that should never be tolerated and, if made public, would probably lead to termination of the offending party.

Beyond the more egregious examples, shared experiences provide invaluable insights into the kinds of workplace interactions that are at the heart of exclusion.

Because this particular project involved women working at a large number of organizations, the specific experiences may not necessarily apply to any particular organization. Nonetheless, when certain experiences are seen many times, it is likely that they reflect some general patterns that impact an entire industry sector. In fact, having worked with some individual organizations in cybersecurity and more broadly in technology, we have found many of the same data patterns reported here, as well as experiences that were shared at different organizations. This should not be entirely surprising: when you consider people moving between companies, and people interacting across organizations through events, professional societies or their professional networks, certain behaviors are likely to be pervasive.

Next steps for the State of Inclusion Benchmark

Buoyed by these initial findings, in the summer of 2023 we began a second phase of our collaboration with WiCyS: we started holding a series of workshops that were open to anyone in the field of cybersecurity—regardless of gender—and we asked WiCyS strategic partner firms to invite their employees to take part in some of these workshops. Our goal is to develop a *State of Inclusion Benchmark* for the cybersecurity industry.

As of this writing, we have completed data collection and are beginning to analyze the data. Our goal is to release the 2023 Report in late Q1 or Q2 of 2024. The results will be shared with the entire industry, along with specific suggestions for initiatives that are likely to have the greatest positive impact on the level of inclusion across the entire sector.

We hope that this approach will be adopted by other trade organizations to establish similar benchmarks in other industry sectors.

The many benefits of measuring inclusion

We want to close this white paper by sharing some important conclusions from several years of research and working with a range of organizations on measuring inclusion. In particular, we have realized that there are several specific ways in which measuring inclusion is better than measuring diversity.

Table 2 provides a side-by-side comparison of the impact of focusing on diversity (left) or inclusion (right).

Diversity	Inclusion
Is a lagging, indirect measure	Real-time, direct measure
Places people into buckets	Places experiences into buckets

Is different in different countries	Can be applied globally
Focuses on individual differences	Focuses on shared experiences
Requires splitting of limited resources	Benefits multiple groups simultaneously
Encourages a zero-sum-game mindset	Shows how to "grow the pie" for everyone

Table 2: A side-by-side comparison of the impact of focusing on diversity (left) and inclusion (right).

We now explain each of these points.

Inclusion is a leading indicator

Diversity is a *lagging indicator*, because it takes a long time to change, especially for larger organizations. In fact, using the computer simulation mentioned earlier, two of us have shown that even after completely eliminating gender biases, it can take decades for an organization to become fully gender balanced[16].

Diversity is also an *indirect indicator*, because any initiative an organization takes today is only one of many factors that will influence its overall diversity. Many other factors, including other internal initiatives as well as external factors such as economic, educational, and demographic trends, will influence your organization's level diversity. And even if there is a change in the level of diversity one or two years later, it is impossible to know whether and how much the any initiatives may have contributed to that change.

In contrast, because it measures experiences and behaviors, inclusion is a *direct indicator* that gives a real-time assessment of the organization, pinpointing what is impacting employees right now. And when an organization implement initiatives guided by inclusion data, they will be able to see the impact in weeks or months, not years or decades.

Inclusion is also a *direct measure* because the combination of quantitative and qualitative data tells exactly what an organization is doing wrong, and how to fix it. For instance, if many employees complain that they are often not being included in meetings, the organization can instruct anyone who organizes meetings to keep a list of everyone who should be invited, and to make sure they are checking any time a meeting is organized.

Inclusion places experiences into buckets, not people

The traditional way to measure diversity is to ask people to self-identify along any number of personal identity traits: race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. These traits are used to place people into "buckets," with the goal of finding commonalities for people within those buckets.

Creating the buckets is not easy, and is often a source of confusion and frustration, both for the organization trying to collect data, and for the individuals who have to decide which buckets they belong in.

The idea that everyone who checks the same box is the same, frankly, is ridiculous. A Chinese person who identifies as "Asian" is most likely very different from individuals from India or from Kazakhstan, both of whom would also check the Asian box. The same can be said for a person of African descent whose family has been in the USA for generations, compared to someone else of African descent who was raised in Jamaica and only recently moved to the US. The same can be said about gender identity, sexual orientation, veteran status, and more.

Unfortunately when organizations recognize these issues they try to address them by adding more traits and adding more choices to each trait, or letting individuals use their own descriptions. This leads to a proliferation of identity traits, and the result is an explosion in the number of possible combinations of traits.

And in spite of all that, the only things we can see with this approach is representation, *i.e.*, how many people belong in each bucket, and use it to see if that number is lower than it should be, relative to whatever arbitrary diversity target was selected. But even if an organization finds that a certain group is underrepresented, they still have to figure out what is happening to people in that group, and then assume that whatever issues were uncovered are equally relevant to everyone in the same bucket—a questionable assumption at best.

Measuring inclusion largely sidesteps this issue because we ask people to describe experiences and put the experiences into buckets. Yes, it is true that it's still valuable to ask participants to share some demographic data, but that is primarily so that the data analysis can reveal whether certain traits are particularly impacted by certain forms of exclusion, which helps to figure out where the greatest opportunities for improvements can be found.

Inclusion can be applied globally

Diversity, by definition, is a relative measure. A Black man working in the US is considered to be "diverse" because his race is different from the race of the normative majority, but if he is working in Uganda, he would be considered a member of the normative majority. The same situation can arise with respect to other identity traits: a Muslim would be part of the normative religious majority in Saudi Arabia, but would be a member of a religious minority in Canada.

The relative nature of diversity is particularly challenging for organizations with a multinational footprint. First, the labels used to identify employees are unlikely to make sense across geographies. For instance, the label "Asian" might make some sense for US-based employees, but would make no sense for a company with employees in the Asia Pacific region, where a very different set of buckets would be needed.

Second, the notion of "majority" that is used to define who is different and who is not, becomes muddled. If you are a white man working in China, superficially you are in a minority group. But if the company is American and you hold a leadership position, then you will enjoy many of the privileges of a member of the majority, even though you may be in a racial minority. And to make things more complicated, it is likely that you will have some experiences that are more typical of members of minorities, perhaps because of language or cultural differences.

Third, there are strict regulations regarding what questions you can ask employees about their identities. In some countries it is illegal to ask employees about race. In other countries, acknowledging that you are homosexual could endanger your life.

In addition to creating practical headaches for multinational organizations, measuring diversity creates challenges in how to interpret results from the data. Should the white man working for the American company in China be lumped in with white men working in the US, UK, Canada, or other majority-white countries?

Measuring Inclusion, in contrast, avoids these problems and complications. The Experience Categories are based on universal aspects of workplace experiences: being disrespected because of your accent will have a very similar impact whether you are a Chinese woman working in New York, or an American woman working in Beijing.

Inclusion focuses on shared experiences, not on differences

Aside from the practical challenges described in the previous section, bucketing people to measure diversity also has negative emotional consequences.

By definition, focusing on identity traits means highlighting differences between people. These differences often make people from HUGs feel alienated, while also reinforcing stereotypes.

In contrast, when you measure inclusion you focus on shared experiences. With rare exceptions, most of the experiences we see often impact individuals across a variety of identity groups. This means that individuals can learn that they are not the only one having a certain experience. Realizing that similar experiences are happening to other individuals who may seem very different, creates a sense of commonality. It also helps to let people know that they are not alone, and that other people are sharing similar experiences.

In addition, even the top leaders with the greatest amount of privilege have undoubtedly had experiences in which they felt excluded or treated unfairly. When you explain to these leaders that some of their employees are having a disproportionate amount of experiences that make them feel excluded, they will understand that feeling excluded is not fun, and will be more likely to take action to reduce the level of exclusion in their organization.

Inclusion avoids the need to split limited resources

One of the largest problems with measuring diversity is that focusing on one group can be perceived as neglecting another. Should we do a float in this year's PRIDE parade? Should we have special activities for Black History month? Should we do some work on our headquarters to make it more accessible? Should we offer to pay families for onsite day-care?

This problem, which becomes more acute when resources are limited, creates problems both for the leaders and for the people they are trying to help.

From the point of view of the leaders, this is a "damned if you do, and damned if you don't" scenario. Ultimately you have a finite number of resources, and you know that providing resources to one group means that members of different groups may feel slighted. Should you focus on specific HUGs based on the size of the group? Or should you identify the HUG that is most underrepresented (or has the least levels of engagement and satisfaction)? And of course this problem is exacerbated as we create increasingly fine identity buckets, which leads to a proliferation of groups that you can inadvertently upset.

From the point of view of the HUGs, it is very easy to feel left out when you think your leadership is pouring resources into a different group. In fact we often hear members of a particular HUG complain about feeling less valued because their organization is focusing on a different HUG. In addition, members of HUGs often complain that by highlighting diversity and diversity targets, their colleagues assume that they were hired only to meet some quotas, not because of their skills. Feeling like a "diversity hire" takes a significant emotional toll.

Focusing on inclusion eliminates these problems completely. Rather than focusing on identity groups, an organization can start with the specific categories where they have found the largest exclusion scores, and work their way successively through multiple problem areas.

When it does this, the organization is not focusing on improving inclusion for a particular group of people—it is trying to create a more inclusive environment for everyone, starting with the most significant problems.

Inclusion shows how to "grow the pie" for everyone

Thinking back to the hypothetical 1,000-person company from earlier in this white paper, leaders have often justified DEI investments on the basis that they can grow the pie for everyone. But because diversity is a lagging, indirect indicator, these claims often amount to nothing more than aspirational statements. Most employees, especially those who identify as white men, see this is a zero-sum-game in which any gains made by other groups will imply a loss for them. Focusing on diversity makes this mindset unavoidable.

One of the reasons why our team always conducts workshops before measuring inclusion, is so that we can use our analogies, simulations and case studies, to demonstrate that inclusion is truly linked to the performance of the organization.

More importantly, we can show that current problems with inclusion are costing the company money and causing unwanted churn. Hence instead of making some vague promises about how diversity may lead to an uncertain amount of growth at an indeterminate time in the future, by measuring inclusion an organization can estimate exactly how much money and how many talented individuals they are losing *right now*.

When leaders learn to use inclusion as a key measurement, the only promise they need to make is that they will pay attention to the results and take action accordingly.

Hence organizations can truly grow the pie by removing the problems that are causing the current pie to shrink. And the fact that diversity is likely to increase as all groups achieve the same retention rates makes it clear that focusing on inclusion is not taking anything away from anyone, and that this is not a zero-sum-game.

Conclusions: the Rising Tide of Inclusion

John F. Kennedy is credited[17] with popularizing the aphorism "a rising tide lifts all boats," to suggest that investing in economic development can benefit everyone who participates in the economy. The mental image of many different boats floating in a marina and being lifted equally by a rising tide is elegantly simple.

Having now conducted Inclusion Assessments for dozens of organizations, and having collected and analyzed inclusion data from thousands of employees around the globe, a different conclusion has emerged: *increasing the overall level of inclusion within an organization benefits everyone, but it leads to an outsized benefit for those groups within an organization that are most likely to feel excluded.*

Building on the popular aphorism, we can say that "a rising tide of inclusion gives the greatest lift to boats that are normally the most excluded." The two drawings in Figure 7 give a pictorial analogy to help convey this idea.

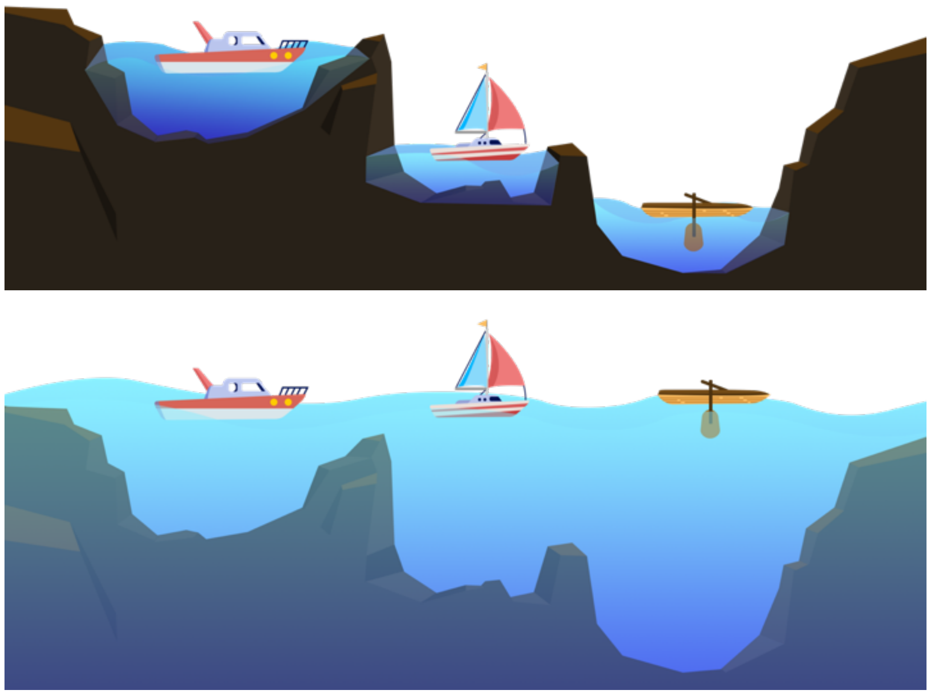


*Figure 7: **Top**: structural barriers cause some groups to enjoy higher levels of wellness than others. **Bottom**: the rising tide of inclusion lifts all boats, but especially the ones facing the greatest barriers.*

In each drawing, different boats represent different groups within the organization. The uneven terrain is meant to represent the presence of structural biases that cause disparities between groups. (These biases may exist within the organization or may reflect societal disparities.) The water level represents the level of inclusion, and the position of each boat reflects the overall workplace wellbeing of people in that group.

The upper drawing represents the current state of affairs in many organizations, where structural barriers and low levels of inclusion cause the boats to sit at different levels. In other words, different groups experience different levels of inclusion and enjoy different overall levels of well-being.

In this pictorial analogy, creating a more inclusive environment corresponds to raising the water level across the entire landscape, as shown in the lower drawing. As water rains down across the landscape, the boats in the deeper basins have the potential to enjoy the greatest improvements, as their well-being is brought up to a level comparable, and eventually equal, to the levels of the other groups.

This pictorial analogy addresses many of the common issues described earlier in this paper. First, regarding the fear that trying to increase diversity for a specific group may cause other groups to feel left out, raising the overall water level is done by "raining" over the entire landscape, *i.e.*, it does not require that you choose on which boat the rain should fall. This reflects the fact that driving greater inclusion does not require that you focus on only one specific group, because any initiative that removes exclusionary practices can improve matters for all impacted groups. For example, removing biases from promotion processes will benefit everyone, but particularly those groups that were most impacted by promotion biases.

The pictorial analogy also addresses the zero-sum-game concern: raising the water level of the lower basins does not require pumping water out of the higher basins. Even the most skeptical individuals should understand that increasing the overall level of inclusion in the organization does not require lowering the level of inclusion of those who already enjoy it. In fact, as depicted in the drawings, the overall water level should rise even for the boats that were already at the highest level. This is reflect in our data, which show that often even the most privileged individuals have some negative workplace experiences. For instance, a company that has an unstructured policy for allocating personal time off may cause most everyone feel overworked, but may be worse for women and particularly bad for Black women, perhaps because their managers are less likely to accommodate their requests due to unconscious biases. Creating a more systematic process for allocating PTO should yield the greatest benefits

Fixing any of these organization-wide processes will be tantamount to raining down inclusion over the entire landscape, causing the inclusion tide to rise for everyone, but especially for those who have most suffered from the impact of individual and systemic biases.

We hope that the work described in this paper will be able to turn the current wave of backlash into a rising tide of inclusion across all industries.

Endnotes

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[3] Executive Director, Women in Cybersecurity (WiCyS), lynn@wicys.org

[4] https://www.forbes.com/sites/paologaudiano/2018/04/02/stop-focusing-on-diversity/

[5] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace

[6] Zhang, C. and Gaudiano, P. (2023). An Agent-Based Simulation of How Promotion Biases Impact Corporate Gender Diversity. Appl. Sci., 13, 2457. Available at https://doi.org/10.3390/app13042457

[7] https://www.forbes.com/sites/paologaudiano/2023/11/27/how-to-calculate-the-financial-impact-of-inclusion/

[8] https://www.engadget.com/amazon-attrition-leadership-ctsmd-201800110-201800100.html

[9] When we use this analogy during presentations, occasionally someone in the audience argues that sometimes they do notice inclusion. In general, that happens primarily to people who are often being excluded. Extending the health analogy, someone who is afflicted by poor health is likely to be keenly aware (and appreciative) of the rare times when they actually feel healthy. In an ideal organization, nobody should be treated in such a way that being occasionally included is noteworthy!

[10] Aleria (see https://aleria.tech) is a Public Benefit Corporation that has developed the platform described here.

[11] The platform does not track individuals, nor does it ask for any personally identifiable information. A detailed confidentiality statement is the first thing that users see when they first access the platform. All identity and job-related information is optional and can be skipped.

[12] For each submitted experience, users have to give explicit permission for us to use the shared experience in our reports. We always encourage users to avoid using any names or identifiable information, and we also manually scrub all experiences to ensure complete anonymity and psychological safety of participants.

[13] WiCyS (see https://wicys.org) is a nonprofit professional organization with global reach, dedicated to the recruitment, retention and advancement of women in cybersecurity. Founded in 2013, WiCyS has grown into an organization representing a leading alliance between trailblazers from academia, government, and industry. As of December 2023, WiCyS had more than 8,000 members across 85 countries, as well as 224 student chapters. In addition to individual members, WiCyS works closely with more than 60 Strategic partner firms, including leading organizations in Cybersecurity as well as global leaders with significant cybersecurity teams. Their impressive list of Strategic Partners includes leading corporations such as Amazon Web Services, Battelle, Bloomberg, Cisco, Google, Intel, JPMorgan Chase & Co., LinkedIn, Lockheed Martin, Meta, McKesson, Microsoft, and Nike, as well as several universities and some government agencies.

[14] Visit https://www.wicys.org/initiatives/wicys-state-of-inclusion/ to learn more and to download the executive summary from the initial project.

[15] Note that number of years with a firm (chart B) and seniority of role (chart A) are not strictly linked. In fact, of the women who have been with their current organization for 6+ years, only 21% are in a senior management or executive role, 31% are in a managerial role, and 48% are in an individual contributor role.

[16] See 6.

[17] https://www.bookbrowse.com/expressions/detail/index.cfm/expression_number/478/a-rising-tide-lifts-all-boats

Find out more…

If you are with a professional organization and are interested in creating a *State of Inclusion Benchmark* for your industry, or if you are a company that wants to learn how to make higher profits and have happier employees without guesswork or backlash, please drop us a line at info@aleria.tech.

