

# What does inclusion mean, really?

Organisational inclusion often goes hand in hand with diversity management. However, inclusion and diversity have different meanings. Even when organisations try to do their best to have inclusive policies, an external event such as COVID-19 may bring new dynamics to the game. **Maria Adamson, Elisabeth K Kelan, Patricia Lewis, Martyna Śliwa and Nicholas Rumens** write that external events test every approach to inclusion and require organisations to continually work on their inclusivity efforts to remain or become as inclusive as possible.



Inclusion has become one of the key organisational priorities. Being an 'inclusive employer' is key to attracting the best talent. In wider society, inclusion has also come to the fore from the rise of Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement to the recent migration crises, especially exacerbated by the recent Ukraine refugee emergency. But what does it *actually* mean for an organisation to be inclusive?

The term 'inclusion' stems from practice, but over time it has received increasing academic attention. Our [special issue](#) of the journal [Organization](#) brought together leading research on the concept and practice of inclusion, highlighting three key issues:

- I. The importance of considering the definition and meaning of 'inclusion'
- II. Thinking through how inclusion is done in organisations
- III. Understanding and critically analysing the conditions upon which different individuals and groups are included

**Defining what inclusion is or what you want it to look like.** Organisational inclusion often goes hand in hand with diversity management. However, [research](#) shows that inclusion has a distinct meaning from [diversity](#). Interestingly though, there is no complete consensus on its definition. Some [academic research](#) defines it as 'the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organisational processes,' which can involve access to resources, decision-making, and so on. Others approach it as an outcome of specific initiatives or a strategic goal, although it is often very difficult to define what 'ultimate inclusion' looks like. A more productive way, perhaps, is to define it as '[a process of becoming rather than a state of being](#)'. Bernardo Ferdman says that inclusion is [never](#) complete and we need to keep coming back to it and checking in on the progress. This may be seen as tiresome by organisations, but this approach allows us to avoid complacency. Of course, one definition does not necessarily exclude the other, so organisations just need to think through how they prefer to define it or what they want inclusion to look like.

**Thinking through how inclusion is done in organisations.** Another important theme in contemporary research is how organisations actually 'do' inclusion. Who does it, how, and how do we know it's working? Scholarship cautions against turning inclusion efforts into another [tick-box exercise](#), or against them being peripheral and undervalued because such attitudes overlook the significance of inclusion for organisational strategy. So, how do we know that we are making progress? [Researchers](#) have tried to identify the key features that comprise 'inclusive organisation,' which may include pluralistic value frames that respect different and diverse perspectives as well as employee feelings of safety, work-group involvement, participation in decision-making, feeling valued, and the ability to be authentic. While it is important to see inclusion as a process and a journey, it still means that progress can and should be measured, monitored, and benchmarked against best practice.

**Scrutinising conditions of inclusion.** The final consideration relates to the conditions of inclusion. Inclusion entails [ambivalences and paradoxes](#)—for instance, wanting to fit in while remaining authentic, or inviting new viewpoints while wanting to hold on to some 'old' norms. It may create discomfort and friction. Any inclusion also implies some exclusion. 'To include' implies that someone has the power to exclude, which raises the question of who is included and on what terms and conditions?

Conditions on which organisations include different minority groups may vary and sometimes do not benefit those included. For instance, we may assume it's important to include women to have a 'feminine' perspective, but fitting women into specific 'feminine' roles may not be the best use of talent or something that they want. What makes conditions of inclusion more complex is that individuals also often inhabit more than one dimension of diversity. Contrary to popular ideas, being at an intersection of several dimensions does not imply hierarchy or cumulative disadvantage, but a difference of experiences. For instance, a woman of colour educated at Oxford may understand and experience inclusion differently to a white working-class woman. How employees that occupy these various positions are included, and the conditions upon which inclusion is granted, may also vary, sometimes giving rise to tensions. While it is necessary to think through how different groups are included, this should not lead to a policy paralysis, where nothing gets done until one 100 per cent inclusion is achieved.

There are a number of questions you can ask to assess the state of inclusion in your organisation:

- First, think about what inclusion means for your organisation. Are you thinking about inclusion as a goal, a process or both? What would you like to achieve through 'doing inclusion'? What would it be like?
- Second, think about how inclusion is done in your organisation. Who is responsible for it both in theory and practice? Is there a tendency to see inclusion as a 'tick-box' exercise? How do you check on progress?
- Third, what are the conditions you include? Do people need to give up authenticity to be included? Have you allowed for the ability to listen to various voices? Does your approach include an understanding that individuals often inhabit different dimensions of difference at the same time?

Finally, although organisations may try to do their best in terms of devising their internal inclusive policies, sometimes external events end up impacting who is included or excluded. The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of such an event, which brought new dynamics of inclusion and exclusion to almost every organisation. Some groups may have experienced greater inclusion, like disabled employees or those on part-time contracts who previously were penalised with presenteeism policies. Other groups, for instance extroverts or newly recruited employees, may have felt isolated and lacking support. Such external events test every approach to inclusion and require organisations to continually work on their inclusivity efforts to remain or become as inclusive as possible.



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