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## It's authentic communication that makes or breaks diversity management

**Study funded by the Academic Society examines how companies can successfully establish and communicate diversity and inclusion**

- How can employers foster an inclusive work environment through communication? A research team from the University of Vienna working with the Academic Society for Management & Communication investigated the role of strategic communication in supporting diversity and inclusion in companies.
- The results show that an inclusive working environment has a positive influence on loyalty to the company, provided D&I management is perceived as authentic.
- An inclusive work environment can be established through the involvement of senior management, an inclusive leadership style, and interpersonal communication.
- The COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS issue "Let's Talk about Diversity & Inclusion" outlines the main findings of the research project. Download: <https://bit.ly/CommInsightsDiversity>



Corporate stakeholders from the general public and politicians to employees increasingly expect companies to reflect the diversity that exists in society within their workforce. The increasing recognition and influence of movements such as Black Lives Matter and ChooseToChallenge has reinforced public awareness and emphasized the need to manage diversity and inclusion within organizations. According to Dr. Sabine Einwiller, professor of public relations research at the University of Vienna: "For D&I management to be successful, communication is a key driver." She elaborates that "strategic internal communication as well as leadership communication can create and strengthen awareness of diversity and inclusion on all hierarchical levels."

Despite the growing importance of D&I management, so far there has been very little in the way of research into the communication of D&I within companies. Therefore, a research team at the University of Vienna carried out a wide-ranging research project including an extensive literature review and three empirical studies: interviews with 20 D&I experts and 84 employees, and a survey among 1,000 workers.

One central finding stood out: D&I management has to be authentic. Only if employees believe that their employer is genuinely serious about D&I will their identification with the organization increase. Then again, the survey among 1,000 workers showed that only 38% identify with their employer. Daniel Wolfgruber, who headed the research project, explains: "Above all, the management board has to be dedicated to ensuring societal legitimacy and sustainable corporate success. An inclusive work environment can significantly strengthen employees' loyalty to the organization."

If an inclusive culture is to be engendered, the whole company must commit to and live by the core values associated with D&I, and executives must act as D&I role models for employees. However, this involves a lengthy change process.

Key findings:

- **Why diversity and inclusion pay off:** Besides legal requirements, the main reasons for introducing D&I management are of an economic and social nature. The business case stresses the economic benefits of a diverse workforce (e.g., increased creativity and thus stronger innovation, adaptation to a diverse clientele). Meanwhile, the justice case emphasizes the social responsibility of companies to treat all employees (including prospective ones) equally and to enable them to develop their full potential.
- **Effects of diversity and inclusion on employees:** Employees who feel included in their organization show a higher level of identification, provided D&I management is perceived as authentic. Furthermore, the higher the level of inclusion, the more likely workers are to be loyal to their employer and to show proactive behavior.
- **Elements of effective D&I management:** The effectiveness of a D&I strategy and its management hinges on the dedication of the management board and the interaction between the managers in charge and the organization's internal and external stakeholders. Creating an inclusive culture can only be achieved if the D&I strategy is well integrated into the overall corporate strategy and is supported by strategic communication. Fair dialogue on equal terms and the implementation of adequate D&I measures such as providing barrier-free infrastructure, promoting skills development, establishing New Work, and cultivating organizational listening are essential elements of effective D&I management.
- **Interpersonal communication facilitates inclusion:** It's essential to consider what employees want and expect in terms of internal communication on D&I issues. Mediated communication channels such as articles on the social intranet, videos and podcasts are good for conveying D&I-related information. Employees particularly appreciate formal interpersonal communication, for instance, in the form of workshops, official meetings, and discussions with executives. Additionally, storytelling is a promising approach to reach and engage employees and to motivate them to speak up and take action.
- **Empowering the workforce:** Successful implementation of the D&I strategy requires an inclusive and competent leadership style. D&I management needs to enable executives and employees alike to strengthen awareness of diversity and to bring about change in attitudes and behaviors. In addition to training and mentoring programs, issue-specific networks and gamification elements such as competitions (e.g., D&I awards) can encourage employees to actively participate in D&I management. Empathic interpersonal communication, active listening, and the judicious use of humor may persuade skeptics of the benefits of D&I initiatives.

The new issue of COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS “Let’s talk about diversity & inclusion” summarizes the results of the research project and provides guidelines for practitioners on aspects such as how to establish D&I strategies to foster an inclusive work environment. Download: <https://bit.ly/CommInsightsDiversity>

## Research background

The research project “Let’s talk about Diversity & Inclusion” was overseen and conducted by Daniel Wolfgruber and Sabine Einwiller from the University of Vienna. It was funded by **The Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication**, a joint initiative of leading companies and universities. The Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications through joint research and knowledge sharing. For more information and updates, please visit [www.academic-society.net](http://www.academic-society.net).

## The academic and corporate partners of the Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication (as of July 2021)



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