

## Behind the curtain: corporate DEI

### 1 Warmer

a. Discuss these questions and then share your answers with the rest of the class.

- What diversity, equality, and inclusion plans have your organisation been running in the last four years? What are the DEI trends in your country?
- What are the positive consequences of these DEI programmes? How can they be improved?
- What do you know about companies with DEI programmes that benefit specific minority groups being sued in the US?

### 2 Key words

a. Choose the key words and phrases that match the definitions. Check your answers and your understanding of how the words are used by using them to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition. Then read the complete article to see how the key words are used in context.

affirmative action    backlash    demographic    discriminate    diversify    ethnic group  
initiative    mentorship    minority    progressive    shortage    talent

1. a strong feeling in reaction to a change in recent events or policies \_\_\_\_\_

*They publicly apologised to customers after there was a strong \_\_\_\_\_  
against the CEO's comments.*

2. the preference by a government or an organisation given to minority groups that are often treated unfairly \_\_\_\_\_

*The university is reviewing race-based scholarships and the possibility of implementing  
\_\_\_\_\_ policies.*

3. a group of people with shared tradition, culture, history, language, etc., living in a country with people of other ethnic groups \_\_\_\_\_

*You can learn about the culture and history of many different \_\_\_\_\_ in the  
Museum of Anthropology.*

4. the process of giving someone, who usually has less experience, advice or help

\_\_\_\_\_

*They have a \_\_\_\_\_ programme in their community, which brings different generations together.*

5. a new plan to solve a problem \_\_\_\_\_

*Teachbot is a national \_\_\_\_\_ that trains teachers to incorporate AI in their classrooms.*

6. treat a person or a group of people differently (usually worse) because of their age, race, gender, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

*She felt that they had \_\_\_\_\_ against her because of her age.*

7. a small group in a population or society that is different from other groups because of their beliefs, religion, race, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

*The journalist interviewed several \_\_\_\_\_ leaders and asked them to share their experiences to inspire others.*

8. relating to the study of different groups that make up populations \_\_\_\_\_

*Many countries are facing the same \_\_\_\_\_ challenge of ageing populations.*

9. when there is not enough of something \_\_\_\_\_

*There is a labour \_\_\_\_\_ in Canada's food and beverage manufacturing industry.*

10. people who are employed who are good at their jobs \_\_\_\_\_

*We need to find new ways to retain our top \_\_\_\_\_.*

11. new and modern, encouraging social change \_\_\_\_\_

*My boss is younger than me, and I like many of her new and \_\_\_\_\_ ideas.*

12. make something more varied or different \_\_\_\_\_

*We are trying to \_\_\_\_\_ our pool of freelancers, including people of different ages and cultural backgrounds.*

## Is the corporate DEI panic finally over?

**IN THE US, THE DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION PUSH HAS QUIETLY ROLLED ON DESPITE POLITICAL BACKLASH**

- 1 Since the Supreme Court overturned the use of affirmative action in college admissions last summer, it seems like corporate America has been consumed by panic over diversity and inclusion.
- 2 But last month, a diversity executive told me that it had not affected her work at all. I have to confess that I wondered if she was delusional. Had she not heard that conservative activists were threatening legal action against dozens of large companies running programmes for specific ethnic groups? Was she unaware that her colleagues in Silicon Valley were laid off by the dozen last year?
- 3 The executive, from a southern energy company, knew about it all. Yet the word she used to describe her office was “quiet.” Her mentorship programmes and cultural celebrations went on like any other year. That is the case in most human resources and diversity departments, save for a small group of high-profile companies, she insisted.
- 4 She is not the only one. While conservative lawmakers and billionaires try to undo the inclusion programmes that US corporations rolled out after George Floyd’s murder in 2020, nearly every one of the dozen executives I have interviewed recently tell me they are not altering their diversity plans.
- 5 The research group The Conference Board surveyed far more chief human resources officers than I did and found the same thing. Of the 194 executives they polled late last year, none said they planned to scale back their diversity initiatives in 2024. The likes of Bill Ackman and Elon Musk may say that such programmes discriminate against white people and men, but few executives seem to be listening.
- 6 That is not to say that the diversity discipline will escape from the current backlash unscathed. Several large Silicon Valley corporations slashed their diversity budgets last year amid recession fears, while lawsuits from conservative activists prompted Pfizer, Comcast, Goldman Sachs and Bank of America to expand programmes that were once reserved for specific racial minorities to people of all races.
- 7 Yet companies’ own demographic data shows that they are continuing to diversify their workforces even as they promote their modified programmes, according to Ken Janssens, cofounder of Windō, a platform that aggregates social responsibility data from hundreds of companies.
- 8 Disney, which became a primary target of anti-DEI campaigners for featuring minority and queer characters in its films, reported that it had increased the share of its executives that identified as people of colour from 21 per cent to 28.5 per cent over the past five years.
- 9 Nike still publishes its targets for the ethnic and gender diversity of its workforce, reporting that the representation of ethnic minorities among their US staff has steadily grown from 56 per cent to 63 per cent over the past seven years.
- 10 “It is quite bold of them, considering how much legal action is being taken against companies, so my hat’s off to them,” Janssens says. “While [other companies] might tout DEI less publicly, they will stay the course.”
- 11 Most companies seem to be far more worried about how a lack of diversity programming could make it more difficult to recruit and retain staff than getting sued, he added.
- 12 Renita Mollman, the chief administrator of Kansas City-based engineering consultancy Burns & McDonnell, says she was not feeling any pressure to alter her DEI plans. She’s too worried about the country’s shortage of engineering talent.
- 13 “We aren’t going to be the company with the most progressive, forward-looking policies,” says Mollman, noting that they only organised employee resource groups, workers who join together based on shared identities or life experiences, in 2021. Such groups are a commonly accepted diversity initiative that were popular in many large companies before 2020.

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14 “I’d say we are neck-and-neck with most of our clients, [who are] airlines, consumer product manufacturers,” Mollman added. Burns & McDonnell also sponsors science, technology, engineering and maths programmes in local high schools and partnered with historically black colleges to diversify its talent pipeline.

15 “People may not be jumping up and down and screaming ‘DEI’ from the rooftops,” says Heather Foust-Cummings, a researcher at workplace-focused non-profit Catalyst, “but the work continues”.

**FT**

Taylor Nicole Rogers, 04 May, 2024

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## 3 Understanding the article

### a. Choose the best option to complete each statement about the article.

1. After \_\_\_\_\_, corporate America focused more on diversity and inclusion.  
a. George Floyd's murder      b. the Supreme Court's decision on affirmative action
2. According to a diversity executive from a southern energy company, her work has \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. been affected      b. not been affected
3. Of almost 200 executives polled last year, \_\_\_\_\_ said they intended to reduce their diversity initiatives in 2024.  
a. all      b. none
4. Diversity executives don't seem to \_\_\_\_\_ those who say that their programmes discriminate against white people and men.  
a. be listening to      b. disagree with
5. Diversity might still be affected while many Silicon Valley companies cut their budgets due to fears of \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. a recession      b. being sued
6. Disney became a primary target of anti-DEI campaigners because it featured \_\_\_\_\_ characters in its films.  
a. minority and queer      b. underaged
7. Janssens thinks that what \_\_\_\_\_ is doing is to be admired.  
a. Disney      b. Nike
8. Mollman says that the most important thing at the moment is to \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. change her DEI plans      b. find engineering talent
9. Foust-Cummings says that the DEI work continues, but no one is \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. boasting about it      b. making progress

## 4 Business language – idiomatic language / collocations

a. Match the idiomatic phrases 1–5 from the article with their meanings a–e. Find them in the article to check your answers.

1. take your hat off to someone
  2. stay the course
  3. forward-looking
  4. be neck-and-neck
  5. scream/shout from the rooftops
- a. continue doing something until you have achieved what you planned to do
  - b. admire someone for an achievement
  - c. say something publicly
  - d. be equally likely to win
  - e. considering future developments and planning for the future

b. Complete the collocations from the article with the nouns below.

action      budgets      programmes      staff      workforce

1. threaten / take legal \_\_\_\_\_
2. alter / roll out / run / sponsor / undo diversity \_\_\_\_\_ or plans
3. slash \_\_\_\_\_
4. diversify a(n) \_\_\_\_\_
5. recruit/retain \_\_\_\_\_

**c. Complete the sentences using some of the idiomatic expressions and collocations. Use the hints in brackets to help you.**

1. We were very worried as they continued to \_\_\_\_\_ (reduce the money available to our department).
2. They are \_\_\_\_\_ (increasing the diversity of their employees) and they are \_\_\_\_\_ (very vocal about it).
3. Their company is \_\_\_\_\_ (hiring new employees).
4. These last two candidates are \_\_\_\_\_ (have equal chances of getting the job) at this stage.
5. I \_\_\_\_\_ (admire them) for starting their first DEI programme ten years ago and for how they have \_\_\_\_\_ (continued until they reached their targets).

## 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss these questions.**

- Which minority groups in your country would most benefit from inclusion programmes? Do you know any companies trying to increase the number of executives who identify as one of these minority groups?
- What are some of the “unintentional” positive consequences of diversity and inclusion programmes?
- How do DEI programmes generally impact companies’ value and profitability? Provide examples.

## 6 Wider business theme – controversial DEI decisions

**a. Read the text below and answer the questions.**

*In 2023, Disney released a live-action remake of The Little Mermaid. The lead character, Ariel, was played by black actress Halle Bailey, who is of a different ethnicity from the original animated character. Ariel’s six sisters are also played by actors from different ethnicities. The film got 16 million views in its first five days of streaming, but it didn’t look like it would be a success.*

- Why do you think Disney decided to do this?
- What were the financial risks and consequences of this rebranding?
- What were the implications for Disney employees? And for investors and customers/viewers?

- b. **Research another controversial DEI decision a company has made and its effect on its business. Use the questions below to guide you.**
- What did they decide to do? Why?
  - What were the financial implications?
  - What were the implications for employees? And for investors and customers?
- c. **Take turns sharing your findings. After each case, discuss whether you think it was a success or not. Give your opinion, highlighting the most important reasons, and say if you agree or disagree with others. Say which companies make the best case study to showcase a successful DEI programme.**

### Useful language

*I'd like you to think about the significance of ... / The significance of this is ...*

*Why is this important? / What does this mean for ...? / Let's consider ...*

*Considering all of these points, ... / On the whole, ...*

*My point of view is that ... / As far as I'm concerned, ...*