

Leveraging on Diversity in Nigeria's Workforce: Strategies for Inclusion and Equality

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is blessed with diversity. Diversity in Nigeria's workplace ranges from socio-cultural differences, geographic, age, learning style, personality traits, gender, language, education, ethnicity, and religion among others. It is however incumbent on organizations that want to gain competitive advantage to widen their perspective on workplace diversity and diversity management. Management must consciously ensure that diversity management is part of its routine operations. However, DEI compliance in Nigeria's workplace is worrisome. Organizations and government civil/public service discriminate in terms of recruitment, promotions and placements. It has become pronounced that to get employment in a number of organizations, it is now a matter of 'who you know', not necessarily 'what you know or the qualifications and experience you possess'. This paper therefore studied workplace diversity in Nigeria, in a bid to propose strategies for promoting equality and inclusion. The researchers adopted historical and descriptive research methods; hence data were gathered from mostly secondary sources such as scholarly journal articles, and textbooks among others. The researchers' workplace experiences were also brought to bear in this paper. It was discovered among others that Cox's individual, group/intergroup as well as organizational levels of diversity hold swear in Nigeria's workplace; only 35% of Nigeria's leading companies have at least a tolerable level of diversity, equity and inclusion. A number of strategies recommended among others include; enacting a strong legal framework that governs DEI practices and compliance in the workplace; inclusive leadership and unconscious biases training; relationship building; flexible work model.

Keywords: Diversity, inclusion, equality, diversity management, workplace.

INTRODUCTION

As societies and organizations around the world have become increasingly diverse over the past few decades, employment equity and workforce diversity have featured heavily on the political and business agenda (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012). Nigeria provides an amazing context in which to explore the concepts of equality, inclusion and workplace diversity, with its unusually high levels of diversity across ethnic/cultural, racial, religious, linguistic, age and socio-economic dimensions. Nigeria's peoples belong to 250–400 different ethnolinguistic groups, with three major ethnic groups. Nigerians also belong to several different religions, with Islam and Christianity accounting for approximately 50 and 40 percent of the population. Islam is dominant in the northern region while Christianity is the major religion in the south; indigenous African religions are also commonly practiced around the country (Ifedapo A., Doyin A. and Olusegun M. 2014).

Globalization and dynamism in the work environment have necessitated the need for organizations and governments alike to develop businesses, administrations and cooperations across their national boundaries. Omotayo *et al.*, (2020) submit that it has become necessary for organizations to solicit a more dynamic

cultural model if they must continue to survive in this dynamic environment and achieve their corporate goals. Organizations now value and appreciate the multicultural workforce where their employees include members of varying ethnic, racial, religious, and gender backgrounds

The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has made the world to become a global village. It has also resulted in diverse employees in organizations. Thus, there is currently much attention on diversity as a crucial mechanism for strengthening business operations (Daniel, 2021). However, deliberations on diversity management have incorporated the concepts of inclusion and equity (Oswick and Noon 2015). Nigeria's low diversity score in the global survey is reflective of the apparently weak or perhaps practically non-existent institutional arrangements to effectively handle workplace diversity issues.

DEI stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This is a critical aspect in the workplace, be it public or private, as it is essential to ensuring that staff of all races, genders, sexual orientations, socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, and other identities are included and supported in the work experience and career growth. Government and policymakers are responsible for creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all citizens. Thus, this paper seeks to among other things, examine the nature of workplace diversity in Nigeria, DEI experience in Nigeria's workplace and the strategies for improving DEI experience in the workplace.

THE CONCEPT OF DIVERSITY

According to Akinnusi D., Sonubi O. and Oyewunmi O. (2017), diversity implies the variety, variegation and multiplicity of characteristics, both visible and invisible, which constitute a phenomenon in both the inanimate and animate worlds. However, the focus of this work is on workplace diversity. Kreitner and Kinichi (2001) defined diversity as the multitude of individual differences and similarities that exist among the people working in an organization. These similarities and differences are in terms such as age, gender, marital status, social status, disability, sexual orientation, religion, personality, ethnicity, language and culture (Kossek *et al.*, 2006). Other aspects include lifestyle, years of service, tenure, position in the organization, functional specialty, or geographical location.

Diversity entails the exploration of human differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual (Satus, 2003). Diversity is a reality created by individuals and groups from a broad spectrum of demographic and philosophical differences (Micah, 2004). It is extremely important to support and protect diversity by valuing individuals and groups free from prejudice, and by fostering a climate where equity and mutual respect are intrinsic. Diversity, therefore, means more than just acknowledging and/or tolerating differences. Diversity according to Clef (2009), includes knowing how to relate to those qualities and conditions that are different from our own and outside the groups to which we belong, yet are present in other individuals and groups. These include but are not limited to age, ethnicity, class, gender, physical abilities/qualities, race, sexual orientation, as well as religious status, gender expression, educational background, geographical location, income, marital status, parental status, and work experiences.

Metcalf, (2010, p. 153), conceptualized diversity *inter alia*;

Diversity is the concept that people should be valued as individuals for reasons related to business interests, as well as for moral and social reasons. It recognizes that people from different backgrounds can bring fresh ideas and perceptions which can make the way work is done more efficient and products and services better.

Figure 1: The Nature of Workplace Diversity



Source: Matkin, S.; Headrick, J.; and Sunderman, H, (2023).

The Concept of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, equity and inclusion are three closely linked values held by many organizations that support different groups of individuals, including people of different races, ethnicities, languages, religions, abilities, genders, and sexual orientations. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are often grouped together because they are interconnected and it is only in combination that their true impact emerges (McKinsey 2022).

Diversity has to do with who is represented in the workforce. Is everyone recognized and not discriminated against, irrespective of age, religion, race, language, culture, physical ability, sexual orientation, economic background, or political beliefs among others? Diversity thus represents a workforce that is representative of people from different backgrounds, ethnicities and communities, and with a variety of personal characteristics.

Equity refers to fair treatment for all people so that the norms, practices, and policies in place ensure identity is not predictive of opportunities or workplace outcomes. Equity differs from equality in a subtle but important way. While equality assumes that all people should be treated the same, equity takes into consideration a person’s unique circumstances, adjusting treatment accordingly so that the end result is equal (McKinsey 2022). Equity, therefore, means using equitable approaches to have a workplace in which every individual has equal access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed.

Inclusion refers to how the workforce experiences the workplace and the degree to which organizations embrace all employees and enable them to make meaningful contributions. Organizations that are recruiting a diverse workforce must as a matter of necessity strive to develop a sufficiently inclusive culture, such that all employees feel among and their voices heard. Inclusion, therefore, means a workplace in which everyone, regardless of individual differences, feels able to participate and contribute meaningfully.

Thus, companies that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive are better able to respond to challenges,

win top talent, and meet the needs of different customer bases (McKinsey 2022).

The Concept of Diversity Management

Diversity Management is imperative for tapping into the positive potential of diversity and transforming this potential into a reality. Organizations are reassessing their structures and processes in light of equal opportunity (Paulson, 2011). Osmond (2008) defines diversity management as a strategy that is intended to foster and maintain a positive workplace environment. Therefore, an effective diversity management program will promote recognition and respect for the individual differences found among a group of employees. diversity management means voluntary organizational actions that are designed to create greater inclusion of employees from various backgrounds into the formal and informal organizational structures through deliberate policies and programs (Harvey and Allard, 2012). Diversity management requires employers to take into consideration the legislative and cultural context in other countries, depending on where their workforce resides all of which centers around attaining a corporate mission. Since organizations are microcosms of their societies, there is a diverse workforce comprising a multitude of beliefs, understandings, values, ways of viewing the world and unique information, making it a “hot-button issue” in political, legal, corporate and educational arenas (Shen *et al.*, 2009), thereby calling for a careful management of these diversities for organizational effectiveness.

Diversity management requires employers to take into consideration the legislative and cultural context in other ethnicity, people and countries, depending on where their workforce resides all of which centers around attaining a corporate mission. However, one of the main aims of diversity management is that it encourages the development of latent skills and talents among employees such that individuals who may have felt unable to move forward in the organization due to factors such as race, skin coloration, age, gender or sexual orientation will find that these attributes are no longer issues (European Commission, 2008; Harrison and Gebert, 2009; Mitchel, 2013).

DEI Experience in Nigeria’s Workplace

A diverse workplace is an integral asset since it acknowledges the individual strengths of each employee and the potential they bring to an organization. As earlier stated, Nigeria is the most populous state in Africa, with over 250 ethnic groups, multilingual, and multi-religious among others. The country has largely been plagued with minority issues as a result of perceived and felt marginalization and subjugation by the powerful ethnic, or geopolitical zones. The outcry for diversity management is not limited to appointive cum elective positions in government offices but has extended to all forms of public and private recruitment. Governments and most organizations in Nigeria often consciously or unconsciously limit talent hunt and development to people who look like those in authority, speak the same language, agree with their views, know how to ‘play the game’, or have the ‘right’ background. There is a public outcry that positions and placements in a number of juicy public establishments such as the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) Ltd, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) are mostly reserved for the children of the elites. This proves a high level of disparity among the different social classes.

Nigeria’s workplace diversity dimension can be rightly explained through Cox’s level of diversity dimension. Workers are discriminated against, marginalized and antagonized, even by leaders at the individual, intergroup and organizational dimensions in most Nigerian organizations.

Cox’s level of diversity dimensions is presented below;

Figure 2: Cox’s Level of Diversity Dimensions



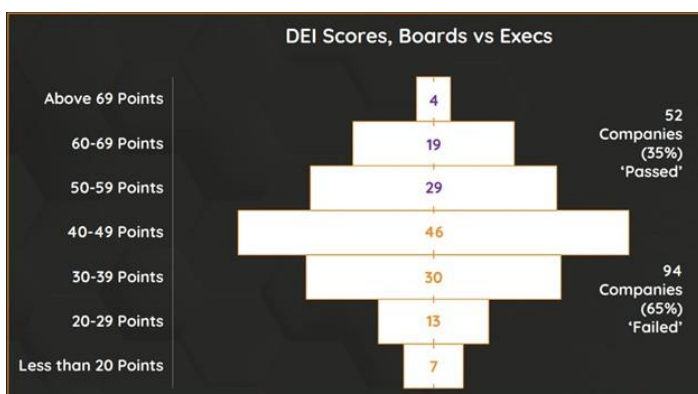
Source: Loden *et al.*, (1991, p. 7).

Figure 2 shows factors in three levels identified by Cox (1994) by which diversity dimensions can be categorized. To corroborate with the identified levels, Isaiah, O., Ojiabo, U. and Alagah, A. (2017) rightly averred that in a number of Nigeria’s organizations, there have been great discrimination activities which appear in the form of hiring only women even in roles that men could rightly fit, employing based on the tribal card, a situation in which majority of firms in a particular state possess a strong inclination to employ individual from the same state rather than more qualified individuals which they liken to trust and security. Stunted growth of employees in terms of position and pay, as management usually discriminate towards promotion based on perception and are more likely to put a certain set of individuals below their actual pay grade as a result of discrimination largely called ‘reasons best known to them’ (Omoh *et al.*, 2015).

Douglas, K. and Nkporbu, A. (2017) in their work entitled “Prevalence and Pattern of Workplace Violence and Ethnic Discrimination among Workers in a Tertiary Institution in Southern Nigeria” discovered that ethnic/tribal discrimination had a 7% (n = 39), with risk factors such as workload (98.2%) home-work interface (82.0%), career 70.1%, interpersonal relationship (64.0%), work schedules 53%, lack of career development 58.7%, unfair target or goals 46.2%, job security 20.1% and working alone or night work 21.7%. The study also revealed that the occurrence of sexual harassment among the workers at the University of Port Harcourt is common. These dimensions of diversity experience in Nigerian workplaces have played a negative toll on the country’s organizational DEI score.

Hofstede Insight conducted a study on Nigeria’s 148 organizations and discovered that nearly two-thirds of Nigeria’s leading companies do not show acceptable DEI levels.

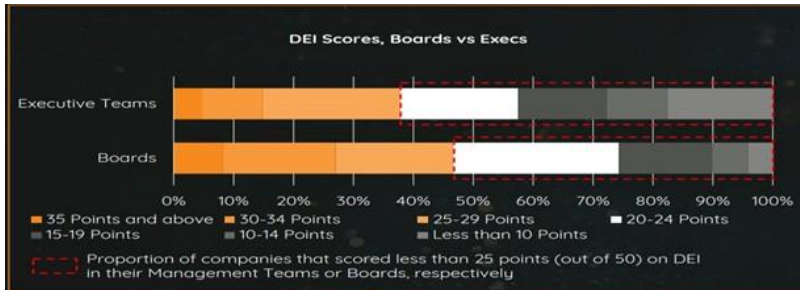
Figure 3: DEI Scores of Boards vs Executives in Nigerian Organizations (2021)



Source: Hofstede Insight

Figure 3 above indicates that only 35% of Nigeria’s leading Companies have at least atolerable level of diversity, equity and inclusion. 65% of the companies analyzed, did not score up to 50 points, overall. Only 4 companies scored 70 points and above in the assessment.

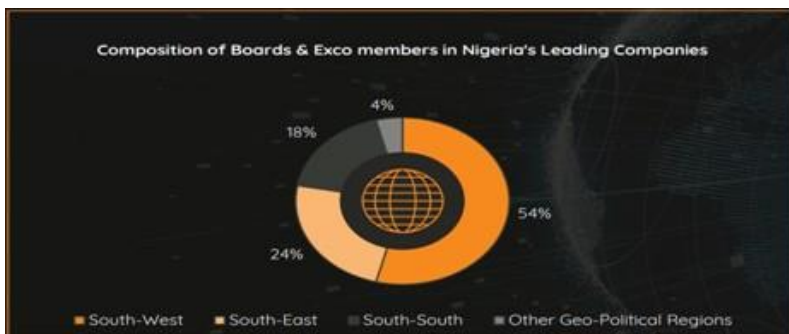
Figure 4: Boards of Directors and Executive Teams DEI Assessment (2021)



Source: Hofstede Insight

Figure 4 above indicates that on average, boards are comparatively more diverse and inclusive than executive management teams. 62% of Nigeria’s leading companies scored lower than 25 out of the maximum 50 points under the DEI of executive management teams. These companies performed slightly better under the Boards of Directors, with 53% of them failing to reach the passing grade.

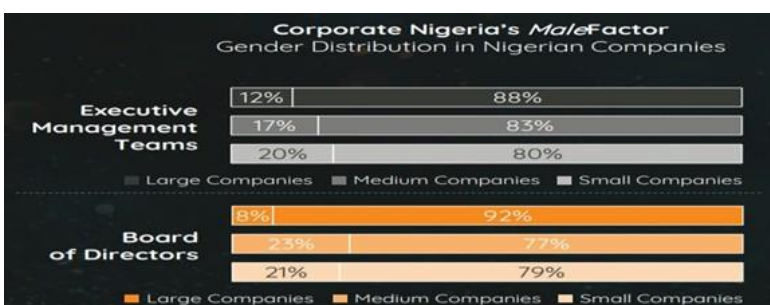
Figure 5: Ethnic Diversity in Nigeria’s Leading Organizations (2021)



Source: Hofstede Insight

Figure 5 indicates that individuals from Nigeria’s South-West geopolitical region made up 54% of the executive management teams and board members of Nigeria’s leading companies, those from the South-East, and South-South, accounted for 22% and 16%, respectively and the other three regions together accounted for only 4% of corporate leadership.

Figure 6: Gender Diversity in Nigeria’s Leading Organizations (2021)



Source: Hofstede Insight (2021)

Men still dominate the highest corporate positions in Nigeria. Out of the 148 companies analyzed, only 14 had a female CEO or MD. 39 companies did not have any woman on the board; 43 had no women on their executive management teams; and 18 had no women on both their boards and executive teams. Women made up around 12% of executive teams and only 8% of boards in Nigeria’s largest companies.

Figure 7: Gender Diversity in Nigeria’s Leading Organizations (2022)



Source: Hofstede Insight (2022)

Figure 7 above indicates that out of 154 CEOs, only 16 were females representing a paltry 10.4%.

Figure 8: Top 10 DEI Companies in Nigeria (2021)



Source: Hofstede Insight (2021)

Transcorp Hotels Plc is Nigeria’s best DEI company, with 76 points (out of a maximum of 100). Africa Prudential followed closely with 75 points, and PZ Cussons had the third-best result with 73 points.

Figure 9: DEI Across Industrial Sectors in Nigeria (2021)

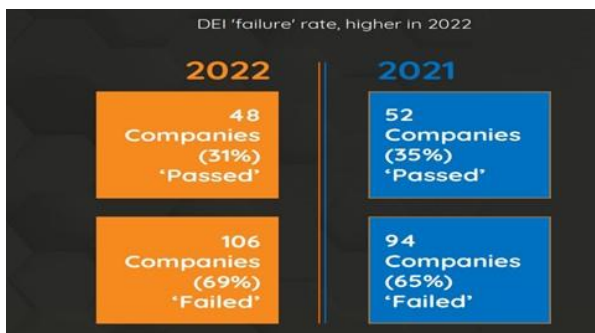


Source: Hofstede Insight (2021)

The aggregated DEI scores for various industries showed that only the top three sectors, achieved a passing grade (i.e., 50 points and above) on average. The Chemicals and Plastics industry had the best aggregated average sectorial DEI score (55 points). The Transport and Logistics and Oil and Gas sectors had the second and third-best DEI scores.

The challenges to promoting DEI in Nigeria’s workplace are; unconscious biases (such as affinity, halo, conformity, attribution, horns among others), lack of diversity at the top, resistance to change, lack of accountability for promoting and implementing DEI initiatives among others.

Figure 10: Comparing 2021 and 2022 Workplace DEI Rate in Nigeria



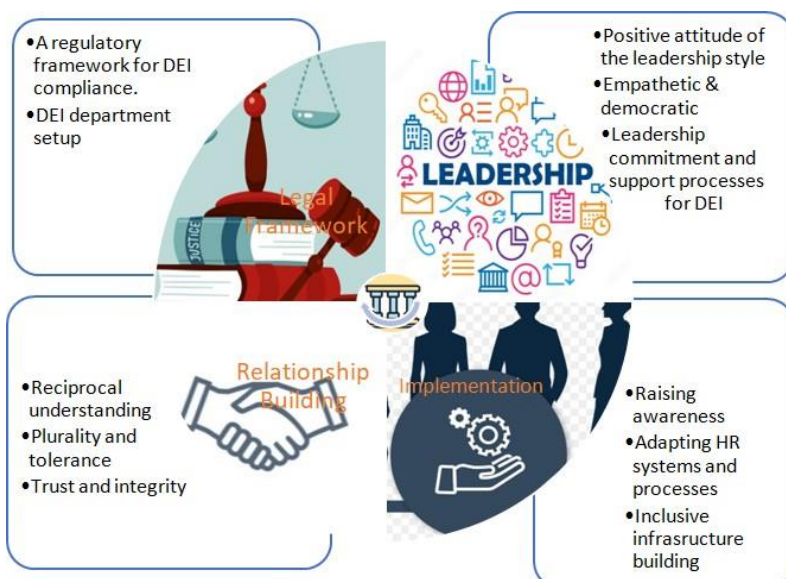
Source: Hofstede Insight (2022)

From Figure 10 above, it could be sadly observed that the failure rate of DEI was higher in 2022 as compared to what was obtainable in 2021. Whereas 52 companies (35%) passed DEI test and 94 companies (65%) failed in 2021; 48 companies (31%) passed and 106 companies (69%) failed in 2022.

STRATEGIES FOR WORKPLACE EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

It is a truism that diversity is a reality in Nigeria’s multi-ethnic, cultural, and religious workplace, however, inclusion is a choice. To make the right choice of incorporating equality and inclusion in the workplace, a number of strategies are to be put in place.

Figure 11: Conceptual Framework of Strategy for Work place Equality and Inclusion



Source: The Authors

For DEI to be fully entrenched in Nigeria’s workplace, it is important for both organizations and governments at all levels to provide clear leadership on strategies for embedding equality, diversity and inclusion into the way people work and their culture. There is need to promote and raise awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion issues and enable better engagement and communication with employees.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (2019) submitted that to maintain a diverse and inclusive workplace culture, the following priorities should be considered;

- Evaluate diversity and inclusion data to understand where there may be gaps in the representation of diversity within the organization or adverse reasons for existing employees leaving. Where needed strategies should be created to resolve and improve representation.
- Evaluate and review the current recruitment and operational processes.
- Target diverse populations by promoting internship, apprenticeship and employment opportunities. Kiradoo, (2011) submitted that organizations should invest in developing a diverse talent pipeline to ensure a steady stream of qualified candidates. This includes offering internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs that provide opportunities for individuals from underrepresented groups to gain experience and develop skills.
- Ensure all qualified internal candidates have an opportunity to compete for open positions and apply for developmental opportunities.
- Cultivate a supportive, welcoming, inclusive and fair work environment that maximizes workforce talent, skills and diversity.
- Broaden access to service and remove all perceived and real barriers (be it gender, age, religion, ethnicity, ideology, personality, etc).
- Build and develop relationships to share knowledge and best practice, improve public services and frontline complaint handling in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Develop inclusive working behaviours throughout management levels.

Achieving diversity and inclusion should not be considered a zero-sum activity, but rather a win-win situation. It requires an open mind to possibilities and changes, welcoming new points of view and treating all inputs as valid inputs. Creating and promoting an inclusive workplace culture is essential to retaining a diverse workforce. Employees who feel valued and included are most likely to stay with an organization and contribute to its success.

Figure 12: How Inclusion is Essential for Retaining Today’s Staff.



Source: Deloitte University, The Leadership Centre for Inclusion (2017).

Figure 10 above indicates that eighty percent reported that inclusion is important when choosing an employer. Thirty-nine percent of respondents reported that they would leave their current organization for a

more inclusive one. For millennials, inclusion played an even larger role in their retention, with over half the millennials reporting they would leave their current organization for a more inclusive one and nearly one-third indicated they have already left an organization for a more inclusive one.

A bias-conscious culture that relies on the creation of an environment where differences can be recognized but discussed and resolved in an objective, constructive and respectful way should be created. It would be pretentious to assume the absence of unconscious biases. In a bias-conscious culture, it is understood that everyone exhibits bias from time to time and that systemic checks and balances have been set up to help manage such biases.

CONCLUSION

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has become increasingly significant in today's workplace. It has become imperative for organizations to recognize that a diverse workforce offers a healthy competitive edge in creating innovation and meeting organizational/customer needs. Nigeria is blessed with diversity; however, this diversity is not properly utilized for the benefit of organizations. Diversity dimensions are still being experienced at various levels. At the individual level; there are identity structures, prejudice, and stereotyping among others; at the group level there are cultural differences, ethnocentrism and intergroup conflicts; and at the organizational level there are cultural and acculturation processes, institutional bias towards humans among others. Thus, there is a need to harness the country's diversity to bring about an equitable, inclusive and productive workplace.

Organizations prioritizing DEI can reap the multiple benefits of improved performance, increased innovation, and higher employee engagement and retention rates. However, implementing DEI strategies can present several challenges, and it requires a long-term commitment from organizations to create a culture that prioritizes DEI. Such commitments require a strong legal framework that enshrines DEI tenets in organizational work culture, building inclusive and strong leadership, and raising awareness/staff training among others. Ultimately, a diverse and inclusive workforce is essential to meet the evolving needs of today's global economy.

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