



How DEI Effects Business in Sweden

BY KATIE-J SMITHSON

In a popular short film, Purl, a pink ball of yarn, starts a job at a white, male-dominated company. Her excitement for her new job diminishes quickly as she realizes her co-workers ignore her. She desperately tries to fit in by entirely changing her appearance to conform to her male counterparts. In the past, companies could get away with hiring and promoting only white males. However, the world is changing, and businesses need to change as well. The

needs to change. This article will address the following three questions:

1. What is DEI?
2. What does DEI look like in Sweden?
3. How can DEI be Implemented for Better Business?

What is DEI?

Kate Heinz, who wrote the article “What Does Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Mean in the Workplace?” describes DEI as “vital to creating and maintaining a successful workplace.”¹ Yet so many businesses have not taken steps to be diverse, equitable, or inclusive. Diversity is the first step to achieving a well-rounded and balanced work environment. Without diversity, equity and inclusion are meaningless. To improve DEI in business, however, we must first define diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Figure 1 - Purl from the Disney short film



Purls of the world need support, and the development of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs will provide the necessary support requisite to facilitate change. In order to change the world, we must first identify what

Diversity

Diversity, as defined by Heinz, is “the presence of differences within a given setting.”² Alicia Dallas from the Boys and Girls Club of the Mississippi Delta defines it more specifically as “the

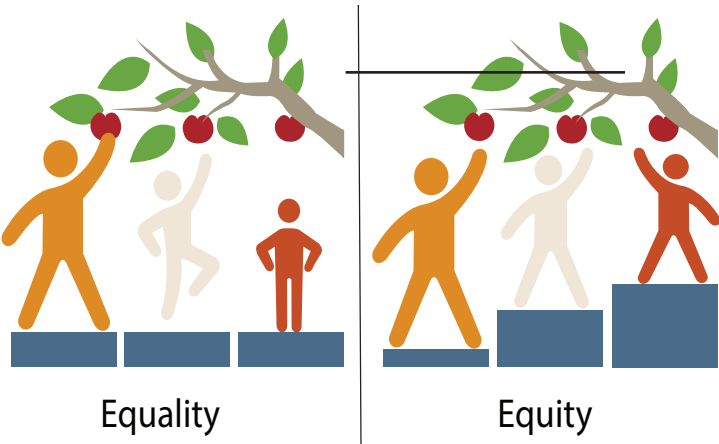
presence and representation of people of differing races, religions, ages, abilities, genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, languages, nationalities, political parties, socioeconomic groups, and other characteristics that inform an individual's worldview and experiences.”³ Both of these definitions come down to the representation of differences between us and not just the differences of our outward characteristics.

Heinz reminds us to be “mindful of diversity of thought.”⁴ I want to take that one step further and include diversity of action. Each and every one of us is unique from the person sitting across from us not only in how we look, but also in how we think, act, and speak. Diversity is about allowing everyone to be present regardless of visible or invisible differences that exist between us. Different perspectives lead to better results in diversity. However, if people with these differing perspectives are not being accommodated for, then we lose the value that diversity can offer. This is where equity comes into play.

Equity

Heinz defines equity as “the act of ensuring that processes and programs are impartial, fair and provide equal possible outcomes for every individual.”⁵ This is not to be confused with equality. As depicted in Figure 2, equality

Figure 2 - The difference between equality and equity



treats everyone the same and ignores diversity. We need to recognize the differences and to provide ways to help those with different struggles than us thrive in the same environment. In Jodi Picoult's novel, *Small Great Things*, one of the characters said, “Equality is treating everyone the same. But equity is taking differences into account, so everyone has a chance to succeed.”⁶ Treating people fairly does not mean providing the same support to everyone. Instead, it means providing the type of support that an individual needs. Understanding how diversity and equity work together is the first step to creating an inclusive environment.

Inclusion

Accommodating the needs of others by being equitable is just the beginning of creating an inclusive environment for them. Inclusion

Figure 3 - Quote about diversity, inclusion, and belonging

DIVERSITY	INCLUSION	BELONGING
is being invited to the party	is being asked to dance	is dancing like no one is watching

takes equity one step further. Once the proper tools and resources have been provided, we still need to ensure everyone feels welcomed and included. Heinz defines inclusion as “the practice of ensuring that people feel a sense of belonging in the workplace.”⁷ A famous quote by Verna Myers, a DEI activist, says, “Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance.” This quote has been taken one step further as people have added “belonging is dancing like nobody’s watching.” Being inclusive is ensuring that everyone feels like they can be themselves. Acknowledge, accommodate, and include people at work.

What does DEI look like in Sweden?

Now that we understand what DEI is, we need to understand what DEI currently looks like in Sweden.

DEI Oriented Companies

Sweden Alva Labs, a Swedish human resources software company, has been exploring new ways to attract a more diverse group of employees. Several executives were brought together to discuss the subject. As immigrants themselves, the executives understood the barrier immigrants face when applying for jobs. Aida Faiz, CEO of Venoxa, said DEI comes down to management. Changing management will result in a change of work culture; a culture that will allow everyone to feel welcome. The group of executives also mentioned the importance of ensuring that their forward-thinking employees feel psychologically safe and can recognize their own biases.⁸

Swedish, a health services company in Sweden, also recognizes a need for “radical change” and believes that DEI is central to that change. The first way it is improving its efforts in DEI is by recruiting “the best and brightest talent to Swedish, prioritizing diversity in race, culture, gender orientation, background, experience, talent and thought.” The second thing it is doing is creating an inclusive work environment where everyone can feel valued and respected.⁹ This is just the beginning of the process; most businesses in Sweden are not embracing “diversity as a business imperative.”¹⁰

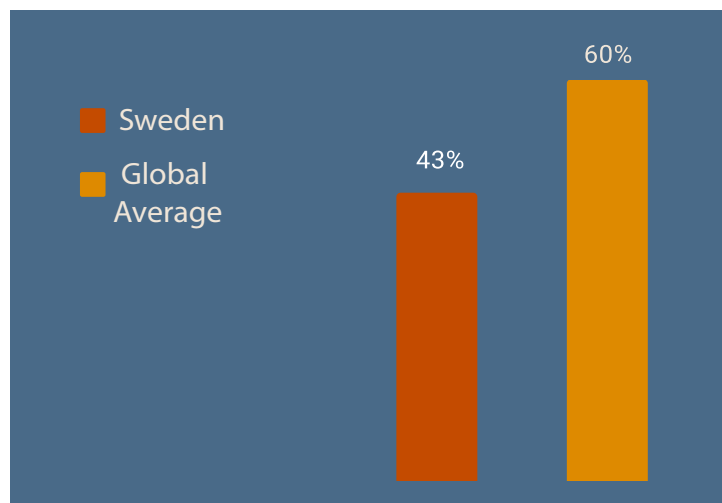
The Problem

Nordic countries have been slow to acknowledge and adapt DEI in their businesses. Despite the research and studies proving the business imperative of DEI, very few corporations in the

Nordic countries have actually been able to leverage DEI as “a strength, a source of value, and a competitive advantage.”¹¹ Sweden has a history of egalitarianism, meaning citizens regard each other as equals. This is partly because of Sweden’s historically ethnically homogenous population.¹² Despite the recent waves of immigrants, Sweden’s egalitarian culture has remained constant. Immigrants are being forced to conform to Swedish culture instead of being free to express themselves how they want to. Changing 5,000 years of culture will not happen overnight; however, a few companies have begun the process.

Figure 4 shows the results of a survey put together by the company Kantar in what it called “The Global DEI Census.” Swedes were significantly lower than the global average in agreeing that the company they work for is actively trying to increase its DEI efforts. Only 43% of Swedes involved in the workforce believe that

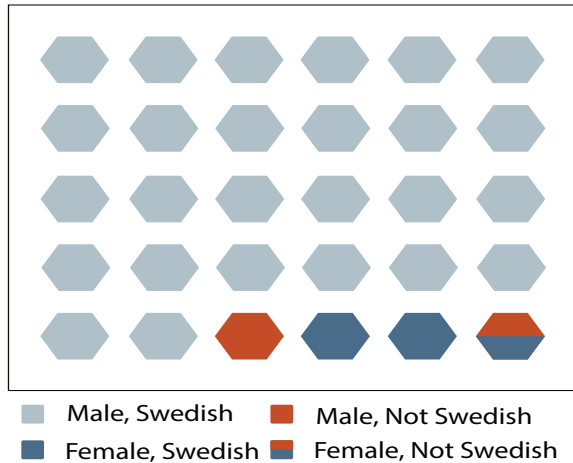
Figure 4 - Percentage of employees who reported their company is taking steps toward DEI



their company is taking steps towards DEI.¹³ According to “Finding the Value in Diversity: Diversity and Inclusion Isn’t Just a Fix,” not many steps are being taken by companies in Sweden. Figure 5 shows that a mere 13% of CEOs in Sweden are not male Swedes.¹⁴ If Aida is right

and change starts with the management, Sweden will not change for a long time.

Figure 5 - Gender and ethnicity of CEOs in Sweden



How can we improve DEI?

Now that we know what DEI is and what it looks like, let us discuss why it is important. According to an Indeed article, diversity in business has five major advantages. Diversity creates opportunities for employees to be creative and problem solve. It also leads to better decision making, lower employee turnover rates, and improved company reputations. The biggest impact diversity provides for a company is increasing its productivity and profits.¹⁵ According to a report from McKinsey and Company, companies “in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams were 15% more likely to experience above-average profitability.”¹⁶

Overcoming Problems

Wealth Management Sweden found three misconceptions in regards to DEI implementation.

- Diversity and inclusion strategies should look the same for every company.
- Top management is exclusively responsible for diversity and inclusion strategies’ success.
- The objective of diversity and inclusion strategies is to drive equal outcomes.

Businesses need to understand that DEI could, and probably should, look different for them than their competitors. Although management plays a role in DEI, if everyone is not involved and actively trying to be inclusive, it will never work. Increased profits are a by-product of diversity. The main goal is to create a positive and inclusive work environment.¹⁷

Conclusion

DEI is not the future, it is the present. We have the power to eliminate the negatives in stories like Purl’s. Diversity, when implemented well, will increase the productivity of employees, lead to smarter-decision making, reduce employee turnover, improve reputations, and increase profits. We have recognized the need for conversations. We have had the conversations. Now is the time to act. Change can happen and profits can only see potential increases only if people are willing to take action.



About the Author

Katie-J Smithson is a senior in the experience design and management program at Brigham Young University. After having the unique opportunity to take a diversity, equity, and inclusion class, she became passionate about creating awareness of these subjects and helping minorities feel included in the business world. After living in Sweden for awhile during her college years, she fell in love with the place and plans to work in Sweden.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁵ Pollmann-Larsen, Poulsen, Jensen, Uehigashi, Kristoffersen, Hansen, Harboe, Nummela, Skeel-Gjorling, and Wigh. "Finding the Value in Diversity: Diversity and Inclusion Isn't Just a Fix."
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