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INFINEUM: CREATING AN INCLUSIVE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Pei-Chuan Wu, Jeremy Thoo, and Hui Tong Koh wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In February 2020, Andrea Isaia was addressing the human resources (HR) team and the inclusion and diversity (I&D) group, referred to as I&D champions, at Infineum International Limited (Infineum). Isaia was Infineum’s global talent and learning manager, as well as the regional HR manager for Asia Pacific (AP). He was speaking about the company’s journey toward achieving I&D at Infineum: “More than five years ago, we were tackling diversity. Now, we truly talk about inclusion. Diversity is about being invited to the party and inclusion is about being asked to dance. It is the second step. You can put many diverse people in a room, but unless you take action on what they say and, first of all, give them a chance to say something, there is no point.”

Isaia was part of the executive I&D sponsor team, a virtual team of passionate executives from the various business departments at Infineum. The team aimed to lead by example and create I&D initiatives and solutions across the organization. The current I&D theme of “diversity of thought” was intended to invite all employees to the conversation. Isaia proudly advocated it as the right move. The team was encouraged by the fact that the company was getting closer to reaching its goal of 33 per cent female senior leaders by 2025, after consistent progress from 24 per cent in 2019 and 25 per cent in 2020.

Infineum’s I&D journey began in 2009. Since then, numerous initiatives and workshops had been taking shape, including I&D-related leadership training, town hall meetings, a company intranet, and others. “Most importantly,” said Isaia, “many colleagues volunteered to become I&D champions and now they truly drive this across the organization.”

How could that momentum be maintained moving forward? Could the goal be achieved without measuring the effectiveness of some I&D initiatives (e.g., volunteering) or setting targets for staffing and promotion? How could employees from Singapore’s plant and office interact more closely with each other? What else could be done to make Infineum’s I&D journey even more meaningful and fruitful for everyone in the company?

Infineum’s Expansion into the Asia Pacific Region

Infineum was formally established as a joint venture between Royal Dutch Shell plc and Exxon Mobil Corporation in January 1999. However, the company’s roots dated back to the 1930s through the history of both its parent companies.[[1]](#footnote-1) With approximately 2,000 highly skilled and dedicated employees worldwide and operations dispersed over 10 geographical locations, Infineum was a world leader in the formulation, manufacture, and marketing of petroleum additives for lubricants and fuels.[[2]](#footnote-2) Over the previous 80 years, the two parent companies had carried out cutting-edge research and development activities in the field of additive products, including automotive oil, heavy-duty diesel oil, marine engine oil, diesel fuel, and specialty applications such as transmission fluid and gas engine oil.

Currently, the company was present in more than 70 countries and business centres in the United Kingdom, United States, China, and Singapore. Infineum prided itself on being a truly global and world-class organization with a global supply chain, multicultural business teams, and the ability to conduct business in over 20 languages.[[3]](#footnote-3)

After its establishment, the company began to expand rapidly into the AP region, which included China, Japan, Korea, India, and Singapore. With the 2012 expansion of a chemical manufacturing plant at Jurong Island, Singapore—the first salicylate plant in the AP region—Infineum witnessed steady growth and underwent positive changes. Aspiring to make the company a “global leader in the transportation additive industry,” former chief executive officer (CEO) Xavier le Mintier advocated for bringing together “the most advanced technology, process design, and best talents, here in the Asia Pacific region, here in Singapore.” The plant expanded its operations in April 2014. With the addition of over 150 new staff members, the Singapore office became home to more than 300 employees.

Trevor Russell, Infineum’s CEO since 2016, stressed the importance of the AP region as a strong priority for the company. He was heavily involved in the establishment of the company’s Singapore and China projects, including the business and technology centres. In early January 2020, a letter of intent was signed to mark the beginning of Infineum’s multi-million expansion of Infineum China’s Zhangjiagang plant, to meet the rising demand for high-end lubricants in China and the AP region. Russell recognized the changes in the business and labour markets, and was determined to have more local nationals and women leading Infineum’s businesses in the future: “We want our workforce to mirror our customer base around the world, so we are working to build on our already significant diversity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Culture, Inclusiveness, and Diversity: Infineum CARES

“Nobody gets hurt” was the first message emphasized to every visitor to Infineum Singapore. The message was evident in the form of a mandatory introductory safety video that every visitor had to watch before entering the office compound. CEO Russell’s captivating speech in the video addressed Infineum’s life-saving rules, showing the top management team’s commitment to a culture of safety.

Infineum endorsed five core values and beliefs—customer focus, ambition, respect for people, ethics, and safety—collectively referred to with the acronym CARES. The values of Infineum’s CARES principles shaped the company’s inclusive culture. As the company clearly stated, “Each of us is truly unique, and when we come together we create a rich tapestry of the visible differences, traditions, personal experiences and points of view.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Infineum went beyond mere physical safety, to place psychological safety at the core of its inclusive culture. Its corporate video illustrated people’s opinions about working at the company: “It’s such a friendly environment. You can go up to anyone and say, “Hey, I need some help on this matter” and usually they’ll sit down, put aside some time, and teach you how to do it. So that’s how it works here at Infineum. . . . It’s not so hierarchical that you’re not allowed to talk to different people; in fact, it’s encouraged.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The company’s inclusiveness and diversity information featured recent reports on Infineum’s attempts to address its gender salary gap and proportion of women in senior leadership positions at Infineum UK, which had doubled from 14 per cent in 2015 to 28 per cent in 2018.[[7]](#footnote-7) Infineum paid a great deal of attention to helping all employees across all levels to realize their potential.

The Early Days

Infineum’s I&D journey began in 2009, when the company started making diversity a core strategic imperative. As part of its diversity roadmap, Infineum set targets to improve the number of female leaders from the AP region in the company. From 2009 to 2012, some steps were taken to advance the diversity agenda and the company set goals for future achievement. However, the pace of change was slow and garnered mixed responses from leaders; some were passionate advocates of diversity, while others remained unconvinced and emotionally unengaged, even though they agreed that diversity was the right strategy.

At the time, Infineum was still largely a Western-dominated firm, in terms of both its organizational culture and its business model. The majority of the executive leaders resided in Western offices, with Asian leadership severely underrepresented at only 12 per cent in 2013. The early days of the I&D journey were sometimes accompanied by a lack of emotional commitment from leaders in terms of honouring the roadmap. Employees, simply following their leaders’ instructions and imitating their behaviours, did not question how company decisions were made or why there were so few Asian leaders. John Hong was the sales director for the AP region. Hong, who was based in Singapore, openly shared his view of the situation: “It was when we pushed for more Asian leaders that we perceived more tension.”

Inclusion-First Vision: Reversing Diversity and Inclusion

The imbalance in power between the West and the East had created a landscape of dominant and minority groups within Infineum. It was in 2013 that Infineum decided to implement a series of instrumental changes to challenge the status quo. Specifically, it adopted an inclusion-first vision for its I&D program. Nicola Pickup, the company’s business transformation director and executive I&D sponsor, emphasized the value of putting inclusion first: “We intentionally view it not as D&I [diversity and inclusion] but as I&D [inclusion and diversity]. You can have as many D&I targets as you want, but if the environment is not inclusive, then nothing will stick; people will not ultimately feel welcome.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

A group of five top executives from different regions and functional areas of the company volunteered to act as global I&D sponsors. Pickup and Hong were among them, responsible and accountable for articulating the core I&D themes and developing strategies, policies, initiatives, and tools. These I&D sponsors partnered with the HR team to achieve a common and coordinated approach across the different regions. Pickup held the firm belief that I&D would eventually form the backbone of Infineum’s long-term success through “connecting better with global stakeholders, enriching decision-making, improving innovation, and ensuring the attraction and retention of a wide pool of diverse talents.”

Company-Wide Unconscious Bias Training

In early 2014, Infineum collaboratedwith an external consulting firm to carry out a program called Global Culture Health Check. The aim of the program was to assess how inclusive the company’s culture was and to identify key areas to focus on. The external consultants conducted focus group discussions with employees of the same gender at similar job levels. They kept the conversations as honest as possible, so the feedback they received could accurately identify the areas that needed to be prioritized. The culture assessment revealed the main inadequacies and underlying rigidity of the organization’s culture at the time. Pickup summarized the assessment’s results as follows: “There was a need to move from the “Western-centric” models and ways of working to true global integration. This posed the important question of how we could become more truly inclusive of people from all the national cultures we have and take advantage of different experiences, perspectives, and work styles. Additionally, how could we become better at recognizing unconscious bias and other issues that may be getting in the way?”

The most important takeaway from the Global Culture Health Check program was the need for all employees to value and embrace their differences. All employees needed to recognize that being open-minded and aware of blind spots were central catalysts of the manifestation of inclusive behaviour. This realization led to a laser focus on unconscious bias within the company. The global I&D sponsors were convinced that unconscious bias training across the entire company was key to helping all employees understand and visualize the meaning and importance of I&D. Hong, one of the executive I&D sponsors, supported the need for unconscious bias awareness training, saying, “It is not right to use Western perceptions to analyze AP situations. For example, just because a person is quieter doesn’t mean that they are not talented or not contributing. Unconscious bias is caused by cultural differences. We try to build [unconscious bias] awareness and encourage people to understand.”

In conjunction with third-party providers, the global I&D team rolled out unconscious bias training materials and facilitated unconscious bias workshops throughout 2015. The workshops were conducted in a classroom learning style, whereby Infineum engaged established external experts in face-to-face sessions with all employees. The training aimed to make individuals across the firm more aware of the personal biases they might have held in terms of relationships and decision-making. Through the unconscious bias training, employees were able to better understand the adverse impacts of unconscious bias on the workplace and how they could use the tailored action plans taught to them during the training workshops to manage personal blind spots.

The unconscious bias modules consisted of five sub-modules: business cases for inclusion, personal biases and relationships, building team inclusion, managing micro behaviours, and talking to others about bias. These five modules were interconnected with each other and were only available to leaders. Infineum leaders were expected to impart their knowledge through conversations with their individual teams after harnessing the learning points of the modules. The leaders then strived to obtain feedback from their teams regarding what I&D themes they would like to learn more about. As such, the module system effectively functioned as a self-reinforcing mechanism, with leaders and employees generating I&D ideas and in turn benefiting from them.

Local I&D Champions

As the commitment to I&D gathered momentum across the company, Infineum encouraged colleagues to volunteer as so-called “I&D champions” to promote inclusion across every part of the business. The objective was to drive a more robust and consistent approach to I&D across Infineum’s vast network of regional firms, as well as to strengthen intra-regional engagement in inclusiveness and communication.

In 2016, Infineum began setting up local I&D committees and reached a high of 70 local champions in 10 different regions. I&D champions were essentially volunteers from any business vertical within that region. The Singapore I&D committee, for example, comprised six I&D champions who worked in areas ranging from plant engineering to the technology division. Together, these local I&D committees played an instrumental role in executing localized I&D strategies that complemented the company’s I&D direction set out by global I&D executive sponsors.

Each localized strategy was tailored to its respective region. However, local I&D committees held bi-monthly meetings to exchange I&D ideas in an open and unrestrained conversation with the global team. The meetings helped global I&D executive sponsors monitor the progress of I&D across the company to better allocate resources in support of the ideas raised. Isaia described the essence of the I&D champions: “These colleagues are the most fundamental ingredient in our inclusion journey. When people are truly passionate about something like this, the sky is the limit in terms of achievement. These colleagues make time for it and are really genuine in their ambition for a more inclusive organization. They see the impact on the success of their organization and the purpose in doing it.”

I&D Awareness and Education Initiatives

Infineum welcomed new initiatives and constantly refined possible avenues for I&D awareness and education. In 2018 and 2019, the company witnessed the growth of a series of activities.

Local I&D Champions Initiatives

Infineum Singapore held quarterly town hall sessions to engage employees in I&D awareness, based on Singapore’s unique cuisine. Employees were encouraged to prepare local food specialties and taste sample dishes from different countries to appreciate a part of their heritage through food. As Singapore I&D champion Rajesh Warrier explained, “The good thing about Singapore is that food brings everyone together.”

In the second half of 2019, Infineum Milton Hill I&D champions launched a series of events during an inclusion week that highlighted the importance of inclusion to Infineum and its employees. With a theme of “Everyday Inclusion: Celebrate and Inspire,” employees were invited to an interactive discussion on ideas for involving other employees in making the workplace more inclusive (see Exhibit 1). Later in the week, company leaders spoke about what had been done by the company in the I&D journey and how it could still be improved. At the end of the week, the HR team ran unconscious bias workshops and used interactive table discussions to raise awareness about how unconscious actions can affect other people. The week ended with the introduction of a company-wide intranet and “Human Library event,” where employees could share thoughts about inclusion.

Cultural Awareness Booklet

Local I&D champions continued to exchange their views on cultural awareness and compiled booklets with cultural information about the countries in which Infineum operated. The guide included information on general etiquette and how to conduct business in each culture, general language phrases, emergency on-site numbers, and Infineum’s life-saving rules in different languages. The booklet included information about Infineum’s CARES program, the principles of inclusiveness and diversity, and an iceberg metaphor depicting Infineum’s definition of I&D (see Exhibit 2).

The iceberg image showed visible differences such as race, gender, and physical characteristics above the surface and less apparent differences below, together representing all elements in a person’s individuality. The iceberg analogy was intended to help Infineum employees support a working culture in which differences were valued and appreciated, emphasized by the statement “Infineum brings together individuals from different backgrounds, cultures, and thinking styles, providing remarkably different talents, perspectives, and life and career experiences.” The booklet encouraged employees to be more culturally aware and sensitive. Naomi Chua, Infineum’s organizational development advisor for Asia in Singapore, explained that she had become more mindful of the need to be culturally sensitive, accommodating, and respectful in all her communications with colleagues from other cultures.

Digital Learning Platforms

Infineum employed digital platforms on the company intranet to provide employees with I&D awareness and education. Specifically, the company used a learning management system called Colleague Central where employees could access learning materials and ideas to apply I&D information to the working environment. Periodic newsletters and articles updated employees on local I&D initiatives. Infineum also provided 30-minute video conference sessions with an I&D trainer, scheduled for employees throughout the workday, that served both as a learning platform and as a way to connect with employees from different regions. Leadership discussion guides were also provided on the intranet. These were mandatory online inclusion resources that were automatically uploaded onto the learning management system for employees in leadership positions and business function leaders, who were asked to serve as role models for all employees.

Diversity of Thought

In 2019, Infineum introduced the new I&D corporate theme “diversity of thought” to recognize that corporate thinking was shaped by culture, background, and experiences, as Pickup explained: “We describe this as moving away from just focusing on the part of the iceberg that is visible—you can see gender, race, physical ability. There are biases in regard to cultural background (e.g., nationality and education, such as level attained, university attended, etc.), that we are now trying to address.”

The company held town hall sessions in Singapore in which local I&D champions asked for feedback and ideas to improve the sessions so that employees would feel comfortable sharing their views in interactive panel discussions. Approximately 50 of 200 Singapore employees attended the sessions.

Employees spoke about sharing their thoughts and being appreciated in a more inclusive culture, as well as meeting people from across the company. The corporate theme reflected how different people thought, communicated, and solved problems. The diversity of thought theme helped to guard against groupthink and overconfidence bias, thereby encouraging employees to demonstrate a high level of mutual appreciation for one another’s differences. Learning to avoid unconscious bias in their day-to-day work behaviour allowed for more open-minded conversations to take place among employees and reinforced the mutual respect accorded to one another.

HR PRACTICES: The Art of Action

In addition to holding sessions for employees to speak about diversity, Infineum integrated diversity into its job advertisements. Neutral language in the advertisements focused on the skills, competencies, experience, and abilities required to perform the work. Candidates were tested using situational assessments, case studies, or business simulations. The goal was to compile a candidate pool that reflected the gender and diversity ratio of the job market, and the interviewing panel included at least three assessors with diverse backgrounds. As part of their structured management training, leaders in the organization were trained on inclusive recruitment strategies. Interview panels for more senior positions required five interviewers from different backgrounds. As Chua recalled, one interviewer wrote a reminder note on the interview table to avoid unconscious bias. Infineum’s goal was to recruit people from diverse backgrounds.

Infineum’s career development process was correlated with corporate goals. Apart from the usual financial key performance indicators (KPIs), such as net profit margins, growth in revenue, and cash flow, Infineum also measured talent and culture KPIs such as inclusion targets. The company established three primary inclusion targets: ethnicity mix of employees at the organizational level, gender mix of employees at the organizational level, and ethnicity and gender mix among senior leadership roles. These diversity targets influenced career planning and development processes of the organization. Infineum set a target for 25 per cent female senior leaders by 2020, as Isaia explained: “Having a target makes you more aware and more conscious in your decisions. Eventually, if a guy is better for a particular position, he gets the job. But, if you look at the pattern and find out one year later that every decision the guy and his friends have made were bad, and the female co-worker has not been promoted instead, then we need to have a chat with that leader.”

Infineum attempted to address gender disparity in salary and bonuses. The company also launched a parental leave program for parents of children born or adopted starting in 2019, making them eligible for a minimum of four weeks of paid parental leave. Jason Hu, a contact engineer in the Zhangjiagang plant, benefited from this new inclusive policy: “It allowed me to have more time and energy to support my family at one of the most important times in my life—to witness my daughter’s growth at the very beginning of her life and to better balance my work and home life. This benefit embodies Infineum’s CARES values and is another inclusiveness and diversity milestone. With such a culture and values, I firmly believe that the future of Infineum will be more brilliant and beautiful.”

The 150 Infineum employees at Keppel Bay Tower in Singapore were offered open space design, a nursing room, an equipped pantry with free coffee and drinks, and comfortable sofas and benches. Each worker was assigned to a fixed workstation with allocated lockers. Infineum Singapore also implemented staggered work hours in its efforts to provide a work–life balance as part of its I&D objectives.

Challenges Ahead

Despite positive feedback from employees, Infineum Singapore still faced challenges. Local I&D champions were devoting their time on a voluntary basis, in addition to their regular duties and workload. Understandably, few new volunteers were eager to join the program. Local I&D champions consisted mainly of the same employees who had been serving in that capacity since the program’s start in 2016, as one I&D champions observed: “We would definitely welcome more volunteers. Of course, we would like fresh blood and new ideas. So far, we haven’t rotated the champions in Singapore over the years. . . . We want to know how people actually apply and embrace I&D in their activities. But ultimately, it is not about recruiting more volunteers, it’s about how to infuse I&D into our DNA.”

Infineum’s Singapore I&D champions organized annual events to promote camaraderie between the two locations. The organizing committee included employees from both the city office and the Jurong Island engineering plant, although these employees were less committed. They felt alienated from I&D initiatives because most I&D activities were hosted at the city office site, which was less accessible to them. To help integrate employees from both locations, Infineum offered an opportunity for employees from one location to assume a position at the other location, if approved by Infineum’s management team. However, as Hong explained, there were challenges in the execution of this opportunity:

We are located in two very different environments. Access to the plant in Jurong Island is not easy and is not encouraged because it is a hazardous environment. There is a need to provide safe havens for all staff located in the plant if a crisis, such as a poisonous gas leak or an explosion, occurs. It costs a lot of money to provide and manage these safe havens. That is why we didn’t encourage people from the office to visit there. We encouraged colleagues from the plant to visit the office instead. But the nature of their work required them to stay in the plant, so it was hard for them to connect and interact with office colleagues. It was difficult to feel like we were all in one organization.

Vivian Cao, one of the Singapore I&D champions, confirmed the issue, saying, “I think the challenge now for us in Singapore is that we need to cater to both the plant and the office. Sometimes, it is difficult because colleagues at the plant have different schedules and interests. So, how to bring them together is always a challenge.”

Another challenge concerned the company’s I&D achievements. The global I&D executive sponsor team recognized that significant I&D milestones had been achieved since 2013 in higher numbers of female leaders, Asian leaders, and minority groups in US locations (see Exhibit 3). Also, 75 per cent of Infineum employees felt their leaders had an inclusive approach in 2020, compared to only 5 per cent in 2013. But Isaia cautioned against using I&D quotas to reach higher goals: “Diversity targets for companies are always difficult to handle. You need to make sure you have a target when taking action because, if you don’t measure things, things don’t happen. At the same time, you need to make sure that it is not a quota. There is a difference between a target and a quota. If you make it into a quota, which some companies do, you are forcing it.”

Infineum planned to develop talent and cultural inclusion KPIs in Asia as part of its I&D program. As Hong reflected on his nine years of service with Infineum, he was optimistic about the current sentiments of his Western colleagues: “Building awareness helped everyone understand better, so their negative feelings were eventually toned down. As time went on, it got easier. The key is to keep the energy up and keep moving forward.”

Isaia, on the other hand, challenged the status quo:

When you start focusing your attention on things like I&D and sustainability, you always need to keep prioritizing them. This might be the right thing to do because in the long term, it pays out, but, in the short term, it has a price tag. Today, Infineum is a very healthy and rich company, but is the market going to be like that forever? Are we going to continue having the tools, the resources, and the ability? Not every company has the luxury of thinking long term. And this is a challenge, I think, for the future.

Infineum is a very value-driven company, and there is a strong commitment to I&D from the top and from our shareholders. We communicate a lot about I&D initiatives through the Infinet [the company’s intranet], including articles on what the I&D champions are doing, initiatives, opportunities, etc. We communicate a lot every week about what we are doing, but not much about what we had already achieved.

Rajesh, however, preferred the more casual approach to I&D from the past: “We didn’t have a measuring system. I think it was more a case of, when you talked to colleagues informally, you got some feedback from them. We have never done anything to find out how effective our efforts are and I don’t think that’s the intention. We like to keep it informal and casual.”

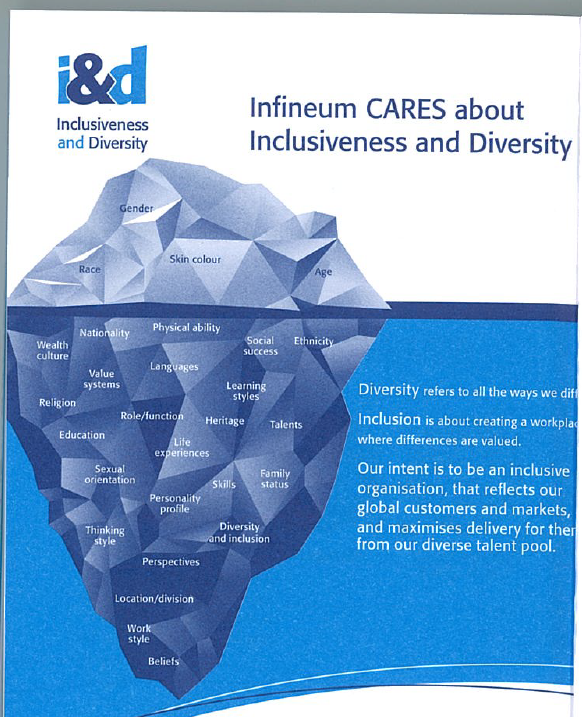
Was Infineum committed to an inclusion-first vision that permeated the entire talent life cycle? Isaia was sure that the company’s diversity of thought theme represented the future of the I&D program, but he also admitted that it was difficult to measure its effectiveness. A freedom-to-share spirit was at the heart of Infineum’s I&D, spearheaded by the sponsors and I&D local champions, and supported by Infineum leaders. This was consistent with an ideation of I&D proposed by De Anca and Aragon based on managing a company’s origin, growth, and aspiration.[[9]](#footnote-9) Infineum’s hiring, learning and development, and rewards strategies were aligned with its I&D principles. But could those I&D initiatives be sustained over the long term? Would employees continue to be highly committed as volunteers? Should Infineum have measured the effectiveness of intangible initiatives? Should it have measured the accountability of those volunteering initiatives; and if so, how? What might be Infineum’s next steps in achieving inclusiveness?

EXHIBIT 1: Interactive table discussion

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| Infineum leaders were invited to share their thoughts on inclusion and diversity, and colleagues were encouraged to provide input regarding how the current state could be improved. Annie Ward, a member of the global communications team, shared her experience of one such session:  *“It was an energetic and engaging session brought to life with real-life examples of the seriousness of what can happen if we don’t create the right culture. It was also encouraging to see how seriously inclusiveness and diversity was taken at every level within the company.”* |

Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 2: INCLUSIVENESS AND DIVERSITY Booklet



Note: The booklet cover reads “Diversity refers to all the ways we differ. Inclusion is about creating a workplace where difference is valued. Our intent is to be an inclusive organization, that reflects our global customers and markets, and maximises delivery for them from our diverse talent pool.”

Source: Company documents.

EXHIBIT 3: Key inclusion and diversity milestones

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Milestone | 2013 | 2020 | Difference | |
| Percentage of female leaders | 14% | 24% | *71%* |  |
| Percentage of Asian leaders | 12% | 20% | *67%* |  |
| Percentage of minority groups in the company’s US locations | 22% | 27% | *23%* |  |
| Percentage of employees who perceived that their leaders had an inclusive approach | 5% | 75% | *1500%* |  |

Note: Selected statistics provided by the company; here “minority groups” is according to ethnicity.

Source: Company files.

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