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Executive Summary

Starbucks is committed to integrating inclusivity and diversity in its workplace and customer experience. The organisation's notable efforts are recruiting candidates from marginalised communities, hosting open dialogue sessions and offering sign language skills training. The purpose of this report is to evaluate Starbucks's inclusivity and leadership effectiveness in facilitating a supportive workplace culture for a global workforce.

To promote inclusivity, Starbucks has fostered a workplace culture where sign language has become the pivotal mode of communication and interaction. Therefore, observing senior leadership efficiently communicate with hard-of-hearing and deaf individuals at the organisation offers a tangible understanding to newly recruited workers regarding how to use sign language. In addition, the company actively participate in its workforce in a non-judgemental working atmosphere where they are comfortable and motivated to learn through the process, trial and error for further improvement. Strategies of Starbucks such as Signing Stores & vocational training, recruiting candidates from marginalised communities, and reminding employees of their contribution fosters physical, emotional and cognitive engagement.

Starbucks' inclusive & diversity practices lead their 11,000 employees across the globe to complete vocational training in sign language. 95% of the employees have said they gained a better understanding of the deaf community. The company also achieved a 100% score on Disability Equality Index. The findings revealed that Starbucks has adequate reinforcement of sign language through observational learning and feedback.

In conclusion, Starbucks was found to adopt a universal strategy to promote inclusivity in employees' roles across manufacturing, enterprise and retail. The aspect that made the company unique in compare to others is its broad focus on inclusiveness promotion not only for employees but for customers as well. Based on the analysis, Starbucks is recommended to implement ongoing mentorship programs pairing experienced employees with new hires, strengthening Community Partnerships and implementing Employee Feedback Mechanisms.

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Introduction

Background

Starbucks Corporation is a US-based multinational coffeehouse and roastery service chain headquartered in Seattle, Washington. The company is a global leader in the coffee sector, renowned for its premium and heritage coffee products. The company has expanded its business in over 80 countries and thousands of locations (Starbucks, 2024a).

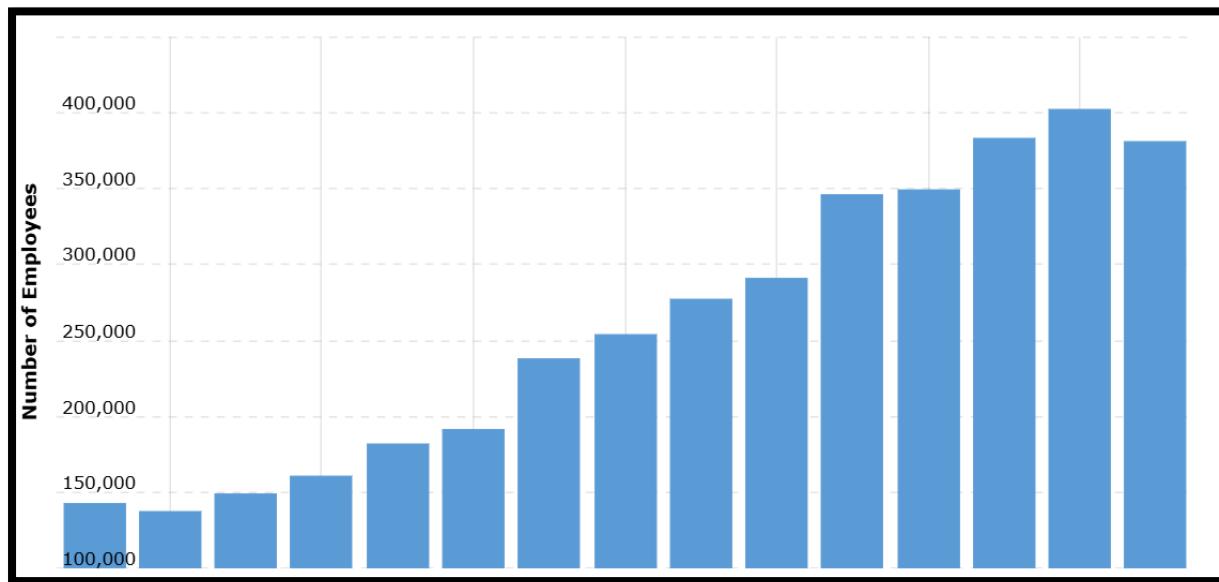


Figure 1: Number of employees at Starbucks Worldwide

(Source: Macrotrends, 2024)

Starbucks's total number of employees was 381,000 worldwide in 2023, while 402,000 employees in 2022 (Macrotrends, 2024). Over the years, the giant coffee chain has demonstrated its commitment towards inclusivity and diversity in its workplace and customer experience (Starbucks, 2024b). For instance, the leadership at the company is dedicated to being an equitable, accessible and inclusive workplace, supporting and creating equal opportunities in their communities by facilitating an *inclusive culture that values diverse experiences and perspectives* (Starbucks, 2024b). Starbucks' leadership's notable efforts towards inclusivity involve *recruiting candidates from marginalised communities, hosting open dialogue sessions and offering sign language skills training* to mitigate social and community challenges. These initiatives of Starbucks align with its mission “*to inspire and nurture the human spirit-one person, one cup, and one neighbourhood at a time*” (Starbucks, 2023). This case study explores and evaluates Starbucks' strategic approach to inclusivity and

provides detailed insights into how companies can balance commercial success by fulfilling social and community responsibility.

Problem Statement or Purpose

The case study demonstrated an understanding of Starbucks' efforts to improve inclusivity and worker engagement through unique practices catering to employees' different needs and expectations. While the coffee chain is known for facilitating an inclusive culture, challenges persist in ensuring inclusivity is frequently managed and integrated across Starbucks's global operations. For example, Starbucks has implemented the "Starbucks Inclusion Academy" and initiatives like sign language into its workforce engagement strategies by introducing signing stores to empower disabled employees like hard-of-hearing and Deaf (Starbucks, 2024c). Despite Starbucks's diversity and inclusive practices, an ex-employee of the company complained about the company over a racial discrimination case (BBC, 2023). In addition, a Disabled Muslim family also complained about Starbucks discrimination regarding forcibly thrown out from a Utah store over seating (Pace Johnson Law Group, 2024). It raises questions about the scalability regarding inclusiveness because the company has also seen a 5.22% decline in employee numbers from 2022 to 2023 (Macrotrends, 2024). The report has the purpose of evaluating Starbucks's employees to promote inclusivity and leadership effectiveness in facilitating a supportive workplace culture for a global workforce. Specifically, the main objective of this study is to examine Starbucks's leadership initiatives, like the use of Sign Language or Inclusion Academy, for inclusivity and employee engagement.

Scope and Importance

This case study has scope to explore Starbucks' initiatives to promote diversity, inclusivity and employee engagement at the company. This case study on Starbucks' leadership effectiveness is significant to evaluate and study because it highlights how the leadership approach in the company drives inclusiveness and employee engagement in an international corporate setting. Starbucks has adopted strategies like sign language and its Starbucks Inclusion Academy to promote inclusiveness in the workplace. These initiatives have pioneered the service industry because they showcase the organisation's commitment to facilitating a working culture that reflects diversity and accessibility (Starbucks, 2020). For example, Starbucks has adopted Signing Stores to support disabled candidates who are deaf and hard of hearing to thrive in a working environment that caters for their needs (Starbucks, 2024d).

On the other hand, with Starbucks Inclusion Academy initiatives, the leadership of Starbucks emphasise offering on-the-job training programs where candidates with physical and cognitive disabilities gain adequate techniques, skills and experience in manufacturing and distribution (Starbucks, 2024c). Leaders provide vocational training and career development opportunities to people from diverse backgrounds, improving employee engagement and enabling Starbucks to fulfil societal challenges around workplace inclusion and accessibility (Starbucks, 2024c). Hence, this report will demonstrate how Starbucks successfully implemented inclusivity into its leadership strategy, creating a workplace that engages employees with their organisational mission and vision. Therefore, the study has the scope to offer valuable leadership insights to other organisations to enhance their leadership practice and employee engagement strategies by highlighting the vital role of inclusiveness and leadership practice in driving long-term success.

Approach or methodology

To analyse Starbucks' inclusivity and employee engagement practice specific theories will be used as a method. For example, Social Learning Theory and Kahn's Employee Engagement Model will be priorities to discuss and establish a robust foundation for evaluating how inclusive practices impact employee engagement and help identify the role of leadership in influencing employees' behaviour. According to *Social Learning Theory*, it is significant to prioritise the role of modelling, observation and social interaction in shaping employees' behaviour (Kauppila *et al.* 2022). Therefore, this theory will be applied to understand how the company has established inclusivity through modelling and interactions in initiatives like Inclusion Academy and Signing Stores that encourage workers to embrace accessibility and diversity as organisational values. *Khan's employee engagement model* states three core dimensions of engaged employees such as, physical, emotional, and cognitive (Khan *et al.* 2022). This case study analysis will comprehensively assess Starbucks' strategies by applying both theories. As someone familiar with Starbucks' operations through informal insights from a former worker, I will leverage this perspective to enhance the evaluation with practical observations, ensuring an informed and adequate approach.

Main Section

Social learning theory

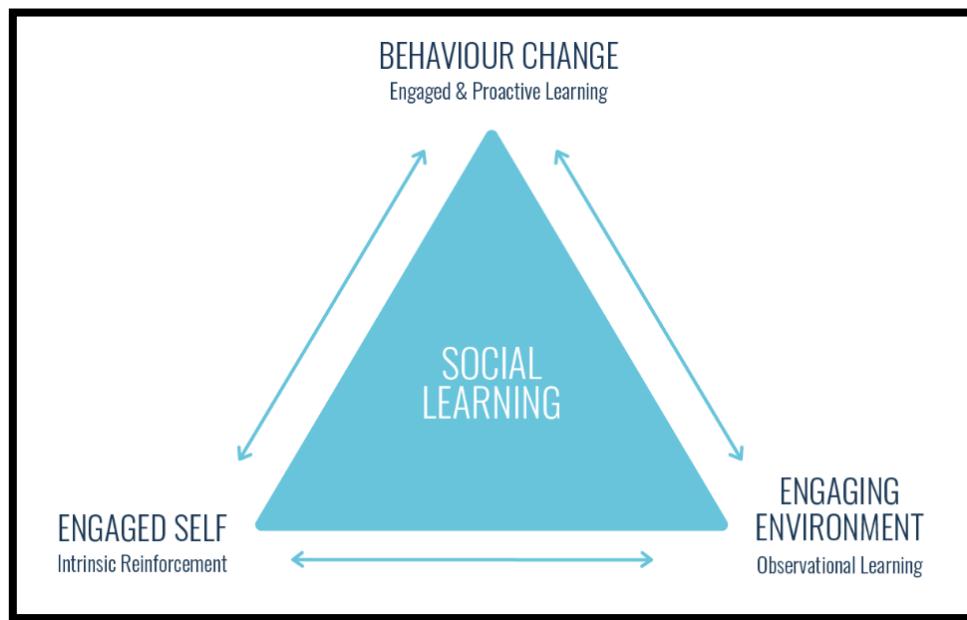


Figure 2: Social Learning Theory

(Source: Yarberry and Sims, 2021)

Social learning theory states that learning occurs through observation, imitation and modelling and is influenced by factors such as attitudes, motivation, attention and emotions. The theory suggests that learning happens due to individuals' observational ability and the consequences of other people's behaviours (Yarberry and Sims, 2021). In the context of Starbucks, Social learning theory reflects how the employees learn and reinforce sign language as part of the organisation's inclusivity initiatives. At dedicated Starbucks Signing Stores, the company creates and provides various employment opportunities to Deaf and Hard of Hearing employees, who become full-fledged partners (Starbucks, 2024g). Besides, the workers are also engaged in a workplace culture where sign language has become the pivotal mode of communication and interaction. Therefore, it enables the workers to observe other team members and managers to utilise sign language while working with disabled teams actively and while interacting with employees (Starbucks, 2024g). Conversely, sometimes observing and watching others cannot offer a tangible understanding of how sign language fosters inclusivity and improves service quality because it requires practical training and experiences to learn adequately.

Role modelling has been a key aspect of this procedure, as Deaf workers and fluent sign language users assume the role of leaders in offering vocational training and demonstrating efficient communication initiatives that newly recruited workers can emulate. It also aligned with the concept of vicarious reinforcement, where observing positive outcomes such as effective collaboration and satisfied consumers motivates the workers to implement similar practices and behaviour (Sun *et al.* 2020). Moreover, Starbucks has provided structured observational learning opportunities through sign language practice training sessions (Starbucks, 2024d). In that situation, workers visually get a representation of basic and sign language techniques reinforced through vocational training, guidance and repetition. Hence, this structured exploration leads the company to ensure all employees develop adequate skills to address societal and community issues like inequality. For instance, more than 11,000 partners worldwide have completed vocational training in sign language (Starbucks, 2024f). In 450 stores, all the employees have completed the training, and 95% of the employees have said they gained a better understanding of the deaf community (Starbucks, 2024f). Therefore, the statistical evidence shows adequate reinforcement of sign language through observational learning and feedback.

According to the Social learning theory, observational learning is completed by imitation (Han *et al.* 2022). Hence, in the context of Starbucks, workers replicate the activities of their role models, senior leaders and trainers. In that scenario, leaders influence active workforce participation by facilitating a non-judgemental working atmosphere where staff feel comfortable and are encouraged to make mistakes and learn through the process, trial and error for further improvement (HRD America, 2024). Hence, the repetitive nature of these tasks and encouragement reinforces adequate learning and development among the workforce. For example, workers may repeatedly practice signing customers' names, instructing the company drink orders and solidifying their competencies over time (Starbucks, 2020). Hence, iterative procedures ensure that sign language becomes a pivotal part of their communication repertoire instead of learning easily forgotten competencies.

Feedback also plays a key role in Social Learning Theory, allowing individuals to adopt and learn new behaviours through guidance and evaluation (Scavarelli *et al.* 2021). In the context of Starbucks, the leadership team has also implemented a feedback mechanism at the workplace through continuous guidance and evaluation. For employees or managers who are deaf, leaders offer them constructive feedback and guidance to refine their skills and improve errors (Dudekula, 2023). For example, if a worker cannot use sign language adequately and

struggles with fluency, leaders tend to provide accurate feedback and support that emphasises enhancement rather than criticism. It has also been evident that leaders at Starbucks recognise and appreciate employees' progress and milestones by reinforcing positive behaviours through encouragement. For example, this commitment led to an employee turnover rate of only 9%, compared to the service sector average of 30% (LinkedIn, 2024). Hence, the learning provided by Starbucks has effectively minimised employee turnover and improved employee engagement rates.

Khan's employee engagement model

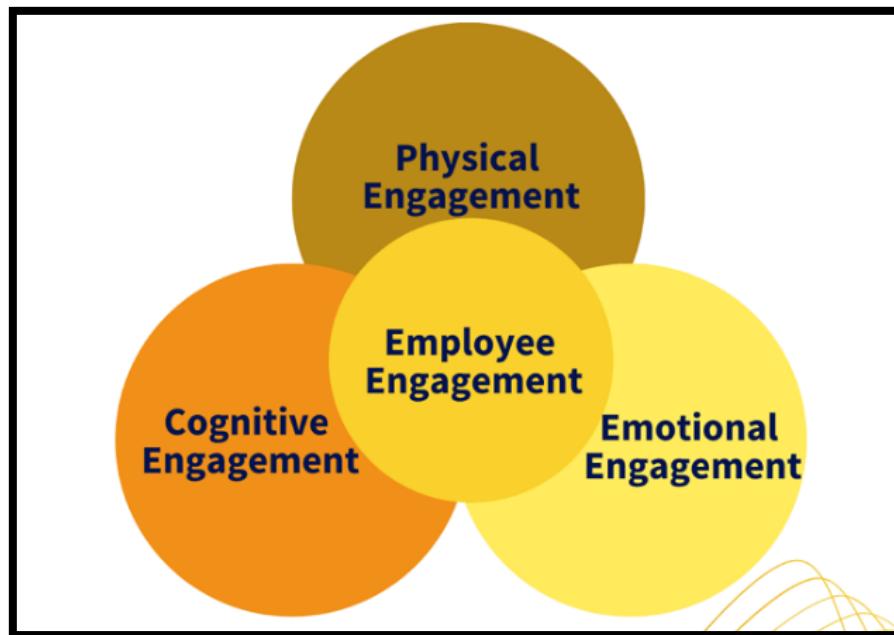


Figure 3: Khan's employee engagement model

(Source: Al and Khan, 2020)

According to Khan's employee engagement model, there are three principle dimensions of employee engagement such as physical, cognitive and emotional (Al and Khan, 2020). The model states that those engaged in their work are considered energetic, cognitively vigilant and empathically connected with others. Inclusivity in the organisation is a vital aspect of Starbucks' cultural and operational strategy as it improves employee retention and motivation (Starbucks, 2024c). Using this employee engagement model, in this report, how Starbucks's inclusiveness impacts the company and reduces employee turnover has been discussed.

Physical Engagement

According to Kahn's employee engagement model, the physical dimension refers to the energy in the work and job role invested by the workers (Huang *et al.* 2020). It has been evident from the Starbucks Inclusion Academy that Starbucks promoted an inclusive workplace through tailored practices such as implementing Signing Stores or vocational training that addresses the employees' needs with diverse backgrounds and abilities (Starbucks, 2024c). These initiatives lead the workers to provide adequate resources and tools through vocational training, enabling them to perform their roles confidently and effectively. For example, Deaf employees in the Signing Stores are equipped with Sign language communication systems and a supportive team structure that enables them to work effectively without obstacles (Starbucks, 2024d). For instance, 95% of the employees who participated in Signing Stores said they have adequately gained skills learned from store training (Starbucks, 2024f). Thus, this statistical data indicates employee satisfaction rates through Signing Stores and training programs. It can also be said that physical support minimises stress and encourages workers to emphasise their job responsibilities, resulting in higher employee satisfaction and engagement levels. When employees feel respected with physical resources and adequate skills, their motivation and confidence to perform and remain committed to the organisational goals are ultimately enhanced.

Emotional Engagement

According to Kahn's employee engagement model, emotional engagement feels valued, connected and respected by the organisation (Rather and Sharma, 2020). Hence, Starbucks foster emotional engagement by implementing inclusivity into its organisational values by recruiting candidates from marginalised communities, respecting diversity and offering adequate platforms for open dialogue to reflect the organisation's commitment to facilitating a sense of belonging (Starbucks, 2024b).

DISABILITY INCLUSION	FY23	FY22
Score on the Disability Equality Index	100%	100%
Representation of U.S. workforce self-identifying with disability		
retail %	14%	14%
enterprise %	11%	11%
manufacturing %	11%	13%

Figure 4: Disability inclusion at Starbucks

(Source: Starbucks, 2024e)

From the above figure, it is found that, in retail shops, Starbucks has recruited 14% of disabled employees (Starbucks, 2024e). Besides, 11% of the disabled workers are recruited in enterprise and 11% in manufacturing in the US Workforce (Starbucks, 2024e). It leads the company to score 100% on the Disability Equality Index as well (Starbucks, 2024e). Starbucks utilises sign language not only beneficial for disabled workers but also creates a culture of collaboration and empathy among the entire workforce and customers.

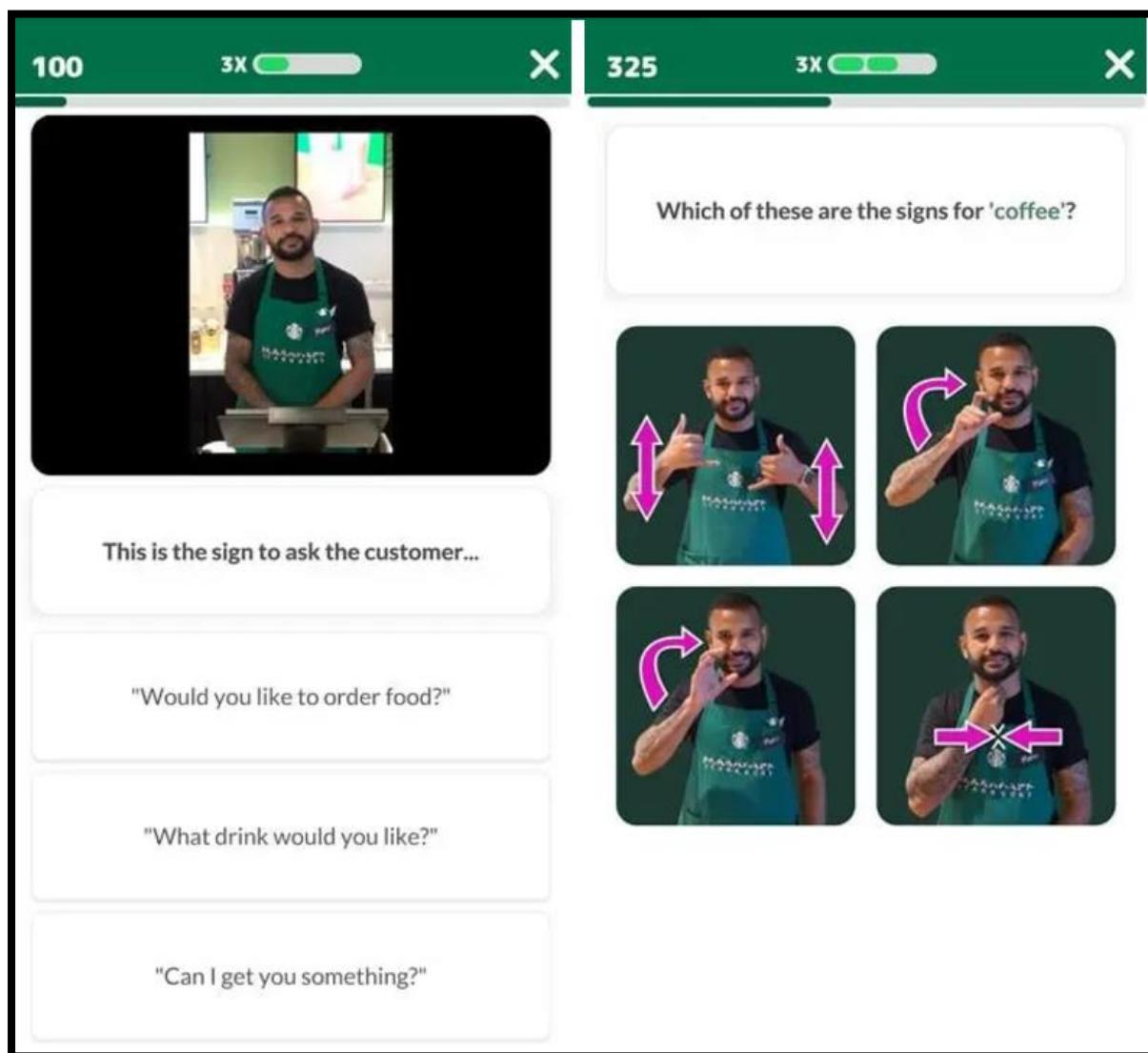


Figure 5: Use of Sign languages by Starbucks employee

(Source: Starbucks, 2024f)

Hence, it also enables the workers to facilitate meaningful connections with other group members and consumers, improving job satisfaction. According to Kahn, workers who are

emotionally engaged with the company are likely to demonstrate enthusiasm, loyalty and commitment towards the company (Agu *et al.* 2024). Hence, sign language communication and diverse recruitment exemplify the emotional engagement strategy of Starbucks that empowers its employees to take pride in their job roles and satisfy the diverse customers' needs (Starbucks, 2024f).

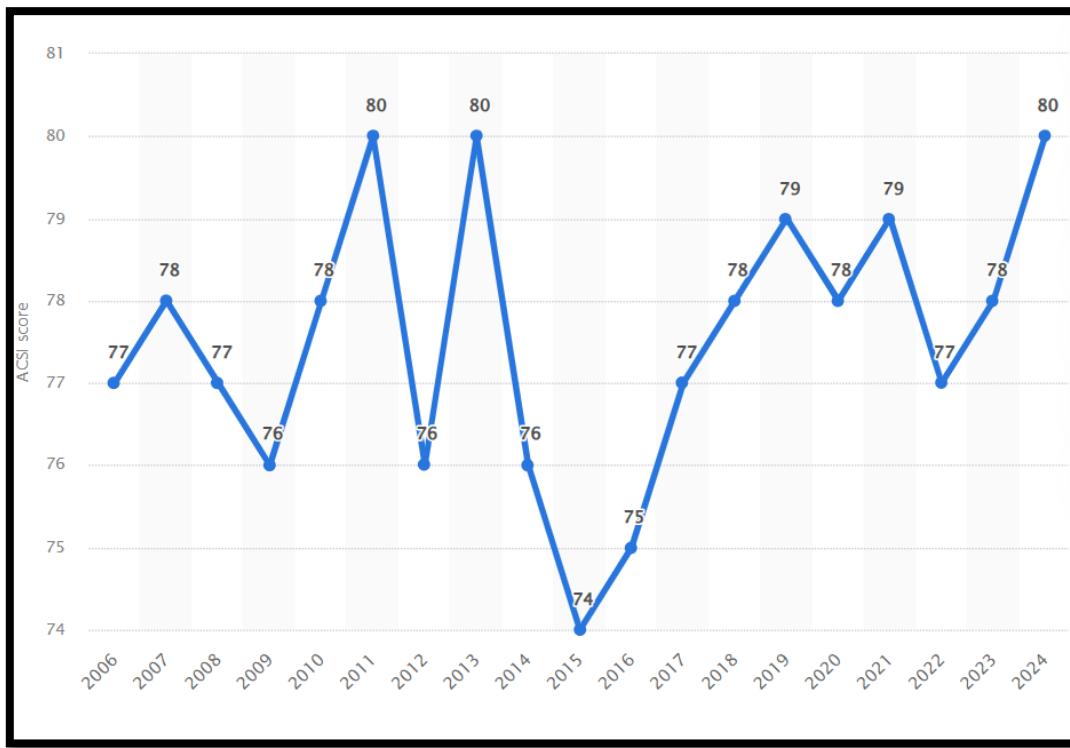


Figure 6: Starbucks' American Customer Satisfaction

(Source: Statista Research Department, 2024a)

According to the above figure, the customer satisfaction rate in the United States scored at 80 in 2024, two points higher than the 2023 score of 78 (Statista Research Department, 2024a). It indicates significant inclusion through sign language also positively impacts the customer's satisfaction. Despite increment in customer satisfaction, employee engagement cannot adequately reinforced by the diversity & inclusion practices implementation. It is because Starbucks's total number of workers in 2024 was 361,000, a 5.25% decline from 2023, and in 2023, the total number was 381,000, a 5.22% decline from 2022 (Macrotrends, 2024). The issues can be the consequences of a recent diversity dispute in the company over racial discrimination and sue by a Disabled Muslim family discrimination regarding forcibly thrown out from a Utah store over seating (Pace Johnson Law Group, 2024).

Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement includes the intellectual connection of employees with their job roles and responsibilities in the organisation, including an understanding of organisational purpose and value (Soelton, 2023). In this regard, Starbucks has implemented inclusivity efforts to align its organisational mission “*to inspire and nurture the human spirit*” (Starbucks, 2023). At the company, workers are consistently reminded that their contribution and work are highly valuable to Starbucks's larger goals, creating a welcoming and respectful workplace atmosphere for all colleagues and consumers. Starbucks' inclusive initiatives, like Inclusive Academy, offer vocational training and career development opportunities for the employees, enabling workers to grow within the organisation while reinforcing the significance of inclusivity (Starbucks, 2024c). Workers who see their work as meaningful and impactful will likely remain committed and engaged with the company.

Comparative insights

Starbucks' strategy for inclusivity through its Signing Stores and Inclusion Academy is mainly noted by its implementation into customer satisfaction and employee engagement (Starbucks, 2024c). On the contrary, *McDonald's* latest inclusivity campaign is focused on increasing awareness regarding deafness with sign language training to promote inclusivity and equality among the workforce only (Helsinki, 2022). It indicates that McDonald's has focused on offering workplace accommodations for its workforce with disabilities while Starbucks has created a customer-centric Signing Store that celebrates Deaf culture and not only addresses social issues by hiring and training deaf workers but also supports deaf customers to promote inclusiveness as their organisational values which makes it more effective and unique.

Other than the service sector, companies like *Microsoft* in the technology industry have also opted for a Neurodiversity Hiring Program to include neurodivergent candidates to strengthen their workforce with innovative and creative thing solutions (Microsoft, 2024). The Neurodiversity diversity initiatives of Microsoft emphasise attracting talented neurodivergent workers and offering employment opportunities to showcase their unique talents while learning and developing (Microsoft, 2024). This initiative of Microsoft reflects a focus towards targeting specific roles, whereas Starbucks integrated a universal strategy to embed and promote inclusivity into employees' roles across manufacturing, enterprise and retail (Starbucks, 2024e). Hence, what makes Starbucks unique compared to Microsoft is its broad focus on inclusiveness promotion instead of isolated programs. In different regions like India, one of the leading technology service companies, *Capgemini*, has also put much effort into expanding workforce diversity by sharing and creating awareness around disability. For

example, their diversity and inclusion program, like “Sakhi”, is focused on supporting the professional growth of females and efforts to recruit people with disabilities centre on employee empowerment (Economic Times, 2021). The inclusive initiatives of Capgemini reflect a focus on internal professional development, while Starbucks’ has uniquely tied its inclusive strategy to customer-facing roles, making inclusivity visible to the broader community.

Conclusion & recommendations

Conclusion

It can be concluded that Starbucks has adopted inclusivity initiatives such as Signing Stores and Inclusion Academy. Signing Stores and Inclusion Academy initiatives led the 11,000 worldwide employees of Starbucks to complete vocational training in sign language. 95% of the employees have said they gained a better understanding of the deaf community. For employees or managers who are deaf, leaders offer them constructive feedback and guidance to refine their skills and improve errors. Initiatives such as vocational training and hiring candidates from marginalised communities reflect diversity and inclusiveness in the company, fostering employee engagement and positively contributing to increased customer satisfaction.

Recommendations

Implementing ongoing mentorship programs pairing experienced employees with new hire

The above analysis indicates a decline in employee numbers since 2023 due to discrimination issues in the workplace. Therefore, the company should integrate a mentorship program to pair experienced employees with newly hired workers to cultivate skills development and inclusivity awareness. Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that mentorship programs can increase 90% of the employee's engagement (Cook, 2024). At Starbucks, implementing ongoing mentorship to include inclusivity training such as racial or cultural sensitivity and practices to treat disabled customers would strengthen peer connotation and reinforce engagement with inclusive values. The potential benefit of this recommendation would be improved job satisfaction and increased employee loyalty towards the company (Dhir *et al.* 2020). However, offering an ongoing mentorship program would increase financial pressure for investment. To address this obstacle, Starbucks can seek investment from angel investment teams.

Strengthening Community Partnerships

It has been found that, in only 450 stores, Starbucks has provided vocational training in sign language. There are 38,038 Starbucks stores worldwide in 2023 (Statista Research Department, 2024b). This means Starbucks has still not properly implemented diversity and inclusion practices in all stores worldwide. Hence, the company is recommended to collaborate with local deaf communities across the globe to offer employees continuous learning and engagement opportunities through recruitment and vocational training. It is because the partnership with local deaf communities will significantly improve employee inclusivity skills through real-world practice, increasing employee engagement and morale (Kanwal *et al.* 2024). However, while implementing this recommendation, Starbucks may face challenges related to logistical coordination and potential resistance from workers unfamiliar with deaf culture. However, offering cultural sensitivity training will address the obstacles effectively.

Employee Feedback Mechanisms

The analysis shows that Starbucks has implemented inclusion and diversity practices despite seeing employee turnover. Hence, it is recommended that the company adopt employee feedback mechanism tools to gauge employee experiences and make improvements accordingly (Kedi *et al.* 2024). For example, Starbucks can adopt Culture Amp tools that will allow them to gather and analyse feedback to enhance inclusive culture. It offers customisable surveys and feedback mechanisms to collect data on employee sentiment, satisfaction, and firms' alignment (Goretzki *et al.* 2022). It will lead the company to enhance employee morale, and job satisfaction, reducing turnover and ensuring every employee feels heard and valued. However, low participation and unstructured feedback can create barriers in implementing this recommendation. To address this, Starbucks should use user-friendly features to encourage trust and engagement.

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