

## Understanding and Addressing Organizational Barriers to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI): A Comprehensive Research Report

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### ABSTRACT

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are essential for fostering innovation, enhancing employee engagement, and achieving long-term organizational success. Despite the growing emphasis on DEI, various barriers persist, such as leadership deficiencies, resistance to change, and inadequate accountability systems. This study employs the Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) framework to explore and map the interdependencies among ten critical DEI barriers, identifying leadership and organizational commitment as pivotal factors influencing other challenges, including communication, individual attitudes, and mentorship. By analyzing these complex relationships, the research emphasizes the need for integrated approaches that align DEI initiatives with organizational goals, offering a roadmap for overcoming systemic barriers.

The study's unique contribution lies in its mapping of the relationships between DEI barriers and the provision of actionable strategies for addressing them. Recommendations range from short-term actions, such as unconscious bias training and leadership workshops, to long-term strategies like policy integration and mentorship programs. By embedding DEI into organizational culture and aligning it with broader business objectives, organizations can foster an inclusive culture that drives innovation, attracts diverse talent, and contributes to broader societal progress. This research provides valuable insights for organizations seeking to build sustainable, inclusive workplaces that prioritize DEI as a cornerstone of their strategy.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Organizational Barriers, Total Interpretive Structural Modelling.

### Introduction

#### Background

#### Understanding Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI): A Three-Pillared Approach

Diversity refers to the variety of human experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives within an organization. This encompasses both visible aspects like race, gender, ethnicity, and physical abilities, as well as invisible ones such as socioeconomic background, neurodiversity, and thinking styles. A diverse workforce enhances creativity and innovation by integrating a broad range of perspectives. This diversity allows organizations to address complex challenges more effectively and design solutions that resonate with a wider range of stakeholders (Cook, 2018).

Equity focuses on creating a level playing field by addressing historical and systemic disadvantages faced by specific groups. Equity ensures that all employees, regardless of their background, have access to the opportunities and resources necessary for success. This involves implementing transparent career progression paths, offering equal access to training and development programs, and fostering fairness in workplace policies. Equity-driven initiatives can help organizations attract and retain talent from underrepresented groups, contributing to a balanced and just workplace environment (Durrach, 2023).

Inclusion emphasizes fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety within the organization. It goes beyond representation to create an environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their unique talents and perspectives. Inclusive practices might include establishing employee resource groups, integrating feedback mechanisms, and ensuring workplace policies accommodate the needs of diverse employees. An inclusive culture not only benefits individuals but also enhances organizational cohesion and performance (Cook, 2018).

#### The Evolution of DEI: From Compliance to Strategic Imperative

DEI has evolved from being a compliance-driven initiative to a strategic imperative for organizational success. Initially, diversity efforts focused on legal and regulatory compliance to ensure fair representation and non-discrimination in the workplace. Organizations prioritized adhering to legal frameworks to mitigate risks and uphold fundamental fairness in hiring and employment practices (Durrach, 2023).

As the understanding of DEI deepened, it became evident that embracing diversity offers strategic benefits beyond legal compliance. Research has consistently demonstrated that diverse teams perform better, make more innovative decisions, and achieve higher levels of productivity. Organizations that prioritize DEI are better equipped to foster collaboration, enhance decision-making, and adapt to the complexities of an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

Globally, initiatives aimed at promoting DEI emphasize its role in driving social equity and organizational effectiveness. Multinational organizations, non-profits, and policymakers

advocate for inclusive practices that bridge systemic disparities and create equitable opportunities. For instance, UNESCO underscores the significance of inclusivity in addressing social inequalities and promoting global citizenship. Organizations that embed DEI principles into their strategies not only fulfill ethical imperatives but also unlock pathways for sustained growth and innovation.

#### The Historical Context of DEI

Historically, organizational cultures emphasized efficiency and uniformity, often sidelining the human element. During the industrial era, work processes were optimized for scalability, treating employees uniformly as cogs in a larger machine. This approach prioritized maximizing output while overlooking individual contributions and unique perspectives.

Over time, as businesses faced growing competition and complexity, the limitations of this approach became evident. Companies that embraced diversity and individuality began to outperform those focused solely on efficiency. Studies highlighted that fostering diverse teams and inclusive cultures led to better performance, enhanced creativity, and improved problem-solving capabilities. Concepts such as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) emerged as organizations recognized the importance of optimizing individual potential for collective success.

The Harvard Business Review's 2020 study revealed that embracing diversity enhances decision-making, innovation, and overall team effectiveness. By recognizing and celebrating individual differences, organizations can create an environment that drives collaboration and shared success. A forward-thinking approach to DEI involves leaders fostering empathetic, inclusive practices that celebrate differences while unifying efforts towards common goals.

#### DEI in the Indian Context

India's unparalleled diversity in language, culture, and socioeconomic conditions makes it a unique case study for implementing DEI initiatives. With over 780 languages spoken and significant disparities in economic opportunities, India's challenges and successes in fostering inclusivity offer valuable insights. Despite centuries of external influences and internal complexities, India has maintained a functioning democracy, underscoring the resilience and potential of diverse societies.

Incorporating DEI principles into India's evolving corporate landscape is both a challenge and an opportunity. Systemic inequities, such as regional disparities and gender imbalances, must be addressed to foster a more equitable workforce. Organizations that successfully implement DEI strategies stand to benefit from enhanced innovation, improved employee engagement, and broader social impact.

### Literature Review

#### Conceptual Evolution of DEI

The concept of workplace diversity has undergone a significant transformation over the years. Initially, diversity efforts were compliance-driven, focusing on meeting legal requirements. However, organizations have gradually recognized the strategic importance of fostering diverse and inclusive environments. This evolution reflects a shift from numerical representation to a holistic approach that emphasizes inclusion, equity, and belonging as drivers of competitive advantage.

#### Employee Perceptions and Diversity

The study by Sochi-Iwuoha et al. (2024) delves into the intricate relationship between employees' perceptions of workplace diversity and their job satisfaction, emphasizing the significance of these perceptions in the context of DEI initiatives. Their research identifies that while some demographic factors, such as age, may not substantially affect how diversity is perceived, others, including sexual orientation, education level, and ethnic origin, are pivotal. These findings underscore the challenge posed by personal characteristics and individual beliefs, which can create barriers to effective DEI implementation.

Organizations must recognize these diverse perceptions and adapt their strategies to ensure DEI initiatives resonate across all employee demographics. Furthermore, the study highlights a disconnect between DEI policies and their impact on the workforce, suggesting that aligning organizational policies with the nuanced needs of employees is critical. Failure to address these barriers may lead to resistance to change and perceived inequities, further hindering DEI efforts.

#### Generational Perspectives

Aguas (2024) emphasizes that Generation Z's leadership preferences and expectations regarding mental and physical well-being, alongside their strong inclination towards diverse workplaces, present significant challenges in implementing DEI initiatives. The research underscores the importance of aligning leadership practices with the expectations of this

emerging workforce to prevent intergenerational conflicts, which can hinder DEI efforts. This barrier is both people-centric and policy-related, requiring organizational commitment to adapt leadership styles and DEI strategies that resonate across all demographics. If leadership fails to meet these expectations, decreased employee morale and retention issues may arise, further complicating the effective implementation of DEI policies. Organizations must foster adaptable and inclusive leadership, addressing both employee beliefs and the structural support necessary for DEI success.

### **Leadership and Organizational Commitment**

Austin (2024) underscores the transformative potential of inclusive leadership. Their findings illustrate how leadership practices can elevate DEI from a compliance-driven effort to meaningful organizational change. By promoting psychological safety and fostering an inclusive culture, leaders can create environments where employees feel valued and empowered.

#### **Racial Microaggressions in the Workplace**

Ryan (2024) highlights a significant barrier to DEI initiatives: the challenge of addressing racial microaggressions within the workplace. The study demonstrates that while inclusive leadership is essential for mitigating these subtle and pervasive issues, leaders often struggle with implementing and maintaining effective inclusive practices. Microaggression is complex and difficult to address using traditional leadership methods, and leaders' personal experiences with such issues can further impact their ability to lead inclusively. Therefore, equipping leaders with the skills, self-awareness, and commitment to social justice is crucial for addressing this barrier.

This research underscores that barriers to DEI are closely tied to both people and policies. On the people side, leaders need to develop the empathy and skills required to recognize and combat microaggressions. On the policy side, there must be supportive structures and training to enable leaders to address these challenges effectively. Thus, overcoming barriers related to racial microaggressions involves addressing both individual capabilities and organizational practices.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Several theoretical perspectives provide valuable insights into understanding and addressing DEI barriers:

- **Organizational Change Management:** Explores strategies for overcoming resistance to DEI initiatives and implementing sustainable change.
- **Psychological Safety Models:** Focus on creating environments where individuals feel safe to express their ideas and concerns without fear of negative consequences.

The research by Sochi-Iwuoha et al. highlights the nuanced relationship between employee perceptions of diversity and job satisfaction. Key demographic factors, such as sexual orientation, education level, and ethnic origin, play a pivotal role in shaping these perceptions. The findings underscore the necessity for tailored strategies that address the diverse needs of employees. Moreover, the study points to potential misalignment between DEI policies and their practical impact, emphasizing the need for robust communication, support, and leadership to bridge this gap. Addressing these challenges is critical for overcoming resistance and ensuring the success of DEI initiatives.

Generation Z's expectations for leadership that prioritizes mental and physical well-being and fosters diversity present significant barriers to DEI implementation. Aligning leadership practices with these expectations is essential to prevent intergenerational

conflicts and maintain employee morale. The study highlights the importance of adaptable leadership and inclusive organizational policies to address the diverse needs of multigenerational workforces. Organizations must balance these perspectives to craft effective and inclusive DEI strategies.

Grieve (2024) identifies high turnover among DEI officers as a critical barrier to sustainable DEI efforts. This attrition is attributed to burnout and insufficient organizational support, reflecting a reactive approach to diversity rather than a proactive, strategic commitment. Additionally, external factors, such as legal and political pressures, further complicate DEI initiatives. To address these barriers, organizations must invest in foundational structures, resources, and long-term strategies that ensure the resilience and impact of DEI efforts.

Weissman (2023) explores the challenges of integrating DEI within supply chains, particularly through supplier diversity programs. Resistance to change, ingrained biases, and perceived risks associated with onboarding diverse suppliers are significant barriers. The study emphasizes the need for strategic approaches to navigate these complexities and maintain organizational reputation and supply chain resilience. Addressing these barriers requires commitment and adaptability to foster inclusivity within procurement practices.

## **1. METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Objectives**

Based on the literature we studied, we observed that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) barriers are often analyzed in isolation, with limited research exploring the interconnectedness of these barriers. While many studies focus on

identifying individual obstacles, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these challenges interact and impact the successful implementation of DEI initiatives. Recognizing this gap, we aim to bridge this understanding by examining both the critical barriers and their interdependencies.

The aim of the study is to:

1. Identify and analyze the critical barriers to DEI implementation.
2. Understand the interconnectedness of these barriers.
3. Provide actionable strategies for organizational transformation.
4. Develop a comprehensive framework for sustainable DEI initiatives.

This study adopts a systematic approach to explore and address the organizational barriers to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). By employing the Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) framework within a mixed-method research design, the methodology seeks to provide both qualitative and quantitative insights into the complex interrelationships among identified barriers.

### Research Design

This study follows a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to comprehensively examine organizational barriers to DEI.

**Barrier Identification:**

From the literature review, we identified 10 critical barriers that hinder DEI implementation. The barriers, drawn from existing research, were:

1. Individual Attitudes
2. Leadership
3. Perceived Risks
4. Lack of Communication
5. Resistance to Change
6. Lack of Organizational Commitment
7. Superficial Diversity Efforts
8. Lack of Accountability and Measurement
9. Policy and Legal Constraints
10. Lack of Role Models/Mentorship Rationale for Selecting Respondents

We chose to conduct semi-structured interviews with five HR professionals to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences across industries. The selection criteria focused on:

1. **Diverse Industry Representation:** To capture a broad understanding of DEI challenges across sectors, the respondents were chosen from industries such as HR services, FinTech, financial markets, manufacturing, and consulting.
2. **Years of Experience:** The respondents' professional experience ranges from less than 5 years to over 15 years, allowing us to gain insights from both early-career professionals and seasoned experts.
3. **Areas of Expertise:** 4 of the 5 respondents have significant involvement in strategic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of HR and DEI initiatives, ensuring depth and relevance in the data collected.

**Profile of Respondents**

- Respondent 1: A Managing Partner from the HR consulting sector with over 15 years of experience. They specialize in strategic planning related to DEI initiatives.
- Respondent 2: A Pride ERG Lead from the FinTech sector with 5 to 10 years of experience. They are actively involved in strategic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of DEI programs.
- Respondent 3: An HR Head and System Administrator from the manufacturing industry with over 15 years of experience, contributing to both strategic and operational aspects of DEI.
- Respondent 4: An HR Executive from the HR services industry with less than 5 years of experience. This respondent provided insights from an early-career perspective, adding diversity to the study.
- Respondent 5: The Head of Country HR - India from the financial markets industry with over 15 years of experience. They are deeply involved in strategic planning, implementation, and evaluation of DEI initiatives.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

**Step 1: VAXO Matrix**

Respondents were asked to complete a VAXO matrix for the 10 identified barriers. The matrix captured the interdependencies among barriers using the following indicators:

- V (1): Barrier 'A' influences Barrier 'B'.

- A (2): Barrier 'B' influences Barrier 'A'.
- X (3): Mutual influence exists between Barrier 'A' and Barrier 'B'.
- O (0): No influence between Barrier 'A' and Barrier 'B'.

Step 2: Qualitative Insights  
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative insights into the barriers and their contextual interdependencies. Respondents shared practical examples and elaborated on the challenges and dynamics within their organizations.

#### Step 3: Thematic Coding and Mapping

The interview data were thematically coded to identify patterns and relationships. These insights were integrated with the VAXO matrix results to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interdependencies.

#### Step 4: Total Interpretive Structural Modeling (TISM)

The TISM framework was used to create a hierarchical structure of the barriers, highlighting their levels of influence and interconnectedness. This process involved:

1. Identifying key barriers based on literature and respondent feedback.
2. Mapping interdependencies using the VAXO matrix.
3. Developing hierarchical models to determine critical and dependent barriers.
4. Validating the framework with research guides and subject matter experts.

**Key Barriers and Insights**  
The analysis revealed the following key barriers and their interdependencies:

**Individual Attitudes:** Biases and cultural conditioning significantly impact inclusivity at the workplace.

1. **Leadership:** Visionary leadership is crucial for driving strategic focus and inspiring inclusive practices.
2. **Perceived Risks:** Concerns over costs, disruptions, and legal implications deter full adoption of DEI.
3. **Lack of Communication:** Ineffective messaging hinders awareness and buy-in for DEI initiatives.
4. **Resistance to Change:** Deeply entrenched practices and fear of the unknown exacerbate resistance.
5. **Lack of Organizational Commitment:** Tokenistic efforts fail to create lasting change, emphasizing the need for genuine commitment.
6. **Superficial Diversity Efforts:** Tokenism undermines the authenticity and trustworthiness of DEI initiatives.
7. **Lack of Accountability and Measurement:** The absence of robust metrics hampers tracking progress and sustaining momentum.
8. **Policy and Legal Constraints:** Regulatory challenges and unclear policies hinder effective DEI implementation.
9. **Lack of Role Models/Mentorship:** The absence of diverse leaders limits growth opportunities for underrepresented groups.

## 2. ANALYSIS

**Individual Responses:**

1. Respondent 1: Stressed the interplay of leadership, organizational commitment, and accountability as key enablers of DEI success. Personal biases and resistance to change were highlighted as pervasive challenges.
2. Respondent 2: Focused on risk perception and policy constraints, particularly in innovation-driven sectors. Their insights underscored the need for adaptive and transparent leadership to mitigate risks.
3. Respondent 3: Shared insights into communication and resistance to change in traditional manufacturing environments. Clear communication was identified as a tool to challenge entrenched mindsets.
4. Respondent 4: Provided a junior professional's perspective, emphasizing the need for mentorship programs and cultural alignment to build DEI competency.

Respondent 5: Highlighted systemic interdependencies between leadership, accountability, and commitment. Their strategic approach emphasized the importance of measurement and mentorship in fostering meaningful DEI change.

**Interconnections Among Barriers**

The TISM framework revealed intricate interconnections among barriers, highlighting the systemic nature of DEI challenges:

1. **Leadership and Communication:** Effective communication strategies are inseparable from leadership quality. Leaders must model inclusivity and engage in transparent, consistent messaging to drive cultural change.
2. **Resistance to Change:** This barrier's complexity (A interactions) was evident across industries. Respondents pointed out that organizational inertia often stems from fear of disrupting established norms, requiring intentional interventions to build adaptability.
3. **Accountability and Organizational Commitment:** Reciprocal influence (X) shows that measurable accountability fosters deeper commitment, creating a feedback loop that sustains DEI efforts over time.

4. Policy and Legal Constraints and Perceived Risks: Moderate (X) influence highlights the need for clearer regulatory frameworks to reduce uncertainty and encourage proactive DEI initiatives.

#### Industry-Specific Patterns

- Innovation-Driven Sectors: Respondents in FinTech and financial markets (Respondent 2, Respondent 5) emphasized how perceived risks and policy constraints limit innovation in DEI practices. These industries demand adaptive leadership to navigate regulatory landscapes.
- Traditional Industries: Manufacturing professionals (Respondent 3) identified resistance to change and communication gaps as primary barriers. Leadership in these sectors must prioritize clear messaging and inclusive practices to challenge hierarchical norms.

#### Key Observations

1. Leadership as a Catalyst: Leadership is central to overcoming DEI barriers. It drives strategic direction, aligns organizational culture, and influences mentorship programs.
2. Organizational Commitment: Commitment must extend beyond superficial efforts to include tangible actions like structured mentorship and diversity audits.
3. Resistance to Change: Overcoming this barrier requires a multipronged approach, integrating training, communication, and leadership development.

Mentorship and Role Models: The absence of diverse role models perpetuates inequity. Respondents emphasized the importance of mentorship programs in fostering inclusion and breaking systemic biases.

#### Comparative Analysis by Professional Experience

- Senior Professionals: (Respondents 1, 3, 5) Displayed a nuanced understanding of systemic barriers and advocated for integrated solutions like mentorship and strategic measurement.
- Early-Career Professionals: (Respondent 4) Focused on foundational needs such as effective communication, mentorship, and alignment with organizational culture.

#### Challenges and Dilemmas

- Superficial Diversity Efforts: Tokenism erodes trust and reduces the credibility of DEI programs.
- Data Integrity Risks: Challenges like misrepresentation during hiring and potential data theft were highlighted as risks to authentic DEI efforts.
- Two-Way Process Complexities: Aligning organizational goals with individual expectations remains a challenge in sustaining engagement.

### 3. Key Findings: Top 10 DEI Barriers

This research identifies ten critical barriers to the implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, mapped through the Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) framework and the VAXO matrix. By analyzing responses from five HR professionals, we can gain a deeper understanding of the interdependencies between these barriers. Below, we provide a detailed overview of the key findings, with a particular emphasis on the role of leadership, organizational commitment, and other mediating factors.

#### Leadership: The Most Significant Variable

Leadership is identified as the most influential variable in the implementation of DEI initiatives. The responses show that leadership has a profound and mutual (X) relationship with communication, mentorship, and organizational commitment. Across the 5 respondents, leadership showed strong interactions with 8 of the 10 barriers. Notably, leadership has a mutual influence (X) with 4 barriers and a reciprocal influence (A) with 3 others. This underscores the pivotal role leadership plays in fostering or hindering DEI efforts. Leadership's ability to guide DEI efforts, allocate resources, and hold teams accountable is central to the success of these initiatives.

#### Organizational Commitment: A Close Second

Organizational commitment plays a significant role in overcoming DEI barriers, especially when it is linked to accountability systems and resource allocation. It shows mutual (X) relationships with accountability and measurement, reflecting its deep influence on organizational change. Furthermore, organizational commitment consistently demonstrates

reciprocal influence (A) with superficial diversity efforts, emphasizing the importance of long-term dedication and resource allocation for impactful DEI initiatives.

#### Individual Attitudes: The Mediating Variable

Individual attitudes toward DEI are shaped by personal beliefs, biases, and cultural norms. These attitudes mediate the relationship between leadership strategies and organizational outcomes. Across the 5 respondents, individual attitudes were found to influence 50% of the DEI barriers, highlighting their role in mediating the success of DEI initiatives. Individual attitudes showed a reciprocal influence (A) with leadership and a direct impact (V) on resistance to change and superficial diversity efforts.

**Resistance to Change: A Persistent Challenge**

Resistance to change is one of the most enduring barriers to DEI implementation. This resistance is particularly strong in hierarchical and traditional industries. Resistance to change shows complex interdependent relationships (X) with leadership, perceived risks, and mentorship, suggesting that change management strategies are critical to overcoming this barrier. The data from respondents indicated that resistance to change is a common theme in DEI efforts, with it influencing 6 barriers.

**Communication: The Enabler**

Effective communication is a critical enabler for overcoming DEI barriers. Transparent, open, and consistent communication fosters alignment between organizational goals and individual perceptions. Communication was identified as a mutual (X) influence with leadership and a reciprocal (A) influence with individual attitudes, demonstrating its importance in bridging gaps in DEI understanding. In total, communication was highlighted as a key influence on 7 barriers.

**Perceived Risks and Policy Constraints**

Perceived risks—such as backlash, disruption, or challenges in achieving DEI outcomes—are a significant barrier to DEI success. These risks, compounded by legal and policy constraints, were seen to inhibit progress. Respondents like Respondent1 indicated that perceived risks interact with at least 4 barriers, particularly in the context of navigating legal frameworks and addressing potential pushback.

**Superficial Diversity Efforts and Accountability**

Superficial diversity efforts, characterized by token initiatives, were highlighted as significant barriers. The lack of genuine commitment and accountability in DEI programs weakens their impact and undermines credibility. Accountability mechanisms are essential to ensure the alignment of DEI strategies with organizational objectives. Across respondents, accountability systems were identified as critical in addressing superficial diversity efforts.

**Role Models and Mentorship**

The absence of role models and mentorship programs creates a gap in DEI sustainability. Mentorship is vital for addressing individual biases, supporting diverse talent, and fostering inclusive environments. Across the respondents, mentorship was cited as a critical support mechanism that helps reduce resistance to change and fosters inclusion.

**Summary Table**

Barrier	Key Insights	Evidence
Leadership	Most influential variable with profound mutual (X) and reciprocal (A) relationships with communication, mentorship, and organizational commitment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leadership influenced 8 barriers (Respondent1).</li> <li>- Mutual (X) interactions with 6 barriers (Respondent2).</li> <li>- Reciprocal (A) with accountability and mentorship.</li> </ul>
Organizational Commitment	Deep influence on accountability and measurement systems; essential for resource allocation and long-term DEI impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mutual (X) interactions with accountability (Respondents1, 5).</li> <li>- Reciprocal (A) with superficial efforts, influencing 6 barriers.</li> </ul>
Individual Attitudes	Mediating variable shaped by personal beliefs and biases; significant reciprocal (A) influence with leadership and resistance to change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influences 50% of barriers.</li> <li>- Reciprocal (A) with leadership and resistance to change (Respondents3, 4).</li> </ul>

Resistance to Change	Persistent barrier, especially in hierarchical industries; requires change management strategies to overcome.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influences 6 barriers (Respondent1).</li> <li>- Mutual (X) interactions with leadership and mentorship.</li> </ul>
Communication	Critical enabler for bridging gaps; mutual (X) influence with leadership and reciprocal (A) with individual attitudes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impacts 7 barriers (Respondent1).</li> <li>- Reciprocal (A) with 3 barriers (Respondent5).</li> </ul>
Perceived Risks	Significant barrier tied to legal constraints and backlash fears; leadership plays a key role in mitigating these risks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interacts with 4 barriers (Respondents1, 2).</li> <li>- Regulatory challenges highlighted by Weissman in supply chain contexts.</li> </ul>
Superficial Diversity Efforts	Undermines DEI impact; robust accountability mechanisms needed to ensure meaningful outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identified as a challenge by all 5 respondents.</li> <li>- Linked with lack of measurement systems and accountability.</li> </ul>
Accountability	Essential to align DEI strategies with objectives; lack of accountability exacerbates superficial diversity efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Critical for addressing superficial efforts (Respondents1, 5).</li> </ul>

		- Linked with robust measurement systems.
Role Models	Absence of role models hinders DEI sustainability; mentorship is vital for fostering inclusion and addressing biases.	- Mentorship influences 6 barriers (Respondent2). - Lack of role models noted as a gap by 4 respondents.
Policy Constraints	Legal and policy barriers complicate DEI efforts; requires strategic navigation and risk management.	- Interacts with 4 barriers (Respondents1, 2). - Challenges amplified in regulatory contexts, as noted by Weissman.

The findings suggest that DEI initiatives are interconnected and require a systemic approach to address foundational barriers effectively. Leadership, organizational commitment, individual attitudes, and communication are the core variables that influence the success or failure of DEI programs, while resistance to change, superficial efforts, and a lack of accountability act as persistent obstacles.

#### 4. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS:

This paper integrates empirical findings and interpretive analysis to generate actionable implications for organizations seeking to enhance their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) strategies. Its primary theoretical contribution lies in applying the Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) framework to map the systemic interdependencies among barriers to DEI. The insights presented here are designed to help organizations and managers develop robust DEI strategies that address systemic barriers while fostering sustainable cultural transformation.

Understanding the Interdependencies of Barriers

The research highlights the systemic nature of DEI barriers, showing how they influence and amplify one another. For example, ineffective communication exacerbates resistance to change, while strong leadership can mitigate multiple barriers simultaneously. The interdependencies revealed by the VAXO matrix demonstrate that addressing a single barrier in isolation is insufficient for meaningful progress. Leadership and organizational commitment emerged as central drivers of change, creating ripple effects on accountability, mentorship, and employee attitudes. Similarly, policy and legal constraints shape perceived risks, directly impacting decision-making on diversity initiatives. Superficial diversity efforts are often a symptom of weak organizational commitment, highlighting the need for structural accountability. By mapping these interdependencies, the research provides a framework for identifying leverage points where targeted interventions can yield the greatest impact. This systemic understanding is particularly crucial for industries with entrenched hierarchies or regulatory constraints. Overall, the study underscores the importance of integrated approaches to addressing DEI barriers.

#### Key Insights from Mapping Interdependencies

1. Leadership as a critical one: Strong leadership influences communication, mentorship, and resistance to change, establishing it as the most critical barrier.
2. Cascading Effects: Organizational commitment cascades across barriers, driving accountability, mentorship, and resistance to change.
3. Mutual Reinforcement: Reciprocal relationships exist between accountability and commitment, where robust measurement frameworks reinforce organizational focus.
4. Communication Gaps: Poor communication amplifies resistance to DEI by creating mistrust and misunderstanding.
5. Policy Influence: Regulatory constraints shape perceived risks and limit experimentation with DEI practices.

#### Practical Strategies for Organizations and Managers

To address these barriers, organizations must adopt integrated strategies that focus on leadership development, cultural transformation, and accountability.

Strategies

Barrier	Short-Term Strategies	Long-Term Strategies
Leadership Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct inclusive leadership workshops to address unconscious bias.</li> <li>- Implement metrics to assess DEI performance of leaders.</li> <li>- Initiate mentorship programs for underrepresented groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Align DEI goals with business objectives.</li> <li>- Tie DEI metrics to executive compensation.</li> <li>- Foster leadership accountability through transparent reporting.</li> </ul>
Organizational Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop DEI roadmaps with clear goals and timelines.</li> <li>- Host regular DEI workshops and town halls.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Embed DEI in performance reviews and mission statements.</li> <li>- Allocate resources sustainably.</li> <li>- Conduct regular DEI audits.</li> </ul>
Accountability & Measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Implement metrics to track diversity ratios and employee engagement.</li> <li>- Conduct regular audits.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish cross-functional DEI teams.</li> <li>- Use real-time dashboards for tracking progress.</li> <li>- Partner with external certifications for validation.</li> </ul>
Resistance to Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emphasize DEI benefits in change management programs.</li> <li>- Share DEI success stories to build trust.</li> <li>- Celebrate milestones.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Address structural barriers like rigid hierarchies.</li> <li>- Involve employees in decision-making for DEI initiatives.</li> </ul>

		- Promote adaptability and resilience through training.
Communication Gaps	- Facilitate open dialogue sessions to address misunderstandings. - Provide regular updates on DEI progress.	- Promote transparent communication from leadership. - Establish feedback mechanisms to foster trust and inclusivity.
Policy and Regulatory Influence	- Identify key regulatory constraints limiting DEI efforts. - Educate decision-makers on managing perceived risks.	- Advocate for systemic policy reforms to support DEI. - Experiment with flexible, compliant DEI practices.
Mentorship and Role Models	- Pair underrepresented employees with senior mentors. - Provide training focused on career development.	- Recognize and reward mentors. - Build a pipeline for developing future leaders from diverse backgrounds. - Create visible role models to inspire inclusivity.

### Unique Contributions of the Research

This research uniquely maps the interdependencies among DEI barriers, providing a system-level understanding of their relationships. By identifying leverage points, such as leadership and organizational commitment, the study offers a framework for prioritizing interventions. The integrated strategies presented here align with the interconnected nature of barriers, ensuring a holistic approach to fostering DEI. This research also emphasizes the importance of systemic solutions, moving beyond isolated initiatives to address the root causes of inequity.

### Practical Implications for Organizations

The findings underscore the need for a strategic and systemic approach to DEI. Organizations must invest in leadership development, cultural transformation, and accountability mechanisms to overcome systemic barriers. Managers should focus on fostering trust, aligning DEI goals with business objectives, and maintaining transparency. By addressing interdependencies and leveraging systemic solutions, organizations can drive meaningful and sustainable DEI change.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives requires a systemic and cohesive approach that addresses both individual and organizational barriers. This study highlights the significant interdependencies among ten critical DEI barriers, with leadership and organizational commitment emerging as key factors that influence communication, individual attitudes, and other structural challenges. By utilizing the Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) framework, the research reveals that addressing these interconnected barriers is crucial for creating an inclusive environment where diverse talent can thrive. The findings underscore the need for organizations to prioritize leadership

development, transparency in communication, and robust accountability mechanisms to overcome these barriers. Organizations must focus on integrating DEI principles into their core strategies by embedding them in leadership practices, performance metrics, and organizational culture. Companies should invest in leadership training, mentorship programs, and policies that foster inclusivity, while also addressing superficial diversity efforts that lack long-term commitment. By adopting a holistic approach to DEI, organizations can create environments that not only drive innovation and improve employee satisfaction but also contribute to societal progress. Ultimately, the research provides a clear roadmap for organizations to dismantle systemic barriers, enhance accountability, and create a sustainable DEI framework that aligns with their business goals.

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## Appendix

- Research Methodology Details – Google Sheet

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1	Purpose of the Paper									
2	Our research aims to identify and analyze the top 10 barriers to the effective implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within organizations.									
3	By understanding these barriers, we seek to provide actionable insights that can help organizations overcome obstacles to fostering an inclusive work environment.									
4										
5	Introduction to the VAXO Matrix									
6	The VAXO matrix is a tool used within the Total Interpretive Structural Modeling (TISM) framework to map and assess the interrelationships between identified barriers.									
7	The acronym "VAXO" stands for the following:									
8	V (1): Barrier 'A' influences Barrier 'B'.									
9	A (2): Barrier 'B' influences Barrier 'A'.									
10	X (3): Barrier 'A' and Barrier 'B' influence each other.									
11	O (0): No influence between Barrier 'A' and Barrier 'B'.									
12										
13	Using the VAXO Matrix									
14	Participants are asked to determine the degree of interrelatedness between the barriers by selecting the appropriate value (V, A, X, or O) for each intersection in the matrix.									
15	This selection will help us understand the direct and indirect influences among the barriers, thereby highlighting the most critical areas to address in overcoming DEI challenges.									
16										
17	Providing Reasoning									
18	Below each barrier, we have included an empty row where you can provide the reasoning behind your selection.									
19	This qualitative input will be invaluable in refining our analysis and ensuring that the final model accurately reflects the complexities of DEI barriers.									

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Barrier B	1. Individual attit	2. Leadership	3. Perceived Ris	4. Lack of Comrn	5. Resistance to	6. Lack of Organ	7. Superficial Dh	8. Lack of Accou	9. Policy and Les	10. Lack of Role Mod
2	Barrier A										
3	1. Individual attitude	V	A	X	O						
4	Reason why you chose the particular response										
5	2. Leadership	A									
6	Reason why you chose the particular response										
7	3. Perceived Risks	X									
8	Reason why you chose the particular response										
9	4. Lack of Communication	O									
10	Reason why you chose the particular response										
11	5. Resistance to Change										
12	Reason why you chose the particular response										
13	6. Lack of Organizational Commitment										
14	Reason why you chose the particular response										
15	7. Superficial Diversity Efforts										
16	Reason why you chose the particular response										
17	8. Lack of Accountability and Measurement										
18	Reason why you chose the particular response										
19	9. Policy and Legal Constraints										
20	Reason why you chose the particular response										
21	10. Lack of Role Models/Mentorship										
22	Reason why you chose the particular response										

- Google Form

docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScZ0i1gsTAmJbFJahFxcDprGjczj-waVzJoNViFd\_WbGF0RQ/viewform

### Barriers to DEI- Research Paper

Our research aims to identify and analyze the top 10 barriers to the effective implementation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within organizations. By understanding these barriers, we seek to provide actionable insights that can help organizations overcome obstacles to fostering a more inclusive and equitable work environment. Your valuable input will contribute to this important study, enabling us to make a meaningful impact in the field of DEI.

**Note : The google sheet link will be shared with you over your submitted email id.**

chavanabhinay01@gmail.com [Switch account](#)

Not shared

\* Indicates required question

- Questions:
  1. Name
  2. Email
  3. Phone number
  4. Company Name
  5. Current Designation
  6. Which industry/sector does your company belong to?
  7. How many years of experience do you have in the field of Human Resources?
    - a) < 5 years
    - b) 5 to 10 years
    - c) 10 to 15 years
    - d) >15 years
  8. Have you been involved in any Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in your organization?

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- a) Yes
- b) No
- 9. If yes, please specify your level of involvement in DEI initiatives
  - a) Strategic Planning
  - b) Implementation
  - c) Monitoring and Evaluation
  - d) Other:
- 10. Would you be interested in participating in future studies or discussions related to DEI?
  - a) Yes
  - No
  - b) Maybe
- 11. Any comments/Feedback