

### **Building Equity During the COVID-19 Crisis Through Diversity & Inclusion**

The positive business impacts of Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) are well established – from employees and executives, to broader company culture. During times of global crisis, it becomes even clearer why D&I should be a part of business decisions, and the responsibility is on organizations and their leaders to think of and speak to all groups.

As we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, several D&I issues have emerged, and the response to these issues from business leaders, in real time and in the future, can have a lasting impact on their company's reputation.

#### **A Look at the Conversation**

Coronavirus is a global health, humanitarian and economic issue that is affecting all our communities in different ways. On the surface, it may not seem like a topic that has much relevance to D&I, but this crisis is fueling research, conversations and perspectives about our world and our people that are important for all organizations to consider as they're making business decisions and communicating with stakeholders.

Some of the key D&I issues that have risen to the top include:

- **Women in the workplace:** Experts have said that this pandemic will have a disproportionate negative impact on working women. A new report, "[The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality,](#)" explores the economic consequences of coronavirus for women. It reveals that more women will lose their jobs because of coronavirus, as many of the sectors that are most affected by the virus have high female employment. However, the paper also highlights that the recent shifts in flexibility and division of household labor could lead to cultural changes that benefit women in the workplace – presenting an opportunity and even an expectation for organizations in the future.
- **Income inequality:** Week three of the [Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index](#) examined working status and emotional well-being by socioeconomic group. According to the index, Americans with higher socioeconomic status are still getting paid and can work from home, while those with lower incomes either still must go to work or have lost their jobs. In fact, just 3% of the lowest status group said they're working remotely or from home, a number that rose significantly with income. These findings demonstrate that there is a need for organizations to recognize the various levels within their workforce and be sensitive to the different experiences that employees across their company are having in their internal and external communications.
- **Race and ethnicity:** The varied impact of coronavirus on different races and ethnicities has also become a prominent discussion. A [USA Today article](#) in March discussed how many of the coronavirus-related layoffs have hurt low-income workers, who are disproportionately people of color. Like the topic in bullet two, organizations should understand the trickle-down effect of their current policies on lower income employees. Additionally, a recent [New York Times story](#) highlighted emerging data showing that black communities in some U.S. states have seen higher rates of infection and death. The data is still limited, but some experts have pointed to existing inequalities within these communities as the reason for them being more vulnerable. While not as directly tied to an organization's reputation, companies should be aware of the conversation.
- **Xenophobia:** As the pandemic has continued to grow, there's also been an unfortunate increase in xenophobia and incidents of racism around the world. This has been well-documented in the media, such as this article in [The Atlantic](#) that reported on the harmful experiences many in the Asian community are facing because of the outbreak. All companies should be thinking about how to support employees who have been impacted by discrimination in or outside of work and raise awareness around the organization about the challenges that many are experiencing. Additionally, companies with global operations and/or partners should address this topic as part of their communications.

### What Organizations Need to Think About

Many organizations talk about their commitment to D&I, now is the time to put those words into action.

Leaders have an opportunity to demonstrate that they understand D&I issues, their connection to equity and equality, and that these are issues that will likely remain post-pandemic.

Key questions for organizations to ask:

- What are some of the D&I issues that have emerged during this crisis that are relevant to my organization?
- Am I applying a D&I lens in all of our communications?
- Are there policies and practices we need to address in this changing landscape?
- How can we maintain our commitment – or create new commitments – to D&I right now?

**The Present:** Doing what's right in the short term to build reputational equity in the long term.

- **Direct and transparent communications:** The need for authentic communications during this crisis applies to D&I issues as well. Leaders should think about the unique challenges that their various audiences and their families might be facing and factor those into internal and external communications. Organizations should feel encouraged to address issues head on – even if they don't have all the answers. Right now, acknowledgement and showing that we are all human is critical.
- **Commitment to communities:** Action goes hand-in-hand with communication, and organizations should think about how they're able to provide support for their stakeholders. Many companies are offering flexibility or creating resource centers and relief funds. Organizations should partner with human resources and internal D&I experts to understand what is needed, and how that might differ depending on the audience.
- **Don't abandon current programs:** It can be easy to deprioritize D&I programs and communications right now. Instead, organizations should think about how to keep their initiatives going by adapting them to virtual environments and using this crisis to address D&I issues in real time and have more open and honest conversations about tough topics.

**The Future:** This crisis will change the workforce in dramatic ways – organizations need to keep up.

- **Policies and benefits:** Organizations should take a fresh look at their current policies. The community will applaud progressive leaders who use this pandemic as a reason to institute updated guidelines around issues like flexibility, paid leave, gender equality and mental health/self-care.
- **Accessibility:** As part of fostering an inclusive environment, organizations will need to ensure that their entire workforce has the space and technology to meet the demands of a remote and flexible workforce. Or, if you're an organization with employees that typically can't work remotely, it is critical to have policies and communications in place to address that.
- **More talent:** With an increased focus on remote work and flexibility, many organizations will have an opportunity to widen their talent pool to include new and diverse candidates. Leaders should explore what programs they can put in place to emphasize this.

### Pulling It All Together

The coronavirus crisis will transform the way corporations need to think about D&I issues and accelerate the evolution of how D&I is built into larger business strategies. As employees, consumers, communities and other key stakeholders demand more, these issues will impact brand and reputation. The companies that get it right will build longer-term reputational strength and competitive advantage and emerge as more magnetic 'employers of choice.'