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DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

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MINI-ROUNDTABLE

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION



PANEL EXPERTS

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Jennifer Farthing, SAI Global's head of product for ethics, compliance, and risk learning, is responsible for creating programmes to engage and educate today's learners for tomorrow's workplace challenges. Throughout her 20-year career in EdTech, Ms Farthing has led workplace learning and transformation efforts. She is tuned into the demands that workers confront as they reskill, take on more responsibility and execute in a changing world, often in a remote or hybrid workplace context. She is a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University's Leadership and Learning in Organizations programme and is certified in instructional design.

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Rina Souppa is a product development leader with over 15 years of experience blending product management, strategy, analysis and communication with creativity and thoughtful, user-centred design. Currently the global head of learning experience for SAI Global, she is responsible for content strategy and creative execution of effective, personalised ethics and compliance learning programmes for Fortune 1000 customers. She has previously held creative leadership roles across the eLearning, educational publishing (K-8), healthcare, telecommunications and editorial industries. She holds a BA from Brandeis University and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts.

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Jennifer Winfield is the deputy title IX officer and assistant director of the title IX, equal opportunity & affirmative action office at a university where she helps oversee best practices and institutional compliance efforts. She also manages reports and investigations of sexual misconduct and other sex, race-based, gender-based, or gender-identity-based discrimination and harassment involving faculty, staff, post-doctoral scholars and students. Previously, she was the chief of the white-collar crimes unit at a US Attorney's Office and during her time there she also directed the US Attorney's Office's civil rights programme and led the human trafficking task force.

R&C: Could you outline how environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors, such as diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I), are ascending the corporate agenda? Which external groups are increasing their focus on these issues?

Farthing: We have seen a rise in expectations that chief executives and other senior leaders take a genuine stand on social issues like climate change and social justice. It is not enough to try and please all parties anymore. Everyone from employees to customers are loudly demanding accountability. Environmental, social and governance (ESG) is the point where your organisation's priorities and your social responsibilities intersect. It is about ethical leadership and doing the right thing, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) is a natural extension of that mission. Whether DE&I initiatives succeed depends on leaders truly committing to a challenging set of changes, even when it makes their own jobs harder.

R&C: What are the key advantages of promoting DE&I in the workplace? In what ways does a more diverse workforce help enhance business growth, brand reputation and organisational stability?

Farthing: There are two lenses to look through here. From a basic cost analysis perspective, successful DE&I is a strong profit driver that improves employee engagement, productivity and innovation.

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SAI Global*

It boosts the bottom line significantly. From a leadership perspective, it is a way of communicating to the world that your organisation prioritises its people and their wellbeing. When you combine those lenses, you see that DE&I makes companies more stable because the people who work there feel like their authentic selves are valued. So, you can further develop the employees you have and earn a reputation that will have the best candidates eager to join the company. It is a win any way you look at it, if you do it the right way.

R&C: What common barriers do companies encounter when addressing

DE&I issues? How can they overcome these challenges?

Souppa: A lot of ESG leaders are still afraid to even address the issues DE&I covers. Getting leadership to acknowledge the realities of racism, sexism, ableism and other issues can be a huge initial challenge. Funding is another thing. Getting the C-suite to loosen the purse strings is not easy when they are convinced there is not enough hard evidence of return on investment. Luckily, there is more evidence every day that proves DE&I is simply good business. In a June 2020 McKinsey survey, 39 percent of job applicants reported not choosing to pursue a job because of a perceived lack of inclusion at a company. The key is to identify the motivations of each stakeholder and show them the numbers they are most concerned about, whether that is turnover, productivity or some other metric.

R&C: Do companies need to consider measuring and reporting ESG metrics including DE&I? What steps should they take to track progress and make disclosures?

Souppa: If you are working with a programme platform that can produce metrics, but you are not

making use of that reporting, you are already falling behind. Metrics need to be analysed on a consistent basis, using the same sources of data each time to make sure the analysis is providing useful insight. It is always best to be transparent with your findings. Periodic disclosure communications about new information and upcoming decisions will help to show your organisation is serious about making real-world progress with DE&I initiatives. Fear of what that data will show holds a lot of companies back as

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SAI Global*

the mindset is ‘I may not be prepared to act on this information’. However, if we do not look, how will we be able to know where to start or where to focus? Your employees, customers and business partners will see your commitment to ethical leadership as more than just talk.

R&C: Is there a need for consistent, standard ESG metrics to really drive DE&I?

Farthing: Standardisation is the next critical step for widespread acceptance of DE&I. Unfortunately, those consistent standards are still being explored and designed by many organisations in the space. There are a few common denominators in most metrics that speak to DE&I, like information on race and ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identification, disability and veteran status throughout the hiring and promotion pipeline. These data points can be analysed regarding retention, pay equity practices and self-reported employee engagement to inform steps forward. Larger companies are developing their own internal metrics and benchmarking systems, so the success of their programmes will have a large influence on what metrics make it into a global standard everyone can agree on.

R&C: How important is it for a company's senior leaders to be on board with DE&I activities and objectives? To succeed, does DE&I need to be embedded in a company's strategy and culture?

Souppa: There is no path to progress with DE&I without full commitment from senior leaders.

Employees can tell when these efforts are just a box-ticking exercise, and when the programmes are not receiving the level of funding needed to be effective. Senior leaders absolutely need to get on board and do so visibly and vocally. The commitment needs to be sincere from the top down, so DE&I can

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*Jennifer Winfield,
NABCRMP*

be built into the organisation from the ground up. In reality, it should be integrated as a core principle at every level of the business if it is to gain traction and reduce pushback. This means actively investing in and supporting middle management, your most powerful behavioural influencer group, with tools and resources to work with their teams on a local level.

R&C: What essential advice would you offer to companies on communicating their commitment to DE&I, managing

the associated risks and achieving their goals?

Winfield: You need full leadership engagement and consistent data to achieve DE&I goals. Leadership must exhibit a sincere commitment to learning, processing and acknowledging cultural differences among employees and achieving cultural competence. Companies should track the DE&I process by setting up opportunities for feedback and starting authentic conversations in response to employee issues that occur because of a lack of cultural competence. DE&I metrics should be framed within the corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ESG criteria as proof of the company's commitment. You can help manage risks by periodically merging different teams to bring out innovation and creativity and leverage the diverse experiences and perspectives of each employee. You need measurable actions and a strategic training plan that goes beyond just hiring practices as companies need to establish pathways to equal opportunities, access and treatment to help eradicate existing systemic barriers that prevent advancement. One way to help manage risks is to periodically merge different teams to generate innovation and creativity and leverage the diverse experiences and perspectives of each employee.

R&C: What are your predictions for DE&I in the coming months and years? How do you expect the issue to evolve, shape and define the companies of the future?

Winfield: DE&I is going to move even closer to the forefront as we face more social unrest and political discontentment. Companies will face increasing pressure to commit to eradicating institutional bias within their workforce and acknowledging the need for continued support of ethnic and cultural diversity. In addition, COVID-19 has changed perceptions of traditional work, and DE&I will continue to be a big part of those changes while people find a work-life balance. We will see an increase in metrics related to DE&I, and new accountability standards in line with the need for data transparency. More DE&I initiatives will be developed, like those that cover workplace demographics and pay gaps, and the results of those initiatives will be used to measure and shape a company's culture and financial outlook. **RC**