

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

How recent social justice movements can have a positive effect on the construction industry

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Recent events in the United States have prompted various social justice movements to address racial disparities within our nation's systems and institutions. These movements, regardless of personal opinions, are ushering in a demand for more transparency from those in power. The American Society of Association Executives' *ASAE Handbook of Professional Practices*¹ includes a list of management trends to watch, which includes the following: "The need for organizational transparency will generate growing demand for information on the ethical implications of the organization's decision-making process."

Although they may not seem directly related to construction, these recent movements provide an opportunity to consider how creating an inclusive work environment will help maximize our industry's potential. As more members of the Baby Boomer generation retire, the industry is dealing with more jobs to fill and a shrinking talent pool. It is important now more than ever to consider expanding the industry's diversity and inclusion initiatives—in part, to help widen that talent pool. Beyond the bottom-line reasons for incorporating these types of programs, regularly having conversations about diversity and inclusion issues will help foster an environment of openness with team members, which has been shown to improve productivity and employee retention.

According to a 2020 report from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics,² the 2019 demographics of the labor force were white, 77%; Black, 13%; and Asian, 6%. The report also includes a breakdown by ethnicity, noting that 18% of the labor force were Hispanics/Latinos, who may identify as one or more races; in this case, 89% of Hispanics/Latinos reported as white. Occupation and

industry breakdowns show that more than 30% of Hispanic/Latino workers were employed in jobs associated with production, transportation, materials, natural resources, construction, and maintenance. In contrast, just 21.9% of Black workers were employed in these fields, a statistic that highlights an opportunity to expand hiring efforts in this community.

Because diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a tough and even controversial subject, many shy away from the topic. However, doing so does not help fix the disparities marginalized groups face. As these conversations become more common, and in turn easier, they often help maximize the effectiveness of organizations and increase the engagement of team members.

Sharing a common terminology is helpful when framing discussions of ethics and social justice. Diversity Best Practices has published an extensive glossary of terms,³ including the following terms and definitions:

- **Diversity:** Psychological, physical, and social differences that occur among any and all individuals.
- **Equity:** The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.
- **Inclusion:** The act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate.
- **Implicit bias:** Negative associations that people unknowingly hold about a group of people or individual, expressed automatically and without conscious awareness. [We all have them; you are not without bias!]
- **BIPOC:** An acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The

term is meant to acknowledge that not all people of color face the same levels of injustice.

A helpful analogy used many times is that diversity is like being invited to the party; inclusion is like being asked to dance. Inclusion focuses more on who is respected, expected, and integrated into a group, as opposed to just being there. To maximize output, it is critical to pull together different perspectives to find the best way to get things done.

Supporting DEI initiatives in our industry helps avoid discrimination for all marginalized populations. Some types of discrimination include:

- disability,
- race,
- sexual orientation,
- gender,
- age,
- education level, and
- income level.

Creating a DEI plan or incorporating an ethics policy should be a consideration for every organization. Fortunately, the construction industry has many resources available, and initiatives have already started. Many companies have incorporated aggressive DEI programs that can serve as great case studies. Now is the time to start looking at these resources, implement what works for our communities, and share our successes and failures.

Industry associations are hubs for relevant information and resources on these subjects and should be leaned on regularly. Organizations like the ASAE⁴ and the Council of Engineering and Scientific Society Executives⁵ have plan and policy templates available to download. In the last several years, communities of practice groups like the Women in Concrete Alliance and Associated General Contractors

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article on diversity and inclusion as it relates to workforce development is outside the range of topics usually covered in ASPIRE®. However, we felt that a perspective on this topic may give value to our readers. Members of National Concrete Bridge Council (NCBC) work with the broader construction industry and bridge specifiers who are part of federal, state, and local agencies. The Slag Cement Association, the members of NCBC, and public and private employers engaged in the bridge community are getting more involved in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. After reading this article, please look for resources and guidance in your local area and consider, as the author states, "incorporating these types of programs [by] regularly having conversations about diversity and inclusion issues that will help foster an environment of openness with team members." We present this article as a call to action, to do the right thing by expanding the industry's diversity and inclusion initiatives, and thus make our industry more welcoming to a wider range of our population, providing opportunities to develop and use the talents of many who may not have previously considered working in our bridge industry.

of America's Diversity and Inclusion Council have been working to provide resources and further initiatives in their respective fields. Advancing Organizational Excellence, a consulting firm with association and corporate clients in our industry, offers a proprietary benchmarking tool as well as training and plan resources specifically for the design and construction marketplace.⁶

The construction industry is a unique sector where we combine science, design, natural resources, and community planning. While it may sometimes be uncomfortable, we would be doing ourselves a disservice by not being a part of the conversation to understand how DEI issues impact our workforce. These social movements, and in turn how we collectively respond, will impact the people within our industry.

References

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