



STATE OF THE WORKPLACE STUDY: RETENTION OUTLOOK THROUGH A DE&I LENS

PART ONE: ANALYSIS OF PUBLISHED INFORMATION

We identify five macro factors that influence the inclusion and retention of historically excluded employees in advertising-related industries and discuss how these factors can help filter potential solutions.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is the first segment of a three-part study that examines reasons why historically excluded individuals plan to leave their employers and reasons why they'd stay.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the advertising industry.¹

So how do you know which strategies to prioritize?

We believe the answer starts with examining the problems. This report organizes selected statistics, stories, surveys, and strategies into five macro factors that influence the inclusion and retention of historically excluded² individuals in the industry. This can highlight potential solutions that have a bigger impact, sooner.

¹ Advertising-related industries (ARIs) include advertising, marketing communications, ad tech, media, creative, and communications, among others. Locating information about the advertising industry also produced research and commentary about related fields. Due to time and space constraints, a consistent emphasis was placed on searching for information about the "advertising industry" with the knowledge that such efforts often would yield information about ARIs. While many sources are specific to ARIs, the report also includes more broadly applicable literature.

² We use the term "historically excluded" instead of "underrepresented." This reminds us that groups are underrepresented not because they didn't show up, ready to participate, but because they've been systematically kept out. Other terms like "underrepresented," "diverse," and "minority" may be used to match the source verbiage.

LOOKING FORWARD

In early 2022, ADCOLOR releases the full results of its inaugural study, the ADCOLOR State of the Workplace Study: Retention Outlook Through a DE&I Lens. Results were previewed during the 2021 ADCOLOR Everywhere Conference, October 5-8, 2021, in New York City.

Access the preview panel [here](#).

The good news: Historically excluded employees are finding their way into advertising and its related industries. The bad news: Many are not staying, and of those who stay, many are planning to leave their current positions within the next year. During this discussion, panelists revealed insights from professionals from historically excluded communities who have navigated the advertising, creative, and tech industries. These employees' challenges, perceptions, and successes can assist the industries' institutions in operationalizing systems to become more inclusive and equitable as they

work toward sustaining a more stable, satisfied, and diverse workforce.

Panelists' comments were based on the outcomes of the ADCOLOR State of the Workplace Study: Retention Outlook Through a DE&I Lens, which consists of an extensive review of published research, a survey of more than 500 industry professionals from the ADCOLOR community, and insights derived from dozens of industry leaders and influencers via personal interviews, dyads, and triads.

Access the full State of the Workplace Study on adcolor.org, coming soon.

Future efforts will address recommendations on how organizations can operationalize DE&I and create sustainable solutions that foster an inclusive and equitable workplace.

ABOUT ADCOLOR

ADCOLOR champions diversity and inclusion in creative industries. Our process is twofold. First, we help individuals and organizations RISE UP, letting their accomplishments and ideas shine. Second, we teach these new leaders and would-be mentors how to REACH BACK and find others who deserve to be noticed and promoted. Our goal is to create a community of diverse professionals who support and celebrate one another.

AUTHORS' NOTES

Defining diversity is increasingly nuanced, fluid, and complex as researchers examine the intersectionality between definitions of diversity “not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities.”³ With that in mind, the authors acknowledge that this report is not inclusive of all definitions of diversity and the intersectionality of those identities. Using Mazur’s dimensions of diversity,⁴ this report focuses primarily on race, ethnicity, gender, and ability, with a focus on Black and female employees due to the volume of literature available, while acknowledging that there are more dimensions of diversity that face nuanced types of discrimination and challenges in ARIs, including invisible dimensions of diversity. The authors acknowledge the increasing complexity of diversity and the intersectionality of all identities, even those regrettably not explicitly covered in this report.

³ [Collins, P. H. \(2015\). Intersectionality’s definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41\(1\), 1-20.](#)

⁴ [Mazur, B. \(2010, November\). Cultural diversity in organisational theory and practice. *Journal of Intercultural Management*, 2\(2\), 5-15.](#)

Terminology may vary across the report to align with verbiage from a source. Selected acronyms that may be encountered in this report, along with related subject areas, are listed below:

AAPI – Asian American and Pacific Islander

ARI – advertising-related industries

BAME – Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and people of color

BLM – Black Lives Matter

BRG – business resource group

CRT – critical race theory

CSR – corporate social responsibility

DEI/DE&I – diversity, equity, and inclusion

DI – diversity and inclusion

DIRE – diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity

EP – executive presence

ERG – employee resource group

ERG theory – existence, relatedness, and growth theory

LGBTQ+ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other identities (intersex, asexual, questioning, etc.)

POC – people of color

WOC – women of color

A heartfelt thanks to Digiday for “Confessions” series interview quotes and to Harris and Hue for “A state of inequity” data points that are heavily referenced in this report.

Citations use modified American Psychological Association style, and in most cases URLs are included for further reference.

Primary search terms for this study included advertising; advertising industry; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I or D&I); employee satisfaction; workplace culture; and others.

Special thanks to Tiffany R. Warren, Dustin Ballard, Andy Coulston, Hazel Clark, Ana Leen, Criseli Sanz, Ayanna Jackson, Dan Ng, Rosalie Bonner, Rhonda Contreras, Trent Walters, Nikki Wilson, Terence Reynolds, Giovanni Villamar, Joel K. Thomas, Ty McDonald, Patty Miller, Selina Hendrix, Valerie Cohen, and Mary Anne Lide.

For more information about the contents of this report, or to submit feedback, please email info@adcolor.org.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the recent attention given to diversity in advertising and related industries, marketing employees⁵ report the highest level of workplace discrimination compared to other job functions, according to a recent study.⁶ While efforts have been made to funnel diverse talent into the industry, less attention has been paid to the inclusion and retention of this talent. In this report, we identify five macro factors that impact the inclusion and retention of historically excluded individuals. By examining the factors that have a pronounced effect on the industry, leaders can learn more about root causes and potential solutions from experts.

⁵ “Marketing” is used to match the verbiage of the source. “Advertisers,” “marketers,” etc., are used interchangeably to describe employees of ARI, dependent on the source.

⁶ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

1. Subjectivity and ambiguity in creative industries breed bias

Subjectivity of creative development: Advertising-related industries, and specifically creative development, are an ideal space to examine bias because of the “ambiguity involved in creative evaluation.”⁷ To compound the subjectivity of creative review, “women are more likely to hold back than men if they feel that what they say isn’t rooted in fact.”⁸

Ill-defined criteria for advancement: Marketers are less likely to say their employer has documentation on pathways to advance compared to other job functions.⁹ One researcher describes advancement as “loose and subjective”: “It comes down to whether a candidate feels like a ‘culture fit’ rather than objective skills or experiences.”¹⁰ Issues of career mobility or growth disproportionately impact BIPOC marketers.

⁷ Windels, K., & Lee, W. (2012). The construction of gender and creativity in advertising creative departments. *Gender in Management*, 27(8), 502-519.

⁸ [Tulshyan, R. \(2021, March 15\). Why is it so hard to speak up at work? The New York Times.](#)

⁹ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

¹⁰ [Boulton, C. \(2020, July 18\). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.](#)

Types of feedback as advancement hindrances: Women are systematically less likely to be given feedback that is tied to outcomes compared to men. Women, especially women of color, are often given feedback tied to communication style, like being told to soften their tone or that they are being “too aggressive.”¹¹

Lack of diverse leader representation: “The lack of company role models who are members of their racial and ethnic group” can be a barrier to retention.¹² In a 2019 study, 19% of Black employees didn’t see someone of their own race making it to a management-level position, compared to 3% of whites. For tenured employees of color, representation matters more.¹³

Absence of objective industry data: On top of the ambiguity of creative and advancement decision-making, there is a tremendous lack of industry-wide data as it relates to diversity and wage gaps. It wasn’t until 2020 and 2021, the first time “in many years,” when several organizations like the World Federation of Advertising and the 4A’s started tracking diversity data.¹⁴

Potential solutions

What do DE&I experts recommend? Where there is a lack of information, subjectivity, or ambiguity, seek to fill this void with research, data, definition, and accountability.

This includes:

- **Listen:** Use research, data, partners, and formal conversations to benchmark and better understand your current state of DE&I from diverse perspectives.
- **Define:** Publicly define your brand’s stance on diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity (DIRE) to foster transparency and accountability.
- **Grow:** Evolve your approach as you learn, scorecard your progress against other companies, and use a formalized succession plan.

¹¹ [Correll, S. J., & Simard, C. \(2016, April 29\). Research: Vague feedback is holding women back. Harvard Business Review.](#)

¹² [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

¹³ [Center for Talent Innovation. \(2019\). The sponsor dividend.](#)

¹⁴ [Miranda H. \(2020, December 10\). Advertising industry diversity survey. 4A’s.](#)

2. Consumer- and client-facing nature of the industry encourages performativity

From pledges to promises: From “Call for Change” to “Commit to Change,”^{15,16,17} there is no shortage of pledges, promises, and commitments made by advertising companies. After negative events or press, there may be “token gestures,” but some diverse employees say “it goes back to normal.”¹⁸

Emphasis on consumer-facing diversity of brands: Some advertising employees think the industry does more to foster diversity and inclusion in the work than at work. But ads “may only become more inclusive if they’re created and sold by diverse groups of people.”¹⁹

Traditionally segregated industry: Today’s general market agencies will “tap into multicultural agencies to help” because they lack the audience group knowledge,

skill sets, or diversity to succeed.²⁰ Diverse employees get tokenized onto accounts and into roles that fit with stereotypes of their identity, and when they are part of high-profile accounts or pitches, they often get sidelined.

Client-pleasing accountability: Some employees believe that movements like #MeToo or Black Lives Matter are addressed in the advertising industry only “when there is a commercial benefit or they can be exploited” or monetized for “commercial gain.” One employee tells the story of a senior executive who prioritized D&I meetings only “when a client would ask for our D&I stats.”²¹

¹⁵ [Watson, I. \(2020, June 10\). Black ad professionals call on agency leaders to take urgent action on racism. The Drum.](#)

¹⁶ [Smiley, M. \(2020, July 27\). Omnicom releases US workforce diversity data as part of broader action plan. Adweek.](#)

¹⁷ [The Drum Reporters. \(2021, January 27\). Black Lives Matter: Have ad agencies followed through on their promises? The Drum.](#)

¹⁸ [Joseph, S. \(2019, July 8\). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.](#)

¹⁹ [Williams, S. \(2019, July 25\). Improving diversity and inclusion in advertising. Forbes.](#)

²⁰ [Kaplan, I. \(2019, July 3\). Confessions of a multicultural agency exec: ‘You can’t define a group of people by data.’ Digiday.](#)

²¹ [Joseph, S. \(2021, March 5\). ‘There’s always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month’: Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. Digiday.](#)

Potential solutions

DE&I experts believe there are ways to use the architecture of the advertising industry to motivate positive change. The press, consumers, industry programs, and clients can be used to keep agencies accountable, but leaders should push beyond external influences to personally influence inclusion in the workforce.

- **Communicate:** Advertisers are skilled communicators, and this should start with internal audiences.
- **Publish:** Realize that we can all hold each other to a high standard when we share our knowledge.

3. “Culture fit” criteria promote homogeneity

“The major problem is inclusion”²²: Diverse and historically excluded groups often feel excluded from majority-white workplaces – particularly in marketing, where employees are the least likely, compared to other job functions, to say that people from all backgrounds feel included at their company.

Conformity and “culture fits”: Creative and technological industries tend to greatly emphasize internal culture. “Cultural fit” is often an important factor in the creative industry’s hiring practices,²³ and it often creates an inclination to hire talent that fits with the majority while “sidelining” other groups, particularly “people of color.”²⁴ Diverse employees go through the process of identity negotiation and code-switching to help others and themselves feel more comfortable in the workplace.

Boys’ club culture and the creative department: Within many advertising creative departments, the “heart of the agency,”²⁵ a boys’ club mentality still permeates from the *Mad Men* era. Advertising and marketing men tend to form networks and relationships with other men who are similar to themselves, largely leaving out diverse and historically excluded voices.

Tokenism and the “diversity hire”: Diverse people are often expected to take on additional DE&I responsibilities outside of their normal job without an increase in pay. After George Floyd’s death and the subsequent protests, many Black people found themselves inundated with requests for advice, ideas, and help. Many diverse employees may feel an inner struggle on how much they should be involved.

Job hopping and freelance: Marketing employees have the shortest tenure of any profession in the business world, just 2.6 years on average.²⁶ It’s common for historically excluded people to switch jobs in advertising to get a promotion. Advertising-related industries also see a prevalence of freelancing.

²² [Monllos, K. \(2020, June 25\). ‘Almost as if racism can be forgiven’: Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.](#)

²³ [Boulton, C. \(2020, July 18\). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.](#)

²⁴ [Dzhanova, Y. \(2021, April 6\). Facebook did not hire Black employees because they were not a ‘culture fit,’ report says. Business Insider.](#)

²⁵ [Monllos, K. \(2020, December 22\). ‘There’s a lot of posturing’: Confessions of a Black copywriter on agencies’ sluggish response to fix diversity, equity, and inclusion. Digiday.](#)

²⁶ [Sweezy, M. \(2017, November 1\). Creative capital – not creativity – is what your brand is missing. Ad Age.](#)

Potential solutions

“Rather than expecting individuals to fit into a set ‘company culture,’ companies should focus on building a culture that honors its employees’ unique differences as strengths.”²⁷ In a boys’ club environment, it is essential to break the culture of sameness and prove the value-in-diversity hypothesis to majority males.

- **Prove:** Convince the majority culture that there is value in diversity, particularly diverse leadership. Build the competence and confidence in majority males to openly discuss DE&I.
- **Personalize to change-makers:** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to fostering the inclusion and retention of diverse employees. Identify key change-makers, and tailor your approach to each role and personality type.

4. Psychologically unsafe work environments create unhealthy workplaces

Stress in the workplace today: Ethnic minorities reported higher levels of workplace burnout throughout 2020 compared to white Americans.²⁸ Nearly 2 million working women are considering leaving the workforce and putting a hold on their career goals due to pandemic-related challenges like burnout, financial insecurity, and balancing household labor and childcare with workplace demands.²⁹ Women of color, especially Black women, are facing even more challenges. Their communities are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and they are dealing with racial violence, grief, and loss.

Hierarchical, fast-paced, competitive, and demanding: Marketers were the job function most likely to disagree that they feel safe at work physically, mentally, and emotionally.³⁰ In one study, women who left agency life were politically savvy but simply less willing to participate in agency politics.³¹

Psychological safety: It is often women (especially women of color) who do not feel safe in their workplace. “The virtual environment has worsened the safety problem. Of the female business leaders who responded to a recent survey, nearly half said women faced difficulty in speaking up in virtual meetings.”³²

²⁸ Hue (2021). [A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

²⁹ Coury, S., Huang, J., Kumar, A., Prince, S., Krivkovich, A., & Yee, L. (2020, September 30). [Women in the workplace 2020. McKinsey & Company.](#)

³⁰ Hue (2021). [A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

³¹ Mallia, K. L. (2009). Rare birds: Why so few women become ad agency creative directors. *Advertising & Society Review*, 10(3).

³² [Tulshyan, R. \(2021, March 15\). Why is it so hard to speak up at work? The New York Times.](#)

Speaking out, retaliation, and the “race card”: Forty percent of marketing employees have felt unable to speak out about discrimination they’ve witnessed or experienced based on their ethnicity.³³ Racially diverse employees are often scared to “speak up because they feel they will be labeled as playing the race card.”³⁴

Sponsorship, mentorship, and access: The access that diverse and historically excluded employees have to more senior employees can affect their ability to move their careers forward. Sponsorship is typically hard to track, because it is completely informal. “[Seventy-one percent] of executives have protégés whose gender and race match their own.”³⁵ Many women underestimate the importance of sponsorship and fail to seek it out. Black women, in particular, are much less likely than their colleagues to have a work sponsor.

Potential solutions

To create psychologically safe environments, agencies must integrate inclusivity at every possible juncture.

This includes:

- **Integrate:** Foster inclusion in all aspects of the employee experience, from day-to-day interactions to institutional policies.
- **Sponsor:** Create, fund, and promote a formal sponsorship program with clear expectations, policies, and goals.

³³ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

³⁴ [Joseph, S. \(2019, July 8\). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.](#)

³⁵ [Center for Talent Innovation. \(2019\). The sponsor dividend.](#)

5. Lack of investment signals a lack of dedication

Fair compensation: Advertising salaries traditionally have been kept under wraps, with the only up-to-date systematic recording of compensation occurring in informal public Google spreadsheets like Real Agency Salaries.³⁶ Yet compensation is a major factor in why employees leave.

Sidelined DE&I: Many companies relegate DE&I programs to a chief diversity officer vs. integrating diversity and inclusion into their teams. Majority males often are fearful of openly discussing DE&I, can't find the time to prioritize it in their work, or don't prioritize these efforts because they aren't affected.

These five macro factors organize some of the most prominent and distinctive elements of the industry that impact the inclusion and retention of historically excluded employees. Greater knowledge of these factors can help industry leaders filter their DE&I efforts to have a greater impact by addressing root causes.

Potential solutions

DE&I experts say to invest not only in DE&I initiatives but also in diverse employees and their families to make work more sustainable and inclusive for all.

- **Reimagine:** Reconsider all aspects of what DE&I could be at your organization.
- **Invest:** Invest in your efforts, including collaborative industry efforts and the needs of your employees and their families.

INTRODUCTION

Much attention has been given in recent years to the lack of diversity in creative industries like advertising and related fields. Despite years of discussion, studies like the 2006 New York City Human Rights Commission on the advertising industry,³⁷ and social movements like the Madison Avenue Project,³⁸ #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and #StopAAPIHate, only 6.6% of the advertising-related workforce is Black and only 8% is Hispanic – compared to the total labor force at 12% Black and 18% Hispanic.³⁹

In fact, marketing employees report the highest level of workplace discrimination compared to other job functions, according to a recent study from Harris and Hue.⁴⁰ Yet marketers are likely to say their employers have made a commitment to build a “more equitable environment for employees of color,” illustrating that their words “may not be matching their actions.”⁴¹

³⁷ [Human rights commission to study advertising industry’s hiring practices. \(2006, June 13\). The New York Times.](#)

³⁸ [Boulton, C. \(2020, July 18\). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.](#)

³⁹ [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. \(2020\). Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2019. U.S. Department of Labor.](#)

⁴⁰ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

⁴¹ [Juang, M. \(2021, March 22\). Marketing jobs report highest level of workplace discrimination, according to new poll. Ad Age.](#)

While efforts have been made to funnel diverse talent into the industry, less attention has been given to job satisfaction, opportunities for advancement, fair compensation, and respectful treatment.^{43, 44, 45} Simply hiring diverse employees is not enough. Without addressing these issues, advertisers “may never fully diversify until they find ways to retain [historically excluded] workers in their ranks.”^{46, 47}

After reviewing literature on factors that impact the inclusion and retention of historically excluded employees in advertising-related fields, we’ve identified five macro factors that have a pronounced effect on the industry – factors that may hold the keys to improving our trajectory toward a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable workforce.

“Right now, it’s in [vogue] to be doing diversity and inclusion initiatives, and I think they need to focus on the inclusion aspect of it. You can hire as many Black people as you want, but if they don’t feel comfortable in the office, what’s the point? In a lot of my experiences, it feels like I’ve been set up to fail.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series⁴²

⁴² [Monllos, K. \(2021, February 4\). ‘Constantly have to defend or prove yourself’: Confessions of a Black PR exec on why agencies need to focus on inclusion. Digiday.](#)

⁴³ [Monllos, K. \(2021, February 23\). ‘Poor track record of growing talent’: Why agencies need to focus on retaining diverse workforce. Digiday.](#)

⁴⁴ [WARC. \(2019, April 30\). How agencies can enhance inclusivity.](#)

⁴⁵ [Riordan, C. M. \(2014, June 5\). Diversity is useless without inclusivity. Harvard Business Review.](#)

⁴⁶ [Hom, P. W., Roberson, L., & Ellis, A. D. \(2008\). Challenging conventional wisdom about who quits: Revelations from corporate America. Journal of Applied Psychology, 93\(1\), 1-34.](#)

⁴⁷ [Miller, L. \(2021, February 17\). The time for diversity in advertising is now. Entrepreneur.](#)

FIVE MACRO FACTORS THAT IMPACT INCLUSION AND RETENTION



Two categories of factors cause employees to leave: pull and push. Pull factors are often external, such as higher-paying jobs and family responsibilities. Push factors are from within the company, including a “perceived disconnect between an employer’s commitment to diversity and the execution of the practices that support that commitment, limited opportunities, lack of role models in senior leadership, unclear career paths, excessive workload due to bureaucratic and management inefficiencies, and lack of respect for personal life.”⁴⁸ In this section, we’ll focus on push factors.

⁴⁸ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

An affirming diversity climate in advertising-related fields can impact retention, job satisfaction, empowerment, and commitment to the organization.^{50, 51} This review of literature has shown that although many publications describe the lack of diversity in the advertising industry, far fewer articles and studies deal with retention. The following are prominent factors that impact retention and inclusion, and existing recommendations related to those factors.

A climate in which “diversity is seen as valuable and members of all demographic groups have the opportunity to reach full potential. Further, members of different sociocultural backgrounds are represented in all levels of the organization and have equal access to formal as well as informal social circles. Rather than expecting minorities to conform to a dominant organizational culture, members of multicultural organizations have a mutual appreciation for different cultures such that customs and values of diverse demographic groups shape the work environment.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ [Wolfson, N., Kraiger, K., & Finkelstein, L. \(2011\). The relationship between diversity climate perceptions and workplace attitudes. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 14\(3\), 161-176.](#)

⁵⁰ [McKay, P. F., Avery, D. R., Tonidandel, S., Morris, M. A., Hernandez, M., & Hebl, M. R. \(2007\). Racial differences in employee retention: Are diversity climate perceptions the key? *Personnel Psychology*, 60\(1\), 35-62.](#)

⁵¹ [Wolfson, N., Kraiger, K., & Finkelstein, L. \(2011\). The relationship between diversity climate perceptions and workplace attitudes. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 14\(3\), 161-176.](#)

FIVE MACRO FACTORS THAT IMPACT INCLUSION AND RETENTION

1. Subjectivity and ambiguity in creative industries breed bias

A spectrum of bias: microaggressions, discrimination, harassment, and racism

As in most industries, diverse employees in advertising experience a spectrum of bias, both unconscious and conscious. This includes nuanced discrimination such as racial discrimination, color discrimination, disability discrimination, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual harassment, age discrimination (ageism), national origin, sex discrimination, pregnancy or status as a parent discrimination, retaliation discrimination, and religious discrimination.

Microaggression is particularly prominent among marketers.⁵² Microaggression is “implicit biases coming to life in everyday interactions.”⁵³ There are three types: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Racial microaggressions have been shown to be especially harmful in work and educational settings, correlating with higher levels of depression and trauma.⁵⁴ Journalists posit that in advertising, microaggressions “exist daily” as “examples of the inherent bias in the culture of agencies built from decades of white privilege.”⁵⁵ For Black women in advertising, “the microaggression can feel tenfold.”⁵⁶ For this reason, many Black women are opting to work from home, where they feel safer, to escape “workplace racism.”⁵⁷

⁵² Hue (2021). [A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

⁵³ Taylor, R. (2020, September 3). [Microaggressions are blocking your agency's diversity and inclusion efforts. Campaign.](#)

⁵⁴ Smith, A. (2020, June 11). [What to know about microaggressions. Medical News Today.](#)

⁵⁵ Taylor, R. (2020, September 3). [Microaggressions are blocking your agency's diversity and inclusion efforts. Campaign.](#)

⁵⁶ Rittenhouse, L. (2020, June 19). [Black professionals describe agencies as hotbeds for racism and microaggression. Ad Age.](#)

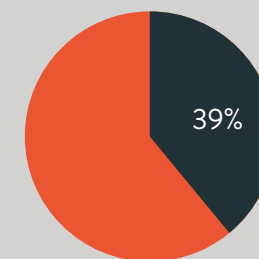
⁵⁷ Davis, D. -M. (2021, July 2). [Some Black women feel safer working from home and are opting out of office life to escape workplace racism. Business Insider.](#)

Although it is illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person’s race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, transgender status, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability, or genetic information,⁵⁸ discrimination still exists in the advertising industry. “According to Digiday Research, 39% of agency professionals have experienced discrimination,” and one-fifth of employees said it was racially related.⁵⁹ In another study, 42% of marketing employees reported suffering “financial or economic hardship due to their ethnicity,” and 38% reported experiencing job loss due to their ethnicity.⁶⁰

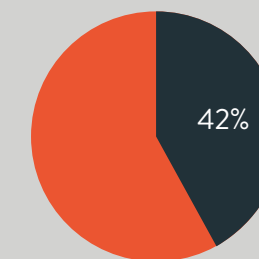
Not until the 2020 *Bostock v. Clayton County* decision did the Supreme Court decide that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act regarding “employment discrimination based on ... sex” also included sexual orientation.⁶¹

While the *Bostock v. Clayton* decision has provided federal employment protections, there are still gaps for LGBTQ+ Americans, including differences in healthcare benefits, parental leave, and different rules for businesses that have fewer than 15 employees or are religious organizations.⁶² Over half of LGBTQ+ workers say they’ve heard lesbian or gay jokes. Transgender workers experience different types of harassment than LGBTQ+ workers, including bathroom accessibility, being deliberately referred to by incorrect pronouns, and having to tolerate inappropriate questions, which can lead to employee disengagement and avoidance.”⁶³

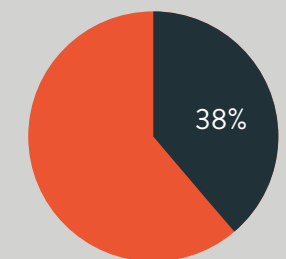
ADVERTISERS WHO HAVE...



EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION



SUFFERED FINANCIAL OR ECONOMIC HARDSHIP DUE TO ETHNICITY



EXPERIENCED JOB LOSS DUE TO ETHNICITY

⁵⁸ [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Overview.](#)

⁵⁹ [Joseph, S. \(2019, March 11\). 'I became the black poster girl': Racism remains an issue within agencies. Digiday.](#)

⁶⁰ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

⁶¹ [Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, 17 U.S. 1618 \(2020\).](#)

⁶² [The Associated Press \(2020, June 18\). Even with ruling, workplace still unequal for LGBTQ workers. NBC News.](#)

⁶³ [Catalyst. \(2021, June 1\). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender workplace issues \(quick take\).](#)

“57% of women report that they’ve experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, from hearing sexist jokes to being touched in an inappropriate way.” Men and women differ when asked about the prevalence of harassment and who pays higher consequences.⁶⁴

More than seven in ten Asian Americans in advertising and marketing report encountering anti-Asian bias since the pandemic began. On top of this, Asian Americans “by nature tend not to speak up about bias.” One agency diversity and engagement lead remarked, “We’re often taught to keep our head down, work hard, and do our best to earn acceptance in proximity to whiteness.”⁶⁵

In a recent survey by Edelman, 58% of Asian Americans said racism at work has damaged their relationship with their employer, up 13 points since August 2020.⁶⁶ The model minority myth has perpetuated a stereotype of Asian workers

as “prosperous and not requiring assistance” and “good workers, but not assertive enough to be leaders,” along with assumptions about technical skill sets.^{67, 68} As one copywriter said, “Asians do not face the same biases as other people of color in advertising. We face different challenges, and that includes a climate where many of us feel invisible.”⁶⁹

Ableism is often left out of the discussion, but in the U.S., one in four adults has some kind of visible or invisible disability. Differently abled individuals report facing stereotypes, microaggressions, hurtful assumptions, and outright discrimination in advancement.⁷⁰ COVID-19 may have opened up more conversation on accessibility. Many companies have historically avoided flexible working options due to the expense, but the pandemic has upended this notion.⁷¹

⁶⁴ [Lean In. \(2019\). Working relationships in the #MeToo era.](#)

⁶⁵ [O’Hara, M. E. \(2020, April 13\). Poll of Asian American ad pros shows majority have encountered pandemic bias. Adweek.](#)

⁶⁶ [Agovino, T. \(2021, June 19\). Asian-Americans seek more respect, authority in the workplace. SHRM.](#)

⁶⁷ [Chen, T. P. \(2021, April 19\). Asian-American professionals push for visibility at work. The Wall Street Journal.](#)

⁶⁸ [Liu, J. \(2021, May 3\). How the model minority myth holds Asian Americans back at work – and what companies should do. CNBC.](#)

⁶⁹ [Josephy, A., & Ad Age Studio 30 \(2021, April 20\). AAPI voices speak out against hate. Ad Age.](#)

⁷⁰ [Slattery, A., & Castle, B. \(2021, February 5\). Ableism in the workplace: what it is & how to combat it. In Her Sight.](#)

⁷¹ [Costa, M. \(2021, March 9\). ‘It’s a business risk to omit’: Firms slowly start to prioritize accessible workforces in their diversity goals. Digiday.](#)

Subjectivity of creative development

Creative development could be considered an “ideal space” to examine bias because of the “ambiguity involved in creative evaluation.” The ambiguity of judging creativity generates “uncertainty about whether negative evaluations were due to gender or ability.”⁷² Compounding this subjectivity, “women are more likely to hold back than men if they feel that what they say isn’t rooted in fact.”⁷³

There may also be evidence that digital agencies foster a more inclusive environment. Research from Mallia and Windels in 2011 indicated that women were more likely to have a positive workplace experience at digital agencies vs. traditional agencies due to more functional diversity of skill sets, a more collaborative culture, and organizational norms that encourage work-life balance.⁷⁴

Perhaps the decreased ambiguity around digital metrics also plays a role.

Also, people at independent agencies are happier and more likely to view their agencies as a positive place to work than those at holding company-owned agencies. They are also less likely to be searching for a new job opportunity. People at creative agencies were the most likely to perceive a higher risk of losing their job than people at integrated or media agencies.⁷⁵

⁷² Windels, K., & Lee, W. (2012). The construction of gender and creativity in advertising creative departments. *Gender in Management*, 27(8), 502-519.

⁷³ [Tulshyan, R. \(2021, March 15\). Why is it so hard to speak up at work? The New York Times.](#)

⁷⁴ [Mallia, K. L., & Windels, K. \(2011\). Will changing media change the world? An exploratory investigation of the impact of digital advertising on opportunities for creative women. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 11\(2\).](#)

⁷⁵ [Digiday \(2019, Spring\). Agency culture and employment report.](#)

Ill-defined criteria for advancement

One researcher describes advancement in advertising as “loose and subjective.”⁷⁶ Issues of career mobility or growth disproportionately impact BIPOC marketers. Marketers are less likely to say their employer has documentation on pathways to advance compared to other job functions.⁷⁷ Succession plans to find and develop future leaders are uncommon in agencies despite their high turnover. The criteria for advancement are less defined, perhaps due to the subjectivity and unpredictability of advertising itself.

Types of feedback as advancement hindrances

One obstacle to female advancement may be the type of feedback they receive. “Women are systematically less likely to receive specific feedback tied to outcomes, both when they receive praise and when the feedback is developmental. In other words, men are offered a clearer picture of what

they are doing well and more-specific guidance of what is needed to get to the next level.” Feedback also seems to be tied heavily to communication style when it is given to women. Women are told to soften their tone or that they are “too aggressive” far more often than men are. Feedback that doesn’t tie to specific business contributions makes it more difficult for people to advocate for women’s advancement. There is also a “protective hesitation” where feedback is avoided for fear of upsetting the recipient. This severely hinders advancement.⁷⁸

Anecdotally, Black advertising employees recount seeing white males promoted all around them, but when they prompted the conversation of what it would take to be promoted, they were “never given any ‘concrete’ steps or guidance from leadership.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Boulton, C. (2020, July 18). [Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white.](#) NBC News.

⁷⁷ Hue (2021). [A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued.](#) The Harris Poll.

⁷⁸ Correll, S. J., & Simard, C. (2016, April 29). [Research: Vague feedback is holding women back.](#) Harvard Business Review.

⁷⁹ Rittenhouse, L. (2020, June 19). [Black professionals describe agencies as hotbeds for racism and microaggression.](#) Ad Age.

Lack of diverse leader representation

Over half of marketers (52%) have changed career direction or industry due to issues of mobility and/or career growth opportunities.⁸⁰ These high-level attrition rates are not unwarranted: “For every 100 men [in the U.S.] who receive their first promotion from entry level to manager, only 79 women receive that same promotion. For Black women, that number is 60.”⁸¹ In fact, Black employees are “leaving their jobs more often than their white counterparts at almost all levels.” “Black employees make up 12% of entry-level employees (such as account associates, software engineers, and paralegals)” but “just 7% of managers. Across the senior manager, vice president, and senior vice president levels, Black representation holds steady at 4% to 5% ... This broken rung and higher-than-expected attrition rates in the pipeline significantly limit representation at subsequent levels of the company.” Black employees are also 41% less likely

to view promotions as fair than their white counterparts at the same company.⁸²

Similarly, a third of Native Americans say they have experienced discrimination in advancement or equal pay.⁸³

“From an early point in my career, I knew I was going to have to work twice as hard as most of my colleagues and be on my game all the time if I wanted to get ahead. People tend to hire and promote people who make them feel comfortable.”

-Digiday “Confessions” series⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Hue (2021). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.

⁸¹ Dixon-Fyle, S., Dolan, K., Hunt, V., & Prince, S. (2020, May 19). Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. McKinsey & Company.

⁸² Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. (2021, February 21). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.

⁸³ Brewer, G.L. (2017, November 18). As Native Americans Face Job Discrimination, A Tribe Works To Employ Its Own. NPR Weekend Edition Saturday.

⁸⁴ Joseph, S. (2020, July 8). ‘My white colleagues are looking to me for answers’: Confessions of a Black ad tech exec. Digiday.

The largest minority group in the U.S. is Hispanic/Latinx, yet there is less literature specific to the Latinx experience in advertising compared to Black, AAPI, and female groups. In general, the gap between labor force (17%) and executive representation (4.3%) is wider among Hispanics than any other group. “U.S. Hispanic representation is roughly equal to that of [B]lack executives and somewhat lower than Asian American executives.”⁸⁵

Women make up “40% of the global workforce [but] ... hold only 24% of senior management roles around the world.”⁸⁶ “Only around 4% of companies have more than 40% women on their executive team.”⁸⁷ In one 2020 study of 500 companies, a mere 37 top-level jobs were held by women. This is a record high of 7.4%, but none of these positions were held by Black women.⁸⁸

According to the 2016 McKinsey “Women Matter” study, when women move up in their organizations, it is usually from line to staff jobs, which are “roles requiring focused expertise or assistance rather than responsibility for major projects.” Also, women aren’t handling projects with budgets as large as those of their male counterparts, according to a 2012 study of alumni of top business schools.⁸⁹ Some attribute this to a lack of confidence, but women’s ambitions “are just as high as their male peers.” They “shy away from competing for these jobs” if they’ve been rejected by the prospective employer in the past. This decision is impacted by their perceptions of fairness in the treatment they receive.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Swerzenski, J.D., D.T. Tomaskovic & E. Hoyt (2020, January 22). “Where are the Hispanic executives?” *The Conversation*.

⁸⁶ Brands, R., & Fernandez-Mateo, I. (2017, February 7). Women are less likely to apply for executive roles if they’ve been rejected before. *Harvard Business Review*.

⁸⁷ Dixon-Fyle, S., Dolan, K., Hunt, V., & Prince, S. (2020, May 19). Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. *McKinsey & Company*.

⁸⁸ Smith, S. B. (2021). How a lack of sponsorship keeps black women out of the C-suite. *Harvard Business Review*.

⁸⁹ Ibarra, H. (2019, August 19). A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership. *Harvard Business Review*.

⁹⁰ Brands, R., & Fernandez-Mateo, I. (2017, February 7). Women are less likely to apply for executive roles if they’ve been rejected before. *Harvard Business Review*.

Asian Americans often encounter what author Jane Hyun called the “bamboo ceiling” when it comes to advancement.⁹¹ In one analysis of national workforce data, white-collar Asian American professionals were the “least likely racial group to be promoted into management roles.”⁹² Even in data and ad tech, where there tends to be a large concentration of AAPI employees, there isn’t representation “at the very top.” One agency leader remarked, “Asians are not typically outspoken people, so much of our cultural upbringing doesn’t translate well into how the U.S. traditionally defines leadership.”⁹³ Organizations that value self-promotion rather than systems to proactively find diverse talent “may leave Asian American workers behind.”⁹⁴ Similarly, Latinas may be viewed by managers as “less hungry” or qualified for advancement due to collectivistic tendencies to “be selfless, [be] generous, and respect authority figures.”⁹⁵

“The lack of company role models who are members of their racial and ethnic group” can be a barrier to retention.⁹⁶ In a 2019 study from the Center for Talent Innovation, 19% of Black employees didn’t see someone of their own race making it to a management-level position, compared to 3% of whites.⁹⁷ “Seventy-five percent [of Black Americans] agree that seeing others who look like them or are from the same racial/ethnic background as them in the workplace motivates them, compared to only 57% of white Americans and 67% of Hispanic Americans.” For tenured employees of color, representation matters more.⁹⁸

⁹¹ [Agovino, T. \(2021, June 19\). Asian-Americans seek more respect, authority in the workplace. SHRM.](#)

⁹² [Liu, J. \(2021, May 3\). How the model minority myth holds Asian Americans back at work – and what companies should do. CNBC.](#)

⁹³ [Josephy, A. & Ad Age Studio 30 \(2021, April 20\). AAPI voices speak out against hate. Ad Age.](#)

⁹⁴ [Liu, J. \(2021, May 3\). How the model minority myth holds Asian Americans back at work – and what companies should do. CNBC.](#)

⁹⁵ [Network of Executive Women. \(2020, May 18\). Study sheds new light on corporate America’s Latina leadership crisis. PR Newswire.](#)

⁹⁶ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

⁹⁷ [Center for Talent Innovation. \(2019\). The sponsor dividend.](#)

⁹⁸ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

Absence of objective data in the industry

On top of the ambiguity of creative and advancement decision-making, there is a tremendous lack of industry-wide data as it relates to diversity and wage gaps. “More data is needed to hold ad agencies accountable and yet ... as of [2019], neither major industry group – not the 4A’s nor the American Advertising Federation” – tracked diversity statistics.⁹⁹ The 4A’s did release the first Advertising Industry Diversity Survey in late 2020, admittedly the first “in many years.”^{100, 101} In 2021, several organizations began census-like studies, including the Global DEI Census by the World Federation of Advertising.¹⁰²

Potential solutions

What do DE&I experts recommend? Where there is a lack of information, subjectivity, or ambiguity, seek to fill this void with research, data, definition, and accountability.

Listen: Use research, data, partners, and formal conversations to benchmark and better understand your current state of DE&I from diverse perspectives. “Listen to employees and do what they ask, instead of what management ‘feels’ is right.”¹⁰³

Employ the learning-effectiveness paradigm: Companies must listen to diverse employees, “tapping into their identity-related knowledge and experiences as resources for learning.”¹⁰⁴ If your organization has employee resource groups (ERGs), open a dialogue with these groups. If you don’t have ERGs, “create, fund, and support” these groups.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Boulton, C. (2020, July 18). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.

¹⁰⁰ Miranda H. (2020, December 10). Advertising industry diversity survey. 4A’s.

¹⁰¹ 4A’s (2020, June 17). It’s time to do what matters.

¹⁰² World Federation of Advertisers. (2021). The global DEI census.

¹⁰³ Wright, K. D., & Taylor, C. (2021, June 23). The primary learning about DE&I from the past year: Impact trumps intention. WARC.

¹⁰⁴ Ely, R. J., & Thomas, D. A. (2020, November - December). Getting serious about diversity: Enough already with the business case. Harvard Business Review.

¹⁰⁵ Watson, I. (2020, June 10). Black ad professionals call on agency leaders to take urgent action on racism. The Drum.

Discuss: “Create a voluntary space for a discussion. Some employees may want to talk about how they are feeling, while others may not.” “An Asian American healthcare employee mentioned that he didn’t attend his company’s discussion, but knowing that it was there made him feel like the company took racial disparities seriously.”

Be available: “Support can come in many forms, whether it’s letting the team know that your door is open, allowing people to take time off to process their feelings, or simply giving them their space. ... This will also avoid singling out or tokenizing team members based on their race.”¹⁰⁶

Conduct an environmental scan: “Understand your company’s current state of DE&I, taking into account industry and geographic contexts.”¹⁰⁷ “Environmental scans should be initiated by leadership (particularly as a public recognition of concerns raised by stakeholders), conducted by

a representative group (at least three to five persons, including at least two members who would be impacted directly by the work, and those having research/data analysis skills), analyzed by institutional research partners, and shared by institutional communication partners. This ensures wide knowledge, buy-in, and full disclosure.”¹⁰⁸

Research and benchmark progress: “Use internal surveys, focus groups, and interviews to document, by subgroup, the experiences and perceptions of women and men of color.”¹⁰⁹

Define: Publicly define your brand’s stance on diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity (DIRE) to foster transparency and accountability.

Define your internal brand as it relates to inclusivity: “Establishing an internal brand has a positive effect on brand orientation, which has a positive impact

¹⁰⁶ [Gupta, S. \(2021, April 6\). What your Asian employees need right now. Harvard Business Review.](#)

¹⁰⁷ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.](#)

¹⁰⁸ [Gentle-Genitty, C., Merritt, B., & Kimble-Hill, A. C. \(2021, February 23\). A model for crafting diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity \(DIRE\) policy statements toward catalyzing organizational change. ACS Central Science, 7\(3\), 383-391.](#)

¹⁰⁹ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

on brand attitudes, namely brand commitment and brand identification. Such attitudes in turn are positively related to employee retention.”¹¹⁰

Commit: “Define your company’s aspiration for addressing racial equity – including steps to address structural barriers”¹¹¹ and long-term plans for making a “greater change in society.”¹¹²

Create your brand’s DIRE statements: “DIRE policy statements enable organizations to be transparent with their work on inclusion. When made public, these statements also allow for intentional internal and external communications around the organization’s core values and organizational metrics for success. ... The DIRE policy statement is often eight sentences organized into one cohesive paragraph. There are four distinct parts: (1)

Purpose (one sentence); (2) Position and methodology (three sentences); (3) Action and measurement (two sentences); and (4) Scope and reach (two sentences).”¹¹³

Move beyond commitment to action: Consider your changes in four system-based levels, which are practices, processes, policies, and programs.

Grow: Evolve your approach as you learn, scorecard your progress against other companies, and use a formalized succession plan.

“Pursue a path to progress, not perfection”¹¹⁴: “Have the courage to set ambitious goals, take risks, and make mistakes along the way.”¹¹⁵

“Reinforce what works – and reimagine what doesn’t.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ [Dechawatanapaisal, D. \(2018, April 3\). Employee retention: The effects of internal branding and brand attitudes in sales organizations. *Personnel Review*, 47\(3\), 675-693.](#)

¹¹¹ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. *McKinsey & Company*.](#)

¹¹² [Gupta, S. \(2021, April 6\). What your Asian employees need right now. *Harvard Business Review*.](#)

¹¹³ [Gentle-Genitty, C., Merritt, B., & Kimble-Hill, A. C. \(2021, February 23\). A model for crafting diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity \(DIRE\) policy statements toward catalyzing organizational change. *ACS Central Science*, 7\(3\), 383-391.](#)

¹¹⁴ [Wright, K. D., & Taylor, C. \(2021, June 23\). The primary learning about DE&I from the past year: Impact trumps intention. *WARC*.](#)

¹¹⁵ [Hall, J. \(2021, January\). Diversity, inclusion and building a positive culture in the marketing team. *WARC*.](#)

¹¹⁶ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. *McKinsey & Company*.](#)

Think short- and long-term: “Couple short-term strategies with longer-term changes to promote healthier teams.”

Create a formalized succession plan: “Succession planning should reflect the way an organization needs to change in order to achieve its strategic goals.”

“Best-practices companies hold someone or a team responsible for achieving the goals of the succession planning program.”

“Define and communicate clearly the criteria, process, and expectations for upward mobility. Review them with the candidates. Taking the time to think through and communicate clear expectations is vital to ensuring the most qualified candidates from a diverse pool are included in succession planning.”

“Best-practices companies that consider self-nomination procedures and systems encourage women and people of color to advance themselves and their interests.”¹¹⁷ Yet keep in mind that organizations that only reward self-promotion, rather than also having a system in place to proactively nurture diverse talent, may leave some less “typically outspoken” Asian American workers behind.¹¹⁸

“The succession plan must become a part of the company’s culture. Workshops should be held for managers across all levels of the company to understand why the company is undertaking this process, how it will work, and what the desired outcome will be.”¹¹⁹

Anticipate a new generation of leaders: “There’s an extreme prejudice in agencies that will be hard to shake until this generation of leaders retires.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

¹¹⁸ [Liu, J. \(2021, May 3\). How the model minority myth holds Asian Americans back at work – and what companies should do. CNBC.](#)

¹¹⁹ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

¹²⁰ [Joseph, S. \(2020, June 12\). ‘I don’t want to rock the boat – even now’: Confessions of a Black media agency director. Digiday.](#)

Potential solutions in action

“In the aftermath of Floyd’s death, agencies went on listening tours. IPG hosted 17 discussions for Black and Brown communities and allies throughout 2020, and later incorporated sessions for Asian and Pacific Islander communities following the widely reported hate crimes committed against those groups across the U.S.”¹²¹

For Publicis, a new networking-focused Talent Advancement Program will allow the agency to source talent across various agencies to “more efficiently and effectively provide career advancement.”¹²²

¹²¹ [Poggi, J. \(2021, July 6\). How ad agencies are living up to diversity promises – and where they fall short. Ad Age.](#)

¹²² [Smiley, M \(2020, July 27\). Omnicom releases US workforce diversity data as part of broader action plan. Adweek.](#)

FIVE MACRO FACTORS THAT IMPACT INCLUSION AND RETENTION

2. Consumer- and client-facing nature of the industry encourages performativity



Diversity theater: from pledges to promises

From “Call for Change” to “Commit to Change,”^{124, 125, 126} there is no shortage of pledges, promises, and commitments made by advertising companies. When companies do craft statements, most are created as “immediate response or position statements and designed to mitigate the blame that could be negatively attributed to the organization.”¹²⁷ After negative events or press, there may be “token gestures,” but some diverse employees say “it goes back to normal.”¹²⁸

Diversity theater is how a company signals diversity and inclusion values externally, like “PR rituals and bureaucracies,” in comparison to how it treats marginalized employees trying to make a change. The phenomenon of “diversity theater creates a sense of dissonance: Workers have to represent the company

“We’ve heard generations of ‘we can do better’ talk, and nothing changes.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series¹²³

“Agencies don’t see it as an urgent problem until there is a PR scandal.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series¹²⁹

¹²³ Joseph, S. (2020, October 13). ‘Real change will happen when there’s an eight - figure problem for agencies’: Confessions of a creative strategist on taking action on diversity issue. Digiday.

¹²⁴ Watson, I. (2020, June 10). Black ad professionals call on agency leaders to take urgent action on racism. The Drum.

¹²⁵ Smiley, M. (2020, December 21). As agencies grapple with DEI, some lean into learning and mentoring initiatives. Adweek.

¹²⁶ The Drum Reporters. (2021, January 27). Black Lives Matter: Have ad agencies followed through on their promises? The Drum.

¹²⁷ Gentle -Genitty, C., Merritt, B., & Kimble -Hill, A. C. (2021, February 23). A model for crafting diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity (DIRE) policy statements toward catalyzing organizational change. ACS Central Science, 7(3), 383-391.

¹²⁸ Joseph, S. (2019, July 8). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.

¹²⁹ Monllos, K. (2021, February 23). ‘Poor track record of growing talent’: Why agencies need to focus on retaining diverse workforce. Digiday.

publicly while feeling victimized by it privately; they must identify shortcomings but are punished for acting on them.”¹³⁰ As one researcher remarked: “Advertising’s unique ability to persuade by creating the appearance of change through rhetoric, symbols, and events has helped corporations and existing power structures conceal and protect white gains and Black losses behind the scenes for generations.”¹³¹

Emphasis on consumer-facing diversity of brands

Despite advertising’s external impact on the masses, the industry internally remains predominantly white. Some advertising employees feel that the industry does more to foster diversity and inclusion in the work and with clients than within the organization. “[Ads] may only become more inclusive if they’re created and sold by diverse groups of people.”¹³³ As one author noted,

agencies are “all working to convince us how ‘woke’ our favorite brands are, so that we don’t look too hard behind the curtain at how white the people in control of those brands and the messaging around them remain.”¹³⁴

Agencies in particular may often “fall into the habit of analyzing different groups of people through a fog of preconceived ideas,” looking at different ethnic and racial groups as one homogeneous entity,¹³⁵ which can affect the stereotypes they project in interpersonal workplace relationships.

“The agency was progressive in how they tackled briefs, but that didn’t stretch to their own people.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series¹³²

¹³⁰ [Fussell, S. \(2021, March 8\). Black tech employees rebel against ‘diversity theater.’ WIRED.](#)

¹³¹ [Boulton, C. \(2020, July 18\). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.](#)

¹³² [Joseph, S. \(2018, November 16\). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.](#)

¹³³ [Williams, S. \(2019, July 25\). Improving diversity and inclusion in advertising. Forbes.](#)

¹³⁴ [Boulton, C. \(2020, July 18\). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.](#)

¹³⁵ [Mander, J. \(2021\). Why it’s important to approach data without biased assumptions. WARC.](#)

It's natural for marketers and advertisers to think of the consumer or client first, which may be why there's no shortage of multicultural campaigns, hashtag activism, inclusive marketing programs, and more. But more DE&I leaders are imploring agencies to start internally.¹³⁶

Traditionally segregated industry

Does the existence of multicultural agencies give traditional agencies an excuse for not diversifying? Multicultural agencies are typically made up of diverse people, and general-market agencies that are predominantly white will “tap into multicultural agencies for help, because they don't really have the skill set or the knowledge of that audience group to provide what they need to the client as far as results go.”^{137,138} One marketer commented, “The truth is, it's going to take time for general-market agencies to meet their diversity goals. Many of them still don't have environments that are welcoming and set up for diverse talent to be successful.”¹³⁹

This segregation of industry goes back as far as the 1960s and 1970s, when Black advertisers “frustrated by explicit race discrimination at large white-owned agencies” opened their own shops as a source for “cultural insight into the lives of [B]lack consumers.” This act “soon turned to detour as it unwittingly provided white advertisers and agencies with a rationale for not employing [B]lacks to market to white consumers (aka: the ‘general market’) and, instead, reseggregated the industry by relegating [B]lack employees to [B]lack accounts where they would market to their ‘own’ people with much smaller budgets.”¹⁴⁰ Such a divide still exists in many ways today. As one marketer said, “Multicultural agencies deserve the same consideration and respect as general-market agencies, as our work and ability to scale is not different – it's our audience expertise and approach that's unique. ... It's a serious blow against progress when the multicultural agency is asked to report to the general-market agency instead of having a direct line of communication to the client.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ [Heath, T. \(2021, March 24\). What it means today for brands to take a stand. SmartBrief.](#)

¹³⁷ [Kaplan, I. \(2019, July 3\). Confessions of a multicultural agency exec: ‘You can't define a group of people by data.’ Digiday.](#)

¹³⁸ [Diaz, E. \(2019, August 30\). What are the benefits of hiring a multicultural marketing agency? LinkedIn.](#)

¹³⁹ [Zelaya, I. \(2020, July 15\). Why hiring multicultural agencies is good business for brands that want diverse fans. Adweek.](#)

¹⁴⁰ [Boulton, C. \(2015\). Under the cloak of whiteness: A circuit of culture analysis of opportunity hoarding & colour-blind racism inside US advertising internship programs. Bepress and University of Tampa.](#)

¹⁴¹ [Zelaya, I. \(2020, July 15\). Why hiring multicultural agencies is good business for brands that want diverse fans. Adweek.](#)

Traditionally, advertising accounts were often seen as being either “masculine” or “feminine.” Beer, car, and power tool accounts were generally reserved for men, whereas tampon accounts were typically designated for women.¹⁴² In Weisberg & Robbs’ 1997 study, almost half the women believed their creative directors felt more comfortable with men and seemed to trust them more easily. “And that, many of them felt, caused the men to receive a larger percentage of good assignments.”¹⁴³ Today, diverse employees get tokenized onto accounts and into roles that fit with stereotypes of their identity, and when they are part of high-profile accounts or pitches, they often get sidelined: “When we won it, I expected to be promoted. Instead, the promotion went to the white woman who presented my plan but hadn’t worked on it.”¹⁴⁴

Client-pleasing accountability

Some employees believe that movements like #MeToo or Black Lives Matter are addressed in the advertising industry only “when there is a commercial benefit or they can be exploited” or monetized for “commercial gain.”¹⁴⁵ Social commentator Roxane Gay said, “When advertisers ignore diversity, it is because they don’t think the lives of others matter.”¹⁴⁶ There is not enough of a financial imperative for those lives to matter.” One employee tells the story of a senior executive who only prioritized D&I meetings “when a client would ask for our D&I stats.”¹⁴⁷ Some advertising professionals think the brands that agencies work for just “want to be able to pat themselves on the back, change their Instagram profile picture, and think they’re done.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² Broyles, S. J., & Grow, J. (2008, January). Creative women in advertising agencies: Why so few “babes in boyland”? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 25(1), 4-6.

¹⁴³ Weisberg, L., & Robbs, B. (1997). Creative department still boys’ playground,” *Advertising Age*, 68, 28.

¹⁴⁴ [Joseph, S. \(2020, June 12\). ‘I don’t want to rock the boat – even now’: Confessions of a Black media agency director. Digiday.](#)

¹⁴⁵ [Joseph, S. \(2021, March 5\). ‘There’s always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month’: Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. Digiday.](#)

¹⁴⁶ [Miller, L. \(2021, February 17\). The time for diversity in advertising is now. Entrepreneur.](#)

¹⁴⁷ [Joseph, S. \(2021, March 5\). ‘There’s always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month’: Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. Digiday.](#)

¹⁴⁸ [Monillos, K. \(2020, June 2\). ‘There isn’t a talent pipeline problem’: Confessions of a black advertising exec. Digiday.](#)

Potential solutions

DE&I experts believe there are ways to use the architecture of the advertising industry to motivate positive change. The press, consumers, industry programs, and clients can be used to keep agencies accountable, but leaders should push beyond external influences to personally influence inclusion in the workforce.

Communicate: Advertisers are skilled communicators, and this should start with their internal audiences.

Acknowledge: When injustices occur in society, acknowledge that what happened is not acceptable and that you support the affected community. Speaking after the wave of anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021, one author recommended that “leaders up and down the chain of command should send a clear and firm message that anti-Asian racism and hate crimes are unacceptable and that they stand in support of the AAPI community.”¹⁴⁹

Center DE&I messages in all internal content: “Justice, equity, inclusion, and diversity should be centered in your internal content and employee data strategy.”

Allow for two-way communication in your digital workplace tools:

“Provide a mechanism for clear communication from leadership while allowing employees to share opinions and thoughts.”¹⁵⁰

Publish: Realize that we can all hold each other to a high standard when we share our knowledge.

Use the press to hold agencies and other companies accountable: The press controls public opinion, and heightened attention to these issues is starting to create change.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Gupta, S. (2021, April 6). What your Asian employees need right now. Harvard Business Review.

¹⁵⁰ Seeley, L. P. (2021, March 15). How your digital workplace design can support psychological safety. CMSWire.

¹⁵¹ Monllos, K. (2020, June 25). ‘Almost as if racism can be forgiven’: Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.

Publish your diversity data: As soon as the industry can start benchmarking its progress, we can better understand how far we have to go.^{152, 153} Inspired by 600 & Rising, the organization that wrote the open letter “A Call for Change,” Agency DE&I has aggregated data about agencies that have made a public commitment to change and provide diversity data. 378 agencies are included in the tracker, but only 64 have published any DE&I data.¹⁵⁴

Scorecard your progress: Profile current retention levels and develop a scorecard (trends and projections): senior level, upward mobility, attrition reality and potential, climate survey results.¹⁵⁵ “Track progress to increase accountability – and share successes.”¹⁵⁶

Share wage data: Marketing leaders advocate for wage transparency, because employees have the right to discuss salary and wages.¹⁵⁷ One study showed that 23% of marketing managers believe transparency helps close the wage gap, 21% think it creates more trust, 20% believe it boosts recruitment and retention, and 19% believe it increases productivity.¹⁵⁸

“Share best practices on effective programs.”¹⁵⁹
Outside of annual reports, examples of industry best practices can be difficult to find.

¹⁵² [Smiley, M \(2020, July 27\). Omnicom releases US workforce diversity data as part of broader action plan. Adweek.](#)

¹⁵³ [Monllos, K. \(2020, June 25\). ‘Almost as if racism can be forgiven’: Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.](#)

¹⁵⁴ [Agency DEI \(2021\). Agency DEI tracker.](#)

¹⁵⁵ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

¹⁵⁶ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.](#)

¹⁵⁷ [Spencer, J. \(2021, March 25\). Can your employer prohibit you from discussing your salary? Jackson Spencer Law.](#)

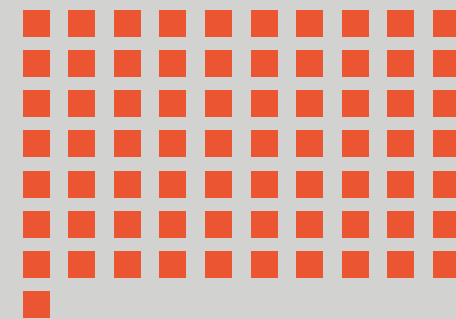
¹⁵⁸ [Valente, J. \(2019, May 10\). Why salary transparency is important – especially for women and diversity. ANA.](#)

¹⁵⁹ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.](#)

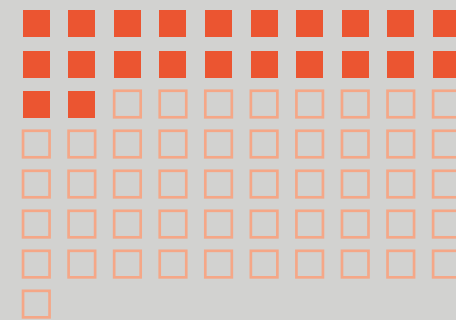
Benchmark against other companies: Understand progress with the Diversity Best Practices Inclusion Index, which provides benchmarks across “multiple dimensions of diversity.”¹⁶⁰

Potential solutions in action

A year after advocacy group Three’s a Crowd launched the “In for 13” initiative to increase the percentage of Black leaders in agencies, only 22 companies remain of the initial 71 agencies who signed up for the pledge.¹⁶¹



AGENCIES THAT INITIALLY PLEDGED TO INCREASE THE PERCENTAGE OF BLACK LEADERS THROUGH THE “IN FOR 13” INITIATIVE

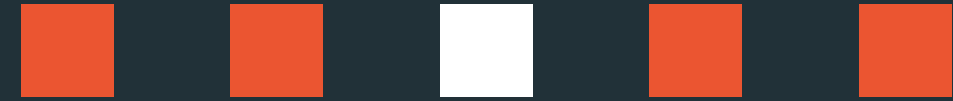


AGENCIES REMAINING AFTER ONE YEAR

¹⁶⁰ [Diversity Best Practices \(2021, January\). DBP inclusion index.](#)

¹⁶¹ [Faw, L. \(2021, July 1\). Why have 49 agencies dropped their DEI pledges? Adweek.](#)

3. “Culture fit” criteria promote homogeneity



Conformity and “culture fits”

Creative and technological industries like advertising, ad tech, media, and communications tend to greatly emphasize internal culture. “Cultural fit” is often an important factor in the creative industry’s hiring practices,¹⁶² and it often creates an inclination to hire talent that fits with the majority while “sidelining” other groups, particularly “people of color.”¹⁶³

Conformity is rewarded, “which is reflected in how people behave, dress, and their mannerisms.” Some young historically excluded executives have had to “act white” to survive.¹⁶⁴ In one series of interviews of Latina executives, most

said they didn’t easily fit into “typical corporate culture” in the U.S.¹⁶⁵ Nearly half (46%) of LGBTQ+ workers in the U.S. are “closeted in the workplace,” which creates a feeling of exhaustion from “concealing their authentic selves.”¹⁶⁶ When historically excluded employees don’t fit into the culture, their point of view can be underappreciated, which leads to them feeling less valued and leaving the agency.¹⁶⁷

“It was clear that if I didn’t fit into it, then I wouldn’t get the job regardless of my actual skills.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series¹⁶⁸

¹⁶² Boulton, C. (2020, July 18). Corporate ads said Black Lives Matter. But the industry creating them is nearly all white. NBC News.

¹⁶³ Dzhanova, Y. (2021, April 6). Facebook did not hire Black employees because they were not a ‘culture fit,’ report says. Business Insider.

¹⁶⁴ Joseph, S. (2019, March 11). ‘I became the black poster girl’: Racism remains an issue within agencies. Digiday.

¹⁶⁵ Network of Executive Women (2020, May 18). Study sheds new light on corporate America’s Latina leadership crisis. PR Newswire.

¹⁶⁶ Catalyst. (2021, June 1). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender workplace issues (quick take).

¹⁶⁷ Monillos, K. (2020, June 25). ‘Almost as if racism can be forgiven’: Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.

¹⁶⁸ Joseph, S. (2018, November 16). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.

When it comes to agency mentorship, some Black employees feel that “the few people of color that do mix in those [top-of-the-agency] circles have to conform to behaving in the same way [as white people at the top]. As smart as they are, they really can’t help me.”¹⁶⁹

“What’s sad is, you have to be a certain way and be cool with opinionated cliques when you’re from a minority background, which isn’t for everyone, as people are all brought up differently.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ [Joseph, S. \(2020, June 12\). ‘I don’t want to rock the boat – even now’: Confessions of a Black media agency director. Digiday.](#)

¹⁷⁰ [Joseph, S. \(2019, July 8\). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.](#)

BY THE BOOKS: APPLICABLE ACADEMIC THEORIES

Social identity theory – Theory that an individual’s definition of self is often shaped by their group memberships, which results in a distinguishment of “in groups” and “out groups.”¹⁷¹

Self-categorization theory – Proposes that there is a shift in thinking that occurs where individuals begin to “depersonalize their identities and view themselves (and others) more as representatives of social categories than as unique persons.” When that happens, intergroup differentiation grows, which “motivates people to develop higher levels of trust for, and affective reactions to, members of their in groups, which become manifested as a differential

regard, or even bias, for individuals with whom they share group membership as opposed to those in other social categories.”^{172, 173, 174}

Similarity-attraction paradigm – A type of bias that posits that “people are attracted to, and have an inclination to seek interactions with, those they perceive as similar. Although such perceived similarity may be based on a range of factors, including demographic characteristics, values, and attitudes,¹⁷⁵ the resultant attraction is likely to engender distinctions between in groups and out groups and to influence social interactions between groups.”^{176, 177, 178, 179, 180}

Homophily – The tendency to form network relationships with those who are similar to themselves.¹⁸¹

¹⁷¹ Tajfel, H. (Ed.). (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. Academic Press.

¹⁷² Turner, J. C. (1985). Social categorization and the self-concept: A social cognitive theory of group behavior. E.J. Lawler (ed.), *Advances in Group Processes: Theory and Research*, 2, 77-122. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

¹⁷³ Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. Worchel, S. & Austin, W. G., Eds., *Psychology of Intergroup Relation*, 7-24. Hall Publishers, Chicago.

¹⁷⁴ Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.

¹⁷⁵ Berscheid, E. (1985). Compatibility, interdependence, and emotion. Ickes W. (Ed.), *Compatible and incompatible relationships*. Springer Series in Social Psychology.

¹⁷⁶ Byrne, D. E. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. Academic Press.

¹⁷⁷ Berscheid, E., & Walster, E.H. (1978). *Interpersonal attraction*. Addison-Wesley.

¹⁷⁸ Min, J. (2017, July 25). [How AI can stop unconscious bias in recruiting](#). TalentCulture.

¹⁷⁹ Roberson, Q. M. (2019). Diversity in the workplace: A review, synthesis, and future research agenda. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 6, 69-88.

¹⁸⁰ Smith, S. B. (2021). [How a lack of sponsorship keeps black women out of the C-suite](#). Harvard Business Review.

¹⁸¹ Ibarra, H. (1992). Homophily and differential returns: Sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37(3), 422-447.

The major problem is inclusion¹⁸²

Diverse and historically excluded groups often feel excluded from majority-white workplaces – particularly in marketing, where employees are the least likely, compared to other job functions, to say that people from all backgrounds feel included at their company.¹⁸³ Inclusion is an undeniably vital part of the DEI trinity, although perhaps less emphasized than diversity. As one consultant defined it, “Diversity is counting numbers; inclusion is making those numbers count.”¹⁸⁴ In a McKinsey survey of technology, financial services, and healthcare industry employees, “while overall sentiment on diversity was 52% positive and 31% negative, sentiment on inclusion was markedly worse at only 29% positive and 61% negative.”¹⁸⁵

Four main dynamics combat inclusivity in the workplace¹⁸⁶:

1. “People gravitate toward people like them.”

Harvard researcher Herminia Ibarra argues that two network mechanisms create and reinforce gender inequalities in the distribution of power among advertising firms: (1) homophily – the tendency to form network relationships with those who are similar to oneself; and (2) one’s ability to convert individual positional resources and attributes into network advantages. Women are more likely to obtain social support and friendship from women, and access to network ties from men. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to form homophilous ties with other men, and access network ties from both men and women. This duality of resources leads men to reap greater network returns relative to women.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² [Monllos, K. \(2020, June 25\). ‘Almost as if racism can be forgiven’: Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.](#)

¹⁸³ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

¹⁸⁴ [Morris, N. \(2021, May 26\). How to action diversity and inclusion in marketing. WARC.](#)

¹⁸⁵ [Dixon-Fyle, S., Dolan, K., Hunt, V., & Prince, S. \(2020, May 19\). Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. McKinsey & Company.](#)

¹⁸⁶ [Riordan, C. M. \(2014, June 5\). Diversity is useless without inclusivity. Harvard Business Review.](#)

¹⁸⁷ [Ibarra, H. \(1992\). Homophily and differential returns: Sex differences in network structure and access in an advertising firm. Administrative Science Quarterly, 37\(3\), 422-447.](#)

Homogeneous teams may feel easier, but research suggests that they are ultimately bad for performance. “Working on diverse teams produces better outcomes precisely because it’s harder.” Also, individuals tend to overestimate the amount of conflict that exists on diverse teams.¹⁸⁹

2. “Subtle biases persist and lead to exclusion.”

People of color are often omitted from high-profile or “high-visibility assignments.” In one interview, a marketing employee reflected on “being excluded from meetings, having my suggestions ignored and job duties ... allocated to other white members of the team who had less experience.”¹⁹⁰ Women in particular “are expected and asked to do thankless tasks – order lunch, handle less-valued clients – more than men, and research shows that doing those tasks slows career development and makes women unhappy at work.”¹⁹¹ Black leaders are more likely to be positioned in functional roles like human resources, corporate social responsibility, and diversity vs. senior profit-and-loss positions.¹⁹²

“My manager had things in common with my coworkers, so she’d talk to them about their lives – if your superior doesn’t see themselves in you or can’t find a way to relate to you, then they distance themselves or ice you out.”

-Digiday “Confessions” series¹⁸⁸

“There have been times throughout my career where I felt I definitely had to ‘play the game’ and make sure other people felt comfortable with me in the room (because of the color of my skin), even if that meant sacrificing my own level of authenticity and comfort.”

-Digiday “Confessions” series¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ [Monllos, K. \(2021, February 4\). ‘Constantly have to defend or prove yourself’: Confessions of a Black PR exec on why agencies need to focus on inclusion. Digiday.](#)

¹⁸⁹ [Rock, D., Grant, H., & Grey, J. \(2016, September 22\). Diverse teams feel less comfortable – and that’s why they perform better. Harvard Business Review.](#)

¹⁹⁰ [Joseph, S. \(2019, July 8\). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.](#)

¹⁹¹ [Bernstein, A., Gallo, A., & Caulfield, E. \(Hosts\). \(2018, September 17\). Let’s do less dead-end work. Women at Work, 2\(1\) \[Audio Podcast\]. Harvard Business Review.](#)

¹⁹² [Korn Ferry. \(2019\). The Black P&L leader: Insights and lessons from senior Black P&L leaders in corporate America.](#)

¹⁹³ [Joseph, S. \(2020, July 8\). ‘My white colleagues are looking to me for answers’: Confessions of a Black ad tech exec. Digiday.](#)

3. “Out-group employees sometimes try to conform.”

The effects of homophilous ties impact many historically excluded groups. Diverse employees go through the process of identity negotiation to help others and themselves feel more comfortable in the workplace. “[O]ne in five African Americans (21%) disagree that they are comfortable being fully themselves at work, compared to 13% of white Americans and 19% of Hispanic Americans.”¹⁹⁵ Latinx workers report “moderating” their appearance, body language, and communication style to fit in with a “traditionally white, male” executive presence; 76% of Latinx workers repress part of their personas at work.¹⁹⁶ For some diverse groups, it results in code-switching, the “process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting.”¹⁹⁷ Black employees report code-switching to make the majority culture feel “comfortable with [their] presence.”¹⁹⁸ For some with invisible minority statuses (e.g., sexual orientation,

“Until the people who run the creative department actually care about it, the diversity conversation isn’t going to move forward.”

-Digiday “Confessions” series¹⁹⁴

disability, religion), identity negotiation might involve stigma management, or choosing how much of their identity to reveal when interacting with others.

4. “Employees from the majority group put up resistance.”

Within many advertising creative departments, a boys’ club mentality still permeates from the *Mad Men* era. “Boys’ club” refers to an environment in which men feel more comfortable working closely and socializing with other men.¹⁹⁹ This mentality particularly pervades the creative department, “the heart of the agency.” Some Black employees say many agencies want to maintain that culture, because “they’ve created legacies off of toxic environments.”²⁰⁰ “It will take a strong external push to get whites in advertising to let go of their power.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁴ Monllos, K. (2020, December 22). ‘There’s a lot of posturing’: Confessions of a Black copywriter on agencies’ sluggish response to fix diversity, equity, and inclusion. [Digiday](#).

¹⁹⁵ Hue. (2021). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. [The Harris Poll](#).

¹⁹⁶ Hewlett, S. A., Allwood, N., & Sherbin, L. (2016, October 11). U.S. Latinos feel they can’t be themselves at work. [Harvard Business Review](#).

¹⁹⁷ Morrison, C. D. (n.d.). Code-switching. In [Encyclopædia Britannica](#).

¹⁹⁸ Monllos, K. (2021, February 4). ‘Constantly have to defend or prove yourself’: Confessions of a Black PR exec on why agencies need to focus on inclusion. [Digiday](#).

¹⁹⁹ Windels, K., & Lee, W. (2007). An exploration into the representation of female creatives in today’s advertising agency. Annual Conference for the American Academy of Advertising, Burlington, VT.

²⁰⁰ Monllos, K. (2020, December 22). ‘There’s a lot of posturing’: Confessions of a Black copywriter on agencies’ sluggish response to fix diversity, equity, and inclusion. [Digiday](#).

²⁰¹ Joseph, S. (2020, October 13). ‘Real change will happen when there’s an eight-figure problem for agencies’: Confessions of a creative strategist on taking action on diversity issue. [Digiday](#).

At the center of a boys' club environment is the majority male (majority race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability). Majority males often are fearful of openly discussing DEI, can't find the time to prioritize it in their work, or don't prioritize these efforts because they aren't affected.

Researchers for years have described the creative departments of agencies as "male fraternities."²⁰² This extends to production, where one Black creative said producers "all look the same."²⁰³

Women find it hard to thrive in this boys' club culture. The consuming nature of the creative job and a macho organizational culture were widely cited as factors that keep women from advancing. For women to succeed in creative departments, they often emulate traditionally male characteristics that are encouraged and rewarded in the ad business.²⁰⁴

Traditionally, and often still today, women who succeed in advertising agencies exhibit typically masculine behaviors. In the seminal piece "Babes in Boyland" from 1997, one woman said, "If you're a girlie-girl with your curly locks and makeup, you won't get as much respect. A lot of women I know downplay their femininity. There's a toughness about the women who are successful in this business."²⁰⁵ In one study, women reported "acting like one of the guys, being a tomboy, or doing guy-ish work."²⁰⁶ They adapted to organizational politics and understood the power of a good client relationship. They were tenacious, aggressive, and competitive.²⁰⁷ The downside to this more aggressive approach: When men fight for ideas, they are respected, but when women fight for ideas, they are labeled difficult.²⁰⁸ In those cases, women often used an "accommodation or deference strategy, in which they tended to 'bend over backwards' to 'make it easier for people.'"²⁰⁹ In one study, smaller-market agencies "had friendlier cultures, including less or no internal competition for creative assignments."

²⁰² Broyles, S. J., & Grow, J. (2008, January). Creative women in advertising agencies: Why so few "babes in boyland"? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 25(1), 4-6.

²⁰³ [Monllos, K. \(2020, June 25\). 'Almost as if racism can be forgiven': Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.](#)

²⁰⁴ Broyles, S. J., & Grow, J. (2008, January). Creative women in advertising agencies: Why so few "babes in boyland"? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 25(1), 4-6.

²⁰⁵ Kazenoff, I., & Vagnoni, A. (1997). Babes in boyland. *Advertising Age's Creativity*, 5(8), 18-20.

²⁰⁶ Windels, K., & Lee, W. (2012). The construction of gender and creativity in advertising creative departments. *Gender in Management*, 27(8), 502-519.

²⁰⁷ Mallia, K. L. (2009). Rare birds: Why so few women become ad agency creative directors. *Advertising & Society Review*, 10(3).

²⁰⁸ Weisberg, L., & Robbs, B. (1997). Creative department still boys' playground," *Advertising Age*, 68, 28.

²⁰⁹ Windels, K., & Lee, W. (2012). The construction of gender and creativity in advertising creative departments. *Gender in Management*, 27(8), 502-519.

Perhaps one of the biggest influences for why so few women become ad agency creative directors isn't gender but the "incompatibility between motherhood and agency creative jobs." Female creative leaders tend to not have spouses with demanding careers or not have children.²¹⁰ One interviewee said, "In creative, unlike any other area, you're often out on shoots for a month at a time, and that makes it difficult if you're trying to raise young children."^{211, 212} Pregnancy discrimination can cause women to delay pregnancies or feel pressure to "forgo mentioning their pregnancy in fear of missing opportunities."²¹³

Tokenism and the "diversity hire"

Tokenism is the "practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort" to be diverse or inclusive, "especially by recruiting a small number of people from historically excluded groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial

"No one tells you how easy it is to become the Black poster girl in these businesses."²¹⁴

"I found that I was being regularly pulled into meetings and onto projects that called for greater diversity because my bosses thought, 'What better way to show we're diverse than by having a Black person in the room?'"²¹⁵

"It's comfortable to enjoy what Black people have to offer, but less comfortable to actually grant them power."²¹⁶

"C-suite execs still think it's cool to only wheel me out to talk about racism."²¹⁷

-Digiday "Confessions" series

²¹⁰ Mallia, K. L. (2009). Rare birds: Why so few women become ad agency creative directors. *Advertising & Society Review*, 10(3).

²¹¹ Weisberg, L., & Robbs, B. (1997). Creative department still boys' playground," *Advertising Age*, 68, 28.

²¹² Hom, P. W., Roberson, L., & Ellis, A. D. (2008). Challenging conventional wisdom about who quits: Revelations from corporate America. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(1), 1-34.

²¹³ Monllos, K. (2019, October 28). 'You miss out on opportunities': The hazards of being pregnant in advertising. *Digiday*.

²¹⁴ Joseph, S. (2019, March 11). 'I became the black poster girl': Racism remains an issue within agencies. *Digiday*.

²¹⁵ Joseph, S. (2018, November 16). 'There's no people like me in places like this': Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising's diversity problem. *Digiday*.

²¹² Joseph, S. (2020, October 13). 'Real change will happen when there's an eight-figure problem for agencies': Confessions of a creative strategist on taking action on diversity issue. *Digiday*.

²¹⁷ Joseph, S. (2021, March 5). 'There's always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month': Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. *Digiday*.

equality within a workforce.”²¹⁸ When the “proportion of minority to majority” is 20% or less, “tokenism is assured.” The damaging effects of tokenism include “heightened visibility and scrutiny, additional role demands ... isolation, boundary heightening, and role encapsulation.”²¹⁹

Some diverse employees can be labeled as a “diversity hire,” someone who was hired on the basis of their diversity vs. talent, which can lead to devaluing those employees’ contributions in the workplace.²²⁰ “Being stigmatized as the ‘diversity hire’” means employees feel they “must work three to four times as hard to excel, stand out for excellence, and be recognized for their skill and knowledge.”²²¹

Diverse people are often expected to take on additional DEI responsibilities outside of their normal job without an increase in pay. After George Floyd’s death and the subsequent protests, many Black people found themselves inundated with requests for advice, ideas, and help. Many diverse employees may feel an inner struggle on how much they should be involved, from “I’m not going to tell you

“That’s the really frustrating part. Black people didn’t create these systemic prejudices, so please don’t expect us to resolve them alone.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series²²²

²¹⁸ [Lexico. \(n.d.\). Tokenism. In Lexico \(Oxford\) dictionary.](#)

²¹⁹ [Hughes, A., Horner, P. S., & Ortiz, D. V. \(2012, September\). Being the diversity hire: Negotiating identity in an academic job search. Journal of Social Work Education, 48\(3\), 595-612.](#)

²²⁰ [Monllos, K. \(2021, February 4\). ‘Constantly have to defend or prove yourself’: Confessions of a Black PR exec on why agencies need to focus on inclusion. Digiday.](#)

²²¹ [Gentle-Genitty, C., Merritt, B., & Kimble-Hill, A. C. \(2021, February 23\). A model for crafting diversity, inclusion, respect, and equity \(DIRE\) policy statements toward catalyzing organizational change. ACS Central Science, 7\(3\), 383-391.](#)

²²² [Joseph, S. \(2020, July 8\). ‘My white colleagues are looking to me for answers’: Confessions of a Black ad tech exec. Digiday.](#)

people how to talk to my people” to a feeling of “moral responsibility to your Blackness.”²²³ Tech workers and recruiters explained that they felt a sort of double-consciousness, which they described as “part of their jobs [to] work to identify and ameliorate racial trauma (for example, through recruiting more people of color or changing company culture through unconscious bias training), all while being subjected to racial trauma.”²²⁴

These additional responsibilities can create pressure. As one Black employee said, “My opinion does not represent every Black person.”²²⁵ Another employee said, “I think a lot of the misconceptions came from people seeing Black culture from afar and expecting me to behave in a certain way.”²²⁶ People of color may feel “visible yet invisible.”²²⁷

If you head up diversity efforts, you can be “tainted with the ‘diversity’ label in the organization.” “It felt like I was being pigeonholed into an unofficial role on top of my actual role without the additional resource or pay.”²²⁸

Job hopping and freelance

Marketing employees have the shortest tenure of any profession in the business world, just 2.6 years on average.²²⁹ Coupled with the fact that one-third of brands are considering changing agencies in the next six months,²³⁰ a picture of a volatile industry starts to form. It’s common for historically excluded people to switch jobs in advertising to get a promotion.²³¹ Some Black agency employees report being inundated with offers from agencies looking to expand their

²²³ [Monllos, K. \(2020, June 25\). ‘Almost as if racism can be forgiven’: Confessions of a Black creative calling out a willful legacy of oppression at agencies. Digiday.](#)

²²⁴ [Fussell, S. \(2021, March 8\). Black tech employees rebel against ‘diversity theater.’ WIRED.](#)

²²⁵ [Monllos, K. \(2020, June 2\). ‘There isn’t a talent pipeline problem’: Confessions of a black advertising exec. Digiday.](#)

²²⁶ [Joseph, S. \(2018, November 16\). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.](#)

²²⁷ [Monllos, K. \(2021, February 4\). ‘Constantly have to defend or prove yourself’: Confessions of a Black PR exec on why agencies need to focus on inclusion. Digiday.](#)

²²⁸ [Joseph, S. \(2018, November 16\). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.](#)

²²⁹ [Sweezey, M. \(2017, November 1\). Creative capital – not creativity – is what your brand is missing. Ad Age.](#)

²³⁰ [Craft, E. J. \(2021, April 14\). One - third of brands are considering change of agency in the next six months: study. Ad Age.](#)

²³¹ [Joseph, S. \(2020, June 12\). ‘I don’t want to rock the boat – even now’: Confessions of a Black media agency director. Digiday.](#)

diverse roster, especially recently among mid-level employees. Former 4A's president Nancy Hill said, "Because we've had such a poor track record of growing talent, people drop out at mid-level, and there is a shortage of mid- to senior-level."²³²

Along with short tenure, advertising-related industries see a prevalence of freelancing. Even in 1997, researchers reported women dropping out of agency workplaces and freelancing for the more flexible work schedule, then called being a "maternalancer."²³³ The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted over 2 million Americans to start freelancing, and despite the job market recovery, the prevalence of freelancing job postings has "remained elevated." In advertising-related fields, "the shift to temporary or freelance workers has been even more stark."

Before COVID-19, the share of temporary job postings for communications and marketing was at 12% and 8%, respectively – but in April 2020, those numbers jumped to "four times higher" for communications and 28% for marketing. Many advertising jobs were converted to temporary or freelance positions.²³⁴

Freelancers are also more likely to be ethnically diverse.²³⁵ Black women, in particular, are likely to run or develop a business on the side of their full-time job, coined "side-preneurship."^{236, 237}

Job hopping and freelancing tendencies are some of the few factors included in this report that could be considered both push and pull factors.²³⁸

²³² [Monllos, K. \(2021, February 23\). 'Poor track record of growing talent': Why agencies need to focus on retaining diverse workforce. Digiday.](#)

²³³ Kazenoff, I., & Vagnoni, A. (1997). Babes in boyland. *Advertising Age's Creativity*, 5(8), 18-20.

²³⁴ [Berliner, U. \(2020, September 16\). Jobs in the pandemic: More are freelance and may stay that way forever. NPR.](#)

²³⁵ [Statista \(2021, May 11\). Freelance workers in the United States in 2019, by racial background.](#)

²³⁶ [Beale, A. \(2021, April 22\). Bonita Stewart's new research for the next era of leaders. The She Word.](#)

²³⁷ [Stewart, B.C., & Adams, J. \(2021\). Women of color in business 2020: Cross-Generational Survey.](#)

²³⁸ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”

Potential solutions

“Rather than expecting individuals to fit into a set ‘company culture,’ companies should focus on building a culture that honors its employees’ unique differences as strengths.”²³⁹ In a boys’ club environment, it is essential to break the culture of sameness and prove the value-in-diversity hypothesis to majority males.

Prove: Convince the majority culture that there is value in diversity, particularly diverse leadership.

Use the value-in-diversity hypothesis: Categorical dissimilarity “engenders differences in knowledge, skills, and experiences, which exposes the group to a broader range of viewpoints and opinions. With access to a larger and varied pool of informational resources, it is assumed that heterogeneous groups are more likely to generate better-quality solutions to problems.”²⁴⁰

Build the business case for high retention facilitating better business:

“Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians,” and for gender diversity, 15% more likely to have higher financial returns.²⁴¹ “A revolving door leaves you in a constant mode of training,” but getting people to stay allows them more time to help the company make a profit.²⁴² “From an economic standpoint, when employees leave and replacements are hired, companies must deal with higher recruiting costs, longer training time, and lower productivity. Research suggests that the cost of a professional or a manager leaving an organization can be as high as twice the average associate’s salary or a minimum of one year’s worth of salary and benefits.”²⁴³

²³⁹ [Heath, T. \(2021, March 24\). What it means today for brands to take a stand. SmartBrief.](#)

²⁴⁰ Roberson, Q. M. (2019). Diversity in the workplace: A review, synthesis, and future research agenda. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 6, 69-88.

²⁴¹ [Hunt, V., Layton, D., & Prince, S. \(2015, January 1\). Why diversity matters. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁴² [Barber, K. \(2020, July 20\). The Minority Report is providing a playbook for diversity and inclusion in the media industry. Digiday.](#)

²⁴³ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

Build the business case for diverse leaders: In particular, build the case for diverse leadership, including but not limited to increased earnings;²⁴⁴ outperforming competition;²⁴⁵ reducing firm risk and improving performance;^{246, 247} lowering the wage gap;²⁴⁸ increasing mid-level management diversity;²⁴⁹ and likelihood to embrace DEI, mentorship, and sponsorship.²⁵⁰

Personalize to change-makers: There is no one-size-fits-all approach to fostering the inclusion and retention of diverse employees. Identify key change-makers, and tailor your approach to each role and personality type.²⁵¹

KEY CHANGE-MAKER: LEADERSHIP

Be clear about expectations: “Evidence suggests that this is where leaders most shortchange their organizations. ... Leaders weren’t clear enough about what they wanted the change to achieve or about what it would entail. It seems the reasons for this are twofold: Leaders too often express what they want in terms not of outcomes but of tasks – and they rarely, if ever, make clear the full extent of the change they are asking for.”

Live the change: “Followers are looking for signals to help them make sense of what they should do. As a leader, you have disproportionate power to shape these signals.” This “means much more than modeling any behaviors you’ve asked for; it also means making a myriad of decisions that support the change.”²⁵²

Cultivate “culture-smart” leaders: To help historically excluded individuals feel valued, culture-smart leaders act as allies, support ERG initiatives, and share efforts company-wide.²⁵³

²⁴⁴ [Hunt, V., Layton, D., & Prince, S. \(2015, January 1\). Why diversity matters. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁴⁵ [Dixon-Fyle, S., Dolan, K., Hunt, V., & Prince, S. \(2020, May 19\). Diversity wins: How inclusion matters. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁴⁶ [Perryman, A. A., Fernando, G. D., & Tripathy, A. \(2016, February\). Do gender differences persist? An examination of gender diversity on firm performance, risk, and executive compensation. Journal of Business Research, 69\(2\), 579-586.](#)

²⁴⁷ [Noland, M., Moran, T., & Kotschwar, B. \(2016, February\). Is gender diversity profitable? Evidence from a global survey. Peterson Institute for International Economics.](#)

²⁴⁸ [Cardoso, A. R., & Winter-Ebmer, R. \(2010, October 1\). Female-led firms and gender wage policies. Industrial & Labor Relations Review, 64\(1\), 143-163.](#)

²⁴⁹ [Kurtulus, F. A., & Tomaskovic-Devey, D. \(2011\). Do female top managers help women to advance? A panel study using EEO-1 records. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 639\(1\), 173-197.](#)

²⁵⁰ [Cory, S., Huang, J., Kumar, A., Prince, S., Krivkovich, A., & Yee, L. \(2020, September 30\). Women in the workplace 2020. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁵¹ [Lindsey, A., King, E., Membere, A., & Cheung, H. K. \(2017, July 28\). Two types of diversity training that really work. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁵² [Johnson, E. \(2017, June 13\). How to communicate clearly during organizational change. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁵³ [Hewlett, S.A., Allwood, N., & Sherbin, L. \(2016, October 11\). U.S. Latinos feel they can’t be themselves at work. Harvard Business Review.](#)

KEY CHANGE-MAKER: MANAGERS

Drawing from decades of data and interviews with 25 million employees, Gallup concluded that the biggest factor in employee turnover is an individual's manager.²⁵⁴

Inspire managers to voluntarily educate themselves: “Engage managers in solving the problem.” “Expose them to people from different groups. ... Encourage social accountability for change.”²⁵⁵ “Educate managers about the work realities faced by historically excluded groups.”²⁵⁶

Foster accountability: “Hold managers accountable for the retention and advancement” of historically excluded employees and for “providing critical development opportunities and high-visibility assignments necessary for advancement.”²⁵⁷

Give feedback tied to business and goals outcomes: “Before you begin evaluations, either written or verbal, outline the specific criteria you are employing to evaluate individuals. ... Set a goal to discuss three specific business outcomes with all employees. ... Systematically tie feedback – either positive or developmental – to business and goals outcomes. ... When evaluating people in similar roles, equalize references to technical accomplishments and capability. ... Strive to write reviews of similar lengths for all employees.”²⁵⁸

KEY CHANGE-MAKER: MAJORITY MALES

Build the confidence and competence of majority males in the workforce: Majority men often hold positions of power in companies, many of whom fear broaching these topics, including the threat of being publicly shamed, leading them to disengage or stay silent. This starts with majority men seeing themselves as part of “white male culture” that has “long set the standard for workplace culture.” Researchers recommend sharing stories of the benefits of a diverse team and encouraging executives to brag on the D&I competencies of their executive team to reinforce the idea that “inclusive leaders earn strong reputations.” They also recommend helping majority men let down their defenses and “receive pushback in a spirit of understanding.” Lastly, researchers see the need to delineate between sessions where majority men should listen and learn vs. more actively participate.²⁵⁹

KEY CHANGE-MAKER: WHITE WOMEN

Studies show that senior-level white women are more likely to embrace DEI, mentorship, and sponsorship;²⁶⁰ pay women better and reduce the wage gap;²⁶¹ and help increase mid-level management diversity.²⁶²

²⁵⁴ Schwantes, M. (2021, February 28). [Why do people leave their jobs, exactly? The entire reason can be summed up in a few sentences. Inc.](#)

²⁵⁵ Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016, July-August). [Why diversity programs fail. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁵⁶ Pace, C. (2018, August 31). [How women of color get to senior management. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁵⁷ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

²⁵⁸ Correll, S. J., & Simard, C. (2016, April 29). [Research: Vague feedback is holding women back. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁵⁹ Kennedy, J. T., & Jain-Link, P. (2020). [What majority men really think about D&I. Center for Talent Innovation.](#)

²⁶⁰ Coury, S., Huang, J., Kumar, A., Prince, S., Krivkovich, A., & Yee, L. (2020, September 30). [Women in the workplace 2020. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁶¹ Cardoso, A. R., & Winter-Ebmer, R. (2010, October 1). [Female-led firms and gender wage policies. Industrial & Labor Relations Review, 64\(1\), 143-163.](#)

²⁶² Kurtulus, F. A., & Tomaskovic-Devey, D. (2011). [Do female top managers help women to advance? A panel study using EEO-1 records. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 639\(1\), 173-197.](#)

Potential solutions in action

Julian Obubo of Manifest, a UK public relations agency, said his agency doesn't "hire for a culture fit, we hire for a culture add. That's critical to why we are where we are."²⁶³



“Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians,” and for gender diversity, 15% more likely to have higher financial returns.

FIVE MACRO FACTORS THAT IMPACT INCLUSION AND RETENTION

4. Psychologically unsafe work environments create unhealthy workplaces



Stress in the workplace today

Nearly 2 million working women are considering leaving the workforce and putting a hold on their career goals due to pandemic-related challenges like burnout, financial insecurity, and balancing household labor and childcare with workplace demands. Women of color, especially Black women, are facing even more challenges. Their communities are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and they are dealing with racial violence, grief, and loss.^{264, 265, 266, 267} Black Americans are almost twice as likely to live in the counties at highest risk of health and economic disruption from the pandemic, and 39% of all jobs held by Black Americans are threatened by reductions in hours or pay, temporary furloughs, or permanent layoffs.^{268, 269}

“Being an ethnic minority at a predominantly white workplace creates its own kind of stress. ... I’ve seen it really affect people and have a negative effect on their mental health because they were ostracized. ... Sometimes it’s better to leave than constantly butt heads with clueless people.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series²⁷⁰

²⁶⁴ [Cory, S., Huang, J., Kumar, A., Prince, S., Krivkovich, A., & Yee, L. \(2020, September 30\). Women in the workplace 2020. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁶⁵ [AAUW. \(2020, September 15\). AAUW reacts to stagnant gender pay gap numbers.](#)

²⁶⁶ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

²⁶⁷ [Aspan, M. \(2021, March 30\). LinkedIn is adding ‘stay-at-home mom’ and more caretaker titles, as 2.3 million women leave the workforce. Fortune.](#)

²⁶⁸ [Florant, A., Noel, N., Stewart, S., & Wright, J. \(2020, April 14\). COVID-19: Investing in Black lives and livelihoods. McKinsey & Company.](#)

²⁶⁹ [AAUW. \(2020, September 15\). AAUW reacts to stagnant gender pay gap numbers.](#)

²⁷⁰ [Joseph, S. \(2019, July 8\). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.](#)

Among marketers, 45% have “felt fatigue related to racial tension or issues at work during their career.”²⁷¹ One employee said on leaving her job, “I know the way to change these issues is to do so from within, but getting to those positions is tough when there are so many things working against you. It’s not worth my mental health.”²⁷² One Black male said that putting on a front for white colleagues, educating them on diversity, is “exhausting.” He said he wishes his white colleagues would “educate themselves.” Yet another said, “I was experiencing so much abuse, so I let [the N] word go because I just couldn’t fight that day.”²⁷³ Ethnic minorities reported higher levels of workplace burnout throughout 2020 compared to white Americans.

Hierarchical, fast-paced, competitive, and demanding

“Marketers were the job function group most likely to disagree that their employers’ leaders care about their health and well-being (32%) and that they feel safe at work physically (20%), mentally, and emotionally (28%). This is especially important since 77% said they would leave a job where their employer did not prioritize mental and emotional health and well-being.”²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

²⁷² [Joseph, S. \(2018, November 16\). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.](#)

²⁷³ [Rittenhouse, L. \(2020, June 19\). Black professionals describe agencies as hotbeds for racism and microaggression. Ad Age.](#)

²⁷⁴ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

“You have to be somewhat of a kiss-ass in agencies if you want to get ahead regardless of your sex, but during my career, those women in higher leadership roles took it to another level. It’s the personalities and dynamics of the competitive, unforgiving culture of agency life that makes people, especially women, turn on one another. It’s dysfunctional, and there was a lot of jockeying for positions at the upper levels of the organization where everyone saw each other as competition.”

-Digiday “Confessions” series²⁷⁵

In “Babes in Boyland” (1997), authors interviewed agency creatives who said women drop out because “advertising is competitive and tough. Maybe women just don’t want to put up with the bullshit. Maybe they’re more well-balanced. Maybe they’re not willing to drop everything to get up there to the power positions.”²⁷⁶ Later, Mallia came to a similar conclusion in her research: Women who left agency life were politically savvy but simply less willing

to participate in agency politics.²⁷⁷ “I didn’t want to deal with the dysfunction and politics of the work environment.”²⁷⁸

Mothers face stereotypes and assumptions that they are “less available, less flexible, and less dedicated to their work – a cascade of assumptions that often labels them as unsuitable for top leadership positions.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Joseph, S. (2019, October 29). ‘There’s a certain disdain’: Confessions of a former agency exec on sexism at work. [Digiday](#).

²⁷⁶ Kazenoff, I., & Vagnoni, A. (1997). Babes in boyland. *Advertising Age’s Creativity*, 5(8), 18-20.

²⁷⁷ Mallia, K. L. (2009). Rare birds: Why so few women become ad agency creative directors. *Advertising & Society Review*, 10(3).

²⁷⁸ Rittenhouse, L. (2020, June 19). Black professionals describe agencies as hotbeds for racism and microaggression. [Ad Age](#).

²⁷⁹ Hewlett, S. A., Peraino, K., Sherbin, L., & Sumberg, K. (2010, December). The sponsor effect: Breaking through the last glass ceiling. [Harvard Business Review](#).

Psychological safety

“Psychological safety is the belief that you can speak up, take risks, and put forward ideas, questions, or challenges without facing ridicule or retaliation. When employees feel safe, they trust that they can admit mistakes, seek feedback, or even fail without dire consequences.”^{280, 281, 282} According to a two-year study at Google, the most common feature of high-performing teams was, by far, feeling secure enough to contribute.²⁸³ It is often women (especially women of color) who do not feel safe in their workplace. “The virtual environment has worsened the safety problem. Of the female business leaders who responded to a recent survey from Catalyst, nearly half said women faced difficulty in speaking up in virtual meetings.”²⁸⁴

“About a quarter of African and Hispanic Americans disagree that they feel/felt safe at work physically (25% and 18%, respectively), compared to only 8% of white Americans. The same disparity holds for mental safety. Twenty-four percent of African Americans and 22% of Hispanic Americans disagree that they feel safe at work mentally, compared to just 12% of white Americans.” “Only 62% of BIPOC women agree they feel heard at work and that their voice carries weight in decision-making, compared to 76% of white men.”²⁸⁵

Much of psychological safety involves trust, and “while women of color tended to trust their own race first and other women of color second, all groups concurred that they did not trust Caucasian women – even though white women were the most-named race/gender for role models, by 40% of respondents.”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁰ [Tulshyan, R. \(2021, March 15\). Why is it so hard to speak up at work? The New York Times.](#)

²⁸¹ [Edmondson, A. \(2014, May 5\). Building a psychologically safe workplace. TEDxHGSE.](#)

²⁸² Carmeli, A., Brueller, D., & Dutton, J. E. (2008, November 25). Learning behaviours in the workplace: The role of high-quality interpersonal relationships and psychological safety. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 26(1), 81-98.

²⁸³ [Google. Guide: Understand team effectiveness.](#)

²⁸⁴ [Tulshyan, R. \(2021, March 15\). Why is it so hard to speak up at work? The New York Times.](#)

²⁸⁵ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

²⁸⁶ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

Speaking out, retaliation, and the “race card”

A grievance system is the typical formal organizational procedure for employee complaints.²⁸⁸ When employees don't feel like the grievance system does anything, they stop bringing their problems forward, which results in companies believing they don't have any issues to resolve.

Forty percent of marketing employees have felt unable to speak out about discrimination they've witnessed or experienced based on their ethnicity.²⁸⁹

Employees stay quiet due to two viewpoints: personality and situational factors.²⁹⁰ Some diverse employees report that when they speak out against aggressive or upsetting behavior, “people try to demonize you or start to imply that your mental health or well-being need to be investigated.” Black and Latina women report being perceived as the “angry Black woman” or as having a “Latin temper,” respectively, if they speak passionately.^{291, 292}

Racially diverse employees are often scared to speak up because they think they could be labeled as playing the “race card.” “Playing the race card” is “using coded language to racialize” a situation and “brand an allegation of injustice as a cynical ploy rather than a sincere protest.”²⁹³ The fear of retaliation prevents employees from speaking up, validated by research showing that “leaders generally react quite negatively to employees who challenge them.”²⁹⁴

“The last thing I want to do is become known as the guy who plays the race card, even if it is valid.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Joseph, S. (2020, June 12). ‘I don't want to rock the boat – even now’: Confessions of a Black media agency director. Digiday.

²⁸⁸ SHRM. [What are the steps typically found in a grievance procedure?](#)

²⁸⁹ Hue (2021). [A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

²⁹⁰ Kakkar, H., & Tangirala, S. (2018, November 6). [If your employees aren't speaking up, blame company culture. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁹¹ Joseph, S. (2021, March 5). [‘There's always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month’: Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. Digiday.](#)

²⁹² Network of Executive Women (2020, May 18). [Study sheds new light on corporate America's Latina leadership crisis. PR Newswire.](#)

²⁹³ Nelson, T. E., Sanbonmatsu, K., & McClerking, H. K. (2007). [Playing a different race card: Examining the limits of elite influence on perceptions of racism. Journal of Politics, 69\(2\), 416-429.](#)

²⁹⁴ De Cremer, D., De Schutter, L., Stouten, J., & Zhang, J. (2016, October 18). [Can employees really speak up without retribution? Harvard Business Review.](#)

Companies can be fearful of public backlash when they acknowledge employees speaking out on important issues that put the company in a negative light.²⁹⁵ Sometimes, nondisclosure agreements or other contractual obligations prevent employees from speaking out publicly. One employee recounts several “professional penalties” for going public, including signing “draconian NDAs.”²⁹⁶ Many, if not most, of the interviews featured in advertising publications like Ad Age or Digiday are anonymous, “out of fear of endangering their employment.”²⁹⁷

Sponsorship, mentorship, and access

The access that diverse and historically excluded employees have to more senior employees can affect their ability to move their career forward. In one McKinsey study, women felt that they had “fewer meaningful interactions with senior leaders compared to their male peers – and this gap widened as they advanced.” Women “were also less likely to say that a senior leader outside their direct management

chain had helped them get a promotion or challenging new assignment – even though women were more likely than men to have been assigned a formal mentor.”²⁹⁸ Women of color, in particular, reported being challenged by the “absence of informal networking opportunities with influential colleagues.”²⁹⁹

Two primary programs are recommended to help a diverse set of employees move up: sponsorship and mentorship. In recent years, research has shown that sponsorship can be a more effective way to help promising employees advance.

²⁹⁵ [Asare, J. G. \(2020, December 6\). It's obvious that companies don't want to hear about their diversity issues. Forbes.](#)

²⁹⁶ [Joseph, S. \(2020, October 13\). 'Real change will happen when there's an eight-figure problem for agencies': Confessions of a creative strategist on taking action on diversity issue. Digiday.](#)

²⁹⁷ [Rittenhouse, L. \(2020, June 19\). Black professionals describe agencies as hotbeds for racism and microaggression. Ad Age.](#)

²⁹⁸ [Ibarra, H. \(2019, August 19\). A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²⁹⁹ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

SPONSORSHIP

VS.

MENTORSHIP

Sponsorship is a “helping relationship in which senior, powerful people use their personal clout to talk up, advocate for, and place a more junior person in a key role.”^{300, 301}

It is a powerful link to “senior executives [who are] willing to put their reputation on the line to promote their protégés all the way to the top.”³⁰² Sponsors “invest their own reputation advocating for an employee behind closed doors.”³⁰³

Sponsors also give their protégés tactical advice to realize their vision and “coach [them] on [their] performance and train a spotlight on [them] so that everyone takes note of [their] abilities and potential.”

A protégé will “ask for career guidance, feedback, and stretch assignments” and demonstrate drive and loyalty. Sponsors will look for protégés who are exceptional performers, while protégés look for leaders “who embody their values or value their strengths.”³⁰⁴

Sponsors also have an investment that mentors don’t.³⁰⁵ The protégé’s career outcome is a direct reflection of the sponsor’s advocacy, and thus the sponsor works harder to ensure favorable outcomes, and everybody wins.

A mentor, on the other hand, is someone who is “willing to use their knowledge and experience to provide support and guidance to their mentee. They listen to their mentee’s career vision, offer feedback, and give advice. While a mentor may also be a sponsor, there is a critical difference between the two. ... While a mentor’s role may be passive, a sponsor’s role is anything but.”³⁰⁶

Mentorship is a “more low-profile form of support,” compared to sponsorship as a “visible high-octane support’ that can compound an individual’s dedication to her job and unlock her ability to perform.”³⁰⁷

“Mentors have an interest and provide sound advice, but they are not necessarily providing air cover and counting on the success of a mentee the same way a sponsor counts on a protégé to be successful.”³⁰⁸

“While a mentor is someone who has knowledge and will share it with you, a sponsor is a person who has power and will use it for you.”

³⁰⁰ [Ibarra, H., & von Bernuth, N. \(2020, October 9\). Want more diverse senior leadership? Sponsor junior talent. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁰¹ [Ibarra, H. \(2019, August 19\). A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁰² [Castellano, S. \(2012, November 8\). Sponsoring career success for minority workers. TD Magazine.](#)

³⁰³ [Toppin, L. \(2018, November 13\). Driving diversity and inclusion requires cracking the code on sponsorship. Forbes.](#)

³⁰⁴ [Hewlett, S. A., Marshall, M., & Sherbin, L. \(2011, October\). The relationship you need to get right. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁰⁵ [Toppin, L. \(2018, November 13\). Driving diversity and inclusion requires cracking the code on sponsorship. Forbes.](#)

³⁰⁶ [Her New Standard. 6 tips for a successful sponsorship program.](#)

³⁰⁷ [Castellano, S. \(2012, November 8\). Sponsoring career success for minority workers. TD Magazine.](#)

³⁰⁸ [Toppin, L. \(2018, November 13\). Driving diversity and inclusion requires cracking the code on sponsorship. Forbes.](#)

Mentors have an effect on men’s likelihood of promotion but “no effect” on women’s; one reason is that the “women’s mentors were less senior than those of men and, as a result, lacked the clout needed to advocate for them.”³⁰⁹ Also, when women initiate a mentorship, they receive less mentoring than when men initiate one.³¹⁰ On top of that, “high-potential women are overmentored and undersponsored relative to their male peers.”³¹¹

Center for Talent Innovation research showed that “71% of executives have protégés whose gender and race match their own. As a result, women and people of color don’t reap the benefits of sponsorship like men do, and the company doesn’t gain diverse talent.”³¹² And the #MeToo movement has deterred senior male executives from establishing “one-on-one mentoring relationships

[with women].”³¹³ Six in ten male managers “are uncomfortable participating in a common work activity with a woman, such as mentoring, working alone, or socializing together. That’s a 32% jump from a year ago. ... As for why this is happening, 36% of men say they’ve avoided mentoring or socializing with a woman because they were nervous about how it would look.”^{314, 315}

Sponsorship is typically hard to track because it is completely informal.³¹⁶ Formal sponsorship programs that organizations have implemented fall through due to executives feeling that “they are being asked to advocate for people they don’t know well or don’t think are ready.”³¹⁷ Sponsors also usually expect their protégés to be just like them and can miss out on the other valuable skill sets and traits that their protégés bring to the table.³¹⁸

³⁰⁹ [Ibarra, H. \(2019, August 19\). A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³¹⁰ [Scandura, T. A., & Williams, E. A. \(2001\). An investigation of the moderating effects of gender on the relationships between mentorship initiation and protégé perceptions of mentoring functions. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 59\(3\), 342-363.](#)

³¹¹ [Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. \(2010, September\). Why men still get more promotions than women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³¹² [Center for Talent Innovation. \(2019\). The sponsor dividend.](#)

³¹³ [Anderson, R. H., & Smith, D. G. \(2019, August 7\). What men can do to be better mentors and sponsors to women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³¹⁴ [Lean In. \(2019\). Working relationships in the #MeToo era.](#)

³¹⁵ [Bennhold, K. \(2019, January 27\). Another side of #MeToo: Male managers fearful of mentoring women. The New York Times.](#)

³¹⁶ [Toppin, L. \(2018, November 13\). Driving diversity and inclusion requires cracking the code on sponsorship. Forbes.](#)

³¹⁷ [Ibarra, H. \(2019, August 19\). A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³¹⁸ [Center for Talent Innovation. \(2019\). The sponsor dividend.](#)

Sponsorships are a powerful driver of engagement and ambition,³¹⁹ but most historically excluded individuals are unlikely to have a sponsor. Many women underestimate the importance of sponsorship and fail to seek it out. Women are more likely to believe that “hard work alone will succeed in turning heads” or that getting ahead based on “who you know” is an inherently unfair, even “dirty” tactic.³²⁰

Only 23% of Black employees, compared to 30% of white employees, believe they get “a lot” or “quite a bit” of support to advance.³²¹ Black women, in particular, are much less likely than their colleagues to have a work sponsor. In a study of sponsorship among Black women, compared to their white male counterparts, Black women had a harder time obtaining and retaining sponsorship. “Only one-third of Black women’s sponsors in the study were white men – most sponsors were Black (57%), and almost one-third (29%) were women.”^{322, 323}

In one study, Latinx employees with sponsors were 42% more likely to be satisfied with their career advancement than Latinx employees without sponsors. But only 5% of “full-time, high-earning” Latinx professionals at large companies reported having a sponsor.³²⁴

Potential solutions

To create psychologically safe environments, agencies must integrate inclusivity at every possible juncture.

Integrate: Foster inclusion in all aspects of the employee experience, from day-to-day interactions to institutional policies.

Break the culture of sameness: Homogeneity is comfortable. Companies should embrace a wide range of styles and voices.³²⁵

³¹⁹ [Castellano, S. \(2012, November 8\). Sponsoring career success for minority workers. TD Magazine.](#)

³²⁰ [Hewlett, S. A., Peraino, K., Sherbin, L., & Sumberg, K. \(2010, December\). The sponsor effect: Breaking through the last glass ceiling. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³²¹ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.](#)

³²² [Smith, S. B. \(2021\). How a lack of sponsorship keeps black women out of the C-suite. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³²³ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

³²⁴ [Hewlett, S.A., N. Allwood & L. Sherbin \(2016, October 11\). U.S. Latinos Feel They Can't Be Themselves at Work. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³²⁵ [Ely, R. J., & Thomas, D. A. \(2020, November-December\). Getting serious about diversity: Enough already with the business case. Harvard Business Review.](#)

Create a psychologically safe workplace where employees feel they belong:

Psychological safety is a critical part of the “unfreezing” process for “organizational learning and change.”³²⁶ Psychological safety is a “principal motivator of employee performance behaviors in a racially diverse work setting.”³²⁷ Frame the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem. Acknowledge your own fallibility. Model curiosity and ask lots of questions.³²⁸

Create space: “Normalize creating space within your team’s work cycles to include time for inclusive practices.”³²⁹

Foster an open dialogue: Simply having diverse voices in a room does not automatically create a space for open-mindedness; in fact, the diversity can cause more disagreement. Instead, cultivate an open-dialogue environment without ego or judgment.³³⁰

Encourage a “speak-up culture”: Encouraging people to speak up will help create a more inclusive environment. Be transparent about the process, show that you are willing to listen and take advice, and reconsider what “retaliation” means.³³¹

Institutionalize change through unexpected “mundane behaviors”: By weaving the brand messages into employees’ everyday experiences, behavior change can become instinctive. “It is what David Nadler and Michael Tushman, in their 1990 exploration of how change becomes institutionalized, called ‘mundane behaviors.’ It means changing how you spend your time.”³³²

³²⁶ Frazier, M. L., Fainshmidt, S., Klinger, R. L., Pezeshkan, A., & Vracheva, V. (2017, Spring). Psychological safety: A meta-analytic review and extension. *Personnel Psychology*, 70(1), 113-165.

³²⁷ Singh, B., Winkel, D. E., & Selvarajan, T. T. (2013). *Managing diversity at work: Does psychological safety hold the key to racial differences in employee performance?* *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 86(2), 242-263.

³²⁸ Edmondson, A. (2014, May 5). *Building a psychologically safe workplace.* TEDxHGSE.

³²⁹ Hall, J. (2021, January). *Diversity, inclusion and building a positive culture in the marketing team.* WARC.

³³⁰ Ely, R. J., & Thomas, D. A. (2020, November-December). *Getting serious about diversity: Enough already with the business case.* *Harvard Business Review*.

³³¹ Finnie, T. (2019, September 9). *Understanding “speak up” culture and how it can benefit the workplace.* LinkedIn.

³³² Johnson, E. (2017, June 13). *How to communicate clearly during organizational change.* *Harvard Business Review*.

Sponsor: Create, fund, and promote a formal sponsorship program with clear expectations, policies, and goals.

Set clear expectations: Educate people on what sponsorship is, publicize policies, and “clarify and communicate the intent of the program.”^{333, 334, 335}

Show executives what’s in it for them: Sponsors also reap many rewards like expanded skill sets, knowledge of their consumer base and new market segments, and job satisfaction.^{336, 337}

Train both parties: “Train sponsors on the complexities of gender and leadership”³³⁸ and “train both sponsors and protégés to manage ‘like me’ bias.”³³⁹
 “Integrate conversations on workplace biases into sponsorship programs.”³⁴⁰

Involve the right people and give everyone a voice: “Coordinate efforts and involve direct supervisors.” Give everyone a voice through your matchmaking process.^{341, 342}

Bring the topic of sponsorship to talent discussions: Ensure that historically excluded groups are being sponsored and are part of large projects to expose them to senior leadership.³⁴³

³³³ [Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. \(2010, September\). Why men still get more promotions than women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

²³⁴ [Hewlett, S. A. \(2013, October 8\). As a leader, create a culture of sponsorship. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³³⁵ [Her New Standard. 6 tips for a successful sponsorship program.](#)

³³⁶ [Center for Talent Innovation. \(2019\). The sponsor dividend.](#)

³³⁷ [Her New Standard. 6 tips for a successful sponsorship program.](#)

³³⁸ [Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. \(2010, September\). Why men still get more promotions than women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³³⁹ [Ibarra, H., & von Bernuth, N. \(2020, October 9\). Want more diverse senior leadership? Sponsor junior talent. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁴⁰ [Pace, C. \(2018, August 31\). How women of color get to senior management. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁴¹ [Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. \(2010, September\). Why men still get more promotions than women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁴² [Her New Standard. 6 tips for a successful sponsorship program.](#)

³⁴³ [Toppin, L. \(2018, November 13\). Driving diversity and inclusion requires cracking the code on sponsorship. Forbes.](#)

Hold sponsors accountable: Make sponsorship matter by making it a benchmark on executives' evaluations.³⁴⁴ Push for punishment by explicitly stating the consequences of violating company policies.³⁴⁵

Majority men must advocate for women and minorities: To improve gender balance and diversity in the workplace while making a profit for a company, men need to advocate for women's advancement.³⁴⁶

Potential solutions in action

Brands like Accenture, IBM, and Deloitte have implemented sponsorship programs with promising results.^{347, 348} Accenture has publicly committed to a gender-balanced workforce by 2025, and part of this commitment includes a sponsorship program in which senior-level female employees are paired with C-suite executives. Since the development of this program, 47% of Accenture's new hires are women, and its

global workforce is 44% women. Accenture reports that 100% of female employees participate in programs related to mentorship, sponsorship, and career development.³⁴⁹

“WPP's new employee-listening channels, or virtual CEO town halls, have reached more than 39,000 employees, according to the agency, and its 'safe rooms,' designed for open and candid discussions, are averaging several hundred people per session. The first safe room WPP hosted in June 2020 had nearly 3,000 participants.”³⁵⁰

³⁴⁴ [Hewlett, S. A. \(2013, October 8\). As a leader, create a culture of sponsorship. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁴⁵ [Ibarra, H., Carter, N. M., & Silva, C. \(2010, September\). Why men still get more promotions than women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁴⁶ [Anderson, R. H., & Smith, D. G. \(2019, August 7\). What men can do to be better mentors and sponsors to women. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁴⁷ [Henderson, R. \(2020, March 13\). Sponsors could be key to solving tech's lack of gender diversity. TechCrunch.](#)

³⁴⁸ [Tapia, A. H., & Kvasny, L. \(2004, April\). Recruitment is never enough: Retention of women and minorities in the IT workplace. Proceedings of the 2004 SIGMIS conference on computer personnel research: Careers, culture, and ethics in a networked environment, 84-91.](#)

³⁴⁹ [Henderson, R. \(2020, March 13\). Sponsors could be key to solving tech's lack of gender diversity. TechCrunch.](#)

³⁵⁰ [Poggi, J. \(2021, July 6\). How ad agencies are living up to diversity promises – and where they fall short. Ad Age.](#)

5. Lack of investment signals a lack of dedication



Fair compensation

Advertising salaries traditionally have been kept under wraps, with the only up-to-date systematic recording of compensation in informal public Google spreadsheets like Real Agency Salaries.³⁵¹ Yet compensation is arguably the most important factor in why employees leave.³⁵²

In general, “women still are paid just 82 cents for every dollar paid to a man. Black women are paid just 63 cents and Latinas 55 cents compared to what white men earn.”^{353, 354} White employees have a “disproportionately large share of income in top quantiles, and all other races accrue a disproportionately large share of income at the bottom 10% and 1% of the overall income distribution,”

particularly Blacks, American Indians, and Hispanics. “Most racial groups (with the exception of Asians) have incomes that are between 50% and 80% of the corresponding white income level consistently across the income distribution.” What’s more, “income mobility decreased for all racial and ethnic groups between 2000 and 2014.” “Together, these results paint a picture of a rigid income structure wherein [B]lacks, Hispanics, and American Indians may move within their own income distributions but still are stuck at the bottom overall.”³⁵⁵ “Compared to only 18% of white Americans, over a quarter (28%) of BIPOC disagree that they are/were paid fairly and in a comparable way to other colleagues at their level.”³⁵⁶ And 22% of LGBTQ+ Americans say they have not been paid fairly or promoted at the same rate as their peers.³⁵⁷

³⁵¹ [McAteer, O. \(2019, November 22\). Creative ad agency salaries laid bare in public spreadsheet. Campaign US.](#)

³⁵² [Wilkie, D. \(2019, May 19\). Cash remains king: new survey confirms what others have said for years. SHRM.](#)

³⁵³ [AAUW. \(2020, September 15\). AAUW reacts to stagnant gender pay gap numbers.](#)

³⁵⁴ [Key, K. \(2020, June 19\). The other pay gap: Why minorities are still behind. The Muse.](#)

³⁵⁵ [Akee, R., Jones, M. R., & Porter, S. R. \(2019, April 3\). Race matters: Income shares, income inequality, and income mobility for all U.S. races. Demography.](#)

³⁵⁶ [Hue \(2021\). A state of inequity: Employees of color feel unsafe, unheard, and undervalued. The Harris Poll.](#)

³⁵⁷ [Catalyst. \(2021, June 1\). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender workplace issues \(quick take\).](#)

Sidelined DEI

Many companies relegate DEI programs to a chief diversity officer vs. integrating diversity and inclusion into their teams. One D&I chair remarked, “I [didn’t] even report in to the CEO. What sort of business keeps its senior marketer away from the management team? It’s the one that sees D&I as a HR problem, not a business one.”³⁵⁵ “In today’s marketplace, best-practice companies are those that integrate diversity philosophy into their business missions.”³⁵⁹

Black employees are 39% less likely to believe “their company’s DE&I programs are effective than white employees in the same company.”³⁶¹ “In cases where I spoke to HR, they weren’t qualified or properly equipped to handle my issues or complaints,” one historically excluded employee recounted.³⁶²

“There was a lot of lip service paid to being a diverse and inclusive agency, but the reality was, our HR team never had a strategy to deliver on either of those points.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ [Joseph, S. \(2021, March 5\). ‘There’s always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month’: Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. Digiday.](#)

³⁵⁹ [Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.](#)

³⁶⁰ [Joseph, S. \(2018, November 16\). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.](#)

³⁶¹ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.](#)

³⁶² [Joseph, S. \(2019, July 8\). ‘People are scared to speak up’: Confessions of a minority marketer. Digiday.](#)

Often, AAPI perspectives are “overlooked” in DE&I with plans that don’t specifically address Asians.³⁶³ One executive search firm said clients only wanted “someone Black or [B]rown” for their diversity officers.³⁶⁴ As one copywriter remarked, “[W]e as an industry haven’t taken the proper steps to understand and educate each other on what the cultural sensitivities surrounding Asian people are.”³⁶⁵ The diversity of heritage and perspective within AAPI means data surrounding this group needs to be disaggregated.³⁶⁶

Although DEI programs vary, research suggests that some approaches may be doing more harm than good. Companies force people to get with the program “by blaming and shaming them with rules and reeducation.” Making employees go through training that questions their bias is short-lived and may actually “activate bias or spark backlash” in the long term. Negative incentives have not been shown to create sustainable change. When people voluntarily decide to educate themselves, the message gets across more effectively. There are also

special training programs for managers as decision-makers in the hiring, firing, and promotions process. However, “singling them out implies that they’re the worst culprits, [and] [m]anagers tend to resent that implication and resist the message.”³⁶⁷

Majority males often hold leadership positions in white-collar companies, and many don’t prioritize these efforts because they don’t affect them.³⁶⁸

“Part of the reason no one really cared to do what was necessary to address diversity was because it was an issue that didn’t really affect them.”
-Digiday “Confessions” series³⁶⁹

³⁶³ [Chen, T. P. \(2021, April 19\). Asian-American professionals push for visibility at work. The Wall Street Journal.](#)

³⁶⁴ [Agovino, T. \(2021, June 19\). Asian-Americans seek more respect, authority in the workplace. SHRM.](#)

³⁶⁵ [Josephy, A., & Ad Age Studio 30 \(2021, April 20\). AAPI voices speak out against hate. Ad Age.](#)

³⁶⁶ [Yagi, A., Huang, J., & Ngo, A. \(2021, May 17\). Understanding diversity within AAPI: Disaggregating data and other inclusive practices. Paradigm.](#)

³⁶⁷ [Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. \(2016, July-August\). Why diversity programs fail. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁶⁸ [Kennedy, J. T., & Jain-Link, P. \(2020\). What majority men really think about D&I. Center for Talent Innovation.](#)

³⁶⁹ [Joseph, S. \(2018, November 16\). ‘There’s no people like me in places like this’: Confessions of Black ad exec on advertising’s diversity problem. Digiday.](#)

Potential solutions

DEI experts say to invest not only in DEI initiatives but also in diverse employees and their families to make work more sustainable and inclusive for all.

Reimagine: Reconsider all aspects of what DEI could be at your organization.

Move DEI off the sidelines: “We need to move D&I off the sidelines and fully integrate it into the operating ethos of our organizations. This means organizations need to signal to all of their employees, especially executives and team leaders, that D&I isn’t a second job; it’s a thread that runs through all the work they do.”³⁷⁰

Reimagine DEI with those most impacted by its policies: Shed the “bourgeois skin” of DEI and involve “rank-and-file workers” who are “most impacted by the politics it creates.” People like “union organizers, coalition builders, and activists” over “scientists and business administrators” whose “allegiances are to executives.”³⁷¹

Integrate DEI into all aspects of institutional practices: “Integrate diversity initiatives into routine organizational practices such as recruitment, orientation, training, career-development tools, and succession planning.”³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Kennedy, J. T., & Jain-Link, P. (2020). What majority men really think about D&I. Center for Talent Innovation.

³⁷¹ Tran, K. (2021, March 23). The diversity and inclusion industry has lost its way. Harper’s Bazaar.

³⁷² Diversity Best Practices. Chapter 8: Recruitment, retention, and advancement. Diversity Primer.

Use training that encourages perspective-taking and goal-setting:

Training that encourages employees to mentally walk in someone else's shoes has been proven to “improve pro-diversity attitudes and behavioral intentions,” and these effects persisted eight months later. Goal-setting involves “asking diversity-training participants to set specific, measurable, and challenging (yet attainable) goals related to diversity in the workplace.”³⁷³

Develop training inclusive of all perspectives: “Companies can play a role in helping their employees unlearn harmful stereotypes ... by developing more robust” diversity and equity training inclusive of all experiences.³⁷⁴

Disaggregate data, especially for AAPI: “By collecting more granular data, you can begin to understand the diversity of AAPI employees in your organization.”³⁷⁵

Invest: Invest in your efforts, including collaborative industry efforts and the needs of your employees and their families.

Signal commitment through investment: “Commit to continued investment and research.”³⁷⁶ “How your organization spends its resources (capital, people, capabilities) and what it chooses to measure are the final critical ways it signals what is important. ... It doesn't just mean money – though that is important. It also means allocating the right people, with the right level of seniority, experience, and political connections, to work on the change.”³⁷⁷

³⁷³ [Lindsey, A., King, E., Membere, A., & Cheung, H. K. \(2017, July 28\). Two types of diversity training that really work. Harvard Business Review.](#)

³⁷⁴ [Liu, J. \(2021, May 3\). How the model minority myth holds Asian Americans back at work – and what companies should do. CNBC.](#)

³⁷⁵ [Yagi, A., J. Huang & A. Ngo \(2021, May 17\). Understanding diversity within AAPI: Disaggregating data and other inclusive practices. Paradigm.](#)

³⁷⁶ [Hancock, B., Williams, M., Manyika, J., Yee, L., & Wong, J. \(2021, February 21\). Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector. McKinsey & Company.](#)

³⁷⁷ [Johnson, E. \(2017, June 13\). How to communicate clearly during organizational change. Harvard Business Review.](#)

Integrate DEI into the business model: Show how DEI is within the “operating ethos” of your organization (not just relegated to a chief diversity officer role) and how it boosts careers, particularly among white male managers who prioritize D&I in their teams and hiring practices.^{378, 379}

Make work more sustainable for all: “Reset norms around flexibility.”³⁸⁰ Recognize and assist with stress from “financial issues and social/family obligations.”³⁸¹ Workplace flexibility has been shown to be an important retention strategy for Latinx professionals in particular, for whom family has a high importance.³⁸²

Potential solutions in action

As a response to the letter “Call for Change,” WPP committed to spend \$30 million over the next two years to fund inclusion programs within WPP and support external organizations.³⁸³

Dentsu has started providing “citizen bonuses” to employee resource group leaders to recognize and promote their contributions.³⁸⁴

³⁷⁸ [Kennedy, J. T., & Jain-Link, P. \(2020\). What majority men really think about D&I. Center for Talent Innovation.](#)

³⁷⁹ [Joseph, S. \(2021, March 5\). ‘There’s always money for avocados, but none for Black History Month’: Confessions of a Black ad tech senior marketer. Digiday.](#)

³⁸⁰ [Cory, S., Huang, J., Kumar, A., Prince, S., Krivkovich, A., & Yee, L. \(2020, September 30\). Women in the workplace 2020. McKinsey & Company.](#)

³⁸¹ [Tapia, A. H., & Kvasny, L. \(2004, April\). Recruitment is never enough: Retention of women and minorities in the IT workplace. Proceedings of the 2004 SIGMIS conference on computer personnel research: Careers, culture, and ethics in a networked environment, 84-91.](#)

³⁸² [Gurchief, K. \(2014, October 30\). Understand culture, values to reach, keep Hispanic workers. SHRM.](#)

³⁸³ [WPP. \(2020, June 17\). WPP announces commitments to fight racism and invest in Black talent.](#)

³⁸⁴ [Poggi, J. \(2021, July 6\). How ad agencies are living up to diversity promises – and where they fall short. Ad Age.](#)

CONCLUSION

We can do better. We owe it to the people of our industry, our future workforce, our clients, and consumers to foster inclusion, advancement, respect, well-being, and fair pay to historically excluded individuals in advertising and related fields. This starts with an honest and fearless self-reflection on the factors that are combating inclusion and retention:

1. Subjectivity and ambiguity in creative industries breed bias.
2. The consumer- and client-facing nature of the industry encourages performativity.
3. “Culture fit” criteria promote homogeneity.
4. Psychologically unsafe work environments create unhealthy workplaces.
5. Lack of investment signals a lack of dedication.

It moves beyond a public commitment to specific, measurable actions that directly and positively impact historically excluded professionals. This won't be easy or quick. Characteristics of creative industries – including history, culture, makeup, subject matter, and design – have led us to the current, imperfect state of advertising. But creative organizations also have a huge benefit: the ability of their people to create powerful and novel solutions to tough problems. A greater knowledge of the factors above, combined with a focused commitment from leaders to overcome them, will lead to an empowered, diverse workforce and a healthier, more effective industry.

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ENDNOTES

Coming in early 2022:

ADCOLOR State of the Workplace Study: Retention Outlook Through a DE&I Lens

The ADCOLOR State of the Workplace Study: Retention Outlook Through a DE&I Lens consists of an extensive review of published research, a survey of more than 500 industry professionals from the ADCOLOR community, and insights derived from dozens of industry leaders and influencers via personal interviews.

The good news: Historically excluded employees are finding their way into advertising and its related industries. The bad news: Many are not staying, and of those who stay, many are planning to leave their current positions within the next year.

We hope the challenges, perceptions, and successes shared by these professionals, most from historically excluded communities, who have navigated the advertising, creative, and tech workplaces can assist the industries' institutions in operationalizing systems to become more inclusive and equitable as they work toward sustaining a more stable, satisfied, and diverse workforce.

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