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## DEI & Hybrid Work Environments: A Game Changer or Another Disruptor?

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### 1. Problem Statement

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have been on the corporate agenda for years, and companies actively seek to raise awareness and mitigate disadvantages for the respective marginalised groups. Some examples of DEI agendas include: (i) how to overcome injustice when hiring or promoting staff from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, (ii) equal pay, (iii) gender equality, (iv) disability, and (v) neurodiversity. However, the pandemic has raised two key questions. 1. Which additional dynamics are added to the DEI conversation with remote and hybrid workplace scenarios? 2. How do these dynamics impact the decisions of current and future generations of workers when making career decisions and choosing an employer?

### 2. Levelling the Playing Field

Large consultancies and data-driven organisations are sharing their data and providing insights into who the ‘winners’ and ‘beneficiaries’ are regarding remote and hybrid working, and how this impacts their DEI missions. Dowling et al. (2022) report on a survey conducted by McKinsey highlighting that hybrid work environments can benefit the LGBTQ+ community (13%) and disabled workers (11%). Subramanian & Washington (2022) report that 81% of black knowledge workers in the US prefer hybrid work constructs over on-site scenarios. The good news, so it seems, is that hybrid work options cater better for the needs of marginalised groups compared to in-person work setups. The sad news is that it appears that marginalised groups feel safer and more accepted in their own home than in the workplace and possibly, therefore, prefer virtual working formats. What happens if these marginalised workers cannot easily shift to remote or hybrid working because their jobs do not allow it? Additionally, what about those workers who cannot work remotely as their colleagues can? Whilst more jobs can now be done from home following the pandemic, this is still not the case for all jobs (Desilver, 2020; Milasi et al., 2021). Looking at sectors such as tourism, nursing, and healthcare as well as civilian workers and the service industry demonstrates what could happen to organisations if they turn a blind eye to workers who are not afforded the freedoms and flexibility to work remotely due to their job roles. Across Germany, one can see the ripple effects of the pandemic already when looking at the chaos at airports during the 2022 summer break (e.g., cancelled

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flights, undelivered luggage, long waiting times at check-in and security). There have also been impacts on restaurants or shops in cities (e.g., the need for signs saying that their opening hours must be reduced due to a shortage of staff). Will other companies be impacted next if their blue-collar workers, process engineers, technicians, and other service employees look for jobs that offer them more autonomy and flexibility when it comes to the choice of where to work from? More inequality can also be seen around compensation, where some organisations have opted to pay workers who work remotely a lower salary than their counterparts who work in the office each day. Moreover, why does sexual orientation, gender, or ethnicity determine wages despite the abilities and qualifications being identical to other workers who are paid more? Additionally, why is age sometimes viewed as a benefit due to maturity and experience, whilst at other times it is seen as a disadvantage whereby older workers may be viewed as lacking flexibility and technology skills? Remote and hybrid workplace options might bring positive and promising changes to certain marginalised groups. Still, they could also create new divides – which will be as essential to address as the existing divides that we have been trying to close over decades or even centuries.

### 3. Conclusion

Diversity has always been a given within populations. Equity is hard to obtain, and Inclusion requires active choices and an intentional focus by all of us. Therefore, humanity has struggled with the Equity and Inclusion aspects and will continue to struggle – not just in the corporate world but in broader society. Hybrid and remote working can offer advantages and benefits to some marginalised groups, but at the same time, they can also facilitate the creation of newly marginalised groups. What does that mean for job choice, skill development, and employability? In German, there is a saying, ‘watch out when choosing your career!’. Historically, this meant choosing a job and a career that matched your talents and interests and could be aligned with your family plans. Nowadays, it means considering all of the above AND choosing a job and a career that offers you autonomy and flexibility if you prefer to work remotely. This could mean choosing a career in which you are encouraged to challenge your thinking and the thinking of those around you, where your uniqueness is appreciated and not seen as a consideration, and where Inclusion and Equity are valued and improved. Does such a place exist after all?

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