

Wolfgruber, Daniel; Einwiller, Sabine; Wloka, Michelle

Research Report

Tackling the backlash: Dealing with internal and external criticism of D&I initiatives

Communication Insights, No. 16

Provided in Cooperation with:

Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication – An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation, Leipzig

Suggested Citation: Wolfgruber, Daniel; Einwiller, Sabine; Wloka, Michelle (2022) : Tackling the backlash: Dealing with internal and external criticism of D&I initiatives, Communication Insights, No. 16, Academic Society for Management & Communication, Leipzig

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/267715>

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COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

TACKLING THE BACKLASH

Dealing with internal and external
criticism of D&I initiatives



ACADEMIC SOCIETY
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

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Authors and citation of this publication (APA style):
Wolfgruber, D., Einwiller, S., & Wloka, M. (2022). Tackling the backlash. Dealing with internal and external criticism of D&I initiatives (Communication Insights, Issue 16). Leipzig: Academic Society for Management & Communication. Available online at www.academic-society.net

Published by Academic Society for Management & Communication – An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation
c/o Leipzig University, Nikolaistrasse 27–29,
04109 Leipzig, Germany

Email: info@akademische-gesellschaft.com

Website: www.academic-society.net

Proofreading by Chris Abbey

Photos and illustrations Agnes Prammer (S. Einwiller, p. 3); ÖBB Holding (D. Gansrigler, p.11); Infineon Austria (C. Rafati, p.11); UNIQA Insurance Group (U. Kienast-Salmhofer, S. 11); Deutsche Bahn (C. Epler, p.11); Adobe Stock: p.4 (Sensvector), p. 6 & 13 (bsd studio), p. 9 (VectorMine), p. 16 (Nuthawut)

Layout and graphics by Zitronengrau Design

ISSN 2749-893X

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EDITORIAL



» You can't win everybody over, but you can appease emotions. «

Language is an incredibly powerful tool. When it comes to diversity management, the conscious, sensitive use of language can contribute to empowering employees, weakening bias, and fostering equality and fairness. But language can also be destructive and counteract the progress made towards an inclusive organizational culture. Because of its impact, language awareness was identified by the Communications Trend Radar 2022 (a research project by the Academic Society) as one of five trends likely to change corporate communications.

This issue of Communication Insights focuses on language awareness with respect to diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, and especially the ensuing criticism of it. Language is obviously an important aspect of D&I as far as the use of inclusive language is concerned, and it also plays a key role in criticism of D&I, which is often offensive and hateful. The research builds on our previous project on D&I management and communication in an organizational context. When discussing the findings, practitioners raised the question of how best to deal with destructive, sometimes even hostile criticism or backlash. Whether using gender-sensitive and overall inclusive language, participating in Pride parades, or establishing programs and policies designed to support women, a research team headed by Daniel Wolfgruber and me set out to investigate why negative reactions towards such initiatives emerge, and what companies can do about them.

This publication explains why people speak out and vent their anger, and provides insights into employee criticism of D&I initiatives, public criticism of corporate D&I posts, and companies' responses, as well as important takeaways. Our results are based on an extensive literature review and two empirical studies, for which we conducted interviews with 15 D&I experts in German and Austrian organizations, and analyzed 368 D&I-related posts by German/Austrian and US companies as well as 1,049 critical user comments. We'd like to express our gratitude to all those who supported this research by giving us their time. Our thanks also go to the Academic Society for Management & Communication for making the project possible.

If you're interested in our previous research on D&I management, I recommend Communication Insights #11 on fostering an inclusive work environment through communication.

We hope our findings prove valuable and will be a source of inspiration to further raise language awareness and improve corporate D&I management.

Dr. Sabine Einwiller
Professor of Public Relations Research
University of Vienna, Austria



KEY FINDINGS

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) have become highly relevant concepts, including in the business world. Even though genuine D&I management, which aims at fostering an inclusive work environment, can lead to economic benefits while promoting a fairer world, it is frequently subject to criticism. Here is an overview of our key findings on why negative reactions emerge and what companies can do about them:

- ▶ **Why people criticize D&I initiatives:** Based on an extensive literature review, a model was developed that describes the psychological sequences that elicit criticism and workplace backlash. Voicing criticism of D&I management/initiatives is presented as one of three coping strategies to (re)gain emotional equilibrium following an individual's perceived injustice (p.8).
 - ▶ **Employee criticism of D&I initiatives:** Programs aimed at empowering women and the introduction of policies regarding the use of gender-sensitive (and inclusive) language are particularly likely to trigger critical voices. In a few cases, however, the experts encountered criticism because of a lack of D&I initiatives, which often prompted evaluation and improvement. Criticism is expressed almost exclusively on the social intranet and mostly by middle-aged white men with a somewhat low level of education (p.10)
 - ▶ **Corporate D&I posts and public criticism:** While German and Austrian companies tend to focus more on issues of gender equality, LGBTQIA+*, and diversity in general, the majority of the D&I-related posts by US-based companies addressed ethnicity and to a lesser extent LGBTQIA+ issues.
- Only in half these cases were critical reactions (at least partly) related to the initial D&I content of the post. In the other half, D&I posts were used as a platform to proclaim dissatisfaction with any kind of bad experiences with the company, its behavior, products, or services (p.14).
- ▶ **Companies' responses to criticism:** While critical comments disparaging minorities are often deleted or "hidden" (at least on the social intranet), a response is usually given in the case of justified and constructive criticism. However, frequently merely general statements by the companies are made, which only marginally address the content of the critical comment, or in some cases not at all. Companies are more likely to respond if the criticism is related to their products and services. There is room for improvement here, as this gives the impression that the company cares more about its business than about social justice. This may trigger a veritable (communication) crisis at a time when the public is closely scrutinizing companies and their approach to socially relevant topics. (s.16)
- *LGBTQIA+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research project was headed by Daniel Wolfgruber at the University of Vienna, and consisted of a literature review and two related empirical studies.

1 Literature review

A review of the literature on D&I and criticism from a broad range of disciplines provided the basis for the conceptual underpinning of the research, including communication, psychology, sociology, management and organization studies, gender studies, linguistics, and (moral) philosophy.

2 Semi-structured interviews with 15 experts

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in study 1 with 15 experts working in D&I management or internal communication from 13 companies headquartered in Germany or Austria. Industry sectors included technology, banking and finance, pharmaceuticals, and logistics/transportation. Twelve interviewees worked in D&I and/or HR, and three in (internal) communication.

In the interviews, experts were asked about D&I initiatives (e.g., the implementation and use of inclusive language) and internal criticism of D&I management and concomitant initiatives as well as measures

such as guidelines for gender-sensitive language, the empowerment of women and minorities, and playing host to and participating in D&I-related events.

3 Quantitative content analysis of over 350 D&I-related posts and 1,000 ensuing critical comments

Study 2 dealt with D&I communication and subsequent critical comments on the Facebook and Twitter pages of large companies headquartered in Germany, Austria, and the US. The company sample included the 50 largest German- and US-based corporations according to the Forbes Global 2000 list, plus the nine Austrian companies included in the Forbes list. First, the Facebook and/or Twitter accounts of the selected companies were searched for D&I-relevant posts at any time in 2021. Of the 109 companies, 88 remained in the sample as they had at least one D&I-related post that received one or more critical comments. A total of 368 posts were identified, saved, and coded (Germany/Austria: 145; USA: 223). The number of critical user comments was limited to a maximum of five per D&I post, resulting in the coding and analysis of 1,049 critical comments.

A selection of organizations that participated in this study



15 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts working in D&I management or internal communication from 13 companies headquartered in Germany or Austria.



DIVERSITY & INCLUSION AS A SUBJECT OF CONTROVERSY

WHY THE PROMOTION OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES MAY ELICIT CRITICISM

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are two interrelated concepts intended to enable employees in traditionally disadvantaged groups to develop and flourish. However, it is quite common for (some) people to criticize concomitant initiatives. Theories and extant studies from psychology and management help us to better understand this phenomenon.

As we live in a globalized world in which people from all walks of life and parts of the world frequently interact and do business with each other, it goes without saying that issues related to diversity and inclusion (D&I) have gained much attention in recent decades. Both public and private institutions and organizations have developed and implemented concomitant initiatives such as anti-discrimination laws, gender quotas in leadership positions, and affirmative action programs to counteract phenomena such as (structural) racism, sexism, and homophobia (Hansen & Seiderstad, 2017). Since such socially

relevant initiatives do not stop at an organization's doorstep, diversity management has been established in myriads of organizations, especially in multinational corporations due to their international operations.

D&I INITIATIVES AS A BONE OF CONTENTION

Although diversity management initiatives facilitating an inclusive environment for all employees are rightfully widely regarded as necessary and welcome steps to foster equality among all organizational members, some scholars claim that the equal opportunity

approach is somewhat immoral as it draws on quotas or "positive discrimination"*, possibly legitimizing the unequal treatment of some individuals or groups (e.g., Köllen et al., 2018). Another criticism is that such actions are basically adapted to existing power asymmetries: because inclusion – as a strategic goal – is defined by the organization and its management, it becomes morally ambiguous (Tyler, 2019).

With these arguments in mind, it is not surprising that a phenomenon called **workplace backlash** frequently occurs, which is mostly caused by an individual's perception of organizational injustice. The backlash concept comprises any form of overt or covert resistance from members of traditionally privileged groups (mostly men) to D&I policies and initiatives developed by an organization to promote the advancement of employees in historically marginalized groups (Lee, 2022).

This perception of injustice amounts to a violation of a psychological contract between the organization and the individual perceiving a breach of "promise." It may be induced by poor communication by the (diversity) management team as well as by the individual's personality traits and history (Anderson, 1996).

The perception of a violation, which some scholars also term expectancy violation, is highly subjective and emotional, meaning that the same event can be interpreted by different people as being just or unjust (Burgoon, 2016). Interestingly, previous studies on perceived contract violations in the context of D&I exclusively focus on perceived violations of employees who are members of minorities (e.g., Chrobot-Mason, 2003) and ignore the breaches perceived by members of traditionally privileged groups.

PERCEIVED INJUSTICE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The phenomenon of psychological contract or expectancy violation and its consequences (e.g., workplace backlash) is best described by drawing on basic ideas of appraisal theories since they foreground the interplay of an individual's cognition and emotions. The basic premise is that emotions are responses to a person's appraisal or evaluation of an event or aspects of organizational life that seem relevant to them when trying to make sense of an event or situation.

**preferential treatment to those who are at a disadvantage*

i AT A GLANCE

- **Diversity** refers to demographic differences between organizational members concerning observable (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, physical impairment) and (mostly) non-observable (e.g., education, cognition, sexual orientation) characteristics (Mor Barak, 2015; Roberson, 2006).
- **Diversity management** is a strategic process that aims at harnessing and nurturing the full potential of all employees in order to ultimately foster an

inclusive work environment that also benefits the organization's (business) objectives (Mor Barak, 2017; Ravazzani, 2018).

- Fostering **inclusion** is deemed the main objective of diversity management as it encompasses an individual's sense of belongingness and recognition, psychological safety, and their opportunity to participate in relevant decision-making processes and (work-related) activities (Shore et al., 2018).

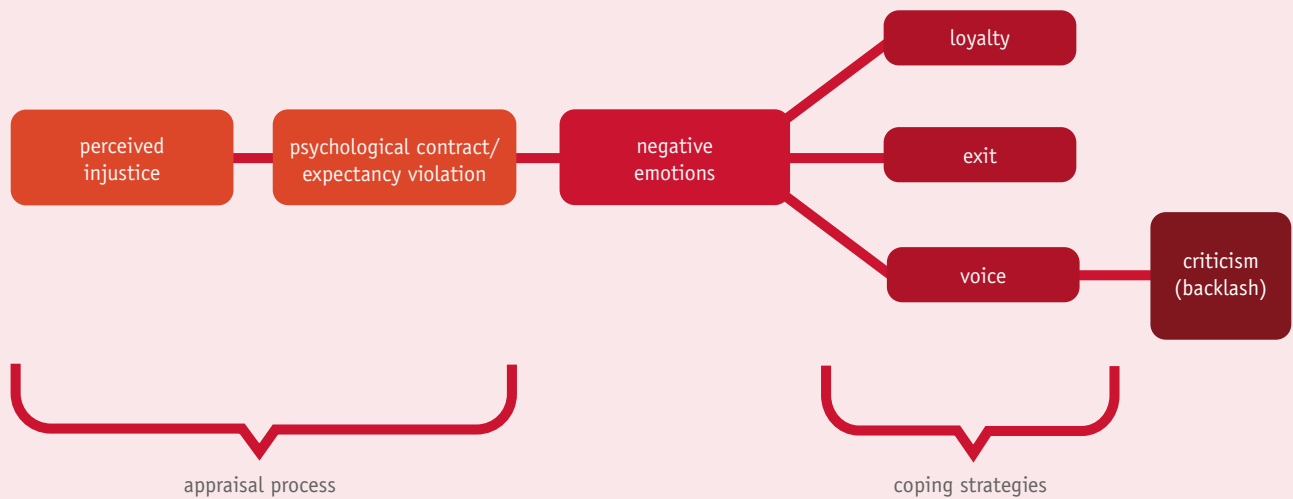
The appraisal of the person–environment interaction and its (emotional and behavioral) consequences are strongly influenced by the individual’s expectations and the information that they draw on, which can be highly subjective and thus biased and distorted (Moors et al., 2013). As soon as an individual evaluates an event or situation as something over which they have no or limited control, emotions such as fear or anxiety may be aroused (Wolfe Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

To cope with these unpleasant emotions and thus restore emotional equilibrium, humans apply various

kinds of strategies. In an organizational context, employees usually choose between three coping mechanisms (Hirschman, 1970):

- 1 **Staying loyal** through reinterpretations of the event or simple inertia
- 2 **Exiting** the relationship with the organization (real or quiet quitting)
- 3 **Voicing** and venting one’s anger or disappointment

How and why D&I initiatives elicit criticism



Voicing criticism is one of three coping strategies to (re)gain emotional equilibrium following an individual’s perceived injustice.

This issue of Communication Insights focuses on voicing criticism of D&I initiatives. In particular, traditionally privileged people (mostly white men) tend to perceive D&I initiatives meant to support members of minorities or disadvantaged groups as unjust and thus as a form of contract or expectancy

violation. This arouses negative emotions such as fear, which the privileged person has to cope with to (re)gain emotional equilibrium. One of the three coping strategies is voicing criticism, which is a form of explicit workplace backlash.



D&I? DON’T WE HAVE ANY OTHER PROBLEMS?

EMPLOYEE CRITICISM OF D&I INITIATIVES AND HOW ORGANIZATIONS DEAL WITH IT

Interviews with practitioners in German and Austrian companies working in either D&I management or internal communication reveal that criticism is uttered mainly by white men. Criticism is chiefly leveled at the use of gender-sensitive language. And it is mainly expressed on internal social media rather than directly to D&I managers. The managers we interviewed dealt with constructive criticism by engaging in dialogue. Yet, when the comments were offensive or hurtful, they were almost always deleted.

As with almost all socially relevant topics, D&I can generate concerns and whip up negative feelings, which may lead to constructive or destructive (and sometimes quite hostile) criticism or backlash. This backlash is highly emotion-driven due to a negative appraisal of

the D&I initiatives implemented or planned by the company, or of concomitant statements and announcements (Klein et al., 2016; Lee, 2022). The interviews with experts revealed that criticism of D&I initiatives occurs in almost all companies.

EMPLOYEE CRITICISM OF D&I INITIATIVES



POLARIZING D&I TOPICS

Most criticism concerns the use of gender-sensitive language as well as programs and policies designed to support women. Regarding the use of gender-sensitive language, critics often emphasized that work is about doing business and not about social issues, asking cynically: “Don’t we have any other problems?” When it comes to exclusive support for women, critics argued that such programs are unjust and discriminate against men. While negative criticism predominated, three of the experts reported that employees also complained that too few D&I initiatives were in place and that some D&I measures were too occasion-related, such as supporting the LGBTQIA+ community solely during Pride Month.



COMMUNICATION ABOUT D&I TOPICS

Interestingly, almost all the experts interviewed said that they had rarely been confronted with criticism directly. This may be due to social pressure, i.e., because it is no longer appropriate to speak out against women’s empowerment or the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. Criticism may also have been dampened by the high-profile of active networks championing such causes. An important reason for the limited explicit criticism, according to the interviewees, was the CEO’s overt commitment to D&I. Nevertheless, all the experts were aware that there are always a few people who are prone to criticize D&I initiatives – albeit on the quiet, meaning that grievances often do not reach those responsible for D&I management. To avoid whipping up feelings and criticism, two experts mentioned the possibility of simply relinquishing the D&I label. By merely communicating the facts or telling stories about an initiative without emphasizing that it is part of D&I management, critics may become less wary and their emotions kept in line.



D&I CRITICS AND THEIR PLATFORMS

The interviewees stated that criticism and backlash usually come from white and heterosexual men in their forties or fifties as well as non-minority employees. For example, older white women also criticized guidelines for gender-sensitive language sometimes, especially when they were mandatory. In most cases, criticism of D&I measures is voiced on the social intranet and not in person to D&I managers. Most people use their real names when commenting on the social intranet, which is indicative of a healthy communication climate. However, there are also anonymous critical comments, which are often highly emotional and rather destructive. In fact, the vast majority of critical comments are emotion-driven.



» In my experience, gender-sensitive language is still the most polarizing issue. Another subject that also causes problems is the provision of support for women, especially women who want to make it to a management position. Some men feel disadvantaged. That happens from time to time. «

David Gansrigler, Diversity Manager, ÖBB Holding

» Quite a while ago, our CEO said that inclusive language was important and that we would implement it. That’s great and really supportive. The commitment from the top is there, and that makes everything a bit easier – at least the implementation of measures. «

Claudia Rafati, D&I Manager, Infineon Austria



» I haven’t yet encountered very much employee criticism on D&I initiatives, probably because it’s a social taboo. You’d be outing yourself as someone who’s totally nasty, and nobody wants that. Ultimately, I think that’s because the social pressure is very high. «

Ulrike Kienast-Salmhofer, Manager Future of Work, UNIQA Insurance Group

» I would say that almost 95 percent of critical comments are emotional. And the remaining 5 percent who try to argue fairly rationally also have a problem with something. Sometimes, I read really crude things – for example, that it is common knowledge that homosexual men buy and sell children. Such things are totally unacceptable and unnecessary. «

Christine Epler, Head of HR Strategy, Innovation & Diversity, Deutsche Bahn



HOW COMPANIES HANDLE INTERNAL CRITICISM OF D&I INITIATIVES

Key takeaways from the interviews for dealing with critical comments:

- ✓ Try to **persuade the critic** of the relevance of the initiative, but only if the critical comment has substance, i.e., the critic has asked a reasonable question without offending anyone.
- ✓ If comments are offensive, hateful, or destructive, it is best to delete them immediately. It may be necessary to threaten **disciplinary action** if the offender can be identified.
- ✓ Welcome substantive criticism and consider **modifying the measure concerned or even making changes** to D&I management.
- ✓ Finally, merely **monitoring** the discussion is sometimes sufficient. This is the case if employees actively defend the content of a critical posting or the initiative to which the posting is responding. These are mostly people who belong to a minority or are affected by the issue raised themselves.

» It is of course much harder to enter into dialogue with the commenter if they fail to base their argument on facts, because then it's simply an emotionally charged discussion. And if no facts are involved, then it all boils down to emotion management. «

Key takeaways from the interviews about communicating D&I content:

- ✓ Have a clear **communication plan** that enables D&I-related criticism to be dealt with promptly, since the internal communication unit is responsible for the social intranet.
- ✓ Discuss comments requiring a more in-depth **cross-departmental** response.
- ✓ Get in touch with your colleagues from **D&I management regularly**. This collaboration will be fruitful – internal communication professionals will learn more about D&I management while D&I management staff will find out about professional communication.
- ✓ Almost all the D&I managers interviewed agreed that **more collaboration with internal communication** would be desirable in order to communicate D&I content more effectively and to better respond to possible criticism.



INFOBOX: What is the difference between gender-sensitive and inclusive language?

Although in practice the terms gender-sensitive and inclusive language are often used interchangeably, there are significant differences. The use of gender-sensitive language is aimed at promoting gender equality in and through language, particularly in languages that distinguish between feminine, masculine, and sometimes also neuter terms such as nouns and personal pronouns (e.g., in German, French, Spanish, Arabic). In contrast, inclusive language goes further as its objective is the inclusion of everyone involved in

acts of communication. Additional features of inclusive language include the consideration of individual language skills, the implementation of screen reader programs, balanced yet authentic visual language (including the use of symbols), the modest use of technical terms and abbreviations, and the avoidance of reproducing stereotypes resulting from the use of stale, sometimes prejudiced terms, idioms, and (verbal) images. For this reason, gender-sensitive language is considered a component of the overarching concept of inclusive language.

Language guidelines in the companies studied

Have you implemented a language guideline?



What is the focus of that guideline?



Is the compliance with the guideline mandatory?



Language guidelines concerning gender-sensitive and inclusive language are quite common in the German and Austrian companies studied. However, most guidelines focus on gender only and are mostly recommendations; only specific departments (i.e., communication, marketing, and HR) are obliged to adhere to these language guidelines.

CRITICISM OF D&I-RELATED POSTINGS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC CRITICISM OF CORPORATE D&I POSTS AND COMPANIES' RESPONSES

The content analysis of companies' Facebook and Twitter pages shows that US companies post significantly more on D&I than companies from Germany and Austria. Among those critical comments on D&I issues, posts addressing ethnicity are prevalent in the US, while gender and sexual orientation predominate in German and Austrian posts. Many companies receive critical comments on their social media sites in response to D&I-related posts, a lot of which are actually off topic. The response rate to critical comments is very low at 10 percent.

Over the last decade, social media have become highly relevant communication platforms for corporate communications – possibly even the most relevant, particularly for B2C companies. Despite the various advantages, such as the ability to reach a large audience affordably and quickly, and interacting with stakeholders, it is precisely the possibility of immediate interaction that makes social media a crisis-prone environment. Hence, companies' handling of such criticism or even outrage and how they respond on social media (assuming they do) requires strategic consideration – after all, it could have severe consequences for an organization's reputation. Therefore, we analyzed (1) how much companies post on D&I, (2) how much criticism they receive, and (3) how they handle critical comments that are posted in response to D&I-related corporate postings.

1 Frequency of and topics addressed by D&I posts

The research shows that in 2021, 105 of the 109 companies analyzed (see p. 5) posted about D&I-related issues at least once. Even though D&I is an ubiquitous socially relevant topic, there are differences between companies headquartered in the US and Germany/Austria concerning not only the number of postings but also the topics addressed. US-based companies communicate significantly more about

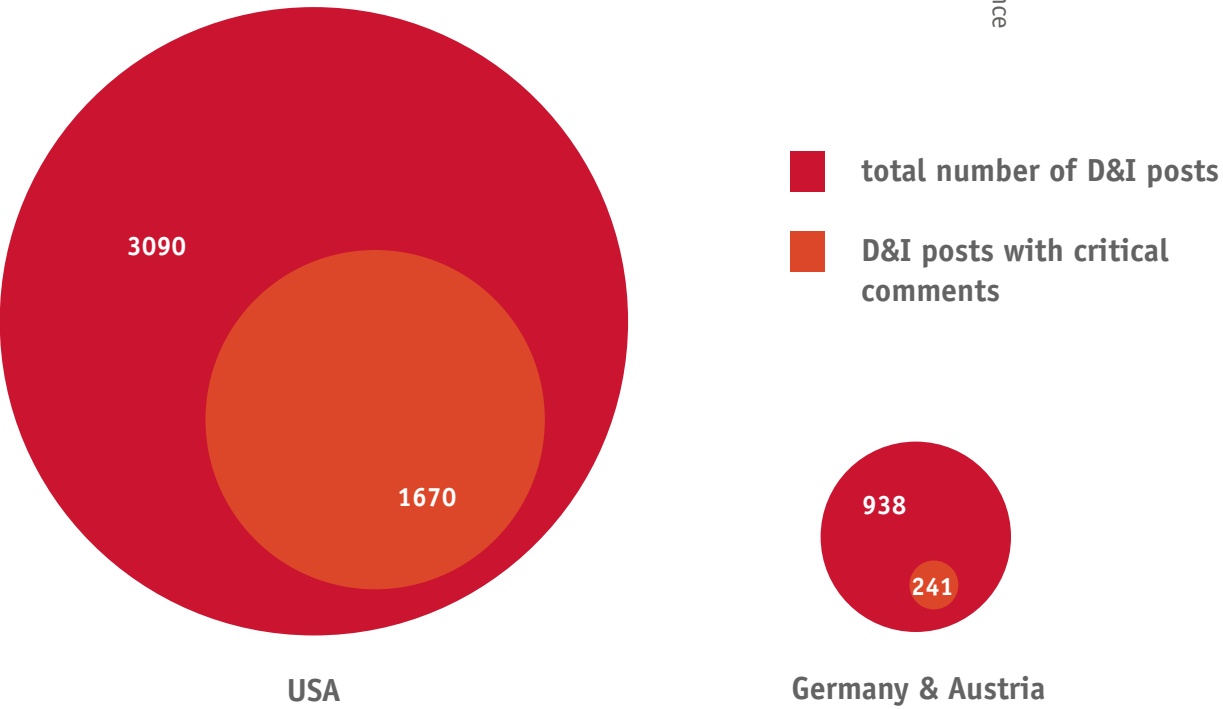
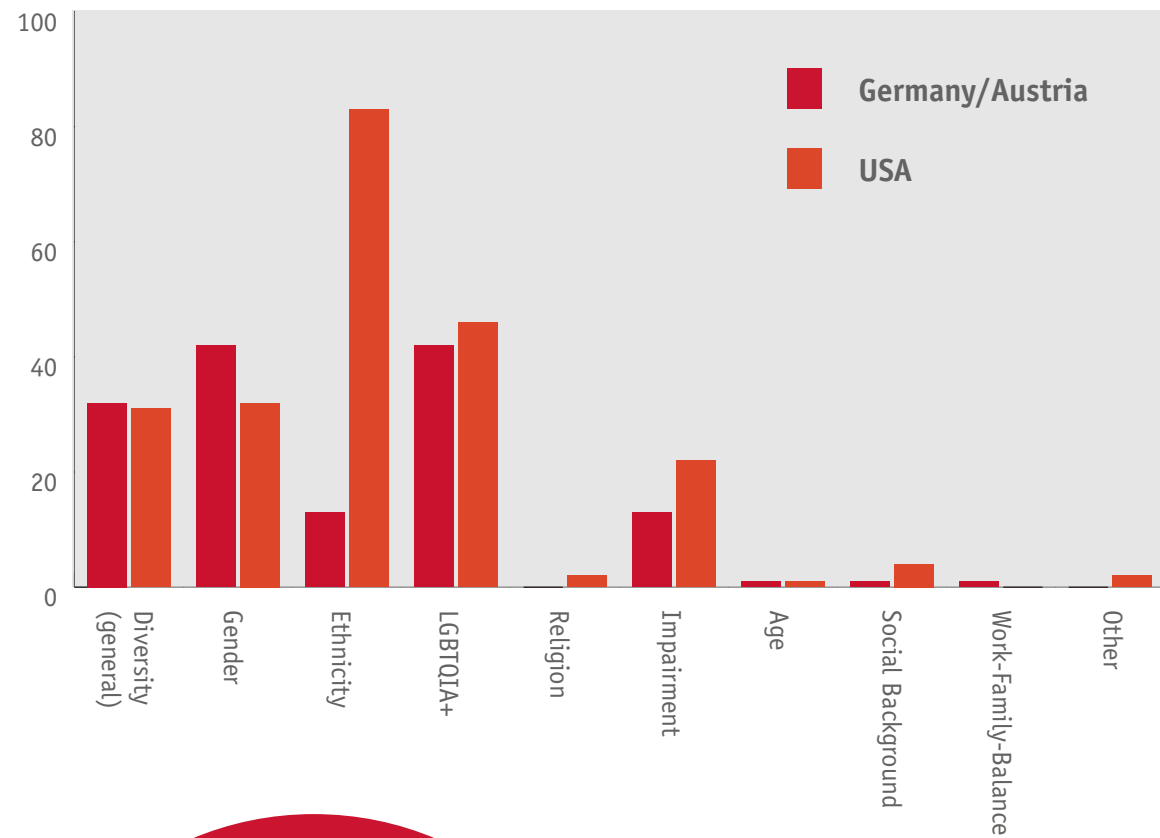
D&I issues (3,090 postings overall; 223 analyzed) compared to companies headquartered in Germany and Austria (938 postings overall; 145 analyzed).

Regarding the topics addressed, around a third of the D&I-related postings by US-based companies focused on ethnicity, for example the Black Lives Matter movement. In proportional terms, companies from Germany and Austria communicated significantly more often about gender equality and the empowerment of women as well as sexual orientation and issues concerning the LGBTQIA+ community. Surprisingly, hardly any posts addressed the diversity characteristics age, religion, or social background, or mentioned the work-family balance.

2 Criticism received

About half the D&I posts attracted critical comments. The analysis of 1,049 randomly selected critical user comments revealed that less than 40 percent were entirely related to the topic addressed in the company posting. More than a third contained complaints about alleged irresponsible behavior concerning the environment and society. Moreover, about 20 percent of the comments complained about the company's products and/or services. Responses were often highly emotional and rather

Numbers and topics of D&I postings



Overall, about a third of the D&I-related postings by US companies address the diversity characteristic of ethnicity, while companies from Germany/Austria address in equal measure issues concerning gender (identity) and the LGBTQIA+ community. In proportional terms, gender (identity) seems to play a significantly more important role in D&I communication in the German-speaking world than in the US.

destructive, and even contained insults directed at the company or other people. Interestingly, the critical comments by German-speaking users are significantly more rational and less abusive than those on D&I-related posts by US companies.

3 Companies' responses to critical comments

The analyses show that companies only respond to a quarter of postings (24%) containing at least one critical comment. Looking at the individual comments, the number of company responses becomes even smaller: companies only respond to one in ten critical comments.

Companies' responses also vary depending on the content of comments. The findings clearly show that companies are less likely to respond to (partly) content-related (i.e., D&I-related) comments or to comments containing accusations of irresponsible behavior toward the environment and/or society. However, when users criticized the company's products and/or services, companies responded in 22% of the cases – three times more than the number of responses to critical comments about D&I and irresponsible behavior. Surprisingly, neither the degree of emotionality displayed in the critical comments nor their (de)constructiveness influenced the companies' response rate.

D&I posts offer a platform for the online public to voice general dissatisfaction



The results of our analysis indicate that the topic of a posting does not necessarily evoke content-related user comments, but instead offers a platform for the online public to voice their dissatisfaction with any kind of bad experience with the company, its behavior, products, or services.

LESSONS LEARNED

HOW TO REDUCE WORKPLACE BACKLASH AND CRITICISM OF D&I INITIATIVES

Programs and initiatives designed to empower and support members of minorities and traditionally disadvantaged groups can arouse feelings of fear and envy on the part of the "privileged", leading to backlash behavior and the voicing of criticism. This research project tried to understand why such reactions arise and what companies can do about them. There are five key lessons learned that underpin the primeness of authenticity, transparency, and aspiration.

1 D&I MANAGEMENT MUST BE AUTHENTIC

Authenticity, already important in every aspect of (business) life, is pivotal in the context of socially relevant topics such as D&I. Most experts interviewed emphasized the importance of the CEO's genuine commitment to D&I management because issues about equality and fairness are taken more seriously throughout the organization and beyond. This also has an impact on the organization's culture and reduces the inclination of critical employees to voice disapproval of D&I initiatives. When the CEO and ideally the whole top management team show their commitment, D&I has a much better chance of permeating all the business processes of the organization.

2 BE TRUE TO YOUR VALUES – BUT WITH TACT

In many parts of the world, companies are expected to genuinely support movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, and express their support for example during Pride Month. However, this is not the case in every country or cultural area. Therefore, although companies are advised to stay true to the values on which their D&I initiatives are based, in some parts of the world it might be better to communicate them more cautiously. On the other hand, saying nothing at all about inequalities and discrimination in certain places can have similarly detrimental consequences for a company as acting upon these issues with all colors flying in places where discrimination is part of the culture. Hence, while companies are encouraged to take a stance on D&I issues, they should do so judiciously and authentically.

3 BE TRANSPARENT AND TELL (TRUE) STORIES

The backlash phenomenon and criticizing D&I initiatives are based on an individual’s negative emotions aroused by perceived injustice. Therefore, communication plays a crucial role in persuading people why these initiatives are intended to compensate for historically grown injustices. To achieve this, it is vital to communicate transparently what D&I initiatives are planned and why, what their purposes are, who will be affected by them, and why they are important for the company, its employees, and other stakeholders. The use of storytelling can be particularly effective here if the people affected openly share their own experiences of unequal treatment at work and in society. However, it is advisable not to put the “D&I” label on every minor measure as this may lead to reactance.

4 YOU CAN’T WIN EVERYONE OVER

Just like in everyday life, it is impossible to convince everyone of something, and that of course also applies to D&I management and corresponding initiatives. Although D&I managers and communicators are advised to listen to and try to persuade each critic at least once, it is highly unlikely that they will manage to convince every employee of the benefits of establishing an LGBTQIA+ network or similar initiatives in the organization. Nevertheless, it is crucial to communicate about this transparently and openly in order to achieve a habituation effect that may lead to the topic triggering fewer negative emotions among critics over time. Even if the person may still not support the D&I measure in question, it may appease their emotions and dampen their desire to criticize it.

5 BE RESPONSIVE, BUT DON’T RESPOND TO EVERYTHING

While some criticism is constructive and can evoke positive change, some comments can be destructive and even offensive. It is important to show an interest in constructive criticism and enter into dialogue with critics to dispel fears, persuade them with facts, or explain the company’s values and point of view in clear but simple terms. However, it is best to simply ignore criticism that is purely emotional without referring to facts. Insults or hateful comments must be hidden or deleted to protect victims. Ideally, third-party advocates will intervene, so that self-cleansing forces are set in motion. At any rate, there should be a D&I communication strategy in place so that internal and external criticism can be responded to in a unitary yet individual way.

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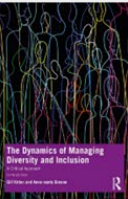
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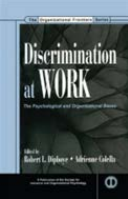
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INTERESTED IN FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT THROUGH COMMUNICATION?



Sabine Einwiller and Daniel Wolfgruber (University of Vienna) investigated the role of strategic communication in supporting diversity and inclusion in companies. The research comprised an extensive literature review and three empirical studies: interviews with 20 D&I experts and 84 employees, and a survey among 1,000 workers.

The COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS “Let’s talk about diversity & inclusion” summarizes the results of the research project and provides guidelines for practitioners on aspects such as how to establish D&I strategies to foster an inclusive work environment.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Why diversity and inclusion pay off: Besides legal requirements, the main reasons for introducing D&I management are of an economic and social nature. The business case stresses the economic benefits of a diverse workforce (e.g., increased creativity and thus stronger innovation, adaptation to a diverse clientele). Meanwhile, the justice case emphasizes the social responsibility of companies to treat all employees (including prospective ones) equally and to enable them to develop their full potential.
- Effects of diversity and inclusion on employees: Employees who feel included in their organization show a higher level of identification, provided D&I management is perceived as authentic. Furthermore, the higher the level of inclusion, the more likely workers are to be loyal to their employer and to show proactive behavior.
- Elements of effective D&I management: The effectiveness of a D&I strategy and its management hinges on the dedication of the management board and the interaction between the managers in charge and the organization’s internal and external stakeholders. Creating an inclusive culture can only be achieved if the D&I strategy is well integrated into the overall corporate strategy and is supported by strategic communication. Fair dialogue on equal terms and the implementation of adequate D&I measures such as providing barrier-free infrastructure, promoting skills

- development, establishing New Work, and cultivating organizational listening are essential elements of effective D&I management.
- Interpersonal communication facilitates inclusion: It’s essential to consider what employees want and expect in terms of internal communication on D&I issues. Mediated communication channels such as articles on the social intranet, videos and podcasts are good for conveying D&I-related information. Employees particularly appreciate formal interpersonal communication, for instance, in the form of workshops, official meetings, and discussions with executives. Additionally, storytelling is a promising approach to reach and engage employees and to motivate them to speak up and take action.
 - Empowering the workforce: Successful implementation of the D&I strategy requires an inclusive and competent leadership style. D&I management needs to enable executives and employees alike to strengthen awareness of diversity and to bring about change in attitudes and behaviors. In addition to training and mentoring programs, issue-specific networks and gamification elements such as competitions (e.g., D&I awards) can encourage employees to actively participate in D&I management. Empathic interpersonal communication, active listening, and the judicious use of humor may persuade skeptics of the benefits of D&I initiatives.

ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a non-profit think tank for corporate communications. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and is currently supported by six professors, four universities, and approximately 40 corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, forward-looking research projects. These extensive, multi-disciplinary studies are designed to support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications. In the past years, more than 20 research projects have been carried out in areas such as value creation, agility, virtualization, digitalization, and automated communication.

Since 2020, the Communications Trend Radar, an annual research project, has identified trends that impact corporate communications. The aim is to help communication leaders to identify emerging challenges and opportunities early on and set the right course.

“Language awareness” was identified by the Communications Trend Radar 2022 as one of five trends likely to change corporate communications.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management dedicated to advancing science and knowledge transfer in the field of communications.

For more information and updates, please visit academic-society.net.

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Academic Society for Management & Communication

c/o Leipzig University
Nikolaistrasse 27-29
04109 Leipzig, Germany

Tel: +49 (0)341 97-35065
Email: info@akademische-gesellschaft.com
www.academic-society.net
ISSN 2749-893X