

PROJECT

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USE PROJECTS TO DELIVER REAL DIVERSITY

Amit Popat and **Jaspal Kaur-Griffin** reveal how using a project management framework can instil equality, diversity and inclusion in your organisation

Unless you are a specialist in equality, diversity and inclusion (ED&I), the subject can seem confusing. The common message we hear among peers is that project management and ED&I do not tend to be the best bedfellows in an organisation – project management is often used as a tool for core strategic programmes, whereas the ED&I agenda can often get tagged on like a poor cousin.

Our experience has shown that this is wrong. Project management can be very effective not just in helping clear the mist that sometimes surrounds ED&I, but also in helping embed ED&I best practice within an organisation. What's more, ED&I can also improve organisational effectiveness if it is embedded in all stages of the project management cycle – yes, they are symbiotic (even a love affair waiting to happen!).

ED&I must be managed. This means having a clear idea of what the organisation wants to achieve in terms of outputs, impacts and culture change. This must involve leaders and employees in the organisation coming together to do the hard thinking



ED&I promotes fairness and inclusion for staff

The CIPD defines a psychological contract as “the perceptions of the two parties, employee and employer, on what their mutual obligations are towards each other”. Organisations with a positive psychological contract with their staff are rewarded with high levels of commitment. This normally translates into better performance, and less sickness and staff turnover. Where this isn’t the case, employees may become disillusioned, resulting in lower performance, commitment, engagement and, ultimately, exit.

Embedding ED&I is easier said than done. It can’t be done by just having a policy or working group, or employing an ED&I specialist. Don’t get us wrong, these are key ingredients, but often organisations over-rely on them and hope that ED&I best practice will simply emerge from these investments. The truth is that ED&I must be managed. This means having a clear idea of what the organisation wants to achieve in terms of outputs, impacts and culture change. This must involve leaders and employees in the organisation coming together to do the hard thinking. Here is where project management is key: it includes a framework for engaging stakeholders, reaching goals and assessing whether targets are met.

Adopting project management frameworks for ED&I sets a tone to staff that this issue is being taken seriously. For late adopters, it sends a clear message that ED&I is becoming a core part of the organisation and, at some stage, they will be expected to align. As project management sets clear measures of accountability, this increases engagement with the agenda and makes clear where there have been successes or failures. Applying project

management principles and frameworks for ED&I can be an organisation’s saving grace.

Reputational, performance and financial enhancement

In an era of choice, customers vote with their feet if they feel an organisation’s ED&I reputation is superficial or is compromised – they may choose to boycott the company and seek alternative options. This can apply to employees too. Stakeholders, including regulators, increasingly expect companies to embed and evidence ED&I best practice as part of their collaborative approaches. If you can present a well-thought-through ED&I project plan to showcase the investment and seriousness of your organisation’s commitment, your reputation, profit and trust could all rise. Research from both McKinsey

Applying project management principles and frameworks for ED&I can be an organisation’s saving grace

and Deloitte suggests that companies with more inclusive cultures are twice as likely to meet financial targets, three times more likely to be high performing, six times more likely to be innovative and eight times more likely to have better business outcomes. ED&I pays in every sense of the word.

At the heart of the ED&I agenda lies anti-discrimination legislation prohibiting unlawful discrimination (for example, in the UK we have the Equality Act). There have been many cases where companies have breached equality laws and paid hefty fines for poor practice. Project managed ED&I would enable



well-meaning policies to come to life, and aligning ED&I project objectives with ED&I policies will evidence that an organisation is not only complying with the law but embracing its spirit – and it is this spirit that engages both hearts and minds and will drive positive change.

Best practice means going beyond compliance, preventing ED&I from being just a tickbox exercise, and instead one where policies are implemented and benefits evidenced. Good project management can provide this evidence.

Why using a project management framework actually works

Project management can be a very useful vehicle for stand-alone diversity initiatives as well as more strategic endeavours. The structure project management can give well-meaning ED&I programmes provides a foundation to properly assess the problem, engage and secure the buy-in of stakeholders, address any risks, ensure there are clear goals and, most importantly, provide key points at which to measure impact and learn lessons.

It can also contribute to mainstreaming and embedding of ED&I within an organisation. If ED&I is given the same project management emphasis as wider strategic programmes, then the assumption is that it is as much a core part of the business. Consequently, staff will give it the same level of interest and attention.

Having the programme sponsor work with an ED&I professional from the outset is imperative to help ensure that the programme initiation document (PgID) sets out the vision and change that needs to be delivered through individual projects, and that the programme of work defines the outcomes and outputs that will allow for the change to happen. Individual projects now will have a remit that they need to deliver, and this makes sure that change is being delivered in bite-sized projects that are manageable.

The PgID will be a good way to start thinking about what the project intends to achieve, what expertise is needed, and how much time and budget will be needed to deliver it. Having the vision for the programme championed by a programme sponsor and strongly endorsed by the senior management team will be a good way for stakeholders to understand the benefits that will be gained from embarking on this programme of work. Project team members could also be trained to become ED&I champions within the organisation, helping to ensure that the message is not only being received top-down from the programme sponsor, but also being delivered through concrete tangibles that individuals at all levels in the organisation are working together to deliver.

Running a cross-departmental programme of work also allows for colleagues from different departments to work together outside the usual remit of their day jobs. This fosters a shared culture of development and accountability and could help maintain enthusiasm for the proposed changes and benefits it will bring.

How to use change models to help overcome resistance

Embedding an ED&I agenda is similar to project work in that you embark on a journey where change needs to happen (sometimes on a large scale) and where the outcomes may not be crystal clear at the very beginning. Having a good understanding of how knowledge is disseminated within your organisation is imperative, as it will help

TOP TIPS TO MAKE CHANGE HAPPEN

- 1 Create a safe space for colleagues to discuss issues related to ED&I in an organisation. This helps ensure that everyone can share their fears and concerns about discussing these matters in a way that is safe and non-judgemental.**
- 2 Have the equality and diversity message championed at all levels of the organisation, from the programme sponsor to ED&I champions.**
- 3 A project management framework that encompasses ED&I considerations at all stages of the project life cycle will ensure that these are not just a mere afterthought.**
- 4 Embedding ED&I considerations into organisational work practices and policies enhances the psychological contract with staff, which could lead to financial, reputational, performance and wellbeing benefits.**
- 5 Having regular activities, from knowledge-sharing sessions to workshops and seminars, to increase ED&I organisational knowledge on an ongoing basis will maintain programme momentum and enthusiasm.**



Having organisation-wide knowledge-sharing sessions where staff can listen to what benefits the programme will bring, and what will be involved in making the transition for them at a practical level, will get them thinking

overcome resistance to change and help embed new practices and processes.

Change models can be extremely helpful in how best to get change accepted into an organisation, and Kotter's eight-stage approach to strategic change works well in large, structured organisations. As it suggests:

- 1 Establish a sense of urgency.
- 2 Create the guiding coalition.
- 3 Develop the change vision.
- 4 Communicate the change vision.
- 5 Empower employees to deliver those changes.
- 6 Generate short-term wins.
- 7 Consolidate gains to produce more change.
- 8 Ensure that those changes and the benefits get anchored in the new approaches to culture in the organisation.

This is not a change that will happen overnight, but having a developed programme plan that maps out what is to be achieved in each of the tranches ensures that this becomes a programme of work that can be sustainably delivered over time.

It is also important that a variety of ways of disseminating the key ED&I messages within the organisation are used that take into account the different learning styles that people have (as championed by Honey and Mumford). Having organisation-wide knowledge-sharing sessions where staff can listen to what benefits the programme will bring, and what will be involved in making the transition for them at a practical level, will get them thinking and conversations flowing. Seminars and workshops where role playing could be initiated (for example: you are a disabled mother coming back from maternity leave – what concerns could you have as you prepare to return to work?) could make participants confront a reality that may not be their own. This could decrease 'othering' and increase awareness and empathy for their colleagues, thereby making for a more inclusive work environment. ED&I champions can then further embed the key messages

discussed at the various workshops and learning sessions from the ground up.

Like many change programmes, well-delivered ED&I practice works outside the comfort zone. ED&I is about organisational change, and project management can provide a sense of security in knowing that the change is not just going in its own direction, but is held within a trusted framework.

How project management can contribute to embedding ED&I best practice

Project management can contribute to embedding ED&I best practice by ensuring that ED&I considerations are undertaken at all key stages of the project life cycle. The embedding of Equality Impact Assessment forms (EIAs) as part of a PgID, for example, will help ensure that any negative impacts from embarking on the proposed project can be discussed and mitigated.

Project managers who are core to motivating and driving project teams could be trained to be ED&I champions and to spot when project deliverables could have adverse ED&I implications. The relationship is symbiotic – project management could itself be more inclusive by making the language of project management more accessible and easier to understand by all in the organisation, and could result in the demystifying of both project management and ED&I processes. Ultimately, both project and ED&I professionals want the same thing, which is making processes work better so people are treated in the best possible way to achieve the best possible outcomes. In our minds, a happier marriage than that cannot be envisioned.

The views in this article are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect those of their employers

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