Meritocracy in Organizations”

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Disrupting Fairness: How DEI (Diversity Equity Inclusion) Backfire Challenges Meritocracy in Organizations

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to identify the unintended negative consequences of DEI known as 'DEI Backfire' and its impact on meritocracy in creating fair workplace.

Methodology: The study employed qualitative research design conducted in 9 DEI implemented organizations of different industries, covered (n=9) participants, positioned at various managerial levels were undergone semi-structured interview were analysed using grounded theory approach and performed axial coding to conduct thematic analysis

Findings: The findings present a conceptual framework that includes both intended and unintended consequences of DEI and proposal of possible strategies to resolve the issue of DEI backfire in creating a fair workplace.

Implications: Theoretical implications depict the formation of conceptual framework with limited factors, that might lack broad insights at an integrated level. Practical implications would arise depends upon the acceptance of resolution strategies in regards with nature and type of organization.

Originality: This paper presents how the negative consequences of DEI initiatives/DEI backfire impact meritocracy in a workplace and resolution strategies with the help of conceptual framework.

Keywords: DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) Backfire, Meritocracy, Qualitative

1 Introduction

Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives has been aroused as pivotal in forming milestone for creating inclusive workplace environments. They are being promoted by various organizations to show their commitment to reflect their ethical and social responsibility. DEI initiatives attract and retain distinct talents, while inclusivity promotes the diverse experiences and perspectives of the people, helps in contribute to organizational goals in the form of mentoring, diversity performance evaluations (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). Additionally, a diverse workforce also fosters innovation and novel approaches for problem resolution, especially in a dynamic workplace (Kiradoo, 2022). Organization spent notable time and effort in DEI initiatives in the form of tying diversity metrics to compensation programs etc. This was evident in case of companies like McDonald's, Starbucks etc. Despite well-intentioned efforts to promote such initiatives, it ends up in mixed results and unintended negative consequences as 'DEI backfire' challenging meritocracy in an organization (Hyter C Michael & Tapia T Andres, 2015; Leslie, 2019). It is evident in case of companies like LinkedIn, Amazon and Google facing issues in hiring quotas on the fronts of DEI, sidelining meritocracy and creating resentment among employees.

The fast pace and growth of globalization since 1990s, followed by global crisis and germination of associated social movements connected with the expected ethical and social responsibility business practices from stakeholders persuaded the need and promotion of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within an organization. Moreover, the increasing pressure over organizations for implementing DEI practices demanded to take subsequent actions on building a diverse, equitable and inclusive workspaces (Adediran, 2021). The notion of estimated results in the form of positive intended consequences of DEI always withstand and strengthens fairness in a workplace, However, the aspect of negative consequences/DEI backfire often shakes the notion of fairness and meritocracy in the workplace through various forms.

The term Meritocracy as coined by Michael Young in 1958 often enrooted and flourished as a conventional culture and identity of the organization depicting the symbol of fairness. Gagné proposes meritocracy as a shift of focus from "intellectually gifted"-one having dominant intellectual aptitude to "academically talented"- one dominates superiority in academic performances, as a prior quality of an individual, who excels in performance stage (Francoys Gagné, 2011; Dimaano, 2011). The principal theory behind meritocracy is 'hard work will pay off, and each person will be judged fairly based on results and rise to the fullness of their potential' (Hyter C Michael & Tapia T Andres, 2015). A true meritocracy should consider

every proportional representation of diverse kinds of talents, but the possibility of rise and fall of such talent is completely based on merits; and not based on diverse backgrounds (Hyter C Michael & Tapia T Andres, 2015). Moreover, it furnishes accountability of the employees and motivates them to develop their skills and capabilities for enhanced productivity and profitability. Meritocracy has long been a foundational stone in determining an employee identity through rewards and bonuses based on one's hard work, performance and capabilities, despite focussing on his personal networks and connections (Wackym et al., 2024). However, the fresh aspect of DEI initiatives for promoting inclusive workplace unexpectedly backfires and compromises the notion of meritocracy (Konrad et al., 2021). This challenges fuels tensions and conflicts between advantaged meritocratic and DEI marginalized groups, in the name of identity-validation threat, over perception of organizational fairness and justice.

Maintaining a co-existing culture quest the need for integral values and commitment from prospective stakeholders for embracing the DEI-meritocracy paradox is a challenge. In fact, both the concepts are interrelated and their balanced combination supports the pillars of social and organizational justice. However, the aspect of DEI backfire worsen the situation and the organization find it difficult to tackle backfire issues creating a significant gap to maintain a balanced culture. This study indulges in analysing the intended and unintended consequences of DEI initiatives, and the role played by unintended negative consequences-DEI Backfire in compromising meritocracy by proposing a conceptual framework for maintaining a DEI-meritocratic work culture and proposal of possible strategies to create a sustainable inclusive workplace.

2 Literature and theoretical framework

The concepts of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and meritocracy as defined by different authors are as follows:

T. H. Cox and Blake (1991), defines Diversity as the wide range of human variations; factors such as colour, origin, sex, age, sexual preference, disability and other features. It means all the easily observable as well as personal aspects and personal experiences of the person. Bell & Norwood (2007) defined Equity means that individuals do not suffer injustice and is said to major in the negation of discrimination, prejudice and unequal Treatment. It supports the important belief that everyone to should have an equal chance to achieve success. T. Cox (1994) referred. Inclusion means making people feel wanted and useful in a variety of roles and with a full range of abilities, opinions and perspectives(Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan, 2023). The well-intended initiatives of DEI practices can always have a possibility of backfire, when the outcomes not only meet the expected standards, but ends in negative impacts. This paved way for the conception of the DEI backfire as put forward by Leslie et al (2019) that, when "a diversity initiative affects the intended outcome (i.e., diversity goal progress) but does so in an undesirable direction instead of in the intended desirable direction (e.g., decreased target representation)"(Burnett & Aguinis, 2024). The principle of meritocracy as a social order in which "merit or talent is the basis for sorting people into positions and distributing rewards". The idea of meritocracy was used and coined by Michael Young in a satirical tale called, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033* (Young Michael, 1958). He defined the concept as intelligence plus effort. He described "Meritocracy" as a competing society that accepts inequitable gaps of income, wealth, and social position taking into consideration talents, merit, competencies, motivation, and effort (Young Michael, 1958; Poocharoen & Brillantes, 2013).

The rationale for DEI initiatives is rooted in social movements, like MeToo and Black Lives Matter, further exacerbated by the social instability linked to the COVID-19 pandemic which adversely impacted many vulnerable communities (Ferraro et al., 2023). The existing tensions and conflicts arise, between the marginalized and advantaged groups for ease of access for opportunities and resources manipulated themselves as they strive and struggle, over status, power, and identity. Hence, these assumptions have been expanded with the help of three principal theory, that fits into this approach. They were, Tajfel and Turner (1986)'social identity theory'; Tomaskovic-Devey (1993)'social closure theory'; and Ridgeway (1991) 'status characteristics theory'. These three theories have been presented with regards to three levels (psychological, relational, material) as an assumed criteria for the holistic development and well-being of an individual personally and professionally.

At psychological level 'social identity theory' by Tajfel & Turner, (1986) established that identity groups tends to struggle and compete for status to affect individual self esteem. By striving to seek a self-positive view, individuals indulge in biased judgment and behaviour favouring in-groups over out-groups. Individuals create a self-concept based on their identity within an ingroup and began to compare themselves

with the outgroup. Such self-categorization stresses them to made pride over their social group identity (marginalized-meritocratic) over their individual identity. However, at relational level, 'social closure theory' by Tomaskovic-Devey (1993) argues that competition between identity groups for connections with powerful individuals especially in creating munificent interpersonal networks. Channelling of scarce opportunities and sponsorships for the informal network members were sourced by powerful individuals; and identity groups hoard connections with such powerful in-group members to monopolize the resources in the workplace, fuelling inter-group tensions. At the material level aspect, the 'status characteristics theory' by Ridgeway (1991) highlights, prevailing competition between identity groups for access towards capability-enhancing resources. Sequentially, evident records of unequal resource access under prolonged historical conditions transforms, 'social identities' into 'status characteristics' creating standard benchmark, that members of high-resource-access groups as superior performers and members of low-resource-access groups as inferior ones, triggering inter-group grudges. In detail, social identity could result in discrimination, whereas social closure and social status could target rise in biases and inequities, that ultimately shake the workplace culture internally and reputation externally (Konrad et al., 2021). Specifically, DEI strives for integral values to promote inclusivity favouring marginalized groups, whereas meritocratic principles stand for competence and abilities, as their explicit values. Hence, the aspect of DEI initiatives and Meritocratic principles creates an identity-validation threat, in the loop of interlocked values underpinning competence and integrity between marginalized and advantaged groups (Konrad et al., 2021).

Building on these theories, this study stresses the concept of both DEI initiatives and meritocracy, as a coexistent paradox, in which the improper balance of DEI initiatives outlining DEI backfire being an inevitable hurdle and has a huge impact meritocratic principle in the form of employee turnover, reduced self-esteem etc. Hence, conflicts arises out between inter-groups, have the calibre to distort the peaceful work climate and meritocratic environment. The threat and competition prevailing between the two groups, creating a significant research gap on failure in addressing the negatives of DEI initiatives (DEI backfire) and leveraging their interrelatedness with Meritocracy as a reason for posing the research questions:

RQ1: What are the unintended consequences of DEI initiatives that challenge fairness in the organization?

RQ2: How do organizations promote DEI initiatives in line with meritocracy in the workplace?

This study indulges in answering the above research questions and proposing a conceptual framework with proposed strategies for maintaining a DEI-meritocratic work culture and inclusive workplace.

3 Methodology

The study employed a Qualitative enquiry framework to explore the research questions. The steps have been illustrated as follows in figure 1. The scopic study focussed on 9 DEI implemented organization (min past 2 years) of different industries such as Healthcare, IT, Retail, Education, Banking etc. The semi-structured questionnaires were framed and retested with other 2 experts in the research field. The process of data collection followed the phenomenological aspect; in order to make an in-depth understanding of what the participants experience and their interpretation on real-life context concerning the study. The data analysis process being done employing axial coding and thematic analysis and the final results were validated using inter-rated reliability test with the help of expert researchers.

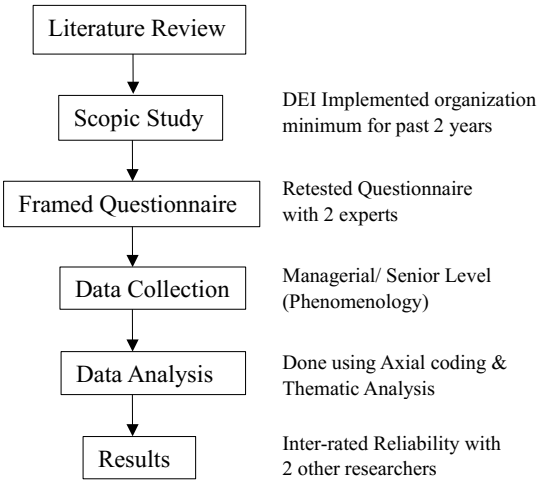

Figure 1 Steps followed in Methodology
Source: Author (s) work

3.1 Participants

The study uses a descriptive design to collect the needs assessment data. We conducted the study in 9 organizations of different industries, which involves healthcare, Education, IT, Retail, Banking, Logistics industry, etc; recruited through convenience and snowball sampling to ensure wider representation of participants from diverse industry types. We contacted the organization through key resource persons, who has endorsed with dealing of practical support for academic persons; which helps to scrutinize participants based on pre-defined criteria (Managerial level positioned participants with a minimum experience of 2 years). Such criterion applied eligible participants have dealt with the intended and unintended consequences of DEI directly. The participants stated their current position as CEO, Team leader, Middle-level manager, General manager etc as illustrated in table 1. The age of the participants varies from 30s, 40s or 50s. Even though age was not an essential criterion, they referred with to reflect on their career journey and wonderful experiences on their way ahead to such top-level positions.

Table 1. Details of sample organization and participants

Respondents Code	Industry (Outlet)	Gender	Level of Seniority	Years of Experience	DEI implemented years	Company started	Annual Turnover (USD)	Total employees current
RM01	Healthcare	Male	General Manager	12	5 years	1987	USD 696 Million	300
RM02	Information Technology	Male	Middle level Manager	6	More than 3 years	2013	USD 750 Million	500
RM03	Retail	Male	Senior level Manager	2	More than 3 years	1952	USD 101.77 Million	35
RF04	Education	Female	Team lead head	2.5	More than 3 years	2005	N/A	300
RM05	Banking & Insurance	Male	Middle level Manager	4	More than 5 years	1992	USD 790 Million	54
RM06	Logistics	Male	Middle level Manager	2.5	More than 5 years	1980	USD 1.6 Billion	500
RM07	Retail	Male	CEO	12	More than 15 years	1998	USD 1.96 Million	100
RF08	Banking	Female	Team lead	9	More than 12 years	1853	USD 18.09 Billion	57
RM09	Banking & Corporate	Male	Senior level	12	More than 5 years	1931	USD 36 Billion	53

Source: Author (s) work

3.2 Procedures and Data Analysis

In the month of November and December 2024, virtual and telephonic semi-structured interviews were conducted on individual basis. The above-mentioned interview design was selected to have an interactive and descriptive flow of participants incidental experiences and to ignore the gap between the researcher and participant. It involves both open-ended and close-ended questions and the interview lasts between 25-30 minutes at the minimum. The interview transcription was merged into a Word document and the link to the document was shared with the participant. The transcripts also gave the participants another chance to agree to the utilization of their data in the study and self-check. The recorded files deleted of all names of the companies, possible names of the participants and any other pertinent or identifiable data. In addition, the script given to the interviewee were given a coded number and the only person who knew the correlation between name and the number is the interviewer.

Qualitative research involves process, meaning, fieldwork, description, and inductive reasoning (Cresswell, 2013). To analyze the interview data, we used Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). We transformed iterative, referent, everyday situations, words, and expressions into substantive themes and then connected the themes with existing theory (Charmaz, 2014). Combining the data themes with theory yields novel ideas about the phenomenon and contributes to eventual eradications of norms. The interview transcript data was data cleaned to adjust the informal words and vernacular languages associated and replaced with alternatives to make the content reflect better. The data cleaned transcript was encrypted and deciphered into 17 evolving codes. The next activity that was carried out was axial coding with the view of identifying the links and connections between significant categories as illustrated in table 2. Last but not the least, we constructed three sources of explanation that led us to the formulation of the survey.

Table 2. Some of the coded responses of participants from organization

S.No	Respondents	Responses	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Themes
1	RM01 General Manager Experience: 12 years DEI implemented=3 years Industry: Healthcare	"I have observed an unintended consequences such as the perceptions of the reverse discrimination. The incident, where a high performing employee felt overlooked for a promotion in favor of meeting diversity goals"	high performing employee felt overlooked for a promotion in favor of meeting diversity goals.	Reverse Discrimination/Inequality/ Employee preference	**Unintended Consequences of DEI initiatives**
2	RM02 Middle level manager Experience: 6 years DEI implemented= More than 3 years Industry: Information & Technology	"what I have seen is like during the pride month, we change our logo color and, keep posting on LinkedIn that we are actively engaged in this programs And to get that content, we do some random activities with the HR planning those things"	during the pride month, we change our logo color and, keep posting on LinkedIn	Brand Image/ Reputation/ Social Acceptance/ Fame-popularity	**Intended Consequences of DEI initiatives**
3	RF08 Team lead Experience: 9 years DEI implemented=8 years Industry: Banking	"We are having a separate team to handle any discriminations or disparity related issues known as "speak out". So, here, the best thing is like neither the victims no need to reveal their name or their identity, nor the team to the targeted individual. It will be kept confidential by the team. In case of any criticism against such vulnerable groups through bullying attitude, speech or words either in social media, colleague whatsapp group, or in person on floor backed by an evidence support means, management will constitute a heated panel discussion and whomsoever, the target will face his monetary loss on that consecutive year"	a separate team to handle any discriminations or disparity related issues known as "speak out". So, here, the best thing is like neither the victims no need to reveal their name or their identity, nor the team to the targeted individual	Redressal Committee/ group/ panel	**Strategies by firms to tackle DEI initiatives in line with meritocracy**

Source: Author (s) work

4 Findings

The consequences of DEI initiatives in an organization has been divided into 2 parts as intended positive outcomes and unintended negative outcomes as illustrated clearly in figure 1. Even though the positive outcomes of DEI initiatives strive to maintain its level best to acquire an inclusive, fair and harmonious work culture, the unexpected negative outcomes such as bias, discrimination resulting ingroup and outgroup formation tarnishes the fair play disrupting meritocracy in an organization. However, adoption of certain strategies like effective DEI committee, accountable system could tackle and resolve such issues to an extend.

4.1 Intended and unintended consequences of DEI initiatives

The intended consequences of DEI initiatives will result in a positive outcome depicting high growth-stake assuring productivity accompanied by fair and harmonious work culture in the long-term, whereas, the unintended negative consequences will likely result in outlining DEI Backfire in an organization, which down lifts the notion of meritocracy and fair play in an organization as illustrated in Figure.2.

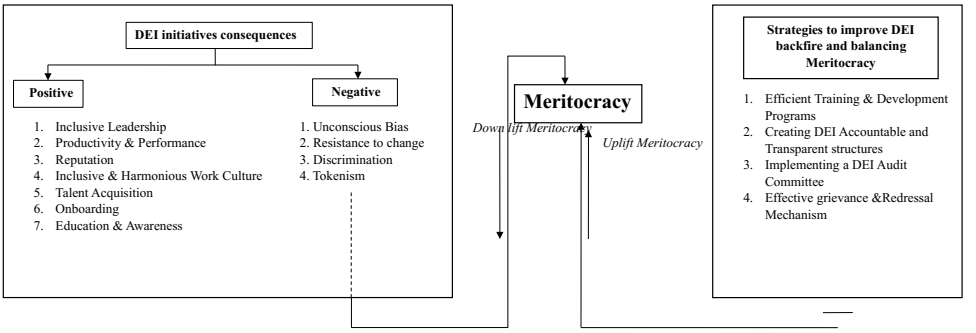

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of DEI Backfire affecting Meritocracy in the workplace

Source: Author (s) work

Intended positive consequences of DEI Initiatives

The possible intended positive consequences of DEI initiatives involves inclusive leadership, improved performance and productivity, Reputation, harmonious work culture, diverse talent acquisition, onboarding, education and awareness, etc has presented in detail in Appendix I.

Unintended Negative consequences of DEI initiatives compromising Meritocracy

The possible unintended negative consequences of DEI initiatives affecting meritocracy were unconscious bias, Resistance to change from employees, tokenism and discrimination. These all factors not only compromise the principles of DEI, leading to DEI backfire, but also disrupting the notion of fair play and meritocracy in the workplace.

Unconscious Bias

Bias can be an attitude or opinion held in advance regarding ascertain people, things, or groups that puts them in a less favorable position than others. It can be either conscious (intentional) or unconscious (unintentional) and it is not confined to race and ethnicity. The UCSF's Office of Diversity and Outreach (2021) definition of unconscious bias as "the array of social stereotypes about certain groups which are formed in the subconscious minds of people outside of their conscious awareness". Everyone has some level of biases because of an extended time of oppression and discrimination that results to prejudices, marginalization, and similar previous experiences. The prejudices developed based on stereotyped beliefs about different social and identity classes make people sort their sociophysical environments (Adediran, 2021). Adediran (2021) asserts that, unconscious bias is more pervasive than conscious bias and regularly contradicts with other's conscious principles, provoking unconscious sentiments and beliefs. Harji et al (2023) further contends that, pre-existing unconscious bias is considered as the root cause for majorly observed behaviours. As mentioned by RM01

> 'meritocracy is rarely achieved in its purest form because of the presence of structural biases and informal networks often undermine the meritocratic principles and create issues'

These biases can have indirect influences on hiring decisions, promotions and performance evaluations and causing DEI backfire, thereby disrupting the fairness and transparency in the system as well (Kiradoo, 2022). The organization can provide training to staff on recognizing and mitigating biases. Rosenkranz et al. (2021) emphasized that, bias can be overlooked by putting improved efforts on rationalizing one's thought process, mindfulness, and self-regulation. Adediran (2021), proves that, implementing programs like blind hiring practices, could eliminate potential biases resulted often from reviewer perception of certain demographics. Incorporating 360-degree feedback from peers into evaluations is also one of the effective ways to minimise biases and nurture an inclusive workplace nurturing meritocracy.

Resistance to change

Resistance to change is one of the symbol for the improper implementation of DEI policies. This is because, DEI policies are controversial and subject to public debates concerning their necessity and success probability (Crosby et al., 2003). Opposition can be especially fierce from members of advantaged groups who doesn't directly benefit from such policies. As advantaged group conventionally occupy positions of power and privilege in organizations in the society, they play an influential role in implementing DEI policies (Iyer, 2022). Lack of engagement is another common passive form of organizational employee reluctance to accept new policies and DEI frameworks raises tensions and workplace conflict. As stated by RM02,

> 'Everyone is respecting each other in our company, I don't think a DEI initiative is required because being a startup company, we are more focussing on how we can get things done quickly, thereby will only look for, education background and the experience of candidates'

Kiradoo (2022) contends that, It is the responsibility of the organisations to communicate the importance of DEI and the benefits associated to address resistance for creating a productive and inclusive workplace. Further, Organisations can cultivate and enhance DEI strategies by having the employees as a guarantee of DEI culture towards a meritocratic workplace for the long term growth of the employees.

Discrimination

Discrimination, defined as "the treatment or consideration of or making a distinction in favor of or against a person or thing based on the group, class, or category to which that person or thing belongs rather than on individual merit" (Chantarat et al., 2023). Chantarat et al (2023) proves that, the females reporting direct discrimination due to gender was comparatively higher than that of males as stated by RM01,

> 'Even the gender disparities issues being an implicit hurdle, because women have their own problems and issues. They find it difficult to get promoted in an organization in the long-run'

Further, followed by disparities in job promotions, compensations, access to professional development opportunities and inappropriate behaviours of colleagues were reported most common in workplace environments (Matovu et al., 2025; Baker et al., 2024). Boulom et al (2021) reported that, Microaggression is another broad term challenge that includes micro assault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Micro assaults are physical, verbal, and nonverbal acts that tell recipients they are of a lesser value. Microinsults are insensitive to a person's background. This backfire causing violation of meritocratic principles in this case is because of the inter- group's illegitimate power and status. Such status of implicit symbolic threat between the groups, that focuses on the perceived illegitimate changes distorts the firm's standard operating procedure. Thus creating an inter groups conflict between DEI-merit groups resulting in discrimination, biases and so on (Iyer, 2022).

Tokenism

Tokenism refers to the "individual's limited participation in the organization she works due to his/her social category (gender, ethnicity, etc.) and therefore, his/her limited acceptance in the job and/or occupation means that the individual is accepted as "token" (Kanter, 1977). Brand tokenism (the practice of going through the motions of, at least, offering a representation to members of a specific underrepresented group, or recruiting at least one or two of them makes it easy to see how even the corporate brands can be fake (Burgess et al., 2021). Organisation should ensure that it recruits and promote people who are qualified for the job and deserving to have the job without any discrimination of their race color, or gender to deals with issues of tokenism. Also, organisations can create diversity targets that focus on diversity within the workforce within every tier rather than solely focusing on the entry level tier (Kiradoo, 2022). As stated by RF08,

> 'we have to keep on monitoring such marginalized groups. If they are not meeting our criteria we will give them two chances through additional and extended training for improvement. If they insist to stick to our team, even after they fail to met the essential criteria means, either the monetary benefit or promotion will not be provided to them and will be sent out to other team in which their skill can cope-up'

Kiradoo (2022) added that, training and development programs to support such underperforming employees, followed by right guidance and mentorship programs to measure and monitor employee progress would effectively assures the employee growth personally and professionally for a meritocratic workplace.

4.2 Strategies to improve DEI backfire with Meritocracy

The possible strategies to address and tackle the issues of DEI initiatives backfire, consequently aligning with a meritocratic workplace can be done through efficient training and development programs, creation of DEI accountable structures, implementation of DEI audit committee, effective grievance and redressal mechanism with effective guidelines and outcomes are illustrated as follows in table 3. Implementing and sustaining these practices will likely uplift the notion of meritocracy in an organization.

Figure 3. Strategies to tackle DEI backfire and balance Meritocracy

Strategies	Practices	Outcomes	Citation
1.Training & Development Programs	• Integrate diversity training into different types of training programs such as Internships & Apprenticeships to reduce the isolation of marginalized groups • Educating employees about bias and disadvantages faced by targets and providing strategies for preventing bias from resulting in discrimination. • Coaching & Mentorship Programs for marginalized groups • Implementing Leadership development training • Awareness of bias-works to build awareness of personal blind spots	• Skill Development • Measuring & Monitoring employee progress • Reduced stigma and discrimination between the groups • Reduced Inter-group conflicts and disputes • Inclusive & harmonious work culture • Awareness on bias, inequality and strategies for change	(Kiradoo, 2022) (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024) Leslie, 2019) (Iyer, 2022) (Rosenkranz et al., 2021)
2.Creating DEI accountable structures	• Leverage DEI evaluations in performance and hold persons accountable for DEI outcomes • Create DEI culture accompanied by periodic review and feedback • Ensuring the DEI initiatives be included and practised in the long-term organizational life • Decision-making aided by AI driven technologies	• Effective & Efficient goal achievement • Measure success of DEI initiatives • Ensuring balanced workplace nurturing meritocracy & DEI culture • Ensuring integral & transparent system • Enhanced communication, cohesiveness and morale	(Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan, 2023) (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024) (T. H. Cox & Blake, 1991)
3.Implementing DEI Audit committee	• Emphasize on the significance of international rights like Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights • Communicate the importance of DEI and balanced workspace • Addressing the issues of complaints concerning unconscious biases & Microaggressions by maintaining confidentiality • Prioritise diversity at all levels and assure that minority employees should be consulted about their workplace experiences to determine if they have experienced discriminatory treatment	• To reduce the potential sources of unconscious bias towards certain groups • Enhanced employee retention in organization • Increased employee job satisfaction • Reduced aspect of "woke washing" tarnishing company reputation • Increased organizational trust among employees	(T. H. Cox & Blake, 1991) (Kiradoo, 2022) (Boulom et al., 2021) (Ferraro et al., 2023) (Mckay & Avery, 2005)
4.Effective grievance &	• Establishing a system through which individuals can	• Reduced employee turnover	(Leslie, 2019)

Redressal Mechanism	report instances of discrimination and other events that inhibit progress toward diversity and meritocratic goals. • Giving space to 'people voice' • Uphold justice, fairness, and ethical standards and reflect the values of the organization in decision-making that shapes culture, strategy, and morale of the organization	• Enhanced company reputation • Increased employee loyalty towards organizations • Fair staffing and workplace policies that minimize discrimination and interpersonal conflict	(Mullin et al., 2021) (Mckay & Avery, 2005)

Source: Author (s) work

Efficient training & development programs

Managing and valuing diversity training is the most prevalent starting point for managing diversity. Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan (2023) mentioned about the two types of training are popular: The first is the awareness training, and the second is skill-building training. Awareness training emphasis is laid on giving knowledge about the importance and concept of managing and diversity. It also was to enhance the awareness of the participants on matters touching on diversity for instance stereotyping and cross cultural sensitivity. Skill development training entails imparting knowledge on certain cultural variations and how to address variation within organizations. T. H. Cox & Blake (1991) strengthened the significance of treat training as an on-going education process rather than a one-shot seminar, accompanied by mentors to sponsors within organizations to assist them in advancing their careers. As mentioned by RF04 and RM09,

> 'there needs to be a regular training and development. It's not like once in a year or at the time of joining. It should be continual, not continuous also'

> 'We have frequent soft skills and hard skills training conducted by the bank and HR department in various subjects depends upon the performance requirements and nature of job specifications'

Burnett & Aguinis (2024) shows that, integrating DEI training into different training programs such as performance management, leadership development and onboarding will signal the management's commitment to DEI initiatives. Proactively addressing trainee challenges such as defensiveness, anxiety and overconfidence before and after training enables a "learner-centric" diversity training approach that acknowledges a broader context in which its influence on trainee motivation and learning at early pace. Hence, tackling backfire causing the negative perception of fairness within the workplace.

Creating DEI accountable & transparent structures

The main reasons for the DEI backfire and disrupting meritocracy is due to the lack of transparent and accountable systems within the workplace. While some organizations create DEI initiatives, they do not ensure that the persons of change will be held responsible for their work's success and failure in the long-term, which, in most cases, results in counterproductive outcomes (Kiradoo, 2022). The approach to assure representativeness and its effectiveness must come from top down to 'ground level' within the workplace (Harji et al., 2023) as stated by RM02

> 'We are having three tier hierarchical check system to inquire the issues takes place in our company. They will be well-aware about the actions and decisions that I had taken, whether right or wrong, They can communicate at my skip level in case of any wrong action and make sure that the employees are not going through any work-life imbalance, mental stress or torturing regarding anything'

Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan (2023) shows that, organizations should establish clear cut goals and standards for DEI implementation in the form of DEI impact metrics (metrics related to the impact of DEI initiatives through employee satisfaction, productivity, customer satisfaction), employee resource groups chart (a chart that shows the ERG and their activities of membership and contribution towards DEI in the business), DEI strategy Roadmap (a roadmap chart, the outlines the organization's long term goals, strategies and key milestones, that paves the stakeholders to understand the overarching plan to achieve a harmonious workplace. Consequently, Tang (2024) added the transparency being a powerful tool to instil trust, employees can trust the organization more and retain, if the review process and promotion criteria are transparent. Essentially, Harji et al (2023) claimed that, these key strategies should be highlighted through the focus groups centered on transparency, that involves transparent DEI quota reporting, selection processes and independent oversight to ensure that the process is fair and followed, preferably by the lay, diverse peoples.

Implementing a DEI audit committee

A review of the organization culture and other human resource management systems like recruitment, appraisal, development, promotion and reward should be done. Namely, the goals of this audit are to discover sources of potential bias that may be detrimental to members of some cultural groups and outline ways that corporate culture can be disadvantageous to some employees (T. H. Cox & Blake, 1991). Additionally, Kiradoo (2022) stressed on the importance of establishment of DEI committees or task forces responsible for the

implementation and management, respectively. effective maintenance of DEI initiatives and should ensure accountability for their success. Mckay & Avery (2005) further, added that, organisations should assure that marginalised group should be consulted and inquired about their treatment to determine if there is any discriminatory issues prevails or not. Existing and new simulations will be reviewed by the diversity committee or other knowledgeable representatives selected by the committee. As stated by RF04,

> 'There is a particular group in our company, named the diversity group. So, they make sure that everything is happening properly. In case of any complaints being raised, employees can contact the concerned authorities without revealing their particular personal details or won't face any sort of confidentiality issues, Thus the issues got taken care, addressed and resolved by team efficiently'

This step is intended to ensure that the content is culturally humble and addresses DEI-relevant topics with exact appropriateness. Continuous quality improvement accompanied by the integration of questions pertaining to DEI valuations would enhance the transparency in creating a fair and equitable workplace (Buchanan & O'Connor, 2020).

Effective grievance & redressal mechanism

Providing a platform for employees enables them to report discriminatory practices. Grievance system should shield any employee that undergoes discrimination and even reporting it, from the effects of 'DEI backfire'. The system should be more formal and involve the reporting, investigating and providing a solution to the claim. Leslie (2019), reflected on making a grievance system available to all employees will counter the increased bias against target group employees that can resolve the negatives of DEI practice implementation. As per RM05,

> 'We have grievance department and speak up policy functioning in our firm. If, any employee involved in any crime, or malpractice in any branch level. Others from employee front, can escalate the issue to branch level and to the management'

Moreover, it should also provide avenues for employees to report practices, in which they seems unfair. Therefore, a coordinated system with appropriate DEI initiative management and constant supervision could bring about the balance of the openness and manager control with the meritocracy (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

5 Discussion

This paper focuses on the intended and unintended effects of DEI strategies and the role of negative consequences/ DEI Backfire on Meritocracy. Studies shows how DEI policy typically concentrated on close scrutiny of organizational policies and procedures to proactively improve the representation, status and power of disadvantaged groups. Meanwhile, lack of its proper implementation 'DEI backfire' serves as contextual cue pointing to a social environment, that is welcoming more of disadvantaged beneficiary groups, than it is of the advantaged group causing backfire, compromising meritocracy (Iyer, 2022). These groups were related, because both are valid norms for evaluating activities and consequences in organizational decisions (Konrad et al., 2021). However, positive outcomes such as inclusive leadership, improved performance and productivity, enhanced reputation, harmonious work culture, wider talent acquisition, onboarding, education and awareness tends to upbring and balance the meritocracy to an extend, However, the negative consequences such as unconscious bias, resistance to change, tokenism, and discrimination outlining DEI backfire, down lifting the notion of meritocracy. These results reflects how challenging it is to change attitudes and behavior regarding controversial issues of DEI initiatives in order to create social change (Iyer, 2022).

Meanwhile, resolving the ineffective implementation of DEI initiatives requires a tightrope walk to create a fair workplace environment. Essentially, cost implications in managing such diversity is a tiresome task. Consequently, creating a workplace environment quickly gaining competitive advantage to every personnel within dynamic world is a whirlwind affair in this competitive era (T. H. Cox & Blake, 1991). Furthermore, organizations compensate for better performances, either public/private companies, or through the lens of DEI/meritocracy, has been criticised as being unfair to women most especially those working in organisations dominated by male employees. Even the performance evaluations may seem visibly built on an equitable meritocratic ideology, but those tenets are difficult to see, when the privilege failed to reach the eligible ones (Doan-Goss et al., 2023). Hence, even issues included within the capacity for bullying and discriminating against people with disabilities and members of the LGBTQ population were seen in virtual environments (Ferraro et al., 2023).

Additionally, it was revealed that organizations active in signalling their DEI initiatives implementation efforts often rushed into demonstrating the practice of "woke washing" (cashing in on social justice movements without taking meaningful actions to support) are quiet often (Ferraro et al., 2023). Addressing backfire and managing meritocracy through training, DEI committee, as well as accountable frameworks with the assistance of evidence-based strategies for improvement can be done. Metrics-based solutions like AI system (such as recommendation tool) are phenomenon with the latent bias and end up in reproducing stereotypes and negative impression. This is done best by Amazon's recruiting AI algorithm that was designed to eliminate the filter bias that human recruiters inherently possess, it was developed based on Amazon's past hiring patterns (Ferraro et al., 2023).

5.1 Future research

This paper reviews on the intended and unintended effects of DEI initiatives that result in backfire and seeks to offer recommendations for the resolution. However, the unintended consequences of DEI are interrelated and multidetermined, it is equally important to investigate different issues and unintended consequence types simultaneously, not independently (Leslie, 2019). Essentially, all these policies are human-centric, hence the possible negative outcomes also likely to vary depends upon the nature, characteristics and attitude of the individual (Leslie, 2019). Furthermore, motives for unintended consequences may vary from person to person depends upon their cognitive, attitude and behavioral components (Gündemir et al., 2024). However, the motives may also vary depends upon individual, group or context-level factors (Gündemir et al., 2024). Moreover, this study focussed on limited sets of unintended consequences and its impact within workplace, meanwhile, there might be other unintended outcomes, which remains unexplored may have significant effect on meritocracy (Leslie, 2019). Specifically, the commitment towards DEI initiatives takes an inverse relationship, especially during economic downturn, the influence of social pressure may offer a temporary support, but the economic value is crucial for a sustainable DEI encultured meritocratic workplace (Tang, 2024).

5.2 Limitations

Existing framework focussing on limited metrics and parameters based on individual level-approach and designing interventions to reduce the effects of backfire and balancing meritocracy may be superficial. Hence, a broad network and deep structural change accompanied by the support of both marginalized and advantaged groups must be embedded in organizations to combat social inequality (Iyer, 2022). The sample size employed in this study is diverse, hence it does not consists of all participants from different other industries, that might lose the valuable insights and affect the accuracy of the obtained outcomes (Chantarat et al., 2023). Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study, and lack of data collection over time, may lack the direction of causality concerning the study (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). This study doesn't overlooked the presence or absence of factors like age, gender having moderate or mediating relationship leading to unintended consequences affecting meritocracy (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). Apart from finding and implementing strategies to tackle backfire and balance meritocracy through training programs, DEI committee, and accountable structures, the end of the day decision lies in the hands of human beings ultimately and possibilities of being an ideal being is a choice for them. Moreover, certain representations may have been over-represented or under-represented, involving limited number of LGBTQ+ populations, persons of color or veterans, that were likely under-represented in the present curricula (Buchanan & O'Connor, 2020).

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study highlighted an identity-threat between the DEI and meritocratic group as a result of DEI backfire. In theoretical aspect, the presented framework only involves limited constructs and factors, that might lack broader insights concerning the study. The presence of much wider framework could give integrated view with in-depth insights. From a practical aspect, there might be a possibility to trigger anti-social behaviour of individuals/groups that have been performed for value-expressive rather than instrumental purposes (Aquino & Douglas, 2003). Consequently, such initiatives to reduce inequality will be opposed by advantaged groups in a passive form by distance themselves from the message, showing ignorant attitude towards such effort is difficult to handle (Iyer, 2022). Moving towards a DEI initiated fair workplace, along with aforementioned objectives, it is equally important to consider the perceptions of ethical climate perception, engagement and ethical behaviour while decision-making in order to have disciplined culture (Leslie, 2019).

Conclusion

In nutshell, in this competitive era, DEI initiatives stands for the interest of marginalized groups whereas meritocracy stands for the interest of advantaged groups, in which ineffective implementation of DEI initiatives-backfire often creates DEI-Meritocratic clash. Instead of lensing the two phrases from two opposite ends, they can be aligned towards a particular direction with efficiency for the integrity, morality and harmonious work culture. However, improper implementation of DEI initiatives outlining backfire, creates and compete more with the principles of meritocracy. Efficient implementation of DEI principles, through accountable structures, transparency in system would always outweighs a fair workplace like a golden feather in the crown of the organization.

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Appendix I

Inclusive Leadership

The Army's definition of leadership is “the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization” (Ahmed et al., 2022).Leadership plays a vital role in creating and sustaining a diverse workforce, especially in a DEI implemented organization. Only a DEI aware leader could accommodate diverse talents and set the tone for fast pace of work, devoid of conflicts and issues (Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan, 2023). As stated by RM01,

> ‘The kind of programs which includes the inclusive leadership training programs to bring in all the underrepresented groups thereby aims to bridge the gaps in case of any discrimination or disparity issues, between the people’

Kiradoo, (2022) and Leslie, (2019) argued that, holding leaders accountable for diversity and inclusion goals, setting expectations and standards for behaviour and communication promoting diversity and inclusion, encouraging and supporting employees from under-represented groups to take leadership roles, monitoring progress and frequent communication about the goals could lead a peaceful and holistic approach towards implementation of DEI initiatives in an organization.

Improved Performance & Productivity

Performance refers to how well a person, group, machine, or system executes a task or activity (Corvellec, 2018). Productivity traditionally describes the relationship between input and output, aiming to maximize output while minimizing input (Mackensen, 2008).The performance management process is one with high-stakes and has direct impact on promotion, career growth and remuneration. (Leslie, (2019) claims that the adoption of calibration exercise becomes key as it helps managers come together to discuss proposed employee ratings to ensure consistency across the process against and their direct reports will be rated. As per RM03,

> ‘We have been tracking the performance of vulnerable groups for past two years presenting better performance and have good talents in our company. When we asked them to finish the work, they finish it on time’

Incorporating strategies such as 360-degree feedback as stated by RF04,

> ‘There is method, called disguised marketing performing in this firm. So, the candidate wouldn’t know that, the opposite person is actually evaluating his or her behavior. We are also having disguised members within the organization. So, it will be like a 360 degree peer review process for valuation’

Adediran (2021) argued that, employee development conversations, 1-on-1 conversations are an effective way to ensure managers and their direct reports are aligned on development on a week-to-week basis. Building such regular conversations into employee experience would help managers to improve their drawbacks and provide clear views on progresses to be made to advance in the organizations and its productivity as well (Adediran, 2021).

Enhanced Reputation

Reputation is the opinion (more technically, a social evaluation) of the public towards a person, a group of people, or an organization (Fayad & Flood, 2017). DEI benefits organization in general as well as specifically in reflecting brand identity. Essentially, brand plays a pivotal role in shaping a company culture and become a part of social culture; thereby defines society and responsibility towards it (Ferraro et al., 2023). Leslie (2019) claimed that, beyond the implications of implementing DEI initiatives, in an organizational perspective to resolve their problems, it should be intended to counteract the unfair disadvantages targets face in society (Leslie, 2019). As stated by RM05,

> 'The society will get the public idea about our company and it encourages a positive inspiration to all people'

Thus, Ferraro et al (2023) strengthens by showing that, an effective snapshot of the brand perspective of DEI with a particular focus on the holistic impact on brand identity, sociocultural responsibility, relevance, and the alignment of brand and consumer values.

Inclusive and Harmonious work culture

Creating an inclusive and harmonious workplace is a major challenge in any DEI implemented organization. Employees who feel valued and recognized are more likely to retain in organization in the long term. Relying on culture rather than coercion to promote DEI efforts by linking them to shared values (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024), Comello et al (2024) shows that, fostering open communication with employees, encourage dialogues between employees and marginalized groups. As stated by RF08,

> 'In our organization, there is a separate day, celebrated as "pride day" and inclusion celebration programs. We invite all the LGBT community business people who can make money within the organization like installs. This program will kept in a periodic cycle of six months or two months gap. We have colleague from such community, breaking the stereotype about them in society. Also, there is no such bifurcation, fear or humiliation to mingle with them and to address them my colleagues'

Kiradoo (2022) proves that, provide training and coaching to educate employees on understand and respect different cultures and backgrounds, celebrating diversity and recognising the contributions of all employees, offering employee resource groups that provide support and networking opportunities for underrepresented groups are some of the effective ways to foster an inclusive and harmonious work culture.

Diverse Talent Acquisition

Diverse talent acquisition, while considered as a significant factor in deciding new roles and opportunities in the dynamic organization, reflects its seriousness on DEI principles in pooling diverse applicants. Reaching out to such a diverse pool requires a proactive and efficient fast-paced working environment, however, it seems to be easy to go with usual candidate sources, which leads to a huge pile of homogenous candidates. Adediran, (2021) proves that, building and maintaining effective relationships with agencies and other organizations would helps in overcoming such challenges. Such agencies may range from community groups to skill-acquisition programs, that had the capacity to amplify applicants from diverse backgrounds as stated by RM02 and RM07

> 'Our organization focus on recruiting people directly from the campus ensuring diverse talents. This is a kind of program kind of where the recruitments are only done from certain reputed campuses like IITs and NITs. Hence, we have people from all the places of India'

> 'I have seen so much of talented ones in these disabled groups. Like, they presents an extra-ordinary performance and their work will be quick and punctual in time'

Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan (2023) concreted this by utilizing measures like careful wording of job descriptions, use of 'blind' application processes without revealing the identity of applicant, examination of candidates through structured and unstructured interviews, followed by testing competencies; leading to a direct impact stressed on performance factor. Whereas, Kiradoo (2022) emphasized on offering mentorship, apprenticeships and internships programs fostering opportunities for underrepresented groups helps to gain experience and develop skills for increased productivity in organizations.

Onboarding

Onboarding is the process in which new employees are introduced to an organization and its vision, mission, and values (Craft, 2021). Most organizations only shows commitment to DEI specifically during the phase of recruitment and hiring (Kiradoo, 2022). It makes sense further only when there are visible efforts towards ensuring actual experiences live up to expectations. The onboarding provides an excellent opportunity in establishing a sense of inclusion and belonging as it helps freshers to mingle with experienced persons; such that it can boost their confidence and can bring the entirety of person to work. As stated by RF04

> 'We normally conduct the practice of "onboarding" i.e, a person is mixed with a senior member as well as a medium level member together for work. That's how the freshers get trained a lot. Which highlights the focus towards equity policy'

Adediran (2021) shows that, some of the practices include pairing new employees with onboarding guides or buddies i.e. someone within the organization that can offer them some advice, take them to lunch, and answer any potential questions, sharing information on DEI programs, giving freedom to design their own workspaces to make them comfortable, offering of floating holidays that allows new hires create work schedules that accommodate cultural traditions.

Education & Awareness

Education and awareness is required essentially for a broader understanding and simultaneous addressing of DEI issues in the organization. Alam Khan & Ahmad Khan Noor Alam Khan (2023) shows that, offering DEI training to all employees, particularly those involved in human resource department, facilitates the development of awareness and comprehension of DEI. Strengthening base to the foundation. As per the words of RM06

> 'It's time for getting educated and impart knowledge on relevance of such DEI initiatives. Some courses are also offered explicitly as a part of such programs in our organization. If the number of employees from such vulnerable group is sufficient, we usually move ahead with that idea of awareness in our company'

(Harji et al (2023) claimed that, educational initiatives promoting EDI will enable open and transparent ongoing discussion of key issues, will promote a supportive environment for further discussion and will promote inclusivity and diversity among the organizational community. Ensuring inclusivity in the development and delivery of this educational programme, including the involvement of allies, will be central to the successful dissemination of a future programme.

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