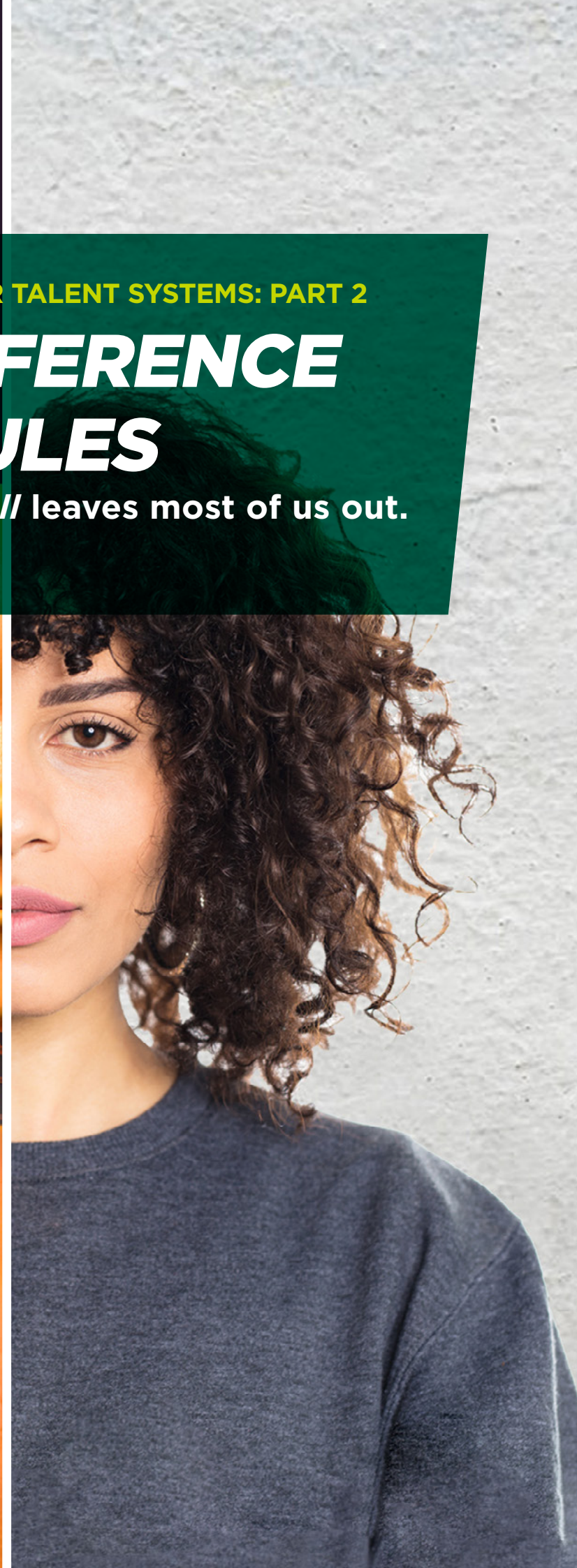
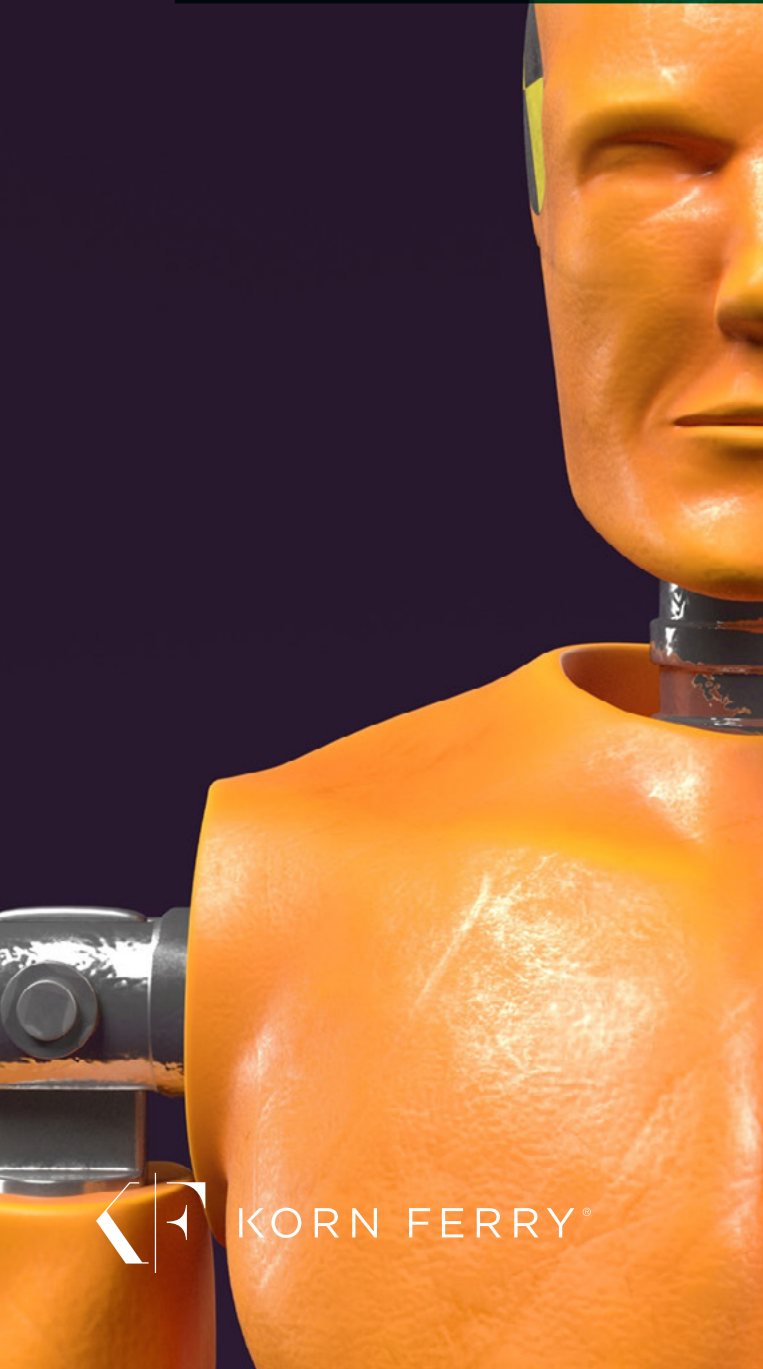


INCLUSIVE DESIGN FOR TALENT SYSTEMS: PART 2

THE “REFERENCE MAN” RULES

Why one size fits all leaves most of us out.



KORN FERRY®



In a hyperdiverse world, the white, straight, and able-bodied male can no longer be the default for talent systems design.



In the first paper of this two-part series, *Asleep at the wheel: Why a singular focus on unconscious-bias is driving diversity and inclusion off the road*, we considered the case for structural inclusion and introduced the three pillars of equality, equity, and inclusive design.

Visit <https://infokf.kornferry.com/asleep-at-the-wheel.html> to download a copy.

Here we explore inclusive design, the third pillar and methodology of structural inclusion, and look at how organizations can apply it to their talent systems.

Meet the Reference Man.

This person, or rather this concept, has influenced your life in more ways than you can possibly imagine.

First introduced in 1975, the Reference Man concept was initially devised to simplify calculations on radiation exposure, although it went on to be used consistently in research models of nutrition, pharmacology, population, and toxicology. Intended to personify all of humanity, the Reference Man was in fact defined in very specific terms: A 25 to 30 year old male, weighing 154 pounds, standing 5 feet 6 inches tall,¹ Caucasian, with a Western European or North American lifestyle.²

¹ 70 kilos and 1.7 meters.

² International Commission on Radiological Protection. (1975). *Report of the Task Group on Reference Man*.

Your thermostat is sexist.

The bias toward young, white, able-bodied men can be found in every corner of the designed world. Ever wondered why the line for the women's toilet is always much longer than the men's? It's because the design of women's toilets does not take women's needs into account. Women tend to use the toilet more frequently and for longer than men (and often with recalcitrant children in tow), yet the provision of toilets does not often allow for this. This leaves one wondering: How have the needs of 50% of the human population been neglected by building planners and designers for so long?

The same biases can be seen in thermostat settings in office buildings, the height of top shelves, the position of light switches, the size of safety masks, and the shape of body armor, not to mention crash-test dummies, clinical drug trials, and research into chronic diseases. They have even made their way into many elements of digital hardware and software design, from smartphone grips and keyboard key size to voice-recognition algorithms.

Unfortunately, it would appear that talent systems have been as susceptible to design biases as any of these other examples. In the past, many HR leaders embraced a one-size-fits-all approach to talent systems, convinced that it would be the most efficient and effective way to manage hiring, performance, advancement, and reward, particularly as organizations grew and became more global. And indeed, they also believed it would create equality.

Perhaps inevitably, the one size in question turned out to be HR's equivalent of the Reference Man. In this way, unconscious biases were built into talent systems and have served to preserve glass ceilings and to perpetuate unequal outcomes in access, opportunities, support, and rewards.

The world is still built for men.



Voice-recognition devices.

Many voice-recognition systems are designed to recognize a male voice. After five failed attempts of trying (and failing) to get a voice-recognition system to make a call, one female user lowered the pitch of her voice, and it worked first time.



Fitness monitors.

One study of 12 of the most common fitness monitors found that they underestimated steps during housework by up to 74% and underestimated calories burned during housework by as much as 34%. Today women still do the majority of the housework, so this really matters.



Apple's Siri.

When Apple launched their artificial intelligence system Siri, it could help you if you'd had a heart attack, but if you told it you'd been raped, it replied, "I don't know what you mean by 'I was raped.'"



Car seats and safety.

Modern car seats are designed based on male crash-test dummies and are too firm to protect women in accidents: the seats throw women forward faster than men because the back of the seat doesn't give way for women's on average lighter and smaller bodies.

Women also tend to sit further forward when driving, making their legs more vulnerable in an accident (given the angle that their knees and hips sit). And they have less muscle in their necks and upper torso, making them up to three times more vulnerable to whiplash.

So while more men than women are involved in car crashes, women are 17% more likely to die in one.

Abstracts from *The deadly truth about a world built for men - from stab vests to car crashes.*

By Caroline Criado-Perez.³



Map apps.

Map apps fail to account for women who may want to know the safest in addition to fastest routes.



Health-monitoring systems.

When Apple launched its health-monitoring system in 2014, it boasted a "comprehensive" health tracker. It could track blood pressure, steps taken, blood alcohol level, even molybdenum and copper intake. But Apple forgot one crucial detail: a period tracker.

³ Criado-Perez, C. (2019). The deadly truth about a world built for men - from stab vests to car crashes. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes>

Inclusive design is the antidote.

Concerns about the ethical and commercial perils of the Reference Man are not new. Early pioneers include Jutta Treviranus, the founder and director of the Inclusive Design Research Center (IDRC) at OCAD University in Toronto, who began exploring the dynamics of exclusionary design in digital products way back in 1993. Focusing initially on disability inclusion, the IDRC developed a set of inclusive design principles that went on to influence thinking at companies such as Microsoft, ultimately leading to the formation of the Microsoft Inclusive Design team, whose own set of best-practice standards are now available open source.⁴

Inclusive design rejects the Reference Man paradigm and recognizes instead the simple and obvious truth that there is no such thing as a default person. As the Microsoft Inclusive Design team explains in their manual: “The interactions we design with technology depend heavily on what we can see, hear, say, and touch. Assuming all those senses and abilities are fully enabled all the time creates the potential to ignore much of the range of humanity.”

The answer, whether you’re designing a workplace, a transport system, or a virtual-reality headset, is to address the needs of all potential users, starting with the most marginalized and excluded populations. This then allows you to produce more elegant and streamlined designs that benefit all. The Microsoft team again: “Everyone has abilities, and limits to those abilities. Designing for people with permanent disabilities actually results in designs that benefit people universally.”

⁴ Fast Company. (2018). The No. 1 thing you’re getting wrong about inclusive design. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90243282/the-no-1-thing-youre-getting-wrongabout-inclusive-design>.







The wider benefits of inclusive design have already been discovered in some places. **Just think how those curb ramps for people with disabilities have made life better for joggers, cyclists, and parents with strollers as well.** Closed captioning, which was created for the hard-of-hearing community, now enables everyone to follow the action in loud sports bars or crowded airports. The high-contrast screen settings that make it possible to read in bright sunlight were originally made for people with vision impairments. And what do you think inspired remote controls?

Above all, inclusive design is the antidote to exclusion. As Kat Holmes, one of the leading thinkers on inclusive design writes in her book *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*: “Ask a hundred people what inclusion means and you get a hundred different answers. Ask then what it means to be excluded and the answer will be uniformly clear: It’s when you are left out.”⁵

⁵ Holmes. K. (2018). *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*.

Four core principles of inclusive design for talent systems.

Inclusive design principles have been applied to everyday products and services to make them more accessible for users with physical abilities. Those same design principles can also be applied within organizations to create talent systems that are inclusive of all human differences.

Here we share our four core principles of inclusive design for talent systems, adapted from the work of the Inclusive Design Research Center.

1.

Define equality.

The value of equality is enshrined in most vision statements, codes of ethics, and non-discrimination policies. But what does equality actually mean? The answer will vary from organization to organization. Inclusive design journeys should therefore begin with an explicit, self-reflective exploration and declaration of what kind of equality the organization stands for and how it manifests itself in talent management practices and processes. The organization must then ensure that its aspirational statements, guidelines, and policies all support this declaration. They also must be clear about the non-negotiables that are expected of every leader, manager, and employee, and about the rules, standards, and guidelines that will ensure that no one is favored or unfavored on the basis of who they are.

2.

Unearth inequities.

Many of today's organizations are inadvertently creating and perpetuating disparities through their talent systems. Our second inclusive design principle is to unearth those inequities and discover whether there are any "faults in the default". This can be achieved by examining the data and by exploring the experiences of different talent groups—experiences that can be difficult and even painful. Is the organization living up to its commitments on equality? Do leaders reflect the full diversity of talent pools? Is all talent being paid equally for equal work?



3.

4.

Learn from diversity.

The only way to break away from the Reference Man and ensure that inequities are not perpetuated is to modify or create systems using input from all users—from the mainstream to the overlooked user. This requires a human-centric and empathetic approach. Designers must be curious about people's vast differences and consider the needs, wants, and aspirations of the most excluded user rather than simply assuming similarity and building their solutions around the lowest common denominator.

Solve for one, benefit all.

Science and experience are showing us—and features such as closed captioning prove—that if we can make something work for the exception then we will end up with a better design for all. Similar successes can be achieved in talent system designs if we specifically address the needs of overlooked users—those whose experiences, mindsets, and visibility are in the minority.

Equality achieved?

By applying these four inclusive design principles, organizations can develop talent systems and processes that are free from legacy inequities and inclusive of all human differences. The ultimate aim, of course, is to create equality for everyone. But how do you know when you have achieved it?

To measure the effectiveness of an inclusive design approach, we recommend asking yourself if equality has been achieved across the following four work experiences.



Access

Do employees have equal access to resources, leaders, programs, and other tools they can leverage to achieve their full potential?



Opportunity

Do employees have equal opportunity to apply, and to be tapped and considered, for short-term, high-visibility developmental projects or job postings?



Support

Do employees get equal support to be coached when learning new skills, provided with constructive and honest feedback, mentored in navigating the political environment, and sponsored and advocated for behind closed doors?



Rewards

Do employees enjoy equal rewards to those who have had comparable impact, and are contributions to the organization always recognized?



RESTROOM

Case studies: Inclusive design for talent systems in the real world.

So that's the theory. Now what about the practice? On the following pages we look at how these inclusive design principles are applied in practice, with case studies from organizations that have used the principles to achieve improved structural and behavioral inclusion in the areas of attraction, advancement, and retention.





Attraction

Case study 1: A growing number of large companies dropping college-degree requirements

One systemic barrier to greater diversity in positions of influence and leadership has been the requirement for a college or university degree. Societal biases have, for example, tracked women and racial/ethnic minorities away from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education or even away from college for many years. The result has been an underrepresentation of women and racial/ethnic minorities in pools of STEM college graduates, thus perpetuating the lack of diversity in organizations.

There is plenty of diverse, skilled talent with no college degree that organizations are missing out on. So leading organizations have begun to drop this requirement for roles few would have ever imagined could be done without a degree.

Tim Cook recently said that about half of the people Apple employed in the US last year did not have degrees.⁶ He reasoned that many colleges do not teach the skills business leaders need most in their workforce, such as coding.

In a *New York Times* interview, Laszlo Bock—the former senior vice president of people operations for Google—reported that the tech giant had rejected grade point averages and test scores as worthless criteria for hiring, because they “don’t predict anything.”⁷ At a recent White House session of the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board meeting, Siemens USA CEO Barbara Humpton added, “All too often, job requisitions will say they require a four-year degree, when in fact there’s nothing about the job that truly requires a four-year degree—it merely helped our hiring managers sort of weed through the crowd and get a smaller qualified candidate group.”⁸ Today there are fifteen companies that no longer require college degrees.

In this case, the initial intent was to remove inequity in recruitment of underrepresented talent. But it ultimately resulted in a more inclusive design for everyone who might not have college degrees but does have the needed aptitudes and learning agility. It therefore solved for one and benefited all.

⁶ Eadicicco, L. (2019). Apple CEO Tim Cook Explains Why You Don’t Need a College Degree to Be Successful. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/apple-ceo-tim-cook-why-college-degree-isnt-necessary-2019-3?r=US&IR=T>

⁷ Bryant, A. (2013). In Head-Hunting, Big Data May Not Be Such a Big Deal. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/20/business/in-head-hunting-big-data-may-not-be-such-a-big-deal.html?module=inline>

⁸ Akhtar, A. (2019). Apple, Google, and Netflix Don’t Require Employees to Have 4-Year Degrees, and This Could Soon Become an Industry Norm. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/top-companies-are-hiring-more-candidates-without-a-4-year-degree-2019-4?r=US&IR=T>



Case study 2: Busting the myth that “there aren’t any.”

The mantra that “there aren’t any,” when used as the excuse for why there is not more diversity in sourcing and hiring pools, is a debilitating one for both those saying it and those hearing it. Giving the benefit of the doubt for a moment to those who say it, it is true that what is getting sourced by the talent acquisition function can often fall short of expectations when organizations declare that no hiring can happen until there is diverse slates of candidates.

But for those hearing it, there is a cognitive dissonance. Given the upward trend of more women than men getting undergraduate and graduate degrees, and the rising demographic numbers of racial/ethnic minorities and their higher educational attainment compared to their parents, there would seem to be plenty more diversity in the talent pools that organizations need to tap.

While acknowledging that available talent pools need to be defined not just by sheer demographic numbers but also by having the right set of education, skills, and experiences, there is still clear evidence that organizations are overlooking a lot of talent, leading to inequities in sourcing and recruiting.

Lockheed Martin is a company that has cracked the code. After several years of learning from the diversity around them, in 2018 they attended three young-professional STEM conferences—two for Latinx people and one for women. One of those, the national convention of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), had over 8,000 recent Latinx STEM graduates and early-career professionals; Lockheed walked away having made around 100 offers.

But it wasn’t just about turning up. Preparatory steps to build behavioral and structural inclusion into Lockheed’s approach ahead of the conferences included the following:

- Securing top financial and logistical sponsorship and arranging for top executives to be speakers.
- Sourcing and identifying strong candidates who were going to be attendees.
- Scheduling final interviews to take place at the events.
- Bringing hiring managers to the conference and briefing them on the candidates as well as on unconscious-bias pitfalls ahead of time.
- Hosting an inclusive and hospitable reception party for all the candidates on-site.
- Making offers on the spot.

No surprise, then, that Lockheed was recognized as the Company of the Year by SHPE.

The ripple effect to all from this more inclusive design approach? It is now being used to source other hidden talent among veterans, LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, and more.





Advancement

Case study 3: Extending differentiated development to all.

A professional services firm had discovered inequities in the retention and advancement of racially/ethnically underrepresented talent. By learning from the diversity around them, they gained deeper insight into shared challenges that members of these groups faced within the organization. The challenges were specifically due to the ways in which these workers were different, and they needed support to be able to talk about and wrestle with these unique challenges.

To address inequities, the organization introduced differentiated development programs for African American, Latinx, and Asian talent, to help this talent better grasp what they were going through and why.

After a number of years running the programs, the company realized that many of their employees who represented the majority populations were also interested in learning about the headwinds their colleagues in the minority groups were facing. As a result, the company extend their differentiated development programs to all employees to foster a greater sense of empathy, so that all could learn from and about human differences and how to better reduce the impact of unconscious-bias.

But then the benefit extended even further when the organization realized that some of the very principles that workers were benefiting from to overcome their unique challenges would be beneficial for all.

In effect, while the causes of the barriers that women or racial or ethnic minorities experienced—racial animosity, sexism, xenophobia, unconscious biases—were unique, some of the key remedies within one’s own personal power to respond to adversity could be universal. For example, being clear about one’s short- and long-term goals, developing strategic plans for achieving them, resilience—these could be beneficial to *any* professional regardless of their background.



Case study 4: Informal processes masking structural inequities at a financial services company.

While this company did not have formal development processes, it was phenomenal at informal development. A diversity and inclusion diagnostic revealed that lateral moves in the form of short-term assignments, expat deployments, and high-visibility projects were culturally endemic throughout the organization. In fact, a deep quantitative diagnosis revealed that there was a strong predictive pattern that four lateral moves consistently led to promotions to a certain level, and six moves, to the level above that.

But when a structural inclusion equity analysis was performed, it revealed a good amount of opportunity disparity. And in looking at the informal horizontal movements more closely, it appeared to be white men who consistently and disproportionately got more of those assignments. Women were two times less likely to get those moves, Latinx employees six times less likely, and black/African American employees 14 times less likely.

To learn from diversity, the organization conducted focus groups to hear firsthand how this was affecting the performance and inclusion experiences for members of these underrepresented groups. As a result, they changed the key accountability metric for managers from representation or promotions (both examples of lagging indicators) to a key short-term metric of lateral movement of underrepresented talent (a predictive leading indicator).

How did the more focused inequity findings and the inclusive design that followed benefit all? Managers became much more aware of how they can, in their informality, overlook all kinds of talent, not just among those who are traditionally underrepresented.



Define equality

Unearth inequities

Learn from diversity

Solve for one, benefit all

Retention

Case study 5: Inclusive parental leave.

Parental leave is a textbook case of where designing for the one benefited all.

The one in this case was working mothers. Though it took too long for companies to acknowledge the complicated realities of working mothers, eventually there was a recognition that to attract, retain, and support women with children, they needed to provide benefits that addressed those realities. But by its very name—maternity leave—this policy left out a whole bunch of people from a benefit that at its essence is a recognition that human beings have others in their lives who at critical times depend on their focused support to survive and thrive.

And oh yes, there are fathers too. And so paternity leave was added at an increasing number of organizations. But then how about same-sex couples who have children? Did they have access to this benefit? No. Adoptive parents? No. Foster parents? No. Parents via surrogate birth? No.

As the result, a number of progressive companies including HPE, Vodafone, Spotify, Aviva, Novartis, Netflix, Microsoft, TIAA, Twitter, and IKEA have adopted a more inclusive design referred to as parental leave. This leave is neutral with regard to gender, sexual orientation, and child arrival method.

Companies such as Cisco are pushing parental benefits even further, beyond the nuclear family to those who have become grandparents as well as those who need to care for elder loved ones at the other end of the cycle of life. Addressing the needs of one group—working mothers—led to a design that could be used to be inclusive of all.



Case study 6: Ensuring that talented women weren't lost through poor people management.

A tech managing consulting firm was having difficulty retaining many of their female consultants, despite hiring at nearly 50/50 male/female parity among recent-college-graduate hires.

The organization was quick to tie the intensity of their consultancy demands to their high attrition of talented women consultants. The answer, they were sure, lay in developing policies that allowed for more work-life balance. But a diversity and inclusion diagnostic revealed that this was a tertiary issue. The women they were attracting were just as ambitious as the men and working just as hard. The pivotal root cause of losing so many women after five to seven years was something different: poor people management skills on the part of people managers.

This was because professionals who excelled technically were rewarded with promotions that required them to also manage people. Most of them did not relish the managerial responsibilities—nor were they given any training or development for it. Further, talent development systems were nearly nonexistent, meaning that the organization did not have the tools or processes to help managers manage their people well, and those managers were not held accountable for doing so.

While this affected both men and women, the structural inclusion reality was that it disproportionately affected women because of the lack of informal systems working for them. With technology still a traditionally male-dominated field, women were either being shut out of the boy's club or being asked to adapt to a more male-influenced culture. This was compounded by the lack of effective people managers, who lacked the tools to coach their people into optimal performance and career growth and were even further disconnected from understanding gender inequity dynamics.

No wonder women were leaving at a higher rate. Corrective action then became about enhancing the manager selection process, onboarding, and adjusting development and rewards. Embedded in that would be training on unconscious-bias and conscious inclusion.

But this in the end did not benefit just female talent. As managers got better, many more people benefited, because bad managers have a debilitating effect on all.



Case study 7: *Progressive pronouns.*

There has been a lot of conversation both in organizations and in society at large about the inclusion of transgender and gender-nonbinary colleagues through the use of their preferred pronouns. In some forward-leaning environments, employees have started to use their preferred pronouns in their email signatures (he, she, they), which has sparked discussions around identity and allyship. This in turn has motivated many cisgender employees to become allies by adding their own pronouns to their signature line, even though they identify with their gender assigned at birth, with the goal of making the practice more common.

The link to inclusive design? A sigh of relief for many employees with unusual, non-Western, or gender-neutral (Chris, Pat, Adrian, etc.) names who for years have been wrongly addressed as Mr. or Ms. By adopting the practice of adding their pronouns to their own signature lines, they are able to put an end to the guessing game and be addressed by their correct gender salutation, thus avoiding the awkwardness of having to correct colleagues and clients.

And let's not forget behavioral inclusion.

These stories, and many more like them, illustrate the power of inclusive design. But just as unconscious-bias training fails without structural inclusion,⁹ so inclusive design cannot be sustainably and consistently applied without also addressing potential behavioral inclusion gaps.

For example, managers may use conscious and unconscious biases about gendered roles to exert pressure on the men on their team to reduce the amount of parental leave they take.

Or hiring managers may dismiss resumes of those without college degrees even after recruiters have deemed them suitable.

This reinforces our fundamental point of view that it is vital to design structural and behavioral inclusion interventions that reinforce one another.

⁹ For more on behavioral and structural inclusion, see: Tapia, A., Polonskaia, A., Kirtzman, F., and Gisbert, G. (2019). ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL: Why a singular focus on unconscious-bias is driving diversity and inclusion off the road. Report. Los Angeles, CA: Korn Ferry.





Conclusion

What does it take to achieve the deeply desired, yet elusive transformation of more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations?

Yes, it requires addressing legacy inequities through a combination of structural and behavioral inclusion interventions that are mutually reinforcing. Yes, it involves applying inclusive design principles to prevent new exclusions from being codified into the organizational DNA.

But at an even more profound and human level, it requires courage and will.

Courage to ask if inequities are present and, when they are confirmed, confront the past wrongs and make them right. Courage to enter the environments of those who are different from us, see things from their perspective, and be curious about how they think, feel, and act. Courage to share stories of our own journeys and the ways they have shaped how we view and live in the world.

And after all that, it requires the will to see changes through, acknowledging that the transformation takes more than just one great training experience or high-profile initiative. The will to change entrenched but exclusionary cultural norms—and to sustain those changes over time.

Ultimately, it's about inclusive leadership—because organizations can only hope to achieve sustained structural and behavioral inclusion through inclusive design if they have the motivated, skilled, and outcome-driven leaders and managers who can lead the way.

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For more information on how we can help you apply Korn Ferry's Inclusive Design for Talent Systems™ to your organization, please get in touch.

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