the clear company

An Introduction to Intersectionality

Disruptors
Innovators
Experts

Intersectionality in Focus

1. Introduction

It is often said amongst Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) practitioners, that DEI can only be truly achieved through an intersectional lens. True diversity is Intersectional. We hear that a lot, but what does 'intersectionality' truly mean?

Origins

The term 'intersectionality' was formally defined by Dr Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose studies in Law led her to realise that in American courts, judges would not recognise discrimination faced by Black women as inequality that reflected both their race and gender. The courts would find that if they didn't experience racism in the same way as a Black man, or sexism in the same way as a white woman, then you haven't been discriminated against.[1]

Dr Crenshaw observed that for Black women, there were claims of being seen as too different to be accommodated by law. Whilst this observation had been made by many activists, scholars and theorists beforehand, she formally coined 'intersectionality' as a way of identifying the barriers and obstacles created by the intersection of race and gender.

2. Intersectionality at the Clear Company

Our interpretation and application of intersectionality strives to adhere to our core values.

Authentically Inclusive

We aim to achieve psychological safety within our value of being Authentically Inclusive

Courageous and Curious

We want to face up to the difficult questions within our value of being Courageous and Curious

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[1] 'Why I'm No Longer talking to White People about Race' Renni Eddo Lodge, page 156

Pragmatic expertise

We will use an evidenced based approach to empower change within our value of Pragmatic Expertise

As a result, we have defined intersectionality in the following way at the Clear Company:

At the Clear Company we acknowledge and honour the origins of intersectionality by providing tools to dismantle barriers to equity and equality across margins that include race and gender, but also involve many other characteristics.

We acknowledge that 'intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that are not often understood among conventional ways of thinking'[2]. We are working to understand, address and overcome these obstacles for our clients and internally, because single-issue discriminations rarely exist, because as people, 'we do not live single-issue lives'[3].

3. How can we apply this within DEI?

Intersectionality is a term that still feels relatively new within organisations and within conversations in equality, but it is something that we need to raise awareness of and embed within practice if we are to make organisations truly inclusive.

1. Understand the needs of employees who suffer the most 'adverse impact.'

    Unpick the data: Do not analyse each group in isolation, drill down and cross-reference so you can really understand the experiences of not only your female colleague, but your Black, trans colleague who works a job-share, for example.

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[2] Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989:139–67, p. 149

[3] "We don't live single-issue lives" is a quote from Audre Lorde's 1982 speech, Learning from the 60s

2. ## Examine the language you use to address your colleagues and employees

   Don't let homogeneity win: It is often said that organisations are embarking on positive initiatives 'for our women colleagues',' for our Black colleagues' and whilst this work is vitally important still it's about educating ourselves beyond those shared experiences, zooming out from the dominant identity and understanding the nuances of the individual experience at work.

3. ## Collect your organisational data across a variety of protected characteristics using diversity data monitoring forms

   One way of achieving this is through our Inclusion Maturity Index.

4. ## Analyse the data from an intersectional lens with the help of our Inclusion Maturity Index

   Understand how to mitigate against your biases: Once we can all acknowledge that we have biases, and that the employee experience is not equal we can move towards understanding and eventually towards effective solutions.

5. ## Provide strategy, action plans and policies that reflect your business needs

   Make time for cross-fertilisation of ideas: Having distinct staff networks is important but people are not single identities, and they do not live single issue lives – so make it easier for people to share their experiences as multi-identity professionals – that's the only way we can learn. Revisit your values: We know that it is important that inclusion is part of the DNA of your organisation. Challenge your organisational values, are they truly inclusive and so do they take into account intersectionality? Is your competency framework inclusive and are you encouraging, promoting and role modelling truly inclusive behaviours at all levels of the organisation?

4. Research on Intersectionality in Practice

Case study: Sexism and homophobia

In 2017 one of our consulting partners, Hannah Jepson, published research exploring the experiences of gay women in the workplace (Fielden & Jepson, 2016). The majority of women Hannah spoke to, expressed a strong reluctance to come out at work; not because they experienced the culture of their organisations as overtly homophobic but because of the way that they saw sexism and homophobia cut across each other within their work environments. Those women chose to hide a part of themselves because they couldn't hide the fact that they were women and so they lied, pretended and covered up throughout for almost all of their careers.

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"Pretending is hard. Pretending takes time and energy and effort you don't have when you are applying for a job or trying to do your job to the best of your ability and that's when the spiral of stereotyping continues. Because people in minority groups can often experience a very real stereotype threat and as a result, they have less energy to expend on performing to the best of their abilities at work. The subsequent perception that they are not performing at their best can often be tied up with their identity and it is from that position that unhelpful and damaging stereotypes are created and perpetuated."

We know the need to create organisational environments that are receptive to diversity is greater than ever before and this starts with recognising the difficulty and importance of acknowledging our complex identities.

Case study: Racism and wellbeing

Contribute to the broader Social Value / Sustainability agenda

Another intersection to consider is the crossover of race and disability (or wellbeing, from a physical and mental perspective). Studies indicate that the negative consequences of the pandemic have been most pronounced for racial/ethnic minoritized people.[4]

The following traumatic events have contributed to the creation of a syndemic (or synergistic epidemic), which is 'the aggregation of two or more concurrent or sequential epidemics'; a racism pandemic within the viral pandemic, impacting those who sit at the intersection of race and disability the worst:

1. Anti-Asian sentiment arising from COVID-19 pandemic (racist narratives about the origin of the pandemic)
2. Anti-blackness with the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020
3. Identification of 'comorbidities' impacting communities of colour the worst within the COVID-19 pandemic (higher infection and death rates, loss of employment, income and childcare)
4. In addition to this, the United Nations identified what was called a 'shadow pandemic', during the several lockdowns, globally, within the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying increased levels of gender based & domestic violence.[5]

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[4] Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Mental Health and Mental Health Care During The COVID-19 Pandemic
[5] https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19

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This has resulted in poorer mental health across these intersecting groups. As employers, it is crucial that our DEI efforts consider the intersectional impacts of a changing world of work to people who face these challenges.

Intersectional Experiences

Research from CultureAmp (2018) exploring intersectionality found that those from underrepresented groups experience the workplace less positively than employees in the majority group and that this disparity is compounded for employees in multiple minority groups.

We need to consider how all our demographic traits intersect and highlight how our unique identities affect our experiences at work. By treating individual minority groups as separate we risk making individual employees feel undervalued and unheard and as a result, we risk complete erasure of the issues that are most important to them.

Fundamentally, true inclusion that takes an intersectional approach will create environments that allow people to be fully and authentically themselves at work and we know that makes organisations more effective, happier, and better places to be.

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The Clear Company have been working to bring about positive change for 16 years and are recognised as global leaders of inclusive talent management insight, training and technology. Established in 2003 clients such as Lloyd's of London, Highways England, Ofcom, The Civil Service, Co-op and PageGroup have taken significant steps on their inclusion journey, becoming leaders in their sectors around hiring and ongoing talent management.

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