How to (Really) Fix the Pipeline Problem

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ABSTRACT

Many organizational leaders seeking to improve DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) point to "the pipeline problem"—that is, too few Black, Latinx, and Indigenous candidates in the recruiting/hiring pipeline—as a reason for a lack of diversity in their organizations. Owing to systemic factors, there is some truth to this perspective, but it also ignores the reality that many qualified candidates of color are underutilized in the workforce or unseen in recruiting pipelines. It furthermore assumes that the problem is primarily external, ignoring opportunities for internal growth. We offer an alternative solution to the pipeline problem that prioritizes internal equity and inclusion rather than diversity in and of itself. Such equity and inclusion work ensures that all members or employees of an organization feel seen, heard, and valued for their authentic contributions. This work requires a significant time and energy investment that organizations must be prepared to give. In turn, they accrue many tangible and intangible benefits, including the foundation on which to build a sustainably diverse organization.

KEY ACTION STEPS FOR LEADERS

Rethink "the pipeline." Identify biases and assumptions you may be making that lead to a narrow recruiting/hiring pipeline.

Address internal equity and inclusion before or concurrently with changes to the hiring process. Examine if your organization currently fosters a welcoming and affirming environment for a racially diverse team. A DEI consulting firm can help you conduct an equity assessment.

Make meaningful adjustments. Use what you learn from an equity assessment—especially by listening to the voices of those from underrepresented groups—to adjust policies and foster inclusion within your organization.

INTRODUCTION

As DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) researchers and consultants, we frequently hear that a lack of diversity in recruitment pipelines is the biggest barrier to achieving an organization's DEI goals. Organizational leaders feel that they are simply not encountering enough talented Black, Latinx, or Indigenous candidates to achieve meaningful racial diversity at all levels of their organization. They seek the help of DEI consultants such as ourselves in finding these elusive candidates.

We want to push back against—or at least complicate—this narrative that a lack of racial diversity in organizations is a "pipeline problem." It implies (1) that there is a linear relationship between the composition of recruiting pipelines and the composition of organizations, i.e., if recruiting pipelines were more diverse, organizations would be too, and (2) that equity and inclusion work—the E and I of DEI—is something to be done after the "pipeline problem" is fixed.

We see two major problems here. First, there are already many qualified Black, Latinx, and Indigenous job seekers, but for a variety of reasons, they are not being seen. Second, focusing only on hiring ignores the strategic and ethical imperative to create an organizational environment that genuinely embraces diverse perspectives, cultural markers, and life experiences. Ultimately, to achieve greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, leaders and organizations must look inward to understand what biases, inequities, and exclusionary practices or cultures may be getting in their way.

THE HIDDEN PIPELINE PROBLEM

This article about the tech industry in Massachusetts aptly describes how, despite years of diversity statements and public commitments, "nothing

actually changes." Candidates are narrowly selected from elite universities, and bias in venture capital makes it difficult for Black and Brown tech entrepreneurs to receive funding. Tech boot camps are offered as a possible solution toward greater racial and ethnic diversity in the tech industry.

However, while boot camps are indeed a valid approach to expanding opportunity pathways for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous talent, the issue of diversity in recruitment pipelines is not where the problem starts or ends. In tech, while it's true that there are fewer eligible Black and Brown job candidates, it's also true that Black and Brown people who have four-year and advanced degrees in STEM are underutilized. Many of these candidates simply aren't landing in jobs that use their STEM training.

What accounts for this underutilization? There are multiple theories, but perhaps the one that has received the most attention is bias in candidate evaluation. Audit studies in the social science literature show that job applicants with Black-sounding names are less likely to get callbacks than applicants with White-sounding names. Companies are increasingly addressing this issue with blind resume review processes for the initial candidate screening phases. Yet a deeper issue remains: employers often seek employees who not only have the skills required of the job but who are also similar culturally to them. With an overwhelmingly White and male leadership and workforce in the tech industry, this tendency to prefer culturally similar employees can hinder Black, Latinx, and Indigenous job candidates.

So, let's reframe this issue of the pipeline: it's not just a supply problem, but an uptake problem as well.

There are actions that organizations can take to broaden the proverbial pipeline, but first, they must also be ready to broaden their ideas about what makes a candidate a good fit.

PIPELINE SHOULD COME AFTER INTERNAL DEI

A diverse pipeline is meaningless—and, in fact, potentially harmful—if Black, Latinx, and Indigenous applicants who successfully navigate the recruitment process find themselves in inhospitable working environments.

To continue with the tech industry as an example, the Kapor Center's Tech Leavers Study found that 40% and 36% of underrepresented men and women, respectively, left their tech jobs due to unfair treatment. In another study, 55% of Black workers reported that racial inequality occurs "frequently" or "very frequently" in the tech industry, with 48% reporting that they have personally experienced racial discrimination. There have also been several high-profile examples of racial harassment and racial pay disparities within large tech companies.

But it's not just the tech industry. Evidence of racial inequities abounds in all kinds of industries and organizational contexts—even, in our experience, in nonprofits and organizations with overtly progressive orientations.

A study of wage differences at the intersection of race and gender shows that Black men receive 76 cents on the dollar in hourly wages compared with White men, while Black women receive only 61 cents on the dollar. Those gaps are even larger when looking at annual earnings. Studies have also shown that workers of color and women are more likely to be judged harshly in performance reviews than their White male counterparts. Black women report sexual harassment at nearly three times the rate of White women. These are only a few of the data that resoundingly point to persistent inequities in U.S. organizational environments.

As long as there are significant equity and inclusion issues at an organization internally—as long as Black and Brown employees are paid less, taken less seriously, and/or are unable to bring their authen-

tic selves to work—the goal of increasing diversity, without first attending to internal equity and inclusion, is misplaced.

How do leaders know what equity and inclusion issues exist in their organizations? They have to ask.

Indicators for equity and inclusion are not necessarily as visible or tangible as markers of diversity, and not every organization has the same issues. Understanding the DEI issues specific to one's own organization is a reason to put equity and inclusion work up front.

To put it simply, unless leaders are asking the questions, they will not know their organization's true DEI needs.

THE LINK BETWEEN INTERNAL CULTURE AND THE PIPELINE

We've all heard about "the business case for diversity." A lesser-known qualification to the diversity-is-good-for-business argument is that those with non-dominant identities must not only be present but feel included—otherwise diversity can actually be bad for business. Unfortunately, this nuance is too often lost in the DEI conversation. While we'd prefer to move away from the business case for diversity altogether, we hope that this qualification provides a strategic incentive to do equity and inclusion work. The ethical case is self-evident.

As awareness of DEI-related issues increases, DEI shortcomings within an organization can also have upstream effects on the pipeline. In our consulting work, we've observed firsthand how poor DEI can hurt recruitment. One employee shared with us how her negative experiences as a woman of color in multiple companies (in the same industry) have prompted her to be less than enthusiastic when candidates of color reach out to her for advice about

careers in her field. By not focusing on equity and inclusion for current employees, companies may be losing the competition for talented Black, Latinx, and Indigenous employees before it even begins.

Addressing the underlying structural and cultural inequities is requisite if companies truly wish to realize their DEI commitments. A large investment in organizational-level self-reflection and critical analysis is required to do this work well, and making this investment is the first step to improving the experiences of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous workers.

We believe that the organizations who seek DEI consulting truly want to do better. Yet often the

work is deeper than they realize. Where they might anticipate needing to make a few tweaks to their recruiting tactics, we push them to break out of stale, mechanical thinking about where the problem lies (and therefore what the solution is). We ask them to open themselves to a new paradigm of problem-solving—one that, frankly, may require more time investment and vulnerability than some companies are prepared to give. But without it, the cycles of inequity will persist. On the other hand, companies who are ready to make this investment will contribute not only to the success of their organizations, but to the realization of equity and justice for all.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ahmmad Brown is Executive Director and Co-Founder of EBDI Consulting, a consultancy which draws on best practices from academic research as well as social justice frameworks to help organizations become more equitable and inclusive. He is also a Senior Advisor for Working Ideal, a DEI consultancy with vast experience in public, private, and non-profit sectors. Previously, Ahmmad worked in college admissions and social sector consulting, and served in advisory capacities for postsecondary institutions on student recruitment, engagement, and success initiatives. Ahmmad is a doctoral candidate in Organizational Behavior at Harvard Business School. His dissertation, which will be completed in spring 2022, focuses on Black students' experiences in higher education. His other research focuses on how organizational leaders conceive DEI strategy, and the predictors of allyship behavior in organizational settings. Ahmmad will be an Assistant Professor of Instruction at the Northwestern School of Education and Social Policy, starting in summer 2022.

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