

Beyond rhetoric: what's really sustaining (or undermining) DEI in UK workplaces

IPA Hub event

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Source: Microsoft stock images

Discussion for today

- 1 What is driving inclusion and fairness in organisations right now?
- 2 How do current labour market challenges strengthen – or complicate – the case for DEI?
- 3 What would make DEI sustainable – feel like ‘core business’ – rather than additional demand on resource?

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Drivers for employer action on DEI

IES research insights

Environmental Drivers

Operational Drivers

Regulatory compliance	Legal mandates and equality duties	Organisational values and culture	Moral imperatives and business advantages
	Public procurement and ALMPs		EDI as leadership value
Market competitiveness	Market differentiation and advantage	Workforce and skills needs	Expanding talent pool
	Benchmarking and industry pressures		Skills shortages
			Cost-effectiveness
Reputation and brand image	Increasing brand attractiveness	Innovation and creativity	Unique competences and skillsets
	Legitimacy and trust		Accessing market niches
Societal trends and events	Growth of CSR and social justice	Organisational growth and productivity	Enhancing organisational efficiency
	Influence of wider national policies		Increasing workforce cohesion

Source: What works to promote employer action and behaviour change in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), Youth Futures Foundation, 2025

Poll

What has kept DEI alive on the agenda in your workplace?

- a) Senior leadership buy-in**
- b) Regulatory compliance**
- c) Committed DEI champions**
- d) Workforce needs (talent acquisition/ retention)**
- e) Competition**
- f) Brand/reputation**
- g) Organisation values/ culture**
- h) Other factors**

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Why progressing DEI feels harder right now

- ❑ Global uncertainty and geopolitical tensions
- ❑ Cost pressures and wage floors
- ❑ Talent shortages and constrained pipelines
- ❑ AI and automation risks
- ❑ Industrial relations and employee trust

Organisational factors that support/ hinder DEI

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Enablers (supports)

- Culture and values
- Leadership
- Line managers
- Staff networks/ lived experience
- HR structures, workforce data
- Learning, development, collaboration

Barriers (hinders)

- Resources and capacity
- Lack of information
- Lack of shared understanding
- Unconscious Bias/ entrenched norms
- Lack of leadership engagement
- Fear of self disclosure
- Inadequate structure, process, and monitoring

Discussion

What is the main enabler and/ or key barrier that you see operating within your organisational context currently?

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A back-to-basics blueprint

- 1. From visibility to value: rebuilding the business case**
- 2. Go deep, not wide: diagnosing your starting point and context**
- 3. Listen locally: tailoring aims to employee voice and labour markets**

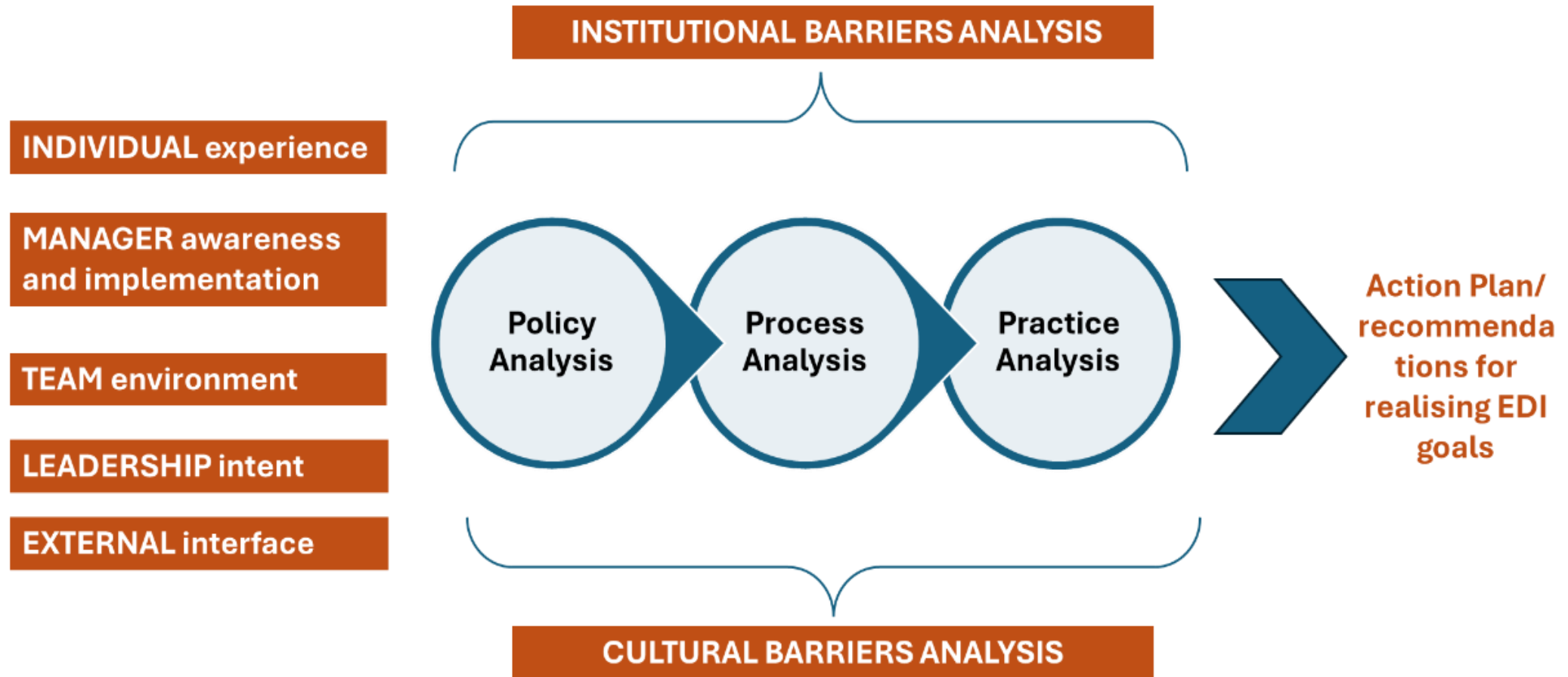
1. Anchor EDI investment in business value, not visibility

- ✓ Reframe EDI around outcomes leaders already care about:
 - Access to talent and wider hiring pools
 - Retention of scarce skills
 - Management capability and decision quality
 - Reduction in people, legal and reputational risk
- ✓ Use diagnostics and workforce data to understand where inclusion failures create operational risk or inefficiency.
- ✓ Move away from abstract benchmarks toward organisation-specific evidence of where EDI adds value.

2. Depth beats breadth: invest where systems drive change

- ✓ Diagnose your starting point before investing further
 - Where are barriers embedded in policies?
 - Where do people processes (recruitment, progression, pay, complaints) reproduce inequality?
 - Where do everyday manager behaviours and practices undermine inclusion?
- ✓ Prioritise fewer interventions but do them thoroughly and well.
- ✓ Apply a whole-system lens (e.g. Policy–Process–Practice):
 - Policies set intent
 - Processes operationalise fairness
 - Practices and behaviours determine lived experience

IES' Policy-Process-Practice (PPP) framework offers multiple starting points for your transformation journey



3. Sustainable DEI is context-specific, not generic

- ✓ Ground DEI priorities in:
 - Employee voice and lived experience
 - Local labour market conditions
 - Organisational risk profile and strategic goals
- ✓ Use benchmarking for context, not a target list.
- ✓ Allow language to evolve (“belonging”, “inclusive culture”) if needed not to weaken substance:
 - Governance and leadership accountability
 - Robust complaints and escalation mechanisms
- ✓ Set clear expectations from managers and leaders

In sum, ask yourself

Where could I redirect my attention and efforts to bring about more sustainable, systemic change that actually shapes outcomes?



Any questions?



Thank you

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