

COMMENTARY

Cutting the cord: Good riddance to ineffective DEI programs

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As scholars who belong to multiple categories of the minority classes described by Follmer et al. (2024), we acknowledge the importance and the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the workplace and education. We concur with the overarching sentiments of Follmer et al. In fact, we are cognizant that previous scholarship on DEI programs in organizations has generally shown support for increased positive outcomes, such as reduced hiring bias and reduced workplace discrimination (Bateh et al., 2023). Therefore, we are entering this conversation not to contradict the focal article or to minimize the threat of ongoing anti-DEI legislation but rather to suggest areas of further consideration and future research to industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists.

A primary argument of Follmer et al. is that the dissolution of DEI programs poses significant threats to providing representation for minorities. As a slew of state legislation is being passed to restrict DEI efforts, training and programs are facing increased scrutiny in the United States (U.S.). Prasad and Śliwa (2024) indicate that the “war on woke” (p. 1) has moved beyond the political sphere to also enter academia, with faculty members increasing their backlash against DEI efforts. In a similar vein, the focal article presents anti-DEI legislation as an attack on woke while also devoting time to expand on the concept of being woke. The “anti-woke agenda” presents fragmented argumentation by excluding a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of the efforts that have emerged from the woke era.

There is no disagreement that a legislative “war on woke” (Prasad & Śliwa, 2024) exists, targeting organizations perceived as “woke” that Foss and Klein (2023) define as socially progressive companies focusing on DEI. Popular press outlets are furthering this “war on woke” discourse by citing organizational DEI efforts as divisive to America (e.g., CNN U.S. [Ellis, 2024]). We suggest that the anti-DEI legislation, although largely pushed by legislators, does indicate that a specific subset of Americans do not discern the value of DEI training, programming, and initiatives. In fact, the focal article leverages a Gallup poll to suggest that only about half of Americans support DEI initiatives in businesses (Gallup, 2022). Substantiating our argument, it can be assumed that the remainder of Americans are either not supportive, neutral, or have mixed feelings about these efforts.

Therefore, based on the statistics presented by Follmer et al., legislators are not unaccompanied in the progression of the anti-DEI movement. Presumably, up to 166 million American civilians share similar perspectives. Scholars, such as Kulik et al. (2007), have previously highlighted how DEI training may only be valuable to those who are already appreciative of diversity. As a result, we are inclined to question the impact organizations are making on individuals who are not predisposed to support DEI policies, platforms, and mindsets.

Criticism of DEI initiatives is not siloed to legislative sessions and popular press outlets. This is evidenced through an escalation of scholarship toward the anti-DEI movement (e.g., Waldman & Sparr, 2023) or challenging the effectiveness of current DEI initiatives (e.g., Anand & Winters,

2008; Foss & Klein, 2023). For instance, Devine and Ash (2022) and Cox and Devine (2019) highlight the lack of empirical evidence surrounding DEI effectiveness, highlighting that DEI initiatives are often motivated by personal preference and training intuition instead of theoretical or empirical evidence. Similarly, Chang et al. (2019) found limited support for sustained DEI effectiveness three weeks post intervention. Despite the increase in scholarly criticism of DEI practices and questioning of DEI effectiveness, additional research investigating the temporal effectiveness of DEI initiatives over time is needed. Instead of viewing anti-DEI legislation or individuals who disagree with the woke movement or DEI effectiveness as a condemnation, we posit it as an opportunity for reflection and improvement within the DEI field. As such, we highlight four points of consideration to progress the conversation.

First, some organizations and educational institutions should take responsibility for incorporating DEI agendas without thoughtful consideration or the genuine intention to promote fair treatment. As mentioned in Follmer et al., monumental and historical events, such as the murder of George Floyd, ignite a cascade of reform efforts in the workplace. Several organizations and institutions were not ready or intentional about deploying these plans. For example, Follmer et al. note that the tragedy of George Floyd resulted in a significant increase in chief diversity officers (CDOs) being hired. According to Zippia (2024), 76% of CDOs are White; as of 2021, 45% were male. Selecting nonminority individuals in CDO positions is contentious and could be seen as going against a fundamental principle of DEI initiatives. As minorities commenting on this focal article, our experiences are vastly different from those of White men. Although there are undoubtedly well-intentioned and well-educated members of majority classes, DEI efforts and programs should represent and reflect the voices of minorities through their leadership choices. Some employees might find an organization's decision to hire a nonminority in a CDO role as problematic and thoughtless.

Follmer et al. comment that, without DEI initiatives, organizations may struggle to attract and retain LGTBQ+ and racial minorities in the workplace. We argue that ineffective DEI initiatives, such as following the Discrimination and Fairness Paradigm (Ely & Thomas, 2020; Weeks et al., 2024) and nondiverse leadership selection (Federo, 2024), are equally deterring the recruitment and retention of minority employees. Leslie (2019) and Burnett and Aguinis (2024), both highlight a phenomenon called "DEI backfire" as a consequence of ineffective DEI initiatives. Essentially, the initiative backfires when there is an impact on the intended outcome but in an undesirable direction (Leslie, 2019). We argue that some prominent DEI backfires act to discourage minority applicants from applying to organizations that have publicly experienced these backfires. For example, Burnett and Aguinis (2024) suggest that the Wells Fargo initiative of requiring a diverse candidate pool backfired when it was discovered that minority candidates were receiving "sham" interviews when the position had already been offered to other candidates.

Second, Follmer et al. indicate that the fundamental purpose of DEI efforts is to reduce prejudice and bias toward minoritized individuals. The authors note that current policies and legislation have been criticized for encouraging reverse discrimination. In that case, it should serve as an indicator that our current efforts are systematically flawed and need a critical reassessment. As such, future research should focus on the modern-day implications of various DEI initiatives and generate a stream of best practices for organizations. In states that have banned DEI efforts, scholars should investigate how to improve and enhance previous legislation to present a more refined and polished version that addresses the previous concerns of preceding legislation. Furthermore, researchers should not assume that citizens of affected states will accurately interpret the impact of anti-DEI legislation, rather we must identify how to effectively communicate the true impact and nature of the new legislation. In totality, we urge I-O scholars to view anti-DEI legislation as an opportunity to adapt and refine present DEI efforts to be more effective at providing training to individuals who view present efforts as antagonistic, placing blame, and favoring nonmajority group members. Instead, the criticism against DEI highlighted by the focal article indicates that DEI training may be ineffective, prohibiting the subset of

individuals Follmer et al., would consider anti-DEI supporters from expanding their understanding of the value of DEI initiatives.

Third, the focal article highlights that anti-DEI policies will hinder the applicant pool, limiting the ability of recruitment and hiring efforts to remain unbiased. An alternative perspective is to analyze how, if any, does the presence of DEI efforts promote faking behaviors in the applicant pool. It is not uncommon for individuals to craft their interview responses to align with the expectations and beliefs of the hiring organization. Depending on the context, this phenomenon can be identified in the literature as impression management, surface acting, or deep acting. Although we concur that a potential exists for additional biases to be introduced into the hiring process from anti-DEI policies, the existence of an unbiased process is impossible.

Fourth and finally, future research should utilize additional moderators to analyze the outcomes of DEI training, such as person–organization (mis)fit (P–O fit). This focuses on the congruence between individuals and organizational values (Santos & De Domenico, 2015). Researchers have suggested that P–O fit is related to organization compatibility through employee alignment with organizational beliefs, norms, and values (Chatman, 1989; Netemeyer et al., 1997). The P–O fit literature would suggest that individuals who lack congruence with company values will leave the organization (e.g., Verquer et al., 2003). This traditional approach to P–O fit may be overlooking individuals and applicants who “fake” their P–O fit to gain or retain employment. In these circumstances, an employee may, at face value, indicate support for DEI efforts to align themselves with the woke company superficially while privately holding anti-DEI sentiments.

Consequently, scholarship should investigate if individuals falsely respond to DEI surveys to present as a woke employee (i.e., maintaining the appearance of P–O fit). Impression management has been identified as a potential method bias producing socially desirable responding to questionnaires and causing validity concerns (Connelly & Chang, 2016; Keiser & Payne, 2019). To evaluate the potential of this phenomenon, we urge future research to focus on the concerns of validity and reliability of current measures of DEI effectiveness. For instance, survey scales and questionnaires may not represent the best methodological approach to capturing genuine opinions on DEI efforts in the workplace. Sensitive topics, such as opinions regarding DEI, can introduce social desirability bias and can increase response bias (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Connelly & Chang, 2016). Thus, a heightened awareness of response bias from anti-DEI employees, who are successful at portraying and maintaining an image on questionnaires, obscures our knowledge of their genuine DEI sentiments. In addressing these alternative concerns, outside of the implications on recruitment and hiring, this research could have a significant impact on uncovering *why* DEI efforts are ineffective and *how to* improve future initiatives. Additionally, we encourage researchers to conduct longitudinal studies to investigate the temporal power of DEI initiatives. Potentially, the positive outcomes previously associated with DEI efforts may lose significance once temporal distance from the original training or intervention mechanism is accounted for.

Conclusion

Just as academia seeks multiple blind reviews for manuscripts, the essence of building knowledge, recognizing flaws, and addressing mistakes is at the core of research. Without acknowledging our worst critiques, we have systematically failed to push the conversation forward. The increased scrutiny and legislation against current DEI initiatives should encourage scholars now, more than ever, to focus on evaluating current effectiveness and building future DEI initiatives. These efforts should not only resonate with individuals already inclined to support DEI but also with those who would previously have been anti-DEI. Only through effectively training both subsets will we be able to move forward into a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable future.

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