

Why diversity is the new safety imperative

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Keeping a diverse workforce safe is not easy. Physical and physiological challenges to keeping people safe can be measured against a range of technical absolutes and standards; dealing with psychological challenges requires a culture where everyone feels free to speak up and a style of leadership - that embraces diversity and inclusivity.

Leaders are under mounting pressure to demonstrate that they have a safe and diverse workforce. Indeed, these are fast becoming key indicators of a well-run company. In our work with clients we find that these goals have a lot in common. This article explores the relationship between safety and diversity - where organizations need to improve and how they can get started.

The diversity premium

There is a strong correlation between a company's higher-than-average diversity, in terms of ethnicity and gender, and higher-than-average profits¹. Not only that, but companies with diverse leadership teams and workforces have been seen to grow faster and be more enjoyable places to work².

Creating and managing a diverse workforce, however, also comes with some challenges. For business leaders, these revolve around ensuring diversity at all levels of the organization, cultivating inclusion and belonging, dealing with conflict and miscommunication, and developing an inclusive leadership culture that is less command-and-control and more empowering and innovative.

The challenges associated with keeping a diverse workforce safe centre on providing a safe working environment and safe working practices for all employees. They are both technical (workplace processes that are accessible and understood by all) and adaptive (making sure all employees feel safe enough to speak up). To overcome these challenges safety has to understand diversity.

Diversity in the safety function

A diverse safety function is more likely to understand the issues faced by a diverse workforce and be more effective in preventing illnesses, injuries and fatalities. However, there are two areas where safety functions are lagging: the recruitment of women into safety roles and the effective harnessing of neuro-diverse workers' skills to solve safety challenges.

Gender inequality

In 2020, ERM conducted a global survey of 273 Health & Safety (H&S) functional leaders.



15%

Just 15% of the leaders we interviewed were women, despite the fact that our survey indicated little difference in gender demographics further down the organization⁵.

This contrasts dramatically with the growing (if still unequal) share of women in senior positions in business globally, which has increased from 19% in 2004 to 29% in 2020³. Representation of women in health and safety leadership is clearly lagging.

Limited embrace of neuro-diversity

Some areas of safety are highly complex and require a laser-like focus on detail, for example, the safe design of operating facilities or the rigorous analysis of industrial incidents. People with autism, for example, often excel at pattern recognition and spotting irregularities⁴ – an ideal skill for identifying problems and flaws in highly complex and hazardous industrial systems and processes. Such skills have been embraced and supported in the IT industry, but in our experience, have been less well sought after in safety.



Protecting a diverse workforce

Lack of diversity within safety functions is a cause for concern in itself. But what makes it so urgent is the growing body of evidence about the safety issues faced by more diverse workforces. Managing a safe place of work for a diverse workforce is complicated and requires specialist knowledge and skills in five key areas: marginalized groups, ethnicity, multiculturalism, gender and age.

1. Marginalized groups

A recent survey conducted by McKinsey & Company reveals that women, LGBTQ+ employees, people of colour and working parents are having the hardest time during the Covid-19 pandemic, both in the workplace and with balancing work and home life⁶.



The survey found that employees who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender non-binary (LGBTQ+) disproportionately fear losing ground at work and report feeling isolated. These employees report more work-related challenges than their straight peers, for example in relation to mental health, as well as a heightened loss of connectivity and belonging.

Employees who feel isolated and discriminated against are unlikely to speak up if they see unsafe conditions or behaviours. Distraction and stress may, unwittingly, be putting them and their colleagues at risk.

2. Ethnicity

With growing societal expectations as a result of a global movement towards racial justice, all companies need to consider how systemic racism exists within their organizations and determine what impact this might have on the safety and welfare of their employees.

According to research carried out in the US, black employees often feel a heightened sense of difference when among their mostly white peers and feel pressurized to create ‘facades of conformity’ which can suppress discussions relating to racism⁷. To address this, some companies invite black professionals to become “champions of minority groups”, adding a new role to the one they were actually hired for and creating an increased workload.



From a safety perspective, any group feeling discriminated against, isolated or pressurized to conform is likely to be more prone to stress, mental health issues and, at the very least, distraction. It also places them at much greater risk from the hazards and related risks in the workplace. When stressed, we are up to 500 times more likely to make errors⁹.

3. Multiculturalism

When people from multiple cultures work together, difficulties or misunderstandings can occur as a result of language issues or because of differences in attitudes and beliefs. Managing multicultural teams requires awareness of such differences in order to create a work environment in which differences are openly addressed so that people can perform to their full potential.

This challenge is particularly acute in the oil & gas, aviation and medical industries. For example, aviation studies have investigated the willingness of pilots and co-pilots from different cultures to challenge the decisions of their superiors and their level of creativity in coping with emergency situations. These studies reveal that cockpit behaviour is significantly influenced by national culture and emphasize the critical role of training in national cultural characteristics⁸.

Beyond these sectors, it’s clear that cultural differences could have a significant impact on peoples’ willingness to challenge and speak up, particularly in stressful situations. Proactive efforts to overcome any barriers are therefore critical.

4. Gender

Women represent more than 40% of the global workforce¹⁰. However, in the past, the health and safety needs of men in the workplace have been prioritized over women. Risk prevention has typically focused on visibly hazardous work, more often carried out by men. However, when women work in these areas, they often find that they are given protective equipment or clothing that's designed for men.



In 2019, ERM conducted safety transformation work at a very large industrial site with more than 500 women working in front-line operations. One of the first topics to emerge during our women-only focus groups was **why personal protective equipment (PPE) – overalls, jackets, gloves, boots and safety glasses – was designed for men. None of the local suppliers were able to supply PPE designed for women, so to rectify the situation our client looked further afield to find one that could.**

PPE is just the tip of the iceberg. Work equipment (such as desks, chairs and machinery) still tends to be designed for the average-sized male worker and takes less account of the ergonomic needs of women. Hazardous substance exposure affecting women workers has been under-estimated in the past because exposure limits were based on laboratory tests on men¹¹. To cap it all, workplace temperatures are typically also based on what is comfortable for men rather than women¹².

5. Age

The workplace poses different risks to workers depending on their age. Statistics from the UK reveal that not enough is being done to accommodate older workers.

According to the UK Health & Safety Executive, 111 people were killed at work in 2019/20 (the lowest on record).

aged **60+** Workers aged 60 or over accounted for **27% of the fatalities**, even though they make up only 10% of the workforce.

aged **60-64** Workers aged 60-64 had a **fatality rate almost twice as high** as all other age groupings.

aged **65+** Workers over 65 had a **fatality rate four times as high**¹³.

Older workers may need to undertake less strenuous work than their younger colleagues, but this does not mean they are less productive. Many industrial facilities have adapted work shift patterns and breaks to accommodate older workers and this flexibility often results in longer retention for older employees, higher productivity and a happier workforce.



Connecting Health & Safety and DE&I

Corporate and asset-based safety policies, programs and procedures must take all aspects of workforce diversity into account in order to keep all employees safe. Some aspects of diversity are better understood and are being managed more effectively than others, but there is still a long way to go. So how can organizations begin to make progress? The answer lies in leadership.

Create a culture of inclusive leadership

The leadership characteristics that enhance health and safety are very similar to those that promote an inclusive culture that embraces diversity. Courageous conversations are needed across all levels of management and job types, from janitor to general counsel. Stronger links can be made between the tools used to transform safety leadership and the approaches used to promote diversity and inclusion in the workforce.

Organizations with high levels of psychological safety create an environment where people feel free to speak up, ask questions, and make suggestions without fear of retribution, or concern that their comments might damage their relationships or reputation.



The consequence of listening to multiple voices leads to a broadening of the knowledge base for alternative decision-making. This in turn leads to an increase in the number of possible pathways to problem solving. This style of open and egalitarian communication is exactly what's needed to solve non-routine safety problems.

Challenge leadership bias

Business leaders must recognize that many types of bias exist and that everyone has them. The types that impact workplace safety (e.g. anchoring, championing, group-think and representative bias) are not always well understood. To get past this, leaders must examine their

own behaviours to recognize their personal blind-spots, reflect on their hidden agendas as individuals and also embodied biases towards other groups that may cut across efforts to keep them safe.

Indeed, seeing everyone as equal may hinder the ability to see how different groups have different safety needs. The safety-impacting biases that exist in an organization need to be examined closely. The resulting discussions will tell you how inclusive and open an organization actually is.

Lay the foundations

Operational leaders have to establish safe places of work, provide their employees with the information, instructions and the correct tools and guidance to work safely. They also need to check rigorously that work is conducted safely. All these steps need to consider the diversity of your workforce. Some initial key questions to consider include:

- Are workplaces and equipment designed and operated for the physical dimensions and characteristics of your workforce?
- Is workforce diversity taken into account in risk assessments?
- How do you know that the right safety tools, guidance and support are being provided?
- How comfortable and safe do all of your employees feel in speaking out?
- How do your assurance activities reach the most vulnerable employees in your organization?

Seek out diverse voices

To understand the needs of a diverse workforce health & safety managers should seek out diverse perspectives. If a health & safety function is not very diverse it needs to work closely with the DE&I leaders to achieve your common goals - to cultivate an inclusive and empowered workforce and to keep everyone safe.

Integrate into risk management

Diversity needs to be integrated into risk assessment processes. Practical risk assessment tools need to take into account the specific risks faced, for instance, by people with disabilities, migrant workers, older workers, women and temporary workers.

Examples of measures that could benefit the whole workforce include the following:



Reviewing risk assessments to determine how diversity has been integrated.

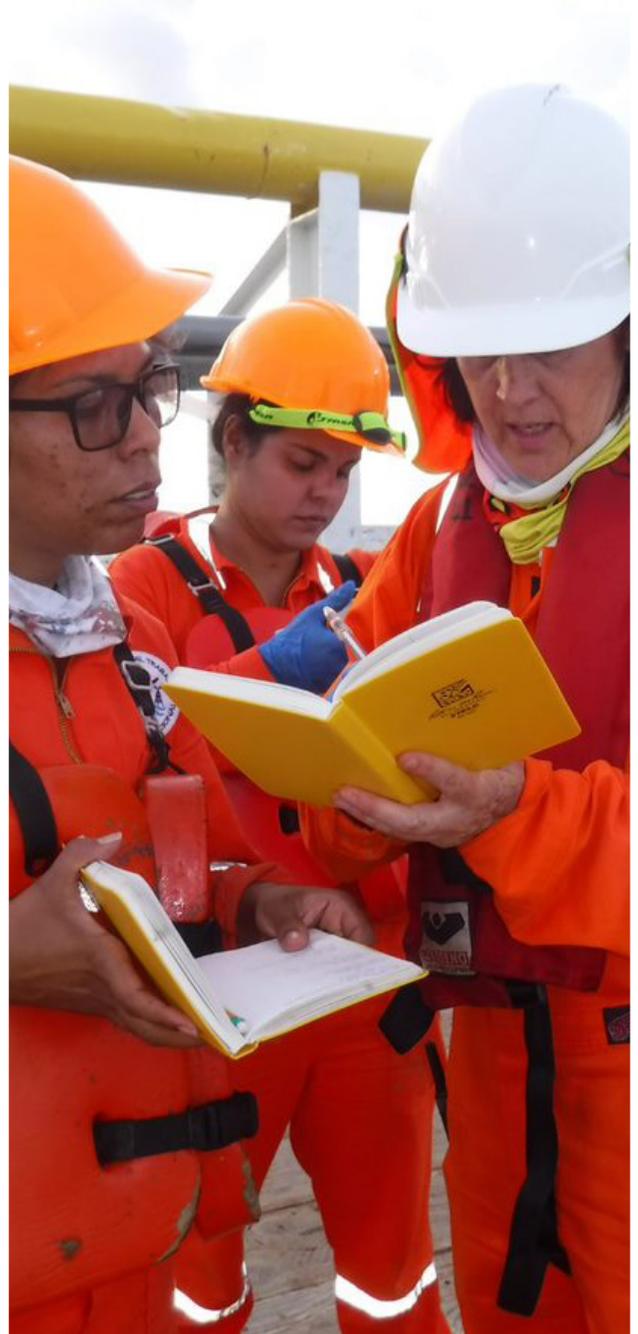


Purchasing a wider range of tools and equipment that can be adapted for every worker.



Train and protect your colleagues of colour, female employees, LGBTQ+ employees who are sent to locations where they may be exposed to prejudice and volatile environments.

The need to manage a diverse workforce is providing many organizations with new and valuable opportunities to advance their thinking and approach to safety. As more organizations embrace DE&I and seek to diversify their workforce, the need to think even more broadly and deeply about health and safety cannot be underestimated.



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Our diverse team of world-class experts supports clients across the breadth of their organizations to operationalize sustainability, underpinned by our deep technical expertise in addressing their environmental, health, safety, risk and social issues. We call this capability our “boots to boardroom” approach for its comprehensive service model that allows ERM to develop strategic and technical solutions that advance objectives on the ground or at the executive level.

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