

Why workplaces need to embrace multi-dimensional identities

By Tina Vinod and Manaswini Bhalla | Oct 9, 2023

In a world of labels and stereotypes, our power lies in exploring the intricate dimensions of our identities while embracing the vibrant, interwoven tapestry of others



The identity that we choose to prime changes with the circumstances around us. Given the penalties and benefits associated with how society perceives us Image: Shutterstock

Simply put, our identity refers to who we are.

But is it really that simple?

Identity formation is a complex and dynamic process often influenced by a combination of factors. Identity is multi-dimensional. Identity is also driven by myriad factors that intricately influence who we are as individuals and how we come across to others. These two key aspects of identity are our 'Personal Identity' and the 'Social Identity.'

Personal Identity encompasses our sense of self. Factors within our control—such as our interests and decisions—as well as external factors beyond our control—such as our family and lived experiences— influence it. For instance, Priya, a social entrepreneur, is heavily influenced by her mother, who runs an NGO. She is also interested in music and is a trained classical musician. She identifies herself both as a social entrepreneur and a musician.

On the other hand, social identity is how others perceive us; this could be based on similarities or dissimilarities to a social group—examples: gender, nationality, profession, race, marital status, occupation, religion and so on. For example, Ranjit is a doctor and an out and openly gay man. Ranjit is identified by his peers as a medical professional and belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.

The combination of our personal and social identities contributes to our intersectional identities.

Our identities can also create overlapping and compounding systems of disadvantage or advantage. Intersectionality recognises that we experience challenges based on multiple marginalised identities. For example, an older, unemployed woman seeking to re-enter the workforce may face ageism coupled with gender bias, making her job search more challenging than it might be for younger individuals or men of her age.

THE IDENTITIES WE CHOOSE TO PRIMEThe identity that we choose to prime changes with the circumstances around us. Given the penalties and benefits associated with how society perceives us, the aspect of our identity that we choose to prime may change with circumstances. In the instance of Ranjit, they may decide to prime their identity as a doctor more than their LGBTQ+ identity in a professional setting, for example, while treating their patients. This is a personal choice.

Recent research has revealed that the salience of different identities can dramatically impact one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, as well as that of the group. (1)

EMPOWERING WORKPLACES TO BE AUTHENTICIn the workplace context, inclusive cultures often encourage people to be authentic at work. This would be impossible if the workplace culture lacks safety and respect.

The identities we choose to prime are contextual to our environment and how safe we feel. A queer person is able to express their thoughts, opinions, and identities without fear of discrimination or harassment when an organisation is visibly supportive and has representation from the LGBTQ+ community with inclusive policies and practices that enable psychological safety. Many times LGBTQ+ folks are more open about their queer identity at work than with their families because they find larger acceptance here.

Workplaces that are authentically inclusive and exhibit equitable practices can also become empowering, encouraging their members to prime their true identities fearlessly.

RECOMMENDATIONSIn the context of building diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces, understanding and acknowledging the reality of multiple, intersectional identities can serve as a compass for designing effective people strategies that enhance employee retention and engagement, foster inclusivity, and cultivate a culture of belonging, especially for those from under-represented and marginalised communities. It could

prevent us from designing and investing in homogeneous cookie-cutter solutions that lack the essential elements of inclusion and innovation.

For example, when formulating parental leave policies and medical insurance benefits, it is important to consider individuals who become parents through surrogacy or adoption. Thus, those who become parents through alternative means receive the same benefits and support as biological parents. It also respects the diverse paths to parenthood, including those chosen by same-sex and LGBTQ+ parents.

Research has found that when affirmative action policies are formulated separately for each identity dimension (e.g., race and gender) and are not intersectional, they do not reach the intended outcome, worsen equality and increase the under-representation of already underrepresented segments of society. (2)

Recognising and understanding multi-dimensional identities in the context of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion can help HR and DEI professionals design and implement policies and practices that result in a work culture that is safe, respectful and inclusive of all voices and perspectives.

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