

Diversity & Exclusion Disillusion Delusion Illusion Confusion

The Diversity & Confusion Report
Data and insights into the state of
equity, diversity & inclusion in 2023
Prepared by **The Unmistakables**



Executive Summary

Where we are in 2023

A research report published by The Unmistakables in 2021 showed that UK business was largely in a state of 'diversity and confusion'. Cultural confidence (the ability to navigate modern society and different cultures with insight, ease and intelligence) across UK business was low, and fear of saying the wrong thing appeared to be hindering the progress of equity, diversity and inclusion (ED&I).

It's now 2023 and, while new data shows us that confusion levels have changed, there are four prominent themes that every business leader and ED&I professional should know how to navigate:

#1 Exclusion

- Underrepresented groups feel the most excluded from the work of ED&I
- 45 per cent of the working population in the UK believe 'your chances in life are broadly determined by your background'
- The underrepresented communities that over-index the most in this belief are the most likely to feel excluded from ED&I conversations in the workplace

#2 Disillusion

- Underrepresented groups are frustrated by the ED&I conversation
- Only 32 per cent of disabled employees, 25 per cent of LGBTQIA+ employees, and 27 per cent of employees who identify themselves with a religion are comfortable talking about their identities/beliefs with colleagues
- 26 per cent of the workforce find conversations about ED&I frustrating
- 22 per cent of the workforce find these sorts of conversations nerve wracking

#3 Delusion

- Workplace confidence in talking broadly about ED&I has grown, but the workforce is not confident in discussing topics related to human identity
- The workforce is more confident talking 'professionally' about ED&I than two years ago
- The workforce has very low confidence in talking interpersonally about identity e.g. age, disability, gender, race and ethnicity, religion or belief, sex, sexuality etc.

#4 Illusion

- Some of the most powerful and influential voices in the UK are using the word 'woke' as a means of cancelling, threatening, destabilising, or delegitimising ED&I initiatives
- In 2022, a total of 120,000 UK news stories were published about the 'ED&I' agenda compared to 28,600 that used the word 'woke'
- Despite 'woke' being mentioned 77 percentage points less than 'ED&I' in UK news stories, 'woke'-led news saw more social traction by 84 percentage points
- Where every 'ED&I' news story saw 1.7 social interactions, 'woke' stories saw a total of 10.8
- Taken from a sample of 2,416 'woke'-led UK news articles published last year, 695 were from the Mail Group (even just using a sample, this equates to nearly two per day)

Introduction

In 2021, The Unmistakables published a report that drew one major conclusion about the understanding of and attitudes towards ED&I (Equity, Diversity & Inclusion) in UK business at the time: organisations were largely in a state of diversity and confusion.

Low levels of cultural confidence made it difficult for the workforce to navigate modern society and the different cultures it is made up of with insight, ease and intelligence. Fear of saying the wrong thing hindered the progress of ED&I. And many people were unsure if they should or should not play a role in the ED&I agenda at all.

While the challenges facing businesses at that time were not insignificant, it seemed rational that confusion could be addressed through increased education, and that confidence could be enhanced through better engagement.

The world of business, however, never operates in isolation. The Unmistakables' 'Diversity & Confusion' report was based on research commissioned as we emerged from the lockdown era of the global COVID-19 pandemic – a time that divided how and where many of us worked through numerous, well-documented socio-economic factors. It also came in the shadow of George Floyd's murder. This killing – made public by news and social media – initiated a wave of corporate commitments to tackle racism, as internal and external stakeholders demanded change. The case for ED&I strategies had rarely felt so urgent.

It's now 2023, and what urgency looks like for many UK businesses shifts at a dizzying pace.

We have new political leadership with our third prime minister in two years and our first new monarch in 70. We have new data from the Census providing the first updated snapshot of the populations of England and Wales in a decade. And we have new crises, too – from the war in Ukraine, to the earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye, to the cost-of-living energy prices to climate change – each refuelling strategic priorities across all organisations.

The key boardroom challenge is deciding what to prioritise as the workforce grows impatient to see which ED&I commitments materialise.

So, where are we now?

Are we living up to these expectations?

Are we still confused?

Or are new challenges holding back the progress of ED&I?

UK business, this report reveals, needs to become more effective when it comes to equity, diversity and inclusion.

The research in this report was conducted by Censuswide with 1,600 employed UK workers between 5th and 12th January 2023. This was combined with new media analysis provided by Independent Marketing Sciences (IMS), with all data based on Boolean searches between 19th December 2021 and 19th December 2022. We outline findings from a 2023 study on understandings of and attitudes toward ED&I in the UK workforce; alongside insights and intelligence from ED&I leaders and other external sources.

Comparing similar data from 2021 (from a Censuswide survey of 1,522 employed UK participants between 15th and 19th March 2021), the research highlights where ED&I has made progress, while also revealing the factors that are preventing UK businesses from achieving meaningful inclusion.

Foreword

"There can be an assumption that an organisation's culture is detached from the outside world. This simply isn't true. We only need to look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to observe how directly company culture transferred into our homes and back again, as so many 'white collar workers' began to work remotely. The lines between internal and external workplace environments and cultures have become significantly blurred.

"As consultants, we need to have a solid grasp on what's going on in wider society in order to make an impact on the workforce. That's why we apply our trademarked 'Inside Out Inclusion®' approach to everything we do. We take time to understand the roles that outside forces including media, marketing, advertising, communications, and politics play in influencing organisational cultures. We then apply that knowledge to advise our client partners on how to progress leadership, culture, learning and data on the inside of their organisations. All of our work in ED&I is placed within the context and reality of what is happening across society at large, too.

"This report is no exception. We have sourced new 'inside' research to help leaders and ED&I professionals understand the sentiments and expectations of the UK workforce, while interpreting their significance against the backdrop of today's tumultuous 'outside' world.

"The insights we uncover present stark challenges for all ED&I professionals and anyone else seeking to further social justice. Understanding internal workplace dynamics will not be enough to make positive change happen within UK organisations. We need to be prepared to take on the challenges of the world outside the relative security of our walls, as well. For many this means bringing together marketing and HR to do what those functions are designed to do – focus on humans.

"This report reiterates our belief that ED&I must evolve beyond training and one-off statements and exercises to wholesale systems change. The client partners we work with share that ambition. They realise that, in order to stay relevant and futureproof, they need to review and adapt many deep-seated beliefs and ways-of-working – both on an individual level as leaders, and at a collective level as responsible organisations."



Asad Dhunna, founder and CEO,
The Unmistakables

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Chapter 1. Diversity &... Exclusion

In 2021, our research showed that 27 per cent of people in the workforce felt excluded from conversations about ED&I because of who they are. Over the last two years this figure has improved slightly to 21 per cent. While more inclusive business practices across UK organisations may have contributed to this change, in this year's research we wanted to look under the surface of ED&I work and ask a more fundamental question.

Do we all have equal opportunities to succeed in life or are our chances determined by our backgrounds? ¹

Rather than treating attitudes towards ED&I workplace practices in isolation, the responses to this societal question – broken down by different characteristics – provide a much broader sense of how communities experience inclusion (or exclusion, as the case may be). We believe this information is critical to how organisations consider ED&I today.

If we take a slight tangent and examine the impact of the pandemic on working practices, many leaders now understand that culture does not begin and end in the physical workplace. New dynamics have forced organisations to consider how to make hybrid working an integral part of company culture rather than something that works against it.

It follows, then, that just as our work lives often come home with us as employees, our lived experiences as people also impact our careers.

We asked people in employment across the UK whether they believed everyone has equal opportunities or whether our backgrounds create disparities. Our findings show a nation that is equally split, which, these days, may hardly be a surprise: **45 per cent of the working population believe 'everyone has equal opportunities to get where they want in life regardless of background'**, while **45 per cent say, 'your chances in life are broadly determined by your background'**.

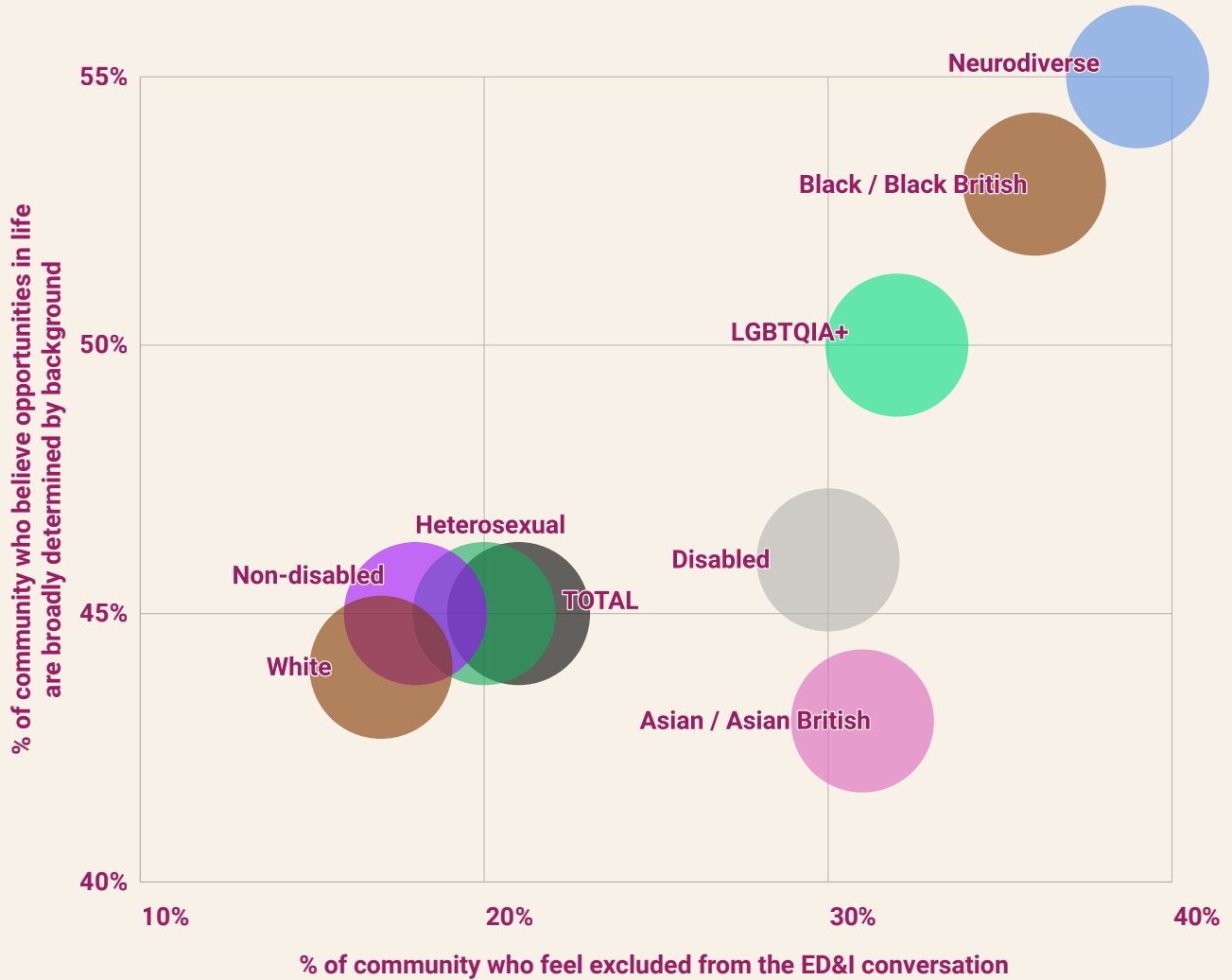
This data may create challenges for organisations that tend to 'go with the majority' in their people policy decision-making. It also points towards the myth of meritocracy ², given the parity between those who believe they can rise to the top no matter who they are, and those who believe who they are impacts their chances.

¹ Defined as financial or socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, gender, or any other characteristic that defines who we are.

² Myth of meritocracy is a phrase arguing that meritocracy, or achieving upward social mobility through one's own merits regardless of one's social position, is not widely attainable in capitalist societies because of inherent contradictions.

When it comes to engagement around ED&I conversations in the workplace, the communities that feel most excluded mirror those who over-index in believing that opportunities in life are broadly determined by background.

Figure 1: Communities excluded from the ED&I conversation



This graph shows that communities who most believe that opportunities in life are determined by your background are most likely to feel excluded from the ED&I conversation, particularly those of a minority identity.

Of all identity groups, neurodiverse, Black / Black British and LGBTQIA+ communities are most likely to feel excluded.

The data suggests that few people from backgrounds often underrepresented in the workforce believe that reaching the top through meritocracy is realistic. The recent BAFTAs controversy provides another flashpoint of how this plays out. On the one hand we hear activists and commentators calling out #BaftasSoWhite, and on the other we hear people arguing that the awards are handed out on merit.

"Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ [sic] problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things."

– Kimberlé Crenshaw

This highlights a need to move beyond characteristics and to look at systems. While employee resource groups (ERGs) and ED&I communities have been striving to make progress within organisations, the data shows that it is typically the very people that ERGs are trying to support who feel most excluded from ED&I conversations in their workplaces.

This exclusion also plays out for those who have an intersectional identity. Intersectionality³ was a phrase coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw when specifically examining the intersection of race and sex to create a legal and academic framework for Black women.

The term intersectionality was introduced through this lens, and has since expanded in the workplace to mean the cross section of a number of characteristics. Just as the word woke has evolved (as we'll explore later), so too has the word intersectionality to help us understand how our identities overlap and intersect.

When exploring the needs of today's workforce, we must also consider any data with the nuance of intersectionality. For example, while the research tells us that a significant proportion of Black employees are likely to feel excluded from conversations about ED&I, none of us is defined by just one characteristic – we all have intersections (and many of us have intersecting inequalities, too).

Consider, for instance, how deeply a Black employee's experiences of exclusion might be compounded if they also identify as LGBTQIA+ and neurodivergent. It's only when we understand and address the breadth and depth of challenges that are being reported by employees that we will start to make inclusion a more likely outcome. What's more, it's only when we remind ourselves that we are human and fundamentally complex that we can discuss how to effectively support one another.

What's notable in the research is that Asian and British Asian people in the UK are, at first sight, more likely to believe the workplace is meritocratic than any other group (well, we do currently have a British Asian prime minister, after all). When we dig a little deeper, however, we discover that this does not present the full picture. British Indian and British Bangladeshi people, for example, have quite different world views.

³ Crenshaw, Kimberlé "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
She wrote that race discrimination cases were viewed in terms of 'sex- or class-privilege' and in sex discrimination cases focussed on race- and class-privilege. The idea was to look at the problems of viewing race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience.

Figure 2: Background impact vs Feeling of exclusion (British Asian)



This graph shows that most Asian / British Asian communities who believe that opportunities in life are determined by your background feel excluded from the ED&I conversation, with the exception of British Bangladeshi.

That is, British Indian communities are most likely to feel excluded from the ED&I conversation, despite being less likely to feel opportunities are determined by your background amongst Asian / British Asian communities.

This just shows how important it can be to deconstruct groups to get to the truth. A grouping, such as ‘Asian’ (as referenced above), is frequently referred to as “a community”, and this can often be seen as a misnomer. Clearly there are communities within communities, which is something that anyone responsible for a workforce or a marketing strategy needs to consider seriously.

In ED&I, it’s often imperative to acknowledge the differences in any group – even if we find discomfort in the results. UK Government data from July 2022, for instance, shows

that 40 per cent of workers from what it refers to as “the Indian ethnic group” were in ‘professional’ jobs – the highest percentage out of all “ethnic groups”.

By comparison, 22 per cent of workers from the combined “Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic group” were in ‘professional’ jobs – the lowest percentage out of all “ethnic groups”. Combined with views on life chances, we can see that gaining true cultural confidence takes effort to understand these complexities.

Exclusion from conversations about inclusion

Life background is often the convening point for numerous ED&I efforts within organisations. Despite efforts to create characteristic-led networks, set up in support of different underrepresented communities, it’s still a case of diversity and exclusion within many UK organisations.

And for those responsible for inclusion strategies and workstreams, it’s crucial to note who feels either included or excluded within ED&I conversations.

Our data shows that those more questioning of meritocracy are more likely to feel excluded from conversations around ED&I in their workplace. In our conversations with client partners, we’re seeing that this is either because the broad banner of ‘equity, diversity and inclusion’ isn’t addressing the deep-seated issues that exist within organisations and industries, or because voices that need to speak truth to power aren’t being heard. More often than not it’s a combination of the two.

ERGs that are set up and convened around specific backgrounds and characteristics are not given sufficient investment or time to drive change. For those outside of the groups, there can be a sense that they themselves are excluded from ED&I. Time and time again, we see ‘sides’ that appear as the ED&I equivalents of like-poles of two magnets. Each impulsively pushing the other away in often unconscious acts of exclusion.

Is diversity creating exclusion?

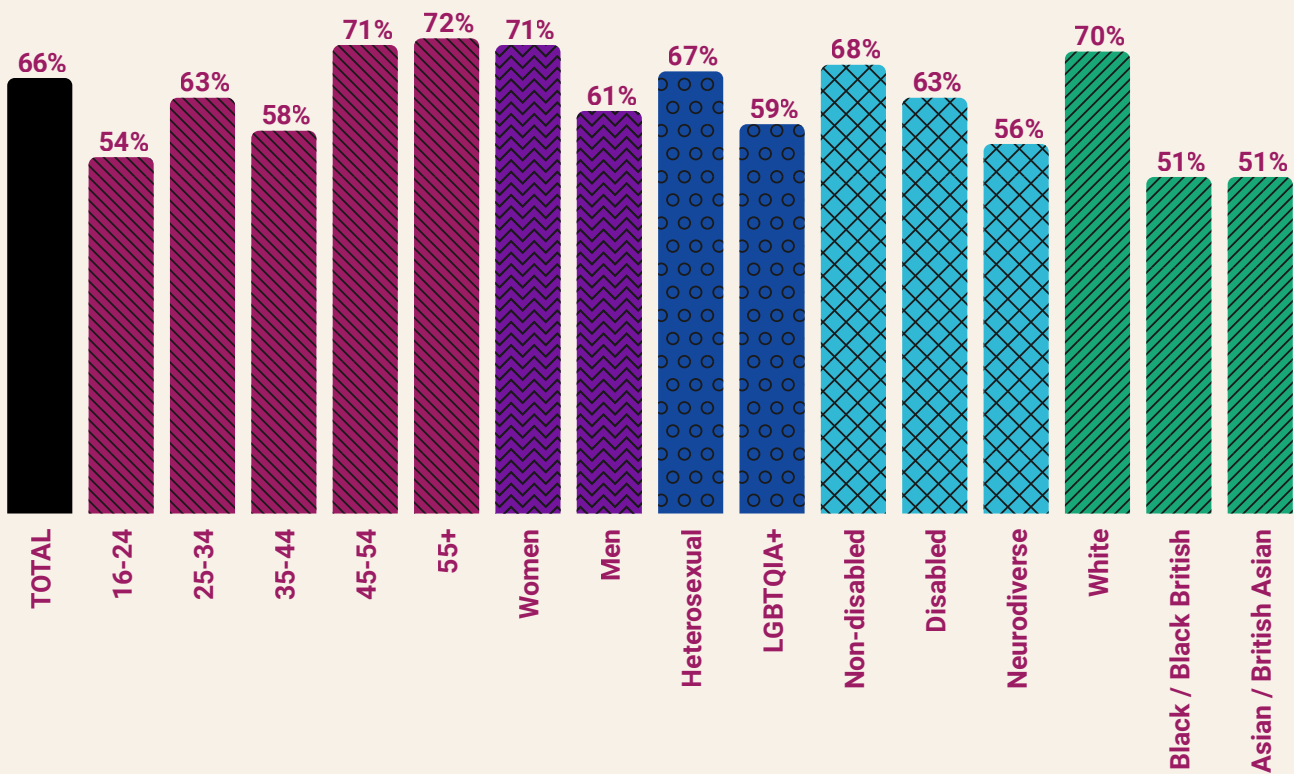
In 2022, a study by London Business School and Yale School of Management made headlines when it revealed that people from “diverse backgrounds” are less likely to apply to companies that claim to be ‘woke’ “to boost their bottom line”. Those companies that are seen to boast about their credentials in equity, diversity and inclusion, the report suggested, may put off candidates of different backgrounds from applying, as they feel judged or used based on their identity. This is where the ‘business case’ for diversity starts to stall amongst the very people who are the target for change.

The reality is the case for diversity is not a singular one – it’s multidimensional and directly linked to becoming relevant to an ever changing society.

While it’s well documented that diversity has a positive impact on businesses, has diversity hiring translated into inclusion? As part of our work, we have developed a way to measure inclusion across a number of different indicators within an organisation’s operating system and culture, with ‘psychological safety’ being a key factor.

To help understand levels of psychological safety across the UK workforce, we asked people how comfortable they feel around their colleagues. And the data suggests that there is still a long way to go in making the leap from diversity to inclusion.

Figure 3: Comfortable around your colleagues



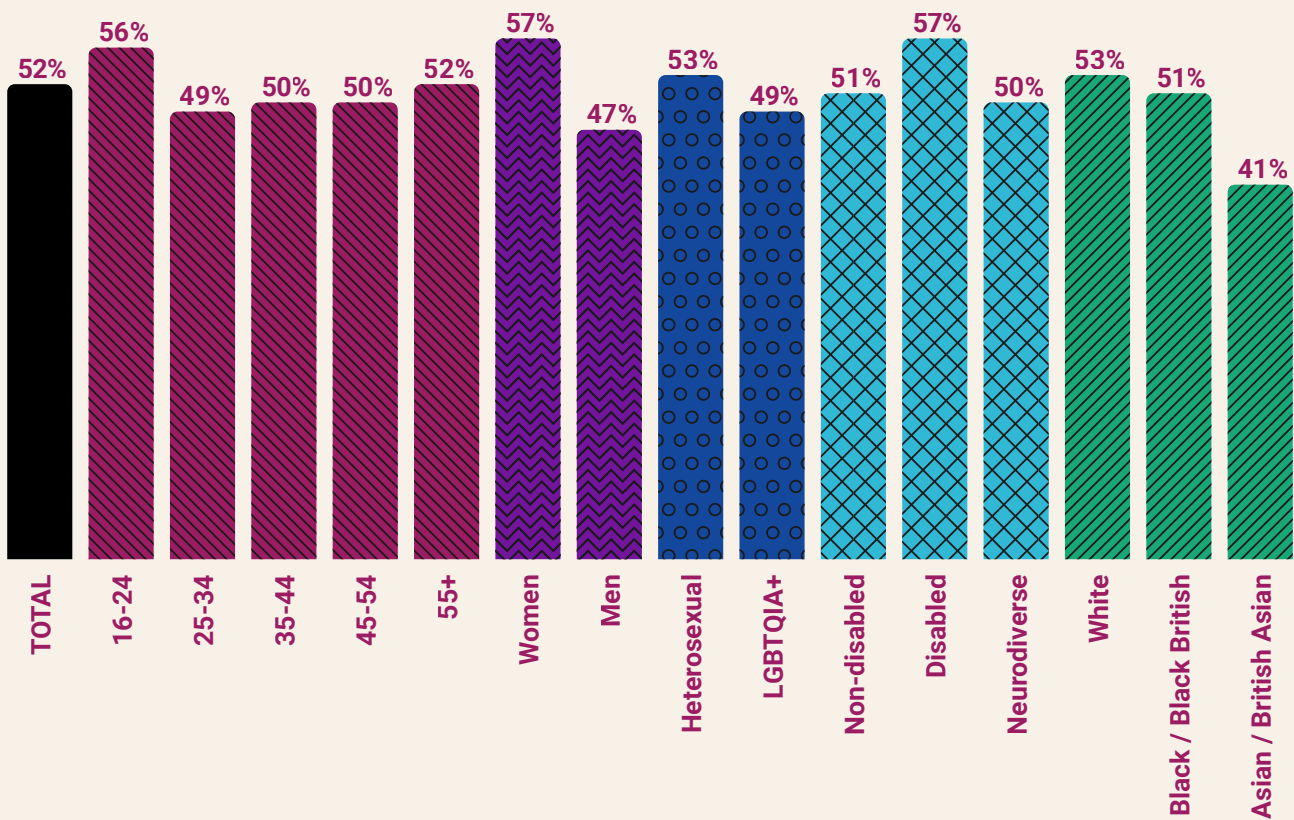
This chart shows that working professionals who are older (45+), women, heterosexual, non-disabled and White are the most likely to feel comfortable talking to their colleagues about ED&I.

Younger professionals between 16 and 24 and between 35 and 44, men, LGBTQIA+, neurodiverse / disabled, minority ethnic communities are more likely to be uncomfortable.

While this data indicates that there is still substantial work to do in creating inclusive workplace environments across the UK, further insight shows just how integral this is to employee retention. Perhaps the most interesting observation here is that the percentage of people who say they would want to leave a workplace if they didn't find it inclusive for people like themselves varies little between most groups.

In short, inclusion is a universal need for us all. Indeed, our very willingness to stay in a workplace depends on it.

Figure 4: I would want to leave a workplace if I didn't find it inclusive for people like me



This graph shows that working professionals who are younger aged between 16 and 24, women, heterosexual, disabled and White are the more likely to want to leave a workplace if they didn't find it inclusive for people like them.

People aged between 25 and 44, men, LGBTQIA+, neurodiverse, Asian / British Asian are less likely to leave a workplace if they didn't find it inclusive for people like them.

The Unmistakables' Take

"The idea that ED&I professionals are unable to catalyse inclusion because the work is met with exclusion inside many workplaces is disheartening. The equation is often unbalanced. On one side, ED&I professionals contribute with experience, competency, effort, and advocacy. On the other, the agenda is often met with complex stakeholder environments that need to be 'managed', occasional cynicism, and, disappointingly, a lack of investment and pace. All of this suggests a need to pause to look at what is and isn't working.

"Often the perceived 'answer' for ED&I is training, which we are often asked to develop. However, we know that awareness training alone doesn't translate to change. And for many years, people have associated ED&I training with compliance or a HR mandate. Simply doing more of the same isn't going to have the necessary impact.

"For programmes to be effective, 'cognitive disruption' needs to be at play, where, as opposed to going through the motions, we create memorable moments that bring about a transformative experience to our lives.

"Training is only ever one part of a broader set of changes that need to be made. We often embark on systems reviews and designs, looking at how and where bias can creep into any part of a process or way of working. We know that it can get activated in the employee lifecycle; in how candidates are selected and recruited; and in the brand and marketing ecosystem, in how products, brands and campaigns are developed.

"What we see is that bias is typically the result of: mindset + behaviours + process + structures.

"Focusing on changing a singular element tends to yield weak results and generates ongoing frustration and, at times, apathy. A more holistic review and plan is required to create impactful change."



Simone Marquis, Managing Director,
The Unmistakables

Chapter 2. Diversity &... Disillusion

Picture the workplace scene. Think of a moment in the diverse British cultural calendar that goes beyond mainstream UK celebrations and public holidays like Christmas or Easter. Try to make it something you can relate to or have experienced for yourself.

Perhaps it's Ramadan or Eid. Maybe it's Lunar New Year or Holi. It could be Black History Month or Pride.

Now think about whether your workplace has ever marked any of these occasions, who took responsibility for the activity, and who else – if anyone – got involved.

Were LGBTQIA+ colleagues asked to explain the history of Pride or even plan a party to help create allies or give more people exposure to the movement? Were Muslim colleagues invited to help the rest of the workforce understand why they fast at certain times of year? Did you learn something new?

Now consider what the rest of the year looks like for these employees. Is the environment you operate in sufficiently equitable and inclusive for all colleagues to be who they are every day and not just during festivities and high holidays? And are underrepresented employees enthused by opportunities to discuss ED&I? The data suggests not.

Our research not only indicates a sense of exclusion from ED&I conversations amongst certain underrepresented groups, but disillusionment with it, too. **And this is where those trying to improve ED&I surely face one of the biggest conundrums: most people from underrepresented communities are avoiding discussions on topics that reflect their identities with colleagues.**

We may be able to, at least in part, put this down to the notion of 'othering'⁴ certain communities and, at times, leaning on them in ways that might be deemed 'extractive'.

Consider how your workplace might approach Disability Awareness Month, LGBTQIA+ History Month, or any religious holiday armed with this new data from our 2023 research:

Disability: Just under a third (32 per cent) of disabled employees feel comfortable talking about the topic of disability with their colleagues

⁴ Seeing and/or treating underrepresented people/communities as fundamentally different from the dominant group.

LGBTQIA+: Only a quarter (25 per cent) of LGBTQIA+ employees feel comfortable talking about sexual orientation with their colleagues

Religion: Just over a quarter (27 per cent) of employees who identify themselves with a religion are comfortable talking about their faith with colleagues

Individuals don't just want to be celebrated once a year – they want to be seen, heard and catered to 365 days a year. We have seen this happen within conversations with our client partners who are unsure about how to celebrate certain times of the year unless individuals put themselves forward to make it happen. While some organisations have thriving advocates for change amongst their workforce, many leaders have fallen short of creating cultures where authentic conversations about identity are natural and part of the DNA.

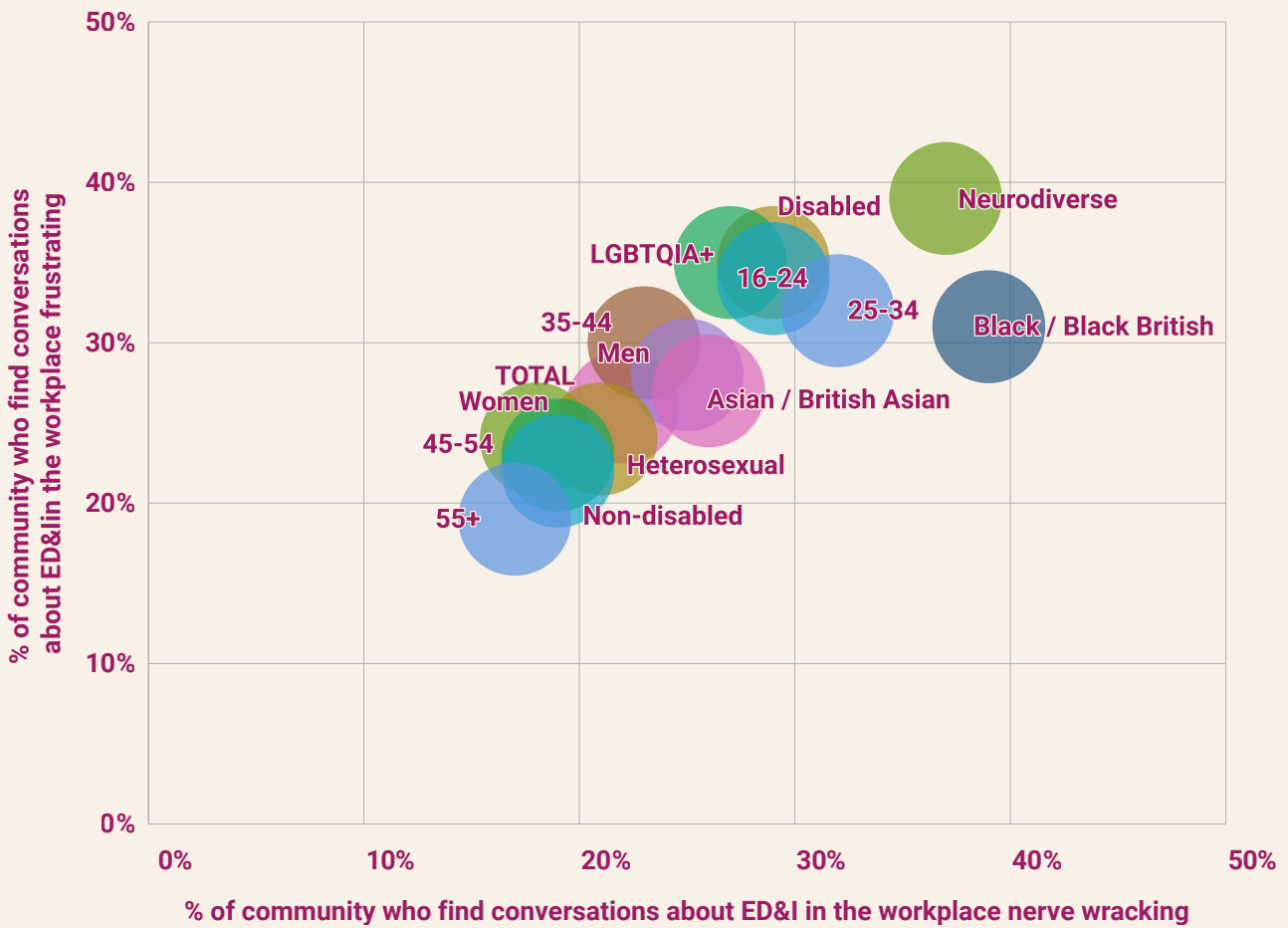
Being labelled as 'diverse' or 'divergent' by a dominant group by no means signals an individual's or community's appetite for engagement in the work of equity, diversity and inclusion.

Meeting the challenges of disillusion with ED&I

Leaders must use these insights to challenge and reconsider how they structurally gear ED&I into their workplaces. Offloading the challenges of inclusion to underrepresented groups who all-too-often feel excluded isn't working. While ERGs are successful in creating forums for discussion amongst various communities, organisational change cannot usually be driven within an ERG (in a religious environment, we might call this 'preaching to the choir'). And without evidence that culture is changing for the better, ERG members are often left feeling more despondent and less comfortable having ED&I discussions.

This is evident in the data, which shows how certain groups over-index in the frustration they feel with ED&I conversations in the workplace, and how nervous they are about having them.

Figure 5: Conversations about ED&I in the workplace



This graph shows that communities who find conversations about ED&I in the workplace most frustrating are most likely to also find it nerve wracking, particularly those of a minority identity.

Neurodiverse and/or disabled, Black / Black British, younger (16-34) and LGBTQIA+ communities are most likely to feel frustrated and nervous across all identities.

The frustration we see here may be down to talk not converting into action. When we talk to our client partners we hear that the time invested in ED&I conversations has been considerable, but without clear governance and action plans, conversations rarely convert into change.

Frustration naturally flows when people feel they are talking into a vacuum. It should, therefore, come as little surprise that so many underrepresented employees are done talking.

The Unmistakables' Take

"Data is one of the best ways to tackle disillusion. Over the last three years we have seen a push towards organisations gathering data around the demographic make-up of their colleagues, and the feelings they hold towards their workplaces. In working with a number of client partners to do this, we've seen consistent challenges around disclosure rates and then developing a sensible action plan and roadmap to address what the data shows.

"We're currently observing that once the data is gathered, colleagues demand to know what will change as a result. For example, as diagnoses around autism and ADHD become more widely discussed, we'll naturally see the recorded numbers of neurodiverse employees within the workplace increase. While knowledge is power in the first instance, standards and expectations are held high around what will change as a result.

"Once the data has been gathered, leaders need to show what they're going to do differently, both practically and tangibly. This is where taking a systems change approach (as Simone mentioned in the previous chapter), paired with ongoing measurement and evaluation, creates an opportunity to create proper organisational change over a number of years."



Ruth Hoyal, Insights & Strategy Director,
The Unmistakables

Chapter 3. Diversity &... Delusion

Mastering the vernacular of the industry, company, and team you're working in is fundamental to success. Consider the phrases, abbreviations, and acronyms adopted by the medical or legal sectors, for example, how specific use of language could be the difference between life and death, freedom or incarceration. But corporate jargon can also be a trap: a linguistic shortcut to overconfidence on subject matters that require long term, deep learning.

ED&I is no different. Our latest data shows growing confidence in the language of ED&I, but not in participating in the conversation that sits beneath it. In 2021, 31 per cent of UK workers said they would feel confident talking 'professionally' about ED&I in the workplace. That figure has grown by 11 percentage points (to 42 per cent) in two years. This increase is likely to be linked to the prevalence of ED&I job roles, forums and learning programmes. According to LinkedIn Talent Solutions there has been a 67 per cent growth in ED&I employees, and ED&I jobs grew 1.65 times faster than HR jobs in EMEA over the last five years. While we're starting to see a downward signal in 2023, it's fair to say that more people working in the field has meant more conversations and understanding about what it is.

A key lever for achieving greater levels of equity and inclusion in the workplace is our ability to confidently discuss topics that relate to our identities. In our 2023 data, 50 per cent of UK workers reported that 'there is an opportunity for me to learn about ED&I including language in my workplace'.

Two years on, the workforce is increasingly comfortable using professional terms like 'inclusive' or 'diverse'. And yet, conversely, our new data suggests that confidence in discussing topics that relate to personal identities – such as race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion or belief – is actually very low.

In the world of medicine, this might be comparable to a student learning about the language of human biology but having neither the experience of handling a body nor the nuance that comes from understanding that they all differ.

Examining these insights against the backdrop of our 2021 data suggests that the use (and misuse) of ED&I jargon may be luring us into a false sense of security. This research showed that nearly one in five (19 per cent) working professionals used the term 'diverse' to avoid stating specific protected characteristics. The same amount also misused the collective term 'diverse' to signify an individual of a different social or ethnic background, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or disability.

Back in 2021 we argued that we should stop saying diverse and say what we really mean, but some two years later we're struggling to take the stabilisers off.

Could this increase in confidence in talking about ED&I be just that – all 'professional' talk and little interpersonal substance? The 2023 data certainly suggests so.

"We often hear companies say they want to hire 'diverse employees' and create 'diverse cultures'. But what does it really mean when someone says 'diverse'? Are they talking about different genders? Sexualities? Ethnicities?"

"These kind of expressions acronyms often simply refer to people who are not White, cisgender, and straight. They end up telling us what we're not – as opposed to who we really are. When we frame identities this way, it often creates a feeling of us versus them."

– Asad Dhunna

Figure 6: 'Diversity' topics working professionals have actively avoided



This chart shows that working professionals are most likely to actively avoid getting into conversations about socio-economic status, race & ethnicity and/or religion through fear of getting something wrong.

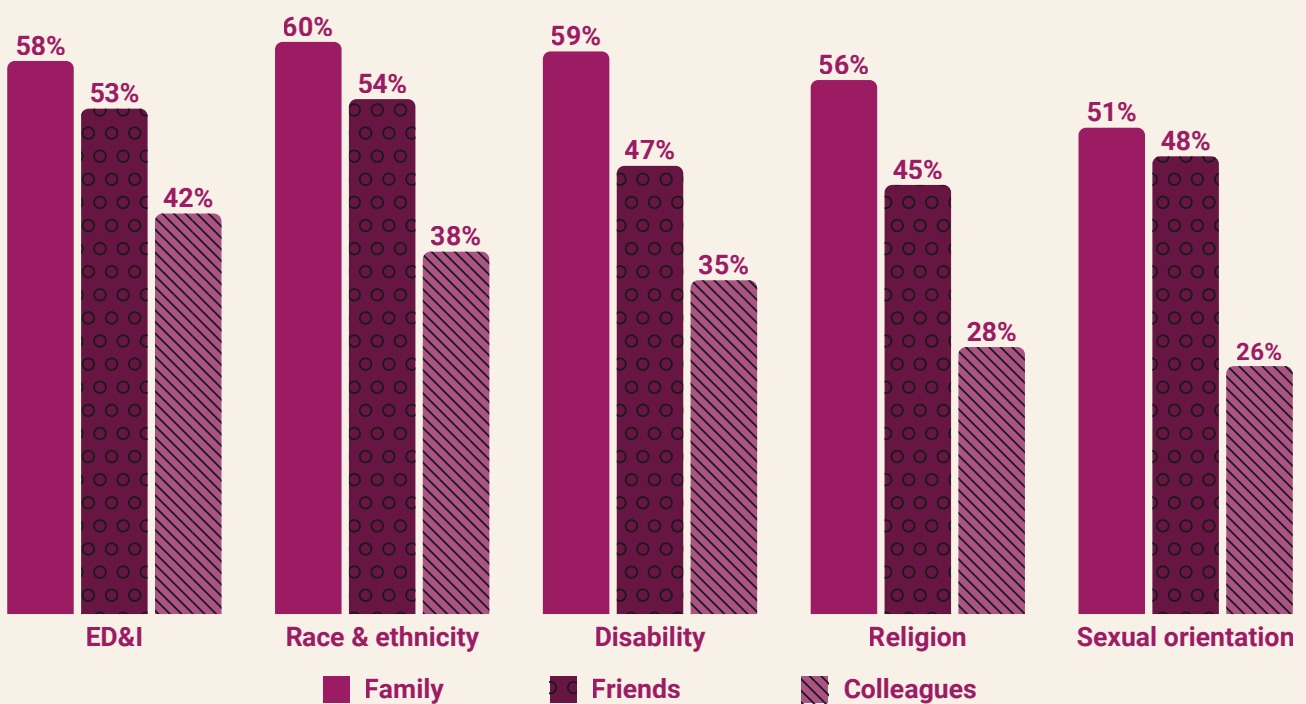
Working professionals are less likely to avoid conversations about age, and/or disability.

Fear of getting something wrong is one of the biggest inhibitors to innovation and also psychological safety. Our data reveals that socio-economic status has become the biggest cultural landmine for the workforce, followed equally by race and ethnicity, and religion – all presenting challenges for ED&I professionals aiming for true inclusion across all communities and identities.

In fact, work is one of the hardest spaces to influence cultural confidence; according to the research we are far less anxious about discussing these topics with our family and friends. Perhaps, then, confidence is better built around the dinner table than the boardroom table. Of course, it is still feasible for businesses and brands to get in on conversations that are held at homes and outside of the workplace, through marketing. It's well documented that advertisers have increased the overall 'diversity' of their casting in recent years (often even disproportionately so), which can have a positive impact on the visibility of certain communities.

Anecdotally, however, we know the aim can sometimes be more cynical. As long as people continue to care less about what they say (and how they say it) at home, advertisers creating spots featuring 'diverse' talent will stir more conversation – for better or for worse. The conversation these adverts spark in the home is far more confident and brazen than the one in the agencies that develop them.

Figure 7: Who do you feel most confident speaking to about ...?



The numbers show that working professionals are more likely to feel most confident speaking about topics such as ED&I, race & ethnicity, disability, religion and sexual orientation with their family.

Working professionals are least confident speaking to their colleagues in comparison to family and friends about any of these topics.

A limited lexicon of equity, diversity and inclusion has made the workforce neither fluent in the language of identities nor fluid in inclusive communication.

The Unmistakables' Take

"We need to have difficult conversations at work if we're ever going to see systemic change within organisations. These difficult conversations require being able to say what you really mean, which is impossible if the psychological safety isn't in place for that conversation to happen.

"Where it is – for example around the dinner table with family – we're able to express what we're seeing, sensing and surprised by.

"We're hearing that many people are surprised by the number of mixed-race families in advertising. While the recent Census data shows that this is a growing demographic in England and Wales, many believe we're seeing overrepresentation. This is then fuelled by the media – as we'll explore in the next chapter.

"Often those decisions around casting are made with good intent, but in a cloud of delusion about how to go beyond literal representation to genuine, equitable inclusion. Marketers and communicators need to avoid 'diversity washing' and instead build the confidence to have deeper and more meaningful conversations about what makes us human alongside interrogating the systemic ways of working that are currently holding them back.

"That's why we help teams and agencies have better, more informed and nuanced conversations. Education around the realities of society and lived experiences will ultimately lead to bolder, braver, more relevant and more inclusive marketing and communications."



Shilpa Saul, Inclusive Communications Director,
The Unmistakables

Chapter 4. Diversity &... Illusion

The data tells us that we are more comfortable talking about identity topics with family and friends than with colleagues. It follows, then, that some of our cultural anxieties may manifest more in the workplace. Our 2021 report named 'queer' the 'diversity term' that most working professionals (51 per cent) were more likely to avoid using at work. Given the word's chequered history, it's perhaps unsurprising that it's still so divisive.

In April 2022, attitude.co.uk wrote: "Since the 1980s, the word 'queer' has been reclaimed by many in the LGBTQ community as an umbrella term for non-normative sexual and gender identities. What began as a challenging and radical rebranding of a common slur has now entered everyday vernacular for many LGBTQ people, but plenty still take issue with the word's usage."

Many people now understand that 'queer' can be used to both attack and shield. And while not everyone within the LGBTQIA+ community approves of its usage, what goes beyond doubt is that a community reclaimed the word for themselves and thus diminished its power in the mouths of others.

Quite the opposite has happened with another word that divides societies today: 'woke'. Woke was officially added into the Oxford English Dictionary as an adjective in June 2017. The dictionary defines it as "originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice".

The term's origins date back to 1930s' USA Black American English and referred to the need for African-Americans to stay conscious of the threats of a White-dominated, often racist America. But it was this century when the term broke into mainstream language; the Black Lives Matter movement used the hashtag #staywoke in the wake of racial injustices spreading across the States. A word with its roots in race, it has since often been expanded to include other injustices and forms of discrimination.

Unlike the word 'queer', 'woke' belonged to its community first. And unlike 'queer', the shield that 'woke' created for its community has been appropriated by others and weaponised.

Take a moment to consider the most simplified and inclusive meaning of the word: '**alert to social injustice**'. Now reflect on how some of the most powerful and influential voices in the UK and around the world are using – and have appropriated – the word 'woke' as a means of cancelling, threatening, destabilising, or delegitimising ED&I initiatives. Matthew Syed recently asked: 'when did the word 'woke' turn into a nasty joke?'

UK Media & Social Media

- The then Attorney General, Suella Braverman, cancelled equality training in her own department, stating, "Britain needs a lot of things, but it certainly doesn't need **woke commissars** policing our thoughts."
- MPs accused six of Whitehall's most senior officials of wasting time on "**woke projects**" after their roles as civil service diversity and inclusion champions "were exposed".
- One media outlet described a collective of woke people as a '**woke blob**'.
- Tory MPs reportedly demanded the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jeremy Hunt, slash the "£12 million **woke Whitehall diversity bill** to the taxpayer."
- Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg criticised the diversity officers in the civil service, suggesting they have little impact on the workforce. Speaking to Sky News about plans to cut 326 diversity officer jobs, Rees-Mogg claimed that such roles added no diversity to the civil service, branding them as "**a job creation scheme by the woke, for the woke.**"

US Government (2022)

- In the USA, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis went so far as to redefine the term 'woke'. Creating a whole new acronym to debunk the term, his '**Stop Woke**' (Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees) Act, prohibits educational institutions and businesses from teaching students and employees anything that would cause anyone to "feel guilt, anguish or any form of psychological distress" due to their race, colour, sex, or national origin. In 2022, it was reported that this act could bar Disney from holding diversity training in the sunshine state.

UK Media (2021)

- Senior British broadcaster and former chairman of GB News, Andrew Neil described '**woke liberals**' as, "Po-faced people who take themselves too seriously."
- Piers Morgan has repeatedly hit out at the '**woke brigade**' on Twitter whenever he faces backlash when mentioning Meghan Markle.
- The FA was warned about going '**woke**' when they shared suggestions for National Silent Support Weekend to applaud from the sidelines, rather than cheer in order to reduce pressure on youth players.

But is what is often referred to as the “woke agenda” anything more than an illusion that is stalling the progress of ED&I?

When we see the word ‘woke’ used in response to ED&I initiatives, it appears to have the aim of reducing ongoing, complex, and nuanced societal conversations and commitments to critical one-word sound bites. It often makes diminishing the work of ED&I child’s play. In news and social media terms, it’s the adult equivalent of blowing a raspberry at a conversation in which one doesn’t wish to engage.

The challenge now for those wanting to embed equity, diversity and inclusion is to find equally effective and emotive – but crucially far less callous and reductive – ways to elevate the work’s impact. But **what impact is this illusionary attack on ‘woke’ having on broader UK society?** We explored news and social media in 2022 to understand the sentiment towards the ED&I work in the UK.

If you want to stoke social media, ‘woke’ social media

Through media analytics we found that, in 2022, a total of 120,000 UK news stories were published about the ‘ED&I’ agenda compared to 28,600 that used the word ‘woke’. It was perhaps the reaction to the news, however, that was more interesting. Despite ‘woke’ being mentioned 77 percentage points less than ‘ED&I’ in UK news stories, ‘woke’-led news saw more social traction by 84 percentage points. Where every ‘ED&I’ news story saw 1.7 social interactions, ‘woke’ stories saw a total of 10.8. This indicates that ED&I doesn’t trend in the same way, which perpetuates the sense that it’s a problem to fix, rather than linked to broader societal change.

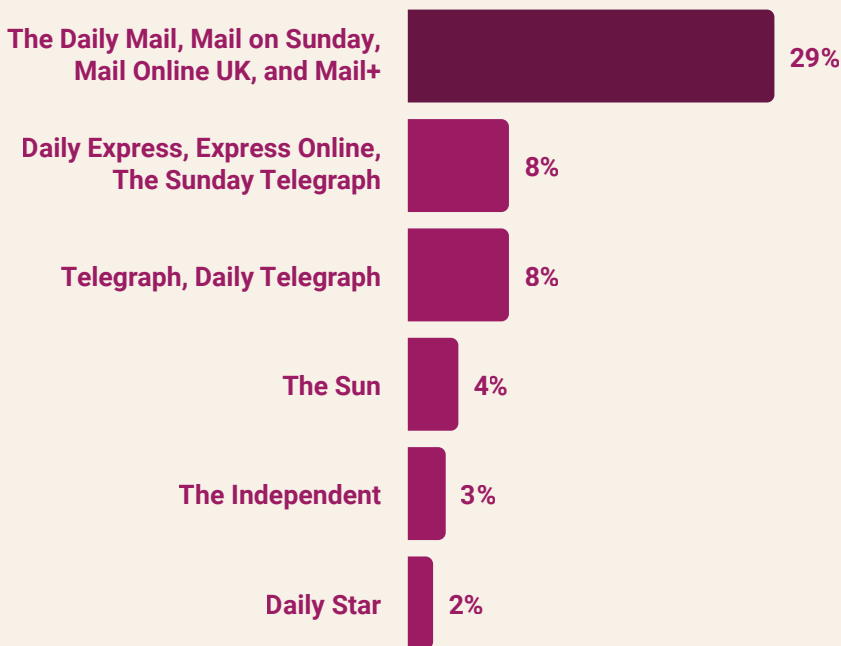
Not only are the statistics so stark, but the sentiment behind them is, too. Where total ‘ED&I’ stories saw a net sentiment of 52 per cent (indicating a fairly neutral to positive social media response), the net sentiment of ‘woke’ stories was -38 per cent (note this is a minus figure), indicating the severe negativity stoked by the word and its connotations today.

Topic	News stories	Social mentions	Net sentiment
Equity, diversity and inclusion	122,000	209,867	52%
Woke	28,600	310,190	-38%

Of the 'woke'-led news articles, more than a quarter of all articles were from a publication by the Mail Group i.e. the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday. Taken from a sample of 2,416 articles published last year, 695 were from the Mail Group, which – even only based on the sample – equates to nearly two per day.

Note: due to paywall restrictions, The Times has not been included in this analysis.

Figure 8: Proportion of articles using the word 'woke' published in 2022



This graph shows that The Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Mail Online UK, and Mail+ have the highest proportion of articles using the word 'woke' across published articles in 2022 of all main UK tabloids / newspapers.

ED&I hasn't woken up yet

There may be some good news here for ED&I professionals and leaders who support inclusion initiatives: most conversations about 'ED&I' and the 'woke agenda' do not overlap. Of the articles that included mentions of 'woke', just six per cent referred to 'ED&I'. And of the articles that mentioned 'ED&I' just one per cent referenced 'woke'.

However, before breaking off to celebrate, these insights must be interrogated further. We believe this data suggests that ED&I professionals are not adequately engaging with those who have concerns about "the woke agenda". Instead, we suspect ED&I professionals are falling into a trap of investing disproportionate amounts of time in engaging the already converted, something that we hear every day at conferences and within forums.

All the while, those who actively and vocally oppose ED&I efforts grow louder and more sweeping in their critique. While news articles reported countless mentions of what is labelled “the woke agenda” by voices of authority and influences, we have yet to find (or be able to name) those who apparently created, lead, or maintain this “agenda”.

What is the “woke agenda”?

The Brexit debate saw the only properly organised side of the debate (Vote Leave) effectively create both a leader (Nigel Farage) and an enemy (the EU). Unlike the ethereal, largely faceless ‘remain’ campaign, Vote Leave had tangibles that people could rally behind.

When the often-toxic leave vote won, UK politics learned a lesson that would impact the course of history for years to come: using division and incivility could be a means of achieving its ends. It appears that, as a nation, we are still stuck in the cycle.

Division is at its most powerful when there are actual competing sides – you only have to look at the world of sport to see how intoxicating rivalry can be. But what we have seen in recent years is a trend towards manufacturing enemies when, tangibly, they don’t exist. This, we believe, is true of the “woke agenda”.

“Woke” has no leader. It has no headquarters. Ironically, “woke” also has no agenda either, because that would require, by definition, a particular person or group to have “underlying intentions or motives” that sit behind it. “Woke” is an adjective rather than a noun, and as such it can only really be an attribute of an agenda – it cannot be one. And as far as we can see, it isn’t. In many ways it is a bogeyman (or to be “woke” about it, a ‘bogeyperson’). When analysing conversations relating to the “woke agenda” our research shows that it is rarely (if ever) attributed formally to any organised group. Those who use the term may align it with ‘activists’ but they are never named. **The “woke agenda” is a manufactured enemy made real only through repetition.**

This makes its threat no less palpable, though. With no specific figureheads named or actively targeted by those who seek to legitimise the “woke agenda”, anyone who seeks to fight social injustice – or indeed work in ED&I – could be perceived to be furthering it.

In news and discussions that mention the “woke agenda”, it is notable that we rarely see the counterargument or the rationale for why certain initiatives are being introduced. The media’s ‘right of reply’ due diligence is not applied simply because the “woke agenda”

does not have a home or a figurehead. There is no brand, business, or board of directors. There is nothing but an idea. And journalists can't ask an idea for a comment.

ED&I's right of reply

Despite there being more than four times the amount of news stories published about the 'ED&I' agenda, 'woke'-led news gets more than four times the amount of social traction (and it's exceedingly negative). This suggests that ED&I professionals are struggling to link their work to positive impact.

The work of ED&I can encompass complex issues from racism to sexism, the rights of trans people to the wrongs of Britain's colonial past – highly complex issues and ones that require rich and informed conversations between those with differing perspectives and experiences. Yet, our analysis suggests that such considered conversations are rarely taking place. Instead, we are frequently exposed to highly distilled, but 'catchy' headlines or conversations in social forums with a high emotional temperature and limited face-to-face engagement.

ED&I must organise in defence of this manufactured enemy, or watch as the work of social justice is delegitimised through wildfire repetition of one four-letter word.

The Unmistakables' Take

"When I asked an audience in 2019 'are we woke enough yet?' I couldn't have imagined we were just at the tip of an iceberg. The proliferation of 'the woke agenda' continually comes up through the ED&I news algorithm we've developed at The Unmistakables. When reviewing news from around the world, any positive efforts around ED&I are constantly undermined by politicians seeking to create division in a bid for votes. The cycle of 2016's Brexit vote simply continues under a new guise.

"Therefore, understanding the media agenda and helping stakeholders translate what's being reported versus what's being contorted is crucial. This is particularly important when creating new content – anything from a new TV show to a new TV advert. These formats are often the places where businesses seek to showcase their purpose and commitment to ED&I. But this can often be held back by the press response.

"When we run simulations and provide counsel on the media response, we see that boosting the understanding and expertise of how influence works today is vital for commercial success. Without that then, at best, organisations lose vast sums of money that have been invested in developing content. At worst, they give in to a media agenda, which evidence shows is geared against inclusion."



Asad Dhunna, founder and CEO,
The Unmistakables

Chapter 5. How to Clear the Confusion

Unlike two years ago, when many organisations were still taking their first steps into the world of ED&I, patience with promises has faded away. Underrepresented groups are removing themselves from the conversation through frustration and feelings of exclusion. And, just as we said it would, the tactical ED&I work is stalling. The workforce has not grown in confidence when it comes to discussing identity matters. Fear of how outside influences might judge work as 'woke' (as if social justice were a bad thing) is doubtless playing on some business leaders' nerves, too.

So, what now? Do we ignore all the data that shows how diversity boosts creativity, innovation, and financial performance? Do we refute the evidence that shows how it leads to better decision-making and higher performing teams? Do we go back to the workforce and tell them that trying to be inclusive was just too difficult (and that we're too scared of what might be said about us in social media)? The data tells us that, as employers, businesses can't be sustainable if they choose to follow these paths. What's needed now is steely determination and true focus on impact.

Over the last two years, some organisations have struggled to define measurable objectives for their ED&I work. Some jumped straight into short-term, one-off investments such as training sessions hoping they would prove to be the inclusion panacea. Tactics were often adopted before the depth and breadth of the challenge and required systems change had been considered, a long term strategy drawn up, or investment to achieve goals signed off.

Some may have concluded that inclusion efforts had failed in their organisations. The uncomfortable, and more likely truth, however, is that these organisations failed inclusion.

How we can guide you from confusion to clarity

The Unmistakables guides organisations through the process of embedding equity, diversity & inclusion. Our inside out inclusion® framework is unique as it tackles all of the elements of exclusion, delusion, disillusion, and illusion that people are currently feeling and moves you from confusion to clarity.

Here are four recommendations on how you can take action, following this report:

1. Address exclusion with system change

Embarking on operating system redesign and change management is the best way to futureproof. It's most suited for organisations that have a legacy and want to remain relevant for years to come.

Through our inside out inclusion® diagnostic we work across teams to understand what the blockers are, uncover solutions that are bespoke to your organisation and unleash new ways-of-working that address root causes, not surface-level symptoms.

In action:  CANNES LIONS

Cannes Lions asked us how we could help them better understand what's holding them back from being a leading force and voice in the industry for equity, diversity & inclusion. Through our diagnostic, we worked closely across the entire organisation to better understand the state-of-play and ambition for the future during a time of uncertainty. Using a mixture of interviews, listening sessions, surveys and observations, we presented an insight-led analysis of the internal and external barriers and enablers for ED&I.

Combined with our built-in coaching ethos, we helped to increase understanding and confidence of ED&I across the organisation, and embedded learning through a number of methods. We have set them up for success for an ED&I function and solid leadership for years to come.

"There are a lot of cookie cutter solutions out there. I've been pitched many!

"With The Unmistakables, I have never felt like a cookie cutter solution has been put in front of me. It always feels Lions first, personalised and relevant.

"Your attention to detail, the experience design, and facilitation is top-notch."

- Simon Cook, CEO, Cannes Lions

2. Delete disillusion with data

Gathering data is a must have of any modern organisation. While it can benefit organisations of any size, we see a tipping point when an employee base hits 100 and when the completion rate hits 70%.

We provide a suite of data & insights tools. Starting with our data framework, which provides a consistent way of measuring all ED&I data, through to full scale qualitative and quantitative consumer research & insight programmes to bring in new insights from underrepresented groups to the decision-making table.

In action:  mind

Mind asked us how we could help them better understand the experience of ethnic minorities when it comes to accessing mental health support.

Through our inclusive research & insights, we delivered a sensitive human-centred research programme to surface the experiences, preferences and recommendations of people & communities experiencing mental health problems, as well as those delivering mental health support.

Through a comprehensive data gathering exercise across qualitative and quantitative methods, we reached over 500 of our target audience in interview, focus group, workshop and roundtable settings. This surfaced unique insight into lived experiences and was combined with a disruptor session with experts in the mental health space.

The programme increased awareness and understanding internally within Mind, whilst also improving perceptions amongst underrepresented groups. The findings were publicly launched as part of Mind's strategy, [here](#).

"The Unmistakables didn't just deliver a research project for us, but supported us in working with partners and colleagues in an anti-racist way. We not only got incredible insights, but all learned so much on a personal and professional level about anti-racism."

3. Overcome delusion with sensemaking

While progress on having 'ED&I conversations' can't be overlooked, the task now is to go deeper and have more confident conversations about the issues that sit underneath.

We provide sensemaking tools for anyone in creative decision-making to help them have a space to talk about ED&I in a more measured and nuanced way.

Our sensemaking can include us reviewing creative ideas, hosting trends sessions on particular topics or co-developing principles and ways-of-working – particularly between brands and their agencies – that are more inclusive.

In action:



Leading ad agency **BBH** brought us in to work with **Tesco** to better more confidently embed diversity & inclusion in the advertising for one of the nation's biggest supermarkets.

Through an in-depth campaign audit, we provided a planning tool that spanned across a number of different campaign types and objectives on ED&I for advertising.

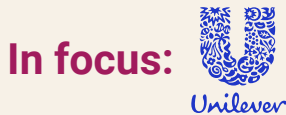
We supplemented this with a series of cultural confidence sessions on specific communities, bringing in the expertise of a number of contributors. This was furthered through inclusive planning workshops, exploring new campaign territories across teams.

As well as increased confidence across the team, the result has been groundbreaking work such as the 'Together this Ramadan' out-of-home campaign of 2022. The campaign didn't just acknowledge Ramadan, it celebrated it, every night of the month. Plates filled up with carefully crafted food on digital posters in Muslim-majority areas as the sun set – an authentic nod to a community that is often overlooked in advertising.

The campaign has been widely praised and awarded, with **The Drum** featuring why every detail mattered for Tesco's first major Ramadan campaign.

4. Overcome illusion with learning

Learning alone is often a sticking plaster to a deeper set issue within any organisation and team. We only embark on learning programmes when we know it is part of a wider suite of tools and interventions that will create change. We provide learning programmes that are bespoke and crafted around the individual or teams to ensure we deliver learning outcomes, not just outputs.



Unilever came to ask how we could build the confidence and capability amongst the senior executive team to lead the diversity & inclusion agenda.

Through inclusive leadership coaching, we worked closely with **Nitin Paranjpe**, CHRO, and his team to understand his learning objectives. Starting with a personal learning needs assessment, we identified nine areas within ED&I that we wanted to cover together.

From there, we designed a bespoke coaching curriculum, covering race & ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, disability, colourism, socio-economics and religion. Across nine 1-2-1 coaching sessions we brought in 24 contributors from our network, each bringing valuable lived experience and professional expertise to help Nitin on his learning journey.

Each session was followed up by key takeaways as well as a final key learnings pack at the end of the coaching series. The series was used as a basis for Nitin to share his learnings internally amongst thousands of colleagues, as well as externally through a series of speaking engagements and thought leadership.

"The Unmistakables helped me on my journey of being an inclusive leader. As experts in ED&I, they understood the areas I wanted to explore and developed an engaging programme of learning that allowed me to evolve my definition of inclusion.

"They brought in a variety of experts, activists and advocates who helped me to see things differently across a number of subjects. They exposed me to lived experience and professional expertise, always within a safe environment, and have left me feeling more culturally confident inside and outside Unilever."

- Nitin Paranjpe, Chief Human Resources Officer, Unilever

Looking for a partner to take you from *confusion* to *inclusion*?

The first step is to tell us a bit more about your current challenge and for us to explore how we can help.

[Click here](#) to book a 25-minute call with one of our unmistakable team today.

Glossary

We use terms throughout this document that are open to interpretation and that will be used differently across organisations.

Our 2021 Diversity & Confusion report revealed, amongst other things, high levels of uncertainty and hesitancy about the language of ED&I. To avoid compounding this, we have outlined several key terms that you will see throughout this document with definitions that we use to support our client partners.

When considering ED&I, it is important to note that equity, diversity and inclusion are not end goals. Instead, they should be treated as ongoing societal conversations, and commitments to evolving the understanding of people and their backgrounds and needs.

Term	Definition
Diversity	Diversity usually refers to a set of protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010. When organisations talk about being ‘more diverse’, they are often mistakenly using the term as shorthand for including more people of marginalised ethnicities, sexualities, and abilities.
Inclusion	Inclusion is an outcome of an internal culture that attracts, encourages, and elevates different perspectives.
Equity	Equity is the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement in the workplace, while simultaneously striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.
Woke	Woke was officially added into the Oxford English Dictionary as an adjective in June 2017. The dictionary defines it as “originally: well-informed, up-to-date. Now chiefly: alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice.”

<p>Protected characteristics</p>	<p>It is against the law to discriminate against someone because of: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and/or sexual orientation.</p> <p>These are called protected characteristics. We are all protected from these types of discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.</p>
<p>Intersectionality</p>	<p>Intersectionality was a phrase coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw when specifically examining the intersection of race and sex to create a legal and academic framework for Black women. She wrote that race discrimination cases were viewed in terms of 'sex- or class-privilege' and in sex discrimination cases focussed on race- and class-privilege. The idea was to look at the problems of viewing race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience.</p> <p>The term intersectionality was introduced through this lens, and has since expanded in the workplace to mean the cross section of a number of characteristics.</p>
<p>Othering</p>	<p>Seeing and/or treating underrepresented people/communities as fundamentally different from the dominant group.</p>
<p>Neurodiversity</p>	<p>Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, and behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits. (Harvard Health definition)</p> <p>Neurodivergent is a non-medical umbrella term that describes people with variation in their mental functions, and can include conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or other neurological or developmental conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). (Forbes Health definition)</p>

A group of people are neurodiverse, an individual is not. Neurodivergent refers to an individual who has a less typical cognitive variation such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia etc.

Methodology

Our findings were developed with the support of two research partners, Censuswide and Integrated Marketing Sciences.

Survey data

The survey research was conducted by Censuswide. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council.

In 2023, research was conducted by Censuswide with 1,600 employed UK participants (age 16+) between 05/01/23 to 12/01/23.

In 2021, research was conducted by Censuswide with 1,522 employed UK participants (age 16+) between 15/03/21 to 19/03/21.

Media analysis

All media analytics have been provided by Independent Marketing Sciences (IMS). All data is based on the following Boolean searches between 19/12/21 to 19/12/22 using tools LexisNexis and the AI based NetBase Quid:

Diversity, Inclusion and Equity	("Diversity AND inclusion") OR ("Equity AND diversity") OR ("Equity AND inclusion") OR "ED&I"
Woke	("woke" OR "wokism" OR "wokist") AND NOT "woke up"

If you have any questions regarding this report, our research or services, visit www.theunmistakables.com or email info@theunmistakables.com

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**You've all made our mission
to accelerate inclusion
that little bit more possible.**

**Together
we can
accelerate
inclusion
over
confusion**

