



Perspectives

IDENTITY EXPLOSION

Identity is becoming more fluid, with people pointing to a mix of genes and experience to claim who they are. And that poses great challenges for corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives.



The problem:

What determines a person's identity is fluctuating more than ever before.

Why it matters:

Connecting identity to such things as hiring, promotion, and employee engagement helps track whether diversity and inclusion efforts are achieving the desired results.

The solution:

Create an inclusive environment where identity goes beyond race, ethnicity, and gender.

Lisa lived in China her entire life. The daughter of an investment banker, she was born and educated there. She speaks fluent Mandarin, and most of her formative experiences in life were forged in that country. But after graduation, she took a job that required her to move to the United States, marking the first time she lived outside China.

A few months after arriving, and feeling a little homesick, Lisa decided to attend a meeting of the Asian employee resource group at her company. There was only one problem—Lisa is white, born to two native-born Americans who moved to China for jobs years ago and never went back. Is Lisa appropriating Asian culture? Or does she simply identify more with her Asian experience than her white American one? And if she can't go to the Asian employee resource group for support, where can she go?

"People are questioning more than ever what determines their identity," says Andrés Tapia, a Korn Ferry senior client partner who is a diversity and inclusion strategist. "Is it something in our blood, as many like to say, or is it a choice? Or a combination?"



Consider, for instance, the controversies surrounding former NAACP leader Rachel Dolezal and Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren's claims to African American and Native American identities, respectively. Or the wide availability of gene testing through services such as 23andMe, which makes DNA analysis as easy as spitting in a tube. Attitudes about what forms and informs our identity today is far more complex, nuanced, and dynamic than ever before. This changing view of identity—fluid, intersectional, inherited, chosen—is contributing to the increased complexity of how organizations need to address diversity and inclusion.

This evolution poses great challenges for organizations and leaders. For the most part, says Susana Rinderle, a principal with Korn Ferry who specializes in diversity and inclusion, conversations and strategies around diversity still seek to categorize people into specific identity boxes. As genetic and geographical borders blur, however, “more people have more identities to manage and more selves that are core to who they are,” says Rinderle.

Nereida Perez first became aware of the concept of intersectionality in 2000. Coined by scholar and civil-rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality refers to how multiple identities do not exist separately but combine and intertwine to either magnify or reduce oppression. As a Latina, Perez embodies the very concept of intersectionality, representing two marginalized groups: women and Latinx.

Perez also has two decades of experience as a diversity and inclusion executive—she currently serves as the global head of diversity

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and inclusion for McCormick & Company in its talent management center of excellence. Perez says intersectionality is “one of those areas that poses a challenge to track and/or address for many diversity and inclusion practitioners.”

Many organizations still focus on the traditional categories used in filing affirmative action reports on gender, veteran status, disability, and ethnicity, for example. But Perez says in today's workplace, “the majority of people are living at multiple points of intersectionality, but the majority of the dialogue is still focused on single dimensions.” A singular dimension of focus can result in disconnect and lack of engagement or the perpetuation of inaccurate assumptions. For diversity practitioners in today's marketplace, Perez says it is critical to build discussions and strategies that focus on intersectionality.

Multi-Identity Inclusion Best Practices

Korn Ferry talent, leadership, and D&I consultants Addy Chulef and Susana Rinderle offer the following advice for optimizing the work of addressing multi-identity inclusion.

Be curious.

There's a fine line between judgment and curiosity, but learning about another person's identities and seeing all their selves is a way to truly connect.

Ask.

Simply asking how someone self-identifies can go a long way. As long as you've already built trust and rapport with this person, it shows that you understand identity is important and that you want to know and value all of their selves.

Mirror.

Reflect the person's identity back to them by using their preferred terms. Never contradict or tell them how they "should" view or identify themselves.

Create.

Allow for multiple ways for people to identify when gathering race, ethnicity, gender, or other demographic data. Talk with community members to determine the most useful current identity labels.

Identity, after all, is a combination of what people feel or claim, as well as how others perceive and experience each other. Increasingly, however, what people identify with isn't readily perceptible to others. "Identity isn't just what's visible, there are also many hidden factors that make up who we are," says Karen H.C. Huang, PhD, a director of assessment services with Korn Ferry.

Take Latinx individuals, Blacks, and Asian Americans as an example. Despite the vast

differences within each group, in many cases diversity and inclusion research and programs tend to lump them all together, if they include them at all. To be sure, Huang says, Asians are generally not thought about as a group that faces much discrimination at work or has any particular career concerns. The "model minority" myth assumes everything is going well for Asians. But the reality is that there are many subgroups of Asians with lower education and training that get overlooked because they get lumped into the larger group.



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Research also shows that there is a career ceiling for Asians—their education and experience gets diluted the further up the corporate ladder they climb. “Asians are quite underrepresented in leadership roles, partly because of stereotyping, biases, and discrimination,” Huang notes.

“Blacks also get simplistically grouped together as one identity when there are many different identities within that umbrella label,” says Korn Ferry senior client partner Darryl Smith. “While I self-identify as an African American, others identify as Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, or by their African country nationality such as Nigerian, Kenyan.”

For diversity and inclusion practitioners, the question then becomes, what does it mean to be a Latinx, Black, or Asian affinity group? “Is that umbrella too broad to grasp the vast differences in identity within each group?” asks Perez. “Are they really addressing the needs of all the subgroups within each group?”

Far from an identity crisis, Korn Ferry’s Tapia says the trend is more of an identity explosion. “It’s not that people don’t know who they are,” he says. “It’s more that they know precisely who they are, and are claiming their identity in a fierce, life-affirming way.”

This awareness is becoming more evident within the LGBTQ community. The legalization of gay marriage, an expanded definition of gender—Facebook, for example, now offers 50 to 70 gender classifications to choose from when creating a profile—and an overall trend toward equality are putting the LGBTQ community front and center in corporate D&I programs. In recent years, organizations have implemented



all-inclusive fertility benefits, generous parental leave, and transgender healthcare, as well as created workforce protections, contributed to corporate social responsibility initiatives, and made other cultural changes.

Still, as a gay Asian American, Wayland Lum has not only been dealing with ethnic stereotypes for much of his career, but also struggling with when and how to let colleagues know of his sexual orientation. An associate principal with Korn Ferry, Lum says that identifying as both Asian and gay can be either “career limiting” or “career advancing” in the largely white, heterosexual domain of corporate America. While Lum says he is comfortable identifying as gay at work—the civil rights organization Human Rights Campaign recognizes Korn Ferry as a Best Place to Work for LGBTQ Equality—he understands that isn’t the case for everyone.

“The gay experience in the business world is as diverse as it comes,” says Lum. “Many gay, lesbian, and transgender people don’t feel comfortable being out at work. It still feels too risky for them. It’s 2019. That needs to change.”

To be sure, navigating a world where one’s name, skin tone, and ethnicity don’t always align with how one identifies can not only be disorienting, but it also has practical implications for common D&I initiatives. Using metrics, for instance, to connect human identity labels to workplace outcomes (such as hiring, promotion, employee engagement, and pay,) helps institutions track whether their policies and practices are having the intended equitable impact. “But when identities become increasingly intersectional and fluid, such data can lose their usefulness,” says Rinderle. “This reduction of usefulness will require institutions to redefine what is meant by ‘diversity.’”

Intersectionality also has implications for mentoring pools. Sue Sun-LaSovage, global vice president of human resources at the automotive parts manufacturer SRG Global, says organizations must

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understand that having a diverse mentoring pool is vital to diversity and inclusion results. “It was hard to find mentors who had the same experience as me when I first came to work in America 17 years ago,” says Sun-LaSovage, who lived in China and Singapore. She says with so much to learn about living in a new country, finding a mentor who understood her was important to her success. For Sun-LaSovage, who now serves as a mentor to others, the fact that she is both Asian and female is critical to the work she does. “Being able to straddle two intersections of life gives me a greater appreciation and understanding of what people, particularly our female employees, are coping with,” she says.

Affinity groups are among the longest-standing initiatives in the D&I field, but Korn Ferry’s Tapia says they too are currently trapped in more unidimensional views of identity. “They need to adapt,” he says. “For example, the Black group needs to address the realities of those who are Black and gay. Women’s networks need to address the additional challenges that women of color face that go beyond just gender dynamics. Latinx and Asians need to more fully expand their spectrum of what it means to be Latinx or Asian.”

Identity has never been solely about what is in a person’s blood, and today, this is becoming truer for more people. Organizations that are truly committed to full inclusion need to take this new reality into account. “Individual and collective experience matters as much to identity as DNA, but claiming an identity should always be done responsibly, and conscious of impact,” says Rinderle.

*For more information, contact
Andrés Tapia at andres.tapia@kornferry.com,
Susana Rinderle at susana.rinderle@kornferry.com,
Karen H.C. Huang at karen.huang@kornferry.com,
Wayland Lum at wayland.lum@kornferry.com, or
Darryl Smith at darryl.smith@kornferry.com.*