

NOV
2021

The Language of Diversity

A report on how communication leaders are defining and discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations



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Dear Reader,

As the founder of a communications agency focused on social justice, I've grown particularly aware of the profound importance and impact of the words and language used to represent various demographics. This fact has been illuminated over the past year and a half, due to the racial reckoning that was launched with the murder of George Floyd. When I first entered the public relations sector two decades ago, long before diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) had become part of our daily lexicon, there was often confusion about how to speak about people of color, underrepresented populations and efforts towards inclusion. The tides are not so much turning yet as they are churning, and we as a sector continue to struggle *TO UNDERSTAND* and *TO EVOLVE* the language that we use.

There has been an ongoing flood of companies vowing their commitment to racial and social justice. Large scale donations and the hiring of DEI consultants has become de rigueur. And while often well-meaning, conversations with those same companies reveal a lack of clarity around what exactly real change – systemic change – looks like and how to realize it. It's far from the feel-good moment of making a declaration of support for justice. It's complex, dynamic, often uncomfortable work that takes time, energy, and a commitment for not only organizations, but the individuals that comprise the organization on all levels, to push past the comfort zone of the status quo. Murkiness often exists, including the language used day to day.

I approached the Institute for Public Relations to conduct this survey on the use of institutional language, knowing that how people communicate is the literal foundation of how institutional cultures are created and sustained. Language is powerful – it shapes our reality and perceptions. It's doubly now relevant now, as the crucial role of communicators in revealing and combating systemic oppression has been in sharper focus. As a communications expert, I feel strongly that our industry has a responsibility to take a leadership role in reflecting the importance of the use of language and how it relates to social justice and the creation of ecosystems that hold DEI principles and most essentially, practices, at their core. It makes sense that we would be gatekeepers pushing for evolution in how we communicate with colleagues and external stakeholders. My agency is actively involved in partnering with companies to create lexicons reflective of their aspirational values.

Before we can lead that charge, though, we need to gain insight into the current perceptions and use of language in our ranks. This survey sought to learn more about how the PR industry views its respective efforts to talk about DEI issues internally and externally and the perceptions around the impact of language. Lack of clarity around language plays into power dynamics – perpetuating and even exacerbating inequity in the workplace and roadblocking authentic inclusivity. The question is whether or not organizations will make the necessary commitment for the long road. Change is never linear and is always gradual. Strategic attention to the use of language and creating clarity and consistency amongst how PR professionals are using it will no doubt help propel the mission. Communicators must involve employees in this process as they shape their language to create greater understanding and improve DEI efforts. Communications professionals are in a unique position of possible leadership for this reason. Let's view this survey as a jumping off point.

Regards,



Founder & CEO, The Wakeman Agency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Institute for Public Relations Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and The Wakeman Agency conducted a survey of 393 communications and public relations leaders to study diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) perceptions and definitions from March 17 - April 12, 2021.

The survey explores:

- The power dynamics inherent in language and how that can reinforce or hinder the work of creating authentic DEI-infused professional cultures.
- How communications professionals perceive any current language used in their organization that reflects DEI principles and the subsequent impact on workplace ecosystems.
- If, and how, terms such as diversity, inclusion, social justice, belonging, and equity are clearly and consistently defined within the respondent's workplace.

The goal of this study is to spark conversation and increase awareness of the implications of fully embedding DEI into an organization and how it supports or hinders efforts geared toward transformation, internally and externally.

Overall, the survey results reveal pervasive inconsistencies among public relations professionals on how they define diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as a general misunderstanding of exactly what social justice is and how it's manifested on a day-to-day basis in professional environments. As a result, it is probable that organizational discussions and plans for action related to DEI initiatives are being hindered.

Notable issues identified in the survey include:

- Insufficient breadth when defining *diversity*
- Confusing *equity* with equality
- Defining *inclusion* as presence in a particular environment

It was abundantly clear from survey responses that DEI-related topics make some people deeply uncomfortable and defensive. However, many respondents welcomed the opportunity to take a deeper dive into the role of communicators, where we stand today, and how we can continue to move forward to use our positions and skills to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion for all individuals.

This report includes the key findings of the survey and suggested definitions for frequently-used DEI terms in organizations, including diversity, equity, equality, inclusion, and social justice.

METHODOLOGY

The Institute for Public Relations and The Wakeman Agency conducted an online survey of 393 communication leaders to understand their perspectives of and how they define diversity, equity, and inclusion. The study was conducted from March 17 - April 12, 2021. A thematic analysis was conducted of the qualitative responses. Definitions were reviewed by rhetorical and linguistic scholars both within and outside the industry.

KEY FINDINGS

1

Language influences or reinforces power dynamics in the workplace.

Nearly all (97%) of communicators agreed that language or words can influence or reinforce power dynamics in the workplace. Eighty-seven percent said it is important for workplace discussions to focus on how language can evolve to be more equitable or inclusive. One-third of respondents said they thought the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion were overused. Two-thirds of communicators agreed that the public relations industry needs to develop standard definitions relating to DEI; only 13% disagreed.

2

DEI-related definitions are used inconsistently; clear definitions of DEI terms are needed.

Slightly more than half (54%) of employees are comfortable with the DEI-related language used in their organizations, while 52% maintained they had a clear understanding of definitions related to DEI. Confusion abounds, however, with 20% reporting they did not recognize the difference between the terms “diversity” and “inclusion.” In addition, 25% failed to recognize “equity” and “equality” as distinct terms, and only 23% saw “inclusion” and “belonging” as separate terms. Less than half of respondents (48%) felt that organizations are explaining why the specific words used about diversity, equity, and inclusion are important.

The survey asked respondents to provide definitions of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Across the board, definitions were inaccurate, inconsistent, and incomplete.

3

There’s a say-do gap between expressing commitment to DEI and engaging in meaningful action.

Communicators reported that their organizations were more likely to verbally commit to DEI publicly (76%) than to take actions, either internally (70%) or in society (59%).

4

Race, sex, and ethnicity were the highest priorities in diversity initiatives.

Notably, 59% percent of communicators said race was a “high priority” in diversity initiatives in their organizations. Respondents reported race (83%), sex (77%), and ethnicity (75%) as being at least a “medium priority” in diversity initiatives. Diversity of thought (63%), cultural background (63%), mental health (62%), and sexual orientation/LGBTQ+ (60%) were also noted as being at least a “medium priority.” More than half of the respondents said neurodiversity (70%), religious or spiritual beliefs (65%), and socioeconomic levels (56%) were “low priority” or “not a priority.”

5

“Diversity,” “Inclusion,” and “Equity” are the most frequently used terms in the diversity space.

Diversity (69%), inclusion (64%), and equity (53%) were the most frequently used terms regarding diversity in both internal and external communications. At least 70% of respondents used the following terms infrequently: neurodiversity, intersectionality, microaggressions, structural racism, privilege, anti-racist, identity, ally, equality, belonging, and social justice. These terms were also reported as being less clearly defined in their organizations.

6

Few organizations had codified DEI definitions and most were not publicly available.

Only 31% of communicators reported their organizations had formal definitions of DEI terms in a handbook or guide. Twenty-four percent said their definitions were publicly available, while 33% said they were not.

7

Organizations update their DEI definitions infrequently.

Only 28% said their department or unit updates their definitions and language used to talk about DEI “always” or “often.” More than one-third said they “rarely” or “never” update their definitions. Organizations should review and refresh their DEI definitions periodically due to the fluidity of language and a changing society.

8

“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)” is the most frequently used title to describe diversity programs in organizations.

Forty-three percent of respondents said “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” was used to refer to their organization’s diversity initiatives. “Diversity and Inclusion” was used in 20% of respondents’ companies, while other less commonly used names were “Equity and Social Justice,” “Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA),” “Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging,” and “Access and Equity,” among others.

9

Most organizational diversity initiatives are located within Human Resources or are an independent DEI function.

Thirty-eight percent of communicators said diversity initiatives were located within Human Resources, and 35% said DEI is an independent function. Only 10% percent reported that the communication function was responsible for DEI. Among communicators who were not primarily responsible for diversity initiatives within the organization, 46% said they worked “very closely” with the function responsible for DEI.

DEFINING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

We want to thank the following contributors who reviewed and provided feedback about the definitions:

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Natalie Tindall, Ph.D., Director, School of Advertising & Public Relations and the Isabella Cunningham Chair,
The University of Texas at Austin

Language is fluid and changes over time. Here, we present definitions for use as a springboard to launch meaningful conversations that result in changes that have lasting, positive impacts on firms and individuals.

Organizations need to discuss these definitions, see how they fit with their internal conversations, and gauge how their constituencies will respond. The presentation of this information should not supplant ongoing work, but rather support efforts to embed DEI into workplace culture and communication efforts. It also should not prevent organizations from staying updated on language usage and making necessary adjustments over time.

In analyzing the data, we found a broad range of definitions. To find patterns in how people articulated the terms, we looked for high frequency words that were common among respondents. These terms do not provide a clear conclusion that would bring us to universally accepted terms. Rather, it loudly sounded the alarm for more refinement in the terms and language surrounding DEI.

This is not an exhaustive list of diversity-related terms. These terms provide a foundation that allows people to explore other aspects of diversity from a common lens.

In the presentation of the terms themselves, there is no intent to present a hierarchy of sorts. Rather, they inform — and ideally are in conversation with — each other.

DIVERSITY-RELATED DEFINITIONS

- **Diversity** is the presence of differences that include demographics (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, language, education, socioeconomic status, religion, or political affiliation) and psychographics (e.g., thoughts/cognitions, values, attitudes, experiences, and personal background). Diversity is fluid and can encompass identities and the intersection of those identities, as well as differences in thoughts/cognitions, culture, experiences, neurodiversity, special needs, (dis)abilities, physical attributes, and other characteristics.
- **Equality** is providing equal access, resources, and opportunities, which includes providing the same rights, materials, and offerings to all.
- **Equity** is promoting justice, impartiality, and fairness, and includes providing proportionate access, resources, and opportunities based on people's individual needs and differences. Equity elevates equality by recognizing that people start from different places, acknowledging and correcting imbalances of power, both present and historical, for both individuals and groups to which they may belong. Equity is rooted within the procedures and processes, and how resources are distributed by institutions or systems.
- **Inclusion** is an outcome to ensure all individuals feel heard, welcomed, accepted, and respected in an organization. In an inclusive environment, individuals feel they have value, they contribute, they feel empowered, and they have a sense of belonging within that environment.
- **Social Justice** focuses on creating an equitable society with systemic equality in opportunity, rights, and justice. Inclusion, diversity, and lack of bias and discrimination, as well as equality and protection in laws and government are some of the elements of social justice.

FINDINGS

The Power of Language

Overwhelmingly, communicators agreed that language or words can influence or reinforce power dynamics in the workplace (97%), and that language or words reflect the culture of the organization (94%) . Eighty-seven percent also agreed that workplace discussions should focus on how language and definitions could be changed to be more equitable or inclusive. Two-thirds of communicators said that the public relations industry needs to develop standard definitions relating to DEI. One-third said they thought the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion were overused, compared to 43% who disagreed.

	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree
Language or words can influence or reinforce power dynamics in the workplace.	97%	0%	3%
Language or words used in the workplace reflect the culture of the organization.	94%	4%	2%
The public relations industry needs to develop standard definitions relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion.	66%	21%	13%
It is important to have discussions in the workplace about how language or definitions could or should be changed to be more equitable or inclusive.	87%	9%	5%
The terms diversity, equity, and inclusion are overused.	33%	23%	43%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

How Employees Feel About Language

Only slightly more than half (54%) felt comfortable with the DEI language that is commonly used within their organizations. A similar percentage (52%) have a clear understanding of definitions relating to diversity. In terms of the nuances of language, 20% did not recognize the difference between the terms “diversity” and “inclusion.” Twenty-five percent did not recognize “equity” and “equality” as distinct terms, and fewer (23%) saw “inclusion” and “belonging” as separate terms.

	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree
I am comfortable with the language related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that is commonly used in my organization.	54%	28%	17%
I have a clear understanding of how my organization defines diversity-related terms.	52%	22%	26%
I think that diversity and inclusion are two different concepts.	80%	9%	10%
I think that equity and equality are two different concepts.	75%	10%	15%
I think that inclusion and belonging are two different concepts.	67%	12%	21%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

The Role of the Organization

Communicators were more likely to say that their company is more likely to publicly express a commitment to DEI (76%) rather than take actions, either internally (70%) or in society (59%).

In terms of whether organizations are explaining why language and words are important, fewer than half (48%) agreed with this statement. Thirty-one percent said their organization is relying on Black, Hispanic, or Latino/Latina employees to lead their DEI efforts.

<i>Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding</i>	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree
My organization publicly expresses their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.	76%	15%	9%
My organization engages in specific actions to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion internally.	70%	16%	14%
My organization engages in specific actions to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in society.	59%	22%	20%
My organization explains why the words or language we use about diversity, equity, and inclusion are important.	48%	24%	28%
My organization relies on Black and Latinx employees to lead diversity, equity, and inclusion communication efforts.	31%	28%	41%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

Priority of Diversity Initiatives

In terms of the priority that communicators think their organizations place on various types of diversity, the most frequently noted by at least three-quarters of respondents as being at least a “medium” priority were race (83%), sex (77%), and ethnicity (75%). Fifty-nine percent of respondents said race was a “high priority.” Diversity of thought (63%), cultural background (63%), mental health (62%), and sexual orientation/LGBTQ+ (60%) were noted as being at least a “medium” priority by at least 60% of respondents.

Some diversity characteristics were considered either “not a priority” or “low priority” by most communicators. More than half of the respondents said neurodiversity (e.g., autism spectrum, ADHD) (70%), religious or spiritual beliefs (65%), and socioeconomic levels (56%) were “low priority” or “not a priority.” Nearly half said language and linguistics (49%), age/generational differences (49%), and physical abilities/disabilities (49%) were also a “low priority” or “not a priority.”

Interestingly, a subset of communicators (who were excluded from the priority tabulation) were unsure about the priorities of their organization. This ranged from 7% regarding race up to 19% for neurodiversity. Overall, communicators should be aware of how their organization defines diversity.

Priority of Diversity Initiatives

	High Priority	Medium Priority	Low Priority	Not a Priority
Race	59%	24%	11%	7%
Sex/Gender	48%	29%	16%	8%
Ethnicity	45%	30%	17%	9%
Diversity of thought	34%	29%	23%	14%
Cultural background	32%	31%	24%	13%
Mental health	34%	28%	23%	16%
Sexual Orientation/LGBTQ+	33%	27%	24%	16%
Veterans/military experience	29%	28%	22%	21%
Physical abilities and disabilities	24%	28%	27%	21%
Generational/Age	16%	35%	28%	21%
Language and linguistics	23%	28%	31%	18%
Socioeconomic status/levels	18%	27%	27%	29%
Religious or spiritual beliefs	15%	21%	29%	36%
Neurodiversity (e.g., ADHD, autism spectrum)	14%	18%	33%	35%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

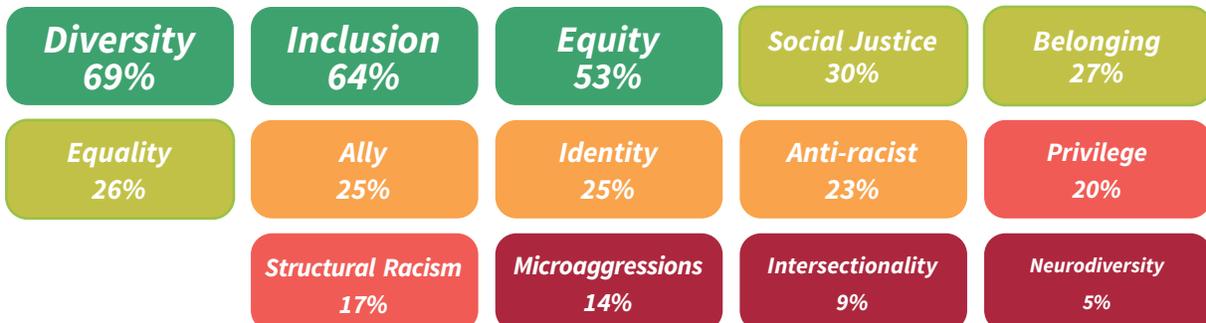
Frequency of Use of Diversity-Related Terms

The most frequently used terms that are “always” or “often” used in external and internal communications about diversity, equity, and inclusion were diversity (69%), inclusion (64%), and equity (53%).

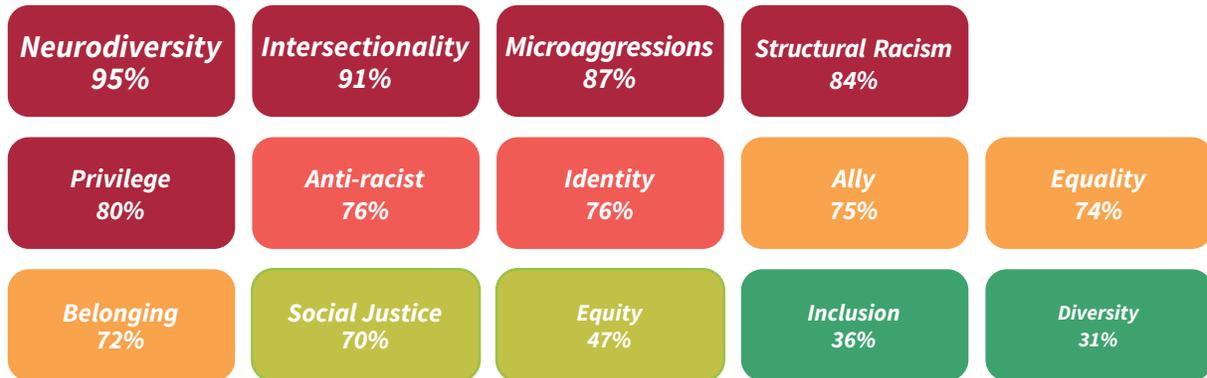
Most terms were only used “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never.” In fact, 11 of the 14 terms we provided were used infrequently by at least 70% of respondents. These included neurodiversity (95%), intersectionality (91%), microaggressions (87%), structural racism (84%), privilege (80%), anti-racist (76%), identity (76%), ally (75%), equality (74%), belonging (72%), and social justice (70%).

How often does your organization use the following terms in its communications about diversity?

Words used *Always/Often*



Words Used *Sometimes/Rarely/Never*



Clearly Defined Definitions for Employees

In spite of the definitional confusion that DEI terms present, communicators stated they felt they had a better grasp on the meanings of diversity, inclusion, and equity. Diversity (79%), inclusion (68%), and equity (50%) were the three most clearly defined terms in organizations. Less than one-third of communicators said other terms were clearly defined for them within the organization.

Communicators offered comments as to how their organizations are defining terms for employees. About eight percent noted that their organizations do not define any of these terms. Others said they were trained on the terms in the hiring process.

Clearly Defined Terms in Organizations

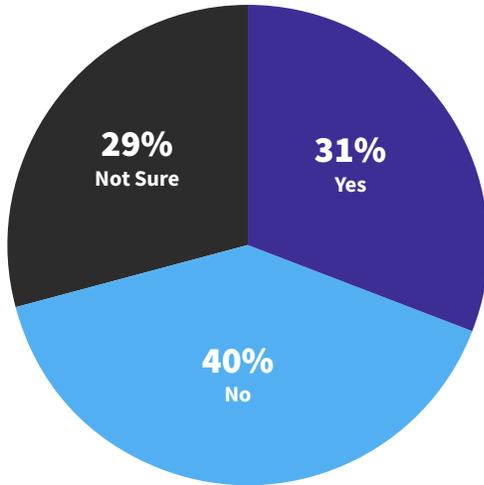
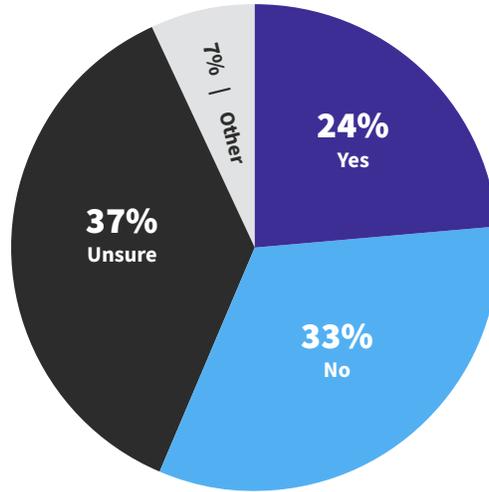
Terms	Percentage of communicators
Diversity	79%
Inclusion	68%
Equity	50%
Equality	28%
Social Justice	27%
Anti-racist	23%
Ally	22%
Microaggressions	19%
Belonging	16%
Privilege	16%

Availability of DEI Definitions

Less than one-quarter (24%) of respondents said their organization’s definitions are publicly available, while 33% said they were not. Thirty-seven percent said they were unsure, and 7% answered “other,” with most of those respondents saying that some definitions were available but others were not.

Only 31% said their organization has formal definitions relating to DEI in a handbook or guide. Forty percent said they do not have formal definitions, and 29% were not sure.

Are these definitions publicly available?

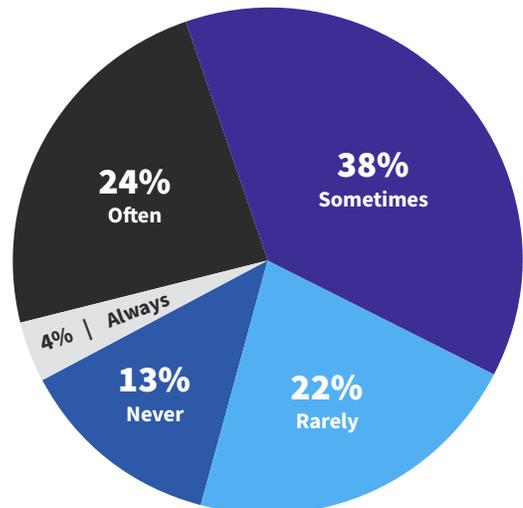


Does your organization have formal definitions relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion in a handbook or guide?

Frequency of Language Updates

Nearly three-quarters of communicators say they only update their language and terms used to reflect inclusivity and equity only “sometimes” or less often.

How often does your department (or team) discuss updates to language and terms that best reflect inclusivity and equity?



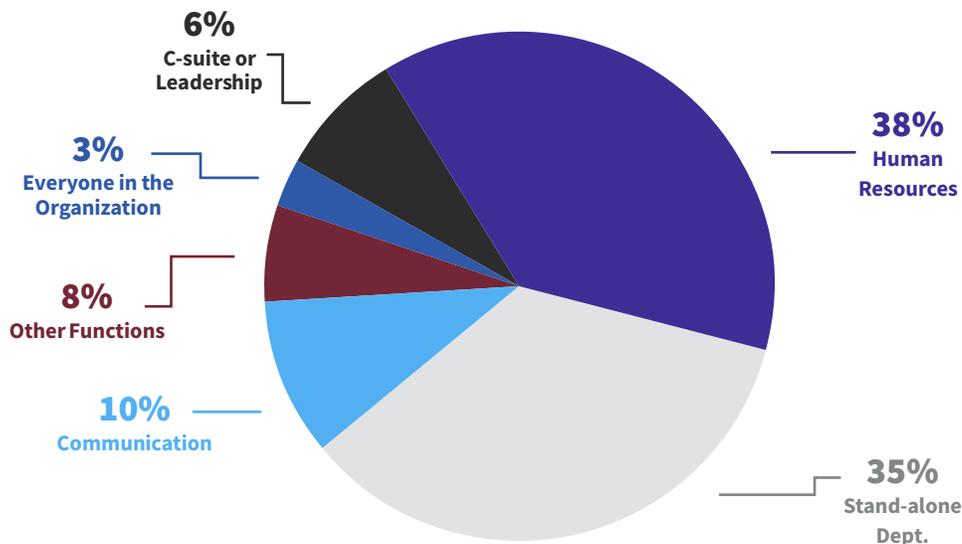
DEI Programs

The most frequently referenced name for an organization’s diversity program was “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” as noted by 43% of respondents. Twenty percent said “Diversity and Inclusion (D&I),” while 18% said they don’t use any specific terms to define their diversity program. Some also noted in the comments that their organization does not have a diversity program at all. Other less common names included:



Several noted the importance of access to DEI while others said that “inclusion” was intentionally at the beginning of the title to demonstrate that it’s the most important component in a diversity-related program.

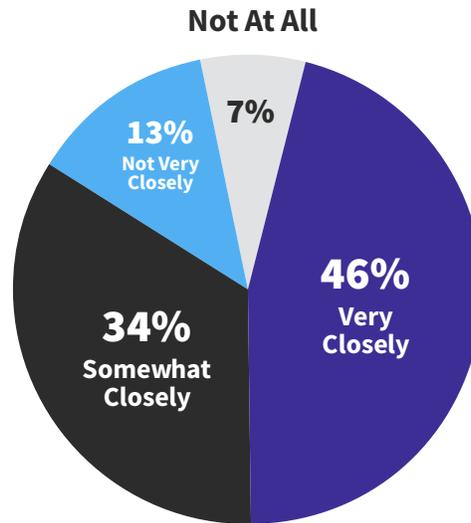
Where are Diversity Initiatives Located Within Organizations?



Relationship Between the Communication Function and Diversity Function

Of those communication functions that were not primarily responsible for diversity initiatives within the organization, 46% said they worked “very closely” with the function responsible for DEI. Thirty-four percent said they worked “somewhat closely,” while the remaining 20% said they worked either “not very closely” or “not at all.”

How closely does the communication function with the department primarily responsible for the diversity initiatives?



CONCLUSION

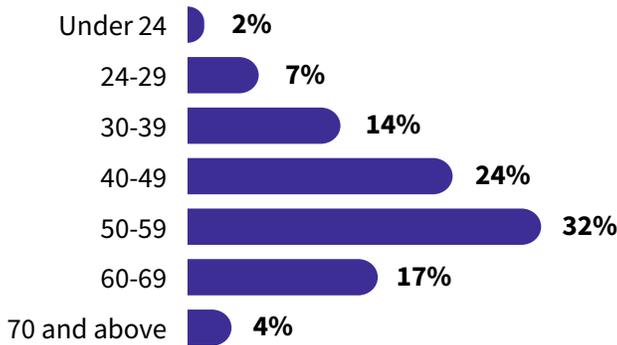
The survey results affirmed that most professional communicators understand and agree that language has an impact on power dynamics in the workplace and reflects the culture of the organization. However, the results indicate that many communicators are somewhat uncomfortable with the DEI language that is being used, and confusion abounds regarding accurate definitions. This is not surprising, considering that formal definitions are not available in most organizations and the perceived meaning of key terms varies widely.

Perhaps most concerning is a reported gap between commitment to DEI and meaningful actions that advance diversity in organizations. This points to our responsibility as communicators to fortify these actions by addressing how language can be more equitable and inclusive, as well as developing standard definitions related to DEI. Clarity and consistency of language will strengthen our work as communicators and help strengthen organizational DEI initiatives designed to correct systemic inequities and the archaic processes that sustain them. Developing a healthy lexicon is an integral and foundational part of building the infrastructure for meaningful change.

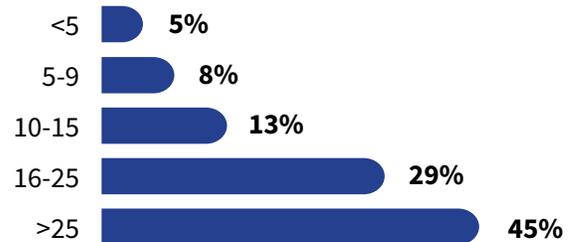
Demographics

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding

Age



Years of professional experience



Which type of organization do you work for?

Association/Non profit	15%
Corporation	24%
Education	21%
Government/Military	14%
Independent Contractor	3%
PR agency/Consultancy/Firm	16%
Products/Services to PR Industry	1%
Professional Services	4%
Healthcare	2%
Other	1%

Are you of Latino or Hispanic origin?



What is your current gender identity?

Female	70%
Male	28%
Trans male/trans man	0%
Trans female/trans woman	0%
Genderqueer/gender non-conforming	1%
Different identity	1%

Which race do you most closely identify with?

White	73%
Black/African American	13%
Asian	4%
Latino/Hispanic	2%
American Indian/Native Alaskan	4%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	2%
Two or more races	1%
Prefer not to say	1%

Are you a member of the LGBTQ+ community?





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About The Wakeman Agency

The Wakeman Agency is a social change agency that deploys culturally competent and transformative communications practices to advance the most pressing social issues of our time. We partner with nonprofits, foundations and socially responsible companies that aim to leverage strategic communications to advance society towards systemic equity and justice. Through our Lexicon Project service offering, we develop and operationalize organizational lexicons that assist in communication with stakeholders through a DEI lens.

Special thanks to the following for their support of this project:



Full report available at:

<https://instituteforpr.org/defining-diversity-equity-inclusion-report>