

Many people have biased perceptions of equity, diversity and inclusion leaders, study finds

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For the past decade, companies across North America have paid more attention to supporting equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This has

prompted many organizations to create a leadership role fully dedicated to advancing EDI—so much so that between 2015 and 2020, the job title "head of diversity" increased 107 percent on LinkedIn. By 2021, more than half of S&P 500 firms had named a chief diversity officer.

But a new study from the UBC Sauder School of Business shows many people have deeply held beliefs about who should be an EDI leader, and they are rooted in [racial stereotypes](#).

For the study, published in the [Journal of Applied Psychology](#), roughly 500 participants with hiring experience were given a press release announcing a new leader at a fictitious company; some were told the person was the head of finance, while others were told they were the head of EDI. They were then asked to identify the necessary traits for leaders in those positions and asked what they believed the race of the leader would be.

"We found that, even though the new leader had a generic name and description, people were significantly more likely to assume the finance leader would be white, while the EDI leader would be non-white," says UBC Sauder assistant professor Dr. Rebecca Paluch, who co-authored the study with Dr. Vanessa Shum, assistant professor of business administration at California State University San Marcos.

In a second experiment, researchers asked respondents about which traits they associated with different racial groups and leader roles. They found people not only assumed non-white individuals were more likely to be committed to social justice and to have experienced discrimination but also viewed those traits as the most critical for successful EDI leadership.

In a final study, the researchers examined how hiring managers evaluate prospective EDI leaders based on information from a candidate packet.

They found hiring managers rated non-white candidates as having stronger leadership qualities for the role and were more likely to recommend hiring them over white candidates. Similar to the findings from the second experiment, this was because hiring managers assumed non-white candidates would be more social justice-minded and would have experienced discrimination.

"We were surprised by how strong the findings were," says Dr. Paluch, who links the results to Role Theories, which suggest people associate certain groups with particular occupations because of their past and current experiences.

For decades, researchers have found that people often expect [business leaders](#) to be white and believe white employees are more likely to possess traits required for successful organizational leadership.

"Although historically business leaders have traditionally been white, which drives that association between being a leader and being white, [social justice](#) movements or diversity initiatives have historically been driven by non-white leaders or groups."

Dr. Paluch says the findings are promising in that they represent a shift in people's perceptions of who leaders are. What's more, when they see non-white people in EDI leadership roles, they will be more likely to expect non-white leaders in other top corporate spots as well.

At the same time, the study reveals continued race-based stereotyping in hiring, adds Dr. Paluch, and as a result, EDI roles risk being perceived as less important. In fact, many businesses have already started reducing or eliminating EDI leadership spots as they look to cut costs.

"It's never good to hire based on biased presumptions. We can't assume things about people just because of the way they look," she says. "Those

biases could ultimately hurt equity, diversity and inclusion in the long run, particularly if there are racial minorities in the role."

Dr. Paluch says leaders need to understand that discrimination is often built into employment systems. Once they're aware of those biases, they're more likely to bring in accountability measures and standardize hiring practices. They also need to prioritize equity, diversity and inclusion; see EDI leaders as central to the management team; clearly define their roles; and compensate EDI leaders equitably.

"Because we find a racial bias for the EDI leader role, it's particularly important not to downgrade the status or necessity of this role, particularly in comparison to other leader roles," she says.

"Organizations should make sure they're giving EDI leaders the same type of resources, prestige and attention as other leaders in the organization. Just like a Chief of Operations or a Chief of Finance, EDI leaders should be guaranteed a seat at the table."

More information: Rebecca M. Paluch et al, The non-White standard: Racial bias in perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion leaders., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2023). DOI: [10.1037/apl0001106](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001106)

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