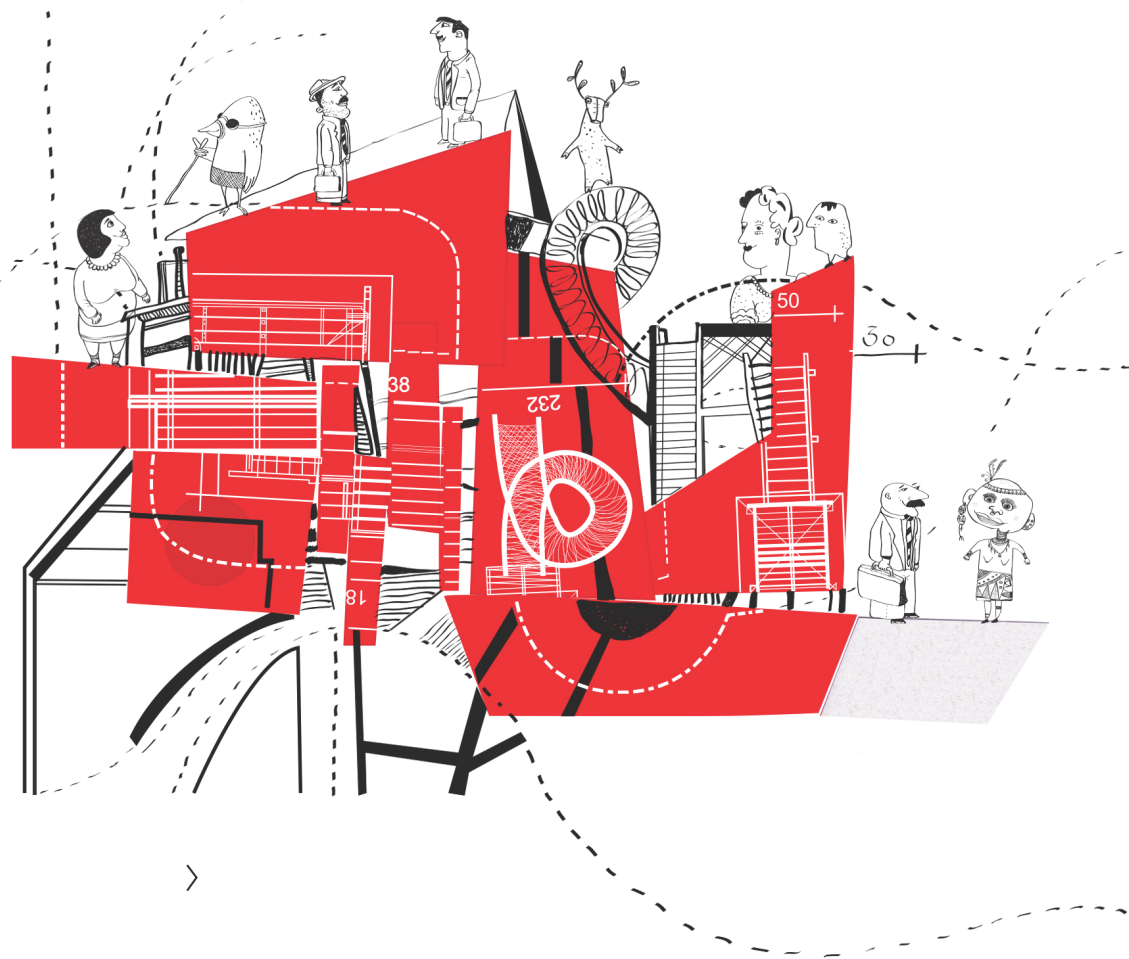


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# BAI RESEARCH REPORT: Can Agile Organisations Be Truly Inclusive?

**D**iversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) encompasses the efforts any institution takes towards creating a welcoming and supportive environment for all their members, employees and customers. Building more equitable and inclusive workplaces benefits everyone. When employees feel supported and embraced by their workspace, they'll naturally work towards their full potential. Which, in turn, improves business outcomes. Likewise, any way of working which relies upon employees bringing all their expertise and lived experiences to bear needs to deliberately integrate inclusion and equity.

It seems evident that the values and principles of agility should overlap with DE&I concepts in many ways: for example, the Agile Manifesto value of individuals and their interactions over processes and tools also reflects the core tenets of DE&I. Both agility and DE&I require organizations to recognize the individual backgrounds and circumstances of team members to understand what people need to thrive. The two concepts should go hand-in-hand.

At least, that's the theory.

The possibility that all might not be well came to the attention of Business Agility Institute co-founder Evan Leybourn when he attended a talk by Mark Green, the founder of Agile Inclusion Revolution. Mark's talk - entitled A Spotlight on Diversity and Inclusion - discussed the issues faced by the integration of inclusion and equity into agile ways of working. The talk explored the misalignment between agility and DE&I, and the resulting inequity and exclusion unwittingly perpetuated by dominant groups. Evan followed up with Mark, proposing further research that would gather insights into the unity of agility and DE&I.

The resulting report is based upon over 400 interviews and surveys with agile professionals and those working in, or with, agile organizations. Our respondents had diverse backgrounds including age, education, disability, gender, sexuality, and religion. Their responses explored instances of exclusion and inequity in agile organizations as well as the relationship between agile and DE&I. They also provided recommendations for organizations, professional bodies, and individuals wishing to improve inclusion and equity inside their communities, and in turn improve outcomes for their customers.

The full report is available at <http://bit.ly/bai-dei>





## INEQUITY AND EXCLUSION IS SYSTEMIC

The first, and possibly most pressing, issue raised by respondents was that agile organizations face the same problems as traditional organizations when it comes to instances of bias, discrimination, inequity, and exclusion.

Gender bias and racism continue to persist in many agile workplaces. This may be overt or exist as a ‘background hum’ of misunderstandings and micro-aggressions. These biases often originate outside the workplace, as society-wide prejudices flow through the organization, often perpetuated by leadership teams. Other systems of injustice persist as well, affecting people of different cultures, abilities and disabilities, people with accessibility requirements or mental wellbeing needs, members of LGBTQI+ communities, single parents and working parents, and so on.

Are these instances of bias the fault of agile ways of working, or are they persisting despite agile ways of working? Our research indicates that it’s a little bit of both.

Respondents believe inclusion and equity was crucial to agile outcomes, but only 19% of survey respondents believed that new ways of working introduced through agile transformations were designed for inclusion and equity. Just like creating a new product or service, new agile ways of working must consider the diversity of its users (the teams and broader workforce) otherwise it is likely to exclude some from the opportunities it creates. As such, we found that agile working methods are almost certain to contribute to exclusion or inequity for some staff and customers.

We also found that conscious inclusion of DE&I in agile transformations is hampered by the mistaken belief that the two are already successfully integrated. The result is that the exclusive and inequitable nature of many agile processes and rituals often go unchallenged. Unless the structures and processes behind these rituals are examined and repaired, bad practices will continue and diverse talent will be pushed to the outskirts.

Some examples of how agile ways of working contribute to exclusion and inequity include:

- The speed of work in agile environments being difficult for new employees, such as some older employees, those with disabilities, or neurodiverse people.
- Common agile rituals, like the daily stand-up, being designed for the majority. This may exclude those who struggle with forced discussions, as well as those who are unavailable at set times due to parenting/caring commitments, religious commitments, time-zone clashes, etc.
- Multiple teams working in a shared and open space can be disruptive, in particular for employees who struggle with sensory processing. Other research has shown that open plan workspaces can reduce productivity and collaboration.
- Rituals or decision-making methods external to the workplace - such as after-work drinks or physically demanding team-building exercises - excluding employees with complex schedules, disabilities, those who do not drink, those who struggle with social engagement, etc.
- Exclusion can occur due to first language or communication preferences. People who struggle with spoken and/or written language may have a hard time adapting to agile ways of working, as agile is very on-the-spot and often does not make allowances for those who need time to process information before making inputs or decisions.

According to respondents, these recurring instances of inequity and exclusion aren’t a blemish on the otherwise perfect agile ways of working. Rather, they are the product of agility and can’t be addressed without first examining and rebuilding many agile ways of working from the ground up, with DE&I being considered from the outset.

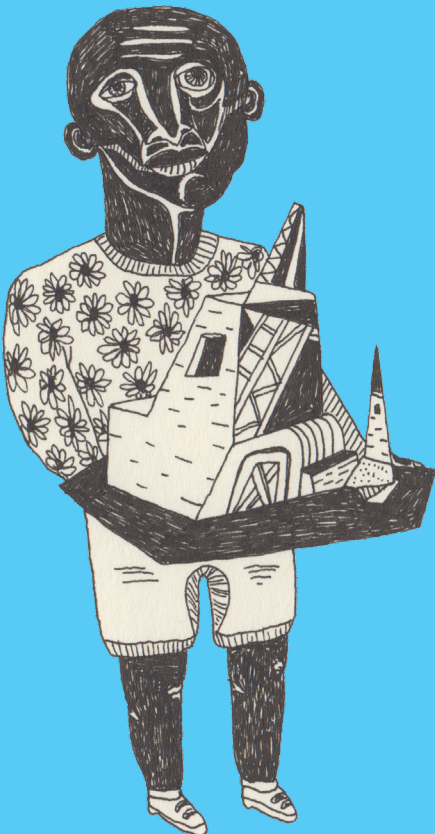




## HOW DOES THIS HURT US?

The collected research shows that everyone suffers when organizations are not intentional about DE&I. Agile transformations are less effective, individuals are suffering inequity and exclusion, and business outcomes are being negatively impacted.

Of all these issues, the impact upon individuals is the most visible. Employees with disabilities, marginalizations, or other diverse attributes and needs are being pushed to the outskirts, overlooked, or actively discriminated against. These employees will soon feel as if their whole selves are not wanted in the workplace. These employees may not disclose their needs, or discuss instances of bias or marginalization, as a pattern has been established in which their concerns are not taken seriously. Agile transformations and ways of working should enable people to be more present and transparent regarding themselves, their needs, and their goals, but those same systems can serve to push people away.



Organisations that do not address these issues are also impacted. Diverse, empowered teams working in inclusive, equitable environments create products that appeal to diverse customer demographics. But by not centering DE&I in their agile ways of working, businesses are missing unique opportunities, reducing outcomes for their teams, and ultimately harming their own bottom line.

In short: if businesses want to perform successful agile transformations, create innovative and relevant products that capture new market segments, and sustain talented, proactive agile teams, they need to embed DE&I into agile ways of working.

But if agile isn't already accomplishing this, the question must then be asked: are we asking too much of agile? Is agile capable or responsible for solving problems such as cultural baggage, unconscious microaggressions, ways of working not being designed for disabled and neurotypical people, employees being treated as exploitable resources, etc.? Or is the statement "we're expecting too much from agile" a sign of defeatism?

## WHY AREN'T WE BETTER?

The agile manifesto, along with other industry models, implies a relationship between agile and DE&I. In fact, the agile manifesto's core value of individuals and interactions over processes and tools implies that, for agile to work well (or work at all), DE&I must be a core component.

Despite this, there is no explicit connection between the two. The implication that, because agile is based around people it must therefore find worth in diversity, is not borne out by research responses: the most common response when discussing the intersection between agile and DE&I was, "I haven't thought about it."

In addition, flaws in the intersection between agile and DE&I were noted by multiple respondents. Respondents stated that, while they believed inclusion and equity were critical to agile outcomes, the organizations in which they were employed (or had previously been employed) were underestimating the business benefits of DE&I and not putting enough explicit focus on achieving equity and inclusion. Respondents also believed agile practices could benefit from the creation of equitable and inclusive work environments, and that organizations were short-changing both their DE&I programs and their agile transformations by not leaning into the connections between them.

As such, the research indicates that these issues of exclusion and inequity aren't the result of a single process, an easily corrected lack of communication, or isolated bad apples. Rather, the root causes are a fundamental lack of understanding of what DE&I entails, what agile is lacking, and what the responsibilities of organizations are when it comes to meeting the needs of their employees.

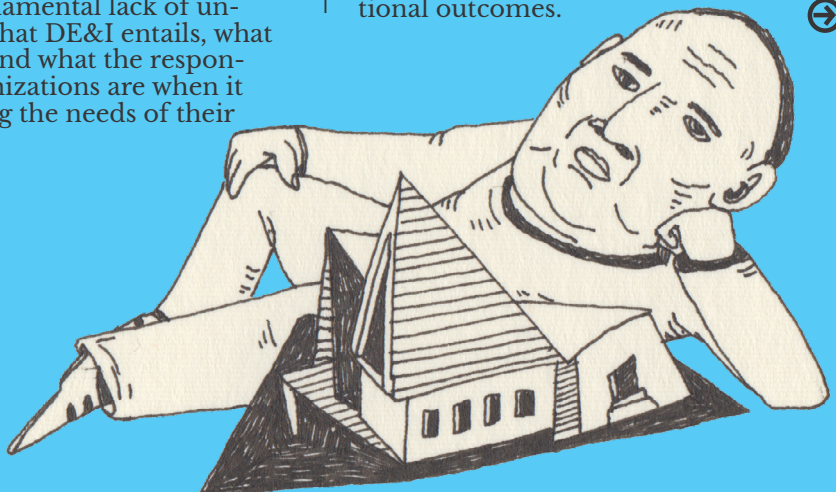
## WHAT DOES DOING IT RIGHT LOOK LIKE?

While it might feel like respondents were universally negative when it came to discussing DE&I in agile workplaces, this wasn't the case. Some of the respondents had been employed in or observed agile workplaces where DE&I was taken seriously, and the needs of diverse demographics were considered by leadership.

In workplaces like these, organization values shouldn't just be buzzwords. Leaders need to model positive behaviours, proactively correct instances of inequity and exclusion, work to create atmospheres of psychological safety, disclose their own unique needs and struggles to create an environment of transparency and disclosure, and so on. During transformations, leadership needs to seek out coaches from diverse demographics and insist upon experience in the realm of DE&I.

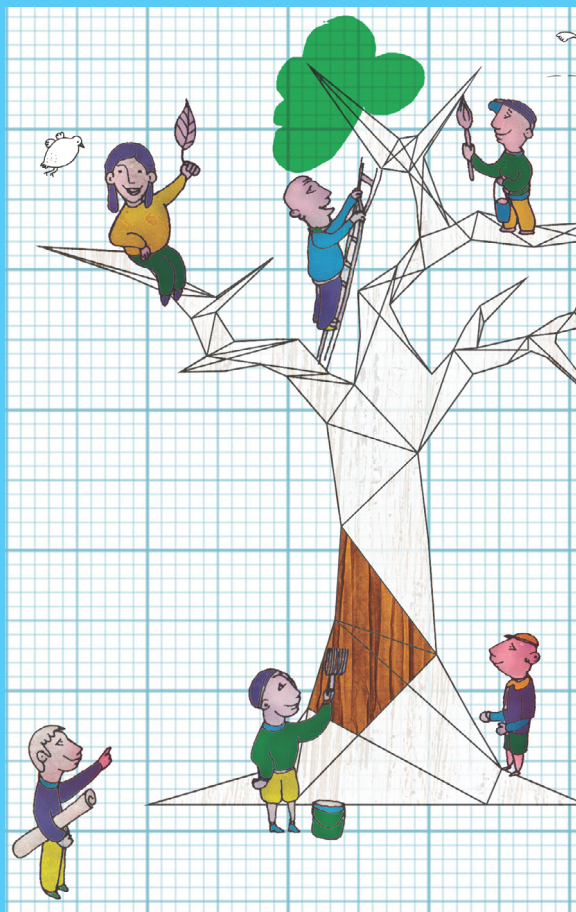
In these environments, respondents reported that their unique needs were often met without needing to disclose, and that they were granted opportunities to grow and develop. By leveraging their lived experiences and leaning into their diversities, they were able to better connect with customers and create better products and solutions.

Creating these sorts of equitable and inclusive environments requires conscious effort and attention from organizations and leadership, but the results are hard to argue with: diverse, empowered teams guided by experienced leaders reach better organizational outcomes.



## WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

After analysis of over 400 surveys and interviews, the report found that respondents generally believed in the benefits of a united agile & DE&I. Organizations who embed a symbiotic agile and DE&I into the core of their transformation journeys will reap the benefits of both. And that their outcomes will exceed organizations who do not take the same step. However, these opportunities are being overlooked by agile teams, leaders, organizations, and industry bodies alike. As such, the report recommended the following:



- All readers take the opportunity to reflect upon how their own ways of working, inherent biases, and mindsets may have contributed to inequity and exclusion or marginalized team members and customers.
- All readers should be vocal and discuss these findings with their teams, leaders, and customers, and begin advocating for change inside their own ways of working.
- Industry and professional bodies should take immediate, explicit, enthusiastic and vocal steps to explicitly call out the need for equity and inclusion, as well as the intersection between agile and DE&I, in current agile ways of working. This requires concrete actions such as updating the relevant skill sets of professionals currently coaching and training in the field, building accessible knowledge resources, and updating training and certification practices and policies with a renewed focus on DE&I.
- Organizations must communicate and demonstrate the inclusive and equitable cultures they wish their teams to model. This requires continual reinforcement to overcome entrenched cultures of bias or marginalization, especially in cases where teams may see the change as a temporary fad, or a move to appease complaints.
- Organizations should also ensure the agile professionals they employ have updated their skill sets and certifications to better reflect the intersection between agile and DE&I. Building the necessary culture and knowledge base to recognize instances of exclusion and inequity - or to recognize when tools and systems are passively contributing to the same problem - will likely take place on the ground. This movement will have to be led by individual coaches, trainers, and agile/DE&I experts.



- Organizations must examine the ways in which they are sourcing and attracting candidates, ensuring that they are making every effort to recruit from diverse pools and to eliminate bias in hiring procedures. They must also ensure they have already created inclusive and equitable environments, including pay equity, development opportunities, and the flexibility to meet the varied needs of employees.
- Finally, organizations must immediately take action to ensure their ways of working systemically consider equity and inclusion at all stages of transformations and within agile ways of working.

## CONCLUSION

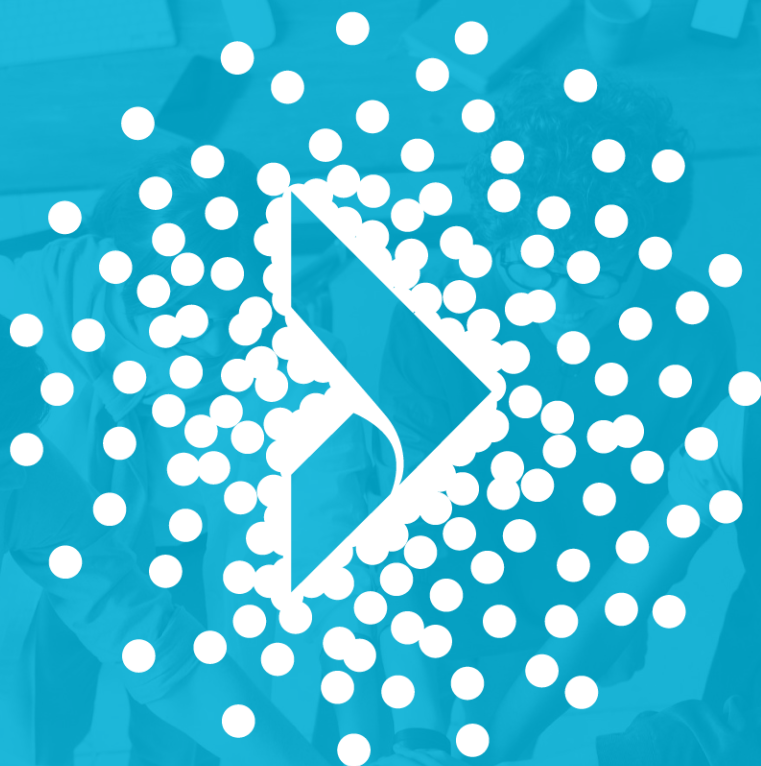
People are the beating heart of agile. If people are not empowered by inclusive and equitable environments, agile, and by extension an agile organization, doesn't work. Agility and DE&I can only support and enhance one another when thoughtfully integrated, and a symbiotic agile/DE&I has the potential to create huge opportunities for both customers and organizations.

We can make a positive, and potentially material, difference to organizations, teams, employees, customers/consumers, and society as a whole, by approaching the intersection between business agility and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with open minds and a willingness to listen to people of diverse demographics.

As agility is a journey with no fixed endpoint, so the road towards creating diverse, equitable and inclusive environments is the same. Agility and DE&I can be pursued, but never totally achieved. They are a process of ongoing learning, reflection, and improvement. A team cannot enter a process of improving agility or DE&I with a mindset towards 'completion', and any approach that unites agile and DE&I will ultimately be ineffective if those taking part are not ready to embark on an ongoing quest for self-improvement.

If we want to create better products, develop better outcomes for customer and organizations, build better agile ways of working and improve equity and inclusivity inside agile organizations, we must acknowledge the shortcomings of existing ways of working, reflect upon our own shortcomings as agile professionals and leaders, and be willing to build new tools and systems of working in the pursuit of equity, inclusivity, and fulfilment for all. ©





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