

Bridging the gap between diversity, equity and inclusion policy and practice: the case of disability

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Abstract

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies have increasingly gained importance in recent years as companies have begun to recognise the importance of creating a more inclusive workplace. Research has shown, however, that working practices do not always reflect policies. This article uses the case of disability to investigate the challenges and facilitators of implementing DEI policies and putting them into practice. Based on 29 interviews with people working in the private sphere, the findings suggest that organisations face three main challenges in seeking to put disability-related DEI policies into practice: (i) getting people on board, (ii) gathering information, and (iii) meeting increased demand for knowledge work. Having said that, integrating policy and practice is facilitated by (a) engaging in partnerships, (b) garnering line managers' support, and (c) fostering open communication.

Keywords

Diversity, inclusion, disability, policy, HRM

Introduction

Recently, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies have gained more and more attention and status in organisations. Stakeholder pressure, employee rights legislation and demographic changes in the workforce have encouraged organisations to put more effort into increasing the diversity of their workforce in terms of ethnicity, gender, LGBTQAI+, and disability, among other things (Bidwell et al., 2013). Besides the moral and legal arguments behind the inclusion of historically disadvantaged social groups (Georgeac and Rattan, 2022), organisations can also benefit from a diverse workforce (Galinsky et al., 2015). Research has linked diversity to outcomes such as creativity, innovation, attraction of talent, positive customer evaluations, and organisational performance (Dwertmann et al., 2023; Galinsky et al., 2015; Herring, 2009; Li and Nagar, 2013; Miller and Del Carmen Triana, 2009; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

This increased interest in diversity has led organisations to implement policies and practices to make organisations more inclusive. The aim is to better accommodate their diverse workforce by integrating the differences among employees and reducing discrimination (Shore et al., 2018). But achieving a diverse workforce, reducing inequalities and creating an inclusive organisation often face challenges. Research has shown that although organisations may have a diverse workforce, members of disadvantaged social groups often experience discrimination (Østerud, 2022; van Laer and Janssens, 2011), are under-represented in leadership positions (Khattab et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2016), are subjected to biased evaluations (Greenhaus et al., 1990; Hekman et al., 2010), and have less access to organisational resources (Ibarra, 1993; Khattab et al., 2020), among other things.

This underlines that employees' lived experiences often do not match the ideals

professed by corporate discourse on diversity, equity and inclusion. Instead, people belonging to historically disadvantaged social groups tend to have limited participation in organisations and are more likely to have their voices neglected (Alegria, 2020; Amis et al., 2020; Randle and Hardy, 2017; Rennstam and Sullivan, 2018; Simpson and Lewis, 2005). This is especially the case for employees with disabilities, who often have less access to opportunities (for example, networking and promotion) and resources (such as reasonable accommodations and accessible workspaces). This may hinder their full participation and limit the extent to which they can influence significant changes in their employer organisations (Foster and Wass, 2013; Randle and Hardy, 2017; Van Laer et al., 2020). Given that diversity, equity and inclusion tends *not* to be prioritised in organisations, those organisational members willing to make significant changes toward a more inclusive workplace are likely to face significant challenges.

This article aims to understand what the challenges are that organisations face in putting diversity, equity and inclusion into practice and how organisational actors attempt to overcome these challenges to bridge the policy-practice gap. To answer these research questions, this study investigates DEI policies and working practices related to disability by analysing interview data from participants working in knowledge-based organisations operating in Belgium and France. While the rights of people with disabilities are secured by legislation in both countries (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b), people with disabilities often experience exclusion in the workplace and are under-represented in the workforce. In the European Union, the employment rate of people with disabilities is 24.4 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities¹ (EPRS, 2020). In addition, employees with disabilities tend to face significant disadvantages at work, such as lower salaries (Kruse et al., 2018), less job satisfaction (Hoque and Bacon, 2022) and less job security (Mitra and Kruse,

¹ In Belgium and France, the disability gap in employment was 31.8 and 18.2 percentage points, respectively, in 2018 (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b).

2016). This shows that organisations are still not able to fully include people with disabilities and highlights the magnitude of the challenges they face in putting disability inclusion into practice. This article aims to contribute to the literature by offering a better understanding of these challenges from the perspectives of HR management, employees and supervisors and by exploring how these organisational members navigate these challenges.

Practice-policy gap in diversity, equity and inclusion

In European countries, anti-discrimination legislation has been implemented to guarantee the civil rights of historically disadvantaged groups. Public disability and anti-discrimination policies reaffirm people with disabilities' right to employment, ensure their right to reasonable accommodations and accessibility, and prohibit discrimination based on disability. In an attempt to comply with legislation, organisations engaged with diversity, equity and inclusion often put in place a range of initiatives aimed at reducing discrimination and guaranteeing equal opportunities in the workplace. These initiatives can include diversity networks, quotas and feedback via performance evaluations, among other things (Kalev et al., 2006). But the actual implementation of these DEI policies and initiatives often falls short of their goals (Nishii et al., 2018).

The HR management literature has consistently shown that, despite the range of organisational policies, initiatives and corporate discourse that support diversity, equity and inclusion, employees with minority status still experience exclusion and discrimination. For instance, having an equal opportunity policy does not eliminate biases in hiring and promotion and might even have the opposite effect (Castilla and Benard, 2010). Several studies show that jobseekers and employees are still susceptible to the unconscious bias of recruiters, managers and clients (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Dwertmann et al., 2023; Heilman, 2012). Furthermore, when poorly implemented, DEI policy can face problems with

resistance (Tienari et al., 2009), tokenism (Settles et al., 2019; Shrewsbury, 2015), negative reactions, and perceptions of injustice (Greig et al., 2023; Plaut et al., 2011).

When it comes to disability, several studies demonstrate that although employers are legally obliged to provide employees with disabilities with reasonable accommodations, requesting such accommodations can be a challenge (Cleveland et al., 1997). Getting reasonable accommodations requires employees to disclose their disabilities, making them susceptible to being stigmatised and discriminated against in the workplace (Baldrige and Veiga, 2001, 2006). Also, research reports that receiving reasonable accommodations can be perceived as ‘preferential treatment’ by colleagues and supervisors, which can lead employees with disabilities to experience inter-personal problems at work (Florey and Harrison, 2000; Kensbock et al., 2017). In addition, workspaces and technology are often inaccessible to people with disabilities, despite policies that are supposed to guarantee accessibility. This contributes to workplace exclusion, as inaccessibility restricts the full participation of employees with disabilities in organisational life (Klinksiek et al., 2023; Van Laer et al., 2020). Finally, despite anti-discrimination and equal-opportunity policies, employees with disabilities still face discriminatory biases associated, for instance, with stereotypes of lower performance and affective reactions of pity (Colella and Varma, 1999; Colella et al., 1997; Lyonset al., 2018). Overall, HRM and DEI research have shown that employees’ daily experiences of inclusion fall short of employers’ DEI discourses, thus indicating a gap between DEI policy and practice. While research has consistently shown that factors such as stereotypes, lack of accessibility, negative employee attitudes and biases, among other things, hinder the daily practice of disability-related DEI policies, little is known about how organisational actors try to overcome these issues and the challenges they encounter while doing so.

Methods

To investigate the challenges and facilitators of putting disability-related DEI policies into practice, I interviewed 29 professionals working in private organisations in Belgium and France (see Appendix 1). The interviewees included people who work in HR, employees with disabilities, and supervisors of employees with disabilities. The interviews took between 38 minutes and an hour and a quarter and were conducted between 2021 and 2023. The interviews were conducted in either English or French. The sample contains interviewees from nine different organisations operating in seven different sectors, ranging from finance to the pharmaceutical sector.

Although France has a 6 per cent disability quota for any employer with at least 20 employees (L.5212-2, French Labour Code), while Belgium's 3 per cent quota applies only to the public sector (European Commission, 2023a), both France and Belgium have signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2006 and have anti-discrimination laws (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b). In addition, I verified publicly available reports of each of the participants' employer organisations. In their reports, all of the employer organisations stressed, as part of their policy, their commitment to equal opportunities and equal treatment of employees despite their disability status, gender or membership of other minority groups. This shows that the employer organisations of the participants in this study all have policies aimed at the inclusion of people with disabilities. I also acknowledge that, given that France and Belgium differ in their legal quota systems, it can be that French private organisations are more motivated to hire people with disabilities. Yet, as this article does not investigate the motivations for hiring people with disabilities and focuses on inclusion, this aspect of the legislative context is not expected to play a major role in the findings.

The data were collected as part of a broader research project aimed at understanding

experiences of disability in new ways of working. The interview guides contained questions about how employees experienced their workplace and how HR management approached diversity and disability at work. For the present study, I focused on information related to the DEI-related issues that employees and HR management encountered in their organisations. It is also important to note that this article is concerned mainly with organisations that rely primarily on knowledge work, operating in the private sector. Thus, the findings are limited and might not be applicable to other types of organisations and jobs, such as government institutions and manufacturing workplaces.

An inductive approach was taken in analysing the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). First, I read the interview transcripts for comprehension. Then, I coded the data using an open coding. During this phase, I read through the interview transcriptions and identified the excerpts that contained relevant information concerning the research questions: (i) the challenges the interviewees encountered in achieving diversity, equity and inclusion in their employer organisations, and (ii) the means they utilised to achieve a more inclusive workplace. After the first coding process, I aggregated the first-order concepts into six second-order themes, which were then aggregated into the two final dimensions (namely, challenges and facilitators). The data were analysed iteratively in a ‘back and forth’ process, in which the codebook was modified and updated based on new information and insights found in the transcripts (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The structure of the data analysis (Gioia et al., 2013) is presented in Figure 1. The data were coded using NVIVO 14.

Findings

In their public reports, the organisations in which the interviewees worked declare that they forbid any discrimination and are committed to a policy of equal opportunity without regard to disability, gender, race and other legally protected status. Most organisations also report that

they value diversity and are committed to an inclusive and equitable workplace. Nevertheless, the interviewees report that their employers still face challenges in putting these policies into practice and achieving inclusion.

Challenges to putting disability-related policy into practice

Getting people on board. Making meaningful changes in organisations requires getting people on board. But employees with disabilities and HR staff alike mention how difficult it is to mobilise managers and people higher up in the hierarchy to put DEI policy into practice.

HR often encountered resistance to making meaningful changes in the workplace, as people in higher hierarchical positions were not willing to back up these changes or even opposed them. This lack of commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion from superiors led to cases in which people were not always held accountable for their discriminatory behaviour.

Often, we come up against people who are well placed [in the hierarchy], who are not at all into [moving things forward]. And so, these people act as a barrier. [. . .] We warn, we call out inappropriate behaviour. Sometimes there are sanctions, sometimes there aren't. (HR7)

The lack of support from superiors also evoked in employees a fear of being punished for speaking up. Often people felt that they might face punishment from managers if they voiced their concerns about issues with discrimination, such as harassment.

The people who try to warn [about discrimination issues] are perceived as ungrateful and end up confined to their posts or a little . . . well, reprimanded in a way that is not visible. (HR7)

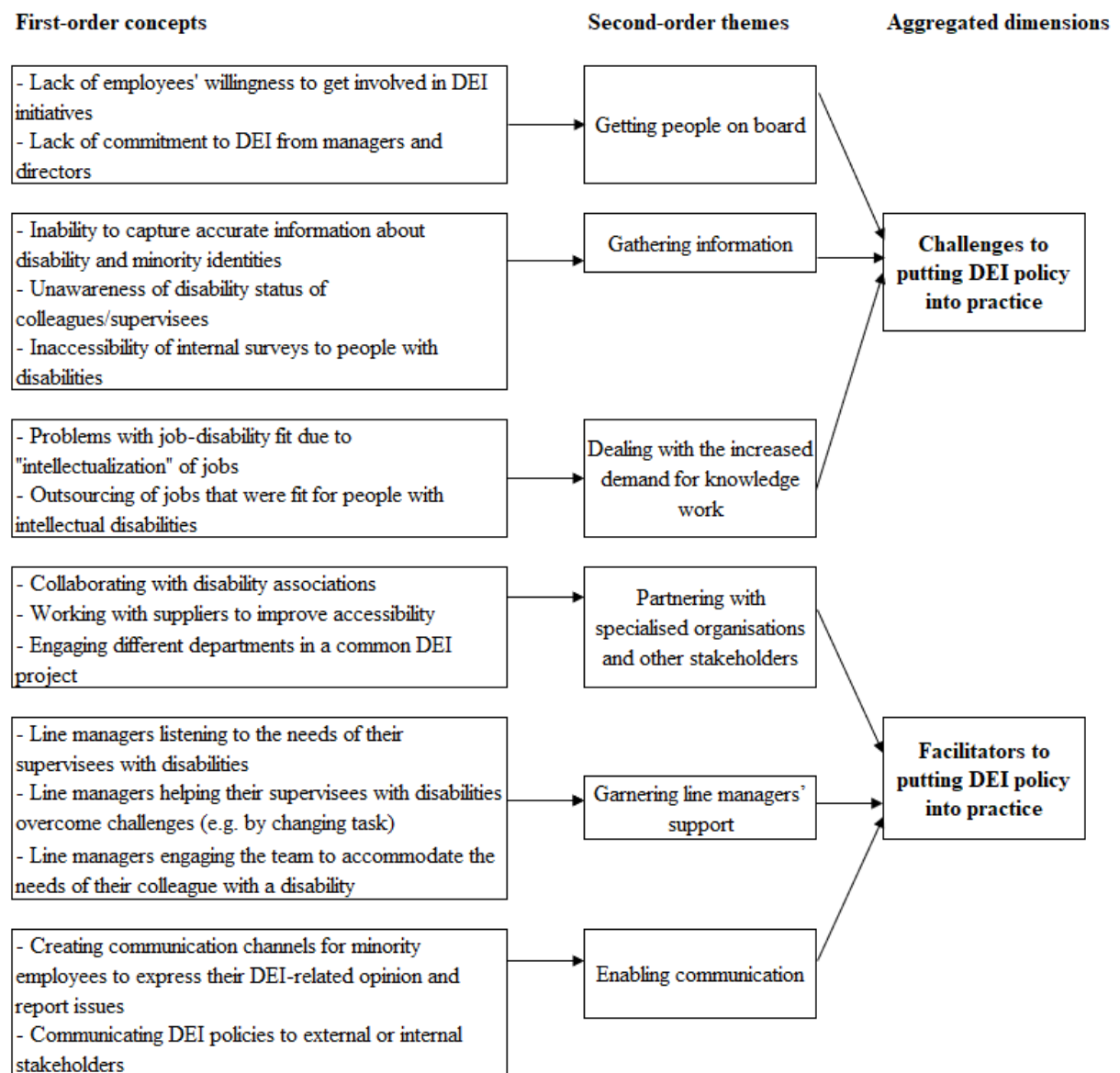


Figure 1. Data analysis structure.

The interviewees also highlighted that employers and managers tend to prioritise costs and productivity over issues with diversity, equity and inclusion. For instance, some managers perceived hiring people with disabilities as a disadvantage because of the costs of reasonable accommodations and concerns about productivity and performance.

We cannot ask for the same productivity from that person to others. And in that case, as there is a lot of pressure on productivity, some managers might say, yeah, but I prefer to take the other person who has no disability who might do more files than that person [with disabilities]. (HR6)

Disability is frightening because it's seen as a lack of productivity, whereas companies are focused on wealth accumulation and productivity. People ask what the cost will be and what the benefit will be. (EWD5)

Finally, another obstacle to getting people on board was the lack of interest in diversity, equity and inclusion. In these cases, people were either not sensitised to DEI issues or were afraid of getting involved because of the sensitivity of the topic.

In my case, my supervisor was sensitised to the issue of disability but there are other decision-makers [in my company] who are not sensitised. (EWD5)

We struggled with getting people behind [it], helping those sorts of initiatives, because again, coming, like when I tried to initiate it, it's getting people on board. And I think because diversity can be quite a tough, sensitive subject, I think people will tend to avoid it. (HR9)

Gathering DEI-related information. The difficulty involved in gathering information on the number of people with disabilities working in an organisation and the types of disabilities present was pointed out as a challenge to DEI policy when it came to disability. Monitoring diversity not only allows employers to measure their progress in terms of diversity and inclusion, but

can also help them to identify existing disparities in hiring, promotion and retention rates among diverse employees and assist decision-makers in improving their organisations' inclusivity.

Some interviewees working in HR described how important it is to identify employees who have disabilities in order to provide solutions and reasonable accommodations accordingly. For instance, an HR employee mentioned that during an office renovation it was difficult to assess whether the new office spaces would be suitable for people with invisible disabilities, such as autism. She mentioned that while visible disabilities were easier to identify, which in turn made it easier to find proactive solutions to adapt office spaces to fit their disabilities, invisible disabilities were more difficult to act upon proactively.

If it's not a physical disability, that is immediately visible to all and where you can immediately act upon it, it becomes much more difficult. If they don't contact us, then most of the time, we just don't know and we cannot always act upon it. (HR11)

Another challenge related to gathering information was the inaccessibility of the feedback surveys conducted by HR to some employees with disabilities. A supervisor of a team that included people with intellectual disabilities mentioned that she needed to help some of their supervisees complete the HR surveys by reading and explaining the questions to them. She pointed out, however, that this breaches survey anonymity and the respondents involved might refrain from giving honest answers.

Sometimes they must complete a question list and not everyone works with the computer, but for those who are working with the computer, sometimes I take time to

help them to complete the question list. And I start [helping them] and I walk away, [. . .] because it's anonymous and I don't want to see how they answer it. [. . .] I read it with them and I explain to them: 'This is what it means, but you must think this way: these are the questions about your manager, that's me; that is the question about your other manager, that manager above me'. (S1)

While these surveys can be an effective means for HR management to gather feedback and other relevant information about potential issues that employees experience at work, the inaccessibility of these surveys can compromise and limit the information collected.

Dealing with the increased demand for knowledge work. Some interviewees also highlighted how jobs are becoming increasingly reliant on knowledge work and the use of technology. Being able to use digital technologies has become a must in the workplace, especially since the widespread adoption of teleworking. While this represents an opportunity for organisations to better accommodate people with disabilities who might find it a challenge to commute to work, it has also had unintended consequences for people with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, the digitalisation of work has constricted the spectrum of job opportunities available for this group of people.

One interviewee who was supervising a team consisting mainly of people with disabilities mentioned that the digitalisation of the company had decreased the range of jobs suitable for people with intellectual disabilities, such as severe cases of autism. She remarked that while in the past people with intellectual disabilities had been hired to do manual labour, such as cleaning, these jobs had been outsourced to contractors, and the jobs available at the company itself had become more and more knowledge-based. This has

reduced job opportunities for those who cannot use computers or perform more complex tasks.

They cannot work with a computer, they don't know other languages, they don't have a diploma. . . [. . .] There were people that worked in the bank, with a contract, but the work that they used to do doesn't exist anymore. For example, in the beginning, we used to do the cleaning. [Now] it's not the bank that does the cleaning, it's another company that does the cleaning. (S1)

The need for cognitive and intellectual skills among employees was cited by most HR workers interviewed as a challenge to hiring people with certain disabilities. They consistently mentioned how their organisations were unable to hire people with intellectual disabilities as the jobs available relied on knowledge work.

[To work here] you need, intellectually, to be able to understand everything, you need to be able to communicate with customers. And so that makes it difficult for people with a mental disability to find a job in our company. (HR5)

Most of the work that we have, and also on our payroll is highly skilled, highly trained work. So, specifically for mental disabilities, not a lot of opportunities exist, because the kind of work that we have that are like running the sandwich bar, and things like that, this is always our contractors. (HR11)

Facilitators to coupling disability-related policy and practice

Partnerships with specialised organisations and other stakeholders. Partnering with other organisations

came up as one way in which organisations might achieve better results in their efforts to include people with disabilities. To hire more people with disabilities, some of the studied organisations entered into partnership with specialised organisations focused on helping people with disabilities find employment. In addition to linking jobseekers with disabilities and companies aiming to hire them, these partner organisations also supported the relevant persons, their employers and the teams in which they worked, facilitating communications, aligning expectations and giving advice to improve and enable their integration in the employer organisation.

We are very happy with that association [. . .] For example, years ago, we had [. . .] a deaf person and we had a problem because she also couldn't speak and no one in the team knew sign language. And so, then they made up together with the team some signs that are easy, 'hello', 'thank you', 'can you call them' or whatever. So that was really a plus, they are [supported] by this [partner] association in order to include that person [in the best possible way]. (HR5)

But while such partnerships can help employers to hire people with disabilities, they do not guarantee it. Often, jobseekers with disabilities are hired on a fixed-term contract (for example, for internships) that does not guarantee that they will remain at the employer company. HR managers mentioned cases in which they were unable to hire a particular person after their initial contract because there were no job vacancies or because the employee with disabilities did not meet the employer's expectations.

If at [the end of the contract] there is not an open position in the team here, we cannot offer the job because we cannot just add two people to a team. (HR5)

An HR manager also mentioned how her organisation collaborates with a partner association on an annual basis to organise training programmes for people with disabilities. In these programmes, individuals join the organisation's workforce for a few weeks or months and work in supporting roles that fit their disabilities. These programmes offer people with disabilities an opportunity to get on-the-job training that helps them understand the dynamics of employment and how to navigate a work environment. But they do not guarantee employment.

This means that we invest in the mentoring of these people in close guidance, etc., and that hopefully, because of this working experience, they might find another job more easily, or if, in [our company], something opens [up], they could apply for that.
(HR11)

Beyond partnering with specialised organisations to hire people with disabilities, one HR employee worker mentioned the importance of engaging with internal and external suppliers to put DEI policies into practice. He mentioned that beyond identifying the problems that people with disabilities face in the organisation, it is also essential to identify the relevant stakeholders concerned with these problems and to implement specific policies directed to these stakeholders. For instance, he mentioned how it was important to implement specific policies requiring suppliers to deliver accessible software in order to improve the company's digital accessibility.

We've started to take stock of all the problems. [. . .] And one of the observations I've made so far is that our purchasing policies don't include a requirement to ask our

suppliers to provide accessible internal software. [. . .] And so now, I've just finished a policy, that I'm going to submit, that requires our buyers to demand that when they buy an IT service or something else, that suppliers send a declaration of accessibility, [stating] that tests have been carried out and that if there are any problems we can contact them. (HR4)

Finally, demanding that external contractors hire people with disabilities was also mentioned as an alternative to counteract the inability of organisations to hire people with intellectual disabilities who are not suited to knowledge-demanding corporate jobs.

We can, of course, ask for our contractors to be much more inclusive, and to have diverse personnel. And for instance, ask them to run the sandwich bar with people with disabilities, etc. But these are not our employees. We don't have the same leverage as we have with our own staff. (HR11)

Line managers' support. Managers also play an important role in putting DEI policies into practice. The importance of line manager support was particularly evident when a person with disabilities required accommodations or was unable to do their job after acquiring a disability. Line managers played an important role in, for instance, identifying the challenges faced by their employees with disabilities, doing the administrative work to obtain the necessary accommodations, setting attainable performance expectations and re-designing their supervisees' jobs to better accommodate their disabilities. For example:

We realised that there was a part of her work that she was able to do remotely from home, where she felt comfortable [. . .]. So from that point on, I negotiated

with my manager and human resources to gradually put this in place, and now [my supervisee with disabilities] has a contract for two days' teleworking and a new office that makes her feel better. And then a special arrangement with regular meetings between us. (S3)

Managers also supported employees with disabilities by creating an environment in which feed- back was mutual by familiarising themselves with their team members' personalities and by being able to identify their needs.

Just having that kind of person standing behind me saying that 'Oh, it's all good, don't worry too much about it, you're doing a great job, I'll talk to them again, make sure everything works out'. For me, that's a big help. (EWD7)

Inclusion was also facilitated when managers were able to get other people in the organisation to be more mindful of their colleagues with disabilities. Supervisors attempted to better include their supervisees with disabilities by asking colleagues and people from other departments to take into account the needs of those with disabilities when, for instance, they planned activities or made changes in the workplace.

There was a subset of employees, I'm a part of them, who were involved in a committee to give our opinions on how [our new office] can be organised. I mentioned that it would be good to have also the feedback or the [employees with disabilities] . . . [. . .] So it's better to think about [their disabilities] [to see whether] you can do something about it. (S5)

Enabling communication. Communication has also been demonstrated to be an important facilitating factor in putting disability-related DEI policy into practice. Getting people on board to take action, and enabling communication channels for people to provide feedback and communicate problems were factors that enabled HR personnel to identify existing DEI-related problems, raise awareness and improve processes and practices in order to make the organisations more inclusive for their employees with disabilities.

Communication was important to get people on board to solve DEI-related issues. For instance, one interviewee working in a digital accessibility programme mentions how the HR department had to engage with the communications department in order to implement their digital accessibility policy. HR asked the communications department to ensure that all organisational communications, e-learning and online training complied with accessibility standards and included features such as subtitles. The interviewee also stressed the need to raise awareness and sensitise others to these accessibility considerations in order to make concrete changes.

A concrete example is that we had templates for PowerPoint presentations with lots of photos and so on. It's very pretty, but for a person with visual disabilities, it's not going to work. So I asked [the communications department] to make corrections. And it's silly, but people didn't even know about the accessibility button on Microsoft. (HR4)

The importance of communication was also displayed in the case of a supervisor who had realised that his supervisee had a hearing disability after talking to the company medical staff. This demonstrates not only the importance of communicating to improve inclusion but also the need to engage with diverse stakeholders within the organisation.

By talking to [my supervisee with disabilities] and then to the nursing staff and the company doctor, I realised that this person had a disability. But I wasn't necessarily warned beforehand either. So she did have a disability. After talking to her individually and then throughout the year, I realised that sometimes she didn't feel well, she was tired, and it was linked to her disability. (S3)

Putting communication channels in place for employees to voice their concerns was important to enable HR managers to identify whether progress was being made but also challenges involved in putting DEI policy into practice. These channels included formal feedback meetings, surveys and intranet communication tools, among other things. For instance, one interviewee mentioned that, through anonymous monitoring surveys, employees with disabilities were able to communicate problems they faced and their dissatisfaction with, for instance, building accessibility. DEI surveys enabled HR to gather information on non-inclusive behaviours and situations that their employees encountered at work, in addition to monitoring progress with diversity, equity and inclusion. For example:

Employees with disabilities were [saying] in [their verbatim comments] that the workplace [in this company] was good, but still not yet adapted for them. Especially employees with mobility issues, who want more and need more. So you know, we have some special ramps to help them go from one floor to another floor, but it's not sufficient, they are saying. (HR6)

In addition to offering the means and opportunities for employees to voice their concerns, the interviewees also revealed the importance of having an organisational climate

that provides employees with sufficient psychological assurance to voice these concerns. This safety enabled employees with disabilities to feel comfortable with communicating their suggestions for a more disability- inclusive workplace.

I have weekly, face-to-face meetings with my manager. There, I can also give feedback on things that I've seen or heard from the company, so there are many occasions to give feedback. And I have the feeling that they're listening and taking them into account. There's a very strong feedback [. . .] it's a mindset. So everyone can give positive or negative feedback, let's say, positive or corrective feedback.
(EWD2)

Discussion

This study shows how the organisations we looked at struggled to put their DEI policies into practice and create a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. The findings reveal that although organisations have policies that forbid discrimination, establish equal access to opportunities for employees, and guarantee the right to reasonable accommodations for employees with disabilities, these policies are not always realised in the workplace. In fact, organisations still struggle to hire and retain people with disabilities in employment and face barriers to building an inclusive work-place for them.

The interviews revealed that the translation of DEI policy into practice was hindered by at least three factors. First, we found that HR management often encountered a reluctance on the part of the senior management to implement substantial changes in organisations. This is in line with a number of studies that show how power structures perpetuate inequalities at work, making it difficult for diverse employees to change their powerless status within

organisations (Amis et al., 2020; Kitchin, 1998). As the findings demonstrate, this is also associated with a corporate prioritisation of cost and performance and a lack of sensitivity to the struggles of disadvantaged social groups. This can significantly hinder progress in creating an inclusive workplace as it perpetuates a culture in which discriminatory behaviour may go unchecked. Second, the findings show how challenging it is for HR management to trace the problems that employees with disabilities face. Gathering information on the number of employees with disabilities and their specific needs can be difficult, especially when disabilities are not immediately visible. This can make it difficult for HR management to provide the necessary reasonable accommodations and support. Third, we found that the shift towards knowledge-based work can limit job opportunities for people with certain disabilities, particularly those who cannot perform complex tasks or use computers effectively. Recently, technology has become a substantial part of work and, while it can benefit people with sensorial and physical disabilities by offering accessible software that facilitates work (for example, speech-to-text or screen readers), as well as allowing them to work from home (Klinksiek et al., 2023; Schur et al., 2020), it can become a barrier for people with intellectual disabilities. As such, the inclusion of this latter group in knowledge-based organisations can become challenging, just as the increasing reliance on high-skilled workers and the outsourcing of manual jobs (Mahony et al., 2008) can become barriers to these companies hiring people with intellectual disabilities.

When it comes to addressing these challenges, the findings of this study also indicate three areas in which HR management and other managers should take action. First, in line with previous research, this article shows that managers play a key role in enhancing the effectiveness of DEI practices (Dwertmann and Boehm, 2016; Nishii et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). While a lack of support from superiors can pose a significant challenge to achieving inclusion, managers can become strong allies once they are on board

with DEI issues. Managers have the power to hold people accountable for their non-inclusive behaviour, encourage an open feedback culture, and enable enough psychological safety for people to voice their DEI-related concerns and call out discrimination. In addition, line managers play an important role in taking action to overcome inclusion issues in their teams, as well as in providing their supervisees with the necessary resources for them to accomplish their work according to their individual needs. Second, the findings show that HR management can make use of partnerships in order to improve diversity, equity and inclusion in organisations. Collaborating with specialised organisations can facilitate the hiring of people with disabilities, while providing support, guidance and assistance to both jobseekers and employers. In addition, the findings also show the importance of engaging with suppliers, contractors and other stakeholders in order to demand that they, too, be more considerate towards and inclusive of employees with disabilities.

Finally, fostering open communication among organisation members, within and across departments, plays an essential role in sensitising and creating awareness of DEI issues. It not only helps to get people on board to solve DEI issues, but can also allow HR management to gather information from employees themselves. By fostering communication, employees have more opportunities to share the non-inclusive behaviour that they experience and any dissatisfaction within the company, as well as suggestions for improving the inclusivity of the organisation. But this calls for an organisational environment in which employee voice is accepted and encouraged (Detert and Burris, 2007; Donaghey et al., 2011).

This study also has implications for trade unions. As the findings suggest, partnerships with external stakeholders can be a facilitator in efforts to couple DEI policy and practice. Hence, trade unions can play an important role in overcoming the challenges associated with disability-related DEI issues. Trade unions should strive to secure

employment and appropriate working conditions for people with disabilities by, for instance, launching projects specifically oriented towards mitigating the harm caused to people with intellectual disabilities by the increased intellectualisation of jobs (Bacon and Hoque, 2015; Richards and Sang, 2016). Also, electing employees with disabilities to act as trade union representatives in organisations can be an important strategy, as it can facilitate negotiations with managers and diversity officers to run DEI audits, to improve accessibility standards and overall to improve organisational practices, such as hiring (Richards and Sang, 2016).

This article also contributes to the DEI literature by bringing a policy-practice decoupling perspective. The scarce literature on decoupling in the context of diversity, equity and inclusion focuses on its causes (Cunningham et al., 2004; Williamson et al., 2020). Such studies pay less attention to the coupling efforts of organisational actors. This article contributes to the literature by reporting the ways in which different organisational actors try to overcome the challenges associated with putting policy into practice. First, this article highlights the role of stakeholders in the coupling process. While research on decoupling has typically addressed stakeholders as an external source of pressure that motivates policy implementation (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Crilly et al., 2012), this article adds a further dimension to the role of stakeholders in decoupling. Specifically, the findings suggest that organisations can also exert pressure on external stakeholders (such as suppliers) to get them to comply with their internal policies and achieve their DEI goals. This was evident from one of the participants who reported imposing rules on suppliers that required certain accessibility standards for the products and services they supplied.

Second, this article shows the variety of communication strategies that organisational actors can use for policy implementation. Prior research has typically addressed communication as a unilateral effort by HR management (for example, Weaver et al., 1999;

Williamson et al., 2020), but this article suggests that policy implementation can be facilitated when communication is multi-sided. Specifically, opening up communication channels for the people affected by DEI policies to provide feedback, report issues and suggest improvements has been demonstrated to increase HR managers' awareness of practice-policy gaps. Third, the findings also suggest that there are DEI-specific factors that complicate relations between policy and daily practice for HR management. Prior research on policy-practice decoupling has highlighted the need to gather and analyse information on coupling policy and daily practice (Bromley and Powell, 2012). But our findings suggest that access to precise DEI information can be difficult because of laws that grant people the right not to disclose their minority status and the sensitive nature of diversity, equity and inclusion, which may induce people to avoid getting involved and providing personal information.

Finally, this study also has limitations. As mentioned in the 'Methods' section, study participants were working for organisations that rely primarily on knowledge work and operate in the private sector. This limits the generalisation of our findings, which might not be applicable to, for instance, manufacturing jobs or public organisations. For instance, it may be that people with intellectual disabilities in manufacturing jobs are less threatened by outsourcing and digitalisation. Also, public organisations might be subject to more pressure and incentives to be more inclusive to people with disabilities, as they are perceived to have a greater social responsibility (Jones, 2016).

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Appendix 1. Interviewees.

Identification	Description	Industry	Country
HR1	HR	Finance	Belgium
HR2	HR	Finance	Belgium
HR3	HR	Finance	Belgium
HR4	HR	Finance	Belgium
HR5	HR	Insurance	Belgium
HR6	HR	Insurance	Belgium
HR7	HR	Pharmaceuticals	France
HR8	HR	Pharmaceuticals	France
HR9	HR	Technology	Belgium
HR10	HR	Technology	Belgium
HR11	HR	Technology	Belgium
HR12	HR	Telecommunications	Belgium
HR13	HR	Consultancy	Belgium
HR14	HR	Consultancy	Belgium
HR15	HR	Energy	Belgium
EWD1	Employee with disabilities	Finance	Belgium
EWD2	Employee with disabilities	Technology	Belgium
EWD3	Employee with disabilities	Telecommunications	Belgium
EWD4	Employee with disabilities	Pharmaceuticals	France
EWD5	Employee with disabilities	Telecommunications	Belgium

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EWD6	Employee with disabilities	Insurance	Belgium
EWD7	Employee with disabilities	Insurance	Belgium
EWD8	Employee with disabilities	Technology	Belgium
EWD9	Employee with disabilities	Pharmaceuticals	France
S1	Supervisor	Finance	Belgium
S2	Supervisor	Insurance	Belgium
S3	Supervisor	Pharmaceuticals	France
S4	Supervisor	Technology	Belgium
S5	Supervisor	Technology	Belgium
