
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inclusive Workplaces and Performance: An Integrative Review of Diversity and Employee Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This integrative review examines whether workplace diversity and inclusion are associated with better employee and organizational outcomes, and, more importantly, the conditions under which such benefits are likely to emerge. The review synthesizes secondary evidence from peer-reviewed conceptual papers, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and influential empirical studies in management, organizational behavior, human resource management, and applied psychology. The evidence does not support a simple claim that demographic diversity automatically improves performance. Instead, diversity appears to expand the pool of information, perspectives, and experiences available to a work group while also increasing the possibility of subgroup formation, conflict, and exclusion. Inclusion helps explain why these competing possibilities produce different outcomes across organizations. Across the reviewed literature, inclusive climates and inclusive leadership are consistently linked with stronger belonging, psychological safety, organizational commitment, knowledge sharing, creativity, job satisfaction, and retention-related outcomes. Meta-analytic evidence also indicates that diversity-management practices and diversity climate are associated with favorable employee and organizational outcomes, although effect sizes vary and causal evidence remains uneven. The review proposes an integrative pathway in which structural fairness and inclusive leadership shape an inclusion climate; that climate supports belonging and valued uniqueness, which strengthen psychological safety, trust, and information elaboration; these mechanisms then influence employee attitudes, behavior, and performance. The paper concludes that the performance value of diversity is conditional rather than automatic. Organizations are more likely to benefit when representation is accompanied by fair systems, credible leadership behavior, voice, accountability, and sustained practices that allow differences to contribute to collective work.

KEYWORDS

workplace inclusion; diversity climate; employee performance; psychological safety; inclusive leadership; employee outcomes

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1. Introduction

Workforce diversity is now a routine feature of organizations rather than an exceptional condition. Employees differ in gender, race and ethnicity, age, nationality, disability, professional background, functional expertise, values, and other characteristics that can become relevant to how work is organized and experienced. Yet the managerial question is not simply whether a workforce is diverse. The more difficult question is whether differences are translated into better decisions, stronger learning, creativity, commitment, and performance, or instead become associated with exclusion, conflict, and withdrawal.

Research has long resisted a universal answer to this question. The categorization-elaboration model argues that diversity can improve access to task-relevant information and perspectives while simultaneously activating social categorization and intergroup bias that interfere with information exchange (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Meta-analytic work similarly shows that the direct relationship between team diversity and performance is generally small and strongly dependent on context

(Joshi & Roh, 2009). This makes the familiar claim that 'diversity improves performance' too broad to serve as either a scientific conclusion or a management prescription.

The growing literature on inclusion offers a more useful way to interpret these mixed findings. Shore et al. (2011) conceptualize inclusion as an employee's experience of both belongingness and being valued for uniqueness. This distinction matters because representation can exist without voice, access, influence, or interpersonal acceptance. A workforce may therefore be diverse in composition while remaining weakly inclusive in everyday practice. Later reviews extend this argument from individual experience to leadership, organizational practices, and climate, positioning inclusion as a multilevel organizational phenomenon (Shore et al., 2018).

This paper integrates these streams of evidence around a practical research question: under what conditions are diverse and inclusive workplaces associated with better employee outcomes and performance? Rather than treating diversity and inclusion as interchangeable, the review separates workforce composition from the social and organizational conditions through which differences are managed. It then synthesizes evidence on five outcome domains: job attitudes and commitment, retention, psychological safety and well-being, knowledge sharing and creativity, and individual or collective performance.

The contribution of the review is threefold. First, it clarifies why diversity alone is an unreliable predictor of performance. Second, it identifies inclusion as a set of mechanisms and organizational conditions that can convert heterogeneity into productive participation. Third, it develops an integrative framework that connects structural practices, leadership behavior, inclusion climate, employee psychological mechanisms, and work outcomes. The resulting argument is deliberately conditional: inclusive workplaces can support better performance, but the effect depends on how organizational systems and leaders shape employees' ability to belong, contribute, and be heard.

The distinction between representation and inclusion is also important because organizations increasingly face pressure to justify diversity initiatives through measurable outcomes. A narrow business-case approach can be tempting: if diversity is assumed to raise productivity, innovation, or financial performance, then inclusion is framed as a tool for extracting those gains. The literature, however, supports a more careful interpretation. Performance effects are neither uniform nor immediate, and many of the most robust outcomes concern the social conditions of work – fairness, voice, commitment, psychological safety, and retention. These outcomes are consequential for organizations, but they are not reducible to a single financial metric. An analytically stronger approach therefore asks how organizational arrangements influence both employee experience and the processes through which work is performed.

A further difficulty is that diversity operates at several levels of analysis. An individual employee may be demographically distinctive within a team; a team may be heterogeneous relative to other teams; and an organization may have substantial aggregate representation while maintaining occupational or hierarchical segregation. Inclusion can likewise be experienced locally through a supervisor and work group while being contradicted by organization-wide promotion or reward systems. Failure to distinguish these levels can produce misleading conclusions. A positive corporate diversity statistic, for example, says little about whether employees in a particular unit have equal access to developmental assignments or decision influence. This review therefore treats inclusion as a multilevel phenomenon and gives particular attention to mechanisms that connect organizational practices, local leadership, team interaction, and individual outcomes.

The review also adopts a critical stance toward causal language. Much of the inclusion literature relies on cross-sectional surveys in which employees report both the climate they experience and their attitudes or intentions. Such designs are valuable for identifying theoretically coherent relationships, but they cannot by themselves demonstrate that inclusion causes improved performance. Stronger causal claims require temporal separation, objective outcomes, experiments, natural experiments, or quasi-experimental designs. Accordingly, this paper differentiates between evidence of association, evidence supporting a plausible mechanism, and evidence that permits stronger causal inference. This distinction is essential for a publication-oriented synthesis because managerial relevance should not be achieved by overstating what the evidence can establish.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Diversity and inclusion are related but distinct

Diversity describes differences among members of a collective. Depending on the study, these differences may be demographic, functional, educational, cultural, cognitive, or value based. Inclusion, by contrast, concerns the quality of participation and membership experienced within the collective. Shore et al. (2011) locate inclusion at the intersection of

belongingness and uniqueness: employees should be accepted as legitimate members of the group while also being able to contribute perspectives that are not erased by pressure to assimilate.

This distinction helps resolve a common conceptual problem. Increasing representation changes who is present, but it does not necessarily change whose knowledge is trusted, who receives developmental opportunities, who is invited into informal networks, or whose dissent is treated as useful. Shore et al. (2018) therefore describe inclusive workplaces through multiple foci, including work groups, leaders, organizational practices, and climate. Inclusion is not merely an individual attitude; it is also an interpretation of recurring organizational signals about fairness, access, respect, and voice.

Measurement remains a challenge. A systematic review of workplace inclusion measures found substantial variation in how inclusion and exclusion are operationalized, which limits comparability across studies (Rezai et al., 2020). A later scoping review of qualitative research similarly showed that workplace inclusion spans interpersonal, organizational, and work-process dimensions (Rezai et al., 2023). These findings caution against treating any single survey scale as a complete representation of an inclusive workplace.

2.2 Why diversity can help or hinder performance

The strongest theoretical account of mixed diversity effects is the categorization-elaboration model. Diverse groups may possess a broader range of task-relevant information, perspectives, and networks. When members exchange and integrate these resources, diversity can improve problem solving and innovation. At the same time, visible or meaningful differences can trigger subgroup categorization, stereotyping, distrust, and conflict. These social processes can reduce the very information elaboration through which diversity might create value (van Knippenberg et al., 2004).

Meta-analytic evidence supports the importance of context. Joshi and Roh (2009), synthesizing data from 8,757 teams across 39 organizational studies, found very small direct diversity effects but stronger relationships once industry, occupation, and team-level moderators were considered. Guillaume et al. (2017) likewise argue that the consequences of demographic differences depend on moderators that shape social integration and the use of informational resources. Diversity should therefore be understood as a potential resource whose effects are contingent on the work environment rather than as an independent performance intervention.

This conditional perspective also explains why diversity initiatives can produce uneven results. Training, recruitment, mentoring, accountability systems, and leadership practices operate through different mechanisms. A meta-analysis of diversity training found an overall positive effect, but effects differed by outcome and were stronger when training was sustained, addressed both awareness and skills, and was complemented by other diversity initiatives (Bezrukova et al., 2016). The implication is that isolated symbolic interventions are less likely to alter the broader conditions in which employees work.

The conceptual boundary between inclusion and adjacent constructs also deserves attention. Organizational justice concerns perceived fairness in outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal treatment; psychological safety concerns the perceived interpersonal consequences of speaking up; belonging concerns social acceptance and membership; and diversity climate concerns shared or individual perceptions of how an organization treats diversity. Inclusion overlaps with each construct but is not identical to any of them. Its distinctive contribution lies in combining membership with the possibility of contributing difference. This combination explains why an employee may experience fair procedures yet still feel pressure to assimilate, or may feel psychologically safe in a supportive team while perceiving unequal organization-wide opportunities. Conceptual precision is therefore necessary if research is to identify which organizational levers affect which outcomes.

Theoretical explanations of diversity effects can be grouped broadly into informational and social-identity pathways. Informational perspectives emphasize variety in knowledge, expertise, networks, and cognitive frames. Social-categorization perspectives emphasize the tendency to classify people into in-groups and out-groups, particularly when demographic attributes are salient. The categorization-elaboration model is influential because it does not treat these explanations as mutually exclusive. Instead, it proposes that both can operate simultaneously and that contextual moderators determine which pathway dominates (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). This dual-process logic is especially useful for inclusion research: inclusion can reduce the interpersonal costs of difference while increasing the probability that informational variety is expressed, examined, and integrated.

A related analytical issue is the difference between surface-level and deep-level diversity. Visible demographic attributes may influence early categorization, whereas differences in values, knowledge, expertise, and perspectives may become more

important as members work together. Yet the two categories cannot be cleanly separated because social meaning is context dependent. Gender, ethnicity, disability, nationality, or age can carry status implications that affect access to networks and credibility; functional or educational differences can also become bases of subgroup formation. The relevant question is therefore not whether one form of diversity is inherently more valuable than another, but how particular differences become salient in a given work system and whether organizational conditions enable productive interaction across them.

3. Methodology

3.1 Review Design

This study adopts a structured integrative literature review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. The distinction is important. Integrative reviews are designed to bring together conceptually heterogeneous evidence—including theoretical articles, quantitative studies, qualitative research, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses—in order to clarify constructs, reconcile competing explanations, and develop a higher-order conceptual account (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The present review therefore prioritizes explanatory integration over exhaustive enumeration. Its purpose is not to claim that every publication on diversity and inclusion has been retrieved, nor to estimate a new pooled effect size. Instead, it evaluates convergent and conflicting evidence relevant to the question of when workplace diversity and inclusion are associated with employee and organizational outcomes.

3.2 Search Strategy

The evidence base was assembled through a structured secondary-research process using scholarly search platforms, publisher databases, DOI records, and PubMed for relevant psychology and occupational-health literature. Searches combined terms from four concept families: (1) diversity and climate (e.g., workplace diversity, diversity climate, climate for inclusion, diversity management); (2) inclusion and leadership (e.g., workplace inclusion, perceived inclusion, inclusive climate, inclusive leadership); (3) explanatory mechanisms (e.g., belonging, valued uniqueness, psychological safety, trust, communication openness, knowledge sharing, information elaboration); and (4) outcomes (e.g., commitment, satisfaction, turnover, creativity, innovation, job performance, team performance, well-being). Search combinations used Boolean operators such as AND and OR to connect these concept families. Citation chaining from foundational and review articles was then used to identify influential empirical studies and later syntheses that directly tested mechanisms represented in the proposed framework.

Because the original review process was designed as an integrative rather than protocol-driven systematic review, a complete audit trail of database-specific query strings, duplicate-removal counts, and screening counts was not retained. No retrospective counts are invented here. This limits reproducibility and is treated as a methodological limitation rather than obscured by systematic-review terminology. To strengthen currency and triangulation, the revised manuscript also incorporates recent meta-analytic and meta-review evidence, including Holmes et al. (2021), Li et al. (2025), Zhao et al. (2025), and Nault et al. (2026).

3.3 Eligibility Criteria

Sources were eligible when they were peer-reviewed scholarly publications focused on workplaces, work groups, leaders, or organizational practices and addressed at least one of the following: workforce diversity, diversity climate, workplace inclusion, inclusive leadership, diversity-management interventions, or mechanisms linking these constructs to employee or organizational outcomes. Priority was assigned to systematic reviews, meta-analyses, meta-reviews, major conceptual articles, and empirical studies that tested mechanisms central to the review model. Relevant outcomes included job attitudes, organizational commitment, turnover or retention, psychological safety, well-being, knowledge sharing, creativity and innovation, voice, role performance, and team or organizational performance.

Sources were excluded when they were non-workplace studies, purely opinion-based commentary, practitioner material without an identifiable research basis, or publications whose bibliographic details could not be verified. Studies were not excluded simply because they reported null, mixed, or adverse findings. This decision was necessary because the central theoretical problem is precisely why diversity and inclusion do not produce uniform effects across settings.

3.4 Study Selection

Selection proceeded iteratively. First, review-level and foundational sources were used to map the principal theoretical streams and identify recurring constructs. Second, empirical studies were retained when they provided direct evidence for a pathway, boundary condition, or outcome represented in the emerging framework. Third, newer review-level evidence was used to test

whether conclusions drawn from foundational studies remained consistent with the broader accumulated literature. The final evidence base is therefore purposive and theory-guided rather than exhaustive.

Screening and synthesis were conducted by the author as a single-reviewer process. This is appropriate to disclose because single-reviewer selection can increase the risk of omission and interpretive bias compared with independent dual screening. The review addresses that risk through source verification, reliance on high-level evidence where available, explicit attention to contradictory findings, and conservative causal language. Nevertheless, independent replication with a preregistered systematic protocol would provide a stronger test of the proposed framework.

3.5 Quality Assessment

Evidence was weighted according to methodological strength and directness rather than treated as equally probative. Meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and meta-reviews were used to assess the consistency and boundary conditions of broad relationships. Longitudinal, multisource, multilevel, and field studies were given greater inferential weight than single-source cross-sectional associations when evaluating mechanisms. Conceptual papers were used to define constructs and specify causal logic but were not treated as empirical confirmation.

Three additional quality questions guided interpretation: whether the construct was measured at the same level at which the conclusion was drawn; whether predictor and outcome data came from the same source; and whether the design supported temporal or causal inference. These checks are particularly important in diversity-climate research. Holmes et al. (2021), for example, showed that diversity-climate relationships vary by climate operationalization, outcome type, demographic diversity, climate strength, and common-source measurement. Nault et al. (2026) likewise report measurement-related moderation and stronger diversity-climate relationships for several outcomes in more diverse organizations. Such findings argue against reading a single positive correlation as evidence of a universal performance effect.

3.6 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

For each retained source, the synthesis extracted the focal construct, level of analysis, research design, principal outcome(s), proposed mechanism, relevant moderator or boundary condition, and the role of the evidence in the emerging framework. The analysis then used constant comparison across studies to organize findings into a process sequence: structural conditions and HR practices; relational and leadership conditions; inclusion/diversity climate; belonging and valued uniqueness; proximal psychological and social mechanisms; and employee or organizational outcomes.

Thematic synthesis was explicitly mechanism-based. Evidence was not summarized only by whether an article reported a positive or negative association. Instead, studies were compared according to what they implied about how and when effects occur. This approach revealed a recurring pattern: diversity expands the potential informational resources and social complexity of a work system, whereas inclusion-related conditions influence whether those differences are expressed, integrated, or suppressed. Recent meta-analytic evidence on inclusive leadership strengthens this interpretation. Li et al. (2025), synthesizing 105 independent samples ($N = 39,948$), report positive relationships between inclusive leadership and task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, innovative behavior, creativity, and voice, together with a negative relationship with turnover intention; psychological safety, empowerment, perceived inclusion, organizational identification, and leader-member exchange emerge as mediating mechanisms. The synthesis therefore treats performance as a distal consequence of a chain of organizational and psychological processes rather than a direct product of demographic heterogeneity.

4. Results and Integrative Findings

4.1 Inclusion Climate Changes the Meaning of Diversity

The accumulated evidence is now stronger than the early single-study literature alone would suggest, but it also reinforces the need for conditional interpretation. Holmes et al. (2021), in a meta-analysis integrating 25 years of diversity-climate research, found that climate-outcome relationships vary according to the type of climate measure, the outcome examined, demographic diversity, climate strength, and whether predictor and outcome data are obtained from the same source. Nault et al. (2026) extends this evidence and reports that positive leadership and HR practices are antecedents of diversity climate, while diversity climate is associated with occupational health and well-being, interpersonal relationships, work behavior, and job attitudes. Importantly, several relationships are stronger in more diverse organizations. These findings support the framework proposed

here, but they also qualify it: climate is not a uniform organizational asset whose effect is constant across contexts. Its value appears greatest where demographic differences make integration and fairness more consequential.

One of the clearest findings in the literature is that climate matters. Nishii (2013) showed that an inclusive climate can reduce the interpersonal bias associated with gender diversity, weakening the link between diversity and conflict and protecting unit-level satisfaction from the damaging effects of conflict. The study is important because it shifts attention from the amount of diversity to the social conditions under which diverse employees interact.

Research on diversity climate reaches a similar conclusion. Hofhuis et al. (2016) found that perceived diversity climate was positively related to job satisfaction, inclusion, work-group identification, and knowledge sharing, with trust and openness in communication operating as mediating mechanisms. McKay et al. (2007), using a large sample of managers in a national retail organization, linked more favorable diversity-climate perceptions with lower turnover intentions, with particularly strong relationships for Black managers in their sample.

Recent meta-analytic evidence strengthens this pattern. Nault et al. (2026) synthesized 99 publications and reported that diversity climate was associated with favorable outcomes across workplace health, interpersonal relationships, work behavior, and job attitudes. Their analysis also indicates that effects can vary according to how diversity climate is measured and according to the diversity of the organizational setting. Taken together, these findings suggest that employees respond not only to demographic composition but also to whether organizational policies and interactions signal that differences are respected and fairly managed.

Climate is analytically important because it captures employees' interpretation of repeated organizational cues rather than the existence of a formal policy alone. A written equal-opportunity statement may be present in both an inclusive and an exclusionary organization. What differs is whether recruitment, promotion, recognition, conflict management, and leader behavior consistently reinforce that statement. Climate therefore acts as a social information system: employees observe what happens to people who speak up, who receives desirable assignments, how mistakes are treated, and whether complaints produce credible responses. Over time, these observations create expectations about the risks and rewards of participation.

This interpretation also suggests why climate can moderate demographic diversity effects. In a weak inclusion climate, demographic differences may be interpreted through status stereotypes or prior intergroup assumptions, increasing the probability of conflict and withdrawal. In a strong inclusion climate, the same differences can be framed as legitimate sources of perspective and experience. Nishii's (2013) findings are consistent with this moderation logic. The practical significance is that organizations cannot infer the consequences of diversity from composition alone; the social meaning attached to composition is partly produced by climate.

4.2 Belonging and Valued Uniqueness Are Central Mechanisms

The inclusion framework developed by Shore et al. (2011) is useful because it identifies two needs that can otherwise be treated as opposites. Belonging without uniqueness can become assimilation: employees are accepted only when they minimize difference. Uniqueness without belonging can become marginalization: employees are noticed as different but are not fully integrated into the group. Inclusion requires both.

Empirical research is consistent with this mechanism. Chen and Tang (2018) found that perceived inclusion was positively associated with job-role and innovator-role performance through organizational commitment and was directly associated with team-role performance. The result suggests that inclusion can affect performance partly because employees who feel accepted and valued develop a stronger relational attachment to the organization and invest more fully in their roles.

Qualitative evidence also broadens the interpretation of belonging. Rezai et al. (2023) found that workers describe inclusion through social acceptance, participation, organizational support, access, and the ability to contribute meaningfully. These dimensions imply that inclusion cannot be produced solely through representation targets. It is experienced through ordinary work arrangements: meetings, task allocation, information access, flexibility, recognition, development, and interpersonal treatment.

Belonging and uniqueness also illuminate a tension in organizational socialization. Organizations need shared norms and coordinated behavior, but excessive pressure for conformity can suppress precisely the perspectives that diversity is expected to provide. Conversely, celebrating difference without creating common membership can essentialize employees or confine them to identity-based roles. The inclusion framework avoids both extremes by treating common membership and

differentiated contribution as simultaneous requirements. This is more demanding than simple acceptance because it requires organizations to create common purpose without equating professionalism or fit with sameness.

The framework also has implications for employee voice. Voice is not merely the opportunity to speak; it includes whether contributions are taken seriously and can influence decisions. An employee who is routinely invited to meetings but whose suggestions are ignored may be formally included yet substantively peripheral. Valued uniqueness therefore introduces an influence dimension into the analysis of inclusion. Future empirical work would benefit from measuring not only perceived acceptance but also whether distinct contributions alter team reasoning, resource allocation, or decisions.

4.3 Psychological Safety Connects Inclusion to Learning and Creativity

Psychological safety is one of the most plausible bridges between inclusion and performance. Edmondson (1999) defined team psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking and found that it supported learning behavior, which in turn was associated with team performance. Although the study did not focus on diversity, its mechanism is directly relevant to inclusive workplaces: employees cannot contribute distinct knowledge if speaking up carries social or career risk.

Inclusive leadership can help create this condition. Carmeli et al. (2010) found that leader openness, accessibility, and availability were positively related to psychological safety, which in turn supported employee involvement in creative work. Randel et al. (2018) integrate this logic into a broader model of inclusive leadership, proposing that leaders foster belonging and value uniqueness through behaviors that support participation, recognition, and contribution. Their framework links inclusion perceptions to work-group identification, psychological empowerment, creativity, job performance, and lower turnover.

This evidence clarifies why inclusion should not be reduced to interpersonal warmth. A psychologically safe environment is valuable because it changes what employees are willing to do: ask questions, admit uncertainty, challenge assumptions, report problems, and offer ideas that depart from dominant views. In diverse teams, those behaviors are especially important because informational differences create value only when they enter the collective decision process.

Psychological safety is particularly consequential in knowledge-intensive and interdependent work because uncertainty and error are unavoidable. Teams learn when members disclose incomplete information, question routines, and surface problems early. These behaviors are inherently interpersonal: they expose the speaker to the possibility of embarrassment, status loss, or retaliation. Inclusion can reduce these perceived costs, especially for employees who are numerically underrepresented or occupy lower-status positions. In this sense, psychological safety is not a soft cultural outcome but an enabling condition for error detection, experimentation, and organizational learning.

However, psychological safety should not be interpreted as an absence of standards or disagreement. Edmondson's work concerns safety for interpersonal risk taking, not freedom from accountability. High-performing inclusive environments may combine strong expectations with high safety: employees are expected to contribute rigorously, and they can challenge one another without fearing identity-based devaluation or punishment for reasonable dissent. This distinction is important because inclusion can otherwise be mischaracterized as conflict avoidance. Productive inclusion should increase the capacity for task-focused disagreement while reducing personalized or status-based conflict.

4.4 Trust, Communication, and Information Elaboration Convert Difference Into Contribution

The performance case for diversity ultimately depends on whether different information is used. The categorization-elaboration model predicts that diversity is beneficial when task-relevant perspectives are exchanged and processed, but harmful social categorization can interrupt this process (van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Inclusion is therefore best viewed as an enabling condition for information elaboration rather than as a separate social objective.

Hofhuis et al. (2016) provide direct support for this interpretation by identifying trust and openness in work-group communication as mechanisms linking diversity climate with inclusion, identification, and knowledge sharing. Trust lowers the interpersonal cost of relying on colleagues whose backgrounds or perspectives differ. Openness increases the likelihood that information is expressed rather than withheld. Together, these processes help explain how a positive diversity climate can move from employee perception to work behavior.

The implication is that organizations should evaluate inclusion partly through the quality of work processes. Who speaks in meetings? Whose ideas are developed rather than ignored? Are dissent and mistakes treated as learning inputs? Is expertise

recognized across status boundaries? These questions connect inclusion to operational behavior and make it possible to distinguish substantive inclusion from symbolic messaging.

Information elaboration is the point at which the potential value of diversity becomes operational. A team does not benefit merely because different knowledge exists somewhere among its members. That knowledge must be voiced, attended to, evaluated, connected with other information, and incorporated into action. Each step can fail. Status hierarchies may determine whose information receives attention; time pressure may favor familiar viewpoints; interpersonal distrust may cause members to withhold uncertain information; and majority preferences may create premature consensus. Inclusion practices matter to performance insofar as they alter these micro-processes.

This perspective also explains why the same diversity profile can generate different outcomes across tasks. When work is routine and highly standardized, additional perspective may have limited marginal value. When tasks are ambiguous, innovative, or dependent on distributed expertise, information elaboration becomes more consequential. The expected value of inclusion is therefore partly task contingent. Organizations should be cautious about searching for one universal diversity-performance coefficient when the underlying mechanism depends on the informational demands of the work.

4.5 Employee Attitudes, Retention, and Well-Being

Employee attitudes are among the most consistent outcomes associated with diversity management and inclusion. Turek's (2017) meta-analysis reported positive relationships between diversity management and organizational performance, job performance, and organizational commitment, alongside a negative relationship with turnover. The study included a relatively small evidence base, so the exact estimates should be interpreted cautiously, but the direction of findings is consistent with later work on diversity climate and inclusion.

Retention is particularly important because exclusion imposes costs even when short-term task performance appears unaffected. McKay et al. (2007) showed that diversity-climate perceptions were related to turnover intentions and organizational commitment. Nishii (2013) similarly linked inclusive climate to lower conflict and protected satisfaction, with satisfaction in turn related to turnover at the unit level. These findings suggest that inclusion can influence performance indirectly by preserving human capital, continuity, and willingness to remain.

Well-being should also be treated as an outcome in its own right rather than only as a precursor to productivity. The 2026 meta-analysis by Nault et al. places occupational health and well-being among the major consequence categories of diversity climate. The scoping review by Rezai et al. (2023) likewise notes that experiences of inclusion and exclusion can affect social functioning, health, and well-being. A credible business case for inclusion therefore includes both organizational outcomes and the quality of employees' work experience.

Retention outcomes deserve deeper interpretation because turnover is both an individual decision and an organizational process. Employees may leave because they perceive limited advancement, low belonging, unfair treatment, or repeated interpersonal strain. A favorable inclusion climate can affect several of these pathways simultaneously, making retention an important cumulative indicator of employee experience. Yet intention to leave is not identical to actual departure, and actual turnover can also reflect labor-market conditions, pay, career stage, and personal circumstances. Research that links longitudinal climate measures to administrative turnover data is therefore especially valuable.

The relationship between inclusion and well-being also raises an ethical and analytical point. If inclusion reduces chronic vigilance, identity threat, or the effort required to navigate exclusion, improved well-being may be valuable even when no immediate productivity gain is observed. From an organizational perspective, well-being can subsequently affect absence, engagement, cooperation, and retention; from an employee perspective, it is itself a meaningful outcome. A balanced review should therefore avoid treating human well-being merely as an instrument for performance while still recognizing its organizational consequences.

4.6 Diversity Training Helps Most When Embedded in a System

Organizations often begin diversity efforts with training because it is visible and comparatively easy to deploy. The evidence suggests that training can improve learning and some behavioral outcomes, but it is not a substitute for organizational change. Bezrukova et al. (2016), synthesizing 260 independent samples, found a positive overall effect of diversity training, with stronger effects when programs were integrated with other diversity initiatives, included both awareness and skills, and were conducted over a meaningful period.

This finding is consistent with the broader inclusion literature. Employees infer organizational priorities from repeated systems and decisions, not from a single intervention. Recruitment, promotion, performance management, grievance processes, mentoring, flexible work, accessibility, team routines, and leadership behavior can either reinforce or contradict a formal diversity message. The most defensible conclusion is therefore not that training is ineffective, but that its impact depends on design, duration, reinforcement, and alignment with other practices.

Across the evidence base, the most important pattern is not a single average effect but a recurring sequence of conditions and mechanisms. Diversity changes the distribution of perspectives and social identities within a work setting. Organizational systems and leaders then influence whether those differences are associated with status inequality, subgroup boundaries, or legitimate participation. Employees interpret these signals as a climate of greater or lesser inclusion. That interpretation affects psychological safety, trust, identification, and commitment, which in turn shape whether employees share information, learn, remain with the organization, and invest discretionary effort. The consistency of this sequence across otherwise different studies provides stronger theoretical confidence than any isolated correlation.

At the same time, the literature contains an important asymmetry. It is generally easier to demonstrate that exclusion, bias, conflict, or low psychological safety can damage employee experience than to demonstrate that a particular inclusion initiative will generate a predictable performance gain. Harmful climates can directly suppress voice, increase withdrawal, and weaken retention. Positive interventions, however, must pass through multiple organizational and psychological stages before affecting distal outcomes such as productivity or financial performance. This asymmetry helps explain why effect sizes tend to be larger for proximal attitudes and relational outcomes than for broad organizational performance measures. It also argues against evaluating inclusion programs only through short-term financial returns.

The training literature illustrates the difference between changing knowledge and changing systems. A training program may improve awareness or teach specific interpersonal skills, yet employees return to incentive structures, promotion processes, and team routines that may reward different behavior. Transfer therefore depends on reinforcement. If leaders model inclusive behavior, selection and promotion criteria are aligned, and employees encounter consistent accountability, training can become one component of a wider change process. If these conditions are absent, even well-designed learning may decay or remain disconnected from daily decisions.

This does not imply that every organization should adopt the same package of interventions. Context matters, and poorly diagnosed programs can direct resources toward symptoms rather than causes. An organization with equitable hiring but large promotion disparities faces a different problem from one with strong formal policies but low psychological safety in particular teams. Evidence-based diversity management should therefore begin with diagnosis, select interventions that target identified mechanisms, and evaluate whether proximal conditions change before attributing distal performance outcomes to the program.

4.7 What the Intervention Evidence Does—and Does Not—Show

A stronger test of the practical argument is whether organizational interventions reliably change inclusion-related outcomes. Zhao et al. (2025) provide an important corrective to overly broad business-case claims. Their systematic meta-review synthesized 37 reviews spanning 13 years and identified 12 intervention categories across 22 outcomes. The evidence was uneven: workplace accommodations and job training were linked with positive outcomes in age and disability contexts, while diversity training had comparatively stronger evidence for awareness and learning than for downstream organizational outcomes; evidence for recruitment, leave, and compensation interventions was mixed. The implication is not that D&I interventions fail, but that intervention type, target outcome, implementation conditions, and evidence quality must be distinguished.

This intervention evidence sharpens the proposed model in two ways. First, it supports the paper's emphasis on systems rather than symbolic initiatives. An intervention can alter awareness without changing opportunity structures, leader behavior, or team processes, and therefore may not travel far enough through the causal chain to affect performance. Second, it suggests that outcome proximity matters. Learning and attitudinal outcomes are often easier to change and detect than retention, productivity, or organizational performance. Claims about a 'business case' should therefore specify which outcome is expected, over what time horizon, and through which mechanism. The integrative framework is strongest when treated as a set of testable pathways rather than a promise that any diversity or inclusion initiative will generate financial or performance gains.

5. An Integrative Framework

The reviewed evidence can be organized into a five-stage framework. The first stage is structural: fair human-resource systems, accessible work design, transparent opportunities, and credible accountability reduce status-based barriers. The second stage is relational: inclusive leadership and respectful day-to-day interaction signal that employees can participate without surrendering valued differences. Together these stages shape an inclusion or diversity climate.

The third stage concerns employee experience. When the climate supports both belonging and valued uniqueness, employees are more likely to perceive themselves as legitimate and consequential members of the group. The fourth stage consists of proximal psychological and social mechanisms: psychological safety, trust, openness, commitment, identification, and willingness to share knowledge. The fifth stage contains outcomes, including learning, creativity, role performance, job satisfaction, retention, and, under appropriate conditions, team or organizational performance.

This framework also contains a feedback loop. Positive outcomes can reinforce confidence in inclusive practices, while persistent inequities or exclusionary experiences can undermine stated values. Context moderates every stage. Task interdependence, industry, occupation, demographic composition, national culture, power differences, and the type of diversity being studied may change the strength or even the direction of relationships. For this reason, inclusion should be treated as a dynamic organizational capability rather than a fixed policy.

Table 1. Representative evidence synthesized in the review

Study	Evidence and role in the framework
van Knippenberg et al. (2004)	Design/sample: Integrative theoretical model Construct: Work-group diversity Outcome(s): Information elaboration; categorization Main finding: Diversity can create informational gains and social-categorization losses; context determines which process dominates. Role in proposed framework: Explains why diversity is a potential resource rather than a direct performance cause.
Joshi & Roh (2009)	Design/sample: Meta-analysis; 8,757 teams, 39 studies Construct: Team diversity Outcome(s): Team performance Main finding: Direct effects are small and contingent on industry, occupation, and team context. Role in proposed framework: Supports contextual moderation of diversity-performance relationships.
Nishii (2013)	Design/sample: Organizational field study Construct: Climate for inclusion Outcome(s): Conflict; satisfaction; turnover-related outcomes Main finding: Inclusive climate weakens bias-related conflict and protects satisfaction in gender-diverse groups. Role in proposed framework: Links climate to reduced social-categorization costs.
Bezrukova et al. (2016)	Design/sample: Meta-analysis; 260 independent samples Construct: Diversity training Outcome(s): Learning; attitudes; behavior Main finding: Training has positive overall effects, with stronger results when sustained, skills-oriented, and embedded in wider initiatives. Role in proposed framework: Supports systemic rather than isolated intervention logic.

Study	Evidence and role in the framework
Hofhuis et al. (2016)	Design/sample: Two quantitative studies Construct: Diversity climate Outcome(s): Inclusion; identification; knowledge sharing Main finding: Trust and communication openness mediate relationships between diversity climate and work outcomes. Role in proposed framework: Supports trust/communication as proximal mechanisms.
Randel et al. (2018)	Design/sample: Conceptual review/model Construct: Inclusive leadership Outcome(s): Empowerment; creativity; performance; turnover Main finding: Inclusive leadership supports belonging and valued uniqueness through participation and contribution. Role in proposed framework: Specifies relational antecedents of inclusion experience.
Holmes et al. (2021)	Design/sample: Meta-analysis integrating 25 years of research Construct: Diversity climate Outcome(s): Attitudes; performance; withdrawal Main finding: Relationships vary by climate measure, outcome type, demographic diversity, climate strength, and measurement source. Role in proposed framework: Adds measurement and contextual boundary conditions.
Li et al. (2025)	Design/sample: Meta-analysis; 105 independent samples; N=39,948 Construct: Inclusive leadership Outcome(s): Task performance; OCB; innovation; creativity; voice; turnover intention Main finding: Inclusive leadership relates positively to multiple performance/behavior outcomes and negatively to turnover intention; several psychological mechanisms mediate effects. Role in proposed framework: Provides meta-analytic support for leadership → mechanisms → outcomes pathway.
Zhao et al. (2025)	Design/sample: Systematic meta-review; 37 reviews over 13 years Construct: Organizational D&I interventions Outcome(s): 22 outcome categories Main finding: Intervention effects are heterogeneous; training evidence is stronger for awareness/learning, while several policy effects are mixed. Role in proposed framework: Constrains practical claims and highlights intervention/outcome specificity.
Nault et al. (2026)	Design/sample: Meta-analysis; 99 publications Construct: Diversity climate Outcome(s): Well-being; relationships; work behavior; job attitudes Main finding: Leadership and HR practices predict climate; climate relates to multiple outcomes, with some effects stronger in more diverse organizations. Role in proposed framework: Supports structural/leadership antecedents and contextual moderation.

The proposed framework can be expressed as a moderated process model. Structural fairness and inclusive leadership are antecedent conditions; inclusion climate is the shared or perceived contextual signal; belonging and valued uniqueness are core inclusion experiences; psychological safety, trust, commitment, and information elaboration are mediating processes; and employee or organizational outcomes are more distal consequences. Contextual variables - including task complexity, interdependence, demographic status relations, occupation, industry, and national setting - moderate links within the chain. This formulation reconciles apparently inconsistent findings by locating them at different points in the same process rather than assuming that every study should observe a direct diversity-performance relationship.

The model also generates testable propositions for future research. First, structural diversity should have stronger positive relationships with knowledge-related outcomes when inclusion climate and task interdependence are high. Second, inclusive leadership should predict performance more strongly through psychological safety and information elaboration than through direct effects. Third, belonging without valued uniqueness should be more strongly related to retention than to innovation, whereas valued uniqueness without belonging may encourage idea generation but not sustained identification. Fourth, alignment between organization-level systems and team-level leader behavior should produce stronger inclusion effects than either level in isolation. These propositions move the literature toward mechanism-based testing rather than broad correlations.

Figure 1. Integrative Framework Linking Diversity, Inclusion, and Employee/Organizational Outcomes



6. Discussion

The central finding of this review is that the relationship between diversity and performance is conditional. Diversity can enlarge the informational and experiential resources available to a group, but those resources are not self-executing. Without inclusive conditions, differences can remain unused or become bases for social categorization and conflict. This interpretation is more consistent with the evidence than either a universal business-case claim or a universal skepticism about diversity.

Inclusion appears to matter because it changes both membership and contribution. Employees who experience belonging are less likely to interpret the workplace as socially threatening or exclusionary. Employees whose uniqueness is valued have stronger reason to contribute perspectives that differ from the dominant view. Psychological safety, trust, openness, and commitment connect these experiences to observable work behavior. The performance implications therefore arise through mechanisms rather than through representation alone.

The review also suggests that organizations should distinguish diversity metrics from inclusion metrics. Representation measures answer who is present and at what level. Inclusion measures should address access to information and opportunity, voice, interpersonal respect, psychological safety, participation in decisions, and the credibility of organizational processes. Combining the two makes it easier to diagnose whether a representation gap, an inclusion gap, or both are limiting outcomes. A second implication concerns leadership. Inclusive leadership is not simply a positive interpersonal style. It involves concrete behaviors that make participation possible: inviting input, remaining accessible, acknowledging contributions, responding

constructively to challenge, distributing attention, and ensuring that different employees can influence the work. Because leaders allocate opportunities and shape local norms, their behavior can either reinforce formal inclusion policies or neutralize them.

A third implication is that interventions should be systemic. The training evidence is instructive: programs work better when they are sustained and connected to other initiatives (Bezrukova et al., 2016). A similar principle applies to recruitment or representation targets. Hiring a more diverse workforce without changing promotion access, team norms, accessibility, or decision processes can increase numerical diversity while leaving inclusion weak. The relevant unit of change is therefore the employment system and everyday work environment, not a single program.

6.1 Practical Implications for Managers and HR Leaders

Managers can translate the evidence into four priorities. First, examine structural fairness: recruitment, pay, promotion, development, work allocation, accessibility, and grievance processes should be transparent enough to identify patterned disadvantage. Second, build inclusive team routines: meeting design, turn-taking, decision documentation, feedback, and project staffing can reduce informal exclusion and widen participation. Third, develop leaders around observable inclusion behaviors rather than abstract endorsement. Fourth, measure employee experience alongside representation and performance so that inclusion can be linked to retention, engagement, learning, and operational outcomes over time.

These practices should be evaluated with appropriate caution. Cross-sectional employee surveys can identify patterns but cannot establish causality. Stronger organizational evaluation would combine repeated climate measures with administrative outcomes such as turnover, promotion, absence, performance, and internal mobility, while protecting confidentiality. Where feasible, staggered implementation or quasi-experimental designs can provide more credible evidence about which interventions create change.

A central theoretical implication is that inclusion functions as an organizational conversion mechanism. Diversity supplies heterogeneity; inclusion affects whether that heterogeneity becomes usable information and legitimate participation. This framing avoids two common errors. The first is demographic determinism - assuming that differences necessarily produce either conflict or innovation. The second is cultural voluntarism - assuming that positive interpersonal intentions can overcome structural inequalities without changes to systems and resource allocation. The evidence instead points to interaction between structure and social process.

The review further suggests that performance should be disaggregated. Individual task performance, contextual performance, team learning, creativity, innovation, service quality, retention, and financial outcomes are not interchangeable. Inclusion may affect each through different time horizons and mechanisms. Psychological safety can change speaking-up behavior relatively quickly; promotion equity may take years to become visible; innovation depends on whether ideas are implemented, not merely generated. Research and practice become more precise when the outcome is specified rather than grouped under a generic label of 'better performance.'

There is also a risk of reverse inference in managerial discussions. Organizations that are already well managed may simultaneously exhibit stronger inclusion climates and better performance. Good leadership, resource adequacy, procedural fairness, and strategic clarity can influence both. Observational associations between inclusion and outcomes may therefore partly capture broader organizational quality. This does not invalidate inclusion as an explanatory construct, but it strengthens the case for longitudinal and quasi-experimental research that can separate inclusion-specific effects from general management quality.

For practice, the strongest implication is to manage inclusion as an operating system rather than a communications campaign. Representation data should be connected to process data: applicant conversion, assignment distribution, performance ratings, promotion rates, pay progression, access to development, grievance outcomes, and voluntary turnover. Employee-experience measures can then help explain where disparities emerge. This combination allows organizations to move from broad statements about culture to specific hypotheses about mechanisms and decision points.

Evaluation should also distinguish implementation fidelity from intervention effectiveness. A program cannot reasonably be judged ineffective if it was never consistently implemented. Managers should first ask whether the intended practice occurred - for example, whether structured promotion criteria were actually used or whether leaders routinely solicited dissenting views -

and only then assess changes in climate or outcomes. This sequencing improves causal interpretation and reduces the tendency to abandon interventions because distal business indicators did not change immediately.

Finally, accountability requires careful design. Purely numerical targets can encourage superficial compliance if they are disconnected from process quality, while purely cultural aspirations can remain too vague to evaluate. A stronger system combines outcome indicators with process indicators and qualitative evidence. The aim is not to reduce inclusion to a dashboard, but to create enough visibility to identify where employee experience and organizational decisions diverge from stated standards.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This review has several limitations. First, it is an integrative review rather than a new systematic meta-analysis; it synthesizes verified secondary and primary evidence but does not recompute pooled effects. Second, the literature uses overlapping constructs such as diversity climate, inclusion climate, perceived inclusion, belonging, psychological safety, and inclusive leadership. Although these constructs are theoretically related, they are not interchangeable, and measurement heterogeneity complicates direct comparison (Rezai et al., 2020).

Third, much of the evidence is observational. Positive associations between inclusion and employee outcomes may partly reflect reverse causality, common-method variance, selection, or unmeasured organizational quality. More longitudinal, experimental, and quasi-experimental research is needed. Fourth, the evidence base remains uneven across countries, sectors, occupational groups, and dimensions of diversity. Findings from one demographic or national context should not automatically be generalized to another.

Future research should test multilevel models that connect organizational practices to leader behavior, team climate, employee experience, and objective outcomes in the same design. Researchers should also examine when inclusion practices benefit all employees and when effects are stronger for historically excluded groups. Finally, studies should move beyond broad performance measures to investigate specific pathways such as error detection, innovation quality, customer outcomes, knowledge integration, absenteeism, and internal mobility.

An additional limitation concerns publication and construct-selection bias. Research literatures can overrepresent relationships that are theoretically fashionable, statistically significant, or easier to measure through surveys. Negative or null intervention results may be less visible, while distal organizational outcomes are more difficult to obtain than employee attitudes. Meta-analysis can reduce sampling uncertainty but cannot fully correct weaknesses in the underlying studies. Consequently, the apparent consistency of positive inclusion-attitude relationships should not be assumed to imply equally strong evidence for every performance outcome.

Future work should also address intersectionality and status configuration more directly. Employees do not experience gender, ethnicity, age, disability, nationality, class, or professional status as isolated variables. The meaning of one identity can depend on another and on local status hierarchies. Conventional diversity indices often compress these configurations into a single measure and may therefore miss who is included, who is peripheral, and whose difference carries greater social cost. Multilevel and person-centered methods could provide a more realistic account of heterogeneous inclusion experiences.

A further research priority is the changing architecture of work. Hybrid and remote work can widen access for some employees while creating new forms of visibility, network, and proximity inequality. Digital collaboration also changes how voice, interruption, informal learning, and social connection occur. Existing inclusion theories remain relevant, but their mechanisms may operate differently when employees have unequal physical presence or when communication is mediated by technology. Longitudinal studies of hybrid teams would therefore extend the literature beyond assumptions developed primarily in co-located workplaces.

Finally, research should examine implementation sequences. Organizations rarely introduce one isolated practice; they change recruitment, leadership development, flexibility, employee-resource structures, reporting systems, and performance processes over time. Understanding which combinations are complementary, which are redundant, and which generate unintended consequences is a major empirical challenge. Configurational and quasi-experimental designs may be especially useful for identifying bundles of practices that produce durable inclusion rather than temporary attitudinal change.

A further limitation concerns review reproducibility. The evidence search was structured and source-verified, but it was not originally executed under a preregistered systematic-review protocol and did not retain a complete database-by-database

record of search strings, duplicate counts, and screening decisions. The revised methodology reports this transparently rather than reconstructing artificial precision after the fact. Future work should test the framework through a preregistered systematic review or meta-analysis using independent dual screening, explicit risk-of-bias assessment, and prospective coding of study design, construct operationalization, level of analysis, and effect-size information.

8. Conclusion

Do inclusive workplaces perform better? The evidence supports a qualified answer. Diversity by itself is not a reliable guarantee of higher performance. Its effects depend on whether organizations create conditions in which employees can participate, exchange information, challenge assumptions, and remain valued members of the group. Inclusion provides the organizational and psychological infrastructure that makes those processes more likely.

Across the reviewed literature, inclusive climates and leadership are associated with stronger belonging, psychological safety, trust, commitment, knowledge sharing, creativity, satisfaction, and retention-related outcomes. These mechanisms offer a credible pathway to better individual, team, and organizational performance, while meta-analytic findings indicate that diversity climate and diversity-management practices are generally associated with favorable outcomes. At the same time, heterogeneous measures and limited causal designs require restraint in claiming universal effects.

The most defensible conclusion is therefore conditional rather than promotional: diverse workplaces are more likely to realize performance benefits when representation is accompanied by fair systems, inclusive leadership, meaningful voice, psychological safety, and sustained organizational practices. Inclusion is not the automatic consequence of diversity; it is the process through which difference can become contribution.

The broader significance of this conclusion is methodological as well as managerial. The diversity-performance debate becomes more productive when the unit of analysis shifts from asking whether diversity 'works' to examining the conditions and mechanisms through which differences affect work. This reframing accommodates both the informational potential of heterogeneous groups and the social risks created by categorization, status inequality, and exclusion. It also explains why organizations with similar demographic profiles can experience markedly different outcomes.

For scholars, the next stage of the field should emphasize stronger causal designs, multilevel measurement, and clearly specified outcomes. For organizations, the evidence favors sustained attention to the quality of systems and interactions through which employees participate. Representation remains important, but representation without access, voice, psychological safety, and influence cannot be assumed to generate either inclusion or performance. The most analytically defensible position is therefore that diversity creates possibilities, while inclusive organizational conditions shape whether those possibilities become productive, neutral, or costly.

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Data Availability: No new dataset was generated. The evidence synthesized in this review is available in the cited publications.

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