

TECH LEADERS

ON

CULTURE & DIVERSITY



MANNY

**DIRECTOR OF TECH
AND DIGITAL**

MANNY@MAXWELLBOND.CO.UK



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Introduction

Diversity and Inclusion are hot topics across most businesses and sectors, but many business leaders struggle to implement practical steps to create and maintain a culture that enables the growth and sustainability of diversity and inclusion.

In a discussion with prominent technical leaders in the North West, we covered key topics including how to optimise inclusivity when working remotely, how to tackle the myth that to hire diversely means you have to compromise on talent, homophily and unconscious bias, maternity & paternity leave, and future opportunities for diversity and inclusion.



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Inclusivity

Optimising Inclusivity Remotely

Humans naturally have a tendency to gravitate towards similar groups of people, and this has been amplified during lockdown. Some leaders are struggling to really engage their teams and create a culture of belonging, collaboration, and support. This largely comes from leaders missing micro interactions, and finding it harder to detect nuances, body language, or behaviours that indicate emotions or issues. Working remotely makes it much easier to miss these visual clues.

The serendipity of being around and with other people when you are in the office is gone and people tend to just shut down and focus on their work, with little to no real social interaction. So, whilst remote working has given lots of new benefits such as allowing people more time to dedicate to work and family because there is now no commute, there are definitely new challenges in equal measure.

Leaders are now picking up extra caring responsibilities, disproportionately women as they are suddenly having to take on more nurturing responsibilities and finding new ways to ensure the health and wellbeing of their teams. To boost and maximise social interaction, our roundtable participants suggested some of the following ideas:

- Organised interaction can be awkward and difficult, however it can be really useful in engaging and connecting new people online, to help build up team and individual relationships. One example could be to have a lucky dip activity, where people are automatically grouped into teams to complete a task, or just for their lunch and coffee breaks. It can be as simple, organised, or laid back as you want.
- Meetings on the go can be really useful to tackle that Zoom fatigue. Instead of having a formal video catch up, it's okay to occasionally just use a phone call. This way you can get up, go on a walk, and most importantly relax more whilst you are talking. This is a great tool for one-to-ones or personal catch ups, as it makes interaction more natural and comfortable. Constant video calls are really intense so switching off the video every now and again is really useful.
- On video calls, encourage people to have videos on (but don't force it). Whilst having that visual connection can be great, don't force it at the expense of peoples comfort. Some people might not be happy with the look of their homes or might be nervous about switching on the camera for all to see. You can try to negate any anxieties around this by buddying people up, or running training sessions on how to Zoom comfortably (laptop height, lighting, background etc).
- Having an open video call running in the background so you give the illusion of office chatter, but nothing is forced. People can join and have their microphones and videos on or off, and can jump in and out of conversation as they wish, just like if they were in the office.

Every office is different, so it's important to consider your options and decide on actions that will really work in your business. It's also very much a game of trial and error, so it's important to ask for honest feedback from your colleagues and team members to see what you can improve moving forwards.

Meritocracy

Hiring Diversely on Meritocracy

The knee jerk reaction to wanting to boost diversity through hiring, is often to be concerned about unsuitable talent being hired just to meet diversity quotas. The myth around having to compromise talent to boost diversity is strong, but completely false. If a business has a robust and thorough recruitment and onboarding process, you should only be engaging with candidates that are suitable.

Essentially this is all rooted in business processes. Diversity shouldn't be a tick box exercise, and the sole purpose should not be to hit quotas. You should be implementing a robust yet openminded approach to recruitment, so that your diversity naturally improves over time with great hires. As you consistently hire great candidates, you will then expand your network and you gain access to more talent pools, and as diversity becomes more visible in your business, you will automatically become more attractive to diverse candidates.

At the moment the market is challenging as a lot of senior / qualified people simply aren't moving. Here, businesses can take a different approach, by considering hiring more junior candidates, and offering them training, coaching and mentoring in order to grow them internally. This way you are building up teams of people who are more loyal and committed to your business, by taking a chance and then providing a clear progression path for internal mobility. Then, when they do get to that senior position, you know that they have gotten there on merit.

Managers should refrain from hiring just to hit quotas. This "token hiring" of diverse candidates is insulting and is also how this myth likely began. The wrong candidates being recruited into the wrong roles for the wrong reasons. Diversity isn't about ticking boxes and quotas often encourage hiring managers to push unsuitable candidates through the recruitment process, quickly. Diversity doesn't happen overnight and by trying to rush the process, you will hire the wrong person and you will sacrifice skills, and then this will naturally cause problems.

To improve the recruitment process, businesses need to carefully manage their pipeline, look at candidate journeys, look at their brand and image, and revisit their hiring process, all the while being open to feedback from past candidates to see what worked and what didn't.

Put people in the right position for the right reasons. Hiring naturally will build up the right image and will increase your diversity in the right way.



Homophily & Unconscious Bias

The importance of diverse thought

Homophily refers to the tendency for people to have (non-negative) ties with people who are similar to themselves in socially significant ways. This can filter through to so many different circumstances. As we touched on before, people gravitate to similar people. It's instinctive to do this, because we often find it easier to get along and work with people who are similar to ourselves. Of course, sometimes it's practical, e.g. for businesses working across time zones.

However, diversity of thought results in a more diverse pool of ideas and diverse problem solving, all of which benefit the business and heightens creativity by drawing on a variety of experience and knowledge. So, to mould diverse teams, leaders can formally or informally conduct a skills audit to identify the skill and knowledge gaps in their teams. Once you have identified missing pieces, you can then look for this in new candidates.

To prevent hiring based on similarities with themselves, hiring managers can invite different and diverse people to interview the candidate at different stages alongside them. This enables a fair audit and assessment of each candidate from a variety of points of view.

Parental Leave

Improving diversity through hiring is fundamental. But so is having an inclusive culture that retains current employees. A huge factor in this is for parents. Companies should have flexible and accessible policies and support options in place for members of staff who need to take time off for maternity and paternity leave, but also for child loss and adoption. Many women feel pressured to take less time off for maternity than the full amount of time allocated to them, but this is often an even bigger pressure for men.

Men are given two weeks paternity leave, for which many have experienced reluctance from their businesses to grant the full allotted time. Shared parental leave is also an option, but is often not discussed or explained to those who need it. Our roundtable panelists discussed potential ways businesses can make their culture more inclusive and supportive towards new or growing families and came up with the following:

- Frequent reviews of maternity and paternity policies, asking for feedback from those who have gone through the process
- When hiring, consider options such as job shares as this may open up opportunities for parents who still need to be available for childcare or school runs
- Set up internal groups that are dedicated to offering informal support to people throughout pregnancy, child loss and adoption

Opportunities

What opportunities does diversity create?

As much of the recruitment process has now moved online, and with many businesses considering a fully remote, decentralised working nature indefinitely, does this mean office culture is not as important? Lots of businesses have started to hire based solely on tech skills, assessed through technical tests at the first stages of interview. This risks cutting out people with disabilities, anxieties around assessments, people who have poor internet quality and so on. This could reflect an attitude that diversity and an inclusive office culture is becoming less important again, but is that the case and will remote onboarding and working have a negative impact on diversity?

Whilst there definitely is concerns around overlying on technical tests to assess candidates, remote working and hiring should actually open up more doors and opportunities. Flexible working options will allow parents to dedicate more time to their families and will allow them room in their days to take their children to school or attend their assemblies. It will also remove a stressful commute for many people in large cities.

Geographically, it is also more open, as remote workers can be based anywhere, which means your talent pool is already bigger.

Our participants also suggested welcoming new starters into the business before their official start date. This could be anything from inviting them to drinks or lunch, inviting them to a Christmas party, or asking them to participate in a stand up or meeting to allow them to engage and collaborate with the team early on.

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Manny

Director of Tech & Digital at Maxwell Bond

manny@maxwellbond.co.uk

0161 359 3260