

# INTERSECTIONALITY AT WORK

**Taking an intersectional approach  
to inclusion at work**



VinciWorks



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

What is intersectionality?	3
A history of intersectionality	5
How does privilege relate to intersectionality?	6
Why take an intersectional approach?	7
What is stopping us?	10
How can we take an intersectional approach?	11
Intersectionality in action	13
What to do next	15

*“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”*

**Audre Lorde**

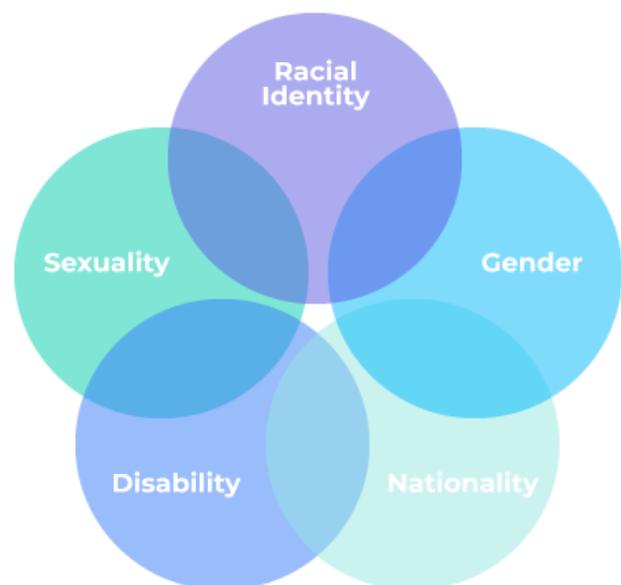
## What is intersectionality?

People are multi-dimensional in their identities and may identify with several different marginalised groups at the same time. For example, someone could be:

- Lesbian and a person of colour
- Muslim and from an economically deprived background
- A refugee with a learning disability

**Intersectionality** describes the relationship between our multiple identities and how they can create a unique experience of discrimination, bias and privilege. Professor Binna Kandola OBE explains, “If you imagine our identities as a set of circles, so you have a gender, you have a sexuality, you have an ethnicity, you may have a disability. If you imagine, so each identity is represented as a circle, it's bringing these circles together and, where they overlap, that represents me as an individual, and that's what intersectionality is about.”

If a person has more than one marginalised or minority group identity, they are more likely to have overlapping forms of bias, discrimination and disadvantage, both in the workplace and in wider society. It is important to remember that some identities are defined by the person (such as your religion or belief), some are defined externally (such as your nationality), and some may be a combination (such as your ethnicity).



To make things more complex, people are also impacted by which identities others perceive them to have – whether they actually have them or not.

To tackle these inequalities, we cannot look at each identity and the associated injustices in isolation because people experience injustices intersectionally. Therefore, to tackle inequalities, we need to explore these intersecting identities and the unique experiences they create for people.



## History of intersectionality

Feminist movements in the past have made progress towards women's rights. However, first and second-wave feminism in the US weren't always inclusive of women from minority groups; these waves were led by the experiences of primarily white, straight, middle/upper-class women. Other personal factors that impact women, such as race, sexuality, class, immigration and disability, were not considered in the fight for women's rights.

It was during the third-wave feminist movement in the 1990s that the definition and breadth of feminism was expanded to include the experiences of people who are Black and LGBTQ+, among other identities.

In 1989, Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' to highlight the discrimination people can face when they identify with one or more marginalised or minority groups, and bring to light the shortcomings of the feminist movements.

During third-wave feminism, many women, particularly women of colour, spoke out about their experiences to expose the truth of the variety of lived experiences women face. It brought more attention to intersectionality, and the conversations continued into the fourth wave, which the US and many other parts of the world are witnessing today.



## How does privilege relate to intersectionality?

Privilege can be seen as a set of benefits given to a person based on certain characteristics they possess, and understanding the role it plays is key to building a more inclusive workplace and society.

There are many different types of privilege, and it can be intersectional as well. Someone who is marginalised in multiple ways may have a lot less privilege and face more adversity than someone who has no marginalised identities.

Someone could also have privilege in one area but experience discrimination as a result of another characteristic. For example, a white person in a majority-white society will have privilege in that they are unlikely to experience discrimination or disadvantage on the grounds of their race. However, they may still experience discrimination as a result of other factors, such as having a disability or being on a low income. Without looking at all of that person's identities and viewing them through their interconnected identities, we may only see the privilege they possess and overlook the hidden barriers they face.

But understanding privilege and accepting that it exists in society isn't an easy thing to come to terms with. People often get defensive when faced with their own privileges; they feel it is the same as being told they didn't work hard, when in fact they have had their own difficulties and challenges. In Karen Catlin's book *Better Allies: Everyday Actions to Create Inclusive, Engaging Workplaces*, she states that while it is easy to get defensive about privilege, we forget "that privilege is simply a system of advantages granted to all people in a given group. It's a social structure that has become endemic to human cultures. It's not about who you are as an individual as much as it is about which groups you belong to and how those groups are viewed and treated by society".

So being privileged doesn't mean a person has never worked hard – they may have had many challenges and obstacles in their lives they've had to overcome – but people without privilege or with less privilege simply face different challenges and barriers to equality.

## Why take an intersectional approach?

We must look at everyone's experiences through an intersectional lens in order to dismantle structural, institutional, and systemic barriers to equality.

For example, many organisations are beginning to tackle the issue of the gender pay gap. Addressing this type of inequality is important, and doing so will benefit some women. However, without looking at it through an intersectional lens, unintentional discrimination and exclusion can still be taking place for women from other marginalised groups.

In Ruchika Tulshyan's book *Inclusion on Purpose: An Intersectional Approach to Creating a Culture of Belonging at Work*, she explains she worked with a client who was running a gender pay equity audit at their organisation. Their audit discovered that they had achieved equal pay between men and women, and also that they had a lot of women in high-paying jobs. However, Tulshyan advised them to filter the salaries by racial demographics. By looking at the

numbers through an intersectional lens, they found that no women of colour were in high-paying jobs and that they were earning less money than their white colleagues for doing the same work.

This company was taking proactive steps to be more inclusive and wasn't intentionally trying to discriminate. However, without understanding how interconnected our identities are or dissecting the complexities of each person's experiences, we won't get the full picture of where discrimination and exclusion might be occurring.

*“Understanding the interconnected nature of oppression will help us realize the interconnected nature of liberation.”*

**Aditi Mayer**

The company Tulshyan worked with isn't the only organisation with a gender and racial pay gap issue. [PwC's Ethnicity Pay Gap Report 2021](#) found that white British men earn more money than women from 14 of the 16 ethnic groups defined in the study. They also found there are significant pay differences among minority ethnic groups. White British people earn more on average than any other ethnic group, with white and Black African people earning around 16% less than the average pay for white British people.

But pay is just one type of discrimination. People from marginalised groups can face other inequalities such as:

- Discrimination in hiring and promotions
- Overrepresentation in insecure jobs
- Increased risk of being fired or underemployed
- Micro-aggressions, harassment and hate violence.

Again, these inequalities are amplified when someone has more than one marginalised identity. For example, many LGBTQ+ people have experienced discrimination, but looking at their experiences using an

intersectional approach, some LGBTQ+ people are at higher risk of experiencing hate violence. For example, if they are LGBTQ+ and:

- A person of colour
- Transgender
- An adolescent or young adult.

Intersectionality isn't about tackling all forms of discrimination at once or creating a hierarchy of oppression by 'adding up' different inclusion characteristics and deciding who is more deserving of intervention or support. Intersectionality is about taking a holistic approach by making sure one form of discrimination isn't being overlooked at the expense of another or missing the experiences of 'minorities within minorities'.

Failing to be inclusive of all groups of people, particularly those from marginalised groups, has severe consequences for people's livelihoods and wellbeing. Not only that, but it also has steep financial consequences. For example, data gathered by Citigroup found that US GDP lost around \$16 trillion from 2000 to 2020 as a result of racial discrimination and inequality.

When we take an intersectional approach to inclusion, individuals,

organisations and the global economy all reap the benefits. Individuals have a greater sense of belonging and have the opportunity to reach their full potential. And organisations benefit when individuals thrive because employees are more engaged, productive and innovative.

[McKinsey Global Institute research](#) found that, starting from 2014, if we worked towards achieving global gender equality, it could add \$12 trillion to the global economy by 2025. In 2019, they found that, unfortunately, there were only marginal improvements since 2014. These results weren't what many of us hoped for, but there were still improvements worth celebrating. And while there is still a long way to go, these monetary benefits demonstrate how much we stand to gain if we strive for global gender equity, and how much we stand to lose from not taking steps to fix it.

But we can only do so when we take an intersectional approach as this allows us to take informed, appropriate and targeted action to address inequality and discrimination and support greater inclusion in the workplace and in wider society.



## What is stopping us?

It is widely accepted that diversity and inclusion is an integral part of organisational profitability, as well as achieving and maintaining a productive, engaged and happy workforce. But why are so many organisations unable to achieve inclusivity?

In Tulshyan's book she explains, "We don't realise – or don't want to accept – that inclusion isn't an inborn trait. It takes awareness, intention, and regular practice." She continues, "By some measures, we're over two hundred years away from global gender parity."

There are also many hidden identities that aren't always obvious and are therefore easy for individuals and organisations to overlook. For example, we may assume that someone is disadvantaged because of a visible characteristic, such as their race or their age, while being unaware that this is compounded by other unseen factors, such as their sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or hidden disability.

In order to make progress, we also need to adopt a growth mindset where we are open to new ways of

thinking. With a growth mindset, you see intelligence and ability as things that can be developed and improved, and you seek to make changes. Someone with a growth mindset, for example, might say, 'I noticed these policies and procedures in our organisation are biased, but we can correct them to make for a more equitable, diverse and inclusive workplace.' In contrast, a fixed mindset sees intelligence and ability as traits that cannot be changed or developed, and does not seek to make changes. Someone with a fixed mindset, for example, might say 'I noticed these policies and procedures in our organisation are biased, but that is how things have always been. We can't change our company culture now.'

Do you, and your wider organisation, have a growth or fixed mindset?



# How can we take an intersectional approach?

*“Diversity is being invited to the party, Inclusion is being asked to dance.”*

**Vernā Myers**

Organisations have a responsibility to drive inclusion at an organisational level through policies, procedures and practices. Dr Ashley Williams, Psychologist at Pearn Kandola LLP, stated that “Moving away from very narrow conceptualisations of identity, and instead looking at how unique experiences might occur at the intersections of different identities, can help us to make sure that any interventions that we design or any efforts to be more inclusive are truly inclusive of the very people that they are intended to support.”

So how can we do this? Here are five key steps to intersectional thinking to help you shape your policies and culture in your organisation:

## 1. Create an inclusive culture

Create an inclusive culture in which people feel comfortable asking questions, sharing their experiences and providing their personal data

This type of culture needs to be driven from the top and regularly reviewed and reinforced. Change doesn't happen overnight and requires accountability and commitment on everyone's part.

## 2. Provide internal feedback opportunities

Part of building an inclusive workplace culture involves hearing people's experiences. Give employees opportunities to communicate feedback to the organisation, and encourage a speak-up culture. If or when staff raise feedback or concerns, make sure that all feedback is taken seriously and that people know they are being heard. Leaders can do this through actively listening; we can't understand another person's experience and really take on board their feedback unless we take the time to truly listen and seek to understand.

Employees that feel there is a safe space for them to address issues are more likely to feel protected and happy in their place of work.

### 3. Gather and analyse data

Gather data using a multi-method approach. For example, through:

- Attitude and engagement surveys
- Exit interviews
- One-to-one interviews with people from marginalised or minority groups
- Discussions with employee resource groups
- Analysis of pay and opportunity gaps in the organisation.

And then carry out intersectional analysis of that data by disaggregating it (i.e. breaking down the data by factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation or other factors).

### 4. Look at the wider context

Once you've got the data, look at the wider context, including both historic and contemporary structures of inequality, and consider where policies and initiatives in one area could be impacting or undermining efforts elsewhere. Are there people in the workplace that might not be as included as others? Or are there certain processes that could be

more inclusive, for example in recruitment, training or promotion opportunities?

### 5. Develop and implement organisation-wide solutions

After identifying the areas of opportunity to be more inclusive, develop and implement solutions that address systemic change in the organisation as well as modifying people's individual behaviour.

Create inclusion goals for how you want your organisation to improve. Think about what you want the workplace to look like and what specific practices or behaviours are necessary to make that happen. How does your organisation expect employees to behave towards one another, and how do you hope to communicate and measure these new changes?

Providing training to staff is a good way to communicate your organisation's inclusion goals and also create an awareness about the many ways in which we are different. Becoming more familiar with each other's differences can help to break down stigmas, prejudices and unconscious biases people might have and help people learn how to appreciate and respect one another.

## Intersectionality in action

In 2018, Adobe announced that they achieved [global pay parity](#) across the 40 countries they operate in. The company defines pay parity “as ensuring that employees in the same job and location are paid fairly to one another, regardless of their gender or ethnicity”.

Adobe took many steps to reach this milestone. After defining what pay parity meant, they spent time defining and clarifying their job architecture. They looked at whether the job families accurately represented people’s roles, realigned employees into more suitable job families, and created new job families where needed. Doing so allowed them to make fair comparisons of people’s pay. They started by analysing compensation practices between the US and India, and then moved on to review other pay disparities in their other operating countries. Where they identified gaps, they quickly made global pay adjustments.



<https://www.adobe.com/diversity/parity/pay.html>

It was a process that took them several years to achieve, but analysing the pay gaps through an intersectional approach ensured that everyone received fair rewards and recognition no matter their gender or location. Since achieving this major milestone, Adobe continues to maintain global pay parity in all areas of the employee lifecycle, from hiring to pay reviews, with 2022 marking the fifth year in a row for global gender pay parity.

Adobe hasn't stopped there. The organisation carries out yearly audits and continues to close the gap. In 2020, they announced they had achieved pay parity in the US between employees from underrepresented minority (URM) groups and non-URM employees.

They've since introduced the concept of opportunity parity, which looks at how fair promotions and lateral job change opportunities are for people of different demographics.

Adobe continues to strive for change with the hope that everyone in their organisation, and new employees coming into the organisation, all feel included and respected and are provided with equal opportunities and pay.



<https://www.adobe.com/diversity/parity/pay.html>

## What to do next

Intersectionality is fundamental in the fight for equity, and equality, and justice. We need to be intentional about our actions and hold ourselves and others accountable to dismantle the barriers and inequalities people face in the workplace and society.

But we can't create a truly safe and equitable workplace unless we look through an intersectional lens, looking closely at the experiences of our overlapping identities. Only then can we begin to understand how to bring about equity, diversity and inclusion for everyone.

The new Skill Boosters film-based course on intersectionality explains the concept of intersectionality and demonstrates how taking an intersectional approach can support greater inclusion and achieve more equitable outcomes.

The course covers:

- What we mean by intersectionality
- How our intersecting identities can overlap to create privilege or disadvantage
- Why taking an intersectional approach is key to more effective inclusion
- How to put an intersectional approach into practice.



**TRY IT NOW**

Skill Boosters also has a range of other diversity and inclusion film-based courses to teach people about diversity and how to promote respectful and inclusive practices in their organisation. Here are a few courses you can get started on today:

- Allyship
- Age bias
- An introduction to unconscious bias
- Creating an environment based on respect
- Cultural awareness
- Disability Confident
- Disability etiquette in the workplace
- Disabled adventures in work and recruitment
- Gender bias
- Gender Matters
- Inclusion Essentials
- Neurodiversity
- Sexual orientation
- Supporting trans and non-binary people at work: A manager's guide
- Tackling gender bias
- Tackling race bias in the workplace: A guide for managers
- The effective bystander
- Trans and non-binary awareness
- Understanding unconscious bias

For a full list of Skill Boosters Diversity and Inclusion courses, or to demo any of these courses, click the link below.

[PREVIEW CATALOGUE](#)

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