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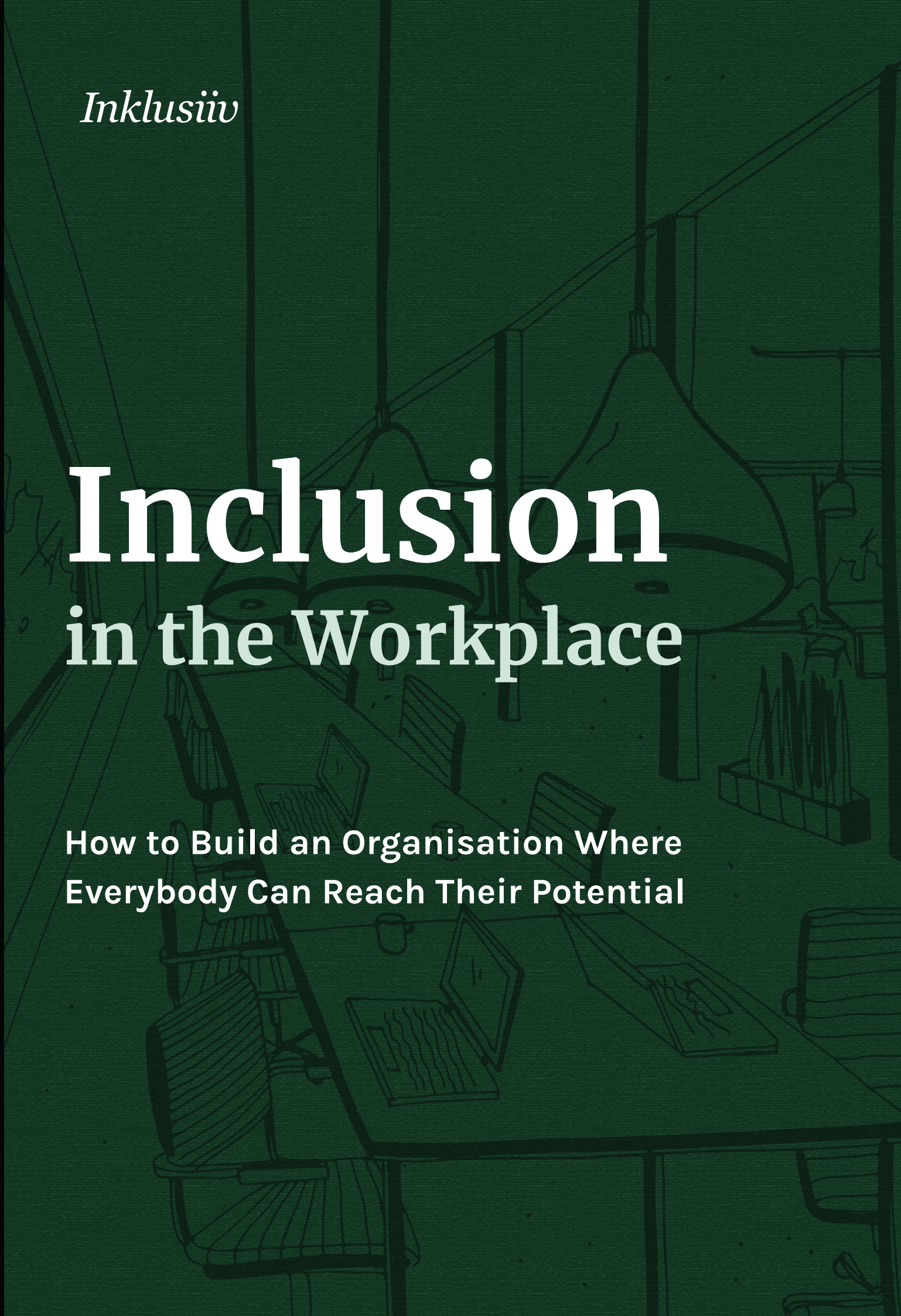
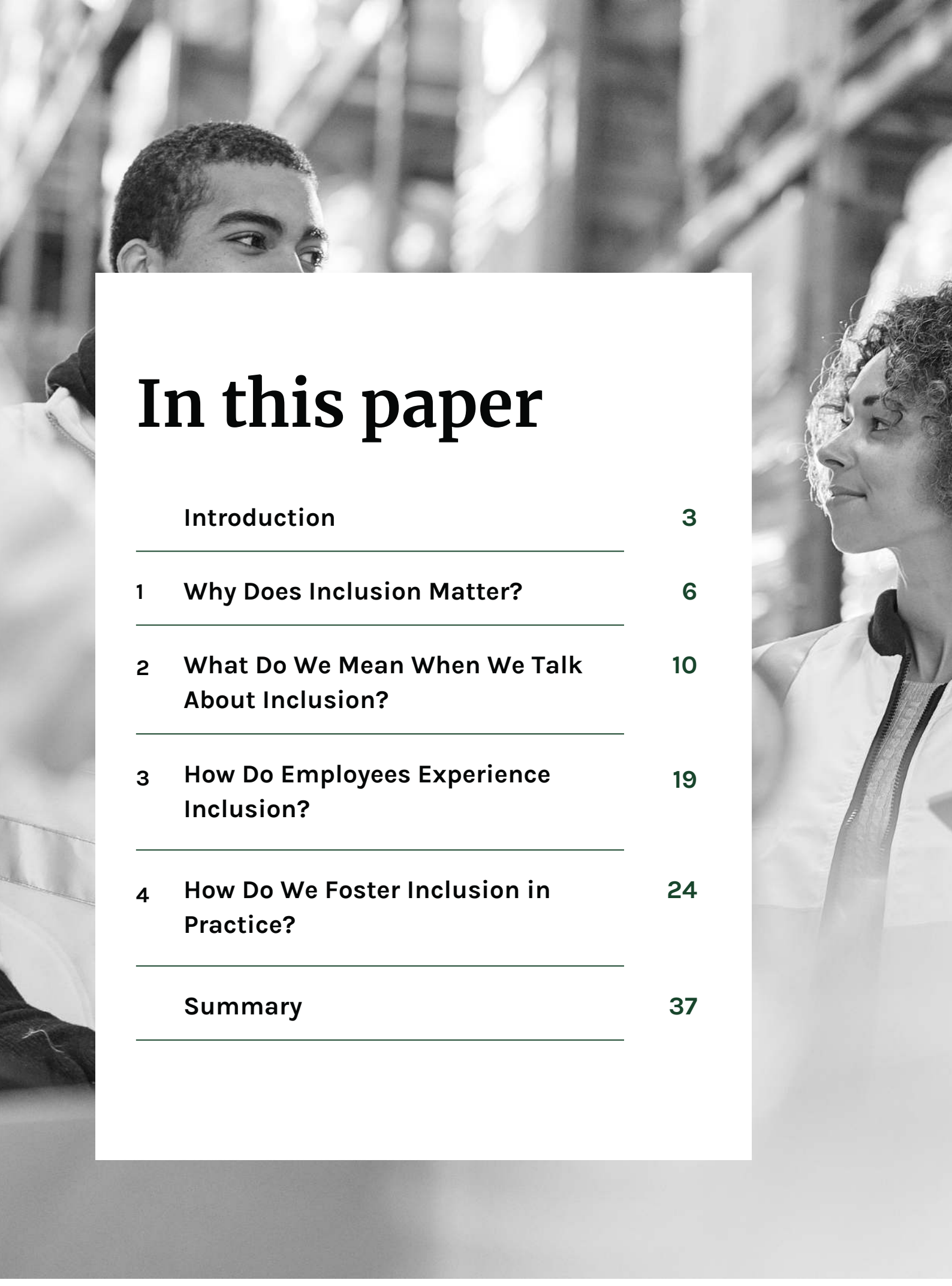
Inclusion in the Workplace

How to Build an Organisation Where Everybody Can Reach Their Potential





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Introduction

Inclusion in the workplace means purposefully building a culture that is inclusive. Ensuring employees – regardless of who they are or where they come from – can feel like they belong and contribute fully benefits the entire organisation.

Organisations with inclusive cultures are more likely to innovate, perform at a high level, and achieve business outcomes.[1] Inclusion is also essential to employee happiness and wellbeing. In an inclusive environment, people are more creative and comfortable sharing their perspectives freely, feel less stress and anxiety, show more commitment, and, ultimately, perform better.[2]

Nonetheless, inclusion is not on every organisation's radar, and many struggle when it comes to fostering it in practice. It is often misunderstood as something "nice to have", but not crucial to success. Sometimes, leaders feel that satisfying people's needs and desires conflicts with the needs and goals of the business. Inclusion work can be seen as vague and difficult to measure, and while employees value inclusion initiatives, their impact frequently falls short.

[1] Star, 2022.
[2] Krentz et al., 2021.

It is time to shed more light on inclusion: what it is and is not, how employees experience it, and how organisations can foster it. This paper explores ***what creates a sense of inclusion in the workplace and how everyone, from strategy-makers to team leaders and employees, can make it happen***. The paper is based on the findings of an unpublished literature review that outlines a framework for advancing workplace inclusion as well as on our work with dozens of organisations and hundreds of leaders across the world.

This paper emphasises that inclusion is not a fad, a bureaucratic burden or a fuzzy PR exercise, but rather a concrete way for organisations to build a culture where employees can reach their potential, feel empowered and are satisfied at work. This requires an understanding of what inclusion is and how it is currently experienced, or *not* experienced, within the organisation, as well as an openness to doing things differently, and a commitment to continuous learning and improvement.

We at Inklusiiv are convinced that inclusion creates a better working life and more successful workplaces, and there is increasing academic research and evidence from our everyday work to support this. We hope this paper encourages organisations and teams of all kinds to implement strategies, processes, and leadership practices that truly embrace and enhance inclusion.

Inklusiiv, May 2025



About the Research

This paper is largely based on an unpublished literature review commissioned by Inklusiiv, which examines 97 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters published between 1995 and 2023 on workplace inclusion from the fields of psychology, social psychology, organisational and communication studies, and education. The review was conducted in 2023 by Dr Oskari Rintala, visiting researcher at the University of Turku, and has benefited from valuable input from Dr Alemanji Aminkeng Atabong, Director of the Social Exclusion Programme at Åbo Akademi, and Susi Nousiainen, PhD researcher at the University of Lapland. We sincerely appreciate their contributions. We are also grateful for the insights and feedback provided regarding this paper by Terhi Elomaa, Mårten Mickos and Amri Johnson, who have helped to refine the ideas presented here. Any remaining errors or omissions are our own.

This white paper was authored by Maria Ristimäki, Katja Toropainen, Maija Koponen, and Yesmith Sánchez, drawing on Inklusiiv's collective expertise in advancing inclusion across workplaces, organisations, leadership, and decision-making.





01

Why Does Inclusion Matter?

Inclusion Benefits People and Organisations

Inclusion in the workplace is beneficial to everyone. ***Inclusive teams promote psychological safety***, a prerequisite for unearthing errors and business risks, ensuring safety and promoting creativity, innovation, and wellbeing at work. Inclusion has been linked to greater job satisfaction, engagement and a stronger professional commitment to the organisation, which promotes higher rates of retention.[3] It has also been shown to reduce stress and job withdrawal tendencies.[4] Inclusive cultures enable creative thinking, new ideas and constructive challenges to the status quo to emerge.[5]

Increased wellbeing, job satisfaction and creativity, in turn, benefit the organisation in many ways. Inclusion, both in social interactions and in contributions to shared work goals, helps employees to integrate successfully into the organisation, and improves job performance. Inclusive leadership shapes the immediate work environment and drives broader benefits by fostering innovation and knowledge-sharing.[6] Inclusive organisations are more adept at managing risk and adapting to change.[7]

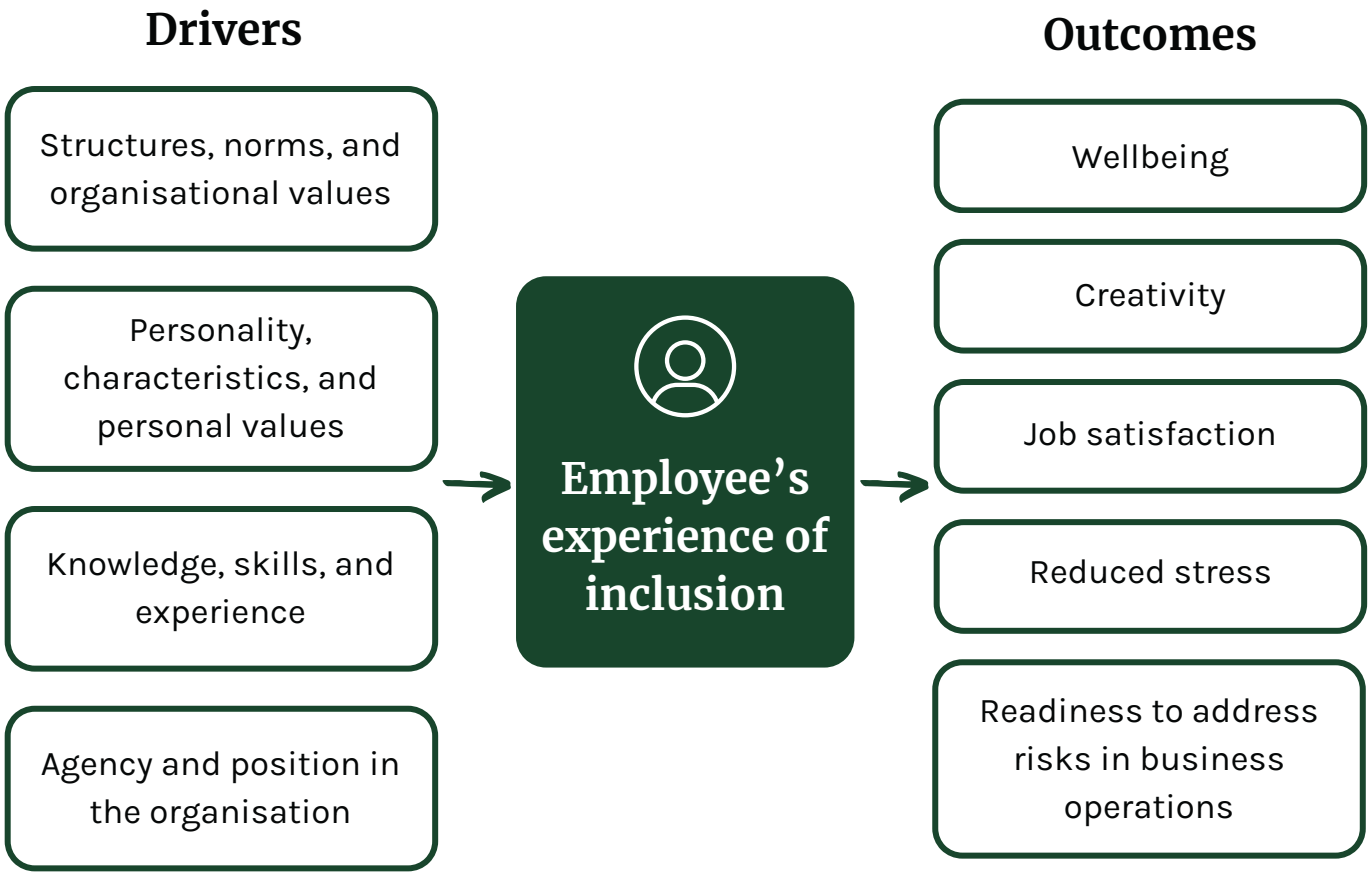
Inclusive culture is a sign that the organisation has built a healthy workplace, which is attractive to new talent and encourages existing employees to stay. Inclusive hiring practices and HR processes ensure that organisations do not miss out on

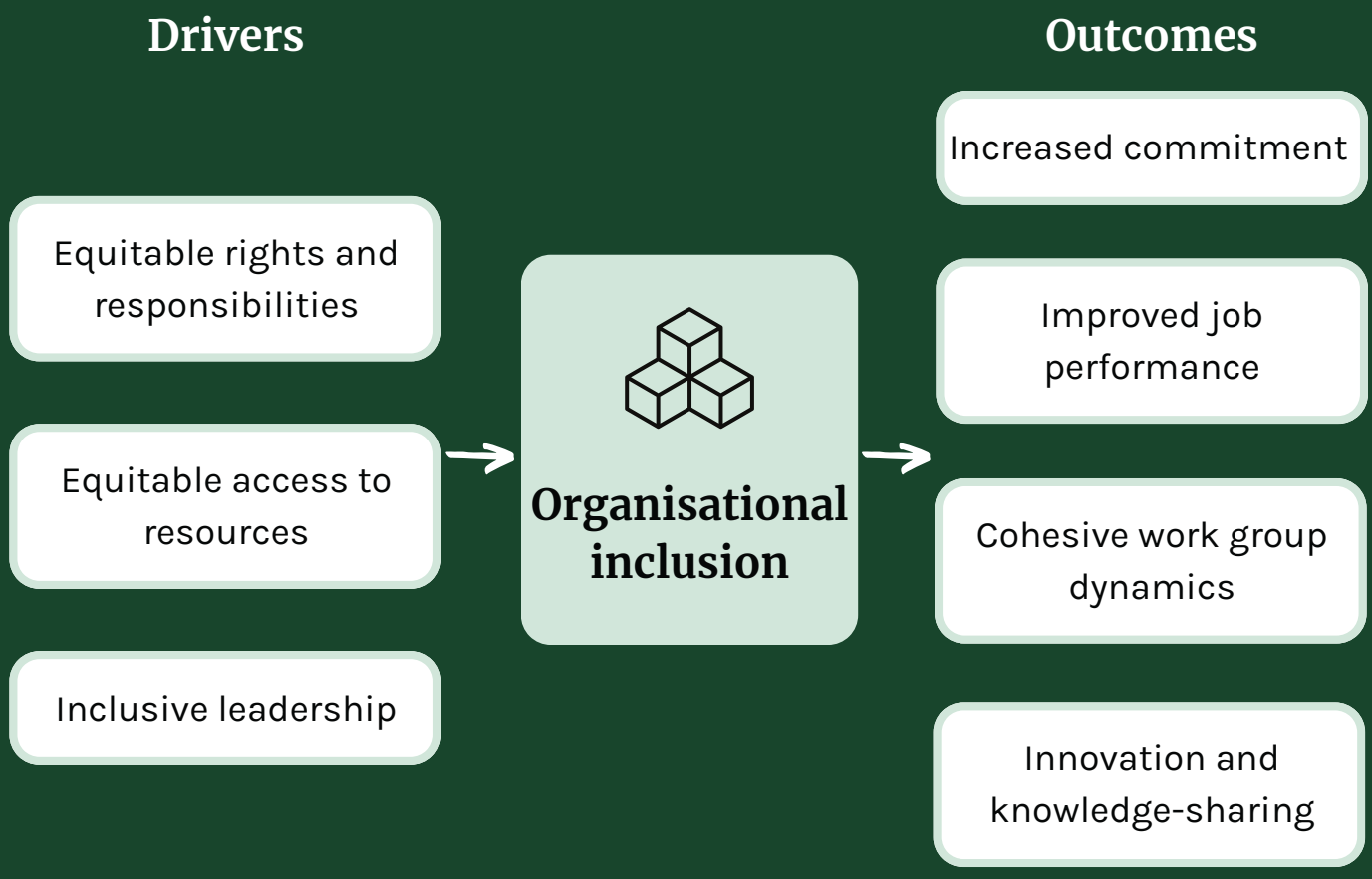
[3] Duong et al., 2024; Novachek et al., 2023; Leonard & Levine, 2006.
[4] Exclusion, on the other hand, can result in negative emotional states, lowered self-perception, and reduced job performance. Mor Barak, 2000; Hopkins et al., 2010; Brimhall et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2020.
[5] Coffman et al., 2022.
[6] Brimhall & Mor Barak 2018; Herring 2009.
[7] Bersin, 2019.

skilled employees because of unchecked biased thinking. Creating ***a culture where every member recognises the opportunity and responsibility to contribute meaningfully*** enables organisations to grow, succeed and have a positive societal impact.

Organisations do not operate in isolation from the broader societal context. Embracing inclusion requires understanding how power relations and societal norms influence workplace dynamics and decision-making. If organisations do not take proactive action to undo exclusionary attitudes and structures in the workplace, they are bound to reproduce them, with the potential harm that this causes to individuals and the organisation alike. Taking inclusion seriously is a sign of commitment to building a more just society and a sustainable future, where workplaces contribute to broader social progress and collective wellbeing.




Drivers
Structures, norms, and organisational values
Personality, characteristics, and personal values
Knowledge, skills, and experience
Agency and position in the organisation
Employee's experience of inclusion
Outcomes
Wellbeing
Creativity
Job satisfaction
Reduced stress
Readiness to address risks in business operations


Drivers
Equitable rights and responsibilities
Equitable access to resources
Inclusive leadership
Organisational inclusion
Outcomes
Increased commitment
Improved job performance
Cohesive work group dynamics
Innovation and knowledge-sharing



02

What Do We Mean When We Talk About Inclusion?

Understanding Inclusion

At its core, inclusion in the workplace is about meeting our social needs. We all have a fundamental desire for ***uniqueness*** – to be recognised and appreciated for who we are, as our authentic professional selves. We also have a need for ***acceptance*** – the knowledge that we are seen in a positive light, without having to change or hide who we are. Lastly, we seek ***belonging*** – to feel needed and to have a role with a purpose, as a valued member of our organisation. When these social needs are met, we are empowered to share new ideas, collaborate across teams, solve problems and build new business models and approaches.

While inclusion has entered the vocabulary in organisations worldwide, it is still often unclear

Social needs in the workplace



Uniqueness

I am recognized for who I am as a person and a professional.



Acceptance

I am appreciated without having to hide aspects of myself.



Belonging

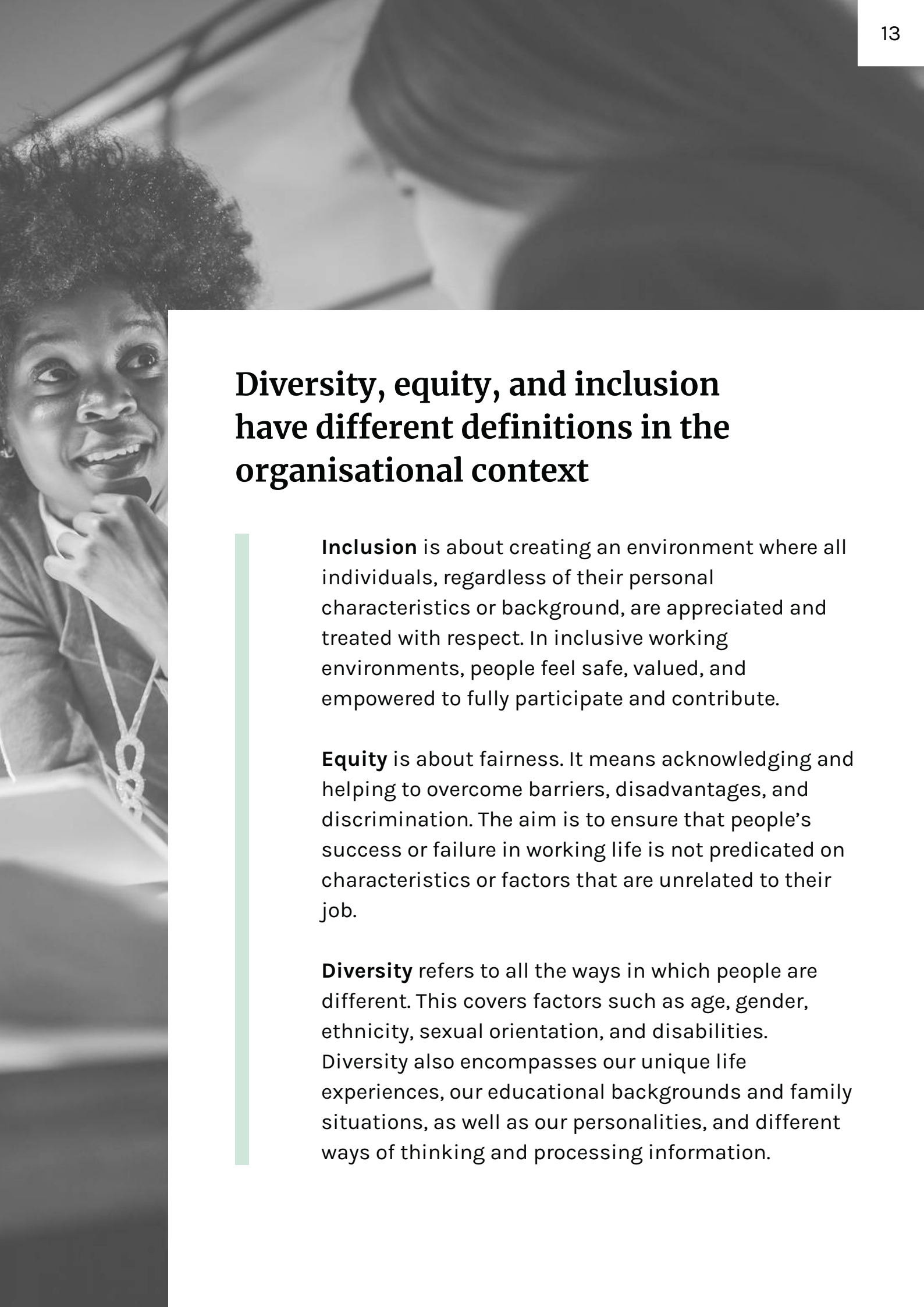
I feel connected to my colleagues through meaningful relationships, mutual support and a clear role that contributes to the organisation's mission.

what it means in practice and how it relates to diversity and equity, the two other, perhaps better-known terms that make up a commonly used combination for organisational development work.

Diversity and inclusion are sometimes even used interchangeably, adding to the confusion. However, ***diversity in itself does not guarantee that employees feel included in the workplace and its strategies and processes***. If managed poorly, increasing diversity might, in fact, lead to conflict and unfair practices. Diversity can be mandated through legislation, e.g., by enforcing representation of people with disabilities[8] or legislating for gender representation on the board of directors.[9] In contrast, inclusion emerges from our everyday actions and interactions with others in a supportive organisational environment.[10]

[8] International Labour Organisation, 2019.
[9] European Commission, 2025.
[10] Winters, 2013.





Diversity, equity, and inclusion have different definitions in the organisational context

Inclusion is about creating an environment where all individuals, regardless of their personal characteristics or background, are appreciated and treated with respect. In inclusive working environments, people feel safe, valued, and empowered to fully participate and contribute.

Equity is about fairness. It means acknowledging and helping to overcome barriers, disadvantages, and discrimination. The aim is to ensure that people's success or failure in working life is not predicated on characteristics or factors that are unrelated to their job.

Diversity refers to all the ways in which people are different. This covers factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disabilities. Diversity also encompasses our unique life experiences, our educational backgrounds and family situations, as well as our personalities, and different ways of thinking and processing information.



Inclusion is Something We Experience

First and foremost, it is helpful to understand that inclusion is experiential – it is about ***feeling and knowing that we belong***. It is the experience of being an insider, a valued member of the team with access to and leverage within the group or organisation.

This also explains why ***there is no one-size-fits-all solution for fostering inclusion in the workplace***. It is always a systemic and dynamic process that requires a shared understanding of what inclusion is and how to advance it in this particular team or organisation.[11]

[11] Ferdman, 2013.

In the workplace, inclusion is created on different levels



On the **individual level**, inclusion is based on the psychological motives of belonging, uniqueness, and acceptance. People want to feel that they belong in groups or organisations where they spend much of their time, without feeling that they need to hide or sacrifice who they are.

On the **relational level**, inclusion stems from positive interactions, especially between managers and employees. A shared understanding of the organisation's goals and of one's role in achieving them can create a positive dynamic where experiences of inclusion further strengthen this understanding.



On the **collective level**, inclusion arises from the organisation's so-called "inclusion climate", or how employees perceive its genuine efforts to foster inclusion. External cultural values and societal norms can either support or hinder the organisation's inclusion efforts.



Inclusion is Paradoxical

Inclusion is not an either/or scenario, but a spectrum. At one end, there is exclusion: leaving someone out of the group, not treating them as an insider, or not engaging with them, even when it would be appropriate. In the workplace, this can manifest itself as bullying, ostracism and harassment. At the other end of the spectrum, people are fully included as their authentic selves.

A good workplace is inclusive, but not too much so.[12] Inclusion does not mean that every employee should be consulted on every decision, which would risk slowing down operations and creating inefficiencies and burdensome workloads. Nor do we need to invest in the workplace emotionally in the same way as we do in our private lives. In other words, being at work does not need to feel like being with family. Instead, inclusive workplaces enable us to spend time in the social environments that really matter: with our friends, families, and communities.

Sometimes, inclusion is viewed simply as the absence of exclusion, even though people can feel both included and excluded simultaneously.[13] This is the paradoxical nature of inclusion: ***the strategies, processes, and actions to build inclusion can also inadvertently create a feeling of exclusion among some employees***. Fostering inclusion among the majority can exclude the minority, or vice versa.[14] For example, research on inclusion practices towards employees from refugee backgrounds shows that these practices can be both welcoming and limiting, forcing employees to find a balance between feeling included and meeting the expectations predefined by others.[15]

[12] Xiaotao et al., 2018.
[13] Rennstam & Sullivan, 2017.
[14] Jansen et al., 2016, Konrad et al., 2021.
[15] Ortlieb et al., 2021.



The paradoxes of inclusion[16]

Belonging and being different

People want to belong to a group and share behaviours, qualities, and attributes with others. They also want to maintain their individuality and be valued for their uniqueness.

Boundaries and flexibility

Boundaries and norms in a group must be stable and well defined. They also need to be flexible and open to being renegotiated when new group members arrive.

Safety and discomfort

Inclusion is about making people feel safe and more at ease. This requires learning and becoming more attentive to the needs of others, which can be uncomfortable.

[16] Ferdman, 2017.



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Inclusion requires continuous learning

Building more inclusive workplaces means doing some things differently, which requires continuous learning and unlearning. Open dialogue, sharing experiences, actively listening to others, and normalising mistakes can enable collective learning, transforming resistance into understanding and a more inclusive work environment for everyone. We do not need to be perfect; making progress is what counts.



03

How Do Employees Experience Inclusion?

What Shapes Our Sense of Inclusion?

Our personal experience of inclusion is shaped by many different factors. ***Current societal norms, histories of marginalisation, organisational policies and processes, and our individual attributes can all affect our likelihood of feeling included in a group or workplace.***

Discriminatory behaviours and structures are a barrier to inclusion. Research shows that especially people with disabilities, racialised people, women, sexual and gender minorities, individuals from socioeconomically marginalised backgrounds, and many other groups are structurally at a disadvantage in working life. Discrimination creates negative experiences, and results in unfair outcomes. At the same time, factors such as a higher education level or greater work experience in the organisation can be advantageous as regards becoming part of the group.[17]

Our personal values and traits can also shape our perception of being included.[18] Humility, openness, and an appreciation of diversity can strengthen the feeling of belonging, as can self-awareness, self-esteem, and confidence. Social skills such as active listening, empathy, and self-monitoring, or the ability to regulate one's emotions and behaviours, also make it easier to feel included. Employees who understand the organisational structures and power dynamics and feel that they have control over their own experiences are more likely to feel they belong to the group.

[17] Hope Pelled et al., 1999.
[18] Hays-Thomas et al., 2012.

Three key factors that shape an employee's experience of inclusion



Psychological

What an employee thinks and feels about the relationships between themselves and others in the workplace; an experience of being included and accepted as an insider by others, on both cognitive and emotional levels.



Structural

An employee is an esteemed part of the team or organisation, has access to the necessary resources, and can influence decisions that impact their work. Organisational policies, practices, and norms support the employee's meaningful involvement in tasks, goals, social interactions, and workplace dynamics.



Behavioural

An employee experiences and engages in inclusive behaviours, or acts of including others, and believes that such behaviours are expected and rewarded by the organisation.

Everyone Plays a Part in Creating an Inclusive Workplace





The ability to contribute to workplace processes and decisions is key to feeling included, but how much agency and influence an employee has often depends on their role.[19] Those in positions of power, mainly leaders and managers, have a greater ability – and thus a greater responsibility – to foster inclusion within their teams and the organisation. Inclusive leadership practices are explored further in the next section.

However, everyone plays a role in building an inclusive workplace. Supporting and rewarding inclusive behaviours and work skills fosters more inclusive interactions and, ultimately, a more inclusive culture in the workplace. Anyone involved in hiring, running meetings, and making decisions about how resources are shared and managed can help make these processes more inclusive. Below are some examples of actions that anyone can consider in order to advance inclusion. Given that everyone has different circumstances, abilities, and roles, these actions may look different depending on individual situations.

[19] Shore et al., 2018.

Everyone Plays a Part in Creating an Inclusive Workplace

1. Learn about and become aware of how your personality and background shape your behaviour, thinking, and work style in order to better understand others.
2. Notice others in daily interactions: greet colleagues, encourage people to speak up in meetings and take a moment to ask how someone's day is going.
3. Learn about what constitutes inappropriate behaviour and how to act if you encounter it in the workplace.
4. Use non-discriminatory language. Consider different communication preferences and the impact words can have on others.
5. Slow down decision-making about people to check for biases; reflect on what factors are influencing your judgments.
6. Own your learning. Stay open and curious about others' experiences.



04

How Do We Foster Inclusion in Practice?



Start with Strategy

Fostering inclusion starts with strategy. ***Organisations must first understand what inclusion is and how it relates to their values, culture, sustainability commitments and business goals.*** In an inclusive organisation, there is clarity and consensus as to what the values and norms are, and how inclusion efforts are actively supported.

With this understanding, organisations must incorporate inclusion into their strategies and practices, and resource the work accordingly. In practice, this concerns the culture, leadership, and ways of working, and goes beyond simply trying to hire for more diversity or having one-off celebrations during Women's History Month or Pride Month, for example. Employee resource groups are an example of a long-term, structural practice that can support the success and wellbeing of under-represented employees when they are well resourced and managed.

It is important to acknowledge the paradoxes of inclusion, particularly people's need to feel they belong without having to sacrifice their uniqueness. Thus, ***organisations must emphasise both connection and differences in their inclusion work.***[20] On the one hand, they should remind employees of how important everyone is as regards achieving the organisation's goals – "we all have an important role in this" – and, on the other hand, they should understand how individuals may experience inclusion in many different ways based on their different backgrounds, personalities, experiences, and many other factors.

[20] Bond & Haynes, 2014.



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Embed inclusion into your organisational strategy

Building inclusion into your strategy starts with understanding your employees' experiences and your organisation's culture and leadership practices. Every organisation is unique, so while you might be tempted to benchmark other organisation's strategies, areas of focus, or metrics, it is of utter importance that you assess the unique needs of your team, your vision, your values and your resources, and develop your own strategy based on those. Prioritise, set clear goals, and plan actionable initiatives. Add meaningful indicators of success to measure progress. Keep employees in the loop throughout the process – gather feedback and hold people accountable for following through.





In an inclusive environment, people are more creative and comfortable sharing their perspectives freely, feel less stress and anxiety, show more commitment, and, ultimately, perform better.

Actions to promote inclusion

1. Establish inclusive practices in hiring, promotion, and development
2. Communicate and ask for feedback
3. Follow universal design
4. Equip leaders to create inclusive teams

Establish inclusive practices in hiring, promotion, and development[21]

Blend practices that focus on merits and fairness with those that actively support diversity. Ensure that hiring and promotion are based on skills and performance and give everyone an equal chance to succeed based on their abilities and track record as professionals. This means being objective in assessments and avoiding biases that favour one group over another. Career support and recognition are practices that have some of the most positive effects on perceptions of inclusion.[22]

On the other hand, it is essential to recognise that the playing field is not level and to address different experiences and starting points by providing support to disadvantaged team members and ensuring equitable access to opportunities. This can mean creating employee resource groups, mentorship programmes, and policies that address the needs of under-represented groups. Combining these two approaches addresses systemic inequities and validates the experiences of marginalised individuals, while maintaining opportunities for everyone.

[21] Konrad et al., 2021.
[22] Duong et al., 2024.





Communicate and ask for feedback[23]

Inclusive communication means listening actively, avoiding assumptions, and focusing on individuals rather than stereotypes. Replace discriminatory language with inclusive word choices and only mention specific personal identities or characteristics, such as race, gender or disability, when they are relevant to the context. Use multiple channels and modes of communication, ensure proper documentation, and be open to feedback.

Emphasise that diversity and inclusion are valued because they enrich the organisation, not just because they might benefit the bottom line. Highlight the fact that every employee has an important role in reaching the organisation's goals, with different roles being crucial at different times.

[23] Feitosa et al., 2022, Vainikainen, 2022.



Follow universal design[24]

Create spaces that provide accessibility to all, whether they need it or not. Build an accessible physical environment from the get-go. To account for neurodivergence, this could mean offering quiet spaces, allowing flexible schedules, support with planning work projects and timelines, and gathering information about preferred forms and channels of communication.

Promote inclusion in remote or hybrid work settings by establishing routines, sharing meeting materials in advance, and aligning practices regarding the use of video during virtual meetings.

[24] Silver et al., 2023, Szulc, 2022, Byrd, 2022.





Equip leaders to create inclusive teams

Effective leadership satisfies both the need to be unique and the need to be a part of the team. It increases individual agency by allowing employees to contribute to processes and decisions and ensure that everyone can access the necessary resources. Inclusive leadership is a competence that can be developed, and inclusive organisations support their leaders in this work.





Inclusive Leaders Lead by Example

The role and responsibility of organisational leadership cannot be overlooked when creating an inclusive workplace. ***Inclusive practices and leadership styles are critical when it comes to creating an environment where all employees can thrive and contribute meaningfully.***

While commitment from senior management is needed to drive the strategic focus towards inclusion, it is often individual managers and team leaders who embody inclusion and influence employees' work experiences on a daily basis. Building the skills of an inclusive leader begins with an understanding of diversity and the varied backgrounds, needs, and experiences employees bring to the workplace.

Leaders should lead by example. Mutual respect and trust enhance the feeling of inclusion, prompting some researchers to suggest that ***the quality of the interactions between leaders and their team members is even more important in creating a sense of inclusion than the employees' job satisfaction or their commitment to the organisation.***[25]

Leaders can also have a negative influence in this regard. Leadership style and quality can be key factors in creating a culture of exclusion. Leaders that exhibit exclusionary behaviours have likely not reflected on their own biases, privileges, and positions of power. Such leaders likely do not actively listen to the needs, desires, and contributions of their team members and may exclude and ostracise employees who do not conform to certain social norms.

[25] Brimhall et al., 2017.

Leaders that advance inclusion:[26]

Are fair and open in their interactions

Are role models to others and foster a culture of respect

Communicate a compelling vision and purpose everyone can identify with

Treat all employees as unique yet equally valuable individuals

Consider multiple perspectives when making decisions

Encourage employees to voice their views

Support individual autonomy and recognise team members' contributions

Explain how organisational practices align with inclusion



[26] Cottrill et al., 2014, Boekhorst, 2015, Gotsis & Grimani, 2017, Judge & Piccolo, 2004, Brimhall & Palinkas, 2020, Carmeli et al., 2010, Randel et al., 2018.



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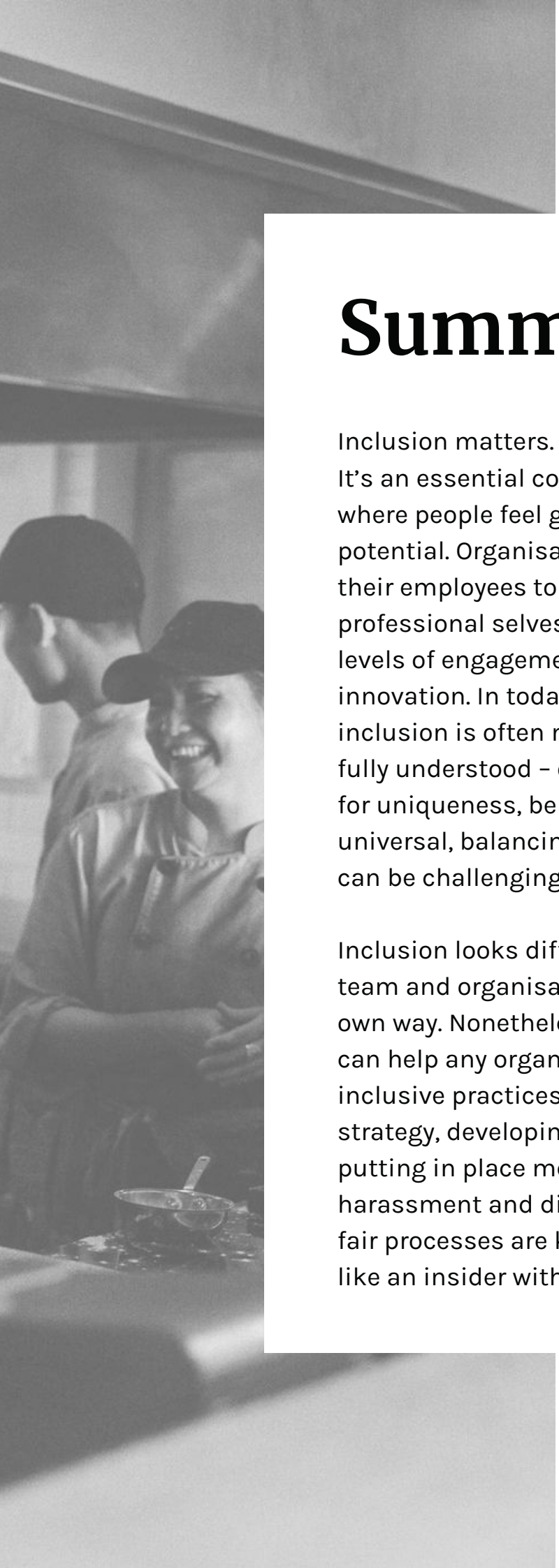
How to Measure Inclusion

A common misconception is that diversity is measurable, but inclusion is not. However, well-designed surveys are a good tool for gauging employees' experiences of inclusion. Based on the surveys we have conducted, we know that the feeling of belonging correlates with good leadership practices, professional development opportunities, a sense of agency over decisions that affect one's work directly, and the experience of being valued for one’s unique talents and skills at work. Measuring and having data-driven conversations about inclusion helps organisations to set a baseline, identify goals, track progress, and foster greater accountability in inclusion efforts.



Summary

Inclusion matters. It leads to better business results. It's an essential component in healthy workplaces where people feel good and perform to their full potential. Organisations benefit from empowering their employees to contribute fully as their authentic professional selves. We see this reflected in higher levels of engagement, retention, wellbeing and innovation. In today's workplaces, the concept of inclusion is often mentioned, but it is not always fully understood – or experienced. While our needs for uniqueness, belonging, and acceptance are universal, balancing them with organisational goals can be challenging.

Inclusion looks different in every setting, and each team and organisation needs to navigate it in its own way. Nonetheless, there are certain steps that can help any organisation move forward. Aligning inclusive practices with the broader business strategy, developing inclusive leadership skills, putting in place mechanisms to prevent and address harassment and discrimination, and establishing fair processes are key to ensuring that everyone feels like an insider without having to hide who they are.

Diverse backgrounds and perspectives are enriching and valuable, but their mere presence in an organisation is rarely enough. People need to be actively included, in ways that meet our basic social needs for uniqueness, acceptance and belonging, and that allow us to contribute with our ideas, skills and expertise. Fostering inclusion often means stepping out of our comfort zones in an effort to understand and embrace differences. However, the rewards for this systematic work and the occasional discomfort of continuous learning are plenty: employees feel and perform better and are eager to strive towards shared goals, ultimately creating a competitive advantage and better working life for everyone.



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Inklusiiv was born of a vision: a world where working life is inclusive and equitable for all.

Based in Helsinki, Finland, we are a partner to forward-thinking teams and organisations worldwide to help them build better workplaces where people can reach their potential.

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Gratitude

We would like to express our gratitude to the supporting members of Inklusiiv ry who made this research possible:

- Ernst & Young Oy
- Fingrid Oyj
- Gofore Oyj
- Icebreaker Fund Management Oy
- Maki Ventures Oy
- Siili Solutions Oyj
- SSAB Europe Oy
- Supercell Oy
- TietoEVRY Oyj
- VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland