



AIA Best Practices: Creating a more equitable culture for your architectural practice

How justice, equity, diversity and inclusion make your business stronger

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Summary

“Diversity” has become a buzzword in the profession, but it’s more than just the latest business fad. It’s a new way of thinking about who we are, who we work with, how we design, and for whom we design. It means matching the diverse clients, users, and public we serve with equally diverse design teams. It means understanding how diversity affects architectural design. And it means making the kind of workplace that attracts a diverse talent pool. Understanding diversity will give firms the edge they need to thrive in future economies.

Firms that embrace diversity get better design, improved business, and a richer work experience – these are the seven steps taken by many firms that can help you intentionally increase diversity within your practice.

Starting the conversation

“As a profession, you ought to be taking stands on these kinds of things. If you don’t as architects stand up and . . . deliberately seek to bring in minority people who have been discriminated against in many cases, either kept out because of your indifference or couldn’t make it—it takes seven to 10 years to become an architect—then you will have done a disservice, . . . most of all, to yourselves.” —Whitney M. Young Jr., 1968 Keynote Address to the AIA Convention

If you look at a group photograph of principals from most 20th-century American architectural firms, what are you likely to see? Mostly white men. Since architecture became a profession, it’s been predominantly white and male. But in the 21st century, that’s beginning to change. And smart architectural firms are embracing that change.

“Diversity” has become a buzzword in the profession, but it’s more than just the latest business fad. It’s a new way of thinking about who we are, who we work with, how we design, and for whom we design. It means moving beyond barriers and stereotypes about culture, ethnicity, skin color, race, religion, age, sexuality, physical abilities, political opinions, and economic settings to form diverse teams of talented professionals to

create excellent work. It means matching the diverse clients, users, and public we serve with equally diverse design teams. It means understanding how diversity affects architectural design. And it means making the kind of workplace that attracts a diverse talent pool. Understanding diversity will give firms the edge they need to thrive in future economies. In short, diversity helps make architectural firms competitive in today's global marketplace. It gives architects the opportunity to practice with integrity and to raise the standards of their profession.

Beyond diversity

But diversity is just one component of a much broader concept: justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (J.E.D.I.).

- **Justice:** fair and just processes
- **Equity:** equitable access to the same opportunities
- **Diversity:** recognizing differences
- **Inclusion:** valuing, respecting, and embracing those differences

Most of us understand the concept of justice, but we may have trouble distinguishing diversity, inclusion, and equity. This whimsical analogy may be helpful: Diversity is asking someone to the party (the more, the more different, the better). Inclusion is asking someone to dance. Equity is asking someone to share their playlist at the party.

Fifty years ago, few architectural firms gave any thought to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Women and people of color were rarely welcomed into the profession. The exceptions, such as Denise Scott Brown, Paul Williams, and I.M. Pei, succeeded through extraordinary talent and perseverance. Beginning with the civil rights movements of the 1960s, things very slowly began to change. But within the architecture profession, the shift was even slower.

In recent years, however, a spotlight has been aimed at architects, who profess to be working for the public good but often fall far short of that goal in their own practices. As we'll see below, achieving a working environment of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion is achievable for any architectural firm.

Position statement

Programs that promote an inclusive environment help to position firms as desirable and inclusive places to work—and by being more diverse, they are better positioned to succeed in a global market. Firms should be committed to increasing diversity and inclusion within their organization and the profession. To that end, firms should establish J.E.D.I. programs to push diversity and inclusivity forward.

Why J.E.D.I.?

What value do justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion bring to an architectural practice? In other words, what do firm owners get out of it? Simply put, they get better design, improved business, and a richer work experience. Justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion are driven by three imperatives:

The demographic imperative

Take a look around you. No matter where you are in America, you see that our clients, the available workforce, and society at large are more diverse than ever. Far more immigrants arrive from Latin America, Asia, and Africa than from Europe, and they bring diverse cultural and design perspectives to our profession. In 2020 (as this is written), the percentage of foreign-born residents (mostly non-Europeans) in the U.S. is higher than it's been since 1930 (even with recent immigration restrictions, that percentage has flattened but not dropped).

Diversity is especially evident in urban areas: In 15 of the 20 largest U.S. cities, people of color represent more than half of the population.¹ That this trend towards greater diversity will continue to increase can be seen in U.S. demographics statistics. Of Americans 55 to 64 years old, 74% are white, while among those 10 to 14 years old (i.e., the incoming workforce a decade from now), 54% are white.

Similarly, the percentage of women in the profession will continue to increase. Just 50 years ago, architectural schools could (and many did) legally bar women from entering their programs. Today, roughly half of all architectural students are women. Yet many women with architectural degrees find themselves drifting to other professions when they perceive unequal treatment with their male counterparts.²

And then there are LGBTQ people, who have always been 4% to 5% of the workforce but are now far less willing to hide their gender identities at work.

The business imperative

Our clients are increasingly more diverse and expect the same of their consultants. The days when six white guys in suits can successfully interview for a project are over. And diversity helps us not only win work but also do the work profitably. Research has shown³ that the more diverse an organization is, the more successful (i.e., profitable and productive) it is.

How does this happen? First, the younger generations of architects, designers, and emerging professionals are themselves highly diverse, and they are looking for workplaces that embrace that diversity. Shutting out that talent can only hurt our businesses.

Second, a diverse staff can produce better, more creative work. Creativity is enhanced when more diverse points of view are allowed to contribute. Having a diverse staff, *at all levels*, will result in better designs and work processes.

And third, the more rigid an organization is, the more likely it is to shut down voices and perspectives, and to stifle innovation and engagement. Diverse organizations are also innovative ones.

The human imperative

Architects often see themselves as visionaries of human societies. Our success as visionaries is directly related to our ability to embrace the full range of human diversity. The history of white male architects designing for diverse human populations has been, to say the least, dismal. Today and in the future, for architects to be social visionaries we must represent and reflect the diverse human societies we serve. We must, if we are to design authentically, develop highly refined cultural competence—that is, the ability to

understand the cultural aspects of our communities and the intercultural interactions that affect our work and our business.

How to promote justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in your firm

Once you've accepted the three imperatives as valid reasons to embrace diversity in your firm, what's next? How can you increase diversity in your workplace? The first thing to recognize is that increased diversity won't just happen on its own. It will require a specific effort by your firm. And it won't happen overnight; it's a long-term effort that takes focused and consistent attention. Fortunately, a number of firms have taken steps to increase their diversity, and we can learn from their experiences.

Step 1: Create your vision

Before you can start down the path to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, you must create your J.E.D.I. vision and set goals for what you want to achieve. Your vision should be aspirational, aiming for your firm to be at least as diverse as the population it serves. To achieve this vision, you should set specific qualitative and quantitative goals, and a timeline for achieving them.

Step 2: Find your leader

Identify a person to lead your justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion mission, someone who's empowered and accountable for the strategic vision and implementation. This leader should have a passion and commitment for advancing the J.E.D.I. principles and should understand the specific conditions of the profession. In addition, this leadership requires grassroots efforts and innovative thinking. The leader should *not* be a Human Resources role, although HR can be a valued partner and provide the necessary compliance expertise.

The leader doesn't have to be of an underrepresented demographic (woman, person of color, etc.); however, it is typically women and persons of color who gravitate toward these roles because of their personal experiences and everyday reality of dealing with issues of bias, racism, and sexism in their careers. What is most important is that the leader *believes* in the value and urgency of advancing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the firm and the profession.

Step 3: Create a strategic plan

As we've noted, some firms have already started on the path to advancing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The strategies below have proven effective and are scalable to accommodate your firm's size and available resources. What is essential is to create a strategic plan that is appropriate for your firm.

Your strategic plan should focus on three areas: your firm, the profession at large, and the pathway to the profession

Your firm: You have the most control over your own firm, so it's advisable to start your efforts there. All of the following efforts will help you meet your goals:

- Assess the level of diversity and inclusion within your firm.
- Research and implement best practices for a diversity, inclusion, and representation strategy.
- Assess the impact of diversity on your projects and clients.
- Engage internal and external experts to advise and monitor your firm's efforts to increase diversity, inclusion, and representation.
- Invite speakers from academia and the business world to speak on the subject.
- Seek expert advice to help develop a policy on diversity.
- Provide resources and training to make J.E.D.I. leadership and management a core competency.
- Collect and disseminate data on programs that demonstrate performance consistent with your firm's policies and objectives for diversity, inclusion, and representation.
- Develop tools, metrics, and processes to track success and celebrate achievements.
- Promote “affinity groups” or “employee resource groups” (ERGs) within your firm. Affinity groups and ERGs give employees who identify as, for example, Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ as well as others who want to develop their cultural competence, the opportunities to share experiences among themselves and with others in the firm. These groups are ideally generated at a grassroots level but may need the program leader to encourage their creation.

The profession at large: You may be thinking, “I’m just one architect, and we’re just one firm. How can I/we change the profession?” Every journey begins with a first step, and here are three ways to get started:

- Create opportunities to educate the public and celebrate the work of underrepresented architects.
- Partner with diverse (minority, women-owned, LGBTQ-identified) firms in a mentor-protégé relationship.
- Support and participate in organizations committed to advancing diversity in the profession, e.g., National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA), Equity by Design, Women in Architecture (WIA), Women’s Leadership Summit.

The pathway to the profession: The demographics of our profession are driven by the diversity of students who choose to enter it. K-12 and community college students who don’t see themselves represented are less likely to pursue architecture as a career. Collectively, we must build a pathway for students who are not typically exposed to career options in our profession—including those entering architectural schools—by deliberately increasing access to knowledge and mentorship. This starts at the elementary school level. Here are some of the things we can do:

- Collaborate with academic partners to advocate for changes that promote greater diversity, inclusion, and representation among architectural students.

- Conduct K-12 and higher-education outreach to advance awareness and mentorship to underrepresented demographic groups (e.g., visiting a K-12 school, leading K-12 career workshops, and participating in university career fairs and studio critiques).
- Support and volunteer with allied organizations that focus on building a diverse pathway (e.g., NOMA, Pipeline Summer Camp, ACE Mentorship).
- Engage community colleges in mentorship and recruitment; a large percentage of Black and LatinX architecture students pursue preprofessional degrees that don't provide eligibility for licensure and often go uncounted and untapped.

Step 4: Create a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion organization

Other than for very small firms, one person can't singlehandedly turn a firm into a J.E.D.I. leader. It takes a team, with the size and makeup of the team depending on the size and complexity of your firm. The following recommended organization is based on the upper extreme—in other words, large multi-office global firms. However, it can be scaled to fit the needs of any firm. (See diagram below.)

Firmwide Executive Advocate: For firmwide core values to "stick," they must be consistently reinforced by the firm's leader (e.g., the CEO, president, or person whose name is on the front door).

Firmwide J.E.D.I. Program Leader: The justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion leader is responsible for developing and integrating strategies into recruitment, retention, development, and engagement programs, and measuring the success of initiatives across the firm. This role manages programs, initiatives, and progress. The program must be appropriately funded, and the leader must be empowered to make the program successful and be accountable for its progress.

Firmwide Diversity Council: A Diversity Council, led by your program leader, will implement your firm's strategic plan. Membership in this council should represent the full range of your firm's organization. For multi-office firms, it should include representatives of all offices. For multi-disciplinary firms, each discipline should be represented. And each of the typically underrepresented groups (e.g., women, Blacks, Asians, Latinx, and LGBTQ) should be represented. The council supports the program leader in establishing a focused and deliberate approach to creating a culture of diversity, increasing economic equality, and improving interpersonal relationships of teams.

Firmwide Partners: Your Diversity Council will need the support of everyone in your firm but especially your human resources, marketing, and public relations teams as well as your design leadership.

Local Diversity Champions: To provide a direct connection between your Diversity Council and your staff, it might (depending on your firm's size and complexity) be useful to identify—by office, discipline, or levels of experience—champions who can implement the strategic plan at the local level.

JUSTICE, EQUITY, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION PROGRAM LEADER

DIVERSITY COUNCIL

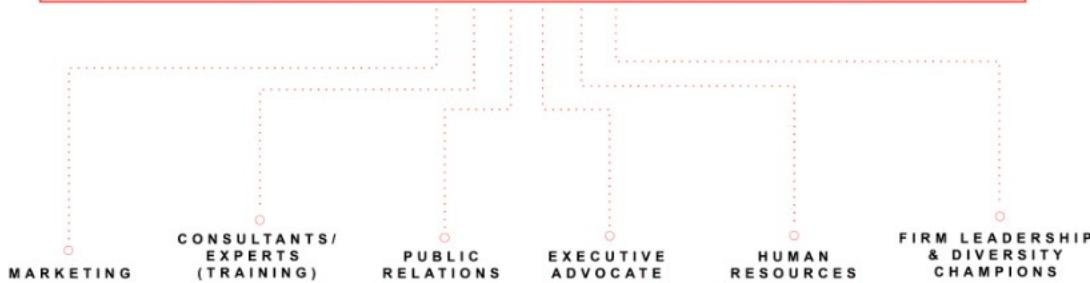


DIAGRAM OF RECOMMENDED DIVERSITY COUNCIL PARTICIPANTS

Step 5: Develop tools

To have an effective justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion program, you need the right tools, such as the following:

- Recruitment/retention programs, designed with a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion lens. Evaluate and modify your interview process to ensure it reflects your firm's values.
- Learning and development programs, focused on racial bias, cultural competency, difficult conversations, and the effect they have on your work and your communities.
- Cultural training, within teams, projects, and office culture, to reinforce “bringing your whole self to work.”
- Outreach that targets historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as well as organizations focused on diversity.

Step 6: Measure your progress

Achieving high levels of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion is not easy, and it's not quick. It's more a marathon than a sprint. Remember, you (as well as the rest of us in the profession) are attempting to reverse decades of institutionalized behavior and practice.

As with most activities, the way to know how you're doing is by measuring your progress. To begin, your program leader needs to evaluate your firm's current culture of diversity and its demographic data. What percentage of your employees are women, Black, Latinx, Asian, or LGBTQ? How well does that represent the demographics of the population you serve? (Hint: If you find that you have few or none of any of these

groups, or that you have no out-of-the-closet LGBTQ employees, that's a sign your firm may have cultural problems.) Ask your staff the question: "Does everyone feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work?"

Next, create a timetable of ambitious but achievable milestones, with targeted, quantifiable goals for each milestone. Be ready to adjust, redirect, and act depending on the societal curveballs coming your way. Now more than ever, what happens in society affects our work, culture, and people.

Then, when curveballs do come your way (and they will), create venues for your staff to discuss them. It's important to remember that what happens outside your firm might be deeply affecting many of your staff.

Step 7: The final step

Sorry to disappoint you, but there is no final step in a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion program. Even when your firm achieves the goals you set for it (and that will likely take at least several years), there is always more that can be done—in outreach, in building the pathway, in recruitment, in training. But take heart in this: By the time you reach this step, most if not all your staff will be supporting it, and the results will become exponential. Advancing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the architectural profession is within your (and our) reach. But those crucial first steps need to be taken. In the words of Representative John Lewis, "Find a way to get in the way."

Footnotes:

1. [Race and Ethnicity in the United States](#) – Percentage of people of color in the 20 largest U.S. cities: New York (68%), Los Angeles (71%), Chicago (68%), Houston (75%), Phoenix (56%), Philadelphia (65%), San Antonio (74%), San Diego (57%), Dallas (71%), San Jose (73%), Austin (51%), Jacksonville (47%), Fort Worth (59%), Columbus (42%), Charlotte (57%), San Francisco (59%), Indianapolis (43%), Seattle (34%), Denver (47%), and Washington, D.C. (64%).
2. [Where Are All the Female Architects?](#)
3. [Here's How Workplace Diversity Boosts Profitability](#)

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This article corresponds to:

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Chapter 02 – Diversity and Demographics

Section 01 – Diversity and Practice Management