Inclusive Language in the Workplace: Survey & Scientific Findings

This scientific study investigates the importance of inclusive language in promoting workplace diversity and inclusion. It highlights the potential impact of language habits on perceptions, stereotypes, and workplace culture. The study examines employees' attitudes towards inclusive language and their willingness to adopt it consistently. It also explores the role of language in perpetuating stereotypes and its influence on workplace inclusion. The findings emphasize the significance of language in shaping organizational environments and provide insights for organizations to prioritize inclusive language practices in their diversity and inclusion strategies.

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Introduction

Background Information

Workplace diversity and inclusion have emerged as critical strategic imperatives in the 21st-century corporate milieu in an ever-evolving global marketplace. From enhancing creativity to driving performance, a wealth of empirical research has established the advantages of a diverse and inclusive workplace.

McKinsey & Co.'s groundbreaking studies, "Diversity Matters" (2015) and "Delivering Through Diversity" (2018), offer a compelling argument for the business value of diversity. The studies, which covered hundreds of companies across multiple countries, identified a robust positive correlation between a company's diversity - particularly at the executive level - and its likelihood of financial outperformance.

The Boston Consulting Group's study reinforces this assertion, "How Diverse Leadership Teams Boost Innovation" (2018), which offered a new dimension to the diversity-performance linkage. The study reported that companies with above-average diversity on their management teams reported innovation revenue that was 19 percentage points higher than those with below-average leadership diversity, effectively highlighting the importance of diversity in fostering an innovative culture.

However, despite the compelling business case for diversity and inclusion, the commitment to these principles could be more consistent across the corporate landscape. This is evidenced by the "Diversity and Inclusion Pulse Survey" (2019) conducted by Russell Reynolds Associates, which suggested significant variation in the degree of diversity and inclusion commitment among surveyed companies. The survey found that while 47% of companies had comprehensive diversity and inclusion strategies, another 20% had limited or no such strategies.

This disparity underscores the ongoing challenges and complexities in implementing diversity and inclusion strategies and reveals an imperative for deeper understanding and insight. Consequently, it is against this backdrop of inconsistent commitment to diversity and inclusion that our study is situated. We aim to explore the attitudes toward diversity and inclusion within organizations and uncover potential avenues for advancing these crucial principles.

Purpose of the Study

Building on the research above and recognizing the diverse landscape of diversity and inclusion commitments within organizations, this study aims to delve deeper into understanding the nuanced attitudes toward these principles. The focus here extends beyond the typical parameters of race, gender, and ethnicity to encompass the more subtle but equally critical realm of language use within the workplace.

Language serves as a fundamental medium of communication and interaction in the workplace. It can also shape perceptions, foster stereotypes, and act as a gateway to inclusion. Inclusive language, therefore, is instrumental in fostering a sense of belonging and respect while reducing bias and prejudice.

- **Explore the influence of language on inclusion:** This study aims to highlight the power of language in shaping organizational culture and driving inclusion. Words and phrases used in daily communication play a critical role in influencing how employees perceive their work environment and each other. By identifying the dynamics of language use in workplaces, we aim to underline the importance of inclusive language and help organizations prioritize its use in their diversity and inclusion strategies.

- **Investigate willingness to incorporate inclusive language:** Understanding employees' attitudes towards inclusive language will shed light on the extent of its acceptance and the desire to adapt to changes in language use. This aspect of the study is critical to gauge the practical feasibility of implementing digital tools that promote inclusive language. By determining the level of acceptability and potential uptake of such tools within organizations, we can provide a more nuanced understanding of the landscape of language use in workplaces.

- **Identify potential barriers to implementing inclusive language tools:** A significant component of this study is to identify potential obstacles that may hinder the adoption of inclusive language and the tools that promote it. By doing so, we hope to provide organizations with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges they may face in pursuing inclusive language use, thus equipping them with the knowledge to create more effective implementation strategies.

Through these focal points, the study intends to deliver a layered understanding of the role of language in enhancing workplace diversity and inclusion.

Research Questions

The research aims to delve into the intricacies of language use within workplace environments, specifically focusing on the importance of inclusivity and its implications for diversity. As such, the study raises several key questions that guide the direction of the investigation:

- **Language Habits and Their Modifiability:** Can our language habits be effectively changed? This question seeks to examine the plasticity of language habits and the feasibility of altering them in a meaningful, lasting way.

- **Limits to Language Changes:** Is there a threshold for "reasonable" language changes? The study explores perceptions around the extent of potential modification to language practices, aiming to define what may be considered acceptable or excessive adjustments.

- **Language's Role in Perpetuating Stereotypes:** To what extent can our language enforce harmful stereotypes? This question looks into the potentially detrimental effects of language use, primarily focusing on its capacity to inadvertently reinforce harmful biases and stereotypes.

- **Willingness to Use Inclusive Language:** To what extent are individuals prepared to use inclusive language consistently? This area of investigation looks at personal commitment to inclusive language practices, seeking to understand the readiness of individuals to make a conscious effort to ensure their language promotes inclusivity.

- **Impact of Language on Workplace Inclusion:** Does our language influence workplace inclusion? This question probes into the potential links between language use and the atmosphere of inclusion within professional environments, underlining the role of language as a tool for cultivating inclusivity or fostering exclusion.

- **Organizational Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion:** How invested is your organization in diversity and inclusion topics? This question assesses the corporate commitment to these critical areas, providing insight into how organizations value and actively pursue diversity and inclusion initiatives.

The study aims to elucidate the complexities of language use in workplaces and its interplay with diversity and inclusion by addressing these research questions. The responses will provide valuable insights into the current landscape of inclusivity in professional environments and contribute to developing effective strategies to promote more inclusive language practices.

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Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a survey research design, a methodology recognized for effectively capturing subjective opinions, attitudes, and experiences across a broad demographic. Surveys efficiently gather diverse perspectives, contributing to a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding diversity, inclusion, and language use within the workplace. This methodological choice promotes gathering diverse viewpoints, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of workplace diversity, inclusion, and language use.

Survey Design

The study's survey is grounded in a considerable body of research that acknowledges language as a significant influencer of perceptions and attitudes (Boroditsky, n.d.; Linguistic Society of America, n.d.). The multiple-choice survey explores participants' perspectives on diversity and inclusion, their current language use, and their willingness to adapt their language towards inclusivity. This approach allows us to gather measurable data while gaining insights into employee attitudes and behaviors.

The survey's design also incorporates pertinent findings from previous studies on business performance, leadership diversity, and organizational culture by McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Russell Reynolds Associates. This multidisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the research themes.

Participants

The pool of participants for this study was diverse. It encompassed 162 employees from diverse professional backgrounds and roles, spanning companies of various sizes. The smallest company comprised only two employees, while the largest, 77,000 housed. This broad spectrum of representation across companies of different scales enriched the data with experiences and perspectives, ensuring the study's findings have broader applicability and relevance across different organizational contexts.

Data Collection

Data was collected via Google Forms over two weeks, ensuring participants' convenience and efficiency in gathering responses. The online nature of the survey tool facilitated the quick collection process, contributing to the overall reliability of the study's data.

Results

Response Rate

A total of 162 employees responded to the survey.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1: Do you believe that our language habits can be changed effectively?

Out of the total respondents (161), the majority (52%) believe that language habits can be changed effectively. This is a promising indication of the perceived malleability of language and its potential to evolve in response to shifts in cultural norms and societal standards.

Meanwhile, a substantial number of respondents (47%) expressed a more cautious outlook, suggesting that language habits can be changed, but only to a certain extent. This group acknowledges the influence of deeply ingrained cultural factors and habits, which might limit the extent of change possible.

Interestingly, a small fraction (1.2%) of respondents emphasized that language follows culture and habits, suggesting a perception that language is more likely to mirror society than actively influence it. This view acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between language and culture but leans towards the idea of language as a consequence of social change rather than a driver.

Overall, the responses illustrate a broad consensus on the potential for language habits to change, albeit with varying perspectives on the degree of change that can be feasibly achieved.

Research Question 2: Do you feel there is a limit to what are "reasonable" language changes?

A total of 115 participants responded to this question, sharing diverse perspectives on the concept of "reasonable" changes in language.

Most respondents (n=73, ~63%) agreed there is a limit to what they consider "reasonable" language changes. Their rationale varied, with some expressing the need to keep the language simple, to consider the impact on non-native speakers or individuals with cognitive impairments, and to respect cultural and individual differences. Others noted that language changes could become too complex or challenging to keep up with, which could be counterproductive to enhancing communication and inclusivity.

However, a substantial proportion of the respondents (n=35, ~30%) disagreed with a "reasonable" limit to language changes. Many of these respondents emphasized the dynamic nature of language, suggesting that it continually evolves in response to social norms and cultural shifts. They believed that language evolution should not be a hard limit if changes are handled with respect and understanding.

A smaller fraction of respondents (n=7, ~6%) offered nuanced views, suggesting that the concept of "reasonable" may depend on various factors, such as context, culture, the nature of the language, and the level of societal acceptance of change.

While the majority of respondents believe in the existence of a "reasonable" limit to language changes, there is also a substantial proportion that views language as a dynamic entity that evolves continually. This mixed response suggests that "reasonable" is subjective and contingent on various factors.

Research Question 3: To what extent would you make an effort to use inclusive language consistently?

Based on the responses, most participants indicated a high willingness to use inclusive language consistently. Here, I will assume that the responses are given on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating no effort to use inclusive language and 5 indicating a very high level of effort.

Out of the total responses, a substantial number of respondents (n=92) scored 5, indicating a high degree of effort to use inclusive language consistently. This represents a significant majority of participants willing to make significant efforts towards using inclusive language.

A lower, but still noteworthy, number of respondents (n=45) scored 4, suggesting a moderate to high level of effort to use inclusive language.

Few respondents indicated low levels of effort. Only 10 participants scored 3, suggesting a neutral stance on the matter, and a mere seven respondents provided scores of 2 or 1, indicating low to no effort to use inclusive language.

In summary, most respondents expressed a high commitment to consistently using inclusive language, indicating a strong positive attitude towards this aspect of communication. A smaller proportion of respondents expressed moderate or neutral commitment, and very few indicated low effort. This finding underscores a general trend toward valuing and promoting inclusivity in language use.

Research Question 4: To What Extent Do You Think The Language We Use Can Perpetuate Harmful Stereotypes?

From the analysis of the survey responses, it is evident that many participants acknowledged the impact of language in perpetuating harmful stereotypes. The responses were given on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating a lack of belief that language can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and 5 denoting a strong belief in this idea.

Most participants (n=84) scored 5, demonstrating a solid understanding of language's power in perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This underscores the need for vigilance and awareness in our use of language.

Another substantial group of respondents (n=47) provided a score of 4. This suggests a firm, albeit slightly less absolute, belief in the power of language to perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Notably, there were a smaller number of respondents who showed a less strong agreement. About 15 participants scored a 3, indicating a neutral position. Interestingly, only a negligible number of respondents (n=4) provided scores of 2 or 1, suggesting low to no belief in this phenomenon.

In summary, most participants demonstrated a strong awareness of how language can reinforce harmful stereotypes. A lesser but still significant proportion of respondents acknowledged this to a slightly lesser degree. A small minority indicated a neutral or negative belief in this concept. These findings emphasize the widely held recognition of the influence of our language in reinforcing stereotypes, thus, the importance of mindful communication.

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Research Question 5: Do You Think The Language We Use Has An Impact On Workplace Inclusion?

Based on the responses, the majority of participants strongly believe that the language we use has a significant impact on workplace inclusion. Assuming the responses are given on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 suggesting no impact and 5 indicating a substantial impact, let us examine the distribution of responses:

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (n=98) scored 5, affirming that they see a significant impact of language on workplace inclusion. This signals the recognition of the power of language in shaping inclusive workplaces.

A considerable number of respondents (n=31) rated 4, indicating that they believe language has a substantial, though not total, impact on fostering inclusivity in the workplace.

Only a few participants (n=7) rated three or below, suggesting that they perceive the impact of language on workplace inclusion to be moderate to negligible.

In summary, the data reveals a strong consensus among participants on the influential role of language in promoting or hindering workplace inclusion. The majority acknowledges the high impact of language use, while a smaller group perceives this impact as moderate to minimal. This finding underscores the importance of language awareness and training in workplace settings to promote an inclusive culture.

Research Question 6: How Much Does Your Company Care About Diversity And Inclusion Topics?

Most participants perceive their companies to highly regard diversity and inclusion topics in the responses. On a scale of 1 to 5, with one indicating little to no care and 5 indicating significant care:

Most participants (n=78) scored 5, reflecting a high level of care about diversity and inclusion topics in their companies. This suggests that many workplaces are recognizing the importance of these issues and taking active steps to address them.

A substantial number of participants (n=55) scored 4, indicating that their companies care about diversity and inclusion, albeit not to the maximum extent possible.

A smaller proportion of respondents (n=20) gave a score of 3, suggesting a moderate level of care in their companies about these topics.

Only a few participants (n=9) scored 2, and no respondents selected 1, indicating that very few companies care little about diversity and inclusion topics.

In summary, the data reveals that most respondents perceive their companies as highly caring for diversity and inclusion topics. A smaller group perceives this care as moderate, and very few perceive a low level of care. These findings highlight companies' increasing attention to fostering diversity and promoting inclusion in the workplace.

Research Question 7: When Do You Believe Is A Priority To Use Inclusive Language?

Inclusive language is seen as essential across multiple organizational domains based on the data provided. The analysis reveals the following insights:

Branding and Advertising: A significant number of respondents (120) highlighted the importance of using inclusive language in branding and advertising. This reflects the understanding that an organization's external communications should be inclusive to reach and resonate with diverse audiences.

During Recruitment: Slightly more respondents (121) emphasized the need for inclusive language during recruitment. This suggests a recognition that inclusive language in job postings and interviews can help attract a broader range of candidates and promote diversity in the workforce.

In all Internal Communications: Most responses (125) mentioned the importance of inclusive language in all internal communications. This indicates a broad consensus that inclusive language should be a standard part of everyday interactions, staff meetings, emails, and other forms of communication within an organization.

Others: There were other specific areas where respondents suggested using inclusive languages, such as public relations, daily business, and always, among others. However, these were relatively less frequently mentioned.

These findings indicate a comprehensive understanding of the importance of inclusive language across various aspects of organizational operation. It suggests that most participants recognize the role of inclusive language in fostering a diverse, inclusive, and respectful internal and external environment.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

When interpreting our survey results within the broader context of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, we find significant parallels between our findings and existing research. We noted that respondents consider language habits to be changeable, demonstrating a clear understanding of language as a flexible, adaptable tool. This is particularly important in a diverse workplace, as it suggests that organizations can cultivate an inclusivity environment through strategic language use adjustments (Russell et al., 2019).

Differing opinions were noted on what constitutes a reasonable change in language habits, underscoring the intricacy and delicacy of the task. While there was a consensus about the need for language evolution, the question of balance surfaced, particularly around considerations of simplicity and accessibility. As our respondents have shown, an inclusive workplace should seek to accommodate individuals from diverse backgrounds, different cognitive abilities, and varying levels of language proficiency (Hunt et al., 2015).

The survey further revealed a heightened awareness of language's role in shaping perceptions of diversity and inclusion. This aligns with current trends of increasing societal recognition of diversity and inclusion as fundamental to successful organizations. Respondents' positive perception of organizations prioritizing diversity and inclusion underpins this growing societal expectation, which pressures businesses to take demonstrable action towards these goals (Hunt et al., 2018).

Lastly, the consensus on the necessity of inclusive language across multiple organizational operations demonstrates the far-reaching implications of language use. Beyond internal and external communication, language plays a role in other operational areas, such as branding, advertising, and recruitment, providing organizations with ample opportunities to display their commitment to diversity and inclusion (BCG, 2018).

Comparison with Previous Research

Comparing our survey's findings with previous studies paints a compelling picture of the profound and far-reaching influence of language habits and inclusive language on diversity and inclusion.

One critical research reinforcing our findings is the 2019 "Diversity and Inclusion Pulse Survey" by Russell Reynolds Associates (Russell et al., 2019). This study, too, emphasized the importance of

language flexibility and the necessary appreciation of cultural nuances. As with our study, this research underlines the need to understand and accommodate cultural differences to create a genuinely inclusive environment. It aligns with our respondents' concerns about the extent and limits of language adaptation, providing a clear echo of our findings in the broader research landscape.

Adding to the body of supporting evidence, our findings resonate with the ideas presented in a TED talk by Boroditsky (Boroditsky, 2018) and the perspective proposed by the Linguistic Society of America. Both sources emphasize language's transformative power, asserting its capacity to shape thought and societal norms. They both contend that language can either support or challenge harmful stereotypes, which aligns with our findings, thereby highlighting the vital role of language in driving societal and organizational change.

Our survey's results also find validation in reports such as "Diversity Matters" (Hunt et al., 2015) and "Delivering Through Diversity" (Hunt et al., 2018) from McKinsey & Co., along with the Boston Consulting Group's report on the pivotal role of diversity in driving innovation (BCG, 2018). Each of these studies underpins our argument for the positive influence of inclusive language on workplace inclusivity. They highlight a consistent correlation between an inclusive work environment and positive business outcomes, robustly supporting our survey's findings.

When our survey's findings are juxtaposed with the data and insights derived from these previous research studies, it further emphasizes the crucial role of language habits and inclusive language in promoting diversity and inclusion. As organizations increasingly value these aspects, language proves to be more than a medium of communication - it is an instrumental tool in enhancing workplace inclusivity and driving organizational success.

Implications for Practice, Policy Development, and Future Research Directions

The implications of this survey's findings span across sectors, with professional work environments being the most significant. Most respondents expressed a willingness to consistently adopt inclusive language, underscoring the need for training initiatives that encourage inclusive communication practices to foster a respectful and inclusive work culture where all employees feel valued.

The results underscore the need for thoughtful policy-making to navigate language changes efficiently. Policymakers should strive to balance cultural differences while promoting inclusivity, considering respondents' concerns about the impact of extensive language changes on non-native speakers and individuals with cognitive impairments. Carefully crafted policies can pave the way for a linguistically inclusive environment that promotes equity and minimizes inadvertent exclusion.

Future research avenues open up through these findings. The varied perspectives on what constitutes a "reasonable" degree of language change. These divergent views could refine language policies and practices. Examining the influence of corporate culture on the use of inclusive language can identify strategies to navigate potential barriers and foster inclusivity in workplaces.

Study Limitations and Scope for Improvement

The study, while offering valuable insights, has limitations. Although sufficient for this study, the sample size needs to be bigger considering the diverse global population, which might limit the generalizability of the findings. Also, reliance on self-reported measures introduces potential biases, including social desirability bias, where responses reflect perceived social expectations rather than genuine attitudes. Future research can address this by incorporating more objective measures, such as independent assessments or observational studies. Lastly, only some aspects of inclusive language use were explored in the survey, leaving room for more comprehensive future studies.

Despite these limitations, the study significantly contributes to the literature on language change and its implications for diversity and inclusion. It underscores the importance of awareness, training in inclusive language use, and thoughtfully formulated language policies, suggesting exciting directions for future research.

Conclusion

Summary

This study provides valuable insights into perceptions of language change and inclusive language use and their potential impact on workplace diversity and inclusion. The findings illustrate a consensus on language's capacity to evolve, with varying views on the extent of reasonable

change. Most respondents acknowledged the importance of consistently using inclusive language, recognizing its role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes and enhancing workplace inclusion. The results further emphasized the importance of inclusive language in different internal and external organizational operations, highlighting the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Recommendations

Given that existing research indicates traditional training methods may not always yield significant improvements in fostering inclusive language use, organizations are encouraged to leverage innovative tools, such as Witty, to support their diversity and inclusion efforts. Witty, a real-time language tool, can assist employees in identifying and correcting biased language use, thereby offering a practical, immediate solution for promoting more inclusive communications.

In addition to adopting real-time inclusive language tools, companies should create comprehensive language policies sensitive to cultural differences and cognitive abilities, effectively promoting inclusivity while minimizing unintentional exclusion. These policies should consider the challenges that language changes can pose to non-native speakers and individuals with cognitive impairments.

Furthermore, organizations must nurture a culture that truly values diversity and inclusion. This means introducing and enforcing inclusive policies and ensuring that the organizational norms and practices genuinely reflect these values. This holistic approach to diversity and inclusion is crucial for creating a work environment where everyone feels respected and valued.

Future Research

Future research could explore what constitutes "reasonable" language change, focusing on the implications for language policy and practice. Understanding the influence of corporate culture on the use of inclusive language can also provide insights to devise strategies to overcome potential barriers, thereby furthering the goal of creating more inclusive and respectful workplaces.

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