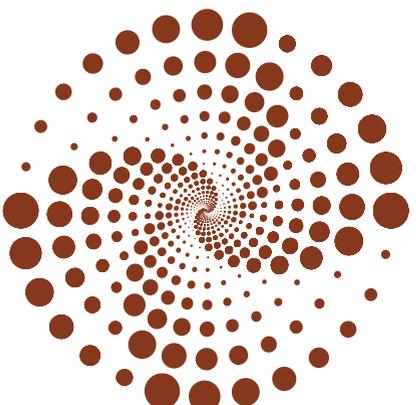# Design
for All

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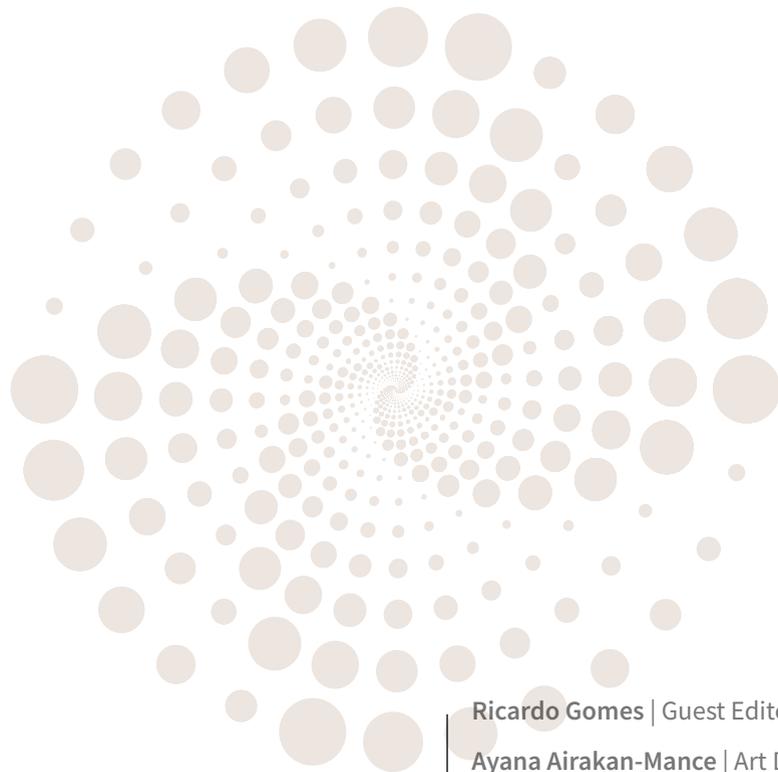
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion from the African Design Diaspora

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The Need for Belonging in Innovative Practice

By Eric Anderson

So, I'll ask the question again: "Have you lost touch with seeing, respecting, and intentionally supporting the success of your Black and other underrepresented employees?"

I first presented this question in my article "OK, you say you are listening, now what?"[1] I contributed to the argument that employers are not benefiting from the efforts of diversity, the range of human differences, and the inclusive act of creating the conditions for valued differences to exist —if the unique contributions of these employees and their authentic selves are lost to barriers in the work culture. In this writing, I reference research on diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the professional service industry, as well as the emerging research on belonging, to argue that a sense of belonging for Black and underrepresented designers is essential to allowing their authenticity to create distinctions in innovation. I argue that this high-level state of acceptance is crucial for organizations (for-profit and nonprofit businesses, government, and academia) that desire to impact markets and communities with value, through growth or new offerings, while increasing the organization's bottom line.

The Convergence of Social Justice and Innovation Pressures

Recent outcries and protests by U.S. citizens and global communities —against racial discrimination and the lack of diversity and inclusion (D&I) opportunities and practices in society and business —have exposed the shortfalls of D&I efforts. The response has been a renewed and heightened declaration of support for diversity and inclusion by organizations across many sectors. Domestically, this work began in the 1960s with U.S. legislation taking up affirmative action mandates and passing the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*. Diversity workforce training programs were implemented shortly thereafter which today have emerged into the business case for diversity. According to Lussier,[2] diversity experts and executives argued that a diverse workforce provided a competitive advantage to corporations in a globalized economy.

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Global data services corporations are now regularly tracking and reporting on the value of D&I efforts in the professional services industry. In their 2018 report, "Delivering on Diversity," McKinsey & Company[3] describe how companies indeed see a diverse and inclusive workforce as a competitive advantage, and PWC reports a growing number of CEO's see D&I as key to new areas of growth. Yet, these same reports highlight the significant work yet to be done by companies to articulate their values and designs around D&I strategies and implementation plans; some are leading by example while others haven't begun to take meaningful action. Despite the growing investment by companies to embrace D&I, it is important to acknowledge skepticism around the effectiveness of the business case for diversity concerning execution.

Counter arguments to the business case for diversity express concerns that it "provokes people to focus more on economic equality-based metrics of success" rather than advancements beyond incremental change —that the compelling economic impact of D&I efforts has yet to be seen from this model (Kaplan)[4]. Newkirk is more direct in her book, "Diversity, Inc.: The Failed Promise of a Billion-Dollar Business." She states the primary beneficiary of the business of diversity is what she classifies as "the Inclusion Industrial Complex —consulting firms and Diversity & Inclusion professionals who can profit from putting diversity management programs in place."[5] There are three ways organizations engage with D&I work and the potential outcomes, according to Anderson:

For compliance —There are requirements or tactical advantages to hire diverse people but little or no desire for culture change. Here, minimum or no effort is made to be inclusive; therefore, people struggle to perform authentically. Consequently, they acclimate to the existing cultural practices and attitudes.

To enrich culture —There is realization that the organization is operating well but would be more innovative and competitive by creating and leveraging employees' differences. However, research informs that unless there are suitable representations of diverse people as part of the work group, the desired attributes the employee would bring can become diminished or lost over time. The result is acclimation of existing cultural practices and attitudes.

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To change culture —This is the most challenging and most courageous action organizations can take towards innovation. It is a declaration that the organization is not meeting its mission or needs to establish a new one. People are hired to transform the mindset and culture of the organization through inclusion and not simply offer improvement.

Having the presence of diversity and the goal of inclusion without the proper conditions and ongoing investment only checks the boxes and does not leverage the power of either to create differences. Organizations without a strategy to embrace culture changes to achieve D&I are at risk of creating mechanisms to identify the "who," "what," "when," "where," and even "how," and positioning themselves to struggle with articulating the "why." At best,these D&I efforts lack clarity and depth and can be implemented in uneven and problematic ways (Anderson).

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To be clear, the work of D&I continues to be an essential need and a formidable challenge to achieve. As the work evolves, we must not lose sight of the goals and value of diversity and inclusion; rather we must address ways to deliver on its promise more effectively and expediently. That said, leveraging the possible differences of D&I is reliant on the differences of people being accessible and embraced. This is perhaps most easily evidenced in discipline-focused models for innovation practice.

Extending Beyond Functional Innovation

In my past role as a co-founder and co-director of the Integrated Innovation Institute at Carnegie Mellon University —which established pedagogy and culture for cross-training disciplines of design, business, and engineering —my research contributed to articulating the distinction between team collaboration and integration in the innovation process.[6] Insights were drawn from across the technology, health care, and design sectors. The definition by Peter Beck, Senior Fellow of the Design Futures Council, was particularly helpful. Beck writes, "Collaboration is a data-centric activity wherein each discipline contributes data information to other disciplines for processing to achieve common objectives."[7] The limitation with collaboration, at least

in practice, is the inconsistency of engagement within and across teams; the default is people working alongside each other despite the expectations of a close-knit practice. By contrast, Beck offers that integration is a "knowledge-centric activity" that relies on participants sharing their knowledge, which, in our work, was to intentionally cross-train the fundamentals of disciplinary knowledge for a shared baseline and the goal of a holistic mindset. Using the integrated model, each discipline learned to value the differences of each other and the important role they play in support of successful outcomes. An integration model achieved higher-level functional innovation goals in our research and practice. Its limitation, however, is in inviting the uniqueness of the individual —their social and cultural experiences beyond functional disciplinary expertise —into the innovation process.

The degree of non-technological innovation within mainstream products and services today is arguably limited, which has led several to opine that many products look the same and many services feel similar.

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A contributing factor is the influential cycle of sophisticated algorithms that inform the inspiration searches of designers and innovators, resulting in more homogenized marketplaces. Further, algorithms, coupled with the mechanics of innovation practices, are becoming more visible and commonly practiced; and the loss of diverse perspectives due to acclimation then decreases the chances of a leap in innovation. I propose this is a new opportunity for innovation where the diverse experiences of Black and underrepresented designers are actively embraced for their unique personal experiences and interpretations. While it may be the expectation that Black and underrepresented designers contribute their differences naturally when part of an innovation team, organizational culture and historical social baggage has a strong impact on what they contribute of themselves. An example of this seen the U.S. is the idea that since the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 —the mandates and legislative acts that sought to undo centuries of deeply embedded racial and social discrimination systems and practices, and ideally embrace diversity —opportunities remain elusive for the communities they intended to serve. Therefore,

while some organizations promote diversity language and structures, it should not imply that an organization is inclusive of cultural and social differences. Many organizations remain abstract in their strategic initiative and are seemingly content being acknowledged having taken some action. McKinsey reports that a diverse and inclusive culture is rapidly becoming a priority for the talented people organizations seek to hire. However, the most capable and confident individual needs to have opportunities to express their unique self, which means they are seen, their voice is heard, and they feel their contributions are valued —they feel a sense of belonging. A culture of belonging can support retention, greater chances for innovation, and growth.

Belonging As the Top Level of Acceptance

Belonging is the emotional dimension of being human, where a person feels safe to share their more guarded identities. Significant research on belonging has been conducted within several analytical frameworks that include social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, ethical and political values, and the politics of belonging,[8]and across disciplines including psychology, organizational behavior, and business management. This writing does not attempt to sum up this vast literature in any way, nor does it provide ways to achieve belonging; there is much written to address this goal. The purpose here is to frame the value of belonging in the context of creative and innovative practice. As such it does align with the framework of identifications and emotional attachments, "which deals with identities are narratives, and stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)".[9]

When hiring diverse people or assembling diverse teams, many organizations overlook the essential need of people to feel they belong —assuming they will automatically find a way to be included. To this point, Waldon comments that "if you are a minority (Black, Latino, female, disabled, etc.) 30% of your time at work you are worried about how you fit in."[10]In a Deloitte study, among those who identify as ethnic minorities, "36% of millennials and 39% of Gen Zs said they are discriminated against all the time or frequently in the workplace. Roughly three in ten who identify as homosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual concur."[11] The need for belonging is global as leading organizations recognize that diverse

talent is all around us, "coming from emerging and developed markets, traditional and start-up companies, and different kinds of educational backgrounds" (PWC).

Creating a belonging environment enables people to share their identities and authentic selves more readily beyond disciplinary skill and functional perspectives and contribute uniqueness to the work. On the contrary, when people don't feel seen, respected, or supported, their authentic self may rarely be visible, and its value is lost. According to Waldon, on average, 80% of an organization's operating expenses are related to talent, suggesting that belonging is essential towards its potential impact on the success of the organization and crucial to its bottom line.

As it relates to creative practice and innovation, the literature suggests that the concept of belonging represents the highest state of personal acceptance. Further, Filstad et al. writes "belonging at work, is linked to the possibility of sharing practices in community, creating meanings, participating in common goals, learning through participation, grasping new shapes of identity through relationships with others and changing personal investments, representations and growth."[12] I argue that this is a deeper level of connectivity different than what will most often occur in social structures of diversity and inclusion, or functional structures of collaboration and integration, where the inclusion of personal identities and experiences have less value, if they have value at all. Therefore, as it applies to innovation practice, belonging deserves to be critically studied.

Belonging As a Shared Opportunity

The recent movements in social culture have motivated leaders in successful organizations to learn and respond to diversity and inclusion as strategic requirements. This embracement of D&I and the necessity for work cultures to be better prepared for open exchanges has provided the foundation for belonging. Research suggests that the pursuit and support of talented people who feel they belong will produce more distinct and successful outcomes. Therefore, organizations must be vigilant in their hiring and onboarding processes and work culture development to cultivate a sense of belonging. However, the degree of belonging possible relies on some level of partnership with employees. Employees

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can support, if not lead, belonging initiatives by introspection of their needs and desires. Outcome scan potentially inform how they align and desire to align with existing or future work cultures. While this type of activity is typically guided by work psychology and management perspectives based on skill alignment and personal dynamics, the opportunity here is to reflect on a personal level. Belonging —feeling comfortable to express identities and personal experiences —in support of innovation work can be the hidden value of Black and underrepresented employees. Reflective questions and analysis may include: 1) What part of your identity is hidden/protected and why?2) What part of your identity do you want to make visible and why, and to what degree?3) What part of your hidden/protected identity could contribute to your workplace?

As a starting point to responding to reflective questions, it may be useful to borrow from the work of Gardenswartz & Rowe[13] and their "Four Layers of Diversity"model to construct and articulate individual characteristics and identities. Select key examples from each dimension to describe and use the responses to answer the larger introspection questions. The goal of the outcomes is to guide personal journeys and future contributions to work and workplace culture.

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What informs your unique perspectives?		
Organizational Dimensions	**External Dimensions**	**Internal dimensions:**
Functional Level/Classification Work Content Field Division/Department Unit/Group Seniority/Management Status Professional Affiliations	Geographic Location Personal/Recreational Habits Religion Educational Background Work Experience Appearance Marital/Parental Status	Age Race Ethnicity Physical abilities Sexual orientation Gender identity

Adapted from Four Dimensions of Identity, Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2003

In Closing

To be sure, asking people to expose personal identities beyond the current surface levels they are comfortable with sharing in their work environments requires a level of trust that is often not present, or in some cases, possible. The reality is that belonging will be experienced in degrees based on the employee, their willingness to share, and the social and environmental conditions established by the organization. It is a negotiated pursuit that will have moments of achievement but requires much effort to sustain. That said, to achieve greater leaps in innovation, the pursuit is necessary.Looking ahead, the advancements in technology and the ways we connect across the globe will continue to provide international populations access to mainstream products and services. Several trends will require new ways to create valued differences: things that were once rare become commodities; interactions and experiences with consumer goods become more homogeneous because of similar design systems and methods; algorithmic populism has guided more of our choices and decisions. PWC states, "it's the people who change the industry, the firms they work in, and through that work, make an impact on the communities and world around them." I hypothesize that future differences in products and services will be inspired by the uniqueness that people engaged in the process of innovation contribute from their identities and experiences, which is best possible when they feel they belong.

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Endnotes

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