

# Masking EDI: The Erasure of “Diversity” and “Equity” in Organisational Rebranding



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## Introduction & Context

The shift from **DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)** to more nebulous terms like "Inclusion," "Belonging," or "Engagement" is a widespread corporate trend driven by legal, political, and cultural shifts over the last year.

### Why the "D" and "E" are Disappearing

The removal of "Diversity" and "Equity" is rarely an accident; it is often a strategic choice to manage perceived risk and presumed backlash. This is set against the background of, for example:

- **Legal & Political Pressure:** Following the 2023 US Supreme Court ruling against affirmative action and subsequent executive orders, many companies (including [Google](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Amazon](#)<sup>2</sup>, and [Walmart](#)<sup>3</sup>) have rebranded to avoid what is perceived as "politically

charged" language that might trigger lawsuits or government investigations.

- **Avoiding "Equity":** The term "Equity" is specifically being replaced by terms like "Opportunity" or "Fairness" (as seen at JPMorgan) to sidestep perceptions of preferential treatment.
- **The "Whitewashing" Risk:** Experts warn that by focusing solely on "Inclusion" or "Belonging," organisations risk ignoring the structural barriers that "Diversity" (representation) and "Equity" (fairness in systems) were designed to address.

## Why does this matter?

**Equity as a pre-requisite** for inclusion, since without dismantling systemic barriers, "inclusion" is merely performative.

- **Power Imbalances:** True equity requires leaders to redistribute power, which is

<sup>1</sup>João da Silva & Natalie Sherman (2025). Google joins firms dropping diversity recruitment goals. Available at: [DEI: Google joins US firms abandoning diversity recruitment goals - BBC News](#)

<sup>2</sup>Jennifer & Annie palmer (2025). In Trump era, companies are rebranding DEI efforts, not giving up. Available at: [In Trump era, companies are rebranding DEI efforts, not giving up](#)

<sup>3</sup>Chita Singla (2025). Companies Rebrand DEI Efforts Amid Political Backlash, Not Abandoning Goals. Available at: [Companies Rebrand DEI Efforts Amid Political Backlash, Not Abandoning Goals](#)

why rebranding can feel like a "backward step" especially for underrepresented groups who no longer see their specific challenges named.

- **The Cost of Retreat:** Scaling back these efforts can lead to a "talent exodus," particularly among Gen Z employees, and alienation (among wider minoritised communities and allies) who prioritise values and psychological safety.
- **Equity is not equality:** There needs to be a conscious effort, and investment, to ensure that equality is achieved in practice through equity. This needs to be embedded into institutional policy and intent to become reality.

## The Leadership Challenge

The real question for leaders today isn't what the department is *called*, but whether the **substance** remains. While some firms are "disguising" the work to keep it alive in a hostile climate, others are using rebranding as a polite way to exit the work altogether.

Crucially, a leader prepared to dismantle power imbalances must be willing to defend **targeted support** even when the language to describe it is under fire. They must set out the obvious business / organisational benefits and explaining to stakeholders why this is important matters, and why a different approach might be needed, if they decide to change name or course.

## The situation: The Rebranding of Justice

Over the past eighteen months, a quiet but profound linguistic shift has swept through the corporate and institutional landscapes of both the United Kingdom and the United States. Departments once explicitly dedicated to "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI or EDI) are being systematically renamed. The "D" and the "E" are vanishing, replaced by more palatable, generic concepts like "Inclusion and Belonging," "Culture," "Wellbeing," or "Access and Community".

While proponents of this shift, frame it as an "evolution" toward a more unified workplace, this rebranding is fundamentally a retreat. Language is the primary tool by which we name reality; by

removing "Diversity" and "Equity" from their formal mandates, organisations are not just changing their stationery—they are obfuscating the structural and institutional barriers that prevent true fairness. This paper argues that the trend of "whitewashing" EDI work into generic "inclusion" is a dangerous move that risks reinforcing the very systems of power imbalance it was designed to dismantle.

## A History of Emergence: From Compliance to Retreat

The trajectory of DEI/EDI work began in the mid-1960s as a response to civil rights legislation, moving from simple legal compliance toward "multiculturalism" in the 2000s and a robust "equity-first" framework in the wake of 2020's global calls for racial justice. The global protests following the killing of George Floyd in 2020 marked a significant turning point, prompting many organisations to publicly commit to advancing racial equity, increasing transparency in diversity data, and investing in structural workplace

reforms. In the months that followed, many firms issued public pledges and significantly expanded diversity initiatives<sup>4 5</sup>. However, while these commitments initially accelerated organisational investment in DEI programmes, the period between 2023 and 2025 has seen a noticeable slowdown and, in some cases, reversal of these efforts as political and legal pressures intensified<sup>6</sup>.

## The US Context: Legal Chill and Political Backlash

In the United States, the primary catalyst was the June 2023 Supreme Court ruling against affirmative action in higher education. Although the ruling was technically limited to admissions, it emboldened a wave of "reverse discrimination" lawsuits against corporate programmes. By 2025, executive orders further targeting "radical and wasteful government DEI programmes" accelerated a "chilling effect" across the private sector. As a result, large organisations like [JPMorgan](#)<sup>7</sup> and Walmart have substituted "Equity" with terms like

<sup>4</sup> McKinsey & Company. (2020). *Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters*.

<sup>5</sup> Edelman. (2022). *Trust Barometer Special Report: The Belief-Driven Employee*.

<sup>6</sup> Deloitte. (2023). *Global Human Capital Trends Report*. Deloitte Insights.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

"Opportunity" or "Everyone" to avoid political crosshairs.

Furthermore, Higher Education accreditation bodies such as [AACSB](#)<sup>8</sup> have seen recent risk management initiatives such as replacing “diversity and inclusion” as one of its 10 “[Guiding Principles](#) and Expectations for Accredited Schools” in favour of “Community and Connectedness”.

## Companies Leading the Rebrand

A significant number of Fortune 100 companies have altered their language in the last year. According to [Paradigm](#)<sup>9</sup>, there was a **22% decrease** in the use of the term "DEI" and a **59% increase** in the term "belonging" between 2023 and 2024. Evidence suggests that these language shifts are not isolated organisational decisions but part of a broader trend across corporate sectors. A recent analysis by [Paradigm](#)<sup>10</sup> found a 22% decline in the use of the term “DEI” in corporate communications between 2023 and 2024, alongside a 59% increase in the use of the

term “belonging.” Similarly, research by The Conference Board<sup>11</sup> indicates that many organisations are reframing diversity initiatives under broader organisational culture or employee experience agendas in order to navigate growing legal and political scrutiny while maintaining aspects of the work<sup>12</sup>.

Company	Former Branding	New Branding / Change
Amazon	VP of Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	<a href="#">VP of Inclusive Experiences &amp; Technology</a> <sup>13</sup>
JPMorgan	Equity	Opportunity
Walmart	Chief Diversity Officer	Chief Belonging Officer (marketed as "Walmart for Everyone")
Google	DEI Hiring Targets	Googler Engagement (references dropped in investor reports)
McDonald's	Global DEI <a href="#">Center of Excellence</a>	<a href="#">Global Inclusion Team</a> <sup>14</sup>
Kohl's	Chief DEI Officer	<a href="#">Chief Inclusion and Belonging Officer</a> <sup>15</sup>

## United States: Rebranding as a Defensive Manoeuvre

In the US, the rebranding is primarily driven by legal fear following the 2023 Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action and subsequent executive orders.

- **Microsoft:** In late 2024 and 2025, Microsoft made a significant shift by **removing**

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Jack (2025). Business school group scraps diversity and equity targets. Available at [Business school group scraps diversity and equity targets](#)

<sup>9</sup> Idem

<sup>10</sup> Paradigm. (2024). *The State of Culture and Inclusion Report*.

<sup>11</sup> The Conference Board. (2024). *Corporate DEI Practices in a Changing Political Landscape*.

<sup>12</sup> Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2024). *The Rise and Retreat of Corporate DEI*. Harvard Business Review.

**DEI as a mandatory component** of employee performance reviews. Previously, every employee had to set a "DEI Core Priority" goal; this is now voluntary and carries no weight in performance scoring. Furthermore, Microsoft broke a decade-long streak by **refusing to publish a traditional data-filled Diversity Report in 2025**, opting instead for "dynamic formats" like videos and stories that critics argue are far less transparent.

- **Walmart & JPMorgan:** These retail and banking giants have moved toward "Universalist" language. Walmart shifted its "Chief Diversity Officer" title to "**Chief Belonging Officer**" and rebranded its initiatives as "**Walmart for Everyone**". JPMorgan replaced "Equity" with "**Opportunity**" to frame the work around merit rather than identity.
- **The "Hard Exit" Group:** Some US firms have not just rebranded but dismantled programs. **Ford, Lowe's, and Harley-**

**Davidson** withdrew from the Human Rights Campaign's "Corporate Equality Index" and scrapped specific representation goals in response to activist pressure.

## The UK Context: Culture Wars and Mirroring

The UK has followed a similar, albeit legally distinct, path. While the Equality Act 2010 remains a robust statutory shield for EDI work, the UK has not been immune to the "anti-woke" backlash. Terms like "wokeism" have been weaponised to paint equity work as divisive, leading some UK firms to quietly rebrand to "Wellbeing" or "Culture" to avoid the perceived toxicity of the "EDI" label. Experts note that "when the US sneezes, the UK catches a cold," with UK financial services and tech sectors particularly prone to mirroring the American retreat. This pattern reflects the deep interconnectedness of corporate governance and political discourse across the Atlantic. Multinational corporations headquartered in the United States often set global organisational policies, which are subsequently adopted by UK subsidiaries and partner

organisations<sup>13</sup>. As a result, shifts in the American legal and political landscape surrounding diversity initiatives frequently influence organisational behaviour and discourse within the UK<sup>14 15</sup>.

## United Kingdom: Rebranding as "Mainstreaming"

The UK context differs because of the Equality Act 2010, which provides a more stable legal framework. However, a "chilling effect" from the US has crossed the Atlantic.

- **GSK & Accenture:** As multinationals with heavy US presences, these firms have mirrored the US retreat. **GSK** reportedly paused several UK diversity initiatives and removed diversity references from its website to align with global shifts<sup>16</sup>. **Accenture** ended specific demographic

representation goals and discontinued some career development programs for minority groups, affecting roughly 11,000 UK staff<sup>17</sup>.

- **The "Culture & Wellbeing" Pivot:** Many UK firms are quietly re-labelling EDI departments as "**Culture**," "**People**," or "**Wellbeing**" teams. Experts note that while this "embeds" diversity into broader business functions, it often results in the loss of dedicated EDI specialists who hold the business accountable.
- **BT:** One of the few major UK firms to explicitly alter policies, BT dropped diversity measures from its **managers' bonus schemes** in early 2025, moving away from tying financial incentives to representation targets<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2022). Getting to Diversity: What Works and What Doesn't. Harvard University Press.

<sup>14</sup> CIPD. (2023). Inclusion at Work: Perspectives on DEI in UK Organisations. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

<sup>15</sup> Financial Times. (2024). UK companies rethink diversity policies amid US backlash. Financial Times.

<sup>16</sup> Maggie Fick. (2025). GSK abandons diversity targets following Trump pressure. [GSK abandons diversity targets following Trump pressure | Reuters](#)

<sup>17</sup> Reuters. (2025). Accenture scraps diversity and inclusion goals, memo says. Available at: [Accenture scraps diversity and inclusion goals, memo says | Accenture | The Guardian](#)

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Williams. (2025). BT dumps diversity targets from bonuses. Available at: [BT dumps diversity targets from bonuses](#)

## The Danger of Generic Language

The shift toward generic terms is not a neutral act. Language that obfuscates is problematic because it makes the invisible visible again - or rather, it re-buries the specific struggles of marginalised groups.

### *1. Equity is the Pre-requisite*

The removal of "Equity" is perhaps the most damaging change.

Equality gives everyone the same pair of shoes; equity ensures they actually fit. Without a focus on equity, organisations revert to "colourblindness" - a superficial rule that ignores the reality that employees (and people) have different 'starting points' in life. Removing "Equity" from organisational language undermines accountability by replacing measurable, trackable frameworks with vague platitudes like "belonging" that are much easier to abandon.

### *2. Diversity is the Evidence*

"Diversity" is a metric of representation. When "Diversity" is removed from the title of a department, the pressure to ensure that the workforce actually reflects the community it serves is diminished. Generic "inclusion" can be performed in a room full of

people who all look and think the same. However, "diversity" requires the presence of difference.

### *3. Obfuscation Protects the Status Quo*

By rebranding EDI as "Culture" or "Wellbeing," organisations effectively "sanitize" the work. This allows leaders to gesture toward inclusion without doing the hard, often uncomfortable work of confronting institutional power imbalances. It suggests that an organisation has somehow "moved beyond" the need for equity without ever having dismantled the systems that created the inequity in the first place. The same goes for society.

### *4. Nothing matters?*

Thinking in generic terms (about anything really) visibly reduces the importance of the agenda and leads individuals / organisations / society to give less importance to it. This could also imply that 'EDI does not matter' and it's ok to maintain a neutral stance. Nothing can be further from the truth and we can see how life chances of people are being negatively by "just standing by". Apart from the moral

imperative, it is well articulated that [DEI](#)<sup>19</sup> makes good business sense.

### *The Positives: Strategic Resilience*

Some proponents argue that rebranding is a necessary survival tactic to keep the work alive in a hostile climate.

- **Reduced Legal Risk:** By moving away from "equity" (often misinterpreted as quotas) toward "opportunity," companies like JPMorgan aim to lower the profile of their programs to avoid "reverse discrimination" lawsuits.
- **Universal Appeal:** Terms like "Belonging" or "Culture" can feel less exclusionary to majority groups who may have felt "sidelined" by previous DEI framing. This can theoretically build broader [internal buy-in](#).<sup>20</sup>
- **Operational Integration:** Amazon argues that moving DEI into

"Inclusive Experiences & Technology" better reflects how the work is embedded into product design and employee experience rather than being a separate HR silo.

### The Negatives: The Erasure of Accountability

The dangers of this "whitewashing" are often more systemic and long-lasting than the short-term political gains.

- **Muffling Minority Voices:** In the UK financial sector, [70% of ethnic minority professionals](#)<sup>21</sup> report little progress since 2020. Rebranding has created a "chilling effect" where employees feel "muzzled" and fear losing their jobs if they raise specific race-related concerns.
- **Loss of Measurable Goals:** While "Equity" requires trackable outcomes

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Laker (2025). The Costs Of Abandoning DEI And Why Leaders Can't Afford To Backtrack. Available at: [The Costs Of Abandoning DEI And Why Leaders Can't Afford To Backtrack](#)

<sup>20</sup> Dominique Harris, Kristen Etheredge, Caroline Queen & Stephanie Miller. (2025). Diversity and inclusion wrapped 3.0: could rebranding diversity

create more inclusion? (2024). Available at: [Diversity and inclusion wrapped 3.0: Could rebranding create more inclusion? | Kearney](#)

<sup>21</sup> Chris Osuh & Aamna Mohdin (2025). Firms 'rebranding' diversity initiatives to avoid unwanted political attention. [Firms 'rebranding' diversity initiatives to avoid unwanted political attention | Business | The Guardian](#)

(like closing the pay gap), "Belonging" is a [subjective feeling](#)<sup>22</sup> that is far harder to measure. This makes it easier for organisations to abandon their commitments when budgets get tight.

- **Erosion of Trust:** When a company like [Target](#)<sup>23</sup> or [McDonald's](#)<sup>24</sup> quickly retires diversity goals or changes titles, it can lead to a drop in employee morale and a "talent exodus," as seen in [declining DEI ratings](#)<sup>25</sup> on platforms like Glassdoor.
- **Substance vs. Symbolism:** Critics argue that renaming a department while keeping the same underrepresented leadership stats is "performative." It suggests an organisation has "moved beyond" the work without ever actually dismantling the barriers.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Blanchette (2025). Rebranding equity as 'belonging' won't advance justice — it's DEI rollback in disguise. Available at: [Rebranding equity as 'belonging' won't advance justice — it's DEI rollback in disguise](#)

<sup>23</sup> Hiyam Ghabbash. (2025). Target DEI Boycott: What Actually Happened in 2025. Available at: [Target DEI Boycott: What Actually Happened in 2025](#)

<sup>24</sup> Associated Press. (2025). Which US companies are pulling back on diversity initiatives? Available at:

Table 1: Summary of Positives and Negatives

Impact Area	The "Strategic" Rebrand (Reframing)	The "Whitewashed" Rebrand (Retreating)
Trust	Maintains trust by explaining <i>how</i> the work is now "integrated" into everyday culture.	Erases trust as employees feel "muzzled" and see the removal of "Equity" as a betrayal.
Metrics	Switches to "Inclusion Indices" or engagement scores.	<b>Data Opaque:</b> Eliminates public demographic reporting, making progress impossible to track.
Motivation	Uses "Belonging" to appeal to a wider workforce, reducing "backlash" from majority groups.	Causes a "talent exodus" as Gen Z and minority staff seek more transparently committed firms.
Self-Perception	The organisation sees itself as "mature" and beyond the "box-ticking" phase.	The organisation prioritises <b>short-term profit and political safety</b> over long-term values.

The danger remains that by removing "Diversity" and "Equity" from their vocabulary, these companies are effectively removing the **legal and social mandate** to fix the specific systemic barriers that "Inclusion" alone cannot solve.

## Impact of rebranding

### Impact on Employee Trust and Confidence

The "whitewashing" of EDI language has created a significant disconnect between leadership and staff. A number of identified<sup>26</sup> impacts are summarised below:

#### [Which US companies are pulling back on diversity initiatives?](#)

<sup>25</sup> Glassdoor. (2025). Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) at Starbucks. Available at: [Starbucks: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion | Glassdoor](#)

<sup>26</sup> Isabel Jackson (2025). Only a quarter of leaders say their organisation has a fully embedded EDI strategy, study reveals. Available at: [Only a quarter of leaders say their organisation has a fully embedded EDI strategy, study reveals](#)

- **Perception of Betrayal:** Many employees, particularly from underrepresented groups, view the removal of "Diversity" and "Equity" as a retreat from justice and a signal that leadership is prioritising optics over meaningful change.
- **Credibility Gap:** While **78%** of senior leaders say they are rebranding to protect programmes, only **15%** of employees feel that inclusion is actually embedded in their day-to-day culture.
- **Muzzling Effect:** In the UK financial sector, ethnic minority professionals report feeling "muzzled" and fear that raising race-related concerns under generic "culture" branding could lead to job loss.

## Employee Motivation and Engagement

Motivation is deeply tied to an employee's "psychological bond" with their organisation, which is weakened when values seem to shift under pressure. Other concerns have also been identified.<sup>27</sup>

- **Declining Morale:** Nearly **50%** of companies that reduced or rebranded their DEI efforts reported a measurable decline in employee morale.
- **Talent Attrition:** Inclusive organisations see staff stay an average of **3.76 years longer** than those that do not prioritise inclusion. Conversely, companies that rolled back or rebranded DEI in 2025 saw their "Employer Attractiveness" scores drop by an average of **4.6%**.<sup>28</sup>
- **Loss of Safe Spaces:** Leaders have expressed disappointment that rebranding often leads

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<sup>27</sup> Fair Play Talks (2025). **DEI Cuts Hit One in Five Companies, Raising Morale and Inclusion Concerns, Confirms Study.** Available at: [DEI Cuts Hit One in Five Companies, Raising Morale and Inclusion Concerns, Confirms Study - Fair Play Talks](#)

<sup>28</sup> Onvero. (2025). **The State of Inclusion in the UK: From Ambition to Action.** Available at: [New UK research definitively links mature DEI practices to stronger performance, retention, and employee happiness for the first time - Onvero](#)

to the dissolution of "safe spaces," leaving employees feeling less supported and more alienated.

## Changes in Metrics and Reporting

Language that obfuscates specific goals makes accountability harder to maintain.

- **Plummeting Disclosures:** Board demographic diversity disclosures—particularly regarding race and gender—fell sharply in 2025.
- **Shift to "Subjective" Metrics:** Organisations are moving away from quantitative diversity targets toward harder-to-define metrics like "Employee Engagement" or "Belonging".
- **Accountability Erosion:** Without the term "Equity," which requires trackable outcomes like closing pay gaps, reporting often becomes a "box-ticking" exercise rather than a driver of systemic change.

## Organisational Self-Perception

The rebranding trend has split how organisations see themselves vs. how they are seen by the public.

- **Survival vs. Cowardice:** Internally, leadership often views rebranding as "strategic adaptation" to survive a hostile climate. Externally, however, it is frequently perceived as "cowardice" by advocates and "dishonesty" by detractors.
- **Reputational Duality:** Companies like **Apple**, which maintained clear DEI commitments, saw an **11-point surge** in attractiveness, while those that pivoted, like **Home Depot** (in May 2025), experienced sharp reputational plunges.
- **The "North Star" Risk:** Experts warn that if "fairness" is a core value, relabelling it to avoid controversy risks the organisation losing its moral "north star," leading to long-term reputational and legal risks.

## Business Performance

- **Destination of choice:** Businesses will become less attractive for high performing individuals, particularly as Gen Z are

more driven by ethical companies and by finding meaning in their jobs, as illustrated by a recent [Deloitte](#)<sup>29</sup> report.

### Leadership: Bravery vs. Branding

Treating everyone the same in an unequal system inadvertently deepens exclusion. For a leader, the true test of commitment is not found in the cleverness of a department's new name, but in the willingness to provide targeted support where it is needed most.

The current rebranding trend is largely a reactive move intended to appease external critics rather than respond to the needs of the employees / people most affected by discrimination. Leaders must ask themselves: Are we changing the name to protect the work, or are we changing the name to protect ourselves from the work?

### Whither Leadership

Rebranding can be a "fig leaf" used to hide a retreat, or it can be a "shield" used to protect ongoing work. The difference lies in **transparency**: if the data (diversity hiring stats, pay gap audits) disappears along with the name, the rebranding is a failure of leadership. As noted by [experts at NYU](#)<sup>30</sup>, 80% of leaders believe that reducing equity efforts actually *increases* long-term reputational and legal risk.

### Conclusion

Language matters because it defines the scope of our responsibility. When we erase "Diversity" and "Equity," we erase the mandate to confront systemic injustice. Organisations that choose to retreat into the safe, warm embrace of "Inclusion and Belonging" while abandoning the structural rigour of "Equity and Diversity" are not moving forward; they are reinforcing the very power imbalances they claim to oppose. True leadership requires the bravery to name the problem, to keep the "D" and the "E" on the door, and to

<sup>29</sup> Deloitte (2025). 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey. Available at: [2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey](#)

<sup>30</sup> The Conversation. (2025). Rebranding equity as 'belonging' won't advance justice — it's DEI rollback

in disguise. Available at: [Rebranding equity as 'belonging' won't advance justice — it's DEI rollback in disguise - Talent Canada](#)

continue the hard work of building a system where everyone—not just the same few—can actually thrive. It is also about the social mission that every organisation should have as a core part of their mission, even as some already proclaim.

# Focus On

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**Citation: Cite as:** Miller, P., Tipi, L., Olagbami, S. (2026). *Masking EDI: The Erasure of “Diversity” and “Equity” in Organisational Rebranding*, Huddersfield: Institute for Equity, University Centre