

Rethinking Workplace Diversity in Thailand: What It Means for Gen Z

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ABSTRACT

As Generation Z enters the workforce, their expectations of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are reshaping organisational culture. This study explores how Gen Z employees in Thailand perceive and define workplace diversity, and how their expectations align with or challenge existing corporate DEI policies and initiatives. This research uses a qualitative case study approach to explore what Gen Z thinks of workplace diversity in Thailand, and how they prioritise DEI in organisations through semi-structured interviews with 18 Gen Z participants. Data were analysed using In Vivo coding and thematic analysis. The research identifies three key findings: a lack of DEI awareness, Gen Z's prioritisation of equity, and their expectations for organisations to implement DEI policies. The research contributes to the theoretical understanding in the field of workplace diversity, diversity management, and generational difference. It also provides organisational implications for policy making and management practices in response to generational shifts in the workforce and the expectation of Gen Z employees in Thailand.

Keywords: Workplace Diversity, Workplace Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

เปิดมุมมองความหลากหลายในสถานที่ทำงาน ผ่านสายตาคนรุ่นใหม่ : ความหลากหลายในสถานที่ทำงาน มีความหมายต่อ Gen Z ในประเทศไทยอย่างไร

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บทคัดย่อ

การก้าวเข้าสู่ตลาดแรงงานของคนรุ่นใหม่ หรือเจนเนอเรชัน Z ได้นำมาซึ่งความคาดหวังต่อประเด็นความหลากหลาย (Diversity) ความเสมอภาค (Equity) และการผนวกรวม (Inclusion) ซึ่งส่งผลต่อวัฒนธรรมองค์กรในยุคปัจจุบันเป็นอย่างมาก งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งสำรวจมุมมองและนิยามของพนักงานเจนเนอเรชัน Z ในประเทศไทยที่มีต่อความหลากหลายในที่ทำงาน รวมถึงพิจารณาว่า ความคาดหวังของพวกเขาสอดคล้องหรือขัดแย้งกับนโยบายและแนวทางปฏิบัติปัจจุบันขององค์กรในด้านความหลากหลาย ความเสมอภาค และการผนวกรวม (DEI) อย่างไร งานวิจัยใช้วิธีวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพในรูปแบบกรณีศึกษา (Case study) โดยเก็บข้อมูลผ่านการสัมภาษณ์ในรูปแบบกึ่งโครงสร้าง (Semi-structured interview) กับผู้เข้าร่วมสัมภาษณ์ซึ่งเป็นพนักงาน เจเนอเรชัน Z จำนวน 18 คน และวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยวิธี In Vivo Coding และการวิเคราะห์แก่นสาร (Thematic Analysis) ผลการวิจัยพบประเด็นสำคัญ 3 ประการ ได้แก่ การขาดความตระหนักด้านความหลากหลาย ความเสมอภาค และการผนวกรวม (DEI) การให้ความสำคัญกับความเท่าเทียมของ เจเนอเรชัน Z และความคาดหวังให้องค์กรนำนโยบาย ความหลากหลาย ความเสมอภาค และการผนวกรวม (DEI) ไปปฏิบัติอย่างจริงจัง งานวิจัยนี้มีส่วนช่วยในการพัฒนาองค์ความรู้ด้านความหลากหลายในสถานที่ทำงาน การจัดการความหลากหลาย และความแตกต่างระหว่างคนต่างรุ่นในองค์กร อีกทั้งยังเสนอแนวทางเชิงนโยบายและการจัดการสำหรับองค์กรในการตอบสนองต่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงของตลาดแรงงานและความคาดหวังของพนักงานเจนเนอเรชัน Z ในประเทศไทย

คำสำคัญ : ความหลากหลายในสถานที่ทำงาน การมีส่วนร่วมในสถานที่ทำงาน ความหลากหลาย ความเท่าเทียม การผนวกรวม

INTRODUCTION

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has been a topic of interest for decades. It is not a new concept (Nguyen, Evan, Chaudhuri, Hagen, & Williams, 2024; Russen & Dawson, 2023). In Thailand, according to SEC Thailand (2024), DEI is incorporated in the Corporate Governance Code for publicly registered companies to adhere since 2017. A study done by Oswick and Noon (2014) reported that workplace diversity related topics, such as diversity, equity, inclusion, were shown around 13,896 publications in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) during the period from 1970 to 2009, which accounted for the average of 347 articles per year. In 2020, the situation of George Floyd raised social awareness which led to social movements on social media platforms such as “#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and #TogetherWeRise” (Russen & Dawson, 2023, p.26). This has highlighted the increasing attention for organisations to take actions towards positive impacts (Segal, 2021). Initially, DEI was discussed to minimise discrimination and barriers for underrepresented individuals, but it has now been raised to a key business strategy in HR practices (Dong, 2021).

As the workforce demographics continue to shift, organisations started to place a strong emphasis on DEI (Alahakoon et al., 2024; Wang, Gomes, Rosa, Copeland, & Santana, 2024). It is a central topic for organisations, especially HRM professionals worldwide (Irim, Salman, & Rauf, 2024). Several studies show positive impacts of DEI practices in organisations in many aspects. For example, implementing DEI is a significant factor influencing organisational performance (Alahakoon et al., 2024), inclusion may support psychological safety and minimise psychological distress (Aslan, Mert, & Sen, 2021; Gonzalez, Tillman, & Holmes, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024). It is also positively linked to employees’ psychological contract (Mousa, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024), organisational commitment (Chen & Tang, 2018; Giffords, 2009), and employees are more likely to have higher job satisfaction when companies embrace DEI policies (Brimhall et al., 2017).

However, regardless of the positive impact of DEI on organisations, only 11% of Fortune 500 companies fully understand and/or could describe the definition of workplace inclusion and the impact it can bring to organisations (Mondal, 2021). There are still gaps in existing literature that do not explore DEI in a multifaceted approach that address different challenges of diversity in the workplace (Adamson, Kelan, Lewis, Śliwa, & Rumens, 2021). Numerous studies have touched on the relationship between Gen Z and DEI, and findings show that Gen Z employees value DEI practices in the workplace more than employees of previous generations and they are willing to work for companies with supporting DEI policies (Pichler, Kohli, & Granitz, 2021). With the increasing presence of Gen Z in the workforce demographics, it might be worthwhile for organisations to prepare for advocating and implementing DEI policies as one of the core strategic goals. It is necessary for organisations to effectively implement DEI, but ensuring employees understand and apply these policies remains a key challenge for organisations. More importantly, aligning these policies with Gen Z expectations presents an additional consideration for organisations. While these phenomena seem to require further explanation, there is

not enough investigation to support such explanations in the extant literature. To date, existing studies have investigated DEI policies in the workplace (e.g. Chen & Tang, 2018; Mousa, 2020; Russen & Dawson, 2023) and the impact of DEI (Giffords, 2009; Irim et al., 2024; Mondal, 2021). Still, research into attitudes of Gen Z towards DEI policies in organisations remains limited (Muralidharan, La Ferle, & Roth-Cohen, 2024).

Although effective DEI implementation is necessary, ensuring that employees understand and apply these policies remains a significant challenge. More importantly, aligning DEI efforts with Gen Z's expectations adds another layer of complexity for organisations. While these phenomena clearly warrant further exploration, there is a lack of in-depth investigation in the current literature. To date, existing studies have explored DEI policies in the workplace (e.g., Chen & Tang, 2018; Mousa, 2020; Russen & Dawson, 2023) and the overall impact of DEI (Giffords, 2009; Irim et al., 2024; Mondal, 2021). However, research specifically examining Gen Z's attitudes toward DEI policies in organisations remains limited (Muralidharan, La Ferle, & Roth-Cohen, 2024).

The objective of this research is to discover what Generation Z thinks of workplace diversity in Thailand and explore the specific aspects of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) that Generation Z values most in organisations to understand their preferences for the future workplace. To understand this phenomenon, the research seeks to address two research questions: 1) What do Gen Z think of Workplace Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) in organisations in Thailand? And 2) Which aspects of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) do Gen Z value most in the organisation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace Diversity

The term 'workplace diversity' refers to differences among members of identity groups and these differences can be defined in terms of the following:

Race, skin colour, ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability or disability, socioeconomic background, academic background, profession, family and relationship status, language, habits and activities, and personality traits (Morukian, 2022, p. 9).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is another term frequently used as a tripod to discuss workplace diversity. Each term represents different meanings, and while they may be used independently and interchangeably in some research, they are all considered part of workplace diversity concept. The term 'diversity' centres on "the differences in the demographics of groups or organisations (Adamson et al., 2021). It includes differences in racial backgrounds, culture, gender roles, religious beliefs, and the individuality of each person behaviour (Agbontaen, 2019; Miller & Rowney, 1999; Saxena, 2014).

Equity means treating all employees fairly and equitably, irrespective of race, gender, age, religion, or other personal traits (Kiradoo, 2022). Equity and equality are often mistaken for one another, but they have nuanced meanings. Equality aims for equal treatment by treating everyone with the same approach, whereas equity focuses on fairness by acknowledging individual circumstances and providing tailored support to achieve equal outcomes (McKinsey, 2022).

Inclusion emphasises ensuring employee involvement in organisations and removing barriers that may hinder employees from participating and/or maximising their skills (Adamson et al., 2021; Roberson, 2004). It involves creating a workplace where people from diverse backgrounds (i.e. racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and sexual orientations) feel respected and valued (Kiradoo, 2022). While equity often receives inadequate attention among DEI (Russen & Dawson, 2023), the absence of equity in the workplace will result in separation or discrimination (Berry, 2016). Therefore, diversity, equity, and inclusion should not be treated as a siloed initiative.

Building on these definitions, it provides a comprehensive perspective on workplace diversity based on three key aspects: diversity, equity, and inclusion. Organisations should ensure that none of these elements are overlooked to maximise their positive impact.

The Impact of DEI in Organisations

In the context of organisations, DEI are practices designed to support organisational performance and human resource management. Many organisations are increasingly embracing DEI to promote more inclusive workplaces (Morukian, 2022; Nguyen, Evan, Chaudhuri, Hagen, & Williams, 2023). It may come in different forms, for example, diversity training programs (McCoy, 2020), policies, recruiting and hiring process, employee resource groups (Cenkci, Zimmerman, & Bircan, 2019), and community engagement activities (Mmeje, Price, Johnson, & Fenner, 2020). Studies claimed that these DEI initiatives provide benefits (Acquavita, Pittman, Gibbons, & Castellanos-Brown, 2009; Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013; Ely & Thomas, 1996; Mor Barak et al., 2016; Saxena, 2014) but also present challenges to organisations in their implementation (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Nwoga, 2023).

One of the widely recognised benefits of DEI implementation is that it could enhance organisational performance (Alahakoon et al., 2024; Sabharwal, 2014; Singh, Winkel, & Selvarajan, 2013). Organisations that implementing DEI are more likely to attract job applicants and audiences (Alahakoon et al., 2024). Research shows DEI is associated with several employee psychological factors, such as, turnover consideration (McKay et al., 2007), psychological safety (Singh et al., 2013), psychological distress (Aslan et al., 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024), psychological contract (Mousa, 2020) and organisational commitment (Chen & Tang, 2018). These factors could affect employee's work attitudes which could also lead directly to their overall organisational performance.

McKay et al. (2007) found that creating a positive diversity climate influence employee retention, which enhance organisational commitment and reduce turnover consideration among employees. Their study shows that diversity is not only for certain ethnic groups or minorities, but it benefits all employees in organisations. A study by Singh et al. (2013) found that DEI has a positive effect on psychological safety, which in turn enhances employee performance. However, their study indicates that DEI should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all approach. Apart from psychological safety, research found that the outcome of organisational inclusion has positive results on psychological contract between employers and employees with responsible leadership acting as a supporting mechanism (Mousa, 2020). This means that employers or leaders, as well as their understanding and expectations, can encourage employees to develop a positive working perception, which allows them to work more effectively towards employers' expectations. Another research by Chen and Tang (2018) found that the employees' perception of being accepted and inclusive in organisations promotes organisational commitment, which further supports employees' work-related role behaviours.

In addition, there is a positive relationship between DEI policies and employee job satisfaction (Brimhall et al., 2017). Brimhall et al. (2017) suggests that employee perceptions of workplace inclusion can lead to more positive feelings of being valued and supported by the organisation. This is associated with high-quality leader-member exchange relationships in the workplace. This is also more likely to encourage a positive work environment, and can enhance job satisfaction, as employees feel more engaged and satisfied when they perceive themselves as included and supported by their leaders.

While the recognition that DEI is crucial for maintaining competitiveness in the global economy is growing, its implementation continues to be challenging for organisations. Despite past research highlighting the numerous benefits of promoting DEI in the workplace, researchers found challenges DEI implementation. Nwoga (2023) found internal organisational barriers that hinder DEI implementation to be misalignment with organisational needs, lack of proactive analysis of potential obstacles, and cultural resistance. According to a recent study (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024), the reasons for undesirable outcomes or DEI backfire in organisations are due to stereotypes, self-interest and signalling theories, and organisational factors, such as tensions between different DEI frameworks, and a failure to integrate unity into diversity strategies. These factors can lead to perceived unfairness, further increasing bias and reducing inclusion.

However, these obstacles are not insurmountable for the successful implementation of DEI in organisations (Brimhall et al., 2017; Nwoga, 2023). When addressed properly through the right policies and leadership, DEI initiatives can provide greater impact than challenges for organisations.

Given the increasing importance of DEI in organisational success, it is essential to consider how the emerging workforce, particularly Gen Z, perceives and interacts with DEI initiatives. As this generation enters the workforce, their unique values and expectations around DEI are likely to shape the future

of workplace culture and DEI practices. Understanding what DEI means for Gen will be crucial for organisations striving to create inclusive environments that meet the needs of both current and future employees. The following section will discuss extant studies on Gen Z and workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Gen Z and Workplace Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Since the arrival of Gen Z in the workforce, the topic has been the centre of attention among academic researchers and managers. According to recent statistics (2025), approximately 80% of Gen Z in Thailand are participating in the labour force. These statistics, which define Gen Z as those born between 2000 and 2010 based on Stanton’s (2017) classification, suggest that Gen Z will dominate the Thai workforce within a few years.

Research on Gen Z indicates that Gen Z prioritises workplace diversity more than older generations (Muralidharan, La Ferle, & Roth-Cohen, 2024), and is more likely to seek employment with organisations that implement DEI initiatives (Pichler et al., 2021). Pichler et al. (2021) proposes a framework called DITTO, which consists of Diversity, Individualism and Teamwork, Technology, and Organisational Supports. The framework is designed to help organisations effectively manage Gen Z employees. As a result, diversity is an essential part of the framework to meet their expectations. Sakdiyakorn, Golubovskaya, and Solnet (2021) also found that Gen Z employees believe in universalism in hospitality work, where universalism is linked with “harmony, respect, justice, fairness, equal rights, integrity and helping others beyond their inner circle” (Sakdiyakorn, Golubovskaya, and Solnet, 2021, p. 6). They recommend organisations to design workplace inclusion and diversity management program to serve the engagement of Gen Z employees.

Due to their strong DEI preference, it was also found that it helps attract and retain Gen Z employees in organisations (Lazar, Zbuche, & Pinzaru, 2023). This generation is driven by a desire for authenticity and equality, seeking workplaces that reflect their values and uphold ethical standards. If organisations align with their expectation, research shows that it is linked with their organisational commitment and connects employees with organisations.

DEI is not only seen in the context of organisations, Ferraro, Hemsley, and Sands (2023) found that modern consumers especially younger generations like Gen Z and Gen Alpha, actively support or reject brands based on their commitment to DEI. Their research reports that over 60% of young consumers (Gen Z, Gen Alpha) are influenced by diversity in advertising, while 70% of Gen Z will reject brands that run offensive or non-inclusive campaigns. This indicates that Gen Z values DEI and expects brands to prioritise DEI into their brands.

Even though the trend of DEI seems to be what Gen Z prioritises, research on this topic has to be explored as there are still gaps in the literature (Low, Lavin, Du, & Fang, 2023). For instance, while studies highlight Gen Z's preference for diversity and inclusion in the workplace, there is limited understanding of what it means to them and what key aspect of DEI they prioritise and value. Moreover, previous literature has discussed the positive impact of DEI in organisations; limited studies have explored what DEI means for Gen Z employees, especially in organisations in Thailand. Understanding the specific dimensions of DEI that resonate most with Gen Z in this context—Diversity, Equity, Inclusion—could provide valuable insights into how organisations can better engage and retain this demographic. Additionally, there is a need for research that examines the practical implementation of DEI policies within Thai organisations and how these align with Gen Z's expectations. Therefore, this research aims to fill these gaps by investigating what Gen Z employees in Thailand think of when they hear “workplace diversity, equity, inclusion”, and which aspects of DEI (whether it be diversity, equity, inclusion) they prioritise and/or wish organisations to pay more attention.

Theoretical Framing and Thai Organisational Context

To further conceptualise Gen Z's strong emphasis on DEI, this study draws on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), has been widely applied in diversity research. The theory suggests that individuals construct their self-concept by identifying with an ingroup, and this identification shapes their identity as they compare themselves to both ingroup and outgroup members. As a generational cohort, Gen Z has been shaped by technology-driven environment (Ghobadi & Mathiassen, 2020), which influences their behaviour and core values and attitudes, such as fairness, representation, and inclusion (Pichler et al., 2021; Muralidharan et al., 2024). These values are important to their workplace identity and expectations. As a result, DEI is not only a strategic HR initiative for this generational cohort, but reflects their group identity. When DEI is absent, misaligned, or tokenistic, it can trigger feelings of exclusion or invalidation, which in turn affect organisational engagement and long-term retention. Studies show that Gen Z views inclusive organisational culture as fundamental to job satisfaction and long-term commitment (Lazar, Zbucnea, & Pinzaru, 2023). Unlike previous generations who may have accepted hierarchical control and lack openness and clarity in HR practices, Gen Z seeks visible accountability, and authenticity in leadership communication (Pichler et al., 2021). Their attitudes reflect a more individualistic, value-driven mindset that may contrast with existing workplace norms for some workplace cultures.

When considering DEI within Thailand, it is critical to account for cultural characteristics unique to Thai organisations, such as hierarchical structures, seniority systems, and collectivist values (Hofstede, 2010). Research shows that power distance and hierarchical cultures are prevalent in the Thai organisational context (Buasuwan, 2021). Cultural norms, such as “respect for elders” play a significant role in shaping employee behaviour and interpersonal interactions. Thai organisational culture is often

described as clan-or family like (Yaoprukchai & Kardkarnklai, 2014), which, while fostering close relationships, may create challenges in implementing DEI initiatives that require open dialogue and transparency. Another cultural trait is *kreng jai* a deeply rooted norm of deference, conflict avoidance, and consideration for others' feelings. This can hinder honest feedback and upward communication (Andrews & Chompusri, 2013). These norms often influence communication patterns and workplace dynamics, which may affect the implementation of DEI initiatives. While DEI may be formally acknowledged at the policy level, Gen Z employees may refrain from voicing their concerns or expectations out of respect for authority.

Despite these cultural constraints, Gen Z has been widely recognised as an expressive and outspoken generation, using platforms like TikTok to voice their political views, mental health struggles, and shared generational identity (Stahl & and Literat, 2023). This generational tendency toward openness and self-expression may influence the perceptions and engagement of Thai Gen Z employees with DEI policies. Yet, the interplay between generational identity and national culture remains complex. To address these complexities, this study seeks to understand what Gen Z expect DEI in Thai organisations with Thailand's cultural context to ensure greater relevance and resonance for Gen Z employees in Thai organisations.

Adopting a cross-cultural lens is essential when implementing DEI in Thai organisations, where hierarchy, seniority, and harmony shape workplace behaviours and communication norms (Hofstede, 2010; Komin, 1990). Feitosa, Hagenbuch, Patel, and Davis (2022) emphasise that effective DEI requires not only awareness of cultural differences but also the implementation of practices that integrate diverse perspectives, particularly in environments characterised by strong power dynamics. In Thailand's context, aligning global DEI principles with local cultural values is crucial to ensuring these initiatives are both meaningful and sustainable for the Gen Z workforce.

To clarify these cultural and generational dynamics, Figure 1 below 1 presents the conceptual framework underpinning this study.

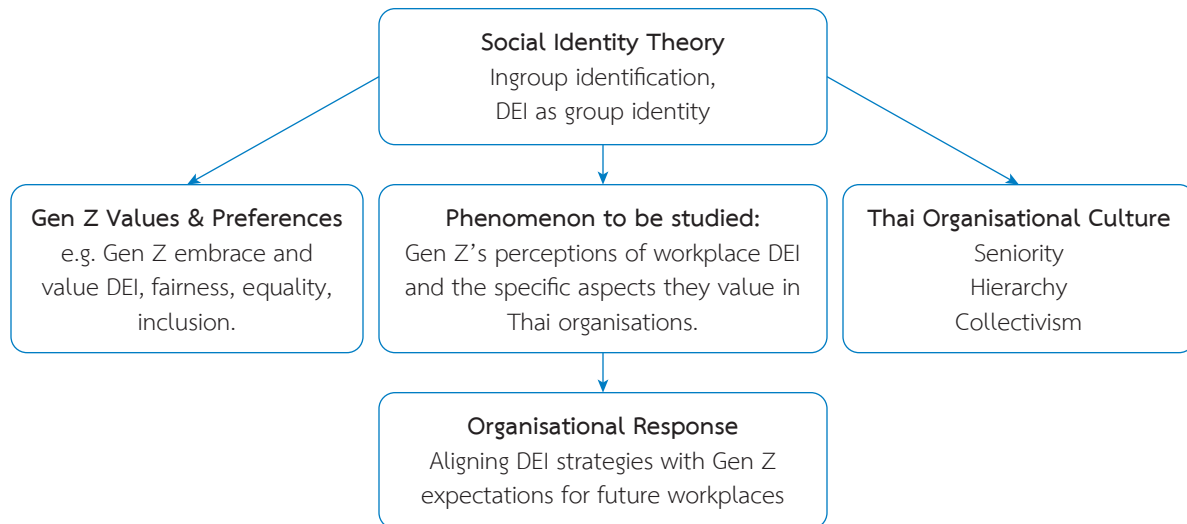


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework:

Understanding Gen Z's DEI Expectations in Thai Organisational Contexts

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted qualitative method with an interpretivist epistemological stance and a social constructivist ontological approach to address research questions and understand social phenomenon within a real-life context (Scotland, 2012). This approach provides valuable insights into the diverse perspectives of Generation Z on how they perceive and value DEI.

In terms of sampling strategy, the study employed a purposive and convenience sampling approach. Purposive sampling is chosen because researchers identify specific research objectives and select participants based on relevant criteria (Bryman, 2016). In this study, the research was conducted in a multinational company, with participants selected according to age classifications established by (Stanton, 2017). Convenience sampling was also employed, as the research site had previously been conducted for a PhD thesis, which facilitated access and ensured permission for data collection.

A Multinational Company Case Setting

This research used a single case setting at a multinational company (MNC) to explore what workplace diversity means for Generation Z in Thailand and which aspects of DEI they are most likely to prioritise. The research site was a multinational Japanese automobile company located in the northeastern region of Thailand. The rationale for selecting an MNC as the case setting lies primarily in its suitability for addressing the research questions. This research aims to explore the human perspectives of DEI and its significance for a specific generational group in the workplace, which is Generation Z. The case setting allows an in-depth investigation of the topic in a real-world scenario (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Additionally, the work environment of modern workplaces is often in

multinational environment. The nature of MNCs and their organisational culture offer a valuable viewpoint for understanding broader employee perspectives and the research phenomenon, with findings that could be applicable to a wide range of businesses.

Data Collection and Participants

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview at a multinational company. The interview was conducted with 18 Generation Z employees at MNC. All interviews were based on a voluntary basis. This study selected Generation Z based on the age category focusing on the birth year (Stanton, 2017, p. 60) as shown in Table 1. The interviews were carried out from 1 hour to 2 hours with an average of 1.5 hours. The interviews took place at the MNC location. All interviewees were asked for consent to record prior to each interview. The interview consisted of two parts. The interviewer started by asking general questions about participants' roles and positions in the company followed by asking about DEI initiatives and policies in the workplace as the second part of the interview. The interviewer ended the final question by asking participants which aspects of DEI they prioritise provided with their reasons.

Table 1: The age classification

Birth year	Generational group
Born 1922–1943	The Veterans, Traditionalists, or Silent Generation
Born 1943–1963	The Baby Boomers
Born 1964–1979	Gen X, or Gen X'ers
Born 1980–2000	Gen Y or Millennials
Born after 2001	Gen Z

(Source: Stanton, 2017, p. 60)

While the use of convenience sampling allowed the researcher to access participants efficiently, particularly given prior access to the selected multinational company, there might be the risk of selection bias. Participants may share similar perspectives due to shared work cultures or hierarchical influences within the company, which potentially could reduce the diversity of perspectives in the data. To address these concerns and enhance trustworthiness, the researcher employed member checking strategy, which allowed participants to validate interpretations.

Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of interpretations (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). This allows participants to review and validate the results derived from their responses. It includes a range of activities including. For example, participants may be asked to

review the interview transcript and/or interpreted data, interview member checking, focus group member checking, and analysed synthesised data member checking (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016)

In this study, after the data were analysed and key themes identified, the researcher returned the analysed findings to participants for validation and to ensure accurate interpretation of their perspectives. To further establish credibility, the research questions and objectives were shared with participants, and they were informed of their right to omit any part or decline representation in the findings. Although the member checking process was conducted at the end of data analysis, all 18 participants confirmed the accuracy of the and granted permission to publish the findings as presented.

Although the study relied solely on semi-structured interviews without additional sources of data, methodological rigour was maintained through transparency, participant engagement, and alignment with research objectives.

DATA SATURATION

In qualitative research, the adequacy of sample size is primarily guided by the principle of data saturation. It is a key methodological concept for deciding when to stop collecting or analysing data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Data saturation occurs when no new information, codes, or themes emerge from ongoing data collection, which indicates that additional interviews are unlikely to offer further insights (Saunders et al., 2018). Previous research suggests that the average of 10 to 12 interviews may be sufficient for thematic saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Lu, Jian, Muhamad, & Hizam-Hanafiah, 2024)

In this study, data was collected at 18 interviews based on the voluntary basis. Even though there are more Gen Z employees at the research site, only 18 participants agreed to join the research project. However, data saturation was reached by the 10th interview, as participants' responses began to consistently align with previously identified patterns. The researcher observed that no new codes or thematic categories were emerging, which indicated that the essential aspects of participants' experiences with DEI had been sufficiently captured.

The final eight interviews were conducted and not to generate new themes, but to validate and confirm the consistency of existing patterns. This process aligns with Fusch and Ness (2015) who argue that data saturation is a marker of qualitative rigour and helps ensure both the depth and reliability of findings. Therefore, despite only 18 participants were interviewed, the evidence of saturation confirms that the sample size was sufficient for this case study. This approach enhances to the trustworthiness and thematic completeness of the study, particularly within a focused scope on Gen Z employees in a multinational organisational setting.

DATA ANALYSIS

During the data analysis process, this research adopted In Vivo coding and thematic analysis to systematically interpret participants' responses. The analysis was conducted in two phases to ensure a structured and comprehensive approach to identifying key themes related to workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) among Gen Z employees in Thailand.

Phase One: In Vivo Coding

In the first phase of analysis, In Vivo coding was used to capture key phrases and words directly from participants' transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). This helps ensure that the analysis remains accurate to participants' language and perspectives. In qualitative data analysis, understanding stories and ideas through participants is essential, and In Vivo serves this purpose by capturing actual words of participants and offering understanding nuanced meaning (Manning, 2017).

After transcribing interview data, the researcher identified and highlighted key words and phrases from the 18 participants' responses that directly addressed the research questions (Table 2). This process ensured that the most relevant and meaningful expressions were extracted for further analysis. Once the In Vivo coding process was completed, the coded data were reviewed to identify initial patterns that could inform the next phase of analysis.

Table 2: In Vivo Coding analysis (an example of participant 1 and 2)

Research Question	In Vivo Coding
RQ1: What do Gen Z think of Workplace Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) in organisations in Thailand?	Participant1: If companies in Thailand implement DEI and take it seriously, it would be awesome, but I haven't heard of it in our company. I wish there was some policies or initiatives. Participant2: I haven't heard of it from our executives or my boss at all.
RQ2: Which aspects of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) do Gen Z value most in the organization?	Participant1: I think "equity" is very important for my generation because we want to be treated fairly in the workplace. Participant2: For me, definitely equity. I can't tell you exactly how I value this but it would be an ideal workplace to work for and if we have it in organisations, the working environment will be great.

Phase Two: Thematic Analysis

In the second phase of analysis, thematic analysis was applied following the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), drawing on data from the first phase of In Vivo coding (Table 2). This phase of analysis followed an inductive approach, as themes were derived directly from the data rather than imposed based on pre-existing theories, which aligns with data-driven rather than theory-driven approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 3 summarises each phase of thematic analysis and how it was applied in this study.

Table 3: Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description
1. Familiarisation	Each transcript was read multiple times, and preliminary notes were taken to capture emerging concepts.
2. Generating Initial Codes	In Vivo coding was applied to stay closely aligned with participants' authentic language and perspectives (Saldaña, 2016).
3. Searching for Themes	Codes were organised and grouped; recurring patterns and relationships were explored using Microsoft Excel.
4. Reviewing Themes	The researcher examined whether each theme was consistently supported across the dataset. Themes were refined or combined as necessary to ensure analytical coherence.
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Each theme's focus was refined, and its core meaning in relation to the research questions was clearly articulated.
6. Producing the Report	Themes were linked to relevant literature, and their implications for organisational DEI practices were discussed.

As summarised in Table 3, In Vivo coding is in the second phase. The researcher used this strategy to ensure that the themes remained grounded in participants' authentic language while maintaining a logical and organised structure for interpreting the data. Table 4 provides illustrative examples of how specific themes emerged from the coded data. These themes reflect key patterns within the dataset and directly relate to the research questions, which offered insights into participants' perceptions and experiences of DEI in the workplace. The accompanying quotes highlight the participants' voices, further reinforcing the data-driven nature of the analysis.

Table 4: Thematic Analysis (Example of Emerging Themes)

Theme	Example Quotes from Participants
Lack of DEI Awareness in Thai Workplaces	<p>“I haven’t heard of it from our executives or my boss at all.” P2</p> <p>“I don’t know what it means.” P3</p> <p>“Can you explain what it means?” P5</p>
Gen Z prioritises Equity	<p>“I think “equity” is very important for my generation because we want to be treated fairly in the workplace.” P1</p> <p>“For me, definitely equity. I can’t tell you exactly how I value this but it would be an ideal workplace to work for.” P2</p> <p>“Equity is the most important.” P3</p>
Expectation for DEI Policies and Initiatives	<p>“I wish there were some policies or initiatives in my company.” P1</p> <p>“...if we have it (DEI policies and initiatives) in organisations, the working environment will be great.” P2</p> <p>“I hope our executives take it (DEI policies and initiatives) more seriously. Our work environment would have been great.” P5</p>

In the process of analysis, the researcher used Microsoft Office tools, such as Word and Excel, to store transcribed data and apply coding techniques. The combination of in vivo coding and thematic analysis ensures that the findings remain closely aligned with the participants’ perspectives while allowing for a structured interpretation of patterns within the data. This approach provides depth and rigour to the analysis, offering insights into the participants’ experiences in a way that is both rich and systematic. Importantly, a key aspect of the analysis process is ensuring data validity. To achieve this, interviewees were asked to confirm the research findings after the final analysis. All interviewees confirmed and gave consent to researcher to report findings for further publication and academic contribution.

FINDINGS

The aim of this research is set out to investigate what DEI means for Gen Z and what aspect of DEI Gen Z prioritises in organisations. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, three key findings emerged: 1) a lack of DEI awareness in organisations among Gen Z, 2) Gen Z's prioritisation of equity, and 3) Gen Z's expectations for organisations to implement DEI policies and initiatives. These themes consistently appeared during the interviews and data analysis, and each will be discussed in further detail below.

1. Lack of DEI Awareness

Despite the growing attention DEI has received in recent years, findings show a noticeable lack of DEI awareness within organisations from the perspective of Gen Z. Throughout the interview sessions with 18 participants, most responses were “I haven't heard of it”, “I don't know what it is”, and all participants asked researcher to explain what DEI in organisations is. This shows they had limited exposure to or understanding of DEI initiatives within their workplaces. While there is prominent section on the company website explaining how they implement DEI policies in the workplace, Gen Z employees reported that they were unsure about the extent to which their organisations were truly committed to DEI efforts. One participant expressed “I am not sure we have it in our company” – Participant 6.

In terms of DEI-related activities or training, all participants shared that there is no DEI-related activities or training during their employment at the company. This lack of awareness could be particularly related to the company that had not clearly communicated their DEI goals or actively engaged employees in DEI-related activities or training. However, it was found that even though the company does not provide training, workshops or DEI-related activities, it does not mean that Gen Z employees does not value DEI in the workplace (Table 5).

Table 5: Interview Excerpts – Gen Z Values DEI

Interviewer	Quotes from Participants
How do you think DEI is important in organisations after I explained the concepts and policies for you?	“I would love to work for company that promote DEI” – Participant 8. “I think it is important and all companies in Thailand should take it seriously because Gen Z like us will want to work in the workplace that support us” – Participant 10. “It should not be only a trend but a must for all companies” – Participant 7.

According to the excerpts in Table 5, it shows that most participants would be encouraged to work if the company for they are working implement DEI initiatives. It seems that DEI serves as a meaningful and supportive policies for an ideal workplace for Gen Z employees. The second finding represents how Gen Z views and prioritise DEI in organisations.

2. Gen Z prioritises equity

The second key finding that emerged from the thematic analysis is that, given Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Gen Z values and prioritises equity in the workplace the most. This emphasis on equity was consistently noted across interview responses. Participants expressed the importance of fairness, equal opportunities, and the removal of inequalities in the workplace. According to the interview responses, 83.33% claimed that they prioritise equity in the workplace, whereas 16.7% prioritised inclusion. Interestingly, none of the responses mentioned they valued diversity in the workplace.

In addition, the recurring theme of prioritising equity in the workplace is strongly associated with creating a positive work environment, where employees are treated fairly and provided with equal opportunities, as illustrated in Table 5. Most participants responded similarly that they value equity because it is important for their generation. They believe that an equitable work environment fosters a sense of respect and trust, which leads to an ideal workplace for Gen Z employees. According to participant 17 (Table 6), the excerpt places a strong emphasis on equity, and it is a powerful statement to mention “an era of equal rights.” This shows that Gen Z employees truly value fair treatment and are advocates for embracing equity in the workplace.

Table 6: Interview Excerpts – Gen Z Prioritises equity

Interviewer	Quotes from participants
Among these three key aspects—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—which one do you prioritise the most, and why?	<p>“I think “equity” is very important for my generation because we want to be treated fairly in the workplace.” P1</p> <p>“For me, definitely equity. I can’t tell you exactly how I value this but it would be an ideal workplace to work for.” P2</p> <p>“Equity is the most important.” P3</p> <p>“I think equity because it is an important issue for my generation. It is something that must be implemented. I believe without it, things wouldn't work. We live in an era of equal rights”. P17</p>

Another prominent finding regarding how Gen Z employees prioritise equity is their strong emphasis on a sense of belonging, being respected as individuals, being recognised for their performance and perseverance. As participant 4 emphasised during the interview, “I prioritise equity because we work for them; we want them to see our value”. This highlights that Gen Z employees expect workplaces to acknowledge their contributions fairly and create an environment where they feel valued, respected, and included given their dedication and commitment to organisational success. A significant related finding is that Gen Z prefers management team and colleagues to treat everyone in the company equally, not based on social connectedness or favouritism. As Participant 18 responded, “Equity is the most important aspect among DEI because everyone should have equal opportunities to work and receive fair recognition based on their efforts, not because of favouritism or personal connections.” This participant indicates “favouritism or personal connections” exist in organisations, which reflects that Gen Z employees do not support this approach, and this is the reason why equity should be prioritised in organisations to prevent and eliminate such practices.

3. Expectations for DEI Policies and Initiatives

The third finding reveals that Gen Z has strong expectations for organisations to implement DEI policies and initiatives. Even though participants were initially unaware of what DEI is, they showed increased interest after it was explained to them. Based on their responses, Gen Z employees expect DEI policies and initiatives to be taken seriously within organisations. Table 7 shows interview excerpts their expectation regarding for DEI in organisations.

Table 7: Interview Excerpts – Expectations for DEI Policies and Initiatives

Interviewer	Quotes from Participants
What are your expectations from your company regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)?	<p>“I usually don’t challenge my seniors much and tend to go with the flow. But for people in my generation, they strongly expect equity in the workplace. Without it, it would be a major trigger.” P1</p> <p>“I think equity and work ethics should go hand in hand for long-term success.” P3</p> <p>“I’m not sure yet within the department, but I would like the management to pay more attention.” P4</p> <p>“I’m okay with anything. It’s up to the seniors.” P16</p> <p>“It depends on the management team”. P17</p> <p>“It would be great if policies were implemented.” P18</p>

According to Table 7, the responses vary across participants, which reflects diverse expectations Gen Z has regarding DEI initiatives in the workplace. The results indicate that 44.44% of participants stated that “It would be great if DEI policies were implemented.” In contrast, 11% stated that DEI initiatives should not only be implemented but also integrated with strong work ethics. Another 11% indicated uncertainty regarding how DEI initiatives would be implemented within their organisations. A further 6% mentioned that the implementation of such policies is contingent upon the seniors, while another 6% emphasised that practices of such policies highly depend on the management team. They also expressed a reluctance to disagree with senior leadership, as it might negatively impact their professional standing. Building on these findings, it can be inferred that the majority of Gen Z employees expect organisations to not only adopt DEI policies, but also effectively communicate and engage employees in these initiatives. This will ensure that all employees understand DEI goals and objectives and take them seriously. As participant 1 mentioned, ‘without it (DEI), it would be a major trigger’. This emphasises the critical importance of equity that without it, it would be a major trigger for dissatisfaction among Gen Z employees. Thus, the finding of this research highlights the strong desire for fairness within the workplace and the need for organisations to prioritise DEI initiatives, which aligns with the values and expectations of Gen Z employees.

DISCUSSION

This research explored what Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) means for Gen Z employees in Thailand, and which aspects of DEI Gen Z values and prioritises the most. The findings of this research provide significant insights into Gen Z’s perspectives of DEI in the workplace.

Firstly, the findings of this study align with existing literature on the strong preference of DEI among Gen Z (Ferraro et al., 2023; Muralidharan et al., 2024; Pichler et al., 2021; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). The findings show that Gen Z employees highly value DEI policies and initiatives and suggest organisations implement DEI policies seriously, as Gen Z views such practices as an ideal workplace to work for. This is consistent with the extant literature that discussed DEI implementation could delay turnover intention (McKay et al., 2007) as well as attract and retain employees (Lazar et al., 2023). Consistent with prior research (Mousa, 2020; Chen & Tang, 2018; Brimhall et al., 2017), this research confirms leadership’s critical role in successful DEI implementation. When leaders embrace DEI policies, Gen Z employees experience commitment, a positive work atmosphere, and increased job satisfaction. They feel more engaged and satisfied when they are valued and supported.

When compared to Gen Z employees in Western contexts, however, there is a few key differences. Thai Gen Z may strongly embrace and value DEI but according to the findings of this study, they are often constrained in voicing concerns due to cultural norms such as *kreng jai* and hierarchical respect. While Gen Z in Western countries may openly demand accountability (Stahl & Literat, 2023), Thai Gen

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Zs tend to navigate their ideals through indirect or respectful forms of communication. This illustrates how generational traits interact with national culture, which create a nuanced expression of DEI expectations.

Secondly, while it is obvious that Gen Z values DEI, the findings has extended the existing literature (Mondal, 2021) that there is still a lack of DEI awareness in an individual level in organisations. Existing literature on DEI has claimed the importance of DEI and the increasing application of DEI policies (Alahakoon et al., 2024; Wang, Gomes, Rosa, Copeland, & Santana, 2024). However, the findings of this research suggest that organisations may not be effectively communicating or actively engage employees with their DEI policies. This lack of awareness can lead to a disconnect between organisational goals and employee expectations, which could affect organisational performance, employee satisfaction and retention, as well as organisational commitment.

Thirdly, this research contributes to the existing knowledge on DEI and Gen Z perspectives by revealing that, among the three aspects—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—Gen Z values and prioritises equity the most. To date, no study has specifically examined which aspect Gen Z values the most, which makes this a novel finding in the existing literature. Also, this has supported the current knowledge (Russen & Dawson, 2023) that equity should not receive less attention among DEI and the findings added a nuanced knowledge (Berry, 2016) that without equity in the workplace, it will not be an ideal workplace for Gen Z in the future workplace trends.

Lastly, in line with existing research (Muralidharan et al., 2024; Pichler et al., 2021; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021), Gen Z employees expect organisations to actively implement DEI policies, communicate about them, and engage more with these topics, as they consider them essential for their generation. Additionally, the findings offer a nuanced understanding of DEI implementation by highlighting that DEI policies and initiatives entirely depend on management teams and senior positions. This reflects the influence of organisational culture, particularly seniority culture in organisations, which shape policymaking and power distribution in organisations. While Gen Z highly values DEI, they recognise that decision-making ultimately depends on senior leaders.

In the Thai organisational context, hierarchical structures are deeply embedded, with authority often concentrated at the top and decisions made in a top-down manner. Age hierarchy is closely associated with perceptions of competence and leadership legitimacy, which can discourage younger employees from expressing their expectations in the workplace. This power distance can create barriers to collaboration on DEI efforts across organisational levels. As a result, it reinforces the need for senior leaders to take action and actively promote an inclusive workplace.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the perspectives of Gen Z employees in Thailand regarding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the workplace. It has offered valuable findings into what DEI means for this generation and the aspects they prioritise the most. The findings demonstrate that Gen Z values DEI, particularly equity, and expects organisations to actively implement and communicate DEI policies. The key findings of this research illustrate the importance of raising awareness about DEI within organisations, as there are still some limited understanding of DEI concepts and initiatives among Gen Z employees. This lack of awareness is call for the need for better communication and engagement around DEI policies at the organisational level to align with the values and expectations of younger generations.

Moreover, Gen Z's strong prioritisation of equity over diversity and inclusion highlights their demand for fairness, equal opportunities, and the eliminations of inequalities in the workplace. This generation strongly believes that a workplace rooted in equity fosters trust, respect, and a positive work environment. The findings suggest that organisations should focus on creating equitable workplaces that ensure all employees are treated fairly, regardless of social connections or favouritism.

Importantly, Gen Z employees expressed high expectations for their organisations to implement DEI policies that are not only visible but integrated into organisational practices. Findings show that Gen Z believes that DEI policies should be actively communicated and that management teams should play a critical role in promoting a DEI culture. However, the research also reveals the influence of seniority within organisations, which can affect the practicality of DEI policies and practices.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research has made significant theoretical contributions by extending the understanding of what DEI means for Gen Z employees. While previous research mentioned that equity seems to receive less attention than diversity and inclusion, this research has made a significant contribution by revealing that Gen Z places the highest importance on equity. This has contributed to the existing literature that discussed the assumption that diversity and inclusion are the primary focus for younger generations (Russen & Dawson, 2023). This study also supports the existing literature that there is a gap in DEI awareness among Gen Z employees. The research suggests that organisations need to improve communication about their DEI policies. Additionally, the research extends existing theories on organisational commitment to DEI by showing that Gen Z employees expect these policies to align with ethical practices and values. Moreover, the study has provided a nuanced understanding of DEI policies and initiatives by emphasising the vital role of management teams and senior leaders in successfully implementing DEI initiatives, which add a new dimension to the understanding of leadership's impact on promoting a diverse, equitable, and inclusive work culture.

PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The findings of this study have provided implications for organisations. While previous literature addressed that the workplace is shifting because Gen Z will soon dominate the workforce, it is important for organisations and practitioners to understand Gen Z perspectives and prepare for the future workplace trends such as DEI policies. This research confirms the existing literature that Gen Z values DEI policies and expect organisations to implement them (Ferraro et al., 2023; Muralidharan et al., 2024; Pichler et al., 2021; Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). Findings suggest that organisations should prioritise equity by creating fair systems for performance evaluation and eliminate any biases in the workplace. Additionally, the research highlights DEI policies and initiatives will likely become key trends in future workplaces. Management teams and senior leaders should recognise the importance of DEI to promote a positive work environment for Gen Z employees. By implementing DEI in organisations, it could not only create a positive and fair work environment but also ensure that the workplaces remain attractive to the values and expectations of the emerging workforce.

Furthermore, the study suggests that DEI should not remain a conceptual ideal but should be embedded into HR systems, such as performance appraisals, promotion criteria, and onboarding practices. For example, performance appraisals should incorporate DEI-related metrics that assess how employees contribute to inclusive behaviours, support team diversity, or foster equitable practices. Promotion criteria should be clearly defined and transparent, which ensure that it is based on merit and inclusive leadership behaviours rather than favouritism or social networks. Similarly, onboarding practices should include DEI training and/or workshop that helps new employees understand the organisation's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusivity. These implementations can help turn Gen Z's expectations into sustainable organisational practices that promote diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace

However, Thai workplaces often reflect collectivist values and hierarchical decision-making structures, where respect for seniority and indirect communication are deeply embedded. This cultural backdrop may discourage younger employees, particularly Gen Z, from openly discussing their DEI-related needs, especially when such initiatives are implemented in a top-down manner with limited participatory engagement. Unlike the western contexts, Gen Z may be more vocal in expressing dissatisfaction, Thai Gen Z employees might choose to leave an organisation rather than confront issues directly, which ultimately lead to similar outcomes, such as high turnover rates. This highlights how differing cultural dynamics can still result in similar organisational challenges.

A key takeaway from this research is that, in practice, organisations—not only in Thailand but globally—should clearly define their DEI goals from the outset, embedding them into the organisation's mission and vision. These efforts must go beyond tokenistic gestures or public relations strategies and instead be integrated into daily practices. Additionally, this research highlights that diversity, equity,

and inclusion should extend beyond categories such as race, ethnicity, sex, or religion; differences in opinion, perspective, and generation also matter and must be recognised in inclusive workplaces.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small. This research only collected data from 18 Gen Z participants, which may not fully represent the broader population. Future studies could include a larger sample to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Gen Z's views on DEI. Secondly, this research focused on Gen Z employees in Thailand, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other countries or cultural contexts. Future research could explore DEI perceptions among Gen Z in different countries to identify cultural or regional differences. Additionally, this study primarily relied on qualitative interviews. Future studies could incorporate quantitative methods to validate the findings and provide more robust data. Lastly, while this research sheds light on Gen Z's expectations and priorities regarding DEI, further studies could examine the long-term impact of DEI policies on employee engagement, retention, and organisational performance across different sectors and industries.

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