

APPLYING AN INCLUSIVE LENS TO PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

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Product Inclusion: Building Better User Experiences and Business Growth



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Google's Community and Business Inclusion team is dedicated to mobilizing our employees to improve equity, diversity, inclusion and integrity at our company. One way we manifest this is by applying an inclusive lens to create better products and grow our business. We call this practice Product Inclusion, and the new research from Harvard Business Review Analytic Services in this report illustrates how firms across industries are taking this approach as well. But first, here are some concrete actions your team can take to practice Product Inclusion, too.

Create a dedicated arena (e.g., a workshop or summit) to discuss the topic of product inclusion. My team organized Google's first Multicultural Summit in late 2015. Our strategy was to bring together stakeholders, product teams, and diversity subject matter experts (SMEs) within a safe, constructive and focused environment to discuss the concept of inclusion and how it relates to solving product and business challenges. We connected participants to a network of diversity SMEs within our People Operations (a.k.a. Human Resources) team to guide any Google employee or team to shape ongoing conversations on inclusion, in the context of creating excellent user experiences.

Ask questions to help teams identify actions to take. One key outcome of the Multicultural Summit was a set of questions that serve as the foundation of our repeatable, scalable practice of Product Inclusion.

Google's Product Inclusion questions:

1. Has your team been exposed to inclusive design?
2. Have you identified a champion?
3. What's the business challenge you're trying to solve?
4. What is the inclusion challenge you're trying to solve?
5. How do the business and inclusion challenges align? (This will help shape a team's goal statement for product inclusion)
6. Whom do I need to influence to unlock resources to solve the problem?
7. What's your action plan for a test/pilot?
8. What partners need to be involved?
9. How can you build the resources to continue this work?
10. What is your public commitment to inclusive design?

THE RESULTS

In our first year using the questions (2016), our goal was to work with six teams across Google. By the end of that year, we had worked with 29 teams, illustrating how ready teams were to use the questions. We've seen positive outcomes for product launches that incorporated these questions, such as extremely low negative user feedback reports related to inclusion issues on the Assistant since its launch in 2016.

LESSONS LEARNED

Track and show results to gain support. We require any team who uses the Product Inclusion questions to track their progress. Ongoing positive results help stakeholders and teams understand the value of talking about inclusion to create better products.

Ask leaders to amplify your discussions on inclusive product design. Not only do we rely on senior leaders for advisory conversations, but we also offer talking points to include in their internal and external thought leadership on inclusive product design.

This is a growing area of practice at Google and for others in tech, and our field has a lot more work to do to define and understand the burgeoning Product Inclusion space. But we're learning something important, which is that the diverse talent and perspectives we need to make the inclusive products of the future are right in front of us. Taking proactive steps to integrate these perspectives into product design is the work of designing the kind of inclusive company Google wants, and needs, to be for the future.

APPLYING AN INCLUSIVE LENS TO PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Most organizations do not have product development processes that are designed with customer diversity in mind—a key finding in a new survey of 1,033 business and IT executives conducted by Harvard Business Review Analytic Services. As international markets become more accessible to all businesses, and demographics within markets continue to change, it becomes vital to ensure that an inclusive lens is applied to the ideation, creation, testing, launch, incident response protocol and continuous improvement of the company’s product offerings. Only leading organizations—defined as those companies that are highly effective at realizing the benefits of a diverse workforce—place a high priority on product inclusion. They are the diversity and inclusion (D&I) leaders. While more than half of all respondents see diversity having an extremely positive impact on their business, only 16% of follower and 5% of laggard organizations make it a high priority.

FIGURE 1

A few years ago, a director at a public broadcasting company in Northern Europe raised the concern that their coverage was too focused on urban white males to serve a population that was becoming increasingly diverse through immigration. “We weren’t reaching everyone in the country,” said a company leader. “We weren’t diverse enough.”

They made it a priority over the past two years to increase the diversity of their news product—the parts of the country they reported on, the kinds of stories they covered, the people they interviewed, their anchors and the guests they had on their shows. This has included having older women as anchors, as well as both men and women from the Middle East. They’ve hired refugees as interns, and they’re doing more of their reporting from outside the city centers. “We want to create a reflection of every corner of this country on the national news.” They are increasing their reach with new audiences as a result of these efforts.

HIGHLIGHTS

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53%

OF LEADERS PLACE A HIGH PRIORITY ON PRODUCT INCLUSION

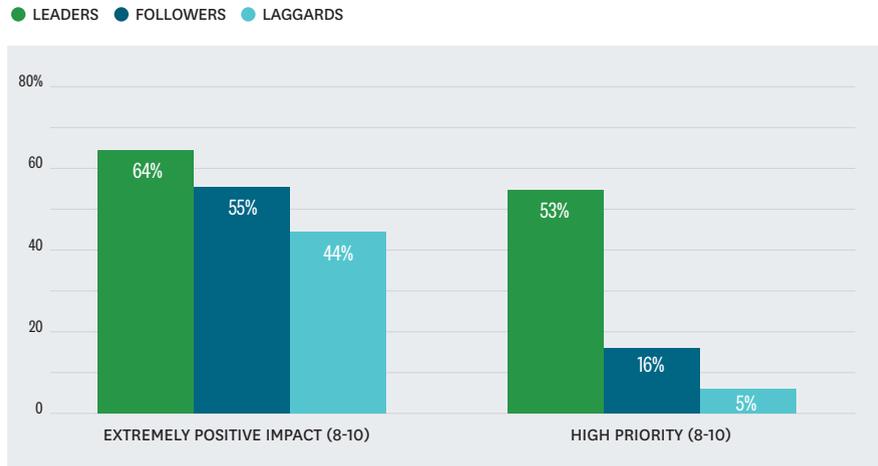
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64%

OF LEADERS SAID PRODUCT INCLUSION HAS AN EXTREMELY POSITIVE IMPACT

FIGURE 1

LEADERS PLACE A HIGH PRIORITY ON PRODUCT INCLUSION

Respondent's rating of impact of product inclusion on organization overall
 Respondent's rating of priority of product inclusion in organization



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JANUARY 2018

ONCE PRODUCT INCLUSION ISSUES BECOME KNOWN, D&I LEADERS ARE TWICE AS LIKELY AS LAGGARDS TO SET GOALS TO INCORPORATE THEM INTO BUSINESS PLANNING

To succeed in global markets, it's important to understand how pricing, marketing, and cultural norms are different. For instance, a global pharmaceutical company sells the same drug for sexually transmitted diseases the world over, but its approach to marketing it varies significantly depending on the country or region, according to the company's digital sales and marketing leader.

In Europe, for example, it's OK to talk openly about the transmission of the disease, but not in the Middle East. There it's appropriate to talk about how the disease is activated in the body, but not how it's contracted.

Banking is conducted very differently in Islamic countries, according to the associate vice president of the multinational bank, driven by religious beliefs about banking and lending. So, the bank has a division that focuses exclusively on that. And in emerging markets, technology products must be more affordable and easy to use.

Most organizations do not have product development processes that are designed with customer diversity in mind. D&I leaders are far more likely to do so. [FIGURE 2](#)

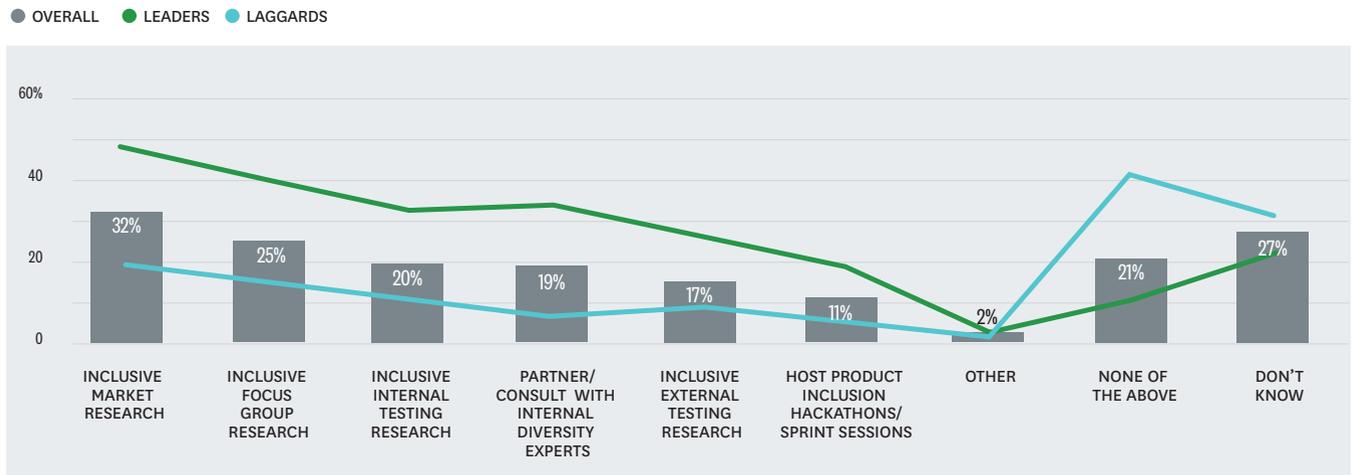
By employing such practices, a global tool and hardware company discovered that while women in one South American country liked its products, many of their tools were too heavy for women to use comfortably eight hours a day. This led to a new product line for women in industrial settings, as more women were taking on those types of jobs.

A global online employment company uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to gain insight into what matters to its members (the people looking for jobs) so it can better serve its customers (For example, according to the head of customer success for global clients in EMEA, a company looking to open a division in Europe would want to understand how easy it would be to attract people and what things would help, such as company culture, work hours, and commuting distances. This led to a new product feature, where prospective employees

FIGURE 2

LEADERS ARE AHEAD IN ALL ASPECTS OF INCLUSIVE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Practices organizations employ in support of designing and building products for a diverse customer base



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JANUARY 2018

could enter their address and see what their commute would look like.

Bringing Product Diversity Challenges to Light

To ensure that a company's products and services are hitting the mark, it's important that diversity and inclusion challenges are brought to the organization's attention. This might include noting when a product is not inclusive of a demographic that will use it (such as the heavy tools for women). It could also mean identifying potential fallout if a product fails to work for a particular group – for instance, if the multinational bank had simply launched its traditional banking model in Islamic countries, consumers would have rejected it, leading to a loss of market share.

Leaders are twice as likely as laggards to engage employees at every level in this work, with employees responding to product inclusion challenges surfaced by customers (44% of D&I leaders versus 18% of laggards) or revealed by a news event (25% versus 11%). Leaders are also twice as likely to say that employees at all levels proactively solve such challenges (40% versus 13%) and that senior leaders also

bring such challenges to the attention of the organization or product team (46% versus 20%). Laggards are most likely to delegate this work to a special D&I employee or group.

Once product inclusion issues become known, D&I leaders are twice as likely as laggards to set goals to incorporate them into business planning (with executives, product managers, employee resource groups and diversity councils variously involved in goal setting). More than a third of D&I leaders' executives are themselves accountable for making sure plans for inclusive product development are implemented. They are more likely to allocate budget for the plan, to grant employees time to work on it, and to recognize those working on the plan in a meaningful way.

Survey respondents expect a broad range of benefits from their product inclusion efforts. On the customer front, they hope to improve customer insight and therefore relevance and customer experience. They believe it will help them to provide the right features in their product offerings as well as improve overall product quality. In the process, they hope to increase both revenue and market share. [FIGURE 3](#)

FIGURE 3

LEADERS EXPECT BROAD BENEFITS FROM PRODUCT INCLUSION FOCUS

Respondent's desired benefits from organization's focus on product inclusion

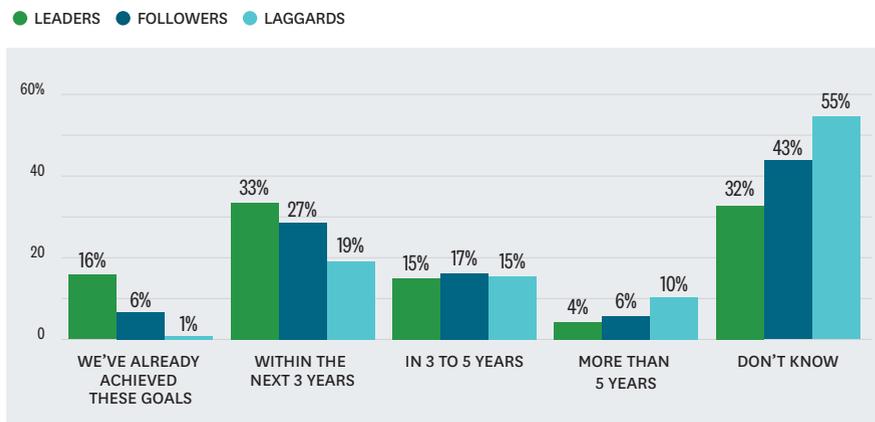


SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JANUARY 2018

FIGURE 4

TIMELINE TO REALIZE BENEFITS

Respondent's expected timeframe to achieve goals



SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW ANALYTIC SERVICES SURVEY, JANUARY 2018

Even a third of laggards believe that more product inclusion would increase their revenue. That being the case, it's puzzling that only 5% of them are making this a priority. As a result of their lack of prioritization and investment, laggards don't expect to realize these benefits anytime soon. Figure 4 The jump that D&I leaders have on their competitors here could certainly have an impact in the market, with nearly half saying they have already realized these benefits or will within the next three years compared with only a third of followers and a fifth of laggards.

Future research is needed to understand the reason for this gap between belief in the business value of product inclusion and the challenges of implementing inclusive product development. It would be valuable to know how long it takes to get an inclusive product to market and what's getting in the way of those who have not yet implemented their product inclusion strategies. [FIGURE 4](#)

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

A total of 1,033 respondents completed the survey, including 280 who are members of the Harvard Business Review Advisory Council.

SIZE OF ORGANIZATION

ALL RESPONDENTS' ORGANIZATIONS HAD 1,000 EMPLOYEES OR MORE.

60% 10,000 OR MORE EMPLOYEES	12% 5,000 - 9,999 EMPLOYEES	28% 1,000 - 4,999 EMPLOYEES
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SENIORITY

15% EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT/ BOARD MEMBERS	33% SENIOR MANAGEMENT	36% MIDDLE MANAGERS	16% OTHER
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KEY INDUSTRY SECTORS

14% FINANCIAL SERVICES	13% TECHNOLOGY	13% MANUFACTURING	8% HEALTH CARE	8% GOVERNMENT/ NOT-FOR-PROFIT	7% OR LESS OTHER
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JOB FUNCTION

18% HR/TRAINING	13% OPERATIONS/ PRODUCT MANAGEMENT	9% SALES/BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT	8% GENERAL MANAGEMENT	6% OTHER
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REGIONS

46% NORTH AMERICA	23% EUROPE	20% ASIA	11% REST OF THE WORLD
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Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.



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