

INSIGHT PAPER

What's in a Name?

Considerations for Organizations Rebranding Their Inclusion Efforts

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Diana Forster

Director

Stefani Murray

Marketing Manager

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Why Are Companies Renaming Their DEI Departments?	5
Findings from Seramount's Listening Sessions.....	10
Name Changes in Action.....	16
Four Questions to Ask Before Changing Your Name	19
Conclusion.....	20

Introduction

As we all continue to navigate the changing times surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in all facets, Seramount is here to provide expert guidance to help member organizations navigate the necessary changes. This guide was originally made available only for Seramount members, but due to the extreme need for answers on this topic, this exclusive guide is now available for all to use.

Member organizations have access to many resources such as this one, as well as Seramount's expert advisors and the broader Seramount team to help inform critical decisions. If you would like to know more about becoming a member, please see [contact us](#).

Corporate America cannot ignore the fact that the basic tenets of DEI have become increasingly politicized. During the first week of his second term, President Donald Trump issued [two executive orders](#) that took direct aim at DEI efforts, both within the federal government and in the private sector. Nearly half of Seramount's partners are federal contractors, but even those who aren't are experiencing fallout from these policy changes.

These government attacks on DEI have led some leaders and organizations to explore the possibility of renaming their programs and departments in order to avoid using language that can feel increasingly stigmatized. These reconsiderations first began in 2023, with [the Supreme Court's decision banning affirmative action](#) in higher education.

Organizations that are rebranding their DEI efforts should carefully consider not only *what* their new name should be, but how that new name will reflect both their company's values and their continued commitment to creating an inclusive workforce. This report leverages surveys of both US employees and DEI leaders to provide a deep dive into the current state of language around DEI, including:

- Why some organizations are changing their names
- How employees feel about different terms in the DEI space
- How Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) and other DEI leaders feel about efforts to rebrand their work
- What names other organizations have chosen when rebranding their DEI departments
- Four key questions any organization should consider before changing the name of their DEI department

Why Are Companies Renaming Their DEI Departments?

Efforts to rename DEI work are largely driven by two desires: to [minimize legal risk](#) and to trade a newly politicized term in favor of one that may be palatable to a wider audience of employees, customers/clients, and shareholders. But as the information in this section demonstrates, there are no guarantees that a name change will accomplish either of those goals.

Minimizing Legal Risk

In January 2025, during his first week in office, President Donald Trump issued two executive orders aimed at dismantling DEI work in both the federal government and the private sector. The first of these executive orders, [“Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing,”](#) terminated “all discriminatory programs, including illegal DEI and ‘diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility’ (DEIA) mandates, policies, programs, preferences, and activities in the Federal Government, under whatever name they appear.” The primary effect of the second, [“Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,”](#) was to outlaw affirmative action in federal employment hiring and employment. However, it also ordered the removal of all references to DEI values and programs, “under whatever name they may appear” from federal contracts, grants, and other financial assistance procedures. It also encouraged the private sector to abandon all efforts that violate “the policy of individual initiative, excellence, and hard work.”

As noted, while President Trump’s executive orders primarily use variations of the term *DEI*, they are careful not to limit their changes to departments and programs that operate under that specific label. The recurring phrase “under whatever name they appear” indicates that name changes will not be sufficient to safeguard DEI programming from these attacks.

Insulating your inclusion efforts from legal risk is far more complicated than simply dropping the words *Diversity* and *Equity* from your work. An effective [risk mitigation strategy](#) requires keeping a close eye on the ever-evolving legal landscape around DEI and ensuring that your programs follow best practices, such as avoiding [the “three P’s”](#) of conferring a *preference* on a *protected group* with respect to a *palpable benefit*.

Legal experts also suggest that concerns about DEI communications are broader than just department or program names. Kenji Yoshino, the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Constitutional Law at NYU School of Law and the faculty director of the Meltzer Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging; David Glasgow, executive director of the Meltzer Center; and Christina Joseph, project director of the Advancing DEI Initiative at the Meltzer Center, argue that all DEI communications should avoid the “three P’s” listed above. [They write](#), “Any other DEI statements that do not invoke

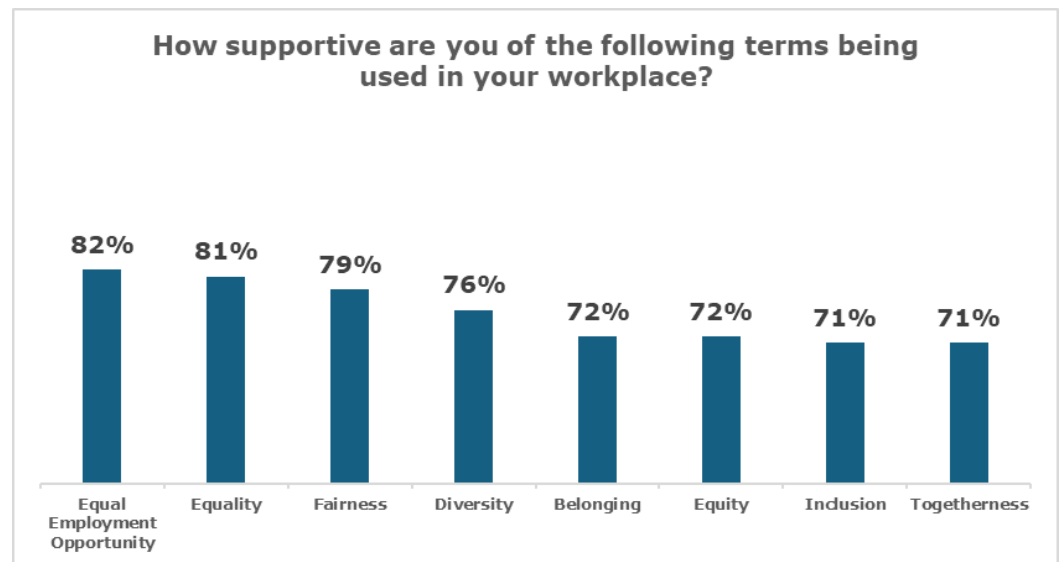
the three Ps are legally low risk. Leaders can still use each of the words in the DEI acronym, and advocate for:

- Greater *diversity* of personnel in their organization
- Fairness and *equity* in the organization's policies and procedures
- A culture of *inclusion* in which employees feel a sense of belonging."

Engaging New Groups of Employees

In May 2024, Seramount fielded a [nationally representative survey](#) of US workers at companies with 500 or more employees. The survey yielded more than 3,000 responses, including more than 1,600 white-collar employees and more than 1,300 frontline workers. Stratified sampling was implemented to ensure accurate representation across race/ethnicity, geography, gender, political affiliation, age, job level, and other key demographics. Unless otherwise specified, all the data points explicitly called out in this section are statistically significant at the .05 level. This means that the observed differences are unlikely to be caused by chance.

Among many other questions about employees' workplace experiences, the survey included a series of questions about how employees feel about DEI language. The results for the first of those questions, "How supportive are you of these terms being used in your workplace?", are shared in the chart below.



Source: Seramount National Survey, May 2024.

Newer terms such as *belonging* and *togetherness*, which advocates have argued are more inclusive and can appeal to a larger group of employees, are actually less popular with employees than more conventional ones such as *equal employment opportunity* and *equality*.

Seramount's data also suggests that there is reason to question the theory that newer terms such as *belonging* are more appealing to individuals who have not traditionally been associated with DEI. For example, White

respondents were significantly less supportive of the terms *belonging*, *diversity*, *equality*, *equity*, *inclusion*, and *togetherness* than Black/African American respondents were. *Equal employment opportunity* and *fairness* are the only terms for which support did not vary by race/ethnicity.

	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic / Latine	White	Other
Equal employment opportunity	78%	85%	82%	82%	83%
Equality *	75%	85%	81%	80%	81%
Fairness	76%	78%	77%	80%	76%
Diversity *	69%	80%	80%	74%	80%
Belonging *	70%	77%	74%	71%	73%
Equity *	66%	76%	75%	71%	67%
Inclusion *	65%	75%	75%	69%	70%
Togetherness *	69%	77%	72%	69%	73%

* Indicates a statistically significant difference between Black/African American and White.

Source: Seramount National Survey, May 2024.

Similarly, LGBTQ+ respondents are significantly more supportive of the terms *diversity* and *inclusion* than others are.

	LGBTQ+	Others
Equal employment opportunity	83%	82%
Equality	82%	80%
Fairness	80%	78%
Diversity *	81%	75%
Belonging	74%	72%
Equity	74%	72%
Inclusion *	79%	70%
Togetherness	73%	70%

* Indicates a statistically significant difference between LGBTQ+ and Others.

Source: Seramount National Survey, May 2024.

In addition to demographic groups, support for DEI-related terms also varies by job type. White-collar workers are significantly more supportive of the terms *equality*, *equity*, *fairness*, and *inclusion* than frontline workers are.

	Frontline Workers	White-Collar Workers
Equal employment opportunity	81%	83%
Equality *	78%	83%
Fairness *	76%	81%
Diversity	76%	76%
Belonging	71%	74%
Equity *	68%	76%
Inclusion *	68%	74%
Togetherness	70%	72%

* Indicates a statistically significant difference between Frontline Workers and White-Collar Workers.

Source: Seramount National Survey, May 2024.

Finally, support for DEI-related terms not only varies by job level; it actually *declines* as you move down the corporate hierarchy. Corporate executives consistently express higher levels of support of the terms than their subordinates do. At the same time, senior managers are consistently more supportive of the terms than managers, non-managers, and hourly, non-salaried workers are. Similarly, managers are consistently more supportive than non-managers or hourly, non-salaried workers. This suggests that *none* of these terms have the same resonance with the average employee as they do with leadership.

	Corporate Executive	Senior Manager	Manager	Non-Manager	Hourly, Non-Salaried
Equal employment opportunity *	85%	72%	61%	44%	41%
Equality *	86%	74%	64%	43%	39%
Fairness *	85%	70%	62%	41%	38%
Diversity *	85%	71%	64%	46%	43%
Belonging *	82%	70%	63%	42%	41%
Equity *	82%	69%	59%	41%	36%
Inclusion *	85%	71%	62%	44%	39%
Togetherness *	83%	71%	61%	41%	40%

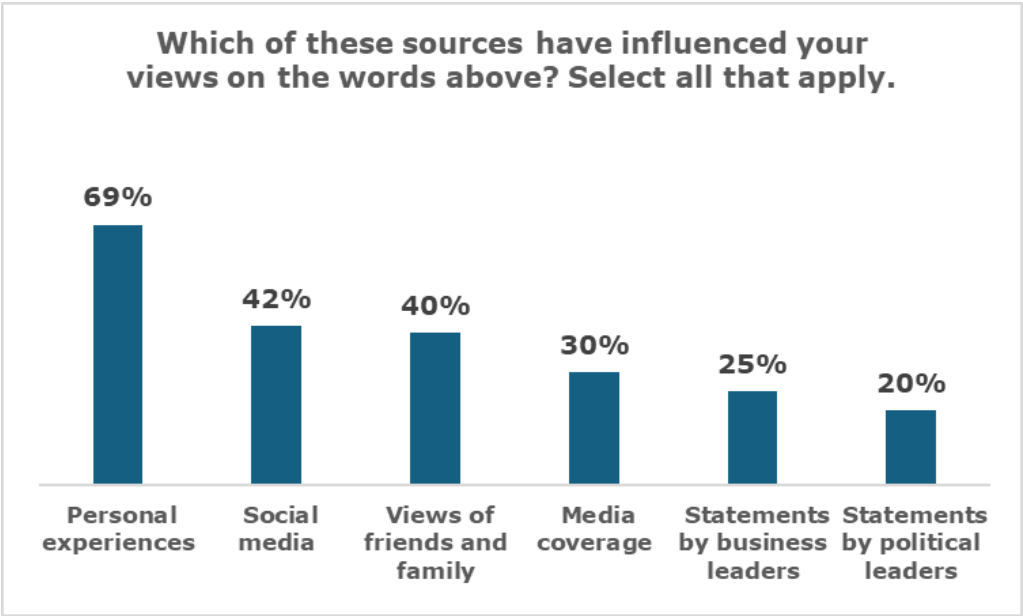
* Indicates a statistically significant difference between Corporate Executives and lower levels, senior managers and lower levels, and managers and lower levels.

Source: Seramount National Survey, May 2024.

These findings suggest that any renaming effort geared toward appealing to new constituencies of employees needs to be augmented with additional

communications around the importance of this work to all employees, regardless of identity or job level.

Notably, employees in Seramount’s survey were more likely to report that their views had been influenced by their personal experiences and social networks than their professional experiences. As the chart below shows, employees’ views of these terms are influenced by a wide variety of sources outside the walls of their workplaces. Fewer employees are influenced by statements by business leaders than by their own personal experiences, social media, and the views of their friends and family.



Source: Seramount National Survey, May 2024.

Findings from Seramount's Listening Sessions

Seramount has been tracking DEI name changes in corporate America for more than a year now through listening sessions with our partners. Seramount's Employee Voice Sessions (EVS) provide an anonymous platform for DEI leaders to share their experiences with one another and provide valuable insight into how leaders are navigating these decisions.

April 2024

On April 11, 2024, Seramount held an EVS with Chief Diversity Officers and other senior DEI leaders to discuss the challenges to DEI that had arisen since [the Supreme Court's ruling banning the use of affirmative action](#) in colleges and universities. The session included a series of questions concerning what recent changes their organizations had made to their DEI programming.

In that session, 13 percent of participants indicated that their organization's departments, programs, and/or initiatives were no longer using terms such as *diversity*.

Seramount followed up by asking, "If your organization is no longer using terms like *diversity* to describe your DEI efforts, what terms are you using instead?" Below are some of the replies:

- *We are using the word Inclusive more and I am hearing more about "Diversity of Thought." This term is the next catch-all and I believe diminishes the work that we trying to accomplish.*
- *We are shifting to an emphasis on belonging (meaning belonging not just for marginalized experiences but for the straight white guys, too) in an attempt to defuse threat responses to DEI.*
- *We still use "diversity" but adding "belonging," "accessibility," "human skills vs. AI."*
- *Our entire DE&I Strategy is called I Belong. We recommend using IDE and putting the D as secondary, but business CEO said NOPE. Leave it...we have work to do.*
- *We are being advised by legal counsel to use terms such as 'culture', and 'Inclusion for all.'*
- *Thankfully we haven't found ourselves in this position, yet...*
- *No changes to how we use "diversity" and we just recently added "equity" to our acronym.*

November 2024

On November 19 and November 21, 2024, Seramount held two EVSs for partners to discuss their reactions to the election of Donald Trump to a second presidential term. Several of the questions touched on the issue of changing language as a result of the DEI backlash, with a few respondents noting possible changes to their titles and/or the names of their departments.

Seramount asked, "What other aspects of your work have been impacted by the DEI backlash?" Several participants noted changes in language:

- *We have continued our programming; we have just changed some naming conventions.*
- *Messaging moving away from using DEI to Belonging.*
- *Omit "DEI" and more focus on "employee experience." We are considering changing my title in prep of new incoming leadership.*
- *Hesitancy of Board to include DEI items in public statements, website, etc. Looking to take "flash point" words out of all of our internal and external communications, such as DEI itself, and just using terms such as treating all people equitably and fairly.*
- *Prior to the surge last year we reworded some of our purpose statements for programs geared toward underrepresented communities...We have also embarked on discussions about what we call the work.*
- *Agree that language is shifting.*
- *Lots of focus on maybe using inclusion as the driver.*
- *Considering changing the name of the function away from DEI.*
- *The language we use around the D&I narrative.*

In response to the same question, several participants mentioned decisions and internal discussions about reorganizing their DEI departments.

- *Combining DEI with other departments, likely with intent to not remove the department but lessen the focus.*
- *We combined DEI with Talent and Learning/Development.*

Shifting language also emerged in response to several other questions in the EVSs. In response to the question "What actions are you planning to take to engage and mobilize stakeholder support for DEI in coming months?", one participant shared, "Potentially some language updates—using 'DEI' less and talking about the work itself more." Another shared, "This is an opportunity for us to refine our messaging."

The theme of refining the messaging around DEI in the wake of Donald Trump's election also emerged in the discussion around Seramount's Chief

Diversity Officer Collaborative (CDOC) Virtual Forum on December 5, 2024. Seventy-one CDOs and other senior DEI leaders joined to learn about the results of Seramount's post-election EVSs and discuss the future of DEI. Several leaders who shared verbally or in the chat noted that their organizations are currently rethinking how *diversity, equity, and inclusion* is defined and the terminology used in discussing DEI work, both internally and externally. While some offered that the evolution of DEI terminology is an inevitable aspect of the evolution of the profession, others expressed concern that language shifts signaled capitulation to external pressures and backlash. Many leaders felt deep concern about the eradication of the term *diversity* from the names of DEI departments, especially as a signal to employees, clients, and stakeholders of abandonment of fundamental values, while others called out the importance of distinguishing between "diversity" and "representational diversity": Employee experiences are meaningful and value-added for all employees, yet is distinct from representation gaps for Historically Excluded Talent (HET). These more nuanced notions of diversity resonated with session participants, who are leaning into a framing of DEI that engages all employees as allies and as individuals with intersectional, distinct experiences and perspectives.

January 2025

On January 30, 2025, Seramount held an EVS for partners to discuss their reactions to President Trump's early anti-DEI executive orders. Several respondents shared that they were having discussions against changing the names of their departments as a result of the order:

- *We are changing the name from DEI to Inclusion & Belonging internally. Externally we will call it Pathways. We are proud of our work. We are not changing course. We are shifting terms and narrative about how we talk about our commitments externally.*
- *We are not changing our name, but we are thinking about the composition of our programs and how we promote them to ensure inclusivity.*
- *Changed the name of our Employee Resource Networks to Business Impact Groups and are now transitioning these groups.*
- *Legal say we're in good shape. Suggest [we] consider changing [our] name.*

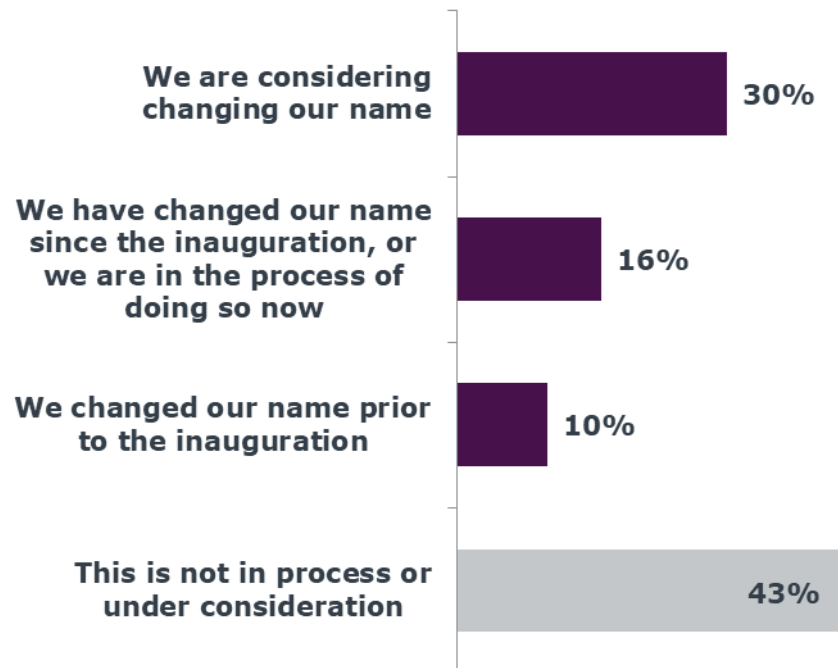
Another partner noted that their employees had expressed fear and concerns around possible name changes, writing, "They are afraid that we may change the name and identity for the DEI work."

February 2025

On February 12, 2025, Seramount held an EVS for partners to discuss their experiences during the first month of President Trump's second term. The session included a series of questions concerning name changes.

Fewer than one-half of participants indicated that they had not had any conversations within their organization about changing the name of their DEI department. Three in ten shared that they were currently considering changing their name, while an additional 16 percent had changed it since the inauguration or were in the process of doing so. Another one in ten organizations had changed the name of their DEI departments prior to President Trump's second term.

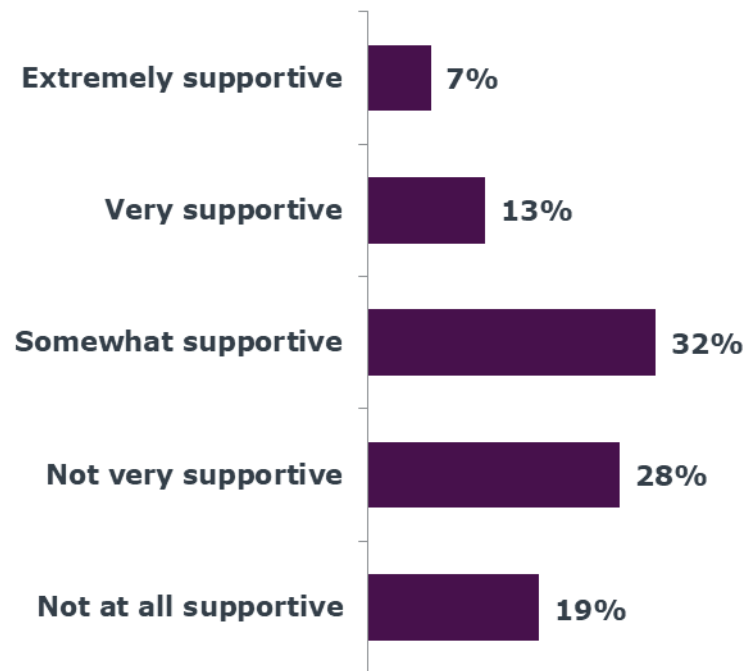
Since the inauguration, have you had any conversations within your organization about changing the name of your DEI department?



Source: Seramount Employee Voice Session, February 12, 2025.

Seramount also asked participants how supportive they personally were about efforts to rename their work. Although opinions were divided, 47 percent indicated that they were not supportive of changing the name, while only 20 percent identified themselves as very or extremely supportive.

How supportive are you, personally, of efforts to rename DEI work?



Source: Seramount Employee Voice Session, February 12, 2025.

Among leaders who were supportive of changing the name, several noted that terms such as *belonging* were perceived as being more inclusive than terms such as *diversity*. Other supporters emphasized the need to reset efforts. They also affirmed that the work would remain the same regardless of what DEI is called.

- *This is an opportunity to reframe and reset. We have been trying for years to make DEI part of the business strategy. Now we have to.*
- *Belonging is more comprehensive and an umbrella term that captures everyone, including white straight males, who often feel left out of DEI efforts.*
- *It doesn't matter so much what it's called as long as the scope and spirit of the work remains the same.*

By contrast, those who were *not* supportive of moving away from the DEI label expressed concerns about what the change would mean for Historically Excluded Talent, both symbolically and in a practical sense.

- *It sends a really concerning message to employees. I also don't think it practically will help - given that the administration will target these groups regardless of name (if it comes to that).*
- *Name changes feel like distractions from the work we are aiming to accomplish. Changes would also cause more questions and unease among colleagues than actually achieving our strategic priorities.*

- *I feel like we are moving towards an "All Lives Matter" approach, which does not address the unique challenges of certain communities.*

Name Changes in Action

Suggestions from Seramount's Employee Voice Sessions

Seramount's February 12, 2025, EVS included this question: "If you've changed the name of your DEI department or you're discussing changing the name, what specific alternative terms or names have been discussed?"

In qualitative comments, participants shared the alternative names they had discussed. Among the responses shared, *Inclusion & Belonging* was most popular.

- *Belonging*
- *Culture & Inclusion* (2 mentions)
- *Diversity, Inclusion and Culture*
- *Employee Experience*
- *Employee Experience & Belonging*
- *Employee Experience & Engagement Team*
- *Impact & Belonging*
- *Inclusion & Belonging* (8 mentions)
- *Inclusion & Culture*
- *Inclusion & Impact*
- *Inclusion Learning and Engagement*
- *Inclusion, Belonging, Impact*
- *Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Belonging*
- *Organizational Culture*
- *People & Culture*
- *Talent Development Center of Excellence*

Source: Seramount Employee Voice Session, February 12, 2025.

Companies Making Headlines

McDonald's

In early January 2025, [McDonald's announced](#) that they were changing the name of their diversity team to their "Global Inclusion Team," writing in an internal memo, "This name change is more fitting for McDonald's in light of our inclusion value and better aligns with this team's work." The name change was part of a larger pivot away from the language and work of diversity toward a strategy focused on inclusion. Suheily Natal Davis, who [joined McDonald's](#) as VP, Global Chief Diversity Officer in early 2024, is now Vice President, Global Inclusion at the organization.

The Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM)

SHRM is the largest professional [human resources](#) membership association in the world, with nearly 340,000 members in 180 countries. In a [post on LinkedIn](#) in June 2024, SHRM announced that it was officially eliminating Equity from Inclusion, Equity and Diversity and would lead the effort with Inclusion and Diversity instead. The statement read in part as follows: "Effective immediately, SHRM will be adopting the acronym 'I&D' instead of 'IE&D.' This strategic decision underscores our commitment to leading with Inclusion as the catalyst for holistic change in workplaces and society."



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"We're going to lead with inclusion, because we need a world where inclusion is front and center. And that means inclusion for all, not some people. Everyone has a right to feel that they belong in the workplace and that they are included." – [Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP](#).

Today, SHRM announces an important shift in our approach to Inclusion and Diversity.

Effective immediately, SHRM will be adopting the acronym "I&D" instead of "IE&D." This strategic decision underscores our commitment to leading with Inclusion as the catalyst for holistic change in workplaces and society.

As SHRM President & CEO Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP shared in his [#SHRM24](#) Main Stage address, this new focus highlights SHRM's role as the foremost expert and advocate in workplace Inclusion and Diversity. By emphasizing Inclusion-first, we aim to address the current shortcomings of DE&I programs, which have led to societal backlash and increasing polarization.

While we shift to I&D, our commitment to advancing Equity remains steadfast. Equity will be integrated under the broader Inclusion framework, continuing to be a priority in our strategy and leadership decisions.

SHRM is excited to lead this initiative as the next step in our enduring commitment to fostering better workplaces and a better world. We encourage you to adopt an Inclusion-first approach within your own organizations and join us in creating meaningful change.

Let's drive change together. Adopt I&D today and be part of the movement.

[#InclusionAndDiversity](#) [#WorkplaceChange](#) [#Leadership](#)

SHRM's decision was [widely criticized](#) by its members and DEI leaders. Workplace diversity researchers Dr. Enrica N. Ruggs and Dr. Oscar Holmes IV wrote in [Harvard Business Review](#): "The recommendation by SHRM to remove equity from DEI in favor of just highlighting I&D is dangerous and misguided. Without a specific focus on equity, companies lose sight of the

ways that current policies and practices do not account for former injustices, and indeed may allow disadvantages to persist.”

Four Questions to Ask Before Changing Your Name

Organizations should carefully consider the following questions before changing the name of their DEI programs.

- 1. What is the goal of changing your name?** Reflect on why you're considering changing the name of your DEI department right now, and make sure that you have reasonable expectations for what a name change can accomplish. Changing the name is unlikely to fully insulate your DEI work from legal challenges. If your goal is to make all employees, regardless of their identities, more aware of how DEI initiatives and programs affect them, be prepared to do more work beyond the name change to promote that shift.
- 2. How does the new name intersect with your overall company culture?** Your new name should reflect your company's values and mission statement. Ideally, it should also be consistent with the naming conventions of your other departments and programs.
- 3. How does the new name intersect with your ongoing employee engagement efforts?** Your employees and other stakeholders will inevitably want to know, "What does this mean?" The answer may be clear, for example, if you're changing your DEI department's name to appeal to new groups of employees who may have been excluded, that ethos should influence your other programming as well. On the other hand, if your name change is driven entirely by legal considerations, you may plan to continue all of your existing efforts, just under a new name.
- 4. How will you communicate the name change to employees?** Any name change or rebrand should be communicated to employees along with a summary of your responses to the questions above: Why did you change the name? How does the name reflect your culture? Will your current employee engagement efforts and programs change? Consider working with your Employee Resource Groups to inform the messaging and ensure that your Historically Excluded Talent groups are aware that the work you're doing for them will continue regardless of what you're calling it.

Conclusion

As leaders continue to assess the changes that are happening federally, they will need to take time to consider the appropriate needs of their own corporate organization. Just because something worked well for one company doesn't mean that practice will have the same results for your own.

With a multitude of resources available for members to access, Seramount is your trusted source of information to help your organization and leaders make the correct decision that fits your organization best.

To help aid your process and provide more information, we have provided a few more resources to help you:

- [DEI Backlash: What Employees Really Think](#): In these unprecedented times, leaders need trustworthy information about what their employees perceive and want, especially those from Historically Excluded Talent (HET) groups. Seramount's 2024 DEI National Survey provides answers. This nationally representative survey of 3,000+ US white-collar and frontline employees at companies with at least 500 employees, across dimensions of diversity as well as geographic and political differences, explores questions related to three different crucial areas: commitment, progress, and desires.
- [Effective Communications Strategies During Times of Crisis](#): The recent anti-DEI executive orders have created considerable confusion regarding their impact on private organizations. When outcomes and impacts remain unclear, it can be difficult to determine when, how, and what to communicate to employees. This guide provides insight into what employees need and how organizations should approach communicating during times of crisis.
- [Navigating the Intersection of US Law and DEI: Mitigating Legal Risks](#): Organizational programming around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is currently facing a myriad of legal, political, and social threats. This report reviews the most pressing of those threats and shares strategies for mitigating them. Specifically, this report begins by discussing the Supreme Court ruling banning affirmative action in higher action and its ramifications for corporate employers and DEI in the United States. The report then provides an overview of how the ruling has opened new avenues for conservative organizations and

activists to challenge DEI efforts in the courts. Next, the report outlines best practices for DEI program design that will help companies avoid litigation.

As we all continue to anticipate more changes to come from the federal government that will affect corporate decisions, Seramount will be here, to serve as a trusted partner through it all.

Are You Interested in Gaining Access to More Resources Like This?

[Contact us](#) to speak to an expert on how you can become a partner today and start your organization on a path forward.