

the **DEI** *movement*

Diverse Perspectives Elevate Meetings and Events

By Maura Keller

The American melting pot consists of many ingredients. It's what gives our nation depth, character and diversity. With so many different kinds of people, how do association meeting planners manage diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within their meetings and events environments?

The emphasis being placed on diversity, equity, inclusion and multiculturalism in the events industry today is much greater than it was even a mere five years ago. Eric M. Bailey, president of Bailey Strategic Innovation Group, says, as a keynote speaker, he has seen a dramatic increase in the requests for diversity, equity and inclusion content over the past five years. And, as a Black keynote speaker, Bailey has seen an increase in requests for his voice and perspective at conferences around the world.

"The concept of diversity has been expanding over the past several years, in large part due to the fact that more folks are thinking and talking about it," Bailey says. "These conversations have led to real tangible changes in the ways that meetings and events are produced."

He has also seen a tremendous increase in the number and variety of translation services available both in-person as well as virtually, and he's seen sign-language interpretation, Spanish/Polish/Mandarin translation and transcription, not to mention accommodations for color blindness, visual and hearing impairment, and table spaces for various physical abilities.

"Diversity, equity and inclusion is a complex set of concepts, and the fact that conferences and meetings are diving into that nuance is creating a better, more welcoming experi-

ence for more people," Bailey says. "And more people being welcomed to conferences is good for many reasons."

Alexandra Schrecengost, founder & CEO of Culture With Us, is a meeting planner who provides virtual and hybrid events in inclusive hospitality, focused on DEI for Fortune 1000 companies. Her virtual and hybrid events increase awareness and education of different demographics, while providing a fun environment for a workplace or business gathering.

Schrecengost says now that we're years into some very important and overdue conversations on active and pragmatic diversity, equity and inclusivity measures in the workplace, executives and managers have had time to shift their priorities in a way that benefits their employees and the organization as a whole. As a result, the meetings and events industry has seen substantially more resources allocated to Black History Month, Women's History Month, Pride Month, Latinx Heritage Month, and Asian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

"Employees now have the upper hand when it comes to the intersection of professional and personal contentment, and tend to not hesitate to leave work environments that don't actively make them feel included as individuals," Schrecengost says. One very effective way to cultivate a strong culture within an association and make everyone feel like they have a seat at the table, no matter their background or where they're located, is by encouraging and making time for DEI-focused programming within the meetings and events realm.

Amira Barger, MBA, CVA, CFRE, executive vice president, health communications & DEI advisory at Edelman, works with corporations as an adviser to meetings/events departments, as well human resources groups. Her work includes

Jacqueline Shaulis says often planners and organizations will create a checklist of diversity initiatives, but true diversity goes beyond merely checking a box.



COURTESY PHOTO

building strategies for inclusive and accessible considerations for all meeting/event attendees to participate.

“The hyper focus on DEI strategies within the meetings/event arena is no surprise as we come upon the three-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessibility considerations and participation accommodations were already making their way to the forefront of meeting/event professionals’ minds, because participants increasingly demand it,” Barger says. “In today’s COVID-19 world, accessible hybrid meetings/events are part of the ‘new normal,’ and our collectively swift shift to virtual environments in 2020 forced this hyper focus on DEI strategies within the meetings/events arena. While many meetings/events skills and best practices apply to both in-person and virtual presentations, there are nuances and challenges to delivering a compelling meeting/event both in-person and online that create an experience for audiences.”

As Daniela Herrera, a DEI professional with 17+ years of experience, further explains, 2020 was a reckoning year for everyone, and the events arena was no exception. First and foremost, event organizers had to learn how to pivot and take their events online. With that, they had to familiarize themselves with different technology offerings, and more importantly, with making their events inclusive and accessible for their audiences.

“We see, for example, more events asking their audience whether they need reasonable accommodations during the sign-up process; events offering closed-captioning and ASL

With a bit of forethought and planning, meetings and events can create experiences that allow their participants to attend to their needs without interrupting the event.

Jacqueline Shaulis

**Founder and Principal, Awesome Enterprises LLC
Executive Director, National Center for
Intersectional Studies**

interpreters; organizers ensuring that physical locations are accessible for attendees with disabilities; and organizers making sure everyone has read and signed a code of conduct before attending a virtual or in-person gathering,” Herrera says.

Event organizers also learned that conferences, event panels and lineups would take a little bit more intentional planning. Audiences — and speakers — are demanding to see more diverse speaker’s lineups and topics. “Even now, with the return of in-person or hybrid events, the need for accessible, equitable and inclusive spaces is crucial,” Herrera says.

“Speakers and event organizers that are interested in reaching the largest audiences possible can’t ignore the need of keeping the event accessible, safe, diverse and inclusive.”

INCORPORATING DEI STRATEGIES IN MEETINGS

Equity is about specificity and meeting the individual needs of audience members. Both in-person and virtual events provide opportunities to practice DEI and serve the specific needs of varied audience members. As Barger explains, some of these opportunities to practice DEI include: broadening reach to previously excluded audiences, protecting the autonomy of audience members and participants, and accommodating learning styles for every audience member. Meetings and events are often planned to both create an experience for the audience and to impart learning of some sort to attendees.

“Meeting planners can continue to focus on and incorporate DEI by heeding the advice of scientists who study the

planners should attempt to strategically utilize tried-and-true techniques for engagement, including quizzes, polls, gamification, incentivization and chats.

- **Emotion:** For meeting and event memories to stick well, there needs to be strong emotions. Creating an emotional experience begins with a great storyteller. Their voice, their energy and the mastery of the story they tell sets the tempo of the journey.
- **Spacing:** Learning is most effective when learning sessions are spaced out over time. The Neuro Leadership Institute’s research reveals that the human brain loses attention every 20 minutes, which is why researchers recommend having something new to react to every two to three minutes. Whether this is a visual shift, a content shift or a delivery shift, the goal is to generate something new to keep multilearning audiences engaged.

In Bailey’s work, he focuses heavily on the brain science of communication, collaboration and culture. “We understand what happens to people when they get defensive or feel that their character has been attacked — they shut down higher-level thinking, learning and creativity, among other things,” Bailey says. “We have learned that, unfortunately, many DEI efforts, in their desire to stand out from the rest, turn to shocking language and imagery to spark an emotional reaction.”

While this can be beneficial for some, it can cause a fight-or-flight situation in others. Bailey stresses that one of the things that it is critical to do in an event planner’s DEI efforts is to find vendors and speakers that will create experiences that are inclusive in such a way that encourages more conversations, learning and curiosity.

“There are a lot of different elements of DEI that are often overlooked,” Bailey says. “Most folks

COURTESY OF DANIELA HERRERA

don’t know that there is a pretty powerful — and accurate — transcription/translation feature built into PowerPoint. This is good for folks who may have impaired hearing, but can also benefit those who have a more difficult time with fast-moving presentations and many other scenarios. Having sign language interpreters or live-audio foreign language speaker systems can enhance the experience of more attendees.”

Having a good mix of people presenting information is also a critical DEI initiative. As Bailey explains, for many people, getting up to speak about their area of expertise is not an easy thing to do, but if you see someone that you relate to, braving the stage and sharing their knowledge, it subconsciously gives others an expanded vision of their own realm of possibility; representation matters.

Schrecengost adds that DEI programming in events can be as simple as looking ahead and getting a fun and educational activity on the calendar for attendees to look forward to, or as involved as inviting employees to spend working hours developing the programming they’d like to see at an event — programming that showcases their personalities and cultures and helps their colleagues understand them better.



Daniela Herrera, a DEI professional, second from right, says as COVID-19 forced planners to familiarize themselves with different technology offerings such as hybrid and online meetings, planners had to work harder to make their events inclusive and accessible for their audiences.

anatomy of meetings and events, and adult learning experiences that allow participants of all types to walk away with a meaningful experience,” Barger says.

The Neuro Leadership Institute conducted research that found four conditions — attention, generation, emotion, spacing — need to be met to help these multilearning audiences effectively experience and retain information. As Barger explains, these conditions include:

- **Attention:** For learning to occur, participants must pay close attention to what they’re learning. Meeting and event planners should stick to shorter, impactful and specific presentations to keep audiences interested and limit ideas to not overwhelm or dilute learning.
- **Generation:** Learning works best when participants generate their own connections to the material, linking new ideas to their own existing knowledge. Meeting and event



COURTESY OF AMIRA BARGER

"I recommend the creative, out-of-the-box thinking that truly drives inclusion. What is an interactive experience that resonates across a group of individuals? That is important," Schrecengost says.

According to Jacqueline Shaulis, founder and principal at Awesome Enterprises LLC and executive director, National Center for Intersectional Studies, one of the biggest challenges for events and their planners who want to incorporate greater inclusion is becoming dogmatic about the checklist of diversity. That is: Is there a woman? Check. Is there a BIPOC person? Check. Is there an LGBTQ+ person? Check.

And while this is marginally better than nothing, Shaulis says it ignores the purpose of DEI, which is to include voices and perspectives of the underrepresented, and many of the most important areas of inclusion are not on the surface and checkable. "With a bit of forethought and planning, meetings and events can create experiences that allow their participants to attend to their needs without missing something or interrupting the event," Shaulis says.

She suggests having captions for both the deaf/hard of hearing and non-native English speakers; having clear pathways for those in wheelchairs or with mobility challenges; offering breaks so the introverts can recharge, the neurodivergent can acclimate and those with chronic ailments can attend to their needs; and addressing the nuance of personal experiences related to the topic/themes. Intersectional experiences are rarely acknowledged, but add tremendous value and insight when discussed.

"These are just a few considerations to create an event that allows everyone to engage and benefit, while also creating a sense of camaraderie and support, and teaching moments that facilitate conversation and awareness for future events of the attendees, organizations and meeting planners themselves," Shaulis says.

Herrera adds that if you're hosting a virtual meeting for an association, ask your audience if they need any reasonable accommodations to enjoy the session; ensure that closed-captioning is enabled; train the event organizers or the panel moderators on how to manage attendees that might disrupt the event, show up uninvited or make the virtual space unsafe

Amira Barger, MBA, CVA, CFRE, Executive Vice President, Health Communications & DEI Advisory at Edelman, center, says meeting and event attendees are increasingly requesting to hear from diverse voices.

for some; and ensure the event is hosted in a closed and private virtual room to prevent uninvited guests from joining.

"If you're planning an in-person event, I'd also suggest assigning a 'quiet room' with reduced sensory stimulation for attendees to relax and decompress if needed," Herrera says. "Also make sure all attendees, speakers and moderators read and sign a code of conduct, have gender-neutral restrooms and assign a few rooms for prayers and nursing parents."

CONTINUING EVOLUTION

The future is bright for DEI initiatives within the meetings and events industry. First of all, we are becoming a more diverse nation, so it is easier than ever to offer DEI-focused meetings and events experiences that mirror those in attendance. And the best thing about DEI within the meetings and events arena is that, at its core, it's about learning and understanding.

Barger says a key component of the future of DEI within the association meetings and events industry will be speaker and keynote list makeup, as these will look different going forward. "Alongside authors, celebrities, academics and other notable public figures, we will see diversity in speaker lineups that takes the form of social influencers, TikTok creators, social justice activists and Gen Z voices," Barger says. "DEI in this space is not only about different event formats and channels, it is evolving into creating a social narrative arc

with meetings and events and diversifying who gets to be a storyteller on stage with a message relevant to the social ailments of our time."

As more people enter the conversation, it evolves, and so too, does our understanding of the world, Bailey says. "The future of DEI is broader, more nuanced and informed by more people than it has ever been before. The future of DEI in the meetings and events space has new technologies, vendors and talent bringing a wider array of experiences and knowledge to the table. The future of DEI is big and bright, and we all will have a better and broader understanding of the world because of it." | AC&F |



DEI is a complex set of concepts, and the fact that conferences and meetings are diving into that nuance is creating a better, more welcoming experience ...

Eric M. Bailey

President, Bailey Strategic Innovation Group