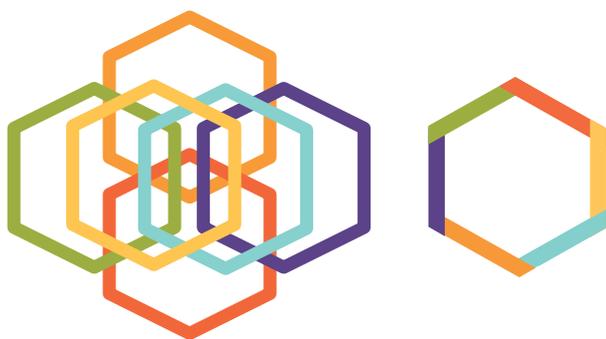


Understanding intersectionality and its impact

Organisations sometimes base their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on the needs of a single or a few separate identities without considering the many facets that make up a person. While well-intentioned, this approach can limit impact, since it disregards the diversity of experience within a group. To achieve deeper levels of inclusion and equity, organisations must be mindful of intersectionality when advancing their mahi.

What is intersectionality?

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected relationship between demographic characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) within an individual or group, and how they interact to create unique experiences of privilege or disadvantage. When someone belongs to multiple non-dominant or marginalised groups, they can face compounded inequities and an experience of disadvantage that's distinct.



Intersectionality describes how a person's diverse identities combine to create a unique whole.

The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw over 30 years ago to explain the oppression experienced by African American women. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as a lens or prism for seeing how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.

Why is it so important?

Thinking intersectionally involves recognising multiple identities, understanding how exclusion and inequities are interconnected, and framing interventions accordingly. This approach can help organisations address experiences more holistically and support a broader range of people with diverse identities, rather than looking at each identity in isolation. By understanding how intersectionality shapes people's experiences, organisations can create environments where all employees feel comfortable bringing the different facets of their identity to work.

How can intersectionality shape workplace experiences?

There are many ways in which those with intersecting identities can experience the workplace differently, for example:

- **Pay and promotion inequities:** People belonging to multiple non-dominant groups may experience greater pay and promotion inequities.
- **Microaggressions:** Workplace incivility can be amplified when directed at those with multiple non-dominant characteristics.
- **Work-life balance:** Individuals with different intersecting identities may experience unique challenges with work-life balance and flexible working.



Lived experience example

An example of this at work can be seen in the experiences of a queer woman of colour who is also low-income. She may face multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage. She may be bullied in the workplace because of her gender, race or sexual orientation at the same time as being paid less than her white, male peers. She may also face racial prejudice within the Rainbow community, and experience economic hardship due to barriers to education, job opportunities, and affordable housing.

Top tips for talking about intersectionality

It's not always easy to discuss topics relating to DEI, so it's important to level the playing field and support shared understandings of intersectionality.

Here are some tips:

1. **Start with the basics:** Begin by defining intersectionality, using a variety of sources and media.
2. **Use examples:** People relate to storytelling, so use scenarios and different contexts to exemplify diverse lived experiences.
3. **Provide reassurance:** Stress that this is not about creating hierarchy or divisions; it's about understanding each other at a deeper level.
4. **Acknowledge complexity:** Don't shy away from concepts such as power and privilege; acknowledge their complexity and ensure conversations are held safely.
5. **Encourage self-reflection:** Active listening and exercising empathy is key to all DEI work – thinking about your own intersecting identities is also a good place to start.

What actions could your organisation take?

1. **Provide education opportunities:** Provide training to your people on DEI topics that includes key concepts relating to intersectionality and encourages them to adopt an intersectional lens when supporting DEI efforts.
2. **Open space for intersectional kōrero:** To understand people's experiences at a deeper level, it's vital to create the psychological safety that's required for people to feel able to share – hold forums that offer this.
3. **Broaden the scope of storytelling:** Whether it's your diversity celebrations or your everyday website collateral, think about representation in a more multi-dimensional way, giving voice and visibility to those from multiple marginalised groups.
4. **Disaggregate diversity data:** While not always possible with small sample sizes, consider cutting your diversity data and surveys in multiple ways to learn more about the experience of those with intersecting identities.
5. **Review practice through an intersectional lens:** Whether it's recruitment, performance frameworks or flexible working, adopt an intersectional lens when creating and redesigning policies and processes.

Other key terms

Positionality – the social, cultural and historical factors that shape an individual's identity, experiences and perspectives

Privilege – the advantage that a person or group has over another as a result of their background, characteristics or identity

Power – the dynamics at play that give rise to one person's or group's ability to exert influence, control or favour over another person/group

Further resources:

- Centre for Intersectional Justice: [What is intersectionality?](#)
- World Economic Forum: [Five ways intersectionality affects diversity and inclusion at work](#)
- Lean In: [Double discrimination and intersectionality](#)