

BREAKING THE BARRIERS: AN ANALYSIS OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION STRATEGIES IN THE GLOBAL AVIATION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

Purpose – Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) refers to efforts to promote the involvement of a wide range of individuals from diverse backgrounds, experiences, skills, and expertise. Despite the growing importance of DEI in the aviation industry, there has been a lack of research exploring the DEI strategies of airlines. This study aims to examine the DEI strategies of the top 10 airlines in the world based on their official statements and reports. The study investigates the prioritization of DEI concerns by airlines and the types of DEI strategies commonly employed.

Methodology – Data is gathered from the airlines' websites and reports, and each company's DEI scores are calculated. This study employs manual coding to analyze how airline's view and prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as how they implement DEI practices.

Findings – The study provides a better understanding of the current state of DEI practices in the aviation industry and identifies potential areas for improvement. Prioritizing DEI can positively affect the travel experience and attract customers who value DEI and sustainability. Embracing diversity can also lead to a more dynamic and productive workplace for airlines.

Contribution – The findings will be valuable not only for the aviation industry but also for other industries. Also, this study will serve as a foundation for further research on DEI practices in the aviation industry. It provides a DEI management performance evaluation of airlines and offers recommendations for areas of improvement, helping airlines to create a more inclusive environment and benefiting the tourism industry as a whole.

Keywords: Diversity, equity, and inclusion; DEI initiatives; Air transportation; Airlines.

INTRODUCTION

The airline industry and the tourism sector are closely interconnected, as airlines play a critical role in transporting individuals to various destinations for tourism purposes (Bieger, Döring, and Laesser 2002). As such, airlines are key facilitators of tourism, providing travelers with efficient and effective transportation to their desired locations and allowing them to experience different cultures and environments (Papatheodorou 2021). Both industries are highly diverse, reflecting the multicultural nature of the destinations they serve. Acknowledging and valuing differences is critical to providing high-quality services that meet the needs of a diverse customer base. With the increase in the diversity experienced, embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices has become more significant in attracting and retaining diverse talent, improving creativity and innovation, and enhancing the quality of service provided to tourists. This is particularly critical since the number of international visitors worldwide is expected to increase, especially with the ending of the Covid 19 pandemic. Additionally, the

industry's multicultural nature offers a unique opportunity for employees and tourists to understand new cultural experiences, promoting sustainable tourism and cultural exchange (Aydın and Alvarez 2020).

DEI initiatives have become increasingly important in both industries. Having DEI initiatives or promoting DEI provides equal opportunities for everyone by addressing disparities in hiring, promotion, and representation of people from different backgrounds, including gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality (Shen et al. 2009). Encouraging DEI fosters sustainability, and even the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is centered around the concept of “leaving no one behind” (Tahiri, Kovaçi, and Trajkovska Petkoska 2022). Moreover, DEI practices can contribute to social and economic sustainability by creating a more diverse workforce and an environment where different perspectives and ideas can be shared. Utilizing a range of viewpoints and experiences can enable individuals to learn from one another, leading to increased organizational effectiveness (Rosenzweig, 1998). This, in turn, enhances creativity and innovation and improves the quality of service provided to customers. Additionally, DEI initiatives can help companies improve their reputation and attract more customers (Ferraro, Hemsley and Sands 2022).

Despite the increasing importance and attention given to the topic, there remains a lack of research conducted in this area. Therefore, this study aims to examine the airlines' DEI practices and how these airlines have implemented equity and inclusion practices by reviewing their official statements. This study will provide a better understanding of the current state of DEI practices in the aviation industry. The study intends to assist organizations in gaining knowledge from the experiences of others and recognizing areas where they can enhance their own DEI- initiatives. The result of this study also aims to indicate areas where more in-depth investigation is needed.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a concept that embraces the importance of diversity and inclusivity for achieving business objectives. It originated during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, primarily focused on issues of race and gender, but has since evolved to encompass various areas such as age, sexual orientation, political affiliation, organizational role, education, and talent, among others (Johnson and Chichirau 2020).

Today, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of promoting DEI in the workplace. Organizations have been adopting DEI practices in order to create a workplace in which fairness, equal opportunities, and inclusivity are promoted (Shen et al. 2009). Creating work environments where all employees feel valued and supported not only enhances employee engagement and motivation but also boosts the organization's image and reputation (Ali and Konrad 2017).

Studies have shown that implementing DEI management can result in several positive outcomes. DEI practices can help create an inclusive organizational culture where everyone, regardless of age, gender, region, etc., is treated fairly, has equal access to

opportunities, and can contribute to making decisions equally. With the help of DEI practice, companies can have strong relationships with their employees. Also, they can offer professional development opportunities such as training programs, mentorship opportunities, and networking events for their employees. All of these can lead to increased employee engagement, job satisfaction, and motivation, ultimately improving employee performance (Creary, Rothbard, and Scruggs 2021; Rosenkranz et al. 2021). Furthermore, these initiatives can support economic sustainability within an organization by improving employees' creativity, problem-solving and decision-making skills and reducing the costs associated with high turnover rates and absenteeism (Yang and Konrad 2011).

While the advantages of DEI in the workplace are numerous, it can be difficult to establish such initiatives, and it demands considerable effort and dedication. To ensure the successful implementation of DEI initiatives, it is crucial to collect and analyze comprehensive data regarding the diversity of employees, pinpoint any hindrances to the inclusion of individuals from different backgrounds, provide training on DEI, and foster active participation and feedback from employees (Pinkett 2023). Besides, it is vital to set precise objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) for DEI and create a detailed plan of action with specific steps to attain them and to assess the outcome (Karakhan et al. 2021).

Most importantly, effective planning and execution of communication methods are crucial for building credibility and gaining support for DEI efforts (Hayles 2014). Stakeholders expect leaders to communicate about DEI issues. Communication on DEI demonstrates the company's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and fair treatment of individuals from diverse social identity groups (Hayles 2014). By conveying the importance of DEI, stakeholders are more inclined to provide support in terms of resources, such as capital, revenue, and potential employees (Ali and Konrad 2017). Research has demonstrated the significance of DEI communication for employees. Most employees expect their company to prioritize DEI, while job seekers consider workplace diversity a crucial factor in their job search. Moreover, the majority of job seekers are more likely to apply to companies that have publicly committed to DEI (Miller, 2021). Organizations can reach external stakeholders through multiple means, such as their company website, financial statements, press releases, and social media.

The aviation industry provides services to diverse communities worldwide and employs a workforce from various backgrounds, ages, and genders. Hence, addressing DEI is crucial for the industry. This study aims to evaluate the DEI strategies of airlines by analyzing their official statements to assess how they prioritize and implement equity and inclusivity practices. The study will create a scorecard to rank airlines based on their DEI management performance and provide recommendations to improve their practices and create a more inclusive environment. The basic assumption is that companies accurately represent their actions and intentions in their public statements: they do what they state in their external communications and state what they do.

2. METHODOLOGY

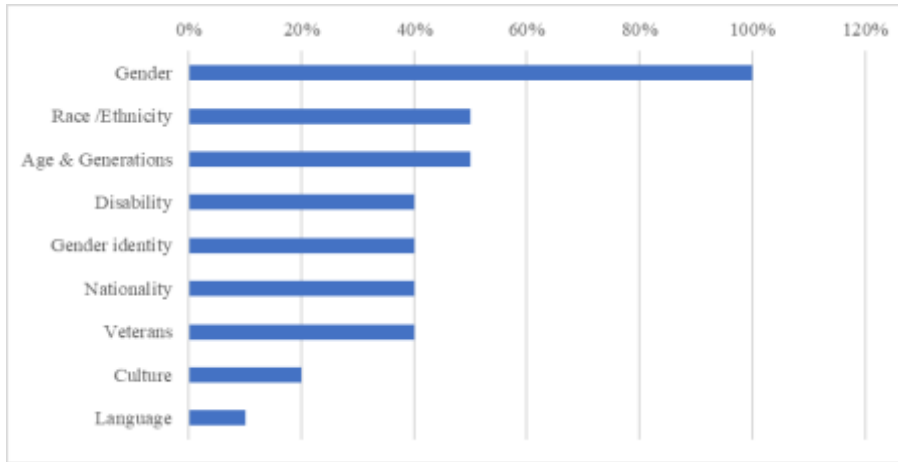
DEI-related data from the websites and reports of a sample of the top 10 airlines with the highest Available Seat Kilometers (ASK) was collected from OAG, a flight database and statistics provider (OAG 2023). The airline reports included annual reports, official documents (e.g., Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reports, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports), and website content. These types of reports are commonly used as a source of data for research in various studies (Benckendorff 2006; Liao et al. 2017; Baier et al. 2020).

The research used manual coding to understand how airlines view diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which specific aspects of diversity are prioritized, and how airlines implement DEI practices. Manual coding is a method of analyzing data that involves repeatedly reading and categorizing the data, grouping similar codes, and interpreting the findings. This process is crucial for gaining insights and constructing theories. A manual approach offers a more deliberate and thoughtful engagement with the data, facilitating deeper reflection and more meaningful interpretations (Maher et al. 2018; Rademaker, Grace, and Curda 2015). To ensure validity and reduce bias, a second researcher independently analyzed the data and obtained the same results (Saldaña 2021).

3. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

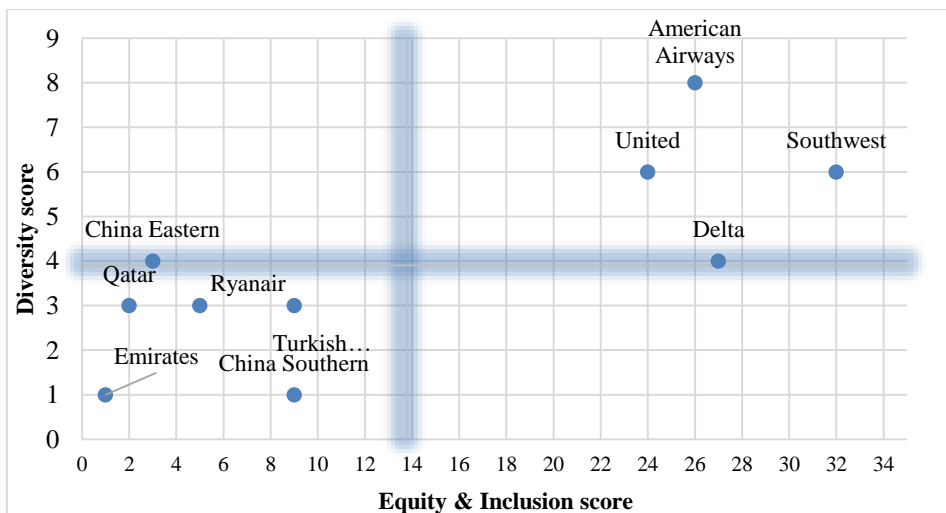
The study discovered that all the airlines examined had content on their websites or reports relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). However, the topics and the extent of coverage varied considerably. Gender diversity was the most frequently discussed issue, with all companies addressing it, followed by race/ethnicity and age/generation. Figure 1 provides information on the other diversity topics and the percentage of airlines addressing them. The results also revealed that while some airlines mentioned multiple diversity issues, they lacked equitable and inclusive practices to address them.

Figure 1: The % of Airlines Addressing Each Diversity Item



Then, the airlines were categorized based on their DEI practices. Each company's diversity, equity, and inclusion scores were calculated. The diversity score represented the sum of diversity categories that the airline addressed. The equity and inclusion score represented the number of equity and inclusion practices adopted by the airline. Points were awarded for each diversity item addressed, as well as each equity and inclusion practice, with a score of 1 point per item. For instance, if an airline addressed only gender and race diversity, they received 2 points. Similarly, if the airline had established five equity and inclusion practices to promote gender equality, they received 5 points. The final score for each company was the sum of all the equity and inclusion scores for each diversity item. The resulting scores were then plotted and visualized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Diversity & Equity & Inclusion score



As can be seen, the airlines in the United States are the most successful ones in terms of both diversity, equity, and inclusion performance. Table 1 provides the diversity scores of all airlines involved in the analysis. The top-ranked airlines in terms of their diversity scores, out of all the airlines analyzed, are AA, Southwest, and United.

Table 1: Diversity score of airlines (representing the number of diversity categories addressed by the airline)

	Gender	Disability	Gender identity	Race /Ethnicity	Nationality	Age & Generation	Veterans	Culture	Language	Score
AA	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	8
Southwest	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0	6
United	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	6
Delta	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	4
China Eastern	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	4
Ryanair	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	3
THY	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Qatar	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	3
China Southern	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Emirates	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	10	4	4	5	4	5	4	2	1	

Table 2 indicates equity, and inclusion scores of all airlines involved in the analysis. Southwest, Delta, and AA are recognized as leading airlines in terms of their equity and inclusion scores.

Table 2: Equity and Inclusion score of airlines (the equity and inclusion practices addressing each diversity item)

	Gender	Disability	Gender identity	Race /Ethnicity	Nationality	Age & Generations	Veterans	Culture	General	Score
Southwest	3	8	2	4	0	0	2	0	13	32
Delta	4	0	4	6	0	0	1	0	12	27
AA	3	2	2	4	0	1	2	1	11	26
United	2	1	4	4	0	1	1	1	10	24
THY	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	9
China Southern	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	9
Ryanair	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	5
China Eastern	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Qatar	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Emirates	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Example of calculating Southwest Airlines Equity & Inclusion Score - Excerpts from company reports are as follows:

Gender Equity & Inclusion

- 1) Increasing gender diversity of our Senior Management Committee by 2025
- 2) Support diverse communities – e.g., Women Community Partners
- 3) Commitment to Supplier Diversity

Race Equity & Inclusion

- 1) Committed to doubling the percentage of racial diversity in Senior Management Committee by 2025.
- 2) Partnering with a Historically Black College and University for cadet programs.
- 3) Established a Diversity Center of Excellence to support recruiting and hiring initiatives, which included identifying four Top Tier Historically Black Colleges and Universities,
- 4) support diverse communities; Black/African American Community Partners; Hispanic/Latino Community Partners; Asian American & Pacific Islander

The equality and inclusion initiatives in the sample that airlines can use to develop their DEIs can be summarized as follows:

- Setting specific and measurable diversity goals (metrics) to deliver on commitments (e.g., a minimum of 33% women within the Group Executive Committee by 2030)
- Revealing pay gap report per gender, race, etc. and ensuring pay equity
- Working with minority-owned suppliers such as by ethnic minorities (e.g., Black, Asian American and Pacific Islander), women, disabled individuals, veterans, and LGBTQ individuals.
- Having various voluntary employee-led Business Resource Group (EBRG) (e.g., women, disability, races, religion, generations) to foster a diverse, inclusive workplace
- Offering mentoring platforms for minorities
- Establishing consistent and objective talent practice for assessing, identifying, developing, and moving talent
- Requiring all hiring slates and interview panels to reflect diversity
- Giving equal consideration to a candidate's skills, background and experience to close the opportunity gap for diverse talent.
- Using a hiring technology to ensure accountability and mitigate potential hiring bias
- Recruiting and hiring initiatives from minority schools and colleges
- Celebrating nationally observed holidays and months that honor employee demographics and the diverse communities served (e.g., Black History Month, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, and National Disability Employment Awareness Month)
- Supporting diverse communities (e.g., Black/African American Community Partners, Hispanic/Latino Community Partners; Individuals with Disabilities Community Partners)

- Supporting disabled employees through use of disability-inclusive language, ensuring all applicable training materials and resources are fully accessible
- Providing training to employees to raise disability awareness, etc.
- Conducting employee surveys to receive feedback on employee satisfaction and engagement
- Organizing listening sessions and town hall series to hear concerns and take action on a range of issues impacting team members, including discrimination
- Organizing events and publications to facilitate a company-wide conversation on DEI
- Providing inclusive leadership e-learning for managers
- Supporting women to balance work and family by giving pre-natal and post-natal flexibility, opening a nursery, planning no overnight duties, etc.
- Having Allyship Guide that educates and supports employees in building cultural competency to recognize, respect, and value the differences of their peers.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations are developed. Firstly, airlines need to broaden their approach to diversity by focusing not just on gender, but also on other factors. In addition, it's important to recognize that diversity, equity, and inclusion are separate yet interconnected concepts that should be treated separately.

To expand the scope of focus from just diversity to encompass equity and inclusion, there are several strategies that can be employed. These include setting specific and measurable DEI objectives and key performance indicators, ensuring pay equity per different identity groups, working with minority-owned suppliers, having various EBRGs, offering mentoring platforms for minorities, establishing consistent and objective talent assessment practices, taking measures to mitigate bias in the selection process such as using a hiring technology and requiring all hiring slates and interview panels to reflect diversity, recruiting and hiring from minority schools and colleges, celebrating nationally observed holidays and months that honor employee demographics and the diverse communities served, supporting diverse communities, supporting disabled employees through use of disability inclusive language, ensuring all applicable training materials and resources are fully accessible, providing training to employees to raise disability awareness, the collection and analysis of diverse employee data, conducting employee surveys to receive feedback on employee satisfaction, encouraging employee engagement and feedback, organizing listening sessions or townhall series to hear concerns and take actions against discrimination, organizing events and publications to facilitate a company-wide conversation on DEI, offering DEI training, identifying barriers to the inclusion of individuals from diverse backgrounds, encouraging inclusive communication, and conducting regular evaluations of DEI efforts, providing inclusive leadership e-learning for managers, supporting women to balance work and family, and having allyship guide for employees.

Having a corporate policy that supports the DEI concept is crucial as it helps to establish concrete steps towards creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace while also holding the company accountable for its DEI-related actions. In order to achieve

substantial and measurable change, the DEI strategy should involve all stakeholders, including business partners, customers, members, volunteers, employees, and others who live and work in the areas where the organization operates and may be affected by its actions. Importantly, to gain credibility and support, organizations need to effectively communicate their DEI commitment and efforts (Hayles 2014). Lastly, this study and its methodology for constructing a DEI scorecard can serve as a valuable resource for organizations looking to evaluate and enhance their own DEI initiatives.

Tourism is a significant driver of the worldwide economy, and airlines play a crucial role in facilitating travel and tourism. Prioritizing DEI in airlines is important for creating a more inclusive and welcoming travel experience, which can have positive effects on both the airline's financial performance and the wider tourism industry (Accenture 2019).

Tourism industry serves a diverse group of travelers with different backgrounds, cultures, religions, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and experiences. When airlines prioritize DEI, they can better understand and attract this diverse customer base, which can lead to better customer experience, increased loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. In addition, more and more customers are gravitating towards companies that value DEI and sustainability. Therefore, publicly demonstrating DEI values and strategies is critical for airlines to attract customers who are sensitive to this issue (PwC 2019; Accenture 2019).

It's crucial to note that customers seek novelty and uniqueness. By embracing diversity and inclusivity, companies can attract individuals with innovative perspectives and backgrounds, and cultivate a culture that promotes creativity. Such a workplace would allow for diverse perspectives in decision-making, ultimately leading to a more dynamic and productive workplace. Lastly, as more people desire to work for inclusive organizations that allow them to reach their full potential, it's essential for companies to communicate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion values (PwC 2019; Accenture 2019).

CONCLUSION

The tourism industry is unique because it is made up of a complex network of businesses with diverse employees and clients from different backgrounds. Airlines are a vital component of the tourism industry as they provide the primary means of transportation for tourists to travel to their destinations and their continued success is critical to the growth and sustainability of the global tourism economy. Prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in airlines is important for creating a more inclusive and welcoming travel experience, which not only benefits the airline's financial performance but also positively impacts the tourism industry as a whole.

By prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion, airlines can appeal to a wider range of customers, resulting in a more positive customer experience, higher customer loyalty, and increased positive recommendations. In addition, by promoting a diverse and inclusive workplace, companies can benefit from a range of perspectives and ideas, leading to greater innovation and problem-solving.

The tourism industry relies heavily on the skills, expertise, and hard work of its employees to provide high-quality services to tourists and ensure that their experiences are positive and memorable. Indeed, employees represent the backbone of this industry, and their performance and job satisfaction are crucial to its sustainability. Creating a workplace that embraces diversity, equality, and inclusivity can foster a culture where employees feel valued and respected, leading to increased levels of engagement and motivation. This, in turn, can lead to improved job satisfaction and performance, boosting the industry's overall success.

This study evaluated the DEI strategies of airlines by analysing their official statements to assess how they prioritize and implement equity and inclusivity practices. Data was gathered from the airlines' websites and reports, and a scorecard was developed to rank airlines based on their DEI management performance. The study discovered that all of the airlines examined had content on their websites or reports relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), but the topics and the extent of coverage varied considerably. Based on the findings, potential areas for improvement were identified. The study then provided recommendations for airlines to improve their practices and create a more inclusive environment.

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