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Trade Association Leaders' Successful Strategies for Increasing Racial Diversity Within Their Respective Industries

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MAC, University of Denver, 2007

MBA, Regis University, 2003

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Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

In the architectural, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry, innovation thrives on diverse perspectives. Without effective diversity and inclusion strategies, AEC industry leaders may hinder innovation opportunities, which could result in reduced profitability and employee morale in a highly competitive market. Grounded in institutional theory and resource-based view theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore successful strategies AEC trade association leaders use to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. Data were gathered from six participants from various AEC trade associations across the United States using semistructured interviews and reviews of publicly available documents from participants' association websites and social media pages. Thematic analysis revealed six key themes: institutional committees and dedicated roles, safe spaces and cohort-based engagement, workforce pipeline development, recognition and inclusive awards, data-driven diversity assessment, and language and cultural inclusion. A key recommendation is for AEC association leaders to create specific positions or committees focused on diversity and inclusion to implement comprehensive strategies. The implications for positive social change include the potential for AEC leaders to dismantle systemic barriers, ultimately benefiting underrepresented communities and enhancing industry resilience.

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Dedication

This work stands as a testament to enduring love and wisdom that transcends time. I dedicate my doctoral journey first to my grandparents—especially my maternal grandfather, who faced the Great Depression's hardships yet championed knowledge as life's unshakable foundation. His conviction that education, once earned, remains ours forever has fueled my resilience. Your legacy lives in this pursuit of lifelong learning.

To my parents, my unwavering foundation: Your faith sculpted my character. Every path I have walked bears the imprint of your guidance, and every challenge met reflects the strength you nurtured.

To Lamont, my husband and quiet strength: Your sacrifices—handling countless responsibilities, guarding my study time, sustaining our family—made this possible. This achievement is ours, a testament to shared devotion.

To Morgan, Ethan, Logan, and Arya, my brightest lights: May this work inspire you to chase dreams with the grit and joy you have gifted me. Let it remind you that no mountain is too high when climbed with purpose and love.

Each page honors our family's story—perseverance, unity, growth. May it echo our values: excellence lived, knowledge rooted in humility, love's quiet power moves worlds. While concluding my research, this begins greater hope—that our collective journey encourages others to rise, learn, and lift those beside them. To my family, past and present: you are my why. Every insight and barrier overcome carries your spirit. This is ours, forever.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I give thanks to God, whose unwavering grace and divine wisdom sustained me through every challenge of this doctoral journey. It is only by His provision that I found strength to begin, perseverance to continue, and clarity to complete this work. This project stands as a testament not to my ability, but to His faithfulness.

I also extend my deepest gratitude to my doctoral chair, Dr. Matthew Knight, for his direct and succinct guidance throughout this academic endeavor. Each interaction with Dr. Knight ignited a renewed determination within me to excel further and push the boundaries of my capabilities. I am immensely thankful for his unwavering support and the invaluable mentorship that has been pivotal in guiding me to this significant milestone in my academic journey.

I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to my second committee member, Dr. James Glenn, whose insightful reviews and contributions were instrumental in refining my work.

Their combined expertise and encouragement have been a beacon of inspiration, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

Background of the Problem

In particular industries and organizations, the lack of diversity continues to be a prevalent issue that has significant implications for the competitive edge of companies within the United States. The issue of diversifying workforces to enhance competitiveness, innovation, and profitability among trade associations and their member organizations in the United States stands as a critical challenge. The general business problem is that numerous trade association leaders lack effective strategies to promote workforce diversity, which is essential in today's dynamic business landscape.

The necessity for new research emerges from the dynamic nature of workforce demographics and the evolving understanding of what constitutes effective diversity strategies. Previous research has largely focused on the benefits of diversity within organizations (Guillaume et al., 2015), but there is a lack of research specifically targeting the role of trade associations in fostering this diversity. Given that trade associations play a pivotal role in shaping industry standards and practices (Rajwani et al., 2015), investigating this unexplored avenue can yield actionable insights that may influence a broad spectrum of industries.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that some trade associations' leaders in the architectural, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry lack successful strategies for assisting associations' members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. The

purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore successful strategies trade association leaders use to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale.

The targeted population consists of trade association leaders within the AEC industry who have implemented successful strategies to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. I used purposive sampling to select six participants in the United States and gained access to them through professional associations and social networks. To collect the data, I used semistructured interviews and a review of publicly available documents. The conceptual framework for this project included Meyer's (2010) institutional theory and Barney's (1991) resource-based view (RBV) theory.

Research Question

What successful strategies do trade association leaders use for assisting their members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are foundational beliefs or premises that guide the research process and shape the direction of inquiry (Sim & Butson, 2017; Thune, 2009; Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). In this project, I made four assumptions. First, I assumed the

participants would be knowledgeable regarding strategies that encourage and assist their members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. Second, I assumed that participants would be willing and honest in providing responses to the interview questions. Third, I assumed trade association leaders are involved in encouraging and assisting their member organizations in developing and adopting diversity strategies to enhance their organizations. Fourth, I assumed that implementing effective diversity strategies would enhance member organizations' performance through increased innovation, profitability, and employee morale.

Limitations

Limitations are factors that can impact the validity and generalizability of study findings (Greener, 2018). A potential limitation of this project was related to the participants' responses. Participants could withhold information or be dishonest with their responses. A second possible limitation was access to data. Access to secondary data could pose a constraint, potentially limiting the depth and scope of my research findings. A third limitation of this project was a separation of roles and ethical considerations. As a researcher, I had to ensure that I maintained a clear distinction between my role as a researcher and any potential conflicts of interest. Clearly outlining my intentions, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring informed consent from participants were important ethical considerations. Fourth, time and resources could cause limitations. Conducting semistructured interviews and reviewing company

documents can be time-consuming and resource intensive. Planning and allocating sufficient time were crucial for a comprehensive project.

Transition

I aimed to identify and explore successful strategies AEC trade association leaders use to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. In Section 1, I provided the background for the problem, addressed the business problem focus and project purpose, and discussed assumptions and limitations. In Section 2, I review professional and academic literature. Section 3 includes discussions on project ethics, the nature of the project, data collection and analysis activities, and reliability and validity. In Section 4, I discuss the findings and the implications for business practice, social change, and further research.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Literature Review Opening Narrative

A literature review is a critical and comprehensive evaluation of existing research on a particular topic with the aim of synthesizing findings from various studies to provide a cohesive understanding of the subject matter. A literature review serves multiple purposes, including identifying gaps in the current knowledge base, establishing the context for new research, and highlighting significant trends and themes within the literature (Ekawati, 2022). By systematically analyzing and integrating diverse sources, a literature review not only summarizes previous work but also critiques methodologies and findings, thereby contributing to the development of theoretical frameworks and guiding future research directions (Cho & Ardichvili, 2024; Gano-an, 2021). In the context of this doctoral project, the literature review focused on the intersection of workforce diversity and organizational performance within the AEC industry, utilizing two theoretical foundations, institutional theory and the RBV, to frame the discussion. This structured approach allowed for an exploration of how trade associations can effectively support their members in enhancing organizational performance through diversity initiatives.

In this literature review, I explored the critical role of workforce diversity in enhancing organizational performance within the AEC industry. The foundation of this inquiry was grounded in two theoretical frameworks: institutional theory, which emphasized the influence of social norms and structures on organizational behavior, and

the RBV theory, which posited that unique organizational resources could lead to competitive advantages. Both theories provided a lens through which to examine how trade associations could leverage diversity to foster innovation, profitability, and employee morale.

Research has consistently demonstrated that diversity in the workforce is not merely a social imperative but a strategic advantage that can lead to improved organizational outcomes. Pasupuleti (2024) indicated that diverse workforces enhance creativity and innovation by bringing together varied perspectives and experiences, which is crucial in industries like AEC that thrive on problem-solving and innovation. Sun et al. (2024) also indicated that organizations that embrace diversity often report higher employee engagement and trust, which are essential for fostering a collaborative work environment. This research aligns directly with the RBV theory. Alkhawaldeh (2020) suggested that diverse human capital can be a valuable resource that contributes to superior organizational performance.

In the context of the AEC industry, the significance of diversity is particularly pronounced. According to Olutimehin et al. (2024), the AEC sector has historically faced challenges related to workforce homogeneity, which can stifle innovation and limit the pool of ideas necessary for addressing complex engineering and architectural problems. Leadership strategies that prioritize diversity management are essential for overcoming these challenges. Pasupuleti (2024) indicated that effective leaders in the AEC industry implement initiatives that not only focus on recruitment but also on creating inclusive environments where diverse voices are heard and valued. This

approach not only enhances innovation but also contributes to improved profitability and employee morale. Fasano et al. (2022) indicated that diverse teams are better equipped to meet the needs of a varied client base and adapt to changing market demands. This literature review further considered the benefits of diversity within the AEC sector as a whole.

The organization of this literature review includes first delving into the theoretical foundations of institutional theory and RBV, exploring their relevance to the research question. Following this, an overview of racial diversity and its significance in the contemporary business landscape is presented, highlighting its implications for organizational performance. The review then focuses specifically on diversity within the AEC industry, exploring existing literature on the challenges and opportunities it presents. Finally, I analyze leadership strategies that effectively enhance diversity, drawing on case studies and empirical evidence to illustrate successful practices. This comprehensive exploration provides a robust framework for understanding how trade associations can assist their members in leveraging workforce diversity to achieve organizational excellence.

The approach to my literature review involved developing a search using keywords and phrases including *institutional theory; resource-based view theory; architectural, engineering, and construction industry; diversity; diversity management; benefits of diversity; trade associations; associations; business associations influence; trade associations influence; association influence; impact of diversity and inclusion on workplace effectiveness; diversity in a workforce provides value for the company;* and

impact of associations on their industries. I utilized the Thoreau Multi-Database Search tool to identify and access journal articles in Walden University Library databases including EBSCOHost, Emerald Publishing, Pearson Education, ProQuest Central, Sage Journals, and Sage Premier. To supplement these search efforts, I used Google Scholar to identify additional relevant information and gained access through Walden University Library. I ensured that most of the sources were peer-reviewed and published within 5 years of my expected graduation. The reason for these parameters was to ensure the necessary recency regarding empiricism and perspectives and a rigorous research quality assurance process for articles used. Research related to the conceptual framework will not meet the time filter criteria as these theories were founded many years ago. I did not include nonpeer-reviewed articles to avoid concerns related to the reliability of the data sources.

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to explore strategies that trade association leaders employ to assist their members in enhancing organizational performance through workforce diversity, thereby increasing innovation, profitability, and employee morale. Workforce diversity is increasingly recognized as a key driver of organizational success, as it enriches creativity and problem-solving capabilities within teams (Yunyi et al., 2024). Specifically, incorporating diverse perspectives fosters a more dynamic environment conducive to innovation, which can improve overall performance metrics including profitability and employee engagement (J. Liu et al., 2023). By understanding the mechanisms through which trade associations

influence diversity practices, this research aimed to provide actionable insights that can enhance member organizations' capacity to thrive in competitive markets. Ultimately, this project aimed to contribute to a crucial conversation about effective diversity strategies and their tangible benefits for organizational performance.

Conceptual Framework

The importance of a conceptual framework in a doctoral project lies in its foundational role in guiding the research process, shaping the project's design, informing the interpretation of findings, clarifying the research problem, and establishing relationships between various concepts to facilitate a structured approach to inquiry. A conceptual framework acts as a bridge between theoretical paradigms and practical investigation and forms a crucial link that explains the research issue while guiding the investigation process (Sillence, 2022). This project considered the following two theories: institutional theory and RBV theory. The relevance of institutional theory and RBV theory was critical for understanding the challenges faced by trade associations in the AEC industry regarding workforce diversity.

Institutional Theory

The institutional theory provided a crucial framework for understanding how both formal and informal institutions influence the behavior of organizations. The founders of the institutional theory argued that organizations do not exist in isolation; rather, they are embedded within a broader social context that shapes their structures, practices, and identities. Meyer and Rowan (1977) emphasized the importance of legitimacy in organizational behavior, asserting that organizations conform to the

expectations of their institutional environment to gain legitimacy and acceptance (Smith, 2024). This approach highlighted how institutional norms and values can dictate how organizations operate, resulting in a balance between rational adaptation to external pressures and the pursuit of internally consistent practices.

DiMaggio and Powell's (1991) seminal work introduced the concept of isomorphism, which is central to understanding institutional theory. The authors identified three types of isomorphic pressures: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism arises from external forces such as laws and regulations that organizations must comply with, while normative isomorphism typically stems from professional standards and certifications that influence organizational practices. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations replicate the practices of others, particularly in uncertain times when they are unsure how to act. This triadic pressure contributes to the homogenization of organizations within similar fields, suggesting that organizations will often adopt similar structures and behaviors to secure legitimacy.

The concept of legitimacy, as articulated by Kuruppu et al. (2019), underpins the operational mechanisms of institutions. Organizations seek to align their practices with societal expectations to gain legitimacy and socio-political support. Kuruppu et al. further argued that this pursuit often leads organizations to prioritize conformity to established norms and frameworks overachieving operational efficiency. Institutional legitimacy becomes a critical asset, as organizations that fail to conform risk losing their social acceptance and, consequently, their viability. The significance of this legitimacy extends beyond transactional relationships; it affects organizational identity and

stakeholder perceptions, which can have lasting implications for organizational survival in competitive environments. Dacin et al. (2006) suggested that institutional legitimacy serves as a mediating factor that shapes organizations' reactions to external pressures and influences their operational strategies. Institutional legitimacy serves as a mediating factor that shapes organizations' reactions to external pressures and influences their operational strategies (Drori & Honig, 2013). For instance, studies indicate that legitimacy pressures compel organizations to adopt certain practices that align with external expectations, which is essential for maintaining acceptance in their environmental contexts (Feng & Wang, 2010; Y. Zhang & Yang, 2021). Legitimacy is viewed as central to organizational strategy; it can drive decisions and modifications in operations as firms respond to legitimacy challenges or leverage their legitimacy to gain competitive advantages (Diéz-Martín et al., 2013; Schembera & Scherer, 2017). This dynamic illustrates how legitimacy not only underpins organizational practices but also influences strategic decision-making in response to external pressures (Feng & Wang, 2010; Guo et al., 2020).

The interplay between legitimacy and operational strategies is highlighted by the notion that organizations identify and implement strategies that cater to both internal and external legitimacy needs, particularly during times of institutional change or challenge (Çoşkun & Arslan, 2023; Vaara et al., 2006). The path to achieving legitimacy often necessitates operational adjustments that resonate with both regulatory standards and public expectations, thus bridging the gap between institutional pressures and strategic action (X. Chen et al., 2020; Tang, 2017). By navigating these pressures through

effective operational strategies, organizations can enhance their legitimacy and, consequently, their overall success and resource acquisition (Chedrawi et al., 2020; Judge et al., 2008). Scholars have shown that organizations with strong legitimacy are more likely to engage effectively in trust-building efforts and maintain stakeholder relationships, thereby enhancing their long-term sustainability in complex environments (Guo et al., 2020; Kuruppu et al., 2019). Thus, understanding and cultivating institutional legitimacy is essential for organizations aiming to thrive amid evolving societal expectations and competitive challenges.

The relational dynamics at play within institutional fields introduce complexities that necessitate a nuanced understanding of institutional theory. Meyer (2010) emphasized that organizations are not merely passive recipients of institutional pressures; rather, they actively negotiate and navigate these pressures to construct their identities and strategic actions. This perspective aligns well with the ideas presented by DiMaggio and Powell (1991), who explored the interplay between agency and structure in institutional contexts. DiMaggio and Powell noted that as organizations adapt to external pressures, they also possess the capacity to influence those very institutions, thereby engaging in a reciprocal relationship. This interplay highlights the dynamic nature of institutional environments, where organizations must balance conformity and innovation to thrive in a constantly evolving landscape.

A critical exploration of institutional theory reveals its application across various contexts, including public administration, business ethics, and governance. M. Ali and Pirog (2019) illustrated how institutional theory informs social accountability

mechanisms through citizen oversight of police organizations, demonstrating the transformative potential of institutional norms in promoting change within public institutions. This example underscores the versatility of institutional theory in elucidating how normative pressures shape practices and drive reform across diverse sectors.

The ongoing discourse surrounding institutional theory continues to evolve, highlighting its relevance in contemporary organizational contexts. Loi et al. (2021) utilized institutional theory to analyze governmental responses amid crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in Macao's hospitality sector. This framework illustrated how crises can catalyze transformative adaptations in organizational responses, as demonstrated by S. Chen et al. (2021), which emphasized the significance of regulatory perceptions in shaping corporate behavior during crises. Such applications underscore the utility of institutional perspectives in interpreting organizational responses under external pressure while highlighting the importance of adaptability and resilience within established frameworks.

Even as institutional theory offers valuable insights into organizational behavior and adaptation, critiques persist regarding its applicability and limitations. For instance, while institutional isomorphism elucidates homogeneity, questions arise concerning how organizations can maintain uniqueness within highly institutionalized environments. W. Zhao and Ge (2023) affirmed that understanding the dual institutional processes at play can facilitate insights into the differential organizational status and the subjective interpretations varying stakeholders have regarding institutional legitimacy and

expectations. This tension between isomorphic pressures and organizational differentiation invites continued examination, particularly in an increasingly globalized and competitive landscape.

In summary, institutional theory presents a multidimensional perspective that emphasizes the influential role institutions play in shaping organizational behavior and identity. Through the foundational frameworks developed by Meyer (2010) and DiMaggio and Powell (1991), it becomes evident that institutions are critical in establishing norms and standards that organizations strive to achieve. The exploration of isomorphic pressures and the pursuit of legitimacy provides a robust lens through which to analyze organizational practices across diverse contexts and specifically in the AEC sector for this project. Engaging with the evolving implications of institutional theory is essential for effectively navigating the challenges of contemporary organizational landscapes while understanding the interplay between institutional frameworks and organizational agency.

Application of Institutional Theory. The AEC industry faces significant challenges in enhancing racial diversity and inclusion. Institutional theory, as a framework for understanding organizational behavior, provided valuable insights into how institutions shape diversity strategies and practices within this sector. Besser et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of considering diversity in urban planning and healthcare, suggesting that initiatives must engage meaningfully with various communities to enhance health outcomes and drive effective diversity strategies. Similarly, Rolf et al. (2022) noted that nonprofit organizations must actively confront

systemic inequities, reflecting broader societal movements aimed at fostering racial inclusion. This highlights the significance of social norms, values, and regulations that institutions develop, adopt, and espouse over time. Consequently, applying institutional theory offers a lens through which to analyze diversity efforts and serves as a guide for the implementation of effective strategies, especially in nonprofit trade associations advocating for intentional diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Institutions play a vital role in reproducing existing structures of inequality, which has profound implications for underrepresented racial minorities in the AEC industry. The institutional framework suggests that organizations often conform to the social pressures and expectations of their environment, which can lead to superficial or "cosmetic diversity" rather than substantive change. For instance, Strauch et al. (2023) argued that developing partnerships with community organizations and emphasizing the importance of diversity in research teams are crucial strategies for facilitating patient-centered research, which can also be translated to AEC organizations aiming for inclusivity. This demonstrated that genuine engagement with the surrounding context is essential for fostering meaningful change across sectors. Harris et al. (2022) and Vosmer (2022) further supported this claim, illustrating that systemic institutional barriers can perpetuate inequality and emphasized the importance of embedding diversity in organizational missions and practices to achieve transformative outcomes in traditionally exclusionary sectors. Ultimately, addressing these institutional barriers is essential for fostering true equity and inclusion in the AEC industry, paving the way for a more diverse and representative future.

Institutional pathways serve as mechanisms through which organizations can analyze their fulfillment of diversity goals. Fleming et al. (2022) reinforced the idea that institutions must critically assess their recruitment and retention practices, ensuring they create welcoming environments for racially minoritized groups. Specifically, Fleming et al. indicated those institutions that assess the structural barriers faced by minority faculty in engineering can adopt effective strategies that prioritize inclusive faculty search processes. Such analyses can also extend to AEC firms evaluating their employment practices and leadership representation, consequently achieving improved outcomes in diversity.

In addition, goal-setting initiatives linked with racial diversity within institutions have proven effective. Jong (2019) revealed that factors such as formalization and goal setting can explain the relationship between racial diversity and performance outcomes within organizations. Jong emphasized that a structural approach to diversity management, including explicit goal-setting methods, can enhance operational effectiveness. By embracing these strategies, AEC association leaders and industry stakeholders can begin to dismantle the barriers to diversity that have historical roots.

Nonprofit trade associations significantly contribute to promoting diversity and inclusion in the AEC sector. Organizations like the National Organization of Minority Architects influence institutional practices by providing resources, training, and mentorship aimed at amplifying the presence of minority professionals in the field. For instance, X. Zhang (2022) highlighted the indispensable role of nonprofit organizations in fostering skills and confidence among underrepresented groups, emphasizing that

participation in such associations aids in dismantling barriers that hinder diverse representation in industries like AEC. Choto et al. (2020) argued that these organizations function as crucial vehicles for socio-economic development, demonstrating how trade associations can serve as platforms for advocacy and support to promote inclusivity and equitable practices across the sector. Membership in such associations offers minority professionals opportunities to network, learn best practices, and benefit from advocacy aimed at broader systemic change. This aligns well with the goals of institutional theory, which posits that organizations adapt to environmental pressures, including social expectations regarding diversity.

Trade associations can create accountability measures to ensure member organizations are upholding diversity commitments. Kim and Woo (2024) highlighted the importance of developing institutional policies that genuinely affect employee experiences and demonstrate a commitment to enhancing workplace diversity. Bowe et al. (2023) supported this notion by illustrating that effective measurement and reporting of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within organizations can enhance accountability and influence positive systemic change in workplaces. Ahmed et al. (2023) indicated that implementing rigorous accountability mechanisms can lead to greater transparency and trust among employees, which ultimately bolsters diversity initiatives and fosters a more inclusive organizational culture (H. Baker et al., 2020). Such accountability structures within organizations can push the AEC industry toward long-lasting change, ensuring that diversity initiatives are not just symbolic gestures.

Institutional theory underscores the significance of institutional legitimacy in diversity practices. Institutions often seek legitimacy by adopting widely accepted practices. Miles et al. (2024) indicated that this phenomenon is evident in engineering education institutions, where the presence of women of color is highlighted. This overall pursuit of legitimacy through diversity is echoed by Chaudhury et al. (2019), who argued that diversity training should be an integral part of engineering programs, promoting collaboration among students from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds, thereby preparing them for an increasingly global workforce. The acknowledgment of these dynamics encourages AEC organizations to remain transparent about their diversity efforts and strive for legitimacy, not only through diverse hiring but also by fostering supportive environments that champion minority voices.

Achieving real diversity and inclusion goes beyond simple managerial initiatives or recruitment strategies. It requires a cultural shift within organizations that promotes belonging and equity for all individuals. As Miles et al. (2024) and Dietz et al. (2023) warned, the mere implementation of diversity initiatives without addressing the historical and contemporary contexts of race and racism may yield limited outcomes. To realize effective change, organizations must garner the commitment of all stakeholders within their association and the overall AEC sector and actively work toward creating equitable pathways for all employees.

Equally important is the call for continuous assessment of diversity initiatives' effectiveness. This involves maintaining metrics and accountability for diversity

practices, which aligns with emerging data-driven approaches in several professional settings. Nazer et al. (2023) argued that benchmarking racial and ethnic representation is essential for promoting accountability for diversity and inclusion in research settings. This claim is supported by Grimes (2023), who indicated that the establishment of appropriate goals and metrics, coupled with transparency and accountability, are indispensable for the success of diversity initiatives within any organization. This accountability should be emulated in the AEC sector, encouraging firms to regularly analyze their diversity representation and outcomes.

In summary, institutional theory presents a compelling framework for understanding the complexities and dynamics surrounding racial diversity in the AEC industry. This framework emphasizes the need for organizations to move beyond merely symbolic actions toward substantive changes that reflect a genuine commitment to inclusivity (Chaubey & Kuknor, 2024). The application of this theory revealed the multifaceted responses needed from trade associations and their member organizations as they navigate unique challenges associated with diversity and inclusion. Organizations are increasingly recognizing that a diverse and inclusive workplace not only enhances innovation and productivity but is also essential for fostering a healthy organizational culture overall (Won et al., 2020). Moving beyond cosmetic efforts, AEC stakeholders, in collaboration with nonprofit trade associations, can forge a path leading to significant institutional change that uplifts minorities and fosters an equitable environment for both employees and communities.

Resource-Based View Theory

The RBV theory as articulated by Jay Barney in 1991, posited that a firm's unique resources and capabilities are fundamental to achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. This theory diverges from traditional economic theories that emphasize market position and industry structure as primary determinants of competitive success. Instead, RBV focuses on the internal attributes of the firm, arguing that resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and organized (the VRIO framework) are essential for sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 2001a; Ju, 2024; Turulja & Bajgoric, 2015).

Barney's seminal work introduced the VRIO framework, which serves as a tool for assessing the potential of a firm's resources to contribute to competitive advantage. The first criterion, value, refers to the ability of a resource to exploit opportunities or neutralize threats in the environment. Resources that do not provide value cannot contribute to competitive advantage, regardless of their other attributes (Gutiérrez-Martínez & Duhamel, 2019; Jugdev & Mathur, 2012). The second criterion, rarity, indicates that for a resource to be a source of competitive advantage, it must be scarce relative to demand. If a resource is widely available, it cannot confer a competitive edge (Cardeal & António, 2012; Wijayanto Aripradono, 2022). The third criterion, inimitability, addresses the difficulty competitors face in replicating a firm's resources. Resources that are costly to imitate due to unique historical conditions, causal ambiguity, or social complexity can provide a more sustainable competitive advantage (Carolis, 2003; Ferreira et al., 2022). Finally, the organization criterion emphasizes that

a firm must be organized to exploit its resources effectively. This includes having the appropriate management systems, processes, and structures in place to leverage valuable, rate, and inimitable resources (Elias & Farah, 2020; Khilwani et al., 2011).

Barney's RBV theory has been influential in strategic management, leading to a deeper understanding of how firms can achieve competitive advantage through their unique resource configurations. The theory suggests that firms should focus on developing and protecting their core competencies—those capabilities that are particularly valuable and difficult for competitors to imitate (Álvarez et al., 2020; Simarmata et al., 2022). This focus on internal resources contrasts sharply with the external focus of traditional competitive strategies, which often prioritize market positioning and competitive dynamics (Andersén & Samuelsson, 2016; Sheehan, 2006).

The RBV theory has implications for human resource management, as it highlights the importance of human capital as a strategic resource. Firms that invest in developing their employees' skills and knowledge can create a workforce that is not only valuable but also difficult for competitors to replicate (Hendi et al., 2022; Kraaijenbrink et al., 2009). This aligns with the broader understanding that intangible resources, such as organizational culture and employee expertise, can be significant drivers of competitive advantage (Barney, 2001b; Nair & Bhattacharyya, 2019).

In addition to the VRIO framework, Barney's work has spurred further research into related concepts, such as dynamic capabilities, which refer to a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Hansen & Ferlie, 2014). This

extension of the RBV theory underscores the importance of adaptability and innovation in maintaining competitive advantage over time.

Critics of the RBV theory argue that it may overlook the role of external factors, such as market dynamics and competitive forces, in shaping firm performance (Barney & Wright, 1998; Santamaria, 2023). However, proponents contend that understanding a firm's internal resources provides a critical foundation for navigating external challenges. By leveraging their unique capabilities, firms can better position themselves to respond to competitive pressures and market changes (Castro & Giraldi, 2018; Kumar & Singh, 2022).

The RBV theory articulated by Barney in 1991 remains a cornerstone of strategic management literature. Its emphasis on the importance of internal resources and capabilities in achieving sustained competitive advantage has reshaped how scholars and practitioners think about strategy. The VRIO framework serves as a valuable tool for assessing resource potential, guiding firms in their strategic planning and resource allocation decisions. As businesses continue to navigate complex and dynamic environments, the insights provided by the resource-based view will remain relevant in understanding the sources of competitive advantage.

Application of the Resource-Based View Theory. The RBV theory provided a relevant framework for understanding the internal capabilities of organizations, particularly as they pursue strategies for enhancing racial diversity within the AEC industry. The RBV theory focuses on how unique, valuable, and inimitable resources can serve as a foundation for competitive advantage, suggesting that organizations that

leverage their diverse human resources are likely to outperform their less diverse counterparts. This perspective highlights that strong managerial support, an essential factor identified in previous studies, can facilitate the effective utilization of diverse workforces to drive innovation and enhance organizational performance in competitive sectors, including AEC (Kassa & Tsigu, 2021). The ability to manage and cultivate these resources effectively often translates into improved organizational capabilities, thereby promoting sustainable change through diversity initiatives (Mantok et al., 2019). By adopting an RBV perspective, nonprofit trade associations that advocate for diversity can utilize their resources—such as industry knowledge, networks, and community trust—to enhance inclusion and drive systemic change in the AEC sector.

Understanding the implications of the RBV theory requires a comprehensive assessment of how social and cultural resources within organizations can be mobilized to support diversity initiatives. As organizations strive to create more inclusive environments, they must recognize that human capital is not merely an input to production but a critical strategic asset. Boudreau and Anis (2022) illustrated initiatives focusing on the feelings of inclusion within engineering education settings create a sense of belonging among diverse students and professionals. This suggests that institutions can cultivate a diverse community and thus become more innovative in solving engineering challenges through the strategic deployment of their unique human resources. Crook et al. (2011) highlighted investments in human capital significantly correlate with firm performance, asserting that a workforce whose skills are aligned with the firm's context can lead to better resource allocation and decision-making. Similarly,

Ramirez and Hachiya (2006) emphasized that firm-specific organizational capital, including uniquely tailored human capital, contributes directly to a firm's operational efficiency and overall productivity. Together, these insights reinforce the notion that effectively leveraging human capital is essential for fostering innovation and achieving strategic objectives in a diverse organizational framework.

The integration of diverse perspectives can enhance problem-solving capabilities within organizations. Sukkar et al. (2023) emphasized that recognizing and valuing differences in team dynamics leads to more innovative engineering solutions. This notion affirms the principles of the RBV theory by showcasing that teams composed of individuals from varied backgrounds can harness a broader range of insights and ideas, thereby enhancing innovative capacity and organizational effectiveness. As noted by Cañet (2023), diversity within teams not only expands the skill set and experiences available for tackling problems but also brings forth a wider array of viewpoints, which significantly contributes to more effective task completion and problem resolution. Hong and Page (2004) supported this view, demonstrating that groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform homogenous groups, as a broader range of perspectives leads to more effective decision-making processes within teams. Trade associations can leverage such evidence to advocate for diverse hiring practices within their member organizations as part of a strategic focus on resource utilization.

The role of trade associations in promoting diversity within the AEC industry is critical, as they can act as platforms for knowledge exchange and resource sharing among firms. By providing training and resources to firms on best practices for diversity

hiring and retention strategies, these associations can facilitate the development of valuable social capital. Boudreau and Anis (2022) further indicated that a focus on communal participation in engineering initiatives fosters inclusivity and retention, ultimately enriching the organizational culture. This aligns with the findings of Wang and Cotton (2024), who emphasized how diverse hiring practices, including boomerang and pipeline-based strategies, enhance organizational effectiveness by tapping into varied human capital pools that reflect different perspectives and experiences. Kehoe et al. (2022) suggested that leveraging pre-existing employment ties to increase diversity not only helps in resource mobilization but also strengthens organizational relationships, further driving the capability of firms to meet diversity challenges effectively. Through such concerted efforts, trade associations can enhance the overall capacity of firms to address diversity challenges effectively.

Effective diversity strategies often hinge on creating supportive environments that empower underrepresented groups. S. Chen et al. (2021) discussed the importance of collaborative efforts in constructing inclusive practices and policies within educational contexts, accentuating the roles that institutional structures play in crafting these environments. This aligns with the view established by Ayeni and Eden (2024) that robust environments foster the inclusion and retention of diverse groups by promoting networks and support, which have been highlighted as essential in various fields. Luo et al. (2020) emphasized that community and institutional strategies must engage diverse populations directly to build meaningful pathways into professional programs, supporting the argument that an empowering environment must couple

inclusivity with active outreach and mentorship. These studies are reflective of the RBV emphasis on organizations developing unique capabilities to foster diversity. Trade associations can promote the development of such practices among AEC firms, thereby cultivating organizations that can respond adeptly to the shifting dynamics of the labor market.

In the AEC sector, the commitment to enhancing racial diversity can also be interpreted through the lens of human capital development. Training programs designed to uplift minorities in the AEC workforce not only address immediate workforce gaps but can also enhance the long-term prosperity of firms. This argument is supported by Alalouch (2021), who posited that diversity initiatives need to be strategically integrated into the workplace to build robust talent pipelines. The RBV theory indicates that fostering a diverse workforce can lead to improved organizational effectiveness, giving firms a sustainable competitive edge by leveraging unique perspectives and skills (Moon & Christensen, 2019). Research shows that employee perceptions of diversity climate significantly impact retention rates and overall job satisfaction, pointing to the importance of cultivating a diverse and inclusive work environment (P. McKay et al., 2007). By aligning diversity efforts with organizational goals to improve retention and performance, AEC firms can draw upon unique capabilities that contribute to a sustainable competitive advantage.

Trade associations and professional societies can play a critical role in institutionalizing inclusive methodologies that enhance the design and functionality of built environments. As highlighted by Zallio and Clarkson (2021), implementing

inclusive assessment tools fosters diversity and promotes integration and accessibility in architectural design. This integrative approach enables organizations to produce designs that accommodate a broader spectrum of users, thereby enhancing the overall utility and accessibility of built structures. By employing diverse perspectives in the evaluation of these environments, trade associations underscore the importance of such methodologies within their member training programs, effectively positioning inclusivity as a cornerstone of product development and innovation. The imperative for inclusivity is further supported by research indicating that integrating inclusive design principles into educational and professional development initiatives significantly impacts the built environment. Notably, Heylighen et al. (2017) argued that fostering inclusive design in continuing professional education for architects enhances diversity in the built environment sector. Their findings suggested that when professional training incorporates diverse design methodologies, it not only impacts the immediate professional community but also changes the narrative around inclusivity in architectural practice. Hence, trade associations are uniquely positioned to leverage these insights to elevate inclusivity as a central tenet in built environment design, aligning their values with contemporary social imperatives and ensuring their members are equipped to meet the evolving needs of diverse populations, thus leveraging the RBV framework.

The RBV theory recognizes the transactions between organizations and their environmental contexts, where community involvement can enhance firms' reputational resources. Organizations with strong reputations and community ties benefit from increased trust and collaboration with diverse customer bases, ultimately leading to

better business outcomes. This is echoed in the findings of Bowe et al. (2023), who asserted that inclusive practices not only serve internal organizational needs but also strengthen external stakeholder relationships. As nonprofit trade associations work to enhance diversity, they simultaneously help member organizations cultivate stronger external networks, paving the way for reinforced community engagement. Research indicates that corporate reputation is linked to cooperative behaviors, suggesting that a well-regarded firm is more likely to achieve collaborative success and foster deeper ties within its community (X. Liu et al., 2019). Such cooperative dynamics enhance the overall reputation of companies, further promoting positive business outcomes and strengthening the bonds with stakeholders (Chung et al., 2023). In essence, the RBV theory underscores that by leveraging community involvement and inclusive practices, organizations can enhance their reputational resources, leading to stronger stakeholder relationships and improved business outcomes.

Trade associations can play a pivotal role in driving diversity through policy advocacy and leadership development. By providing leaders with the necessary resources and tools to understand and value diversity, associations can cultivate inclusive leadership styles that inspire collective action towards organizational goals. Pollock et al. (2022) indicated that this aligns with the RBV perspective, which highlights leadership as a valuable resource that can differentiate high-performance organizations in the AEC industry. Leaders who embrace inclusivity can steer their organizations toward sustainable growth through diversity-focused initiatives. Ashikali et al. (2020) suggested that inclusive leadership is instrumental in fostering a supportive

climate within diverse teams, thereby promoting collaboration that is critical for achieving organizational objectives. The work by Lo et al. (2019) indicated that cultural diversity in teams can enhance firm performance by integrating varied perspectives, ultimately influencing strategic decisions positively. These perspectives reinforce the notion that associations can enhance leadership capabilities, paving the way for improved organizational outcomes through focused diversity strategies. In essence, the integration of diverse leadership practices not only aligns with the RBV theory but also underscores the strategic importance of leveraging human resources to foster innovation and competitive advantage in the AEC industry.

In summary, the RBV theory provided valuable insights into enhancing racial diversity strategies in the AEC sector. By leveraging social, human, and reputational resources, nonprofit trade associations can foster structured diversity initiatives that benefit their member firms and the industry at large. Understanding diversity as a resource that can be strategically developed leads to the establishment of inclusive organizations capable of thriving in an increasingly competitive market. Through collaboration, training, and advocacy, trade associations can help the AEC industry operate from a diverse and inclusive perspective, which is crucial for fostering sustained organizational success. The promotion of best practices, such as implementing comprehensive diversity training programs and fostering a culture of respect and accountability, can mitigate the negative impacts of homogeneity in workplace environments, ultimately driving innovation and productivity within the industry (Kunnur et al., 2024; Zallio & Clarkson, 2023).

Institutional Theory and RBV Complementarity

The integration of institutional theory and the RBV theory provided a robust framework for understanding how trade association leaders can effectively promote racial diversity within their respective industries. Institutional theory highlights the importance of social norms and pressures, suggesting that organizations are often guided by established practices that influence their structural and strategic choices (Dubey et al., 2019). By leveraging this perspective, trade associations can identify and harness institutional forces that either facilitate or hinder diversity initiatives, ensuring compliance with societal expectations while also crafting their internal strategies to foster an inclusive environment (K. Ali & Johl, 2023). In parallel, the RBV emphasizes that organizations can achieve competitive advantage through their unique resources and capabilities, including human capital diversity (Salsabila et al., 2022). This dual perspective underscores that successfully increasing racial diversity is not merely a compliance issue but a strategic move that can enhance innovation and performance through diverse viewpoints and experiences (Gibson et al., 2021). Consequently, trade association leaders can cultivate a dual focus on shaping institutional norms while simultaneously investing in their internal capabilities to build a more diverse workforce, ultimately contributing to long-term organizational success and sustainability. Thus, this multifaceted approach offered a pathway for trade associations to align their strategic objectives with the imperative of inclusivity, setting a precedent for their industries moving forward.

Overview of Racial Diversity and its Significance in Today's Business Environment

Racial diversity in the business environment has emerged as a factor influencing organizational performance, innovation, and overall competitiveness. The increasing globalization of markets and the demographic shifts within the workforce necessitate a deeper understanding of how racial diversity contributes to business success. Research has shown that organizations with diverse leadership teams are better positioned to implement effective diversity initiatives, which can lead to improved financial performance and innovation outcomes. According to J. Li et al. (2022), diverse teams are more likely to engage in creative problem-solving, which enhances innovation and adaptability in rapidly changing markets. Santosa et al. (2022) noted that the presence of diverse perspectives within teams fosters a culture of inclusivity and respect, which is essential for attracting and retaining talent in today's competitive job market. This overview synthesizes various scholarly articles that highlight the significance of racial diversity in today's business landscape, focusing on its impact on financial performance, innovation, employee satisfaction, and organizational culture.

Research has consistently demonstrated that racial diversity positively influences financial performance across various organizational levels. Smulowitz et al. (2018) found that racial diversity not only affects the financial performance of organizations as a whole but also shows significant positive effects at different hierarchical levels, including associates, mid-level, and partners in law firms. This finding is echoed by Richard et al. (2015), by introducing introduced the concept of racial diversity congruence, suggesting that alignment between store-unit racial diversity and community demographics can

enhance sales performance. Such insights underscore the importance of aligning workforce diversity with market demographics to optimize financial outcomes.

The relationship between racial diversity and innovation is well-documented. Diverse teams bring together a variety of perspectives, fostering enhanced creativity and problem-solving capabilities. Zijl et al. (2023) emphasized that functional diversity has a positive relationship with team innovation, suggesting that varied job roles provide access to a wider knowledge base, facilitating collective problem-solving. Azeem et al. (2022) further supported this notion by indicating that functional diversity in collaborations leads to greater innovation diversity, indicating that diverse viewpoints stimulate novel solutions. The benefits of diversity therefore extend beyond financial metrics; they also encompass qualitative aspects of organizational performance, such as employee engagement and satisfaction. Overall, the creativity and problem-solving resilience offered by diverse teams are essential for organizations striving for innovation and effectiveness in today's dynamic environments.

The operational efficiency of organizations is also linked to racial diversity. Lee et al. (2023) conducted an empirical study on U.S. hospitals and found a direct correlation between the racial diversity of medical staff and operational efficiency. Lee et al.'s findings suggest that a diverse workforce can lead to improved patient outcomes and operational metrics, reinforcing the notion that diversity is not merely a social or ethical imperative but a strategic advantage in highly competitive sectors like healthcare. This aligns with the broader argument that diversity management should be viewed as an essential component of organizational strategy rather than a peripheral concern.

In addition to financial and operational benefits, racial diversity significantly impacts organizational culture and employee satisfaction. Research indicates that diverse workplaces foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity, which can enhance employee morale and retention. Vairavan and Zhang (2020) found that organizations with diverse leadership teams are better equipped to address the needs of a diverse customer base, leading to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty. The presence of diverse role models within an organization can inspire underrepresented employees, promoting a culture of empowerment and engagement.

The implementation of diversity initiatives is not without challenges. Organizations often face resistance to change, particularly in environments where traditional norms and practices are deeply entrenched. As noted by Jackson et al. (2013), the quality of inclusion is crucial; without genuine efforts to integrate diverse voices into decision-making processes, organization leaders may fail to realize the full benefits of diversity. This highlights the importance of not only promoting diversity but also fostering an inclusive culture where all employees feel valued and heard.

The business case for diversity is further supported by evidence linking diversity to enhanced organizational performance. A meta-analysis by Bezrukova et al. (2016) indicated that diversity training and management practices can lead to improved organizational outcomes, including financial performance and employee satisfaction. This reinforces the idea that diversity is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity for organizations aiming to thrive in a competitive landscape.

The impact of racial diversity extends to the boardroom, where diverse leadership teams are associated with better decision-making and strategic alignment with diverse stakeholder interests. Vairavan and Zhang (2020) emphasized that diverse boards could enhance corporate governance and social performance, ultimately contributing to improved financial outcomes. The authors suggested that organizations should prioritize diversity not only in their workforce but also at the leadership level to fully leverage the benefits of diverse perspectives.

In the context of the ongoing discussions about racial equity and social justice, the significance of racial diversity in business cannot be overstated. The historical context of racial discrimination and exclusion necessitates a proactive approach to diversity and inclusion in organizations. As highlighted by Warikoo (2017), the value of diversity extends beyond economic considerations; it is also about fostering a fair and equitable society. Organizations that embrace diversity as a core value are better positioned to navigate the complexities of today's sociopolitical landscape.

In summary, racial diversity plays a pivotal role in shaping the success of organizations in today's business environment. The evidence presented across various studies underscores the multifaceted benefits of diversity, including enhanced financial performance, increased innovation, improved operational efficiency, and a more inclusive organizational culture. As businesses continue to evolve in an increasingly diverse world, prioritizing racial diversity and inclusion will be essential for achieving long-term success and sustainability.

Diversity in the AEC Industry

Overview of the AEC Industry

The AEC industry is a complex sector that significantly influences global economies and faces ongoing challenges related to productivity and the integration of innovative practices. A notable trend in this industry is the shift towards building information modeling (BIM), which has transformed how projects are planned, executed, and managed, enhancing collaboration and efficiency among stakeholders (El-Din et al., 2022; D. Zhao et al., 2015). Studies have highlighted that, despite significant technological advancements, the sector still grapples with fragmentation and a reluctance to fully embrace digital workflows, which hinders overall performance (Johansen et al., 2021; Sawhney et al., 2020). With an increasing emphasis on sustainability, the AEC industry is exploring methodologies like Construction 4.0, which advocates for a holistic approach to tackling the multifaceted issues of modernization, including resource management and environmental impacts (Sawhney et al., 2020). As the industry prepares for future developments, it remains imperative to encourage continued educational integration of emerging technologies to equip professionals with the necessary skills to meet evolving demands (Debs et al., 2022; Huang, 2018). Fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability will be crucial for the AEC industry to thrive in an increasingly digital and sustainable future.

Current State of Racial Diversity in the AEC Industry

The current state of racial diversity in the AEC industry is characterized by persistent disparities and challenges, highlighting both a need for improvement and

ongoing efforts to foster inclusivity. Numerous studies indicate a marked underrepresentation of racial minorities within the AEC sector, with this imbalance manifesting in workforce composition, leadership roles, and project participation rates. Specifically, research highlights that, despite initiatives aimed at enhancing diversity, many organizations within the AEC continue to exhibit discriminatory practices and a lack of supportive environments, contributing to higher turnover rates for diverse groups (Francis & Michielsens, 2021). These obstacles not only impact individual career prospects but also the overall innovation and efficacy of projects within the industry. Leslie (2019) indicated that while diversity strategies may be well-intentioned, they often fall short of producing meaningful change, leading to what some scholars describe as "false progress"—a superficial increase in diversity metrics without substantial improvements in workplace experiences or outcomes for minority employees. Addressing these issues requires a committed and systematic approach to change organizational cultures, ensuring that all employees feel valued and supported. As the AEC industry continues to move forward and evolve, initiatives promoting equitable practices will be crucial for enhancing not only racial diversity but also overall organizational performance and project success.

Barriers to Racial Diversity in the AEC Industry

The AEC industry faces considerable barriers to achieving racial diversity, which significantly hinders its potential for innovation and growth. One primary barrier is the systemic structural inequalities present within the industry, which often manifest through hiring practices and organizational cultures that inadvertently exclude minority

groups (Azhar, 2011; F. Shafique & Mollaoglu-Scott, 2024). Research highlights that many AEC firms continue to experience fragmented communication and unclear pathways for career advancement, particularly for underrepresented races in leadership roles (Babatunde et al., 2020; Oke et al., 2023). Rane (2023) indicated the lack of mentorship opportunities and tailored support for minority employees further perpetuates a cycle where these underrepresented groups struggle to gain equal footing. Maqbool and Shaji (2024) pointed out that it is crucial to recognize that these barriers not only affect individual career trajectories but also impact the overall creativity and problem-solving capabilities of AEC project teams, diminishing the industry's capacity for addressing diverse client needs. Consequently, addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive reevaluation of organizational practices within AEC firms to foster inclusive environments that encourage diverse professional participation and leadership (Klarin & Xiao, 2023). Moving forward, the integration of diversity and inclusion strategies must become a focal point, with a strong emphasis on establishing mentorship programs, community outreach initiatives, and other strategies aimed at attracting qualified talent from underrepresented backgrounds in the industry.

Definition and Scope of Trade Associations in the AEC Industry

Trade associations are essential entities within the AEC industry, acting as crucial intermediaries that foster collaboration, standardization, and advocacy among professionals and firms. These organizations are defined as voluntary associations formed by businesses or professionals within a specific industry to promote collective interests, enhance professional standards, and provide platforms for networking and

knowledge sharing. Research indicates that trade associations are pivotal in establishing industry standards that ensure safety and quality in construction practices, thereby maintaining public trust and regulatory compliance (Bouguerra et al., 2020; Habib et al., 2022). For instance, the implementation of BIM has been significantly influenced by trade associations, which advocate for its adoption and standardization across the AEC sector, enhancing efficiency and collaboration among stakeholders (Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2019; Hamzeh et al., 2021). The scope of trade associations in the AEC sector is extensive, encompassing functions such as the development of industry standards, provision of training and certification, advocacy for policy changes, and facilitation of research and innovation (Altamimi et al., 2024).

Trade associations in the AEC industry are instrumental in establishing and promoting standards that govern professional practices. Organizations such as the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA) are examples of associations that develop guidelines and best practices for their members. These standards not only enhance the quality of services provided by member firms but also contribute to the overall integrity and professionalism of the industry. The establishment of such standards is crucial, especially in a sector characterized by diverse practices and varying levels of expertise among practitioners. W. Li et al. (2019) found that trade associations play a significant role in shaping industry standards, which are essential for ensuring consistency and high quality. According to Johnson and Gore (2016), the AIA has been critical in developing architectural standards that address both ethical practices and technical competencies, which has in turn led to

fostering a culture of professionalism within the field. Ottmann (2024) noted that these associations not only facilitate the dissemination of best practices but also engage in advocacy efforts that influence policy and regulatory frameworks affecting the AEC sector.

Trade associations play a pivotal role within the AEC industry by serving as a collective voice that advocates for members' interests. Trade associations serve not only as agents for their membership but also as vital intermediaries in shaping the regulatory landscape that impacts construction practices, labor relations, and environmental standards. This is particularly evident in the lobbying efforts of organizations such as the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), which actively lobbies for policies conducive to housing affordability and sustainable building practices. Research indicates that such lobbying activities do not merely represent the specific interests of trade associations, but they also influence broader public policy discussions, thereby affirming the importance of these organizations in ensuring that the needs of AEC professionals are recognized in legislative frameworks (A. McKay & Lazarus, 2023; You, 2022). The influence of trade associations extends beyond direct lobbying efforts; they also play a critical role in aligning industry-specific concerns with broader societal needs. By mobilizing collective action among their members, these associations are able to amplify their voices in policy debates, enhancing their efficacy in advocating for favorable legislation. Their involvement in legislative processes helps to foster a regulatory environment that supports the dynamic priorities of the AEC industry. Research suggests that the intertwined nature of trade associations and policymaking reveals significant

impacts on legislative outcomes that favor industry interests (P. Baker et al., 2021; Wouters, 2020). Thus, the robust advocacy role of trade associations is fundamental for shaping a conducive business environment, illustrating that their lobbying efforts are integral to representing the AEC sector effectively in public policy discussions.

In addition to advocacy and standardization, trade associations provide valuable resources for professional development. They offer training programs, workshops, and certification courses that help members enhance their skills and stay updated on industry trends and technologies. The AEC sector's increasing complexity necessitates that professionals continuously update their knowledge and abilities to keep pace with rapid technological advancements and regulatory changes, leading to calls for improved educational practices within industry discussions (Daryono, 2024; Horry et al., 2021). As highlighted in recent literature, the emphasis on upskilling and technical proficiency is paramount for not only individual professional growth but also the collective efficacy of the AEC industry (Tremblay et al., 2020). The importance of continuous education in the AEC sector cannot be overstated, as rapid advancements in technology and changes in regulations necessitate ongoing learning (Daryono et al., 2023). By facilitating access to educational resources, trade associations contribute to the professional growth of their members and the overall advancement of the industry.

Another significant aspect of trade associations is their role in fostering collaboration and networking among professionals in the AEC sector. These organizations create platforms for members to connect, share experiences, and collaborate on projects. Evers and Knight (2008) and Measson and Campbell-Hunt

(2015) indicated that trade shows and similar gatherings facilitate direct sales and serve as vital networking infrastructures that can lead to the establishment of partnerships, joint ventures, and opportunities for knowledge exchange necessary for innovation and competitiveness in the industry. The networking opportunities provided by these trade associations enhance collaborative environments, where best practices and lessons learned can be shared among members, ultimately benefiting the entire sector (Evers & Knight, 2008). Measson and Campbell-Hunt found that the emphasis on collaboration nurtured by these organizations serves as a catalyst for sharing insights and resources across the AEC industry, creating a more integrated and efficient operational landscape. In summary, trade associations play a critical role in enhancing collaboration and networking within the AEC sector, ultimately driving innovation and collective advancement.

Trade associations play a crucial role in research and development within the AEC industry. They often engage in, or fund research initiatives aimed at addressing industry challenges, improving construction methods, and advancing sustainable practices. By supporting research efforts, trade associations contribute to the continuous improvement of the industry and the adoption of innovative solutions. For instance, organizations within the AEC sector actively participate in studies exploring the implementation of BIM, which has been shown to enhance project efficiency and collaboration among stakeholders (Azhar, 2011; Kuruppu et al., 2019). The construction industry is pivotal in achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs), a responsibility that trade associations actively support through research and advocacy for

sustainable practices (Chaudhury et al., 2019). Such commitments to research initiatives not only address current challenges but also pave the way for the adoption of innovative solutions that advance the industry's overall performance and sustainability.

The scope of trade associations extends beyond national boundaries, as many organizations operate at an international level. This global perspective is essential in an increasingly interconnected world where construction projects often involve multinational teams and cross-border collaborations. International trade associations, such as the International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC), provide a platform for sharing knowledge and best practices across different countries and cultures. This global engagement enhances the ability of AEC professionals to navigate complex international projects and fosters a culture of collaboration and innovation. For instance, research has demonstrated that cross-national collaboration through international trade associations facilitates the sharing of technological advancements and methodologies, which leads to improved project outcomes in various countries (Trommer, 2017; Xue et al., 2022). Trade associations play a critical role in harmonizing standards and practices, which is crucial for addressing the diverse regulatory environments encountered in international projects (Evans & Farrell, 2022). By fostering a network of knowledge exchange and collaboration, trade associations contribute significantly to the global advancement of the AEC industry.

In summary, trade associations in the AEC industry serve as vital entities that promote standardization, advocacy, professional development, collaboration, and research. Their multifaceted roles contribute significantly to the advancement of the AEC

sector, ensuring that professionals are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in a dynamic and evolving industry. As the AEC landscape continues to change, the importance of trade associations will only grow, making them indispensable partners in shaping the future of construction and engineering practices.

Strategies for Enhancing Racial Diversity in the AEC Industry

The AEC industry has long been criticized for its lack of racial diversity. Manzoor et al. (2021) indicated that the AEC sector continues to face challenges regarding inclusivity and representation of racially diverse groups. Dai et al. (2021) highlighted the ongoing criticism of industries, including the AEC industry, continuing to have systemic inequities and failure to effectively implement diverse strategies. This persistent deficiency not only limits the creativity and innovation that diverse perspectives can bring but also perpetuates systemic inequalities within the profession. As the industry evolves, there is an increasing recognition of the need for strategies that enhance racial diversity. It is critical to consider current research on effective strategies for promoting diversity within the AEC sector, focusing on workforce pipeline development, mentorship and sponsorship programs, educational and training initiatives, policy implementation and compliance, and networking and collaboration opportunities.

Workforce Pipeline Development

Intentional workforce pipeline development is essential for enhancing racial diversity in the AEC industry. X. Zhang et al. (2021) highlighted that diverse teams are more innovative and effective at problem-solving, leading to improved project outcomes. Won et al. (2020) demonstrated that a diverse workforce leads to improved

creativity and problem-solving, which are critical for successful project outcomes. Won et al. advocated for the development of intentional workforce pipelines that focus on recruiting and retaining diverse talent, as this approach can significantly enhance the overall performance of construction projects. As recommended by Lara (2024), organization leaders should aim to actively recruit from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions, which often produce a significant number of graduates from underrepresented backgrounds. White et al. (2023) emphasized that by establishing partnerships with HBCUs and other minority serving institutions, AEC firms can develop internship and co-op programs that provide students with hands-on experience and exposure to the industry. This evidence underscores the importance of developing targeted programs that recruit, train, and retain underrepresented groups in the AEC field, fostering a more inclusive environment that not only promotes equity but also drives industry success. In summary, investing in intentional workforce pipeline development not only addresses racial disparities but also enhances the overall performance and innovation within the AEC industry.

Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs

Mentorship and sponsorship programs are vital strategies for enhancing racial diversity in the AEC industry. Youmans et al. (2020) found that employees who participated in mentorship programs reported increased job satisfaction and career advancement, particularly among underrepresented groups. Goulart et al. (2021) emphasized that sponsors facilitate important professional connections and enhance career opportunities for minority individuals, thereby playing a crucial role in decreasing

inequalities within their fields. Sponsorship significantly impacts the career trajectories of minority professionals, leading to greater representation in leadership roles. This data suggests that by implementing structured mentorship and sponsorship initiatives, companies can effectively support the professional development of diverse talent, promoting a more inclusive culture within the AEC sector. Ultimately, prioritizing these programs not only fosters diversity but also enhances organizational performance and innovation in the industry.

Educational and Training Initiatives

Education is a crucial area for enhancing racial diversity in the AEC industry. Isaac et al. (2023) highlighted the significance of tackling bias and discrimination within engineering education, pointing out that discriminatory speech and microaggressions create a hostile environment. This environment deters underrepresented groups from pursuing careers in engineering and architecture. Addressing these issues through educational reforms can promote inclusivity and diversity awareness among students. Casper et al. (2021) argued that incorporating diversity and inclusion content into the curriculum is crucial for preparing students for a multicultural professional environment. Cañet (2023) emphasized the significance of diversity in enhancing employee performance and recommended training strategies aimed at promoting intercultural awareness, ensuring equitable treatment, and fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their diverse perspectives. By integrating these approaches, educational institutions can better equip students for success in diverse teams. This preparation is vital for thriving in today's globalized industry. By focusing on these

reforms, the AEC industry can create a more welcoming and diverse environment for future professionals.

Policy Implementation and Compliance

Establishing and enforcing policies that foster diversity and inclusion is a vital strategy for improving racial diversity in the AEC industry. According to Amer et al. (2024), advocating for policies that promote diversity includes supporting legislation that encourages diversity in hiring practices and funding for programs aimed at increasing the representation of underrepresented groups in architecture and engineering. Organizations can collaborate with professional associations to develop standards and guidelines that promote diversity and inclusion within the industry. Casper et al. (2021) indicated that by establishing benchmarks for diversity, firm leaders can hold themselves accountable and track their progress over time. The establishment of awards and recognition programs for firms that demonstrate a commitment to diversity can incentivize organizations to prioritize inclusivity in their practices. BrckaLorenz et al. (2021) documented that such initiatives can raise awareness about the importance of diversity and encourage firms to adopt best practices in their hiring and retention strategies. Research related to policy implementation and compliances indicates that without strong policy frameworks and compliance mechanisms, efforts to diversify the workforce may be ineffective, as organizations may lack the accountability needed to drive real change (Nyangoma et al., 2022). Therefore, prioritizing policy implementation and compliance is essential for creating a sustainable path toward greater racial diversity

in the AEC industry, ultimately leading to a more equitable and innovative work environment.

Networking and Collaboration Opportunities

To enhance racial diversity in the AEC industry, it is essential to actively utilize networking and collaboration opportunities. Badawi and Abdullah (2021) found that fostering interdisciplinary collaboration can significantly improve innovation and creativity within the AEC sector, which has historically been characterized by a lack of diversity. Altamimi et al. (2024) indicated that collaborative environments that integrate diverse perspectives are shown to lead to more effective problem-solving and project outcomes, as diverse teams can draw on a broader range of experiences and ideas. Obi et al. (2022) argued that establishment of networks that connect underrepresented groups with industry leaders can facilitate mentorship and professional development, thereby increasing the representation of diverse individuals in leadership roles within the AEC industry. By prioritizing networking and collaboration, the AEC industry can create a more inclusive environment that not only enhances diversity but also drives innovation and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving market. Fostering environments where professionals connect and collaborate not only supports the advancement of underrepresented groups but also improves creativity and problem solving. Researchers have established that prioritizing networking and collaboration opportunities is critical for building a more diverse and effective workforce in the AEC sector.

Leadership Strategies in Enhancing Diversity

Leadership Styles and Diversity Management

Leadership styles significantly influence diversity management within organizations, shaping how effectively diverse teams can function and contribute to organizational goals. Research indicates that transformational leadership, characterized by its focus on inspiring and motivating team members, is particularly effective in fostering an inclusive workplace culture that enhances employees' affective commitment to diversity initiatives (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2013; Jin et al., 2017). Leaders who adopt inclusive leadership approaches not only promote diverse perspectives but also reinforce commitment to diversity management policies, thereby driving organizational performance (Hanif et al., 2023; Ng & Sears, 2018). This relationship between leadership styles and diversity management is supported by findings suggesting that leaders' behaviors and psychological traits play a crucial role in how diversity is perceived and valued within teams, impacting overall team dynamics and effectiveness (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013; Leroy et al., 2021; Sundar & Allen-Valley (2022); Vito & Sethi, 2020). Chua et al. (2023) indicated that the integration of diverse leadership styles and robust diversity management practices can lead to higher innovation and improved problem-solving abilities in organizations. Understanding the interplay between leadership and diversity management allows organizations to develop strategic initiatives that leverage diversity as a vital component for achieving competitive advantage (Loh et al., 2022; Vairavan & Zhang, 2020; Wu et al., 2021). In summary, effective leadership styles, particularly those aligned with transformational and inclusive

approaches, are essential in managing diversity successfully. Ultimately, prioritizing these leadership styles can empower organizations to fully harness the benefits of diversity, driving both innovation and success in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Role of Leaders in Creating Inclusive Organizational Culture

Leaders play a pivotal role in creating an inclusive organizational culture that fosters employee engagement and satisfaction. Bao et al. (2021) indicated that inclusive leadership significantly enhances employee work engagement, as leaders who actively promote inclusivity create a supportive environment that encourages participation and collaboration among diverse team members. For instance, Bao et al. found that leaders who engage in inclusive practices, such as mentoring and coaching, not only improve employee engagement but also cultivate a culture where all employees feel valued and empowered. This aligns with the findings of Gotsis and Grimani (2016), who emphasized that servant leadership practices can foster a sense of belonging and uniqueness among employees, thereby enhancing the overall climate for inclusion within organizations. By adopting such leadership styles, organizations can effectively leverage diversity to drive innovation and improve performance, ultimately leading to a more cohesive and productive workplace. Thus, the role of leaders in shaping an inclusive organizational culture is essential for maximizing the potential of all employees and achieving organizational success.

Strategic Planning for Diversity and Inclusion

Strategic planning for diversity and inclusion is an essential component in fostering an equitable organizational climate, ultimately leading to enhanced

productivity and innovation. Chimakati and Kelemba (2023) indicated that an explicit focus on diversity strategies within organizational frameworks can significantly improve workplace culture and performance outcomes. For example, effective diversity programs have been shown to contribute to problem-solving capabilities and encourage innovative thinking, thereby aligning with overall business strategies (Chimakati & Kelemba, 2023; Y. Li et al., 2019). A critical analysis reveals that leadership commitment, inclusive policies, and continuous employee engagement play pivotal roles in the successful implementation of these initiatives (Anggoro & Anjarini, 2024; Martins, 2020). Redd et al. (2020) demonstrated that the integration of diversity goals into strategic planning processes ensures that organizations remain accountable for their diversity efforts and can measure their effectiveness over time. Without a systematic approach to diversity and inclusion, organizations risk missing substantial benefits, such as increased employee satisfaction and improved reputation, which are crucial in today's competitive landscape (Delapenha et al., 2020; Purwoko, 2024). Thus, strategic planning for diversity and inclusion is not merely a compliance issue but a strategic imperative for organizations seeking sustainable success.

Measuring and Evaluating Diversity Initiatives

Measuring and evaluating diversity initiatives is crucial for organizations striving to foster inclusive environments and assess their impacts. A variety of methodologies exist, such as using specific indicators accumulated from program websites, to measure commitment to diversity and inclusion initiatives, which can illustrate the effectiveness of such efforts in a tangible manner (Cummings et al., 2024; He et al., 2023). Evidence

shows that the presence of dedicated webpages, commitment statements, and diversity initiatives can serve as valuable metrics for assessing program dedication to DEI, albeit these measures are often imperfect and qualitative (Vicioso et al., 2022; Wei et al., 2022). Quantitative indicators like workforce composition must be paired with qualitative assessments to fully understand the cultural shift that diversity initiatives should promote within institutions (Andreski et al., 2020; Ravenna et al., 2022). For instance, academic medical centers have begun to emphasize the necessity of aligning diversity metrics with organizational values and monitoring employee sentiments regarding these initiatives (Andreski et al., 2020; Anggoro & Anjarini, 2024). In summary, a comprehensive evaluation strategy that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data is essential to effectively gauge the performance of diversity initiatives within organizations, indicating a larger trend towards accountability and continuous improvement in fostering equitable environments (Cohen et al., 2022; Wheat et al., 2024).

Case Studies of Successful Diversity Leadership in AEC and Other Industries

In the AEC industry, successful diversity leadership is essential for driving innovation, improving project outcomes, and enhancing organizational culture. Research has highlighted various case studies exemplifying transformative leadership practices that prioritize diversity and inclusion. For instance, the study by Francis and Michielsens (2021) discussed the challenges and barriers faced by women in the AEC sector, emphasizing the importance of strategic programs aimed at increasing female participation in leadership roles, despite prevailing challenges such as discrimination

and high turnover rates among women. Similarly, Olutimehin et al. (2024) provided insights from case studies within the renewable energy sector, highlighting leadership initiatives that focus on workforce diversity and community engagement, which can also be applied in the AEC context.

Diversity-oriented leadership models have been linked to higher organizational resilience and adaptability, as demonstrated by M. Shafique et al. (2023), who suggested that organizations valuing diversity are better equipped to respond to external shocks and maintain competitive advantage. This is critical within the AEC industry, where project dynamics and market conditions are often volatile. The emphasis on inclusive leadership styles, although Jayavant's (2016) work centers on education rather than AEC, suggested that nurturing inclusive cultures can significantly impact employee engagement and innovation.

By contrasting these approaches with the leadership narratives from other industries, it becomes clear that while challenges persist within the AEC realm, the adoption of successful diversity leadership strategies can lead to meaningful organizational transformation and enhance overall performance. Ultimately, fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion within the AEC industry is not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for sustained growth and innovation.

Summary

Researchers can use these strategies together to create an inclusive workplace in the AEC sector. Gross-Gołacka et al. (2022) argued that organizations must actively measure and manage diversity within the workplace to foster an environment conducive

to inclusivity. Amer et al. (2024) indicated that leadership's commitment can be demonstrated through transparent hiring practices, equitable promotion pathways, and the establishment of diversity task forces with organizations. Activities towards creating workplace inclusivity can also include implementing policies that promote equal opportunities for advancement and creating mentorship programs that support underrepresented employees. A healthier and inclusive work culture can be cultivated through training programs that educate employees about the value of diversity and the impact of unconscious biases. By addressing these biases, organizations can create a more equitable workplace that encourages participation from all racial and ethnic groups.

Transition

In this Section, I reviewed professional and academic literature and discussed the application of the literature to the business problem. In Section 3, I include discussions on project ethics, the nature of the project, data collection and analysis activities, and reliability and validity. In Section 4, I discuss the findings and the implications for business practice, social change, and further research.

Section 3. Research Project Methodology

This Section outlines the research project methodology employed in this doctoral project, detailing the systematic approach taken to investigate the research questions. Ethical considerations and limitations of the project will be addressed, ensuring transparency and rigor in the research process (Dobrowolska et al., 2021). I introduce the intended population and sampling strategy, specifying the criteria for participant selection and the rationale behind these choices. A clear delineation of participant criteria is necessary to enhance the external validity of the research findings and to ensure that the sample is representative of the broader population (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2024). Following this, the data collection methods will be described, including tools and techniques employed to gather relevant information. The data analysis procedures are outlined, explaining how the collected data were analyzed to derive meaningful insights, which is crucial for maintaining the rigor and validity of the research (Corr et al., 2022). This comprehensive methodology aimed to provide a robust framework that supported the validity and reliability of the findings, reflecting current best practices in doctoral research (as described by Capello et al., 2023).

Project Ethics

A researcher plays a crucial role in the data collection process, particularly through semistructured interviews as the primary method. This qualitative approach is imperative for capturing the nuanced perspectives of association leaders and their members. Semistructured interviews have been highlighted as effective in contexts where understanding the deeper motivations and feelings of participants is essential,

such as in studies exploring sensitive topics like personal experiences (Oldfield & Stevenson, 2024; Otemah et al., 2023). The researcher must facilitate a conducive environment that encourages openness and trust, allowing participants to share their insights and experiences authentically. Such an environment not only respects participants' confidentiality but also adheres to ethical standards by ensuring that informed consent is obtained prior to interviews (Dahl et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2021). The semistructured format permits flexibility in questioning, which can lead to richer data, as it enables the researcher to formulate follow-up questions based on participant responses, thereby promoting deeper exploration of relevant themes such as diversity in workforce strategies (Brennan et al., 2022). The ethical obligations of the researcher extend beyond simply collecting data; they also include the responsibility to protect participants' confidentiality and to handle sensitive topics with care (Hertz et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2024). The ethical dimensions embedded in the researcher's role emphasize the importance of participant welfare, particularly in an exploratory project like this one that aims to uncover potential barriers to enhancing organizational performance through diversity initiatives. By prioritizing ethical considerations in the data collection process, the researcher not only enhances the validity of the findings but also contributes to a more responsible and reflective research practice within the AEC industry (Cheong et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2024). I used semistructured interviews as the primary data collection method in this project.

My career background includes previous work in the architectural, engineering, and construction sector for approximately 5 years; however, for over 2 decades and

currently, I am engaged in leading an association management company that collaborates with a diverse range of industry sectors. I had no prior relationships with the participants involved in this project, nor did I possess previous experience with the specific research topic. This distance from the industry and the participants ensures an objective perspective, allowing for a thorough and unbiased exploration of the subject matter in my doctoral project.

In the qualitative research landscape, ethical considerations are paramount, particularly regarding participant confidentiality, informed consent, and the integrity of the research process. My doctoral project, following the guidelines set forth by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), aimed to uphold these principles diligently. The ethical framework, as detailed in *The Belmont Report*, emphasizes respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, directing the necessary conduct in qualitative studies involving human subjects (Koen et al., 2024; Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024a; Taquette & Souza, 2022). *The Belmont Report* establishes principles and guidelines to address the ethical issues involved in research with human subjects (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979).

The informed consent process is a vital component of ethical research, ensuring that participants are fully aware of their rights, the nature of the project, potential risks, and benefits before agreeing to participate. This process involves providing clear and comprehensive information to participants, allowing them to make an informed decision about their involvement. During the consent process, participants are encouraged to ask

questions and seek clarification, reinforcing their autonomy and ensuring that their participation is voluntary and free from coercion (Hakami, 2022). Effective communication strategies and the use of multimedia resources have been shown to improve participants' understanding and engagement in the consent process, emphasizing the need for clarity and transparency in the information provided. Researchers should strive for a participatory dialogue that fosters trust and continuous engagement (Campbell et al., 2020; Pajuk, 2024). I utilized practices to ensure clarity and transparency with all participants. An informed consent form was presented to all participants.

One primary ethical concern I addressed in my project is the relationship dynamics between the researcher and participants. The ethical challenges inherent in qualitative research often stem from the dual role of the researcher, which can complicate interactions with participants (Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024b). To mitigate bias and enhance trust, I practiced reflexivity—documenting my assumptions and preconceptions throughout the research process, a method endorsed by various scholars in the field (Lang et al., 2022; Taquette & Souza, 2022). This approach allows researchers to remain cognizant of their influence on data collection and interpretation, thereby fostering a more accurate representation of participants' perspectives.

Member checking was employed to validate the findings by inviting participants to review my interpretations of their responses to the interview questions and provide feedback, ensuring their views and experiences are accurately represented in the project. This technique not only enhances the credibility of the research but also reinforces ethical standards by actively involving participants in the review of their contributions

(Gabbidon et al., 2022; Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024b). To preserve confidentiality, I labeled each participant as P1, P2, P3, etc. to serve as generic identifiers. It is important for researchers to implement steps that prevent deductive disclosure which could identify individuals through contextual clues in qualitative data (Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024b; Stewart-Withers & Greener, 2022). Such practices align with established ethical frameworks which prioritize confidentiality and the protection of participant identities (Muntaha & Qayum, 2023; Rana et al., 2023).

The informed consent process is structured meticulously to ensure that participants are fully aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the project at any time. Each participant received in the informed consent form detailed information about the research purpose, their involvement, and the measures in place to protect their confidentiality. I utilized the informed consent form to inform the participant that their involvement in the project was voluntary and that they had the right to decline or discontinue participation at any time without facing any penalties. The participant could withdraw from the project by emailing or calling me, or by expressing their desire to withdraw during the interview. By obtaining formal consent, I adhered to ethical guidelines that emphasize voluntary and informed participation. This is crucial in research studies as it provides participants with autonomy and transparency, as highlighted in literature discussing qualitative ethical practices (Muntaha & Qayum, 2023; Rana et al., 2023; Sandhu et al., 2022). Literature further emphasizes the need for quality assessments and participant considerations during the research process. (Sandhu et al., 2022; Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024b). Participants were informed that their data would

be handled confidentially and stored securely for 5 years, further solidifying the commitments made during the consent process.

Upon completing the research project, I will share a summary of the project findings with all participants, along with a $25 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their involvement. No additional incentives were provided to participants in this project.

Challenges related to participant access and geographical constraints of interviews necessitate clear communication strategies. Researchers should aim to foster a positive rapport with potential participants (Bawadi et al., 2023; Sandhu et al., 2022). I secured IRB approval (# 04-25-25-0244859) prior to outreach to participants and followed the guidelines established in the IRB process to ensure that I operated in compliance with ethical standards. The necessity of maintaining confidentiality and sensitivity is particularly relevant in this context, as qualitative inquiries often involve discussions of personal or sensitive topics (Gabbidon et al., 2022; Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024b).

In summary, my doctoral research adhered to rigorous ethical principles as delineated by *The Belmont Report* and relevant qualitative research literature. By implementing strategies such as member checking, reflexivity, and standardized data collection protocols, I minimized bias and enhanced the integrity of the research process. These steps were instrumental in ensuring that the project was carried out ethically, respecting participant confidentiality throughout.

Nature of the Project

In my research, I utilized a qualitative method to explore the phenomena of interest, deemed the most appropriate for exploring the intricacies involved in a specific context. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and insights, providing data that quantitative methods might overlook. This aligns with the views expressed by researchers who advocate for qualitative methodologies as suitable for uncovering complex, subjective themes that emerge from human contexts, particularly highlighted in the literature on qualitative research (Esparza et al., 2022). Such qualitative methods encourage the gathering of rich, detailed narratives that can address nuanced dimensions of the researched topic, thus effectively addressing the research question posed.

For this project, I adopted a pragmatic inquiry design, focusing on gathering data from association leaders in the architectural engineering and construction sector in the United States. Conducting interviews with selected respondents was crucial, as this methodology allows for the collection of detailed insights. Pragmatic inquiry emphasizes flexibility and responsiveness, allowing researchers to adapt their strategies to uncover meaningful data relevant to their specific research contexts (Cuffe et al., 2023). The qualitative pragmatic inquiry design was fitting for this research, as it facilitated an exploration of complex themes across various organizations while ensuring that the data collection was rooted in real-world issues. It also allowed for an iterative approach, where themes could emerge and evolve directly from the data gathered (Skamagki et al.,

2022). This adaptability is a hallmark of pragmatic inquiry, enabling a comprehensive understanding of a diverse array of issues within the field.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The target population for this qualitative pragmatic inquiry design was six trade association leaders within the AEC industry who have implemented successful strategies to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. Participants included females and males. I used LinkedIn connections to access various association leaders in the AEC sector. The aim of my research was to gain in-depth knowledge by conducting six interviews with chosen participants.

In the context of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, the sampling method I used was purposive sampling, a technique that allows researchers to select participants based on specific characteristics that align with the research objectives. W. Li et al. (2019) indicated that this method is particularly beneficial in studies where a targeted group is required to provide rich and in-depth insights. Given that the research aim is to explore the experiences of trade association leaders in the AEC industry regarding workforce diversity, the criteria for participant selection included individuals who have successfully implemented strategies to enhance organizational performance through diversity initiatives. By using this intentional method, I was able to gather nuanced perspectives critical for understanding the interplay between workforce diversity and organizational outcomes such as innovation and profitability (as described by Francis & Michielsens, 2021).

The sample size for this project consisted of six trade association leaders in the AEC sector. While qualitative research does not prescribe a set sample size, it is widely recognized that small samples can yield significant insights, as they allow for detailed exploration of participants' experiences (Shelbourn et al., 2017). Using a qualitative methodology, particularly within the professional context of the AEC industry, interviews serve as an essential tool for data collection. Dursun (2023) indicated that interacting with experienced leaders not only provides direct knowledge but also enables the researcher to capture the subtleties of their perceptions and the contextual factors influencing their strategies. Such depth of inquiry is particularly relevant, as the leaders' differing roles and experiences can lead to diverse insights, aligning with the industry's needs for robust strategies in advancing inclusion and diversity (Roberson et al., 2017).

Recruitment of participants was facilitated through LinkedIn, a crucial platform for professional networking. This approach underscores the importance of accessibility and connectivity in qualitative research, particularly when targeting industry leaders (Alade & Windapo, 2020). The use of existing professional networks aligns with the recommendations of Alade and Windapo (2020) emphasizing that the sample should be strategically audience-focused to ensure relevance and value. The sample aimed to include both male and female leaders. According to Francis and Michielsens (2021), reflecting gender diversity is vital, particularly in industries where women and underrepresented groups are seeking greater inclusion in leadership roles. By interviewing leaders across gender lines, the project aimed to capture a range of

strategies and insights that reflect broader industry trends impacting diversity and inclusion in the AEC framework.

I employed purposive sampling to selectively engage the association leaders, ensuring a collection of rich, in-depth data relevant to advancing workforce diversity. By leveraging professional connections and focusing on leaders' specific experiences, the project aimed to gather significant insights that contribute not only to academic understanding but also to practical applications in enhancing organizational performance through diversity initiatives.

To establish a productive working relationship with project participants, I implemented several strategies that prioritized trust and open communication. First, I ensured transparency by clearly explaining the purpose of the research, the interview process, and how their contributions will be utilized. This approach helped participants feel more comfortable and valued. Additionally, I actively listened to their perspectives and concerns, fostering an environment where they feel secure sharing their experiences. Building rapport was also essential. I engaged with participants prior to the interviews through their preferred method of communication and incorporated informal discussions, which helped alleviate any apprehensions they may have had. According to Lata (2020), the ability to create a safe and trusting environment is fundamental, as it allows participants to be seen as individuals rather than mere respondents. Lastly, maintaining confidentiality and respecting the participants' time and insights were paramount, as these aspects were crucial in strengthening our relationship and ensuring a meaningful exchange during the interviews. My commitment to these ethical standards

aligns with Dianiska et al. (2021) and Gidron et al. (2020), who emphasized that building rapport leads to higher quality data collection, as it encourages genuine and open dialogue.

Data Collection Activities

I acted as the principal instrument for data collection within the context of this project. Engaging in data collection affords the opportunity to acquire pertinent raw data that was instrumental in addressing the specified research problem and objectives (Rauwerdink et al., 2021; Yadon, 2022). Each participant was presented with a consistent set of semistructured interview questions to uphold a level of consistency across interviews as recommended in the research by Schrage et al. (2022) and Sumiyoshi et al. (2024). I adopted a semistructured interview format to gather data on critical strategies while allowing participants the freedom to express their perspectives. Brekelmans et al. (2024) and Skogstad (2024) recommend this approach for facilitating open and meaningful discussions. I employed semistructured interviews to create an informal setting that allows participants to articulate their thoughts without interruptions. Damschroder et al. (2022) and O'Connor et al. (2025) recommend this method for fostering engagement through follow-up inquiries, which enriches the qualitative data collected.

The semistructured interview format has a documented advantage for qualitative research, ensuring the acquisition of rich, contextualized data whilst maintaining certain guiding questions to enhance thematic exploration (Jensen-Marini et al., 2024; Tomczak et al., 2021). This method allows for a flexible interaction that can adapt to the flow of

conversation, yielding deeper insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, which has been echoed in similar studies (Jimenez et al., 2021; Messina et al., 2021). Using structured yet open-ended inquiries align well with interpretivist research paradigms, emphasizing the importance of context and subjective experience (Ingram et al., 2021; Watson-Mackie et al., 2022). Data collected in this manner allows for a nuanced analysis that accounts for the complexities of participant responses, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the subjects at hand (Gorączko et al., 2021; Sivertsen et al., 2021).

The interview protocol, which is included in the Appendix, guided the completion of data collection, ensuring that each interview was conducted systematically. This systematic approach is essential for obtaining reliable data and is supported by Hershkowitz et al. (2017) and Shoozan and Mohamad (2024), who emphasized the importance of structured protocols in gathering high-quality information during interviews. I utilized audio recordings to capture the interviews accurately, which facilitated thorough analysis and allowed for the richness of participant dialogue to be preserved. The use of audio recordings not only aids in accurate transcription but also ensures that nuances in conversation are not lost, as highlighted by M. Baker et al. (2021) in their research which emphasized the benefits of audio documentation in qualitative studies. Additionally, to enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection process, I performed member checking, allowing participants to verify my interpretations of their responses of their responses to the interview questions. As recommended by Price et al. (2016) and Shoozan and Mohamad, this approach strengthens the trustworthiness of the

findings and fosters a collaborative relationship with participants throughout the research process.

Interview Questions

I used semistructured interviews to collect data. The interview questions were as follows and the Interview Protocol in the Appendix also includes these questions:

1. What does workforce diversity mean to you, particularly in the context of the AEC industry?
2. Why is workforce diversity important for organizations within the AEC sector?
3. What key strategies has your association implemented to promote workforce diversity among your association's members?
4. Please provide examples of successful strategies that have enhanced organizational performance through workforce diversity.
5. How do you measure the impact of these diversity strategies on innovation, profitability, and employee morale within member organizations?
6. Have you encountered any challenges in measuring the outcomes of your diversity strategies? If so, how have you addressed them?
7. How do you think institutional factors (e.g., regulations, norms, etc.) affect the implementation of diversity strategies in the AEC industry?
8. How do you collaborate with member organizations to share best practices related to workforce diversity?

9. What role does your association play in providing support or resources to help members enhance their diversity efforts?
10. What else would you like to share about your experiences or perspectives on workforce diversity and its impact on organizational performance in the AEC industry?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

In this qualitative pragmatic inquiry, the organization and analysis of data were fundamental to ensuring that the findings reflect participants' experiences accurately. Data were collected through semistructured interviews, which are recognized for their ability to elicit rich, detailed insights from participants (Bloomer et al., 2023). Each session was audio-recorded with participant consent, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim. All raw data will be securely stored for 5 years. Maintaining field notes is crucial as it captures nonverbal cues and contextual details that may be significant for analysis (Baliton, 2023; Bloomer et al., 2023). Such practices are essential as they contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the participant narratives and the nuances of their experiences.

To facilitate a systematic analysis, transcriptions were produced using transcription software, ensuring that the data is accurately represented. Kambere et al. (2024) recommended this approach for enhancing the reliability of the transcribed information. Each transcript was securely stored and labeled systematically by participant ID, date, and data collection type. The data organization was enhanced through the use of Nvivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software, which helped in

managing transcripts and field notes effectively. Ramanadhan et al. (2021) aligned with this process, highlighting the benefits of using such systems for improved data management. Initial open coding was employed, where segments of text were described with codes that encapsulated the essence of participant responses. As recommended by Pihlström (2023), this coding process was iterative, allowing the researcher to refine codes as new insights developed through ongoing analysis.

The analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by the principles of pragmatism, as indicated by Emond et al. (2024) in their research, to ensure practical implications of findings. I deeply engaged with the data, repeatedly reading transcripts and taking notes on thoughts and impressions. This approach, as recommended by Ogola et al. (2021), facilitated a comprehensive immersion in the material. I generated initial codes inductively from the data to ensure they accurately reflect the narratives of participants without imposing my own preconceptions. Pene et al. (2025) supported this approach, emphasizing the importance of allowing the data to guide the coding process.

Codes were subsequently grouped into potential themes that highlighted significant patterns within the data. This clustering process involves identifying overarching themes that encapsulate the participants' experiences, ensuring they are conceptually distinct yet interconnected (Jacobs et al., 2021). I explored and revised themes in relation to both the coded extracts and the broader dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data and maintained clear boundaries. Velástegui (2024) aligned with this process, highlighting its necessity for validating the themes effectively.

Each theme was defined and articulated, outlining its specific contribution to the research question.

Finally, the derived themes were contextualized concerning the research question and existing literature in an effort to consider their broader implications. According to King (2022), a pragmatic approach allows researchers to derive themes from their data while exploring these themes in relation to various contextual factors, including their implications for practice and theory. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review the themes and interpretations, thus verifying they resonated with their experiences. Garrison (2022) highlighted the importance of engaging participants in the research process to ensure that themes and interpretations derived from the data accurately reflect their experiences. As recommended by Maisaroh et al. (2024), maintaining an audit trail documented the entire research process, covering aspects like data collection, coding decisions, and thematic development, thereby ensuring transparency and rigor in the qualitative inquiry.

Reliability and Validity

After reviewing the gathered data, I assessed the credibility of the research findings by confirming their reliability and validity. The key factors I explored to evaluate the project's reliability and validity included dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Reliability

Research reliability evaluates whether research methods produce consistent results under the same conditions. Ensuring reliability is paramount in research, as it impacts the validity of findings and their dissemination within the scientific community. To enhance reliability in my research, I employed an interview protocol, which is essential for maintaining consistency in data collection. This approach helped minimize variability in responses, thereby ensuring that the results were more repeatable across different participant groups and settings (Janis, 2022; Oduola et al., 2025). The Appendix shows the interview protocol that was given to and discussed with each participant in my project. I utilized open-ended questions to allow participants to provide comprehensive responses that captured the richness of their experiences, aligning with qualitative research protocols that advocate for triangulation to bolster reliability and validity in qualitative research (Janis, 2022; Oduola et al., 2025).

Dependability was assured through meticulous documentation of the research process, including details on data collection methods and analytical procedures. As indicated by Olaghere et al. (2023) and Singh et al. (2021), an audit trail will enable other researchers to replicate the project or at least follow the logical paths taken throughout the research, thereby validating the consistency of findings.

In addition, the use of NVivo 12 software for qualitative data analysis significantly contributed to the reliability of research outcomes. This software aids in systematically coding and analyzing qualitative data, thereby supporting the establishment of consistent patterns and themes across the dataset (Oduola et al., 2025).

The process of employing qualitative software can be likened to the rigorous demands for quality and consistency noted in studies of measurement properties, where ensuring fidelity to data analysis protocols is crucial for achieving dependable research results (Makabe et al., 2022). Thus, the combination of a semistructured approach to interviews and advanced data analysis software not only adheres to quality assurance standards but also enhances the reproducibility of the research findings, highlighting the importance of reliability in academic research (Oduola et al., 2025).

Validity

Validity in qualitative research, especially within a pragmatic inquiry framework, is a multifaceted concept that diverges significantly from traditional views held in quantitative studies. In qualitative research, the emphasis shifts to the guiding principles of credibility, transferability, and confirmability of findings, which are essential for establishing trustworthiness and rigor in the research process (Harriss et al., 2022). Each of these aspects must be meticulously evidenced and reinforced throughout the project process. As recommended by Manouchehri et al. (2022) and Singh et al. (2021), this project endeavors to ensure that its findings genuinely reflect the perspectives and experiences of participants while also maintaining relevance across broader contexts.

To ensure credibility, I deployed triangulation—a methodology that incorporates diverse data sources and perspectives, such as participant interviews and public documents. This methodological pluralism enriches the understanding of the examined phenomenon and mitigates biases inherent in single-method approaches (Park & Moon, 2024; Walker et al., 2024). The use of member checking provides an additional layer of

verification, allowing participants to give feedback on my interpretations of their responses to the interview questions, thus as recommended by Motulsky (2021), ensuring the participants viewpoints are accurately portrayed. The researcher's reflexivity is crucial throughout the study to systematically reflect on potential biases that may influence the interpretation of data; this practice is essential in promoting credibility in qualitative inquiries (Kazemi et al., 2024; Peddle, 2021).

To enhance transferability, I ensured the provision of rich, contextual descriptions concerning both research settings and participant demographics. According to Dado et al. (2023) and X. Zhang et al. (2023), this context enables readers to evaluate the applicability of findings within other settings. I applied purposive sampling to ensure diversity in participant experiences, which facilitated a broader understanding of the phenomenon studied. This approach is supported by evidence suggesting that diversity in sampling enhances the findings' relevance across various contexts, thereby reinforcing the validity and applicability of research outcomes (Mukti et al., 2022).

Confirmability was pursued through reflexive journaling, systematically documenting personal thoughts, feelings, and assumptions encountered during the research process. This practice is fundamental in mitigating bias and enhancing objectivity within research findings, fostering greater trust in the outcomes derived (Martin et al., 2023).

To ensure data saturation, I conducted interviews until no new themes or insights emerge from the participants' responses. This involved a systematic analysis of the data as it is collected, allowing for adjustments in sampling if necessary. Walden University

recommends collecting data from a minimum of six participants to achieve data saturation. I also engaged in iterative coding processes, continually refining categories and themes to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. According to Morgan and Nica (2020), employing an iterative thematic inquiry approach allows researchers to focus on themes from the outset and maintain attention on these themes throughout the research process, ensuring a robust analysis that echoes the participants' perspectives. Additionally, the iterative nature of thematic analysis promotes deep engagement with the data, allowing for the refinement of themes and insights that resonate with participants' experiences, though it is essential to remain vigilant about potential biases in interpretation, as highlighted by (Gale et al., 2019). For this, I utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which involved a detailed six-phase process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within qualitative data, thereby enhancing the rigor of the research. By focusing on the depth and richness of the data, I aimed to capture the full spectrum of perspectives related to workforce diversity in the AEC industry.

The validity of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project was upheld through a combination of strategies that enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and data saturation. By implementing these approaches as recommended by Romeu-Labayen et al. (2021) and Stanley and Robertson (2024), I aimed to contribute reliable and insightful findings to the field, enhancing the understanding of the research topic at hand.

Transition and Summary

In this project, I explored the effective strategies trade association leaders within the AEC industry use to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. I stated the problem, identified the purpose, and described the nature of the research project. I used the institutional theory and RBV theory as the conceptual framework basis for the project. I identified limitations, assumptions, and the significance of the project. I also reviewed professional and academic literature on which the topic is anchored. In Section 3, I included a discussion of the research methods and designs that were used in the project. In Section 4, I discuss the findings and implications for business practice, social change, and future research before concluding with a summary of the project.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry research project was to identify and explore successful strategies trade association leaders use to assist association members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale. Data were collected from six trade association leaders from the AEC sector who succeeded in assisting association company members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity. I identified six themes: institutional committees and dedicated roles, safe spaces and cohort-based engagement, workforce pipelines development and education, recognition and inclusive awards, data-driven diversity assessment, and language and cultural inclusion. Diversity can lead to enhanced workplace outcomes when effectively managed (Negi & Professor, 2023).

Institutional committees and dedicated roles emphasize the deliberate creation of structures that integrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice within trade associations. Safe spaces and cohort-based engagement encourage the creation of environments that allow all individuals to be heard, seen, and valued. Workforce pipelines development and education highlighted the committed efforts to create a diverse and sustainable pipeline by developing interest in the industry at younger ages. Recognition and inclusive awards demonstrated that recognition programs help to create awareness of the professional excellence that is often overlooked in traditional, professional validation. Data-driven diversity assessment indicated the importance of utilizing data collection and analysis to

evaluate the positive impact of diversity over time. Language and cultural inclusion demonstrated the need for association leaders to ensure that their messaging regarding diversity initiatives was structured to avoid being penalized in varied political and cultural environments while continuing to advocate for diversity and inclusion. Dhanani et al. (2024) emphasized that effective inclusion practices are pivotal for realizing the benefits of workforce diversity across various contexts.

Presentation of the Findings

The primary research question was "What successful strategies do trade association leaders use for assisting their members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale?" As the primary data source, I conducted six individual semistructured interviews with senior leaders from various trade associations within the AEC industry. To protect the identities of the research participants, I listed each association leader as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. Public documents from their association websites and social media pages were used to collect secondary data. The institutional theory and RBV theory were the conceptual framework for this project. I thematically analyzed the data in NVivo, resulting in the following six themes: institutional committees and dedicated roles, safe spaces and cohort-based engagement, workforce pipelines development and education, recognition and inclusive awards, data-driven diversity assessment, and language and cultural inclusion. From these themes, I identified strategies for association leaders to use for assisting their member companies in enhancing their organizations'

performance through workforce diversity. Table 1 includes the themes, number of participants identifying each theme, and occurrences of the themes.

Table 1

Frequency of Themes

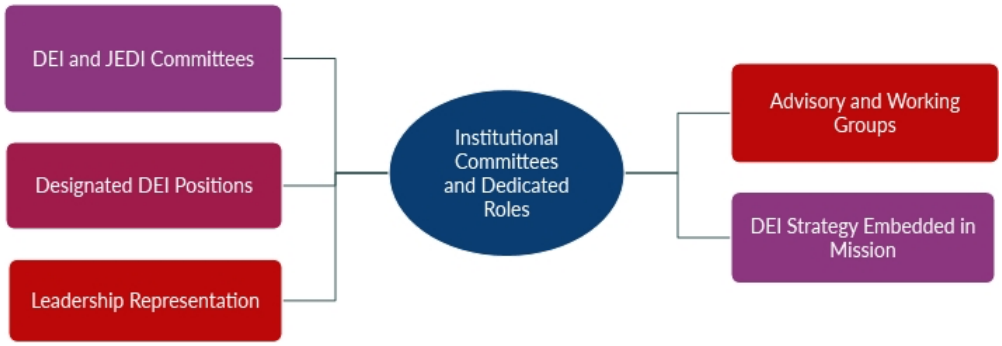
Themes	Number of participants identifying the theme	Number of occurrences
Institutional Committees and Dedicated Roles	6	18
Safe spaces and cohort-based engagement	5	15
Workforce pipelines development and education	6	21
Recognition and inclusive awards	4	10
Data-driven diversity assessment	5	14
Language and cultural inclusion	4	11

Theme 1: Institutional Committees and Dedicated Roles

The development of institutional committees and dedicated roles highlights the intentional structural integration of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) within trade associations. Participants emphasized that successful strategies for advancing workforce diversity require not only individual champions but institutional mechanisms such as formal committees, advisory councils, and executive roles that embed DEI values into the fabric of organizational decision-making. The presence of such structures demonstrates organizational commitment, facilitates accountability, and legitimizes diversity as a strategic priority rather than a symbolic gesture. Figure 1 demonstrates the subthemes of institutional committees and dedicated roles.

Figure 1

Theme 1: Institutional Committees and Dedicated Roles



Subtheme 1.1: DEI and DEIJ Committees

Participants emphasized that establishing formal DEI committees was a foundational move in institutionalizing diversity efforts. These committees often comprised underrepresented voices and were responsible for setting the tone for inclusive programming and cultural shifts. P1 stated, “We have that position where the person is focused on their job on diversifying the membership… that’s always been a goal of (our organization).” P1 also explained that “It’s not a DEI committee. It is called members of society... a committee of BIPOC professionals… They are strong. They write for the organization.” P4 reflected on programmatic evaluation tied to committee outcomes: “I have been working with Project Pipeline for nearly a decade… we’ve served more people, but we have to think if it’s actually changing outcomes.” These committees not only gave voice to historically excluded members but also served as agents of programmatic innovation and internal critique.

Subtheme 1.2: Designated DEI Positions

Organizations have increasingly established designated leadership roles focused on DEI strategies. These positions often report directly to senior leadership or functioned as standalone executive roles, ensuring DEI is prioritized across departments and initiatives. P1 stated in the introduction, “I am the Director of Accessibility and DEI strategy for our publications and standards.” P5 shared, “I joined the DEI Committee when it was just presenting its first round of data… it was quite an uphill battle to get to that stage.” P6 emphasized the importance of representation at higher levels: “You know, I think we need to get these individuals engaged as more than just members but get them in some leadership roles… give them a seat on our region boards, national boards.” These participant statements reveal that roles focused on DEI not only support internal transformation but also advocate for external visibility, influencing board decisions, strategic direction, and cultural messaging.

Subtheme 1.3: Leadership Representation

Beyond committee structures, participants expressed a pressing need for leadership that reflects the diversity they aim to achieve. Diverse leadership signals to members and partners that the organization walks the talk when it comes to inclusion. P5 asserted, “Electing more women to the board… more people of color… that’s how we get credibility.” P3 emphasized access by stating, “Our membership realizes they need to figure out how to get individuals in the door.” P6 added nuance around systemic barriers: “The only way to get to that level of being a board member is you’re part of a really big,

successful firm. The small guys get overlooked." Leadership diversity is not just symbolic it represents equitable access to power and influence.

Subtheme 1.4: Advisory and Working Groups

Smaller working groups and advisory boards were also leveraged to operationalize DEI goals. These entities provided feedback loops to organizational leadership and empowered peer-based learning. P2 noted, "We have structured small cohorts, and that creates these peer advisory groups where professionals learn and support each other." P5 added, "We've had different working groups to help collect data and analyze it… they play a role in keeping leadership informed and accountable." These efforts promote community, reflection, and iterative program development creating a culture where DEI is everyone's responsibility.

Subtheme 1.5: DEI Strategy Embedded in Mission

Some participants described DEI as inseparable from the organization's mission and daily function. This integration ensured that diversity goals were not add-ons but part of core operational standards. P4 described this evolution by stating, "We've steadily aimed at being a justice-aligned organization… that's the biggest change for me." P1 gave a practical example by stating, "The DEI strategy is embedded in our publication guidelines… who we feature, who we platform, all go through an equity lens now." Embedding DEI in mission and workflow shifts organizational behavior and nurtures a shared culture of responsibility.

Institutional committees and dedicated roles are foundational pillars in achieving sustainable, measurable progress in workforce diversity. By anchoring DEI work within

leadership structures, assigning responsibility to formal positions, and embedding inclusion into core organizational processes, trade associations are advancing strategies that go beyond performative gestures. These efforts foster a systemic transformation, ensuring that DEI is not dependent on individual initiative alone but is driven by consistent policy, leadership support, and collective accountability. Table 2 shows the institutional committees and dedicated roles subthemes, number of participants identifying the subthemes, and number of occurrences of the subtheme in the data collection.

Table 2

Frequency Table: Institutional Committees and Dedicated Roles

Subthemes	Number of participants identifying the subtheme	Number of quote occurrences
DEI and DEIJ Committees	3	4
Designated DEI Positions	3	4
Leadership Representation	3	3
Advisory and Working Groups	2	2
DEI Strategy Embedded in Mission	2	2

Alignment of Institutional Committees and Dedicated Roles with Conceptual Framework

Institutional committees and dedicated roles within trade associations are vital for promoting workforce diversity by establishing structured mechanisms that align with organizational norms and practices. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), the institutional theory posits that organizations operate within a framework of social norms and expectations. The establishment of dedicated diversity roles reflects a commitment to

these norms. By creating specific positions focused on diversity initiatives, organizations not only navigate institutional pressures but also enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders, as documented by Besser et al. (2023). When considering the RBV theory, dedicated roles can be seen as valuable organizational resources that enhance capabilities for innovation and performance, as they enable focused strategies that leverage diverse perspectives (Barney, 1991). Research by Rajwani et al. (2015) supported this view, illustrating that organizations with dedicated diversity committees are better positioned to implement effective strategies that foster a culture of inclusion, thereby enhancing overall organizational performance.

Alignment of Institutional Committees and Dedicated Roles with Existing Literature

The significance of institutional committees and dedicated roles in fostering workforce diversity is well-documented in the literature. Research indicates that organizations with specialized teams focused on diversity are better positioned to implement comprehensive strategies that address systemic barriers to inclusion. For example, Pasupuleti (2024) indicated that dedicated diversity officers can lead initiatives that enhance recruitment practices and foster inclusive workplace environments, ultimately contributing to improved employee morale and retention. The literature highlights that organizations with dedicated committees can establish accountability measures that promote transparency in diversity efforts, reinforcing a culture that values inclusion (Fasano et al., 2022; Gano-an, 2021). By prioritizing these roles, trade associations can create a robust framework for enhancing diversity within their member organizations, leading to greater organizational performance and innovation (Harris et al.,

2022).

Theme 2: Safe Spaces and Cohort-Based Engagement

The theme of safe spaces and cohort-based engagement centers around the intentional creation of safe, inclusive, and empowering spaces within trade associations. Such spaces foster trust, openness, and peer-led growth, especially for underrepresented groups in the AEC industry. These environments go beyond physical inclusion they are deeply emotional and relational, allowing participants to feel heard, seen, and valued. As described by participants, these safe spaces serve not only as support systems but also as platforms for critical reflection, identity affirmation, and systemic disruption. Figure 2 demonstrates the subthemes of safe spaces and cohort-based engagement.

Figure 2

Theme 2: Safe Spaces and Cohort-Based Engagement

Subtheme 2.1: Emotional and Mental Safety in DEI Contexts

Emotional and psychological safety emerged as a critical factor in supporting underrepresented individuals. Participants highlighted the importance of feeling mentally secure in DEI spaces, where their lived experiences are validated and not tokenized. These reflections signal that mental and emotional safety is an essential precondition for genuine participation and performance in diversity efforts. P3 stated, “I think one of the

issues that have come to me in enjoying the DEI work is safety. It plays in many ways: your mental health, your physical safety… I realize now all go hand in hand." P3 also shared, "If you're the only woman on the job, even going to the bathroom becomes a safety issue."

Subtheme 2.2: Community and Peer-Led Growth Spaces

These spaces prioritize shared growth and community-building, where hierarchy is flattened to encourage mutual learning. Such environments nurture vulnerability and allow diverse voices to co-create pathways toward inclusive leadership and support networks. P2 shared, "I think the more that there can be conversations and transparency around opportunities to engage in experiences like what we're creating… that can help remind leaders that this is equally, if not more, important than focusing on clients." P2 also shared, "It's about continuing to build a culture and reshape a culture over time."

Subtheme 2.3: Brave Spaces for Critical Dialogue

Beyond safe spaces, participants emphasized the need for "brave spaces" where difficult conversations around identity, oppression, and power dynamics could take place. These spaces confront discomfort as a necessary tool for transformation, particularly in the wake of national social justice movements. P4 noted, "Various uprisings over the last decade and a half were propellants… people needed a brave space." P4 also added, "We created space for people to be vulnerable… to sit in that discomfort together."

Subtheme 2.4: Supporting Underrepresented Groups

Participants described how safe peer-led groups offer long-term support, identity reinforcement, and access to organizational decision-making. These networks are not

only emotionally supportive but structurally influential in shaping organizational DEI strategy. P1 asserted, “We formed a strong committee of BIPOC professionals… they write for the organization and have been around for as long as I remember.” P6 shared, “They’re not just members; they have a seat at the table and shape where we go as an organization.”

Safe and cohort-based engagement is central to sustainable diversity work. These spaces offer more than inclusion they provide empowerment, belonging, and critical dialogue. Participants spoke of brave conversations, identity-affirming cohorts, and emotionally safe ecosystems that allow real transformation to occur. Safe spaces, when designed with intention and accountability, become incubators of inclusive leadership and strategic culture change. Table 3 is the Frequency Table for Theme 2: Safe Spaces and Cohort-Based Engagement, showing the number of participants who mentioned each subtheme and the number of supporting quote occurrences.

Table 3

Frequency Table: Safe Spaces and Cohort-Based Engagement

Subthemes	Number of participants identifying the theme	Number of occurrences
Emotional and Mental Safety in DEI Contexts	1	2
Community and Peer-Led Dialogue	1	2
Brave Spaces for Critical Dialogue	1	2
Supporting Underrepresented Groups through Peer Networks	2	2

Alignment of Safe Spaces and Cohort-Based Engagement with Conceptual Framework

Creating safe spaces and facilitating cohort-based engagement are essential

strategies for enhancing workforce diversity, resonating with institutional theory's emphasis on fostering environments that reflect societal expectations. These safe spaces allow for open dialogue around diversity issues, which can lead to more effective engagement among members, reinforcing, as indicated by DiMaggio and Powell (1991), the social norms that drive inclusivity. By institutionalizing these practices, organizations not only comply with external expectations but also cultivate an internal culture of inclusivity. In relation to the RBV theory, these safe spaces and cohort-based initiatives can be seen as unique organizational capabilities that enhance employee satisfaction and retention, ultimately leading to improved innovation and performance (Harris et al., 2022; Vairavan & Zhang, 2020). According to Dietz et al. (2023), organization leaders fostering such environments see enhanced collaboration and engagement, which are critical for driving organizational success.

Alignment of Safe Spaces and Cohort-Based Engagement with Existing Literature

The importance of safe spaces and cohort-based engagement is well-documented in the literature, illustrating how these practices contribute to a more inclusive workforce. Safe spaces allow individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and challenges without fear of judgment, which is in alignment with the research by Vairavan and Zhang (2020) that emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of belonging. Cohort-based programs have been shown to enhance peer support and mentorship, which are critical for the retention and advancement of underrepresented groups within organizations (Harris et al., 2022). The literature suggests that organizations fostering such environments see improved collaboration and engagement, which are essential for

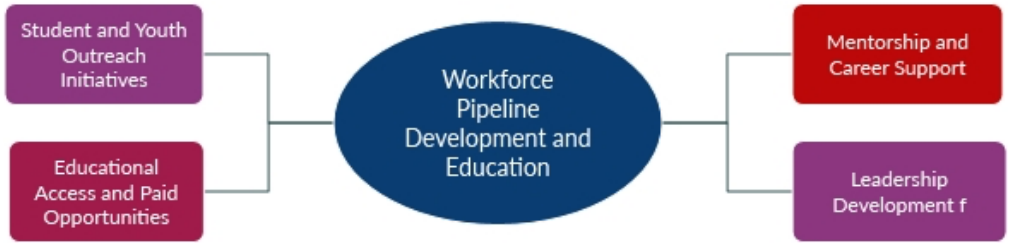
driving innovation and organizational success (Dietz et al., 2023). For instance, Smulowitz et al. (2018) indicated that organizations that implement inclusive engagement strategies experience higher levels of employee satisfaction and performance, demonstrating the positive impact of creating safe and supportive environments in the workplace.

Theme 3: Workforce Pipeline Development and Education

The theme of workforce pipeline development and education highlights the proactive, forward-thinking strategies adopted by trade association leaders to ensure a diverse and sustainable talent pipeline in the AEC industries. Recognizing that diversity must begin long before hiring, association leaders are cultivating interest in the AEC fields from an early age through outreach programs, mentorship, and inclusive educational opportunities. The focus is on reducing systemic barriers, promoting exposure to industry pathways, and ensuring long-term retention of diverse talent through financial, social, and institutional support. These efforts not only aim to correct historical exclusion but also to ensure that future leadership reflects the demographic richness of society. Figure 3 demonstrates the subthemes of workforce pipeline development and education.

Figure 3

Theme 3: Workforce Pipeline Development and Education



Subtheme 3.1: Student and Youth Outreach Initiatives

Associations actively invest in engaging young students especially from Black and Brown communities through structured design programs and school partnerships. These early interventions help familiarize students with career paths in AEC, while also offering exposure to design thinking, architecture, and engineering in practical settings. P4 shared, “We were also able to bring back Project Pipeline in 2021, and this time we did it in partnership with (another association’s) mentor program… it was a 5-week course focused on design education for Black and brown youth.” P5 stated, “We’ve tried the student outreach, and I don’t think we’ve seen the full benefit of that yet… I think that takes some time to see if people… follow that career path.”

Subtheme 3.2: Mentorship and Career Support

Mentorship is positioned as a long-term tool to sustain engagement and guide individuals from underrepresented backgrounds into and through the AEC industry. Participants emphasized sustained guidance from high school through professional licensure. P2 noted, “A significant part of our program now includes one-on-one mentorship. We pair young participants with experienced professionals especially those

who share similar backgrounds." P4 confirmed that "exposure at an early age is good, but sustained mentorship is better. We need to carry them from high school all the way through licensure."

Subtheme 3.3: Educational Access and Paid Opportunities

Participants recognized that economic disparity is a major barrier to workforce diversity. They aim to level the playing field by providing stipends, scholarships, and paid internships, which ensure participation by students who might otherwise be excluded. P1 shared, "We make sure all internships are paid only privileged kids can afford to work for free." P3 explained, "Scholarships and financial aid make the difference for many of the students we target. Without them, they're simply not in the room."

Subtheme 3.4: Leadership Development

Beyond entry-level support, leaders are focused on promoting from within and ensuring underrepresented individuals have clear paths to leadership. Internal leadership development programs are seen as crucial to creating lasting change in organizational representation. P2 stated, "We're starting to promote from within… people who came in through internships are now managing teams." P6 stated, "Leadership training programs have become a staple in our pipeline development strategy. We want to see more diverse people on our boards and in C-suite roles."

The theme of workforce pipeline development and education highlights the importance of proactive strategies in building a diverse workforce in the AEC industry. This theme also highlights how deeply associations are investing in the future of the AEC

industry by nurturing talent from underrepresented communities. Association leaders focus on engaging underrepresented youth through outreach, mentorship, and educational support, while addressing systemic barriers to career pathways. Financial aids like scholarships and paid internships ensure broader participation, and internal leadership development fosters future leaders that reflect community demographics. These efforts aim to create a sustainable talent pipeline that corrects historical exclusions and promotes a more inclusive AEC workforce. Below is the Frequency Table for Theme 3: Workforce Pipeline Development and Education. The table shows the number of participants who mentioned each subtheme and the number of supporting quote occurrences.

Table 4

Frequency Table: Workforce Pipeline Development and Education

Subthemes	Number of participants identifying the subtheme	Number of occurrences
Student and Youth Outreach Initiatives	2	2
Mentorship and Career Support	2	2
Educational Access and Paid Opportunities	2	2
Leadership Development	2	2

Alignment of Workforce Pipeline Development and Education with Conceptual Framework

Workforce pipeline development and education are crucial for promoting diversity and align with both the institutional and RBV theories. Institutional theory suggests that organizations must adapt to societal expectations by creating pathways that facilitate the entry of underrepresented groups into their workforce (Meyer, 2010). By proactively developing talent pipelines, organizations not only adhere to these norms but

also enhance their legitimacy within the industry. From the RBV perspective, investing in education and training programs equips organizations with the essential human capital necessary for fostering innovation and competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). White et al. (2023) emphasized that organizations prioritizing educational partnerships with minority-serving institutions can create robust talent pipelines that lead to greater representation in the workforce. This dual approach underscores how workforce pipeline development serves both as a response to institutional pressures and a strategic resource for enhancing organizational effectiveness (Alkhawaldeh, 2020; Won et al., 2020).

Alignment of Workforce Pipeline Development and Education with Existing Literature

The literature emphasized the critical role of workforce pipeline development and education in enhancing diversity within the AEC industry. White et al. (2023) revealed that organizations that prioritize educational partnerships with minority-serving institutions can create robust talent pipelines that lead to greater representation in the workforce. Targeted training programs aimed at skill development for diverse groups have been linked to improved organizational performance and employee engagement (Won et al., 2020). Research by Alkhawaldeh (2020) indicated that intentional workforce pipeline development not only addresses racial disparities but also fosters a more inclusive environment that drives industry success. By investing in these initiatives, organizations fulfill social responsibilities and enhance their overall effectiveness in a competitive landscape (Richard et al., 2015; Zijl et al., 2023).

Theme 4: Recognition and Inclusive Awards

Recognition and inclusive awards emerged as a central strategy to validate and elevate the contributions of historically marginalized individuals within the AEC industry. Participants underscored that recognition systems, whether internal or external, serve as both motivation and a corrective force to traditional bias in professional validation. These mechanisms serve to highlight the cultural, community, and social contributions often overlooked in traditional measures of success. Through revising award criteria, amplifying diverse voices, and showcasing culturally relevant achievements, organizations are fostering a more inclusive and aspirational environment for diverse professionals. Figure 4 outlines the subthemes of recognition and inclusive awards.

Figure 4

Theme 4: Recognition and Inclusive Awards

Subtheme 4.1: Inclusive Criteria for Awards and Recognition

Participants noted the need to reshape traditional recognition frameworks that often rely on outdated or exclusionary standards such as licensure or tenure. Instead, there is a push toward acknowledging the broader spectrum of contributions particularly

those related to equity, education, and public engagement. As an example, P4 shared, "Too often, awards are based on licensure, ignoring the invaluable work done by people in adjacent roles like advocacy, education, and outreach." P1 stated, "We changed our nomination guidelines to allow for teams or individuals who may not be licensed architects but are doing powerful, equity-focused work."

Subtheme 4.2: Celebrating Cultural and Community Contributions

Participants highlighted that meaningful recognition should extend to projects and individuals making an impact on cultural identity and social equity. Awards are increasingly being given to those whose work fosters inclusion in the built environment and enhances community life. P2 stated, "One of our honorees last year led a community design process that transformed a neglected neighborhood park into a vibrant gathering space." P6 shared, "When we think of success, we now include the social impact of the project, not just aesthetics or budget."

Subtheme 4.3: Visibility and Elevation of Role Models

The symbolic power of showcasing underrepresented leaders and innovators was repeatedly acknowledged by participants. Highlighting such figures not only increases visibility but reshapes expectations of what leadership and excellence look like in the AEC world. P3 said, "Our annual conference now includes a…segment where early-career BIPOC professionals are spotlighted and get to speak on stage." P2 stated, "Seeing someone who looks like you getting an award can change the whole trajectory of a student's mindset."

Subtheme 4.4: Internal Acknowledgement Systems

Not all recognition must be public or formal; internal acknowledgments like employee spotlights and social media appreciation posts were cited as impactful methods to make individuals feel valued and seen. P5 shared, “We do monthly features on diverse staff achievements it boosts morale and reminds everyone they are seen.” P6 indicated, “Our social media now includes a ‘Faces of the Future’ series. It’s small, but it’s powerful.”

The theme of recognition and inclusive awards demonstrates how strategic acknowledgment can influence cultural change within associations. By redefining what is celebrated moving from status-based achievements to impact-driven contributions, organizations are actively dismantling barriers and promoting equity. These efforts are not merely symbolic; they establish role models, enhance motivation among underrepresented groups, and embed values of justice and inclusion into the professional core identity of the AEC industry. From student spotlights to national awards, recognition becomes a tool of empowerment and systemic transformation. Below is the Frequency Table for Theme 4: Recognition and Inclusive Awards, showing the number of participants who mentioned each subtheme and the number of supporting quote occurrences.

Table 5

Frequency Table: Recognition and Inclusive Awards

Subthemes	Number of participants identifying the subtheme	Number of occurrences
Inclusive Criteria for Awards and	2	2

Recognition		
Celebrating Cultural and Community Contributions	2	2
Visibility and Elevation of Role Models	2	2
Internal Acknowledgement Systems	2	2

Alignment of Recognition and Inclusive Awards with Conceptual Framework

Recognition and inclusive awards play a vital role in promoting diversity by legitimizing diversity efforts within organizations. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977) in their explanation of the institutional theory, organizations can pursue legitimacy by adopting practices that align with societal values and norms. By implementing recognition programs that celebrate diversity-related achievements, organizations reinforce the importance of inclusion and motivate others to adopt similar practices, thereby enhancing their legitimacy (Fasano et al., 2022). From the RBV perspective, these recognition programs can be seen as strategic resources that not only enhance employee morale but also foster a culture of excellence that attracts diverse talent (Barney, 2001a). Research by Grimes (2023) demonstrated that organizations that prioritize recognition of diverse contributions experience improved performance outcomes, highlighting the intersection of institutional legitimacy and the strategic value of diversity initiatives.

Alignment of Recognition and Inclusive Awards with Existing Literature

Research indicates that recognition and inclusive awards significantly impact workforce diversity by highlighting best practices and successful initiatives. Grimes (2023) found organizations that implement recognition programs for diversity-related achievements create a culture that values inclusivity and encourages participation from

all members. Gibson et al. (2021) suggested that such recognition not only enhances employee morale but also serves as a benchmark for other organizations, promoting a broader movement toward diversity within the industry. For instance, studies show that organizations prioritizing recognition of diverse contributions experience improved performance outcomes, as employees feel validated and motivated to contribute to diversity initiatives (Fasano et al., 2022). This approach reinforces a positive cycle of engagement and innovation, ultimately benefiting the entire organization.

Theme 5: Data-driven Diversity Assessment

The theme of data-driven diversity assessment captures how organizations are transitioning from aspirational diversity rhetoric to quantifiable progress by embedding data collection and analysis into their DEI strategies. Participants emphasized that without metrics, equity efforts risk becoming performative or directionless. By leveraging demographic audits, feedback systems, and data transparency, associations can identify gaps, allocate resources meaningfully, and evaluate impact over time. These approaches signal a shift toward measurable accountability, making DEI a business imperative grounded in evidence rather than intention. Figure 5 demonstrates the subthemes of data-driven diversity assessment.

Figure 5

Theme 5: Data-Driven Diversity Assessment

Subtheme 5.1: Demographic Data Collection and Analysis

Leaders stressed the foundational need for collecting and analyzing data on race, gender, roles, and compensation. These insights help highlight disparities and serve as the baseline for strategic planning. P1 shared, "We asked, 'Who are we?' before we can even ask, 'Who's not here?' We did a full demographic audit across members and leadership." P4 stated, "We're using data to break down our staff demographics, not just by race or gender, but by role and pay level, too."

Subtheme 5.2: Using Data to Drive DEI Strategy

Rather than relying on broad DEI principles, participants reported using concrete data to inform policies, prioritize programming, and fill representation gaps in specific roles and departments. P5 said, "Our DEI strategy is not based on vibes; it's based on numbers. We know which groups are underrepresented, and we build programs accordingly." P6 reported, "After analyzing our workforce composition, we realized we had zero Latinx project managers… Now we're actively recruiting from Hispanic-serving institutions."

Subtheme 5.3: Transparency and Public Accountability

Participants discussed the value of transparency in fostering trust among stakeholders. Regular public reporting holds leadership accountable and reassures communities that the organization is serious about its commitments. P2 stated, “We publish our diversity report every year, even when the numbers aren’t great. That’s part of our commitment.” P3 emphasized, “There’s power in being honest about where you are. It holds you accountable to your community and your values.”

Subtheme 5.4: Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

Beyond numbers, qualitative feedback is crucial. Organizations are embedding surveys and engagement metrics into their DEI dashboards to capture how inclusive their culture feels to employees and members. P1 said, “We sent out an anonymous survey to ask how included people feel because diversity isn’t just about being present but about feeling valued.” P6 shared, “Our DEI dashboard now includes engagement scores and climate satisfaction by department.”

Data are the backbone of effective diversity strategy. As shown by participant insights, robust DEI efforts now begin with a clear understanding of who is represented, how they experience inclusion, and where interventions are most needed. Whether through audits, feedback loops, or dashboards, data provides the structure for intentional action, long-term accountability, and strategic alignment. The organizations leading this shift are not just tracking diversity they are transforming it into a measurable outcome tied to performance and equity goals. Below is the Frequency Table for Theme 5: Data-

Driven Diversity Assessment, showing the number of participants who mentioned each subtheme and the number of supporting quote occurrences.

Table 6

Frequency Table: Data-driven Diversity Assessment

Subthemes	Number of participants identifying the subtheme	Number of occurrences
Demographic Data Collection and Analysis	2	2
Using Data to Drive DEI Strategy	2	2
Transparency and Public Accountability	2	2
Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms	2	2

Alignment of Data-driven Diversity Assessment with Conceptual Framework

Data-driven diversity assessment is a critical strategy for organizations seeking to enhance workforce diversity through informed decision-making. This concept aligns with institutional theory, which emphasizes the importance of adhering to societal expectations through transparency and accountability in diversity initiatives (Meyer, 2010). By utilizing data to track diversity metrics, organizations can demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and respond to institutional pressures for accountability. From the RBV, data analytics represent a valuable organizational resource that allows firms to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement in their diversity initiatives (Barney, 1991). Nazer et al. (2023) and X. Zhang et al. (2023) indicated that organizations leveraging data analytics are better equipped to implement targeted interventions that enhance diversity and, consequently, overall performance. This dual lens illustrates how data-driven assessments not only fulfill institutional expectations but also contribute to the strategic capabilities that drive organizational success.

Alignment of Data-Driven Diversity Assessment with Existing Literature

The literature highlights the significance of data-driven diversity assessment in fostering accountability and transparency within organizations. Nazer et al. (2023) showed that organizations leveraging data analytics to track diversity metrics are better equipped to implement targeted interventions that address systemic barriers. This approach not only enables organizations to monitor progress effectively but also encourages a culture of continuous improvement. X. Zhang et al. (2023) also indicated that data-driven assessments facilitate informed discussions around diversity initiatives, empowering leaders to make evidence-based decisions that enhance organizational performance. Alkhawaldeh (2020) emphasized that organizations that utilize data to evaluate their diversity strategies often report higher levels of employee engagement and satisfaction, demonstrating the positive impact of accountability in diversity efforts.

Theme 6: Language and Cultural Inclusion

Language and cultural framing emerged as crucial strategies used by trade association leaders to ensure inclusivity, belonging, and continued progress toward diversity goals especially in politically polarized or culturally varied environments. Leaders recognized that language is not neutral; the words used in branding, messaging, and programming significantly impact how members perceive and engage with DEI efforts. This theme illustrates how leaders deliberately adapted their language to reflect community values, avoid backlash, and inspire participation across the association ecosystem. Figure 6 demonstrates the subthemes of language and cultural inclusion.

Figure 6

Theme 6: Language and Cultural Inclusion

Subtheme 6.1: Emphasis on Language Sensitivity

Participants described using inclusive and empathetic language in their communications. They were intentional about choosing words that would not alienate members and prioritized messaging that promotes belonging and avoids politically charged connotations. P6 said, "We are extremely thoughtful with language… because words can empower or exclude." P2 echoed P6 by stating, "We try to ensure every piece of communication, even newsletters, uses inclusive terminology." P5 stated, "Sometimes DEI gets politicized. We've learned to focus on impact rather than labels."

Subtheme 6.2: Respecting Cultural Contexts in Messaging

Leaders were mindful of regional and cultural diversity across their member base. They emphasized tailoring communication to reflect local values, ensuring their messaging would resonate with all audiences regardless of geography or demographic. P1 shared, "When we publish resources, we make sure the language resonates with different regional chapters." P3 stated, "Language is more than translation; it's interpretation and empathy."

Subtheme 6.3: Culturally Inclusive Terminology Shifts

Due to heightened scrutiny of DEI initiatives in some regions, associations adopted more community-oriented terminology. This strategic linguistic shift allowed them to continue advancing equity work without triggering political resistance. P4 shared, “We renamed our DEI committee to the ‘Community-Focused Committee’—same mission, less resistance.” P6 emphasized, “In some states, the term DEI raises red flags. So, we speak in terms of equity, leadership, and opportunity.” P2 stated, “We avoid words that are polarizing, but keep the intent strong cultural alignment helps us advance the work.”

Subtheme 6.4: Aligning Language with Organizational Values

Participants noted that aligning DEI language with core organizational goals like innovation, leadership, or business success helped increase buy-in from boards, funders, and leadership teams. P2 stated, “Our DEI messaging always ties back to our core mission: building better communities through inclusive design.” P5 said, “When we frame diversity in terms of innovation and excellence, we see better board engagement.”

Subtheme 6.5: Language Adaptation Due to Political Climate

Several leaders highlighted that in politically tense environments, language adaptation became a necessity. By rebranding or reframing their DEI initiatives, they maintained forward momentum without compromising their equity values. P4 said, “We frame the work as belonging, collaboration, or professional excellence. It opens doors where DEI might shut them.” P6 emphasized, “We have to adjust language to make sure our work is protected, especially when funding or support is at stake.”

Language and cultural inclusion strategies were vital tools for navigating the evolving socio-political landscape while preserving the integrity and momentum of DEI efforts. Trade association leaders demonstrated adaptability in shifting terminology, reframing initiatives, and customizing messaging to resonate with various audiences. Rather than abandoning DEI goals under pressure, they reimagined how to communicate those goals in ways that aligned with both organizational missions and the lived realities of their members. This theme underscores the essential role of strategic communication in cultivating inclusive cultures and sustaining systemic progress. Below is the frequency table for the sixth theme, Language and Cultural Inclusion, showing the number of participants who mentioned each subtheme and the number of supporting quote occurrences.

Table 7

Frequency Table: Language and Cultural Inclusion

Themes	Number of participants identifying the subtheme	Number of occurrences
Emphasis on Language Sensitivity	3	4
Respecting Cultural Contexts in Messaging	3	3
Culturally Inclusive Terminology Shifts	3	4
Aligning Language with Organizational Values	3	3
Language Adaptation Due to Political Climate	3	3

Alignment of Language and Cultural Inclusion with Conceptual Framework

Language and cultural inclusion are fundamental components of workforce diversity strategies that connect with the institutional and RBV theories. DiMaggio and

Powell (1991) posited with the institutional theory that organizations must align their practices with societal norms to gain legitimacy; fostering an environment that respects linguistic and cultural diversity is a key aspect of this alignment. By prioritizing language and cultural inclusion, organizations not only adhere to these societal expectations but also enhance their legitimacy among diverse stakeholders. From the RBV theory, this commitment to inclusivity is seen as leveraging unique organizational capabilities that drive innovation and performance, as diverse perspectives contribute to creative problem-solving (Barney, 2001a). Dietz et al. (2023) and Smith (2024) indicated that organizations that prioritize cultural competency training and language accessibility improve employee engagement and satisfaction, ultimately leading to enhanced organizational outcomes. This connection underscores the strategic importance of cultural and linguistic inclusivity in fostering an effective and innovative workforce.

Alignment of Language and Cultural Inclusion with Existing Literature

The literature underscores the importance of language and cultural inclusion in enhancing workforce diversity. Dietz et al. (2023) emphasized that organizations prioritizing cultural competency training and language accessibility are better equipped to engage diverse employees and clients. By creating an inclusive environment that values cultural differences, organizations not only improve employee satisfaction and retention but also enhance their ability to adapt to diverse market needs (Smith, 2024). Integrating language and cultural inclusivity into organizational practices fosters a sense of belonging among employees, which, according to Dietz et al. (2023) and Zallio and Clarkson (2021), is crucial for driving innovation and overall organizational success. This

commitment to inclusivity not only enriches the workplace culture but also positions organizations to leverage diverse perspectives as strategic assets that drive performance and competitiveness in an increasingly globalized market.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings from this doctoral project shed light on critical strategies that trade associations and their leaders can implement to enhance workforce diversity, thereby improving organizational performance, innovation, profitability, and employee morale. The research identified six key strategies: institutional committees and dedicated roles, safe spaces and cohort-based engagement, workforce pipeline development and education, recognition and inclusive awards, data-driven diversity assessment, and language and cultural inclusion. Each of these strategies plays a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive organizational culture that not only aligns with societal expectations but also drives competitive advantage.

Business leaders should establish institutional committees focused on diversity and inclusion, with dedicated roles assigned to encourage accountability and strategic focus. This structure not only aligns with best practices in the industry but also cultivates legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders. As demonstrated by the findings, organizations with dedicated diversity roles are more effective in implementing comprehensive strategies that enhance inclusivity.

Creating safe spaces for open dialogue and cohort-based engagement initiatives is essential. These environments promote a culture of trust and belonging, which is critical for retaining diverse talent. Leaders should invest in training programs that empower

employees to share their experiences and challenges, ultimately fostering a collaborative atmosphere that drives innovation.

Organization leaders must proactively develop workforce pipelines through partnerships with minority-serving educational institutions. Investing in educational initiatives not only addresses systemic barriers but also enhances the organization's talent pool. This approach aligns with the findings that highlight the importance of targeted recruitment strategies in building a diverse workforce capable of driving organizational success.

Implementing recognition programs that celebrate diversity-related achievements can significantly enhance organizational culture. Leaders should establish inclusive awards that acknowledge the contributions of diverse employees and teams. This practice fosters a sense of belonging and motivates others to engage in diversity initiatives, thereby creating a positive feedback loop that benefits the entire organization.

Organization leaders should adopt data-driven approaches to assess diversity metrics and outcomes actively. By leveraging analytics, leaders can identify gaps in their diversity initiatives and implement targeted strategies for improvement. The findings suggest that organizations that prioritize data-driven assessments experience higher levels of employee engagement and satisfaction, leading to improved organizational performance.

Prioritizing language and cultural inclusion is vital for enhancing employee engagement and adaptability in a diverse market. Leaders should invest in cultural competency training and ensure that organizational practices reflect linguistic diversity.

This commitment not only enriches the workplace culture but also positions organizations to leverage diverse perspectives as strategic assets.

To the research-scholar community, the findings of this project contribute significantly to the existing body of knowledge on diversity and inclusion in organizational contexts. The research underscores the importance of adopting evidence-based strategies that align with both institutional norms and competitive advantage principles. Scholars should continue to explore the interplay between institutional frameworks and resource-based perspectives to further elucidate the complexities surrounding workforce diversity.

The implications of this research extend beyond theoretical contributions; they offer actionable insights for practitioners seeking to implement effective diversity initiatives. Future studies should focus on longitudinal analyses of these strategies to assess their long-term impact on organizational performance and employee satisfaction. By bridging the gap between scholarly research and practical application, the academic community can play a pivotal role in shaping more inclusive and equitable organizational practices.

In summary, the identified strategies from this doctoral project provide a comprehensive framework for business and organization leaders aiming to enhance workforce diversity. By implementing these recommendations, organizations can foster an inclusive culture that not only meets societal expectations but also drives innovation, profitability, and overall employee morale. The findings and recommendations presented

here serve as a call to action for leaders to prioritize diversity as a strategic imperative in their organizational practices.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this project underscore the critical role that trade association leaders in the AEC industry play in fostering workforce diversity. By identifying and implementing effective strategies to encourage member companies to embrace diverse practices, these leaders can facilitate substantial improvements in organizational performance. Such enhancements yield benefits in terms of innovation, profitability, and employee morale and contribute to broader social change by promoting equitable opportunities for all individuals within the workforce. As Chapman et al. (2022) noted, diverse workforces not only improve creativity and innovation but also leads to significant improvements in organizational performance. This aligns with the conclusions drawn by Ding and Riccucci (2022), who emphasized that organizations with robust diversity management practices can expect enhanced performance outcomes due to the diverse perspectives and problem-solving abilities brought by varied workforce backgrounds. This research advocates for the inherent worth and dignity of diverse perspectives, which enrich organizational cultures and drive sustainable growth.

The implications for social change extend beyond the immediate benefits to individual organizations; they resonate throughout entire communities and society at large. As trade associations champion diversity, they set a precedent that encourages other organizations to reevaluate their own practices, thus fostering a culture of inclusivity. According to Leroy et al. (2021), organizations that cultivate a climate of

inclusion enhance team creativity and foster positive relationships that impact the social fabric of communities. Scott and Klein (2022) argued that organizations that prioritize diversity can help dismantle systemic bias and promote equality, thus advocating for a more just society. This ripple effect can lead to a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, reducing systemic barriers that have historically marginalized certain groups. By prioritizing diversity, trade associations can help dismantle stereotypes and biases that hinder social cohesion, fostering environments where collaboration and creativity thrive.

The research also highlights the importance of leadership in this transformative process. When trade association leaders actively promote diversity strategies, they not only influence their member organizations but also inspire future leaders within the industry to adopt similar values. As noted by Maj (2023), leaders that embrace diversity can lead to enhanced job satisfaction and organizational commitment among employees. This shift in leadership dynamics can empower individuals from underrepresented backgrounds, creating pathways for their advancement and involvement in decision-making processes. In line with this, Hanif et al. (2023) asserted that effective leadership in diversity management significantly influences employee performance and organizational effectiveness. Ultimately, by harnessing the power of diversity, trade associations can lead the way in transforming industry standards, thereby enriching communities and contributing to a more inclusive society that values the contributions of every individual. This commitment to social change not only uplifts marginalized voices but also catalyzes a broader movement towards social justice, equity, and sustainable

development, ensuring that the benefits of diversity are experienced on multiple levels within the fabric of society.

Recommendations for Further Research

In Section 1 of this project, I outlined possible research limitations. A common limitation in qualitative research studies often stems from the subjective nature inherent in this research paradigm; as Aspers and Corte argued (2019), the limitations of qualitative research are often tied to the variability of interpretations and representations inherent in the collection and analysis of data, presenting challenges in ensuring reliability and validity. The data collected could be impacted by participants' willingness to be transparent and honest, access to associations sharing data on websites and through other public domains, conflicts of interest, and the availability of time and resources. Data saturation was reached through participants' responses to semistructured interviews, follow-up questions, and information available to explore strategies for association leaders encouraging diversity in different industries. Building on the findings of this project, several recommendations for further research can enhance understanding and practice regarding workforce diversity strategies within trade associations.

Expanding Industry Focus

The current project concentrated on the AEC sector, which operates under specific federal, state, and local regulations. A recommendation is to investigate how trade association leaders in other industries (e.g., technology, healthcare, manufacturing, etc.) approach workforce diversity. Understanding the unique challenges and successes

across varied regulatory environments can provide a more comprehensive view of effective diversity strategies.

Quantitative Metrics

Future research should consider employing quantitative methods to capture specific metrics related to diversity strategies. For instance, a quantitative study could analyze the impact of implemented diversity initiatives on innovation, profitability, and employee morale. This data-driven approach could help organizations better assess the success of their diversity strategies and identify areas for improvement.

Longitudinal Studies

Conducting longitudinal studies that track the long-term effects of diversity initiatives will provide deeper insights into the sustainability and effectiveness of these strategies over time. Such research could reveal how initial diversity efforts evolve and adapt in response to changing organizational and societal dynamics.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis between organizations that actively implement diversity initiatives and those that do not could yield valuable insights into the tangible benefits of diversity. This could involve case studies or surveys that highlight differences in employee satisfaction, retention rates, and organizational performance metrics.

Intersectionality and Diversity

Further research could explore the intersectionality of diversity dimensions (e.g., race, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc.) and how these intersections impact

organizational culture and employee experiences. Understanding these dynamics could lead to more tailored and effective diversity strategies.

Implementation Barriers

Investigating the barriers trade associations face in implementing diversity strategies will be crucial for developing effective solutions. By addressing issues such as resistance to change, resource allocation, and systemic biases, future research can provide actionable insights for leaders seeking to foster a more inclusive environment. By implementing these recommendations, future research can significantly contribute to the understanding and effectiveness of workforce diversity initiatives within trade associations. This will not only enhance organizational performance but also promote social equity and inclusion across various sectors.

Conclusion

This doctoral project has illuminated the pivotal role that trade association leaders play in advancing racial diversity within the AEC industry. Through thorough qualitative analysis, six key strategies emerged: the establishment of institutional committees and dedicated roles, the fostering of safe spaces for engagement, the development of robust workforce pipelines, the implementation of inclusive recognition programs, the adoption of data-driven diversity assessments, and the emphasis on language and cultural inclusion. Each of these strategies not only addresses systemic barriers to diversity but also enhances organizational performance, innovation, and employee morale.

The findings underscore that effective diversity initiatives are not merely about compliance or superficial changes; they require intentional structural integration and a

commitment to creating environments where all voices are valued. By embedding diversity into the fabric of organizational culture, leaders not only fulfill their ethical obligations but also drive their organizations toward greater success. Byrd (2022) emphasized that organizations that embed diversity into their core values are positioned to enhance both employee morale and overall performance.

Moving forward, it is crucial for industry leaders to recognize that the journey toward inclusivity is ongoing and requires persistent effort and adaptation. The insights gained from this research offer a roadmap for trade associations and their members to cultivate a more equitable and diverse workforce, ultimately enriching not only the AEC industry but society as a whole.

In closing, I encourage associations and their member companies to embrace the transformative power of diversity as a fundamental driver of growth and innovation. By advocating for inclusive practices and fostering environments where everyone can thrive, the full potential of our industries and communities can be unlocked. Working together, a future can be built where diversity is not just a goal but a defining characteristic of our professional landscape.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Primary Business Research Phenomenon Under Study and Overarching Research Question

The topic for my research project is *Trade Association Leaders' Successful Strategies for Increasing Racial Diversity Within Their Respective Industries.* The overarching research question is *What successful strategies do trade association leaders use for assisting their members in enhancing their organizations' performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale?*

Primary Research Goal to Achieve from This Interview

The purpose of this interview is to explore strategies that were used to assist your member organizations in enhancing their organization's performance through workforce diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale.

Introduction

1. Thank you for participating in this project. Your participation in this educational project related to the strategies utilized to encourage diversity within the staff of association member companies is important. It will help better understand how to support other associations, which are indispensable to national economies, in implementing appropriate strategies to utilize diversity to increase innovation, profitability, and employee morale.
2. I will be interviewing you and several other association executives from the architectural, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry. So, I hope to have adequate information for this research project. Before we get into interview questions, I would like to go over just a few things with you.

3. First, you should know that your participation is totally voluntary. So, if I ask a question that you don't want to answer, or if you need to stop the interview at any time, just let me know.
4. Also, with your permission, I will be audiotaping the interview and taking some notes. Later, I will provide you with a transcript of the audiotape along with my notes so you can look at them, review them, and make any corrections that you see need to be made, making sure that we captured what you needed to say accurately.
5. This project may be shared with faculty members and colleague students and in sharing, there will be no mention of your names. Even if I use direct quotes, I will use pseudo names. It might also be used in conferences and professional meetings.
6. I will keep your shared information strictly confidential and safely stored for 5 years after my project's completion date and then destroy them.
7. Do you have any questions?
8. As you know, we have set about 60 - 90 minutes for this interview. Does that seem to be ok for you? We will not go beyond that time unless you wish to do so.
9. Is audiotaping still fine?
10. Ready to go?
11. Let's get started then!

Initial Probe Questions

1. Please state your name and title.
2. What is your current scope of responsibility within the organization?
3. How would you describe your tenure with the organization?

4. How would you describe the organizational experience of your company over the past several years?

Targeted Interview Questions

While asking these questions, I will watch for nonverbal cues, paraphrase as needed and follow up on responses with probing questions to obtain more depth.

1. What does workforce diversity mean to you, particularly in the context of the AEC industry?
2. Why is workforce diversity important for organizations within the AEC sector?
3. What key strategies has your association implemented to promote workforce diversity among your association's members?
4. Can you provide examples of successful strategies that have enhanced organizational performance through workforce diversity?
5. How do you measure the impact of these diversity strategies on innovation, profitability, and employee morale within member organizations?
6. Have you encountered any challenges in measuring the outcomes of your diversity strategies? If so, how have you addressed them?
7. How do you think institutional factors (e.g., regulations, norms, etc.) affect the implementation of diversity strategies in the AEC industry?
8. How do you collaborate with member organizations to share best practices related to workforce diversity?
9. What role does your association play in providing support or resources to help members enhance their diversity efforts?

10. What else would like to share about your experiences or perspectives on workforce diversity and its impact on organizational performance in the AEC industry?

Targeted Follow-up Questions

1. Can you identify specific factors that have contributed most significantly to the success of your diversity initiatives? Conversely, what challenges have you faced in implementing these strategies, and how have you addressed them?
2. How have the diversity strategies implemented within your member organization directly influenced innovation and profitability? Can you provide examples where diversity has led to measurable improvements in these areas?
3. In what ways have the diversity initiatives impacted employee morale and the overall sense of inclusion within the member organizations? Are there any specific programs or practices that have been particularly effective in fostering an inclusive environment?
4. Reflecting on your experiences, what lessons have you learned that could benefit other trade associations in their diversity efforts? Looking ahead, what future strategies do you plan to implement to further enhance diversity and inclusion within your industry?

Targeted Wrap-up Question

1. Is there anything else you feel can be important to this project?

Closing

1. Thank you very much for your time, The information you provided is valuable and will help me successfully complete my project.

2. I would like to schedule a follow-up interview with you to review and discuss the audiotape transcript and my notes to ensure I interpreted your responses accurately. Would xx date and xx time be okay for you?
3. I will provide you with the transcript and notes at least three days in advance to allow you sufficient time to review.
4. Again, thank you very much for participating in my research project.