How To Create An Inclusive Design Practice

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INTRODUCTION

A diverse and inclusive interior design industry will not only ensure that everyone working in it feels valued and included, but research [1] has also shown that diverse businesses are more financially successful. The interior design profession is made up of thousands of individual design practices and it is important that each practice has the resources and tools they need to create an inclusive and diverse workplace. Research by the Design Council shows that over 90% of interior design businesses are micro businesses [2]. This means they employ nine or fewer people. Unlike larger companies and corporations, it is likely that the vast majority of interior design practices in the UK do not have an in-house HR team to create the policies and procedures that underpin an inclusive workplace. Some practices may choose to invest in external advice from a company, or specialist diversity and inclusion consultant, to help them review their current policies and procedures and implement new working practices. However, we recognise that this may not be financially viable for some smaller practices. We have therefore created this guide as a starting point for some of the key elements that you should consider.

WHAT IS AN INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE?

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) defines an inclusive workplace as one that 'allows all people to thrive at work, regardless of their background, identity or circumstance'.

Certain elements of being an inclusive workplace are required by law. The Equality Act came into law in the UK in 2010 and applies to all UK employers. It specifies 9 'protected characteristics' which are:

- **Age**
- **Sex**
- **Race**
- **Disability**
- **Pregnancy**
- **Marital status**
- **Sexual orientation**
- **Gender reassignment**
- **Religious background**

Discrimination against employees or prospective employees on the basis of these protected characteristics is against the law. However, it is important to remember that creating an inclusive workplace goes beyond just complying with legislation.

It is important to consider unconscious bias when addressing discrimination within your practice. Unconscious bias (also referred to as implicit bias) is the name for the mental associations we have that are influenced by our life experiences, environment and culture. Although everyone has unconscious bias, we are not always aware of it or able to control it and it can lead to decisions and judgements which are unfair and discriminatory.

An example of unconscious bias cited by Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) is that of a male manager who thinks men work harder. When recruiting for a new position he appoints a man rather than the female applicant even though the recruitment process showed she was the better applicant.

Recruitment

RECRUITING:

1) CREATING THE JOB DESCRIPTION

When you have decided you want to recruit a new member to join your team, review the job description you have written with a critical eye. Does it include any terms that could be exclusionary? For example, if you describe your practice as 'A young, dynamic team' will older candidates be put off applying for the role out of concern that they will be discriminated against in the recruitment process?

Terms such as 'recent graduate' or 'highly experienced', can also discriminate in terms of age, says Acas. It notes that you must be able to prove you have a good reason for any job requirement.

You should also avoid requirements such as 'native English speaker'; use proficient in English, for example, as an alternative. Likewise, rather than using a phrase such as 'German interior designer', use instead 'German-speaking interior designer'.

In terms of what you are looking for in candidates, it is also worth questioning whether a particular qualification is essential. You could potentially exclude a highly competent candidate who does not have that particular qualification. Could you instead focus on the competencies that you are looking for in your prospective employee? This will mean a wider pool of candidates is able to apply.

It is also worth considering whether to include a statement on diversity and inclusion in the company description that accompanies the job description. This will send a clear message to anyone reading the job description that you are committed to equal opportunities for all applications and employees. An additional line to consider would be 'We are acutely aware of the differences that exist in society, so we will ensure that equal attention is given to all applicants, without bias to their socio-economic situation'.

2) ADVERTISING THE ROLE

Some design practices have relationships with a particular college or university, and when they are recruiting for a more junior role they may choose to just reach out to that college to ask them to shortlist some candidates, rather than publicly advertising the role. There are many understandable reasons why a design practice may choose to do this: they may have graduated from the college or university themselves so feel that they know the training is of good quality, they may have had previous bad experiences with the quality of applications they received when they publicly advertised the role in the past, or they may appreciate the time savings of having someone else present them with a shortlist rather than having to do that themselves.

However, a consequence of this approach is that many good candidates are excluded as the job is never advertised on a platform that they see. For this reason, we advise that the best way to ensure that you have an inclusive recruitment process is to advertise the role on a popular and accessible job noticeboard so the widest possible pool of applicants are able to apply. For design practices who are concerned about receiving 100s of applications when they recruit in this way, there are a number of solutions. Instead of asking for a CV, cover letter and portfolio, you could create an online application form using a software tool such as Microsoft Forms, Google Forms or SurveyMonkey. This method means you can ask the candidates to answer specific questions which can ensure that only candidates who are really invested in applying for the role will complete the process.

Consider what's known as name-blind recruitment, which means a candidate's sex and ethnicity is not revealed to avoid potential bias. In 2016 Paul Drechsler, president of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), described unconscious bias as a big challenge. He was reported in The Guardian as saying, 'The first time many come into contact with this in the workplace is during job applications. One of the ways of tackling this is name-blind applications, removing criteria that could unintentionally bias managers and give under-represented groups confidence that their application will be fairly considered.'

Further to that you may wish to also exclude details such as age, address and educational institutions. There are recruitment agencies and specialist software platforms that enable you to do name-blind recruitment for roles you are advertising.

3) INTERVIEWING CANDIDATES

It is important to create an assessment criteria that you will use to assess all of the candidates that you invite to interview. This ensures the process is as fair as possible and that every candidate will be judged by the same criteria.

Candidates can ask the employer for feedback following an interview, but an employer does not have to give this information (although it is a good idea), says Acas.

Bear in mind the following, however. According to Xpert HR, Job applicants have the right to see interview notes if the notes are either transferred to computer or form part of a "relevant filing system". The UK General Data Protection Regulation (retained from EU Regulation 2016/679 EU) (UK GDPR) gives job applicants and other data subjects the right to request copies of personal data that an employer holds about them. The UK GDPR covers personal data put on paper and held in a structured filing system, as well as computerised personal data. For a manual system to be covered, the data must be accessible according to specific criteria. There must be some sort of system to guide a searcher to where specific information about a named job applicant can be readily found. For example, a set of interview notes filed by name in alphabetical order, or chronologically, is likely to be covered by the UK GDPR.

Employers should therefore decide how interview notes will be stored. If they will be held on computer or form part of a relevant filing system, interviewers should be made aware that interviewees will have a right to request access to their interview notes.

'Keeping interview notes can help a business to protect itself from potential claims, such as for discrimination, but they should be destroyed when they are no longer needed.'

If at all possible, you should form an interview panel to assess candidates so that more than one person's opinion can be considered when deciding who you offer the job to.

When you are deciding who to offer the job to following interviews, it is important to interrogate assessments such as 'They are just not the right fit for our company'. Historically, this has sometimes been used by employers to exclude qualified candidates on the basis of ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or other characteristic.

Managing your team
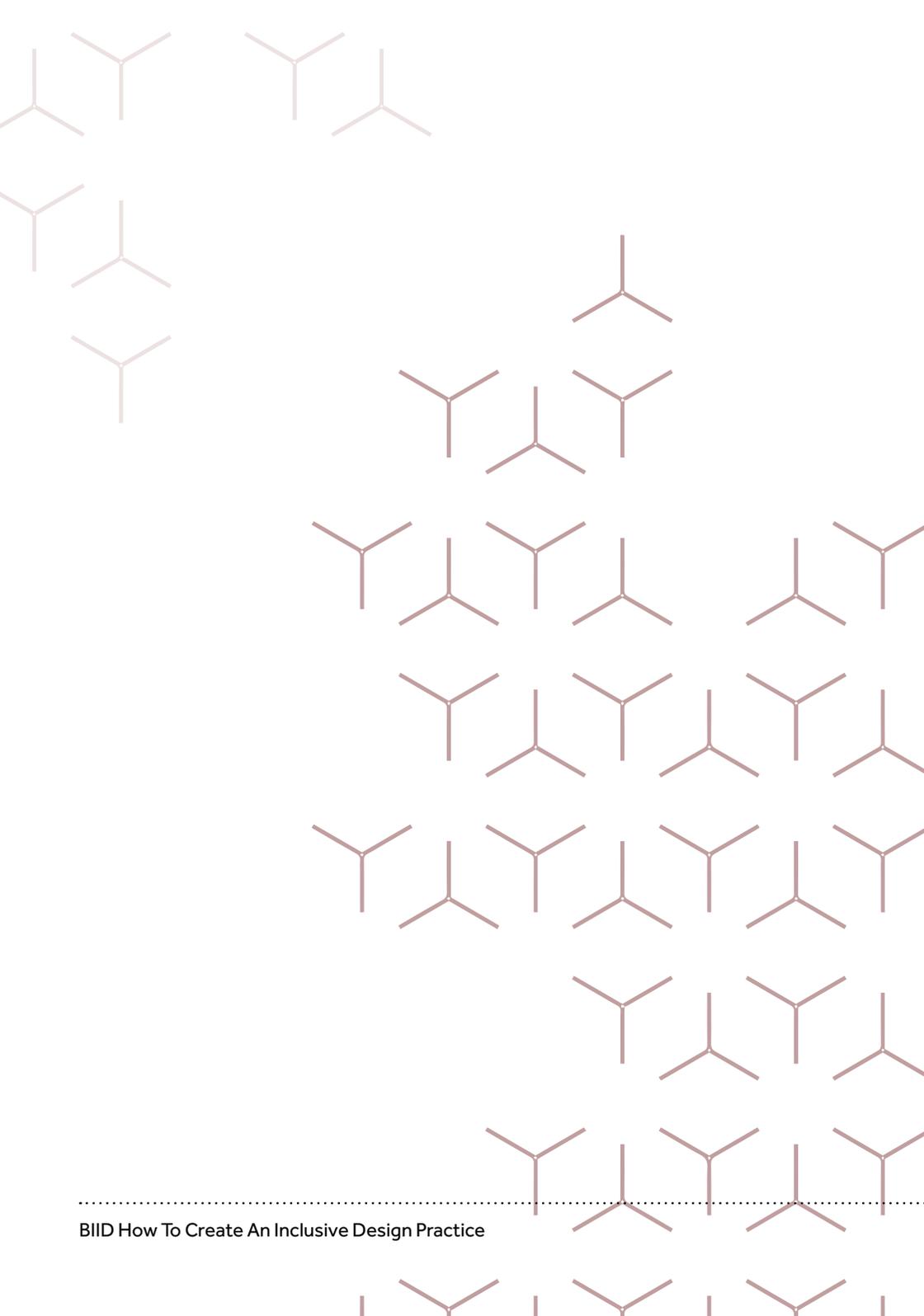
4) CREATING A SAFE AND HAPPY ENVIRONMENT

A key element of creating an inclusive design practice is to create a safe and happy working environment where all of your team members can thrive without fear of discrimination. Some suggested ways to do this are:

- **Ensure you have policies in place that explain what steps you will take if bullying or discrimination is reported.**
- **Provide regular anti-discrimination training to staff.**
- **Have regular one-to-one catch-ups between employees and their line managers to help build positive working relationships.**
- **Have an up-to-date equality policy.**

Acas offer futher recommendations in their equality, diversity and inclusion policy template.

Create an environment where every employee feels able to speak up and feels confident that they will be listened to. Enabling your employees to contribute their ideas, which may be informed by their own unique background or experiences, will help to make them feel valued and will help the practice.

5) CAREER PROGRESSION

It is not enough to implement inclusive recruitment and management practices. An inclusive workplace is also one where employees of all backgrounds and identities are able to progress and be promoted within the organisation. A lack of diversity in senior leadership is an issue common to many sectors. For example, The Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) CEOS in 2018 were more likely to be called Dave or Steve than be female [3].

Providing access to training and development opportunities is important, says the Equality and Human Rights Commission in 'An employer's guide to creating a diverse workplace'.

'Some staff may need particular provisions to be put in place before they can take advantage of the opportunities you offer,' the body notes. In order to ensure that staff are not inadvertently excluded from development opportunities you should undertake an equality review of these opportunities, and consult staff about their requirements.

Training courses are one way of building employees' skills, but the body notes there are other ways in which this can be done. 'For example by offering job shadowing opportunities in other departments or chances to take part in cross-project working in different areas.'

Specifically for small business, it suggests, 'Offer buddying or mentoring for new and junior staff. This can be a relatively low-cost practice, as senior or experienced staff offer advice and support to new or junior staff, helping them to feel welcome and more confident and encouraging them to contribute and progress within the firm.'
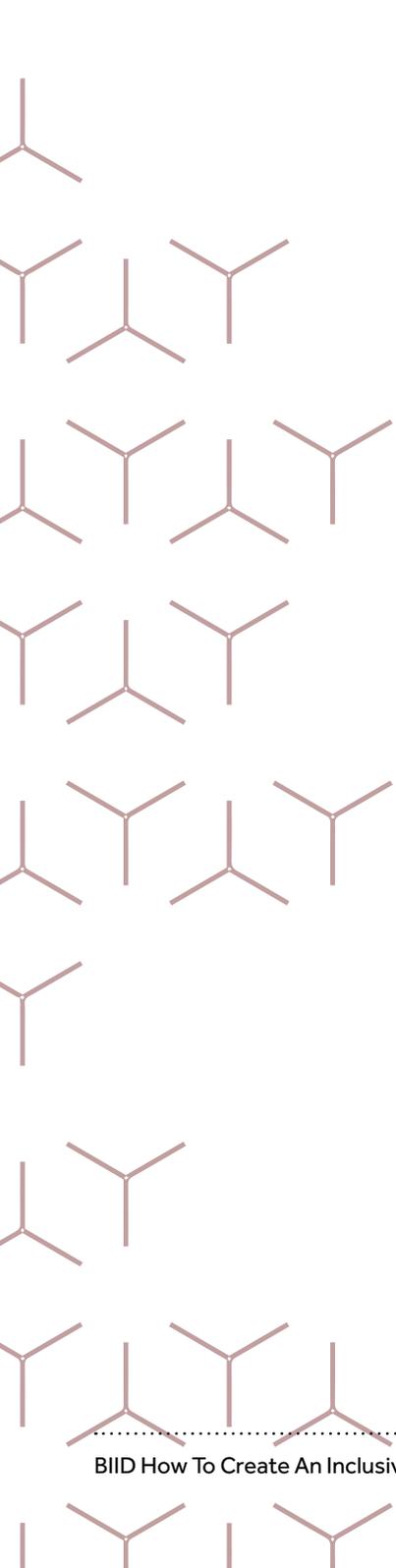
6) INTERNSHIPS AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Historically, in common with many other creative industries, the norm was for interior design internships to be unpaid. Over the past few years the situation has improved but unfortunately some practices still offer unpaid internships that can last for several months. Unpaid internships are exclusionary as they exclude anyone who cannot afford to work without pay. As internships can be an important stepping stone for recent interior design graduates to secure their first junior interior designer role, the continuing presence of unpaid internships means that not everyone has equal access to this important opportunity.

The government has stated that 'An intern's rights depend on their employment status. If an intern is classed as a worker, then they're normally due the national minimum wage.' A person is generally classified as a worker if they have a contract (which doesn't have to be a written one); they have to turn up for work even if they don't want to; and the employer has work for them to do as long as the arrangement lasts, among other criteria. Note that interns are classed as workers if they're promised a contract of future work. Employers cannot avoid paying the national minimum wage by stating it doesn't apply or having a written agreement saying someone is not a worker or is a volunteer.

The Wider World

7) YOUR PUBLIC PROFILE

Creating an inclusive design practice isn't just about managing your own team and your internal employment policies. Think about how your public profile – including your website, social media platforms, any publications you are featured in and any events you speak at – represent the values of your practice. If being an inclusive design practice is important to you, consider how you can reflect this in your public profile. For example adding staff profiles to your website can really help with visibility and representation.

8) YOUR SUPPLIERS, CONTRACTORS AND CLIENTS

In addition to your public profile, think about your relationships with current and potential suppliers, contractors and clients. This is an area where even the smallest design practices have a lot of influence.

The CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) suggests you could send suppliers a questionnaire about the diversity of their ownership and make your commitment to diversify your supply chain.

With data on the diversity of your supply chain you can then consider where to focus your efforts, it says, and commit, for example, to at least one diverse supplier on every request for proposal. Whatever the targets you set, you should measure progress.

To find diverse suppliers, the CIPD suggests, Advocacy organisations like MSDUK for ethnic minority owned businesses and We Connect International for women owned businesses are a great start, but of course not all diverse businesses are registered or certified by them. You can look out for directories such as the BAME Executive Coach Directory, or look at businesses that are nominated for or win awards, such as the Black British Business Awards or Asian Business Awards. Your local Chamber of Commerce will know its members well, and the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and Institute of Directors (IoD) have leads for diverse groups who you could ask for recommendations. You could search your network; every person in your network has an extended network that could include the diverse supplier that you are looking for.

Tracking Your Progress
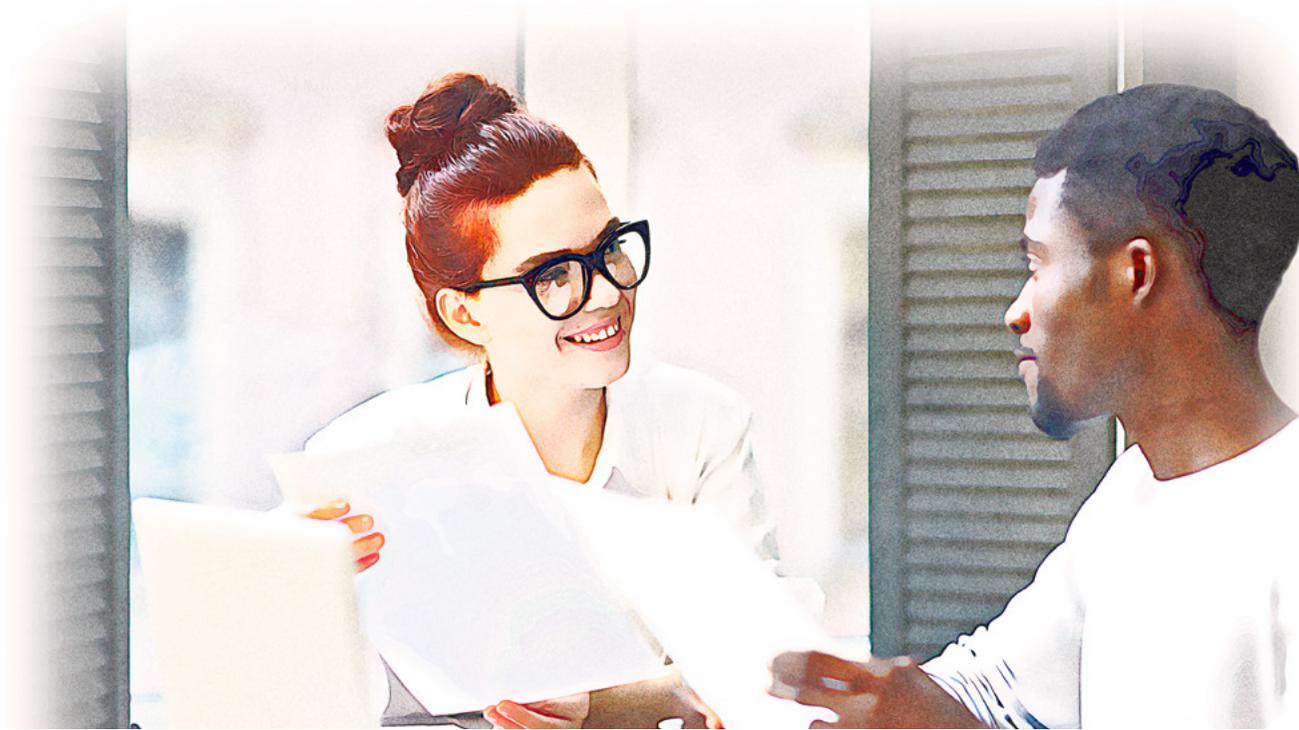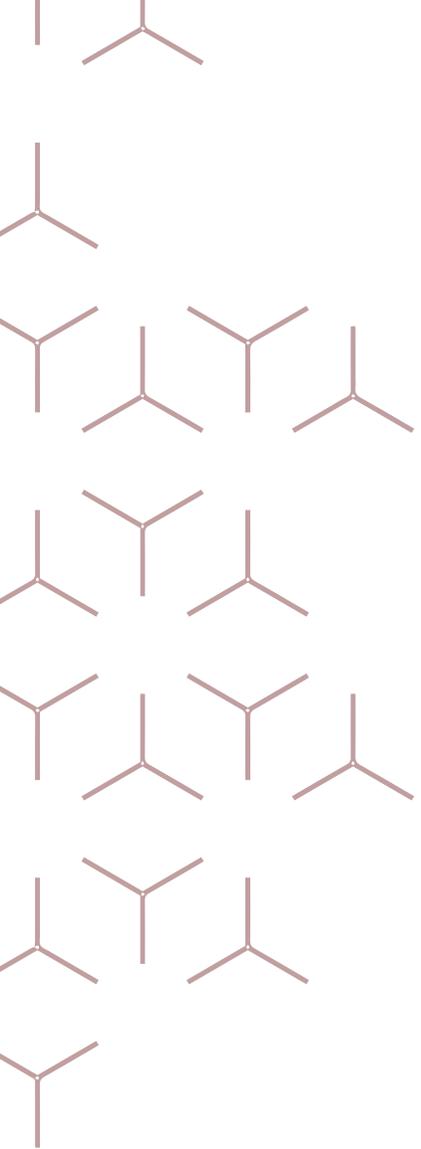
9) MEASURING IMPROVEMENT

In order to understand whether you are making progress towards becoming a more inclusive workplace, it is important to implement some kind of tracking system. Tracking progress on diversity and inclusion is becoming more common in the UK and for some companies mandatory – for example, since 2017 all employers with a headcount of 250 or more are now required to do gender pay gap reporting. As the interior design industry is dominated by microbusinesses, it is unlikely that most practices will be affected by any compulsory reporting. In addition, for microbusinesses with only a few employees, tracking the diversity of your employees year to year may not be the best measure of your progress on inclusion as it is not statistically significant.

However, you might want to follow the recommendation of Acas, which suggests using an anonymous and voluntary staff survey to check equality, diversity and inclusion in your workplace.

It suggests you could use this to find out how employees feel about a certain workplace policy; if you are recruiting and promoting people fairly; and if senior staff and managers are demonstrating the behaviours they expect of their staff.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission suggests, 'Look again at the demographic make-up of your organisation: has it become more diverse or representative of the local community? Consider information on the job applications you have received and the staff who have left: what does it tell you?'
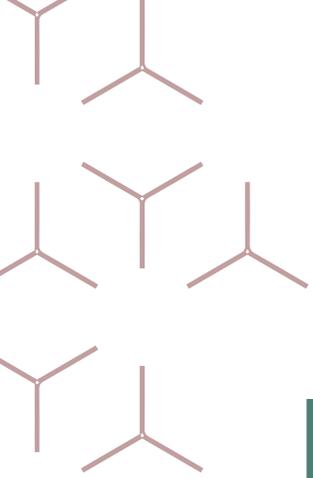
BENEFITS TO AN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Creating a diverse and inclusive design practice can help you to;

· Avoid missing out on new clients for whom diversity is a priority
· Recruit the best possible candidates

USEFUL RESOURCES

https://lattice.com/library/how-to-reduce-unconscious-bias-at-work
https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/beyond-microsoft/default.aspx

FOOTNOTES

(1) Research evidence to come e.g. https://hbr.org/2018/07/the-other-diversity-dividend

(2) P. 6 of The Design Economy 2018, published by the Design Council

(3) https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/women-ftse-100-gender-discrimination-pay-gap-board-representation-chief-executive-a8244361.html

British Institute of Interior Design

biid.org.uk