

BEYOND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT: A CONSTRUCTIVE PERSPECTIVE ON INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES

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Annotation. Drawing on the needs identified in academic discourse, this study aims to address the theoretical and methodological gaps by conceptualising inclusion in the workplace and examining fundamental organisational processes that facilitate the management of an inclusive workplace. Additionally, it evaluates the limitations of previous research models on inclusion and proposes a new model for an inclusive workplace. The authors used the grounded theory method to conduct interviews with a total of 14 respondents. The findings conceptualise the multifaceted nature of inclusion and unfold the process of managing an inclusive workplace in Pakistan. Furthermore, the findings led to the development of a model of inclusive workplaces, which aims to enhance inclusivity at the workplace and address the challenges associated with a diverse workforce. The current study enriches the theoretical understanding of inclusion by improving the concept's generalisability based on data, enhancing the theoretical knowledge of inclusion from a new perspective.

Keywords: diversity, equality, inclusion, inclusive workplace, leadership, grounded theory.

JEL classification: M00, M10, M12, M14.

Introduction

Different multilevel policies and strong legislative support have not been able to help organisations overcome the challenges of exclusion and inequalities (Russen *et al.*, 2023). Even more than 50 years after the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the U.S and many other developed countries have not been able to end discrimination in the workplace (Cheung *et al.*, 2016). In 2021, the EEOC in the USA reported a 13% increase in the complaints received about workplace discrimination (HHS, 2023). Recent social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Equal Pay Day give voice to this otherisation (Manoharan *et al.*, 2021). Racial discrimination against some groups is still relatively high in the US (Rice

et al., 2023), along with pay disparity (Crowder, 2023). Despite strict laws, gender discrimination continues in Japan, Germany, and many other countries (Bader *et al.*, 2022; Reichel *et al.*, 2022). The changing demographics of the world indicate an increase in a diverse workforce, emphasising the need to assess the strategies for inclusion (Shore *et al.*, 2018). Organisations in different countries are already implementing diversity management practices to ensure equal representation of different groups, but the exclusion continues to increase (Köllen, 2021; Mor-Barak, 2015; Shore *et al.*, 2018). Garg and Sangwan (2021) highlighted that creating an inclusive workplace is a real challenge, and anti-discrimination norms are blossoming areas of the near future for organisations to invest in an inclusive culture. Diversity management programs have contributed to organisational performance and individual outcomes (Leung *et al.*, 2023; Tran *et al.*, 2024), making the inclusive workplace is however still a greater challenge than maintaining the diversity of human resources (Garg, Sangwan, 2021; Shore *et al.*, 2018; Remeikienė, 2023). Organisations find it challenging to be diverse so as to create an environment in which everyone contributes to work using the best of their abilities (Sarkar, 2015).

1. The Theoretical Framework

1.1 Research Gaps in Inclusion Studies

Research scholars and practitioners have acknowledged the importance of making workplaces inclusive (Köllen, 2021; Saqib, Khan, 2022), but there is a debate on “How to manage inclusion” (Shore *et al.*, 2018). The research on inclusion has revealed significant theoretical and methodological gaps, posing various challenges for organisations in managing inclusive workplace environments. First, there is a lack of a robust theoretical framework and multilevel business theory for inclusion in the workplace (Garg, Sangwan, 2021; Russen *et al.*, 2023). The multilevel policies and strong legislative support have not been able to help organisations overcome the challenges of exclusion and inequalities (Russen *et al.*, 2023). Prior research has leveraged some theoretical support for inclusion in various theories (Shore *et al.*, 2011). However, the shortcomings of contemporary approaches have demanded new theoretical insights and development (Bernstein *et al.*, 2020).

Secondly, existing models on inclusion have enriched the literature on inclusion; some of the highly cited models did not fully describe the diversity, and some of them addressed specific attributes of diversity management. Researchers criticised Mor-Barak’s (2000) value-based model for its vague association with diversity (Pelled *et al.*, 2002; Shore *et al.*, 2018). It exhibits a negative correlation between gender, race, and inclusion dissimilarities (Pelled *et al.*, 2002). Shore *et al.* (2018) proposed a management framework that focuses on averting exclusion and fostering an inclusive environment through management practices. The model describes the significance of psychological safety, recognising diversity, involvement in workgroups, and participation in decision-making; however, it lacks measurable outcomes to check the effectiveness of organisational practices. As found in Swaroop (2021), measuring the effectiveness of inclusion is important for ascertaining the areas that organisations need to focus on. The proposed model also discusses confronting the ‘micro-discrimination’, which includes intentional or unintentional behavioural or environmental treatment that is perceived adversely by the employees (Anwar *et al.*, 2025; Shore *et al.*, 2018). Micro-discrimination is subjective based on individual perception (Skadegård, 2017); their model does not explain the behaviours and potential inconsistencies in addressing these challenges. Fujimoto and Uddin (2020) discussed Mor-Barak’s (2014) model and found that empowerment of the poor is missing in the available literature; they presented a poor-inclusive model for addressing social, economic, and psychological challenges of the poor in the workplace domain. Their model, although it discusses one of the aspects of diversity management, i.e., for the poor,

there are contextual challenges for the poor. They admitted that the workplace dynamics and inclusion strategies may change if the definition of poor changes (Fujimoto, Uddin, 2020). Pakistan is facing economic challenges and has a very low per capita income (Saddique *et al.*, 2024); an exploratory study seeking insights from the Pakistani context may improve the contextualisation of inclusion for people facing socio-economic challenges.

Thirdly, perception and context are important for promoting inclusion and limiting unintentional issues (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024). The variability of organisational goals and priorities in different cultures always influences the diversity and inclusion (D&I) programs (Saqib, Khan, 2022). Garg and Sangwan (2021)'s review revealed that Western contexts have conducted most inclusion studies, with a strong emphasis on gender, equality, and social justice. In contrast, Pakistan's culture is more homogeneous, predominantly shaped by Islamic values. Few studies have explored inclusion in this context, and researchers recommend further exploratory studies to enrich theoretical frameworks and provide more diverse perspectives (Garg, Sangwan, 2021; Saqib, Khan, 2022). Recent research has recommended exploring the concept of inclusion in a less-researched, non-Western context (Garg, Sangwan, 2021; Saqib, Khan, 2022).

Fourth, we argue that both survey research and review studies have fallen short in significantly advancing the conceptualisation of inclusion. In their review, Shore *et al.* (2018) provided the summarised details of studies on inclusion and found that the maximum number of studies used quantitative approaches to study the inclusion constructs. Garg and Sangwan (2021) found that empirical research, using quantitative analysis and reviewing previous literature, dominates the inclusion literature. Conceptualising a phenomenon or concept requires an investigation of both micro and macro aspects to elucidate the theoretical foundations comprehensively (Becker, 1983). Quantitative studies are not able to capture a series of activities and processes for decision-making (Heyler *et al.*, 2016). Quantitative surveys focus on causal relationships only, while qualitative research develops conceptualisations of processes using in-depth inquiry based on human experiences (Polit and Beck, 2010). We argue that both conceptualisation and contextualisation of inclusion are important. We contend that qualitative inquiry should explore both the conceptualisation and contextualisation of inclusion, as well as the understanding of management and workforce, given that quantitative studies frequently overlook the context and the 'why' behind responses.

Lastly, conceptualising inclusion is a challenge (Williams *et al.*, 2023). The challenges in conceptualising inclusion stem from a variety of sources: inconsistent definitions, the broadness of the term, cultural differences, and the tendency to focus either on the process or the outcome of inclusion (Shore *et al.*, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2023). Various studies distinguish their definitions of inclusion from the statistical concept of representativeness, prompting inquiries into the potential application of these terms in organisational configurations (Steinmetz, 2021). Nguyen *et al.* (2024) provided various definitions of inclusion based on the nature of jobs across different organisational levels; each definition is distinct. Cultural differences also play a significant role in shaping the concept of inclusion. In the European context, inclusion primarily focuses on gender equality, whereas in developing countries, the emphasis is more on gender participation (Saqib, Khan, 2022). Societal culture influences organisational norms, which in turn adopt inclusion processes that align with cultural values and societal pressures (Thomas *et al.*, 2024). The perspective of inclusion can differ depending on organisational goals and priorities, which vary across cultures (Saqib, Khan, 2022; Stadler-Heer, 2019). One common challenge in conceptualising inclusion is the tendency to focus on measuring outcomes. Diversity literature often overlooks measuring inclusion directly, instead emphasising practices that foster an environment perceived as inclusive by

different groups (Shore *et al.*, 2018). Different terminologies conceptualise inclusion in various ways, creating challenges in its definition and complicating the measurement of outcomes (Bertelli *et al.*, 2022).

1.2 Present Study and Research Questions

The broad and inconsistent definitions of inclusion and cultural and contextual variances have made it difficult for scholars and practitioners to reach a consistent understanding of the concept. This has also limited the development of effective strategies for promoting inclusion and managing diverse workplaces. We address these gaps by exploring the multifaceted nature of inclusion and developing a cohesive understanding of the concept. We propose that employees significantly vary in their perception of inclusion, based on the premise that individuals perceive inclusion uniquely and manifest it differently across organisational levels. To substantiate this proposition, the study seeks to answer the following research questions in the conceptualisation phase:

Q1: *How do employees conceptualise and define inclusion?*

Q2: *Does the experience of inclusion differ among various segments and groups within the organisation?*

Perspective is also crucial in shaping our understanding (Imms *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, inclusion practices adapt to the priorities and objectives of organisations within varying cultural contexts (Saqib and Khan, 2022). Much of the existing research on inclusion originates in Western contexts (Bozani *et al.*, 2020; Köllen, 2021; Shore *et al.*, 2018), where robust policies and regulations across multiple levels have facilitated the implementation of inclusive practices (Bozani *et al.*, 2020; Cavicchi *et al.*, 2022). Clucas (2003) posits that a coherent theoretical framework is essential for understanding inclusion comprehensively, an area where legislation alone cannot suffice. Scholars have also emphasised the value of integrating diverse contexts and perspectives to cultivate a more holistic view of inclusion (Farndale *et al.*, 2015; Roberson, 2006). Recent studies have encouraged the examination of inclusion from underexplored perspectives (Garg, Sangwan, 2021; Saqib, Khan, 2022). Based on this premise, this study also undertakes to investigate policies, challenges, and strategies in fostering workplace inclusion within a local context, guiding us to the following research questions:

Q3. *What strategies do organisations in Pakistan employ to foster inclusive workplace practices?*

Q4. *What challenges do organisations in Pakistan encounter in establishing inclusive workplaces?*

Q5. *How do organisations in Pakistan address these challenges?*

As revealed in the recent reviews (Garg, Sangwan, 2021; Shore *et al.*, 2018), the inclusion literature is overly reliant on review-based studies and survey research. Although these approaches have contributed valuable insights, they have not significantly advanced the theoretical or practical understanding of inclusion. Therefore, this study aims to explore both the conceptualisation and contextualisation of inclusion in the workplace. Using a grounded theory approach, this study proposes a model that provides actionable strategies to manage inclusive workplaces in organisational contexts. The present study seeks to address the research gaps identified in the current understanding using qualitative inquiry.

2. Methods

This study used the grounded theory approach to gain a deeper understanding of workplace inclusion in an under-researched context, thereby contributing to theoretical development. The Constructivist approach of Grounded Theory offers researchers a fresh perspective by acknowledging participants'

presumptions and guiding the researcher's assertions based on the data (Charmaz, 2017). We conducted a two-step analysis to elucidate the concept of inclusion and explore the process of managing an inclusive workplace in the under-researched context.

In the first step, we used concept-driven coding by coding specific questions that addressed our research questions. Concept-driven coding in qualitative inquiry refers to the coding process and developing categories derived explicitly from your research questions or interview guide (Kuckartz, 2019). The second-step analysis is performed using data-driven coding, which helps researchers develop broader categories using step-by-step coding on all data (Kuckartz, 2019). The aim of identifying broader themes across the data is to develop a model for managing inclusive workplaces.

2.1 Population and Sample

We conducted in-depth interviews with participants from leading commercial banks in Pakistan using purposive and theoretical sampling. We selected the population based on Saunders's *et al.* (2007) guidance on selecting a population with a specific brand. The banking sector is the first sector in Pakistan that is officially following government guidelines to manage diversity through a centralised "Banking on Equality" policy (SBP, 2021). We conducted interviews with HR and diversity heads from commercial banks. We used the data saturation approach, as suggested by various studies (Charmaz, 2014; Mason, 2010) to determine the minimum sample size. *Table 1* illustrates the details of the selected sample.

Table 1. Primary Participant's Details

Interviewee Code	Organisation Code	Means	Level in the Organisation	Gender (of the Interviewees)	Core Functional Area
P1	Org1	Face-to-face	Group Head	Female	HR
P2	Org2	Face-to-face	Vice President	Male	D&I Unit
P3	Org3	Face-to-face	Deputy Director	Male	DEI Unit
P4	Org4	Face-to-face	Assistant Vice President	Male	HR, Diversity
P5	Org5	Face-to-face	Vice President	Male	DEI Unit
P6	Org6	Phone	Chairman	Male	D&E Council
P7	Org7	Zoom	Senior Manager	Female	HR
P8	Org8	Face-to-face	Deputy Head	Female	DEI Cell
P9	Org9	Face-to-face	Vice President	Male	HR
P10	Org10	Phone	Senior Manager	Male	HR
P11	Org11	Phone	Senior Vice President	Female	People Management
P12	Org12	Face-to-face	Vice President	Male	HR
P13	Org13	Face-to-face	Senior Manager	Female	DEI Unit
P14	Org14	Face-to-face	Vice President	Female	D&I Unit

Source: created by the authors.

Wells and Baldwin (2012) prioritise a broad understanding over generalisation in the qualitative study, while Leung (2015) suggests using the data triangulation technique for generalising the results. For validation and generalisation purposes, this study used data triangulation. We conducted a total of fourteen semi-structured interviews with primary participants to develop a broader understanding of the underlying phenomena, and we conducted seven secondary interviews with the lower tier to validate the primary response for data triangulation purposes.

Table 2. Coding Similarity in Data Triangulation

Research Question	Similarity in Codes from Interviews	
	Primary Participants	Secondary Participants
Definitions of Inclusion	Welcoming, valued, needs, preference, desire, support, opinion, perspective, views, ownership, respect, differences, recognition, fair opportunity, commitment, acceptance, equality, concerns	Valued, requirements, choice, perspective, views, respect, recognising employees, equal treatment, commitment, supporting needs, accepting people, addressing concerns
Nature of Inclusion	Actions, experiences, phenomenon, perception, participation, process, behaviors, collaboration, practice.	Actions, lived experiences, phenomenon, cooperation, attitude and behaviors, perceived facts, practice, work behaviour.
Inclusive Strategies and Practices	Monetary benefits, non-monetary, development, engagement, career, growth, work environment, assistance, scholarships, childcare, bonuses, infrastructure, support, facilities, focus, information sharing	Financial support, employee development, career planning, culture, scholarships, child allowance, infrastructure, facilities, ex-gratia, effective communication, peer support.
Issues and Challenges	Jealousy, mindset, biases, insecurity, fear, discrimination, exclusion, job-nature, working hours, acceptance, gender-based issues, infrastructure, masculinity	Jealousy, man-dominancy, fear of losing jobs, nature of work, late-sitting, acceptability, infrastructure, attitude, favoritism, unfair treatment.
Addressing Challenges	Training, development, sensitivity, leadership, restart, motivation, commitment, management support, empowerment, need assessment, infrastructure development, assessment, forecasting, awards, recognition, appreciation, community engagement, community support, equality, fairness, digitalisation, complaints	Training and development, leadership support, focus, addressing needs, recognition, equal opportunities, social support, innovation, addressing concerns, career development, re-engagement, awards, employee motivation, employee participation. Assessing trends.

Source: created by the authors.

The lower tier includes different groups of people working in organisations where we interviewed the primary participants. We intended to validate primary cases through secondary interviews. The study also utilised six official documents and reports created using web scraping. The secondary interviews were primarily coded using concept-driven coding and validated with original responses received from primary participants. *Table 2* indicates the triangulation results.

3. Results

3.1 Definition of Inclusion

The research debate concerns inconsistent definitions, contextual variances, and the unexplored multifaceted nature of inclusion. The first research question of the current study focuses on definitions of inclusion. *Table 3* presents the question-based, specific themes identified in the data. The recurring themes include prioritising needs, valuing employees, and promoting equal opportunities, among others. Most responses consider inclusion a workplace that respects and addresses individual needs. The participants perceived that needs differ for each individual; inclusion is a dynamic concept that caters to employees' needs for expected organisational outcomes. Some participants held the belief that

inclusion in the workplace necessitates a sense of value and welcome. Other themes suggested that adaptability and acceptance of diverse opinions and ideas can achieve inclusion.

Table 3. Themes and Interview Excerpts for Research Question 1

Theme	Inclusion-Based Principle	Sample Quote
Addressing Needs	Addressing needs fosters inclusivity	Inclusion is different for everyone, as everyone's needs are different; addressing needs will make them feel included. [P6]
Feeling Valued and Welcomed	A welcoming environment fosters collaboration	People remember the way you treat them; a welcoming environment enhances collaboration between employees. [P11]
Equal Opportunity	Fairness reduces favouritism and builds cohesion	Providing equal opportunity, fairness, and discouraging favouritism builds a healthy and cohesive workplace. [P12]
Acceptability	Accepting marginalised groups improves inclusivity	Both society and institutions need to accept marginalised groups; this will boost inclusivity and build a positive image. [P4]
Perspectives	Decision-making benefits from diverse viewpoints	I believe an inclusive workplace is a process that allows employees to participate in decision-making; different perspectives improve the process. [P2]
Recognising Differences	Recognising differences increases tolerance and acceptability	It's the organisation's responsibility to create an environment where employees recognise their differences and acknowledge each other's points of view. [P11]
Ownership and Belonging	Ownership builds loyalty	It's a two-way process; if organisations own their employees, they, in return, show loyalty. A sense of belonging creates ownership. [P9]
Respect	Respect reflects moral values and culture	Treating employees with respect creates a culture that lasts long. [P5]
Commitment and Contribution	Commitment results in Contribution	Inclusion is about putting your efforts and commitment toward organisational goals. [P14]

Source: created by the authors.

We tried to ask more questions to expand the definition and remove any discrepancies, and found that the concept of 'need' unites all definitions of inclusion. Participants also emphasised that valuing some employees, allowing them to participate in decision-making, and providing better infrastructure for hassle-free work are all essential components of inclusion. The interviews also explored the employer's perspective on inclusion; responses show that the organisation's primary need is to improve its performance and productivity by utilising its resources. The employer may define inclusion as a cohesive approach that addresses the organisation's needs. The responses define inclusion as a cohesive environment that the organisation creates to meet employee needs and achieve expected outcomes.

3.2 Examining the Multifaceted Nature of Inclusion

Question 2 explores the multifaceted nature of inclusion at various organisational levels, scrutinising its perception across various roles and levels. People perceive inclusion as a phenomenon, a practice, and a process, according to three common themes. The responses reveal that the phenomenon aligns with the individuals' lived experiences, reflecting their feelings of welcomeness, appreciation, value, and respect. We also observed inclusion as a set of behaviours that guide interaction and foster inclusivity.

Research most commonly studies the last theme, “Inclusion as a process”. It refers to action taken within an organisation to create inclusiveness.

Table 4. Themes and Interview Excerpts for Research Question 2

Theme	Inclusion Lens	Sample Quote
Inclusion as Phenomenon	Highlights inclusion as a subjective experience, emphasising personal and collective perception.	We have studied this phenomenon as a somewhat lived experience of an individual; people experience inclusion. [P14]
Inclusion as Process	Frames inclusion as a dynamic and participatory mechanism, contributing to organisational growth and collaboration.	I believe an inclusive workplace is a process that allows employees to participate in decision-making; different perspectives enhance the process. [P11]
Inclusion as Practice	Underlines the behavioural aspect, reflecting the consistency of actions by management in fostering inclusivity.	We can observe how managers tend to react to a diverse workforce – whether they welcome them or not. Inclusion works as a practice we engage in frequently. [P2]

Source: created by the authors.

Nguyen *et al.* (2024) found that inclusion varies across different roles and organisational levels; this study explored the type and the relevance of variance within the nature of inclusion. The responses from the participants revealed that each role and level has different dynamics and context; the nature of inclusion also changes according to the context of that particular level. As per the data, inclusion at any level should fall into one of the three categories, as explained above. Nguyen *et al.* (2024) categorise task-based inclusion based on the extent to which employees perceive consultation and involvement in a task. In a broader sense, we categorise this nature as a “phenomenon”, referring to the lived experiences of individuals. Similarly, we categorise any level of an organisation’s structured sequence of activities, such as appraisal systems, policies, workflows, etc., as a process. Finally, we categorise the actions or behaviours that managers adopt, such as mentorship, initiatives, and success recognition, as practice.

3.3 Inclusive Strategies and Practices

We conducted interviews with individuals from various Banks to identify their key strategies for managing inclusive practices in developing countries. A total of nine themes emerged from the data, *Table 5* presents these themes in order of frequency. The majority of the responses supported the idea that the monetary and non-monetary benefits are the key motivators in building a cohesive work environment. We merged and transformed open codes such as allowances, bonuses, scholarships, financial assistance, facilities, etc., into the main theme, “Perks and Benefits”. Many participants reported that their organisations have achieved positive outcomes by enhancing their employee engagement, employee development, and career development policies. The frequency of responses underscores how important it is for organisations to prioritise employee engagement, development, and career progression. One of the respondents added that:

“Monetary benefits motivate everyone, but they are not a lasting solution for inclusion; people want to see their careers grow, and they are very much concerned with their own development”. [P13]

Table 5. Themes and Interview Excerpts for Research Question 3

Theme	Objective	Sample Quote
Perks & Benefits	Highlights the need for comprehensive benefit structures to enhance employee satisfaction and retention.	We believe pay and allowances are not enough for employees; other benefits such as insurance, educational assistance, and healthcare facilities are important factors to include in policies. [P9]
Employee Engagement	Emphasises the value of structured engagement programs in fostering inclusivity and collaboration.	Training programs, onboarding, and re-entry programs are all effective policies that work well for inclusion. [P10]
Employee Development	Reflects an organisational focus on gender diversity and professional growth for women.	We followed an approach that attracts, develops, and retains female employees. [P14]
Career Planning & Development	Stresses the importance of structured career pathways to support long-term employee growth.	You hire many people, but ensuring they are given a career path is where the challenge lies. [P5]
Support for Diverse Groups	Demonstrates a commitment to addressing the specific needs of diverse employee groups.	For all kinds of segments, we ensure that anything they need is made available. [P7]
Work Environment	Showcases confidence in providing a competitive and supportive work environment.	I have worked with a few banks and observed their compensation and environment. I believe we provide facilities as good as one can expect from the industry. [P13]
Information Sharing	Highlights the importance of collaboration and shared learning across organisations for continuous improvement.	Currently, we are partnering with different banks to share practices and initiatives. We guide and learn from each other; it is a good practice. [P2]
Inclusive Systems & Processes	Underlines the role of inclusive strategies and operational processes in creating a sense of belonging.	It focuses on what strategies and processes are used to make me feel welcomed and included. [R5]
Appropriate Infrastructure	Stresses the need for tailored infrastructure to ensure employee well-being and productivity.	Your privacy and comfort are associated with the appropriate infrastructure provided by the organisation. [R14]

Source: created by the authors.

Responses further necessitate policies that cater to all groups within the organisation, for instance, a common issue with married working females is taking care of their children; facilitating them through childcare facilities or allowances enables them to feel included and work without any domestic pressures. Similarly, the transportation of people with disabilities (PWD) can be challenging and expensive compared to others. However, specialised facilities such as transportation or allowances can help them balance their expenses. Other themes that rarely receive discussion include information sharing, supportive systems and processes, and appropriate infrastructure. Few participants held the belief that sharing information among employees and involving them in decision-making enhances their sense of belonging and inclusion. The “Supporting Systems and Processes” theme pertains to processes and systems that are user-friendly and transparent, providing clear guidance on organisational policies, decisions, and guidelines. Finally, the “Infrastructure” theme caters to the responses that demand supportive infrastructure for diverse groups, such as PWDs and females. One of the participants shared that:

“In a survey of departing employees, we discovered that a significant number of female employees switched to other banks because they believed the organisation should prioritise their privacy”. [P10]

3.4 Issues and Challenges to Maintain an Inclusive Workplace

Our fourth research question investigates the issues and challenges local organisations face in managing inclusive workplaces. Table 6 presents the themes that emerged from the data responding to our question.

Table 6. Themes and Interview Excerpts for Research Question 4

Theme	Sample Quotes	Impact
Individual Personal-ity Issues	Some personal issues, such as jealousy, insecurity, and many others, are very common in the workplace. [P14]	Low morale, reduced team cohesion, and productivity.
Employee Retention	We have recognised that employee retention presents both challenges and opportunities. [P7]	Increased turnover leads to higher recruitment costs and loss of institutional knowledge.
Discriminatory Practices	Discrimination is a reality. In our efforts to equalise and provide equal opportunities, we must ensure others do not feel alienated. [P1]	Decreased employee satisfaction, potential legal challenges, and reputational damage.
Job-Related Issues	If you are giving them opportunities, diversity is difficult to achieve because perspectives are created regarding the nature of the work. [P4]	Lack of diversity limits innovation and broader perspectives.
Cultural Issues	Our organisation is very old; cultural issues exist, and it needs a significant transformation, which may take a few more years. [P1]	Resistance to change, misalignment with modern practices, and employee dissatisfaction.
Gender-Based Issues	Females say and feel that they have not been provided the kind of appreciation and reward they deserve. [P8]	Gender inequality harms reputation and limits access to diverse talent pools.
Infrastructure Issues	It needs a huge infrastructure to make all our branches PWD-friendly, including ramps, seating arrangements, braille receipts, and other facilities. It's difficult if not impossible. [P6]	Excludes people with disabilities, negatively impacting inclusivity and compliance with accessibility laws.

Source: created by the authors.

In the banking sector, personality issues and employee retention pose significant challenges; participants consistently identified discrimination, job-related issues, and cultural issues as their primary obstacles to fostering inclusive workplaces. The open codes that contribute to the “personality issues” theme encompass jealousy, a negative mindset, implicit bias, insecurity, and other issues. The participants also report instances of gender-based and language-based discrimination, primarily occurring in older banks that did not prioritise diversity in the past. The participants observed a shift in the banking culture over the past few years, with individuals who have been working for the last two decades largely dominating the work environment. Individual issues present a challenge, but they are becoming less prevalent over time. The responses indicate that “employee retention” is the second major issue in the banking sector. In the banking sector, retaining female employees is particularly challenging, but the insights reveal that many male employees also leave their organisations for various reasons. The frequency of responses suggests that organisations were equally challenged to manage workplace inclusion due to discriminatory practices, job-based issues, and cultural problems.

Participants shared experiences of exclusions, unfair appraisals, pay disparities, and failure to accommodate, all of which indicate workplace discrimination. Cultural issues highlight the unwelcoming and acceptance problems in the workplace. Participants expressed that the organisational culture, which has evolved over time, is impeding the acceptance of diversity. Many banks face challenges related to infrastructure; some perceive it as a significant obstacle, while others consider it a minor one. The participants suggested that banks have significantly developed their infrastructure over time, with the exception of accommodating people with disabilities (PWDs). However, given the relatively small number of PWDs in banks, they consider this a minor challenge. Conversely, a few participants expressed greater concern for their clients and customers, citing this as their primary concern. A participant said that:

“The client-to-employee ratio in banks is quite high; for example, a branch with 30 employees would likely have 30,000 accounts. Our bank places equal emphasis on our clients, and we perceive infrastructure for people with disabilities (PWDs) as a challenge, given that only 10% of urban branches currently have PWD-enabled facilities”. [P14]

3.5 Addressing Challenges

Our next question explores the participants’ strategies for addressing the challenges discussed in the previous question. “Training and development”, “Leadership support”, and “Addressing needs” are the main themes identified by the responses.

Table 7. Themes and Interview Excerpt for Research Question 5

Theme	Sample Quotes	Potential Impact/Outcome
Training & Development	Banks are directed by regulators to arrange gender sensitivity training, with a perspective of inclusion so that females feel comfortable, and male staff understand their boundaries and limits. [P1]	Improves gender sensitivity, workplace harmony, and female participation.
Leadership Support	Supporting us in inclusion policies would be less rated; they actually push us hard to formulate and implement inclusion-related policies. [P14]	Drives organisational commitment to inclusion and ensures implementation of equitable practices.
Addressing the Needs	The concept of an inclusive workplace stems from inclusion, which involves addressing employee needs and fostering a sense of welcome. [P9]	Enhances employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention.
Infrastructure Development	Infrastructure is equally essential; PWDs need ramps, lifts, hearing assistance, and other necessary facilities. [P5]	Promotes accessibility and compliance with legal requirements, fostering inclusivity.
Monitoring & Assessment	We need to assess and forecast the market situation and devise our policies accordingly. [P6]	Enables better policy alignment with market trends and organisational goals.
Appreciation & Engagement	We celebrate minority events like Holi and Diwali in our office, inviting senior executives to make minorities feel included. [P8]	Boosts morale, fosters inclusivity, and strengthens team cohesion.
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	The community plays an important role in business; CSR activities achieve positive image building and social perception. [P8]	Enhances brand reputation, strengthens community ties, and attracts socially conscious consumers.

Table 7 (continuation). Themes and Interview Excerpt for Research Question 5

Theme	Sample Quotes	Potential Impact/Outcome
Fair Treatment	Employee motivation involves multiple aspects, such as fair workstations, treatment, appraisals, and recognition. [P13]	Boosts employee morale, reduces turnover, and enhances organisational loyalty.
Digitalisation	Digital innovation can boost employee inclusivity; however, it also has a significant impact on the organisation from the customer's point of view. [P10]	Improves operational efficiency, broadens accessibility, and enhances customer and employee experiences.
Addressing Concerns	Inclusion is about addressing employee needs and making them feel welcomed. [P6]	Encourages open communication, reduces grievances, and promotes a positive work environment.
Policy Review	We conduct an annual policy review to identify strengths and areas for improvement. [R13]	Ensures policies remain relevant and effective, fostering continuous organisational growth.

Source: created by the authors.

Most of the responses stressed the need for training and development to sensitise people to the expected outcomes of acceptability, improved attitude towards different groups, recognising the differences, tolerance, customer satisfaction, and employee development. The theme of “Leadership support” emerges from the responses, highlighting the crucial role of management in addressing these issues. The participants shared that from setting the foundation to building an inclusive environment, the leadership support plays a foundational role in addressing workplace issues and managing an inclusive environment. The concept of “Addressing needs” consistently surfaces, with question 1 delving into the connection between inclusion and individual needs. The theme “Addressing needs” in our last research question validates that link and emphasises addressing individual needs for reducing workplace issues. One of the participants said that:

“Organisations often make the mistake of creating a uniform policy that does not meet the needs of all employees. It requires flexibility and empathy, and you must listen to the voices of your employees about what they need”. [P12]

According to Table 7, participants reported that the low inclusion rate of diverse groups, particularly PWDs, in their sector is a result of infrastructure issues. Infrastructure development will assist in resolving these issues. The responses underscored the importance of enhancing organisational processes, systems, and policies to foster inclusivity for both employees and stakeholders, extending beyond the physical infrastructure. A few other themes include monitoring and assessment, appreciation and engagement, corporate social responsibility, fair treatment, and digitalisation. The “Monitoring and assessment” theme talks about monitoring the current market trend and setting your policies in comparison to your competitors; this will minimise the risk of attrition and will improve employee retention. The participants viewed “Appreciation and engagement” as a strategy that bridges the gap between the employer and employees. By recognising and engaging your employees, you motivate them to work more effectively. During the interviews, we learned that corporate social responsibility is a less-practised element. However, the participants believed that it works in multiple ways; it bridges the gap between the organisation and society. By engaging society as a stakeholder, organisations can improve their perception and branding in society. The participants further suggest ‘fair treatment’ as a solution to the discrimination, unfairness, and exclusions within the organisation. During the conversation, we

discovered that certain Banks provide flexibility in their working schedule, while others provide digital applications for their clients to enhance their involvement. For instance, one organisation has specifically developed an app to assist visually impaired individuals. As a result, participants held the belief that through digitalisation, organisations can enhance the inclusion of diverse groups, such as including visually impaired individuals as employees and other disadvantaged groups.

3.6 Model of Inclusive Workplaces

In the second step analysis, data-driven coding was performed, and a total of 7 main themes and 21 sub-themes emerged from the data. *Table 8* presents the details of the theme, subtheme, and corresponding comments from respondents. Based on the emerged themes, we propose model of inclusive workplaces for effectively managing inclusion at workplace.

Table 8. Themes, Sub-Themes, Comments and Respondent's Details

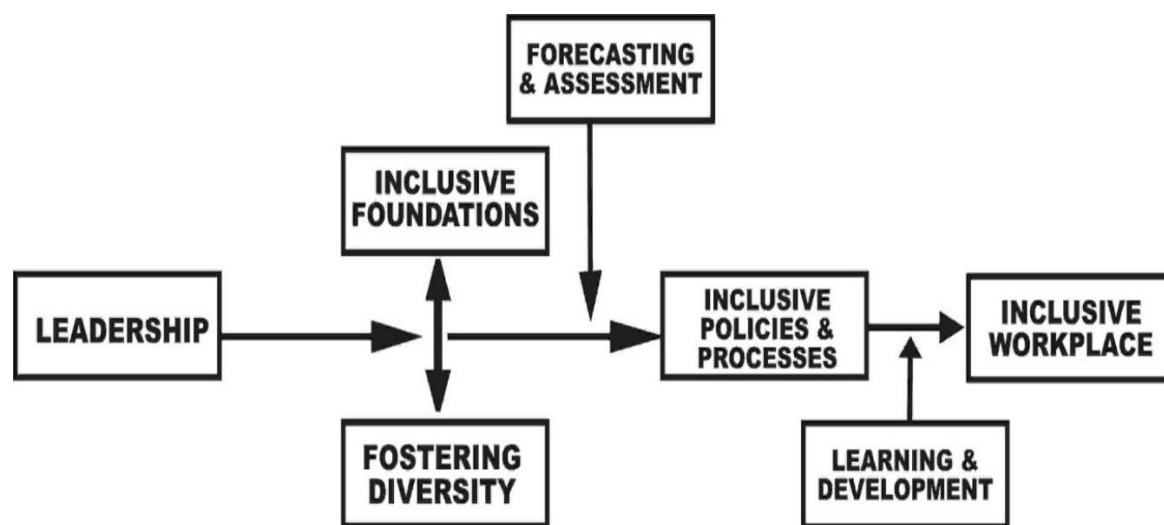
Theme / Sub-theme	No. of comments	No. of Respondents
Leadership	52	
Management Support	23	11
Leadership Focus	19	7
Leader's Commitment	10	9
Building Foundations	61	
Infrastructure & Processes	22	7
Understanding & Recognising Diversity	30	13
Equity and Equal Opportunities	9	6
Managing Diversity	44	
Heterogeneous Workforce	22	9
Pioneering Focus on PWDs	13	10
Diverse Perspectives	09	5
Organisational Focus & Commitment	33	
Needs & Preferences	14	9
Forecasting & Assessment	12	5
Social Responsibility	07	4
Policies & Processes	47	
Perks & Benefits	15	7
Digitalisation	13	8
Retention	10	8
Holistic Approach	09	5
Learning and Development	63	
Employee Development	25	12
Career Planning & Development	13	9
Training	25	14
Measuring the Outcome of Inclusion	42	
Performance	25	9
Outcome	17	10
Total Unitted Comments	342	

n=14

Source: own calculations.

At the outset, the inclusive workplace model encourages group understanding for collective organisational goals through leadership focus, commitment, and support. O'Mara (2013) also identified leadership as one of the basic elements for inclusion. At the second level, the model suggests

establishing a foundation for inclusion and diversity. Themes 2 and 3 interconnect and depend on each other. Modelling at this level entails focusing on providing better infrastructure, understanding and appreciating diversity, and promoting equity. The foundation will empower organisations to manage a diverse workforce. “Fostering diversity” involves not just recruiting a diverse workforce from different social groups, but also ensuring equity and equality regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or association with any group, race, or religion. Initially, we placed both themes (2 & 3) separately and engaged the respondents to prioritise each theme based on the organisation’s logical requirements. We aimed to find what comes first – foundation or diversity? In summary, the responses led to the conclusion that management must acknowledge diversity and establish a supportive infrastructure to foster diversity. For instance, X Bank has located a branch on the fourth floor of a building without lifts or elevators. Do we assume that a person with a physical disability would opt to be employed in that place? Leadership and organisation must possess a comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs of all groups and provide them with appropriate infrastructure and accessibility. Respondents concluded that both themes are mutually dependent and interconnected.



Source: created by the authors.

Figure 1. Model of Inclusive Workplaces

We discussed Fujimoto and Uddin (2020)’s poor inclusive model, which offers inclusion for the poor but has many marginalised groups that, for many reasons, cannot attend work. The “Forecasting and assessment” in the proposed model helps with the marginalised groups, hence, provides extended support to Fujimoto and Uddin (2020)’s model. Organisational commitment and focus prioritise the evaluation of needs, forecasting the trends and challenges with respect to diverse groups, and linking organisational goals with community development.

The third stage involves making inclusive policies and processes. The policies are moderated by the “Forecasting and assessment” theme on essential elements necessary for inclusion. The respondents emphasised that organisational policies must be aligned with the needs and preferences of diverse groups. The action necessitates managerial focus to assess the market trends, which may be technological advances, hybrid office or data analytics and design organisational processes according to the market needs. Another factor investigated through the interviews is social responsibility; it is expected that organisations should contribute to overall social well-being. Respondents indicated that

social connectivity leads to developing a positive public perception. One way or another, society is your consumer; a favourable societal perception leads to a strong consumer base. Organisational policies must include special programs targeted at the various demographic groups of society. As learnt from the respondents, their organisations offer scholarships, organise free medical camps, and conduct different activities that support disadvantaged groups of society.

“Learning and development” in the model emphasises to provide continuous opportunities for growth, considering both personal and professional development (*Appendix 1*). Respondents discovered that an inclusive workplace not only focuses on skills development but also provides a clear career path for each group; continuous development is a key aspect of inclusion. It transforms diversity initiatives into an inclusive workplace. The last theme of the study, “Measuring the outcome”, is named as “Inclusive workplace” in the proposed model, as the aim of the overall process is to manage an inclusive workplace; the model evaluates the efficacy of inclusive practices at the last stage. By measuring the effectiveness, the model aims to assess the extent to which the process in the model contributes to creating an inclusive workplace. By doing so, the model addresses the key limitation of Shore’s *et al.* (2018) model. As we acknowledge that business trends are constantly changing, for continuous improvement in work culture, organisations need to continuously evaluate the efficacy of their processes. The proposed model (see *Figure 1*) exhibits some similarities in themes found in Shore’s *et al.* (2018) empirical review of inclusion; however, the overall process extends the model using responses grounded in data.

4. Discussion

The purpose of the study was to delve into the concept of inclusion and explore the process of managing an inclusive workplace in the local context of a developing economy. A review of the existing literature on inclusion lacks a universally accepted definition of inclusion that can be operationalised across different contexts. Different authors have identified different characteristics pertinent to different contexts, yet a foundational understanding of the concept is elusive. A baseline definition is missing, which offers basic applicability across different levels. Research suggested many definitions of inclusion across different levels (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024), employee-centric element is missing amongst all (Dhanani *et al.*, 2024). The findings of this study proposed a baseline definition and concluded that “Inclusion refers to accommodating the needs”, overarching definitions for different domains and levels may follow this root definition. The participants clarified that the ‘term’ need is not specified in the employee context only, it has a wider scope and applies to all stakeholders. This study provides a fundamental outline for conceptualising inclusive workplaces in varying contexts. Our respondents provided valuable insights, revealing that we can study the concept of inclusion from three perspectives: as a phenomenon, as a practice, and as a process. One of the respondents shared that:

“Inclusion is a phenomenon for individuals as employees, where we can ask them about their lived experiences for being included and accepted within the organisation.” [P11]

Our study aimed to explore inclusion as a process; we inquired the respondents about their views on inclusion as a process. Based on Ferdman (2017) in their assessment of inclusion as a concept, respondents perceived it as a multifaceted concept that encompasses both phenomena, practice and process. The practice of inclusion involves managerial actions aimed at welcoming a diverse workforce and fulfilling their needs within the organisation. However, the inclusion process involves ongoing organisational efforts to integrate, assess, and improve managerial actions to meet individual needs; this

process ensures continuity. An inclusive workplace is based on a process that an organisation follows to integrate managerial actions towards inclusivity.

A review by Garg and Sangwan (2021) indicate that 'gender' is the most researched aspect of diversity and gender issues are the major challenge for inclusion. This research found that discrimination is not restricted to gender only; language, personal biases, and infrastructure are the major obstacles in Pakistan. The comparison of Pakistan with European states may not suggest any generalised finding as the U.S female employment ratio is around 56.6% (World Bank, 2024). Conversely, most of the organisations in our population have female participation below 20%. This may be the reason that gender issues are comparatively low in the local context.

4.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Based on the results, we have expanded the theoretical understanding of inclusion by improving the concept's generalisability based on the data we provided. Ferdman (2017) called inclusion a multifaceted and complex concept. We found that inclusion is a multidimensional concept, but the organisational process of managing diversity makes it more complicated. Our study has examined the multifaceted nature of inclusion and expanded the understanding of inclusion as a process, a practice, and a phenomenon. We also established a universally recognised root definition of inclusion as a concept, which remains unchanged whether applied as a practice, process, or phenomenon.

In terms of validation of benchmarking on inclusion, O'Mara (2013), while discussing the benchmarks for inclusion, found that leadership is a fundamental element of inclusion. The majority of the previous research models on inclusion do not address the role of leadership. Shore *et al.* (2018) have explored the importance of management support. Thus, this study utilises leadership as a crucial foundation for promoting inclusion. This validates a crucial component for inclusion benchmarking, as explored in (O'Mara, 2013).

We align our data and proposed model with the existing theoretical framework of inclusion, extending both the literature and the inclusion model. The models align all seven themes with Shore's *et al.* (2018) empirical review, highlighting the key improvements in their model by measuring the effectiveness of inclusion practices. In comparison to Mor-Barak (2014), it also suggests a more apparent association between different dimensions of diversity. Our model extends Fujimoto and Uddin (2020)s model by contextualising the poor class and providing support for all marginalised groups.

Heyler *et al.* (2016) indicated that by developing a model using empirical evidence grounded in data, researchers can address the missing links in previous models, existing literature, and organisational processes. Based on exploratory inquiry, we have proposed a model that offers theoretical implications by improving the existing models, integrating the role of leadership for inclusion, validating the previous literature, and comprehending the concept of inclusion.

The findings suggest that leadership serves as the starting point for an organisation's journey toward inclusion. Organisations must design leadership programs that emphasise the role of leaders in managing an inclusive culture. Secondly, the proposed model provides a systematic approach to managing an inclusive workplace; organisations must incorporate its key elements into their strategic planning and HR policies, ensuring a systemic implementation of inclusion across various levels. Third, the findings of the study have elaborated on the need for tailored policies for diverse groups; practitioners must develop systems and programs targeting specific groups and their needs. As referred

to in Shore *et al.* (2018), many countries are using legislation to create inclusive workplaces. Lastly, we believe that applying this framework would enable organisations to manage inclusive workplaces through an institutional approach.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study addresses the conceptualisation challenges and extends the theoretical knowledge of the basic principles of inclusion. However, the study has some key limitations. First, the study uses samples from Pakistan's banking sector, which may limit its generalisability to other sectors. Future research could utilise data from other industries and conduct a cross-sector comparison to generate a more comprehensive analysis. Secondly, the study investigates the inclusion from the perspective of a developing economy; the inclusive practices of other developing countries are unexplored and may vary. Thirdly, the study suggests that the responses gathered at a particular point in time, along with the insights on issues, challenges, needs, and practices, may change over time. Conducting longitudinal studies will help researchers test the model's effectiveness over time to gain deeper insights into the evolution of the inclusion process. Finally, the model needs empirical testing for generalisability. Future research may therefore use different organisations and sectors to enhance the robustness and generalisability of the model. We also recommend empirical testing of this model to ensure its validation and generalisability.

Conclusions

This study has enhanced the theoretical understanding of inclusion by conceptualising and contextualising the notion, using qualitative data. We have examined the management of an inclusive workplace in a local setting, our findings have helped to bridge both theoretical and research gaps related to workplace inclusion. We also critically discussed the limitations and constraints of previous research models on inclusion. After analysing the responses and utilising themes developed from our analysis, we have proposed a model for inclusive workplaces. The proposed model for inclusive workplaces offers a systematic approach for leaders and managers to avert exclusion and foster an inclusive work environment. Furthermore, it also addresses gaps and constraints of previous inclusion models, providing a more robust framework for managing inclusive workplaces.

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UŽ VALDYMO ĮVAIROVĖS RIBŲ: KŪRYBIŠKAS POŽIŪRIS Į ĮTRAUKIĄ DARBO APLINKĄ

Shahjehan Manthar, Ghulam Muhammad, Muhammad Zahid, Rizwan Raheem Ahmed

Santrauka. Akademiniame diskurse išryškėjo teorinės ir metodologinės spragos darbo aplinkos įtraukties ir pagrindinių organizacinių procesų, kurie palengvina įtraukios darbo aplinkos valdymą, srityje. Šiuo tyrimu siekiama užpildyti šias spragas. Be to, įvertinami ankstesnių tyrimų, skirtų įtraukties modeliams, apribojimai ir siūlomas naujas įtraukaus darbo modelis. Pritaikę grįstosios teorijos metodą, autoriai atliko interviu su 14 respondentų. Tyrimo rezultatais konceptualizuojamas daugialypis įtraukties pobūdis ir atskleidžiamas įtraukios darbo aplinkos valdymo procesas Pakistane. Be to, gauti rezultatai leido sukurti įtraukios darbo aplinkos modelį, kurio tikslas – skatinti įtrauktį darbo vietoje ir spręsti su įvairia darbo jėga susijusius iššūkius. Šis tyrimas papildė teorinę įtraukties sampratą. Remiantis duomenimis jame labiau apibendrinta sąvoka ir pateikiamas naujas požiūris į įtrauktį.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: įvairovė; lygybė; įtrauktis; įtrauki darbo aplinka; lyderystė; grindžiamoji teorija.

Appendix 1

Table 9A. Interview Excerpts on Data-Driven Analysis

Theme	Sub-Themes	Sample Quote
Leadership	Management Support	I think they are the people who own it; they are the people who can drive the strategies and action plans to a conclusion and execute them. Our senior management and president are totally up for it. [P1]
	Leadership Focus	Our leadership is very focused and has enforced a strict policy to recruit females to improve their inclusion. [P2]
	Leader's Commitment	Commitment , you say, dedication, how dedicated your leader is to make it happen. Decision making is mostly done by the leadership so dedicated leadership makes inclusive decisions, sets the foundation and includes team members in decision making. [P13]
	Infrastructure and Processes	Infrastructure is equally important; PWDs need ramps, lifts, hearing assistance, and other required assistance. [P12]
Inclusive Foundations	Understanding & Recognising Diversity	All people are different; there are some traits that make us similar, some are different. You will be inclined to one way, and in other things, you will be inclined to another way. That's completely okay. That is the first message we are trying to give our employees to recognise differences and acknowledge them. [P5]
	Equity and Equal Opportunities	Equity is the essence of inclusion; we provide people with what matters to them by doing justice to their needs. [P13] Our understanding of inclusion is that everybody should have a fair and equal opportunity to come to work to carry out honest day work and go back without feeling eliminated, harassed, or treated differently than anybody else. [P6]
	Heterogeneous Workforce	Diversity in the workplace comes with heterogeneity in the workforce, we encourage all types of workers regardless of their gender, class or religion. [P12]
Fostering Diversity	Pioneering Focus on PWDs	We should be grateful to the State Bank, which launched a policy for persons with disabilities . They are encouraging banks to do that, it's a great initiative for disabled staff . [P5]
	Diverse Perspectives	The major benefit of diversity is that you get diverse perspectives . Diversity of perspective takes you to a level solution with the best results. [P3]

Understanding and Reshaping Socioeconomic Development to Overcome Challenges

Forecasting and Assessment	Needs & Preferences	Female needs are different from males, basically, you cannot offer a pink card and expect that it will do well in all segments. [P3]
	Forecasting & Assessment	You cannot make your policies alone, you need to assess the market and offer your policies accordingly. This will help you in staying alive in business. [P12]
	Social Responsibility	We have defined it in three “Cs”: your colleagues, your customers, and the community; our CSR section is supporting the community, and we are paying them back through support, like we recently did in the flood. Diversity cannot be increased alone with employment, yes, employment can increase many things, like you are encouraging the economy. [P8]
	Perks & Benefits	Pay, allowances and other benefits are key factors contributing to employee motivation and inclusivity. [P12]
	Digitalisation	We believe organisational processes must be designed in a way that supports inclusivity in every aspect, so you need digitalisation for workplace inclusion and especially for financial inclusion of females and other groups. [P11]
Policies & Processes	Retention	We have assessed that retention is a challenge and an opportunity; we lost many of our employees because other banks were offering them options that we missed. We are working to make policies, including those options which may help us in retaining good employees. [P14]
	Holistic Approach	Different people working in the same organisation but living in other places have geographical diversity, so diversity is about including those people for a common goal, and adopting a holistic policy approach . [P1]
	Employee Development	New advancements, new trends are coming each day, and inclusion demands updating and upgrading the skills of your employees. [P12]
Learning and Development	Career Planning & Development	Now the question is, are we only hiring them? No, it's hiring, elevation and retention. Because hiring is not sufficient, if there is an elevation, they will see their career . [P5]
	Training	We have a designed training on Diversity, Equality and Inclusion, we discuss on gender, disability and harassment. It is offered digitally as well as in classroom. [P5]
Measuring the Outcome of Inclusion	Performance	When employees are motivated and feel inclusive, they perform better; we have acknowledged this fact in performance evaluations. [P11]
	Outcome	There are a number of outcomes associated

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with inclusion, you get new perspectives, it helps in decision making, it creates a welcoming environment and so on. [P13]

Source: created by the authors.