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DEI Strategies for a Stronger Global Tourism Industry

**A 2022 International LGBTQ+
Travel Association Foundation Report**

Moderators:

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The 2021 IGLTA Foundation Think Tank was executed as an invitation-only roundtable discussion that brought together thought leaders from various segments of the LGBTQ+ welcoming tourism industry around the globe, including established companies and start-ups, destinations, and governmental entities at both the local and regional levels. The Think Tank discussion focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies and responsible tourism—specifically, how the LGBTQ+ travel segment can help address DEI issues facing global tourism. The Think Tank session was scheduled for about 90 minutes in two rooms simultaneously with two moderators in each room (Jamie Anne Harrell with Greg DeShields, and Billy Kolber with Zoe Moore).

The premise of the discussion was to acknowledge that the different dimensions of diversity create dynamic and complex communities that require continuous learning, reflection, and examination of practices, policies, cross-cultural principles, and institutional infrastructures, so that those practices promote and ensure the general welfare and the success of all.

Organizations in the tourism industry must be purposeful in enriching their intersectional demographic profiles to reflect the populations of the places they inhabit. Multi-sector collaboration is essential to address DEI and workforce challenges effectively. The next sections provide an account of the main topics discussed in the Think Tank meeting and their implications for future dialogue and action.

1. DEI Journey

The dialogue began with a review of the responses received to survey questions for DEI insights. The survey asked how far individuals and companies have advanced in their DEI journey and used a scale of 1-5 to determine where in the journey they fall. Most responses showed values of five out of five, the highest choice for individual advancement. This suggests that DEI is viewed as very important for individual development. One discussant mentioned that recent events (the social justice movement and mass protests in response to police brutality and racism) have brought “race and gender to a platform where they had not been before.”

In discussing individual advancement, the participants distinguished between the DEI journey as information (understanding how much diversity there is) and the DEI journey as learning about diverse experiences. While progress in acknowledging diversity is clear and significant, learning how diversity shapes people’s experiences is an ongoing process of engagement that is “the harder work that we have to do,” as one participant noted. Related to this ongoing process is the understanding of privilege, particularly white privilege, that goes beyond observing diversity. DEI advancement for individuals involves identity and requires vulnerability about the process, as another participant noted.



The survey also reported a substantial share of responses of high organizational advancement. The participants believed that their companies tend to be ahead of individuals in terms of advancement. At the same time, the progress has been more limited in certain areas such as accountability or recognition for DEI-related work. The participants raised the question about how to further develop these important areas. The focus on teams and teamwork emerged as central to connecting individual and organizational advancement in DEI because group processes involve shared experience and foster collective as well as individual learning.

Teams are the suitable organizational context for inclusion work and reflection. One participant noted: “Often, we consider initiatives to work on and then we reflect, were we inclusive? If we are diverse, are the diverse voices represented in what we do? This is not only in human resources, but in every department including finance—how much budget is allocated to DEI there?” These questions point to the importance of bringing DEI work into everyday organizational practices and make it part of “how we always operate, our DNA,” as moderator Zoe Moore said. In this context, executive leadership is paramount to creating a culture that is diverse and inclusive. Coaching and training for leaders should be ongoing so they are aware of the importance of civility and understanding their employees. Leaders must understand their role as exemplar members of their organizations.

2. Responsible Tourism

The integration of individual, group and organizational DEI advancement is central to enhance work on responsible tourism. The participants defined responsible tourism in terms of minimizing negative social economic and environmental impacts. Responsible tourism should be culturally sensitive, encourage respect between tourists and hosts, and build local pride and confidence. The issue has multiple dimensions. One dimension relates to improving working conditions and greater access to jobs particularly for more

vulnerable members of the LGBTQ+ community, such as transgender people in consumer-facing positions and leadership. Improving working conditions in the industry requires changes in organizational culture broadly intended, but also leadership and personal culture.

The discussion of responsible tourism also pointed to the role of employee resource groups (ERGs) in facilitating change. As voluntary, employee-led groups whose aim is to foster a diverse, inclusive workplace aligned with the organizations they serve, ERGs promote change internally via socialization, professional development, and mentoring. They bring employees together and coordinate activities to create a more positive work environment. By actively contributing to the organization's mission, values, and efforts specific to inclusion, ERGs can also benefit the external environment where they extend their activities.



A second dimension of responsible tourism involves making destinations more welcoming and safer. One participant noted that there remain places that LGBTQ+ people want to visit and whose culture they want to experience but are not welcoming: "We have to drive some of that, it's part of our impact around the world." Part of the responsibility of the LGBTQ+ community was described as promoting cultural competence to change people's mindsets and better understand differences (for instance, among African countries). The role of education and advocacy extends to places that may not be welcoming of LGBTQ+

visitors. In these cases, advocacy also involves allyship. The international LGBTQ+ community can make people in less welcoming destinations aware that they can change the culture with respect to LGBTQ+ people in general (not only tourists) and hold local politicians accountable for these demands. The role of the customers was also highlighted, particularly the idea that “the best examples of DEI in corporations tend to involve customers, and changing their experiences.” In sum, the entire ecosystem needs to be involved and committed to responsible tourism.



Participants noted that companies and organizations need to engage in discussions about where they stand on issues relevant to the LGBTQ+ community. Some participants also noted the potential, indirect risk of external advocacy, that “we also want to be mindful of ripple effects and ‘weaponizing’ DEI.” An example was presented of the North Carolina legislature passing the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (House Bill 2). In addition to making other changes, the bill defined the issue of bathroom access as one of statewide concern, and required that all bathrooms be separated by biological sex.[1]

Advocacy groups, celebrities, and businesses joined together in a boycott of the state of North Carolina. North Carolina’s economy reportedly lost over US\$400 million in investments and jobs. State and local administrations issued travel bans

[1] The portion of the law regarding bathroom use was repealed on 30 March, 2017, with the passage of House Bill 142. The remainder of House Bill 2, which barred local governments from passing anti-discrimination ordinances, was repealed on 1 December, 2020.

in response to House Bill 2, barring government employees from non-essential travel to North Carolina. Several filming projects were canceled or were being reconsidered. One Think Tank participant advised to consider that “the people who can hurt the most may be those who cannot work because of the decisions” made by businesses and institutions in response to anti-LGBTQ+ laws and policies.

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In summary, some mechanisms were identified in the discussion through which the LGBTQ+ travel industry can foster responsible global tourism:

- Improving working conditions and access to the industry
- Providing more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues
- Involving local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances
- Making positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage embracing diversity
- Minimizing negative social, economic and environmental impact
- Providing access for physically challenged people
- Generating greater economic benefits for local people and enhancing the well-being of host communities

For these mechanisms to operate effectively, the participants identified changes in these areas as priorities: workplace culture; cultural competence and education; advocacy and allyship; and training and messaging.

3. Investment in DEI

The participants discussed that wherever they may be in their DEI journey, there are opportunities to “do more and better,” as one of them remarked. To do better “means to improve one’s standard of performance or work.” A discussion theme developed about why organizations should invest in DEI. Generally, two arguments motivate investment in DEI. One is a ‘value argument’ that DEI work is just the right thing to do. Related to this, engagement of organizations with DEI is important because it helps employees feel safer, more respected and more connected; and it signals to employees that they can bring their whole selves to work. All these factors help build a stronger sense of community. Diversity of gender, race, nationality, creed, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and more also implies that we can better represent what the world—and the customer base—looks like.



A second argument is the ‘business argument,’ which connects a culture where all employees are welcomed and encouraged to thrive, and the resulting sense of belonging, to relevant organizational outcomes such as attracting top talent to increased productivity, greater innovation, and higher profitability.

Making the business case for diversity may be difficult, but more and more organizations support it now. However, some gaps remain. For instance, corporate-level efforts do not always make it into local markets, and DEI efforts can be under-funded, or treated as a profit center. The participants discussed an alternative logic for the business case for DEI, an ‘investment argument’ (Harrell 2021). This argument considers how long a company has had DEI as part of their strategy. Given that the effects of limited DEI work accumulate over time, a key issue is the size and longevity of what Think Tank moderator Jamie Harrell termed “DEI deficit” in the organization. Harrell noted that the DEI balance from the past carries over “as deferred maintenance on your brand. And eventually that deferred maintenance takes life as an unseen impairment on your balance sheet. Your accumulated inequity deficit, your deferred DEI maintenance... your impairment ... is holding you back and charging interest. And that interest is accruing faster than you're able to pay it down” with decisions such as the appointment of a Chief Diversity Officer. This argument shifts the logic from one of immediate performance to one of long-term investment. Harrell noted: “it’s time for your CEO and CFO to ask the question how much do we need to invest into DEI today to avoid an impairment charge on our balance sheet tomorrow?”

There was consensus among participants that organizations should be “intentional” about their DEI efforts, and apply appropriate skills to make a measured difference. The discussion sketched a general framework for DEI strategic work in three main areas:

- 1. Professional development.** Employees, senior leadership, allies, and business partners must have access to learning opportunities that use various modes of engagement to enhance knowledge, proficiency, skills, and effectiveness in implementing and practicing the principles and values of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Strategic goals, including performance-based



results, cannot be achieved without creating opportunities for self-discovery, reflection, and perspective-taking that allows each of us to understand our communal impact on others and to understand how our own diversity helps to shape community practices, work and engagement, and environment and culture in global tourism. If organizations want to continue making progress, “they need all agents in the conversation,” as one participant remarked.

2. Organizations must build a strong **DEI Culture**. Culture reflects the collective attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and principles of all the members of an organization. For an organization and its employees to be the most successful, a culture that merely supports DEI, and belonging is not enough. Instead, DEI and belonging must be the cultural foundation upon which the organization is built. This also means creating a supportive environment such that employees would also feel safe to report and take actions against individual cases or practices of discrimination and harassment. Clear reporting procedures and structures need to be established and communicated. Organizational members need to be surveyed on a regular basis to measure their perception of the DEI culture in all aspects of their organizational life.

The practice of the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion takes vision, community participation and guidance, and a resolute commitment to actualize this work. It is imperative to understand and have the expertise to develop a DEI Strategy and form an implementation and integration plan. As one participant noted, implementation “requires data to see where you are, where you should be, and how you can go there.”

3. Accountability means evaluating, correcting, and eliminating systemic issues, barriers, and/or practices embedded in institutional policies, protocols, and procedures that impede fairness, access, equity, and equality in our living and working environments. Organizational leaders are responsible for collecting data on DEI metrics as well as for sharing data with employees and other stakeholders on a regular basis. Things measured can demonstrate their significance. Thus, benchmarking measurable indicators of change in institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion goals will take both formal and informal configurations that may include climate surveys.

In the tourism industry, central to a framework that considers any organization as part of a broader ecosystem, more enforcement and rewards should be directed toward improving practices and processes such as supplier diversity. Supplier diversity is a proactive business program encouraging the process of sourcing from minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned, LGBTQ+-owned, service-disabled veteran-owned, historically underutilized businesses and SBA-defined small business vendors.

Legislation and Laws for Human Rights are also part of the accountability system for DEI work. International human rights law lays down obligations which States (and organizations operating in these States) are bound to

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respect. The responsibility to respect means that States must refrain from interfering with or curtailing human rights. The commitment to protect requires States to protect individuals and groups against human rights abuses.

4. Future Agenda

Additional items emerged in the discussion that can create opportunities for discussion in future convening of the Think Tank:

- **Organizations should establish a prioritized financial focus to support DEI strategies appropriately and effectively.**
- **There are differences in the DEI strategies of larger and smaller organizations. Larger organizations tend to view DEI investments as embedded in the overall organizational architecture and mission, and accountability as paramount to DEI work. Smaller organizations such as start-ups tend to prefer a more focused approach to DEI.**

Small businesses can make progress by encouraging their teams to create partnerships beyond their existing networks or by investing in informal socialization processes, such as attendance of cultural events, that can have broader benefits on engagement and belonging.

This report was curated by Giacomo Negro, Professor of Organization & Management and Professor of Sociology (by courtesy), Goizueta Business School Emory University.

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Harrell, Jamie. 2021. "A New Model for the DE&I Business Case: Moving DE&I from the P&L to the Balance Sheet." LinkedIn, September 7. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/new-model-dei-business-case-moving-from-pl-balance-jamie-harrell-mba/>



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