Research paper

DEIB

*Diversity, Equity, Inclusion
and Belonging*

Colophon

DEIB Research – Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging

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Introduction

In an era of increasing globalization, technological advancements, and social movements, DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) stands at the core of organizational transformation. These four core values represent the fundamental principles that organizations adopt not only to create fair and inclusive workplaces but also to drive innovation, productivity, and employee engagement.

Diversity is about the variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences within an organization. Equity focuses on equal opportunities and fair treatment for everyone. Inclusion ensures that every employee feels welcome and can contribute, regardless of their background. Belonging is the outcome: an environment in which employees feel valued, accepted, and connected.

Numbers

10% of adults have a physical disability

25% of the Dutch population has a migration background

19% of the workforce is experiencing a burnout

10-15% of the workforce is neuro-divergent

18% of people aged 15 and older are LGBTQIA+

18% of employees are 60 years or older

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Increasing attention

The growing focus on DEIB is the result of various societal and organizational developments:

1. **Social and cultural movements**
   Movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ Initiatives have sparked a global debate about equal treatment and inclusion, both in society and in the workplace.

2. **Changing work cultures**
   With the increasing diversity among employees, there is a growing need for inclusive workplaces where everyone can be their authentic self. This not only promotes well-being but also strengthens team dynamics.

3. **Business benefits of Inclusion**
   Research shows that inclusive organizations perform better in the field of innovation, productivity, and financial outcomes. Diversity leads to a broader range of ideas and solutions.

4. **Legal obligations and ESG standards**
   Regulations and societal pressure, such as the introduction of sustainability criteria (ESG), force organizations to pay attention to inclusion and diversity.

5. **Technological Advancements**
   Innovations such as artificial intelligence help in monitoring diversity goals and offer opportunities to reduce barriers to inclusion.

Bridge to the physical work environment

Although DEIB is often associated with HR policies, the physical work environment plays a crucial role in realizing these principles. An inclusive workplace goes beyond hiring diverse talent; it also means designing the environment in such a way that everyone feels welcome and can perform at their best. Consider features like low-stimulus spaces and ergonomic workstations that meet the diverse needs of employees.

In this research report, we explore how organizations can integrate DEIB principles into their physical work environment. By looking at best practices, design strategies, and user experiences, we provide guidelines to help transform workplaces into inclusive spaces that contribute to well-being, engagement, and productivity.

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Research design

The DEIB research was conducted in two phases to gain a comprehensive understanding of strategic policies and practical user experiences.

Fase 1: Interviews with Organizations

In this phase, we conducted tandem interviews with DEIB managers (HR) and representatives from Real Estate (RE) or Facility Management (FM) in the following sectors; private, public, healthcare, and education. The discussions focused on:

- The motivation behind DEIB policies.
- DEIB strategies and implementation within organizations.
- The roles of various departments in shaping these policies.

Fase 2: Experience Journeys with User Groups

In the second phase, we carried out experience journeys with diverse user groups, including employees with physical disabilities, neurodiverse employees, and different generational groups. These sessions consisted of:

- Observations of how users experience the work environment.
- Feedback sessions to identify needs and challenges.
- Validation of existing and used measures in the workspace.

This two-phase structure combines insights from policy development with practical experiences to form a holistic view of DEIB in the workplace.

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Phase 1
Interviews

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Phase 1 - Interviews

WorkWire conducted an extensive research by interviewing 26 organizations to gain insights into how Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) are integrated into their policies and physical work environments. These interviews were conducted with both DEIB managers (mainly from HR) and representatives from Real Estate (RE) and Facility Management (FM), to provide a holistic view of the current situation. The organizations interviewed operate across various sectors, including profit-driven businesses, public institutions, healthcare, and education, resulting in valuable insights and broad applicability of the findings.

The discussions focused on four core topics: the motivation for DEIB policies, the characteristics of these policies, the key insights, and the challenges. We will outline the most important findings per theme.

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Motivation behind DEIB policies

- **External obligations:** Many organizations began implementing DEIB policies due to compliance requirements, legislation (such as the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities or the act on equal composition of management and supervision) and ESG standards.

- **Social pressure:** Movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter acted as catalysts for organizations to place inclusivity higher on their agendas.

- **Internal needs:** Companies often saw the need for action arising from their own employee networks (such as LGBTQ+ or neurodiversity groups).

- **Employer branding:** Organizations in sectors like consulting and technology emphasized that DEIB is crucial for attracting young talent and maintaining diversity in the workplace.

Characteristics of the Policy

- **Stage of development:** Only 8% of the interviewed organizations have translated DEIB policies into Real Estate (RE)/Facility Management (FM). The focus is still often on HR and communications.

- **Tagert groups:** Most organizations target a wide range of groups, including gender diversity, people with physical disabilities, neurodiverse employees, or generational groups (parents with young children, caregivers, women in menopause). However, some organizations deliberately choose a holistic approach without naming specific groups.

- **Regional and cultural differences:** In the Netherlands, there are regional differences in how DEIB is implemented, for example, between the metropolitan areas and more traditional, provincial environments.

- **Focus on intrinsic motivation:** There is a visible shift from reactive compliance with laws to proactive, intrinsic motivation to promote inclusivity.

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Key insights

- **Engaging users:** Successfully implementing DEIB begins with involving end-users. Many organizations emphasized the importance of focus groups and user panels in shaping policies

- **Low-hanging fruit:** Small adjustments, such as creating rest spaces or offering low stimulus environments, can make a significant impact..

- **Importance of community building:** Initiatives like Diversity Days and employee networks raise awareness and increase support for inclusivity.

- **Belonging as goal:** Organizations that take an integrated approach to DEIB aim to foster a sense of belonging: a work environment where employees feel accepted and can be themselves.

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Challenges

- **Translation into action:** There is a gap between policy and implementation. Middle management often struggles to translate general DEIB objectives into daily practice.

- **Finding balance:** Organizations struggle to determine how far they should go in their investments to promote inclusion, particularly when the impact on small groups is significant, but the costs are substantial.

- **Fatigue:** Both employees and managers can experience "DEIB fatigue" due to the complexity and long-term nature of the changes.

- **Regional Accessibility:** There are differences in office accessibility, particularly between older and modern buildings. Accessibility measures are often applied reactively rather than proactively.

- **Lack of monitoring:** Unlike countries such as the US, where strict regulations ensure compliance, the Netherlands often lacks the oversight and enforcement of DEIB-related guidelines.

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Conclusion

The results of the interviews in phase 1 highlight that DEIB is more than just an HR issue; it requires an integrated approach in which RE/FM plays a key role.

The second phase of the research focused on testing concrete interventions in the work environment, with the aim of developing a toolkit that organizations can use to create inclusive and accessible workplaces.

Phase 2

Experience journeys
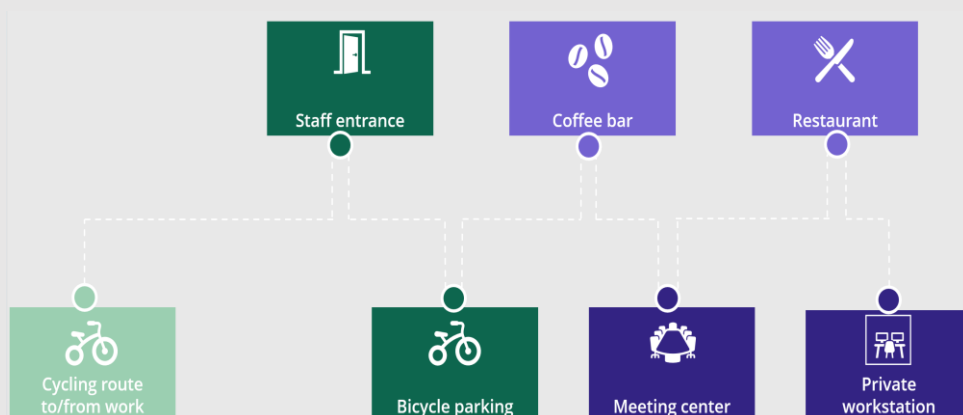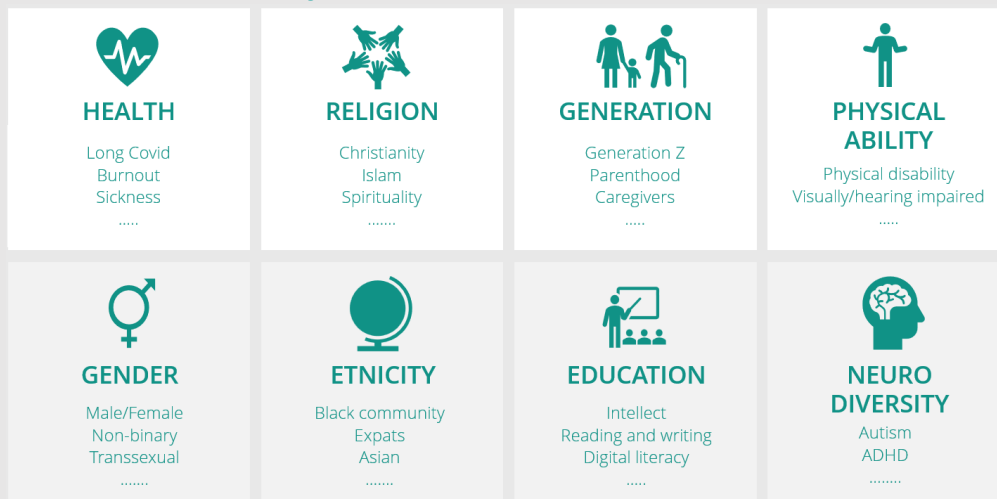
Phase 2 – Experience journeys

WorkWire conducted a series of *experience journeys* with experts from various user groups, including employees with physical disabilities, neurodiverse employees, and different generational groups.

During these sessions, the experts shared from their personal experience, highlighting the limitations they face in their office environments and the obstacles they encounter. Based on these limitations, they explored how a physical work environment can be created where everyone feels welcomed, valued, and supported, regardless of background, personal characteristics, and needs. We will highlight some key insights from these sessions.
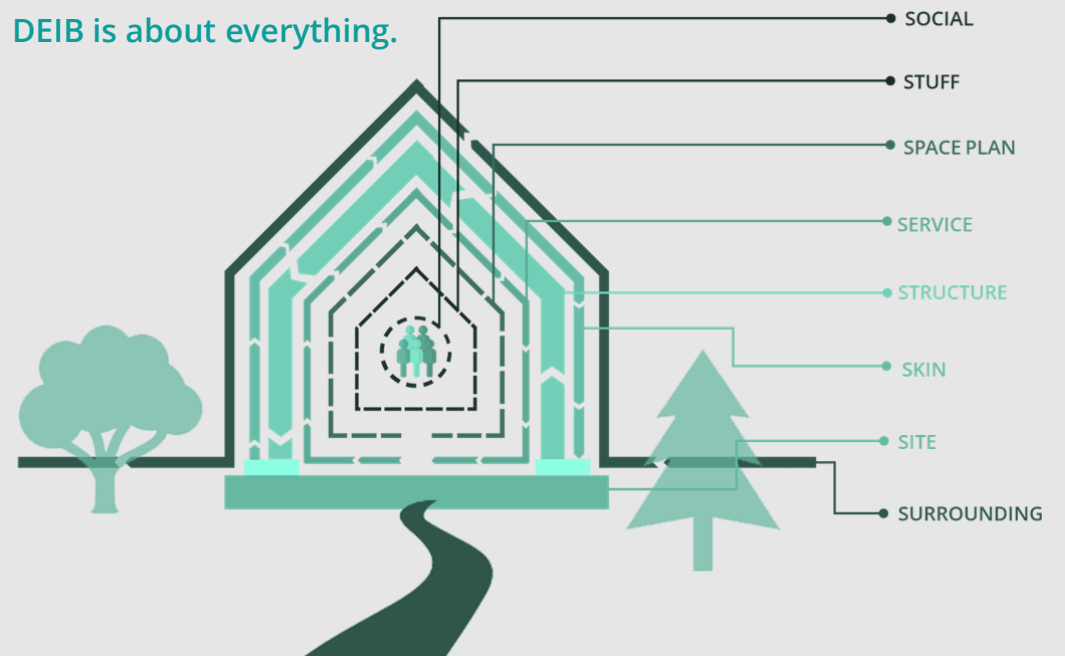
DEIB workshop

WorkWire has developed a custom DEIB workshop. In this workshop, we create a safe environment for all participants to contribute, drawing from their own backgrounds, personalities, and preferences, to think about a workplace where everyone feels welcome, valued, and supported. WorkWire achieves this through (anonymous) statements, open discussions, and an active exercise in which participants, drawing from their own *experience journey*, identify challenges and turn them into solutions for an optimal work environment. The workshop uses the *8S model*, which highlights the building aspects where the greatest improvements can be made, the possibilities for adjustments, the potential impact, and the stakeholders involved.

DEIB is about everyone

HEALTH	RELIGION	GENERATION	PHYSICAL ABILITY
Long Covid Burnout Sickness	Christianity Islam Spirituality	Generation Z Parenthood Caregivers	Physical disability Visually/hearing impaired ......

GENDER	ETNICITY	EDUCATION	NEURO DIVERSITY
Male/Female Non-binary Transsexual	Black community Expats Asian	Intellect Reading and writing Digital literacy	Autism ADHD ....

General statements (Mentimeter)	Experience journey & touchpoint	(Silent) issues ideas per touchpoint	Quest for the ideal environment, for everyone

Staff entrance

Coffee bar

Restaurant

Cycling route to/from work

Bicycle parking

Meeting center

Private workstation

DEIB is about everything.

- SOCIAL
- STUFF
- SPACE PLAN
- SERVICE
- STRUCTURE
- SKIN
- SITE
- SURROUNDING

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Key insights

- **Silent issues:** Many issues experienced by users in office environments go unspoken, often due to shame, fear of labour dispute, or a perceived lack of support. To make these "silent issues" more open for discussion, a culture must be created in which users feel safe and heard. Furthermore, the organization needs to be structured in a way that allows these issues to be addressed proactively and integrally, rather than reactively and situationally.

- **Do not decide for others:** To find the right solutions, it is crucial to engage with experts and learn from their experiences and needs. While this may seem like common sense, in practice, solutions are often developed with the best of intentions but are frequently based on assumptions that do not align with actual needs of the users.

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Arriving at the barrier, I press the intercom button. The barrier remains closed, followed by the usual silence.

Experience journey of a person with hearing Impairment

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General key insights

- **DEIB goes beyond laws and regulations:** Building regulation, the working condition act, and quality marks such as BREEAM and WELL do not guarantee an office environment that meets the diverse needs of all user groups. Achieving this requires a deeper approach. The new NEN9120:2024 (currently in development) is a valuable addition. This standard aims for a universal design ("Design for All"), where (office) buildings are accessible and usable by a wide range of users, including people with disabilities.

- **Universal solutions, freedom of choice and controllability:** Many of the improvements suggested during the sessions are universal in nature. They ensure that specific user groups are better supported without causing inconvenience to others. For example, providing access to the coffee machine or printer from a wheelchair. Other suggestions are more specific and require freedom of choice and controllability, such as the ability to adjust lighting at the workstation according to personal preferences.

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These are challenging years when raising young children. My mental and physical well-being fluctuate daily. Sometimes, I need to take a break.

Experience journey of a parent with young children

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Insights in Detail

Often, it's the small details that make a difference, and recognizing them requires a high level of empathy. Throughout the sessions, a variety of real-life examples were shared, highlighting challenges that user groups face on a regular or even daily basis. These challenges can lead employees to feel unsupported or even undervalued in the workplace. Some concrete examples include:

- An open and vibrant entrance area with a coffee bar where neurodivergent employees may become overwhelmed by sensory stimulation.

- A coffee machine with a touchscreen, making it difficult for a visually impaired employee to find the "button" to make coffee independently.

- An employee going through menopause, experiencing recurring hot flashes, who needs a private space to retreat to for a while.

- An employee returning to work after a burnout or long COVID who requires a low stimulus environment to focus.

- A lift intercom without video connection, leaving an employee with hearing impairments unable to communicate with the emergency response team in case of an emergency.

- A wheelchair user unable to use the printer because the control display is located at the top of the device, making it inaccessible.

- Employees avoiding the company restaurant because they find the space and atmosphere overwhelming, preferring to use their breaks to mentally recharge.

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> "The hustle and bustle, the noise, the light in the atrium... I am already exhausted before I reach a workplace.

Experience journey of an autistic person

NEN9120:2024

The NEN9120:2024 is a new Dutch standard that outlines performance requirements and specifications for the accessibility and usability of buildings. It is a national elaboration of the European standard NEN-EN 17210, focusing on promoting equal access and ease of use in the built environment. The standard aims for a universal design, ensuring that buildings are accessible and usable by a wide range of users, including people with disabilities.

The standard is developed in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the Netherlands ratified in 2016. This contributes to the national implementation of accessibility requirements as described in the Buildings and Living Environment Decree.

The NEN 9120:2024 provides guidelines for architects, construction companies, and facility managers to design and manage accessible buildings. It serves as a tool in tenders and contracts for projects where accessibility is a central focus

> **The lighting levels required for older people, for example to read, can be up to four times higher than those needed for younger people.**

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DEIB and Experience Based Working

- **DEIB:** Through this research, WorkWire has gained valuable insights into the current state of DEIB and its connection to the physical workplace environment. Additionally, we have developed a comprehensive methodology to help organizations define their DEIB strategy and vision (through Value Fit sessions), assess employee needs (via the DEIB survey module), and collaboratively design improvement plans through Experience Journeys. DEIB requires a tailored approach, driven by the specific needs of employees, which can differ from one organization to another. While there is still much work to be done, we are excited to continue expanding our expertise in partnership with our clients and making working environments future-proof through DEIB initiatives!

- **Experience Based Working**: The DEIB research is an integral part of our vision for the future of the workplace. The way we work has undergone a fundamental transformation in recent years. While Activity Based Working (ABW) was once the go-to model for flexibility, we are now recognizing its limitations. At WorkWire, we believe it's time for a new approach: Experience Based Working (EBW). EBW goes beyond just activities and workspaces, it fosters an environment that supports diversity, individual needs, and well-being. With EBW, our goal is to create a workplace where everyone feels truly supported, empowering employees to not only perform at their best but also feel a sense of connection.

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DEIB and Experience Based Working

The core of Experience Based Working (EBW) lies in creating diversity, freedom of choice, and flexibility in the workplace environment. While Activity Based Working (ABW) focuses on supporting activities, EBW goes further by designing workspaces and areas based on emotional needs as well. Additionally, EBW addresses both the social aspect of the workplace, facilitating interaction and connection, and the individual aspect, ensuring employees have space for physical and mental recovery.
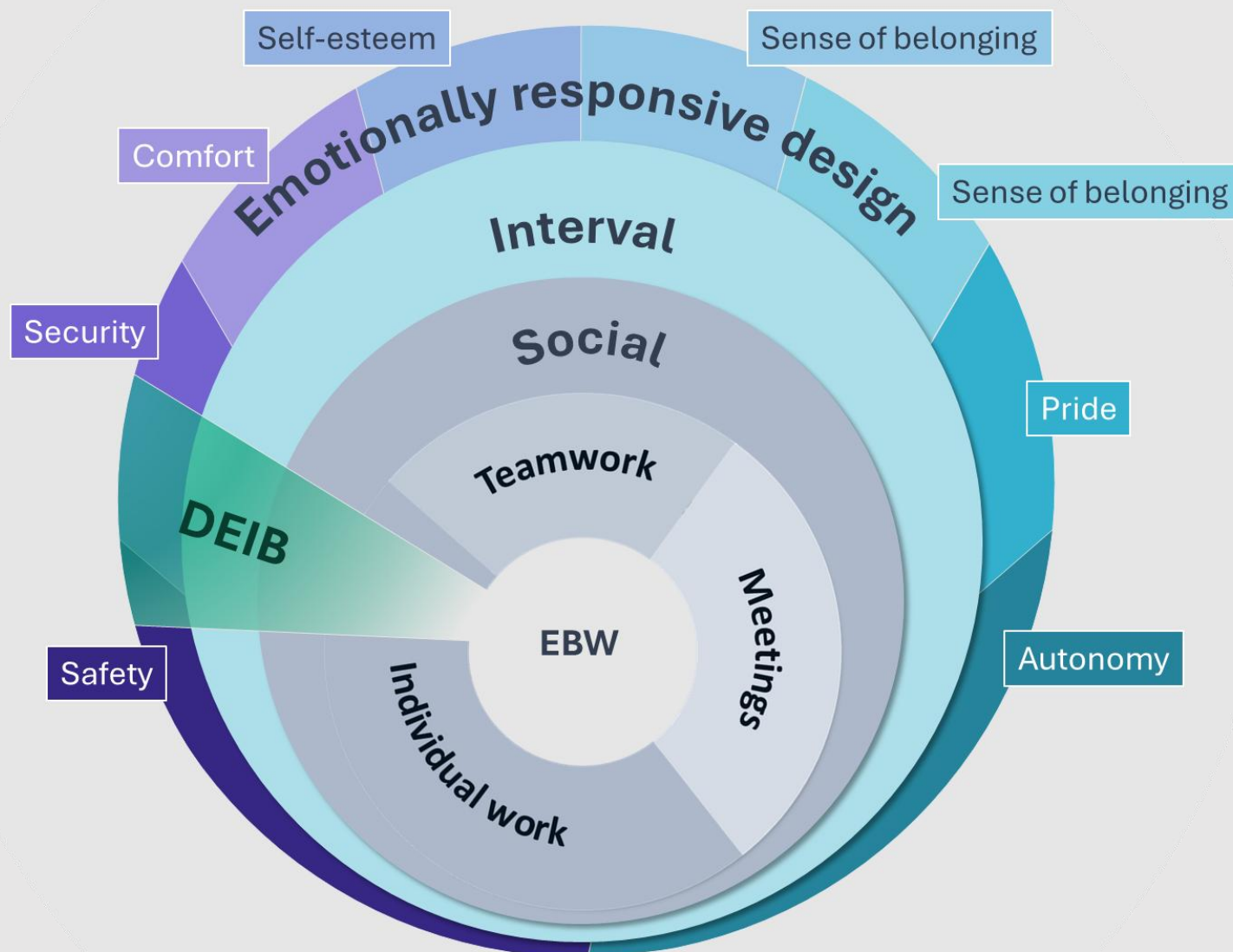
More information?

Would you like to learn more about our DEIB research and its findings? Or are you interested in our services related to workplace strategy, concept development, and interior design? Please feel free to contact Esther Roelofs or Marco Verhoef, and they will be happy to provide more information.

With extensive experience across various sectors, we offer solutions that help organizations create future-proof work environments.

We support the entire process, from strategy and concept development to interior design and design management, connecting user needs with the building in the best possible way. This makes our approach unique.
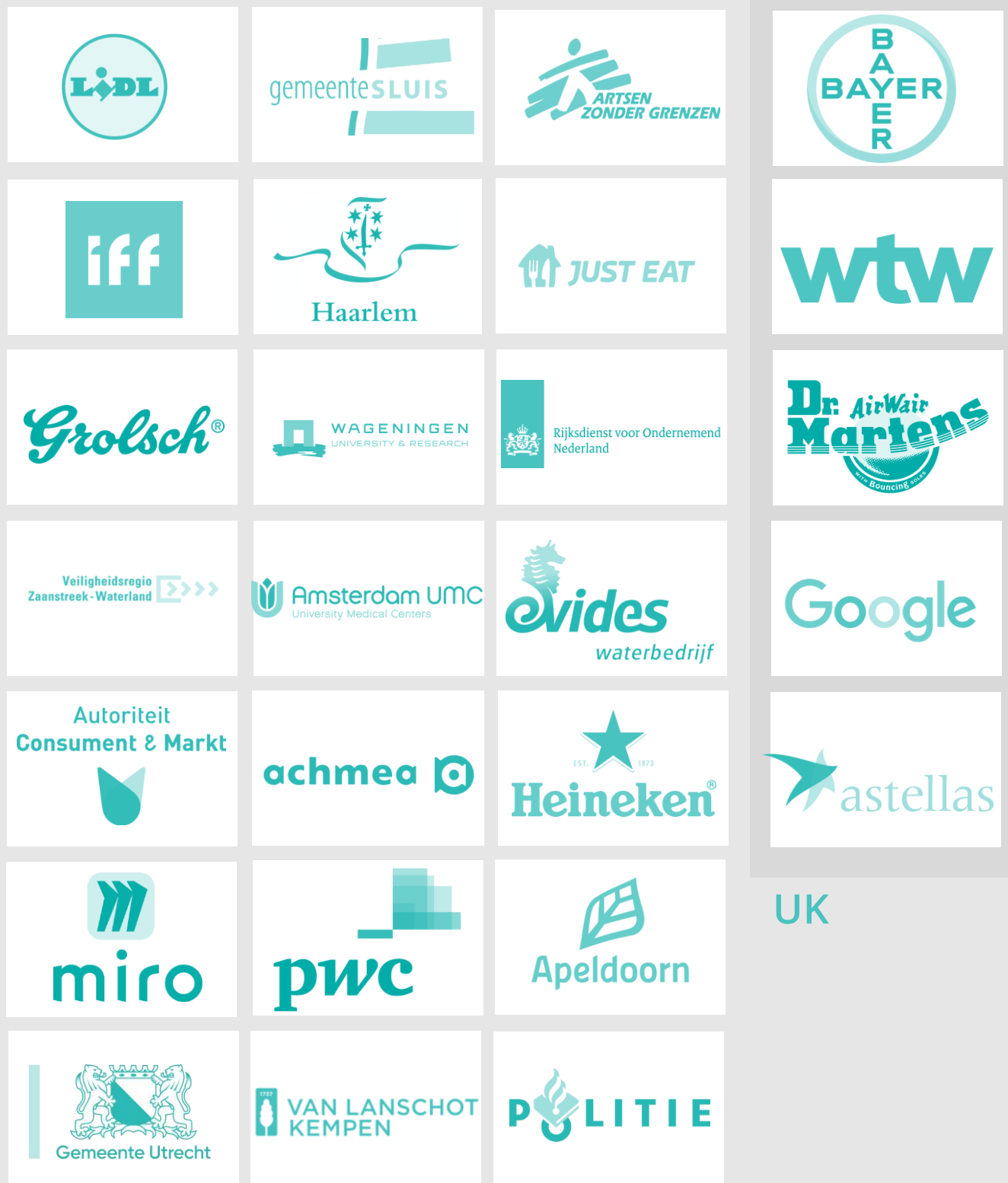
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Participating organizations

The following organizations have participated in our DEIB research:

UK

NL

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WORKWIRE.NL

WORKWIRE
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