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From Symbolic to Strategic: Validating a Systems-Based Maturity Framework for Inclusion in Organizations

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Abstract

This study introduces and validates a Strategic Inclusion Maturity Framework for assessing how well organizations embed inclusion into their systems, structures, and governance. Grounded in behavioral science, systems theory, and implementation science, the framework comprises five diagnostic domains: Aligned Objectives, Data Driven, Accountable Strategy, Capable Engagement, and Consistent Commitment. A two-phase diagnostic process was conducted across 20 organizations from diverse sectors and geographies, involving key internal stakeholders. Exploratory factor analysis confirmed the structural integrity of the framework, and cluster analysis identified two distinct organizational profiles: Embedded Strategists and Symbolic Starters. Correlation and regression analyses further revealed that inclusion maturity positively predicts external employee perceptions, as reflected in Glassdoor scores, independent of organizational size. These findings validate the tool's conceptual and practical utility, offering a scalable mechanism for internal benchmarking, cross-sector comparison, and strategic transformation. The study concludes with implications for practice and a future research agenda positioning inclusion as a measurable enterprise capability.

Keywords

Inclusion Maturity, Organizational Systems, DEI Strategy, Institutional Theory, Behavioral Science

1. Introduction

The pursuit of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has become a defining focus for organizations across sectors. In recent years, organizational commitments to

inclusion have proliferated, marked by the introduction of executive-level DEI roles, the expansion of employee resource groups (ERGs), and the visibility of inclusion campaigns. However, these efforts often fall short of delivering meaningful, measurable outcomes (Chen & Weber, 2023; Green, 2024; Okatta et al., 2024). While DEI discourse has become more prominent, the translation of inclusion intent into embedded, accountable, and enterprise-level systems remains underdeveloped in both practice and research.

Existing literature has largely emphasized employee perceptions, cultural climate, or representational metrics (O'Keefe et al., 2020; Pasztor, 2019). These dimensions are critical, but they offer only a partial perspective on how inclusion is operationalized within organizations. Perception-based measures reflect lived experience but often fail to capture the structural and institutional mechanisms that shape that experience. Simultaneously, inclusion efforts have frequently been siloed within human resources or treated as peripheral initiatives disconnected from core business strategy, operational governance, or performance infrastructure.

Strategic inclusion maturity refers to the degree to which inclusion is systematically embedded across the architecture of an organization, spanning its strategic priorities, operational processes, data systems, performance frameworks, and governance structures (Wilson, 2024). In contrast to representational or cultural approaches that emphasize workforce composition or employee sentiment, strategic maturity emphasizes institutional mechanisms that sustain inclusion as an organizational capability. It involves formal alignment between intent and implementation, ensuring that inclusion is reinforced not only through culture but through codified expectations, resourced structures, and ongoing accountability. Emerging empirical work has begun to highlight the importance of this systems-based approach (Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Rolls et al., 2025), showing that the presence of embedded, structural inclusion mechanisms is positively associated with organizational trust, innovation, and employee engagement.

This study responds to calls for a more systemic, embedded approach to inclusion (Gagnon et al., 2022; Kamenopoulou, 2016; Wong, 2019). Drawing from organizational systems theory (Lai et al., 2017), institutional theory (Scott, 1987), and implementation science (Ogden & Fixsen, 2015), it positions inclusion as an enterprise capability requiring intentional design, embedded governance, and continuous feedback loops. These perspectives underscore that inclusion, like safety or quality, must be sustained through structured practices, leadership accountability, and system alignment, not merely through aspirational values or one-off initiatives.

To that end, this research introduces and empirically tests a Strategic Inclusion Maturity Framework, grounded in behavioral science and informed by systems thinking. The framework focuses on organizational mechanisms that embed inclusion into strategic objectives, governance structures, data systems, and operational processes. Maturity is assessed across five diagnostic domains: Aligned Ob-

jectives, Data Driven, Accountable Strategy, Capable Engagement, and Consistent Commitment.

Through the development and validation of a 23-item diagnostic tool applied across a diverse organizational sample, this study offers both a practical mechanism for internal assessment and a scholarly contribution to inclusion measurement. It further examines how inclusion maturity relates to external performance indicators—including employee perception (via Glassdoor scores) and organizational size, offering a rare systems-level view of inclusion's structural embedding and strategic relevance.

To the author's knowledge, this is the first empirical study to assess the strategic maturity of inclusion using a validated diagnostic tool, cluster-based typology, and external outcome measures. In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in the literature. It reframes inclusion not as an interpersonal or cultural initiative, but as a measurable and institutionally embedded function of organizational effectiveness.

2. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional, mixed-informant quantitative design to examine the extent to which organizations have strategically embedded inclusion into their systems, structures, and ways of working. The research was intentionally designed to move beyond sentiment or perception-based assessments and instead evaluate measurable indicators of strategic inclusion maturity across core organizational levers.

The study included 20 organizations from diverse sectors, including finance, construction, not-for-profit, education, and manufacturing. These organizations were geographically distributed across Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and one classified as "Other". Each organization was asked to convene a purposive panel of internal stakeholders with direct accountability for, or insight into, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) outcomes.

To ensure contextually grounded input, the diagnostic questionnaire was distributed to individuals in the following roles: Chief Diversity Officer (or most senior DEI-equivalent executive), Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), DEI specialists or officers (where present), members of the Inclusion Council (some of which included C-Suite level executives), and representatives from Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).

A breakdown of respondents by organization and role category is provided in Table 1.

Each participant completed the questionnaire independently online. To enhance psychological safety and methodological rigor, a two-phase process was used. Phase one was initial independent completion, in which participants rated inclusion maturity indicators independently and anonymously. This approach minimized social desirability bias and encouraged authentic reflection. Step two was a facilitated group review followed by reassessment. Aggregate initial scores

Table 1. Respondents by organization and role category.

Organization ID	Role Category		
	C-Suite	DEI Role/Council	ERG Member
1	1	6	12
2	2	3	5
3	0	5	10
4	1	8	9
5	0	12	31
6	2	10	44
7	1	2	12
8	0	8	26
9	0	2	19
10	0	1	6
11	1	1	13
12	0	2	45
13	0	2	17
14	1	4	8
15	1	4	17
16	0	11	11
17	1	2	3
18	2	7	6
19	0	5	5
20	3	7	0

were presented back to the group in a virtual session. A trained facilitator led a structured discussion of each item, encouraging participants to surface differences across business units, identity groups, and operational contexts. After this dialogue, each participant re-completed the questionnaire individually and privately. These second-round responses served as the final dataset for analysis.

This two-phase process was grounded in dialogic data refinement and collective sensemaking (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017), similar in structure to Delphi-style methodologies (Gordon, 1994) used in applied research. It enabled participants to consider broader organizational contexts without pressure to conform, thus improving both data quality and cognitive engagement. By combining independent judgment with structured peer input, the design promoted deeper analysis while preserving individual autonomy.

The diagnostic instrument comprised 23 items grouped into five theoretically informed domains:

1) Aligned Objectives
2) Data Driven
3) Accountable Strategy
4) Capable Engagement

5) Consistent Commitment

Although the present tool does not directly assess the 8-Inclusion Needs of All People®, the diagnostic indicators were influenced by earlier work by the researcher establishing inclusion needs as systemic, measurable, and intersectionally experienced (Wilson, 2023b). Consequently, the researcher developed the tool, drawing on applied DEI strategy experience and aligning it with behavioral science, organizational systems theory, and governance literature (Wilson, 2024). The initial pool of diagnostic items was generated based on practitioner-informed insights and theoretical constructs related to strategic HRM capability, implementation science, and inclusion research (e.g., Fixsen et al., 2005; Nishii & Leroy, 2022; Ulrich et al., 2009). These indicators were then refined through iterative feedback from DEI practitioners, HR leaders, and academic peers to ensure both conceptual alignment and practical utility. Items were further mapped to validated frameworks in organizational capability (da Cunha Bezerra et al., 2020), implementation fidelity (Carroll et al., 2007), and systems change (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007) to support construct validity and consistency across domains.

Each item was designed to evaluate the system-level presence and quality of mechanisms that embed inclusion into organizational infrastructure, not individual opinions or isolated actions. Examples include the integration of inclusion into strategic plans, data systems, accountability frameworks, leadership expectations, and operational resilience protocols.

All items were rated using a 3-point Likert scale: 1 = No (Not in place), 2 = Maybe (Somewhat or inconsistently in place), 3 = Yes (Clearly and consistently in place). This scale was intentionally selected to reduce cognitive load, promote clarity, and support actionable maturity classification. In particular, the 3-point structure minimized central tendency bias and enabled clearer categorization for downstream analysis, including cluster modeling.

To examine external validity, the organizational dataset was augmented with two continuous variables: Glassdoor scores (n = 19) and employee count. These variables were sourced from public databases and official disclosures. Glassdoor scores provide an aggregated measure of employee sentiment, while employee count serves as a proxy for organizational scale. Due to observed skewness in both variables, non-parametric tests and log transformation were employed in subsequent analysis.

The study adhered to established ethical principles for organizational research. Participation was voluntary, and no personal or identifying information was collected. Responses were anonymous and reported in aggregate form only. Participants were informed that the data would be used for research purposes and that findings would be de-identified. The design prioritized psychological safety, data protection, and the respectful inclusion of diverse perspectives. While the study examined system-level organizational data rather than individual-level human subjects, all protocols were still aligned with the principles of beneficence, autonomy, and justice outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the

Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Participating organizations received a summary of their inclusion maturity results to support informed internal decision-making.

3. Results

Analysis of the 23 strategic inclusion indicators revealed notable variation in maturity levels across participating organizations. Item-level data showed that widespread implementation was uncommon. Only 5 indicators had more than 25% of organizations rating them as fully implemented ("Yes"). 11 indicators were marked as "No" by 50% or more of respondents, indicating systemic absence. The remaining items were predominantly rated as "Maybe", suggesting partial or inconsistent application.

The highest-scoring indicators reflected early-stage symbolic or cultural alignment (Table 2):

- Inclusion has been mapped to the organization's mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities (Mean = 1.95)
- Inclusive celebrations are planned and aligned with organizational strategy (Mean = 1.95)
- A comprehensive inclusion narrative has been defined for the organization (Mean = 1.89)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for highest scoring indicators.

Indicator	Mean	% "Yes"	% "No"
Inclusion linked to strategy	1.95	26%	16%
Inclusive celebrations aligned	1.95	25%	19%
Comprehensive narrative defined	1.89	21%	24%

In contrast, the lowest-scoring indicators highlighted significant gaps in system-level integration (Table 3):

- Success measures using both lead and lag indicators have been set (Mean = 1.37; 74% "No")
- A plan for navigating challenging internal or external inclusion-related events is in place (Mean = 1.42; 68% "No")
- An inclusion strategy has been prepared with clear and concise action plans for each initiative (Mean = 1.47; 58% "No")

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for lowest scoring indicators.

Indicator	Mean	% "Yes"	% "No"
Lead and lag metrics in place	1.37	11%	74%
Crisis/event response plan exists	1.42	16%	68%
Actionable strategy plan exists	1.47	21%	58%

These findings suggest that while many organizations have articulated inclusion intent, few have implemented the measurable, accountable, and resilient systems necessary for sustained impact.

Descriptive statistics for the two additional variables, Glassdoor score and employee count, revealed the following:

- Glassdoor score (n = 19): Mean = 3.45, Range = 1.00 to 4.50, SD = 0.77, Skewness = −2.05
- Employee count: Mean = 9,941, Range = 100 to 96,000, SD = 22,204, Skewness = 3.60

Due to non-normal distributions, both variables were subjected to log transformation and non-parametric testing.

Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha across the five diagnostic domains (Table 4). All domains exceeded the accepted threshold of $\alpha > 0.75$, indicating strong internal reliability.

Table 4. Cronbach's alpha by framework domain.

Domain	Cronback's Alpha
Aligned Objectives	0.78
Data Driven	0.80
Accountable Strategy	0.79
Capable Engagement	0.84
Consistent Commitment	0.88

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted to examine structural validity (Table 5). A five-component solution explained 80.2% of total variance, supporting the theoretical domain structure. The first principal component accounted for 51.0% of total variance, indicating a strong latent dimension of overall strategic inclusion maturity. Loadings largely aligned with the predefined domains, with minor cross-loading consistent with the interdependence of organizational systems.

Table 5. PCA component loadings (Summary).

Component	% Variance Explained	Notable Domains Loaded
1	51.0%	All (overall maturity)
2	10.3%	Capable Engagement
3	7.2%	Data Driven
4	6.5%	Accountable Strategy
5	5.2%	Aligned Objectives

To identify organizational inclusion profiles, k-means clustering was applied to standardized item responses. A two-cluster solution was selected based on silhou-

ette score analysis (score = 0.35). While a silhouette score above 0.5 typically indicates strong separation, scores around 0.3 are acceptable in complex, real-world social science datasets where constructs are interrelated (Ketchen & Shook, 1996). The resulting clusters were:

- **Embedded Strategists:** Organizations with consistently high scores across all domains, indicating mature, integrated inclusion infrastructure (mean item scores 2.14 to 3.00);
- **Symbolic Starters:** Organizations with uneven or lower scores, reflecting aspirational or partial implementation (mean item scores 1.00 to 1.67).

The distribution of mean domain scores across these two clusters is visualized in Figure 1, illustrating the distinct maturity profiles observed.

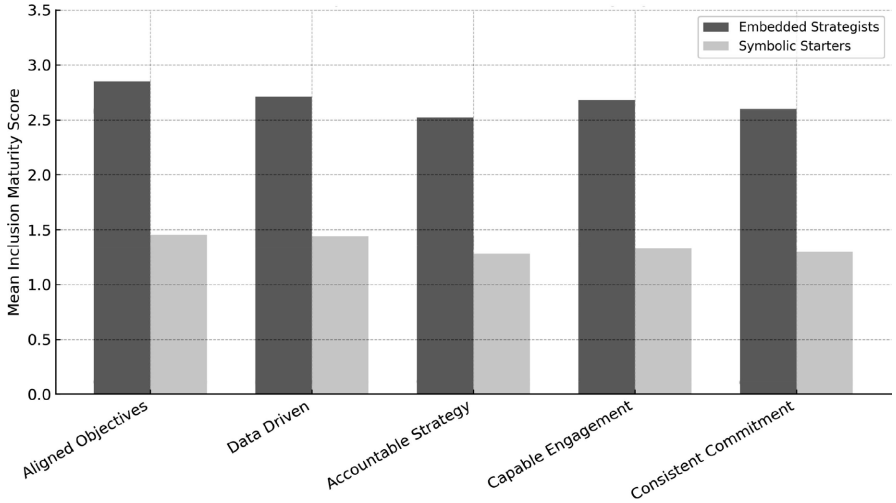

Figure 1. Cluster comparison of inclusion maturity by domain.

Key differentiators included: 1) the presence of formal data collection and analysis mechanisms, 2) integration of inclusion in policy and role expectations, 3) use of evaluation processes tied to DEI projects, and 4) Existence of governance linked to inclusion outcomes. Mann-Whitney U tests confirmed the following:

- **Glassdoor score**: Embedded Strategists (Mean = 3.92) significantly outperformed Symbolic Starters (Mean = 3.23), $p = 0.028$;
- **Employee count**: No significant difference between clusters, $p = 0.759$.

Spearman correlations revealed the following relationships:

- Inclusion maturity and Glassdoor score: ρ = 0.47 (moderate positive correlation);
- Inclusion maturity and employee count: ρ = 0.18 (weak positive correlation);
- Glassdoor score and employee count: ρ = 0.33 (mild positive correlation).

An Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was conducted to explore the predictive power of inclusion maturity on employee sentiment (Table 6). The model included log-transformed employee count as a control variable. These results suggest that strategic inclusion maturity is a statistically significant predictor of external employee sentiment, while organizational size is not.

Table 6. OLS regression predicting glassdoor score.

Predictor	β	*p*-value
Inclusion Maturity	0.65	0.050
Log(Employee Count)	0.075	0.393
Intercept	1.79	0.037
Model R^2	0.27	

The results of this study empirically validate the Strategic Inclusion Maturity Framework as a reliable and conceptually grounded tool. The five-domain structure demonstrates strong internal consistency and structural coherence. The two-cluster typology, "Embedded Strategists" and "Symbolic Starters", distinguishes between aspirational and embedded approaches, offering insight into how inclusion is operationalized across organizational systems.

External data analysis shows that organizations with more mature inclusion infrastructure are perceived more favorably by employees, as reflected in Glassdoor scores. The lack of a relationship between maturity and organizational size further supports the premise that strategic inclusion is a matter of system design, not scale.

These findings support the framework's utility for both academic inquiry and practical application in diagnosing, benchmarking, and improving inclusion at a systemic level.

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine how inclusion is operationalized as a strategic function within organizations, beyond well-meaning rhetoric, cultural initiatives, or standalone programs. By assessing 23 indicators across five empirically supported domains—1) Aligned Objectives, 2) Data Driven, 3) Accountable Strategy, 4) Capable Engagement, and 5) Consistent Commitment—the findings offer a detailed picture of current maturity levels, emerging patterns, and persistent structural gaps.

These five domains are conceptualized as interconnected organizational capabilities that collectively power the maturity of inclusion systems. As illustrated in Figure 2, the diagram represents inclusion maturity as both a structured capability and a dynamic, system-integrated process. Each domain contributes to strategic inclusion and is embedded within the organizational infrastructure and feedback loops.

A core finding of this study is the consistent gap between symbolic alignment and structural execution. Many participating organizations reported visible commitment to inclusion, such as linking inclusion to mission and values, establishing executive sponsorship, and holding celebratory events. However, the indicators most frequently affirmed reflected cultural signaling rather than operational integration. In contrast, items that required deliberate, system-level implementation,

such as success metrics, structured evaluation processes, and crisis readiness, received substantially lower scores.

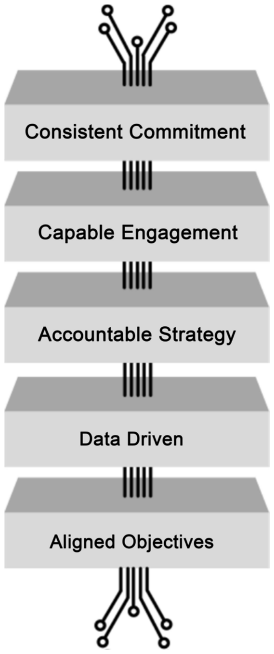

Figure 2. A system-integrated model of strategic inclusion maturity.

This pattern mirrors what has been observed in other domains of enterprise transformation: visible commitment often precedes the more complex and slower work of building infrastructure, governance, and accountability (Korhonen & Halén, 2017; Proper et al., 2017). In the case of inclusion, this suggests that many organizations are still operating in an early maturity phase, where aspiration outpaces execution, and symbolic gestures are not yet backed by embedded mechanisms for sustainable change. These findings underscore the need for a more disciplined and strategic approach to inclusion that moves beyond culture-building and into the operational core of how decisions are made, performance is measured, and systems are designed.

The statistical reliability of the five maturity domains reinforces the framework's conceptual integrity. Internal consistency values (Cronbach's alpha between 0.78 and 0.88) confirm that the items within each domain form coherent constructs. This consistency provides confidence that the tool can be used not only for organizational diagnostics but also for cross-organizational benchmarking and future research replication.

Moreover, each maturity domain maps closely to foundational dimensions of organizational performance:

- **Aligned Objectives** strengthens strategic coherence and performance alignment by ensuring inclusion is reflected in measurable goals, leadership priorities, and organizational direction rather than just aspirational rhetoric (Schie-

mann, 2009; Volk & Zerfass, 2020).

- **Data Driven** maturity enhances evidence-informed decision making and performance tracking. This enables continuous improvement, risk anticipation, and leadership accountability (Magakwe, 2025; Zhang, 2024).
- **Accountable Strategy** embeds inclusion into governance and performance systems by linking it to role expectations, outcome monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms. This drives consistent behavior and supports organizational fairness (Newcomer & Caudle, 2011; Rujomba & Yona, 2024).
- **Capable Engagement** builds internal capability by investing in resourcing, systems, and leadership skills. These factors are critical for implementation fidelity, cultural change, and sustained performance (Barrick et al., 2015; Hall et al., 2024).
- **Consistent Commitment** signals organizational resilience and readiness by institutionalizing inclusion practices across changing conditions. This strengthens adaptability, stakeholder trust, and long-term enterprise integrity (Huzooree & Yadav, 2025; Moşteanu, 2024).

Exploratory factor analysis (Watkins, 2018) further supports the theoretical structure of the model. A five-component solution explained over 80% of the variance, with the first principal component accounting for more than half. This indicates a strong underlying dimension of overall strategic inclusion maturity. This finding aligns with systems thinking literature (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Lai et al., 2017), which emphasizes the interdependence of structures, behaviors, and feedback loops in producing sustained organizational outcomes.

One of this study's most compelling contributions is its validation of inclusion maturity against external employee perceptions. Organizations with higher maturity scores also had significantly higher Glassdoor ratings, with a moderate positive correlation ($\rho = 0.47$) that held even when controlling for organizational size. Regression analysis showed that inclusion maturity was a statistically significant predictor of Glassdoor score ($\beta = 0.65$, $p = 0.050$), while employee count was not. This finding reinforces the diagnostic's credibility and its relevance to outcomes that matter in real-world settings.

Moreover, the lack of a significant relationship between employee count and maturity score or cluster assignment suggests that organizational scale is not a prerequisite for strategic inclusion. Smaller organizations are equally capable of embedding mature systems, if intentionality and integration are present.

Perhaps the most actionable insight from this study emerged through cluster analysis, which revealed two distinct inclusion maturity profiles:

- "Embedded Strategists" are organizations that demonstrate high levels of maturity across all five domains. These organizations have embedded inclusion within formal governance, aligned policies, measurement systems, and clear stakeholder accountability. Their approach reflects integration rather than initiative, positioning inclusion as a function of how the organization operates.
- "Symbolic Starters", by contrast, reflect organizations that have made early

commitments or begun piloting inclusion-related activities but have not yet institutionalized these efforts. Their inclusion efforts tend to remain symbolic or siloed, lacking systemic reinforcement across strategy, decision-making, or operations.

These findings contribute timely insight into how organizations can evolve from declarative commitments to embedded, measurable inclusion systems. The alignment between maturity scores and external employee perceptions illustrates that the framework not only diagnoses internal capability but also predicts real-world impact. As the next sections outline, this study not only validates a reliable maturity diagnostic but also invites new theoretical framing and practical application for inclusion as a core enterprise capability.

4.1. Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the emerging field of strategic inclusion by offering a systems-based, measurable approach to assessing organizational maturity. While much of the existing literature has emphasized representation, perceptions, or cultural climate (Bowe et al., 2023), this research shifts the focus toward the operationalization of inclusion within the organizational architecture, across strategy, governance, data, capability, and accountability mechanisms.

By validating a five-domain diagnostic framework (Aligned Objectives, Data Driven, Accountable Strategy, Capable Engagement, and Consistent Commitment), this study advances the theoretical understanding of inclusion as a structural and institutional construct. It reinforces the view that sustainable inclusion is not achieved through individual behaviors or awareness alone, but through systemic conditions that support and reinforce inclusive outcomes.

This reframing bridges gaps between behavioral science, organizational systems theory, and implementation science, inviting scholars to reconceptualize inclusion as a core component of enterprise functioning and transformation. The framework creates a foundation for future theory-building around strategic inclusion maturity and its relationship to organizational performance, risk, and resilience.

4.2. Implications for Practice

The findings from this study offer actionable guidance for organizations seeking to move beyond symbolic inclusion efforts and embed practices that are measurable, durable, and aligned with enterprise performance.

First, organizations must transition from awareness campaigns and performative gestures to operational integration. This means embedding inclusion into performance management, governance structures, and decision-making. The diagnostic data show a clear pattern: symbolic indicators such as celebrations and narratives were commonly affirmed, while structural indicators such as metrics, evaluation, and preparedness were often absent. This gap highlights that visible commitment alone cannot deliver lasting change. Inclusion efforts remain fragile

without systems that drive accountability, reinforce expectations, and enable improvement.

Second, the two-cluster typology (Embedded Strategists and Symbolic Starters) provides a useful reference point for organizational self-assessment. Leadership teams can use this maturity model to identify where they currently sit and what strategic levers are needed to shift from intention to integration. It supports planning and prioritization by highlighting which capabilities and systems require investment to elevate maturity across all five domains.

Third, the diagnostic tool has practical value as a benchmarking instrument. It can be used to assess readiness before embarking on major DEI initiatives, monitor progress over time, and inform internal and cross-industry comparisons. Because it focuses on system-level integration rather than sentiment or representation alone, it enables organizations to measure what matters most for long-term inclusion capability.

Fourth, the integration of external perception data (Glassdoor ratings) illustrates how organizations can validate internal progress through credible external indicators. In environments where DEI efforts are under scrutiny, demonstrating alignment between system maturity and stakeholder experience enhances defensibility, transparency, and strategic positioning.

Finally, the results of this study reinforce that inclusion should not be treated as a standalone initiative. It must be understood as a core driver of organizational effectiveness, on equal footing with priorities such as safety, quality, and innovation. For inclusion to deliver impact, it must be woven into the design of systems, the allocation of resources, the expectations of leaders, and the way success is defined and measured. When inclusion is treated as a system-level capability to be built, rather than a value to be expressed, organizations are more likely to achieve equitable and enduring outcomes.

5. Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides a foundation for assessing strategic inclusion maturity in organizations and highlights several opportunities to extend and refine this work.

Replication with more demographically and structurally diverse samples would improve generalizability and support sector-specific comparisons. This would also enable the use of Confirmatory Factor Analysis to validate the five-domain framework across varied organizational settings. Broader sampling should intentionally include organizations at different stages of inclusion readiness, including those with limited resources or engagement.

Additionally, organizational inclusion maturity may be shaped by national culture and industry norms. For instance, organizations operating in high power-distance or collectivist societies may emphasize different mechanisms than those in more individualist or egalitarian cultures. Similarly, sectoral conventions—such as those in construction, finance, or education—may influence which maturity domains are prioritized, resisted, or underdeveloped. Future research should ex-

amine how these contextual factors shape trajectories of inclusion system design and implementation.

To address the limitations of self-reported data, future studies should incorporate triangulation methods such as internal audits, document reviews, performance dashboards, and external verification. A broader sampling strategy that includes non-ERG member senior executives, mid-level managers, and frontline employees would provide a more balanced view of organizational inclusion maturity and reduce potential overrepresentation by identity-based advocates.

Self-selection bias also warrants consideration. Organizations that opted into the study may be further along in their inclusion efforts than the general population, potentially inflating maturity levels. Research that engages organizations with varying levels of inclusion commitment will be important for capturing a fuller picture of the landscape.

Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how inclusion maturity evolves over time and in response to organizational events such as leadership transitions, restructures, or external pressures. Realist evaluation and implementation tracking may offer valuable insight into the mechanisms and contextual factors that influence the sustainability of system-level change.

Additional research should explore whether the presence of mature inclusion systems translates to improved employee experience. Mixed-methods studies that combine diagnostic data with interviews, focus groups, or survey responses disaggregated by identity can help assess alignment between infrastructure and lived experience. The 8-Inclusion Needs of All People® framework (Wilson, 2023a) offers a useful lens for this inquiry.

Further investigation is also needed into the outcomes associated with strategic inclusion maturity. Predictive models could test relationships between maturity and key performance indicators such as psychological safety, innovation, engagement, and retention of underrepresented talent. Structural Equation Modeling or mediation analysis may help clarify the role of specific domains in influencing these outcomes.

Finally, future research should extend beyond internal stakeholders to explore how external actors (such as investors, regulators, and customers) perceive inclusion maturity. As organizations increasingly face scrutiny on ESG and ethical practices, perceptions of inclusion infrastructure may shape trust, reputation, and strategic value.

6. Conclusion

This study advances the field of organizational inclusion by validating a practical, systems-based framework for assessing and embedding strategic inclusion maturity. Through empirical analysis across a diverse organizational sample, it demonstrates that inclusion must extend beyond symbolic commitments to become a measurable enterprise capability embedded in governance, strategy, data, and operational design. The five-domain Strategic Inclusion Maturity Framework pro-

vides researchers and practitioners with a structured approach to diagnosing systemic readiness, benchmarking progress, and aligning inclusion with organizational performance outcomes.

By linking maturity indicators with external employee perceptions, this research affirms that structural integration is a critical determinant of inclusion credibility and effectiveness (both internally and externally). The validated framework offers a scalable and defensible tool for embedding inclusion in ways that are rigorous, sustainable, and aligned with enterprise priorities. Future research should build on this foundation through longitudinal studies, outcome-based validation, and further exploration of how inclusion maturity influences employee experience, institutional resilience, and organizational performance.

In a context where inclusion efforts face increasing scrutiny, this study underscores that durable change arises not from intention alone, but from the intentional design of systems that institutionalize inclusive practices and outcomes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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