

Introduction

Tokenism in the workplace refers to a practice where an organisation includes a minimal number of individuals from underrepresented groups to create an appearance of diversity while issues of systemic inequalities remain unchanged. Tokenism can perpetuate systemic inequalities and hinder true diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts within an organisation. This factsheet aims to provide an overview of tokenism in the workplace, its impact, and strategies to combat it.

What is it?

Tokenism is the practice of including a limited number of individuals from underrepresented groups for the purpose of creating a pretence of inclusivity. It involves giving these individuals limited visibility, voice, or influence while maintaining existing power structures and unequal distribution of opportunities.

The negative impacts of tokenism

Emotional burden: Tokenised individuals often face increased pressure to represent their entire community, leading to added stress, isolation, and imposter syndrome.

Undermined credibility: Being seen as a token can undermine the credibility and professional reputation of individuals, as others may question their qualifications and expertise.

Limited growth opportunities: Tokenism can restrict career growth by denying tokenised individuals access to critical opportunities, advancement, or mentorship.

Decreased morale and engagement: When employees perceive tokenism in the workplace, it can lead to decreased morale, disengagement, and reduced trust in the organisation's commitment to DEI.

Association of stereotypes: Tokenism could lead to tokenised individuals being categorised or stereotyped due to the group they belong to.

Summary

Tokenism in the workplace undermines genuine efforts towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is important to note that not all efforts to be more diverse should be interpreted as tokenism. Individuals who are the first with their protected characteristic to occupy a role should first be seen for their individual contribution and may also be celebrated as trailblazers. It is only where no subsequent colleagues with the same protected characteristic can follow that it may appear that tokenism has taken place.

By recognising the signs of tokenism, understanding its impact, and implementing strategies to combat it, organisations can create a more inclusive environment that values all employees and promotes equal opportunities for growth and success. Building a workplace culture that embraces true diversity benefits not only individuals but also contributes to improved innovation, creativity, and overall organisational performance.

Signs of tokenism

Limited representation: Tokenism is often characterised by a small number of individuals from underrepresented groups, making them highly visible as tokens of diversity.

Lack of inclusion: Tokenised individuals may be excluded from decision-making processes, important projects, or leadership roles, which prevents them from making a meaningful impact.

Symbolic gestures: Organisations may focus on superficial gestures, such as using diverse images in marketing materials or highlighting tokenised individuals in public events, without addressing deeper systemic issues.

Disregard for input: Tokenised individuals may experience their perspectives being dismissed or ignored, with their presence seen as a checkbox rather than valued contributions.

Strategies to combat tokenism

Genuine inclusion: Focus on creating an inclusive culture that values diversity and provides equal opportunities for all employees to contribute and advance.

Representation matters: Ensure diverse representation at all levels of the organisation, including leadership positions, to avoid tokenism and foster a sense of belonging.

Empowerment and support: Provide resources, mentorship, and development opportunities for individuals from underrepresented groups to thrive and grow professionally.

Amplify voices: Actively listen to and amplify the perspectives of tokenised individuals, giving them the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes.

Accountability and transparency: Establish measurable goals and hold leadership accountable for progress on DEI initiatives. Regularly communicate progress and challenges to foster transparency.