

DIVERSITY BEYOND BORDERS

*How Swedish companies are pioneering diversity,
equity and inclusion on the global stage*

EMBRACING DEI – A MATTER OF COMPETITIVENESS

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are critical elements of today's organisational strategies – serving as essential drivers of innovation, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. This importance is further accentuated by new regulatory obligations for companies operating in European countries and value chains when it comes to reporting on DEI policies and metrics.

Sweden has long been a global leader in equality and inclusion, with its national values and policies serving as a benchmark for progressive social and workplace practices. Building on this strong foundation, Swedish companies have extended these principles into

their global operations and established themselves as champions of DEI.

But translating these values into actionable strategies across diverse cultural and regulatory landscapes poses unique challenges and opportunities.

This report explores how Swedish global companies approach DEI in international markets, drawing on insights from interviews with 12 global companies and organisations strongly committed to DEI, highlighting both their successes and obstacles. The analysis focuses on four areas: motives, organisation, key initiatives, and challenges and outlines success factors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

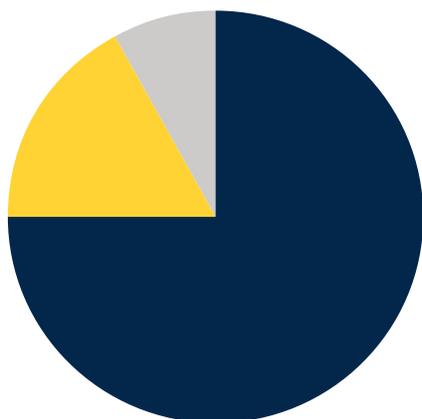
- **Motives:** Swedish global companies pursue DEI agendas as a strategic imperative to remain competitive. DEI drives competitiveness, talent attraction, and compliance with global sustainability objectives. Incorporating DEI into Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting has further reinforced its importance as an essential component of long-term organisational success.
- **Organisation:** DEI strategies are typically guided by top leadership and supported by HR and/or dedicated DEI teams. Implementation is left to regional and local teams, allowing for local adaptations to meet specific cultural and operational needs.
- **Key Initiatives:** Common practices include global parental leave policies, flexible work arrangements, and local initiatives tailored to regional challenges, such as creating supportive and inclusive working environments for underrepresented groups (e.g. women and people with disabilities). These initiatives foster employee well-being, increase workforce participation, and address systemic barriers to equality.
- **Challenges:** Operating in diverse cultural landscapes presents challenges such as resistance to change, societal biases, influencing already existing complexities of implementing global policies in local contexts.

SUCCESS FACTORS

- **Leadership commitment:** Strong leadership is essential to driving the DEI agenda, setting a clear vision, and serving as role models. DEI must be integrated into the company's core strategy, rather than being treated as an isolated HR initiative.
- **Employee engagement:** Engaging employees fosters inclusivity and ensures DEI initiatives are informed by diverse perspectives. Training programmes, workshops, surveys, and having ambassadors from different parts of the company and geographies plays a crucial role in this process.
- **Policy adaptation:** Policies should be adapted to local contexts to balance global standards with regional relevance.
- **Monitoring:** Setting measurable goals and implementing robust systems to track progress is critical for evaluating the impact of DEI initiatives.

DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEWEES

12 interview subjects



■ Companies ■ Institutions ■ Associations

INDUSTRIES

- Materials & Industrials
- Healthcare & Life Sciences
- Energy & Transport
- Digital Technologies
- Retail & Consumer Goods

EXAMPLE OF TITLES INTERVIEWED

- Group Head of Diversity & Inclusion
- Global Inclusion & Diversity Booster
- Head of Leadership, Culture and People Sustainability
- Global Well-being, Diversity, Inclusion Manager
- Regional HR Manager
- VP Sustainability

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is based on a combination of desktop research and interviews conducted with Swedish global companies actively engaged in DEI, complemented by experts at two government institutions and one business association in Sweden. The focus was primarily on large companies, as they tend to have more structured approaches, dedicated resources, and DEI strategies in place. Small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) were not the primary focus due to their entrepreneurial nature, limited resources, and often less formalised DEI practices, making it challenging to draw broad conclusions.

TERMINOLOGY

There are few rankings available that include Sweden or Swedish companies for each specific pillar of DEI, so the emphasis in some areas is on equality. It's important to understand that equity and equality are different: equality provides the same opportunities to everyone regardless of their circumstances, while equity allocates resources based on individual needs to address imbalances. The interviewed companies commonly use the terms DI, DEI or DEIB¹ to structure their work processes rather than equality.

Executive Global Insight is published by Business Sweden to give Swedish business leaders a regular deep-dive into the most important trends in cross-border trade. The report series helps decision-makers break down risks and opportunities and provides actionable insights, drawn from the knowledge and expertise of Business Sweden's global advisors based in more than 40 markets. [Subscribe now](#) and get our next analysis in your inbox.

DEFINITION OF DEI²

- **Diversity:** The variety of unique characteristics and experiences within a group, including race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability and more.
- **Equity:** Identifying and removing the barriers that create disparities in the access to resources and means, and the achievement of fair treatment and equal opportunities to thrive.
- **Inclusion:** Creating an environment where everyone feels welcomed, respected, and valued, allowing diverse individuals to fully participate and contribute.

¹ "Diversity and Inclusion", "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" or "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging"
² [International Institute for Management Development](#)



INTRODUCTION

WHY DEI IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

THE FACTS ARE UNMISTAKABLE. DEI IS HERE TO STAY AS MORE AND MORE COMPANIES SET THEIR SIGHTS ON CONTRIBUTING TO AGENDA 2030 WHILE GAINING A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE.

In an increasingly interconnected and globalised world, diversity, equity and inclusion is not just about aspirational values; these principles have become critical drivers of innovation, resilience, and sustainable growth. While some companies continue to prioritize DEI as a strategic advantage, recognizing its role in fostering diverse and inclusive workplaces, others are beginning to deprioritize these efforts amidst shifting economic and political landscapes. Nevertheless, DEI initiatives have been shown to enhance employee

engagement, attract and retain top talent, and improve decision-making by bringing together a broader range of perspectives³.

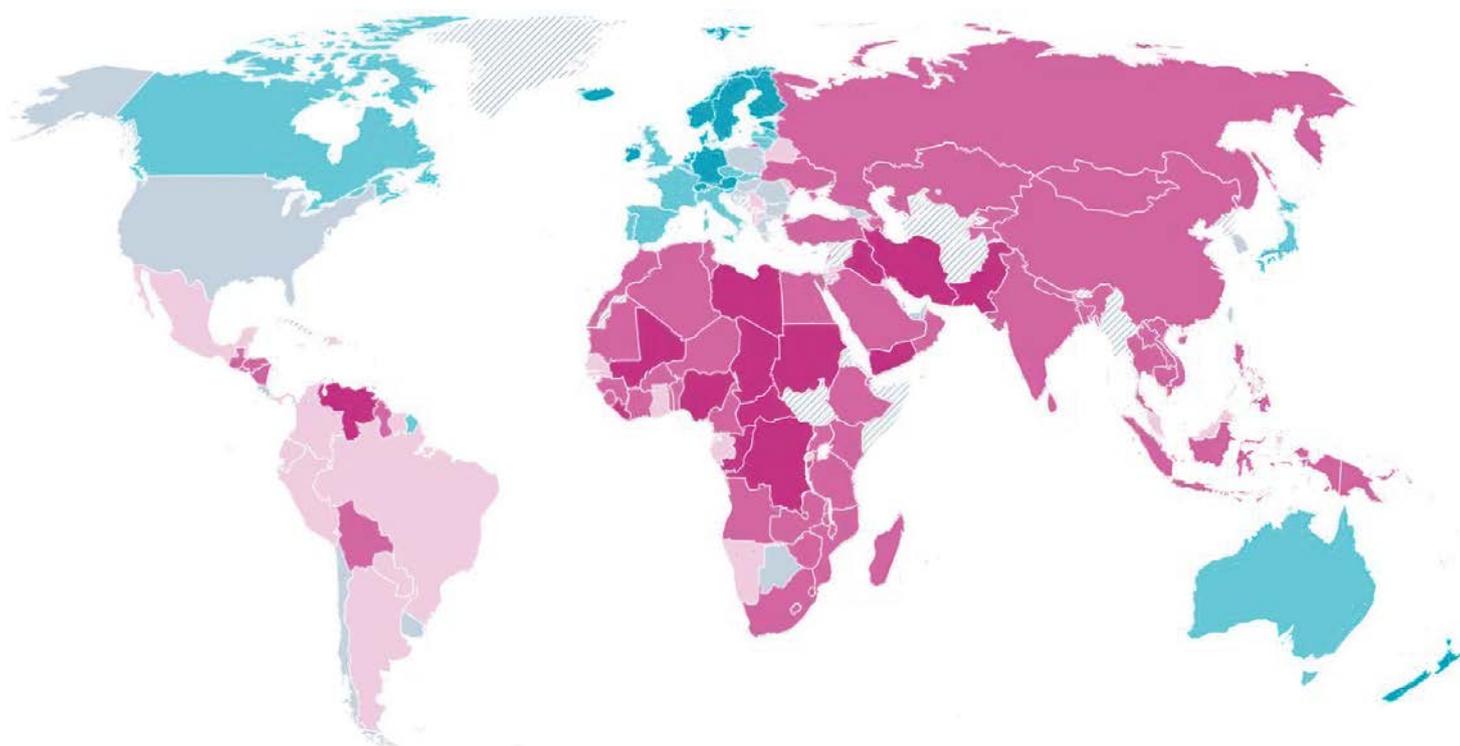
The growing emphasis on DEI is also intricately tied to global sustainability efforts, particularly the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goals such as SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) highlight the necessity of creating equitable opportunities for all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or background.



³ British Council: The power of inclusion: How DEI initiatives boost employee engagement



SWEDEN AND FINLAND HOLD TOP POSITIONS FOR HIGHEST ESG SCORES AMONG 150 COUNTRIES



THE GLOBAL COUNTRY SUSTAINABILITY RANKING MAP (COUNTRY ESG SCORE)⁴



Swedish companies, recognised for their strong sustainability performance, are well-positioned to contribute to these goals⁵. By developing their global DEI agendas, companies are addressing systemic inequalities while reinforcing their competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global marketplace.

This report explores how Swedish companies

approach DEI in international markets. It begins by examining Sweden's legacy as a global leader in equality and inclusion, followed by an in-depth look at how Swedish companies implement DEI strategies across diverse cultural and operational contexts. The final chapter distills key lessons and learnings, offering insights that can guide companies worldwide in advancing their DEI efforts.

⁴Robeco's Country Sustainability Report 2023
⁵Global Soft Power Index (2023)

SWEDEN LEADS GLOBAL PUSH FOR EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

WITH A STRONG REPUTATION FOR FAIRNESS, SOCIAL INCLUSION AND PROGRESSIVE POLICIES, SWEDEN IS FLYING THE FLAG FOR EQUALITY AND INCLUSION ON THE GLOBAL STAGE.

While this report focuses on DEI as a holistic framework, this chapter narrows its focus to equality and inclusion. This distinction reflects how countries are often evaluated at a global level – through measurable outcomes such as equality and inclusion, rather than equity. Sweden’s brand remains positive and consistently ranks as one of the top 10 strongest nation brands globally, according to Ipsos Anholt Nation Brands Index. Sweden is often associated with values such as democracy, good governance, reliability, social justice, quality of life, human rights, and equality.

This reputation is reflected in Brand Sweden, a term used to describe the country’s image abroad. Brand Sweden contributes to Swedish companies’ business success and competitiveness abroad according to 82% of the respondents in Business Sweden’s Global Business Climate Survey⁶.

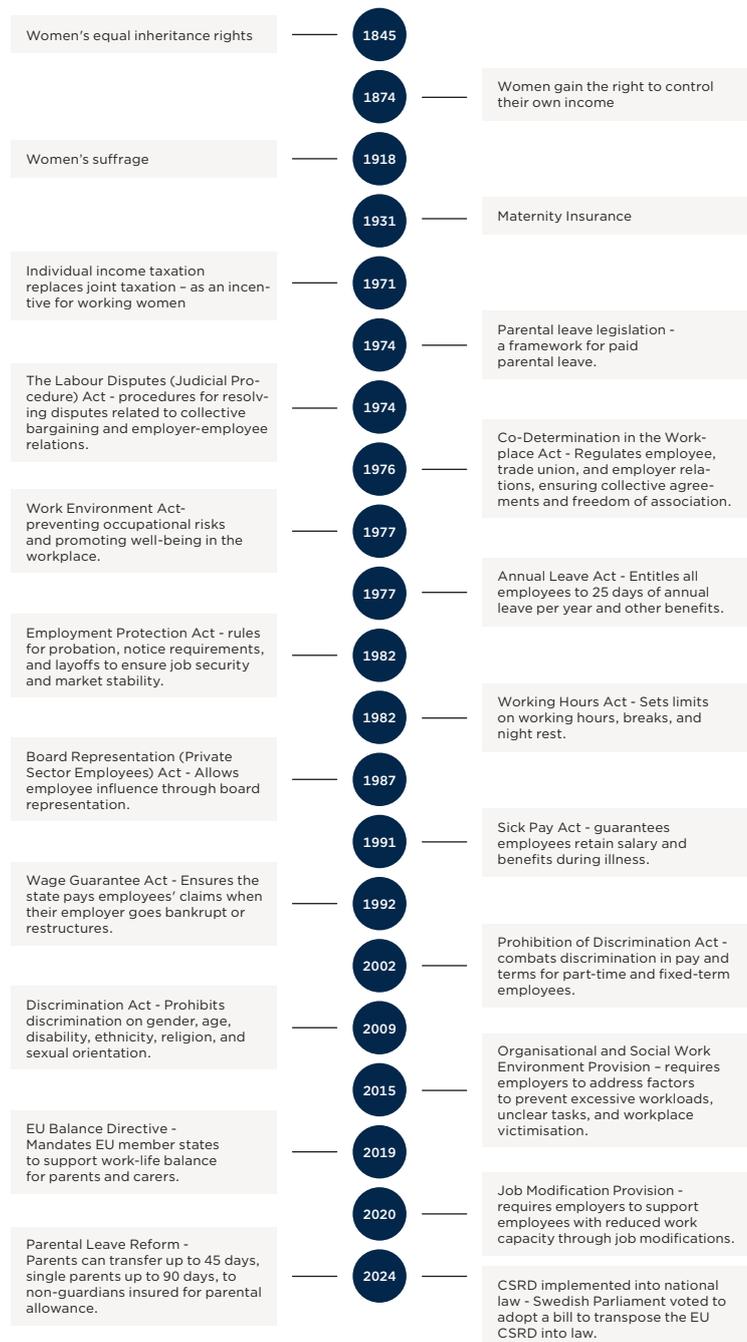
CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF PROGRESS

Sweden’s commitment to (gender) equality and inclusion dates back to the 1800s when legislative developments began shaping its progressive agenda. Among the first milestones was the introduction of women’s equal inheritance rights in 1845. This was followed by an act in 1874 giving women right to control their own income.

The 1970s marked another turning point with the removal of joint taxation and the introduction of a universal childcare system, enabling greater workforce participation. Since then, parental insurance has facilitated parental leave for both parents, enabling equal care responsibilities and economic activity for both women and men.^{7,8}

Today, parents can share 480 days of paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child. In addition, a reform introduced in 2024 allows these days to be transferred to non-legal guardians, such as grandparents or friends, making it the first policy of its kind worldwide⁹. The Parental Leave Act also includes VAB, “vård av sjukt barn” (care of sick children), allowing parents to take paid leave to care for a sick child under 12, which reinforces Sweden’s commitment to work-life balance.

Timeline highlighting key milestones in Sweden



⁶Business Sweden's Global Business Climate Survey (2024)

⁷SCB. På tal om kvinnor och män (2024)

⁸Swedish Government. Gender equality policy in Sweden

⁹EuroNews

Sweden's Discrimination Act (2009) is a cornerstone of its legal framework and protects individuals from discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or age. The act mandates that all Swedish workplaces need to actively work toward preventing discrimination and promoting equality, with requirements to document these efforts. This is complemented by the Work Environment Act (1977) which obliges employers to provide safe working conditions that consider both physical and psychological health.

Meanwhile, the Prohibition of Discrimination of Employees Working Part-Time and Employees with Fixed-Term Employment Act (2002) protects employees with part-time or fixed-term contracts, ensuring they receive equal pay and the same conditions as their full-time colleagues.

Besides this, Sweden leads in LGBTQIA+ inclusivity¹⁰. This is reflected in progressive policies such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the recognition of same-sex adoption¹¹.

These policies have not only shaped Sweden's domestic landscape but have also earned the country recognition in international rankings.

Sweden has long pursued equality through strong commitment to social and workplace inclusivity. The focus on equality measures improves the positioning of Swedish companies and is proven positive in global talent attraction.

Executive Director,
Nordic Center at University of California Berkeley

TOP MARKS IN GLOBAL RANKINGS

Sweden tops the Nation Brands Index's "Equality in Society" score, ranks third for "Quality of Life"¹², and is also in the top spot among EU Member States in the 2024 Gender Equality Index.¹³

The Gender Equality Index monitors gender equality across EU Member States, and assesses progress in several areas of life, including work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health. Sweden is the leader in gender equality within the EU, coming in at 1st place with a score of 82.¹⁴

In the Global Gender Gap Report, countries are benchmarked based on gender parity across four key areas: economic participation, educational attainment, health outcomes, and political empowerment. In 2023, Sweden ranked 5th with a score of 82.¹⁵ Other Nordic countries dominated the rankings with Iceland in the lead with a score of 94, followed by Finland (89), and Norway (86).¹⁶

In addition, Sweden ranks among the world's most inclusive countries to work in with women holding 11% of CEO positions, compared to

"The perception and performance of Brand Sweden is in harmony and companies use this as a competitive asset, perhaps more in investment and talent attraction than product in the market"

Brand strategist,
Swedish Institute

only 7% in similar markets. Sweden is a leader in female representation at CFO level, with 27% of these roles held by women. This high level of representation extends across other leadership areas: Board 38%, Executives 27%, Senior Management 30%, Workforce 36%.¹⁷

Sweden also ranks 11th among 49 European countries on the ILGA Europe Rainbow Index, further cementing its leadership in LGBTQIA+ rights through progressive policies and inclusive practices.¹⁸

Finally, Sweden ranks among the top 5 most inclusive countries globally, reflecting its strong performance across various categories including race, gender and LGBTQ+, setting a global benchmark for equality and inclusion.¹⁹

THE TOP 5 MOST INCLUSIVE COUNTRIES

S/N	Country	Inclusivity Score
1	New Zealand	81.21
2	Portugal	78.52
3	Norway	77.43
4	Iceland	77.09
5	Sweden	76.85

SWEDEN'S INCLUSIVENESS RANKING BREAKOUT PER CATEGORY

S/N	Category	Rank - Out of 152
1	Race	1st
2	Gender	3rd
3	LGBTQ+	6th
4	Religion	64th
5	Disability	55th
6	General Population	9th

¹⁰Global Citizen Solutions (2024), ILGA Europe (2023)

¹¹Government Offices of Sweden

¹²The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (2023)

¹³Gender Equality Index (2024)

¹⁴European Institute for Gender Equality, Gender Equality Index (2024)

¹⁵Countries are given a score from 1 to 100, where 100

representing complete gender equality

¹⁶World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap (2024)

¹⁷Equileap, Gender Equality Report & Ranking (2024)

¹⁸ILGA Europe, Rainbow Index (2024)

¹⁹Inclusiveness Index | Othering & Belonging Institute



INTERVIEW STUDY

HOW ARE SWEDISH COMPANIES PROMOTING DEI ABROAD?

THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION WHEN IT COMES ROLLING OUT GLOBAL DEI POLICIES. BASED ON INTERVIEW FINDINGS, THIS CHAPTER EXPLORES HOW SWEDISH COMPANIES ARE TAKING ON THE CHALLENGE.

Building on Sweden's global reputation as a leader in equality and inclusion, many Swedish companies have established themselves as champions of diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces. This is reflected in rankings such as the Financial Times Diversity Leaders 2024, where European companies are evaluated based on their success in promoting diversity and inclusion within the workplace.

In this ranking, 50 Swedish companies are featured out of 850 European companies. Notably, the Swedish-Finnish company Stora Enso topped the list in 2023 for its inclusive culture.²⁰

This chapter explores how Swedish companies approach DEI in international markets. Drawing insights from interviews with global companies strongly committed to DEI, the analysis focuses on four key areas: Motives, Organisation, Key Initiatives, and Challenges.

1

MOTIVES: WHY FOCUS ON DEI?

One of the main reasons Swedish companies pursue a DEI agenda is that it drives competitiveness and makes them attractive employers for both women and men. This helps companies stay relevant in their industries, attract top talent, address potential labour shortages and reduce the risk of going out of business.

DEI is increasingly demanded and expected among clients, suppliers, and employees alike. As industries evolve, having a DEI agenda is

becoming more of a competitive necessity than a voluntary disclosure, making it essential for companies to meet these expectations.

There is an inherent link between DEI and sustainability objectives. In the past decade, many companies have incorporated DEI goals, such as increasing the number of women in leadership roles, into their broader sustainability strategies by linking these organisational goals to the SDGs in Agenda 2030; particularly SDG 5 Gender Quality, and SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities.

More recently, these voluntary metrics have transformed into legal requirements for companies operating in European countries and value chains, following the introduction of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and, more recently, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). CSRD marks a key milestone as it significantly raises the requirements for transparency and accountability in sustainability and DEI practices.

European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS²¹) – such as S1 Own Workforce²² – become vital for virtually every company and require companies to disclose information on gender pay gap, equal pay for equal work, share of people with disabilities and DEI policies and practices, as well as detailing how overarching these benefits are for employees. This integration of DEI into sustainability strategies underscores that DEI is both about achieving long-term organisational goals and responsible business practices, and securing an advantage in the fierce competition for talent attraction and retention.

“Diversity without inclusion doesn't work. Diversity has no use if we cannot be inclusive.”

Head of Leadership, Culture and People Sustainability, Scania

²⁰ [Inclusive culture at Stora Enso bolsters the safety factor \(November 2023\)](#)

²¹ [European Sustainability Reporting Standards \(ESRS\)](#)

²² [ESRS S1 Own Workforce](#)

2

ORGANISATION: HOW ARE DEI INITIATIVES RUN?

Large Swedish companies approach DEI governance in various ways, but a few common patterns emerge. Most strategic decisions are guided by an executive committee, which relies on the HR team or specialised DEI functions to outline the strategy. The HR teams play a key role in gathering input, benchmarking, and providing informed suggestions to the executive committee.

Reaching out within large companies, from HQ to each employee, can be challenging. A useful approach is to host interactive workshops, which serve both educational purposes and help gather input and insights from employees globally. Another frequently used method to gather employee input is through regular surveys (monthly or quarterly basis).

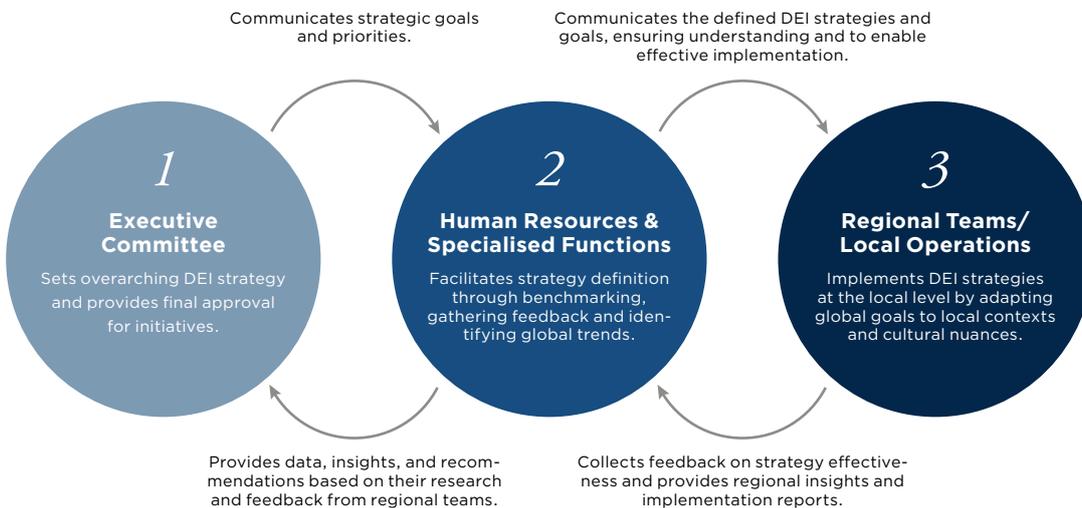
Some companies reinforce governance by creating committees composed of regional representatives, or ambassadors, to ensure that global goals are adapted to local contexts and cultural nuances. These committees collaborate to propose initiatives to the executive committee, drawing on benchmarking of industry best practices, regional insights, and feedback from external stakeholders (e.g. clients and suppliers). This balance between global oversight and local flexibility allows companies to maintain consistency while addressing regional specificities.

Some companies partner with external consulting firms to evaluate their existing processes, identify gaps, and develop comprehensive DEI strategies that cover all aspects of the business.

“The DEI work is not only to fulfil regulations, but critical to the business in order to be successful - and we aren’t successful without our people.”

Head of Leadership, Culture and People Sustainability, Scania

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE FOR DEI GOVERNANCE



The diversity of our workforce and the inclusion of our people is fundamental to our success. We truly believe that diverse teams will perform better and that when our employees can come as they are and be themselves, they will be more engaged and thrive.

Group Head of Diversity & Inclusion, ABB

EXAMPLES OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

- **Epiroc** has an Inclusion and Diversity Board chaired by the CEO with regional presidents and representatives from various divisions. The board uses a combination of benchmarking, employee surveys, and input from partners to propose global initiatives. The company is also piloting the creation of Inclusion and Diversity networks, making sure that the regions are more involved in the strategy definition process.
- **Scania** has a network of approximately 200 "Skill Capture Ambassadors," with 60% of them being managers. HR works closely with these ambassadors, who have received specialised training. Additionally, there is a Community of Expertise, that consists of subject matter experts and representatives from the global HR organisation. They bring local perspectives and support implementation, ensuring that the initiatives are adapted to local needs.



3

KEY INITIATIVES: HOW IS DEI BEING IMPLEMENTED?

Two common practices adopted by a majority of the Swedish companies interviewed for this report, are global parental leave and flexible work arrangements. Both practices are adopted with the goal to create inclusive workplaces and foster employee well-being worldwide.

Global parental leave has become a standard for many Swedish companies, ensuring equitable opportunities for all employees regardless of gender or family structure. By encouraging shared parental responsibilities, these policies not only help to retain talent but also address gender biases that often affect women disproportionately in the workplace.

One of the interviewed companies is even exploring the possibility of introducing the Swedish concept VAB (care of sick child) in their overseas business, allowing parents to take paid leave to care for children under 12 years of age.

Global parental leave

To address gaps in parental leave policies globally, particularly in markets with limited provisions for men or non-traditional family structures, many companies are introducing comprehensive parental leave policies. These aim to strengthen employee well-being and work-life balance by setting a global gender-neutral parental leave with

a minimum standard of paid weeks (range of 12-14 weeks in our interview sample).

A global policy rollout ensures consistency across all markets and is primarily aimed towards male employees, as men commonly have fewer parental leave days in most locations. This can also help eliminate biases in hiring, particularly against women, by addressing concerns about potential workforce interruptions due to parenthood.

The global parental leave policies provide a competitive advantage in recruitment but also boost employee engagement. Success stories shared by employees on social media highlight the positive impact of these initiatives. Additionally, at some companies, male CEOs are leading by example by taking parental leave themselves and sharing their views, describing it as "a great experience that has also benefited work."²³

Flexible work policy

Flexible work has proven particularly effective when it comes to increasing the participation of women in the workforce, especially in regions where caregiving responsibilities primarily fall on women.

This means that employees can tailor work schedules and locations to meet their personal and professional needs. Some companies take flexibility further by enabling employees to work from any location through "Work from Anywhere" programmes.

²³ Spotify's U.K. boss took paid paternity leave 26 times longer than average American dad and Fortune Europe and Global paid parental leave at Sandvik

CASE STUDIES - GLOBAL INITIATIVES

■ Flexible work at Spotify

Spotify offers employees to work from home or the office and choose their work location, including country or state where applicable. As collaboration remains a priority, some roles are tied to specific regions or time zones to ensure effective teamwork during working hours. This programme fosters work-life balance and inclusivity, enabling employees to stay connected to their preferred environments while maintaining strong collaboration with their teams.

■ Flexible work at SKF

SKF has adopted region-specific flexible work policies tailored to the needs of local teams. In India and Indonesia, the company introduced hybrid work arrangements alongside workplace daycare facilities. This approach has not only increased the participation of women in operational roles but also improved employee retention by addressing key barriers for working parents.

■ Inclusive recruitment at Epiroc

By using inclusive job advertisements and actively shortlisting female candidates, Epiroc is working towards its goal of doubling the number of women in operational and managerial positions by 2030.

■ Compensation equity at Spotify

This initiative ensures fairness in pay practices through a structured approach to compensation equity – relying on regular audits, clear frameworks, and data-driven insights to address pay gaps and promote transparency. By aligning compensation with skills, experience, and performance, the initiative fosters trust and inclusivity while supporting Spotify's commitment to equitable workplace practices.

In addition to global practices, companies also implement local initiatives that address specific regional challenges and objectives.

CASE STUDIES - LOCAL INITIATIVES

■ Disability adaptations at Scania

In Brazil, companies are legally required to have a hiring quota for persons with disabilities, which ranges from 2-5%.²⁴ Scania has adapted its production facilities to attract and integrate employees with hearing disabilities. Modifications include installing visual alarms and communication systems that do not rely on auditory signals, ensuring a safe and effective work environment.

■ Women in manufacturing at Sandvik, India

Sandvik's "Training and Empowerment Program" in Patancheru, India, was launched in 2022 as a one-year initiative to increase women's participation in manufacturing. It provided technical and soft skills training for women from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing on inclusivity and career development. The programme combines theoretical and practical instruction, including organisational values and safety training. Nine participants were hired as apprentices, reflecting initial success in creating career pathways.

To overcome societal and operational barriers, Sandvik collaborated with local industries, implemented transport systems, employed security guards for women, adapted the work uniform, and ensured compliance with labour laws.

²⁴ DisabilityIn

EVALUATING THE INITIATIVES

When evaluating the DEI initiatives, companies tend to focus primarily on the adoption and impact on employees. Examples of key metrics tracked are number of employees participating in programmes such as flexible work or global parental leave and how these influence employee satisfaction and retention.

What can be improved, however, is the direct impact on company performance such as innovation, competitiveness, and financial results.



“Global policies are adapted to markets by considering local regulations and input from surveys. Local managers may provide additional benefits but must adhere to global minimum standards.”

Regional HR Manager (MEA), Getinge

4 CHALLENGES: WHAT'S BLOCKING PROGRESS?

Embracing DEI policies presents both opportunities and complexities for Swedish companies, particularly when operating across diverse cultural landscapes.

While Sweden's inclusive norms often set a global example, it's crucial to recognise that DEI cannot be universally enforced. Instead, these efforts must evolve organically, respecting local cultures and avoiding the perception of being imposed.

Patience and flexibility are key virtues to successfully advance the DEI agenda in global markets, where companies typically face the following five overarching challenges:

Adapting to diverse cultural landscapes

For many companies with a global footprint, a major challenge lies in adapting to the diverse cultural landscapes of local markets. Operating across multiple regions often means avoiding culture clashes that make implementing global policies difficult. For instance, practices that employees in Sweden may take for granted may be questionable or even forbidden in other locations.

Some companies adopt global communication strategies supporting LGBTQ+ rights, including external campaigns and celebratory activities. However, this approach is sensitive in countries where LGBTQ+ rights are not legally recognised or culturally accepted, requiring careful navigation to maintain inclusivity without risking operational setbacks.

Navigating hierarchical differences

In regions with stronger hierarchical structures, employees often find it difficult to challenge managers, unlike in Sweden's corporate culture where flat organisations (non-hierarchical) are common. In such environments, creating psychological safety for employees to voice their concerns and ideas has been identified as a critical enabler for fostering an inclusive work culture.

Overcoming local biases

Promoting progressive practices, such as increasing female workforce participation, often requires addressing deeply rooted societal expectations in certain markets. For example, a company encouraged managers to hire more female employees to increase women's participation in operational roles. But when adopting the new policy, women were often assigned to paperwork rather than workshop tasks, as male employees believed this protected them from physically demanding or potentially hazardous work.

Ensuring effective incentives structures

Generous parental leave policies inspired by Swedish standards have proven ambitious in regions where taking parental leave is not a cultural norm or where monetary incentives, such as sales commissions, discourage employees from using them. In such cases, companies face the challenge of encouraging employees—particularly men—to take leave once a global policy has been introduced.

“Navigating varied cultural norms and legal frameworks requires us to strike a balance between global standards and local realities, ensuring our policies remain inclusive and impactful everywhere we operate.”

Group Head of Diversity & Inclusion, ABB

FOUR KEYS TO SUCCESS

TAKING A MULTIFACETED APPROACH CENTERED ON LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT, EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT, ADAPTABLE POLICIES AND MONITORING PROGRESS LAYS A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS WHEN PROMOTING DEI ABROAD.

Sweden's dedication to DEI is deeply rooted in its national values and policies, establishing it as a global leader in promoting equality. While Swedish companies adopt employee-focused policies at home by default, implementation of these policies abroad requires careful consideration and planning.

As this report has shown, there is no shortage of cultural and societal challenges when trying to roll out DEI strategies consistently across diverse global markets. But as also demonstrated, many Swedish companies have taken innovative approaches that provide useful inspiration.

Our interviews with Swedish companies highlight four key success factors for effective implementation of DEI strategies in international markets. While there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution, these steps provide a valuable framework for developing initiatives that are tailored to diverse cultural and operational contexts.

1. LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT

- Ensure top management owns the strategic DEI agenda and communicates how it aligns with company goals and overall corporate strategy.
- Encourage top executives to act as role models.
- Avoid making DEI an isolated HR initiative.

2. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

- Promote open dialogue between employees and management to boost inclusivity in the decision-making process.
- Conduct training sessions and workshops to educate employees about unconscious biases, psychological safety, and related topics, starting with managers and then expand to all employees.
- Empower employees to act as ambassadors, taking ownership at the local level to gather insights on needs, and adapt and implement policies effectively.

3. POLICY ADAPTATION

- Benchmark against other companies and consider collaborating with external consulting firms to accelerate progress.
- Recognise that practices common in Sweden may not be universally understood; make local adaptations to address specific needs.
- Pair policies with actionable plans.
- Be open to feedback rounds to refine initiatives and allocate sufficient time for implementation.

4. MONITORING

- Set measurable targets and key performance indicators (KPIs).
- Develop processes to monitor the impact of policies and initiatives prior to launch, enabling follow-up on KPIs to evaluate the success.

Strong leadership sets the tone and direction for DEI, while employee engagement provides critical insights to shape initiatives that resonate across the company.

Adapting global policies to local contexts ensures a balance between maintaining high standards and addressing regional nuances, making DEI efforts both relevant and impactful. Additionally, implementing robust processes to measure the impact of these initiatives is essential for tracking progress and demonstrating their contribution to business success and competitiveness.

As global markets become increasingly interconnected, the experiences of Swedish companies abroad offer valuable lessons for organisations worldwide. By leveraging these insights, companies can navigate the complexities of DEI implementation and create workplaces that drive innovation, foster collaboration, and uphold fairness for all.

But that's not all. By focusing on these success factors, companies can build a strong foundation for impactful DEI efforts that unlock a competitive advantage on the international stage.



BUSINESS SWEDEN CAN SUPPORT YOU

Business Sweden is a trusted partner for Swedish companies when it comes to accelerating sustainability issues abroad. We provide strategic advice and practical support to integrate responsible practices in international business strategies.

Our expertise includes assessing sustainability risks, developing sustainable business models, and identifying partners. With our knowledge and network, we help Swedish companies drive positive impact while achieving international business goals.

With a unique mandate from the Swedish government and the business sector, our global team offers strategic advice and practical support in more than 40 markets worldwide.



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