



Integrating Inclusivity Into Your Submission & Application Process: 7 Key Strategies



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DIVERSITY ENGENDERS BETTER OUTCOMES FOR EVERYONE



A sea of white faces at a national conference.

A magazine's table of contents that lacks the names (and perspectives) of women.

A panel that is an echo chamber of the same opinion.

A list of award winners that matches the demographics of the award's review board.

Failing to think about inclusivity when you're collecting applications and submissions is unfair to those who are being excluded. But much more than even that, it harms the final impact of what you are trying to accomplish, because [diversity engenders better outcomes for everyone.](#)

How can you be more inclusive in a way that's fair to everyone? And how can you integrate inclusivity into your submission and application processes in a way that doesn't solely depend on the fallibility of humans, who all struggle with internalized biases and prejudices?

In this guide, we'll examine the importance of being inclusive—and the importance of having concrete and trackable operations that ensure inclusivity throughout your application and submission processes. Then, we'll look at 7 actionable steps that your organization can take to make sure your inclusive practices are integrated into what you do, every step of the way.

INTEGRATING INCLUSIVITY INTO YOUR SUBMISSION & APPLICATION PROCESS: 7 KEY STRATEGIES

WHAT IS INCLUSIVITY?

Inclusivity is the act of including people and groups in activities from which they have been historically excluded or marginalized—and making sure that those people have the same access and opportunities as others.

[Inclusivity goes a step further than diversity alone.](#) Ensuring diversity simply means people from a range of backgrounds are present. Ensuring inclusivity means that the diverse range of people who are present will feel they belong and not face further barriers from participating once included.

Those who directly benefit from inclusivity practices include:

- People of different races and cultural backgrounds.
- People with different gender identities.
- People with different sexual orientations.
- People who are disabled or differently abled.
- People from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Inclusivity might also include other types of groups, depending on your call for submissions/content and the nature of your organization. For example, if you're awarding grants to organizations in a specific geographical area, you may wish to be inclusive of the different regions within that area. If you're calling for papers about a specific topic, you may wish to be inclusive of people with different ideas, approaches, or schools of thought.

WHY IS INCLUSIVITY SO IMPORTANT?

It is so obviously important to include everyone, from all walks of life, in the work that you do: it's simply the fair and right choice to avoid bias and discrimination to the best of your ability.

But even beyond that solidly moral choice, there's a growing mountain of evidence that diversity and inclusion help everyone, not just the people and groups who have been historically marginalized. Doing the right thing in this case isn't just doing the right thing, it's doing the best thing.

An uptick in diversity and inclusion have been strongly linked to:

- [An increase in innovation](#)
- [Economic gains and improved financial performance](#)
- [Improved recruiting and employee retention](#)
- [A more ethical team](#)
- [A more competitive team](#)
- [Increased racial harmony and understanding](#)
- [Improved company culture](#)

As you can see, focusing on inclusion means focusing on the central, long-term goals of most any organization and increasing the overall impact of what you do.

SEVEN STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION

Understanding that inclusivity is the right thing to do is the first step. Understanding that inclusivity is the smart thing to do is the second step.

But how can you ensure that your organization is taking the correct steps towards being inclusive?

Beginning with your submission and application processes is a choice place to start, because it makes more certain that the people and content you are selecting to be associated with your organization are fairly diverse and optimal to achieving your goals. Just to name a few use cases, you can improve:

- Your hiring process
- Your grant application process
- Your conferences and events
- Your awards, scholarships, and fellowships
- Your corporate giving/CSR program
- Your admissions or auditions process
- Your peer review process
- Your calls for papers or content

The central strategy here is to put processes in place that override internalized bias and human error—and also to choose strategies that promote inclusion at every step and not just during a single stage.

Let's take a closer look.

1 Build your form thoughtfully

Be thoughtful about the demographic information you're requesting. Before creating your form, consider the questions you're planning to use. While it may seem common to include a field for gender, it may not be [necessary information](#) for your opportunity. Skipping these questions can streamline the application process and avoid unintentional exclusion altogether.

Instead of requesting that your applicants identify their gender, try framing the question differently. For example, on Eyebeam's Internship Application, they provide a field for applicants to specify their personal pronoun instead of their gender. This gets at the information you're seeking but challenges the male/female labels that might leave some applicants out.

What gender pronoun(s) do you use? *

Make a positive first impression in the guidelines. If you decide that certain information is critical to the form, explain your purpose in the guidelines. Applicants will be more comfortable providing you with sensitive information if your guidelines clarify your intention and ensure that applicant data will be protected. Including a privacy policy is a great way to do this. Here's an example from Durham Arts Council.

“Durham Arts Council promotes and encourages excellence in the creation, experience, and support of the arts all for the enrichment of our total community. Durham Arts Council does not discriminate against any employee or applicant for employment because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, political affiliation or belief, age, or disability.

Use inclusive language. Not using inclusive language in your guidelines and forms is a huge red flag to applicants—both those who belong to marginalized groups and those who want to work with organizations who take diversity seriously. Have a style guide that ensures your forms are written with inclusive language and know the [central principles of writing inclusively](#).

Give your applicants and submitters lots of options.

Limited categories are one of the biggest culprits of exclusion. While preset options can be helpful for form efficiency, they also imply that your potential applicant should fit into one of the categories you listed. Providing an array of answers is important, and providing an opportunity to self-describe is best. Offering users a blank field to self-describe and use the answer they find most accurate for themselves establishes respect and makes applicants feel affirmed and included.

And if the information you're requesting is sensitive, *always allow submitters the option not to answer*. Even if you've gone the extra mile to make the question inclusive, the final decision should be left up to them. This shows submitters your highest concern is respecting their privacy and may make them feel more inclined to answer.

Seek feedback. Using inclusive language is a lot easier said than done. At the end of the day, it's always better to seek feedback than risk excluding potential applicants. You can use [additional forms](#) to ask applicants for feedback and help you better understand the issues that may affect them.

Ensuring that your language is fully inclusive requires a lot of researching, thinking, and learning, but the end goal—a form that makes all users feel considered and accepted—is worth it.

2

Reduce barriers to entry

You may be unintentionally excluding certain groups of people from even applying to your opportunity by putting up barriers to entry in your guidelines and forms. These barriers mean that people from marginalized groups or diverse backgrounds may begin to look into your job, program, or other opportunity but then stop the process and reject it altogether.

Lowering or eliminating barriers completely can widen your net and increase the number of applications you receive (which almost always means increasing the diversity of your applications).

- **Consider your fees.** Many submission or application fees are vital to the success of your organization. But eliminating or lowering your fees can greatly reduce economic barriers to applying or submitting. High fees mean that less privileged people may hesitate to participate—and that not only includes people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but also women and minorities. Other options include tiered, optional, or pay-what-you-can fees.
- **Don't ask for too much information.** Long and involved forms mean fewer people will fill them out, and once again, you'll have more limited submissions or applications to select from.

For each question on your form, ask yourself why you need that information and whether it's really necessary to the process. Yes, you want to collect enough information to make the best decision, but you don't want to lose out on awesome candidates and ideas by creating a barrier of busywork.

- **Make your form accessible.** Inaccessible forms can be a huge barrier to entry for many groups of people, from those with disabilities, to those with limited technical knowledge, to those with limited time. Choosing an accessible application and submission platform, and learning the [guidelines to creating accessible websites and online environments](#) is key to including huge percentages of the population and finding the absolute best fit for your opportunities.

Some organizations complain that they'd be more inclusive if they could only get a more diverse pool of applications or submissions. Many of these organizations don't realize that their processes for soliciting applications are exclusionary.

3 Cast a wider net

It's extremely important to write your forms using inclusive language and to tear down barriers to entry for marginalized groups. But what happens if diverse audiences don't even know that your opportunity exists?

You don't want to put a ton of inclusive measures in place, and then get a shallow pool of applicants anyway.

- **Market you call.** Getting the word out is imperative, and the dollars you spend on marketing your opportunity will come back when you get to make selections out of a larger, deeper pool. How you market depends heavily on what kind of call you're making, but you can take steps like writing a press release, taking out ads, and posting on social media.
- **Seek out diversity.** Don't make diverse candidates and ideas come to you. There are groups, organizations, and outlets who you can communicate with about your opportunities. Many mainstream groups have privileges and advantages that others don't. Going the extra mile to level the playing field helps all of us.
- **Make it known that you're inclusive.** Putting the word out about your opportunity—whether it's a grant or a job opening or a contest or a publication—is great. But making it known that you're actively seeking a diverse group and engaging in inclusivity practices is even better.

4 Educate everybody

Most of us don't want to be biased and don't want to discriminate. The issue is that we lack awareness and education. To create an inclusive environment, educating

everyone involved in the process is vital: your review board, your administrators, and your employees.

Issues that may be covered in your educational program include but are not limited to:

- Hidden and unconscious bias
- Affinity bias
- The difference between diversity and inclusion
- Sensitivity training
- Microaggressions and [micro-affirmations](#)

Training should be done regularly—not just once. And education doesn't just end with an annual workshop or talk. Combating bias and promoting inclusion should be an ongoing goal in your office.

5 Make your review panel more inclusive

A diverse panel of reviewers will improve your organization because having a variety of perspectives and insights helps to enhance project outcomes. Review panels often identify with people who look and think like them, and who have similar interests and backgrounds. This makes them biased against those who are different, even when they aren't outwardly discriminatory. Having a diverse panel helps ensure that your selections will be diverse as well.

How can you achieve a diverse panel?

Be clear about why you want diverse outside reviewers.

It's important to carefully consider the reasons you're interested in diversifying your review panel and share those reasons with stakeholders. Ensuring that you are ready to embrace these changes, and that everyone understands why these changes are important, will guarantee a smoother experience for everyone. And although it should go without saying, it's important to be sure that you are adding diversity to your review panel not for the optics, but because you value diverse viewpoints.

Do your homework. Posting a call for reviewers across your social media platforms may bring in some diversity, but you'll have better luck if you reach out to the reviewers you want on the platforms, groups, and communities where they spend the most time. You can also reach out to other organizations that serve particular communities, and ask them to help you solicit reviewers. Market your review board opening just like you would your opportunity.

Consider paying your reviewers. More privileged groups can more often afford to work for free. Depending on your company's size and budget you may or may not be able to pay your reviewers, but either way, be honest about what you can offer when you are soliciting assistance. This will help establish trust in your organization, and will save time

for potential reviewers and your team. If possible, do offer some kind of compensation. Even modest payment is a way to show your reviewers that you value the work they are doing for your company. Alternately, get creative about other ways you can provide compensation. [And be sure you've ironed out all the logistics ahead of time.](#)

Don't add token members for diversity's sake. Nothing is more off-putting to a team member than realizing she is the only woman on the team. Or the only Black person in the room. Diversity for diversity's sake will leave reviewers feeling tokenized. Ensuring that your review team is truly, broadly diverse and inclusive will help you make decisions authentically and will help you build diversity into your company's ethos.

6 Explore anonymous review options

We are influenced by so many things subconsciously that we don't even realize—and since we're often socialized to discriminate against marginalized groups like women, minorities, and queer people, [we can be biased and discriminate](#) even when we have the best intentions.

One of the best proven ways to prevent this is anonymous review (formally called blind review) in which information about the submitter, like their name, gender, or race, is withheld from the reviewer.

Anonymous review, which is easy to implement when using submission management software, puts applicants on a level playing field and increases diversity while also eliminating favoritism.

7 Collect data and analyze your outcome for next time

Collecting and analyzing demographic data can be both necessary and beneficial, whether it's to ensure a broad representation of applicants in a publication or on a board, or for a fellowship offered to underserved artists who are also parents.

A few things to keep in mind:

- **Use the right language to get the best data.** It's important to pay attention to current terms for various identities and to shifts in how these identities self-identify. Conducting research and staying updated on best practices for collecting demographic information will help you collect more accurate data. This precision can help you avoid making inaccurate conclusions. Most importantly, using accurate and sensitive terms will help users see themselves reflected.
- **Know your specific goals for collecting demographic data.** What do you need to know, and why? How will it influence your marketing, decision-making, or actions?

Be sure to eliminate any questions that don't align with your goals. For example, if you are collecting information to determine interest in a scholarship for Black photographers, do you need to know their income level or sexual orientation? Many organizations are so eager to demonstrate their diversity that it can be easy to lose sight of what information you actually need to accomplish what you've set out to do.

- **Research the most current best-practices.**

[In Rethinking and Updating Demographic Questions](#), researchers established best-practice recommendations for the options that should be included in demographic surveys.

- **Explain why you are collecting this information.**

Whether you are collecting demographic data for grant reporting, ensuring equity, or assessing that your audience aligns with your mission, be sure to explain briefly in your guidelines what you will do with the information you are collecting and who will see it. Some demographic information is legally protected, so make sure you or your organization's attorneys know what you can share and with whom. It's also important that you share the details about your privacy policy upfront with your users so they know how their information might be used.

- **Act on your findings.** Once you've analyzed your data, make sure to distribute what you've learned to the people who would benefit from it and that you've taken what you've learned and applied those lessons to the next time you undertake the same task. Collecting data is useless if you don't use the information to improve and grow.

LOCK THESE PROCESSES IN PLACE WITH A SUBMISSION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

While some of the above strategies rely on team effort, the majority may be greatly assisted by application or submission management software. Using an all-in-one platform can help organizations achieve key goals through concrete and measurable action plans.

At Submittable, we understand the importance of inclusion, and we take it seriously as we build and improve our software. We are committed to creating a platform that promotes diversity and inclusion and to helping our customers and the community use our software to integrate inclusion into their processes. To learn more, [contact our team](#).



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