



2025 Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity

C-Suite Survey Report

FEBRUARY 2025

Littler[®]

Executive Summary

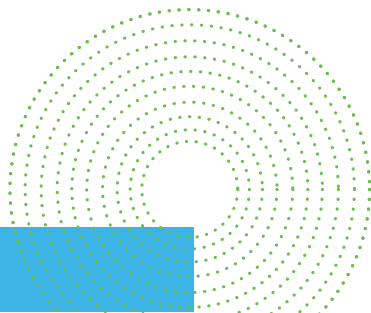
Inclusion, equity, and diversity (IE&D) programs face existential threats in 2025. President Trump kicked off his second term with a series of [executive orders](#) taking aim at such efforts, including ending federal IE&D programs and directing government agencies to investigate such policies in the private sector. This new paradigm in Washington, D.C., presents business leaders with the formidable challenge of balancing the shifting political landscape—and pressure from vocal IE&D critics—with employee expectations and existing IE&D commitments.

As headlines questioned the very future of corporate IE&D, Littler surveyed nearly 350 C-suite executives from across the U.S., both before the inauguration and after, to gauge how businesses have adapted their programs since our first [IE&D C-Suite Survey Report](#) published in January 2024. Representing a diverse range of industries and company sizes, respondents to our second annual survey—including Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), General Counsels (GCs), Chief Legal Officers (CLOs), and Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs)—weighed in on how their programs have changed and the factors they expect to shape corporate IE&D initiatives this year.

Looking ahead, about half (49%) of C-suite leaders surveyed post-inauguration say they are *not* considering new or further rollbacks of their IE&D programs as a result of the Trump administration's executive orders, with just 8% seriously considering changes. Six in 10 say they are waiting for further details on the new administration's priorities—including enforcement mechanisms—before making any modifications.

While many companies do not appear to be abandoning their IE&D programs overnight, they are very aware of the threats. Approximately half (55%) are more worried post-inauguration about the risk of IE&D-related lawsuits, government enforcement actions, and shareholder proposals. Fears are even more widespread among federal contractors and public companies that are highly visible targets for regulators. A similar share expect to see this challenging environment take a toll in the coming months: 53% surveyed post-inauguration say that anti-IE&D policies and/or rhetoric under the Trump administration will likely lead organizations to decrease their IE&D commitments over the next year—up from 38% who said the same pre-inauguration. Even before the inauguration, a number of prominent companies were already gutting IE&D programs.

Despite these high-profile examples, however, Littler's pre-inauguration survey revealed that the majority of organizations (76%) maintained or even increased their IE&D commitments and activity levels over the past year. Among those respondents, approximately three quarters said that employee expectations for ongoing IE&D commitments played a role, suggesting that IE&D remains an important talent retention and recruitment strategy for many employers even as the environment around those efforts becomes more hostile.



In this climate, many organizations are avoiding what may be perceived as unnecessary risks and focusing more on safer measures like affinity groups that still signal a commitment to inclusion and belonging in the workplace. Fewer employers are currently pursuing IE&D initiatives involving benchmarks, metrics, or incentives that could give the appearance of quotas or discriminatory practices. Among the 51% of executives from our post-inauguration survey who report that their organizations are considering rollbacks of IE&D programs, the largest percentage (61%) are focused on weighing whether to remove or reduce IE&D-related language from their websites, proxy statements, and/or outward-facing communications.

In what follows, we'll examine how IE&D has both persisted and shifted over the last year, along with top concerns for 2025 and beyond.

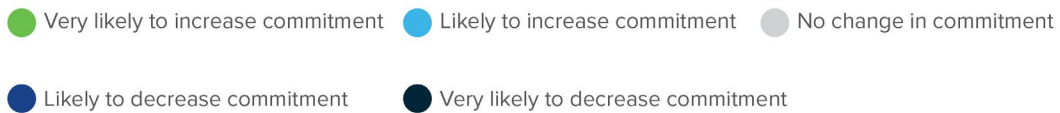
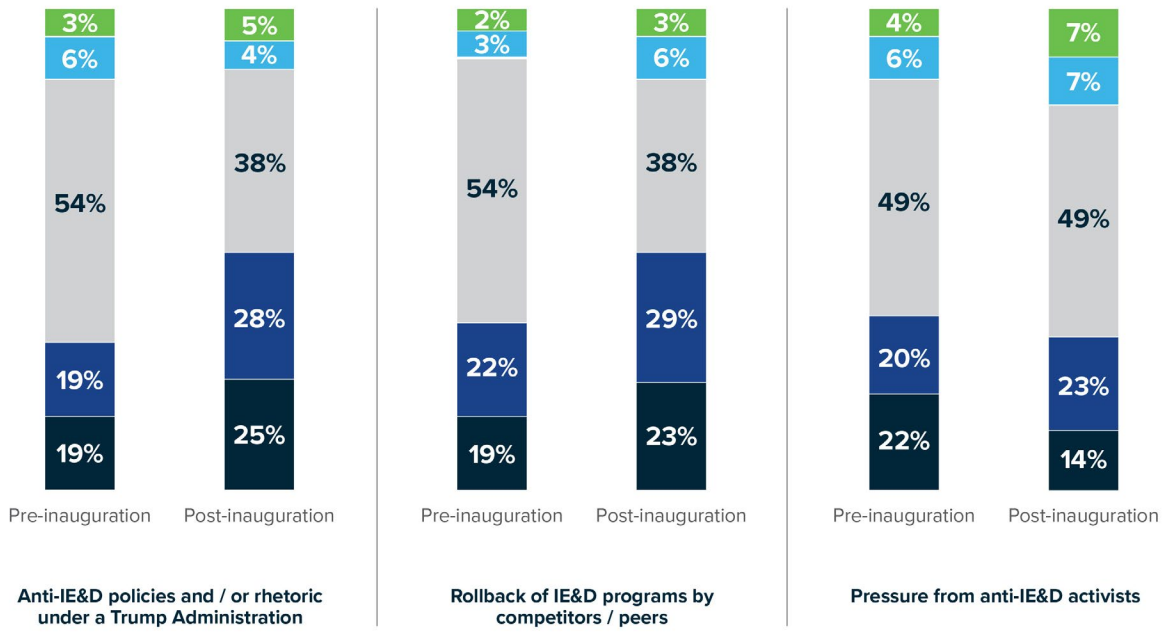
A Note on Naming

This survey report refers to inclusion, equity, and diversity (IE&D) programs as the term Littler adopted in January 2021, but respondents were instructed to answer survey questions with the title their organizations use for their programs in mind. For data on the titles that respondents use for their programs and the extent to which changes have been made, as well as a breakdown of respondent demographics, see the [methodology and demographics section](#).

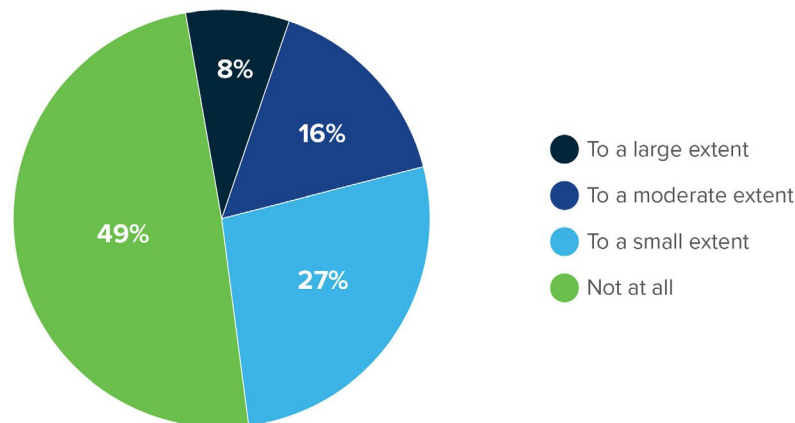


CONTENTIOUS ENVIRONMENT POSES NEW CHALLENGES FOR IE&D

What impact do you think each of the following factors is likely to have on corporate IE&D initiatives over the next year?



President Trump issued a series of executive orders during his first few days in office that take aim at IE&D programs, including language specifically directed at private sector employers. To what extent is your organization considering new or further rollbacks of your IE&D programs and policies as a result of these orders? *This question was only asked to those who indicated that their organizations have a program in place.*



The second Trump administration marks a watershed moment for the anti-IE&D movement, with the president moving quickly to halt such policies in the federal government and revoke long-standing affirmative action requirements for federal contractors. Within days of the inauguration, IE&D staff across federal agencies had been placed [on leave](#) “effective immediately” as programs were shut down. Federal workers were instructed to [report](#) on colleagues who attempt to maintain IE&D programs or objectives by any other name.

Most importantly for employers: Trump also directed the federal government to scrutinize private sector IE&D practices, with each agency to identify up to nine civil compliance targets for investigation. A subsequent [memo](#) from the Department of Justice called for criminal investigations into the IE&D practices of private companies, heightening the stakes.

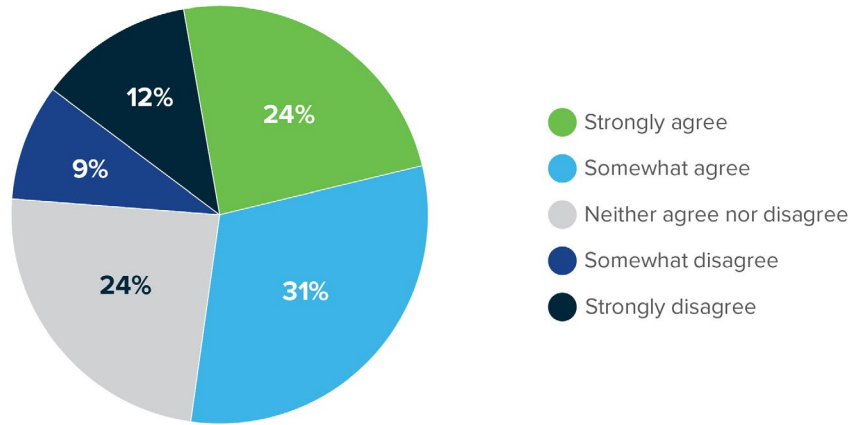
Despite the flurry of executive-branch activity targeting such efforts, however, the view in the C-suite remains split, with relatively few executives changing their 2025 IE&D outlook from the start of the year. In our post-inauguration survey, just 53% say the anti-IE&D policies and/or rhetoric of the Trump administration are likely to lead companies to decrease their commitments in 2025. While this is a 15-percentage-point jump from the pre-inauguration survey, it still leaves nearly half of executives (47%) expecting to see commitments remain the same or even grow as IE&D becomes increasingly polarized. Already, leaders at high-profile companies across industries such as banking, retail and technology have [reaffirmed](#) their commitment to IE&D even as other organizations announce rollbacks.

This mixed outlook aligns closely with the 49% of executives whose organizations are not considering new or further rollbacks of their IE&D programs and policies as a direct result of President Trump’s executive orders. Only about a quarter (24%) are considering decreasing commitments to a large (8%) or moderate (16%) extent as a result of these directives. Nevertheless, this could have a cascading impact: our post-inauguration results find 52% of executives saying that the rollback of IE&D programs by competitors or peers is likely to decrease corporate IE&D commitments broadly over the next year—a moderate increase from the 41% who said the same pre-inauguration.

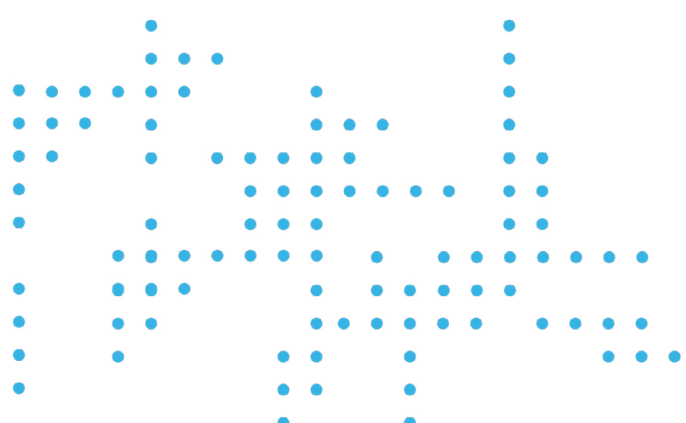
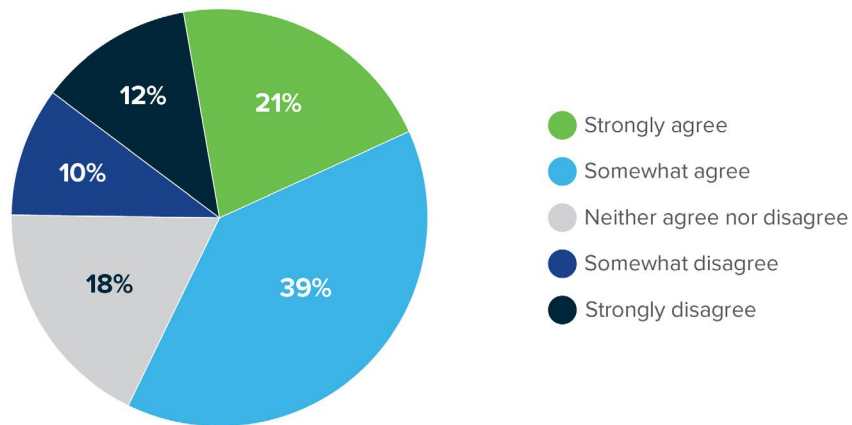
CEOs appear to be more pessimistic about the future of IE&D initiatives in the post-inauguration environment, potentially reflecting the attention and criticism they are predisposed to receive as the public face of their organizations. They are more certain that the administration’s anti-IE&D policies and rhetoric will make companies “very likely” to decrease commitments over the coming year (36% of CEOs vs. 25% overall). And nearly a third of CEOs (31%) expect the same impact from rollbacks by other companies, compared to 23% of all respondents.



Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:
My organization is more concerned about the risk of IE&D-related lawsuits, government enforcement actions, and/or shareholder proposals following Inauguration Day than we were previously.

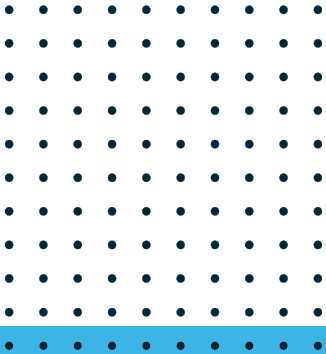


Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:
My organization is awaiting further developments on the new administration’s IE&D priorities, including enforcement plans and other details, before making any changes to our IE&D program. *This question was only asked to those who indicated that their organizations have a program in place.*



The Trump administration’s swift and drastic change in IE&D policy has certainly led to a notable uptick in C-suite concerns. More than half of executives (55%) say they are more worried following Inauguration Day that they were previously about the risk of IE&D-related lawsuits, enforcement actions, and/or shareholder proposals. These fears are especially pronounced among executives whose organizations are likely targets for federal investigation, with approximately three-quarters (74%) and two-thirds (67%) of federal contractors and public companies, respectively, saying they are more concerned after Trump made the fight against IE&D a Day One priority.

Still, as IE&D developments from Washington come almost daily, most executives are following a “wait-and-see” approach to adjusting programs and commitments. Six in 10 respondents (60%) say their organizations are awaiting further developments on the new administration’s IE&D priorities—including enforcement plans—before making any changes. “We are observing the changes that are unfurling and taking time to analyze before we make any rash decisions with long-term consequences for our employees, our company, and our reputation,” said one executive, reflecting the complex landscape of stakeholders that organizations must contend with in this challenging climate.



“The first weeks of the new administration have forced business leaders to reckon with new and complex considerations as they weigh how—or even whether—to continue to pursue core aspects of their IE&D programming. Despite the increased scrutiny, many companies seem to be taking a measured approach, rather than rushing to end or scale back IE&D efforts. Leaders are looking for ways to balance legal risks with the value such programs provide to their workforces and company cultures.”

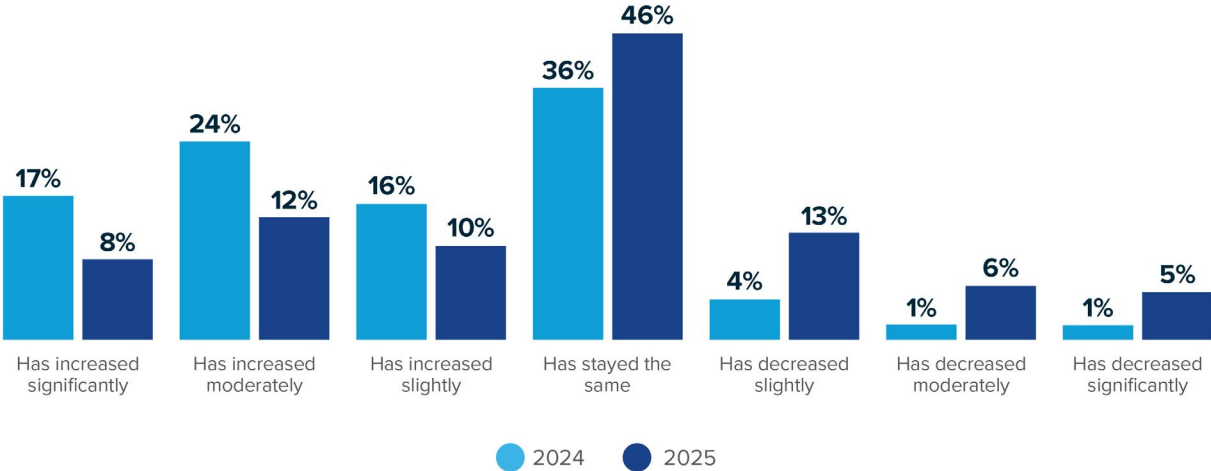
Jeanine Conley Daves,
Little shareholder and member of
the firm’s Inclusion, Equity and
Diversity Consulting Practice



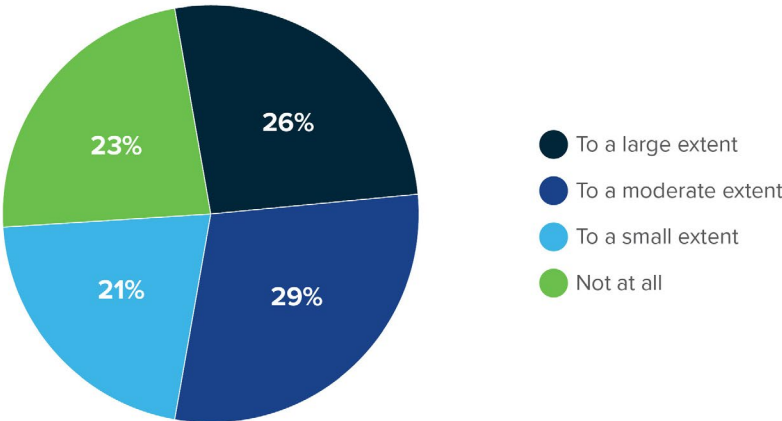
MOST COMPANIES REMAIN COMMITTED TO IE&D, THOUGH SOME RETREAT AMID BACKLASH

Pre-Inauguration Survey

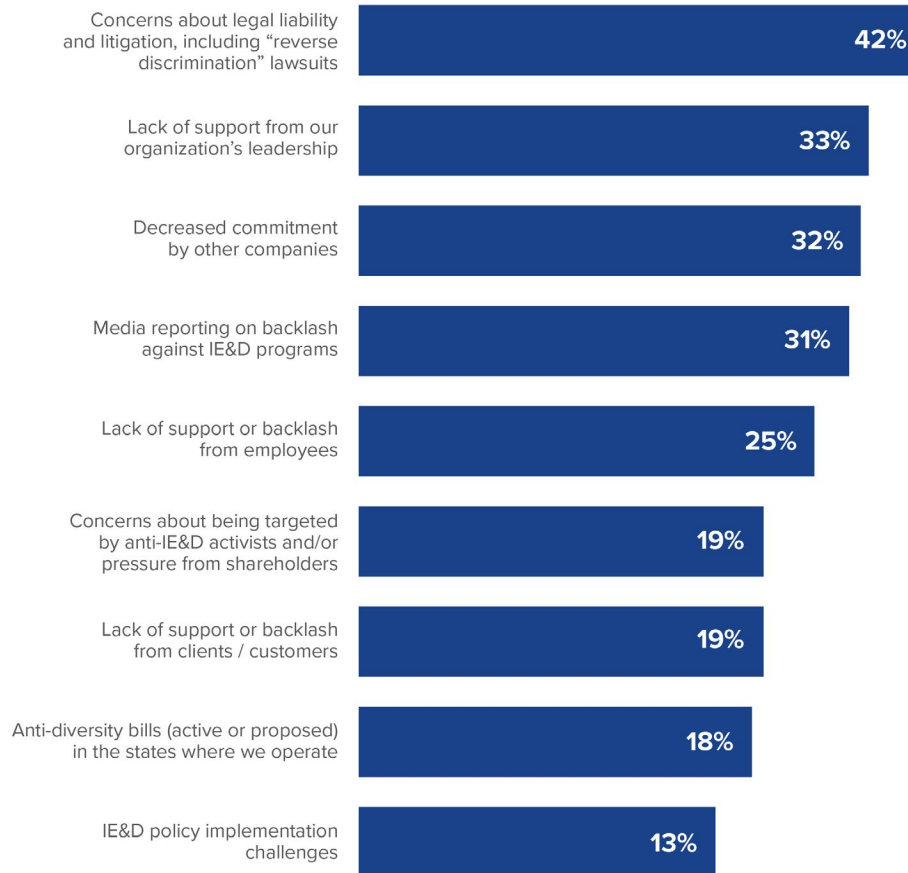
To what extent has your organization’s IE&D commitment and level of activity changed, if at all, since this time one year ago?



To what extent has employee expectations for an ongoing commitment to IE&D influenced your organization’s decision to maintain or increase its efforts in this area? *This question was only asked to those whose organizations have increased or maintained their IE&D commitment.*



To what would you attribute your organization’s decreased commitment to IE&D now versus one year ago? (Select all that apply) *This question was only asked to those whose organizations have decreased their IE&D commitment.*



2024 IE&D SHIFTS

Survey data collected prior to Inauguration Day shows that 2024 did not usher in the death knell of corporate IE&D programs, front-page news about the embattled future of IE&D notwithstanding. In fact, only about a quarter of respondents (24%) said their organizations decreased IE&D efforts to any degree last year, with the majority either maintaining (46%) or even increasing (30%) their commitments and activity levels since 2023.

Among organizations that maintained or increased their IE&D efforts in 2024, approximately three quarters said employee expectations for ongoing commitments played a role, suggesting that IE&D remains an important tool for attracting and retaining talent. CEOs appeared to be particularly attuned to employee preferences, with 40% saying employees influenced their organizations' IE&D approach "to a large extent" (compared with 26% overall). This impact broadly tracks with sentiment among the American workforce, as less than a quarter of employees say that focusing on IE&D at work is a bad thing, according to an October 2024 Pew Research Center [poll](#).

Nevertheless that nearly a quarter of organizations scaled back IE&D commitments and activities in 2024 is a notable increase from last year's survey report, when just 6% of respondents reported a decrease in commitments and activities since the same time in 2022. This 18-percentage-point jump reflects the intensifying backlash against such efforts—including proliferating anti-IE&D [state laws](#), reverse discrimination [lawsuits](#) and IE&D criticism from influential figures like then-presidential candidate Donald Trump and media personality [Robby Starbuck](#)—which added to existing pressure in 2023 following the Supreme Court's decisions to roll back college affirmative action admissions policies.

Overall, concern about legal liability and litigation—including reverse discrimination lawsuits—was the most common reason for decreased commitment to IE&D, cited by 42% of respondents whose organizations scaled back over the last year. Approximately one third of this group also attributed that shift to a lack of support from their organizations' leaders (33%), decreased commitment from other companies (32%), and media reporting on backlash against IE&D (31%).

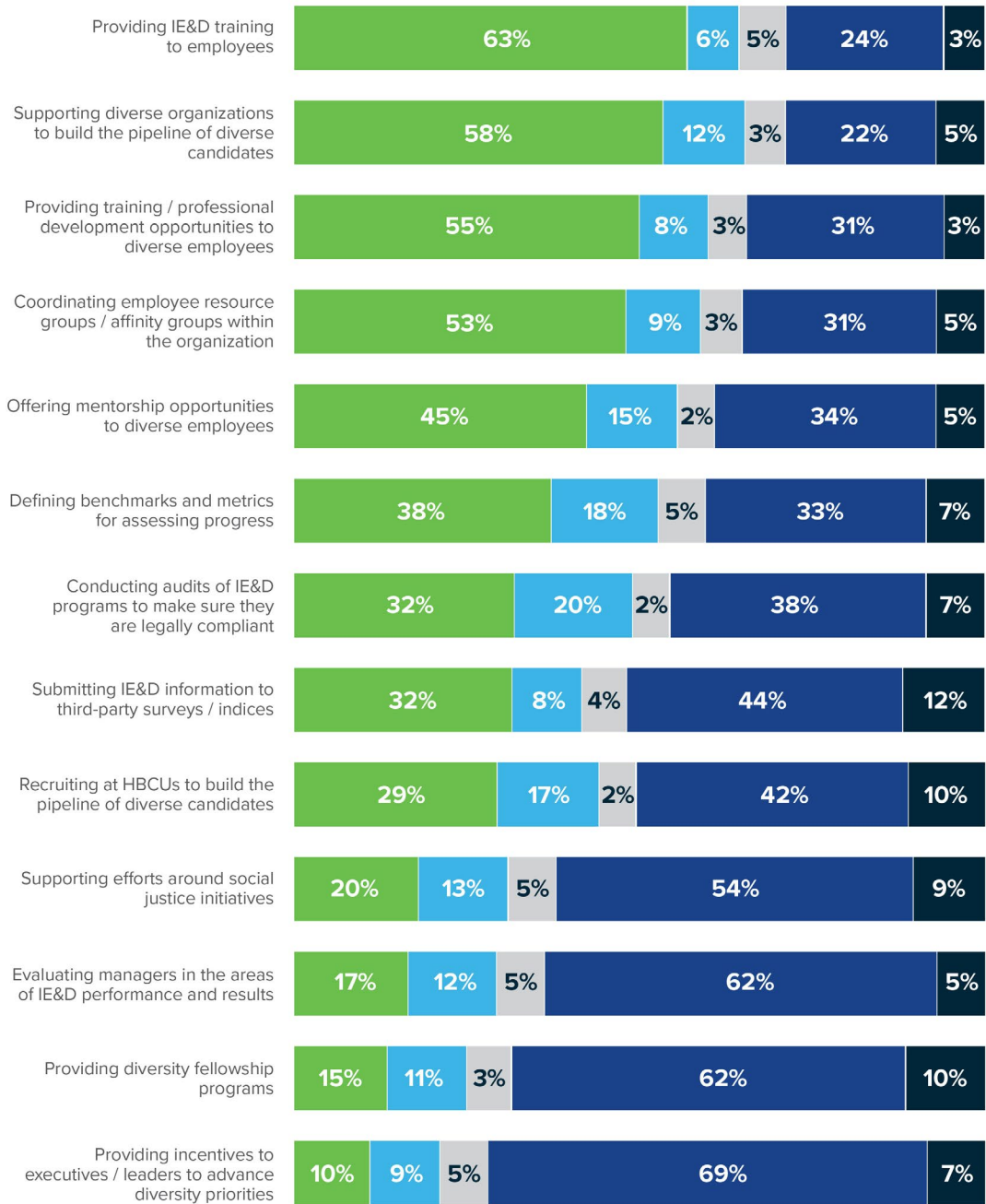
CLOs and GCs had a more conservative perspective on IE&D efforts as legal challenges proliferate: 34% said their organizations decreased commitments and activity levels in 2024, compared to 22% of CEOs and 9% of CDOs that said the same. That more legal executives believed their organizations rolled back efforts compared to others in the C-suite could give rise to legal liabilities, since this suggests the GC's office does not have full visibility into the scope of IE&D programs.



COMPANIES ADAPT IE&D PROGRAMS, FAVORING SAFER ACTIVITIES

Pre-Inauguration Survey

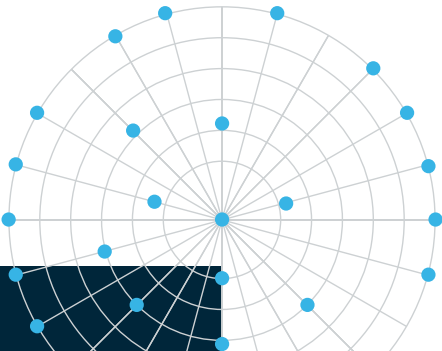
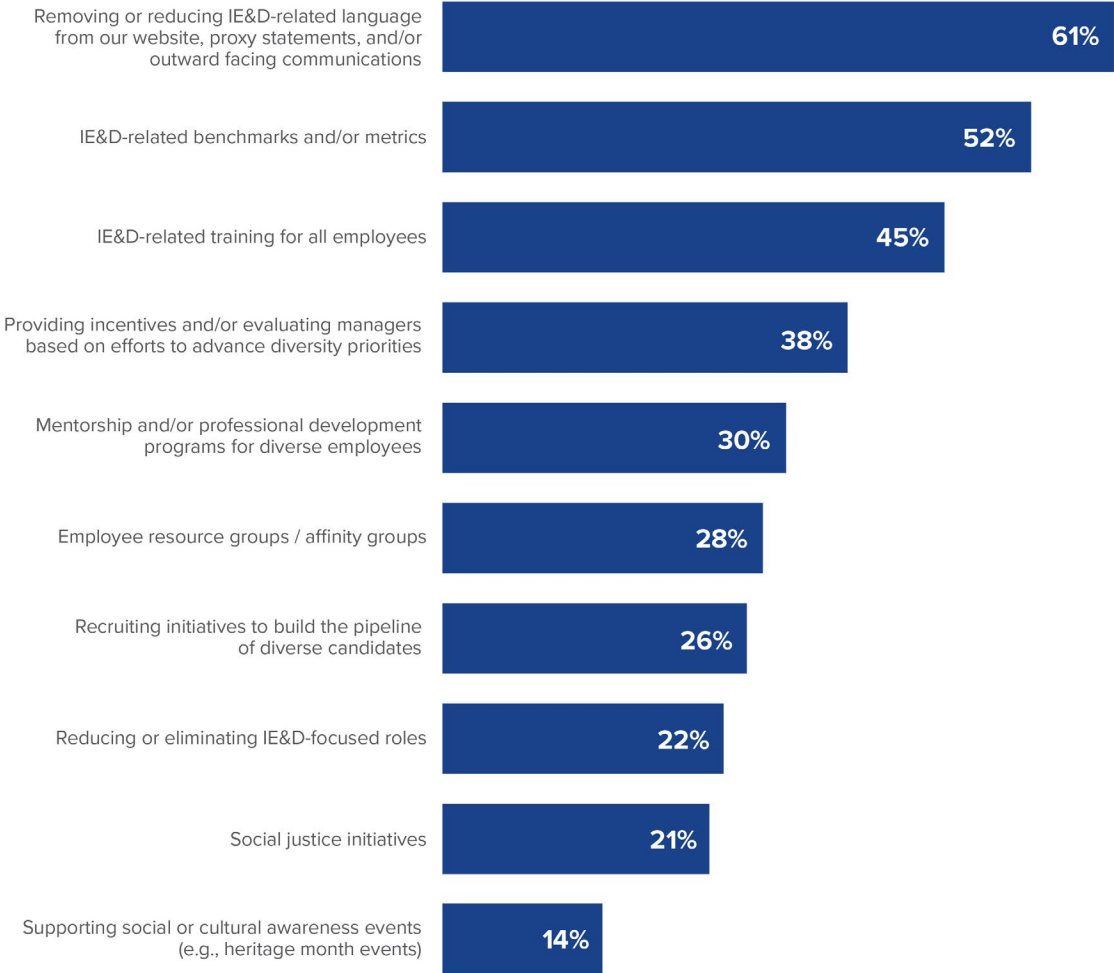
Which best defines your organization's current status regarding the following IE&D-related activities?



- Currently doing
- Not currently doing, but plan to or are considering it
- Previously implemented, but have since eliminated
- Not currently doing, have not implemented previously, and not planning / considering
- Unsure

Post-Inauguration Survey

In which of the following areas is your organization considering rolling back or eliminating IE&D-related initiatives? (Select all that apply) *This question was only asked to those who are considering rollbacks of their programs.*



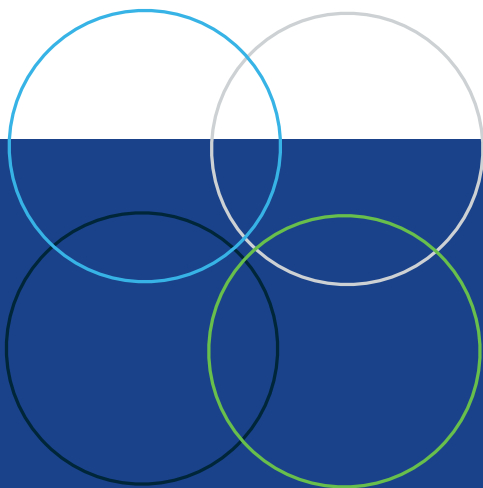
The new climate in Washington has transformed IE&D into a balancing act for many organizations, but most are still pushing forward with an array of well-established activities in support of their IE&D goals. As one leader noted following President Trump's first days in office, "we are discussing ways to thread the needle in a manner that maintains commitment to diversity and inclusion for all" while avoiding legal risks. Notably, only 22% of executives surveyed after the inauguration are currently considering reducing or eliminating IE&D-focused roles.

The post-inauguration survey showed that organizations considering future rollbacks of IE&D programs are mainly focused on minimizing external communications, rather than eliminating programs. Nearly two-thirds (61%) say they are weighing whether to remove or reduce IE&D-related language from their websites, proxy statements, and/or outward-facing communications. Seventy percent of federal contractors and public companies, with their greater visibility to regulators, are considering such modifications.

This may be a risk mitigation tactic rather than the first step in a larger reversal. "Diversity has almost become a bad word," a GC said, though "we've managed to maintain several previously implemented initiatives regardless of what they are called."

Messaging aside, higher-risk elements of IE&D programs are facing real cuts at a number of organizations. Approximately half (52%) of those looking to downshift IE&D are considering whether to eliminate IE&D benchmarks and/or metrics, which risk appearing as quotas to federal agencies focusing in on potentially exclusionary or discriminatory practices. Similarly, 38% of this group is contemplating ending incentives or manager evaluation criteria tied to advancing IE&D priorities. This tracks with a drop in executive pay linked to diversity goals in company statements filed during the 2024 proxy season, according to an [analysis](#) from advisory firm WTW.

These findings echo themes from the pre-inauguration survey, which also showed employers retreating from data-focused activities and incentives that could pose elevated legal risks in an increasingly politicized environment.



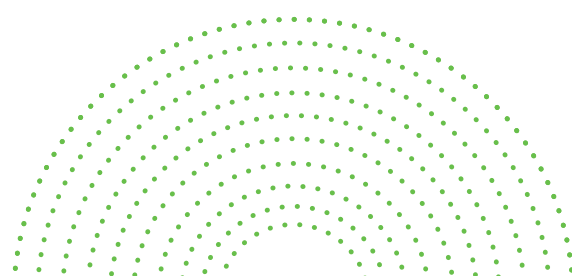
Only 56% of respondents surveyed before Inauguration Day said their organizations were either defining benchmarks and metrics for assessing IE&D progress (38%) or are planning to or considering it (18%)—a 16-percentage-point drop from [last year's survey](#), when 70% said they were either already doing it (34%) or planned to or were considering it (36%). Relatedly, 32% of companies surveyed at the start of 2025 said they submitted IE&D information to third-party surveys or indices—something several large companies announced in 2024 that they would no longer do.

Even before the inauguration, organizations also appeared to have heightened concerns that IE&D performance benchmarks and incentives could spark allegations of discriminatory practices in hiring or promotions. Just 10% reported providing incentives to executives to advance diversity priorities (compared to 23% last year), while fewer than three in 10 (29%) either evaluated managers on IE&D performance or planned to or considered it, compared to 51% the previous year.

Two key IE&D areas appear headed for some retrenchment as a result of the post-inaugural political climate. Before the inauguration, providing IE&D training to all employees was the top action taken in support of IE&D programs, selected by 63% of respondents. Post-inauguration, 45% say their organizations are considering rolling back or eliminating such training. Additionally, pre-inauguration, 55% said their organizations were providing training and professional development opportunities to diverse employees; however, 30% are now considering rollbacks in this area.

On the other hand, employee resource groups or affinity groups appear to have more staying power. More than half (53%) in our pre-inauguration survey said such groups are part of their IE&D programs, and only 28% are considering rollbacks in this area following the start of the second Trump administration.

Pre-inauguration, only 32% of respondents said they conduct audits of IE&D programs to make sure they are legally compliant. Nearly four in 10 (38%) said they do not conduct such audits, never have and are not planning to do so in the future, potentially exposing their programs to unnecessary legal risks at a time when compliance is of the utmost importance.



“While the letter of the law governing IE&D programs remains unchanged, the risk of investigations and lawsuits is amplified by the Trump administration’s regulatory priorities. As a result, it’s more important than ever for private sector companies to carefully review their programs for any potential vulnerabilities. By conducting such audits under attorney-client privilege, businesses can proactively examine their IE&D practices to guide compliance with longstanding anti-discrimination laws.”

[Kate Mrkonich Wilson](#),
Littler shareholder and member of
the firm’s Inclusion, Equity and
Diversity Consulting Practice



UNDER THE IE&D SPOTLIGHT, LARGER EMPLOYERS STRUCTURE PROGRAMS DIFFERENTLY

With their larger and more diverse workforces—coupled with greater visibility and potential investor reporting obligations—bigger companies understandably take a different approach to IE&D programs than their smaller counterparts. Those differences came into sharper focus after Inauguration Day, demonstrating the stakes organizations face in an era of heightened scrutiny.

With IE&D already in the political and regulatory crosshairs, larger organizations (those with over 5,000 employees) surveyed after President Trump took office predict a greater impact on corporate programs than their smaller counterparts (those with under 1,000 employees). Leaders at large organizations are more likely to anticipate decreased IE&D commitments over the next year stemming from the Trump administration's anti-IE&D policies and rhetoric (61% vs. 47% of small companies). There was similar divergence by size in expectations on the impacts of rollbacks among competitors (60% vs. 45%) and pressure from anti-IE&D activists (46% vs. 32%).

When it comes to their own IE&D programs, leaders at larger organizations are more concerned about the potential for legal action. Nearly a third (32%) strongly agreed that they are more worried about IE&D-related lawsuits, enforcement actions and shareholder proposals than they were prior to the inauguration, while just 18% of small companies say the same.

Meanwhile, these C-suite leaders are more likely to be considering new or further reversals to existing programs and commitments. Large organizations surveyed post-inauguration are more than twice as likely as their smaller counterparts (37% vs. 16%) to be weighing changes to their IE&D programs to a moderate or large extent due to Trump's recent executive orders, likely because they are facing heightened scrutiny from both regulators and the public.

Such shifts among bigger companies could have significant impacts on the scope of corporate IE&D efforts because, as our pre-inauguration survey revealed, large organizations are more frequently engaged in a variety of IE&D programs and initiatives than their smaller counterparts.

For example, 65% of large organizations provided mentorship opportunities to diverse employees and 84% provided IE&D training to all employees, compared to just 34% and 51% of smaller companies, respectively. Bigger companies were more than twice as likely to recruit from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to build a pipeline of diverse candidates (49% vs. 19%) and to report IE&D information to third-party surveys or indices (56% vs. 20%). Another significant difference in approach can be found in coordinating affinity groups, something that 76% of bigger companies did but just 34% of smaller companies reported doing.

That divergence is likely rooted in the different IE&D needs and priorities tied to workforce size. Larger companies may be more likely to have a critical mass of employees interested in participating in affinity groups, as an example. They may also have the infrastructure (and funding) needed to recruit talent from colleges, including HBCUs, compared to smaller organizations. Large employers with higher profiles could elect to collect and report data to third parties as part of their talent recruitment strategy, while smaller organizations may see less value in such initiatives—particularly given the potential for public criticism in the current climate.

Looking ahead, modifying or even eliminating IE&D programs will prove especially tough for large organizations due to IE&D's importance for talent recruitment and retention. Eighty-eight percent of C-suite leaders at large companies said employee expectations played at least some role in maintaining or expanding their IE&D efforts, versus 72% at smaller employers.

Methodology and Demographics

From mid-December 2024 to mid-January 2025, 347 C-suite executives completed Littler’s initial survey via an online survey tool. Following President Trump’s inauguration, from Jan. 30 to Feb. 7, 340 C-suite executives completed Littler’s additional survey measuring reactions to the series of executive orders issued addressing IE&D programs.

Respondents, who were all based in the U.S. and represented a range of industries, included:

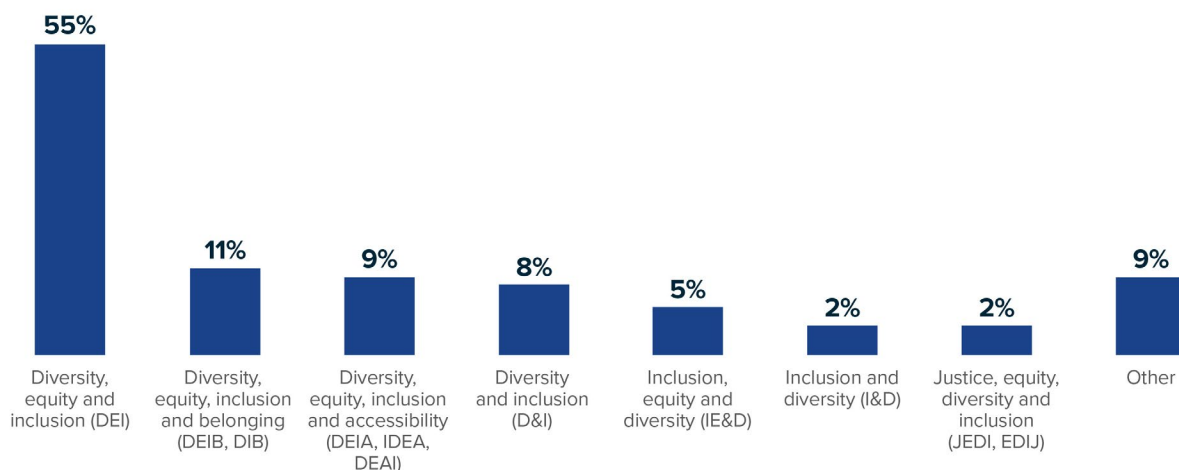
	Pre-Inauguration Survey	Post-Inauguration Survey
Chief Legal Officer / General Counsel	31%	38%
Chief Executive Officer	25%	25%
Chief Human Resources Officer	19%	16%
Chief Diversity Officer	13%	10%
Chief Operating Officer	3%	4%
Chief People Officer	3%	2%
Chief Compliance Officer	2%	2%
Other C-Suite Title	3%	3%

Companies represented were of a variety of sizes:

	Pre-Inauguration Survey	Post-Inauguration Survey
One to 100	8%	15%
101 to 500	20%	21%
501 to 1,000	22%	17%
1,001 to 5,000	28%	24%
5,001 to 10,000	7%	8%
More than 10,000	16%	16%

Responses to some questions in the surveys do not add up to 100% due to rounding, and some exceed 100% because respondents were invited to select more than one answer.

Respondents to the pre-inauguration survey were asked how their organizations currently refer to their programs addressing diversity, equity and inclusion issues, with the largest percentage of those having a program name that leads with “diversity” (83%).



Respondents were also asked to note any changes relative to the title of their programs since they were originally implemented. Only 9% of respondents said their organizations have eliminated or moved back the word “diversity,” but a notable segment had added or moved up the words, “equity” (22%), “belonging” (18%) and “inclusion” (17%) in their program titles. This could signal a move toward emphasizing this terminology as companies update their programs.

