



**D**iversity **E**quity **I**nclusion

# Managing Diversity in Smaller European Businesses:

Survey 1 (for individuals) & Survey 2 (for SMEs) &  
Hackathon I and II

## Contributions

While the report is written by several colleagues, the survey has been developed, reviewed, tested and data collected by collective work of many within the DEI4SME project team. We briefly mention key contributions of all colleagues who were involved in implementing WP2, Activity 1 (Survey on DEI challenges for the under-represented groups), Activity 2 (Survey on DEI challenges for the SMEs), and Activity 5 (Report on DEI management in SME context framework).

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## Definitions of the Main Concepts Used in the Surveys and this Report

**Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)** is a conceptual framework that promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, especially populations that have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination because of their background, identity, disability, etc.

- **Diversity** refers to the representation or composition of various social identity groups in a work group, organization, or community.

- **Equity** involves providing resources according to the need to help diverse populations achieve their highest state of health and other functioning.

- **Inclusion** strives for an environment that offers affirmation, celebration, and appreciation of different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences.

### Diversity & Identifications Explored:

**Gender identity** refers to one's deeply felt sense of being male, female, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum.

**Belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community** refers to an individual's lasting pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to individuals of the same gender, different genders, or multiple genders.

**Age** refers to the length of time that an individual has lived or existed since birth.

**Language** refers to systems of communication used by humans to convey meaning through a combination of sounds, symbols, and gestures. An individual's native language refers to the language learned from birth. **Accent** refers to the distinct patterns of pronunciation, intonations, and speech characteristics associated with speakers or a particular language or dialect.

**Caregiving** refers to the provision of assistance, support, and care to individuals who are unable to fully care for themselves due to age, illness, disability, or other circumstances.

**Education** here refers to different types and contexts. Formal education: primary education, secondary education, higher education. Vocational education: vocational training programs, apprenticeship.

**Religion** refers to a system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and moral values centred around the worship of a divine or supernatural being.

**Students or those with little previous work experience** refers to one's current educational path (student) or one's who recently graduated and/or one's feeling that their work experience is minimal.

**Ethnic background** refers to one's affiliation with a group based on shared social, cultural (e.g. language, religion, food, or heritage), and historical experiences derived from a common national or regional background. Ethnic groups are distinguished by their specific beliefs, values, behaviors, and sense of belonging. Individuals may identify with multiple ethnicities.

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# 1 Managing Diversity in Smaller European Businesses: SME Perspective

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## Executive summary

### The Key Insights and Implications from the Survey for SMEs

This report looks at how SMEs from Austria, Finland, Germany and Lithuania handle diversity, equity and inclusion. Most firms report adhering to legal requirements, but DEI management is still maturing, and most companies place themselves in the early “compliant” or “aware” tiers, while only a few claim advanced expertise. Few have appointed a named DEI person to lead the way and steer the company. Formal policies are uneven, reviews are sporadic and mentorship for under-represented staff is not for certain, and many firms don’t collect DEI data or monitor it. DEI software adoption is considered by a sizable proportion, yet actual adoption and usage remains unused. Benefits as reported by owner’s centre on better morale or occasional surges in creativity, but many struggle to see a concrete return. Overall, intent is widespread but execution lags, pointing to a need for practical resources and sustained support.

### 1.1 Methodology

This statistical survey analysis provides an overview of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) management practices in companies across the DEI4SME project partner countries: Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania. The survey aimed to explore how SMEs perceive and address DEI issues in their daily operations.

The questionnaire consisted of four thematic sections: (1) basic company information, (2) human resource management, (3) DEI in strategic management, and (4) best practices. Each section included key definitions and explanations where necessary, ensuring clarity for respondents (e.g., definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion were provided at the beginning of relevant sections).

Given the sensitivity of the topic, the questionnaire was designed to be as inclusive and neutral as possible, ensuring anonymity for all respondents. Participation was entirely voluntary, as stated in the ethics statement, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

Survey was translated into the local languages of all target countries. When first designing the survey, the English language was used, and its structure was discussed among academic and corporate project partners. Then, when internal agreement on the first draft of the survey was made, the English version of the survey was translated to Finnish, Swedish (the two national languages of Finland), Lithuanian, and German (spoken officially in both Austria and Germany). When translating, native speakers worked in teams to ensure that at least two native speakers

check the translation and localize the meanings making them not only linguistically, but also culturally correct. There was extensive effort to coordinate between German speaking project partners, ensuring that German version of the survey suits both Austrian and German speakers. Once the translations were complete, the survey was further tested with external stakeholders, at least five in each country gathering their feedback on clarity and structure of the survey. Once the feedback was gathered from all countries and jointly discussed, minor adjustments were made in all language versions and if needed further translated following the same process once again.

The survey primarily employed a quantitative approach to assess DEI practices in SMEs. However, some open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to clarify their perspectives or share best practices.

The questionnaire was distributed digitally through project tools and professional networks within the partner consortium. While this sampling method may introduce potential biases, it aligns with the project's objective of understanding DEI issues specifically within SMEs rather than providing a comprehensive statistical analysis of broader societal trends. To mitigate individual bias, the questionnaire included two specific questions designed to gauge respondents' personal perceptions of DEI.

## 1.2 Demographics

The survey consisted of 53 questions (148 questions and sub-questions). It was conducted during May and September 2024 with 137 full responses collected. The survey was conducted in Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania (Figure 1).

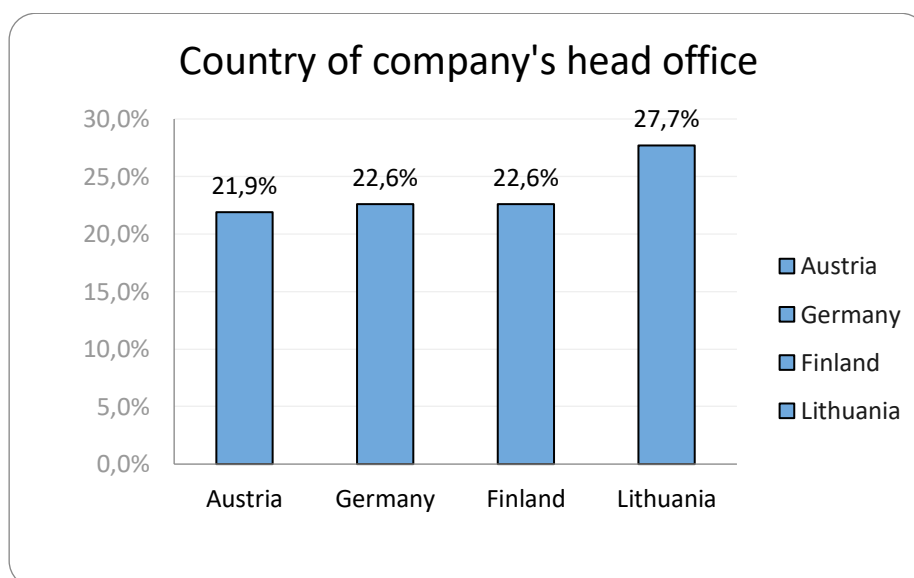


Figure 1. Location of the company's head office

In Figure 1 respondents were asked to identify the country of where their represented organisation is located. Thirty respondents (21,9%) indicated Austria as the primary location of activities (head



office), 31 (22,6%) indicated Germany, 31 (22,6%) indicated Finland, and 38 (27,7%) indicated Lithuania. Seven (5,1%) respondents represent companies with head office located in Sweden, Norway, Estonia, or US.

Majority of the companies that respondents represent are of small size, having 10-49 employees (44 companies, 32,1%). As the survey and the project overall tackles SME issues, Figure 2 shows that 90,5% of the companies are below 250 employees.

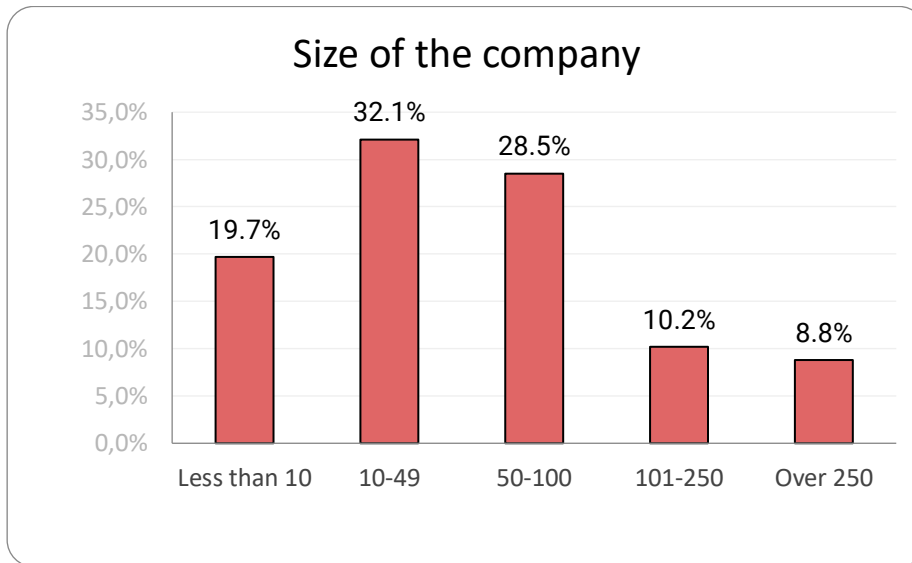


Figure 2. Company size

Additionally, majority of the companies are operating under 2 million € annual turnover (54, 39,4%). Figure 3 presents the approximate annual turnover of the company for the previous fiscal year.

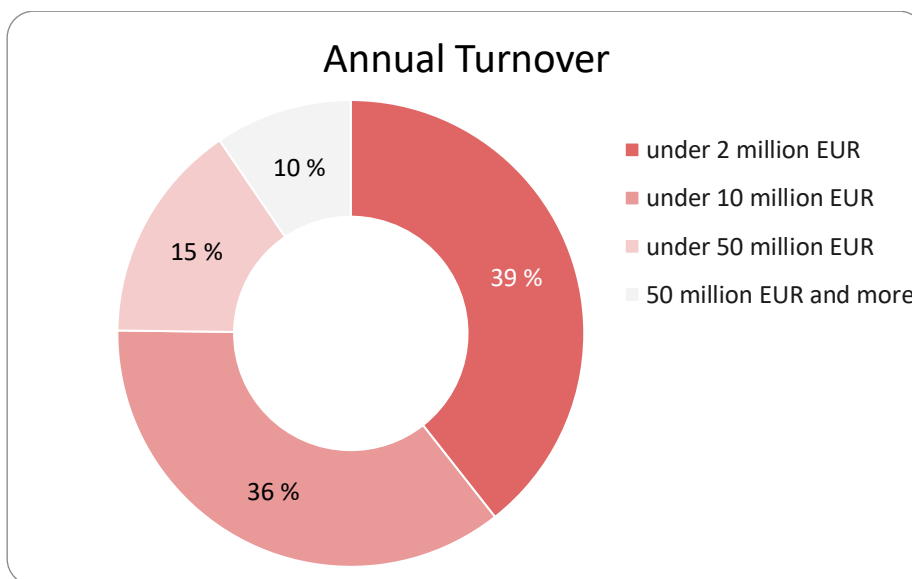


Figure 3. Annual turnover of respondents' companies' previous fiscal year

Respondents indicate that most of their represented companies operate for more than 20 years (69, 50,4%). Figure 4 indicates the distribution of companies by years operating.

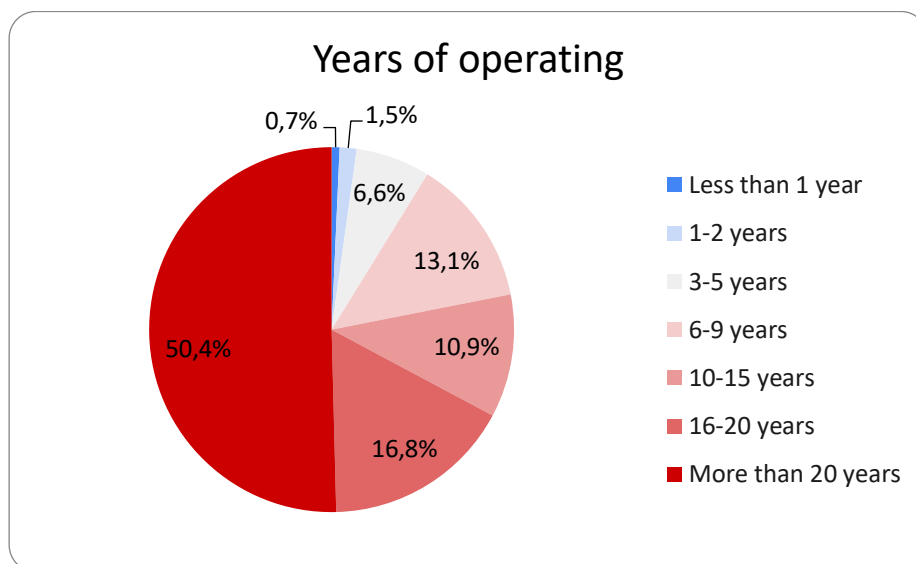


Figure 4. Companies' years in operation

The sample organisations represent variety of industries. Figure 5 shows the main 6 industries under which respondents operate. Retail trade is most common in the sample (9, 6,6%). Education and human health activities are the next two main industries, represented by 8 companies each (5,8% each).

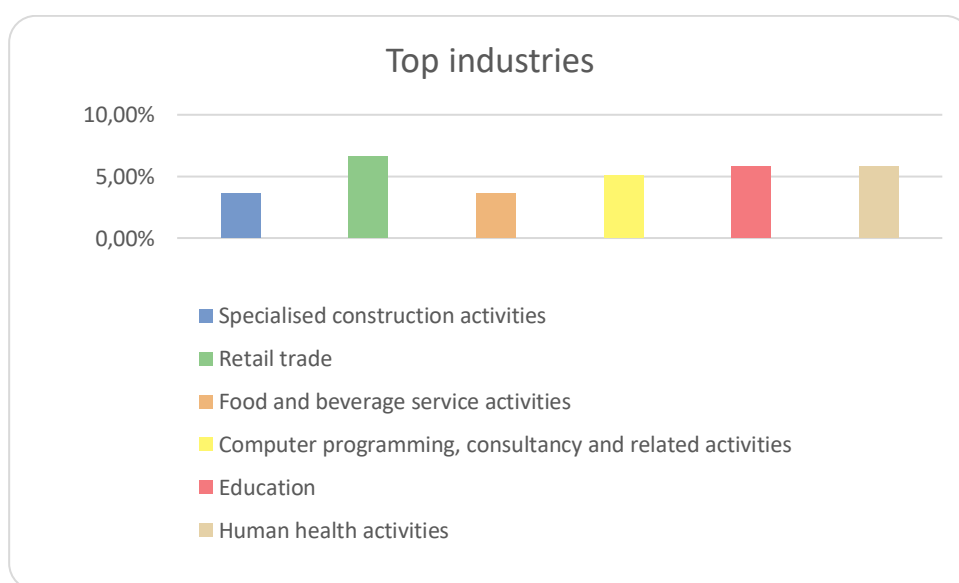


Figure 5. Top 6 industries of sample companies

Furthermore, it was interesting to see the scope of international activities of our sample companies. Figure 6 indicates that approximately a third of the respondents do not have any international operations (44, 32,1%). However, the remaining sample respondents state that they have at least minimal international activities (21, 15,3%), some (44, 32,1%) or extensive operations abroad (22, 16,1%) or is a unit of a foreign company (6, 4,4%).



Figure 6. Scope of the companies' international activities

### 1.3 Maturity of DEI management

With the survey we were able to grasp were in the DEI maturity scale stand the sample organisations. The data depicted in Figure 7 shows direct evaluation of DEI maturity of sample organisations by themselves. Looking at the whole sample, 5,8% of sample organisations attribute themselves to the level of **DEI experts**, being legally compliant, having implemented company's policies and processes for handling DEI, being proactive advocates of DEI inside and outside the company. Furthermore, companies **advanced in DEI** (8,8%) have legal compliance, enacted company's policies and processes for handling DEI. There are companies already **developing their DEI management** (17,5%), having legal compliance, currently developing company's policies and processes for handling DEI. **DEI aware** (27,7%) organisations indicate their legal compliance and current discussions on the need for further DEI actions. Most of the sample companies attribute themselves to **DEI compliant** (28,5%), having legal compliance, but taking no further actions in DEI management. Still, 11,7% of the sample companies state that they **lack DEI awareness**: they are not sure about their legal compliance or DEI actions. These results indicate clearly that there is space for improvement in managing DEI related issues.

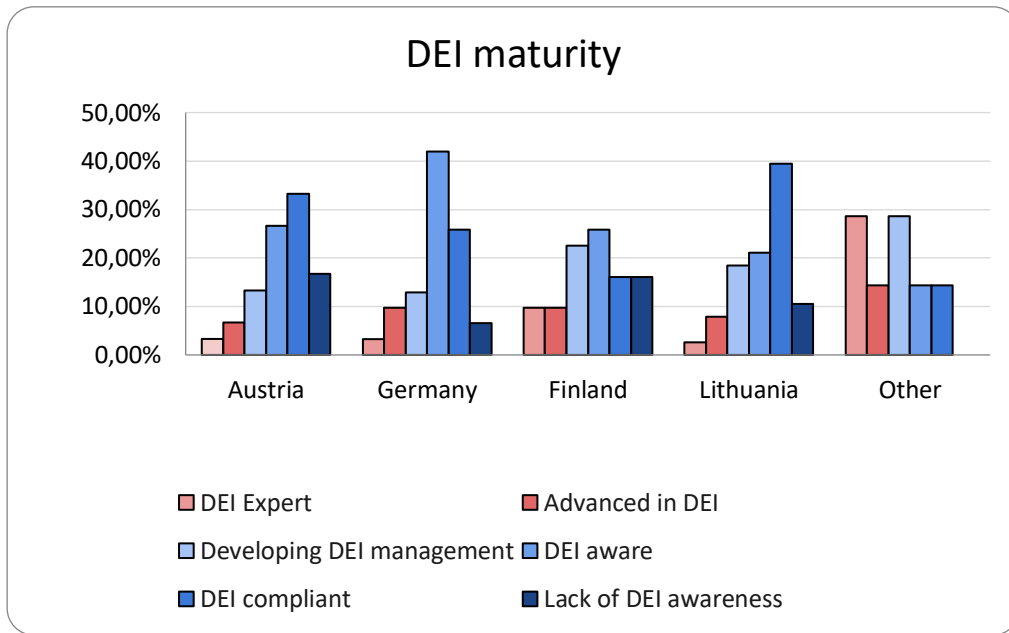


Figure 7. DEI maturity rank by sample organisations

Majority of Austrian (33,3%) and Lithuanian sample organisations (39,5%) indicate that they are currently DEI compliant, meaning that they know the legal regulations and comply to them, but not necessarily move further to set the best practices in business in relation to DEI management. Respondents from German companies indicated that they are DEI aware (41,9%), meaning that these companies not only know the legal requirements, but discuss these issues in the company for the further steps. Finland is showing most cases of sample companies developing DEI management (22,6%), additionally being DEI aware (25,8%).

The following graphs support the statistics provided in Figure 7. One of the common practices could be to have a DEI appointed employee to represent these issues in the company. However, it is not mandatory in relation to EU regulations and in the sample countries as well. Only 12% of responding companies have DEI person appointed (0% of respondents say that they have appointed a DEI person in Austria, 19,4% in Germany, 3,2% in Finland, and 18,4% in Lithuania).

Figure 8-Figure 12 represent how organisations handle specifics of DEI management in recruitment process, monitoring inclusion, career advancement, training, and handling harassment. Out of the survey sample, in most cases (69%), Germany has policies and/or processes for handling the aforementioned areas, without concentrating on any specific diversity group. Whereas Austria (48,7%), Finland (46,5%), and Lithuania (39,5%) has the most common DEI issue management style of handling them on case-by-case bases.



Figure 8. Managing DEI issues in recruitment process

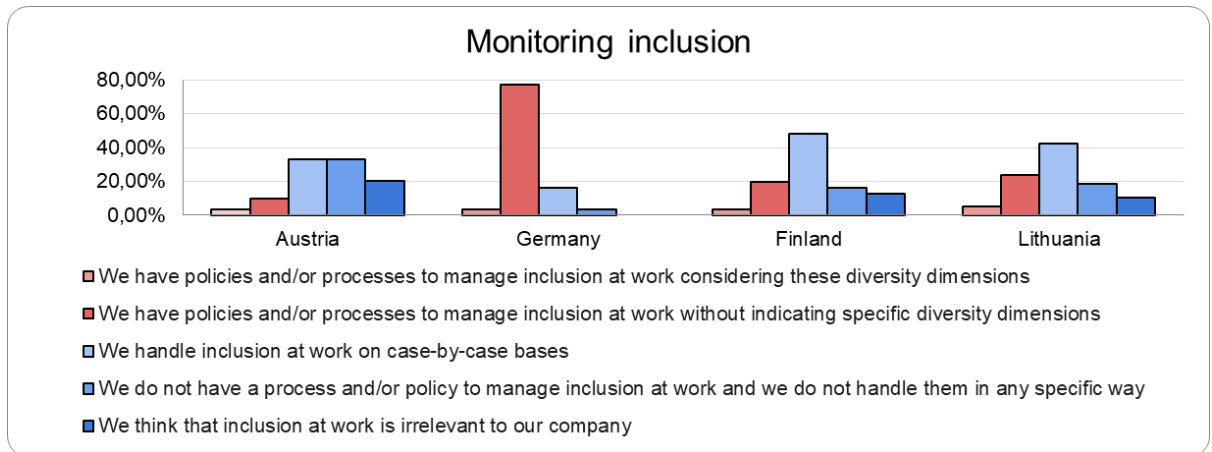


Figure 9. Monitoring inclusion

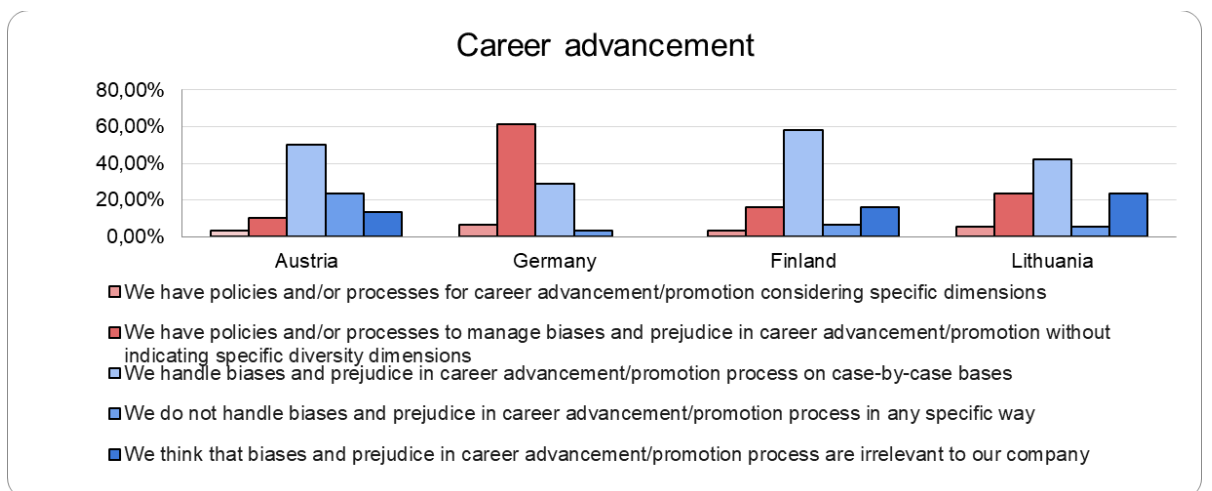


Figure 10. Managing DEI issues in career advancement

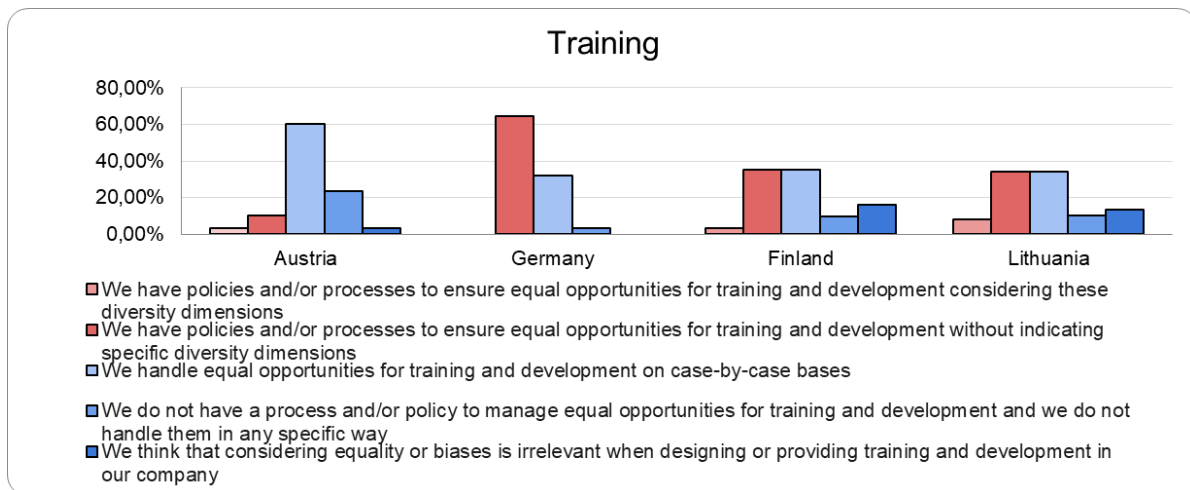


Figure 11. Managing DEI issues in training

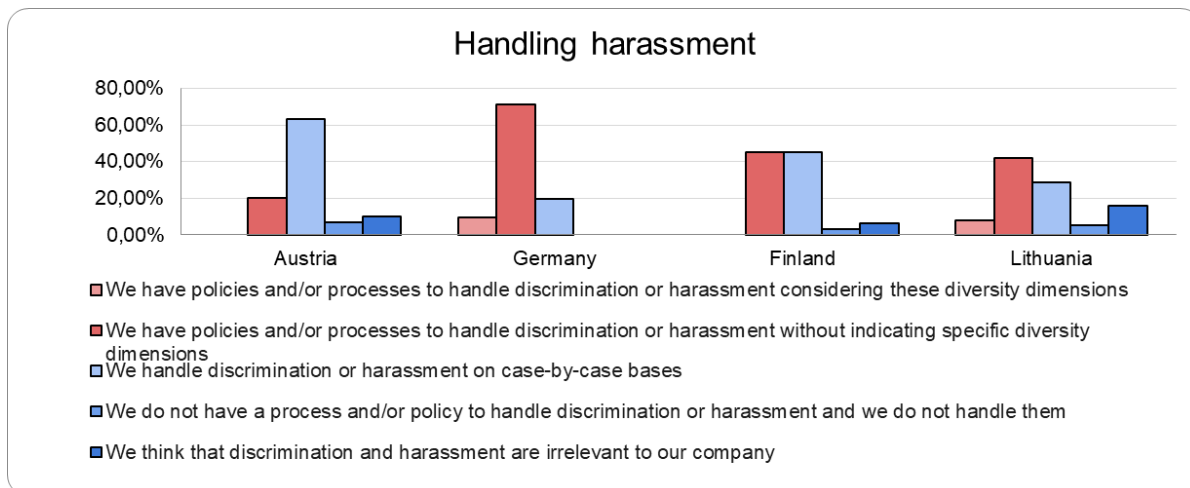


Figure 12. Handling harassment

The results in figures Figure 8-Figure 12 are somewhat contradictory compared to results in figure 7, and in need of a more thorough investigation. Figure 7 shows that Germany is mostly DEI aware, meaning that they know the legal requirements to move further ahead. This is supported with the results of management practices shown above, where German sample companies indicate that they have policies/processes to manage DEI issues. However, even when there are more companies ranking themselves above DEI aware, it is not necessary that they have the supporting practices in place.

Considering the maturity of DEI management in companies, it is important to understand whether these practices are periodically reviewed and renewed according to the changes in the context. On average, 16,8% of sample organisations revise their existing priorities, processes, policies and ways of working to address the most critical issues related to DEI frequently; 53,3% review them occasionally; and 29,9% do not revise them. German sample companies are the ones to mostly revise their DEI issue management (83,9%), whereas Lithuanian sample companies are the least likely to revise them (55,2%).

Additionally to the DEI maturity evaluation, sample companies were asked to prioritize DEI issue management. Figure 13 shows sample the DEI priority rank of sample companies. Austrian sample companies indicate that DEI initiatives are not a priority (40,0%) in their organisation or that they rank alongside other business priorities (26,7%). Clear majority of German sample companies state that DEI initiatives are not a priority (51,6%). Most of Finnish sample companies state that business priorities are more important than DEI initiatives (41,9%). Lithuanian sample companies indicate that they either have DEI initiatives alongside other business priorities (31,6%), or that DEI initiatives are not a priority (31,6%).



Figure 13. DEI initiative priority rank

In support to DEI priority rank, we have asked several questions of how the company sees DEI as an integral part of their organisation. Out of the sample companies, 65,6% feel that diverse perspectives are encouraged and valued in strategic-decision making and 66,6% feel that diverse perspectives are encouraged and valued in daily-decision making (Figure 14).

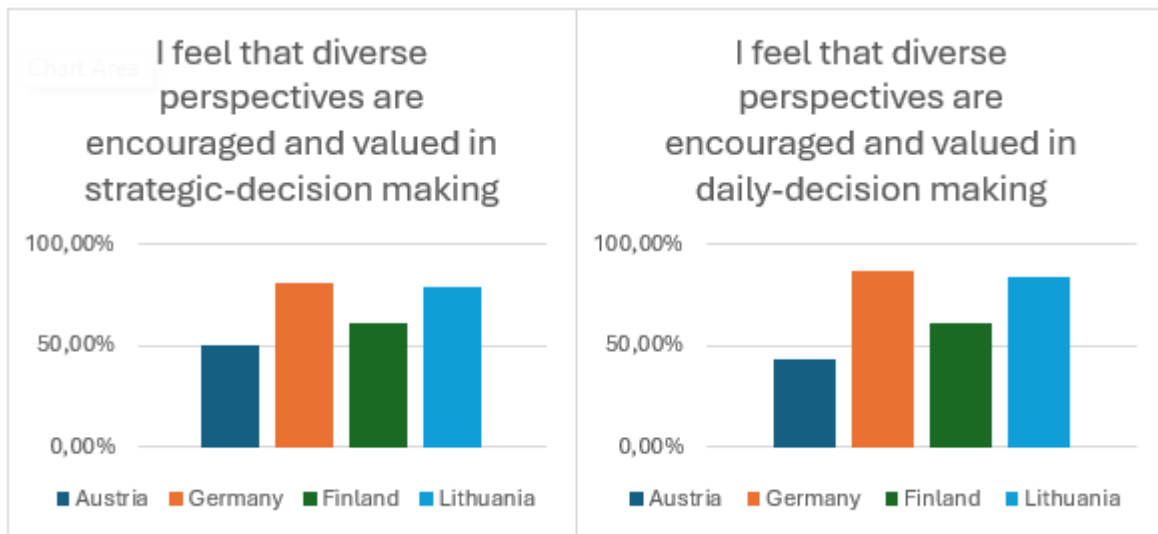


Figure 14. Diverse perspectives in strategic and daily decision making

Moreover, 51,4% of respondents notice that workforce diversity and inclusion help developing their business (Figure 15).

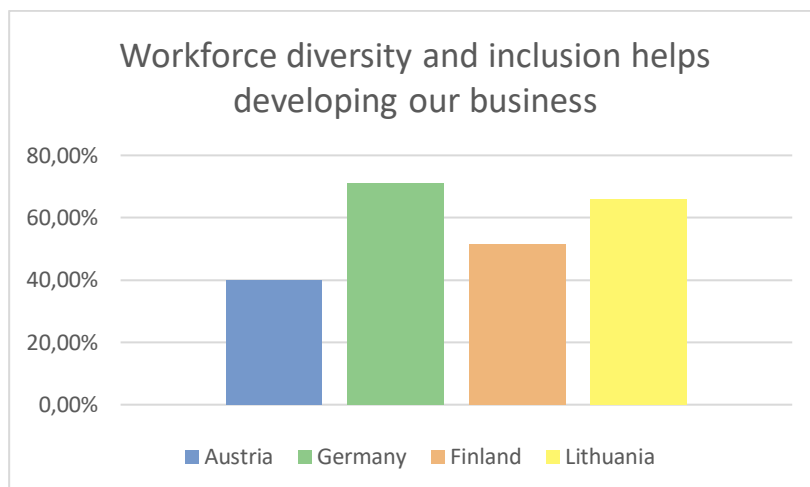


Figure 15. Workforce diversity and inclusion help develop business

Even though diverse perspectives are appreciated and seen beneficial in more than half of the sample companies, only 30,3% of them indicate that DEI is a part of the companies' identity (Figure 16).



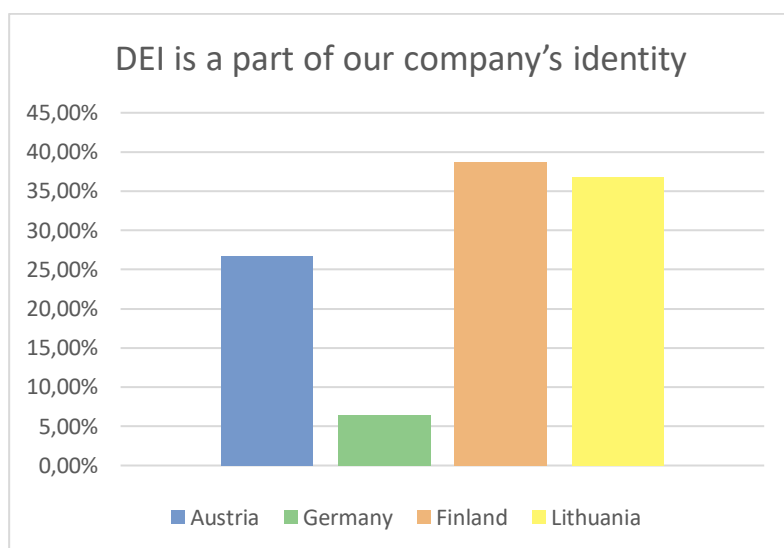


Figure 16. DEI being a part of the company's identity

There is an uneven distribution among sample countries in whether they clearly understand the challenges (Figure 17) and the benefits (Figure 18) that DEI has to their business. Overall, challenges (47,1%) that are brought by DEI issues are slightly clearer to the sample organisations than the benefits (42,7%) addressing them could bring.



Figure 17. Understanding DEI challenges to business

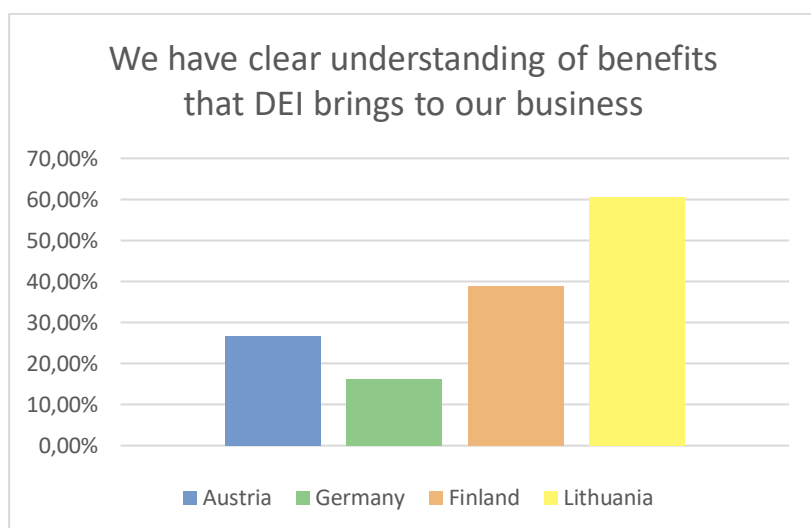


Figure 18. Understanding DEI benefits to business

Followingly, 59,8% of sample companies would like to understand better how DEI can support their business (Figure 19). However, 74,4% of the respondents do not have sufficient resources to support DEI initiatives at work (Figure 20).

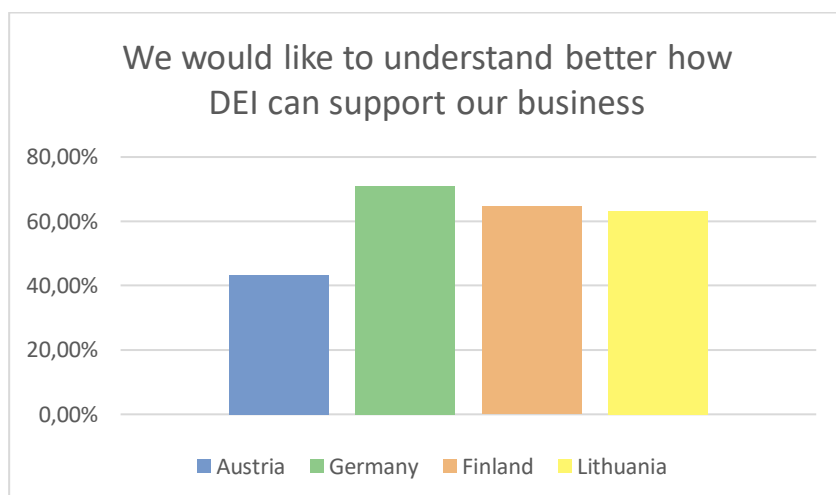


Figure 19. Need to increase understanding of how DEI can support business

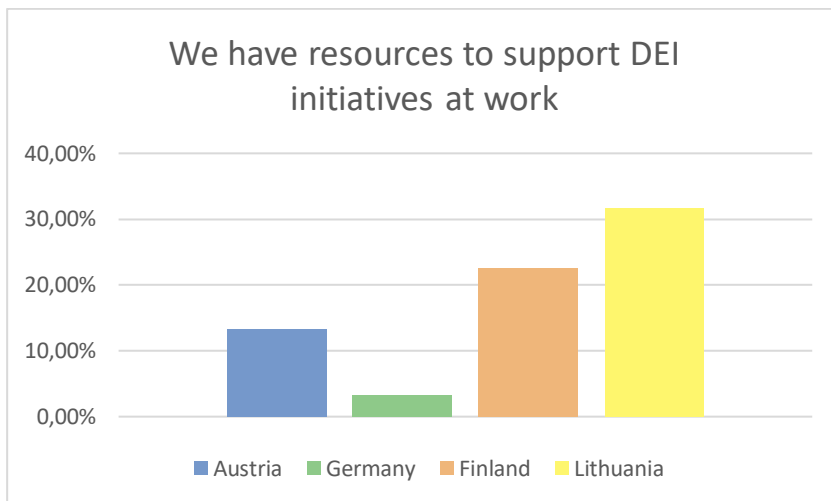


Figure 20. Access to resources to support DEI initiatives at work

Figure 21 presents whether all sample organisations see any benefits of managing DEI issues in their company. Most commonly, companies find that employee job satisfaction has increased (22,6% of sample companies see this benefit) and that they have higher levels of innovation and creativity at work (19,7%). Finnish respondents were the ones to spot the most benefits of DEI issue management for their companies, as Austrian sample the least. However, it is visible that the benefits of managing DEI issues are yet still unclear for the 39,4% of respondents.

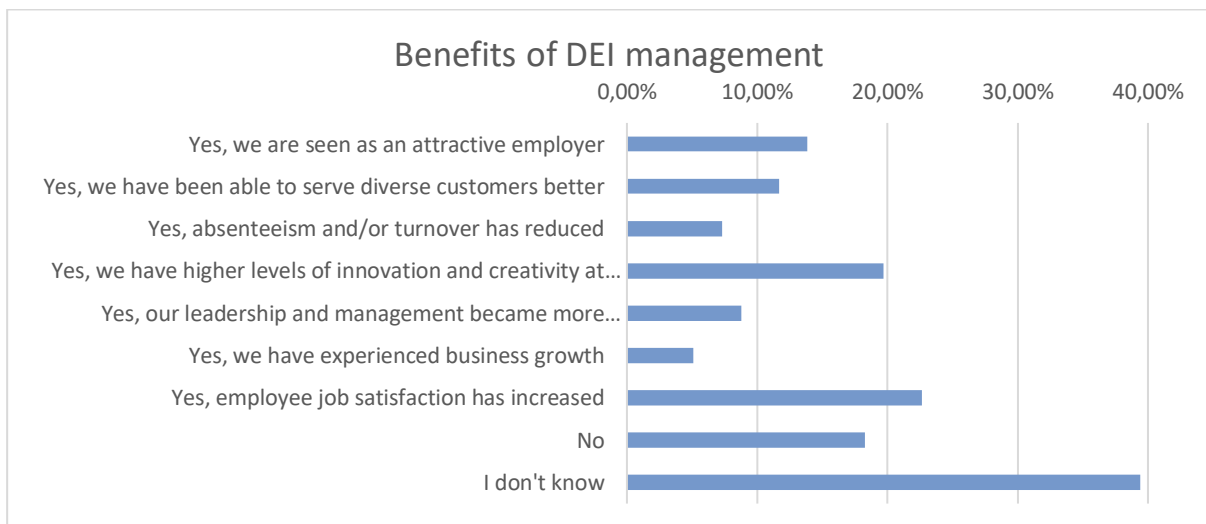


Figure 21. Benefits of DEI management

Overall, DEI issues in the sample companies are addressed mostly because of the laws demanding it. Evidently, only on some occasions the sample companies were able to see benefits of tackling these issues. Otherwise, more information is needed on how to engage with DEI in company level.

## 1.4 DEI in practice

Even though the sample companies are on their journey towards DEI management maturity, it is worthwhile to address what practices are being implemented. The survey included several questions about various practices that companies can engage when handling DEI issues. The following graph (fig. 22) addresses sample organisations' awareness, processes, and support structures for effective DEI management. They capture the extent to which employees understand reporting mechanisms, the presence of support programs for underrepresented groups, and the clarity of DEI success criteria. Additionally, they evaluate the organisation's ability to collect and monitor relevant DEI data in compliance with the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and ensure responsiveness to DEI-related requests.

Figure 22 indicates and supports previous chapter notions, that sample companies don't yet understand how to handle DEI issues, what data to collect and monitor. Moreover, mentorship is a rare practice to support the employees of underrepresented groups. However, more than 35% of all countries representatives state that they have a clear understanding of what it means to be successful in managing diversity, equity, and inclusion at work. Simultaneously, this being a mandatory practice demanded by laws in European countries, above 60% of sample organisations state that employees are familiarised with how to report any acts of exclusion, discrimination, or harassment happening at work.

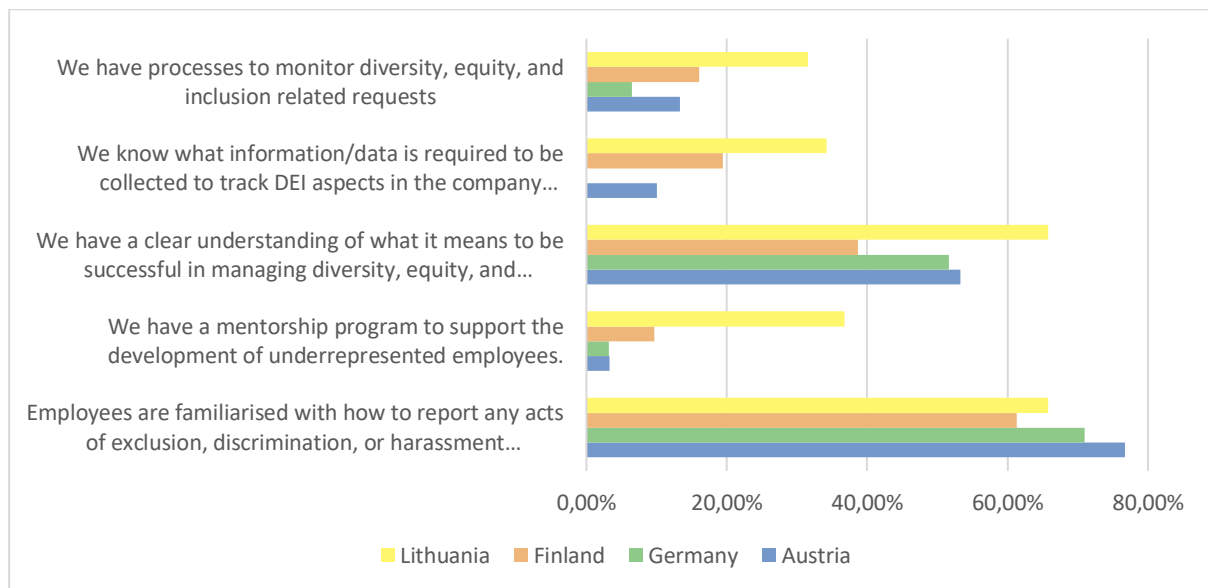


Figure 22. General DEI management practices

With the survey it was also addressed, whether companies assure equity. In Figure 23 it is visible that sample companies try to ensure equity in their communities, but not all of them engage with these practices.

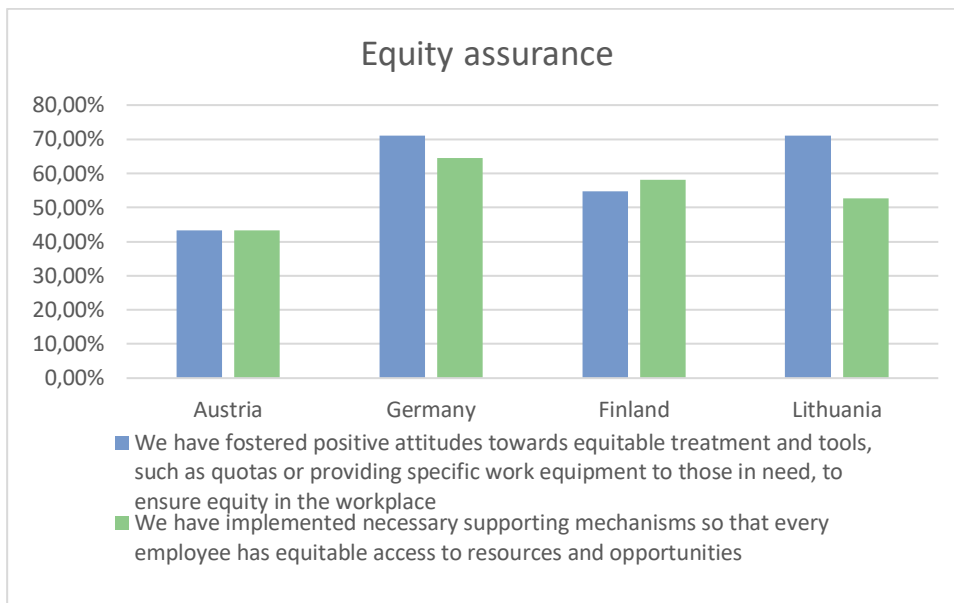


Figure 23. Equity assurance

In managing equity practices, we can see that some initiatives are more popular than others (Figure 24). Seventy-nine out of 137 sample companies provide resources and support in daily work according to individual or specific group's needs; 71 provide benefits to cater different needs (i.e. childcare, flexible work hours); and 62 provide resources for career development according to individual or specific group's needs. However, quotas and blind resume reviews are rarely adapted practices. Moreover, 21 sample organisations do not manage equity at work whatsoever.

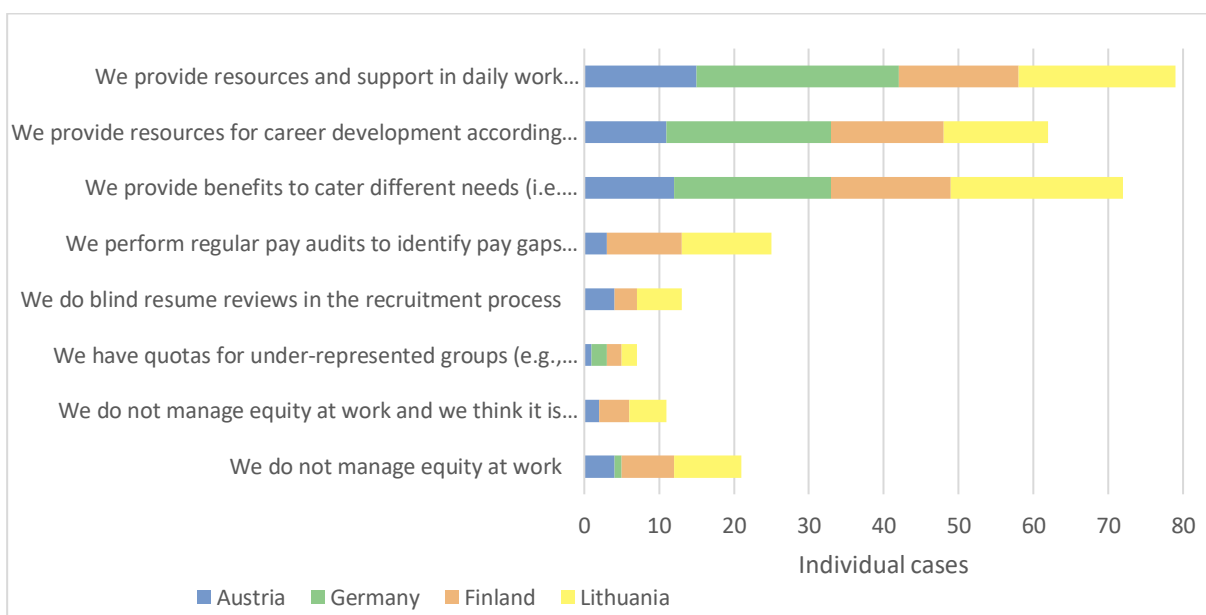


Figure 24. Equity management, count

The survey also addressed DEI management practices that are related to external factors or extended stakeholders, as indicated in Figure 25. These indicators assess an organisation's commitment to measuring, reporting, and actively fostering DEI. They reflect efforts to track DEI progress through data collection and key performance measures, ensure transparency by sharing DEI reports with value chain partners, and encourage management involvement in building an inclusive workplace. Additionally, they highlight engagement with value chain workers, the use of collective bargaining agreements, and the alignment of DEI initiatives with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Most commonly by the sample companies, the management actively participates in creating an inclusive climate at work (81 individual cases). Collective bargaining (58) and engaging with value chain workers (52) are also visible practice, though not that common. However, it is rare that sample companies request their partners in value or supply chain to prepare reporting information on their DEI activities; design initiatives or processes for DEI with the aim to also support the achievement of one or more of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals; or implement measures (such as Key Performance Indicators) to ensure the effectiveness of equal opportunities, diversity, or inclusion policies at work.

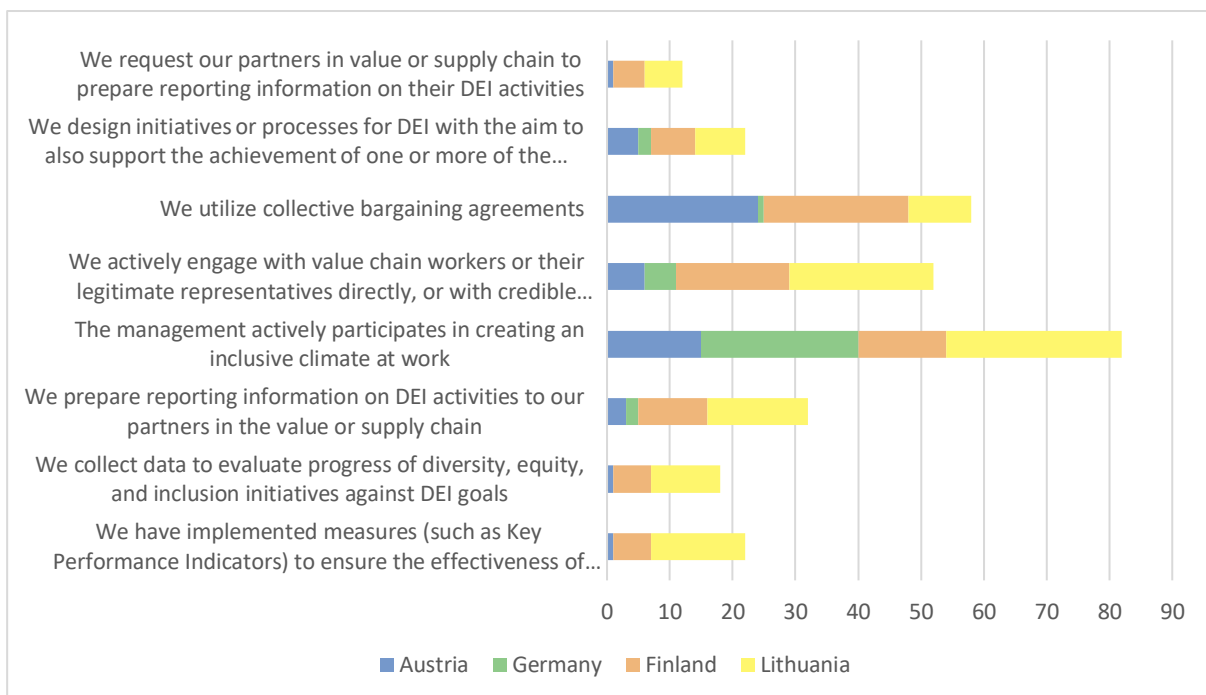


Figure 25. DEI practices

Even though not all practices that could be applicable in managing DEI are implemented by the sample organisations, it is clear that they are taking steps to assure safe environment for their employees of various diversity groups (Figure 26). Supposedly, this can be done by involving the employees in the company's decision-making process frequently (30,7%) or at least occasionally (62,8%).

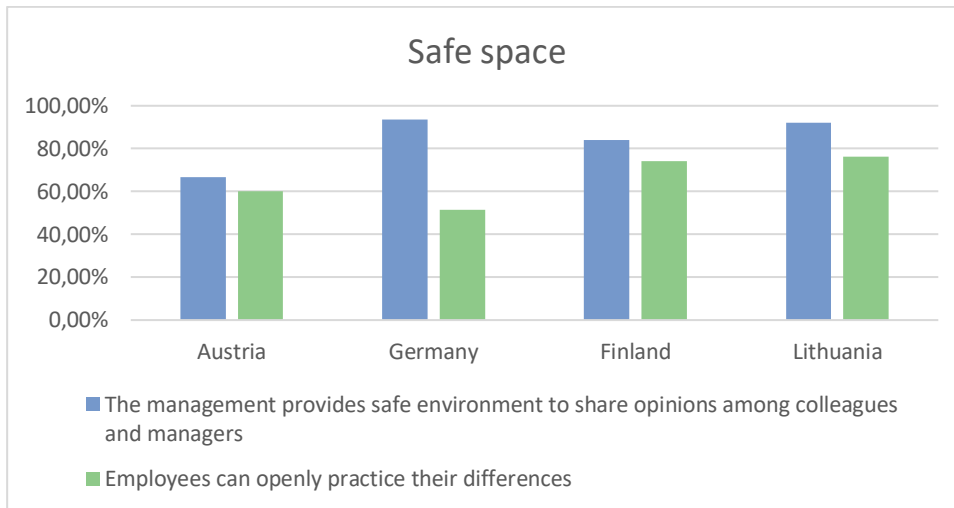


Figure 26. Safe space for employees

Additional practice that is important in the project of DEI4SME is the use of digital tools to support DEI management. However, none of the sample company uses software for planning, implementing, and monitoring diversity, equity, and inclusion-related issues, though 25,6% of them would like to have such a tool in their company. Similarly, 28,5% of sample companies would like to have a software to report compliance with various laws and guidelines such as CSRD.

## 1.5 Inclusion of people of different diversity groups

Seeing, that companies do apply some practices and in general have a care for different needs of their employees and other stakeholders, the survey invited the respondents to address whether there are different diversity dimensions represented among their employees and managers. The following graph (Figure 27) depicts the answers to the statement “To my knowledge, in our company we have these diversity dimensions represented among employees”. In most cases, company representatives know that there are employees working in the organisation of various age, speaking various languages or dialects, who are caregivers, and have various educational backgrounds. On the other hand, employees with various disabilities or those who identify themselves with the LGBTQIA+ community are not recognized or are not included in the workforce of the sample companies.

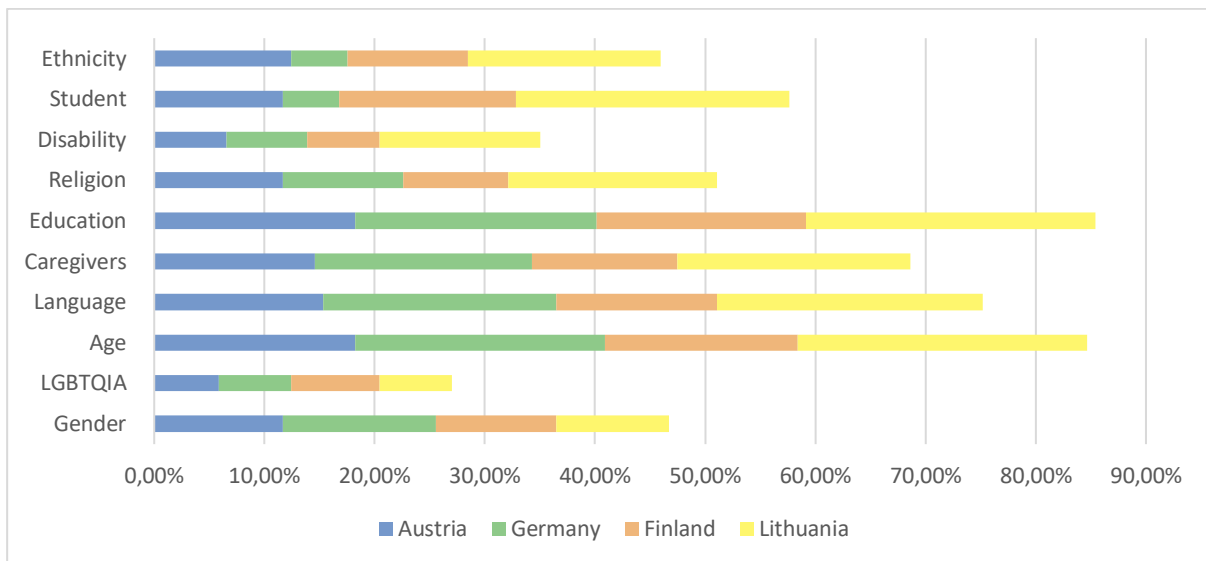


Figure 27. Employees representing different diversity dimensions

Interestingly, employees of the least represented diversity groups are the ones whom the representatives of the company were least able to identify. Therefore, in Figure 28 the answer of “I don’t know” whether this diversity group is represented among employees is visualised.

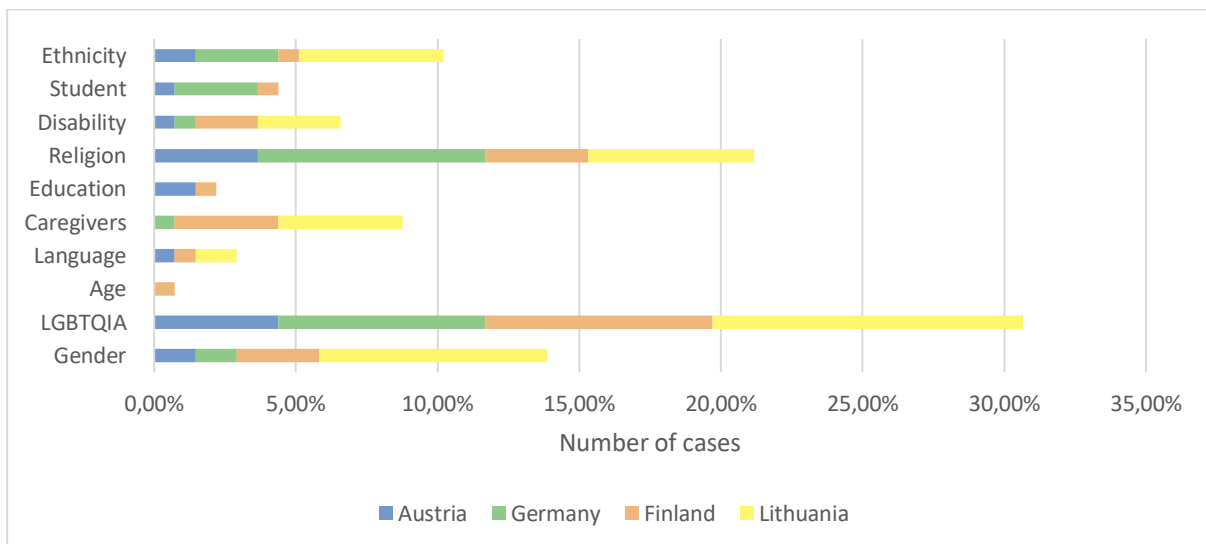


Figure 28. Uncertainty in employee diversity representation

Among management teams, it can be postulated that there are even more inequalities among different diversity group representation (Figure 29). Evidently, there are people of different age and educational background covering managerial functions among the sample companies. However, it is rare that people of various ethnicities, few work experience (students), disabilities, LGBTQIA+ diversities are represented among the management. Sadly, gender representation only reaches 40%.



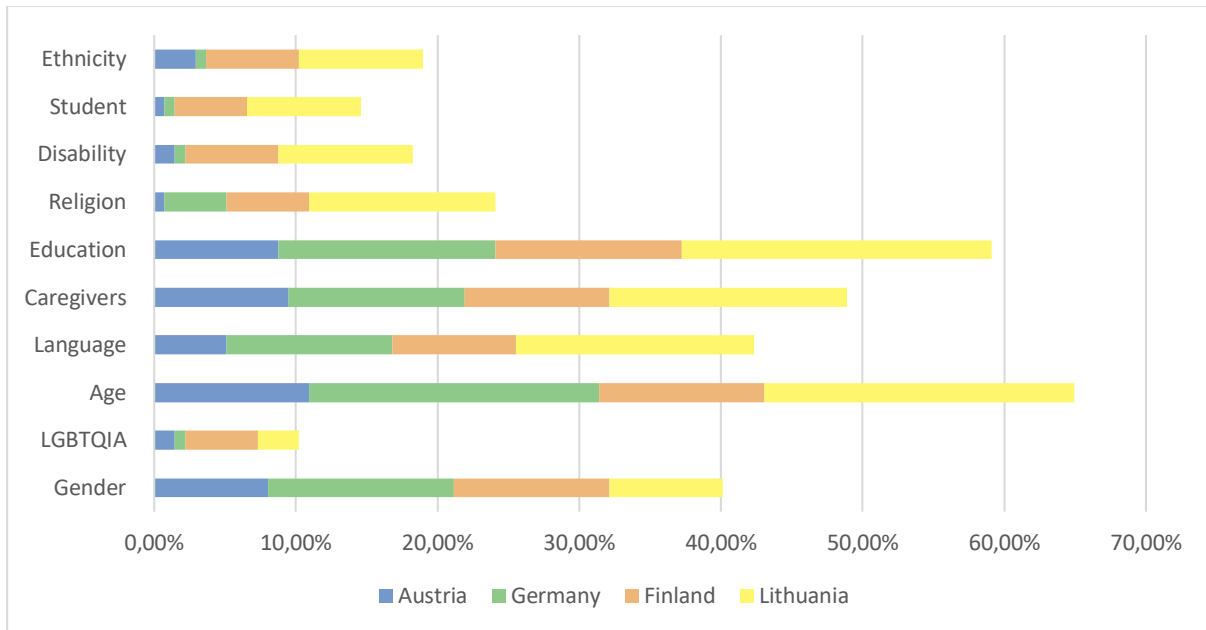


Figure 29. Managers representing different diversity dimensions

A very similar situation can be spectated in the management as in the employee representation when it comes to whether the managers know if different diversity dimensions are represented (Figure 30).

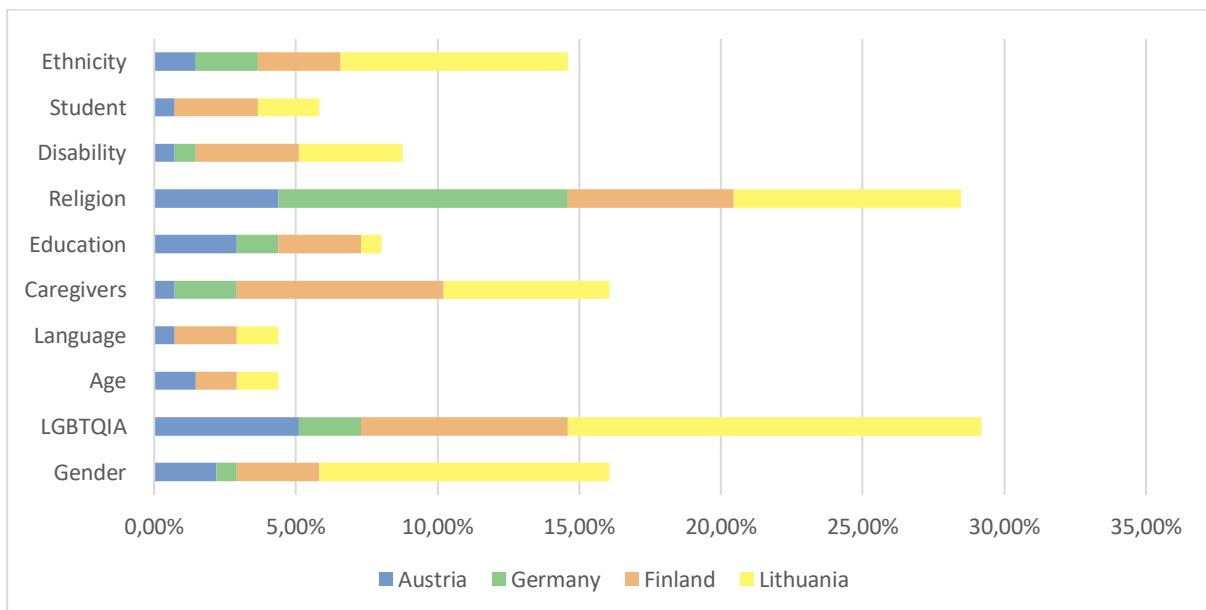


Figure 30. Uncertainty in management diversity representation

In conclusion, the sample organisations are yet covering their path towards more inclusive, diverse, and equitable management of their employee communities. Some practices, that are attributed to DEI issue management, are already in place. However, seldomly sample organisations can cover all the expenses that these additional processes require. This results in unequal inclusion of various diversity dimensions in to the working environment.



## 2 Managing Diversity in Smaller European Businesses: Employee Perspectives

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### Executive summary

#### The Key Insights and Implications from the Survey for Working Individuals

How inclusive are workplaces in Europe today and for whom? This report presents findings from a 2024 cross-national survey examining perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania. With 304 respondents primarily working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), this report explores how DEI is embedded in day-to-day work experiences.

Despite growing awareness of DEI as a priority, the results reveal inconsistencies between countries, identity groups, and policies & practices. While some companies by respondents were seen as legally compliant, this did not always transform in advanced DEI policies, and in fact significant number of employers across all countries were considering companies to be unaware of basic DEI obligations. Lack of dedicated personnel, accountability structures, or mechanisms to monitor diversity outcomes was widespread and contributed to the disconnection between DEI efforts and the everyday reality of employees.

Bias and barriers were reported across key stages of employment. No single country companies were considered to have inclusive practices across all identity groups, and marginalized individuals consistently reported reduced access to development, recognition, or advancement. DEI training and mentoring were rare, and leadership remained less diverse than general staff roles. Despite this, over half of respondents felt free to express their identity at work, indicating resilience, but highlighting the complex, uneven nature of inclusion.

Equity measures such as quotas or blind recruitment were seldom used. Instead, organizations, according to respondents, favoured general support policies, which do not necessarily address the deeper structural inequities identified in the data. Many employees were unaware of any DEI measures at all, suggesting that even well-intended efforts often fail to engage or impact those they are designed to support.

Taken together, the findings challenge the notion that DEI can be managed through broad, universal policies. They underscore the need for visible, identity-specific, and measurable DEI strategies particularly in SMEs, where flexible structures offer unique opportunities for inclusiveness. This report offers an overview of the current gaps and a roadmap for including

diversity, equity, and inclusion into the core of organizational activities. By utilizing observed experiences of the employees working in the European firms in target countries, this report provides specific recommendations for managers, especially those leading smaller firms.

## 2.1 Methodology of the Survey for Working Individuals

The questionnaire consisted of four thematic sections: (1) basic company information about the respondents and their work-related experience, (2) their assessments of DEI management in the company/organization for which they have worked including a number of considerations at strategic, operational, and human resource management levels, (3) their experiences at work when seeking employment in relation to their identity (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), and (4) their overall perceptions of the work-related matters in their country of residence and the European Union (EU). Each section included key definitions and explanations where necessary, ensuring clarity for respondents (e.g., definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion were provided at the beginning of relevant sections; identity dimensions were defined before the section on identity-related experiences). The definitions used in the survey are available at the start of this report.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, the questionnaire was designed to be as inclusive and neutral as possible, ensuring anonymity for all respondents. Participation was entirely voluntary, as stated in the ethics statement, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. The survey was also completely anonymous.

Survey was translated into the local languages of all target countries. When first designing the survey, the English language was used, and its structure was discussed among academic and corporate project partners. Then, when internal agreement on the first draft of the survey was made, the English version of the survey was translated to Finnish, Swedish (the two national languages of Finland), Lithuanian, and German (spoken officially in both Austria and Germany). When translating, native speakers worked in teams to ensure that at least two native speakers check the translation and localize the meanings making them not only linguistically, but also culturally correct. There was extensive effort to coordinate between German speaking project partners, ensuring that German version of the survey suits both Austrian and German speakers. Once the translations were complete, the survey was further tested with external stakeholders, at least five in each country gathering their feedback on clarity and structure of the survey. Once the feedback was gathered from all countries and jointly discussed, minor adjustments were made in all language versions and if needed further translated following the same process once again.

The survey primarily employed a quantitative approach to assess individual perceptions of DEI management in SMEs and other organizations in Europe. However, some open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to clarify their perspectives or share best practices. This report primarily presents data gathered from the quantitative questions.

The questionnaire was distributed digitally through project tools, social media, university networks, and professional networks within the partner consortium. While this sampling method may introduce potential biases, the design of the survey for individuals allowed capturing broad range of perceptions concerning both employment-related experiences of individuals and their perceptions about the broader societal trends related to diversity management in companies in their country of residence and in Europe. To mitigate individual bias, the questionnaire included

multiple sections which were intended to elaborate on the issues asked in different words and at varying levels of details.

### 2.1.1. Composite Score Construction for Better Readability When Reporting Findings

The survey used Likert scale that included the following options: ‘Strongly Agree’, ‘Agree’, ‘Neutral’, ‘Disagree’, ‘Strongly Disagree’, and ‘Don’t know’. To enhance readability of the results, composite scores were created based on participants’ responses to the survey items.

The first composite score aggregated the proportion of responses that were either “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”, representing overall agreement with the given statements.

The second composite score aggregated the proportion of responses that were either “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree”, representing overall disagreement.

These composite scores were calculated separately for each respondent across relevant items and were subsequently used to assess group differences.

On the graphs, these composite scores were named “**Agree\*\***” and “**Disagree\*\***” with the asterisk further reiterating the meaning of each aggregated concept.

### 2.1.2. Data comparison to SME survey

The surveys for individuals (section 2) and for SMEs (section 1) were conducted simultaneously within the scope of the same DEI4SME project, however the answers are not linked. The individuals responding to the survey discussed hereafter are not necessarily working in the companies mentioned in the first part of the report. As a result, it is noted that the data is not directly comparable between section 1 and 2.

## 2.3 Demographics of the Respondents

The survey consisted of **39 questions**, of which 10 were asked to all, and 29 were conditional. The questions asked to all individuals related to identifying the respondent’s profile and demographics.

There were two **conditionality rules** that applied in the survey. Respondents who were seeking employment, i.e., were not yet in working life, answered only the questions identifying their profiles and demography and continued with sharing their experiences about seeking employment and their general views on employment. The respondents who already had some work experience answered questions about their previous or current employer and the questions about their general views on employment. The second conditionality rule applied to respondents in relation to their identification (or not) with various diversity dimensions. All respondents were first asked about their identification with various diversity dimensions. According to their identification choices, the questions concerning individual experiences in relation to the selected diversity identity in working life got opened. As a result, the conditional questions were asked only to selected respondents.

The survey was conducted between the months of **June and September 2024** with **308** total answers collected, of which 304 were from the target countries and 4 were from respondents based in other countries which were excluded from the results' analysis. The survey was conducted in four countries: **Austria, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania**, and Figure 31 indicates the representation of respondents' country of residence per country.

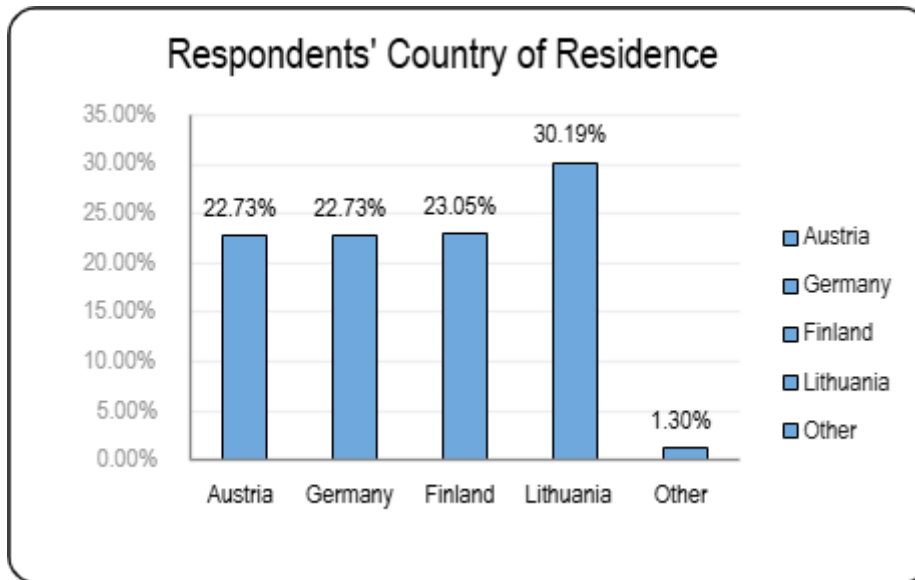


Figure 31. Respondents' country of residence

The majority of the respondents identified as binary, in other words females or males, with females being predominantly represented in the answers gathered (Figure 32). Although additional **gender** options were presented to the respondents, very few established a non-binary gender identification (non-binary, transgender, or others).

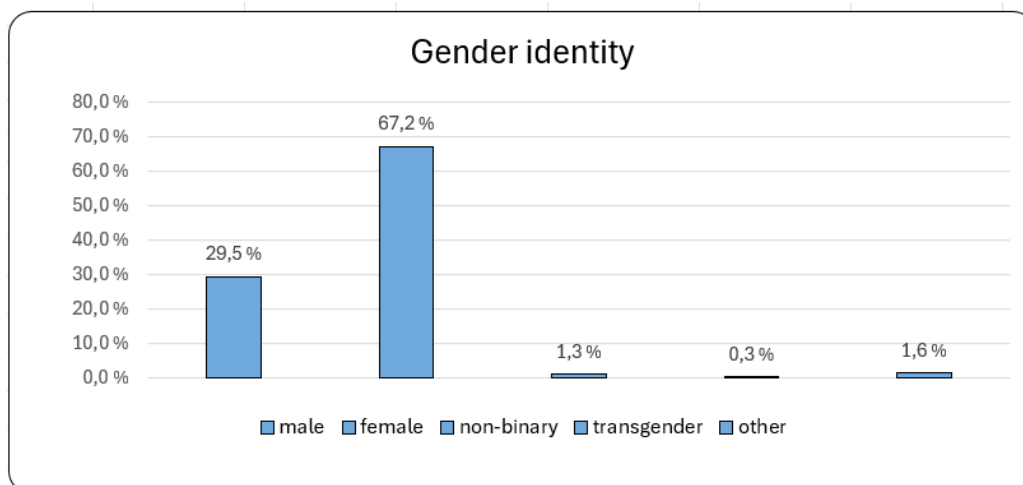


Figure 32. Respondents' gender identity

Survey was answered by respondents in the diverse **age** groups. Individuals were mostly between the ages of 26-35 and 36-49, respectively represented with 31,8% of the answers (Figure 33) and

therefore represented a standard population of working individuals. The second most reached groups was the younger generation, and the least reached was the older generation.

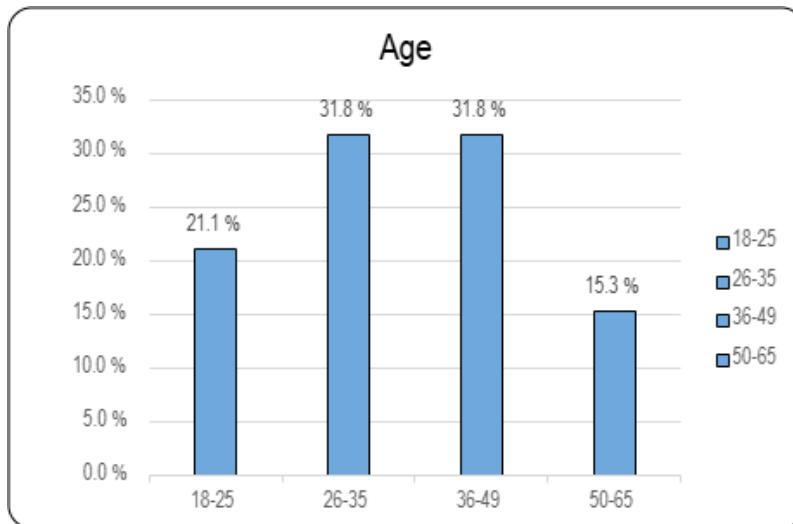


Figure 33. Respondents' age

Since individuals were asked to disclose their identification and **belonging to various diversity groups**, such as gender identity, LGBTQIA+, age, caregiving, and more (Figure 34) the survey could explore individual experiences in relation to these identities. All of the proposed diversity dimensions were chosen at least once by the individuals surveyed in each country. It is important to note that individuals identified with these diversity groups based on their own perceptions and potentially the belief that it impacts their work-related experiences. Some diversity dimensions were selected more often (e.g., gender, age, language), than others (e.g., disability, LGBTQIA+, religion) (Figure 34).

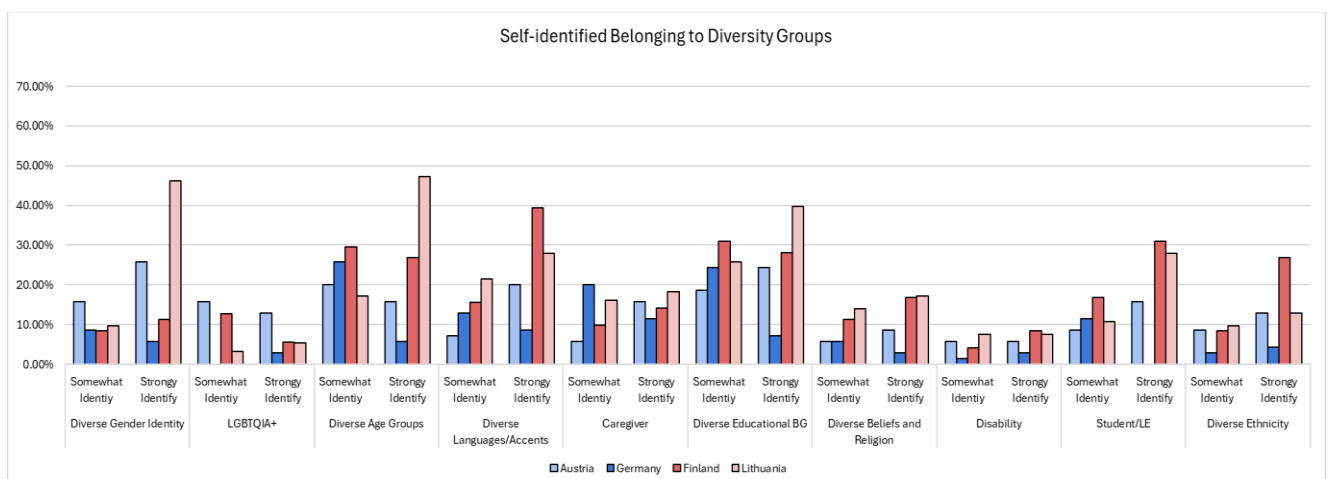


Figure 34. Respondents' self-identified belonging to diversity groups

Individuals who were already in working life were asked to provide more details about their **level of responsibility** and **years in the companies**, and **other specifics on their workplace** such as type of organization, its size or scope of international activities (Figure 35 to 39). The surveyed

individuals were mainly in non-management positions (over half of the answers gathered), while mid-level core and supporting roles, with a combined 31,8% of response, formed the second most represented groups in this analysis. The other positions at work were seldomly selected by respondents (Figure 35).

Most respondents had medium to long work experience in companies with over 76,3% of them having been employed for at least over a year, and within this percentage almost 34% have been employed for 5 years or more (Figure 36). It is worth mentioning that the individuals were not asked whether they maintained the same position or worked in the same company during all these years of employment. The survey reflected their current situation at work.

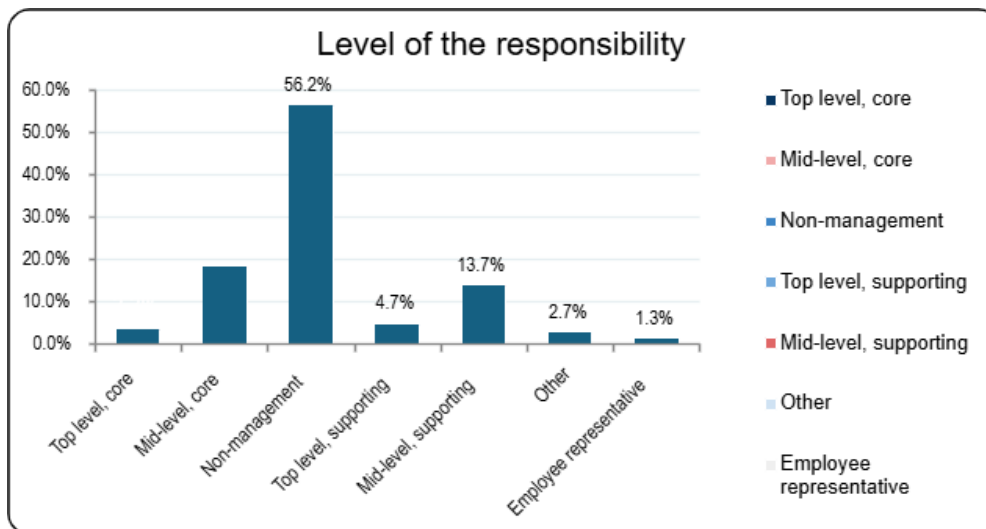


Figure 35. Respondents' level of responsibility in own company

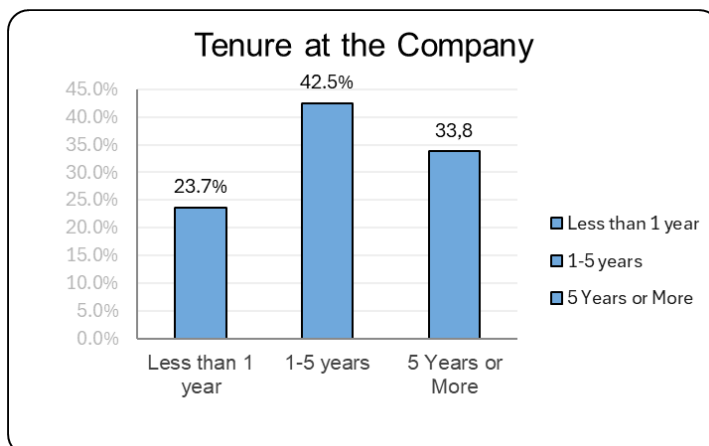


Figure 36. Respondents' tenure at the company

Respondents also provided additional information about their **employer's organization**. The survey was primarily targeting individuals working or seeking employment in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and therefore almost half (48%) of the surveyed individuals were working within an SME (Figure 37).

Some of the respondents worked in large local companies, multinational company (MNCs), and public institutions, all respectively under 17%, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or



other organizations - respectively less than 5%. These features of respondents' employer were further confirmed by follow-up questions. Figure 38 provides more detailed information on the size of the company in terms of employee counts. Most of the companies where respondents worked had between 10 and 250 employees.

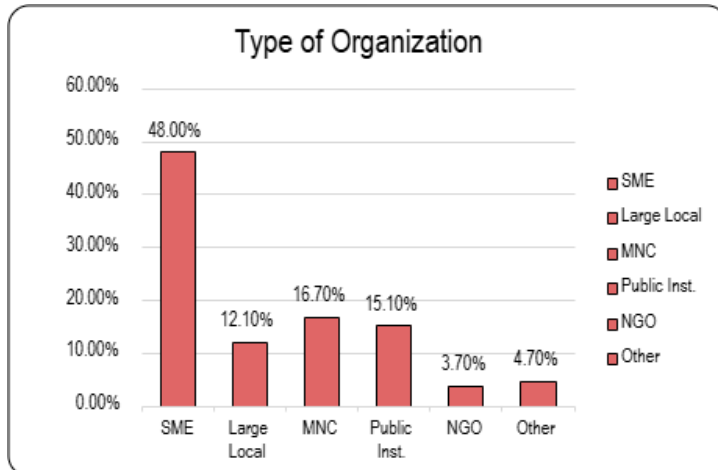


Figure 37. Type\* of organisation in which respondent has work experience

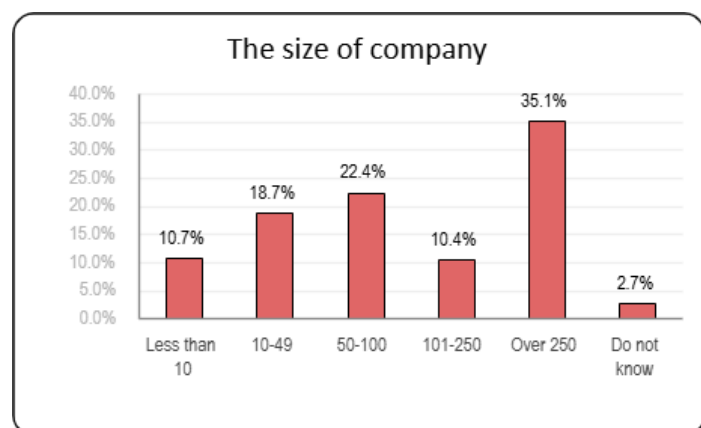


Figure 38. Size of the company in which respondent has work experience

Most of the respondents worked in an organization that had at least some international presence and only 22,7 % of individuals worked in firms without any international operations or presences (Figure 39). This indicated that many employers of individuals who responded had exposure to at least cultural diversity that formed a part of their operations. Head office of the companies that respondents were working were located primarily in the target countries: 18.6% companies had their headquarters in Austria, 28.7% in Germany, 20.6% in Finland, 25.0% in Lithuania, and 7.1% in other countries.



Figure 39. Respondents' assessment of the scope of the companies in which they work international activities

The survey captured a rich and multidimensional picture of diversity among respondents. This diversity was reflected not only in individual characteristics - such as gender, age, ethnicity, and other identity dimensions - but also in professional roles, company types, and organizational contexts. Additionally, the inclusion of participants from four different countries added further contextual variety, which was explored in more detail in the following sections.

## 2.4 Level of maturity of DEI management in European companies: Individual experiences and perceptions

To understand the how in general respondents evaluate their employer's interest, efforts, and ability to address DEI issues, respondents were asked to provide an overall rank to the company they worked for. The **rank** included categories spanned from perceiving their employer as a **DEI Expert** - a company that has legal compliance, enacted company's policies and processes for handling DEI, is an proactive advocate of DEI inside and outside the company – to the company that has **Lack of Awareness** – does not even know what legal issues need to be addressed to handle DEI appropriately.

In Germany, most of the employers (50%) were seen as **DEI compliant**, i.e., doing all what is required by law for the diversity management, or **DEI Aware**, i.e., in addition to legal compliance discussing that further actions beyond this would be necessary (25%). In other target countries, employers were almost evenly ranked across all the indicated categories. In Finland and Lithuania approx. 20% of companies were perceived to be **Advanced in DEI**, i.e., legally compliant with also established and functioning policies and procedures for DEI management, whereas in Austria and especially Germany respondents considered that there considerably less such type of companies. 20.60% in Austria, 14.10% in Finland, and 23.60% in Lithuania companies were not even aware of legal requirements to be addressed when managing DEI according to respondents' assessment (Figure 40).

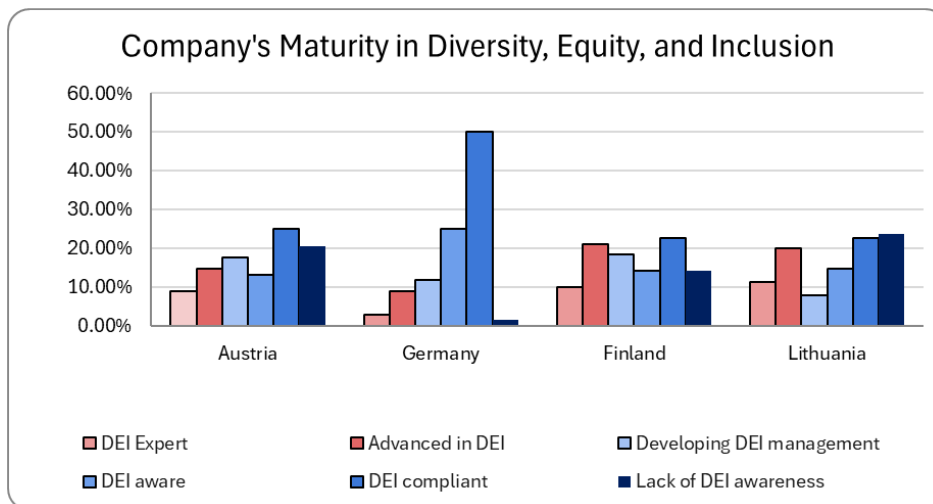


Figure 40. Respondents' evaluation of company's maturity in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Austria and Lithuania, according to respondents, had most of the employers (approx. 38%) who had DEI as a part of their identity (Figure 41). However, more than a third of participants in each country disagreed that their employer having DEI in their identity. In other words, similar numbers of respondents perceive DEI as integral to their employer's **brand image**, while a comparable proportion do not share this view in all the target countries.

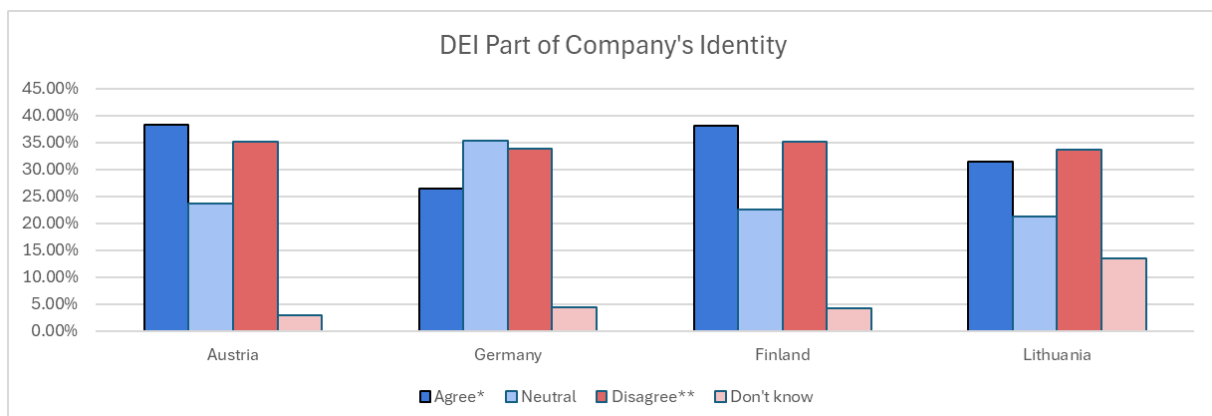


Figure 41. Respondents' evaluation of DEI having a role in the company's identity

To understand who is **accountable for DEI management** in the employers' firms, respondents were asked about a person nominated to handle DEI issues in their company (Figure 42). In many companies across the four target countries large number of companies did not have at all a person appointed for addressing DEI issues. In Austria, there were the largest number of such companies (almost 50%), in Germany almost 43%, in Finland about 35%, and in Lithuania almost 34% of such companies. In all four countries, with more than half of the companies in Germany, the most often nominated person to address DEI issues in the company was a human resources (HR) manager. This means that DEI in firms remained either unattended or a matter outside the main business functions. External consultants and software system were used occasionally in all countries, except Germany. The highest use of these options was observed in Austria where almost 3% of companies used external consultants to handle DEI matters and Lithuania where almost 7% of firms used software systems for addressing DEI issues in the company. To conclude,

many companies in target countries, according to working individuals still do not have a dedicated person internally for DEI-issues and therefore a person who would be accountable for these issues. Accountability for DEI remains outside the main business, what reinforces DEI maturity ranks (discussed above) assigned to the assessed employers.

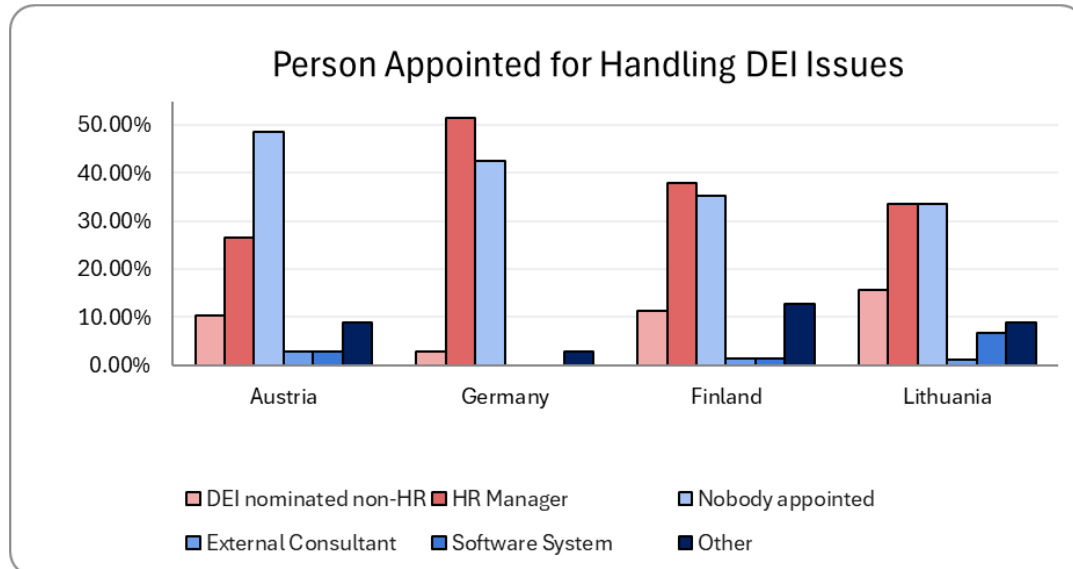


Figure 42. Person appointed for handling DEI issues in the company as perceived by individuals

### 2.4.1. Impact of Gender Identity on Work and Employment Experiences

A set of the survey questions explored the respondents' experiences regarding the presence or absence of bias and/or discomfort based on gender identity, within their workplace environments. Analysis of responses (Figure 43) shows a generally positive trend across the countries, with majority indicating they have not felt discomfort or bias during recruitment, career progression, training, or performance evaluation based on their gender identity. Overall, around 62% of individuals agreed that they experienced no bias during the recruitment process, with Finland and Lithuania showing the highest levels of agreement. Similarly, approximately 66% of respondents reported feeling fully included at work without pre-judgments due to their gender identity, this sentiment was particularly strong in Finland, Lithuania and Germany. Opportunities for advancement and training were also perceived positively, with approximately 64% and 73% agreement across the surveyed countries.

In contrast, respondents in Austria presented with slightly lower positive responses, especially regarding career advancement, training, and perceptions related to evaluation. Workplace accommodations based on gender identity were an area with lower positive responses overall, with only 55% agreement, and with noticeable country-level differences.

Largest differences between countries were found in perceptions of bias during recruitment processes and in the availability of workplace accommodations. Specifically, Germany reported significantly higher experiences of discomfort during recruitment compared to the other countries while Austria showed substantially lower agreement regarding gender identity-based accommodations.

While the general trend is positive, these results highlight those areas where improvements can be made, especially recruitment bias in Germany and workplace accommodations in Austria.

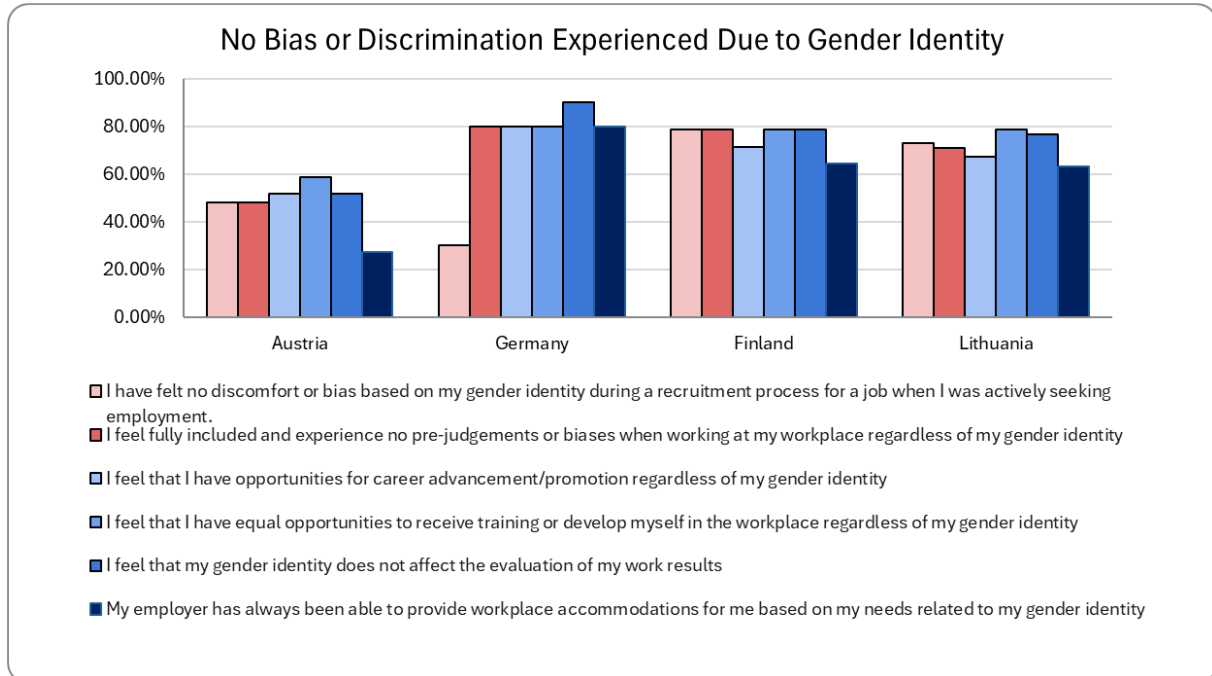


Figure 43. Impact of Gender Identity on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.2. Impact of Belonging to LGBTQIA+ Community on Work and Employment Experience

Regarding the experiences of LGBTQIA+ employees' perception (Figure 44), the findings show mixed results, with some positive signs but also areas where significant improvements are needed across the surveyed countries. Opportunities for career advancement and training were perceived more positively, with 55% and 61% of respondents agreeing that they experienced no hindrance due to their LGBTQIA+ identity. Similarly, 57% indicated that their work evaluations were unaffected by their identity.

In recruitment processes, only 41% of respondents indicated no bias or discomfort linked to their identity. Germany stood out with 100% of respondents reporting no negative experiences during recruitment (notably, the sample size of Germans with LGBTQIA+ identity was vastly smaller). In the other countries, majority did not report clear agreement, which highlights that recruitment bias remains a concern.

Approximately 43% of respondents reported that they feel fully included and free from pre-judgment at their workplace, with Finland demonstrating stronger positive perceptions, notably none of the German respondents agreed with this statement – suggesting challenges even in countries with otherwise strong results, and elevating the fact that this dimension can be well-

hidden in the recruitment stage, whereas may become an issue and potential reason of discrimination when working.

Workplace accommodations based on LGBTQIA+ identity remained a weaker area, with only 34% reporting positive experiences, with Austria and Lithuania reporting noticeably lower satisfaction regarding accommodations.

Overall, while encouraging results in career development and evaluation are present, there are significant gaps in building fully inclusive workplaces, especially in recruitment processes and accommodations.

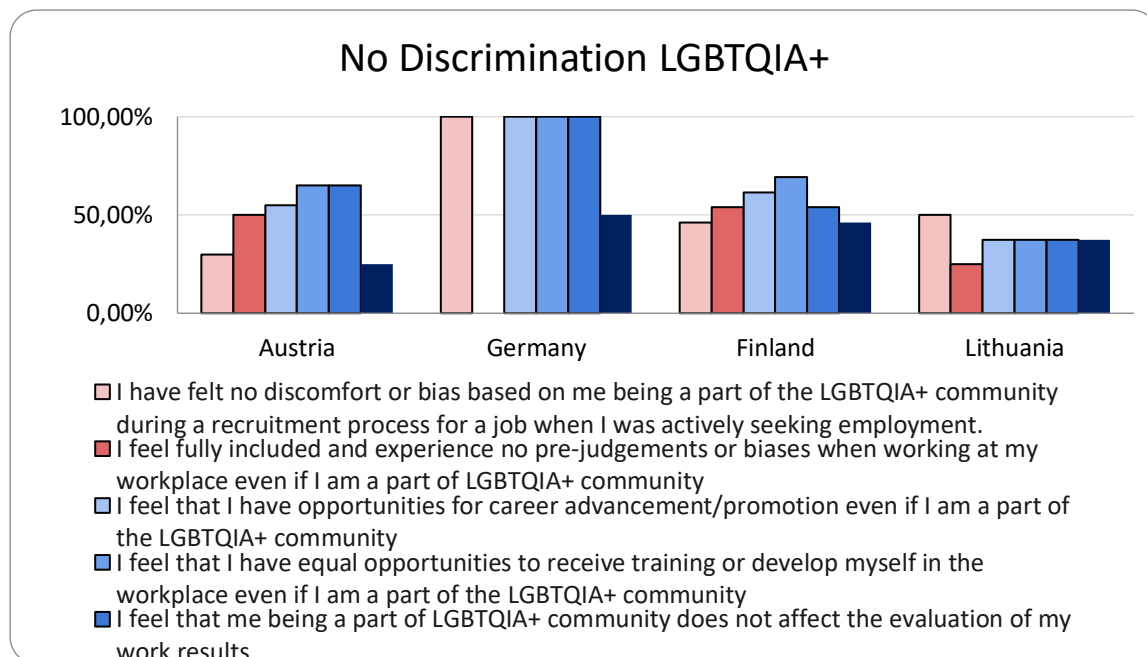


Figure 44. Impact of Belonging to LGBTQIA+ Community on Work and Employment Experiences

### 2.4.3. Impact of Age on Work and Employment Experience

Experiences of age-related bias, inclusion, and support in the workplace showed mostly positive results across the surveyed countries. While many respondents reported fair treatment overall (Figure 45), clear differences emerged between countries and across different stages of employment.

51% of respondents reported feeling no bias during recruitment related to their age. Finland (57.5%), Austria (56%), and Lithuania (55%) showed the highest levels of agreement, while Germany reported much lower positive responses at 22,7%. The results may not reflect realities of the youngest and the oldest working individuals, since they were minority in the sample. Workplace inclusion was perceived more favourably, with 70% of all respondents agreeing they felt fully included. Germany and Lithuania showed the strongest positive perception, whereas Austria and Finland were slightly lower, but still above 60%.

Career advancement and training opportunities were among the most positively rated aspects, with 68% and 79% agreement respectively. Germany reported particularly high scores for both (86% for advancement and 95,5% for training), followed by Lithuania and Finland. Austria's results were positive but comparatively lower. Regarding workplace evaluation, 75% agreed their age did not impact assessments, with Germany reporting the highest agreement (91%), followed by Lithuania and Finland. Workplace accommodations yielded the weakest results, with only 62% expressing agreement. Germany and Lithuania scored relatively high in this category with 91% and 72%, respectively. On the contrary, only 40% of respondents from Austria agreed that their employer provided adequate workplace accommodations.

Overall, perceptions of inclusion, development, and fair evaluation were largely positive, the results highlight recruitment processes and workplace accommodations as critical areas for improvement, especially in Germany and Austria. However, these results should be interpreted with caution, because respondents were primarily 26-49 years age and this age group on average is known to experience less biases and discrimination in comparison to other.

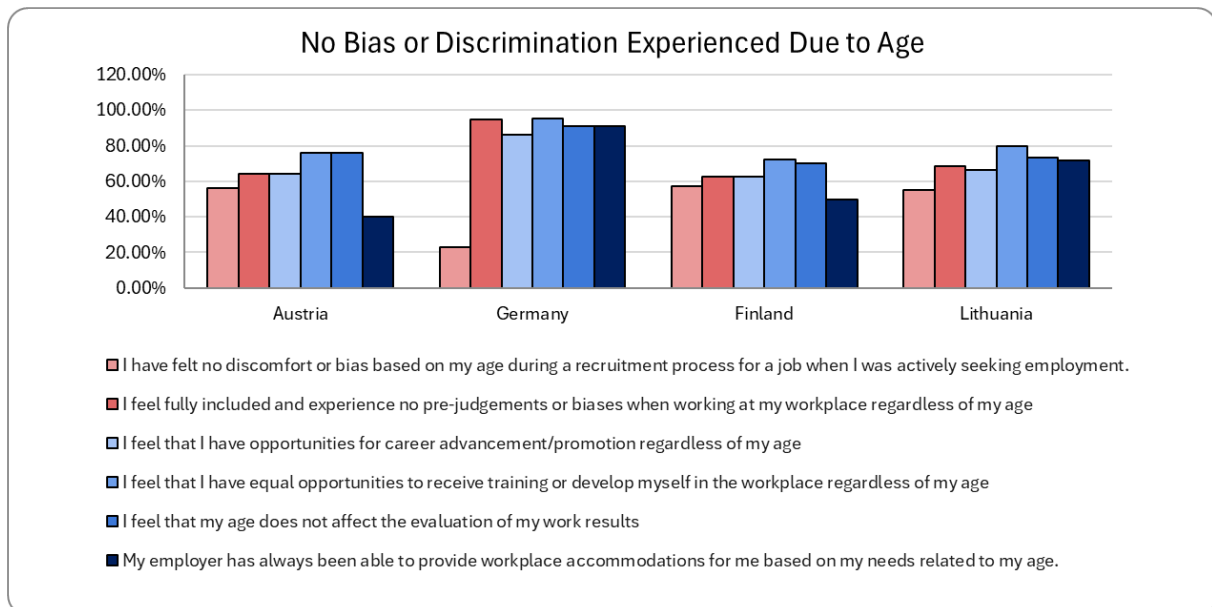


Figure 45. Impact of Age on Work and Employment Experiences

#### 2.4.4. Impact of Native Language Used or Accent on Work and Employment Experiences

This section of the survey explored employees' experiences of bias, inclusion, and support related to their native language or accent. Overall results (Figure 46) indicate mainly positive results, though notable country differences remain.

Across all countries, about 63% of respondents reported no bias during recruitment based on language or accent. Lithuania showed the highest agreement (80.4%), followed by Finland and Germany (both around 53%), while Austria reported lower levels (47%).

In terms of workplace inclusion, around 63% of respondents felt fully accepted, with Germany (87%) and Lithuania (74%) leading. Finland showed a notably lower inclusion rate (41%),



suggesting this as a critical area for reconsidering how individuals with diverse linguistic backgrounds can be better integrated at work.

Opportunities for career advancement and training were positively perceived by 67% overall, with Germany and Lithuania again showing the highest satisfaction. Respondents in Finland and Austria reported slightly lower satisfaction about the possibility to advance career or receive training for individuals with diverse linguistic background.

Regarding fair evaluation, 72% agreed their language or accent did not negatively affect their work assessments. Lithuania and Germany performed strongest, while Austria reported comparatively lower agreement. Workplace accommodations were identified as a challenge. Only 55% agreed their language-related needs were supported, with Austria (37%) and Finland (38%) showing the weakest results compared to Germany and Lithuania, both over 73%.

In summary, while experiences with inclusion, career development, and fair evaluation are largely positive, the data highlight gaps in recruitment experiences, inclusion at work, and linguistic accommodations, particularly in Austria and Finland.

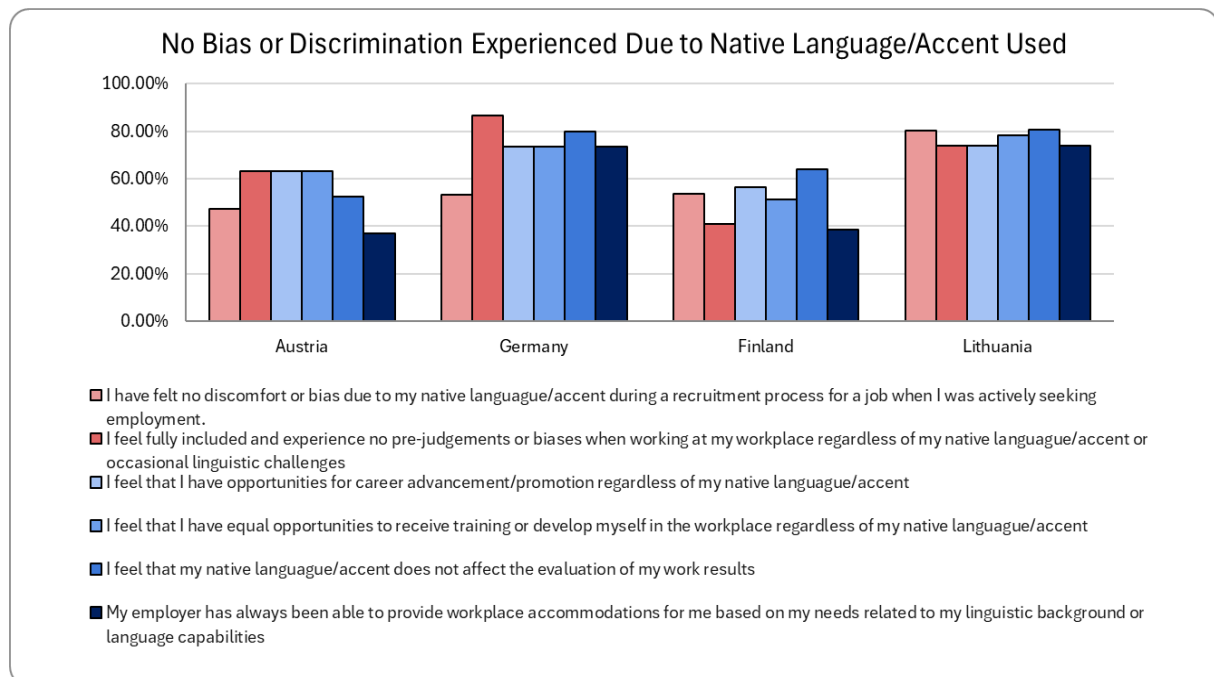


Figure 46. Impact of Native Language Used or Accent on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.5. Impact of Care Giving Needs on Work and Employment Experiences

Around 53% of respondents across countries reported feeling no bias during recruitment based on their caregiving responsibilities, with all the countries showing very similar levels. However, as only a little over half experienced recruitment as bias-free, the results suggest that this remains an area of concern.

Workplace inclusion was somewhat stronger, with about 60% agreeing they felt fully included regardless of their caregiving needs. Germany (73%) and Finland (71%) recorded the highest levels of positive responses, while Lithuania (50%) reported less inclusion. Career advancement



opportunities were seen positively by around 60% overall. Finland (83%) stood out with the highest agreement, followed by Germany (64%), while Austria was significantly lower at 40%, indicating that caregivers may face more barriers there.

Equal access to training and development opportunities was reported by 66% of respondents. Finland (82%) and Germany (82%) again showed strong results, whereas only 33% of caregivers in Austria reported equality in training and development opportunities. Regarding fair evaluation of work performance, 60% of respondents said their caregiving responsibilities did not impact assessments. Finland led with 76%, while Austria remained weaker in this area. Support for workplace accommodations related to caregiving needs was more mixed, with 59% agreeing their needs were met. Germany (68%) and Lithuania (59%) performed better, but Austria (47%) continued to show lower satisfaction.

Overall, while many respondents reported positive experiences around inclusion and professional development, noticeable issues persist, specifically in recruitment, career progression, and workplace accommodations, especially for those in Austria. Results, especially in Austria, relate with challenges reported due to gender identity and age, since often younger females have need to take care of children or are still tasked to take care of siblings.

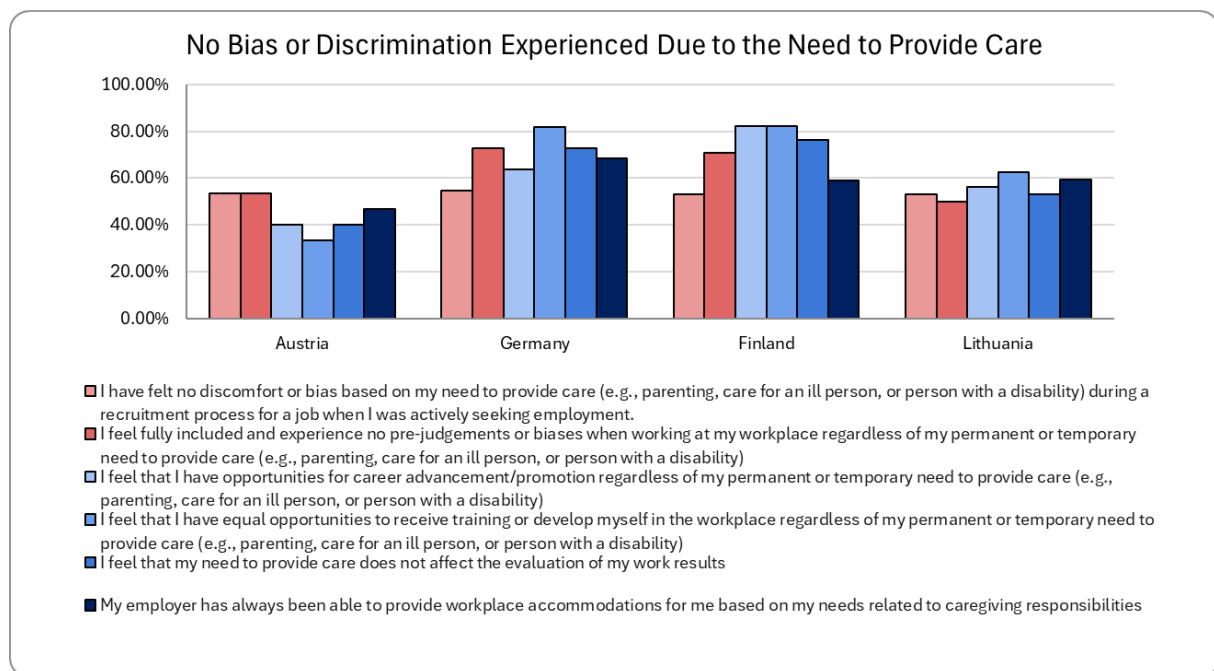


Figure 47. Impact of Care Giving Needs on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.6. Impact of Educational Background in Work and Employment Experiences

Respondents' experiences of bias or discomfort related to their educational background were also explored in the survey. Overall, results (Figure 48) suggest that most participants did not face discrimination linked to their education, particularly during recruitment, career progression,

training, or performance evaluations. Around 62% reported no bias during the recruitment stage, with the highest levels of positive responses coming from Lithuania and Germany.

Workplace inclusion outcomes were also encouraging, with around 71% reporting that they felt fully accepted regardless of their educational history. Germany, Lithuania, and Finland led in positive perceptions, while Austria showed slightly more mixed results. Similarly, perceptions of fair opportunities for career advancement and training were relatively strong, ranging from 60% to above 70%.

Despite these positive signs, Austria consistently showed lower satisfaction, especially regarding career progression opportunities and access to training. Differences across countries were most visible in recruitment experiences and perceptions of professional development opportunities, suggesting that educational background still influences workplace experiences in some settings.

In general, findings reflect a positive workplace environment regarding educational diversity at work but also highlight where improvements could be made, particularly in Austria, to better support diverse educational backgrounds in career development and training access.

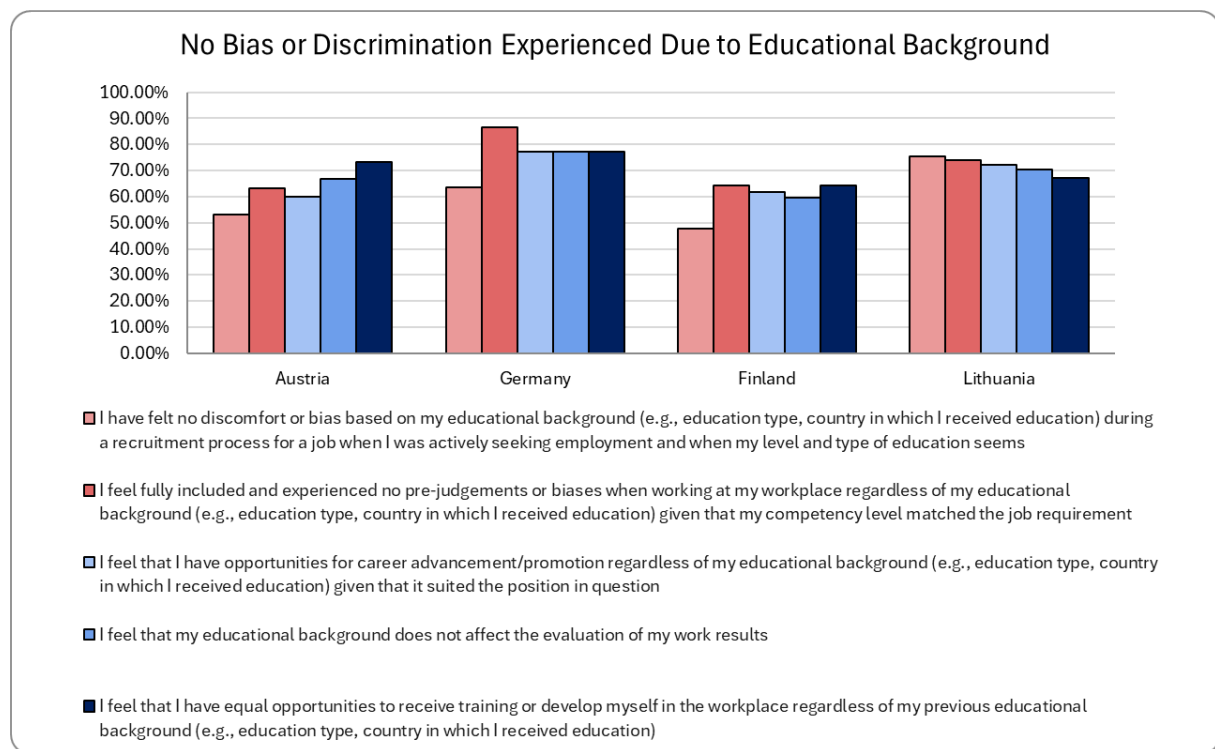


Figure 48. Impact of Educational Background on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.7. Impact of Religion on Work and Employment Experiences

Analysis of the responses related to bias/discomfort due to religious beliefs show positive results across the surveyed countries, with most individuals reporting no bias during recruitment, career progression, training, or performance evaluation linked to their religion. Approximately 58% of respondents indicated they experienced no bias during recruitment processes, with Lithuania (72%) and Finland (55%) showing the strongest levels of agreement. In contrast, Austria and

Germany reported lower positive responses, indicating that recruitment experiences still vary by country.

Workplace inclusion outcomes were similarly positive. Around 61% of respondents stated that they felt fully included at work regardless of their religion, with particularly high levels of inclusion observed in Lithuania and Finland. Germany showed moderate levels of agreement, while Austria lagged slightly. Neutral responses and uncertainty (“Don’t know”) were relatively higher in Austria compared to the other countries, suggesting less clarity or consistency in experiences.

Opportunities for career advancement and access to professional development were also viewed favourably, with 67% agreement across countries for both dimensions. However, Austria recorded noticeably lower satisfaction with career development opportunities, with only 40% agreement, compared to 66–76% in other countries.

When considering the fairness of work performance evaluation, 70% of respondents felt their religion did not affect how their work was assessed. Lithuania and Finland showed particularly strong perceptions of fairness, while Austria reported slightly weaker outcomes, consistent with broader trends across the survey.

Workplace accommodations related to religious needs were more mixed. Only 52% of respondents agreed that their employer had consistently been able to meet accommodation needs, with Lithuania leading again (69%). Austria reported the lowest levels of satisfaction (20%), highlighting a continued gap in support for religious diversity at work.

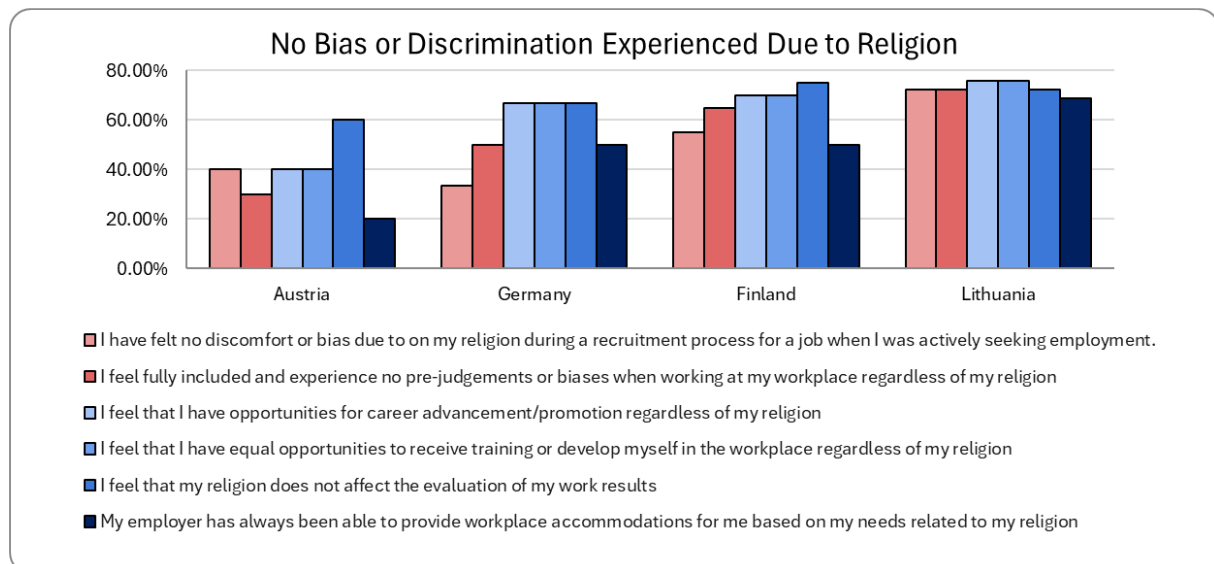


Figure 49. Impact of Religion on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.8. Impact of Having Temporal or Permanent Disability on Work and Employment Experiences

Responses regarding inclusion of and bias towards People with Disability (PWD) reveal a mixed picture across the surveyed countries. Germany was unfortunately excluded from this analysis due to lack of applicable responses. This absence is a significant result that speaks by itself.

Research shows that although Germany has legal quotas (e.g., the 5% employment quota for PWD in companies with over 20 employees), actual employment of PWD remains below target, and disclosure rates are low due to stigma and lack of trust in workplace accommodations ([European Disability Forum, 2021](#)). Thus, the limited response may reflect structural exclusion or a cultural reluctance to identify with disability at work.

Across the remaining countries, only 37% of respondents reported feeling no discomfort or bias due to disability during recruitment, with Finland (44%) and Lithuania (50%) showing higher agreement, while Austria reported lower (25%). Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents selecting “Doesn’t apply” was high across all three countries, suggesting that many participants either did not yet have disability when seeking employment (many respondents had longer work experience and might have obtained disability in their later years in the working life) or chose not to disclose their disability in the recruitment phase, potentially due to strong stigma towards PWD and their abilities.

When asked about inclusion at work, 37% of respondents overall felt fully included and free from bias, with Finland and Lithuania again showing higher levels (56% and 43%), and Austria being rather low - at 25%. Disagreement or neutrality was common, especially in Austria, pointing to a less consistent sense of belonging among employees with disability.

Access to advancement and development opportunities for PWD also varied. While over 50% of respondents in Finland and Lithuania agreed that they had equal access to training and growth, only 25% in Austria did. Career advancement showed even lower agreement overall (just 37%), again with stronger positivity in responses in Finland and Lithuania, and less positivity in Austria. These patterns suggest that while support structures may exist, their visibility and consistency are still uneven, even in the countries where companies should employ PWD due to legal obligations (e.g., in Austria or Germany).

Performance evaluation appeared moderately fair: around 43% agreed that their disability did not affect how their work was assessed, with Finland (56%) and Lithuania (57%) reporting the strongest agreement. Austria again showed weaker outcomes, and a high percentage of respondents selected “Doesn’t apply,” further hinting that many employees with disabilities may not be in the work roles in which formal assessment is performed or are uncertain about how their status affects assessment.

Finally, perceptions of accommodation availability were somewhat more positive. Around 37% felt that their employer had always been able to provide necessary adjustments. This was strongest in Finland and Lithuania (50–55%), with Austria again showing more mixed responses. Notably, disagreement and uncertainty remained across all countries, suggesting room for clearer and more reliable support processes.

In sum, the findings illustrate both progress and persistent gaps. While inclusion and equity for PWD are recognized more strongly in Finland and Lithuania, Austria presents weaker outcomes across almost all dimensions. And the absence of data from Germany signals more than a missing column, it underscores the continuing invisibility of disability as a workplace identity in many national contexts.

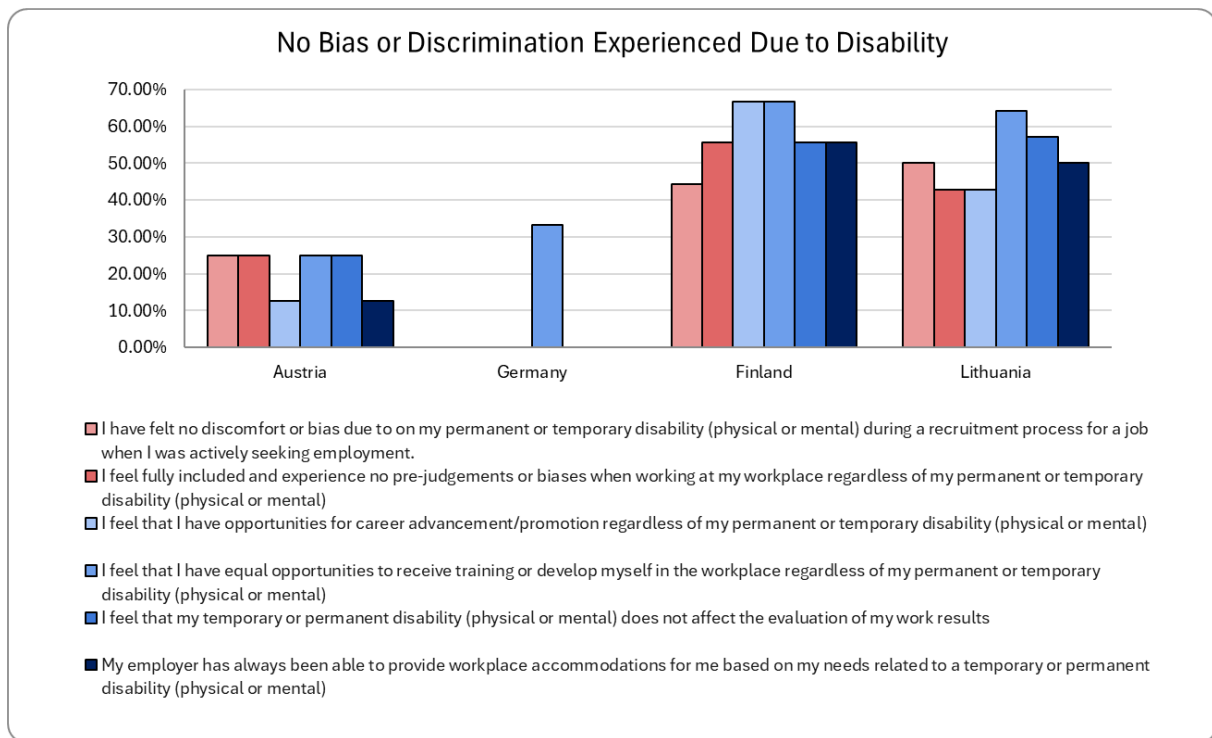


Figure 50. Impact of Having Temporal or Permanent Disability on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.9. Impact of Having Student Status or Little Work Experience on Work and Employment Experiences

Questions in the survey also examined experiences of bias or discomfort related to student status or limited previous work experience. Overall results (Figure 51) suggest a moderately positive trend. Across all countries, 54% agreed they experienced no bias during recruitment processes, with Finland and Lithuania showing the highest levels of positive responses.

Feelings of inclusion in the workplace were similarly positive, with 60% of respondents indicating they felt fully accepted regardless of their student status or limited work history. Finland and Lithuania again stood out with stronger perceptions of inclusion, whereas Austria displayed slightly weaker results.

Career advancement opportunities were also perceived relatively positively, with 65% overall agreement. Lithuania and Germany showed the most favourable outcomes (75–87%). Equal access to training and development followed a similar pattern, with 69% of participants across countries feeling they had equal opportunities, although Austria reported lower satisfaction compared to the other countries.

Regarding fair evaluation of work performance, around 54% of respondents agreed that their student status or lack of prior work experience did not affect how their work was assessed. Finland and Lithuania showed stronger perceptions of fairness in the stage of assessment. Finally, support for workplace accommodations resulted in 60% agreeing that their needs related to student status or limited experience were addressed. Germany and Lithuania performed more positively, while Austria showed slightly lower satisfaction.

Overall, Austria consistently reported lower levels of satisfaction, suggesting a need for better support and more inclusive practices for those entering the workforce with less experience. While current practices to support students and individuals in their early career stages should be preserved and further enhanced in Finland, Germany, and Lithuania.

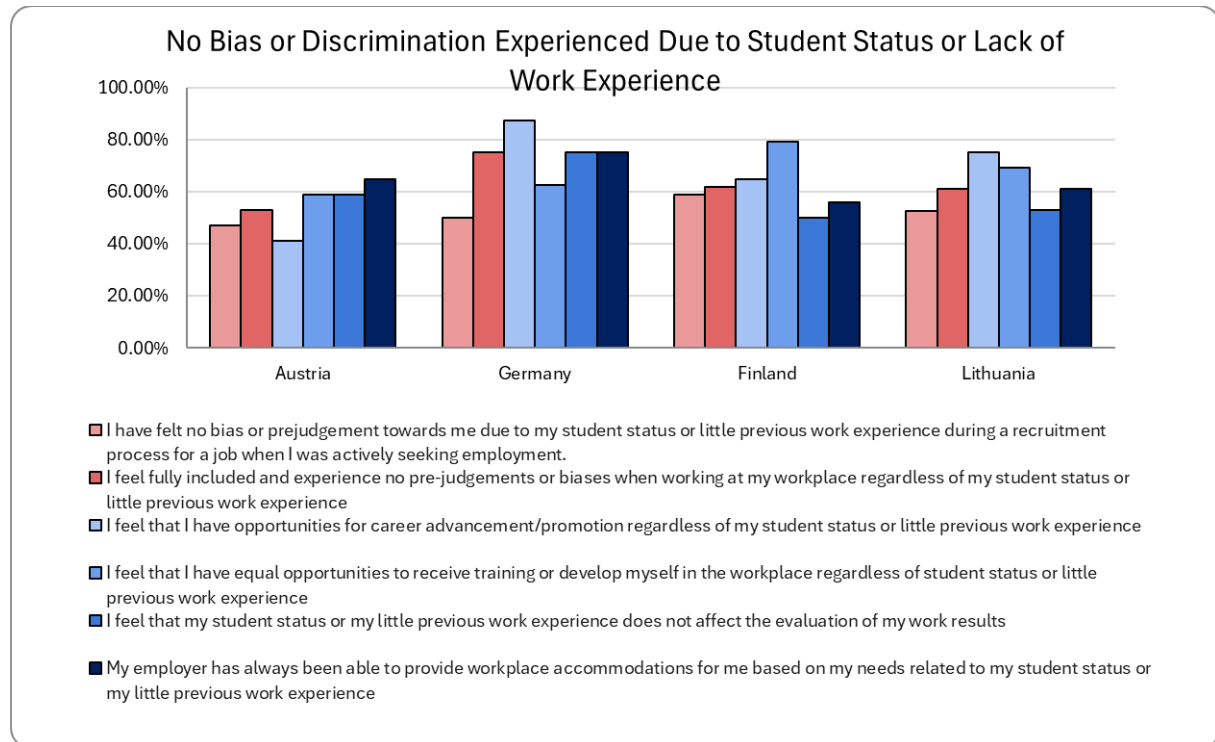


Figure 51. Impact of Having Student Status or Little Work Experience on Work and Employment Experiences

## 2.4.10. Impact of Ethnic Background on Work and Employment Experiences

Experiences of bias or discomfort based on ethnic background were explored across various employment stages. Our results (Figure 52) reveal mixed outcomes, with less than half (49%) of respondents overall agreeing they experienced no bias during recruitment processes. However, country differences were large: respondents residing in Lithuania reported a very high level of agreement (86%), while Austria and Germany showed significantly lower positive responses.

In terms of workplace inclusion, about 62% of respondents felt fully included regardless of their ethnic background, with respondents in Lithuania reporting far higher levels of fairness in comparison to respondents residing in other countries. Similar patterns were observed regarding opportunities for career advancement and access to training, where around 66% agreed their ethnic background did not limit them, although Austria's results were notably weaker.

Evaluation of work performance was an area of greater concern, with only around 52% feeling confident that their ethnic background did not negatively impact assessments. Here again, employers in Lithuania outperformed the other countries, with Austria and Germany reporting much lower levels of confidence that employees with diverse ethnic background will not be discriminated in work assessment or evaluated with bias.



Workplace accommodations related to ethnic background needs showed the lowest overall satisfaction, with only 50% of respondents across countries agreeing their needs had been consistently met. Lithuania recorded much stronger outcomes compared to the other countries surveyed.

Overall, while respondents with diverse ethnic background residing in Lithuania reported consistently high levels of positive experience, the results across the other countries highlight concerns, particularly around recruitment, evaluation, and workplace accommodations. The findings emphasize the need for more targeted efforts to support inclusion of ethnic minorities at work.

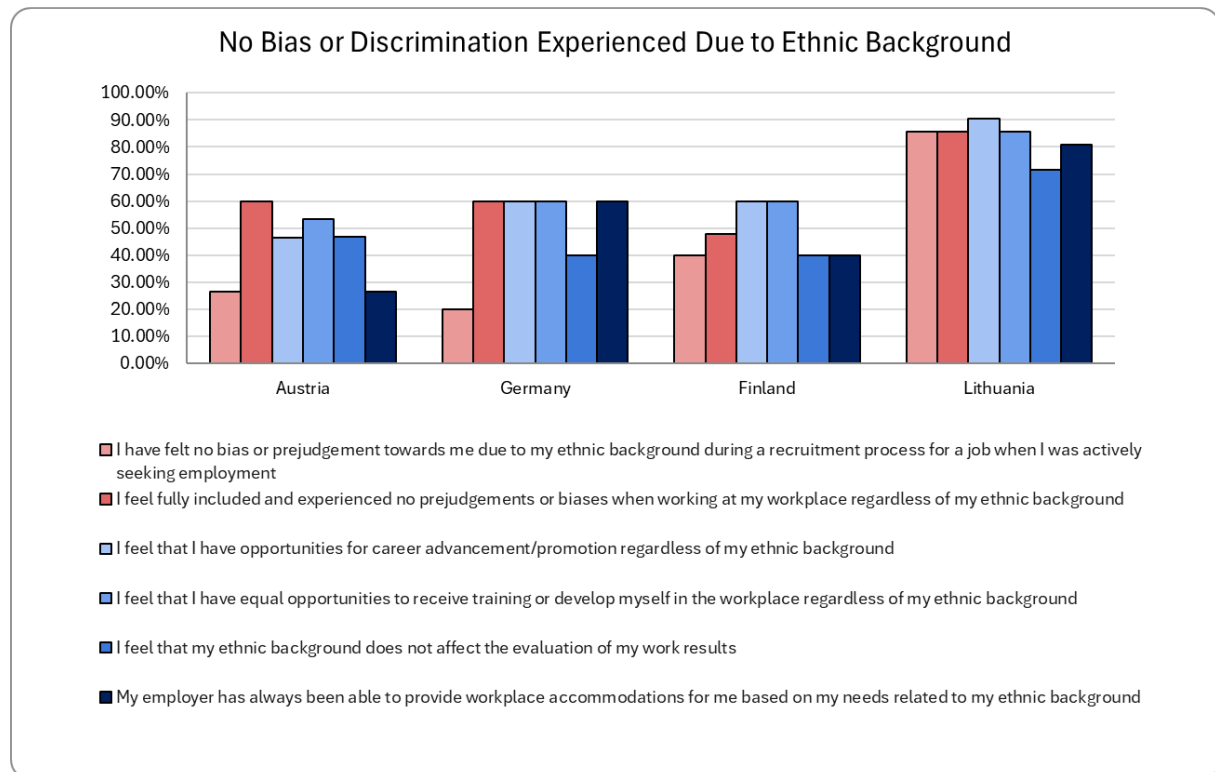


Figure 52. Impact of Ethnic Background on Work and Employment Experiences

### 2.4.11. Identity-Based Experiences in Recruitment Across Countries and Their Implications for SME Managers

Figure 53 reveals that inclusivity in recruitment is highly uneven, both across countries and across identity categories. While all four countries show some positive outcomes, the consistency and breadth of those outcomes vary substantially. For instance, according to respondents, companies in Germany show a strikingly strong result for LGBTQIA+ inclusivity in recruitment yet simultaneously scores lowest for potential biases and discrimination of individuals who belong to certain age groups, have a disability, and are of a specific ethnicity background. This indicates that progress in one area of identity inclusion does not necessarily translate into a broader inclusion and non-discrimination practices. It also points to a selective approach to diversity, rather than a broad or truly inclusive strategy that companies may adopt.

Companies in Austria were seen to present a similar pattern, with relatively low scores in areas such as LGBTQIA+ and ethnicity, suggesting stronger biases, limited protections or cultural support for marginalized groups. Companies in Finland were perceived to show somewhat more balance when handling different identities in the stage of recruitment, with moderate-to-high levels of inclusivity in gender and youth experience, though lower scores in areas such as caregiving and educational background hint at ongoing structural biases. Data from Lithuania indicates a broader distribution of inclusivity across most categories in companies, suggesting a more uniformly positive recruitment environment, at least from the perspective of respondents.

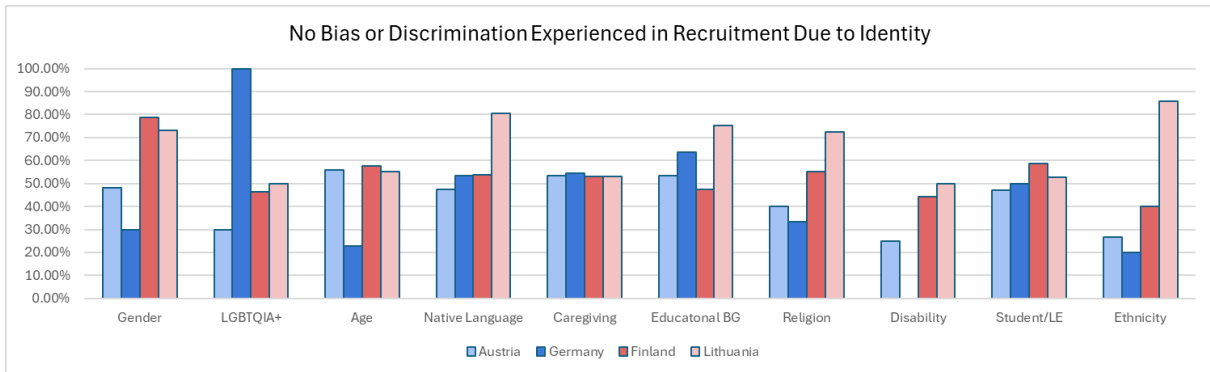


Figure 53. Biases and Discrimination in Recruitment: Experiences of Individuals with Diverse Identification in Four Countries

The key takeaway from this comparison is that each country companies appears to have its own profile of inclusion in the stage of recruitment, shaped by different societal norms, policy frameworks, and institutional practices. According to experiences of working individuals, no single country companies perform well across all diversity dimensions in the stage of recruitment, and the disparities between identity categories within countries highlight the need for more nuanced, intersectional approaches to anti-discrimination efforts. Rather than assuming that general diversity initiatives will benefit all diversity groups equally, these findings underscore the importance of identity-specific strategies that address the unique challenges faced by individuals with different identification.

By utilizing data available in Figure 53 on how individuals from various diversity groups experience recruitment, SMEs in a specific studied country can adjust their job adds, interview process, and candidate screening procedures to ensure that those diversity groups that have experienced more biases or faced discrimination when seeking job in their country would feel more included and become more visible in the job market by their skills rather than biases brought by a specific identity.

## 2.4.12. Inclusion at Workplace: Identity-Based Experiences Across Countries and Their Implications for SME Managers

Experiences of workplace inclusivity across Austria, Germany, Finland, and Lithuania highlights that bias and prejudice are far from evenly distributed across identity groups or national contexts.



Germany shows very strong inclusivity when it comes to traditional structural categories like gender, age, native language, caregiving responsibilities, and educational background. However, its results for inclusion of LGBTQIA+ community and people with disability stand out for different reasons. In the case of disability, only one respondent in the data reported working with a disclosed disability. This does not necessarily imply open discrimination at the workplace level but rather suggests a deeper structural issue: people with disabilities are significantly underrepresented in the workforce sample itself. This absence speaks volumes, pointing to broader barriers to employment, limited access to inclusive hiring, or social stigmas that prevent individuals with disabilities from participating fully in the labour market. The lack of data is therefore not a neutral absence but an important signal about ongoing exclusion. It aligns with existing research that shows Germany, despite having legal frameworks like quotas for employing persons with disabilities, where companies with more than 20 employees are required to fill 5% of jobs with people with disabilities ([BMAS, 2023](#)), still struggles with practical implementation. Many employers prefer to pay a compensatory levy rather than hire workers with disability. Moreover, the proportional employment rate among persons with severe disabilities in Germany remains significantly lower than the general population (30% compared to over 65%) ([Destatis, 2017](#)), reflecting cultural stigma and a lack of real workplace integration.

Finland shows a different pattern: its results are more balanced across identity groups, without the extreme highs and lows seen in Germany. Although it does not dominate any single category, companies in Finland, according to employee experiences, maintain relatively moderate inclusivity across most areas. Companies in Finland scores lowest in native language and ethnicity inclusion what suggest that linguistic minorities (despite Finland having two national languages and English widely used in all official and work matters) and migrants might face more barriers compared to other groups. This points to a more stable but still incomplete model of inclusion, where traditional markers like gender and disability receive better protection than cultural diversity factors.

Evaluation results of employers in Austria reflect a generally moderate workplace environment with notable weaknesses. While companies in Austria perform seem to perform adequately in areas like educational background and native language inclusion, they score low in addressing religion and disability at work, therefore highlight persistent challenges around inclusion tied to personal identity and bodily ability. Austria's relatively poor showing in these sensitive areas suggests that certain forms of bias remain deeply embedded in workplace practices despite a wide existence of legal obligations (like in Germany, Austrian firms are obliged to hire PWD) and other legal pressures.

Lithuanian employers, by contrast, show high inclusivity regarding ethnicity and religion, categories often associated with traditional cultural belonging. However, it records lower inclusivity at work scores for LGBTQIA+ individuals and those with caregiving responsibilities. This suggests that while companies in Lithuania have made strong advances in cultural or ethnic inclusion, newer or less traditionally recognized diversity categories have yet to receive the same attention.

Overall, the data across all countries reinforces the idea that diversity policies cannot be one-size-fits-all. Each national context reveals a specific profile of strengths and weaknesses shaped

by historical, cultural, and social factors. True inclusivity requires attention not just to the most visible or traditional categories of difference, but also to those identity factors that are less protected or more politically sensitive. Intersectional approaches are necessary to ensure that progress for one group does not mask exclusion of others.

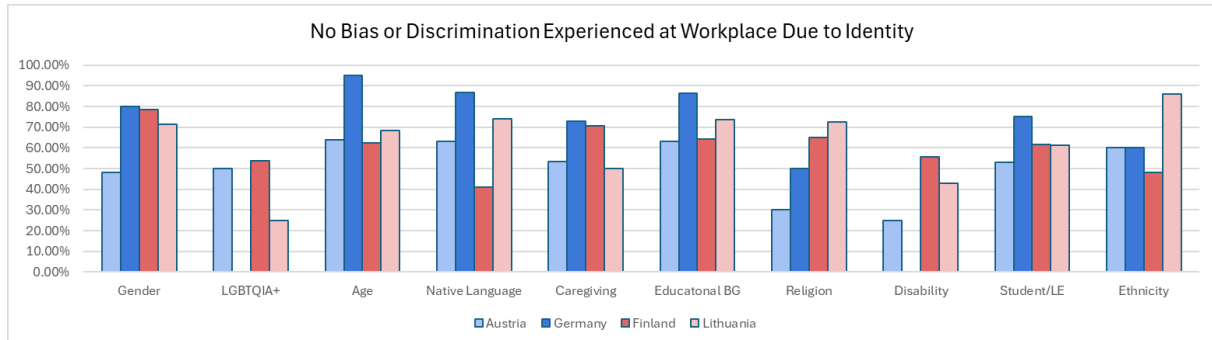


Figure 54. Biases and Discrimination at Workplace: Experiences of Individuals with Diverse Identification in Four Countries

### 2.4.13. Identity-Based Experiences in Career Advancement Across Countries and Their Implications for SME Managers

Opportunities for career development shows similar patterns as observed in workplace inclusion, but also important differences.

In Germany, regarding career advancement in companies, respondents reported high levels of perceived fairness across most identity groups, including diverse gender identities, LGBTQIA+ community, individuals of diverse age and educational background, and those who are students or have less work experience.

In Finland employers were perceived to show a fairly balanced situation. Opportunities for career development appeared accessible across most diversity dimensions, especially for individuals with caregiving responsibilities and disabilities. However, companies in Finland were given lower scores for creating career advancement opportunities for individuals with diverse native language and ethnical background suggesting that individuals from migrant or minority backgrounds still face challenges when in professional growth.

Results concerning companies in Austria are mixed. While educational background and LGBTQIA+ show moderate levels of perceived fairness, the much lower scores were provided for employer's ability to secure inclusion for individuals who provide care, have disability, and student or those with less work experience. This suggest that career advancement is more difficult for people who do not follow a traditional employment path and for those working alongside studies. This indicates that companies in Austria still place a strong emphasis on standard career trajectories and employees of traditional profile.

Companies in Lithuania were perceived to show high results in fair treatment of individuals from ethnic and religious minorities but much less fairness for those who are providing care, belong to LGBTQIA+ community, and have disability. This points to a system where people from different

cultural backgrounds may have better access to advancement, while other groups still face significant barriers at work.

Overall, the data suggests that while general workplace inclusion has improved in some areas, this does not always translate into fair access to career progression. Many groups still face hidden barriers when moving upwards in their careers. Improving diversity efforts will require a stronger focus by company managers on professional development, promotion, and leadership opportunities for underrepresented groups with specific focus on challenges faced by minorities in a specific country during the process of career advancement (Figure 55).

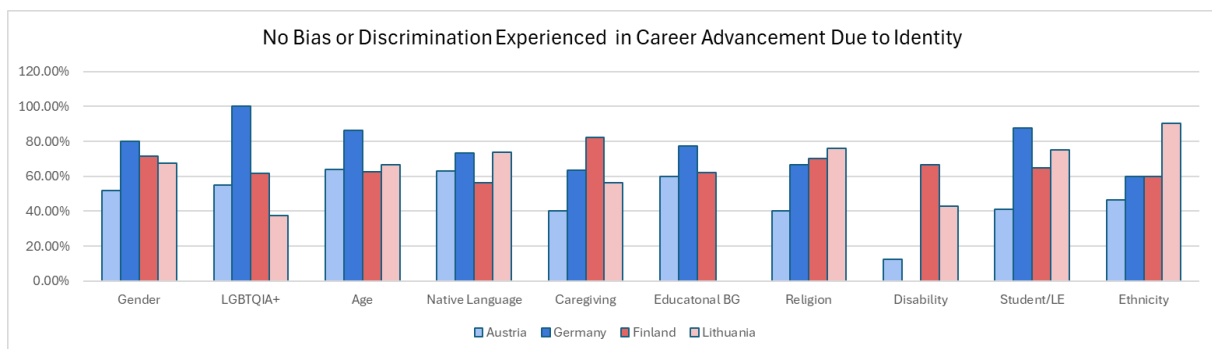


Figure 55. Biases and Discrimination in Career Advancement: Experiences of Individuals with Diverse Identification in Four Countries

#### 2.4.14. Access to Training at Work: Identity-Based Experiences Across Countries and Their Implications for SME Managers

Access to training at work has varied across countries and was impacted by the identity of working individuals.

In Germany, respondents reported very high levels of perceived fairness in training access across most identity groups, including gender, LGBTQIA+, age, native language, caregiving, and educational background. This suggests that training is widely available for people who are already within dominant social groups or who fit expected professional profiles. However, as discussed earlier, no respondents with a disclosed disability were present, meaning training access for individuals with disability cannot be evaluated. This absence points to a larger problem: access to development opportunities may only be available to those who first manage to enter the workforce, while some groups being still systematically excluded.

In Finland companies were considered to provide a relatively consistent access to training for most identity groups. Opportunities for professional development appeared available especially for people with caregiving responsibilities, disabilities, and low work experience levels. However, lower scores in native language show that linguistic minorities may face practical barriers to accessing upskilling or development programs. This suggests that while inclusion policies are working for some groups, cultural and language differences continue to create obstacles to equal growth and requires further attention from company managers.

Results from Austria show more selective support. While gender and educational background show moderate fairness regarding access to training, individuals who have caregiving needs,

disability, or are of different religion all evaluated their access to training much lower. This pattern suggests that in Austria training opportunities are still shaped by traditional expectations: workers who do not fit the standard full-time, uninterrupted employment may find fewer opportunities to build their skills and advance.

Results from Lithuania are uneven. Ethnic and religious minorities report good access to training, which could reflect a broader cultural openness in certain areas. However, low evaluations reported by LGBTQIA+, individuals who provide care, and are of diverse educational background suggest that social and life circumstances outside the mainstream still limit access to professional development. This indicates that inclusion is often tied to visible cultural identity, while people with different personal or social situations are not as included.

Overall, the training data suggests that, with minor exceptions, access to skill-building is often easier for groups that already fit established norms, while others, particularly linguistic minorities, caregivers, people with disability, and those from less traditional career paths, continue to face more difficulties. Without direct efforts to support underrepresented groups in training and professional development, the long-term impact may create deeper gaps when creating achieving diversity in leadership, senior roles, and strategic decision-making power. Therefore, SME managers may consider paying more attention to who is provided with training and upskilling opportunities and how those opportunities can be made more accessible for those who fall outside traditional employee profile.

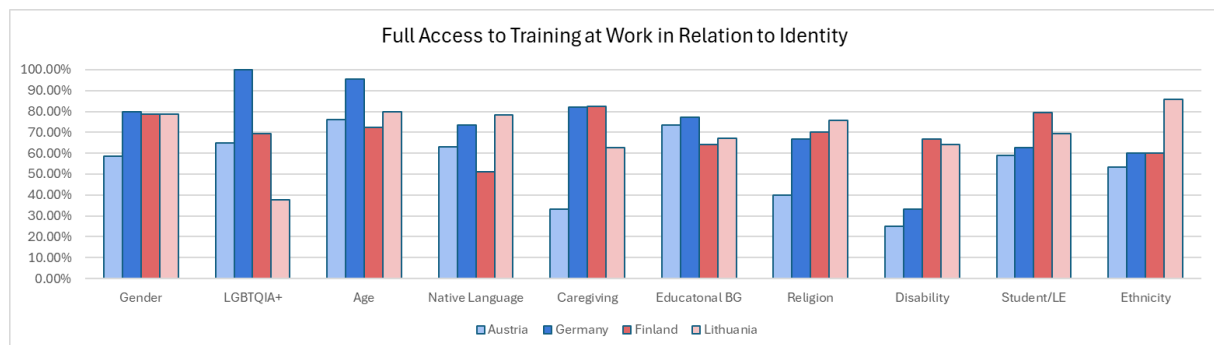


Figure 56. Access to Training at Work: Experiences of Individuals with Diverse Identification in Four Countries

## 2.4.15. Evaluation of Work Results: Identity-Based Experiences Across Countries and Their Implications for SME Managers

Evaluation of work results is very important aspect that defines possibilities to get promoted, receive a pay raise, remain motivated at work, and many other aspects for working individuals. However, survey shows that in all countries where survey was carried out, evaluation of work results to smaller or larger extent was affected by identity of the working individual.

Individuals who work in Germany reported very high scores across nearly all identity groups indicating that their identity in Germany does not affect much how their work results are being evaluated. Respondents perceived performance evaluations to be fair regardless of their gender, belonging to LGBTQIA+, age, native language, caregiving needs, and educational background. These results suggest that once in the system, many groups are evaluated by generally consistent standards. However, as in previous sections, no respondents with a disclosed disability were

present in the German sample, which prevents any reliable insight into how fair evaluation processes are for employees with disability.

Results from Finland present a more even but less exceptional distribution. High fairness in work result evaluation was reported by individuals who need to provide care, are of different religion, or have disability. This shows a generally fair treatment across life circumstances and identities. Still, ethnicity, educational background, and student status or having less work experience seem to have impacted work result evaluation in Finland implying that workers outside the dominant academic or cultural norms may not be evaluated on equal terms, potentially affecting promotion and development.

Results from Austria continue to show weaker support for inclusive practices. While individuals who have diverse educational backgrounds and religion scored fairness in work result evaluation moderately, many other diversity groups remain with lack of confidence about their fair assessment. This is especially so for individuals with caregiving needs, disability, and those of diverse ethnicity. This points to a system where performance evaluations may still be influenced by assumptions about who fits the expected framing of a competent or promotable employee, leaving less room for those who do not match that profile.

In Lithuania, working individuals had stronger perceptions of fairness when they ascribed themselves to diverse native language user group, religion, or had disability. However, the results for LGBTQIA+, care providers, and students or individuals with less work experience were less positive, suggesting that evaluations may still reflect bias against individuals whose work or personal paths do not fit dominant social expectations or dominant stereotypes.

Taken together, the data shows that evaluation is not simply neutral or objective. It reflects broader assumptions about what a "typical" or "ideal" worker looks like. Without conscious efforts to check how identity affects assessments, performance reviews risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than correcting them.

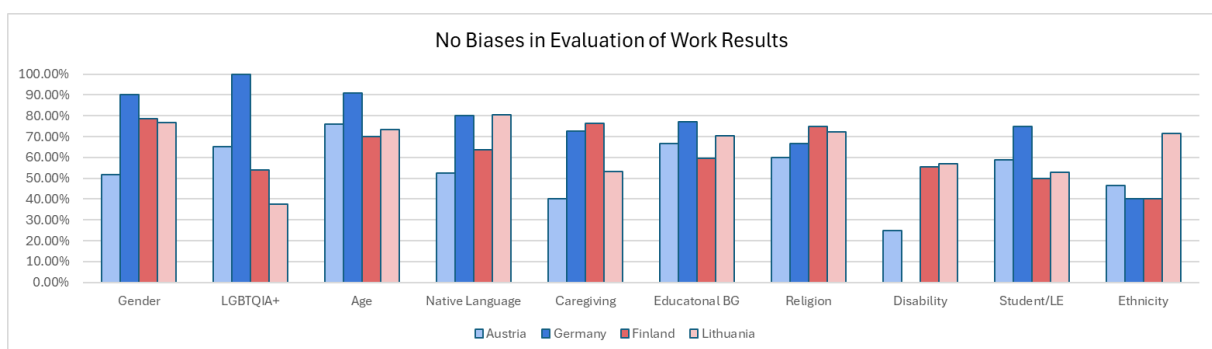


Figure 57. Biases in Evaluation of Work Results: Experiences of Individuals with Diverse Identification in Four Countries

## 2.4.16. Identity-Based Experiences with Accommodations at Work Across Countries and Their Implications to SME Managers

Equity or, in other words, accommodations at the workplace based on the needs of the individual ensures that each employee has the environment that allows them to reach their ultimate

potential. In four investigated countries, individuals reported that receiving such support based on their needs remain a challenge.

Companies in Germany shows high results across most diversity groups and seem to be able to provide workplace accommodations, particularly for individuals of diverse gender, age, native language, caregiving needs, student or employees with less work experience. These results suggest that many employees feel that identity factors do not strongly limit their access to adjustments at work. However, as discussed previously, there were no respondents with a disclosed disability in the German sample, meaning it remains unclear how accessible accommodations are for employees with disability.

In Finland results are more mixed. Higher access to accommodations observed by individuals with caregiving needs and disability suggest that accommodations are available for some. However, lower evaluations were provided by individuals who spoke diverse native language, LGBTQIA+ community members, and diverse ethnic groups. This shows that cultural and identity differences still influence whether employees feel supported. This indicates that flexibility exists for certain groups, but some minority workers may face more difficulty in getting necessary adjustments.

Results from Austria are consistently low. Very low scores regarding the accommodations at work were provided by individuals of diverse gender, LGBTQIA+ community members, those who spoke different native language, and people with disability. This suggests that in Austria workplace accommodations are limited across a wide range of identity groups. Those who differ from dominant social or professional expectations appear to face significant barriers in receiving support. While for individuals with caregiving needs and students/individuals with less work experience results are somewhat better, they do not offset the general pattern of exclusion.

In Lithuania the pattern for accommodations at work is more uneven. Higher scores from individuals who reported diverse ethnicity, native language, and religion suggest stronger cultural inclusion. However, lower results from LGBTQIA+ community, individuals with caregiving needs, and disability reveal gaps in support for individual life circumstances, particularly for those outside traditional societal norms.

Across countries, the results clearly show that groups who are most likely to need accommodations, particularly people with disabilities are often the ones reporting the least support. This may indicate a wider failure to create accessible environments from the beginning for those who need it the most. This lack of accommodations based on the individual needs may come from the company background – especially smaller firms may not have resources to do so (see further in the report, respondents suggested that only 30% of firms on average have resources to provide accommodations). However, some accommodations may be missed due to the lack of awareness or lack of considerations for flexible alternatives. Thus, SME managers could deeper engage with their employees in discussions what accommodations they may need, considering creative, low-cost options that could bring substantial changes for employee ability to contribute and succeed at work.



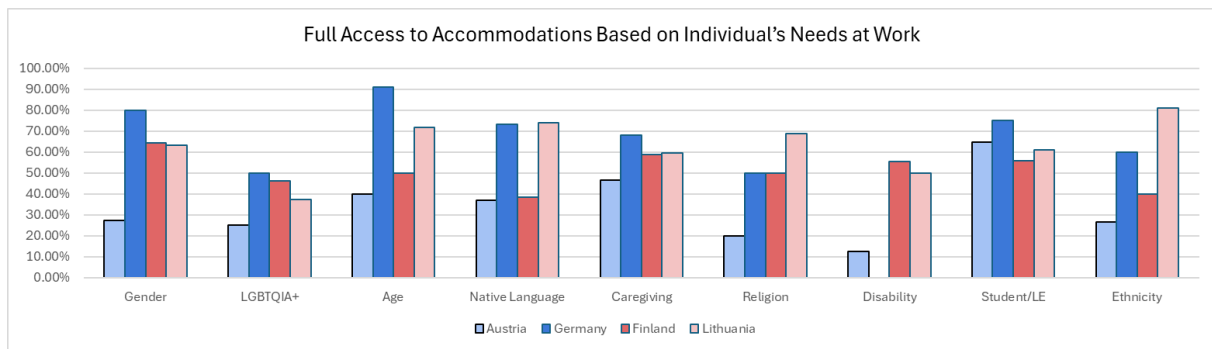


Figure 58. Access to Accommodations Based on Individual's Needs at Work: Experiences of Individuals with Diverse Identification in Four Countries

## 2.5 DEI in Company Management Practices as Perceived by Working Individuals

Experiences and perceptions of individuals analysed in the previous sections allow us comprehending the overall picture of how individuals in the target countries feel about being included, appreciated, or fairly treated at work given their diverse profiles. Understanding of what specifically employers have been doing to address DEI in company management allows delving in the reasons behind these experiences and being more specific about the actions that companies can take to improve the current situation concerning DEI management in European smaller firms. Therefore, the survey aimed at individuals in working life also included questions about various practices that companies can take to handle DEI issues and the survey results concerning these practices are reported in this section.

We start with the bigger picture and respondents' opinions on what policies for managing DEI exist in their company (Figure 59). The question requested knowledge on several points, DEI training or education for employees, mentorship program, benefits, outcome, and challenges of DEI in the company, collective bargaining agreements, and existing priorities, processes, policies and ways of working to address DEI issues in the firm. DEI training seems to be common only in Germany, and only in Austria and Finland employees are protected with the collective bargaining agreements. All other common DEI practices, such as mentoring programs or discussions around issues directly concerning the topics of DEI are not common in most of the target country companies. One key takeaway in this figure is the high count of respondents who are unaware (*answered: Don't know*) of their companies' management on proposed policies; this is a fact seen across all four countries. What is most invisible to employees is how companies revise the existing priorities, processes, policies, since across the countries 30-45% of individuals reported being not aware of this matter. This indicates that even if the companies are taking DEI-related actions, they remain largely invisible to their employees or do not engage a wider group of employees and therefore are likely to not reach the expected impact.

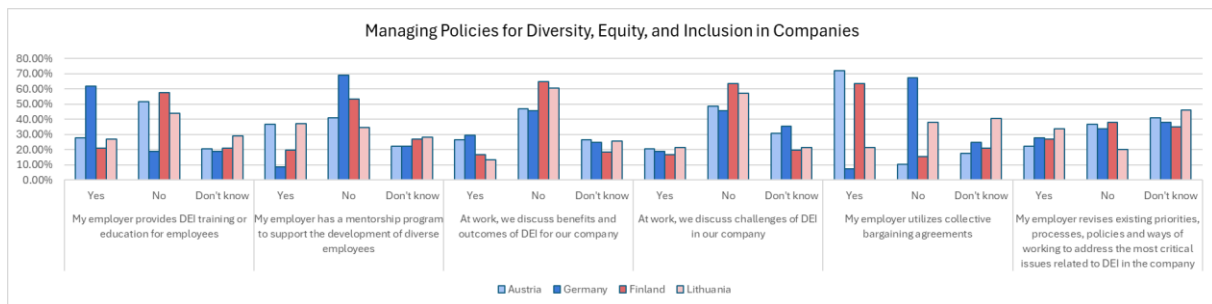


Figure 59. Managing Policies for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Companies

Individuals had much clearer opinion whether they have benefitted or not from diversity management in the workplace (Figure 60), as results are segregated but clear with only little portion of individuals being unaware of the benefits they could have received (*answer: don't know*). The perceptions of benefiting from diversity management somewhat resembles the experiences in each country discussed in the previous sections: it seems that individuals in Austria have had much lesser possibilities to observe and benefit from DEI management in the workplace than individuals working in other target countries. Germany-based respondents appeared to have a more positive view on the matter with 53% of individuals admitting to having benefitted from diversity management at work while only 20.6% disagreed with the statement. This country is the sole one showing this trend; indeed, the situation is inversed for Austria-, Finland- and Lithuania-based respondents who disclose higher negative answer count. Sampled individuals admitted at 58.8% (Austria), 52.10% (Finland), and 34.8% (Lithuania) that they have not benefitted personally from diversity management in the workplace. The latter is rather interesting finding, because when exploring individual experiences at work, Lithuania consistently stood out as a country where most fairness and less discrimination was observed by various diversity groups.

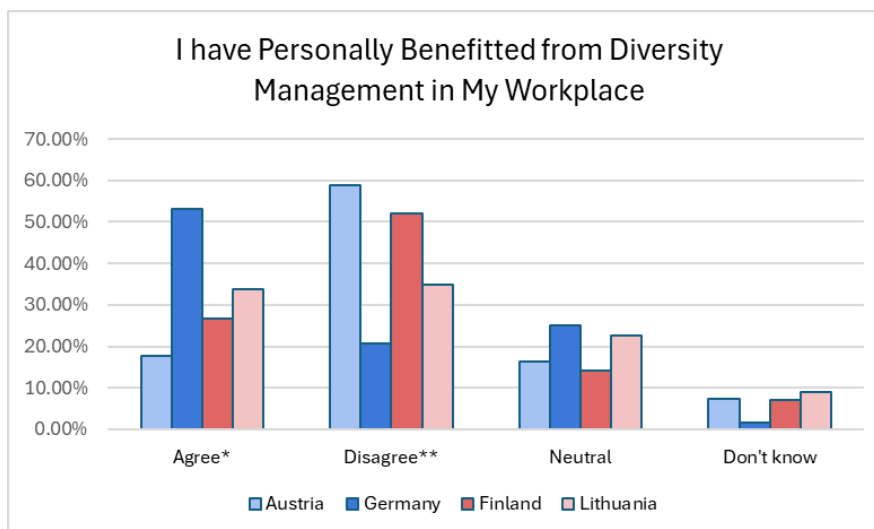


Figure 60. Respondents' Feelings About Personal Benefits Received from Diversity Management at the Workplace

This may hint that in the countries where discrimination is high at the society level, actions to manage DEI taken at the company level are vital. Both Austria and Germany have very high levels



of discrimination in the society, scoring above the EU average, whereas Lithuania and Finland are way below the EU average regarding discrimination in the wider society (OECD, 2024). Despite having high scores of discriminations at the societal level reported in Germany, working individuals within our sample in Germany have experienced relatively positive treatment at work (see 2.4 section) and seems to have benefited most from diversity management at work (Figure 60). However, individuals in our sample in Austria have reported more negative experiences that seem to resemble the trends reported by OECD at the Austrian societal level. Individuals in Lithuania and Finland in our sample report more positive experiences that aligns with less discriminatory environment in the respective countries. This means that managers of companies, and especially smaller firms where organizational change is more flexible to perform, are able to enhance situation regarding discrimination and fairness by engaging in DEI management at work even in the countries with high level of discrimination. More research is needed to confirm this initial observation.

### 2.5.1. Diversity Representation in Companies as Perceived by Working Individuals

What were the reflections of working individuals regarding the diversity representation at their workplace and ways their employer **measure and monitor diversity issues**? The reflections are illustrated in Figures 61 and 62. According to respondents in Austria, Germany and Finland, most of the employers do not have ways to measure or monitor diversity issues at work. Respectively 40% to 52% of individuals across these three countries suggest that their company has no way to measure DEI-related issues, and an even stronger percentage disclose that there is also no way to monitor these issues. With 10%-20% responding neutrally, it leaves very little room for positive statements. This demonstrates that companies in these three countries, although on a curve towards DEI maturity as discussed earlier, have little tools and practices to reflect on DEI management and impact in a tangible way. Under such conditions, often observed in the DEI literature, DEI management in the companies is likely to become vulnerable to critique and political attacks.

On the other hand, Lithuania displays different results for both issues. Almost half of the respondents from Lithuania agree that their company has ways in place to measure diversity issues and 30% also disclose that the company monitors diversity issues; although it is noticeable that Lithuania respondents have answered, in higher count than the other countries, being unaware of the monitoring ways in the company (21%).

These results, based on the views of working individuals, suggests that:

1. SME managers should reflect on adopting potential measures and monitoring mechanisms for DEI, if they have not done it yet. This would not only help the companies align with the emerging regulatory frameworks for sustainability in the EU (e.g., CSRD, VSME), but would also ensure that factual and tangible DEI management actions and impacts can be captured. This way measuring benefits obtained and address critique to DEI management would be easier, the company would have ways to track their development in diversity management.
2. If SME management is already taking actions to measure and monitor DEI, it would be important to reflect to what extent these efforts are visible to their employees. Reflecting on communication strategies about DEI measurements and monitoring actions would be

essential so that such efforts become more visible to the wider community (given that the communication employed by the company complies with the GDPR requirements).

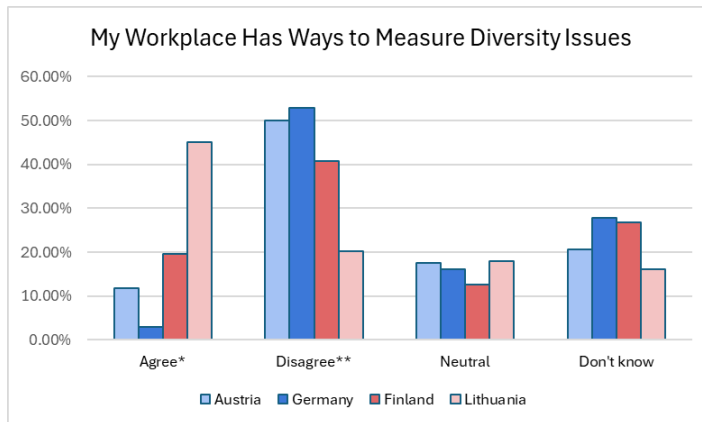


Figure 61. Respondents' Evaluation about their Workplace Ability to Measure Diversity-related Issues

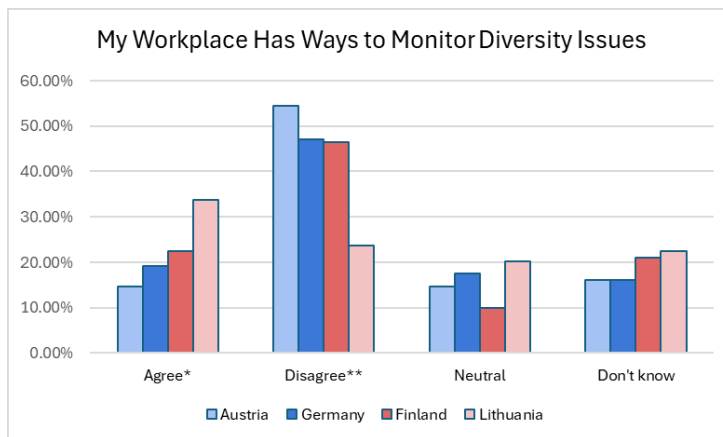


Figure 62. Respondents' Evaluation about their Workplace Ability to Monitor Diversity-related Issues

We further explored how **diversity is represented among the management and at the employee level** in the companies operating in the target countries.

Across the surveyed countries, **gender diversity** among employees appears to be widely recognized, with over 58.4% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that there are non-management employees of varying gender identities in their companies. This is further echoed at the managerial level, with a similarly high perception (Austria 41.2%, Germany 55.9%, Finland 31.0%, Lithuania 51.7%) of gender-diverse leadership, suggesting relatively visible gender inclusion across hierarchies.

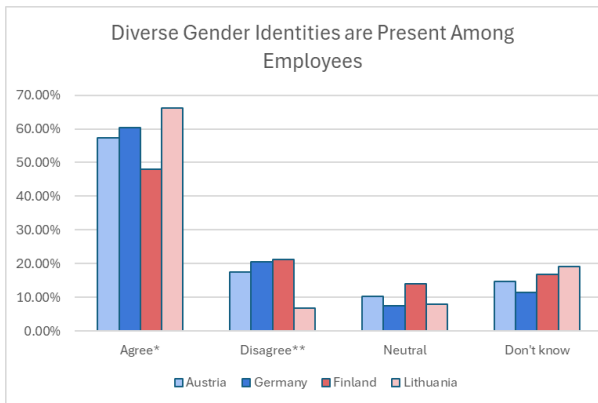


Figure 63. Gender Identity Amongst Employees

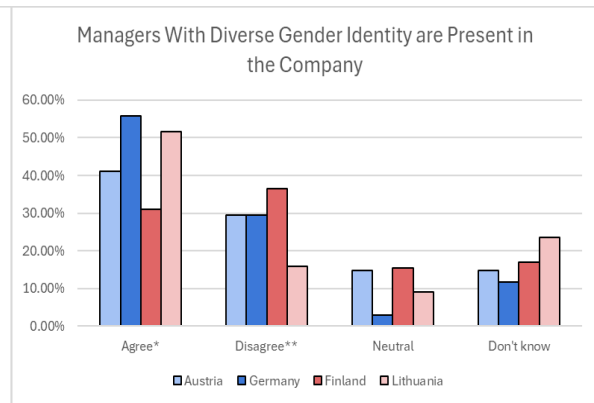


Figure 64. Gender Identity Amongst Managers

**Age diversity** is widely recognized across all surveyed countries, with an overwhelming 90.2% of respondents confirming the presence of employees of different ages in non-management roles, and an equal percentage noting the same for managers (Austria 61.8%, Germany 77.9%, Finland 52.1%, Lithuania 77.5%). This consistency suggests that age diversity is both visible and culturally integrated within organizations. It is also one of the least disputed categories, with minimal disagreement and very low "don't know" responses indicating that age is a naturally observable trait, less affected by privacy concerns or disclosure.

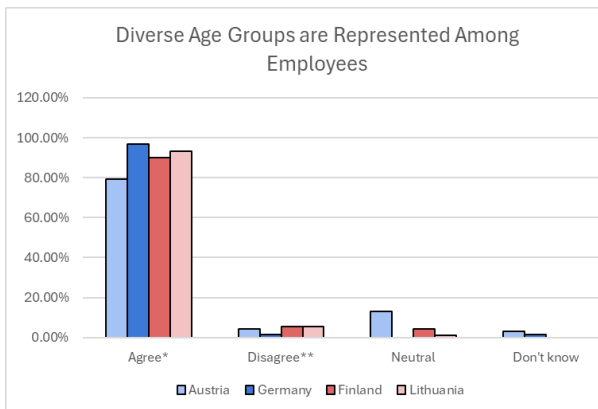


Figure 65. Age Diversity Amongst Employees

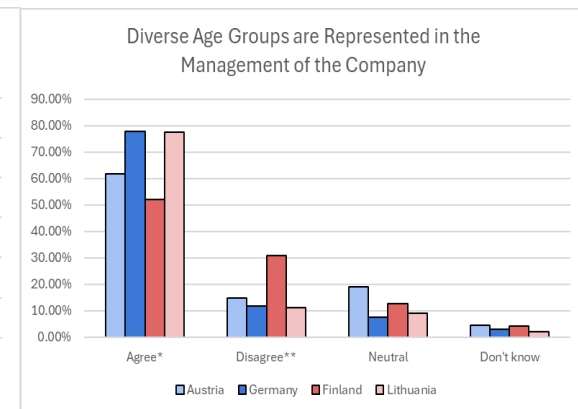


Figure 66. Age Diversity Amongst Managers

**Language diversity**, on the other hand, shows a high level of acknowledgment among employees (73.9% agreement overall) but a slightly lower perception in management roles (Austria 36.7%, Germany 32.4%, Finland 39.4%, Lithuania 65.2%). Countries like Lithuania and Germany display particularly strong perceptions of language diversity among employees, which may correlate with multilingual environments or higher immigrant workforce presence. However, when it comes to management, some countries like Germany show a sharp drop in agreement, possibly pointing to linguistic homogeneity in leadership roles. Given that language differences are often more easily noticed but not necessarily recorded formally, these perceptions likely stem from day-to-day interactions.

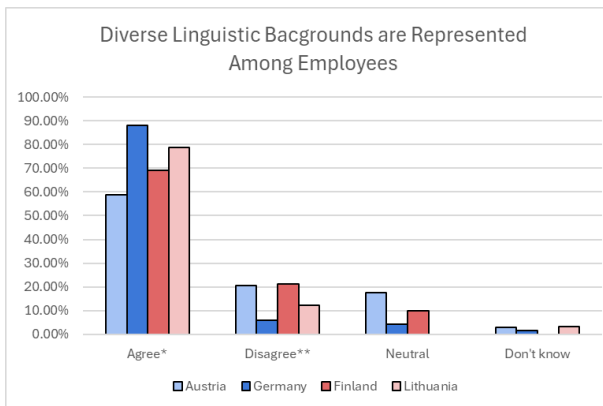


Figure 67. Linguistic Diversity Amongst Employees

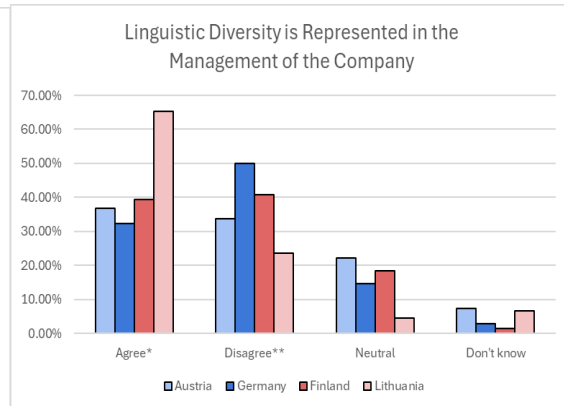


Figure 68. Linguistic Diversity Amongst Managers

Recognition of employees with **caregiving** responsibilities is relatively strong, with 66.2% of respondents affirming their presence in non-management roles. This perception is slightly lower but still prominent at the management level (Austria 39.7%, Germany 44.1%, Finland 29.6%, Lithuania 58.4%), though responses vary widely by country. Interestingly, a notable portion of participants selected “Don’t know” (up to 32.4% in Finland), reflecting the private nature of caregiving and the influence of GDPR protections on collecting or disclosing such personal information in workplace settings.

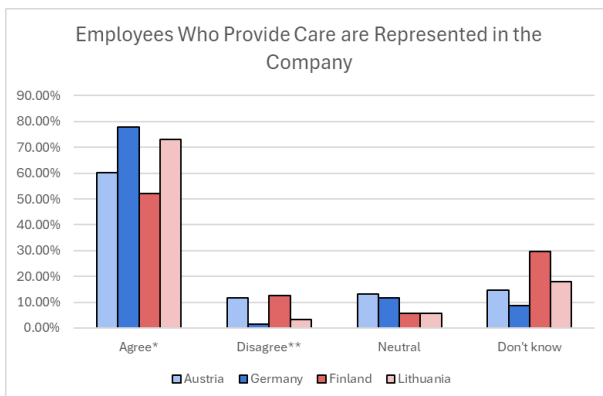


Figure 69. Caregiving Needs Amongst Employees

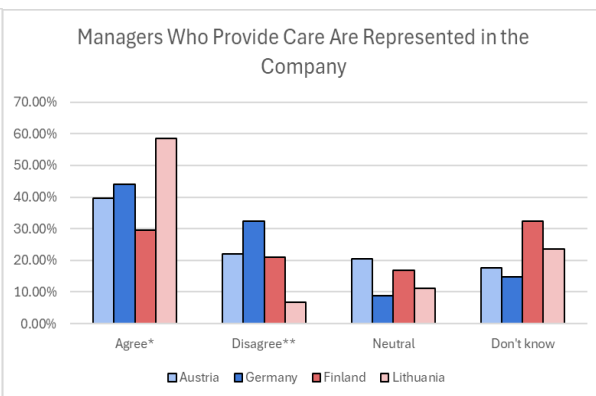


Figure 70. Caregiving Needs Amongst Managers

**Educational diversity**, in contrast, is highly visible and broadly acknowledged, with 78.0% agreement overall for both employees and managers. Lithuania and Germany stand out with the strongest agreement rates (Lithuania 61.8%, Germany 50.0%), possibly indicating cultures where academic backgrounds are more openly discussed or institutionally valued. The similarity in responses across both groups suggests a relatively equal representation of educational backgrounds at different organizational levels. These patterns underscore how education tends to be more formally documented and transparent in professional contexts, while caregiving status remains less apparent.

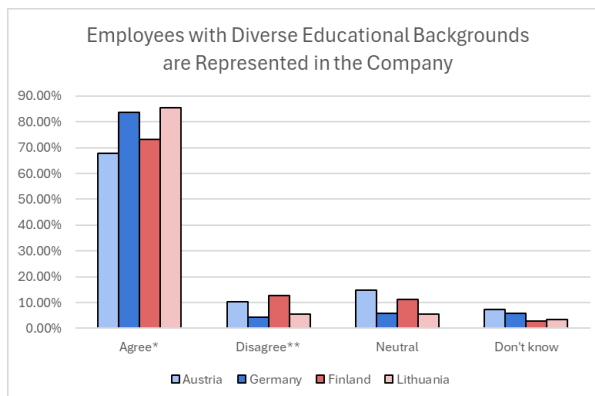


Figure 71. Education Diversity Amongst Employees

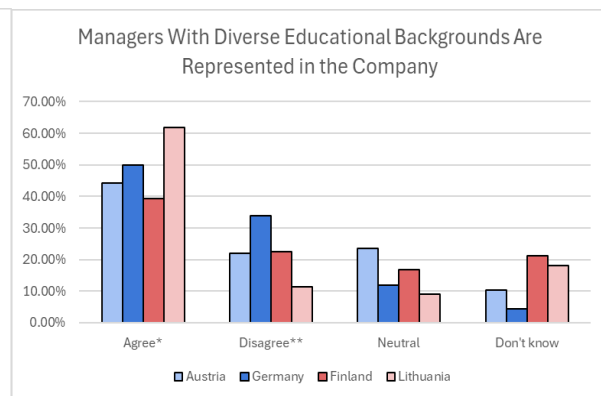


Figure 72. Education Diversity Amongst Managers

Perceptions of **religious** diversity are mixed and country dependent. While 45.6% of respondents agree that employees of different religious backgrounds are present, this number drops significantly in Germany (11.7%) and Austria (19.1%), where up to 41.2% and 23.5% of participants respectively selected “Don’t know.” This trend is even more pronounced when looking at management, with over a third of respondents in Lithuania (37.1%) and Finland (32.4%) also unsure. These figures suggest that religious affiliation is either not openly discussed or not perceived as relevant in many workplace settings, possibly due to cultural norms around privacy or the secular nature of some work environments. GDPR may also play a role here, as religious belief is a sensitive category and rarely documented by employers.

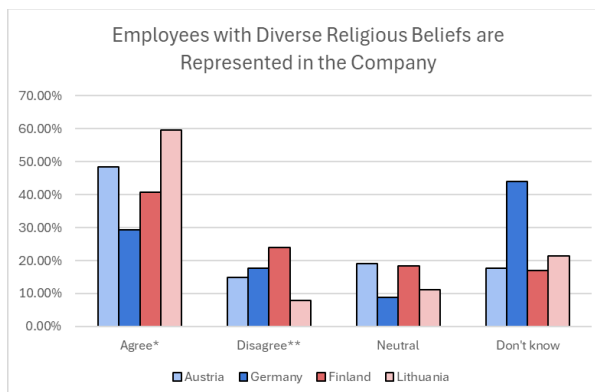


Figure 73. Religious Diversity Amongst Employees

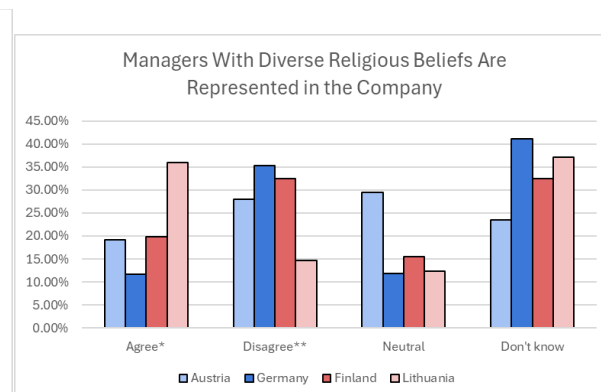


Figure 74. Religious Diversity Amongst Managers

In terms of **disability**, the data reveals a notable gap between awareness and presence, only 29.7% of respondents believe there are employees with disabilities, and even less believe there are manager with disabilities: Austria (14.8%), Germany (10.3%), Finland (4.2%), and Lithuania (16.9%). A high level of disagreement, especially in Germany (74%), Austria (53%), and Finland (52%), suggests that either people with disabilities are underrepresented or not visibly identified in the workplace, especially in managerial positions. Disclosure of disabilities is often voluntary and influenced by perceived stigma, which may contribute to the lower visibility of individuals with disabilities in leadership positions. These findings point to a broader challenge: ensuring inclusivity while respecting individual privacy. This also means that employers may face

challenges related to awareness of certain identity groups' presence and may need to strengthen inclusive practices and normalize diverse needs without relying on self-disclosure, ensuring that support structures are available even when identities remain private.

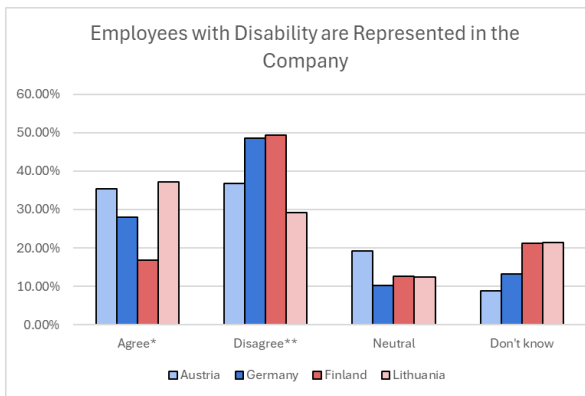


Figure 75. People with Disabilities Amongst Employees

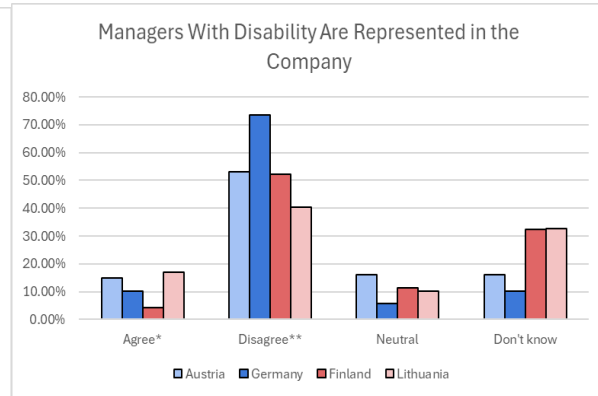


Figure 76. People with Disabilities Amongst Managers

Similarly, **LGBTQIA+ representation** remains less visible with only 31.4% of respondents agree or strongly agree that LGBTQIA+ individuals are present among employees, and this drops even further to Austria (14.8%), Germany (7.4%), Finland (7.0%), Lithuania (11.2%) for management roles. The disparity is especially notable in countries like Germany, where a high number of respondents either disagreed or stated they didn't know, reflecting a potential gap in openness or comfort in expressing LGBTQIA+ identities in the workplace. These findings may point to a culture of privacy, potentially influenced by GDPR regulations and differing levels of societal acceptance across countries. While gender is typically more visible and often captured in HR data, LGBTQIA+ identity is personal and not always disclosed, highlighting the importance of safe environments for voluntary self-identification and open expression.

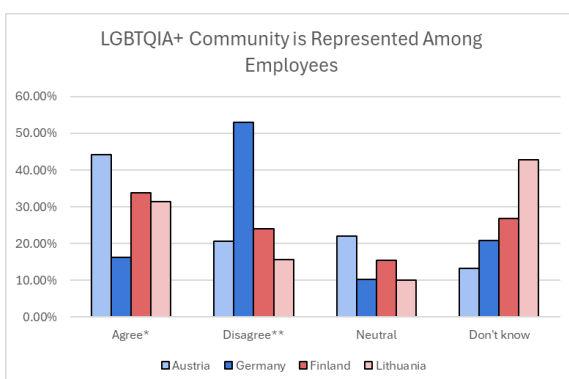


Figure 77. LGBTQIA+ Representation Amongst Employees

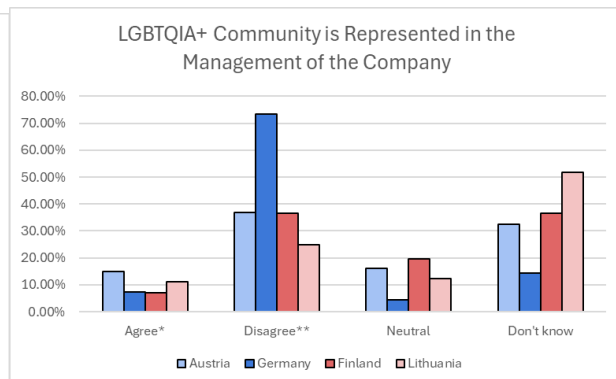


Figure 78. LGBTQIA+ Amongst Managers

**Student status** is widely acknowledged among non-management staff, with Austria (63.2%), Germany (19.1%), Finland (78.9%), and Lithuania (78.6%) of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that students are present in the workplace. Germany stands out with a much lower

perception on the representation of this diversity dimension: with less than one-third the level of Austria, and less than a quarter of that in Finland and Lithuania, indicating a substantially reduced visibility or presence of student workers. This may, also however point to differences on who is considered 'a student'. In Germany, vocational education is common while working, but is not necessarily considered as creating a 'student status'. As expected, the recognition of this dimension at the management level drops drastically: Austria (19.1%), Germany (1.5%), Finland (15.5%), and Lithuania (25.8%). These low numbers indicate that students are rarely seen in leadership roles, which is understandable, as management often requires longer tenure.

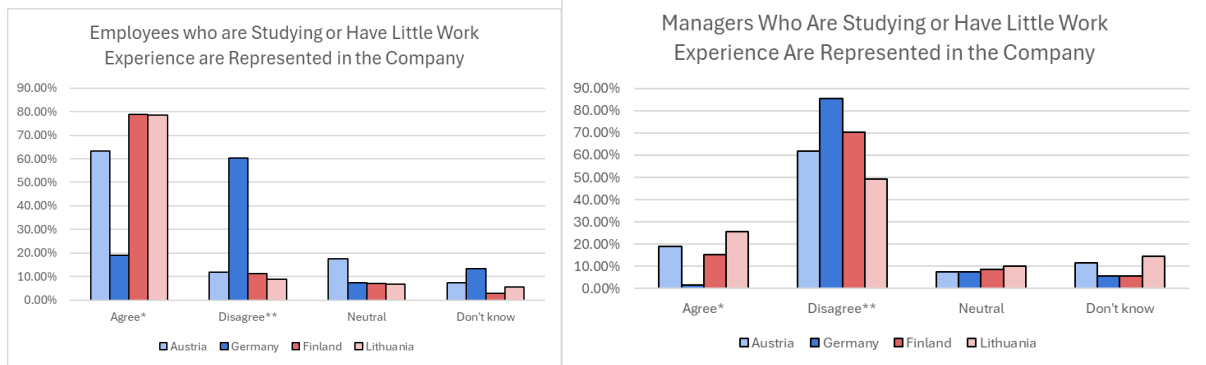


Figure 79. Students/Work experience Amongst Employees Figure 80. Students/Work Experience Amongst Managers

**Ethnic diversity** among employees in most of the target countries, except Germany, is more visible, with individuals reporting an agreement of representation of ethnic diversity: in Austria - 58.9%, Finland - 64.8%, Lithuania - 59.6%, and in Germany only 19.1%. Germany shows a large contrast: its perceived ethnic diversity is less than a third of what's reported in Finland, Lithuania, and Austria, pointing to either a real underrepresentation or reduced visibility of ethnic minority employees. In management, however, perceptions of existing ethnic diversity are again more modest: Austria (30.9%), Germany (10.3%), Finland (26.8%), and Lithuania (37.1%). Germany, in particular, reports a very low perception of ethnic diversity in leadership, matched by high disagreement and "Don't know" responses which suggests limited ethnic representation at the top or challenges in visibility due to privacy or cultural assumptions.

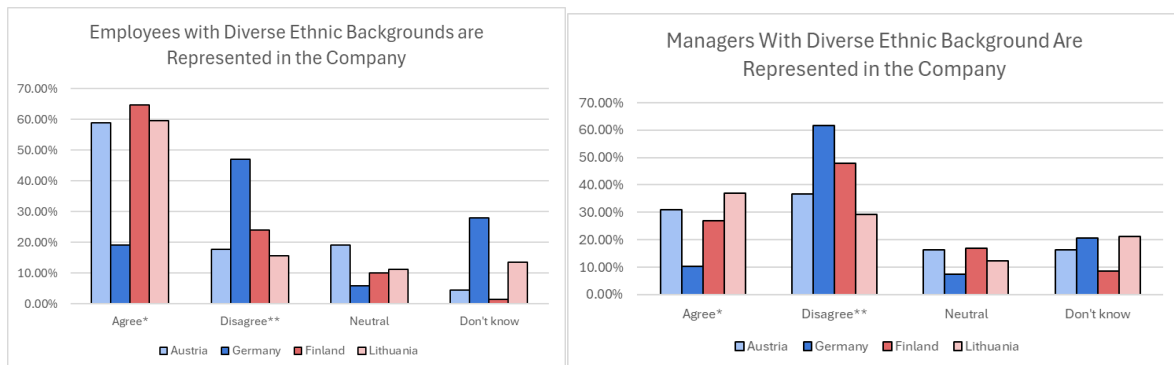


Figure 81. Ethnic Diversity Amongst Employees

Figure 82. Ethnic Diversity Amongst Managers



As with other identity dimensions, GDPR and self-identification play key roles. While comparing diversity representation, there is **consistent trend** of having less diversity in managerial roles than the employee-level roles in all target countries. These findings reinforce the need for diversity strategies that go beyond compliance and incorporate aspects to reduce stigma, reduce discrimination or bias in work result evaluation, create access to training for all diversity identities. These best practices would help closing the gap of diversity in leadership positions. Other practices are important, too, and we discuss them in the following sections.

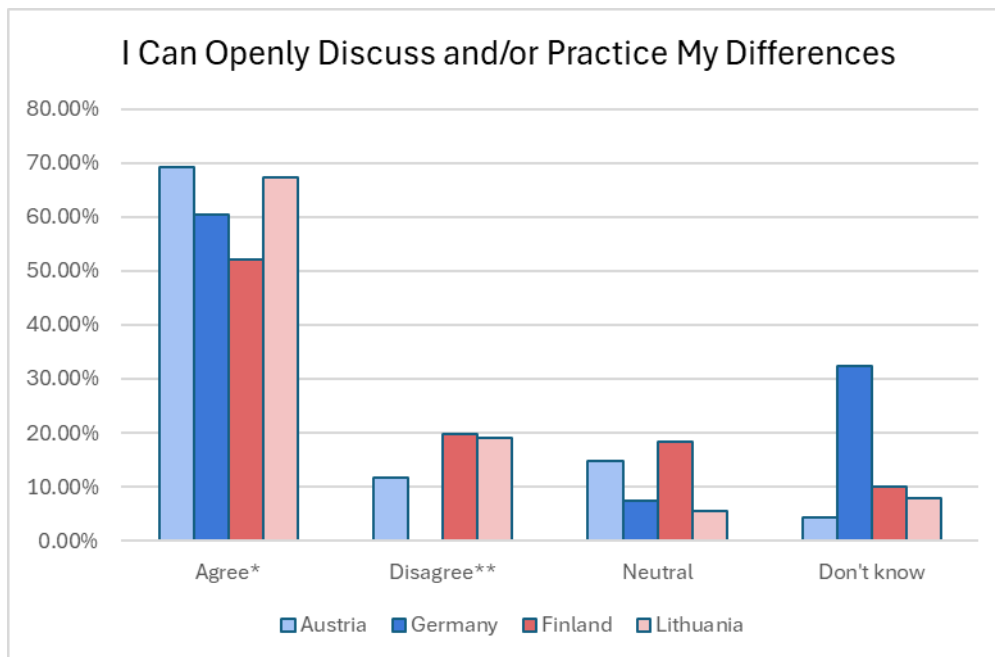


Figure 83. Respondents' Feelings about Their Ability to Openly Discuss and/or Practice Their Differences at Work

On a positive note, most respondents felt that they do not have much of perceived or actual constraints to practice their differences at work, since over 50% of the respondents in all four target countries reported having the possibility to practice their differences at work. There were two surprises, however. Respondents residing in Austria, while reporting relatively pessimistic impressions across most of the other questions, this time reported the widest ability to practice differences at work. Whereas respondents in Finland, who otherwise reported relatively positive or mixed results, suggested that they have some limitations when expressing their differences.

Such paradox might have been observed because of environmental influences: in the country environment with lots of support for DEI at the structural level (e.g., in Finland), the respondents may have very high expectations of what "practising their differences" would mean at work; while in Austria, where support at the structural level may be less, even small availability to practice differences may be appreciated. However, this may also suggest the existing mismatch between support mechanisms available in the country or at work and the more conservative and less open-minded organizational cultures present within companies. To try understanding the reasons behind these observations, we further explore policies and practices at work adopted in the companies within the target countries.



## 2.5.2. Diversity Management Policies and Practices in Companies as Perceived by Working Individuals

This section presents observations of two widely used tools for addressing diversity at work: practices of employee engagement, especially encouraging diverse opinions in strategic and operational work, and the use of DEI policies.

As seen in Figures 84 and 85 below, German companies stand out with their appreciation of and encouragement for diverse opinions in decision-making both at strategic and operational level, with over 80% respondents agreeing with this observation. Companies in Finland seem to score lowest at their appreciation and ability to appreciate diverse perspectives in both strategic and operational decision-making processes. This further elaborates earlier observation where employees in Finland felt more constrained in practicing their differences at work. Connecting the two reflections, our data suggests that companies in Finland are likely to have more conservative and less inclusive organizational cultures. Similar, yet slightly more positive situation can be observed in Lithuania and Austria.

For SME managers this observation is vital: in smaller firms, where processes are typically less formalized, organizational environment and culture can be decisive on whether employees can fully utilize their potential by practicing diverse perspectives and ideas. Encouraging open discussion of diverse perspectives in strategic and operational decision making is vital to every smaller and larger organization.

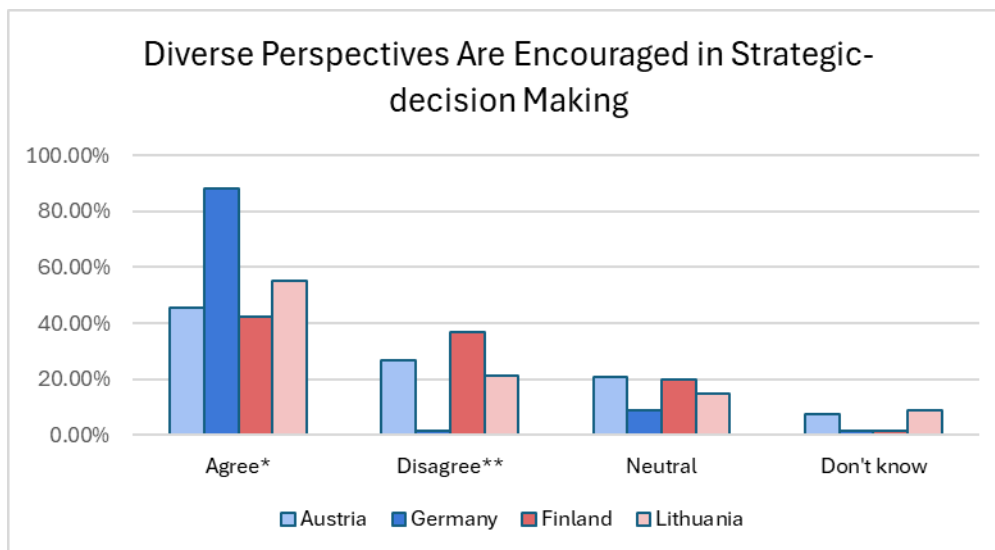


Figure 84. Respondents' Evaluation on the Degree to Which Diverse Perspective are Encouraged in Strategic Decision-making at Their Workplace

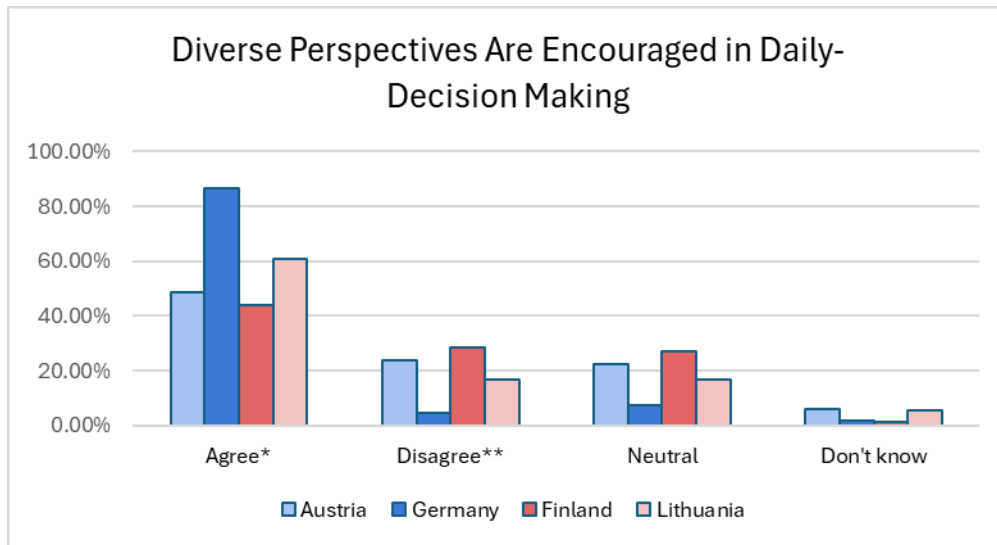


Figure 85. Respondents' Evaluation on the Degree to Which Diverse Perspective are Encouraged in Daily Decision-making at Their Workplace

**Diversity policy** is a tool via which companies can officially establish DEI management priorities, set principles for DEI management, and create visibility as well as obligations to consider DEI issues in different phases of business management and in daily operations. DEI policies and documented practices may not be so widely spread in smaller firms, in which in general, management practices tend to be less formalized in comparison to the larger firms. DEI policies can support establishment of both formal and informal best practices for DEI management, since they also define what company values and appreciates pointing to desired behaviours at work.

Thus, to understand how widely spread is the use of policies and documented practices are in the companies, survey has included questions about the use of DEI policies and practices concerning.

Employees' awareness of diversity-related **policies** varies widely across identity areas and countries. For **gender identity**, Germany stands out with 60% agreeing that their employer has relevant policies. In Austria and Finland, however, agreement is much lower (25% and 27%), and disagreement is relatively high. This may reflect not just the presence or absence of policies, but how visible or well-communicated they are. If gender inclusion is not explicitly framed in HR materials or leadership messaging, employees may assume it is not prioritized.

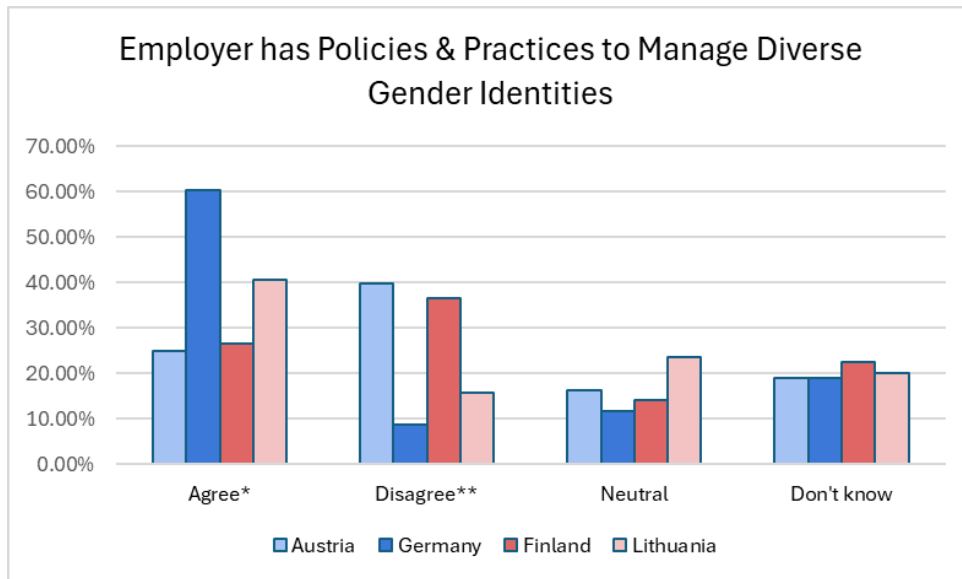


Figure 86. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Diverse Gender Identities in Their Workplace

Policies related to **LGBTQIA+ community** inclusion show similar divides. Austria and Germany both report high disagreement (40% and 53%), while Lithuania sees much less disagreement (13%) but high uncertainty, 33% say they do not know if such policies exist. This suggests that even where efforts may exist, they may not be clearly labelled or actively promoted.

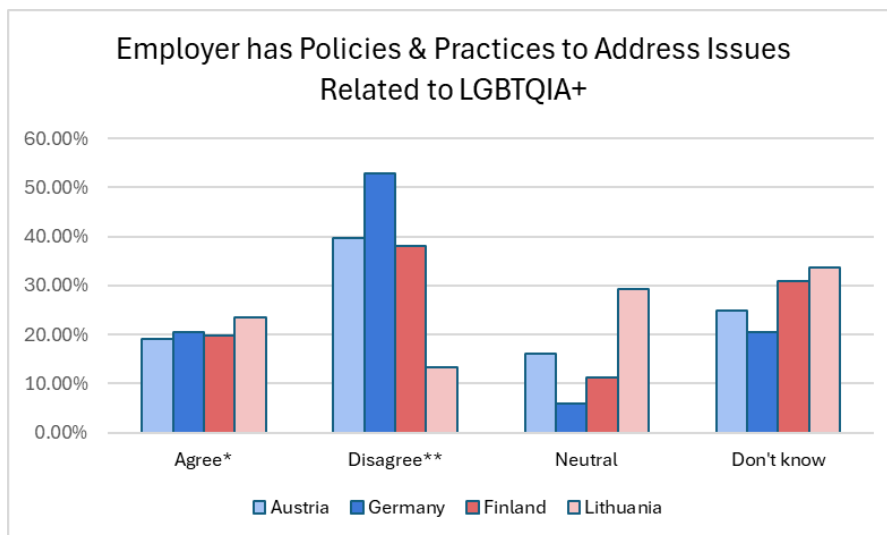


Figure 87. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Diverse LGBTQIA+-related Issues in Their Workplace

For **age** diversity, Lithuania shows the strongest belief in employer support (64%), while Austria is much lower at 25%. Finland and Germany are somewhere in the middle. Since age is a less “visible” policy area unless tied to formal retirement planning or multi-generational teams, it is

likely that perceptions are shaped more by individual experience than by structured communications.

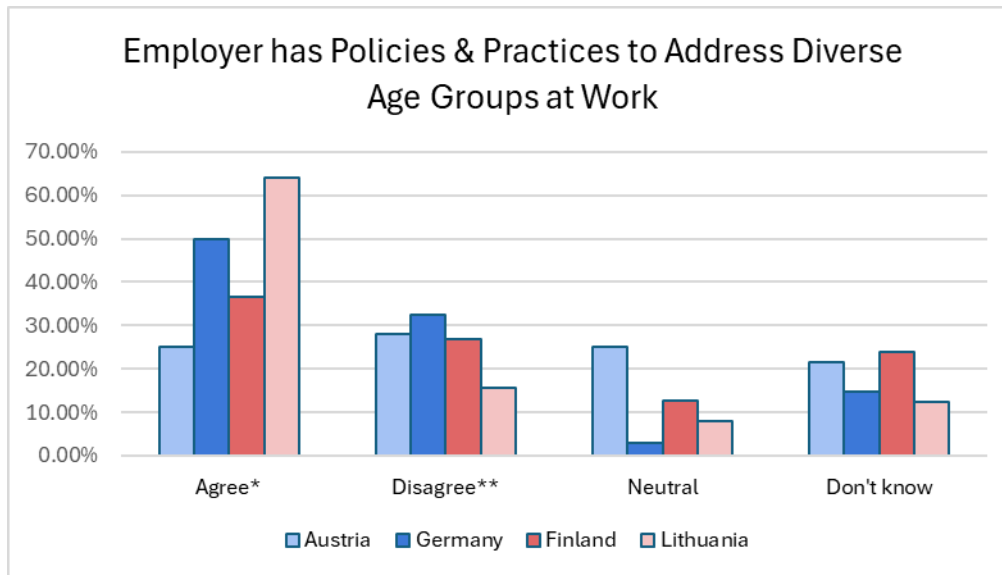


Figure 88. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Diverse Age Groups in Their Workplace

Support for **language and accent diversity** reveals large differences. In Lithuania, 61% agree their employer addresses this, compared to only 25% in Germany, where over half (53%) disagree. This may suggest that in some contexts, dominant language expectations are taken for granted and policies supporting multilingualism are rare or unrecognized. Where language is not considered a legitimate form of diversity, employees may feel excluded but see no formal path for support, which is discussed in critical linguistics and inclusion research.

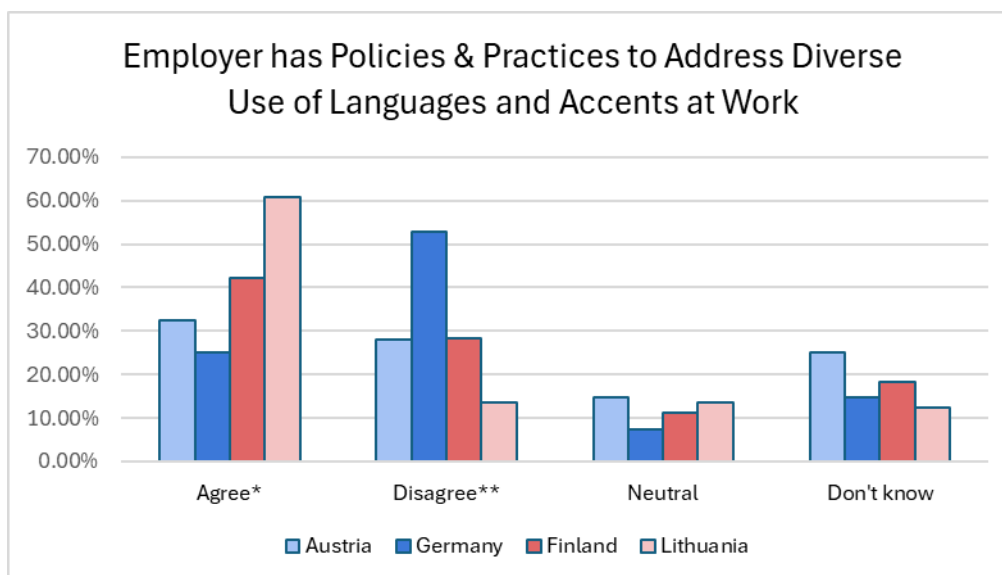


Figure 89. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Diverse Languages and Accents in Their Workplace

**Caregiving** is one of the more widely recognized diversity areas, especially in Germany (78%) and Lithuania (56%). But in Finland, agreement is much lower (28%), and a large number of people (38%) say they do not know whether policies exist. This kind of gap may arise when caregiving accommodations are handled informally, or on a case-by-case basis or decided outside the company's environment (e.g., defined by the state).

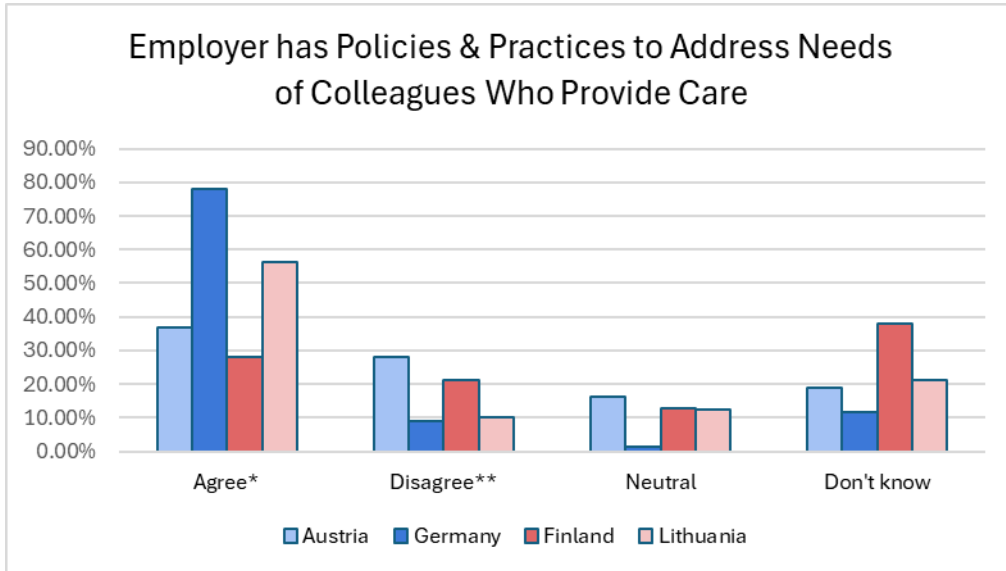


Figure 90. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Caregiving Needs in Their Workplace

Recognition of **educational diversity** is strongest in Lithuania (63%), where employers may be more vocal about supporting non-traditional career paths. Austria (35%) and Finland (39%) are lowest, and Germany sits at 44.1%. This could also reflect differences in national education systems or hiring culture. If companies emphasize traditional credentials and career tracks, employees without them may not feel those differences are acknowledged or supported.

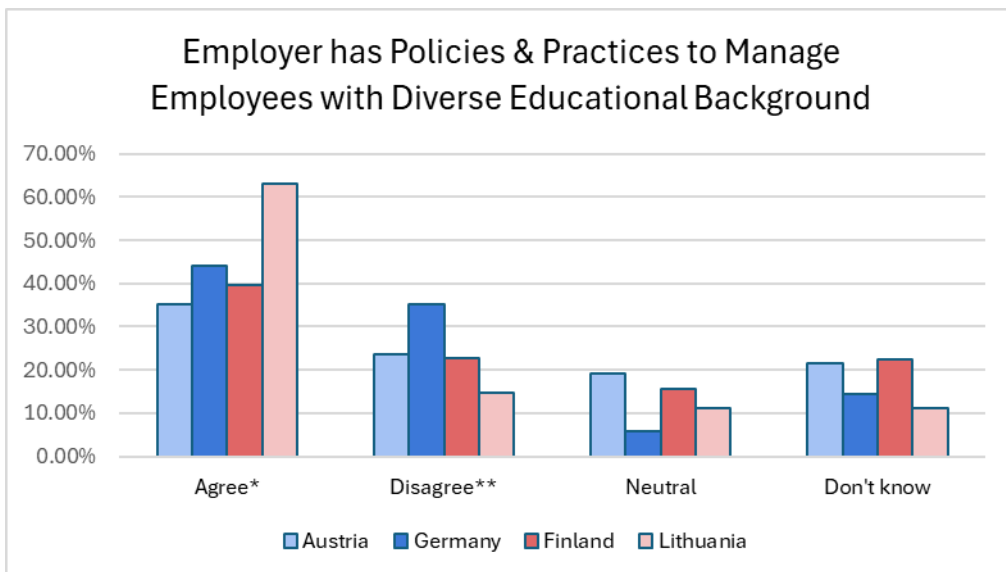


Figure 91. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Workforce with Diverse Educational Backgrounds in Their Workplace

**Religion and belief diversity** is among the least recognized across all countries. In Germany, 52% disagree that their employer supports this area through the establishment of policies or practices. “Don’t know” responses are also high across the respondents in all countries. This likely relates to GDPR concerns and cultural norms: religion is often considered private matter or an issue off-limits to be discussed at work. But critical diversity theory points that avoiding these topics entirely can leave employees feeling that part of their identity is invisible or unsupported, especially for those whose practices affect work routines (e.g., prayer, holidays, dietary needs). Moreover, many diversity-related conflicts at work may arise due to visible elements of culture and religion. To avoid them, it would be recommended to address them in policy or otherwise.

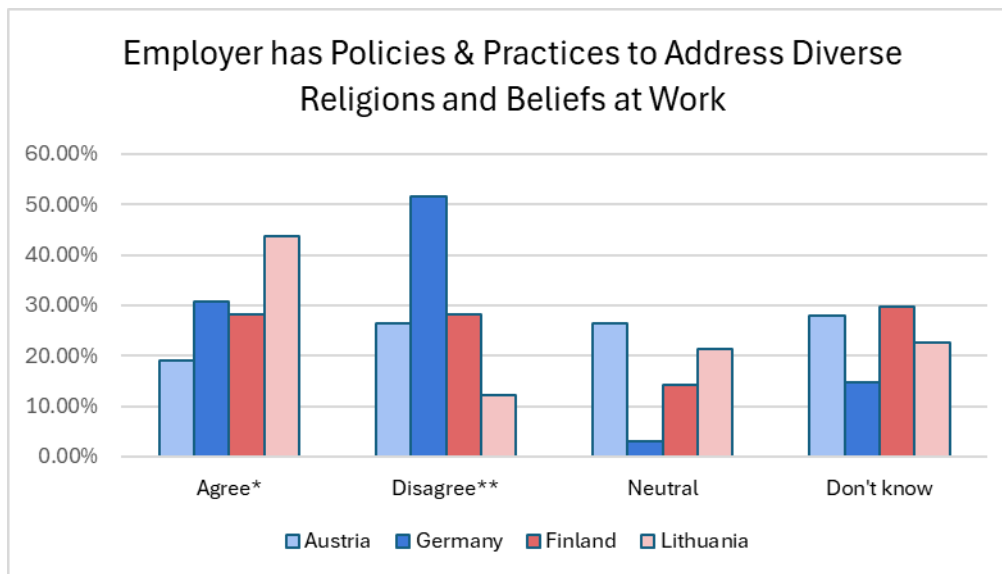


Figure 92. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Diverse Religions and Beliefs in Their Workplace

Similar trends are observed regarding the support for **ethnic diversity**: it is weakest in Germany, where over half (54%) disagree such policies exist. Lithuania (46%) and Finland (37%) report stronger perceptions of support, while Austria shows high uncertainty (26% “Don’t know”). Due to GDPR, many companies avoid collecting ethnicity data or addressing it directly which can lead to ambiguity.

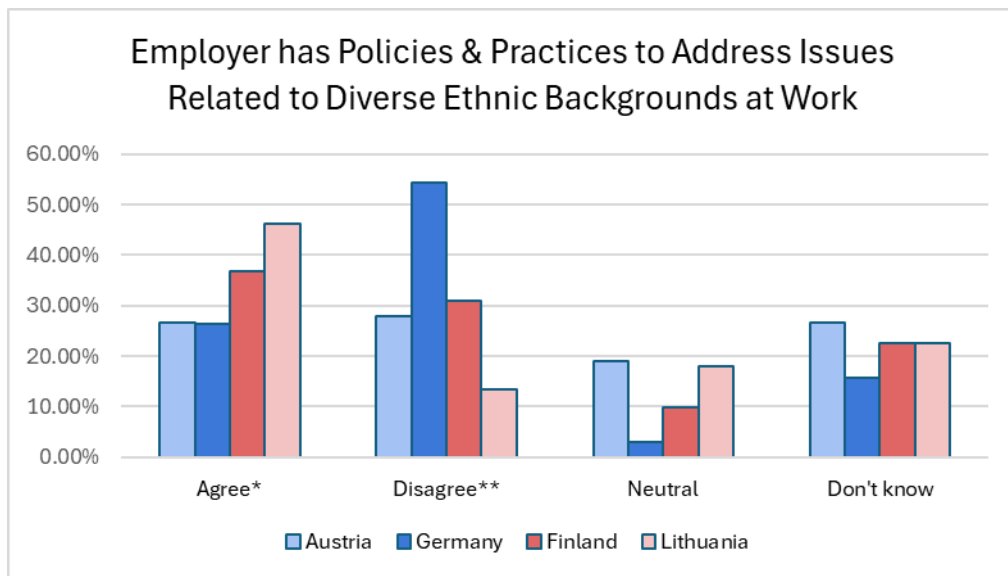


Figure 93. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds and Race in Their Workplace

Support to inclusion of people with **disability** is perceived most strongly in Germany (68%) and Lithuania (40%). Finland, however, shows very low agreement (10%) and high disagreement (41%). This suggests that disability accommodations may not be visible or perceived as systematic, especially at the company and not the state regulation level. In other words, companies have large scope to participate in defining their active principles and strategies on how to include people with disability in working environments, especially in Finland.

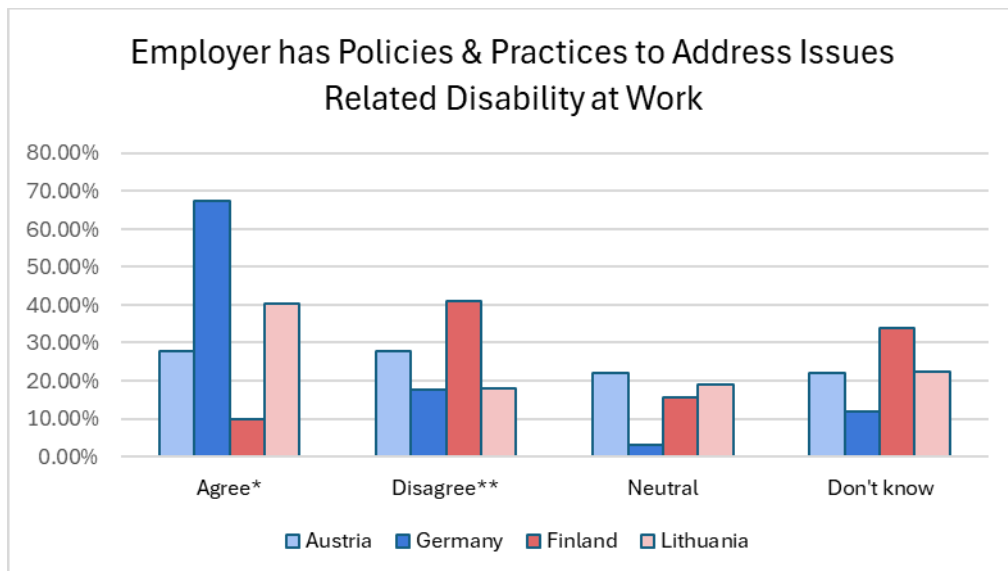


Figure 94. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Disability-related Issues in Their Workplace

Finally, issues concerning **student status or individuals with little work experience**, are widely addressed in Lithuania (66%) and Finland (51%). This may also reflect the existence of more visible entry-level opportunities or targeted support programs. Austria (32%) and Germany (28%) are lower, with higher disagreement and uncertainty, suggesting that companies in these countries could be more active in creating visible opportunities for those seeking their first workplace or at the start of their professional experience development.

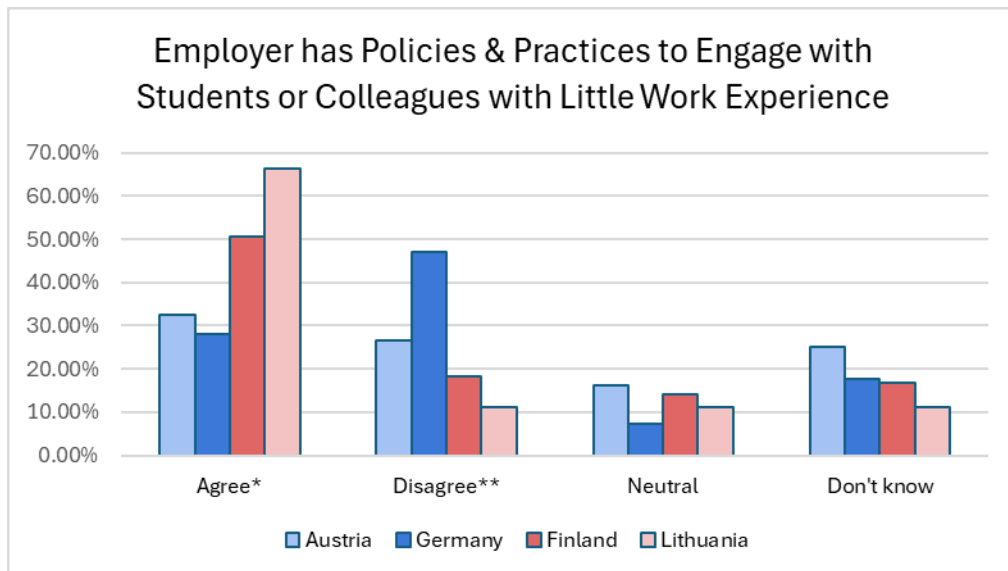


Figure 95. Respondents' Evaluation on Presence of Policies and Practices to Manage Students and Colleagues with Little Work Experience in Their Workplace

To conclude, employers had some policies and documented practices, but their presence greatly varied across countries. The most striking absence was observed regarding the policies and practices to include people with disability in Finland and relatively large absence of LGBTQIA+ community-related policies or documented principles across all countries. According to respondents' experiences and observations, in Finland and Austria on average companies had less formalized DEI management practices than in Germany and Lithuania.

SME managers in each target country could utilize these above-discussed observations to reflect on where the company could take a stronger role in documenting DEI management principles and practices and/or where more explicit communication about them would be necessary.

### 2.5.3. Inclusion Management Practices in Companies as Perceived by Working Individuals

Inclusion at work is created through various practices. Some of the best practices that can be applied in any company or organization despite their size are as follows: (1) communicating and showing that employees are valued at work; (2) encouraging everyone in the organization to share opinion, even if it objects the views of majority or management; (3) encouraging to report issues and problems observed at work regardless of the position in the organizational hierarchy; (4) having a clear system to report issues and challenges observed, (5) explain how to report issues and make such system of reporting the challenges easily accessible to everyone in the company;



(6) encouraging to openly practice differences where work conditions and requirements permit (e.g., by wearing clothes that employees like if there is no need for a uniform or special safety-related dressing, allowing to perform prayer during the work time, creating possibilities to have holidays on the religious/ethnic celebrations, permitting to bring children to work when needed; communicating in a way that same-sex partner would be welcomed to the company's events or encouraging to talk freely about diverse types of relationships at work, ensuring that everyone can interact with colleagues and customers without any constraints even when using a wheelchair, etc.) without fear or negative judgement; and (6) involving employees in decision-making process.

Therefore, we asked individuals to reflect on how companies they work or have worked for have practiced these issues creating inclusion at work. Below we present their experiences in relation to each best practice for creating inclusion at work.

The data shows that a high share of respondents in Germany report **feeling valued** at work (94%) and **confident sharing opinions** (93%). This may indicate that employees there experience consistent signals of inclusion and interpersonal trust in communication with colleagues and managers. By contrast, respondents in Finland show lower agreement in both areas (66% and 68% respectively), which could suggest variability in how inclusion is experienced and further reinforces observations that diversity of expressions is not widely encouraged at work (as it was observed above, discussing decision-making processes), pointing to the need for reflecting on dominant organizational cultures in the country.

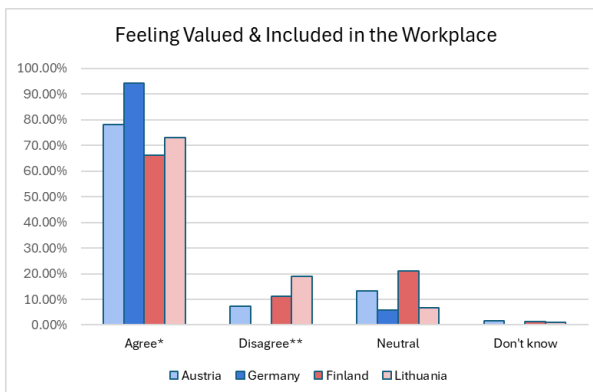


Figure 96. Feeling Valued and Included at Work

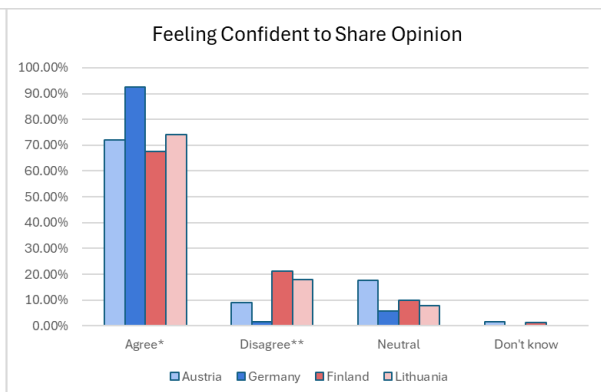


Figure 97. Feeling Confident to Share Opinions at Work

When it comes to **reporting issues related to inclusion or fairness**, the proportion of employees who feel comfortable doing so ranges from 82% in Germany to 55% in Finland, again Finland scoring the lowest among the investigated countries. Despite this, levels of actual disagreement, that is, respondents who actively said they do not feel comfortable, are relatively stable across countries. This may suggest that uncertainty or hesitation, rather than actual distrust, is influencing comfort levels in some contexts. The ability to report also appears connected to awareness. For example, in Finland, 65% agree they know how and to whom to report, compared to 94% in Germany. This points to a practical implication: clarity of process and communication seems to be directly linked to perceived ability to act.

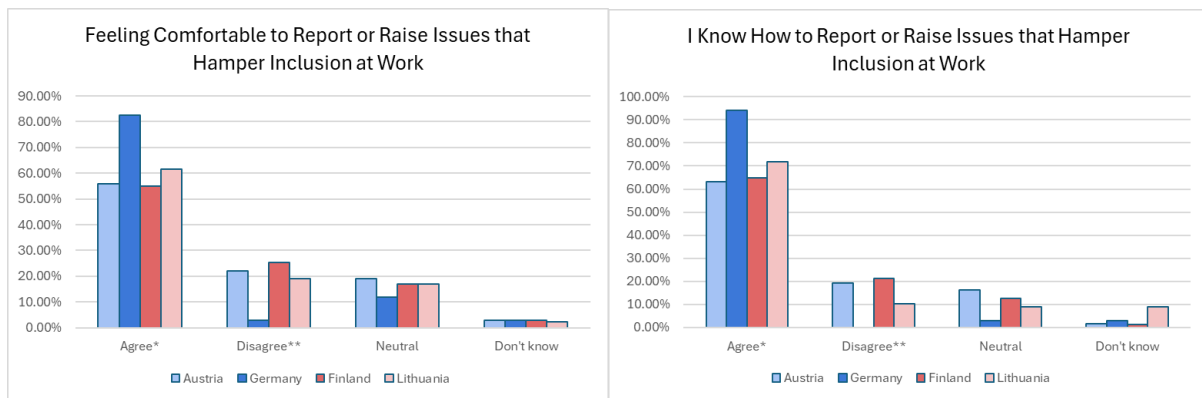


Figure 98. Comfort to Report Issues Hindering DEI

Figure 99. Knowing How to Report Issues Hindering Inclusion



Figure 100. Respondent's Employer Explains How to Report Harassment

Figure 101. Respondent's Manager Provide Safe Environment

Perceptions of management **creating a safe space for differing opinions** are less consistent. In Austria and Finland, just over half of respondents agreed (52% and 51%) with the statements about having safe environment at work, while a sizable share remained neutral or disagreed. When neutrality is high, it may signal ambiguity; employees might not have had the opportunity to test whether it is truly safe to speak up.

Employees, in all target country companies, only occasionally involve their employees in decision-making process (Figure 102).

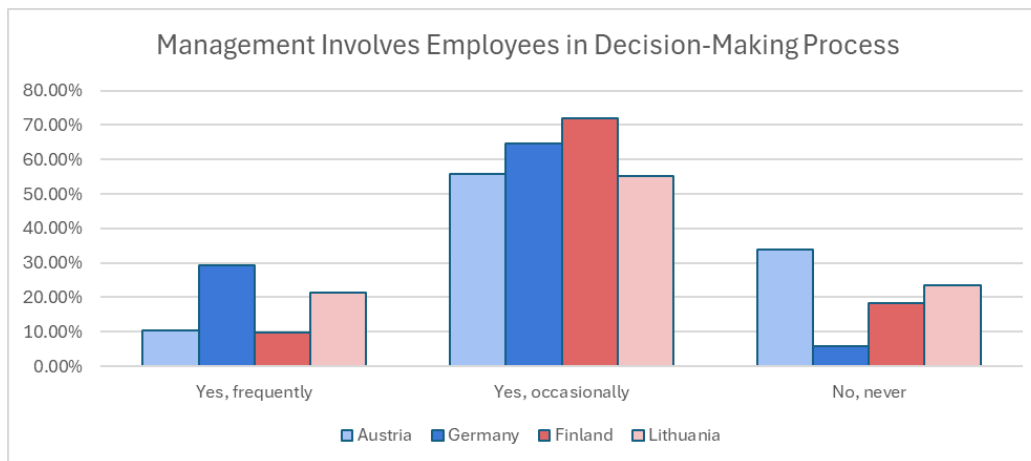


Figure 102. Respondents' Feelings about Their Management Involving Employees in Decision-making Process

Together, these findings suggest that inclusion is not only about values or procedures. It is closely tied to how clearly processes are communicated to employees.

#### 2.5.4. Equity Management Practices in Companies as Perceived by Working Individuals

Data regarding equity management practices (Figure 103) reveal variation in how employers across the four countries **manage equity in the workplace**. A notable proportion of respondents (22%) reported that their employer does not manage equity at all. This sentiment was most common in Austria (32.4%) and Finland (31%), while significantly less common in Germany (10%), suggesting that inaction is not even across countries. An additional 13% across all countries felt that their employer not only failed to manage equity but also saw it as irrelevant, with this perception peaking in Lithuania (20%). These figures reflect underlying organizational cultures and possibly sectoral norms where diversity is not yet institutionalized.

In terms of proactive practices, only 11% of respondents reported that their organization uses **quotas** to improve representation of underrepresented groups. This is relatively low, with Germany (22%) standing out as the only country where this approach is more commonly reported.

Similarly, **blind recruitment** which is often promoted as a tool to reduce hiring bias, was noted by just 9% overall, suggesting that some tools assuring fairness remain underused.

Employers appear more responsive when it comes to **offering broad benefits** (e.g. childcare, flexible hours) and support mechanisms tailored to individual needs. Over half of respondents (54%) said their employer provides benefits addressing different needs, and nearly half (49%) reported career development support tailored to individual or group needs. Companies in Germany again leads in these categories, with nearly 80% of respondents reporting inclusive benefits and 75% reporting group-specific development support. This suggests that Germany, while cautious on quotas or blind recruitment, may invest more in structural inclusivity through benefits and development opportunities.

However, Lithuania shows a different profile. Despite relatively low use of quotas (3%) or blind recruitment (12.4%), it still performs relatively well in benefit provision (56%) and individual work support (36.0%), indicating a more pragmatic, service-based model of inclusion. Austria and Finland remain in the middle, with Austria leaning toward lower support across all categories.

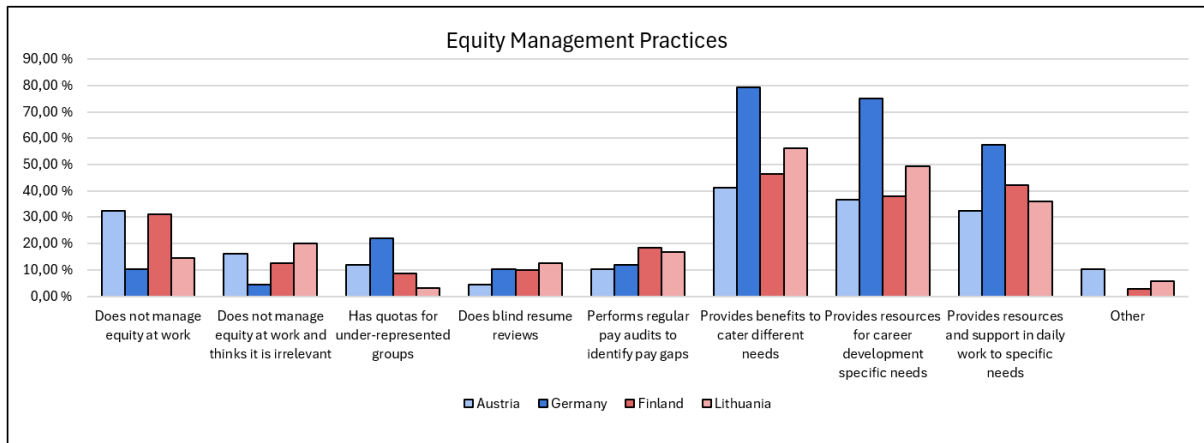


Figure 103. Equity Management Practices in Companies that are Visible to Employees at Their Workplace

Differences in equity management practices are supported in the broader **Equity Management Scores**. The vast majority of organizations were rated as either “Minimal” (37.5%) or “Moderate” (30.1%) in their equity efforts, while only 1.3% reached the “Strong” threshold. Austria and Finland had the highest share of “Does Not Manage” ratings (39.7% and 40.8%, respectively), indicating either a lack of clear strategies or a gap between formal policies and perceived impact. In contrast, companies in Germany stand out with 45.6% of responses falling into the “Moderate” category and the lowest share (10.3%) reporting no equity management. This reflects a relatively stronger infrastructure for equity management, albeit with room for growth in active inclusion mechanisms like quotas or transparency audits.

Taken together, these results suggest that **equity management in target countries is still in its developmental phase**. Most organizations operate with basic or moderate levels of equity management, often favouring indirect or general approaches (like flexible benefits) over systemic tools like quota-setting, blind recruitment, or equity audits. The discrepancy between strategic commitment and experience may require not only clearer communication and implementation of policies but also stronger accountability mechanisms.

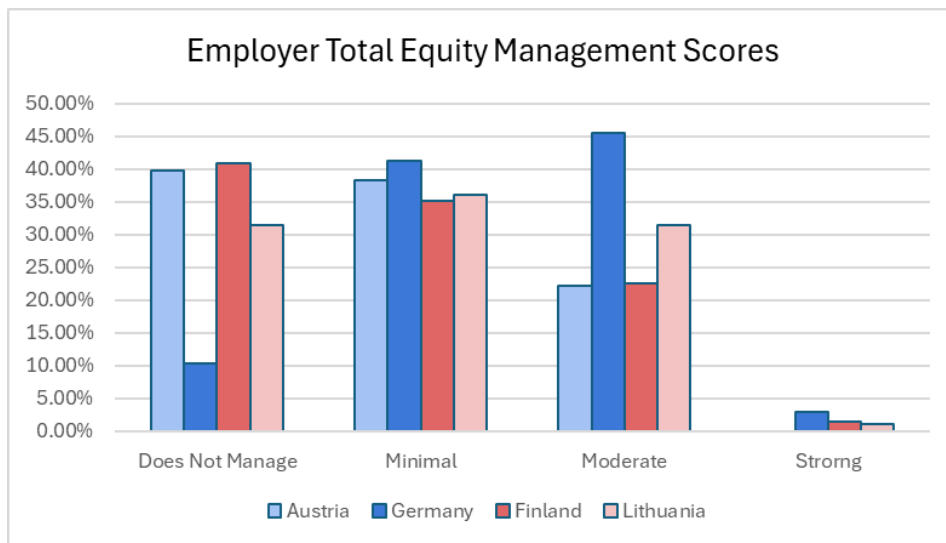


Figure 104. Respondents' Assessment of Their Employer Regarding Its Ability to Manage Equity

**Perceptions of employer support for equitable treatment and tools** such as quotas or adaptive work equipment, vary significantly across countries, suggesting differing organizational climates.

Germany stands out, with 94.1% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that their employer fosters positive attitudes toward equity. This unusually high figure, compared to 50% reported in Austria, 59.5% in Lithuania, and just 43.7% in Finland suggests a particularly strong institutional attitudes around equity in Germany. In contrast, respondents in Finland display the lowest overall agreement (43.7%) and the highest share of respondents actively disagreeing (31.0%). This may signal greater scepticism about the authenticity or effectiveness of equity measures.

Responses from Austria show a more divided perception: half of respondents agree that positive attitudes are fostered, but disagreement (16.1%) and neutrality (27.9%) are also high. This suggests a lack of consensus, potentially indicating that equitable treatment is valued but not yet normalized or understood across the organizations. Lithuania, while showing relatively strong agreement (59.5%), also has a substantial group (20.2%) who are neutral, indicating ambivalence or limited visibility of efforts.

Across all countries, 61.5% of respondents perceive that positive attitudes toward equity are fostered. However, the sizable share of neutral (16.9%) and "Don't know" (4.7%) responses underscore a key challenge in equity initiatives: visibility and clarity. Without clear communication and practical demonstrations of equitable practices, even well-intentioned efforts may fail to have an impact.

This variation supports the argument that equity tools alone, such as quotas or accommodations, are not enough. As theories of organizational justice ([Colquitt et al., 2001](#)) suggest, perceptions of fairness depend not only on outcomes but on transparent processes and treatment. To be perceived as genuine, equity practices must be seen in daily interactions and supported by managerial behaviour.

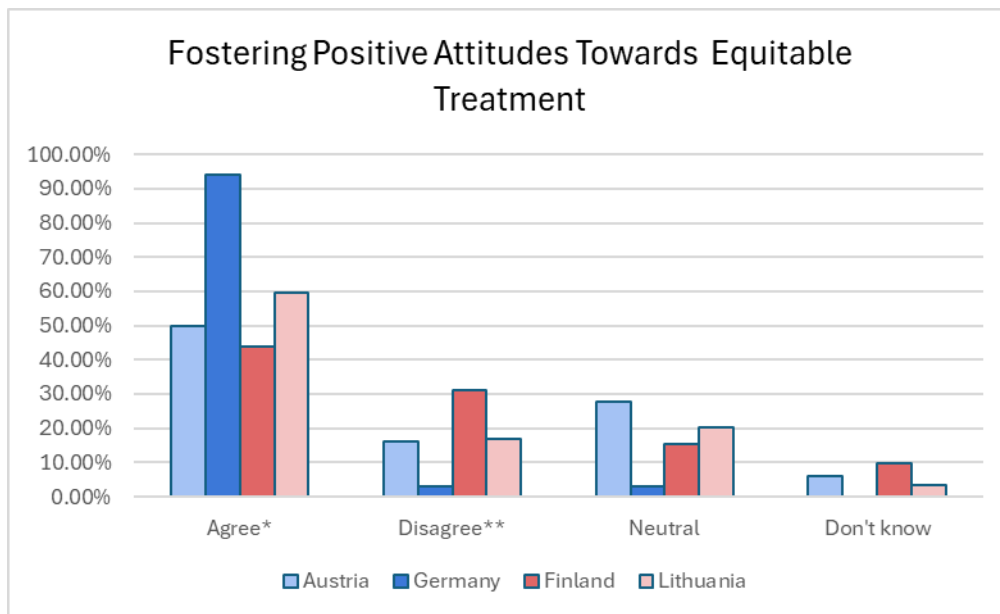


Figure 105. Respondents' Evaluation of Their Employer's Efforts to Foster Positive Attitudes Towards Equitable Treatment at Work

Perceptions of whether employers have **implemented necessary mechanisms to ensure equal access to resources and opportunities** vary across the surveyed countries. Germany reports the strongest positive perception, with 82.4% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that such systems are in place. Lithuania's results are more positive, with 59.5% of respondents expressing agreement. However, neutral responses (15.7%) and a sizable minority expressing disagreement (15.7%) still indicate variability in perceived access and support.

Austria and Finland display more divided opinions. In Austria, only 44.1% of respondents agreed that supportive mechanisms exist, while in Finland, agreement drops further to 35.2%, coupled with a notable 30.9% disagreeing. These results may suggest gaps between formal commitments and the employee experience of those policies. As argued by [Lipsky \(1980\)](#), the implementation of equity policies often depends on "street-level bureaucrats", meaning frontline managers and HR professionals whose behaviour can shape whether policy is experienced as inclusive or exclusive in practice.

Across all countries, just over half of respondents (55.4%) report that such mechanisms are in place. However, the remaining responses suggest that many employees may not see equity support as reliably available or clearly communicated. This supports the view that equity is not only about policies but also about procedural fairness and daily reinforcement ([Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007](#)). Organizations that fail to embed these supports into everyday operations may find that their equity efforts lack legitimacy in the eyes of their workforce.

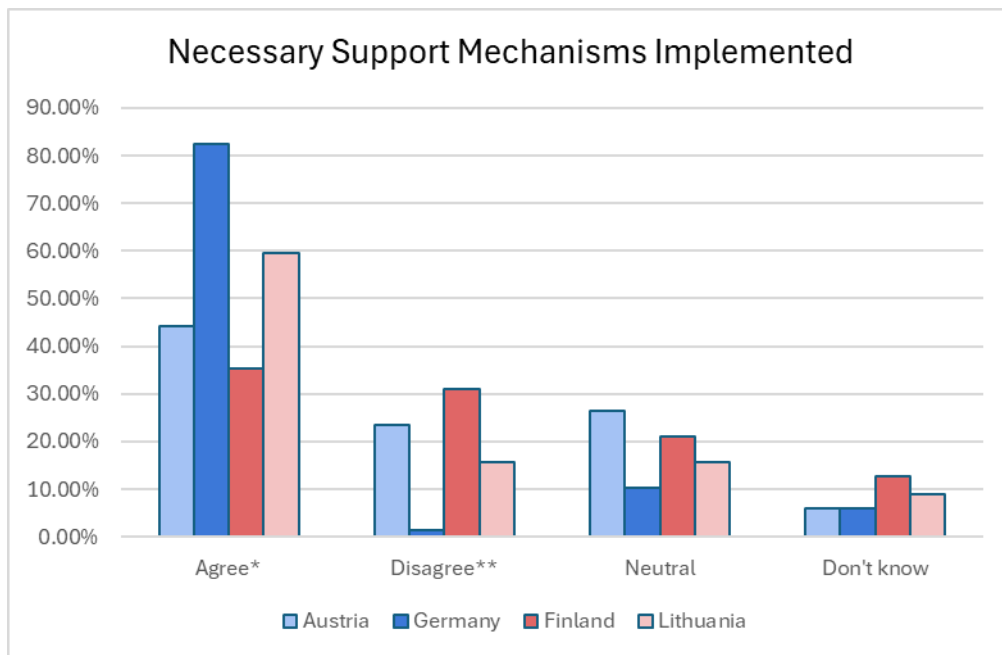


Figure 106. Respondents' Assessment on Whether Their Employer Has Implemented Necessary Support Mechanism for Diverse Employees

Perceptions of **whether employers have sufficient resources to ensure equitable treatment of employees** vary across the surveyed countries. Lithuania reports the strongest positive perception, with 67.4% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that such resources are in place. This high level of agreement may reflect a growing sense among Lithuanian employees that employers are taking concrete steps to build infrastructure or allocate budget toward equity initiatives. However, the presence of 13.5% disagreement and 15.7% neutral responses still suggests that confidence is not universally shared.

In Finland, 42.2% of respondents believe their employer has sufficient resources to support equitable treatment. While this represents a relative majority, the notable presence of 25.7% who disagree and 19.3% who remain neutral points to significant variation in how well-resourced equity efforts are perceived across different workplaces. A further 12.8% of employees selected “don't know,” indicating that resource availability may not be made visible across organizations.

In Germany respondents show an evenly split distribution of views. 31.0% of respondents agree that sufficient resources exist, while 30.9% disagree. The high percentage of neutral responses (25.4%) further suggests inconsistency in how equity resourcing is experienced. The close alignment between agreement and disagreement figures may reflect uneven employer practices or a gap between stated commitments and operational reality.

In Austria, confidence in employer resourcing is also limited. Just 30.9% of respondents expressed agreement, while 26.5% disagreed and 17.6% selected neutral. A significant proportion of 25.0% reported not knowing whether resources are in place, the highest of any country surveyed. This level of uncertainty may point to low transparency around equity-related infrastructure or a lack of visible signals from leadership regarding resource allocation.



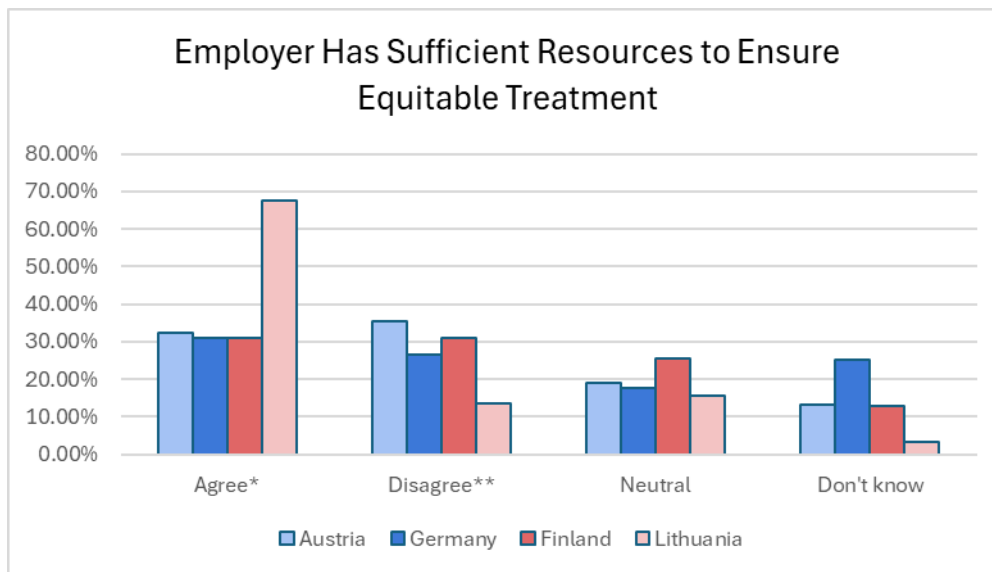


Figure 107. Respondents' Assessment on Whether Their Employer Has Sufficient Resources to Ensure Equitable Treatment at Work

Across all countries, only 42.2% of respondents report that their employer has the resources necessary to ensure equitable treatment. At the same time, 25.7% express disagreement and 19.3% remain neutral. These figures suggest that while some employers may be actively resourcing equity efforts, many employees continue to experience uncertainty, inconsistency, or absence of visible support. Where organizations fail to link equity goals to tangible resources, confidence in their ability to deliver fair treatment may remain fragile.

## 2.6 Individual Perceptions about Inclusion in Job Market in Europe

Finally, respondents were asked to reflect on the easiness to find the job in their country of residence and the EU in general. On the one hand, this allowed capturing the impressions about the employment situation in the studied countries. On the other hand, these questions served as an additional checkpoint to understand whether impressions of overall employment situation relate to positive or negative views about the DEI management in companies.

Regarding the ease to find employment, **Germany** reports by far the most positive outlook, with 92.9% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it is easy to find a job in their country of residence. Disagreement is nearly non-existent, and no respondents selected “don’t know,” suggesting widespread confidence in employment accessibility. **Lithuania** also reflects a generally positive perception, with 58.1% agreement. However, 32.3% of respondents disagreed, and an additional 8.6% selected neutral. These results suggest that while a majority view job access as relatively straightforward. In **Austria**, 57.2% of respondents agree it is easy to find a job. Still, 18.6% report disagreement and an identical proportion (18.6%) are neutral, indicating a more cautious or uneven confidence in the local job market compared to Germany. **Finland** presents the most divided responses. While 46.5% agree that it is easy to find a job, a nearly equal share, 43.7%, disagree, and 15.5% strongly disagree, the highest of any country surveyed.



Overall, 63.6% of respondents across the sample agree or strongly agree that it is easy to find a job, while 24.3% disagree. The remaining responses suggest either neutrality or uncertainty. These results point to high levels of confidence in some countries, especially Germany, but also reveal persistent access concerns in others, particularly Finland. It is worth noting that we did not ask to specify whether the job corresponds to the respondents' field of expertise or education.

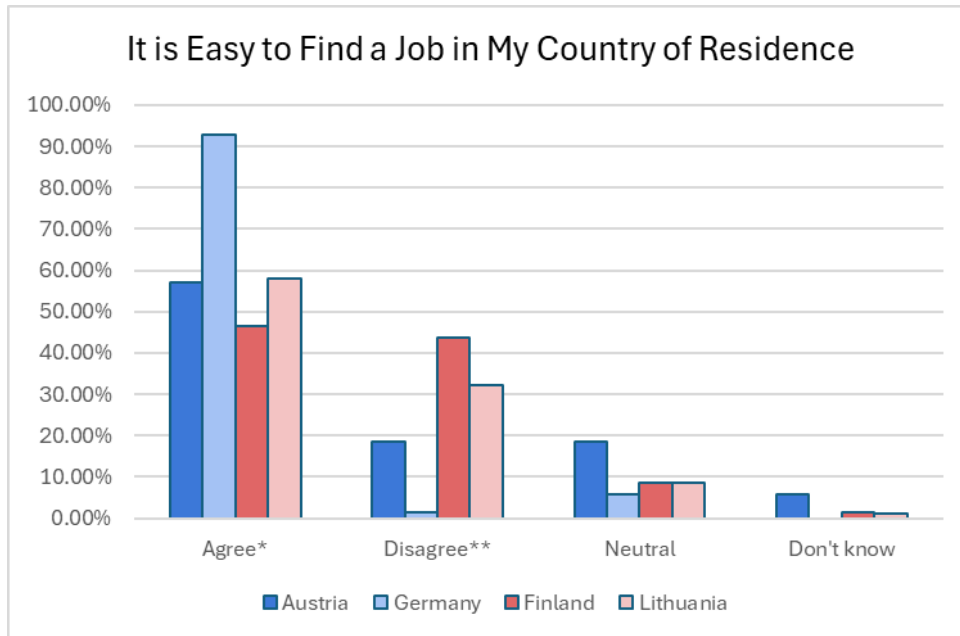


Figure 108. Respondents' Assessment on Whether it is Easy to Find a Job in Their Country of Residence

Regarding **finding a job within the European Union**, perceptions among respondents are varied and often uncertain. Survey results (Figure 79) show that only 35.3% agree or strongly agree that it is easy to find work in the EU, while 14.6% disagree and a significant 33.1% selected "don't know." The high rate of uncertainty suggests that many individuals may lack direct experience with cross-border job-seeking or are unfamiliar with the mechanisms that facilitate EU labour mobility.

Country-level differences are notable. **Lithuania** stands out with the most positive perception with 49.5% agreeing and 9.7% strongly agreeing, indicating relatively high confidence in the accessibility of employment opportunities across the EU. **Austria** follows, with 40.0% agreement, though this is accompanied by 30.0% uncertainty and 15.7% disagreement, pointing to a more divided view.

In **Finland**, respondents are more sceptical. Only 28.2% agree that it is easy to find a job in the EU, while 26.8% disagree and 31.0% report not knowing. This balance suggests a degree of caution or limited familiarity with labour market conditions outside national borders. Respondents in **Germany** report the highest level of uncertainty. Just 17.1% agree that it is easy to find a job in the EU, while nearly 73% of respondents selected "don't know." This suggests limited awareness or engagement with EU-wide employment pathways among German respondents, despite Germany's strong position within the EU labour market. However, it is also worth noting that Germany is the largest country by populations in our sample and therefore the need to consider outside country employment in Germany might be at the lowest level.

While there is some confidence in EU job accessibility, particularly in Lithuania, in which migration rates have been consistently high, overall perceptions reflect hesitation, knowledge gaps, or limited exposure to cross-border employment systems.

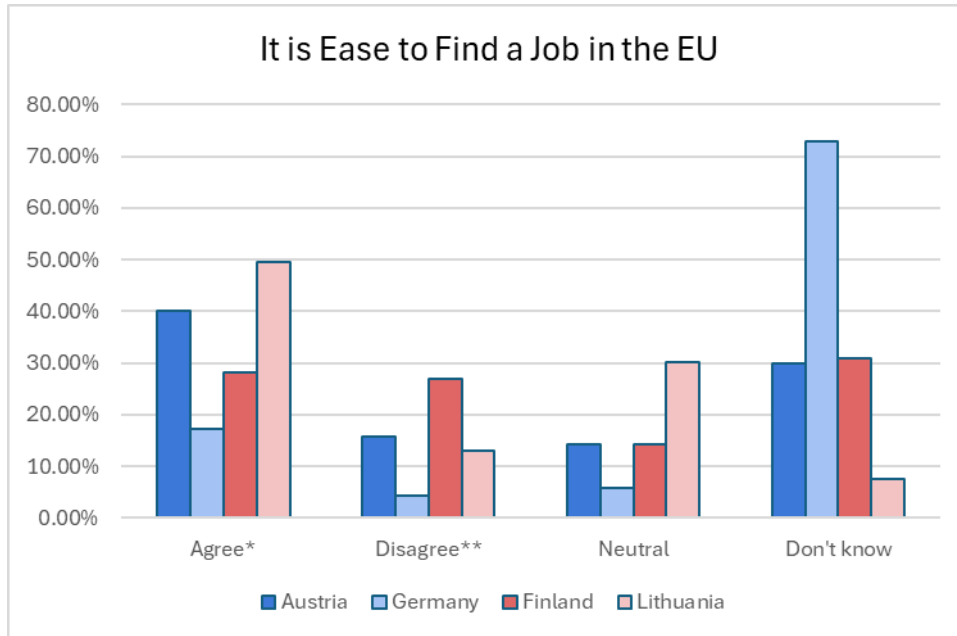


Figure 109. Respondents' Assessment on Whether It is Easy to Find a Job in the EU

Only 24.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that **companies in their country of residence have sufficient awareness of how to handle DEI-related matters**. In contrast, 38.0% disagreed, and 17.2% selected “don’t know,” highlighting a widespread lack of confidence in employer competence in this area.

In **Lithuania** respondents report the most positive perception, with 28.0% agreement, though this is offset by 36.5% disagreement and 25.8% neutrality. Similarly, in **Finland**, 26.8% of respondents agreed, but more than half (50.7%) disagreed which suggests that while some view companies as aware, many see current efforts as lacking in impact. In **Germany** respondents present a slightly more optimistic picture, with 25.8% agreement and a lower disagreement rate of 11.5%. However, 38.6% of German respondents selected “don’t know,” indicating a potential lack of visibility or communication around DEI policies in the workplace.

In **Austria**, scepticism is strongest. Just 15.7% of respondents agreed that companies have sufficient DEI awareness, while 54.3% disagreed, which is the highest of any country in the sample. These results point to persistent doubts among respondents residing in Austria about whether organizations are equipped to engage meaningfully with DEI issues and further summarizes overall more pessimistic view on diversity management observed in Austria.

Overall, the findings reflect low confidence in companies’ readiness to support diverse groups in the workplace. While a small portion of respondents see progress, most express doubt or uncertainty. These results are similar to a more specific observations gathered about specific companies, in which respondents had experience.

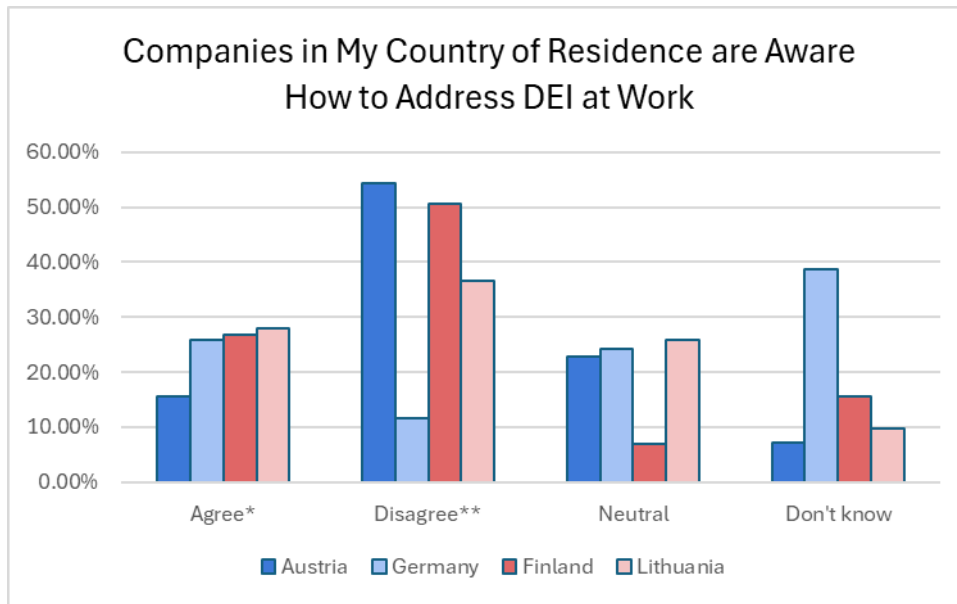


Figure 110. Respondents' Assessment on Whether Companies in Their Country of Residence are Aware How to Address DEI at Work

Views on whether there is a **sufficient support system for different diversity groups in the respondents' country of residence** vary, with overall sentiment leaning toward scepticism. Only 28.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that adequate support exists, while 31.1% disagreed and 21.1% indicated they did not know. This suggests that effective systems of support for diverse groups may be lacking or inconsistently implemented.

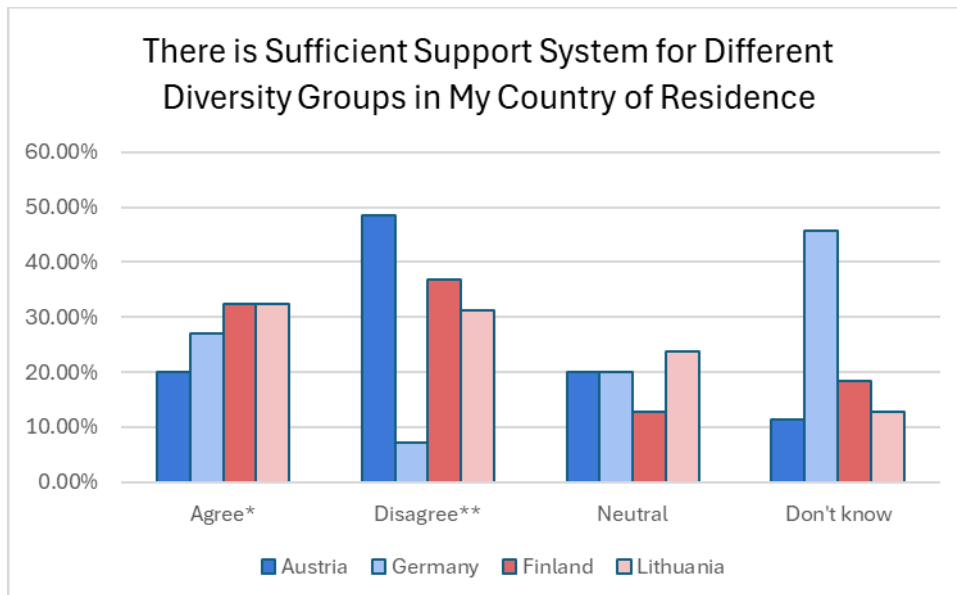


Figure 111. Respondents' Assessment on the Existence of Sufficient Support System for Different Diversity Groups in Their Country of Residence

Respondents in **Lithuania** and **Finland** reported the highest agreement levels, at 32.3% and 32.4% respectively, but both countries also had substantial disagreement rates of 31.2% and 36.8%, and noticeable proportions of neutral responses. These results point that while some perceive progress and effective support systems, others remain unconvinced or do not even know of such systems existing. In **Germany** again respondents showed a high level of uncertainty. While 27.1% of respondents agreed that there is sufficient support for diversity groups, 45.7% selected “don’t know,” by far the highest in the sample. This pattern suggests that support systems may not be actively recognized by employees, even if they exist. In **Austria** respondents report the most critical view. Less than one-fifth (20.0%) of respondents agreed there is sufficient support, while nearly half (48.6%) disagreed. This suggests a widespread perception that institutional or organizational backing for diversity groups is inadequate or missing.

Altogether, the data reflect a cautious outlook on how well different diversity groups are supported at a systemic level. Even in countries where agreement is relatively higher, there is no overwhelming consensus, and significant proportions of respondents either disagree or remain uncertain.

## 2.7 Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

### 2.7.1 Data Corrections Related to Survey Translations

Building the survey took place over the course of several months, with teams in Germany, Austria, Lithuania and Finland handling the translations from English into local languages where the survey was to be implemented, receiving feedback on the survey when testing its feasibility among the stakeholders, and then incorporating the received feedback locally in all partner country. As a result of this complex process of developing the survey, there were some issues and minor mistakes made in translations across the five languages in which the survey was conducted. Most of the mistakes were corrected in the testing phase aligning meanings and questions as well as option orders in all languages. However, several misalignments were noticed only after the data collection was completed. Due to this, data set had to be corrected before proceeding to the data analysis phase. Below we describe specifically why the corrections were needed, what was corrected, and how these corrections were made.

Once over and the survey data downloaded, it was noticed that human errors happened during the preparation phase and slightly impacted the final data in a way that further steps were needed to acquire analysable and reliable dataset. The tool used for conducting the survey (webropol) requires to set a master language, the chosen language then becomes foundation in relation to which the rest of the languages are linked during the data collection and when downloading the survey responses. As a result of having to choose such a master language, all other languages must fully match – in questions and responses order – to provide accurate data. However, since multiple adjustments were made when incorporating feedback in the survey’s testing phase, in two out of five languages – Lithuanian and German – mistakes in translations were spotted after the survey was closed. These mistakes were spotted in relation to option order in several questions in Lithuanian and German languages, and in several questions some words were translated incorrectly.

To fix the mistakes and ensure that all possible mistakes are noticed and fixed, two independent native speakers of both languages were asked to check the survey's alignment between English and German and English and Lithuanian. The received results were compared and coordinated to reach the final agreement on the issues spotted across the two reviewers. Once it was ensured that all potential mistakes are spotted, the dataset was corrected to fix the mistakes.

### Rearranging the option order in several questions

The data manipulations were done to rearrange answers in the appropriate order, i.e., to ensure that the order of options marked in Lithuanian and German languages correspond to the options marked in other languages. Such re-arrangements were done for questions 6, 30 and 31 fixing both German and Lithuanian versions, and in questions 27 and 29 fixing only Lithuanian language version.

For questions 27, 29, 30 and 31, two options were inverted and rearranged to match the other languages. An example of the rearrangement that was done is provided below: question 27 in English and German (Picture 1), and the same process was done for the other four mentioned questions.

27. Based on your opinion, please evaluate the following statements \*

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree Don't know Doesn't apply

I feel that I have equal opportunities to receive training or develop myself in the workplace regardless of my previous educational background (e.g., education type, country in which I received education)

I feel that my educational background does not affect the evaluation of my work results

27. Bitte beurteilen Sie die folgenden Aussagen, basierend auf Ihren Erfahrungen:

Stimme überhaupt nicht zu Stimme nicht zu Neutral Stimme zu Stimme voll und ganz zu Ich weiß es nicht Nicht zutreffend

Ich finde, dass mein Bildungshintergrund die Bewertung meiner Arbeit nicht beeinflusst.

Ich fühle mich an meinem Arbeitsplatz gleichberechtigt behandelt, unabhängig von meinem Bildungshintergrund (z. B. Art der Ausbildung, Land, in dem ich ausgebildet wurde) und kann berufliche Ausbildungen und Weiterbildungen machen, wie alle anderen.

Picture 1. Answer options across the translations were rearranged in questions 27, 29, 30, 31 to match the data correctly

Similarly, in question 6. The order of the answer options was rearranged to match the other languages' order which was: Finland, Lithuania, Germany, Austria, Others. The simple rearrangement of the options placed all answers in the same order as the master language and ensured that data obtained referred to the indented meaning across all language versions of the survey.

6. The company where I have been employed is based in....

○ Finland

○ Lithuania

○ Germany

○ Austria

○ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

6. Įmonė, kurioje dirbu, yra įsikūrusi:

○ Austrijoje

○ Vokietijoje

○ Suomijoje

○ Lietuvoje

○ Kita (įrašyti) \_\_\_\_\_

6. Wo befindet sich der Hauptsitz Ihres Unternehmens?

○ Österreich

○ Deutschland

○ Finnland

○ Litauen

○ Andere (bitte benennen) \_\_\_\_\_

Picture 2. Answers rearranged in question 6

It is worth mentioning that no data was changed by doing this manipulation, rather the answers across the languages were simply rearranged so that they correspond to the same option across all languages prior to the start of the data analysis phase.

### **Need for new categorisation in Question 5**

The other issue that was spotted in the Lithuanian translation in question 5 was the different categorizations of work tenure, which presented respondents with a different scale than in other languages (Picture 3).

<b>5. How long have you been employed in this company? *</b>	<b>5. Kiek laiko dirbate dabartinėse pareigose? *</b>
<input type="radio"/> Less than 1 year	<input type="radio"/> Mažiau nei 1 metus
<input type="radio"/> 1-5 years	<input type="radio"/> 1-3 metus
<input type="radio"/> 6-10 years	<input type="radio"/> 3-5 metus
<input type="radio"/> Over 10 years	<input type="radio"/> Daugiau nei 5 metus

Picture 3. Survey original scale with translation errors

Since this was a different scale and not the different answer order, this translation mistake required creating different intervals when reporting the tenure of the respondents.

According to the data available and ensuring that new categories are meaningful given the answers received in all languages, it was decided to recategorize the scale as follow: • less than 1 year (the same on all languages), • 1-5 years (includes Lithuanian scale of ‘1-3 years’ and ‘3-5 years’ combined with data in other languages in the category of ‘1-5 years’), and • 5 years and more (included ‘over 5 years’ in Lithuanian language and ‘6-10 years’ and ‘over 10 years’ in other languages). By proceeding to categorize all the answers into a new scale, the team was able to maintain the validity of answers provided by the respondents while avoiding analysis problem.

## **2.7.2 Sample size**

Although the overall sample (N = 304) and country-level samples support reliable national comparisons, certain subgroup analyses fall below the accepted thresholds. For example, when we disaggregated data by identity categories within countries or specific organizational contexts, some subgroups drop below the commonly recommended minimum of 30 participants (VarVoorhis & Morgan, 2007; Field, 2013<sup>1</sup>), which limits the robustness of those comparisons. Additionally, high rates of “don’t know” or “doesn’t apply” responses reduced the effective sample sizes for some items. This suggests, that while overall patterns are informative, results from smaller subgroups should be interpreted with caution.

Despite having slightly more respondents based in Lithuania than in other countries (90+ vs 70+), the difference is not significant enough to disallow comparison. To address this limitation, it was decided to use percentages rather than numbers of answers, in doing so the statistical comparison is possible and results between countries can be discussed against each other.

<sup>1</sup> Field, A. (2013) Discovering Statistics Using IBM SPSS Statistics: And Sex and Drugs and Rock “N” Roll, 4th Edition, Sage, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi.

### 2.7.3 Directions for Future Research

Future research should aim to build on these findings by expanding both the scale and depth of analysis. Larger, stratified samples would allow for more robust comparisons across intersecting identity groups and national contexts. Longitudinal studies could also help capturing how DEI practices evolve over time and whether perceived inclusion leads to measurable change in workplace outcomes. In addition, incorporating organizational level data, such as formal DEI policies, leadership demographics, and HR practices would help to better understand employee perceptions and contrast these with institutional realities. Lastly, incorporating more countries within the EU would allow for better understanding of how DEI is implemented and experienced in diverse European workplaces.



# 3 Managing Diversity in Smaller European Businesses: Comparative Analysis

Dr. Joana Ramanauskaitė

## Executive Summary

### The Key Insights and Implications from Comparative Analysis

Two parallel surveys – one for SME owners/managers, other for employees – in Austria, Finland, Germany and Lithuania reveal that diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is more of a expressed goal than a set practice. Most firms consider themselves “aware/compliant”, but formal roles, metrics and mentoring schemes are still the exception; many managers admit they are “just compliant” or even unsure where they stand. Formal DEI job titles are rare, yet roughly half of the employees assume someone is looking after the topic and issues, hinting at weak sign-posting rather than total neglect. Every country reports clear rules for pointing out harassment, but everyday supports such as mentoring, progress tracking and staff input are lacking and noticed by workers even less than by managers. Age, gender and language differences are widely recognised, but by contrast more marginalized identities are largely unrecorded especially in management roles, and many respondents simply “don’t know” who is present. Overall, the findings indicate good intentions but struggles following through.

### 3.1 Overview of Data and Comparative Approach

In both surveys we have a distribution among respondents in relation to the location of the head offices of their companies where they work or which they are represented. SME survey has a more unified distribution among Austria, Germany, Finland, and Lithuania, whereas in individual survey we have most responses from Lithuania. As of company size, SME survey covers companies with size that adheres to the SME definition having less than 250 employees (91,2%), whereas the individual respondents cover a broader variety of company sizes, ranging from <250 employees (62,2%) to >250 employees (35,1%). As intended, more than half of the respondents in the SME survey are top or mid-level managers (64,2%) and in the individual survey we cover non-management position (56,2%).

It is important to note that **the findings in this chapter are based on two distinct surveys** conducted among small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) representatives and individual employees across Austria, Germany, Finland, and Lithuania. Importantly, **the samples are not directly matched**: individual respondents are not employed in the same organizations as the SME representatives. Therefore, comparisons between the two groups should be interpreted as indicative of broader cross-national trends rather than intra-organizational. For the SME survey, companies were categorized by the location of their head offices, while individuals were grouped based on their country of residence. This discrepancy in geographic categorization introduces additional context-related variation that may influence perceptions of DEI practices and culture. Additionally, the SME survey had a substantially smaller sample size than the individual survey, due to which its findings are more susceptible to random variation and less likely to reflect the



broader population. When interpreting joint conclusions from both surveys, this limitation should be considered, especially in cross-country comparisons where the SME data may distort or exaggerate results.

There are also structural differences between the two samples. The SME survey achieved a more balanced distribution across all four countries, whereas in the individual survey slightly more responses came from Lithuania (30.19%). In terms of organizational scale, the SME data aligns with the European Commission's definition of small and medium-sized enterprises as 91.2% of companies surveyed had fewer than 250 employees. Conversely, the individual respondent pool reflected a wider range of company sizes, with 62.2% working in SMEs and 35.1% in larger organizations. Furthermore, the SME survey predominantly reflects managerial perspectives, with 64.2% of respondents holding top or mid-level management roles. The individual survey captures experiences from lower hierarchical levels, with 56.2% of respondents in non-management roles. While a subset of questions was designed to allow for comparison between the two surveys, differences in sample composition and organizational contexts should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

Finally, the data visualization approach used throughout this report consolidates Likert scale responses by merging "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" categories. While this improves readability and facilitates cross-group comparisons, it reduces response granularity and may obscure differences in the intensity of agreement. Such simplification should be interpreted cautiously, particularly when assessing the depth of sentiment across groups ([Harpe, 2015](#)). Overall, the results offer valuable insights into perceived DEI conditions across sectors and countries but should be understood within the constraints of the survey design and sampling strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018<sup>2</sup>).

## 3.2 Maturity

The results from the survey reveal some differences between SME representatives and individual respondents regarding the maturity of DEI in companies across Austria, Germany, Finland, and Lithuania.

When trying to understand the level of maturity of DEI management in a company, it is worthwhile asking whether the respondents, as a part of a company, feel that DEI is a part of the company's identity. The statement *"DEI is a part of our company's identity"* received significantly more agreement from individuals than from SME representatives in Austria and Germany (Figure 112). In Austria, 38% of individual respondents agreed with the statement, compared to only 26% of SMEs. In Germany, this difference was even more pronounced (individuals – 27%, SMEs – 7%). Interestingly, in Finland, both groups reported nearly identical levels of agreement (38%), indicating a shared understanding of DEI's importance. In Lithuania more SMEs (36%) than individuals (32%) identified DEI as part of their company identity.

<sup>2</sup> Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

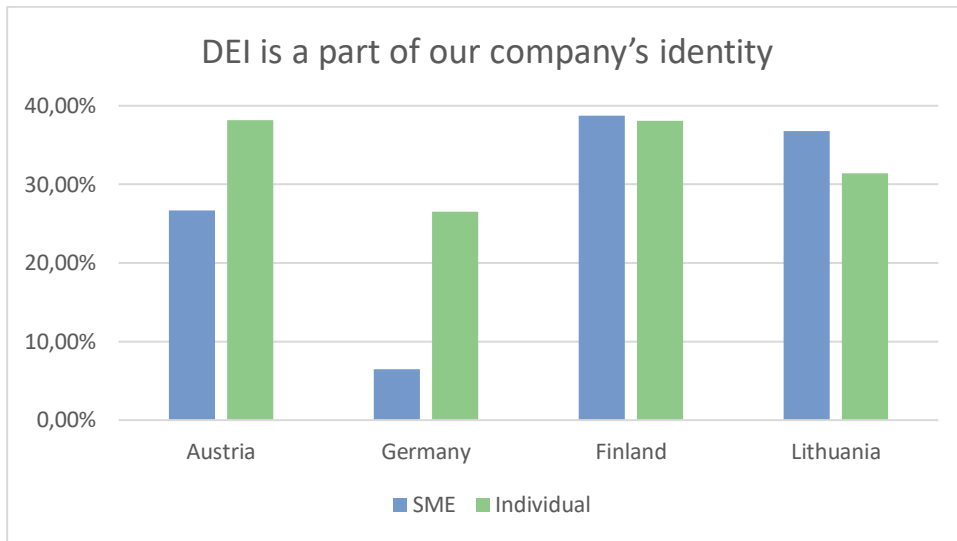


Figure 112. DEI is a part of our company's identity (SME and Individual)

Additional to DEI in company identity, it is important to take certain measures. In this case, appoint as person responsible for managing DEI issues in the company (Figure 113). SME representatives commonly indicate that their companies do not have a designated person responsible for DEI-related matters. In contrast, individual respondents reported that, on average, approximately half of the companies have someone assigned to DEI responsibilities. This may suggest that although formal DEI roles are uncommon in SMEs, DEI responsibilities are often integrated into existing HR function, which may not be clearly communicated or formally recognized.



Figure 113. Nominated person responsible for DEI related issues (SME and Individual)

Next graph presents a more nuanced picture of DEI maturity using six predefined levels (that were explained to the respondents) (Figure 114). Most common level where companies attribute themselves or the individuals see their employers positioned are being DEI are and DEI compliant. Individual respondents, on average, see their employers slightly higher in this maturity ranking, attributing DEI Expert and Advanced in DEI on average 3,5% and 7,7% respectively more than SME representatives. This suggests a general perception that DEI practices are still developing and far from being fully institutionalized. On the other hand, a notable proportion of SME respondents reported a Lack of DEI Awareness, suggesting significant gaps in organizational cognition of DEI-related issues.

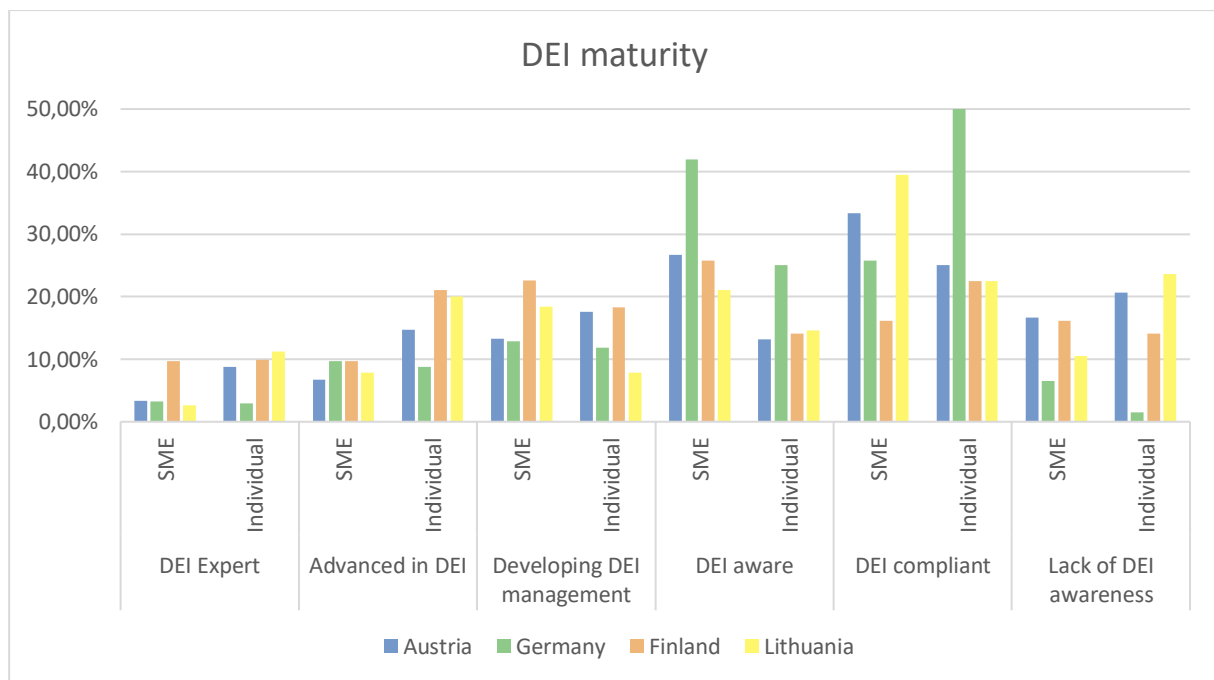


Figure 114. DEI maturity (SME and Individual)

Figure 115 presents comparative results evaluating the extent to which diverse perspectives are encouraged and valued in both strategic and daily decision-making. Both parts of the graph show similar situations across countries including diverse perspectives into strategic and daily decisions. The graph highlights consistent variations in valuing and encouraging diverse perspectives across company and individual levels. Germany emerges as a clear leader in aligning company diversity objectives with employee experience, suggesting effective DEI practices integrated into organizational culture and everyday interactions. Lithuanian companies also indicate strong organizational policies, though the slight gap at the individual level signals room for improvement. Austria and Finland show consistently lower agreement levels, particularly at individual levels, indicating critical areas where diversity strategies may need refinement and closer alignment with employee perceptions.

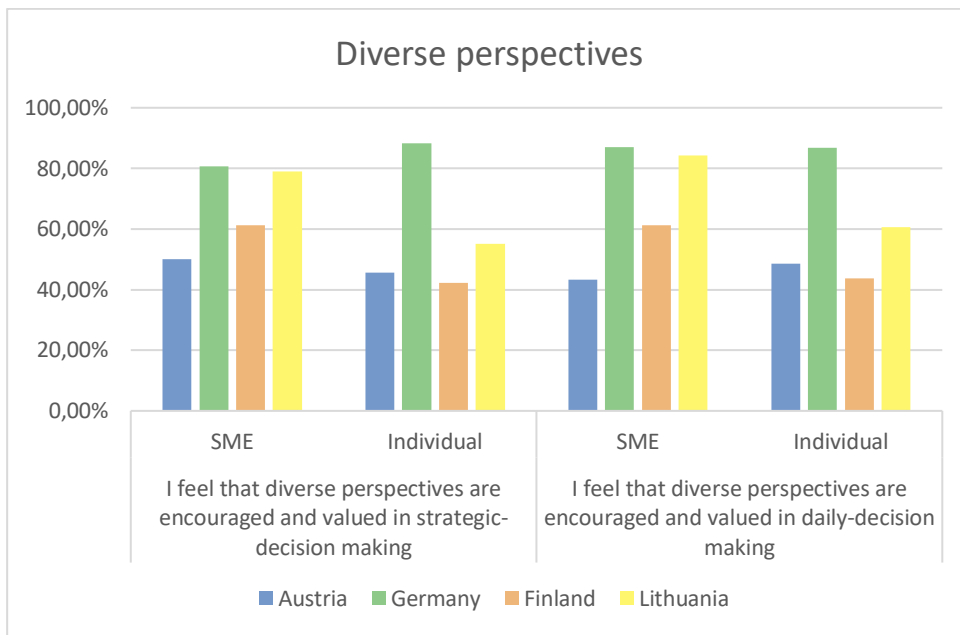


Figure 115. Diverse perspectives (SME and Individual)

The comparison between SME and Individual surveys highlight some possible discussion points. Indeed, differences between SME representatives' and individual respondents' views on DEI as part of their organizational identity suggest gaps in communication or alignment. In Austria and particularly Germany, individuals perceive DEI as more integral to their companies' identity compared to SMEs' views, implying that employees might recognize informal or implicit DEI practices not formally acknowledged by company management. In Lithuania, the opposite is observed, raising questions about possible overestimations by SMEs regarding their DEI integration or insufficient awareness at the employee level. Interestingly, Finland shows alignment between SMEs and individuals, which may indicate a shared organisational culture or more transparent DEI communication strategies. Moreover, despite limited formal appointments of DEI-specific roles in SMEs, individuals commonly acknowledge that DEI responsibilities are managed, underscoring the significance of explicit recognition and communication of such roles. Finally, varied levels of maturity and differing perceptions about the inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making reveal that while countries like Germany have achieved strong alignment between DEI policies and practices, others face critical challenges in effectively translating DEI strategies into employees' daily experiences. Thus, these findings underline the importance of not only establishing DEI frameworks but also ensuring their visibility, explicit communication, and meaningful integration into organisational culture and operations.

### 3.3 Practices

This subchapter presents a comparative analysis of SME representatives' and individual respondents' perspectives on DEI practices within companies of sample countries. The following graphs provide insights into how employees are involved in decision-making processes, what DEI management practices are implemented, and how diversity is managed in daily organizational life.

In previous section statement about diversity appreciation in strategic and daily-decision making was analysed. This section provides a deeper understanding whether companies truly involve employees and welcomes their perspective in decision-making process. Figure 116 indicates, that across most sample countries, a larger proportion of SME representatives report involving employees occasionally rather than frequently. For instance, in Germany, 84% of SMEs report occasional involvement, while only 13% report frequent involvement. Individual respondents, particularly in Finland (72%) and Austria (56%), tend to indicate more frequent involvement than SMEs report. Interestingly, the percentage of respondents stating “no involvement” is higher among individuals than SME representatives in Austria (33% vs. 17%), suggesting a potential misalignment between perceived and actual employee participation.

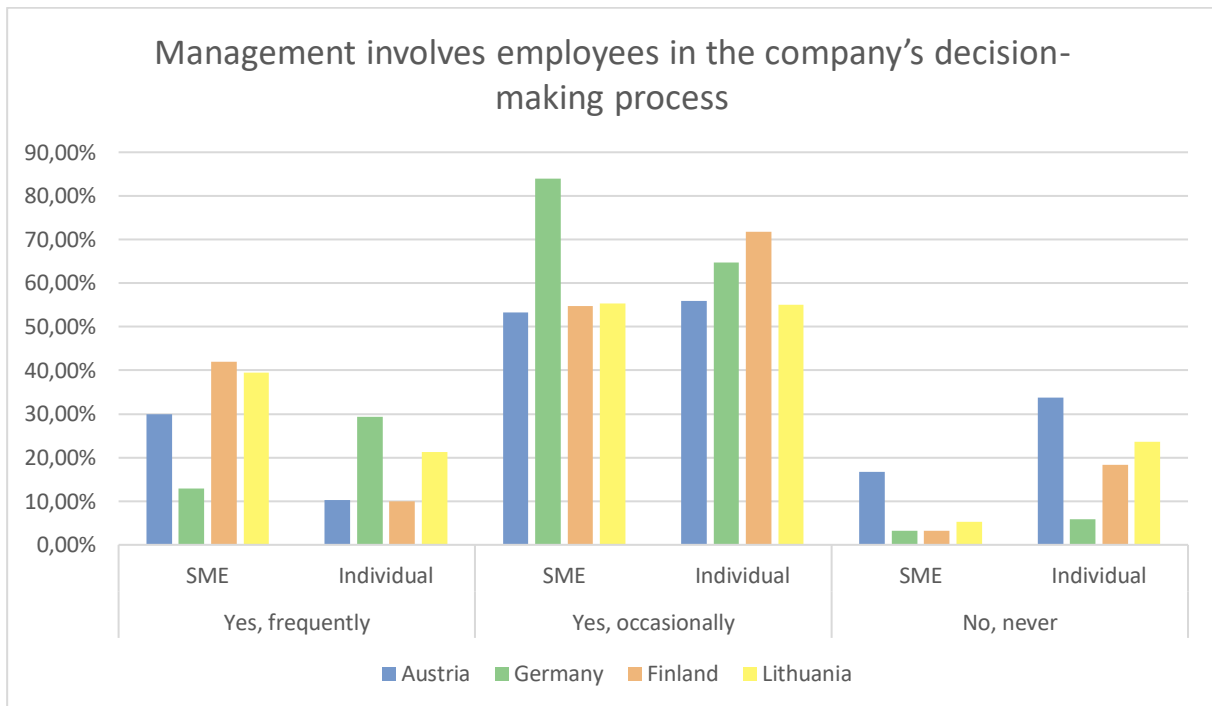


Figure 116. Employee involvement in decision-making (SME and Individual)

Couple of important and often mentioned good DEI management practices involve building a culture of inclusion (Figure 117). For that reason, safe space and difference appreciation are significant. Across countries, most SME representatives believe that management provides a safe space for sharing opinions, especially in Germany (92%) and Lithuania (91%). However, individual perceptions are more modest (around 50-70% across countries), again suggesting a gap between managerial views and employee experience. When it comes to practicing differences openly, responses are more aligned between SMEs and individuals. Lithuania stands out with consistently high agreement across both statements and respondent groups, whereas Germany shows a notable drop between SME and individual perspectives, particularly regarding openness to practice differences (SMEs 90%, Individuals 60%).

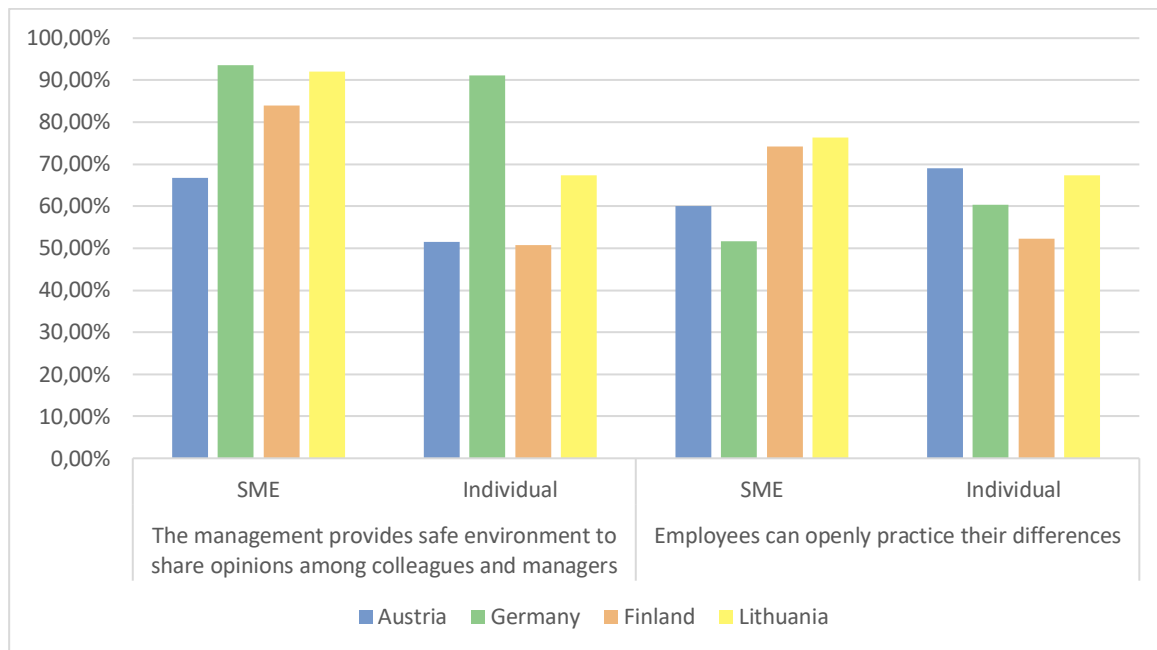


Figure 117. Practices of creating safe space and practicing differences (SME and Individual)

Figure 118 illustrates the presence of DEI-related structures and practices within organizations. Overall, the most commonly acknowledged practice among SMEs is employee familiarization with how to report discrimination or harassment. Austria (75%) and Germany (70%) report the highest values for this indicator at the SME level. However, individuals across all countries report lower levels of awareness than SMEs, hinting at a possible communication gap. The existence of mentorship programs and monitoring processes is reported less frequently by both groups, with Lithuania showing relatively higher implementation levels in both categories. In contrast, Austria and Germany show the lowest levels of mentorship programs, particularly from the SME perspective (below 10%). Notably, Lithuanian respondents from both SMEs and individual groups indicate a relatively uniform understanding of DEI management practices across all categories. This alignment might be attributed to formal regulatory requirements in Lithuania, where employees must be introduced to specific workplace policies and legal documents when starting a new position. These mandatory onboarding practices may contribute to greater awareness and perceived consistency in DEI structures among Lithuanian respondents.

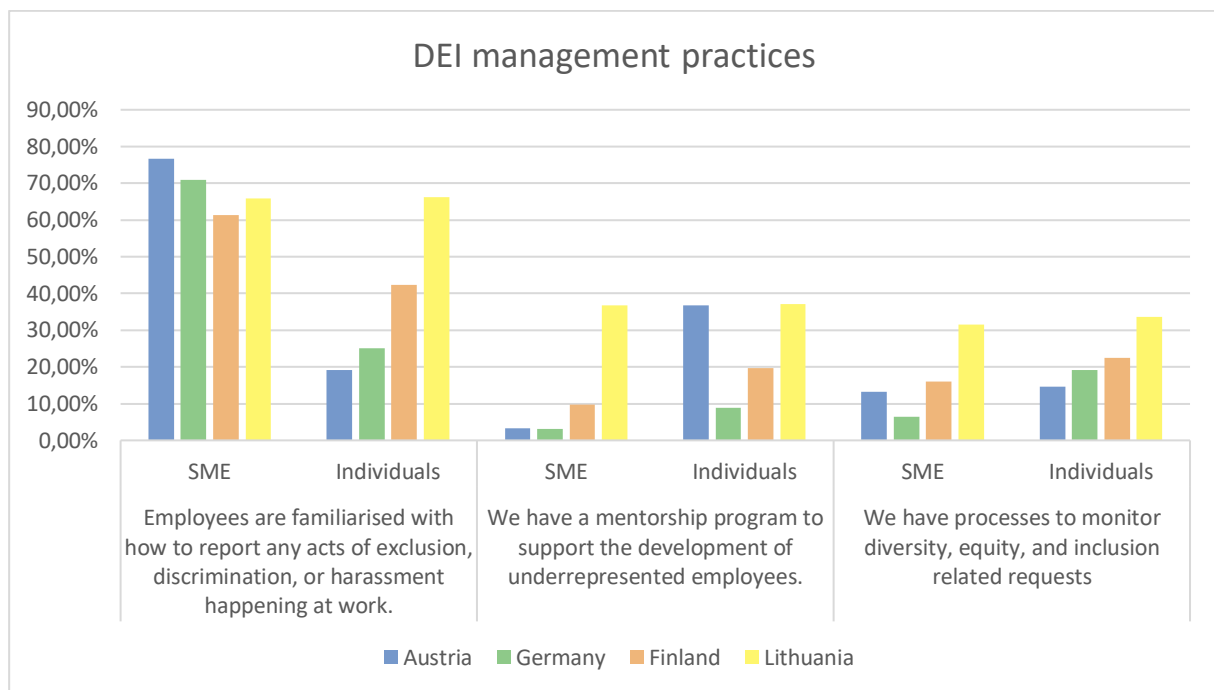


Figure 118. DEI management practices (SME and Individual)

The comparative analysis highlights several discrepancies between SME representatives and individual employees regarding the implementation and perception of DEI practices. SMEs often report higher levels of DEI-related engagement and structures than their employees recognise, particularly in areas such as decision-making involvement and formal processes for addressing discrimination. This suggests that while many SMEs may have DEI mechanisms in place, they may not be sufficiently visible or communicated to employees. Lithuania consistently demonstrates stronger alignment between SME and individual responses, indicating potentially more transparent or embedded DEI practices. Conversely, Austria and Germany show more pronounced gaps, suggesting a need to enhance internal communication and employee engagement in DEI processes. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of not only implementing DEI policies but also ensuring their clarity, accessibility, and effectiveness from the perspective of all organizational members.

### 3.4 Inclusion/diversity

This section compares responses from SME representatives and individual respondents on how different dimensions of diversity are perceived to be represented among employees and managers in companies. The analysis is based on reported recognition of ten diversity dimensions: gender, LGBTQIA identity, age, language, caregiver status, education, religion, disability, student status, and ethnicity.

As shown in Figure 119, most respondents agree that age, education, gender, and language are the most visible diversity dimensions in their workplaces. In Germany and Lithuania in particular, SME representatives report extremely high levels of diversity in these areas (often exceeding 90%). In contrast, representation in dimensions such as disability, LGBTQIA identity, and religion is

reported far less frequently across all countries and both respondent groups. Interestingly, Lithuania and Germany report consistently higher levels of perceived diversity across most dimensions than Austria and Finland. In Lithuania, both SMEs and individuals report strong representation in nearly all categories, suggesting a broader recognition or possibly greater actual diversity. Austria and Finland tend to show more modest recognition of diversity, with greater variation between SME and individual perspectives.

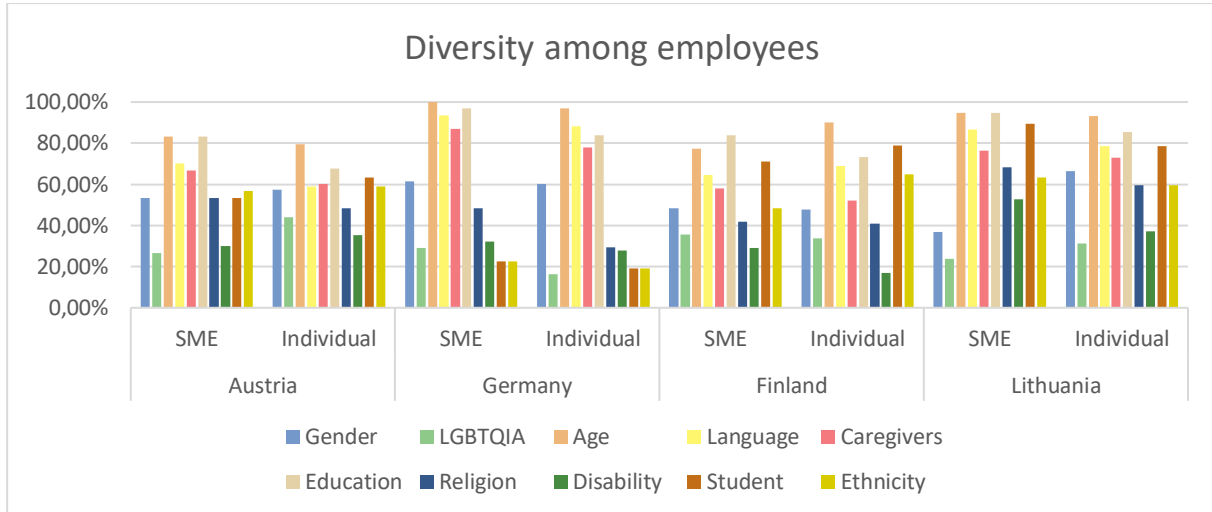


Figure 119. Diversity among employees (SME and Individual)

Figure 120 reveals a noticeably different picture regarding diversity in managerial positions. Across all countries and diversity categories, reported diversity among managers is significantly lower than among employees. While age and education remain the most visible characteristics, dimensions such as LGBTQIA identity, religion, disability, and ethnicity appear to be particularly underrepresented in leadership roles. The data show some divergence between SMEs and individual respondents. In Austria, individual respondents tend to report more diversity among managers than SME representatives do, suggesting that non-managerial staff may observe greater diversity or be more attuned to inclusive practices than those in managerial positions. This contrasts with Germany, where SME representatives report higher diversity levels than individuals, possibly reflecting optimism bias or limited visibility of diversity in leadership from employees' perspectives.

In contrast, SMEs in Finland appear to have a slightly more positive outlook on managerial diversity, particularly in traditional or visible categories (gender, age, education), whereas individuals perceive more diversity in the less-visible dimensions (e.g., disability, ethnicity). However, the differences are not drastic, suggesting relatively aligned perceptions overall. In Lithuania, non-managerial employees are significantly more likely than SME representatives to perceive diversity among managers. This might indicate either greater awareness of day-to-day interactions with diverse leaders or that managerial self-perception underestimates the presence of diversity.



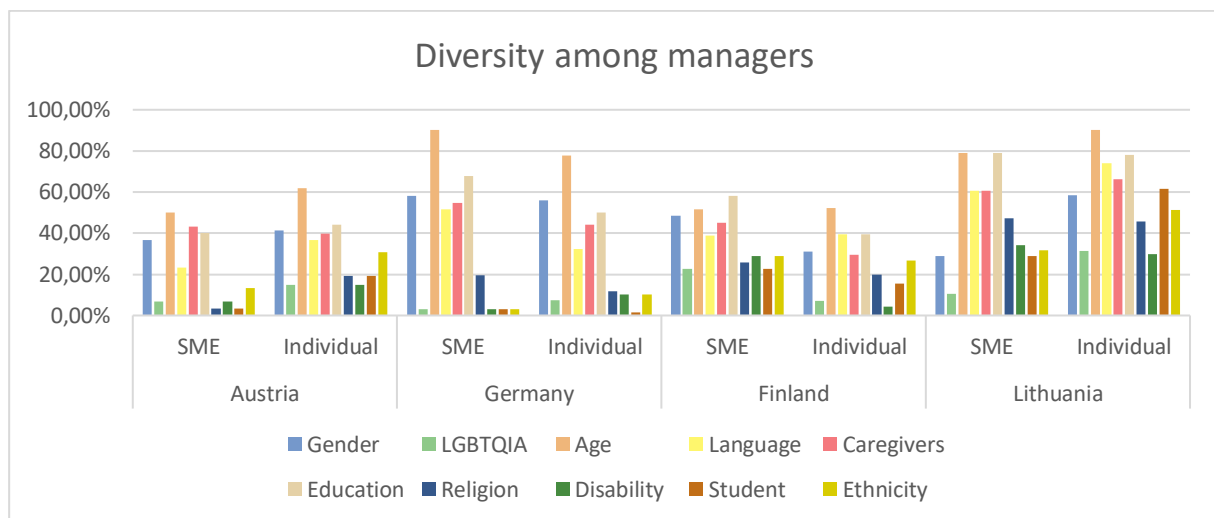


Figure 120. Diversity among managers (SME and Individual)

The “don’t know” responses shown in Figure 121 are particularly revealing, offering insight into employees’ and managers’ awareness of diversity within their organizations. Across all countries and both respondent groups, a substantial proportion of individuals and SME representatives indicated uncertainty about whether specific diversity dimensions are represented among employees and managers. In Germany, Finland, and Lithuania SME respondents selected “don’t know” when asked about the presence of diversity in categories such as LGBTQIA identity and religion. Among individual respondents, the rates are often even higher, suggesting that non-managerial employees may feel less informed or less confident in identifying whether certain diversity characteristics are present in their companies. Austrian respondents felt more confident when recognising diversity dimensions both among SME and individual respondents, going slightly above 20% of “don’t know” option for LGBTQIA and religion dimensions.

A noteworthy case is Lithuania. While both SME and individual respondents in Lithuania previously reported high levels of diversity across most categories, the “don’t know” responses paint a more complex picture. Lithuanian individual respondents express some of the highest uncertainty across all countries, especially regarding LGBTQIA identity (about 40–50% for employees, even higher for management), religion, and disability. This suggests that while diversity may be present, its visibility and communication within companies are not equally distributed across roles. Employees may not feel empowered or informed enough to recognise diversity, more in less visible or more sensitive categories.

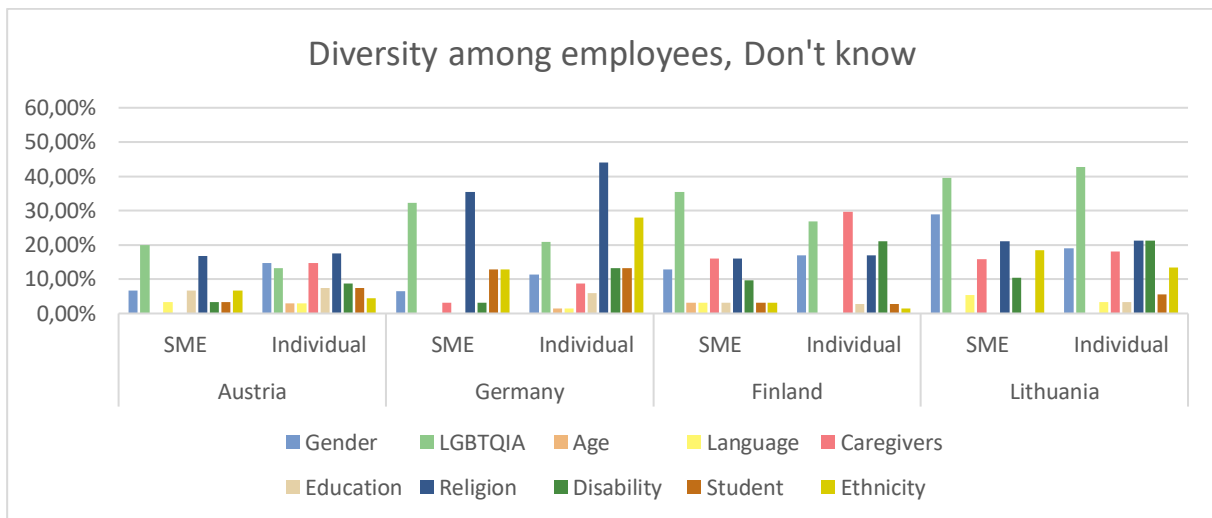


Figure 121. Diversity among employees, Don't know (SME and Individual)

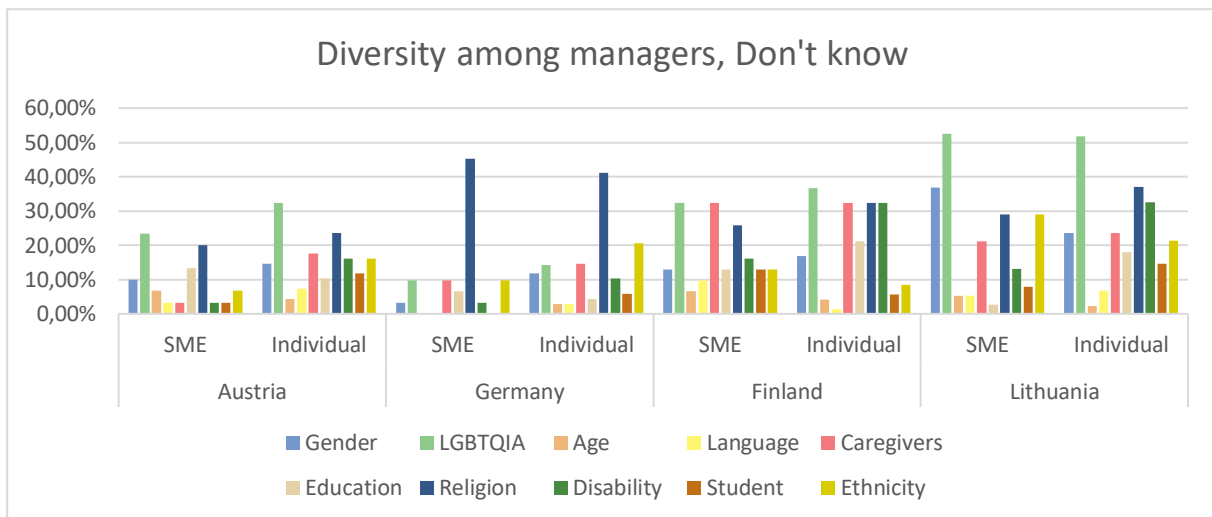


Figure 122. Diversity among managers, Don't know (SME and Individual)

In stipulation, this contrast of high reported diversity alongside high uncertainty may be explained by several factors, including limited opportunities for open dialogue, cultural norms that discourage discussion of personal characteristics, or unclear communication of diversity-related policies. Furthermore, in contexts like Lithuania, where onboarding procedures are often formal and standardised, employees may be familiar with institutional documents but still lack day-to-day exposure or understanding of how diversity manifests in practice, especially in leadership positions. These findings raise important questions about transparency and awareness. The high level of uncertainty, particularly in relation to protected or less visible identity dimensions, suggests that DEI efforts may not be sufficiently communicated, measured, or openly discussed. This underlines the need for better internal communication, employee engagement, and inclusive leadership practices to ensure that all organizational members, regardless of position, are aware of the company's diversity landscape and feel that diversity is recognized and valued in practice not just on paper.

To summarise, the analysis confirms that while some aspects of diversity (such as age and education) are widely recognised, others, specifically those involving protected or less visible characteristics, are either underrepresented or unknown. This discrepancy is even more pronounced at the managerial level, where reported diversity is significantly lower across nearly all categories. The high incidence of “don’t know” responses, especially among managers, signals a lack of comprehensive diversity tracking and possibly a discomfort or lack of confidence in addressing certain identity dimensions. These findings emphasise the importance of building internal awareness, promoting open dialogue, and creating mechanisms that allow diversity to be better understood, respected, and integrated at all organizational levels.



# 4 Managing Diversity in Smaller European Businesses: Insights from DEI4SME Hackathons

Mirella Fiammengo, WKSTMK Room 466, Austria

## 4.1 Reflections from Hackathon I (Finland & Online) on DEI in SMEs in Europe (student & company perspectives)

One of the most striking insights from Hackathon 1 was the disconnect between the political framing of DEI and its practical relevance for businesses—especially SMEs. DEI is often poorly defined and shaped more by personal attitudes than by strategic intent.

Although the EU promotes DEI through regulation, a clear gap remains between policy and business practice. Bridging this divide requires not only cultural change but also concrete, accessible approaches that demonstrate the value of DEI in everyday operations.

Notably, SMEs that engage with DEI meaningfully often do so quietly, while others hesitate—unsure of where to start or afraid of doing it “wrong.” Another key observation was the uneven perception of DEI topics: while age inclusion or care responsibilities are often welcomed, subjects like LGBTQ+ inclusion tend to provoke resistance, sometimes perceived as “forced” or ideological.

These differences are not only thematic but also sector-specific. In Austria, a major blind spot exists in labor-intensive industries such as hospitality, retail, transport, and care—sectors employing many marginalized groups, often under precarious or structurally disadvantaged conditions, yet receiving the least DEI attention. In Finland, while having openness for diversity, inclusion to work environment and willingness to talk openly about DEI-related actions in business context remains limited to a few managers and companies.

The hackathon clearly demonstrated the power of cross-sector collaboration. Because DEI is not just an economic concern but a deeply societal one, it cannot be meaningfully addressed in isolation. Bringing together diverse perspectives—across industries, roles, and backgrounds—proved essential for building understanding, generating ideas, and identifying realistic entry points for action.

Because DEI is a societal issue that demands shared solutions, events like this play a vital role in turning principles into practice and translating abstract DEI goals into tangible, shared solutions.

It was amazing to be part of the hackathon and to see the enthusiasm and joy that many of the student participants showed during the event.

More reflections and stories from the Hackathon I (Finland & Online) are available online: <https://dei4sme.eu/dei4sme-hackathon-finland/>

## 4.2 Reflections from Hackathon II (Lithuania & Online) on DEI in SMEs in Europe (student & company perspectives)

The hackathon II had very well managed in-person and online session with great attendance from various stakeholders- students, scholars, educators, university top management team, high level government officials, business associations, MNE and SME managers or HR, people from the marginalised groups. A lot of inspiring speeches and presenters (e.g. from person with disability, HR manager and others), panel discussion, which allowed to see different perspectives DEI in SME. Smooth cooperation between Lithuania and Germany organising team members allowed to achieve a flawlessly run hackathon that delivered tangible solutions, inspired participants, and strengthened cross-border academic and business ties.

In planning the event, the organising teams from Lithuania and Germany adopted an intentionally personal, empathy-led approach to collaboration. Rather than exchanging only formal agendas and compliance checklists, coordinators shared their own and other stakeholders' motivations – ranging individual experience and motivation, to strengthening local SME ecosystems or improving student employability. This perspective-taking approached, operationalised in the form of written interviews and stories helped to maintain a shared sense of purpose. By grounding cross-border insights in individual stories and mutual understanding, the organisers modelled the inclusive mindset they hoped participants would practise during the hackathon itself.

Reflecting on students, companies and other stakeholders' perspectives, the DEI4SME Hackathon highlighted significant variations in how diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) are addressed within Germany's and Lithuania's small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Four principal observations emerged.

### I. Reflective Note on SMEs Experience at the DEI4SME Hackathon

#### 1. Resource constraints limit systematic DEI activity in SMEs.

SMEs consistently prioritise immediate operational demands - production, client delivery, cash-flow management – thus DEI initiatives perceived as non-essential. Structured diagnostics, staff training or inclusive recruitment tools are often postponed because they compete with inventory costs, energy prices or invoices. Future support for SMEs will need to be lean, easily deployable and able to demonstrate short-term business benefits such as improved retention, market credibility or innovation capacity.

#### 2. Inclusion issues are addressed informally and without DEI terminology

In practice, many SMEs already manage age-diverse teams, integrate Ukrainian refugees, employ people with various disabilities and accommodate returning parents. These cases are handled individually, without reference to a DEI framework. The absence of a shared vocabulary prevents organisations from consolidating lessons or sharing solutions. Providing common

language and simple measurement tools could convert isolated interventions into systematic organisational learning.

### 3. Diffuse responsibility weakens accountability

Hackathon II revealed that often there are no clear ownership of DEI: references ranged from chief executives to office administrators. Such diffusion, typical of flat SME structures, hinders consistent action and evaluation. A light-touch governance model - assigning one DEI contact with scheduled reporting to senior leadership was viewed a potential option. Embedding this role in operational decision points (procurement, recruitment, product design) rather than in a separate CSR function would strengthen accountability.

### 4. Interdisciplinary scope complicates stakeholder engagement

Because DEI spans legal, psychological, operational, marketing and ethical considerations, stakeholders find it broad and, at times, peripheral to core tasks. Communication that frames DEI as risk management, innovation stimulus or client-base expansion could gain attention more readily. Translating interdisciplinary concepts into discipline-specific value, for example, illustrating how inclusive design attracts new users or how team diversity reduces succession risk, could facilitate adoption.

### Lessons learned and suggested steps:

- Develop and pilot a concise “DEI-Lite” toolkit (self-audit checklist, short staff briefing, starter metrics) tailored to SME capacity.
- Encourage each participating SME to appoint a designated DEI contact and integrate two to three inclusion indicators into existing review cycles.
- Establish a peer-learning circle through regional business networks to exchange low-cost inclusion practices.
- Produce function-specific briefs that express DEI benefits in finance, engineering, HR and other operational languages.

Reflecting on the DEI management in SMEs we noticed, that when DEI initiatives are pragmatic, owner-endorsed and framed as standard business improvement, SMEs are more likely to incorporate them into everyday practice, contributing to resilient and competitive growth across the sector.

## II. Reflective Note on Student and Educator Experience at the DEI4SME Hackathon

### 1. Student Perspective

Participation levels confirmed that interdisciplinary events, while intellectually rich, do not automatically attract students. Many potential participants struggled to see how a hackathon on

DEI and small-business management would advance their immediate academic or career goals. Two observations stand out:

- **Extrinsic rewards unlock engagement.** Announcing a tangible financial prize for the winning team tipped the balance for undecided students. Once enrolled, they devoted significant after-hours effort, suggesting that the prize functioned less as payment for attendance and more as a signal that the organisers valued the work at a professional level.
- **Clarity of benefit sustains motivation.** Students who understood in advance that hackathon outputs could be cited in coursework, CVs or internship interviews showed higher persistence during intensive design sprints. Conversely, those who viewed the event as peripheral to their degree requirements drifted to peripheral roles.

Many students noticed an unexpected intrinsic gain - insight into real SME challenges and the satisfaction of proposing solutions with an immediate path to implementation. So extrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives were essential for assembling a diverse, multidisciplinary cohort.

## 2. Educator Perspective

Faculty involvement hinged on two practical factors: institutional recognition and workload balance.

- **Alignment with attestation requirements.** Lecturers are more motivated for supervising extracurricular learning when activities meet defined attestation criteria. Clear documentation of learning outcomes, assessment rubrics and student hours would allow departments to treat hackathon supervision as valid teaching effort. Without that alignment, several staff indicated they would have been unable to release students or attend as mentors.
- **Professional reward and peer visibility.** Educators welcomed modest benefits - certificates, public acknowledgment - because these elements translate into promotion evidence. The hackathon thus became a low-risk opportunity to demonstrate innovative pedagogy.

Notably, faculty echoed the students' pragmatism: they praised the event's concise format, which haven't interrupted study process and appreciated work- life balance, as well as the way organisers' handled logistics, all of which minimised preparation overhead.

## 3. Lessons learned

1. **Make the value proposition explicit.** Both groups engage more readily when the organisers can articulate how participation advances grades, career prospects or attestation points.
2. **Balance interdisciplinary breadth with concrete deliverables.** The complexity of DEI can deter novices; anchoring tasks in specific SME scenarios kept the scope manageable and evidence-based.

3. **Use modest financial incentives strategically.** A prize need not offset every hour spent, but it underscores seriousness and adds a competitive spark that raises overall quality.
4. **Provide ready-to-use documentation.** Templates for learning outcomes, reflection logs and evaluation rubrics would help educators integrate the hackathon into formal curricula and justify their involvement.

In conclusion, the event demonstrated that a pragmatic incentive structure - financial awards for students, recognition credits for staff - creates the initial momentum required for interdisciplinary collaboration. Once engaged, participants discovered intrinsic value in addressing real-world DEI challenges within SMEs, suggesting that carefully designed extrinsic rewards can serve as an on-ramp to deeper, self-sustaining motivation.

More reflections and stories from the Hackathon II (Lithuania & Online) are available online: <https://dei4sme.eu/dei4sme-hackathon-lithuania/>



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