

Discourses of Ethics. 2024, 3–4(23–24): 101—110

ISSN 2311-570X (online)

permanent link:

http://theoreticalappliedethics.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/DE2024_3-4_23-24_101-110.pdf

GOOGLE USED A BLACK, DEAF WORKER TO TOUT ITS DIVERSITY

Mazina Alina, Solovyeva Yana

received 10.05.2024

accepted 09.06.2024

published (online) 28.02.2025, as corrected 27.03.2025

© Alina M. Mazina

BA student, Department of Management, National Research University

“Higher School of Economics”, St. Petersburg, Russia

Correspondence to: ammazina@edu.hse.ru

© Yana K. Solovyova

BA student, Department of Management, National Research University

“Higher School of Economics”, St. Petersburg, Russia

Correspondence to: iksolveva@edu.hse.ru

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Abstract. Companies being reluctant to incur significant costs by implementing corporate diversity policies, complying with the stakeholders’ current expectations, may merely imitate equity and inclusivity at the workplace. The paper considers the instance of ethical misconduct at an American multinational technology company, Google LLC, by investigating the case of discrimination against Jalon Hall, Google’s former ‘*black, deaf*’ employee. The case was studied within the scope of the Conceptual analysis, Descriptive ethics and Ethics management. From the perspective of established ethical concepts (Utilitarianism, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Stakeholder Theory) Jalon Hall’s mistreatment at Google was an indecent act. Accord-

ing to the behavioural analysis, inappropriate inclusivity management seems to be commonplace despite the employees' and societal discontent. Ethical issues concerning inclusivity faced by Google LLC and other multinational corporations could be tackled holistically at multiple organizational levels, ensuring stakeholders' mutual accountability for the diversity management.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Corporate Social Responsibility, Diversity Policies, Ethical Misconduct, Google LLC.

Introduction

Global changes urge businesses to adjust their working culture. Today, the culmination of the gradual shift towards an inclusive society is observed. *Inclusive society* is defined as ‘*a society that over-rides differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography, and ensures inclusion, equality of opportunity as well as capability of all members of the society to determine an agreed set of social institutions that govern social interaction*’ [6]. This transition led to the re-evaluation of the stakeholder values, making *inclusivity* one of the most significant ones. McKinsey & Company 2021 survey revealed that ‘*two out of three Americans believe their social values now shape their shopping choices*’ [13]. Thus, retention of stakeholders requires companies to accommodate public concerns by reviewing corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and amending corporate values.

Given the tendency, Google LLC, an American multinational technology company, claims to have made inclusivity and diversity one of its core corporate values. Melonie Parker, chief diversity officer at Google, states ‘*Building belonging for everyone means ensuring no one is left out and each person can thrive.*’ [2] The company manifests its attitude through creating a more ‘*inclusive workplace*’, ‘*co-creation in their products*’ and ‘*unlocking opportunity in society*’, reflecting the efforts on social media and in its Diversity Annual Report. Nonetheless, the picture-perfect image of the corporation has been tarnished by disturbing insights disclosed by Jalon Hall in a recent interview for WIRED [15]. A deaf woman of colour, Hall has been exploited for diversity promotion purposes while being discriminated against by managers and deprived of essential tools and an interpreter for her work as a video moderator. Notably, in the court, Google did not deny discriminatory accusations. Further investigation and media coverage may collapse Google’s corporate image and elicit public re-evaluation of businesses’ diversity management.

A complex moral dilemma whether companies should invest their capital into creating an authentically inclusive workplace, thereby benefiting society, or create a mere image of embracing diversity, utilizing minimum resources, in order to satisfy stakeholders at a cost of putting the reputation at stake is brought to light by the Google diversity case. The essay examines the issue through the lens of Conceptual analysis, Descriptive Ethics and Ethics Management.

Conceptual Analysis

Resolution of moral dilemmas, such as the one defined for Jalon Hall's case, should be resolved based upon established ethical standards. In this sense, theoretical concepts should be addressed and applied to business-related situations.

One of the fundamental theories widely applied to corporate governing is Utilitarianism. Developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, it considers potential consequences of one's action to define whether it is right or wrong. According to this approach, *'the morally right action is the one that produces the most good'* [7]. Therefore, from the utilitarian perspective, an ethical business is the one whose operations maximize society's utility and minimize suffering. This principle is universal and is applicable to all stakeholder groups. Thus, any ethical misconduct bringing one dissatisfaction is a violation of what is considered right by utilitarians. Given this notion and the previously stated diversity issue, businesses should be truly inclusive as it contributes to the overall well-being, while discriminatory actions breed public discontent, thereby decreasing society's utility.

Coined by Howard Bowen in 1953, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a contemporary framework commonly applied in business ethics. The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation defines CSR as *'a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders'* [17]. Corporate social responsibility practices are guided by the Triple Bottom Line framework, which examines a company's social, environment, and economic impact. The 'People' pillar promotes inclusion and diversity practices in the workplace by holding organisations accountable for the diversity management

in the recruitment process and encouraging establishment of a collaborative work environment, thereby implying condemnation of adverse practices, including discrimination against employee groups. Similarly to the utilitarian approach, the concept regards inequitable treatment at the workplace as an indecent act.

Developed at the end of the 20th century, the Stakeholder Theory is one of the most common normative concepts employed in modern ethics management. It is defined as a *'theory of organizational management and business ethics that accounts for multiple constituencies impacted by business entities like employees, suppliers, local communities, creditors, and others'* [16]. Stakeholder theory suggests that businesses have an ethical responsibility to consider the interests and accommodate the needs of all groups who are affected by their policies and operations. Returning to the previously stated dilemma, from this perspective, if a company does not truly comply with the diversity principles, it neglects the interests of the critical stakeholder groups — employees, customers and local communities — which is a contradiction to what is deemed ethically correct.

Given the discussed frameworks, the act of Jalon Hall's exploitation, discrimination and deprivation of essential working tools, is an ethical misconduct. Universally applied, any similar corporate practice is a wrongdoing. The morally correct action would be appropriate diversity management guided by sincere appreciation of the business responsibility towards the public and its well-being.

Descriptive Ethics

From the perspective of descriptive ethics, the dilemma could be explored through the lens of employees' and managers' attitude towards diversity at workplace and existing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices.

Multiple studies were conducted to determine how employees reason about diversity, equity and inclusion. Pew Research Center survey revealed that *'a majority of workers (56%) say focusing on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion at work is mainly a good thing'* [14], while a CNBC report underscored that nearly 80% of workers desire to work for a company with equity and in-

clusion values prioritized [3]. Based on that, generally, employees appreciate diversity policies at the workplace, complying with the globally observed social tendencies.

As regards the managerial perspective, as a rule, it is mainly guided by self-interest and business objectives — increasing profit and outperforming competitors. Such rationale frequently results in unethical and even illegal practices. Jalon Hall's case perfectly exemplifies this notion: the woman was exploited to underpin Google's corporate image, while being neglected and discriminated against by the management. Apparently, more often than not unethical attitudes stem from the top-management perspective. For instance, Diversity: IN's 2023 Disability Equality Index report, which benchmarks disability inclusion policies and programs, revealed that only 58% of 485 participating companies in corporate America enable managers to access funds that accommodate the needs of employees with disabilities. In this case, middle managers are involuntarily incapable of providing decent conditions for workers with special needs. Thus, negligence of social responsibility and inappropriate inclusivity management seems to be commonplace among corporate ruling authorities.

Ethics Management

As Jalon Hall's case revealed, the issue ought to be addressed at the micro- and macro-levels: the woman was discriminated against by managers, with the overarching corporate system of Google turning a blind eye to it. The holistic approach will ensure congruent execution of corporate social responsibility policies and fair treatment of employees within companies.

As regards the corporate level, there are few methods to warrant ethical behaviour for prepotent multinational entities, such as Google. With 88% of all internet searches [18], the company is the absolute leader on the global market. Given the market power, there is little to no chance of society abandoning Google's services despite ethical concerns. Therefore, to ensure obedience with social responsibility standards profound measures must be taken.

On the one hand, global companies could be penalized for abusing their power and building a responsible image on unethical grounds. Although more and more multinational corporations issue inclusivity and diversity reports for

stakeholders accountability, these documents are not legally standardized and considered by ruling authorities. In this sense, in contrast with legally binding issues, such as fraud, market power abuse or environmental laws violation, ethical misconduct is practically not controlled by governments or international laws. Based on this notion, corresponding legislation could be passed. Measures could include standardization of annual diversity reports and compulsory monitoring. The norms violation could entail fines or even imprisonment for those in charge. Such an approach would ensure business valid accountability to authorities, and disincentivize ethical misconduct by the threat of considerable legal sanctions.

On the other hand, corporations could be induced in proper diversity management by appreciation of its positive business effect. For instance, it is argued that inclusion leads to higher levels of retention. In addition to that, the corporate environment is alleged to be more creative and flexible [10], because talents are not overseen because of their gender, race or mishaps. Social organizations and governmental research centers could utilize these facts in the corresponding campaigns to underscore the significance of appropriate diversity management in today's corporate world. Acknowledgement of lucrativeness of ethical conduct may motivate shareholders to revert to more humane practices for financial benefits.

Simultaneously, the issue has to be tackled from the managerial perspective. First, emotional intelligence of corporate leaders should be developed through psychological workshops. It would enable consideration of multiple perspectives and other people's feelings regardless of their position, gender, race or health condition in the decision-making process, eliminating discriminatory orders. Second, a feedback system for employees could be established. Employees could report unethical treatment to a specified committee, which would investigate the case. In the event of a manager's failure, they could be penalized. Such an approach would ensure leader's accountability and disincentivize them from unethical and discriminatory treatment.

Ultimately, a holistic approach targeted at multiple organizational levels and combining the proposed solutions, holding the company and employees ac-

countable for their diversity management could be adopted to induce multinational corporations, such as Google into being socially responsible.

Conclusion

The moral dilemma behind Jalon Hall's case was explored through multiple perspectives. Based on the behavioural analysis, despite the ubiquitous urge for inclusivity showcased by consumers and the workforce, managers tend to neglect society's needs in virtue of companies' financial objectives and self-interest. Such an approach leads to immoral actions, similar to the one made by Google. From the conceptual perspective, it is unacceptable to simulate the appreciation of diversity and inclusion to attain a company's aspirations. Instead, it would be morally correct to build an authentically inclusive workplace, which would not only demonstrate a company's social responsibility but also comply with different stakeholder groups' needs, maximizing their welfare and satisfaction. Although it is challenging to induce a multinational company, such as Google, to accept a certain behavioural model, we believe that an attempt could be made. Presumably, a holistic approach targeted at multiple organizational levels, holding the company and employees accountable for their diversity management would be the most viable option. The execution process could be prompted by publicity and social organizations exerting pressure on corporations or authorities amending the corresponding governmental policies.

References

1. 2023 Disability Equality Index Report. (n.d.). Disability: IN. <https://disabilityin.org/2023-dei-report/> [Accessed 1st May 2024].
2. Building a Sense of Belonging at Google and Beyond. (n.d.). About.Google. <https://about.google/belonging/#:~:text=As%20of%202021%2C%20we> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
3. Caminiti S. (2021, April 30). Majority of employees want to work for a company that values diversity, equity and inclusion, survey shows. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/04/30/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-are-important-to-workers-survey-shows.html> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
4. Catalyst. (2004). The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity. https://www.catalyst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The_Bottom_Line_Connecting_Corporate_Performance_and_Gender_Diversity.pdf [Accessed 1st May 2024].
5. Chatterjee P. (2023, November 13). How Google’s search dominance has made life difficult for smaller search engines. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/how-google-search-dominance-made-life-difficult-smaller-search-engines/article67527860.ece> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
6. Desa. (2009). Vision for an inclusive society. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/compilation-brochure.pdf> [Accessed 2nd May 2024].
7. Driver J. (2014, September 22). The history of utilitarianism. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history/> [Accessed 2nd May 2024].
8. Gellerman S.W. (1986, July 1). Why “Good” Managers Make Bad Ethical Choices. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/1986/07/why-good-managers-make-bad-ethical-choices> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
9. Google. (2022). Google Sustainability. Google Sustainability. <https://sustainability.google/> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
10. Ivcevic Z., Menges J.I., & Miller A. (2020, March 20). How Common Is Unethical Behavior in U.S. Organizations? Harvard Business Review; Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/03/how-common-is-unethical-behavior-in-u-s-organizations> [Accessed 1st May 2024].
11. Leonard J.S., Levine D.I. (2006). The Effect of Diversity on Turnover: A Large Case Study. *ILR Review*, 59 (4), Pp. 547–572.

12. Macdonald C., & Marcoux A. (2018, March 4). Ethical Theory: Utilitarianism. The Concise Encyclopedia of Business Ethics. <https://conciaseencyclopedia.org/entries/ethical-theory-utilitarianism/#:~:text=In%20business%20contexts%2C%20utilitarianism%20implies> [Accessed 2nd May 2024].
13. McKinsey & Company. (2022). The rise of the inclusive consumer | McKinsey. [www.mckinsey.com. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-rise-of-the-inclusive-consumer](https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-rise-of-the-inclusive-consumer) [Accessed 30th April 2024].
14. Minkin R. (2023, May 17). Diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/05/17/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-the-workplace/> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
15. Paresh D. (2024, March 7). Google Used a Black, Deaf Worker to Tout Its Diversity. Now She's Suing for Discrimination. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/story/google-black-deaf-worker-diversity-suing-discrimination/> [Accessed 1st May 2024].
16. Tom L. (2018). Incorporating Social Activism. Ssrn.com. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3294317 [Accessed 1st May 2024].
17. UNIDO. (2023). What Is CSR? United Nations Industrial Development Organization; United Nations. <https://www.unido.org/our-focus/advancing-economic-competitiveness/competitive-trade-capacities-and-corporate-responsibility/corporate-social-responsibility-market-integration/what-csr> [Accessed 30th April 2024].
18. US versus Google – what's it all about? The University of Auckland. (n.d.). www.auckland.ac.nz. Retrieved May 2, 2024, from: <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2024/01/18/us-versus-google---what-s-it-all-about-.html> [Accessed 1st May 2024].