


Since when did meritocracy become the antithesis of DEI?

March 2025

meritocracy

noun [C or U]

UK  /,mer.ɪˈtɒk.rə.si/ US  /,mer.əˈtɑː.kre.si/

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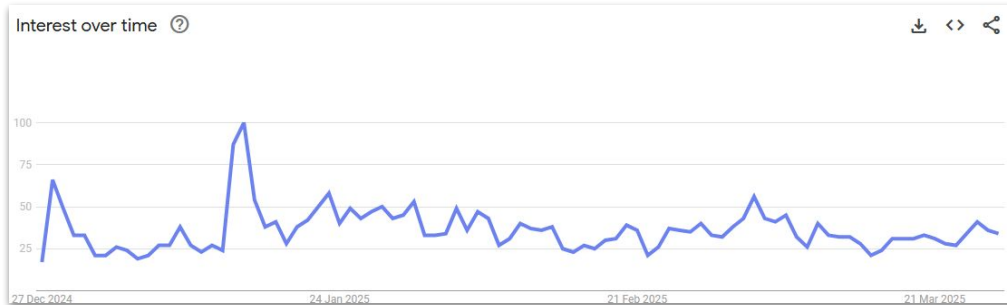
a social system, society, or organization in which people get success or power because of their abilities, not because of their money or social position:

• *The company is a meritocracy. Good work is rewarded with promotions.*



MERIT

What's The Memo?



Total mentions of meritocracy in Google search terms, December 2024 - March 2025.

This quarter, meritocracy has become a hot topic in conversations. DEI has been cast as the antithesis of meritocracy, accused of lowering standards, promoting tokenism, and prioritising identity over ability. Why?

In June 2024 Alexandr Wang, CEO of Scale AI, said his company had formalised an MEI (Merit, Excellence and Intelligence) hiring policy. Wang articulated that his company's success stems from hiring the most qualified individuals, focusing on individual capabilities without engaging in stereotyping or tokenism based on demographic categories. Fast forward to February 2025 and the FT reports that "Merit is the word of the moment", citing ExxonMobil, Boston Consulting Group and Accenture as just some of the organisations that are centring the notion of meritocracy.

This is just a snapshot of some of the headlines:

Leadership + Add to myFT

Can businesses ever run a true meritocracy?

Corporate leaders are ditching diversity for performance-based promotion. Critics say it is not that simple

UBS drops diversity targets from annual report, emphasises meritocracy

By Reuters

The myth of meritocracy: who really gets to succeed in the workplace?

We get it.

Here at The Unmistakables, we pride ourselves on our professional expertise. No one wants to feel that their achievements are attributed to anything other than their own hard work and accomplishments.

However, it would be remiss to not mention how the notion of meritocracy assumes that we all start on a level playing field, suggesting that talent and effort alone determine success. This assumption overlooks how our social status, surrounding environment and identity causes us to begin our climb to success from vastly different starting points.

Take the hard-working, diligent, quiet Year 8 student who attends a local grammar school; the only way she was able to gain a place was through her own hard work to pass 11+. That said, she was undoubtedly aided by the fact her parents had the means to provide private tuition on a weekly basis plus an intensive summer school programme to enable her to learn what was needed to pass the test - because her local state primary school did not cover any of the learning required to pass the test. Similarly, her friend gained a place without the need for a tutor but with the help of a well-educated parent who dedicated all his time to helping his son pass the 11+. Yes, it took brain power and effort, but their favourable condition played a significant role in their success.

Now, let's consider families where parents never had the chance to learn because they lacked the time, support, or resources. In these situations, success becomes much harder. While a few individuals, like [Dr. Katriona O'Sullivan](#)—who wrote *Poor* and grew up with parents struggling with addiction—manage to overcome the odds, most simply don't have the foundation they need to succeed.

In 2025, any organisation claiming to operate as a pure meritocracy ignores how social status has always shaped opportunities. If meritocracy truly existed, leadership teams would reflect the demographics of society, but they don't. Instead, meritocracy often places the burden on the individual, attributing success to skill and hard work while blaming failure on personal shortcomings. This view conveniently overlooks the structural, historical and social barriers that prevent talent from being recognised and rewarded fairly.

In a world that has been heavily influenced by systemic power imbalances, meritocracy, at least in its ideal definition form, remains out of reach. But that doesn't mean we can't strive to move closer to it. The solution isn't to ignore these barriers, but to actively dismantle them. That's what DEI is designed to do: acknowledge systemic inequalities and remove the obstacles that prevent people from competing on an equitable footing.

So, when companies declare themselves meritocracies in 2025, the real question to ask is:

meritocratic for whom?

What are large organisations saying about meritocracy?

Meritocracy has traditionally been linked to talent—determining who gets hired, developed, and promoted within a company. Some believe that opportunities are now being handed to those who don't truly deserve them, viewing hiring as a numbers game that prioritises characteristics over qualifications. In cases where organisations took a simplistic, tokenistic approach, this criticism may hold some truth. However, in most instances, efforts to address underrepresentation included setting hiring goals alongside clear role-based criteria.

But what about the criteria?

This is the most critical yet often overlooked part of hiring and promotion. The way success is defined—and who gets to define it—influence hiring and advancement decisions. If leadership teams lack diversity, it can lead standards to become skewed, limiting the opportunities of specific identities as we have seen women and people of colour in senior roles. Indeed, research on meritocracy suggests that it can sometimes mask systems that reinforce existing social inequalities. ([Van Dijk et al, 2020](#)).

In the US, DEI discussions often align with the priorities of fast-paced capitalism, emphasising profit over ethical considerations, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. This short-term focus can create workplace structures that are neither inclusive nor built for long-term success.

Ironically, in the pursuit of 'meritocracy,' organisations may actually be making it harder for individuals from diverse backgrounds to get hired or promoted.

What are the conversations you need to have right now?

Organisations must take a hard look at their talent strategies and scrutinise their data. It's essential to focus on objective hiring and promotion processes, actively managing and mitigating bias, and conducting regular audits of outcomes. This means breaking down the hiring process to understand who is making it through each round and who isn't.

Characteristics play a critical role here. For example, understanding why candidates with visible disabilities are dropping off at the interview stage could indicate a flaw in your process. Similarly, examining the impact of socio-economic factors on access and performance in recruitment can reveal exclusionary practices that may be happening without your awareness.

All of this should be grounded in a set of objective, robust criteria that are future-focused.

The business case for diverse teams is clear. If we continue to take a short-term approach, we risk creating homogeneous teams that think alike and are less connected to the diverse customers we serve.

How can you cut through the noise?

Here are three things we are speaking to our clients about right now:

'Outside in' thinking - as part of planning processes or leadership development, we bring bespoke insight into our clients' organisations to help them think differently and more inclusively. These sessions include a combination of strategic advisory and skills building, and are typically with senior leadership teams or those responsible for company direction.

Create the right measurement framework - many DEI strategies have been focussed on representation statistics and balances. While these are part of the equation, we have long argued for a more rounded approach. We're working with a number of clients on how they consider inclusion at a strategic business level, exploring what it means to apply inclusivity as a lever for growth.

Focus on psychological safety - as this has become increasingly measured across our organisations, we are working with leaders and teams to decipher existing data points and build plans of action that help to build psychological safety. This includes skills building through in-person and online leadership and team development programmes.

If you're interested in finding out more about how we can help you navigate the current climate then [contact us](#) for a complimentary 30 minute consultation.

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info@theunmistakables.com