


**INCLUSIVE DESIGN FOR TALENT SYSTEMS: PART 1**

# **ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL**

**Why a singular focus on unconscious-bias is driving diversity and inclusion off the road.**





**Behavioral  
inclusion  
without  
structural  
inclusion  
will not  
change the  
status quo.**

## Unconscious-bias training has been dominating diversity and inclusion efforts in almost all major corporations—and with good reason.

This scientifically grounded approach has improved self-awareness and helped many admit their biases without feeling judged. Its popularity is confirmed by the CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion pledge, in which more than 750 of the world's leading CEOs express their commitment to implementing and expanding unconscious-bias education.

But the evidence suggests that unconscious-bias training in and of itself has not done much to break down the barriers holding back traditionally underrepresented talent. Glass ceilings remain firmly in place, even in companies that have invested heavily in unconscious-bias training, and especially for people from racially and ethnically underrepresented groups.

Perhaps this should come as no surprise. Unconscious-bias is only one small piece of the puzzle. For organizations to ensure that their investments deliver results, they must take a more comprehensive approach to diversity and inclusion.

This starts with driving personal transformation in their leaders and employees by enabling individuals not only to recognize unconscious-bias but to counter and mitigate it as well. We call this *behavioral inclusion*.

In addition, organizations need to transform themselves at a systemic level, re-examining and reshaping their talent processes to ensure they are fair and equitable. We call this *structural inclusion*.

On the following pages, we examine these two types of inclusion in more detail to see how they relate to each other and what distinguishes one from the other.



## Unconscious-bias training: How it works and why it's popular.

The science of unconscious-bias shows that our brains have been conditioned by billions of stimuli to act in certain ways when we encounter people who are not like us. These stimuli, which include parental messages, media images, societal attitudes, and personal experiences, trigger a myriad of unconscious emotions and thoughts that can make us afraid, suspicious, and judgmental.

As a result, we may reject or misinterpret the way other people speak and act. In the work environment this can lead to individuals not hiring, not developing, and not promoting those who are different.

Unconscious-bias training is designed to raise awareness of these hidden forces and the barriers they create to diversity and inclusion. The approach is relatively judgment-free. Participants are told: "It's not your fault. Having these biases doesn't make you a racist, sexist, or homophobe; but having awareness of them can make you more welcoming of those who are not like you." Such framing has been liberating for the millions who have gone through unconscious-bias training in the past few years.

# What is behavioral inclusion?

Behavioral inclusion is about leading individuals on a journey of self-discovery, alerting them to the biases that hamper their decision-making, and equipping them to act on this new-found self-awareness by behaving in a more consciously inclusive way.

## ***Building awareness of unconscious-bias.***

Typical behavioral inclusion exercises draw on powerful neuroscience research to expose our difficult-to-deny biases in dimensions such as race, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, accent, etc. These exercises are highly effective at inducing “aha” moments in participants, enabling them to recognize the blind spots caused by unconscious-bias that have been distorting their attitudes, actions, and decisions concerning those who are different from them.

## ***Turning awareness into action.***

Many behavioral inclusion programs stop at this point in the process, but individuals can only truly benefit from their self-awareness journey if they work on building counter-bias capabilities as well. This means acquiring the skills, competencies, tools, and techniques that turn awareness into moment-to-moment actions that help people go from micro-rejections to micro-affirmations and from micro-inequities to micro-equities (see page 6 for definitions), and to make judgments based not on erroneous assumptions but on a deep understanding and appreciation of difference.

Such a shift in behaviors can be achieved by designing a learning journey that allows participants to practice counterintuitive and consciously inclusive ways of dealing with familiar work situations such as interviewing, mentoring, managing performance, and conflict resolution. These work experiences tend to be rife with culturally reinforced unconscious-biased responses and can lead to decisions and actions that prevent *all* talent from reaching their full potential.

## How little things become big things.

### **Micro-inequities.**

Micro-inequities are day-to-day exchanges that transmit a sense of subordination from one individual to others based on any number of social identities, including race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, nationality, religion, and disability.

These expressions exist in larger systems of micro-inequity, where some individuals, often unknowingly, repeatedly engage in micro-activities that undermine the success and well-being of those who are different from them.

### **Examples:**

- Men monopolizing speaking time and constantly interrupting their female colleagues.
- Making assumptions regarding qualifications or abilities distinct from work output.
- Using outdated language to refer to a racial or ethnic group.

### **Micro-affirmations.**

Micro-affirmations are small gestures of inclusion, caring, and listening that enable everyone to succeed through equal opportunity and treatment. They are grounded in an environment marked by generosity, credit-giving, support, and respect for all.

These expressions create conditions for greater overall equity, breaking down unconscious-bias and creating more successful working relationships.

### **Examples:**

- Acknowledging excellence demonstrated by colleagues.
- Providing direct reports equal access to development opportunities, and engaging in active listening.
- Affirming emotional reactions and validating the experiences of different individuals.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rowe, M. (2008). *Micro-affirmations and Micro-inequities*. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*.

### **Addressing conscious-bias and power dynamics.**

Unconscious-bias tends to be the focus of behavioral inclusion efforts. But it is by no means the only issue at play. Organizations that are serious about behavioral inclusion must also address conscious-bias, power structures, privilege dynamics, and diversity of social networks.

Research conducted by the internationally recognized Dr. Sukhvinder S. Obhi, professor of psychology, neuroscience, and behavior at McMaster University in Canada, has shown how power interferes with inclusive behaviors and produces negative effects on leaders' brains.<sup>2</sup> These include increased stereotyping, reduced empathy, and impaired risk perception. In Dr. Obhi's words: "It is imperative that leaders fully understand how power can affect them if they don't use it mindfully. Once such understanding is gained, strategies for the more effective use of power—to create positive change—can be leveraged to move the organization toward better outcomes."

Let's now look at the other essential element for transformation: structural inclusion.

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<sup>2</sup> Obhi, S. (2018). *Beyond Unconscious Bias: Power Is the Linchpin for Building Successful Diverse Organizations*.



# What is structural inclusion?

Behavioral inclusion helps individuals to internalize inclusive behaviors. But what if the organizational structures they operate in are preventing them from acting in a truly inclusive way?

Many of the talent systems and processes supposedly designed to optimize human performance are in fact riddled with built-in biases. And while those biases may have been introduced unintentionally, that hasn't stopped them from undermining the progress of traditionally underrepresented talent at a deep and systemic level.

## **Systemic biases.**

How do we know this? Just look at the absurdly skewed demographics of the world's C-suites and boards.<sup>3</sup> Consider the fact that only 7% of Fortune 500 CEOs are currently women (7%, astonishingly, represents an all-time high) and only four are currently black.<sup>4</sup> Whenever Korn Ferry conducts disparity assessments of performance ratings or promotability, our findings are very consistent.

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<sup>3</sup> Korn Ferry. (2017). *Women CEOs Speak. Strategies for the next generation of female executives and how companies can pave the road.*

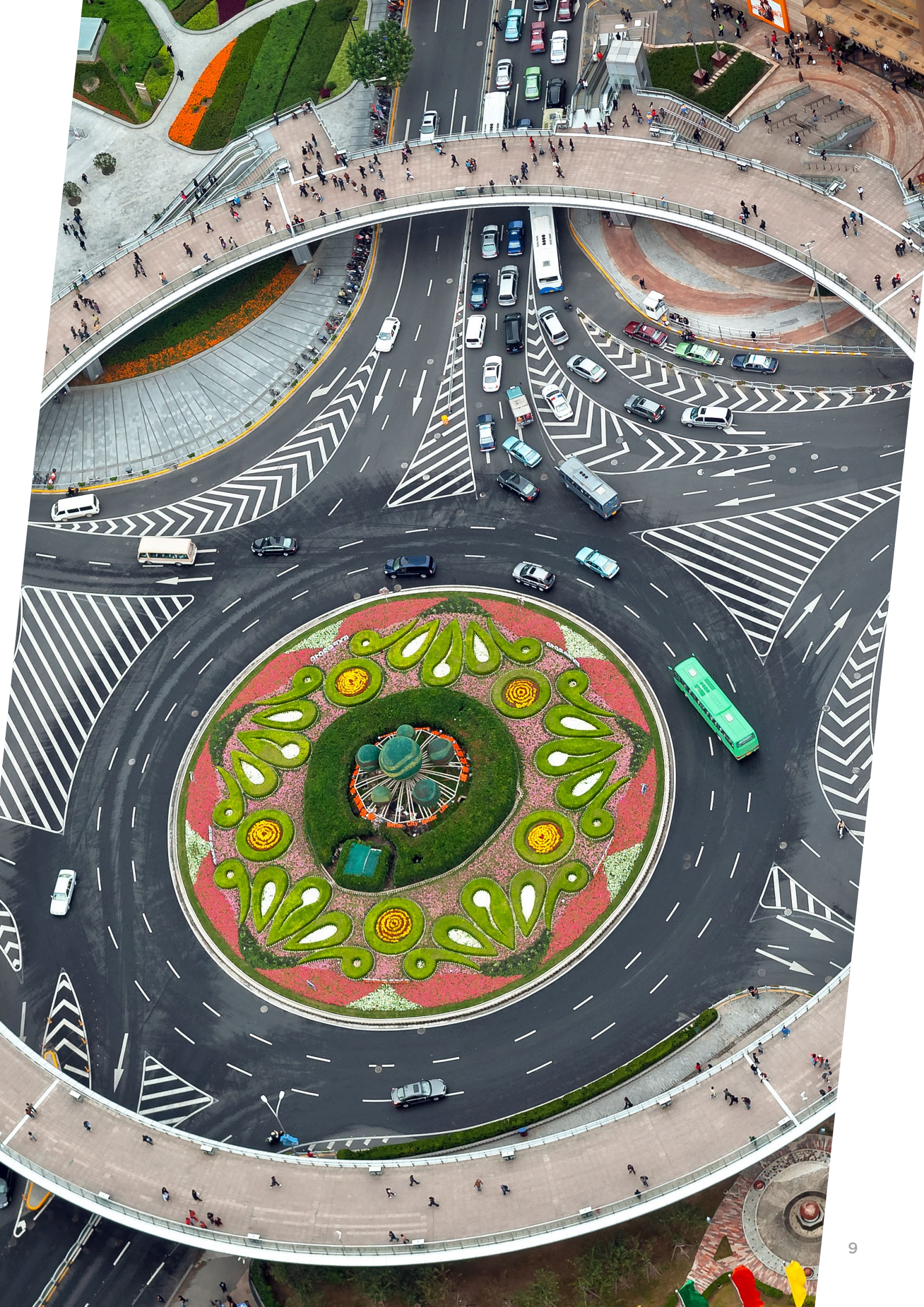
<sup>4</sup> Korn Ferry. (2019). *The Black P&L Leader: Insights and lessons from senior black P&L leaders in corporate America.*

No matter what industry we conduct them in, the pattern is almost always the same: everything else being equal, women are promoted at a lower rate and paid less than men, and members of racially and ethnically underrepresented groups are promoted less, paid less, and given lower performance ratings than white people.

## **Structural inclusion makes behavioral inclusion stick.**

The presence of these exclusionary forces means that it is not enough to simply equip people with counter-bias capabilities. Without also addressing the biases of the systems that individuals operate in, you are, so to speak, jogging in a smog-choked city. Addressing systemic biases is what structural inclusion is designed to do. **Structural inclusion is about putting equitable and transparent systems and processes in place that prevent unconscious-bias from occurring—and correct it when it does.** To put it simply, structural inclusion is what makes behavioral inclusion stick.













According to the latest research, behavioral and structural inclusion are both critical to enhancing the collective intelligence, quality of decision-making, problem-solving and creativity of diverse teams working on complex tasks.<sup>5,6</sup>

While behavioral inclusion optimizes performance through social sensitivity and psychological safety, structural inclusion does it through a process that allows for equal contribution of all team members.

**We often use a traffic analogy to describe this. Behavioral inclusion is about everyone learning to be good drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians who abide by the rules and exercise good judgment as they encounter unexpected traffic situations.**

**Structural inclusion, meanwhile, is about ensuring that there is proper signage and that there are traffic stoplights, well-marked lanes, speed bumps, and so on to remind and channel people to do the right thing.**

Both are essential for a safe and efficient road system. Introduce one without the other, and the traffic system collapses.

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- 5** Woolley, A., Chabris, C., Pentland, A., Hashmi, N., & Malone, T. (2010). *Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups*. *Science*.
- 6** Page, S. (2017). *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy*.

# The three pillars of structural inclusion.

For structural inclusion to be effective, it must address three separate but interrelated issues: **equality, equity,** and **inclusive design.**

While behavioral inclusion focuses on the mindset and capabilities of individuals, structural inclusion requires an organization-wide approach leveraging the three pillars of equality, equity, and inclusive design.

The terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably, but although they are related, they are not in fact the same. Inclusive design is key to achieving both equality and equity. Here we explore what each pillar means and the roles they play in achieving structural inclusion.

**Equality is a value of ensuring fairness for everyone.** Equality represents a deeply held belief in meritocracy and a promise that no one is to be favored or treated unfairly because of who they are. Organizations can pursue this aspiration through their values and codes of ethics, and by instituting non-discriminatory policies and practices in hiring, assessment, promotion, and rewards.

**Equity, on the other hand, is about righting past wrongs.** It recognizes that not everyone has had equal opportunity to compete in and benefit from a system that is supposed to be available fairly and equally for all. People from certain backgrounds start off with unearned advantages or disadvantages that perpetuate inequities in access, rewards, opportunity, and support. Basically, we are not all on a level playing field.

To go back to our traffic analogy: Equality here is about all road users being largely governed by the same rules (stop at red traffic lights, indicate when turning, etc.) whether they're driving a car, truck, motorcycle, or bus.

The rules have been created to ensure efficiency and safety for all, and nobody wants to see the law favoring one person or group over another.



Equity, meanwhile, is about rectifying the reality that not everyone is able to take equal advantage of the traffic system. This will involve countering the disadvantages faced by certain types of road users by introducing measures such as special parking areas for cyclists, beeping crosswalk signs for people with impaired sight, special lanes for carpoolers, elevators in subway stations for those with mobility limitations, etc.

**Equality is impossible without equity.**

So if companies are serious about achieving fairness for all, they must first define what equality means for their talent management processes and then explore every aspect of their talent processes to identify potential inequities and their historical root causes. The inequities can then be eliminated or at least significantly reduced.

Organizations should then strive to achieve equality by adopting an **inclusive design** approach when designing their talent management systems to minimize the probability of inequities reoccurring. In the second paper in this series, *The “Reference Man” rules: Why one size fits all leaves most of us out*, we explore the inclusive design approach in detail and introduce our core principles of inclusive design for talent systems.



# Conclusion

Unconscious-bias training is a powerful tool for raising employees' awareness of the barriers they may inadvertently be creating to diversity and inclusion. When it comes to actively changing behaviors, however, and creating organizations that are more diverse, inclusive, and equitable, the effectiveness of unconscious-bias training as a stand-alone intervention is severely limited.

Real transformation requires a broader set of behavioral inclusion interventions, which should include helping individuals develop counter-bias capabilities as well as addressing other barriers to inclusion.

Structural inclusion is also needed to ensure that behavioral inclusion sticks—and that means focused effort to address legacy inequities and, through inclusive design, put systems and processes in place that prevent unconscious-bias from happening in the first place.

**In short, if you want to build a truly diverse and inclusive organization, you need to transform the organization as a whole—both the people through behavioral inclusion and the processes through structural inclusion.**

For more on structural inclusion and how to apply inclusive design to talent systems, read our second paper in this series:

*The “Reference Man” rules: Why one size fits all leaves most of us out.*

Visit <https://infokf.kornferry.com/the-reference-man-rules.html> to download.



## Contributors

Andrés Tapia

**Senior client partner, global diversity and inclusion strategist**

Korn Ferry

t: +1 773 372 3782

e: andres.tapia@kornferry.com

Alina Polonskaia

**Senior client partner, global diversity and inclusion practice leader**

Korn Ferry

t: +1 416 365 4001

e: alina.polonskaia@kornferry.com

Fayruz Kirtzman

**Senior principal**

Korn Ferry

t: +1 212 984 9473

e: fayruz.kirtzman@kornferry.com

Gustavo Gisbert

**Senior principal**

Korn Ferry

t: +1 312 526 0520

e: gustavo.gisbert@kornferry.com





## Get in touch

### APAC

#### ***Alicia Yi***

t: +656 231 6220

e: [alicia.yi@kornferry.com](mailto:alicia.yi@kornferry.com)

### LATAM

#### ***Cecilia Pinzón***

t: +571 313 1400

e: [cecilia.pinzon@kornferry.com](mailto:cecilia.pinzon@kornferry.com)

### EMEA

#### ***Margot Zielinska***

t: +44 207 024 9162

e: [margot.zielinska@kornferry.com](mailto:margot.zielinska@kornferry.com)

### North America

#### ***Alina Polonskaia***

t: +1 416 365 4001

e: [alina.polonskaia@kornferry.com](mailto:alina.polonskaia@kornferry.com)

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