

Managing Diversity

Diversity in the true sense means that each individual is unique. It encompasses acceptance and respect along with recognizing individual differences in the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual. With the ever-changing business environment, business owners are adapting diversity policies and strategies that appeal to their employees, vendors, clients and suppliers.

Diversity in the workplace brings with it a host of potential benefits as well as potential conflicts for business owners to manage. Diverse workplaces are composed of employees with varying characteristics including, but not limited to, religious and political beliefs, gender, ethnicity, education, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation and geographic location.”

“It is an on-going process that unleashes the various talents and capabilities of a diverse population within an organization, community or society, so as to create a wholesome, inclusive environment, that is safe for differences, celebrates diversity, enables people to reject rejection, and maximizes the full potential of all, in a cultural context where everyone benefits.

In today’s era, all organizations are working towards the management of diversity at respective workplaces to enforce a sense of belonging among employees so as to achieve the objectives set by them.

Incorporating diversity practices in a workplace can include recruiting from diverse talent sources to make the company open to employees from various backgrounds. Diversity may also be infused into advertising practices to ensure products and services are targeted to all consumers who represent the target market, whether through print, online, television or radio.

Today, as workplaces embrace the idea of diversity, they often tend to realize benefits that help in improvement of their companies, from new ideas to increased international exposures and opportunities. Diversity adds varied ideas and perspectives to a workplace.

A possible equation of the company should be as follows:

Respecting Individuals + Valuing & Respecting Differences + Focusing on Business Goals as a team = Diversity”

Advantages of a diverse workforce:

- **“Creativity increases** when people with different ways of solving difficult problems work together towards a common objective. The heterogeneous groups are cross-fertilizing one another within the organization, bringing in more creative ideas and solution techniques. More the ideas obtained from different people, more likely the business develops a workable answer.

- **Productivity increases** exponentially when people of various cultures work together towards a single inspiring goal. Employers can offer more solutions to customers because of new ideas and processes brought into the organization. Workplace diversity increases employee morale and causes employees to desire to work more effectively and efficiently.

- **New attitudes** are brought to the business table by people from diverse cultures. For instance, Americans may want to consider adopting the perspective other cultures have about time. Our culture believes that “time is money” and “getting to the bottom line” is paramount in business. However, in most other countries around the world “time is for building relationships” and an integral part of getting to know the other party you are considering doing business with before starting a transaction. How much of an advantage would workplace diversity be if we followed this practice more closely?

- **Language skills** are obviously needed in today’s increasingly global economy and diverse workers often have this proficiency. If a company needs specific knowledge or language skills, it may hire foreign nationals for help. In some markets, international job seekers have the advantage. For example, companies breaking into European, Asian or Latin American markets will need foreign expertise. It is always advised, that to truly build relationships with the other people of the world, we must speak their language. It is a tremendous advantage of workplace diversity if we enable people from other cultures can help us understand not just their words, but also the meaning behind what they are saying.

- **New processes** can result when people with different ideas come together and collaborate. In today’s fast-moving world, there is no longer room for thinking. American workers must bring multiple skills to the environment, think cross culturally, and adapt quickly to new situations. Those who meet these criteria are likely to do well, regardless of culture—even in tough economic times.

- **Positive Reputation** - Job seekers are drawn to companies with diverse workforces because it is evident that the companies do not practice employment discrimination. Potential employees want to know that employers treat their staff fairly regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. Not only are such firms able to attract new talent but they can also retain existing talent because of high employee morale resulting from workforce diversity.

Other benefits include: enhanced performance, access to wider talent pool, diversity of thinking and improved corporate governance.”

Diversity Issues

Diversity in the work environment promotes acceptance, respect and teamwork. Companies that overcome certain diversity issues often achieve greater productivity, profit and company morale.

The major diversity issues at workplace include:

- **Respect in the Workplace** The key component in achieving a favorably diversified workplace is establishing teamwork and mutual respect among staff members. Acceptance of individual differences is

essential in creating a copacetic and productive work environment. Acceptance leads to respect, and ultimately opportunity.

- **Conflict** Conflict among employees becomes inevitable when prejudice, racism, discrimination and a lack of respect creep into a work environment. If not distinguished, this can turn explosive or even violent. Businesses who provide a diversified work environment and provide sufficient diversity training often reduce or eliminate such occurrences.

- **Lifestyle Acceptance** Though one's personal life should typically not affect their job performance, however, at times the lifestyle acceptance is an issue in the workplace. Unfortunately, even though many employers now provide extended benefits to "alternative lifestyle partners," sometimes gay and lesbian workers experience disrespect and discrimination from co-workers. Such behaviour often leads to an uncomfortable working atmosphere and poor productivity.

- **Ethnic and Cultural Differences** It is often noticed that, some individuals harbour unfair prejudices against people of different colours, cultures, ethnicity or religion than their own. Such prejudice should not be tolerated in the workplace and should be dealt with in a firm and prompt manner. Firm company policies and appropriate training help build acceptance and respect among a well-diversified employee body.

- **Gender** One the oldest and most common diversity issues in the workplace is the topic on "men vs. women". Over the years, a new element in the disputes over equal pay and opportunity is the transgender employee.

- **Harassment** At times harassment can be an issue in a diversified work environment, but should absolutely never be tolerated. Recognizing harassment is key in preventing and eliminating discrimination from the workplace. Even the slightest comment made in jest can be considered harassment if any -- even remotely vague -- any racial, sexual or discriminatory connotation is made. For example, "I love Asian women" or "We should have hired a man."

- **Communication** Even when no prejudice exists among employees, a diversified workplace can bring about certain communication issues. Hiring immigrants who speak little or no English can reduce productivity by creating a communication barrier among team members. Employing some form of communication training and hiring sufficiently bilingual workers helps encourage and improve staff interaction.

- **Generation Gaps** In larger diversified corporations, staffs are often made up of workers who range in age from teenagers to senior citizens. Inevitably, generation gaps can become an issue and the age differences can trigger "cliques" and separation of the company as a unit. Bridging the gap between multiple generations of workers can sometimes become an issue for employers attempting to establish teamwork.

- **Disabilities** Unfortunately, workers who are mentally or physically handicapped sometimes encounter discriminatory behaviour from insensitive co-workers. In some cases, employers innocently overlook

handicapped worker needs, such as ramps or special needs equipment. Creating a fair and comfortable work environment for disabled employees is important in a diversified workplace.

- **Consistency** Diversity training and practices are not just a course or exam that employees take. Consistency and a daily practice of company behaviour policies is essential in moulding a positive and productive workplace.

Strategies in Managing Diversity

Diversity in the workplace is important for running a successful business. Your workforce, your customers, and your markets are increasingly diverse. To promote individual and organizational success, you must welcome diversity and manage it well.

These five strategies will help to manage diversity effectively:

- **Emphasize communication**: Organizations should ensure that all employees understand their policies, procedures, safety rules, and other important information. They should work to overcome language and cultural barriers, have key materials, such as safety information, translated when possible and use pictures and symbols on warning signs so that everybody can understand.
- **View employees as individuals**: Positive and negative stereotypes, both should be avoided. There should not be any assumptions regarding employees from different groups. Successes and failures should be judged individually. Organizations should respond promptly and firmly when employees express prejudices or stereotypes and also remind them of the policies that prohibit discrimination. Employees should be encouraged to view co-workers as individuals and judge them on their work, not on personal factors.
- **Encourage employees to work in diverse groups**: Organizations should assure that work teams reflect the diversity of their workplace. Diverse work teams let employees get to know and value one another as individuals. They also help in expanding the experiences and views of all the workers on the team. In addition, they help them recognize the strength of their combined talents and perspectives.
- **Base decisions on objective criteria**: Each and every employee (of all backgrounds) should be asked to meet required standards and perform to the best of their ability. There should not be different criteria for different groups. Management should focus on job-related issues, not personal issues, when dealing with employees.
- **Be open-minded**: Recognize, and encourage employees to recognize, that one's own experience, background, and culture are not the only ones with value to the organization. Management should set an example of encouraging diversity by developing relationships with colleagues whose backgrounds differ from theirs. They should identify ways to incorporate diverse perspectives and talents into efforts to achieve organizational goals.

Work Life Balance

Work life balance is a method which helps employees of an organization to balance their personal and professional lives. Work life balance encourages employees to divide their time on the basis on priorities and maintain a balance by devoting time to family, health, vacations etc along with making a career, business travel etc. It is an important concept in the world of business as it helps to motivate the employees and increases their loyalty towards the company.

Importance of work life balance

Working on a job for a company and making a career can be an extremely time consuming duty for any employee. Employees are busy at their offices throughout the day and sometimes even on weekends. This gives them very little time to interact with their family. Because of high pressure of work, often family members get neglected. Also, stressful jobs cause the health of employees to deteriorate. This is where work life balance come into the picture. Work life balance concept allows an employee to maintain a fine balance in the time he or she gives to work as well as to personal matters. By having a good balance, people can have a quality of work life. This helps to increase productivity at workplace as the employee is relaxed about his personal commitments. It also allows the employee to give quality time with family to spend vacations, leisure time, work on his/her health etc. Hence work life balance is extremely important for employees and increases their motivation to work for the company.

The Six Components of Work Life Balance

- **“Self-Management** refers to sufficiently managing one’s self which can be challenging, particularly in getting proper sleep, exercise, and nutrition. It is the recognition which tells us that effectively using the spaces in our lives is vital, and that available resources, time, and life are finite.
- **Time Management** or more appropriately said effective time management involves making optimal use of your day and the supporting resources that can be summoned – one can keep pace when the resources match the challenges. Time management is enhanced through appropriate goals and discerning what is more important and urgent, versus important or urgent. It entails knowing what you do best and when, and assembling the appropriate tools to accomplish specific tasks.
- **Stress Management** refers to managing the stressful situations. Since, societies tend to become more complex over time therefore these days stress on an individual is inevitable. More people, distractions, and noise require each of us to become adept at maintaining tranquility and working ourselves out of pressure-filled situations. Most forms of multitasking ultimately increase our stress, versus focusing on one thing at a time.
- **Change Management** refers to the continuous adaptation of new methods and re-adapting others is vital to a successful career and a happy home life. Effective change management involves making periodic and concerted efforts to ensure that the volume and rate of change at work and at home does not overwhelm or defeat you. In our fast-paced world, change is virtually the only constant.

- **Technology Management** refers to effectively managing technology which means ensuring that technology serves you, rather than abuses you. Technology has always been with us, since the first walking stick, flint, spear, and wheel. Now, the rate of change is accelerating, brought on by vendors seeking expanding market share. Often there is no choice but to keep up with the technology, but one must rule technology, not vice versa.
- **Leisure Management** is the most overlooked part of the work-life balance supporting disciplines, it acknowledges the importance of rest and relaxation- that one can't shortchange leisure, and that "time off" is a vital component of the human experience. Curiously, too much of the same leisure activity, however enjoyable, can lead to monotony. Thus, effective leisure management requires varying one's activities."

Steps to improve work life balance

There are specific guidelines to how an individual can maintain a proper work life balance, some of which are:

1. **Creating a work leisure plan:** Where an individual has to schedule his tasks, and divide time appropriately so that he has allocated appropriate time to his work and his career development goals and at the same time allotted time for leisure and personal development. Employees also use a compressed work week plan to build a balance.
2. **Leaving out activities that waste time and energy:** Individual should judiciously avoid wasteful activities which demand large time and energy and in return not produce output for either the work life or the leisure life. Effective time management can help an employee be less stressed.
3. **Outsourcing work:** Delegate or outsource time consuming work to other individuals.
4. **Set enough time for relaxation:** Relaxation provides better work life balance, and tends to improve productivity on the professional or the work front along with providing ample scope to develop the life part of the balance.
5. **Prioritizing work:** Often employees do not give priority to work and end up doing a lot of work at the last minute. Better planning can help employees save unnecessary time delays, which can be utilized by employees for personal work.