

What Is Diversity?

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by Karen Shepard-Jackson

Many organizations around the world are struggling to figure out how to reinvent themselves to gain and maintain their competitive advantage. Businesses and healthcare organizations are putting long- and short-term strategies into place to ensure that their research and development organizations are producing new and better services, including revising policies and restructuring organizational setup. But many organizations continue to ignore one area—and probably their most important asset—people. In the next millennium the workforce will contain more immigrants, minorities, and women than ever before, resulting in a changing workforce and customer base¹ (see [Tables 1 and 2](#) below).

The most successful organizations in the coming decade will be those who figure out how to tap into the hidden abilities of all of their employees, regardless of differences, and leverage those unique qualities to meet and exceed the needs of their diverse client bases. Statistics show that both the workforce and the customer base will become increasingly diverse, requiring organizations to create an environment in which all employees can compete and contribute equally and the work ethic is responsive to its customers' needs.²

But what is diversity? Some organizations use a legalistic definition that includes race, gender, physical disability, and religious background. Other organizations use a more generic definition that may include thought, style, and background. My favorite definition of diversity is simpler: difference. This all-inclusive definition has a meaning that everyone can relate to.

Diversity—The Challenge

The challenges diversity presents are both plentiful and difficult to overcome. But the benefits of successfully managing diverse employees are worth the effort. People have strong tendencies to segregate themselves with those of similar backgrounds, so many organizations face the challenge of getting people from different backgrounds to work together effectively. One way to increase the effectiveness of a diverse team is to shape a culture that enables employees to understand and respect differences among people. In this type of culture, both employees and the overall company are expected to respect other perspectives, opinions, and beliefs—a difficult task with a workforce that includes both genders and people of various ethnic backgrounds. The key: creating an environment where respect for differences is expected and disrespect for differences is not tolerated. Achieving and managing diversity demands sensitivity to and respect for group and individual differences. This can be accomplished through a uniform code of conduct to which both managers and employees are expected to adhere.

Everyone sees others through their own "filter." This means that any person or thing you look at will automatically generate an opinion or perspective shaped by your own past experiences and beliefs. It is imperative to recognize, work through, and hopefully transform stereotypes of others that reinforce prejudices. For example, if a young, female African American enters the healthcare facility, a nurse may instantly assume the patient is uneducated, has no insurance, and is on public assistance. This perspective may be based on the way the woman is dressed, her language, or a number of other things. The nurse's filter could be limited to images of African-American women that are portrayed on the nightly news or in the public clinic in which he or she works. Whatever the case, the assumptions are not based on fact, but on past experiences. The danger in this behavior is that it affects the way organizations hire people, render services, sell products, and promote employees. Because companies are made up of many individuals who have their own set of filters, it is extremely important that the expectation is set to permit equal access to opportunities and services for everyone. In turn, the organization's filter will become more inclusive as the management layer diversifies.

Diversity—The Opportunity

Connecting diversity to an organization's success is easier to do than most people think. One obvious reason is that the effectiveness of any organization is enhanced when the full potential of diverse individuals is utilized. It is certain to lead to an

environment that:

- is open to new ideas
- is willing to learn and listen
- has an increased desire to grow
- has the flexibility to adapt to change

These characteristics are necessary for an organization to be innovative and responsive to change.

The integration of differences into a company's culture can pay big dividends for long-term success. Many organizations use diversity as a change agent and integrate it into all of their policies and procedures. Organizations that simply constrain diversity to a human resources policy and position it as a response to the various discrimination laws that exist in the US give diversity a negative connotation. When diversity principles are integrated into various business strategies and plans, diversity actually becomes a part of the work culture that outlives all of the changes organizations undergo. The benefits are:

- an ability to break the glass ceiling
- increased potential to attract and hire the most qualified individuals
- an understanding and responsive strategy for the impact of minority influence

Implementing Diversity

Implementing diversity is a challenge that any organization attempting to integrate these concepts will face. It is critical to have a clear plan that aligns with a business strategy and is endorsed by top management. Well-planned measurements to evaluate the diversity effort's progress are also important. A good example of this is Dow Chemical Company's diversity strategy. Now in its implementation stage, it includes the following four elements:

Cultural Shift

Definition: People are the source of our success. We treat one another with respect. We strive to assure every individual is understood for their uniqueness, experience, and skills. Through shared learning, teamwork, and collaboration we leverage the differences of individual viewpoints and ensure that diverse opinions can be focused rapidly on business solutions.

It is imperative for an organization to evaluate its own "diversity climate" through a cultural audit. This can consist of surveys and/or focus groups. The main objective is to identify aspects of the corporate culture that either inhibit or prohibit individuals from equally competing and contributing to the overall success of the organization. This is a critical first step that can produce important results. Both the management and the employees are responsible for creating an environment in which everyone can thrive.

Horizontal Growth

Definition: Managers provide team, task force, and project opportunities that use diversity principles.

Organizations are becoming flatter in order to become more efficient. When layers are removed from a company, the opportunity for vertical movement is reduced, making horizontal opportunities critical. These experiences—including appointments to various teams, task forces, or special projects—allow individuals to gain the skills and competencies needed for promotions. Although the process for these appointments are usually informal, it is critical to ensure that a diverse group of people are given access to these opportunities.

Another important step is for the organization to decide what its diversity principles are going to be. These are the foundation upon which all actions, behaviors, and corporate beliefs around the subject of diversity are built. Some examples of diversity principles are:

- a diverse employee mix
- a value for all employees
- opportunity and development for all

- fair and equitable employment practices
- respectful work environment
- flexibility and adaptability

Vertical Growth

Definition: All qualified candidates have access to opportunities and career advancement.

Vertical growth pertains to all of the upward mobility opportunities within an organization. It usually involves changes in job titles and pay increases. Many companies are putting various job selection processes in place to ensure equal access to opportunities among employees. One practice becoming more common is job posting, whether it is on an established LAN file or easily accessible bulletin boards around the facility. This enables all employees to be aware of job openings and gives them the opportunity to apply. It is also very important for organizations to monitor the results of such a system to prevent systematic screening out of certain groups—either during interviewing or job selection.

Diversity in an organization should exist at all levels to reap the maximum benefits of new ideas and increase productivity. But while a job selection process can help diversity in many organizational levels, it does not always work for senior positions, where the glass ceiling is more frequently encountered. In fact, many organizations find it difficult to retain women and minorities at any level of the organization, which results in fewer who can attempt to move upwards.

A critical step to implementing diversity is ensuring that diversity principles are considered when putting together recruiting strategies, succession plans, and employee development processes. For example, a healthcare organization having difficulty attracting minority nurses may need to consider recruiting from the nursing schools of traditionally African-American colleges. The addition of minority-focused schools increases the pool of diverse candidates available during the hiring process.

Other avenues are available as well. For instance, a hospital experiencing difficulty in finding minority or female candidates for senior positions should begin with succession plans for its "corporate critical" roles. This plan includes keeping a list of candidates who could adequately fill one of the corporate critical roles if necessary. Remember to include women and minorities on the succession list. This is an effective way to diversify the management ranks of an organization and sends an important message to the rest of the firm. While some organizations feel they are forced to utilize the services of executive search firms, this quick fix could stifle the development of employees that would be gained through maintaining a diverse pool of candidates for all job levels. An employee development process should include good mentoring programs that give employees the opportunity to seek the support and guidance they need.

Regulatory Compliance

Definition: Ensures that the company is in compliance with local employment regulations.

This element is usually only seen within an organization's equal employment opportunity department. However, by including it in a firm's diversity strategy, it raises the exposure of a process that provides excellent data to the organization. Through affirmative action planning, an organization can:

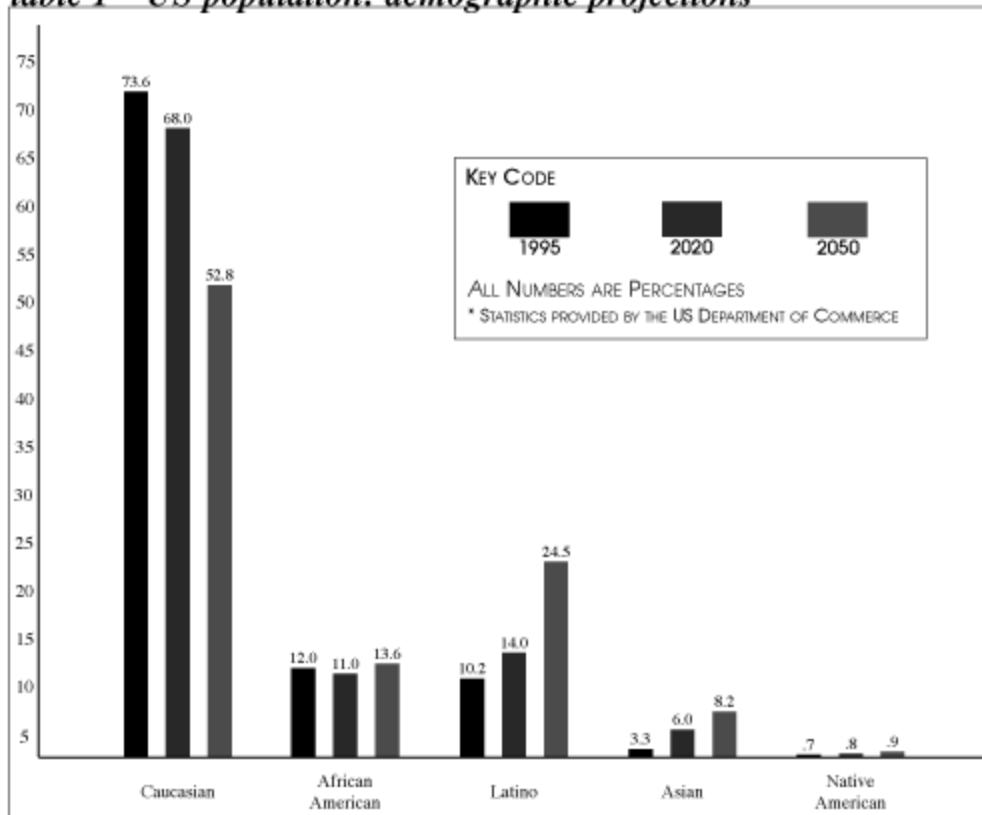
- determine where its glass ceiling is by looking at population representation at different levels
- identify whether any discrepancies exist in the way employees are paid by analyzing pay equity studies

In today's global marketplace, it is becoming more difficult to achieve and maintain a competitive advantage. In order to survive and remain a viable entity, companies will have to find that advantage, improve upon it, and hold on to it. The best place to start is with people. A diverse workforce can catapult an organization into the next millennium with new ideas and a spirit of change. It is up to the organization itself to adapt its culture so that all of its employees can compete and contribute. And it is up to the employees to share their unique perspectives and talents. By combining these two very powerful steps, any organization can find itself well ahead of the competition.

Notes

1. US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census. *Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1995 to 2050*. Washington, DC: GPO,

February 1996, p. 13.

2. *Ibid.***table 1—US population: demographic projections*****table 2—1994-1996 purchasing power of minority population in the US (in billions)**

GROUP	PURCHASING POWER
AFRICAN AMERICAN	\$284 TO \$400
ASIAN	\$100 TO \$150
LATINO	\$183 TO \$235

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