

Diversity Management: A Tool for Competitive Advantage

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ABSTRACT

A diverse workforce is a reflection of a changing world and market place. For achieving success and maintaining competitive advantage, one of the important factors that an organisation should attribute is its diverse and talented workforce. Organisations that promote and achieve a diverse workforce will attract and retain quality employees, thereby contributing to organisational performance. Diversity management embraces such dimensions, as a result of which a supportive culture emerges, where all employees can be effective. Thus, this article reflects on various dimensions of diversity initiatives and the benefits of implementing it in organisations and highlights on few measures to augment it, as it is the need of the hour for today's organisations.

Keywords: Workforce diversity, Competitive advantage, Globalisation, Competency, Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

The globalising economy and the increase in the number of multinational corporations make diversity management a necessity for companies that want not only to survive but also thrive during this time of economic, social, and cultural changes. The term diversity management originated in North America but has slowly taken hold in other regions and countries of the world (e.g., Hays-Thomas, 2004; Kaiser and Prange, 2004; Nyambegera, 2002; Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008; Palmer, 2003; Palmi, 2001). Below is a brief definition of the term:

Diversity management refers to the voluntary organizational actions that are designed to create greater inclusion of employees from various backgrounds into the formal and informal organizational structures through deliberate policies and programs.

The goal of diversity management is to transform the organisational culture from a majority-oriented to a heterogeneous-pluralistic culture in which different value systems are heard and thus equally affect the work environment. Diversity management has a dual focus: the first is enhancing social justice by creating an organisational environment in which no one is privileged

or disadvantaged due to characteristics such as race or gender; the second is increasing productivity and profitability through organisational transformation (e.g., Cox, 2001; Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008; Thomas, 2005).

More and more companies are realising that there could be a business benefit for having diversity management programs or, at the very least, to include language about it in their public relations materials. For example, IBM's chairman and CEO, Sam Palmisano, points to the link between diversity management and the core business at IBM. Highlighting IBM's long involvement with equal opportunity and diversity initiatives, Palmisano notes that "diversity policies lie as close to IBM's core as they have throughout our heritage. Today, we are building a workforce in keeping with the global, diverse marketplace, to better serve our customers and capture a greater share of the on-demand opportunity" (IBM Web page, 2009).

"Diversity makes good business sense". Diversity management can provide businesses with a competitive advantage. Here the logic is that by managing diversity, companies have much to gain (Cox, 2001; Kochan *et al.*, 2003), including (a) cost reductions due to lower absenteeism and turnover, (b) advantages in the

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competition for talent in the workforce (Thomas *et al.*, 2002), (c) reduced risk of discrimination lawsuits due to a more just and nondiscriminating environment, (d) more effective marketing to diverse customer pools (Kossek *et al.*, 2006; Pradhan, 1989), (e) increased creativity and innovation through diverse work teams (Weiss, 1992; Kossek *et al.*, 2006), (f) government contracts for which minority- or gender balanced businesses are given preference, and (g) improved corporate image, which generates public goodwill. Cox and Blake (1991) identify six reasons why companies must manage cultural diversity so as to gain competitive advantage. They are:

Cost argument: As organisations become more diverse, the cost of a poor job in integrating workers will increase. Those who handle this well will thus create cost advantages over those who do not.

Resource-acquisition argument: Companies develop reputations on favourability as prospective employers of women and ethnic minorities. Those with the best reputations for managing diversity will win the competition for the best personnel. As the labour pool shrinks and changes composition, this edge will become increasingly important.

Marketing argument: For multinational organisations, the insight and cultural sensitivity that members with roots in other countries bring to the marketing effort should improve these efforts in important ways. The same rationale applies to marketing to subpopulations within domestic operations.

Creativity argument: Diversity of perspectives and less emphasis on conformity to norms of the past (which characterise the modern approach to management of diversity) should improve the level of creativity.

Problem-solving argument: Heterogeneity in decision and problem solving groups potentially produces better decisions through a wider range of perspectives and more thorough critical analysis of issues.

System flexibility argument: An implication of the multicultural model for managing diversity is that the system will become less determinant, less standardised, and therefore more fluid. The increased fluidity should

create greater flexibility to react to environmental changes (i.e. reactions should be faster and at less cost).

Thus, diversity management may be understood as the systematic and planned commitment by organisations to recruit, retain, reward, and promote a heterogeneous mix of employees (Thomas, 1991; Ivancevich and Gilbert, 2000). It is directed at enabling the diverse workforce to achieve its full potential in a work environment that is equitable and where no group has any superficial advantages (Torres and Bruxelles, 1992). Furthermore, managing diversity is based on the assumption that diverse groups will create new ways of working together and that morale, profit and productivity will increase. It tries to build specific skills and to create policies that derive the best from each employee (Golnaz and Hoa, 2002).

The 1990s saw the development of a new trend in the form of workforce diversity mainly because of the liberalisation and globalisation of markets (Henry and Evans, 2007). As the businesses are growing and the world is moving toward a concept of global village, the competition among the organisations and industries is rapidly increasing. Also, due to the global economy, the distance among people, different nations, races, sexes, etc. are diminishing. In this scenario of high interaction, the existence of any business/economy is dominantly dependent upon not only the optimal utilisation of current available resources, but also on innovation and diversity (Sabeen, 2007). Significant changes in society and in the markets are responsible for the growing workforce diversity. The globalisation process compels organisations all over the world to deal with more international customers and suppliers (Cox and Blake, 1991; Milliken and Martins, 1996). Improvements in transportation and communication, and the change in lifestyles contribute to the growing mobility of people (Kossek and Lobel, 1996). The increased mobility and interaction of people from diverse backgrounds as a result of improved economic and political systems and the recognition of human rights by all nations has put most organisations under pressure to embrace diversity at the workplace (Henry and Evans, 2007). The participation of social groups traditionally seen as minorities or disadvantaged groups in the workplace has

increased in numbers, qualifications, and influence (Carr-Ruffino, 1996). Women, older people, individuals with disabilities, and people with different ethnic backgrounds, lifestyles, religious faiths, and sexual orientations, are becoming regular players in the labour market (Dass and Parker, 1996). As the economies are shifting from manufacturing to service economies, diversity issues will gain importance because in a service economy effective interactions and communications between people are essential to business success (Wentling and Palma-Rivas, 2000).

The importance of diversity management programs for global companies is a recurrent theme in the statements of many executives (for a sample of statements in speeches by senior officers of Nikkeiren, Japan's Business Federation, see Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2008). Emphasising the global angle of diversity management, Tiane Mitchell Gordon, senior vice president for diversity and inclusion at American On Line (AOL), notes that diversity management has a strategic role: "It really is about looking at how we can influence and impact our business from a different lens to understand how, as a global company, we have to be more culturally aware" (Schoeff, 2009). Cox (2001) notes that "the globalisation of business is a trend that makes diversity competency crucial for many organisations" because both large and small companies increasingly derive a significant portion of their revenues from other countries in the world.

Wentling Rm, Palma-Rivas (2000) in their study entitled "Current status of diversity initiatives in selected multinationals corporations", has defined diversity as the co-existence of employees from various sociocultural backgrounds within the company. They have given a broader definition of diversity, which may include age, national origin, religion, disability, gender, values, ethnic culture, education, language, lifestyle, beliefs, physical appearance and economic status. In their study, they have highlighted that as the economies are shifting from manufacturing to services economies, diversity issues will gain importance because in a service economy effective interactions and communications between people are essential to business success. They also have stressed that organisations with a diverse

workforce can provide superior services because they can better understand customer's needs.

Allen *et al.* (2004), in their study, "Diversity practices: Learning Responses for Modern Organisation, Development and Learning in Organisations" stated that diversity in the workforce can be a competitive advantage because different viewpoints can facilitate unique and creative approaches to problem-solving, thereby increasing creativity and innovation, which in turn leads to better organisational performance.

Cox (2001) notes, "The challenge of diversity is not simply to have it but to create conditions in which its potential to be a performance barrier is minimised and its potential to enhance performance is maximised". Diversity management refers not only to those groups that have been discriminated against or that are different from the dominant or privileged groups, but to "the mixture of differences, similarities and tensions that can exist among the elements of a pluralistic mixture" (Thomas, 2005). Using a jar of jelly beans (colorful candy) as a metaphor, Thomas (1996) emphasises that diversity management is dealing with the collective mixture of all workers, not just the recent additions to the organisational workforce.

Further, diversity management can create a competitive advantage in areas such as marketing, problem solving, and resource acquisition (Cox, 2001). Therefore, diversity management is not the sole domain of the human resource function in the organisation (as has been the case with affirmative or positive action initiatives) primarily aimed at compliance with legal requirements. It is a systematic organisation-wide effort based on the premise that for organisations to survive and thrive, there is an inherent value in diversity (Cox, 2001; Kreitz, 2008; Orlando, 2000). However, it is important to note that careful research in a global context suggests that diversity management can have both positive and negative consequences as well as no change at all and that a more nuanced approach to the link between diversity management and organisational outcomes is in order (Kochan *et al.*, 2003; Jackson, Joshi and Erhardt, 2003; Thomas, 2005).

Goetz (2010), in his study “Workforce diversity”, has emphasised that mismanagement of diversity in the form of unfavourable treatment can have negative consequences such as inhibiting workers’ abilities and motivation. This leads to lower job performance. Therefore, when an organisation ignores the existence and importance of workforce diversity, conflict can emerge and neither the corporation nor its employees will realise their potential.

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The United States (US) has historically been seen as a “melting pot” of people from many different countries, cultures and backgrounds. The Bureau of Labour Statistics projects that by 2015, the US labour force will include 21 million black, 11 million Asian and 24 million Hispanic individuals. It also indicates that by the year 2050, Hispanics will make up 24 percent of the US labour force, blacks 14 percent and Asians 11 percent (Lepak and Gowan, 2009). Females are expected to increase their percentage in the workforce by 15.1 percent, so that more than 62 percent of the women in the US are expected to be working in 2010 (Moorhead and Griffin, 2009). They are expected to make up 47 percent of the US labour force in 2016 (Lepak and Gowan, 2009). The graying of the U.S. workforce is another source of diversity. People over age 65 comprises of 13 percent of the population in 2010 and 20 percent of the population by 2030 (See Nelson and Quick, 2007). In contrast, the growth rate of individuals in younger age group is markedly smaller and expected to decrease by seven percent by 2016 (Lepak and Gowan, 2009). Issues of workforce diversity are not prevalent just in US. In Canada, minorities are the fastest-growing segment of the population and the workforce. In addition, women make up two-thirds of the growth in the Canadian workforce, increasing from 35 percent in the 1970s to more than 50 percent in 2005. Many German factories now have a very diverse workforce that includes many workers from Turkey. Several Central Europe countries like Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have experienced a steady influx of workers from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka,

China and Somalia (Moorhead and Griffin, 2009). Thus, workforce demography is undergoing a drastic change across the globe. McEnrue (1993) found that the recruitment expenditure of organisations that value diversity is 40 percent less than that of those that do not and that they suffer less from high costs of labour turnover, absenteeism and discrimination lawsuits (Fernandez 1991; Cox 1993; Morrison 1992). There is also evidence that workforce diversity improves organisational effectiveness through increased organisational and individual creativity and innovation, and improves decision-making and problem-solving by providing work teams with different and diverse perspectives (Bhadury *et al.*, 2000; Cox 1993; Fernandez 1991; Cordero *et al.*, 1996; Cox and Blake 1991; Kirchmeyer and McLellan 1991; Hoffman 1978). Thus, companies need to focus on diversity and look for ways to become totally inclusive organisations because diversity has the potential of yielding greater productivity and competitive advantages (Green *et al.*, 2008).

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT IN INDIAN ORGANISATIONS

The Constitution of India has envisaged a strong legal foundation for diverse workforce in organisations. Article 16 of the Indian Constitution offers equality of opportunity for employment to citizens irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex, descent or place of birth. Article 15 provides for prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 19 of Indian Constitution offers the privilege for movement across the country and carry out business or profession of one’s choice.

Directive principles of state policy provide reservation for weaker and deprived sections of the society like scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, other backward caste, women, etc. So far as people with disabilities are concerned, Parliament has passed a legislation titled:

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act 1995 requires every appropriate government to reserve not less than three percent job vacancies for persons or

class of persons with disability (Woodard and Saini, 2006; Sia and Bhardwaj, 2003). The Indian Government has increased the retirement age of employees in few sectors from 60 to 65 years (professors in central universities). Some private sector organisations retain as well as hire older employees for their valuable experience.

Women, minorities and deprived sections of the society are also entering the organisations. However, with the rise in literacy levels and betterment of the position of women due to economic and social development, the position of women in many spheres has been becoming better. For example, women are playing a significant role in the expansion of the Indian software industry, where they constitute 45 percent of the high-tech workforce (Budhwar *et al.*, 2005). Similar trends can be noticed in education sector and the BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) industry where women are employed in sizeable numbers. More than 60 percent of the employees in Pepsi and ICICI are women (Woodard and Saini, 2006). In India, the diversity is more prevalent in urban centres as most of the medium and large organisations are located near urban areas (Sia and Bhardwaj, 2003). The Indian software giants like Infosys, TCS and Wipro have already embraced the challenge of building a global workforce. Since Indian human capital is known to be of high-calibre, Indian companies have to eventually realise the importance of investing in diversity management and thus go beyond legal compliance (Woodard and Saini, 2006).

Kundu (2001) in his study titled, "Valuing cultural diversity: a study of employees' reactions to employer

efforts to value diversity in India" has mentioned that in today's fast-paced work environment a successful organisation is one where diversity is the norm and not the exception.

Agrawal (2010) in his study, "Managing Human resources in a liberalised economy." has mentioned that the ICICI Bank, the largest private sector bank in India has been providing equal opportunities to its female professionals and today a large percentage of top and senior executives in the company are female including its CEO.

CONCLUSION

It is an indubitable fact that the practice of workforce diversity is emerging as a source of competitive advantage for organisations. The concept of 'global village' and shrinking geographical distance have provided tremendous fillip for organisations to become 'diversity-friendly'. Put differently, being a very sensitive issue, diversity management is a double edged sword as it can be both boon as well as bane to organisations. This is because diversity practices would benefit the organisations only when it is managed effectively. It is not just making a 'salad' using various vegetables available in the market. It is more of creating a 'tasty and eatable' salad by carefully and consciously choosing the fresh and right mix of vegetables available in the market. The top management attitude coupled with conducive organisational climate and culture valuing the differences would play a pivotal role in leveraging the power of diversity to the advantage of the organisation.

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