

Chapter 81

Emerging Technology Trends and Implications for Diversity Management

Mike A. Guest

Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, USA

Elizabeth Culhane

Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, USA

Daniel P. McDonald

Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, USA

ABSTRACT

The rapid pace of globalization around the world is associated with profound changes to how individuals and organizations communicate. Emerging technologies and applications in recent years, such as social networks and virtual workspace tools, are dramatically opening communication, collaboration, and learning opportunities. Such technologies provide a platform for efficient communication among individuals around the world. In parallel, evolution of simulation technologies (e.g., Virtual Environments [VE] and online gaming) over the last decade has resulted in cost-effective, widely-accessible interactive environments that provide rich user experiences (e.g., 3-dimensional). These technology developments represent significant changes in the way that individuals interact with one another, and bring new challenges and opportunities for diversity management. This chapter discusses the current state of emerging technologies and implications for diversity management.

INTRODUCTION

“Globalization means an increase in the permeability of traditional boundaries, including those around countries, economies, industries, and organizations” (Thomas & Inkson, 2003, p. 6).

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As these boundaries are removed, the cultural differences between individuals and groups become increasingly relevant. Held (1999) described globalization as “the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual” (p. 2).

Thomas and Inkson argue that globalization is accelerating due to numerous factors in international business settings such as growth in international trade, international migration expansion, technology allowing for communication and information to transcend quicker and greater distance, organizations restructuring and downsizing, an increase in multinational corporations, and the privatization of state enterprise. The increasing prevalence of cultural differences, coupled with the wider geographic distribution of resources (e.g., personnel, equipment), challenges conventional approaches to organizational management (e.g., centralized versus decentralized).

As with traditional (centralized) organizations, globalized organizations still rely critically on teams that bring together diverse perspectives and utilize multiple resources. In order to coordinate teams, this requires communication, distribution, and incorporation of task-relevant information, harnessing collective effort and information analysis, and making decisions. Coordination of teams becomes increasingly difficult when team members are culturally diverse and distributed physically in different times and spaces. Accordingly, organizational effectiveness will become more dependent on how well it navigates and optimizes within this global landscape (see Caligiuri, Lepak, & Bonache, 2010, for a discussion of globalization trends).

An inseparable aspect of globalization is the underlying evolution of technology that is so profoundly changing how people interact. Consider that the number of people in the world with Internet access in 2006 was over 1 billion, compared to less than 100 million about a decade earlier (Computer Industry Almanac). Over the past fifty years, there have been tremendous developments in computer-based training, interactive simulation, intelligent tutoring systems, animated pedagogical agents, serious games, multimedia, hypertext and hypermedia, inquiry-based information retrieval, virtual environments with agents and computer-supported collaborative learning (Blascovich

& Hartel, 2007). More recently, the explosive popularity of social networking and online gaming has made online interactions an essential platform for communication and coordination. Organizations or teams that are able to capitalize on these technological developments gain an enormous advantage over competitors. Accordingly, diversity management may be strongly enhanced, or hindered, by how well it takes advantage of available or emerging technology.

Diversity management involves leveraging human potential and tapping into unique skill sets. As technology developments are facilitating a changing landscape in communication and interaction, diversity management initiatives must take into account, and take advantage of, this changing dynamic. This chapter reviews recent and emerging trends in technology that have implications for diversity management. In particular, social networking and simulation technologies are discussed with specific examples of recent and ongoing research and development projects applicable to diversity management. Additionally, solutions and recommendations are addressed; specifically, recruiting and outreach, training and education, resource optimization, and program tracking and measurement.

DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT

One of the questions frequently posed by companies is why we should be concerned with diversity? Of course, certain forms of discrimination are illegal (e.g., gender discrimination) and require adherence. Beyond legal adherence, some research has challenged the premise that diversity is always a good thing. For example, Thomas, Mack, and Montagliani (2004) discuss several potential pitfalls of diversity, including increased conflict among members with diverse backgrounds, increased miscommunication, exclusion of organization members from networks, and lower group cohesion. On the other hand, there is an

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