

# Managing a Diverse Workforce

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*You can't categorize diversity by what a person looks like. It's what a person can do for the organization. -Charles K Poole*

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations are complex systems that must focus on being current and having access to the best available technologies and the brightest talent to gain/maintain competitive advantage. We live in an age where there is rapid and intense change and the result is increased tension on the organization to respond with agility. Given that the organization is a microcosm of a larger system, it is impacted by what is happening globally. The new organization is seen as a rich resource of diverse talent, which in many instances, remain untapped. But how do we define the term 'diversity'? The Hospitality Industry Diversity Institute (Hidi) has put together a review of diversity research in order to illustrate the emergence of the concept of diversity, discuss how the definition of diversity has broadened over time to become more inclusive and to put forth its own definition of diversity (Kapoor, 2011).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1978, the Supreme Court Case Regents of University of California v. Bakke, introduced the term diversity into an equity/affirmative action discussion when Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell wrote that:

*... the attainment of a diverse student body was a compelling state interest because a diverse student body would promote the "vigorous exchange of ideas" and therefore, "using race as a basis for university admission is a special concern of the First Amendment and important to the state. (Peterson, 1999, p. 19)*

Diversity made its way into the management discussion in 1987 in the Hudson Institute report, Workforce 2000, which stated that blacks, women, Hispanics and immigrants make up 85% of new job seekers (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000). However, soon after, managers realized that they were ill-equipped to deal with the new workforce, and the diverse needs of their constituents. Tsui et al. (1992, p. 549) pointed out "more and more individuals are likely to work with people who are demographically different from them in terms of age, gender, race, and ethnicity". Diversity management programs were introduced in the 1990's in the UK and USA with the goal of:

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- Increasing the rates of participation of women and ethnic minorities.
- Improving career prospects for minorities.
- Incorporating wider perspectives into the decision-making process.
- Helping organizations reach new, and formerly, untapped markets. (Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000)

But the definition of diversity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has grown to include different variables that promote the interest of different members of the society. They include issues relating to ageism, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and disability. Many organizations have listed these diversity variables in their policies and initiatives to form an inclusion strategy for minorities. Some organizations include a section for expatriates or immigrant workers that addresses language and culture. Hidi's research endorses the definition that the Diversity Task Force uses and claims its validity in guiding future research. Diversity is defined as "all characteristics and experiences that define each of us as individuals" (the Diversity Work Force, 2011).

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination at the workplace. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for enforcing federal laws that 'make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information' (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). One might ask how does the LGBT community fit into all of this, considering it is not part of the list. 'While Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not explicitly include sexual orientation or gender identity in its list of protected bases, the Commission, consistent with case law from the Supreme Court and other courts, interprets the statute's sex discrimination provision as also prohibiting discrimination against employees on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Equal Employment Opportunities Commission).

In a multicultural environment, the conversations about diversity and the management of talent within organizations become more than just sound bites for political efficacy. Instead, the business case has been made by practitioners for inclusion to be the bedrock on which businesses are built. As the chapter progresses, the variables will be discussed, beginning with ageism.

## **Ageism**

In a world driven by how we perceive our environment and those within, there is still some caution exercised when discussing ageism as part of the diversity dialogue. We use categories to make sense of the world, and more often than not our categories are roughly hewn constructs that are embedded in one's culture. Ageism is not often referenced when we talk about diversity. Not as much as the popular themes of today that resonate around race and sexual orientation. This sentiment is shared by Nelson (2004) who borrows from Barrow and Smith (1979) that "much empirical and theoretical attention has been devoted to the study of racism and sexism", but there is comparatively very little research in psychology to offer a deeper understanding about ageism. In similar disciplines, the lament is the same. McCann and Giles (2002) weighing in on the discussion, point out that literature about aging concerns "unfortunately do not command mainstream attention in the discipline of communication."

The stereotype that attends aging is well documented in the jokes told about "old geezers" who are slow to adapt to change. Although ageism is often linked to older members in the organization, there are tales of young professionals who are discriminated against because of their age. Ageism can therefore be seen as an attempt to discriminate based on an individual's chronological age. As in the case of other forms of discrimination, being discriminated against because of age is impactful and can erode self-esteem and

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