



Diversity as a Win-Win Strategy

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This article reviews, on the basis of company website audits and students' on-site research of four organisations, the ways diversity is implemented in today's business environment.

This paper reviews the two most dominant reasons why organisations implement workplace diversity, and subsequently refers to a mutuality-based approach of applying this phenomenon, with benefits for both the organisation as well as its workers.

Introduction

Diversity in the workplace is a very often-mentioned topic in today's corporate world. However, if you examine this phenomenon a bit more in-depth, you may arrive at disheartening conclusions. The majority of US business corporations still have a long way ahead when it comes to walking their diversity talk.



Coca-Cola



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Workplace diversity, as it will be interpreted in this article, is the presence of a blend of people from various sexes, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, ages, abilities, and perspectives in a work environment.



Top: Muhtar Kent, President and Chief Operating Officer, The Coca-Cola Company
Above: Michael Dell, Chairman of Dell Inc

Workplace diversity in education
One of the consistent exercises I conduct in each workplace diversity university course I facilitate, is company website auditing. In this exercise I ask students to select a company of their choice and subsequently perform an audit on this company's website regarding its diversity policies, the formation of its executive board, and the representation of images on the company website. In addition to the website evaluation I ask the students to conduct some research through business databases to find out whether the company of their

choice has had any published involvement in diversity-related issues.

Some of the companies reviewed

for this exercise in the most recent course were Dell, Office Depot, Target, Starbucks, Honda, Coca Cola, IKEA, Godiva Chocolatier, and Jones Day International Law firm.

Of the companies listed above, those that profiled diversity in an outstanding manner on their websites were Dell and Coca Cola, while most of the others had sufficient reflection of diversity through pictures and mentioning of the importance of this issue on their sites.

Still, the consistent outcome of this project is that the majority of the audited companies, although mentioning diversity as one of their core values, do not apply this concept at all levels. Top executives are usually fitting the same old picture of mature, white, and male, with here and there an exception of mature, white and female in-between.

This indicates that, in spite of all the calls and theories pro diversity, the movement toward its actual and comprehensive utilisation happens at a rather slow rate. In most organisations diversity gets implemented up till the upper-mid level. But when strategic echelons appear in sight, diversity seems to fly out the window.

The reasons provided for this trend are familiar and not too hard to understand. Making diversity work takes time, and attracting someone who already walks the board's talk is an established and hard-to-beat advantage. The creature-of-habit and the change-averse mentality kick in at their fullest strength in those circumstances. Presidents and CEO's want their life's work to be continued by their

successor, so they handpick him with great care.

Yet, at the same time these very CEO's and presidents will set out a plea for diversity and its advantages, thereby exclaiming popular phrases as, "better reach of larger consumer groups", and "doing the morally right thing". Even the aspect of broadening workforce perspectives is listed among the benefits mentioned! But when the real diversity related challenges surface and current procedures, organisational cultures or strategies get jumbled up by implementing diversity, the positive attitude of top management is not so positive anymore.

A closer look at the implementation of diversity

A few weeks ago, four of my students in the diversity course reviewed their workplaces in a class presentation. They first analysed the level of diversity in their workplaces, and then reviewed the reasons for this phenomenon to occur.

One of the students, who works in a small engineering firm of 15 people, found that the organisation was predominantly Caucasian and that the few minority members working there (30%) were not particularly encouraged toward making a difference in the way work processes were executed. The organisation is very set in its ways and seems to expect workers to act as a united entity with a total disregard of differences.

The second student reviewed a large candy producer with units all through the US, as well as on various other continents.



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This student arrived at some interesting findings as well: The organisation had a special diversity department in the state where its headquarters were located, and seemed to implement racial diversity at a maximal level throughout the organisation. However, the business seemed to be solely driven by females. Whether that indicates that the line of business of this organisation is more tailored or more attractive to females, or whether this distinction was made for other reasons was unclear to the student.

The third student reviewed a large office supplies corporation with departments all over the US. The working quarters of this student were located in downtown Los Angeles, and were therefore predominantly manned by Hispanic American workers. The student stated that it is the tendency of this business to hire workers who live in the area where a particular sales unit of the chain is located in order to maximally facilitate the local clientele. This, of course, was a nice idea, were it not that the higher levels of this corporation showed the earlier mentioned picture of older white males. Also, when analysing the reason for implementing diversity further and the chances for lower and mid-level workers to advance within the corporation, it could be concluded that diversity, in this organisation, was only implemented for profit maximisation purposes and not for workers' advantages. The locals would have a hard time advancing in the organisation, and were only hired for identification purposes: they understood the local customer group, and the customers could feel comfortable when communicating with them.

The last student reviewed a local college and found that this institution also resembled the conventional picture when it came to its directors and shareholders boards, with only one, probably symbolic exception. The mid- and lower layers of this organisation had a rich representation of diversity, with a slight majority of women in all but the business departments.

Conclusion

The most off-putting conclusion from all the class discussions is, that, whenever diversity is implemented in workplaces, it still seems to be for all but the single right reason: enhancing advantage for the organisation as well as its stakeholders. In most of the studied cases it is only the organisation that benefits from the implementation of diversity, or diversity is applied for moral reasons, perhaps even tying in with religious beliefs or sensitivity toward affirmative action. But the mutuality-based perspective that diversity can lead to so much more advancement for the organisation; the quality of its output, and its place in its industry, while at the same time it could benefit workers to learn from one another, become more flexible in handling problems in the future, and improve personally in multiple environments is entirely overlooked.

If conscientiously applied and facilitated at all levels, diversity can elevate an organisation's long term performance to levels that are beyond all expectations. And with the increasing diversification of the local workforce; organisations' needs to search for more advantageous markets and production unit locations outside their current comfort zone, and the continuous increase of organisational stakeholder bases due to enhanced global accessibility, the implementation of diversity for the right reason should become a first priority. Not tomorrow. Today!