

## **Workforce Diversity**

*Staffing Professionals From Coast to Coast Say It's a Sound Business Strategy*

**By Kari Heistad**

Have you noticed how your talent pool is becoming more varied, seemingly by the month? From nationality to age, ability, and attitude, America's diversity is changing at an increasing rate. Small towns in Iowa now sport Hispanic grocery stores, and even cities with small populations, such as Portland, ME, can state that they have over 50 different languages spoken by their student populations. And technology is integrating people of all abilities into the workforce. Today, the definition of diversity includes not only race and ethnicity, but generations, disabilities, and cultures.

### **Advantage of Diversity**

As staffing professionals, you match the skills, talent, and time of your temporary and contract employees with the needs of clients who depend on you to deliver the highest-quality people to fulfill their needs. As the diversity of the workforce increases, more and more of the best people for the job will come from minority and immigrant communities.

By accessing these communities and creating a diverse workforce, you are not only responding to client needs, but also establishing yourself as a leader in today's marketplace, says Jyrl Washington, senior vice president and general counsel for Adecco North America.

"Companies must respond to these issues in order to remain competitive and successful," she says.

Tapping into the wide range of thinking that comes from having a diverse workforce can give your company the advantage it needs to stay on the cutting edge in today's marketplace.

John Chuang, CEO of Aquent, a Boston-based staffing firm, says, "The thing about diversity is that you don't know what you are missing if you don't have a diverse workforce. Your common sense is all off. You don't have the input from a wide variety of folks."

### **The Face of Today's Workforce**

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, more than 50 percent of the growth in the U.S. labor pool in the past decade came from immigrants. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao says, "Our growing labor shortage will require us to take a fresh look at immigration because the immigrant's hope is closely entwined with America's need."

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And according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 75 percent of the U.S. population growth in coming years will come from immigrants or the children of immigrants. The Census Bureau estimates that this will push the percentage of foreign-born workers in the United States from its current 15 percent of the market to 20 percent or even 25 percent in coming decades.

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These immigrants are increasingly well educated and bring with them highly competitive skills. With more than 50 percent of them having at least started higher education, they are the most educated wave of immigrants in our nation's history. Over 10 percent of them complete advanced degrees and are landing management positions in companies.

Many employers have not fully exploited this trend of the well-educated immigrant worker. Marketing not only their engineering skills, for example, but also their ability to speak a foreign language and to navigate culturally diverse assignments is one way that staffing companies can tweak an existing market for greater profit.

Even if you are not actively recruiting a diverse workforce for your company, chances are you have begun to see a wider variety of people walking through your doors looking for employment. The American Hispanic population has exploded in the last decade and now almost equals the African American population. When these two groups are combined with the Asian American population, they equal almost half of the U.S. population. And this doesn't take into account smaller ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and the list goes on. Essentially over half of your potential talent is diverse, and the coming decade will see this increase dramatically.

And now making its presence felt in the marketplace is Generation Y. Born between 1977 and 1996, Gen Y will make up more than 40 percent of the American workforce by 2010. The largest generation in American history, these 76 million new workers have grown up in a more diverse America, and more than 34 percent of them define themselves as racial or ethnic minorities.

### **Attracting Diversity**

How do you tap into this expanding workforce? The first step is to look at your own company objectively. Does your workforce reflect the community you are in? Do you have an inclusive company culture that is accepting of different viewpoints?

If the answer is no, you should consider the economic costs of ignoring the changing demographics in America, and create new company policies and action plans to develop a workforce that reflects your community and allows you to respond to your clients' needs.

Consider the following techniques, used by Adecco to make diversity an integral part of its operations:

- Participate in diversity career fairs.
- Provide financial support and be involved with diverse community organizations.
- Educate your employees about how to manage and value diversity.
- Retain bilingual recruiters and sales staff.
- Translate applications, employee handbooks, and safety information.

- Assist clients in getting key documents translated.
- Provide training and tuition reimbursement to help staff improve their skills.
- Seek out minority and women owned businesses as vendors and suppliers.

### **Hire the Best**

Rick Spragins is senior vice president for Snelling Personnel Services, based in Dallas. His policy for cultivating diversity sounds deceptively simple: “Hire the most qualified candidate.” To do this, he has advertised in foreign language newspapers, used Internet job boards, and translated key personnel information, such as policy books, into Spanish and other languages.

“By hiring the most qualified person for a position, you are going to naturally produce a culturally diverse and competent workplace,” he says.

Keith Fairchild, franchise owner of TRC Staffing Services in Jacksonville and Orlando, FL, agrees. He observes, “The shortage of talent (even in times of relative high unemployment) has forced the staffing industry to become much more inclusive. The challenge in doing this is to train ourselves to truly recognize talent, without letting personal prejudices interfere.”

### **Make a Connection**

A big challenge to developing a diverse workforce is getting the word out.

“The best way to recruit from any population segment is to live in that segment. That is to say that community involvement and support of professional organizations are key,” says Ralph Egües, vice president of corporate relations for AMN Healthcare Inc., headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, FL. “You have to know and be known by the communities you are targeting and be perceived to have an understanding and interest in advancing its members.”

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Ray Soll, hr Staffing

This also worked for Ray Soll, CEO of hr Staffing Inc., based in Torrance, CA, who says, “We started first by getting involved with our local Hispanic chambers of commerce in each of our locations. Then we asked ourselves, How can we take what we learned working with the Hispanic chambers and apply this to other places?”

The success built upon itself, and now Soll is a strong proponent of tailoring his staff’s interview techniques to each target population. “We have sent our staff to workshops so they understand how to interview diverse people,” he says. “The kinds of questions you need to ask to get someone to open up who is Korean are vastly different than someone from Mexico, for example.”

Advertising in targeted publications or on local radio stations that target specific populations are two easy ways to get your firm’s recruiting message out. With low production costs, 30-second radio ads that highlight an employee of the week from that target market sends a clear message

to your community that you are a great company to work for and that you are recognizing the talent within your organization.

In building his business, Chuang learned early on that diversity means more than race and ethnicity and that effective communication is critical to success. “When we created our business, we were a group of 20-something-year-old, male college grads,” he recalls. “What did we know about creating a good maternity policy or choosing text for our brochure that would be easy to read for older people?”

### **Clients Need Diversity**

As America becomes more diverse, marketing and services are becoming increasingly tailored to specific audiences, and companies are scrambling to find workers who understand these new target markets. Staffing companies that are able to assist their clients in tapping into these markets by supplying workers from them gain a leg up on the competition.

Whether it’s customer service personnel who are bilingual, graphic designers who speak Chinese, or baby boomers who have the patience to explain new technology to banking customers, companies need to respond to changing customer needs. By hiring and providing multilingual, culturally diverse workers, you will help them improve their bottom line, and in turn, you will improve your own.

Soll finds that clients are becoming less interested in the background of the person you are sending to do the job and more interested in how well they can perform. “Clients five or 10 years ago might have questioned who we were sending them. Now they just want people who show up on time, have a strong work ethic, and can do the job. As long as they can do that, they don’t care where they are from.”

Egües says that his company’s clients are asking for diversity. “We have had hospitals specifically ask for Spanish-speaking nurses so that they can better serve the growing number of Spanish-speaking patients and their families.

“In a shrinking world, it’s also important to realize the opportunities that exist for providing international services,” he says. “Hospitals in south Florida have been successful in attracting tens of thousands of foreign patients for elective procedures, in part by leveraging the area’s significant number of multilingual physicians, nurses, and other health-care workers.”

How do you uncover these lucrative niche markets? Look at local employment trends. Asking local chamber of commerce members what skill sets they cannot find may unearth a hidden need that could be met by a community group with your staffing firm serving as matchmaker.

Providing a supervisor from the same culture is a best practice that Soll uses. “We try to have diverse workforces supervised by people from the same culture,” he says. “If we are doing a large project for Sony, for example, and we are using people from Vietnam, we bring in a

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Vietnamese supervisor. This allows us to provide employment for people who may not have English skills, but who can still do an excellent job.”

Providing clients with a diverse workforce can be a challenge. “Companies must have or develop an accepting culture toward diversity, says Alicia Vicentini, president of Strategic Staffing Inc. in Alexandria, VA.

Fairchild agrees. “When speaking about our external workforce, there is also the challenge of getting our clients to let go of antiquated thinking regarding cultural, racial, and gender stereotypes,” he says.

His company works with its clients to help them understand the inherent benefits and value of a diverse workforce. “We have recently had a success in bringing cultural diversity training to a client’s managers, solving some problems we were encountering,” says Fairchild.

### **Retaining Diversity**

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Vicentini says that her firm has created a corporate culture that values diversity. “Managing diversity is unique in itself as employees possess different levels of education and culture and they must be brought to a certain level of understanding of the ways of other cultures represented in the company. This is accomplished with ongoing inside and outside training, which includes corporate coaching by managers or principals and training courses given by external professional training organizations,” she says. “Occasionally, employees have to be counseled to understand certain reactions other employees might have.

“Customs vary widely between cultures and depend on regional or local habits,” Vicentini says. “For example, the custom to send a thank-you note is not common in many overseas countries, so we coach our staff and raise their awareness,” Vicentini says.

The world has always come to America, and today we are harvesting the fruits of this trend in our diversity. Companies that are on the cutting edge, from Boston to Los Angeles, are using diversity to establish themselves as community leaders and at the same time to generate higher profits for themselves and their clients. Will your staffing firm be riding this wave of the future as the world continues to beat a path to our doorstep?

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