



The Changing Face of Diversity Programs

By: Wambui Wamunyu

Introspective baby boomer CEOs, a more competitive marketplace and an influx of foreign workers are combining to change the approach to diversity in the workplace.

That's the word from diversity experts, who say that job seekers can now insist on working in a place that fosters inclusiveness, where they will not only be hired, but also retained and promoted.

"These days, it's all about your negotiating your success," said Janine Fondon, co-author of the newly released book "The Practice of Power: Finding Success in a Diverse World."

The consulting firm Novations/J.Howard and Associates released a survey in early September showing more US employers are showcasing their diversity outreach efforts to gain a competitive edge.

Companies are hiring consultants to analyze how they are communicating their commitment to workplace diversity and whether the media they use - for example, mainstream as opposed to ethnic - are the best in reaching those they want to recruit. "Boston is getting better because there is no choice for it but to get better," said Greg Almieda, principal at Global View Communications, a recruitment advertising agency that promotes diversity. "We want to remain competitive. We want to keep the skill set here in Boston."

Diversity training programs no longer talk about awareness, now they are "behaviorally specific," said Verna Ford, executive consultant at Novations/J.Howard & Associates. "We are not just concentrating on a business case like seven years ago," said Ford. "This is, 'You have a diversity-related conflict on the team. You as a manager, how do you handle it?' It's more about skills building and less about sensitivity training and awareness." It's not only programs that have changed. Ford says there are "deep fissures" in the old-boy network.

Baby boomer business leaders, facing retirement are looking back on their careers and evaluating what they've done against their core values, she said. "A lot of them are seeing the opportunity to serve diversity in a more convincing way," she said. "They are making it a priority in their later years."

Younger leaders are jumping on board too. Christopher Oddliefson, CEO at Rockland Trust Co. says five years from now, he wants to be an employer of choice. "This is as much a personal journey as it is a leadership journey," said Oddliefson. "It requires looking inside and asking what are your values, and how as a leader, you take some tangible steps to embrace the joys of diversity."

Studies and anecdotal data have shown that developing a culture of inclusiveness in the workplace boosts morale. Having a diverse workforce also boosts an employer's ability to reach a wider range of clients, which ultimately leads to a healthy bottom line.



Melodie Jackson, director of public affairs at Citizens Bank, said diversity made the company "significantly stronger." She said the company's employees collectively speak 81 languages. "It has made not only our collective culture richer but also helped us better serve our customers," said Jackson, adding that there was no data on the economic benefits of having a diverse workforce. "But we've heard in some cases [customers] really appreciate being able to do business with someone who speaks the same language." Jackson said the company had a variety of programs, such as English as a Second Language classes, for employees.

Diversity has often been better represented in the lower ranks than, in the mid-to upper-management levels. People like Fondon and Almieda said that in conferences and meetings they attend, they are often alone or just one of a few minorities represented. But Seidu Sumani, audit senior manager at Deloitte and Touche, LLP said diversity is creeping into the boardroom. "There is a change out there," said Sumani, who is from Ghana. "It makes a difference when you can be at the table when discussion are happening. It will surely filter down."

Count Sumani among the foreign-born workers who have gradually been increasing in numbers in Massachusetts. Kari Heistad, a Newton-based culture coach, cited number showing 100 percent of the growth in the Bay State's labor force since 1990 has come from foreign-born workers. "The Massachusetts economy is dependent upon foreign-born workers," she said. "that trend is catching up with the corporate environment right now."

Heistad holds training sessions at workplaces to foster "cultural competence," the new buzzword in diversity. So employees learn for example, that in some cultures, avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect, while in the US is seen as being shift. So, how can a prospective employee evaluate whether or not a company is merely paying lip service to diversity?

Ford suggest that the potential new hires be rigorous in interviewing their recruiter. They should ask about the organization's commitment to diversity., the results of any recent employee surveys about the success of the company in reaching that commitment and by what standards the potential new hire will be judged. They can look at company websites to see who is holding the top company posts. Publications that rank companies on their commitment to diversity are another resources.

Almeida said many company diversity initiatives used to about avoiding liability. Now, they are about drawing top talent. "There are certain companies out there where diversity is solely compliance driven," said Almieda. "It goes back to a fundamental issues: how does the employer view the minority employment market? If it's an area where they will find talented individuals, that will dictate their actions. If its a way to avoid a lawsuit, or even more dangerously, as a charity, that will drive their efforts as well...it is really about promoting or putting forth the idea that there's a tremendous amount of untapped value in these markets."