



Why Companies Need a Diversity Plan

By Donna Payne and Shirley Gorman, PayneGroup, Inc.

If you've been in the workforce for a while, chances are that the company you work for today is quite different from the workplace environment experience when you first entered the job market. Over the years, companies have found that embracing diversity contributes to their success, adding a wide collection of skills and experiences, including creative and innovative thought. While the economy has ebbed and flowed over the years as well as how our companies have responded to changing markets, what is perhaps more noticeable is the way most businesses have diversified their workforce to meet ever-changing needs.

Twenty years ago, diversity in the workforce focused primarily on race and gender. Ten years ago, it also focused on age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and level of education. Today, diversity encompasses all of this and more. In fact today diversity within the workforce includes cultural background, religious practices, learning styles, life styles, thinking styles, personality and communication styles.

Diverse Ages

One area in which companies are being forced to look at diversity is with new hires. Baby boomers, and to a certain extent, Generation X employees are likely to stay at a company for more years than their younger counterparts. If upon formation, a company hires people all around the same age, these same employees may also retire around the same time, leaving a big gap in the workforce. As a result, contingency planning needs to occur for this potential exodus of key employees. One potential solution would be the pairing of younger hires with the more seasoned employees in mentor/mentee relationships, which will help ensure knowledge is transferred across age groups while creating relationships that embrace and engage all parties. This solution offers a way to retain the younger employees while at the same time providing succession planning, both of which are necessary for the long term health of any company.

Management Challenges

Managing a diverse workforce presents its own unique set of challenges, including some that may not be blatantly obvious at first glance. While diversity, as described previously, encompasses many things, such as race, age, gender, often it is the diversity in areas we don't immediately observe that have the biggest impact and present the greatest challenges for management. Example of these difficulties can include personality conflicts, language barriers and cultural differences. Personalities may clash, thought processes may conflict with company objectives, and communication styles may leave room for

improvement. All of which reduce productivity, morale, and company profitability. Communication needs to be the primary focus of management by acknowledging differences, ensuring that all voices are heard, valued, and acknowledged. Keeping an open mind is critical – just because something was always done a certain way, doesn't mean it should always be done that same way.

An organization that is committed to innovation will not only embrace differences, but will actively seek a diverse group of candidates for all positions. As an example, if you have an organization with a rather stifling, bureaucratic culture that you want to change, it doesn't make sense to bring in more people of the same mindset. Focusing on applicants who have more diverse skills, experience and creative thought processes would make you much more likely to achieve your goal. Diversity! Will the current staff like it? Perhaps not. Will they have negative attitudes at first? Perhaps yes. Will they resist the changes? Absolutely. Will they eventually get on board? Most will, especially with strong leadership that focuses on open mindedness and good communication skills. Those who won't get on board will probably eventually leave, and for the long-term success of the organization, that's okay too.

The Benefits of Diversity

Building and valuing a diverse workplace adds creativity and innovation to your company. It may very well be that key factor that gives your company that competitive edge, helping to better position your company for the fast paced changes to come. If we focus on hiring people who push the envelope on thinking, eventually our creativity and invention will benefit. Businesses must either innovate or they will disappear. Diversity fuels innovation to greater heights and at speeds that seem ridiculously impossible, turning ideas that we can barely grasp today into the critical new technologies of tomorrow.

The reality of the business world is that it is constantly evolving to meet ever changing needs. It is, in essence, a microcosm of the larger world around us. Employing a diverse workforce creates an environment that encourages creativity, innovation, open dialog, and ultimately greater job and personal satisfaction. Use diversity to move beyond simple business strategies to the creation of an innovative environment infused with new ideas and creative solutions that are bound to be generated from the beauty of a diverse group of individuals.

About the Author

Donna Payne, CEO and founder of PayneGroup. She is co-chair of a Diversity committee for a non-profit and believes that including diverse voices and opinions make a company better.

Shirley Gorman is VP of Client Relations for PayneGroup. She has been with the company for 15 years and has seen many changes as the workforce diversifies.