

## Why is diversity important in the workplace?

---

### “Diversity: the art of thinking independently together” (Malcolm Forbes)

Regardless of the type of business you are in, your organization exists in the context of a global marketplace that is characterized more by differences among people than by sameness. Customers, employees, vendors, and others that you come in contact with on a regular basis are likely to come from all walks of life. It's necessary to prepare the people who are employed by your organization to interact effectively with all different types of people they'll need to work within the context of their jobs if you want them - and your business - to be able to enjoy success.

### What can be the advantage of having a diverse workforce?

**Innovative problem solving.** Differences among team members contribute a variety of perspectives from different cultural backgrounds, ages, religions, genders and abilities. There is no one best answer to any question--the more ideas you can obtain from different people, the more likely you are to develop a workable answer.

**Enhanced productivity.** Homogeneous teams are less likely to produce creative, innovative solutions. With a diverse workforce that includes individuals of different ages, genders, sexual orientation, abilities, and cultural backgrounds, they will overcome challenges through their wealth of experiences and perspectives.

**Develop and maintain a global competitive advantage.** Cross-culturally trained and multi-lingual staff will give your business a clear advantage to operate in today's global market. Decrease or eliminate barriers to sales. A diverse workforce has expert knowledge of the communities it represents and can help your organization expand beyond traditional markets and customers.

**Save money.** Capitalize on the talents within your workforce and reduce employee turnover by learning to manage and maximize diversity in your workplace. Create a healthier work environment. Effective diversity management can result in an accommodating and supportive work environment that recognizes the benefits of individual differences.

**Fill job vacancies.** Hiring from diverse groups can help you avoid a labour shortage by creating a larger pool of candidates from which to draw.

### What can be the consequences of ignoring diversity?

Ignoring diversity issues costs time, money, and efficiency. Some of the consequences can include unhealthy tensions; loss of productivity because of increased conflict; inability to attract and retain talented people of all kinds; complaints and legal actions; and inability to retain valuable employees, resulting in lost investments in recruitment and training.

## How to develop diversity competence?

When we stereotype, we place a person in a particular “mental file” not based on information gained through knowledge about or personal experience with the particular person. Rather, we assign the person to a mental file based on what we believe about a group to which the person belongs. Stereotypes help us organize our thinking and manage massive amounts of information. We classify the infinite variety of human beings into a convenient handful of “types.” Once in place, stereotypes are difficult to undo. It’s hard to stop being “on automatic.”

To help us move off automatic and begin to value differences, we need to develop diversity competence. Diversity competence consists of four areas: awareness, knowledge, skills, and action or behaviour.

### **Awareness**

- Recognize differences as diversity rather than abnormal behaviour or inappropriate responses to the environment.
- Respect the benefits of diverse values and behaviours to people and to the organization.
- Accept that each culture finds some values more important and some behaviours more desirable than others.
- Understand the effect that historic distrust has on present-day interactions.
- Have a clear sense of your individual culture.
- Recognize your own ethnocentricity—the ways in which you stereotype, judge, and discriminate—and your emotional reactions to conflicting cultural values.
- Understand how the culture of your organization affects those whose culture is different.
- Recognize the similarities that are shared across the human culture regardless of the differences that exist among individual cultures and groups. These include, but are not limited to, desire for safety, good health, education and well-being of our children, love and belongingness, self-esteem (feeling of worthiness), and the ability to pursue and achieve our potential.

### **Knowledge**

- Learn factual information about other cultures and groups with different backgrounds.
- Read an article or book about a cultural or social group different from your background. Compare your views with those of the author.
- See a movie about other cultural lifestyles. Compare how you live your life to what you’ve seen on film.
- Read about cross-gender differences in communication styles.
- Learn a new language.
- Interview people from different cultures to learn about their cultures. How did they grow up? What were the important messages passed on to family members? How are children viewed? How do they view older people?

### **Skills**

- Take personal responsibility.
- Make continued and sincere attempts to understand the world from other points of view.
- Develop skills in cross-cultural communication, influencing, networking, problem-solving, conflict management and leadership.
- Look for ways to work effectively with diverse groups of people.

### **Action/Behaviour**

- Teach others about cultural differences.
- Develop a mentoring relationship with someone from a different culture or identity group.
- Show more patience when working and interacting with people who have learning styles different from yours.
- Integrate diversity issues as an ongoing topic in staff meetings at work.
- Develop a personal plan for continued learning toward diversity competency.

If you would like to test your self-awareness and diversity competence, contact us.

### **Contact Info**

For more information please contact

Mary Kramer  
Global Service Group Leader – Human Capital Solutions  
[mkramer@spenglerfox.com](mailto:mkramer@spenglerfox.com)

Sources:

<http://business.lovetoknow.com>

<http://www.yourdiversityatwork.com>

<http://ucsfhr.ucsf.edu>

<http://extension.psu.edu>