

Diversity in Practice

Justyna Kubicka-Daab **interview's Agnieszka** **Romanczuk, ex VP HR** **EMEA for Avon**

Justyna Kubicka-Daab: Agnieszka, during your career, you experienced a lot of diversity of all kinds, and you yourself can be considered as an example of the diversity policy of the company – both gender and cultural- wise. Let us start from the beginning – your move from highly technical, men - dominated environment of Xerox, to Avon – The Company for Women. What were the major differences between the organizational cultures of these two companies?

Agnieszka Romanczuk: Yes indeed, Avon was shockingly different to Xerox. Xerox was a men dominated culture, very aggressive and very political, but process oriented and quality oriented. Avon ,on the other hand struck me as people and relationship oriented, quite soft but with limited process . Of course majority of staff are women, very friendly and collaborative, however ambitious as men. In my view culture of any company is dominated by staff, whose composition is strongly influenced by customers. As majority of Avon customers are women, it is quite natural that majority of our staff is women as well.

Justyna Kubicka-Daab: What kind of approaches to the diversity issue have you encountered on your way? Have you been personally responsible for the implementation of the diversity policies during your career?

Agnieszka Romanczuk: I have worked and sponsored as HR leader many diversity initiatives. The most interesting one was in the US. We have done an extensive project and proposed clear solutions to improve diversity and inclusion at Avon. This

project received very high strategic rank and was sponsored by the CEO herself. The aim was not only to maintain the proper diversity in terms of the workforce structure but to ensure the equal INCLUSION of all segments of employees. A lot of procedural initiatives were designed and implemented at that time. For example, one part of the project was devoted to meetings organization. An extensive training in conducting meetings was offered to all managers. They learned how to empower and listen to all team members. Another initiative was connected with inclusion via flexible work arrangements and improved work –life balance. A lot of technical and infrastructural solutions were introduced to enable remote work and engagement. What seems important is the fact that those initiatives were not only driven by political correctness and quota obligations. They were also strongly supported by our marketing strategy. The idea was to mirror our clients' structure in our own internal organization and to have all segments "represented" among Avon's employees. For example we had a very strong Hispanic community among our Avon ladies-consultants. We recognized a strong need to diversify our management and marketing teams in terms of ethnic background and to educate top management as to how strong is the link between business results and in-company diversity. A lot of "soft" integration techniques were also introduced: establishing Councils representing minorities (e.g. Hispanic, Asian but also gay, lesbian etc.) and series of Christmas Parties dedicated to each culture. Back in EMEA as well I was a big supporter of Diversity project in our Region, although it is definitely less diverse by nature.

Justyna Kubicka-Daab: During your career at Avon you moved several times – from Poland to New York and back to Poland, then again to USA, next to Philippines, then to London. Which of these moves were particularly difficult and challenging? When have you felt "the most diversified" and why?

Agnieszka Romaczuk: Definitely our first move to the US, as it was the first time I moved out of Poland together with part of my family. So everything was new, challenging and different. However, the most different culturally was my life in Manila, where I was a head of HR for APAC. Not only it was challenging culturally but required a lot of adjustment physically (hot climate) and it was a hardship location with limited food selection, security issues, weather surprises. Also, in terms of office and work habits – it was quite a lesson of openness and tolerance (e.g. strong religious accents in everyday office life).

Justyna Kubicka-Daab: What is the impact of frequent relocations on the family? Looking from hindsight – do you (and your closest) consider it as an enriching/ positive experience or rather some kind of sacrifice?

Agnieszka Romaczuk: The balance sheet of these moves looks positive from the perspective of the family. My children have learned English, have seen a lot of countries and places but as well are able to adapt to changing conditions so easily. They have met friends of different cultures and races and appreciated them a lot. This is most probably the best benefit of this experience. At times it was hard, and my family had to face lot more challenges than the regular family who never moved out of Poland. But even these challenges were enriching because they had to learn to be more independent and accountable.

Justyna Kubicka-Daab: What do you personally think about the diversity programs /political correctness/ parities? What are their benefits and possible shortcomings from the point of view of the company performance?

Agnieszka Romaczuk: Personally, I am a big proponent of diversity programs and parities. Most probably I am a minority in terms of being so clear and vocal about it but let me explain why. First, I am reading a lot of reports and participated in many conferences focused on that issue, I have experienced and observed these aspects in

business for many years and in many different countries. Based on that knowledge diversity for me is more than helping women get to the top, (however it is very important) but it is about leading more inclusively. We need to draw upon diverse talents to deliver better products and services to our customers.

Corporations have become increasingly aware that diversity involves change in organizational culture. It requires taking an action in many areas. Many people including women think quotas are humiliating and counter-productive. But I must say they are better than no push. Because when there are targets, people are forced to take action, to do something to change current reality. Of course there is a risk that introducing quotas will force companies to compromise quality or perhaps do things only because of quotas not strong beliefs but these disadvantages are in my view smaller than advantages of more progressive approach. We need to act more aggressively so to speak to achieve better progress, specifically in Poland with women leading only 3% of large and mid-size organizations. To speak and softly support diversity is just not enough.

On the other hand I often witnessed the surprising lack of mutual support among women, especially those who already are successfully on the top. They tend to behave with solidarity up to a certain point but once they reached a certain level, they seem to forget about diversity and inclusion issues.

*Interview was conducted in December 2014, when Agnieszka was in between career moves, and covers her experience gained in Xerox and Avon.

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