

Fostering an Inclusive Work Environment

Objective

- It is important to create an inclusive and respectful environment for all.
- Many of these terms and ideas are not just buzzwords or ideals for business practices but allows for an inclusive and diverse environment to benefit from everyone's unique perspectives.

America's Workplace

- America's workplace is becoming more diverse every day. According to the Department of Labor, white men make up only 45% of the total workforce.
- Women, minorities and immigrants account for 80% of new entrants into the American labor market.
- The average age of employees is also growing, and 50% of all new jobs require more advanced skills and training.

Definitions

- **Diversity** represents a cultural ideal that recognizes and values individual differences and abilities. More than that, workplaces are more diverse than ever, which is a reflection of this ideal. To succeed in this changing work environment, employees must make an effort to understand many different cultures and backgrounds and learn to work with people who have distinct customs beliefs and attitudes

Perspectives

Diversity means speaking about dynamic cultural values based on accepting and understanding people and the variety of factors that can shape individual identities. These factors can include race, sex, age, national origin, religion, mentor or physical disability, pregnancy, and sexual orientation.

Society and the Workplace

Society

Society is moving away from a “melting pot” perspective, in which everyone tries to become the same. We now consider society to be more like a “salad bowl,” in which individual differences are valuable and the different ingredients actually enrich one another. Our ability to understand and appreciate our own diversity determines our success.

Workplace

Companies that encourage an open dialog about differences and provide education, such as this course, give employees opportunities to examine their own perceptions, assumptions, and fears in a safe environment. This is an important step toward recognizing and valuing the differences in your company and creating a culture of inclusion for all employees.

Personal Beliefs

Diversity in the workplace and in society means reevaluating long held beliefs and considering all people as individuals with their own unique characteristics and talents period thinking negatively about coworkers could prevent you from meaningful and successful work relationships

Working Through Differences

Members of a minority may occasionally feel people around them make snap judgments based on their age, religion, sex, race, color, or disability. Those who are not minorities may not spend much time or energy thinking about individual differences. Some may even believe that the playing field is already level, and that hard work alone is what makes success possible.

The best way to develop a genuine appreciation for diversity is to work toward a mutual understanding of coworker's individual differences and abilities. Rather than thinking of disagreements as "us versus them," emphasize diversity and harness the strengths of each individual employee. This will create a strong team with few weaknesses.

Benefits of Diversity

A successful diverse workforce encourages and enables all employees to fully draw on their talents and skills for the benefit of their company. In today's global economy, companies that have employees who can communicate and understand the international market will be more successful and profitable.

Productivity

Coworkers who have an awareness of individual differences can have a significant impact on the productivity of the organization. Studies indicate that employees who feel comfortable in their work environment are more motivated to do a good job and will take more pride in their work.

Intolerance of individual differences can cause resentment, stifle creativity, and increase employee turnover.

Problem solving

A recent study on the impact of diversity on problem-solving skills indicated that diverse groups make better decisions.

When the same test problems were presented to two different groups, teams that included Asian-American, African-American, and Hispanic employees produced more effective and feasible solutions than team groups composed of only Anglo-Americans. The diversity of opinions, knowledge, and background allowed these participants to consider different ideas and alternatives. Part of diversity is creating choice where there was none before.

Factors

Age

The average age of the American worker continues to increase. This is true even as baby boomers begin to retire. As they do so, it could be difficult to replace them with younger workers who are as skilled and as knowledgeable.

Immigration

Workers from other countries, many of them well-educated, will continue to migrate to the United States. This trend, coupled with declining birth rates and the decreasing number of college graduates in the United States, will mean an influx of talented immigrants into the American workforce.

Religion

There are hundreds of religious denominations in the United States. Sensitivity to the spiritual beliefs, religious observances and holidays, and customs of coworkers is incredibly important now and will only be more so in the future.

Disability

Designed to support and protect the rights of the disabled, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has contributed to an increased presence of mentally and physically disabled people in the workplace. As employers continue to identify and accommodate qualified persons with disabilities, talents that were previously overlooked will make their way into the labor force.

A New Environment

Change is always difficult. Sometimes, you may not realize there is a need for change. You may feel that since you never say anything that is racist or sexist, you are okay just as you are. Diversity is not simply about avoiding discriminatory comments. Understanding the diversity around you means that you allow people with different viewpoints to contribute to your success in the workplace and that you can give back what you gain.

Beliefs

Analyze your belief system

Analyzing your own culture and beliefs is a critical first step. Your belief system is the sum of your experience — it's how your parents raised you, how your neighbors talked, where you went to school, and every job you've ever had. Whether you came from a small or big town, whether you went to college or trade school, you must evaluate your beliefs and think hard about where they came from. Ask yourself if your beliefs still represent who you want to be and how you want to be seen.

Consider the consequences of your beliefs

Your beliefs have consequences. Even if you never said a word, you could not keep all your beliefs a secret. Your coworkers are as aware of you as you are aware of them, and every idea can result in something positive or negative. Insensitivity to the beliefs of other employees could affect the way others see you and may prevent your success at work. Even an offhanded remark could have unexpected and unwanted repercussions.

Listening and Keeping an Open Mind

Listen and learn

Create an open line of communication between yourself and your coworkers. Rather than let assumptions shape your perceptions and how others perceive you, express yourself clearly and ask questions that show you are willing to understand other viewpoints. Diversity is not about passive tolerance; it's about building an environment of trust where all employees can talk about the things that are important to them and count on respect and enthusiasm in return.

Keep an open mind

Keep an open mind about people who are different from you. Don't rule out the possibility of changing your thoughts and actions. Rethink how you work with other people and ask "Is this how I want things to be?" Participating in a changing workforce will challenge your existing values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. It is a process that will require both your time and effort — but it's also something that can only benefit you, your career, and your coworkers.

Civil Rights

Federal civil rights legislation prohibits certain types of employment discrimination in the terms and conditions of employment such as hiring, promotions, compensation, and termination. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) ensures that individuals have the same chance to succeed regardless of race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy), national origin, age, disability, or genetic information. The EEOC is also responsible for investigating employee discrimination claims.

Title VII of the Civil Right Act of 1964

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, as amended, is the broadest and most general of all workplace diversity laws. Title VII applies to employers with 15 or more employees. State and local laws often apply to smaller employers.

Protects: All employees from discrimination on account of race, color, religion, sex, pregnancy, or national origin.

Purpose: To ensure equality of employment opportunities and eliminate discriminatory practices.

Prohibits: Discrimination in hiring promotion discharge payment of benefits job classification, training, referral and other aspects of employment based on race, color, religion, sex, pregnancy, or national origin.

American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

The ADA applies to employers with 15 or more employees. State and local laws often apply to smaller employers.

Protects: Qualified individuals with disabilities.

Purpose: To make employment and public facilities more accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Prohibits: Discrimination against individuals with disabilities and hiring, promotion, discharge, payment of benefits, job classification, referral, and other aspects of employment because of a physical or mental disability.

Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA)

The ADEA of 1967 applies to employers with 20 or more employees state and local laws often apply to all employers.

Protects: Employees 40 years of age or older although some state and local laws apply to all employees regardless of age.

Purpose: To ensure equality of employment opportunities and eliminate discriminatory practices.

Prohibits: Discrimination with respect to hiring, promotion, discharge, payment of benefits, job classification, referral, and other aspects of employment.

Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 (PDA)

The term “because of sex” now includes “because of or on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions.”

Protects: Women with conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth.

Purpose: To ensure pregnant women or women with related conditions are treated the same as similarly skilled people in all aspects of employment.

Prohibits: Discrimination and hiring, promotion and discharge, payment of benefits, job classifications, referral, and other aspects of employment based on pregnancy or a related condition.

Generalizations

Stereotypes do not reflect the truth about any particular individual or group, but it sometimes appears easier to make judgments about people based on their race, religion, or national origin than it is to build a meaningful work relationship.

Shared Goals

Truly understanding the differences between you and your coworkers is not easy. Everyone has a family, home, religious belief, favorite food, and personal dress style. But your coworkers probably share your goal of personal success and success for the company. To achieve that success, it is vital that you learn who your coworkers are, rather than rely on stereotypical notions of who they might be.

Benefits of Inclusion and Diversity

- **Improved decision-making:** Diverse teams are more likely to consider a wider range of perspectives, leading to more creative and innovative solutions. When individuals from various backgrounds collaborate, they bring fresh ideas and approaches to assist with decision-making.
- **Increased creativity and productivity:** Diversity of thought and experience can act as a catalyst for new and better ideas, products, and services. When individuals with different life experiences come together, they spark a synergy that drives creativity and boosts productivity.
- **Stronger business results:** Research has repeatedly demonstrated that companies with diverse and inclusive workforces perform better financially. Embracing diversity isn't just a moral imperative; it's also a smart business strategy.

Benefits of Inclusion and Diversity

- **Improved employee engagement and satisfaction:** Employees are more likely to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs when they feel valued and respected for their unique contributions. Inclusivity fosters an environment where every team member feels heard and appreciated.
- **Reduced turnover:** When individuals feel a sense of belonging and see their contributions recognized, they are less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere.
- **Enhanced brand reputation:** A reputation for inclusivity can set your organization apart in a competitive job market.

Involvement

- All employees need to understand their role in building inclusive workplaces. This involves employers setting clear standards of behavior for inclusion, treating all colleagues with dignity and respect, and empowering employees to challenge exclusionary behavior.
- What you can do:
 - Make inclusion relevant to people at all levels of the business; what does inclusion mean in their job role and what they can do to be more inclusive?
 - Work with employee resource groups to highlight employees' roles in inclusion, promoting alliance.

From the Top Down

- Managers are key in inclusion. The relationship they have with employees, and how they carry out people management practices and policies, will impact employees' opportunities and experiences of work.
- Managers need to ensure there's a level playing field for their team, and support employee's individual needs. However, bias can play a role in the opportunities that individuals are given at work - given our preferences for people 'like us'.
- What you can do:
 - Examine progression and hiring data to ensure that there's a level playing field and address any bias.
 - Embed inclusion in line manager training and development – for example, raise awareness of issues relating to inclusion and empower managers to carry out people management practices effectively.

Policies and Procedures

Consider the formal and informal mechanisms that can be improved to enhance inclusion for all employees. For example, ensure that there are clear mechanisms for feedback that allow employees to feel like they have a 'say' in the organization.

Create specific policies and practices that support particular groups or individual needs. For example, make sure there are clear policies in place to support individual needs; these need to be implemented by managers and backed up by a supportive workplace environment.

Culture, Climate and Values

Creating an inclusive climate and culture requires fair policies and practices, recognizing and valuing difference, and including all employees in decision-making processes.

Real advocacy and buy-in is important in creating a truly inclusive organization. In some cases, organizations might need to evaluate their own norms and values.

Conclusion

- Culture influences values, assumptions, thought processes, and work relationships.
- Consideration should be made for anti-discrimination laws, common stereotypes, and how to work in a dynamic and diverse workplace.
- The key is to recognize the changing work environment and identify how to improve the working relationships with people from different backgrounds.