

The Challenge of Diversity in a Global Environment

By Deirdre Golden, ORC Worldwide

In recent years the term “diversity,” as it applies to people and culture, has grown in prominence and appears to have taken on a life of its own, it is used with the assumption that everyone knows what it means, and that it resonates with every culture. The reality however, may be very different.

In some countries, the term does not exist in the language. In others, the focus of diversity on respect for difference and individualism may be at odds with more homogeneous cultural bases and attitudes. In other countries, diversity may just not feature at all.

We can only achieve an integrated and holistic approach to diversity when we are clear about what it means and are sure that our understanding takes cognisance of local cultures and environments.

If we look first at the United States and Europe, we can already see some clear differences in how diversity is understood and put into practice.

In the United States and Britain we have come to view diversity from a strictly representative basis, namely equal opportunities and compliance with relevant laws. This approach means that diversity is viewed in terms of the rights of minority groups, for example the rights of women, of people from specific ethnic minority groups, disabled people, different religious groups, or people who have suffered some other kind of discrimination. Consequently, many people would take the view that if you don't belong to one of those minority groups, then diversity is irrelevant to them.

In continental Europe, where it is not the custom or practice to identify and measure ethnicity in the workforce, and in fact, the practice is outlawed in some countries, the term “diversity.” has tended to focus predominantly on gender issues. However, recent EU legislation has addressed other categories of person, namely age, disability, race and ethnic origin, religion and belief, and sexual orientation.

If we consider diversity at a global level, there are differences at a very fundamental level between developed and developing nations.

Developed nations tend to perceive fundamental rights as civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech and religion and freedom from discrimination, and believe them to be of primary importance, while people from less developed countries more frequently list economic and social rights, such as food, shelter and education, as being of primary importance.

Therefore the concept of diversity as it is perceived in developing countries will be very low down on the hierarchy of needs.

For example, the recent proposals in Korea to extend the retirement age to 60, aim at reducing poverty in old age. In Europe demographic needs have forced the extension of retirement age, and equality legislation now outlaws discrimination against older workers, thus extending the individual's rights and choices. These examples show that cultural attitudes to concepts such as diversity and equality may be accorded very different priority depending on the region.

Some of these differences are only becoming apparent now as organisations look to extend their diversity programs beyond the home country headquarters.

Consequently, a key challenge for any organisation in this position is to develop a common understanding of diversity, and how it applies to the organisation at a local level.

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This process is critical and may well be time-consuming. However, once it has been achieved, through research and dialogue with employees in local areas, goals can be set that match local needs and which fit into the overall organisation framework of values that the organisation has defined. For example, in some locations, increasing the number of women in management might be the main goal, while in others, the objective might be to increase opportunities for individuals of a certain caste, or to address a bullying problem. Other key steps include communicating the organisation's approach to diversity across the organisation and ensuring that it is reinforced repeatedly at all levels.

The approach outlined above does not assume that the process will be smooth sailing.

There will of course, be occasions when corporate values will be challenged, or where they conflict with established practices at local level. In these situations, the organisation's commitment to diversity will be tested as it seeks to impose corporate values that will override local ones.

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