

TEN MYTHS ABOUT CULTURALLY DIVERSE EMPLOYEES



The United States Office of Employment predicts that 29 percent of the U.S. labor force will be comprised of minorities by 2008. More importantly, it estimates that between 1998 and 2008 some 41 percent of the people entering the U.S. workforce will be minorities. With over 120 million Baby Boomers retiring and only 70 million Generation-X employees to fill their jobs we must obviously look elsewhere to meet this shortfall.

Hiring people from diverse cultures is one possible solution that many companies are turning to but they're finding it very different from hiring European American workers. Issues such as advertising for candidates, interviewing techniques, screening or testing, reviewing resumes and getting referrals to workers must be customized to this group.

1. **“PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE CULTURES ONLY RELATE TO PEOPLE FROM THEIR OWN CULTURE.”**

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, many cultural groups would prefer to be managed by someone from outside their own culture. Asians and Hispanics, for example, are very private about their financial affairs and may prefer to be supervised by people who don't know their culture.

2. **“MULTICULTURAL PEOPLE HAVE SUPERSTITIONS AND BELIEFS THAT ARE TOTALLY INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO AMERICANS.”**

Remember that people in the United States have beliefs that often baffle outsiders such as the fact that black cats, walking under ladders and the number thirteen are unlucky. Most other cultures have their own beliefs that are just different.

Many cultural beliefs happen to directly affect the purchase of real estate such as the direction a home faces or the numbers in the address. Many Asians believe that the number four is unlucky because when pronounced in Japanese or Chinese it sounds very similar to those cultures' word for "death".

Just as there are very few hospitals or hotels with a thirteenth floor in America the same buildings in Asia lack a fourth floor. You can see that this belief is similar in both countries.

3. “SOME PEOPLE FROM OUTSIDE THE U.S. ARE UNETHICAL BECAUSE THEY INSIST ON RENEGOTIATING AN EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT AFTER IT HAS BEEN SIGNED.”

While it's true that people from other cultures often try to renegotiate An employment agreement after it has been signed it's not a matter of ethics. America is a “low context” country where everything is spelled out between people either verbally or in contracts. Other countries are “high context” where much more information is derived from the context of the communication and less is spelled out.

In high context countries it is understood that contracts are only the beginning of a relationship which can change as the parties get to know each other. The parties are obligated to help each other “adjust” the contract to their needs until it is completed.

4. “PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE CULTURES GET ALONG TOGETHER BECAUSE THEY'RE ALL MINORITIES.”

This is one of the biggest myths in the workplace. In fact, many groups from the same race don't even get along. For instance, Asians are composed of seventeen separate and distinct major groups who may intensely dislike each other. Between the groups there can also be animosity such as that which exists between many Asian groups and African Americans. Why, because they are at the opposite ends of the cultural continuum. They are complete opposites in terms of eye contact, body language, expression, etc.

5. “PEOPLE FROM OUTSIDE THIS COUNTRY ARE UNREASONABLE WHEN IT COMES TO NEGOTIATING.”

Remember, there are two types of countries in the world – negotiating and non-negotiating. The United States is a non-negotiating country where we generally pay the price asked by vendors. In most other countries around the world people haggle on everything from groceries to clothing to homes. To expect someone from one of these places not to bargain is tantamount to asked them not to breathe.

Experienced negotiators know that when they first make an offer on a job it is the highest they will ever be able to go. They can only go in one direction from there – down. This is why they will start embarrassingly high with their initial offer even if they might be willing to accept a lower salary.

6. “PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES ARE JUST TOO MUCH TROUBLE TO BOTHER WITH.”

The author hears this statement from employers throughout the country. Too bad for them because if you know how to meet the special needs of multicultural workers they can be just as loyal and enjoyable to work with as anyone else. In addition, people from other cultures are very good about referring their friends and family if you serve them with sensitivity and patience.

An added bonus when working with people from outside the United States is the opportunity to learn about other cultures. Just think of it. You can take a round-the-world trip without getting seasick or losing one piece of luggage.

7. “PEOPLE SHOULD DO AS AMERICANS DO WHEN THEY’RE IN THIS COUNTRY.”

Did you ever wonder why we are called the “Ugly Americans” when we travel outside our borders? We will fly to Germany, France or China and expect the people there to accommodate us in terms of providing the food and other amenities we are comfortable with. We expect to be served pizza in Asia and to speak English in France.

Just as it’s difficult for we Americans to leave our 200-year-old culture at the gate when we travel abroad it’s even harder for those coming here with cultures that are thousands of years old to do as we do here. While they do try it is hard.

Also, if we want to attract people from diverse cultures to our companies it is we who will have to adjust – a little. Take the time to learn about other cultures, languages and foods. As a bonus you will become a much more interesting person to talk to in the process.

8. “MULTICULTURAL PEOPLE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES ARE DISLOYAL AND USUALLY END-UP LEAVING THE COMPANY AFTER A SHORT TIME.”

Actually, it's just the opposite. People from culturally diverse backgrounds usually stay longer than the average employee. In fact, they often won't consider leaving unless they are treated extremely poorly regardless of pay. When a company and its workers treat minorities with sensitivity it's rare and they are reluctant to go elsewhere, even for higher pay.

9. "WE SHOULD TREAT EVERYONE EQUALLY, REGARDLESS OF CULTURE."

Yes, it's true that we should treat every worker fairly but this does not necessarily mean equally. For instance, if a new employee who is blind comes into your office would you simply hand them an employment contract to "read"? This is equal but is it fair? Hardly. Wouldn't you try to treat them equally?

Similarly, by taking into account the unique needs of every worker aren't we serving them better? This would be equally true for being culturally sensitive.

10. "PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT THEIR CULTURE – THEY JUST WANT TO BE TREATED LIKE EVERYONE ELSE."

This is probably the biggest myth when dealing with people from other cultures. We who are from diverse cultures know we are different and unless something is mentioned early in your relationship with a multicultural employee it will always stand as a barrier to building true rapport.

Once you take a sincere interest in your worker's cultural background he or she will usually be more than happy to tell you about their language, food and even beliefs. Get into the habit of asking every employee, "Where do your ancestors come from?" Notice, this can get the conversation started with someone from Ireland just as easily as Thailand.

Try asking workers how to say "hello" or even your name in their native tongue. You may be slightly embarrassed as you struggle with their language but they'll love you for it because now you know how they feel trying to speak English.

If you want to be truly successful with people from other cultures you must make an agreement with each and every one of them. "I will teach you about our company and how things operate here. In exchange, I want you

to teach me about your cultural background.” In this way, you develop a mutually-beneficial relationship which will hopefully last a lifetime.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael D. Lee, CRS, GRI, has been a real estate professional for over twenty years. He is a nationally-recognized professional speaker and the author of the best-selling book *OPENING DOORS: Selling To Multicultural Real Estate Clients* from Oakhill Press. Michael speaks to real estate groups throughout the country on selling to diverse home buyers and can be reached at (800) 41-SPEAK or by e-mail at: Michael@EthnoConnect.com.

