

Business Advantages of Diversity in the Workplace

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 from 1998 to 2008 some 41 percent of the people entering the U.S. workforce will be minorities.

Most companies in America recognize that there are significant advantages to diversity in the workplace. By integrating workers from culturally diverse backgrounds into their workforce companies become much stronger. However, many firms don't understand the importance or challenges of workplace diversity. Diversity needs to be seen as an integral part of the business plan, essential to successful products and increased sales. This is especially true in today's global marketplace, as companies interact with different cultures and clients.

Among the advantages of diversity in the workplace are: increased creativity, increased productivity, *new attitudes*, new language skills, global understanding, new processes, and new solutions to difficult problems.

1. ***Creativity increases*** when people with different ways of solving difficult problems work together towards a common solution. 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. Other cultures can offer insightful alternatives Americans might not have considered. This is a tremendous advantage of diversity in the workplace.

2. ***Productivity increases*** exponentially when people of all cultures pull together towards a single inspiring goal. Foreign executives are extremely successful in the American corporate world because of globalization and internationalization. People from China and India benefit U.S. firms with their stellar quantitative skills. And European citizens--Swiss, Germans, British, and French--do well here in high-level jobs. Increased productivity is an obvious advantage of diversity in the workplace.

3. ***New attitudes*** are brought to the business table by people from diverse cultures. For instance, Americans may want to consider adopting the perspective other cultures have about time. Our culture believes that "time is money" and "getting to the bottom line" is paramount in business. However, in most other countries around the world "time is for building relationships" and an integral part of getting to know the other party you are considering doing business with before starting a transaction. How much of an advantage would workplace diversity be if we followed this practice more closely?

4. ***Language skills*** are obviously needed in today's increasingly global economy--and diverse workers often have this proficiency. If a company needs specific knowledge or language skills, it may hire foreign nationals for help. In some markets, international job seekers have the advantage. For example, companies breaking into European, Asian or Latin American markets will need foreign expertise. High-tech firms in particular are expanding into countries abroad. In the United States, we like to believe that English is "the language of the world." While that may be true for business, our native tongue ranks

second in the world behind Chinese and just slightly ahead of Hindustani. To truly build relationships with the other people of the world, we must speak their language. It is a tremendous advantage of workplace diversity if we enable people from other cultures can help us understand not just their words, but also the meaning behind what they are saying.

5. *Understanding how the United States fits into the world picture* is crucial. By relating to people of all backgrounds, Americans will gain a greater perspective on how different cultures operate and experience greater success in global business as a result. The average American believes that this country's residents account for about 25 percent of the world's population. People from outside our borders are not surprised to learn that the figure is actually less than five percent.

6. *New processes* can result when people with different ideas come together and collaborate. In today's fast-moving world, there is no longer room for thinking, "We *have* always done things this way and cannot change." American workers must bring multiple skills to the environment, think cross culturally, and adapt quickly to new situations. Those who meet these criteria are likely to do well, regardless of culture--even in tough economic times.

Workplace diversity can make American companies more productive and profitable. They also bring differences that we must understand and embrace for those benefits to be realized.

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