

Corporate Advice



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LEADERSHIP

# Diversity in your Workplace. Get On Board!

**W**e humans are a funny lot! Apparently most of us value doing new and different things, enjoying the full scope that life has to offer but when it comes to diversity in the workplace, we're not always as accepting of others as we could or should be.

Diversity is about difference. Different colours, different skills, different backgrounds, religions and interests.

After all, it's these aspects that make the workplace energetic, interesting and a fascinating kaleidoscope of difference.

Diversity in the workplace occurs when employees with a wide range of differences work together - different ages, backgrounds, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, workplace experiences, educational backgrounds and political affiliations, to name a few.

The problem with humans and diversity

Many countries around the world today are multi-cultural societies, rich with approaches, cultures and ways of being.

Most of us say that we value diversity and people who are 'different' to us, but it does not always appear to be the case. Particularly in the workplace.

Humans, like other primates, are born into social groups - otherwise named a clan, a tribe, a culture.

Raised within, and by, this clan and the culture significantly shapes, in part, the people we become.

When that is threatened, we often go into fight or flight mode, standing our ground to protect our clan.

It's similar in the workplace. We may be more accustomed to working with people from our own or similar background, because 'we do things in the same way.'

For example, if we follow a particular religion, we may pray similarly, and respect each other for doing so.

Whilst this may seem strange or unfamiliar to a person from another religion with whom you work, it does not mean either is right nor wrong, merely different.

Because a colleague of yours does something in a different way, does not mean that their way is wrong. Just different.

The quicker we learn to appreciate diversity, and be curious and accepting of it, the better all workplaces will be.

**What the law says**

It is unlawful to disadvantage employees and job seekers because of their colour, race, gender, sexual preferences, religion, nationality, disability, political affiliation or age, for example.

As in many countries, the fall-out of not implementing effective Workplace Diversity plans success-

**Types of Diversity**

There are many and on the positive side include:

- ✓ Mature Aged workers, who bring with them experience, skills gained over many years and countless lessons learned about how to deal with situations well;
- ✓ Young People, who bring an advanced technological ability, new ways of approaching old problems, energy and zest;
- ✓ People with a disability, who are passionate about their roles and are gifted at uniting a team;
- ✓ Women in the workplace, who are often able to see issues from various perspectives and are able to mentor and coach younger people;
- ✓ Apprentices and trainees, who are committed to learning as much as they can about their particular trade or area of study to use well;
- ✓ People from overseas, who bring with them a richness in culture, language, beliefs and different ways of doing things that Organisations can use for their benefit;
- ✓ Indigenous people, who are intrinsically steeped in the richness of the culture and people of their land and from whom we can all learn so much.

fully in Organisations in Fiji often results in bullying, harassment and discrimination.

The Employment Act of 1965, currently the single most comprehensive piece of legislation dealing with employment in Fiji, deems workplace discrimination as illegal. (Source: [www.ilo.org/ifpdial/information-resources/nationallaw](http://www.ilo.org/ifpdial/information-resources/nationallaw))

**Conclusion**

If you don't practice workplace diversity in your Organisation, it's time to get serious.

Research findings explain that workplace diversity brings a competitive edge to your business and increases profitability.

Doing workplace diversity 'well' requires planning, inclusion of people and a firm commitment to fairness and equality for all.

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**Benefits of Workplace diversity**

There are many reasons why diversity in the workplace helps increase the bottom line.

For many Organisations, it is the very ability to embrace and build on a diverse workforce that gives the company its competitive edge.

- **A richer pool of ideas and approaches to problem solving:** When challenges or problems arise, a diverse workforce is able to lean on a range of different approaches, perspectives and solutions to resolve issues that may not be solved as efficiently without approaching it from many ways.
- **A broader range of services that increase a client base:** Because a diverse workforce has employees who speak different languages and understand different cultures, service providers are able to broaden their services and products to accommodate these different cultures, ultimately increasing their client base.
- **Increased Adaptability and flexibility:** Individual skills and talents learned in different countries and applied in a variety of ways enable an organisation to be more flexible and adaptable in providing solutions to business problems.

**The stumbling blocks to successful Workplace Diversity**

If workplace diversity is so advantageous, why do so many Organisation's struggle to implement it successfully?

- **Discrimination:** People judge others and stereo-type each other. Think about your own workplace and reflect on whether this happens. An example is a woman being passed over for a promotion 'because it's a man's job and she has children to go home to.'
- **Prejudice:** People are prejudiced against each other, or a particular racial group or gender, for example. Believing that because a person or group who hail from a particular country will never be as good in a role as a person or group from another ethnic background is an example of prejudice.
- **Inflexibility:** Our minds are made up about other people and we are so inflexible in our thinking that we are not prepared to 'give them a go' or encourage them to greater heights in their career. Research indicates that this is more prevalent in management positions.
- **Communication difficulties:** Speaking different languages is often a barrier to effective communication and working well together. Rather than making the effort to learn how to communicate better with each other, it all becomes too hard, and potentially valuable relationships at work are doomed before they start.
- **Historical barriers:** People judge and don't forgive each other for the sins of the past even though they may not have been born at the time! A classic example: Jim worked with a woman in a key role in a manufacturing company who was adamant that she would never work with a person from a German background. It was later discovered that her family had been exterminated in a Camp and even though this woman was not born at the time, she was not prepared to forgive the perpetrators of the second world war - ever! Tragically, even though she was an excellent worker, eventually her attitude and prejudice lost her a key role in the Organisation and the opportunity to work with, and make, many great friends.
- **An ineffective (or non-existent) workplace diversity policy and inefficient processes to support diversity:** Organisations often talk about 'workplace diversity' but don't implement it properly or support it with robust policies and procedures. The world is a small village since the advent of the internet, and it stands to reason that we will work with people from all parts of the globe. Organisations, through their policies and procedures, need to ensure that workplace diversity is successfully embraced and implemented.

**Workplace Diversity - Get it Right!**

- **Take stock of diversity in your workplace:** Design a plan on how to successfully implement a workplace diversity plan, based on what is currently happening in your workplace. Get feedback from your staff, involve them in designing a policy and implementing creative and robust strategies to increase workplace communication and break down barriers.
- **Form a Workplace Diversity Project Team:** With a key group of people from different backgrounds and levels within your Organisation, form a project team to design, implement and monitor a plan that will respect and promote successful workplace diversity.
- **Implement your Policy and Plan:** Led from the top, the workplace diversity plan must be founded on respect, inclusion and acceptance of all concerned, and needs to permeate throughout the entire workplace. In addition, consequences for not adhering to a Plan of this nature need to be devised and implemented.
- **Promote diversity in leadership roles:** Leaders are responsible for creating a culture of acceptance and tolerance. Start with workplace diversity at the top.
- **Promote open communication:** Become an organisation where people at all levels, and from different backgrounds, are able to have their say and voice their opinion respectfully and in an inclusive way, without fear of retribution or harassment.
- **Promote diversity:** One organisation with whom we work holds a Cultural Day on the last Friday of each month. Every person is encouraged to wear traditional clothing from their homeland to work, each brings one plate of food to work that represents their country of birth and the day is peppered with traditional activities and ways of celebrating.
- **Ongoing assessment:** Conduct an annual staff survey to ensure that the Workplace Diversity plan, policies, procedures, recruitment, promotion and succession plan is successful and where necessary, modified or changed.