



## Managing a Diverse Workforce

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## Contents

Managing a Diverse Workforce .....	2
Defining Company Culture .....	2
The Intergenerational Workplace .....	2
Working Without Borders .....	3
Knowledge, Skills and the Workforce of the Future .....	4
Education and Capabilities.....	4
Thought Diversity.....	4
Bringing Diverse Groups Together .....	5
Conclusion.....	5

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## Managing a Diverse Workforce

Mention the phrase “workplace diversity” and people’s minds usually go to gender, race, ethnicity or religion. While these subjects are integral to the discussion of diverse teams, the concept goes far beyond these topics. Diversity encompasses a variety of subjects, such as multi-generational workforces, variations in the ways people perform their jobs, and technology which makes it possible for a company’s employee base to work from different locations around the country and world.

Although these aspects of diversity can be challenging to manage, there are many benefits to bringing together an array of skill sets, generations and perspectives. According to the Center for American Progress, diversity can result in more qualified and satisfied staff, greater creativity, and improved market share — all of which can lead to having a competitive edge. Employees in a diverse environment often challenge each other to think differently, and they benefit by learning from each other’s experiences. The alternative is a homogenous workplace where new ideas and innovation may never come to light.

## Defining Company Culture

Before defining how diversity will manifest in an organization, it’s important to understand and define the company culture; identify the ideals that drive how the company operates and how employees perform. These guiding principles set a tone for what is acceptable and not acceptable in the workplace, as well as outline the role diversity will play in the company’s evolution. When assessing the company culture, consider the following:

- Does the culture emphasize entrepreneurial initiative or hierarchical structure?
- Is there a focus on innovation and bringing new ideas to the table?
- Does work occur primarily in teams or on an individual basis?
- Do employees socialize together?
- How does the company reward or recognize people and hold them accountable?

Paul Wynkoop, vice president of administration with Springfield, Ore.-based PacificSource Health Plans, believes that company culture is the keystone for diversity. He further states that

**Identify the ideals that drive how the company operates and how employees perform.**

diversity is the most important aspect of an organization’s culture and ability to thrive. To this end, PacificSource hosts a two-day orientation program for new employees and surveys the team regularly to assess the culture.

According to the *Harvard Business Review*, high-performing companies each have a unique identity — one which elicits passion from its employees. In these companies, the culture tends to promote behaviors that support the overall business strategy, including innovation or new ways of thinking. Diversity plays an important role in a company’s ability to innovate by welcoming fresh ideas and new trends or practices. It also compels people to step outside of their comfort zones.

## The Intergenerational Workplace

According to the American Management Association, there are four generations of employees working together in the current economy: the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation

X and Millennials. The goals and expectations of those born in the age of social media can be very different from those who watched the first moon landing on television. Stereotypes abound about Millennials' sense of entitlement or Boomers' lack of technological capabilities, but it is unwise to make assumptions such as these. Instead, recognize that there may be differences, and consider how you might leverage them to enhance the organization.

For example, those who have been in the workforce for decades might experience frustration with having a younger manager with less experience. So, it's important to recognize that more seasoned workers may have a wealth of knowledge that could be very valuable to younger leaders. Likewise, Millennials may be dissatisfied in a workplace where they are not promoted swiftly or one in which technology is not state-of-the-art. But, these desires may inspire a new training program or more investment in technology to help employees be more productive.

With this in mind, how can organization leaders position staff for success? Some possibilities include:

**Set expectations of all staff members.** Regardless of age differences, life experiences and individual needs, there should be company norms that influence performance and behavior. Place emphasis on values such as open communications and being accountable for getting the job done. Skill sets can vary by position, so make sure to align people with the positions that best suit their abilities and knowledge.

**Provide training.** Give people the opportunity to start at the same baseline by having a robust training program for both skill building and company culture integration. Keep in mind

that culture can cross over into skill usage, as companies may execute tasks in ways unique to them. Use training to help supervisors manage staff of varying ages.

**Encourage mentoring.** Whether it's a structured program or more casual connections, embolden employees to create mentor-mentee relationships. Each generation has much to learn from the others, and sharing information or advice helps to build relationships.

**Acknowledge the differences.** Rather than stumbling over the issues related to intergenerational differences, address the topic head on. Don't focus on the difficulties; communicate how your workplace is adapting to the changing workforce and invite ideas from staff on how to embrace it.

Place emphasis on values such as open communications and being accountable for getting the job done.

## Working Without Borders

These days, with advancements in technology, working remotely is becoming more commonplace. Many businesses work with employees and contractors regionally, nationally and globally, and have learned to navigate the challenges of having distant team members. For some, these team members may be employees who have worked at the physical location in the past, but circumstances required them to move. Or essential skills or expertise may be best sourced in other geographic areas. Business leaders realize there are benefits to allowing this type of flexibility, but it does pose challenges as well. For example, working with teams in different time zones puts restraints on work delivery and meeting times, and lack of in-person exposure could result in needing more time for employees to bond. But, there are measures that can be put in place to reduce these issues:

- Supervisors or project leaders should have regular one-on-one check-ins with remote employees to maintain a connection and assess if there are any problems. Provide ongoing, direct feedback and ask for ideas to improve processes.
- Ensure team members share all relevant information with remote employees, as they do not have the benefit of participating in impromptu discussions. It is helpful to document project updates in an easily accessible location.
- Utilize face-to-face meeting opportunities as much as possible to establish engagement and relationship building. Video conferencing, Skype and Google Hangouts are great options. Encourage phone contact to supplement email conversations.
- Establish best practices for overcoming time zone issues, such as pre-determining deadlines for deliverables and optimal times for meetings.
- Ensure teams have easy access to online project tools and documents.

These practices can apply to employees who are in other regions, as well as those who work from home occasionally. The things that matter most are inclusion, engagement and accountability.

Ron Petersen, president of Petersen Brothers, Inc., a transportation contracting company based in Sumner, Wash., employs a very diverse group of employees, from professional staff to teams on job sites. One of the company's challenges is a lack of information from job-site workers about their projects. The company is adopting a mobile tablet system with photo capability and voice recognition, giving these vital employees the ability to relay information back to the office confidently and quickly.

**Thought diversity brings richness to an organization and gives companies an edge.**

## Knowledge, Skills and the Workforce of the Future

### Education and Capabilities

In some instances, diversity is not a planned business strategy; rather, it is a necessity based on the varying levels of skills required for the job. For example, in a manufacturing company, there may be assembly line workers in the same office location as an attorney or CPA. All are important functions, but they require very different educational attainment and knowledge. In any industry, it's critical to recognize that team members at all skill levels and with varying levels of education can be essential to a company's success. Likewise, it is important to provide the tools necessary for employees at all levels to do their jobs well.

### Thought Diversity

An exciting trend emerging in the workplace is the focus on diversity of thought, whereby people with different strengths and thought processes collaborate. According to a study by Deloitte, this type of collaboration can foster innovation, creativity and efficiency.

In order for this practice to be effective, the company culture must be open to different ways of thinking and approaching problems. Wynkoop of PacificSource notes that thought diversity brings richness to an organization and gives companies an edge. He says that the more points of view a business has access to, the better opportunity they have to build something better and stronger than the competition.

Deloitte posits that businesses must eliminate the thinking that there is only one right way to do

something; instead, they must build a learning culture where employees are comfortable sharing ideas and gaining knowledge from others.

With varying groups of people, take into consideration differences in personalities and the ways in which they communicate. For example, introverted people may not be as quick to share thoughts and ideas in a large group setting, whereas those who are more vocal may dominate a discussion. Ensure there are opportunities for all employees' voices to be heard, such as one-on-one conversations or follow-up emails. Foster an inclusive culture in which personality differences and communication styles are respected.

It's vital that employees are given the tools and training they need to embrace a diverse workplace.

## Bringing Diverse Groups Together

To cultivate a successful organization in which diversity is a core value, businesses must make it easy for diverse employees — whether near or far — to interact. If people don't know what's happening in the company or are unable to work together, the benefits of diversity may be lost. The following are some ways to increase engagement and interaction:

**Encourage collaboration.** Change project teams on occasion to give employees the opportunity to work with different people. Connect people with varying capabilities to share knowledge with each other. Consider setting up office space that facilitates

interaction and group discussions, including open workspaces and common gathering areas.

**Facilitate communication.** Ensure teams have the technology needed to access files or meet with coworkers. Establish an internal website or messaging application to post important information and enable dialogue.

**Conduct team-building events.** Giving people the opportunity to spend time together in an informal setting gives them insight into others and the ability to learn about common interests. If you have teams in other locations, allocate resources to bring everyone to one place at least once a year.

## Conclusion

In building a strong workforce, business leaders must be open to diversity in all its forms. Incorporating and acting on differences in thought, experience, age and location can catapult an organization far ahead of its competition. It is important to ensure that a well-defined culture and strong management practices are put in place to foster a healthy, productive environment. And, it's vital that employees are given the tools and training they need to embrace a diverse workplace. Regardless of your industry, if these elements are present, it opens up numerous possibilities for increased success.

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## About Pacific Continental Bank

For more than 40 years, Pacific Continental Bank has served the Pacific Northwest with a focus on building long-term business-banking relationships. And along the way, we have forged a strong reputation as a proven business resource and proud civic partner. Pacific Continental Bank's strength lies in our extensive expertise in banking community-based businesses, professional service providers and the nonprofit sector. This expertise means we can help clients tackle the financial issues specific to their enterprise. What's more, clients have access to local bankers who have the authority to make decisions for them on the spot.

Pacific Continental Bank maintains a strong connection to the communities where we operate. The bank empowers its employees to actively engage in fostering an environment where all community members can flourish. We endeavor to work with local nonprofit organizations and community-based businesses, ensuring more dollars stay close to home. The bank supports hundreds of nonprofit organizations in achieving their missions — both philanthropically and through direct participation.

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