
Find strength in differences . . . profits, too; [Final Edition]

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Due to rapid globalization, cultural diversity in the workplace is on the rise. The increase in mergers, alliances and networks is having a significant impact on how we work, the quality of our working relationships and the prosperity of our communities.

Our own robust economy in Waterloo Region owes much to talent that has emerged here or arrived from other parts of the world

Major firms such as NCR, AGFA HealthCare, Research In Motion, Toyota, Manulife and Home Hardware recognize that managing cross- cultural relationships is a key factor in their maintaining customer satisfaction, a reputation for excellence and healthy bottom lines.

Despite these role models, some firms continue to lose out by not hiring and integrating immigrants -- even when the potential employees are both well-educated and positively-motivated.

Based on our own informal feedback from people at many companies, when cultural differences are not acknowledged, celebrated and well- managed, undesirable results can occur.

Failure to be culturally aware and appreciative can lead to distrust, disrespect, stereotyping, miscommunication, increased conflict and worker isolation. In the global economy, an organization's inability to integrate and motivate culturally-mixed teams can hurt its performance and profits.

A McKinsey & Co. study in the late 1990s showed that 60 per cent of mergers fail to live up to the projected revenue potential because the parties didn't have the knowledge and resources to successfully blend corporate cultures and business practices.

The good news is that companies can lessen the discomfort of diversity and avoid failure.

Here are some strategies to consider:

Create a "diversity" mindset -- Promote messages such as: Change is good. Different is great. Diverse thinking and ideas are valued and provide opportunities for learning and continuous improvement.

Find strength in differences -- The question on everyone's mind should be: "How can the strength of our differences create a competitive advantage that meets the employer's needs and exceeds the customer's expectations?"

Many local organizations are working together to answer this question. The New Canadian Program in Waterloo recently launched a pilot study to find ways to improve the connection between skilled immigrants and local employers who need their talents. A recent Immigrant Skills Summit also brought business and non-profit organizations together to work toward removing barriers to workplace diversity.

Create an atmosphere of trust -- Your goal should be a workplace where everyone's beliefs and opinions are valued.

Your workplace should also be a place where open and honest communication drives innovation and the pursuit of excellence, where everyone wants to be part of a winning team.

Recognize the value of immigrants' skills and contacts -- Cross- cultural expertise is critical to minimizing

problems when breaking into foreign markets.

New immigrants who have lived and worked in the targeted country or region can speak the language and have knowledge of local business practices.

They may know of key business contacts and will understand subtle cultural nuances that allow them handle delicate situations and avoid faux pas.

Foster diverse teams -- Encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds to come together in teams. They should celebrate common strengths, share past experiences, spread knowledge to others, brainstorm ideas, improve problem solving and support each other when the going gets tough.

Amazing marketing campaigns, innovative and cost-effective manufacturing processes, efficient logistical systems and great working relationships are all potential outcomes of this strategy.

Ensure clear and meaningful communication -- Simplify your communication by using words that are easily understood.

Avoid jargon, slang or synonyms that exclude participation, especially if English is not the employee's first language. Clarify the content and meaning of the message.

Encourage all points of view to be heard and discussed without bias.

Ask for immediate feedback to quickly discover and address any major misunderstandings. Summarize and document decisions to prevent goal ambiguity and to ensure that action items agreed to at meetings are actually implemented.

Provide cross-cultural sensitivity training and ongoing support - -This type of focused professional development will allow the organization to quickly integrate new team members, enhance productivity, increase employee satisfaction and build long term, profitable customer relationships around the world.

In short, take care of the team's cross-cultural challenges and it will take care of the business.

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