



Why diversity at work is good for you and your workplace

Diversity is not only good for business, it's good for employees. Studies have found that diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones at all organizational levels. Team members learn from each other, are able to see problems through many lenses, and take different paths to new solutions. When differences are embraced, collaboration, mutual respect and effectiveness flourish - and people are happier, more productive and more loyal to their company.

Defining diversity

A diverse workforce not only embraces people of all ethnicities, cultures, religions, ages, physical abilities and sexual orientations, but varying political views and personality types (e.g., introverts and extroverts). Having coworkers who bring different experiences, perspectives and ways of working can help you develop your skills, identify professional opportunities, enhance your creativity and productivity and better understand our increasingly global market.

The challenges for diverse teams

Diverse teams benefit everyone but differences can also cause frustration, misunderstandings and even conflict among colleagues. These include:

- **Language.** No matter how fluent we are in another language, mastering the slang, quirks and idioms of that language can be extremely difficult. For example, Americans use dozens of sports analogies that can leave other nationalities befuddled: “in the ballpark”, “get the ball rolling”, “come out swinging”, “throw in the towel” and “carry the ball” are just a few.

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- **Cultural expectations.** There are many aspects of culture that can pose problems, including forms of address, personal space, hierarchies, appropriate greetings, touching, negotiation styles and giving feedback. Most cultures also have unwritten rules about gender and social roles that can cause conflict.
- **Communication.** Different communication styles are often the greatest cause of misunderstanding and conflict. In some countries, it's considered more efficient to be direct, even blunt, in business communications; no offense is intended. Others prefer a more, respect-driven, face-saving approach.
- **Time.** Time is perceived and managed differently according to culture. Many Western countries view time in a linear way. People prefer to work on a single task before beginning another and place great value on punctuality and keeping to schedules. They are focused on information rather than relationships. Many other cultures, especially those in Latin America and Asia, view time as more of a circle, with past, present and future all interrelated. In these countries, people are adept at multitasking and timeframes are more fluid. These different perceptions of time can cause frustration in global teams.

Being part of a diverse team

People must feel welcome if they are expected to fully contribute, develop their skills and remain productive and engaged. Responsibility for creating an inclusive and respectful environment falls on both management and employees. Here are some ideas on how you can help create and maintain a harmonious global team:

- **Learn as much as you can about other cultures.** Every culture – including your own - has intricacies and nuances that can be difficult to understand by outsiders. Learn as much as you can about your team members' backgrounds; this will enhance your ability to work across cultures. Participate in diversity training provided by your organization or contact your Employee Assistance Program for further cross-cultural information.
- **Be patient.** Everyone's culture shapes the way they approach tasks and how they communicate. There's no right or wrong, just different.
- **Be respectful.** Whether or not you share the same world view or work ethic, beliefs or values, respect differences. This means not commenting on things you don't personally agree with, or don't understand. Try not to stereotype people, and simply accept each person for who they are.
- **Be willing to learn.** Colleagues from many other cultures and backgrounds expose you to customs, cultures and practices you might otherwise never come in contact with. An international team also provides you with opportunities to acquire new skills, perspectives and practices.

Diversity can cause challenges, but it can also be a tremendous professional and personal asset in today's increasingly competitive global economy. In fact, being able to work with people from many cultures and backgrounds has become a career necessity.

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