# Creating and Managing a Diverse Workforce

Insights
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For several years, employers in various industries ranging from high tech to agriculture have known that they face a potential labor shortage. Not only do employers need to add hundreds of thousands of jobs in the coming years, they also will need to fill existing positions each year due to the retirement of baby boomers and normal attrition. The labor shortage will be particularly acute in the area of skilled labor.

As a result, employers must reach out to persons who have not traditionally pursued careers in the their particular industry. In many cases that means overcoming misperceptions about employment opportunities in the industry. For example, there is a prevailing myth that construction jobs are for white men, that work in the restaurant industry is a lesser alternative to other career options, and that only younger people can excel in computer-oriented high tech industries. To succeed, such employers must embrace the challenge of fostering diversity in the workplace.

**Getting The Terms Straight**

Encouraging diversity is not affirmative action – it is a recognition that people in your organization will differ in background and experience. A diverse workforce is one which enhances productivity by affording all employees and applicants a positive work environment and the opportunity to advance within an organization. There are a number of things employers can do to foster a workforce which recognizes diversity:

- prepare a written policy that demonstrates a commitment to providing equal employment opportunity for all applicants and employees;
- have a strong statement of non-discrimination in the workplace and an effective complaint procedure;
- consider adopting a diversity mission statement;
- be clear about what qualifications are needed for a position and make sure that the qualifications established for a given position actually reflect those needed to do the job rather than those based on historical assumptions;
- develop relationships with organizations that cater to the needs and interests of atypical industry candidates (e.g., people of color, women, older workers, etc). Membership in such organizations will increase your networking base and, thus, increase and diversify your applicant pool;

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- consider partnerships with local schools and trade schools. Become a mentor through such programs and use your company as a means to further and promote interest in careers in your industry;
- place job listings in newspapers that have a diverse audience so that you reach new candidates in different communities;
- monitor your diversity efforts and determine what activities have promoted a positive and diverse workforce; and
- showcase diversity in your annual report, on your website, and at every opportunity to communicate with the public. A diverse workforce is something to be proud of – it is indicative of progressive corporate thinking that will likely result in increased profitability.

**Developing Your Corporate Culture**

As your workforce becomes more diverse, you must also effectively train workers to deal with the changing workplace culture. "Buy-in" from all levels is critical for maintaining diversity. While a company may be committed to diversity, if front-line supervisors have not been trained, the company's objective will likely fail. Managers and supervisors must recognize that the way they treat their existing employees has a great deal to do with whether a particular organization is able to attract and retain the employees it needs to be a successful organization.

Unless a company creates a climate that welcomes and is hospitable to those who are in some way different from the existing group, costly turnover can result as new talent leaves. Consider the following in maintaining and managing a diverse workforce:

- make sure that information about position openings and developmental opportunities are accessible to all employees through an organization-wide posting system;
- create a mentoring program that matches new employees with those who are more seasoned. Not only will new employees get to learn first-hand from successful employees, both mentors and protégés have the opportunity to develop trusting relationships that will enhance the work experience;
- provide continuous training. When a company invests in its employees, they are more inclined to feel valued and believe they have genuine opportunities for advancement;
- listen and be flexible. The key to retaining skilled employees from different backgrounds and generations is flexibility. Before a new idea is summarily dismissed it should be considered whether the idea is dismissed because it is truly implausible or simply because it is different from the way the company has previously operated.

**The Bottom Line**

There are clear benefits associated with a diverse workforce. Diversity brings to an organization the varied experiences and thoughts of persons of dissimilar backgrounds. It increases creativity and promotes the growth of the workforce that is absolutely critical to today's employers. Employing a

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diverse workforce, particularly one that reflects the community in which you provide your services, opens up business opportunities and allows you to maintain a competitive edge.

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*For more information, contact the authors at GBallew@fisherphillips.com or JHolland@fisherphillips.com.*

## *Related People*

**Gregory D. Ballew**
Partner
816.842.8770
Email

**James R. Holland, II**
Regional Managing Partner
816.842.8770
Email

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