

Does Your Selection Process Promote Diversity?

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A diverse workforce is becoming much more accepted as a source of competitive advantage for a number of reasons. First, the sheer volume of culturally diverse people in the United States suggests not fully capitalizing on them to fill important jobs would be a mistake. By 2020, the minority portion of the U.S. workforce is expected to be double what it was in 1980, according to data from The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Additionally, organizations should be able to serve the increasingly diverse mix of customers as effectively as possible. For example, at DuPont Merck, the sales of an anticoagulant drug were low in the Hispanic markets. When a Hispanic manager noticed the drug was only labeled in English and consequently translated the instructions into Spanish, sales improved significantly.

Diversity of backgrounds also may lead to better innovation. For example, a 1993 study in the Academy of Management Journal found that, over time, diverse teams became more effective at identifying problems and generating solutions than homogenous teams. Imagine an organization's short-term bottom line is suffering and the introduction of more innovative approaches subsequently improves profitability.

What Exactly Is Diversity?

There are three primary meanings of the term "diversity" from an organizational development perspective. First, there is "cultural diversity," which includes gender, national origin, age, religion, race and the like. This appears to be the context of most discussions about diversity. Any talk of quotas or adverse impact likely considers diversity in this context.

Second is "noncultural diversity." This differs from organization to organization in terms of what it includes. It can refer to region, functional area, academic background, types of experience, working styles, etc. In organizations that frequently undergo mergers, the organizations from which people hail would be an important source of diversity in this context.

Third is "inclusion." This reflects the extent to which people from diverse areas are equally included in business operations and projects. An inclusive organization is not one that has employees with many diverse backgrounds, but one that heavily involves people with many diverse backgrounds in key endeavors. Further, these diverse populations are systemically developed and comparable opportunities for advancement are available.

The distinctions between these contexts are important. For example, having a wide variety of cultural backgrounds in an organization is not the same as providing equal opportunities to them, involving them in important decisions and initiatives, and embracing their contributions as equally as their majority counterparts'.

Perhaps the most obvious way for diversity leaders to use the selection process to facilitate diversity is to recruit from sources likely to contain qualified diverse candidates and to develop relationships with these sources during the interview process.

Train Interviewers

Research on interview structure has identified many ways to increase the effectiveness of selection interviews. These include using job-related questions, asking behavioral questions, using specific rating guidelines, conducting the same or similar interviews with different candidates for a position, etc.

First, train interviewers in the importance of being objective. They should identify the criteria for success on the job and ask questions that directly address those criteria. They should evaluate candidates on those exact criteria. These can include questions about teamwork, communication and resilience, rather than just technical skills.

Second, training should address minimization of different kinds of biases. For example, similar-to-me error is a bias interviewers can have when they evaluate the candidate. Just because an interviewer is attentive to detail doesn't mean the job requires it. But just because the interviewer is an Ivy Leaguer doesn't mean the job requires it.

Managing first impressions also is an important part of interview training. A tall candidate is not necessarily going to be a good leader. A candidate with a weak handshake is not necessarily timid. A confident candidate is not necessarily decisive, and if he or she is decisive, the decisions might not be good ones. A candidate whose suit is not quite as good as other candidates might be just as high a performer as the others.

People who have biases against certain types of characteristics or people might not know it is inappropriate to make hiring decisions based on those biases. People may have subtle biases they are unaware of, and training might call those out. It is important that interviewers hire people with the skill sets required by the job. Hiring someone because he or she reflects aspects of diversity is likely to be counterproductive if that person doesn't have the job-related skill sets.

To accomplish similar goals, use a team interviewing approach. That way, when evaluating candidates after interviews, interviewers can help one another identify inappropriate biases if they come up. They also can maintain greater focus on objective evaluation.

Provide Realistic Job Previews

Realistic job previews are meaningful descriptions of the job and the company that interviewers provide to candidates. They should describe the positives and the negatives of the job to help the candidate make a decision about whether to pursue the job and/or accept an offer if provided. These can be very structured — such as thorough, prepared documents or videos — or they can be guided tours of the premises, discussions with incumbents, etc.

There are two primary purposes to realistic job previews. First is to make sure the candidate understands what he or she is pursuing before the company invests a lot of time and money into that candidate. For example, the candidate should understand this customer-service position involves working extensively with angry customers, or that training position involves many late-night airplane trips.

In that context, the company may save time costs, orientation and training costs if the candidate self-selects out before taking the job, rather than three to six months later. While good, old-fashioned honesty is an underlying theme here, so is good business sense. It is largely a step to reducing cost of hire and turnover.

Realistic job previews also communicate the positives of a job and company that might not be readily apparent to the candidate. Therefore, if there are extensive diversity and inclusion programs, make them known. This can increase the acceptance ratios for diverse candidates.

For example, if all managers are required to go through training in career development, coaching and inclusion, tell candidates that. If the organization has policies about fair treatment, describe them. However, it is inappropriate to present different realistic job previews to different ethnic groups because it shows differential treatment.

For example, PepsiCo's Web site states: "[W]e view diversity as a key to our future. Our brands appeal to an extraordinarily diverse array of customers. And they are sold by an equally diverse group of retailers. To truly understand the needs of our customers and consumers — and succeed in the marketplace — PepsiCo must reflect that diversity in our employees, our suppliers and in everything we do."