

**The business case for diversity:**

**The impact of diversity management on organisational culture**

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**Abstract**

Focusing attention on diversity being a source of competitive advantage for the organisation, this paper considers it as the most crucial contribution towards the achievement of the overall business mission and vision. The action research has been conducted among the employees of a particular department of a private organisation in Cyprus. Action research revealed that the firm has not established any specific diversity management policy and any issues arise are often treated by the administration on the basis of goodwill. A significant proportion of the employees recognise the value of diversity in the workforce, but only through the prism of a "personalized approach", where the emphasis is on individual characteristics of the employee over and above cultural or other differences. Thus, it is important for the company to develop and implement a clear policy to prevent discrimination based on differences in national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.

**Introduction**

*Literature review*

The prevailing business trends for globalisation elicit questions on the feasibility of a diverse executive team to retain and motivate their employees towards higher productivity and satisfaction (Pelled, Eisenhardt and Xin, 1999; Allen et al., 2007). As a research topic diversity is relatively new and its definition is still evolving. Kandola and Fullerton's (1994) definition suggests that the diversity consists of both visible and non-visible differences which include gender, age, background, race and personality (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994; Simona et al., 2012). Numerous studies have discussed the contribution of the differences among employees with diverse backgrounds and personal attributes on effective organisational decision-making (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Bowers, Pharmed and Salas, 2000; De Dreu, 2007; Elsass and Graves, 1997; Jehn et al., 1999; Simons, Pelled and Smith, 1999; Simona et al., 2012), whilst others debate the likelihood of diversity causing an undermining of the group performance through social categorisation processes (Williams and O'Reilly, 1998). Researchers were interested in examining the impact of demographic characteristics on individual and group organisational behaviour (Ely and Thomas, 2001), underlying that beneficial outcomes are a function of employees being in a position of sharing common values and ambitions (Chatman et al., 1998; Jehn, Northcraft and Neaie, 1999; Simona et al., 2012). House (House and Global Leadership and Organisational Behavior Effectiveness Research Program, 2004, p.5) stated that "as economic borders come down, cultural barriers go up, thus presenting new challenges and opportunities in business. When cultures come into contact, they may converge on some aspects, but their idiosyncrasies will likely amplify".

Bearing in mind that team charisma composition has considerable main effects on team outcomes (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert and Mount, 1998; Bell, 2007; Kichuk and Wiesner, 1997) and that differences in national culture or ethnicity can influence industrial relations and cross-border interaction (Tayeb, 2003; Adler, 2002), it can be easily identified the significant impact of

cultural diversity on attitudes, perceptions and thus performance of the individuals within an organisation (Frey-Ridgway, 1997; Karoc-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 2001; Mwaura et al., 1998). However, as the literature reveals, it is not the diversity per se that affects the performance, motivation or retention of employees, but the employee's perception of inclusion or exclusion regarding the critical organisational processes that determines whether diversity will have a positive or negative impact (Mor Barak and Cherin, 1998).

Scholars have also associated the effects of diversity management with specific aspects of the individual's personality. Based on the five-factor model (Mc-Crae and Costa, 1987), Homan et al. (2008) revealed that the diverse teams that consisted of members that were open to experience appear to be performing better than diverse teams that score low on this attribute, whilst they disclosed that when differences within a team are prominent, openness to experience smoothes the progress for the individuals of capitalising upon their disparities. According to social identity theory, people are positively biased towards the social group they belong to thus creating a dichotomised sense of "us" and "them" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), while researches have correlated the minority origin with high individuals' feelings of isolation and lack of identification in one-on-one relationships (Chrobot-Mason, 2004; Ibarra, 1995; Jones and Schaubroeck, 2004; Mor Barak and Levin, 2002). Apparently, the majority of studies have focused on issues of national culture, gender and ethnicity, and most of it has been conducted in the United States (Egan and Bendick, 2003; Page, 2007; Wentling and Palma-Rivas, 2000).

Employees expect leaders, persons with formal authority, to intervene when social identity conflicts emerge. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to investigate the scenario where the formal authority per se appears to be culturally or else diversified. Literature is emphasised on the application of social identity theory, inter-group anxiety (Stephan and Stephan, 1985) and faultlines from the perspective of managing diversity within a group, whilst it would be interesting to examine and identify the impact of diversity per se on the formation and establishment of an efficient organisational culture (Hofstede, 1991) and henceforth overall effectiveness. Hence, a gap is identified in the literature regarding the utilisation of these theories in the case that diversity occurs in the upper level of management, thus eliciting what it is like to be lead in the context of very salient social identity group differences. The need for conducting a research so as to detect and classify realistic, effective and applicable methods of efficiently dealing with diversity is considered to be crucial (Gardenswartz and Rowe, 2010).

As globalisation has elicited cultural diversity as an integral part of the daily business functions and operations, none organisation can be justified by choosing to ignore it (Smiers, 2003). The gap that is noticed among the customs, perceptions and ways of communicating the feelings of the employees often appear to have a negative impact on the performance, the establishment of effective communication channels and the team's coherence and thus the overall organisational effectiveness. Therefore, this paper is interested in examining and hence identifying the method by which the companies will be able to manage the inevitable presence of diversity, in order for the workforce to remain united and aligned with the core values of the cooperation and coherence (Shapiro, Young Von Glinow and Cheng, 2005). Henceforth, a win-win situation for both the workforce and the organisation will be obtained.

Broadly defined, inevitably enough diversity is multidimensional. As Dreachslin (2007) aptly puts it, "it includes not only the oft-discussed racial, ethnic, and gender identities but also factors such as sexual orientation; generation; social class; physical ability; family; religion; and regional, professional, political, and other personal affiliations. Although every human being is unique, with a distinct and individual temperament, each person is also a member of a wide array of

identity groups” (Dreachslin, 2007, p.81).

Over the past decades, the European and global workplace has experienced a greater participation of women, minorities, immigrants, elderly and diverse ethnicities within the labor force. The shifting workforce composition up to higher levels of authority and hierarchy is gradually evident. The emergence of these groups as buyers and customers has also emerged a number of new challenges. The increasing diversification of consumer needs appears to require the establishment of more creative product conservation and innovation strategies. Inevitably enough, the processes, products and services must be specialised so to meet these newly materialised requests and desires.

In business terms, diversity can be described as “a set of differences of individual traits including socio demographic variables and professional variables, which can be found in an organisation’s various levels. Core dimensions of diversity include age, ethnicity and culture, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and capabilities. Secondary dimensions include education, status, language, income levels, etc” (Panaccio and Waxin, 2010, p.54).

The necessity for moving and establishing diversity policies beyond the HR department is evident in a study by the European Commission (2003, p.3), under the name “Costs and Benefits of Diversity”. According to this study, companies with active policies to promote diversity attribute to the diversity the important benefits of reinforcing the company’s cultural values, enhancing corporate image and helping to attract and retain highly talented people. Likewise it provides the employees with greater incentives and thus higher productivity and performance, whilst it enhances superior innovation and creativity among employees.

#### *Significance of the study*

Focusing attention on diversity being a source of competitive advantage for the organisation, this paper considers it as the most crucial contribution towards the achievement of the overall business mission and vision.

By and large, effectively managing labour diversity promotes:

- The attraction and retention of high valued employees.
- The corporate responsibility image of the organisation and
- The augmentation of the firm’s organisation in encouraging and endorsing innovation.

The profound literature review that has been conducted revealed various ways of defining human resources management. “Human resource management is a distinctive approach to employment management which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through the strategic deployment of a highly committed and capable workforce, using an array of cultural, structural and personnel techniques” (Storey 1995, p.5).

Despite the immense amount of literature in the wider field of human resources management, it appears that it all converges to the admission that as a tool it recommends, coordinates and monitors the effective implementation of policies concerning the:

- Recruitment and selection of employees and career planning and development,
- Evaluation of performance,

- Competitive compensation system and provision of benefits and incentives,
- Promotions and transfers,
- Management of disciplinary offenses,
- Effectively dealing with employees' complaints

aligned with the overall policy and mission of the organisation in order to achieve the optimal utilisation of the diversity of the human resources.

To this end, this paper is focusing on intensifying around gaining a deep understanding on how a specific private organisation in Cyprus manages diversity and the impact of this top management diversity on the overall organisational culture.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

The action research has been conducted among the employees of a particular department of a private organisation in Cyprus.

Given that the paper is focusing on effective diversity management, this department appear to be to be the ideal teams to work with, since its top management was already interested in examining the impact of diversity in its general performance. Given that within the firm's short term objectives expanding its activities in the global market is included, being able to effectively deal with diversity issues will be crucial for its overall mission and vision.

The aim of the sampling design is to ensure that the analysed data are providing the optimum information required for the population that is under investigation, at the lowest possible cost.

For the purpose of this research, the whole population –including the HR manager of the organisation- was investigated, since there were no barriers in collecting data from each employee –team member. Therefore, the sampling strategy was intentionally based on the population, since each of the individuals was members of a team, in which effective diversity management was essential for the overall success.

### *Instrumentation*

Organisations and enterprises worldwide, achieve better operational and financial results, by enhancing the way people socialize, communicate, collaborate and are being supervised.

In light of this, a team is effective when it is mature. This means that members consciously evaluate and redesign the way they behave, communicate, decide, and act. The resulting work, beyond the knowledge of the subject, rests on two things:

1. How the individual understands his or her abilities and
2. How the person selects and works with others towards implementing objectives.

The main research instrument used was the semi-structured interview; one of the most commonly used tools in the case of qualitative research, especially in the case study (Peräkylä, 2005; Fontana and Frey, 2005; Coolican, 2004; Robson, 2002). The posed questions were mostly open-ended to allow for greater flexibility, more depth, better clarification of possible

misinterpretations, more harmonious atmosphere and a greater chance for unanticipated or unexpected responses (Coolican, 2004; Robson, 2002).

The existing archival material on policies that organisations in Cyprus have established towards managing diversity was used as a complementary research tool, whilst the legal framework of Cyprus on equality and anti-discrimination was also examined. According to Robson (2002) studying archived material can be a valuable complementary tool and a rich source of information, especially when the research is conducted in organisations.

#### *Procedure*

During the interview, an attempt was made to avoid common mistakes such as critical or pressing climate, double barrelled questions, deliberate guidance of the interviewee as well as posing any complex and ambiguous questions. In addition regular feedback was provided to respondents, while there was flexibility in the order of the questions as well as in their wording, whilst the venue for the interview was ensured to be quiet and the respondent was allowed with sufficient available time to avoid distraction (Coolican, 2004). The selected documents were considered reliable and relevant to the purpose of the research so not to overload the search with unnecessary and irrelevant information. Alongside, all the rules of ethics (confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity) were complied.

#### **Results**

##### *Data analysis*

The data analysis revealed the following outcomes:

##### *Establishing policies enhancing effective diversity management*

According to the research, the organisation has not established any specific diversity management policy and any issues arise are often treated by the administration on the basis of goodwill. Though it is important for the company to develop and implement a clear policy to prevent discrimination based on differences in national origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, still the management has neglected to establish a written policy addressing and cauterization of such discrimination on behalf of the personnel. According to the HR manager:

“No we don’t have any official diversity policy. The unofficial policy that we have is for the gender. We are trying to keep the gender percentage which is 60% to 40%. But nothing formally. Regarding foreigners, we don’t have such a policy, but there is no barrier of hiring foreigners, I mean foreigners especially from EU, because if you have non-EU employees, you need to have a work permit from the Ministry of Labour, and since the Ministry does not give work permits due to the high unemployment rates, so by foreigners we mean mainly EU citizens. So, if we find an EU citizen which is suitable according to our needs, we hire them. Just because he or she meets the criteria.”

Interesting enough, the majority of the employees have claimed that they never witnessed someone being discriminated against or experienced discrimination themselves:

“No what I faced is a misunderstanding, not a discrimination. Maybe due to language, maybe to culture and so on. So let’s say when some people that they have a high sense of humour, maybe they like to have fun with their colleagues, some others they don’t like while they are working to have fun, and also they are people who can make more easy friends than others and those that are

socialising very easy, and someone can be offended because he didn't give that space to you to come closer. This is, actually I faced such situations, but if you sit and talk with them you will find that there is no intention behind that. So that's why I am not calling that as a discrimination, because most of the times, discrimination is something that is intentional.”,

whilst a foreigner employee has argued that:

“I don't have that problem of people facing me as a foreigner. I believe I don't have a problem because I know how to joke someone, how to interact with them, because I have spent time abroad. So, I think I am a people person, and in that way I incorporate with everyone, I never heard of any complaints or I don't think I had any complaints. We may have a misunderstanding, but that maybe something that you clear out immediately.”

However, there were employees who have raised the necessity of establishing a formal diversity management policy, since that would have protected them against discrimination:

“Well it could be difficult to be heard sometimes, but they won't look down at you, they might not do what you told them, but they won't actually be offending. They just won't listen. I would like to think that this is not because I am a woman, but I think it is. Especially being a young woman and I am not a head of something, so they prefer to speak with something a lot more experienced. I think women in this company with managerial positions are actually heard a lot more and are not having this kind of issues. Just because of position. I think at our company is more about the gender rather than the nationality, because we have so many here. Even the Cypriot between us speak English which is something ridiculous, but now it's part of our culture. So, there isn't any overall policy or plan for diversity. There could be one but it would be nice for us to know it.”

#### *Top management diversity and organisational culture*

The behaviour of top management plays a key role in shaping organisational culture. Thereafter, employees set priorities as separate entities which lead to creating a diversity climate. Both researchers of the organisational culture and of climate seem to share the same perspective that both are strongly influenced by the behaviour and attitudes of senior management. The hierarchical classification of the administration priorities lead to an analogous understanding and interpretation of the culture and climate on behalf of the workers. Any differences in the ability and background between members of the top management team can lead to value creation for the company and thus improve performance, whilst “upper echelons theory builds on the idea of the dominant coalition (Cyert and March, 1963) to propose that executives influence organisational performance through the decisions they make (Hambrick and Mason, 1984)” (Knight et al, 1999, p. 447).

In light of this, respondents advocate that:

“Our manager is compassionate towards foreigners, he understands where they are coming from, and if people felt were left out of something, we have from different cultures, other departments, so I think he can connect much better than the Cypriot would be able to connect them. He makes sure that the department would go out and maybe like kind of dinner or something. Ok we are living to Cyprus and there are some Cypriots that have some views, maybe they are backward, but our manager is very supportive.”

As discussed by Boerner et al. (2011) “diversity within a TMT should therefore contribute to the processing of information within the team – that is, to team members' exchange, discussion, and

integration of ideas, knowledge, and insights that are relevant to the team's task. This in turn could reduce the tendency towards groupthink associated with homogeneous TMTs (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) and result in more elaborated team decisions" (Boerner et al, 2011, p.330) and this is supported by employees' statement:

"I feel free to speak up my opinion and that is probably due to the combination of managerial skills and the overall organisational culture. Our manager allows us the freedom of speaking up our opinion, because obviously he values our opinions. I've always thought if there is something wrong, you have to say something about it, regardless of what it is. You have to stand up for yourself."

#### *Diversity training and awareness of human resources personnel*

In addition to improving diversity in the workforce, the organisation also needs to augment its ability to effectively manage this situation and to ensure respect and fairness for all. Companies have tried to address this need by implementing a series of human resources policies and programs so as to upgrade the working environment and the personnel experience. Such programs include: training sessions on diversity, intercultural skills and exchange programs, legal issues and compliance matters, language and integration sessions for migrant workers, fair recruitment and selection procedures as well as evaluation and change management programs. There are even companies that provide managers with a framework of performance programming, control methods and diversity devices to assist them in implementing the policy.

According to the HR manager:

"To be honest there is no a specific training in diversity but we arrange meetings and bonding events and so on where people can join. We used to offer for foreigners the opportunity of having actually before I come we had an employee who had studied Greek literature and he was giving for free –fees paid by the company- and she was giving free Greek lessons. But foreigners didn't attend the lessons so we stopped the provision. And the other thing we did is for the foreigners who showed interest we offered paying their fees to the National Courses of Greek language for foreigners and we offered them the opportunity if they wanted to register. But usually they don't attend."

#### **Discussion**

As revealed by the research, there is a moderate degree of awareness on issues of multiculturalism and diversity management and the organisation appears to align its policies with a standard adjustment to labour and insurance law. However, a significant proportion of the employees recognise the value of diversity in the workforce, but only through the prism of a "personalized approach", where the emphasis is on individual characteristics of the employee over and above cultural or other differences. Diversity per se is recognized as an asset only by a small percentage of employees, who seem to appreciate more of an interactive style of management where the company takes into account the unique and diverse needs and skills of employees.

Given the current multicultural and globalised perspective of markets, diversity can advantage businesses, transactions with customers, suppliers, shareholders and other stakeholders (Hicks and Iles, 2000). By committing to diversity the business reputation and corporate image can be effectively enhanced (Cannings, 1988). The avoidance of discrimination can aid companies evading the costs of court battles, the high turnover and the increasing workforce absence rates. It can also provide employers with access to new labor pools and endow them with the competitive

advantage of attracting and retaining high quality employees. The business model indicates that organisations will achieve increased innovation and effective learning through effectively managing diversity.

Therefore, diversity management should be the integration of ideas and diversity practices in the daily management and learning processes of a company and its environment. Professional decisions should be obtained within a climate of confidence, acceptance and recognition. Kochan et al. (2003), clearly emphasise: “managers should do their best to translate diversity into positive organisational, group and individual outcomes” (Kochan et al., 2003, p. 18).

Obviously, managers need and ask to see results. They are usually not interested in major theories that satisfy the aesthetic. In order to achieve their goals and excel their competitors, managers need to understand their external environment including the market as well as the overall mission, vision, strategy and culture of the company. Encouraging job applications from individuals of culturally diverse background is not enough when not accompanied by an effective diversity management on behalf of the competent personnel, especially in larger organisations. It is desirable that the business executives who are responsible for hiring staff and those involved in managing human resources to be trained in effectively managing issues of diversity and multiculturalism.

Organisations that succeed in managing the positive diversity climate by using a system of equal opportunities are encouraging and supporting the employees, thus providing the company with the competitive advantage of promoting the creativity and utilisation of the labour force. If employees do not feel comfortable due to their gender or ethnicity, this will inevitably affect their performance at work, and therefore the overall organisational development, their job satisfaction as well as their participation in the formation of creative teams. Arguments claimed that women with different ethnic origin may be characterised by reduced work integration compared to men. This affects the workforce refresh rate as people who are characterised by low transposition rate or social acceptance are more likely to declare voluntary retirement. Cannings (1988) documented in his research that gender constitutes a primary factor in career development with women receiving fewer promotion opportunities than men. As revealed by the analysis, it is crucial for the organisation to develop and implement a clear diversity policy and effectively communicate it to the employees.

Workforce diversity is often considered as a ‘double edged sword’ as it can engender both advantages and disadvantages for organisations. Differences in deeper characteristics like personality, knowledge and skills, if properly manage can constitute a competitive advantage for the team, since it will allow the best utilisation of each member’ contribution. The surface features, if not overcome, are likely to lead to low cohesion of the group, frequent replacement of members, social isolation, lack of identification of members with the group and therefore miscommunication and poor dedication, which will eventually result in poor performance.

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