

# Strategic Commentary

## Discovering and expanding diversity with authenticity

Robyn Brennaman

The business case has long since closed about the critical importance and value of diversity in the workplace. One would be hard-pressed to find a single C-suite executive or human resources (HR) professional who does not acknowledge that a homogenous (i.e. white and/or male) workforce impedes innovation, productivity and the ability to attract and retain the talent that can fuel a company's growth.

Even those who were late to accept this reality recognize that a high-minded mission statement or well-crafted "Diversity & Inclusion" page on their websites is no longer enough to demonstrate a real commitment to diversity. To build a 21st century workforce that reflects the panorama of backgrounds, experiences and perspectives found in society – and in their clients and customers – companies need to act with intention, thoughtfulness and authenticity. They must recognize and overcome the inherent or unconscious biases that can infect even the most well-intentioned hiring process.

### Diversity below the surface

But as much as these biases can strangle sincere diversity efforts, so too can a narrow conception of what diversity means. For too many, building a diverse workforce does not extend beyond recruiting and hiring more women, people of color and

LGBTQ individuals. We should applaud such efforts, of course, especially at the executive and management levels.

True diversity, however, is more than gender, skin color and sexual orientation. It involves those who may look the same but whose upbringings and life experiences are dramatically different. It includes searching for those who may have nontraditional career trajectories or educational paths. It means hiring practices designed to explore nuances, points of view and traits that a resume does not reflect. And it requires that the people charged with hiring a diverse workforce demonstrate that they value and respect candidates.

### Educational and socioeconomic diversity

Eliminating bias is one of the most challenging aspects of diversity efforts. For many, this means reviewing "blind" resumes that remove names or other references that would reveal a candidate's race or gender. While that may reduce bias, it may not expand the pool of candidates or shield a candidate from other unfair or outdated prejudices and presumptions.

Educational pedigree – for better or worse – remains an inflection point for many companies when considering candidates. But those who summarily reject candidates because of where they went to school, operate on a

Robyn Brennaman is based at Jobplex, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

misguided presumption that institutions reflect intelligence.

This view fails to consider people whose life circumstances – rather than their gifts, smarts and efforts – prevented them from attending marquee universities. Lack of opportunity or financial resources, the need to support a family or care for a sick loved one and a host of other factors often stand in the way and make community college or, increasingly, online universities, the only viable path to a degree.

Thus, by excluding candidates based on their education, hiring committees are also excluding talented and well-suited candidates from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. What makes this particularly damaging is the fact that the very circumstances that may restrict educational options can also speak to the character, drive and insights that characterize exceptional employees.

These “class migrants,” as they are sometimes called, have valuable traits that those from backgrounds that are more privileged may lack. For example, one study found that CEOs who were class migrants typically had increased risk-taking sensibilities that propelled them up the corporate ladder. But socioeconomic backgrounds and how the experiences related to those backgrounds shaped the candidate will not show up on an otherwise qualified candidate’s resume. By not giving these folks a chance, companies make educational and socioeconomic diversity unlikely.

### **Experiential and generational diversity**

Similarly, hiring executives may see nontraditional career paths or gaps in a resume as inherent negatives. People who leave the workforce for a

time or change positions may do so for reasons of family responsibilities or personal growth – not because they are incompetent or lack ambition. Exploring these detours, respectfully and with sensitivity, and being open to how those detours may add value, can expand a company’s experiential diversity.

People who have overcome physical limitations or mental health issues also may possess unique and positive attributes as a result of these challenges. Perseverance, creativity and the ability to grow and learn when facing personal obstacles are all characteristics that any hiring professional would put in the plus column.

Generational diversity adds a mix of cultural and technological perspectives to a company, but preconceived notions that youth equals innovation or that experience means wisdom may color how and whether a candidate is considered, even if such perceptions do not rise to the level of age discrimination in a legal sense.

### **Authenticity leads to diversity**

Expanding the pool of candidates to include individuals who possess these less prominent but equally valuable aspects of diversity can require greater effort for several reasons. Companies may need to be creative when sourcing candidates by focusing on organizations, geographic regions or online communities likely to contain a higher percentage of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Discovering and exploring experiential diversity requires much more than reading a resume. These qualities may reveal themselves only after candidates believe the hiring

process is based on a sincere commitment to learning about who they are, not just what they have done. While the increasing use of artificial intelligence in hiring practices can add value, an algorithm will not indicate career success in a candidate who experienced the death of a parent as a child.

The key to getting to this point is authenticity, which, as has been said, cannot be faked. Authenticity means that a company reflects its commitment to diversity in the people that a candidate sees on the other side of the table during the hiring process. When a group of white men makes the decisions, not only will it betray that diversity does not go beyond lip service but also exclude people from the process whose own diverse backgrounds can offer insightful perspectives or make a candidate feel comfortable discussing personal and sensitive life experiences.

Authenticity also involves integrating conversation with evaluation when interviewing a candidate. A real conversation builds trust and encourages openness. This, in turn, can lead to the demolition of assumptions and biases that would remain in place if the interviewer did not spend the time or make the effort to listen and learn about the candidate as a human being – not just a collection of accomplishments or skill sets.

HR professionals can assist clients in their diversity initiatives by expanding their views of what diversity means and helping them understand the importance of looking below the surface. Although it requires significant time and effort, it can infuse their companies with talent they may otherwise overlook.