

Diversity and Inclusiveness: The Path to Innovation, Collaboration & Growth

By Rob Doyle



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THE TOPIC OF DIVERSITY may bring to mind affirmative action from the '90s or Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)-related issues. But these policies and regulations really have little to do with how diversity and inclusion can play a powerful role in today's business environment.

When I think about these topics, and look at my company and our association, I see diversity as an opportunity for growth and development. I see that diversity can increase our competitive advantage.

I write this article as a disabled veteran, married to a person of visible minority, and father to a son who has a hearing disability. It is true that our life experiences affect our views, but if everyone viewed diversity as an opportunity to improve our businesses while enriching the lives of our employees, we would be more diverse and have deeper appreciation for the value that it brings.

■ Diversity in the Workplace

U.S. workplaces overall are becoming more diverse. According to *Forbes*, by 2020, women will outnumber men in the workplace for the first time in our country's history. And between 2020 and 2050, 83 percent of workplace growth will be from immigrants and their children.

So, what is diversity in the workplace anyway? I view it as a workplace that reflects the community where our warehouses reside and our society at large. If we think logically, a workplace that matches society at large also matches the society in which it serves. Furthermore, diversity itself has no boundaries: gender, race, veteran status, sexual orientation, age, and disabled individuals all contribute to a diverse workplace. This makes the most diverse workplaces better equipped to serve a diversified society.

Research is now showing that the definition of diversity is changing, as younger generations are expanding the definition well beyond traditional demographics to include life experiences, such as where someone was born or went to school, or the subjects he or she studied. The digital age of social media has hyper-intensified our concepts of diversity, as each characteristic leads to a person's individualism.

As our countries, cities, and workplaces become increasingly diverse, it is more important to look at all of the great talent around us, embrace our differences, and surround ourselves with the best and brightest. Building teams with diversity in mind will increase collaboration and make companies more resilient to outside factors.

So how do we create a diverse workplace? It's not about checking a box: It's more of a front-end effort, whereby companies deliberately cast a wider net and consciously develop a workplace that is welcoming and accommodating to a diverse community. These diversity-minded companies build departments and teams with a mix of people from veterans groups, colleges, the local labor de-

partment, disabled training co-ops, women, and minority groups. The process requires adapting to different qualifying methods that do not rely on socio-economic factors.

Once the net is wider, the choices will be more plentiful in our recruiting process and, at that point, the best person will rise to the top.

■ Benefits of a Diverse Workplace

According to a January 2015 report, *Diversity Matters* by McKinsey & Company, companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35 percent more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians.

The question is, why?

In bringing the diverse groups together, we tap in to a potentially powerful cross-section of life experiences that can lead to successful innovation. Teams made up of unique backgrounds are much more likely to enhance their roles and challenge each other to develop unconventional thinking. The more unique the group, the more unique the concept becomes, because there is no box to step out of. This optimal collaboration is what leads to enhanced revenue and profit.

The statistics clearly indicate that having diversity at all levels, from warehouse workers to managers, can grow our businesses and bottom lines. I view this in more simple terms, in that most good ideas in our companies come from those who are doing the work, and it is our job as executives to ensure that our boardrooms and warehouse floors have the diversity of thought that we need to challenge the status quo and continually strive to improve.

Diversity without a culture of inclusiveness would be missing the main point: It is only through inclusiveness that real change, *innovation*, and *growth* can occur. Inclusion is what makes a diverse workforce come together as one. Companies must promote inclusion in an honest, open manner to foster creativity and equality.

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■ Diversity as an Access Point to the Global Economy

Beyond how a more diverse and inclusive workforce will help us internally, it will become critical to our standing with our customers and suppliers. Just as we cast a wider net in recruiting talent, that talent also casts a wider net in retaining new customers. This diverse workforce and diverse perspective will enhance our ability to communicate and interact with a diverse culture. It will create more depth and knowledge within our approach to attracting a company that is as unique as we are.

A recent RFP from a Fortune 100 company asked – as the first question – if our company was a minority-owned, woman-owned, veteran-owned, or LGBT-owned business. When I visited the company's office weeks later, I was met with a very diverse group of decision makers, from an age, gender, and ethnicity standpoint. It was clear that this company valued its diversity and was looking for a partner with similar values.

■ The Bottom Line

Companies must constantly adapt to market fluctuations, regulations, competition, and economies. Why should changes in society be any different? As societal diversity increases, companies must account for these changes, too, in their workforces. These changes are valuable not only internally, to harness intellect and experiences, but also to a company's ability to attract new customers and suppliers and maintain a competitive advantage to increase growth and profit goals.

These efforts can be large or small:

- They may mean a louder voice for employees in day-to-day operations.

- They may include a wide-scale strategic recruitment effort.
- They may also entail a new inclusion policy or managerial training program.

It is only when it identifies a path toward diversity and inclusion that a company can truly improve top- and bottom-line growth while enriching the work experience of all of its employees.

When we look at IWLA member companies, what drives our success and sustainability is the active engagement of all of our members: from the smallest warehouses to the regional players and up to the large national and international corporations. IWLA members also represent a diverse industry of value-added services, products, sizes, and backgrounds. These collective experiences and resources of the entire membership allow the association to become more relevant – and it is this corporate diversity that will sustain us well into the future.

As IWLA Chairman, I am proud to see the IWLA taking a deeper dive into this area in the coming weeks and months. I look forward to applying the lessons learned to my company.

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Note: The IWLA Diversity Council, led by co-chairmen Andre Thornton, ASW Global, and Scott McWilliams, OHL, is working to build a diversity perspective into all of IWLA's offerings. In addition, the group is seeking success stories from IWLA members whose companies make diversity a priority in their businesses. To learn more or share your story, contact IWLA at mail@IWLA.com.

You should have recently received a letter from IWLA President & CEO Steve DeHaan. It outlines the steps IWLA and the IWLA Diversity Council are taking – and how you can tap in. If you want to discuss diversity with Steve, call 847.813.4699 or email sdehaan@IWLA.com.