

5.4: Challenges of Diversity

What is workplace discrimination, and how does it affect different social identity groups?

Although diversity has its benefits, there are also challenges that managers must face that can only be addressed with proper leadership. Some of the most common challenges observed in organizations and studied in research include lower organizational attachment and misunderstanding work diversity initiatives and programs.

Lower Organizational Attachment

Although diversity programs attract and retain women and minorities, they may have the opposite effect on other, nonminority employees. When diversity is not managed effectively, White and male employees can feel alienated from or targeted by the organization as diversity programs are put in place. A study that examined 151 work groups across three large organizations investigated whether the proportion of group membership based on race or sex affected the group members' absentee rates, psychological attachment to their work group, and turnover intentions,¹¹¹ three factors that play significant roles in an employee's attachment to their organization. Results showed a positive relationship between group heterogeneity and lower organizational attachment, higher turnover intentions, and greater frequency of absences for men and for White group members. In other words, as work group diversity increased, White employees and male employees felt less attached to the organization and were more likely to quit. Because heterogeneous groups improve creativity and judgement, managers should not avoid using them because they may be challenging to manage. Instead, employers need to make sure they understand the communication structure and decision-making styles of their work groups and seek feedback from employees to learn how dominant group members may adjust to diversity.

Legal Challenges and Diversity

The legal system is used to combat discrimination. Among the ways that we will cover here are reverse discrimination, workplace discrimination, harassment, age discrimination, disability discrimination, national origin discrimination, pregnancy discrimination, race/color discrimination, religious discrimination, sex-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination.

Reverse Discrimination

As research shows, workplace discrimination against women and racial or ethnic minorities is common. **Reverse discrimination** is a term that has been used to describe a situation in which dominant group members perceive that they are experiencing discrimination based on their race or sex. This type of discrimination is uncommon, but is usually claimed when the dominant group perceives that members of a protected (diverse) class of citizens are given preference in workplace or educational opportunities based not on their merit or talents, but on a prescribed preferential treatment awarded only on the basis of race or sex.

Research conducted in the 1990s shows that only six federal cases of reverse discrimination were upheld over a four-year period (1990–1994), and only 100 of the 3,000 cases for discrimination over that same four-year period were claims of reverse discrimination.¹¹² Interestingly, a recent poll administered by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that a little more than half of White Americans believe that White people face discrimination overall, and 19% believe they have experienced hiring discrimination due to the color of their skin.¹¹³ This misperception stems in part from the recalibration of the labor force as it becomes more balanced due to increased equal employment opportunities for everyone. Members of dominant identity groups, Whites and men, perceive fewer opportunities for themselves when they observe the workforce becoming more diverse. In reality, the workforce of a majority of companies is still predominantly White and male employees. The only difference is that legislation protecting employees from discrimination and improvements in equal access to education have created opportunities for minority group members when before there were none.

Workplace Discrimination

Workplace discrimination occurs when an employee or an applicant is treated unfairly at work or in the job-hiring process due to an identity group, condition, or personal characteristic such as the ones mentioned above. Discrimination can occur through marital status, for example when a person experiences workplace discrimination because of the characteristics of a person to whom they are married. Discrimination can also occur when the offender is of the same protected status of the victim, for example when someone discriminates against someone based on a national origin that they both share.

The **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)** was created by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with the primary goal of making it illegal to discriminate against someone in the workplace due to their race, national origin, sex, disability, religion, or pregnancy status.¹¹⁴ The EEOC enforces laws and issues guidelines for employment-related treatment. It also has the

authority to investigate charges of workplace discrimination, attempt to settle the charges, and, if necessary, file lawsuits when the law has been broken.

All types of workplace discrimination are prohibited under different laws enacted and enforced by the EEOC, which also considers workplace harassment and sexual harassment forms of workplace discrimination and mandates that men and women must be given the same pay for equal work.¹¹⁵

The provision for equal pay is covered under the **Equal Pay Act of 1963**, which was an amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Virtually all employers are subject to the provisions of the act, which was an attempt to address pay inequities between men and women. More than 50 years later, however, women still earn about 80 cents to every dollar that men earn, even while performing the same or similar jobs.¹¹⁶

Harassment

Harassment is any unwelcome conduct that is based on characteristics such as age, race, national origin, disability, sex, or pregnancy status. Harassment is a form of workplace discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.¹¹⁷

Sexual harassment specifically refers to harassment based on a person's sex, and it can (but does not have to) include unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or physical and verbal acts of a sexual nature. Though members of any sex can be the victim of sexual harassment, women are the primary targets of this type of harassment.¹¹⁸

Age Discrimination

Age discrimination consists of treating an employee or applicant less favorably due to their age. The **Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA)** forbids discrimination against individuals who are age 40 and above. The act prohibits harassment because of age, which can include offensive or derogatory remarks that create a hostile work environment.¹¹⁹

Disability Discrimination

A person with a disability is a person who has a physical or mental impairment that limits one or more of the person's life actions. **Disability discrimination** occurs when an employee or applicant who is covered by the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** is treated unfavorably due to their physical or mental disability. The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination in employment, public services, public accommodations, and telecommunications against people with disabilities.¹²⁰ To be covered under the ADA, individuals must be able to perform the essential functions of their job with or without reasonable accommodations. Research has shown that reasonable accommodations are typically of no or low cost (less than \$100) to employers.¹²¹

National Origin Discrimination

National origin discrimination involves treating someone unfavorably because of their country of origin, accent, ethnicity, or appearance. EEOC regulations make it illegal to implement an employment practice or policy that applies to everyone if it has a negative impact on people of a certain national origin. For example, employers cannot institute an "English-only" language policy unless speaking English at all times is essential to ensure the safe and efficient operation of the business. Employers also cannot mandate employees be fluent in English unless fluency in English is essential to satisfactory job performance. The EEOC also prohibits businesses from hiring only U.S. citizens or lawful residents unless the business is required by law to do so.¹²²

Pregnancy Discrimination

Pregnancy discrimination involves treating an employee or applicant unfairly because of pregnancy status, childbirth, or medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth. The **Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA)** prohibits any discrimination as it relates to pregnancy in any of the following areas: hiring, firing, compensation, training, job assignment, insurance, or any other employment conditions. Further, certain conditions that result from pregnancy may be protected under the ADA, which means employers may need to make reasonable accommodations for any employee with disabilities related to pregnancy.

Under the **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)**, new parents, including adoptive and foster parents, may be eligible for 12 weeks of unpaid leave (or paid leave only if earned by the employee) to care for the new child. Also, nursing mothers have the right to express milk on workplace premises.¹²³

Race/Color Discrimination

Race/color discrimination involves treating employees or applicants unfairly because of their race or because of physical characteristics typically associated with race such as skin color, hair color, hair texture, or certain facial features.

As with national origin discrimination, certain workplace policies that apply to all employees may be unlawful if they unfairly disadvantage employees of a certain race. Policies that specify that certain hairstyles must or must not be worn, for example, may unfairly impact African American employees, and such policies are prohibited unless their enforcement is necessary to the operations of the business.¹²⁴

Religious Discrimination

Religious discrimination occurs when employees or applicants are treated unfairly because of their religious beliefs. The laws protect those who belong to traditional organized religions and those who do not belong to organized religions but hold strong religious, ethical, or moral beliefs of some kind. Employers must make reasonable accommodations for employees' religious beliefs, which may include flexible scheduling or modifications to workplace practices. Employees are also permitted accommodation when it comes to religious dress and grooming practices, unless such accommodations will place an undue burden on the employer. Employees are also protected from having to participate (or not participate) in certain religious practices as terms of their employment.¹²⁵

Sex-Based Discrimination

Sex-based discrimination occurs when employees or applicants are treated unfairly because of their sex. This form of discrimination includes unfair treatment due to gender, transgender status, and sexual orientation. Harassment and policies that unfairly impact certain groups protected under sex discrimination laws are prohibited under EEOC legislation.¹²⁶

The key diversity-related federal laws are summarized in **Table 5.4.1**.

Table 5.4.1: Key Diversity Related Legislation

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964	Created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission with the primary role of making it illegal to discriminate against someone in the workplace due to their race, national origin, sex, disability, religion or pregnancy status
Equal Pay Act of 1963	Mandates that men and women must be given the same pay for equal work
Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA)	Forbids discrimination against individuals who are age 40 and above
Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)	Prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, public services, public accommodations and in telecommunications
Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA)	Prohibits any discrimination as it relates to pregnancy, including hiring, firing, compensation, training, job assignment, insurance or any other employment conditions
Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)	Grants new parents up to 12 weeks of paid or unpaid leave to care for the new child and gives nursing mothers the right to express milk on workplace premises

Other Types of Discrimination

Beyond the key types of discrimination outlined by the EEOC, diversity and management scholars have identified other types of discrimination that frequently impact certain identity groups more than others. **Access discrimination** is a catchall term that describes when people are denied employment opportunities because of their identity group or personal characteristics such as sex, race, age, or other factors. **Treatment discrimination** describes a situation in which people are employed but are treated differently while employed, mainly by receiving different and unequal job-related opportunities or rewards.¹²⁷ Scholars have also identified a form of discrimination called **interpersonal** or **covert discrimination** that involves discrimination that manifests itself in ways that

are not visible or readily identifiable, yet is serious because it can impact interpersonal interactions between employees, employees and customers, and other important workplace relationships.

This type of discrimination poses unique challenges because it is difficult to identify. For example, one study examining customer service and discrimination found that obese customers were more likely to experience interpersonal discrimination than average-weight customers. Salespersons spent less time interacting with obese customers than average-weight customers, and average-weight customers reported more positive interactions with salespeople when asked about standard customer service metrics such as being smiled at, receiving eye contact, and perceived friendliness.¹²⁸

concept check

- What is the role of the EEOC?
- What are the types of discrimination encountered in the workplace?

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