

3.4.5: Challenges of Diversity

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the challenges of a diverse workforce

What makes us different can also make it challenging for us to work well together. Challenges to employee diversity are based not only on our differences—actual or perceived—but on what we perceive as a threat. Our micro (e.g., organizational culture) and macro (e.g., socio-political and legal) operating environment can also be challenges for diversity. Long-term economic, social, political and environmental trends are rendering entire industries—and the associated skill sets—obsolete. For many in these industries and many slow-growth occupations, workplace trends seem to represent a clear and present danger.



In an article titled “Meet the US workforce of the future: Older, more diverse, and more educated,” Deloitte notes that the U.S. labor market is increasingly dividing into two categories: “highly skilled, well-paid professional jobs and poorly paid, low-skilled jobs.”^[1] The authors Dr. Patricia Buckley and Dr. Daniel Bachman note that there are relatively fewer middle-skill, moderate-pay jobs—for example, traditional blue-collar or administrative jobs. Indeed, as we’ve discussed in other modules, the idea of a static set of skills for a given occupation is a historical concept. The authors note that participation in the future labor force will increasingly require computer and mathematical skills, even at the low-skill end.

Deloitte expects the workforce of the future to be older (“70 is the new 50”), more diverse and more highly educated.^[2] To the diversity point, Deloitte states that “if current trends continue, tomorrow’s workforce will be even more diverse than today’s—by gender, by ethnicity, by culture, by religion, by sexual preference and identification, and perhaps by other characteristics we don’t even know about right now.”^[3] The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that by 2024, less than 60% of the labor force will identify as “white non-Hispanic,” down from over 75% in 1994.^[4] Hispanics are projected to comprise approximately 20% of the 2024 labor force, African-Americans 13% and Asians 7%. Women are expected to comprise 47% of the 2024 workforce. For many, these economic and demographic shifts represents a radical change. Macro level challenges to diversity include fixed mindsets, economic trends and outdated socio-political frameworks.

Here are specific challenges that may be experienced at the organizational level:

1. **Complexity.** This is the flip-side of one of diversity’s benefits: it’s hard work! Reynolds notes that while it might seem easier to work on a homogeneous team, there is a tendency to compromise and “settle for the status quo.” The title of a Harvard Business Review article captures the dynamic: “Diverse Teams Feel Less Comfortable—And That’s Why They Perform Better.” The authors’ argument: “working on diverse teams produces better outcomes precisely because it’s harder.”^[5]
2. **Differences in communication behaviors.** Different cultures have different communication rules or expectations. For example, colleagues from Asian or Native American cultures may be less inclined to “jump in” or offer their opinions due to politeness or deference as a new member or the only [fill in the blank] on the team.
3. **Prejudice or negative stereotypes.** Prejudice, negative assumptions or perceived limitations can negate the benefits of diversity and create a toxic culture. As Reynolds notes, “although not all stereotypes are necessarily negative...all are simplifications that can prove limiting or divisive in the workplace. And while outright prejudice or stereotyping is a serious concern, ingrained and unconscious biases can be a more difficult challenge of workplace diversity to overcome.”
4. **Differences in language and non-verbal communications.** George Bernard Shaw quipped “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” Clearly, language differences can be a challenge, including accents and idioms. Translation errors can also occur with non-verbal communication; gestures, eye contact, personal space and greeting customs can be significantly (and disastrously) different across cultures and regions. For perspective, scan *Business Insider’s* infographic [How to properly shake hands around the world](#).

5. **Complexity & cost of accommodations.** Hiring a non-U.S. citizen may require navigating visas and employment law as well as making accommodations for religious practices and non-standard holidays.
6. **Differences in professional etiquette.** Differences in attitudes, behaviors and values ranging from punctuality to the length of the work day, form of address or how to manage conflict can cause tensions.
7. **Conflicting working styles across teams.** In addition to individual differences, different approaches to work and team work—for example, the relative value of independent versus collaborative/collective thought and work—can derail progress.

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1. Buckley, Patricia and Daniel Bachman. "[Meet the US Workforce of the Future: Older, More Diverse, and more Educated.](#)" Deloitte Insights. July 31, 2017. Accessed September 14, 2019. ↵
2. Ibid. ↵
3. Ibid. ↵
4. "[Labor Force Projections to 2024: The Labor Force is Growing, but Slowly.](#)" United States Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics. December 2015. Accessed September 14, 2019. ↵
5. Reynolds, Katie. "[13 Benefits and Challenges of Cultural Diversity in the Workplace.](#)" Hult International Business School. February 2019. Accessed September 14, 2019. ↵

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