

Workplace diversity - what's really important?

Diversity has become a familiar buzzword in recent years and many organisations are now committed to increasing their diversity. But what does “workplace diversity” actually mean and what can you do at your next interview to differentiate yourself?

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For many people, when they think of workplace diversity, the first thing that comes to mind is ethnicity and gender, but diversity is much broader than that. Workplace diversity refers to a variety of differences between people within an organisation. This includes everything from race and religion, to personality and education.

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The top three factors Australians think are most important when it comes to workplace diversity are experience (72%), education (54%) and personality type (33%). Interestingly, ethnicity and gender both ranked as less important (23%).

What the research tells us is that when it comes to recruiting people for a job, the workforce believes candidates should be recruited because they are the best fit for the job – primarily based on having the right experience, education background and personality fit, and not based on such factors as their gender or physical ability.

Are many companies pursuing a diversity agenda when it comes to recruitment?

According to Hudson General Manager, Auckland, Tony Pownall, while most briefs he

receives from companies do not specify any particular criteria to improve their diversity profile, the most common diversity request he does receive is gender based.

These requests are mainly from large organisations, especially in the financial services sector, he says. “Many businesses in the banking and finance industry have clear gender diversity policies. These initiatives aim to attract and maintain a gender-balanced workplace and target women at all levels of the industry, from graduates, right through to executive-level.”

Pownall believes in the past many women have dismissed a career in the industry because of a perceived lack of flexibility when it came to supporting responsibilities outside of work. “This seems to have been driven by a belief that the industry was traditionally male-dominated and lacked senior female role models,” he adds.

Jill Sears, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at Melbourne Water, says, while diversity comes into play when recruiting, it is mainly a consideration to attract applications from a broad mix of candidates.

“We know that to recruit a diverse workforce we need to adopt different recruitment strategies. We take the time to look at our processes to identify any barriers and, if needed, we adjust the interview process to ensure all applicants can access it.”

This might include, for example, having an Aboriginal person on the interview panel, or providing deaf candidates access to a sign language interpreter, Sears says.

Should businesses strive to be diverse?

There is a lot of research that demonstrates diversity delivers better outcomes. When SEEK asked employees what they thought were the advantages of having a diverse workplace, the primary benefits were seen to be ‘more diverse experience’ (58%) and ‘an increase in creative thinking and problem solving’ (51%). Just less than half (48%) thought having a diverse workplace ‘builds better teams’.

Sears believes teams made up of people with different experiences look at problems through different lenses and consequently have varied perspectives and ask different questions. This can lead to more innovative and robust solutions and outcomes.

But diversity is only one part of the equation. “Inclusion is the other key ingredient,” Sears says. “To achieve the benefits of diversity workplace culture must be inclusive,

enabling the participation of everyone regardless of difference.”

So how can candidates put their best foot forward at their next interview and align themselves with an organisation that values diversity?

Sears says increased awareness and understanding around diversity in the workplace is a good thing and you can use it in an interview in a positive way.

“If your diversity contributes to making you a great candidate, I would encourage you to talk about that. For example, people with a disability may be able to demonstrate how having to do things differently as a result of their disability has led to resilience and problem-solving skills – these are great skills for any modern workplace.”

If English is your second language, you might use that as a springboard to demonstrate how your cultural background gives you a better understanding of the needs of people from different cultures. “This may be knowledge and understanding the organisation values,” Sears adds.

With businesses increasingly viewing diversity in broader terms, it’s an opportunity for candidates to think about what makes them a unique fit for the roles they are applying for, not just in terms of their technical skills and expertise, but also in terms of their education, personality, volunteer work and personal experiences.

“At Melbourne Water, we make sure the candidate has every opportunity to discuss not only their work experience but also their education, volunteer and personal experiences. A recent candidate used an example from their time as Treasurer of their local footy club to demonstrate their ability to show leadership in a difficult situation.”

It is also worth investing time to think about your own experiences of working in diverse teams and the role you have played in those teams.

“Candidates applying for any role, but especially those who are applying for people leadership roles should be able to demonstrate how they have fostered an inclusive culture within their team that has actively encouraged diversity of thought and welcomes everyone to participate.”

Ultimately, a broader definition of workplace diversity and increased awareness about the benefits of diversity in the workplace presents new opportunities for candidates to showcase their unique experiences and new avenues for illustrating how they will be

the best fit for the role they are applying for. So, start thinking outside the box and don't restrict your frame of reference when it comes to describing your experiences at your next interview.

Source: Independent research conducted by Survey Sampling International (SSI) on behalf of SEEK. Interviewing 4800 Australians annually with data being weighted to be nationally representative of age, gender, location, employment status and income (based on ABS).