Diversity, Inclusion, Equal Employment Opportunity—What’s the Difference?

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We hear so much about “diversity,” “inclusion,” and “equal employment”; but what do these terms mean in the workplace, and how do they relate to each other? This month’s article explores these concepts and their importance at work.

Diversity, inclusion, and equal employment opportunity (EEO) are all elements related to equity and respect, and can be defined as follows:

**Diversity** seeks to promote and embrace a workforce that is comprised of people with different characteristics, such as age, race, color, gender, sexual orientation, and disability, as well as individuals of different religions, cultures, backgrounds, beliefs, abilities, interests and education, to name only a few.

**Inclusion** is the promotion of a supportive and respectful environment that ensures everyone belongs, is valued, respected, and has equal access to all opportunities. Employers who support diversity and inclusion celebrate and utilize the different backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas of all their staff members. As Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., President and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) points out, diversity and inclusion work together; he states: “We often forget the ‘I’ in the D&I conversation. The challenge is in having a culture where all employees feel included. It’s a major investment to bring talent into your organization, so why bring them in if they’re not happy when they get here? You’ve got to get the inclusion part right.”

**EEO** is the legal obligation under state and federal law to treat applicants and employees equally in all aspects of employment without regard to their protected class status, which encompasses age, race, gender, pregnancy, childbirth, ancestry, color, national origin, religion, medical history, honesty testing, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, arrest and conviction records, use or nonuse of lawful products, and military service. All Wisconsin employers must abide by the provisions of the state Fair Employment Act set forth in Wis. Stat. §§ 111.31-111.395.

**Why are these concepts important?**

Diversity, inclusion, and EEO protect against inaccurate and irrelevant assumptions that could be used to deny someone employment privileges and opportunities. They ensure that employees are treated fairly and that employment decisions are based on a person’s qualifications, skills, and talents. They are also good business practices since biases interfere with hiring and retaining the best employees.

**How can an organization implement these concepts?**

Diversity, inclusion and EEO should be part of an organization’s overall strategy for people management. Some suggested elements include, but certainly are not limited to:

1. **Commitment**: Incorporating diversity, inclusion, and EEO comes from a consistent commitment throughout all levels of the organization to embrace the initiatives, and it must start at the top. The leadership team must understand expectations around diversity, inclusion, and EEO compliance, and be held accountable in performance management and compensation for failure to satisfy those expectations.

2. **Recruitment**: Creation of a diverse workforce starts with recruitment. Hiring efforts should look for ways to achieve a more diverse pool of qualified...
applicants and ensure a bias-free hiring process. Expanding recruitment sources could include, for example, posting job announcements on sites that promote diversity in the workplace, such as Professional Diversity Network. College job fairs and career centers are also excellent sources to increase a diverse candidate pool.

3. Workplace Culture: Culture is the foundation upon which diversity, inclusion, and EEO flourish in the workplace. The U.S. Education Department’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan highlights this idea: “Cultivate a culture that encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness to enable individuals to contribute to their full potential and further retention.” Diverse and inclusive environments emphasize the importance of:

- unique perspectives, ideas, and experiences;
- innovation and creativity;
- equal opportunity;
- teamwork and collaboration; and
- promotion of healthy and respectful conflict.

One option to drive these concepts into the workplace culture is appointing a committee responsible for championing diversity and inclusion and whose members consist of employees from different departments and levels of the organization.

4. Training: Organizations should train employees, especially managers, to be mindful of their biases. Assessments exist to measure a person’s unconscious biases, and training can reduce or eliminate the influence of these biases. Training provides instruction on modeling inclusive behavior and demonstrates how these concepts are important for making decisions and solving problems throughout the organization. This training can be part of broader respectful workplace training that encompasses anti-harassment, anti-discrimination, diversity, and cultural competence education.

Communities that embrace diversity, inclusion, and EEO in their workforce have a greater ability to fulfill their mission to serve what is often a diverse population. These organizations are more innovative, efficient, and solve problems faster with a more engaged workforce. Adopting a formal plan to achieve these things is worth the effort.

Next month, we will explore legally-required EEO obligations related specifically to recruiting and hiring as well as compliance resources.

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“I am so proud to know that you all work diligently to make your program the best. Please keep up the good work and thank you all so much.”

- Pamela
Marked Tree, Arkansas