# Briefing Paper: Diversity in the ICT Workplace

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## Subject and Background

Australia is rapidly becoming more culturally and demographically diverse (McLeod, Lobel and Cox 1996, p. 248; Green et al. 2012, p. 1) due to migration and demographic trends (Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 175), which are further facilitated by Australia's multicultural policies (Koleth 2010). Australia's workforce will follow suit as legislative pressure, market forces and demand for skilled workers lower the barrier to entry for minorities (Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 175). Consequently, organisations will need strategies to manage and harness diversity (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, p. 30).

This brief's objectives are to inform readers of the benefits and challenges of ICT workplace diversification, and how to harness it. Appropriate references were searched for using Google Scholar. Research indicated that properly managed diversity enhances team creativity and performance, whereas poor diversity management allows conflict and disfunction to hinder performance.

## Key Questions

Key questions about workplace diversity include:

- What are the advantages, disadvantages and challenges of workplace diversity?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of workplace homogeneity?
- What impediments might organisations face to diversification or harnessing diversity?
- How can diversity be managed and harnessed best?
- What professional obligations do organisations have regarding diversity?

## Research Findings

### Benefits of Workplace Diversity

Bassett-Jones (2005, p. 172) and Shachaf (2008, pp. 8-9) say teams with greater diversity – regarding gender, ethnicity, age, social attitudes, personality, educational background, etc. – have more perspectives, approaches, knowledge and skills available than homogenous teams. Their broader network of contacts keeps them more informed and responsive regarding marketplace turbulence. Variety in perspectives hinders groupthink and improves performance, creative problem solving, critical evaluation and decision-making (pp. 171-172; McLeod, Lobel and Cox 1996, p. 250). It makes teams less risk-averse and helps them generate more ideas (Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 172; Shachaf 2008, pp. 3), and solutions with greater quality, originality, feasibility, practicality and effectiveness (McLeod, Lobel and Cox 1996, pp. 248, 250, 256-257). Consequently, diverse teams eventually outperform their homogenous competitors (p. 249; Shachaf 2008, p. 3). Their members also report increased job satisfaction and commitment, and their organizations become more agile and innovative (Bassett-Jones 2005, pp. 169, 171).

### Challenges of Workplace Diversity

Just increasing teams' diversity worsens team performance; diversity must be properly managed and varied perspectives used to be beneficial (McLeod, Lobel and Cox 1996, p. 261). Upon formation,

diverse teams initially perform worse than homogenous teams on complex, communication-intensive tasks (pp. 249, 258-260). They experience higher turnover (p. 260), greater conflict, and less integration, cohesion and trust, they lack shared mental models, and have to manage in-groups and out-groups (Bassett-Jones 2005, pp. 171-172; Shachaf 2008, p. 3) and "complexity, conflict, confusion, and ambiguity" in communication due to communication style differences, "false assumptions of similarity [and] language, nonverbal misunderstanding . . . misconceptions and stereotypes" (pp. 3, 6-8). Furthermore, minority members of diverse teams report less team attachment than peers from homogenous teams who don't feel different from their co-workers (McLeod, Lobel and Cox 1996, p. 248; Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 172).

## Impediments to Workplace Diversity and Effective Diversity Management
Ethnic minority students' interest in ICT doesn't hinder diversification; they "have higher expectations of computer expertise [for] future job[s]" and express curiosity about computers more often than non-minority students (Volman et al. 2005, pp. 45-46).

Organizational failure to diversify or manage diversity can stem from uncertainty "about how diversity is evaluated", a lack of "clear policies initiating diversity" as an organizational priority, managers lacking skills required to manage diversity properly, employee or departmental opposition to "commitment[s] to multiculturalism" out of "institutional resistance . . . to differences". They mightn't understand diversity's value "or [be] well trained about [it]", or may have "biases and prejudices [that cause] cultural discrimination and conflicts". Other employees might be under pressure to perform well and not have time to participate in the diversity management process (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, pp. 27-28). Additionally, if the process isn't continuous, is symbolic, or is "executed separately [from] the firm's strategic goal", it will fail (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, p. 28).

## Professional Obligations
For Australian Computer Society (ACS) members, the ACS Code of Conduct (Australian Computer Society Professional Standards Board 2014) favour workplace diversity. The section on professionalism says "[d]iscrimination is unprofessional behaviour" and that ACS members should "confront attempts to limit [workplace diversity], and ensure that opportunities are based on [objective employee performance], free of stereotypes and prejudices" (p. 8). The section on competence notes you should "be aware of your own limitations", "be able to recognise when you need additional expertise and information", and "respect, and seek where necessary, the . . . expertise of colleagues" in their domains (p. 7), such as demographic or cultural familiarity, or a perspective that makes product and service flaws that are problematic for their group visible, qualifications more common and developed in members of that demographic or culture than outsiders.

## Diversity Management Recommendations
Diversity requires proper management to increase performance, requiring "an understanding of individual strengths and weaknesses, and working relationships . . . founded upon sensitivity and trust" (Bassett-Jones 2005, pp. 171-172). Key factors include "trust, team spirit, unified commitment, principled leadership, an elevating goal, a results-driven structure, standards of excellence, participation in decision-making, external support and recognition, and an aptitude to adjust to new roles and behaviours to accommodate . . . emergent values" (p. 172); diversity management should foster "mutual acceptance, learning and adaptation", not manage "the differences among the group" (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, p. 27).

Diverse teams' leaders must "understand the challenges of diversity management . . . have the emotional intelligence and commitment necessary to build a personal relationship with each . . .

group/team member" (Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 173), "foster trust and inclusiveness" (p. 174), and create a space where employees feel safe to communicate. They must understand discrimination, its consequences, and their own cultural biases and prejudices, and maintain ongoing training for team members – "a one-day session [won't] change people's behaviours". They should understand change will be slow, but still persevere and encourage it (Green et al. 2012, pp. 2-3).

When building high-performance teams, leaders must keep in mind individuals' preferred work styles, types and contexts, and that the best diversity management strategy will depend on the team (Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 173; Green et al. 2012, p. 2). They must "match functional competence and personality" against job requirements, and "produce a balance of work preferences, attitude to risk and [inclusiveness of] social identity" (Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 173).

Attitudinally diverse groups perform better when trained to understand other's views and attitudes (McLeod, Lobel and Cox 1996, p. 260). This can be facilitated by activities where employees learn from each other in groups, "organizing events, holding seminars, talking face-to-face and even using a cultural facilitator" for intercultural learning, "sharing what they need and listening to what they expect", exchanging "information and feedback" to develop mutual understanding and acceptance and adjust behaviours (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, p. 28). These exercises also foster close communication skills, which makes diversity management easier and enhances job satisfaction, engagement and productivity. Communication can also benefit from appropriate use of ICT tools (emails, teleconferencing, shared workspaces, messaging, etc.) to help mitigate disadvantages and conflicts associated with cultural diversity within teams (Shachaf 2008, pp. 9-17). When teams do experience conflict, if collaboratively managed and properly channelled, it can be helpful rather than harmful (pp. 4, 8; Bassett-Jones 2005, p. 172).

Diversity management should be integrated into an organization's overall goals and strategic plan, making diversification and management a "departmental responsibility", allowing staff to "be paid for their successful diversity performance and taken as a good example for everyone . . . Diversity initiatives can be successful if . . . staff [are] well-guided and well-monitored" and understand the initiatives' benefits. "A diversity department . . . can [help] direct other departments to . . . match the [organization's] diversity mission" (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, p. 29). Alongside this, performance appraisals that objectively measure staff performance and ignore "race, age, gender, religion", etc., can help manage equality, helping the organization to "offer equal job opportunities to everyone", evenly apply a corporate ladder, establish "equality culture internally and increase . . . job satisfaction" (Bui and Eguaikhide 2019, pp. 28-29). Even if applicants for leadership positions fail, they should be provided with the "necessary, constructive, critical feedback" to learn for future applications (Green et al. 2012, p. 3).

## Recommendations

Based on my research, I'd suggest the following to ICT organizations:

- Employees should:

    o Receive training to ensure they can communicate effectively face-to-face and online, understand workplace diversity's benefits, and understand and accept each other, irrespective of differences.
    o Receive recurring training to ensure they can collaboratively manage and productively channel conflict.
    o (If they are team leaders) receive regular training to maintain the skills, knowledge and understanding for building and leading effective diverse teams.

- o Regularly participate in activities where employees learn from each other, developing understanding and acceptance of each's differences and perspectives.
- o Have appropriate breaks and team-building activities to allow them to build relationships and trust, and to engage with the diversity management process.

- Organizations should:

  - o Not discriminate against applicants by gender, race, age, etc. If applicants have required technical and transferrable skills and can diversify the organization, they should be hired. They'll inevitably have to hire minority staff; preparing now will unlock benefits sooner.
  - o Align their existing goals and strategic plan with those regarding diversity.
  - o Employ staff to coordinate diversity management.
  - o Fire belligerent employees that unyieldingly discriminate, express prejudices, or disregard diversity training.
  - o Make employees' performance appraisals objective and non-discriminatory, affording equal opportunities for minority employees, with feedback for all applicants on their performance, whether they advance or not.

## Conclusion

The Australian population is diversifying, and the ICT workforce is following suit. ACS members are obligated to promote diversity, and it's in organizations' interest to harness it: diverse teams and organizations perform better than homogenous competitors, but only when appropriate training and policies are implemented.

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