The complex concept of sustainable of diversity management

…and why forming policies in this area is far from straightforward

By Simon Best, Andrew Boff, Michael Muller-Camen and Alistair Soyode

Abstract

Purpose – *Explores the notion of sustainable diversity-management practices.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Summarizes research into the sustainability of diversity management across four countries and provides examples of efforts to maintain high levels of diversity.*

Findings – *Looks at the activities of Africa House, an organization that develops business links with Africa, and of BEN Television, which is a television station that caters primarily for ethnic minorities.*

Practical implications – *Demonstrates that diversity is a multi-dimensional concept that can be structured within two frameworks: demographic diversity regarding, for example, age, gender and nationality; and human-capital diversity, such as cognitive diversity, skill and experience diversity.*

Social implications – *Highlights the complexity of diversity and so the difficulty of legislating in this area.*

Originality/value – *Explains that employees can also stifle attempts to engage in sustainable diversity management policies. A lack of understanding of local laws or language, or through limited social contacts, can prevent full participation by employees.*

Article type: General review

Keyword(s): Diversity; Employee attitudes; Involvement

Over the past 30 years substantial changes in the composition of the workforce have come about through the recognition of diversity, which embraces disability, gender, age, ethnic group, sexual orientation and cultural orientations (Bleijenbergh, Peters and Poutsma, 2010; Foster and Harris, 2005).

As a result, we told a conference named "Diversity: a Practitioner's Journey", held at Middlesex University, London, there has been a shift in what these differences mean for organizations and how they use various management techniques to engage with the differences within the labor market, workplace and marketplace (Bjerregaard and Lauring, 2013).

There is mounting evidence that diversity, when managed well, can lead to the recruitment of employees who add to the flexibility of an organization, as well as stronger fiscal sustainability and improved ability to retain key employees (Michielsens, Bingham, and Clarke, 2014).

Beyond the business case for diversity are the moral and ethical considerations. Managing diversity in the workplace pushes for social justice as well (Bleijenbergh, Peters and Poutsma, 2010). Consequently, the notion that people can be discriminated against on the basis of demographic and non-task related factors is now widely legislated against (van Dijk, Engen, and Paauwe, 2012; Foster and Harris, 2005). Furthermore, CSR has broadened its embrace to become one of the key drivers of equality and managing diversity in the workplace (Colgan, 2011). Organizations are seeking to be seen as a place of employment of choice, based on the way they manage diversity (Foster and Harris, 2005). This has led to the effective management of employee diversity being one of the most critical aspects of HRM.

However, the perception exists that managing a homogenous workforce is significantly more straightforward than managing a heterogeneous workforce. (Sippola, and Smale, 2007). Furthermore, it is unclear what managing diversity in the workplace actually means (Foster and Harris, 2005).

The purpose of diversity management is to ensure that everyone can succeed based on his or her individual characteristics (Soltani, Syed, Liao, and Shahi-Sough, 2012). It is not intended to give certain groups of workers preferential treatment and so give rise to a sense of unfairness among other groups (Bleijenbergh, Peters and Poutsma, 2010).

Sustainable diversity management

Using sustainability reports from some of the biggest listed public organizations in the USA, Germany, Japan and China, Michael Muller-Camen's (Hanappi-Egger, Muller-Camen and Schuhbeck, 2014) explored the question of whether diversity management was a universal concept, or if differences existed between various organizations in different countries.

Using a critical discourse analysis approach the researchers examined sustainability reports for sequences of various dimensions that pertain to diversity within the workplace.

The results show that the main diversity dimension was gender for all four countries. However, other diversity dimensions varied between each country and in some cases quite significantly. For example, in the USA race featured prominently and was the second highest ranked dimension, yet for the other three countries it ranked much lower. In Japan disability ranked much higher than the other countries.

The conclusions drawn from the research are that, despite the pressure to enact diversity-management policies, there are substantial differences between countries and between industries.

The research also found that sustainability reports are not particularly good tools to measure diversity-management outcomes. While the results of the research are not emphatic, they do suggest that there are some difficulties with enacting diversity-management policies that are sustainable.

The example of Africa House

Africa House is a social enterprise that was established to develop and increase trade between the UK and Africa. One of its aims is to provide technical support to establishing and developing business relationships between organizations in the UK and Africa. One aspect of this support is to improve corporate governance.

Andrew Boff ,of Africa House (Boff, 2014), said that Africa is sometimes seen as a single entity yet embraces all diversity dimensions in a way that is far more complicated than in any single country. This diversity extends across and within African countries as a result of the colonial division of Africa. This division was determined on the basis of political influence rather than the ethnic and racial profiles of Africans. This presents a serious challenge for organizations looking to engage in Africa and can influence non-African enterprises' decisions to engage with African enterprises. A key component of Africa House's strategy to improve corporate governance is to help to develop diversity-management policies.

The example of BEN Television

Alistair Soyode (Soyode, 2014) discussed the *rationale* behind the setting up of BEN (Bright Entertainment Network) Television and the contribution it makes to sustaining diversity. While recognizing the broad diversity that exists in the UK, the focus of BEN Television is to deliver content to diverse ethnic audiences. It sees itself as a progressive black and family-oriented television station. This leads to one of the biggest challenges it faces; producing and broadcasting programs that do not discriminate against any group or individual. As an organization that focuses on a specific diversity dimension, sustaining a diversity-management policy across numerous dimensions is problematic.

Conclusions

While there is little doubt about the benefits of diversity management, the three presentations demonstrate the immense difficulty of enacting a sustainable diversity-management policy for any organization. Each of the presentations demonstrated the variety of focus that different organizations take, with some organizations focusing on certain dimensions over others (Jose Chiappetta Jabbour, et al., 2011).

Diversity-management policies require the acknowledgement that each person is different from the next, and that this difference needs to be accepted (Jose Chiappetta Jabbour, et al., 2011).

Diversity is a multi-dimensional concept that can be structured within two frameworks: demographic diversity regarding, for example, age, gender and nationality; and human-capital diversity, such as cognitive diversity, skill and experience diversity (Martín-Alcázar, Romero-Fernández & Sánchez-Gardey, 2012).

Clearly, employees are not just constructed by their skills and abilities, but by their ethnic background and social history (Syed, and Kramar, 2009). These differences can also lead to obstructions in implementing a diversity-management policy.

Furthermore, despite management's efforts, employees can also stifle attempts to engage in sustainable diversity management policies. A lack of understanding of local laws or language, or through limited social contacts, can prevent full participation by employees (Syed, and Kramar, 2009).

Finally, the notion of equality and social justice gets challenged as the individual uniqueness of each person creates unique interpretations of what is equal. Trying to be all things to all people is virtually impossible (Foster, C. & Harris, L. 2005).

Note

Simon Best is a senior lecturer in management in the Department of International Management and Innovation at Middlesex University Business School, London. Andrew Boff is London-wide London Assembly Member, leader of the GLA Conservatives' group and chairman of Africa House, London. Michael Muller-Camen is a professor at the Institute of Human Resource Management at WU Vienna University of Economics and Business and visiting professor at Middlesex University, London. Alistair Soyode is chief executive of Bright Entertainment Network (BEN) TV.

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Box-out quotes

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