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WORKFORCE DIVERSITY: A NEED OF TIME IN 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT:

In modern management, human resource is considered as the most valuable asset of the business organization. Each and every company strives to attract and retain the best workforce. After LPG policies, world has become a 'Global Village'. Increasing number of multinational corporations paved the way for diverse workforce. Workforce diversity is an essential concern in the 21st century. Diversity refers to the variety of experiences and perspectives which arise from differences in race, culture, religion, mental or physical abilities, heritage, age, gender and other characteristics. It refers to policies and practices that seek to include people within a workforce who are considered to be, in same way, different from those in the prevailing constituency.

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, Affirmative action, Tokenism, Assimilation, Equal Employment Opportunities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER:

- 1) To understand the meaning and origin of Workforce Diversity.
- 2) To highlight the importance of Workforce Diversity in business organizations.
- 3) To describe the management of Workforce diversity.

BACKGROUND OF WORKFORCE DIVERSITY:

The original model of workforce diversity was situated around affirmative action derived from the law and a need to comply with 'Equal Employment Opportunity' objective. This model gave rise to the idea that tokenism was the reason an individual was hired into a company when he or she differed from the dominant group. Tokenism is the policy and practice of making a perfunctory gesture toward the inclusion of members of minority groups. This token effort is usually intended to create a false appearance of inclusiveness.

The concept covered only gender, race and ethnicity. The social justice model evolved next and extended the idea that individuals outside of the dominant group should be given opportunities within the workplace, not only because it was the law, but because it was the right thing to do. From this developed the model of representation and diversity acceptance where the scope of diversity expanded beyond gender, race and ethnicity to include age, physical abilities and sexual orientation.

Today the diversity model is one of inclusion which reflects a globalized economy and multicultural workforce where value is placed on diversity of thoughts.

WHAT IS WORKFORCE DIVERSITY?

Diversity is defined as, "the variety of experiences and perspective which arise from differences in race, culture, religion, mental or physical abilities, heritage, age, gender, sexual orientation and other characteristics." Diversity is otherness or those human qualities that are different from our own and outside the groups which we belong, yet present in other individuals and groups. Diversity also encompasses a wide variety of other differences such as work experiences, parental status, educational background, geographic location etc.

Workforce diversity is becoming more common in today's global business environment. In the era of economic globalization, many companies are making efforts to achieve workforce diversity, which aims to employ workers from different background to provide tangible and intangible benefits to the organization.

Reasons for Workforce Diversity:

Followings are the major factors which motivate companies to diversify their workforce:

- 1) Many of the beneficiaries of good diversity practices are from 'disadvantaged' group of people. It is one of the best ways to fulfill Corporate Social Responsibility.
- 2) The changing demographics in the workplace. Nowadays, talent is available in heterogeneous groups.
- 3) Many companies are under legislative mandates to be non-discriminatory in their employment practices. Non-compliance with Equal Employment Opportunity can result in fines and/or loss of contracts with government agencies.
- 4) Buying power is represented by people from all walks of life. To ensure that their products and services are designed to appeal to this diverse customer base, smart companies diversify their workforce as a marketing strategy.
- 5) Companies that choose to retain homogeneous workforce will find themselves ineffective in their external interactions and communications.
- 6) Companies that prosper have the capacity to effectively solve problems, rapidly adapt to new situations, identify new opportunities and quickly avail them. This capacity can be measured by the range of talent, experience, knowledge, insight, and imagination available in the workforces.

Classification of Workplaces: There are, generally, three types of workplaces such as,

- 1) **The Monolithic organization:** It refers to the workplaces where amount of structural integration is very less. Diverse workforce is not preferred.
- 2) **The Plural Organization:** It has a more heterogeneous membership than the monolithic organization, and makes efforts to be more inclusive of persons from cultural backgrounds that differ from the dominant group.
- 3) **The Multi-cultural organization:** It not only contains many different cultural groups, but it values this diversity. It encourages healthy conflict as a source of group thinking.

Significance of the Workforce Diversity:

1) Increase in Productivity :

Diverse workforce can bring about an increase in productivity and competitive advantage. Companies can offer more benefits to customers because of new ideas and processes brought into the organization. It improves employee's morale and motivates to work more effectively and efficiently.

2) Increase in Creativity :

It helps to increase creativity within the company, because heterogeneous groups are more creative in nature. People from different cultural background bring in a variety of solutions on how to achieve a common goal.

3) Language Skills :

Companies that plan to expand into global market, benefit from language diversity in the workplace.

4) **Positive Reputation:** Compliance with 'Equal Employment Opportunity' legislation facilitates positive reputation. Talented employees prefer employer who does not practice employment discrimination and treat employees fairly regardless of race, ethnicity and gender.

MANAGING DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE:

Managing diversity is defined as, "planning and implementing organizational systems and practices to manage people so that the potential advantages of diversity are maximized while its potential disadvantages are minimized." Managing diversity means acknowledging people's differences and recognizing these differences as valuable, it enhances good management practices by preventing discrimination and promoting inclusiveness. Managing diversity provides a distinct advantage in an era where flexibility and creativity are the keys to the competitiveness. An organization needs to be adaptable to meet the new customer needs. To manage diversity issues management should consider what policies, practices, and ways of thinking have differential impact on different groups. What organizational changes should be made to meet the needs of a diverse workforce?

Managers have a key role to perform in transforming the organizational culture. Some of the skills required are: a) an understanding and acceptance of managing diversity concepts, b) recognition that diversity is threaded through every aspect of management, c) self-awareness, in terms of understanding your own culture, identity, biases, prejudices, d) willingness to challenge and change institutional practices that create barriers to different groups.

Managing diversity is different from Affirmative Action:

Managing diversity is focusing on maximizing the ability of all employees to contribute to organizational goals. Affirmative action focuses on specific groups because of historical discrimination, such as people of color and women. It emphasizes legal necessity and social responsibility, whereas managing diversity emphasizes business necessity. Managing diversity is also concerned with affirmative action.

Challenges before managing diversity:

One of the biggest challenges an organization has when trying to adopt a more inclusive environment is *assimilation*² for any member outside the dominant group. People who spend significant amounts of energy coping with an alien environment have less energy left to do their jobs. Assimilation does not just create a situation in which people who are different are likely to fail, it also decreases the productivity of organizations.

Another problem is management of diverse population. Managing diversity is more than simply acknowledging differences in people. Work teams that are highly diverse can be difficult to motivate and manage.

A major challenge is miscommunication. There are skills which help to develop effective communication in diverse organizational environments. These skills include self-monitoring, empathy and strategic decision making. Self-monitoring refers to a communicator's awareness of how his/her behaviour affects another person. Empathy enables the receiver to go beyond the literal meaning of a message and consider the communicator's feelings, values, assumptions etc. Strategic decision making implies that the communication sources and channels used to reach organization's members are mindfully selected.

Consequences of Ignoring Diversity:

Ignoring diversity issues costs time, money, and efficiency. Some of the consequences can include unhealthy tensions, loss of productivity, increased conflicts, inability to attract and retain talented people of all kinds, complaints and legal actions etc.

CONCLUSION:

According to Dr. Santiago Rodriguez, Director of Diversity for Microsoft, "truly diversity is exemplified by companies that 'hire people who are different – knowing and valuing that they will change the way you do business.'"

It is clear that companies that diversify their workforces will have a distinct competitive advantage over those that don't. Heterogeneity promotes creativity and a higher level of critical analysis. With effective management of diversity companies can achieve a reputation as an 'employer of choice'.

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²Assimilation is a process by which a person or a group's language and ,or culture come to resemble those of the another group.

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