

Cayman's diverse workforce

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When considering diversity in the workplace in the Cayman Islands, many people think in terms of nationality. With more than 110 nationalities represented here, most workplaces resemble a mini-United Nations gathering.

However, the diversity in Cayman's workplaces goes far beyond just nationality, and also includes factors such as culture, gender, race, education, religion, political alliance, wealth and even language to a certain extent.

Difference is implicit in the concept of diversity and having so much difference in workplaces can and does create conflict. But there are advantages to having diversity in the workplace as well, says Samantha Nehra, president of the Cayman Islands Society of Human Resources Professionals, who believes diversity in the workplace should be embraced and fostered.

"Diversity brings different perspectives, which in turn brings innovation and creative thinking," Nehra says. "If we all think the same, problem solving is a problem! The most successful organisations actively embrace and promote diversity in their employee base because they know they will get better results."

Mario Ebanks, the senior consultant and project leader of Premier Solutions Group and former president of the Cayman Islands Society of Human Resources Professionals, calls the Cayman Islands "a rich global melting pot of cultures and nationalities". With all of Cayman's diversity, Ebanks says it's important that staff members understand each other and can work together for the good of the business.

"As a service economy, it is important that all employees who are providing these services to visiting and international clientele are efficient and working as a unified and focused team," he says.

However, getting a diverse workplace staff working together takes some effort, Nehra says. "Organisations must have cultural and diversity awareness programmes. If they do not, there is a potential for misunderstanding between employees, which can then lead to conflict."

Dealing with conflict

Julie McLaughlin, the director of mediation and facilitation services at Solutions Ltd., says diversity breeds conflict. "Many interpersonal conflicts in the workplace result from the varying ways different people view the world," she says. "We generally respond best to people who are like us because we can better understand their behaviour. However, when people are different from us, we may not understand them or trust them as much."

However, McLaughlin says conflict can be good for a business, if it is managed well. "One of the major myths about conflict is that it is always negative," she says. "Yes, unmanaged workplace conflict drains organisational resources as significant amounts of time, money and emotional energy are spent dealing with conflicts at the expense of focusing on job expectations and responsibilities. However, conflict in the workplace is not always bad."

Working through conflict in constructive ways can create fresh insights that result in unique solutions, McLaughlin says "the distinction between bad conflict and good conflict



Mario Ebanks



Julie McLaughlin



Samantha Nehra

comes in terms of how it is managed. Especially when working with diverse individuals within a group, if conflict created by group members' differing viewpoints and opinions - upbringing, culture, race, experience, education, occupation, socio-economic class, etc. - are highlighted and managed effectively, the resulting discussion can act as a catalyst for progress and a positive tool for growth."

Celebrating diversity

Nehra says that organisations that prescribe to best human resources practices often have strong diversity and cultural awareness programmes in place. "They celebrate different customs, indulge in foods from different nations during organised socials or lunches, share stories of their upbringing and also have Cayman culture and heritage programmes," she says. "This promotes harmony and acceptance of differences. Without such programmes there is always the potential for misunderstandings."

As part of a celebrating diversity policy, McLaughlin says businesses should consciously create a workplace environment where employees are comfortable voicing different constructive opinions. "Not only does this encourage more fluid communication, but also allows for the positive results of the ensuing conflict to be identified, managed and optimised,"

Orientation

Ebanks is a big advocate of orientation programmes for new employees.

Over the years, Ebanks says he's seen and developed several successful orientation programmes that have contributed to the job satisfaction, productivity and retention of good employees. He's also recommended a national orientation programme be developed to provide a comprehensive guide to incoming first-time foreign workers, similar to what the Education Department provides each year for new teachers.

"This cultural orientation programme would also include the Department of Tourism and the National Cultural Foundation," he says. "If Caymanians understand their non-Caymanians co-workers better, and if non-Caymanian employees better appreciate the finer details of the Caymanian culture and sensitivities, then I feel that this would be a recipe for transforming the collective service delivery and productivity of the Cayman Islands from good to great."

Some organisations already try to sensitise foreign workers to Caymanian culture, Nehra says. "I have seen organisations that provide a tour of Cayman for new employees, taking them to the National Archive, Pedro Castle, the [National] Museum and local restaurants like Champion House as part of their orientation

programme," she says. "This is particularly useful for expat employees."

But such programmes aren't only for expatriates. Nehra says she knows of one organisation that has a half-day programme where all types of diversity is explored, including age, genders, politics, personality and more.

Government policies

The Cayman Islands Government indirectly tries to promote nationality diversity through the Immigration Law Regulations by favouring applications from a wider nationality base.

The real aim of these policies is to prevent any foreign nationalities from having too large a presence here. As a result, getting a work permit approved for someone from a country that already has thousands of other people here can be more difficult than getting one for someone from a country that only has small number of work permit holders already here.

In addition, the points system for the Permanent Residence Assessment awards more points to applicants who have fewer countrymen here on work permits.

The reasoning is discussed in the Immigration Regulations (2010 Revision). "The Board may take into consideration the desirability of granting permanent residence to applicants with different backgrounds and from different geographical

areas in order to maintain a suitable balance in social and economic life of the country," it states.

These policies have the effect of encouraging employers to recruit from the widest national range, with the one provision being that applicants should have a basic understanding of the English language, both spoken and written.

Although Cayman Islands law allows for certain kinds of discrimination in the workplace when it comes to hiring - namely the preference of Caymanians over non-Caymanians - legislation that outlaws discrimination on the basis of gender was introduced in June 2011. The Gender Equality Bill makes it illegal for anyone to discriminate in hiring, pay or workplace opportunity on the basis of a person's gender, with a few exceptions based on the type of job sought.

Women have been prominent in most workplaces in Cayman for decades, but the legislation further ensures gender diversity in all but a few jobs.

With regard to age, the government civil service and some private sector companies, particularly in the finance industry, require retirement at the age of 60. However, many private sector businesses retain employees beyond the age of 60 and there's been a trend in the civil service in recent years to extend the employment of key civil servants through post-retirement contracts.