

Linking African-Americans to the Workplace

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify African-Americans as a specific diverse employee group, and to evaluate diversity policies that affect that group in the workplace. An evaluation of current policies based on workplace inclusion theories is presented, and best practices for a diverse workplace will be identified in the existing literature to provide evidence supporting the benefit of collaboration, respect, and dialogue across culturally diverse groups within organizations. Recommendations will aim to fill any gaps encountered, ethical codes will be integrated and standards to improve current policies and to guide the change process will be provided.

African-Americans are citizens of the United States whose ancestors were mostly indigenous to Sub-Saharan Africa, and today they make up 13.1 percent of the total United States' population (Miley & Wheaton, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2014). The United States Census Bureau (2014) has projected that by the year 2060, African-Americans will comprise 18.4 percent of the population. Linking African-Americans to the workforce has been difficult, because individual barriers such as subtle racism and prejudice, tokenism and presumed incompetence pose challenges for them (Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2010). The workplace has become more diverse and in the face of laws against racial discrimination, African-Americans still face problems stemming from negative stereotypes to organizational practices (Pitts & Jarry, 2007). Statistical data from the United States Department of Labor (2011) shows that the African-American community as a whole has exhibited poorer workforce outcomes than other races, demonstrating that African-Americans often face inordinate challenges. Further data revealed that unemployment for the nation peaked at 10 percent in October 2009, while the unemployment rate for African-Americans continued to rise before peaking at 16.7 percent in August 2011. African-Americans employed or looking for work made up 11.6 percent of the U.S. labor force in 2011.

Overall in 2011, 18 million African Americans who were employed or looking for work represented 61.4 percent of all African Americans; somewhat less than the 64.1 percent participation rate for all Americans. The average unemployment rate for African-Americans in 2011 was 15.8 percent, compared to 7.9 percent for Whites, and 11.5 percent for Hispanics. Historically, African-Americans have had persistently higher unemployment rates than other major racial and ethnic groups (United States Department of Labor, 2011). Many African-Americans do not participate in the workplace because of organized exclusion stemming from stereotypical biases within organizations. A critical organizational dimension for many African-American employees is the diversity climate (Kulik, 2004).

Evaluation of Current Policies and Workplace Inclusion Theories

When organizations make efforts to value and to include African-Americans in their decision-making processes, it is apparent that such actions enable the maintenance of a competitive advantage among counterparts, and lead to increased effectiveness. By adopting best practices to achieve a diverse workplace, organizations can attract and retain the best and most qualified employees. The increase in a diverse customer base is the best testimony to the power of diversity that any organization can produce. According to Mor Barak (2008), the world has become more multifaceted with technological advances and global economies, with workplace diversity playing a role in this convolution. Organizations that fail to effectively manage diversity will lose the occasion to take advantage of the potential of their workforce, and such inaction will preclude organizational growth and sustainability under the growing complex conditions. As a result, these organizations are likely to deliver inferior products and services.

Despite results of research and the literature indicating abundant benefits to effectively managing diversity in the workplace, many barriers remain to be resolved before organizations can take advantage of these benefits. These barriers have been identified as organizational, stemming from the workplace environment, and individual, originating with employees themselves. The barriers may be overcome at the environmental level, by incorporating diversity initiatives to render the work environment inclusive. On the employee level, inclusiveness means embracing change that will create a balance in the employees' outlook on the quality of their workforce (Mor Barak, 2008).

Managing diversity is all about ensuring that employees have the opportunity to maximize their potential, enhance their self-development, and achieve their best in the work they perform. People are different; and this diversity consists of a range of characteristics including gender, race, disability, belief, sexual orientation and age, as well as personal characteristics, such as work style, personality and culture. Recognizing and valuing diversity in the workplace can result in a productive environment in which everyone is valued and where talents are fully utilized; resulting in the recognition of organizational goals (Emmott & Worman, 2008). By valuing diversity in the workplace, the organization places the power in the hands of the employees, enabling them to become productive and successful within the organization. As stated further by Emmott and Worman (2008), managing diversity is all about making sure employees have the opportunity to maximize their potential, enhance their self-development, and achieve their best in the jobs they do. Theories are important in explaining the complex nature of people.

A theory is a series of concepts organized into assumptions and generalizations that lead to hypotheses about a phenomenon. A theory guides research in a problem area; it facilitates understanding of complex phenomena; it helps practitioners in making decisions; and it provides a basis for predicting what might occur (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). According to Lindgren and Packendorff (2009), individuals and collectives define themselves, and are defined by others in relation to general expectations on how to behave and think. When acting and thinking differently, people usually combine such general expectations with new ideas and perspectives, constructing both sensibleness and strangeness. The following theory will help provide a set of lenses from which to glean employee self-development.

The theory of Social Constructivism, allows for the study of social phenomena through the subjective minds of individuals, and not only through observable behavior. Constructivism is grounded in positivism in that, it takes for granted a dualistic ontology separating man and reality, and implying that people can formulate objective truths about social phenomena beyond individuals' subjective interpretations of reality. Such reasoning often leads to cause-effect models implying that action can be explained and deduced from individual thoughts and intentions, and individual thinking is converted into scientific data through language, which is thus perceived as a true and objective arbitrator of intentions and interpretations (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009).

During the first decade of the 21st century, corporations have expanded their efforts and incorporated the concepts of diversity and inclusion into their strategies that were previously based only on compliance. It is wise for organizations to use progressive measures to curb the impact that today's changing demographics in communities, and customers have driven into the workplace. It makes good sense for organizations to incorporate a multinational workforce that represents a mixture of people from different cultures and social backgrounds (Henderson, 2010). Social constructivism is outwardly based on a hermeneutic tradition where there is no knowledge beyond individuals' subjective and inter-subjective interpretations of reality. This position is based on a rejection of the idea that true, objective facts and laws on human behavior can ever be developed, or that societal processes can only be interpreted on how people construct and understand their reality and actions (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009). In relation to African Americans' experiences with discrimination in the workplace, it is important to note that such experiences can only be understood by the person experiencing the phenomenon. Through language, and interaction, African-Americans can express how they experience exclusion and discrimination in the workplace, for it is their reality; shared subjective reality.

A multicultural organization is one that has policies which address diversity and inclusion initiatives, and has adopted the practice of embracing people from different nationalities, ethnic backgrounds and lifestyles, as employees. A multicultural organization's policies must result from recognition of African-Americans, particularly their skills sets and culture that they bring to the workplace. Using these skills sets and cultural identities the organization ensures the employment of talented individuals from a diverse pool.

African-American employees can thrive in the workplace through regular promotions to associates, assistant managers, and top level positions. Researchers and practitioners with different organizational approaches have been interested in employees' participation in organizational decisions, through the management and the humanistic approaches. The management approach focuses on participation as an instrument to enhance employees' loyalty to their organizations, while the humanistic approach views participation as beneficial to human growth and satisfaction of social needs (Joensson, 2008).

Both approaches suggest that participation may improve employees' evaluations of their relations to the organization. By utilizing both approaches, an organization can become an employer of choice by allowing employees of diverse backgrounds, particularly African-American employees to participate at all levels of the workplace's decision-making process. This can be further accomplished by the organization reflecting the diversity of the community, as well as fulfilling the increasing demands to allow its employees to provide culturally informed services to a culturally diverse customer base. Organizations can employ the humanistic approach by making diversity a reality through organizational changes which foster the maximization of worker potential and minimization of barriers to participation and inclusion (Joensson, 2008). When worker identity and differences are acknowledged and valued, such action promotes effective management practices by preventing conflict and discrimination, and promoting inclusiveness. Inclusiveness can then translate into employee loyalty and organizational productivity. Organizations that promote and achieve a diverse workplace will attract and retain quality employees, and increase customer and employee loyalty (Hohenshil & Burge, 2009).

Theoretically, social identification is presumed to be the underlying reason for how and why individuals act on behalf of a group or an organization (Joensson, 2008). Social identity has been defined as "the extent to which the group is valued and self-involving" (p. 598). Social identity is also that part of our self-concept that emanates from our membership in social groups, the value placed on this membership, and what it means emotionally. Social identity and group allegiance develop in relation to other people and groups. Intergroup competition and conflict are dynamics that must be considered, because they breed anger, alienation, and scapegoating. Intergroup relations take on a culture whereby Whites and African-Americans frame the workplace narrative differently. Compared to African-Americans, Whites repeatedly tone down or disregard the structural barriers to success and their own white privilege, and focus more often on values. African-Americans are viewed as having a culture that is adverse to that of mainstream American values and behaviors. African-Americans are described as loud, aggressive, violent, angry and lazy (Miller & Garran, 2008). Having to manage expectations, values, and roles within the African American community as well as the dominant culture, and being subjected to expectations and stereotypes that others have about them, contribute to making the African-American experience quite different from that of the dominant culture.

For example, personnel officers whose stereotyped beliefs about African-Americans contribute to their hiring African Americans for low-level and low-paying jobs exclusively, ignore their potential experience or qualifications for higher level jobs (Edwards, 2008). If African-Americans are not integrated into the profile of the organization and are not allowed to participate in decision-making and in the power structure of the organization, then this absence of interplay between the individual and the organization contributes to further alienation (Reza, 2009). Alienation can be avoided by acknowledging and integrating employee differences into the fabric of the culture of the organization to promote creativity and productivity.

Research and Analysis

In this section, results of a literature review will be utilized to identify current studies regarding African-Americans and how they are linked to the American workplace. An evaluation of best practices for a diverse workplace as it pertains to African-Americans will ensue, and suggestions for improving workplace diversity as it relates to African-Americans will be provided. The prevalence of racial inequality in the workplace is well documented. Studies have focused on a wide range of topics related to earning differentials, job segregation, promotion opportunities, and the distribution of authority in work settings (Skaggs, 2009).

As proposed by White (2009), if business education is intended to provide students with skills and perspectives that will assist them in their business careers, then African-American students should be made aware of the problems they will likely encounter in the workplace.

These problems include racism, prejudices, stereotyping, and biases that result in employee discrimination through lower earnings, occupational and job segregation, disparities in employment decisions and performance evaluations, and barriers to informal networks and mentoring. It has been decades since the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and African-Americans continue to trail behind Whites in virtually every category in society, including employment and occupational mobility (Cocchiara (2010). African-Americans are still underrepresented in government and employment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) revealed that African-Americans have lower job participations rates that Whites with comparable credentials, and are today less likely to hold managerial and professional positions.

Historically, the unemployment rate for African-Americans age 16 and over has been higher than that of the total labor force. Nationwide, the September 2004 unemployment rate for Blacks was 10.3 percent, while their White counterparts were unemployed at the rate of 4.7 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). The employment status of African-Americans has not recognized much improvement as evidenced in the recent unemployment report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). As of November 2014, the unemployment rate for Blacks stood at 11.1 percent, while that for Whites was 4.5 percent.

According to the National Urban League (cited in Cocchiara, 2010), in 2004, African-American workers had the second-highest median earnings of American minority groups after Asian -Americans, and African-Americans had the highest level of male-female income parity of all ethnic groups in the United States. According to Purcell (2009), in 2005, employed African-Americans earned only 65 percent of the wages of Whites in comparable jobs, down from 82 percent in 1975. The 2006 Equality Index found their overall status was just 73% of their White counterparts (Cocchiara, 2010). As of October 2014, the median weekly earnings for black men working at full-time jobs were 75.8 percent of the median for White men. Despite the progress that African-Americans have made in society, the group remains underrepresented in high-level and high-pay careers. Career achievement has been found to evade most African-Americans when measured by an objective, customary standard of the combination of high status of promotions, high annual pay, and high organizational level in corporate America (White, 2009).

Historically, racism has excluded African-Americans from employment opportunities, and legislation has prohibited African-Americans from competing with Whites in a supposedly free market economy. As important as credentials, virtue, and access are, many jobs are acquired through networking among families and friends, and many African-Americans do not possess the necessary connections (Miller & Garran, 2008). Although awareness of discriminatory behaviors in the workplace is increasing, African-Americans continue to face problems in dealing with oppressive presumptuousness, policies, and culturally insensitive practices. Inimitable sources of discrimination presenting African-Americans with stress not encountered by Caucasians in the workplace include individual, organizational and structural discrimination (Goldsmith, Hamilton & Darity, 2006). A source of organizational discrimination involves the practice of channeling African-Americans into minority positions (Kerr, Miller, Reid, & Edwards, 2008). For example, in the total United States' population, three out of seven employees hold white collar jobs; while the ratio is one out of seven for African-Americans (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010).

Workplace diversity as proposed by Sluss and Ashforth (2007) is an issue that is focused on the differences and similarities that people bring to an organization. Diversity as noted by Woods, Bormann and Schmidle (2010), is usually defined broadly to include dimensions beyond those legally specified in equal opportunity and non-discrimination statutes. Equal employment laws have been designed to proscribe discrimination in the workplace. Diversity has been defined as including all characteristics and experiences that describe each person as an individual. It includes the entire spectrum of primary dimensions of an individual, comprising race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, disability and sexual orientation (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

Diversity can be interpreted to include dimensions which affect the identities and perspectives of people (Leidner, 2006). This observation renders diversity more than a moral imperative, but a business opportunity, given the changing demographics within the population of the United States and of the marketplace. As observed by Woods et al. (2010), diversity is about learning from others who are not the same, about dignity and respect for all, and about creating workplace environments and practices that encourage learning from others. Despite the foregoing, Ali (2010) noted that diversity in the workplace has been frequently viewed in a limited fashion; primarily addressing ethnic or gender differences, and linked to the laws providing protected status to certain groups.

While diversity programs have brought awareness and education into the workforce, diversity managers and administrators are challenged to ensure that their diverse workforces are fully inclusive (Mor Barak, 2008). Granted, employers have come a considerable way in implementing fair and equitable workplace practices, but there is still much room for improvement. A diverse workplace better serves a diverse customer base, offers better insights into customer needs, and markets can be segmented along diversity group lines (Ali, 2010). From the foregoing, it can be inferred that workplaces that embrace diversity can reap tremendous rewards, while those that maintain traditional approaches or none at all, risk facing serious consequences, including penalties and fines. Thus, managing diversity is a skill today's leader needs, and an organization's ability to fully manage diversity will have a significant impact on the organization's performance into the future. Organizations should thus create a community of practice that achieves and values workforce diversity. These practices should then reflect leaders' and managers' understanding that valuing and recognizing diversity is imperative to maintaining a competitive edge and sustainability in the future.

Today's managers and leaders are responsible for leading employees and responding to the needs of consumers who come from backgrounds that are more ethnically diverse. In order to achieve success and maintain a competitive advantage, the American workplace must be able to draw on the skills of that workplace, as its most important resource (Ali, 2010). If the workplace is comprised of Asians, African-Americans, Hispanics, Whites and Arabs, every member of that workplace should participate in its overall operations. Organizations that engage in this practice will recognize the rewards that emanate from such practice. By allowing all diverse employee members full participation in workplace activities, organizations can model the establishment of a standard of practice that will appeal to other organizations. Given the current diversity of the global economy, it would behoove managers and leaders to include all employees in decision-making processes that affect workplace achievement. As observed by Ali (2010), organizations that promote and achieve a diverse workplace will attract and retain quality employees. This is important because without quality employees, the end product or services provided by the organization will mimic the composition of the workplace.

As Hogg (2001) has pointed out, success in workforce diversity begins with an active and visible commitment by senior leaders, and diversity strategies are hopeless or limited without a genuine commitment from the top. This means that effective leadership is pertinent in directing an organization to full diversity. Under-participation among employees in the workplace is a problem that warrants unrelenting attention. Leaders should be able to identify barriers to full participation and the pivot points for removing these barriers and increasing participation (Sturm, 2006). Overall, Organizations must find ways to locate responsibility for achieving inclusiveness with those in a position to have an impact. Organizations that have committed to diversity and inclusiveness are well on their way to positioning themselves for future success. In an attempt to explain why African-Americans encounter job segregation, earning disparities, and lack of job opportunities, Lindgren and Packendorff (2009) posited that because people share common interests, they form membership affiliations. People are naturally attracted to those who are similar to them, and likewise organizations tend to attract, choose and retain employees who are similar to their members. The aim of managing diversity is to maximize the potential of all employees to contribute towards the organization's goals, and to achieve their full potential untrammelled by group identities, such as gender, race, nationality, age and ethnic background. Diverse work groups have been found to be more creative and innovative, and they think through diverse alternatives in decision making (Mor Barak, 2008).

Recommendations

Although racial inequalities that occur within organizations are well documented, many organizations continue to attract members who are identical to their existing membership. In addition, institutional barriers that arbitrarily thwart the participation of women, people of color, and other excluded groups still prevail within organizations. These gaps exist despite research indicating that engaging in diversity efforts in the workplace facilitates the exchange of differing perspectives, it improves problem solving, and it creates an environment where individuals are respected despite their perceived differences or unique characteristics (Mor Barak, 2008). It is thus recommended that organizations value people and cultivate an environment where cultural awareness, sensitivity, fairness and integrity carry the day. This can be accomplished by developing a process of diversity initiatives that has foundation in laws, rules and procedures. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, color, race, religion, national origin, age, or physical disability (EEOC, 2009).

Many organizations have no programs that promote diversity and inclusion. This lack of diversity initiatives exists despite research showing that a strong commitment to diversity and full participation of all workplace employees will contribute to improved performance, the sharing of more innovative ideas, and retention of a quality workforce (Ali, 2010). It is recommended that organizations make diversity a part of their mission and core values, and support a strong commitment to achieving diversity in the workplace. In order for all employees, regardless of racial or ethnic background to thrive, succeed and develop, organizations must integrate a process that will guarantee full participation of all employees in decision-making activities across the spectrum.

Another area of concern is that many organizations do only what the law requires and do not undertake further initiative to add diversity programs. This is despite research (Sturm, 2006) showing that by placing key people with the training, skills and knowledge in pivotal locations to identify and work on biases, the organization can sustain and provide accountability for this change process. It is accordingly recommended that organizations should not rely on the threat of legal sanctions, but to generate bold initiatives to combat exclusiveness within their walls. This can be accomplished by placing employees with knowledge, influence and credibility in positions to influence practice in areas where gender, racial, and ethnic biases operate (Sturm, 2006).

Many organizations provide a narrow definition for diversity, which does not include categories such as sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, disability, but focus solely on race and gender. This is despite research showing that it is important that organizations make clear distinctions between diversity and affirmative action, and that it is also necessary to define diversity broadly (Cox, Zagelmeyer, & Marchington 2006). It is hence recommended that organizations should engage in the practice of defining diversity broadly to allow everyone to be included in all of the dimensions of diversity. This can be accomplished by writing policies in clear simple language so that everyone can understand what they convey.

Still some organizations do not provide their employees with the tools needed to guide their work, and are lacking an effective ethics management program. This is despite research showing that an ethics management program will help the organization accomplish preferred behaviors in the workplace, and will provide businesses more practical tools and information to understand their values, and how to manage them (Brenner, 2006). It is consequently recommended that all organizations develop a corporate ethics management program, and should recognize that managing ethics is an important process. As with any management practice, one important outcome is behaviors preferred by the organization. Thus, the best of ethical values and intentions are relatively meaningless if they do not generate fair and just behaviors in the workplace. It is imperative that practices generate lists of ethical values, or codes of ethics, policies, procedures and training that translate those values to prescribed behaviors.

Conclusion

The best practices delivered in the literature provide tremendous insight into the reality of a global need for diversity models in the workplace. Recognizing that many organizations have not considered diversity initiatives makes one think about how the lack of strategic planning can harm an organization. Organizations and individuals alike must keep pace with the changing demographics in this country. The take home message is that recognizing globalization and its shrinking effects on boundaries, renders it vital to embrace workplace diversity as an imperative for long-term sustainability of all organizations, regardless of size. African-Americans bring a diverse skill set to the workplace, and should be allowed the opportunity to be hired at all levels, and once hired should be afforded the opportunity to participate in decision making at all echelons of the workforce.

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