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Powerful Diversity: Fueling Excellence through Ethnically Diverse Teams

*Global Networks, Global Perspectives and Global Talent
Discussions on the Development of Human Capital in Agribusiness¹*

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Abstract

As organizations seek to become culturally and ethnically diverse, they need to put in place measures to authentically leverage this diversity. Having a diverse workforce, without a clear path for ‘productive integration’ is devoid of value. The food industry is currently facing emerging challenges and opportunities, and effectively managing a diverse staff can be a win-win for the organization as well as the employee base.

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“Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life.”

Octavio Paz

Much has been written about how the employee base of an organization is its most valuable asset. Attracting and retaining talent is, without a doubt, embedded into the discourse of most employers today. At the same time, workforce diversity also appears to be a highly desirable trait, one by which organizations are measured and tracked.

As organizations become more global, having an ethnically diverse staff is much more a reality than an aspiration. With the geographic expansion experienced by these companies, hiring local talent has become mainstream. Furthermore, in geographically complex supply chains, the intricate relationships between actors are bound to represent a few nations, if not continents. Not only is the corporate world witnessing these changes, but leading educational institutions are opening up campuses beyond their home countries. At the same time, they are in search of students willing and able to stretch the geographic boundaries of their educational paths.

In this globalized environment, ethnic diversity is bound to occur in most organizations. The issue at stake, however, is how to truly maximize the value of an ethnically diverse force and, at the same time, foster opportunities for integration and advancement.

Come and Teach Me

What does an ethnically-diverse staff bring to an organization? This question cannot be answered without recognizing the meaning of human capital, which refers to the skills, knowledge, and experience held by an individual or population.

Where we were born and grew up greatly influences our ‘assets’ in reference to the meaningful contributions we make as human capital. It goes beyond the extent of this paper to lay out the elements that influence and shape the culture of societies; it suffices to say, for instance, that access (*or lack of*) to certain resources during the formative years, will greatly mold cultural patterns in a way that can be positive to human capital.

Human capital is much more than one’s ability to merely ‘do things or carry out activities;’ it is about how we do them, when we do them, why we do them, with whom we do them—and many other considerations that transcend the job at hand.

Realizing the value of an ethnically-diverse workforce will precisely focus on these considerations. It is clear that organizations seek to drive excellence in performance. Excellence in performance, however, is not the output of our work only, but the novelty and workmanship of our work, the time and resources that went into producing our work, the networks that were created as a result of our work, and the by-products of our work, etc. When ethnically-diverse staff are effectively integrated into an organization, their assets are leveraged so that excellence in performance can be achieved in a *truly holistic way*. In reality, we are maximizing the value of individual strengths ranging all the way from scientific or technical contributions, alternative social circles, and often unrecognized, a different way of solving problems.

Understanding and appreciating ethnic differences in the workplace and leveraging these for everyone’s benefit is not totally devoid of difficulties. Obvious obstacles to integration will stem from difficulties in assimilating. With more emphasis placed on interpersonal communications within organizations, it is clear that language and even behavioral differences can affect a genuine, productive interaction among players. Something as simple as gestures or word choices can be misconstrued, and therefore, empathic listening becomes critical.

Also, as organizations become more ethnically diverse, tension within teams may surface. When the roots of dissent are properly understood, however, we will gain clarity on the various positions so that we can more effectively deal with an issue.

Integration does *not* imply setting aside differences in skills, knowledge, and experience, but quite the opposite. It implies recognizing that differences are likely to occur and it is to everyone's benefit to leverage them. There will be teachers who will become learners, and learners who will become teachers. Full-fledged integration will have everyone doing what they do best.

Where Do We Start?

There is no repository of practices that address this issue at work. I would like to offer some examples of where I think the employer and the employee can achieve a win-win situation.

Attract Diverse Talent

Argentina is a country of immigrants and diversity is embedded in the work force, to different degrees depending on the sector. Leadership in the agribusiness sector could actually benefit from greater national diversity. While I was serving as a consultant for a produce exporter during the early 1990s, it was recognized that although Argentina's human capital was very capable of leading agricultural operations dealing with extensive crops or cattle, experience in the postharvest management of horticultural crops for export markets was limited. Chile, on the other hand, had a great talent pool in this area. The company I was working for expanded its search for talent to Argentina's neighboring country and attracted a very qualified individual who was a significant contributor in this start-up operation.

Be responsive to career pathing: Career plans, by which employees cite their evolving skills and career aspirations, are an accepted practice in most companies today. However, failure to reassess these plans as employees develop history within an organization may lead to static plans where neither the employee nor the employer benefit. Since for many foreign born individuals, it is often more challenging to make their voices heard when working abroad, career plans can constitute an effective way of communicating between the employer and the employee. There are many examples of beneficial career overhauls resulting from a careful examination of an employee's career path. Being attuned to career pathing, allowed an employer to discover hidden talent in a senior process engineer, who grew up and studied in China, but had extensive business experience in the US, to become a successful business liaison between the headquarters and their China business unit.

Create an inspiring culture: Hiring diversity to merely meet a quota is not the best use of a diverse workforce. As teams become diverse and all successful players are recognized for their varied contributions, we are creating a replicable model for the organization; one that confronts employees with the many demands of the changing global landscape, but at the same time highlights and recognizes success broadly.

What Does This Mean For The Food Industry?

No movements have been more infectious within the food industry than the concept of health and wellness, along with the concept of sustainability. Let us ground our discussion and see how an ethnically-diverse staff can provide a transformational value to both health and wellness as well as to the sustainability proposition.

The concept of health and wellness in the food industry is rooted in the notion that what we eat can contribute to our general well-being. That is the premise behind nutraceuticals, a term coined to represent the nutritional as well as therapeutic aspects of foods. While the term is new, the concept is not. Ancient cultures in China, India, the Middle East and the Americas (to name a few) have relied on herbal preparations for centuries for the treatment and prevention of diseases. Understanding the traditional use of plants for vari-

ous applications is so important that the scientific discipline of ethnobotany focuses its efforts on explaining the relationship between cultures and the utilization of plants. It is not surprising, then, that many leading companies that specialize in the business of nutraceuticals (dietary supplements, functional foods or drinks, etc.) tap into an ethnically-diverse employee base which can command control of the complex landscape of bioprospecting, development, formulation, marketing, etc.

The concept of sustainability is another development that has taken the food industry by storm. Sustainability has a broad reach within the food industry ranging from livelihood enhancement to environmental preservation. Programs in water and climate stewardship as well as in waste reduction are commonly linked to corporate performance. The care and respect for nature, so deeply engrained in the concept of sustainability, is yet another value that we can rescue from many civilizations across the globe. The connection between individuals and nature professed by many cultures such as Native Americans is widely recognized.

Another dimension of the sustainability proposition is that of maximizing efficiencies. Interestingly, without much recognition, many societies around the world have carried on for centuries based on prolonging the life of production inputs or equipment and finding innovative applications for unused elements or left-over parts. In most developing countries, “doing more with less” has long been a currency in everyday living. The workplace that draws on these cultural stances is set to benefit from wisdom that was forged over generations.

Clearly, there are distinct benefits for those organizations that nurture a truly multicultural environment. When this idea is embraced at all levels, everyone is set to win.