

Diversity or Death

Some firms are slowly realizing they'll need minorities to survive

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When Vikram Ahluwalia immigrated to Canada four years ago, he couldn't figure out why he wasn't getting any job offers. In India, he had spent the better part of a decade working his way up to middle management at a multinational packaged goods company, so he knew he was more than qualified to fill the positions he applied to in Canada. But he wasn't getting past the interviews. Finally, a headhunter told him what was turning prospective employers off: his turban and his beard. Though it was an emotionally difficult decision — Ahluwalia is Sikh and had never cut his hair — he took her advice and removed his turban and trimmed his beard. "I could see the impact right away," he says. "Within weeks, I had two major offers."

Canadian corporations are not nearly as advanced as we like to think they are when it comes to workplace diversity. But that's changing quickly. Not because executives are particularly broad-minded or sensitive to discrimination, but because they're finding that the very future of their business now depends on hiring immigrants. Currently, one-fifth of our country's workers are immigrants, and by 2011, it's estimated that new Canadians will account for all net labour-force growth. In industries where the labour market is particularly tight, such as the Alberta energy sector, immigrants already account for almost all growth. While prior generations of new Canadians complained of underemployment, the latest wave of highly skilled immigrants is finding that in many sectors, they have plenty of options to choose from. In such a market, if they get the impression that your firm doesn't welcome their culture or religious beliefs, they'll simply look elsewhere. The shift is "quite dramatic," says Joerg Dietz, an international business professor at the Richard Ivey School of Business. "If you don't start working on diversity management today, you might not be around tomorrow."

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Michael Bach, national director of diversity and inclusion at KPMG, freely admits that when his accounting firm began to explore how to tap into the immigrant workforce three years ago, "it wasn't so much about the right thing to do as it was the right thing to do for our business." In the next decade, 30 per cent of the firm's partners will reach the mandatory retirement age. To position itself as "the employer of choice for all people," he says KPMG has offered diversity training to managers, created an international club, which acts as a support network for new

Canadians, and in several offices it has added a "reflection room" that can be used for prayer. Visible minorities now make up more than a quarter of employees.

Likewise, the economic argument for attracting and retaining immigrants is "a no-brainer" for Wardrop Engineering Inc., says vice-president of human resources James Popel. The multidisciplinary consulting firm has more than doubled its staff in the past five years, and is looking to boost numbers by another 25 per cent this year, but he says "there aren't enough applicants out there to fill all the roles." To meet its needs, the Winnipeg-based company recruits from agencies that assist immigrants with their job search. It also facilitates the accreditation of internationally educated engineers, and provides on-site English language instruction and cross-cultural training. At its Pickering, Ont., office, there's a dedicated prayer facility that was created at the behest of employees. If similar spaces are requested elsewhere, says Popel, "we'll adjust."

For companies that are only now waking up to the need to reach out to a more diverse pool of employees, the learning curve will be steep, says Nadir Shirazi, president of Multifacet Diversity Solutions Ltd. Shirazi says the first step was cultural integration. Now, he assists businesses with what he calls "Diversity 2.0," which is more about accommodating religion. "Where many older workers may not bring [religion] forward, many younger workers know that if they're not treated in a certain fashion, they can go somewhere else," he says. Just ask Ali, a Winnipeg-born Muslim who markets specialized medical devices for a company located on the outskirts of Toronto. The 25-year-old, who requested anonymity, recently started looking for a new job, largely because he says he feels "alienated" at work. Although his daily prayers take "far less time than a cigarette break," there's not an appropriate space, and taking time out to drive to a nearby mosque has been discouraged. Though his employer knows he fasts during Ramadan, he says he feels pressure from co-workers to attend corporate lunches, and last year, he had to work on Id al-Fitr, the celebration that concludes the fast, because he had a deadline to meet. When choosing his next job, he says if the right company offers religious accommodation, it "could make for an easy decision."

It takes time to implement a strategy that works for attracting and retaining minorities. "It's like any other major strategic initiative you pursue. You have to put all your resources behind it, and each and every aspect of your organization has to work toward achieving that strategic imperative," says Dietz. About three years ago, TD Bank Financial Group realized it had to make a concerted effort to "embed diversity into the fabric of the organization," says Bill Hatanaka, CEO of TD Waterhouse Canada and chair of the diversity leadership council. TD aimed its approach at the Chinese, South Asian, Korean and black populations, and has since conducted numerous surveys with these groups to measure its performance. The bank offers individual and group mentoring, has instituted quiet rooms in several locations, and last year partnered with Ryerson University to acclimatize immigrants to the Canadian workforce. By the end of October, almost all of the bank's executives and half of its managers will have undergone diversity training.

Gauging the impact of diversity strategies on the bottom line is difficult. "It's an organizational design effort," says Dietz. "You can't put a dollar figure to it." Although the corporations Maclean's interviewed weren't able to quantify the effect of their efforts, they were quite firm about what they stood to lose if they didn't continue to increase diversity. "There's a cost to not

taking this seriously," says Andrea York, a partner at Blake, Cassels & Graydon. York, who co-chairs the law firm's diversity and equity committee, says, "Our clients are expecting us to put forward a diverse team." Says Hatanaka, "You have to make sure that your organization can continue to be relevant. Those organizations that do not have a diversity initiative will, over time, be relegated to the scrap heap."

It's true that there are still many companies that can find all the skilled workers needed without implementing a diversity program, but if immigration patterns keep up, that will change. In the meantime, companies that continue to shrug off the importance of embracing immigrants and minorities may be driving valuable employees away. Since Ahluwalia started working in Canada's consumer packaged goods industry, he says he has come across just one turbaned Sikh. "A lot of companies talk about diversity, but I think it's just lip service," he says. The 34-year-old has chosen to keep his hair short, because he sees the long, traditional Sikh beard as a "hindrance" in his ability to get ahead. "But I sometimes get up in the middle of the night and look in the mirror, and I can't recognize myself," he says. Ahluwalia is now contemplating moving to work in the U.S., where he hopes he'll feel more accepted — whether he wears his turban or not.