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Employers at Diversity 'Tipping Point'

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Studies show employers only paying lip service to diversity, but demographics will force their hands

Lesley Young

Employers may talk the talk when it comes to implementing workplace diversity policies, but they're just starting to walk the walk, according to a report by the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario (HRPAO) and G-Force, an HR consultancy in Toronto.

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The *Corporate Diversity Assessment Report* was presented at the Toronto 2007 Career and Diversity Forum in November. At the event, Toronto Mayor David Miller encouraged companies to make the most of Canada's exceedingly diverse workforce.

"Workforces must reflect the populations they serve if organizations are going to succeed," said Miller. "Diverse employees give companies a competitive advantage because they are educated in the global economy."

Many companies are only paying lip service to diversity, the study found. While 46 per cent of the 830 respondents said their company's vision and mission

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statement reflects a commitment to workforce diversity, only 24 per cent had a diversity hiring plan. Similarly, while 44 per cent of companies audit policies and procedures to ensure compliance on diversity issues, only 15 per cent have a plan with specific objectives for improving retention of diverse groups.

But Claude Balthazard, director of HR excellence at Toronto-based HRPAO, is optimistic about the study's findings. He said Canadian companies are at the "tipping point" of diversity becoming a business imperative. That's because all of the growth in the labour force will come from immigration by 2011, according to Statistics Canada.

"The older way of thinking about diversity is a compliance, regulation mindset. The current discourse is somewhat different," he said. "It has to do with access to talent. So it's not so much what should we be doing but, rather, a need to get doing it now."

Another recent study found less than positive findings around internal supports for diverse groups. More than one-half of companies do not target women, Aboriginals, visible minorities, mature workers and lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-identified employees for managerial positions, according to *Career Advancement in Corporate Canada: A Focus on Visible Minorities – Critical Relationships*. The report was conducted by Toronto-based Catalyst Canada and the Diversity Institute at Toronto's Ryerson University.

Fewer visible minorities than Caucasian respondents in Canadian companies reported receiving one or more development opportunities in the past three years. Visible minorities were also more likely to perceive workplace barriers, including lack of fairness in career advancement processes, an absence of role models, inequity in performance standards and fewer high-visibility assignments, according to the survey of 17,000 managers, professionals and executives working in large organizations.

"Visible minorities in some large businesses feel excluded in the critical relationships that are important to career advancement," said Deborah Gillis, executive director of Catalyst Canada.

She cited sporting or gender-based networking events as being less than appealing to women and visible minority women. Another challenge is for visible minorities to find mentors who are influential within a company.

Catalyst Canada recommends the following strategies to help companies manage the career advancement of visible minorities:

- think critically about where informal networking takes place and how this may exclude certain groups;
- provide formal and targeted networking opportunities for visible - minorities;
- formalize mentoring programs and encourage and train strategic mentoring behaviour;
- ensure the availability of a diverse pool of mentors and encourage diversified mentoring relationships;
- base career-advancement decisions on formal performance evaluations consistent for all employees; and
- provide employees with the necessary resources to communicate their achievements.

"Promoting visible minorities within is a real opportunity for employers in Canada because they are such a growing and important part of the labour force. (Employers) want to make sure they are maximizing the potential contribution from all employees," said Gillis.

KPMG leverages diversity

Companies showing leadership in diversity policies, such as KPMG Canada, believe leveraging diversity is an HR advantage. KPMG's workforce is composed of 54 per cent women, 23 per cent visible minorities, 1.5 per cent disabled and 0.6 per cent Aboriginal, with the balance comprising white males.

Michael Bach, KPMG's director of diversity, said his role is to help "shrink the gaps." The more employees understand each other in the workplace — with diversity education and training — the better working relationships they have, said Bach. And that leads to the ultimate benefit of diversity action plans: "When people are able to bring their 'whole selves' to work, regardless of what that looks like, then they are more engaged in work in a more productive way, and ultimately more profitable to any organization."

Web-based diversity training is mandatory for all KPMG employees, said Bach. And in 2008 it plans to conduct training for managers in how to manage diverse work styles, including culturally different work styles.

Another big focus at KPMG is on voluntary employee-driven "member networks." The groups, which include a women's network, a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender network, an international employee support club and a parent of special-needs children club, provide support to diverse groups — precisely what the Catalyst report noted is lacking in many organizations.

Besides providing career-advancement opportunities for diverse groups, some of the groups are also used as business tools, reaching out to clients and potential clients in diverse communities, as well as enabling recruitment of diverse employees to KPMG, said Bach.

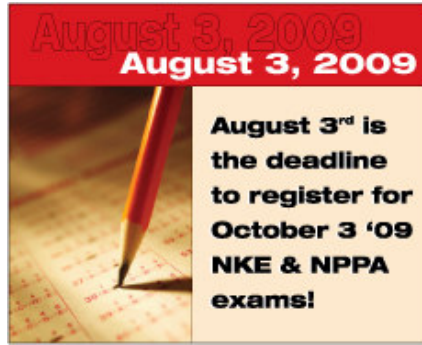
"You have to build from the top down, there's no doubt about it. Our CEO Bill McKinnon and the senior partners have been behind this from day one," said Bach. "We have a clear mandate to remove any barriers in place so every individual at KPMG has the ability to succeed in any way they can."

About the Author:

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