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Lots of talk, not much action on diversity

Four in 10 organizations don't have a plan to foster diversity: report

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The majority of Canadian organizations rank diversity as a priority, but 42 per cent of them have no strategic plan to foster it, according to a Conference Board of Canada report.

“There’s always a gap between awareness and execution in anything,” said Prem Benimadhu, vice-president of governance and HR management at the Conference Board.

With 85 per cent of the organizations surveyed citing diversity as a priority, most organizations are aware of the benefits of a diverse workforce, such as increasing global competitiveness, increasing the available talent pool and increasing an organization’s innovative capabilities, said Benimadhu.

Unfortunately there are several stumbling blocks to organizations implementing strategic plans to foster diversity, he added.

“There’s a full-plate mentality in organizations, particularly among managers. They’re wrestling with hoards of issues every day and if diversity is presented to them as another nice thing for them to do, they will pay lip service to it and little gets done,” he said.

Competing priorities is a very real obstacle in many organizations, said Toronto-based diversity consultant Lynne Sullivan. With so many changes taking place in organizations over the past decade with new technology, reorganizations, downsizing and mergers, some initiatives can get lost in the shuffle.

“What you find is that issues, diversity included, get near the top of the agenda and they’ll be there for awhile, then they’ll retreat for a few years, but they’ll be back,” she said.

But keeping diversity on the agenda and ensuring it doesn’t get lost requires commitment and buy-in from senior management, something that is lacking in too many organizations, said Benimadhu.

In the Conference Board’s *Report on Diversity: Priorities, Practices and Performance in Canadian Organizations*, only 56 per cent of organizations said senior management communicates the importance of diversity to organizational success, leaving a lot of room for improvement.

“Leaders’ commitment to (diversity) is lacklustre,” said Benimadhu. “In any program, leadership matters, the commitment of leaders matters. What it means is that leaders will have to make more

than a yearly pronouncement on the value of diversity and really lead the charge.”

If diversity isn't linked to the overall business strategy of an organization, it's easier to push it aside for other business priorities, said Benimadhu.

“People don't do good things because they are good things, people do good things because they are really linked to their pocket book,” he said. “If organizations were to say to their employees and their managers ‘This is directly linked to our future, to our prosperity, to our business success,’ then we would have a very different kind of mindset.”

In developing an effective diversity strategy, the person in charge of diversity, who is often in HR, should report to the CEO.

“What is important to the CEO is important to the whole organization,” said Benimadhu.

By elevating the position so that it is linked to the CEO, either by a solid reporting line or a dotted reporting line, the position and the issue have more weight, he said.

Senior management should also be held accountable for diversity and reaching targets, he said. This ensures the diversity plan can be measured and progress can be evaluated.

The lack of strategic plans can be seen in the representation rates of the four designated groups — Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, visible minorities and women — in the surveyed organizations.

Even though 80 per cent of the organizations surveyed fall under the Employment Equity Act, none of them meet the labour market availability of all four groups. The worst representation rates are seen for people with disabilities, followed by Aboriginal people.

While most organizations do a good job of meeting representation rates for visible minorities and women, these rates fall in the senior management ranks where women and visible minorities are still under-represented.

But diversity isn't just about representation rates. Even if all organizations had the proper representation of all four groups, they must leverage that diversity and that means managing, motivating and engaging a diverse workforce. Therefore, organizations need to invest in training and development for current and future leaders to make the most of diverse employees, said Benimadhu.

Unfortunately, too many organizations believe they won't have to do anything to increase diversity because it will just happen naturally, especially with Canada's changing demographics, said diversity consultant Sullivan

“The leadership has to be convinced that it's not going to happen on its own, because it won't,” she said. “If you want a different result from what you've got right now then you have to change something.”

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