

Evolution in Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace

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At the Economic Developers Council of Ontario's 2021 annual conference "EvolveOn", Asvini Keethakumar and Myrna Pavlin, students in the post-graduate Public Administration Program at Seneca College, summarized the workshop entitled "Evolution in Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace". The moderator was Heather Madden, Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, County of Brant and the panellists included Rajbir Sian, Senior Economic Development Officer, Town of Oakville and Jason Felix, Trade and Investment Specialist, Ontario Ministry of Energy, Northern Development & Mines.

Abstract

The following report outlines the stimulating discussion held at the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) conference surrounding the topic of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Panellists Rajbir Sian and Jason Felix highlighted their thoughts, opinions, and impressions on diversity and inclusion, while they reflected on their journey of navigating through barriers in the workplace. This report further discusses four themes, including the historical context of diversity, faces of diversity, how to nurture inclusive environments, and how to create lasting change moving forward.

Keywords: *Workplace Diversity, Workplace Inclusion, EvolveON, Tokenism, Equity, Equality, Leadership*

Introduction

The EDCO's 64th Annual Conference was held virtually to present a series of discussions, surrounding noteworthy topics relevant to Ontario's economy during the COVID-19 pandemic and considerations moving forward. Conversations regarding the evolution of diversity and inclusion in the workplace were discussed among the EDCO speakers Rajbir Sian and Jason Felix, who reflected on important questions and shared their lived experiences. Both speakers noted that the terms "diversity" and "inclusion" have become 'trendy' in today's workplace, with many organizations committing to becoming well-rounded in their hiring practices and vowing to attract a breadth of new talent. However, the speakers reflected on the disparity between using the right terminology and acting on commitments across public and private sectors. This report will outline the key themes that were discussed throughout the session and captures (1) the multigenerational experience in the workplace; (2) the definition of diversity: the good, the bad, and the ugly; (3) the steps to establish, support, and celebrate diversity in the workplace, and (4) overcoming challenges.

1) The Multigenerational Experience

As both panellists noted, diversity and inclusion in today's workplace has morphed and transformed significantly. Sian discussed diversity and inclusion through a historical lens, where it was used as a necessity to fill empty and unskilled jobs to ensure a robust economy. Women were used to replace men who went off to war, and immigrants including people of colour were used to work on low-skilled labour projects. However, today's diversity and inclusion look differently, as the job market is filled with a wide range of skills and backgrounds.

Felix also suggested that workplaces need to start thinking about diversity beyond the traditional prompts of race and gender. As Canada's aging population is paired with longevity and health, workplaces with mixed age profiles are more prevalent today than any other time in our history. Felix stated that workplaces today comprises of colleagues from various generations, including traditionalists, baby boomers, Gen X's, millennials, and Gen Z's. As a society and to create productive work environments, Felix noted that it is essential to understand and appreciate the differences that comes with different generations, while learning to incorporate an array of values, communication styles, and work habits. Moreover, it is equally important to replace negative age-related stereotypes that run rampant in the workplace. Felix suggested that organizations rely on the wisdom, eagerness, innovation, and experiences of others to cultivate collaborative solutions.

Diversity and inclusion have been used as a ploy to fill quotas in the workplace for employers to appear responsible to the public, however, both panellists noted that it is time to have conversations that translate into actionable items of equity and equality. Rather than tokenism, Sian stated that is time to start appreciating, valuing, and respecting the differences that lay the foundation of Ontario's multigenerational experiences.

2) Definition of Diversity: The Good, The Bad and the Ugly

Felix described diversity as the variability of people's perspective, background, skin colour, age, sex, and race. Workplace diversity and inclusion aids creativity and innovation. Studies have shown that workplace productivity increased by approximately 35% in companies that promoted diversity. This not only makes it the 'right' thing to do, but the more profitable thing to do. Felix asks, "Why are people uncomfortable when speaking about diversity?" He postulated that most workers are not trained on *how* to discuss the topic, while others feel that a problem simply does not exist. Taking it a step further, Felix believes industries need to look at the 'face' of communities and see diversity, which needs to be reflected across public and private organizations. Felix argues that there is still discrimination based on skin colour, ethnicity, race, and sex, and that it is time we start making a statement about eliminating this bias in our society.

Sian categorized workplace diversity into four distinct groups. First, internal diversity includes race, age, gender, along with both physical and mental abilities. External diversity includes personal interests, education, and religious beliefs. Organizational diversity includes our job functions, place of work, management styles, pay grades, and seniority in an organization. Finally, world view diversity is comprised of political beliefs, moral compass, and one's outlook on life. When pluralism and diversity is showcased in the workplace, it brings a level of empathy to their job function which increases their ability to identify the needs of the businesses and residents in their community.

Minorities in leadership positions need to reflect, acknowledge and reach out to those who have *no* active voice, according to Sian.

3) Steps to Establish, Support and Celebrate

There needs to be an honest desire for real change regarding diversity and inclusion in the workforce. Felix outlined five steps to creating real and lasting change within organizations. First, companies need to embrace the plethora of benefits that diversity offers, especially the impact it would have on the organizations culture work environment. Secondly, diversifying any organizations requires participation of all employees not just the Human Resources department. Third, diversity and inclusion goals need to be attainable and measurable. Fourth, policies and procedures must be developed and implemented to promote fairness and equality to eliminate conscious and unconscious biases in hiring processes. Fifth, ongoing training ensures that every employee is aware of the rules on diversity.

There are actionable items that Sian believes will help to support and foster diversity and inclusion. Small gestures such as learning the correct pronunciation of a colleague's name, workplace calendars denoting the holidays for different religious and cultural groups, and pot-luck lunches celebrating different ethnic foods, bring a level of clarity and appreciation of coworkers.

4) Overcoming Challenges

When looking at challenges and overcoming obstacles, Felix recounted a story where he felt he was treated unfairly in the workplace. He noted that people in an organization need to be educated on the course of action available to them to resolve issues that they deem unfair or biased. Individuals should not have to change things about themselves that they feel the employer may find 'offensive', such as accents, names, and traditions. Felix argued that employers need to meet employees half-way to overcome diversity and inclusivity related challenges.

Sian recounted how she overcame a challenge where she was in a professional capacity which required her to interact in a male dominated, rural setting. She used her family's background in agriculture to build a relationship with these farmers although they were all from dissimilar cultural backgrounds. This example highlighted that this circumstance was an opportunity for learning about diversity on both sides.

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion strategies are a must for the workforce and Ontario's economy as a whole. Senior management is the least diverse group and yet is most positioned to encourage diversity. Management needs to engage, be consistent, and set timelines for diversity deliverables. Companies need to implement action items for their diversity and inclusion strategies and ensure that everyone knows their role. This includes leadership buy-in and a top-down approach to ensure success and buy-in from all employees so that as their roles change or they are promoted, these guiding principles will follow them. Change can be implemented, diversity and inclusion can gain momentum, and remain relevant.