FEATURE ARTICLE
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# HOW TO FOSTER DIVERSITY & INCLUSION IN THE CONTACT CENTER

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Contact Center Pipeline

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2020 was marked by multiple pivotal moments, most of which have been embraced as long-overdue turning points for businesses and the work environment. A raging global pandemic accelerated the transition to digital technology and cloud solutions, permanently altered consumer behavior and expectations, sped up the move to a work-from-home model, and emphasized the demand for more scheduling flexibility among contact center workers.

The last year also will be remembered for the nationwide protests and civil unrest that brought to the forefront the systemic racism and inequality that exists within our society and the workplace. While President Biden has set the stage for change at the government level with a diverse Cabinet that more closely resembles the racial and ethnic makeup of America, much more work is needed in the business world. In Corporate America, progress toward creating diverse and inclusive work environments has been painfully slow for workers who have been marginalized because of race, gender, socioeconomic status, disabilities or lifestyles.

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) challenges in the workplace typically stem from a lack of diversity at the executive level. Company leaders, who are primarily white, heterosexual males, often underestimate the bias and obstacles to inclusion that diverse employees face daily, including opportunities for growth, development and promotions, according to Boston Consulting Group. A BCG study found that, among Fortune 500 CEOs, only 24 are women (less than 5% of the total), only three are black, and only three are openly gay, including just one lesbian.

The absence of diversity in leadership, in general, has resulted in lackluster D&I initiatives over the years and a significant gap in views between how well company leaders believe their D&I efforts are going versus what employees think. According to a global, multiyear study by PwC, the majority (79%) of leadership engagement on D&I still remains at the basic level. While 76% of employees agree with the statement, "Diversity is a stated value or priority area for my organization," one-third (33%) also say that diversity is a barrier to progression at their organization.

Clearly, the events of the past year have put businesses on notice. Customers and employees increasingly want to support brands that are racially and ethnically diverse. As more consumers and workers hold businesses accountable for creating diversity in society and the workplace, leaders are looking to expand their D&I efforts from an executive checkbox exercise to tangible actions to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Driving change is hard work, but the good news is that D&I efforts will pay off:

- Research by McKinsey & Company found that organizations in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management are 35% more likely to outperform their competitors.
- Boston-based Quantopian reported that companies headed by women generated returns 226% higher compared with enterprises run predominantly by men.

The ability to tap into diverse thinking drives better problem-solving, creativity and innovation within the organization. In the contact center, having a workforce that is as diverse as your customer base also helps agents to build stronger connections between customers and your brand.

## FROM THE *CONTACT CENTER PIPELINE* ADVISORY BOARD

**SANGEETA BHATNAGAR**
*Founder, SB Global*

### Q What are some best practices for incorporating D&I into contact center recruiting and hiring practices?

Given the state of all that has been going on, we tend to think of diversity and inclusion based on race, but it is a lot more than that. Here are just a few areas of diversity that we need to consider when recruiting and hiring for the contact center:

1. Age
2. Culture
3. Gender
4. Religion
5. Physical abilities
6. Learning styles
7. Personality blend
8. Sexual orientation
9. Socioeconomic background
10. Life experiences

Diversity and inclusion should not be limited to just a department or a one-off training, rather it should be part of the entire corporate culture. This culture can be created when the leadership is empathetic, both emotionally and cognitively.

### Sourcing: Strategic Diversity Recruitment

- When sourcing for frontline contact center agents, deliberately choose to source from a **DIVERSE pool of candidates**. For example, when you go to colleges and universities for campus recruitment, you could directly connect with the various cultural and ethnic groups, diverse sexual orientation groups, along with those with diverse physical abilities. When you include diverse academic backgrounds, you can ensure a very diverse pool of candidates that you may not have met going to a traditional job fair.
- There are several **professional multicultural groups** you can partner with to keep your pipeline full of diverse candidates. In addition, **not-for-profit groups**, such as NPower, train and develop those in underserved communities. As a recruiter, I have found that students who graduate from these programs are excellent. They may not have been successful applicants on their own, but partnering with reputable organizations opens up opportunities for the employer and the candidate.
- When writing job descriptions, **be inclusive in your words** and use basic language (don't assume everyone knows the industry or business jargon). I experienced this years ago when I asked a candidate, "Please share an example of when you assisted an irate customer." The candidate looked at me with a blank face. With embarrassment, this lovely candidate asked me, "What is irate?" I realized that I could have said "angry" instead of "irate."
- There are numerous **talent management systems** that can assist in the recruitment process, as technology can help us filter candidates without personal bias in place.
- Eliminate our personal bias. Discard the idea of "North American Experience Required." This is a **global marketplace**; we have to lose the idea that experience gained in another country cannot be counted. It is all good!
- Always remember ***will* over *skill***. Someone might have a strong desire to learn, be coachable and be motivated, but may not have the exact skill you are looking for. If the person has the right attitude, mentality and desire to learn—forget everything else when recruiting for agents. This person will learn how to listen, talk, type, upsell cross-sell. I can speak for myself: When I first entered the contact center world, my typing speed was way below average, but with time, practice and a supervisor encouraging me, all the right skills came together.
- Assess the **skill sets and desire to learn**; forget your ideas or biases around name, heritage, age. Instead, look for signs of dedication, hard work, desire to learn and ability to be coached.
- What's in a name? Take a look at the resume before **prejudging based on the name**. It is funny, I was told once, "You speak very good E N G L I S H." The person assumed I would have a heavy accent based on my name. Needless to say, I chose not to work at that company!

## Ideas to Get Started

Every company is unique, therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all roadmap for aligning D&I initiatives with your workforce, culture, customer base and brand vision. The following are a few considerations and practical actions that you can put in place now as you begin your journey toward a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace.

### REVAMP RECRUITING & HIRING PRACTICES TO MINIMIZE BIAS

Ensuring a diverse and inclusive workforce goes far beyond setting targets for hiring employees from certain ethnic, racial, gender or cultural backgrounds. Employers need to examine their longtime recruiting and hiring practices for unconscious bias. For instance, two popular recruiting strategies in use today can introduce bias into the hiring process by narrowing the candidate field to "people like me":

#### *Employee Referral Programs*

Employers love employee referral programs, and for good reason—they have been proven to save recruiting time and costs, and increase job satisfaction and retention among new-hires. New employees come on board already having established relationships with co-workers, which smooths the transition and boosts engagement.

But, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), these types of sourcing programs often result in "like me" referrals because employees tend to refer candidates of the same race, religion, national origin or other class.

#### *Hiring for Culture Fit*

Another popular strategy that may introduce bias is hiring for culture fit—a longtime interviewing tactic used by companies looking to bring on board individuals whose values, beliefs and behaviors are aligned with the company's culture. While the goal is to ensure that the candidate will be successful in the role and work environment, will be more productive, will stay longer and will contribute to the company's vision and mission, this approach is often mishandled, resulting in

sustained discrimination and a lack of diversity.

According to Lauren Rivera, associate professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, "Instead of looking for people who share the company's values, hiring managers look for people who share their own background and interests. And if the people doing the hiring are predominantly male, or white, or wealthy, then they perpetuate that lack of diversity in their organization."

**PRACTICAL POINTER:** To avoid culture-fit bias, assemble a diverse hiring team to compare and evaluate candidates at the last stage of the process. Rivera recommends conducting skills-based screening *before* bringing candidates in for interviews. And, at the end of the interview process, put a cap on how much the interviewer's sense of culture fit can influence hiring decisions.

### TREAT ALL EMPLOYEES AS INDIVIDUALS

Don't assume that employees who share customs, traditions, religion, heritage or gender have the same needs or career goals. People are individuals with unique perspectives and life experiences.

Keep in mind that a diverse workforce brings creative thinking and fresh approaches to problem-solving. Get to know your team members on a personal level: To tap into the unique talents of your team, spend one-on-one time with individuals to learn what makes the people on your team tick. Incorporate their preferences into workplace activities, coaching sessions, language, communications, performance reviews, growth opportunities and projects.

**PRACTICAL POINTER:** Frontline managers set the tone for workplace culture, but often lack the training to effectively support D&I efforts. Bias and diversity training for managers can increase their awareness of diversity issues in the workplace, help them to identify their own unconscious biases, and provide the skills to bring about a more cohesive work environment. Personality assessments, such as the DISC model recommended by SB Global Founder and *Contact Center Pipeline* Advisory Board member Sangeeta Bhatnagar, can help frontline managers identify the communication preferences of their team members and learn the best way to connect with each individual (see "DISC Temperaments under Stress," *Pipeline*, June 2020).

### ACKNOWLEDGE AND CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES

Contact centers love a reason to celebrate. What better way to build awareness of diverse cultures and lifestyles than with a series of activities (e.g., lunch-and-learn events) that honor each team member's background or heritage? The focus for these activities should be education and inclusion.

Expand your holiday celebration calendar to include cultural awareness months that matter to your team members, for instance:

- Black History (February)
- Women's History (March)
- Asian/Pacific American Heritage (May)
- Jewish American Heritage (May)
- Pride (June)
- Native American Heritage (November)
- National Hispanic Heritage (September 15th–October 15th)
- National Disability Employment Awareness (October)

**PRACTICAL POINTER:** Be mindful of employees' religions and preferences when planning holiday festivities. For instance, many companies consider the annual office Christmas party to be a mandatory activity, yet in a multicultural and diverse workforce, holiday celebrations built around secret Santas, Christmas trees and alcohol will leave some employees feeling excluded.

### INVOLVE FRONTLINE CHAMPIONS IN DRIVING CHANGE

D&I cannot be a top-down directive. To create meaningful change in the workplace, feedback about D&I challenges and obstacles must come from those who experience them on a day-to-day basis. Involve your team members in building D&I awareness within the contact center and throughout the company. Put together a D&I frontline team to work with HR and management on driving D&I efforts in the workplace.

What are some activities that frontline D&I team members can pursue?

- Reviewing company policies for bias.
- Participating in D&I awareness and feedback sessions with executives.
- Participating on crossfunctional project teams.
- Mentoring new employees.
- Leading awareness and education sessions during company meetings.

**PRACTICAL POINTER:** Survey your team regularly to identify gaps between the company mission and D&I initiatives, and your employees' day-to-day workplace experience. Discuss areas of misalignment with the frontline D&I team and gather their input on how to close the gaps. Enlist team members' help in reaching out to their peers who may be feeling excluded or experiencing bias at work.

## D&I Is More Than a Policy

Creating a diverse and inclusive work environment where individuals feel safe, supported and respected requires time, effort and internal resources. It cannot be accomplished as a onetime training event or communication in response to current events. D&I is a long-term change initiative that must involve the entire organization—from the executive suite to frontline agents. This is not just the right time to focus on D&I efforts, it's the right thing to do for your employees, your customers and your brand.

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