

By Gita Anand June 30, 2020

Why workplace diversity and inclusion matter

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Policies need to be followed by actions.



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Diversity and inclusion are more than just buzzwords; they are an important business strategy for engineering firms.

Confronted with the reality that huge numbers of baby boomers are retiring, the construction industry overall is experiencing widening gaps in its workforce. BuildForce Canada estimates more than 20% of the current labour market will retire from job sites in the next decade. To replace them, the organization suggests employers should concentrate recruitment efforts on historically underrepresented groups, including women and Indigenous and new Canadians.

Although women comprise more than half of Canada's population, for example, they are significantly underrepresented in the engineering profession and in on-site construction industry occupations, including skilled trades. One of the keys to recruiting them and other underrepresented groups to the industry—and retaining them—is a strategy of diversity and inclusion.

This notion was addressed in Engineers Canada's 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, which made the recruitment, retention and professional development of women in the engineering profession a priority. Through its '30 by 30' initiative, which was launched in 2015, the industry organization has a goal of raising the proportion of newly licensed engineers who are women to 30% by the year 2030.

Diversity vs. inclusion

To better understand diversity and inclusion, consider this analogy: a jigsaw puzzle comprises hundreds of unique, multi-coloured pieces in different shapes and even sizes.

'Diversity' could describe the variety of qualities and characteristics of each individual piece, as it does to represent the uniqueness of each individual person. 'Inclusion,' on the other hand, relates to the completed puzzle, whereby the individual pieces fit together for the benefit of the collective. It is about creating a work culture that respects, values and accepts differences.

So, together, diversity and inclusion strive to embrace the uniqueness of each individual within an environment that values and respects them for their talents, skills and abilities to the benefit of the group—*i.e.* a celebration of a piece within a puzzle.

Value for business

There is no doubt diversity is good for business.

Workplace diversity has proven its value in sparking innovations, fostering creativity and solving problems. Cultural and gender differences can help introduce new ideas and fresh perspectives. In fact, research has shown teams with gender diversity are smarter and more innovative than those without.

Innovation leads to better results, which in turn drive better company performance. In the construction industry, especially, better-performing teams can achieve better project outcomes. Positive impacts of diversity can be seen in terms of productivity, quality, revenue, market share, absenteeism rates, employee retention and safety.

The gender gap

Across all industries, construction is one of the largest areas of employment in Canada in both the public and the private sectors, accounting for almost 1.5 million jobs.

Yet, despite this significant scale, it is a male-dominated industry. In fact, with only 12% female employment, statistics show construction employs the lowest female-to-male ratio across all industries—even lower than other traditionally male-dominated industries like mining, oil and gas.

Moreover, female employment in construction has not increased over the years. In fact, there is a decreasing trend.

In 2017, a gender study helped show that where a workforce is male-dominated, the workplace culture is male-dominated, too. It is for this reason the status quo of a gender imbalance in the workplace can become a barrier to the recruitment of women.

Policies and actions

Organizations and institutions have studied issues relating to recruitment and retention of (a) women in industries where the workplace is male-dominated and (b) individuals with diverse backgrounds in those that are homogenous.

Over the past decade, many of them have also introduced policies reflecting new commitments to increase diversity and improve equality in the workplace. Some have followed up with training sessions explaining what these policies mean.

While these are positive first steps, however, value will only result by moving beyond lip service. For that matter, diversity is useless as a business strategy without also figuring out how to make a workplace more inclusive.

Hiring more women may result in gender diversity, for example, but without also creating an environment where those women feel valued and respected and have access to the same opportunities as their male counterparts, successful recruitment efforts will not resolve a gender imbalance.

Only when an inclusive work environment is created will many of the positive benefits of diversity be enjoyed, both by individuals and the organization, including reduced turnover, improved collaboration and loyalty, stronger team engagement, reduction of conflict and increased employee satisfaction.

That is why organizations like Engineers Canada focus not only on recruitment, but also on retention, of women in the workplace. Retention depends on inclusion. And compared to diversity, inclusion—which may require authentic change in business culture—is the hard part.

People feel a fundamental need to belong within an organization, yet inclusion has proved difficult for most businesses to achieve. Research shows certain dynamics work against it in many cases, including the inclination for people to gravitate toward other people like themselves, the existence of subtle but exclusionary biases, the attempt of those different from the majority to conform as a coping strategy and a resistance to change among those within the majority group.

Methods of improvement

There is a wealth of literature suggesting how organizations can create and enhance workplace inclusivity, including training employees about bias, equity, respect and other elements of teamwork and inviting them to reflect on their own biases and consider what they could do to make their work environment more inclusive.

Individuals at every level of an organization can make a significant impact in the creation of an inclusive environment. And indeed, they must all step up. Women and members of minority groups should not be expected to lead the charge. All business leaders must spearhead efforts through promoting diversity, training, setting targets and creating and implementing policies that improve the representation of diverse individuals in leadership positions.

It is key for those in leadership roles to ensure diversity and inclusion become firmly entrenched in the organization's systems and processes. Creating a culture of inclusion is not unlike creating a culture of safety, which has already become embedded in most workplace structures.

To get there, leaders will need to place both diversity and inclusion at the top of their list of priorities, talk about their importance, speak about the issues, seek out and encourage differences, notice when they are present, question when they are absent, actively drive them forward and make everyone accountable.

Mitigating legal risk

Finally, there are also legal reasons to focus on diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Provincial and federal human rights laws, which apply to employers, prohibit discrimination in employment on a wide number of grounds, including age, disability, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation. This prohibition extends to discrimination in the hiring and retaining of employees. A diverse and inclusive workplace reduces the risk of costly legal claims for breaches of these laws.