

## **Diversity Pays**

**A flexible and open attitude at work helps bosses attract and keep talent, raising profits.**

Regardless of our background, we have a responsibility to care for others. Perhaps you are a parent to young children or a child of elderly parents. Perhaps you have a sibling who has a disability or a spouse who is chronically ill. The obligation to care for our family, in particular, runs deep in us.

Such obligations need not interfere with our work performance. Yet, we often feel we have to choose. Imagine, for instance, that you are an only son who is responsible for the care of your elderly mother, and she has a serious illness. She needs constant attention, but your company does not support flexible work arrangements.

There are others who face additional barriers in their professional lives due to their gender, disability, race or sexual orientation. Imagine being a top-performing salesperson, but as an ethnic minority you are constantly a target of discrimination inside the workplace.

In such instances, would you stay or leave?

In these scenarios, the organisation risks losing valuable staff. Yet, with a slight reorientation in mindset and policies, employers can encourage talent, expand business opportunities and improve working relations.

Is it not time for us to rethink our corporate culture?

An equal opportunity workplace can help create an environment of mutual respect that must be good for business. There are four key elements here: the workplace needs to be inclusive, gender-friendly, family-friendly, and talent-oriented.

First, inclusive policies are becoming an increasingly important consideration for top young talent. Over the next decades, we face a looming talent crunch fuelled by our ageing population and low birth rate. Consequently, younger workers will increasingly become an asset.

The post-1980s generation grew up with wider exposure through living and studying overseas, and through travel and access to the internet.

They tend to have a wider range of interests, value opportunities to learn and take diversity as a given. Consequently, they are more likely to want both an inclusive workplace and to look for a healthier work-life balance. Employers who cannot fulfil these desires risk falling behind in the race for talent.

Second, employers need to show commitment to promoting gender diversity. More women than men are now graduating from universities worldwide. Women have increasing buying power and often make purchase decisions for the rest of the family. This means gender diversity matters, and will increasingly matter, in this city's workplace.

Yet, according to the *South China Morning Post*, women made up only 9.2 per cent of the board directorships of Hang Seng-listed companies last year. Those who lag behind on gender diversity risk losing out: some research has shown that companies with the most female managers tend to outperform their counterparts in the same field. Gender diversity widens the variety of inputs and better equips the company to anticipate the needs of its customers.

Third, family-friendly policies help retain talent, especially female workers. Many women leave the workplace before they reach the top, because they hit a glass ceiling in their careers or because it becomes too difficult to juggle the needs of work and family. This female brain drain is a serious loss to the business and the community.

In truth, family-friendly policies can help ensure that employees do not easily burn out. A recent survey from Community Business indicates that almost one in five working respondents fall sick more often. More than one-third feel that they do not have time for their family, and more than half feel extreme and prolonged fatigue. Tired and sick employees are neither productive nor engaged.

Not surprisingly, nearly 40 per cent said that they would consider leaving their current job for a better work-life balance. Policies which promote

work-life balance cost little but can have long-term benefits in building up human capital.

Finally, fostering an equal opportunities culture means judging performances based on merit, not on stereotypical factors. Unfortunately, stereotypical attitudes about different groups remain prevalent. For example, in a 2009 survey conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission, almost one in four local Chinese respondents said they would not choose job applicants of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent.

In this globalised world, workplace diversity can help companies better cater to their customers' needs. It also fosters creativity and innovation, as well as improving productivity. For instance, according to Harvard Business School research in 2004, there are measurable performance benefits when a racially diverse group chooses to learn from its members' different experiences rather than ignore or suppress them. Therefore, a workplace which embraces diversity allows its workers to contribute their best without distraction.

Everyone can be a leader in his or her own spheres of influence. As leaders, corporate executives have the ability to implement real changes and be a role model for future generations. By taking action, leaders can guide their own company to inspire by example.

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