Diversity training in organisations: an introduction

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on diversity training and examine the effect of power, privilege and politics on diversity in organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper examining the arguments in favour and against diversity training in organisations. It identifies the presence of dominant groups in society leading to the marginalisation and oppression of minority diverse groups. It introduces the papers to the special issue under the three themes of: organisational impacts and outcomes; identify and self-presentation and resistance to diversity.

Findings – The value of diversity training to promoting inclusivity, equality and fairness in organisations is underlined as is the importance of the human resource development community adopting a more proactive role in addressing the issue of diversity through research and course curricula.

Originality/value – The paper introduces this special issue in “Diversity training in organisations” by examining the background concepts and providing an overview of the contributions to the issue.

Keywords Equal opportunities, Training

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Embracing diversity is one of the key challenges faced by both small and large organisations. Recognising, understanding and valuing difference is key, particularly in light of the dual trends of globalisation and the increasing participation rates of diverse groups in the workplace (Moore, 1999). In order to respond effectively to employees and customers, many organisations are seeking to embed diversity at the core of their business practices resulting in changes to attitudes, behaviours and outlooks both within and out-with the organisation. As such, in a global market, organisations are seeking employees from diverse backgrounds who have the cultural, linguistic and social knowledge to adapt products and practices to fit the expectations of customers (Vielba and Edelshain, 1997). The issue of diversity has, therefore, moved from being a social ideal to becoming a practical business mandate, especially as more organisations operate beyond national borders (Lattimer, 1998).

Diversity is forged in an individual’s identity and encompasses both visible and non-visible aspects by which individuals categorize themselves and others (Ely and Thomas, 2001). As such, diversity is a multidimensional concept and can include aspects such as gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality class, religion, age
and disability. Consequently, organisations are rich with difference and valuing diversity in organisations can involve a complex process of moulding a common set of values inclusive of difference (Sadri and Tran, 2002). However, the drive to unify employees under a common values set, can produce dynamics where difference becomes submerged and hidden. Koene and van Riemsdijk (2005) argue that this collective identity orientation can reinforce an organisational structure with strong group divisions enabling easy stereotyping of others. Likewise, Swann et al. (2004) argues that through emphasising superordinate goals and identities, the distinctions amongst group members often becomes blurred, negating the true value of diversity. As such, differences become lost and secondary to the goal of unity. In this way, Byrd (2009) argues that a collectivistic values set can result in a diversity-blind attitude and an emphasis on sameness with a resulting generalisation of the language of diversity.

By valuing diversity, the potential for creativity and innovation in an organisation is enhanced (Page, 2007; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1996). It is argued that organisations that promote diversity can improve their effectiveness through maximising individual potential (Kim, 2006); enhancing their ability to recruit the most skilled applicants (Cox and Blake, 1991) and increasing job commitment and performance amongst employees (Richard and Shelor, 2002; Iles and Hayers, 1997). Furthermore, Lattimer (1998) argues that managing diversity (MD) can help an organisation adjust to new challenges including securing new and emerging markets; dealing with globalisation; adjusting to a changing workforce and shifting employee values and integrating new technology and information systems. By fostering inclusivity and respect for the dignity and identity of the individual, it is also argued that organisations can free themselves of costly lawsuits, hostile environments and divisive conflict-ridden cultures (Aghazadeh, 2004).

This introductory paper sets out some of the key issues affecting diversity training in organisations. It examines the case for diversity training outlining the rationale for engaging in investing in this form of training as well as the criticisms leveled at it. It also explored the diversity training priorities across the individual, organisational and societal levels of analysis. The effects of power and privilege on individuals and minority groups in organisations is discussed and the barriers facing these groups identified. Finally, the paper introduces the key themes that will be examined in this special issues and provides a précis of the individual papers comprising the issue.

**Diversity training in organisations**

With the dual effects of globalisation and workforce mobility increasing, diversity training is becoming a more pressing priority for human resource development (HRD) professionals. Lai and Kleiner (2001) define diversity training as the process by which a workforce is educated about cultural, socio-economic, racial and religious differences among employees and taught how to embrace those differences so as to create and maintain an effective work environment. Diversity training, therefore, educates and trains employees to embrace difference, regardless of gender, age, race, religion, sexual orientation, class or any other related dimension. Pendry et al. (2007) identify the primary goal of diversity training as facilitating the integration of minority groups into the workplace by attempting to confer on the workforce the skills, knowledge and motivation to work productively alongside dissimilar others and interact effectively with a diverse customer population. The intent of diversity training is, therefore,
to reduce and end workplace discrimination and harassment of minority groups (Hemphill and Haines, 1997).

Increasingly, diversity training is being valued by organisations for the ability to understand and leverage difference in making better decisions. For this reason, Anand and Winters (2008) argue that diversity is increasingly being positioned as a competency in organisations; the implication being that all employees need to be diversity-competent. Diversity training, therefore, involves guiding participants towards incorporating new worldviews into their problem solving and decision-making activities. Within this paradigm, research has indicated moves towards ending the hierarchical construction of difference, towards looking at difference in terms of it producing a unique culture and distinctive identity. Sandel (1999) questions whether deafness, rather than being considered a disability could be viewed as a distinctive identity. Similarly, Day (2007) subscribes to a developmental approach to diversity, recognising the cultural basis of difference and he argues that cultural differences represent an opportunity to strengthen organisations through shared learning, better communication and new perspectives.

A summary of diversity training priorities at the individual, group, organisational and societal level can be found in Table I.

Several criticisms have been levelled at the concept of diversity training. Broadly speaking, the main arguments here fall within two categories. First, much diversity training works on the basis of identifying and recognising dominance and privilege. Such activities identify diversity inequalities as implicitly resulting from the hidden power exercised by white males in the workplace. For this reason, Karp and Sutton (1993) argue that diversity training constitutes brainwashing and have the effect of intimidating white males (whether intentional or not). Lindsay (1994) maintains that this may lead to white males feeling over-exposed, targeted and maligned. In this way, it is argued that far from eliminating discrimination and division, diversity training

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Individual level</th>
<th>Harness positive attitudes to diversity</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promote an understanding of the effects of power and privilege</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educate employees about diversity</td>
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<td>Develop and frame of self-identity</td>
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<td>Help employees overcome diversity barriers</td>
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<td>Group level</td>
<td>Promote teamwork through inclusive activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Foster respect and tolerance of difference</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Review group values</td>
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<td>Improve access and support</td>
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<td>Reexamine recruitment, promotion and other practices</td>
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<td>Organisational level</td>
<td>Provide career mentoring and coaching programmes</td>
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<td>Develop organisational policies towards diversity</td>
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<td>Promote a positive diversity climate</td>
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<td>Facilitate diversity workshops</td>
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<td>Appoint diversity champions</td>
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<td>Societal level</td>
<td>Promote equality and social justice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Eliminate discrimination</td>
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<td>Encourage greater participation of diverse groups</td>
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<td>Foster positive relations amongst diverse groups</td>
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<td>Dissemination of good practice</td>
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<th>Diversity training priorities across levels of analysis</th>
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results in negative labeling and heightens tensions in the workplace (Hemphill and Haines, 1997).

Second, diversity training deals with highly personal issues and experiences. As Lindsay (1994) points out, the participant and the trainer are the topic itself. She argues that the topic requires people to talk about fears, experiences and opinions which they may not feel comfortable doing in a public setting. As such, diversity training may touch upon emotionally charged topics and needs to be carried out with a high degree of sensitivity.

**Power, privilege and politics**

Power, privilege and political issues dominate critical analyses of diversity issues. There is widespread recognition of the dominance of white, able-bodied heterosexual norms in organisational norms, ideology and practices (Broadridge and Hearn, 2008; Fassinger, 1995; Skidmore, 2004). Social dominance theory seeks to explain power differentials by examining how hierarchies are constructed based upon social group membership (McKay and Avery, 2006; Aquino et al., 2005). It argues that the dominance of a particular group confers disproportionate privileges on the “superior” group providing greater access to resources than the “inferior” group. For their part, Chattopadhyay et al. (2004) maintain that differentials in power and status are legitimated and maintained through ideologies shared by “superior” and “inferior” groups. This mechanism allows organisations to present an appearance of equality, while inequities remain hidden. Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2008) describe the dominant image of the white, heterosexual masculine norm that exists in organisations as similar to that of an anchor, from which diverse groups continually find themselves deviating from. Consequently, research has shown that diverse groups are more likely to suffer from higher levels of discrimination, victimisation and social support (Aquino and Bommer, 2003; Pratto et al., 1994). Indeed, diverse groups can sometimes engage in non-standard working patterns and are consequently perceived as less reliable and committed to the organisation, suffering career penalties as a result (Beauregard, 2008).

Unearned privileges are often the outcome of power differentials in the workplace. McIntosh (1993, p. 31) describes the concept of privilege as “an invisible container of unearned benefits that operates in such a way as to maintain its invisibility, to keep its beneficiaries ignorant of its presence, and to preserve its existence”. She argues that there is often an unwillingness by the dominant group to acknowledge that they are advantaged and the invisibility of privilege means that it is more likely to be denied and thus protected. A study of race-related privilege by Rosette and Tost (2007) found that white employees had greater advantages over minority groups in the workplace, but that white employees viewed such advantages as normative and available to all employees.

In the area of sexuality, the dominance of heterosexual norms means that it is often difficult for homosexual employees to discuss their sexuality in the workplace. Studies exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian employees report strategies of closeting, hiding and lying about one’s sexual orientation in the workplace (Gedro et al., 2004; Adams, 1996). In many cases, homosexual employees may decide to pass themselves off as “straight” in order to avoid bullying and harassment. However, Driscoll et al. (1996) maintain that the partitioning of an individual’s personal and
professional life can often result in lower self-esteem, higher stress levels and a lack of
closeness in workplace relationships.

While much has been written on issues of power and privilege, only limited research
has focused on the politics of diversity. Harris et al. (2005) recognise that organisations
are political arenas and that organisational political behaviour seeks to benefit, enhance
or protect one’s self-interests to the exclusion of others. Therefore, organisational politics
can play a role in sustaining inequalities and disparities by granting privileges upon
certain groups over others. A paper by Ferris et al. (1996) argues that informal
information, rules, norms and practices are selectively transmitted amongst dominant
groups in the organisation to the benefit of privileged groups in the organisation.
They argue that this also results in members of the minority group being closed out of
the information network leading to a lack of awareness of how things get done and
political skill deficiencies.

Specific themes explored within the issue
The papers within this special issue fall broadly within three categories: contributions
that look at the effect of diversity training on organisational practices; contributions
that look at how diverse employees present themselves in the workplace and contributions
which examine resistance to diversity.

Organisational impacts and outcomes
Several commentators have noted that there is a distinct lack of research examining the
effectiveness of diversity training. Holladay and Quinones (2008) identify a lack of
empirical data documenting the design features that contribute to the effectiveness
of diversity training. Likewise, DeMeuse et al. (2007) argue that greater attention needs
to focus on the evaluation of diversity training initiatives. This absence of research
may explain the commonly held perceptions that diversity training is “woolly” and the
business case for diversity training requires clearer articulation.

Some research indicates that attention should be paid to how studies of diversity in
organisations are conducted. Cox (2004) argues for greater use of qualitative approaches
in diversity research through the use of in-depth interviews and open-ended questioning.
Addressing the need for longitudinal case studies, both Krieger (2005) and Wentling and
Palma-Rivas (1997) argue that diversity studies carried out over a long time period would
allow a clearer identification of successful interventions and programmes. Meanwhile,
Sippola and Smale (2007) identify a greater need for research amongst international firm
as to how diversity is managed and diversity challenges are overcome.

Responding to the lack of empirical studies examining the impact of diversity, this
issue presents two papers that explore the effectiveness of diversity training.

Jim Stewart and Victoria Harte examine the relationship between talent management
(TM) and MD. They explore the implications of the inclusivity versus exclusivity debate
within TM for diversity and equal opportunities within organisations. Through the use of
semi-structured interviews discussions, the authors seek to establish the degree to which
policy and practice in the areas of TM and MD are coordinated. It also seeks to ascertain
whether TM policies help to achieve the goals of MD and inversely, whether MD supports
the objectives of TM. In particular, attention is paid to whether HRD provides a suitable
framework for linking both concepts. The paper recommends that a more integrated
approach be adopted to link TM, MD and HRD.
Margaret Yap, Mark Robert Holmes, Charity-Ann Hannan and Wendy Cuk present the findings of a large cross-sectional study of diversity training practices in Canada. The authors note an increasing dependence on immigrants across the Canadian workforce and the likelihood of immigrants facing discriminatory treatment across a number of economic and social variables. The authors cite research showing that the isolation and marginalisation of diverse groups has a negative impact on career satisfaction and engagement as well as on organisational variables such as productivity, profitability and employee turnover. Using an online survey design, the authors collected data from over 11,000 managers, professionals and executives. The authors examined employees’ perceptions of their organisations’ diversity training programs, and the relationship that human capital, subjective and objective factors have on organisational commitment and career satisfaction. The paper concludes that diversity training programmes significantly affect levels of organisational commitment and career satisfaction and advocates greater awareness of the benefits of diversity training programmes.

Identity and self-presentation

Research has shown that the social identity that individuals derive is significantly influenced by the groups which individuals belong and the environment they operate in (Rink and Ellemers, 2007; Tajfel, 1972). A key aspect of social identity, therefore, is the degree of similarity between the individual and the group/organisation to which they belong. The existence of privileged hierarchies and cultures thus forces diverse individuals and communities to conform to masculine heteronormative organisational paradigm, where the rights of majority members are visible and unchallenged (Munn et al., 2009). In such cultures, individual identities and diversities may become submerged and behaviours constrained to fit with the dominant norms. In this special issue, we present two papers which explore the ways in which both women and lesbians operate within highly masculine-dominant contexts.

Heather Kissack explores how email has become a gendered form of communication. Using muted group theory, she examines the use of gender-preferential language highlighting the use of power in everyday communication. She argues that language is socially constructed and women must assimilate textual norms suited to replicating male dominance and the marginalisation and silencing of the female voice. She maintains that women must conform to language rules that do not allow for feminine voice and marginalises what is being said. The absence of in-person social cues imposes additional limitations on female expression, leading to the further exclusion of women. She argues for the need to embrace more effective inclusive forms of communication and a stronger critique of organisational life. She suggests that action research may usefully identify inequities and inequalities in organisations and provide a roadmap for developing more democratic respectful organisations.

Julie Gedro in her paper entitled: “Lesbian presentations and representations of leadership, and the implications for HRD” examines the double-marginalisation of lesbians through gender and sexual orientation. She highlights the absence of research on lesbian leadership in the HRD and business literature and argues for greater attention to be devoted to sexual minority issues in the workplace. She identifies a series of key pressures for women in leadership including, the persistent prejudice amongst women working outside the home; sexism amongst followers; lack of acceptance of women’s
leadership style; appearance pressures and an expectation that women will conform to
gender norms. She also discusses some key pressures unique to lesbians, namely, lack of
attention to lesbian concerns even within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered
literature; pressures related to identity management and issues related to gender
expression. She concludes that HRD can play an important role in dismantling the sexist
and homophobic attitudes that continue to prevail within many organisations.

Resistance to diversity
Does the field of HRD embrace the concept of diversity? Historically, it appears that HR
systems were designed to promote similarity in social characteristics, with Schneider
(1985, 1987) arguing that individuals were generally attracted to organisations that
aligned with their values and outlook and that over time, employees who did not fit
with the dominant culture would leave the firm. Kuchinke (2002) argues that diversity
is not well embedded in the core curriculum of graduate HRD programmes with only
44 per cent of programmes covering diversity as a topic area. This finding questions
the commitment of the field to diversity issues.

Laura L. Bierema presents an analysis of the resistance to diversity within the field
of HRD. She argues that diversity presents a threat to the prevailing performance
frameworks that emphasise productivity, profitability and resource efficiency. She
maintains that research within the field ignores issues such as gender, homosexuality,
women, race, social responsibility and power. She claims that accepting diversity as
a core aspect of HRD would in the view of some commentators dilute HRD's power
base and challenge the power relations that privileges dominant groups in the
workplace. Her conclusion is a call to arms for the field of HRD to reclaim diversity and
realise HRD's long-standing humanistic and developmental vision.

A summary of the papers included in this special issue is provided in Table II.

Conclusion
Diversity training has a significant role to play in fostering greater equality, inclusion
and fairness in the workplace. Critically, it can help diverse individuals and
communities recoup important aspects of their identity and enjoy productive fulfilling
careers in the workplace. Diversity fosters a new outlook in organisations through
capitalising on the perspectives of all employees and giving voice to silenced minorities.
It promotes greater understanding, communication and the integration of different
worldviews in decision making and problem solving. To embed diversity effectively in
organisations requires both leadership by senior management and a realisation that
diversity will improve performance metrics, rather than simply being a socially
desirable ideal. It involves recognising that promoting diversity and an inclusive culture
is a shared responsibility and is not solely the preserve of diversity advocates or HR
departments.

As globalisation effects increase and the participation of diverse groups in the
workplace grows, there is a clear need for the field of HRD to commit to promoting
the cause of diversity. Diversity needs to become a priority item on the HRD agenda
through embedding diversity into the cirricula of HRD programmes. Educating HRD
graduates and practitioners about diversity issues is critical to fostering inclusivity
and equal opportunities in the workplace. It is critical to prepare HRD practitioners
**Stewart and Harte**

**Objective of the paper**
To explore how HR professionals connect TM and MD and how HRD practice helps/hinders these connections

**Theoretical approach**
TM; MD; HRD

**Methodology**
Document analysis; interviews with six HR professionals within a large metropolitan local council

**Key findings**
Poor HR professional understanding of TM and limited knowledge of linkages between TM and MD; evidence of TM and MD remaining separate initiatives in practice

**Implications for HRD**
Little evidence of HRD practice helping or hindering connections between TM and MD; need for an integrated approach linking HRD, TM and MD

**Yap, Holmes and Hannan**

**Objective of the paper**
To examine the relationship between diversity training effectiveness, organisational commitment and career satisfaction
To explore the relationship between being an immigrant, organisational commitment and career satisfaction
To analyse the relationship between being a visible minority, organisational commitment and career satisfaction
To evaluate the relationship between subjective factors, organisational commitment and career satisfaction

**Theoretical approach**
Synopsis of literature on demographic factors, human capital, subjective factors and objective factors

**Methodology**
Online survey of 11,000 managers, professionals and executives from nine large Canadian organisations

**Key findings**
Employees who believe their organisations diversity training programmes to be effective were more satisfied with their career and more commitment to their organisation
Being an immigrant was positively associated with organisational commitment and negatively associated with career satisfaction
Visible minority employees have higher levels of organisational commitment, but lower levels of career satisfaction
Subjective factors were positively associated with organisational commitment and career satisfaction

**Implications for HRD**
Effective diversity training increases career satisfaction and organisational commitment Employees who perceive that the diversity training in their organisation is ineffective have significantly higher levels of career satisfaction and organisational commitment those who perceive that their organisations have no diversity training

**Kissack**

**Objective of the paper**
To examine gender-preferential language in e-mail usage in organisations
To explore mechanisms by which female voice is muted through e-mail usage

**Theoretical approach**
Muted group theory

**Methodology**
Theoretical paper

**Key findings**
Language difference between males and females are carried over into organisational e-mails despite the lack of contextual cues within e-mail
Women’s voice in e-mail is not merely marginalised, but is muted
The absence of social cues on e-mail forces individuals to infer gender from textual cues only, thus magnifying the importance and use of masculine language

Table II.
Summary details of papers included in the special issue

(continued)
to see diversity as core HRD business, rather than a peripheral add-on. As Beaver and Hutchings (2005, p. 595) put it:

[...] the creation of a culture that values and appreciates differences requires major, systematic planned change efforts and creating such transformation depends upon a fundamental change in the thinking of HRD professionals.

HRD needs to lead the field in documenting through research the experiences of diverse groups in the workplace. If HRD truly believes that employees are the true source of added value in an organisation, then it must affirm a commitment to improving the experiences of diversity groups and readjusting power asymmetries. HRD research can usefully examine topics such as: the barriers facing diverse groups; the effectiveness of various diversity training interventions; methods for fostering a diverse organisational culture; the role of leaders in embedding diversity or evaluating the effect of reward structures on diversity.

In conclusion, if organisations are to achieve a goal of operating effectively in today’s global market, it is clear that they must learn how to effectively dismantle diversity borders. Diversity training programmes offer an important opportunity to discuss and explore workplace differences constructively. Through the papers presented in this special issue, we hope to provide HRD researchers and practitioners
with a set of useful ideas and concepts to beginning tackling the diversity challenges that we face and create organisations that respect and value difference.

References


Further reading


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