

## Living and Working in an Increasingly Complex Society

Joseph W. Ruane  
*University of the Sciences in Philadelphia*

### Abstract

*A challenging study of diverse opportunities in the inclusive modern day workplace, identifying positive features of diversity programs in business, and the reactions indicating the possible problems to be overcome as the cultural world comes into the business world from both a researched and experienced perspective presents itself with a look at the present and future. To attain the liberty, freedom and democracy seemingly promised in early U.S. cannot be mandated by ignoring differences, but those differences must be called out to recognize the deep seated roots of cultures now part of the new members of the workforce in order to improve hiring practices, productivity and profits through innovative creativity and recognition of new cultural experiences for all.*

What's in a name: Smith, Parikh, McGuinness, Adams, Rosinski, Petitfrere, Schultz, Olajuwon, Martinez, DiNuncio, Aifuwa, Nguyen, Javid, Ahmed...? Where does it end? Why should it? Last names are not the only change. From Mary and Joseph, Jack and Jill we have gone to Nidhi, Jamal, Furhi, Ahmad, Abdul, Gyuzel, Oluwaseun, Giancarlo, Aiisha, Mei-ling and so many more.

One could dissect the origin of all the names of people we work with and still workers with other names will come to be added to any list we develop. Such is the complex society we work in today. Employees from various cultures and ethnic groups, of different religions and politics, speaking multiple languages from many nations join the workforce daily. Furthermore we work with colleagues of diverse sexual orientations and family groupings of differing races, abilities and disabilities. Respect for all becomes the mantra as we learn to live and work in an increasing inclusive world that demands an effort by all to gain a better sense of people's inherent worth.

Not only names are different, but so are dress and customs. Just when some became accustomed to yarmulkes, others come with a burqa, khimar or scarf and hijab robe and kufi or skull cap. The covering of some very observant Muslim women wearing an abaya, a long robe, and a niqab, the head covering showing only the eyes may raise questions, but to the women wearing these clothes it is an expression of their faith. Likewise Sikhs come wearing turbans every day unlike the wearing of ashes only on Ash Wednesday that indicate a Christian one day a year. Also too are the mostly younger set exhibiting their tattoos along with their talents. Saris and the bindhi on the forehead of Hindu women add to the mix. And this is just in the United States. Questions about the clothing are opportunities to learn more about the co-worker, and to begin friendships. After all, as Toni Morrison (1998) says, "What do you know about a person when you know their race (or nationality)...Nothing, only stereotypes."

However, new cultural practices from abroad may be an affront to those who grew up with the beliefs and behaviors of the United States. Being asked a question such as "What is your salary?" or "How much did you pay for your house?" or "Who are you voting for?" may reflect an ordinary question common to one culture, but one seen as intrusive and needing an evasive answer in another culture. Of course one may simply say that the question is one we don't care to answer, or that such questions are customary only among close friends. Companies also face the problem that employees rightly put obligations on the newcomers to learn local customs and to become acculturated to their new surroundings. Timing is important in such critiques. All of us must accommodate to the requirements of our workplace at times. Circumstances like this point out the variety of ways misunderstanding may arise in complex populations.

## Living and Working in an Increasingly Complex Society

Gradually most people begin to reflect on why those from different cultures, ourselves included, behave the way they do. Eventually we may become nonjudgmental and more accepting. We begin to grow as we recognize our own prejudices. This new awareness and sensitivity to the world around us enables us to have better relationships with others in settings of diverse groups. This is not focusing on a diversity that keeps us apart as Jonathan Zimmerman (2008) has written, but one that recognizes that by virtue of the simple fact of existing, every human being must be fully respected (CDF 2008). The PBS documentary *Journey of Man* (2001) pulls together the latest evidence from many different scientific fields – genetics, linguistics, anthropology and paleoclimatology.

As most of us work in surroundings with an international global focus along with our domestic business interests, this tremendous change in the workforce helps us to become more accustomed to cultures far different than we may be used to. We learn of new food choices, customs that we have never heard of, inspiration from other spiritual practices, and gain new knowledge of people around the world. We may learn that not all cultures view time as we do, or that some negotiate differently, or require us to be indirect rather than direct about what we are asking for at the business table. Such intercultural knowledge becomes an advantage in dealing with business partners who are international, or in working with suppliers or outsourcers in a global marketplace.

The acceptance of these many differences in a spirit of respect for all, sets an example of tolerance even for those newcomers to our country and our organizations who may be experiencing conflict in their homelands with the ethnic or religious group to which other co-workers may belong. There is an example of an Ethiopian restaurant owner and an Eritrean bar and grill competitor who put differences aside to work for a clean-up and renewal of a neighborhood business corridor here in a U.S. city. Seeing such cooperation, and knowing of the differing political positions and beliefs those two held, other ethnic business owners interested in improving the business corridor as well for their own business interests soon joined in the community betterment project. Recently a suburban Indian restaurant opened a second restaurant in the same block, and a Vietnamese restaurant expanded its operation.

Similarly, the story of a the rabbi of a new seminary in New York City that trains people to be interfaith ministers not by making them give up their own faith and traditions but by helping them learn about other faiths is an example of this new model of understanding our differences.

As new employees are added to a company the caste and race conflicts, religious conflicts, conflicts hanging over from colonization years ago all have the potential to disturb the daily business atmosphere. However, so does the hiring of new generations of Americans necessitate changes in the traditional organizational culture of most companies. Management policies must set the stage for peaceful coexistence by developing a work culture demonstrating a friendly environment that cuts through status differences and preconceptions. A culture that recognizes and respects the equality of each employee as a person enables a work environment of trust rather than one merely of tolerance of differences. Employees today value good two-way communication with management, and expect validation for who they are, and what they contribute to the corporation.

Changing demographics indicate that diversity varies in areas of the United States. As noted by the Feagins (2008, 374), today about half of the white population lives in the Northeast or Midwest, but a much smaller proportion of all Americans of color live in those same areas. Americans of color are already a majority of the populations in California, New Mexico, Hawaii, and Texas. The populations of eight additional states, including New York, New Jersey and Florida are projected to be more than 40% Americans of color by the 2020's. They argue that much more thought needs to be given by all Americans to the likely effects of these changes and to ways to create a truly democratic multiracial country.

Some have written that the unstable economy at present may be an important factor for the future of diversity. Jino Ahn, President of Asian Diversity, Inc. says "the economic downturn is

## Living and Working in an Increasingly Complex Society

polarizing the diversity movement by separating the corporations that really believe in it, and see it as a profit center, from the ones that just pay lip service to it, and see it only as an expense.“ Ahn continues, “Many companies jumped on the diversity wagon because everyone else was doing it without really understanding the potential of diversity, and the very real long-term benefits. This is a good time to shed light on the true believers.” (Forsythe, 43, 2009)

Doug Freeman, CEO of Virtcom Consulting notes that the smart strategic companies don't just believe that diversity offers competitive advantages; they know exactly how it does it. It improves the performance in the workplace, drives efficiencies, and production...leveraging diversity brings competitive advantage in good times and bad. (Forsythe, 43, 2009)

Others have written that in today's global economy it is more important than ever for people to be open to others in order to work together effectively, and that many businesses place high value in recruiting a diverse staff, as mixed backgrounds can foster more creativity and higher productivity. They continue, people who have cultural knowledge and understand how to navigate through and prosper in a diverse setting will be in the best most competitive position for future employment. (Philadelphia Inquirer, 2010)

What is important is to realize that the inclusion of individuals or groups different than ourselves is a way to learn of the commonalities and likenesses we have with the different individuals, and how much we miss by separating ourselves from such people when we have an opportunity to reach new understandings that may enhance our lives and, in the business realm, improve our workforce and bottom line. Many bring skills from a unique culture yet excel in their tasks in our dominant culture. Their beliefs in the values of the U.S. are often testified to by their patriotism and the moist eyes when they speak of their new opportunities. The excitement of immigrants when becoming citizens is a testimony of their patriotism. Their comments can reenergize our own beliefs in all people in our global society.

However, Andres Tapia, Diversity Officer with Hewitt Associates states that in order to have true inclusion, we need to “constructively call our differences – as opposed to spending time and energy trying to find commonalities. The melting pot ideal – the strategy to minimize differences – ignores the legitimate and very deep seated motivations and preferences naturally embedded in different cultures and lifestyles. (Forsythe, 46, 2009)

“...as Latino scholar Ilan Stavans (1995, 167) has noted, this celebrated image (about liberty, freedom, and democracy of Thomas Jefferson and others) is not the reality of the past four centuries. Instead North America has always been ‘the crossroads of hope and violence, democracy and intolerance. America the beautiful and America the ugly’”

Chris Satullo (2006) in speaking of citizenship states that the political center should stress the shared identity that unites all Americans, that of citizen, over partisan, cultural, and ethnic identities that divide them.

Nationalism is good but needs to be kept in perspective at work. The old ‘love thy neighbor’ makes more sense than expecting newcomers to live up to my culture as soon as they arrive. What happens at work can be carried over at home. To insist my neighbor fly my flag on his or her national holiday is a simplistic view of patriotism in our integrated neighborhood. Neighborhoods are seeing more interracial couples of varying nationalities and cultures and such harmony that the mixed couples display can be a model of the harmony expected in the workplace among our employees as a group.

While my wife was brought up in a family that did not speak English primarily, she lived by the dictum of speak in the language you are spoken to. Yet if two people are speaking a language unknown to me, I don't worry that they are speaking anything nasty about me. For all I know they could be saying something complimentary about me. If we always show respect to the other, most likely they are saying something nice about us. While we may have learned that it is discourteous to

## Living and Working in an Increasingly Complex Society

speak a language in front of others who do not understand us, it is healthier for us and for our business to assume that those speaking a different language need to use their own language to understand a point more clearly. Such occasions will arise the more our organizations grow around the world, or more of the world comes to us.

For fifty years my work has put me in situations where I may be the minority member at a table full of people of color from different continents. Such experience has been enriching to the point that at times I can be uncomfortable in homogeneous settings that include no one of color or of a faith different than mine. I wonder why some seem excluded. Fortunately, being given an occasional leadership role has enabled me to develop programs to integrate organizations by forming and holding accountable committees with that responsibility or by hiring competent minority members to give departments an international or integrated work staff. I once looked to work in South America, but was told to return to the United States to work to eliminate the racism here.

As an academician I started a university's Black Student Union and its Association of Latino American Students. At the university level the diversity in and out of the classroom prepares students to be better prepared to work with different ethnic groups domestically and internationally. On a campus 40% Hindu, Muslim, or Asian, predominantly from the Middle East, Pakistan and India, or Vietnam, Korea or Taiwan and China, one learns to live with and embrace diversity.

Having a mother who was a Lenni Lenape American Indian, and whose father came from a Welsh Baptist tradition while her husband and her German and Irish in-laws were Roman Catholic, prepared me to understand bias and to appreciate cultural differences. It also helped me to accept or to willingly choose marginal positions in which to be a change agent. To me inclusiveness means everyone is welcome at the table at work. In any organization, churches included, it means men and women, straight or gay, married, partnered or single have the right to lead the organization. Perhaps my daughter once put things in perspective when asked her ethnicity. She said, "I'm half Italian, and half ordinary." Hopefully one day, diversity will be ordinary.

## References

- Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) (2008) *Dignitas Personae*, December 12, Part I, Paragraph 15.
- Feagin, Joe R., and Clairece Booher Feagin, (2008) Racial and Ethnic Relations, Pearson, Prentice Hall.
- Forsythe, Jason, (2009) "Leadership in Diversity and Inclusion," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 November.
- Morrison, Toni (1998) comment on NBC *Dateline*, August 9.
- PBS, Journey of Man, (2001) Jeremy Bradshaw/Tigress Productions, Justine Kershaw, Producer.
- Philadelphia Inquirer*, (2010) "Focus on: Diversity in the Workplace," February 21.
- Satullo, Chris,(2006) "Center Square" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 12, in the Currents section.
- Stavans, Ilan, (1995) The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America, Harper Collins, New York, in Racial and Ethnic Relations, Joe R. Feagin and Clairece Booher Feagin, Pearson, Prentice Hall, 2008, 363.
- Tapia, Andres T.,(2009) The Inclusion Paradox: The Obama Era and the Transformation of Global Diversity, Hewitt Associates, 2009
- Zimmerman, Jonathan (2008) "Commentary" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 7.