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VOICES

By Mafalda Arias | December 15, 2016



The use of human resource data for making business decisions related to employee benefits, salaries and promotions is a regular practice in many organizations; these numbers have an impact and tell stories about managing an organization's personnel. But this kind of data has even more potential. Human resource information can be harnessed to develop strategies to improve diversity and inclusion (D&I) within a company's workforce.

Unless it is a large company in Canada, it is likely that an organization does not know specific demographic statistics about its employees, such as how many indigenous people, minorities and immigrants work there. Thus, the human resource data collected from employees cannot be used for D&I initiatives or hiring targets. An exception to this would be an Impact and Benefit Agreement or similar type of agreement with an indigenous group that requires a company to track and report its indigenous hiring targets.

What precludes the private sector in Canada from doing this is the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA), which governs how this sector collects, uses and discloses personal information in the course of its business, consequently limiting the information and knowledge an organization has about its employees. A Crown corporation or a federally regulated organization, like a bank, is responsible for reporting on employment equity data, so they have access to this valuable information and can use it to report on their D&I progress. In contrast, private organizations just check a protected group box. If a private organization does collect D&I information, it is pulled individually (with no larger system tracking the numbers companywide), voluntarily disclosed, and it requires the permission of the employee to obtain and keep specific information. But because it is not necessary information to run a business, most private organizations do not collect and record this information. In the United States, The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act requires institutions, including publicly traded companies and their vendors, to diversify their workforces and include women and minorities to the maximum extent possible.

Most organizations start such initiatives with a committee formed by D&I champions in the office who set goals and start various activities to understand the diversity range in their organization, locate the sources of misunderstandings, build multicultural work teams and integrate D&I into the DNA of the organization. Considering that current regulations in Canada do not make it easy for private organizations to track D&I information and its progress, if a more diverse, inclusive workplace is something company leaders believe in and support, perhaps it is time to think differently about human resource data and consider what information is needed for a D&I baseline and how to collect it. This is valuable historical information about the human fabric of an organization because what gets measured gets done.

There are several strategies a company can use to move toward being a diverse and inclusive work place. The first is to take the time to understand the problem. Make leaders aware of the underlying consequences PIPEDA poses for obtaining demographic information and its impact on accountability, leadership pathways, and planning for workforce shortages.

A D&I champion can also suggest a census or inventory of the organization, like a self-reporting initiative. This will require internal stakeholder engagement and communication strategies to inform and engage everybody.

It is equally important to know the numbers. Baseline data plus a subsequent voluntary census will inform the leader of the organization of what percentage of employees are female, how many are in executive roles, the portion of existing employees who are indigenous or the progress toward D&I goals.

Another strategy is to advocate for the creation of the special interest groups that the census has identified, and promote what I like to call “developmental meetings” that offer guided activities, lectures and visits for everybody to participate in. This will help your personnel become aware, inform, and get to know people from different backgrounds, and create an inclusive work environment in the organization.

An inclusive workplace provides a competitive business advantage. Harness that potential by examining HR data with different eyes.

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