

harmony

in the workplace

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Fact Sheet 3: What is Diversity in the Workplace?

Diversity is relevant to everyone, as each person is shaped by experiences and practices related to their cultural identity. So, talking about diversity is not something that concerns some and not others – it's everyone's business and impacts us all.

This factsheet discusses what diversity is and how it's relevant to your organisation and its employees.

What does cultural diversity mean for your organisation? How do you identify it?

Recognising cultural diversity in your workforce is the first step in creating a positive workplace culture that's inclusive and responsive to all employees' needs. Ignoring cultural diversity can lead to an exclusionary environment where employees feel unable or unwilling to talk freely about their views and opinions. This will affect your ability to encourage creativity and innovation.



Organisations need to recognise and accommodate the wide array of cultural factors that shape their workforce.

A successful organisation seeks to understand and build on cultural diversity for its own good and that of its employees.

To develop a positive workplace atmosphere that embraces cultural diversity you could collect information about your workforce to learn what your organisation's cultural diversity actually looks like. This can be done formally, via surveys, or informally through regular conversations and discussions to determine the following:

- Self-described ethnic or linguistic identity
- Age

- Gender
- Country of birth and length of time in Australia
- Training opportunities received or sought
- Employees' desire to learn about cultural groups and your organisation's diversity
- Experiences and types of discrimination and exclusion
- Job satisfaction – most and least favourite aspects of your organisation, their role, etc.
- Satisfaction with career progression and professional development opportunities
- Opinions on the inclusiveness of your workplace culture and whether they feel comfortable with cultural diversity and how it's reflected in the organisation.

By collecting this information you can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural diversity in your workplace and how to make best use of it. Your employees can also have the opportunity to share their culture with others in an inclusive working environment.

Be mindful of privacy...

It's not against Australian privacy laws to collect information about your employees' cultural and linguistic background, as long as they know why it's being collected and how it's going to be used and stored. You will risk violating privacy laws if you collect information without your employees' consent or if you use it in an unauthorized or inappropriate manner.

For more information about Australian privacy laws, please visit www.privacy.gov.au/law.

Recognising cultural diversity in the workplace

Some workers may have specific cultural needs or requirements that should be acknowledged so they feel comfortable, well supported and respected in their working environment. This will help to raise their productivity and motivation to fully engage with, and contribute to, your organisation. You can acknowledge the cultural diversity of your workforce in the following areas:

- **Clothing and dress** – some cultures wear specific items of clothing at all times, such as headscarves or turbans. Employees are entitled to wear religious dress at work unless it creates a safety hazard. If items of clothing cover the face, you can ask an employee to show their face for reasonable identification purposes.
- **Religious practices** – some religions require time during the workday for prayer or time off to observe religious events.
- **Social values** – perspectives on issues in society such as politics, sexual behaviour and orientation, work ethics, wealth and career ambitions vary between cultures.
- **Customs** – some cultures can or can't have specific foods and drinks or may have rules about how food is prepared.
- **Family obligations** – some cultures prioritise family commitments that may, at times, conflict with work commitments.
- **Non-verbal behaviour** – use of eye contact, facial expressions, hand gestures and how people interpret them vary between cultures.

Acknowledging how these factors shape the nature of your workforce is vital in building an inclusive work environment.

Blending cultural diversity within your activities

Successfully managing a culturally diverse workforce requires ongoing commitment. This shouldn't be limited to cultural competency training. A more comprehensive strategy should be developed to

encourage a culture of diversity across all areas and functions of your organisation. This could include:

- Internal policies, programs and systems that acknowledge and refer to cultural diversity
- Policies and structures dealing with workplace discrimination and racism
- Staff training, including cultural competency training
- Communications, such as newsletters and staff updates, reporting on cultural diversity in your organisation
- Events, celebrations, activities, staff development exercises and initiatives that acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity.

A diversity strategy based on the above areas will help you to effectively manage a culturally diverse workforce.

A word of caution...

It's very important that information collected on cultural diversity in your organisation isn't used to stereotype staff. This may otherwise result in:

- Staff not wanting their ethnicity or cultural background to be highlighted and becoming unwilling to engage in discussion or activities around cultural diversity in your workplace
- Creating misleading assumptions about beliefs, customs and behaviours that are difficult to remove.

Most importantly, remember that gathering cultural knowledge is a good way to positively engage your employees and not a means to gauge or predict people's behaviour in your workplace.



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