

Recruiting Diverse Talent

When the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) was founded in 1993, it had a staff of two and a mission to foster access and success in post-secondary education. A little over 10 years later, the team numbered more than 20, with 50 percent of the staff and 60 percent of the senior management group made up of people of color. President Jamie Merisotis noted, “We have explicitly taken the opportunity to build a diverse team. We see our diversity as integral to who we are as an organization and what it takes to achieve our mission.” He added, “Our country is becoming more diverse by the day, and it is important that organizations like ours who serve a public purpose both reflect and respect that diversity.”

Merisotis’ story is illustrative of the growing importance of diversity in organizations, for-profit and nonprofit alike. By 2016, more than 43 percent of new entrants to the labor force will be people of color and nearly 50 percent of new entrants will be women, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report “Employment Outlook 2006-2016.” Recruiting, retaining, and managing a diverse workforce at all levels of an organization is a significant priority for nonprofit leaders. Though most organizations specifically target recruiting and retention of racial and ethnic minorities when they talk about diversity, the definition of diversity can encompass much more—for example, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion.

Few nonprofit leaders doubt that diversity is important. Kathleen Yazbak, Bridgestar’s managing director, national relationships, emphasized, “The vast majority of clients that come to Bridgestar are explicitly concerned about developing a broad and diverse talent pool.” And while some, like IHEP, have successfully addressed the challenge, others struggle greatly to achieve the level of diversity they desire at various levels of the organization.

Why the struggle? “The biggest challenge to developing a diverse leadership team is moving from awareness of the issue to real action and accountability,” asserted Joe Watson, founder and chief executive officer of StrategicHire, an executive search and strategic management consulting practice based in Virginia. “Though most organizations—for-profit and nonprofit—will talk about developing a diverse team, the majority don’t bring the needed level of energy and resources to make it happen.”

Beth Babcock, president of HEARTH (Helping Elders At Risk Through Homes), agreed. “Building a diverse team takes commitment and effort. It’s not just about recruiting diverse staff, but about becoming an organization that truly values diversity and multi-culturalism. You need to invest in diversity throughout the organization. You need to recruit aggressively, make an effort to develop and promote managers from

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within the organization, and create an overall environment that values and supports diversity.”

However, even organizations that truly value and embrace diversity can have difficulty filling specific positions. “Recruiting for diversity is harder on a tactical level for a couple of reasons,” noted David Brown, managing partner of Bridge Partners LLC*, an executive search firm based in NJ. “First, you have to work harder to break out of the usual networks, the usual sources, the usual databases. On top of that, the numbers are simply fewer, so you have to dig harder and make a much more concerted effort.”

“It’s challenging, but it’s doable,” asserted Watson. “If nonprofit organizations can set out to conquer challenges like fighting AIDS, or dramatically reducing teen pregnancy, or responding to tragedies like Hurricane Katrina, then they should be up to the challenge of recruiting a woman of color to the leadership team, for example.”

The good news is that for organizations committed to building diverse teams, there are some tactical steps that experts agree will help you conduct a successful search:

- Ensure that the way you communicate about a position—both internally and externally—emphasizes your commitment to diversity. Begin internally: let those working on the search know that diversity is critical, not a “nice to have.” Externally, recognize that what seem to be subtle things can make a big statement. For example, when looking for bilingual staff, an organization should make key languages a requirement of the job, as opposed to inserting “Spanish speaker preferred” at the tail end of a job description. Other actions signal commitment to diversity as well. For example, the Lynn (MA) Community Health Center made bilingual capability something that—like years of work experience—influences the level on the salary scale at which an employee will be placed, which helped the center attract and hire the diverse new staff it sought.
- Make your candidate pool as broad as possible from the beginning, by doing sufficient research to break into new target networks. The experts agreed that one of the biggest mistakes organizations make is moving to the interview stage before getting a significant level of diversity in the initial pool. Organizations that are serious about this will reject a slate of candidates that doesn’t include enough diversity, and won’t move forward in the process until it does.
- Invest time and resources in getting outside of your usual networks. “People tend to associate with—and hire—others who resemble them. It’s just natural instinct. But it is not going to get you a diverse set of employees,” said Heidi Brooks, associate director of strategic alliances at

Bridgestar. In a search, moving beyond the typical networks means, among other things, not relying on monster.com or other generic job sites and databases, but rather finding channels into target communities, like local newspapers that circulate in specific neighborhoods, or associations like The League (of Black Ivy Alumni), or the National Society of Hispanic MBAs, or conferences focused on a specific group or specific issue common to minority employees.

But it's more than just finding the right channels. Watson noted, "There is a certain nervousness that many people have in explicitly referring to race or ethnicity when trying to explore new networks. I tell my clients 'you just have to get over it,' but it's a stumbling block that affects many people."

Organizations often turn to executive search firms for help in this arena, for they have the ability to develop both wider and deeper networks over time, building them with every search they complete. If you do go this route, remember that for organizations (as for individuals) it takes significant time and experience to develop the deep networks and high-quality relationships that will make diversity-oriented searches successful, and choose your search firm with that in mind.

For many organizations, it is a little bit of a chicken and egg problem, in that until you reach a certain point where the culture of the organization both embraces diversity and is in fact truly diverse, you will have a greater challenge attracting and retaining diverse candidates. And yet, as Babcock pointed out, the good news is that "Once you get there, your staff does the recruiting for you. You don't have to work nearly as hard at tapping into 'different' networks because your employees' networks are now the ones you had been trying so hard to tap into in the past."

At the end of the day, organizations need to make a commitment to what Watson called "diversity without excuses," meaning that organizations truly committed to diversity redouble their effort when faced with obstacles, rather than making excuses for not overcoming them. Babcock added, "We can't afford not to do this. Especially in health and human services, how can we create a welcoming and supportive environment for our diverse constituents if we aren't able to develop and retain a well-functioning, diverse team?"

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