



Deep Diversity

Cultural Competence



It is important that you prioritize diversity on your team. Aside from the fact that it is morally and socially the right thing to do, studies show that diverse teams outperform non-diverse ones. Or, as [Maya Angelou](#) more eloquently put it, “in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”

You probably agree with that. But have you considered the *kind* of diversity you need? In addition to ethnic, racial, and gender, other aspects including cognition and personality may be important.

Racial, ethnic, and gender diversity

A 2015 international McKinsey study found that companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 35 percent more likely to have above-average financial returns, while those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15 percent more likely to financially outperform. Among US companies, there was a linear relationship between racial and ethnic diversity and financial performance. For every 10 percent increase in the racial and ethnic diversity of the senior executive team, companies experienced an increase of 0.8 percent in earnings before interest and taxes.

Conversely, those in the bottom quartile for ethnic and gender diversity were less likely to achieve above-average returns.

Cognitive diversity

A recent study found that [high levels of cognitive diversity](#) enhances group learning and performance when confronting new, uncertain, and complex problems.

While cognitive diversity may be important, seeking it out can be challenging because it is less visible than other traits. That, in turn, may accentuate our tendency to hire those who resemble us. As the study authors note, “colleagues gravitate toward the people who think and express themselves in a similar way.”

One way to try to overcome this is to intentionally list cognitive thinking as a trait to recruit against. You will want to include both “left brain” (logical, analytical, and objective) and “right brain” (creative, inventive, and empathetic) thinkers on your team.

Companies have begun to appreciate the benefits of broad cognitive diversity, with some specifically seeking out autistic talent for that reason. As Padmini Ranganathan, vice president of products and innovation at SAP Ariba, notes, [“people on the autism spectrum bring with them an unfiltered perspective that promotes innovation and inspires team culture.”](#)

Personality diversity

Recent research suggests that one important characteristic of high-performing teams is that [members play different psychological roles](#). Indeed, in this respect, personality can be as important to team performance as functional skills.

To boost team performance, make sure that in addition to relevant skills, you are actively considering personality traits, including the roles that people will likely play on the team as well as how they will interact with others.

Where to go from here?

One conclusion that can be drawn from all of this is that you need to focus on having deep diversity if you want to boost team performance. The deeper the diversity of a team, the more likely people on it are to think and act differently. As [Regina Dugan of Facebook](#) puts it, “The ultimate goal is cognitive diversity, and cognitive diversity is correlated with identity diversity.”

Therefore, make sure that you’re adding in a broad range of considerations to your diversity mix. Racial, ethnic, and gender traits are critical, but don’t forget to include cognition and personality diversity as well as disability, age, life experience, and other factors.

Of course, creating a successfully diverse team is about more than scientifically arriving at an optimum mix to boost team performance. At its heart, success through diversity comes from creating a culture that is accepting and safe — one that is open to both new ideas and different ways of thinking so that everyone feels welcome to contribute.

Achieving *that* kind of legal team should be the ultimate goal of high-performing counsel everywhere.

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