

Multiculturalism in Organizations: Benefits and Drawbacks

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received: 17/09/2023

Accepted: 29/12/2023

Published: 31/12/2023

Abstract:

The global economy is becoming increasingly interconnected. As economic activities become more intertwined there is often an exchange of cultures between different countries and nationalities resulting in multiculturalism in organizations which has become a recurring issue in debates in business and organizational management circles. As organizations expand their reach across borders, the workforce becomes more diverse, comprising individuals from different cultural backgrounds, races, religions, and ethnicities. Embracing and effectively managing this multicultural workforce can bring numerous benefits to organizations. However, along with these benefits also come certain challenges. This article explores the concept of multiculturalism in organizations, it highlights the benefits it brings, as well as the challenges and drawbacks it may entail. It also discusses the necessary strategies to overcome these challenges and create an inclusive work environment.

Keywords:

Multiculturalism; Diversity; Organizations; Benefits; Drawbacks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and cross-border exchanges have resulted in a worldwide immigration flow causing a mobilization of human resources. Thus, organizations have acquired greater cultural diversity among the employees, and workplaces have become a meeting point between individuals of different backgrounds resulting in multiculturalism in organizations as a holistic phenomenon. Therefore a new challenge seems to be imposed to international managers and to international human resource managers, how to benefit from multiculturalism and create cooperation between employees representing different cultural backgrounds, and how to create inclusive environments in multicultural organizations, because multiculturalism has the potential of yielding greater productivity and competitive advantages, if handled properly, but when ignored or mismanaged, it brings challenges and obstacles that can hinder the organization's ability to succeed. Hence, it is important to highlight the various advantages of multiculturalism and the potential challenges it poses in the workplace.

In order to understand multiculturalism in organizations, and the advantages and disadvantages that result from it in the workplace, the following question is asked:

What are the benefits and drawbacks of multiculturalism in organizations?

This question implies the following sub-questions:

- What is multiculturalism in the workplace?
- What are the reasons of its emergence?
- How to manage multiculturalism in organizations and why managing it is so important?

Objective of the study:

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Providing a theoretical analysis of multiculturalism by concentrating on definitions of diversity as a general and cultural diversity within organizations.
- Identifying the positive and negative aspects of multiculturalism in organizations.
- Demonstrating how to manage multiculturalism effectively.

Importance of the study: The importance of this study lies in the fact that it addresses multiculturalism in the workplace, which is a topic of utmost importance in today's globalized and diverse business environment. With advances in technology and increased migration, organizations are becoming increasingly multicultural, making it imperative to understand multiculturalism, and its pros and cons. Thus, the

present study addresses several aspects related to managing multiculturalism in organizations and the challenges that facing managers.

Methodology: To achieve the purpose of this study, we will rely on the descriptive analytical method as the most appropriate method for analyzing the phenomenon intended in this study. We start by looking at the concept of multiculturalism and the reasons of its emergence. Then we look at the positive and negative aspects of multiculturalism in the workplace. Additionally, we discuss the possible measures and strategies for managing multiculturalism in the workplace.

2. Definition of Multiculturalism in the Workplace and Reasons for its Emergence

The concept of multiculturalism or cultural diversity in organizations continues to draw management and public attentions due to the constantly changing global business atmosphere especially for multinational corporations (MNCs). Multiculturalism is most times interwoven and used interchangeably with the term of diversity thus, making it difficult to differentiate between the two terms.¹

Therefore, before embarking to recognize the concept of multiculturalism, it is important to provide a definition of diversity.

2.1 The Concept of Diversity:

The term diversity has not been wildly used until the 1980s, and through a review of the literature, the attention to the term diversity has begun in the year 1987 and it reached its peak at the beginning of the nineties.²

There have been numerous attempts at setting the definition of diversity mainly due to its subjective nature. When the word diversity first became common in the mid-eighties, it described changes in demographic characteristics of the labor force and work organization, particularly race, ethnicity and sex.³

Later, in the nineties, Loden, (1996), in his dimensions of diversity model, defined and distinguished individuals from each other both in terms of primary dimensions such as age, race, gender (core characteristics that do not change) and in terms of secondary characteristics such as education, religion and communication style that can change.⁴

Amaliyah (2015) states that workplace diversity (WPD):” is a concept that denotes the differences between people working in or for an organization. This can also mean the multiplicity of differences amongst individuals and their beliefs about they identify themselves as well as how others distinguish them in that organization. The concept describes the physical, sociological or psychological attributes that define an individual or group “.⁵

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Workplace diversity can be defined as: “the physical characteristics, family status, cultural differences, disabilities and a variation of the academic abilities possessed by different individuals who work together “.⁶

In view of the foregoing, diversity includes all those visible and non-visible factors that cause differences among workers in an organization, e.g. gender, religion, physical disability, family status, age, race, hierarchical status, language, education. The features of workforce diversity are as follows:

- Multidimensional: diversity is multidimensional, as it includes both visible and invisible dimensions of human being.
- Inclusion: diversity not only includes differences but also similarities among people.
- Pros and Cons: Diversity if handled properly can prove to be a competitive advantage for an organization and if mismanaged, then it may result in the destruction of the organization as well. ⁷

2.2 The Concept of Multiculturalism

To adequately understand the concept of multiculturalism, it is important to explore the various definitions currently propounded in literature. The views of different authors on multiculturalism are as follows:

DeLancey (2013) states that: “multiculturalism is the interaction of employees from different countries, regions, and cultures, it is a reflection of the various cultures that exist in our world. “.⁸

Martin (2014) describes multiculturalism as:” the workforce representation of variations in race, ethnicity, language, nationality, religion”.⁹

According to Kokemuller (2019): “A multicultural workforce is a workforce in which a wide variety of cultural variations exist among the employees within the organization. Nonetheless, multiculturalism is an idea that grants equal opportunities to different cultural or racial groups in an organization, thus creating a situation whereby no member is marginalized or regarded as unimportant “.¹⁰

Amakiri Don-Solomon and Perewari Fakidouma in their part state that: “Workplace cultural diversity is a blend of labor force from dissimilar socio-cultural experiences working in an organization”. Multiculturalism in the organizational setting according them is: “all about the distinct cultural features that brandish organizational changes or similarity to one another; the blend of employees from several races, backgrounds, religious beliefs and so on “.¹¹

Hence, it can be summed up that, multiculturalism refers to the presence and coexistence of diverse cultures within an organization. It emphasizes the recognition

and celebration of different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives. In a multicultural workplace, employees from various ethnicities, religions, and nationalities come together, contributing to a rich and vibrant environment.

In general, an organization which is organized by a diverse workforce is known as a multicultural organization. The multicultural organization is the set of different cultural people. Workers from different cultures, religions, ethnicity, languages, races are handed equal opportunities in the multi-cultural organization without any discrimination to work and achieve the organization's goal. The essential factors to work in a multicultural organization are skills, natural abilities and talents, best performance and so on. In global and multinational companies, every fundamental and internal interaction and operations are related to several cultures.¹²

Today's work markets are increasingly shaped by the multicultural reality. Many analyses thus project the future workplaces will be comprised of diverse groups of people drawn from various parts of the world. According to the Pew Research Centre, the existence of a single racial or ethnic majority in the United States of America (USA) will cease to exist by 2055. Other studies estimate that over 20 million people currently actively employed in the USA were born abroad. As a result, it is estimated that the USA and many nations worldwide will become pluralistic shortly. This paradigm shift in the global demographic mix will simultaneously present challenges and prospects in the near future.¹³

In this context, it should be noted that there is no one definition of culture that is universally accepted as culture varies from one country, region within a country, or geographic region in the world to the other. Generally, it means specific characteristics of customs, social patterns, beliefs, and values of people in a particular country or region, or in a particular racial or religious group. Geert Hofstede studied employees working in a multi-national corporation. He described four ways that can help in analyzing and understanding other cultures as follows:

- **Individualism vs. Collectivism:** In some cultures, the individual is emphasized while in others the group is emphasized.
- **Power distance:** The culture that believes that organizational power should be distributed unequally.
- **Uncertainty avoidance:** Hofstede found that some cultures tend to accept change as a challenge while others don't.
- **Masculinity vs. Femininity:** Hofstede himself tends to reject the terms "masculine" and "feminine". These two terms should be overlooked in order to value other issues which are more important to the organization such as achievement and assertiveness.¹⁴

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In the light of the foregoing, although multiculturalism and diversity are used interchangeably in the workplace, owing to their combined role in addressing employee-related issues, it seems clear that the two concepts are different. Unlike other forms of diversity such as gender or age diversity which focus on specific characteristics or attributes of individuals within a workforce, multiculturalism emphasizes multiple dimensions including race, ethnicity, culture, language etc. Thus, multiculturalism goes deeper than diversity by focusing on acceptance and promotion of multiple cultural traditions in an organization. In diversity people are not aware of differential power but in multiculturalism individuals have the knowledge about the differential power among different people and gatherings. Multiculturalism focuses more on inclusiveness, understanding, and respect, with attention on equal power in the society more than diversity.¹⁵

2.3 Reasons for the Emergence of Multiculturalism in Organizations

The emergence of multiculturalism in the modern workplace can be attributed to several reasons:

- Globalization: Due to globalization many companies are now operating in more than one country. This crossing of geographical boundaries by the companies gives the birth of multicultural organization where employees from more than one country are working together.¹⁶ If globalization is an inevitable process, then cross culturalization will also be inevitable. On the one hand, the world is becoming more homogeneous, and distinctions between national markets are fading and, for some products, disappearing altogether.¹⁷
- Demographics changes: the increasing cultural diversity in organizations is a result of changes in population demographics and the economic need for businesses to have a diverse workforce that reflects the diverse marketplace.
- International migration: the rise in international migration to industrialized countries has led to a larger presence of ethnic minorities in these countries. This recent trend of increasing ethnic diversity and the high number of ethnic minorities is also reflected in companies and the amount of multicultural employment is increasingly leading to a culturally diverse workforce.
- Social responsibility: The tolerance for diversity and positive attitudes towards it are growing, and this is putting pressure on organizations from both their members and customers. These stakeholders expect organizations to act responsibly and promote diversity. While some organizations may resist these pressures, it seems that increasing workforce diversity is ultimately unavoidable due to demographic, economic, legislative, and social changes.

- Market considerations: The need for organizations to attract a viable workforce to remain competitive in the trend towards globalization.
- Technology advancements: the technological advancements have made the world seem smaller and increased the interaction between people from different cultures.¹⁸

3. Positive Aspects of Multiculturalism in Organizations:

The impact of multiculturalism at the workplace can be both favorable and unfavorable. Positive effects can have a profound impact on the overall success and productivity of an organization, it can include the following elements:

a- Employee growth and development: The exposure of employees to diverse cultures can stimulate personal growth and skills development. Also, the existence of people of various backgrounds in organizations improves the ability of its employees to acclimatize to different circumstances¹⁹. Moreover, spending more time with colleagues from different cultures helps to gradually dismantle unconscious prejudices and biases, ultimately leading to workers becoming more knowledgeable and open-minded members of society.

b-Promoting corporate attractiveness: Multiculturalism can increase the attractiveness of organizations to potential business partners, collaborators, and the society at large. Over the years, diversity studies in the workplace have shown that companies that hire and retain employees of diverse backgrounds received positive attention from the media, society and governments worldwide. According to Robinson and Dechant, companies that promote workplace diversity and corporate inclusion can bolster their attractiveness to future employees and clients.²⁰

c- Encouraging wider range of skills and experience: One major advantage of working within a cross-cultural environment is the ability to capitalize on the array of experiences of different employees. Each employee brings unique strengths and weaknesses influenced by their cultural background. By employing effective managerial strategies and providing cross-cultural training, strengths can be exploited and weaknesses minimized. Companies that possess a diverse range of skills and knowledge are capable of providing a broader array of products and services to their customers. This is due to the fact that having a variety of cultures within the company brings forth a wider range of expertise, resulting in a greater diversity of products and services.²¹

d-Effective Communication with customers: In a multicultural environment, there can be communication barriers between co-workers which can reduce the rate of productivity via misinterpretation of data and information. However, on a long-term basis through continued collaboration and proper cross-cultural training, this is greatly

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minimized.²² Thus, multiculturalism can immensely strengthen a company's relationship with some specific group of customers by making communication more effective. This is particularly important in customer service, where pairing representatives with customers from the same area or location can make them feel more comfortable and connected to the company. For instance, some companies in the southwestern United States may hire customer service personnel who are bilingual in Spanish to better serve customers who speak their native language. Multicultural organization is better suited to serve a diverse external clientele in a more increasingly global market. Such organizations have a better understanding of the requirements of the legal, political, social, economic and cultural environments of foreign nations.²³

e-Positive reflects on reputation: Multiculturalism in the workplace has a positive impact on organization's reputation. When organizations hire and support individuals from diverse backgrounds, they are viewed as good employers. This reputation attracts potential clients who feel valued and are more likely to do business with these organizations. Furthermore, a diverse workforce brings a range of skills and experiences, allowing companies to better understand and relate to their clients, resulting in excellent global service.²⁴

f-Increasing Productivity: Organizations use various strategies to enhance productivity, one of those strategies is promoting multiculturalism and effectively managing it. By prioritizing the well-being of employees through fair compensation, healthcare benefits, and performance evaluations, management fosters a sense of belonging regardless of their cultural background. This leads to increased loyalty and hard work among workers, ultimately boosting the company's productivity and profitability.

g-Increasing the number of job opportunities for minority workers: Multiculturalism in the workplace helps to create more job opportunities for minority workers by considering all population demographics when hiring. This means employers have the chance to find the best person for a job without being limited to a specific group. As a result, more minority groups are more likely to be hired. This applies to all levels of employment, from the local small business to multinational firms.²⁵

4. Negative Aspects of Multiculturalism in Organizations

Some researches signal that while multiculturalism in the workplace has its benefits, it also has some drawbacks, and many organizations that emerged as a positive example of multiculturalism have faced issues in relation to facilitating

people from different groups to work cohesively. The following are the most significant multiculturalism workplace drawbacks and issues:

a-High cost of multiculturalism management: To increase job satisfaction, multiculturalism management could sometimes be very costly, when an organization strives to effectively manage the diverse workforce, it undergoes a mandatory diversity training during which supervisors, employees, and managers receive training on the best way to promote diversity in the company, and how to embrace the ideas and thoughts of other cultures and also how to treat conflicts and prejudice in an appropriate way.²⁶

b-Discrimination: One significant disadvantage of working with a multicultural workforce is discrimination in the part of both managers and employees. Ethnic superiority can exist but hidden aspect of a poorly managed workplace. When a worker is being discriminated, it affects his ability to perform well and it also affect the perception of equity and raises issues of litigation.

c-Conflicts: Greater differences in a workplace produces more potential for conflict among employees. People that come from different cultural backgrounds have different perspectives on how to handle issues or concerns that arise. Thus, when culturally diverse workers are placed in a group to achieve a goal with mutual effort and collaboration, these differences of opinions and other variables can hinder the development of unity. Harrison, Price, and Bell (1998) assert that the effect of deep-level similarity on group cohesion is positive, while that of deep-level dissimilarity on group cohesion is negative. Workers may have reasons to indulge in conflict with one another that may or may not be related to work at all. For example, a South African and an Indian employee might argue with each other over a cricket match lost by India to South Africa. Likewise, workers may have historical and regional reasons to conflict with each other. For example, a Japanese employee and an American employee might disagree over the Battle of Pearl Harbor. Reasons can vary from very serious to trivial. Whatever the cause, the interpersonal conflict results in lost productivity and development of negative emotions among employees, which can be detrimental to the organization.²⁷

d-Communication issues: Multiculturalism can hinder communication within a company, leading to decreased productivity and weaker relationships among employees. While spending time with colleagues can help overcome these barriers in the long run, initial communication challenges caused by cultural differences can be hard to manage.

e-Potential Turnover: Poorly managed diversity can lead to high turnover rates in businesses. If the workplace fails to provide a safe and inclusive culture that treats employees from diverse backgrounds fairly, the company may also risk losing talented individuals to competitors. When employees are dissatisfied and feel that the work environment is unsafe, they are likely to leave. Constantly having to replace these lost employees is expensive as the company needs to spend money on hiring and training new ones.²⁸

f- Poor career planning: In some cases, the companies lack career opportunities for employees with diverse backgrounds, especially in senior leadership positions.²⁹

5. Strategic Approach to Managing Multiculturalism in Organizations

Multiculturalism, wherever it exists, needs a strategy to deal with it. This strategy is required to direct multiculturalism in order to achieve the success of the organization, while at the same time avoiding the adverse effects that can result from the misuse of this diversity.

Managing a multicultural work force is defined as "planning and implementing organizational systems and practices to manage people so that the potential advantages of diversity are maximized while its potential disadvantages are minimized".³⁰

The extent to which managers and employees recognize cultural diversity and its potential benefits and drawbacks defines an organization's approach (strategy) to manage multiculturalism. Many approaches have been proposed in the literature on how to deal with multiculturalism in organizations. Adler (1997) has identified the following strategies for managing cultural differences:³¹

- **Ignoring differences:** This strategy involves managers not recognizing cultural differences and their effect on the organization. It is commonly used in parochial organizations, where managers and employees don't see any importance in cultural diversity. They consider multiculturalism as irrelevant and ignore its impacts. However, this approach hinders the ability to effectively handle cultural diversity and limits the potential to reduce negative effects and increase positive outcomes.³²

- **Minimizing differences:** In this case managers do not think about the advantages of diversity, they recognize it but only as a source of problems. Therefore, instead of embracing the benefits of diversity, they seek to minimize the problems by reducing the diversity. Such type of organizations tries either to select a culturally homogenous workforce or to attempt to socialize all employees into the behavior patterns of the dominant culture.

- **Managing differences:** Organizations that adopt the strategy of managing cultural differences are known as synergistic organizations. These organizations recognize the impact that cultural diversity within their workforce can have on their performance and understand the advantages and disadvantages of having a multicultural workforce. They believe that the best way to handle this diversity is by assembling a creative and heterogeneous workforce that brings together a variety of skills.³³ By adopting synergistic approach, managers and employees focus on minimizing potential problems by managing the impacts of cultural diversity, not by attempting to minimize the diversity itself. This approach involves training managers and employees to recognize and leverage cultural differences to create advantages for the organization.

Thus, organizations can manage multiculturalism in the workplace by implementing the following strategies:

a- Create written policies to promote inclusivity and prevent discrimination: It is important for companies to clearly communicate their policies in writing. Companies should include their policy in relation to diversity in their employee handbook ³⁴. This can be done by including guidelines against prejudice and discriminatory behavior in employee manuals, mission statements, and other written materials. By doing so, companies can internally broadcast the message of diversity and create a shared understanding for all members of the organization.

b-Cross-cultural training: Cross-cultural training stresses on training employees about other cultures and sensitizing them to the discrimination and biases diverse employees feel. Cross-cultural training programs can be categorized into two types: awareness and skill-building. Awareness training introduces the concept of managing diversity and covers topics such as work force demographics, the definition of multiculturalism, and exercises to encourage participants to reflect on relevant issues and increase their self-awareness. On the other hand, skill-building training offers more detailed information on the cultural norms of various groups and how these norms can impact communication and behavior.³⁵

c-Establish and communicate clear performance standards: Performance standards must be based on critical competencies necessary for each job. These must be clearly and objectively established, effectively communicated, and used on objective criteria.

d- Seeking input from minority groups: Soliciting the opinions and involvement of minority groups on important work committees, etc., is beneficial not only because of the contributions that they can make, but also because such overtures confirm that

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they are valued by the company. Involving them in important work committees can also increase their feelings of belonging to the organization. However, if minority members are only given unimportant committees or projects, it can lead to negative relations between different cultural groups.³⁶

e-Valuing and boosting multiculturalism: many synergistic organizations are using a lot of methods to support multiculturalism by following a series of steps emphasizing on the following elements:

- Attract some minorities to join as members of the board of directors and assume that groups within society differ across cultures and that each maintains its cultural distinctness.³⁷
- Give similarities and differences equal importance.
- Direct contact with officials from the minorities for the purpose of appointment.
- Assess the diversity program effort of employment
- Satisfy the need for self-esteem among workers.
- Provide a healthy environment for employees where they can do their jobs effectively.³⁸

f-Provide continuous feedback: Employees should be trained about how to give and receive feedback continuously on clearly identified undesirable behaviors the company want to change and desirable behaviors the company want to encourage. Identification of desirable and undesirable behaviors must be based upon performance feedback discussions involving a multicultural workforce.

6.CONCLUSION

Multiculturalism is a focal issue of human resource management in modern organizations, and managing it in a balanced way is one of the biggest challenges facing these organizations.

Based on what have been discussed about multiculturalism and its benefits and drawbacks in organizations, the study revealed the following:

- Multiculturalism in the workplace refers to an organizational environment that embraces and celebrates diversity by employing individuals from different cultural backgrounds or national origins. It recognizes the value of varied perspectives and experiences brought by employees.
- Multiculturalism has become more prominent in modern organizations due to globalization, demographic changes, international migration, market considerations, and advancements in technology.

- Multiculturalism in the workplace is a double-edged sword, it can be both favorable and unfavorable. It can offer numerous advantages such as enhanced creativity, innovation, and problem-solving capabilities through diverse perspectives. However, it also comes with challenges such as potential conflicts or miscommunication due to differing cultural values and norms.

-The effects of multiculturalism in the workplace depend upon how well they are being managed by the organizational leaders. With proper strategic planning, top management can enhance the positive effects and reduce the negative effects of multiculturalism in the workplace. However, when ignored or mismanaged, it brings challenges and obstacles that can hinder the organization's ability to succeed.

- In order to thrive in a multicultural environment, organizations must adopt a multicultural approach that promotes inclusivity and embraces different perspectives and ideas. This includes implementing policies and practices that address unconscious biases, promoting cultural sensitivity training, and actively engaging employees in discussions about diversity and inclusion.

7. Margins:

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