

**Analytics**

# **Why Hiring for Cultural Fit Can Thwart Your Diversity Efforts**

by Celia de Anca

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Recently I had a revealing conversation with the head of sales of a global marketing company. She was talking about her company's vision of diversity. As someone who has studied diversity for a long time, what she said was music to my ears. She described how the market has changed and globalized over the last 10 years, and how today it is unthinkable not to have diversity in our organizations.

Job done. I experienced a momentary feeling of self-congratulation. Something I believed in and had researched now seemed to be accepted as part of the mainstream.

Such moments, I should have known, tend to be fleeting. A student joined the conversation and told us how in her former company, she was hired because of her diverse background, being a woman from India. But, after two months and just before being offered a more permanent contract, she was asked to leave the company. After a series of sophisticated tests, it was determined that her personality did not really fit into the company.

The woman was sanguine. “Of course, you need to have a personality that fits into the company. One of the most important elements in any organization today is to have well-harmonized teams, in which all the members fit,” she said.

I checked on the experiences of others. Their comments echoed those of the student. “In the company we are all are from a certain prototype: super kind, generous, enthusiastic, extroverted, and proactive. The company uses the services of a big data company to help find the right people from all over the world,” said one.

“If people are different from the majority, and do not fit into the group it is very difficult to work with them and to integrate them into the team,” observed another young woman.

And then it became clear to me that the biggest threat to diversity in the workforce in the future might not be prejudice or blind adherence to tradition, but the confluence of two rising trends in talent management: this passion for “fit” and the enthusiasm for Big Data.

We might be creating a situation in which companies will be very diverse in appearance, but intrinsically homogenous. They will be hiring the same profile of people even though they might have very different backgrounds. Thus the company will *appear* diverse — but we know that appearances can be deceiving.

This clearly flies in the face of what we have been striving for in championing diversity in organizations – creating places where people with different ideas, different perspectives, different attitudes, and different aspirations can work positively together. The beauty of diversity is to have different, unique people come together to work on a common project. And, because putting together different people tends to produce conflict, diversity needs to be managed, to turn a potential area of conflict into an opportunity.

To be clear, I do think Big Data companies, such as Gild in the world of recruitment, have an important role to play in the future of Human Resources. But managers need to understand their limitations, and the value of balancing “fit” with diversity. In other words, the issue isn’t with the tool itself – it’s with how companies today are using it.

Two problems are likely to emerge if homogeneity comes to hold sway over genuine diversity.

First, each unit within an organization could eventually become what I call a “personality silo.” This is a silo based on personality type rather than the business unit or the type of work it completes. This already happens to some extent – think about how people in your company talk about “the IT department,” or “the marketing people.” It’s not that uncommon for a team or department to have its own personality as a group. But in most cases, there are still individuals who are different and most people adapt to working in new units. If companies decide to select people scientifically by using sophisticated profiling techniques and algorithms, however, the tribe may close in itself, which might cause serious problems of horizontal coordination.

The second obvious problem comes from the individuals who do not easily fit into any given prototype. These people used to be much valued in the twentieth century, since they could come up with new ideas or creative solutions to problems. As people are organized into neatly designed homogenous groups, however, these quirky creators will no longer have a place, and organizations will miss out on their

iconoclastic thinking. These people are often the ones who, because they don't fit easily into any one group, serve as the “translators” between groups.

In these fragmented times, we will need translators more than ever before. And we will need people who are unique in their thinking and in their being.

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