



# Book Diversity in Organizations

Myrtle P. Bell  
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## Recommendation

Most Americans agree that discrimination is wrong. The U.S. population is an amazingly varied patchwork of people from every conceivable background and orientation. Nevertheless, widespread discrimination prevents members of racial minorities, as well as people of other classifications, such as women, disabled people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, from realizing their full potentials at work. The recognition and celebration of diversity is essential to a smoothly functioning U.S. society. In this textbook, diversity expert Myrtle P. Bell explains that diversity is a strength, not a weakness. Employers who actively seek to create diverse workplaces benefit from doing so. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to human resource managers and others who wish to promote workplace diversity and end discrimination.

## Take-Aways

- Diversity concerns ethnicity, religion, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, disability and other distinguishing factors.
- Most people belong to more than one of these kinds of groups.
- Both organizations and the individuals within them benefit from diversity.
- Everyone should enjoy the same opportunities for employment and advancement.
- All people, no matter what their group identity, should be able to reach their full potential at work and in life.
- In the U.S., federal, state and local governments have enacted numerous laws and regulations to prevent discrimination and promote diversity.
- Despite these laws, the U.S. has yet to achieve full equality of opportunity.
- Throughout the nation, white people earn more and receive more benefits than people of color.
- People of color tend to work at the lowest paying jobs, which provide few benefits.
- In an increasingly competitive world, arbitrarily excluding people of particular groups from the workplace makes no sense.

## Summary

### What Is Diversity?

Diversity concerns the “real or perceived differences among people that affect their interactions and relationships.” Diversity takes into account numerous factors, including “race, ethnicity, sex, religion, age, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, work and family status, and weight and appearance.” Since it covers so many characteristics, it involves just about everyone. Certain groups – such as white men – have unfair advantages over other groups in U.S. workplaces and in society in general, which is why diversity is important.

“After more than two decades of diversity research, four decades of antidiscrimination legislation and extraordinary media attention...discrimination and exclusion in organizations persist.”

In the U.S., white, able-bodied men generally earn better salaries and enjoy higher status than nonwhites, women and people with disabilities. They progress more easily into more prestigious positions, while people of color remain in the “secondary labor market of low-skilled, low-paid, insecure jobs.” These kinds of jobs offer few benefits or opportunities for advancement.

### The Benefits of Diversity

According to management experts Taylor Cox and Stacy Blake, diversity makes organizations more competitive because it has these six valuable benefits:

1. **“Cost”** – If you devalue certain workers because they are women, lesbians, people of color, disabled and so on, your organization is sure to experience increased job turnover, which drives up costs. Devalued workers have low morale, which reduces productivity and worker harmony. Organizations should consider the high cost of litigation associated with employment discrimination, as well as the effect of negative publicity on the company’s stature and sales. Discrimination simply does not pay.
2. **“Resource acquisition”** – Many capable, talented individuals often prefer not to work for organizations that discriminate. They consider it shameful to do so. Thus, companies that do not treat all employees equally limit their ability to acquire new workers. People of color, women and sexual minorities, along with members of other nonmajoritarian groups, are a growing percentage of the work force. When organizations treat such individuals poorly, they announce to the world that they do not want them as employees. Recruiting an adequate number of skilled workers becomes difficult.
3. **“Marketing”** – All types of people are consumers. As such, they are unlikely to purchase products from companies that overtly discriminate. Indeed, they may join product boycotts and similar high-profile actions against offending companies. Companies that openly embrace all people regardless of their backgrounds or surface characteristics are in a position to develop and market products that everyone will like.
4. **“Creativity”** – According to research, people who are members of cultural minorities often have life experiences that make them creative. Companies can benefit from their enhanced abilities. Studies show that diversity increases “innovation, idea generation and creativity” within organizations and that diversity within the workforce improves individual performance.
5. **“Problem solving”** – Diversity in the workplace tends to increase flexibility and innovation, while homogeneity tends to reduce creativity and impede problem solving. Research shows that diverse organizations generate more new ideas.
6. **“System flexibility”** – Studies show that women handle ambiguity and multitask better than men. Employees with such traits are very productive. Similarly, cognitive flexibility goes hand in hand with “bilingualism and biculturalism.” Thus, Asian Americans and Latinos, who are often fluent in more than one language and culture, can be excellent workers.

“Misperception: Diversity is beneficial only to minorities and women. Reality: Diversity benefits everyone.”

Hiring people from different groups gives employers additional advantages and capabilities. For example, Asians, blacks and Latinos, who have “collectivist” backgrounds, tend to work more cooperatively than European Americans, who have “individualist” backgrounds. In addition, stock values increase with diversity. All other things being equal, the share prices of companies with affirmative action programs do better than those of companies that discriminate.

“By the year 2000, 85% of net new entrants to the U.S. workforce would be women and minorities.”

In addition to these organizational advantages, diversity offers direct benefits to individuals. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the University of Michigan’s “diversity programs.” The university was able to prove that members of a diverse student body are more likely “to see commonality in values.”

## Diversity’s Downside

Of course, diversity is not all peaches and cream. Diverse organizations can suffer from numerous problems, including “dysfunctional communication processes between different group members, discrimination, harassment [and] perceptions that nontraditional workers are unqualified.” However, such problems generally diminish over time. With the support of management, supervisors can do much to reduce and eliminate them.

## Diversity Is Not Just Good Business – It’s the Law

Since the 1960s, the U.S. government has enacted numerous laws that make employment discrimination of any kind illegal. The primary federal laws that protect people in the workplace against discrimination are Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (often simply called Title VII), the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Another important federal law is the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which covers nearly all U.S. employers. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects people with disabilities from discrimination.

“When working full time, year round, white women with college degrees earn about \$25,000 less than white men with college degrees.”

In addition, numerous executive orders and regulations promote diversity in the workplace and punish discrimination. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is a federal watchdog agency that assists employees who believe they have suffered discrimination in the workplace. In addition to federal laws, states and local governments legislate to prevent discrimination and promote diversity.

“Misperception: Inviting a coworker to attend worship services is illegal. Reality: Pressuring a coworker to attend a worship service is illegal.”

Executive orders require contractors who want to do more than \$10,000 worth of business annually with the U.S. government to institute “proactive measures” that ensure fair treatment for racial minorities and women. Many such firms have to develop affirmative action plans that the government must approve before it does business with them.

## U.S. Categories and Groupings

These are the groups that U.S. employers must welcome into the workplace:

- **“Blacks/African Americans”** – Thirteen percent of the U.S. population is black. As a group, blacks tend to have less education and earn less money than whites. Their unemployment rate is much higher as well. Blacks are victims of both “access discrimination” – they have trouble being hired – and “treatment discrimination” – they receive lower salaries, fewer promotions and awards, and poorer performance evaluations than other groups. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the driving force behind much of the current U.S. legislation that prohibits discrimination and promotes diversity.
- **“Latinos/Hispanics”** – Hispanics comprise 14% of the U.S. population, making them America’s largest minority group. They are a diverse group, originating

from many countries and having a variety of racial identities. Because Hispanics have higher birth rates than other groups and are immigrating in large numbers to the U.S., they will constitute 24% of the nation's population by 2050. Even though they are such a big group, Hispanics experience discrimination in the workplace and society at large. To benefit from U.S. society and to improve their education and employment levels, Hispanics must gain fluency in the English language.

- **“Asians and Asian Americans”** – Comprising 5% of the U.S. population, Asians and Asian Americans are better educated than other racial and ethnic groups. Because of this, Americans have traditionally viewed Asians as “‘model minorities’... in contrast to blacks, Latinos and American Indians.” Nevertheless, like members of other racial minorities, Asians and Asian Americans experience “individual, organizational and societal racism, discrimination and exclusion.”
- **“Whites/European Americans”** – Three out of four people in the U.S. are white. However, they occupy nine out of 10 of the top U.S. management positions. Despite their relative affluence and strong representation in the workplace, some whites claim to be victims of “reverse discrimination” because of affirmative action. U.S. minorities do not agree with this assessment.
- **“American Indians, Alaska Natives and multiracial group members”** – The “original Americans” – Indians and Alaska Natives – and people who belong to more than one racial group are a minuscule 1.5% of the U.S. population. American Indians (AI) and Alaska Natives (AN) suffer the “worst unemployment, poverty and health insurance rates in the United States.” AI and AN women “earn less and are more likely to be in poverty than black, Asian and white women.” Infant mortality and domestic violence rates in these communities are high.
- **“Sex and gender”** – Called the “51% minority,” women are now half the U.S. workforce. However, most work in low-paying jobs. People have numerous misconceptions about women in the workplace. For example, many believe that women are newcomers to the U.S. labor force. This is not true. Women were among the earliest agricultural laborers in the country. They worked in factories and industry. And, of course, before the Civil War, slave women worked right next to slave men in the fields of the American South. Women of color, in particular, have a strong tradition of working outside the home. American society has long devalued the work of women, inside and outside the home. This has greatly influenced “sex discrimination and harassment, sex segregation of jobs and the glass ceiling.” Indeed, U.S. women have long suffered in the workplace due to “distorted and inaccurate perceptions” of their talents and characteristics.
- **“Religion”** – Since 9/11, discrimination against Muslims and those who appear to be Arab American has grown in the U.S. Because 77% of people in the U.S. profess to be Christians, this large majority can easily harass and exclude people of other religions. In 2004, the EEOC “resolved 2,676 charges of [religious] discrimination.”
- **“Age”** – Many people in the United States believe that older workers are not productive. Research does not bear this out. Indeed, younger workers lose more work time due to accidents and injuries than older ones do. The ADEA originally protected workers up to 65 years of age against discrimination. Now, with more elderly people in the workforce, ADEA has no age limits on this protection.
- **“Physical and mental ability”** – Twenty percent of Americans are disabled. Like everyone else, they want to work. However, people with disabilities are less likely to have jobs than able-bodied people, and when they do have jobs, they earn less money. Seven out of 10 people with disabilities do not require special accommodations at work, and the accommodations for those who do need them usually cost less than \$500. Often, they cost nothing. Many believe that people with disabilities are poor performers in the workplace. This perception is incorrect. Most disabilities do not have any effect on work performance.

“In most states, people can be fired for being fat.”

Other kinds of diversity include “work and family” (equity issues regarding women – and men – who have both job and family responsibilities); “weight and appearance” (fat women earn less than thin women, and attractive people get jobs more easily than unattractive people); and “sexual orientation” (federal law does not prohibit discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, although some states and municipalities prohibit such discrimination).

## Diversity: A Strength, Not a Weakness

For the peoples of the world, the U.S. has always been a haven from hatred, discrimination and bigotry. Yet, America has long had its own major problems in these areas. Still, the strength of the country is the diversity of its people. In a world that grows smaller and more cross-cultural every day, the U.S. must promote diversity and a level playing field. Shortchanging “potential contributors” to society because of their race, ethnicity or other factors makes no sense. Excluding people is not just wrong. In a competitive world, it also is absurdly bad business.

## About the Author

**Myrtle P. Bell** teaches at the University of Texas at Arlington. An authority on diversity issues, Bell's research has appeared in numerous academic publications. She is the chair-elect of the Gender and Diversity in Organizations Division of the Academy of Management.

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