RECRUITING AND RETAINING A MORE DIVERSE WORKFORCE

Caren Goldberg, Ph.D.

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One of the most daunting challenges faced by HR departments is designing and implementing effective recruitment vehicles for attracting and engaging with prospective well-qualified employees across a wide spectrum of diversity, including people with disabilities and veterans. Many organizations no longer deem it acceptable to simply post an advertisement for an open position and cross their fingers, hoping that it will attract a well-qualified pool of applicants that reflects wide-ranging diversity. Given the inefficiency of this shotgun approach of marketing open positions to a universe of potential candidates, there has emerged a trend favoring the use of a more effective, targeted strategy. Thus, diversity and inclusion leaders are tasked with creating and implementing marketing and recruitment vehicles that are easily accessible and that effectively communicate the availability of career opportunities to diverse communities of potential employees who might otherwise not even be aware that such opportunities exist.

Such approaches are important because despite overall improvements in U.S. employment statistics, the gains have not been enjoyed equally among various demographic groups. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that whereas the unemployment rate for whites and Asians in the second quarter of 2015 had fallen to less than 5%, blacks and Hispanics have unemployment rates of 9.6% and 6.5%, respectively. Data from the bureau also show that the 2014 unemployment rate of persons with a disability, at 12.5%, was more than double that of persons without a disability. At first blush, the unemployment rate for veterans appear quite similar to those who have not served; however, a closer examination reveals that Gulf War-era II veterans had a 2014 unemployment rate of 8.1%.

Given these statistics, it would seem that increasing diversity should be an easy task, as there is obviously a sizable pool of “nontraditional” candidates. Yet, there appears to be a disconnect between what employers say they want and what they actually do. For example, a Department of Labor study reported that 82% of employers want to provide accommodations to attract and retain workers with disabilities, yet a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey of HR managers indicated that less than 20% of employers actively recruit persons with disabilities. Efforts toward achieving the goal of a more diverse workforce can easily become thwarted when managers think of diversity as an additional goal, on top of their already-full plates. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that employers can achieve the goal of increasing diversity through easy and inexpensive means. In fact, some of these suggestions may require little more than small tweaks to existing efforts aimed at attracting and retaining talent.

Recruitment is a two-way street, but it is easy to lose sight of the fact that applicants make fit assessments about employers in the same way that employers make fit assessments about applicants. Therefore, organizations need to manage their impressions in order to be perceived as welcoming employers of nontraditional applicants. Research has shown that organizations that value diversity are likely to be
perceived as particularly attractive to nontraditional applicants. There are several ways organizations can accomplish this.

**Update your recruitment website.** Research indicates that four attributes of recruitment websites affect candidates’ intentions to pursue employment at that organization: ease of use, usefulness, the presence of diversity statements and the extent to which users can interact with the website in a personalized way. While these characteristics result in more favorable organizational perceptions for all candidates, they had a significantly stronger effect on black applicants’ perceptions than on white applicants’ perceptions. This was particularly true with regard to the personalized interaction characteristic. Making the website more engaging will make it more attractive to all applicants, but appears to be particularly meaningful to individuals who come to the recruitment process with expectations of negative experiences.

**Use advertising material that portrays the audience being targeted.** Research indicates that black and Hispanic applicants were more attracted to organizations that depicted minorities in their recruitment brochures than to organizations that did not have minority representatives depicted in their brochures. Another study by the same author found that the position of the people depicted in the brochures made a difference. Specifically, black applicants showed no preference toward organizations that depicted black workers in their advertisements, but showed a significantly stronger preference for organizations that depicted black supervisors. That black job seekers were only influenced by the depiction of blacks at higher levels in the organization means that depicting minorities in higher-level positions may be an avenue for increasing this demographic’s perceptions of the likely returns on their human capital investments. A notable finding from this study is that white job seekers were not affected by advertisement diversity; thus, this strategy for increasing minority representation is unlikely to have adverse consequences for more traditional applicants.

**Expand the list of schools used for campus recruiting.** Relying on recruitment sources that are targeted to a particular group of applicants is an effective means of ingratiating the organization with that group. For example, if an organization is trying to attract black candidates, campus recruiting efforts should include historically black colleges and universities. Similarly, by including schools that don’t charge elite tuition rates, organizations are apt to capture candidates that might otherwise be excluded. There are well-documented racial differences in income, which can result in fewer minority candidates from expensive private schools. Further, research indicates that nontraditional candidates expect to experience discrimination. As a result, even those who can afford elite schools often do not choose these options, as they are less likely to yield the same return on their educational investment.

**Consider the recruiters’ demographics.** Research indicates that black job seekers had more favorable impressions of organizations where they were interviewed by black recruiters. This finding suggests that other recruiter characteristics may also send an important signal to candidates about the extent to which an organization values diversity. In another study, researchers found that black candidates place greater weight on recruiter demographics than whites do, which suggests that the increase in nontraditional candidates’ impressions of the organization does not come at the expense of other candidates’ impressions. As a practical matter, most
organizations do not have the resources to match recruiters to particular applicant groups; however, smaller-scale efforts, such as including minority representatives at job fairs and campus recruiting events, are likely to send a similar message regarding the organization’s valuing of diversity.

**Include targeted recruitment sources.** Because different applicant groups often rely on different recruitment sources, the most effective recruitment plans are the ones that include sources targeted at the particular pool of candidates being sought. Employers do need to bear in mind that focusing on recruitment sources that target nontraditional applicant groups at the expense of sources that target traditional applicant pools could result in claims of reverse discrimination. Therefore, it is important that employers aim to cast a wider net (as opposed to just a different net) and use recruiting sources in addition to those that they already use to attract traditional applicants.

Recruiting at predominantly minority (or female) colleges and universities was addressed above. However, there is a vast array of other targeted recruitment sources at managers’ disposal. For example, minority job fairs and media that are targeted at particular racial or ethnic groups are practical ways for organizations to convey the message that they are actively seeking minority candidates. The SHRM Enterprise Solutions for Diversity platform is another means of targeting racially diverse applicants because it offers customized recruitment sites to companies in every industry. There are also an infinite number of affinity groups for minority candidates in various fields that hold conferences where organizations could gain visibility among a targeted pool of candidates (e.g., National Society of Black Engineers, National Society of Hispanic MBAs, National Minority Technology Council).

There are far fewer recruitment sources that specifically target veterans and people with disabilities; however, the U.S. government has programs in place to help employers increase their diversity of these groups. For example, for organizations looking to increase the number of persons with disabilities in their workplace, the Department of Labor has a program specially designed to help employers find students and recent graduates who have disabilities. Likewise, the Department of Justice has a program designed to provide employment opportunities within the federal government to veterans and to help recently hired veterans adjust to service in a civilian capacity. In addition, the SHRM Enterprise Solutions for Disability and the SHRM Enterprise Solutions for Veterans allow employers to target their recruitment efforts at job seekers with disabilities and veteran job seekers, respectively.

The practices indicated above play a key part in attracting a more diverse pool of talent—if applicants don’t know an organization is interested in recruiting nontraditional candidates, they’re less likely to pursue employment at that organization. But being visible is only part of the puzzle; applicants also need to see the organization as attractive. Like all candidates, nontraditional job seekers are drawn to organizations where they expect to feel valued. Research suggests that policy statements regarding inclusiveness are an effective means of conveying that the organization values diversity. Targeted recruitment efforts should therefore strive to not only reach a particular pool of candidates, but also to convey the organization’s policy statements regarding inclusiveness. For example, if an organization were using one of the Enterprise Solutions discussed above, it might consider emphasizing such policies.

In determining whether they will be valued, job seekers also consider benefits. Thus, to appeal to nontraditional candidates, organizations need to consider whether the benefits they offer appeal to the applicant group they’re targeting. In this context “benefits” include not only those plusses that are directly paid for by employers, but also those that come from the job and/or culture of the organization. As an example, a study by the Government Accountability Office
found that employers indicated that providing mentorship opportunities is a key job feature necessary to recruit and retain older workers. There have not been any published studies on the preferred benefits of the groups focused on in this paper (racial and ethnic minorities, veterans, and persons with disabilities). However, it would seem logical that health-related benefits would be particularly attractive to persons with disabilities. As with the recruitment sources, it is important that benefits offered in order to appeal to particular nontraditional groups not come at the expense of other groups. Given that adding benefits across the board can be quite expensive, a cafeteria benefit plan may be a more cost-effective option for appealing to a broader pool of candidates.

Although this paper is focused on recruitment, it bears noting that success in attracting and hiring a more diverse pool of talent is only useful if you can retain these employees. Given that both managers’ and new hires’ expectations about job performance affect turnover, efforts should focus on ways to increase the expectations for each party. On the manager side, this would include practices such as ongoing diversity training specifically aimed at helping them understand the pervasiveness of stereotypes (few, if any, managers believe they rely on stereotypes, though the research suggests otherwise). In addition, the basic HR principle that people do what they are rewarded for doing is certainly applicable in the diversity sphere. Tying manager pay to the achievement of diversity goals is an effective means of keeping managers focused on those goals. Note, however, that diversity goals should not be quota-based; rather, they should emphasize fostering an environment in which everyone feels included.

On the employee side, practices aimed at increasing workers’ expectations about their ability to do the job would include HR practices that provide opportunities for learning and reinforcement. Research indicates that employees are more likely to learn from mistakes in training programs that provide a judgment-free environment where trainees are encouraged to take risks, told that making mistakes is normal and encouraged to talk openly about their mistakes. By learning from their mistakes, employees develop a more positive self-concept of professional competence. This would likely be particularly beneficial for nontraditional employees, given their lower expectations about performance; however, such a training environment should be provided for all new hires.

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To summarize, there are a number of recruitment practices that can increase diversity: using targeted recruitment sources, offering benefits that appeal to the group(s) being targeted, using advertising materials that portray the audience being targeted and revamping the recruitment website to make it more engaging. However, given the high cost of turnover, it is also important that efforts toward recruiting nontraditional applicants be matched by practices aimed at retaining them once they are on the job, such as broader diversity efforts focused on reducing managers’ biases and training programs focused on increasing employees’ self-efficacy.

CAREN B. GOLDBERG (PhD, Georgia State University) is an Associate Professor at Bowie State University. Her research, which focuses primarily on diversity and sexual harassment, has appeared in such journals as the Journal of Applied Psychology, Sex Roles, Psychology of Women Quarterly, the Journal of Organizational Behavior, and Group and Organization Management. She has also written five book chapters. Caren is the Treasurer of the Academy of Management’s Gender and Diversity in Organizations Division, where she recently completed a three-year term as an Executive Committee Member. She has served as an associate editor at Group and Organization Management and is on the editorial board of that journal as well as Journal of Business and Psychology and Human Resource Management. She has been a testifying expert on numerous employment discrimination cases and a consulting expert on several others.
The Society for Human Resource Management has long supported diversity in the workplace. Experience demonstrates that diverse workforces foster strategic growth, creativity and innovation, and HR practitioners are seeking smart ways to broaden the pool of qualified job candidates and improve inclusive hiring goals.

Toward that end, SHRM Enterprise Solutions makes it simple for employers to design and implement customized, branded websites to attract and retain veterans, individuals with disabilities and other minority candidates.

Developed in cooperation with DirectEmployers Association, SHRM Enterprise Solutions is more than just a recruiting platform. It helps employers magnify their marketing and outreach to diversity applicants, and underscores their commitment to corporate social responsibility. With minimal expense or delay, your company can target these communities with one or more websites at the .jobs domain.

**KEY PLATFORM FEATURES**

- Customized website and registration of a corporate .jobs domain name (www.yourcompany-veterans.jobs)
- Your branding and messaging to these communities
- Daily automated job posting updates
- Full job search functionality
- Integration with your application tracking system
- Search engine optimization
- Responsive design for tablets and mobile devices
- Embedded links to relevant web pages within your corporate site
- Automated syndication of job listings to 40,000 networks
- Monthly reporting and metrics for tracking
- For more information visit [SHRM Enterprise Solutions](http://enterprise.shrm.org)
- To find out how your organization can adopt this SHRM-promoted solution for Diversity & Inclusion, call 855-411-SHRM.