

How To Make A Better Business Case For Diversity

Diversity is good for business, but our supportive arguments need to better reflect the complexities of the benefits.

Pondering the business case for diversity, Todd L. Pittinsky, a professor of technology and society at Stony Brook University, observes something isn't quite right. "Different kinds of people will come up with different kinds of ideas, and the more variety, the better," [he writes](#) in *Harvard Business Review*. Multiple [studies have backed](#) this up.

However, he asks, if that's the case, then why has Silicon Valley consistently been a locus of innovation? Pittinsky rightly notes that there are other kinds of diversity in the Valley, particularly foreign workers on H-1B visas. And just touting the boost to the bottom line by having more women and people of color doesn't really stand as an argument when tech is an industry that consistently delivers profits.

"Should we just drop the subject? Abandon the cause?" he asks. "No, we shouldn't. But we do need to be more honest about our motives and about the case to be made for diversity." Pittinsky argues that there are more accurate business cases to be made.

Much the way the [gender pay gap](#) can't be boiled down to one single cents on the dollar figure, Pittinsky illustrates that there are nuanced ways to approach support for diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

THE LONG-TAIL BENEFIT

Workplace diversity has an impact on social good, Pittinsky says. [A global study from Harvard University](#) indicates that countries with social cohesion experience greater economic growth. How to get more socially cohesive? By diversifying the population.

Companies investing in diversity shouldn't expect a quick return. But the long-term gains are evident.

"The more the members of an organically diverse society enjoy that diversity and see the visible benefits of investing in shared prosperity and the common good, the more secure and resilient that society will be," he writes.

This has been true for the U.S. economy as waves of immigrants have come through and assimilated over centuries. And this is the other side of this argument: Companies investing in diversity shouldn't expect a quick return. But the long-term gains are evident.

US PLUS THEM

[Multiple studies](#) show that positive emotions boost individual and team performance. Bias, on the other hand, is laden with negative emotions such as fear, contempt, and anger, which are collectively detrimental to collaboration and creativity.

But people who are not like us should not merely be tolerated. Pittinsky cites his own research that measured allophilia, otherwise known as positive and not just tolerant attitudes toward a group other than one's own. Teams and organizations with higher allophilia were more likely to display "open communication, feelings of inclusion, mentoring across genders and ethnicity, and bringing one's whole self to work," he writes. Who wouldn't want to work for a company that fosters this kind of environment?

THE CULTURE QUOTIENT

Building an "us plus them" mind-set is essentially laying the foundation for a company's entire culture. [Pittinsky's own research](#) finds that leaders are able to bring together not just a group of diverse individuals, but their respective subgroups, too. The trick is to not have to turn all those people into a collective "we" to achieve consensus quickly.

To be truly innovative, there has to be an exchange of ideas through debate among diverse groups. A cohort of researchers who wrote "Collective Genius," a [paper on leadership and innovation](#), found:

All too often, leaders and their groups solve problems through domination or compromise, resulting in less than inventive solutions. Innovation requires integrating ideas—combining option A and option B, even if they once seemed mutually exclusive—to create a new and better option.

This, the researchers argue, can only be achieved through these three methods:

- **Creative abrasion.** The ability to generate ideas through discourse and debate
- **Creative agility.** The ability to test and experiment through quick pursuit, reflection, and adjustment
- **Creative resolution.** The ability to make decisions that combine disparate and sometimes even opposing ideas

A leader is able to create the context to allow innovation to unfold by encouraging ideas from a diverse team whose members believe they can truly bring their whole selves to work. This has implications far beyond the company's walls. As Pittinsky says: "If we can become more disciplined and precise in learning how to create and maintain [diversity] in the right ways, this will make for a more prosperous and productive economy in the future."

via [HBR](#)