

# THE IMPORTANCE OF A DIVERSE WORKFORCE IN TRANSFORMATIVE TIMES



DEBORA AYDELOTTE  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, HEAD OF CLIENT STRATEGY

Across America, millions of workers have made an extraordinary transition to working from home. We're accommodating the demands of a global health emergency while still meeting customer needs and expectations.

This is not the time to let the progress we are making in diversity and inclusion start to slip. There is a proven body of research and evidence that diverse leadership and diversity at all levels lead to improved performance. McKinsey also found the reverse to be true: companies lacking diversity in both gender and ethnicity underperform.

Inclusivity is the first step toward creating a diverse environment. Particularly important during times of stress and challenge is the innate human need to come together, rely on each other and seek support. Reaching out and creating an inclusive environment has a multiplier effect in creating the supportive environment needed now.

During a crisis, companies need leadership from all levels. Leadership comes in different forms, not merely through title. Leading and supporting a remote team has required many to quickly pivot and learn new ways to motivate, ideate and succeed.

We have also quickly learned that everyone manages stress differently. People are isolated from workplace resources and may be feeling lonely. Many are balancing the competing needs of work and family; some are doubling as their children's teachers.

Our focus should be on taking extra steps to make sure everyone is feeling heard, whether during conference calls, additional one-on-one time or more informal calls to get a group together for a virtual coffee break. Additionally, we should remind ourselves that flexibility in this new environment is warranted; whether that means flexible schedules to attend to family needs or allowing quiet time to get real work done.

Diverse approaches and perspectives can help us solve problems. Recent evidence has shown that companies already investing in the needs of working parents during the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced a smoother transition to remote-working than companies not taking similar steps. As an example, a recent article in *Working Mother* noted law firms with established diversity and inclusion practices have leaders experienced in leading critical projects from home, while working reduced or flexible hours or while balancing work alongside family demands. These diversity and inclusion programs helped create workforces better prepared for their new remote environments.

Research from the NeuroLeadership Institute showed companies which stay the course on diversity and inclusion during crises bounce back from recessions best. In the Institute's "Your Brain at Work" blog, researcher Paulette Gerkovich pointed to a 2019 study of publicly-traded companies before, during and after the 2009 Great Recession. "It found that the financials of companies that maintained a diverse and inclusive environment flourished while those that didn't saw precipitous declines," Gerkovich wrote.

We all depend on talented teams of people to help us meet customer needs and deliver services with excellence and integrity. Part of being inclusive means the willingness to seek-out one another's contributions because of the value and richness their diversity brings to an organization.

There are so many ways in which an inclusive environment strengthens company culture. Fostering diverse ideas helps in business development, product design and problem solving, facilitates recruitment and retention of talent, and bolsters employee satisfaction and internal career growth.

Each organization is at a different point on the diversity maturity path, but their long-term goals are the same: to make diversity and inclusion second nature and make it unnecessary to have special programs to achieve these goals. For most of us, the real work of creating a diverse and inclusive workplace has only just begun. Let's not slow it down by neglecting these important initiatives during this crisis.