

Corporate Exposure: Work Force Diversity

Harry P. Mirijanian



When analyzing claims and risk management issues for our clients, we repeatedly note the impact the culture of the work force has on the corporation. Regardless of whether we are reviewing worker compensation issues, products liability issues, E & O, or other risks, the effectiveness with which the company manages diversity is a critical component.

Managers must confront several challenges to maximize efficiency within the workplace. Let's examine just a few.

Language barriers can create obstacles, particularly in training programs for employees. Retaining a translator may be a prudent strategy. Various federal regulations require proper training of employees on issues such as hazard communication, emergency evacuation procedures, and so on. I recall a hospital that was cited by OSHA for failure to train employees properly. The hospital had a sizeable Asian work force, but all the training guides were in English (as were all general notices, signs, etc.). Many employees, fearful of losing their jobs, did not let the trainers know that they could not understand the written material. We suggest that all training programs include a testing process to verify that trainees understand the critical issues.

In another instance, a corporation promoted a hardworking employee to the position of manager—to a group of employees who did not speak English. After several months, a psychologist alleged that this man's inability to communicate with his staff had created stress that in turn created psychological prob-

lems. A workers compensation claim was presented against the corporation.

Often, workers gravitate toward others from their own ethnic group, and a strong sense of camaraderie develops. Understanding this—and understanding how to minimize its effects on your operation—should be a consideration in your risk management plans. We were recently told of an on-the-job fatality involving an employee who became entangled in the moving components of a piece of equipment. The company is now facing difficulty getting the other employees to use the machine. Why? Because they now suspect the equipment has a spirit. They have effectively made this machine a shrine to their fellow countryman.

Women in the work force also require adjustment on the part of management and other employees. The majority of hiring, training, processing, operations, and so on, has been established for male employees. Retooling the operation to meet the changes in the work force created by the greater inclusion of women has been more difficult for some than for others. We have only to look at the explosive number of sexual harassment claims to realize how deeply entrenched some of the conditions are, and how much more has to be done.

Disabled workers, who have in the past been forgotten by the workplace, constitute another group that presents management challenges. Fortunately, more employers now realize the quality and value this group can bring to the workplace. At the same time, the needs of disabled workers must be incorporated into today's risk management plans. Often, companies will consider only the physical adaptations required and fail to review the psychological impact on the disabled workers, their supervisors, and co-workers.

Flex, part-time, or leased employees

come to the workplace with a host of needs, attitudes, and risk management concerns. They represent one of the fastest growing work segments.

Personality is another factor that should be evaluated—certainly before an employee is hired. Some individuals are considerably more predisposed to stress, regardless of their environment. Is it possible, perhaps, that a trait or characteristic sought in the hiring/application process may in fact be a red flag that could, if identified, keep certain individuals from being hired?

Environmental factors, such as proper lighting and ventilation, cannot be overlooked in evaluating issues important to the work force. These factors, can be important in helping maintain proper attitudes and high levels of productivity.

Regardless of the challenges presented by workplace diversity, management must recognize that employees still essentially represent a homogenous group that has many of the same basic wants and needs. Study upon study has confirmed that employees across the board have the same concerns about their jobs: open communication, the relation of work to personal/family life, the nature of the work, and good relationships with supervisors. A workplace that meets employees' needs by practicing sound management is one that will have good insurance experience—in other words, lower premiums and broader coverage. The challenges confronting today's managers, however, have never been more tested. ■

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