

# MERIT GUIDELINES™



June/July 2008

## Creating a diverse workplace

Smart ways to protect your employees' sensitive information

Inappropriate workplace behavior can be costly

Approach hiring from the *other* side of the desk

Ask the Advisor:  
Noise in the office

## Business decisions and human resources decisions go hand-in-hand.

Successful companies recognize this relationship and consciously factor in the effects of each into their planning processes. In other words, they don't just focus on the business and forget about the people.

To get the greatest results from applying this way of thinking requires a balance of leadership, open communications, appropriate practices and great rewards. It also requires access to the right HR expertise to provide these competencies and to support business goals as needs change.

For nearly 20 years Merit Resource Group — the local market leader providing HR expertise throughout Northern California — has been helping organizations address these very kinds of issues.

Whether it is to provide the day-to-day professional HR talent to support business operations, fill senior HR positions to direct the work of others, or design and implement customized HR programs to help organizations run more efficiently and profitably, Merit is where Northern California companies turn.

Contact us today and let us put our HR expertise and capabilities to work for your company.



2440 Camino Ramon, Suite 297  
San Ramon, CA 94583  
925-867-4400  
FAX: 925-867-4494

1250 Oakmead Parkway, Suite 210  
Sunnyvale, CA 94085  
408-501-8863  
FAX: 408-501-8864

[www.merithr.com](http://www.merithr.com)

# Creating a diverse workplace

**G**one are the days when a glance could confirm or deny whether a business was diverse. Back then, if there were a handful of women and minorities in visible positions, the company's diversity initiatives would have been considered a success. Today, savvy leaders know that workplace diversity isn't just having a certain number of minority hires; rather, it's creating an inclusive, progressive environment that values and leverages every staff member's background.

## A broader, deeper definition

Current population trends indicate that, by 2050, there will be no racial majority in the United States, according to the Pew Research Center, a not-for-profit research group that studies public policy issues. Our nation's shifting demographics underscore the need for companies to revise how they look at diversity.

Clearly, diversity can no longer be viewed in simple terms. Currently, a new definition of diversity is emerging. Forward-thinking organizations are now recasting the concept of diversity to embrace all the ways people can bring a unique perspective to the workplace.

Today, businesses are realizing the benefits of recognizing — even celebrating — individual differences as a way to respond to business challenges more quickly, creatively and effectively.

In accepting a broader and deeper definition of diversity, companies need to examine whether they've progressed beyond looking at only traditional differentiators such as race, gender and nationality. For instance, does your organization include workers with physical disabilities; of different generations; or from a variety of social, economic and educational backgrounds? Does it allow employees to be open about their sexual orientations, cultures and religions?

## A business imperative

By 2050, nearly one in five people employed in the United States will have been born outside of the country, says Pew.



In other words, the world continues to get smaller. Our increasingly mobile population and global economy means being diverse now isn't just the right thing to do — it's the *only* thing to do.

To be successful, businesses must recruit and retain a richly varied mix of employees who understand the cultures and practices of their current and potential customers. What's more, companies must nurture a workplace that enables each employee to make decisions and innovate based on his or her distinctive set of experiences. It's only through diversity of thought, experience and perspective that organizations will be able to compete on a global level — both now and in the future.

## Ways to make it work

When it comes to becoming truly diverse, corporate actions speak much louder than words. Here are some ideas for better managing diversity within your organization:

**Broaden recruiting horizons.** To reach out to the widest range of potential candidates, employers need to think beyond traditional recruitment strategies and events. One option is to seek out associations, job boards and hiring fairs that highlight diversity, such as the US Business

Leadership Network's (USBLN's) annual career fair, which is dedicated to linking individuals with disabilities to potential employers.

**Network wisely.** Leading companies use employee networks — for instance, Asian-American, African-American, Latino, and gay and lesbian groups — as a way to foster diversity. These networks offer members an internal support system for growth and development while enabling businesses to demonstrate their commitment to an inclusive organizational culture that views diversity as a competitive advantage.

**Appreciate differences.** In the past, diversity initiatives called for companies to be blind to differences, downplaying them as the politically correct thing to do. Today, businesses are realizing the benefits of recognizing — even celebrating — individual differences as a way to respond to business challenges more quickly, creatively and effectively.

**Hire with diversity in mind.** To show employees how much your organization values diversity, employ a diverse range of people at all organizational levels, especially in the senior ranks. Without this proof, promising workers may decide there's no room for growth at your company and take their talents elsewhere.

**Provide ongoing education.** If diversity is a core value of your company, make sure management is acting in a way that reflects it. Offer diversity and cultural sensitivity

## Be sure to foster open communication

A company can benefit from the depth and breadth of its workforce's experience only if its management listens to what employees have to say. Empower your workers to contribute ideas, manage business challenges, and express opinions and views — even if they don't always mesh with management's.

Make sure you have a formal channel of communication in place so employees can tell you if they feel they're being treated unfairly or are somehow being marginalized by a perceived difference. And conduct regular employee surveys to determine how well diversity initiatives are being met.

training to reinforce your commitment, because employees won't believe it unless leadership acts upon it.

### Every company's goal

All companies, no matter what their product or service, share the same goal of enhancing the bottom line. Creating a diverse workforce — and one leveraged to its fullest — can accelerate the achievement of this objective, while building organizational sustainability. ■

---

# Smart ways to protect your employees' sensitive information

**T**he HR department is the keeper of some of the most sensitive data in a company: employee records. And it has a slew of privacy-related legislation to comply with, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Sarbanes-Oxley Act and Patriot Act.

When you think about all the data you have to contend with, you may be tempted to simply dump your files out in the parking lot and start a bonfire. Of course, that's not a

practical solution because, among other reasons, you're legally required to retain certain employee information for specified periods. Fortunately, there are some less drastic and more prudent ways your organization can safeguard its sensitive employee information.

### Beyond the simple

Security experts agree that the most common threat to data security is found inside the company. Simple actions such as shredding paperwork, keeping files under lock and key, and using password protection on computers are essential

## Do you need a Chief Privacy Officer?

Back in 2000, *BusinessWeek* magazine touted the then-emerging role of Chief Privacy Officer (CPO) as one of the hot jobs of the new millennium. Today, you'll find CPOs at many of America's most recognizable companies, including IBM, Wal-Mart and the Walt Disney Corporation.

This executive role is generally designed to create, implement and enforce privacy practices throughout the organization — HR-related security needs are just one area of responsibility. CPOs tend to suit businesses that:

- Retain large amounts of customer data (such as consumer products companies),
- Have highly sensitive data (such as health care, financial and insurance organizations), or
- Conduct most of their transactions via the Internet (such as online stores).

For more information about this position, check out the International Association of Privacy Professionals at [privacyassociation.org](http://privacyassociation.org).

to safeguarding data. Yet there are other, equally important strategies every organization should employ. For example:

**Educate workers.** Train all employees on your security and privacy policies, and their responsibility for keeping information safe. Remind workers to never leave material unattended and offer refreshers at times when sensitive data is at the forefront, such as during the hiring or benefits enrollment process.

**Mind your technology.** Consider dedicated printers and copiers in the HR area that aren't accessible to the rest of the company, restrict and password-protect access to your information as much as possible, and conduct thorough background checks on employees who have access to your HR systems. Even with these precautions, restricting physical access or requiring visitor escorts for nonscreened or non-HR employees is a good idea.

Also, periodically conduct electronic audits on your HR information systems to analyze what files have been accessed and by whom. Investigate any activity that seems unusual, such as frequent access to the system at odd times or access attempts by unauthorized personnel.

**Avoid Social Security numbers.** Instead, create employee ID numbers and require your vendors, such as insurance companies, to do the same. Your employees will appreciate your efforts to protect their Social Security numbers.

**Prevent inadvertent slip-ups.** Not all data breaches are launched with criminal intent. You could inadvertently violate HIPAA regulations by answering an innocent hallway question about why a worker has been absent all week.

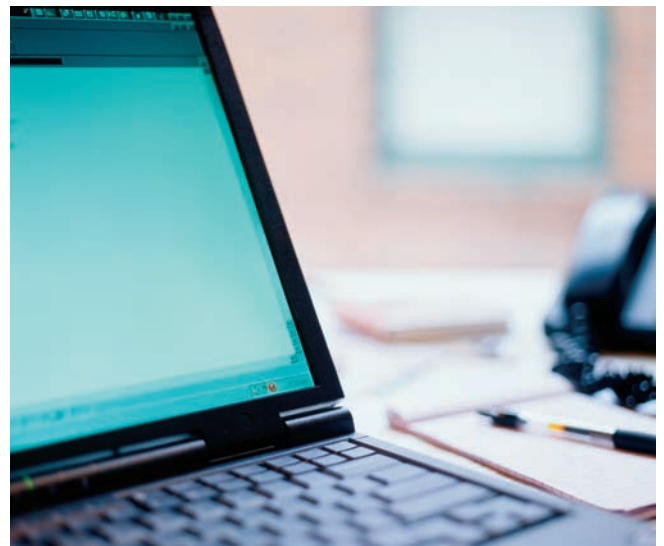
Also, take care when talking with “helicopter” parents — those who continue to hover in their 20-something offsprings' lives to the point where they'll intervene on work issues. Having conversations with parents about a son's or daughter's salary, benefits or performance may violate your own privacy policies.

**Hold private conversations.** All conversations involving sensitive information about an employee need to be conducted behind closed doors. If you have an open-space floor plan, use a conference room for such discussions. Even in an enclosed space, however, don't assume that sound won't carry.

**Choose vendors wisely.** Carefully vet any supplier you're considering to ensure its security and employment practices meet yours. Pay particular attention to how data gets transmitted between a vendor's offices and yours, and who has access to it.

### Diligence is the key

You can't afford to take a casual approach to preventing data breaches. The damage to your employees, your company and your HR department's reputation can be irreparable. Be sure you're doing everything you can to keep private information private. ■



# Inappropriate workplace behavior can be costly

**S**evere examples of a hostile workplace, such as sexual harassment and discrimination, tend to garner headlines, lead to lawsuits and worry company leaders. Although these are important issues that need to be immediately addressed, there are other forms of inequitable behavior or unfairness that exist in the form of covert actions, which often go undetected or overlooked — and can be just as costly.

## What it looks like

What does this bias or “unfairness” in the workplace look like? It’s when childless employees are expected to work late more often than co-workers with young kids at home. It’s when a manager doesn’t show the respect or courtesy to learn the proper pronunciation of an employee’s name. It’s when a female manager is told she isn’t being promoted because she “just doesn’t look the part.” It’s when the boss gives the “silent treatment” rather than discussing issues with employees.

As you can see from the examples above, workplace bias or unfairness can come in many forms, many of which are extremely subtle. Because it can be difficult to pinpoint and therefore eliminate, workplace unfairness is often a silent killer of employee morale and corporate loyalty. In fact, it’s the sole reason more than two million professionals and managers give notice each year, according to the 2007 *Corporate Leavers Survey*, conducted by the Level Playing Field Institute, a nonprofit focused on increasing fairness in education and the workplace.

## The hidden price tag

This high turnover rate is hitting employers where it hurts most: the bottom line. The survey estimates losing employees in this way is costing companies \$64 billion annually. To give you some perspective, the survey equates that cost to the combined 2006 revenues of Google, Goldman Sachs, Amazon.com and Starbucks.

In addition to the time, money and resources companies must spend to replace employees lost to these workplace behaviors, there are other significant consequences. More than a quarter of employees surveyed by Level Playing Field reported they wouldn’t recommend their former employers as good places to work. What’s more, many of these workers



would go so far as to not recommend the company’s products or services either.

## Fighting the problem

Workplace tendencies of this kind are a lot like schoolyard bullying: Much of it happens far from watchful eyes that could do something about it. So it can be hard for leadership to pinpoint exactly who and what is contributing to the problem. Despite its covert nature, there is a great deal that can be done.

The Level Playing Field Institute recommends taking the first step by instituting a zero tolerance policy. It should come from the top of your organization, be tied to your corporate values, explicitly state the types of behavior that are unacceptable and include a guarantee of protection

from reprisal. The Institute also suggests developing a clear roadmap that:

- Provides training at all levels to make employees aware of the subtle way workplace biases can infiltrate their work environment,
- Teaches workers how to report situations and emphasizes their responsibility to speak up,
- Creates a formal channel to communicate complaints,
- Establishes monitoring mechanisms to track reports of unfairness and how they're handled, and
- Arms managers with informal problem-solving skills.

Above all, follow through on commitments aimed at preventing these veiled tendencies in the workplace, because employee engagement and trust depend on leaders and managers doing what they say they'll do.

### Protect your investments

Covert behaviors in the workplace that prevent employees from fully participating in their jobs has a profound negative effect throughout an organization — even leading to significant financial losses. That's all the more reason to take measures to eliminate them now. ■

## Approach hiring from the *other* side of the desk

"Know your audience" is excellent advice for writers, speakers and HR executives with jobs to fill. As the competition for talent remains intense, hiring managers and HR professionals need to put themselves in the prospective hire's shoes.

According to CareerBuilder.com's *2008 Job Forecast*, 32% of employers surveyed planned to increase headcount this year, while 40% reported having open positions to fill. Many expressed concern over the shortage of qualified candidates.

The survey also forecasted several trends for the coming year. Researchers expect to see companies using increasingly competitive recruitment strategies as well as higher paychecks, more perks, additional advancement opportunities and more flexible work arrangements to entice candidates.

Finding the right employees is always challenging, but understanding what applicants really want can help both parties achieve their respective goals. Here are employment strategies that are just as applicable to employers as they are to job seekers:

**Do your research.** Job applicants are expected to approach interviews armed with a good understanding of the company. Employers should also do their homework by having a clear definition of essential job responsibilities and performance measures. You can

further prepare by screening resumés to ensure applicants have the necessary experience and interest.

**Articulate your needs.** Candidates are advised to bring a list of what they want from an employer to the interview. In turn, you need to be ready to ask and answer hard questions during the recruitment process, making sure to paint the most accurate picture possible in terms of job responsibilities and expectations. And shoot straight about management style and corporate culture, so there are no misconceptions about what it's like working for your organization.

**Spell out the hiring process.** Waiting for a job offer can be nerve-wracking for applicants. Don't leave them in the dark: Explain who the hiring manager is, your timetable for interviewing applicants and making a decision, and when candidates will hear back from you.

No matter what side of the desk you're sitting on, the objective is the same: to find the perfect employment fit. Doing plenty of research before the interview and communicating openly and honestly during and afterward will go a long way toward helping employers and job seekers find what they're looking for.



# How can we quell office noise?

### Dear HR Advisor:

Like many offices, ours has an open floor plan intended to foster collaboration among employees. Unfortunately, this kind of design does nothing to contain the many sounds of the workday. Is there any way we can quell office noise without having to completely rebuild our facilities?

Signed,  
*Can You Hear Me Now?*

### Dear Can You Hear Me Now?:

The incessant, unavoidable sounds of the office — ringing phones, loud chit-chats, crackling radios, the constant whirr of the printer, soda cans landing with a thud in vending machines — can drive employees to distraction.

A 2001 study by Cornell University published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* found that workers in noisy environments had noticeably higher levels of the stress hormone epinephrine in their systems than employees in quieter offices. Noise-battling workers were not only more stressed, but also less likely to make ergonomic adjustments to their workspaces. The result: stressed-out workers suffering from physical discomfort.

For the well-being and productivity of your staff, consider these noise-abatement strategies:

**Permit privacy — real or virtual.** If appropriate, allow employees to wear noise-canceling headphones or listen to an audio device when they need to concentrate. Naturally, you need to add a caveat that workers can't be so zoned out that they don't respond to phone calls or requests from co-workers.

Setting aside some small conference rooms or study carrels where employees can retreat to silence when necessary is another option. Or you might offer flexible work arrangements, such as flex hours (so staff members can be in the office during quieter hours) or occasional work-from-home days.



**Employ design tricks.** Short of constructing private offices for every employee, you can do some rehabbing to help dampen or mask noise. Carpeting, fabric dividers, acoustical ceiling tiles, white noise machines, curtains, and even plants or other soft surfaces may all help absorb sound.

As much as possible, corral noisy equipment such as printers, copiers, shredders and vending machines into closed-off areas as far from the main work area as possible. If you can't put them in a separate room, create a buffer zone between the noisemakers and staff with file cabinets, bookshelves or other furniture.

**Make politeness a policy.** Look to your office policies to improve workplace ambiance. For instance, ban employees from playing radios or streaming music from Web sites unless they use headphones. In addition, to avoid a cacophony of loud ringtones, insist that staff set their cell phones to vibrate and use speakerphones only in enclosed offices or conference rooms. You may also have to speak privately with "loud talkers," who may not be aware of how far their voices carry.

No one should expect the workplace to be as silent as a library, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't take steps to mitigate whatever noise distractions you can. Through a combination of smart design, sensible policies and plain old common courtesy, you can keep noise levels in check — and employees productive and happy. ■



# Merit can get you there

The Local Market Leader – Providing HR Expertise

## MERIT

RESOURCE GROUP

San Ramon: 925-867-4400  
Sunnyvale: 408-501-8863  
www.merithr.com

Getting your company to work together toward common goals is more important than ever. Having the right HR team and strategy in place is the only way to reach those goals effectively.

### Visit the all new MeritHR.com

We've updated our website! Stop by and learn more about the HR services and career opportunities Merit can provide.



## MERIT

RESOURCE GROUP

2440 Camino Ramon, Suite 297  
San Ramon, CA 94583