Workforce Diversity: Igniting a Boon or Bane Debate

[1] Gabriel, J.M.O., Ph.D. TAMN, [2] Ogbuigwe, T. Okeke, [3] Daniel Chimezie,

[1,2] Department of Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

[3] Department of Business Administration, The University of America, United States of America

Abstract: This paper is a theoretical description of workforce diversity (WD), specifically highlighting its significance in a wide array of organizational outcomes. The paper conceptualizes diversity comprising the workforce in terms of similarities and dissimilarities regarding age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion.. Workforce diversity was observed as a phenomenon whose adoption transcends the compelling forces of government legislations but remains indispensable as a result of the incontestable complications associated with it. This paper proposes that it is imperative for organizations to recognize and foster an enabling environment that is inclusive and appreciative of individual uniqueness. Such an environment increases employee output and ultimately encourages activeness and peaceful work relations across the organization.

Keywords: Workforce, Diversity, Igniting, Boon, Bane, Debate

1. Introduction

Organizations are said to require a variety of esources such as human capital, finance, materials, and physical workforce to achieve their goals (Mathis, Jackson & Valentine, 2017). In line with this, Gabriel, Gabriel & Nwaeke (2018) describe human resources (HR) as the most valued corporate asset organization requires to sustain effectiveness and prosperity. Similarly, Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright (2015) stated that human resources are crucial in the conversion of other resources into finished products and services. But Mathis et al. (2017) crowned it by averring that HR is the 'glue' holding all the other assets together; guiding their use in the production of required goods and services for the achievement of other desired corporate ends.

Granted that these derivable values associated with human resources cannot be controverted, human capital remains the most challenging and difficult resource to manage due to its emotions-carrying potentials and the inherent complexities. One important characteristic of human resources that should be devoted sufficient attention is diversity; the manifestation of the multiplicity of heterogeneous personalities at work. No workplace or setting can possibly operate in a state of workforce homogeneity; be it family business, or large-scaled corporations, there is bound to be differences and similarities amongst its workforce.

Scholars agree that workplace diversity is an inevitable feature in today's organizations (see Jone and George, 2006; Panaccio and Waxin, 2010, Prize, 2010). These differences and similarities can be said to account for the values, attitudes, potentials, and behaviors that people put up to work, and are as such eventually the precursors of their job performance and other conditions such as self-efficacy, ability to cooperate with colleagues, ability to put forward positive or negative work actions among others.

The significance of workplace diversity cannot be overemphasized. This is evident in its current prominence across academia and industry, spurring debate over decades. The subject has been in the spotlight of many experts ranging from academics, social critics, government functionaries across Nigeria and beyond (see Bamgbade et al., 2014; Edewor and Aluko, 2007; Miebi, 2014; Bamgbade et al., 2014; Ogbo et al., 2014; Ike and Eze, 2013; and Issa, 2011) respectively. Their contributions have been marked by an acknowledgment of the importance of diversity, a critique of how the concept

has been perceived and implemented, and suggestions for mining this seemingly untapped resource. A review of these studies, however, pinpoints to a significant gap worthy of attention. The extant research on workforce diversity is yet to adopt a perspective of exploring or investigating whether workforce diversity is a source of boon or bane in the Nigerian work context. This is the exact gap we intend to bridge through this literary exploration.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Different social theories can be applied in the discussion of workplace diversity, but they are mostly derived from basic in-group/out-group psychology. The three most commonly cited theories which we've adopted are 1) Social Identification and Categorization Theory, (2) Information and Decision -making Theory, and 3) Similarity/Attraction Theory.

- Social Identification and Categorization Theory- Social identification and categorization theory posits that in order to maximize self-esteem, people make comparisons with others within their reach. These comparisons metamorphoses in the development of a social identity, which is defined as one's membership in a given group of categories. Accordingly, social identity theory has been postulated to represent a theory of group membership and behavior (Hogg, Terry and White., 1995); and as a sub-theory of social cognition, social identity theory developed with the purpose of understanding how individuals make sense of themselves and other people in their social environment.

- As opined above, individuals derive a portion of their identities from their memberships and interactions within and among groups (Hogg and Terry, 2000). People tend to hold their categories in high regards while deeming all others as negative; sometimes resulting in their stereotyping of out-group members as having controversy potential for dependability, truthfulness, obligingness, or intelligence. This theory is relevant because social identities and group categories can develop based on race and job status. Group membership defines one's social identity, relating it directly to self-esteem. Thus, it is important to embrace each employee's social identity to make them feel valued and to benefit from the diverse perspectives by which they contribute to the workplace (Chrobot-Mason & Ruderman, 2004).

- Information and Decision-Making Theory- this theory predicts a positive relationship between diverse workgroups and outcomes. In terms of information delivering and within-group decision-making, this theory posits that diverse workgroups possess more ingenuity, ideas, and knowledge (Cox, Lobel, & McLeod, 1991; Pitts & Jarry, 2007); perhaps due to different experiences, orientations and other traits. Although it may be more difficult to initially interact and collaborate with diverse group members, Sulman, Kanee, Steward, and Savage (2007) however found that amidst the disagreements in such groups, there is inherent originality and novelty. The influx of information that emerges from the diverse workgroup can compensate for any discrepancy that arises within the workgroup (Joshi & Jackson, 2003).

- Similarity/Attraction Theory- this theory suggests that people with similar characteristics, especially demographic characteristics, tend to appeal to others with comparable qualities. Persons from similar backgrounds are likely to share common interests, which make them more comfortable with one another while working towards a common goal. Furthermore, such individuals opt to interact with similar people, and they are more likely to reinforce their in-group member's ideas. Thus, the similarity/attraction theory posits that faulty work process is the probable outcome in diverse workgroups (Pitts & Jarry, 2007); perhaps due to the conflicting interest that may arise.

3. The Concept of Workforce Diversity

"It's hard to define what diversity is because everyone has an opinion." - **Goldman Sachs diversity ad, 2000.**

Like several other controversial concepts in management literature, workplace diversity has been argued to be ambiguous administrative phenomena that have defied scholarly consensus concerning its definition (Janssens and Steyaert, 2003). Scholars have, over the years perceived the concept from multiple or different ideological standpoints; narrowly or broad (Nkomo, 1995). Although most of these scholars who narrow their definition of the concept contend that workforce diversity should be restricted to specific cultural categories, such as race and gender (see Cross, Katz, Miller and Seashore, 1994); others still hold the view that diversity based on race, ethnicity, and gender cannot be understood in the same way as diversity based on organizational functions, abilities or cognitive orientations (Nkomo, 1995).

However one may conceptualize it, workforce diversity ought not to be a concept too hard to define because almost every worker faces its reality and implications. Workforce diversity encompasses all the possible ways people can differ from each other and not just in language, religious ethnic, or cultural differences (see Jackson, May, and Whitney, 1995).

Individuals, according to this scholars, do not only differ concerning their race, gender, age, and other demographic categories but also in respect of their values, abilities, organizational function, tenure and personality. They argued that an individual has multiple identities and that the manifold dimensions cannot be isolated in an organizational setting. Apart from introducing their race, age, ethnicity, and, gender in the workplace, individuals also bring in their particular knowledge, personality, and cognitive style to the project.

Hays-Thomas (2004) defines diversity as variation in demographic characteristics influencing the approval, performance, liking, and advancement in the workplace. When striving for ideal WD, there are three key areas to be taken into account: 1) does the organization include employees from all populations/groups represented in the community and served by the organization?; 2) is the integration of the diverse expertise and knowledge from these populations carried out throughout the organization?; and 3) are there promotion opportunities, resources, responsibilities, and authority available to all populations and in all organizational levels? (Sullivan Commission, 2004).

Gardenswartz and Rowe (1994) describe diversity in terms of layers, personality, internal dimensions, external dimensions, and organizational dimensions. Personality refers to individual traits, likes/dislikes, and morals. Internal dimensions include attributes that are out of an individual's control, such as age, race, ethnicity, sex, and physical ability. External dimensions encompass characteristics associated with personal choice, including religion, education, recreational habits, appearance, and geographic location. Finally, organizational dimensions consist of factors controlled by the organization in which an individual works, such as position, seniority, department, or employment location. While most organizations focus their diversity endeavors on the internal dimension, effective leaders in diversity management focus on all four layers of diversity and use the employees' distinctions and similarities to foster a more positive atmosphere and to ensure a successful collaboration.

Furthermore, it is possible to define diversity in terms of acknowledging, understanding, accepting, and valuing differences among people with respect to age, class, race, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, spiritual practice etc. (Esty, Griffin & Schorr-Hirsh, 1995, Grobler, 2002:46) or as an acceptance of existence of multiplicity in individual differences and similarities with respect to race, gender, age, class, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, spiritual practices and so on among members of an organization(Gabriel, 2019). Whichever framework is adopted to understand diversity, the important issues to note remain that workplaces do not harbor only people of similar characteristics or of different characteristics, rather a mixture of both. This implies that workplace comprises of people who are of same age brackets, as well as those belonging to different generations; people who are of the same gender and those of other gender-especially now that a third gender is gradually being introduced.

A common theme across these conceptualizations of workforce diversity is the fact that organizations are made up of people who might view issues similarly and those with varying degrees of differences in perspectives. Regardless of how these idiosyncrasies are present in an organization's workforce, the most important aspect is utilizing these conditions to leverage the resources. Recognizing and appreciating diversity has become more important now than ever due to globalization, lack of sufficient workforce and the increase in customer's needs. With this in mind, being diversity conscious is no longer a mere issue of human resource hiring practice compliance, but a basis for organizational competitiveness and triple bottom line performance; This leads us to the following sections of this paper where we unpack the layers/Dimensions of Workforce Diversity and subsequently the need for effective diversity management.

4. Layers/Dimensions of Workforce Diversity

As there are many definitions of workforce diversity, so there are several categorizations to bear in mind. Some authors and researchers have attempted to categorize diversities into levels and layers. Milliken and Martins (1996) group diversities to indicate innate differences. Based on their categorization, diversities are divided into two main types: observable attributes including race, ethnicity, gender and age; and underlying attributes including values, skills, and cohort membership. Figure 1 below demonstrates Milliken and Martins' classifications.
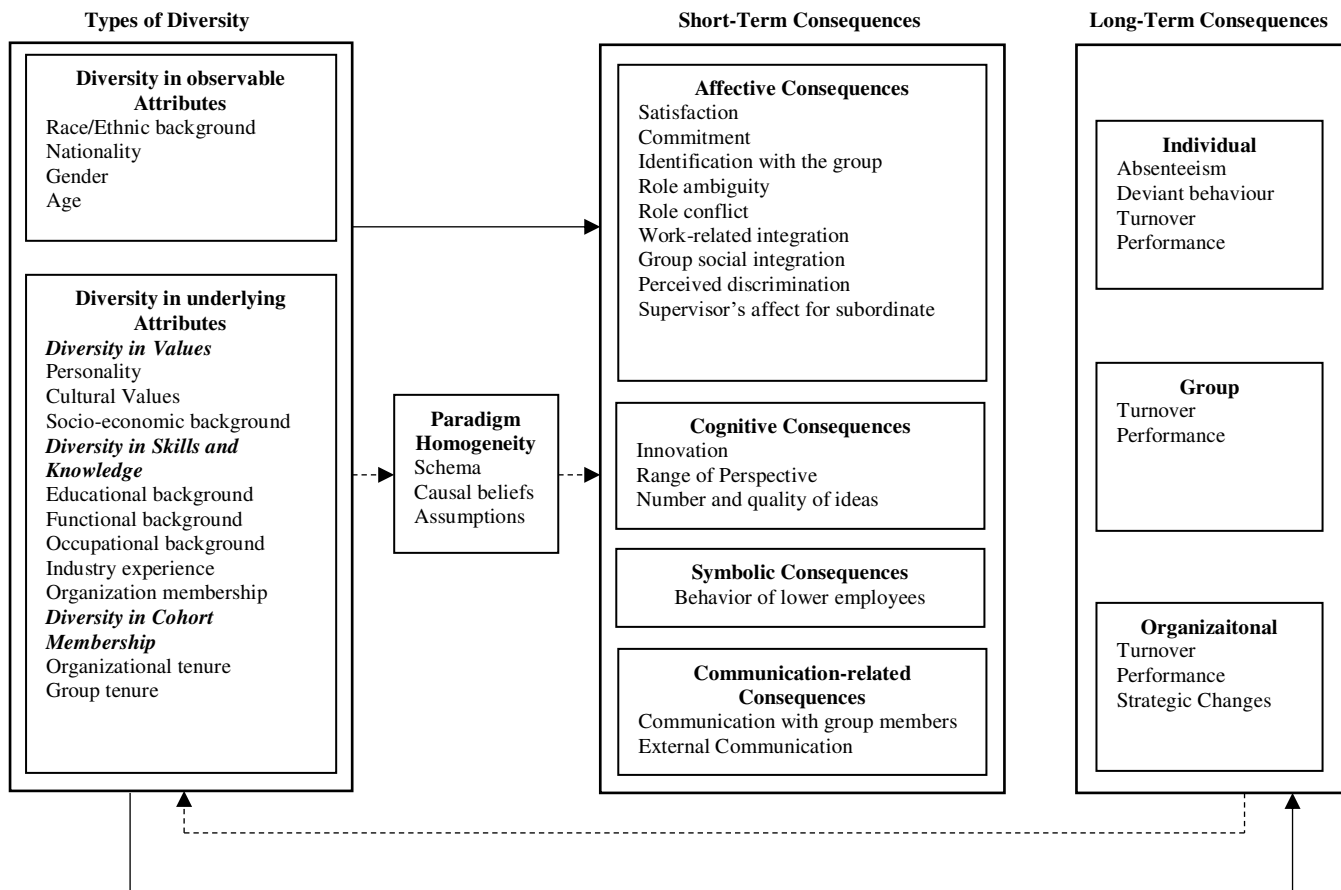
<table>
<tr><td>Types of Diversity</td><td>Short-Term Consequences</td><td>Long-Term Consequences</td></tr>
</table>

Types of Diversity

Diversity in observable Attributes
Race/Ethnic background
Nationality
Gender
Age

Diversity in underlying Attributes
Diversity in Values
Personality
Cultural Values
Socio-economic background
Diversity in Skills and Knowledge
Educational background
Functional background
Occupational background
Industry experience
Organization membership
Diversity in Cohort Membership
Organizational tenure
Group tenure

Paradigm Homogeneity
Schema
Causal beliefs
Assumptions

Short-Term Consequences

Affective Consequences
Satisfaction
Commitment
Identification with the group
Role ambiguity
Role conflict
Work-related integration
Group social integration
Perceived discrimination
Supervisor's affect for subordinate

Cognitive Consequences
Innovation
Range of Perspective
Number and quality of ideas

Symbolic Consequences
Behavior of lower employees

Communication-related Consequences
Communication with group members
External Communication

Long-Term Consequences

Individual
Absenteeism
Deviant behaviour
Turnover
Performance

Group
Turnover
Performance

Organizaitonal
Turnover
Performance
Strategic Changes

Figure 1: Observable and underlying attributes of diversity

Source Milliken and Martins (1996)

From a bi-dimensional construct standpoint, Griffin & Moorhead (2014: 39), investigated primary and secondary dimensions of diversity. In their opinion, primary dimensions of diversity refer to those factors that are either inborn or exerted extraordinarily through influence on early socialization, such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental abilities, and sexual orientation (Griffin & Moorhead, 2014: 38). On the other hand, secondary dimensions refer to factors relevant in defining individuals; however, they may be less permanent than primary dimensions and can be adapted or modified. These involve educational background, income, geographical location, marital status, parental status, religious beliefs, and work experience (Griffin & Moorhead, 2014: 40).

Using different measurements and attributes, Gardenswartz and Rowe (2003) also develop a four-layer model of workforce diversity. These diversities are listed from internal to external level. They all have influence on a person's behavior or performance. Figure 2 illustrates Gardenswartz and Rowe's categorizations initially highlighted in preceding sections of this paper. Once again, it is obvious that diversity is a very broad and inclusive concept, as demonstrated in figure 2.
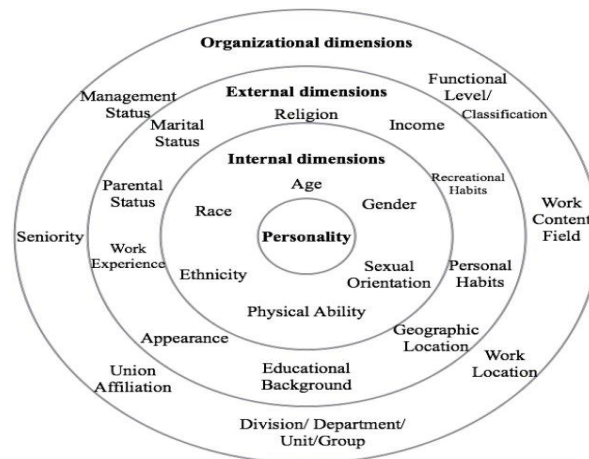
Figure 2: Four layers of diversity
Source: adapted from Gardenswartz & Rowe (2003)

1. **Personality:** This describes the stable set of characteristics establishing a person's identity. These are comprised of mixture of behavior, emotion, motivation, and thought patterns defining an individual and distinguishing him/her from others. There are different varieties of personality traits that an individual can portray. These could be understood through a person's action, the behavior they process and their attitude as well.

2. **Internal dimensions:** These dimensions are characteristics strongly influencing people's perceptions, expectations, and attitudes towards other people. These include factors like gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, physical ability, and race.

3. **External dimensions**: These dimensions are personal traits we can partially or in the most part control or influence. These include factors such as income, personal and recreational habits, religion, education, work experience, appearance, marital status, and geographic location.

4. **Organizational dimensions**: These dimensions are relevant or significant to the organization itself. They include factors such as management status, unit or division, work field, seniority, and union affiliation.

A critical overwiev of these three categorizations reveals some ties and resemblance especially amongst the internal dimensions of Gardenswatrz & Row (2003), primary dimensions of Griffin & Moorhead (2014), and observable attributes noted by Milliken & Martins (1996). These three categorizations border much on attributes such as age, gender, sexual orientations, and physical abilities among others.

5. Managing Workforce Diversity

Solomon and Eno (2018) averred that managing diversity in the workforce is a comprehensive managerial process for establishing an environment favorable and encouraging for all employees. They stated further that diversity management is an inclusive process because all employees belong to a given unique culture, including those from the country's traditionally dominant cultural group. Similarly, diversity management was defined as the process of planning, directing, organizing and applying all the comprehensive managerial attributes for the development of an organizational environment, in which all diverse employees, irrespective of their similarities and differences, can actively and effectively advance the organizational competitive edge (Kreitner, 2001:38). In essence, managing diversity is all about applying diversity as a resource to enhance organizational fortune.

Similarly, Ogunjimi (2015) posits that managing workforce diversity encompasses more than simply acknowledging differences in people and includes recognizing the value of differences, combating discrimination and promoting inclusiveness; and therefore must be utilized an increasingly important, yet complex, element of an organization's business environment. Successfully implementing a strategy for diversity in the workplace is about embracing and valuing cultural differences and using these to enhance an organization's strategic advantage (Mussie, 2017).

Several approaches have been proposed for managing WD, but those of Tatli & Ozbilgin (2009) are discussed herein. Tatli & Ozbilgin identified three approaches/models towards corporate diversity management; namely liberal change,

radical change, and transformational change. In light of their account, the liberal change model recognizes the equality of opportunity in practice when all individuals, freely and equally, are enabled to compete for social rewards; and the aim of the model is to create a fair opportunity labor market wherein the best person is selected for a job based only on performance. This approach centers on law, compliance, and legal penalties for non-compliance.

On the other hand, the radical change model seeks to intervene directly in workplace practices in order to achieve a balanced workforce, as well as a fair distribution of rewards among employees. This model, unlike the liberal change model, not as much oriented toward developing rules to ensure equal treatment, as it is outcome-focused (Mussie, 2017). Lastly, the transformational change model embraces an equal opportunity agenda to satisfy both immediate and long-term solutions. This approach acknowledges the existence of power systems and seeks to challenge the existing hegemony through the implementation of equality values.

6. Examining Workforce Diversity as a Boon

Literature is filled with studies indicating a diverse workforce can provide organizations with a number of advantages (See Esty et al. 1995, Berman et al., 2016: 118, Kerby & Burns, 2012, Rice, 2014, Griffin & Moorhead, 2014). Organizations diversify their workforce not only for ethical, legal, and moral purposes but also for economic reasons. According to Berman et al. (2016: 118), workforce diversity is an ethical and managerial necessity. This implies that organizations could be considered unethical for not hiring a team comprised of a combination of people with similar and different attributes. Such negligence can tantamount in some corporate image failure. Aside from this, there are many other benefits to fostering workforce diversity, as several other scholars point out.

An array of studies have indeed highlighted the advantages of WD in several ways. Kerby & Burns (2012) argued that WD drives economic growth. Others were of the opinions that WD enriches a company with greater knowledge of the preferences and consuming habits of a diversified market (Rice, 2014);); support a broader range of services (Greenberg, 2004), supply a greater variety of solutions to problems in service, sourcing, and allocation of resources (Griffin & Moorhead, 2014), and provides more effective service to customers on a global basis (Kreitz, 2008); meet business strategy needs and the needs of customers more effectively (Heneman et al. 2015); and overall, WD provides a distinct competitive advantage over other non-diversified organizations (McInnes, 1999; Tencer, 2011).

Others have also found that WD fosters a better brainstorming outcomes, experiences and improves the communication between employees with varying points of view (Griffin & Moorhead, 2014); promotes an environment that fosters creativity and innovation (Berman et al., 2016);supports effective problem-solving on the job (Tencer, 2011); promotes more creative and innovative workforce (Gathers, 2003; Kerby& Burns, 2012);provides talented employees with greater acceptance and a sense of belonging, which in turn increases their commitment to the company and allows each of them to contribute in a unique way (Kreitz, 2008); and support more effective execution or corporate agenda(Greenberg, 2004).

Furthermore, WD has been reported to promote a competitive edge by facilitating understanding of other customs, cultures, and marketplace needs (Galer, 2014); by helping businesses increase market share (Kerby& Burns, 2012); and to increase adaptability in the marketplace (Greenberg, 2004). Additional advantages of workplace diversity include bringing together individual talents and experiences to encouraging them to suggest flexible ideas that will adapt to fluctuating markets and customer demands (Heneman et al., 2015); generate a variety of viewpoints (Greenberg, 2004; Heneman et al., 2015) which can result in better decision making and eventual organizational prosperity.

7. Workforce Diversity as a Bane

Notwithstanding the plethora of benefits linked to WD, there are also some negative consequences associated with it, such as the following:
- Feeling unsafe -Many people feel threatened by working with people of different age, sex, or culture. And these feeling can turn to hatred, suspicion, generate mistrust, tension, and disunity, eventually hamper team spirit and group cohesiveness.
- High training needs and cost- high costs are associated with seminars, programs and lectures given to promote diversity in the corporation. These types of training are given to all levels of staff within the organization. Such programs are designed to teach employees how to accept the personalities and ideas or thoughts of others and how to deal with conflicts and prejudice in a professional and civil manner (White, 1999).

- Increased interpersonal conflicts - a disadvantage of diversity in the workplace can be observed in an increase in workplace conflicts. Conflicts arise when two or more individuals or groups do not see eye to eye in a particular situation. This problem is especially evident in Nigeria and worsened by the multi-ethnicity condition of the country where everyone perceives from the other tribe's member as a potential enemy. This is exacerbated by ignorance, prejudice feelings or derogatory comments resulting in lack of mutual acceptance. When authority ignores these conflicts, neither the corporation nor its employees will realize their potential (Goetz, 2001).
- Ethnocentrism, stereotyping and cultural clashes- this is also another problem or negative side of WD and it is of high prevalence in Nigeria's workspace. The most common conflict arises from feeling super which must not be winked at by management(White, 1999

Increases in labor turnover and absenteeism is another disadvantage in having a diverse workplace. When the workplace becomes too hostile, employees opt to voluntarily exit such an organization. And sometimes valued employees are the actors, and that does not make the organization content as it could tantamount to the organizational inability to meet its triple bottom line performance targets.

Conclusion

Workplace diversity is key to organizational health depending on how it is managed. Diversity on its own is neither a boon nor a bane, what matters is what comes out of it. When efforts are made to appreciate, understand, tolerate and accommodate one another in the workplace, the team spirit will be lifted and the peaceful and harmonic atmosphere is equally ingrained. On the other hand, the inability to recognize and respect diversity among workgroups leads to undermining the overall corporate interest of the organization. Diversity is a resource when embraced and a source of conflict, hatred, and disharmony when not included and managed appropriately. Further, this paper concludes that workforce diversity is an overarching issue in the workplace that calls for integrated practices supported by all levels of management for the organization to progress and prosper and the main finding shows no organization in this age of radical globalization would survive without embracing workforce diversity. It is the duty of the management to critically evaluate the benefits of workforce diversity in their organization. On the other hand, management should facilitate the conditions of including the workforce diversity in order to generate benefits for their organizations, this applies most directly to their strategy formulations and policy crafting.

On this backdrop, it becomes pertinent to pinpoint that every employee must understand the arrears of dissimilarities with colleagues as being as important and useful as those of similarities. From each difference people share, both parties have something to learn; andevery similarity, the parties must synergize for greater values. More so, it is crucial for organizations to take into account that the differences in people's opinions on organizational issues are vital for improving the quality of decisions and actions. Likewise, the similarities can reduce the length of time spent in decision-making as well. Therefore, no one should consider himself or herself to be superior or inferior to the other person. No person should perceive their culture as better than that of another person. Everyone must respect and esteem one another if the interest of all organizations stakeholders are about to fulfilled.

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