



Digital Article / Diversity and Inclusion

The 3 Types of Diversity That Shape Our Identities

It's likely that your organization is thinking about diversity too narrowly.

by *Celia de Anca and Salvador Aragón*

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Diversity means different things to different people. In a study of 180 Spanish corporate managers, we explored perceptions of diversity and found that depending on who is answering, diversity usually means one of three things: demographic diversity (our gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on), experiential diversity (our affinities, hobbies, and abilities), and cognitive diversity (how we approach problems

and think about things). All three types shape identity — or rather, identities.

Demographic diversity is tied to our *identities of origin* — characteristics that classify us at birth and that we will carry around for the rest of our lives. Experiential diversity is based on life experiences that shape our emotional universe. Affinity bonds us to people with whom we share some of our likes and dislikes, building emotional communities. Experiential diversity influences we might call *identities of growth*. Cognitive diversity makes us look for other minds to complement our thinking: what we might call *identities of aspiration*.

It is important to remember that categories only serve the purpose of classification; in the real world, differences between these categories are blurred. Diversity is dynamic. But we believe this diversity framework, though somewhat artificial (as all frameworks are) can be useful to companies who are trying to refresh their approach to managing diversity. What kind of diversity does your company focus on? Could you benefit from broadening your perspective? Let's take a closer look at each in turn.

Managing identities of origin. Since the 1980s, most global companies have developed diversity and inclusion policies led by human resources. The most frequent include: assessment tools (climate surveys, statistics monitoring, minority targets), human resources programs (flexible policies, mentoring or coaching), communication campaigns, and training programs.

Consider Sodexo. In 2002 the company hired a chief diversity officer, Anand Rohini, to make diversity a priority. Some of the diversity priorities at Sodexo focused on gender, ethnicity, disabilities, and age. Its diversity strategy included a series of systems and processes

covering human resources policies (such as flexibility measures, training, selection processes and career services); diversity scorecards; and quantitative targets, mainly regarding numbers of women and minorities, not only in the organization in general but also in leadership positions. By 2005 Sodexo was widely recognized as a diversity champion. For more than a decade it has been consistently ranked among the best of the DiversityInc [top 50 list](#), and Anand Rohini has been widely recognized as a global diversity champion.

For Sodexo and other companies taking a similar approach, the result is an enhanced company image and reputation. Talented individuals in general, but from minorities in particular, select companies in which they expect to feel appreciated.

Managing identities of growth. Identities of growth often provide us with a feeling of security. Our likes and dislikes change over time, and so our affinity groups change. Identities of growth dictate who we spend time with.

Many companies have developed friendship-based communities among employees, typically organizing activities such as weekends away, departmental Christmas parties, and so on, in a bid to create emotional ties between workers and the company. But because emotional communities are held together as much by the likes as by the dislikes of members, they can be unpredictable and difficult to manage in the long term. As a result, these emotional communities can sometimes work to the benefit of organizations, but they can just as often end up having the opposite effect, particularly when people share a dislike for certain policies, a particular boss, or for what they consider to be an unfair situation.

Our research suggests that the best policy for dealing with communities of growth is through minimum intervention. Emotional communities will emerge in organizations, whether management likes it or not, and will have a life of their own. For that reason it is best to take a neutral position. Creating affinity groups is positive for the company. But these groups should always be voluntary and develop at their own pace, without management interference.

Managing identities of aspiration. Our cognitive differences find their place in a community of aspiration. In those communities, we are valued for our unique way of understanding and interpreting the world. A community of aspiration is a space where our ideas are valued for their contribution to a common project, regardless of our different traits or individual likes or dislikes.

Innovative organizations are shifting from managing units to managing challenges or projects, asking employees to voluntarily join projects, creating structures where employees can move out of their comfort zones to join temporary communities of aspiration that strengthen cross-organizational ties and help the company achieve its strategic goals.

Corporate experience shows that the most effective strategy for companies to manage communities of aspiration is to create the contexts and the projects for them to emerge.

Valve Corporation, a video game developer, has defined a unique corporate structure with no bosses or managers at all. Each member of the company is invited to define their contribution to the company according to their choices and preferences. A highly talented developer specialized in graphics animation might choose to work on a game by assuming a “group contributor role,” becoming part of the group

developing that game. After finishing this “group contribution,” the same person might choose to work in a more individualistic fashion on the next task. This “free to choose” approach is mirrored in the firm’s office design. Valve offices incorporate wheeled desks to foster mobility and allow the fast configuration and reconfiguration of groups as well as individual work.

Understanding multiple types of diversity is particularly relevant in our tribal times. Individuals now construct identities consciously. We want to play with a multiplicity of identities and use them in as many different roles as their different affiliations allow.

We live in complex times, when complex solutions are needed and where a one-solution-for-all approach no longer works. Each form of diversity is different and requires its own management strategy to effectively integrate people. Diversity is a journey and, like any journey, requires careful navigation.

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Celia de Anca is currently the director of the Centre for Diversity in Global Management at IE Business School, the author of *Beyond Tribalism: Managing Identities in a Diverse World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and a coauthor with Antonio Vázquez of *Managing Diversity in the Global Organization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).



Salvador Aragón, Ph.D. is Professor of Innovation and information Systems at IE Business School. He is currently researching the role of diversity in business innovation and the concept of innovation governance as a framework to design innovative organizations aligning organizational mechanisms, structures and business models.