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Why is Cognitive Diversity Important for Your Local Government?

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Workforce diversity has become an increasingly important recruitment and hiring factor for local governments and there are many good reasons for this to be a growing organizational priority. Unfortunately, many hiring authorities and leaders have become hyper-focused on improving only demographic diversity rather than understanding the underlying benefits of a more balanced approach to improving both demographic and cognitive diversity. Additionally, hiring authorities often incorrectly conflate the benefits of cognitive diversity with demographic diversity when research indicates they are only moderately correlated.[1] Ultimately, cognitive diversity has the greatest positive impact on organizational performance and innovation.[2]

What is the difference between cognitive and demographic diversity? *Cognitive diversity* is the inclusion of employees who have different experiences and approaches to problem-solving, think differently, and offer unique perspectives to unique and everyday challenges facing local governments. *Demographic diversity* refers to the degree of inclusion of employees within an organization that are heterogeneous with respect to demographic attributes such as age, gender, and ethnicity.

So, why are demographic and cognitive diversity important to your local government?

• **A demographically diverse organization** better reflects your community and the customers you serve, making it easier for your staff to understand their needs.

• **A demographically diverse workforce** improves your organization's ability to recruit and retain talent when diversity and inclusion information is available to the public during the hiring process.

• **A cognitively diverse workforce** solves problems faster and is strongly correlated with higher performance.

• **A cognitively diverse workforce** is significantly more innovative and creative.

Intuitively, one would think the more diverse your organization is in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender, the more creative and productive it will likely be. But more than 100 research exercises over 12 years found only a small to moderate correlation between demographic diversity and performance.[3]

Alternatively, cognitive diversity has been demonstrated as a critical factor for generating creativity and innovation in the workplace. This is because employees who bring different perspectives often see threats and opportunities that others miss. How the employees interact and challenge the status quo is also seen as a critical component of innovation.[4] Some employees prefer to apply historical information to solve problems, while others look to generate new knowledge. Employees also have different tendencies in applying their own expertise versus seeking feedback from others. Consequently, organizations with more diverse approaches to problem-solving and greater cognitive diversity have been shown to be more creative and innovative.

Does demographic diversity improve cognitive diversity? Not necessarily. Research demonstrates that improving demographic diversity is only moderately likely to improve cognitive diversity and should not be the sole strategy for improving cognitive diversity.[5] As a result, these parallel recruiting efforts should use different methodologies, but should be coordinated for the benefit of the entire organization.

One of the most important lessons to learn from this analysis is that many local government workplaces that are demographically diverse can become cognitively uniform overtime. In local government and other industries, some managers and leadership prefer candidates who have graduated from a particular school or training environment. In other circumstances, mid-level managers think it's necessary to fill an open position with someone who has the same experience as the employee who left. The tendency for managers and leadership to look for someone who conforms with their existing beliefs is called *confirmation bias* and often prevents an organization from becoming cognitively diverse. This is especially true in local government where the parochial approach to recruitment of local government professionals can undermine the cognitive diversity of our organizations.

Additionally, cognitive diversity can be observed all around us, but because our human tendency is to fit in, employees are often cautious about providing alternate approaches and ideas to every day issues. When your organization has a homogenous culture, it can naturally stifle cognitive diversity. The result is that your organization will become cognitively uniform over time despite your best efforts to improve demographic diversity. If this phenomenon sounds familiar, it's because many of us are academically conditioned to avoid the similar phenomenon of groupthink—making poor decisions as a group so as not to disagree with the consensus—in order to avoid irrational or sub-optimal decision-making in our organizations.[6] Groupthink is a symptom of an organization that lacks cognitive diversity.

So, the next time you think about hiring a chief innovation officer that has spent their entire career in local government, maybe you should consider hiring a candidate from a private sector consulting firm. Or maybe the next time you think about hiring a public works director you should look at civil engineering candidates from the U.S. military. If you do, it's very likely that your organization will become more innovative and higher performing than if you stuck to the status quo. Remember, great minds think differently!



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Endnotes and Resources

[1] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0149206310365001

[2] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/you-according-them/201706/ cognitive-diversity

[3] https://hbr.org/2017/03/teams-solve-problems-faster-when-theyre-more- cognitively-diverse

[4] https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/InnovationLeadership.pdf

[5] https://diversity.defense.gov/Portals/51/Documents/Resources/Commission/docs/Issue%20Papers/Paper%2004%20-%20Relationship%20Between%20Demographic%20Diversity%20and%20Cognitive%20Diversity.pdf

[6] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/groupthink

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