



# DIVERSITY+INCLUSION=INNOVATION (AND SUCCESS) @SXSW

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## INTRODUCTION

We have all heard the statistics about the rapidly changing demographic landscape in America. We have already seen the impact of that transition in our politics with the election of the nation's first African American president and the potential for the first female president in 2016.

2015 saw the commemoration of several tremendous moments from the Civil Rights Movement, most notably the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the embrace of President Barack Obama and Georgia Congressman and civil rights legend John Lewis at the base of the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Yes, we have traveled far as a nation, but we still have a long road ahead of us.

## TECH & DIVERSITY @SXSW 2016

This theme reverberated throughout the 2016 SXSW Interactive conference in Austin, Texas. Conference managers were acutely aware of past criticism concerning a lack of diversity at the annual event, and by extension, throughout the tech community. While tech is on the diversity hot seat right now, and companies like Google and Microsoft are making strides to identify talent in new spaces, the challenge of recruitment and retention in companies is certainly not limited to Silicon Valley.

During a training session on diversity and innovation at SXSW, Dr. Kathleen Wong (Lau), Ph.D., of the University of Oklahoma Southwest Center for Human Relations Studies, offered a set of insights and tools to support recruitment and integration in organizations large and small. Some of them are common sense but somehow often overlooked, while others are counterintuitive but backed by consistent research outcomes.



## A PRETTY PICTURE VS. A STRONGER WORKFORCE

Just as with survival of the species, diversity of our personal interactions and overall experiences makes organizations stronger, and more innovative, in the end. Demographic diversity is as broad as the world is round. However, organizations more often than not consider assimilation as the goal for employees rather than integration when identifying and recruiting talent.

If a Hispanic male from Texas makes his way to a successful company in tech, financial services or communications, will he be asked to conform by stifling his innate ethnic and cultural self, or will those differences be viewed as assets that can be combined with other human experiences at the firm to enhance the overall team?

Clearly integration is better, but even organizations with the best intentions often lack the skills needed to make this happen. Therefore their focus on diversity remains superficial and the contributions from those outside the majority are severely limited. As Dr. Wong offered, “Diversity is a description, but inclusion is a practice.”

## AVOID THESE COMMON ISSUES

**Seeking the “bullet proof” candidate** – Often organizations working to build diversity in their firms, will seek out the perfect candidate; someone whose skills are far superior to even that of majority team members; someone who attended the right schools, has the best background, has similar social circles and isn’t “too much” like the stereotypes associated with their group (women, Indian Americans, African Americans, etc.).

This is one form of tokenism, especially in circumstances where there is only one representative for a certain group (woman, African American, etc.). This allows the perfect to be the enemy of the good and even the best intentioned firms may continue to tread water while their organizations remain PWOs (predominately white organizations) and less innovative.

Organizations should assess candidates individually for who they are and what they can bring to the table balanced against the needs of the company beyond diversity.

**Me too! (Really?)** – People work to connect with others through empathy associated with personal history or experiences. This is often a tool used by majority groups, or



those in power positions, to relate with people who are clearly different. “See, we’re not so different after all,” is the intended message.

However, research shows that this approach can backfire. Adrissha Wembly serves as a senior advisor on tech issues to New York City mayor Bill de Blasio and appeared as a panelist during SXSW. She noted the importance of embracing difference and how we shouldn’t pretend that those differences don’t actually exist.

“We are all different. My color cannot be hidden,” Wembly said.

Dr. Wong goes a step further to say when people outside an individual’s group assume a direct understanding of that individual’s experience (“me too”), it can actually cause the listener to recoil or stunt their willingness to engage, even among groups with similar cultural and historical ties. For example, I have experienced discrimination as a black male in America, but I will never know what it means to be a black woman in America. Despite our historical commonality, there are clear differences that will make her experiences forever foreign to me.

## GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE

So how do we move from paralysis of analysis to conscious engagement concerning diversity and inclusion with positive outcomes? Here are some tools to consider.

Avoid putting undue pressure on the candidate or employee – and the company – by actively listening during the interview and after the person is brought on board. That may mean asking direct, but sometimes uncomfortable, questions for clarification on issues. Confirm what was heard as part of the response by repeating or paraphrasing what was said. For this to work, both sides need to be prepared for a candid and professional exchange of ideas and references.

Actively promote a culturally integrated work environment. For example, when questionable statements or issues come up, deal with them in the moment or very soon thereafter. If someone makes an off-key statement, intentionally or otherwise, others should feel empowered to speak up in a thoughtful and productive way.

Also, when collaborating, maintain an open mind when members of other groups offer ideas or recommendations that are unfamiliar. Talk the point through and judge it on the merits. These types of engagements are the roots of innovation.

Finally, remember acceptance does not equal tolerance. While not always true, tolerance is possible without actual respect, which is essential to developing a truly



integrated and innovative workforce. Accepting difference doesn't always mean we immediately understand, but it does connote a willingness to seek understanding.

These are some of the lessons and tools the tech industry and other industries can use to build a collaborative workforce that drives innovation. The tea leaves tell us that the organizations who get there first have a higher likelihood of being winners in the end.

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