DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE LACKS CLEAR DEFINITION, SHRM REPORTS

Although the vast majority of surveyed human resource professionals say diversity management is an “extremely important” or “somewhat important” tool used in their profession, most of the respondents say their workplaces do not have an official definition for diversity, according to a report by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). “I am not surprised by the results because diversity is a field that is still evolving and has only been around for the past twenty years,” says Shirley Davis, SHRM’s director of diversity initiatives. “Unfortunately, more companies haven’t embraced diversity in an official context.”

The report indicates that 16 percent of the human resource professionals surveyed at medium-sized organizations (100-499 employees) had an official definition of diversity, while 84 percent said their organization had no definition in place. Fourteen percent of respondents at small organizations (1-99 employees) said their organizations had not officially defined diversity, while 86 percent had an official definition. Forty-three percent of human resource professionals at large organizations (500 or more employees) said their companies had officially defined diversity, compared to 57 percent that did not.

The report also reveals that 96 percent of surveyed human resource professionals value the importance of “diversity management skills” or strategies used by organizations to effectively achieve specific goals through diversity initiatives. Meanwhile, 5 percent of respondents said they did not value the importance of diversity management skills in their profession. Ninety-one percent of surveyed human resource professionals at small organizations report that diversity management skills are important company values, compared to 9 percent who said they are not important. Nearly 97 percent of respondents at medium-sized organizations said they valued the importance of diversity management skills, compared to nearly 4 percent that did not. Ninety-seven percent of respondents at large organizations acknowledge the importance of diversity management skills, versus 3 percent that did not.

According to the report, human resource professionals and diversity professionals are more likely to express concerns about diversity rather than optimism. A lack of progress and understanding of diversity was cited as a major concern. Respondents also said that diversity management placed too much emphasis on gender- and race-based hiring decisions, and that the field needed a broader outlook and focus. Davis also says “organizational diversity initiatives should not simply focus on getting people of color and women in the door, but embracing an inclusive culture to maintain these employees.”

In addition, according to the surveyed diversity practitioners, the most successful outcomes of effective diversity management in an organization include:

- creating a work environment or culture that allows everyone to contribute all that they can to the organization;
- leveraging differences and similarities in the workforce for the strategic advantage of the organization; and
- enhancing the ability of people from different backgrounds to work effectively together.

Despite challenges in workplace diversity, Davis says she has noticed progress in the field. “An increased focus on workplace diversity in HR recruitment is occurring and more leading edge companies are placing more emphasis on the business advantages of diversity, and not just its moral importance.”

The report titled, 2007 State of Workplace Diversity Management Report, includes responses of 1,400 human resource professionals and diversity practitioners.