

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT DIVERSITY

The most progressive business leaders see the benefit of a broad definition, says Brunswick's **JON MILLER**

ACROSS THE WORLD, in all sectors of business, the subject of diversity is moving up the boardroom agenda. Companies are advertising their diversity credentials in order to compete for the best talent, appeal to millennial consumers and foster a culture of innovation. They are saying: we are a modern business with an open, accessible culture, a progressive workplace, and a global mindset.

From Davos to Milken to the Clinton Global Initiative, diversity is up for discussion. Business luminaries such as Warren Buffett, Tim Cook and Richard Branson are expounding on it. It is a hot topic, but what, exactly, does it mean? What are we talking about when we talk about diversity?

Understandably, “flashpoint” group differences, such as race, gender, sexual preference, religion or socio-economic class, attract most of the attention. These all carry a history of oppression in some form. But numerous other forms are nearly or equally as important for a dynamic workplace: diversity in health, experience, opinions, skills, personality, languages, wealth, values and many more.

Many businesses already have a proud history of working to allow everyone to participate in business life. In the early 1950s, as demand for IBM computers exploded, the company opened manufacturing facilities in the heart of the racially segregated southern US, where laws required separate housing, medical care, education and transportation for white and black citizens. IBM refused to comply with

those practices. As the company’s President at the time, Thomas Watson Jr., wrote: “It is the policy of this organization to hire people who have the personality, talent and background necessary to fill a given job, regardless of race, color or creed.”

This bold statement set out a business’s position on diversity more than a decade before the US Civil Rights Act. The company’s similarly progressive stand on women’s rights guaranteed equal pay for equal work in 1935, almost three decades before the US Equal Pay Act. And now, IBM is a proponent of LGB&T rights, even in countries

with anti-LGB&T laws (see “Open For Business” on the following pages).

Today, the conversation about diversity is led by some of the most progressive companies. At the forefront Apple, alongside companies such as Cisco and National Grid, has shifted to focus on inclusion rather than diversity, pushing the conversation forward: what matters isn’t checking boxes and filling quotas, but creating a culture where everyone can make a contribution.

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DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

