

# DOES BEING DIFFERENT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

**Jack Ho** explains how being inclusive benefits everyone

WHAT can you bring to the team? What makes you stand out? What do you have that no one else does? What difference will you make to the business?

These are questions that job applicants commonly face during job interviews, in one form or another. Even if they are not posed explicitly, the answers to these questions will certainly have crossed the minds of recruiters before hiring decisions are made.

Career coaches recommend keeping some ready responses on hand. Tell stories of real-life experiences or share case studies. Provide evidence of how you have been significant. Help them understand how you have made a difference because of who you are, what you do, and what you stand for.

Sceptics may argue to the contrary – that differentiation is bad, or that it is not going to work for jobs or companies that simply want people to conform and blend in. A “different” job candidate may not be desirable, for instance, to a production line manager looking for uniformity across the chain.

In a competitive job market with more candidates than jobs, recruiters will still likely gravitate towards people they can remember. Hence, for a better chance of success, one has to leave an impression and stand out from the pack.

## Difference and consequence

Diversity is our reality, but we live in a world where differences are seldom welcome. Some people feel a need to hide what makes them different, perhaps to avoid discrimination and rejection. Such fears affect some more than others.

If you belong to the dominant majority, “diversity” issues may not seem immediately important or relevant, as it implicitly accords privileges based on your attributes. Privilege such as walking into an office and feeling like you belong because everyone shares the same attributes. It is the freedom to be competitive and not be labelled “bossy” or “ambitious”; to be able to share your life with colleagues without fear of judgment or rejection.

To the privileged, these routine experiences may be trivial, or even completely unnoticeable. For everyone else, these are small, everyday annoyances that are undeserved, yet exceedingly difficult to overcome. Left unaddressed, they can chip away a person's self-esteem, motivation and work performance.

## Inclusion benefits everyone

Research has shown that organisations – in demonstrating a commitment to diversity,

ensuring that everyone can be themselves and bring their whole selves to work – are likelier to see employees engage more creatively and productively.

In organisations where people are stifled, afraid to socialise, unwilling to speak up, share ideas and challenge norms, the organisation will, on the whole, be less innovative and adaptable.

Most workers, if presented with choices, will invariably favour organisations that practice inclusion, and engage with organisations that value their individuality and self-expression.

## Does inclusion matter to you?

What does this mean for you, the job seeker? For starters, ask yourself if you believe your unique perspectives and skills will make a significant difference to the organisation at which you wish to work.

Will it affect you too badly if you are not heard? Are you able or willing to repress aspects of your identity at work? For persons with invisible disabilities, for example, the answers to these questions can be the difference between authenticity and compartmentalisation at work.

If you believe that an organisation's commitment to diversity lies at the core of your work ethic, the next step will be to research the organisation. Run a search online for information on how the organisation manages workplace diversity. Look through the organisation's website, business blogs, news sites and online forums. Speak to the organisation's representatives at job fairs, and ask about the workplace culture.

If diversity matters to the organisation, and to you, be sure that you communicate to the recruiter, how you – your identity, your unique attributes, experiences, skills and perspectives – can add value to the business, to the organisation and to its culture.

Finally, when you have secured your job, do not forget to contribute to inclusion at your workplace. Contribute your talents and time with an employee resource group that champions diversity. Bridge differences within your team and work groups. Listen out for ideas and to colleagues that may not have been heard.

These contributions may not be critical to your job, but they can raise your visibility. More importantly, the stories and experiences that you will collect will help you as you advance to your next job or job level, when you next have to answer the question: What can you bring to the team?



## SUMMARY

- Bring your whole self to work and be more creative and productive
- Research your potential organisation and let the recruiter know the importance of diversity
- Contribute to inclusion yourself

**Jack Ho is Assistant Director, Diversity & Inclusion (D&I), at Singapore Management University (SMU). SMU is Singapore's first local education institution to initiate a D&I function. It is committed in ensuring no deserving student, staff or faculty should be denied access or opportunities on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical (dis)ability, nationality, religion, age, socioeconomic status, or creed, and to ensure a safe and welcoming environment where every member of its community can fulfil their fullest potential.**

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