

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Working in a Culturally Diverse World: What is diversity and why does it matter?

Working well with all kinds of people is a key to success, whatever your position is in the workplace. This article series explores this skill and how it has become increasingly important now that the workforce is more global and more ethnically and culturally diverse than ever.

➤ This is the first in a three-part series of articles on working in a culturally diverse world.

What is diversity and why does it matter?

Knowing how to work in a diverse environment will help you get along with a broad mix of co-workers, customers, clients, or vendors anywhere in the world. It will also expose you to new ideas that will help you continue to learn and grow on the job and in your career. It’s well worth the effort to understand and respect the uniqueness of all kinds of people, and to communicate well with and value them. Mastering these skills can have tremendous benefits for you and your organization.

You may think that "diversity" refers to people who are different from you. But to other people, *you* may be the one who's different. Knowing how to work in a diverse environment means being able to work with people who are similar to you and with people who are different from you. Differences may include:

- age
- gender
- race
- religion
- cultural or ethnic background
- marital status
- sexual orientation
- personality or temperament
- physical abilities
- lifestyle
- approaches to work
- ideas and opinions

Understanding cultural norms

Every culture has its own ideas and expectations about the way the world works. These are called "cultural norms," and they may include beliefs, traditions, and written or unwritten rules about how to

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act. Therefore, two people from different backgrounds may have very different ideas about what's "right" or "normal." And none of their ideas may be "better" or "worse." Their ideas may be just different.

Many norms involve work, and this is partly what makes it so challenging to work in a culturally diverse world. Different groups may have different ideas about the following:

- punctuality, or being on time
- speed of response to requests
- standard work hours
- showing respect for management, authority, and/or people who are older
- how a "dedicated employee" acts
- clothes that are appropriate for work
- interactions between men and women on the job
- ways of greeting or communicating with others
- the kinds of gifts that can be exchanged between co-workers or others
- when business functions may take place and what food or drinks may be served
- the relationship between work and family life
- frequency of social interaction outside of the workday

Understanding others' expectations will make it easier to work as a team with all kinds of people. Making an effort to learn about and understand others' perspectives will also help to keep your work stimulating because you will gain new ideas from the people you get to know.

However, while there is room for some differences in cultural norms in the workplace, most companies have health, safety, and work-related expectations. Your manager and human resources (HR) department are generally responsible for ensuring that all employees understand and follow company policies and procedures.

➤ **This is the first in a three-part series of articles on working in a culturally diverse world. Read the next in the series, "Avoiding stereotypes or making assumptions."**