

Workplace diversity management in Australia

What do managers think and what are organisations doing?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify Australian managers' attitudes and understandings regarding workforce diversity management (WDM) and the practices and incorporation of WDM in organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – Methodology is quantitative. A questionnaire in the form of a self-administered survey instrument was mailed to 650 managers (325 HR managers and 325 other managers) in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

Findings – The research found that workforce diversity is not especially well understood or appreciated; especially by non-HR managers. Organisations appear generally not to prioritise WDM and levels of senior manager engagement with the topic are tentative. Statistical analysis highlighted considerable divergence of opinion across the surveyed group.

Research limitations/implications – As an exploratory study, further research is encouraged to better understand cause and effect relationships pertaining to the findings.

Practical implications – There are implications for HR managers or those in related roles who might design, implement and promote WDM initiatives. There are implications for consultants, employees and senior managers regarding education, awareness and support of diversity objectives.

Originality/value – Addresses a gap in the literature by looking at contemporary attitudes and practices regarding WDM in Australian organisations. Provides the first empirical comparison between HR and other managers on the topic.

Keywords Australia, Diversity, Gender, Human resource management, Managers, Diversity management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the past few decades workforce diversity management (WDM) has evolved to become an increasingly important part of human resource management (HRM) in organisations. It is arguably the case that academic and practitioner interest in the topic has grown owing to the benefits that diversity management (DM) strategies can deliver. According to McCuiston *et al.* (2004), for example, properly implemented policies to promote workplace diversity can result in an improved bottom line; increased competitive advantage; superior business performance; higher levels of employee satisfaction and loyalty; a strengthened relationship with multicultural communities, and attracting the best and the brightest candidates. Indeed, contemporary scholars concur: having and making use of a diverse workforce is beneficial to organisations (Stewart and Brown, 2010; Ivancevich and Konopaske, 2012; Dessler, 2013; Mathis *et al.*, 2013; Mondy and Mondy, 2014; Noe *et al.*, 2014).

It is important that equal employment opportunities (EEO) are embedded in the firm's routine business practices to ensure the success of DM initiatives. This means, for example, that firms must provide EEO throughout the employee work life-cycle to



prospective and existing employees. In essence, this mandates treating all people equally and impartially irrespective of their immutable characteristics. Important employee-employer interfaces where decisions most visibly reflect equal employment opportunity in action include recruitment and selection; promotions and rewards; recognition; career-pathing and access to professional development opportunities such as leadership development programs or coaching. Therefore, the role of human resource (HR) managers is critical and it is a focus of the present study.

A review of recent literature reflected that relatively little scholarly research on DM programs has been conducted on Australian organisations. Further, the literature that does exist is somewhat dated now. The present research project, therefore, was designed as an exploratory study to survey current understanding and attitudes towards DM in Australian organisations. The broad objectives were to discern the extent to which Australian organisations are actively employing DM principles and practices and to identify managerial perceptions and opinions regarding DM. The study also sought to identify whether the best practices of a few notable Australian companies (highlighted in the literature review to follow) were the norm or the exception in Australia today. Through these objectives the intention of the present study is to raise interest among practitioners and academics in this field to further explore the issues raised in this study.

This paper is organised into five sections. The first section provides a review of the relevant literature including the pertinent Australian literature and an historical contextualisation of WDM. This is followed by an explanation of the research design adopted for the research and a justification for the approach adopted. The third section presents the findings of the research with an emphasis on highlighting the most significant findings as they relate to the objectives of the research project. The fourth section is a discussion of the findings providing commentary on how the findings relate to existing knowledge and add to this knowledge and our understanding of WDM. The paper closes with a section which draws several conclusions from the research with the aim of guiding practitioners and future research projects concerned with WDM.

A review of the literature

The literature review has several objectives. First, it is provided to situate organisational WDM in an historical, social and cultural context. The review sets out the origins and evolution of WDM in Australia and globally. The review also describes some WDM practices, particularly in Australian companies, to highlight how legislation and policy (intent) has been realised in practice both strategically and operationally. The review also highlights the benefits organisations can gain through active implementation of WDM practices. The overall purpose of the literature review is to underscore the importance and value of WDM to organisations and highlight that this topic is deserving of the further attention and understanding that this research project has been designed to provide.

WDM in context

DM principles have their origins in the American Civil Rights movements of the 1960s. Most significant: the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 which made discrimination unlawful. This Act was a watershed in that it provided the momentum whereby common effort has since been made to promote principles and practices of equal opportunity (Maxwell, 2004). Following the American example, equal opportunity ideals spread to the rest of the Western world. Today, legislation in most Western countries protects

prospective and actual employees against discrimination in the workplace based upon differences such as age, gender, race, national origin, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy, religion and disability. Differences among western countries do, however, exist and reflect in part countries' unique national regulatory contexts. In the UK, for example, a distinct emphasis concerning DM has been on voluntarism and multiculturalism; in France national discourse concerning equality has led to the pursuit of an agenda of assimilation. In Germany, DM exists largely as a voluntary strategy, which is almost explicitly separated from the notion of ethnicity, allowing other forms of difference to be accommodated in workplaces (Tatli *et al.*, 2012). In Canada, employers must not only prevent discrimination, but also take proactive measures to eliminate barriers to equity in the workplace. Canadian employers must also ensure that aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, visible minorities and women are proportionately represented in their workforce (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012).

So, the literature suggests that workforce diversity resonates differently across the world. Patrickson and O'Brien (2001) contend that diversity practices vary from country to country due in part to geographic and historical reasons. This results in different approaches to issues of societal organisation, work and family, resulting in diversity and its management to take on varying forms. In Australia, until the mid 1960s, the workforce remained predominantly Anglo-Saxon due to the "White Australian Policy" – an official policy of racial discrimination (Lewis *et al.*, 2000). In 1975, anti-discrimination legislation was enacted addressing discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, family status and disability. This was followed in the 1980s by affirmative action (also known as EEO) legislation and policies which sought to recognise and reflect women's increasing participation in the workforce (Strachan *et al.*, 2004). Currently, Australia seems to be among the most proactive countries with legislation recognising a wide range of forms of diversity (Patrickson and O'Brien, 2001). Australia has substantive legislation that includes more than 12 Federal and State Acts covering both anti-discrimination and affirmative action (Burgess *et al.*, 2009). Thus, Australian legislation requires organisations to remove discrimination and create equal employment opportunity workplaces (Syed and Kramar, 2010). That said, Australian legislation places only limited obligations on organisations to manage cultural diversity (Syed and Kramar, 2010). In the private sector, DM represents a voluntary corporate strategy, which is considered to be closely linked to a notion of increased productivity and performance (Bertone and Leahy, 2001; Coleman, 1995). For example, The Diversity Works Policy (previously: Productive Diversity) is aimed at promotion of positive economic outcomes resulting from managing cultural diversity (Syed and Kramar, 2010).

Benefits of WDM

Even though legal settlements with some international corporate giants suggest that ineffective management of a diversified workforce can be detrimental to organisations and their bottom lines (Friday and Friday, 2003), DM goes far beyond the necessity of adherence to legal requirements. DM is advisedly adopted on a voluntary basis whereby it represents a strategic response to issues of workplace diversity (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012), which results in many positive work-related outcomes. Diversity and equality management has been shown to result in higher labour productivity, higher levels of employee innovation and lower voluntary turnover (Evans, 2014; Armstrong *et al.*, 2010; Bridgstock *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, strategic DM practices have been positively correlated with improved work-group performance outcomes and increased levels of job satisfaction (Pitts, 2009).

In other notable studies, employee perceptions of the diversity climate have been advantageously related with measures of employee loyalty (Jauhari and Singh, 2013). Racial diversity, when moderated by DM practices and team processes, have been noted to positively correlate with employee performance (Choi and Rainey, 2010). More directly tangible financial outcomes have also been observed to derive from DM (Labelle *et al.*, 2009). According to Gotsis and Kortezi (2013), for example, a DM strategy that is based upon ethical concepts of organisational virtue, care and human dignity will result in financial benefits for the organisation. Indeed, numerous studies have found that top management diversity positively influences firm performance and financial results (Baixauli-Soler *et al.*, 2015; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2013; Talke *et al.*, 2010; Barkema and Shvyrkov, 2007; Caligiuri *et al.*, 2004). Other recent studies have concluded that DM programs result in the development of competitive advantage, the ability to compete effectively in a global market, the leveraging of multiple employee talents and skills, the creation of an inclusive work climate, a workforce that mirrors the customer base and continuity of leadership and production through an increasingly loyal leadership team and workforce (McCuiston *et al.*, 2004). Competitive advantage is further enhanced through DM, according to Jauhari and Singh (2013), because it helps to attract and retain talented employees.

WDM approaches

Effective DM practices must permeate the organisation more deeply than merely being non-discriminatory policies that make provisions for equal opportunities. According to Robbins and Judge (2013, p. 91) DM is “the process and programs by which managers make everyone more aware of and sensitive to the needs and differences of others”. Thus, following the introduction and establishment of greater workforce diversity through policies, the subsequent challenge becomes effectively managing that diversity (Maxwell, 2004). Hiring for a diversified workforce but failing to consciously manage that diversity could even be counterproductive (Sabharwal, 2014; Hur, 2013). Effective management of a diversified workforce, according to Martín Alcázar *et al.* (2013), requires a holistic transformation of HR strategies. For instance, it is not enough to introduce “gender neutral” practices to increase gender diversity since in reality these practices may appear more “gender blind” and lead to a declining number of women employed in male-dominated organisations (Evans, 2012). To retain women in such organisations, gender-biased organisational cultures have to be changed (Hanappi-Egger, 2012).

The need to transform organisational culture to achieve DM objectives applies not only to traditionally male-dominated industries such as information technology, electronics and computing. For instance, academia has been shown to experience difficulties realising DM programme objectives such as gender equality. It has been observed that women continue to be under-represented on editorial boards of scholarly management journals and in relation to their representation as first-named authors of articles published by those journals (Metz and Harzing, 2012, 2009). This appears to be in spite of the fact that the accrediting body AACSB expects business schools to prepare students to deal with ethics and diversity issues in organisational life (Nelson *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, contrary to expectations that business students who are exposed to a curriculum that emphasises the importance of diversity will exhibit fewer gender stereotypes, some results indicate that upper-level business students stereotype the managerial role using male characteristics to a greater degree than lower level and general education students (Paris and Decker, 2012).

According to Kramar (1998), the process of building a culture that explicitly values differences between individuals operates at three levels: strategic, managerial and operational. An example of this in practice is Australian Esso (Kramar, 1998; Krautil, 1995, pp. 26-27). At the strategic level Esso has linked DM to its core business through its mission statement and three of the six corporate values (teamwork; concern for the individual; and achieving business excellence by maximising the productivity of people which provides the means of linking DM and strategic management). At the managerial level, Esso used data from its cultural audit (an assessment of the perceptions of the extent to which the behaviour of employees complies with the organisation's core values) to review HR policies. The policies reviewed included recruitment, training, working conditions, compensation, benefits, termination, transfer and promotion. As a result of the review, the following actions were undertaken: first, supervisors received assistance in creating a supportive environment and in clarifying which behaviours are unacceptable. Second, supervisors were provided with additional training aimed at increasing their understanding of their own managerial style and how to adjust to a style that better supports diversity. Finally, the company's departments – together with staff from the employee relations department – developed diversity initiatives consistent with their business priorities.

WDM and the importance of managers

The previous section mentioned the importance of managers to the success of WD initiatives. Indeed, the main responsibility for effective and meaningful DM in organisations rests with senior management. In the view of Cole and Salimath (2013), organisational leaders can best demonstrate a commitment to diversity by incorporating it in the strategies and mission statements of their organisations. It is imperative that the execution and evaluation of a corporate diversity strategy use a planned change approach to not only acknowledge and value diversity, but also systematically include diversity into the organisation's corporate culture (Friday and Friday, 2003). Leaders need to be proactive about learning from diversity; committed to establishing a climate of openness, equity, tolerance and inclusion; demonstrate excellent communication, facilitation and team building skills; possess understanding, humour, honesty and integrity (McCuiston *et al.*, 2004).

It has been claimed that best practice DM also requires leaders to focus on creating an environment which supports internal communication (for instance, through daily meetings encouraging interaction and dialogue) since frequent employee interactions are beneficial to the social environment leading to more openness towards and tolerance of those dissimilar to themselves (Lauring and Selmer, 2012). Communication and interaction in the workplace can also improve workplace performance by empowering all employees with the information and resources necessary for decision making, self-expression and idea sharing, being listened to by management and helping to promote self-esteem (Sabharwal, 2014). According to the results of research conducted by Leveson *et al.* (2009) in a large Australian financial institution, cultural DM practices – if perceived by employees as a sign of care and support – favourably affect employee commitment. To achieve this objective, managers must invite as many employees as it is practical to participate in the formulation and implementation of DM policies.

Managers can influence the success of WD initiatives through poor behaviours as well as positive behaviours. According to Bertone and Leahy (2002), some long-standing social attitudes, such as ethnic and racial stereotyping, can indeed be difficult to change. This can challenge the implementation and success of DM in practice. It is

noted that some senior managers perceive diversity policies as a threat to their positions and may resist diversity initiatives even when the evidence suggests that DM will benefit their organisations. In Australia, Bertone and Leahy (2002) noted that only a small number of companies recognised that in order to be competitive in today's global marketplace, they need to have culturally diverse employees to serve a diverse customer base. Managers play an important role in encouraging and building this environment through recruitment and development of diverse employees. Organisations that have recognised this such as Australian Digital discussed below, however, have enjoyed benefits including greater employee commitment, increased market share, and higher levels of customer satisfaction. At the National Australia Bank, DM is important not only for attracting, retaining, and developing staff, but also for attracting, retaining and developing their customer base (Beauregard, 2008).

WDM strategy and practice

An illustration of how workforce diversity policies can translate in practice is provided by Honeywell. At the managerial level, Honeywell in Australia has included: "building rapport", "supporting development", "acknowledging value" and "recognising individuality" dimensions into their selection, appraisal and pay policies (Kramar, 1998). Another firm, Australian Digital, integrated managing diversity into their management practices by using performance appraisal and reward systems that take into account how well managers meet affirmative action and EEO targets (Kramar, 1998; Hall, 1996, p. 15). Westpac Bank similarly requires their managers to meet EEO targets together with financial targets (Kramar, 1998).

In America companies have engaged employees with the importance of workplace diversity through the innovative step of establishing corporate diversity councils. These companies include: Sodexo, Marriott International, Bank of America, Verizon Communications, Coca-Cola, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide, Health care Service Corporation, MGM Mirage, HSBC – North America Bank, Walt Disney Company, JP Morgan Chase Bank, Kraft Foods, Target Corporation and J.C. Penney. Many of these corporate diversity councils include company senior executives and are chaired by CEOs. These councils are responsible for promoting and centralising a DM agenda and focusing management and staff attention on key diversity issues and actions being taken to realise DM outcomes (Madera, 2013).

There are numerous foci for targeted DM strategies available to organisations today. For instance, according to Gröschl (2011) and McCuiston *et al.* (2004), in order to attract and recruit differentiated talented employees, organisations can incorporate DM into their hiring strategies and communicate adherence to DM via their websites. To retain valuable employees and enhance their career development, organisations can ensure that all employees with leadership potential irrespective of their immutable characteristics have an opportunity to be mentored (Kalra *et al.*, 2009). This requires a strategic focus on having diverse leaders in influential positions because evidence suggests that mentors tend to select protégés similar to themselves in background, education, gender, race, ethnicity and religion (Robbins and Judge, 2013, p. 427).

Alternate practices to achieving similar benefits include focusing on deliberately recruiting a workforce that reflects the cultural and ethnic mix of the area in which the organisation operates ((The) Aston Centre for Human Resources, 2008, p. 339). Companies might also or alternatively focus their DM strategy on creating greater supplier diversity, or diversity in their advertising, public relations, websites, assessment, training, career development, or compensation and benefits (Gröschl, 2011; McCuiston *et al.*, 2004).

Whatever the strategic focus and particular practices adopted, DM outcomes will be achieved through action not intent; through meaningful employee interactions and through mutual understanding. To achieve these aims organisations are advised to encourage employees to congregate and communicate with each other. Practices which can facilitate this include establishing diverse teams, creating cross-functional committees and involving all people in social and ceremonial activities. Effective communication can be advanced, for example, through various learning and development activities. (McCuiston *et al.*, 2004).

Research design

The research design was informed by the desire to investigate several important questions resulting from the literature review:

- RQ1.* Australia is a leading country in terms of legislation to promote diversity and protect against discrimination in the workplace. To what extent has this positively impacted awareness, attitudes and practice in Australian companies?
- RQ2.* WDM is essentially voluntary in Australia. To what extent and in which ways have Australian companies initiated and implemented workforce diversity activities?
- RQ3.* A few notable Australian companies have been proactive and creative in embedding WDM within the routine activities of their companies. To what extent are these companies the norm in Australia?
- RQ4.* A great deal of the success of WDM practices depend upon the support, encouragement and participation of managers and leaders in organisations. How active and positive are the managers in the surveyed organisations regarding WDM?
- RQ5.* WDM is most commonly introduced within HR responsibilities such as recruitment, training, performance appraisal and career planning. To what extent are HR managers particularly aware of and supportive of the principles and goals of WDM?

Research design adopted a quantitative methodology and a questionnaire was developed in the form of a self-administered survey instrument. The survey comprised three parts: Demographic questions (D1-5); Group A statements soliciting the respondents' personal opinions and understandings regarding WDM (A1-10) and Group B statements soliciting respondents opinions of their organisation's engagement with diversity (B1-10). Group A statements were designed to discover respondents' personal understandings regarding WDM and their personal opinions regarding the value of DM to the organisation. Group B statements sought to reveal the value placed on and status of WDM within the respondents' organisation. The statements were informed by the literature review for this paper and from current issues relating to WDM found in recent editions of the national HR publications of the American Society for Human Resource Management and the Australian Human Resources Institute.

Statements were open-ended and explanations of key terms were provided along with the survey itself. A five-point Likert scale was adopted to capture the extent to which respondents agreed with the statements on the survey. The survey was mailed to 650 mid-level managers in private sector organisations in Sydney, Melbourne,

Brisbane and Perth. The survey was targeted at large and mid-sized businesses with a minimum of 500 employees. Businesses represented a diverse range of industries including: oil and gas; utilities; mining; financial services; pharmaceuticals; FMCG; hospitality; logistics and transportation; media and manufacturing. Half (325) the surveys were sent to HR managers and the other half were sent to non-HR managers (managers in non-HR fields such as finance, marketing, operations and logistics). The survey was mailed along with an addressed, reply-paid envelope in an attempt to encourage a good response rate. Organisations were identified through various online business directories. Data collection was carried out over November and December 2014. Data were analysed using Stata®, a statistics software programme.

The authors acknowledge that the research approach adopted has limitations. It is less personal and investigative in comparison with focus groups or semi-structured interviews, for example. Therefore, it does not allow for the researcher to establish trust and rapport with participants which other research approaches can accommodate. This may limit the respondents' engagement with the project and might then influence the time they give to considering their responses. The survey did not ascertain the reasoning behind respondents' opinions and any explanations for their opinions are not known. It is also possible that misinterpretation or differing interpretations of statements on a survey can result in responses which may not be intended or consistent among respondents. Interviews and focus groups are able to clarify the information sought from participants to overcome this. A survey, however, is time efficient, focused, can potentially garner many more responses and is free from the common criticisms of interviewer bias. A survey ensures every respondent is responding to exactly the same question with the same information free from potential influences such as tone, emphasis and volume which can influence respondents participating in face-to-face interviews.

Findings

Of the 650 mailed surveys, 198 (30.4 per cent) useable surveys were returned. Of these 114 (57.6 per cent) were completed by women and 84 (42.4 per cent) by men. Women made up 61.4 per cent of the HR managers who responded. 162 (81.8 per cent) respondents were employed in Australian-owned companies and 36 (18.2 per cent) worked in foreign-owned companies. In total, 53 (26.7 per cent) of respondents identified their company as a multi-national. In total, 116 (58.6 per cent) respondents were HR managers and 82 (41.4 per cent) were other managers (Table I).

To avoid statement predictability and “marking down the middle”, positively phrased statements and negatively phrased statements were interwoven on the survey. After sorting, the sum of Group A statements and the sum of Group B statements for all respondents were as follows.

Table II reflects a significant difference between respondents' personal views and understandings regarding workforce diversity and how they perceive their organisations' attitudes towards workforce diversity. In general, respondents indicated

Table I.
Respondents by
company size

Number of employees	Number (n = 198)	Per cent
< 500	60	30.30
500-1,999	75	37.88
2,000-5,000	54	27.27
> 5,000	9	4.55

a positive personal view about the role and influence of workforce diversity and claimed a general understanding of what WDM is about. However, when asked to reflect the extent of their organisation's commitment to diversity, responses were far less positive. Indeed 56.87 per cent of all responses to Group A statements were strongly positive or positive while only 13.53 per cent of responses were negative or strongly negative. Conversely, responses to Group B statements revealed that 38 per cent of all responses were either strongly positive or positive and 35.39 per cent of responses were negative or strongly negative. It is especially noteworthy that just 16.1 per cent of respondents indicated that their workforce is not diverse yet over half of all respondents (56.5 per cent) said that WDM would not even rank in their company's top ten business priorities. This was one of numerous disparities between the value of WDM recognised by individuals and the lack of apparent value placed on WDM by organisations.

Table III illustrates another noteworthy finding from the data analysis. It details those statements which elicited the highest percentage of neutral responses. Almost one-third (29.1 per cent) of all responses to the statements were "neutral" (partly agree; partly disagree). In the context of the statements posed, this would seem to reflect uncertainty or on the part of respondents both in relation to their own views and understandings and the position of their organisations on the issue of WDM (Table IV).

Group A statements			Group B statements		
	Number	Per cent		Number	Per cent
Strongly positive	474	23.94	Strongly positive	255	12.87
Positive	652	32.93	Positive	458	23.13
Neutral	586	29.60	Neutral	566	28.60
Negative	204	10.30	Negative	432	21.81
Strongly negative	64	03.23	Strongly negative	269	13.58
Total	1,980	100	Total	1,980	100

Table II.
Sum of responses for
Group A and Group
B statements

Statement <i>n</i> = 198	No.	%
I have a very good understanding of what WDM is designed to achieve	64	32.3
I think WDM is good for all employees; even majority groups	88	44.4
I do not think that WDM creates a fairer/more equal workplace	68	34.3
I do not think that WDM discriminates/disadvantages majority groups	75	37.8
Our company has clearly benefited from the workforce diversity it has	69	34.8
Our workforce is not very diverse	74	37.3
Our employees do not care about nor value workforce diversity	74	37.8

Table III.
Statements with the
highest percentage
of neutral/non-
committed responses

Gender	Other manager	HR manager	Total
Female	44	70	114
	38.60	61.40	100.00
Male	38	46	84
	45.24	54.76	100.00
Total	82	116	198
	41.41	58.59	100.00

Table IV.
Respondents by
gender

In general, there was not a marked divergence of views between the male and female respondents. Of the 20 statements, there was less than a 10 per cent variance between the views of men and women on 15 statements regarding positive responses. Indeed, even in these cases the variance was for the most part only a little over ten per cent. The five exceptions are shown in Table V. There was a much more marked divergence in views between HR managers and other managers. HR managers expressed far more positive views on behalf of themselves and their organisations regarding workforce diversity than did the non-HR managers. This was true for all 20 statements but especially the case regarding personal views and understandings of WDM. HR managers indicated that they knew a lot more about the topic, placed greater importance on the topic, were more aware of the benefits of the topic and considered workforce diversity to be more important in their organisations than did the non-HR managers. Table VI highlights those statements where the greatest divergence of positive views was observed between the HR and other managers.

The data in Table VI is revealing. It reflects quite a considerable difference between the responses given by the HR managers and those of the non-HR managers. While it might reasonably be expected that HR managers would know more about WDM and be

Table V.
Greatest divergence
of views by gender
(positive responses)

Statement ^a	Strongly agree or agree (F)	Strongly agree or agree (M)	Difference %
I believe companies should have WDM practices in place	71.05	59.52	11.53
I disagree that WDM discriminates/disadvantages majority groups	32.45	45.24	12.79
Our company measures the benefits/returns on WDM initiatives	38.60	20.24	18.36
Our employees care about and value workforce diversity	41.23	30.95	10.28
Our company in some way celebrates the diversity we have in our workforce	36.85	26.19	10.66

Note: ^aFor the purposes of constructing the table, all statements have been positively phrased

Table VI.
Greatest divergence
of views by job type
(positive responses)

Statement ^a	Strongly agree or agree (HR)	Strongly agree or agree (O)	Difference %
I have a very good understanding of what WDM is designed to achieve	62.06	42.68	19.38
I believe WDM principles and practices are important	77.59	50.00	27.59
I believe companies should have WDM practices in place	74.14	55.50	18.64
I think WDM stimulates a more innovative and creative workplace	65.52	39.03	26.49
Our company has written WDM policies	55.17	31.70	23.28
Our company has clearly benefited from the workforce diversity it has	51.72	24.39	27.33

Note: ^aFor the purposes of constructing the table, all statements have been positively phrased

more positively inclined towards the topic, this factor alone might not adequately account for the extent of the difference. For example; HR managers agreed by a margin of more than 26 per cent over other managers that WDM stimulates a more innovative and creative workplace. It would seem that there are likely to be other factors contributing to the differing opinions other than just awareness or knowledge. Irrespective of this issue, it would seem that HR departments have a considerable opportunity to better promote the virtues of a diverse workforce than currently appears to be the case.

The second observation arising from the data in Table VI is that a significant proportion of HR managers are also not well informed about or supportive of the ideals behind WD. For example; only 62 per cent of HR managers agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good understanding of what WDM is designed to achieve. Only half the HR managers could say that their organisation had benefited from the diversity it has. Nearly a quarter of HR managers did not mostly agree that WDM policies and practices are important and a quarter could not decisively agree that companies should have WDM practices in place. This would appear to be a significant finding in the context of the study.

Tables VII and VIII display statistical data for all statements for the purpose of comparison. The mean was calculated from responses on a five-point Likert scale where 1 represents strongly agree and 5 represents strongly disagree (after all

Group A statements ^a	Mean	SD	CV
I have a very good understanding of what WDM is	2.06	1.04	50.47
I have a very good understanding of what WDM is designed to achieve	2.42	1.10	45.48
I have a very good understanding of why WDM is considered important	2.45	1.12	45.54
I believe WDM principles and practices are important	2.16	1.01	46.94
I believe companies should have WDM practices in place	2.15	0.95	44.36
I think WDM is good for all employees, even majority groups	2.65	0.96	36.24
I think WDM creates a fairer/more equal workplace	2.53	1.05	41.61
I think WDM stimulates a more innovative and creative workplace	2.41	1.04	43.10
I disagree that WDM discriminates/disadvantages majority groups	2.80	1.06	37.98
I disagree that WDM is a waste of money	1.91	0.82	43.01

Table VII.
Statistical data for
Group A statements

Note: ^aFor the purposes of constructing the table, all statements have been positively phrased

Group B statements ^a	Mean	SD	CV
Our company has a formal, active and planned WDM strategy in place	3.11	1.27	41.06
Our company has written WDM policies	2.76	1.25	45.42
Our company promotes WDM awareness through things like employee inductions or seminars or trainings or workshops or team building	2.64	1.22	46.25
WDM would be one of our company's top 10 business priorities	3.66	1.15	31.51
Our senior management talk about WDM issues	3.21	1.22	38.07
Our company has clearly benefited from the workforce diversity it has	2.80	1.15	41.12
Our company measures the benefits/returns on WDM initiatives	3.17	1.25	39.56
Our workforce is very diverse	2.57	1.08	42.16
Our employees care about and value workforce diversity	2.91	1.05	36.06
Our company in some way celebrates the diversity our workforce has	3.13	1.21	38.63

Table VIII.
Statistical data for
group B statements

Note: ^aFor the purposes of constructing the table, all statements have been positively phrased

responses were positively phrased for the purposes of reporting results). Also shown in the table is the standard deviation (SD) from the mean and the coefficient of variation (CV) describing the amount of variability relative to the mean.

The interpretation of the findings of the data represented in Tables VII and VIII suggests several things. In general respondents' personal understandings and views regarding WDM were positive and reflected some appreciation of the benefits of WDM as highlighted in the literature review. However, understandings and opinions were not strongly positive and WDM principles and ideals were not strongly endorsed by participants. Indeed, the average mean for Group A statements of 2.35 would indicate little more than tentative support for and endorsement of WDM. The SD for Group A statements of over 1 SD on average across the statements signifies an observable degree of disagreement among respondents. In essence, the data reflects a considerable lack of consensus among the group on some fundamental points. The two statements with the highest SD from their respective means relate to fundamental understandings about what WDM is. This disagreement might be cause for concern among advocates and managers of WDM initiatives in organisations. The point is further endorsed by the observation that the statement with the greatest spread of opinion relative to its mean as measured by the CV is the first statement. The finding here is that there is considerable difference among the surveyed group regarding their understanding of what WDM is about.

The data displayed in Table VIII leads to several interesting observations. Most noticeably, especially in comparison with Table VII, is that the average mean for Group B statements is higher at almost 3 (2.996). On the Likert scale used for this study, 3 represented 'partly agree and partly disagree' which can indicate uncertainty or lack of knowledge pertaining to the statements. It can be said that in relation to Group B statements, respondents were less assured regarding their organisation's position on WDM than on their own personal views. Perhaps most striking is the finding that the least endorsed statement of all with a mean of 3.66 reveals that WDM has a low priority in organisations. This discovery would appear to correlate with the statement with the next least positive mean indicating that senior management in the surveyed organisations, according to the respondents, are not advocating much for WDM. A second finding is that the SD for the statements pertaining to the respondents' organisation is greater on average than for Group A statements. This signifies that the divergence of opinion among respondents relating to their organisation and WDM is greater even than the observable deviation previously commented upon regarding respondents' personal views and understandings. The statements with the greatest spread of opinion relative to their mean as measured by the CV reflect an apparently significant difference between respondents' organisations regarding the practice of WDM. Most notably, whether the organisation has written WDM policies and whether WDM is actively promoted by integration with key employee educational and informational activities.

Discussion

The percentage of useable questionnaires returned (30.4) was a pleasing response rate which was likely aided by the inclusion of a reply-paid, addressed envelope and a relatively short questionnaire. Of the 198 questionnaires included for data analysis, there was a satisfactory spread across the demographic alternatives with the exception only of Australian-owned (81 per cent) vs foreign-owned (19 per cent) organisations. As the research project was limited to Australia, this outcome might have been

expected. In terms of gender, organisation size and manager classification (HR and other managers) there was sufficient variation within the sample group to validate the comparisons presented in the previous section and the general conclusions forwarded in the following section.

Respondents reported more positively on their own views regarding WDM than on their organisation's approach to WDM. For example; only 16 per cent of respondents said that their organisation was not diverse while 56.5 per cent of respondents indicated that workforce diversity was not in the top ten business priorities for their organisation. Yet even the respondents' personal views and understandings were tentative. WDM was not well endorsed as an entrenched and valued ideal or practice in the findings of this study. It was found that in response to many statements, a significant proportion of respondents (a third or more) were selecting the "partly agree/partly disagree" option on the questionnaire. This lack of commitment or certainty reflects the widespread relative invisibility of WDM in organisations compared with, arguably, more integrated or promoted HR-led programs such as talent management, performance management or reward management. Many respondents could not say with certainty whether their organisation has a WDM strategy or WDM policies. If WDM was well promoted and integrated it seems likely that more respondents would have been able to be certain.

This study did not find especially significant differences between respondents' questionnaires based upon gender. In almost all instances the difference between men and women in terms of knowledge about or support for WDM was less than 10 per cent. In the few instances where this was not the case, these researchers could identify no discernable pattern upon which to draw any robust conclusions. In contrast, however, the findings did observe a significant general variation between the responses provided by HR managers and those provided by other managers. As WDM is most commonly associated in organisations with broad HRM, this finding might have been reasonably predicted in that HR managers would be expected to know more about topics closely associated with their role compared with managers for whom WDM is not role-associated. Indeed, HR conferences, magazines, trainings, text books and professional associations generally give space to WDM.

Less foreseeable was the finding that although HR managers were more aware of WDM issues and more informed regarding documented benefits of WDM, even they were not overwhelmingly enlightened. A significant proportion of HR managers could not endorse the benefits of WDM, agree that WDM was important or even say with certainty what WDM was about. Notwithstanding the point made in the final sentence of the preceding paragraph, clearly WDM has not been as well promoted in HR forums as other topics. Perhaps because organisations generally might not consider WDM as important to the business as other HR topics such as talent retention, it is the case that the HR community has not shown as much interest. Ultimately, organisational decision makers tend to take interest in things that make or save them money. Talent management has been well promoted as something that does both and consequently has enjoyed a great deal of attention from practitioners and academics for many years. WDM has no such popular reputation and may suffer from a lack of a money-making identity. The critical question here is whether HR is leading and influencing discourse on what organisations should be prioritising regarding employee management or whether the HR industry is reacting to what business thinks it wants from HR and then providing it. Certainly there seems to be a need for the HR community, in Australia at least, to educate its own professionals to a more sophisticated degree on WDM.

Therefore, in terms of the five core research questions this project sought to address, the following can be said based in light of the literature and the research findings.

There appears to be a disconnect between legislation and policy in Australia that supports and encourages workplace DM and the practice in Australian organisations. The literature review highlighted that Australia is one of the most legislatively progressive countries regarding diversity and equal opportunity (Syed and Kramar, 2010; Patrickson and O'Brien, 2001) yet the survey responses do not strongly support reflect this. It might reasonably be expected given Australia's significant, long-standing social cultural diversity and progressive legislation that managers in mid-sized and large companies might have perceived WDM in a more positive light.

The voluntary nature of WDM policies in Australian organisations would seem to have not worked to encourage most organisations to prioritise WDM. The literature found that in Australia only a small number of companies recognised the importance of a diverse workforce to competing in a global marketplace (Bertone and Leahy, 2002) and the present research suggests little advancement has been made. The survey results found that WDM is not a business priority in Australian organisations whereby a significant proportion of organisations are doing little to actively promote WDM. This is in spite of the findings of this paper's review of the literature that a meaningful commitment to workplace diversity begins with the organisation and its strategy, vision and mission statements (Cole and Salimath, 2013).

The survey results suggest that the Australian companies cited in the literature review as actively engaging their workforce with WDM practices in strategic and operational ways are not typical. While further research is required, the survey results indicate that those companies cited in the literature review such as Honeywell, Esso and National Australia Bank are more exceptions than the norm. While these companies are actively developing practices that facilitate diversity through both strategic and practical initiatives including employee selection, pay, appraisal and development, the research indicates that a similar commitment among Australian organisations at large is not widespread.

The research findings tended to endorse the findings of earlier studies as discussed in the literature review in regards to managerial attitudes about workforce diversity. Earlier studies found that managers can be ignorant of their own biases that hinder the progress of diversity advancement (Robbins and Judge, 2013) and ingrained social prejudices can lead to some managers resisting diversity initiatives (2002). According to the participating respondents of the present study, managers are not particularly enthusiastic about promoting WDM and they are skeptical of the value and the benefits WDM offers. This is significant because the literature review found that the commitment and active involvement of managers in diversity initiatives is paramount to the success of those initiatives (Lauring and Selmer, 2012; Leveson *et al.*, 2009; McCuiston *et al.*, 2004).

The literature review highlighted the importance of HR managers to the fortunes of WDM initiatives. The literature showed that the promotion of diversity is inextricably linked with the organisational activities that influence employee attitudes and behaviour such as, for example, recruitment (Gröschl, 2011), mentoring and career development (Kalra *et al.*, 2009) and learning and development (2004). The survey found that while HR managers report being significantly more supportive, informed and personally active regarding WDM than other managers, they are not overwhelmingly so. The data indicates a sizable minority of HR managers do not consider WDM especially important and do not personally adopt practices that would advance diversity objectives through their work.

Conclusion

This study was designed as an exploratory investigation and, as such, the primary conclusion is that the findings warrant deeper examination through further research. That said, what is apparent from the present study is that WDM is far from universally understood and appreciated in contemporary organisations in Australia and that includes by HRM professionals. There appears to be sufficient lack of clarity on key points such as the purpose and benefits of WDM to encourage practitioners to review their WDM strategy and practices if they have them or to design and implement them if they do not. Prioritising WDM and aligning it with other business objectives could help raise the profile and importance of WDM and in so doing improve employee understanding of and appreciation for workforce diversity. Organisational leaders also need to talk about WDM as their attitudes serve as indicators of what the organisation values and tend to influence the attitudes of employees generally. The present study found that managers are not talking much about WDM which serves to render the topic invisible.

The notable divergence of opinion and understanding concerning workforce diversity might indicate that the messages are not being communicated clearly or succinctly, if at all. Organisations could consider reviewing their communications channels and measuring the impact of workforce diversity messages. Reviewing the content, clarity, timing and delivery of diversity information provided to employees might reveal possible reasons why understandings appear to differ so much. Clearly this study must conclude that the most significant implications of the findings are practical and they impact most directly on HR professionals, organisations and their employees.

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