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Mike Cote's Business Editor's Notebook: Why don't you speak English or wear pants?



I once tried to recruit a reporter with a Hispanic surname to join a newspaper I worked for in Florida. Because of her ethnic background and Denver locale, I assumed she spoke Spanish.

Turns out she spoke about as much Spanish as I did French. Like most third- and fourth-generation immigrants, English was her native tongue.

Establishing a diverse workforce that reflects the community and encourages innovation takes time, patience and humility.

And you're bound to make mistakes along the way.

Clay Rush, vice president of human resources for Triangle Credit Union, said it has been working on this issue for about a decade once it decided to focus its efforts in serving the growing Hispanic membership.

It was not enough to simply have employees who spoke Spanish, Rush told a meeting of the Diversity Workforce Coalition in Manchester on Thursday. They needed to be aware of cultural characteristics, such as a general distrust of banks by immigrants who come from countries with unstable economies, said Rush, who alluded to the 150 percent inflation that Brazil experienced in 1983.

Rush, an 18-year veteran of the Nashua-based credit union, said one manager working on the diversity effort in the early stages asked the question, "Shouldn't one be expected to learn English?"

That's a fair question. But for a financial institution that saw its demographics changing, it was not practical.

"Our diversity is more geared to how to serve our customers," said Rush, who noted that the credit union's executive team and workforce learned to embrace the changes as both its member and employee base became more diverse.

These days, Triangle Credit Union's 160-plus employees represent 13 countries, something that sparked a friendly rivalry for this year's World Cup, said Rush, who ended his talk by showing a promotional video that featured Christmas greetings presented from employees in several languages. The video was capped by credit union President and CEO Maurice Simard, who spoke in English.

The ability to speak more than one language is a necessity for both immigrants arriving in the United States and corporations with a global reach. Thursday's discussion touched on both of those subjects.

Amadou Hamady, site director for the International Institute of New England and a former social worker with the Manchester school system, said he spoke no English nine years ago when he emigrated from Mauritania, a country in western North Africa.

When Hamady worked with the city school system, the University of New Hampshire graduate was the only person of color working with teachers and administrators, he said. But he praised the efforts he and his colleagues achieved in creating new programs for English-language learners, whom Hamady said he was able to reach because they considered him one of their own.

At the International Institute, which operates three sites in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, Hamady works with about 100 people. Their varied backgrounds help the group make better decisions, he said.

"One of our greatest strengths is the diversity of our workforce," Hamady said, noting that having people from different countries and cultures on staff helps the institute better serve its clients. "As a person of color, feeling you are treated with dignity and respect makes a lot of difference."

Companies that employ a diverse workforce also improve their ability to recruit workers, he said.

At Velcro USA, many employees who speak only one language are required to learn a second one, said Samantha O'Neill, vice president of human resources-Americas for the Manchester-based company, which operates in three global regions and recently began expanding into Latin America.

The company, which manufactures consumer and industrial products that employ its hook-and-loop fasteners, has a warehouse in Douglas, Ariz., near the Mexico border, and offices in Mexico. People who speak only English must learn Spanish, and Spanish speakers must learn how to speak English, O'Neill said. The company provides language training.

"Similarly to the credit union, a lot of the positions, depending on your level, you have to be bilingual," O'Neill said.

English is the common denominator language for the company, which also has offices in France, China and Uruguay and recently acquired two companies in Brazil.

As a federal contractor with more than 50 employees, Velcro also is subject to Affirmative Action requirements and needs to demonstrate that it recruits a diverse workforce, O'Neill said.

"We have to show how we recruit. Do we recruit minorities? Do we promote minorities? People with disabilities. Females. And we have to show how we do that. But we also live by it," said O'Neill, adding that the company's employees range from high school interns to workers in their 70s.

The Diversity Workforce Coalition meeting was held at FIRST, the Manchester nonprofit that organizes international robotics competitions for students. Research and development engineers from Velcro, which is among FIRST's sponsors, have served as volunteers.

"We are looking for engineers, and we're looking for people who are creative and can really think out of the box and look into solutions that can help our customers," O'Neill said.

Recruiting engineers from a diverse population is one of the greatest HR challenges for any company that employs tech workers. Girls and minorities are not well-represented in the science, technology, engineering and math workforce, FIRST President Don Bossi said in his remarks to the group. Google recently reported that only 17 percent of its technical workforce is female.

"Part of our mission is not just to inspire a whole new generation, a much broader generation, of kids to grow up and be science and technology leaders, but to make that population look more like our communities and our population," Bossi said.

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For more information about the Diversity Workforce Coalition, visit diversityworkforce.org. The group plans to meet again in September.

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