

CLOSE THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

True diversity in the workplace won't happen until you do

There's a vital need for diversity in Corporate America. Along with simply being the right thing to do, diversity has a compelling business case. A diverse workforce helps a company better understand and fulfill the needs of its customers. Diverse perspectives strengthen problem-solving and decision-making, fuel innovation, and sharpen a company's competitive edge.

Not surprisingly, businesses are increasingly baking diversity and inclusion into their employee training, onboarding and recruitment, community outreach, and other corporate initiatives.

On the other side of the fence are countless young individuals with great potential who will never see the inside of a corporation. Most of them are economically challenged, and struggle with any number of other pressures that stifle their ability to find and get good jobs. For these individuals, without being presented with a tangible opportunity, "diversity" and "inclusion" are just words on a poster.



For nearly 20 years, Dr. Arthur Langer, Director of the Center for Technology Management at Columbia University, has done a lot to bridge this opportunity gap. In 2005, he founded Workforce Opportunity Services (WOS), a 501(3)(c) nonprofit organization that connects leading companies with a pipeline of early-career individuals from underserved populations and post-9/11 veterans.

"It's a good thing to change one person's life, two people's lives, ten, or twenty," Langer says. "But to do something that's systemic . . . to actually change the course of the way things are going to be. That's what I wanted to do."

WOS works with partner organizations to identify their specific staffing needs and then trains individuals to fill those roles through a uniquely supportive program of coaching, mentorship, and hard- and soft-skills training.

"Underserved populations and veterans need to be on equal footing when they join the workforce," says Langer. "Our program not only prepares them to hit the ground running within a company, but also helps build their self-confidence and esteem, which is key for them to successfully integrate into the workplace."

To carry out this mission, WOS partners with universities and colleges throughout the U.S. to create academic curriculums that align with real-world corporate objectives. Individuals in the WOS program are handpicked and trained to fill roles requested by the partner companies. The majority of roles are in IT, and include programming and design, cybersecurity, project management, services, operations, and business support among others.

"WOS has a unique ability to identify raw talent, many who haven't had any prior work experience, and provide them with the right training," says Warren Kudman, CIO of Turner Construction, a WOS partner company for more than six years. "They get the skills and ongoing coaching that allows them to come in to a company and be productive right away."

"The commitment to personal learning and growth that we see in these individuals is off the charts," adds Kudman.

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PARTNERSHIPS THAT GROW AND LAST

In 2005, Prudential was the first company to pilot a partnership with WOS, a relationship that included developing academic curriculum at Columbia University. In the early 2000s, Prudential and many other businesses faced challenges around sourcing young talent in IT. The rise in offshoring led students to shy away from the industry, fearing their job prospects would be grim by the time they earned their degree.

In 2010, unemployment among post-9/11 veterans was two percentage points higher than the national average. The chairman at Prudential assembled a team to figure out what the company could do to tackle the problem.

By then WOS had been sourcing talent within Prudential for nearly five years, mostly individuals from underserved populations. Capitalizing on that success, the Prudential team got the green light to modify the WOS program to focus predominantly on post-9/11 enlisted veterans.

Prudential uses the WOS program to develop talent sourcing opportunities in many regions in the U.S. Buoyed by a white paper in which Langer suggested that El Paso, Texas, would be a good location for the program because of its strong veteran talent potential and good labor cost differential, Prudential conducted its own analysis. Their findings confirmed Langer's data, and Prudential set up an El Paso operation, which now supports more than 250 people.

"WOS provided the initial intel that identified El Paso as a valuable sourcing location for us, but beyond that, they provided us with thought leadership and senior management input," says Dele Oladapo, Vice President and Chief Technology Architect and Innovation Officer at Prudential. "WOS became one of the lead partners that we leverage for how we source talent."

The Fort Bliss Army post headquartered in El Paso offers Prudential an immensely rich talent pool. Prudential uses its partnership with WOS to train not only veterans in El Paso, but also military spouses. Nearly 50 percent of the 250 people at the El Paso site are either veterans or military spouses. Johnson & Johnson is another long-time WOS partner with a focus on helping veterans.

"In my mind, there isn't a better population of people to try to help than the people who've served their country," says Dan Zelem, CTO at Johnson & Johnson. "To be able to give them an opportunity to have a successful career in addition to getting their education is a win-win-win all the way around."

Plus, as Zelem points out, many veterans have military experience and training that's relevant in a corporate environment. "They come with a level of discipline that you're not going to get with most young students who haven't entered the workforce yet. It's a unique advantage veterans bring to the table."

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP, NOT CHARITY

There are other programs similar to WOS, but none that provides greater support for the individuals in the program. For those who are motivated, have a strong work ethic, and a true desire to succeed, Langer commits to helping them thrive every step of the way—professionally, financially, and personally.

At times the support has entailed buying a student clothes, getting an apartment for a student living in his car, hiring a sitter for a student who couldn't attend night school because she needed to watch her baby brother, cutting a check to a landlord so a student with four kids wouldn't be evicted from his apartment. There are a lot more stories.

"What always impressed me about WOS is that it did whatever it needed to do to help support an individual's success," says Zelem. "Johnson & Johnson is a very nurturing, embracive environment. Partnering with WOS and supporting this mission syncs with our corporate culture and company credo."

Every company is looking for a talent pipeline, and it has to be diverse. WOS connects companies with a pipeline of diverse talent that's groomed and ready to succeed. Program participants receive phenomenal hands-on support, training, and coaching that doesn't end when they're placed in a corporate setting. And partner companies get a solid return on their investment.

To date, WOS has helped more than 3,800 early-career military veterans and individuals from underserved populations, by partnering with more than 60 corporations in more than 40 locations in the U.S. and abroad and working with 23 local universities and colleges. The partnerships WOS has with these companies and academic institutions go a long way toward closing the opportunity gap.

Not every student in the WOS program will make it. But the ones that do change the course of their life. That's systemic.

