

The origins of affirmative action

Life



" All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (1)"

Affirmative action can trace its roots back to the 14th amendment, although it did not really get started until Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, giving minorities equal employment rights. The overall strategy and outline for this plan were contained in Executive Order 11246, which was issued by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1972 (Gilbert et al. 2). This led to a wave of programs that were intended to further the equal employment opportunities for minority individuals. Affirmative action programs were intended to legally require organizations to be diverse.

During the 1990's these programs have come under a lot of scrutiny and are being replaced with a concept known as diversity management. . Managing and valuing diversity are key aspects of organizational behavior, but the question lies in how to create the diversity within the organization. In this paper, I will examine several articles that will give us reasons that affirmative action should be replaced by diversity management, as well as one that believes that affirmative action is still needed in today's society. Mary Guy believes that affirmative action programs are still needed today.

She noted that if we lived in a perfect world we would not have a need for organizations to have affirmative action programs (240). However, since people have a tendency to work around people that are most like us, programs are needed to ensure that past discriminatory actions are corrected. Opposition to these programs generally has come from "advantaged" groups who feel that quotas will keep them from their jobs. Since the laws creating affirmative action never required quotas, then when quotas have been put in place, they are merely exceptions to the rule (Guy 242).

Diversity in the workplace has been slowly increasing under affirmative action, however, Guy feels that this is no time to abandon it, but to keep it moving forward (242). "Stigmatization revisited: Does diversity management make a difference in applicant success?," written by Jacqueline Gilbert and Bette Ann Stead, includes the results of experiments conducted at two universities. These experiments examined whether there was a greater perception of increased qualifications and competence when employees were hired under a system of diversity management versus an affirmative action plan.

The second article "Diversity management: A New organizational paradigm," written by Jacqueline Gilbert, Bette Ann Stead, and John Ivancevich, defines diversity management and compares it to affirmative action. Furthermore they discuss strategies that will help to insure that a diversity management program is successful. (Gilbert et al. 1) In "Stigmatization revisited..." the authors performed experiments to determine the effects of affirmative action versus diversity management.

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Individuals, both women and those of color, that were hired under the guise of an affirmative action plan were generally viewed as less qualified than their peers. It was noted that the perception was that if they were qualified for the position, then there would have been no need for an affirmative action plan. Those individuals that were hired in an atmosphere of diversity management were not perceived as being more or less qualified than their peers. These results were especially evident when the job was a traditional "male type", for example, an electrician (Gilbert & Stead 11).

They concluded that an organization that valued and promoted cultural diversity would enable women and minorities to be perceived as competent for the positions that they held. Also those companies would have an inherent advantage when it came to many other areas; including resource acquisition, marketing, creativity flexibility, and corporate attractiveness. These advantages would lead to greater profits and therefore a more positive outcome (Gilbert & Stead 11).

The theories of affirmative action are changing in today's world, according to the authors of "Diversity management... Many states, as well as the federal government, are debating the future of programs that are viewed as giving any type of advantage to a particular group of people (i. e. race or gender) (Gilbert et al. 1). In order to alleviate concerns of discrimination, companies are developing corporate cultures that embrace cultural diversity. This is known as diversity management. Affirmative action has come under a lot of scrutiny, both by majority and minority groups, due to misperceptions and problematic implementations of the programs.

Many people view affirmative action as a quota system that leads to unqualified individuals being hired ahead of those that are qualified, and are therefore viewed as less competent than their peers. By treating all people equally, with regards to race and gender, these perceptions disappear (Gilbert et al. 8). These programs, however, will not work if they only exist in one part of an organization. Diversity management programs must start with the CEO and work its way down to the bottom.

By being prevalent throughout an organization, the positive ethics of a strong diversity program will not be detrimentally affected with the decisions of one individual who chooses not to be ethical (Gilbert et al. 8). Through their research, the authors feel that the traditional misperceptions that are prevalent in an affirmative action program should not surface in a diverse multicultural organization (Gilbert et al. 8). As we can see, the problems that have been associated with affirmative action can be dissolved and the goals still met with a strong diversity management program within and throughout an organization.

Affirmative action is under fire all around the country. Here in Georgia we have had several cases that have been brought to the public's attention. The University of Georgia is being sued because of racial preferences in its admission process (Rankin & Suggs 1). The City of Atlanta's affirmative action set-aside plan is being challenged in a lawsuit as well (Campos & Rankin 1). The overall trend in these suits, as well as others throughout the country is that any system that gives preference to certain groups is actually discriminatory in and of itself.

In my view the original concept of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was that any type of discrimination is in violation of the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution. Affirmative action programs that use quotas, no matter how they are implemented, result in individuals being classified and treated according to their race and gender. Diversity management programs within an organization will promote the multiculturalism that is required, as our business world becomes more and more global. Though traditional discrimination is still around in some cases, I do not believe that we need to keep affirmative action in the form that it is in today.

A strong diversity management program will actually do more for the affected individuals by treating them as individuals instead of as part of a group. By looking at the individual and their individual contribution, stereotypes can be avoided. This is not an easy task, as old habits die hard, and people are slow to change. By embracing cultural differences that exist within our organization, misconceptions and prejudices can be left behind as we rise above discrimination and into diversity management.