Voluntary Self-Identification Beyond Gender and Race:
A New Frontier in Diversity
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When hearing the phrase *voluntary self-identification*, some of today's general population might not be sure exactly what this term means. Slowly becoming a more frequently discussed topic, certainly amongst diversity and HR circles, voluntary self-identification is undergoing a new period of discovery and emergence. It is crossing multiple layers of diverse identities, beyond just gender and race. I often refer to it as one of the next frontiers of inclusion and diversity to be conquered by leading practitioners. Although complex in its entirety, it is a fascinating subject area, and one in which lies great potential for growth in empowerment for multiple diverse communities.

The roots of voluntary self-identification stem back through the various emergences of equality laws and regulations such as Affirmative Action, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Since the inceptions of these various laws and regulations, re-definitions have often occurred, and regulations have sometimes been changed or augmented. Societal progress and change, combined with the evolution of equality advocacy and its priorities, has continued to influence when and how these laws have become more comprehensive.

In many ways, the evolution of the inclusion and diversity space has often followed that of the legal arena. In its early days, women and minorities were the two areas of focus by diversity leaders. Some organizations, based upon later commitments to diversity, may still remain focused in these two areas. However many companies have moved beyond these categories, with sincere commitment to the LGBT, disability, veterans and other diverse employee populations.

The challenge for diversity practitioners today is two fold. One challenge is simply keeping leaders and employees engaged in the momentum of commitment to diversity. The second challenge is figuring out the conduits and strategies for engaging beyond race and gender. This is no easy task.

One conduit of possibility might just be voluntary self-identification. Why do I suggest this? Self-identification has become the norm for any applicant when filling out a job application. Most people have become comfortably automatic in identifying race, ethnicity and gender. Some identification confidence is now being made amongst the veteran community due to a strong emotional sentiment by employers to consider veterans returning from active duty. Due to recent OFCCP regulatory changes invoking employers to proactively ask candidates and new hires to self-identify on disability, we should also soon see the result of employers gaining improved statistical knowledge of employees with disabilities. This knowledge will go beyond the historical expectation that they would only acquire this information when an employee formally disclosed in order to receive an actual accommodation.

So I ask, why stop where regulation ends? Regulatory mandate is sometimes needed, and has contributed in many ways to the success of diversity in the workplace over the past few decades. But leaders with insight and passion can push the envelope further. By leveraging regulations and trends and through the extension of strategies in logically connective ways to other diverse employees with similar barriers and challenges. Self-identification doesn't end with gender and race; and it won't end with veteran and disability status either. The LGBT community faces self-identification struggles in the workplace, as do individuals who are re-entering the workface after having been in the correctional system. And even though I mentioned the general population's comfort level with gender identity, organizations must also become ready and confident in appropriate identification conduits and employee communications for the transgender community. Non-apparent diversity is a critical piece to the self-identification discussion and journey.

If and how an organization becomes successful in knowing all of their diversity and making progress in moving beyond race and gender, will directly stem from their willingness to creatively and provocatively engage their workforce around self identity. **How can we, as human resource and equality advocacy professionals, help push the dial in this voluntary self-identification space?**

A first step is simply fostering discussion on the subject matter. Again, it's a newer topic, and one that isn't on the radar screen of some of our professional community.   In other instances, colleagues may be thinking about it, but just aren't sure how to broach it. Dialogue can lead to considerations and actions around cross-connected self-identification vehicles, improved company policies that foster open communication exchange, and inclusion strategies that positively message to diverse employees to be all of who they are. Ultimately, self-identification is always up to an individual.   Simply getting the conversation exchange happening is so important. Knowledge, comfort and confidence growth needs to occur amongst leaders, practitioners, and the general employee population, before voluntary self-identification will start to happen. Human Resource champions will become the initiating forces of workplaces that openly invite and welcome identity exchange. It's critical to remember that self-identification isn't limited to just one, two or four categories. New categories may be added into the future. Those of us willing to take the reigns, beyond mandate and with creative connectivity in mind, will lead the way to a broader acknowledged diversity of tomorrow.

To learn more about this emerging topic, please join us for NEHRA's upcoming D&I Series - Cross Talk on Disability, Sexual Orientation, and Re-Entry, April 29, 2015 7:30-10:00 a.m. in Marlborough, MA.

For more information:
http://www.nehra.com/events/event_details.asp?id=578224&group=