Gartner for HR

Engagement Tactics for Underrepresented Employees Across the Employee Experience Life Cycle
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Many leading organizations are reevaluating how they engage underrepresented employees and what aspects of their overall strategy need to adapt to become inclusive. This research helps HR leaders consider potential tactics to improve the engagement of underrepresented employees across the workforce.

Focus on Engaging Underrepresented Employees

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) is a key challenge for organizations; a recent Gartner survey of global CEOs found that D&I ranked as their top talent priority for 2020.¹ To realize progress in creating successful D&I strategies for their organizations, leaders across the HR function are looking to improve the employee experience for employees from every talent segment, including age, culture, ethnicity, gender, physical ability and disability, race, religion, sexual orientation and thought. HR leaders are currently relying on their engagement strategies to make their organizations more attractive for all employee segments and to drive employee performance. To ensure the greatest potential impact of their strategies, they should consider how to improve the experience of underrepresented employees across each phase of the employee life cycle.

Recruiting

To effectively recruit and retain underrepresented employees, organizations should focus on expanding sourcing from underrepresented talent pools. Companies who successfully source from underrepresented talent pools:

- **Create ERG Referral Programs:** Established employee resource groups (ERGs) should be a go-to source for recruiters seeking an underrepresented talent pool. In fact, Gartner research shows that when using ERG referral programs, 52% of employees are likely to refer someone in their network to an open job position.² Using this approach can broaden the talent pool beyond the traditional channels used by recruiting functions.

- **Validate Accessibility of Job Descriptions:** To attract underrepresented candidates, HR leaders should consider the inclusivity of their job descriptions. Often times, boilerplate language included in job descriptions may include job elements that are not in fact required for the position, such as the ability to lift heavy objects, or a minimum education requirement. HR leaders should ensure their job postings are specific to the open roles, and include the specific skills required.
It is not enough for recruiting leaders to solely focus on increasing diversity of the talent pool to create an effective underrepresented talent pipeline, however. In addition, it’s important for recruiting to minimize bias in the candidate selection process. Organizations that minimize bias in candidate selection:

- **Involve Underrepresented Assessors**: In general, hiring managers tend to prefer candidates with similar personal and professional backgrounds to their own experience. Organizations can mitigate these biases in candidate selection by both increasing the number of individuals included in hiring decisions, as well as focusing on maximizing the diversity of hiring committees. Furthermore, underrepresented selection teams have the added benefit of demonstrating the organization’s diversity to candidates.

- **Evaluate Using Consistent Selection Criteria**: Organizations cannot accurately and fairly assess candidates unless hiring managers use the same set of criteria to evaluate responses to questions. To ensure hiring managers can compare applicants fairly, they need to ensure they ask the same questions across candidates. Using consistent criteria and questions ensures greater objectivity throughout the interview process.

**Onboarding**

As employees become oriented to their new roles, one of the key parts of onboarding is developing a network to get to know new team members and learn the specifics of a new role. To ensure diverse employees are provided the opportunity to start and cultivate their network, HR leaders should consider ways for them to create connections early on in their role. Two ways they can do this include:

- **Build Virtual Connections**: While social structures or other D&I programming can create spaces for diverse employees to build connections across functional areas, organizations can also leverage technology to facilitate virtual connections across the enterprise. Organizations should consider utilizing low-cost collaboration technologies such as Yammer or Microsoft Teams to provide virtual spaces where underrepresented employees can feel more comfortable to ask questions and get support from others in the organization.

- **Leverage ERGs for Employee Mentorships**: It is useful for employees to have access to formal structures that allow them to build mentorship relationships with more senior colleagues. Organizations should consider using a formal mentorship program through their ERG programs to ensure that employees have support from someone beyond their immediate workgroup who can provide an impartial view into their work challenges. Such a program also helps build networks that enable both collaboration and internal mobility across the enterprise.

**Development**

Learning and development opportunities are a strong engagement driver for all employees. In fact, dissatisfaction with future career opportunities ranks as the second most frequently cited source
by employees to leave their previous employer, in 3Q19. As a result, L&D leaders should:

- **Personalize In-role Development**: Employees should ideally learn the majority of their on-the-job training through in-role development, and Gartner research shows that dedicated coaching can be even more impactful for racially and ethnically diverse employees. To develop underrepresented talent through their work, provide managers and leaders training to equip them to more effectively support their direct reports with more frequent coaching and informal performance conversations.

- **Engage Skip-level Managers**: Today’s work environment is increasingly matrixed, and as a result, it can often be challenging for direct managers to provide the support required to create cross-team development opportunities. By encouraging skip-level managers to have career conversations with employees, senior leaders know how the organization can improve existing development, and employees gain greater visibility for opportunities across the organization that they — and their direct managers — may not be aware of.

**Retention**

While there are many factors that can influence whether underrepresented talent remains committed to the organization, there are often low-cost options that have a disproportionate impact. Organizations should:

- **Communicate the Organization's Commitment to Inclusion**: Although many organizations continue to prioritize their D&I strategies, they may be missing out on opportunities to further engage underrepresented employees if employees themselves are not aware of the organization's commitment. HR leaders should partner closely with their organizational communications team to ensure employees are aware of the different D&I efforts currently underway and the progress already made toward achieving the organization's D&I goals.

- **Crowdsource Preferences of Underrepresented Talent**: To more effectively understand what underrepresented candidates value, some organizations are crowdsourcing and asking their own employees what they value and what keeps them engaged at work. Organizations can then use this information to customize their EVP strategy for underrepresented talent segments to meet these needs. Asking underrepresented employees for their preferences allows HR leaders to take advantage of easy wins, such as offering a floating holiday that can help employees take a day to celebrate with their family for a holiday they may not typically get a paid day off for.

**Offboarding**

Despite the best engagement programs, it is inevitable that each employee will eventually exit the organization. Organizations maximize the opportunities they have to learn from the departure of underrepresented employees when they:
Maximize Lessons from Exit Interviews: While it may be too late to engage an employee that has already left the organization, it is not too late for organizations to learn how they can continue to improve their D&I strategies. Consider how the organization is using exit interviews with underrepresented employees as a feedback mechanism to continue to improve the organization's D&I strategy. There are likely areas of improvement that may not emerge as part of the more formal elements of performance management, or other employee feedback mechanisms.

Offer Alumni Groups on Social Media: Social media offers an easy way for former employees to remain current on the latest happenings of an organization, if they are interested in staying connected with the organization. As changes inevitably occur in available roles, alumni groups can serve as a helpful mechanism to let underrepresented employees know about changes that may have occurred since they exited the organization. These interventions can both attract “boomerang” employees that return to an organization later in their career as well as increase employee referrals.

Endnotes

1. 2018 Gartner CEO Future of HR Agenda Poll
2. 2018 Gartner Recruiting Candidate Survey
3. “Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms,” ASA.
4. “Global Talent Monitor 3Q19: Update on Workforce Activity”
5. “Advance Racially and Ethnically Diverse Employees”

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