

Cognitive Diversity: How Your Organization Can Thrive With It



Did you know that [auto-tune](#), so prevalent in music today, was actually developed by an engineer at an oil company seeking to send sound waves into the ground for seismic data exploration? This is a great example of how cognitive diversity can drive innovative thinking by encouraging employees to take their experience and expertise from one area and apply them to another.

Diversity comes in many forms and is hugely beneficial to team collaboration, problem-solving, and business success. While bio-demographic diversity (age, gender, culture, language, and race/ethnicity) may be more evident, cognitive diversity (expertise, experience, and perspective) is gaining interest among L&D professionals. By understanding the benefits of cognitive diversity and building it into the hiring process, organizations can realize higher functioning and more creative teams. What does supporting this type of diversity look like in practice, and how can it enable growth and innovation within an organization?

Birds of a Feather Don't Necessarily Work Well Together

As this [Forbes article](#) suggests, there is an unfortunate trend in hiring employees who think alike. This can also include applicants who share a similar cultural, educational, or social background. While this may appear to be a positive form of “team building,” it leaves a lot on the table when it comes to encouraging outside-the-box thinking. Finding the “perfect fit” is essential for creating high functioning teams, but there are many factors that contribute to the overall quality of prospective hires—and they shouldn't be overlooked. Embracing cognitive diversity and difference is the foundation of critical and creative thinking.

Cognitive Diversity Drives Problem Solving

As demonstrated by the auto-tune example, outside-the-box thinking can yield unexpected and amazing results. This level of innovative thinking and cognitive diversity can contribute to how well your teams develop solutions to problems. This Harvard Business Review [study](#) shows how higher cognitive diversity correlates to better team performance, which in turn makes them more effective, efficient, and valuable to the business.

You know the expression “to a hammer, everything is a nail.” If your team approaches every problem with the same perspective, they're going to arrive at a tried-and-true answer. However, when teams have diverse perspectives, they have the opportunity to invent more diverse solutions. Individuals can better contribute to solutions and engage with complex situations more effectively when they bring fresh perspectives and alternative experiences.

VR Learning Example: Cognitive Diversity at Play

Is it any wonder that when [virtual reality learning](#) became an established mode of learning L&D teams turned to game designers for inspiration? Since many of the qualities that make virtual reality an engaging, immersive, and visceral experience in learning are the same qualities that video game designers have been developing for decades. Nowadays, it's not uncommon for L&D to bring in game designers or [developers](#) as part of their instructional design process to help broaden the cognitive diversity of their learning teams.

Game designers working in the virtual reality gaming industry build visually stunning landscapes where players need to proceed along predetermined paths to ensure a story is told and the game can progress, but how can they ensure that players “learn” the right path to take? Designers use visual cues, such as a particular color or dynamic lighting, to tell the player where to look and how to proceed. These same techniques can be applied to story-based VR learning experiences.

Players also need to learn how to use VR controllers. Game designers are experienced at providing simple, integrated training tutorials that easily assist in the learning process. When applied to VR learning, VR experiences can be designed with greater ease of use and quicker adoption to allow learners to “get into the game” faster.

How to Bring Cognitive Diversity to Your Organization

It's important to establish the value of diversity with your executive leaders. When it comes to recruiting and hiring, always consider the full breadth of a candidate's life and professional experience. Consider what business challenge your organization is attempting to solve and then define the capabilities and experience that may allow you to address these challenges in innovative ways.

Consider working with an L&D talent vendor that can assist you in defining your talent strategy and provide you with access to a pool of experienced L&D professionals from a variety of backgrounds.