

Learn to harness diversity for strategic benefit

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The UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) will be refocusing the discourse on transformation this year by moving the discussion from issues of compliance to those of strategic advantage with a new short course called Leveraging Inclusivity and Diversity.



Programme Director Craig Arendse - who is also MD of Mediation and Transformation SA - says the time has come for companies "to move energetically away from being compliance-based organisations and to realise the massive strategic benefits that leveraging diversity can deliver".

"More than 15 years into a democratic South Africa and discourse on diversity in the workplace continues to be fuelled by political and social agendas. Transformation is still for many an issue of compliance but evidence is mounting that leveraging inclusivity and diversity actually makes strategic business sense and can increase organisational competitiveness," he said.

Arendse's short course in September is geared to providing the skills to change this perspective by providing delegates with an understanding of the importance of diversity as a business asset and by offering the skills and tools to link diversity to strategic plans and increase competitive advantage. Diagnostic tools and templates to develop diversity action plans will also be provided to delegates.

The business case for diversity - as will be presented on the course - has received coverage in top international management and HR journals for some time now, yet social and political motivations continue to dominate the transformation debate in South Africa.

Researchers Stephen Knouse and Alvin and Patricia Smith at the University of Louisiana, for example, recently put forward a convincing supportive argument. In a paper titled "The Business Case for Diversity: Is Diversity Cost Effective?" they demonstrate that diverse workforces offer a competitive edge in several areas: better customer service, better problem solving, better critical analysis, tolerance of different ideas, better understanding of organisational communication patterns, increased flexibility, valuing fairness and respect for individual contributions, improved innovation, and sharing best practices.

Arendse believes this strategic motivation could do more for creating truly inclusive organisations in this country than legislation has been able to do.

"Some companies here continue to bemoan the transformation agenda and its supposed negative effects on operations. Enough evidence now exists to rubbish these claims and businesses need to be aware that it is not diversity that is the problem - it is their attitude towards it first and foremost that is," explained Arendse.

"To talk of 'diversity management' is still to see each group in a separate corner. Instead of simply asking, 'how can we all get along better?' we need to be asking 'how can we leverage our diverse workforce to become a better business?'"

In practice, leveraging diversity is about building strong, integrated organisations where the corporate culture is truly inclusive and not dominated by one worldview.

The way companies harness their diversity will also influence how they see and access new markets, said Arendse.

"Product and service offerings that are more inclusive will open the door to new emergent markets in this country and globally. We are already seeing an immense increase in the spending power of a diverse group of South Africans entering higher LSMs. Truly inclusive organisations are naturally better placed to identify these opportunities and to position themselves to take advantage."

The UCT GSB's Executive Education unit will offer Leveraging Inclusivity and Diversity for the first time from 8-10 September this year. Arendse believes it will be an empowering experience for the HR managers, directors and senior leaders that sign up for the two-day programme.

"They will leave with a re-energised outlook on diversity and transformation as well as a powerful stand - and toolkit - for leveraging diversity within their own organisations," he said.

Delegates will also benefit from Arendse's more than 20 years of experience in the field of mediation and transformation. He has consulted to international organisations - including the World Bank - and was a key player in facilitating a peace agreement between PAGAD and the South African Police when tensions ran high several years ago.

For more information about Leveraging Inclusivity and Diversity contact Mario Pearce on 021 406 1268 or SMS 'Diversity' to 31497.

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