

Ethnic Hair and the effects of Diversity in the Workplace

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Capstone Project

Abstract

This paper identifies that companies are using hair as a means to not hire people with textured hair. Discrimination against this physical appearance, causes these companies to lack diversity and hurt themselves in the end. Studies have shown that diverse and inclusive companies perform better. This paper dives into the background of natural hair and explains how it is not widely accepted in professional setting and also how not being diverse or inclusive negatively affects businesses.

Introduction

How much thought do you put into your hair before you go into an interview for a job? Do you have to alter the appearance of your hair to prevent dirty looks at work or to keep your supervisor from having a talk with you about your hair in their office? How many times a day do your co-workers ask to touch your hair like it is something they've never seen before? These are things that myself and other African Americans deal with on a daily basis. We not only have to put thought into what we wear, what we bring for lunch, or anything our job requires, but we also put a lot of thought into our hair. Our hair is one of our biggest issues, yes issues, because it brings extra attention to us at work and could get us in trouble.

Growing up preparing for job interviews was stressful. I barely slept the night before because I wanted to make sure my clothes were presentable, I practiced enough interview questions, and I prepared all of my documents. More important than all of this my mother always made sure my hair was "professional." My natural hair alone was never enough, it always had to be tailored a certain way that would not draw attention to the person interviewing me. Usually I would spend hours washing, conditioning, blow drying, hot combing, and flat ironing my hair the night before. The end result made my hair mirror the hair of people with less textured hair. I

grew up thinking that altering my hair texture was the only way my hair could be accepted in the workplace and avoid negative connotations. I thought this was only my own reality, but I later found out through word of mouth, and reading that this was happening to many other people.

The purpose of this project is to explain how textured hair is used as a means to not hire candidates for a job and how companies are losing out on revenue because of it.

Problem

Employers use hair as a basis to bypass applicants which makes their company less diverse and can in turn hurt their business because it has been proven that businesses that are more diverse perform better. By providing employees with an environment where they feel like they are accepted regardless of their physical appearance, race, ethnic background etc, everyone can thrive (Ward, 2019).

Many black men and women have been in situations where they have to choose between going against their cultural identity and keeping their job. This is because in order to seek promotion or job opportunity, one must appear to fit the culture of that firm or be excluded (Reidy, 2016).

Background of Ethnic Hair

Naturally black men and women have hair that looks different. Natural hairstyles such as afros, braids or cornrows, and dreadlocks are styles that allow black people to protect their strands and avoid altering their texture. This means avoiding chemicals and damaging heat. It takes way more for textured hair to be styled to resemble straight hair. In order for textured hair to be straight it has to either be pressed with heat from blow drying, flat irons, or hot comb, or be changed using chemicals like perm, relaxers, or keratin treatments. This process also has to be repeated after rain or washing because the chemical makeup of the hair doesn't allow it to

withstand the precipitation or humidity. It will revert back to its original state (Hargro, 2011). Textured hair grows upward which is the opposite for looser textures that grow downward. The coils of textured hair make it easier to be damaged. It may appear to be strong and thick, but it is actually fragile. People with textured hair wear protective styles to prevent damage. These styles are easy to achieve for this hair type because its coil and pattern is easy to tangle and interlock (Hargro, 2011). Natural hair has been a struggle in African American history for years and many don't understand it, not even some African Americans themselves. In the 70's the afro symbolized Black pride and African roots. While this is true, there has always been the concept that straight hair is better and beautiful while the natural textured hair of African Americans is nappy and ugly. Until recently, magazines, ads, and TV did not acknowledge kinky hair. The imagery of kinky hair was not reinforced because these volumes almost always portrayed African Americans with straightened hair either by heat or chemical change like a perm. This has contributed to how straight hair became associated with grooming and care (Hargro, 2011).

Personally, I don't believe that it is acceptable to call protective styles or textured hair in general unprofessional. I believe that statements such as these have become common amongst employers and it takes away from people with textured hair being able to express who they really are. I have felt that I had to change the appearance of my hair to be accepted by my employer and now that I am older, I no longer will allow the care of my hair to be compromised for anyone. I don't think some employers understand the background of textured hair and it leads to my research of why the ethnic hair of African Americans is being discriminated against in the workplace.

Natural hair in the Workplace

As stated previously, there are plenty instances of textured hair being an issue in the workplace. In 2018, a black woman went into a job interview for a customer service position. This black woman was offered the job but was told that she could not be hired with her dreadlocks because they “tend to get messy”. This discriminates African Americans because of the hair they are born with. This tells them that their hair is messy and should look a different way.

In 1981, a black woman employed with American Airlines was told her cornrows went against their grooming policy. She was actually accused of mimicking a white actress, Bo Derek’s (1979 film 10) hairstyle. If you go back in history, you will find that cornrows originated from Africa and the Caribbean (Reidy, 2016).

Another case about natural hair involves the TSA who pats down women’s textured hair and focused heavily on Afro’s. The ACLU filed a complaint and TSA agreed to stop after reaching an agreement with the ACLU. They have agreed to stop this practice (Reidy, 2016). I felt so violated experiencing this at the airport. My experience in law enforcement has taught me that people can hide things inside their ponytails or extension. I was moved by watching women with less textured hair walk through the lines untouched with high buns and multiple hair extensions but people with textured hair constantly being stopped.

The US military was asked to rethink their grooming policies by the US Black Caucus. Their policy barred cornrows, twists, and dreadlocks. The outcome was that cornrow braids are now allowed. (Reidy, 2016). If people can’t wear their natural hair when they’re putting their life on the line, then where can it really be accepted?

In a study of personnel officials, managers with hidden bias would not choose a candidate with an ethnic hairstyle, but this same candidate would have a better chance at the job if their

hair was straightened and resembled less ethnic hair (Reidy, 2016). Instances such as these prove that companies that allow this behavior are not accepting of physical appearance. This makes them less diverse and less successful.

Diversity in Business

According to (Highland ,2014) diversity in the workplace means employing people that don't look the same, don't have the same background, and who look different. The differences in the people in a diverse work environment may be national origin, hair, clothes, age, gender, physical abilities, physical appearance, and so forth. Highland goes on to say that diversity in the workplace has become the norm for a lot of employers and that "more employers are becoming awakened to the fact that having a diverse workforce is not a burden but a potential strength (Highland, p214)." When companies analyze their future growth, they see that they have to not only attract different people but also retain them in order to be successful. Some companies go as far as putting together programs specifically about diversity just to educate their employees on working with people with individual differences and how these differences can be assets in the workplace (Highland, 2014).

That was all I needed to hear, but that may or may not be enough to convince companies not on the bandwagon that they need to be. "Organizations that are committed to the foundational principles of a diverse workforce extend employment opportunities to applicants of varied qualifications, backgrounds, and origins. As such, the establishment and nurturing of a diverse workforce is a process that shows the organization is capable of achieving homogeneity of purpose through people with varied characteristics and capabilities. The dynamics of a diverse workforce are manifested in the organization's employee recruitment and development, organizational development, external interactions, and cultural interactions." (Hill, 2012).

Having a diverse workplace says a lot about the company. When a work environment is welcoming of multiple dynamics from its employees, it in turn makes them feel appreciated and accepted for being themselves. Other benefits of a diverse workforce include: enhancing flexibility in adapting to competitive environments, providing an innovative and creative platform due to self-initiated research and problem solving efforts, demonstrating success and favorable reputations for existing and prospective employees, high employee turnover, exposing different learning environment to employees, and opportunities to expand to international markets. Companies that are known for displaying these efforts are Google, IBM, and American Airlines. When I initially began college, I was an Information Technology major. I've always been fascinated with Google, but I never applied for an internship or job opportunity with the company because I feared that my hair would be a deal breaker for them considering how successful the company was. I wish I had taken my chances.

To make things clearer, I'd like to point out the fact that in an article Ward (2019) tells us that diversity drives better business outcomes as a whole. In an article about diversity in business, Ward pointed out that you cannot chose which diverse issues you prefer because it defeats the purpose. When you start to exclude a difference, the company will suffer. Employers need to create and welcome an environment where people of all color, race, background, hair, etc. are valued.

Benefits of Diversity

Bandal and Harter (2014) conducted a study on the relationship between gender diversity and financial performance. The result was that what actually happened by allowing this diverse culture was that an engaged culture was created an it yielded financial benefits. This specific study focused on gender alone in the retail and hospitality industry. For retailers, gender diversity

and employee engagement positively related to revenue. Gender diverse and engaged businesses were said to have a revenue increase of 5.76%.

For hospitals, the results of this study indicated that gender diversity and employee engagement positively affect Net Profit. Employee engagement effecting gender diversity increased Net Profit by three or four percent. The study also supports previous studies that gender diversity has a strong impact on performance. It recognized that gender is not the sole factor in diversity and suggests that companies focus on creating a diverse workforce and also an engaged culture (Badal, S., & Harter, J. K. 2014).

The legal profession is one of those fields that has not taken advantage of the benefits of diversity and inclusion. In an article by (Fires, 2017), the case of diversity and inclusion and them increasing profits is made. He makes the claim that diversity improves a law firm's financial performance and law firms that are not diverse have reputations that suffer because of it (Fires, 2017). According to the article, law firms welcoming diversity would perform well in talent, client relationships, and leadership. As it pertains to talent, society is becoming more and more diverse, so it would be to a law firms' advantage to have a team that reflects that especially since the jury will be diverse as well (Fires, 2017).

The legal profession thrives on making relationships. A lot of how counsel is selected has to do with how comfortable people feel with you. For this reason, business formed by relationships made with diverse layers of your firm increases your chances of winning more business opportunities which explains how diversity would affect client relationships (Fires, 2017).

The last way Fires explains diversity would contribute to business is through leadership. Welcoming diversity would make business stand apart from other businesses. Being different or

creating a distinction between your company and others better your chances of attracting business which brings more profitability to the firm and without doing so, dollars are being left on the table (Fires, 2017).

Triguero-Sánchez, R., Peña-Vinces, J., & Guillen, J. (2018) performed a study to examine the influence employee diversity had on human resources management and organizational performance. The findings were that there was a positive correlation between the two. The results showed the benefits of diversity were present when human resources had goals directed towards achieving the commitment of its employees rather than control them. Factors considered were seniority, age, and origin of country and data showed a direct positive relationship diversity and performance. Practices of performance that increased due to diversity are employee participation in solving organizational problems, establishing quality circles, teamwork improvements, largely, the achievement of employee commitment through quality assurance in their jobs. The study concluded that performance improves when firms have a diverse workforce in terms of age and functional specialty.

Solution &Artifact Discussion

The fact that your natural hair is the hair that sprouts from your head when you are born seems like common sense. Why is it so hard for natural hair to be accepted in the workplace? Recently, cities like California and New York have passed The Crown Act which will “prohibit employers and schools from enforcing purportedly race neutral grooming policies restricting natural hair styles taking effect immediately. A national study by Dove revealed that black women are 80% more likely to change their natural hair to meet social norms and expectations at work than other women and that they are 1.5 times more likely to have reported being sent home because of their hair,” (MMR 2019). Black women who conform to wearing Eurocentric

hairstyles usually have no issues regarding their hair but black women who wear Afrocentric hairstyles today “maybe viewed as more dominant, and therefore less professional, than their counterparts who wear Eurocentric hairstyles,” (Opie, 2015).

My solution to this issue would make companies and their employees more aware of textured hair and diversity so they can gain an understanding of both. Instead of textures hair being viewed as anything other than natural and a part of physical appearance, it can be incorporated in training on diversity for both companies and its employees. My solution would be to inform companies on what they are missing out on by not possessing a diverse workforce, and teach them what it is, what it can do for their company, and how they can achieve it. I can guarantee once realizing the benefits of welcoming diversity to their companies they would not want to miss out on the opportunities. I would then suggest they take the information they learn and incorporate it into employee orientation in the form of a power point. I would also add information regarding natural hair because it deals directly to physical appearance and it has been used as means of not hiring people with textured hair which defeats the purpose of welcoming diversity.

I created an artifact pertaining to the research I have done on this topic and this paper I have written. The power point explains how different companies use natural hair as a means to not hire people with textured hair. The power point proceeds to explain how this directly relates to physical appearance and diversity. I included statistics and information that tells readers how diverse companies performed better. This information informs readers and companies what they are missing out on my not being inclusive by hiring people with textured hair.

It is my experience that before beginning a new job I have to attend an orientation. These orientations are extensive and contain plenty of power points. The information includes how

employees should treat one another, policies about sexual harassment, the history of the company, and so forth. I believe it would be an excellent idea to include a section of that orientation about diversity and include information about physical appearance because it is a form of diversity. There are a lot of preservations about textured hair because it is misunderstood. Giving background about natural hairstyles and where they originated from and their significance would allow people with textured hair to walk in their place of work freely without blank stares because their coworkers will have orientation with background knowledge of their hair. It is unlikely that background information needs to be given on straight hair because it is widely accepted but because it is widely accepted it can also be included.

Conclusion

Not accepting or allowing textured hair within your business is wrong from a moral standpoint. The thing about it is that everyone has different morals and different values. One thing all businesses have in common is the desire to generate revenue. Being equipped with employees from different backgrounds, that speak different languages, that look different, and have different abilities is a good way to open the doors for different ideas to flow, solving problems faster, reaching a bigger audience, which are all things that will bring more business for your company.

You could not hire someone for wearing the hair that was grown out of there scalp, but why would you do that when that person can introduce something new to your company? That person speaks to a new audience, may speak a different language, and may offer a new skill. Companies are losing out on the opportunity to bring in more revenue just because they don't want to make the decision to be inclusive.

Also, if you make the decision to be inclusive or advertise your business as such, it is not a wise decision to pick and choose what you will be inclusive about. You have to be inclusive as a whole. You cannot welcome various sex, ethnicities, etc. and leave out people with different physical abilities and people with textured hair for example. That is just not how diversity and inclusion works.

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