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# PANEL 1 VALUING DIVERSITY: THE CHALLENGE FACING IT MANAGERS AND EDUCATORS

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## PANEL 1

### VALUING DIVERSITY: THE CHALLENGE FACING IT MANAGERS AND EDUCATORS

**Panel Chair:** Lynda M. Applegate, Associate Professor, Harvard Business School

**Panelists:** Joe Cleveland, Vice President, Business Information Technology  
Mary Gentile, Senior Research Fellow, Harvard Business School

*The ability of companies to effectively compete in the years ahead will be determined in large measure by their success in employing productive workers in a labor management characterized by scarcity, skill deficiencies, and demographic diversity. The most successful companies will be those that meet this challenge creatively and aggressively. (Hudson Institute 1988)*

*We are living through a transformation that will rearrange the politics and economics of the coming century. There will be no national products or technologies, no national corporations, no national industries....Each nation's primary assets will be its citizens' skills and insights. (Reich 1992)*

Effective management of human resources and intellectual capital has become a key strategic challenge of the 1990s, but the need to focus attention on developing the skills and insights of people has come at the same time that organizations have been forced to radically restructure in the face of intense cost and market pressures. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that more than thirteen million American workers lost their jobs during the first half of the 1980s. By 1987, one third remained unemployed or had left the workforce, and those who found employment often earned less than they had before (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987).<sup>1</sup> It has also been reported that, in 1985 alone, 600,000 middle managers lost their positions due to mergers and acquisitions (Kanter 1989). Taken alone, however, these figures are misleading: while traditional employment opportunities are indeed declining, there was also a dramatic increase in the need for workers with different skills and talents. Flexibility, creativity, the ability to manage people rather than numbers, to foster more collaborative work environments, and to effectively deal with the demands of global businesses — these skills were (and still are) in short supply. Along with the decline in traditional jobs, the 1980s and 1990s have also seen a decline in traditional sources of labor and the emergence of a “new workforce” that often faces significant hurdles to their full and effective participation. More recently, it is becoming apparent that increased diversity in the workplace may be a critical source for the new skills required in the 1990s. Indeed, a major challenge faced by business and the academic institutions that educate and train tomorrow's workforce is to develop programs and curriculum that do not *manage diversity* but instead *value diversity*. This subtle shift in terminology suggests a significant reorientation in ideology and action. Where before we attempted to “assimilate non-traditional workers, students and faculty” into an environment designed to reward and perpetuate traditional skills and approaches using affirmative action policies and quotas designed to minimize differences, today's challenge is to recognize, reward and foster the new perspectives, skills, experiences and talents that a diverse workforce and classroom can bring. This latter approach acknowledges that the ability to effectively exploit the benefits of a diverse workforce is a critical success factor for the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup>Although these statistics relate to U.S. firms, similar trends have been reported for European and Asian firms. See Thomason, Pettigrew, and Rubashow, “British Management and Strategic Change,” *European Management Journal*, Volume 3, Number 3, 1985, pp. 165-173; Doz and Prahalad, “A Process Model of Strategic Redirection in Large Complex Firms: The Case of Multinational Corporations,” in Pettigrew (Ed.), *The Management of Strategic Change*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987; and T. Peters, “Japan: New Strategies for a New Reality,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 1991.

The information technology (IT) profession has been forced to deal with the human resource challenges discussed above while simultaneously dealing with significant changes in their role within organizations. In many firms, the role of IT changed dramatically during the 1980s from "back office to front office"<sup>2</sup> which demanded new approaches to managing the information resource and a new breed of IT professionals and leaders (Cash et al. 1992; Applegate and Elam 1992). This panel will provide a forum for exploring the challenges facing IT leaders and academics as they attempt to develop and institute programs and curriculum for addressing the human resource challenges discussed above. In keeping with the theme of this conference, the emphasis will be on the issues that must be addressed in defining strategies and agendas for action that enable organizations to value, rather than manage, diversity.

Panel presentations will help frame key issues facing IT leaders and academics, but will be kept brief to enable the audience to share their experience and perspective on this important topic. A bibliography of readings, case studies, and other curriculum materials will be distributed.

**Lynda Applegate**, associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, will chair the panel and moderate the discussion. She will frame the issues to be discussed by the panel and will provide an overview of innovative approaches taken by academic institutions and companies that have implemented programs for valuing diversity.

**Joe Cleveland**, who until its recent merger with Martin Marietta, was head of information technology at GE Aerospace, has spent the past decade helping to create within General Electric a work environment that values diversity. Cleveland instituted a variety of programs within the IT department and was also instrumental in designing and implementing GE's Diversity Training Program, participation in which is required of all GE employees. Cleveland will focus his presentation on the challenges of defining and implementing programs that promote a culture for valuing diversity in the workplace, including specific strategies and programs he has implemented within GE, among them hiring practices; training and sensitivity programs; career development strategies; and natural support groups that recognize and foster diversity. He will also demonstrate how information technology has been used to help individuals and groups deal with sensitive and embarrassing situations that arise from ignorance, inexperience, or cultural biases. Attendees will have an opportunity to use an interactive, multimedia computer-based module that is used throughout GE as part of their training program to sensitize individuals to potentially embarrassing situations and issues prior to face-to-face discussion.

**Mary Gentile**, a member of the faculty at Harvard Business School, will discuss her experiences over the past six years as she led an interfunctional group of faculty in the development and implementation of a curriculum, teaching materials, and methods to help students learn about the challenges and opportunities of valuing diversity in the workplace. These efforts were part of her work in developing the ethics curriculum module within the school. She will also describe her current efforts to identify faculty development needs and design and implement faculty development strategies and programs. Gentile will present a framework for categorizing the pedagogical challenges associated with implementing diversity education programs and a template for individual or institutional faculty development. She will also summarize the successes and pitfalls Harvard Business School has experienced in its efforts.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>2</sup>Our thanks to John King who coined the phrase, "front-officing the back office," that we believe expresses so well the challenges facing the IT profession.