

Why Diverse Teams Make Pharma Stronger

Companies in the pharma, packaging, medical devices and related industries know diversity drives better decisions and more success



**A CONVERSATION WITH
AMY STEWART**
Chief People Officer, ApiJect

Amy Stewart is a Human Resources executive with 25 years of experience maximizing investment in human capital for organizations, including the past 15 years in the pharmaceutical industry.

As a solutions-oriented change leader, Ms. Stewart seeks to balance people strategy with business strategy while demonstrating agility and collaboration throughout organizations.

INTERVIEWER: Amy, what is the connection between diversity and excellent performance? How does the one materially contribute to the other?

AMY STEWART: It's a very direct, cause-and-effect connection. An employee who is happy, who feels accepted and included in the company culture, will perform better in their role. They will be excited to collaborate with teams, and eager to participate in company initiatives. They will inevitably work with stronger dedication to the company.

Has the pharma industry embraced this insight? Can you fill in some details in this picture?

Companies are realizing that a strong commitment to DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) and ESG (environmental social governance) attracts employees. Word of mouth is very powerful. Referrals are a huge source of recruiting. Candidates and employees share experiences with their network of friends and colleagues. Companies want to do business with partners that are inclusive with positive values and environmental initiatives. Company diversity across the board — culture, race, gender, and nationality -- brings a diversity in customers.

Corporate America has embraced diversity “in theory” for many years, but it seemed to become a higher priority after McKinsey, the consulting company, released its report Diversity Matters in 2015. As you know, their data indicated that companies with more racial, ethnic, and gender diversity were 15% to 35% more likely to have financial returns above industry norms. Have there been more studies like that since?



There have been many more studies confirming these positive outcomes, and diversity has become an especially urgent priority since the economic upheavals that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm thrilled that companies are now realizing being diverse and inclusive increases your profits. Companies are opening up the candidate pool, recognizing that when every employee feels accepted in every way, it brings more talent and better revenues to a company.

How is that greater commitment to diversity manifested in daily life on the job?

Twenty years ago, if a job applicant had braided hair, or wore a burka, their appearance might be judged as “unprofessional.” Or the person would not be considered “front desk” material, as the HR world would say. Today it’s not even a thought, much less an issue. Different cultural identities are celebrated, and companies understand they can still be a great employer. I love that.

Indra Nooyi, the longtime chair and CEO of PepsiCo, said when she first took that role, even companies that hired diverse workforces had trouble retaining their minority and female team members. Has that track record improved in the U.S. economy?

Yes. Retention of minorities and women has improved, and the workforce’s increased commitment and longevity on the job helps every company achieve greater productivity.

Job-hopping is still a way of life for many of the younger cohort, and some HR people say you're lucky if you can get anyone under age 35 to stay two years at a single company. But now I think they don't always switch jobs as fast. If the company is more committed to the employee, there is a better chance that the employee will become more committed to the company.

It also makes sense that a more diverse workforce can do a better job of relating to a diverse, global customer base.

Agreed. Also, companies don't want to partner with a company that isn't diverse. They don't want their name connected to it. We're going through those kinds of information requests for information from potential new customers right now, including our DEI agenda, our sustainability plan, and our ESG plan. It’s all part of the conversation.

What does DEI mean to you? Is it a movement, a slogan, an evolving ideal, a legal requirement, a numerical criteria for success, or something else? How does a human resources expert, or a successful company, use DEI as a guiding principle?

DEI is a way of life, not a “check the box” exercise. Set the example, build the foundation of the company on these beliefs. Data, legal requirements, and initiatives are created to bring

awareness to many injustices. Now it is a company's responsibility to empower every voice and celebrate ALL people and expect nothing less.

Companies that are getting this right aren't focused on displaying their workforce composition data; they are improving their performance overall and their position in their industry by making their company a great place to work. That performance is the real proof of success for DEI as a guiding principle.



However, articles like the Forbes piece, “Meet America’s Best for Diversity 2021,” help jobseekers target employers, and help employers learn where they can improve.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristinstoller/2021/04/20/meet-americas-best-employers-for-diversity-2021/?sh=271fe1857498>

The problem with hiring based solely on traditional criteria is that effective research and development today demands that your team approach problems with more than one way of thinking, or more than one type of education. You need voices from diverse backgrounds. If every one of us was sitting in an in an office building, with the same experiences, we would have no idea of the realities of the market.

For example?

The leadership of our company includes people who have spent a great deal of time visiting clinics in developing countries, talking to doctors, nurses, patients, families, and local suppliers. If our team had not experienced those real-world situations, we would not know there was a need for new technology and new solutions. We would not know how severe that need is, why there are shortages of suitable medical equipment, and what is causing the roadblocks. There would be no insight or feedback that comes from other countries and other cultures.

That is why companies in this field need both academics and broad real-world knowledge. People in pharma, medical devices, and healthcare can benefit tremendously when they are able to relate to the real world, not just understand what's happening in the lab.

Corporate America has times bemoaned the fact that they would like to hire more women and minorities, but in some fields, there are only a handful of applicants to go around. Is that true of pharma and related fields such as medical devices and bioscience?

I think it is a true statement to a point, or was in the past, but it's changing very rapidly. In years gone by, I attended many job fairs of engineering schools, or scientific schools, where you could look around and perhaps see two African Americans out of hundreds of attendees. Or you might see a lot of Asian men, but very few Asian women.

As a result, our Equal Employment Opportunity statements and our HR reports to the president of a division would trigger the obvious questions. Why are our recruiting numbers so low for women and minorities? How can we get some qualified candidates?

What's the answer?

One important answer is to not wait until someone has graduated from college to attract them to the company. You need to get involved a lot earlier. You need to start a dialog and target your future workforce in grade schools, junior high schools, and high schools to expose people to what's available to them.



Has the pandemic had an impact on the pool of available candidates?

If there is a benefit to the pandemic, it is that we now have many more people who are interested in the life sciences, medical fields and health careers. That interest is visible now in science classes as early as fifth grade. Kids want to help solve the pandemic, or prevent future pandemics, and that fascination with the biosciences simply wasn't the case before.

So I think we're going to see a surge of people in health sciences, and more people in biology, going forward. In 10 years, we're going to be flooded with job applicants who got excited about the field, very early in life.

What are some of the other special challenges to recruiting scientists and engineers for the pharma industry, the medical devices industry, and related fields?

In the U.S., our society tends to swing back and forth between idealism and materialism. There are decades when most students seem interested in maximizing their earnings potential. In those eras, few people seem excited about becoming scientists. It's not seen as a sexy career, or mainstream. But now there's a strong and growing interest in bioscience and medical devices, because more people want to be part of solving an important global issue. And those idealistic people are where we will get our workforce. They are very committed people who want to get involved and make a contribution to society.

How much impact has the STEM movement had, which attempts to recruit more minorities and females into science, technology, engineering, and math?

I think it's had a bigger impact than we've realized, especially in the past three to four years where corporate America has placed more emphasis on valuing diverse backgrounds and cultures. That definitely includes the life sciences, pharma, and other health-focused fields.

The generation that is 35 and younger has never known anything else but this welcoming attitude, and as a result they are more open to these careers. They never got the message, intentionally or unintentionally, that "This career is not for people like me."

What can you tell us about women in leadership roles across the pharma industry? Who are some outstanding examples of women executives?

Emma Walmsley became the CEO of GSK in 2017. She was the first woman to lead a global pharmaceutical company. In my career I have also had the good fortune of reporting to some

amazing women who are presidents in the drug development field, as well as many colleagues who became CFOs, attorneys, scientists, VPs in business development, marketing, and many more.

Do women leaders typically create a different corporate culture, and if so, how is that manifested?

That largely depends on the company and the executives in each case. I have seen firsthand when women reach the top, other women look up to them and are inspired to realize that this same path is a possibility for them, too.

I have witnessed women who perform a difficult balancing act, very gracefully. They managed to run board meetings, make it to their child's soccer game on time, and buy and prepare the Thanksgiving turkey for the family, while balancing corporate budgets – all without losing a step. That earns admiration from men and women alike, I might add.

To sum it all up, what is the fundamental reason that diverse teams succeed in the field of drug development and discovery? How does diversity strengthen an R&D team specifically as regards the unique challenges of creating new drugs and vaccines?

Creative solutions and different ways to solve issues are brought to bear by a diverse team. When differences of gender, race, ethnicity, mental and physical abilities, work styles, and lifestyles are recognized, valued, and incorporated into a company's strategic approach, success is sure to follow.

Thank you, Amy.