

# Cognitive Diversity at Workplace: An Overview

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## Abstract

With increasing complexities and fragmentation of the business environment, it is essential to surpass traditional ways of thinking and to implement dynamic strategies at workplaces. Managing cognitive diversity has become integral part of these dynamic strategies and work culture. People with different mindsets are moving to different geographic regions and trying to assimilate in different places, diverse culture and work environment. Knowing the fact that cognitively diverse workforce has become a necessity to sustain and succeed in this highly competitive global environment, managing such diverse workforce and making them work together is a tedious task. This paper is a qualitative research, aims to give insight and explanation about the concept of cognition, diversity and cognitive diversity, and try to answer the questions about why cognitive diversity is important in the present working environment, how different cognitive styles affect managerial decisions and lastly, how to manage cognitively diverse workforce to tap abundant available opportunities.

**Keywords:** Cognition, Cognitive Diversity, Cognitive Style, Knowledge and Psychological Safety

## I. INTRODUCTION

Increasing complexities in business and culture has led to increase in the demand of global mindsets, just about exponentially to this complex environment. Prof. Celia de Anca (Agenda, 2018) stated that Cognitive diversity is one of the key drivers to succeed in fourth industrial revolution. According to Cohen (2010), global cognition can prove to be a competitive advantage in the market, so organizations need a high inventory of cognitively diverse employees. Starbuck (2015) stated that in the early twentieth century, there was debate among psychologist about human cognition and its importance, and their roles in apparent behavior. However, it has been observed that in today's world importance of cognition at the workplace is undeniable.

## I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is a qualitative research based on descriptive analysis of exiting literature established from various research papers, books and articles, which aims to explain terms cognition, diversity and cognitive diversity and attempts to answer questions about why cognitive diversity is vital, how different cognitive styles influence organizational behavior, and how effective management can help to reap potential benefits.

### COGNITION, DIVERSITY & COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

he word cognition and diversity are two different terms having their respective importance in sociology, psychology, and anthropology, when combined together they have a vital role to play in organizational context. Cognition and Knowledge are wider concepts, which are far beyond the logical calculations. The word cognition itself involves everything that accumulates knowledge. It's a

process of knowledge accumulation through experiences, it's a thinking process which varies from individual to individual. According to Noteboom (2015) Cognition and Knowledge embodied wider band of mental activity, including proprioception, perception, sense making, categorization, inference, value, judgment and emotions. Fallesen (2015) found that cognition is a human centric thinking process that accumulates knowledge and drives an intended behavior.

Eriksen et al., (2015) stated that diversity is a process which continuously obtained new information from an individual's experience. Also, this information is filtered through, interacts with, and gets attached into an individual's existing schema where an individual's experience is mediated by surface level diversity. Shore et al., (2017) stated the broader definition of diversity that includes unprotected areas of difference among the people in US law, but also diversity as both observable and unobservable differences, and superficial and in-depth level diversity. Luring and Selmer (2012) described diversity at the workplace as distinctiveness in distinct demographic characteristics, which are associated to an individual's deep and surface level features. Reynolds et al., (2017) stated that cognitive diversity is a variation in perspective or on styles of processing information, and factors such as age, ethnicity or gender has no relevance in this regard. Pandolfo (2017) described that cognitive diversity is differences in experiences, knowledge, abilities, and skills which forms the basis of their perspective, beliefs, attitude and cognitive styles. Thus, we can say that cognitive diversity is differences in the process of accumulation of knowledge that results in differences in intended behavior in an organization.

## II. IMPORTANCE OF COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

Recent studies have stated that it is not diversity but the cognitive diversity which makes an organization to outperform other organization. Reynolds et al., (2017) in Harvard business review stated that because of less visibility and cultural barriers, cognitive diversity often get overlooked by managers. However, the growing importance of cognitive

diversity at the workplace makes it an essential component of organization behavior and performance. In one of the articles published in Forbes by Denning (2012) cognitive diversity is termed as super-additive which follows the concept of improvement over improvement. According to Newberry (2018) cognitive diversity is essential to bring in fresh ideas and perspective. Reynolds et al., (2017) published an article in Harvard business review stated that there is a strong positive correlation between cognitive diversity and performance. Thus, according to the author "Higher the cognitive diversity, higher the performance." Glosserman (2017) cognitive diversity results into wider perspective and a broader horizon of options, which helps a manager in better decision making and effective problems solving. According to one of the articles published in Vercidia (2016), Dr. Jacqui Grey has stated that wider the scale of experiences and backgrounds of management teams, greater the possibility of a team to produce more innovative products.

Dumay et al., (2013) explored the relationship between Innovation and different types of Intellectual Capital (i.e. human, structural, and relational capital). The study is conducted in Australia based on cross sectional data collected from 27 executive managers of public sectors and companies. It is found that human capital is most important and complex factor essential for effective increscent innovation, also, have a cushioning effect on evolutionary and radical innovation. However, all the three Intellectual Capital's type relationship needs to be managed effectively in the organization.

Boroujerdi & Hasani, (2014) conducted survey to test the association between creativity and thinking styles based on data collected from 235 sport's teachers in Kurdistan province. The authors found that there is a strong positive relation between thinking styles and teacher's creativity, frequency of creativity, teacher's individual trait, and ranking amongst them.

Startbuck (2015) discussed a work of Weick in making cognition essential element of organizational behaviour. In this study, the perspective of cognitive diversity at workplace provides grounds, for creativity and innovations, which brings added advantage to an Organization in terms of market

share, goodwill, efficiency, effectiveness, competition and problem solving.

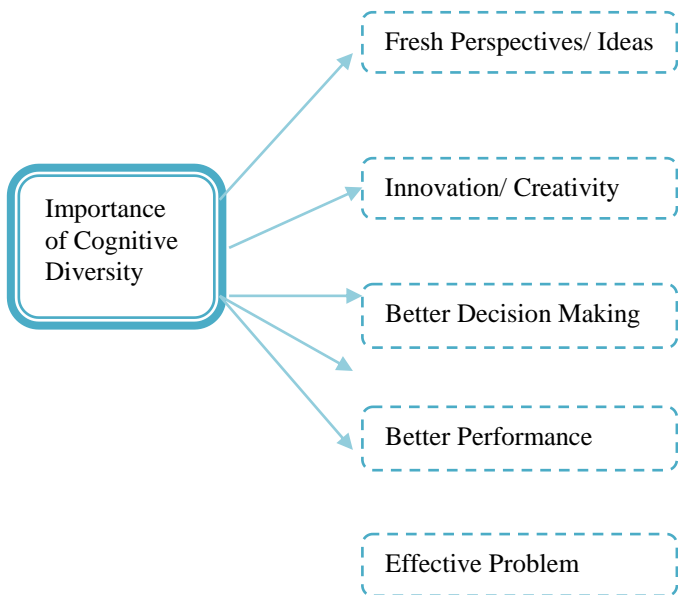


Figure 1: Importance of cognitive diversity.

Source: Authors' own contribution.

Thus, as stated in figure 1. cognitive diversity is essential in an organization as it brings in fresh perspective, helps in better decision making, effective problem solving, enables better performance by enhancing the potential of innovation and creativity in an organization, thereby, outperforming the potential competition and coping up with the complexities and dynamics of the global work environment.

### III. COGNITIVE STYLES AND ITS IMPACT ON ORGANISATION FUNCTIONING

Every individual's process of procuring information and converting it into a basis for taking rational decision is different. These information processing styles are known as cognitive styles, and are affected by individual experiences, perception, existing knowledge, and environment, and affect decisions and behavior at the workplace (figure 2).

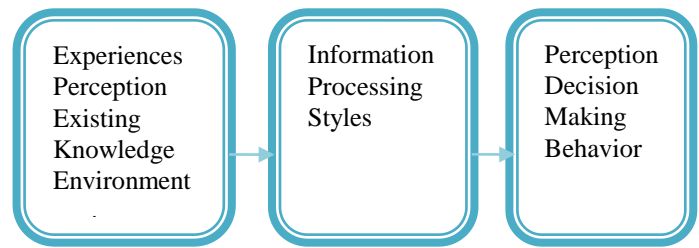


Figure 2: process showing how cognitive diversity effect employees behaviour

Source: Authors' own contribution.

Gallen (2006) aims to investigate the influence of manager's cognitive style on selecting feasible strategies for the organization. The study is based on data collected from 70 managers at top hierarchical management teams of the spa industry. The analysis depicts that different cognitive styles of managers have an impact on selection of strategies and preferences. Intuitive manager prefers the analyzer or the prospector strategies as a more practical option while sensing manager prefer the defender or the analytical strategies as more viable.

Cools and Broeck, (2008) conducted a qualitative study to gain in-depth understanding of cognitive styles and its impact on managerial actions by focusing on people and task oriented behavior of managers in context of different styles such as knowing, creating and planning. The study indicates that manager's preferences in the organization are based on different cognitive styles, which leads to variations in handling conflicts, making decisions, and giving feedbacks.

Evans and Waring, (2008) compared different cognitive styles of trainee teachers based on their perceptions and backgrounds. The study is based on data collected from 80 trainee teachers at the beginning and at the end of their training programme in the UK. The authors taken up two major styles as intuition and analysis, and has grouped them into four categories of high and low ratios and found that trainees became more intuitive than analytical over the course of time. Thus, through thorough comprehension of differences via training can lead to moderate changes in cognitive styles of average managers.

Jain and Jappesen, (2013) explored influence of leader's cognitive style on cognizance management. The study is based on data collected from 210 senior and middle managers working in different public sector units in India. The authors studied the adoption of diverse cognitive styles in solving problems and making decision influences knowledge management execution of an organization. The analysis states that there is an unfavorable influence of the innovative-collaborator or radical cognitive styles on knowledge management executions. While, there is existence of favorable influence of an adaptable style on knowledge management executions.

Ettlie et al., (2014) conducted a study to analyze and affirm balanced, linear/ nonlinear cognitive style with innovation and actions. The study is based on data collected from 186 business students studying in the USA. The authors found that innovation and creativity are significantly related to balance non linear/ linear thinking styles. Furthermore, training to enhance balance in linear/ nonlinear thinking styles also enhances the potential of innovation among employees.

Weaver and Stansburry, (2014) conducted a theoretical analysis to understand the impact of religious cognition on varying individual's behavior pattern. The authors found that larger religious orientated institution affects individual's behavior and cognition, which, in turn, influence ethical, group co-ordination & management, and other workplace behavior and practices.

Rossem et al., (2015) aimed to find a reason for variances in manager's reaction toward coming ideas. The study is based on survey data collected from 189 managers in Belgium. The authors found that differences in cognition exist at different hierarchical position in the organization. Managers at the top hierarchical position, consider classic ideas and fashionable ideas at par while taking management decisions, giving importance to effectiveness and efficiency dimension. While, managers at a lower echelon, having a lower education level, are more prone to consider ideas that are popular and are in trend.

Eriksen and Beauvais, (2015) conceptualized team diversity on the basis of mental barriers and schemata

concepts and developed a model, which demonstrate that "More heterogeneous the schemata of a diverse team, and thinner the mental boundary, greater will be the creativity." The authors have stated that diverse minds, cognizance at different mental structures and with continuous intercommunication between them, leads to creativity at the individual level and team level.

Batra and Vohra, (2016) conducted their study on employees having experience of industrial work in India, aims to test the impact of cognitive style on individual innovativeness. The Author has found that employees who briskly open to experiences, participate in tasks and are able to conceptualize and abstract on the basis of these experiences are more innovative than employees with reflecting or concrete experiences observation are more likely to be innovative. In this study, cognitive styles are categorized into classes (a) high analysis- low intuition, (b) high analysis- high intuition, (c) low analysis- low intuition, and (d) low analysis- high intuition. Cognitive styles that are fixed can relatively develop using training sessions. It verifies the meta-cognitive value of differentiation whereby learners who have or gained a deeper understanding of their own learning.

Estelami and Nejad, (2016) conducted two studies to analyze the impact of manager's cognitive style, organizational attitude, and gender on responding to price reduction strategies adopted by competitors. The First study is conducted in a lab setting utilizing simulation price environment, while, second study is based on additional data collected from business persons in the USA. The analysis depicts that there is a significant relationship between the managerial cognitive styles and responsive competitive price reduction and found that more the analytical cognitive style, lesser the price reduction possibilities and more the intuitive cognitive style, greater the price reduction possibilities.

Thus, cognitive style differs from person to person and is based on individual's experiences, learning, and position at workplace. The variation in cognitive styles, have varied effects on manager's decision making, problem solving approach, and preferences for viable strategies. Based on literature review, the major cognitive styles are intuitive and analytical

which lies on the two ends of a continuum. Manager's cognitive style can be developed and can be moved from one end to another through training, knowledge, and experiences. If managed and deployed properly, cognitive diversity can bring wonderful outcomes and abundant opportunities to the organization.

#### **IV. MANAGEMENT OF COGNITIVE DIVERSITY**

Diversity among social identities of employees in an organization is a resource that needs to be cherished and managed efficiently in order to bring out best possible outcomes by creating more accepting and healthy work environment. Pompper (2014) found that recognition of diverse social identities at work is dynamic, complex, and over-lapping. Manager's choice in making strategic decisions helps in shaping the structure and process of an Organization.

Ball and Sims, (1991) studied affect and cognition in context of organizational punishment circumstances. The study outline that constructive criticism is positively related to better organizational performances, knowledge about structures of social cognition ( i.e. knowledge about people, situations, and the precept that influences our observations, interpretations, comprehension, discern, and actions) can help with constructive cognitive processing and more effective punishment practices in the organization.

Amason and Sapienza, (1997) explored the role of top management teams (TMTs) in line with cognitive and affective conflicts. The study is based on 48 TMTs of 94 food processing firms. The author found that team size has a positive relation with both cognitive conflict and affective conflict, while openness also showed a positive relation with cognitive conflict. Shared cognition between team members and task conflicts in team holds inverse relationship. According to team mental model theory, shared cognition accommodates differences within the entrepreneurial team for the company's benefit.

Aritzeta et al., (2005) examined the concurrent validity of the (TRSPI) Team Role Self-Perception Inventory along with (KAI) Kirton's Adaption-Innovation Inventory. The study is based on data collected from two different samples of 114 students and 109 managers, differences in cognitive

style was apparent in both the samples. The author stated that by acquiring knowledge about the existing association between conflicting managerial styles and team members' role preference, one can turn problems and difficulties into organizational opportunities enabling employees to deploy their own preferences

Cohen (2010) conducted a literature study to find out vital factors that are essential to successfully develop leaders with global mindsets and found that with an increase in cultural and business complexities, leaders need to acquire added skills, knowledge and most importantly a mindset that can explore and overcome the complexities and surpass the traditional boundaries, leadership with global mindset is a result of the global strategies adopted by the organization.

Robergea and Dick, (2010) proposed a model to manage diversity based on behavioral perspective and tried to answer how group performance is positively related to diverse setting. The study suggests that psychological safety and identity recognition at workplace mediates the relationship between diversity and psychological mechanisms at both individual and group level, which, in turn, mediates the relationship between group performance and diversity. It has been found that team involvement and trust is the mediator between group performance and diversity.

Howard (2012) proposed a readily workable thinking model for managers that stimulates better and effective decision making in the organization. The author stated that thinking initiates actions. By making an organization a learning organization and through careful comprehension of thinking processes one can benefit from experiences, it helps in better understanding of the weaknesses and biases, urgency, and risk involved.

Knippenberga et al., (2013) developed a theory about the sharedness, awareness of sharedness, and accuracy as mediator between diverse mindsets and diverse group performance. The study reveals that diverse mindsets when reflects promotion, exploration, group related knowledge and information sharing, facilitates positive relationships between team performance and diversity, the greater

the group member involvement and sharing, higher would be the diverse group performance.

Pompper (2014) tried to investigate different aspects and dimensions of social identity differences. The author found that in order to advance and appreciate diverse social identity dimension, management of diversity must be beyond the function of human resource department and be included as an essential part of a corporate social responsibility.

Fink and Yolles, (2015) assembled previous theories on cognitive agency, cognition, and affect and their impact on the decision making process. In line with affective theory, the study indicates that that self-regulation is clearly affected by emotional regulation and thus, has an impact on changes in an organization; cognizance of regulation of emotions in an organization can bring a new outlook of understanding how social feasibility can be attained in an organization.

Caruso and Woolley, (2015) presented a model to promote emergent interdependence for the success of a diverse team, and proposed that when there are ambiguities in the work environment, task related structural interdependence is not influential, in such situations emergent interdependence majorly facilitate co-operative behaviour among members of a diverse team. Both structural and emergent interdependence reinforce each other and psychological safety at the individual level enhances the efforts of employees to work for the organizational benefit.

Rose and Gordon, (2015) studied changes in cognition based on change in age and its implication on cognitive style, and found that, an age specific cognitive dynamics in an organization can be effectively managed by following distributed leadership, which will enhance innovation, and competitive endurance by creating participative and more inclusive workplace and encourages cognitive contribution at all levels.

Chen et al., (2017) conducted study on 203 entrepreneurial teams of tech-based companies in Taiwan, to explore dynamics of conflict, cohesion, and cognition on interaction between members of entrepreneurial teams. The authors found that relationship conflict leads to impediment in team

members social exchange behavior, is inversely related to team cohesion, and task conflicts. Team cohesion must be increased to resolve relationship conflicts among people at the workplace.

Reynolds et al., (2017) stated that to maintained cognitive diversity at workplace, leaders have to encourage employees to be themselves and employ their different mindset by creating an environment where cognitively diverse people can sense psychological safety.

Fink and Yolles, (2018) developed a classification of cognitive and affective orientation in context with “generic cultural, socio-cognitive trait theory of plural affect agency”. The author found that interference between cognition and affect is internalized by figurative and operative intelligences of respective personality’s affect/cognition, which ultimately affects the individual personality traits and behavior pattern, understanding and knowledge about this interference, helps to predict occurrence of typical behavior in the organization.

Thus, knowledge about self, different social identities and understanding interference between cognition and affect is essential for effective management of cognitively diverse workforce. By creating a thinking work environment which is more acceptable, receptive to different mindset, participative, inclusive, is more cohesive, encourages information sharing, and enhances the psychological safety of employees, leaders can build a long run cognitively diverse human capital for an organization, enabling the organization to tap all the possible opportunities available.

## V. CONCLUSION

Cognitive diversity literature shows that employees have different mindsets and accumulates knowledge differently, comprehend, and employ that knowledge variedly when it comes to making strategies, solving problems, and taking decisions. This paper contributes to the existing literature by understanding the importance of a cognitively diverse set of employees at the workplace and their contribution in surpassing the global competitions and complexities by bringing in fresh perspectives, ideas (*figure.1*) and by understanding how different cognitive styles can affect managerial decisions and execution at the

workplace (figure.2). Through effective management, by creating a thinking work culture, knowledge about self and other identities, understanding association between cognition and affect, promoting shared leadership, training interventions, emergent cohesion, and enhancing psychological safety of employees, benefits of having cognitively diverse workforce can efficiently be reaped out. This paper gives a theoretical insight and a foundation to conduct an empirical research about the impact of important variables of cognitive diversity on prolific performance at workplaces and it will also help effective managerial decisions and understanding diverse employee psychology.

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