

## Unlocking the Benefits of Diversity

by **Tony Santiago**

Tony Santiago is the founder and president of TaxSearch Inc.

In this installment of Tax Pulse, Santiago interviews Sonia Hollies — senior vice president of global tax, risk management, and treasurer with Perrigo Co. — on diversity and why it matters within corporate tax departments.

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Diversity, a term that echoes across boardrooms, educational institutions, and communities, has become a buzzword. However, when properly developed, diversity holds a significance that transcends conventional understanding.

Often confined to notions of race and gender, diversity is far more encompassing, serving as the bedrock of innovation, creativity, and problem-solving. It forms the cornerstone of fostering unique and differing viewpoints that drive progress, and its importance reverberates across various facets of society.

To better understand diversity, why it matters, and how to develop it within corporate tax departments, I spoke with Sonia Hollies, senior vice president of global tax, risk management, and treasurer with Perrigo Co.

**Tony Santiago:** Let's start with the concept of diversity. Indeed, it's a word we often hear, but what does diversity mean to you, and why does it matter?

**Sonia Hollies:** As a person of color and a woman of color, I always get asked about diversity and why it matters. Many people don't understand that diversity is everything. It's not just race, it's not just gender. It's not just age, sexual orientation, or ethnicity.

For example, one potential problem in Michigan is that many potential candidates went to either the University of Michigan or Michigan State. Well, right there, you have a potential diversity problem because you're only recruiting people from two schools, and then you need to get people with varying or differing mindsets. If you're only recruiting people from one geographical area, you lower your chances of getting people with different perspectives.

In that sense, diversity is everything. When you look at a team, building a team, innovation, and problem-solving, you want to get those unique and different perspectives. People tend to hire other people who look like themselves, but if everybody is from one geographical area or went to the same schools, you're going to have a homogeneous culture. This stifles creativity and smothers innovation, and it's been proven time and time again that diverse teams are better problem solvers. Companies that have diversity and do well perform better than companies that don't.

**Santiago:** Most people would agree with your definition and why it matters. However, not everyone is as successful at cultivating diversity in their team. Are there any stumbling blocks to diversity that you tend to see?

**Hollies:** One thing that can get in the way of building diversity in your team is bias. I enjoy this topic — bias awareness — because everybody always says, "I'm not biased."

We're all biased. So the first step is to acknowledge it. Everybody has built-in biases against other cultures, against different people, or sometimes even depending on where you were raised. For example, I'm from the East Coast, and I work in the Midwest, and many people will say, "Oh, you have that New York thing."

Everybody has that built-in bias. So the first step is to acknowledge the bias and then educate

yourself and challenge your assumptions: Why do I have this bias? Why do I think this way? Challenge your beliefs, be open to feedback, and embrace different perspectives.

**Santiago:** Can you think of a time when bias might have impacted a diversity hire?

**Hollies:** The example I like to give is that a few years ago, I had someone working for me, and we had hired somebody — a person of Asian descent — to work for him as a manager. Ultimately, the hire didn't work out, and afterward, the person who worked for me came to me and said:

You know, I'll be honest with you. I'm shocked because the only other time I ever had someone of Asian descent work for me, they were fantastic. So I kind of just assumed this person was going to be fantastic, and I missed the red flags. I never really paid attention because I had this built-in bias that I didn't even know I had, that this person would be phenomenal.

In this case, there was an acknowledgment because he had never thought about it. Afterward, we could debrief and say, "OK, what should you look at?" It was a good teaching moment for me and an opportunity for him to learn. He didn't even realize he had that built-in bias because he had only had that one experience.

**Santiago:** So if you, as a tax leader, become aware of a bias someone has, how do you handle it, or what would you recommend that others do in that situation?

**Hollies:** I think that it is super important to have those open and honest discussions. Too often, people are afraid to have a conversation, so it never gets talked about.

In the situation I described, I was happy that my employee felt comfortable enough to come to me and discuss. He acknowledged that A, there was a bias, and B, he had used one experience to make an overarching decision that, "My other experiences are going to be that way." However, in the end, it was a big win as he began seeking to educate himself and get better.

**Santiago:** Speaking of big wins, you've had some extremely notable success with creating diverse teams. What are some of the top strategies you employ to make that happen?

**Hollies:** I have a very diverse team, and people always ask me, "How does that happen?" It's not because I lowered my standards or have some particular program; it's a little of everything, right?

One of the critical ways I create diverse teams is through internships. You often work somewhere, and they'll generally recruit from certain schools. "Oh, we only recruit from these schools." I constantly challenge that assumption. Why? "Oh, because they have the best talent." I'll say, "Are you sure about that? Have you gone to other schools?"

If you think about diverse populations, they often go to commuter schools or community colleges because they don't necessarily have the money to live on campus. So have you considered recruiting from a different school?

I also do remote internships where possible and recruit from different schools. I recruit from all different schools because, again, I'm open to geography. But if you are limited by geography, you can look at that community or surrounding communities and ask, "Are there other schools we can tap for talent?"

**Santiago:** Great point. So now that we've established that tax leaders need to look beyond the local "tax" or "legal" programs and consider all the schools in their area, are there any other steps you've taken to develop such diverse teams?

**Hollies:** The next step is to develop relationships. I have conversations with the chairs of collegiate accounting departments to find the best talent from that school. I tell them, "Hey, if you know anybody looking for an internship, let me know."

To this day, even if I no longer live in that area, people will reach out to me and say, "I know this person with really high grades, but there's something unique about them." For example, somebody called me, explaining that they "have a student that's only been a nanny, and no one will hire them." I said, "All right, let me talk to them."

I spoke to this person — she was of Hispanic descent — and I hired her as an intern. When she graduated, we found a role for her within the organization, and she's been tremendous. But again, had I not had that relationship with the chairperson of the accounting department at that school, I wouldn't have even known that candidate existed.



Sonia Hollies

**Santiago:** That's excellent advice for tax leaders. Do you have any thoughts on how to include human resources in those initiatives?

**Hollies:** Yes. That's another way to do it: honest conversations with HR. If you're only recruiting from a school where you're not going to get diverse candidates, why are

you recruiting at that school? You're saying you want to recruit more diverse candidates, but the actions must match your objectives. It doesn't add up. So again, I think having those honest conversations with HR is essential.

**Santiago:** If someone has explored or used internships, are there other angles they might want to consider or pursue?

**Hollies:** First and foremost, ensure your job ads speak to an extensive range of candidates. People read the ad, and sometimes they'll self-eliminate based on how it is written. I encourage people to think about not limiting themselves in terms of language when they're posting an ad for a job. First, be sure there isn't a gender bias. Second, instead of saying, "The job is located here," if you're open to a hybrid or a flexible arrangement, say it's hybrid or flexible. I think that would encourage a lot of different types of candidates.

**Santiago:** Along with leveraging internships, which are clearly an excellent source of diversity, are there any other strategies you use to build your team?

**Hollies:** Proactively reach out to your diverse colleagues and talk to them. They know people, right? They'll often say: "Oh, you know what? My friend's son or my friend's daughter is looking for something," or, "I know someone at this company that I used to work for." Those conversations resonate with people. I've done an excellent job over the years of saying: "Hey, if you know of people, reach out to me. Even if I don't have something, I may know of something else in the market." As a result, we've formed an informal network to help those people along.

**Santiago:** It's remarkable to consider how many resources are accessible if we shift our mindset. Do you have any final input on developing diverse tax teams?

**Hollies:** My final suggestion is to amplify any business resource groups. We have business resource groups for Black and African American employees, veterans, and LGBTQ+. By amplifying the business resource groups, I mean go to them and say, "We're looking for diverse talent, let's do lunch and learn," or something like that. Reach a wider audience within the organization because usually, when you have those resource group meetings, you're getting 50 or more people attending those. That's a way to reach a wider audience and reach them quickly instead of just having one-on-one conversations.

### The Power of Diversity

Elevating the discourse on diversity goes beyond lip service — it hinges on recognizing the manifold value it brings to teams, innovation, and overall success. Teams composed of individuals representing diverse backgrounds offer a rich tapestry of viewpoints that catalyze innovation. The interaction of dissimilar perspectives enables organizations to tackle complex challenges from multiple angles, leading to solutions that transcend conventional thinking. By accommodating diversity, organizations break free from the confines of uniformity, fostering an environment where creativity and innovation thrive. ■