

Q & A

With **Beth Ronnenburg**,
vice president of *Berkshire Associates Inc.*

The business case for affirmative action and workforce diversity programs is striking.

Over a 10-year period, American companies that ranked highest for employing a diverse workforce outperformed the NASDAQ by 28 percent, Standard and Poor's 500 by 25 percent and the Dow Jones Industrial Average by 22 percent, according to Diversity Inc., a media company focused on diversity issues in America.

Diverse companies have typically

diversity programs, and most of those are Fortune 500 companies.

Beth Ronnenburg, vice president of Berkshire Associates Inc. in Columbia, acknowledges that affirmative action programs, which are required for most federal contractors, can be costly, labor-intensive and downright daunting.

Berkshire, a woman-owned company, is a full-service human resources firm with more than 50 employees and 2,900 clients. About 75 percent of Berkshire's work is helping companies



Beth Ronnenburg, vice president of Berkshire Associates Inc. in Columbia, at the company's training center where clients learn Berkshire's affirmative action and HR software products.

LISA HELPERT

had heightened success marketing to women and minorities, and those consumers command a large and growing share of the American market, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. By 2010, women will control \$1 trillion — 60 percent — of the nation's wealth. African Americans' purchasing power is nearing \$800 billion while Hispanic Americans' purchasing power has grown to nearly \$700 billion.

Yet only 20 percent of American companies have affirmative action or

implement affirmative action plans and its software development wing now markets nationwide a software package that helps companies implement and track affirmative action programs.

But many companies have found low-budget and unconventional ways to build a more diverse workforce and comply with federal affirmative action requirements, Ronnenburg said. She talked with *Corridor Inc.* about smart tactics and the future of affirmative action.

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IF YOU DISCOVER THAT YOU ARE NOT ATTRACTING SUFFICIENTLY DIVERSE JOB APPLICANTS, HOW DO YOU FIX THAT?

Google is a great thing. You can Google what you are looking for and sometimes find professional groups that you didn't know about and start talking to them about how you can recruit to their base. Sometimes it doesn't cost a lot of money.

You might want to host the breakfast or host the lunch at their next meeting. Sponsoring meetings is helpful because it reaches people who may not be looking for a job. What they say in the staffing industry is typically the person you want to hire isn't usually looking for a job. Most talent is found among people who are still working and not actively looking.

Some companies do other things that are not overt recruiting. I was looking at a magazine and there was an ad from Bank of America and the ad is basically about diversity and it talks about how they were one of the top companies in Diversity Inc. magazine. It doesn't really say a whole lot about banking. To me that said they weren't really advertising to be my bank, they are advertising to be my employer. So there is a whole marketing strategy for a company around how to attract diverse and talented people.

HOW OFTEN DOES AFFIRMATIVE ACTION SIGNIFICANTLY CHANGE THE MAKEUP OF A COMPANY'S WORKFORCE?

It depends on the level of their effort. I have seen companies have success when they do two things: They focus on recruitment and retention.

I think that is one of the biggest mistakes companies make is that they focus solely on recruitment and not on retaining. Sometimes what companies don't understand is if I'm a new em-

ployee and I'm a woman and I'm going to walk into a department meeting with all men, it's a little bit daunting. If there's a woman in a different department who could mentor me, I could see how women move up in the company. Mentoring programs are very successful in organizations in helping retain women and minorities.

DO YOU HAVE COMPANIES WHO COME BACK TO YOU AND SAY THEY HAVE GOTTEN SOME MONETARY BENEFIT FROM DOING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?

Very rarely are your clients exactly like you. If you have a diverse workforce, ultimately it means you can provide products and services that are diverse and can serve different groups. That's not just race and gender, that's age, that's socio-economic. That's your pool of potential customers and prospects. If you have a workforce that looks like that, you are much more likely to be able to market and gain their attention.

WHAT CHANGES DO YOU SEE ON THE HORIZON FOR AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EFFORTS?

Probably now, the biggest concern is with the economy and making sure these programs don't get cut. A lot of my colleagues who I work with out in the private sector, are very nervous that all the gains that we've made in these programs might get chopped. And these aren't just employee-based programs, they're community programs as well. A lot of employers have the idea that if you get involved with the community, you can do some good and you are seen as a good employer and that has corporate benefits. A lot of people are concerned that some of those programs may get cut just with the downturn in the economy.

For more from Beth Ronnenburg about changing standards for affirmative action programs, go to www.corridorinc.com.

