

BUSINESS

Can a 10-minute survey get a firm's diversity goals on track? This Minneapolis company thinks so

Infinity Systems guiding businesses in improving their "cultural competency"

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Art Johnson has a proposition for companies ready to get serious about diversity and retention: Give him 10 minutes with your employees and he'll tell you what's been standing in your way.

Johnson, the founder and leader of the management consultant firm Infinity Systems Inc., has spent two decades developing surveys and coaching techniques to figure out how to get employees on board with corporate goals. Now he's turned his attention to helping businesses root out the more deeply ingrained systems that have allowed racism, sexism and other workplace barriers to fester.

The work centers on a 29-question online survey that he calls a diagnostic tool. It aims to give leaders a road map to improving what Johnson calls their "cultural competency" in diversity, equity and inclusion.

"Organizations are running all kind of different initiatives, from establishing enterprise resource groups to having internal advocates," Johnson said. "But the question you have to answer is: are any of these things moving the needle?"

Minneapolis-based Infinity Systems began marketing the cultural competency survey in February after a year of development that included input from organizational psychologists and others at the University of Minnesota.

Then came May and June, when the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked conversations in boardrooms and cubicles about unconscious bias and structural racism. Interest soared for the company's new survey on cultural competence.

"We began to show up on the radar for many organizations," Johnson said.



Art Johnson is founder and chief executive of Infinity Systems. The Minneapolis-based company recently launched a new 10-minute



By next year, Johnson anticipates sales of the survey, which it calls Equimetrics, to have eclipsed that of his company's organizational alignment tool, called Orgametrics.

There's been a rallying cry for more diversity in the workplace for decades. The business case for hiring more women and people of color has been clear, but action has been slow.

Johnson feels it keenly. He was the first Black student at his elementary school and, in a 25-year career as a manager and executive with IBM, US West and Medtronic, he often was the lone person of color in the room.

"I questioned a lot of things that were common practices, that were not diverse, not inclusive in their thinking," he said of his work at large companies. "I pushed back."

Many companies have created C-suite officers to help their organizations do better in diversity, inclusion and equity, which is becoming known by the acronym DI&E. But achieving broader change — the kind that leads to greater retention and better workplace performance — has been elusive.

"Diversity means a person like myself has been invited to dinner," Johnson said. "Inclusion means I get to participate in the dinner discussion. And equity is you're serving something I can actually eat."

The Equimetrics survey is simple by design. Johnson said he spent a year carving it down from 100 questions to a couple dozen.

It asks questions of inequality in nine areas, such as diversity, equity, inclusion, communication, leadership, and company policies and practices. Respondents rank their answers on a 1 to 10 scale. There's a chance to answer some open-ended questions afterward.

Joe Byrd, the company's vice president of operations, said the tool is a data-driven, non-judgmental way to get managers and executives to start thinking differently.

"A leader may be looking at their company and saying, 'We're hiring more women, we're hiring more minorities. I think we're going in the right direction with diversity,'" Byrd said. "But they may have no idea what the experience throughout the organization is for someone who looks different than they do."

Diversity is easy to measure, with head count. But the Equimetrics survey aims to help organizations go deeper and understand why merely having a diverse workforce isn't enough.

Studies bear out that when people feel part of something bigger, that they've been included in the corporate strategy, they're less likely to leave the company for opportunities elsewhere.

"A person included in the dinner discussion is more apt to stick around for dessert," Johnson said.

The third component — equity — is the fair and transparent treatment of everyone, and it requires transparency.

"Transparency," Johnson said, "creates this feeling of being in a meritocracy versus some beauty contest."

Dunwoody Technical College is among Johnson's clients that turned to the Equimetrics survey this fall in direct response to the year's protests for racial justice.

The private, nonprofit college in downtown Minneapolis has about 250 employees, including full-time and adjunct faculty, and had worked previously with Johnson and Infinity Systems around organizational measures.

"If we're really going to focus on an initiative that's going to support underserved, underrepresented populations, we better make sure our house is in order — that we are as inclusive and equitable as we think we are," Dunwoody's president Rich Wagner said.

About 70% of the staff completed the Equimetrics questionnaire, which Wagner said was encouragingly high.

The campus has since formed a diversity, inclusion and equity team led by the vice president of human resources and the director of career services. Another person, in a newly created position to work with high school juniors and seniors, will also have DI&E responsibilities.

Based on survey results, Dunwoody plans to launch an action plan in the first quarter of 2021, including ways to improve communications among employees and opening up the hiring and interview process.

"I don't like doing surveys for the sake of doing surveys," Wagner said. "You do them to learn something and then implement actions to improve some things."

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