

A melting pot of innovation

 By [Walter Penfold](#)

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At business school they taught me that diversity in the workplace is a good thing. I can still remember the intensity on my lecturer's face when he explained how bringing people together from different walks of life would foster a creative environment, and bring us untold riches.



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The way he described it was as if diversity would lead to the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I was a little sceptical to say the least. I mean, how do you get a bunch of people of different cultures, languages and religions to understand each other and work together effectively? It sounded like a recipe for disaster.

So when I started my first company about ten years ago, diversity wasn't something I thought about consciously. I was too busy trying to survive and make payroll every month to worry about anything else. I hired a few people without really thinking about what colour they were or what background they had. I just wanted the right person for the job. Then a strange thing happened. My staff mix started to reflect my customer mix. I like to think that this was because I had some profound understanding of diversity and had consciously hired people that mirrored our customers, but if I have to be honest it was probably just pure pot luck. However it happened, it definitely worked. My customers were happy, my staff were happy, and I was amazed. It was my first real life lesson in diversity.

A strong driver of market share gains

Over the next few years I started to understand how important it is to have people in your organisation that can relate to and communicate effectively with all your customers. I would even go as far as to say that building a workforce that mirrors the diverse ethnicities and backgrounds of your customers is a strong driver of market share gains. So, increased diversity equals increased market share; a hypothesis I hope someone smarter than me will test someday!

When we started seriously ramping up staff at Everlytic I realised that what I had learnt about diversity was just the tip of the iceberg and that there were many more lessons to come.

How better to be creative than to put a bunch of completely different people in the room and let them play, creating a real melting pot of innovation?

Today we have 60 employees that speak 24 different languages, are citizens of 11 different countries, have ancestry from 22 countries, and represent more than 10 different religions/belief systems.

A refreshing and inspiring environment

The other incredible thing about diversity is that it helps staff retention. Most people cherish the idea of being respected as an individual regardless of where they come from or how they chose to live their lives.

Working in an environment where people are tolerant and accepting and where differences are celebrated is quite refreshing and can also be inspiring. We underpin all of this with a strong set of values to guide us. These include respect, integrity, transparency, excellence and innovation. We also want everyone in the company to love what they do, be real, and be happy.

So what have I learnt? I've learnt that diversity is the key to building a culture where people can thrive and be creative. I've also learnt that customers love diversity and companies that get their mix right can use it as a competitive advantage in the market place.

Any doubts I've had about the benefits of diversity have completely evaporated in the face of overwhelming evidence. Now all I need to do is look up my old lecturer and apologise to him for being so obstreperous.

ABOUT WALTER PENFOLD

Walter is the managing director of Everlytic, a SaaS marketing automation platform. Everlytic was voted the fastest growing tech company in South Africa by Deloitte in 2014, and was acquired by Vox Telecom in January 2016.

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