



Diversity is **key**

By Soozie Jones Walker,
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First, I'd like to discuss what diversity is and maybe what it isn't. When you ask business leaders and their staff members what diversity is, there seems to be confusion when individuals try to describe it.

The meaning of the word diversity is actually very diverse. Simply put, it means understanding that each individual is unique and recognizing our individual differences. It involves understanding that we are all more than just a number. Merriam Webster defines diversity as "the state of having people who are different races or who have different cultures in a group or organization." This would include people of a different gender or sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, age, or background.

Diversity is important, not just in the commercial real estate industry and in SIOR, but in all businesses and organizations that want to remain relevant and successful in today's increasingly global and diverse business world. Our clients, members, and communities are

growing at record rates with new, exciting, and diverse influences. Knowing and understanding these differences could very quickly determine if you will succeed in this rapidly changing environment.

Diversity has played a huge role in my career, helping me grow and achieve personal and professional success. In the early stages of my career, women were not included in most male-dominated fields such as commercial real estate, real estate lending, or upper management of corporations. Women were too often relegated to support roles such as assistants, secretaries, and accounting clerks. When I began my real estate career in 1979, I was told residential real estate would be my best path. I immediately searched for high-level, commercial designation/training certifications I could achieve to set myself apart from the herd.

Refusing to recognize that being "a woman in a man's field" might be recognition enough, I quickly found that SIOR would be my path to success. I began associating with the industry leaders in my town and obtaining the knowledge and education necessary to proudly wear my "pin."

Breaking the perception of just being a woman, I worked harder; I was always over-prepared for meetings with clients, and I made sure my clients and customers knew I was uniquely qualified and different from my competition. Having been the third woman in my local market to earn the SIOR designation, it was not only a privilege but an honor to be associated with so many who believed that seeing diversity in those they hired was good for their business.

Today, I'm fortunate enough to be involved and to serve in leadership positions in a wide range of professional organizations. Each organization takes pride in pushing to make their membership more diverse.

I've learned from diversity champions like James Murren, chairman and CEO of MGM Resorts International, which employs approximately 62,000 people worldwide and is the largest private employer in Nevada. In an SEC filing in February 2016, Murren said it best: "Diversity and inclusion are fundamental to our Company's value system, our people philosophy, our cultural life, and therefore, our competitive advantage as an employer and destination of choice for our global customer base. Our diversity initiative at our resorts fosters employee engagement, individual responsibility, team collaboration, leadership competency, high performance and innovation. Our diversity initiative has been widely recognized for many years and has been awarded numerous accolades." He went on to explain in a later interview that "strategy is great, but culture will eat strategy for lunch."

A clear and strong policy on diversity is a great start, but truly embracing the concepts and living the policy daily in your business is the way to create such a culture of diversity.

As Chair of the SIOR Diversity Working Group, I am proud to report that our committee has been charged with ensuring SIOR is moving forward with a clear culture of inclusion in order to grow and flourish over the next 75 years, embracing new members from all diverse backgrounds. ♥

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