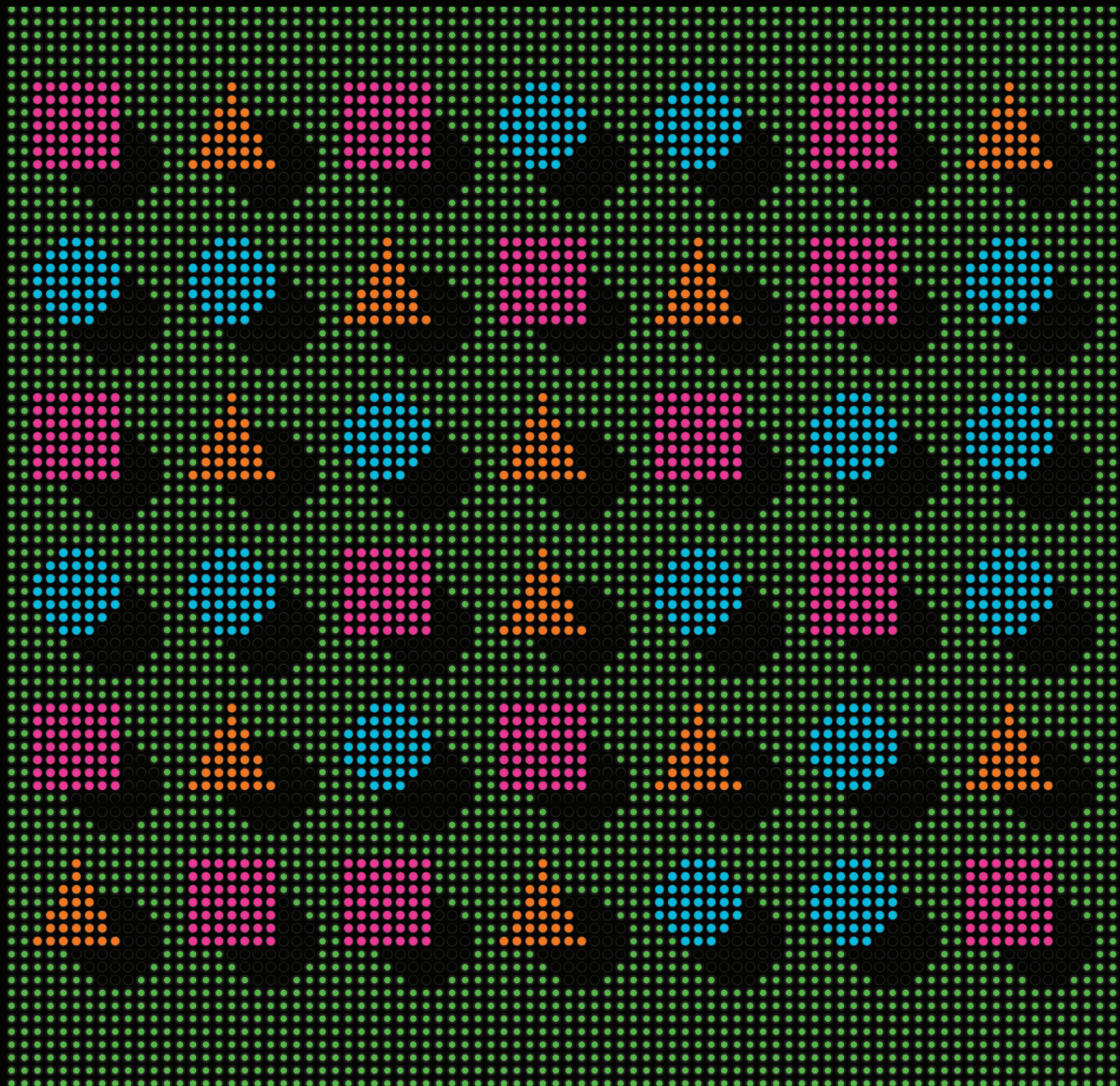


The value of diversity

JULY 2022

Why everyone benefits
from inclusion



This is the 14th in a series of *PF Perspectives*, produced by CIPFA and *Public Finance* to stimulate discussion on key public finance and policy issues. These essays, by leading public sector practitioners and experts, examine the importance of diversity in the workplace and why policies of inclusion should be pursued for the benefit of the workforce as a whole

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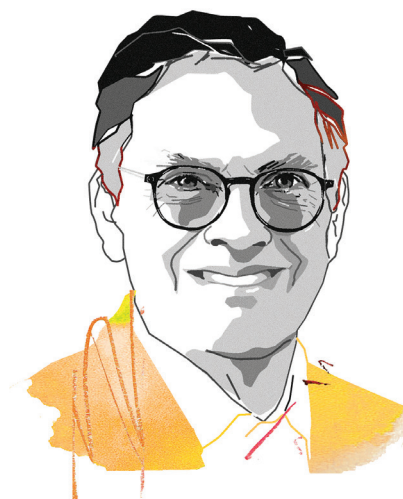
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FOREWORD



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No two people are ever truly alike.

The stunning breadth and diversity of the human race is surely one of our greatest strengths as a species – and the public sector needs to harness this potential.

Despite the uncertain future and difficult global challenges, the public sector must not lose sight of its role in society. Improving the lives of citizens through providing essential services is its founding principle. To do this effectively, it must reflect those it is there to serve.

That's why this special issue on diversity is so timely. The best way to tackle uncertainty is together. By working together, and understanding and respecting our differences, we will be able to overcome the challenges ahead.

But it's also vital for individuals to feel that the public sector is there to serve them, regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation or religion. To do this, the public sector needs to be as diverse as the people who depend on it.

The use of affirmative action in the US has improved opportunities for minority groups, despite criticism of the practice, argues Mark Mack, from the Government Finance Officers Association. Employing people from those groups that have been subjected to discrimination is vital if we are to ever have a public sector that truly represents society.

Closer to home, Alison Sweeting, CIPFA's diversity and inclusion lead, explains that gender equality in the workplace is not just good for women, but for all employees, and the organisation itself. Quite simply, gender equality in the workplace means it's a better place to work for everyone.

Being inclusive doesn't have to come at the cost of business goals, says Saorsa-Amatheia Tweedale, the Department for Work and Pensions national diversity ambassador. There are just over one million people in the UK who identify as LGBT+, with a combined spending power of £6bn, so the incentives for businesses to be demonstrably LGBT+ inclusive are clear.

Other contributors to this issue of *PF Perspectives* include Dr Lisa Cameron MP, from the Scottish National Party, on why it's so important to ensure the fair representation of those with disabilities in the workplace, and Richard Iferenta, vice-chair and partner at KPMG UK, who writes about how increasing the number of people from ethnic minorities in the workplace can boost socio-economic growth.

Despite these difficult times, we must stay focused on our commitment to diversity and inclusion. As we can learn from these essays, it is not only the right thing to work towards, but it can also help achieve business goals.

Ensuring that all parts of society are represented throughout our public sector is vital if we are to work together to overcome the inevitable global challenges that await.

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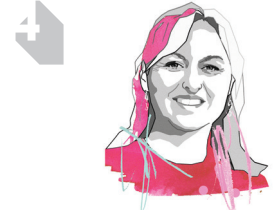
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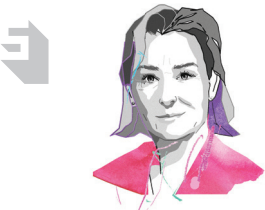
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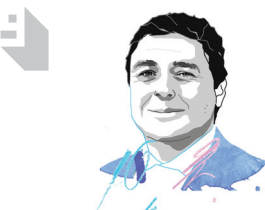
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REPRESENTATION:
THE IMPORTANCE
OF WORKPLACE
INCLUSION

Employers must set an LGBT+ example for the wider world

ESSAY



BY MIKE FREER

The safest and most prosperous societies are those where everyone lives freely, without fear of discrimination – and good LGBT+ practices in business can fuel wider acceptance



Mike Freer is the minister for equalities, with a specific focus on LGBT+

AS MINISTER FOR EQUALITIES, it is my duty to ensure that this government does not shy away from its responsibility to LGBT+ people. I will be driving forward our work to ensure employers provide a safe and inclusive space for LGBT+ people to thrive.

Unfortunately, LGBT+ people continue to face high levels of bullying, harassment and conflict in the workplace. Research carried out last year by employment and HR body CIPD shows the effect this can have, with LGBT+ employees often experiencing lower levels of psychological safety, wellbeing and job satisfaction, as well as poorer workplace relationships, than heterosexual people.

People that are able to feel themselves at work are free to work uninhibited by any need to hide aspects of their identity. Fostering an inclusive and open workplace environment will allow LGBT+ employees to do their work unencumbered, to the benefit of not only their careers but their businesses and the global economy.

Like many LGBT+ people, my experiences in the workplace as a gay man have been hugely varied. There are lots of factors that play in to why an employee may be more or less likely to be open about their sexual orientation or gender.

Employers have the ability to take control

There is no doubt, though, that employers are in a great position to influence these factors by promoting workplace diversity, equality and inclusion. We've found that taking concrete steps, such as establishing diversity leads with effective targets, running structured interviews and using skill-based assessment tasks, are particularly effective.

It couldn't be easier to access some of these resources in order to support LGBT+ employees. The Behavioural Insights Team has published toolkits that provide employers with evidence-based actions they can take to improve equality in the workplace. Lots of organisations are on hand to provide advice, such as Ernst & Young Global, which has a guide on ways to advance LGBT+ policy throughout global companies, or the LGBT Foundation, which provides advice on how employers can be good LGBT+ allies.

As well as attracting and retaining diverse, talented workforces, employers should be conscious of how they are also having an impact on the wider world. Graduates in particular are now not only asking "What is my employer doing for me?" but also "What is my employer doing for the world around me?"

Influencing the world beyond work

Business has the power to accelerate the pace of change for equality and to support LGBT+ inclusion, not just in the workplace but in the world around them. Whether big or small, local or multinational, businesses can use their influence through relationships with governments, partner organisations, supply chains and customers to advocate for liberal values across the globe.

Of course, we cannot and should not seek to build diverse and inclusive workplaces simply because of the economic benefits. Everybody has the right to feel safe wherever

they are. Unfortunately, that is not the case for LGBT+ people in some countries. There are 71 territories that still criminalise same-sex relations, and there are many places where LGBT+ people face violence and discrimination.

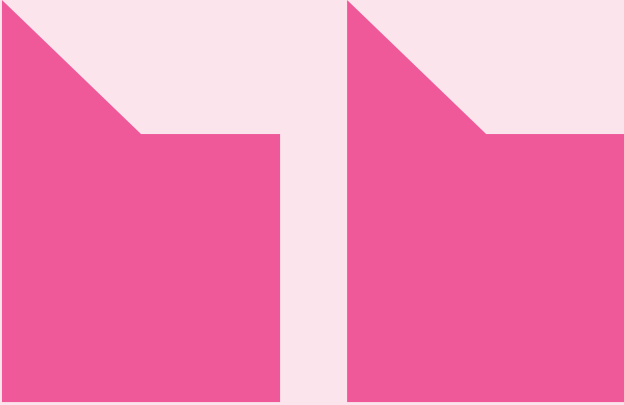
The safest and most prosperous societies are those where everyone lives freely, without fear of violence or discrimination, and are empowered to play full and active parts in their society. We are here to support businesses to foster an open and accepting culture, so all staff feel empowered, regardless of their background, sexual orientation or any other part of their identity.

We are also aware that we have a lot to learn from business. There is a great deal of work already being done by businesses and the Federation of Small Businesses' Let's Grow Business Together digital hub is helping to harness that. The hub provides a platform for businesses to share resources and expertise on which policies are working for them on the ground. It is also there to celebrate LGBT+ entrepreneurship and ensure real positive change for LGBT+ people in the workplace. I'm keen to get out there and meet with some of these businesses to hear about the good work being done.

Last year, the Equality Hub hosted an event in Manchester, bringing together businesses and civil society organisations such as Google, Asos and Auto Trader, to discuss how to support people to be themselves at work. An important part of our work going forward will be to continue with this engagement – helping to establish best-practice on LGBT+ inclusivity across different sectors.

Employers, now more than ever, need to be proactive about inclusion and to understand and address any forms of discrimination in the workplace. This remains a priority for me. Government will be on hand to provide support, ensuring the vast talents of the LGBT+ workforce are utilised so that productive, exciting and fulfilling careers can be experienced by all. ●

‘There are 71 territories that still criminalise same-sex relations, and there are many places where LGBT+ people face violence and discrimination’



Employers, now more than ever, need to be proactive about inclusion and to understand and address any forms of discrimination

Why gender equality in the workplace matters to everyone

ESSAY



BY ALISON SWEETING

Gender equality can deliver clear organisational benefits, and public services that wish to properly serve the public must begin with a workforce that reflects its needs

A COMMON MISCONCEPTION surrounding issues of gender equality is that they only relate to women. This is a misleading idea, as gender equality has consequences for everyone working in an organisation.

Over the last several years, there has been a lot of publicity and research about how we can reach gender equality in the workplace. There is still much work to be done, as is clearly illustrated by the continuing gender pay gap. In 2021, women working in the UK earned, on average, 90p compared to every £1 that their male colleagues received. In the construction industry the gap was much wider, with women earning 76p compared with every £1 earned by a man.

However, this issue is not just limited to the well-documented gender pay gap. Research also shows that women are more likely to be part-time workers, to have carer responsibilities, to work in lower-level roles, and to take career breaks. It's not hard to see why gender equality matters to women – but it needs to matter to everyone. Employers, colleagues, customers and service-users all benefit from gender equality in the workplace, partly because it encourages equality for other marginalised groups, too.

One major benefit of gender equality is an increased diversity of views – different people bring different experiences and expectations to the workplace. Organisations with only one type of employee risk missing out on the different viewpoints, ideas and perspectives that a diverse pool of colleagues brings. Gender inequality also has a disproportionate impact on different types of women, based on factors such as race, class or disability (to name a few).

Seizing the rich opportunities of diversity

Recognising the richness that comes from diversity of thinking leads to more opportunities for other marginalised communities in the workplace.

Creating a level playing field for women benefits any organisation by making it a more attractive place to work and by widening the recruitment pool. If your employees don't feel valued or listened to, they're more likely to leave in favour of a more inclusive environment. High levels of turnover are expensive for employers and can be damaging to colleagues and customers alike. If employers recognise that the bulk of unpaid care work still falls on women and thus accommodate employees' needs to work flexibly, this encourages increased loyalty and a more stable workforce. Men, too, should have the opportunity to work flexibly so they can take on care duties.

Gender equality in the workplace thus leads to improved quality of life for all employees. An employer who is demonstrably committed to flexible working arrangements, equal pay, diverse hiring and support for career progression will have a happier and more productive workforce. Flexible working also means that employees with physical conditions that limit their ability to attend work in an office can also tailor their working hours to suit both themselves and their employer. All employees can feel they are better able to make effective contributions at work and have the opportunity to progress in their careers. For organisations worried that flexible working leads to lower ►



Alison Sweeting is training delivery manager and the diversity and inclusion lead at CIPFA

‘Clear and targeted initiatives that mitigate the burdens women experience will be central to any push for equality in the UK’

productivity, research demonstrates that this is not the case – and the last two years have given most of us the opportunity to test that out, with hybrid working becoming the norm across much of the public sector in the UK. An organisation that is committed to gender equality will be seen as a progressive organisation.

This is especially important as we consider the backslides in gender equality we’ve seen as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Research suggests that women’s jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable than men’s and that women, despite representing only 39% of the global workforce, account for 54% of job losses. Women also have disproportionately high representation in some of the services worst-affected by the pandemic, such as food, accommodation, arts or recreation. The fallout of the pandemic on women’s employment opportunities cannot be ignored in contemporary discussions of gender equality in the workplace.

At a time when we’re seeing a worrying increase in mental health problems across all sections of our population, it is vital that employers work with their employees to support them in the best way they can. A lot of people may still feel anxious about returning to the office environment after two years of working from home, but employers can support staff with phased returns, staggered working hours and hybrid arrangements.

Representing your ‘customer’ base and communities

Having a diverse workforce in the public sector means all users of public services know that they have more than likely been represented at some stage of the service inception, planning and delivery. If there are representatives within the public sector who can advocate for the needs of different groups, this means that those needs are less likely to be ignored.

This can lead to healthier, more satisfied communities who are more likely to engage in consultations and support the relevant organisations for ongoing change. The government’s levelling-up agenda must also push for increased opportunities for women if it is to achieve true economic and social equality across the UK. This includes initiatives that support women’s career growth, especially in industries where they are under-represented. Clear and targeted initiatives that mitigate the burdens women experience will be central to any push for equality in the UK. Services that wish to properly serve the public must begin with a workforce that reflects its needs.

Clearly, it is not enough to just talk about equality. It is vital that employers take action to make it actually happen, by providing equality training to their staff, widening their recruitment processes, supporting staff who need flexible working arrangements and encouraging open conversations about employees’ mental health. Words have to be supported by actions. Gender equality impacts all members of an organisation and is especially critical in organisations that represent and serve the public. It’s therefore time to stop limiting gender equality to an issue for which women are solely responsible, and start making changes for the better of everyone. ●



One major benefit of gender equality is an increased diversity of views – different people bring different experiences and expectations to the workplace

Think big and act big

ESSAY



BY RICHARD IFERENTA

Improving ethnic minority representation to unlock socio-economic growth cannot be done one small step at a time

WHY IS ETHNIC DIVERSITY in the workplace so important? For a start, it's the right thing to do if we want a fair and just society. But it also impacts your bottom line. In fact, research by McKinsey has found that organisations in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity outperformed those in the lowest quartile by 36% on profitability. Our economy benefits, too, with the McGregor-Smith review on race in the workplace revealing that racial equality could be worth £24bn a year to the UK economy.

A key argument can also be made that ethnic diversity helps tackle the skills gaps we face, especially in the key growth areas of the digital and green economies, unlocking talent that's currently being overlooked. It was found by the Bridge Group that employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds take 25% longer to progress in financial services jobs, and this 'progression gap' increases to 32% for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who also identify as having black heritage. The research actually found no link between background and performance, suggesting this gap is about polish, fit and ethnicity – not a lack of performance.

From symbolism to bold interventions

Progress on getting ethnic minority employees into the top roles has been slow, especially for black heritage employees. A Business in the Community report, *Race at the Top: Revisited*, found that black heritage employees held just 1.5% of top management roles in the UK private sector.

But there are positive signs that change is picking up pace. In April this year, the FCA issued a policy statement requiring issuers to include a statement in their annual financial reports, setting out, on a 'comply-or-explain' basis, whether they have met specific board diversity targets. Similarly, in the US, the Securities and Exchange Commission approved new listing rules regarding board diversity for most Nasdaq-listed companies. Some individual investors have threatened to vote against companies that fail to diversify their leadership teams.

Businesses are moving on from symbolic gestures to bold interventions to improve the workplace experience for under-represented groups – especially black heritage employees. These can be very successful when they're focused and where they help ethnic minority employees gain the right skills to progress to the next level.

As a firm, we are continually challenging ourselves with respect to attracting and retaining more diverse talent, which we see as not only the right thing to do ethically, but also good for business and for client outcomes, too. Reflecting on my own experience of what makes a difference, I have set out some suggestions below.

Take personal ownership

All the CEOs and boards that I've been talking with recognise the importance of improving ethnic minority representation. That's good because it is unequivocally leaders who must drive this change and provide a clear strategy and roadmap for delivering it. Yes, middle management does play a critical hands-on role in embedding the necessary



Richard Iferenta is
vice-chair and partner
at KPMG UK

cultural change and identifying targeted interventions, but that change needs to be championed from the top, then percolate down through the business.

It also helps to have a spearhead for change. Custodians of inclusion, diversity and equity agendas need to have the power and influence to drive meaningful change. They must be supported and enabled to deliver strategy by the whole C-suite.

Set clear targets

Some may debate the value of targets, but I strongly believe setting them is key to success – what gets measured gets done. It happened with gender representation. On average, just 9% of FTSE 350 board roles were held by women in 2011. By 2021, that had risen to almost 38%. And we’ve experienced it ourselves at KPMG, with our Black Lives Action Plan seeking to bolster black heritage senior representation. Building on our initial success, we’ve now challenged ourselves even further and are aiming for 10% of our workforce and 5% of our leadership to be of black heritage by 2030.

You need to be careful that adhering to targets isn’t misconstrued as tokenism, though. This isn’t a box-ticking exercise, it’s about data helping to understand the challenges while also driving meaningful change that impacts lived experience.

Capture data to give you the full picture

You can’t set meaningful targets without good data, as you need to understand your starting point so you can then track progress. And the more data you collect – workforce diversity, length of time people from different demographics spend in grade, their median and mean pay, etc – the richer the picture you’ll have of the problem and how to address it.

Such insight also enables you to build in some simple checks and balances. For example, if the average time in a role for all colleagues is two to three years, but for black heritage employees it’s five, then something clearly isn’t right. That would require investigating and remedial action.

We should be open and should be publicly sharing our progress against targets set – ideally in a standardised format. It’s the only way to demonstrate commitment to employees, customers, investors and regulators, and to add to the broader dialogue around change. Public commitments also hold leaders accountable for driving change, which is critical.

Incentivise recruiters to hit diversity targets

One way to increase diversity is by setting a target for the percentage of black heritage and ethnic minority candidates put forward, perhaps by reference to representation countrywide, as per the data from the most recent census. You can then incentivise or penalise recruitment agents by reference to whether they have hit the target. It is worth noting that signatories to the voluntary code of conduct for executive search firms have made a commitment to support their clients with achieving diversity on their boards ►

‘Custodians of inclusion, diversity and equity agendas need to have the power and influence to drive meaningful change’

and their senior executive ranks. Another is to look to recruit outside of your normal pool and increase your networking with diverse talent. If you continue to look in the same places, you'll end up with the same results.

What constitutes a successful candidate is also just as important. An advert for a senior manager vacancy in financial services that requires up to ten years' experience immediately excludes a huge number of competent people who – because of their race or socio-economic background, perhaps – may not have had the opportunity to gain that experience. Instead, employers should contextualise an application, with greater emphasis placed on competencies and behaviours that ensure success in a role.

Ensure work allocation is fair and provides opportunity

The task doesn't end with recruitment – getting on is just as important as getting in, and so we must pay close attention to inclusion.

Beyond recruiting, we must also give equal opportunity to ethnic minorities. Failing to do so may stifle rather than unleash potential. It's important to ensure a fair allocation of work. That entails providing all employees with work that's challenging, and supporting them in achieving it.

Minorities in senior positions need to be treated equally and included in the conversation, as well as in decision-making. Otherwise, this doesn't mark progress, it's purely lip service.

The day-to-day experience of an ethnic minority member of staff is a key consideration. They're more likely to aspire to certain roles and give the best of themselves if they see someone like them in a similar or more senior position.

Provide support through allyship

If we're going to address the progression gap I mentioned earlier, we need to support and champion our under-represented groups. Employees who have a sponsor are more likely to be given opportunities.

One approach to this is allyship, and it's something that is helping us improve the prospects of black heritage colleagues at KPMG. So far, we've matched 240 black heritage colleagues with allies and seen over two-fifths of them promoted, which is a fantastic result that clearly shows the key role allyship plays.

So what is an ally? It's someone who uses their position, or just their voice, to advance the inclusion of others through intentional actions. They stand up and speak out when things aren't right. They help their colleagues get to a position where they get the opportunities to do stretching work. It's a role that requires real effort, self-reflection and making conscious decisions about everyday actions.

The BITC Allyship Toolkit (www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/black-talent-allyship) is designed to help cascade allyship across a range of organisations, regardless of firm size and industry, and is certainly worth a read.

You can't do this a step at a time

Taking targeted action to support the most under-represented groups is key to driving change. But it's not possible to tackle diversity and inclusion issues piecemeal.

Whether it's race, religion, gender or any other protected characteristic, businesses must take a holistic approach. It's the only way to ensure a fair and equal environment where the full potential of both individuals and the collective business can be unleashed. That's how we'll get to a position where the entire business community can truly flourish, with inclusion, diversity and equity front of mind. ●

'The task doesn't end with recruitment – getting on is just as important as getting in'

A charter for disabled workers

ESSAY



BY DR LISA CAMERON MP

If we are to truly build back better, there is an overwhelming need for more robust government action that drives inclusive employment practices for disabled workers



Dr Lisa Cameron MP is the Scottish National Party MP for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Disability Group

IN RECENT MONTHS, we have heard the calls about a necessity for “building back better” and “levelling up across the United Kingdom”. But as chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Disability Group, I believe there has been a noticeable absence of diversity and inclusion in these calls.

To build back better, it is vital we ensure disability is central on the agenda. There are more than 14.1 million disabled people in the UK, and yet for far too long they have often been forgotten – while their access to participation in wider society has been limited. One way we should be building back better and levelling up across the UK is by ensuring employment practices remain inclusive and accessible.

The disability employment gap remains at 28% and data from Leonard Cheshire’s *Locked Out of the Labour Market* report, which examined the impact of Covid-19 on disabled adults in accessing good work, both now and into the future, showed a significant minority of employers (19%) were less likely to hire a disabled person. Attitudes therefore must change, and one way organisations can demonstrate this is by diversifying their recruitment and employment practices.

Introducing the Disability Employment Charter

The APPG and I are therefore supporting leading UK disability organisations, including charities and academics, who have united to urge the government to take more action to end employment discrimination against disabled people. This group launched a Disability Employment Charter as a clear mandate for action in October 2021, outlining the steps the government and employers must take to address the disadvantage disabled people experience in UK workplaces.

The charter, created by the DFN Charitable Foundation, Disability Rights UK, Disability@Work, Leonard Cheshire, Scope, the Shaw Trust Foundation, UNISON, and the University of Warwick, calls on the government to increase workforce transparency by requiring large employers to publish annual data on the number of disabled people they employ as a proportion of their workforce, and their pay gaps.

The charter summarises the key proposals we believe the government should enact to address the disadvantage disabled people currently experience, thereby improving disabled people’s employment outcomes. The proposals within it are backed by evidence published in recent high-profile reports, including the CSJ Disability Commission’s report *Now is the Time* and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Disability report *Ahead of the Arc*.

Further proposals for reform include the option to work flexibly from day one to become the legal default for all jobs, stronger rights to paid disability leave for assessment, rehabilitation and training, improvements to the Disability Confident and Access to Work schemes, and an increase in the rate of statutory sick pay to the European average. This charter now has the support of more than 100 organisations.

The charter also calls for employers to notify employees on decisions regarding reasonable adjustment requests within two weeks. Regarding this, UNISON general secretary Christina McAnea has said: “Disabled workers often wait far too long for even ▶

the most simple of workplace adjustments to be put in place. The government should give employers a two-week deadline to agree the required changes to offices and equipment. This would help prevent employees leaving their roles frustrated at lengthy delays.”

Meanwhile, Kamran Malik, CEO of Disability Rights UK, adds: “Disabled people face a range of hurdles in finding and progressing in work, which just shouldn’t be there. The charter simply and powerfully sets out the concerted actions that the government needs to take to move the dial forward. It’s not enough to tinker round the edges; we need a bold plan to bring down the barriers.”

Breaking down barriers

The government’s National Disability Strategy has been heralded by the government as a chance to “build back better and fairer for all our disabled people”. But the charter argues more needs to be done to reduce the disability employment gap, and it calls on the government to bring forward detailed proposals to tackle the employment disadvantage disabled people face.

It also argues that addressing the barriers disabled people encounter in employment is not only the right thing to do, but also makes business sense by giving employers access to the widest talent pool and helping them address skills shortages, thereby enabling disabled workers to contribute to the post-Covid-19 recovery.

Professor Kim Hoque, co-founder of Disability@Work, and one of the charter’s creators, has described the charter as “a powerful and timely message to government from the country’s leading organisations representing disabled people, that there is an overwhelming need for more robust government action, and broad consensus regarding the form this action should take”.

By signing up to the charter, and inviting other organisations to do the same, we hope to demonstrate the broad platform of support for the proposals we are calling on the government to enact, and the commonality of views across organisations regarding the policy interventions that are needed.

Timely – but time is also of the essence

Launching the charter is particularly timely now, with the ongoing consultation on mandatory employment reporting – which we believe should be introduced. There’s also the review of Disability Confident, which we believe needs to focus on employers’ disability employment outcomes rather than the processes and practices they implement – which were announced in the National Disability Strategy. Our intention is to use the charter to demonstrate to the government the widespread support for reform in these areas.

Currently, disabled people face a disability employment gap that has remained persistently high over the past decade, at 30 percentage points, and a pay gap of 19.6% – alongside poorer work-life balance, job-related mental health and job satisfaction.

Disabled people have also been particularly negatively affected by the pandemic: 21 in every 1,000 disabled people were made redundant in 2020, compared with 13 in every 1,000 for the rest of the population.

As we build back better there is an overwhelming need for diversity and inclusion, and disability should be at the forefront of this.

To find out more about the charter, and how individuals and businesses can help to support its aims, visit www.disabilityemploymentcharter.org ●

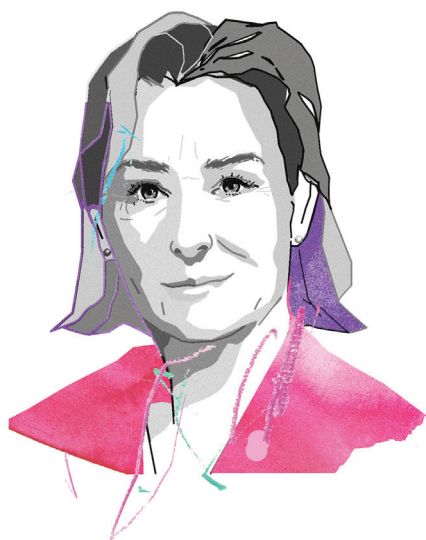
‘Currently, disabled people face a disability employment gap that has remained persistently high over the past decade, alongside poorer work-life balance, job-related mental health and job satisfaction’



The charter simply and powerfully sets out the concerted actions that the government needs to take to move the dial forward”

Our way is unique – it is not wrong

ESSAY



BY CHARLOTTE VALEUR

Ensuring fair representation of those who are neurodiverse in the workplace can open up a world of new ideas and opportunities

THE CHALLENGE FOR ORGANISATIONS in attracting and retaining talent seems greater than it has been for many years. We have seen huge job insecurity during the pandemic and the Great Resignation, and a shortage of available talent for businesses as they have looked to bounce back. This has now been rounded off by a cost-of-living crisis.

So, how do organisations manage their talent strategies during volatile times like this, and why is it of value for them to ensure fair representation of those who are neurodivergent in the workplace?

It has by now been generally accepted that diverse teams perform better than homogeneous ones. Diversity considerations generally cover gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, disability and generational diversity. The last frontier of diversity is neurodiversity – which is new to most organisations. And if not new, then until recently at least, largely overlooked.

Neurodiversity finally enters the mainstream

Spurred on by several incredible neurodiversity advocates and influencers, the neurodiversity movement is slowly becoming mainstream. More and more high-level neurodivergent individuals are publicly disclosing their neurodivergence – and the narrative is changing faster.

Organisations are waking up to the fact that neurodivergent people are everywhere, that the stereotypical view we are all white men in technology is not true, and that they probably have a high percentage of neurodivergent employees at all levels of their own organisations.

It is becoming clearer that talent has many forms – and to harvest the best, especially in times of talent shortage and a need for innovation, organisations must broaden their inclusion practices to make sure they can attract and retain the broadest group of talent possible. So far, neurodivergence has not been specifically included by any but the most progressive organisations.

So why is it important to include neurodivergent talent in organisations? In today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, we need people who think differently. By our very nature, we all do think differently – but often we are not heard. All organisations have neurodivergent employees who are not seen or heard, and this is a vast lost opportunity.

So much is talked about authenticity, and when organisations allow their neurodivergent employees to be authentically themselves, it automatically gives everyone that benefit. Neurodivergence is everywhere – we exist in all layers of society, all ethnicities, all industries. But a lot of us are still hidden because we don't feel safe to disclose our neurodivergence. Organisations that can make it psychologically safe for all to be who they authentically are, will benefit from higher levels of overall wellbeing and productivity among employees.

Many neurodivergent people look at problems and opportunities with a significantly different set of eyes. In fact, most of us will think of different and perhaps better ways



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of doing most things before there is even a need for doing it differently. This gives us agility when a crisis hits, in that we have already thought of other ways of performing tasks. Individuals who stick to doing things in a certain way “because we have always done it this way”, will take time to find a new way.

Canaries in the coal mines – a guiding light

I have for years referred to the example of canaries in the coal mines – saving the miners by being more sensitive to toxic gases – as a metaphor for what neurodivergent people can be in the workplace.

Most neurodivergent people experience the world more intensely, because we generally have a wider sensory band. This explains some neurodivergent people’s extraordinary attention to detail, memory, ability to detect patterns, empathy and work performance. It also explains the success of those of us who manage our way around stereotypes and discrimination.

This broader sensory band also explains why any toxicity of the environment around us – physical and emotional – is felt by us earlier than others. We will often experience people telling us that we are too sensitive, when in fact our sensitivities are exactly what can bring significant value to a workplace.

Toxic behaviours in the workplace are very apparent to me, while they can go unnoticed by others. Toxicity is a huge risk for any organisation and one that can harm all aspects of that organisation. It reduces productivity, destroys employee wellbeing, increases the risk of losing talent, and heightens the likelihood of having employee grievances. It also impacts the connection to all stakeholders, as unhappy employees will struggle to be enthusiastic about their work.

It is almost impossible for me to work in a toxic environment because of the intensity I feel in it. This is the same for most neurodivergent people, and a workplace could help itself by listening to us when we point out there is a toxic environment that needs healing.

We also often have the ability to see the complex impact of decisions or to see different potential impacts than other people see. One decision impacts organisations in so many ways – performance, revenue, employee engagement and client satisfaction, to mention a few. Organisations will benefit from having as many different sets of eyes evaluating key decisions, to ensure all stones have been turned.

I have a strong interest in risk management, for example, and I see patterns of impacts for risks and opportunities that many other people don’t notice. I often have a significantly longer list of the potential impacts of any given risk or opportunity, which improves the quality and depth of risk and opportunity management.

Using neurodivergent and disabled people as the guiding light for how workplaces should operate and how the work environment should be, would help create a better work environment and true equality in the workplace. It can also help organisations function better overall, reduce risks and improve opportunities in many areas. ►

‘More high-level neurodivergent individuals are publicly disclosing their neurodivergence – and the narrative is changing faster’

How do we change workplaces to be inclusive of neurodivergence?

To achieve proper inclusion within neurodivergence, organisations need to increase awareness of the ‘neurotypicals privilege’. This privilege is bestowed upon the people who fit into what is seen as ‘normative’ or ‘neurotypical’. The world is broadly organised to suit neurotypicals, as opposed to the wider group of neurotypes. This is a privilege not often thought about, but one that nevertheless affects all neurodivergent people every day, from cradle to grave.

Once this is acknowledged we can start changing organisations to include neurodivergent talent. This should ideally be in a way that benefits everyone and which does not have to be expensive or hard – in fact, it is something already practiced.

The curb-cut effect: how universal design makes things better for everyone

First documented in the US as a response to a need to support people in wheelchairs, the curb-cut effect relates to the way in which pavement indentations implemented to support wheelchair users turned out to benefit many – those pulling suitcases on wheels, those pushing babies and young children in buggies, bikers, workers with large racks making deliveries, and many others. The curb-cut effect is an excellent illustration of how laws, accessibility measures and programmes designed to benefit vulnerable groups, such as disabled people, can end up benefitting all.

The curb-cut effect, in its essence, shows us that an investment in one group can be a much bigger investment in the broader wellbeing of all people. This also transpires in the workplace. When I talk about accessibility for neurodivergent people, I always look for universal solutions that make it better for everyone, as opposed to one segregated group.

A good example of a change meant for one group but benefitting many, is Oxo Good Grips. The creation of Oxo Good Grips started with the goal of creating a vegetable peeler that was easy and comfortable for someone with arthritis to use. In developing the product, the grip was tested on people of various ages, hand sizes, hand strength and dexterity. The consideration of a functional and attractive product for all people led to the product becoming widely recognised as a design and brand in its own right.

Another universal design success is the House of Disable People’s Organization in Taastrup, Denmark. Designed by architect firms Cubo Arkitekter and Force4 Architects, this office building promotes equal access, and encourages users to be self-reliant through several design features. The objective was to create ‘the world’s most accessible office building’. This was a complex task, where intense user-involvement and a new strategic approach was deployed. By building the design strategy around universal design, creating equality for all users was the outcome. Solutions that support and encourage all users to be as self-reliant as possible while considering everyone’s dignity, have been incorporated.

Good universal design demands extensive knowledge about regulations and standards, but even more importantly, a good knowledge and understanding of the needs of all users.

Once organisations have found ways to include neurodivergent employees, they will hopefully realise we can provide them with a competitive edge that can bring measurable benefits, both in terms of productivity and profit, and to the overall workplace culture and morale.

Our unique ways of interacting with and interpreting the world are not mistakes – they are an advantage available for those who are open-minded enough to embrace them. ●

‘To achieve proper inclusion within neurodivergence, organisations need to increase awareness of the neurotypicals privilege’

Workplaces that are LGBT+ inclusive find many advantages


 ESSAY


BY SAORSA-AMATHEIA TWEEDALE

In addition to the economic benefits, LGBT+ inclusion in the workplace also fuels innovation, team dynamics, motivation and problem-solving

IT IS ESTIMATED that just over one million people in the UK identify as LGBT+, or about 1.5% of the population, with a spending power in excess of £6bn a year. A survey by Harris Interactive also shows that 87% of LGBT+ adults would consider purchasing from a brand that provided equal workplace benefits, with 23% saying they would switch products or services because another company was more LGBT+ supportive – even if that brand was more expensive or less convenient.

Therefore, there is a clear business imperative to be demonstrably LGBT+ inclusive from a commercial point of view. There are far more significant reasons for any organisation to ensure LGBT+ representation in its workplace, however. Workplaces that are LGBT+ inclusive create a culture of success through trust, teamwork, creativity and breadth of ideas. Furthermore, an atmosphere of workplace inclusivity is a key driver of any dynamic, responsive, agile and productive organisation.

A recent survey by The Intelligence Group suggested that 88% of millennials look for work/life integration within their professional life, while Stonewall UK's survey of business leaders who are 'out' showed that 92% believed that being able to be open about sexuality at work improves relationships with colleagues. Both of these survey results suggest that being able to be open about one's sexuality and/or gender identity at work can drive forward engagement. Furthermore, Gallop research has shown that employee engagement drives significantly higher productivity and profitability.

Being comfortable to be yourself and knowing that your workplace supports and encourages you to be open is key, therefore, to employee engagement. Workplaces that have very clear LGBT+ inclusive policies, strategies and statements, and which demonstrate through their actions and deeds that they fully embrace LGBT+ individuals, are sending a clear signal that all employees are accepted and valued, free to be themselves, and that their contribution to the organisation is welcomed. LGBT+ inclusivity sends a strong signal that a workplace is progressive and can therefore play an important role in attracting the best talent.

Boosting retention as well as employee appeal

As well as attracting talented staff, a strong LGBT+ inclusion profile can also play an important role in staff retention. Not only does this keep the talent within the workplace, it also minimises the extremely costly process of acquiring new staff to replace those leaving through feelings of a lack of inclusion or an inability to be their true selves in a workplace.

Successful workplaces have key features in common: high engagement, collaborative teamwork, a predisposition to problem-solving through innovation, and high motivation. All of these key indicators of success are encouraged by strong and visible LGBT+ inclusion.

An inclusive environment is one in which employees can feel empowered to speak up and offer alternative solutions to workplace problems or suggest business innovations when opportunities are identified. The obverse demonstrates the truth of this. If a ►



Saorsa-Amatheia Tweedale is DWP national diversity ambassador on trans issues and DWPrize (LGBT+ Staff Network) national co-chair

‘Being able to be out at work not only increases personal confidence, it also allows the sharing of new and different ideas’

person is having to hide a fundamental part of themselves, such as sexual orientation or gender identity, through fear of bullying or harassment, perhaps even fear of dismissal, then not only is a proportion of their mental energy being wasted in hiding their true selves, but they are also not empowered to offer creative solutions which may out themselves to their work colleagues or employer. Being able to be out at work not only increases personal confidence, it also allows the sharing of new and different ideas.

The Williams Institute study *Economic Motives for Adopting LGBT-Related Workplace Policies* shows that having inclusive policies in place encourages a generation of better ideas and a more innovative decision-making regime. Diverse groups outperform homogenous ones through the amalgamation of new perspectives. A feature of any successful workplace is teamwork, but a team where everyone is valued and that has different backgrounds and mindsets will lead to a more careful processing of a much broader set of information and perspectives. This, in turn, leads to more innovative solutions as more diverse perspectives are considered as part of the developmental or problem-solving process.

Mutual understanding and good relations between team members are essential to team performance. A strong LGBT+ inclusive environment, where standards on diversity and inclusion are not only clear and respected, but also an integral part of the workplace culture, allows all team members to feel valued and able to contribute. In turn, this assists team collaboration and productive discourse of fresh ideas, which is integral to success.

Opening the talent pool

A vital aspect of any vibrant and successful workplace is the motivation of its staff members. As [the Open for Business report](#) points out, people are motivated if they feel they are being treated fairly. A logical extension of this, therefore, is that robust policies and practices that encourage diversity and inclusivity lead to a more motivated workplace. The LGBT+ community is particularly affected by factors that can reduce motivation, such as the levels of hate speech and crime, negative media portrayals and a lack of positive representation. Proactive LGBT+ inclusive policies and practices that challenge stereotypes, have a zero tolerance towards homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, and encourage openness at work, can therefore unlock a motivated talent stream which would otherwise be lost and hidden.

LGBT+ inclusivity, therefore, offers a competitive advantage for all organisations and workplaces due to the innovative talent pool and reservoir of ideas that can be unlocked. To do this effectively, however, requires workplaces to adopt strategies for such inclusion. A good starting point is conducting a full review of diversity and inclusion policies, bringing them up to date both legislatively and in terms of good practice. Making links with community organisations and charities can be a start in this process and a good source of advice and guidance.

Once the policies and guidance have been written anew, reviewed and/or updated, an organisation wishing to move to a strong LGBT+ inclusive position needs to start

putting those documents into practice. If there is no strong historical commitment to diversity and inclusion, especially in relation to the LGBT+ community, then the existing workforce may need LGBT+ inclusive awareness training.

Familiarity with the issues and terminology of the LGBT+ community can help to dispel many misconceptions and begin positive discussions around sexuality and gender identity. Unconscious bias and prejudices formed through a lack of experience and/or knowledge can be challenged and dispelled by effective community-led training. This again can be achieved through cooperative working with local LGBT+ community groups or charities. Revisiting and revising/updating existing LGBT+ training where it exists should form part of the policy/guidance review. Again, this should ideally be done in cooperation with the LGBT+ community.

Appointing a senior individual within the organisation/workplace to act as LGBT+ inclusion champion/coordinator is another key to a successful inclusion strategy. Having a visible senior figure advocating for, supporting and pushing forward the LGBT+ inclusion strategy sends a clear message within the workplace that this is regarded as an important initiative with high-level support.

Alongside the LGBT+ champion, a workplace can encourage LGBT+ visibility by encouraging the appointment of LGBT+ allies. These individuals may not be community members but show visible support through the use of such visual items as LGBT+ lanyards and badges. The organisation may also adopt a pronoun policy on staff badges, the development of gender-neutral facilities, and the use of gender neutral language in official communications, letters and corporate greetings, where they exist.

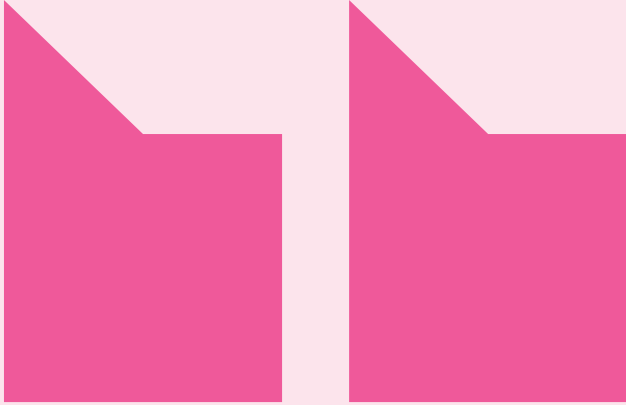
Increased visibility and support for LGBT+ inclusivity within the workplace will then hopefully encourage existing LGBT+ staff to be open about their sexuality and gender identity, as well as attract community members to join the workforce during recruitment exercises. In this latter regard, placing a statement of inclusion in job adverts and interview invites is an important marker of a workplace's commitment to LGBT+ inclusion.

An important and progressive step forward

With increased openness in the workplace and the recruitment of LGBT+ community members, the establishment of an LGBT+ staff network is an important step. Such a network can work with workplace leadership to develop, update and advise on LGBT+ inclusive policy development and initiatives, as well as help the workplace mark significant community events and historical anniversaries. The celebration of LGBT+ identities by all within a workplace is not only good for team building and mutual understanding, but also affirms the commitment to inclusivity by the organisation and its leadership.

There are undoubted benefits to LGBT+ representation in the workplace. As shown, there is an economic imperative for some workplaces and businesses, but there is also a far stronger argument for LGBT+ inclusion in the form of advantages in innovation, team dynamics, motivation, problem-solving and staff/service user-engagement. With a workplace leadership committed to developing LGBT+ representation, any organisation can realise the advantages of a diverse, agile and innovative workforce by putting in the time and effort to develop its inclusive policies and strategies. Furthermore, what is true of the LGBT+ community is also true of other under-represented demographics in the workplace. ●

‘Any organisation can realise the advantages of a diverse, agile and innovative workforce by putting in the time and effort to develop its inclusive policies and strategies’



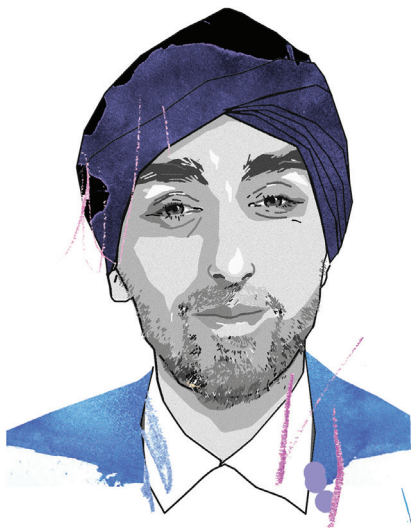
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STRATEGIES:
WAYS TO IMPROVE
DIVERSITY IN
ORGANISATIONS

Addressing health inequalities is complex – but not impossible

ESSAY



BY HARDEV VIRDEE

The public finance community has a huge role to play in shaping the legacy of the health of local communities



Hardev Virdee is group CFO at Barts Health NHS Trust and chair of the NHS Finance Academy

WHEN YOU THINK about why people spend whole careers in the public sector, we often come back to the common values of ‘wanting to make a difference’ and ‘giving something back’. This is all very well and good – but how in the world of public finance do we leave a legacy? And what difference do we expect to make when it comes to diversity?

Having worked in the NHS for over 20 years I have seen how various policies and initiatives have driven us to a position where we continue to pose questions about the determinants of health inequalities. We can examine socio-economic factors, from education to employment, but there is also significant evidence that Covid-19 has exaggerated the levels of health inequalities across England.

There are various studies that have shown diversity in teams and leadership improves productivity and performance. This is also the case when it comes to the way healthcare is delivered, which is important when we look at health outcomes. Having a more diverse team at every level will be beneficial for productivity and for the ability to respond to population health issues. After all, we recognise that having a diverse population will see greater disparities of health outcomes.

Startling outcomes that diversity can help address

The extreme health inequalities in maternal healthcare were highlighted in a report from MBRRACE-UK in 2020, which showed that black women in the UK are statistically four times more likely to die during childbirth than white women. In addition, women with an Asian ethnic background were three times more likely to die due to complications than white women.

Those working in the NHS recognise the pressures faced by maternity units in recruiting and retaining staff. However, we need to ensure that as we recruit, we have a more diverse maternal team at all levels to address such stark outcomes. Diversity will help us understand some of the reasons and actions needed, but it will take more to make an impact. The British Medical Association report in 2017, *Health at a Price*, described how twice as many people are clinically obese in the most deprived areas of the UK than in the least deprived areas. Unfortunately, the impact of poverty at the early stages of life does have wider health implications (physical and mental) in the long term.

Yet many of the health challenges the NHS focuses on are the ‘here and now’ issues, such as long waiting lists or overwhelming demand for emergency services. As we move into creating Integrated Care Systems, that at a very local level will aim to work with partners to create integrated services, they are expected to improve access for all. This will be a big step in ensuring services are designed around the population, meeting their health and care needs.

Planning for the long term – and for alignment

The coming together of public services to address health inequalities needs to be supported by long-term planning and an approach that takes away many of the barriers that prevent alignment of services.

To this extent, finance functions play a key role in designing frameworks and allocations that will make or break the ambition to improve outcomes for all. In my view, the finance leadership community in the public sector has a great opportunity to step up and shape the future of services that will impact the lives of local communities. This is our chance to create the legacy of reducing health inequalities – something far more powerful than the technical annual cycle of financial performance management.

Creating partnerships across local populations to improve health outcomes is not new and there have been many positive examples in the past – but nothing on the scale that is needed.

There was a recent high-profile national issue that showed how services absolutely need to be better aligned, and the important role of finance. In the midst of a national traumatic event, a local health service was asked to provide trauma support to the population that was apprehensive of ‘government-run services’.

The NHS local trauma mental health support attempted to reach into the community and was met with a wall of distrust. There were many conversations about how a tried-and-tested trauma service was not able to get into a ‘hard-to-reach community’. But this was a population that was not hard to reach, it was a population that was not listened to – and never had been.

It became clear through very personal local discussions that the service on offer was not appropriate. As was told to us by the local community representative: “You are telling us this is the service we need and we are telling you about the service we want.”

The new service was redesigned and led by a more diverse team that reflected the population it was servicing. Finance teams across the system played a key part in taking away perceived barriers to allow funds and people to move more freely. Needless to say, the results were dramatic, as services were co-produced, and the approach has been used in other areas. This is just one example of the power of diversity.

Inclusive, comprehensive and structured

Within the NHS finance community a recent survey of thousands of finance staff showed a desire to do more on influencing the health inequalities agenda. In response, One NHS Finance (www.onenhsfinance.nhs.uk) was created, together with the NHS National Finance Academy. The Academy is aimed at ensuring there is an inclusive, comprehensive and structured training and development offer for all finance staff across the NHS. There are many initiatives that have helped to improve the way finance teams reflect the population they serve.

One of the exciting areas under development is a programme to bring in young people from socio-economic deprived backgrounds, to give them a taster of working in finance. Attracting new starters from a wider background will bring different perspectives and a recognition that the population we serve is equally wide.

However, this alone will not be enough. How does a diverse finance function reduce the burden of poor health outcomes? ►

‘Finance functions play a key role in designing frameworks and allocations that will make or break the ambition to improve outcomes for all’

The Mental Health Act Statistics 2019-20 published by NHS Digital showed that the rate of detention under the Mental Health Act in England for black people was four times higher than for white people. Spend on NHS mental health services has grown since 2015 (£11bn to £14bn in 2020-21), and finance leaders have been supporting the important decisions to reduce the disproportionate impact of mental health on ethnic minority communities.

It can be argued that the more diverse the finance leadership teams are, the more likely they are to be able to work through such difficult issues. Clearly, it is only one part of a complex jigsaw, but having a diverse team reflecting the same characteristics of the population means being better equipped to appreciate the challenges faced and therefore must be more likely to come up with relevant solutions.

When we look at the landscape of finance leaders across the NHS and the public sector we are hard pushed to say that their characteristics fully reflect the challenges faced by the population they serve. At the same time, we should note that data on characteristics beyond ethnicity and gender is not readily available for various reasons. The more we are able to see and hear leaders like 'us', the more we will have role models creating a path for others to come through.

The NHS National Finance Academy is looking to adapt the job roles of all the finance leaders to ensure it appropriately captures the need for finance directors to play their part in developing talent and supporting inclusion and diversity, as well as highlighting their role in helping to reduce health inequalities.

Every finance decision made around resources that impact a local population should be seen through the lens of how it will narrow health variations in outcomes. This will allow systems to think differently about the approach taken to many of the groups that are underrepresented but have the least-effective health outcomes.

We can see some of how this will work in practice through the work of D. Bola Owolabi, who, as the director of health inequalities at NHS England/Improvement, has launched a programme called Core2oPLUS5.

The aim is for systems to focus on the most deprived 20% of the population, using the indices of multiple deprivation. Systems will then identify the local population with worse-than-average health outcomes and create a drive to address five key clinical areas of health inequalities among them. Engagement from the local population and clinicians is key, as is the input from finance professionals to help translate population data and resources. Financial analytical skills are important to the programme and will be seen as health systems produce business cases to invest limited resources.

Long-term investment plans are needed to impact the generational inequalities and shifting to a strategic population health management approach, rather than the short-term focused investment cycle, which will require all parties to recognise the priority given to rebalancing health outcomes for all.

Addressing health inequalities is complex but not impossible. The public finance community has a huge role to play in shaping the legacy of the health of local communities. We can make the difference that we all hold in our values by looking at how we shape our financial decisions and how we create diverse teams. Diversity throughout the finance function is more than an aspiration – it is a necessity to help us progress. ●

‘Every finance decision made around resources that impact a local population should be seen through the lens of how it will narrow health variations in outcomes’



We can make the difference that we all hold in our values by looking at how we shape our financial decisions and how we create diverse teams

Learning from the limitations of affirmative action

ESSAY



BY MARK MACK

Government bodies can learn from the use of affirmative action in the US – regardless of how some of its outcomes have been perceived



Mark Mack is senior manager at the Government Finance Officers Association's Research and Consulting Center in the US

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN the US is the active effort to improve employment, education and other opportunities for members of groups that have been subjected to discrimination. Criteria for affirmative action includes race, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnic origin and age. For the past several decades, affirmative action has been heavily criticised. Terms such as tokenism and concepts such as equality of opportunity have been offered as counterpoints to the blunt instrument of cold, hard quotas. Still, if you ask affirmative action hires their opinion, they will likely tell you their qualifications and hard work were insufficient alone to obtain the job offer.

Many recipients of affirmative action already possessed the requisite qualifications long before the job offers credited to affirmative action materialised. It was the affirmative action quota requirement, either explicit (required by law) or implicit (expected and strongly encouraged by polite society), that was the reason they were hired. Under affirmative action 1.0, qualified applicants were likely more often the recipients of job offers based on a need to fill a quota rather than merit – which is unfortunate.

AA 1.0 – what happened

Affirmative action 1.0 came with much fanfare and many expectations, the least of which was creating a shift in the Overton window or the range of ideas the public is willing to consider and accept.

If ethnic minorities could see themselves represented in various positions, they could believe such a position was achievable for a person like them. Generally speaking, this was a rational expectation and based on good research. For example, demanding that boards of directors and senior government cabinets include women, ethnic minorities and other protected groups – such as veterans and the disabled – should create new expectations among those groups and the broader public of what a board or senior government finance official should look like.

This should, in turn, normalise diversity in these spaces and create new expectations for the broader public. It should also create new ambitions among people who may otherwise never have aspired to these now achievable roles. With these two new realities in place, new expectations by the general public, and new-found ambitions of marginalised groups, the momentum would organically and permanently address all other disparities – eventually eliminating the need for affirmative action altogether, the rationale held.

To some degree, the first two outcomes were achieved. Expectations among the general public of what types of people are qualified for leadership roles in government finance changed to include previously marginalised groups. The aspirations of ethnic minorities, women and the disabled have also changed to include these now reachable positions.

The third and most important goal, however, has proven much more elusive. Simply put, the first two outcomes alone did not naturally produce the expected success that was envisioned in the early days of affirmative action 1.0. However, I think it's fair to say that we learnt a lot. Therefore it is perhaps valuable to start with what worked and what we learnt.

What worked and what we learnt

In order to have a good faith discussion about the future of affirmative action, I believe it's necessary to first acknowledge the successes and limitations of affirmative action 1.0. This approach clearly produced quantitative, numerical progress. More minorities existed in senior government finance roles, and this was directly attributable to the legal mandate of affirmative action 1.0.

After the industry saw these quantitative, numerical gains, questions began to surface. The questions were primarily centred on whether the affirmative action candidates were quality hires. More specifically, whether the employees hired under the affirmative action policies possessed the necessary qualifications and experience for the job. Many opponents of affirmative action 1.0 used less direct arguments to oppose the hiring of marginalised groups.

One common example was to suggest they lacked 'soft-skills', or some other non-objective, non-quantifiable measure to exclude the candidate from hire. The arguments are largely subjective, and often sound like this: "She's just not a good fit," or "He's over-qualified," etc. These questions were suspiciously similar to prior reasoning used to refuse employment to qualified applicants on the basis of belonging to a marginalised group. While innocuous on the surface, the questions appeared to be raised in bad faith, and with the goal of derailing the progress made by affirmative action 1.0.

Recognising these 'soft-skill' gaps, human resource professionals moved to plug these holes in the early 2000s by focusing on the legal aspects of their hiring practices. This shift was effective and should be celebrated as a valuable step that produced positive, tangible outcomes. Still, we see persistent disparities in key areas such as: 1) representation in leadership roles; 2) general career advancement; 3) the time it takes to be promoted compared to non-minorities when advance is achieved; and 4) pay equity.

Lincoln Quillian at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research looked at changes over time in the level of hiring discrimination in the US labour markets. He examined 55,842 applications submitted for 26,326 positions since 1989, and found white people received, on average, 36% more call backs than African Americans, and 24% more call backs than Latinos.

But wait, how is ethnicity, race or gender determined from an application or resume? Normally, this information can be inferred from data points such as an applicant's name, geographical information such as neighbourhood, educational institutions, or more recently, social media profiles. What we learnt was that the quantitative or numerical progress that was produced by affirmative action 1.0 came with a backlash in the form of bad-faith arguments.

Bad-faith arguments abound

There are many bad-faith arguments made in opposition to affirmative action 1.0. These are objections rooted in an existing opposition to affirmative action, rather than observations of legitimate limitations of affirmative action as a construct. This point is critical. People that offer objections to affirmative action with no alternative solutions are often not interested in actually addressing the legitimate challenges related to equal representation. When fair-minded, thoughtful people don't call out bad-faith arguments, it leaves no space in the discourse to properly critique the limitations of affirmative action 1.0. It also creates a climate where advocates of affirmative action dismiss all critiques, even legitimate ones, as regressive – in an effort to re-establish balance in the dialogue.

At this point in the debate, the whole conversation starts to fall apart. Zealots retreat to their corners, and indifference and apathy become the default position for anyone not directly affected by the outcome. The topic itself often becomes taboo and is intentionally avoided by those who should be thinking critically and rationally about how to address equal representation properly.

One way to help understand the negative effects of bad-faith arguments on affirmative action is to use the parallel of an ageing car. What rational person, upon finding limitations with their ageing car, would simply dump it without first making plans for how they will get around after the car is gone? Yet that is precisely what we've done with affirmative action 1.0. In many places, we've simply dumped the car because it is an imperfect, clunky means of accomplishing the goal of equal representation. We've provided no replacement and simply hoped for the best. Opponents of the policy have leveraged legitimate flaws in affirmative action, such as tokenism, as a means of ending it while offering no new means of transportation in its place. This has created a vacuum, leaving no public policy in place of affirmative action 1.0 to address the challenges of ►

‘The quantitative or numerical progress that was produced by affirmative action 1.0 came with a backlash in the form of bad-faith arguments’

underrepresentation for marginalised groups. It has also highlighted the truth that, flawed though it may be, affirmative action 1.0 was perhaps the most effective tool in the toolbox.

Exploring the most effective tool in the toolbox

To continue the analogy of the old car, simply dumping the car with no plan for future transportation has seemed to work, somewhat, in urban areas. Perhaps because of the existing infrastructure for transportation (e.g. trains, buses, cabs, bikes and pedestrian-friendly design), and existing ‘infrastructure-of-representation’ – such as social expectations, large pools of diverse candidates, advocacy organisations and greater competition for skilled talent – discriminating against marginalised groups is less pervasive in some governments and communities.

But exurbs and rural areas have fared less well in the absence of affirmative action 1.0 mandates. Senior government finance positions in mid-sized, small and rural communities saw little change. We know this because of the numbers. There is very little, if any, representation in many finance-related leadership roles throughout the US. In some cases, there has never been an ethnic minority in these roles in the history of the municipal government. A blunt instrument such as affirmative action 1.0 is effective because it simply requires the organisation to address the statistical problem. If the premise is that racial bias is not present in hiring or promotion in a given municipality, state, province or ministry, then these statistical anomalies should not be so widespread and predictable. Still, affirmative action 1.0 is an old and damaged tool, and like anything, with its age comes a recognition of its design flaws and inherent limitation.

Affirmative action 2.0: how AA should look in the future

So how should affirmative action look in the future? To propose any solution seems a lofty goal when considering so large a challenge. Still, it only seems right to try – and so let us consider the following observations.

First, stop being ashamed of your raggedy old car. Flawed though it may be, that gas-guzzling, carbon-emitting clunker we call affirmative action 1.0 has proven its effectiveness and efficiency over many years. As such, it should not be dismissed without first identifying a credible replacement. Furthermore, any replacement vehicle should be required to demonstrate an ability to achieve broad representation in roles impacting the allocation of public resources, such as government finance leadership. In organisations where diverse representation has been achieved broadly and organically, new and more flashy methods of transportation may be appropriate. However, in places it has not, the blunt instrument of affirmative action 1.0 will do just fine.

Next, recognise bad-faith arguments for what they are and dismiss them from the conversation. Any critique of affirmative action that is purely regressive and provides no substantive path towards broader representation should be recognised for what it is: a distraction.

Finally, be intentional about recruitment, advancement and professional development. There may be other reasons (personal, perception, etc.) why diverse candidates may not apply for roles in small and/or rural areas.

If representation is a value, a responsible organisation will seek out diverse candidates by going to the communities, schools and conferences where they can be found, in order to reach them and encourage them to apply. For most of human history, industries have become professionalised by the development of workers within the industry, and by the recruitment of untrained prospects who show aptitude.

Identifying a person with aptitude and recruiting them to work in a trade, play an instrument, a sport, or nearly any other profession is practically second nature to leaders in most industries. Why not government financial management? Instead of accepting critiques about a lack of qualified candidates or empty pipelines, be intentional about filling the pipelines by creating opportunities at all levels. While a surplus of qualified candidates will never address open bigotry, it will certainly create the conditions needed for affirmative action 2.0. However affirmative action 2.0 looks, one thing is certain, government leaders must first value it in order to achieve it, and that value set must start at the top. Only then can it translate into actions that will retain minority employees and attract new, qualified people from all backgrounds. ●

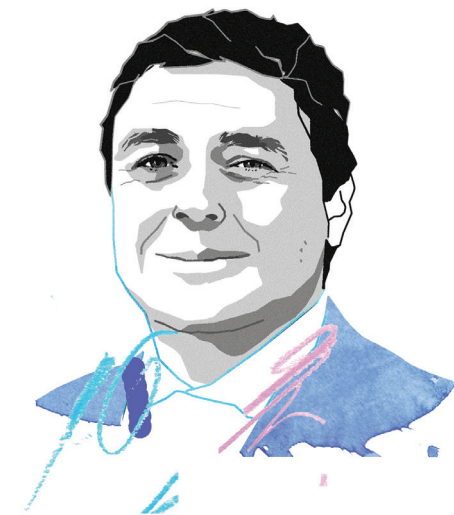
‘Instead of accepting critiques about a lack of qualified candidates or empty pipelines, be intentional about filling the pipelines by creating opportunities at all levels’



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We must embrace new approaches

ESSAY



BY JOHN BLOOMER

Providing current and potential staff with opportunities to develop, and improving diversity, means discarding many of the old ways of doing things

DIVERSITY ACROSS ALL areas of life, whether this be public, business or private, has become and will remain one of the key issues for the foreseeable future. However, rather than seeing this as an 'issue', we should see this as an opportunity to embrace the significant benefits that diversity, in all its forms, brings to our world.

Looking through both a historic and, sadly, modern lens, the rejection of diversity and difference is a hallmark of totalitarianism that often leads humanity into a very dark place – and a modern western value should be the embrace of diversity and difference as something that makes us stronger and more united, rather than divided.

Having spent time working across councils, the NHS and currently in policing, it's clear each sector has its own successes and challenges – as well as geographical and demographic differences. Within geographies and demographics there can be significant differences and, as a result, a 'one size fits all' approach will invariably be the wrong one.

While the word 'legitimacy' is often associated with policing and its connection (or lack of) with communities, it is a word that applies to all public services and to all professions within the public sector. Legitimacy, and the need for it, is at the heart of the debate on diversity. Fundamentally, one of the key purposes of public services is to address societal 'ills', and the best way of solving these in a sustainable fashion is to work with communities to find solutions, rather than imposing solutions on them. Bluntly, without building the broadest coalition representing all our communities in full, we are only making our job of serving these communities harder.

Much has been done already to address racism in the police and in society, and we have made huge strides in tackling discrimination. Policing is more inclusive, more diverse and more reflective of our communities than it's ever been. But there is always more we can do to make our service more inclusive. The more we understand about the communities we serve, the more effective we will be at supporting victims and reducing crime. Without the trust and confidence of diverse communities, policing is less effective at protecting all communities. It is more important than ever to be an inclusive organisation, as an employer of choice and as a service provider.

Within Staffordshire Police, our workforce is changing to become more representative of the communities we serve. Since the last general election, policing in general has been working towards recruiting an additional 20,000 police officers – representing a significant opportunity to improve our diversity, and to become more representative of the communities we serve.

Our force has undertaken significant positive action to achieve this, as well as utilising different entry routes into the profession that appeal in different ways to different demographics. Under the Uplift Programme, 46.3% of entrants to the force are female and 5.3% are from a minority ethnic background (against a demographic profile of 50.2% of the population being female and 5.9% of the population being from a minority ethnic background). Our new entry route of becoming a detective straight away (as opposed to after a couple of years post-entry), the Detective Constable Degree Holder Entry Programme (DC DHEP), which is targeted at degree holders, saw an intake that was



John Bloomer is the chief financial officer with responsibility for finance and commercial services at Staffordshire Police

80% female, 17% minority ethnic and 7% with a declared disability. Our age profile is also changing as a result of the programme, bringing a new generation into the workplace who have different expectations of the employee offer, as well as a diversity of thought that stands us in good stead for the future.

More remains to be done, and data is key

Still, there is more to do within policing in general around the collection of data relating to our workforce – to better inform debate and conversation, and to build an inclusive environment. Large numbers of the workforce do not feel confident or do not wish to disclose information around their sexual orientation, disability or gender. Nationally, a campaign called ‘Safe to say’ looks at informing our workforce as to why we collect data and how we use that data. Data is the lifeblood of modern public sector organisations and, when blended with local know-how and understanding, it enables us to deliver a stronger resident offer as well as delivering better-value services.

The same applies within the finance profession, albeit our issues and opportunities will be both distinct and similar to other public sector professions. One of our key challenges will always be entry routes into the profession; setting a qualification bar. While this is important to any profession in terms of protecting its reputation for being an academic profession and also maintaining standards, this naturally means the profession struggles to attract those from backgrounds deemed to be ‘working class’ – particularly within a UK context of having low social mobility compared with other western nations.

The answer to this particular conundrum cannot be addressed solely by the profession itself, but given our role in shaping public institutions, our ability to affect change is often greater than we think.

If you look around the public finance profession, we had challenges in recruiting talent before the pandemic – and the post-pandemic jobs market is one of employee choice. Some of this stems from a decade of under-investment at the front end of the finance profession across the public sector. The financial challenges of the last decade have led to a shortage of qualified staff with the requisite experience. Too often in the public sector, we still see a view that ‘time served’ equals both ability, capability and experience to do a job. But experience does not come from the number of years under your belt, nor does your ability to be a good public servant come from your length of time in a particular sector.

Breaking down barriers to entry

We have hired some really strong, impactful leaders from outside the public sector, who I know would have been discounted elsewhere, simply because they were not career local government/NHS/central government professionals. This has improved our organisation because it has brought in a diversity of thought and ways of working that we simply would not have achieved on our own.

In terms of our role at the front end of the profession, bringing people in, training them up and giving them an opportunity, we need to move away from seeing

‘Without the trust and confidence of diverse communities, policing is less effective at protecting all communities’

this as a pure financial consideration to one that sits at the heart of our place-shaping responsibilities.

Yes, we may actually over-recruit apprentice roles, and yes, they may leave at the end of their course. But if they then spend a career adding value to our communities, that means we have delivered on one of our core roles as a public body.

Locally, we have grasped the opportunity presented by apprenticeships. We had 98 applicants for one finance apprentice role, and now have three individuals studying with us for AAT and three studying for CIPFA, with one individual now being fully qualified, and five studying CIPS. Go back four years and we were reliant on buying in talent as opposed to growing our own. Layer on top of this that we have a CIPFA prize winner and a diverse intake of students into our training roles, and it is clear that our organisation is changing and morphing continually in the right direction. One of the most uplifting experiences of my professional career has been seeing people come through schemes we have sponsored – often sponsored in an environment where we still need to sell the benefits of investing in people – qualifying and achieving so much.

Within the debate around how to create and support a diverse finance workforce in the public sector, it would be remiss not to talk about how changing working styles (the office vs home debate) can be leveraged to support us. While I realise this is topical at the moment socially, culturally and politically, with two tribes who seem diametrically opposed to each other's views, I will tread with uncustomary caution on setting out how this can be leveraged to support diversity.

Again, as a profession, we too often approach the debate from a position of 'how can we save money?' as opposed to 'how do we make this work best for our people and our communities?' Just look at the number of public sector surplus assets being disposed of as we adopt hybrid working.

We know that women are still more affected than men by the demands of childcare and, as such, a nine-to-five role that is 100% office-based is less appealing to them – meaning we lose out on talented individuals due to our lack of flexibility. Conversely, at the start of your career in particular, being in an office-based environment is incredibly beneficial to accelerating your growth beyond just exam passes – into becoming a rounded professional. Locally, we have addressed this in the same fashion as many other bodies have, through a blend of work locations (you work from where you can perform your role best on that particular day). We are flexible on work time and, crucially, treat people as adults. The same logic applies to training. Where this used to be rigid, the ability to do it remotely in your own time allows people to fit it around a busy home life, opening doors for people who previously struggled to access development. ●

'We need to move away from seeing training as a pure financial consideration to one that sits at the heart of our place-shaping responsibilities'



TAKING ACTION:
DIVERSITY
PROGRAMME
CASE STUDIES

Case study: the Stepping Up programme

ESSAY



BY HELEN SINCLAIR-ROSS

How a major positive-action programme launched by Bristol City Council has increased the diversity of senior leadership within public and private sector employers across the region

STEPPING UP is now an enhanced diversity-leadership talent pipeline for disabled, black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, as well as women and LGBT+ people in Bristol and the south west region.

The programme was launched in January 2018, and has won local and national awards, including being named 'CIPD diversity initiative of the year 2020' – and continues to improve the diversity landscape it initially aimed to shift.

The need for a positive-action intervention was highlighted by strong evidence that there was lack of diversity at senior leadership levels across the public and private sectors in the region – evidence that was supported by the Baroness McGregor-Smith report into race in the workplace. It was in response to this that Bristol set off on a mission to create a culture where transformational change could enable a fair and transparent workplace – where diversity could flourish. It was agreed systemic and transformational change was needed.

The programme, which runs for one year at a time, was so successful in its second year that it was decided a spin-off community-based programme for Somali women, called Horumar, should be launched. This programme has created a pathway for Somali women to enter the workplace.

Setting the framework of this ground-breaking initiative

The original vision was to create a system where the private, public and voluntary sectors worked together to shift the needle in terms of the adoption of equality and inclusion best-practice, and talent management in major organisations across the region.

The mayor, Marvin Rees, wanted to see a commitment to changing the leadership landscape – where diversity of thought was embraced – and it was agreed that such a huge task could only be achieved in incremental stages.

To help achieve those incremental changes, programme architect and CEO Professor Christine Bamford established key milestones for delivering the transformational change model, based on guidance from Harvard and other leading business schools. This included steps to:

- Establish collaboration of partners across the public, private and voluntary sectors;
- Engage partners in the project to co-create the initiative;
- Demonstrate equality and inclusion best-practice in talent management to all partners;
- Source core funding and in-kind support;
- Deliver and evaluate proof of concept.

The resulting co-created intervention included the following programme attributes:

- Six core leadership modules – featuring international speakers;
- Career management support;
- A virtual 'career passport' to help show experience – which will eventually be hosted on blockchain;
- Mentoring – delivered as in-kind support from partners (eight hours per month over a one-year period);



Helen Sinclair-Ross is the lead contact for the Stepping Up programme at Bristol City Council

- Virtual learning sets;
- Stretch assignments linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The programme has been supported by many local stakeholders – the Bristol mayor Marvin Rees, the Equality & Inclusion cabinet member and councillor Asher Craig (deputy mayor) – along with the chief executive of Bristol City Council, Mike Jackson, who is the council’s equality and inclusion champion, and was previously a mentor on the programme. Together, these stakeholders have ensured the Stepping Up programme is firmly planted in the council’s DNA.

The first cohort commenced in January 2018, and the programme is now in its fifth year, with attention now turning to the potential launch of a national programme. In addition, there are presently more than 100 partners across the city who have enthusiastically engaged with the programme.

Success proof points

In addition to these indicators, there have been many other clear success stories. External evaluation undertaken by Cranberry Research, indicated an extremely positive impact for the second cohort in 2019, including the fact that:

- Confidence increased from 37% to 93%;
- Self-assurance increased from 32% to 70%;
- Influence increased from 32% to 78%;
- Confidence in applying for promotion increased from 6% to 90%;
- 60% achieved career movement.

Feedback from individual participants has also been hugely positive. Saida Bello, a Stepping Up participant from the first cohort, is now head of diversity and inclusion at the Government Actuary’s Department. She completed her MBA under the Apprenticeship Level 7 levy system, and says there were clear elements of the programme that others can benefit from: “Take full advantage of the mentoring opportunity and leadership modules. Set a clear career goal with support from your mentor. Remember the road to success is never easy. Secondments and wider opportunities [will] help you step forward to achieve your vision.”

Barry Scrase is from Bristol City Council. Barry’s disability impacted his education and he left school with few qualifications. As a result of Stepping Up, however, he has achieved a lifetime ambition to study for an MBA and has passed year one of his studies. He says: “When I started Stepping Up I was angry, and now I am a role model encouraging other individuals with a disability to also step up.”

Other elements of the programme have also seen success. Horumar proved very successful in its first year, for example, with 31 women signing up for the second tranche.

Now, we are pleased to announce that the fifth cohort of Stepping Up is under way, and there have been so many unexpected consequences arising from it. The Horumar ►

‘Bristol set off on a mission to create a culture where transformational change could enable a fair and transparent workplace – where diversity could flourish’

Somali women's programme is one of a raft of city and community legacy projects. By the end of 2022, we will have a talent pool of 300 diverse leaders ready to 'step up' and make an impact in their community, their city, their organisation and their region.

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this impact, however, is to list many of the incredible outcomes we have seen:

- The Stepping Up programme has created more than 50 more diverse boards in Bristol and the south west region;
- We have seen commitment from senior leaders, both in Bristol City Council and in other organisations in the private and public sectors;
- The success of the programme has been validated by an independent company;
- It has improved the diversity representation on non-executive and executive boards;
- It includes a ground-breaking and award-winning mentoring programme with senior leaders, including CEOs drawn from all sectors;
- The programme has now won four awards, including the CIPD award for diversity and CIPD overall winner award;
- Delivery of the sophisticated modular programme has been underpinned by academic rigour;
- The first two cohorts were linked to a self-funding MBA programme through the apprenticeship levy;
- Development of a diverse alumni programme has been established;
- Other organisations across the country are now looking to replicate the model.

There are, of course, obstacles to setting up such a programme. Engagement of 60-plus employers for leadership talent, and securing pro bono mentors, venues, speakers and stretch assignments is one. Securing funding from employers and other agencies – with a fee levied to employers for their employees to participate in the programme – is another.

However, there are clear steps that all bodies looking to participate can take to achieve success:

- Be clear about the funding and costs, and develop a funding model;
- Establish interest before proceeding formally;
- Gather data to support this positive-action programme – as is required legally;
- Establish a level of leadership entry point for participants – senior/mid-level;
- Establish buy-in from senior leadership.

Visit www.steppingupbristol.com to learn more. ●

‘By the end of 2022, we will have a talent pool of 300 diverse leaders ready to step up and make an impact in their community, their city, their organisation and their region’

Case study: opening doors to opportunity

ESSAY



BY JAMIE BEWICK

Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust is using the Prince's Trust scheme to help develop the professionals needed for the future

SUSSEX COMMUNITY is a large and growing NHS provider, with more than 5,500 staff. It provides community healthcare services to a population of 1.3 million people over a large geographical area. Attracting and retaining staff is a key challenge facing the organisation. The trust also has a responsibility, as a significant employer in the area, to build a diverse workforce that is representative of the community it serves.

These factors have increasingly led Sussex Community to broaden its recruitment practices to reach a wider pool of talent. One of these initiatives is its partnership with the Prince's Trust, which aims to support young people in building their confidence and starting a career.

Sussex Community's involvement in the Prince's Trust

Sussex NHS Community Foundation Trust has been a supporter of the Prince's Trust charity for several years – and the finance team has played an active role in that support. The Prince's Trust provides work experience and access to employment opportunities for young people who have struggled to access employment through conventional routes.

As part of that partnership, since 2016 Sussex Community has offered work experience to cohorts of young people, giving exposure to a range of roles, including finance, admin, estates, IT and work in nurseries. This has enabled local young people to access experience and opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable to them. In a number of cases, this has led to young people finding permanent positions and pursuing careers in the NHS.

Two members of Sussex Community's finance team joined via this route. They are David Wilder, whose recent career successes includes becoming fully qualified and being voted the Healthcare Financial Management Association's south east regional trainee of the year, and Alena Pospisilova, who is planning to start her studies towards a full accountancy qualification later this year.

Their stories – and the way in which Sussex Community's involvement with the Prince's Trust has brought benefits both for these young people and for the finance team – are important. I hope they will be an encouragement to other finance teams to consider widening access to finance careers by using alternative recruitment methods.

Case study one: David Wilder's story

David was part of Sussex Community's first cohort of Prince's Trust placements in 2016. He had been out of work for more than a year after leaving university in 2014. Diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, David struggled with the formal nature of the job interview process, and was not able to find meaningful employment.

Through the Prince's Trust, however, David secured a work placement with Sussex Community, which gave him valuable work experience in an office environment. It also gave him access to coaching for the interview process and presentation skills. His placement led to a part-time opportunity working in Sussex Community's procurement team.



Jamie Bewick is head of financial accounts at Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust

‘To achieve a more diverse finance team, Sussex Community has embraced different recruitment routes to sit alongside the more traditional forms of recruitment’

But it was important that support didn’t stop there. David found it particularly challenging to adapt to the social side of work. Communicating in an office environment and over the phone were areas he found daunting at first. With the team’s support, however, he was able to learn and practise these skills in a supportive environment.

In 2018, David applied for an apprenticeship role in the finance team, which was an early adopter of finance apprenticeships. The team saw the potential of the levy to access funding and offer training to a wider group of staff than would otherwise have been possible. David was an early beneficiary of the levy funding and, in 2018, he began his professional studies.

He certainly made the most of the opportunity to access a professional qualification, and excelled in his studies. He took just three years to become a fully qualified accountant, which he achieved in 2021. The apprenticeship programme gave David exposure to a variety of roles within the finance team, as well as a secondment to the trust’s internal auditors, TIAA. When the pandemic arrived in 2020, he briefly worked in procurement again, using his skills to support the wider effort to source and obtain stocks of personal protective equipment.

Since qualifying, David has secured a substantive role in the team as a primary care accountant. It is a mark of how far he has progressed that he now holds an important strategic role, setting and monitoring budgets for a range of GP practices, with a focus on building and maintaining relationships with primary care partners.

In another notable achievement, in October 2021 David was voted Regional Finance Trainee of the Year in the annual HFMA Awards.

Case study 2: Alena Pospisilova’s story

Alena was part of the 2018 intake of Prince’s Trust work experience placements at Sussex Community. Although she had good academic qualifications from the Czech Republic, she struggled to access meaningful employment in her new home in the UK, while also having the challenge of mastering a new language.

Alena made a strong impression during her Prince’s Trust placement, however. Her ambition, intelligence and enthusiasm shone through. Following the placement, a temporary opportunity arose for her to cover another team member’s absence. She quickly learned how to cover many different roles within the department and established herself as an indispensable member of the team. She has a positive can-do approach and has been undaunted by whatever has come her way. Her attitude provided a particular boost to team morale during the difficult Covid-19 lockdown period.

Alena was keen to develop professionally and asked to start a Level 3 apprenticeship in AAT, which the Trust supported. She passed in 2020 and is on track to complete Level 4 this summer. Alena’s ambition is to become a fully qualified accountant, and she hopes to start a CCAB qualification later this year, with Sussex Community’s support.

Kickstarting the next cohort

The planned 2020 Prince's Trust work experience programme was unable to go ahead during the pandemic. At the start of 2022, however, the Trust was able to offer a new round of work experience to another group of young people.

The 2022 intake has taken a different form – Kickstart. This is a DWP programme offered to 16-24-year-olds who are in receipt of universal credit, to enable them to gain skills and experience in paid positions to support them into employment. The six-month placements are fully funded, and Sussex Community has been able to provide placements for a group of 18 young people. The young people are supported by a workplace mentor during their placements and are given training in interview skills.

Case study three: Will Robinson's ambitions

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound effect on all sections of society. Young people have been particularly affected by the disruption to education and limits to career opportunities.

Will Robinson, who is 19, has an ambition to be a qualified accountant. He started a degree in accountancy but his university experience was severely disrupted by the pandemic. He left the course and was low in confidence when he applied to join Sussex Community's finance team as part of the Kickstart programme.

Will was very grateful for the opportunity to work with the finance team and has been an enthusiastic and helpful member of the team since joining. The placement has given him experience of working in an office environment and has helped him build his confidence. It has also helped him gain some practical experience to supplement what he has learned through his studies. Will is looking at potential career options for when the placement comes to an end.

Reflecting on success

It is important to conclude with some reflections on our experiences, too. First, it is probable that none of the people mentioned in this article would have secured positions in the finance team through a standard competitive recruitment and interview process. To achieve a more diverse finance team, Sussex Community has embraced different recruitment routes to sit alongside the more traditional forms of recruitment.

Secondly, for us, recruiting via the Prince's Trust has in no way led to a lower quality of candidate. The team members who have joined in this way have established themselves as high-performing and valuable members of the team. Since joining, both David and Alena have secured internal promotions on merit and have stayed to develop their careers within the department.

The apprenticeship levy has been key to our team's efforts, as it has provided the funding to be able to provide our young recruits with access to professional training and qualifications as a gateway to a finance career.

Sussex Community's finance team is pleased to be able to provide an example of what can be achieved, and our director of finance and performance, Ed Rothery, feels the same, saying: "Over the past two-to-three years, it has increasingly become a team that is leading the way in the organisation in terms of how staff are supported and developed, and how we are widening access to a career in healthcare to parts of our community that may not have had access before."

Success indeed. ●

'Recruiting via the Prince's Trust has in no way led to a lower quality of candidate'

Seizing the value of female returners

ESSAY



BY JULIANNE MILES AND
HAZEL LITTLE

Amid an increasingly tight talent pool, programmes such as Women Returners are helping organisations find talent among women who have taken career breaks and are ready to return to work



Julianne Miles is CEO and **Hazel Little** is deputy CEO of Women Returners, a purpose-led consulting, coaching and network organisation specialising in enabling professionals to get back to work after an extended career break

THERE IS STRONG EVIDENCE that organisations that attract and retain a diverse workforce reap a range of rewards. Not only are they promoting social justice, they are also accessing a broader pool of talent, increasing innovation, improving decision-making and boosting financial performance.

One powerful way to increase multiple diversity measures – gender, ethnic, experience and broader cognitive diversity – is by bringing in women professionals returning to work following an extended career break for childcare, eldercare or other reasons. Yet this skilled and experienced group faces multiple personal and structural barriers when they try to resume their careers, to the detriment of business, society and the economy.

Tackling this ‘career break penalty’ requires targeted action from companies, the government and specialist return-to-work organisations. Since 2014, Women Returners, a purpose-led consulting, coaching and network organisation, has adopted a practical approach to lowering the return-to-work barriers. Alongside providing support to returning professional women, it has partnered with more than 140 employers to run returner programmes. These programmes act as a supported bridge back to suitable-level roles at a mid-to-senior level for returning professionals. The organisation has successfully reintegrated people with career breaks of 18 months to 30 years, into a range of private and public sector organisations, from multinational investment banks to local London councils.

The value of the returner talent pool

There are currently 1.7 million economically inactive people in the UK on a caring-related career break, of whom 85% are women, around 25% have a professional or managerial background, and an estimated 75% want to return to work when the time is right.

There are many thousands more women on career breaks who do not appear in these statistics, as they are either looking for work, working on a small scale around family commitments in roles that are vastly below their skills and experience level, or on career breaks for other reasons, such as health or relocation. Research by PwC estimates that bringing professional women returners back into suitable-level employment could increase UK output by £1.7bn.

Professional women on a career break are a high-calibre and diverse talent pool. They bring diversity of experience and thought, with a fresh perspective and a high level of motivation. The skills and experience they offer to an employer are illustrated by the composition of the Women Returners Professional Network, a free-of-charge community focused on the UK and Ireland. Of the 7,700 members, 95% are degree qualified, more than 60% have postgraduate degrees or higher-level professional qualifications, and the majority have more than 10 years’ work experience. They are also highly ethnically diverse, with 50% from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Challenges faced by returning candidates

Despite this wealth of experience and skills, reinforced by the additional life skills they have developed during their career breaks, women returning to work after a multi-year

break face multiple barriers when they want or need to resume their careers. Returning to work after a prolonged pause is a daunting and often overwhelming process. Professional self-confidence is typically low, particularly for those whose work identity has been lost after many years of seeing themselves as ‘just a mum/carer’. Women returners may see a return to their previous career as an impossible dream, feeling they have lost their networks, their up-to-date sector knowledge and their job-search skills.

This fragile confidence is further eroded if they start applying for jobs through the conventional routes of online job adverts and recruitment agencies, where there is widespread bias against candidates without recent experience. Too often their diligently tailored CVs are delivered straight to the reject pile, as they are (falsely) perceived as being a risky hire, considered too old to learn new skills or not ambitious enough to take on a role at a mid-to-senior level.

Facing continued rejection, many talented returners opt for lower-level and lower-paid employment, believing this is the only attainable option, or they give up altogether and postpone their return indefinitely.

Returner programmes

Returner programmes offer a proven means of addressing this huge waste of talent, giving organisations a structured way to hire and support career returners. Pioneered in the UK by Women Returners in 2014, returner programmes are now widespread in financial services, tech and engineering, and are starting to make in-roads in other sectors, such as media and telecoms. Public sector programmes are slowly reviving post-pandemic, with a recent pilot launched by the Government Internal Audit Agency.

Returner programmes are designed to support professionals back into work following an extended career break of more than 18 months and up to 15 years. Although open to all genders, the vast majority of successful candidates are women who have taken caring-related breaks. Participants benefit from a supportive and structured recruitment process, with line managers and HR teams who are trained to understand the nuances of assessing a candidate whose work experience can date back well over a decade. The programme does not stop with an offer. Managers have received training in supporting the new hire and returners benefit from expert return-to-work support to enable them to settle back in and integrate quickly into the organisation. These multiple components create a successful experience for both the returner and the employer.

The most common format for a returner programme is a ‘returnship’, a paid three-to-six-month higher-level professional placement, with an intent to hire if the placement is successful for both sides. During this time, the returner is undertaking a real role, using their existing or transferable skills and experience. A well-structured programme will include transition support by way of training, coaching and mentoring, setting the returner participants up for success. Typically, participants join the programme as a cohort, benefitting from a ready-made peer support group, although some programmes ►

‘Returner programmes offer a proven means of addressing a huge waste of talent, giving organisations a structured way to hire and support career returners’

now operate rolling returnships into ad-hoc roles. At the end of the returnship period, 80-90% or more of participants typically secure ongoing roles.

An increasingly popular option is ‘supported hiring’, a programme designed to bring returners into permanent roles with the same supportive wrapper of training, coaching, mentoring and peer-cohort support. This is preferable where there is major investment upfront in training, and can work well if line managers are more open to ringfencing roles for returners and to hiring candidates with non-traditional career paths.

Another more recent development is the cross-company returnship, where multiple companies work collaboratively under one umbrella programme within a specific sector. Cross-company programmes have the benefit of creating bigger sector impact, facilitating sector-wide returner peer groups, being less vulnerable to the hiring peaks and troughs of individual employers, and being inclusive of organisations that have smaller recruitment needs.

One successful and fast-growing example is the Diversity Project Cross-Company Returner Programme in the savings and investment sector, a partnership between Women Returners and the Diversity Project. It started in 2020 with five employers including BlackRock, Fidelity Investments and Schroders, and it placed 11 returners. In 2021 it expanded to seven employers, with new organisations such as Aviva Investors and ABRDN, and 20 returners were placed. In 2022, 11 employers are participating and together they offered 27 placements. The conversion to permanent employment has been 84% to 86%.

Using these proven models, organisations have effectively increased their workforce diversity, filled skills gaps and refilled their female talent pipeline. Returner programmes have successfully provided a supportive route back to work for over 1,000 returners with over 140 employers. Many organisations now run programmes annually as part of their experienced hire talent strategy and a few, such as J.P. Morgan and Amazon, have scaled their returner programmes on a global basis.

Government’s role

The government also has a role to play in tackling the career break penalty. Funding can enable returners to receive return-to-work coaching and job skills training to help them get ‘job-ready’ and increase their likelihood of success in the job market. The Scottish government provided funding to Women Returners in early 2022 for this level of comprehensive support to women in Scotland who were on a career break. Through a series of individual discussions, small-group workshops and a professional mentoring programme, 84 women benefitted from tailored support. More than a third of participants successfully secured employment within three months of completing the programme. Due to this success, the Scottish government has provided additional funding for 2022-23.

The impact of recent trends

Current economic trends are also having an impact. As the cost of living soars, many families are feeling the fiscal impact, increasing the number of women who now need to return to work for financial reasons. For some women, the pandemic added an unwanted two years to their career breaks due to homeschooling and the Covid-related pause in recruitment.

The current surge in the UK recruitment market, with high levels of activity and a scarcity of talent across many areas, including technology and financial services, is creating both opportunities and threats for returners. Some returners who have had career breaks of under two years are finding it easier to secure permanent roles, as employers seek out new talent pools. On the flip side, there is a risk that women who have taken longer career breaks will find it even harder to return, as recruiters, under pressure to fill multiple roles quickly, focus on candidates they believe can ‘hit the ground running’.

Geared for the future

As we live longer and careers span a 40-50 year period, we can expect more people will want or need to step off the career ladder at some point, for reasons including childcare, eldercare, physical and mental health and burnout. It is crucial for business, the economy and wider society that career breaks are normalised rather than stigmatised.

By working together to harness the skills and experience of women returning to the workforce, organisations and the government can take a major step towards reducing the gender pay gap, increasing economic output and creating a fairer, more inclusive society. ●

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The value of diversity

This is the 14th in a series of *PF Perspectives*, produced by CIPFA and *Public Finance* to stimulate discussion on key public finance and policy issues. This collection of essays, by leading public sector practitioners and experts, examines the importance of diversity in the workplace and why policies of inclusion should be pursued for the benefit of the workforce as a whole

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