

What about me?

Charles Woodruffe examines the consequences to organisations of only looking to the familiar faces to fill the top jobs

Put starkly, what many organisations still do in the arena of human resources is somewhat crazy. They want the best people for their positions but continue to leave the dice loaded in favour of white, reasonably-privileged, able-bodied men.

I head up a firm of business psychologists working to help our clients with their talent management. One of our main areas of activity is diversity. It is self-evident that, if you want the best talent, you throw open the doors as widely as possible and make sure that you attract and choose the best people from the entire population available to you. You also ensure that all the talented people you have in your organisation are properly developed and this means encouraging those people who have generally been overlooked and come to feel excluded as well as ensuring that developmental opportunities are accessible to all.

I really do not think that the lack of inclusiveness that still is evident in many organisations is due to deliberate discrimination. Rather, it is a failure to understand the full impact of action or inaction coupled with a failure to be sufficiently motivated to make the changes required for real inclusion. So what if the selection day is on a religious festival for some applicants; so what if the disabled candidate cannot easily

get into work; so what if the training event runs on to an hour when the mother needs to be on her way home.

We were recently involved in a fascinating piece of research for an organisation that was very keen for minority groups to be better represented at senior levels. At the same time, it was using psychometric ability tests to shortlist people for an assessment centre that was the gateway to a high potential development programme. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of ethnic minority (as contrasted with white) applicants failed the psychometric test stage. The assumption by those administering the tests was that the Black and Minority Ethnic applicants to the programme were simply weaker than their white colleagues.

However, it is equally the case that BME candidates (more specifically, black people) are repeatedly found

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to score less well than their white counterparts on such tests.

The adverse impact of tests of cognitive ability is a well-established fact but it would be quite wrong to hastily conclude that it is a reflection of lesser ability by minorities.

One alternative explanation lies in the phenomenon of 'stereotype threat'. It refers to the idea that the test scores of BME people are lowered by their awareness of the





stereotype that they are weak at such tests, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In a major piece of research on the phenomenon, it was shown that the disadvantage that African Americans suffered in the Raven's test when it was described as a measure of IQ (a high threat description) was reversed when it was described as a set of 'puzzles' (a low threat description). The conclusion is that ethnic minority

candidates might appear to be weaker than white people on such tests as Raven's but their weakness is illusory.

Acts such as using psychometric ability tests to create shortlists helps perpetuate the under-representation of minority groups at senior levels in organisations. For those on the receiving end, it leads to a feeling of exclusion. And the problem is that we all suffer from the repercussions.

First, and at the level of real self-interest, organisations fail to avail themselves of the best people. Second, organisations that appear not to offer a reasonable reflection of their customer-base will seem out of touch with those customers. Third, people working within organisations who feel excluded are likely to become disengaged and not give their best to their jobs. Fourth, all staff nowadays want to see corporate

social responsibility taken seriously by their employer and actions that fail to include minorities will disrupt CSR credentials. Fifth, we all as a society suffer if some people feel excluded from the best that society has to offer. It is clearly divisive and lays the seeds for social unrest and ills.

Now, I am not wanting to lecture you in pure political correctness and, at the outset, we should look at the downsides of exclusion and check that they apply. The table right sets out the reasons for inclusion, the counter-arguments – the ‘why bother?’ objections – and it also discusses how those objections might not be such persuasive grounds for complacency after all.

I hope that this deals with some of the more obvious objections. The truth is that we now live in an era in which being inclusive and aware of the issues of diversity are simply a must for organisations. They are a must both to secure customers (particularly if the public sector is within their customer base) and to secure staff (particularly the contemporary Generation Y worker, who is vigilant to his employer’s standards).

It is up to all leaders to consider how inclusive or exclusive their organisation is to all the talent available to it. What they need to do is get a step ahead of their legal obligations and overcome the hurdles that cause groups of people to be under-represented – particularly at senior levels.

My company has recently been working with one of the largest UK government departments on part of its programme to help people from under-represented groups achieve their potential. It runs a one-year development programme for a small number of carefully-selected staff who have a disability or who are from ethnic minorities.

The programme starts with a one-day development centre that helps participants consider the personal and

Argument	Objection	Comment
You need the best people and therefore must include all talented people	We have plenty of applicants of the right quality without bothering to be inclusive	Might be true for low-level jobs. But for top jobs you need the best people, not just ‘good enough’ people.
You need your people to reflect your customer base	Our customers are not that diverse	That’s the argument! A more diverse workforce might attract more – and more diverse – customers
If you do not include people, they will not give their best	I won’t allow them to be that disengaged	It is a lot less effort to have staff voluntarily engaged to ‘go the extra mile’ than having to coerce them to perform.
All staff want to see CSR credentials and inclusion is part of that	We are perfectly ethical and principled. If you want more, we will support a local charity.	People are extremely vigilant to hypocrisy and lack of authenticity. If you want to engage people, you have to really believe your message.
Exclusion is a social ill	Social ills are not the concern of business	The larger you are in your community, the greater the positive impact will be on your business of doing the right thing. Doing nothing undermines any claim to corporate social responsibility.

organisational impediments to their advancement. Top amongst the personal impediments is a straightforward lack of self-belief. It is a well-researched fact that white males are the least bashful at putting themselves forward for opportunities. The development programme boosts the self-belief and confidence of ethnic minority and disabled staff by giving them feedback on their skills and helping them practise situations they will have to tackle if they are to get ahead, such as interviews for promotion.

In other words, the programme equips them with some of the skills they need but also boosts their belief that they have, and can demonstrate, all the required skills.

The precise content of the development centre was based upon careful research into the needs of the delegates. Human Assets interviewed 17 disabled and ethnic minority participants.

Key themes were gathered and a questionnaire was sent out to all 50 participants (including the 17 who were interviewed).

The delegates’ priorities were compared with their managers’ views. Eight line managers of disabled and ethnic minority participants were interviewed, followed by a questionnaire that was sent out to 45 line managers.

Some priorities for the development centre were common across grades. For example, participants across all grades stated they wanted:

- To learn the best way to promote themselves to apply for a new job/promotion
- To learn how to influence others to get the best result
- To get honest and constructive feedback and identify their strengths and weaknesses
- To discover tools/techniques that can help in their development
- To have a group discussion on how to manage their careers.

There were also several grade differences. For example, taking a more strategic approach to their work and challenging ways of working were more important for senior staff. On the other hand, developing self-confidence, asserting their ideas and putting

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their views across were more important for junior staff.

As a result of these differences in priorities, we designed two versions of the development centre. We found that this tailoring was definitely appreciated by delegates as it maximised the relevance of the particular event that they were attending. For example, the centre for junior grades included a chance to develop their presentation skills and self-confidence in speaking in front of a group of people.

Failing to act with programmes like this has the opposite effect and can help create a vicious circle that leads to the phenomenon of 'corporate flight' by already under-represented groups. Recent articles in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*¹ reported on the attrition statistics for nearly half a million American employees of mainly Fortune 500 corporations. They show that the turnover of female professionals and managers is higher than that of their male

counterparts and perpetuates the under-representation of women in executive positions. In turn, the lack of female exemplars at the top undermines the diversity climate and contributes to women's higher rates of quitting. The same vicious circle also applied to ethnic minorities, who were shown to experience slower progress in their careers than white male executives did.

So we have people quitting because there are not people like them at the top and the more they quit, the fewer there are. Breaking this loop requires overcoming some pernicious prejudices. One example is provided by recent research² that

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demonstrates that applicants for promotion who were described as either fathers or mothers obtained lower scores than non-parents for anticipated job commitment and anticipated striving for achievement. In addition, mothers, but not fathers, received lower ratings for competence than other people and fewer passed through a screening process.

The authors apply the term "the maternal wall" to their findings. They suggest that mothers are particularly associated with having stereotypically female attributes and to lack the stereotypically male attributes associated in people's minds with success in powerful commercial positions.

Findings such as these should cause every leader to pause for thought and wonder if they really are making the best use of the talent available to them. We are not talking, of course, about the sort of direct or indirect discrimination that is the subject of legislation. Rather, we are dealing with the,



no doubt unconscious, subtle and partial exclusion of whole categories of people.

For example, Barclays Bank noted in 2005 that only a third of its disabled staff openly registered their disability and that disabled staff were amongst the lowest in terms of engagement scores. It decided to act and set up a group chaired by the chief executive to listen to the issues faced by disabled staff and come up with solutions. The areas identified for particular attention were the recruitment of disabled people, their promotion and development, and support from line managers.

Subsequent initiatives on these three areas have transformed the bank's employment of disabled people. Particularly noteworthy is a scheme called 'Recruitment that Works' that targets disabled people for entry-level jobs in call centres. These people would previously have been out of work on social welfare benefits. Instead, they are given two weeks of work preparation training and then they go through the normal recruitment process.

The bank's experience of these recruits is that they become both high-performing and loyal members of staff.

The bank has also taken steps to ensure that disabled staff receive the IT help they need, funding this from a central budget rather than from individual line managers' budgets. It has also set up a mentoring scheme for disabled employees, a disability portal and compulsory training for line managers.

All this effort has been rewarded – the number of registered disabled employees has trebled and disabled staff now deliver engagement scores that are close to, or higher than, those of other staff.

What these initiatives illustrate is that action to bring in people who are excluded pays off. Action on the diversity climate goes



Action to bring in the excluded pays off

beyond that which is strictly required by the law and it is action that might well not even occur to those of us who are able bodied, not from an ethnic minority and thoroughly included.

If you listen to partially-excluded groups at work, it is a real eye-opener to hear things from their point of view. Apart from under-representation at senior levels, there are all the petty annoyances: people with diabetes need to eat at regular times and so meetings that run on cause them problems; colleagues go off to the bar in the evening and finish off discussing a decision, leaving excluded the Muslim who does not drink alcohol; the company intranet uses a font that partially-sighted members of staff cannot read, and so on.

The best way to find out is to follow the example of the Barclays chief executive and talk with people.

Of course, establishing a positive diversity climate will carry a price but I hope

I have done something to encourage you as employers to see the price as an investment rather than a cost. The return on investment might be particularly appealing to employers with relatively large numbers of otherwise marginalised minority staff in customer-facing roles – shops, banks, government agencies spring to mind immediately.

Left out in the cold, excluded groups will not perform to the best of their ability, you will be missing some genuine talent and society suffers from having citizens who see themselves as disadvantaged. ■

References

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