

Steve Jefferys: How to adjust to a more diverse workforce

The presence of ‘a more diverse workforce’ that requires ‘adjustment’ appears to be an unproblematic statement. Unfortunately, this is far from the case. At least three questions arise: What do we mean by ‘diversity’; what is meant by adjustment? and why should any adjustment be required? These are questions each of which raises considerable debate. What I would like to do here is to sketch the parameters of these debates.

What is meant by ‘diversity’?

The short answer is different things to different people. An academic definition (Kossek, Lobel and Brown 2005) indicates both how broad its definition can be and how it can be viewed descriptively and passively rather than as a policy issue:

Workforce diversity acknowledges the reality that people differ in many ways, visible or invisible, mainly age, gender, marital status, social status, disability, sexual orientation, religion, personality, ethnicity and culture.

- For some companies, diversity means simply having a more gender-balanced workforce.
- In other companies diversity might be claimed on the basis of employing some staff from different ethnic, national or linguistic backgrounds and perhaps a handful of disabled workers.
- Still other companies – particularly those that have local roots and are customer-facing – see diversity as a business opportunity in which having a workforce whose gender, age and ethnic composition more or less reflects the local marketplace will most probably increase turnover.
- In other companies diversity may also be construed as a business asset: where proper diversity management is the process or art of bringing difference into the workplace that can create the dynamics and synergies to ultimately build the business.

In research we conducted on employer and trade union responses to the Racial Equality Directive for the Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna, a Paris representative of the CGPME complained that many French companies had only responded in a tokenistic way to what he considered was its requirement to create a genuinely representative multi-racial workforce. They employed a handful of ethnic minority workers in order to claim they were not discriminatory; but they had no intention of changing their traditional recruitment methods where ‘like recruits like’. He strongly believed:

Companies during the crisis must know how to prepare for afterwards, in trying to find among people with diverse backgrounds, the men and women, young and less young... who have different talents.

- Some companies do have understandings of ‘diversity’ that come much closer to the Racial Equality Directive’s interpretation of how to achieve Equal Treatment: by recruiting, training and promoting in ways to ensure genuine equal treatment by introducing processes that rendered much more difficult showing favourable treatment because a person belongs to the ‘national majority’ or because they fit ‘neutral’ criteria that would exclude many minority people (eg excluding Roma women from skilled seamstress work because they lack a school leaving certificate, or only recruiting from certain sources or groups to which access was effectively denied to ethnic minorities, whatever their talent and capabilities).

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The recent history of the use of 'diversity' is revealing. Neither in the 1995 Florence Declaration, drafted by the CEEP, UNICE and the ETUC in the European Year Against Racism, nor in 2000, when the Racial Equality and Equal Treatment Directives were introduced by the European Commission, was 'diversity' mentioned. Instead the directives spoke of and defined 'direct discrimination', 'indirect discrimination' and 'harassment'.

It was effectively only in 2003, the year the Racial Equality Directive was supposed to be implemented, that 'diversity' began to be widely used to promote anti-discrimination action while avoiding employment regulation. It is probably not unfair to suggest a semantic slide from the meaning of combating 'discrimination' to promoting 'diversity'.

One of the first Diversity Charters was launched in France in 2004 by Claude Bébéar and Yazid Sebag. In Belgium it was the government that initiated a Charter in 2005 as was the partly the case in Italy in 2009. Diversity Charters have been supported by the European Commission as a way of moving towards the 'soft' goal of fairer employment opportunities for all, usually as a way of stimulating some fairer ways of integrating 'different' groups of workers without having to introduce increased monitoring and accountability.

With the EC and many large employers supporting 'the Business Case for Diversity' the positives were a plethora of initiatives – principally in Western Europe in the period up to the Crisis or its immediate aftermath - creating Diversity Manager posts that in turn led many trade unions to create their own Diversity Officers.

Since 2010, however, the momentum seems to have eased. There is much less focus today on 'diversity champions' or 'diversity correspondents' and diversity charters. In a Belgian retailer we researched the Charter was signed and a plan adopted in 2009. But its Diversity Committee did not meet following restructuring and the Diversity Manager post was deleted. It is unlikely that the problems disappeared; more likely that the problems slipped down the list of company priorities.

What is meant by 'adjustment' to diversity?

Adjustment implies 'nudging', a slight degree of change to ensure stability. In the case of diversity, the Charter campaigns tend to suggest action covering at least six areas:

1. Training senior managers and staff involved in recruitment and career development to recognise the need to ensure non-discriminatory practices
2. Practising non-discrimination throughout HR processes
3. Trying to reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the whole population within the firm
4. Developing diversity action plans with targets and deadlines
5. Discussing diversity with trade union and personnel representatives
6. Developing internal and external communication strategies to stress the company's commitment to non-discrimination

In many firms, however, such Charters have been signed, and/or diversity certificates awarded, without anti-discrimination being championed from the top. Despite the commitment of HR

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professionals this has frequently led to non-adherence by middle level and front line managers who use the reasoning that more needs to be done in wider society to educate people against discrimination rather than try to deal with these problems within the workplace.

Adjustment is also difficult to measure without regular and transparent evaluation, carried out most effectively where there is ethnic monitoring. However, this rarely takes place across Europe for both politico-cultural, legal and resource-based reasons – although where the will is there it can still happen.

Why should any adjustment be required?

Work is the place where there are more, longer and potentially more rewarding inter-ethnic, multilingual and inter-cultural exchanges than anywhere else. It is this reality that makes employment such a key site for integration and toleration. Without equality of access to employment and equal treatment within work, however, this ambition is unlikely to be realised. And a considerable body of evidence suggests there are still major obstacles to getting there.

Self-declaration of ethnicity in the UK permits an X-ray examination to reveal otherwise hidden patterns of discrimination. These can be highly disturbing as where they suggest that even in jobs that have been significantly ‘diverse’ for the last 50 years, with around half the workforce over most of that period coming from ethnic minorities, institutional racism remains strongly embedded. This is even the case in major multinational companies. Table 1 shows an example of the % ethnic distribution by job classification of 4,290 men working in one London transport company in 2006 given to me by the then HR Manager.

Table 1. Occupational distribution by ethnicity in a London transport company, 2006

Males	Managers	Admin	Supervisors	Engineers	All	Drivers	Cleaners
White	88	77	73	59	47	43	39
Asian	4	8	4	2	12	13	10
Black	5	8	13	28	30	31	39
%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

While a minority - 47% - of the total workforce was White, they made up 88% of all managers, a level that compared to the 9% of Asian and Black workers who made up 42% of the total male workforce.

After the onset of the economic crisis data on UK youth unemployment data make even clearer the continuation of ethnic penalties based on the visibility of ‘difference’:

Table 2 UK youth unemployment rate by ethnicity, 2011-12, ranked by % not in employment

	Age 16-24	
	Unemployed numbers (ILO)	Not in employment %
Gypsy or Irish Traveller	1,444	55.3
Arab	4,147	44.6
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	47,111	44.1
Bangladeshi	12,277	34.8
Other Asian background	10,592	32.0
Pakistani	22,863	30.8
Other ethnic group	11,275	29.3
Mixed/multiple ethnic background	22,861	27.3
Indian	25,569	24.2
White Irish	2,863	21.3
White British	748,041	19.9
Chinese	2,778	19.0
Other White	23,433	14.3
<i>All</i>	<i>935,254</i>	<i>21.0</i>

Source: UK Office for National Statistics (Release date 15 February 2013)

For the under 25s, unless you are from Chinese origins, the chances of being unemployed in the UK appear to rise directly with the degree of visible difference from the national majority of ‘White British’.

But such difference-related discrimination effects are not confined to visibly ‘different’ groups. Already in 2007-8 the unemployment rate of Third Country non-EU origin workers was 61% higher than that of all EU workers aged 15-64, and this rose to 87% higher over 2009-13. For ‘other’ EU-origin workers unemployment jumped from 7 per cent higher than the average for all workers to 27% higher after the crisis.

The need for ‘adjustment’ away from current levels of direct and indirect discrimination is stark. There is a danger that in the face of an increasingly mobile international labour market, in which higher unemployment and high levels of immigration go hand-in-hand, the reflex action of trying to exclude the ‘newcomers’ will predominate.

The moral case for sustained and continuing adjustment until equal treatment is assured, however, is also a pragmatic business one. Ultimately the social price of creating a Europe of segmented workplaces and segregated neighbourhoods will be paid for in low productivity, wasted talents and social unrest. The challenge now is how to stop the semantic slide into passivity and to put equal treatment of ‘the other’ back into our promotion of ‘diversity’.