Exploring How Diversity Impacts On Our Workplace
How Does Diversity Affect Our Workplaces?

Introduction

This whitepaper is an output from the Global Mobility Network meeting that took place in London on 27th September 2007.

The theme of the network meeting was diversity and how it impacts on our workplace. Network members attending the meeting were senior executives from a range of knowledge disciplines and organizations, including large companies, small businesses, academia, and business support agencies. Our aim was to explore the issues businesses need to consider in managing increasingly diverse workforces. The meeting was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of research input on the topic of diversity to provide possible trigger points for discussion. The rest of the session was an exploration of the topic from the experienced practitioner perspective.

To help us in the first part, John Sharman from the Equal Opportunities Commission was welcomed as the guest speaker. He presented the Enter the Time Lords report, published earlier this year, which researched flexible working practices that are essential for sustainable, competitive and healthy working to meet the challenges of the rapidly changing global business environment. The report, observations from bodies such as Acas and the Chartered institute of Personnel Development, and observations from research studies were presented to the network members to provide input to the discussion.

Part One

Traditional v. Emerging View of Diversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional view</th>
<th>Contemporary view?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illegal to discriminate against people at work on the grounds of:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Learning styles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Mobility and flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Comfort with technologies</td>
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<td>Religion or belief</td>
<td>Collaboration practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation</td>
<td>Culture</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Business boundaries – networked organisation and fragmentation</td>
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Diversity has tended to be popularly associated with equality and legislation, compliance with which remains a baseline minimal requirement. Organisations such as Acas stress the business case for diversity, and the CIPD similarly speaks of creating business value through harnessing everyone’s talents. These interpretations of diversity provide commercial and good practice incentives for effective diversity policies and practices, apart from the legal imperative.

This definition is typical of the emerging view of diversity:

"Businesses need to ‘get under the skin’ of diversity and look beyond gender, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation, focusing instead on instilling a diverse culture that encourages differences in work styles, personality and ways of thinking. Providing an environment in which people can
Organisations are dynamic eco-systems of people collaborating and communicating within and across complex systems of relationships and subcultures. These rich ecosystems are full of differences - different personal values, experiences, perspectives, beliefs, professional and national cultures, emotional states and so. Reflecting on the definition in the previous section, one of the Global Mobility Network members spoke about inspiring, igniting and emerging a diverse culture that embraces, celebrates and consciously values differences.

The fact that such diversity creates conflict is welcomed and regarded as necessary for innovation. In her keynote speech at a recent conference on the future of the workplace, Dr Frances Westley spoke about knowledge creation, noting that people act from deeply-held personal beliefs and values that need to be surfaced. She maintains that learning how to engage with conflict is an essential prerequisite for generating knowledge integrated from diverse perspectives and values.

**What’s driving the current focus on diversity?**

The analysis so far supports the view that there is a business case for recognising and embracing diversity, and that diversity is inherent in organisations. There are a number of global trends that are making workplaces even more complex. Growing diversity on multiple fronts, including culture, age, communication styles, and differing attitudes and approaches to using communication technologies are creating a significant challenge for managers and workplace practices.

Cultural proliferation is rising through the physical migration of talented young people who are relocating to fill skills gaps. At the same time, virtual teams can consist of members from anywhere in the world. Sharif Khan, Vice President HR of Microsoft in Canada, recently confirmed that workforces are becoming distributed and talent will be sourced globally. He spoke about casting the net to the world, which has becomes the talent pool. Rather than people having to relocate, roles are migrating to where the talent is.

According to this article, "the once popular perception of the corporation as a stand-alone, self-sufficient entity is as out-of-date as prohibition and snake-oil". Having outsourced all but core capabilities, businesses now have to manage multiple external relationships and people in the supply network contracted to deliver outputs. So the growth of partnerships and external contractual relationships adds to workplace diversity.

One further trend that is really complicating the workplace and adding to workplace diversity is the existence of four generations of employees. Managing inter-generational interests and expectations is becoming a dominant issue for managers.

**How do we understand the workplace?**

The workplace has physical and organisational attributes. Effective physical design and layout contributes to collaborative vitality, and supports a mix of work activities within workspaces. Organisational attributes of workplace design are concerned with how work is organised and supported. Detailed topics and issues related to work organisation can be found at the UK Work Organisation Network website.

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3. [www.ukwon.net](http://www.ukwon.net)
**Part Two**

The group was divided into four tables to brainstorm the question. Each table was provided with flip chart paper to record their individual and group responses to the two parts of the topic question: What is diversity? How does it affect the workplace? Responses were recorded on Post-it notes, which were collated after the meeting onto a mind map that attempted to capture some of the key points of the collective conversation.

The number of insights and thoughts articulated in the conversation resulted in too many observations to be able fully to do justice to their richness. Twenty creative and experienced people can generate a plethora of ideas with the space of 50 minutes, approximately the time given to group discussions before feedback from each table.

What was written on each note was recorded as written and then categorized. Collating the individual Post-It notes prior to creating the mind map inevitably required some interpretation.

It may be helpful to read the analysis of issues arising in conjunction with the mind map

**What is Diversity?**

Responses can be considered under the sub-headings of Individual, Group, Organisation and Business Environment.

**Individual Diversity**

Key words under this category include preferences, values, beliefs, observable behaviours, expectations (met and unmet), wants (met and unmet), aspirations (met and unmet), opinions, degrees of toleration and acceptance of others, dreams, different stakeholder perspectives, image, abilities, education levels and talents.

It was noted earlier that people are motivated to act from deeply held values and beliefs, which they may not consciously be aware of. Individual behaviour may also be influenced by culture – organisational and national.

Apart from individuality in employees, there was consideration of customer diversity. This included different ages, locations, professions and activities.

**Diversity Within and Across Groups**

Key words and phrases include diverse thinkers with common purpose, diversity of skills mix within teams, collaboration trumps competition (nobody knows it all), valuing and enabling each other, community, conflict and power.

Diversity also applies to groups of customers.

**Strategic / Organisational Diversity**

Key words and phrases included flexible environments to meet individual preferences, support systems and processes, control mechanisms, diversity of technologies, diverse and distributed working practices, time (shifts and global time zones), payment structures, embracing and expressing cultural norms (although these may be unconscious), business models, workspaces, office locations and cross-country borders. The culture and expectations of the Board of Directors was also identified as contributing to diversity.

**Business Environment**

Diversity of economic and financial conditions (and different levels of staff exposed to these in different ways).

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How Does Diversity Affect Our Workplaces?

Responses to the ‘how’ part of the question seemed best to analyse according to topics and issues arising.

Policies, Procedures and Cultures

These need to be Board and HR led, and designed and implemented to support diversity in personal tastes, values, requirements, opinions (there are no right and wrong opinions), beliefs, perspectives, paradigms, working styles, approaches, ideas, age, groups, experiences, races, religions, genders, sexual orientation and disability.

Challenges

Diversity presents challenges for individuals and leaders. For individuals, there is a need to consider their impact on others, as well as be aware, respectful and have humility. These challenges also apply to leaders, with the additional requirement to be able to recognise and combine dynamic skill sets. In working with diversity of skill sets, leaders need to be able to recognise and encourage top performers, and provide education to improve the performance of those not performing as they could.

A key challenge is how to access those who are excluded, and who often are the people with answers and knowledge. This implies inclusiveness and being aware of the value of everyone’s talents.

A further challenge is how to deal with perceived risks associated with diversity, and surfacing actual risks that are present in diverse workplaces.

Opportunities

Diversity creates opportunities for individuals, leaders and for businesses. For people, it presents the opportunity to open hearts and minds, and results in individual empowerment. For businesses, diversity is a source of competitive advantage through better talent, skills and innovation.

Changing Mindsets

Changing mindsets around diversity is facilitated through reason, resonance, recognition, rewards, resources, research and re-description.

Leadership

There needs to be processes for identifying sources of leadership, and identifying who is a leader within a particular context. Leaders then require tools and approaches to energise and instil confidence, competence and curiosity in others (and to have support in maintaining their own confidence, competence and curiosity).

Structures

The design of organisational structures should be appropriately adaptable to facilitate diversity, avoiding silos in favour of cross-boundary networks and flexible hierarchies.

Communication

Inter-personal communication in diverse contexts requires awareness, thought and responsibility. Communication systems, processes and tools need to create the capacity for workplace participants to ‘dance with different styles’ so that communication can move from direction to dialogue.

Talent

Diversity requires effective talent management strategies, which are appropriate and personal to emotionally energise, engage, and enable people. Talent management improves retention.

Mechanisms for Handling Conflict

Businesses need mechanisms for handling conflict, which creates the capacity and will for confrontation and conversation.
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**Concluding Observations**

The immediate thing that is apparent from the mind map of the collective conversation is the volume of inter-linked themes that business leaders and managers need to know about; having awareness of what the issues are, how they all fit into the big picture and then understanding how to implement policies and procedures to energise, inspire and ignite a creative and dynamic workforce.

It seems to us that managers are having to work constantly with tensions and trade-offs, for example considering the interests of individual against those of the team, department or business. It is not difficult to imagine that a fully customised and personalised approach to the management of work-style and communication preferences, and individualised talent management strategies might come with a significant management overhead.

Current global workplace trends are adding diversity to already diverse workplaces. These can be summarised as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Organisations</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connected</td>
<td>Boundary-less</td>
<td>Anytime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networked</td>
<td>Networked</td>
<td>Anywhere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-generational</td>
<td>Creative/ knowledge intensive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two trends emerge from the management literature as potentially challenging.

The trend for businesses to fragment into boundary-less, loosely-linked entities is having major implications for relationship management. Workforce participants have to develop the necessary communication and inter-personal skills, and relationship management makes significant demands on time and energy.

The other potentially challenging trend is the assimilation of so-called Generation Y, Millennials or NetGen employees into the workplace. These young people are important because their skills are scarce, but also because they represent a potential catalyst for changing business structures and processes. Although a cautious approach is wise when pre-judging individual capabilities according to a group norm, we do know that young people who have grown up with the internet are entirely at home in social networks. They tend to be highly collaborative, and this goes against the rigidities and formalities found in many organisations.

These two issues did not emerge as dominant concerns at the meeting. Rather they were included within a holistic surfacing and merging of strategic and operational issues around individuals, groups and business environments.

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