

# Do you intend to have children?

**Mike Burnitt** and **Isabel McKenzie** expose the changing attitudes surrounding equality and diversity

Britain has never been more diverse and the need for organisations to recognise and manage equality and diversity issues has never been more prevalent. Yet many organisations are still standing firmly behind the starting line even though they realise they are being left behind.

Back in the 1980s equality was, for many organisations, a matter of race and gender issues. In the early part of this decade there was a rush to train managers to comply with the (by then established) gender and race discrimination laws.

'Never ask a woman if she intends to have children during a job interview,' said many training officers of the time. 'Why not?' replied many 1980s male managers.

While it can be argued that things have moved on considerably in the last 20 years, more often than not this is not the case. In reality, many organisations (large, small, public, private etc) still remain confused as to what is required of them within this area and why they need to do anything in the first place.

Not everything that can be measured is important and not everything that is important can be measured.

An undeniable aspect of 21st-century working is measurement. Seemingly everything that is capable of being measured nowadays is. The measurements that are made within organisations are, more often than not, analysed, placed into a league table or graph and duly offered as a statistic to indicate either 'performance' or 'opportunity for improvement'.

In some cases this may well be a good thing but

as a result, an average worker, within all sectors of UK business (including voluntary and not for profit) may find themselves analysing targets, measures and key performance indicators as part of their daily working lives. However, in this world of 'if it counts you can count it' certain important issues that are not always as easy to 'count' can often be overlooked. While it is almost impossible to measure, not all employees feel fully included and therefore do not fully contribute.

Many of the long-established theories of human motivation point towards creating an environment where people feel valued and are recognised. In reality, many organisations (and in sharp contrast to their equality policies) operate a practice of organisational assimilation where everyone is encouraged to do what everyone else does. This is often typified within induction programmes where new starters (a minority group) are shown how to become members of the majority group. 'Fit in or get out' is the unspoken yet underlying message.

While of course, all organisations must have procedures, rules and regulations, otherwise organisational anarchy would prevail, this organisational assimilation is often completely at odds with the aspirations of many managers. How often does a manager – particularly in times of crises, express a desire for 'more initiative', 'different thinking' or 'creativity' within their teams? In our experience the answer is often, yet those very same qualities, rather paradoxically, often get either suppressed or lost somewhere along the way.



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### Feeling included is an important measure

If you had a personal characteristic that was 'different' to that of the majority group within your workplace, would it be important to you that this difference was recognised, understood and embraced? And if your difference was not embraced and you felt excluded what would you do? (Your options would actually be surprisingly limited in these circumstances.)

For example, would you exercise your right to leave the organisation in question? Complain? Or to stay in the hope that things might improve?

All these options could have potential negative consequences to the wellbeing of both the organisation and person in question. Feeling excluded or 'left out' at work has proven negative effects on personal wellbeing and consequential performance at work. The manifestations of these include sickness absence, productivity, leaving employment etc. From an organisational perspective, labour turnover, productivity, absence rates and organisational reputation are hugely important issues. For the 'it must be capable of being measured to matter' brigade, try mentioning the costs of sickness absence or labour turnover as a persuasive argument.

### Barriers to success

Typically, there are a number of common barriers to effectively managing equality and diversity issues within the workplace. Some of these words may be strangely familiar to some of our readers.

#### ■ Denial

An organisation or individual that refuses to acknowledge diversity as a real issue can often be heard to say: 'There is not a problem here. I treat everyone as I like to be treated myself.' The fatal flaw of this old-fashioned mantra is fairly obvious; in reality, it alludes to treating everyone in an identical way and in accordance with what is perceived to be acceptable by one person – a far cry from accommodating difference!

#### ■ Feeling trapped

As legislation has advanced, many organisations simply do not understand how to implement their legal obligations and see them as restrictive. 'The world has gone mad' are the words of people who remain in denial within this area.

As a test of the lack of contemporary understanding within this area, ask a work colleague if they are aware of the six headings under which people are protected by discrimination legislation in 2008. The answer, by the way, is race, gender, disability, religion/belief, sexual orientation and age.

### Recognising a need to change behaviour

What is in it for me? How will we measure it? How will it affect bottom-line profit? These are questions typically posed by organisations in the early stages of developing equality and diversity initiatives.

We have already mentioned the potential cost implications of factors such as productivity, absence and labour turnover; combine these with the potential costs associated with legal non-compliance and even the most die-hard organisation opposed to change may start to listen.

There is also the impact of the demographic shifts occurring within Britain at the moment to consider – particularly the migration from eastern Europe and the ageing population of our workforce.

Organisations that are continuing to do what they have always done within the areas of, for example, recruitment, may discover that they will not necessarily continue to get what they have always got as the demography of the working population changes.

Then there is the question of reflective diversity within areas such as customer service. More diverse groups expect to see diversity reflected in the people organisations select to provide their frontline services.

Finally, and of equal importance, expectations of what is acceptable in 2008 differ greatly from those of 20 years ago.

Discriminatory behaviour tolerated (albeit reluctantly) in the 1980s is generally considered

totally unacceptable today. However, many people still remain unenlightened as to modern acceptable behaviours and/or how to challenge people who demonstrate otherwise.

### **Recognising the need for help**

Not unlike counselling, this is a specialist area and requires specialist interventions. It is also a hearts and minds issue. Learning about discrimination law might engage the mind but recognising the benefits of embracing an inclusive culture is quite another thing entirely. Many people and organisations, however, fail to make use of the expert resources and advice available to them.

### **The link between counselling and equality and diversity**

Workplace counsellors, mentors, employee assistance programmes and the like are often an initial point of contact for employees facing equality related issues. The questions 'can my employer do this' or 'how can I raise this' are not uncommon.

Discrimination, harassment, inclusion and dignity at work are complex issues which, left unchallenged, can have enormous effects on personal wellbeing. This may, for some readers, open an interesting debate about what we should and should not know as workplace counsellors to provide the best advice to our clients.

Secondly, to more general practitioners, it is an established fact that people who are discriminated against, harassed or excluded at the workplace are at a greater risk of experiencing stress-related absence.

In these circumstances, counselling may once again be a natural point of contact via, for example, a GP referral.

### **Essential knowledge and skills**

So what are essential knowledge and skills for anyone who has interaction with other people as part of their role within the areas of equality and diversity?

#### **■ Legislative awareness**

As a basic platform, knowledge of the six main provisions of discrimination legislation is recommended. This area is often over complicated and misunderstood. For example, race discrimination applies to people of all races – including, for example, a white British male. Religious discrimination legislation includes atheists and vegans.

**‘All too often, people and organisations wait for things to happen before seeking advice’**

#### **■ Tools for challenging inappropriate behaviours**

Identifying and recognising 'black hole' behaviours that drain energy from people and how to encourage people to challenge these for themselves.

#### **■ Acceptable language**

The much confused area of what is and is not acceptable terminology.

#### **■ Dignity at work**

Skills relating to detecting, recognising and managing issues of harassment and bullying within the workplace.

#### **■ Prejudice and stereotyping**

Understanding how and why people form prejudices and use stereotypes, and how this can easily manifest in discrimination and harassment.

### **I enjoy learning but do not always enjoy being taught**

So how can I enlighten myself or my teams?

For many, this area is synonymous with political correctness and compliance and some people, in our experience, even expect it to be boring.

Our experience is that using modern and engaging techniques of learning, including audio visual methods and thought-provoking materials, provides a learning experience that can appeal to even the most reluctant of learners.

### **Flavour of the month or a passing phase?**

Equality and diversity issues began in earnest in 1944 when the parliament of the time passed the Disabled Persons Act. Since then, equality and diversity has become an issue at a national, European and global level. With the addition of the human rights acts in the late nineties, respecting others' differences are firmly on the agenda both at work and in play. As the profile and expectations of people will continue to change, so will this complicated area. In our final likening to counselling, all too often, people and organisations wait for things to happen before seeking advice. The future, as they say, lies with our future generations. Do you intend to have children? ■

*McKenzies HR are a leading provider of equality and diversity consultancy and training within the UK. Their client base of over 200 UK organisations includes BACP, the British Medical Council, the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the Healthcare Commission. McKenzies can design and supply policies, procedures, learning materials, training courses and seminars within this area. Website: [www.mckenzie.co.uk](http://www.mckenzie.co.uk) Enquiries: [arrive@mckenzie.co.uk](mailto:arrive@mckenzie.co.uk) Tel: 020 7435 4466*