

# Supervisors' perception towards diversity management: A strategic tool or an operational nightmare?

Stefanos Nachmias  
Nottingham Trent University,  
Nottingham Business School, Nottingham, UK  
[stefanos.nachmias@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:stefanos.nachmias@ntu.ac.uk)

## Abstract:

The study explores supervisors' perception of diversity management and the level of exchange relations in supporting diversity goals. It seeks to fulfil a knowledge gap by exploring supervisors perceived self-motivation and commitment, perceived organisational support and leader-support exchange towards diversity management. In-depth, critical interviews were conducted with 16 supervisors aiming to explore their perception and insights. The adoption of a qualitative method, coupled with the use of social exchange theory has resulted in a study that gives a voice to the key participants in the implementation of diversity management strategies. The findings show that organisations need to develop positive exchange relations between leaders and supervisors to support the delivery of expected supervisory work and role outcomes in diversity. Effective relations will enable organisations to address diversity needs and enhance individual self-motivation in supporting the successful implementation of diversity strategies.

**Keywords:** Diversity management, supervisor perception, organisational support, social exchange theory

## 1. Introduction

The changing work environment creates a complex challenge for organisations to promote effective relations and address workforce challenges (CIPD, 2012). Despite the fact that diversity has a sound business case with an explicit strategic approach to valuing individual differences (Dijk, Engen and Paauwe, 2012), utilising the strategic benefits of diversity is less strong in practice than in theory (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Individuals with diversity operational responsibilities have become the target of such criticisms due to lack of buy-in-to diversity, lack of knowledge and concerns over the feasibility and efficiency of diversity strategy

(Greene and Kirton, 2011; Foster and Harris, 2007). Past research has suggested that managers' competencies influence the delivery of any diversity policy (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). However, there is an absence of research that gives a voice to the key participants in the diversity strategy implementation, the supervisors<sup>1</sup> themselves (Ehrke, Berthold and Steffens, 2014). Emphasis has been paid in exploring social integration variables (e.g., conflict, cohesion, and attachment), performance related variables (e.g., organisational performance, work group performance and innovation, and individual in-role and extra-role performances; Joshi et al., 2011) and diversity training (e.g., training effectiveness, training tools; Johnson and Schwabenland, 2013; Kulik and Roberson, 2008). Nevertheless, any diversity strategy could not be delivered without an effective supervisory support and appropriate skill set to address diversity policy needs (Mavin and Girling, 2000). As Martins (2015) argued supervisory contribution to the implementation of diversity goals is crucial to the effective execution of any diversity strategy. Thus, the study aims to explore supervisors' perception of diversity management and the level of exchange relations in supporting diversity goals.

It is upon this backdrop that the study aims to fulfil this knowledge gap by using social exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Although this theory has widely been used as a theoretical foundation in organisational studies, there is an insufficient conceptual and empirical foundation to provide an in-depth understanding of supervisors' perception of diversity management. Thus, the study seeks to explore three types of social exchange: perceived self-motivation and commitment of diversity management, perceived organisational support and leader-support exchange to address implementation of diversity strategies. The researcher recognises that diversity implementation involves various operational tasks and information sharing, therefore it requires exchange relations and organisational support to deliver expected work and role outcomes.

Key findings seek to enhance the 'cycle of production of knowledge about diversity' (Ahonen et al., 2014:278) through the qualitative exploration of individual cases.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of the study the term supervisor considers an individual who has supervisory duties in diversity management and support the operational implementation of diversity practices.

Organisations should be able to support operational roles for driving progress, which is not limited to specialist understanding of diversity issues, but extends to an understanding of the broader business case arguments for diversity (CIPD, 2012; De Meuse and Hostager, 2001). Key findings would also support organisations to dedicate effective resources for implementing diversity strategies and offer learning opportunities to develop an appropriate level of diversity density (Hopkins et al., 2008).

## **2. Theoretical developments**

### *2.1. Understanding diversity management*

Since the mid-1990s, literature has perceived diversity management as a conventional approach to equal opportunities (the principle of equality is about sameness and reflects a moral concern for social justice - Vickers, 2011) into “planning and implementing organisational systems and practices to manage people so that the potential advantages of diversity are maximized while its potential disadvantages are minimized” (Cox, 1993:11). This literature has deconstructed diversity with a broader scope and perspective when compared to traditional and accepted ways of understanding diversity within business (Kirton and Greene, 2010). The changing workforce demographics and organisational values (CIPD, 2012) have reinforced the need to achieve greater inclusion which promotes visible and non-visible differences (Boekhorst, 2015). Diversity management has been found to affect outcomes at individual (McKay, Avery, and Morris, 2008; McKay et al., 2007; Foster and Harris, 2005), group (e.g., Kochan et al., 2003), and organisational (e.g., Richard, 2000; Wright et al., 1995) levels. Specifically, evidence suggest that effective diversity initiatives encourage the development of greater employment relationship in less predictable work roles and working life (Marvin and Griling, 2000; Dijk, Engen and Paauwe, 2012) and ability to translate diversity policies into improved performance (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004; Kochan et al., 2003).

Some authors argued that poor understanding of individual needs could lead to performance loss (Ely, 2004), prevents effective management decision making (Kumra and Manfred, 2012) and results in high labour turnover and talent loss (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). Critics of diversity management are sceptical about the real business benefits arising from diversity policies and practices. They argued that there is still a need of theoretical and conceptual improvement (Zanoni et al., 2010) and the

actual impact on organisational performance is seldom readily generalizable (Yasbek, 2004). Others suggest that diversity management supports the achievement of organisational goals as an ultimate guiding principle and explanatory device for people in organisations, rather than educating a truly diverse organisation (Greene and Kirton, 2011).

Nevertheless, the narrative of equal opportunities creates a culture of silent acceptance with limited focus on the individual elements of diversity management (Marvin and Griling, 2000). This culture may be generated through a discourse which promotes diversity as a prerequisite for company success (CIPD, 2012), without providing a uniform managerial solution. Literature suggests that uniform solutions seek the identification of 'sameness' developing in and out groups (Celik et al., 2012), which does not release the new insights into organisational culture that individual differences can bring (Argote, Gruenfeld and Naquin, 2001).

Seeking to identify 'difference' creates a complex challenge for organisations through the demand of identifying a plurality of interventions to "diminish effects of social categorization processes without relinquishing the benefits of diversity" (Ely, 2004:756). Managing diversity is therefore perceived as a 'unitarist' managerial concept rather than diversifying. This requires the development of effective human resources practices to facilitate the achievement of diversity objectives (Olsen and Martins, 2012). Therefore, individual capacity and organisational commitment play a vital role in influencing the progress of managing diversity, especially those with dedicated responsibilities for diversity. As CIPD (2012) argued, those individuals act as crucial change agents in the successful implementation of diversity strategies.

## *2.2. Supervisors' role, leadership and organisational support*

Organisations explicitly or implicitly hold diversity-related strategies that underlie various diversity management activities. A backbone aspect of any activity is the supervisor's behaviour and ability to achieve operational goals. Without appropriate level of organisational support, individuals will struggle to take on and perform HRM responsibilities (Martins, 2007), which include managing diversity. Their actual perception of the HR process could impact on their level of self-motivation (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Purcell and Kinnie, 2007), and ultimately influence the effective

implementation of diversity management. The AMO model (Ability, Motivation and Opportunity) is a useful framework as HR practices can be analytically bundled into those that impact on individual abilities (A) on their motivation (M), and on their opportunities to perform (O) which could affect individual behaviour (Appelbaum et al., 2001) including supervisors.

Nevertheless, increased focus on diversity management does not necessarily build commitment and improve motivation without the appropriate organisational support (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004). As McGovern et al. (1997) found, the extent and nature of individual discretionary behaviour will be influenced by organisational current practices and support. The fulfilment of supervisory roles and in this case, diversity commitments, might often rely on their own sense of motivation and commitment (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Perceptions of positive organisational support have been found to be positively associated with employee in-role performance, (Eisenberger et al., 2001) and affective organisational commitment (Farh et al., 2007).

Leadership's attitude towards policy implementation is a critical role in supporting individual commitment. As Boon et al. (2005) argued, leaders primarily pay attention on the implementation of HR policies and place little emphasis on how individuals perceive policies context and processes. This lends support by the so-called HR attribution as how individuals interpret causes of behaviour are influenced by management behaviour. HR policies that are perceived as commitment-focused (i.e. intended to enhance service quality and employee well-being) are positively related to individuals' attitudes, and practices that are perceived as control-focused (i.e. designed to reduce costs and exploit employees) are negatively associated with their attitudes (Nishii et al., 2008). For example, a CIPD (2012) survey revealed that only 16 per cent of participants were positive about senior management support in delivering diversity goals. Therefore, the extent to which supervisors feel supported or controlled by the implementation of diversity management plays a role in shaping supervisors behavioural actions.

Supervisor's perception of leadership capacity could be also determined by the level of leadership commitment. Presence of a diversity mind-set in the senior management group is essential for successful implementation (Kumra and Manfredi, 2012; Moss,

2009; Hopkins et al., 2008). This is supported by Bowen and Ostroff (2004) who argued that individual perception of HR practices is dependent on the behaviour of management through the means of effective level of commitment. They suggested that “a strong HRM system coupled with visible line managers may foster stronger relationships among HRM, climate, and performance than each would individually” (p.216). In other words, personal initiative, individual take an active and self-starting approach to work, can be stimulated by the availability of environmental support (Frese and Fay, 2001), such as organisational leadership.

However, diversity management in practice is less strong due to poor leadership commitment (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010) and limited allocation of budget and resources for diversity (CIPD, 2012). The lack of financial resources commitment might suggest that organisations are not committed to address the progress of diversity and support operational tasks. This partly lends support by the notion of leadership transgression as poor leadership buy-in could have a detrimental effect upon individual behaviour including turnover and psychological withdrawal (Shapiro et al., 2011), engagement (Reio and Sanders-Reio, 2011) and job performance (Harris et al., 2007).

Leader’s actions at work and their attitude towards workplace norms associated with workplace-related policies, procedures, or practices could create a negative work climate and raise questions on the actual policy appropriateness (Shapiro et al., 2011). This is supported by the CIPD’s (2012) survey findings who argued that 70 per cent of organisations do not have set objectives to progress diversity, which suggests that it is not a strategic issue in their organisations. Therefore, the way supervisors enact diversity practice is likely to be influenced by senior management behaviour and strategic direction (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007).

Research has also shown that supervisors lacked appropriate skills to manage diversity (Anand and Winters, 2008). The CIPD’s (2012) survey revealed that there is lack of appropriate skills and knowledge in delivering diversity goals. There is less focus on developing individual capacity to effectively manage, monitor and implement diversity (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Diversity training is a critical factor in the change of individuals’ ability to inform personal and professional practices (Ehrke,

Berthold and Steffens, 2014; Kulik and Roberson, 2008) and most importantly to improve level of knowledge awareness (Bezrukova, Jehn and Spell, 2012). Without appropriate organisational support and training activities, supervisors might not have the potential to overcome the barrier of lacking awareness and knowledge of diversity (Ely, 2004); enhanced self-knowledge and awareness (Curtis and Dreachslin, 2008; Brickson, 2000); and improve skills to work on diversity issues (Ely and Thomas, 2001). Poor 'dominant narratives' of knowledge (Ahonen et al., 2014) limits management's ability to facilitate awareness, acceptance, adoption and adherence of diversity (Paluck, 2006). As Johnson and Schwabenland (2013) argued, diversity training acts as a strategic tool to support organisational goals and mobilise support for policies through line management (Kirton and Greene, 2010). This reinforces Ferdman and Brody's (1996) observation that change can only begin once awareness is acknowledged.

### *2.3. Diversity management and the social exchange theory*

The review reveals that supervisors perception on implementing diversity management depends on how they enact the policy, level of organisational and leadership support, level of self-motivation and how leaders perceive the nature of diversity policy. These are important elements to build strong and reciprocal exchange relations between leaders and supervisors in supporting diversity goals.

Social exchange relationships develop between two parties through a series of mutual, although not necessarily simultaneous, exchanges that yield a pattern of reciprocal obligation in each party (Blau, 1964). Such social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations and interdependent/contingent actions (Emerson, 1976) which provide the potential to generate high-quality relationships. This is an important element as the study recognises that lack of self-commitment, self-obligation and self-motivation to address operational diversity needs could influence the delivery of any diversity strategies. A social exchange relationship rests on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Therefore, the specific research question (RQ1) that the study addresses is as follows: *what is supervisor's perceived self-motivation towards diversity management and their perception of current organisational diversity strategies?*

Further to that the review shows that organisational diversity practices reflect a more cosmetic rather than deep-rooted changes as to how diversity is supported by leaders. The paradox is that diversity management is being described as a management practice concerned with valuing people (Ozbilgin and Worman, 2006). However, the review shows that there is lack of appropriate level of leadership support and effective relations in supporting individuals at operational level. The study recognises that leadership commitment is core to managing diversity synergies amongst supervisors and creating supervisory capacity to implement diversity strategies. Leader-support social exchange is about the quality of relations between two parties and “each must see the exchange as reasonably equitable and fair in order to continue it” (Graen and Scandura, 1987:182). Therefore, the specific research question (RQ2) that the study addresses is as follows: *to what extent could the level of leadership support and behaviour influence supervisor’s perception towards diversity management policies?*

Finally, the level of organisational support in terms of personal development, resource allocation and skills capacity seems to affect the effective implementation of diversity management. The study recognises that effective organisational support is likely to devote greater individual effort towards helping the organisation achieve its diversity goals (Wright and Nishii, 2013; Purcell and Kinnie, 2007). Organisational support exchanges reflect the quality of the employee-organisation relationship, and the extent to which individuals believe that their efforts are being recognised and supported (Blau, 1964) and both partners are willing to provide resources valuable to the other (Aselage and Eisenberger, 2003). Therefore, the specific research question (RQ3) that the study addresses is as follows: *to what extent does the level of organisational support affects supervisors’ ability to achieve diversity work-related goals?*

### **3. Methodological consideration**

The study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore participants' accounts, perception and insights through the lens of social exchange theory. The aim was to bring to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals (Bryman, 2008). This is important as the world is constructed with meanings and that explaining particular phenomena must be done through the participants’ own perspectives (Husserl and Moran, 2001). This is particularly important as current studies favour laboratory experiments and surveys with little space to critically understand exchange



relations in relation to diversity management. This is an important element of the phenomenological approach addressing Paluck's (2006) identification of the importance of moving beyond questionnaires in diversity research. As Hayles (1996:106) highlighted, there are three competencies in valuing diversity: 'head (knowledge), hand (behaviour and skills) and heart (feelings and attitudes)'. Therefore, personal knowledge and understanding of the world are powerful attributes for explaining subjective experience, gaining insight into personal motivation and actions, and challenges (Blamey and Mackenzie, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

The study has purposefully selected a group of 16 individuals against criteria of having supervisory responsibilities for diversity management within their current roles (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The logic and power of a purposive sampling lies in the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 1990) with good correspondence between the research question and the sampling (Streubert and Carpenter, 1995). The majority of participants were female (68 per cent), with good representation of male participants (32 per cent) working in a variety of organisations and sectors. The aim was to attract a diverse number of individual cases in terms of personal experiences and work roles rather than the type of organisations and different sectors. This approach enabled the researcher to establish a good level of rapport and empathy in gaining depth of information from each participant.

A semi-structured interview technique has been adopted to address the research questions. The interviews provided individual understanding of participants' experiences (Kvale, 1996) and provide the flexibility to lead the conversation into areas which have not previously been considered (Saunders et al., 2009). Phenomenologists often favour the intimacy that in-depth interviewing can create in an attempt to understand little known phenomena (Bryman, 2008). Participants were asked to look back at a past experience and assess the way they have posed problems, their orientation to perceiving, believing and acting in a complex environment in relation to diversity management. Interview themes were in line with the research questions and the three social exchange principles. Each of the interviews averaged 60 minutes in length and were carried out outside participants working environment. All interviews were digitally recorded and then professionally transcribed.

The study adopted 'thematic analysis' approach as a tool engage in research analysis that probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features (Paluck, 2006). A detailed thematic index of the findings was developed and the data was labelled into themes for subsequent retrieval and exploration. All the data relevant to each theme was identified and examined using a 'constant comparison' approach, in which each item is checked or compared with the rest of the data to establish the analytical categories necessary to providing explanations for the findings (Seale, 2004).

The validity of the key themes was reached through the use of the academic literature, research questions and appropriate terminology. Of course the generalisability of the findings is limited to the degree of the wider population that has the same degree of certainty. This limitation may be offset in part by the richness of the data collected and the sample population in order to draw a scope of the findings. Miles and Huberman's (1994) tactics for generating meanings and testing relationships between themes throughout the process of analysing the data was also adopted to ensure the validity of the findings. Participants were assured that the information they gave would be confidential and extra care have been taken to protect personal details.

#### **4. Research findings**

Findings are divided into three themes. Initially, findings focus on the level of self-motivation on diversity management and the impact of organisational reality upon individual knowledge. It continues with an evaluation of leadership-support in addressing diversity needs and then present key findings on the role of organisational support in relation to diversity work-related roles. Arguably, there are a multitude of facets that could be discussed in relation to these themes, analysis was based on the most prominent to emerge from the data.

##### *4.1. Self-motivation and organisational reality*

Questions were asked about participants' perception on the meaning of diversity management. Analysis revealed that there is a strong 'personal' commitment to promote diversity and generally support organisational diversity needs. All participants

highlighted that diversity management could be potentially a positive tool for organisations and HR policies should be able to advise individuals how to promote and manage diversity ( $n=16$ ). One participant's statement is representative of the sample:

“It is a good tool [...] diversity in recruitment, move forward, we are more diverse as a nation, more diversity as an industry, a diverse customer base, inclusive working environment and you need to raise awareness, address religion and cultural differences”.

Participants also argued that diversity management is a useful tool to inform key HR functions including recruitment, talent management and rewards ( $n=11$ ). “We leave in a diverse environment and we need to be flexible in addressing this complexity at both strategic and operational level”. Nevertheless, further questioning revealed that positive self-attitude towards diversity management is influenced by the organisational approach to diversity management. In particular, most participants responses in relation to current diversity organisational strategies were vague with emphasis on the legal requirements and the feasibility of the current legislative framework in terms of recruitment ( $n=15$ ). A level of frustration and ‘guiltiness’ has been documented as participants were ‘apologetic’ in their response and how they justified the use of diversity management within their organisational roles. For example, one participant argued that:

“...legislation has to be there, some companies don't bother, just legally comply, but the framework should be adopted at individual level. I do try... but certainly – it's the law framework – but not flexible at all, especially on recruitment- it's about people, and not about the legal policy, try to create an un-bias policy which is less regulatory and more proactive in terms of recruitment”.

Of course participants' responses around the needs to address current legislative requirements were appropriate. However, findings revealed that there is a lack of knowledge and skills to actually support diversity strategies as well as time/resources

restrictions to consider diversity goals ( $n=9$ ). There was a strong sense that their knowledge needed to address mainly recruitment targets rather than support a comprehensive diversity strategy. One participant argued that:

“We don't have any specific policy and recruitment is a very structured with no training or emphasis on diversity, there is no time to actually go beyond the legal perspective... target, pressure and target again and again... just need to deliver in terms of recruitment goals... as simple as that”.

It is interesting that all participants were positive on the prospects of diversity management ( $n=16$ ); however organisational reality seems to affect individual self-motivation. Personal passion about diversity is in place, nevertheless lack of organisational structure to communicate and support personal views might hinder individual self-motivation. Level of authority and engagement with decision-making process might explain the impact of organisational reality into self-motivation and attitude towards organisational diversity practices. For example, it was stated that:

“We have core competence and goals, but supervisors do not have a say into how they recruit or manage difference. There is a need for more flexibility to provide opportunities to express ideas”.

Organisational pressures in addressing key competencies and delivering results might limit personal commitment and self-motivation for enhancing individual knowledge. This is supported by one participant's response to diversity management due to high levels of personal and organisational engagement with learning. In her own words, “acknowledge people have differences is key in the workplace...have to be open... accessibility is everything. Barriers should be removed. Openness is key in everything we do [...] performance review use diversity as one of the key values, it is working, as people have been asked questions on how they appreciate differences”. Participant was really enthusiastic about the current diversity strategies and able to clearly articulate personal knowledge.

#### 4.2. *Leadership support and behaviour*

All participants argued that senior leadership is a key force in driving diversity and act as 'champions' within their own organisations ( $n=16$ ). However, there were overly critical with current leadership behaviour in supporting their roles. Throughout the interviews there was a sense of 'confession' to the researcher expressing their concerns about current leadership support. When they were further questioned, comments were made that "managing directors and leaders are unaware of the implications of poor diverse workforce". There were clear evidence to suggest that leadership 'apathy' in reinforcing the diversity goals affect individual level of commitment. Some participants argued that diversity is not an operational tool questioning leadership commitment ( $n=9$ ). In particular, the following statement summarises participant's perception on leadership support:

"Little emphasis or interest at highest level to change the way we do things. It is hard to talk about this... we are not deaf [...] management is a bit hesitant to actually listen but you need to achieve operational goals and manage effectively expectations...a lot of staff members including leaders, are not as co-operative within filing in forms and therefore will be unclear of what the policy entails exactly. I don't agree but I have to follow with the decisions though".

Leadership experience has been also identified as a key challenge ( $n=7$ ). They argued that old schooling management and traditional accepted view hinders progress in diversity and their roles. They argued that:

"They have been in business for a long time, they are just limited with what they look for, they are narrow minded, they don't think outside the box, look outside the industry. Mid-managers might have the passion, but leaders are not encouraged to changes, no cultural shift, and not open to new ideas".

Another participant reiterated that:

"...resistance is what I think a major barrier, people not taking it seriously. I think this is partly due to lack of communication and disorganisation, plans

aren't well considered and actually implemented. Some people don't actually bother".

There were also comments about the need to manage different leadership attitudes and styles. Participants argued that the level of acceptance and support is partly individualised and depends on individual leader commitment to diversity ( $n=9$ ). The following statement is a powerful expression of participant's perception on current leadership behaviour:

"Less accepting of people being different and less committed to actually put in practice various strategy is dangerous. Leaders might not be approachable and this can cause issues in terms of people perception. But I believe leadership attitude to diversity is key, you have to put forward ideas and express concerns and ideas, might be rejected but ideas should be considered. But this is not always the case. I believe this depend on the individual leader and the acceptance level. Sometimes you have to play the game and understand individual behaviour".

Nevertheless, the underpinning argument is that there is a lack of confidence with the level of leadership support within their current roles. Only two participants argued that they feel confident to hold discussion with senior leader to address diversity issues in a regular way ( $n=2$ ). "There are some clear goals and it is a top down tool as the organisation itself embrace diversity in all different aspects. There are meetings that everyone can join and a committee where they review progress and record ideas". They commented that effective organisational culture has the potential to let individual committee with cultural values and this is critical to enable "leaders to take more ownership of diversity and less pressure on HR practitioners".

#### *4.3. Organisational support and individual recognition*

Participants expressed similar views on the level of organisational support and provided a number of critical comments on the need to 'advance' organisational support mechanisms in understanding current diverse labour market. The lack of formal structure and strategies was well documented ( $n=11$ ). In particular, participants

emphasised the vagueness of current policies and need to remove biases from the workplace because:

“...places are most effective and less problematic - different expectations – biases and poor understanding of the actual needs”.

There was not a clear justification on the meaning of bias, but they felt that poor organisational support dismisses personal contribution to deliver diversity goals. Some participants expressed their dissatisfaction about the lack of recognition ( $n=10$ ). It was stated that “rewarding part of the job is to help people, it is rewarding, but some individuals don’t really value our contribution”. There was a sense of ‘disbelief’ throughout the interviews as to whether their knowledge has been utilised. In fact, they highlighted that the level of organisational support could be detrimental in achieving greater individual commitment because:

“...having the support as a background is very good....support is everything, build confidence and provide room to improve practices, but this depends on the acceptability level at management level... the more flexible the better... but currently you always have to be careful how you express concerns and avoid saying you need to do this and need to do that...just be careful”.

Other participants argued that they felt less confident in achieving work-related expectations due to the level of political correctness and power distance ( $n=6$ ). It seems that resource implications and financial pressures might create such an ambiguity in individual attitude. As argued, in most cases resources are available to support operational activities:

“... but how we use that is a different story... it’s upon them to use those resources, there is a pressure to effectively utilise resources though. You need to make sure decisions are effective and cost effective”.

There was a single positive response with regards to the level of organisational support. It was stated that “I feel very confident to ask for resources as the company itself has a good reporting structure. I think that the management’s openness and

transparency in the process does make a difference as you know exactly what to do and how". This response is reinforced by the advice approach to managing diversity and the effective HR reporting.

## **5. Discussion and evaluation**

In turning to the first research question on supervisors' perceived self-motivation towards diversity management, it emerged that participants recognise the value of diversity management at personal level. They expressed their appreciation of the effectiveness of diversity initiatives to the development of a greater employment relationship (Marvin and Griling, 2000) and the need for organisations to understand the diverse labour market (Engen and Paauwe, 2012). However, an element of vagueness has been identified with regards to participants' attitude on organisational diversity management and their ability to explain current practices. It has been recognised that diversity management in practice is less strong (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010) and questions raised about the effectiveness of current human resources practices to facilitate the achievement of diversity objectives (Olsen and Martins, 2012). In fact, the findings strongly support the argument that negative exchange relations and organisational reality influence the level of self-motivation and commitment towards diversity management at organisational level. It seems that lack of appropriate diversity structures and organisational strategy hinders personal interest and ability to support diversity goals. This lends further support to the claims of Wright and Nishii (2013) and Purcell and Kinnie (2007) that perception of the HR policy could impact on individual level of self-motivation. These considerations appear to apply to participants in this study.

This is a critical point as there was little evidence to suggest that participants have high level of personal initiative to managing diversity needs. The findings suggested that the lack of confidence expressed about the level of contribution towards the decision-making process and ability to communicate personal ideas could have an impact upon their ability for active and self-starting approach to diversity management (Frese and Fay, 2001). The overriding impression gained was that organisational reality in terms of addressing legal requirements, over emphasis on delivering results and poor structures do not allow supervisors to effectively support diversity needs.



Possibly the lack of appropriate training activities to enhance self-knowledge and awareness (Curtis and Dreachslin, 2008; Brickson, 2000) and organisations' inability to raise awareness on the benefits of diversity management (Boekhorst, 2015; Dijk, Engen and Paauwe, 2012) might function as a constraint upon individuals' ability to fulfil their supervisory roles. This is supported by the positive response towards organisational approach to diversity management and the impact of learning towards shaping effective exchange relations. A key element of social exchange relations is the need for reciprocal obligation and interdependent/contingent actions (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Nevertheless, the findings revealed a loose relationship between supervisor's perception of obligation and organisational reality generating low-quality relationships in diversity.

In relation to the second question on the level of leadership support and behaviour, there was a consensus on the strategic role of leadership in managing diversity. In theory, participants highlighted that leadership level of commitment towards policy implementation is critical to achieve diversity goals. This confirms current studies who argue that diversity management requires a top-down approach and leadership commitment (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010; Boon et al., 2005).

In reality, a less promising picture was presented. This is a critical point to note as participants' perception of diversity management has been affected by leadership behaviour. Participants made a number of negative comments about current levels of commitment and the sense of 'apathy' present amongst leaders. This confirms other studies' findings that individual perception of HR practices is dependent on the behaviour of management through the means of effective level of commitment (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004). Participants highlighted that the lack of commitment to foster stronger relations between supervisors, organisational needs and diversity goals influence individual level of self-motivation and sense of contribution in delivering diversity goals. If Nishii et al. (2008) are correct in the view that individuals interpretation of causes of behaviour are influenced by management behaviour, then the conclusion here is that less commitment-focused leadership behaviours are negatively related to supervisors attitude and work practice perception.

There was also a strong argument about the variety of leadership styles. Interestingly, participants expressed their frustration with regards to the lack of leadership consistency in dealing with diversity management. This lends support by to CIPD (2012) survey findings that found senior management support and style in delivering diversity goals is questionable. The findings strongly support such an argument as the level of acceptance and support seems to negatively shape supervisors behaviour and perception. Without the appropriate leadership style, supervisors might not have the potential to overcome the barrier of lacking awareness and knowledge of diversity (Ely, 2004) which might limit their ability to support diversity strategies (Ahonen et al., 2014). The positive response on the effectiveness of leadership style supports this argument as the development of quality relations between supervisors and leaders is essential as “each must see the exchange as reasonably equitable and fair in order to continue it” (Graen and Scandura, 1987:182).

Finally, the third research question aimed to evaluate the role of organisational support towards supervisors’ ability to achieve diversity work-related goals. The findings revealed that poor levels of organisational support is highly related to participants’ ability to deliver results. Their perception had been negatively affected by poor commitment to supply resources and financial pressures. Of course organisations have to meet a number of financial commitments. However, there was strong evidence of withdrawal in having a contribution to the delivery of diversity goals and a sense of frustration amongst participants. This is in line with current academic literature who argue that poor organisational support could have a detrimental effect upon individual behaviour including turnover and psychological withdrawal (Shapiro et al., 2011), engagement (Reio and Sanders-Reio, 2011) and job performance (Harris et al., 2007).

Poor levels of organisational support towards diversity management might be explained partly by the quality of the employee-organisation relationship, and the extent to which individuals believe that their efforts is being recognised and supported (Blau, 1964). Positive responses reinforce such an argument as effective organisational support is likely to devote greater individual effort towards helping the organisation achieve its diversity goals (Wright and Nishii, 2013). In other words, the study findings support the view that positive organisational support towards diversity

strategies could increase the sense of self-motivation and commitment (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007).

## **6. Conclusion and implications**

The aim of this study was to explore supervisors' perception of diversity management and the level of exchange relations in supporting diversity goals. The use of qualitative approach allowed the researcher to yield rich data through a process of detailed exploration of individual perception. The study considered three types of social exchange: firstly *perceived self-motivation and commitment* (poor structure, lack of organisational strategy and organisational realities hinders self-motivation and personal interest to support diversity goals at organisational level); secondly *leader-support exchange* (supervisors perception is negatively influenced by the behaviour of leaders through the means of poor level of commitment) and thirdly *perceived organisational support* (poor levels of organisational support is highly related to supervisors' inability to deliver diversity goal at operational level). Therefore, a critical and interpreted understanding of supervisors' perception through the lens of social exchange theory enforces the argument that positive exchange relations are essential to support the delivery of expected supervisory work and role outcomes in diversity management.

In the question whether diversity management is a strategic tool or an operational nightmare amongst supervisors, the answer is less promising. Key findings highlight the need for organisations to develop appropriate diversity management strategies through the establishment of effective exchange relations. Current diversity management strategies reflect a more cosmetic rather than a strategic perspective as to how diversity is operationally supported. Of course, diversity requirements might be highly specific as diversity needs vary across organisations (Kochan et al., 2003). Nevertheless, failure to develop effective exchange relations between supervisors and leaders would influence organisation's ability to address the changing employment relationships (CIPD, 2012). There is a need to pay more attention to understanding supervisors' level of self-motivation and commitment by improving knowledge within organisations (Bezrukova, Jehn and Spell, 2012) and consider the quality of leader-support social exchange in diversity (Graen and Scandura, 1987). The implications of

the evolving modern workplace and exchange relations reinforce the need to develop effective supervisory capacity on diversity management over the coming years.

There is also a need to develop diversity training tools aiming to increase organisational knowledge and abilities to address workforce challenges. Building management commitment and accountability is key in any successful diversity policy implementation (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004). Proactive action is needed to build supervisors' capacity to effectively manage, monitor and implement diversity and most importantly to enhance levels of self-motivation and commitment. Effective learning and training is critical to change individual abilities (Ehrke, Berthold and Steffens, 2014) as well as to establish effective exchange relations and organisational support to deliver expected work and role outcomes.

Consequently, the current study adds to the richness of data around the subject. Of course, exchange relations is one component of a complex set of behavioural, social and organisational factors that influence individuals perception of diversity management. Therefore, the study's theoretical foundation could be utilised to explore further the effect of leadership and power in shaping individuals' attitude towards diversity management and evaluate further the extent to which high level of self-motivation could act as 'agent of change' in supporting diversity goals.

## **7. References**

Ahonen, P., Tienari, J., Meriläinen, S. & Pullen, A. (2014) Hidden Contexts and Invisible Power Relations: A Foucauldian Reading of Diversity Research. *Human Relations*, 67(1), pp.263-286.

Celik, H., Abma, T., Klinge, I. & Widder, A. (2012) Process evaluation of a diversity training program: The method strategy. *Evaluation and Programme Planning*, 35(1), pp.54-65.

CIPD, (2012) *Managing Diversity: Linking Theory and Practice to Business performance*. London: Charter Institute of Personnel and Development.

De Meuse, K. & Hostager, T. (2001) Developing an instrument for measuring attitudes toward and perceptions of workplace diversity: An initial report. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 12(1), pp.33-51.

Dijk, H., Engen, M. & Paauwe, J. (2012) Reframing the Business Case: A values and virtues perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 111(1), pp.73-84.

Ehrke, F., Berthold, A. & Steffens, M.C. (2014) How diversity training can change attitudes: Increasing perceived complexity of superordinate groups to improve intergroup relations. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 53(1), pp.193-206.

Foster, C. & Harris, L. (2005) Easy to say, difficult to do: diversity management in retail. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 15(3), pp.4-17.

Greene, A. & Kirton, G. (2011) Diversity management meets downsizing: the case of a government department. *Employee Relations*, 33(1), pp.22-39.

Lola-Peach Martins , (2015),"HR leaders hold the key to effective diversity management", *Human Resource Management International Digest*, Vol. 23 Iss 5 pp. 49 - 53

Mavin, S. and Girling, G. (2000) What is managing diversity and why does it matter? *Human Resource Development International*, 3(1), pp. 419-433.

Paluck, E. (2006) Diversity training and intergroup contact: A call to action research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), pp.577-595.

Purcell, J. & Hutchinson, S. (2007) Front-line managers as agents in the HRM–performance causal chain: theory, analysis and evidence. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 17(1), pp.3-20.

Tomlinson, F. & Schwabenland, C. (2010) Reconciling competing discourses of diversity? The UK non-profit sector between social justice and the business case. *Organisation*, 17(1), pp.101-121.