Professional standards research: diversity in the workplace

It's easy to talk about managing diversity, but difficult to do
Lynette Harris and Carley Foster

An increasingly diverse workforce presents new issues for employers, who must ensure consistency and fairness while recognising staff needs.

The demographic profile of the UK working population is changing. More women of all ages are in employment, a growing number of people are likely to be working beyond retirement age, and the workforce is more culturally varied. How do operational managers demonstrate equal treatment for all employees, while ensuring they are responsive to different employment needs as a consequence of, for example, disability, religious belief, age or sex?

These questions prompted a study into how managing diversity was interpreted in practice by operational managers and HR professionals in a large, well-known UK retailer with an online operation and stores in both the UK and US. Interviews were held across the organisation, with managers, HR specialists and store staff being asked about their jobs, careers and organisational experiences, and their perceptions of equality and diversity policies. Day-to-day operations were also observed and company documentation analysed in detail.

The research revealed a marked contradiction between what people thought in theory about diversity management, and what was reported as actually happening in practice. While supportive of the principle of adopting differential treatment to meet individual needs, respondents saw such an approach as creating potential unfairness if it led to perceived benefits for certain individuals that were not available to others. It was widely seen as an approach that was "easy to talk about" but "difficult to do", and that its dilemmas were not sufficiently addressed in management literature or by those responsible for diversity strategy.

Diversity management was found to be heavily influenced by the fact that it meant different things to different people - for busy managers this could mean what was most expedient at the time. Faced with balancing the pressures of caring for the individual and defending the robustness of their decision-making, managers opted for the tried-and-tested route of treating people the same - an approach reinforced by much of UK and US anti-discrimination legislation and supported by the growth of personnel procedures to aid legal compliance.

Views on employing a diverse workforce and valuing individual differences were highly influenced by contextual factors, such as the diversity of the available labour market and the size and structure of the organisation. Both UK and US operations relied heavily on formal, prescriptive employment procedures to ensure consistency. In contrast, a reduced level of formal procedure and a less visible workforce in the smaller-scale online operation resulted in a group of managers who were more at ease with implementing ad hoc arrangements to meet individual demands as they arose.

An interesting outcome of the research was that it revealed the limitations of using prepared cases and scenarios - even if based on actual situations - to gain insights into employee attitudes. Interviewees almost universally suspended organisational realities in considering how they would respond to such situations, resulting in responses that were at odds with the examples they provided of actual experiences. This has implications for diversity training. Relying on case studies or scenarios to explore attitudes and behaviours towards diversity may create an unrealistic view of how people's differences will actually be approached in the workplace.

Although this study is limited to one sector, its findings provide much-needed insights into how managers actually put diversity strategies into operation. They suggest that regarding diversity management as a logical development of equal opportunities overlooks the complex organisational reality it presents. Key concerns for employers are to retain a collective commitment among staff, and to address the perception that granting benefits to one group that cannot be enjoyed by another - for example flexible working leave for parents of young children - is potentially unfair.

A positive view of difference, as diversity management advocates, is unlikely to be encouraged by an over-emphasis on "what not to do" in the employment relationship. This study revealed how important it is for policy makers to ensure that there is a shared understanding of what it means to all parties and developing an approach that takes into account the pressures and dynamics of a range of contextual factors. The recommended way forward is for employers to develop home-grown approaches to diversity management and to provide training and development that places the emphasis on the operational realities of those responsible for its implementation.

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Professional Standards Conference

This paper is from the CIPD's Professional Standards Conference held on 28-30 June at Keele University

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