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## Diversity and corporate conformism

I cannot recall when I began to write about diversity in the workplace. It may have been when I first came across the term “glass ceiling” that some in human resources management use to describe an invisible barrier to promotion faced by women when they reach a certain level in their careers.

Now there is an equally prosaic term, “the pink plateau”, applied to gay employees. No doubt we are going to see similar terminology to describe promotion barriers faced by people from ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

Recruiters are becoming so acute to demands to increase the diversity of workforces that it may help to emphasise whatever makes you stand out from the crowd. The diversity agenda, however, appears to stress some differences more than others. Gender, race, disability and age can all be ticked in the usual diversity boxes. But you do not hear HR people talking about regional differences, educational backgrounds, class distinctions or eccentricities.

Many workplaces today, for example, favour educational qualifications over experience. There is a “qualification ceiling” guarding certain jobs where degrees are expected as a minimum entry requirement, particularly in to management fast tracking programmes.

Experienced teachers sometimes face such barriers in the state education system. Last year it was reported that Tristram Parry-Jones, the retiring headmaster of Westminster School would be unable to teach mathematics in the state system because he lacked the required qualification. The same restrictions applied to David Wolfe a teacher at the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, who had run a physics department of a US university earlier in his career. Later the Department of Education backtracked on an insistence that he would need a GCSE in mathematics.

I would be surprised, however, if these issues arise in what has been billed as a two-day UK “summit” on diversity in March, because they are unfashionable minority concerns that lack the garnish of political correctness. The London-based conference, organised by Caspian Events, has attracted an impressive platform including Patricia Hewitt, trade and industry secretary, Sir Digby Jones, director general of the Confederation of British Industry, Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for racial Equality, and Brendan Barber, general secretary of the Trades Union Council.

No further proof than this showcase event should be needed to demonstrate the UK Government’s growing interest in promoting diverse workforces. This means that diversity, a workplace issue that has already been around for some years, is going to be one of the most fashionable human resources concerns of 2005.

Why now, you may ask? There are several reasons. Workplace legislation is demanding greater attention to equality although, apart from an unusual increase in sex discrimination cases in the past year, a large proportion of which refer to dress codes, the number of sex discrimination cases brought against employers has been gradually declining.

The latest drive is all about promoting what Sir Digby Jones calls the “compelling business case for diversity”. Skills shortages and a need for greater social inclusion, he argues, are underpinning the economic argument for greater workplace diversity.

There is no shortage of corporate supporters for this diversity movement in business. US companies influenced by punitive anti-discrimination laws in the US have been among the most active employers in seeking a greater diversity of candidate short lists from UK recruitment firms.

Stonewall, the lobbying group championing the rights of gays, lesbians and bisexuals, has just published a Corporate Equality Index listing the UK’s top employers for lesbian, gay and bisexual staff. Leading the list is the venerable British Council with IBM, Citigroup, Credit Suisse First Boston, and Manchester City Council in joint second place. Employers were ranked using criteria ranging from the possession of an effective equalities policy to having openly gay staff on their board of directors.

The proportion of lesbian and gay people in the adult population of the UK is thought to be about six per cent so they represent an important workplace minority. It must be right, therefore, that employers should seek to increase the diversity of their employee base. And yet, among companies, at least, I can see problems ahead for diversity policies.

There is an implicit contradiction between the characteristics of diversity and those of corporate culture. The nature of diversity is to celebrate difference. The nature of a corporate culture is to emphasise conformism. Most companies would recognise what Richard Branson at Virgin refers to as “the way we do things”. The way that people look, the way they behave towards customers, the way employees are expected to conduct their day-to-day business is often underpinned by elaborate procedures and codes.

That some of these requirements are resented by employees is suggested in the 7,000 or so sexual discrimination complaints registered by UK industrial tribunals last year against the imposition of dress codes such as the insistence that men must wear a collar and tie.

Companies may say they want a diverse workforce but in practice they tend to demand a high degree of homogeneity in the way their employees look and behave. If you don’t believe this ask any recruiter whether the wearing of long hair and earrings would effect a man’s selection chances at an interview for, say, a graduate training programme in a blue chip company. The interpretation of diversity in business tends to focus on prominent and vocal minority groups, not on an individual’s desire to be different.

I worry that workforce diversity is being infused in to companies in some cases as a kind of bland organisational multiculturalism where managements adopt diversity policies to stay “on message”. If so, is it possible that it could reproduce the same inherent problems that bedevilled multicultural programmes in the UK public sector during the 1970s?

Diversity is a complex evolutionary force. For diversity to exist in living systems it is necessary for populations to maintain recognisable differences in order to be viable. In nature diversity is probably the most important insurance policy against extinction that any species can employ but it is a diversity that emphasises differences, not among individuals, but among groups and species. This is why when people meet

they focus more on what they have in common, than on their differences. Birds of a feather flock together. You do not see much evidence of diversity in the corporate expatriate communities that support international assignments.

If companies allow a flourishing of diverse thinking to go with their workplace diversity policies – and I do not see much evidence of this so far – we might see diversity developing as a business philosophy beyond the “minorities” and compliance policies that dominate today’s agenda. The diversity debate needs to be pushed to a new phase.

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