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viewpoint

Tackling bias in the workplace – are we ignoring the wider picture?

Trying to ensure equality for all in the workplace has been a major concern for global employers over many years and continues to be much discussed in the press.

Yet over time the term ‘equality’ has tended to become synonymous with how minority groups might be disadvantaged economically, ignoring the fact that it encompasses many other social and cultural issues – from accepted working patterns, the uptake of paternity leave and even clothing.

Why does this matter? Well, aside from the legal aspects associated with discrimination, it’s really a question of best practice. Treating one group of people unfairly compared to another is recognised as being both outdated and wrong.

Organisations will get the best out of their employees when they feel they are treated equally – whether that relates to formal remuneration, work patterns or just that feeling of what is acceptable.

Unconscious bias

It’s important to remember that workplace inequality isn’t always caused by the formal policies and processes that are imposed from above, but can be altogether more subtle. Often it is a result of unconscious and unmeaning prejudice that is a reflection of a broader cultural environment, or simply the attitude of senior management and the prevailing views of employees.

Let’s start with the less subtle. We can’t pretend that gender bias does not still exist in workplaces across the world. There is plenty of data to support this fact as well as the quantifiable issues of different pay rates and the composition of corporate boards.

Regardless of their seniority, women are often asked to take on tasks that are not expected of their male peers – take the minutes, organise the coffee. Even the language we use to discuss gender in the workplace can still be

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problematic despite much progress. Look at the phrases used to describe female leaders when interviewed in the media that focus on their ability to manage a ‘family life’ rather than their business acumen. Which man has ever been asked about his ability to manage his career and look after his children at the same time?

And interestingly, in recent times, inequality in the workplace has also been highlighted as literally being bad for your health. Telling women to wear high heels in the office, which some argue represents workplace professionalism, could also result in these colleagues suffering from spinal nerve conditions and even anatomical changes!

‘...men don’t apply for flexible working ... because they think they will be perceived negatively by colleagues.’

Only **50 per cent** of women of working age are in the labour force, compared to **77 per cent of men**. The gender gap in labour force participation remains especially large in Northern Africa, Western Asia and Southern Asia³



Women currently hold just **29 (5.8 %)** of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies, based on the January 2017 S&P list²

Going beyond the obvious

The above issues always receive a good deal of attention – but by focussing on those are we in danger of ignoring bias against those who seem to have an advantageous position in the global workplace, such as older university educated men? Are there instances when men or those without children also have legitimate complaints?

What is often not discussed is hidden gender bias, much of which is not part of a formal company structure – but simply a consequence of how employees relate to each other.

Consider attitudes to taking time out of the workplace to care for children. Are flexible working requests less likely to be accepted from a man – especially a male parent – than a woman? Is there an undercurrent of machismo, where in the workplace men feel they would look weak should they apply for flexible working?

There is an increasing body of thought that suggests even when it is made available to them, men don’t apply for flexible working or even take up their statutory paternity leave. They often self-select out because they think their request will be rejected, or that they will be perceived negatively by colleagues.

Empirical evidence also suggests that when parents have children who are unwell, employers and colleagues are more sympathetic towards women taking time off work to collect them from childcare or nursery than their male counterparts.

It is not just a male/female parental issue. Perceived discrimination stretches in a multitude of directions. HR directors across the world report anecdotes of workers without children feeling discriminated against in terms of flexible working options, or increased expectations of long hours and work travel because they are simply not perceived to have the same level of personal commitments.

What can we do?

Organisations increasingly recognise that tackling these issues could significantly improve employee morale and productivity. Developing strategies to identify perceived injustices and cases where people don't take up their available legal rights to flexible working and parental leave is something growing numbers of HR directors, across the globe, are now seriously considering.

When doing so, it's important to look beyond policies, principles and regulations. A simple measure of the take-up of available options will help to indicate if there is an underlying equality issue.

Equality is not always about making sure the same opportunities are available to all. It can also be about ensuring people feel empowered to take up the benefits and options on offer. Companies can drill down into the specific barriers to take-up, such as how negatively someone will be seen by their colleagues simply for adopting the same behaviours as peers.

Discrimination, both overt and covert, takes many forms in the workplace. Even the most progressive employer with the most equitable principles could find that it's the attitudes amongst employees that are preventing true equality. Senior management teams who want to get the best out of every employee could consider shining a light on these underlying views and then lead by example to encourage a truly fair and equitable work environment.



Research among 200 employers by the firm My Family Care found that more than **four out of 10** companies had not seen a single male employee take up their entitlement. For 11% of the employers surveyed, between **0.5% and 1%** of male workers had taken shared parental leave and fewer than 10% reported more than a 1% take up⁴.

1 Source: <http://www.thespinehealthinstitute.com/news-room/health-blog/how-high-heels-affect-your-body>

2 Source: <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-sp-500>

3 Source: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/chapter4/chapter4.html>

4 Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2016/apr/05/shared-parental-leave-slow-take-up-fathers-paternity>

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