

TROUBLESHOOTER

Despite being in an ethnically diverse area, the workforce of this fast-growing company is overwhelmingly white, male and able-bodied. How can it build a more diverse workforce without embarking on positive discrimination?

THE PROBLEM

Last year I took over as HR manager of a fast-growing private-sector firm that has developed in recent years from a local family business to a thriving regional enterprise with several hundred employees.

To appreciate fully the make-up of the workforce, I recently undertook a diversity monitoring exercise. The results made uncomfortable reading: despite operating in an urban area where there is a mix of ethnic backgrounds, we are overwhelmingly white. We also have few female and no disabled employees, despite there being no obvious reason for this in the nature of the work.

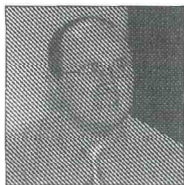
When I alerted senior management to the results they agreed with me that the issue needed to be addressed. They are wary of exercising any "positive discrimination" but want us to do what we can to reach out to all sections of the community. Our managing director commented that there

was a strong business case for this as we needed to reflect our customer base.

In terms of recruitment, I do not believe our advertising or interviewing criteria are directly discriminatory. Unconscious discrimination among line managers – many of whom are traditionalists and believe in hiring on instinct – may be more of an issue. Also, the evidence shows that there is simply a shortage of candidates from minority groups, so despite our positive will we cannot make progress if the applicants are simply not there.

We use agencies for some of our recruitment and have told them that we welcome diversity. This has had little effect, but I am not sure what more can be done since we do not want to compromise on the quality of candidates.

How can we develop a more diverse workforce while doing what is best for the business?



PETER ABSALOM

Staff resourcing manager,
King's College Hospital NHS
Foundation Trust

HE SAYS: I am encouraged that the managing director acknowledges the business case for the workforce to be representative of the community it serves. That is a critical step and an important lever to engage line managers. Communicating what diversity is and what you hope to achieve are key steps.

There are some practical steps you can take. Line managers would benefit from a formal recruitment training course. Valuing diversity and following the law are important components of the course. A competency-based recruitment method will move them away from hiring on instinct. This includes ensuring decisions are based on a well-drafted person specification and job description. Requirements to fit the company culture will hinder your strategy and could lead to discrimination.

Your strategy should not end at the point of recruitment. To ensure you retain the talent you bring into the organisation, line managers will need to adapt their style accordingly. An equality and diversity champion within the company can raise organisational awareness.

To increase the number of candidates from under-represented groups I would suggest a positive action (quite different to positive discrimination) initiative. You can reach out to such groups by inviting them to meet with managers informally, find out more about your business and understand the career options available. An open day or an event in a local community centre are practical measures. Local disability groups can help you to reach disabled applicants.

Using a recruitment advertising agency may help you to identify traditional and new media opportunities that communicate with the wider community. You should explicitly state you are dedicated to equal opportunities and actively encourage under-represented groups to apply.

When selecting recruitment agencies as partners ask them to demonstrate their track record of providing applicants from a variety of backgrounds.

All of your activities should be complemented by a good HR information system that can measure the impact of your strategy. You should also publicise your aims and achievements.

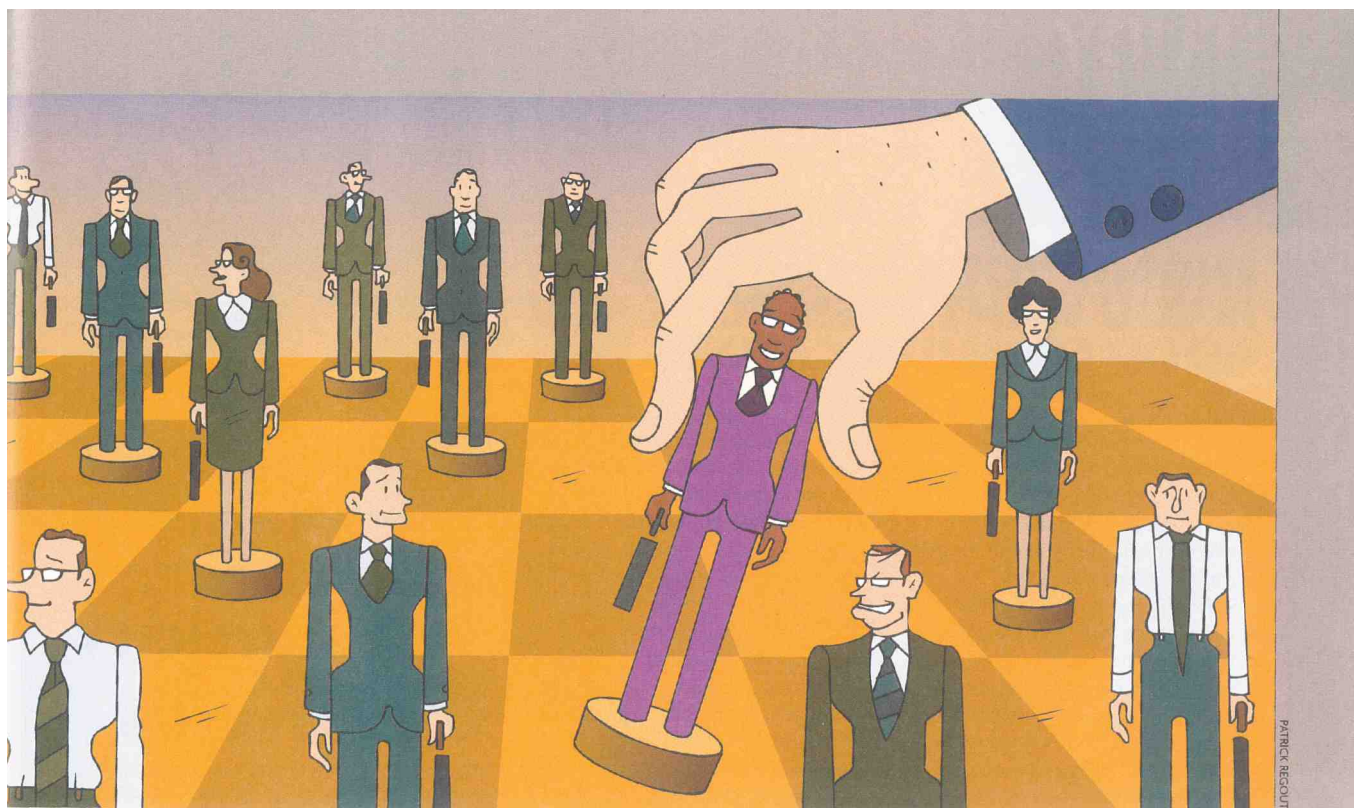


ZOE CLEMENTS

Senior recruitment
co-ordinator, recruitment
consultancy Corcoran Parker

SHE SAYS: If your recruitment agencies are not actively promoting diversity then you might want to consider changing agencies. However, before doing so you should discuss your concerns with them. They should be able to recognise some of the problems concerning your vacancies/recruitment procedures and offer advice on how to break down the barriers you may be facing.

Discuss your recruitment methods and see if they can identify any areas for improvement. For example, the skills you are requesting from candidates may be indirectly discriminatory or your advertising may not be reaching all sections of the community. Do you advertise in local and ethnic publications, community areas and colleges to make sure you get the candidates that best match the role?



PATRICK REGOUT

When discussing your needs, remember to include budgeting aspects – for example, adaptations required for disabled employees. Your agencies should be able to advise you on local facilities and where to get financial support.

Ask the agencies to explain how they source candidates and what methods they use to ensure they come from all sections of the community. What percentage of candidates are from minority groups? Ask to see their diversity policy and examples of how they promote diversity in business. Check agencies' standards to see which companies they are affiliated to and whether they are members of official bodies.

Ask them what links they have with the local community – for example, job centres, youth groups, disability organisations, health clubs, colleges and schools. Do they hold targeted recruitment open days that are easily accessible? Do they advertise for positions in a variety of media?

Are the agencies having difficulties sourcing candidates themselves? Perhaps the skills you are requesting are found mainly in affluent white areas. Is it possible to train someone for the role? What have your agencies done to address the problem?

Ask the agencies to obtain information about your area by gaining feedback from candidates. This can provide you with reasons why certain candidates are not interested in accepting jobs with your firm.



CHARLES HIPPS

Managing director,
e-recruitment firm WCN

HE SAYS: There are a number of ways in which employers are using online recruitment to improve diversity in their workforce. E-recruitment gives you real-time reporting which would immediately identify that your recruitment is overwhelmingly white, male and able-bodied. You won't need to wait for your next diversity monitoring exercise: real-time reporting shows the impact of the campaign as it unfolds. You'll be able to see which of your adverts and agencies aren't generating a diverse pool and adjust your sourcing accordingly. The audit trail and the reports will highlight any indirect discrimination and identify line managers requiring re-training.

You can also use e-recruitment to embed best practice in your organisation. A good system will guide line managers through best practice workflows and provide interview

scripts and structured scoring templates. This will improve consistency across the firm.

Your managing director should be supportive of adopting online recruitment as it will not only help you to reflect your customer base but will improve the service to candidates and your firm's image. You'll be able to provide the managing director with regular top-line reports on costs, quality and the time taken to fill vacancies.

Online recruitment can be particularly useful in reaching disabled candidates. Make sure that your e-recruitment system follows web content accessibility guidelines which will ensure that it is widely accessible to people with disabilities. You may wish to consider using the system to facilitate the running of a guaranteed interview scheme: this is a scheme whereby disabled candidates who meet the minimum qualifying criteria are guaranteed an interview. Our clients have found online recruitment helpful both in ensuring that only eligible candidates reach the interview stage and in administering the minimum qualifying criteria.

You haven't mentioned age discrimination, but online recruitment can also provide age diversity reporting to enable you to take steps to rectify any discrimination.

Further info

If you have any queries or problems, please send them to troubleshooter@peoplemanagement.co.uk

THE SOLUTION