

Management essays - addressing workplace inequality



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What are the most effective ways of addressing inequality in the workplace?

Inequality in the workplace is the most pressing issue facing the UK workforce at the beginning of the twenty first century. It is a fact that, in 2006, the political triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, the 'Second Wave' Feminist Movement of the 1970's and the Gay and Lesbian Rights' Movement of the 1980's have yet to be translated into sociocultural realities meted out in the contemporary British workplace. Women remain well below men in terms of income (yet not in terms of rank), while ethnic minorities have yet to penetrate the upper echelons of the private sector in anything like the manner the Government would have liked. Latent prejudices pertaining to sexuality, age and religion likewise persist in the modern British workplace, each standing tall as major obstacles to the greater political and cultural integration of society.

However, a troublesome cultural and economic tightrope must be walked by employers in the post-modern era. Organisations must adhere to the most up to date legislation for the good of the firm and of society, yet organisations must also compete on an increasingly aggressive economic scale, governed by an international market economy. Indeed, this balance that private firms must strike between fairness in the workplace and economic well-being is the most important theoretical paradigm to understand within the broader remit of the following discussion. Moreover, it is a discernibly private sector issue. Unlike the public sector, which is able to rely upon the Government for funding, private sector firms have no such fiscal safety net and are keenly aware that profit and loss remains their

raison d'Être, as David Farnham of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2002: 203) suggests.

“ The distinctive feature of private sector businesses is that they are market driven and market led organisations. This means that the ways in which private businesses are managed reflect the market environment in which they operate.”

Operating within a neo-liberal capitalist political environment means, therefore, that UK organisations are inherently profit driven and are ideologically and economically averse to spending valuable hours investigating and mediating between claims and counter-claims pertaining to equality in the workplace.

The following examination into inequality in the workplace must necessarily adopt a dualistic approach, tracing both the cause and effect of the problem of workplace inequality. This will involve analysis of legislation, best practice and human resources. Each of the major strands of contemporary workplace discrimination will be studied including sexual, racial and ethnic forms of inequality and methods will be suggested that have been cited as the best means of addressing the issue within the workplace. The study also will look at case studies in both the public and the private sector before drawing a conclusion that will attempt to show that laws are likely to become stricter as the Government seeks to force the wider political issue of ‘ social inclusion.’

First, a brief overview of the academic literature available on the topic is necessary. Concerning workplace inequality, it should be noted that the literature – like the legislation – changes at very frequent intervals. Web <https://assignbuster.com/management-essays-addressing-workplace-inequality/>

sources and government publications thus make up much of the contemporary literature relating to workplace bullying, discrimination and inequality dove-tailed with key academic literature. Certain landmark academic works remain central to the understanding of workplace harmony, such as the analysis conducted by Neil Thompson who has been a pioneer in British anti-discriminatory research practices. Thompson's *Anti-Discriminatory Practice* (Basingstoke: 1997) set the boundaries for more recent investigations into workplace discrimination, particularly with regards to the human cost in key professions such as nursing, social care, teaching and youth work. Research projects such as this have proved to be the catalyst for an increased interest in cultural diversity in the workplace, emphasising the different strains of discrimination in the process. In this context, Gill Kerton and Anne-Marie Greene's (Butterworth-Heinemann: 2004) study, *The Dynamics of Managing Diversity* stands out as particularly relevant to the following essay as does Carol Harvey's *Understanding and Managing Diversity* (Prentice Hall: 2004).

Media-centric campaigns emanating from the Government have ensured that the topic of equality in the workplace has remained at the forefront of the national consciousness, while more recent intellectual studies have tended to concentrate more on the philosophy of human behaviour within private sector organisations, which stresses the inevitability of conflict and diversity in the workplace. As Andrew Kakabadse and Shaun Tyson (1994: 9) detail, the complexities of human behaviour directly affect economic performance.

“ Human interaction is a vital area of study in the fields of management and organisation analysis. The manner in which human beings relate to each

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other influences the application and quality of performance by which people do their work.”

The most obvious theoretical starting point for any generic analysis into inequality in the workplace is the long-standing effort on the part of women to achieve parity with men at work. Sexual discrimination is the most widely reported yet also the worst defined of the entire anti-discrimination measures set-up in workplace throughout the Western world. Legislation ushered in during 1975 stands as the most prominent building block of the sexual equality in the workplace programme in the UK, although the Sex Discrimination Act is mainly viewed as a barometer for recruiting additional female employees. In this sense it is anachronistic in terms of modern day concerns which centre on pay and the dearth of female in management positions. However, as Clutterbuck and Snow (1990: 12) assert, “ legislation generally represents only the minimum of action required in any area.”

Sexual discrimination covers a wide range of possible charges, from bullying to innuendo to assault and the blurring of the lines between corporate and civil law means that many sexual harassment cases are taken beyond the bounds set by the organisation, which necessarily incurs excessive legal costs and damaging media publications. It is for this reason that the UK Sex Discrimination Act has largely been deemed to have been a failure because although it has come to the theoretical and legislative aid of thousands of women since its inception, high profile manipulation of the law as occurred, for instance, during the unfair dismissal and sexual harassment case brought by Faria Alam against the Football Association (Personnel Today website: first viewed 25/01/06), has only served to ridicule all aspects of employment <https://assignbuster.com/management-essays-addressing-workplace-inequality/>

law, most damaging of all for the employees. Moreover, although few are willing to go on record, many managers in the UK are put off hiring women executives for fear of a large pay-out in the event of a claim relating to sexual harassment being levied against the firm.

The law, therefore, has - via amendments - become an obstacle to organisational integration in the workforce with equality in terms of pay appearing to be the most obvious victim of this legal and cultural shortcoming. *The Guardian* (2002: 3), for example, released a poll stating that women chief executives earn on average £9 000 less than their male counterparts in sectors such as housing, charities and hospitals. In some cases the wage discrepancy for equal jobs was as much as £25 000 per annum. It is large discrepancy and a serious issue because the public sector salaries ought to reflect the government's wish for greater equality in the workforce. Certainly there is far more external pressure exerted upon public sector businesses than is the case concerning the private sector and it is logical to think that discrepancies will always be greater in the private sector because of these types of negative messages disseminated by the representatives of the state. It is therefore beyond doubt that sexual equality, in terms of equality based on gender, has not come very far either ideologically or practically since 1975.

With regards to addressing the issue, the onus is once again on the government to ignite a trend of gender equality in the workplace via positive action in the public sector. Certain NHS Trusts, such as the Merseyside Trust, have - for instance - targeted female nurses for extra training and education with a view to assisting more women to gain promotion in the Health

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Service. In terms of pay, however, there remains little grounds for conjecture or debate: only when a sharp rise is detected in women's incomes can the term ' progress' be assigned to gender equality in the UK workforce.

The Race Relations Act (1976) was passed at the same time as the Sex Discrimination Act and is therefore a product of the same cultural era. Like the Sex Discrimination Act, the Race Relations Act has resulted in greater scrutiny being placed on employers with little by way of monitoring equality after the employee has joined the workplace. However, the issue of race equality is seen in societal terms as a far greater cultural malaise than gender equality; certainly charges of race discrimination remain taboo and would be far more damaging for a firm if found guilty. Thus racial inequality in the workplace has been elevated to a higher political status and, as such, is the subject of greater government monitoring, which involves wholesale re-education on the part of public and private sector business and the way in which they structure their organisations. As Hunt (1992: 112) explains, " structure is the favoured force of integration."

The result of the emphasis upon race relations in the UK has been a growth in independent organisations that spend much time and money on educating employers about the best methods of addressing racial equality in the workplace. Of all of the bodies established to deal with workplace inequality, the Commission for Racial Equality is the most proactive with regards to tracing the cause rather than the effect of discrimination due to race or ethnicity. The Commission for Racial Equality website (cre. org: first viewed 24/01/06) offers advice on addressing the issue of race discrimination by underlining the significance of the 2003 Race Relations Act and Employment <https://assignbuster.com/management-essays-addressing-workplace-inequality/>

Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations, which maintain that “ employers are responsible for maintaining a workplace that is free from discrimination or harassment. Failure to take reasonable steps to prevent such behaviour will result in employers shouldering the liability for the actions of abusive staff.”

The Commission insists that employers establish an up-to-date anti-discriminatory handbook that is administered to *all* employees, triggering an internal policy of ‘ positive action’. This action has, in fact, been standard practice in the UK for many years but many employers feel as if their responsibility ends with the establishment of an internal code of ‘ best practice.’ The Commission for Racial Equality, via strong government backing and the finest independent academic research at its disposal goes much further – suggesting that employers train their management staff and monitor their proposals for greater workplace integration. Managerial refresher training courses should be attended on a regular basis and a procedure must be set-up to deal with complaints in-house. Counselling should always be offered in the event of a racial discrimination complaint and not only to the alleged victim. Support and (if need be) suspension has to be taken against the alleged perpetrator to quell any fears of favouritism within the organisation. The message must be disseminated to *all* employees that harassment and bullying will not be accepted within the workplace in any form. In this way, managers cannot be accused of negligence or of not paying due attention to the issue.

The Commission’s concerns extend beyond the boundaries of colour.

Religious belief has, more recently, been of great concern to employers with a high number of cases of harassment reported after the July 2005 bombings
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in central London. Racial and ethnic equality in the workplace is therefore a highly contemporary and topical question, one that will be the subject of increased government and media monitoring in the coming decade (Kirton and Greene, 2004: 289), increasing the pressure on managers to curtail discrimination before, like a cancer, it has begun to spread throughout the organisation.

It should be noted that racial equality watchdogs, both the independent variety and those sponsored by the government, only have authority to influence public sector organisations. Although private sector firms consult these websites and have used their guidelines for the formulation of internal handbooks, facts and figures always relate to public sector firms only. In this way the discrepancy between public and private sector workers is again highlighted; and, once more, the public sector must be seen to be setting the example for the private sector to follow in the future.

It has been seen that the two traditional strands of workplace inequality, gender and race, have been addressed according to the importance accrued to them by the government and public sector related agencies and watchdogs. Yet there also exists inequality based upon the grounds of sexuality, an ever increasing issue as the social stigma behind homosexuality quickly dissipates in the UK. However, as was proved to be the case with women and non-whites, business is lagging behind politics with regards to equality of sexuality. Furthermore, as political correctness is translated into cultural reality, discrimination against single employees and non-religious employees may become more pronounced as a backlash against minority hegemony erupts. This sociological fact, together with the <https://assignbuster.com/management-essays-addressing-workplace-inequality/>

added relevance given to discrimination on the grounds of age and physical ability, has persuaded the government to replace all existing anti-discriminatory statutes and replace them with a broader law covering all facets of equality in the workplace. This new agency has been fused with the relatively novel paradigm (within the context of domestic employment law) of human rights, something that has only come to the fore of British politics via greater integration with the EU. The resultant Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) is the response of a Government White Paper (2004: 101) concerned with the costs to the state of the continued social exclusion of key ethnic groups as well as disabled and elderly but competent people.

“ The overall lost output from these exclusions has not been quantified, but the potential gains from reversing it are self evident.”

The future political landscape with regards to ‘ social inclusion’ is therefore well charted, involving a more wholesale attempt on the part of UK policy makers to iron out inequalities with regards to employment. The fate of the public sector is sealed, though the rate of integration will doubtlessly not correlate to pre-ordained research data garnered by government officials. However, in terms of the private sector, the issue of workplace equality must move in line with theories pertaining to organisational structure, which dictates that wholesale change in workplace culture is not only unviable but damaging to economic stability.

As touched upon during the introduction, a balancing act must be maintained within the private sector that attempts to keep the status quo in

flourishing enterprises, yet which will also consciously seek to recruit from a more diverse range of applicants. Studies have tended to favour the view that small-to-medium enterprises with a varied ethnic, sexual and racial mix of staff are more likely to prosper in the contemporary economic environment as globalisation becomes an increasing political and economic fact. Companies in other parts of the world see more opportunity to do business with like-minded, diverse European firms, which has meant that there has been an upsurge in 'positive action' with regards to recruitment from minorities, as Paul Iles and Graeme Salaman (1997: 207) ascertain.

"A variety of 'key HRM levers' have been employed but chief among them has been viewing recruitment and selection activities as 'integrated key tasks' for organisations."

Organisational integration within the context of private sector workplace equality should therefore be seen as an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary process, mirroring the gradual changes seen in society at large. As a result, the key to addressing the issues of equality in the workplace must not be dealt with by extremism on the part of employers. Change is a healthy process but it is likewise one that cannot be forced or rushed, as Allan Williams et al succinctly (1993: 125) suggest.

"The culture of an organisation develops beliefs, attitudes and values of its individual members. If we wish to change organisational culture, we will need to influence the thoughts and beliefs of individual employees."

Conclusion

The contemporary bid to bring forth greater equality in the work place is a discernibly New Labour phenomenon tackled in a New Labour style of leadership. Authority is delegated according to regions. The public sector is targeted in rhetoric though rarely in practice while the private sector remains largely free to recruit, manage and delegate work as it sees fit. It is vital to recognise the balancing act that goes on in both instances. The state must avoid claims of excessive interference in domestic business, which goes against the ideological grain of neo-liberalist politics. The private sector, likewise, must maintain a profit while appealing to all sectors of society.

Addressing issues of workplace inequality are well documented and, in the same way as tobacco advertisements warn of health dangers, the state has made sure that no employer would be able to dodge the issue of liability in the event of a claim being made. It is consequently up to employers to follow government and watchdog guidelines pertaining to the internal dissemination of information, reportage and monitoring cases of harassment, bullying and intimidation in the workplace. Ultimately, then, the issue resides firmly within the bounds of human resources – staff recruited especially to deal with instances of discord in the workplace.

Evidence (Storey, 1995; Hepple et al, 2000) suggests that line managers are, within a decade, taking far more responsibility over personnel matters and issues of workplace strife. Human resource departments are in a far stronger organisational position than they have ever been before and directors are acutely aware of the intricacies and consequences of inequality in the workplace. Thus, in the final analysis, progress is in perpetuation and <https://assignbuster.com/management-essays-addressing-workplace-inequality/>

invisible to those analysts that speak only in facts and figures and never in terms of people who are indeed *the* commodity in question within the bounds of the contentious discussion relating to equality in the workplace.

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