

# Equal opportunities and managing diversity

Sociology



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What is the distinction between equal opportunities and managing diversity?  
How is it possible to justify either in an organisation? What are the distinctions between equal opportunities and managing diversity? Equal opportunity ensures that all personnel decisions that relate to recruitment, pay and promotion are only based on an individual's capability to do their job well.

Equal Opportunities: The term used to describe ' policies and practices that tackle inequalities, aiming to ensure that all staff are treated fairly, and that service users do not experiencediscrimination'Equal opportunity is concerned with keeping within the law; all organisations are required by law not to discriminate an individual by reasons of their colour, marital status, disability, gender, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins. At the very least organisations should abide by the; Equal Pay Act 1970, Sex Discrimination Act 1975, Race Relations Act 1976 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Diversity however is a more wide-ranging approach to equal opportunity. Diversity focuses on valuing the varying of qualities that employees bring to their job and organisation. Managing diversity therefore is when a manager creates anenvironmentwhere the employees feel valued for their individual talents and where the employee's skills and competencies are fully utilised. Taking advantage of all employees' full potential will benefit the organisation in many ways; such as it will encourage employees to work to the best of their ability and a wide range of experience, creativity and ideas will be brought to the organisation.

Managing diversity can be defined as ‘ a planned, systematic and comprehensive managerial process for creating an organisational environment in which all employees can contribute to the strategic and competitive advantage of the organisation, and where no one is excluded on the basis of factors unrelated to production. ’ Equal opportunities within the workforce have many advantages; everyone is treated fairly and without prejudice, removing barriers which impact more harshly on individuals of reasons such as gender, disability, and race, focusing on an individuals abilities rather than who they are.

Furthermore the concept of equal opportunities also has its disadvantages; positions such as nurses are mostly seen as a ‘ women’s job’ therefore a patient might not be comfortable with having a male nurse and a job that requires heavy lifting is seen as a male position therefore a male is more likely to be recruited. If two candidates both have the qualifications needed for the job description, managers may feel that they should recruit the candidate who fits the equal opportunity policies rather than the candidate who they feel is more suitable to cope better with the dedication that the job requires.

Diversity within the workforce has many advantages. These advantages include; a greater access to a wider range of individual strengths, experiences and perspectives, a greater understanding of the diverse groups of potential and existing customers represented within the workforce, better communication with these diverse groups of potential and existing customers and an improved legitimacy and organisational image across a

wider audience. Diversity within the workforce also has disadvantages as well as advantages.

Some of the disadvantages include; an increase in conflict among the workforce as differences in opinion makes it more difficult to agree on solutions, poorer internal communication because levels of knowledge and comprehension differ between employees, an increase in the management costs that arise from dealing with potential conflict and communication problems. Valuing diversity means that organisations recognise that all individuals have complex identities made up of many strands.

These can include, but are not limited to, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation physical and mental aptitudes, nationality, socio-economic status, and religious, political or other beliefs. This means we embrace and celebrate our differences in a positive environment, and are committed to engage with the needs of our diverse staff and users to enable us, both individually and corporately, to achieve our aims. From 1971 to 2001 the rate of female participation in the workplace had increased from 56. % to 72%. This increase is due to equal opportunities; all organisations are required by law not to discriminate an individual by their gender, both men and women are equal. The Sex Discrimination Act meant that both men and women are to be treated equally in the recruitment and selection process therefore resulting to an increase of female participation in the workplace which then resulted to a decrease in male participation rate, now at 84% (Equal Opportunities Review).

However equal opportunity is not yet completely equal; for instance pay differentials between men and women have only narrowed down a little since initial improvement after implementation of Equal Pay Act 1970, women still earn 18% less. Racial and ethnic groups' rate of unemployment is still more compared to white population. Also disabled peoples' rate of employment is 53% compared to 84% for non disabled. Age discrimination often occurs; both being too young and being too old is discriminated against.

Coded language in a job description is used to identify the age range in which they managers are looking for. Managers tend to see young applicants as less worthy and less capable of fulfilling the job position. Managers also see old applicants as unreliable and they are not regarded as long term workers so they are less likely to hire an older applicant. Not all discrimination however is direct discrimination. Indirect discrimination can occur; this is when a requirement is applied equally but it affects one group more negatively than the others.

Managers are faced with a number of problems when it comes to equal opportunities and diversity. Firstly they are faced with the problem of how to ensure fairness; it is not always possible to comply with the rules, for instance where a job requires heavy lifting it is more practical to seek a male worker as they are known to be the psychically stronger sex however this is not always the case. Another question managers need to face is should they ignore the differences and treat people equally or acknowledge differences and treat people differently?

Everyone is an individual and therefore their differences should be taken into account when a manager makes a decision; for instance an employer has to make reasonable adjustments in respect of a disabled employee. Equality and diversity is vital for both the employees and the success of the organisation. Managers have a moral obligation to treat all individual with the same fairness and equality. It is important for managers to make their decisions without prejudice and stereotype. However it could be argued that a manager's aim is increase profit not morality.

Equality and diversity is also important to the success of a business. Equality and diversity would lead to a positive company image; therefore attracting customers and creating customer loyalty. However it is difficult to find a meaningful measure of equality and diversity. How is it possible to justify equal opportunities and managing diversity in an organisation? Tesco is an example of an organisation that tries to provide diversity for all individuals, no matter their differences.

For example Tesco has devoted itself to providing more employment opportunities to disabled people by signing agreements with disability employment providers Remploy and the Shaw Trust. This has lead to 400 disabled people getting recruited. " The local community is very important to Tesco and these vital agreements ensure we help local disabled people to find employment" announced Claire Peters, head of resources. Another example is that Tesco tries to extend its workforce's working knowledge of religions operating in the UK.

Tesco issues employees with religious toolkits to improve their knowledge and understanding of all religions and their corresponding festivals, daily routines and eating habits. Tesco also provide managers with a support pack at Ramadan which help them understand how to support staff and customers better during this time of fasting for Muslims. ' Everyone is welcome' is the name given to Tesco's diversity work and it is driven by the value ' look after our staff so they can look after our customers. Everyone is welcome trains managers so that they will feel more confident in encouraging talent from more under represented groups. Tesco takes part in national benchmarking surveys, giving them an independent assessment of how they perform under each area of diversity. This year they were awarded Gold standard in the Opportunity Now benchmarking survey and they were also recognised as an Age Positive Employer Champion by the Department of Work and Pensions. They have recently completed the Employer's Forum on Disability Survey and the Stonewall Diversity Champions Index.

In addition another organisation that aims to provide diversity within the workforce is Toys R Us. Toys " R" Us is a major retailer of toys and children's merchandise and has stores spread across the world. To ensure the employees are comfortable with discussing differences, Toys R Us chose to begin their workforce diversity with one day of LIFO training. LIFO training has gone beyond the successful, turnover-reducing diversity program to take an important part in the management development curriculum and in training line managers to facilitate performance improvement with store personnel.

The workforce diversity program aims to encourage employees to discuss their differences and to ensure they feel comfortable and to provide a great source of insight. It is aimed to enable their participants to open up and share with each other their own styles and how their styles had helped or hindered them in the business setting. Including LIFO training in the diversity workforce program has enabled Toys R Us to achieve a number of key program goals and it has helped participants identify behaviours they want to change and what will motivate them to change.

In conclusion the distinction between equal opportunities and managing diversity is; equal opportunities are policies that tackle inequality such as race and gender whereas managing diversity focuses on the varying of qualities whereby managers create an environment where the employees feel valued for their individual talents. The equity and diversity policies are designed to develop equal opportunities policies, provide training, review recruitment, selection, promotion and training procedures, consider the organisations image, set an action plan and draw up a clear and reasonable job criteria.

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