

Viki Holton and **Linda Holbeche** explain how professional expertise can help make diversity initiatives successful

Diversity, rhetoric & reality

How HR can be a game changer

Is diversity valued as it should be by business? How committed are companies to creating an inclusive workspace that truly welcomes and values every different diversity group?

These are key questions in today's business world. Diversity and inclusion have become more and more relevant to society and to business because of changing expectations, increasing social and political pressure as well as legislation. Increasingly, diversity impacts on customer expectations and the reputation and brand of a business, and not least what we (as society) expect from a modern employer.

It is also worth considering how different countries view diversity. You might not expect a sporting event to become a barometer for international opinion on diversity yet this is exactly what happened in 2014 with the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, which was later dubbed by the media as the "Gay Olympics".

Readers may recall the speed of events when Russian president Vladimir Putin felt compelled to announce ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics that gay people would be welcome. Full-page adverts to that effect were placed in various newspapers including the *New York Times* as until this point such a welcome was in doubt – not least because Russia had just introduced legislation to ban homosexual "propaganda."

In the weeks leading up to Sochi, public pressure and a social media brouhaha created a perfect storm questioning Russia's commitment with many people lobbying major Olympic sponsoring firms to get actively involved and put pressure on Russia to change its approach. It is difficult to think of another diversity issue played out on the international stage in such a way and creating such a social media storm.

Customers also expect companies to be ethical and fair employers, including across their supply chain. Just consider the market backlash against Nike's supply chain crisis in 2005, when shocking working conditions including child workers were revealed in some of its supply companies.

In the workplace, we are also seeing diversity issues being put increasingly under a public

microscope. One example were staff protests at Google in 2019 with demonstrations outside and inside their offices over diversity issues. These occurred internationally and highlighted employee concerns over recent diversity events, challenging Google as to whether it was truly fulfilling its public commitment to diversity.

Again, it is difficult to think of another situation where employees have so publicly challenged their employer over diversity issues. It seems that we are now not only in a society that puts a high value on diversity but also a more transparent workplace where new generations of employees have much higher expectations of companies.

In all this debate and discussion over diversity, the role of Human Resources departments (HR) is a crucial one where they can be a game changer. When HR "leans in" to champion diversity this turns rhetoric into reality.

We believe that there is considerable room for HR to create stronger and more rigorous diversity action. Finding ways to support, advise and encourage more firms to go beyond legal requirements and move towards creating diversity-friendly workplaces which are a better fit for the 21st century should be an HR priority.

Let's look first at two company examples that have put the spotlight on some of the critical issues that are important to progressing diversity action and understanding within an organisation.

Diversity in action

Both the initiatives briefly outlined below are great examples of innovative and creative diversity in action. Carefully designed to deliver long-term results, each programme aims to alter attitudes and behaviour in the workplace and to provide the best support and encouragement for those in minority groups.

Ensuring at the same time, that those in the majority (or in the leadership team) understand the work experience of those from diverse backgrounds (for example because of sexual orientation) or groups where discrimination has happened over a number of years (such as for gender and race).

Walk a mile in my shoes

This is a mentoring scheme to transfer diversity knowledge and work experience between senior leaders and employees from a range of diverse backgrounds. But the senior leader is not the mentor (as might be expected); instead it is the person with a diversity background.

Considered by the company to be both innovative and imaginative, it was also seen as risky but an important step forward to transfer learning between these two rather distant groups and thereby help to build inclusive leadership skills and knowledge. It was so successful that a second mentoring programme was quickly established with a new wave of senior leaders being mentored.

Integrating diversity into leadership

This initiative is a leadership “twin” as it runs alongside the company’s flagship leadership programme, providing minority ethnic participants with key skills, experiences and structured support and encouragement to specifically address diversity issues.

Rather than a separate leadership programme, this initiative aims at providing diversity employees – who have won their place on merit – with support, coaching and, if required, an added injection of confidence or cultural knowledge to ensure they can take on a more senior leadership role.

Both initiatives were designed to create an inclusive environment, a level playing field, rather than one that would make the participants feel that they were being offered remedial training or support. The support that is offered is carefully tailored to ensure their life experiences and current workplace needs are respected.

It is an important distinction. People in different and varied diversity groups often say that they do not wish to be targeted for “special” treatment or to be labelled as needing “extra” support.

Such an approach may seem patronising and instead creates resentment and an unwillingness to participate as people may not wish to be singled out in this way. Some companies unfortunately only discover this after introducing a well-meant initiative.

As one person said after a cool response to a



well-meant diversity event, “It was not a partnership and we were hardly consulted about what we would find useful in such a network or whether we wished to be publicly identified in this way. Some of us did, some certainly did not. Not everybody felt comfortable with that”.

Improving diversity in the workplace is no easy task. Creating an inclusive, welcoming and bias-free environment may require a shift in organisation culture. Both initiatives described were tailor-made with consultation and discussions to engage all stakeholders across the business.

As one of those involved in the design process explained, “there was no point in anything other than tailor-made approaches for diversity. What would work in our organisation has to ‘fit’ the business needs. Otherwise, there will be no buy-in from the individuals we are seeking to help nor from our managers as to why they need to support and promote diversity”.





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The way forward

So how can HR – and business schools – make a real difference to furthering the diversity agenda, not just because it is the “right thing” to do but because it can make a real difference to business results?

Creating diversity initiatives that encourage and support different groups of employees who may feel marginalised and isolated is a “Cinderella” area in some sectors where HR policy and practice can transform a workplace into one where inclusion and diversity thrive.

Increasingly, many large employers understand the need for this in recruitment, describing themselves as having an outstandingly positive career space where everyone is welcome and all will thrive. However, this welcome does not extend far and is diluted once someone joins the company. While this may partly be because social attitudes are slower and harder to change, there is much more that HR can do to address that lack of diversity within.

Invariably, in such pace-setter companies as those in the initiatives above there is a talented HR team that provides leadership and insight and understands how best to embed diversity throughout the business.

Every leadership process and practice including executive education, informal development, key

assignments that count for so much in promotion and succession planning needs close examination, to be shaped through the lens of diversity.

The opportunities to take part in executive education and leadership development are also critical parts of the diversity jigsaw and this is where business schools can take on a stronger leadership role helping their clients to step up to the diversity challenge. True, some business schools are already on-message but this is not happening everywhere. In some instances, the strong “partnership” between business schools and companies is more evident in executive development than in diversity.

An HR director said recently, “one of my favourite quotes is ‘diversity is being invited to the party, inclusion is being invited to dance’”. When every HR director and every business school can say the same then diversity will have come a lot further on its journey towards being mainstream, a standard way that almost everyone will clearly understand and appreciate.

We look forward to that time!

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