

Delegates Challenges and solutions to Achieving Greater Diversity

At the recent 'Delivering Diversity in Public Appointments' conference hosted by the Government Equalities Office, delegates were asked by RFL what they saw as their challenges to achieving greater diversity in their organisations. They were also asked for solutions to these challenges. Delegates were mostly from public sector organisations, with the majority from Central Government departments. Below is a summary of delegates' comments. The unedited list of challenges and solutions is attached to this report as Appendix 1. Please note that these are the views of the delegates and not RFL's opinion. We would be delighted to hear of other solutions which can be emailed to kate@rachelfrost.co.uk.

Delegates challenges have been categorised into the following themes:-

- Reaching and attracting people from diverse groups.
- Changing the mindset of recruiting organisations to approach appointments in new ways.
- A lack of expertise and resource hindering greater diversity.
- Retaining and promoting diverse employees.

1) Reaching and attracting diverse candidates

The following challenges were mentioned most regularly:-

- Generally reaching and attracting diverse candidates.
- Communicating roles effectively to disabled candidates and those from ethnic minority groups so they felt enticed to apply. This was particularly a problem in relation to specialist fields for which ethnic minority candidates might not traditionally apply.
- Successfully using staff networks for community engagement and to achieve a broad candidate search.
- Knowing about the perceptions of under-represented groups regarding public roles and boards (so that any negative perceptions can be addressed).
- Late notification of appointments and cumbersome application processes were believed to hinder applications by diverse candidates.
- A lack of sensitivity amongst recruiters to the concerns of disabled groups in relation to disclosing their disability status.

Solutions

Solutions to these challenges included:-

- The need for more extensive and creative networking into community groups where potential candidates might be found and with other organisations who have already overcome these barriers. For example a delegate networked with West Midlands Police to share its best practice experience.

- Use of different communication channels for advertising roles and more imaginative use of advertising language and imagery. For example, one delegate suggested the trailing of a storyline in television soaps of a diverse candidate selected for a public appointment as an imaginative way of getting public awareness on the subject.
- Encouraging employees to recommend diverse friends and working with universities to promote public sector appointments amongst more diverse groups.
- Better joint co-ordination and forward planning of Public Body posts by the GEO co-ordinating an Annual Recruitment Conference to discuss forthcoming post recruitment.
- Implementation of more research using Focus Groups, amongst under-represented groups to understand their perceptions and reasons they don't apply.
- For specialist fields, it was suggested reconsidering the Board composition to ensure a mix of specialists and generalists in order to obtain a more diverse mix overall.
- Recruiters to emphasis the merit based recruitment for posts and candidates to be encouraged to complete monitoring forms for better information.

RFL Commentary

Joint co-ordination of recruitment and sharing of best practice is already prevalent across Government departments. However, improved recruitment results and greater efficiencies are still to be achieved by departments and public bodies working more closely together. In addition to cost savings, this would lead to non-successful candidates being redirected to other suitable roles. We therefore welcome the stance the Government Equalities Office is taking with its Diversity Action Plan and believe it is well placed to highlight the issue and encourage greater and more imaginative media communication about diversity.

2) Changing the mindset and traditional approaches by recruiting organisations

The second most commonly noted challenge related to a general reluctance to change the way appointments are approached. Specific challenges were:-

- How to encourage Chairmen to consider appointing Board members who may still some development in order to realise their maximum potential as board members;
- A lack of understanding by interviewers of the importance of cultural issues amongst diverse groups.
- A tendency to use traditional and cumbersome application processes which 'put off' diverse candidate rather than seeking new approaches to appointments.

It was also suggested that recruiting organisations are not always clear regarding their expectations of requirements to successfully perform the role. In addition, they may not provide enough flexibility in the time commitments required to encourage 'non-traditional' candidates to apply.

Solutions

Solutions suggested were:-

- Ensuring robust targets and processes are implemented and challenging managers who do not achieve these.

- Review recruitment and assessment processes and change these if necessary, for example by providing longer windows of time to apply for roles, revisiting role criteria to ensure these don't discriminate, using less traditional and more strategic advertising channels. Improved encouragement and support through the process would also encourage candidates to carry on.
- Share best practice with organisations who have overcome such hurdles.
- Consider ways in which conscious or sub-conscious bias of interviewing panels can be mitigated, such as through the use of independent, objective assessors.

RFL Commentary

Changing organisational culture is not straightforward. Detailed statistical analysis of applicants at each stage will assist organisations in focusing on the issues and to target solutions more precisely. Organisations more likely to succeed are those with commitment to change at a senior level. Good communication is essential - promoting successful case studies and positive outcomes resulting from innovative appointment methods, may go some way to encouraging these changes.

3) Lack of expertise and resource

These familiar issues include:-

- Not having a specific Diversity Officer or dedicated diversity resource in place.
- Lack of knowledge sharing across organisations, in particular across government departments.
- Recruitment and advertising costs being met out of running costs which limits the ability to use advertising to attract diverse candidates.
- A lack of expertise often translating into cumbersome application processes which hindered applications by non-traditional candidates and/or did not allow an in-depth analysis of candidates.
- Data protection issues and a lack of resource meant that organisations were not able to take advantage of 'capturing' data for candidates who may have narrowly missed out on one role but might be suitable to apply for an alternative position.

Solutions

Solutions suggested were:-

- Appointing a Diversity Champion, whose will have a key aim of encouraging board support for resources and budgets to achieve diversity aims.
- Connecting with existing networks and organisations who promote diversity. Organisations such as Equalitec and the Civil Service Diversity Practitioner's Network were suggested to provide access to best practice.
- Using specialist assessment companies alongside Headhunters to advise on the application and assessment processes, so as to ensure the process is as transparent and streamlined as possible with support provided to candidates along the process.
- Encouraging the production of statistical information about organisational diversity would encourage organisations to approach the whole topic more rigorously.

RFL Commentary

There are many examples of best practice to be shared by organisations that are committed to achieving greater diversity – networking is crucial to making best use of this. Particularly when budgets are tight, senior level endorsement and more creative approaches are essential.

Organisations should look to their suppliers to help deliver greater diversity outcomes. We would argue there is a strong role for specialist assessment firms to be used alongside Headhunters to help achieve greater diversity because:-

- They advise on the extent to which assessment processes are likely to be off-putting or discriminatory to non-traditional candidates.
- In-depth analysis of candidates encourages recruiting organisations to see behind CVs, by highlighting candidates' potential and transferable skills, and by discussing the likely impact of their leadership and interpersonal style. Assessors with individual development expertise can advise panels on the extent to which any candidate weaknesses or gaps are likely to be mitigated through coaching or other development interventions.
- Assessors act as objective facilitators on panels, sensitively challenging any conscious or sub-conscious bias shown by interviewers.
- Third party assessors can assist with the data collection and tracking of 'near misses' across campaigns. Where appropriate, candidates can therefore be redirected towards other suitable roles within the same organisation.
- Enhanced pre-assessment support can be provided to diverse candidates by providing familiarisation events and materials.

4) Retention and promotion of diverse staff

Participants noted the following issues around the retention and on-going promotion of staff:-

- Problems retaining diverse staff. Anecdotally participants said that they feared that diverse staff were less likely to stay within their organisations. This can have high cost implications if significant resources have already been spent on recruiting these individuals.
- Encouraging promotion of well qualified and experienced employees from diverse backgrounds into more senior roles resulting in a general lack of diverse representation at senior levels.

Solutions

It was suggested that extra support be provided to diverse employees such as:-

- Specific induction programmes
- Diversity focus groups and web-based support networks to better understand and respond to concerns and experiences amongst under-represented groups;
- Mentoring schemes to help with networking and accessibility of promotion opportunities to different groups.

RFL commentary

The challenges of retaining and promoting diverse employees are not dissimilar to the problems experienced in retaining other talented employees. We have realised through our extensive work in the field of assessment and development that the support people receive during and after their recruitment, particularly into an unfamiliar environment, is key to how successfully they integrate and flourish in the environment. Organisations providing support and encouragement through coaching, mentoring and focused networking groups are most likely to see the long term benefits of recruiting and retaining a diverse and motivated workforce.

APPENDIX 1

CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS
Reaching and attracting people from diverse groups	
Using staff networks effectively to engage with communities	
To encourage more ethnic minority appointment	Encourage the completion of the Monitoring Forms. Ensure that potential candidates aren't 'put off' by completion. Reiterate MERIT based recruitment
Most challenging to find disabled candidates and how to target them	More extensive networking both within target communities but also with other public bodies that may have overcome barriers to reaching those target groups.
Do more to understand the experiences of under-represented groups that find public appointments. If their experience is negative, the word they spread about public appointments will be negative.	Obtain better intelligence on why people get form but don't apply.
Understanding of perception of 'public sector' boards	
Recruiting ethnic minorities in a specialist field	Look at board composition - mix 'specialists' and 'generalists'
Reaching (communicating with) & encouraging hard to reach groups/people	Advertising roles in a more innovative / different way (incl. specialist media, in various languages and all accessible formats)
	I have suggested on the feedback questionnaire that the GEO should organise an Annual Recruitment Conference for Public Body posts that are coming up over the year/year ahead and recruitment consultants/headhunters should also be involved
	The so called 'hard to reach' read the Metro, London Life and London Paper, and watch the same TV emissions as everyone else. No community / group is 'hard to reach'. Maybe some thought should be given to the channels of communication used.
Candidates not coming forward	Network creatively
	Ask new recruits to recommend a friend
	Trail storyline in EastEnders, someone getting selected
	Promote case studies current board members at events and in literature websites for potential candidates
Encourage universities to promote appointments	
Understanding the issues of under-represented groups, specifically in terms of disability - helping to address the concerns some candidates may have about disclosing their disability.	Focus Group - BARG - share 'good' practice, encourage exchange of ideas/ solutions. Awareness raising of events (Regions)
Lack of broad reach during search.	Use existing staff networks, extensive networking, creative communication and imaginative imagery. Encourage headhunters to use different approaches to broaden candidate lists.

CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS
Raising awareness early enough of appointments - do people hear of opportunity too late?	Longer application window to give opportunities for a wider selection pool.
Changing the mindset and approach of recruiting organisations	
Changing the mind set of current Chairs to look toward taking on Members who need development	
The biggest challenge is ensuring that the interviewers really understand how important culture is for diverse groups.	Using an assessment company can provide objective facilitators to challenge any conscious or sub-conscious bias shown by interviewers.
Finding new approaches to appointments, to overcome 'traditional' barriers	Networking with other organisations who have overcome barriers. Sharing best practice. For example, I have networked with West Midlands Police. This has helped me make changes in our Region.
How do we change the mindsets of senior officials who want to do things in the way they have always done them?! (notably absent from this conference!)	Have robust processes to check on progress towards targets. Challenge managers who are not reaching targets to ensure they change processes if targets are not being met.
Clarity of expectations. Flexibility of Commitments (of recruiting body)	Be clear about expectations of role and likely commitment (of individual). Check the criteria is right to get best candidates.
Judicial appointments - structure of the legal profession	
Traditional 'process'	Less cumbersome application process. Less traditional approach - not just Sunday Times, traditional application. Let's be bold and use new media, alternative methods, language imagery.
Cumbersome application process	Longer application window. Encouragement and support through application process.
No diversity means you are not appealing to diverse sectors / individuals in the public (especially as a public sector body)	
Lack of expertise and resource	
Resource to deliver. Implications. Budgets are being cut once again. No specific Diversity Officer	
Not enough knowledge sharing / best practice sharing across govt depts	Promoting diversity in all organisations and statistical information to reflect it.
Recruitment and advertising costs being met out of normal running costs restricts the amount/impact of advertising	Get management board support for extra resource/cash. Use your diversity champion.
Lack of expertise in many govt departments	Connect with Civil Service Diversity Practitioner's Network
Data Protection Issues - to be taken into account. Ensuring the 'diverse' pool of complete application forms and are captured in terms of the 'near' miss appointable candidates.	

CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS
Retaining and promoting diverse employees	
Retention of staff is very important as time & money is spent on recruitment	Better induction and support. Focus groups to learn from. Web based support network/forum
Helping & encouraging to promote well qualified and experienced employees from diverse backgrounds	Solution to finding talent - more focus on communities
Retention and recruitment	Engagement with organisations promoting diversity in recruitment, e.g. Equalitec.
Increasing representation at the very top of the organisation.	Increase accessibility of promotion opportunities to different groups by running mentoring exercises.