CHAPTER 6

Equality and diversity

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the management of equality and diversity in the workplace as a way of ensuring that organisations both operate within the law and make best use of workers’ diverse skills and talents. As the previous chapter has shown, laws in Britain and many other countries now protect workers from discrimination on the basis of race, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and age. All employers are therefore obliged to make sure that their staff are not subject to workplace discrimination in how they are managed, how their pay, rewards and benefits are determined, or how decisions on training and development, promotion and dismissal are made.

Employers are also responsible under discrimination law for protecting their employees from bullying and harassment from colleagues and managers. See Chapter 5 in this book for an overview of discrimination laws in the UK.

Compliance with discrimination law is not the only reason why workplace equality and diversity are important. Discrimination has a demoralising effect on employees and can lead to poor work output and a waste of their skills and talents. However, employers who take steps to stop discrimination in the workplace could benefit by using fully the wide range of skills, talents, experience and cultural resources of their workers. In other words, equality and diversity are important to any well-run organisation.

In using the terms ‘equality’ and ‘diversity’, we note that they are often regarded as identical, but they are not in fact completely interchangeable. For example, ‘equality’ means not treating somebody less favourably on the basis, of for instance, his or her gender or age. Here, the focus is on the individual. ‘Diversity’, on the other hand, refers to approaches which employers can take to make sure that people from different backgrounds, and with different perspectives, are suitably represented, and valued in the workplace. Equality and diversity are closely associated since promoting equality is likely to lead to a diverse workforce; and an
This chapter is divided into two parts. Part 1 discusses the importance to employers of having a strategy for managing equality and diversity in the workplace. This is illustrated in the context of developing an age-positive workplace. In 2006, age discrimination in the workplace was made unlawful in Britain. Although most employers have equal opportunities policies, few have developed strategies for appropriately translating the policies into HR management. This chapter is not meant to give an overview of the new law – see chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of UK law and the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 – but to examine how an organisation’s approach to equality and diversity can impact on how people are managed.

In Part 2 of this chapter we look at how equality and diversity policies can be used to improve team performance. This is demonstrated using the concept of ‘cultural positivity’ as a twenty-first-century tool for promoting, understanding and addressing conflict among those people who are different from each other, especially those working in teams.

This chapter also draws readers’ attention to various diversity-related issues from a theoretical perspective, in order to broaden their knowledge and to encourage their support for a positive approach towards dealing with negative stereotypes. Although the issues raised in this chapter are illustrated by examples of age and cultural equality and diversity, the lessons learned can be used more widely, to tackle other forms of discrimination.

employer who promotes diversity is more likely to treat employees equally than one who does not. The first part of this chapter is about age equality, and the second examines cultural diversity.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

At the end of this chapter readers should be able to:

- describe ways in which discrimination can occur in the workplace
- discuss the negative impact that discrimination can have on workplace morale and performance
- adopt a positive approach to working with those of difference
- identify the organisational benefits of having strategies for equality and diversity
- list ways of embedding equality and diversity in all aspects of management
- describe ways in which to harness positive working relationships
- pinpoint ways in which to resolve workplace conflict.
We now pull together ten key points about sustainable HRM raised in this chapter:

- Workplaces are becoming more diverse as people from different backgrounds enter the labour market. This can be good for business since diversity brings new ideas.

- Taking a positive approach to equality and diversity can benefit you and your organisation by encouraging employees to make best use of their talents and fostering positive working relationships.

- Ageism is the latest form of discrimination to be made unlawful, and most employers will find it a challenge to eliminate it from the workplace. Ageist attitudes are often hidden as 'common sense' and it is difficult to make people realise that they are discriminatory.

- Tackling ageism early can give an employer a competitive edge, since it can make use of an unused source of skilled and experienced labour.

- Discrimination, even if done with good intentions, is unlawful and can do more harm than good to a person whom you are trying to help. It can also have unintended consequences in the workplace.

- Simply having an equal opportunity policy is not enough to stop discrimination. You must make sure that all HR policies and practices treat people equally, and that employees understand that discrimination is not tolerated.

- Stereotypes can hurt team formation, as colleagues hold false assumptions about their colleagues.

- Stereotypes can be broken down by discussing them within a team, but dialogue must take place in a positive and constructive environment.

- It is better to take a positive approach to equality and diversity at an early stage rather than after things go wrong.

- Governments across Europe are taking steps to eliminate discrimination because it harms people and is bad for the economy.

Perhaps there are other key points that you would like to note for yourself.

The main case study in this chapter now follows. It is based on a team conflict situation.