

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND DIVERSITY

Equal opportunity and diversity are not the same things. Many people use the terms as though they were interchangeable, thinking that 'diversity is what we call it now.' This is a serious error with important implications for the decisions an organisation might take in addressing diversity and equality issues.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY is about ...

- tackling irrelevant discrimination and dealing with inequality
- fairness, decency, respect and high standards of behaviour between individuals and groups
- treating everybody equally well

In corporate terms: Equal opportunity is a concept underpinned by legislation. It requires organisations to provide relevant and appropriate access for the participation, development and advancement of all individuals and groups. In turn, equal opportunity requires individuals and groups to conduct themselves in particular ways when interacting with others.

From an individual perspective: Experiencing equal opportunity is having access to relevant services, real choice to participate in and/or contribute to, activities or processes and believing that you are being treated appropriately in relation to your ability and circumstances.

DIVERSITY

Diversity is a given. **It is not an option** or something to decide to have or not to have. Where there are two or more people, you have diversity. Diversity is difference and we are all different from each other.

Our differences include:

- family background
- age
- ethnic origin
- gender
- physical abilities and qualities and appearance
- nationality
- sexual orientation
- educational background
- marital status
- parental status
- religious beliefs
- temperament
- ways of thinking
- life and work and experience
- all the experiences that have touched our lives or influenced our thinking.

Differences between us give us a unique range of attributes and characteristics and a distinctive view of the world. Our customers, clients, other stakeholders, the wider community and the colleagues we work with are diversity personified.

Organisations wanting to be more successful therefore need to recognise, capitalise on, and maximise the diversity of their staff. The starting point for organisations is to recognise the value of, and then actively seek to benefit from, the diversity of their staff team.

Our staff teams have additional layers of diversity that we need to take account of. As well as exhibiting most, if not all, of the differences on the previous page, they may also be...

- Part - timers
- Work - share partners
- Temporary staff
- Home workers
- Telecommuters
- Sub - contractors
- Consultants
- 'Support' staff
- Specialists; in addition, they might belong to specific professional groups.

We need to recognise and actively seek benefits through these differences also.

Similarity

There is a natural human tendency to gravitate towards people who are similar. We feel comfortable, at ease, secure and able to 'be ourselves' when we are with people like ourselves. Similarity then is generally the order of the day. The old saying '*birds of a feather flock together*' resonates strongly in most social settings and in many organisations.

Although most organisations say that they want individuals to bring different and innovative approaches, in practice, many operate on the basis that difference is of little or no value and similarity is of great importance. Whilst this is usually not conscious or deliberate, unless conscious, deliberate, and positive action is taken to recognise, acknowledge and promote the value of diversity, then the old order – *birds of a feather...*, will prevail: It is important to note here that this can be, and often is the case, without there being any breach of anti-discrimination legislation or the organisation's equal opportunity policy.

Difference Adds Value

Uniformity holds organisations together, but they need diversity to stop them dying. For any system to survive there needs to be sufficient difference within it to cope with environmental change, amongst many other things. Difference adds value.

Whilst our similarities hold us together and help us to work together; our differences not only keep our organisations alive, but they also make our work more effective and efficient.

Similarity and difference are like two sides of the same coin. Both sides are necessary if the coin is to be of value. In the case of similarity and difference, the more tightly they are bound together, the greater the value. Pulling them apart simply devalues the "currency".

Organisations must help their people to understand and value those things that they hold in common – *organisation values and principles* - and which bind them together. At the same time, they need to recognise, acknowledge and utilise the differences their people bring into the workplace – *how they see things, ways of thinking and doing things* - and consistently encourage them to display and utilise those differences.

In most organisations, high productivity and good quality delivery depends on people working in multidisciplinary teams, it is very important therefore to understand, appreciate and value difference. More than that, it is ***vital that organisations enable all their leaders to develop the necessary skills to consistently get value from the diversity of all their people all of the time.***