Diversity and occupational health

Craig Jackson, Professor of Occupational Health Psychology at Birmingham City University, examines the role of diversity within occupational health, the growth of the “dignity at work” movement and the implications of diverse cultures for workplaces and organisations.

Introduction

Diversity, as a social concept, is often misunderstood. It is frequently blamed as the reason behind many social, cultural or organisational failings. Cultural diversity, and especially the application of promoting diversity, has been unfairly represented in the UK and is often viewed as a form of enforced social engineering that poses many problems in workplaces. It would be fair to say that attempting to ensure cultural diversity and equality is viewed by many as both a blessing and a curse at the same time.

The cultural commentator Jonathan Meades explained that cultural diversity can be a strong and unifying phenomenon when it attempts to create a culture that is at one while acknowledging that the constituent people come from a variety of backgrounds, bringing with them their best attributes to create a better contemporary and diverse culture. Celebrating the commonality of the members of a culture, despite their variety of starting points, is a hallmark of diversity at its strongest and most creative. Conversely, diversity can also be a restrictive and retrogressive phenomenon when the host culture focuses more on the diverse backgrounds and histories of its members than any current commonalities. This form of diversity, Meades argued, is entrapment and tribalism, forcing people to be preoccupied with their histories and any disadvantages at the expense of moving forward and focusing on how their "uniqueness" can benefit the host culture.

We are all diverse

Diversity is not just something that applies to minority groups — without the “majority” there is no “minority”, and no diversity. Irrespective of what individuals may believe about the relative merits of diversity, or whether developing diverse cultures is seen as problematic in posing an almost endless variety of challenges, it is UK law that dictates the workplace approach to diversity, following the implementation of the Equality Act 2010. For many laypersons, the term "diversity" is synonymous with issues of immigration and ethnicity, but the workplace reality is far more broad and all-encompassing. Diversity in workplaces relates to almost all of us in one way or another, including: age; disability; gender reassignment / transgender issues; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion and beliefs; sex differences; and sexual orientation. Temporary workers would also be classified as vulnerable in this sense, and the failure to provide any necessary personal protective equipment to such staff if provided for other employees would constitute unlawful discrimination.

The Equality Act readily applies to all areas of the workplace, including recruitment, pay, benefits, development, training, promotion, transfers, management, dismissal, redundancy and retirement. Of more relevance to health and safety and environment professionals will be the impact on how health and safety is applied and practised, particularly in terms of risk assessments, worker assessments, working hours, flexible working, health promotion, communication, and worker absence issues due to ill health.

Driving forces

The concept of diversity, in an employment context, means ensuring that organisations recruit and retain the best people from the widest possible “talent base” regardless of gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, age or disability. Implicit in this is the recognition from organisations that different
approaches are needed for different people with differing needs and beliefs. Emphasis is placed on organisations valuing “difference” as opposed to believing that people should just “fit in” to a workplace. From both organisational psychology and strategic perspectives, this approach makes sense — to view “difference” as a resource. Finding a way to utilise such difference to advance the practice of occupational health would clearly be an advantage. A challenge for occupational health is that of how to function effectively in preventing ill health at work in the face of the difficulties that such diversity can sometimes pose.

The Equality Act, which came into effect in October 2010, is the biggest driver of diversity in workplaces, along with the acknowledgement of massive and speedy social, demographic and cultural shifts. In the last 10 years alone, most workplaces have witnessed increases in the proportion of older workers, minority ethnic populations and a wider range of migrant workers, greater numbers of working women and working parents, more people with disabilities, and more openly gay and lesbian people. In short, the traditional patterns of employment have changed rapidly, and in the age of “work-life balance” following on from the stress epidemic of the late 1990s, employees now have more exacting expectations that their employers will accommodate their needs to fit around their lifestyle and wider societal position. In this sense, it can be argued that diversity has evolved rapidly in the UK, perhaps as a product of the health and safety age. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) states that it “wants to see health and safety as a cornerstone of a civilised society and, with that, to achieve a record of workplace health and safety that leads the world”. So perhaps the health and safety industry can take some credit for increasing diversity.

**Workplace and organisational benefits**

Diversity therefore involves understanding how workers’ differences and similarities can be mobilised for the benefit of the worker, organisation and broader culture. There is no reason why such benefits should not be applied to the administration of health and safety within businesses. Diverse workforces equate to diverse skills and abilities, which could improve the organisation’s ability to deliver and maintain a competitive edge status. Theoretically, there is a strong business case for diversity and, presumably, there can be a strong health and safety case for diversity too.

Specific benefits of diversity in a health and safety context might include:

- reducing costs of labour turnover and (new) employee training
- reducing costs of absenteeism and peripatetic training
- contributing to employee responsiveness to engage with health and safety messages
- building employee commitments to health and safety
- managing the impact of technological change on sub-cultures
- improving knowledge of how to operate safely in different cultures
- enhancing the organisation’s image in different countries
- improved management and worker relations
- creating opportunities for social cohesion within the organisation
- reducing the capacity for bullying and harassment.

The HSE estimated that bullying and harassment, in one form or another, accounts for up to half of all stress-related workplace illnesses, which would equate to approximately 80 million lost working days with a £2 billion loss of revenue. On top of this would be the costs of legal actions taken by employees resulting in adverse judgments, damages and the negative publicity that may follow.
Case study 1: The Health and Safety Executive

The HSE has run a “Single Equality Scheme” scheme since 2010, which is intended to be reviewed prior to 2013. The scheme explains how the HSE plans to meet its statutory duties to promote equality for all groups in society. As the regulatory body responsible for promoting better health and safety at work in the UK, the HSE must be paramount in ensuring its policies and employment practices are fair, accessible and appropriate for a diverse UK society. Highlights of the scheme include goals on:

- working with stakeholders on objectives and actions on communications, policies, procedures and research to deliver improved health and safety outcomes for all, whatever their background
- the actions HSE will take to ensure a working environment where all staff are treated with professionalism, dignity and respect and are able to deliver and develop to the best of their ability without having to face discrimination or harassment
- how they will meet their statutory duties and ensure that equality and fairness are embedded in all areas of their work, planning and employment.

Dignity at work

The HSE continues to publicise that stress remains a major problem in British workforces (HSE, 2011), with between 12 and 13 million lost working days each year due to stress-related issues. Given that only one in three employees believe their managers have taken preventive action against stress (HSE, 2006), and that bullying and harassment maintain a major role in the aetiology of stress for many, the need for dignity at work remains high. Many may dismiss such dignity at work policies with the same casual disregard given to other work-speak issues, such as “mission statements” and “investor in people” awards. However, a Dignity at Work Policy may provide a fairly cost-effective remedy for the sizeable proportion of workplace stress cases that emerge from bullying or harassment issues.

In the HSE’s six domains of the management standards, the role of diversity and a subsequent Dignity at Work Policy could be sizeable, in terms of:

- job demands
- control over how work is to be done
- management support, colleague support, company support
- relationships at work
- employee roles within companies
- change and the management thereof.

In developing and implementing any such dignity at work policy, be clear who it is aimed at — does it relate to just staff, or perhaps include clients, customers, visitors and contractors? If separate policies are used for different groups they will need to be consistent and comparable. A single policy will clearly allow a company to promote a single recognised standard of conduct for all, and giving tangible examples of unacceptable behaviour always helps. Relative responsibilities should be covered, such as bystander or witness duties, and guidance given on the procedures to be used, along with sources of help for those who need it. Clear courses of action, both formal and informal, should be outlined too.
The following are core features of a Dignity at Work Policy.

- Acceptance of bullying as an organisational issue.
- Appropriate resources allocated to allow follow-through and implementation of the policy.
- Managers to lead by example.
- Flexible implementation into the workplace fabric.
- Diversity training expected from all colleagues.
- The creation of a pro-diversity business case — make it as crucial as good customer care or risk assessments.
- The development of a Diversity committee populated with senior staff.
- Diversity training offered to all affiliates, eg contractors, temporary staff.
- The use of external expertise when necessary.
- The use of joint initiatives with other companies in your sector.
- The development of mechanisms for third-party complaints.
- Confidentiality for complainants.
- Fair and reasonable investigation procedures.

Four key considerations to evaluate any Dignity at Work Policy would be to ask the following questions.

1. Does the policy cover everyone equally?
2. Is it effectively implemented?
3. Is it agreed between the employer and any trade unions?
4. Can organisational progress be measured?

When launching a Dignity at Work Policy, some emphasis and forceful marketing will be vital, especially in order to overcome the negative perceptions that accompany terms like “diversity training”. Some tips on a launch would include:

- a highly prominent and well-publicised launch initiative event or roadshow
- an activity week highlighting available services with special events
- a range of training available through a management development programme (bullying and harassment, stress awareness, diversity training)
- workshops with examples of contraventions for staff to experience
- bystander events, where a “do nothing, not my business” stance is challenged
- linking the launch with other concepts, eg management training and stress management
- the development of a specific website for staff that is easy to find internally.

**Case Study 2: The university**

A large higher education institution employs over 3000 staff and has 25,000 students spread across several campus locations, as well as halls of residence. Based in a highly diverse major metropolitan zone, the university has a clear business need to appeal to a diverse range of students and staff. Specifically localised issues of a Dignity at Work Policy for the health and safety department of this business would include the following.
• A regular impact assessment of all health and safety department issued policies and codes of practices are undertaken and reviewed.
• The policy is publicised and implemented equally across all campuses, courses and student groups.
• There are documented procedures for personal emergency egress plans (PEEPs) for vulnerable staff and students.
• Disabled evacuation guidance is developed in close conjunction with student services.
• Advice is regularly sought from the equality and diversity advisor.
• All staff compulsorily attend training in equality and diversity.
• Externally contracted service providers are requested to adhere to the university policy and procedures on equality and diversity.
• Continuous monitoring and feedback on equality and diversity issues are delivered following training course delivery.
• There is access to informal “advisors” for staff who feel they may need to act against indignity.
• Useful policy documents for access by all are published on the staff intranet, including:
  • guidance for managers on Dignity at Work
  • Dignity at Work Policy
  • Dignity at Work contact advisors list
  • Dignity at Work advisor job description
  • informal and formal procedures for dealing with bullying/harassment
  • template for recording incidents
  • route-map of which “informal process” to choose from
  • confidentially statement
  • monitoring the Dignity at Work service
  • employee assistance advice and telephone counselling service.

Diversity as the “enemy” of safety culture?

In paraphrasing Meades’ comments earlier about the dangers of a backwards looking kind of diversity that focuses more on the history of its members at the expense of forming a better present and future, what can go wrong for the practice of health and safety? It is certainly true that safety culture has been one of the main topics at industry health and safety conferences and seminars in the last few years, and it shows no sign of abating. Many industries still see the essential value of creating a harmonious safety culture where everyone adheres to the rules for the benefit of the workers and the company on both micro and macro levels. Indeed, those companies that lag behind their rivals in
health and safety are often the ones who do not possess a fully functioning safety culture. A good safety culture is almost universally viewed time and again as being a core value that underpins any successful drive towards improved health and reduced dangers within workplaces, regardless of the industry sector.

As a psychologist, I am interested in the tension that therefore might exist between the desire to achieve workplace diversity with the ethos that “different is good” and the idea that safety culture is based on homogeneity, conformity and compliance; the latter two words often being quantitative markers used in measuring the effectiveness of any such safety culture.

- Does this conflict not bring with it difficulties for health and safety professionals trying to foster conformity and compliance?
- When does it become impractical to include several languages on a safety warning sign?
- Can role-play safety training concerning “lunchtime drinking” be sensitively portrayed discretely (for cultural reasons) without losing the message impact?
- How do safety managers schedule several repeated toolbox talks to accommodate the variety of flexible workers in a company?

**The return of the behavioural nudge**

Nudge theory was a concept that achieved brief notoriety in the late 2000s after Thaler & Sunstein's (2008) book looked at the health and societal happiness improvements obtainable through positive reinforcement, rather than instruction or legislation. Although popularised by politicians and the like afterwards, initial work into nudge theory suggested that subtle suggestion can influence the motives and decision-making of individuals and cultures alike, better than traditional instruction could. As a social instrument, nudge theory has been developed into corporate cultures, particularly in the quest to achieve zero-accidents and incidents.

There is potential in the use of behavioural nudges to perhaps avoid the conflict between diversity and the non-diverse need for safety culture conformity. Nudge can be used for a variety of purposes that can circumnavigate diversity conflicts:

- engineering and designing out unsafe working
- increasing vigilance and awareness
- communicating risk
- increasing motivation.

This subtle form of communication need not rely on reading, cultural awareness or even attendance at training events. The McDonalds Corporation embraced the nudge notion of designing kitchen equipment that could only be operated the safe way in the hands of the user, thereby removing the potential for injury or accident. Despite the noble principle of attempting accident reduction, such technology became synonymous with the term “McJob” to describe a “low-paid job that requires little skill and provides little opportunity for advancement”. A resounding success for accident reduction, but an own goal in terms of public relations. Other forms of nudge communication that could overcome language and cultural barriers include the behavioural associations (or anchoring) made between two events. An example might be when a new senior figure starts in a company, it may be a good time to introduce/remind staff of a policy or change, thereby hitching the message to the novelty of the new stimulus (senior figure).

Using a safety campaign featuring pictures of a diverse group of workers operating safely could be counterpointed by campaigns using pictures of “old-school”, out rightly non-diverse workers behaving
unsafely — effectively killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. Perhaps not subtle, but subconsciously it could work. Another non-verbal way to deliver more effective health and safety messages concerns the framing of the message; a monthly poster pictorially displaying the accident level in a company will be more effective if it concentrates on the positive (98% accident-free statistic) rather than the (2% had accidents) details.

Bordering the line between “clever psychology” and “outright propaganda”, nudge theory could provide a way of assisting the achievement of healthier and more diverse workplaces. Critics of course see it as unethical psychological hoodwinking of individuals but the end could be argued to justify the means.

**Conclusion**

Diversity will not be exiting the world of health and safety any time soon, and the business case for its existence in a globalised, transient and connected world of workers suggests the better business will utilise diversity as a resource, not a burden, in the same way that smart companies initially used health and safety to gain an advantage over other competitors.

**References**

- Single Equality Scheme (Health and Safety Executive, 2009)