

HubCap Article June 2011

Why Diversity Matters – for Employers

Ted Cante, (iCoCo)

The world around us is changing much faster than most of us realise. We often talk glibly about the impact of globalisation as though it is swirling around in the stratosphere, whereas the impact is here and now and in each of our own communities. It is already changing the way we live and work, but is business adjusting quickly enough to the changing environment?

The most significant – and visible – change is in terms of diversity. There are now over 300 languages in London schools and over 200 in most of our larger cities. But it does not stop there, diversity has come to our market towns and rural areas. In Boston Lincolnshire for example, there are over 65 languages and 14 faiths are represented. Of course, increasing diversity has reached many of our workforces and, as with schools and local communities, this has posed new challenges.

But the process of change is accelerating. Take the case of the City of Bristol. At the last Census in 2001 it almost exactly reflected the British population with around 8% of the City's population being of minority background. The annual schools census for 2008 showed that 22.5% of pupils are from BME backgrounds and 27.4% were of non white British origin. This is almost a 50% increase from the 2004 figure of 18.5%. The distribution of children by age points strongly to a continuing rise in the overall numbers of non-White British pupils: 36.5% of children in the City's nursery schools are now from non-White British backgrounds. The same growth is evident in many other areas and indeed the minority population at school age is above 50% in a good number of other areas.

Of course, this greater level of diversity has been of huge value to the British economy and has enriched the cultural and social life of the Nation. But not everyone would agree with this and the Far Right political parties continue to trade on xenophobic and racist manifestoes. Their electoral support has grown from just 50,000 votes in 2001 to around 570,000 in 2009. And we have seen an

increase in religious extremism and tensions between many different communities who now share the same neighbourhoods.

For the most part, our different communities have learnt to live together and our history of tolerance and fair play really does stand us in good stead. Though we have had our problems our multicultural model compares very favourably with all other advanced economies.

As David Cameron recently pointed out in his speech on multiculturalism¹, some aspects of our daily lives are based on separate communities, with some schools, neighbourhoods and even workplaces operating on the basis of segregation. As our ethnic and religious minorities increase, one of the challenges will be how to avoid this becoming more of a problem. We have yet to see much by way of practical policy responses and the minority communities complain that they are being presented as the problem for self-segregating, whilst contending that they have no effective choice because they are either too disadvantaged or discriminated against.

But the problem of segregation is only one aspect of the challenge which we now face and, as indicated earlier, the growth in diversity will have a profound impact upon our labour market and workplaces.

In the first place, new recruits to the labour market will be much more diverse than ever before and will have a much wider set of skills and aspirations and bring with them a wider variety of social and cultural norms. This means that all employers – public and private sector – will have to have a much more sophisticated understanding of diversity and be able to adjust recruitment and selection accordingly. In some industries, the workforce will be made up almost entirely by people of minority background.

Further, all employers will also have to re-consider their working practices to accommodate diversity and ensure that their managers and first line supervisors are equipped with the

¹ The speech criticised multiculturalism in much the same way as the previous Government, in that the way policy had been interpreted in the past had been to promote separation as a means of preserving distinct cultures. My Report in 2001 on Community Cohesion (the 'Cantle Report') referred to the problem of 'parallel lives' and was also widely seen as a critique of the then basis of multiculturalism. The speech was new in the sense that it specifically linked segregation to Muslim extremism, which many Muslim commentators thought unfairly identified the whole Muslim community with terrorism.

necessary professional skills. We are already seeing businesses beginning to come to terms with challenges like whether to insist on English language across the shop floor and in all internal communications; whether to encourage or permit sections of the workforce to be organised by shift or production line according to ethnic or religious affiliation; and whether the forming of single identity representative groups (eg a black workers group) is good or bad for workforce cohesion.

The good news is that there are now many organisations who are already very sensitive to diversity and have developed good practice, for example, iCoCo's [Workforce Cohesion Toolkit](#). Support is also at hand and iCoCo has joined forces with Peoples Resolutions and the Association of Labour Providers to form the [Workforce Cohesion Alliance](#).

Employers need to gear up to the challenges ahead and to follow the lead of those that are already doing so.

Professor Ted Cante CBE is Chair of the Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo) which advises on all aspects of community cohesion. He is regarded as the 'founding father' of community cohesion having established the concept in the 'Cante Report' in 2001 which made a series of recommendations following the race riots in northern towns. There are many free resources on the iCoCo website at www.cohesioninstitute.org.uk and Mr. Cante's book *Community Cohesion: A New Framework for Race and Diversity* is published by Palgrave Macmillan.