

TOP STORY

Business 'needs a wake-up call on race'

HR departments must lead the way, say experts, as CIPD survey finds BAME employees are being let down on career progression

WORDS MIRIAM KENNER

Working life for many people with black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds is defined by a lack of career progression and negative experiences in the workplace – in marked contrast to their white British colleagues.

The conclusions of a new study into the topic conducted by the CIPD are notable both for their incongruity at a time of supposedly progressive attitudes towards diversity, and the lack of surprise

they have generated among seasoned campaigners and HR professionals with minority backgrounds. But all agree they can act as a major turning point in the debate around race at work.

The report, *Addressing the barriers to BAME employee career progression to the top*, found that BAME employees were significantly more likely to say their identity or background had an effect on the opportunities they received. Drawn from a survey of 1,290 UK employees (700 with a BAME background),

it found BAME staff were more disappointed with their progression and careers in general, and often had to censor how much they told their colleagues about their personal life.

The news should be a “wake-up call to HR professionals and CEOs who may be guilty of benign neglect in regards to staff”, said Frank Douglas, CEO of Caerus Executive and a prominent voice on HR’s role in diversity. The profession holds the “levers of change”, he added. Meanwhile, Business in the Community said the

figures suggested that little had changed since a wide-ranging study it conducted on the topic in 2005.

“These findings are unacceptable in 2017, and we can’t be having the same conversation in five years’ time,” said Dr Jill Miller, the CIPD’s diversity and inclusion adviser and the report’s author. “There have been definite strides in the right direction on gender, and we need the same progress on race.”

“We are seeing government attention – through the Parker review and the McGregor-Smith review – and shocking statistics will hopefully drive change. The challenge is how to catalyse employer action.”

Some experts felt business leaders should be more vocal on the issue, while others pointed to the HR department or the potential to make ethnic minority career progression part of line manager objectives.

There are official proposals mooted to introduce formal race pay audits for UK businesses, and some



Former England women's manager Mark Sampson was found guilty of making racially discriminatory comments to players including Eni Aluko (left)

larger companies have begun including the ethnic breakdown of employees in their annual reports. But introducing firmer quotas around race runs the risk of perceived tokenism, said Miller: “For sustainable change, employers need to interrogate their workforce data to identify the grass roots issues in their organisations and remove those barriers.”

Douglas added: “We know race is a difficult conversation in society and the upper levels of organisations. The [CIPD] report provides HR professionals with a narrative that allows them to start a conversation within their organisation on how they create opportunities and eliminate barriers for BAME staff.”

“In an overwhelming number of organisations, the dominant leadership culture is one of white, assumed straight, able-bodied and male. Most organisations have explicitly addressed underrepresentation in two or three of those attributes. However, the one that is generally missing is the issue of race.”

Douglas said HR leaders were also reluctant to discuss

the issue, with the exception of the public sector. “As a nation, we shy away from talking about race. We have to move it further up the agenda, otherwise nothing will change,” said Miller.

The CIPD study favours the use of race pay gap reporting, a move that was backed by Ruby McGregor-Smith, former Mitie Group CEO and author of a government report on the topic. She said line managers were the most significant influence on individuals’ careers: “Organisations need to invest much more in the development of line managers, and help them understand the needs of each team member to provide the appropriate development support.”

Sandra Kerr, race equality director at Business in the Community, said better use of employee surveys and more conversations between staff at different levels, were important factors in improving equality. She added that mentoring –

which the CIPD study suggested was key for the development of BAME employees – should be a two-way process.

Douglas said: “As the research illuminates, the issues are very nuanced and there is no ‘silver bullet’ solution. In addition, few solutions are transferable. In

my work on BAME progression and retention, I have found that the solutions are highly contextual – specific to the culture of each organisation. And yes, it will be hard work.”

Shakil Butt, founder of HR and leadership consultancy HR Hero, said it was vital that HR led the way on race. “Most of my career has been in one organisation, and that was the reverse of the report,” he said. “But the door to diversity in HR – they are the

gatekeepers. If you get diversity in that team, it will have a ripple effect.”

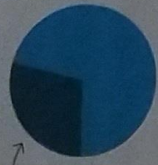
“[As an HR leader] I started recruiting people with all backgrounds and within years I had a very diverse workforce. Because they were business partners on recruitment panels, it meant they had to play a different game. That had a massive impact on the way we worked. HR professionals are the people most attuned to their own biases.”

* Read the CIPD report at cipd.co.uk/bame-report

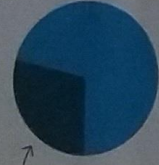
RACE AT WORK THE BIG NUMBERS



38% of BAME employees and 31% of white British employees say their career has failed to meet their expectations



29% of black employees and 20% of BAME employees whose careers have failed to meet their expectations say discrimination has been a factor, compared to 10% of white British staff



29% of BAME respondents whose organisations lack mentors say this would help them reach their working potential; 100% of those with mentors say it has been effective

SOURCE: CIPD SURVEY OF 1,290 UK EMPLOYEES

FREES ASSOCIATION, SHUTTERSTOCK