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**Beauregard, T. A. (2008). Managing diversity in organisations: Practitioner and academic perspectives. Report from a Gender in Management Special Interest Group research event. *Equal Opportunities International*, 27(4), 392-395.**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose** - This report aims to provide a brief summary of the presentations made by researchers and practitioners at the Gender in Management Special Interest Group's research event, *Managing Diversity in Organisations: Practitioner and Academic Perspectives*.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The research seminar was chaired by Dr. Adelina Broadbridge (University of Stirling) and Dr. Gillian Maxwell (Glasgow Caledonian University), and featured five presentations related to diversity in organisations, with a focus on gender issues. Twenty-five delegates were in attendance.

**Findings** - The academic research presented provided empirical evidence that women continue to face barriers to career progress in a number of industry sectors. The industry presentations provided examples of organisational efforts to improve diversity both among staff and customers.

**Research limitations/implications** - More needs to be done to ensure that women enjoy career opportunities equal to those of men in a variety of industry sectors. Even in organisations where women are comparatively well represented, such as

professional services firms, research indicates that they are disadvantaged in terms of career development and progress.

**Originality/value** - This session provided a valuable opportunity for practitioners and academics to meet and share information regarding the state of diversity in today's workplace.

**Keywords** - Diversity, Women, Discrimination, Age

**Paper type** - Viewpoint

On January 23rd, the British Academy of Management's Gender in Management Special Interest Group sponsored a seminar held at Glasgow Caledonian University. Three industry presentations discussed aspects of diversity policy, initiatives, and programme development within Bank of Scotland, National Australia Group UK, and BBC Scotland. These were followed by two academic presentations, giving details of diversity-related research conducted by Dr. Savita Kumra from Oxford Brookes University and Dr. Susan Ogden of Glasgow Caledonian University. The majority of presentations focussed on gender equality, but occasionally touched upon other areas of diversity management as well. This report will summarize the key points of these presentations, which provided the audience with a unique perspective of diversity management from both sides of the research-practice divide.

## **Practitioner perspectives**

The two banking firms represented at the seminar emphasized the importance of diversity management not only for attracting, retaining, and developing staff, but also for attracting, retaining, and developing their customer base. Julie Harris-Burland, manager of Bank of Scotland's Women in Business programme, explained the rationale underpinning the programme designed to encourage female entrepreneurs to invest in their firms through HBOS loans. Citing statistics that over one million women in the UK are now self-employed, and that women-owned or led businesses currently contribute approximately £60 billion to the UK economy, Harris-Burland went on to quote economic projections that women in the UK will be financially better off than men by 2025, when they are projected to control 60% of the nation's wealth. Hilary Crowe and Julie Wade from National Australia Group UK alluded to similar motivations for their organisation's Inclusion and Diversity Action Plan; the business case outlines clear benefits for financial institutions that can attract female consumers.

The Women in Business programme operates according to the principle that women approach business differently than men do, said Harris-Burland. For instance, female entrepreneurs have shown themselves to be more likely to use their personal savings or credit cards to finance their business endeavours, preferring not to incur the perceived risks of taking out large loans. The programme aims to provide service to female customers in a way that takes into account their attitudes to banking and their business goals, both of which can be different from those of male entrepreneurs. According to Harris-Burland, the goal is to make mainstream financial products appropriate for Bank of Scotland's female customers as well as male ones, rather than

to introduce a different set of products for women.

Programmes to manage staff diversity were also discussed by the three industry presenters. Crowe and Wade cited reduced turnover and improved share of the UK talent pool as the business case drivers for the internal component of National Australia Group UK's Inclusion and Diversity Action Plan. The plan includes, among other elements, diversity awareness and capability building, gender balance in senior and sales management roles, multicultural marketing, and the identification of accountable individuals or sponsors for each action taken. Bank of Scotland's Women in Business Internal Programme focuses on the provision of training, confidence building, and networking opportunities for female staff members, and takes pains to emphasize that it is not a "women's club"; many of the topics are designed to have broader appeal throughout the organisation. This concern for inclusion, rather than exclusion, was also discussed by Pat Davers, diversity advisor at BBC Scotland, who spoke of the dangers of inadvertently marginalising men when designing and implementing programmes to support women.

The impact of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations for the National Australia Group UK was addressed by Crowe and Wade. The Group took a four-pronged approach, comprising collaboration (with union representatives, agencies, legal advisers, and benchmarking with industry), establishment of a project group, amendment of affected HR policies and procedures, and communications. A number of adjustments to existing HR practices needed to be made in order to comply with the new regulations. The recruitment process in particular was scrutinized closely for its potential to discriminate against younger or older workers. Job advertisements were reworded to avoid using loaded adjectives such as "youthful", "dynamic", or "mature". Candidates were no longer required to state years of job experience, but

rather were asked for examples of relevant experience. The placement of the job advertisements was also reviewed, with an eye to achieving diversity in the range of media through which the advertisements were disseminated. For instance, efforts were made not to focus exclusively on websites that tend to attract a younger user base.

### **Academic perspectives**

Following these demonstrations of positive strides being taken by firms towards the equal treatment of women and workers of all ages, two presentations were made that reminded the seminar delegates how far there is yet to travel on the road to equality. Dr. Susan Ogden reported on the findings of research undertaken as part of two Gender Balance in Management projects within the Centre for Public Policy and Management at Glasgow Caledonian University. Evidence was provided of a gender gap at the managerial level in both the public and private sectors; for example, in the retail sector, while 60% of the workforce is composed of women, they comprise only 40% of management roles. In the NHS in Scotland, women comprise fully 90% of the workforce, yet occupy only 33% of senior management positions.

Ogden identified a number of barriers to women's career progression. Masculine organisational cultures emphasising long hours and internal networking tend to exclude many female employees, particularly those with family responsibilities, from the inner circles of power and influence. The importance of external, male-dominated networking, or the "old boys' club", was also cited as a factor hindering women's progress up the career ladder. Interviews with workers across the health, finance, and catering sectors also revealed negative perceptions of

those using part-time or non-standard working patterns, and/or well as maternity leave. The implication is that workers, usually female, who engage in non-standard working patterns are seen as unreliable by their supervisors, usually male, and suffer consequent career penalties. The issue of work-life balance was also raised by interviewees, with employees wondering if the price of career progression was too high in terms of increased hours and workload.

Some barriers were sector-specific. For instance, those working in retail described the requirement for mobility as a condition of promotion difficult or impossible for women with children who were established in schools and with partners or spouses who had careers of their own. In the voluntary sector and in SMEs, HR practices related to employee development were characterized by respondents as underdeveloped and inconsistent. Interviewees spoke of confusion over the routes to progression within their organisations, and of a lack of formal career development strategy or formal Human Resource Development opportunities.

Similarly, the self-managed nature of career development was identified in Dr. Savita Kumra's research as a main area of disadvantage for women working in the professional services. Interviews with both male and female consultants in an international consulting firm revealed the importance of understanding the "rules of the game": being aware that the formal systems in place for career progression do not always operate by the book, assessing what behaviours are valued by the firm, and ensuring one's contributions are recognised and rewarded. The women interviewed were less comfortable with the proactive nature of this process than were the men, who appeared more at ease with the networking and self-promotion activities required to make themselves visible as candidates for promotion to partner. Consultants also spoke of the necessity of fitting an existing mould in order to succeed within the firm.

The prevailing model of success within the organisation was described as gendered, requiring visible commitment, acquiescence with requests, and similarity to existing (and predominantly male) partners.

The afternoon concluded on a hopeful note, as Ogden highlighted a number of success stories from various sectors. Policy initiatives in the police, finance, and health sectors were reported as leading to improvements in female recruitment and development. Women were found to prosper in organisations featuring – and observing - formal HR policies and visible, positive female role models. Supportive and approachable managers were also identified in all sectors; by encouraging women’s access to training and development, and their applications for promotion, these managers played an important role in overcoming the glass ceiling so often present in organisations.

Emerging issues identified by Ogden included the need for further “gendering” of policy and strategy formulation. While organisations, for the most part, understand the business benefits of gender equality and are implementing ongoing incremental changes, prevailing organisational cultures tend to inhibit the uptake of work-life balance and flexible working practices. Female employees also continue to face the challenges of making use of available policies, such as women’s networks, without incurring any negative reactions from those who associate such initiatives with unfair advantage or “reverse discrimination”. The afternoon’s proceedings indicated that despite valuable progress being made towards women’s equality, more work is necessary on the part of organisations, professional bodies, and government to provide women with career opportunities truly equal to those of men.

## **Session Chairs**

- Adelina Broadbridge, Senior Lecturer in Marketing, University of Stirling
- Gillian A. Maxwell, Senior Lecturer in HRM, Glasgow Caledonian University

For more information about the Gender in Management Special Interest Group and for joining instructions, please visit [www.gimsig.ac.uk](http://www.gimsig.ac.uk).

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