

diversity's making the difference

Social need or business expediency? Julian Desser looks at diversity training in Britain, examines why it has become such a prominent part of our learning landscape – and the direction it is expected to take in the future.

Not so long ago, perhaps little more than a decade, if you'd mentioned the word diversity in training circles very few people would have understood what you were talking about. Equal opportunities, yes. Diversity, probably not.

Today, diversity training has become an integral part of the workplace learning environment, taking a high priority in both public and private sector organisations, and spawning a new breed of specialist consultancies.

So what exactly is diversity? All the definitions that have been put forward so far share some common elements, such as:

"Diversity is . . . the concept that people should be valued as individuals for reasons related to business interests, as well as for moral and social reasons. It recognises that people from different backgrounds can bring fresh ideas and perceptions which can make the way work is done more efficient and products and services better."

Essentially, diversity is based on the concept of recognition of differences: recognising that everyone is different, and respecting and encouraging those differences for business benefit.

Discrimination law in this country is made up of different acts and regulations, each outlawing less favourable treatment on a specific ground: gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, religion, age and, in Northern Ireland, religious or political opinion.



Each strand shares common themes. Underpinning them all is the concept of unlawful direct discrimination – in other words, treating someone differently for an unlawful reason.

In addition to the law itself, the three equality commissions – the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission – have all issued codes of practice. Although the codes do not have the force of law they carry considerable weight as to how the law should be interpreted.

However, the Equality Act of 2006 seeks to replace these three bodies with a single Commission for Equality and Human Rights.

A major landmark in the evolution of diversity came about in 1999 with publication of the Macpherson Inquiry report into the murder of Stephen

Lawrence which recognised the existence of institutional racism within the police service.

The following year, the government introduced the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which places a general duty on public authorities to promote race equality. Additionally, the Act places some specific duties on many public authorities to help them to meet the general duty.

Under these duties, certain public authorities have had to prepare and publish a Race Equality Scheme, explaining how they will meet both their general and specific duties, a key element of which is staff training.

"Diversity training as we know it has been around for about ten years," says Wendy Aldred, of Dagon Services based in Carlisle, which specialises in delivering diversity training, mostly to



local government and public organisations across northern England and in Scotland.

"It was developed from the equal opportunities and equality training which emerged following a growing awareness of cultural differences created by mass immigration into Britain in the Sixties.

"Equal opportunities tends to imply

that everyone is the same. Over the years people realised we can't treat people in this way. The reality is that people are different and have different needs and beliefs. So, in diversity the emphasis is more on equality of opportunity.

"When we are contacted by an organisation which requires diversity

training we carry out a needs analysis, just as with any other type of training. We can be called in for a range of reasons, very often for compliance with current legislation.

"At other times it can be because companies have a big migrant workforce which needs to be accommodated. Increasingly, the private sector is seeing the business case for diversity training, for example understanding more about the communities which form their customers can reap benefits of increased sales.

"Any diversity programme really needs to involve senior management, not just staff. Senior managers are sometimes reluctant to become involved and this can result in the process being tick-box training."

Earlier this year (March), Dagon Services successfully completed a pilot programme for the Scottish Fire Service in which six instructors and two managers achieved equality qualifications accredited by the Open College Network.

The five-day equality and diversity programme was delivered over several months to fit in with other fire industry training. Typically, the Dagon five-day programme covers topics including:

- knowing more about individuals
- groups and how they behave
- different types of culture including the organisation
- working in different settings
- harassment
- dealing with conflict
- relevant organisational policies and legislation

"In my training I focus on the three key elements – diversity, equality and culture," says Aldred. "But above these, I place respect, because if there is respect, the others will follow.

"There still might be conflict in the workplace, but we can work through it with respect for other people and their cultures and beliefs. Also, it's important to remember that diversity cuts both ways – it's not only about the majority learning about the minority, but just as much the

other way round."

"As diversity trainers we need to be careful we do not impose our personal beliefs as the right way or judge others for their beliefs. The training needs to provide a safe environment in which delegates can explore the issues for themselves, reflect and be challenged.

"It is also about getting people to think about how others may react to comments they are making or behaviours they are using. This can be through ignorance or through fear."

Recent research published in the Employment Review showed that employers are just as likely to train people in diversity issues to make it a better place to work as they are to do it because they think it will help them avoid a tribunal claim.

The survey of 73 organisations which employ more than 450,000 people, found that of the 62 providing some form of diversity training, about one in three do it primarily to create an open culture - the same number as cite legal compliance as their main aim.

Among the other positive reasons cited, 13 were trying to counter discrimination in their organisation, while smaller numbers thought it would improve business outcomes (8) or help managers tackle discrimination (5).

Almost all those providing training do so for all employees (56 organisations). Just two organisations restricted training to managers, and two to non-managerial staff.

Of the 11 survey participants that do not currently provide diversity training, seven said they lacked the budget or time to do so, while three said they preferred to tackle the issue in other ways. Just one said they thought training was ineffective.

The survey also reveals that diversity training can take up a considerable amount of staff time: at 17 organisations, staff go through training once a year - and more often than that at a further 16. Only 12 organisations see training sessions as a one-off activity.

Training at 24 organisations lasts for half a day, but at a further 20 whole-day programmes are the norm. One respondent said their organisation ran two-day diversity training courses. Ten organisations expect employees to put one or two hours aside for training.

Aldred believes that the next development in diversity training is to

encourage difficult conversations within organisations. "All too often we find that people are scared to have these conversations," she adds.

"This is about understanding each other's cultures and people putting their points of view. We want to create a culture in the organisation where someone has a problem or issue they can come forward."

big brother row: racism or ignorance?



Channel 4's popular "reality" show Big Brother, in which viewers vote to evict celebrities from a house, caused a storm of protest earlier this year when several contestants were accused of making racist comments about one of the others.

The treatment of Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, who later emerged as the winner, attracted more than 30,000 complaints from viewers, caused a minor diplomatic incident involving Gordon Brown while he was India, and prompted the show's sponsor Carphone Warehouse to pull out.

Three of the contestants – Danielle Lloyd, Jo O'Meara and Jade Goody – were accused of bullying and making racist comments. In one show, Goody was challenged by Big Brother about calling her "Shilpa Poppadom".

Even before this outburst, remarks such as "you don't know where those hands have been" and Shetty being told in foul language to "go home" were enough for some people to make up their minds that this was a row fuelled

by her ethnicity.

The incident even reached Westminster, where the film star was invited by Labour MP Keith Vaz to meet Tony Blair, whom she described as "very sweet", and prompted this comment from Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell: "To make entertainment out of racism is disgusting."

Solicitor Chris Boothman, an expert on race law believes the complaints were not sufficiently serious enough to warrant a criminal prosecution, which requires harassment over a long period, but he believes Shetty could have had a case to pursue in the civil courts had she wished to pursue it.

Goody later denied her "poppadom" remark was a racist comment and apologised for any offence and Channel 4 issued a statement saying that unambiguous racist behaviour would not be tolerated. There were also claims that ignorance was more to blame than outright racism.

But many commentators believe race played a part. Sarfraz Manzoor, a British broadcaster of Pakistani origin, says he initially believed it was a "clash of culture and a clash of class" but changed his mind after a few days of viewing. "It's too easy to say that if Shilpa Shetty was pink or blue or green she'd be getting the same treatment - I don't think that's true."

case study: severn trent plc

When Severn Trent plc wanted to launch a wide-ranging and challenging diversity and equality training programme for their staff they called in Drama For Training based in Holmfirth, West Yorkshire, (home of TV's Last Of The Summer Wine). The intentions were to engage people's emotions using an innovative technique called forum theatre.

The initial work was targeted at managers and employees from the PLC at the corporate centre in Birmingham through a series of workshops. The aims of these workshops were to

- raise awareness around issues concerning diversity and equality
- demonstrate the impact of inappropriate behaviour on members of staff

Delivery

The workshops started with some light-hearted exercises designed to put delegates at ease and set the tone for the day. A presentation followed the workshops, which examined the effect of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace and the damaging effects it can have on individuals. Participants were then able to use the actors as a 'visual tool' to explore some of the key issues raised by using techniques such as forum theatre and hot seating.

Using the drama as a catalyst, delegates were able to discuss the issues raised and explore different ways to resolve the situations portrayed.

Forum theatre works on the theory of raising a dilemma. Learners stop the action, and offer possible methods of resolving the situation. The actors play out the various suggestions in context, and debate can follow concerning the outcomes.

Hot-seating is a technique that is used extensively in conjunction with role-play and forum theatre. An actor sits in role and is questioned by learners. The character explains his or her motivations and behaviours to prompt debate with and among the learners. Using the actor in this way as a 'sounding-board' has the benefit of allowing learners, in a safe environment, to discuss their fears and perceptions with someone who has undertaken, albeit in role, something the learners themselves may face.

Outcome

Combined with resource material handouts developed by drama for training to support the workshops, delegates found this method of experiential training to be a strong and challenging way to explore these complicated and controversial issues in an interesting and engaging way.