Theme 2: Equality and diversity

The business case for the employment of disabled workers

The collection of empirical data for this project, funded by the European Social Fund and led by Ardha Danieli working with Carol Woodhams (Manchester Metropolitan University) and – until April 2005 – Shafaq Afraz and Sam Bairstow, was completed early in 2005. The project consists of two in-depth case studies of one private sector and one public sector organisation. Analysis of the data, which is both qualitative and quantitative in nature, has furnished a fascinating comparison of the practice of equal opportunities in the two organisations.

A comparison of two organisations approach to the employment of disabled workers

The private sector, public-service organisation (PSO) had a clear corporate commitment to the business case for the employment of disabled people, and equality and diversity policies based on best practice advice. Yet in practice respondents found it difficult to make a business case, since this was often interpreted as requiring an economic justification. Disabled people did not view the organisation's culture as disability friendly. Indeed many described it as one of fear, and cases of bullying and harassment were reported.

The contradiction experienced between corporate policy of valuing diversity and actual organisational practice led to a significant degree of cynicism towards the organisation on the part of disabled employees. The roots of this inconsistent approach to the employment of disabled people lay in the constant drive to improve productivity with ever decreasing resources, outsourcing of HR administration and decentralisation of people management and budgets to line management. A number of other factors also shaped the behaviour of line managers. These included:

- an appraisal system which values the achievement of performance targets over people management skills
- a performance management system which links productivity targets and sickness/absence statistics to bonus payments for managers
- the charging of occupational health and safety referrals and, in some divisions, the costs of reasonable adjustments to line managers' budgets
- high levels of turnover amongst line managers which made for inconsistency and created time delays in making reasonable adjustments
- a lack of understanding of disability amongst line managers due to inadequate training
- a sickness/absence system which made no distinction between impairment related absence and general sickness absence
- a divisionalised business structure which militates against the redeployment of disabled people across the organisation

The employment of disabled people in the English Local Authority (ELA) presented different problems than those in PSO. Respondents were aware that the organisation had a corporate commitment to supporting the employment of disabled people. Yet many felt that the business case was overridden by moral and social justice considerations. Line managers and disabled employees were generally unsympathetic to the business case, arguing that the language and the economic rationale underpinning it did not sit well with the ethos of public service.

Disabled employees reported that a sense of corporate social responsibility was embedded within the culture of the organisation, creating a disability friendly culture which valued diversity. There was little perceived contradiction between corporate policy and organisational practice.

Several of the structural factors which inhibited the employment of disabled people in PSO were not evident in ELA. Nevertheless, others were highlighted as problematic.

- physical access to buildings and within buildings was cited most often as inhibiting the employment of people with mobility problems. This was primarily a result of the age of buildings and the cost of adaptations.
- finite budgets for adaptations which once spent, resulted in an inability to fund further adaptations until the next financial year
- a lack of understanding, due to insufficient training, amongst line managers of disability related issues
- a lack of promotional opportunities
- a sickness/absence system which made no distinction between impairment related absence and general sickness absence

The findings suggest that ELA is making more progress towards removing differences between disabled and non-disabled employees than PSO. The implication is that the business case alone is unlikely to lead to an improvement in the employment of disabled people. Organisations have also to create a culture in which difference can be valued in practice by those charged with its implementation. This requires that HR systems and procedures enable difference to be accommodated rather than ignored.

In PSO the approach to disability can be characterised primarily as one of *assimilation*. Line managers believed that once specialist equipment had been provided for disabled employees they should then be treated as though they were no different to non-disabled people. In contrast, the overarching approach to managing disabled employees in ELA is one based on *integration* in which difference is accommodated beyond the provision of specialist equipment.

The project's findings have been disseminated through a range of events. In the private sector organisation, findings were presented to corporate level Equality Managers from each of the different divisions; to Equality and Diversity forums within the divisions; to the Disability Group which represents disabled employees and to the Disability Champion. In the local authority, three dissemination events were organised for HR managers from all the authority's departments; to the Disability Group which represents disabled employees and to the Head of HR. Dissemination workshops were also held for an International HR Company which provides HR services to private sector organisations; for Equality and Diversity Officers and negotiators from a range of trade unions hosted by the TUC at Congress House and BT hosted a one day event at their Headquarters in London to disseminate the findings to an audience of 200 (primarily) HR managers drawn from both public and private sector organisations. A paper based on the quantitative data was given at a diversity conference in Beijing, and further papers are in preparation.

The involvement of stakeholders in diversity management

2005 has seen the continuation of fieldwork and analysis associated with this second ESF-funded project, which involves Anne-marie Greene and Deborah Dean. While the case study of the public sector organisation (PubSO) was completed by the end of 2004 (and key findings are given in the box), the fieldwork in a private sector

company (ServiceCo) was ongoing and completed during 2005. The case studies entailed semi-structured interviews with senior, middle and line managers, and with trade union representatives plus focus group interviews with employees and observation at diversity training courses and at employee involvement events. PubSO has a long established equality diversity policy whilst ServiceCo is at the very beginning of introducing the policy, and this will be a focal point of the comparative analysis of the two organisations.

Key findings from the public sector organisation

- a number of areas of significant mismatch between policy and practice were identified, where progressive measures do not have the positive impact they should due to the way in which they are implemented. A key feature of implementation was the extent to which various stakeholder groups (senior managers, line managers, non managerial employees, trade union representatives) are involved in the process;
- different stakeholder groups tend to use different criteria by which to judge the equality and diversity policy.
- the main challenge lies in meeting the expectations of all the stakeholder groups. To do this involves conceptualising equality and diversity as a *process* needing continuous attention in order to sustain the momentum. Part of this process must involve mechanisms that allow employees at the lowest levels of the organisation to understand, and become involved in policies and initiatives.

Interviews have also been conducted with a range of professionals involved in the area of diversity management, to date, involving a total of 57 individuals from 46 organisations drawn from a range of different industries and a mix of public, private and voluntary sectors. There is little recent research focusing on this group of key actors in diversity management, despite the fact that they are critical to policy developments within organisations. The aim was to explore organisational policy approaches, initiatives and processes from their own perspectives. Initial findings include: professionals who stood outside of mainstream organisations (e.g. trade union officers and consultants) were the most critical of the shift from equal opportunities to diversity management; a near universal consensus that the greatest challenge facing organisations is achieving line-management 'buy-in', indicating a clear move from the procedural compliance associated with traditional equal opportunities; that for equality and diversity policy to be successful it was necessary to involve and communicate with non-managerial employees; and that the mechanisms for this were underdeveloped but also varied highly between organisations but were currently limited.

A second practitioner / academic workshop was convened in November to disseminate and discuss findings from the two cases studies, and the programme of interviews with diversity champions. A paper reporting findings was presented at the Gender, Work and Organisation conference in June.

Women in trade unions

Jane Parker continued her ESRC-funded research on women's' groups in trade unions. Main activities included: content and thematic analysis of empirical material gathered in 2004 via two national postal surveys completed by equality experts within British trade unions; semi-structured interviews with union officials, activists and

members; and some observational fieldwork; quantitative, multi-variate analysis of the survey data to examine the contextual influences operating on women's' groups; and writing up of the findings for dissemination to academic and to practitioner audiences. In respect of the last, a paper was published in Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations and another presented to the BUIRA annual conference and summary reports prepared for those participating in the study. Discussion of union equality and democracy usually locates women's groups as a special representative form within unions. A paper accepted by *Economic and Industrial Democracy* focuses on the extent to which women's groups themselves address the interests of diverse constituent groups. It analyses the attention the women's groups give to diversity, as compared to gender, and finds that in most unions groups do also tackle diversity issues – albeit to varying extent.

Last year it was reported that, as a result of collaboration with Janice Foley (University of Regina, Saskatchewan), an adapted version of the survey instrument had been distributed to relevant officials and lay representatives in Canadian trade unions. Comparative analysis of the two sets of findings is underway and was facilitated by a small grant from the WBS Research Development Fund.

Towards the end of the year, a follow-up bid to ESRC was prepared to examine social movement unionism in Britain.

Regulating for equality

In 1989 Linda Dickens was the invited guest editor of a special issue of the *Industrial Relations Journal* on women and work. Her editorial article discussed levers to gender equality action, including the role of law. On the occasion of the second such special issue (to appear in 2006) she has been invited to reflect on changes, especially in the legal framework, over the past 15 or so years.

In her article, entitled 'Re-regulation for equality: from either/or to both', Dickens notes that at the time of the first special issue the UK was mid way through a long period of Conservative government (1979-1997) pursuing a policy of de-regulation in the labour market and in employment law. Influenced by 'New Right' ideology Conservative governments from 1979 saw the free market as compatible with the promotion of equality and resisted proposals for legislative change and enactment to support equality. Such regulation was seen as undermining competitiveness and market based business rationales were left to drive forward equality initiatives. At the time of the second special issue the UK has had 8 years of Labour administration. The business case for equality action is still stressed, but the government has been prepared to engage in a degree of re-regulation.

The article argues that allowing a role for stronger equality legislation alongside encouraging self-interested, business case, employer action can be seen as part of a more general shift since 1997. Rather than being posited as alternatives, social justice and economic efficiency are increasingly presented as complementary – a shift Dickens describes as from 'either/or' to 'both'. The article questions the extent to which in practice the goals of social justice and economic competitiveness are treated as complementary, and highlights hesitant and reluctant action and some tensions in the legislative package for equality. Developments in this 'package' since the late 1980s are described and Dickens considers the extent to which the problems she identified then have been tackled. These problems concerned the nature and scope of the legislative provisions; the form of law and the institutions operating it; the

principles and conceptualisations embodied in the legislative approach, and related also to contextual fit. Her assessment is that although the full potential of re-regulation for gender equality has not been realized, and aspects of the problems identified in the late 1980s remain, the legislative lever to equality action is without doubt stronger at the time of the second special issue than it was at the first.

Other developments

Anne-marie Greene hosted the fourth seminar in an ESRC funded seminar series on Critical Perspectives on Career and Family Friendly Policies at Warwick in February. This was convened jointly with Loughborough University and involved a programme of five speakers.