

Aiming for equality

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Training and organisational change

It has been a repeated theme of this study that training in race relations and equal opportunities refers not to a single type of employee training but embraces a wide range of activities. This can be gleaned from the commentaries on the history of race relations training, from the demands and experiences of the client organisations we visited, and from the services offered by the trainers we interviewed. One of the most important distinctions to make between different meanings of 'race relations training' is between training seen as an input to overall organisational change and training seen as a sprucing-up of staff performance. Despite its place within an overall context of formal equal opportunities policies, much of the recruitment and selection training that we found in this study is of the latter type. There is little doubt that training to improve interviewing and selection procedures does have an immediate equal opportunities impact, but the impact is limited. Some organisations take on programmes of equal opportunities training that are much more comprehensive. They do this by using training to look at ways in which their general structures, policies and practices have implications for race equality and can be improved. In some cases, these training programmes are accompanied by professional equal opportunities consultancy.

Other differences between types of training have been discussed in this report. Staff training in large industrial and commercial firms tends to focus on employment, personnel and staff development, and on staff skills and duties, while in public service and retail organisations the scope of training also covers client service and is often extended to include knowledge about minority experiences and cultures. These are only generalisations about the training we know about, but they are useful indicators that the diversity of training packages reflects a real diversity of needs and training aims. This

analysis stands in contrast to the view that the diversity of training results from a confused set of approaches to a single training aim.

Establishing training aims

Given the range of options open to an organisation in terms of equal opportunities training, and given that the range is based on differences of training aims, what can we say about the process by which organisations choose, and should choose, from the options? The process so far has not been uniform, but it would be wrong to say that it has been haphazard, for we can see regularities within different categories of organisation, sometimes resulting from the direction of pressure for change (such as the more fundamental organisational measures in public sector and charitable bodies, as a consequence of justice-oriented equal opportunities approaches) and sometimes in line with the nature of the client organisation or department (such as the differences between equality training in employment and service delivery, as outlined above). It has also differed according to the sector of the training provider, partly because of the ability of trainers with background funding to spend more time on advice, consultancy and general organisational development, and partly because of the different professional and political histories of the trainers involved. Despite these patterns, it is also true that some organisations have blundered into equal opportunities training without explicit aims, and without any considered strategy of equal opportunities change.

How should training needs and training aims be established? If we start from a desire to maximise the equality performance of an organisation, in whatever area it is practicable, be it recruitment, staff development or customer service, then the training requirements must rest on an assessment of two things: first, the present shortcomings of its equality performance, and second, the changes necessary to improve that performance. Some of those are likely to be changes in work practices within the organisation, but others may be structural changes in the organisation itself. Depending on these assessments, a 'training' programme could be established with the right balance of organisational development, consultancy, high-level workshops, and staff training of different types. But who is to make the assessments? It is doubtful that they can be made accurately and comprehensively from within an organisation, because people on the inside have a view which is permeated by the very problems that they are concerned to

tackle, so an outside view is also required. Independent trainers offer advice and consultancy in this area but, given the variation between different trainers in the substantive areas of their expertise, there is a risk that a client would be pulled towards the type of training in which the consultant is most interested (it should be remembered that this is not a problem unique to equal opportunities – it occurs in other fields where consultancy is bound up with provision, such as computing). It may be that a third, independent view is important. In principle this could come from a variety of sources – for example, from institutions such as the CRE, or the professional and employers' associations, from networks of organisations already involved in equal opportunities development, or from some kind of professional association of trainers. In practice there is a problem of resources, for none of these bodies could provide free advice and help without extra background funding. As we have seen in the surveys, employers are unlikely to relish the idea of direct spending on another layer of consultancy service, and most employers reduce the amount of pre-course consultation to a minimum, being prepared to go ahead on the basis of an independent needs assessment comprising only two or three meetings at managerial level.

However these problems of needs and aims assessment are resolved, one important conclusion of the study is that the variety of content and style of training on the market is sufficient to put the ball in the consumers' court. Employers report that training does play an important part in promoting equality in employment and in service delivery, but it has to be used for carefully planned strategic objectives within an overall programme. In the main, organisations are satisfied with the quality of training that has taken place, but there have been problems when the training objectives have been unclear or simply wrong for the organisation, and when training is expected to carry the entire burden of change. The important question is therefore not whether equal opportunities training as such is any good, but this: what types of training are necessary and appropriate to help the organisation implement a programme of equal opportunities change?

Promoting investment in equal opportunities

Another practical issue is the relationship between what an organisation needs and what it is prepared to do. Starting an analysis with the objective of maximising equality performance is helpful in

principle, but not all organisations are prepared to devote resources to a comprehensive equality programme, or to withstand the disruption that it might involve. Although there is a good business case to be made for equal opportunities, employers judge that there is a level of activity beyond which equality performance has a net cost in the short and medium term. Some firms take the view that their social responsibilities extend beyond this, and push their level of effort further for justice-oriented reasons, but our research does not suggest that they are common. In the public, charitable and voluntary sectors, where fairness is meant to be a central operational principle, pressure based largely on justice-oriented arguments can be applied and there are often several channels for that pressure. Above all, in those sectors the people who have power are publicly accountable and their decision-making is open to scrutiny. When pressed to change policy and practice for the better, they find they have to argue the matter in public. In the private sector, however, we were told repeatedly by informants that a business reason is required for all decisions, and that a simple argument about justice has little effect.

The main business-oriented arguments for developing equal opportunities programmes and training should be enumerated here. On the employment side, the most prominent argument is the growing shortage of job applicants and the consequent need to widen the recruitment pool. This has generally replaced the earlier, weaker argument that discriminatory recruitment, biased promotion and restrictive staff development prevent a company from realising the full potential of its current employees or the available labour force. The point about staff potential may be valid, but its appeal is based on marginal gains that are not easy to visualise, and its power to persuade is limited; staff shortages, on the other hand, are brutally convincing. Many of the employers we interviewed said that they were prompted to think about their recruitment procedures by a shortage or by the fear of shortages to come. The 'demographic downturn' has begun to affect employers, and they are now competing for staff, but in time things will get worse for them.

We are experiencing huge recruitment problems. It's easy to identify how horrendous it will be when the number of school leavers drops more. We are having dedicated equal opportunities courses for managers at the right time.
(Utility Company)

Previously neglected and badly-treated potential recruits, such as women and ethnic minorities, are now courted. In a number of cases the equal opportunities efforts of large companies began with a focus on the recruitment and retention of women, the largest source of potential labour, and turned later to ethnic minorities. Very recently, however, the underlying demographic trend towards labour shortage has been mitigated by an economic downturn which has raised the level of unemployment. It is unclear whether this will have a dampening effect on employers' attempts to widen the scope of their recruitment or the process will continue despite short-term economic fluctuations.

Another business-oriented motivation for equality measures starts with minorities, however, and that is the realisation of ethnic minority markets. The buying power and commercial clout of black and Asian people is being recognised, and some retail and financial companies are already competing for that business. Several told us that they were seeking to change their public image to appeal to ethnic minority customers, and that the change of image had to be carried through the whole organisation.

Most people are coming in from the justice angle, and you can't sell it solely on that. Some firms are worried about shortages and are discovering ethnic markets, however.

(Independent Trainer)

Another business argument for equal opportunities training is the avoidance of trouble with the Race Relations Act. Several employers told us that industrial tribunal cases are expensive and by comparison training is cheap. The loss of public face in such cases is also seen as a problem, particularly to those wanting to expand business with black customers, or with trading links overseas.

Training providers, when seeking to persuade employers to adopt equal opportunities measures, also appeal to the professionalism of managers, especially those working in personnel. They also argue that poor race relations in an organisation can inhibit other necessary changes. In a similar vein, some of the employer interviews suggested that openings for equal opportunities changes are created by the pace of other changes in industrial relations, technology or organisational structure.

The larger companies that have set out to improve their equality performance do say that public image is one of the factors that

prompted them, and that a momentum develops in a particular industry. There is more to it than a bandwagon effect: sometimes a particular corporate policy stance becomes the norm by a curious interplay between politics and commercial competition, such as in the case of the current prominence of 'green' issues in company image-making. That process may have made a faltering start for equal opportunities in some areas, and has been encouraged by the establishing of informal networks of equal opportunities staff in private sector as well as in the public sector. Responsibility for the growth of that momentum rests both in the organisations that have made some progress already, and among people and bodies with the political power to convince employers equally of the business advantages of equal opportunities change and of the need for fairness and justice.