

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CURRENT RECRUITMENT PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN A PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANISATION

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Key words

Diversity and inclusion; Gender equality; Gender segregation; Recruitment

Word count: 999

Introduction

The pandemic reinforced the moral and social justice case for diversity and inclusion (D&I) deepening the need for equality and fairness of opportunity (McKinsey, 2022). D&I should be an integral part of people resourcing which is about attracting and selecting the most suitable candidate for the job in accordance with organisational goals (Bratton et al., 2022). However, it is not always clear what makes a candidate ‘suitable’. There is potential for bias when making these decisions and evidence shows that marginalised groups face discrimination in recruitment (CIPD, 2022). Thus, recruitment often fails to result in an inclusive and diverse workforce (Pilbeam and Corbridge, 2006; Di Stasio and Heath, 2019).

It is well established women are disadvantaged in recruitment and promotion due to embedded stereotypes about gender (Wynn and Correll, 2018). Women are seen as more nurturing and family-orientated than men, resulting in “motherhood penalties” in hiring (Correll et al., 2007). Employers use gender to assess candidates’ employability intentionally and/or unintentionally

(Foley and Williamson, 2018), and women receive fewer interview invitations (Moss-Racusin et al., 2012; Neumark, 2010). Women are often excluded from influential networks that lead to career progression (Ibarra et al., 2013). Thus, gender gap has been observed at the top and at every stage of the career ladder (Maggian et al., 2020) - the evidence of horizontal and vertical segregation at work. Both types of gender segregation are seen as contributing to gender inequality. Horizontal segregation describes the situation whereby women and men are either under or over representative in certain occupations, whilst vertical segregation arises when women and men are located at different hierarchical levels (Jarman et al, 2012). Research illustrates the over-representation of women in low-skilled and low-paid jobs (Eurofound, 2017) and much higher concentrations of men in managerial and senior positions (Hardy et al., 2015).

Context

The research was conducted at a private sector organisation, 'Company X', a FTSE 100 energy services and solutions company operating globally, predominantly supplying energy to UK consumers. It has a total of 25,753 employees, a large proportion of which are engineers. Company X has recently experienced significant transformation with a newly appointed CEO, restructuring, and disputes with trade unions regarding terms of employment – seeing hundreds of key workers leaving the organisation. These changes have resulted in a need to recruit in high-volumes and reassess the workforce needs. This paper aims to identify and analyse the issues of gender equality emerging from internal and external recruitment, and discuss the implications on Company X and its D&I strategy.

Research approach

This study incorporated qualitative and quantitative approaches, involving questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The researchers set out to collect data from a cross section of Company X due to its sheer size and time constraints. A total of 71 questionnaires were returned, and 12 participants interviewed. The sample size was sufficient in establishing key themes from the data that are representative of the wider organisation's population, therefore addressing the research aim. Questionnaires collected quantifiable data to describe trends and

explore relationships and interviews enabled a rich understanding of underlying issues in an organisational context (Anderson et al, 2020).

Discussion

Key findings concerning the current recruitment practices are discussed as follows:

First, internal recruitment was found to be favoured by Company X, but it was perceived to be unfair and non-transparent by most respondents. Most of the managers, 60% being male, were internally recruited, predominantly through the means of word of mouth. Furthermore, nearly half of respondents disbelieve recruitment was made on merit alone. Specifically, female interviewees used the term “old boys club” in reference to internal recruitment with many either giving up trying to break into this, or resent applying for roles citing that “someone else already has the job” before official recruitment opened. These findings illustrate Company X’s internal recruitment activities were biased and failed to provide equal opportunities holding back D&I.

Second, external recruitment contributed to inclusion problems. Despite positive progress to diversify the engineering workforce, inclusion of female engineers and apprentices was seen inadequate. Interview findings indicate the lack of managerial commitment to D&I hindered overall diversity as new recruits (particularly females) expressed their reluctance to stay or feared they would be discriminated against should they pursue career progression.

Finally, most participants were uncertain of how D&I was actively encouraged in recruitment although they understood the D&I policies of Company X. Inconsistent recruitment processes and little managerial commitment to D&I were found to be the main causes.

Implications

Internal recruitment resulted in negative perceptions of the process, a distrust in the D&I policies and a divided workforce, with many believing Company X failed to implement D&I consistently. Whilst its efforts to attract externally diverse talent are notable, the perceived vertical and horizontal gender-based segregation as a result of current recruitment practices override any progress. Should the company fail to address the state of D&I as a priority, they

risk imposing a disproportionate impact on their workforce and being outperformed by more diverse competitors (Hunt et al, 2015).

There is a clear business case for creating a gender-balanced representative engineering workforce across all levels at Company X. A diverse and inclusive talent pool gives rise to increased creativity that is essential for an innovative, solutions-based industry, enhanced employee engagement and retention, and financial performance (Phillips et al., 2009; Phillips, 2014).

When exploring solutions for equality and diversity in recruitment (Harver, 2020), it is suggested organisations aiming to minimise gender discrimination in recruitment consider adopting anonymous application procedures and/or training managers to understand how stereotypes affect hiring decisions (Foley and Williamson, 2018). Anonymous recruitment has the potential to reduce reliance on subjective judgement and stereotypes, and refocus managers' attention on objective, job-related criteria (Kraus et al., 2012). Its effectiveness depends on the extent to which managers support their organisation's D&I goals (Foley and Williamson, 2018). To retain diverse talent, particularly female engineers, management must let female voices be heard to understand where its inclusion efforts fall short, and implement appropriate strategies to uphold their employees' trust, and their employer brand.

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