

TIMEWISE ROUNDTABLE:

How behavioural insights can improve workplace flexibility and gender equality

Held at LSEG, in association with the Behavioural Insights Team, 26 July 2018

Focus

- To share key learnings from the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) on how behavioural insights can bring about positive change around workplace flexibility and gender equality.
- To hold a group discussion and share insights and thoughts from partner organisations.

Introduction

- Tackling inflexible mindsets and culture is a key part of developing a living and breathing flexible working strategy and reducing workplace inequality.
- Understanding how and why people think and behave as they do is a critical part of this work.
- It is equally important to understand **what works** in terms of tackling gender inequality and barriers to flexibility, so that efforts are focused in the right areas.
- Evaluating initiatives and gathering evidence is therefore an important part of any work to close the gender pay gap.

Presentation highlights

Gender stereotyping plays a large role in workplace inequality.

- For example, when given lists of words and asked to apply them to images of men and women, men are more likely to be associated with active terms (such as competitive, powerful, dominant) and women are more likely to be associated with softer traits (such as caring, helpful, agreeable).
- This matters because leadership qualities tend to be associated with the former rather than the latter, and so women can be perceived as less likely to succeed.
- These stereotypes can also influence what we pay attention to (such as taking more notice of an idea suggested by a man, even if it has already been suggested by a woman), and how we interpret information (such as being quick to judge a woman who is having an off-day as not being up to the job).

- Ambiguity in processes such as recruitment or performance evaluation is therefore a problem, because it allows this kind of gender stereotyping to have a greater effect. Structure and transparency is key.

The BIT have carried out a project focusing on actions that will help tackle these issues and close the gender pay gap.

- They reviewed 100 action plans from organisations' gender pay gap reporting, selected randomly.
- Whilst there was a clear willingness to act, in many cases the plans read more like a narrative than a set of clear, concrete actions. Only around 20% had effective actions in place.
- As a result, while organisations are investing time and money in trying to close the gap, they are not necessarily doing so in the most effective way.
- This is made more difficult by the lack of evidence about what works.

The resulting guidance, ***Actions to close the gender pay gap***, sets out:

- **Effective actions** – which have been tested in real world settings and found to have a positive impact. Examples include:
 - Using skills-based assessment tasks in recruitment
 - Including multiple women in shortlists for recruitment and promotions
 - Using structured interviews for recruitment and promotions
- **Promising actions** – which need further research to improve the evidence on their effectiveness and how best to implement them. Examples include:
 - Improving workplace flexibility for men and women
 - Encouraging the uptake of Shared Parental Leave
 - Offering mentoring and sponsorship
- **Actions with mixed results** – which have been shown to have a positive impact sometimes and a negative impact at other times, and so cannot currently be recommended as good ways to reduce gender inequality. Examples include:
 - Unconscious bias training
 - Diversity training
 - Leadership development training

While a degree of bias is inevitable, the three key ways to tackle it, and dilute its impact, are:

- Transparency of processes
- Structuring of processes
- Evaluation of any actions and initiatives

The full guidance is available here: <https://gender-pay-gap.service.gov.uk/actions-to-close-the-gap>

Discussion highlights

- There was a discussion around the role of flexible working and shared parental leave:
 - It was noted that there is evidence that working part-time prohibits progression, and that there is therefore a pressing need to create more flexible roles at a senior level.
 - The BIT highlighted a CIPD trial which tested four different messages sent to HR professionals to identify the best way to promote flexible working.
 - It found that messaging around social norms (ie letting people know that more and more companies are doing it) were 15% more effective.
 - They also highlighted an organisation in Australia which increased the uptake of flexible working by introducing an element of competition, challenging teams to try and work more flexibly.
- A concern was raised that networking groups for minorities can sometimes have a negative effect, creating more not less resistance to the members of the group. It was suggested that a lack of senior participants can be an issue, and that mentoring and sponsorship programmes may be a better way to provide support and advice, particularly to those from BAME backgrounds or who have a disability.
- Partners were asked to share any personal evidence they have on their own gender equality initiatives, given the lack of concrete evidence about what works. Partners shared the following experiences:
 - Changing the performance management cycle from annual to quarterly, which improved its perception among employees.
 - Demanding gender-equal longlists and shortlists which led to an increase in female hires.
 - Developing a process to stay in touch with and pipeline women on a shortlist who aren't hired.
 - Doing a deep dive into recruitment data, looking at where in the process there is a drop-off of female talent (for example, during the screening process, the interview or even the channel) – not yet concluded.
- A discussion took place about data and the tracking of initiatives.
 - A concern was raised that it is hard to assess what works best if an organisation is carrying out a range of initiatives at once and only evaluating overall outcomes.
 - The BIT stated that, in terms of gathering evidence, it is better to make one change at a time and pilot it, so the impact can be accurately evaluated.
 - It was noted that there is an organisational impatience to bring about change which leads to organisations trying a range of initiatives at the same time.

- The BIT noted that many organisations do have access to useful data, but do not use it effectively. For example, if an organisation has a lack of senior women, they should be able to identify where in the talent pipeline the drop-off occurs. By identifying the pinch point, it would then be easier to target timely interventions.
- A discussion took place about whether unconscious bias around part-time versus full-time is a prevalent issue.
 - The BIT referenced the tendency of colleagues to value part-time work less highly, and of part-time workers to feel less entitled to put themselves forward for promotion.
 - A partner observed that more men in their organisation are working flexibly, but not requesting it formally, just flexing within their existing role.
 - The BIT team noted that while this is an easier way to work flexibly, it isn't practical for people who need a fixed regular pattern (such as primary carers) and can also be dependent on seniority.
 - An example was given of an organisation which supports flexibility, in which management roles still tend to be advertised as full-time and, as a result, are male-heavy. This is being tackled by sharing success stories of female managers and developing scheduling to support flexibility at management level.

Conclusion

The session highlighted the importance of taking concrete action to improve flexibility at all levels and close the gender pay gap, rather than just having well-meaning intentions. It highlighted new guidance focusing on a range of actions that could be considered by employers. And it reinforced the need to track and evaluate any initiatives that employers take, to demonstrate what works and what doesn't.

By doing so, it will be possible to build the evidence that will encourage organisations across the board to deliver flexible working, tackle their gender pay gaps and so bring about real change for women in the workplace.