Article: Gender Imbalance in the Workplace

Summary

This article looks at the issue of gender imbalance in some work sectors, and looks ahead to what can be done to redress the balance.

Introduction

There is a history of gender imbalance in the workplace. In some areas of work, you could be forgiven for thinking that nothing has changed. Some people still think that there are jobs which are naturally for men and jobs which are naturally for women. However, there are many reasons why this should not be the case.

Expectations

From a young age, many of us have strong ideas about men's jobs and women's jobs. It is often easier to take a route that is more expected, than venture into an area that is not traditionally entered by people of our gender.

It can be difficult for both men and women who want to enter non-traditional work areas. Ideas of femininity and masculinity are often closely linked to the jobs people do.

How things stand

Research

A report by the National Skills Forum - Closing the Gender Skills Gap - found that women are less likely than men to work in certain areas, such as science, technology and engineering (known collectively as STEM). The fact that there are skills shortages in these areas is a good reason to encourage more women to consider a STEM career.

There are certain sectors, such as childcare, which are dominated by female workers. Pay rates in childcare are much lower than other, male-dominated, areas of work.

Early stages

According to research, much of the careers advice that young people receive still reinforces traditional choices. Work experience and Apprenticeships are also influential in forming people's opinions of the work they might be suited to. Unfortunately, there is significant gender imbalance in Apprenticeships.

What is happening?

On the whole, girls do better than boys at school. There are more female than male university students; the female students are also more successful. However, many of the women who follow vocational, rather than educational, routes are faced with limited choices.

Women make up almost half of the workforce, yet their skills are, in many cases, restricted to certain sectors. Research has found that more women would have considered looking into more diverse career areas if they had been made more aware of pay-rate differences.

On the positive side, women are now gaining management positions in UK business at a younger age than men. Also, more women than men are now entering the professions of law and medicine. But still only a third of managers are female.

Why change?

One of the major reasons to change is the skills shortage we are seeing in a number of areas of work. As the National Skills Forum research showed, there is a link between skills shortages and gender imbalance.

There are other benefits of equalising the gender balance where it is heavily weighted one way or another. These include more accurately reflecting the gender spread in the population as a whole, and giving people more choice in
who they employ to provide a service.

The way forward

Early stages

Career options need to be widened right from the earliest stages of young people's development. There is too often the assumption, both in education and in the home, that girls won't be interested in sectors such as construction or engineering, and boys won't be interested in roles in childcare or nursing.

By making information and advice available to everyone, regardless of gender, people can begin to make confident and informed choices on what they can achieve, in whichever area of work they choose.

Employers

Currently, it is much more likely to be large employers who have a policy of challenging gender stereotypes. This is partly because they are more likely to have the resources needed to focus on this issue, and have positions such as 'diversity officers', who visit schools and recruitment events to encourage less typical people to apply.

However, in industries such as construction and plumbing, there are large numbers of small employers, who don't necessarily have the resources to address the gender issue.

Those employers who don't yet realise that there is a vast potential workforce out there, should be looking beyond their existing boundaries. Industries and businesses assumed to be 'male' in the past can change and help realise the potential of all employees, male or female.

Sector Skills Councils

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) have a responsibility to address gender imbalance in their sectors. Initiatives such as CC4G (which started out as 'Computer Clubs for Girls'), which is run by e-skills UK (the SSC for IT), show that there are practical solutions to current and future employee shortages in industries where there is under-representation of female employees. Currently only 20% of the IT workforce is female.

Looking ahead

Change won't happen overnight, but as we have seen, there are a number of ways in which the situation can be (and is in some instances) addressed.

In recent research, 70% of young people believed that more jobs would be done equally by males and females in ten years' time. And more adults than in the past have a positive attitude to challenging traditional work patterns.

Many employers see the business case for recruiting non-typical staff. 70% of employers recognised that non-typical recruits could bring positive benefits to their business. 80% thought that a better gender mix would create a better range of skills and talents in their sector.

Individuals, employers and the economy would all benefit from redressing the gender imbalance in the workplace.

Further Information

Contacts

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