



**DEBORAH THOMAS** LOOKS AT THE TREND TOWARDS RECRUITING PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCE.

# Outside the comfort zone

**B**oardroom performance and diversity remain high on the agenda for shareholders and the public. Recent research shows the need to extend searches beyond personal contacts to broader sources of new talent and highlights the importance of having on board a range of different backgrounds and experience to enhance corporate decision making. The issue reaches down to all levels. Companies are being actively encouraged to stimulate the inclusion of a more diverse range of people.

The change needs to be made if for no other reason than because it makes good business sense to reflect customer bases and to promote a better understanding of diverse backgrounds. It is also important to exploit fully the wider gene pool of talent and to recognise the potential contribution of a wider portfolio of skills. Diversity enriches the decision-making process and brings positive benefit to a company.

Recruiters are in a unique position to influence and should be challenging companies to take a broader and more accessible brief to the market.

Research shows that organisations with high-quality human resources and personnel systems that incorporate equality deliver better products and services and ultimately better shareholder value. It endows an organisation with a wider portfolio of skills, which must be good for business. You will be able to develop role models for younger people, encouraging them to stay and become the next generation of leaders and influencers.

**DIVERSITY TIPS FOR COMPANIES** Ensure that the company focuses on grooming individuals from diverse backgrounds. For example, offer employee network schemes, career development programmes, mentoring or flexible working policies. Identify a strategy to search a broader pool of talent and use your network to access the latter, including internationally. Encouraging people to step outside their comfort zones helps prepare them for broader or more senior roles. Research shows that the more diverse the group making decisions is, the more informed those decisions are likely to be. The composition of a board and other high-profile internal departments sends out strong signals about the values of the company

It is key that this policy receives commitment at the board-level. Without that, it will not succeed. Demonstrate your commitment by setting specific goals and timetables. Ensure everyone in the organisation knows what you are working towards and that your company reflects your consumer base. This should enable you to understand your customers even better.

Using criteria-led selection when recruiting

can help to ensure that you avoid narrowing your field of vision. Research shows that we tend to appoint in our own image, so interviewers need to approach the process with a more open mind.

Take action straightaway. Once you start to recruit more diverse members to a team or group, the process becomes easier. Companies need to think proactively and accommodate lifestyle issues, not just tolerate them. You need to think ahead with succession planning in mind. Make sure that you provide appropriate training and development and that your approach is inclusive, with feedback encouraged. Don't wait for change to occur. Publicise the steps you have taken to make things change in your organisation. Make sure they are highlighted.

It is thought that in about seven years' time only a third of the workforce will be male and under 45. Now is the time to review your structures.

**HOW DOES THIS WORK FOR THE INDIVIDUAL?** The concept of diversity should lead to more criteria-led selection, where candidates are judged not just by their technical skill set but by a broader range of drivers. Guidance for individuals includes:

**Network** A number of organisations – women's networking groups, for example – support diversity. Make sure that people are aware of what you do well. Participate in corporate activity where possible. Be clear about what you want and what you have to offer. Target your skills to where you know those skills would be most useful. Find out which companies are pushing for further diversity. Build good relationships.

**Acquire the right skill set** This is particularly relevant at senior levels. It's not just about the technical fit, it's about your other skill sets. When we think about board-level appointments (including non-exec) those other skill sets really do make the difference. Some of the key skills include: financial literacy, due diligence and corporate governance, communication skills and marketing/PR, strategic planning, evaluation and succession planning skills, knowledge of human resources, leadership, and committee and project management experience.

**Take on a leadership position** If the opportunity presents itself, seize it, whether it's on a project team, taskforce or non-exec position in a corporate or a voluntary environment. It all develops the skill set.

**Believe in yourself** Because if you don't, no one else will. You must have the confidence to get where you want to go. You're in for the long haul. Keep acquiring skills that will one day take you to where you want to be.

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