



Workplace Diversity in Asia: Pressing Issues and Barriers



DIVERSITY
& INCLUSION
IN ASIA
2005



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Introduction

On 22 and 23 November 2005, Community Business held the Diversity & Inclusion in Asia 2005 Conference in Hong Kong. The focus of the conference was on Women in the Workplace and Cross Cultural Effectiveness.



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At the end of the second day, a facilitated 90-minute dialogue was held with delegates to identify the most pressing diversity issues in Asia and the greatest barriers to addressing workplace diversity for companies in Asia. This session was called Meeting of Minds¹ and this paper outlines the findings from this session.

Objectives

This paper summarises the findings of the Meeting of Minds session which took place at the Diversity & Inclusion in Asia 2005 Conference. This report presents the responses to the following questions posed to participants:

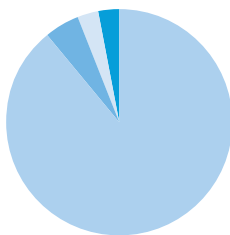
- What are the three most pressing workplace diversity issues in Asia?
- What are the three greatest barriers to addressing workplace diversity for companies in Asia?

For the purpose of these questions, Asia was limited to Hong Kong, Mainland China, India and South East Asia. South East Asia was taken to include: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Profile of Participants

In total there were 242 delegates who attended the Diversity & Inclusion in Asia 2005 Conference. 89% of delegates were from the corporate sector and 91% were from Asia. Furthermore, by job function the majority of delegates were split equally between business managers and human resource and diversity specialists. Figures 1, 2 and 3 give a further breakdown of delegate profiles.

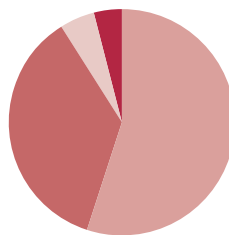
Figure 1



By Organisation

- 89% Corporate
- 5% Government
- 3% NGOs
- 3% Academic

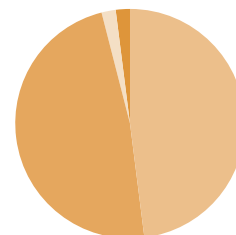
Figure 2



By Region

- 55% Hong Kong
- 36% Rest of Asia
- 5% North America
- 4% Europe

Figure 3



By Job Function

- 48% Diversity/HR Specialist
- 48% Senior Business
- 2% Government
- 2% Academic

The Meeting of Minds session took place on the second day of the conference and there were 121 delegates present for this session. We are assuming that the profile of the participants of the Meeting of Minds session mirrors that of the whole delegate list – with the exception of the delegates from the US who left the conference early because of the Thanksgiving Holiday on 24 November 2005.

¹ The term 'Meeting of Minds' is a trademark and intellectual property of Options Information Company and is not for use without express written permission. Community Business thanks Options Information Company for the free use of 'Meeting of Minds' terminology at the Diversity & Inclusion in Asia 2005 Conference.

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Methodology

- Planning for this facilitated dialogue took place pre conference where the facilitation process was developed by Community Business and communicated to a group of sixteen nominated table facilitators by email. Just prior to the Meeting of Minds session all table facilitators were briefed about the process and the key objectives.
- At the Meeting of Minds session 121 participants sat on tables of 6-10 per table. The process was explained to them by the lead facilitator, Shalini Mahtani, Chief Executive Officer of Community Business. On each table, the nominated table facilitator answered questions, facilitated table dialogue and recorded responses in the predefined format.

What are the Three Most Pressing Workplace Diversity Issues in Asia?

Process

Individually each participant was given a list of workplace diversity issues and asked to spend a few minutes prioritising what they considered to be the three most pressing diversity issues for each of the four geographies: Hong Kong, Mainland China, India and South East Asia. The diversity issues included on the list are shown along the x axis in Tables 1-4 below. Participants were asked to rank the top three priorities from the list of diversity issues in each geography and to only comment on those geographies in which they had experience. They were also given the option to add other issues to the list of diversity issues and these are grouped in the 'Other' category in the tables below. The scoring system they followed was: Priority 1 equals 3 points, Priority 2 equals 2 points and Priority 3 equals 1 point.

The table facilitator added up the total score for each issue and geography for their table and submitted this to Community Business using a predefined matrix. After the conference, Community Business added together the scores from each table to produce a total score for each issue and geography. The highest scores represent what participants considered overall to be the three most pressing workplace diversity issues.

Findings

Tables 1-4 show the total scores of each diversity issue by individual geography. Table 5 aggregates this data to illustrate the three most pressing issues in the region.

Table 1: The Most Pressing Workplace Diversity Issues in Hong Kong

Number of people who commented on Hong Kong: 59

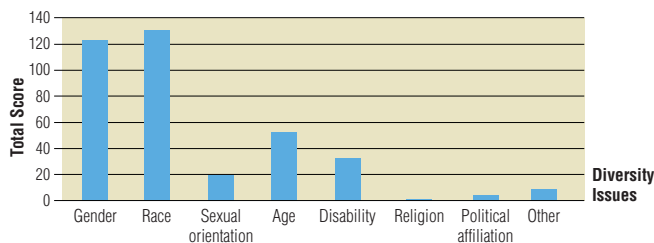


Table 2: The Most Pressing Workplace Diversity Issues in Mainland China

Number of people who commented on Mainland China: 54

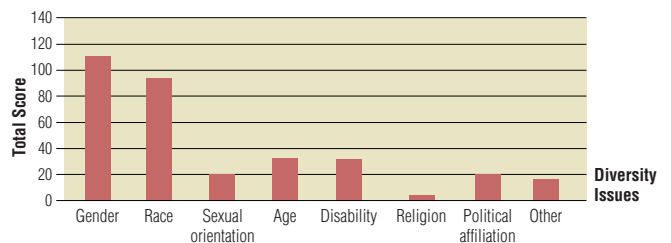


Table 3: The Most Pressing Workplace Diversity Issues in India

Number of people who commented on India: 35

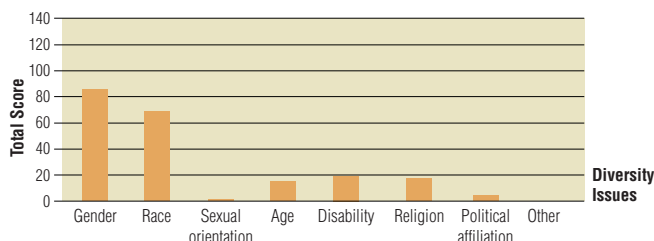
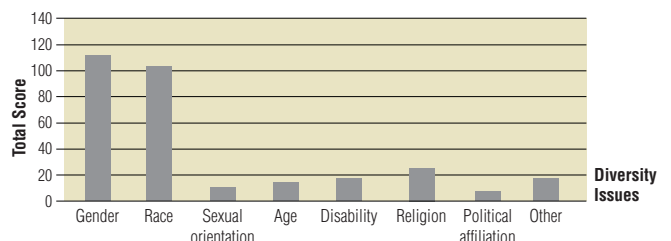


Table 4: The Most Pressing Workplace Diversity Issues in South East Asia

Number of people who commented on South East Asia: 51



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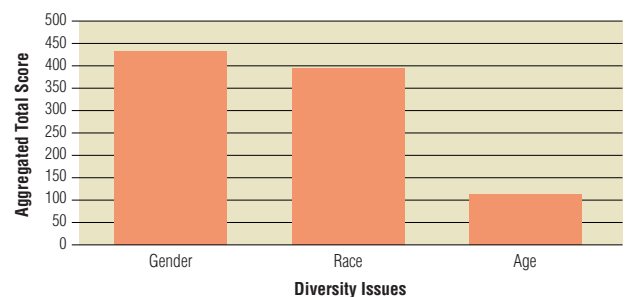
Looking at Tables 1-4 reveals a difference in priorities across the region. Some notable differences include:

- Gender is the number one priority in all geographies and race is number two – with the exception of Hong Kong where race is number one and gender is number two.
- Age is the third most pressing diversity issue in Hong Kong and Mainland China. In India it is disability and in South East Asia it is religion.
- Sexual orientation barely receives a mention in India.
- Religion is considered more important in India and South East Asia than Hong Kong or Mainland China.
- Political affiliation is more relevant in China than in the other geographies.

The ‘Other’ category included a range of issues such as work-life balance, social status and openness to change.

Table 5 clearly illustrates that the three most pressing workplace diversity issues across the Asia region are discrimination on the grounds of gender, race and age. Gender and race are overwhelmingly the top priorities with age following as a far third.

Table 5: The Three Most Pressing Workplace Diversity Issues in Asia



What are the Three Greatest Barriers to Addressing Workplace Diversity for Companies in Asia?

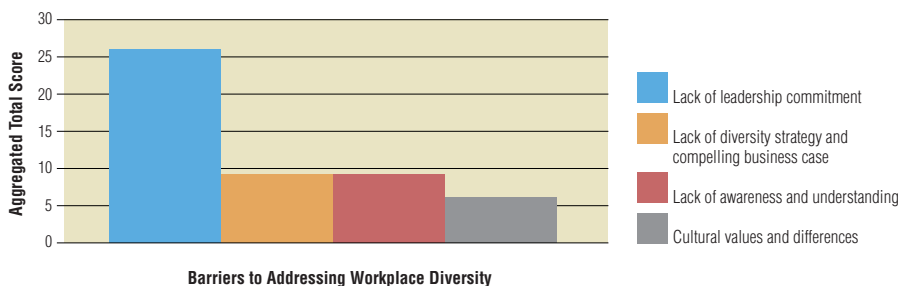
Process

Individually each participant was asked to spend a few minutes on their own listing what they considered to be the top three barriers to workplace diversity in Asia. The table facilitator then invited the delegates to feedback their views to the group and compiled a master list of all the barriers identified. The table facilitator subsequently facilitated a group discussion and worked with the participants to reach consensus on the top three barriers, if necessary asking participants on the table to vote. The summary results are shown in Table 6.

Findings

Table 6 below shows the three greatest barriers to addressing workplace diversity for companies in Asia.

Table 6: The Three Greatest Barriers to Addressing Workplace Diversity for Companies in Asia



The biggest barrier to addressing workplace diversity in Asia was clearly identified as lack of leadership commitment. Lack of diversity strategy and compelling business case and lack of awareness and understanding were identified as an equal second. Cultural values and differences were identified as the third greatest barrier.

Other important barriers that did not make it to the top three included lack of resources and investment, mindset of employees, resistance to change and lack of role models and success stories.

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Conclusions

Gender and race discrimination in the workplace were cited as the most pressing issues for companies to address in Asia. The relatively high participation rate of women in the workforce and the “multicultural” workforce which some companies boast about in the region are obviously not going far enough to address the underlying discriminatory environment that exists in the workplace.

The most commonly discussed issues under gender were work-life balance and the need for flexible work practices as well the glass ceiling which has resulted in a lack of women at leadership. Discussions regarding race focused on blatant discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity as well as culture. The dialogue of culture highlighted the often indirect requirement in some western multinationals for Asian people to assimilate to the predominant Western culture and those Asians who are deemed to be more “Western” are often given an unfair advantage.

Age discrimination was ranked overall as the third workplace diversity priority for participants and as individuals live longer and medical care continues to improve, an older working population is inevitable. Employers, particularly in some industries, will need to move away from the mentality of “young is best”.

It is also important to note that there are differences across the region and although age is the third priority in Hong Kong and Mainland China, in India the third priority is disability whilst in South East Asia it is religion. This highlights the need for diverse diversity initiatives across the region which are reflective of the local needs and culture.

In reviewing the other workplace issues of discrimination such as disability, religion and sexual orientation, for example, it may be that these issues did not make it onto the list of the top three most pressing issues because there is a lack of awareness on these subjects and not necessarily because of the lack of importance and need – certainly, this is what our experience at Community Business tells us.

Not surprisingly, the greatest barrier to companies addressing workplace diversity is a lack of leadership commitment. Unless diversity has the commitment of the board and senior management it will always be seen as an add-on to core business – a non essential. This is evident in many global companies in Asia by the shamefully small diversity budgets and the lack of manpower allocated to diversity in the region – this despite many international companies claiming that China and India are the economic powerhouses of the future.

Participants jointly rated the lack of a compelling business case and lack of understanding about diversity as the second barrier to diversity. It would seem plausible that because management in Asia does not understand the local diversity issues nor see the business benefit to diversity that they do not take the leadership commitment to drive it.

Cultural values and differences came up as a significant barrier to diversity. Even where there is an awareness and understanding of the importance of diversity, it seems initiatives can often be hampered by the personal assumptions or limited frames of reference of those involved in Asia in developing or implementing policies. So for example a policy to hire for diversity may not actually achieve its aim if the people responsible for the process do not themselves represent a diverse range of backgrounds and views.

Moving Forward

For companies committed to diversity in Asia there are three crucial steps to take, particularly if you are faced with the barriers mentioned above. First and foremost, find out what the diversity issues are in the locations you are concerned about. One of the best ways to do this is to engage in open dialogue with your staff – preferably using an independently facilitated process. This is key to understanding the diversity priorities which apply to your workplace as well as staff members’ anxieties. These findings are crucial to proving to leadership the importance of diversity and will assist you in developing your diversity strategy and business case.

Secondly, invest in training of your staff in Asia using Asian case studies and examples. Training is fundamental from a risk management point of view, particularly in jurisdictions like Hong Kong where companies are vicariously liable for the actions of their staff under current equal opportunity law and must therefore take reasonable steps to mitigate potential liability. Asia based training is also vital to enhance awareness of diversity in the workplace – our experience at Community Business has shown us that there is much need to breakdown stereotypes and challenge commonly held views in order to move the diversity dialogue forward.

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Moving Forward (continued)

Lastly, there is a lack of workplace diversity research in Asia and companies must pool together to invest in research across the region that highlights best workplace practices, explores how to address barriers and measures the business case of diversity. Research must be undertaken at a country level – we know after all that a one size fits all strategy or initiative will not work for the entire region.

Moving forward as a business community in Asia we have to go beyond the mere rhetoric of “diversity and inclusion”. If we want the best talent in this competitive global world, leadership must drive the diversity agenda to recruit, retain and develop people based on merit. It is a matter of survival.

Acknowledgements

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For More Information

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Community Business is a unique membership based charity whose mission is to lead, inspire and support businesses in Hong Kong to continually improve their positive impact on people and communities. Community Business provides training, facilitation and advice to some of the world’s largest companies in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its major areas of focus include diversity in the workplace, corporate community investment and CSR strategy and policy. Founded in 2003, Community Business currently has 31 member companies. For more information, visit www.communitybusiness.org.hk