

Since the murder of George Floyd last spring and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests across the globe, the need to stamp out institutional discrimination and foster better inclusion and diversity has come to the fore. But with gender pay gap reporting having stalled during the pandemic, and ethnicity pay gap reporting still waiting in the wings to be officially legislated, many organisations are still failing to make significant headway.

Yet for many, work to improve inclusion and diversity in organisations far precedes the events of 2020. Bernadette Thompson OBE, deputy director for inclusion, wellbeing and employee engagement at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government), has worked in inclusion for the UK

government for several years, including at the Home Office and the Treasury.

Prior to Thompson's appearance at this year's CIPD Annual Conference and Exhibition, *People Management* grabbed some time in her busy diary to find out what she thinks is stopping organisations taking their diversity efforts to the next level, and the role HR has to play.

Why should organisations invest in improving inclusion and diversity?

In the private sector, it equates to money. That's simply it. Research shows you're able to do good business. But for me, it's just the right thing to do. It's all about people's lived experiences within the workplace. We spend an awful lot of time at work, so it's making sure that people are able to thrive and be themselves so that they can give their best. It's the moral case for me rather than the money.

Why do some organisations struggle to get a handle on their I&D?

Time is a problem when there are so many other things that need doing, as is finding good analysts who can unpack all the data.

But some of this is historic. Back in the day, it was fine to have an all-male meeting because no one asked 'where are all the women?'. Now, it would be awkward if you walked into a room and there were no women. But it's taken a long time to get to that point. If the people in the room making the decisions don't have the lived experience, it's not going to bother them.

How can businesses make I&D more of a priority?

It's about accountability – what gets measured gets done. If it's a big deal for the CEO, it will get done. We need to treat it the same way as our commercial functions – have the same level of accountability, the same kind of governance, and make sure that if it's not done, there are consequences. It's a wicked problem, because if it were simple, we would've solved it by now. Leadership needs to be driving this, but by asking the right questions and demonstrating that it matters to them, not just by having glossy strategies.

Should there be more public reporting around organisations' I&D metrics?

Definitely. When we started being intentional about the gender pay gap, organisations started looking at it, then realising they had to publish it and that they perhaps weren't going to look good. Once they start publicising figures, they realise they don't want to be at the bottom of the league table. More of that will help to foster action.

What role does HR have to play in improving I&D among its own ranks?

It's about role modelling. In HR, we point our fingers at the business and tell them what they should be doing, but the rest of the fingers are pointing back at us. I find it slightly

“HR can't tell the business off without looking at itself”

Government diversity leader, advocate and public speaker Bernadette Thompson OBE on how businesses can level up their inclusion efforts

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embarrassing. We've got an awfully long way to go. In most organisations, the two groups that are the most underrepresented are people with disabilities and people from a BAME background, but when we talk about HR, we have to mention gender as well.

It's not right for us to tell the business off without looking at ourselves. I always advocate succession planning by that underrepresented group – who's the next disabled person that can take your job? Who's the next BAME person that can take your job? Who's the next man that can take your job? And if that person doesn't exist in your organisation, do they exist outside? And if they don't then there's a problem, because we're just recycling the same kind of people.

What advice would you give to an HR department struggling to improve I&D?

I always say 'don't boil the ocean'. There's no point trying to juggle so many balls, everything will just drop. Start by encouraging more people to declare their diversity data. You'll be amazed at some of the reasons some people choose not to say and who they think is seeing it.

The second thing is to look at your most underrepresented groups and focus on those, looking at the employee lifecycle, because that really shows you what's going on in your organisation. Employee networks also really help – any organisation that's serious about inclusion and diversity needs to talk to the people who can actually tell them about their lived experiences. There's no point wanting to solve a problem for someone with a disability and not talking to them.

You also need to invest in adequate resources. Inclusion is as important as digital and finance. You need professionals, not just someone who has passion. Passion is good, but you need qualified people who understand how to lead the people's function that is I&D. **PM**

*Thompson will be appearing at this year's **CIPD Annual Conference and Exhibition** on 3-4 November in Manchester and online. To view the conference programme and book your ticket, visit cipd.co.uk/ace