

TIMESONLINE

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Bringing down the barricades

Keeping firms aware of anti-discrimination laws and disability rights is just part of the diversity consultant's role. Diana Bentley investigates

The term "diversity consulting" may once have made some managers' eyes glaze over or brought on jokes about political correctness — but not in these more sober times. Organisations in the public and private sector are now well acquainted with what diversity consultants are about.

Viki Ford, managing partner at Kingshill Management Consultants, says: "Diversity means to us all the differences that exist between people of diverse backgrounds. As consultants, we provide products and services that help businesses become more efficient in the way they understand and deal with differences between people — from their employees to their suppliers and customers."

Legal issues such as sexual and age discrimination have been a critical driver in the rise of diversity consulting. Nicholas Lakeland, head of the employment law unit at City law firm Silverman Sherliker, says: "Employers may be enlightened about these matters but they've also been well advised to put in place training and diversity policies to ensure that they've got a statutory defence against charges of discrimination."

Notions of corporate social responsibility and demographic changes also prompt companies to embrace diversity matters. "By 2010, we estimate that less than 20% of the working population will be white, male, heterosexual, non-disabled and under 45," notes Helen Cooke, diversity consultant at Reed Consulting.

Diversity issues have also come to be a part of the concern to lift management standards: expert advice is seen as a way of helping organisations find the best people and nurture talent. Lubna Haq, a consultant with the Hay Group, says: "To view diversity as a matter of equal opportunities or legal necessity or see it as a problematic area is quite old-fashioned. We're more concerned with outcomes and a better understanding of personal relationships. It matters because everybody is interested in becoming more effective."

Audits that provide an independent assessment of where an organisation stands on a specific point of diversity are a crucial part of the consultant's work. "We look at where our clients are and how they measure up against others in their field in a particular area," says Tina Hallett, leader of Price Waterhouse Coopers' UK diversity group. "We consider blocks clients are facing in an area, like the lack of women in senior roles."

But anybody wanting to become a diversity consultant, take note: would-be consultants need to think about why they want to focus on diversity — a personal commitment to a cause or a crusader mentality is not always considered a good starting point. Advisers must be able to maintain objectivity.

Consultants should be prepared for plenty of personal development. "It's a fast-moving field. Legal, corporate and social responsibility issues and demographics change frequently," says Ford. "You must be at the leading edge of developments and research in these areas, or conduct research yourself, and this usually must be done in your own time." A shift from another field of consulting is possible but those wanting to make it must be prepared for a steep learning curve. Consultants also face competition from within client organisations. City law firm Herbert Smith this year hired an "inclusivity manager".

Consultants in this sector consider the work rewarding. "It's about giving people opportunities and the chance to achieve to the best of their abilities," says Cooke. A specialist in disability consulting, she says consultants can help dispel fears about minority groups. "In my field, organisations think that they'll have to make big changes to employ people with disabilities. Often only small changes are needed to accommodate people in wheelchairs at work. Many people don't know about the government funding available. It's good generally to help people feel confident about dealing with the disabled."