



## **Diversity benchmarking project in full swing**

By Gwen Thomas, Complinet

A new benchmarking group set up by specialist consultancy Proactive Reputation Management in association with Complinet is enabling a range of leading employers to share best practice on diversity. Harish Bhayani, principal of PRM, talks here about the background to the project and the issues it is addressing.

### **What motivated you to set up the benchmarking group?**

"A passionate belief in diversity and in the value of benchmarking. Diversity is a relatively new field, so there is much to be gained by comparing and contrasting the approaches and experiences of different organisations. We are able to contribute our consulting and benchmarking competencies, and our objectivity. Complinet is a natural partner for PRM on this project because of our common understanding of diversity needs and complementary resources."

### **How is it different from other diversity projects in the marketplace?**

"There are many so-called diversity projects, but actually a lot are single-issue equality projects. That is one of several differences; the Diversity Benchmarking Group focuses on diversity in the round, not on specific equality streams or even equality as a whole. We invested in a long development period with prospective members to understand what their needs are. Other differences that make this project unique are:

- programme content derived primarily from prospective members' needs; not from what is already in the marketplace.
- the high quality of our member organisations
- a diverse membership, including both private and public sector, and international member partners who contribute learning from regions worldwide
- our own perspectives on what diversity is, and what it is not
- a focus on culture, to help understanding on how to formulate robust diversity strategies and embed diversity in organisations
- the commitment to diversity of each participant; each is active, and therefore is able to contribute. As a result, all participants benefit.
- a comprehensive survey process, exploring a very wide range of issues
- other practical activities to support members on an ongoing basis."

### **How were the member organisations selected?**

"We have avoided blanket invitations for organisations to join. We identified those we knew to be active or demonstrated a serious commitment. We also aimed to create a diverse mix of member organisations. We try to share with and encourage other organisations via articles like this"



**Does it make sense to benchmark across industry sectors, particularly as certain sectors seem to be more established in this area?**

“Absolutely, yes. It is illogical to not benchmark diversity across diverse sectors! It is even more important currently, because diversity is a relatively new field and this makes benchmarking across a wide variety of organisations even more valuable. Of course, this does not mean one overlooks opportunities to benchmark internally, ie within a sector or even smaller groups such as a global or diversified organisation.”

**What aspects of diversity is the Diversity Benchmarking Group exploring?**

“We have made it is pretty much ‘soup to nuts’, although we are open to building in new aspects as we learn. Examples are: exploring working definitions of diversity and equality, approaches, practices, activities, cultures, organisation, successes and failures, trends, demographics.”

**Do employees that are far removed from HR/diversity functions really understand what diversity means or is it just perceived as the latest buzzword?**

“There is a lot of confusion and need for guidance, even among some closely involved in the subject. That is not a criticism, it just reflects that it is still a relatively new topic to most people. For example, no two people anywhere are likely to quote the same definition of diversity.”

**How is diversity different to equal opportunities?**

“How long have you got?! In our client training activities we spend a lot of time helping delegates explore and understand for themselves precisely these differences. You cannot take full advantage of diversity unless these differences are clear. We use a guide that explores about twelve specific differences. Directionally, diversity adds and protects value, equality only protects value. They are quite separate ways of thinking about difference.”

**Which sectors do you consider to be most ahead of the game?**

“I think it is more of a case of some sectors being more active than others, rather than ‘ahead of the game’. There are significant differences in approaches across sectors. Certainly the public sector and financial services are two of the most active. In some other sectors it is not so much whole sectors as individual companies who are very active.”

**Do you think it is fair that diversity standards now contribute to the overall rating in appraisals at some firms?**

“Not only is it ‘fair’, it is necessary. An organisation cannot expect its people to take a subject seriously unless its importance is reflected in its reward/disciplinary systems. It’s simply about consistency and promoting desired behaviour. What is



key is giving the appropriate weighting to diversity alongside other important performance requirements.”

**Do you think certain firms are approaching diversity from a reactive rather than proactive perspective, ie to reduce the risk of a high-profile discrimination claim?**

“Undoubtedly. And while that is one element of the whole business case, in my view it is only one, relatively minor, element.”

**Do some executive boards just pay lip service to the concept of diversity because it is seen to be politically correct?**

“Unfortunately yes, and I think this is because they either have not taken the trouble to explore it deeply enough or they have been misguided by others inside or outside their organisations. The danger they face is that such an approach very quickly generates cynicism among employees and other stakeholders, ie a negative impact.”

**Does diversity always sit within HR?**

“No, sometimes it exists as a function in its own right, or sometimes as part of an overall corporate social responsibility function. No single home exists nor should it; the correct location depends primarily on how much importance the organisation places on diversity and how influential the prospective location is in the organisation.”

**What is the best way of communicating diversity values to employees, particularly in large organisations?**

“It is a matter of connecting through a combination of ‘spirit and structure’. Spirit refers to aspects such as top management commitment and a values-based foundation. Structure refers to aspects such as written policies, surveys and formal networks. Spirit alone is likely to fail to consistently reach all parts of an organisation, whereas structure alone is likely to lack conviction.”

**What do you consider to be the biggest misconception about diversity?**

“The belief among many that it is about equal rights and nothing more. As a result organisations are losing opportunities to improve their short and long term performance and enhance the fulfilment of their stakeholders”

**What are the key issues organisations are facing?**

“Lack of understanding of the potential of diversity to add value, lack of internal resource and lack of competent service providers.”

Case studies on the participant organisations will be published on Complanet over the coming weeks. For further information contact PRM at 0845 330 6738 or [dbg@prorepman.co.uk](mailto:dbg@prorepman.co.uk).