Baker McKenzie.

INCLUSION & DIVERSITY 2021 VIRTUAL SERIES

Social mobility: The importance of an intersectional approach

Tuesday 22 June 2021, 1.00 – 2.00 pm BST

What does intersectionality mean?

- Intersectionality is a framework for thinking about a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages.
- There is growing evidence which demonstrates that some women and men, ethnic minority groups, those who identify with a disability and those from the LGBT+ community, are excluded from various levels of participation in society and work.
- When layered with lower socio-economic factors - and indeed where several factors or potential disadvantages combine - the levels of exclusion and marginalisation increase.

What are the struggles those with intersectional identities face?

- Mental energy trying to fit in. It is a common experience to feel exhausted trying to hide certain identities or using mental energy trying to fit in with those around you, e.g., using an English name, hiding race/ethnicity and hiding or adapting your accent.
- Identity tension. There can be a tension with the various identities making up where you have come from and comparing with the perceived identity of who you are with this career.

How does intersectionality play out in the workplace?

- More overlapping identities, more challenges. Generally, the more overlapping identities a person has, the more challenges they face for a number of reasons. Other people without these struggles have had it easier, and these success stories are the exception rather than the norm as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds have to work much harder than their peers to get through the door.
- Limited opportunities. Certain cultures have different views on hierarchy, patriarchy and notions of gender. This can mean those with intersectional identities may find it more challenging to find their own voice in meetings. Coupled with an immigrant model minority mind set and being from a lower socio-economic background, this can translate to limited opportunities.
- Sense of not "fitting in". It is a common experience for those with intersectional identities to feel that they do not fit in. A lack of cultural awareness in the workplace can lead to a non-inclusive work environment, which makes it difficult for individuals to participate in certain spaces or fit in. Examples of how this may manifest include work events with a focus on alcohol (which often exclude racial/ethnic minorities). Individuals can also feel they don't fit in with their accent and not having visual representation at senior levels to identify with.
- Lack of confidence. A common experience is lacking "private school confidence" which can hold people back from speaking up, even where they have a valid contribution in a work scenario. Overlapping identities coupled with a lack of confidence can translate into a feeling of not wanting disagree with consensus where others do not have the same overlapping identities for fear of what that may look like to those without intersectional identities.

How does intersectionality affect career progression?

- Once those from socially mobile backgrounds have climbed the ladder, they still have to work harder to progress down to numerous factors. These factors are layered upon one another the more overlapping identities an individual has.
- Factors limiting progression:
  - Lack of visual representation and mentors with first-hand experience of the same overlapping identities.
  - No access to career advice from family members around career progression.
  - Work events not being inclusive (e.g., alcohol focused events).

What can organisations do to encourage transparency and progression in law?

- To make a difference, organisations should act differently and should be prepared for backlash in doing so. Organisations cannot use the same systems they have always been using.
- Intersectional senior role models. Better decision making and better engagement is needed across the legal industry. Organisations need people with intersectional identities to be at board level, as this is where the real decision making and impact can take place.
- Mentoring and coaching. Organisations should support and coach those with intersectional identities and be clear they are doing this, with the data to back it up.
- Encourage authenticity. It is crucial that organisations create safe spaces for people to be their authentic selves. Embedding effective support networks and creating a strong understanding of allyship are important to help those with intersectional identities to express themselves authentically. Speaking out, encouraging people to share their social mobility journeys and actively fostering inclusion are some of the ways we can encourage authenticity in the workplace.
- Hire a more diverse workforce. Be ambitious about diversity targets and input a strategy to implement that. It makes it easier for the employees who are role models. Look to non-Russell Group universities, tap into networks beyond the normal networks (minority newspapers)
  - Look in the right places / through the right mediums.
  - Use the right communication strategies.

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#WeAreNotNeutral

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