

12 October 2018

Blog article by Frank Fleming, Equality Commission, Advice & Compliance

Gender pay gap reporting – giving STEM Employers a competitive edge

The New Scientist reported earlier this year that women working in science and engineering earn a fifth less than their male colleagues in the UK. And the gender pay gap increases with age and experience.

“Increasing diversity in physics can lead to all sorts of good things”, the words of Northern Irish astrophysicist Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, who was overlooked for her part in the discovery of radio pulsars when the 1974 Nobel prize was awarded to her senior male colleagues. Given her experience as a minority person working in science, Bell Burnell has chosen to donate the £2.3 million she recently received from the Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics towards supporting female and ethnic minority physicists.

Now more than ever, increasing diversity and inclusion within STEM businesses is vital if ‘good things’ are to be realised. The STEM skills shortage has been well documented as a barrier to economic growth, and in Northern Ireland, the situation is becoming critical with the STEM shortfall set to increase as future demand for STEM skills rises.

The current skills shortage is due to many factors. A major concern is the low number of pupils choosing core STEM subjects and the high drop off rate (65% in Northern Ireland) of girls studying STEM subjects between GCSE, A level and Further Education. Businesses are dealing with the fallout from this, with UK employers reporting 43% of STEM vacancies being hard to fill due to insufficient numbers of qualified candidates.

In the face of increasing competition to recruit talented staff, STEM employers need to take all steps to ensure their businesses are attractive to discerning STEM candidates, particularly female applicants, who are likely to choose the most diverse, inclusive, reputable and innovative employers.

Those working environments most likely to attract women in STEM are those where gender equality is central to business and where:

- there is a deep understanding of diversity at senior level
- women are represented in management roles

- a gender inclusive culture exists
- there is clarity around working practices and procedures such as maternity leave, shared parental leave, flexible working, working part time, working from home
- employees have an awareness of unconscious bias and have received training
- there is a mentoring process
- there are robust processes around recruitment, promotion
- systems for remuneration are fair

The issue of pay has been in the spotlight this year with the introduction of Gender Pay Gap Reporting Regulations (GPRR) in GB, and the proposal to bring in regulations in Northern Ireland. These new regulations are presenting businesses with an opportunity to show transparency around pay and to address differences in average pay between men and women.

Employers using gender pay gap reporting information to reduce their pay gap are likely to reap the benefits when recruiting staff. Research conducted by Business in the Community has indicated that 92% of female respondents would use gender pay gap data to choose between two potential employers. It also found that more than half the women surveyed would favour the company with the smallest pay gap, or the one that was doing the most to close it.

The regulations are empowering women to raise issues about pay at work. Trade Unions are encouraging employees to have conversations about pay and women are realising that they have a right to discuss and challenge pay rates where inequality exists.

The regulations will not be introduced in Northern Ireland until there is a functioning Assembly and it is unclear how closely they will mirror those in GB. Although the detail is yet to be decided, Northern Irish employers are advised to start preparing and to ensure systems are in place to gather necessary information. Conducting a gender pay reporting “dry run” will help to put employers on the front foot, ready to publish information on which they will be judged.

We can help STEM employers prepare for the introduction of GPGR regulations by discussing the topic at the next employer STEM network meetings. We will be hearing from an employer who has already carried out a gender pay report. The first session is in Malone House Belfast on 25 October, 10am-12:15pm, and in the City Hotel, L/Derry on 26 February 2019. If interested in attending, please contact Frank Fleming, ffleming@equalityni.org or Heather Wilson, hwilson@equalityni.org.

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