

‘View from the Chair’ article published in the Business Newsletter, 5 March 2019 by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Executive, Equality Commission NI

Recruitment must open, fair and without bias

Language is something we rely on every day in order to communicate one to another. The words we choose, how we phrase our sentences or the way in which we emphasise certain phrases have the ability to influence the response given. So, it is important that we ensure we are clear when we communicate, in any form, written or oral.

Words are often interpreted differently by people - depending on their experiences or viewpoints. Take, for example, terms such as inclusion, diversity, equality, equality of opportunity, fair treatment, equal treatment. They all seem to address the same issue, but in different contexts can mean different things.

Choice of words can also be of vital importance to employers, particularly when it comes to recruitment. Employers will be aware that they have to reflect very carefully on the words they use in advertisements, when setting out job descriptions and personnel specifications, and in setting criteria. Clarity in all areas is essential.

Their first priority will be to identify clearly what the job involves and what they are looking for in the applicant. For example, listing what qualifications and experience are needed and the qualities which they feel the person will need in order to carry out the job appropriately.

They also need to ensure that they are not importing non-essential elements into the recruitment process. Things that might be desirable, but not core to being able to do the job. “Unconscious bias” - a discussion point recently in an entirely different context - can be a factor in any recruitment process unless those involved are on their guard against it.

Every recruitment exercise will involve setting out some attributes that an employer will deem essential, others merely desirable. For any of these categories there is a danger that requirements are set out which go beyond the essentials needed for the job, things that might re-inforce underlying perceptions of the type of person the employer is seeking.

Such unconscious prejudice is a vehicle through which, unwittingly, some workplaces end up replicating existing imbalances in their workforces. For example, does a job really require a person to be in a particular age group? If not, don't seek a candidate with “youthful enthusiasm”. If you set a criterion which rules out flexible working, you need to reflect on any potential impact on women or a person with caring or family responsibilities.

It is important to avoid setting criteria that would disadvantage or exclude applicants from any of the groups protected by equality legislation, unless, of course, it can be objectively justified. Groups covered by equality laws are age, disability, gender, race, religious belief and political opinion, and sexual orientation.

The reason to employ an open, fair and inclusive recruitment process, though, should not be seen as a defensive exercise to avoid discrimination complaints – though that is essential. It is a way in which you can make sure that you get the best possible candidate for the job. Un-necessary requirements and poor recruitment decisions, especially if fuelled by what may be unconscious bias, can exclude the best candidates for your post. To state that “*We’ve always done it this way*” is not the best way to advance and improve, in business or in life.