HR in the Boardroom: Diversity roundtable

The BSA, in conjunction with Associate Members Trowers and Hamlins LLP and New Street Group, held an event on diversity and inclusion in the business services sector. The event brought together speakers from a spectrum of diversity-focussed organisations and HR Directors from service providers to discuss how the business services sector is approaching diversity and inclusion within the workforce and to share best practice.

Why diversity and inclusion matters
Not only is seeking a diverse and inclusive workforce at all levels the right thing to do, it also makes good business sense. A diverse team brings diversity of thought and different experiences and viewpoints. At decision-making levels of the organisation, particularly board level, this diversity of thought can lead to better choices. Diversity and inclusion also rates highly on clients' agendas and best practice can be shared both ways.

Diversity in the talent pipeline
In order to see diversity prevail at every level of an organisation, the talent pipeline should be a priority. For some organisations this will mean looking at how people are attracted into the organisation. For others it will be about progression through the company.

There are a number of ways organisations are trying to tackle this challenge. Common strategies include staff networks and senior sponsorship for diversity initiatives. Organisational culture is important for everyone, not just minority groups, as well as a willingness to try new approaches and see what works.

As part of progression routes, rewards and bonus systems within organisations can be where differences between groups become more evident. It is important to look at data and understand any patterns. Unconscious bias in policies and processes should also be looked at, using data to ensure unintended consequences of seemingly fair processes are identified. The Army was cited as a good example, where reaching defined objectives leads to promotion, irrespective of personal characteristics.

Challenges
One of the challenges identified is knowing where to start as diversity and inclusion is a far reaching topic. Do organisations start with a particular group and extend the programme over time or does this in itself discriminate? Looking at data, the business case and understanding what is driving organisations to put in place diversity and inclusion initiatives can help to make this difficult decision.

Another challenge is around communication and use of inclusive language. Inclusive language is one area where employees at all levels may lack confidence and fear causing offence. Networks and facilitation of open conversations can help to mitigate this and training is available.

In a client-focused sector such as business services, the culture within the client organisation and unconscious bias on the part of the client also form part of the picture. Understanding the client relationship and developing a relationship where diversity and inclusion can be raised are vital to address any issues that may arise and to align diversity and inclusion agendas.