Breakout Session - Key Takeaways

Breakout Session D – Progression: How do you create the right environment for success?

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Having invested in outreach and recruitment, the next challenge is progression. Retaining and developing candidates from less privileged backgrounds is essential if diversity is to be achieved at the highest levels of our profession.

In this session, we looked at the different techniques and considerations involved in creating the right support and environment for success, from mentoring and sponsoring to work allocation and workplace culture.

Insights from research:

The Bridge Group
Conducted research into who gets ahead in the legal sector. Exploring if there is a correlation between training, early career progression and social mobility. The Bridge Group worked with 10 leading law firms, and looked at data relating to 3,000 early career professionals and 600 hours of interviews. The trainee and associate population across those firms was deeply unrepresentative of the eligible candidate pool. Only 54% of early career solicitors were educated at UK state schools compared to 82% of the national population at key stage 5.

There is an assumption that firms with diversity at entry level will have that diversity reflected at senior levels. Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were 75% more likely to be in the top decile of performance. But they were also less likely to progress and more likely to leave. This is the business case for diversity in the legal sector.

There are biases and inconsistencies in hiring and myths around meritocracy. Two things are important:
1. Those things that seem to be important to getting ahead – confidence, gravitas, being ambitious, being visible – those characteristics have little to do with job performance and are much more available to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. A strong recommendation is to have greater specificity about talent – being clear on what matters, how performance is judged, how you get ahead.
2. Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds have agency but do often describe expending energy on assimilating into unfamiliar environments. Question if you are helping minority groups to settle in better. Or, if you want to create a dominant culture that enables people to thrive equally.

There is a range of practical recommendations which include tools like mentoring and having clear progression routes. Also, things like defining talent, defining how pay is realised – systematic things that matter most.

Connectr

Findings on belonging:

- 34% of people feel they completely belong with their current company
- 72% of those who don't feel like they belong are considering leaving their role within the next 12 months

The Government Taskforce for social mobility has found, through 121 interviews and roundtables, that there is need for:

- More sponsorship and allyship
- More mentoring including reverse and cross company
- More tools for managers
- More storytelling and role models
- Social mobility data on progression

Insights into the impact of mentoring with purpose:

- Mentoring programmes boost minority representation at management level by between 9% and 24%
- Mentoring also improves retention and progression rates by as much as 38% as compared to non-mentored employees
- 79% of millennials see mentoring as crucial to their career success
- Mentees are five times more likely to be promoted
- Mentors at six times more likely to be promoted
- 89% of those who have been mentored will go on to be mentors

Need to be aware of 'marginal mentoring' (referencing Harvard Business Review article on this)

- Where mentoring is for the few, not the many
- Disengaged and/or untrained mentors
- Not correctly resourced or evaluated
- Poor and slow mentor-mentee matching
- Lack of recognition for mentors

Key elements of mentoring with purpose:

- Importance of mentor matching and having choice of mentor
- Clear objectives with every 'relationship' and must measure impact
- Train your mentors
- Technology as an enabler. Removing the need for 'contacts' (fair access). Ensuring delivery at scale.

Thoughts and reflections from the group

- Reverse mentoring – when done well, supports belonging. Being matched with someone who is very different to you can be very powerful.
- More firms are setting up internal staff networks – drives change, facilitates important conversations, builds connections across staff.
- There is a need to tackle contradiction when clients demand greater diversity in teams, usually rooted in ethnicity and gender, but in pitches, they want to meet the 'right' people which is rooted in social mobility.

- There is a risk that firms feel they have to choose a favourite diversity 'child' when inclusion, looking after the whole 'family', is important.
- Sponsorship is a key way to ensure individuals get high profile work and activities.
- Understanding of how different diversity characteristics intersect is very important. We don't live and experience our diversity in isolation. The relationship between diversity groups is important too.
- Collecting [social mobility] data is key.
- The key is middle management, where change actually happens in an organisation.
- Creating storytelling videos to support inclusion and belonging.
- Taking on apprentices in other parts of the organisation also helps encourage conversation about backgrounds.

Key takeaways
- Set up internal social mobility network groups.
- Tap into the power of storytelling, especially from senior leaders of their lived experience.
- Provide fair access to mentoring and use technology as an enabler.
- Senior leaders have benefitted from reverse mentoring to better understand others who are not like them.
- The need to define 'talent' as a driver for progression and not 'fit & polish' – and be brave to challenge clients on this and use the data on the high performance of those from less advantaged backgrounds.

Additional resources:

Harvard Business Review: Why your Mentorship Program Isn't Working
Bridge Group Socio Economic Background And Early Career Progression In The Law – 2018
SMC Financial And Professional Services Sector Toolkit – 2021