

“A Positive Disruption”: Local Council HR Managers Want Diversity

The Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria’s (ECCV) consultations on strategies to increase culturally diverse employment in local councils across Victoria uncovered an intergenerational fissure over the benefits of diversity for Human Resources managers.

A group of HR managers from a range of local government councils including inner urban and outer growth areas, met for a roundtable discussion on increasing cultural diversity in the workforce. ECCV conducted the roundtable hosted by the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) in November 2015 in Melbourne. Those at the meeting discussed how to achieve greater cultural diversity in the local council workplace while dealing with intergenerational sector challenges.

There was a general feeling that people from culturally diverse backgrounds were under-represented in the local government workplace. The HR managers represented a change in generational attitudes as they wanted to open up local government workplace recruitment to greater cultural diversity. As one person put it, “most of the change needs to be internal”.

The attitudes of HR managers in the discussion reflected a generational schism between enthusiasm for new ideas, innovation and creativity and a perceived “cradle to the grave career” culture in local government. In many cases local councils now employ people in their 30s and under whilst there are many people in their 50s and over continuing their employment in local government. The younger managers represent the views of ‘millennials’, sometimes known as ‘Gen-Y’, with a large employed group consisting of the ‘baby boomer’ generation.

According to the *Henry Intergenerational Report (2010)* the first Australian baby boomers began to retire in 2010. In 2014 MAV explained to ECCV that whilst the turnover of staff in local government was low, there would be future opportunities as the workforce was ageing.

This impending retirement of a large cohort of baby boomers within the next five to ten years will open up opportunities for a change in the employment culture. These opportunities are already reflected in the age groups of some of the HR management groups that are made up of younger people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

These managers recognise how important it is for their workplace to reflect the diversity of the broader Victorian population. In some cases they are facing a lack of internal. There is a growing need to ride this wave of change that is moving towards genuine inclusiveness and cultural diversity in the workplace. A new awareness exists for the importance of creative and innovative thinking to pierce what one person described as “the bamboo ceiling”.

Despite most local councils having diversity strategies in place, the practice of retaining a lack of diversity in local council staff across local government remains strong.

Key Consultation Feedback

Key points

- There was a perception that in order to create a level playing field, training is needed to change the recruitment approaches and unconscious bias that currently inhibits culturally diverse job seekers.
- HR managers felt that increasing culturally diverse representation in the local government workforce was the right way to go.
- Despite diversity policies being in place there are still obstacles and risks around relevant practices in local councils.
- There were several examples where bilingual staff were welcomed and encouraged in the local government workforce.
- There was confusion and a lack of understanding about the benefits of culturally diverse talent.
- Innovative practices around culturally diverse recruitment were trialled by some HR managers with limited and varying success due to lack of support and follow through.
- ‘Not the right cultural fit’ was a common excuse for excluding culturally diverse job seekers.
- Smarter recruitment for a culturally diverse workforce requires stronger support from senior leaders for innovative strategies and creative approaches to hiring culturally diverse staff.

Participants’ insights

Intergenerational perception in the workplace

The millennials, sometimes called Gen Y, describes a generation of young people born between 1981 and 2000. Increasingly, HR managers represent such a generational sub-group where acceptance of diversity is becoming a common sense way of thinking. At times they feel like victims of a culture of exclusion that adversely affects multicultural Victoria.

A mix of diverse professionals, younger HR managers in local government are passionate, collaborative and innovative with a commitment to making the world a better place. They are confused and frustrated by the disconnection from policy to practice in their daily work. An opening comment was: “How do we do that grey stuff around the edge to make it more accessible to diverse jobseekers?”

One person said: “In many cases local councils employ people below 30, also more females, and then there is an approximate age around 50.”

Another added: “Having a diversity policy or framework is important but we need an advocate. If a director or CEO takes leadership on diversity it really helps.”

A typical response was: “Things have changed. Now if you see someone who is 7 to 10 years in a role you think they are too settled. There is a culture of change.”

Another suggested: “You have to be creative and open minded. You can do some research but what diversity brings is just that. I’m from Europe and had experience in big multinationals. I had experience but had no

'Melbourne experience' and my English was not that good. You don't have an AFL team to banter over morning tea. When they hired me I made so many changes to hire staff from overseas and not just from local government. But we don't promote it. That's what diversity means."

Barriers and Benefits

Obstacles to employment in local govt were about subtle exclusion.

Many agreed that: "...if you're going to provide services for your community, the staff capacity to do so needs to be there. By having more multicultural staff you will get that improved capacity."

The younger generation HR staff want to connect with people: "I don't want to miss out on a whole lot of people who have amassed a tremendous amount of skills by asking them to try to negotiate our recruitment practises. I'd just rather meet them. We're not doing anything in that space."

Intergenerational issues also matter to HR staff: "I think advertising to the multicultural sector can be a little problematic, from my understanding, that community is about the older members of the community,...who are the groups [within groups] that we want to target? How can we know?"

"Private companies deliberately embed diversity principles- but they had the CEO as a champion. There was not so much resistance. We had senior accountabilities and that flowed down. "

One person commented: "[Policies and directives from Councillors are]... massively important as it gives you legitimacy, endorsement to go to HR or any department and say a different recruitment process is Council endorsed."

Recruitment practises

Some HR managers felt confused and frustrated about having diversity policies in place that were not effective in practice. Passionate HR managers felt unable to speak out to try out new and creative recruitment practices. They felt their ideas and efforts were blocked off.

All the HR staff questioned how accessible their recruitment processes were today and that they were aware that this was an issue beyond recruiting culturally diverse employees. It was about updating

their processes to account for a culturally and physically diverse workforce.

There was general agreement amongst the HR professionals that interviews were 'not great' for seeing the best qualities, skills and personality of the person in an unnatural situation. "For culturally diverse applicants this can become magnified depending on the cultural competence of the interview panel." A pertinent comment was, "They say recruitment is by merit but no effort seems to be made to deal with cultural differences."

Lack of local experience is a significant obstacle to workforce entry for new graduates and a double disadvantage for some people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Some HR managers in the roundtable described local government interviews as unfair, for example, "if you don't have experience you are out of the pile which is evidenced in abundance." Others commented that "people don't value diversity."

When culturally diverse job applicants didn't make it through interviews some HR managers posed general queries such as "I'm curious whether it's conscious or unconscious? I mean, how much is the cultural fit playing into these hiring practises? "

People felt that "there is an unwritten criteria about fitting into the team, especially into a small team like ours... but in small teams if somebody doesn't fit culturally they stand out quite a bit."

One person commented: "I think the recruitment process is not attractive. It has jargon and is not appealing to culturally diverse communities because it is not accessible. So, getting back into the communities, we had an information session in languages for people interested in getting work with local government even part time. Simple things like service plans came up."

Over-focusing on selection criteria "inhibits people from displaying open-mindedness to someone who doesn't fit the norm. We see local government experience as the be-all and end-all."

People admitted: "We are a culture in local government. We use our language to protect our culture, to protect our tribe, and our group is very effective. It's very hard coming from another culture. I don't even understand my own position description. We exclude culture and languages."

HR professionals noted: "Culturally diverse applicants might act more formal because of the situation, as a Council can be an intimidating culture for some. I think they cover it up."

One person commented: "Interviews are such an unnatural situation. You're trying desperately to sell yourself. To just judge a person on a set of criteria, on a very structured even stilted interview processes is hard. The probationary period becomes very important. If there is a mismatch then how do we deal with that?"

One person asked the question if hiring a culturally diverse person can be a 'positive disruption' to a less diverse team in terms of bringing in new ideas and experience and building that cultural capacity.

Inclusion in the workplace

A few HR managers expressed confusion and uncertainty about the psychological safety and inclusive environment in their workplaces. One person said early in the discussion, "People don't value diversity". ECCV noted that, although major reports such as Deloitte's *Waiter Is That Inclusion in my Soup?* (2013) make a strong case for the benefits of diversity; this has not filtered into the hiring practices of local government in Victoria.

A typical response was: "Local government is very good for the policies but the challenge is how that translates."

Deloitte's report defines inclusion, "... as an active process of change or integration, as well an outcome, such as a feeling of belonging. In essence, when organisations or individuals adapt their practices or behaviours to respond to people, then people feel included." (2013:12)

Innovative practices fell flat: "Unconscious bias is definitely there. In one project we loaded a bus full of culturally diverse youth to help them apply for jobs and none of them got a job. It was incredible."

People said: "In terms of culture, a lot of wording in local government settings struggle to understand the local community."

One person explained: "The best qualified might not always fit into the team. It's a whole different criteria. How do we clean up our backyard for when someone starts the job? We had one employee, a female engineer of Asian background and she expressed

feelings of discrimination because of her Asian background and accent. So for me, it's about how do we do some clean-up to be inclusive in our workplace?"

A HR manager said: "I have asked culturally diverse staff like, where do you pray? And they say well I sneak out and try not to be noticed, it goes for 5 minutes, almost less time than going to the toilet, so it shouldn't be a big deal."

Another commented: "In terms of multiculturalism if we say we have a prayer space allow for different holidays up front, this will influence our reputation with communities, so we tell people upfront before the advertising and interviewing. I'm going to keep using Islam as an example; we can work with that with different holidays like Ramadan."

Seeking better recruitment strategies

HR managers were seeking better strategies to improve the recruitment of culturally diverse job applicants. They were keen to make the transition to change in the employment culture however they need the support of the baby boomer generation.

HR managers noted that "educating managers about unconscious bias is important. Being aware and finding balance, stepping outside the comfort zone and what that means in practice" were crucial.

A manager said that they did not have the capacity to do culturally diverse recruitment. It was the same when it came to occupational health and safety. "We need culturally diverse education. When you are stressed or don't have enough time you can see that as an add-on."

People said: "In real terms employees go from one council to another so it's a bit closed."

Another commented: "Our selection panel tries to address their biases to see past that and recognise peoples' skills."

A few local councils had best practice examples of cultural diversity recruitment. "Where I work, we run unconscious bias training for managers. We talk openly about it. So for second interviews for some people we must customise it for each job."

One HR person said: With our local policies, we have changed our recruitment process. We had a Muslim staff member and he said I actually know our

community leaders as part of his selling point. It's been really successful for us.

People said: "A recruitment agency is another area we need to work on. I asked them do you understand our diversity policies? What leverage do we have to understand how other people work?"

A person commented: "Anyone with a second language is a real asset to Councils. Everyday use such as filling in forms is much easier. Drawing on staff experience like that is a wonderful program."

One person said: "We interviewed a gentleman from the African continent. Somehow he didn't cut it straight away. The interview didn't sit comfortably with us but it turns out he's incredibly qualified. We took a chance and gave him a go and he turned into the most amazing staff member. In the interview he didn't always make sense because we didn't allow him to perform. So we made more space and he emerged as himself and he's great."

Opening up local government culture included this story: "We have a pool of African people who have never learnt to swim. We got some African lifeguards and I said I know someone fantastic. They said they want him but after looking at the application he said what's a 'deliverable' what's a 'criteria'? I said, man, you grew up in Kuwait, have this big community bag and for me, I don't know how to tick that box even when I can see it. His spoken English was good enough but one of the questions was, 'what do you do if you're bitten by a blue ring octopus' and he didn't know what that was. So I helped him with the process and came as a support person. I didn't think the panel would see him. Now he's been there for years and is just brilliant. We've gone from being a male Anglo 'rough-as-guts' culture to the last ten years when we have had more than 10% from his background and more than 50% of Muslim staff. We put in prayer mats and spaces, special toilets, made the effort to ensure they knew they were wanted."

HR professionals said: "There is no central process for when we want to become creative. For instance, I know of one workplace where it was seen as good to explore options for community leaders to be part of the interview panel. Having community members on panel blew me away."

People said: "One council has built LGBTI into their recruitment process and we encourage applications from people with LGBTI background. That little cue might be the prodding they need. In interviews they

ask a situational question to establish their values and ability to be inclusive in their job. That applies to everyone equally."

Innovative ideas

ECCV was encouraged by hearing younger HR professionals from local government focus on creativity and innovation as tools to improve recruitment practices to diversify their workforce. To realise these ideas in practice the HR sector wanted stronger support from their leaders. This is consistent with Deloitte's (2013:15) findings on inclusive leadership, "*...that the behaviours of senior leaders and managers influence employees' perceptions about whether an organisation is authentically committed to, values and supports diversity, and whether they feel included.*"

A person said: "In one of my jobs they did the second interview outside the building in a cafe. We did that. We went to a coffee shop. We had food and coffee and they asked more questions and the second interview worked much better."

Another added: "In one of my previous interviews she took me for a drive and I had the interview. It was very informal. The feedback on my written application was also the best one but she took me for drive for the interview too and that worked really well. Why don't we do that more often?"

Everyone agreed: "Plain English for all PDs is crucial. Also plain English in job ads. I find it strange that I can't even understand half the jobs we advertise with all the jargon."

"In [our Council] people in middle management positions are changing. Mentoring after being hired makes a difference. The feedback and loyalty and commitment after mentoring have made a big difference in our Council."

They noted: "Participants expressed the importance of a multiple action plan supported by all levels in the local council." Others added that advisory panels can be useful in some cases.

One Council said: "We do cultural training at the start for every employee. It's part of our core approach so they can't say later that it's seen as an add on. We want the breadth of experience and to look at the community we work for to provide this."

A person said: "If you look at the big banks, I spoke to someone at Westpac. They say they market it. She said to local government, "you don't market what you do. We have marketing people dedicated to our brand. But local government don't advertise to explain their diversity initiatives."

Future directions

ECCV believes that:

- Any efforts put into supporting the ideas of the millennial generation of HR managers will pay off to improve the workplace.
- There is a need to build relationships between the younger generation of managers and the baby boomer generation in local councils.
- Local Government should find strategies to employ more people from culturally diverse backgrounds including a fair induction and orientation period.
- It is crucial to implement strategic practises that promote the benefits for a culturally diverse workforce.
- It is important to promote inclusive initiatives that improve understanding of the benefits that cultural diversity brings to the workplace such as '*A Taste for Harmony*', a diversity in the workplace project by the Scanlon Foundation and the Diversity Council of Australia.

References

A Taste For Harmony Project, Scanlon Foundation and the Diversity Council of Australia., Victoria, <http://www.tasteofharmony.org.au/>

Intergenerational Report 2010, Dr Ken Henry AC, Department of the Treasury, Commonwealth of Australia, 2010.

Waiter, is that inclusion in my soup? A new recipe to improve business performance, Deloitte and The Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, May 2013.

About ECCV Employment Policy Briefs

ECCV's policy briefs are short snapshots from our roundtable discussions on employment. They are not forums or education events. Culturally diverse community members, leaders and service providers are invited to attend both open and closed discussions on what is an evolving and complex issue.

To respond to the increasing rate of social change and also government policies on issues such as social cohesion, ECCV has developed a new way of consulting, analysing and sharing insights from each roundtable that give a voice to multicultural Victoria on issues that matter. We post our briefs online within two weeks. After launching a series of social cohesion policy briefs in 2015 we have now added a new series on employment and languages.

The information is a combination of direct quotes from participants, policy analysis and human observation grounded in ECCV's 41 years of consultation with multicultural Victorians.

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For more information contact Carl Gopalkrishnan, Senior Policy Officer at email: cgopalkrishnan@eccv.org.au and telephone: 03 9349 4122