A joint welcome from the Presidents of ATT and CIOT

Welcomes

30 July 2020

Glyn Fullelove: A state of collective blindness

In Matthew Syed's book 'Rebel Ideas', he discusses how organisations can exhibit a state of 'collective blindness' – sometimes with catastrophic consequences. He illustrates this with a discussion of how the CIA managed to miss obvious signs of an upcoming
attack prior to 9/11. The signs were obvious – to those with a certain cultural background. However, the CIA had a highly homogeneous cultural character – white, male and elite.

While the politicians who oversaw the CIA were concerned about the lack of diversity in the agency, their concerns were generally trumped by the CIA leadership pointing to the recruitment criteria they had used for many years. These were a set of criteria based around excellence – recruiting the 'brightest and best', irrespective of background. In short, they believed that political correctness should not be put above protecting
national security. However, when a set of criteria established by a white, male elite consistently recruited those from the same cultural background, a lack of diversity at the CIA was to prove disastrous for the nati onal security of the USA.

The point is not that we should encourage diversity for diversity's sake – it is much more profound. Complex problems can rarely be solved from one perspective alone. Complex businesses can rarely be run successfully in the long term based on a single skill set. Perhaps we should consider why auditing firms seem to be unable to escape from a regular procession of audit failures – could it be because there is a form of 'collective blindness' present?

In the tax profession, we can risk ‘collective blindness’ by over-emphasising one skill set; for example, technical excellence. High technical standards are crucial and must be maintained. However, it is also highly probable that our firms, companies and even the Institute Council will benefi t from looking to build leadership groups that achieve a mix of backgrounds, cultures and skills to tackle the wide-ranging issues the tax profession faces. It is against this background that we have established our new committee.

Glyn Fullelove
President, CIOT

Jeremy Coker: Inclusion is being asked to dance

At the CIOT Cambridge conference last year, I was approached by a member who was pleasantly surprised that I was President. When pushed, it transpires it was more surprise than pleasantness. She lamented what she saw as the lack of representati on.

After the conference, I reached out to her to ask if she would articulate her concerns so that I could take them forward. She did not. While I was glad that she had voiced her concerns, many people from diverse backgrounds will be aware of the risk of being ‘labelled’ just because one has an opinion that is ‘different’. Also, she felt that no one would listen.

Recent events mean that some are listening. I have also been educating myself. Conversations are, by definition, uncomfortable. It seems most need to start by individuals being made aware of privileges they do not realise that they have. Despite the discomfort of such conversations, eminent writers on such matters say that a refusal to recognise the existence of said privilege(s) when they are pointed out to them will
mean that such individuals continue to inadvertently cause discomfort for others.

I am eternally grateful to quite a few female Past Presidents for being where I am today. We however recognise that we can always do bett er. We can learn more by educating ourselves; and also by encouraging and engaging with people from across the whole spectrum. It is this engagement that will lead to the educati on. To borrow a phrase: ‘Diversity is being invited to the party; Inclusion is being asked to dance.’

We are continually looking for volunteers from all backgrounds for our Steering Groups and frequently advertise in Tax Adviser and the weekly newsletters. We have sent out the invitations. I look forward to many newly involved members leading the dance.

Jeremy Coker,
President, ATT

JANE ASHTON

Diversity is about including people from all different backgrounds and accepting people for who they are.

I count myself lucky because many of my friends from my childhood and throughout my working life are from diverse backgrounds. I have appreciated the different opinions and ideas they have which can improve decisions and enrich conversations.

I did not come into tax with a ‘silver spoon’ in my mouth – neither of my parents went to university and I went to a huge state comprehensive school. But through working hard, a mindset to grasp every opportunity that was offered and volunteering for various causes (not all to do with tax) I met amazing people who gave me the encouragement to progress throughout my career.

Here at ATT, we are committed to providing equal opportunities to job applicants, staff, students and volunteers regardless of sex, sexual orientation, marital status, age, race, ethnic origin, religion or belief or disability. Now, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we are supporting all our staff to work from home.

We have volunteers from a range of diverse backgrounds which is incredibly important because they help to shape the organisation and what we do to meet our charitable objectives. We are constantly bringing new volunteers into the organisation to sit on our various steering groups and all that we ask is that you bring enthusiasm and a commitment to shape and improve the Association going forward.

If you are interested in being a volunteer, whatever background you come from just do it, or if you want any further information contact me or one of our many volunteers.

HELEN WHITEMAN

I arrived at the CIOT from a legal regulator CILEx Regulation. It is a professional body whose regulated community is 75% female. Furthermore, 13% are from a BAME background and 80% of that community do not have a parent who attended university. It is the only non-university route to a career as a lawyer.

I was very proud to be the Equality and Diversity Champion, developing and delivering a plan of action to further enhance and improve our approach to education, membership, governance and law reform. It was pleasing to see other professional bodies across many sectors respond to a report from Alan Milburn on Fair Access to the Professions, called ‘Unleashing Aspiration’. What a motivating title!

The more you immerse yourself in learning about people, their background and experiences, the more you walk in the shoes of others, encourage discussion, help to promote change and embed good practice. Like ATT’s chief executive Jane Ashton, I grew up with a broad mix of people around me who taught me from an early age to listen and respect the opinions and backgrounds of others.

Here at CIOT, my aspiration is to deliver on Council’s ambition to ensure that our strategy, actions and behaviour are inclusive, transparent and open to all, regardless of background. I am pleased to be working with my ATT colleague Jane to review and produce revised terms of reference for the Equality and Diversity Working Group, which Glyn referred to in last month’s Welcome article. These will go to both CIOT and ATT Councils in Autumn with a proposed joint action plan. Our key stakeholders are staff, members, volunteers, employers and those third parties who access our services, such as members of the public, other charitable/professional bodies and suppliers. On a practical level, while there is a lot of good practice in place, there is more we can do. We are listening and responding to feedback from staff, some of which is featured in this article. We are also looking to engage as broadly as possible with you. Please keep an eye out for future articles and communications to get involved.