We must all be aware

General Features



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As part of our series on diversity in tax, we share the personal experiences of Georgiana Head and Dipti Thakrar about their battles to secure equality in the tax world

Diversity and unconscious bias Georgiana Head reports that we must all be aware that unconscious racism – and other discrimination – is still taking place in recruitment

I don’t think that I have ever been as proud of being ATT qualified as when I read the joint welcome message from our ATT President Jeremy Coker and CIOT President

Glyn Fullelove in the July issue of Tax Adviser, explaining that the Association and the Institute are committed to welcoming and valuing all their members and students regardless of their background and identity. In the midst of this torrid time of Covid-19 and racial unrest, there is in this message an oasis of calm and good sense.

I have found most of the news in the mainstream media unsett ling because my own 13 year old son is mixed race, with light brown skin, green eyes and a fabulous towering afro. Generally, I never think anything of his racial mix: he is just Alexander, the fastest on the Xbox, the tallest in his class and the kindest of chaps, who is brilliant at tricky social situations and currently totally obsessed by coffee. I remember when Barack Obama became president of the US thinking that things were changing for the better.

Then came the news that Huugo Boateng, another 13 year old mixed race boy, was injured by police when they att empted to arrest him and his father during a charity bike ride along a river path. He was totally innocent but was knocked off his bike and handcuffed and threatened with a Taser. Huugo looks very like my son. This happened in Tottenham in North London. I realised then that we did have to take Alexander's race into consideration at times, as we worry that when he is old enough to drive he will be pulled over by the police.

It made me think of one of my oldest friends, a successful marketing director and businessman who loves flash cars and spends his spare time rallying and fixing cars and motor bikes. On average, he gets pulled over by the police 10 times a year. He purposely drives carefully within the speed limit because he knows as a black man he is likely to be pulled over. I'm a blonde haired white woman, and I have only been pulled over once in my life and that was for driving too slowly.

Institutional racism exists in Britain; we may think it doesn't but it does. We may think we are different from the US, more liberal and more understanding but we still have unconscious bias. If you don't think this is true, have a look at the accountancy firm, law firm or company that you work in. Think about the most senior tier of people in your company. How many of them are male? How many are over six feet tall? How many are white British?

We unconsciously see tall white men as leaders. I'm not devaluing these partners or saying they don't deserve their roles; I'm saying that they had a competitive

advantage purely from their height, and that is even before their race or sex. A good book to read about unconscious bias and how we make decisions is ‘Blink: the power of thinking without thinking’ by Malcolm Gladwell.

Generally, I think the tax profession is a great place to work. It is modern and progressive, encouraging of women and has traditionally been a place for social mobility with partners coming through from both the state school system and from HMRC. Today, firms are actively trying to get a more diverse population. Apprenticeships and A-level trainees are some of the ways that they are trying to break down class and social barriers. The larger accountancy firms have great LGBT support groups, and accountancy firms get good placings in the Sunday Times 100 Best Employer lists.

However, having worked in recruitment for the last 23 years, I have seen things that in hindsight I wish I had made a more active stand against. It started with friends from Asian families, who changed their names by deed poll to ensure that their graduate applications would be given the same consideration as their white British counterparts. In the late 1990s, working as a junior recruiter, I had a client who was a partner in a law firm who used to say to me: ‘They have an Indian sounding name – are they fully anglicised?’ The candidate in question went to Eton and was at the time working for the Queen’s own law firm. The same client asked me if a woman in her 50s was overweight and would be able to manage their stairs; and if a woman in her 30s was married as he thought she would be trying for children. In both cases, I politely explained why he couldn’t ask these things and that I had put forward people who I thought were genuinely brilliant at their jobs. I was hugely relieved when I moved to Yorkshire and no longer had to deal with him.

After that, I sometimes sent out CVs with the names of the candidates blanked out. While some candidates asked me to do this for reasons of confidentiality, I started doing it when I thought it might prevent a candidate from being at a disadvantage; for example, where a candidate had a traditionally Nigerian sounding name. It is an unpalatable truth that a candidate with an African sounding name – no matter how good their experience and qualifications – is less likely to get an interview than a candidate with name that sounds British. People don’t do it intentionally, but they literally read the CV differently.

So what do I think? I think things have got better in Britain in 2020. We now have laws that mean we don’t disclose birthdates on CVs or anything that might overtly

point to someone’s sexuality. Employers can’t ask candidates or recruiters if someone is married or might be planning a family. Our employers are publishing their gender pay gap figures and more recently statistics about their racial mix. But remember that under the 2011 UK census for England and Wales in 2011, 86% of the UK population is counted as white, 7.5% Asian, 3.3% Black ethnic, 2.2% mixed ethnic groups and 1.0% other ethnic groups. Consider whether your company is representative of this mix. In the tax profession, we are educated and privileged, analysing information and legislation as part of those roles. We need to use those same skills to look inwardly.
Georgiana Head is director of Georgiana Head Tax Recruitment.

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Many forms of discrimination

Dipti Thakrar reminds us that colour prejudices are not the only discrimination that we face

From a young age, I was told that the biggest challenge to be faced in my career would be racism. I was told that my colour would impact my career, and I would face obstacles at every step of the way. This was not true for me. I worked in temporary jobs in small companies in Leicester all the way from 18 to 22, when I got my graduate position with KPMG, and I never experienced outward racism. I was treated with respect, worked hard, took instructions well and delivered. I was judged on my work ethics, so I relaxed – my colour did not impact my career then or now. Once I am invited to a worktable, I am judged on my craft not my colour, and I thank all the companies I have worked at for this.

At school, I was guided by two white teachers who formed the foundations of my ambitions. Both encouraged me to continue studying. One teacher came home to meet my father, who did not see the point of college and thought that as a woman, it should be enough for me to work in his shop. Without teachers such as these, people from non-professional backgrounds do not know how to navigate into the professional world.

The challenges that I have faced at work have arisen when colleagues have not taken care to understand my culture. Racism is very subliminal in the professional world. An individual should feel comfortable about their culture and be able to talk about it to their colleagues. I am not asking for businesses to issue an encyclopaedia on cultural differences, rather that people should increase their own awareness to understand their colleagues.

My biggest career challenge came after my pregnancies and maternity leaves. When I saw the blue line on the pregnancy test (the first of four children), it was the happiest day of my life. But I was also quite sad and told my husband that now I would never be a tax director for a large company or a partner in a big four firm. I had no role models of women in senior tax roles to look up to. Fifteen years later, I wish I'd had more faith in my own capabilities.

Before my first child, I was aiming for a leadership career in tax with the full support of the senior team. At my next appraisal 18 months later, I was told that was no longer possible as there were no places for career advancement at that time. I started to think about the key attributes of a tax director and partner position, and had hundreds of conversations with people at all levels in the tax world. I realised I wanted to:

- be a good leader;
- have a connected and valuable network;
- be a creative team player;
- be hugely collaborative in the workforce;
- understand my business and give excellent commercial tax advice;
- have an excellent salary; AND
- have the title of tax

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I achieved all the above but did not get the title. I had to re-evaluate my career. Having children meant that I was not able to be a traditional leader, so I became something different. I have the freedom to work my hours, attend events and add value in and out of work. I get requests for my opinions on job roles, candidate searches, technical papers and senior interview preps, among other things.

Many recruiters stopped calling me after I mentioned I wanted a part time, flexible senior role. The feedback was that CFOs believed tax cannot be delivered by someone working flexibly and from home. My reply was always the same: please give my CV to the CFO and I will sell myself when I get to the interview. Two CFOs have offered me a job within 20 minutes of my interview, convinced that I could work from home and will not let them down.

Early in my career, a very senior manager gave me some great tips. He said that being a woman and coloured will not impact you. However, what you do with the knowledge you learn and how you use it will. Find something you are good at and make it work for you. Know your strengths. Then ask yourself: am I good at this and does it make me happy?

If you choose to have children in your career, keeping an open dialogue with work and your partner is particularly important. It will allow you to plan your return to work after your children. Talk to other people who have taken career breaks. I found the return to work after my first two children very hard. Looking back, I feel I took on too much as I wanted both my senior tax role and to be the primary career for my children. When I was forced to decide, I chose my children.

Take opportunities to talk about yourself if you are asked to introduce yourself in the meeting. Say something personal about yourself and perhaps about your culture. If you feel safe, find a way to communicate your boundaries, especially those you are unable to move. It is not your organisation’s responsibility to research your culture but it is your responsibility to tell your organisation what is non-negotiable. Do not allow anyone to disrespect you, whether it’s a small joke or a little comment made in a meeting. If it makes you uncomfortable, call it out and be confident to say why you feel this is an inappropriate comment.

Organisations should ensure that a diverse selection of CVs are always presented for review and Group HR departments should call managers up when this is not happening. Perhaps approaching smaller, more bespoke recruitment firms can help expand the diversity of the CVs coming in.
Organisations wishing for diversity at all levels should network and sell their business in diverse communities and cultures, encouraging talent to flow from communities who would not originally apply to them. If we want to see diversity at senior levels, then we MUST support the education and growth of diverse talent from early years. For example, could organisations offer more scholarships or paid

placements to people in poorer communities who do not receive the same quality of education as others?

Finally, organisation should have safe places allowing people to raise their fears and anxieties. These should be clearly signposted so people know where to go if there are issues and problems with understanding cultural, gender and other diversity concerns. This will help employees and their stakeholders to create diversity and create more role models for the next generation.

Dipti Thakrar is an experienced Head of Group Tax with a demonstrated history of working in industry. She actively runs the London Transfer Pricing in industry group, is on the London Women In Tax committee and co-chairs/runs the East Midlands WIT Branch.