

The right person for the job

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In the current economic climate, graduates are facing the toughest job market in 20 years. Among job-seekers confronting the greatest challenges are those from backgrounds traditionally disadvantaged in the labour market: people from ethnic minorities and those with disabilities. But in the coming months, new legislation and a range of public sector initiatives are being launched to fast-track talented graduates from these backgrounds into employment.

Before the recession, some progress had been made in addressing the employment gap due to initiatives such as the Ethnic Minority Employment Task Force (EMETF) and the revised Disability Discrimination Act 2005, which improved employment rights. The rate of employment for disabled people rose from 38% in 1997 to 48% in 2007, according to the government's Equalities Office. The chances of someone from an ethnic minority finding work compared to a white person also increased in the same period - with black and minority ethnic (BME) candidates 15.5% less likely to get employment in 2007, compared to 17.9% less likely in 1997.

Perhaps surprisingly, not all parts of the public sector have shown this progress. Racial diversity, for example, is better in the financial sector - covering banks, building societies and insurance - where the proportion is 14% and in professional firms and services where it stands at 15%, according to the Race for Opportunity benchmarking report 2009.

This compares favourably to central government, the police, the armed forces and the fire and ambulance services where 9% of posts are held by BME employees, and other public bodies in which they make up 10%. But the figures for people with disabilities are less encouraging. Research for the Housing Corporation this year found 6% of staff in housing associations have a disability, compared to 13.1% in the wider economy. It also found some minority ethnic groups, despite their qualifications, are likely to be "bottled-necked" at front-line level.

Steve Cairns, director of employment services at the disability charity Scope, says: "Even if they are in jobs, many disabled people are not in graduate entry jobs. Of disabled graduates in 2007, just under half (49.9%) were in full-time paid employment.

"Of our workforce, 22% have a disability and we aim to improve that proportion at all levels, with 50% of senior managers being people with disabilities by 2018."

The business case for diversity

Cairns believes the private sector has taken a lead on graduate development because it realises there is a financial reason to embrace diversity which can bring an insight into particular markets.

This business case is now being embraced by public services. Among those pushing this message is the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (Cilip), which is setting up a graduate training scheme for BME graduates. Ayub Khan, head of library services at Warwickshire county council, who chairs Cilip's equal opportunities and diversity panel, says: "It makes sense for your workforce to be more representative of the local community because they can do more to encourage participation and engage with local people. It also allows us to tap into a wider range of skills."

This autumn, the Communities and Local Government Department launches a "high potential leadership programme" for the fire and rescue service, aimed at women and BME candidates. Modelled on a London Fire Brigade scheme, it will recruit about 50 people a year - both existing staff and new entrants - with the aim of helping them to reach middle manager level in four years. James Dalgleish, head of human resources at the London Fire Brigade, said 42% of those recruited in the first year of its scheme in 2007 were women - six out of 14 candidates. The number of women firefighters and fire officers in the service increased from 61 to 210 between 1999 and 2007, with a further 7% rise the following year.

However, the success of the established civil service fast-stream diversity scheme has been patchy. While the number of people with a disability rose from 8.7% in 2007 to 12.6% last year, the ethnic minority intake in the same period fell slightly from 9.5% to 9.3%. But the Cabinet Office believes that enhancements to its summer diversity internship programme for people from ethnic minorities will boost representation. Its coaching programme for people

on the internships, to help them onto the fast-stream graduate course, should also help, with 30 summer interns, both from BME and those with a disability, due to be coached this year.

A further boost to graduate workforce diversity is expected from the Equality Bill due to receive royal assent next spring. The bill, which replaces legislation on different types of discrimination with a single equality duty, imposes a duty on public bodies to ban discrimination on grounds of age, sexual orientation or religion, gender or disability.

The legislation allows organisations to take positive action to employ more women or people from ethnic minorities by favouring them in job interviews over equally qualified white men. If a particular group is under-represented in its workforce, employers can take this into account when deciding whom to employ. They will also be able to fast-track or select recruits from under-represented groups, as long as they are equally suitable for the job.

Liz Sayce from the disability group Radar says she is optimistic that the law will make a difference: "In advocating transparency [the bill] may help to throw a spotlight on what is happening in the labour market." But she also has reservations. Targeted training schemes should not become ghettos for talented graduates, she says. "It's being part of the mainstream career development programme in an organisation that opens up opportunities for advancement."

Fast track: Graduates speak

Charlotte McGuinness is a trainee on the London Fire Brigade's graduate entry scheme

After two years working as a secondary school science teacher, Charlotte McGuinness craved a career that was not so desk-bound. McGuinness, who has an Msc in sustainable environmental management, was attracted to the London Fire Brigade's new graduate entry scheme because it offered accelerated progression into management roles.

She attended a women-only open day where serving staff encouraged them to consider firefighting as a career. "I was aware that there weren't that many women in senior management roles, but the course seemed designed to address that. Of the 14 graduate trainees taken on, six were women," she says.

The scheme provides the graduate trainees with an extra four week's training, which focuses on management and leadership skills. "We studied incident management, looking at the tactics on a fire scene, what jobs you should do and which you should delegate," says McGuinness, 26, from Waltham Abbey in Essex. "When I turn up at incidents, I feel I'm one step ahead and am more confident."

Her training ran from December 2007 to May 2008, after which she was posted to Stratford fire station on the red watch. Just over a year later she is close to finishing her development book, which can take up to three years to complete, and expects to start her crew manager training after Christmas. "As graduate trainees, we get an extra period of six weeks shadowing crew managers before the training," she says. "Two of the other trainees have already started the course and another is due to start soon." Meanwhile, McGuinness is already thinking stepping up to watch manager.

Marcus Gazette has joined the civil service's fast stream graduate programme

Marcus Gazette admits that the popular impression of the Foreign Office, where he works as a desk officer for European Union justice and home affairs, is that it is staffed by "stuffy, elderly, white gentlemen". But Gazette, 24, who is of African and Indian descent, says the department is "not an old boys club".

He puts this change in environment down to the design of the diplomatic service's fast-stream graduate programme which he joined in October last year. Although the scheme is not exclusively for black or minority ethnic (BME) candidates, it has been designed to remove discriminatory bias from the recruitment process.

"The scheme is very objective," says Gazette. "You first have to complete online assessments and then work on a computer-based exercise. When I went for interview at the assessment centre, they had no idea how old I was or where I went to university.

"Once you are in the office, your induction involves diversity training and I think managers are very conscious of its importance. Your chances of promotion and progression are also largely based on written and performance-based tests, so the chances of systematic discrimination are minimised. And to progress to senior levels you must meet diversity objectives in your appraisal. I don't feel there's a glass ceiling. There are already women at board level."

Grazette, who grew up in Barbados, Somerset and London, is also doing his bit to counter the Foreign Office's stuffy image. "I've been asked to talk at BME career events at universities. I think this helps to change people's perception of what it's like."

Libraries: Bookmarking it

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (Cilip) is setting up a three-year graduate recruitment programme called Encompass aimed at people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. Cilip, the professional body for library staff, found that just 2% of the workforce were from a BME background, compared to 8% of the population as a whole. The three-year course, run in partnership with skills development agency Path National, includes a two-year professional qualification at masters level, which trainees study one day a week, the rest of their time spent in work placements.

Head of Libraries for Warwickshire county council Ayub Khan, who chairs Cilip's equal opportunities and diversity panel, hopes the scheme will particularly address the acute shortage of BME library staff in senior positions such as chief librarian. "The shortage is a combination of a failure to encourage more people from BME backgrounds into the profession, a lack of role models, and perceptions of the work," he says. "Many parents, because of their own experience of libraries, don't appreciate that you can have a senior role in a university or work extensively with IT."

The scheme will be piloted next year with four trainees placed in libraries across London, including the House of Commons library and the London School of Economics. It will then be rolled out across the country the following year. The goal is to train 100 graduates over five years.

Housing: Building trainees

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is setting up a two-year traineeship for people with disabilities to increase the number working in the housing sector. Starting in the autumn of 2010, it aims to help 120 people with disabilities to get jobs with housing organisations over the following five years.

Each trainee will pursue work placements, including mentoring from senior staff, and a course of academic study at either foundation degree or postgraduate level, depending on their existing qualifications. The trainees are expected to earn a salary of £10,000-12,000. The institute will also provide specialist training

to the housing organisations that sign up to the scheme to help them address workplace inequalities.

The Glasgow Centre for Independent Living runs a similar scheme, called the professional careers traineeship. Allan Barr, 33, who has cerebral palsy and is a wheelchair user, is now a trainee housing officer at Glasgow Housing Association. Prior to joining the scheme in April 2007, he had been unemployed since graduating with a history degree from the University of Glasgow in 1999. He spent most of his time in his bedroom in his parents' house and lacked confidence and self-esteem. Now he has his own flat, a good social life and, after completing a postgraduate diploma in housing in June, became a housing officer, earning £25,000. "I am enjoying the job," he says. "I feel I am making use of my degree and I am an ordinary part of the team."