

A world of difference

BOC has to mirror the changing world and that means embracing diversity. Philippa Anderson reports



a glance

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The EMB is sponsoring a programme to strengthen BOC's global approach to diversity.

“**B**est person for the job.” It’s a simple statement. Yet those five words are vital for the future of the Group.

Put simply, “best person” means accessing the widest possible talent pool and attracting and retaining people – regardless of race, gender, age, or any other factor.

Says Tony Isaac, Group chief executive: “To sustain BOC as a successful global business means having an inclusive organisation. Often that means creating a work environment that attracts and seeks to develop people from all walks of life. In some cases it means removing barriers. In an increasingly competitive world, diversity is not an option but a business imperative.”

Diversity cuts across a huge range of issues – equal opportunities, gender, race, disability – and less obvious are factors such as nationality, religion, ethnicity, caste, social background, educational and vocational attributes, sexuality, personal preferences, life experiences and family responsibilities.

Responding to such a range of issues, BOC sets manageable priorities and objectives according to local need and in the context of what helps businesses and local communities co-exist.

Diversity is about making sure the workplace is founded on fair employment practices, mutual respect and an understanding that business needs to unlock the potential within its communities. By embracing diversity BOC also helps drive the wellbeing of the places in which it operates.

Diversity is not new to BOC – relevant policies, processes and standards have long

been integrated into the way BOC does business, for example through the Group’s Code of Conduct and ACTS. What is new is that as society and BOC’s markets continue to change, the Group’s ability to respond to those markets will be key to achieving growth targets.

This is such an important issue that the executive management board (EMB) established diversity as a key Group objective.

“Setting goals and making people accountable will ensure action,” says Isaac.

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Afrox: step change

Following implementation of the Employment Equity Act in South Africa in 1998, Afrox recognised that a step change was essential. Workshops have helped people understand the legislative implications.

Says Rick Hogben, Afrox chief executive: “It soon became clear this was a business imperative rather than about legislation.”

Afrox needed to become an organisation which better reflected the demographics of the whole country. This would appeal

to a wider pool of talent, improve interaction with customers and suppliers, and enable Afrox to gain state contracts, where assessment of employment equity is now a commercial imperative.

Employee consultation was key and diversity forums have been established at all sites. Diversity is also on the agenda for every HR planning committee. Says Hogben, who chairs the committee: “In the new South Africa, recruitment and retention are serious

issues as qualified African, Asian and Caribbean managers are in demand and extremely mobile.”

Afrox is responding with a graduate scheme which offers a bursary to high-potential students and a development programme once they join. Hogben believes the ability to attract and retain talent may be the key competitive differentiator in years to come.

Workshops are also underway to help employees understand inter-cultural sensitivities.

“In an increasingly competitive world, diversity is not an option but a business imperative”

Tony Isaac, Group chief executive



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"While the EMB is sponsoring a programme to strengthen our global approach, diversity is not simply an initiative. It has to be part of the fabric of our organisation."

Indeed the Group's approach weaves together many of the existing activities in the business units (BUs), and defines specific focus areas. These include: more women in managerial roles, more nationals in managerial and leadership roles in Asia, and a significant increase in the recruitment of black employees in South Africa.

The Group programme is essentially a framework which will help to achieve a more diverse workforce and a more sustainable talent pool, including clear measures to track and report progress.

Balance

In Australia, gender balance is an important national issue. BOC in the south Pacific is

leading the way with a programme to improve opportunities for women in the workplace. Significant focus on work / family initiatives is moving the BUs there beyond equal opportunities compliance and creating a springboard for broader diversity action plans.

Gender was also the focus of a recent project by one of the teams on Lead, the Group's executive development programme. Testing hypotheses around gender equality through interviews, focus groups and a survey, the team came up with potential solutions. BUs are using these as part of local plans.

Lead project team member Mark Newlands, Group director, risk, comments: "There is strong evidence of the value of diversity but we found that managers need to improve communication and visible leadership."

Surveys are a useful tool for identifying priorities. South Africa's local survey, for example, helped build a picture of how accepting employees are of different cultures within Afrox. Focus groups are now helping develop action plans to address areas for improvement, including more work on disability.

Embracing diversity creates a virtuous circle. Rob Lourey, Group HR director, explains: "Creating an environment where differences are embraced means the organisation will attract a more diverse workforce which in turn helps challenge the status quo."

"A world of difference" is how BOC is described on its recruitment web site. This site and regional graduate recruitment sites stress that a broad diversity policy "helps attract the best future employees, whoever and wherever they may be".

Talent

How diverse is the pipeline of talent into BOC? This is a key question. PGS in the US, for example, has decided to change its feeder colleges to those with a more diverse student population. In ISP Europe, the executive team also questioned whether the workforce is representative of the market. Where they have identified gaps, actions plans have been put in place.

In Asia, the focus is on attracting and developing local talent to fill managerial and leadership positions, rather than relying on expatriates. Locally-recruited managers in turn feed into the global talent pool. A number of programmes are supporting this drive, including the Asia management trainee programme where recent recruits have been from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand and China.

Says John Bevan, chief executive, PGS: "Asia is a massive growth opportunity for BOC and our workforce has to reflect the local population. In China, for example, we are fast-tracking managers through the 12-month

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Rob Lourey, Group HR director

South Pacific: raising the bar

In the south Pacific, diversity is high on the BOC agenda. A number of successful initiatives have been implemented in the last two years addressing work / life balance, part-time work, working from home and job sharing. These include increased maternity leave, a parenting room at the North Ryde office and improved employment opportunities for women in the workplace.

A positive impact is already being demonstrated. Participation in part-time work has doubled in the last year and the number of women in professional managerial and sales positions has increased, as have participation rates for women in training and development.

Earlier this year a number of workshops were held to increase awareness and understanding of

further improvements.

"We now want to raise the bar," says Graham Smith, managing director, ISP South Pacific.

"We are putting together a team from all areas of the business to develop a diversity plan which will take us to the next level. The plan will encompass both BUs, the initiatives will be measurable and most importantly, they must make a difference."

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Tony Isaac, Group chief executive

China people development plan, providing six months' overseas experience to place people in middle management roles. We are also looking to fast-track high-potential nationals into general management roles and have initiated the Group's senior manager development programme, iLead.”

BOC Edwards has reduced its reliance on expatriates in Asia during the last year by recruiting and developing local people. The Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese businesses are all run by local people and key roles for China are being drawn from the development programme. Succession planning is playing a crucial role. The plan is to use shorter-term development assignments, rather than three-year expatriate postings, which will prove worthwhile for personal development and help improve cultural understanding and cohesion.

Gist is improving diversity across the whole workforce. Increasing immigration in the UK means as many as 20 different ethnic groups at one depot and a mix of languages. Actions to ensure these differences are harnessed without impacting productivity include: English as a second language training, team leader groups which better reflect the ethnic background of the workforce, new shop floor trainers selected so that training can be conducted in the employee's first language and cultural awareness training courses.

States Isaac: “The fact that we are a global organisation employing 44,500 people in more than 50 countries, means BOC is already diverse. To respond to the diversity of customers, suppliers and investors, we have to reflect their diversity in our own organisation. Failure to do so restricts our ability to compete. So we have to continually strive to create an environment where people's differences are harnessed to maximise their potential.”

USA: work/life balance

“You had to be seen behind your desk for people to know you were working.” That used to be the view. A recent pilot work / life programme explored options such as telecommuting and flexi-time. These are now being evaluated to provide managers with a broad set of tools to ensure employees' productivity, taking into account his or her specific circumstances.

This is part of the work underway to develop a common approach to diversity in the US. Senior management training has been rolled out and a diversity module has been implemented for the iLead programme. PGS is at the forefront with the launch of its diversity action team in 2002. Its aim is training for every employee in Murray Hill by end-2004 to gain buy-in.

Says Kent Masters, president, PGS, North America: “We continue to look for the best person for every role but we are managing recruitment in different ways to try to attract more diverse candidates.

“More cross cultural hires and more short-term overseas assignments will bring in broader experience and views, which in turn will deliver more innovation.”