

Businesses of all sizes and from all industry sectors have become increasingly committed, particularly over the last decade, to understanding the link between diversity, performance and productivity. Our own research, published in 2012, uncovered some of the motivating factors for organisations seeking to improve gender diversity at the executive decision making level. For example, it is now widely recognised that having a gender diverse board can lead to better decision making and greater awareness of and attention to managing risk, as well as better understanding of employee needs and business culture.

These benefits, however, are also associated with diversity at all levels, and not just with gender. A recent survey highlighted several other workforce trends that are impacting diversity policies. Last year's CIPD Award winners Tyne and Wear Rescue Service, for example, was recognised for its commitment to and engagement with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community. Other areas include the multiple generations and national cultures within today's workforce, flexible working arrangements and the aging population.

There is certainly a demand for HR to be effective in this area, yet although many organisations today are quick to claim that diversity is a key part of overall strategy, the details of many diversity policies are often rudimentary in nature. By taking a lead in creating supportive and collegial working environments, HR represents the organisation's commitment to ensuring that diversity and inclusion are at the core of people strategy.

The most innovative companies see the value in adopting a holistic strategy, where the whole ethos of the business in terms of its brand, its values and its approach to identifying, hiring and developing talent becomes focused on the benefits of diversity. For such a strategy to be successful, it is something that needs to be embraced by the whole organisation and driven from the top by the Executive Board.

This is increasingly important in a global world where, for many companies operating in multinational markets, effectively managing diverse talent continues to be a challenge. In 2014, there is a new focus on globalising the diversity debate to help those employers better appreciate that different markets have different and complex workforces. Tackling pipeline issues in international markets requires an understanding of diversity that goes much deeper than just obvious factors such as age and gender.

It is the responsibility of HR to maximise the potential each individual brings to the organisation. HR teams that adopt a real vision for diversity, that encompass the multiplicity of today's workforce, as well as making diversity something which is truly synonymous with the company itself, rather a marginal concern, will be the ones that will reap the benefits.