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This International Women's Day – Choose to Challenge!

March 8th marks International Women's Day (IWD), celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. This year the theme is #ChooseToChallenge. IWD is a great opportunity to review how inclusive and supportive your workplace is and to seek out and celebrate women's achievements.

In some cases, 'choosing to challenge' may mean calling out gender bias and inequality where it exists, and looking at ways to improve the working lives of women in your own workplace.

Where employers choose not to challenge issues such as gender bias and show reluctance to address problems, they may end up with an unhappy and unproductive workforce. There may be increased workplace grievances, resignations and problems recruiting. By preventing women reaching their potential they risk losing talented, experienced members of staff and damaging the reputation of their business.

The current pandemic has resulted in a huge amount of uncertainty and additional strain on all of us, but particularly on working parents. Anyone who has tried to combine home-schooling and working is likely to have found the juggling difficult. Research has found the majority of childcare and homeschooling responsibilities have fallen on women, regardless of whether or not they were in employment.

How can employers support women in the workplace?

Employers are already obliged to take steps to ensure that women are paid and treated equally in the workplace, and should be demonstrating a clear zero-tolerance approach to all forms of discrimination and harassment.

Managers and business leaders have an important role to play in creating and maintaining a culture where women feel comfortable in requesting family friendly leave and feel confident to discuss their salary and career ambitions.

Supporting part-time and flexible workers, and creating an environment where women feel that they fit and belong is an important step to creating a positive experience.

Research has shown that mothers are more likely to leave full-time roles compared to fathers after having children. Introducing a return to work programme for those returning from family leave and providing mentoring and training opportunities may assist in retention.

Barriers to progression for women can include bias around pay or promotion opportunities, a lack of support with balancing work and care and inflexible working hours. Evaluating your own recruitment, promotion and talent management processes is the starting point in creating a more inclusive environment. Where you become aware of potential problems, such as a regular difference in the number of men and women applying for a role and who is successful, look for why that might be. Take action and revisit new processes to ensure they are effectively removing barriers. It may be as simple as changing the wording used in your adverts.

Publishing your commitment to flexible working and family friendly leave on your website is a helpful way to attract a wide range of candidates to apply for your roles, and shows that you care about the wellbeing and diversity of your workforce.

Policies, Procedures and Training

Ensure that all your staff and managers are aware of your equality, diversity and inclusion policies and how they will be implemented. Managers should already be proactively tackling inappropriate behaviour, and taking formal disciplinary action if it proves necessary.

Review your induction and annual training and regularly monitor how effective it is. We know that when training becomes stale and is perceived merely as a 'tick box' exercise it becomes ineffective.

Senior management should take every opportunity to act as role-models and demonstrate their commitment to equality in the workplace. Transparency in your pay and progression processes are important too in helping to avoid any bias and to encourage women to reach their potential.

If you don't know how your employees feel about your approach to diversity and inclusivity consider using staff surveys to find out what is working for everyone and where improvements are needed. You may wish to introduce an equality and diversity committee to focus on improving the work environment for everyone.

Working hours

The current pandemic has forced many organisations to introduce home working and flexible working at a much faster pace than they ever expected.

In many instances both employers and employees have risen to the challenge extremely well, and have shown how flexible and home-based working can assist businesses in creating a more agile environment. Whilst flexibility is likely to be attractive to women, promoting an agile and flexible workforce for men as much as for

women is the best way of normalising such working practices and achieving equality.

Where roles can be carried out part time, home based or flexibly, make that clear in your recruitment advertising to reach a wider pool of candidates and show how inclusive your business is. When recruiting staff to replace outgoing employees, take time to consider what your needs are and how flexible you can be.

Many excellent candidates will be positively seeking out employers who have a modern approach to working hours and who are seen to be encouraging and enabling all employees to reach their potential.

Why are Equality and Inclusion so important?

As we have seen, the positives of getting equality and inclusion right are numerous including increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, reduced employee relations issues, improved recruitment and retention and higher staff satisfaction.

Workforces that include individuals from a variety of different backgrounds will better represent a wider customer base and can add different experiences, talent, and skills.

You may be aware of the phrase 'diversity is being invited to a party, and inclusion is actually being asked to dance when you get there'. Nobody wants to feel that they are not invited to the party! We all want to feel that we are valued for who we are, and recognised and accepted as an individual.

Equal Pay

Many people will think of pay first when they think of gender equality. There is still work to be done in this area. In 2020 the difference between average hourly earnings for men and women in the UK for all workers was 15.5 percent.

In general terms, equal pay is men and women being paid the same for equal work. The Equality Act 2010 standard is the reliable measure in assessing whether your organisation truly has the balance right between men and women.

Regular job evaluation exercises can be a useful way of enabling you to identify barriers, and is often carried out as part of your annual pay review process.

Statistically, women are less likely to try and negotiate increases to their salary and are perceived as less direct when it comes to their own career progression. Publishing and communicating salary ranges will encourage women to have full and open discussions about what they should be paid, and following a fair and transparent talent management process helps with career progression for everyone.

If you would like further information about the topic discussed above, or any other employment or HR-related matters, please contact our [employment law and HR](#) team. Get in touch by emailing online.enquiries@LA-law.com or call 01202 786332.