Finding race-positive employers

Over the last few years employers’ attitudes and commitment to having a diverse workforce have improved immensely. This is partly because they don't want to miss out on talent and partly because a diverse workplace is generally happier and more productive.

Many graduate recruiters are now demonstrating that their organisation seeks out and actively encourages applicants from all ethnic backgrounds. So, how can you find these employers and research their level of commitment to diversity? Here are a few ideas:

Your university/students’ union

- Speak to your careers service about schemes and organisations that work to encourage black and ethnic (BME) representation, such as The Windsor Fellowship or Sponsors for Educational Opportunity (SEO) London. The Civil Service Fast Stream Summer Diversity Internship Programme (which is open to students in their penultimate or final year) and the Pearson Internship Programme (PIP UK) are also schemes that your careers service may be able to provide information on. Both also have detailed information on their websites.
- Find out what your students’ union offers. Most unions have a diversity or equality officer, who may have been approached by employers wishing to promote their diversity message.
- Attend employer-led events, fairs and workshops, hosted by your careers service. Use this opportunity to find out more about an employer’s values and check whether they are really committed to encouraging equality of opportunity in their organisation.

Websites and fairs

- Sources of specific vacancies include Ethnic Jobsite and Adab Trust which offer training opportunities, vacancies, job hunting advice and more. They also usually feature details of companies that actively support them.
- Check out company websites for staff profiles and consider whether the employer has a mixed ethnic workforce. Does the employer have a designated diversity representative who communicates issues to senior management?
- Look for employers that attend specialist minority ethnic careers fairs, such as the annual University of Manchester Ethnic Diversity Fair.
- In some sectors, there are organisations such as the Black Solicitors Network (BSN) and the Association of Muslim Lawyers, which have worked hard to overcome past barriers to their professions.
- The organisation Business in the Community runs a campaign called Race for Opportunity in which their employer members are encouraged to work towards a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

How to assess whether a company is a positive employer

There are certain things to bear in mind when deciding whether individual companies are positive employers:
Many employers have an equality statement and this can be a good way of seeing how inclusive they are as an organisation. Websites are often a useful way to get information on a company’s ethos and equality policy.

Consider what facilities are important to you. Work shadowing can be a useful way to research the work environment. By seeing the organisation for yourself, you can tell whether there really is a diverse workforce.

If an employer provides diversity training, it may indicate that they encourage all staff to learn about and accept each other, leading to a more positive workplace. If no training exists, is this something that you could influence when starting your employment? Diversity, and tackling discrimination, is the responsibility of everyone.

Does the employer offer any ‘positive action’ initiatives aimed at students from BME backgrounds? These work to ensure that individuals from BME groups can compete on an equal basis with non-BME individuals, and are not intended to discriminate adversely. Similarly ‘insight’ days and mentoring schemes aim to encourage applications from under-represented groups.

Continuing support in the workplace is as important as the initial advertising and recruitment campaign that attracts you. If a company has an ongoing diversity programme or mentoring scheme, it may show a longer-term commitment to having a diverse workforce.

Don’t overlook the smaller organisations that may not have the finance to advertise but have the right attitude to diversity. Widen your search to include regional organisations as well as the larger, national employers.

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The key to self-marketing is the same regardless of your ethnic background – you need to demonstrate your individual range of skills and qualifications to their maximum potential. It’s a good idea to think of the assets that you have, such as your ability to relate well to a range of clients from multi-cultural backgrounds and perhaps some additional language skills.

You’re not required by law to disclose your ethnic background at either application or interview stages and so it remains a personal choice. Some students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds are concerned about how to market their skills so that they’re viewed without discrimination. They may be reluctant to disclose information that may be an indicator of their ethnicity, such as presidency of a particular society or involvement in a religious activity. But it’s crucial to remember that these experiences can be presented in a positive way, by bringing out the skills that were involved such as leadership and organisation. Don’t underestimate the transferable skills gained from extracurricular activities/voluntary work and how positively these are viewed by employers.

**Key points for your CV and covering letter**

Consider what your selling points are and what makes you stand out from the crowd. What are you particularly proud of? Many students from BME backgrounds involve themselves in community, religious and voluntary activities which can demonstrate commitment and motivation.
• If you speak other languages, be sure to emphasise this on your CV, particularly if you're applying to a global company as this will definitely be to your advantage.

• Highlight the transferable skills you've gained through extracurricular activities. For example, your role as President of the Afro-Caribbean Society may have built skills in autonomy, delegation, organising, problem-solving and time management. Give some attention to explaining how you've built up these skills.

• Think about how you can make best use of the voluntary work you've done, eg, teaching in a local mosque may have strengthened your skills in communication, listening, organisation, teamwork and working independently.

• In order to match yourself to the role requirements and succeed at all stages of the recruitment process, consider which examples demonstrate your abilities most effectively. For example, group work at university may show teamworking skills, but within your family business, your ability to delegate, listen and encourage others, may illustrate your skills in a stronger light. Draw on examples from different areas of your life.

**Key points for interview**

• Most employers now have an equal opportunities agenda but in spite of this some employers may hold negative stereotypes, so it's crucial to market yourself well. Presenting yourself positively increases your chances of being selected for the job and can also challenge preconceived stereotypes.

• At interview, be confident when discussing your extracurricular activities. Don't assume that all employers will be aware of the significance of what you did and why. For example, if you've taken a stand on behalf of BME students and challenged the way that something was done, explain why this was important.

• Create a balanced picture of all of your activities to show that you have engaged with a variety of interests and work, not just those that lean towards a particular culture or way of life.

• Employers value the business case for recruiting a diverse workforce, so it's vital to reinforce that you're willing and able to mix with a broad range of people.

Visit your university careers service for help with creating an effective self-marketing strategy. Workshops on job searching, application procedures and interviews are often available.

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**Your rights around racism**

Handling discrimination of any type is difficult and dealing with the practical and emotional aspects of discrimination can be daunting. It helps if you understand your rights and have put some thought into ways of dealing proactively with discrimination.

**The Equality Act**

The Equality Act 2010 has streamlined discrimination law into one act that's applicable in England, Scotland and Wales. It combines, updates, and amends previous anti-discrimination legislation, providing greater protection for all individuals across nine 'protected characteristics'. These include race/ethnicity and religion or belief.

More information on the act and its implications for racial discrimination is available from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the official equality watchdog. Part of the Commission’s remit is to tackle race discrimination and promote racial equality.

**What does the Equality Act protect me from?**

The Equality Act offers protection from:

• Direct and indirect discrimination on the grounds of race.
• Any form of harassment and victimisation due to your race.
• Discrimination by association, eg, if you've been discriminated against because you're associated with someone who has a protected characteristic.
• Discrimination because of perception, eg, if you're discriminated against because you're perceived to have a protected characteristic even though you haven't.

In spite of the work that's been done to remove racial discrimination, it's clear that it still exists. This is demonstrated by the figures of cases that are still brought before employment tribunals, which are independent judicial bodies that settle disputes relating to employment.

**What to do if you think you’ve been discriminated against**

If you think that you've been discriminated against when applying for work, or at work by either your employer or other members of staff, you can make a complaint under the Equality Act 2010. Your first step should be to follow the organisation’s internal grievance procedure, but if this proves unsatisfactory your next step will be to pursue your complaint through an employment tribunal.

If you intend to make a formal complaint, here are some things to consider.
It's helpful to know from the outset what you hope to achieve, so be clear about your objectives. For example are you aiming for financial compensation, an employer's apology or both?

Consider how you might resolve the issue informally by speaking to the individual or your manager first. Under UK law, employers are required to follow formal procedures for resolving grievances and these channels must be followed before you pursue your case at an employment tribunal.

Grievances should be dealt with promptly by both the employee and the employer. The GOV.UK website has the latest information and advice on resolving disputes.

Speak to your careers service and/or the Equality Challenge Unit, to get as much advice and support as possible. It's often useful to talk to someone about your feelings and to discuss the implications of taking a case forward.

Seek advice from an independent agency such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, your trade union, the EHRC, your local racial equality council, or the Law Centres Network.

Racial discrimination can be difficult to prove, so it's vital that you can demonstrate that you were treated less favourably because of your race.

Make a detailed record of the incident and why you feel it amounted to racial discrimination, as this will help you to evidence your complaint. Keep written records of any subsequent actions taken by you, other employees or the employer.

Consider whether there are any witnesses you can call on and check whether they would be prepared to verify what happened. Be conscious that witnesses may be reluctant to get involved for a variety of reasons.

Taking forward a complaint can be a stressful and time-consuming experience, so enlist the emotional support of friends or family before you start the procedure.

Consider how you might fund the support needed. Contact the EHRC for advice on funding.

**Extra Information**

- Pearson Internship Programme (PIP UK) ([www.pipuk.pearson.com](http://www.pipuk.pearson.com))
- Citizen's Advice Bureau ([www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk))
- Equality UK ([www.equalityuk.org](http://www.equalityuk.org))
- Law Centres Network ([www.lawcentres.org.uk](http://www.lawcentres.org.uk))
- The Windsor Foundation ([www.windsor-fellowship.org](http://www.windsor-fellowship.org))
- Sponsors for Educational Opportunity London ([www.seo-london.com](http://www.seo-london.com))