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**REPORT ON
RECRUITMENT INDUSTRY FOCUS GROUP
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CONTEXT

The focus group participants included seven consultants from commercial recruitment companies, one peak body representative and two Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria representatives (the Systemic Initiatives Officer and the Education Consultant). An independent consultant facilitated the Focus Group.

The purpose of the focus group was to further explore questions and information gathered through research previously undertaken by the Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria (EOCV) in order to identify and/or confirm:

- the level of awareness within the industry of Equal Opportunity (EO) legislation and its requirements,
- strategies for enhancing the role of recruitment consultants/companies in promoting EO,
- industry training needs and appropriate delivery styles in respect to EO legislation and associated practice, and
- industry features limiting access to relevant training and/or limiting the role of consultants in promoting EO.

The Focus Group was conducted over a three-hour period and utilised a series of trigger questions to promote discussion and explore issues. Industry participants were also offered the opportunity to recommend to the EOCV strategies for enhancing the industry's approach to EO.

All participants committed to a confidentiality agreement in order to promote full and open discussion. This Report adheres to that agreement and summarises discussion at a broad, thematic level only.

AWARENESS OF EO LEGISLATION WITHIN THE RECRUITMENT INDUSTRY

General Findings/Themes

Focus Group participants were confident of the level of knowledge of Equal Opportunity legislation within the industry. It was seen to be one of a raft of compliance matters with which recruitment consultants required familiarity. Basic content information was readily available, although up-dating was perceived as a potential gap. Learning and development needs identified related to building skills in handling complex client relationships and promoting the value of a positive approach to EO in strongly profit-oriented settings.

Conclusion

It remains important to ensure that up-to-date information on the provision of Equal Opportunity legislation is readily available through core training programs within the industry and is supported by well-produced, appropriately transmitted resources, in particular, for new consultants. However, training should be strongly directed toward situational application and ensure content knowledge is connected to relevant skill development.

FEATURES OF THE RECRUITMENT INDUSTRY IMPACTING ON THE RECRUITMENT CONSULTANT'S APPROACH TO EO

A number of factors related to diversity within the industry and associated impacts on the approach to EO emerged.

Features associated with industry diversity that affect the approach to EO include:

- Size and scope of company – from small to medium sized local enterprises to state offices of international operations
- Company focus - permanent or temporary placements or both
- Industry focus – for example blue collar, white collar or executive; or industry specific, for example information technology or hospitality
- Company drivers – relative emphasis on profit or other values
- Company approach to recruitment consultant remuneration – salary based or target (bonus) focussed
- Scope of business – provision of recruitment only services, provision of a broader package of HR services and advice

General Findings/Themes

- It would appear that there are fewer obstacles to a strong(er) focus on EO in smaller, values-based, niche-market companies in which consultants' remuneration is largely salary based.
- Business processes in companies/business units associated with the recruitment of temporary and permanent staff are different.

There appears to be a more straightforward, unambiguous approach in respect to EO with the placement of temporary staff. There is perceived to be a lesser impact on compliance given the temporary nature of the 'hire'. Whereas the impact (and cost to the client) of individual permanent placements is greater and recruitment consultants can experience greater pressure to respond to client requirements that are not fully compliant with EO provisions.

- A company's organisational culture and values impact on the ability of individual recruitment consultants to engage with and promote EO in their relationships with clients.

Conclusion

The diversity and complexity of the industry needs to be taken into account in devising training and other strategies to enhance the focus on EO within the recruitment industry. There is a mix of overt, easily identified difference (for example, permanent or temporary placement focus) and less easily defined difference (for example, remuneration structure and organisational culture).

It is unlikely that a 'one-size fits all' initiative will be effective within the recruitment industry. Specific interventions/training may need to be designed and piloted within clearly described industry segments. Additionally, interventions may need to be targeted to different levels within recruitment companies, that is, to recruitment consultants and to executive managers.

THE RECRUITMENT INDUSTRY AND MOTIVATION TO PROMOTE EO

General Findings/Themes

- The commercial recruitment industry necessarily and commonly has a predominant focus on the financial bottom-line, although, there does appear to be some cognisance of the importance of different (triple bottom line) factors at work within different parts of the industry.
- There is a strong element of competition within the industry and industry participants develop different strategies to secure market share, for example: 'can do', quality of service, specialist focus, value adds.
- Career advancement within the industry is a factor for consideration in looking at motivators. There appears to be, in at least some sectors of the industry, a move away from qualified or experienced HR professionals as recruitment consultants to sales-focussed personnel. In some sectors of the industry, sales expertise is more likely to lead to career advancement.
- The recruitment industry, like many others, has a significant compliance agenda. EO legislative requirements are one part of compliance obligation and were seen to have lower profile or impact than some other compliance matters.

Conclusion

Both compliance and profit motivators need to be taken into consideration in developing strategies to support and promote the industry's role in EO. Both 'carrot' and 'stick' strategies may be of use. Strategies could simultaneously address the cost and risks of non-compliance whilst providing some form of 'EO Quality branding' that offers competitive advantage.

Opportunities for incorporating strategies for building awareness of EO compliance requirements with other compliance related training programs or initiatives could also be explored.

THE RECRUITMENT INDUSTRY AND RELATIONS WITH CLIENTS

General Findings/Themes

- There is a diversity of opinion and practice in respect to where the boundary sits between the 'client' (prospective employer) and the recruitment consultant in ensuring compliance with, and promoting, EO practice.
- The monetary value of the client contract can influence the degree to which a recruitment consultant will risk conflict in respect to EO practice and approach.
- Longer term, 'built' relationships between the client and the recruitment consultant offer most opportunity for increasing influence in respect to promoting EO practice.
- Positive change utilising 'built relationships' has been achieved in some sectors when recruitment consultants have utilised an approach that engages the client in the achievement of industry best practice and reputation enhancement.
- A client can use the term 'cultural fit' as a legitimate means of describing the required attitudes and approach in prospective employees necessary for congruence with the organisation's vision, mission and values. However, it is also a term that can be used to avoid merit-based appointment and can imply an approach that is discriminatory in the terms of the EO ACT (1995).

- Recruitment consultants are required to handle implied or 'off the record' requests that are discriminatory in terms of the Act. Recruitment consultants require sophisticated communication and relationship management skills to handle such exchanges and increase the likelihood of client satisfaction and EO Act compliance.

Conclusion

The relationship between the recruitment consultant and the client is, at times, complex. Training strategies, to be effective, must recognise this complexity and include not only content information (requirements of the Act and descriptions of best EO practice) but also focus on skills for influencing and for handling complex dynamics. Appropriately developed and contextualised role-play may be a useful vehicle.

The organisational context in which the recruitment consultant works is also a critical element influencing the consultant's relationship with the client. The organisation's values and standards will be reflected in the mix of pressure and support experienced by the consultant. Interventions, to be most effective, need to address organisational context and promote a culture that values EO, as well as add to the individual consultant's knowledge and skill base.

The recruitment consultant can be well placed, particularly in the context of longer-term client relations, to promote an enhanced EO approach. The development of a formalised and endorsed 'best practice' framework would support the recruitment consultant in this intermediary role and add opportunity for further client engagement. The development of an '*EO Quality Approved Employer*' approach should be explored in addition to recruitment industry-focussed training interventions.

INDUSTRY REPRESENTATIVES ADVICE TO THE EOCV ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

The following is a synthesis of the recommendations and suggestions offered by participants in respect to the specific strategies that could be adopted by the EOCV to enhance the recruitment industry's role in promoting best practice EO.

Approach to Training

- EOCV should work in partnership with industry peak bodies in developing training interventions and adopt an approach that supports peak bodies to develop a recognised and enduring role in this area. A partnering approach will enhance reach and effectiveness.
- Utilise an outreach approach to engage sectors within the industry under most pressure and potentially least compliant or committed to the promotion of EO.
- Develop case studies that demonstrate EO best practice/non-compliance impact on the financial bottom line as training resources for use with industry management and clients.
- Develop a training program to which recruitment companies can invite their clients – package it as a value-add to clients. And/or participate in company-based client information and PR sessions.
- Ensure training to recruitment consultants is skills-based.
- Provide knowledge-based components of training in workplace accessible formats, for example intranet inserts.

- There should be no added cost for the training, that is, it should be part of the package provided through membership fees paid to peak bodies. It was noted that fee-for-service training provided by the EOCV would not be seen as attractive by the target group.

Broader Strategies to Enhance the Industry's Commitment to EO

- Increase EOCVs visibility and in particular its activities around ensuring compliance with the Act; promote compliance monitoring processes.
- Promote an industry-wide approach to developing EO quality standards and accreditation; explore self-regulation.
- Include 'portable' accreditation of individual recruitment consultants within the broader accreditation framework.
- Develop strategies for 'rewarding and applauding' best practice within the industry.

Other Comment

- Strategies need to be realistic and target specific sections of the industry.
- Keep in mind the client (employer) responsibilities for EO and devise multi-layered approaches that impact on both clients and the industry.
- Promote continued (open and direct) industry discussion on the issue.