

British
Chambers of
Commerce



**BUSINESS
IS
GOOD
FOR
EQUALITY**

Chambers of Commerce: bringing together government and business in conversation; a series of events in partnership with the Government Equalities Office.



About the BCC

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) sits at the heart of a powerful nationwide network of 53 Accredited Chambers of Commerce, serving over 104,000 businesses across the UK, which employ over five million people. Every Chamber sits at the very heart of its local community, working with businesses to grow and develop by sharing opportunities, knowledge and know-how.

Members range from growth-oriented start-ups to local and regional subsidiaries of multinational companies, in all commercial and industrial sectors, and from all over the UK.

Government Equalities Office (GEO)

The GEO is based within the Department for Culture Media and Sport, and leads on issues relating to women, sexual orientation and transgender equality matters; it has responsibility across government for equality strategy and legislation.

Thanks to our participating Chambers of Commerce and to all the businesses and Government Equalities Office representatives who contributed to the success of the Business is Good for Equality breakfast series

- Black Country Chamber of Commerce
- Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce
- Dorset Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce
- Essex Chambers of Commerce
- Leicestershire Chamber of Commerce
- London Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- North East Chamber of Commerce
- St Helens Chamber
- Surrey Chambers of Commerce

Guest Speakers

- Jo Swinson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and for Women and Equalities
- Helen Grant MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Justice Minister
- Mary Macleod MP, Private Secretary to Rt Hon Maria Miller MP and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament



Written and researched by

- John Wastnage, Policy Adviser, BCC
- Kamala Mackinnon, Campaigns Adviser, BCC

Business is Good for Equality workshops

In 2012/13, the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) and the Government Equalities Office (GEO) worked together to run a series of workshops, delivered locally by Accredited Chambers of Commerce around the country. Each workshop included a government spokesperson on equalities as a guest speaker and a legal expert to address some of the myths and genuine business concerns associated with discrimination law. The employers who attended also had an opportunity to share experiences of how equality can benefit their business, and to raise any concerns or queries they had about the day-to-day reality of operating within the requirements of the Equality Act. This report highlights some of the case studies and information that emerged from those discussions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

■ Foreword from John Longworth	page 4
■ Foreword from Jo Swinson MP	page 5
■ Equality is Good for Business	page 6
■ The Equality Act 2010	page 7
■ Shared parental leave	Page 8
■ Recruitment	Page 9
■ Age equality	page 10
■ Think, Act, Report	page 11
■ Looking beyond disability	page 12
■ Lessons learnt	page 15
■ Additional resources	Back cover



John Longworth Foreword



The British workforce is one of the key strengths of the UK economy. The tremendous response to the BCC's joint work with the Government Equalities Office has demonstrated that employers throughout the Chamber Network value their staff and are already working hard to create flexible and happy workplaces. Our own survey work shows that the vast majority of requests for flexible working are approved, albeit often with a compromise solution that suits both parties.

Equality is one of those concepts that everyone agrees with, but the fear of being tripped up by regulation makes it a sensitive subject for many employers. The popularity of the events that preceded the publication of this report are proof of just how much business people appreciate the opportunity to meet government face-to-face to discuss their challenges and successes. I hope that other departments can learn from this partnership between the Government Equalities Office and the Chambers of Commerce Network to engage better with businesses around the country.

The conversations that have taken place as we have travelled the country these past six months have highlighted the importance of the protections contained in the Equality Act, the over-compliance that can result from misinformation and an industry of consultants, and the clear message that well-intentioned regulation can often be a barrier to businesses that would anyway seek to do what is best for their employees.

Employers do not need convincing on the business case for equality in the workplace, but there is clear demand for compliance support in this area. Government must continue to work with employers to ensure that legal duties are easy to understand, and listen carefully where employers believe regulation goes too far.

John Longworth
Director General, British Chambers of Commerce



Jo Swinson Foreword



We wanted this programme of business engagement to raise awareness of equality legislation - as many smaller firms tell us they don't feel they know enough - and to make the business case for equality.

What we have found is that, although there are always challenges, there is no doubt or uncertainty in business about the importance of equality in the 21st century workplace. It is clear the vast majority of employers want the best for - as well as from - their employees.

We have heard from the local Chambers of Commerce and their members up and down the country who have given fantastic examples of how diversity is good for business. Their message is that it is a matter of good business to treat people fairly and that our modern diverse workforces help drive business success.

The British Chambers of Commerce has been an excellent partner in this programme which has been a ground-breaking exercise for us. We are looking forward to new industry-led initiatives that will help to stimulate growth - like those coming from the Women's Business Council, an independent working group advising the Government on practical solutions to maximise women's contribution to economic growth. They report this summer on how the talents of women can benefit businesses and our economy.

Jo Swinson MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment
Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and for Women and
Equalities



Equality is good for business

Throughout the events series that formed the basis for this report, the same messages came through over and over again from the businesspeople in attendance: not only is business good for equality but equality is also good for business. The idea that employers should treat their staff and customers with dignity and respect regardless of their characteristics was considered obvious and non-negotiable for the businesses represented. Two clear messages emerged:

- avoiding discrimination in recruitment and treating staff fairly is essential to ensure access to the best talent, which in turn enables business to maximise profits and wealth creation.
- Diverse teams are usually stronger, because different individuals bring complementary strengths and a range of possible solutions to any given problem.

“Particularly at a time when we need economic growth, we must seek out and make the most of the potential of every person”

Jo Swinson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and for Women and Equalities





The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act identifies nine protected characteristics, and rather than promoting equality actually focuses on preventing discrimination. Businesses must not discriminate against, harass or victimise people based on their individual characteristics:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

“ *Businesses are not required to have a written diversity policy, though it can be useful at Tribunal if it has been followed. Ultimately an employer will be judged on actions, not on policies.* ”

Hilton Leslie, Head of HSE Legal, Government Equalities Office

The Equality Act is about preventing unfair behaviour and does not require positive action from employers, except the requirement to make ‘reasonable’ adjustments for disabled people. This may include existing or newly recruited members of staff or other disabled people who want to use the firm’s goods or services.

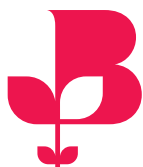
To decide what is an obligatory reasonable adjustment employers should first identify the disadvantage faced by the relevant employee or customer and consider whether the proposed adjustments would alleviate it. The extent to which an adjustment is deemed reasonable will also depend on its cost and the financial resources available to the employer, among other factors.

“ *The Equality Act does not require us to have a diversity policy, but the procurement process from public sector bodies often does and seems to focus more on diversity than the quality of the bid! Without a diversity policy we would lose work.* ”

Name withheld

“ *Although as a Manager I was aware of the need to comply with the Equality Act, what was more important to me was my desire to meet everyone’s needs.* ”

Wendy Jackson, Kensington Nursing Home (North East Chamber of Commerce)



Shared parental leave

Shared Parental Leave: the Children and Families Bill introduces a right for employed mothers to choose to end their maternity leave any time after the initial two-week recovery period; working parents can then decide how they want to share the remaining leave between them. Employers have the right to either accept or reject the requested pattern of leave, but cannot reject the proportion of the couple’s leave taken by their employee.

“ We need to think about how shared parental leave will work, but we certainly will embrace it. Today’s workplace is miles away from the workplaces of twenty years ago and that has to be reflected in the way we work. ”

Lorna Fellowes, Managing Director, Triton Showers (Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce)

“ Maternity leave can be a real challenge for SMEs. They are usually delighted for their employee, but concerned about implications for the business and fearful of getting the process wrong. However there are huge benefits for those firms who get it right: return to work rates vary hugely by firm, from 50%-99%. The new arrangements will mean that women face less of a career penalty if they decide to have children. ”

Jo Swinson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and for Women and Equalities

Dolphin Lifts is committed to employing people of all ages and backgrounds. Norman Farrington, the Managing Director, recently worked with Jobcentre Plus to offer jobs to mothers who wanted to re-enter the labour market after raising children.

“More employers should hire women who have had a career break. Too often their skills and experience are undervalued. Many of the working mothers that we’ve hired have quickly risen to senior positions within the firm”

Norman Farrington, Managing Director, Dolphin Lifts Midlands Ltd (Black Country Chamber of Commerce)





Recruitment

Several attendees had experience of receiving complaints as a result of the recruitment process, and each emphasised the importance of keeping written records of the recruitment process, including objective criteria and notes on each candidate.

“ I was involved in a recruitment process for a technical post. It was a very structured recruitment process. I interviewed three candidates and hired the best candidate, a woman. I received a gender bias complaint from one of the two male candidates but I was able to show that our processes were transparent and fair. ”

Stephen Philips, Caterpillar Marine (Dorset Chamber of Commerce and Industry)

“ One of my former employers was so scared of being accused of discrimination that we had to provide a justification whenever we didn't offer an interview to a candidate with certain protected characteristics, even though the HR team judged applications against strict job criteria and were usually oblivious of their characteristics. ”

Name withheld (North East Chamber of Commerce)

The Ramada Encore is a new hotel in Leicester that opened in January 2012. The management wanted the hotel's staff to represent Leicester as the best of modern Britain and felt that a diverse workforce would best serve the needs of their guests.

“We recently recruited 30 new members of staff from the local community in Leicester, and could not have found a more diverse team. Different ages, nationalities, sexual orientations, levels of education, illnesses and some expectant parents have combined to create a great team able to converse with tourists from around the world and one that reflects the community in which we work.”

Henrik Jespersen, General Manager, Ramada Encore Hotel Leicester (Leicestershire Chamber of Commerce)

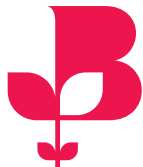
Most attendees were able to articulate clear business benefits associated with employing a diverse workforce.

“ Most of our operatives are men, but 50% of our customers are female. Some have been victims of domestic violence and often feel more comfortable with women. We now work with the Prince's Trust and also try to be more targeted in how we advertise, which has led to more female applicants. ”

Nichola O'Brien, Helena Property Care (St Helens Chamber)

“ Emirates has 140 different nationalities among its staff. That diversity allows us to assign flight attendants to each flight that will meet the language needs of the customers onboard. ”

Julie Dunning, Emirates (North East Chamber of Commerce)



Age equality

Age equality was also a recurring theme of discussions, with concerns about opportunities for young people and innovative new approaches to retirement.

“*The law needs to do more to support an honest and open discussion between employer and employee about retirement plans. Most employers hate the idea of dismissing a longstanding employee due to a reduction in their capability to do the job.*” **Larry Coltman, Coltman Warner Cranston LLP (Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce)**”

“*10% of our staff in property care have taken ‘flexible retirement’, which suits them better than fully stopping work and allows the company to retain skills and experience, and to manage succession. However, there is a limit to how many part-time workers we can accommodate and in future we may only offer this option for medical rather than lifestyle reasons.*”

Nichola O’Brien, Helena Property Care (St Helens Chamber)

“*We introduced a ‘BT Passport’ for our staff, which is a document that they can take from job to job within the company detailing any disability or caring duties that may require flexibility or adjustments.*”

Annette Thorpe, Regional Director, BT (Essex Chambers of Commerce)





Think, Act, Report

Think, Act, Report: Forty years after the Equal Pay Act there is still a gender pay gap. Many of the UK's leading companies are now reporting on gender equality in their workforce through this new voluntary initiative. Think, Act, Report encourages companies to publish as much information as possible - including their gender pay gap, if they feel comfortable doing so - but it's a voluntary initiative, and it's for companies themselves to choose what they make public, and where.

Carrick Travel is an independent travel agency founded in 1974 by Sally and Mike Carrick. The founders took a back-seat role more than a decade ago, and a management buyout last year saw ownership pass to long-serving directors Tina Nason and Tracey Carter.

"Sally Carrick was always a great role model for both Tracey and me, encouraging us to be ambitious and to believe that anything is possible with hard work. We are a very family-friendly business and 85% of our staff choose to work part-time. We both have families so we know how hard it can be to combine being a Mum with work commitments. We don't want to lose good members of staff after investing time and money in training them, so we work with staff to plan their careers."

Tina Nason, Carrick Travel (Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce)

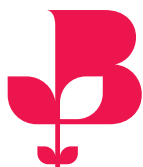
A recurrent theme was that some members of staff, particularly women, may not automatically put themselves forward for promotion and that a good manager should nurture and encourage ambition in high-potential members of staff.

“ *I asked all women MPs in my party why they had stood for Parliament. Over half of them said it was because someone had encouraged them. We all need to encourage women to have ambition and achieve success.* **”**

Jo Swinson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Employment Relations, Consumer and Postal Affairs and for Women and Equalities

“ *In financial services, women still only make up a small fraction of staff in relationship management roles, but this is starting to change as employers understand that they need their staff to reflect the characteristics of their customers. I think there is also a sense that having more women in banking could help to change the culture and repair the industry's reputation.* **”**

Julie Hopwood, Natwest Newcastle (North East Chamber of Commerce)



Think, Act, Report

“ Any employer that wants to retain valued members of staff should aim to be as flexible and supportive as their business will allow. Treating all employees and customers fairly is good for business.”

Sue Barnes, HR Director, TNT Express (Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce)

“ The travel industry is quite female dominated, but at management level it tends to be mostly men. I think women can bring a different approach, but more importantly where I work we focus on employing the right person for the job regardless of their gender. That way we benefit from the best talent available

Julie Dunning, Emirates (North East Chamber of Commerce)

“ As a mother, flexible working is not just helpful, it's a necessity. But, these changes aren't just about equality, workplace flexibility is also about adapting to the way the world works in the 21st century.

Alison Jones, Celesio UK (Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce)

Looking beyond disability

There was broadly a consensus from the business people who attended the breakfast events that physical disabilities should not be a barrier to employment and a strong feeling that more should be done to support people suffering from mental illnesses. Inspired by the case study of M&Y Joinery Ltd, several delegates commented on a desire to do more to support people with learning difficulties.

M&Y Joinery Ltd is an ambitious, commercial business based in St. Helens. The firm prides itself on its investment in its staff and the communities where it works. It works with several local schools, including two that specialise in young people with moderate to severe learning difficulties, and offers mock interviews, vocational training and even sponsors the end-of-school prom. 10% of the workforce are apprentices or work placements and M&Y also acts an evangelist to other employers about the benefits of employing people with mental and physical disabilities.

“The opportunity to work transforms their lives and has been a great experience for staff, despite initial apprehension. We try to take on people with disabilities, but we are honest when setting expectations and we always start with limited hours or a limited placement to test the water.”

Gillian Kelly, Director of Contract Services, M&Y Joinery Ltd (St Helens Chamber)



Looking beyond disability

Working alongside local charity, St Helens Autism Support, St Helens Chamber has launched a scheme to offer work experience to local young people with autism. Before starting the work experience each individual will develop a personal action plan and be introduced to the norms and expectations associated with the workplace.

“ We took on an Apprentice through the Chamber who was bipolar. She was fantastic but sadly she didn't receive any additional support at home, and one day she stopped coming to work and disappeared. ”

Mark Parish, GPW Recruitment (St Helens Chamber)

“ The UK is currently losing over £1000 per employee due to stress and mental illness, so employers need to invest in staff wellbeing just as they do to maintain plant or IT systems. Equality should be more than just a 'tick box' exercise – it's not necessarily about treating everyone the same - and the good news is that making positive changes need not be expensive. ”

Jane Cattermole, Minding Your Business (Surrey Chambers of Commerce)

“ I took on a bipolar member of staff through the Speaker's Parliamentary scheme, which supports young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with a disability. It was challenging at first, but with support she became one of my best employees. ”

Mary Macleod MP, Private Secretary to Rt Hon Maria Miller MP and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament

“ People with learning difficulties can do the job; all we need to do is adapt the teaching methods. ”

Linda Boyham, Specialist Training & Development Ltd (St Helens Chamber)



Looking beyond disability

Triton Showers has a 37% share of the UK shower market and a diverse workforce of 350 people.

“When I started at Triton Showers 20 years ago it was a very male environment with few women supervisors and no women managers. I was encouraged by my male predecessor to apply for the position of MD. As a company, we now see the person and their skills, not their gender, age or race; and we do everything we can to support every individual.”

Lorna Fellowes, Managing Director, Triton Showers (Coventry & Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce)

“ It is important for businesses to use the full talents of people in the workplace and get the best from their employees. Failing to do so can mean increased staff turnover, reduced productivity and higher rates of absence. ”

Mary Macleod MP, Private Secretary to Rt Hon Maria Miller MP and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament



“ People with autism may have problems with changes to routine, contact with new people and a variety of social situations can both cause anxiety which can make finding the right kind of employment a challenge. However businesses should not be put off from hiring someone with autism as there are traits associated with autism that can be very beneficial to businesses, such as intense concentration, having original ideas, great attention to detail, an affinity with computers and other technology and reliability around punctuality. ”

Pauline Devine, Director of Employment Services, St Helens Chamber



Lessons learnt

After listening to a wide range of businesses from across England it is apparent that the conversation about equality in the workplace has progressed significantly in recent years. All of the participants started with the view that a good business should treat everyone fairly, whether staff, customers or suppliers. There was general agreement that business and employment was good for equality, but also that equality is good for business. In particular, employers wanted to hire and retain the best people to fulfil their business functions. There was a strong sense that, within the limits of what a business can do, most employers would be open to flexible ways of working, particularly for disabled or older workers and those with caring duties, if it meant happier staff and higher productivity.

- “Simple common sense and treating people fairly will get you most of the way in complying with the Equality Act.”
- “I’ve realised that there is a lot more we can do in our community to support disabled people into work.”
- “It’s good to see Government educating small business about regulation, and hopefully doing more to cut red tape.”
- “The Equality Act seems a lot less frightening when summed up as ‘don’t discriminate, harass or victimise!’”



Additional resources

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/creating-a-fairer-and-more-equal-society>

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_work/

<http://www.mind.org.uk/employment>

<https://www.gov.uk/parental-leave>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shared-parental-leave>

<https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working/overview>

Think Act Report

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/creating-a-fairer-and-more-equal-society/supporting-pages/think-act-report>

The Equality Act 2010

<http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wor/new/ea-guide.pdf>

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/here-for-business/guidance-for-small-and-medium-size-businesses/>

Chamber HR

Most chambers provide their members with free employment law and HR advice through the Chamber HR service.

www.chamberhr.co.uk



British
Chambers of
Commerce

BRITISH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

65 PETTY FRANCE

LONDON SW1H 9EU

T: +44 (0)20 76545800

www.britishchambers.org.uk