

MINUTES
Social Wellbeing

Women and Work APPG Meeting, Monday 14 December 2020
3-4pm via Zoom

Chair: Laura Farris MP, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG

Parliamentarians in attendance:

- Marion Fellows MP

Minutes

Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG, Laura Farris MP convened the meeting, welcoming the guest speakers and audience. She explained that the theme was social inclusion at work, which draws on other themes from throughout the year. She said the panellists would discuss themes around social inclusion for people with protected characteristics and the lessons that have been learned from this period of altered working practices. She then introduced **Simona Cilenti, Director of the Colleague Engagement Team at American Express**.

Simona said she leads on Amex's UK inclusion and diversity strategy, which aims to deliver a safe and inclusive environment for all employees, where they can be engaged, have a voice and bring their whole selves to work. She said this year had been challenging and necessitated changes and adjustments and has also caused social isolation. Amex reacted quickly by moving its mental health offerings online, which brought more than a 25% increase in use for some counselling services compared to previous years. They also pivoted to a virtual colleague development offering.

Simona explained that Amex has 10 employee networks in the UK, which represent the full spectrum of diversity and over 60% of colleagues are a part of at least one. Through 2020, Amex used these to deliver a programme of support for development and wellbeing and through lockdown, held webinars that had over 2,000 live attendees and viewings doubling via recordings too. These offered acknowledgement of the challenges people were facing and tips for overcoming them. The key issues were presence, productivity, accessibility and redefining goals. Amex's families network put together a playbook with tips for parents working from home with children and worked with partners such as Bright Horizons to deliver this.

Simona said that Amex's colleague wellbeing strategy took on a new dimension, with virtual counselling and an emotional wellbeing therapist available. The organisation also offered weekly meditation, nutrition tips and exercise classes, and held sessions on sleep and mood to help colleagues develop awareness of their emotional state and offer tips to support this within a virtual environment.

Amex was also conscious of colleagues who joined or returned from a period of leave during the pandemic and did as much as possible to support them, with specific

communications for returners on the changes that had taken place while they were away to compensate for being unable to catch up face-to-face.

Simona shared examples of successful work by Amex's employee networks. For example, Amex partnered with its Pride Plus network to launch pronouns in all email signatures, which can feel like a small step to many but was a significant way for transgender colleagues to feel able to bring their whole selves to work. Amex also launched a self-identification initiative in its HR systems in September, which is a voluntary initiative to allow colleagues to confidentially share diversity information about themselves with HR. Simona said they created a colleague-centric communications and engagement plan for this, which was successful in producing a high engagement rate. Amex has also worked with its Black and Asian network to facilitate conversations on allyship and microaggressions in the workplace.

Simona concluded by saying she sees diversity and inclusion work as a continuous journey, and some organisations have made more progress on this than others. She said she hopes for sustained commitment and accountability across a number of organisations, including Amex, and that successful efforts come from across the company and stakeholders at the top. She said she hoped we would not be having the same conversations in a few years' time. 2020 has been a transformational year involving learning, growth, and adaptation, and has made it clear how vital it is that everyone can bring their whole selves to work.

Laura thanked Simona, acknowledging that the experience of working from home has been varied for different people depending on what 'home' means. She said that going into an office can be a good "*leveller*." Laura then introduced **Katy Hamid, Employee Communications Manager at Barratt Developments**.

Katy said that in her role she works with Barratt's Executive Team and group function divisions. The company has 6,500 employees throughout the UK, and throughout the pandemic communication has been more important than ever for keeping employees updated, informed, and feeling like they are a part of the business, especially if they had been furloughed.

Katy explained that Barratt launched its diversity and inclusion strategy in 2017 and has a predominantly male workforce, with 30% women employees. A key part of its strategy is attracting women and people from diverse backgrounds, so ensuring that roles are marketed inclusively is key. Barratt also wants to showcase the range of opportunities it has to offer and demonstrate that whatever your identity or background, you can bring your whole self to work and be celebrated. Its strategy recognises that change cannot take place overnight, emphasising continuous implementation and holding each other accountable on collective goals.

Katy said that Barratt wants to be seen as an employer of choice. It provides training for its employees on the importance of diversity and inclusion and helping them to address unconscious bias. It has a number of policies to support this, like its family friendly policy, which Katy explained includes enhanced maternity leave and paid leave for anybody undergoing fertility treatment, regardless of gender. She added that she is also pushing

for a menstrual policy too following the Women and Work APPG's last meeting on menstrual wellbeing.

Katy said Barratt is also cultivating its talent pipeline and planning its strategies for future talent to ensure better representation. It emphasises this in its graduate and career development programmes. Barratt also offers a reciprocal mentoring scheme, which provides junior colleagues with opportunities to get tips from senior members of the team and for senior colleagues to understand what goes on at different levels of the company. It also has an employee forum, attended by people at all levels including the executive team and board, which meets quarterly to update and strategise.

Barratt is also looking at sharing colleagues' stories, to celebrate them and amplify their voices, through awareness days and employee networks and groups. Its first one was targeted at gender equality and Katy said it was great to see its impact. She added that Barratt has also been publishing its gender pay gap report, which is generating new ideas and understanding. She said Barratt is also looking to establish LGBT+, BAME and disability networks in the new year.

Katy explained that Barratt has also worked to connect people across the business while working remotely. It has two groups that connect parents and a wider group for people struggling generally and wanting to reach out to colleagues. It is also increasing its work experience placements and has worked with Leonard Cheshire and Whizz Kids.

Katy finished by reflecting on the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic on working practices. She said that it is clear that flexible working is here to stay, which is a real positive and would have been a much slower process otherwise. She added that it is important to emphasise flexibility rather than just remote working. Katy said one negative has been the loss of everyday social interactions and added that Barratt is trying to find a way to facilitate this within its business by encouraging non-work-related catch ups.

Laura thanked Katy, agreeing that flexible working and working from home have been conflated but that huge progress has been made in showing remote and flexible working can be effective without people having to make the case themselves. She then introduced **Verity Ayling-Smith, Training and Consultancy Advisor, Leonard Cheshire.**

Verity stated that Leonard Cheshire is an international disability charity supporting people to live, learn and work as independently as they choose. It is a pan-disability organisation, and Verity explained that disability is a very broad term and includes many different types of conditions.

Verity said Leonard Cheshire recently published a report called "*Locked out of the labour market*". This found that the disability employment gap in the UK is around 25%, disabled people are increasingly concerned about losing their jobs and feel at greater risk of redundancy, and young disabled people experience fewer graduate opportunities and work experience placements. It also found that a million young disabled people will be unemployed when the furlough scheme ends, and negative employer attitudes and understanding have been exacerbated during the pandemic. 42% of employers said that not being able to support them during Covid was a barrier to employing disabled people, while 54% said that the practicalities and costs of making adjustments were a barrier.

Verity argued that the report highlighted discriminatory employment and recruitment practices and a lack of understanding of disabilities and reasonable adjustments. She added that 21% of the UK has a disability or long-term condition, whether this is known or not, so it is vital to have inclusive workplace practices.

Verity explained that during the pandemic there has been a conflation of disability and vulnerability to Covid, despite clear government guidelines. She argued that employers have often failed to say when they are unsure how to support employees, which exacerbates the lack of understanding. She said that a positive outcome from the pandemic has been how the role of managers has been integral to making working from home more supportive and effective, as they have got to know their teams better and talked directly about how they like to work. This has enabled more open sharing about disability and barriers people face at work.

Verity noted that while going into work can be a “leveller”, there are barriers for some individuals within an office, or barriers at home. She explained that there is a misconception that people’s homes are set up to cater for their needs, but this is not always the case as some people do not have the technology or ergonomic equipment they need there.

Verity concluded by outlining her key asks of the Government. She criticised that the Plan for Jobs only mentions disability once and said that Leonard Cheshire would like to see four key policy changes. Firstly, adjustment passports should be implemented, which are a tool employees and managers can use to discuss what adjustments they require. People can be nervous about having these conversations, but the passport is a productive tool and a good facilitator, and it can follow an employee if they move teams or get a new manager. Secondly, Leonard Cheshire is calling for flexible working to be a long-term option. Thirdly, as 74% of disabled people placed on furlough feel the support has helped to protect their jobs, and 26% of disabled people placed on furlough have not been able to return to work, Leonard Cheshire would like to see furlough extended for those who are clinically vulnerable. Finally, Verity called for mandatory reporting on the disability employment gap, explaining that information is important to enable adjustments.

Laura thanked Verity, agreeing that many people hear the word disability and think that it only means people in a wheelchair. She added that laws to prevent discrimination against disabled people in the workplace are often effective once someone is in a job but it is hard to provide evidence of discrimination at the point of recruitment.

Q&A

Laura then opened the discussion to questions from the audience. The discussion covered the following key themes:

- How to measure inclusion initiatives. **Simona** argued that metrics and employee surveys are important. **Verity** agreed and said that employers should collect data on the characteristics of their employees, adding that workplace culture is also vital, as is asking why employees may not feel comfortable sharing information about themselves. **Katy** agreed and said that Barratt explains why it is asking for certain

bits of information, emphasising that it is about getting to know its workforce better and being more supportive.

- How to ensure company initiatives are taken forward by people at all levels of an organisation. **Katy** said communication is key, as is transparency and ensuring support is available for people implementing new initiatives. She said using multiple forms of communication can also help. **Verity** added that ensuring people have other places to go if they feel their manager is not supportive or clear on something is highly valuable. **Simona** added that it helps for colleagues to see senior leaders role modelling the initiatives they are calling for.