Diversity training

Only connect

Reed Smith held a panel discussion with representatives of both industry and education to pinpoint problems encountered when enhancing black and minority ethnic (BME) representation across the legal profession.

By Leon Stephenson, partner, and Michael Ingham, trainee associate, Reed Smith

As part of Reed Smith’s ongoing commitment to enhancing diversity and inclusion (both within the firm and throughout the legal profession in general) members of the firm’s Diversity & Inclusion Committee recently organised a panel discussion focusing on the need to enhance representation of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) persons within the legal profession. The aim was to identify practical and effective ways in which law firms and businesses can adapt and take steps to improve diversity and opportunities for BME persons within their organisations. The event sought to draw upon the experiences and opinions of a variety of professionals and students from various walks of life throughout the city, and the panel included an assistant principal from a City school, a law firm partner, a trainee solicitor, the general counsel of a large UK retail bank, a law firm diversity officer and a careers officer of a City university.

The event provided a constructive forum within which employers, students and educational bodies could come together to participate in an open discussion about their experiences of recruitment, diversity within the workforce, and careers in law and the City for those from BME backgrounds. Those in attendance were invited to provide written feedback after the event to help build on the topics discussed. Although the event was focused primarily on the inclusion of those from BME backgrounds, Reed Smith feels that the issues under discussion also relates to the challenges faced by young people from less privileged or lower socioeconomic backgrounds more generally.

The event identified four areas where professions and businesses could focus to help raise aspirations and improve opportunities for students from BME backgrounds to gain access to careers in the city.

The importance of role models and mentoring schemes

Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds will typically have low expectations and narrow horizons as to the kind of jobs and personal achievements to which they can aspire. Role models can therefore play an invaluable role in motivating and inspiring students. It was felt that role models could be successfully utilised through the provision of mentoring schemes, but these schemes are most useful when delivered at an early stage in a child’s education (around age 11 or 12), as it can prove more difficult to raise a child’s aspirations as they grow older.

The event explored the nature of an effective role model. As a general proposition, children from disadvantaged backgrounds will respond well to anyone who they see as showing interest in and spending time with them. It was thought by many, however, that the gender of a role model or mentor can be more important than his or her race. Many students in poorer areas can be from single parent families and benefit a great deal from interaction with male role models. Younger employees can also play a vital role in reaching out to, guiding and motivating those at university looking to take that next step.
on the career ladder, and businesses should seek to encourage involvement of younger members of staff in mentoring schemes.

Exposure to a variety of people in careers, of different ages and backgrounds, enables students to build a more mature and confident picture of the opportunities available to them.

Employers should liaise with schools and universities to ascertain what approach would work best. Training should be provided to all staff looking to become involved in mentoring schemes, allaying any reservations they may have about their suitability or capabilities as a mentor. Effective training can also help reduce the turnover of mentors and promote more durable, and therefore valuable, relationships.

For example, Karl King, representing the Bar Council, highlighted the interest of the Bar in expanding the events and programmes the Bar has run with London schools.

The careers group at London University, meanwhile, recently launched the Reach Online Community, a new online network. This site provides a discussion forum in which students from minority groups can put questions to each other, to employers and to their careers advisers. Employers can list relevant events, opportunities and support services, and participate in other ways to provide practical help for students. The Reach Online Community is one example of the wider use of technology, blogs, and devices like virtual classrooms, which we are likely to see in recruitment and widening access to careers in the City in future.

Work experience
Another common major barrier for BME students and other less privileged students seeking to enter careers is a lack of work experience. Students can have little to no exposure to an office environment and view it as an alien concept.

Work experience can take many forms, from short visits to city offices of a few hours to work placements. Certain forms of work experience will be better suited to students, where influencing factors include age, previous exposure to the workplace and confidence levels. Employers looking to offer work experience should liaise with schools and universities to ascertain what format would best suit their students, so as also to devise a productive and useful experience for students.

The panel’s general view was that, while it is important students experience a business environment at an early age, there is a need to strike a balance between under and overexposure during a student’s education. Such a balance could be achieved by providing opportunities for students to visit the workplace while also bringing the workplace to students at the schools, their “comfort zones”, through talks and mentoring schemes, and as part of a gradual introduction to the world of work. With this issue in mind, the St Matthew Academy, based in London, has run a successful scheme with the law firm Olswang, where lawyers and staff from Olswang visit the school and introduce students to what they do and what legal careers can offer.

Reading partner schemes provide a variation on this theme. At Reed Smith lawyers and staff participate in a scheme with a school in Tower Hamlets. While the scheme’s primary purpose is to assist with reading, part of the process also involves a dialogue with the student about careers in law, and the scheme culminates with a visit to Reed Smith’s offices. This takes place at the end, when a relationship has been forged between the reading partner and the student. Barclays Bank also operates a reading scheme, which was started with the same aim of reaching children at all ages.

Recruitment review
Another interesting point to emerge from the event, however, was the view that there is a need for employers to review their interview and selection processes to ensure they recognise talent and potential that may not have been apparent, or which may have been ‘screened out’ through the use of traditional assessment techniques.

A common difficulty identified when recruiting at graduate level is the tendency for traditional recruitment processes to exclude certain students before they reach interview level, as the employer looks for competencies and skills to be demonstrated through a narrow set of experience that may implicitly exclude those from less privileged backgrounds (for example, perhaps a preference to see that a candidate has travelled widely, when that is likely to be impossible for someone from a low income family). Graduate recruitment processes also typically require candidates to demonstrate that they are “commercially aware”. However, in low income households, television programmes or newspapers of choice are unlikely to be Bloomberg news or the broadsheets. In attempting to address these problems it is important that firms review their recruitment profiling policies in an attempt to weed out any desired traits or experiences that may prove indirectly discriminatory.

Law firm Herbert Smith, for example, now looks to take a much broader view of applicants’ overall achievements and strengths, and focuses less on specific prescribed experiences in so doing. Early education about the world of finance and support with business awareness and skills can help to address the imbalance between applicants of different backgrounds in this area at recruitment level. However, training and support on business awareness and skills could also usefully be offered within workplace programmes or mentoring schemes provided by employers.
Closer communication

Written feedback from a number of other organisations and individuals also strongly endorsed the event’s interest in closer communication and greater dialogue between, on the one hand, schools and universities, and on the other, employers and employer organisations. Greater dialogue can help to raise awareness of the opportunities for work experience and mentoring programmes within these groups. Schools and universities can provide invaluable input for those businesses looking to introduce mentoring programmes, and help to develop a structured work experience programme appropriate for the relevant age group. It was suggested that mentoring and work experience schemes should be actively promoted by the providers, however, making the task of identifying opportunities less onerous for schools.

The event proved highly informative, providing initial, practical steps for schools, universities and businesses to help improve opportunities for young BME talent. While we appreciate there is no quick solution to the current inequalities experienced by students from BME backgrounds, we hope the themes and ideas to have come out of the event will not only provide businesses and schools with strong food for thought, but will also allow them to focus on the practical steps available that could be adopted.

To commit to the kind of longer term and varied support covered in this article will require many law firms and employers to reappraise just how they manage and allocate resources to such activities. Responsibility for proper delivery by a firm against this commitment might not naturally, or exclusively, be the domain of any of the organisation’s recruitment, diversity and inclusion, community support or broader CSR functions or initiatives. It will likely need to be shared across all of these functions. It will therefore be imperative for firms to take a cohesive strategic approach, with senior management support, and to work as closely as possible with schools, sixth form colleges, universities and careers centres. It is also incumbent on businesses themselves to come up with practical steps that can be presented to schools, sixth form colleges and universities, and to be proactive in growing better at rebalancing the underrepresentation of BME lawyers in the legal profession generally.

Leon Stephenson is a partner, and Michael Ingham a trainee associate, at Reed Smith. They can be contacted at: lstephenson@reedsmith.com and mingham@reedsmith.com

Commercially focused CSR

Collins McHugh offer a full range of consultancy services including:

- Benchmarking current performance
- CSR strategy
- Action plans and KPIs
- Engaging employees
- Attracting a diverse workforce
- CSR Reporting

Collins McHugh also offer individual leadership and team development training (MBTI)

To request our brochure email: cr@collinsmchugh.co.uk
or for an informal chat ring
0161 929 0707

A few of our clients:

www.mpmagazine.com