

Chapter 6

EEO and HRM: Compatible Positions, Different Interests

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The first six years of the operation of the Australian Government's Affirmative Action Act have seen human resource management and equal employment opportunity practices proceed hand in hand.

That this should be the case has been the over-riding message from the Affirmative Action Agency. This conference is testimony to the success with which this message has been communicated. So successful has the linking of human resource management and equal employment opportunity been that some EEO officers have suggested that EEO is at worst, *passee*, and at best, a red flag to a bull, and that all the issues associated with removing discrimination against women can be adequately dealt with under the human resource management umbrella.

The argument that I want to put forward today is that the link between EEO and HRM is an important one to recognise and to utilise, but that one does not make the other redundant — both have an important and independent contribution to make to encourage more women participate more fully in the workforce.

First, I make the case that in practice, in Australia, those organisations with the stronger commitment to human resource management are also those that are taking the federal Government's affirmative action legislation more seriously. I then will look at the advantages of this state of affairs, the disadvantages, and finally, suggest strategies for the future that will preserve the advantages and hopefully offset the disadvantages.

The HRM-EEO Link

In 1989-90, the Commonwealth Department of Industrial Relations commissioned the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey. As part of that survey, employee relations managers were asked about their progress in implementing the more basic steps of the affirmative action legislation (for example, having someone responsible for EEO, a written EEO policy, employment targets for women, agreements with unions) and about their progress in introducing workplace practices that help women contribute more fully to the workforce (for example, child care, leave to provide care for sick family members, paternity leave, formal instruction programs to develop skills).

They were also asked about more general

employment practices that we generally associate with human resource management. For those who subscribe to the soft version of HRM, there were questions on meeting the needs of employees through the provision of benefits and services, for example, medical services, recreation facilities and welfare services. For hard-version HRM advocates, there were questions on training, job redesign, skills auditing, performance appraisal and quality control. Detailed analyses of these variables,¹ showed quite clearly that human resource management practices predicted what we may call procedural compliance — meeting the basic requirements of the legislation — and what we may call substantive compliance — introducing practices which accommodate women into the workplace. Using regression techniques, commitment to human resource management added significantly to the prediction of procedural and substantive compliance when organisational size, industry type, and workforce characteristics were controlled.

In another study, of 153 companies conducted in 1991-92, a similar pattern of findings emerged. Companies which gave priority to human resource management strategies in either a hard or soft version were companies which had been more effective in implementing the eight steps required by legislation, and furthermore, were the companies that were introducing practices that give women a fairer go in the workforce. They were also more likely to be workplaces which valued career break schemes, active recruitment of women in non-traditional fields, training in career planning, networking for women, formal instruction programs, and job sharing.

What Does This Mean?

Some would argue that these findings simply show that the affirmative action legislation and the practice of EEO for women are redundant, and that what we are calling EEO progress and compliance with the Affirmative Action Act are things that would normally have happened under human resource management anyhow.

I am prepared to concede that a significant amount of the change that we have seen to date could quite easily be the result of HRM rather than the legislation itself. I am not prepared to concede, however, that HRM would have found EEO as readily without the legislation, nor that workplaces would have gone as far

as they can go in encompassing legislative principles of EEO into HRM practice. Thirdly, there is reason to question the continuing growth of EEO in human resource management without the requirements imposed by legislation.

Importance of Institutional Redundancy and Overlap

Let us deal with the issue of overlap between HRM and EEO first. While I concede that it exists, I am going to argue that it is a highly advantageous state of affairs if meaningful social change is going to take place.

Redundancy may be inefficient when individuals analyse their time use. For instance, EEO officers in strong HRM organisations have a point when they say that they waste time filling out their annual report for the Affirmative Action Agency because it is documenting work that they are doing as HRM managers anyway. But when we look at the bigger picture of social change, the perspective is a little different. According to a recent book by Ian Ayres and John Braithwaite, *Responsive Regulation*, redundancy is a valuable ally. The best way to ensure that self-regulation works is to build redundancy into the system so that the behaviour that constitutes

compliance with the regulation is being reinforced by different groups of people. The underlying idea is that the strengths of one approach to achieving an objective compensate for the weaknesses of another approach oriented to the same objective. Thus, if one mechanism fails, another is in place to ensure effective goal attainment.

Furthermore, through redundancy, the behaviour is entrenched in workplace practice and is less easily marginalised, forgotten, and dropped from the agenda with organisational restructuring.

To make this point more forcefully, consider the factors that prevent women from meeting their full potential in the workforce. There is not one simple answer to this problem. There are many stumbling blocks.

Our major institutions, the media, the church, the law courts, the workplace, our schools and even the welfare system overlap in the message of subservience they give to women. Taking issue with the message in one domain, such as the media, seems to have so little impact precisely because the message is being communicated from so many other sources. The same redundancy which has limited women's options in the past must be harnessed for effective and long-lasting social change.

The second advantage is the importance of overlap in communicating ideas. Several of the EEO contacts that I interviewed said, "it is important to have something to hang your hat on". They were talking, of course, about the legislation as justification for what they were doing within the human resource management section.

The same argument can be made in reverse. From the perspective of government, it cannot automatically be assumed that new legislative requirements will be regarded by the business community with joy and enthusiasm. Doing something new, even if it will bring about benefits to the organisation, is going to be seen as a pain.

One way in which this pain can be minimised, is to tailor the legislation to dovetail with organisational practice and the affirmative action legislation is a very good example of this. I am not suggesting that the Government did this on its own. It came about through considerable dialogue among different interest groups, and the business community was very active in

determining the direction of the legislation.

This dovetailing of established organisational practices with legislated change is obviously important for gaining acceptance of legislation, but it is also important in explaining to organisations what is expected of them. If an organisation is asked to comply with a piece of

legislation that appears to have nothing to do with its day to day activities, one can expect that what will be done is the bare minimum to avoid trouble.

Alternatively, it will be put in the too hard basket and nothing will be done, because the required activity cannot be readily tagged on to other higher priority activities. If the government is serious about the legislated change actually taking place, it must be prepared to invest resources in teaching and persuading such organisations to comply. Organisations must invest time and energy to understand what is expected and how these expectations can be met to the satisfaction of all parties. The process becomes more cost efficient for everyone if there is overlap between legislative requirements and organisational practices that are already in place.

This argument was well-supported in my research involving EEO contact persons. In organisations where there was a history of commitment to human resource management, EEO contact persons reported fewer problems with senior management on EEO issues. They saw senior management as being less hostile to the legislation in that they didn't regard it as intrusive and expected good outcomes to follow for business. Interestingly, these EEO contact persons did not report

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their senior management to be any more enlightened about sex discrimination than EEO contact persons in companies that placed little importance on human resource management.

Does HRM Restrict EEO Progress?

The disadvantages of linking HRM and EEO have probably been captured most succinctly by Clare Burton in her book *The Promise and the Price* when she says, "this focus — on the human resources needs of enterprises — allows much that needs to be changed to be left intact, in particular, the 'masculine' values which predominate in work organisations in the public and private sectors, and to which women are expected to conform." (p. xiii).

For many who subscribe to the philosophy of human resource management, accommodating workforce diversity is no more than a means to an end, in that creating a corporate culture and moulding individuals into the culture is a higher priority than providing for the different needs of individuals. This is where the different interests of HRM and EEO become apparent. Poiner and Wills (1991) illustrate this point well by contrasting an HRM program where "disadvantaged groups are sent off to assertiveness training sessions" with an affirmative action/EEO program where "employers create work environments in which less 'assertive' employees can be productive and prosper" (p.16).

Contribution Beyond HRM

I suggest that the special role assigned to EEO through the Affirmative Action Act has already had an impact on the way in which EEO is practiced and that it has the potential to make a much greater impact than has occurred already. In the study of EEO contact persons that I have already mentioned, 83 per cent saw the legislation as raising awareness of the ways in which women are discriminated against in the workforce and 75 per cent thought their senior management would feel that way as well.

Raising awareness of discrimination is no small feat and there is still a great deal of awareness raising to be done. There is no evidence to suggest that such awareness flows automatically out of a human resource management program. A high 74 per cent of EEO contacts thought that their senior management would agree with the statement: "If a woman is good at her job she will get ahead just as quickly as a man would" and more than half (57 per cent) agreed with this statement themselves.

Lack of awareness of discrimination sits quite comfortably alongside genuine commitment to HRM. It is very difficult to recognise discrimination when we are not part of the group that feels discriminated against. It is even more difficult when the discriminated group is at some distance from us, in that

we don't interact with them on a daily basis, and as a consequence, are denied the opportunity to observe discriminatory practices and spontaneous reactions to them. Given that these are qualities of many human resource managers, let me add a third. Human resource managers generally are socially skilled in handling other human beings. They are sensitised to the need to respect people and probably are less obviously discriminatory in their own behaviour as a result. Therefore, unless they see others behave in a discriminatory way towards someone or unless a case of discrimination is brought to their attention, they are probably going to be sceptical of the seriousness of the problem.

Let me pull these three characteristics together for you to paint a picture of a very common interview with an EEO contact. A socially aware, conscientious and concerned man or woman sitting in an office on the 20th floor of a city building expressing disapproval of sex discrimination, acknowledging that it happens and that the legislation is desirable, but telling me, quite sincerely, that they did not have a problem in their workplace. I do not accept that these are machiavellian characters. I think they are genuinely nice, co-operative people who are located in their organisation in such a way as to be sheltered from the problems that they are supposed to be monitoring. HRM does not offer a solution to this problem. The affirmative action legislation, however, does.

The most poorly implemented steps of the legislation are those that involve communication about EEO with female employees, employees in general, and with trade unions, and the setting of forward estimates.

This has two important implications for the way in which EEO is practiced at the moment.

First, human resource managers are not in regular contact with employees who are likely to know about discrimination and to have experienced discrimination. As a consequence, they don't find out about discrimination. In my interview with EEO contacts, it was quite common to hear "But what would we talk about" or "we tried that, but few women came, and those that did come didn't say anything". When your history in the workplace is one of being in junior positions, in temporary jobs, when you see yourself as easily replaced and when no one has bothered to listen to you in the past why would you be the first to put your hand up and complain about sex discrimination to someone from management whom you only see occasionally?

Female employees must be empowered before they will contribute to this communication process. It involves time and effort in building trust, it involves bringing skeletons out of the cupboard, it involves dealing with anger and disappointment, and there may be increased division before there is cohesion.

In other words, communication about EEO may run counter to human resource management in the short term. But the step is fundamental to recognising and

understanding sex discrimination and how it harms the organisation.

The relative failure of companies to set forward estimates for the employment of women also has unfortunate consequences for the practice of EEO. The importance of setting targets, even tentative targets, is that it engages personnel in better search strategies for recruitment and promotion. By not implementing this step properly, human resource managers have no incentive to look for talent in unlikely places and thereby challenge their own preconceptions about merit and how merit is assessed.

There is simply no personalised data to challenge the dominant stereotype of the high flyer, the person with talent, or the person with leadership potential. These stereotypes are only challenged when we do that extra bit of work and question the basis on which we have judged merit in the past.

The best starting point for this is to find the exception, to look further than one would normally look and with greater care, and find a person whose talent is a surprise to us. If we think that we have been inappropriately influenced by the way talent has been packaged, we have to think very hard about new criteria for judging talent. With the development of new criteria comes risk, and that is going to be particularly threatening to those human resource managers who find security in their tried and true bag of psychological tests and home grown remedies.

Thus, both the obligations to communicate and to set forward estimates, as set out in the affirmative action legislation, extend EEO practices beyond those that fit comfortably under the HRM umbrella.

Conclusion

In summary, the link between HRM and EEO is important and has been mutually beneficial. Those whose primary allegiance has been to EEO have been able to fall back on HRM to gain acceptance of their ideas. HRM practitioners, on the other hand, have used the legislative backing of EEO to increase the priority of their preferred programs for their organisations.

While the extreme closeness in the practice of EEO and HRM over the past six years has been advantageous to both groups, the time may have come to introduce a little more tension between the two. I am not suggesting for a moment that EEO and HRM part ways, but that practitioners of each recognise that behind the similar positions they currently hold in organisations are somewhat different interests.

Recognising the differences should be the basis for debate and dialogue, and should turn the Affirmative Action Agency's annual report from a paper and pencil exercise for one person, into a document for discussion, review and planning involving many from the organisation.

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NOTE

1. See Braithwaite, V. (1993) *The Australian Government's Affirmative Action legislation: Achieving social change through human resource management*. Administration, Compliance and Governability Program Working Paper No. 11, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, 0200.