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Green Paper on Demographic Change
European Commission
DG EMPL/E/1
J-27 01/122
B-1049 Brussels
Belgium

DG EMPL - CAD A/18804
Date: 12/8/2005
CF: E
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Dear Colleagues

EUROPEAN COMMISSION GREEN PAPER "FACED WITH DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE: A NEW SOLIDARITY BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS"

I am writing on behalf of Opportunity Now, which is a UK business-led campaign that works with employers to realise the economic potential and business benefits that women at all levels contribute to the workforce. We challenge complacency and tackle barriers to a fully inclusive workforce. Established in 1991, Opportunity Now draws its membership from the private and public sectors and higher education institutions, and our employers have a combined workforce of over 4.2 million.

We were most interested to read the Commission's Green Paper on the effects of demographic changes in the European Union and are pleased to see that the Commission wants to address these effects. Opportunity Now shares the view that one of the chief ways to do this is to implement the Lisbon Agenda fully, in particular those policies focusing on getting particular groups such as women into jobs, so that the EU can continue to compete effectively in the global market. As an organisation dealing with gender diversity, our comments focus on this area, but could be applied to other diversities as well.

We believe that it is important that discussion of demographic trends and managing their impact takes place at European level. Many EU countries face the same challenges in this area and only by sharing best practice can we hope to improve the situation.

In our view demographic changes are an integral part of the business case for diversity. We set this out in a publication in 2001, much of which remains valid (copy enclosed), though we are in the process of updating the case studies. All our members are committed to the business case for gender diversity and they see this as key to attracting and recruiting the best staff in a competitive market.

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The Opportunity Now members who are most successful, both in business terms and in promoting gender equality, are those who have integrated programmes of diversity policies, rather than tackling each aspect of equality, such as childcare, separately. Comprehensive gender equality programmes should cover:

- Anti-harassment initiatives
- Part-time working
- Flexible hours working
- Home working
- On-site child care
- Child care assistance, ie. vouchers/cash
- Women's networks
- Women's development training
- Mentoring programmes
- Equality awareness training
- Equal pay audits

Good employers promote these programmes creatively among their workforce and more widely. Some examples of integrated diversity strategies are outlined in the Opportunity Now awards case studies booklets for 2004 and 2005 (copies enclosed).

The Commission's Green Paper rightly identifies work-life balance and child care as important in addressing some of the problems caused by demographic ageing and falling birth rates. But research conducted by The Work Foundation revealed that almost a third of organisations in the UK (28%) continued to take a narrow statutory approach, limiting work-life balance options towards working parents. In the UK legislation gives parents of children under 5 and disabled children up to age 18, the right to ask for part-time work. But this has not encouraged enough parents to return to work or to work more flexibly. The British Government has recognised this and is now considering extending the right to flexible work to parents of older children and those caring for sick or disabled adults. This is clearly important in an ageing society where more and more workers have caring obligations for older relatives. But the problem with legislation is that many employers take it as the maximum that they should provide to their workers rather than as a minimum standard. Some Opportunity Now members do take a wider view and make requests for work-life balance 'reason neutral'. This approach encourages both staff and managers to consider the impact of proposed changes to working hours or working patterns on their colleagues, their workload and on the business or service needs of their work unit, as well as meaning that the decision-making is less subjective. In turn, this addresses another problem identified by The Work Foundation which revealed that 'management resistance to change' was the number one difficulty organisations face in implementing work-life balance measures.



Incidentally, Opportunity Now is currently conducting research into ways to tackle middle management resistance to diversity policies and we will publish the results in the autumn.

Opportunity Now agrees with the European Commission that training and up-skilling at all ages will become essential in tackling shortages caused by demographic changes. One aspect which is important is occupational segregation. For example, in the IT sector in the UK only 20% of the workforce is female which means that the sector is losing out on a potential pool of intelligent and skilled professionals. Some of our employers are already taking action to attract girls and women (and ethnic minorities) to non-traditional roles. This includes working with schools and universities and ensuring that recruitment literature is not stereotyped and is targeted where possible. Other employers work with organisations such as the Daphne Jackson Trust which helps women scientists return to academia or to industry after career breaks.

Opportunity Now thinks that the European Commission has an important role to play in addressing the effects of demographic change in Europe. A basic framework of legislation is necessary, but for the reasons outlined above is not enough to make real change. It is also important that the burden of legislation does not make it harder for employers (particularly in smaller enterprises) to promote gender diverse policies. Where the Commission could have a crucial role is in sharing best practice and in promoting a positive climate of acceptance, where discrimination is outlawed. This is a particularly important message from male leaders. Our most successful employers are those who create an environment where women (and other diverse groups) actively want to work. Having accepted the business case for diversity, they have extended it beyond Human Resources and Personnel Departments and promoted it throughout their business or organisation. For examples of this, please see the enclosed publication 'Diversity Dimensions: Integration into Organisational Culture'. I can do no better than conclude by quoting John Varley, Deputy CEO of Barclays PLC, who led the research and said "...it is men in organisations, and particularly male leaders, who hold the key to successful culture change and the creation of diversity and gender equality."

Yours sincerely

Julie Ashdown
Account Manager

Encl: Awards case studies for 2004 and 2005
Diversity Dimensions
Equality and Excellence

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equality and
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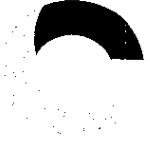


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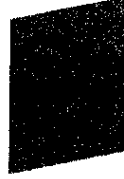
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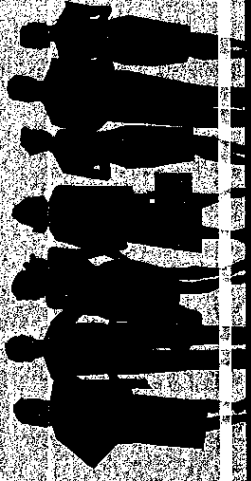
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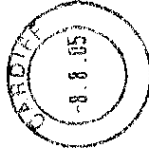
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