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EMBRACING DIVERSITY

2015 was a landmark year for diversity in Ireland with the passing of the Gay Marriage Referendum, making us the first country to pass a vote on gay marriage by popular vote. The success of this coincides with Ireland becoming an international epicentre for financial services and information technology in recent years, putting Ireland on the map as a hub of culture, business, and diversity. Add to this the recent BREXIT referendum, which saw the UK vote to leave the EU, and Ireland has the potential to grow further as one of the key trade channels to Europe.



With this in mind, it is critical that we assess if this growing support for diversity in the social and political landscape is being embraced in the business world. As increased change and transformation bring new and unique business challenges, how are Irish firms adjusting?

The growth of Ireland as a destination for international business is not a temporary adjustment, but rather a change that is affecting the composition of the workforce and overall population. Immigration brings new skills, culture, and perspective to business and society, as international businesses are recruiting globally to bring the best talent on board. According to the CSO¹ while Ireland still faces net emigration, 2015 saw the highest level of immigration in recent years.² Over 69,000 immigrants relocated to Ireland, up 14% on 2014, and up 66% on 2010, with the percentage of those at working age also growing.

The nature and type of immigration to Ireland is also shifting. According to ESRI³ over 70% of work permits in 2014 were allocated to professionals, with 43% to the IT sector alone⁴. These figures highlight the need for Irish employment practices to adjust to an increasingly diverse workforce.

Importantly for business, globalisation can also bring with it a more inclusive society. Today

LGBTQ individuals, people with a disability, and members of the travelling community make up a growing proportion of the labour force in Ireland. Progressive businesses recognise the importance of connecting with their customers and clients, and this translates to having a representative workforce.

It's not just Ireland undergoing transformation, businesses globally are experiencing changes to their workforce. PwC International Ltd (PwC) launched a programme eleven years ago to formally look at gender in the company. In a sector historically dominated by men, PwC have seen the trend shift since 2004. Over 50% of their graduate recruits annually are now female, which is an estimated 13,000 women joining their workforce each year. In order to facilitate these positive changes, firms are continually trying to make increased diversity and inclusivity a strategic priority. However, this isn't always easy.

The Harvard Business Review (HBR) published an article this summer on the problems US firms have faced in the past with increased diversity. Merrill Lynch, the global financial services leader, have paid out nearly half a billion dollars in discrimination lawsuits in the last 15 years, with their competitors facing similar challenges. As a result, firms are finally becoming proactive to

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eliminate discrimination in the workplace. Firms are increasingly turning to programmes that seek to reduce discrimination and promote diversity. The HBR found mandatory diversity training and pre-employment testing to negatively impact minorities, and create further division. While alternative approaches like voluntary training and mentoring schemes to actually reduce the likelihood of discrimination in the workplace.

Like the US, Irish firms are actively trying to eradicate incidences of discrimination by implementing programmes to improve hiring practices and integration in the workplace. In order to achieve this, many Irish firms recognise the need to think innovatively. Sodexo Ireland, identify that like any organisational change; innovative approaches and buy in from senior leadership are key to overcoming challenges. Margot Slattery, President of Sodexo Ireland, notes, "These practices both facilitate change and inclusive policies and support our diversity to build a more inclusive organisation".

There is often concern diversity policies that highlight differences will cause further divergence in the workplace. However, like Sodexo Ireland, inclusivity is key to avoiding this misstep. Guaranteeing all employees have access to initiatives ensures equality within diversity.

Increased interaction with advocacy programmes and networks, also offer insight and guidance to businesses in developing the right programmes. Organisations like Diversity Champions who evaluate businesses on their practices toward the LGBTQ⁵ community, are continually benchmarking firms on their practices toward minorities. Network Ireland and similar women's networks regularly organise events to shape the conversation on the increasing role of women in business.

One of the more prominent Irish examples of proactively embracing diversity is the Electricity Supply Board (ESB)⁶. They are one of the organisations leading the charge in providing a working environment that is inclusive to all. They fully recognise the benefits of a diverse workforce, and it features heavily in their strategic agenda. In recent years, ESB carried out a systematic review of the existing practices and re-evaluated where adjustments needed to be made. As a result their business practices now include programmes for those with a disability, working parents, and training to promote the use of positive language to increase the level of dignity and respect.

Globally, PwC is also ahead of the curve, as they introduced their strategic focus on diversity over a decade ago, and in recent years have stepped it up a gear. Aoife Flood, Senior



Manager for the Global Diversity and Inclusion Programme at PwC, says “about three years ago, we really accelerated our journey, and reframed our leadership and governance strategy around diversity.” Like Sodexo Ireland, the approach taken by PwC is focused on inclusivity. Programmes regarding work-life balance, that might historically have been available to only parents and women, are made available to all. Most impressively, the uptake is also wide reaching. In Brazil, 40% of those participating in the programmes are male, while 60% are young millennials.

Aoife concludes, “diversity and inclusion are embedded in our organisational framework. Inclusivity is inherent to the skillset we develop in our people at PwC”.

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to be addressed, for Ireland to remain a viable destination for world leaders in finance and information technology. While progress is being made in many firms, more has to be done.

The Irish Times found last year that incidents of discrimination against jobseekers was higher for non-Irish than their Irish counterparts⁷. Moreover, while women are increasingly making up a growing percentage of the global workforce, they are not making up their fair proportion of leadership positions. More needs to be done to impact the top tiers of management. Companies need to look to organisations like the ESB and PwC and evaluate whether their practices are promoting an inclusive working environment.

Today, firms are increasingly being measured and judged on their ability to adapt to the rapidly changing international business environment. In order to succeed we all must embrace and facilitate an increasingly diverse workforce, or face falling behind.

1. CSO - Central Statistics Office

2. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2015/

3. The Economic and Social Research Institute

4. www.esri.ie/publications/determining-labour-and-skills-shortages-and-the-need-for-non-eea-labour-migration-in-ireland/

5. LGBTQ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

6. www.esb.ie/energy-insights/behind-the-scenes-at-esb/behind-the-scenes-at-esb/2016/06/20/diversity-matters-in-the-workplace

7. www.irishtimes.com/business/work/diversity-can-work-well-for-many-different-companies-1.2229504