

Careers, Strategies and Practices of UK Diversity Consultants

Anne-marie Greene and Gill Kirton

Executive Summary

Since the early 2000s, commentators have noted the growth of a 'diversity industry', which includes numerous diversity consultants offering a plethora of services and products to help organisations make the most of a diverse workforce. However, despite a large body of research investigating organisational diversity policies and practices and a large number of studies exploring the work of diversity practitioners, diversity consultants (as a sub-set of diversity practitioners) are only rarely given any detailed attention. The study reported here attempts to fill this gap.

- Even without a professional body or formal network, diversity consulting is a fairly networked field where people share information and opportunities, and often combine and work together on client projects.
- People typically become diversity consultants after several or many years' experience in different professional, management and organisational roles often within HR and/or D&I, but also sometimes beyond, in mainstream management and business roles. Being an organisational outsider offered opportunities to side-step the organisational politics that can get in the way of D&I change initiatives and to gain greater control over the substance of their work.
- Diversity consulting is a values-driven field, which people enter out of a desire to contribute to organisational change efforts. Diversity consultants are people who have observed under-utilisation of talent, under-representation of 'minorities', or poor/unfair treatment of employees and who see social and business value in tackling these issues.

- Aware of the changing language within the field, diversity consultants have adopted the language of ‘diversity and inclusion’ seeing it as tactical to do so, and as a means of shifting the debate beyond protected characteristics. In addition, the term D&I captures their personal belief that ‘inclusion’ is the way forward for organisations and/or employees.
- Diversity consultants are committed to involving multiple organisational stakeholders in the D&I project, including managers and non-managerial employees, unions (where present), senior leadership teams, HR practitioners.
- The research identified a number of challenges that diversity consultants navigate in their work including measurement of success; leadership and responsibility for D&I; stakeholder involvement, buy-in and/or resistance; organisational D&I commitment and resources.
- The research also identified future challenges for the field of D&I consulting, including the language and meaning of D&I, the undervaluation of D&I work, and a range of personal challenges related to the values-driven nature of the work.



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About the researchers

Anne-marie Greene and Gill Kirton are senior level research professors in established universities. They have been engaged in research and consultancy in the equality and diversity field for more than twenty years. They have published widely in the area including prominent books, for example the best-selling academic text-*The Dynamics of Managing Diversity: A Critical Approach* (Routledge, 2016) which is now in its fourth edition and *Diversity Management in the UK: Organizational and Stakeholder Experiences* (Routledge, 2009). They have significant experience of funded research projects, and have established expertise in sophisticated qualitative research methods.

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1 Background

We received funding from the British Academy for a research study, which aimed to investigate the work of diversity consultants in the UK. Our previous research on diversity management has shown that there is little awareness about diversity consultants and their work even though it is clear that they are key actors in the equality and diversity field.

We were particularly interested in the motivations, beliefs and values that underpin diversity consultants' careers, strategies and practices and the role that consultants play in developing diversity management practices and initiatives within their client organisations. We wanted to represent and disseminate the experiences and opinions of diversity consultants themselves in order to enhance understanding about barriers and enablers of effective organisational diversity management.

1.1 Why this research was undertaken?

The body of research on diversity management in the UK context has increased significantly over the last decade. However, a significant gap is the relative absence of focus on the roles, activities and contributions of diversity consultants. With the outsourcing of HR activities on the increase, it seems highly likely that diversity consultants will have an increasing influence on the spread of diversity management initiatives, as they are engaged to assist organizations with a range of activities. A specific focus on diversity consultants adds to the body of knowledge of diversity practitioners and their work and contributes to the emergent evaluation of diversity management and its capacity to address organisational inequalities and business performance issues.

1.2 Key areas of interest

- What work backgrounds do diversity consultants have?
- What motivates people to do diversity consultancy work?
- How do diversity consultants and their client organisations understand and work with the concept of diversity?
- What services and specialisms do diversity consultants offer?
- When, how and why do client organisations call upon their services?

- What role do diversity consultants play in developing organisational diversity management practices and initiatives? What kinds of diversity projects are they involved in?

1.3 Research Methods

We are qualitative researchers, interested in providing rich accounts of experiences and opinions in interviewees' own words. For this reason, we use semi-structured in-depth interview techniques, ideally in a face-to-face situation, but we are also able to conduct interviews by telephone where this is more convenient. For this project, we interviewed 28 diversity consultants. The interviews used a broad question guide covering the areas of interest above. The interviews took around one hour, and they were all recorded and transcribed.

1.4 Treatment of the interview data

All the interviews were anonymised at the point at which they were transcribed. The subject matter of the interviews was considered confidential and the utmost care was taken to ensure that there were no identifying attributions in any of the data analysis and reporting. In particular, any references to client organisations were anonymised generically (e.g. a government department, a retail company, a local authority, an IT firm, etc.).

2 Diversity and Inclusion Consultants: Putting values into practice: challenges and opportunities

2.1 Introduction

The original idea for this study dates back to our 2004-06 research on diversity management strategies and policies in UK organisations, published in various academic journals (*Canadian Journal of Administrative Science; Employee Relations; Human Resource Management Journal; International Journal of HRM; Personnel Review*) and in a 2009 published Routledge book, *Diversity Management in the UK: Organizational and Stakeholder Experiences*. Among other things (including in-depth case studies of two large organisations), we interviewed some 40 diversity practitioners – mainly people responsible for diversity strategy and policy in their organisations. It was quite clear that while many large organisations had at least one person dedicated to diversity, many were also engaging diversity consultants to undertake special projects and/or training. As part of that 2004-06 research, we also interviewed a small number of external consultants. Since the early 2000s, commentators have noted the growth of a ‘diversity industry’, which includes numerous diversity consultants offering a plethora of services and products to help organisations make the most of a diverse workforce.

Some 10 years after our major study, we decided to focus a small study on the careers, strategies and practices of diversity consultants. Initially, we carried out a scoping survey of diversity consultant websites from which we identified around 20 high profile UK-based diversity consultancies whom we approached to take part in our interview programme. Some accepted the invitation, some did not; therefore, we also used a snowballing strategy to recruit participants to our study. We found that some of the (40) organisational diversity practitioners we had interviewed for the earlier research were now working as diversity consultants, which was very intriguing and possibly reflected a broader trend of outsourcing of HR activities. The research resulted in 28 interviews (around 35 hours of sound files and 430 pages of transcripts).

In this report, we focus our analysis on the values that diversity consultants bring to the field and the challenges and opportunities they face in putting those values into practice in their work with client organisations. We chose this focus because we were so struck by the answers to the question about how and why our interviewees became diversity consultants and then

subsequently within the interviews, by how a value-driven narrative threaded through the experiences and perspectives the consultants shared. We believe that this sets diversity consulting apart from other forms of management/organisational consulting and makes it a rather unique field.

3 The consultancy organisation

3.1 The business model

The consultancy work of those in our study was organised in a wide variety of ways, from being a self-employed freelance consultant, to owning a company that had both employees and associates (see Table 1).

Table 1: Business Model

Self-employed/ Freelance consultant	6
Consultancy employee	2
Consultancy owner	2
Consultancy owner with associates	12
Consultancy owner with employees and associates	6
Employed at an organisation in diversity role	2

For most, their consultancy work was their primary paid work, albeit with differing hours and variations across the full-time and part-time spectrum. This was not surprising given the variety of motivations for becoming a consultant which are discussed in the next section 4.3. Two consultants were also employed in a D&I role within an organisation and undertook their consultancy activities part-time. The most common business model amongst our sample was that our interviewees owned a consultancy business and then employed associates on a self-employed contract basis. Most associates were employed on this basis; however, there was one consultancy that offered permanent employment contracts to their associates, which connected to their ethical principles:

“it’s also about people, respect for people’s lives. It’s like I couldn’t live on the promise of a day here and a day there. And I mean it would, you know, we need to, I need a team, I can’t work on my own and I feel that we’ve got a team of people who have some fun doing it.” (Martin)

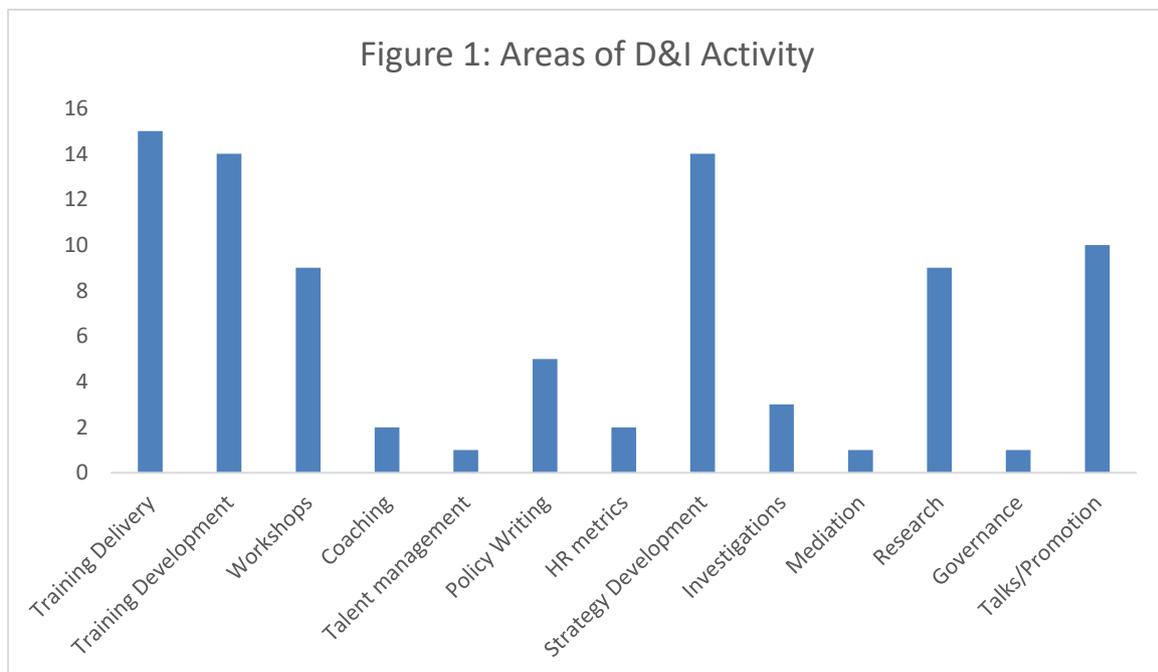
Associates were used to enable the consultancy business to undertake a greater quantity of contracts, and also to expand the range of activities and specialisms that the consultancy could offer. Some of the consultants also offered their services as associates to other consultancies. In almost all cases, the associates that were contracted had longstanding relationships with the consultants through past employment, projects or networking

activities. The need to have a strong relationship of trust with the associates was very important as the reputation of the consultancy business was at stake.

A small number of consultants in our sample worked on a sole-trader, self-employed basis. However, the business model of a consultancy company appeared to have advantages for all kinds of reasons including financial and taxation purposes. Additionally, one consultant related how it was necessary to be a company in order to be able to tender for contracts, because clients would not deal with sole traders.

3.2 Portfolio of activities

A wide range of D&I activities was covered across our sample (see Figure 1), the most common of which were training, strategy development, talks and promotion and



research. Some consultants would engage in training development but not in training delivery, while some would engage in developing and writing higher level strategy but not lower level policy documents. With regard to training, all consultants undertaking this as an activity developed and/or delivered their own materials rather than using an off-the-shelf course and the majority of these courses were bespoke to the client organisation. There were also some particular specialist skills offered by individual consultants for example

mediation, coaching, employment tribunal assistance and governance activities. Within this array of activities, consultants tended to specialise in particular subject areas. Sometimes this was around a particular protected characteristic, for example disability or LBGT, or around particular areas within a protected characteristic, for example the gender pay gap or women in leadership. As has been discussed in section 4.4.1, perhaps one of the most important criteria regarding what activities are engaged in relates to the underlying ethical values of the individual consultant in being involved in D&I.

3.3 Making a living

Many of the consultants in our study had moved from well paid jobs sometimes at extremely senior levels in organisations in order to undertake consultancy work. We were interested in understanding the ways in which consultants generated contracts, and their charging mechanism.

3.3.1 Generating work

Interestingly, a significant proportion of the consultants in our study stated that they did not undertake any active marketing to gain client contracts. The reputation of the consultant was seen as the most important marketing tool they had- when starting out, this was reputation they had built up over their experience as organisational practitioner and later on, it was the reputation they had with clients and their networks regarding their consultancy work. Word-of-mouth recommendations were extremely important here. Some consultants gained clients by approaches through their websites or through online networks like LinkedIn, while others had been successful through presentations at conferences and networking events. While claiming success despite the lack of active marketing, it was interesting that most consultants here were very concerned that they should not be seen as

arrogant, and many were quite self-deprecating, putting their success down to 'luck' and 'good fortune':

"Growing, I would say, growing, yes. And yes, growing and the work is very varied. You know, and we get a lot of repeat business for clients because we do have long term relationships. And we've done all of our work through referrals, we've never advertised... It's very good. We just never, you know, I'm not saying that is the ... I am just being truthful really. We just never had to do it." (Beth)

"I've been very, very lucky, you know, so I've been employed at the rate I would like to be from September and I have work till November this year and I haven't had to advertise or promote what I'm doing yet..." (Martha)

For those that did actively market their services, this involved a variety of methods including tendering for contracts, attending conferences and other networking events, and self-publication through blogs and websites. Many found this part of the consultancy business extremely difficult, perhaps because active self-promotion did not sit easily with their core skills and importantly their wider values:

"I found [it] very, very hard. This whole, the whole point of generating work and projects was very ... And also, I didn't like doing it actually. Because I am not a salesman, you know. I am an intellectual." (Sara)

"No, we have, we do occasionally tender. We are, I have to say in our 25+ years we've never been very good at seeking work. That's not what particularly motivates us. You know, of course sometimes we have to do that but it's not, it's not something that is a

core power of how we operate. Most of our work comes to us either through word of mouth or it's selling on within existing clients." (Sam)

Many indicated how difficult the tendering process was, and that as small businesses they were at a significant disadvantage when competing with the larger consultancy firms. For this reason, many consultants did not bother with tenders anymore, the resources required to put the bid together being viewed as too costly:

"It's a pain, absolute pain. Yes, it eats up a lot of time and if you're a small business you don't have the machinery to do that. Larger organisations will have a bid writing resource. So, we didn't have that and so that balance between the business development side of things and the delivery was always one that we were doing this with... we had to very consciously, you know, say we're not spending enough time out there networking, following up leads, bidding. And then we had to become quite bold in looking at bids and tenders and saying what's the likelihood of us being shortlisted for this, should we go for it or not?... We began to be more selective so that we managed the investment in that." (Jane)

Many consultants were keen to keep on top of changing developments in the field, attending conferences and briefing sessions, often around particular issues such as inclusive leadership. Relatively few consultants in our study were involved in formal D&I related networks, and partly this was because there was a feeling that there were no networks specific to D&I consultancy per se. Indeed, the lack of a professional body for D&I consultants was reflected on by some and is something we return to in the conclusion of this report. However, for those that were relatively well networked with each other, there was a view that the D&I consultancy field was one where collaboration was the watchword.

This meant that consultants would recommend each other to clients if they felt the other was better suited to the contract or if they were unable to undertake the contract within the specified time period. They felt a lack of direct competition between each other:

“I think you’ll find that with diversity, you know, as completely opposite ends of the scale to the pay arena in my old specialism, that diversity practitioners do tend to work with each other a lot even if their companies are in competition... I know some really, really good diversity practitioners out there that I would recommend. If they’ve got a huge task that is too big for me or whatever I can put them in touch with people that I know and trust.” (Beatrice)

“So, we don’t, we just basically don’t compete against each other. So, you know, we always ask if the other person has been approached to do a bit of work, you know, we try to remember to ask. So, we, yeah, we’ve never actually competed against each other for the same bit of work.” (Barbara)

As discussed in section 3.4.1, taking on a contract for work was also a selection process from the point of the view of the consultant. We have already established that a significant proportion of consultants would turn down work for a variety of reasons often tied to their underpinning values. However, for some consultants this depended on the extent to which they were able to make a sufficient living from the business, which the next section goes on to discuss.

3.3.2 Income streams

3.3.2.1 Adequacy and risk

About half of the group of consultants spoke about how much money they were able to make from their consultancy or the decisions they made with regard to chargeable rates. Some indicated that they made a satisfactory living out of their consultancy business, with these individuals indicating they had more work offers coming in than they had time and resources to accept. This all depended on the significance of their consultancy work to their overall income, indeed for some, this was a way of supplementing other income such as a pension and where there was less importance placed on it as an income stream. However, across the whole interview sample, there was no impression that D&I consultancy was where the big money was to be made. If there was a career in D&I, it was not necessarily going to be a well-paid career, at least compared to other professional areas of business and management consulting. Furthermore, there was a sense from many that beyond a certain 'survival' point, the aim of the D&I consultancy business was not about the money, but the value of the work, progressing the D&I agenda and doing something you love:

"I mean, I make a profit each year but what I do do is that profit actually stays in the business and covers what I call rainy day money. And you know, I've got no interest in buying fancy cars or ... I've got a nice house, I've got a car which gets me from A to B, I am not really interested in, I don't know, spending money for the sake of it. And I think part of that is because of what I see out there and what I see in terms of inequalities and working both in the UK and with lots of other ethnic groups across well, globally you, you know, you get to appreciate what you've got so much more. And you tend not to spend money on things that you don't need" (Yasmin)

“Mainly because I hate asking for money... I do it because the world is such an unfair place and if you have any privileges or any doors that you can open to help other people go through them then why wouldn’t you do that? And if you can make a living out of it and actually be comfortable and not be rich but just survive and not have to worry about money then isn’t that, for me that’s really what life is about.” (Heather)

However, even those who actively indicated that they were satisfied with their income indicated that they had experienced lean times, especially during periods of recession:

“I really noticed that in, you know, the big recession, you know, when the ... I mean I was lucky to have a very big piece of work that sort of got me through a good couple of years when I think times were particularly tough.” (Stella)

Furthermore, there was a significant minority of consultants who articulated how difficult it was to make ends meet at certain times, such that being a consultant was a struggle financially. While individual contracts could pay reasonably, the lack of security and regularity of income and risk involved was a source of concern to them. This meant that some were considering or had already decided to take on a part-time salaried job within an organisation:

“in the last year I just haven’t had, I’ve had hardly any work and things have been very tough. I’ve been looking at potentially moving out, closing the business down and moving out of running a business and back into employment. Or taking a, you know, taking a temporary role somewhere just to have that kind of comfort that there’s a regular salary coming in... I am younger than a lot of the consultants who are doing it to kind of keep their hand in, keep their brains going. Whereas this for

me is now my way of earning income, so things like pension contributions, savings are all a pipe dream at the moment. It is very tight, you know, very tight.” (Claire)

“It isn’t easy... the upside is you have control but the downside is you have a huge amount of unknowns... And just month by month I remember, you know, how are we doing, oh gosh, a bit short this month so we’ll have to work a bit harder... it isn’t an easy route and I think it does take a certain sort of resilience I think to kind of be comfortable with that level of as I say not knowing really” (Rebecca)

“part of the reason I decided to take a part-time job... was having done 100% freelance for a complete financial year, it was fine, it really was but it was also very nerve-wrecking and I did not really like the whole feast to famine thing going on.” (Serena)

3.3.2.2 Fee Structures

Many of the consultants indicated that one of the most difficult parts of their job was the financial administration of their businesses, of which a particular source of difficulty was deciding what and how to charge clients. Unlike other forms of consultancy (for example freelance software development), a market rate for D&I work does not exist, and the lack of comparable benchmarks from which to start from was lamented by many:

“Oh, it’s really hard. No, the pricing is horrible. I don’t like that at all. No, the pricing is really hard. Because I don’t know that there is market rates as such... but I don’t really know of going rates and you just have to sort of, you know, put a proposal together and say I think it’s going to take this number of days, you know, I think the

daily rate will be X and I usually do it on a daily rate or occasionally I develop this set of workshops or whatever, it will be X. But it is really hard.” (Geraldine)

“I’m very apologetic when I approach people. [laughs]... And I’m sure that I undersell myself as well. So, negotiating about money has been something that’s been a real challenge and it’s been really good having a business adviser who kind of calls me to task.” (Serena)

The last quote also captures a sense that we gained from many consultants of guilt about charging too much for their services, which fits with the earlier discussion of the principled or moral positioning behind their D&I work. All consultants who spoke about fee structures also indicated that they charged differentially depending on the client organisation - generally charging less for charities and some public-sector organisations than the larger private sector organisations, and even engaging in a considerable amount of pro bono work for particular clients. While this sometimes had a reputational advantage, with the promise of future work, mostly this was from an ethical value stance of the worthwhile nature of the endeavour within the particular organisational context, and depended on what the client could afford:

I would say a lot of this is coming from a sense of vocation as well and I do have a sense that my vocation is to serve not-for-profit organisations who can’t pay corporate rates. So, I mean if a corporate organisation came along and wanted me I would say yes, please, and here’s my corporate rate. But with the limited time I have it is, it does fill up with doing non-profit stuff.” (Serena)

“I don’t like ripping people [off]... It’s public services, we pay for it. So, I couldn’t justify taking public money for work that wasn’t going to be of benefit to them. I’ve never done it. I never want to do it. I don’t ... It wouldn’t be consistent with my notion of morality.” (Bridget)

“I’m still very, very guilty of giving things away. Because it’s much more a passion of mine than I want to be in the Bahamas. If I wanted to be in the Bahamas I could have done that doing other things... you know, I had X call me and say we would really love to do your course, we’ve heard about it but we can’t afford it and I said well, what do you have? And they said we can come up with £200 between us...and I said that’s fine, that’s totally fine. I’ve done it for pizza and beer before...” (Samantha)

However, the consultants were also very aware of the undervaluing of D&I activities generally, both within organisations and then this translating through into comparatively low rates for D&I consultancy contracts. This made many consultants very selective about the contracts they would or would not take. While they would make a decision to do pro bono work, or charge what the organisation could afford from a principled stance, they would also make the decision that *“there is certainly a level that you wouldn’t go below only because then it isn’t worth your while doing it”* (Geraldine). There was a shared view that low level of contract fees for D&I consultancy said something about the low level of commitment to D&I generally within that organisation and therefore said something about the ability of the intervention to be effective. This links to the later discussion in section 4.4.1 about the need for consultants to feel that their work made a difference in the organisation:

"... part of the challenge that we have is people don't value the expertise enough... I had a head hunter who rang me from a very large retailer to say they're putting in a chief diversity officer, global organisation, you know, I know you're a consultant would you be [interested]... and then I was sort of talking about the stuff I'd done and... after a while he did say to me I think we're going to have a problem with salary here. And he said what would you be looking for and I told him and he said we're just miles off. And I said what are you looking for and he said oh, probably about £40,000 and I said you are joking, you are joking!... So, the value piece is an interesting piece where I think that there isn't enough value put on the expertise in this space at the moment."

(Wendy)

"... there is so much what I see with diversity and inclusion, there's such an enormous undervaluing and sometimes a complete no valuing financially. They think that, you know, they can enlist people for peanuts and that's offensive. You know, although it's not a regulated profession there are a lot of people out there who have the skills and abilities and who are oftentimes just not given the compensation that they should be given." (Roberta)

4 Diversity and inclusion consulting – a values-driven field?

4.1 Prior experience of diversity and inclusion work

The consultants had very diverse backgrounds prior to becoming diversity consultants. Collectively, and in some cases individually, they had career histories in a huge variety of sectors, industries, organisational functions and roles. With regard to sectors and industries, the consultants had work experience in both private and public sectors; industries including oil, utilities, advertising, professional services, retail, military, banking, publishing, education, civil service, local authorities, police service, IT, media and communications, non-profits. Most brought with them a huge breadth of experience in different professional, management and organisational roles – very often in HR, and equality and D&I, but also various other business and organisational functions (see Table 2).

Table 2: Diversity consultants’ career histories

Professional/functional role	Number of consultants
Equality, diversity and inclusion	16
HR	10
Academic/teaching/training	6
Finance	4
Change management	2
Business development	2
Union official	2
Writer	2
Management/senior leadership	1
Quality management	1
Sales	1
Lawyer	1
Actor	1
PR/advertising	1
Pilot	1
IT	1

Unsurprisingly, all the consultants had experience in some kind of equality, D&I role inside an organisation immediately prior to becoming a diversity consultant. With regard to their original shift into D&I work, earlier in their careers many consultants had taken on a diversity role with the expectation of being able to effect organisational change after observing under-utilisation of talent, under-representation of 'minorities', or poor/unfair treatment of employees. Some saw the field as a challenge and as offering variety after a long career elsewhere in the organisation, particularly in HR.

"[people] often get into it because they've been directly affected by it themselves and it gets into that thing in the core of your being about you know, this just isn't fair. And there's an awful lot going on in companies and in business that isn't fair and we can do something to try and fix it. So quite a lot of us tend to, I think, end up in it because we've got some sort of direct experience whether it be through having a disability or whatever it might be. I think that's what mostly motivates people into this field."
(Luke)

Personal experiences and identity were important for some in motivating them either to go into this work in the first place or to stay in it and develop their role further as a consultant. The range of 'identity-based' experiences influencing them included, being BAME, a woman, close proximity to disability, being gay, being transgender. Religion/religious beliefs also influenced one or two.

4.2 Why become a consultant?

With regard to the switch to diversity *consultant*, Table 3 shows the main motivations. Some took advantage of voluntary redundancy or early retirement packages to set up as a consultant. The timing coincided with the increased tendency for HR functions/projects to be outsourced, and for most consultants there was and there still is plenty of work available. Many interviewees were attracted to consultancy by the expectation of a better work-life balance than they had found available in senior level corporate roles. They were often motivated variously by a need to accommodate family care-giving, by the prospect of no more daily commuting, or by the expectation of feeling more in control of working hours (some consultants had opted to work part-time). For some, the opportunity to take control of their

own career by virtue of being their own boss was very appealing. Many remarked that large corporations often move people around roles as well as geographically, sometimes expecting high-flyers to take international assignments, for example, and this can interfere with personal/family life and be quite disruptive.

Some reached a point where they simply wanted greater control and choice over the actual work they did and they saw consultancy as providing this. This included increased challenges, a variety of projects and range of organisations to work with as being attractive aspects of consultancy. In addition, not being directly involved in organisational politics and power plays were appealing factors that many mentioned. Thus, many found being a consultant liberating – being able to pick and choose projects; being able to turn down work they did not find interesting or challenging or that they felt was being undertaken for the wrong reasons (e.g. window dressing projects)-these themes are returned to in detail later in section 4.4.1 of this report. In addition, being able to preserve their integrity was important to some when compared with corporate roles where facing moral dilemmas is not an uncommon experience, especially in the HR and D&I fields. A few described never really fitting in to the corporate world.

“Yeah, I am in the lucky position ... I’ve got a pension so I don’t really need to work. But if something sits with my values and I feel like I can add value to that project then I will. I do want to feel that if I do it at the moment that I am being paid a market rate to do it. Now it might come in the future that I’m ready to volunteer but I’m not ready to yet because I’m not really at that point yet. So, I do want to be paid but I am in the lucky position that I can pick and choose, and I will pick those that fit with my own values really.” (Beatrice)

“I suppose the more time I draw away from [the company], the more I realise how I didn’t fit in with that organisation and the whole of my working practice was a compromise really. I was often in deep, not often, no, occasionally in deep water ... you know, deep shit basically, because I had stuck to a principled position, which was not acceptable. you’d be called all sorts of names and, you know, told that you’re being silly and naïve and that sort of thing and you think oh, I think I’ve hurt something there,

you know, I've done something really good if they're having to fall back on personal abuse." (Frances)

4.3 Why become a diversity and inclusion consultant?

In terms of why *diversity* consultancy in particular (rather than generic HR consultancy for example), for some it was the obvious choice (i.e. for those who had previously been D&I specialists), while for others it was more a case of following what had become their primary interests. One described it as her 'dream job'. One interviewee had a student activist-come-equality activist background and shifting into diversity consultancy had occurred as an accidental outcome of this. A small number talked about the pull of a 'calling' for D&I work, which they could not properly pursue within the confines of a single organisation with all the power and politics inevitably involved.

"I think it's very two layered for me. One is I enjoy the consulting so I suppose if I'm completely honest I could have gone out into the market doing management consulting or something and I probably would have enjoyed that, you know. It was the thing jumping out of large corporate structures and all the formality and the hierarchy and the politics that goes along with that in setting your own business up, that was very liberating. And I've loved that, the last eleven years have been brilliant, being your own boss and all of that. But the topic of D&I I think is, is another layer which adds to the sense of fulfilment because you know, I do feel that I am actually making a difference." (Georgia)

Related to this point, from the conversations, it seemed that some interviewees were pushed into consultancy through disenchantment with their organisation's approach to D&I. As their involvement in D&I deepened, many faced constraints and limitations in 'corporate' roles. For example, constantly having to articulate why the organisation should support and promote D&I, or why resources should be allocated to D&I projects/initiatives. For many interviewees, there was a sense of frustration about the way organisations approached D&I. For instance, many were following latest fads, switching from one initiative or idea to another, which proved very challenging for anyone wanting to effect deep and lasting cultural change.

“Do you know what, I lost the will to live to be absolutely honest because my life just constantly became a sales pitch to chief executives of why they had to get behind this, why it was important and why it was going to have an impact on their business. And it got to the stage where they understood that and then bloody hell fire they’d move on and I’d get a new chief exec.” [She had faced several CEOs in the same company in just a few years and each one had to be worked on to convince ‘him’ to take D&I seriously.]
(Susan)

“They [the company] were a bit sort of flim flam in the way that they kind of set direction and they would be blown by whatever wind was blowing at the time. And that isn’t the way to kind of create sustainable change.” (Claire)

Personal experiences of D&I issues were often a motivating factor for doing diversity work more generally, e.g. having family members with disabilities; being gay and experiencing exclusion or homophobia; being BAME and experiencing racism; being a woman and experiencing sexism. For others, the path to diversity work was more accidental than planned or emanating from any deep personal values or experiences.

Table 3: Main motivations for becoming a diversity consultant

Main motivations	Number of consultants
ED&I values	11
After retirement or redundancy	5
Accommodate care responsibilities	3
Experience of personal injustice	3
By accident	3
Seeking challenge	2
Belief in business case	1

In terms of being motivated by deeper values, a couple of interviewees used their paid consultancy work to subsidise pro bono work for non-profits. A few talked about not being motivated by money (even though some of them had earned high salaries in the past), but by wanting to use their past experience to effect change. In whichever way, they framed their

motivations and the appeal of being a diversity consultant, all expressed a strong passion for D&I developed over different time-periods and influenced by different professional experiences and personal situations.

4.4 Self-positioning in the field

D&I is a field where the self – beliefs, values, identity – potentially matters far more than in many other professional fields, and of course, this is what attracts many people to the field. However, because of this, there is greater potential for tension to exist between it being a professional field (with skills and competencies acquired through professional training and experience) and being a values-driven field with attributes more commonly associated with activism (e.g. social justice campaigning experience). Or to put it another way, between being a professional field and an identity-driven field (e.g. underpinned by personal experiences of injustice, unfair treatment, social disadvantage/exclusion). On this question, the consultants were quite clear that they regarded D&I primarily as a professional field, but one where their personal values and identity characteristics were ever-present to varying degrees even if only in the background.

Working in a field where personal values and experiences enter the professional space can carry costs and challenges.

“... you bring your heart into this and you do open yourself up at times to personal attacks. I don't think you can do diversity work without bringing your emotional self into it. And so, it can be quite draining from that perspective. I think that people who go into this from a passion side, a vocational side, can get quite weary with the lack of progress, the slowness to change and the constant challenge around “prove to me that this makes good business sense and is not just a politically correct thing”. So yes, it can be very draining.” (Jane)

In some cases, there was recognition of being somewhat out of step with business-driven values and a perceived need to tone down personal values in the professional space.

“I think one thing that I have done is kind of learned over time how to manage my own beliefs about what needs to change and to present that in a way that is kind of

acceptable to organisations. You know, yeah, I have definitely learned, I have had to change my language, I have had to change how I position myself over the years, you know, what it is that I believe in order to get an in to organisations. And this started way before I started consulting. So, this was like even probably, even probably in my very first job” (Barbara)

However, equally, this dimension of D&I work – bringing the self in – created a source of immense satisfaction and was rarely experienced as deeply problematic.

“... what you tend to find is as you do more and more projects, the more of your personality, the more of who you are, your values and everything else starts to shine out more and then you start to realise that this is, you know, this isn’t a career. It’s not a career at all, it’s more of a ... I don’t know, a destination, something that you want to do, something that you really want to achieve and ... I don’t know, you indirectly direct your career.” (Yasmin)

A small number went so far as to imply that personal commitment to D&I values was entirely necessary:

“If you are in this field then there must be a reason for you being in this field; otherwise don’t be in this field at all because actually it’s quite a lot of personal, if you’re going to do it properly, you are making quite a few sacrifices and you know, personal challenges and ... But some people didn’t take it like that at all. They had a much more instrumental approach to it and maybe that was the right way and me, I’m just, you know, doing things differently.” (Frances)

Personally, I’ve grown immensely in doing it. Very much coming at this from the perspective of, you know, self as an instrument of change. So, I need to have high levels of self-awareness, self-understanding, self-mastery in order to do this excellently well. So, it’s really pushed me to get very clear about my identity and what value that brings.
(Jane)

However, at the same time, perhaps in a bid for recognition of their professional skills and knowledge, many consultants stressed that their personal values and identity were very much in the background.

“...most of the diversity consultants that make a really big living or a living from it have had really professional careers beforehand where they’re able to evidence the range of their experience I think sometimes people do it an injustice by almost viewing it as not a profession and it’s like well, anyone can be ... I mean, if you’re gay, if you’re trans, if you’ve got an equality group, you can just pick it up and become a diversity consultant.” (Heather)

“I mean, I do have very strong personal values around equality. I wouldn’t do this, absolutely wouldn’t do this if I didn’t. So yes, that’s the absolute foundation of it all. But I think in fact combined with organisational change and organisational effectiveness. You know, I have a fundamental belief that organisations work better and are more productive and effective when they have greater diversity and can make that diversity work for them.” (Stella)

*And it really, really matters. It matters to me. I want that to come across that it matters to me personally. **But** I think it has the potential to bring enormous benefits to organisations and the people who work in them. (Barbara)*

4.4.1 What is the diversity and inclusion consulting community trying to achieve?

While a few interviewees mentioned being aware of some less than scrupulous D&I consultants who just seemed to be in it for the money, we found that integrity and commitment overwhelmingly characterised consultants’ approach to their work. Most frowned upon the type of consultant who would accept any work from any client as long as they were well paid. Consultants in our sample insisted to one extent or another on the ethical/moral or social justice/fairness values underpinning their work. Their age and the length of time they had been involved in D&I work, made some difference to perspectives on the field and what it was, or should be trying to achieve. For example, some of the consultants who had been in the field for many years (especially those who recalled the days of ‘equal opportunities’) remained employee-centred and concerned about ‘protected characteristics’; some of those more recent to the field emphasised their business-centred approach. However, age and length of time in the diversity field did not necessarily alter fundamental values and belief in inclusive organisations. There was a widely-shared belief across the

interview sample, in working towards inclusive organisations for everyone's sake – minorities, majority group, consumers, employees and other stakeholders, as well as the organisation itself (and its performance).

The opportunity to *'make a real difference'* was extremely important to consultants and emphasised many times in interviews. The consultants we interviewed were all thoughtful and reflexive people, but at the same time, action and change-oriented. Because of the many challenges involved in being an 'in-house' diversity specialist, many found being a diversity consultant liberating and providing the opportunities they sought to make a difference. This was often talked about passionately with palpable excitement and optimism, but not naivety. Making a difference was clearly also presented as a challenge which is discussed further in section 5.

One interesting finding to come out of the interviews was the fact that the majority of consultants turned down work on some occasions or were very selective about the projects they accepted. Some even related instances where they had pulled out of contracts. The most frequently cited reason for this was around the lack of commitment of client organisations to the effective delivery of D&I objectives. Indeed, they only wanted to work on projects which offered an opportunity to effect change and not ones that they saw as merely motivated by the need to be seen to be doing something, to *'tick a box'* or *'window dressing'*, or to win an award.

"We pulled a five-year plan together... and after a year they still hadn't done what they needed to do within the six-month period. And I challenged them around that and effectively their chief exec got cold feet so I just said I didn't think it was good use of their money or my time for us to carry on working together if they weren't committed to delivering the plan. And if they purely wanted to say that they were doing some work on diversity but actually not doing anything ... So, I won't work with organisations that just want to tick boxes. So yes, we parted company." (Susan)

"I think part of the role of the diversity practitioner is to engage the organisation in dialogue and develop their thinking that this has to be systemic, it can't be piecemeal. That it has to be integrated thinking. Because if we go along with this and just say yes to pieces of work that ... Let me rephrase that: We've certainly always asked the

question of the clients so how does this fit in with the bigger picture, what else are you doing, how is it joined up, how are you communicating around this? One, to help their thinking, to think more systematically about it, but two, to test for ourselves is it worth the effort for us to come and do this work with you. [laughs] Because it is, it is a huge emotional investment, you know, whilst we want the money please but you know, it's kind of like if you're not really ready and you're not open for us to work with you around your readiness then perhaps we're not the organisation for you.” (Jane)

Many consultants also put their principles into practice in making personal ethics a key part of their selection criteria in taking on contracts:

“There’s a client in the US that I turned down because they didn’t, they even though they had plus action law suits going on they refused to talk about bias and they called it automatic thinking. They wouldn’t even acknowledge it. And I said look, if you’re really at that stage of not even acknowledging bias when every single human on the planet has bias then we’re probably not at the starting point.” (Felix)

“You know, one has to, one is also running a business... [but] we feel that if there’s an organisation that doesn’t have a good ethical slant to it, I’m not, I’m not going to do it and I have said to clients or potential clients or whoever, please don’t ask us to come and help you recruit a more diverse population into an organisation that is unhealthy and unfairly, I’m not going to do it” (Roberta)

Another criterion some used when accepting or declining work was whether they would have access to the organisation’s CEO and board of directors – if not, some refused projects/assignments in the belief that they would not make any difference unless the most senior leaders were listening. This leadership challenge is further discussed below in section 5.

4.4.2 The importance of language and terminology

We referred in interviews to the concepts and language used in the field, for the reason that these arguably define problems and frame action. Some consultants in our sample had a long history in the field – up to 30 years – and remembered the days of ‘equal opportunities’ and the beginnings of organisational policy-making in this area. Those younger and newer to the

field were less familiar with the 'older' concepts and approaches. There has been a distinct shift in language used compared to our research a decade ago. Currently, and in a way that we did not find in previous research, all the consultants we interviewed now used the term *diversity and inclusion*. When pressed to offer reasons for the use of this term, this was explained with regard to (a) it being tactical to do so, i.e. extending coverage beyond protected characteristics is more appealing to organisations; and (b) that the term captures their personal belief that 'inclusion' is the way forward for organisations and/or employees. Sometimes it was a combination of the two.

It should be noted that some were sceptical about the language of *diversity and inclusion* and what it signified, and while this was not always named as such, their primary efforts were focused on equality strands/protected characteristics:

"But the starting point is a broad interpretation of diversity. Although there I do find myself on slightly uncomfortable ground. Because it's like tactically as D&I people I think we've broadened the definition of diversity to be all different kinds of difference, you know. But I do think that there are some differences that may have more of an impact than others. So, what I am personally interested in? I am still personally interested in those differences which are prescribed by law because I think those are really huge." (Barbara)

"Yes, I think it is really interesting around language ... So fundamentally I am coming at it from a perspective of equality and justice, so deep down that's my deep-rooted objective. But I also see it that if you have a culture that is rooted in equality and justice you are more likely to have a culture which is about innovation and flexibility. So, I also ... I think that we focused so heavily on diversity that you could have the most diverse workforce in the world but everyone could be feeling crap and everyone could be feeling excluded." (Martin)

"But fundamentally you need to build a culture that works for everybody and when it's very strands based my experience is that people that aren't in those strands can say well, it's nothing to do with me. Whereas actually what you want, is the white male middle management masses to actually be driving a culture that works for everybody. And when you do a very strand based approach I think that tension is very difficult."

And my approach is always you're building an inclusive culture and then you might do specific interventions to enable certain minorities to, you know, accelerate." (Wendy)

Although the consultants all used the language of *diversity and inclusion*, some were more sceptical than others about what the relatively recent addition of 'inclusion' actually meant in practice, especially considering their desire for sustainable and systemic change:

"The real danger of the generic model of the inclusive approach is that we just pick the bits that are most convenient at the time or the most easy to solve, or the low hanging fruit. Or even worse, give a kind of a smokescreen that we're doing something but actually we're not changing the core behaviours of the power group which is the real work. So, I think absolutely there is that and therefore I think it's important that the practitioner, the diversity consultant is alive to that and yes, plays ball on inclusion because I do think inclusion is a really important way to go, but doesn't let people off the hook for things they might find more inconvenient and difficult to deal with."
(Felix)

"Oh, I've got all sorts of words for that [shift to 'inclusion']. I work with companies, [who say] 'can you please call it inclusiveness'. Can you please call it inclusivity. Is that a word? What does it mean? It is all to do with not talking about what the issues are. So, it's sort of, it's nice, it's bland, it's nice, it feels happy and no one is challenged, men aren't too upset by it, everybody is going to gain but it is, you know, we know that life is not like that. Particularly not in the higher echelons of organisations where it's incredibly competitive and cut-throat. So, I have to say it's a meaningless ... I think that it came about, well, my understanding is that it came about because diversity was recognised as well, we're all different and so what. So, we've got to have something that's positive. And the word is 'included'. Well, you can be included and unequal. So, I don't get it. I never use the word." (Rachel)

"I never felt like diversity was quite enough and I think that's why I quite like diversity and inclusion and that kind of gives them, you need to ask them to think and that's on the assumption that people have sorted themselves on the law side. But the idea also is that you don't win people on the law, you never do. So, that's just the bottom line, you know, they want to be compliant but you know, you give them another reason

they're much more likely to tick on this and then start to want to do some work."
(Collette)

5 The organisational change and development process

5.1 Diversity and inclusion consultants and their client organisations

We asked interviewees to talk about their role within the client organisations and offered a number of possible suggestions, which might fit with their own circumstances. Table 4 sets out the roles that they felt they filled as consultants. One of the challenges that diversity consultants obviously face is being an outsider to the client organisation. As discussed in more detail later, as an outsider, the consultant can make recommendations, design interventions, deliver training, etc., but s/he often has little power or leverage with which to drive longer-term change, especially after the project ends. The consultants were all conscious of this and it was one reason why many said that they only worked with organisations genuinely seeking buy-in from all organisational members and those seeking sustainable change.

Table 4: Main role of the consultant within the client organisation

Role	Number of consultants
Change agent	9
Activist	4
Strategic business partner	4
Specialist	3
Advisor	2
Facilitator	2
Prefer not to subscribe to one role	4

However, the challenge of being an outsider can also create opportunities. Consultants may position themselves as impartial and objective (by virtue of having no stake in organisational power or career games). This for many consultants was a significant advantage of the consultancy role with a view that this was very '*liberating*'. In addition, pragmatically, paying a consultant a daily rate or a fee for a specific project provides a powerful incentive for the organisation to listen. Outside of the politics and without any personal investment in the organisation, consultants can be more challenging (maybe '*radical*') because they do not have to think about who they might upset or potential negative effects of advocating for change on their own organisational career. Linked to the ethical and moral stance many of the consultants took, a few were also comfortable with being seen as a D&I activist, someone who actively campaigned and acted to progress diversity issues within organisations and

beyond, often also in their personal lives. However, the more commonly held view of themselves in the change agent role also related to their position of challenging things within their client organisations. One interviewee talked about purposely being '*constructively disruptive*' and seeing that as a central part of her role as a diversity consultant. In a similar vein, others spoke of needing to be '*comfortable with a position of challenge*', and the advantages of being able '*to speak truth to power*' comparing this to their inability to take such a position as practitioners within organisations:

"...when I was on the inside I did think very seriously before I said to my senior leaders what I actually thought about their behaviours and what they were doing. Whereas being external, you know, what's the worst that can happen to me? They can decide that they don't want to work with me anymore but you know, my challenge or my feedback will be from the best place of wanting to help them deliver what they want to deliver. So, I will give, I am more open to giving very clear and directive feedback to senior leaders." (Susan)

In addition, real benefits came from '*not being dragged down*' by organisational politics and constant demands on one's time. Being a consultant meant concentrating on the D&I piece, a luxury not afforded to many organisational practitioners, even those with D&I responsibility.

"...one of the things that was frustrating in being employed... was I never felt I was making a difference because there was just too much sludge, organisational sludge around me. So, it's really nice to feel I can now do work that is very effective" (Serena)

"I'm sure when you walked into work this morning you had a list of things you wanted to do and half of those will go out of the window because something else happens that you have to deal with. And as a consultant you don't get that. And that's lovely so you can be really focused... from a focus point of view when you're working for that client you are completely an investor, I completely invest and focus on what they want me to do and bringing my skills and knowledge and neutrality to advise them." (Martha)

5.2 How to effect change within organisations

One major challenge facing diversity consultants wanting to effect cultural change is that many organisations lack awareness and understanding of equality, D&I issues, especially how to go about designing initiatives that get employees engaged and on board with change efforts. On the one hand, this is often a reason for engaging a consultant, but on the other hand, if there is failure to grasp the fundamental issues, consultants face the challenge of getting the organisation off the starting block. One example is the way that the terminology (discussed above in section 3.4.2.1) in the field has changed often leading to conceptual confusion within organisations. While some organisations are now using the language of 'inclusion' (usually in addition to diversity, i.e. diversity and inclusion), some find the changes in terminology confusing. All interviewees talked about the significance of the changing terminology in the field not only for their own positioning, but also for client organisation approaches. Most consultants saw the shift to diversity *and inclusion* as an opportunity to get employers on board with an inclusive change agenda rather than stopping at obtaining a diverse workforce. This had the potential to overcome some of the criticisms of the business case for diversity, which some critics equate with exploitation of difference or disregard for the moral case for equality. Most of the consultants had reframed this as the business case for *inclusion*.

Most were insistent that diversity in and of itself does not improve business/organisational performance and therefore, some talked about only wanting to take on clients that have a strong ethical foundation to their D&I work and also those who want to think holistically about D&I in their organisations. This stance reflected their personal belief, usually born of experience as an organisational insider that deep *cultural change* needs to occur in organisations for a diversity climate to grow.

The shift to the inclusion discourse, also provided an opportunity to put into practice the consultant's own commitment to broadening the agenda beyond numerical representation issues and beyond a stereotyped understanding of 'protected characteristics' (i.e. people who somehow fall short or who are 'victims'). In other words, there was a strong view that organisations do not simply need new laws and policies to refer to or to benchmark their own

policies against, but that genuine and deep cultural change is necessary for inclusion to become a lived experience in the organisation. The lexicon was seen as critical to this project:

“Yeah, you see I would say how you frame an issue does matter because it will determine what you think the solution is. If you frame an issue as a problem and you call it equal opportunities, then you’re going to think the solution to most of this is policies and getting those right. Whereas if you think and frame this more as a cultural change then you are going to start to wake up to actually where are the real responsibilities, what does need to happen and the primary goal is no longer writing good stuff in policies, it’s actually in terms of well, how do you shift the culture. So, I think how you frame something really does matter.” (Sam)

However, despite the changed terminology, a major challenge remained in persuading clients to move beyond policy-making to cultural change initiatives. There was a sense of frustration that many organisations see policy as the beginning and the end of their diversity work. Some consultants talked about how over the years of working in this field, their frustration with this stance had increased. Some had diversified their offering beyond strictly D&I initiatives because of this – for example into leadership training, management coaching, etc., but insisting that equality and D&I still underpinned their objectives in their work as well as its actual content.

5.2.1 The organisational learning challenge

How organisational learning and development actually occurs – which kinds of interventions really make a difference – was the subject of much conversation in the interviews. Training was something offered by most of the consultants, but it was also problematized.

Consultants were adamant that the type of ‘sheep-dip’ training commonplace in the early 1980s ‘equal opportunities’ days was not the key to cultural change:

“But it’s just E&D is like, once you’ve done an E&D session you never need to go to another one in your life. I think there’s a lot of that engrained culture in people is that they’ve been to so many bad E&D sessions where it’s been a PowerPoint presentation, it’s been like just telling them what direct discrimination is and that’s it. And actually, that listing, just listing it, no real engagement with people that they’ve just switched

off. And the minute that you say that you're there to do equalities work, there's a whole chunk of people that their learning brain just goes into shutdown." (Heather)

One recent trend in the diversity field is unconscious bias training, which the majority of consultants were offering. There were different perspectives on this latest fashion. On the one hand, it was viewed as the latest fad or management buzzword, and just part of the changing landscape of terminology around D&I. Many commented on its popularity and that it had to be a part of their offering to clients because there was such demand. It was also viewed as useful as a way of opening the conversation about prejudice and discrimination and rejuvenating debate:

"... you use all those, EDI, inclusion, you know, and unconscious bias and all that sort of thing and whatever is the, you know, whatever is the motivating phrase of the time.... it's another tool, another avenue, another perspective. And that's very valuable and not to be knocked at". (Frances)

"But you use a word like unconscious bias, it's like different and wow, I wonder what that is. And suddenly people start to pay more attention. So, you know, I think it's a good thing that we rename things now and again to actually get people rethinking. Even if it's the same old thing, it doesn't matter." (Yasmin)

"... at least if it starts a conversation and opens the door then it has its place. And if leaders can engage with it because they think it's cerebrally and intellectually then it's a start" (Sara)

For others, unconscious bias training offered something qualitatively different, which was felt to be more persuasive to organisations in that it focused attention on the prejudice that everyone has, and provided tools for addressing and dealing with this prejudice, as Martin said: *"unconscious bias has made it all more palatable in a way, that we can say it's all part of being human."*

However, others felt that there were also dangers in the popularity of unconscious bias in that it was felt to almost evade the issues by focusing more on individual behaviour and

having less focus on institutional structures that sustain inequalities and lead to absence of D&I. There were also concerns about the 'pseudo-science' aspects of unconscious bias. Further many consultants reflected that while organisations were interested in 'sheep dip' unconscious bias training, very few went beyond this to look at practices, processes and behaviours necessary for long-term cultural change:

"I think that the danger with a lot of the unconscious bias stuff is that what people hear is that we're hard wired to be biased, it's quite natural, it's quite human so if I'm biased, you know towards you, I can't help myself. And for me it's got to go beyond that to the adverse impact that it's having, unintended or not, the ... and what is it you can actually do to minimise the bias and so that needs to go hand in hand." (Jane)

"It's you're not aware of something. I mean it's not, if it's unconscious you need to go to a psychoanalyst for it. I couldn't get someone's unconscious to work in a one-hour session. It just doesn't work like that. So, it's not unconscious, it's just unaware." (Felix)

"I would hate to imagine what UK PLC spend on UB training has been over the past six years and what the return on investment for that training is. Because I think there's been this sheep dip approach to it. There has been very little follow-through after it. So, what are you doing about it? What else is happening? It's like just put them through UB training like it's a panacea for everything" (Martin)

5.3 The measurement challenge

Given the fact that the majority of consultants wanted to 'make a difference' to their client organisations through their work, we were interested in understanding how the consultants measured their own success in this area. All consultants acknowledged how difficult it was to measure their impact or how they were making a difference in such an intangible area as D&I. This was particularly because of the nature of consultancy - the interventions are usually short term and time limited, so the consultants are often unable to really assess the impact of their work on the client organisation. Not knowing what happened after they left causes some consultants real anxiety, frustration or sadness and was cited as one of the main downsides to being a consultant as opposed to an organisational practitioner. Some

related experiences of where they knew that some intervention or momentum around D&I dissipated after their contract ended:

“it’s hard for you to switch off your own frustration. Oh, bloody hell, we had a plan, when I left we had a plan and you’ve thrown it in the bin and now you’ve rewritten it and it’s the same thing.... but you can only do what you can do and it’s not your circus and it’s not your monkeys.” (Claire)

Many consultants had to develop a thick skin to this, or as Claire said above, have the attitude towards the client organisation of ‘*it’s not my circus, not my monkeys*’ - this was something that was seen to come with the territory, both of being a consultant and of the nature of D&I as a long-term project:

“You do have to get resilient because you just don’t get a lot of... good feedback, you know if you’ve got paid and people keep using you that they must be happy with you but you don’t get a lot of that stuff that you get ... You haven’t got a manager and you don’t get that internal development. So, you kind of have to create that yourself but you also have to be thinking about how am I judging myself and how will I know if I’ve done a good job.” (Wendy)

“...because equality, diversity and inclusion are long term issues. If you’re only in for a quick six months intervention, in and out, you are never going to get a sense of what have you helped that organisation achieve.” (Sam)

On the other hand, as discussed below some consultants had long-term retainer-type arrangements with some clients, which afforded them the opportunity to assess the impact of their work. Some consultants tried to measure success by designing impact metrics into their interventions. As one consultant stated: *“I won’t create an action plan with them unless we have impact measures on them”* (Susan). A few consultants utilised formal feedback mechanisms at the end of their interventions, particularly if this involved some form of training intervention. Here, consultants were keen to point out that this feedback tried to move beyond the simple ‘Did you enjoy this course?’ to questions which aimed to elicit how the course would make a difference, asking participants to list ways they would change their behaviour as a consequence. Some consultants stated that repeat business and

forward recommendations were indications of their impact, while others cited industry awards that they had achieved.

However, for the majority of consultants, the main measure they had of whether they had made a difference was in observing changed views among organisational stakeholders. In many respects, this was more important than more tangible and measurable indicators, such as improved numbers of women in particular roles. The consultant role was to challenge prejudice and discriminatory views, but also to question conventional views and accepted wisdom on issues, with the greatest satisfaction often coming in seeing what many called 'that light bulb moment':

"I think the difference you make some of it is about... you're changing some people's views or mind-sets or even just beginning to make people think a little differently... So, it's not so much about can I say now that there are, you know, five, six, ten per cent more, you know, disabled colleagues in a certain part of the ... But actually, have you made some of those more senior people think a bit differently about what they need to do" (Geraldine)

"...with X for example... when I did the work with them last year... they had no feeling, there was no leadership conversation being held about diversity, very little about equity and nothing about inclusion at all. And then when the engagement came to an end in December, amongst the board, you know, the senior management team they were talking fairly sort of confidently about diversity and inclusion... So structurally I could sort of see the change, some changes like that. And I think a lot of it is in this how the conversation changes, you know, that's a lot of where I see the change happening." (Barbara)

The importance of these light bulb moments often had deep and real connections to the consultant's own moral and ethical identity positioning in the field as discussed earlier, for example:

"... when just one person at the time, you get somebody, particularly from an in-group or the proverbial straight white man to genuinely have a light bulb moment and reframe what they understand leadership to be. And that actually it's not about

doing something for women's rights, but it's actually doing something for myself in the sense that I realise that by including my out-group or by being more inclusive or by doing that, actually yes, it's good for the world and it makes me feel better as a human being, but it's also smart business and intelligent leadership to do that... that gives you a moment of real satisfaction.” (Felix)

These changed views were also an important measure because they could have longer lasting effects on behavioural change, and therefore on potential progress around D&I issues within client organisations:

“I was talking to another consultant... and she said to me I talked to X at [Y organisation] which is one of the ones that I have a retainer with and she said ‘I was just amazed by how... strategic and knowledgeable she was about D&I, I’ve seen very few people that think like that’. And she said ‘now I realise it’s because you’re working with them’. And for me that was a real testament to the value that I bring.” (Wendy)

“When we’re talking of diversity and inclusion we’re not just talking about the system, the structures, the processes, the policies, we’re talking about individuals and their beliefs and their attitudes and their behaviours. And... you work with people to bring them round to considering that yes, there is a different way or yes, I have inadvertently contributed to the situation we find ourselves in. So yes, it’s a huge takeaway.” (Jane)

The downsides of not knowing what happened in the organisation after the contract ended, could be mitigated by repeat business with the same client. Indeed, the majority of consultants had repeat clients, or were on some form of long-term retainer contract with some clients. This led to established relationships with particular client organisations, often for periods of many years. These relationships were particularly valued by the consultants in order to be able to track progress, achieve sustained impact, and have wider reach within the organisation, thus meeting that broader aim of many consultants to achieve fundamental change within organisations:

“And then what can often happen with a client, you know, you might do that sort of intervention and then actually they need to go away and do something with that for a while but then of course they might come back later. So, with some clients, you know, which is fantastic you build up an on-going relationship... work with an organisation really on the change approach to diversity and inclusion and be able to work more in that organisational development way with them on this.” (Stella)

“So, we did [this] really big piece of work. They’d not done anything on diversity and inclusion, they wanted to kind of know where do we go, what’s our strategy? We did... several months of very deep intervention... That’s also spun off a couple of other individual projects. We then went into quite a long phase of doing work around unconscious bias, again, you know, more or less in depth with different sort of stakeholder groups. And we’re now going into a third phase with the client of doing some work around essentially sort of line manager capability around diversity and inclusion... We’ve been there on that journey with them” (Barbara)

“... there’s a piece of work that’s on-going... with the owner of a small business and it’s the long term... I value that piece of work. It’s not constant, it’s occasional but the fact that I’ve been around for the last...two and a half, three years... I’ve been around, I’ve watched things develop. Not just watched things develop but tried to stop some things happening and encourage the development of others... Yeah, that’s very pleasing work, I have to say” (Frances)

5.4 The leadership challenge

‘Inclusive leadership’ has become something of a buzz phrase in management. Consultants spoke a lot about ‘inclusive leadership’ and seeing this as a necessary foundation for the kind of organisational culture change they deemed necessary. Indeed, as one consultant expressed, while on the one hand it was just the latest in a long series of name changes, there was an evolutionary logic to ‘inclusive leadership’ as a term, if it was enacted in the ‘right’ way:

“when I first started, it was equal opportunities, then it went to equality and diversity, then it was diversity, then it was diversity and inclusion, and then some companies did

diversity and inclusiveness, and then... inclusive leadership. And I think the frustration for me is that a lot of people use all those words to mean exactly the same thing... When I talk to people about what it means I say... it's all about being in a meeting room, where I say equality is being able to get into the room, diversity is being able to sit around the table and getting those different views, inclusion is about being able to speak and being heard around that table, and inclusive leadership makes all that happen.” (Susan)

Some expressed ambivalent views on ‘inclusive leadership’, finding it quite elusive to define and to differentiate from ‘plain old-fashioned good management’. However, part of what attracted many of them to this discourse/concept was their interest in organisational change. Many had worked earlier in their diversity careers on specific targeted development initiatives, for example women’s development, which they felt had more of a ‘fix the women’ approach. They had come to believe that it is organisations, which need ‘fixing’ rather than ‘minority’ groups/people within them, and the fixing needed to start at the top. Some felt that the D&I umbrella provided an opportunity to focus on majority group behaviour, rather than on the ‘problems’ caused by workforce diversity, but for this to be successful top level leadership buy-in was necessary:

“... the idea that actually it is at a behavioural level we can make changes in the way that we lead on an individual basis if you like as opposed to an organisational change sense.” (Rebecca)

“... getting leaders to understand how by being more inclusive generally, forget about whether that’s about women or gays or disabled or black or whatever, but just about being a better leader who understands how to motivate people well and how to engage with people that actually that will drive business success for them anyway. That a lot of behaviours that you need to demonstrate are behaviours that if you get it right will actually make your organisation more diverse anyway but also will drive better business performance.” (Luke)

However, many related experiences of low level top leader engagement, which could have repercussions for how diversity work is received in organisations and again, the extent to which deep cultural change can occur in the absence of senior level backing:

“Yes, but they’ll [senior leaders] be in the background, yes. One of the challenges is even if you hear the board really want to know or for instance, the board might well take part in... one of the workshops... otherwise why should everybody else do one? But the engagement level I have to say is pretty low. And that is one of the challenges really. That unless you’ve got somebody that’s really, really interested in it, you’re working almost slightly kind of, you know ... Employees pick up on whether the, how important it is.” (Rachel)

For this reason, a key factor in success of D&I interventions concerns which stakeholders within an organisation have responsibility for and are involved in D&I, which formed one of the question areas within the interviews.

5.5 Responsibility for D&I within client organisations

One leadership challenge is the question of who in the organisation takes ultimate responsibility for and leadership on D&I work. We asked consultants who within the client organisations commissioned their work (Table 5). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was most frequently someone based in the HR department or function, though not always the HR Director. Other common contacts included the Diversity or Equality specialist and the CEO or owner of the company (commonly in a small business). Then there were a variety of other contacts from different organisational departments.

Table 5: Main contact within client organisations

Organisational Contact	Number of Consultants
HR Department/Function	23
Diversity/Equality Function	8
CEO/Owner	8
Legal Department	1
Health and Safety Department	1
Talent Team	1
General management team	2

The fact that they worked mainly with HR departments was viewed as a particular impediment to translating their principles concerning the need for systemic and sustainable cultural change, into practice:

“Because you know, HR, love them or loathe them, they’re still the advocates for this as well across the business. And, if you can get the HR team onside and get them talking about this to senior leaders, to leaders across the business, that’s got to be a good thing.” (Susan)

Indeed, there was a very common view that the HR department was not the ideal place for D&I issues to sit. First, this was an issue of resources - even if they respected and valued HR practitioners, consultants observed that HR practitioners often lack power, legitimacy and credibility in the wider organisation. As one consultant said, speaking of the lack of resources given to D&I - *“It’s a very challenging space to operate in”* (Stella).

Second, the consultants found limited understanding of D&I and how it relates to the rest of the business. Many consultants felt that HR practitioners did not necessarily understand the business challenges the organisation actually faces as they often work in an HR silo lacking expert knowledge of the business:

“I do think it sits a hell of a lot in HR. I’m not seeing as many organisations really focusing the D&I agenda on their clients, their marketing, their product development, all that sort of stuff. I still think, I think at the moment that it is sat in the people management agenda”. (Susan)

Others felt that HR, as potential key D&I allies, had been left behind in some organisations in terms of their understanding of diversity, especially the business case and how to achieve cultural change towards the goal of inclusion. In order to remedy this, most consultants also tried to interact with CEOs and board of directors, in an attempt to get diversity work and objectives out of the HR silo and into the mainstream organisation. Consultants believed that not only would this ultimately benefit the working lives of employees, but most also felt strongly that D&I should be a lens brought to all areas of the business: customer service, product development, marketing, etc. A common view was that sitting in HR prevents this

from happening, inhibiting potential business benefits from diversity and a more holistic D&I strategy that most consultants favoured.

Third, many consultants identified problems with lack of specialist experience in HR departments. A few talked about the need to 'up-skill' HR teams to deal effectively with D&I. This was an interesting thinly veiled criticism of HR because we often assume that HR practitioners are the ones pushing D&I forward or at a minimum that they are supportive of D&I aims. Some consultants talked about preferring a model in which D&I would sit outside of HR so that there is the chance to embed it throughout the organisation in marketing, products/services, etc. This meant that some consultants preferred to work with Organisation and Development or Learning and Development professionals, rather than with HR.

Finally, the feminised composition of HR was also noted by several consultants, a fact which in itself could be both a symptom and a cause of the low status/priority of D&I work:

“So, most HR people are women, so you’re asking women to advocate on behalf of other under-represented groups to mostly to men, you know. How weird is that dynamic? That dynamic is not a healthy one. Most HR people are not given the time or the ... It’s not thought important enough really to dig down into what do you really feel about, you know, how confident do they as women feel talking to, you know, men at a senior level in that organisation about the position of women in that organisation. You know, I just think that that dynamic is a really, really tricky one.” (Barbara)

Nevertheless, despite all these concerns, many believed that the fact that HR supports line management means that they should definitely be involved in D&I change programmes. It was the consultants with an HR background who really bemoaned the absence of HR from D&I; the ones with a mainstream business background thought it was a good thing in order to move D&I away from a merely (legal/policy) compliance approach which often gets interpreted by line-managers as 'policing' their behaviour.

These issues around the role and place of the HR department within D&I are quite different to our previous research some ten years ago, where HR really seemed to own the diversity agenda inside organisations. It appears that in some organisations D&I strategy is incorporated into other spaces, for example talent management was also mentioned by a few

consultants as a policy space where D&I work is done on the fringes of HR, but not at the core. At the time of our earlier research, there was considerable debate within the academic and practitioner fields about diversity more appropriately sitting under the corporate social responsibility (CSR) banner. However, only a very small number of consultants experienced D&I sitting within CSR in their client organisations. While for one, CSR was simply another party in the ‘*complicated jigsaw puzzle of players*’ (Beth), others were more negative about CSR as an appropriate site:

I have a bit of a bug bear about CSR and D&I sitting there... for me D&I is an absolute business imperative, it's not charity... It's about creating a great business where you get the best people and you do business with, you know, you do business with the best markets and you attract, you know, the best sort of clients and you know, you're head and shoulders above your competitors. That's not charity for me. So, that, it just does not fit well in CSR for me. (Susan)

I don't think it's as effective sitting in CSR because I think it puts it again in a bit more of a sort of charitable box... it's not really going to have, I don't think from a CSR agenda I kind of think, I can't think of one company we've worked with where the CSR agenda has effectively driven it right through the company. (Georgia)

In general, there was a view, even from those thinking that D&I should be situated within HR, that this was not enough, with many citing phrases akin to ‘D&I should be everyone’s concern, not just HR’. This leads onto the next section regarding organisational stakeholder involvement in D&I.

5.6 The involvement and engagement challenge

Many commentators argue that organisational culture change efforts will not succeed without involvement and buy-in of a myriad of stakeholders. Most consultants talked about encouraging stakeholder involvement in D&I initiatives in their own practices: for example, employee network groups, line managers, senior management, and unions where they were present. In our previous research, we found that there was only limited employee engagement on D&I within most organisations, with most not involving anyone below senior management level. In line with this, from the experience of some consultants, organisations

often merely see senior staff as the key stakeholders, rather than staff at all levels. In contrast, the consultants felt that the people who were going to be affected by new policies or programmes should be consulted about their design and implementation. There was also a common view that a consultant outsider cannot understand the culture of an organisation just by talking to senior leaders or HR people, as much as their involvement was deemed necessary. Thus, the involvement of other organisational stakeholders was seen as a necessity for effective D&I work:

“We would always suggest to the organisation, one of the first recommendations would be that you’d set up a sort of steering group or working party or a committee or a forum, whatever is the right terminology. And on that forum, would be that cross range of stakeholders. So, you’d always be working with a cross-organisational group of stakeholders in order to deliver. So, the governance of a D&I programme one of the considerations is how do you bring all the stakeholders into the governance of a D&I project.” (Georgia)

“And you know, you’re thinking all the time with any massive change who are the key stakeholders, who are the key players? ... everything from the board, the executive team, the individual senior leaders, the next layers of leaders, the people who are, sometimes supervisors and team leaders. You’re talking about, all the different sort of HR people, you’re talking about your CSR people down to individuals. And indeed, as well where relevant you’re talking also about what is the role that trade unions, if they’re involved, might play or you know, works councils in different parts of the world. Anybody, you know, who can have an influence. Internal networks, formal and informal. You know, it’s a kind of complicated jigsaw puzzle of players who can influence this positively or negatively that you have to kind of bear in mind all the time I think.” (Beth)

A few consultants took this to a sophisticated level, deliberately engaging in processes of ‘co-creation’ of D&I strategies with all levels/layers of the organisation such as in the experience quoted below. Some said that they did not accept work from organisations, which refused to take this approach as they did not want to be part of a strategy imposed from the top down because they felt that such a strategy would not work:

“I think co-creation is really important because otherwise it’s imposed, isn’t it, there is no buy-in. So, the co-creation I mean [professional services firm] for example, it was over a period of six months working with about 500 colleagues in groups of ten to fifteen in a room, what, why, how, post-it notes, co-creation, you know, education as well as input, review and really having had the input of about 500 people. It was a genuinely co-created strategy. So, I guess what I’m trying to say is co-creation to me really is that. It’s not a kind of facile exercise of appeasing or trade union consulting. It’s genuinely what’s the best ideas from up here and what’s the best ideas from down here and how does it all genuinely all work together for the best” (Felix)

However, thinking broadly about involving the widest group of stakeholders, particularly non-managerial employees, was not something that happened routinely or at least not without the intervention of the diversity consultant. Indeed, challenging the limited preconceptions of the client, and encouraging them to involve as wide a group as possible becomes a key role for the consultant, and could become a source of frustration when the client does not take the importance of this on board:

“It’s very rare that managers or directors or heads of diversity will have spoken to people much below them. Hardly ever lower than manager level. And managers are normally consulted when the training has already been designed and is about to be delivered. They’ll ask what dates they have available.” (Yasmin)

“...you’ll be amazed at how many companies are not interested in non-professional employees. They’re only interested in professional because they’re the expensive ones...And of course the majority of support staff in a lot of organisations are women. They’re not interested. It’s brutal. I mean there’s nothing nice about it. It’s all about money... but if they say we don’t want to there’s nothing I can do. I can only put my view.” (Barbara)

For others, there was a recognition that being a consultant on the outside of the organisation meant that they could only *encourage* clients to engage more broadly, they did not or could not always engage with non-managerial employees directly:

“So, I don’t engage with them in inverted commas. What I do do is help organisations think about how do you use employee resource groups to help you move your diversity journey forward and how do you use it from a business led way” (Wendy)

Involving stakeholders could be challenging; arousing conflict, opposition and contestation, but the consultants saw this as all part of the change process rather than as something to be feared and shied away from.

“So, I think one of the roles of a consultant, one of my roles is to provide a route for some of that kind of opposition to make that opposition OK, to make that opposition kind of part of the process, for me not to get freaked by the opposition because that’s no good for the clients.” (Barbara)

5.6.1 Non-managerial employees

A small number of consultants made active efforts to involve non-managerial employees in their D&I interventions, frequently through the channel of employee networks or by organising focus groups. This was viewed as helping to make interventions more effective, by engaging those targeted and affected. These consultants saw and attempted to tap into the ideas and creativity of those at non-managerial levels in the organisation in order to develop more impactful policy and strategy.

Some consultants had considerable experience of working with unionised client organisations, yet here too, they found that sometimes organisations ‘forgot’ to involve trade unions unless the consultant prompted them to do so. Those who had had prior employee relations roles in large organisations with recognised trade unions were more conscious of the need to engage unions and the benefits of doing so. A couple of consultants saw the unions as potential or actual allies on D&I issues, so they were keen to involve them for that reason, especially where they felt that D&I were not gaining much traction in the organisation. Others had found unions unhelpful or unresponsive on D&I issues, possibly because union representatives saw consultants as on the management side, but also because unions tend to be more comfortable with concrete policies and procedures than with fuzzier notions of cultural change or ‘inclusive leadership’:

“I think in organisations that are pretty heavily unionised, I am just thinking about my transport company at the moment, they’re more about we’ve got the policy. So as long as we’ve got the policy and people feel that they’re not being treated appropriately we’ll refer them to the policy. And if they’re really unhappy with that then they can take a grievance out ...” (Susan)

Often it depended on whether the client had an existing productive relationship with the union(s). Where this was the case, then involving union representatives could be a very positive step, but also a necessary one.

“I think what helped me was probably that stakeholder management, that is the key, one of the key skills I think around diversity, recognising that legitimacy of interest there that everybody has, you know, it might not be my view but I recognise that the union’s view is very important, I recognise that a disabled person’s view is very important.” (Claire)

5.6.2 Line and middle managers

Getting buy-in from line and middle managers was also seen as particularly critical by many consultants who had plenty of experience of diversity work failing to impact precisely because these managers did not buy into the change programme:

“I think one of the challenges is that you suddenly get a diversity strategy from high saying this is what we’re going to do and the middle managers who usually make the majority of decisions about the employees either make or break this stuff, say well, great but I wasn’t involved in that discussion and I’ve got a day job.” (Susan)

“They’re the key point for diversity. If you don’t get line managers, you don’t do anything. I mean as much as you can laugh at the head of the organisation saying I’m the champion, it doesn’t do anything if you don’t get anyone at that middle layers.” (Collette)

“I think you’ve got to make it real for operational managers... it’s there that you really make the difference and they are the people who ... You know, they are in day-to-day control of the company, not the CEO, not HR, not the chairman. And if they are not

incentivised in the right way to do this and if they don't see the benefits of it they won't. So, that is a massive challenge.” (Luke)

However, there was also recognition how difficult it was to engage line managers and that line managers are often the scapegoats for the failure of D&I policies and initiatives. Consultants were not critical of line managers however, seeing their lack of buy-in as due to the failures of organisations to engage with them properly, make D&I relevant to their work, or offer them sufficient help and support; the encouragement of which was seen as a key role for them as consultants:

“I think there's often a general thought... that your problem is always your line managers which always seems a bit harsh to me. And it would all be fine if they, you know, somehow either they just do what they're told or they wouldn't be so difficult... I think the problem is that I think that's a bit too simplistic and I think also the problem is we expect a heck of a lot of line managers and they've got a lot of other pressures on them and then we also expect them to be able to do a lot of things around the people piece which they haven't always been, you know, trained to do, got much support to do and find quite difficult.” (Geraldine)

“I think line managers are critical [for implementing D&I] but I think it's really important to look at yeah, what do we do to develop our [managers]... and encourage and enable ... You know what are we really asking them to do. Most of the time we just really ask them to deliver volume and pace. We're not really asking them to think about inclusion.” (Stella)

6 Future challenges and opportunities

6.1 For the diversity and inclusion field

6.1.1 The way D&I is talked about and understood

We have identified a key change in the language and terminology within the field over the period of our wider research from the early 2000s. While the language of equality and equal opportunities was in decline then, there is even less mention of this now, with diversity being the ubiquitous label. Moreover, another shift away from managing diversity or diversity management to *diversity and inclusion* is dominant. Our consultants also reflected on the popularity of the latest fashions and buzzwords, including unconscious bias and inclusive leadership. This had not led to a disregard or avoidance of equality or social justice issues from the point of view of diversity consultants, indeed the values driven nature of their commitment and passion was a key characteristic of their self-positioning in the field. However, the D&I piece was also about wider transformative goals that included a business as well as social justice case for action. The changes in language and terminology were therefore seen as useful, as a means of capturing attention and gaining support within organisations. A future challenge if the field is to contribute to deep and sustainable change will be ensuring that the language and the tools used are fit for purpose – i.e. that they can achieve the kind of cultural change that the consultants deemed necessary for a strong D&I climate to flourish in organisations. Here, some of the critical concerns raised by some consultants were about the implications of certain language, in particular the way that the concept of unconscious bias could be used to abdicate individual and collective responsibility for prejudice. These concerns are noteworthy and require thought and action to ensure that organisations have policies and initiatives capable of addressing discrimination and disadvantage.

6.1.2 The way D&I work is valued

There were concerns raised about the extent to which D&I work is undervalued by client organisations, often seen as an add-on, a short-term intervention or as something that does not need the levels of investment that other management functions attract. This feeds through into the relatively modest income that can potentially be earned from D&I consulting, and raises broader questions about the attractiveness of careers in D&I. Part of

this also links to the lack of regulation of D&I professionals. Many consultants lamented the lack of an association regulating and setting standards for the profession, while others would welcome the existence of a D&I consultants network. These are issues the D&I community might benefit from debating. Having practice standards for consulting might help client organisations make more informed choices when selecting consultants, such standards could offer benchmarks for good practice, and for appropriate market rates for different services. A professional association could also offer continuing professional development for D&I consultants. All of this may lead to more impactful interventions that achieve the types of transformative organisational change that the consultants in our study aspired towards. Are there relevant existing bodies, such as the CIPD, which could take a lead on this?

6.1.3 The consultant as a useful change agent for D&I

This research has indicated that while there are challenges involved in being an outsider, there are also very many benefits in being an external D&I consultant. Freer from organisational politics and the administrative burdens of an internal D&I role, the consultant potentially has considerably more space to speak truth to power, enact more radical interventions and progress the D&I agenda. While external consultants can often be seen as a threat to internal practitioners, there is an argument to be made that the D&I consultant may be an important ally for the internal D&I practitioner. This is particularly the case given the values-driven nature of D&I consultancy, where making money is a rather secondary concern and where consultants demonstrate a genuine commitment to helping their client organisations.

6.2 Challenges for diversity and inclusion consultants

6.2.1 Personal experiences of being a consultant

There is no doubt that embarking upon a D&I consultancy career is not an easy choice. Given the lack of a professional association and networks for D&I consultants, it can be a rather lonely and isolating experience. Consultants spoke often of the need to be resilient both in the context of uncertainties created by reliance on short-term/project-based contracts, but also in context of a constant battle to enact change within organisations.

6.2.2 Enacting change within organisations

Many consultants expressed a degree of disenchantment about the prospects for change in organisations. From their experience, there was still a compliance culture in many organisations and failure to move beyond the minimalism necessary under the law, and window-dressing approaches were still commonplace. Bearing in mind the dominant view that they were all in the field in order to try to make a difference, this is a concern. Previous research has indicated that people working in the D&I field can suffer burnout or more simply enough disillusionment to make them quit. However, at the same time, our research indicates that the consultants were also a hugely optimistic group. Partly this was because they were realistic about what was possible within organisations - their aim was incremental change involving small steps, and they were very aware of the need to make what they did relevant to the business and were prepared to talk in the language of business. The discussions above relating to the changes in terminology are relevant here. Partly this was also because while many contracts were short term, many consultants were able to have a better sense of their wider impact on the organisations through the development of repeat contracts generating long lasting working relationships with client organisations.

6.3 Challenges for diversity and inclusion in client organisations

The extent to which organisational statements of commitment to D&I are rhetoric or reality is much debated in the literature. The absence of genuine commitment is something that D&I consultants in our study were very alert to and wary of. This obviously makes working on D&I with client organisations extremely challenging. Added to this, the current economic context clearly represents a challenge for D&I work and consultants observed that D&I is often the first area to be put on hold in times of financial crisis, economic recession, and austerity. The consultants had experienced this, but in different ways depending on their client base: for example, the 2008 crash had affected the City and financial services, while 2010 onwards austerity measures in the public sector had affected the number of available contracts there. Flowing from this, while many consultants were well established and had enough work, there was a general feeling from many that was less work around for diversity consultants now than 10 years ago. Therefore, earning a living and sustaining a D&I consultancy business was very

challenging. Nevertheless, we encountered resilience in the face of these difficulties rather than many examples of opting-out of work that the consultants found immensely fulfilling.

7 Conclusion

The study presented in this report set out to illuminate the professional lives (careers, strategies and practices) of a sub-set of D&I practitioners – consultants – who are now significant in numbers and whose work has hitherto been under-researched within the diversity literature. We explored consultants' motivations to enter the D&I field as well as their current self-positioning within the field. We found diversity consultants to be dedicated, committed professionals working with vigour and optimism in an undervalued field of management and consulting. The skills and competencies required for D&I work, especially as an independent consultant operating in harsh economic times against a complex socio-political context, were apparent and should not be underestimated. The diversity consultants in our study were people who wanted to make a difference, who wanted to be change agents, who wanted to do something worthwhile but within a business (rather than social activism) context. It was clear that diversity consulting could be deeply satisfying work, but also frustrating if organisations were not ready for change or were not prepared to take all the necessary steps to achieve it. Given the continuing trend for HR functions to be outsourced, the field of D&I consulting is likely to grow and the orientations and actions of these external organisational change agents will be worthy of future research.

January 2017.