

## Diversity Project 'Ask Me Anything' call on gender-related issues arising from Covid-19

We reached capacity at 100 people on the call! Our panellists were Julia Hobart (Oliver Wyman), Charlotte Woodworth (BITC), Vicki Foster (SJP) and Cosmo Elms (LGIM, DP Gender Workstream) and the conversation was moderated by Helena Morrissey.

We addressed questions around four themes:

***1. 'As a working parent, the impact of lockdown has meant that I, along with many working parents, have had to change my working patterns completely to cover my childcare responsibilities and of course work from home. Will firms in our industry be open to more flexible working patterns going forward?'***

Yes! This difficult phase has broken much of the stigma around working from home. With CEOs to personal assistants all working from home, we've learned it can work, whatever the job level or role. It's been an unfortunate way of illustrating something that we've struggled to convince people about for years: it's not hours in the office that should count, but results. Firms are now seeing this as a game-changer for ways of working and are starting to think about how to retain the positives from this experience for the post-coronavirus phase. Unfortunately, working from home or flexible hours had previously been hard to negotiate for certain roles – this is now expected to change. The Diversity Project will be working hard to ensure that firms continue to practise greater flexibility after lockdown – the signs are encouraging.

***2. 'Is there a real risk that yet again women lose out from the crisis? With women in typically less senior, 'more dispensable' roles, they are more vulnerable to job cuts. We've seen the withdrawal of the need to publish Gender Pay Gap data – is this a sign that gender equality at work is being deprioritised?'***

Judging from past economic downturns, there *is* a risk, so we need to be vigilant and ensure that firms don't deprioritise inclusion and diversity efforts generally, or gender equality work specifically. At the same time, however, there are reasons to be optimistic: the game-changer for smart working that we've already mentioned and a more even sharing of household tasks and childcare in many households where both partners are now working from home, for example. There's also a growing realisation that the best, most innovative thinking is needed in an unprecedented economic situation – we need new thinking, not more of the same. But it's vital that we don't just sit back and hope – we can each play our part in keeping these issues on the table by speaking up, offering solutions and 'nudges' around ways businesses can ensure their efforts around D&I don't fall away. Together, all those 'nudges' can make a big difference.

***3. 'What should women do who are shouldering the burden of childcare and struggling to get their partner to play their part? The crisis seems to be reinforcing stereotypes in some families particularly where the woman has a less senior role. Single mothers are in a very difficult position – what advice do you give them?'***

Panellists shared how they had reached good arrangements with their partners, including for example, going through upcoming 'non-negotiable' appointments for the upcoming week on Sundays and ensuring neither would be struggling to meet their work obligations. The Equal Lives study conducted by BITC in 2018 confirmed that very many fathers want to share childcare

responsibilities but haven't felt it's socially expected or culturally acceptable at their workplace. If that's what's holding them back at present, this is a great moment to embrace the opportunity and, if necessary, to raise the subject with their line manager! But if your partner is genuinely reluctant (or simply doesn't help, even if they say they will), it's essential to sit down and explain that it's impossible for one person to do everything – that the tasks HAVE to be shared. In other words, don't wait for the offer! Be prepared to respond to the argument 'my work is more important than yours' with calm, rational points about what you agreed around you both working.

The success stories around single parents (in connection with the coronavirus lockdown) are consistent: usually the employee has spoken confidently to their line manager about the need to vary their hours and they have reached a sensible arrangement. This was corroborated by one of those listening in to the session, who said it was the only way she could make the situation work – and it was working! Others have told us their line manager proactively asked what they needed to manage. But not all line managers are created equally....

***4. 'My line manager doesn't seem to understand how difficult my life is at present – I am trying to juggle home-schooling and childcare with my fulltime job. Calls are being set up for lunchtime, when I really need to feed my children, for example. How should I raise this with my line manager?'***

One theme throughout these Ask Me Anything sessions is the need to speak up confidently, even when you may feel vulnerable. Raising the issue calmly, explaining that you can get the work done but that the terms need to be different for now is entirely reasonable and should meet with a positive response. If you fear your line manager won't be receptive, forge alliances within your team or in the broader firm about the issue and raise it together. The world has changed remarkably during the coronavirus crisis: this is not business as usual. The Diversity Project recognises that our industry is generally poor at giving line managers good training around these issues and we are launching a new effort around this – but in the meantime, don't be silent!

We've been thinking hard at the Diversity Project about the implications of the crisis on all aspects of I&D work. We are going to relaunch the gender workstream with a more concerted campaign with measurable goals, reflecting latest developments and the questions and concerns on people's minds.

The panellists concluded by reflecting on the positive developments around gender equality that they could see emerging from the crisis for our industry; these included greater emphasis on 'work life balance' for men as well as women, transformed ways of working, renewed appetite for different perspectives to be considered around opportunities and challenges and most importantly, a greater understanding of each other as human beings. Ironically, being remote from our colleagues is giving us more insight into each other's lives, and more focus on each other's wellbeing. The Diversity Project will be underlining the importance of our member organisations' leaders and senior managers finding ways to share their experiences, to be inclusive in their leadership and so further develop their empathy and shared humanity.