

We must all be aware

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As part of our series on diversity in tax, we share the personal experiences of Georgiana Head and Dipti Thakrar about their battles to secure equality in the tax world

Diversity and unconscious bias Georgiana Head reports that we must all be aware that unconscious racism – and other discrimination – is still taking place in recruitment

I don't think that I have ever been as proud of being ATT qualified as when I read the joint welcome message from our ATT President Jeremy Coker and CIOT President Glyn Fullelove in the July issue of Tax Adviser, explaining that the Association and the Institute are committed to welcoming and valuing all their members and students regardless of their background and identity. In the midst of this torrid time of Covid-19 and racial unrest, there is in this message an oasis of calm and good sense.

I have found most of the news in the mainstream media unsettling because my own 13 year old son is mixed race, with light brown skin, green eyes and a fabulous towering afro. Generally, I never think anything of his racial mix: he is just Alexander, the fastest on the Xbox, the tallest in his class and the kindest of chaps, who is brilliant at tricky social situations and currently totally obsessed by coffee. I remember when Barack Obama became president of the US thinking that things were changing for the better.

Then came the news that Huugo Boateng, another 13 year old mixed race boy, was injured by police when they attempted to arrest him and his father during a charity bike ride along a river path. He was totally innocent but was knocked off his bike and handcuffed and threatened with a Taser. Huugo looks very like my son. This happened in Tottenham in North London. I realised then that we did have to take Alexander's race into consideration at times, as we worry that when he is old enough to drive he will be pulled over by the police.

It made me think of one of my oldest friends, a successful marketing director and businessman who loves flash cars and spends his spare time rallying and fixing cars and motor bikes. On average, he gets pulled over by the police 10 times a year. He purposely drives carefully within the speed limit because he knows as a black man he is likely to be pulled over. I'm a blonde haired white woman, and I have only been pulled over once in my life and that was for driving too slowly.

Institutional racism exists in Britain; we may think it doesn't but it does. We may think we are different from the US, more liberal and more understanding but we still have unconscious bias. If you don't think this is true, have a look at the accountancy firm, law firm or company that you work in. Think about the most senior tier of people in your company. How many of them are male? How many are over six feet tall? How many are white British?

We unconsciously see tall white men as leaders. I'm not devaluing these partners or saying they don't deserve their roles; I'm saying that they had a competitive advantage purely from their height, and that is even before their race or sex. A good book to read about unconscious bias and how we make decisions is 'Blink: the power of thinking without thinking' by Malcolm Gladwell.

Generally, I think the tax profession is a great place to work. It is modern and progressive, encouraging of women and has traditionally been a place for social mobility with partners coming through from both the state school system and from HMRC. Today, firms are actively trying to get a more diverse population. Apprenticeships and A-level trainees are some of the ways that they are trying to break down class and social barriers. The larger accountancy firms have great LGBT support groups, and accountancy firms get good placings in the Sunday Times 100 Best Employer lists.

However, having worked in recruitment for the last 23 years, I have seen things that in hindsight I wish I had made a more active stand against. It started with friends from Asian families, who changed their names by deed poll to ensure that their graduate applications would be given the same consideration as their white British counterparts. In the late 1990s, working as a junior recruiter, I had a client who was a partner in a law firm who used to say to me: 'They have an Indian sounding name – are they fully anglicised?' The candidate in question went to Eton and was at the time working for the Queen's own law firm. The same client asked me if a woman in her 50s was overweight and would be able to manage their stairs; and if a woman in her 30s was married as he thought she would be trying for children. In both cases, I politely explained why he couldn't ask these things and that I had put forward people who I thought were genuinely brilliant at their jobs. I was hugely relieved when I moved to Yorkshire and no longer had to deal with him.

After that, I sometimes sent out CVs with the names of the candidates blanked out. While some candidates asked me to do this for reasons of confidentiality, I started doing it when I thought it might prevent a candidate from being at a disadvantage; for example, where a candidate had a traditionally Nigerian sounding name. It is an unpalatable truth that a candidate with an African sounding name – no matter how good their experience and qualifications – is less likely to get an interview than a candidate with name that sounds British. People don't do it intentionally, but they literally read the CV differently.

So what do I think? I think things have got better in Britain in 2020. We now have laws that mean we don't disclose birthdates on CVs or anything that might overtly point to someone's sexuality. Employers can't ask candidates or recruiters if someone is married or might be planning a family. Our employers are publishing their gender pay gap figures and more recently statistics about their racial mix. But remember that under the 2011 UK census for England and Wales in 2011, 86% of the UK population is counted as white, 7.5% Asian, 3.3% Black ethnic, 2.2% mixed ethnic groups and 1.0% other ethnic groups. Consider whether your company is representative of this mix. In the tax profession, we are educated and privileged, analysing information and legislation as part of those roles. We need to use those same skills to look inwardly.

Georgiana Head is director of Georgiana Head Tax Recruitment.