



The Inclusion Club

Overview

Commentators have often described Professional Service firms' leadership as, 'Pale, Male and Stale,' with female and BME incumbents finding it difficult to break into their leadership teams' 'Old Boys' Clubs.'

This topic has received a lot of attention in recent years and positive change can be seen. This case study shares the experience of one of the Big Four firms who showed courage to address this in a meaningful way.

As a major student recruiter, EY play an important role in helping to develop the UK's future business leaders and the skills of the UK workforce. They have taken bold steps to create a level playing field for talented young people looking to enter the profession, regardless of their background.

Challenge

As one of the UK's largest student recruiters, competing in an especially aggressive market, EY want to attract the best talent to grow their business. They believe that only the highest-performing teams, which maximise the power of different perspectives and voices, will succeed in the global marketplace.

EY recognised that there is unfortunately a strong link in the UK between socio-economic background, academic achievement and career prospects. Further, inequalities in professional firms are a function of inequalities in the country's education system. Top universities, for example, provide a springboard to the most coveted careers, yet access to them is often skewed towards the well-off, principally because these students generally perform better in exams. In addition, research has shown that students from lower socio-economic groups do not perform as well on certain ability tests, which can put them at a disadvantage.

Addressing these concerns raised significant challenges but the issues could not be ignored. In response, EY introduced a new student assessment and selection process that could be fairer and more inclusive, whilst maintaining the very highest intellectual standards.

Approach

A Strong Start

EY had previously introduced Strengths-based recruitment, moving away from the traditional competency-based assessments. Strengths-based assessment looks at past performance as evidence of capability but also uses future-focused techniques. Research (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, Linley & Kauffman, 2007, Harzer & Ruch, 2012, etc.) has shown that individuals who use their strengths at work are:

- more resilient
- happier

- have higher levels of self-esteem
- are more likely to stay in role
- perform at a higher level; and
- achieve their goals with less stress

Following the successful validation of the Strengths assessment process, EY conducted a detailed review of their recruitment process to see what else they could do.

Cause for Concern

An early-stage hurdle, which applied to most graduate recruitment programmes in the UK, was reference to UCAS points. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service in the UK (UCAS) uses points to measure the relative value of all post-16 qualifications in the UK, with points assigning a numerical score to the possible grades that can be achieved in each type of qualification. Selection based on these criteria was becoming increasingly incongruent with the social mobility agenda, and links between career success and UCAS points remained unclear (Kirkup, et al., 2008).

EY's review considered the impact of the academic screening criteria they had set at the time, i.e. 300 UCAS points, and 2:1 degree. They recognised that:

- There was a lack of evidence that academic performance was predictive of subsequent on-the-job performance
- Inclusive progress would be hampered by applying strict academic criteria, as there was a strong link between socio-economic background, academic achievement, and future career prospects
- Academic screening had inherent anomalies and inconsistencies; for example, a candidate with a 2.2 in Mechanical Engineering from a highly academic university may be excluded from applying whilst a candidate with 2.1 from a less demanding degree programme at a less academic University could be eligible
- Experienced professional hires, joining EY later in their careers, could have successful careers even though they would not have been eligible to join the student programmes due to academic screening requirements

Change for the Better

As a result, EY made three bold changes to their recruitment process.

- EY removed their academic 300 UCAS points, and 2:1 degree screening criteria
- They stopped asking candidates about their prior work experience or positions of responsibility held on their application form
- They began operating a 'CV blind' recruitment process so Interviewers and Assessors would not have access to a candidate's application form as part of the recruitment process

In order to do this, a re-design of the process was required to ensure it was robust enough to identify the best and most appropriate talent for the business whilst maintaining a level playing field for candidates to be assessed.

The New Process

The process was underpinned by the Strengths-based recruitment methodology. This approach helped support students with less access to work experience and careers guidance by focusing on potential rather than experience.

A multi-assessment approach was also adopted which combined a range of tests (strengths, technology mindset, numerical and verbal reasoning) that candidates completed in one go rather than in separate assessments. The test scores were then combined into one single talent score, meaning a fairer method of scoring, enabling candidates to demonstrate their capability across a broader set of criteria.

The new assessment process incorporated significant changes:

- Candidates were no longer required to have a minimum academic requirement to make an application
- Candidates were no longer required to submit a CV or covering letter as part of their application; they provided their contact details and completed an 'equal opportunities' form
- Prior work experience and/or positions of responsibility no longer formed part of the screening criteria
- All candidates were given coaching prior to their first interview to provide all students with an equal opportunity to succeed
- A 'CV blind' interview process; details of a candidate's application were only visible to the EY Student Recruitment team, not the Interviewers

This created an assessment process that EY felt was free from discrimination, allowing candidates to perform to the best of their ability, creating opportunities for many students who in previous years may have been rejected due to arbitrary screening criteria.

Outcome

EY continue to value students' academic achievements and maintain high intellectual standards. However, they feel that changes to the process levelled the playing field, allowing all candidates the chance to apply, and significantly supported their commitment to Diversity and inclusiveness addressing the social mobility challenge.

Moving to an upfront multi-assessment approach enabled the business to consider an additional c.15,000 candidates at the initial screening stage, rather than rejecting candidates in a sequential, singular model.

When analysing their intake in the following year, they found the diversity improved:

- 45% female
- 30% black and minority ethnic (BME)
- 60% state school educated
- 37% first generation to go to university
- 9% eligible for free school meals

Upon further analysis it was revealed that 18.3% of graduates who joined the firm, and 18.5% of school leavers, would have previously been ineligible to apply due to minimum grade requirements. In addition to the above hiring statistics, the below key milestones were achieved:

- No Adverse Impact was identified throughout the process for any demographic group
- All assessment stages positively correlated, thus predicting success at later stages of the process
- Process efficiencies reduced time-to-offer by 35%



- Process improvements reduced the demand on Assessors and Interviewers, returning 4,000 client hours to the business

Acknowledgements

Capp & Co Ltd

EY Graduate Talent teams