THE EXPERIENCE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN A PUBLIC ORGANISATION

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REMARKS

The reader is reminded of the following:

- The references as well as the editorial style as prescribed by the *Publication Manual (5th edition)* of the American Psychological Association (APA) were followed in this dissertation. This practice is in line with the policy of the Programme in Industrial Psychology of the North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus) to use APA style in all scientific documents as from January 1999.

- The dissertation is submitted in the form of one research article. The name of the study leader appears on the research article as it will be submitted for publication in a national journal.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONTINUE)

Page

LIST OF TABLES

SUMMARY

Topic: The experience of Affirmative Action in a public organisation.

Key terms: Affirmative Action, Employment Equity, Discrimination, Job Satisfaction, Public Sector, Private Sector.

South Africa is experiencing a process of formidable and fundamental change. Public administrators as well as politicians are under tremendous pressure as heavy demands are being placed on them. These demands include coping with interventions such as Affirmative Action, Employment Equity, and the importance of managing diversity in the workplace. Despite improvements in race relations in the past twenty years, dysfunctional and ineffective behaviour still occur. This may be a reflection of the discomfort and anxiety experienced by employees in the work setting. In order to comply with legislation, organisations created opportunities for Black, Asian and Coloured males and females, White females and disabled people. This, in return, leads to perceptions of preferential hiring. The view that Affirmative Action involves preferential hiring and treatment based on group membership creates resistance to its implementation and original purpose. The reason for this resistance might be linked to the fact that people still perceive discrimination and injustice in the workplace. These perceptions seem true in public organisations even though public organisations have taken a positive stance with regard to implementing Equal Employment and Affirmative Action plans.

A qualitative design with an availability sample ($N = 20$) of employees working in a public organisation was used. The qualitative research makes it possible to determine the subjective experience of employees in a public organisation. Semi-structured interviews based on the phenomenological method were conducted with employees working in different sections and different positions in a public organisation. Non-directive questions were asked during the interview. The tape-recording of the interview was transcribed verbatim in order to analyse the information. Content analysis was used to analyse and interpret the research data in a systematic, objective and quantitative way. A literature-control has been done to investigate relevant research in order to determine the comparativeness and uniqueness of the current research.

Results indicated that Affirmative Action has been used as a tool in achieving its goal by focusing on preferential hiring. From the responses it was clear that the majority of the participants are of opinion that preferential hiring led to the appointment of incompetent candidates. It appears from the interviews that appointments are made without basing it on merit. This is against the basic principle of the public organisation of hiring and promoting employees by set standards. Due to the fact that previous disadvantaged groups are being placed in positions of which they have no experience or are not trained in, job related knowledge seems to present a problem. From the interviews it appeared that employees felt that poor customer service increased across the organisation due to the appointment of incompetent candidates. This also seems to have an effect on the workload being handled.

It seems that predominantly white employees tend to be ambivalent towards Affirmative Action. Part of the reason for this ambivalence is the fear of change, especially when that change involves a radical re-thinking of past strategies. White employees, employed by the old apartheid system, feel alienated and/or marginalised in the new Affirmative Action process. White employees are also leaving organisations because they seem not to be part of the Affirmative Action process. This leads to loss of expertise occurring in organisations. Though organisations show a considerable amount of improvement on relationships between black and white, discrimination still seems to present itself through the implementation of Affirmative Action. Managing diversity is crucial for the effective management and development of people. It is important not to focus only on cultural differences but also concentrate on individual needs and perceptions.

Unfortunately, it appears that South Africa is in the process of making the same mistakes as other countries in focusing on a power game and corruption. Black employees in particular, seem to be actively recruited, placed in senior positions and given the related finishing. In other words top management are using their 'power' to enforce Affirmative Action. There are also those who want to abuse the system or maybe understand the system incorrectly. Corruption coming from top management tends to make employees negative. In order to address these issues, a succession and career planning process needs to exist which is closely tied to the organisations' strategic plan. Employment Equity, as a strategic objective, is managed by the organisation, but needs the

Human Resources function in a support and consultancy role. As such, it requires translation into practical objectives for departments, managers and employees.

Recommendations were made for future research.

OPSOMMING

Titel: Die belewing van Regstellende Aksie in 'n publieke organisasie.

Sleutelwoorde: Regstellende Aksie, Gelyke Geleenthede, Diskriminasie, Werkstevredenheid, Publieke Sektor, Private Sektor.

Suid-Afrika beleef 'n proses van ontsaglike en fundamentele verandering. Openbare administrateurs asook politici verkeer onder geweldige druk aangesien hoë eise aan hulle gestel word. Hierdie eise sluit in om intervensies te hanteer soos Regstellende Aksie, Indiensnemingsgelykheid en die belangrikheid daarvan om diversiteit in die werkplek te bestuur. Ondanks verbeteringe in rasseverhoudinge gedurende die afgelope twintig jaar kom wanfunksionerende en swak gedrag steeds voor. Dit kan 'n weerspieëling wees van die ongemak en vrees wat by werknemers in die werksopset ervaar word. Met die doel om gehoor te gee aan wetgewing het organisasies geleenthede aan Swart, Asiër- en Kleurling-mans en vroue, Blanke vroue en gestremdes gegee. Dit lei weer tot opvattings van voorkeur-indiensneming. Die mening dat Regstellende Aksie met voorkeur-indiensneming verband hou en met behandeling wat op groep-lidmaatskap gebaseer is, skep weerstand teen die instel en oorspronklike doel daarvan. Die rede vir hierdie weerstand kan moontlik gekoppel wees aan die feit dat mense nog steeds diskriminasie en ongeregtigheid in die werkplek waarneem. Hierdie opvattings blyk in openbare organisasies korrek te wees, alhoewel dié organisasies positiewe standpunt ingeneem het wat betref die implementering van Gelyke Indiensnemings- en Regstellende Aksie-planne.

'n Kwalitatiewe ontwerp met 'n beskikbaarheidsteekproef ($N = 20$) werknemers in 'n openbare organisasie, is gebruik. Die kwalitatiewe navorsing maak dit moontlik om die subjektiewe ervarings van werknemers in die openbare organisasie te bepaal. Onderhoude wat op die fenomenologiese metode gefundeer is, is gevoer met werknemers wat in verskillende afdelings en verskillende posisies in 'n openbare organisasie werksaam was. Nie-direktiewe vrae is gedurende die onderhoud gestel. Die bandopname van elke onderhoud is verbatim getranskribeer met die doel om die inligting te ontleed. Inhoudsontleding is gebruik om die navorsingsdata op 'n sistematiese, objektiewe en kwantitatiewe wyse te interpreteer. 'n Literatuurkontrole is gedoen

om relevante navorsing te ondersoek om die vergelykbaarheid en uniekheid van die huidige navorsing te bepaal.

Die resultate het daarop gedui dat Regstellende Aksie as werktuig aangelê is om die doel daarvan te bereik deur op voorkeur-indiensneming te fokus. Uit die response was dit duidelik dat die meerderheid deelnemers van mening is dat voorkeuraanstellings tot die indiensneming van onbevoegde kandidate lei. Uit die onderhoude het dit geblyk dat aanstellings gemaak word sonder dat meriete 'n rol gespeel het. Dit druis in teen die basiese beginsel van die openbare organisasie om werknemers volgens gestelde standaarde aan te stel en te bevorder. Weens die feit dat voorheen benadeelde groepe in posisies geplaas word waarin hulle geen ervaring het of waarvoor hulle nie opgelei is nie, blyk werksverwante kennis 'n probleem te wees. Dit het uit die onderhoude geblyk dat werknemers gemeen het dat swak kliëntediens dwarsoor die hele organisasie toegeneem het weens die aanstelling van onbevoegde kandidate. Hierdie feit blyk ook 'n invloed te hê op die werklading wat hanteer moet word.

Dit kom voor of oorwegend blanke werknemers geneig is om gemengde gevoelens te hê oor Regstellende Aksie. Deel van die rede vir hierdie ambivalensie is die vrees vir verandering, veral as daardie verandering 'n radikale heroorweging van strategieë uit die verlede behels. Blanke werknemers, wat deur die ou apartheidstelsel in diens geneem is, voel in die nuwe Regstellende-aksieproses vervreem en/of gemarginaliseer. Blanke werknemers verlaat ook organisasies omdat dit blyk dat hulle nie deel uit maak van die Regstellende-aksieproses nie. Dit lei tot 'n verlies aan kundigheid wat in organisasies voorkom. Hoewel organisasies heelwat verbetering ten opsigte van verhoudings tussen swart en blank toon, kom diskriminasie blykbaar steeds voor deur die implementering van Regstellende Aksie. Om diversiteit te bestuur is van kritieke belang vir die doeltreffende bestuur en ontwikkeling van mense. Dit is belangrik om nie alleen klem op kulturele verskille te lê nie, maar ook om op individuele behoeftes en opvattings te konsentreer.

Ongelukkig lyk dit asof Suid-Afrika besig is om dieselfde foute as ander lande te begaan deur op magspeletjies en korrupsie te fokus. Swart werknemers, in besonder, blyk daadwerklik gewerf en in senior posisies geplaas te word en verwante duidelikhede gegee te word. Met ander woorde topbestuur gebruik hul 'mag' om Regstellende Aksie af te dwing. Daar is ook diegene wat die

stelsel wil misbruik of dalk die stelsel verkeerd verstaan. Korrupsie vanaf topbestuur is geneig om werknemers negatief te stem. Om hierdie aspek aan te spreek, moet 'n opvolg- en loopbaanbeplanningsproses bestaan wat ten nouste aansluit by die strategiese plan van die organisasie. Indiensnemingsgelykheid, as 'n strategiese doelwit, word deur die organisasie bestuur, maar het die Mensehulpbron-funksie in 'n ondersteunings- en raadgewende rol nodig. As sodanig vereis dit omsetting in praktiese doelwitte vir departemente, bestuurders en werknemers.

Aanbevelings is gemaak vir toekomstige navorsing.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This mini-dissertation focuses on the experience of Affirmative Action in a public organisation.

Chapter 1 contains the problem statement as well as the research methodology employed. The chapter starts out with a problem statement, giving an overview of previous related research conducted on Affirmative Action and the experience of Affirmative Action specifically in public organisations, linking it with this research project and its research objectives. A discussion on the research method follows, including details regarding the empirical study, research design, participants and data collection. It concludes with a chapter summary giving an overview of the chapters that comprise this mini-dissertation.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The increasing complexity of the South African business environment is making heavy and new demands on organisations. These new demands include visible forces such as technological revolution (Anstey, 1992), stronger economic dependency among countries, international competition and shifts of political power (Human, 1997; Thomas, 1997). As a result, it became apparent that if South Africa is to maintain and increase its economic well-being and growth, it will need to follow a path of developing its most valuable asset, namely human potential (Human, Bluen, & Davies, 1999). Related strategies were and are necessary to achieve this. Strategies and interventions, such as Affirmative Action, Employment Equity, and the emphasis of managing diversity in the workplace were implemented in the past few years in order to address this issue (Booth, 1995; Human, 1995).

After the transformation process in 1994, the South African Constitution guaranteed that all citizens are equal before the law (Stacey, 2003), thus creating the path for the implementation of the aforementioned strategies and interventions. This ensured that all citizens should enjoy equally and to the same extent, the rights and freedom that the Constitution enshrines. Every

individual is assured of the enjoyment of basic rights to the same degree as all other individuals in society (Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999). The state therefore treated the people of the country equally in so far as each person is formally given the same space and opportunity as everyone else to make what he or she will of their life (Human, et al., 1999). In the Constitution, the advancement of specific identified groups or individuals who were previously hampered in the pursuit of their life goals and ambitions were also accommodated (Booth, 1995; Stacey, 2003).

Since the progression of South Africa to a democracy, many organisations have been attempting to introduce this concept of equality of career opportunity into their policies. Through the enforcement of the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) (South Africa, 1998), the government laid the basis for Affirmative Action in employment law and the implementation thereof in organisations. The Act states that all employers should take steps to promote equal opportunities in the workplace and eliminate unfair discrimination. Affirmative Action seems to be a temporary intervention designed to achieve equal employment opportunities without lowering standards and without unduly trammelling the career aspirations or expectations of current organisational members who are competent in their jobs (Human, 1991). Affirmative Action is therefore consistent with the ideal of equality to the extent that it eliminates the disadvantages of an unequal distribution of resources (Agocs & Burr, 1996). A positive outcome of a properly implemented Affirmative Action programme can be the better management of human resources and a rising of standards (Human, et al., 1999). However, the implementation of strategies and intervention such as Affirmative Action has challenged many organisations to change in almost all areas of their existence (Human, 1997).

Still, it has been widely argued that the removal of discriminatory employment practices and the provision of equal opportunities are good for business and gives a competitive edge to the organisation (Pickard, 1999). Perceptions of equal opportunities can be positively linked to job satisfaction. Discrimination and a lack of equal opportunities could contribute to job dissatisfaction and turnover among previously disadvantaged groups (i.e. Black, Asian and Coloured males and females, White females and disabled people) (Mason, 1997). Some beneficial effects of equal opportunities are direct and quantifiable, such as the reduction in costs

2

related to staff turnover and the accessing of largely untapped reserves of skill and talent through a wider pool of applicants (Mason, 1997).

In identifying the need to address inequalities in its practices, the private as well as the public sector experience similar problems (Dainty, Bagilhole, Ansari, & Jackson, 2004). Affirmative Action is perceived as a controversial concept. It raises fears in people's minds of declining standards, token appointments, the end of merit as the basis for promotion and advancement, and a rapid decline in economy (De Jong & Visser, 2000). These fears mostly emanate from white people, and are further reinforced when black people are appointed to senior positions in response to the Employment Equity legislation (Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999). Misperceptions of Affirmative Action seem to be more prevalent in organisations where management structures previously have been dominated by white males. This is due to the fact that attempts to implement Affirmative Action programmes seems to have failed as a result of resistance from both white and black corps, unrealistic expectations of Affirmative Action candidates, an overall resistance to change, and a lack of or insufficient training and development of Affirmative Action candidates (Weiner, 1993).

Another perception is that Affirmative Action programmes may cause organisations to push the worst-off candidates in minority groups even lower down. This is done by giving preference to the better qualified in the minority group (Van Wyk, 1998). This claim is based on the assumption that an individual's qualifications are a direct inverse consequence of the degree to which he or she suffered under discrimination, and that the aim of Affirmative Action appears to be to focus on individuals at the bottom end of the designated group, rather than to improve the average relative position of the group as a whole (Thomas & Robertshaw, 1999).

Affirmative Action lies in the ability to understand and accept cultural differences and not to force people to change and live in a new cultural setting (De Jong & Visser, 2000). It is responsible for bringing people from previously disadvantaged groups into the work environment through recruitment and promotion, depending on their ability and potential. This aim of Affirmative Action therefore makes it important to focus on changing the mindsets of employees to develop a shared vision of the organisational culture (Den Hartog & Verburg,

3

2004) instead on focusing on enhancing misperceptions of Affirmative Action. Affirmative Action is not about fads, morals, levelling playing fields or moving goalposts (Jankowitz, 1995). It is about developing a growth strategy that will result in organisations becoming world class and competitive by investing in their human capital (Jankowitz, 1995).

As Affirmative Action is an important component of an organisation's Employment Equity strategy, managing diversity also forms an integral part of this strategy. Managing diversity is primarily concerned with the improvement of interpersonal and inter-group communication and relationships in the workplace (Den Hartog & Verburg, 2004). The generic reasons for organisations to manage diversity is to tap into a range of skills the organisation has never attracted before, to retain the best talent and to promote better productivity as a result of employee job satisfaction (Thomas, 1997). From the perspective of the employee, managing diversity will result in effective coaching and mentoring by committed management by allowing all people to utilise their skills and potential to the maximum and the inclusion of non-designated groups (i.e. white males) in future development and training (Dainty, et al., 2004). It appears that the monetary value of developing minority groups is very high for organisations, and they should see this as an investment with a bigger pay-off in the longer term. The economy of the country depends on how well organisations invest in the development of their workforce (Ruthven, 2000).

Although previous research (see Reddy & Choudree, 1996) has been published on the experience of Affirmative Action and lessons learned from other countries, very little research was found in the South African context. No research could be found on the experience of those people who have been promoted or appointed in accordance with an Affirmative Action programme in South Africa, and specifically on employees working in the public sector. The objective of this research is therefore to determine the experience of Affirmative Action in a public organisation.

The following research questions emerge from the problem statement:

- How is Affirmative Action conceptualised from the literature?
- What is the experience of Affirmative Action according to the literature?

- What is the experience of Affirmative Action in a public organisation?

1.2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives are divided into a general objective and specific objectives.

1.2.1 General objective

With reference to the above formulation of the problem, the general objective of this research is to determine the experience of Affirmative Action in a public organisation.

1.2.2 Specific objectives

The specific objectives are as follows:

- To conceptualise Affirmative Action from the literature.
- To determine the experience of Affirmative Action according to the literature.
- To determine the experience of Affirmative Action in a public organisation.
- To make recommendations for future research.

1.3 RESEARCH METHOD

The research method for the purpose of this mini-dissertation consists of a brief literature review and an empirical study. Because separate chapters were not targeted for a literature review, this paragraph focuses on aspects relevant to the empirical study that is conducted. The results obtained from the research will be presented in article format.

1.3.1 Literature review

The literature review focuses on previous research on Affirmative Action and the experience thereof in a South African public organisation. An overview is given of the conceptualisation of

this construct as well as the experience thereof from the literature. The reader should note that a literature study is conducted for the purposes of the article.

1.3.2 Research design

For purposes of this research, a qualitative design is used. Qualitative research makes it possible to determine the subjective experiences of Affirmative Action in a public organisation (McMurty, 1988). Qualitative research is defined as the study of people in their natural environments as they go about their daily lives (Bailey, 1994). Despite the negativity surrounding the use of qualitative research, Woods and Catanzaro (1988) indicated that the validity of qualitative research is one of its biggest advantages.

1.3.3 Participants

The participants consisted of an availability sample of employees working in a public organisation (N = 20). It is clear from Woods and Catanzaro (1988) that small samples can provide reliable research data and is therefore acceptable for phenomenology studies. The sample consisted mainly of White (60,00%) male (70,00%) employees aged between 40 and 49 years (60,00%) with a Degree (35,00%) in a Middle Management or Lower Management position (40,00%).

1.3.4 Data collection

An interview, based on the phenomenological method, was used for gathering the data (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher had put all the participants at ease by ensuring that they all clearly understood what was expected of them. The interviews were non-directive, for example: 'How do you experience Affirmative Action in the public sector?'.

The interviews took place in a venue with enough ventilation, lighting and comfortable chairs. A tape recorder was used with the permission of the participants in order to ensure that no information got lost (Omery, 1983). The candidates were put at ease before commencing with

the interviews. The researcher introduced herself during the beginning of each interview and also explained the context of the interview. Non-directive dialogue techniques such as attentive body language, reflection, clarification, minimal encouragement and silence were used to assist the participants in sharing their experiences (Meulenberg-Buskens, 1994).

The researcher transcribed the tape recordings of the interviews verbatim in order to analyse the information. Content analysis (Giorgi, 1985) was used to analyse and interpret the research data in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner. Content analysis consists of the following steps (Giorgi, 1985; Kerlinger, 1986):

- The first step is to universalise the context that needs to be analysed (for example the entire set of verbal answers of the participants), to be defined and to be categorised.
- The second step is to determine the sub-units of the analysis, namely words and themes. The researcher reads the responded notes in order to form an overall picture. Afterwards, she once again reads through it in order to determine the themes. The words that are used by the participant are the smallest analysis that can be made. A sub-theme is usually a sentence and is more difficult but also more useful to analyse. Sub-themes can be combined in order to determine the themes. The analysis of the information is continued until repeated themes have been identified.
- The third step is to free the data from unnecessary information and to determine the meaning of the rest of the subunits by linking it to the whole picture.
- The fourth step consists of the conversion of the concrete language that has been used by the participants, into scientific language and concepts. The precise words of the participants are used in support. An integration and synthesis is then done, based on gained insights.

The number of objects per category were counted and placed in order of preference. The trustworthiness of the content analysis is promoted by the coding that was done by the researcher and the independent psychologist with a thorough background based on facilitation. A literature-control was done to investigate relevant research in order to determine the comparativeness and uniqueness of the current research (Krefting, 1991).