

## Affirmative action in the workplace and how it affects business

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Animal Farm, the book by George Orwell, has one very famous quote- “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others”. *Discrimination and inequality* are unfortunately an innate part of the human experience. Studies have found out time and time again that we are more likely to gravitate towards those with similar characteristics to us and that as we are also too susceptible to biases. These *biases* do not get left by the door the minute that we enter the workplace and can impact a company’s hiring practices and workforce composition. In recognition of this, some organisations have started implementing affirmative action policies to incorrect this imbalance and cater to the previously disadvantaged groups. The discussion will be on weighing on how such policies affect business.

Hiring discrimination comes in many forms. The Harvard Business Review conducted a study on hiring practices in America and they found that on average over a period of nearly three decades, white applicants received, on average, 36% more call-backs than black applicants and 24% more call-backs than Latino applicants with identical résumés. In essence, just a name only and the *implied race* makes a huge difference in the American market for a candidate’s employment prospects. Statistics also support that women have traditionally gotten the shorter end of the stick in the labour market. Although the employment figures for women have increased over the decades, they are still subject to the glass ceiling effect. The *glass ceiling* effect is a metaphor where the target group can see the senior posts in the career ladder but are never promoted to those posts. According to the fortune magazine, women make up 6.6% of fortune 500 CEO’s despite representing 46.9% of the American workforce. Another focus group is those with disability. Employers seldom go out of the way to accommodate for the employee who will require special concessions. All these cases of biases and discrimination are where affirmative action comes in.

Affirmative action, which is also known as positive discrimination, is defined as an active effort to improve the employment or educational opportunities of members of previously disadvantaged groups. In a sense, the act itself attempts to right an uneven workplace that is not representative of the demographics at the national level for the most part.

South Africa is one of the most compelling case studies in terms of a nation that has been actively trying to change the face of the workplace, especially at the skilled, professional level. Due to the Apartheid years, occupations remain highly segmented by race, with blacks disproportionately holding low-paying jobs (compared with whites), although segregation and segmentation also affect in a different way the other population groups (Indians/Asians and Coloureds). Less than a third of the occupational segregation and about half of the segmentation of Africans (with respect to whites) are related to their characteristics, especially their lower educational achievement, a gap that has been reduced over time. Segregation and stratification, however, remain when blacks and whites with similar characteristics are compared (Gradin C, 2018). The modus operandi was that the black population was relegated to only performing manual tasks and whilst the skilled and semi-skilled jobs were the reserve

of the white population. 24 years after independence, the workplace still stands testimony to the policies of the apartheid years.

In a bid to transform the workplace, the government has implemented a plethora of affirmative action policies. These policies are binding to Employers with 50 or more workers, or whose annual income is more than the amount specified in Schedule 4 of the Employment Equity Act, Municipalities, Organs of State and employers who self – volunteer. Affirmative action makes sure that qualified designated groups (black people, women and people with disabilities) have equal opportunities to get a job. The Equal Employment act also states they must also be equally represented in all job categories and levels of the workplace.

Like all things, there are advantages and disadvantages to countering hiring practices.

### *Advantages*

**It promotes diversity.** Affirmative Action ensures that an inclusive environment can be achieved. This adds perspectives and experiences to the environment which wouldn't be present if the program wasn't in place. Although some may say that artificially encouraging diversity doesn't follow societal norms, in most instances, humanity is better when we can learn from our differences instead of being comfortable in sameness.

**It can eliminate socioeconomic differences.** In South Africa, the wealthiest 10% of South Africa's population owned more than 90% of the total wealth in the country while 80% owned almost no wealth. These findings resonate with more recent findings documented in reports produced by Oxfam (2018) and the World Bank (2018). People of colour who are the most likely to be at the lower end of the wealth scale are getting a hand up due to affirmative action.

**It stops stereotypes.** Echo chambers can happen when co-workers with similar backgrounds and characteristics work together. Affirmative Action, in its promotion of diversity, can help to stop stereotypes because it creates interactions between groups that may not choose to interact with each other in "real" life.

**It allows people to chase dreams.** Affirmative Action allows people to pursue a career that they may never have considered without help from the program. There are significant gaps for women in minorities in certain fields still today, such as technology, health care, and aeronautic that could potentially benefit from the diversity that Affirmative Action promotes.

**It can help to break the glass ceiling.** When people are put into an environment and treated as an equal, then it can stop the various gaps that we see in our current society. Wage gaps have the potential to go away. Gender gaps can be reduced in certain industries. Minority gaps can be reduced because there are more opportunities available to receive higher education. These efforts can help to finally break the glass ceilings that have held so many people back for far too long.

### *Disadvantages*

**It promotes discrimination in reverse.** If the goal is to eliminate discrimination from a society, then offering a program that promotes discrimination is not the way to go about doing so. Giving one person preference over another because of their minority status instead of their qualifications is the wrong perspective, especially in quota-based systems. Searching for a diverse group of qualified candidates and having programming to promote that search lessens the promotion of discrimination. An argument has however been that candidates need to meet the minimum acceptable qualifications to be considered.

**It still reinforces stereotypes.** Any time a program exists that allows someone to obtain a position in a school or a workplace, a foundation of minority-based stereotypes can be built. Even if all people are qualified, Affirmative Action comes from the perspective that women or *minorities* are “inferior” to white men, which promotes a superior attitude from the majority class. For such a program to succeed, it must come from a viewpoint of pure equality.

**It lessens the achievements that minority groups obtain.** If someone receives a position because of a program like *Affirmative Action*, then their achievements are viewed as a result of policy instead of personal skill and talent. This means people in minority groups typically must work harder to achieve the same level of respect that people in majority groups receive as they must counter the policy perspective.

In closing, affirmative action is a useful way to even the workforce. For organisations, a diverse workforce means one that can be creative and come up with multi-faceted solutions. It also serves to reduce inequality on a national scale.

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