

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22, 1995

RECOGNIZING DISCRIMINATION AT WORK

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing discrimination is a first step in eliminating it from the workplace. The exercise and accompanying teaching notes are designed to help students understand the nature of the problem and to help them recognize that it can occur unintentionally.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching students that discrimination can occur at any point in the employment relationship is challenging. Quite often discrimination is viewed as no real problem by students. This activity allows students to make a decision and then compare the decision with others. The exercise points out that people often don't intend to discriminate but that factors such as age often enter their decisions.

COURSE DESIGN AND OBJECTIVE

Objective

To identify age biases that influence employment decisions.

Placement in Course

This exercise is best used at either one of two points in the human resource management class:

-As an introduction to the topic of discrimination, this exercise leads the way for a discussion of the occurrence of discrimination throughout the employment process.

-This exercise can be used as a part of the discussion of training. Discussion here would reinforce other discussions on both age discrimination and the occurrence of discrimination at various points in the employment process.

Prior to the exercise, do not explain the purpose related to discrimination.

Group Size

Best suited for larger groups preferably 20 or more. Divide students into smaller discussion groups of 3 - 5 members.

Advance Preparation

Prepare enough sets of the two scenarios for the entire class. (If you have 20 students and you use groups of 5 you would need 10 copies of each scenario.) It is helpful to divide the copies into the numbers desired in each group before going to class. If there are students absent from class that day, remove the unneeded copies but do not try to alter the stacks since that might call attention to the difference in facts or a single group might inadvertently have copies of both scenarios. At the time that materials are being distributed, make no mention of first name or age. By referring to the character as Brown, you do not alert students to the differences in information.

PROCESSING

Instructions

Students should read the scenario, decide individually (about 5 minutes) and then reach consensus within the small groups (10-15 minutes). Because students will be working with materials that appear on the surface to be the same, it is important to reduce the opportunities for them to share information across groups. All members of a group should have the same scenario. Ideally there should be several small groups with each of the scenarios.

Discussion

Ask students to indicate answers to the following questions by a show of hands.

Q--How many decided to grant Mr. Brown's request for training?

Q--How many decided to deny Mr. Brown's request for training?

Outcome: Generally many more of the students that had information on Charles the 62 year old will deny him the training opportunity than those dealing with 26 year old Calvin.

Q--(To those who voted to grant request for training) Why did you chose to allow Mr. Brown to attend the training program? List reasons on board, overhead or flip chart--Do not be judgmental at this point.

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Q-- (To those who voted to deny request for training) Why did you chose to deny Mr. Brown's request to attend the training program? Again list reasons without judgment.

Outcome: Most students seem reluctant to say that age was a factor. Those that deny the request often make statements like "He probably will not work much longer." "That is too much money to spend on someone who is about to retire." Students that would approve the request often point to the opportunity to improve performance.

After the rationale for the decisions has been discussed, ask students to review the facts of the case. It should quickly be determined that the groups were working with different individuals (age and first name are the only differences), ask them to explain the different results.

Q--Was age a factor?

Outcome: Most students will not readily admit that they were biased by age.

Key Points

- Discrimination can occur at any point in the employment process. (This is not just a phenomena associated with hiring.)
- Discriminatory actions are not always intentional.
- Some biases are so deeply embedded that it is difficult to accept that the factor (i.e. age) influenced the decision. Awareness of biases is a first step in eliminating them.

Other Applications

This exercise can be adapted for gender, ethnicity, disability, etc. as well as age.

EXERCISE NARRATIVE

Scenario 1

Charles Brown, 62 years old. Member of sales staff of Coleco Windows for 2 years. (Company builds and installs insulated windows in new construction and as replacements in existing structures.) Previous experience includes five years with company as a service technician/installer. Performance in technician/installer position was above average. Company has strong commitment to promotion from within. Brown was selected for current position through the internal selection procedure. He received an initial two-day training course for the sales position. Other work experiences were in construction prior to joining Coleco. He has a high school diploma and he has completed one year of college by attending part-time in the evenings. His construction skills were learned as an apprentice. His supervisor has rated his performance as marginally acceptable in his current position.

Brown has requested time away from work and funding to cover expenses to attend a one-week sales training program at Kiawah Island, South Carolina. The brochure that Brown attached to his request was very brief. It said that the program would focus on the "newest sales techniques." The registration for the weeklong program is \$2,500. He estimates lodging, food and travel cost to be an additional \$1,600. His total request is for \$4,100.

In the last 12 months, two people have attended this training program from your company. One was an experienced sales person with 7 years with the company and the other was an employee with 18 months with the company. Both employees had favorable reactions to the program. The performance of neither employee has been evaluated since the completion of training.

You are to assume the role of Brown's supervisor. Do you support his request for training? Be prepared to explain your decision.

Scenario 2

Scenario 2 is exactly like the first scenario except the name is Calvin Brown, and the age is 26 years.