Code switching and inclusivity – beyond Black History Month

There's been a fair bit written about black employees and those from ethnic minorities feeling the need to 'code-switch', which in summary includes changing aspects of their identity and behaviour to try and ensure they receive equal employment opportunities or fair treatment (see here for more information and a full definition). This can range from changing their appearance (see our article here on afro hair) to changing their speech or behaviour to try and fit in.

Unsurprisingly code-switching can have a significant impact on an employee's wellbeing. The effort of constantly trying to downplay your identity can be, frankly exhausting.

On the positive side, making efforts to try and create an inclusive environment and tackle the reasons behind why people feel the need to code-switch can lead to significant benefits both for individual employees and for employers. For example, it can:

Help Retention

Many employers are making efforts to diversify their workforce, but it is equally important to create an environment where people from diverse backgrounds feel they can be their authentic selves. To create a place not just that they want to join but where they want to stay. This might include feeling equally able to talk about topics that reflect their culture and identity or being able to style their afro hair naturally without fear of being judged negatively.

Reduce group think

The more employees feel they can be their authentic selves the more this increases diversity of thought and reduces group think. Various studies have shown that businesses that are culturally diverse and gender balanced tend to be more profitable (for example here).

Improve individual performance

Code-switching can feed into imposter syndrome and negatively impact performance. If you need to change parts of your identity to fit in, perhaps you're not good enough to sit at the table? Conversely creating an inclusive environment where individuals feel they can be themselves can improve confidence and ultimately performance.

There are many steps employers are taking to try and improve inclusivity, including tackling under-representation through recruitment. As part of these efforts, Black History Month is a great time to focus on the need to hear about the backgrounds and experiences of those from diverse backgrounds and to be compassionately curious about different cultures.

Having said this, of course one month of celebrating black history isn't a panacea and for employers who want to truly chip away at the need to code-switch, the key is to try to foster an environment where these kinds of conversations are the norm, not just in October.