

# On Overcoming the Glass Ceiling

Humanity in Action Fellowship 2015 by Parisa, Jennine, Julia.

Like many teenagers in The Netherlands, George Arakel wanted to make some money on the side. So he started working at a local supermarket until one day, he was dismissed from work permanently. The reason why? He wasn't Dutch. This was George's first job and unfortunately, it didn't get much better from there. His second employer teased him constantly because of his foreign origin. His school, the municipality and the police said they could do nothing for George. This is no exception in The Netherlands.

George is not the only victim of discrimination when it comes to ethnicity and the workplace. In a report on the Perceived discrimination in the Netherlands, it was found that more than a third of Moroccan and Turkish jobseekers feel they are subject to discrimination when looking for work, as do more than a quarter of Surinamese and Antillean job seekers and migrants from Central and Eastern Europe. Findings from the *Discrimination monitor* also showed that non-Western migrants with the same characteristics, skills and work experience are more often unemployed and more often dependent on temporary work than Dutch natives.

In fact, a report called "Op afkomst afgewezen" came out with the most recent findings on the issue on June 17th. The study distributed three applications of equally qualified candidates with standard letters and resumes for the same vacancy. The only difference: one candidate was perceived as "autochtoon" (Dutch Dutch), one Moroccan-Dutch and one Hindoe-Dutch. In total, the SCP sent out 504 applications for 176 vacancies in the region Haaglanden.

The study found that the White Dutch candidates were 1.5 times as likely to succeed in the application process and had a 34 percent chance to be invited for an interview. On the other hand, only 23 percent of the Hindu-dutch and 19 percent of the Moroccan-Dutch were invited to move forward in the process.

Yet, when interviewing HR recruiters and experts on the issue, the theme of "simply hiring the most qualified candidates" came up repeatedly. This seems to reflect the Dutch attitude towards racism in The Netherlands: the Dutch are a very tolerant people, and thus do not need to worry about racism or its consequences. There simply is no race in The Netherlands. Similarly, the labor market is not discriminatory. If companies and organizations hire only the most qualified candidates and that results in a predominantly White workplace, there is no real problem.

When asked whether businesses had the responsibility to reflect the society in its workplace, and in particular those that have been disadvantaged, an HR recruiter from a startup responded that "you just want to hire the best people – whether those people are Black, Yellow, Pink, Red, it doesn't matter. If they apply for a job and are qualified, they will be invited to work at the company." That begs two questions. First, is that actually how it plays out in reality? Second, are White Dutch people systematically more qualified in the eyes of recruiters?

Leadership and Diversity Consultant, Astrid Elburg proposes her understanding of this issue: "It's a matter of human capital. In the labor market, many different factors influence your economic value as an asset to the company you apply for. If you come from an elite family, you are born with more social capital, for example." She concludes that in The Netherlands, people of color have "50% less human capital in the eyes of HR officials." This problem is an inherent symptom of a society plagued with racism. Clearly, diversity is not a priority to all.

Why should it be? Everyone seems to have a different opinions regarding the importance of a multitude of opinions and backgrounds in the workplace. In general, the goal of diversifying

the workplace is to work towards a more inclusive society. Some have used economic discourses to rationalize why one should strive towards a more diverse workplace.

Of 321 large global enterprises—companies with at least \$500 million in annual revenue—surveyed in a Forbes study in 2011, 85 percent agreed or strongly agreed that diversity is crucial to fostering innovation in the workplace. In a study by Donna Chrobot-Mason and Nicholas P. Aramovic, findings suggest that when employees perceive equal access to opportunities and fair treatment, intent to turnover decreases. These arguments were often referred to as the “business case.” In essence, recruiting from a diverse pool of candidates means a more qualified workforce and a more productive organization. George Arakel advocated for a discourse that avoided framing the issue as a charity case and one that directly correlated the importance of diversity with the profit a business makes. According to Mr. Arakel, a company’s workforce should reflect its consumers, as this would induce a more understanding and cooperative environment.

See Why advisor, Cemil Yilmaz opposes the “business case” and puts forward a more individualized discourse, highlighting the unique values and qualities of people from different walks of life. From the strength and authenticity of those of different ethnic backgrounds, one can show the value of diversity within organizations and society. To include everyone in the workplace is thus a way to build bridges among peoples in society, following the goal of a more inclusive society.

Pravini Baboeram-Mahes from ECHO works with companies to bring more people of different ethnic backgrounds into management or higher-level positions. She argues that a diverse workforce is absolutely essential for companies to succeed and reach their highest potential. In other words, diversity fosters a more creative and innovative workforce and bringing together workers with different qualifications, backgrounds, and experiences is the key to effective problem-solving on the job.

Similarly, Astrid Elberg contends that economically speaking, not hiring up to half the population based on ethnic background is a waste of talent. If an organization is not diverse, then recruiters are not hiring the best candidates. This problem is exacerbated if people of color are also not present in higher level positions.

Diversity in the workplace is vital for many different reasons. It can help alleviate tensions among peoples in society. It provides a more productive and innovative environment for problem solving. Moreover, it is simply the responsibility of everyone to make sure that the workplace on all levels is a reflection of society. That said, why is it that research providing more and more grounds to provoke action on this issue is not enough? Why is it that the Dutch workplace is still not ethnically diverse?

### **Complications within the Hiring Process**

In the literature about diversity on the workplace two views are distinguished: the multicultural and the color-blind perspective. According to the first, cultural differences between employees are recognized and appreciated, while the latter perspective ignores these differences. The different perspectives can be observed within the process of hiring and at the workplace itself. According to the findings described above, it seems like the color blind perspective ignores the systemic problem, and is therefore problematic and ineffective. As we noticed during the interviews with Sanne and Yves, both working at the HR department of a fast growing start up (about 100-200 employees), the colorblind approach was used during the hiring process. As follows from the recruiter’s quote above, they pay no attention to someone’s ethnic background; they only care about attracting the best candidates.

This also holds for Yves at SEOshop: “I don’t care who does the job best.” Who they hire depends only on the candidate’s qualities.

In order to get the people with the desired qualities, two of the recruiters we spoke to search beyond the borders of the Netherlands. About half their staff consists of expats. This group of international talents is cherished and their cultural backgrounds are certainly recognized. For example, they organize dinners from their home country and organize creative sessions with developers to avoid friction among cultures. These activities that are focused on the foreign talents corresponds with the multicultural view.

What struck us was the approach towards a second group: the employees from the Netherlands. Within both companies, the vast majority of the employees are ‘Dutch Dutch’ as they call it, or “autochtoon.” The HR managers estimate the percentage of Dutch employees with a different ethnic background to be about 5 per cent or less. Here we identify a color-blind view. Such a low percentage is remarkable within a multicultural country as the Netherlands. Both the HR managers also wonder why their companies are so white in this sense, because they always assess all candidates equally. They also admit that they never really thought about it, but end up concluding that more qualified Dutch Dutch candidates apply.

We presented these findings to several diversity advisors, who came up with several possible explanations for the low percentage of minorities within these companies. Cemil Yilmaz supports companies with recruiting and selection of diverse talents from his agency See Why. He encounters several causes for the lack of diversity within many Dutch companies. According to him, it is too easy to attribute everything to discrimination, he advises to always begin with the self. What could job searchers with a minority background improve on? The advisor often encounters well-educated youngsters that miss out on jobs because they don’t know how to brand themselves. Cemil explains that a lot of native Dutch people put a lot of extracurricular activities on their resumes in order to make their resumes stand out. These activities indicate certain qualities and skills that are often not taught at university.

Many (children of) migrants are used to bearing large responsibilities towards their family. Therefore they got used to bearing large financial responsibilities from a young age. In addition, children whose parents are immigrants often encounter difficulties with different languages and cultures during their youth, for which reason they more often reach university through a longer path. This is mostly caused by the CITO test, which one takes around the age of twelve. The test is decisive for the level of high school a child may enter and is therefore extremely influential of the child’s future. In order to perform well on it, a good understanding of the Dutch language is essential.

For these reasons, Cemil states that children with a non-western background that graduate from university are often more disciplined, loyal, and determined than others. Unfortunately, this discipline and high sense of responsibility is not reflected on their resumes. Cemil therefore argues that job applicants, especially from non-Western backgrounds, should be more conscious about the way they brand themselves. If they do so, their path to university and other extracurricular activities can work to their advantage.

Recruiters tend to overlook the qualities of many qualified candidates, because they are often native Dutch and have little knowledge of these differences. Cemil finds this problematic and emphasizes the importance of diverse recruitment teams. People who have a different ethnic background themselves can and will recognize these qualities in candidates.

Similarly, according to Mary Tupan, director of the ECHO foundation, the people that are in the position of hiring should be aware of cultural differences. Her colleague Pravini mentions the example of looking down. In the Netherlands this is considered impolite; you ought to

look someone in the eye. In many other cultures, however, looking down is a sign of respect. Part of ECHO's mission is to raise awareness about these cultural differences and embrace them. Because most recruiters are unfamiliar with these differences, minority groups are less likely to be selected. Astrid Elberg also recognizes this problem: the people who hire are the people in power. They are trained to think that good people behave in the same way they do.

During the process of recruitment, large companies often ask candidates to take an assessment. This is another part of the selection process that is inherently biased according to Cemil. He illustrates this with his recent example of a multinational that he works with. He found 15 suited candidates from a non-Dutch background for two positions. Only one of them passed the assessment. Why is this so? Just like the CITO test, it is a very verbal test, which works in favor of native Dutch applicants. According to the See Why. advisor, organizations should look at talent that is more broadly defined and more inclusive.

Besides looking at talent from a broader perspective, companies will have to fish in a larger pool. See Why. distinguishes itself from other recruitment agencies by making use of informal networks with which most recruiters are unfamiliar. In order to attract multi-ethnic talents, recruiters must know how to reach them. This can be done through (multicultural-) student unions, but also by, for example, making advertising more inclusive. A brochure with all white people won't appeal to many non-Dutch talents.

Until now we have only mentioned the difficulties for companies to attract multi-ethnic talents and assess them in a fair way. This implies that companies want to reach a diverse workplace and the chances to move forward in the process are equal. The recent report from the SCP shows that this is not the case: discrimination still occurs. Besides only changing the names, SCP also tested employers from The Hague by adding extra information on the resumes of applicants with a non-Western background. It turned out that Hindu-Dutch are not discriminated against when they are well connected to the Dutch society by, for example, mentioning volunteer work on their resumes. In case of the Moroccan-Dutch, their chances of being invited for an interview could only be raised by showing extra work experience, more relevant courses, or by being more articulate about their motivation.

These findings connect to an striking remark from Astrid Elburg. She notices that recruiters expect candidates of color to be grateful when they are invited for an interview and then later offered the job, which gives the signal that they do not deserve it in the first place. This puts ethnic minorities in a very underprivileged position on the labor market. They are expected to be grateful for an opportunity, for which their resumes must be better than the resumes of white-Dutch job applicants in order to get it.

### **Small Solutions to a Bigger Problem**

In order to recognize the problem and come up with a solution, companies and organizations should also understand the symptoms and side effects of a more diverse workplace. Some indicators of a diverse working environment could be that there is a wider pool of talent, there is innovation due to diverse perspectives, there is a better reflection of society and there is better development of a product. Two of the HR personnel (subconsciously) connected the presence of different cultures, meaning expats, as being an indicator of a diverse working environment. Employees from an ethnic minority did not initially come into mind. When asked specifically why he thought that there are less or even no employees with an ethnic background working at SEO shop, Yves responded that it was a very good question to which he genuinely had no answer.

All interviewees were asked to give their definition of the word diversity and hence indicate what is necessary to create a diverse working environment. Most named more women, more people with a different background, LGBT and people with a disability. Two people from different organizations described diversity as being something more than that.

Yelly Weidenaar, Head of Diversity and Inclusion at ABN AMRO described diversity also as a way of thinking. With that said, one immediately starts discussing groups of people that have those differences, such as gender, ethnic background, LGBT and people with disabilities. For ABN AMRO, diversity is more about creating space so people are able to be themselves and to develop themselves to their best potential. In doing so, both they and the bank will become more successful. The definition of diversity conveys an idea about the topic of inclusion. The ability to create space where people are able to be themselves and, as a result, can grow, was mentioned by Pravini Baboeram from the ECHO foundation.

If organizations truly want more people from the aforementioned groups, they can begin by creating more spaces where different people feel welcome. One of the initiatives of ABN AMRO is offering several trainings on levels of workforce and management in order to create awareness and grasp the consequences of actions, no matter how small. For example, looking someone in the eye has different meanings and consequences in different cultures. Focusing on (cultural) diversity, ABN AMRO has three different pillars: commitment, awareness and empowerment. Two of their trainings stand out. One is a combined training that creates awareness by discussing the framework of culture, that tries to answer the question what culture conveys and explain individualistic versus collective culture. The other training is for the targeted groups themselves and focuses more on the empowerment of these groups. During training, employers are taught how to present themselves and become more visible. Yelly points out that it is not about changing yourself; it comes down to knowing the rules of the game and being able to play within those rules. She mentions one example: if you won't point out your accomplishments, your supervisor will not know what you can do. She also points out that although this might be the game, it does certainly not mean that it is easy for people to play this game when they are not accustomed to playing it.

Another element that would help in diversifying the workplace is networking among specific groups. Events can be organized where people with a Dutch and an ethnic background can come together, both increasing visibility and empowering these individuals within these groups. Third, ABN AMRO is in the ECHO mentoring program and is the main sponsor of the "Top 100 colorful list," distinguishing itself from the predominantly White lists of role models. This list describes and empowers people of color as role models in different organizations and backgrounds. Yelly points out that this is done to signal to minorities that they have a chance to grow and develop within the company. ABN AMRO is also one of the founders of Agora, a platform/network where companies share their best practices on cultural diversity. Finally, Yelly mentions that on the website ABN AMRO mentions not being a diversity paradise (yet) but that they are very seriously on diversity and are looking for people who can make a difference. This is to encourage people to sign up for traineeships and vacancies. Also working together with the HR department on several levels (such as how people are selected) in order to bring in more diverse people.

At the moment ABN AMRO has employees from 100 different nationalities. However, there still seems to be a glass ceiling when it comes to allowing these individuals to grow within the company. When asked about the future of ABN, she replies that it will certainly be more diverse in comparison to the present, as there will be more women holding higher level positions and there will be more cultural diversity. Their goal is to have 30 per cent women in top position by 2020. She emphasizes that ABN AMRO has achieved all of its goals until now and want to keep on doing so. 30 per cent women by 2020 is something they really want to make happen. For people with an ethnic background however, there is still a way to go. Yelly thinks that growth towards top positions is certainly possible and percentages will rise substantial in comparison to what is now

The positive view painted by Yelly is one that is not shared by all. Cemil Yilmaz of See Why. pointed out that most organizations have the tendency to treat diversity as a business case.

Thinking that hiring colorful people will help them improve their organizations, they do not anticipate the consequences and are then confronted by arising frictions between different groups. He sees the existence of these frictions, not feeling at home, as one of the reasons that people with an ethnic background are not growing within the company. He emphasizes that as long as organizations keep treating diversity as a business case and are unable to look into these frictions between groups, minorities are less likely to reach their potential and might even leave organizations. Cemil does note that when companies invest in diversity in the right way and manage the differences well, diversity can be a business case. He notices that most companies only focus on the soft side (creating awareness through trainings) but put insufficient attention to the management side: adapting the human resources planning or control cycles.

The list of inherent struggles minorities have to deal with is a long one. One is learning how to move up in an existing organizational culture that is predominantly white and learning (unwritten) rules to which they play the game. All hurdles that occur during the hiring process and thereafter contribute to less growth for minorities in organizations in general. The difficulties minorities have with reaching high positions within companies is what Pravini Baboeram summarizes with two words: glass ceiling. Also appointed by Cemil as “colorful ceilings”. In order to get rid of these ceilings, organizations must understand that there is need for essential change. Mary emphasizes that a simple checklist is not enough: “Diversity policy has to be a holistic approach.” Otherwise the road will remain rocky and everything will stay just as it is.

By: Jennine, Parisa, Julia