



Analysis & Opinion from B-People Group

Is British Culture Too 'Polite' to Address Class Diversity in the Workplace?

*The Complexities of Classism in British workplaces
(and why it has been left out of the conversation)*

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INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive job market, the promise of equal opportunity often rings hollow for many working-class individuals striving to break through the barriers of class-based discrimination. Tackling the pervasive issue of classism in recruitment and workplace culture, this report sheds light on the hidden hurdles those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds face in the world of work. From biased hiring practices to entrenched stereotypes, this piece looks at how privilege still often trumps merit even in the most modern workplaces. This article delves into the nuances of class-based bias in the recruitment process, uncovering accent biases and how class intersects with other classified inequalities while uncovering the stark realities that continue to shape employment prospects and perpetuate inequality in British society.

Classism in the UK

Classism, an ever-present but often unspoken aspect of British society, still permeates many aspects of work. Despite being a central topic in political debates, discussions surrounding social class diversity remain largely absent from corporate conversations. Sophie Pender, founder of the 93% Club, emphasised in an interview with the FT's [Working It](#) podcast that the invisibility and taboo nature of class discussion may stem from the shame associated with it.

Despite its profound impact on British culture, classism remains one of the most overlooked issues in the workplace. Perhaps due to a sense of discomfort surrounding discussions of privilege and access or simply a manifestation of British politeness, the topic often languishes in silence.

Class-Based Discrimination in Recruitment

Classism manifests prominently in access to job opportunities, with studies revealing stark disparities in professional and managerial employment rates between working-class and affluent individuals.

A 2016 study by Sam Friedman of the LSE and Daniel Laurison of Swarthmore College revealed that while working-class individuals constitute about one-third of the UK's population, they occupy only around 10% of the highest paid roles. Biased hiring practices and entrenched stereotypes erect formidable barriers, thwarting the upward mobility of working-class individuals and perpetuating inequality in the professional sphere.

The study also revealed that affluent students attending Russell Group universities earning second-class degrees were still more likely to enter the professions than working-class individuals who participated at the same universities and graduated with first-class degrees. It is not experience or ability but something more profound that has limited the potential of these individuals.

Hiring bias has been a particular focus for organisations in the last two decades, with modern processes that seek to overcome hiring biases around gender and race, and yet classism is rarely targeted head-on and sometimes even justified by hiring organisations. For example, a BBC report by Christine Ro in 2021 showed that elite law firms allowed a concern that applicants from lower-class backgrounds may not fit with their clients to influence their hiring.

Working-class graduates may not even make it to the application process for many roles in the first place, as they are markedly more likely to regard many professions as wholly inaccessible from a very early career stage. The Social Mobility Foundation highlighted in a 2023 study that almost three out of four 16-18 year olds (72%) stated that the Class Pay Gap discouraged them from seeking jobs in prestigious fields like banking and law. Addressing this issue requires a combined effort between employers and educators

Cultural Fit in the Workplace

The issue extends well beyond the recruitment strategies themselves; even with favourable hiring practices in place, the question arises: How can workplaces truly embrace class diversity? Evidence strongly indicates that there is substantial work to be undertaken in this regard. CJ Gross, writing for Built In, draws attention to a striking statistic: 97% of working-class individuals in the United States believe that their backgrounds significantly influence their workplace experiences.

The concept of 'cultural fit' plays a pivotal role in workplace dynamics, shaping hiring decisions and organisational behaviours. However, this emphasis on cultural fit often exacerbates hidden class biases, further marginalising working-class individuals and limiting their access to opportunities.

The BBC report also showed that individuals from working-class backgrounds frequently had less extensive social networks. In contrast, wealthier individuals are significantly more likely to know people who can support them both into employment and throughout their careers.

Accents and Regional Bias

Geographical limitations also disproportionately affect working-class individuals, particularly in countries such as the UK where the highest paid employment is very centralised around one city. With London as the primary economic hub, access to high-paying jobs in the capital is limited by living costs and opportunities in secondary cities are more limited. Countries such as the US and Germany have multiple economic hubs outside the capital, so their secondary cities support a wider spread of the highest paid jobs, and for this reason social mobility is less affected by geography there than in the UK.

Accents, integral to communication, can also serve as barriers to class mobility in the workplace. Certain accents can be favoured over others, contributing to accent-based discrimination and perpetuating socio-economic disparities. The stigmatisation of regional accents reflects broader societal biases so it will take a concerted effort to challenge and dismantle entrenched stereotypes.

A study from The National Bureau of Economic Research in 2020 showed that those with prominent regional accents made 20% less money overall than those with so-called 'standard' accents in Germany.

Yet, much of it may be unconscious. According to a government survey by the Social Mobility Commission, many people will acknowledge discrimination based on accent if questioned, but even then show minimal awareness of their bias.

Only 3% of employers nationwide list accent or dialect differences as protected characteristics, and yet according to a 2006 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey 76% of employers acknowledged discriminating against applicants based on their accents.

A study By Devyani Sharma in 2022 revealed that 29% of senior managers from working-class backgrounds reported being mocked or reprimanded for their accents more frequently than those from wealthier households (22%). Accents from working-class backgrounds were considered to lack intelligence, ambition and education, regardless of ability and experience.

Speaking in the 'Queen's English' is frequently favoured over regional accents. Although only 3% of the population speak like this, it is commonly perceived as the 'proper' way to speak, as highlighted by The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. Additionally, this 'non-accent' is often considered the most intelligent. The report showed that elite firms were more likely to hire someone with 'no' accent, demonstrating that it's not just what accent you have but what accent you don't have that can make a material difference to your prospects.

The Class Pay Gap and Workplace Inequality

The Class Pay Gap, characterised by The Social Mobility Foundation as wage disparities between social classes, underscores the profound inequities entrenched within the workplace. Despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, working-class professionals continue to face systemic barriers that limit their access to opportunities and perpetuate socio-economic disparities.

Evidence from The Social Mobility Foundations suggests that Professionals from working-class backgrounds make £6,290 less a year, or 12% less, than those coming from households where one or more of their parents held a managerial role. These dynamics not only perpetuate but exacerbate the class differences that exist. Ultimately, workplace class culture can profoundly affect life outcomes both inside and outside the workplace.

All inequality has a commonality, and that is access to opportunity, whether it's race, gender, sexuality or disability; class is no different. Working-class professionals face more obstacles both in the interview process and within the working environment. It is, therefore, no surprise that when these inequalities intersect, they can cause huge disparities between working-class individuals and those in other class brackets.

Looking at class and gender, the intersections of inequality are apparent. Research from The Social Mobility Foundation shows that Working-class women who are professionals face two distinct disadvantages. In the same occupation, there is a £7,040 Class Pay Gap between women of working-class and professional-managerial backgrounds, so unless class considerations are factored into strategies to overcome the gender pay gap these same efforts are at risk of being frustrated by a deep hidden drag.

Talking to B-People's Co-Founder and Director of Search & Recruitment, Jessica Hilton on a personal experience of classism in the British workplace:

" As someone who grew up in a very working-class city [Liverpool] and environment, I remember travelling to London as a new grad for some interviews and on my way to Lime Street station, I said to my Mum, 'What if they say I'm too scouse...?' Later on in my career, there were also jokes made when discussing new hires, such as, 'We already have one scouser!'"

I think with all angles of inclusion; it's about understanding where someone is coming from, where their starting place was, reserving judgment but also looking internally as to why you might have a pre-judgement around background or accent in the first place – then correcting that thinking, as it rarely has any fair basis. This is a critical component of modern leadership.

For me, I firmly believe that companies benefit from deliberately mixing class and building multiple world-views within their workforce, and that doing so invariably increases productivity. People learn from each other's life experiences, which broadens everyone's thinking and drives new insights and ideas. That's the type of community I'd want to build in my business. "

What can be done?

There's no short answer to this but one critical move is for employers to specifically and overtly include socio-economic background on the target list of under-representation that their Inclusion strategies seek to address.

Because it's a less visible difference, and possibly because 'class' can feel like an awkward conversation (especially in the UK), inclusion strategies often treat it as a hopeful bi-product of other workstreams - racial and cultural inclusion in particular. Whilst it's certainly true there are

intersections between class and race for example, the hope that addressing one will largely cover the other is a problem.

If one considers that in the UK young white working-class men have been the least likely to attend university than any other group in society since 2007 (and the subsequent under-representation of this group in professional/managerial roles today), it quickly becomes clear there is a need to address class in its own right and not just through the lines it intersects with.

Because class-based discriminations are some of the oldest and most deeply ingrained forms of discrimination, they are easy to miss... and therefore easy for even the most outwardly enlightened organisation to indirectly participate in.

Taking graduate recruitment as just one line of examination, and which most large employers generally engage in, Oxbridge, Russell Group and the other top decile universities are still the recipient of almost all on-campus investment – despite the fact that most working-class undergraduates are elsewhere and there’s never been any proven correlation between ‘elite’ university attendance and work-based performance.

In a similar vein, and to an earlier point, many otherwise progressive organisations still invest heavily in rigorous processes to ensure they recruit only candidates who offer the closest ‘cultural-fit’ to their own. One can’t help wondering how even the most brilliant individual from a working-class background might fare in these processes given that the culture they grew up in may have shaped them quite differently to most of those people interviewing them.

So the elimination of Classism most definitely needs a dedicated focus, whilst ‘high-potential’ and ‘culture-fit’ considerations probably need a serious re-think in most Talent-related processes.

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