

THE DIVERSITY DILEMMA

Can adland ever reflect society as a whole when most of its jobs are still taken by the white, upper middle class? By John Tylee

A UK ad industry that's both colourblind and classless remains a quixotic notion that defies every well-meaning attempt to make real.

For all the IPA's efforts to better balance adland's racial mix, well over 90 per cent of agency staff are white, a statistic that's remained virtually unchanged for as long as anybody can remember.

And for all the rhetoric about the business looking beyond Oxbridge or the academic powerhouses of Bristol and Durham and making its recruitment message as attractive to a bright kid in an inner-London comprehensive as one in a public school, it's mostly the white, upper middle class twentysomethings who scramble for the 500 or so jobs up for grabs each year.

Having launched Diagonal Thinking, a website that allows people from all backgrounds to test their linear and creative skills, and put its weight behind the Creative Britain initiative, the IPA wonders what more it can do to improve the snail-like pace of change.

Farah Ramzan Golant is the chief executive of Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO, Britain's largest agency, and one of a handful of senior industry figures of Asian origin. She says she was shocked at how little adland reflected the multicultural life of her Cambridge college when she joined the industry in the 80s.

Today, not much has changed. Such agency staff as there are from ethnic minorities are rarely found in client-facing roles but in back-office departments such as IT, traffic and accounts. And even these are predominately Asian. Afro-Caribbeans are so few in number that they are, in the words of one IPA senior executive, "barely a blip on our radar".

Meanwhile, the social elitism that prevails within agencies remains self-perpetuating, sometimes creating advertising "dynasties". "I'm not saying the people belonging to such families aren't talented," an IPA source says.



RUSSELL RAMSEY
Executive creative director, JWT
Age 47
Born South Shields, son of a labourer
Educated South Shields grammar school, Chelsea School of Art, London College of Printing
Career
1986 Saatchi & Saatchi
1990 Bartle Bogle Hegarty
2000 Appointed creative director
2007 Named JWT executive creative director

"If you really believe anything is possible, there's absolutely no reason why you can't achieve what you want"

'Back in the 60s, people got jobs in agencies because they were talented and energetic. Today, the industry just hires in its own image'

Mark Rapley, The Garden

"But it does make it harder for an outsider to break in."

Certainly it's hard to imagine anybody emulating the likes of Peter Warren, who started out in the postroom at the then Mather & Crowther and ended up as the chairman of Ogilvy & Mather. Or Peter Mead, the AMV founding partner, the son of a Peckham window cleaner, who began by delivering metal ad blocks along Fleet Street for SH Benson.

Mark Rapley, the founder of The Garden, which specialises in agency search and selection, says: "Back in the 60s, people got jobs in agencies because they were talented and energetic. Today, the industry just hires in its own image."

Many believe this won't change unless agencies adopt more rigorous selection procedures. "It's often just a one-to-one interview to find out if a candidate will fit into the team," an employment consultant says.

"Agency managers feel less comfort-

able hiring somebody from a different social background."

Money too is at the root of this particular evil. Entrants, whatever their colour or social background, simply can't live independently on the £18,000 average starting salary paid by London agencies unless they have families that are supportive as well as being comfortably off.

For those from ethnic minorities, a good salary equals status and respect. And, in the case of those coming to work in a London agency from another network outpost, it can have a profound effect on careers.

Belinda Kent-Lemon, a founder of Occam HR, who works with a number of the UK's leading agencies and media companies, says: "I get annoyed at the way agencies will take well-qualified and experienced people from India and the Far East on salaries that, to them, seem like a fortune. Not

only are they shocked by the very different culture they encounter here, they also find their salary won't even allow them to get a poky little flat."

All of this begs the question of whether the industry isn't only institutionally snobbish but racist, too. Evidence of systematic prejudice is hard to find and problems seem to arise more through insensitivity and thoughtlessness. Ramzan Golant, born in Nairobi to an Indian family and with some Iraqi blood, remembers being taken aback at a meeting when somebody referred to Arabs as "a bunch of ragheads".

But she says: "I've never experienced or seen racism around me. In fact, I've had more problems relating to my gender than my ethnic background. But, despite my British upbringing, I'm always conscious that I'm among people who may share my interests, but not my origins."

Much of the industry's ability to attract more British Asians may depend on its success at offering credible professional qualifications to entrants. Such things are hugely important to Asian families who will often turn up in force at a school careers evening to make sure a young family member is getting the right advice.

"These are second- and third-generation families that have moved on from the corner shop," a senior IPA executive says. "We have to ask ourselves whether we, as an industry, are worthy enough to attract the best young British Asians. Probably not until our qualifications come some way to matching those offered by medicine, the law and accountancy."

In the US, the diversity issue within agencies has become a hot potato. Madison Avenue is under pressure from the New York City Commission on Human Rights for faster implementation of the pact signed by agencies two years ago to boost minority hirings.

A threatened class action lawsuit against the industry seems to have receded. But the New York Civil Rights Committee chairman, Larry Seabrook, warned agencies last month: "We're going to stay on your case."

"I don't see such a thing happening here," a UK industry source says. "If people aren't applying for jobs there's only so much we can do."

The situation is further complicated by the changing make-up of Britain's ethnic community once dominated by Asians and Afro-Caribbeans but now augmented by newer arrivals from Eastern Europe, including one million Poles. "It's something we need to be looking at," an IPA manager says.

What's clear is that progress towards



FARAH RAMZAN GOLANT
Chief executive, Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO
Age 44
Born Nairobi
Educated Clapham High School (private), Cambridge
Career
1990 Joins Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO from Burdett Weinreich Bryant
1999 Appointed head of client services
2002 Promoted to managing director
2004 Named chief executive

"I've had more problems relating to my gender than my ethnic background"

diversity will be slow. "I see little sign of immediate improvement," Liz Harold, a creative headhunter and the founder of LizH + Grime, says. "Agencies are cautious and prefer to play it safe with teams that have good track records. This isn't going to change while the economy is in the doldrums."

However, Kent-Lemon believes client-facing roles within agencies will be filled by more people from ethnic minorities as black and Asian students graduate in ever greater numbers.

Moreover, the skills they bring may become essential if – as the IPA hopes – more UK agencies become "hub" operations for international accounts.

Moray MacLennan, the IPA president, believes the industry will become more diverse as competition for the best and brightest intensifies. "I'm convinced the situation will improve over the next ten years because the battle for talent will grow increasingly fierce," he says. "It will force us to embrace greater diversity."

Sadly, agency groups haven't always noticed the jewels right under their noses. Kent-Lemon recalls the story of two young Asian agency staffers. Both spoke Mandarin and wanted to work in China at a time when the country was opening up to marketers.

Neither was given their wish and both quit. It was, Kent-Lemon believes, a terrible squandering of talent.

Achieving a broader range of social backgrounds within agencies looks even more problematic. Not least within agency creative departments. Tony Cullingham, the head of the creative ad course at West Herts College in Watford, says applicants from socially deprived backgrounds are almost non-existent. Hardly surprising, he adds, given the locations of the colleges offering the best courses – West Herts, Buckingham, Falmouth and St Martin's.

"There are no art colleges in Toxteth or Moss Side and we're not going to attract people from places like that unless we actually set something up" Tony Cullingham, West Herts College

Taking the Diagonal Thinking test

Diagonal Thinking is a 90-minute test devised by the IPA and the digital production studio V'ON to identify the linear and lateral thinking styles and personality traits characteristic of people who do well in advertising. It's designed to aid recruitment and attract people from diverse social, ethnic and educational backgrounds. The test is available on www.diagonalthinking.co.uk. Here's what happened when three people took it.



John Tylee associate editor, Campaign

So that's it then. There'll be no more invitations to help pick the winners of the Fast Forward pitches. And as for being an IPA Effectiveness Awards juror, it looks like this year could be the first and last time.

My Diagonal Thinking results are, shall we say, less than spectacular. Abject failure, I can live with. Being downright average is hard to bear. I'm trying to console myself with the knowledge that I made a complete balls-up of one of the questions testing my lateral thinking. I suspect, though, that even some dazzling answers here would not have pushed me beyond the moderately average barrier.

Who wants to be an angst-ridden account man anyway?



Moray MacLennan IPA president and chairman

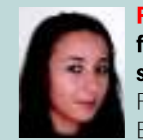
Thinking, which can be used by agencies as a recruitment tool.

The results show him to be clever but no ivory tower intellectual. He can think logically but is still capable of "zigging" when others "zag".

He's no shrinking violet and, being steeped in the Saatchis "nothing is impossible" philosophy, it's not surprising to learn he doesn't like to blindly follow others' rules.

He's sensitive to those around but not so much as to stop him pushing ahead with what needs to be done. He's no out-and-out extrovert. Indeed, he likes to safeguard his privacy – but not to an excessive extent.

MacLennan says: "I once thought of being a lawyer because I thought I was good at arguing and I think there are parallels between the law and our business, which does require great flexibility of thought."



Fatima El-Shayed, 16, former, Quintin Kynaston secondary school, London

Fatima El-Shayed is studying English literature, sociology and psychology. She's eyeing a career in law or journalism after university but doesn't rule out going for a job in advertising. The Diagonal Thinking test was tough, she says – much tougher than she expected.

"It really puts you on the spot," she adds. "There's barely any time to think, let alone come up with the answers. And you have to keep coming up with them."

She says the test is a good way of finding out more about yourself. And she'd certainly encourage fellow students thinking of careers in the creative industries to give Diagonal Thinking a try.

or Moss Side and we're not going to attract people from places like that unless we actually set up something," Cullingham says. "The kids from those areas tend not to leave them."

Often, people working within such communities but with the vision to see beyond them can be vital. Russell Ramsey, JWT's executive creative director, is the son of a coal board labourer from South Shields. He remembers the inspirational influence of his grammar school art teacher who urged him to study in London.

Heading south to college was a bit easier in the days before student loans had replaced grants, he admits. However, he insists that having confidence and ambition is what counts most.

"Coming from a poor background often means that limited expectations are set for you," he argues. "If you really believe anything is possible, there's absolutely no reason why you can't achieve what you want."

Nonetheless, he agrees the industry isn't too good at missionary work. "We help people who ask," he says. "But we're not very good at reaching out."

Some believe it will be the digital agencies, younger, more informal and more meritocratic than many of their mainstream counterparts, that will lead the way towards bringing greater diversity to the industry.

For its part, the IPA would like agencies to become more diverse from the bottom upwards by being more discerning about the people they hire for jobs in admin, dispatch and reception.

For the moment, though, adland has a lot of historical baggage to shed before it becomes genuinely eclectic. But, as Ramzan Golant points out: "How will we ever get a truly vibrant and dynamic industry if it isn't a more diverse one?"

Post or prole? Find out where some of the industry's leading lights went to school at www.brandrepublic.com/campaign/schools