

# ESJOBS



Every day of the  
working week

## On the right path to diversity

Employers know the importance of their workforce reflecting the ethnic makeup of the local area – and the PATH organisation can help them achieve just that

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**R**ESPONDING to customer expectations and changing demographics, employers are increasingly keen to invest in their workforce and embed lifelong learning and equal opportunities in the culture of their organisations. Yet today there are still areas of the public and private sectors in which the UK's black minority ethnic (BME) communities are woefully under-represented and unemployment rates for BME groups remain generally higher than for the white population.

While the Race Relations Act (1976) makes it unlawful to discriminate against anyone on grounds of race, colour, and nationality, ethnic or national origins, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 goes further, giving public authorities a new statutory duty to promote racial equality. According to the Commission for Racial

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Equality the legislation exists to "to prevent discrimination happening in the first place, and to ensure that public bodies play an active role in creating a more equal society". In effect, this means that organisations can use positive action to redress imbalances in their workforce and ensure that their employees are more representative of the community they serve.

PATH National is an award-winning national skills development agency aimed at BME people. Its focus is on enhancing workforce diversity through training interventions. PATH – Positive Action Training Highway – promotes and recruits BME professionals into under-represented professions such as housing, health, planning, environmental health and other areas across the public sector. It is supported by the London Development Agency, the Mayor's agency for business and jobs, and aims to reduce and, wherever possible, eradicate barriers to employment in higher-level positions.

"In much of the public sector BME



Pathfinder: Pratima Ahuja (second left) receiving her Tomorrow's Planners graduation award

groups are well-represented," says PATH chief executive Paul Butler. "However, in a number of fields there remains a concern that the workforce is unrepresentative of the wider community. It's also an issue that in a number of areas, whilst overall employment rates are representative, BME employment is in lower level jobs rather than senior or management roles. At the same time there is a growing recognition that delivery of public services can be improved if the workforce better reflects the community it serves."

PATH's traineeship programmes provide on-the-job experience with an employer, day release for college/university and complementary short courses to assist with personal development. Personal advisers carry out reviews regularly to ensure that both, trainee and employer are happy with

the programme and progress is being made.

On completion of the scheme, the trainee should have the skills and qualifications to enable them to secure employment in open competition.

PATH also offers a management development programme targeted at public-sector BME employees who are working in supervisory or management positions and who want to gain an accredited qualification.

The programme is also targeted at employers within the public sector who are looking to "upskill" their employees. Paul Butler sees PATH as having two distinct client groups: BME individuals looking to advance in a particular profession, and employers who have a commitment to ensuring their staff structure reflects their customer base.

"PATH has developed its expertise of

positive-action schemes over 20 years and has trained more than 2,500 men and women from BME communities for professional careers, developing an excellent reputation with employers, individuals and other key agencies," he says. "To date, PATH has had huge success in realising the aspirations of its trainees; 85 per cent have achieved a professional qualification and up to 95 per cent secure employment on completing their traineeships."

PATH's partner organisations are keen to capitalise on the opportunities that these schemes can offer: Gita Malhotra is assistant director of widening participation and access at North East London NHS Workforce Development Confederation. She says: "What PATH National is able to do is present the employer, in this case the NHS, with trainees of the best standard with pos-

### PATH TO SUCCESS

Pratima Ahuja, 24, graduated from Queen Mary, University of London, with a 2:1 in geography in 2003. Interested in a career in town planning, she identified a two-year masters course at UCL that appealed to her. "But the course was already full and so I decided to take a year out and work for the Environment Agency before starting my masters," she explains. "It was during my gap year that a friend told me about PATH's Tomorrow's Planners programme and I decided to apply."

While Pratima was confident she would secure a place on her masters course, the PATH scheme offered two distinct advantages. She says: "Instead of signing up for a two-year full-time course and paying the fees myself, I would take the same course taught over three years part-time and combine it with work experience in a local authority which would give me day release and pay my course fees. I was also guaranteed a job on completion. It was a no-brainer."

Pratima beat off competition from more than 100 applicants for one of the 30 places on the scheme and completed her traineeship in the planning department of the London Borough of Redbridge.

"I then applied for a full-time post with the London Borough of Hounslow, which agreed to take on the cost of my MSc fees. This is a permanent job nearer my home in west London and on better money."

Pratima is currently working on the borough's local development framework (LDF). "This involves a lot of public consultation and working with the community," she says. "In effect, it sets out the borough's planning policy and vision, giving guidelines that cover issues like affordable housing and infrastructure."

Pratima thinks schemes like Tomorrow's Planners are vital because BME communities are so under-represented in her chosen profession.

"In Hounslow, 35 per cent of the population is from a BME community and having BME planners in the department helps with general understanding about cultural differences. My family background is Hindu and it's also an advantage that I can speak Punjabi to help communicate residents' concerns."

sibly the best potential. If they realise their potential in employment, the outcome is fantastic – for the employer as well as the trainee."

Jan Kincaid of Home Group, a non-profit-making organisation which provides housing for those in need, agrees. "It has enabled us to increase the diversity of our workforce but also to offer wider diversity in terms of customer service," she says. "The real value is in the motivation it's given to everybody involved in the training programme and also in contributing to developing people who are then able to compete in the job market."

● For more information on PATH's management development programme contact Anusha Wijeyakumar on [anusha@pathuk.co.uk](mailto:anusha@pathuk.co.uk). [www.pathuk.co.uk](http://www.pathuk.co.uk)