

Examining the experience of Positive Action Training in Housing

In the mid-1980s, Positive Action Training in Housing (PATH) schemes were developed to address the under-representation of managers from black and minority ethnic communities in social housing. Using the positive action legislation of the Race Relations Act 1976, ten schemes trained people full-time for between one and three years through placements with housing associations and local authority housing departments, supplemented by day-release college attendance and short training courses. Of over 1,000 trainees in the past 15 years, over 80 per cent obtained jobs they were trained for. A study of the experience of former PATH trainees, conducted by Louis Julienne from L&J Consultancy, found that:

- f** The majority of respondents had remained in employment since leaving PATH, most working in social housing management. This compared with the fact that more than half had been out of the labour market on joining PATH and, of those who had been in employment, most had been in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs.
- f** Most respondents had obtained formal qualifications during and since PATH. When converted into 'NVQ' equivalents, these qualifications added an average of almost 3 NVQ points to each respondent.
- f** The overwhelming majority of respondents were very positive about their experience of PATH. Many cited PATH as the most important contributor to their career development.
- f** Other factors perceived as helping career development included respondents' personalities, particularly their 'determination to succeed', a commitment to address discrimination and disadvantage by working with/for people from black and minority ethnic communities, and key individuals at work who acted as a supporter/mentor.
- f** Respondents identified indirect racial discrimination as the main barrier to their career development, and many also highlighted racial stereotyping and direct racism as important. The main manifestations of discrimination were feeling isolated at work and a bar to promotion prospects – the so-called 'glass ceiling'. Amongst women, sexism and caring responsibilities were also seen to have had a role.

Background

PATH (Positive Action Training in Housing) schemes were developed to train people from black and minority ethnic communities to redress their under-representation in social housing. Since the mid-1980s it is estimated that 1,382 people from black and minority ethnic communities have obtained employment at junior and middle management grades in social housing as a result of PATH schemes. No comprehensive study has been made of what happened to the trainees who obtained jobs on completion of the PATH course.

The study sought to demonstrate how effective PATH schemes have been in helping their ex-trainees develop a career in social housing; and to examine what has helped or hindered their career progression. The views of ex-PATH trainees were compared with a control group of black housing workers who had not gone through a PATH scheme.

Qualifications

The survey results showed a considerable range of qualification levels amongst the ex-trainees at the point where they had entered the PATH schemes. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were situated at opposite ends of the qualification scale. At one end, 6 per cent had no qualifications at all and 27 per cent were educated only to GCSE level. At the other, 27 per cent were graduates and 6 per cent had a post-graduate qualification.

Further analysis by year of entry to the scheme indicates that the recruitment of graduates has risen dramatically since the early years. The proportion of trainees who entered PATH as graduates or post-graduates rose from 17 per cent to 45 per cent (see Table 1). Conversely, the proportion of trainees educated up to and including A levels declined from 46 per cent to 19 per cent.

The data suggests that educational achievement is a growing factor in the selection of PATH trainees. This was a source of concern to some of the people

involved in the study, who saw it as a move away from focusing on socially excluded and educationally disadvantaged people from black and minority ethnic communities.

However, the study showed that the qualification achievements of ex-trainees surveyed during and since PATH were also substantial. On average, each respondent had gained the equivalent of nearly 3 NVQ points. PATH's role in advancing educational achievement was echoed through other aspects of the research. As one ex-trainee stated in a focus group:

"... the next time I went to college after leaving school was with PATH and since. PATH put me on the educational trail."

Career progression

The results of the survey confirm that most PATH trainees had been either out of the labour market altogether or in low status jobs before taking on their traineeship. Nearly 70 per cent had not been in paid employment; and of those who had been in work, most indicated that their last paid job had been semi-skilled (52 per cent) or unskilled (33 per cent).

Assessing the degree of career progression following initial entry into the housing sphere proved more difficult, although a number of indicators were considered. Firstly, nearly 75 per cent of survey respondents had been in continuous employment since concluding their training, with less than 7 per cent of respondents having been out of the labour market for more than 6 months. Secondly, nearly 60 per cent of respondents had a current salary of between £15,000 and £24,999, with more than half of the remainder exceeding this figure. This suggests that ex-trainees found themselves mainly in junior to middle management positions.

Respondents were asked how their career progression had matched their expectations. More than 62 per cent indicated that they had reached a level equal to (46 per cent) or higher than (16 per cent) they would have anticipated (see Table 2). Those who had trained more recently were disproportionately represented amongst those who were less likely to have realised their expectations.

Table 1: Respondents' qualifications on joining PATH

Qualification level	Up to 1991	1992-1995	Post-1995
None	9%	4%	3%
Up to and including A levels	46%	28%	19%
Higher education qualification	20%	15%	13%
University degree	14%	36%	39%
Post-graduate qualification	3%	9%	6%
Other	9%	8%	19%

Table 2: Respondents' expectations of career progression

Position/level	Total	%
Higher than expectations	26	16
As expected	75	46
Lower than expectations	61	38
Total	162	100

(missing = 22)

'Bridges' to career development

Survey respondents were asked to attribute the importance of various positive factors contributing to their career development. The PATH scheme was clearly seen to be a very significant bridge to career development, comparing favourably with the other factors identified. More than 85 per cent judged PATH to be 'important' or 'very important'.

This positive experience of PATH was also reflected by the comments of those who had been through the scheme, many of whom reported that it had boosted their self-confidence and helped them focus on their career direction. The following quotes were typical of many responses:

"PATH is the root to my tree. Without PATH I do not know where I would be."

"PATH has been a positive life-changing experience for me where my professional housing career is concerned."

The comparison of ex-PATH trainees and non-PATH interviewees revealed a broadly similar pattern between the two groups (see Table 3). Unsurprisingly, the former were more likely to identify positive action as a major supporting influence; the fact that they were more likely to refer to networking and key individuals as significant bridges also reflected the benefits of the scheme. Ex-PATH trainees had a ready-made network with other ex-trainees, and the matching of trainees with 'mentors' is at the root of the PATH schemes' *modus operandi*.

Non-PATH trainees, on the other hand, were more likely to cite their experience of voluntary work as an important bridging factor to developing their career. Other important factors identified by both groups were personal characteristics, family support (particularly evident amongst male interviewees), and passion/satisfaction for the job.

'Barriers' to career progression

Survey respondents were also asked to attribute importance to negative factors that they saw as having

hindered their progression. Racism and stereotyping, particularly indirect racial discrimination, scored most highly. More than 40 per cent of women and nearly 50 per cent of men perceived this as an 'important' or 'very important' barrier. At the interview stage too, racism and racial discrimination were described as "the norm" at the workplace and expected by many interviewees amongst both groups (see Table 4). That was the "nature of things for black people in this country," said one interviewee, a theme that ran throughout the study from focus groups participants to survey respondents and interviewees. The main manifestations of this discrimination were reported as denial of promotion and feelings of isolation.

Many interviewees had 'desensitised' themselves against racism and racial discrimination, accepting it as part of everyday life. However, for some it was a complete shock, totally outside their experience:

"I couldn't believe what was happening to me. The first month had been okay but after that people stopped talking to me for no reason. I'd walk into the room and everybody would go silent. Then the racist jokes started. I went to complain to the section manager but he defended his staff. I felt awful being the only black in the section; I had no one to turn to. I put an official complaint for racial harassment, but that just made the atmosphere in the office worse." (ex-PATH interviewee)

As with the 'bridge' factors, there were many areas of coincidence between ex- and non-PATH trainees although former PATH trainees were less likely to talk of entry into housing posing a barrier, and were less likely to find isolation a problem. Non-PATH trainees were also more likely to feel that aspects of their personality (particularly lack of confidence) and a shortfall of relevant experience held them back. Again, these are factors that PATH schemes are particularly designed to address.

Conclusions

The author concludes that PATH schemes have been very successful at training future black housing managers. Over 80 per cent of trainees obtained jobs

Table 3: Bridges to career progression

'Bridges'	Ex-PATH interviewees		Non-PATH interviewees	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
1. Positive action	32	100%	10	32%
2. Personality traits	19	59%	16	52%
3. Key individual (positive influence)	19	59%	12	39%
4. Commitment to working with black people	16	50%	10	32%
5. Support from family	15	47%	10	32%
6. Qualification/education achievements	14	44%	10	32%
7. Personal background	13	41%	9	29%
8. Network of support	12	38%	4	13%
9. Voluntary work experience	11	34%	13	42%
10. Passion/satisfaction for job	10	31%	7	23%

Table 4: Perceived barriers to career progression

'Barriers'	Ex-PATH interviewees		Non-PATH interviewees	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
1. Racial stereotyping/discrimination	29	91%	24	77%
2. Promotion blockage	16	50%	21	68%
3. Isolation	12	38%	21	68%
4. Personality traits	11	34%	13	42%
5. Experience shortfall	10	31%	13	42%
6. Caring responsibilities	9	28%	16	52%
7. Personal background	8	25%	7	23%
8. Key individual (negative influence)	6	19%	5	16%
9. Travel time to work	6	19%	6	19%
10. Entry into housing	1	3%	13	42%

they were trained for after completing the course and, according to the findings of this study, this success does not end at the recruitment stage. The added value of PATH for ex-trainees carries on beyond the course, in gaining qualifications, in career progression, and in providing a supportive network of other ex-PATH trainees. The overwhelming majority of ex-trainees were very appreciative of PATH and many cited it as the most important factor in their career. The investment that PATH organisations, their funders and placement organisations have put into the schemes over the past fifteen years appears to have paid off for the sector as ex-trainees on the whole seem to have stayed within social housing.

However, when examining what barriers survey respondents and interviewees felt they had faced, perceptions of racism and discrimination were commonplace. The impression given is that a racist culture exists within social housing which is stifling the career development of many staff from black and minority ethnic communities. Many contributors to the study saw themselves as facing a 'glass ceiling' that prevented them from gaining promotion beyond middle management positions. This continuing perception, in a sector of public services that has been more active than most in terms of race equality, must be considered worrying.

The author concludes that whilst positive action has proved itself and should therefore secure a role for itself in future plans, supporting PATH schemes as local authorities and registered social landlords have done over the years is not enough. There is an urgent need to change the organisational culture within social housing across the board, to challenge the institutional racism that is perceived by so many as a barrier, and to promote diversity in the workplace at all stages: recruitment, selection and promotion.

About the study

The research covered five focus groups with a total of 37 people, discussions with PATH workers and placement provider representatives, 184 valid questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 32 ex-PATH Trainees and 31 non-PATH black housing workers. These latter groups were closely matched in terms of gender, ethnicity, salary level, qualifications obtained, length of time in housing and the region in which they worked.

How to get further information

The full report, *The root to my tree: Examining the experience of Positive Action Training in Housing* by Louis Julienne, is published by L8J Publications, 2 Westcote Rise, Ruislip, Middlesex, HA4 7LP, Tel: 01895 630083 (ISBN 0 9540072 0 4, price £14.95 plus £1.35 p&p).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **Rents, viability and value in black and minority ethnic housing associations**, May 98 (Ref: 5118)
- **Action being taken to tackle racial harassment**, Nov 00 (Ref: N100)
- **The role and future development of black and minority ethnic organisations**, Mar 01 (Ref: 311)

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