



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT AND BUSINESS RESEARCH: G
INTERDISCIPLINARY

Volume 20 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2020

Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal

Publisher: Global Journals

Online ISSN: 2249-4588 & Print ISSN: 0975-5853

Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling in Australia

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GJMBR-G Classification: *JEL Code: L83, M10*



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to generate a discussion about breaking the 'Bamboo Ceiling' in Australia. As this country's workforce has become more multi-cultural with a high level of ethnic diversity working in businesses and industries, it is surprising that there is little Asian representation in Board or senior-level positions.

Despite anti-discrimination laws, other Acts and greater awareness, ethnic diversity employment is only limited to middle management in business. This paper aims to create discussions and debates on how Australia should lift the 'Bamboo Ceiling' in a way similar to the perennial debate of cracking the 'Glass-Ceiling'.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY

Ever since Captain James Cook landed in Australia in 1770 with around 1700 convicts including men, women and children, Australia has become a colony of the British Empire. Since then, more convicts were exiled from the UK to Australia and they started to call Australia home. Although they were far from their homeland, they brought to this country with all the British culture, infrastructure and legal system. Like any colonies at the time, the British treated the natives whom their ancestors settled on the land about 65000 years ago with discontent.

Australia was quietly maintaining its business, trading as well as its close tie with its home country and Europe. Even during the First World War, Australians were fighting as part of the British army - for the King and the country. Australia became prominent and of strategic importance during the Second World War

when the Japanese army swept across Asia and was at the doorstep of this country. General Douglas MacArthur was extricated from the Philippines to Australia and he was charged to use Australia as a base to fend off the Japanese invasion from the Pacific islands and later, in conjunction with the US Navy mounted an offensive from Australia.

Australia is located in the lower part of the Southern hemisphere of the Pacific Ocean. Despite its geographical location is very close to Asia, subsequent conservative governments always maintained its close relationships with Europe and America after the Second World War. Immediately after the war, all trade and commerce were directly connected with Europe and more so with the Americans. With the Cold war, which created uncertainties, to mitigate the threat of future invasions, Australia took on European refugees, to help develop and defend this country. As the economy grows, it has become apparent that six out of the top ten Australia's trading partners are in Asia, with China topping the list, followed by Japan, South Korea, India, Singapore and Thailand. Emerging markets such as Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and Taiwan provide opportunities for Australian businesses to expand their markets.

In addition, Australia is a member of several defence pacts such as the 1951's Australia New Zealand and the United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty and the 1971's Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). In time of conflicts, Australia will be required to navigate a narrow but decisive path to fulfill its obligations yet minimizing the impact of fallout with its trading partners. The South China Sea has been identified as a potential flashpoint, and any future skirmishes or conflicts will require senior business executives to exercise their personal connections with their relevant trading partners to resume trading speedily.

Australia, at the time like other western countries were against Asian migrants. Even this country is close to Asia, successive governments had been conservative, refused to acknowledge the contribution and failed to appreciate the benefit of trade with Asian countries. This attitude was partly due to their thinking that Anglo-Saxons were superior to other races as they were able to colonize most parts of the world. In addition, they wished to protect their manufacturing and keeping jobs in Australia. Even though other countries such as Canada or America at the time, though did not welcome Asians, they did not explicitly say so. Australia however introduced a "White Australian" policy, explicitly

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stated that “colored” people are not welcome into this country.

This policy continued, although this was gradually dismantled by subsequent Prime Ministers. This was not completely abolished until the Whitlam’s Labor government passed the bill in 1973, affirming that potential immigrants were not to be judged on race.

This policy opened an opportunity for Asian migrants who brought to this country with new business opportunities and capital, opening new trading frontiers for Australia. Indeed, Australia was the first country to recognize the then communist China as a sovereign country.

The disaster ending of the Vietnam War brought on massive boat refugees from Vietnam from 1976 to 1984, followed by the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 whereby the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke acted alone in granting asylum for those Chinese, mainly students, who were already in Australia.

These two events and the 1997 exodus of Hong Kong professionals dramatically increased the Asian population in Australia. Like most of migrants from other countries, they established themselves and created various business opportunities in trade.

At that time, Paul Keating the then treasurer labeled the country as a ‘Banana republic’- in that Australians are no longer could afford to sit and wait for events to unfold. This country needed to be more competitive and be able to trade globally, especially with Asia. It was Hawke and Keating that with this foresight, liberated the Australian economy from the well-established protectionism doctrine to an open economy with globally competitive trading partners. Some of the measures they unleashed were to float the Australian currency; deregulated the banking industries, reduced tariff to encourage global trade and to welcome foreign investments.

Since then, Australia businesses have flourished. Today, this country has attracted foreign investments globally especially from the USA, the EU and China. It is important to note that, Asia now has the majority of a mega- metropolis in the world and Australia’s governments and corporate leaders will need to possess the necessary soft skills to deal with these megacities for trade and investments in years to come.

In 1975, the Anti-Discrimination Act (also known as Employment Equal Opportunity) together with the Human Rights Committee Act 1986; the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Age Discrimination Act 2004, were passed to ensure that employees are being treated equally regardless their gender, religion, race, age, disability and creed.

Although with these Acts in place, the struggle for women to gain senior employment and with equal job, equal pay continued. The ‘glass ceiling’ took more than two decades to gain some tractions to the extent

that one can claim the ceiling has been broken, although there are still some ways to go.

III. WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE BAMBOO GENERATION

The term ‘Bamboo Ceiling’ was coined by Hyun (2005), claiming that there is not enough Asian representation in leadership roles in corporate businesses. This term refers to the personal, organizational and cultural barriers that impede Asian descendants to reach the highest echelons of the corporate ladder (Hyun, 2005). This metaphor was considered by many scholars as a useful way to convey a complex issue in a simple and easy to understand and research in the US has identified the bamboo ceiling as an emergent theme commonly experienced by Asian Americans (Tiburan, 2016). Nevertheless, there are some writers and commentators believe that the term of the bamboo metaphor is poorly used since it conveys the image of “panda and jungle” rather than describing the barriers that Asians are facing (Pekarek and Olsen, 2014).

In Australia, with the anti-discrimination policy in place, most of the corporations and businesses are operating under a policy of ‘ethnic diversity’. Indeed, one can find different ethnic mixed in any business nowadays but, unfortunately with a few exceptions, it is limited to the lower to lower-middle management. As Yang (2015) stated that “...Asian Australians account for 10 percent of the overall population and yet only 1.9 percent account for all executive manager positions, even when Australian businesses are focusing in establishing strong business relationship with China. The trade relationships with the Asian countries should not be undermined - especially with China.” With the Trans- Pacific Partnership, Free Trade Agreements with China, Japan, South Korea and China’s “One belt-one road” initiative, the potential economic benefits to this country could not be understated. Yet anecdotally a quick look across the top 100 of the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) public companies, one can hardly find any CEO or director is of Asian descent. While most of the public companies and even governments at all levels publicly assured that they are promoting women to senior positions and or to politics, little have been done about the bamboo generations. The appointment of Mr. Hieu Le, a Vietnamese-born refugee to be the current governor of South Australia (SA) is a welcoming effort by the SA parliament.

The second generation from the Vietnam/China refugees has grown up. These people are no different than the local Australians except their skin color. Most of them are educated under western education systems and were university qualified. Yet, hardly any of these people managed to gain senior managerial positions or reaching the ‘C’ suite. Some of these young Asians are

intelligent, work very hard, with strong work ethics and have the capabilities to move ahead. So why aren't they in a senior position of big corporations especially when they are needed to promote trade with Asian countries?

A report published by Kaplan (1995) [Also known as Kaplan report] suggested that by 2000, Australian business people will be multi-lingual and MBA qualified. Sadly, this has not eventuated. To this date, Asians were used to assist Anglo-Saxon companies to do business in Asia. Nearly all of the CEOs of the big corporation do not speak any Asian language. In 2012, the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard released the Asian Century white paper, but unfortunately, the initiative was abandoned under the prime ministership of Tony Abbott and the Asian century became the shortest century that we have experienced.

Further, as Wong (2006) suggests that over many years it has become evident that there is no specific group advocate or any research on measuring the appointment of minority people to the board. He further advocates that Australia is well behind Canada in appointing ethnic minority to board or senior position and he questioned if people of ethnic background are inferior to their Anglo counterparts.

There is hardly any literature on this subject though one can find many on "Glass-Ceiling". Beilby (2015) research on minority board members found that there is very limited literature on this subject. Past research (Khator, 2010, Mundy, 2014) focused on reasons explaining why there are large numbers of Asian descendants reaching senior position in technical departments because of their technical ability and qualifications and the perception of senior management on the technical positions in organizations.

The recent failed motion "It is Ok to be white" introduced by Pauline Hanson while it is factually correct, revealed a fissure in the national mood on multiculturalism and anti-discrimination laws and the current sentiment reflected the wishful thinking of resurrecting the "White Australian" policy once again. The recent massacre in Christchurch, coupled with the so-called "White Nationalism" tacitly supported by the current USA administration, highlighted a worrying trend on the resurgence of white supremacy across the world.

Research indicated that individuals who aspired to reach senior executive levels would need to resolve the conflicting values (Hofstede, 1981; Khator, 2010) as some common Asian values such as self-effacement, valuing other needs more than one's own, respect for elders and deference to authority figures. These values are often perceived as being contrary to those traits required for executive roles in an organization such as individualism and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1981).

Breaking the bamboo ceiling requires a two-prong approach, the individual needs to harmonize the interplay between personal and organizational factors

(Tiburan, 2016) but governments and organizations will need to create and foster career mobility strategies, mentoring and coaching for young Asians (Hyun, 2005). As the authors presented the paper on "Breaking the bamboo ceiling in Australia" at the International Conference on Education, Psychology and Organization Behavior in Bangkok, there were suggestions by members of the Conference that the Asian generations will not only need to break down the bamboo ceiling but also the surrounding bamboo wall - that is to assimilate into the Western culture.

IV. UNCONSCIOUS DISCRIMINATIONS BY BUSINESSES

As mentioned earlier, business traditions evolved from the Europeans, especially from the UK. Hence, for the past two hundred plus years, this country has been conducting business in the 'Anglo-Saxon' ways. All the business networks and communication are based on Western values and culture, thus make little rooms for Asians-even though they are born and educated locally. In short, it is a 'boys and girls club'.

The misconception of hiring a 'different kind' created uneasiness within the current business environment. This situation is no different than the 'glass ceiling' three decades ago. As reported by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, (Robertson, 2018), only 58 percent of Australians still have British roots; 18 percent are European and 21 percent are non-European. This view is further confirmed by Robertson's report (2018) that "... in the boardroom, 70 percent of directors come from a British background. A detailed breakdown of the other 30 percent is not available, but they include directors from other white, first-world countries". Further, he quoted others in the report, saying that "For an ethnic woman, research shows that it is actually twice as hard because you are having to adapt to the fact that you are a woman, and then you are also showing up as someone who is culturally and ethnically different," explained the chairwoman of AMP Capital Funds Management, Ming Long. Ms. Long knows firsthand how tough it can be for an outsider to break into what's still very much "the white boys' club in director land." Indeed, little has changed since Wong (2005) "...to appoint directors based on political expedience or self-interest rather than merit...should the corporation law economic reform program (CLER9) be strengthened..."

Across the ditch, Beilby (2015) found that New Zealand's corporate governance regime has done little and continues to do little to encourage ethnic diversity on corporate boards. This failure has contributed to the lack of interest or demand for ethnic directors on NZX50 boards. Furthermore, there is a failure to support any form of development to deepen the pool of suitably qualified ethnic directors in New Zealand and there is

little support for increasing the supply of ethnic directors to the New Zealand corporate environment. Likewise, no program developed to address diversity should be confined to gender only. As evidenced by Beilby's study, the diversity debate involves more than just those issues associated with gender diversity. To suggest otherwise, no matter what the reasoning, is to sell the diversity debate short.

V. ASIAN CULTURE

Hofstede (1981) differentiated the Eastern and the Western culture under the terminology of 'cultural

dimension'. He suggested when comparing the difference of cultural aspects between the Eastern culture to the Western culture, Asians behave in a hierarchical setting, they do not tend to challenge higher authority and keep one's opinion to oneself. Asians are not risk takers, so they try to avoid any unforeseen risks-planning activities as much as possible. They are more into a collective culture as different from the West. Eastern culture is more assertive, money orientated, and their inherent trait is to take a long-term views.

Table 1: Hofstede cultural dimension between the East and West

Dimension	East	West
Power Distance	High	Low
Uncertainty Avoidance	High	Low
Individualism	Low	High
Masculinity	High	Low
Time-orientation	Long term orientation	Short term orientation

Summarised for this paper (2018)

The above table shows the difference and sometimes in conflict with western companies engaging Asian senior management. Clearly, Hofstede identified that there is a conflict in value and culture if an Asian - even though they were born and educated in the West, they may still have Asian personality traits. Anecdotal evidence shows that Asian employees are reluctant to join their western counterparts to, for example, have a drink in the pubs.

In 2006, Wong wrote, "...unless minority groups start to assimilate into the Australian culture (this is not about racism rather about commercial reality), they will lack the ability to think and to behave like an Australian business person. University can provide business education, but it does not teach you "soft" skills to enable you to be successful in human relationships, which of course is the most important criterion of being a senior manager. In short, I argue that if we are to lift the bamboo ceiling, people must change their way of life by assimilating more into the Western culture."

And

"while corporations and businesses are starting to address this issue, there is one point missing. Unless this is addressed, the attempt to "raise the bamboo ceiling will fail. Rightly or wrongly, our culture is predominantly grounded in European culture. To this end, people from other countries have difficulty conforming. A child born of Asian parents, though raised in this country, is heavily influenced by their own culture. Asian children are traditionally told to study hard, to gain a profession like lawyer or doctor so that his/her livelihood is secured. They are not

encouraged to play sports or undertake any extra curriculum activities apart from studying hard." (2016).

As a result, they are not networking with the right people and are not positioning themselves to be spotted for further advancement. Research indicated that the Asian values did not differ substantially across generations since their arrivals to the host countries (Khator, 2010). Further research will need to be done to see whether the Asian values in the third generation of Asian descendants to the host countries will lessen significantly or whether the Western values are more embraced by this generation.

It would appear in order to break the 'Bamboo Ceiling' and the walls; all parties must change their behavior and perceptions. The governments at all levels can play an active role in encouraging higher education institutions to provide training or engaging research in this area even though the long-term effectiveness of these initiatives remains inconclusive (Tran, 2015). While the government can play a key role in education, one does not believe it should be legislated or set target. Huyn (2005) originally believed that the onus is on the individuals to "lean-in" (Sandberg, 2013) or to adapt to western values to rise. However, she later advocated that organizations also need to be more supportive and actively seek to increase the number of executives with Asian descents because they will gain more.

As proffered by Beilby (2015), New Zealand will need to promote the benefits of ethnic diversity by way of increasing the education of NZX50 board directors. He found that if the benefits are known and embraced by these Boards, then it is likely to result in more director appointments to the Boards, He proposed that the New

Zealand government needs to introduce changes to the corporate governance framework to encourage and ensure that New Zealand Boards to implement ethnic board diversity. Beilby (2015) also highlighted the low appointments of ethnic males in corporate boards and he suggested that diversity can only be realized through inclusion. However it does not mean that it is done at the expense of another form of diversity such as age, gender, etc... The Bank of New Zealand's newest director Mai Chen agrees. Appointed to NZX50 listed Bank of New Zealand's board in April 2015, Chen insists ethnic diversity is now on a par with gender diversity as a concern for boardrooms (Atherton 2015)."

As reported by Pekarek and Olsen (2014), Dr Soutphommasane, a former Australian Human Rights Commissioner is holding similar views to the authors that there is a need to broadening the debate on diversity in Australia.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated in the outset that the purpose of this paper is acting as a discussion paper. While the breaking of the glass ceiling is progressing, there is little research or concern about breaking the Bamboo Ceiling. The authors believe that by breaking this barrier, Australian businesses can gain significant advantages in trading with their Asian counterparts and explores the soft power skills to the benefits of the overall economic success of this country.

The authors, after examining the currently available evidence, would like to recommend researches to address the following:

Should the benefit of breaking the Bamboo Ceiling be made known to corporations-in light of the current Equal Employment Opportunities?

Should universities or corporations provide training program to teach the Bamboo generations the 'soft skills' on western culture?

Should the Asian community be more 'lean-in' (Mundy, 2014; Sandberg, 2013) to break the Bamboo Ceiling and the surrounding wall?

Should the government be involved? If so in what way?

Should the process of Board selection be changed to avoid 'boys club?' mentality and how?

Has the Asian values in the second and third generation of Asian descendants growing up in the host countries lessen significantly or whether the Western values are more embraced by this generation?

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