

Diversity Management – a queer strategy?

“Work is half of life”. This German proverb points out the significance of work as an important area of life. Besides the necessity of earning money, the workplace is a social space where people with different backgrounds, traits and abilities interact with each other, where social norms and values are applied and reproduced. But the “ideal” of the young, white, Christian, not-disabled, heterosexual male worker doesn’t correspond with the reality in companies and organisations. People with visible and not visible differences build increasingly heterogeneous workgroups and teams. Coming from the discussions about precariousness at the workshop in Hamburg in October 2004, this article wants to introduce Diversity Management as one strategy against the absence of measures that prevent social discrimination, which is one meaning of “precarisation”. (www.wikipedia.de)

For people who “differ” in one or more factors from the so-called majority, working in a team could be an experience of discrimination, of not being taken seriously, of exclusion and in the worst cases of verbal and physical assaults. But U.S. companies have seen this growing diversity as a problem of economics since the beginning of the 1990s. Studies have shown that workers who feel unaccepted and discriminated against because of their identity in the workplace are up to 20 per cent less productive. The companies realised the necessity of strategies for managing this diversity for their own economic success and so the Diversity Management was born. Beginning with the diversity factors of gender, race and disablement, the Diversity Programs have expanded. Liz Winfeld and Susan Spielman report in 2001 that 75 percent of the leading U.S. companies have implemented Diversity Management Programs including the diversity factors of gender, race, disablement, age, sexual orientation, and belief. The aim of these programs is “to create a harassment-free, satisfactory, cooperative, productive and profitable workplace for all”, not, of course, to be friendly, but because of economic considerations. This goal should be reached through a multidimensional strategy that includes the implementation of non-discrimination policies, the offering of education programs to minimize the individual discrimination –potential, and the support of groups and networking: for example of homosexual or disabled workers.

In the German economic world, the implementation of Diversity Management has just started in companies with strong connections to the USA. The common way of dealing with unequal chances of e.g. women or disabled persons is the use of identity-related politics as gender mainstreaming, or the requirement (set by law) that a fixed percentage of disabled persons must be employed. But as the queer criticism on identity-related politics shows, these forms of strategies produce exclusions, reduce the subjects to one part of their identity, take identity as something fixed, and reproduce social norms as the norm of heterosexuality or the imagination that two and only two genders exist. Can Diversity Management be a method of

queer politics at the workplace? Could it overcome identity-related politics with its consequences?

Diversity Management wants to value the differences of the workers and employees as something positive, wants to minimize discrimination, and wants all workers to accept all people with their individual way of living. Does this fit with the idea of queer politics regardless of identity, just connected by a common goal including the destabilization of rigid social norms? In my opinion, Diversity Management is only a step on the way to queer politics. Even if it is viewed in a positive way, there is the difference, there is the normative image of "the normal" and "the others". Even if one diversity factor isn't seen as the essence of identity, and the intersection of diversity factors is included, the concept of Diversity Management deals with fixed identities. Even if there is no limitation to the "classic" differences gender and race, the diversity programs don't cope with the reality of diversity: that it isn't limited to the factors gender, race, disablement, age, sexual orientation and belief. And even if there is the wish to include all differences of people in a positive way at the workplace, there are a lot of exclusions through the reproduction of social norms.

The consideration of Diversity Management from a non-economic and queer perspective is just beginning. A lot of questions have to be answered with a critical view on the promises of Diversity Management and on its impact on the working people.

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