

THE AUSTRALIAN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

BUSINESS ETHICS

Discrimination

Telecom and equality in recruitment practice.

In 1991, three female engineering students complained to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission about the employment practices of Telecom (now Telstra). Each had applied for an engineering cadetship with Telecom after completing a substantial part of her degree at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. The specifics of their complaints differed, but the common theme was the discriminatory way in which the interviews had been conducted.

Ms C. told the Commission that she was asked how she felt about working in male-dominated area and noted "conspiratorial" glances between the interviewers. She was asked the same question on technical details, even when she answered that she did not know. In the end she gave any answers just to stop the interviewers badgering her. She alleged that she had received no positive feedback during the interview and was made to feel stupid.

Ms M. reported a similar badgering style of questioning on technical matters, the panel again being unsatisfied with an "I don't know". M. also alleged that the interviewers asked inappropriate questions such as "You're from the western suburbs, aren't you?"; "What do your parents do?"; "What do you think about Bob Hawke?"; and "Do you have a problem working in a male-dominated area?". One interviewer wrote the word *MANAGEMENT* on a whiteboard and said, "There are things you have to take into consideration when managing a project. Write down about ten words beginning with *M* that a manager would have to take into consideration when managing a project". When M. replied that she could give things a manager would have to consider but had trouble getting the actual *M* words, one of the interviewers replied, "Alright, but we don't think you will be able to get the first one". He then wrote the word *MEN*, saying "A manager needs to get men to work on the project". M. alleged that at this point, the interviewer gave her a quick look to check her reaction.

Ms S. reported that her questioning ran along the following lines, "How many staff members in Telecom?" "How many engineers in Telecom?" "How much profit did Telecom make in the last financial year?" "What type of company is Telecom?" "Can you buy shares in Telecom?" To this last question, S. replied, "I don't think you can, can you?", whereupon the interviewer yelled at her, "Answer the question, don't ask us". Other questions included, "Where in Italy is your father from?"; "What do your parents do?"; "Have you been to Italy?"; and "What were your favourite cities?". S. answered the last question by naming Venice, Florence and Milan, to which one interviewer responded, "You like Milan, that dirty, smoggy, smelly city?"

In its defence, Telecom called two men and two women who had been interviewed by the same panel and had gained places in its cadetship scheme. The men said that they

had not found the interviews tough, but on the contrary, friendly and encouraging. There was no badgering. The women, however, said the interviews had been aggressive.

In April 1983, Telecom had issued guidelines for interviewing women. One interviewer said he had a general knowledge of these guidelines; the other said he had none. Telecom, it seems, had not ensured that its own guidelines were known in the engineering division of the organisation.

The Commission found that the complainants by reason of their sex were treated less favourably than males in circumstance which were not materially different. The intimidatory and hectoring conduct of interviews with women, the introduction of questions of arguable relevance, and the failure of Telecom to implement its own guidelines were grounds for the Commission's decision.¹

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¹ C. M. and S. v Australian Telecommunications Corporation, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 16 December, 1991.