Abstract

High innovativeness and successful management of employee diversity are key challenges for many knowledge-based organisations. This cumulative dissertation is comprised of four empirical studies that analyse the potential and actual utilization of employee diversity for generating innovation. The studies focus on mixed-gender (leadership-) teams and organisational cultures in the natural science and technology sectors. The analysis is based on a literature review across several disciplines, a retrospective career analysis, semi-structured interviews with managers in Germany and Argentina, as well as a case study on Fraunhofer’s “Discover Markets” project.

The first main finding is that organisations support and leverage the potential benefits of employee diversity only to a very limited degree and much less than their executives aspire to. Retrospective career analyses can partly explain the low representation of women in scientific organisations. In the analysed corporations, this situation is based on systematic reduction of complexity by normative processes on an organisational level as well as by normative behaviours on an individual level. In the second main finding, the two good practice studies identify specific strategies on how to tap the full potential of employee strengths, knowledge and experiences in practice. The strategies emphasise the central role of a corporate culture that supports employee diversity and fosters innovation, risk, and organisational learning.

The results are discussed against the background of current processes of transformation in Western societies, organisations and professions. The discussion shows how diversity management driven by innovation can meaningfully contribute to socio- and macroeconomic change beyond the organisational boundaries.