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Australia's Class Ceiling Holds Workers Back

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New research highlights ongoing barriers to social mobility within Australian workplaces, revealing that employees from working-class backgrounds face significant challenges in advancing to executive roles. A recent study by the University of Sydney found that professionals from more affluent origins are 32% more likely to attain senior management positions compared to equally qualified peers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. These findings call attention to persistent

inequalities that contradict Australia's reputation for egalitarianism and raise questions about the effectiveness of current corporate diversity initiatives, which often overlook socioeconomic factors.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has identified unconscious bias in recruitment and promotion decisions as a key factor contributing to these disparities. The research indicates that corporate leaders—many of whom come from privileged backgrounds—may unconsciously favor candidates with similar social and educational experiences. Professor Mark Western, who led the study, remarked that while progress has been made in improving gender and racial diversity, class-based disadvantage remains insufficiently addressed.

Supporting these observations, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that only 12% of executives within ASX 200 companies attended public schools, in contrast to about 65% of the broader population. This discrepancy suggests that individuals educated in public institutions are underrepresented at senior levels of corporate leadership.

Responses from corporate Australia have been mixed. According to the Diversity Council Australia (DCA), although 89% of large companies have implemented gender diversity policies, only 14% actively monitor socioeconomic diversity within their workforces. Some organizations have begun trialing blind recruitment methods—where information such as candidates' educational institutions and backgrounds are anonymized—to reduce bias. However, adoption of these practices remains inconsistent across industries.

Some commentators have emphasized the importance of focusing on equal opportunity rather than solely on representation metrics. For example, business leader David Gonski noted in the Australian Financial Review that a merit-based system requires fairness in access to opportunities, not just proportional representation of different groups.

As the Australian workforce continues to evolve amid increasing skilled migration and technological change, experts argue that addressing class-based barriers is critical to fully utilizing the nation's talent pool. Simple measures such as anonymizing educational backgrounds during hiring and establishing standardized promotion criteria may help create a more level playing field.