

# Director

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ADVICE

## Naina Patel

**The chief executive of the Policy Research Institute on Ageing and Ethnicity speaks with Amy Duff**

"You've got to be a little bit mad to do this," says Naina Patel OBE, the founder and chief executive of the Policy Research Institute on Ageing and Ethnicity (PRIAE), a not-for-profit organisation that helps black and minority ethnic (BME) elders. "When your grant doesn't come in," she explains, "you don't know whether to smile or cry. Money is seductive, and there are easier ways of getting it [PRIAE isn't a public fundraiser] but that would take the focus off what we need to do."

Before Patel established PRIAE in 1998 she was in demand, both from policymakers, who were seeking her knowledge on the issues of ageing and ethnicity, and from headhunting firms that wanted her to consider running a larger organisation. But she chose to go it alone in order to "make a difference". She explains: "I took a risk and set up PRIAE because no-one else was looking into ageing and ethnicity. When you create an organisation you know your own performance has to be high. People assumed I had an army of people, but it was just me."

Ethnic diversity wasn't on everyone's agenda back in 1998, but today Patel's organisation is kept busy representing BME elders and making UK and European policymakers, research bodies and businesses more aware of diversity-related issues including employment, income, health and quality of life. "You won't find us marching up to Downing Street," she says. "We provide insight and we analyse data."

PRIAE recently made headlines with its research on ethnic diversity and the workplace, based on interviews with 300 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It emerged that businesses are ambivalent about how ethnic diversity affects performance—33.5 per cent thought it improved performance; 34 per cent disagreed; the remaining third were neutral. But Patel insists that employing ethnic minorities will help businesses fulfil their potential and

increase opportunities.

Ethnic-owned SMEs, or those with multilingual managers, for instance, are more likely to export to markets outside Europe and North America, such as the emerging economies of Latin America and East Asia. There's a correlation between language skills and exporting, says Patel: "Profitability is slightly higher; they are risk-takers and more outward looking. It makes sense to have ethnic diversity."

Patel would like to encourage SMEs to think about the business case for diversity rather than be victim to what she calls the "five Ps": passive; parochial; price-obsessed; unable to fulfil their potential, or unable to progress. "I know diversity isn't the first thing on their minds," she says. "But it's about making the most of a valuable, still largely untapped resource."

In nine years, Patel believes she has built a solid team ethic and instilled high levels of motivation, mainly by sticking to a strategy. "At times there's been a personal cost—it was quite demanding to work part-time as an academic and to fulfil multiple roles at PRIAE—and it's easy to get distracted. But I've had lots of support and have remained focused. Not everyone can share the dream I have—part of good leadership is knowing how to compromise."

[www.priae.org](http://www.priae.org)

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