

Ability ... not disability

The business case for diversity in the workplace is a no-brainer, says Denise Hartley-Wilkins. She looks at the rewards that employing disabled staff can bring.

The March 'Business after 5' networking event run by the Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce profiled three local employers—Support Works, Nelson Beds and the Victory Community Health Centre—who had successfully employed disabled staff in their workforce. To hear and understand the difference that working had made to the lives of Keryn, Bernadette and David was inspirational.

All too often employers are reluctant to employ a disabled person. Why is this? My experience working as an HR professional for a deafblind organisation in the UK revealed a range of reasons: the 'too hard' basket; too costly; a focus on the disability rather than on the ability of the person (like the employer who asked a blind person "So what will you do with the dog during the day?"); or a fear of getting it wrong and falling foul of the law. Attitudes are changing, but not fast enough to make real progress.

Putting aside the social responsibility of organisations to make a difference in their wider community, the business case for diversity in the workplace is a no brainer. Enlightened organisations recognise that a diverse workforce is central to innovation and productivity.

It stands to reason that if you employ more of the same—more 'like me'—you'll get what you've always had ... the same. A positive, inclusive and diverse workplace, and workforce, collectively combines to stimulate new thinking and ways of doing things. In essence, 'diversity drives innovation'. It doesn't take much, only a willingness to make it work and an open mind to ask "What support do you need to perform this role?"

As we saw from the three Nelson case studies, the employer is rewarded in spades with employees who display reliability, flexibility in attitude, hard work and good attendance. And there are gains for the wider organisation. Employing a disabled person sends a strong signal that the organisation welcomes and values difference and this has a positive impact on the engagement and performance of all staff, as well as helping to strengthen corporate and employer brands.

To get you started, below are a few things to think about:

- Visible leadership that shows the organisation values difference, and openness about sharing experiences of disability and health conditions;
- A focus on ability, rather than disability—what a disabled person can do as opposed to what they can't—then wrap the job around the person;
- Supporting managers by sharing with them the range of adjustments and good management practices possible;
- Sharing with employees examples of adjustments that others have found helpful;
- Identifying and supporting talented disabled people, and ensuring their development is tailored to their needs.

Putting these measures into place could unlock talent to the benefit of individuals, companies and the New Zealand economy.

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