



“ It’s time to recognise diversity as a driver of business performance. ”

For ANZ, the benefits of actively recruiting people with a disability are clear: higher staff retention, fewer sick days, better staff morale and an insight into the needs of ANZ’s customers who have a disability. At the same time, ANZ discovered many of the costs are minimal: accessible keyboards, some extra software and adjustable desks.

The general manager of Australian operations at ANZ, John Harries, says, “It’s time to recognise diversity as a driver of business performance. We don’t focus on the costs. In the scheme of things, the few costs to make the workplace accessible are immaterial.”

Michael Rosenfeld, a partner at one of Sydney’s leading law firms, Sparke Helmore, agrees. He adds that providing opportunities that other people would take for granted, such as work experience, is a rare chance to change people’s lives. “It creates a very positive workplace culture. But that aside, workplaces should reflect the diversity in society,” says Rosenfeld.

Untapped resource

Recognition is growing in corporate Australia that people with a disability are a large and relatively untapped source of skilled workers, given that the incidence of disability among Australians is high: one in five of all Australians has a disability.

According to Nikki Grech, a national account director at recruitment firm Manpower, businesses are increasingly developing diversity action plans, setting up mentoring programs, earmarking graduate positions for people with a disability, and taking the time to understand the subsidies and government assistance available to smooth the induction process.

Good for business

This trend isn’t being driven only by the feel-good factor that comes with giving people a go; it makes sense from a business perspective. The recruitment pool and staff-retention rates are increased, so recruitment and training costs are reduced in the long run. People with a disability take fewer sick days, morale and productivity inevitably improve along with the workplace culture, and staff gain an increased understanding of customer needs.

“As a general rule, people with a disability stay longer and work harder because they had to work so much harder to get the job. They really value the opportunities that others take for granted,” Grech says.

While more and more businesses are recognising these benefits, there are still tens of thousands closed to the possibility. They believe the costs are too great and they harbour incorrect assumptions about what is involved.

According to Rob Gordon, chief executive of disability recruitment agency WorkFocus, most assumptions are misnomers. “In two to three weeks the new employee will be part of the furniture,” Gordon says.

The fear factor

“Many employers are held back by the fear of not getting it right. If you have those questions, call JobAccess, and they will provide you with advice,” Gordon says.

Gordon also points out that only 17 percent of people are born with a disability and that most develop a disability when older than 16. “This means that there are a great number of skilled people, including lawyers and accountants,” Gordon says.

OPEN YOUR BUSINESS: HOW ANZ MAKES IT WORK

Get buy-in from the management team: Staff need to know that diversity at the workplace is supported by the people at the top.

Set resources aside: If a larger screen has to be bought, make sure staff know it’s allowed.

Train staff: Educate them about the basics, for example, about using accessible technology for their presentations if a colleague has a vision impairment.

Promote flexible hours: Enable people to work from home.

Start realistically: Set achievable goals that can be met. For example, establish a mentoring program for uni students with a disability or work-experience places for people with a disability who haven’t had the opportunity to prove themselves in the office environment.

Set targets: Some people are uneasy about positive discrimination, but targets drive change.

Be transparent and accountable: ANZ publishes its diversity strategy and has engaged auditors to report whether the bank is meeting its targets.

HAMISH MACKENZIE lost his sight in a car accident at the age of 26. He says that the key for an interviewee who has a disability is to flip the conversation from what people perceive the person is unable to do to how the person would deal with the challenges.

“In my first interview [after becoming blind], I said to the people interviewing me, ‘You sound a bit wary: tell me where you think I’d have trouble in this job and I’ll tell you how I’d address those issues.’ Sure enough, I was offered the role. Most of the time, employers don’t understand how people work with not being able to see,” Hamish says.

According to Hamish, businesses need to learn the same lesson. “Let the person tell you how they’ll do the job. You’ll be surprised at the solutions that you haven’t even thought of.”



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