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Workbridge at Work, Working with Employers

Workbridge

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Workbridge at Work, Working with Employers

Abstract

[Excerpt] Including disabled people in the workforce has positive benefits for everyone.

It is rare that a significant economic benefit can also be gained whilst addressing a human rights issue. However, this is exactly what happens for employers when they employ a disabled person.

This edition of Workbridge at Work presents the benefits of employing disabled people, by providing 'real life' success stories from both the employer and employee perspectives.

Keywords

work, disabilities, person, task, workplace, independence, compliance, benefit, policies, equality, law, involvement, intellectual disability, communication, reasonable accommodation, equipment, technology

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Workbridge

Mahiri

Workbridge at Work

WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS



Workbridge



Vision

Every person with a disability has the same value as any other person and will contribute positively in the workplace.

Mission

To enable people with disabilities to participate and experience equal opportunities in the labour market.

Values

- Honesty and integrity
- Professionalism
- Respect
- Privacy and dignity
- Understanding cultural diversity
- Opportunity for all
- Commitment
- Collaboration

Matakite

He ōrite te uara o te tangata hauā ki tō te tangata kē ā, e whai hua ana tana koha i te wāhi mahi.

Koromakinga

Kia taea e te hunga hauā te whai wāhi atu ki ngā huarahi ōrite i te mākete mahi me ngā painga e puta ake ai.

Uara

- Te pono me te ngākau tapatahi
- Te whakaute
- Te whakaū
- Te ngaiotanga
- He painga mō te katoa
- Te mahitahi



Workbridge helps employers tap potential

Including disabled people in the workforce has positive benefits for everyone.

It is rare that a significant economic benefit can also be gained whilst addressing a human rights issue. However, this is exactly what happens for employers when they employ a disabled person.

For quite some time, smart employers have recognised the often 'untapped' potential of disabled people, and as a result their businesses have been benefiting from this.

Workbridge has a long and successful history of working with employers to ensure that employing disabled people is the best experience possible.

Each year Workbridge works with the employers of at least 5000 people from the Far North to the Deep South. Each of these interactions presents a fresh opportunity to provide employers with disability knowledge and to enable them to experience the positive aspects of employing a disabled person.



Ruth Teasdale,
Chief Executive, Workbridge

In Workbridge's experience, once an employer has successfully employed a disabled person, they are keen to continue employing disabled people. In this way, employers' confidence in employing disabled people, and positive employment experiences, is steadily growing throughout New Zealand.

This edition of Workbridge at Work presents the benefits of employing disabled people, by providing 'real life' success stories from both the employer and employee perspectives.

Thank you for your interest in this publication. I trust you will feel encouraged and even a little inspired after reading these stories, which represent the many mutually positive outcomes that are being achieved for employers, employees and our wider communities all over New Zealand.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ruth Teasdale".

Ruth Teasdale
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
WORKBRIDGE

Ability is all that matters



Business New Zealand (and its predecessor, the New Zealand Employers' Federation) has long supported the employment of people with disabilities, publishing employment guides and providing advice to employers to look beyond the obvious when employing new staff or thinking about promotion.

Business New Zealand believes employers must actively participate in employing people with disabilities, providing them with the same opportunities for employment, training and promotion others take for granted.

'Disability' covers a wide range of conditions and some, not immediately apparent, have little effect on job prospects.

However, perceived disability, even where some workplace adjustment will be needed, is no reason for denying someone otherwise right for the job an employment opportunity.

It is ability to do the job that matters, and very many employers report taking on (sometimes reluctantly) a person with a disability and finding an employee who is not only loyal, but hard-working and extremely able as well.

All that most job seekers want is the chance to compete in the open job market.

People with disabilities are no different. They do not want to be – and should not be – turned away because of a personal characteristic unrelated to ability.

Too many people with disabilities still miss out because of other people's inappropriate attitudes. Those attitudes need to change.

Phil O'Reilly
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
BUSINESS NEW ZEALAND

Employers benefit from new insights



Employing someone who has a disability should be straightforward, and give employers the opportunity to get someone on board who is both productive and committed to their business. On average, people with disabilities have better attendance records, stay longer in any one job, and have fewer accidents at work.

Quite apart from doing the work that needs doing – and people with disabilities are often an untapped source of talent – an employee with a disability can help the business develop products and services that specifically meet the needs of those with disabilities. The market extends to family, friends and colleagues of people with disabilities. With a growing elderly population this is a significant and growing market.

The insights of such employees can also help employers develop a workplace that makes it easy for disabled people to do business with them.

However, if employers haven't employed someone with a disability before, they might be concerned about some of the adjustments they might need to make. In most cases they will not have to make any physical changes, and even if they do these are not usually difficult. There may also be some Government assistance to help make adjustments, and Workbridge staff are able to advise employers on such matters.

Simon Arnold

Simon Arnold
WORKBRIDGE BOARD DEPUTY
CHAIRPERSON
*(IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT
WELLINGTON CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE)*

Howard shows staying power

Having a steady job is important to HOWARD JESSOP.



Howard Jessop



Ezibuy founding director Peter Gillespie says he was only too happy to take Howard on, having previously made his acquaintance at the Bennetts bookstore.

Howard, who has epilepsy, has been working ever since he was 15 and has a track record as a very loyal and reliable employee.

For the past 12 years he's worked at Palmerston North-based clothing and homeware catalogue company Ezibuy.

Before that, he worked at the Bennetts bookstore in Palmerston North for 29 years, his employment there ending only when he was made redundant following restructuring within the company.

Howard gained his job at Ezibuy with assistance from Workbridge, which approached the company on his behalf.

"He was always very obliging," Peter recalls.

Howard now assists with the distribution of catalogues to Ezibuy's new customers, packaging and labelling catalogues for customers throughout New Zealand and Australia.

He says he enjoys the job and the people he works with, and the flexibility of being able to work hours that fit in with bus timetables.

"I'm unable to drive due to my epilepsy," he explains.

However, the epilepsy doesn't affect his ability to do his job, he says.

"I work the same day as everyone else. I'm just a little bit slower at things."

Ezibuy human resources manager Leonne Goodbehere says Howard is a valued member of staff.

"He does a grand job. He takes full responsibility for what he does and is very proactive," she says.

Peter adds that Howard is a popular member of staff, and that he and Howard have enjoyed many a yarn over their shared interest of horse racing.

"He's a good friend," he says.

Diverse work-force valued



Leonne Goodbehere, left, Peter Gillespie, right

Peter Gillespie takes pride in the fact that the company he founded, clothing and homeware catalogue company **Ezibuy**, has a diverse workforce.

"It's a bit like the United Nations – we have all sorts of nationalities and religious backgrounds," he says.

The Palmerston North-based company, which employs more than 800 staff in New Zealand and Australia, has no qualms about employing people with disabilities either, he adds.

The company employs several people with disabilities, including Howard Jessop, who has epilepsy.

"I believe everyone deserves a chance. We try to employ people on their merits. If a person is able to do the job that's required, then it doesn't matter if they have a disability or not," Peter says.

It's a philosophy that reflects the company's desire to be a good employer, and supporter of the local community.

Human resources manager Leonne Goodbehere says the company sets great store by being an organisation which cares for people.

"It's all about providing an opportunity, finding a niche for people so they are contributing, and so that what they are doing is adding value to the company," she says.

Peter adds that he's found that people with disabilities make very reliable staff.

"Their attendance, punctuality and work ethic is often a lot better than people who regard themselves as able-bodied," he says.

While they may require extra support at times, that's all part of creating an environment where staff look out for each other and work as a team, he says.

Leonne adds that the assistance received from Workbridge for the employment of staff such as Howard has been very helpful.

Job transforms Kris



A full-time job at a Nelson engineering company has given KRIS NEWTON purpose and self-esteem.

Kris has Charge Syndrome, which affects his ability to learn.

Despite that, he's blossomed at Anchor Engineering, learning many new skills and growing in confidence as a result.

Kris has worked at Anchor Engineering since leaving school in July 2005.

He previously had a holiday job at the company, but taking on a full-time position was a big leap into the unknown for both him and his employers, Heath and Jan Botica.

To start with he struggled, but once he was assigned a Job Coach for a short period of time to give him some one-on-one attention, he was able to learn tasks a lot easier. Funding for the Job Coach was organised by Workbridge, using Support Funds.



Kris Newton and Barry Farrer

Job Coach Barry Farrer continued on as a support person, and now works with Kris for two hours a day, and says he's doing very well.

"I'm thrilled to bits with his progress. He's keen to learn," Barry says.

Kris now carries out a wide range of tasks, such as cutting, drilling and grinding steel. He's also responsible for looking after the company's fleet of vehicles, which is a task he particularly enjoys.

Kris's parents, Lee and Sandy, say the job has transformed their son, giving him motivation, and improving his social skills.

"It's been unbelievable to see the transformation in him. He's got purpose now. As far as his personal development goes, it's been invaluable," Lee says.

As for Kris, he says he enjoys earning a wage, which has enabled him to buy things such as a car and a mountainbike.

"And I get to work with all the guys on the workshop floor," he adds.



Bold step reaps rewards

Anchor Engineering owners

Heath and Jan Botica took a leap in the dark when they employed Kris Newton, not knowing how he'd cope because his ability to learn was affected by Charge Syndrome.



Jan and Heath Botica

But it's a move they've never regretted, and they say they've gained a tremendous sense of satisfaction out of watching Kris learn new skills and grow as a person.

"I get a real buzz out of little things, like Kris picking up a tape measure and measuring a bit of steel. He couldn't do that when he started," Heath explains.

He's also enjoyed watching Kris grow in confidence, in both his job and his interaction with other staff.

Jan adds that she's become so fond of Kris she regards him like a son.

"He's part of Anchor Engineering – we wouldn't be without him," she says.

The Boticas say they've learned a lot from the process of training Kris, and discovering what he responds well to.

At one stage soon after he started work, Kris seemed to be going backwards, so Workbridge arranged for a learning needs assessment to be carried out.

From that it emerged that Kris needed more one-on-one attention in order to master new skills, so retired engineer Barry Farrer was hired as his support person, to work with him for two hours a day.

Workbridge arranged funding for his position, using Support Funds.

Heath and Jan say the support they've received from Workbridge has been very helpful.

"They're there if you need them," Jan says.

Marine life enthrals Dylan

DYLAN GILMORE has found his niche in life working at the Seahorse World Aquarium in Picton.



He's fascinated by the fish, sharks, stingrays and seahorses at the aquarium, and says his fascination grows day by day.

"It's amazing watching the fish grow up. I find it very interesting," he says.

Dylan, who has autism, gained the job four years ago with assistance from Workbridge.

He does cleaning jobs around the aquarium and various other tasks such as cleaning fish tanks and helping with feeding.

"I like it very much," he says. "I enjoy working because it makes me feel like I'm doing something useful. I like to keep myself fairly busy."



Dylan adds that the other staff at the aquarium are good to work with, particularly his supervisor, aquarium manager Regan Russell.

"He's a nice guy to work with."

Due to his autism, Dylan feels uncomfortable around large crowds. He also has tinnitus, which makes him sensitive to noise.

But Regan says despite that, Dylan has fitted in well at the aquarium and has grown in confidence.

"When Dylan started at the aquarium he was very shy, but he has really come out of his shell," he says.

Regan says Dylan interacts well with other staff and the public, often answering questions about the exhibits.

He's also good at his job, he says.

"He knows what he's doing and he follows a routine well."

As for Dylan, he can see himself working at the aquarium for many years to come, and says he'd eventually like to learn scuba diving, so he can observe marine life in its natural habitat.

Community spirit spurs employer

Community spirit is important to the management of Seahorse World Aquarium in Picton.



Regan Russell and Dylan Gilmore

That's why they didn't hesitate to employ Dylan Gilmore, who has autism, when they were approached by Workbridge to see if there was a job opportunity for him.

"As a responsible employer we feel we should give something back to the community," director John Reuhman explains.

But John adds that just as Dylan has gained a lot from the job, so too has the aquarium gained a lot from Dylan.

"He's like family to us," he says.

Aquarium manager Regan Russell agrees that other staff have benefited from working alongside Dylan.

"I think it's good for people to be exposed to people with disabilities," he says.

"It's all about not judging people. To us, Dylan is just one of the staff."

However, both John and Regan say there have been ups and downs in the four years since Dylan started work.

One of the biggest challenges was finding out how best to instruct and train Dylan, who at one stage was struggling with the job.

With the help of Workbridge, a system was put in place to ensure Dylan knew exactly what he had to do each day and received feedback on his performance.

He was given a checklist of tasks to carry out each day, and both he and his supervisor ticked off each task as it was completed.

John and Regan say the system has worked well, and Dylan has mastered his job and grown in confidence as a result.

"We feel really good about that," John says.

He adds that the aquarium is grateful for the support it has received from Workbridge.

Job gives Gareth a lift

A permanent job has given GARETH WHITHAM confidence, motivation and a new outlook on life.



Gareth Whitham

Gareth, who uses a wheelchair because he has spina bifida, has worked as a checkout operator at The Warehouse store in Christchurch's Eastgate Shopping Centre since the beginning of 2006.

It's his first permanent job, and he says it's great.

"Because I've got something to do I feel a whole different person," he says.

"It's lifted me a lot. It's given me a lot more confidence."

Gareth obtained the part-time job with assistance from Workbridge, following a work experience assignment at the store.

Workbridge also arranged funding for a specially designed checkout workstation, which enables Gareth to operate his checkout from a wheelchair.

The workstation, designed by Christchurch company Ergostyle, is the first checkout of its type used by The Warehouse in New Zealand. It can be used by other staff as well since it can be raised to standing height.

Gareth says prior to working, he had limited contact with other people, so he particularly enjoys the social interaction of his job.

He gets on well with other staff, and he has received a lot of positive feedback from customers, he says.

"I've had some say to me that they really enjoy seeing me there," he says.

Gareth says he appreciates the support he's received from Workbridge, such as arranging funding for transport to and from work. He is unable to drive due to epilepsy.

Workbridge also organised a Job Coach for Gareth when he first started work, to help him get to grips with the job, and continues to arrange regular workplace assessments by an occupational therapist to ensure he doesn't incur injuries.

Gareth says he's also grateful for the support and encouragement he's received from his supervisor at work.

Solving challenges satisfies



Nic Purcell

Ergonomist Nic Purcell gets a buzz out of helping people with disabilities participate in the workforce.

His company, Ergostyle, specialises in designing ergonomic commercial furniture, including furniture compatible with wheelchairs, such as the checkout workstation developed for Gareth Whitham.

"It's good to see people with disabilities in the workplace," Nic, Ergostyle's managing director, says.

"I think it makes people aware that there is another employment resource out there."

While employers may face challenges in ensuring the work environment is suitable for people with disabilities, the challenges can generally be overcome, he says.

In Gareth's case, the challenge was the fact that checkouts at The Warehouse store where he worked were designed to be operated by people standing, rather than sitting.

Ergostyle's solution was a workstation that can be raised and lowered at the touch of a button, with an electric motor allowing the height to be adjusted quickly.

This means it can be used by other checkout operators as well as Gareth.

Nic says a lot of thought went into Gareth's workstation, with input from both Gareth and an occupational therapist. They conducted many trials to ensure it was comfortable and efficient.

He says he's pleased with the result, and can see the potential for similar workstations in supermarkets and other workplaces.

"It can be modified to suit different environments and situations."

Funding for the workstation was organised by Workbridge, using Support Funds and a Modification Grant from the Ministry of Social Development. The Rotary service organisation also contributed.

Nic says Ergostyle has designed other products which are multi-user as well.

"The thing with good design is, if it's good for a disabled person then it's good for an able-bodied person too," he says.

"A lot of the products we have created specifically for disabled people have become generic products."

Caring attitude impresses



Caring for others comes naturally to RACHEL SUMMERS, so her job as a home care worker with social service agency Presbyterian Support suits her down to the ground.

"I really love working with people," the Nelson woman, who was born profoundly deaf, explains.

Rachel works part-time for Presbyterian Support, helping clients such as the frail and elderly with household chores such as cleaning.

She enjoys helping her clients live independently, and says communication has never been a problem.

For her initial meetings with clients she often has a sign language interpreter, so she can introduce herself and learn how clients like jobs to be done.

But after that she communicates directly with clients via written messages, gestures, and a little sign language.

Rachel says it's a system that works well – and her boss, Sue Holden, says her clients think likewise.

"The feedback from clients has been excellent," Sue says.

"They say she does a wonderful job, and is cheerful and open."

Rachel has held other cleaning jobs, but says she was still nervous when she went for her job interview with Presbyterian Support, because she didn't have any qualifications.

However, Workbridge assisted her with the job application and preparing her curriculum vitae, and also arranged funding for a sign language interpreter for the interview.

Workbridge continues to arrange funding for sign language interpreters when required, such as for initial meetings with clients, or for staff education workshops.

Rachel says the support she's received from both Workbridge and Presbyterian Support has been great.

She says she firmly believes that deafness is no barrier to achieving goals in life.

"If you take things one step at a time, you will achieve," she says.

Having studied to be a sign language tutor, Rachel says one day she'd love to set up her own business teaching sign language.

Open-minded attitude is key

"It was a bit of a bold step on our part to take on someone who couldn't hear or speak, because of the nature of our work," explains Sue.

"But we could see no reason why she couldn't do the job, so we decided to employ her and cross each bridge as we came to it."

Sue says as an organisation in the business of caring for people, Presbyterian Support strives to be compassionate and non-judgmental.

"We're very glad we employed her. It's been a positive experience."

Sue says initially she was apprehensive about the response from clients, but none have expressed any reservations about being able to communicate with Rachel.

"I explain the situation to clients and no one has turned us down so far. They say 'why not?'. And none of them have had any difficulties expressing themselves."

Sue says she doesn't have any problems communicating with Rachel either, using mainly emails and phone text messages to advise her of work assignments.

Occasionally she and Rachel have also used the telephone relay service, which relays typed messages from Rachel to Sue, and voice messages from Sue to Rachel, via a relay assistant.

Sue says the support received from Workbridge, such as arranging funding for sign language interpreters, has been invaluable.

"Without that support we couldn't have done it. It certainly made interviewing Rachel and meeting clients easier," she says.



Sue Holden and Rachel Summers

"To us it is important that we are open-minded about who we employ. It would've been easy to say no, but we believe in giving people a shot."

And she says the decision to employ Rachel has certainly paid off.

Workbridge is a national organisation which has service bases in each of these centres.



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WHAKATANE

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