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Accommodating Diversity

As demographics change, there are more older workers, workers with disabilities, female workers and more of a cultural mix, thus employers need to accommodate diversity within the workplace. There are many ways to do this. Two such examples are: adopting flexible working patterns and making practical workplace adjustments.

Flexible work patterns

As diversity is integrated into your business and you recognise that some individuals combine work with other responsibilities, you may wish to explore flexible work patterns.

Flexible work patterns are often referred to as 'family-friendly' but a true flexible working policy will be relevant and available to all employees - e.g. an employee with mental health problems may wish to avoid rush hour.

Flexible work patterns are also described as 'Work / Life Balance' - for example, an employee could request a 4 day week to have time for themselves.

The business benefits are a committed and loyal workforce, with reduced absenteeism, less stress and a lower employee turnover.

Examples of flexible working:

- Job sharing
- Working from home
- Working term-time only
- Working compressed hours
- Allowing time off for medical appointments
- Allowing time off for religious holidays, festivals and ceremonies

Don't assume that making reasonable adjustments will cost lots of money - many cost nothing and the average is £75. Many adjustments are about doing things a little differently.

Source: DRC (Disability Rights Commission) August 2008

Practical workplace adjustments

Many of the workplace adjustments required to meet a worker with a disability's own individual needs will be at no cost.

Examples of practical workplace adjustments:

- Providing an ergonomic chair or adjusting desk height
- Providing facilities for hearing or visually impaired employees
- Restructuring parts of a task to suit the physical needs of an employee
- Specifying an area for prayer with appropriate washing facilities
- Ensuring that dietary requirements are introduced in staff canteens and restaurants (eg Halal, vegetarian)
- Considering dress requirements (e.g. a requirement to wear skirts may prohibit potential employees who have inhibitions about exposing the body)
- Providing notices in other languages (such as Health & Safety notices)



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SCOTTISH CO-OPERATIVE WHOLESALE SOCIETY

In 2003 the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society store in Portree on Skye accepted a lady on a work experience placement. After about 8 weeks, the Store offered her a part time post of 16 hours as a Stock Replenishment Assistant. This particular individual had never worked prior to this opportunity due to ill health, causing depression and poor self-confidence and a severe lack of self-esteem. This individual, as well as having a mental health condition, also had difficulty with balance and mobility due to one leg being slightly shorter than the other. However she proved that she was a willing worker, and that her commitment to undertaking the work activities was excellent.

Support was put in place through Workstep, where advice and guidance were offered in disability awareness raising for the staff within the store. There was also some funding to assist in the extra costs incurred by the employer in providing a slightly higher level of supervision while the new employee settled into the job.

The employer made reasonable adjustments by:

- Ensuring that the employee was not required to push or pull heavy cages of stock out onto the shop floor, as this was impractical
- Providing a 6 wheeled trolley, for transporting this stock, after breaking the contents of the cage down into smaller manageable portions
- Directing supervisors in whatever department she was working, that she was not instructed or expected to replenish stock at a level above shoulder height, thereby avoiding the need to climb onto stepladders or stools
- Ensuring a clear understanding by all staff of their colleagues' limitations

This particular employee is still working with this employer, and over 5 years has increased her working hours from 16 to 30 on a stepped process, identified and agreed gradually through discussion and review that fully involved the employee, the employer and the Workstep provider.

Reasonable accommodations need not be a costly exercise for employers. In many cases, it can be something quite small that may on the surface seem insignificant that provides the best solution.

The most successful ideas are usually those that come from the co-workers themselves and in the end, result in being better for everyone.

Managing diversity throughout your organisation

Diversity will only offer business benefits when it is integrated successfully throughout your entire organisation. This means that Managers at every level will need to have a thorough understanding of diversity and how to implement diversity policies.

It is essential to equip your Managers with the awareness, knowledge and skills they need to manage their employees effectively.

Further Information

You will find further advice and guidance from the following web addresses:

www.susescotland.co.uk
www.equalityhumanrights.com
www.acas.org.uk
www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk
www.cipd.co.uk
www.dti.gov.u



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