

# Think positive

From tapping into a new source of problem-solving to raising the profile of your brand, new ways of thinking about disability can do wonders for any business, says **Simon Cox**

The response of one employer when I asked him if I was likely to get a job in his company was unequivocal: "I don't employ disabled people," he said. Although this was 20 years ago, it remains fixed in my memory. Have things really changed since then?

At Diverse Matters we believe that progress has been achieved in terms of employers' awareness of disability and their willingness to accommodate disabled people. But the old cliché - "there remains more to do" - still applies. The Disability Discrimination Act has helped to put the issue on the map and brought improvements both in employment and in the way a wide range of services are provided. Another major driver has been the "social model" of disability.

This is not some new European doctrine, or theory about the friendliness - or otherwise - of disabled people! It is a way of thinking and acting on disability equality. It explains that social barriers, rather than individuals' impairments, are the cause of disability. It also sees the failure to give disabled people access to the labour market and entrepreneurial activity as economically inefficient and wasteful of a significant pool of skills and abilities. The model seeks to empower disabled people to control all aspects of their daily life - from choosing the time they get up in the morning to making decisions about their education and careers. In addition, it helps to identify those parts of society that can be changed to include disabled people in mainstream activities such as employment.

In practical terms, the social model leads to a focus on solutions, and this is where HR comes in. If you are proactive and creative in your approach, you will not only support

equality for disabled people, you will also maximise the profit potential of your business by tapping into the perspective that disabled people can bring to a host of issues, including service and product design. In fact, you are likely to be doing much in this direction already - for example, through modernising the design of jobs, introducing new technologies, conducting equality impact assessments, and encouraging greater flexibility. So it's simply a case of applying these approaches in ways that enable and encourage disabled people to participate.

By doing this, you will be able to help colleagues to perform in their jobs and customers to access the services your business offers. At the same time you're also likely to improve the quality and image of the business.

Take, for example, a situation where you're about to advertise a post that you have previously found difficult to fill. You'll probably draw up a list of personal qualities and characteristics you are looking for, which will include problem-solving skills or resilience. Many disabled people will have acquired these skills and qualities outside conventional employment. They may have travelled widely and 'project managed' accessible holidays abroad, negotiated with a range of statutory agencies or gained experience of challenging discrimination. As a result, they are likely to have highly developed project management, negotiation or communication skills.

If these are the skills and qualities you are looking for, try asking for them. This approach will enable you to attract applicants you would not otherwise reach. Many of these potential applicants are currently outside the labour market.



When it comes to delivering solutions in this area, you as an HR professional are critical to success. You will want to ensure you have a well publicised, up front commitment to disabled people. Your recruitment advertising should target the places and media where it will be seen by disabled people, and your recruitment and selection policies should be developed to back up your commitment. You will already know some of the reasonable adjustments you could make, and you will find out about others when you listen to disabled candidates and respond flexibly to what you hear.

If you implement this type of positive action to improve the disability profile of your organisation, your products and services will improve - as will your reputation for inclusion.

**Further info**

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