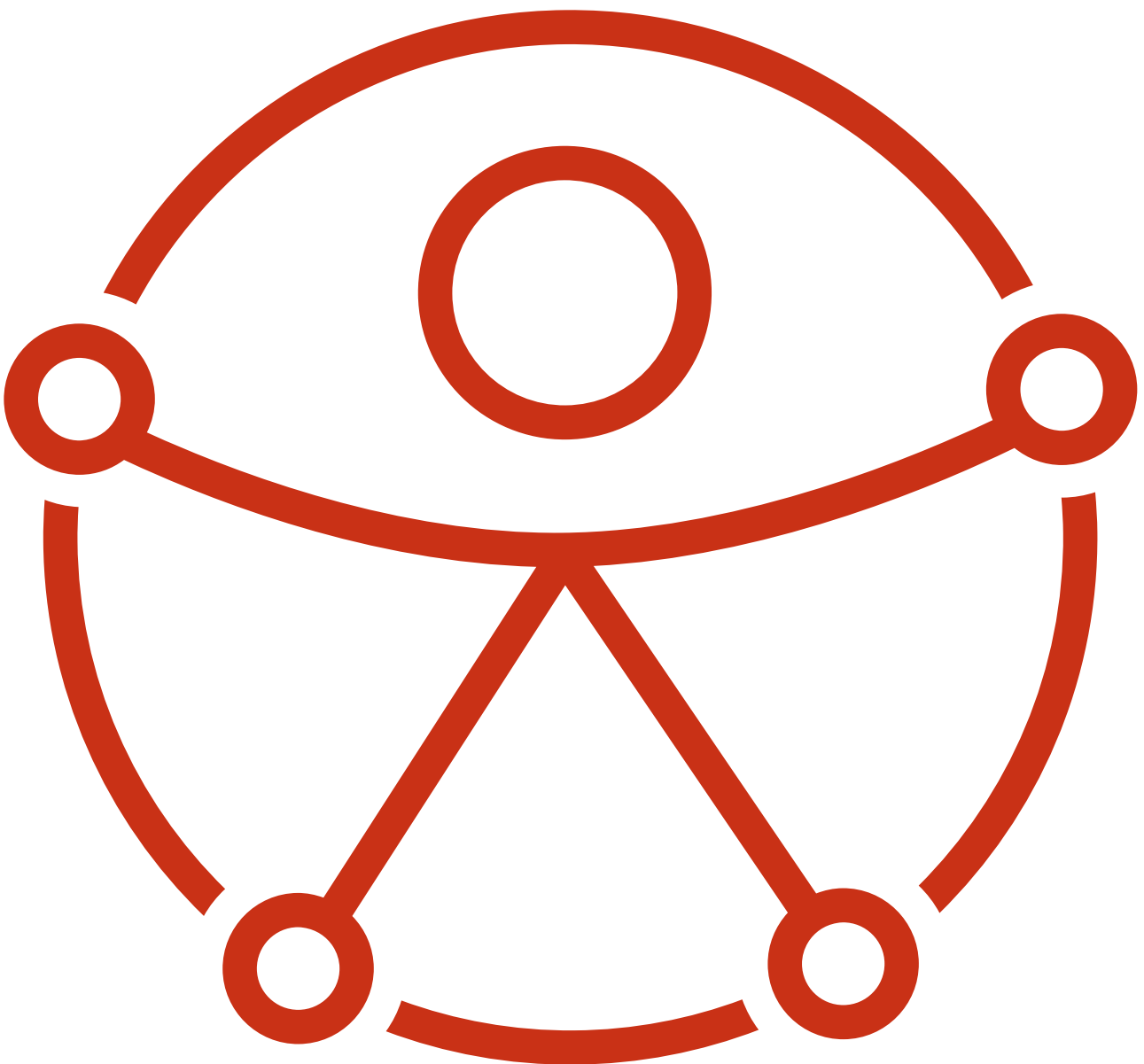

Retaining existing employees

Advice for Line Managers



Introduction

Keeping existing employees makes good business sense

Within your organisation you will have disabled people¹ who have either a disability that existed at the time they were employed or acquired during their employment.

To retain the talent of disabled people, it is important that employees feel appreciated, respected and worthwhile. Retaining experienced and skilled staff that know your business saves you the cost of hiring and training a temporary or new employee and makes good business sense.

Many line managers perceive support for disabled employees to fall into the too hard basket or too expensive. Evidence shows that employing disabled people does not cost any more than employing people without disabilities. Where there is a cost, support is available from Workbridge Support Funds (www://supportfunds.co.nz) to cover reasonable accommodations.

The following is some important advice to line managers:

“You don’t create a positive workplace or culture just by saying so-you have to nurture it by treating your people well, promoting their health and well-being and also by being there to support them when things get them down. Helping people to deal with the pressures in their lives is one of the best investments an employer can make.”²

1 Disabled people include people with health and mental health conditions.

2 Managing and supporting mental health at work, Mind UK - Page 15

An inclusive workplace

An inclusive workplace has the 3A's – attitude, accommodations and accessibility.

The creation of an inclusive workplace has commitment from the organisation's senior leadership team, HR practitioners and line managers. The organisation has a Disabled Employee Network (or staff can connect to another Disabled Employee Network) that can provide frank advice.

A workplace that is inclusive will be able to retain employees who either acquire an impairment or their impairment changes while employed. An inclusive workplace has:

- Managers and staff who have had disability responsiveness training and aware of their own values in relation to disabled people. This will assist managers to effectively support a person back into the workplace.
- Clear policies and processes in place around reasonable accommodations (workplace adjustments) (<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/lead-programme-work/information-and-support/index.html>) for all employees including disabled employees.
- Committed to being fully accessible in its physical environment, learning and development opportunities, and information and services including being available in alternate formats.

Key aids and barriers to retaining and developing disabled employees

Build the confidence of line managers so they can walk the talk

Research conducted by the UK Disability Forum identified the following ways to retain disabled employees³:

- Organisational values
- Good quality reasonable accommodation policies
- Consistent approach to policies implemented across the organisation

They also reported the following barriers identified by disabled employees⁴:

- Lack of disability confident line managers and negative attitudes towards disabled employees
- Lack of targeted development opportunities
- General lack of visibility of disabled employees within the organisation
- Lack of consistency of the application of policies
- Fear by disabled employees about sharing information and mistreatment
- Lack of knowledge around when and how to use support funds
- The sheer volume of change within workplaces - especially for line managers - meant they weren't available to support disabled employees
- A general lack of disability awareness and communication by all within workplaces.

3 State of the Nation: Retaining and developing employees with disabilities By George Selvanera and Kim Whippy, Business Disability Forum- UK - Page 5

4 State of the Nation: Retaining and developing Employees with disabilities- Page 12)

So, what changes can an organisation make to improve the retention and development of disabled staff?⁵

1. Give visibility to disabled people within the organisation.

- Share testimonials by disabled employees on the recruitment webpages
- Profile disabled employees in newsletters
- Provide disabled employees with good role models including in senior roles
- Provide a mentoring programme
- Clarify and publicise who employees can approach about development opportunities
- Develop and/or support a disabled employee's network
- Foster an inclusive culture – Amanda Reaume says that “all of that good work that an agency does to promote diversity and inclusion... that work is going to be compromised if the agency is saying one thing, but the real experience is different.”⁶

2. Build the skills and confidence of line managers to effectively manage disabled colleagues through training and access to good quality advice and guidance.

- Publicise the availability of centrally stored, up-to-date advice and guidance
- Ensure line managers are supported when new team members with workplace adjustment requirements start and when existing staff acquire a disability
- Train managers on disability responsiveness and etiquette.

3. Have consistency in key policies so it is not left to line managers to operationalise them.

- Having a stand-alone disability related absence policy and clear guidelines about how disability related absence is managed (as distinct from sickness absence).

5 State of the Nation: Retaining and developing Employees with disabilities-op cit - P8

6 Ibid

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4. Have a workplace reasonable accommodation process based on: trusting employees; what helps an employee be productive at work (rather than a medical model); and delivering the right workplace adjustments quickly.
 - Publicise guidance about how the reasonable accommodation process operates
 - Provide training and clear guidance to line managers
 - Identify the most commonly requested reasonable accommodations and establish a central stock of resources.
 - Provide flexibility – focus on results, not where people work or the hours, they put in.
 5. Provide development opportunities for disabled employees that are accessible and based on their needs.
 - Reviewing performance appraisal systems for unconscious bias.
 6. Collecting information that informs strategy around the recruitment and retention of disabled employees.
 - Identify the number of current disabled employees at each level within the organisation
 - Determine employee satisfaction with the tools and policies that support and encourage recruitment and retention of disabled employees.
 - Have a plan to understand the effectiveness of existing inclusion strategies and develop a plan to address gaps in experience for disabled employees.

Sharing information

Information will be shared when the organisation shows it is committed to an inclusive workplace and employees feel valued.

Employers often ask employees to “disclose” or declare their disability. Such language is increasingly seen as negative and unhelpful by disabled people and ineffective by those doing data monitoring.

Neutral language is more likely to reassure job applicants and employees that telling you about their disability does not mean they will be dismissed – especially if you make it clear you will make adjustments for employees who need them.

It is likely that during a person’s employment they may acquire a disability which may be due to a health condition, accident or other reasons. The most common long-term absences from work are musculo-skeletal and mental health issues.

Many employers are often unaware of the disabled employees in their workplace. There may be several reasons for this including a fear by disabled employees that sharing information about their impairment or health condition may affect their chances of promotion or been given professional development opportunities.

Where staff are aware that the organisation is committed to creating an inclusive workplace and all staff feel valued, employees are more likely to share information about their impairment or health condition.

Research has shown that people with invisible disabilities are less likely to share information about their needs because they feel they won’t be believed, or they will have to prove they a disability.

The National Council on Disability (US) “We find anecdotally that sharing information about a disability at work can free up a huge amount of “emotional real estate.” Being one’s self at work, by sharing information about a disability with a disability-friendly employer, can increase trust with co-workers, bosses and others, lessening the stress that can come with a disability and allowing the person to freely access needed accommodations.”⁷

7 Disability in the Workplace, The Working Mother Report, Working Mothers Institute, Page 14

Effective Communication

One of the crucial elements of communication is trust.

Communication is not only the words you say but the tone used combined with eye contact, hand gestures, body positioning and even touch.

One of the crucial elements of good communication is trust. Having trust especially in a line manager makes it much easier for employees to share information.

Another important element is how the line manager handles being told a person has an impairment or that an impairment has changed. The aim is to create an honest and open dialogue that will lead to a system of support and sharing.

A line manager should:

- Avoid making assumptions
- Embed confidentiality, including what and who will share anything with team colleagues
- Encourage people to talk
- Respond flexibly
- Use the skills and experience of the person
- Seek advice if they need to.

Remember, many people can manage their impairment/condition and perform their role to a high standard. Many employees can continue to work at their old job, with perhaps some modifications to their workstation or equipment or flexibility in working hours, tasks or location. Others may be able to work in new roles. If you focus on what people can do, and what you can do to enable their full potential, you can maximise the number of people who continue in work.

An effective line manager is alert to any changes in an employee's behaviour or performance at work. Signs such as poor work performance, poor judgement, emotional behaviour or withdrawal may signal to the line manager that the employee is experiencing difficulties. A good working relationship between a line manager and an employee can enable a confidential discussion and a referral for support.

Absent from work

Maintain regular supportive contact and make contact early.

Research shows that providing supports at an early stage to employees who are absent from the workplace, is key to enabling employees to remain or return to work. A person may be absent from work because of a disability, health condition or injury, or caring for someone with a disability, health condition or injury. After six weeks' absence is often more difficult for a person to return to work.⁸

Best practice shows that maintaining regular supportive contact with an employee while they are absent, can assist with returning to work and is beneficial to the employee and employer. How you make contact and communicate makes a difference to the person feeling confident to return to work.

Here are some ways you can make it easier for your employee to return to work: Keep in touch and, at the end of each contact, agree when you will be in contact with each other again and how you will be in contact, such as a phone call, a face-to-face meeting. When you are in contact:

- remind the employee that you care
- reassure the employee about practical issues such as job security and reassure them that they are valued
- ask open questions and listen to the answers – don't make assumptions
- ask if there is any support, they need
- reassure your employee that you understand and respect personal boundaries
- be prepared that the employee may be upset and let them know that is okay
- assist with any concerns that an employee may raise in a thorough and efficient manner
- chat with the employee about how they feel

⁸ Retaining employees who acquire a disability – A guide for employers – National Disability Authority, Ireland
-Page 17

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- update your employee about the social news and encourage them to stay in touch with colleagues. Consider inviting them to social functions
 - where appropriate, ask them if they are ready to consider resuming some work on a flexible basis.

A phased return to work can benefit earlier recovery and is supported by evidence-based practice.

“When I returned to work on a graduated return, the positive way I was treated meant that I felt even more engaged and energised than before, which meant I was more productive than ever. I was made to feel valued and given time and support to get back to firing on all cylinders. Even without knowing the figures, this made the business case for investing in staff well-being crystal clear to me.”⁹

⁹ Managing and supporting mental health at work. Mind UK Page 7

Tips for managing underperformance

Avoid making assumptions.

If your employee is underperforming, this might be a sign that they're experiencing difficulties. Each employee will need to be managed on an individual basis but generally:

- focus on the person not the problem
- avoid making assumptions such as whether the absence is genuine
- ask simple, open and non-judgemental questions
- consider health related solutions such as counselling or the 5 ways to wellbeing¹⁰, not just performance-based solutions but remember you are not treating the person's condition
- understand the person's context – what else may be going on in their life and how you can help
- put in place reasonable accommodations before pursuing formal performance management processes
- allow the employee to be supported in discussions and meetings
- use mediation to resolve conflict if necessary.

¹⁰ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/home/ways-to-wellbeing/>

Supporting the line manager

Provide access to an integrated set of policies and guidelines that can be consistently applied.

The line manager should have access to policies and guidelines that support an employee's retention including return to work. These policies and guidelines should form a clear and integrated whole.

Health and wellbeing policy guidelines: to safeguard, support and promote the physical and mental wellbeing of your employees in the workplace.

Employee assistance programme: to provide confidential support and assistance to employees who may be experiencing difficulties in or outside work.

Absence management policy (including sick leave): to provide parameters around how it is monitored, extended leave arrangements and the contact between the workplace and the absent employee. It is important that this policy is not in conflict with return to work plans including where an employee may be partially capable of work.

Return to work policy and process: to define what type of assessment is required and when, how and what should be in a return to work plan and a link to the reasonable accommodation policy.

Reasonable accommodation (workplace adjustment) policy/guidelines: to outline the process for identifying, recording, funding, reviewing and updating the reasonable accommodation required/provided.

(<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/lead-programme-work/information-and-support/index.html>)

Remember the person is the best expert on their disability and should be asked first when implementing any of the policies or guidelines.

Communicate your policies and guidelines clearly to your staff and make them available in all alternate formats including:

- Easy Read
- New Zealand Sign Language
- Braille
- Large Print
- Audio

Conclusion

An organisation that is openly committed to employing, retaining and developing the skills and talents of disabled people is an important starting point to an inclusive workplace. To achieve this, organisations need line managers who are disability confident and who create an environment of trust and support. Further, there are clear policies and guidelines that are available in accessible formats.

Effective communication is one of the key factors to success, including not making assumptions and understanding and acknowledging your own biases.

Finally, having a strong Disabled Employees Network which is valued for the frank advice it provides is an integral part of the team that designs an inclusive environment.

Resources

1. “Retaining employees who acquire a disability – A guide for Employers “
2. National Disability Authority, Ireland
3. “Disabilities in the workplace” – The Working Mother Report – The Working Mothers’ Institute
4. State of the Nation – Retaining and Developing employees with disabilities – Stage 2 – By George Selvanera and Kim Whippy
5. Business Disability Forum- UK
6. Managing and Supporting Mental Health at Work – Mind UK
7. How to attract and retain people with disabilities – HRD New Zealand

Anne Hawker
Principal Disability Adviser
Ministry of Social Development
(04) 978 4142

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