

Managing diversity in the workplace

Live and work in Auckland City? As New Zealand's most ethnically diverse centre, you could associate with 181 identified ethnic groups, and one in three people you meet will probably have been born overseas (Auckland City Council).

A recent report from Statistics New Zealand showed that the ethnic diversity of the New Zealand population is growing at a rapid rate. You'll soon see this reflected in your workforce as the range of people begins to broaden.

While the majority of the population falls into the "European or Other" category, it is projected to increase by just 0.4 percent a year. Other ethnic groups are expected to more than double that growth until 2026:

- Maori - 1.3% a year, from 620 000 in 2006 to 810 000 in 2026
- Asian - 3.4% a year, from 400 000 in 2006 to 790 000 in 2026
- Pacific - 2.4% a year, from 300 000 in 2006 to 480 000 in 2026

Statistics New Zealand says the different growth rates can be attributed to varying fertility and immigration rates. Whatever the case, the face of the workforce is changing bringing a host of new opportunities and challenges for leaders. Are you prepared and equipped to manage them effectively?

In order to attract and retain the best people from all walks of life, according to the Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) Trust, you will need to establish a workplace culture that embraces diversity and flexibility.

The business benefits of providing such a culture are substantial; some include:

- Increased retention, loyalty and morale
- Improved recruitment
- Reduced absenteeism
- Improved productivity, performance and efficiency
- Strong working relationships
- Status as an employer of choice

Last year's winners of the Supreme Award at the EEO Trust's Work and Life Awards, NZ Ski, drove employee retention initiatives around the needs of its predominantly Generation Y workforce. Their innovative training and development programmes saw their employee retention double, a substantial feat for a seasonal industry. In addition, in the same year that swine flu hit and the recession was rampant, NZ Ski increased its revenue by a phenomenal 169 percent. Through recognising the unique needs of young workers and tailoring strategies to fit them, NZ Ski has built a culture that their workers want to return to season after season.

Below are some tips on how you can adapt effective employment strategies to your workforce and recognise the wide variety of needs that exist:

- Clearly articulate your organisation's values ensuring that tolerance and respect are priorities.
- Consider different forms of flexible work arrangements that may be suitable to your business including shorter weeks, extended leave periods and quality part-time work. This can be a greater draw card than remuneration for parents or people requiring a work life balance.

Managing diversity in the workplace cont.

- Encourage employees to share their priorities and working needs with management
- Offer phased retirement opportunities to extend the working lives of valued older employees.
- Ensure there is a no tolerance policy in place for bullying and harassment.
- Try to recruit a diverse range of people and remember the best management teams often reflect the diversity of the workforce.
- Have a versatile culture that treats people as individuals and can bend to their needs.
- Facilitate and encourage relationship building at across all levels of the organisation.
- When recruiting, write a job advertisement that has a broad appeal. You may want to write several versions in a different language to attract a diverse range of applicants.
- Instil employee orientated training programmes either externally or in-house.
- Support employees with their out of work interests, this may include permitting extended leave or a temporary period of part time hours if intensive training is required.

There is a number of other suggestions readily available, visit www.eeotrust.co.nz for some more ideas. However, talk to your people, find out what they want from their workplace and discuss how you can facilitate their search for a greater work life balance.

Remember, diversity in the workforce is an asset. The combination of different cultures, backgrounds and opinions leads to a cesspit of creativity and a premium environment to develop innovative solutions.

“Diversity is the one true thing we all have in common. Celebrate it every day.” - Anonymous.

* Information sourced from www.eeotrust.co.nz and www.stats.govt.nz.