

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

Hiring Outside the Box Facilitating an Inclusive Workplace

Wednesday, 27 March 2024

PRESENTED BY:

MODERATOR:

Janette Witt

SPEAKERS:

Jim Mullan

Kristin Hay

Alex Milosevic

[Opening visual of slide with text saying 'The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations', 'Hiring Outside the Box', 'Build Your Recruitment Toolkit', 'Hiring Outside the Box – Facilitating an Inclusive Workplace', '#Neurodivergent Talent', '27 March 2024']

[The visuals during this webinar are of each speaker presenting in turn via video, with reference to the content of a PowerPoint presentation being played on screen]

Janette Witt:

Before we get started closed captioning is available for today's session. You can access this through the link that we have posted in the chat or through the link that you can find in the reminder email for today's webinar.

I am Janette Witt, Project Officer within the Industry and Engagement team of the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Our team works with employers and industry to support workforce solutions. Welcome to all.

I am presenting this webinar from the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples. I also would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the various lands on which we all work today and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participating in this webinar. I pay respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

This webinar is part of a series where you will learn about inclusive recruitment and employment practices to develop and grow your workforce.

This webinar will focus on facilitating an inclusive workplace with a focus on neurodivergent talent. We will be hearing from three speakers throughout this webinar who will be giving you an overview of their organisation, the challenges, benefits and offer some key tips in their journey to support those who are neurodivergent.

Disability has an impact on 73% of the world's population. That's over \$13 trillion of disposable income just waiting to be tapped into. The Australian Disability Network also states that here in Australia one in five people have a disability of some kind but only half of them are working and 10% of these are underemployed. Clearly there's not only a massive market but that's a huge opportunity for organisations to employ and to serve 20% of the Australian population.

A Deakin University study shows that up to 15% to 20% of the world's population exhibit some form of neurodivergence. Clearly this shows and confirms the existence of a substantial market as significant opportunity for organisations to engage with and cater to a large gap of the Australian population. The Diversity Council have statistics that show that staff are ten times more likely to say that they are very satisfied at work when they are in an inclusive workplace and when they are in an inclusive workplace they are going to be three times less likely to leave their organisation.

This webinar does not purport to cover everyone with a disability. Rather this webinar focuses on neurodiversity and even within this it is important to note that whether someone with neurodivergence identifies as having a disability and/or feels comfortable disclosing this also affects the data. There are also many different interpretations of neurodiversity, and it covers a wide spectrum of people.

Today our guests will debunk some myths and misconceptions about employing people with neurodivergent characteristics and share strategies they have implemented to attract and retain them. We will also cover the benefits of hiring from this untapped talent pool.

Our first speaker is Jim Mullan. Jim Mullan is the CEO of Amaze Incorporated. Amaze is the peak body for autism in Victoria. Amaze builds autism understanding in the community, influences policy change for autistic people and their families and supporters, and provides independent, credible information and resources to individuals, families, professionals, Government, and the wider community. With that I will introduce Jim. Welcome Jim. Can you please tell us a bit more about Amaze?

Jim Mullan:

[Visual of slide with text saying 'Presenter', 'Amaze Inc', 'Jim Mullan', 'CEO']

Great to be with you Janette. And Amaze was developed almost 60 years ago by a group of parents who could find no services for their autistic children. And over most of that lifespan our work has been focused on probably working in general advocacy and specific areas of policy to help to develop part of the landscape that we now see in Victoria. I mean I don't think that as an organisation we could claim complete credit for where Victoria has landed but we're much more forward down this track than many of the other states and I think that's a testament to the work of our organisation and other partner organisations.

But this has become a particularly important conversation for us now and I think it's generated from two things. I think one we recognise that the underpopulation of autistic people is a significant challenge particularly when so many of them are interested and capable of fulfilling so many roles. But two there's been a spur around what has happened post COVID and the impact that that's had on the labour market, the demand for labour and a growing interest in employers generally about how they access what they may consider to have been historically non-traditional markets for labour. And so, for us that's been an important driver over the last couple of years particularly with respect to where we've landed on employment.

Janette Witt:

Absolutely. And COVID has highlighted the need to include every bit of talent we can in Australia and for everyone to use their potential in employment. Jim there's a lot of words thrown around. Neurodivergent, neurodiversity. Could you explain what these terms mean please?

Jim Mullan:

Yeah Janette.

Janette Witt:

In two seconds.

Jim Mullan:

Actually, I wish I could. So, neurodiversity has come to be understood as the range and variation that there is in brain development across the entire human race. So that's kind of in its broadest terms what neurodiversity represents. However, there are sub-themes within this that we are going to be talking about more. So, there's the notion of what do we mean by neurodivergence and neurodivergent? What do we mean about concepts around neurotechnicality? The challenge in all of this is one, there is no metric currently available anywhere for describing how you measure and how you then slice what neurodiversity is. And therefore on the basis that we don't understand what the sample looks like how do you then begin to reflect what might be considered neurodivergent from a meaning that we don't understand. So you're taking something that's described or understood in what would be a fairly scientific fashion but then having the sociological overlay on it. So it has to be treated with care because I think there are a broad range of uses of this.

For the purposes of this conversation and for the purposes of neurodiversity and neurodivergence in the workplace we would work on the basis that as it is currently described and understood there are a broad range of conditions that sit under the kind of banner of neurodivergent. And our expertise is in autism with a growing understanding of ADHD but I would never ever seek to speak on behalf of sections of our community for whom dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's, OCD, all of these other things that are features of life, because right at this moment in time we don't have an evidence base for what that looks like and what that means in an employment setting. And anyone who tells you that they do is guessing.

Janette Witt:

I just want to thank you for that. I agree. And I want to thank you for putting the constraints around the meaning and the explanation to the audience about what it means or what it doesn't mean more to the fact in doing this workshop. In terms of the myths, there are a lot of myths thrown around that you can probably talk to. What are some of the myths that you would like to address, that you hear around and that you'd like to address?

Jim Mullan:

All autistic people aren't Dustin Hoffman. Rainman has done more damage with respect to what the profile and the popular conception of what autism is. For us it's a car wreck. The reality is that across the spectrum you will find variations that you will see across the rest of the population. So nailing this down on the basis that autistic people are great at data and that they give great attention to detail, most sub-sections of our community or parts of our community do but some don't. And just the same way as you look around your colleagues in the office and you'll find your colleagues are motivated around very, very disparate tasks based upon their own predispositions. And we don't expect that of others. And so there has to be a kind of degree of enlightenment in terms of when we think about neurodivergence, particularly with respect to autism and ADHD, it will manifest itself in lots of different ways.

I mean I have to tell you the most high performing members of our team would class themselves as anxious high achievers. The ADHD is a driver that we have to intervene to manage. This is not about them not being able to do stuff. This is about them focusing to the extent that we need to take care of them to make sure that they don't overdo it. So having an open mind is the starting position in all of this.

Janette Witt:

What about the myth that individuals with neurodivergence cannot maintain relationships easily in their personal lives, so therefore they cannot do it at work. What do you say to that myth?

Jim Mullan:

That's just a lie. That's not a myth.

Janette Witt:

And the next one? These are other ones I've read or other people have put to us. Neurodivergent people require high cost accommodations for job success.

Jim Mullan:

No. That's an old fashioned assertion predicated upon accessibility and reasonable adjustments being the same thing. They're not. There's nothing architectural about anything you do in your workplace to accommodate someone who is neurodivergent. Absolutely not.

Janette Witt:

No. Look thank you for that. And you've touched on some of the misconceptions address, in terms of bringing unique strengths to various roles and being task focused is not an issue. Why should employers recruit and retain neurodivergent workers?

Jim Mullan:

Well why would we as employers not attempt to have the entire community that we engage with and population we engage with represented in our workplaces. The reality is that many of our team – I mean we're not a big organisation. We're an organisation of 54 souls and more than a third of whom are autistic and more than 50% would claim to be neurodivergent, that combination of probably autism and ADHD. These guys bring very, very different perspectives to lots of the discussions we have. They bring a level of colour and a level of insight at times that I think would be difficult for us to access around a traditional workforce. So, in terms of not only productive contribution with respect to their own roles and their own tasks but the general contribution that they make in providing light and colour to lots of the discussions about lots of our approach- there's a creativity around this that is sparky for the rest of our team. It's good for some of our team to be just knocked off track slightly from time to time to make them reconsider the direction in which they're moving and how they're prosecuting things. If you're frightened of an environment like that I suspect there's probably no place for you in a modern working world because this is the future. This is coming. This is the shape of the world. And so understanding how quickly to engage with it, how quickly to build a workforce that serves your needs and whilst doing that meets their needs. It kind of feels like enlightened management to me. No more, no less.

Janette Witt:

Yeah. Thank you Jim. And we look forward to talking again later when we then talk about key tips for employers. And what you've said actually leads onto our next speaker who is from Knight Frank because she will actually talk about her workplace and the refreshing approach that they've taken. So welcome Kristin. Kristin is the Chief People Officer of Knight Frank Real Estate. Kristin you've told me that your company are early on in the journey to recruiting and attracting neurodiverse staff. We'll start with could you tell us briefly about your company?

Kristin Hay:

[Visual of slide with text saying 'Presenter', 'Kristin Hay', 'Chief People Officer', 'Knight Frank Real State', 'Knight Frank']

Yeah. Sure. We make up about 1,200 people across Australia in 29 different locations. We're a commercial property company so a bit different from the sort of real estate agent that you go and buy your house from. And we have I guess three quite different business units. One is the agency side of things, the second property management where we look after assets for other businesses, and the last bit our consulting business. So, they're quite different groups of people anyway if you think about those three business lines.

Janette Witt:

Thank you. Can you tell us why Knight Frank started on the journey of diversifying your workforce?

Kristin Hay:

Yeah. So, I was brought into the business just four years ago now really to change the culture of the organisation, and kind of focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion was a really big part of that. For us it was not a nice to have. It was a have to have. And I don't know if any of you are very familiar with the property industry. It's not typically known for its diversity. So that's something we really wanted to kind of face into. But I think also interestingly it's something that increasingly we're seeing clients want to see and hear about and our people want to know about it as well. People want to be part of an organisation that's doing some good and doing things that are kind of real and tangible and that they feel that they're working somewhere that's actually making a bit of a difference.

Janette Witt:

And do you find it hard to find staff?

Kristin Hay:

Look I think everybody's probably struggled in the last 18 months because it's been such a competitive employment market, but for us in particular because we I guess proactively want to go out there and create a workforce that's much more representative of the society that we live in. And so that can be tough because a lot of what happens is sort of word of mouth and so and

so knows someone who's going to be a great or is a great agent. So we're trying to just kind of break that cycle and break the mould a little bit and that is hard.

Janette Witt:

It is hard. And you've done a survey. Is that right? Can you tell me a bit about the survey that you did?

Kristin Hay:

Yeah. So one of the things that we did to kind of kick off I guess our journey on the diversity side of things was to do an annual sentiment survey. And then last year for the first time we felt like we'd progressed far enough that people had enough trust in us that we could ask demographic questions because we wanted to really understand what our workforce was made up of. And so yes, as part of that we now are aware that there are people in our business who hadn't previously disclosed to us that they are neurodivergent. So that's been really interesting and it's also been really helpful for us to help form our strategy and also just to kind of plan what is it that we need to do. What support do we need to be providing? What about education for managers, for our people? So that was a really useful exercise but we certainly weren't ready to do it just straight up.

Janette Witt:

Okay. And so what have been the challenges for you in doing this?

Kristin Hay:

So we kind of went out specifically and worked with an organisation to recruit. I guess it was a bit of a sad situation in one of our businesses where we'd brought someone in and the agency hadn't disclosed fully the extent of that person's conditions. And so I think they were put into a role that they weren't suited for. It wasn't great for them. And so we were in a situation where kind of mutually we all decided that it wasn't right. And I just felt a bit sad about that because that's not what we wanted to be. But at the end of the day that was the right thing to do for her and for us. But I'm also happy to say we've had some that have worked really well.

Janette Witt:

Look exactly. And no one wants to set up people to fail so it's important to be transparent and honest about what a workplace can offer. Can you tell us a bit about the successes you've had in this space?

Kristin Hay:

Yeah. Sure. So again as part of that we've recruited a number of candidates but one in particular, a young lady who worked here in our Sydney office. I think her sort of story – honestly I think it's touched a lot of people's hearts here because she is such a lovely young lady but has really become part of the DNA of the business. And it's just been really wonderful to see everybody and how they interact with her. I think again because she's Down Syndrome it was something that not a lot of people knew someone who had Down Syndrome and so might have been nervous about what they should say or do. But it's natural and it's lovely. I mean we've recently celebrated her one year anniversary. We had a morning tea with cupcakes. Everybody wore pink because there's her favourite colour. And it was just really lovely to see that.

Janette Witt:

So what has she brought to other staff in the workplace?

Kristin Hay:

I think just understanding and acceptance. As I said I think a lot of people just weren't sure and I think in that situation the agency that we worked with did a really good job, actually did a briefing with everybody in the office here to kind of explain, 'Is it okay to go up and have a chat with her?' Which might seem silly, but it was important in that situation, because I guess she has an overt disability that people just weren't sure. So, they created a level of comfort. So, I think everybody's just grown and learnt from it.

Janette Witt:

Thank you. What do you think already has been – besides that, but more in general – the potential benefits to inclusive recruitment?

Kristin Hay:

Look I mean as I said before I think it's really important as a business that we have a workplace that's representative of society. And I think that with that sort of diversity of kind of representation it also brings diversity of thought. And that is really, really important. If you have the same bunch of people sitting in a room coming up with the same ideas we don't progress, we don't grow. And that's kind of something in this day and age you need to be changing and moving and kind of just growing as a business. But it's really important I think. What it's brought is diversity of thought and I think that's really key.

Janette Witt:

Thank you very much. From my end it sounds like you haven't just started your journey. You are inherently supporting all your staff. So I'd like to thank you very much for your time. From there we're going to go to our next speaker, to Alex. Alex Milosevic is the Manager and Business Owner of Extraction Coffee Roasters. For a small coffee shop in Brisbane they have lots of awards from 2017 'til now. Just to name a few last year they were awarded Queensland Tourism top 100 places to visit in Queensland, head coffee roaster Liam Pratt named as one of the top coffee roasters in Australia, and winner of best customer service in the Queensland Community Service Awards. So not only do you have excellent coffee Alex but also best customer service. Welcome.

Alex Milosevic:

[Visual of slide with text saying 'Presenter', 'Alex Milosevic', 'Manager and Business Owner', 'Extraction Coffee Roasters']

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. Could I just make one statement? We talk about neurodiversity within business. I hire people and when I talk to someone, I see the person first and then we work with whatever comes with that package.

Janette Witt:

Absolutely. And I suppose that was my first question. You've already nailed it I think but I'll ask you it again. Could you tell us your approach to recruiting staff with neurodivergent characteristics?

Alex Milosevic:

When we are looking at bringing people on, I look at them as a person first. And if they've got a personality and inclinations towards punctuality, doing a perfect job, customer service is at the top of what we do and a willingness to actually learn, that's probably a prerequisite. Once we get to work with someone that's when we define is there some diversity going on, that neurodivergence there, or diversity. Not my place to diagnose or judge or ask. What I do is I work with the individual and their needs. And generally we've had some great, great results in that area.

Janette Witt:

So how do you support these staff?

Alex Milosevic:

Again I treat them just like any other person. We talk about this neurodiversity and a spectrum for autism let's say. We're all on the spectrum. It just depends what end you are and how people respond to you.

Janette Witt:

We have discussed before some practical strategies that you've put in place to support these staff.

Alex Milosevic:

Yep. It's being aware, actually developing somewhat of a personal relationship with each and every staff member and treating them as individuals. If I notice a staff member's feeling a bit flat or down I ask them is there something going on? Can we help? If they're really up and hyperactive I ask them to take a deep breath and relax and develop strategies around how they'll deal with their anxieties. We have talks after work if there are internal issues happening with their performance within the business, and trying to define why things may not be going right without me drawing a conclusion based on what it will be circumstantial evidence.

Janette Witt:

And I remember you saying in your workplace you've worked with someone and gradually increased tasks and responsibilities as it went on.

Alex Milosevic:

I think hospitality is well known for attracting a very diverse range of people to work. So we get the full spectrum of humanity through here whether it's our staff or our customers. So learning how to communicate with people as individuals first is critical, not having a cookie cutter approach to everybody within your business. They are people. You've got to treat them as such.

Janette Witt:

Thank you very much. What are some of the benefits to your business?

Alex Milosevic:

My most reliable and efficient and long term employees are people who you would consider to be neurodiverse. They work in a way that I think some of us take for granted. You go to work, you do X, you go home. Whereas a lot of our staff who have issues and are neurodiverse, they see this as an opportunity to become more and to be seen as more. And we found that when we actually see our staff and acknowledge that they are different – but that's a plus, it's not a negative – it generally adds to their self-confidence and their personal growth.

Janette Witt:

Thank you. So what would be your top few messages our audience can take away from today?

Alex Milosevic:

Top thing, don't judge. Talk to them, get to know them. Start to know what you need within your business. Let's not just look at the surface of someone walking through who might be really nervous, struggle with language. I think you'll find when you start to build relationships people really open up. I'm a big one for giving someone an opportunity. If your attitude is right you'll last in my business. If your attitude is wrong, you won't. And I think that's just basic, basic business. Our staff are treated with respect and dignity and they're always spoken to with respect. So we never talk down to people either.

Janette Witt:

And I think the other point I've got on here that you've said that I think it's important to note is also accepting that some strategies work and sometimes they don't.

Alex Milosevic:

And a lot of times I have to change. It's not up to my employees to adjust for me. Sometimes I have to look at what we're doing and the processes involved in my business and go are there things I can do that actually make it better for my staff and consequently it actually makes it better for my customers. Because then everybody wins.

Janette Witt:

Absolutely. Thank you very much Alex. That actually moves onto our next part, is around more helpful tips for employers. Alex and Kristin have both mentioned some already. But now I'll introduce Jim back. Jim could you please give us a few practical strategies that the other employers can implement when considering employee recruitment, both recruitment first and then in the workplace?

Jim Mullan:

Normalise your processes. Don't have specific adjustments that attach themselves to a specific section of your workforce. Normalise the process. Make it the same for everyone. It's keep it simple stupid. It really, really is. Be very explicit about what it is you're looking for. If you're recruiting, describe the job in a particular way. If you want to attract particular talent tell them in the ad that that's what you want to do. This is not going to be captured by everybody on the basis that you have some bland description of we are interested in diversity and inclusion in employment. No. If you want to attract people into your work tell them who you're looking for. We are very interested in hearing from neurodivergent candidates. You have lived experiences of great value to us. Put it out there. Sell it. Because if you don't there's a chance this will slide by.

Make your process as transparent as possible.

Janette Witt:

What do you mean by that?

Jim Mullan:

So some years ago we changed our recruitment process for autistic candidates. So you got a pack from us. It had photographs of the bus stop, the train station, our office, where you come in and where reception is, who's going to meet you, all of that. And it walked you through the entire process. It then gave you the questions that we were going to ask you and said this is not a test

of who can come up with the fastest smartarse reply. We want to understand how you understand the job. And so these are the questions we're going to ask. Always struck me as a conundrum that it was only people who were appointed to my position who knew the questions in advance and everybody else was mugged by a process. So we decided we would change that. When we did this, one, it was great for these candidates, but then when we applied it to everybody who comes to the organisation the feedback we get from everybody who goes through our process is this was the simplest, the easiest, the most straightforward, reduced my anxieties, helped me to perform the way I needed to perform. All of those elements were captured.

So our message to anyone who's listening is these adjustments improve everybody's experience of your organisation. So, you may think you're doing it for a particular reason but the reality is it's going to benefit you and every area of this. Understand what reasonable adjustments mean. All of your colleagues are making reasonable adjustments with each other on a daily basis, on an informal basis about when you go for your lunch and who's going to cover this, and could we out the heater up. All of these things are adjustments. I mean the most significant, technical adjustment I think we've made to our building to accommodate staff is we've got a pillowcase over the top of a fluorescent light just to dim the effect of it. And that was a multimillion-dollar project.

Janette Witt:

So they're minor things that can be done.

Jim Mullan:

Correct. Yeah. This is not rocket science. And for the most part it is just about are you prepared to engage in that conversation with all of your employees? Because if you engage in that conversation with all of your employees then disclosure is not an issue. It's just the way you function.

Janette Witt:

It is. And it also removes the perception that someone is a 'disability hire' or an inclusivity box that's being ticked. So it absolutely does Jim. And look thank you. And I think I for one am nervous when I go to interviews as well as are most people. So I appreciate your time today.

Jim Mullan:

Happy to help.

Janette Witt:

Today we have been over much of what's in the above list on the screen but hope it helps as a takeaway. I was privileged to be able to meet up with a group of employees who identify as being neurodivergent and got some of their insights into the support they feel would assist them in the workplace and what they recommend employers do to support them. Their insights were included throughout this presentation and certainly in the above list.

In conclusion by implementing even one inclusive practice you're making a difference in someone's life, and as Jim and everyone else has pointed out, in everybody's lives, and contributing to a more equitable world. Inclusive practices can unleash the full potential of every individual. By harnessing the power of neurodiversity organisations can unlock new perspectives, drive innovation, enhance problem solving capabilities and foster a culture of inclusivity that attracts and retains top talent. Embracing neurodiversity as an asset, not a limitation, creates workplaces where individuals of all neurological profiles, all of us, can thrive, contribute and succeed.

Thank you very much. We have added some presentation resources to the PowerPoint that will be sent out to everyone. Also, if you would like to reach out to us to explore a broader talent pool we're available to discuss programs and funding support to assist you to diversify and broaden your talent pool. Our next Hiring Outside the Box webinar is in a few months and it will be focused on building a culturally diverse workplace.

As you exit the webinar please stay online to complete the poll about today's webinar. And as always feel free to email us at engagement@dewr.gov.au. See you next time.

[Closing visual of slide with text saying 'Hiring Outside the Box', 'See you next time!']

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