

“Just do it”

Case study for employers from the Scottish Union of Supported Employment

Introduction

This is a case study of a small employer which has embraced the employment of people with disabilities for business reasons.

The employer, Blossoms Cafe, Torwood Garden Centre, in Larbert was a Silver Award winner at the Scottish Business Diversity Awards in 2011, which recognise employer good practice around disability and equality. This short case study highlights Blossoms experience in working with employability agencies that support people with disabilities.

Background

Torwood Garden Centre is a family owned business that has been operating for over sixty years. 8 years ago it relocated to new premises and developed the scope and size of the business. Corporate Social Responsibility features significantly in the business ethos and Torwood has a well earned reputation for supporting charity events. The Garden Centre has had a tearoom for many years, but opened the new Blossoms Cafe and Bistro eighteen months ago.

Linda Shields, Blossoms' manager, joined the business 6 years ago. At that time the tearoom employed 8 staff, had seventy seats, and was 'average'. Now employing sixteen staff, mostly full-time, and in a new coffee shop seating nearly two hundred, there is a seven-fold increase in revenue and Blossoms is a great success story.

Linda first got the idea of employing someone with disabilities from regular customers. A lady and her son with learning disabilities convinced Linda that the young man would make an enthusiastic employee and he became a weekender at Blossoms.

Current Practice

Nowadays Linda works with a variety of supported employment agencies - they support

employers and people with disabilities to achieve sustainable employment for individuals.

2 of Linda's current staff – Billy and Sarah¹ - were placed at Blossom's by agencies that provide support to people with learning difficulties.

Billy and Sarah began on 3 month work placements, after which Linda interviewed them to assess their suitability for a job at Blossoms. Now, as employees, Billy and Sarah work the same hours as all the other staff at Blossoms and are treated as any other team member.

When they first began work at Blossoms, the employability agency² visited the cafe weekly to support both Linda and the employees with any work issues. Over time, this external support has tapered off.

The employer's motivation

Linda is clear that Blossoms don't employ individuals with disabilities for “do gooding” reasons, and that they wouldn't do it if it didn't “make business sense”. Blossoms offers a 9-5 job and they have a waiting list of people interested in working with them, so Linda only employs people with disabilities because it works for her, the team and the bottom line.

Billy and Sarah are enthusiastic, and want to work at Blossoms. They want to stay, and that's good for business. Staff turnover is infamously high in the catering trade, but Blossom's staff with disabilities are loyal and reliable employees who want to stay in their jobs.

Sarah, who joined eighteen months ago, was so keen that she arranged with Blossoms to work both weekend days, although staff are only asked to work one. When she first joined she was shy and a bit worried, but she has grown in confidence and, over time, developed into her job and learnt to trust her colleagues.

Billy has a talent for baking, and Linda contacted the Scottish Association of Master

¹ Individuals names have been changed for the purpose of this case study.

² Sarah was supported by Real Jobs, The Action Group.

Bakers (SAMB). When Billy met the SAMB training adviser he so impressed him that Billy was offered a competitive, sought-after Bakers Apprenticeship. Being at work, having a chance to find and develop his talents has made Billy “walk taller” and the Blossoms’ team are excited about him achieving his potential.

Linda feels that one of the key benefits to employing people with disabilities is that it has supported staff to understand how to get the best out of people. The staff often wanted to “mother” the people with disabilities when they began work. However, the people with disabilities have the same job as everyone else and soon the tendency to mother them wears off. However, the staff with disabilities may have had previous negative life experiences or lack confidence or work experience and supporting them to reach their potential has increased the awareness, patience and consideration of the whole staff team. This has improved customer service, in a business where customer service and staffs’ attitudes to customers is all important. The Blossoms staff have, through working in a diverse workforce, become more tolerant and understanding with customers – you could say, more customer focussed.

Blossoms, with its diverse workforce, has developed a reputation of being a friendly cafe and this brings custom from people with disabilities, their families, carers and agency staff who support them.

What works?

As is the case with every employee sometimes employing people with disabilities doesn’t work out. Linda explains that:

“the main thing is that the person wants to be here”.

The times it hasn’t worked out are when girls have come to work at Blossoms but really want to be a hairdresser or a beautician. Without being interested in the cafe, catering and baking they aren’t likely to do a good job.

Getting this match between the person and the job is an important skill of good quality supported employment agencies. The agencies support the employer, like Blossoms, by filtering out clients or job applicants to ensure those that come to Blossoms want to work and want to do the type of work Blossoms offers.

Linda emphasises that it is the attitude of the employees – supported or otherwise - that matters. If new employees are lacking skills, Linda and other staff members can train them, if they are open to training. Linda admits that the employees with learning disabilities do take time. For example, when a change happens, like installing a new coffee machine, the reasons for the change and the new ways of working have to be explained thoroughly: you “can’t do anything in a hurry”. However she feels the return – reliable staff who won’t move on after 3 to 6 months – is worth more than the time investment.

At the start of their contracts, when the job and environment needs most explanation, Linda was assisted by the supported employment agency staff, who visited Billy and Sarah regularly. Even now, if Linda, Billy or Sarah wanted assistance with a workplace issue they could call the agency for support.

At Blossoms, Billy and Sarah are treated like any other member of staff: this is what works. There is another Blossoms employee with a disability who was employed prior to Linda becoming the manager; his contract and hours are different from other staff and he expects to be treated differently. This alienates other staff.

Employing Billy and Sarah is working well for Blossoms because they are focussed and committed staff that fit in with the rest of the team.

So Linda’s advice for other employers thinking about working with a supported employment agency and employing someone with a disability is “**Just do it**”.

