

Rethinking inclusion in the workplace: more job opportunities needed for those with disabilities

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There are several barriers to employment for disabled people in New Zealand: environmental obstructions, societal prejudice, lack of training, and work experience opportunities.

Statistics New Zealand reports that one in every four New Zealanders identify as having a disability and while unemployment rates for this group are dropping, it is still three times harder to get a job. Disabled people in New Zealand are also significantly less likely to have full time work with 45 percent of disabled adults having employment compared to 72 percent of non-disabled people.

For New Zealand businesses there is an evident untapped talent pool and need for more inclusive workplaces.

Buddle Findlay, alongside the Halberg Foundation, are working together to change these statistics by providing work experience opportunities for young disabled students. Buddle Findlay and the Halberg Foundation launched a career experience programme to address the need for more opportunities for disabled people. This programme offered work experience at all three Buddle Findlay offices to Halberg youth council members.

Buddle Findlay Partner, Mark Odlin worked closely with Christchurch youth council member, Thomas Chin, one of the first participants in the career experience programme. The Canterbury University student, who has cerebral palsy, is studying a double degree in law and Māori and indigenous studies. "Having Thomas as part of our Career Experience programme was invaluable. Thomas seized every opportunity and our team thoroughly enjoyed having him."

Buddle Findlay recognises that its strength lies in employing and working with talented people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. "Employment discrimination can occur even without intent. It is extremely important to consider what someone has to offer rather than how they may do the job at hand."

"The legal profession has worked hard in recent years to improve diversity and inclusion and ensure all people feel respected in the workplace regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality or physical abilities. It's important that this work continues and that the progress being made in the legal field is used for wider application," he says.

Looking back, Thomas Chin viewed the career experience programme as being highly beneficial from both a professional level, and also a personal one. "Often it is hard to see the end goal when you're sitting in a lecture. The programme showed me that a pathway and future in law is a viable option for someone like me. The legal profession can play a key role in change in New Zealand. I want to see the industry be more inclusive and open to people with not only different backgrounds, beliefs, but also life experiences."

The Buddle Findlay and Halberg career experience programme aims to open new opportunities for people with disabilities, which may not have been possible before.

Alongside Thomas, Kiran Dixon, who has metatropic dysplasia, joined the Wellington office as part of the marketing team while studying a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Communications, minoring in History and Music Technology. "My experience was more than I expected, upskilling me to understand the bigger picture. In my time with the marketing team, they showed me new ways to do things, how the company works, and ways to lead. These are valuable skills that I can take with me going forward."

"It is great to see Buddle Findlay progressing and providing the opportunity for career experience, but more work needs to be done in New Zealand. There needs to be a systematic shift in order for us to reach true inclusivity and diversity in the workplace. I hope to experience this change while I am in the workforce."

Ex Buddle Findlay solicitor, and current Disability Rights Commissioner, Paula Tesoriero agrees. "Disabled young people should have as many opportunities to succeed and excel as non-disabled young people. Getting that first job is a huge hurdle for everyone. I want all disabled young people to have opportunities to thrive and flourish, so they can embark on their careers with self-worth and confidence. It's great that my old law firm Buddle Findlay is supporting the aspirations of these youngsters – they are our future and we're all better off when they succeed."

Buddle Findlay and the Halberg Foundation continue to explore work experience opportunities for young people with disabilities. The law firm also provides the Foundation with financial assistance and legal support to help achieve its goal of sport and recreation for all.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE BUDDLE FINDLAY & HALBERG CAREER EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME

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