

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

breaking down barriers

Centrica has developed an innovative employment policy towards disabled people. This has brought benefits to all those involved and helped to raise awareness of the prejudices faced by disabled people in the employment market. Other companies may now follow suit

All too often, disabled people get a raw deal in the employment market. Around one million disabled people are looking for work in the UK, but face prejudices about disability. Employers need talented and committed staff – yet there is a gulf separating disabled people and employers, according to Susan Scott Parker, chief executive of the Employers’ Forum on Disability. ‘The loss to society of the productive contribution of disabled people who cannot find work is enormous’, she says.

Four years ago Centrica, which trades in the UK as the AA, British Gas, Goldfish and One.Tel, started to bridge this gulf. Its Project Led Recruitment initiative aims to tackle unemployment among disabled people and overcome the prejudices they face. The project was launched at British Gas’s Manchester office in 1998, when the company decided to work with the government and voluntary sector to develop a work programme for disabled people and carers.

Originally around 300 job candidates from the north-west of England were referred by Jobcentre Plus, the government-run employment service. Following a telephone interview for permanent positions at British Gas call centres, successful candidates attended a two-day workshop run by career counsellors Capita Grosvenor to prepare for the final interview. Centrica subsequently offered contracts to around 50 interviewees, some of whom had not worked for many years.

Unsuccessful applicants were offered feedback on why they had not got the job, as well as further support from a disability employment advisor. Many of these candidates went on to find jobs elsewhere as a result of the experience gained.

British Gas assessed each of the new recruits for any working aids they might need, such as larger computer screens and adapted hearing equipment. Installing these was not a significant cost. Around 80 per cent of the recruits had a disability, but the remainder had previously cared for a sick or disabled family member for a long period, and had therefore not been able to do other work.

Almost immediately Centrica benefited in terms of productivity, quality of work and loyalty. ‘The people who came to us through the programme were

the company

Centrica is a provider of energy and other essential services, with over 44 million customer relationships worldwide. In Britain it trades under the AA, British Gas, Goldfish and One.Tel brands and operates as Direct Energy in Canada and Energy America in the US. It has over 30,000 employees and in 2001 made a profit of £679million on turnover of £12.6billion. It: ■ was ranked fifth in a 2001 MORI poll that asked members of the public which of 50 UK companies had the best approach to corporate social responsibility ■ came joint top in a 2002 analysis of workforce pay and conditions among the world’s 19 biggest international electricity and gas supply companies by the German ratings agency oekem ■ was highlighted for its anti-discrimination initiatives in a spring 2000 study of the employment practices of FTSE100 companies carried out by the London-based corporate governance consultancy Pensions and Investment Research Consultants ■ won the Realising Ability award at Business in the Community’s 2002 awards for its outstanding work with disabled people.

staff turnover rates have fallen and many of the original recruits are still working for Centrica

extremely motivated and delivered high quality work,’ says Wendela Currie, group HR projects manager. ‘We’ve found an untapped pool of talented, skilled and committed people, and we’ve benefited hugely from it.’

Existing Centrica staff quickly found the scheme to their liking too, says Currie. ‘It soon became very clear that line managers were getting good people of equal quality. Everybody is sold on the idea because of the very good response and the calibre of applicant.’

Now a core part of Centrica’s diversity and corporate social responsibility strategy, the project has so far taken on 150 people across Britain, giving them the chance to put long-term unemployment behind them, renewing their self-confidence and releasing them from benefit dependency. It has also taught the company valuable lessons about how to cater for the estimated one in seven of its customers with some form of disability. As a direct result of the project, each of the group’s business units has appointed a senior diversity champion to improve services for disabled customers, and Centrica now runs staff disability training and awareness programmes.

Staff turnover rates, which tend to be a cause for concern in most call centres, appear to have



■ the UK government has endorsed Centrica's policy of providing jobs for disabled people and former carers as a model for other businesses. The picture shows former work and pensions minister Alistair Darling (right) visiting the Edinburgh scheme

improved, although it is difficult to make direct 'before and after' comparisons. 'Certainly the recruits are highly motivated and deliver a high quality of work,' says Currie. 'As a result, many of the employees initially recruited are still with us. A further positive is that even if staff move on, we know that they will have the necessary skills to move into alternative employment at a later date rather than move back onto benefits.'

There have also been many personal testaments from satisfied recruits. 'I've come a long way since joining British Gas,' says Mark Blades, who secured a job in Manchester. 'It's given me the scope to develop myself and restored my confidence and pride. There were times before when I thought I wouldn't get a job. This has given me the basic opportunity to progress myself.'

This example of best practice in corporate social responsibility has brought material benefits to all parties: Centrica benefits from motivated and productive employees; disabled people have much-improved personal prospects, and society in general benefits from reduced unemployment.

Centrica has now introduced the scheme in a number of offices including Cardiff, Newcastle, Southampton and Edinburgh, and hopes to recruit at least another 100 disabled people by 2003. Already the scope of recruitment has expanded to draw in other groups, such as lone parents. 'Human resources have been convinced of the cost benefits to the group, even if it does take a bit longer to recruit this way than through our normal route, which is to use job agencies', says Currie.

Other companies are now interested in replicating Centrica's scheme, which the UK government has endorsed as a model for business. In November 2001 the Employers' Forum on Disability, a business-led organization that helps companies increase the number of disabled people they employ,

published *Recruitment that works*, a practical guide outlining Centrica's work in this area. Centrica has since made presentations to 15 other companies, a number of whom, including HSBC and Zurich Financial Services, have shown interest in following its example.

The initiative, say those who are involved, has shown that the way to break down assumptions and prejudices is to focus on the abilities of disabled people, and not on their limitations. As Leigh Lewis, chief executive of Jobcentre Plus, says: 'We all tend to focus on what a disabled person cannot do, but this project shows that when we start from a very different perspective, looking at what the employer needs and what a disabled person can do, then the results can be startlingly effective.'

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Everyone has a prejudice. For some organizations, employing people who are disabled conjures up inefficiency and unnecessary expense. Centrica's diversity project started in 1998. Its aim is to attract those with disabilities to work at British Gas call centres. Their experience shows that there is a robust business case for employing those who are in some way disabled. In 2003, the company is expanding the scheme to cover more centres, and is to employ a further 100 disabled people as a result.

outstanding features of the project:

- staff turnover has been reduced
- disabled customers benefit as well as staff
- co-operation with government and voluntary sector
- feedback given to unsuccessful candidates
- the scheme is being replicated by other organizations.

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