

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 18 August 2020 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

What employers do next could help build a better, more equal society

In everything I've written since March, we've been looking at the equality aspects of running your business during the COVID-19 pandemic and how to navigate your way as an employer through all the complexities these last months have thrown up.

There's one common thread running through them all, and that's the absolute imperative to be sure that what you are doing complies with equality law while getting your business through these hard times. It may also present business with some opportunities.

Whilst recognising that many staff worked throughout lockdown and kept us healthy, fed and supplied with what we needed, with an effort not unlike wartime, the 'return to work' provides us with the opportunity to build on what we have learnt over the last few months.

There may be a chance to remove some of the barriers to employment faced by, for example, disabled people or parents, particularly women with children. The move to more flexible working and working from home has the potential to open up employment to different people who may have been excluded up until now. However, it is important to bear in mind that calls to our advice line from employees who feel they have been discriminated continued over the last period.

Keeping equality in mind when you're making business decisions, being fair and objective, and consulting with and explaining things to your staff will strengthen you and your business. You want to keep the talent you need, and the evidence shows that inclusion boosts employee engagement. Making employees feel accepted and valued aids retention and lowers staff turnover rates.

Creating a culture of inclusion is critical to ensure that you engage, attract and retain a diverse workforce and the best talent available. One way of doing this is to have a range of policies on equality issues that are known and available to every member of staff, and of course, to be seen to be implementing them. Another is by your leadership, 'walking the walk' by acting in accordance with clearly expressed company values which include equality and respect for diversity.

So, the four golden rules which should govern your decisions are:

- Do not discriminate against anyone on the grounds of who or what they are, that is, on the grounds of age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, race or religious or political belief. These are all protected by equality law.

- Take the needs of individual employees into account. Time-consuming, but make sure they have what they need to be able to do their best work. Be aware that if you apply the same policy to all staff without thinking about who it might impact on adversely, you may unintentionally discriminate. So communicate with your staff, as groups and as individuals.
- Have policies and follow them. Record your decisions and processes.
- Above all be objective and even-handed. Be the leader who models fairness, dignity and respect. Make sure your behaviour spells out to employees what you expect from them and what they can expect from you.

But there is no doubt that COVID-19 has shown us what is possible and the speed of business reactions and adaptations has been swift. We know now that people can work in different ways that can be responsive to individuals' needs and allow them a better work/life balance. We are in a place where what employers do next could be fundamental to building a better, more equal society, based on new and modern working practices, lessening inequalities and promoting inclusion.