

View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 14 March 2023 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI

Focus on retention – using equality policies to hold onto your staff

One reaction to the talent shortage is to focus on recruitment strategies and resourcing. But another is to stop staff leaving, and staff turnover is expensive. We have some advice to offer when it comes to retaining people you can ill afford to lose. Since International Women's Day was last week, I'm going to focus on retaining women at work.

Retention is difficult for management and senior teams. It means taking a long hard look at your organisation and taking the time to find out what there is about it that is causing women to resign. It might just be a new or better paid job, but it might also be that they see no future for themselves in your organisation, or childcare is so expensive it's cheaper not to work, or they simply do not feel at home with the workplace culture.

The general principles of a welcoming and inclusive workplace apply, and not just to women. The tools and positive action allowed by equality laws can help you with this. And remember too that much of what you need to think about, such as pregnancy and maternity, or the menopause, will not go on for ever, they are phases of a woman's life.

Money is a key consideration for everyone. Equal pay has been the law for many years, but gender pay gap reporting, which looks at the difference in average pay between women and men, is relatively new. In Northern Ireland we have a Gender Pay Gap Reporting bill which has not yet been enacted, but Gender Pay Gap Reporting is now the law everywhere else in the UK and Ireland. Our advice is that employers here will have to do this sooner or later, and some employers are already doing it, so why not do it now, and show your employees, as well as potential job applicants, that you're committed to understanding and closing the gap.

Pregnancy and maternity are two of the biggest issues both for employers and HR people and for women contacting our discrimination advice line. We have supported numerous legal cases where employers have ended up not just losing an employee but also paying out large sums in settlements or compensation. Don't let this happen to you. We have advice to guide you through compliance with the law, either online or in person, or by email or phone.

One of the key ways of helping working mothers balance their work and home responsibilities is by facilitating flexible working and job sharing where you can. There's also a strong argument for flexible working for fathers too – parents can share the care and the working time. Employers must remember that all employees have a right to request flexible working, and if you want to refuse it, you must have a reasonable, objective and justifiable reason for doing so – one that a Tribunal would accept.

There's been a great deal of talk about the rights of women going through the menopause and while there isn't a great deal of case law to rely on, it's certainly conceivable that employers could find themselves on the receiving end of a claim of disability, sex or age discrimination. We published guidance developed with the Labour Relations Agency and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions which can help employers with best practice suggestions to help you and any employee going through the menopause.

One of the most difficult areas to tackle is culture. It's hard to take a look at your organisation and recognise that a culture that's been prevalent for years is a chill factor for new people, including women. We've had queries to our discrimination advice line where an 'all boys together' culture spills over into borderline misogyny, making colleagues humiliated or uncomfortable, sometimes to the point of having to leave their jobs. We publicised the result of a sexual harassment case last December, where a woman was hit on the bottom with a ruler in front of her (male) colleagues and felt so humiliated she had eventually to resign. That 'joke' cost the employer £90,000.

Finally, to retain women employees, prove there is a pathway for them by making women visible in the organisation. If they can see other women being successful, they will believe there is a future and a place for them.

It's important that you have active policies that everyone knows about which lay down the rules for all employees, recognising that there are different upheavals and events in the lives of women and men. Go online for template policies and information at www.equalityni.org, phone us on 028 90 500 600 or email us at enquiries@equalityni.org for tailored, free and confidential advice and information.