Employees can make easy work of disability

Opinion

Robyn Weekes
director of employment, equity and diversity,
University of Wollongong

If you are thinking of employing a person with a disability but are unsure because you haven’t travelled this route before, let me reassure you. You are not alone. In a national inquiry commissioned by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission last year into employment and disability, one of the key barriers to improved employment opportunities was employers’ concerns about financial and personal impact if the job did not work out.

In my role of director of employment equity and diversity at the University of Wollongong (UOW), I have encountered many more successes than failures in employing people with a disability. There are no guarantees that every person you employ will be the perfect employee. I would rate the chance of a successful employment relationship higher if you employ a person with a disability. In my experience, people in this group typically have a “can do” attitude. Most people with a disability want to work if they have the capacity to do so, but sadly the opportunities are limited. When they are given an opportunity, they work even harder to show what they can do. It is important for them to prove something, not only to you, but also to themselves. People with a disability are very loyal employees. They have very low attrition rates. Another barrier to employing people with a disability is our perception of what a person with a particular disability can do. We inevitably underestimate their capacity. We do not fully appreciate what technology is available to assist people with a disability. While most of us are aware of devices to assist workers handling heavy materials, many are unaware of ergonomic technology such as screen readers for the sight-impaired or word prediction software voice activation for those unable to use a computer keyboard.

People with mobility-based disabilities are often very computer literate because computers can provide access to information. UOW has a longstanding commitment to employ a diverse and skilled workforce, which reflects the diversity of our community. People with a disability are one of the various groups in our community under-represented in employment. People with a disability represent 16.6 per cent of Australia’s working-age population. The Federal Government is predicting a skill shortage based on our ageing population. People with a disability provide a largely untapped labour pool of both full-time and part-time staff for employers willing to put aside their concerns and give someone with a disability a go. I guarantee you will get a dedicated and very able employee.

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