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Creating inclusive workspaces for people with disabilities

New study aims to help SA companies facilitate employment and meet targets

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GLOBALLY, people with disabilities are still under-represented in the workplace. The situation is the same in South Africa. While we have well-defined laws, we are still failing to ensure that employment targets for people with disabilities are met in both the private and public sectors. As we celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities this Sunday, we should also emphasise the need for disability inclusive employment that has received growing attention in response to this under-representation.

Amid the guidelines and policies – such as the Technical Assistance Guidelines on the employment of people with disabilities, which includes specific guidelines on reasonable accommodation and fair recruitment procedures – companies still struggle to recruit and employ people with disabilities to meet the set employment equity targets. In addition to systemic exclusion and other barriers facing people with disabilities, many companies may not know how to facilitate disability inclusive employment.

Against this background, we conducted a case study to identify and explore factors that enabled a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the Western Cape to meet its employment equity targets for recruiting people with disabilities. We focused on a regional branch of a partially government-owned entity in the province that employs about 570 workers – from top-level managers to porters and cleaners.

We interviewed human resources managers, human resources employees and employees with disabilities who are permanently employed at the SOE. For secondary data, we reviewed the company website and other organisational documents, including annual integrated reports, as well as two internal policies that ensure procedures for reasonable accommodation, and compliance with the Employment Equity Act (EEA) 55 of 1998 (amended to the Employment Equity Amendment Act 4 of 2022) respectively.

We found that the advancement of people with disabilities is a key focus of the company, as shown in its 2019/2020 annual integrated report. One example of this is the increase in the representation of people with disabilities to 2.5% of the total workforce, nationally. This increase was attributed to:

- ◆ The creation of awareness about the inclusion of people with disabilities.
- ◆ A dedicated task team devoted to ensuring accessibility, inclusion and reasonable accommodation.
- ◆ Running annual declaration campaigns and sensitisation initiatives on disability matters.
- ◆ Recommendations made regarding reasonable accommodation requirements nationally by existing employees with disabilities.
- ◆ Networking support group sessions are held quarterly, focusing on issues affecting employees with disabilities and offering a platform to determine best practice strategies and solutions.
- ◆ Constant engagement with the disability sector organisations to stay abreast of disability developments; and
- ◆ Aligning disclosure and reasonable accommodation policies to address requirements as recommended by employees with disabilities.

We also found that the company's internal policy, aimed at ensuring procedures to provide reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities, outlines disclosure of disability and the accompanying protection of confidentiality and personal information.

It also specifies a special budget to be made available for the provision of reasonable accommodation, monitoring of compliance, and ensuring a non-discriminatory workplace.

The policy encourages employees with disabilities to be involved in decision-making around reasonable accommodation and also prescribes that dispute-resolution processes should be put in place. All procedures for the provision of reasonable accommodation are drawn up according to the policy. This policy gets reviewed

according to changes in the workplace and regulations. Audits are conducted to determine compliance and implementation of reasonable accommodation. Responsible persons are appointed and held accountable for reasonable accommodation regionally and nationally.

Regarding the company's other internal policy aimed at ensuring compliance with the EEA, our study showed that organisational strategic objectives are set according to an analysis of workforce demographics. In this way, the company can make sure that all categories of employment reflect South Africa's demographic profile. The policy document offers a clear definition of disability, outlines various impairments and prescribes fair recruitment and selection processes as well as equitable training and development.

In addition, the policy document enforces action plans to monitor and evaluate progress made to achieve employment equity targets. The document mandates quarterly meetings with representation from designated equity groups and leadership of the organisation. Individuals and departments are held responsible and accountable for achieving employment equity targets both regionally and nationally. Achieving these targets is linked to the performance of individuals and departments.

Our analysis of the interview data showed designing the recruitment process and the workplace environment for inclusion as a key facilitating factor, which has enabled the company to recruit effectively. This included embracing diversity in the workplace as a key facilitator of inclusive environments. This was accomplished through workshops on learning about each other's cultures and disability awareness sessions focusing on topics such as the everyday challenges faced by employees with disabilities and why reasonable accommodation is necessary.

Line managers who are directly involved in recruiting and managing employees were specifically targeted

for such awareness and sensitising educational disability workshops to foster an inclusive culture. This culture created a safe space for disclosures of disability. Human resource practitioners consult employees with disabilities to ensure that any released job advertisements, recruitment drives, and interview venues and processes are accessible to people with disabilities.

The company also found the formation of alliances with disability organisations and disability specific recruitment agencies helpful for effective recruitment and integration of employees with disabilities. These organisations also ensure that the requirements of a specific job are suitably matched to a candidate with a disability (job matching).

So, what does this tell us about how companies could improve the representation of people with disabilities in the workplace?

It is clear from our study that companies that focus on intangible aspects such as fostering an inclusive culture and rebranding themselves as pro-disability are more likely to create inclusive workspaces. Once this has been achieved, it becomes easier to facilitate the tangible aspects such as making sure that recruitment and placement processes as well as budgets are inclusive, physical spaces are altered, and employees are provided with assistive technologies to enable accessibility.

We believe there is much to learn from inclusive companies as far as meeting employment equity targets for people with disabilities is concerned. Hopefully, our study can help employers improve employment for people with disabilities and also show occupational therapists how to engage employers and better prepare people with disabilities to enter or return to the labour market.

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