

Small Employers' Attitudes to Disability

A Disability Rights Commission Survey conducted by Opinion Research Business

Summary

In 2004, Opinion Research Business conducted a telephone study for the Disability Rights Commission among 1000 small business owners covering companies in the retail, services, transport, agriculture and manufacturing sectors. All companies employed up to 50 people. The statistical margin of error in this data is $\pm 3.1\%$.

Key Findings

- 78% of small business owners don't think that other employees will have to cover for disabled people too much.
- 75% of small employers disagree that disabled people will cost companies money.
- Nearly two thirds (64%) of small business owners don't agree that disabled people will take more sick leave than other people.
- Four in five employers in the small business sector (80%) disagree that "disabled people will be less productive than other workers".
- 45% of those surveyed believe that it would be "quite/very difficult" to employ a disabled person. This is significantly higher than for employing older people, women or those from ethnic groups.
- More than four in five employers (87%) think that disabled people "would fit into their team".
- 85% of companies are happy to be flexible about their hours or minor bits of the job role if the employee has the right skills and enthusiasm.
- If the job did not work out, one in four (24%) think that disabled employees would claim discrimination.
- 21% of employers found that an employee developed a disability of health condition once they were in the job.
- Many small business employers when they hear the word "disability" immediately think of people in a wheelchair (41%) and someone with a "physical impairment" (41%). (The reality is that only 1 in 13 of Britain's 10 million disabled people are wheelchair users.)
- Having heard the full definition of a disabled person, one in three companies (36%) think they have employed/recruited a disabled person.
- One in three (31%) small businesses could be financially incentivised to recruit a disabled person.

- Awareness of the Disability Discrimination Act and changes that were introduced in October 2004 may well be vague – one in two “do not know” what the changes mean to them as employers.
- Finding suitably qualified staff was the biggest problem for small employers.
- The majority turn to their accountants for advice.

Comparator Groups

Every company is different, but the survey found that, in terms of attitudes and behaviour towards employing disabled people, there are broadly three types of business.

Nearly There or “The Good Neighbours”

- 15% of businesses fall into this category.
- Every business in this group believes it would be easy to recruit someone with a disability but only 41% have already knowingly done so.
- The way that these companies are set up and operate however, suggests that their employees are probably being well looked after. 40% of these companies believe that their offices are already set up well to manage with a disabled employee.
- ‘Nearly There’ companies have almost never refused a candidate on the basis of their disability and are confident that they understand the issues that disabled people face, either through work or personal circumstances. That said, 38% still think of wheelchairs when they think of disabled people.
- These companies are not particularly scared of discrimination claims. While some believe that employing a disabled person could end that way, 89% have no fear at all. These companies are not scared and, in our view, have no reason to be.

Potential Partners or “Thoughtless Neighbours”

- Potential Partners comprise over half of all small businesses – 53%.
- These companies want to be good employers; they have strong positive views about disabled people and 85% say that they would be flexible about working hours/role if the candidate had the right skills and enthusiasm. 63% are familiar with the issues facing disabled people today. And only 1% believes a disabled person wouldn’t fit into their team.
- These companies believe that disabled people would fit into their team; that other team members wouldn’t have to cover for them; that they wouldn’t be trouble and wouldn’t cost the business money. In fact, only 2% believe that disabled employees would be less productive than other workers.

- 40% instinctively think that it would be difficult for them to employ someone with a disability.
- 50% have some degree of concern about claims being made against them by disabled employees.

Naïve Discriminators or “Nuisance Neighbours”

- Nearly a third of small businesses are Naïve Discriminators. More than 1 in 2 say that they are not very familiar or not familiar at all with the issues that disabled people face. 3 in 4 say that it would be difficult to employ someone with a disability or health condition.
- These companies not only discriminate against people with disabilities, but also against older people and ethnic minorities. Only 58% believe it would be very easy to employ someone from an ethnic minority. Only 59% believe it would be very easy to employ a woman in their company.
- Despite coming from similar sectors to the other two groups, 41% of Naïve Discriminators use the nature of their work (e.g. that it requires physical labour or driving) as an excuse for not employing disabled people.
- Naïve Discriminators think of disabled employees as a drain – on their finances (37%), their colleagues (33%) and through taking sick leave (44%).