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Why diversity?

It sounds like the beginning of a joke: a man and a woman with the same qualifications, experience and potential walk into a job interview.

What's not so funny is the outcome: more often than not it's the bloke who lands the job. Carol Brown, CEO of [Diversitas](#), an Auckland-based company which works with organisations to leverage the benefits of having a diverse workforce, says it's high time we flipped scenarios like this on their head and started leveraging the full potential of the available talent.



"Since 1986, women's participation in New Zealand's workforce has increased by more than 50 percent and internationally our female participation rate is way above the OECD average," says Carol.

"At the same time we've got an ageing population and minimal workforce growth, primarily being driven by immigration. We've never had as much demographic disruption as we're seeing now. It's why creating inclusive workplaces is so important, because we need to make better use of the pool of labour we have."

Of course, hiring, retraining and promoting diverse talent isn't new. But getting it right is gaining in urgency, underpinned by a global trend towards the deregulation of the workforce that means workers are looking for more choice over their working hours, place of work and the way in which that work is delivered. In recognition of the increasing demand for flexible work design, earlier this year New Zealand introduced further amendments to the flexibility provisions of the Employment Relations Act, putting the issue front and centre for employers and employees.

Add to that the fact that New Zealand has one of the highest rates of overall workforce participation - but one of the lowest rates of workforce productivity in the OECD - and it's clear that diversity and inclusion is a train we need to get on board now.

"Evidence shows that diversity, especially gender balance, at all levels of an organisation, means better decision making and organisational performance. Whether you're a small to medium enterprise or a larger employer, having a diverse workforce will create diversity of thought which, in turn, leads to improved innovation and a better understanding of your customer's needs. It's a strategic business imperative and getting ahead of the competition while improving profitability is the pay off," says Carol.

Carol, who believes we lead Australia in terms of voluntarily adopting diversity and inclusive strategies (across the ditch, programmes are largely legislated), says diversity requires commitment to action.

"Diversity and inclusion aren't just passive words to put into mission and values statements but a commitment to invite and engage with different people and make it clear that they are valued and essential to your company's success." It's not just about changing who's sitting at the table, but about changing the table itself.

"Having a workforce which includes people with different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives will change the conversations you have, the ways you work and the processes by which decisions are made. Without new and different thought processes, there is no innovation and without innovation, there is no growth."

The key is to create an environment that allows staff to not just develop but thrive.

"Taking an evidence-based approach to issues such as unconscious bias, conflict, resolution and education are essential and reviewing your people practices to create a more inclusive culture will help to improve your interaction with your employees and customers – and increase productivity and the bottom line. It's a win-win for everyone," adds Carol.

Around 97 percent of New Zealand businesses fall into the small to medium enterprises category (fewer than 50 employees) and the Chief Executive for the Ministry for Women, Jo Cribb, says her team is currently developing workshops that will be rolled out in 2016 to help small to medium enterprises implement diversity and flexible workplace strategies.

"We need to do this, not because it's the right thing to do, but because it's about improving business returns and contributing to a better New Zealand," says Jo.

"Diversity and inclusion makes perfect sense from every angle, so why wouldn't we do it?"

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