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Safe, healthy & inclusive working environment - What the experts say

Lucy Reynolds, Chwarae Teg has advice on how you can offer a good workplace culture for your employees.

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As an organisation, Chwarae Teg has over 30 years of experience in driving forward change to create a more equal, diverse and inclusive Wales. I recently joined Chwarae Teg as CEO after spending the last eight years leading the domestic abuse organisation, Thrive Women's Aid. Therefore, I have had several years of experience in helping people to ensure safe, healthy and inclusive environments.

We know that progress is simply not quick enough when it comes to a more gender equal Wales. At Chwarae Teg, wepublish an annual State of the Nation report, and this year we published our fifth report which highlighted how there had only been marginal change during that time. In fact, if our current pace is maintained, women in Wales are going to have to wait decades for true equality.

Our State of the Nation report also found that women remain at greater risk of harassment and abuse with just 51% of women in Wales feeling safe at home, walking within their local areas and travelling, and at least 40% of women are likely to experience sexual harassment over the course of their career. For some women, these issues are felt even more acutely, women who have other protected characteristics such as women from ethnic minorities, disabled women, LGBTQIA women, and older women are further marginalised and experience multiple forms of disadvantage in the workplace.

Therefore, the need for action to ensure safe, healthy and inclusive working environments is clear, and it can benefit both employers and employees. We know socio-demographic trends are changing rapidly within the workplace and, of course, in other areas of life which means that issues such as an aging population and migration mean that workforces are more diverse than they have ever been.

In fact, the white, non-disabled man is statistically a minority in the global workplace. However, they are, as we know, more likely to be in a senior position and they remain the workplace norm, which most processes and policies are tailored to. Clearly, there is a strong moral and ethical reason for promoting inclusive working environments, but there is also a very strong business case. Not only could

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promoting gender equality in the workplace add £13.6 billion to Wales' economy, but organisations who treat their staff well will also be able to retain talent, and employees who also feel valued and safe will perform better.

This change in approach to equality is needed to match the rapidly changing world of work which, has in part, been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but there are also other factors, such as digitalisation and the need to transition to a green economy.

If we do not prioritise equality as we shape and navigate those changes, we risk reinforcing the inequality that we already see. In Wales, the gender pay gap currently stands at 11.3% and women are less likely to be represented in senior positions and account for only 39% of managers, directors and senior officials, and just 14% of our SMEs are wholly led by women.

But we know first-hand from our work with businesses and individuals that providing safe, healthy and inclusive workplace cultures benefits both parties and those benefits are felt in the long term. Staff feel happier, safer and more engaged in the business and businesses themselves are benefiting from a more committed workforce.

Recruitment is particularly challenging for several sectors at the moment, so we would really urge businesses to think about how they could improve their workplace culture and create working environments which enable the recruitment of a more diverse workforce.

We recently worked with Leabold Financial Management based in Abercynon, South Wales. They introduced agile working into the business and re-shaped the culture of the organisation and the results were astonishing. They have seen their highest annual turnover of £620,000 and saved more than £20,000 in costs as a direct result and forecast they will save over £40,000 in the next financial year. Leabold also experienced other benefits, such as recruitment becoming significantly easier as location is no longer a factor, so they can now focus on getting the right person for

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the role rather than geographic location. Wellbeing and happiness of the staff has increased as they get to work when it suits their schedule, giving them more time to pursue their own interests and spend time with family.

Productivity also rose amongst staff and more time is being spent speaking with customers, as the advisors do not have to travel to different locations. This highlights the benefits of providing inclusive and agile working spaces for both employers and employees.

We really need all employers to engage with these issues and to take action if we are to achieve that ambitious goal
of becoming a more equal and prosperous Wales. The Welsh Government's Fair Work agenda provides an important set of guiding principles for ensuring that workplaces are supporting equality now and into the future. Once organisations have that infrastructure in place, they can then start to think about how they can implement stronger diversity initiatives and positive action which supports equity in the workplace. This is a necessity for those who are most marginalised, and those initiatives promote equality of outcome and not just equality of opportunity, which is critical.

Recruitment is an area where we know bias can creep in, so reviewing policies, processes and practices is really important, as well as providing training to those involved in recruitment.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is not just a HR function, line managers are often making decisions where EDI training can make a difference, and businesses need to start asking themselves: 'Are we doing enough to attract and retain employees from different backgrounds' and 'do we need to start thinking about some positive action?

Of course, the size and the scale of those initiatives will be different for every organisation and there is no 'one size fits all' answer, however, having the right policies in place is part of the solution. But policies alone will not drive lasting,

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meaningful change and that is why we will get businesses to focus on their culture.

We work with employers to understand their workplace culture, focus on issues which we know are critical to achieving gender equality, and then use this evidence to support employers to develop an action plan that is targeted in the areas where they can make the biggest difference.

What is crucial is that any work on EDI is not seen as a tick box exercise. Making safe, healthy and inclusive workplace culture means making EDI a strategic priority for the organisation.

We have seen that as new technologies emerge, we are able to try and innovate new ways of organising work and also supporting people to work in a way that works for them.

We have really seen that pan out as a result of the pandemic. There has been this shift to hybrid work and a more flexible working environment that meets the needs of women and other marginalised groups.

The 2023 International Women's Day theme was to embrace equity, and we hope that this provides some sort of clarity to businesses on what that means. I think there can sometimes be some confusion around the definitions of equality and equity. Ultimately, unless businesses truly understand these definitions, then they cannot implement any relevant actions effectively.

For us, implementing equity within the workplace really does make sure that there is a quality of outcome, and of course, we are always happy to support businesses with any confusion around those definitions and how they embed that into their practice.

As we look to the future, we are also acutely aware that there are other pressures facing businesses, such as green economies and net carbon plans, and so sustainability is also fast becoming another critical priority for businesses.

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The key message that we would like to send from Chwarae Teg is that there is not a choice between diversity and sustainability. They are both emerging movements and are linked. What we do not want to see is people deprioritising their work on EDI in favour of their work on sustainability, because they come hand-in-hand.

Providing safe, healthy and inclusive workplaces is hugely important and has some clear benefits. Human sustainability is equally as important as environmental sustainability, so we really want to continue to see that as a priority for businesses into the future.

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