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Article

Why successful, responsible small businesses are inclusive businesses

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Please note this content was curated for SME businesses in the UK

Many people would agree that creating a welcoming and open environment for staff and customers is a good thing. Experts say it is also great for business.[1] With the right approach, you could grow your customer base, attract more talent and create a positive workplace culture to help your business thrive.

In this article:

- Defining inclusion and its implications for small businesses
- Five business benefits of becoming inclusive.
- Practical steps your business could take towards becoming more inclusive.

What does Inclusion mean?

Inclusion is about having a workplace where everybody is welcome, supported, respected and able to thrive. Employees in inclusive businesses feel trusted and valued, with a strong sense of belonging.[2] The aim of inclusion is to embrace all people, irrespective of their gender, race disability or other demographic difference.

For small businesses, consciously embracing inclusion can help foster a community that works for every employee, customer and supplier. Where people feel included, they are more likely to give their best work or become a loyal customer. Inclusion can also power your brand reputation and strengthen your chances of success.

Five business benefits of becoming a more inclusive business

Many big corporations now have Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategies and departments to monitor workstreams such as recruitment or pay and legal compliance. While it is true that small businesses often do not have equivalent resources, your size can also work to your advantage. Research has shown that the more personal, independent nature of many small businesses, creates fairer cultures, flexible working and greater job autonomy.[3]

Below are five reasons why an inclusive approach could be better for business.

1. Improved reputation

Building an inclusive business could improve your company's reputation. Customers and employees alike value brands that practice and promote diversity and inclusion.[4] When people see that you are actively creating an inclusive working environment, they are more likely to trust your brand, which improves your chances of generating positive word-of-mouth.[5]

2. Better employee engagement

More engaged colleagues are likely to be more loyal, reducing recruitment costs and time spent managing employee turnover. Engaged employees typically value inclusive working practices, where flexible hours and hybrid arrangements may be on offer, which are adaptable to a wider range of people's needs and can improve productivity.[6]

3. Positive work environment

Just as an inclusive approach can lead to better employee engagement, it can also help create a more positive work environment. Collaboration and teamwork are likely to be more productive and rewarding when you recognise people's individual strengths, create safe spaces, and give everyone an equal chance to speak.[7]

4. Legal compliance

The 2010 Equality Act protects people from discrimination in

workplaces and wider society.[8] For small businesses, this means removing barriers for people with visible and non-visible disabilities. It also means giving equal opportunities at work to people with protected characteristics, such as age, religion, sex and sexual orientation.[9] Compliance with the Equality Act will help protect you from fines, legal challenges and damage to your reputation.

5. Innovation and creativity

An accessible, inclusive workplace is likely to attract a diverse range of people and talents. According to Harvard Business School, diversity is a key driver of creativity and innovation because it generates fresher and more individual perspectives.[10] A diverse team may help combat groupthink, lead to innovative ideas, and help take your business forward.

Inclusion for small businesses is about much more than an ethical approach. It delivers a range of commercial benefits, too.

Practical steps towards becoming a more inclusive business

Steps towards becoming more inclusive range from changing mindsets to making physical and technical adjustments to your workplace. Here, we summarise some key areas that could help you get started.

- **Learn and understand**

Your aim is to create an environment where all your present and future employees and customers feel welcome and at ease. To begin with, it might be a good idea to learn about what such an environment might look like for your business.

The best people to learn from are your employees and customers themselves. You can ask them face-to-face or through other channels, such as suggestion boxes or simple surveys. You could also look at what comparable businesses have done to become more inclusive and research the most appropriate practical steps for you.[11]

Whatever you decide, a good starting point is to review your working practices and culture to ensure no one risks feeling marginalised or discriminated against, especially if they have a protected characteristic.[12]

- **Create an inclusive culture**

Underpinning the practical steps you take is a change in mindset. A genuinely inclusive culture is one in which all employees feel accepted and valued, and all customers feel welcome. It might not happen overnight, but you can take many small steps to embed accessibility and inclusion in the fabric of your business.

Accessibility training for you and your employees can help shift mindsets. For example, it could help customers with access requirements engage with your business or support employees to use

inclusive language.[13] You could also offer flexible working options that enable people to work from home or on particular schedules.

As your approach to accessibility and inclusion develops, you could showcase your commitments publicly, on your website and social channels or through sponsorships and partnerships with relevant local charities and organisations.

- **Make your business more accessible**

According to disability charity Scope, 73% of disabled online shoppers have faced barriers to accessing websites, and four in ten disabled people find their local shops inaccessible.[14] However, straightforward modifications to your business can help overcome these barriers and grow your reach.

Physical modifications might include wide doorways, low seating, and accessible toilets for people using mobility aids. But simpler adjustments, such as clear signage reducing noise levels and creating well-lit spaces can also significantly improve accessibility.

A digital accessibility audit can help ensure your business is technologically accessible for customers and employees.[15] Best practices include using CamelCase for hashtags, providing alternative text for images, using contrasting colours, and giving employees access to assistive technologies, such as screen readers and magnifiers.

You can learn more about how accessibility can help you reach the 16 million disabled people in the UK here.

Becoming an inclusive business could not only feel good but also be better for customers, employees, and commercial success. From listening to your team to improving your signage, checking you're legally compliant to providing flexible working hours, you could take plenty of actions to create a welcoming environment for everyone.

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