

Employing and supporting people with disability.



I had the absolute pleasure to interview Samantha French, Advocacy Projects Manager for People with Disability. Samantha is an outstanding person who is articulate, intelligent, funny and possesses incredible communication skills. In addition to this, Sam also has incredible initiative and problem solving skills – she has to, because she has a disability. She faces and overcomes challenges most of us simply don't comprehend. I asked Sam three questions to give us insight into her and her views on helping people to be successful in the workplace.

Please share with us how long you have had your disability and how this impacts you day to day?

"I've had my disability since birth. I was born with albinism so I am vision impaired, not as some think visually impaired." Sam laughed when she said this as she explained that visually impaired is something completely different, ie, not being very attractive. Having her vision impairment means Sam can be called legally blind.

"In terms of impacting me, there are many practical things I can't do like, I can't drive a car. This means getting around within the community is challenging. I simply can't see signs at train stations so using public transport is difficult."

Many people might assume that the biggest barrier for Sam in gaining and keeping a job is communication, however this isn't the case. The fact is its transport, getting to and from the workplace. She relies very heavily on taxis. Getting public transport at peak hour can be overwhelming for her as she struggles to see. Therefore, being given flexibility in her working hours and start time is immensely helpful. Getting around in cabs is expensive but it's much less stressful and more time efficient when Sam travels into work later in the morning and thereby misses rush hour.

How do you find most people treat you?

"Most of my disability is largely hidden. It's hard to see at first. Sometimes when I meet new people they aren't sure how to treat me. I use a magnifying glass to read things, sometimes people aren't sure what is different about me, some think I have some mental disability until they understand that I can't see properly." Sam says that when she explains what her disability is people tend to be more at ease. She feels this is because sensory disabilities are often less scary to people.

If you could give employers and co-workers advice on how to interact and work with people with disabilities, what would you advise?

“I would recommend above everything else, that people think to focus on what the obstacles or barriers might be to the person carrying out their job. Think about any adjustments that a person with disability might need. Rather than focusing on the type of disability the person has. Needing to understand that can lead you down the path of overly complicating the situation. It’s not about the disability it’s about looking at personalising the job for the person.

I would recommend people make space to have a conversation about what having a disability means. If you are not sure about what might be needed just ask. There is a lot of support around to help employers accommodate people with disability. Much of which is free to employers from disability networks.”

Sam recommends employers offer internships to people with disability as this offers low risk opportunities for people in organisations to get exposure to people with disabilities and this helps to reduce any fear factor and help build support for inclusion. The more people meet those with disabilities in the workforce the more comfortable they become.

Sam thinks that employers should offer reasonable adjustments to everyone in the workplace. She gives the example that a single mum, a person with an aging parent, a mature age worker with arthritis or someone with a disability, all need reasonable adjustments to suit their specific needs.

Sam and I agree that when it comes to recruitment and engagement of employees it’s so important to treat people as individual and do what needs to be done to help each person be successful. Many people are fearful of employing someone with a disability because they don't know what they can and can’t ask and they are unsure what the person can and can’t do.

Sam's advice is simply to ask the person what they need to know, as they are the expert in their disability. Based on my meeting with Sam, I for one will now look at all the reasons to hire people with disabilities and how I can help them fit in and prosper, and I hope that you do too.