

The challenge for SMEs in creating and sustaining a diverse and inclusive workplace



As businesses of all sizes respond to shifting geopolitical tensions, the aftermath of the COVID pandemic and an increasing number of flood and bushfire events – having the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time continues to be a challenge.

Australia's supply chain workforce is aging, primarily male and consistently struggles to attract and retain younger workers particularly women. The resulting lack of workforce diversity is a concern, not only because women comprise 50% of the potential talent pool, but because diversity is linked to workforce capability, business performance and growth. Research consistently shows that diverse and inclusive organizations outperform their counterparts in terms of financial performance, employee satisfaction and overall success.

The Geelong Region Local Learning Employment Network has collaborated with researchers at Deakin University to deliver the Supply Chain Talent Pipeline (SCTP) project, a National Priority Fund project funded by the Australian government through the local Jobs Program. The project aims to raise awareness of career opportunities in supply chain and other male dominated industries, and GRLEN is joining with local businesses as they progress their diversity and inclusion journey. The project uses a framework developed by Deakin University researchers to address the structural barriers to recruitment, retention, and promotion – the reasons women apply for roles, and the factors that affect them being recruited and going on to have a successful career.

Creating and sustaining a diverse and inclusive workplace can raise particular challenges for smaller businesses. Compared to larger organisations, SMEs have limited reach when attracting a diverse range of candidates, and they have fewer financial and human resources to educate their employees and promote awareness of inclusion. Smaller businesses are also less likely to have the time and expertise to develop formal diversity and inclusion policies and procedures, which can inadvertently lead to inconsistent practices and make it more difficult to establish a culture of inclusion.

Company size should not be a barrier to inclusion though, and small businesses have the added advantage of being agile and nimble in addressing issues of diversity and inclusion. A resource neutral approach can enable organisations to make meaningful progress towards a diverse and inclusive workplace by leveraging existing resources and nurturing employee involvement.

Resource-neutral strategies include:

- providing a safe space for employees to ask questions and raise concerns
- introducing a 'buddy system' where new employees are paired with a more experienced colleague
- provide training on diversity, inclusion and unconscious bias using online resources or through external partnerships
- revisiting hiring practices to minimise biases (and ensure interview panels are diverse)
- empower employees to propose and lead initiatives that promote and celebrate inclusion
- foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement regarding diversity and inclusion.

Whatever the size of the company, leadership from the top is vital in creating an inclusive company culture. Company leadership can model inclusive behaviour, nurture diverse talent, build trust and hold others accountable for inappropriate behaviour. A company's leaders set the stage for a workplace where all staff feel valued, respected and able to contribute their best.

Join SCTP researchers Jennifer Jones and Patricia McLean as they discuss the importance of diversity, and how SMEs can create and sustain a diverse and inclusive workforce. The free webinar is part of the Geelong Small Business Festival. See details below.

Event name: Sustainable Cultural Change: Fostering a Diverse and Inclusive Workplace

Event Description: How to recruit for greater diversity and how to create and sustain a safe and inclusive work environment

Event Date: Thursday 3 August

Time: 10.30am-11.30am

Event booking link: <https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/sustainable-cultural-change-fostering-a-diverse-and-inclusive-workplace-tickets-657283411377>

Find out more about the SCTP project here:

[Supply Chain Talent Pipeline Project | SCTP \(grllen.com.au\)](https://grllen.com.au)