

## Q&A with new chairperson of the Jersey Employment Trust Helen Ruelle

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Director of Local Legal Services Helen Ruelle has become the new chairperson of the Jersey Employment Trust (JET), a registered charity which helps people with disabilities or long-term health conditions gain and maintain employment. In this Q&A Helen gives her insights from both her work with the trust and her employment law practice about disability and the workplace.

### **How did you get involved with JET?**

Three years ago the trust approached me to see if I would be interested in applying to be a trustee, as the previous chair, Geoff Cook, knew about my employment law practice and my particular interest in discrimination law. At the time I didn't know a huge amount about JET, but the more I looked into it I quickly realised it's one of those organisations that does so much essential work for the community which people aren't necessarily aware of.

### **How does JET understand disability?**

So many things come under the definition of disability, and many disabilities are invisible. Anything that impacts your day-to-day work and wider life potentially can be classed as a disability, be that a mental health condition (both short-term and long-term), a learning disability, the aftereffects of an accident (for example a head injury), debilitating migraines - the list goes on. JET is known for supporting people with disabilities to find and retain employment, and it also supports people with mental health and long-term conditions who have had to leave the workforce because of their condition. The trust supports a real range of people, not just those with visible disabilities, and not just people who have a lifelong condition. JET also practises what it preaches. It runs Acorn Enterprises, where more than 70% of staff have a disability or long-term health condition.

### **How can a workplace be supportive of those living with a disability?**

JET finds that people are often fearful of employing a person with a disability, partly out of a worry about saying or doing the wrong thing. This comes from a good place but actually it can be quite easy

to get it right by just asking the individual what they need and getting the right support. The adjustments employers need to make are often not that significant or costly, and the positive impact of employing people from a diverse background on both the organisation and on the person can be absolutely life-changing.

### **What's the impact of JET's work?**

It can be life-changing for the employee, and hugely beneficial for the employer. JET holds awards every two years celebrating inclusive employers and it's fantastic to go round to nominated employers and see the positive impact that employees with disabilities have had on their organisations. The awards underscore that hiring people with disabilities isn't charity - people with disabilities are a massively untapped pool of talent and it's just good business sense for employers to tap into it. Local employers now frequently go to JET for recruitment for certain roles - they're not doing that for anything other than business reasons. Our latest independent quality assurance report showed that JET's work saves the taxpayer anything between £5,000 and £16,000 per person per year.

### **Where is Jersey in terms of its disability discrimination law?**

For a long time Jersey was seen as being in the dark ages in this area but there have recently been a number of positive changes in disability discrimination law here. Disability discrimination law can be seen as a challenging bit of legislation - it requires more from businesses potentially, and may have been left at the end of the legislative agenda because it is perceived as being a harder law to comply with. Thankfully provisions around employers making reasonable adjustments are now in force and the mind-set is changing. We always say don't look at what you can't do but what you can do in this area and think about the benefits for your organisation as well as your workforce. Making your business an inclusive place for those with disabilities broadens your customer base and talent pool, and you have an all round more positive business as a result.

### **What's the impact of COVID-19 on all this?**

In this kind of climate where many people feel thankful just to have a job, there may be fewer people who feel comfortable challenging bad practice. Even before COVID, many people were worried about saying they have a disability in the first place – for example, there's still a stigma around certain conditions, especially mental health conditions. It's getting better, and people's understanding of mental health conditions is improving but there is too often a question mark for employees about what happens in reality if they tell their boss that they're suffering from depression, anxiety or any other mental health condition. This is why it's so important, especially at this time, for employers to be proactive about building and communicating inclusivity.

### **What's your main message to employers?**

Don't be fearful about disability. It's ok to ask questions about how best you can be supportive - people with disabilities would much rather you asked rather than say nothing at all. Remember that help is

available as well - JET goes to businesses to educate colleagues about a particular disability and how a person with that disability may wish to interact with their colleagues. JET is always happy to help employers who have concerns about an employee. Also, remember that nobody is perfect - if you do get it wrong, apologise and learn from it by getting support and talking about it.

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