

COVER STORY

Fine service down to a tea

Employing workers with disabilities can be refreshing for all involved, writes **Sue White**.

With a long pedigree in the world of advertising, the creative chairman of Droga5, David Nobay, is all too aware of some of the disadvantages of working in his chosen field.

"It can be fairly full-on in a creative department; there can be screaming and egos," he says.

When he started Droga5 in 2007, Nobay wanted to maintain a positive environment. He recalls a stint early in his career when an employee with Down syndrome made a lasting, positive impact on the office culture.

"We decided once we got to a reasonable size we would employ a person with a disability," Nobay says. "We took Lloyd Fernandez on about three years ago. It had a catalytic effect on the whole company."

While Fernandez's role as "hydration manager" primarily involves delivering teas and coffees, Nobay says employing someone with a disability has had a profound and positive effect on the entire business.

"The effect of having someone like Lloyd integrated in the business is such a calming influence, and a levelling thing," he says.

"For Lloyd, it's a really important job; and for everyone else, it's a really important presence."

Unfortunately for the estimated 300,000 Australians with a disability and keen to enter the workforce, not all employers are opening their doors to them.

"Australia ranks 21 out of 29 in the

OECD [on this]," says the Disability Employment Australia policy officer, Bevan Burkin. "The statistics are pretty shocking."

Many employers still have the wrong perception about what employing a person with a disability entails.

"Recent research from the Australian Human Resources Institute confirms reports that employers don't feel confident around the issue," Burkin says. "They think it's too much of an unknown, or will cost too much money in modifications."

It's a misconception that appears disadvantageous to employers and keen potential employees.

A recent paper from the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, titled *Employ Outside the Box*, points to numerous bottom-line opportunities that come when employing workers with disability: occupational health and safety incidents are six times lower than for the average employee; employees with disabilities have fewer sick days than the average employee; and loyalty is high, as employees with disabilities tend to stay put longer in a job.

Policy-wise, things have been improving since 2008, when Australia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The move brought about the National Disability Strategy, one outcome of which is the coming National Disability Insurance Scheme.



Perfect mix ... Lloyd Fernandez (left), with his boss David Nobay, ensures Droga5 staff are hydrated. Photo: Toby Burrows

"It will cost a lot of money, but the Productivity Commission strongly suggests it will be able to self-fund as more people with disability – and their carers – are economically and socially included in the workplace," Burkin says.

But while the policies fall into place slowly, employers are still – consciously or unconsciously – discriminating against employing workers with disabilities. It's a fact that has long frustrated Nobay, particularly after he saw the changes in Fernandez and his other employees.

"We hire a lot of young people and you see them move and change, but you don't see the kind of shift we've seen in Lloyd. He used to stare at the floor; he was incredibly nervous and intimidated," Nobay says.

"Now, you have to stop him singing to you.

"He's created a handshake routine he does with every employee, and his love for jewellery means he's got

more bling than a rapper [staff often give him a new piece of jewellery he admires]."

While Nobay emphasises that Fernandez's role is not an experiment – "he's part of our company" – the success of Fernandez's position shows Nobay the scope for others to make the same type of employment decisions.

With disability employment services available to co-ordinate and support the process (Droga5 works with Break Thru People Solutions) and subsidies incentivising employers, "there's no good reason to say no to giving this a go", Nobay says. Last year he launched Creative Spirit – a call to arms for all Australian creative industries to employ or try out a person with a disability by 2021.

Using the tag line "What could be more creative than being different?", Creative Spirit now has 24 people with disabilities fully employed across various creative

companies. The program has launched in New Zealand and is poised for launch in Britain and the US, while in Australia, Nobay wants other creative industries to step up – "rainmakers in theatre, design, fashion and film to take this into their communities".

"That would be success," he says.