



Down Syndrome
Australia

Employing someone with Down syndrome □ an employer's perspective

Riverview Projects

ACT Down Syndrome Association recently spoke with David Maxwell, the Managing Director of Riverview Projects about employing people with Down syndrome. Here is David's perspective on this decision and strategies used for a successful outcome.

Why were you interested in hiring a person with Down syndrome?

Managing Director David Maxwell began discussions with the ACT Down Syndrome Association in 2017 as he was keen to explore how the already diverse Ginninderry project team, could mutually benefit from having a person with Down syndrome join the team. Over the years David had the opportunity to build a relationship with a boy with Down syndrome, who his son Oliver had 'buddied' at the Sony Foundation Camp at his high school. The special bond that he developed with this child was one that he wanted others to experience and this was the start of the hiring process.



How did you promote/advertise the available position?

Once the commitment was made, we developed a job criteria for an Office Support role, whereby the person would be responsible for a range of administration and customer service duties associated with delivering the Ginninderry project. We worked in consultation with the ACT Down Syndrome Association to refine the role and interviewed several candidates, after they shared the job opportunity with their members and contacts. The decision was a difficult one but in the end we employed two people, who took on the role in a job sharing capacity.

Did you have any concerns in hiring someone with Down syndrome? If yes, what were they?

Overall the team did not have any major concerns but a few of the staff were a little nervous as they had never had any interactions with someone with Down syndrome. A presentation was given to all staff by the Down Syndrome Association and this was a great opportunity for everyone to raise any concerns and ask questions. Any initial fears quickly disappeared once Peter and Kathryn started as they immediately became part of the team. We are very mindful of wanting to make the experience in the work place as enjoyable and positive for Peter and Kathryn, and we are conscious of

managing any stressful situations and ensuring our expectations are realistic. To date one employee has assimilated very easily into the office environment while the other has required a little more assistance and support. This included having a case worker in the office to assist with tasks such as IT training.

How did you address these initial concerns?

We have ongoing and open communication with Peter and Kathryn to ensure they are fulfilling their duties without there being any unnecessary pressure. As a team we keep the scope of their duties flexible along with their working hours. For example Peter catches the bus to Kippax from his home in Tuggeranong, an hour and half away from Kippax, and a member of the team goes to collect him at 10am. Kathryn is driven to work by her mother. It was a learning period where we monitored Peter and Kathryn's abilities and introduced new tasks once we could see they were comfortable with learning and taking on new responsibilities.

What support/training have you offered/provided to Peter and Kathryn in their employment?

IT Training, one-on-one demonstrations ahead of tasks, filing, telephony training and reception opportunities. A buddy has also been nominated who acts as an internal support person for Peter and Kathryn. In saying that they know they can speak to any team member for support, anytime!

What support/training have you offered/provided other team members in supporting Peter and Kathryn?

As mentioned, prior to Peter and Kathryn starting with Riverview a group presentation was given to the project team to provide a general overview of the syndrome. This was also supported with strategies and general tips when providing instructions.

What has surprised you the most in working with Kathryn and Peter?

Kathryn is a quiet achiever with a great sense of humour who goes about her work in a structured manner. She is very intelligent, funny, fiercely independent and very clear on what she wants to do along with a good memory. She is learning how to use a computer and we have seen enormous growth in her as a person and employee.

The intelligence and sense of humour that Peter possesses has also been surprising. He is extremely charismatic and excellent with people. His interpersonal skills are great and nothing slows him down – he's an amazing individual. He also has an excellent memory and will remember details from a conversation better than most. Peter is also keen on learning new tasks and loves to take on new responsibilities. He takes pride in his work and his aim is to become the main receptionist at Ginninderry.

Have there been any positive changes in the workplace/ team since the commencement of Kathryn and Peter?

Absolutely ... Both Kathryn and Peter bring genuine joy to the team. They are valued members of Riverview and no one is ever too busy to take time out for them – to chat, to listen, to teach and to learn from these inspiring individuals. We are very lucky to have them. Peter is extremely positive and proactive with his work and does a great job with any task he is assigned. Kathryn is also very hard working and constantly improving.



Photo:

Kathryn Rodwell -
Ginninderry's Office Support



Photo:

Peter Bartholomew -
Ginninderry's Office Support