

Australia

The Sydney employment service helping people with disabilities find jobs



For nearly 30 years, not-for-profit Nova Employment been supporting people living with a disability to find work, including in its own office.

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BY SANDRA FULLOON

SHARE  

Martin Wren has helped 16,000 of the 4.3 million Australians living with a disability get a job.

He runs a thriving not-for-profit employment service in St Marys, in Sydney's west, with a track record of success across more than 6,000 small businesses.

But when he started Nova Employment almost 30 years ago, there was little assistance for those needing extra support.



"There was something missing, and that was the opportunity to actually get a job," he told SBS's *Small Business Secrets*.

"So that was the need we met. It was to give people who are desperately keen to make a contribution the opportunity to do that, to be tax payers and fully participating members of the community."

Getting back into the workforce

Australia has one of the world's lowest employment participation rates for people living with a disability, with unemployment at around 10 per cent, twice the national average.

Dr Huy Tran is a former refugee whose family fled South Vietnam to start a new life in Australia. He is now a Nova employer and keen to make a difference.



Dr Huy Tran runs a medical clinic and is among Nova's 6,000 disability employers.
Source: Supplied

"We feel the best thing for anybody is to hold a job, so we wanted to hire someone with a disability, to help them get back into the workforce," Dr Tran said.

Cathy Spathis has chronic pain and has had several surgeries on her back. After several years out of the workforce raising her children, the 54-year-old now works part-time as a receptionist in Dr Tran's medical practice.

"This role has boosted my confidence, a lot. Now I have more independence as well," she said.

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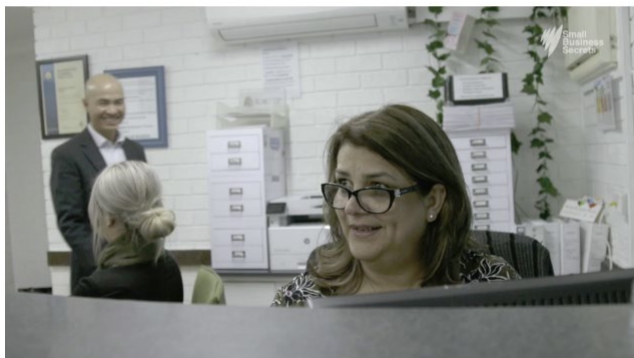


Dr Tran has created flexible work arrangements to help Ms Spathis manage her pain.

"She was a bit scared about returning to work but we worked out a system so that she has the flexibility of having a walk when she needs to, or a rest," Dr Tran said.

Small business is a more flexible employer of people living with a disability, Nova's Mr Wren said.

"Small business is a great employer for people living with a disability because of the flexibility. Also with government subsidies, we can easily modify the workplace at no cost".



Medical Receptionist Cathy Spathis manages back pain to work part-time.
Source: SBS

Leading by example

Around 30 per cent of Nova's staff also have a disability. The office has an inclinator to assist staff ascend the entry stairs.

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Steven Last is an IT expert who has a neurological disability called Charcot-Marie-Tooth.

"The nerves in my peripheral nervous system don't work properly so over time it causes weakness in the muscles and loss of strength," the 32-year-old said.



Steven Last works full-time in IT at Nova Employment.
Source: Supplied

Mr Last started his first full-time role at Nova four years ago and since then the university graduate has made a full contribution.

"Steve is highly skilled and he's also a 'can-do' kind of guy, so I don't think there's any task we've handed to him that he hasn't handled enthusiastically," Mr Wren said.

"People with a disability make great employees because of their positive attitude and the skills they bring. Many are eager to succeed and they pay back."

"We tend to see people with a disability stay in jobs longer as well."

"Most small business operators will understand if they hire four people, one won't be a good fit, that's just how it is," Mr Wren said.

"You deal with it and move on, and you always rise to the challenge and don't let it beat you," IT worker Mr Last said.

"There will be people out there who discriminate against you and they are not the people you want to work for,"

"[But] there will be great employers out there really looking for people and they are waiting for someone to come along."

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Nova currently has 1,500 candidates on the books with a broad range of skills, Mr Wren said.

"We're going to have 25 more people with a disability in work by the end of this week, and there's no limit to how far this can grow."