



The Cookie Project

DIVERSABILITY FINALIST



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VIDEO**

THE STORY

A self-funded social enterprise is baking cookies that ‘spark joy’ for the people who eat them, and changed the lives of the people who bake them.

Employment rates for people living with a disability in New Zealand are low, and jobseekers often face misperception about their abilities from employers, unconscious bias, fear of the unknown, and perceived risk. That didn’t sit well with Graeme Haddon, who has three children with disabilities, and Eric Chuah. Together they founded The Cookie Project to provide fair, meaningful and fun employment for people with disabilities, so they feel accepted, included, and valued.

Strong partnerships were formed with brands including Lewis Road Creamery, Pic’s Peanut Butter and Trade Aid New Zealand who provide ingredients, and weekly baking sessions are done at the premises of Eat My Lunch, with support from a team of volunteers.

Graeme Haddon says these partnerships help ensure the quality of the cookies, which are free of additives, preservatives and colouring.

“We know our cookies will only sell sustainably in the long term if we have a quality product, rather than relying on the sympathy card to generate orders.”

Customers order online and the cookies are couriered out to them. Satisfaction rates are high, with an average 4.9 out of 5.

The founders were keen that no willing bakers would be excluded from the project. As a result they don't ask for a curriculum vitae or conduct interviews, and the project is pan-disability. All bakers earn at least the minimum hourly wage of \$17.70 and there are untimed, unlimited breaks.

All employees, volunteers and suppliers are introduced to the five organisational values that underpin The Cookie Project: inclusion; participation; respect; appreciation; and whanaungatanga.

One of the organisation's objectives is providing employment pathways beyond The Cookie Project.

"We are now working with a few café partners to provide employment pathways for our bakers after we train them in the basic skills that café partners are looking for, such as operating coffee machines, waiting skills, and back of house responsibilities. We are proud to announce that Eat My Lunch is employing one of our bakers, Michael, as their coffee barista for their new retail store at Britomart," says Graeme.

Feedback from bakers and their families has been very positive. The mother of one worker wrote that her son's life had improved significantly. "We have seen a remarkable change in Michael. He has become a confident, responsible young man who is proud of what he has achieved, takes pride in his work and takes responsibility for getting to work and back. He is now socialising outside of work with a few of the young team members ..."

THE CHALLENGE

An estimated one in every four New Zealanders lives with a disability, and the employment rate is 22 per cent, compared with 70 per cent for people without a disability. A lack of work opportunities and the chance to gain workplace experience means many New Zealanders are missing out on the financial and social benefits employment brings.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- The Cookie Project is a social enterprise that employs Kiwis with disabilities to make delicious cookies, partnering with well-known New Zealand brands who provide ingredients, premises and other practical support.



- Cookies are baked on demand after orders are placed online. This guarantees they are fresh and the required number of bakers and volunteers are rostered on.

- Strong relationship with corporate supporters provide resources, but also access to their clients and stakeholders.

RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- 23 people with disabilities are on The Cookie Project roster, with another 40 on the waiting list.
- More than 500 hours of paid employment generated at a minimum wage of \$17.70 an hour.
- Average score of 8.5 out of 10 for staff happiness levels has been achieved, along with nine out of 10 for sense of belonging.
- Eight out of 10 of the volunteers helping the bakers have not worked with people with disabilities before helping in the kitchen and say it has challenged their preconceived ideas.

“Since being given the opportunity at The Cookie Project, Michael has started going to the gym and has been taking boxing lessons, neither of which he would have had the confidence to do this time last year. He didn’t speak to anybody unless he was asked a question and spent most of his time at home in his bedroom. He has come so far!” Mother of one of the bakers.

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