

Empowerment Award Entrant: New Zealand Customs

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/141141182>

Diversity Council drives equity agenda. Customs is New Zealand's oldest government department, and this year is its 175th anniversary of protecting New Zealand's borders. Customs employs approximately 1,200 staff spread across the country and located at all of New Zealand's international airports and sea ports. Staff are proud of its history, traditions and the work they do. Many of the workforce are long serving, with 22 percent having over 20 years' service.

Historically, Customs staff were predominantly male and European. Looking at the demographics of present employees, there is a much more diverse range of ethnicities, backgrounds and ages, with females now representing over 40 per cent of Customs' workforce. However, this gender balance is not reflected in leadership roles where females make up only 25 per cent. Whilst the organisation is proud to have a female chief executive (the first female chief executive to be appointed to a uniformed service) it was recognised that there was a very real need to increase the gender balance of Customs leaders to realise the benefits that diversity brings. Since the inception of Customs Diversity and Inclusion Council in early 2014, there have been a number of measures implemented to empower women and improve gender balance, supported and led by senior leadership.

Deputy Comptroller Operations, Bill Perry, says he is very proud of the work the Council has achieved over the last year. "I've noticed a real change at Customs since diversity and inclusion has become a focus. It is now part of our conversations and is becoming seen as 'business as usual' which is a testament to the work of the Council".

The Council has proved how important a role it plays in driving forward the diversity and inclusion agenda at Customs. It includes four members of the Senior Leadership Team, evidence of how important this issue is for senior leaders.

Customs' diversity and inclusion journey was started by Group Manager People and Capability, Anne-Marie Taggart, who brought the issue to the Senior Leadership Team. Since then they have been on-board and leading the charge, supported by the People and Capability team. Customs Comptroller/Chief Executive Carolyn Tremain, has also been visibly supportive, lending her voice to discussions and getting behind initiatives such as providing more flexible working options for people leaders.

The Council is guiding Customs on its journey and has driven a number of initiatives to empower women, increase gender balance and create a more diverse and inclusive organisation. A strategy and implementation plan was developed with support from the Senior Leadership Team with four key areas of focus - educate, embrace, empower and embed.

There have been a number of activities carried out under the banner of 'educate' but one key initiative has been to raise understanding of unconscious knowledge and bias with leaders across Customs. In November 2014, Professor Robert Wood, from the Centre for Ethical Leadership at the University of Melbourne, spent the morning with Customs Senior Leadership Team running a workshop on unconscious knowledge, bias and mitigation strategies. The workshops had a gender focus and covered research into the evaluation bias and backlash that females in leadership roles can face. In May 2015 these workshops were rolled out to over 80 people leaders across the business with positive feedback from participants. The roll out will continue into the future and will be complimented by a review of policies and procedures with a diversity and inclusion lens to ensure any barriers are removed. .

Changes to organisational recruitment processes have led to a very deliberate approach to ensure gender balance and diversity during the recruitment of trainee Customs officers, and unconscious bias training is provided to recruitment panel members.

The Council also undertook research into the reasons for low numbers of female applicants for a manager role, in order to make recommendations to remove barriers to achieving gender balance in leadership roles.

Setting up the Diversity and Inclusion Council has demonstrated to staff that there is a real commitment to becoming a diverse and inclusive organisation. There have already been a number of benefits realised at every level across the organisation; members of staff now have a tangible channel for their ideas but also a voice for change and those serving on the Council have achieved unexpected personal development through their involvement.

The Council's encouragement of flexible working and subsequent change in policy, along with a change to the Customs' service medal policy has had a significant benefit for employees, and particularly female staff. Previously operational staff believed they couldn't work part-time as a leader and tended to leave Customs when they started a family. They now have the option of considering part-time work or other flexible arrangements and there are now role models who are demonstrating that working part-time can be successful. The change to the service medal policy means part time staff are able to be acknowledged for their hard work and dedication in the same manner as their full time counterparts. In the first year since the change in policy 14 part time staff became eligible for medals and five for clasps.

The Council are proud of what they have achieved in a short period of time and especially in relation to their efforts to improve gender balance and achieve a diverse and inclusive culture. As Customs continue on their diversity and inclusion journey with the Council steering the way, they hope to deliver more benefits for the organisation and for its people.