



Downlights

INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

SMALL-MEDIUM ORGANISATION FINALIST

THE STORY

Recognising that many people with disabilities face discrimination in the workplace and have limited options for meaningful employment, Downlights has created a business that challenges the common perception of a disabled employee's capability.

Downlights is a New Zealand owned and operated artisan candle company that began in 2019 when established candlemaker Jennifer Del Bel met Emma Sykes, a school leaver with Down Syndrome who was unable to find a job.

Today, Downlights is an Akina Impact provider, Living Wage Principal Partner and award-winning business that employs six people with disabilities and has provided 12 work experience placements for people with learning or cognitive disabilities.

“Through the actions of our employees who identify as disabled, we proudly challenge the perception of a disabled employee's capability, and our thought leadership demonstrates a replicable business model that is founded on principles of equality, accessibility and inclusion,” says Jennifer, who is the company's Managing Director.

An integral part of the business model was the establishment of the Downlights Charitable Trust. One dollar from the sale of every Downlights candle is donated to the trust, which also receives donations from individuals and businesses.

“Each Downlights employee (‘the Downlights crew’) is a valued member of our business with unique needs, and the Downlights Charitable Trust supports our commitment to providing an individually customised work environment to help our crew operate independently in the manufacturing studio,” says Jennifer.

Recognising the unique strengths and needs of each crew member, Downlights HQ was designed through the eyes of a disabled person. This created scope for Downlights to adapt each workstation to an employee's individual requirements, ensuring every crew member is comfortable, feels valued and receives an equal opportunity to shine.



**WATCH
VIDEO**

“In February 2022 we acquired ‘Walter the Wax Melter’ which allows every member of our Downlights Crew to safely complete all 21 steps in the process of making a Downlights candle,” says Jennifer.

Downlights supervisors support each crew member’s growth with a values-led approach. They are monitored and coached on skill development via a personal Goal Book, which extends beyond Downlights into life skills such as travelling to work safely and independently via public transport.

“We have worked with our crew to develop their skills and confidence to a point where their work is comparable to non-disabled artisans, challenging commonly held perceptions that the disabled workforce is only suitable for low-paid unskilled work,” says Jennifer.

“The growth in confidence and economic independence allows our staff to connect with the greater community, not just the disabled community.”

Crew family members report the difference meaningful work has made in the lives of their whānau.

“Katrina is passionate to be involved with Downlights activities and feels the love and care from everyone there. As a parent, we noticed the healthy relationships and connections within Downlights environment in the spirit of inclusivity and diversity,” wrote her father Peter.

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THE AIM

Young disabled New Zealanders face many forms of discrimination in the workplace. Downlights wanted to address this by creating meaningful employment and opportunities for growth.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- One dollar from every candle sold by Downlights goes to The Downlights Charitable Trust, which also receives donations from individuals and businesses. This supports the business’ commitment to providing a work environment where all employees are able to thrive
- Downlights HQ is equipped through the eyes of a disabled person with furniture and equipment designed to help crew members operate independently in the manufacturing studio
- Skilled work experience opportunities are offered to disabled students via partnerships with existing disability sector organisations
- Each crew member has a personal Goal Book to monitor and evaluate their skill progress and to identify any challenges they may be facing
- Leadership dedicates a significant period of time each week to supporting supervisors and employees



RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- Downlights employs eight people who identify as disabled and offers work experience to others
- The Downlights Trust allows for growth without reliance on government grants. In addition to supporting the Downlights crew, more than \$40,000 has been donated to the NZ Down Syndrome Association, Recreate NZ and Living Wage Aotearoa
- In the past year ecommerce sales have grown by 32 per cent and retail stockist accounts by 42 per cent
- Customer satisfaction in the product is evident in the 60 per cent return customer rate

KEY LEARNING

In order for everyone to thrive, inclusive workplaces must be centred on the actual, rather than perceived, needs of employees who have unique requirements.

**DO WORKPLACE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION WELL
AND DO WELL BECAUSE OF IT.**

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