

SMALL BUSINESS CASE STUDY: MERLINVET-CEL LTD

Christopher Bainton is one of the Directors of Vetcel Ltd or MerlinVet-Cel Ltd as they became at the beginning of May 2022, which is an SME based in Scotland. The company supports independent veterinary practitioners. They are part of a group of companies coming together under the MerlinVet banner.

Culture

Vetcel believes it is important to build an inclusive culture from the top of the organisation and this is about treating staff as you would wish to be treated and ensuring that all views are listened to.

To ensure the organisation can make the most of the talent that is out there Vetcel supports widespread flexible working. The company allows part-time working, job sharing and operates a work from home policy to help staff manage work-life balance. This can be particularly important for those with caring responsibilities. Around a fifth of their staff (19%) work modified hours, with 50% of those in management positions.

They have good staff retention and have lost only two staff in the last two years.

Christopher emphasises that skilled staff can be difficult to find, so excluding staff based on any characteristic just doesn't make good business sense. For example, Vetcel takes an inclusive approach to staff of all ages because they value the skills of the individual, without judging them based on their age.

Recruitment, pay and progression

Vetcel regularly monitors their salary structure to maintain pay equality. They also include an independent advisor in Board discussions on pay scales, pay increases and bonuses.

Annual appraisals are conducted for all staff to focus on areas of development.

Even with a small workforce, Vetcel believes that it is important to include diverse views in the recruitment process as much as possible. When recruiting, Vetcel ensures that shortlists are viewed by up to three different members of staff working in different areas of the business, including a Director and Senior Manager.

Vetcel provides training for school leavers and their Office Manager works closely with a local high school. They also operate a living wage policy. Training school leavers not only helps widen opportunities but can also yield great business results.

Vetcel's workforce has grown by around 10% in the last year. 69% of their staff and 75% of their managers are female.

Christopher states that other small businesses should "never be afraid to search in other industries for the skills that you seek." Being able to pick from the widest possible talent pool gives you a competitive advantage.



4. Realising people's full potential

“Not everybody wants to be a lawyer or a CEO, so we're not trying to make sure everybody becomes this. Whatever these roles happen to be, what we want is people to find what they want and have the opportunity to do that”

Jeannette Lichner CCMI, board director and CMI advisory council member.

Getting people into your organisation from underrepresented groups is only the first step. Managers and leaders then need to make sure that these people are seen, heard, enabled and supported so they can flourish – and so the business can capitalise on this talent.

It's clear that employees in the UK see their manager as key to unlocking opportunities at work – training opportunities, stretch projects, promotions and salary rises.⁸⁰ But there are still gaps between promises and action. CMI polling found:

- Over half (52%) of disabled respondents⁸¹ who have disclosed their disability to their employer disagreed that their line manager regularly checks in with them more broadly about support for their disability (such as reasonable adjustments).
- Only 15% of respondents to our socio-economic poll said that there was targeted training to employees from lower socio-economic backgrounds such as on-the-job training.⁸²

The levels of support different people will need at different stages of their careers will vary. CMI research with the Learning and Work Institute, for example, found that 37% of low-skilled young people said they wanted more support from their manager compared to only 16% of low-skilled workers as a whole.⁸³ But making progress to close gaps means being proactive about promoting proportionately – not just promoting those that look like the current crop of senior managers. It's also about remembering that progression can happen at any age, any stage; it's not linear. Employers are missing out on talent by assuming that people only want to progress at certain points in the life cycle.

“Fifty per cent of those born today will live to be 100. These longer lives will and should change our approach to achieving and supporting people at work. We could be taking more proactive steps to lighten the burden of people in their 30s and 40s, the age group that often faces the biggest pressures on their time, for example. But as managers and leaders we should be looking beyond different age groups and thinking more creatively about how people work, when they work and the kinds of work that they do”

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, CMI advisory council member.

ACTIONS FOR LEADERS (SMALL, MEDIUM AND LARGE BUSINESSES)

- Hiring managers need to champion transparent practice around salary and make sure that job descriptions and adverts are inclusive.
- Champion the use of a variety of methods to advertise jobs, such as online job boards and job centres to attract a wider pool of talent.
- Clearly communicate promotion/progression criteria and ensure this is transparent.
- Regularly check in with your staff on how they're feeling in work and outside of work to see if any adjustments or support is needed.
- Implement a process for structured interviews in recruitment and promotions. This involves asking a predefined set of questions and scoring this using consistent criteria.
- Spend time getting to know your colleagues as individuals as well as team members. Be willing to listen and learn from the lived experience of others to help improve your understanding of EDI issues.
- Make sure that meetings, team-building exercises, events, social occasions, and other work activities are scheduled with the needs of individual team members in mind.
- Allow the same amount of 'check in' time for all individuals.