

EDGE turns 25!

EDGE Employment Solutions celebrates 25 years in 2009. On reaching this milestone, it is timely to reflect on the achievements of EDGE during this time and the reasons for its success.

According to EDGE Managing Director, Sue Robertson, one of the keys to the success of EDGE has been the unwavering commitment by its staff and board members over the years to its purpose.

"From the start, we had a vision to create opportunities for people with disabilities to be accepted into the workforce. Twenty five years on we remain passionately resolute in our commitment to this belief," said Sue.

When EDGE started in 1984, it was with four employees—today that number is 72—and the organisation helped to place 34 people into employment.

"It was a fantastic start as we were breaking new ground. We are indebted to the City of Wanneroo and other businesses in the Wanneroo and Joondalup area that supported us in those early days," said Sue.

From the onset, the people at EDGE learned the importance of connecting with big business.

"Our inaugural Chairman, Bill Mitchell from Allied Leasing, stressed the importance of connecting with big business if EDGE was to make a difference. With his support and encouragement, we were able to make this connection that has been so vital to our success," said Sue.

Seventy five per cent of organisations that provide employment opportunities to EDGEplaced workers are from big business and the public sector. Without underestimating the role that smaller businesses can play, Sue says that larger organisations tend to provide greater employment opportunities.

"Big business and government bodies generally have HR and diversity policies and practices that encourage the employment of people with disabilities, and they usually provide greater opportunities for long-term, meaningful employment for the workers we place," said Sue.

The success of EDGE is not just about getting people a job, but ensuring that the relationship is enduring and rewarding for both parties.

"Our focus is not to match jobs with people, but to match people with jobs," said Sue.

"We look at the skills, abilities and aspirations of job-seekers and try to find the right job to suit each individual.



Managing Director, Sue Robertson, believes one of the key reasons for the success of EDGE has been its employees. "People who work at EDGE truly believe in providing opportunities for people with disabilities. Our people 'walk the talk', we only employ people on that basis."

"The care we put into the quality of the match has resulted in a lower turnover of EDGE-placed workers compared to the general workforce," said Sue.

The success of EDGE in finding long-term employment for people with disabilities is also linked to the on-the-job support provided by EDGE staff.

"Support is individualised; there is no 'one size fits all' solution. This is important in helping people settle into their work roles and to understand the expectations of their employers and co-workers," said Sue.

Educating co-workers has been a contributing factor to placement success.

"EDGE Job Coordinators educate co-workers in the workplace to help them understand disabilities and what it means for people to have a disability. In addition, we offer a one-day mentoring course for co-workers to equip them with skills to support people with disabilities.

"The feedback we get from these courses is quite amazing," said Sue.

"The course gives people an opportunity to mix with other co-workers of people with disabilities and are conducted in a really enriching atmosphere. A lot of participants tell us that the course has helped them to become a better co-worker and supervisor, not just to people with disabilities, but overall.

Looking ahead

Although EDGE has achieved a great deal in its first 25 years, Sue Robertson is clear that more needs to be done.

"The achievements of the past 25 years have been very satisfying and it has been encouraging how businesses are embracing people with disabilities as part of their workforce," said Sue.

"Similarly, it has been rewarding to see how people with disabilities have responded to the opportunity of becoming productive workers; they have powerfully demonstrated their capabilities and convinced their employers and co-workers of the contribution they can make.

"Although the changes in the last 25 years have been dramatic, it is vital that we continue to promote people with disabilities as valuable and productive workers.

"I'd like to think EDGE can be so successful at doing this that the day will come when the need for specialist employment agencies for people with disabilities won't exist, but there is still much to do before then."

Kifah shines at KPMG

What started out as 15-week work experience under the SWEAT program (see article below) for 16-year-old student Kifah Mafarji, has turned into an 18-month school-based traineeship with international services firm, KPMG.

Kifah, a student at Cannington Community College Education Support Centre, works one day a week as a member of the Facilities Services Team at KPMG.

Her duties include assisting with the mail rounds, organising couriers, typing up team meeting minutes, tidying and organising the copy rooms, photocopying and binding documents, and providing support to the facilities team as required. Kifah spends an hour per week on her traineeship studies.

According to EDGE Job Coordinator, Megan Graham, Kifah has come along in "leaps and bounds" since starting the Certificate II in Business Administration last October.

"Kifah is developing confidence in her abilities and taking ownership and pride in her duties. She is also developing great rapport with her co-workers and really starting to fit in as a member of the facilities team.

"She is also gaining great exposure to administration work and the importance of providing quality service to the internal customers of KPMG," said Megan.

Kifah's training is delivered and supported by her mentor/supervisor Bianca Ward, Megan, and the Registered Training Organisation, Dillon and Whitelaw.

Megan, who works with Kifah to develop strategies to help make her independent in the workplace, said that "the need for full time support has decreased as Kifah's confidence and productivity has grown."

KPMG's HR Manager, Steve Paul, is also full of praise for Kifah.

"Kifah is performing well in what is a busy job and seems to enjoy working as a member of a team in an office environment.

"We are committed to supporting Kifah through to the end of her traineeship by working with the RTO and providing personal support," said Steve.

Steve said that KPMG's involvement with EDGE is linked to the presence of its Chairman of Partners, Steve Scudamore, on the EDGE Board.

"We are pleased to have had this connection to partner with EDGE. Providing this opportunity to Kifah supports our commitment to diversity programs and also provides a busy team with an extra resource," said Steve.

"This type of qualification isn't something we have typically been involved with, but we are pleased to set the example, as a large organisation, to play our part in providing employment opportunities for people with a disability," said Steve.

Good luck Kifah as you progress through your traineeship.

It's thumbs up for 'green thumb' Matt

Matt Tomson.

Matt Tomson is well and truly part of the team that cares for the grounds at John Wollaston Anglican Community School in Kelmescott.

Since starting his Certificate II Traineeship in Horticulture (Parks and Gardens), in 2004, Matt went on to complete his Certificate III in Horticulture (Parks and Gardens) at the end of last year.

Head Groundsman at John Wollaston Community School, Danny Birch, has worked with Matt since he first started at the school five years ago.

"Matt gets on with everyone and fits in well with the grounds staff," said Danny.

As well as caring for the grounds, Matt also helps out with tasks such as setting up for assemblies and his helpful ways has made him popular with teachers and administration staff as well as his co-workers.

"Matt even regularly catches up with ground staff that have moved on to other jobs," said Danny.

EDGE Job Coordinator, Daniel Caughey, is particularly proud of Matt's achievement in completing the two certificates.

"Matt had a great attitude towards the training and worked hard to make the step up from the Certificate II to complete his Certificate III," said Daniel, who is also full of praise for the support of John Wollaston Community School.

"Matt has benefited from the positive environment and great nature of his co-workers at the school and this has definitely been a key to his success," said Daniel.

"There is usually a lot of friendly banter after the weekend during the winter months when the latest round of footy results is discussed, and Matt is right in there!" said Daniel.

Congratulations Matt on completing your Certificate III in Horticulture (Parks and Gardens).

10 Year Milestone for Maria

There are not too many people who can say they don't want to change jobs after notching up 10 years' consecutive service with one company. But that's just how Maria Vallelonga feels after working for 10 years at Coles' Warwick store.

"I like it heaps!" says Maria when asked about working at Coles.

"I have made lots of friends and don't want to move. And I like the money," she adds.

The people at Coles are quick in their praise of Maria as well, who is responsible for helping to keep the store presentation in top shape by making sure shelves are filled and looking their best.

"Maria is a great lady. She is always on time, does more than what she's asked to do and is always cheerful and happy," says her supervisor Rodney.

Store manager, Paul Vlok, shares Rodney's views on Maria.

"We are very proud of her for reaching this milestone. Maria has made many friends here because of her happy and helpful attitude—she is a credit to the industry," said Paul.

Maria's friendly ways must be infectious as EDGE Job Coordinator, Katherine Morison, is just as enthusiastic about Maria. "Maria is such a hard worker and is so open and friendly. She really is part of the family at Coles Warwick and I can't say enough good things about her," said Katherine.

Well done Maria on achieving 10 years' service.

'SWEAT'ing it out pays off!

Craig Robb and Jenny Fuller.

Participating in the SWEAT (Supported Work Experience into Apprenticeships and Traineeships) has paid off with permanent employment for Andrew and Eamon at Central TAFE.

The SWEAT program, jointly funded by EDGE and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, aims to give students with very mild intellectual, learning, physical or sensory disabilities, or a medical condition, the opportunity of work experience in industries that offer traineeships or apprenticeships.

Through the program students are placed in a workplace for one day for up to 15 weeks.

SWEAT Program Coordinator, Jenny Fuller, says the aim is for students to get a taste of working life in a particular industry to help them decide on pursuing a traineeship or apprenticeship in that industry.

"The program is offered in a diverse range of industries that includes horticulture, hospitality, dry cleaning, warehousing, automotive and manufacturing trades at present; however, these industries may change to reflect industry trends and needs," said Jenny.

In the case of Eamon and Andrew, they undertook their placement as SWEAT participants in business administration at Central TAFE. On completion of the SWEAT program, both students were offered a schoolbased traineeship and they went on to complete Certificates II and III in Business.

They have since taken up permanent employment at Central TAFE on a job-share arrangement.

"This is a great example of how experience gained during year 11 can result in meaningful long-term employment," said Jenny.

EDGE hopes to place up to 60 students in the SWEAT program in 2009.

"A lot of work goes into placing students in industries we think they might be interested in, and EDGE provides support to the students in the workplace to help them understand demands and practices and encourage the learning of new skills.

"We also target industries where we know there are career prospects to maximise the benefit to employers and students of participating in the program as the aim is to eventually provide businesses with quality employees," said Jenny.