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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 6 June 2020 – “Things are the same but different”

The term the ‘New Normal’ is almost getting old. It’s used to describe how things are now different to the way things were very recently - just two short months ago. Yes, back in early Autumn before Covid 19 had fallen on us like spiky Autumnal leaves , things were ticking along as normal, predictably- groundhog styles- the same week after week. Then the Covid the Barbarian of all viruses broke out and Aotearoa became very, very alert! Going hard and early, we went rapidly from puttering about at Level One, we went full throttle Four, into Lockdown City in just a few days. As we start stepping out into winter, things are the same BUT different. There’s workers still working from home, fully acquainted with the intimacies of Zoom video conferencing. Suddenly we are not just able to work remotely but we are apparently enjoying and embracing it. People who viewed on-line shopping as somewhat foreign and weird, are now happily buying products on-line ranging from beds to infused gin, to bags of ready to cook food with step by step recipes.

The trouble is that we don’t really know what the “new normal” will be.

For weeks we have snuffled around in a state of high existential uncertainty, which has given us all some degree of stress, whether consciously or sub-consciously. As infection rates drip down into a flat line of no new cases and Jacinda alludes to a move to level one soon, we hear mixed messages about the future. On one hand we hear daily forecasts of high unemployment, lack of business confidence and an avalanche of house prices. On a more positive perspective there is talk about new efficient business practices, increased productivity from employees working from home, decreases in business overheads, strong domestic support for local businesses, reductions in commute grinds, high demand in the housing market and even greenhouse, gas emissions have seen a down turn therefore an up-turn.

For people with disabilities the future is equally unclear. Will the “new norm” open up employment opportunities?

We have seen workplaces take their entire infrastructure online in a matter of days, when previously such an undertaking might have seemed impossible. The adaptation of flexible workplace arrangements makes employment so much more accessible for disabled people and those facing conventional barriers. As for a lot of people, working from home enables disabled employees to avoid additional unnecessary stresses, such as navigating barrier infested environment and allows them to focus on the job at hand.

Or will the forecasted increase in unemployment rates make it even harder to get work. Will the increased awareness of the needs of disabled people during lockdown create a more inclusive society as we rebuild the economy, or will it be survival of the fittest and the law of the jungle? Historically ‘normal’ is not a word that is associated with disability. Time will tell if the new normal encompasses everyone.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception. A Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.