

Accountancy firm Zen Consultants recognised for championing inclusivity in the workplace

Edinburgh accountancy firm Zen Consultants has received national recognition for championing inclusivity in the workplace after being named the Scottish Apprenticeship Awards SME Employer of the Year – Promoting Diversity.

CEO Saj Sharif says she is overjoyed to have won the accolade at a virtual event on Thursday evening (4 March) delivered by Skills Development Scotland and stresses Zen have always championed diversity through apprenticeships.



Saj said: “I’m shocked, happy and proud to have won the award – our apprenticeship programme is priceless; you can’t put a value on it because it’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

Zen is also a member of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB), which is the voice of industry in developing apprenticeships in Scotland.

Saj continued: “It’s so important to me that Zen works by the principles of diversity and inclusion. As a member of the

Employer Equalities Group within SAAB, I'm an advocate for diversity and I try to lead by example within my own organisation, sector and my professional networks. It is important that apprenticeships are open to all, to ensure a broad and diverse talent pool.

"One of our Modern Apprentices who is currently being upskilled is active within her Romanian community and it means that we now attract business from Romanian speakers since we can facilitate clients who aren't fully fluent in English yet.

"We also have clients that only speak Urdu and Vietnamese clients that we communicate with by using Google Translate too.

"We are a very diverse and mixed-race team and our whole culture is about embracing this, using it as a unique selling point and making us and our multi-cultural, multi-lingual service stand out from the crowd."

The Scottish Apprenticeship Awards recognised the resilience and hard work of Foundation, Modern and Graduate Apprentices in a year like no other. They also shone a spotlight on those employers, providers and individuals who champion apprenticeships.

Saj lists seeing apprentices progress – both personally and professionally – as the biggest highlight so far.

She added: "I really enjoy seeing the apprentices come on board, develop and grow. As these young people achieve, their confidence grows with it.

"Then they can then go out and confidently work as a qualified accountant – seeing them achieve gives me a lot of pride and pleasure."

Saj says she would recommend other businesses to follow suit when it comes to apprenticeships and she also confesses she

used to mistakenly think they were only applicable to the building trade.

She said: "I admit I used to be pretty clueless about apprenticeships. I lived in the world where I thought apprenticeships were only available in the construction industry. I had no clue about the broad range of apprenticeships that were available across many sectors.

"But once I became educated about the benefits, I've never looked back. I know a lot of employers will probably think: How can I give young people such a responsible role? But you can't underestimate them because of their age – essentially they are just young adults.

"My advice would be to do it. Taking on an apprentice will benefit your business because you will be shaping an employee into becoming an asset."

Chair of Skills Development Scotland, Frank Mitchell said: "Businesses backing talent through apprenticeships will play a crucial role in supporting Scotland's recovery from the pandemic.

"The Scottish Apprenticeship Awards show the value apprentices add to employers and the economy.

"In a the most challenging of year, our fantastic winners and finalists show that apprenticeships provide the skills that employers and Scotland needs for the future.

" Zen Consultants is a great example of a business developing a strong and resilient workforce for the future through apprenticeships."

Skills Minister, Jamie Hepburn MSP spoke at the ceremony, highlighting the vital part apprenticeships play within the Scottish Government's Young Person's Guarantee, which aims within two years to give all young people, aged 16-24 in

Scotland, the chance to succeed through the opportunity of a job, apprenticeship, education, training or volunteering.

The Minister said: "The Scottish Apprenticeship Awards is an opportunity to celebrate the role apprenticeships play in developing young people's skills and strengthening Scotland's workforce. It also allows us to recognise the achievements of our finalists who are great examples of why apprenticeships are so important."