



Employment and Disabled Persons

Information Sheet

The situation of disabled persons

Disabled persons comprise more than 600 million people worldwide. While many disabled persons are successfully employed and fully included in society, as a group, disabled persons face disproportionate poverty and severe unemployment.

A lack of global data about their numbers and situation is only one piece of evidence supporting the discrimination and exclusion they often face. National data, when it exists, verifies the fact that people with disabilities, and especially women, are less likely to have access to education, training and employment of any kind. When they do work, disabled persons are more likely to be underemployed, to earn less money, experience less job security and have fewer chances for advancement. In other words, disabled persons, and especially disabled women, are less likely to find decent work. It is not surprising then that an estimated 20 per cent of world's poor are persons with disabilities.

It is difficult to gauge how severe the problem is, since typically only the high-income countries gather reliable data and labour force participation rates when it comes to disabled persons and, in these countries, disabled persons are more likely to have access to the services and experiences that lead to decent work. Yet, even in high-income countries, the figures still illustrate the barriers disabled persons face. In Australia, for example, only 53 per cent of disabled persons, as compared to more than 80 per cent of non-disabled persons, are employed. Similarly, in the United States, about 50 per cent of disabled persons have jobs; but only 26 per cent of those considered severely disabled are employed. In the European Union, 42 per cent of disabled persons are in employment compared to 64 per cent of non-disabled persons; and significantly, 52 per cent of disabled persons are economically inactive, compared to 28 per cent of non-disabled persons. In South Africa, 19 per cent of disabled persons were in employment in 2001, compared to 35 per cent of the whole population. In some developing countries, which lack official data, the unemployment rate is estimated to be 80 per cent and higher. At the same time, eighty per cent of the world's disabled persons are estimated to live in low income countries, generally living in rural or remote areas, where they often lack basic services.

What are the costs?

The day-to-day lives of a quarter of the world's population are affected by disability, according to the World Health Organization. The cost of the social and workplace exclusion disabled persons face goes beyond the personal, social and economic hardship that individuals and families endure. In many countries, the financial costs of excluding disabled persons from the active

labour market are staggering and can be linked to the lack of effective policies on disability matters. The costs are related to maintaining workers' compensation systems that lack effective vocational rehabilitation and return-to-work services, separate training facilities and workplaces for disabled persons and losses in taxes and other revenues from disabled persons who might otherwise work, if opportunities were open to them. This combination of elements reflects a welfare approach to disability.

According to a paper commissioned by the World Bank, the cost of exclusion based on disability is between US\$1.37 trillion to \$1.94 trillion of the global GDP. These economic costs to society are shared by all, including business.

Decent work barriers

People with disabilities cannot attain decent work if they do not have access to education, training and employment services and other social and development experiences that enable them to acquire employability skills. Other decent work barriers that disabled persons face include:

- Fears, stereotypes and discrimination about disability at all levels of society, including among employers
- Lack of effective legislation or policy support to address their rights to full participation in society and the workplace
- Lack of information about people with disabilities, which can render them “invisible” and forgotten
- Lack of access to assistive devices, technology, accommodations, support services and information
- Inaccessible buildings and communication and transportation systems
- Psychosocial issues that can arise from years of social exclusion.

Yet, when barriers are reduced and opportunities open up, disabled persons consistently demonstrate their ability to participate, thrive and contribute to the workplace and the economy.

Meeting workplace needs through a diverse workforce

In today's global economy, managing diversity is a major factor in a company's efficiency, productivity and overall business success. Many multinational companies and small and medium businesses alike have discovered the potential of people with disabilities to make significant contributions to the workplace. The Dupont Corporation was one of the first companies to measure the performance of its disabled employees, which it did for more than thirty years. Dupont reported in its publication *Equal to the Task II* that its disabled employees performed on par or better than its non-disabled staff with regard to attendance, safety and overall job performance.

Many companies have found similar results and these experiences have been recounted in publications of the Employers' Forum on Disability in the United Kingdom, in ILO publications like the *Ability* video series (i.e., *AbilityAsia*, *AbilityThailand* and *Ability Caribbean*), and on Web sites like EARNWORKS in the United States (see *For More Information* below), as well as by thousands of employers across the globe.

For other companies, however, the recruitment, hiring and retention of disabled workers is not a component of their diversity strategies. Fears, myths and stereotypes come in all forms and are probably at the root cause of much discrimination and exclusion. In the workplace, for example, the fear that people with disabilities will be less productive than non-disabled workers is simply not the case. The fear that the costs of accommodating disabled employees are high and unreasonable is dispelled by the facts. In the United States it was found that most disabled employees do not require any accommodation and when they do the cost is typically less than \$500 USD

The fact is that when disabled persons are empowered by rights and opportunities, and are given equitable access to training and related services, they make productive entrepreneurs and employees. Promoting rights-based approaches and the business case for employing people with disabilities are crucial to equalizing opportunities and fostering inclusion.

The Business Case

The business case basically states that hiring workers with disabilities can improve a company's profitability and bottom line. Here's why...

- People with disabilities make **good, dependable employees**. Employers of disabled workers consistently report that, as a group, people with disabilities perform on par or better than their nondisabled peers.
- People with disabilities are more **likely to stay on the job**. The costs of job turnover, such as lost productivity and expenses related to recruitment and training, are well known to most employers.
- Hiring people with disabilities **increases workforce morale**. Many employers report that teamwork and morale increases when disabled workers become part of the staff.
- People with disabilities are an **untapped resource of skills and talents**. In many countries, people with disabilities have skills that businesses need, both technical job skills and transferable problem-solving skills developed in daily life.
- People with disabilities have **insight into an overlooked and multi-billion dollar market segment**. That market is made up of disabled persons and their families and friends. The annual disposable income of disabled persons is estimated to be US\$200 billion in the United States, US\$50 billion in the United Kingdom and US\$25 billion in Canada. Ignoring this market may mean losing not only the disabled consumer but his or her family and friends. It makes sense to have employees who are disabled and know first-hand about product and service needs of this customer base.

Employers and Workers Initiatives

Increasingly, businesses and business organizations are directly taking on the challenges faced by a lack of decent work among people with disabilities. Mainstream business organizations, such as the United States Chamber of Commerce and the Employers' Federation of Ceylon, promote the hiring of disabled persons among their members. At the same time, employers are organizing in groups, like the Employers' Forum on Disability in the United Kingdom and the Business Leadership Network in the United States, to inform themselves and take action on issues related to disability in the workplace.

In Ireland, the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) formed a partnership, called Workway, involving unions, employers, disabled persons, service providers and government agencies. Its overall purpose has been to promote the employment of people with disabilities by increasing awareness for all involved in employment process. The Kanagawa Regional Council of the Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Union operates three separate employment service centres for disabled persons and collaborates with government and the employers' organization to facilitate the employment of disabled persons. Retired union members serve as job coaches to help newly placed disabled employees learn their jobs and adjust to the open labour market.

These are only a few examples. Many such initiatives exist and increasingly, employers and trade unions are becoming more active in promoting the inclusion of disabled persons in the workplace. Both have important roles to play in the area of policy development and rights-based initiatives, as well.

Promoting rights for disabled persons

In the past, people with disabilities were considered objects of charity or people in need of welfare and medical interventions, rather than equal members of society entitled to the same rights and privileges as others. The disadvantages resulting from disability were perceived to be the result of the person's impairment. Today, however, the understanding of disability is based on what is called *the social model*, which recognizes that the disadvantages and barriers that disabled people face are largely the result of the social and physical environment. The social model suggests policy approaches based on human rights, integration, inclusion, universal design, and anti-discrimination measures. It holds to the premise that people with disabilities are entitled to the same rights as other human beings.

The ILO has, for decades, promoted equal rights and equal opportunities for disabled persons in the workplace through its conventions and recommendations, as well as through advocacy and technical cooperation. While the rights of disabled persons are covered in many of the ILO's standards, ILO Convention concerning Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons), 1983 (No. 159), deals specifically with disability. It requires that governments develop a national policy on vocational rehabilitation and employment promotion in consultation with employers' and workers' organizations. Such a policy must be based on equal opportunity and equal employment. The accompanying Recommendation No. 168 (1983) and

Recommendation No. 99 (1955) offer specific guidance for governments and employers' and workers' organizations in promoting equal opportunity and treatment of workers with disabilities. The ILO also calls for the active involvement of disabled persons in the development, implementation and evaluation of such policies. In 2001, the ILO adopted the Code of Practice for Managing Disability in the Workplace, which provides specific guidance to employers in promoting and realizing inclusion.

The United Nations has endorsed the rights of disabled persons to full participation in several instruments. Most recently, in December 2001, the United Nations established an ad hoc committee which completed its task of negotiating a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities in August 2006. This landmark human rights Convention went before the UN General Assembly in September 2006. It is a major milestone in the promotion of equality for people with disabilities.

At the national level, most countries have some form of legislation to safeguard the rights or promote employment opportunities for disabled persons. Often, employment promotion measures take the form of quota systems, with levies assigned to employers who do not comply with the required quota, or of antidiscrimination measures with requirements for reasonable accommodation. Many countries also have hiring incentives, promotional schemes, technical supports or other measures to promote the employment and retention of workers with disabilities.

Clearly, however, combating discrimination and promoting decent work for disabled persons is a complex issue. All the social partners and disabled persons are needed to address the issue and its ramifications.

For more information

The following is a selected list of publications and Web sites. For a more complete list, see the ILO's draft publication, *EmployAbility: A Resource Guide on Employment and Disability for Employers in Asia and the Pacific*.

Publications:

- *ILO Code of Practice for Managing Disability in the Workplace*
www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/disability/policy_c.htm
- *AbilityAsia: Hiring People with Disabilities – Employer Perspectives*, a video available from the ILO
- *Unlocking Potential: The New Disability Business Case*, contact the ILO or the Employers Forum on Disability (see Web address below)
- *Unlocking the Evidence: The New Disability Business Case*, contact the Employers Forum on Disability (see Web address below)
- *Disability: Dispelling the Myths – How People with Disabilities Can Meet Employer Needs and Disability 101*.
(www.uschamber.com/cwp/publications/reports/hiring.htm)
- *Moving Forward: Toward Decent Work for People with Disabilities – Examples of Good Practices in Vocational Training and Employment from Asia and the Pacific* (Refer to section on Partnerships in particular)
www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/bangkok/ability/publ/ilopublications.htm

Web sites:

- The ILO Global Disability Programme:
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/disability/index.htm>
- The ILO's disability programme in Asia and the Pacific Region:
www.ilo.org/abilityasia
- Employer Assistance and Recruiting Network (EARNWORKS), US:
http://www.earnworks.com/Private_Employers/priv_businesscase.htm
- Employers Forum on Disability, UK: www.employers-forum.co.uk/www/index.htm