



Ability beyond disability

Priya de Langen 15 Mar 2012



Research shows that more companies around the globe are hiring employees with disabilities, but experts say there is still a long way to go when it comes to employing this group of individuals in high numbers.

The United Nations Enable site states that in developing countries, 80–90% of persons with disabilities of working age are unemployed, whereas in developed nations, this number is between 50 and 70%. A recent Life Opportunities Survey conducted in the UK revealed that 18% of working age people have disabilities, but only 48% of them are employed.

Governments and interest groups in several countries have been raising awareness of the benefits of employing PWDs. In Singapore, an Enabling Masterplan Committee was established in order to integrate this group of individuals into society through several means – an Open Door fund to defray costs for employers to encourage hiring PWDs, a job portal, and diversity management workshops.

HR plays a big role in inclusiveness

Experts say that the efforts are encouraging but organisations can do more, and HR can play a big part in ensuring that this happens – from acknowledging the benefits of hiring these individuals to identifying challenges for the organisations and how they can integrate PWDs at the workplace.

“People with disabilities are the largest and fastest growing minority in the world, so as the population ages and we look to new talent, we must consider this highly productive segment of our society,” states Nadine Vogel, Founder and President, Springboard Consulting LLC. The firm works with multinationals, federal governments and national agencies on initiatives to successfully mainstream disability in the global workforce, workplace and marketplace.

Vogel explains that PWDs are often innovative workers. Moreover, she adds that “while the disability is an integral part of who they are, it alone does not and should not define them. If the workforce considers people with disabilities in this manner it will quickly realise that employing people with disabilities is more than just a strategic advantage, it’s a business imperative.”

Experts say that there are several reasons why organisations may be reluctant about hiring PWDs – employers might feel that these employees could be hindered by their disabilities in accomplishing a task, there is apprehension of communicating properly with PWDs, or they feel that there are extra costs or liabilities involved in hiring workers with disabilities.

However, organisations that have been hiring employees with disabilities say that changes are made to help them integrate at the workplace, but they are not major ones. Moreover, HR has helped make these changes possible.

Holiday Inn Singapore Orchard City Centre is one of the more well-known companies in Singapore that employs PWDs. Currently, 10% of the hotel’s workforce is made up of PWDs. In fact, the first such employee that they hired in 1986, Edward Wong, is still with the hotel.

The hotel’s HR team is active in encouraging the hiring of PWDs. Jagdeep Thakral, Executive Assistant Manager, Holiday Inn Singapore Orchard City Centre, notes that there are no formal policies in place for handling these employees. However, the HR team gets recommendations from the hotel’s partner schools and associations for a hire.

“A meet-up session with the potential candidate will then be arranged to better understand their profile and determine if the employment opportunity is a suitable one for them.” In order to maintain transparency, the potential hire’s parent or guardian and school placement officers will be included in the session. In addition, a teacher from their school will accompany the PWD in their first few weeks of work to “help them adapt to their new surroundings” and will check up on them regularly to monitor their progress.

Additionally, the HR team regularly organises activities with the hotel’s partner organisations, like Metta School and Delta Senior School, where employees volunteer to help out. “These initiatives prove useful in increasing disability awareness within the hotel and help employees to understand and interact better with the PWDs, hence, creating a culture of inclusion,” explains Thakral.

HR also has introduced a buddy system to help this group of employees adapt to their workplace environment and their roles, as well as help increase interaction with other employees, he adds.

Joyce Cheng, GM of Ella Cheong Spruson & Ferguson, an intellectual property firm, is another organisation that is in support of employing PWDs. The company currently employs 10 employees who are hearing-impaired. “We believe in equal employment opportunities and provide permanent employment for PWDs based on their ability to fulfil the essential criteria

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HRM TV



Filling engagement gaps

Despite a host of resources spent on employee engagement programmes today, workers in Singapore are still a rather disengaged lot. Achieve Group’s senior director for HR consulting, David Too, tells us what’s missing in the engagement matrix today

for the position. They enjoy the same benefits and career advancement as people without a disability," she says.

Cheng says that the firm did have to make some adjustments to employ this group of individuals. "There is a longer duration of training due to the extra efforts required by mentors when communicating work process/protocol to PWDs," she explains.

The first employee with a disability that the firm hired has been with the company for more than 10 years. However, during the past couple of years, the pool of these employees has increased and Cheng states that the firm "might consider conducting sign language classes to ease the communication process."

Experts and employers alike state that HR could arrange for training and workshops in order to help organisations understand the needs of this group of workers, help this group integrate into their workplaces, and create awareness among the staff.

Vogel suggests that companies should look at Disability Etiquette and Awareness Training that uses real-life examples and tools. "For instance, when you are having a conversation with someone who uses a wheelchair, should you sit, stand or kneel during the conversation?" she explains, citing an example of what someone can learn from the training.

She points out another workshop, 'Day in the Life', that involves a group of employees that volunteer to take on the role of someone with a disability for the day, simulating their regular daily work activities.

Providing care and safety

Maintaining the safety of workers is essential, and employees with disabilities especially should be included in this context. Experts say that most companies do consider the health and safety of their PWD workers, but not all.

Lee Yew Cheong, Manager, Projects, Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF), says: "Companies might not feel the need to make changes or accommodations for an individual or small group of disabled workers, especially when the company is new in hiring a PWD, as they may fear that the person may not stay long in the job."

However, under the Open Door Fund programme, SNEF works with job placement and job support centres to assist a company in ensuring the safety and health aspects of PWDs are addressed. He adds that more employers are willing to make the changes as the cost is partially funded through the programme.

Employers could also attend the Diversity Management Workshops run by SNEF to understand some of the challenges faced by PWDs and learn how to manage them, says Cheong.

Organisations like Holiday Inn and Ella Cheong Spruson & Ferguson state that there were not many physical changes that needed to be made at the workplace after hiring PWDs. "Currently, the hotel deals primarily with people with mild intellectual disabilities. As such, no physical changes have been required at the workplace. However, workplace operations or processes could be adapted so that the job role and its responsibilities are assigned to the PWD based on suitability," says Thakral.

Similarly, Cheng says that the firm did not make any changes to the physical structure of the workplace, just minor adjustments to its training methodology.

When it comes to the safety and health of employees with disabilities, it is not just about everyday situations but also about emergency preparedness, explains Vogel. "A best practice is to ensure that all individuals entering the building are asked if, in the event of an emergency, would they need assistance to independently exit the building in x minutes, and if so what level of assistance." She also suggests that a company-wide communication should be maintained so that all employees are aware of the protocols during emergency situations.

Changes ahead

There are still many challenges ahead when it comes to employing PWDs. Employers and experts highlight that practising fair employment policies is the first step in handling the challenges.

Cheong of SNEF says: "The starting point for any company hiring PWDs is to have a fair employment policy that communicates to all staff about the company's belief in hiring based on merit, and not discriminated by age, gender or disabilities."

Vogel states companies should conduct corporate assessments. Springboard Consulting conducts a corporate assessment and gap analysis for organisations and the result is a document that outlines long- and short-term opportunities and other recommendations. "It provides an organisation with a strategic blueprint of how to generate profitability and productivity while at the same time mitigating risk. Most employers of choice are having such assessments done."

Thakral says that hiring PWDs has been beneficial for the hotel and has helped alleviate manpower issues faced by many hospitality companies. He says that he would strongly encourage organisations to engage their existing employees, especially the supervisors and managers from the very beginning, to build an inclusive corporate culture.

Singapore accepts PWDs

A recent 'I Accept' Campaign 2011 Survey by the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) revealed that Singaporeans today are more accepting of persons with disabilities (PWDs) as part of the community, workplace and everyday life.

The survey found:

+ An improvement in public's perceived barriers in communicating with PWDs. 25.3% of respondents indicated that they think it is harder to communicate and deal with PWDs



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compared to 43% in 2009

- + A total of 93.1% of those surveyed agreed that more can be done to help PWDs on public transportation in Singapore
- + A significant decrease in the number of people who feel that PWDs are dependent on others, from 47% in 2009 to 13.4% in the 2011. Also, 61.7% disagreed with the statement
- + More Singaporeans are recognising PWDs as contributing members of society. Only 8.8% of the respondents felt that these individuals are unable to perform as well as non-disabled people at work, a sharp decrease from the 23% in 2009
- + A whopping 80.3% of 61 respondents who are in a position to hire are open employing PWDs

Use the initiatives

The Singapore government and several agencies have been working for a few years to encourage organisations to employ people with disabilities. Organisations can apply for the Open Door Fund, a financial support programme for employers to create jobs for PWDs. In addition, employers can refer to The Enabling Employers Network (EEN) site, which can help employers find suitable PWD candidates for their organisations.

Be an inclusive workplace

- + Employ workers based on merit and experience – the PWD who is being hired should be able to fit the role
- + HR can research initiatives in place (eg, government grants) in order to see if these can help the company with the hiring of PWDs
- + HR can discuss with management on some concrete policies when it comes to hiring PWDs – the benefits and the challenges that face the company, etc
- + HR can conduct in-house educational and awareness workshops for all employees and managers to increase disability awareness
- + HR can consider if they need to make any physical changes to the work environment for their PWD employees

Did you know

Ableism – it is a term used to describe discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities

Promoting inclusion around the world

Australia:

The Australian Network on Disability (AND), an organisation funded by Australian private and public employers, was established to advance the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of business. Currently, over 4 million Australians have a disability, which is 18.5% of the population

India:

NASSCOM is an organisation of information technology and business process outsourcing¹² (IT-BPO) companies. In early 2010, it launched the Accessibility Initiative, an advocacy programme centred on the issue of employment and accessibility in the industry. One of the main aims of the initiative is to create a platform to empower persons with disabilities

Vietnam:

The Blue Ribbon Employer Council (BREC) is an initiative of employers established in 2007 to promote the employment of Vietnamese with disabilities, an estimated 7 million people. The BREC provides a platform for employers to share experiences and examples of good practice related to employment and vocational training of people with disabilities

Germany:

UnternehmensForum is an association of private sector employers established in 2002 to promote the joint interests of businesses and people with disabilities in the labour market. It started as an initiative of 15 medium and large companies that are mainly based in the Rhine-Main region of Germany. One of its initiatives is ProBAs, a pilot project for the further professional development of disabled bachelor graduates

US:

The US Business Leadership Network® (USBLN®) is a national disability organisation representing over 5,000 employers in the country, both public and private and small and

large employers. The organisation aims to promote disability-inclusive workplaces, supply chains and marketplaces through an approach that recognises the abilities and potential of PWDs

Source: Disability in the Workplace – Employers’ Organizations and Business Networks, ILO

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