

INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AT THE WORK PLACE

Close to 2.21% of India's total population i.e. 2.68 cr. persons in India are persons with disabilities, of which 1.5 cr. are male and 1.18 cr. are female (source: 2001 census). People with disabilities face barriers at every step of their lives. To begin with India's education system is not inclusive; therefore education penetration among persons with disabilities is very low. As a result only about 2% of the persons with disabilities are literate, only 5% of who are graduates and less than 1% of them number is employed.

These statistics alone show what an intervention as basic as education may make to empower persons with disabilities and in the disabled persons we have a huge untapped resource pool. Although there are a few corporates from diverse industries coming forward to hiring persons with disabilities, most of the corporates/companies are not aware of this untapped resource pool and the potential and value-add each of these individuals may bring to the companies they are employed at.

The sad fact remains that people with disabilities are underrepresented in the workplace. Public sector organizations have been hiring employees from this segment following a mandate of having 3% of their workforce with persons with disabilities. It is heartening to note that despite no mandatory requirement for the private sector to recruit persons with disabilities the private sector is also slowly warming up to the idea and there is an upward trend of hiring and retaining people with disabilities. Apart from multinational companies, that have a global mandate, quite a few Indian companies such as Wipro, Infosys, Lemon tree hotels, ITC Hotels, Café Coffee day, Gitanjali gems, have been consistently including persons with disabilities in their workforce.



The important question is why private sector is ensuring their inclusion, is it just out of compassion and because it is the right thing to do, or there is the business case? Corporate social responsibility remains a strong reason for companies to start hiring persons with disabilities but slowly corporates have started realizing the benefits of having a diverse workforce such as - enhanced public image, employee and customer good will, and a group of motivated employees, who can perform if not better than equally well as their non-disabled counterparts. Creating a more inclusive workplace is necessary for many reasons. Global leaders feel that the rationale for working towards a diverse work environment is threefold: a) responding to future talent shortages, b) building a strong reputation for their company and c) reflecting the markets companies serve. Making a workplace inclusive impacts not only persons with disabilities but is beneficial for everyone, e.g. if the office space is barrier free, doors automatically open and close, it helps even the people who are carrying large packets, accessible websites also help aged people, who might want to read in large font and might want to hear the information instead of reading it.

However finding employment is one of the biggest challenges for People with Disabilities today, owing to the low literacy levels, poverty, and inaccessibility to education, and social stigma, which leads them to be among the most excluded in society. The Government and Non-Government Organizations (NGO) are motivating educational institutions to provide quality education for individuals / children with disability while also

including them in the mainstream education system. While Some NGOs are focusing on specific skills and are providing the much needed 'vocational skills training' to make them ready for future job opportunities a complete set of enablers to make skill development and employment possible are also being put in place - several NGOs spread across geography, such as *Enable India*, *Samarthanam*, *V-shesh* etc. are providing much needed skills and employability training, digital and physical accessibility practitioners such as *Barrier Break Technology* help companies create the conducive eco-system conducive and unique advisory firms such as *Social Equity Advisory Services* act as advisors enabling companies create a truly inclusive environment for hiring and integrating people with disabilities in the work place.

I would like to conclude it with a quote from Kevin Evans, Vice President, Western Canada - Retail Counsel of Canada, "Ultimately, the success of any company depends on the ability of its employers to recognize and recruit skilled people who will contribute to the long-term business goals that have been set out. Recognizing that persons with disabilities are a source of skill and creativity will thus help a business to get the upper hand in a competitive market."



Contributed by Abha Saxena, Founder Social Equity Advisory Services

(www.socialequity.co.in), she is a consultant advising companies on CSR and including persons with disabilities at the workplace.