

## Are we blind to seeing 'ability' in 'disability'?

RICHARD Pimental, a renowned American keynote speaker and an expert on disability management had once quoted - "There are no good jobs for people with disabilities in your company, but there is a good person with a disability for every job in your company".

Corporates in India now seem to be waking up to this idea. Not only corporate giants like IBM but also our very own NTPC have been setting the trend by creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities (PWDs) within their organisations. IBM employed its first physically challenged worker as early as 1914, while the NTPC has been doing so for over a decade now.

The point we are getting at is that there needs to be a change of perception towards PWDs. Leading the pack once again, is IBM. As explained by Joe Mullich in ***Hiring without Limits***, IBM does not hire PWDs 'to be nice', it does so because it is right for the business.

It is the beauty of creation that disability in one of the body functions is compensated by an increased capability in another. Visually challenged people for instance, have an amazing sense of hearing, touch and smell. Paraplegic people are usually very creative and their concentration levels and attention to detail is unmatched. So rather than looking at PWDs as 'challenged' in one aspect, we need to look at them as 'specially talented' in another. IBM, which was facing difficulties in hiring people skilled in the dying art of precision machining found their solution in the National Technical Institute for the Hearing Impaired in the US.

IBM is implementing a small fraction of the avenues available for PWDs and reaping the benefits. But there are numerous other avenues still left to be explored. Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have over the years been building sustainable employment options for PWDs, the most common of them being the selling of handicrafts made by PWDs commercially. Paraplegic people for instance can be trained to perform data entry and call-center responsibilities. The possibilities are vast but the implementation is still at a concept stage. Corporates need to take the initiative here by building their business models by incorporating training programs as well as employment options for PWDs.

One of the realities faced by the recruitment industry is that 'stability' is as important as 'ability'. PWDs are a perfect mix of both. A survey conducted in 2004 proved that workers with disabilities were more punctual, loyal and regular, as compared to their counterparts. Complement this with the fact that they are naturally resilient and adaptable, and you have with you, a diverse workforce with traits that can contribute significantly to the company's growth.

We do not need a 'Disability Law' enforced upon us to ensure that we hire PWDs. All we need is a little insight and more than a little of foresight - An insight into their ability and foresight of their potential. But much needs to be done to realise this vision. Accommodating the disabled needs a big improvement in the basic infrastructure of our organisations. As explained by Peter Verhoeven in his article published in October this year, employment and accessibility go hand in hand and corporate India needs to realise the benefits of making their offices disabled-friendly. The article further reveals the fact that websites are increasing the digital divide through lack of accessibility. Given below is an excerpt from the article:

*"Most websites do not meet the minimum criteria set out in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). According to a UN-commissioned survey most websites are ostracising disabled people by failing to adhere to the most basic accessibility standards."*

The study was launched following the International Day of Disabled persons, 3rd December, which focused on the theme of e-accessibility this year. It examined 100 leading sites across five sectors and 20 countries, measuring them against the WCAG.

For now, we can take a step at a time and begin with creating increased employment opportunities for PWDs. The 'Employability 2006', conducted in Chennai recently is one such initiative. Organised by the Ability Foundation, in association with industry body CII and Lions Club Padi-Shenoy Nagar, it is already into its third year since inception. 'Employability' is a job fair aimed at providing employment opportunities for the disabled and creating a platform for corporates to reach out to them.

The number of corporates participating in the fair increased from 32 in the first year to 69 this year, Ability Foundation founder Jayashree Raveendran said.

The first year saw 600 disabled people take part and this number went up to 1,100 from 13 states this year.

Clearly, we are headed in the right direction and a little synergy is all that we need to keep the momentum going. Soon, we can expect to be in a phase where People with Disabilities compete on the same platform as the rest of us with no special focus or attention required to help their cause.

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