



COMMENT



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Social and redistributive justice for persons with disabilities

SOCIAL and redistributive justice is an absolute necessity in an unequal society such as South Africa.

This kind of justice is also required to achieve equality in the workplace, especially for persons with disabilities.

That's why pieces of legislation such as the Employment Equity Act should be welcomed as they are important means through which equity in the workplace can be achieved, and persons with disabilities can become economically independent and contribute to the country's socio-economic development.

Historical discrimination continues to disproportionately affect persons with disabilities. In fact, it is estimated that the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in South Africa is more than 90%, approaching 100% in rural areas. It is against this background that, for this year's Casual Day (September 2) national campaign, I would like to focus on the pertinent issue of disability in the workplace.

At Stellenbosch University (SU), the institution where I work, instruments such as the 2016 Employment Equity Plan and the 2018 Disability Access Policy are aimed at eliminating unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by people with disabilities.

Studies have shown that despite progressive labour legislation, persons with disabilities continue to encounter barriers in the workplace. Based on my experience as a person with a disability working at SU, I will concentrate on two of these impediments, namely the physical environment and negative attitudes.

I work in a building where my office is on the top floor. The only way I can get to my office is by using the lift. I have learnt that not all lifts are supportive of all wheelchair types; some are restrictive in terms of size. In my case, it means I have to use an additional assistive device that my manager had to procure so that I can get to my office. Moreover, the lift does not function when there's load shedding, which severely limits my movement within the building.

While physical barriers might be easier to dismantle, it is much harder to change people's attitudes and convince them about the importance of fairness and equality in the workplace.

Hence, many studies highlight negative attitudes, beliefs and misconceptions as some of the biggest challenges facing the disabled community.

It's important to keep in mind that negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities are a product not only of individual beliefs, but also of societal and organisational practices.

We should therefore applaud the different types of organisations that try to educate the public about persons with disabilities in order to shift negative attitudes that contribute towards social exclusion.

On a broader level, the lack of improvement in employment for persons with disabilities is negative for both them and employers. Employers will continuously struggle to meet employment equity targets, and if persons with disabilities continue to experience barriers in entering employment, they will remain reliant on the state's disability grants, unemployed or dependent on their families.

To create more employment opportunities and better working conditions for persons with disabilities, we should think of disability inclusion as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

Persons with disabilities should have equal access to employment and promotion.

The public and private sectors must also attract and retain the most creative, thoughtful and talented staff within the disabled community.

Prioritising disability and putting it high on the agenda must be central to any real transformation project.

Developing a practical and sustainable accountability framework is the cornerstone for planning ahead towards a transformed and inclusive working environment for persons with disabilities.



