



Inclusive organisations make

BUSINESS SENSE



There is a general misconception that hiring people with disabilities can be counter-productive and end up costing the company money. The truth, however, is far different and Dr Diane Bell examines the facts.

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To persons with disabilities and their families, unemployment is one of their most significant challenges. Historically, ignorance, fear and stereotyping have contributed to the high level of unemployment of persons with disabilities in South Africa. Persons with disabilities are often disadvantaged compared to those without disabilities in terms of access to opportunities in the job market. This can be partly attributed to limited formal education and

skills, but even with respect to graduates with disabilities there is a high unemployment rate. This, despite robust legislation such as the Employment Equity Act of 1998 and other supporting documents, e.g. Code of Good Practice: Key aspects on the Employment of People with Disabilities (2002) and the Technical Assistance Guidelines on the Employment of People with Disabilities (TAG).

A multitude of labour practices have

added to this demise, such as disability discrimination due to ignorance concerning the abilities and performance capabilities of the individual with a disability, inflexible organisational procedures, processes and regulations, and the inaccessibility of communication, information, the built environment and transport. Additionally, there is a level of ignorance, and a lack of understanding regarding the legal meaning of impairment and disability (refer to



“Individuals with disabilities make a significant contribution to the organisation.”

chapter five of the TAG), and the lack of knowledge around how to ‘manage reasonable accommodation’ in terms of the concepts such as ‘substantially limiting/minimum standards’ (refer to chapter six of the TAG). Ultimately, the implications of low levels of employment for persons with disability are: poverty and a dependency on family and the state in the form of disability grants, among others. Even in cases where a person with a disability is able to secure full-time employment, this is more frequently in positions below their level of competence and where they earn a less than typical salary. Turning to current employees who become disabled, often their employers exert pressure on them to claim disability benefits leading to early retirement, instead of simply meeting their access needs through the provision of reasonable accommodation. In this way he/she could have continued contributing to the success of the organisation by serving as a productive employee.

Disability prevalence in South Africa, employment and income

According to the report entitled “Profile of persons with disabilities in South Africa”, published by Statistics South Africa, which is based on the Census 2011 data, South Africa has a national disability prevalence rate of 7.5%. Provincial variations show that the Free State and Northern Cape provinces had the highest proportion of persons with disabilities i.e.11%, with the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces showed the lowest

percentage of persons with disabilities at 5%. Disability is also more prevalent among females compared to males, and the data reveals that Africans had the highest proportion of persons with disabilities at 7.8%. Analysis on the prevalence of a specific type of disability showed that 11% had ‘seeing difficulties’, 4.2% had cognitive difficulties (remembering/concentrating), 3.6% had ‘hearing difficulties’ and about 2% had ‘communication, self-care and walking difficulties’ (SSA, 2011).

Unemployment rates of persons with disabilities in South Africa are extremely high. According to the World Health Organisation and World Bank (2011), eight in ten persons with a disability are unemployed, making discrimination in terms of denial of employment opportunities one of the most severe challenges faced by them. If one looks at gender, females are more marginalised in terms of employment than their male counterparts. There is also a direct correlation between the degree of difficulty (severity of the disability) and economic participation, with increased difficulty being associated with a decrease in securing employment. Similarly, according to the latest census findings in Indonesia, a person with a mild disability has a 64.9% chance of being employed whilst someone with a profound disability only has a 10.2% chance.

There is obviously a direct link between employment and income, which subsequently affects the well-being of an individual. Results from the census data (SSA, 2011)

show wide-spread disparity pertaining to earnings. Generally, persons with disabilities earn less than persons without a disability. There is also a direct correlation between the degree of difficulty (severity of the disability) and income level i.e. the more severe the disability, the less the income. Average annual income, across all types of disabilities, range from R26 983 (R2 248 per month for a person with a mild disability) to R18 712 (R1 559 per month for a person with a severe disability).

Dispelling myths about employing people with disability

Employers are often reluctant to employ persons with disabilities as many myths abound, such as:

- People with disabilities are less productive than those without a disability – evidence suggests there are no differences between job performance and job productivity.
- Providing for reasonable accommodation is difficult and costly to implement – research (DePaul University, 2007) shows that 46% of accommodations cost nothing whilst 45% of accommodations have a once-off cost, normally around R5 600. The provision of various types of accommodations, rather result in several benefits which include: the retention of a qualified employee and the abolition of costs to train a new employee, where employees return to work after injury or illness.
- Will employing people with disabilities cause more accidents and create more safety risks? Evidence shows that there is no major difference in this regard.

The business benefits of creating inclusive organisations

When individuals with disabilities are afforded access to employment on fair and equal terms with their non-disabled peers, and are provided with the necessary training for skills development, they are in a position to make a significant contribution to the organisation. It is commonly found that the person with a disability grows into a well-adjusted, industrious worker in an atmosphere of acceptance, collaboration and benevolence. There are thus definite advantages in employing persons with disabilities and reasonably accommodating them:

- Organisations benefit from the talent and work ethic that persons with disabilities possess. A South African case study discovered that often employees with disabilities are more loyal and committed

than their non-disabled colleagues.

- Persons with disabilities have a significant role to play in order to make a constructive contribution in the workplace. Employers need to recognise the different viewpoints and understand what people with disabilities offer their organisation.
- Skills development forms 20% of the weighting in the new B-BBEE Codes and thus the training and development of people with disabilities can contribute a significant number of points on the scorecard.
- The cost of providing reasonable accommodation to people with disabilities is often over-estimated. Employers are often able to effect simple, yet effective changes that benefit both their staff with disabilities as well as persons without disabilities (principles of universal design).
- Businesses can enhance their competitive edge by making people with disabilities an essential part of their labour force and their consumer base. A major proportion of an organisation's target market are consumers with disabilities. Disability is a reality in business and identifying it as a business opportunity eventually leads to a bigger market share and wealth.
- Often organisations that employ persons with disabilities report a reduction in staff turnover, an increase in employee loyalty with a spin-off effect of other employees being more optimistic and efficient.
- Employing people with disabilities can escalate a company's brand image in the eyes of consumers.
- Making a difference in the lives of people with disabilities inspires a culture of compassion and reverence for diversity in the employer, and an optimistic consumer response. This is a win-win strategy.

People with disabilities are entitled to enjoy equal rights and the same opportunities as persons without disabilities e.g. 'allowed' to enter the workforce. The resistance of organisations can be 'broken down' through the provision of sensitisation programmes (where people with disabilities play an integral part) so that they are better equipped to understand:

- Their obligation to implement non-discrimination and affirmative action measures in respect of people with disabilities in the workplace; and
- Practical ways to move forward that are relevant to their business and that ensure the application of non-discrimination and affirmative action measures for potential and existing employees with disabilities.

Is it not time for your organisation to become inclusive and reap these rewards? 