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INCLUSIVITY FOR THE DISABLED

Can and able

Lubna Kably and Madhavi Rajadhyaksha | December 1, 2012

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With World Disability Day round the corner, TOI-Crest looks at how workspaces are becoming more inclusive. From coffee brewing to gem cutting, disabled employees bring a different energy to the office.

Subhash Chuttar had a life-altering experience 26 years ago. The head of an auto component unit, in Chakan, Pune saw his mentally challenged son, then just a toddler, showed remarkable capability in completing certain tasks. So heartened by

this was he that he decided to induct disabled people as employees.

Today, they constitute 26 per cent of his total work force of 260 employees. "They require no special provisions or aids, only special training involving a little more patience. We have had zero accidents. If you walk onto our shop floors, you won't be able to distinguish the work of a disabled employee from any other," Chuttar says. He also encourages other factories in this industrial belt to employ disabled candidates.

United Nations has adopted 'Inclusivity' as its theme this year to commemorate the International Day of the Disabled. Inclusivity is also one of the pillars of recently issued Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2012 (draft Bill), which when enacted will replace the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995.

The census figures of 2001 estimate that 2 per cent of our population or 21 million Indians are physically disabled, even as World Health Organisation pegs it at much higher. The census survey of 2011 was aimed at collecting accurate data of our differently-abled population. The provisional figures currently available do not give these statistics, but it is bound to be a significant number.

Even in the past, legislations have aimed to usher in a more inclusive society, especially when it comes to employment opportunities. Currently, there exists a 3 per cent reservation for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in poverty alleviation programmes in certain job categories in the government sector. But this quota has not been met in most states. And now the draft bill seeks to cover even the private sector within the reservation framework.

Experts believe that such legislations may not result in a more inclusive society. "The private sector is opening up towards employing PWDs and there are some good success stories. But, largely there is a gap in demand and supply of skilled human resources with disabilities. Often an employer is unable to see them as skilled or meaningful resource," says Sarfaraz Syed, developmental professional.

India Inc is inching its way towards becoming a more inclusive employer, supported by NGOs and industry affiliated bodies. Youth4Jobs (Y4J) is a Hyderabad headquartered NGO which provides market linked vocational training to disabled youth, especially those from rural and underprivileged families. "We conduct sensitisation workshops for top management, help workplaces be transformed into PWD friendly environments, and in the initial months counsel the newly recruited PWDs," explains Meera Shenoy, founder-CEO of this NGO.

Companies which get past their initial hesitance and are willing to make their environment PWD friendly by providing physical access, assistive devices or proper training often find their special investments well worth the effort.

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Café Coffee Day (CCD) has on board 150 silent brew-masters and has transformed the perceived weakness of this group into their strength. "Their heightened sense of smell and vision ensures the most visually appealing presentation of our coffees. They are our best quality controllers. Silent brewmasters participate in an annual 'Innovative Beverage Making Contest' held in-house especially for them, " says K Ramakrishnan, president, marketing, CCD.

Lemon Tree Hotel Chain earlier relegated its PWD employees (110 of them at present) to back-office operations such as housekeeping. Today, its PWD employees even wait on customers. Young Deepak for instance, wears a badge which says: 'Hi, I'm Deepak and I work at Citrus Café. I can't speak or hear, but if you write down your request I will be very happy to serve you.' Of course a numbered menu card has made it even more easier to note down orders. "Interaction with customers has boosted the morale of these employees and also creates customer loyalty, " says chairperson and MD Patu Keswani.

PWD employees also tend bring to the table loyalty, a rare trait these days. Gitanjali Gems was battling increasing attrition in its diamond cutting polishing and jewelery making unit in Hyderabad and hired a few PWDs. From a sample size of just eight such employees in 2008, Gitanjali Gems today has 280 (largely afflicted with ortho disabilities). They are also employed in quality control and clerical jobs. "PWD employees walk that extra mile to prove their merit and have a negligible attrition rate, " says Madhusudhan Reddy, VP (HR), Gitanjali Group.

Aegis, a BPO, currently has 961 PWDs as employees and is hiring many more. "We hire them for their attitude, but also train them to acquire skills and become more employable, " says SM Gupta, global chief people officer at Aegis. Vivek Kumar, HR head for India, Srilanka at Aegis makes a business case for hiring PWDs - "They are more sensitive towards others (leading to better team work) and are also more disciplined, sincere, organized and loyal. "

A UNDP Report explains the concept of supplier diversity as an emerging trend where large corporations support smaller vendors from marginalised sections. It illustrates that Mumbai based Mirakle Couriers (which only hires the hearing impaired) services mega groups like Aditya Birla and Godrej. Likewise, auto-components of AMC are purchased by Tata Motors and Ford.

Another trend is emerging. Nasscom Foundation is not only focusing on the IT/ITeS sector providing employment to PWDs but also on its making available accessible or assistive technology. "We have been conducting thematic sessions with industry leaders to create awareness and encourage them to develop software/tools that are inclusive in design, " says Rita Soni, CEO, Nasscom Foundation.

While technology company Mindtree creates an inclusive environment by hiring PWDs, Mindtree Foundation also develops assistive technologies for use, such as KAVI (a picture-to-speech software application). "We add engineering expertise to evolve IIT Madras concepts into a manufacture-able state. IITM which owns the technology distributes the same at affordable prices, " says Ravi Shankar, chief people officer, Mindtree.

Chidanand Rajghatta



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