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Inclusion: Insensitive Inc.

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There're as few jobs for the disabled in the country as disabled-friendly toilets. Inclusion initiatives are still few and far between

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Inclusion: Insensitive Inc.

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by Sonal Khetarpal

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On a cold January afternoon, Aradhana Lal, vice-president for sustainability initiatives of hotel chain Lemon Tree, sits in her office in Delhi NCR with this interviewer sipping tea. As she begins chatting, a short man walks in requesting her intervention in an urgent personal matter. He says he wants to continue on the afternoon shift as he doesn't like coming to work in the morning. He goes on to tell her he finds it difficult to wake up early as he watches the teleserial CID at 10p.m. An alibi like that would have ordinarily been dismissed with a warning, but Lal seems sympathetic. She explains that the man suffers from Down Syndrome, and that such people are most particular about their routines and detest changes.

Welcome to an inclusive workplace. Lemon Tree, according to Lal, started making its workforce inclusive in 2007 by employing speech and hearing impaired. Today, 15 per cent or 400 employees of its workforce in its 27 hotels across 16 cities in India, are persons with disability (PWD). The company is currently doing a pilot project in New Delhi to employ people with autism and another in Bengaluru to enlist people with low vision/visual impairment, informs Lal.

Turning A Blind Eye

But Lemon Tree is just among a handful of companies that recognises PWDs as an alternative talent pool. The picture on the whole is pretty dismal. The public sector has been equally unresponsive to the rights of PWDs. Take the case of the 115 persons cured from leprosy that human rights lawyer Jayshree Satpute has been fighting for employment in the railway department as per the government's rehabilitation policy. "These 115 persons have been fighting for over 25 years for their fundamental rights. In spite of several Supreme Court and high court orders, they are still waiting for the government to reinstate their dignity and job," says Satpute.

The government's efforts to incentivise employment of PWDs have not had the desired effect so far. It has announced incentives for private sector companies employing PWDs up to 5 per cent of their workforce under Section 41 of the Disability Act of 1995, but there has been little change on the ground. One hopes things will improve with the Right of Persons with Disability Bill that's pending in the Rajya Sabha, which if passed shall reserve 5 per cent of seats in government-owned or -controlled



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But people like Javed Abidi, director of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), are very sceptical. "I can bet that private sector has not even touched one per cent yet. There are only a handful of companies that employ PWDs and that gets romanticised in the media over and over," he says, adding, "What about the other companies that do not employ a single PWD? They need to be shamed too."

Abidi cites the World Health Organisation (WHO) of 2011 which reported that there were one billion people with disabilities in the world. "If you go by the WHO data, India should have more than 150 million PWDs. If you compare it to the available data from the 2011 Census, India has merely 26 million people with disabilities. This is such an understatement," he says.

Drawing attention to the magnitude of the problem, Abidi says that out of the 150 million PWDs in the country, at least 60 to 70 million must be of employable age, but the cold and bitter truth is that not even 2 per cent of them are employed. That's abysmal compared to our next door neighbour China, where 80 per cent of PWDs are in regular jobs.

The government is now promoting the Accessible India campaign to include PWDs in the mainstream world and the intention is laudable. But can a blind person independently book a railway ticket or access the banking system yet? "Our schools, colleges, universities and public infrastructure are still completely inaccessible to people with disabilities. In a budget analysis done by NCPEDP, we found that in all the Union budgets since 2008, India has spent only 0.009 per cent of its gross domestic product on disability. It may be wishful thinking but our demand is that atleast 3 per cent of the government's budget must be deployed towards the cause of its disabled citizens, considering the large numbers," says Abidi.

We Can't Fly

The key problem seems to be that of perception about disability. Says Shashaank Awasthi, co-founder of v-shesh Learning Services that trains and connects PWDs to their first job: "The world we live in is largely bi-polar, non-disabled versus the disabled. Disability is created not due to an inability to do something but due to physical and mental barriers that hinder participation of PWDs as an equal. The perception of an impairment influencing intellectual ability has no basis but is yet a key hindrance that people with disabilities battle with on a daily basis."

The problem isn't that PWDs lack intellectual faculty but the normalised world that didn't give them equal opportunities to learn and participate. According to the 2011 World Report on Disability by the World Bank and WHO, PWDs are less likely to attend and complete school, more likely to be victims of discrimination and sexual violence, and lack of financial resources hinder them from entering the labour market.

According to Awasthi, the entire concept of inclusion is lopsided. The common perception is of 'we' including 'them'. "Don't we all have different abilities? In fact, they have learnt to live in this world, however it may be. It is 'us' who have to learn and understand how 'they' experience the world. Organisations that hire PWDs provide an opportunity for non-disabled 'us' to learn and understand how the disabled 'they' experience the world. It is the non-disabled that are in fact being included by PWDs," he says.

Dipesh Sutariya, co-founder and CEO of EnAble India, a Bangalore-based organisation that helps people with disability gain employment, makes an interesting point. "We don't see not being able to fly as a disability. This is because none of us can. So, we use an alternative — an airplane." Similarly, if a person cannot see, he says, it should not be seen as his disability, but an 'inability' and he should use an alternative, a cane to walk or a screen reader software to 'see' the computer.

Not Just CSR

Inclusion does not begin or end with hiring 10-15 PWDs and making ramps or adding disabled-friendly washrooms for them. It is not just a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative that companies can boast of to look good. Inclusion will happen only when it is a part of the company's policies and hiring strategy and is not just included as an afterthought. It has to start from choosing an office premise that is accessible to providing the assistive technology to help them have equal access to perform their day-to-day jobs, says Shilpi Kapoor, co-founder of BarrierBreak, a Mumbai-based company that provides assistive technology for PWDs. Seventy-five per cent of the company's workforce is PWDs, whether it's physical, visual, auditory, cognitive, mental health, or multiple disability.

"Inclusion will never work as charity because then it will put pressure on the business. It is about understanding that inclusive workforces yield superior results and make better economic sense in the long run," says Awasthi.

Job Mapping

One important part of hiring PWDs is ensuring the performance doesn't get affected in any way by their disability. To do that, finding the right role for them in a company is key. Organisations such as v-shesh and EnAble India spend days at a company's office to understand each job profile and then suggest where PWDs can perform to their potential. "It is not one job fit for all PWDs as there are a range of disabilities, academic backgrounds and interests. So, you have to understand the qualification and training required and the business outcome that is expected so you can provide the candidate with the right skill set for employment," says Awasthi.

With right job mapping and reasonable accommodations, PWDs deliver on the same targets and pay scale as non-disabled

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had to intervene and ensure their full potential is utilised.

Awasthi points out that it is important to work with companies in pre- and post-employment stages to watch out for and address biases that hinder companies from integrating PWDs in workplaces and help in retaining them.

Once the job mapping is done, it opens up the role for other organisations/units to do the same. In 2012, EnAble India helped State Bank of India make its PWDs productive at a branch after all the visually impaired people who worked as telephone operators had little else to do with the advent of mobile phones. EnAble India did a job analysis of different roles at the bank and identified 47 different roles, one of them being passbook printing for the visually impaired. But there was a catch. The account number had to be manually fed into the system which posed a problem for the visually impaired. So, EnAble India suggested creating bar codes on passbooks which then eliminated the need for the manual update.

This one workplace solution at the SBI branch opened up the role at all the branches of SBI that has over 21,000 jobs just for passbook printing. All it needed was a sense of initiative and a willingness to change. Over the years, EnAble India has identified 272 different job roles in private and public sector companies that PWDs can perform. They have already placed 4,500 candidates in 24 cities in the country.

Efficacy Of Training

Companies must learn to be careful about the sensitivities of PWDs through workshops and regular training sessions. "Dignity is very important for them too so there is no need to treat them with sympathy or mollycoddle them," says Lal. Here, sensitisation of all the employees in the company will be key.

When Lemon Tree started its inclusion initiative in 2007, their first two speech and hearing impaired employees came to work for a few days and then stopped. When the partner NGO enquired, it was discovered they felt a communication gap with other colleagues as no one knew Indian Sign Language (ISL) properly. The company then made ISL compulsory for all and hired a permanent in-house ISL trainer besides running monthly refresher programmes.

At F&B retail company Devyani International that runs Costa Coffee and KFC, the training modules were made accessible to PWDs so they don't lose on any skill and knowledge development opportunity and get equal opportunities to take on managerial roles, informs Virendra P. Singh, executive director of HR. After the training, they work in the kitchen and in the customer service area also. "In fact most of the times, customers do not notice that they are specially abled," he says. Now, PWDs constitute 5 per cent of the total workforce at KFC and 11 per cent at Costa Coffee across India.

Benefits

Companies are slowly starting to recognise a strong business case for employing skilled PWDs, with many proving to be particularly loyal employees, as well as frequently outperforming their able-bodied colleagues.

The attrition rate at BarrierBreak is less than 1 per cent. "What we do is invest in them mostly by doing a two-month training to help them learn the accessibility standards for different software or web applications. This then helps them to read code, access web and do their job better," says Kapoor of BarrierBreak.

Also, companies nowadays look at hiring people with the right attitude than with the skill, as the latter can be taught. Since PWDs have to struggle more to live in the 'normal' world, they are more persistent and have stronger fighter skills. In fact, a lot of times they are more sensitive and conscious about other people's needs.

Inclusion also leads to a lot more diversity in the organisation where all employees bring their best and work as a team. Lal shares how chefs, who are often known to be hot tempered, have become more patient over time as they work closely with people with Down Syndrome in the restaurant. "It impacts team members' behaviour towards each other, they become more relaxed and open-minded," she says.

Says Sutaria of EnAble India that provides PWDs to 600 companies, "Now the situation is that several companies are in the waiting list because we don't have that many persons with disability for placement."

Recently, online ethnic India wear brand Viva N Diva in a bold move chose an acid attack survivor Laxmi as the face of its advertising campaign.

Slowly but surely, the movement has started, and as awareness increases with the Accessibility India programme, we can expect inclusion to become more mainstream. For our part, it's time we start seeing the world as non-dual where they are active participants rather than passive recipients of sympathy and charity.

(With inputs from Mala Bhargava)

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