

“On Second Thought” column
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Stargazers' camp puts blindness in a new light

People with disabilities need to be seen as individuals with their own unique talents

A few weeks ago, I attended the Stargaze Camp for All and the Blind, an annual event organised by the Social Welfare Department in partnership with non-profit bodies and volunteers from the private sector.

To me, this camp is a highlight among the many events I attend, because it helps its participants challenge old, tired thinking on "disability" and "possibility".

As the name suggests, a central feature of the event is stargazing for the blind. How can people who are blind gaze at stars, you may ask. The answer: through a Braille star map jointly produced by the Space Museum and the Shine Skills Centre of the Vocational Council. Narratives on the various stars were provided in Cantonese, with interpretation in sign language and English available.

So with some ingenuity and collaboration, the line between the possible and the impossible was redrawn under a starry sky.

What is preventing us from making this a permanent reality? Too often, people with disabilities still face significant barriers in accessing equal opportunities. This stems, in part, from lingering stereotypes and prejudices about disability.

An Equal Opportunities Commission survey conducted in 2010 indicated there was still a strong belief that having a disability implied a form of incapacity or dependence on others. For instance, one in four respondents felt people with a physical impairment would not be able to enjoy a happy and fulfilling life. More than half indicated that only simple, repetitive tasks were appropriate for workers with disabilities.

Such misconceptions have serious implications for their employment prospects. The stereotypes persist despite the remarkable success achieved by people with disabilities, from Hong Kong's own outstanding Paralympians to physicist Stephen Hawking.

Revealingly, only about six per cent of the survey respondents have regular contact with people with disabilities. The lack of interaction not only makes people cling on unchallenged to their outdated beliefs, but also limits their exposure to the many technological advancements that have transformed the disability landscape.

With assistance from technology, tasks that were unimaginable are rapidly becoming an ordinary, everyday affair. For instance, a research team at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in the United States is developing a prototype of a car for blind drivers. The potential for such technology, and its mainstream application, is endless.

This is where we need to change our thinking. Our society has yet to see people with disabilities as a potential resource. But just like everyone else, they have their individual talents. Their views, needs and experiences can add an invaluable perspective, which can catalyse creative thinking and innovation. For instance, the voice command feature found on smartphones and in many cars has its roots in technology for people with visual and mobility disabilities.

We would be tapping another pool of talent if we make available to them fair opportunities for training and jobs. The government must remove barriers to education, employment and key services such as public transport. It must take the lead in hiring people with disabilities. This could have an enormously positive effect in setting an example to the rest of society.

Events such as Stargaze camp show what we can achieve towards a truly inclusive society. By coming together with the right mindset, we can get there.

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