

## **EO Files (January 2017)**

### **“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”**

#### **Give people with disabilities jobs, not just handouts**

*Alfred C. M. Chan says the Hong Kong government should lead by employing more in the civil service from this disadvantaged group, rather than merely providing meagre assistance*

The fact that income inequality is serious in Hong Kong is not news. The Gini coefficient of this global financial centre is a scathing 0.537, placing it among the ranks of developing countries like Namibia and Haiti. Ever-rising living expenses, especially sky-high rents, have left nearly one million people, or one in every seven, in poverty, according to the Hong Kong Poverty Situation Report 2015.

Life is even harder for people with disabilities, who make up 7.4 per cent (499 400) of the overall population, as the government’s 2013 poverty situation report on disability suggests. Of this figure, which excludes those institutionalised or in collective households, about 180 000 are of working age (18 to 64), and yet only 39.1 per cent of them are economically active.

Society expects the social security system to act as a safety net for this vulnerable group. In fact, nearly 80 per cent of people with disabilities in Hong Kong fall within the system. However, the assistance for people with disabilities – a monthly allowance of either HK\$1,650 or HK\$3,300 depending on eligibility – is less than most are aware of. In addition, to be eligible for these allowances, people with disabilities cannot receive the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance or the Old Age Allowance at the same time.

Encouraging more people with disabilities, who are capable of working, to join the labour force can lift some of the financial burden on society. And, as the workforce continues to shrink as a result of population ageing, any measure to stretch it should be welcome.

Full-time employment will, of course, also help people with disabilities escape the threadbare life led under social welfare. Furthermore, it helps them find a place in the world, gives them a sense of belonging and boosts their psychological health.

A low employment rate and poverty among people with disabilities is a problem that plagues not just Hong Kong but also developed societies like Sweden and Canada. But this does not mean Hong Kong should turn a blind eye to the problem.

When it comes to social inclusion, governments have the biggest responsibility to set good examples and lead changes. Canada, for example, enforces the Employment Equity Act, which requires the full representation of people with disabilities and three other disadvantaged groups in federally regulated industries and federal organisations. Sweden has a state-owned company that offers people with disabilities employment, on top of subsidies for other employers hiring them.

In Hong Kong, the government has yet to show its determination in hiring people with disabilities. For years, for example, the number in the civil service has remained at a low 2 per cent. The Social Welfare Department runs a support programme, which gives out one-off subsidies to companies for buying assistive devices and making modifications to the workplace for employees who have disabilities. Nevertheless, each subsidy is capped at HK\$20,000.

The civil service should take the lead in employing more people with disabilities. The subsidy should also be increased, or tax rebates offered.

An equally important measure is to provide employment support, such as training and job-matching, given that people with disabilities tend to have a lower educational level than the general population due to limited opportunities. Even those with high education level often face setbacks.

Support should not be restricted to the workplace; there is an urgent need to make public transport more accessible, too.

In July this year, the EOC took a case to court on behalf of a person with disability, who finds the policy of MTR Corporation discriminatory, as the policy does not allow him and his wife, both motor wheelchair users, to travel at the same time.

By offering legal assistance in cases like this and by implementing the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, the EOC hopes to remind transport operators and other service providers to incorporate accessibility and inclusion in their policies.

More important still, by directing attention to such issues, we want to increase social sensitivity towards the needs of people with disabilities. Companies and society at large should see the need – rather than the mere benefits – of including people with disabilities in their businesses. An inclusive society is one where we are not wary of how the minority may weigh down on the majority, but one where there is no distinction, where all members are able to realise their potential. There is a long way to go, but it is worth our while.

For those employers thinking of offering jobs to people with disabilities, remember that you are not just giving individuals a chance to contribute, but their families will also live with better hopes and the whole community will be happier and more cohesive.

**Professor Alfred C.M. Chan**  
**Chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission**

(Note: A version of this article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 26 January 2017)