

EO Files (April 2017)

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

Few firms act to realise the benefits on diversity

Alfred C.M. Chan says employing people with disabilities brings proven benefits, as many know, but too few of them actually take that first step towards a diverse workplace

In July last year, non-profit organisation CareER conducted a survey to examine the employment situation among highly educated people with disabilities. Only 59% of the 206 interviewed were employed at the time of the survey, whereas 28% had never held a job. Over a third said it had taken them over six months to land their jobs.

Founded by Walter TSUI Yu-hang, who was born with visual impairment and had experienced the woes of finding employment despite his economics degree and internships at top financial firms, CareER stands for “Care in Education and Recruitment” and strives to connect tertiary students and graduates who have disabilities with potential employers.

The CareER survey also interviewed 103 employers, of whom only 17% said they had plans to hire people with disabilities in the coming three years. Over half said they would not even consider doing so. Yet, over three quarters of the same employers said they believed such employees were no different from their able-bodied counterparts in performing their jobs and were capable of handling a variety of tasks.

So what is stopping employers from hiring them? Reasons gleaned from the survey included physical limitations of the workplace, unsuitable nature of the work and a lack of channels and opportunities for employers to understand this potential labour force.

But accommodating employees with disabilities may not be as complicated and costly as some employers think. A woman with visual impairment explained in a newspaper interview that she only needed the right computer software, a Braille keyboard and the use of electronic files to handle day-to-day paperwork. She was working in public relations at one of the biggest accounting firms.

Employment of suitably qualified people with disabilities is proven to benefit employers. It helps them to better understand the needs of customers with disabilities, and tap into this uncharted market. A US insurance company, for instance, has hired a person with hearing impairment to provide sign language interpretation for clients in need of such services.

In addition to multinational corporations which usually have in place diversity and inclusion policies, employment of the disabled in Hong Kong is largely upheld by non-profit organisations and social enterprises. There are also the occasional small- and medium-sized businesses with well-meaning owners.

Still, very few companies are willing to hire people with disabilities. The unemployment rate among this population is 6.7% according to government data, nearly double that of the general population. In the most recent 18 Districts Caring Employers Recognition Scheme, 174 companies were recognised for employing people with disabilities – less than 0.02% of the companies registered in Hong Kong, the number of which exceeds one million.

It is unfortunate that the Hong Kong government has yet to take the lead in hiring those with disabilities, who account for only 2% of civil servants. But this also implies that there is ample room for the government and public bodies to utilise the human resources this group have to offer. If each of the some 470 public bodies is willing to offer one placement, there would already be 470 openings.

The Equal Opportunities Commission has been reaching out to companies in different sectors, and connecting NGOs with employer groups to line up placements and internships for job seekers with disabilities.

The benefits of diversity for companies – more discerning decision-making, greater flow of innovative ideas, and a more harmonious work culture, among others – have been discussed time and again, and many businesses have already been harnessing its power. Google, for example, not only implements equal opportunity recruitment policies, but also proactively helps its employees to recognise and eliminate unconscious biases at work.

The profits of hiring people with disabilities are there for businesses to gain. It takes only one step to reach them – and those willing to take that first step shall stay ahead of the game.

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