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Why has the Rising Economic Tide Failed to Float the Disability Employment Boat? A Call to Action: Business, Community, Government and People Power

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Abstract: It is well established that people with disabilities are under-represented in the workforce. Disability labour market scholars agree that there is a significant gap between labour market participation of people with disabilities and people without disabilities, with on-going labour market disadvantage widely reported. All indicate that notwithstanding the recent economic growth of Western economies, the employment rate for people with disabilities has not improved. This paper draws on the findings of three recent research projects on disability employment in Australia and on data from contemporary literature on workplace discrimination and proposes that a combination of more robust social inclusion policies and legislation, revitalised supported employment models, intensive social marketing, and radical disability advocacy is required.

Keywords: Disability, Employment, Social Policy, Social Marketing, Activism

Introduction

In Australia and internationally it is well established that people with disabilities are under represented in the workforce (Colella & Stone, 2005; Berthoud, 2003; Kruse & Schur, 2003; and Stapleton & Burhauser, 2003). Disability labour market scholars agree that there is a significant gap between the labour market participation of people with disabilities and people without disabilities. The on-going labour market disadvantage is widely reported (Bukenhauser, Houtenville & Wittenbourg, 2001; Colella & Varma, 1999; and Colella & Stone, 2005). Despite the economic growth of the Western economies experienced throughout the 1990’s and into the early part of the 21st Century, the employment rate for people with disabilities had not improved. This paper draws on the findings of three recent research projects on disability employment in Australia and on data from contemporary literature on workplace discrimination. This paper will examine and propose four ways in which employment for people with disabilities may be improved, namely: revitalising government social inclusion policies; enhancing models of supported employment; using social marketing to dispel disability employment myths and harnessing people power.

Economic Growth and Employment 1990-2005

Throughout the last decade of the twentieth century and into the first decade of the 21st Century, the Western economies were operating in a position of sustained economic...
growth. Production was on the rise, consumption was high, inflation was under control and unemployment rates were low. There were a view glitches such as the major military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Yugoslav Republics; the dot.com bubble; rise and fall and rise of the Asian Tigers; and Y2K but overall the trend was upward. For the resource based Middle-Eastern, South African, Australian, Canadian and South American economies, the emergence of Chinese and Indian economies produced considerable domestic growth. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was yet to emerge; the developed world was living the good life, ignorant of the crunch to come!

In 2004 the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released census figures indicating that the workforce participation for people with disabilities (including Intellectual, Physical, Sensory, Neurological and Psychiatric disability) of working age (15-64) was only 53.2% compared with 80.6% of Australians without disabilities and that there was little improvement between 1993 and 2003, notwithstanding the economic boom experienced by Australia over that decade, that the rising tide had not lifted all boats (ABS, 2004). These raw figures give only a broad indication of the employment barriers faced by people with disabilities in Australia and do not reveal the frustrated work aspirations or career limitations faced by people with disabilities in the workforce. In Australia, the lower workforce participation rate combined with a higher unemployment rate means that people with disabilities suffer significant economic disadvantage. Moreover, even for those people with disabilities in employment, on average, they earned approximately 75% of the income of workers without disabilities (Gartrell, Edwards and Graffam, 2006). Colella and Stone (2005) report a similar wage disadvantage for workers with disabilities in the USA, where in 2002, employees with disabilities earned average US$ 33109 compared to workers without disabilities of US$ 43269.

Social Inclusion and Equal Opportunity

Contemporaneously during this period of international sustained economic growth, progressive governments were introducing social policies aimed at improving access, inclusion and opportunity for socially marginalised people, including people with disabilities. Rights based legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, not only mandated the rights of US citizens with disabilities; it has informed similar pieces of legislation around the world. The Blair government in the UK established its Social Inclusion Unit and similar, Ministerial level portfolios have subsequently been established by many governments. Social inclusion is now a fundamental obligation of all member states in the European Union and is written into the Maastricht Treaty. The new Australian Labor government has established and assigned responsibility for social inclusion to the Deputy Prime Minister and similar high level offices operate in Canada and New Zealand.

There is considerable discourse about what is meant by social inclusion. However, Levitas (1996) identified three different ways of defining social inclusion. Firstly, social inclusion was defined as the right to full social, economic and political participation. Inequalities in wealth, status and power are seen as barriers to participation. Social inclusion is to be achieved through wealth redistribution to ensure that everyone can fully exercise their rights as citizens. Secondly, social exclusion may be seen as moral failing of individuals and groups, with exclusion viewed as a result of a moral decline within society. Those excluded are considered as an underclass, locked into a culture of dependency. From this perspective redistributing wealth will perpetuate social exclusion by sustaining dependency. Thirdly, social exclusion
is a failure to integrate and participate in the society’s economy. The authors of this paper consider that the current unemployment rate for people with disabilities around the world reflects a failure of governments of all stripes to adequately meet their social inclusion obligations. More importantly, in terms of Levitas’ definition unless governments adopt an approach which enhances economic participation they will continue to perpetuate social exclusion.

Arguably, people with disabilities are amongst the most socially marginalised and there is a strong correlation between disability and poverty; the World Bank reported: “Poor people are disproportionately disabled, and people with disabilities are disproportionately poor”. Disability and poverty reinforce one another - intensifying marginalisation and insecurity. People with disabilities are among the poorest of the poor, while people living in poverty are more at risk than others to become disabled. According to the UN, 10% of the world’s population has a disability, with about 75% living in the developing world (World Bank, 2006).

**Disability Employment Support**

Throughout the world, there are many models of disability employment support. Typically these programs include elements such as wage subsidies, train and place, job coaches, workplace ergonomic adjustments and so forth. However, such approaches tend to lock employer and employee into program dependence and may perpetuate the social environmental barriers to employment participation. Stapleton, O’Day, Livermore and Imparato (2005) advocate for a holistic approach to policy reform which encourages people with disabilities to break away from hardship and program dependence. Well intentioned paternalism is often cited as the underpinning philosophy driving disability support programs (Hahn, 2000). Colella and Stone (2005) indicate that paternalism may have a negative impact upon workforce integration and acceptance for people with disabilities and in fact feed resentment among co-workers as they may perceive that disability support programs as positively discriminatory and to their own disadvantage. In other words, the supports given a fellow worker with a disability may enhance their individual productivity and may lead to more favourable assessments, to the disadvantage of workers without disabilities.

Examining perceptions of fairness in disability accommodations, Paetzold, Garcia, Colella, Run Ren, Triana and Ziebro (2008) found that when an accommodation assisted a person with a disability, some co-workers considered it unfair. From this perspective, we can see that progressive disability employment support assistance and programs should consider the needs of all employees and ought to include some components designed to produce cognitive change in co-workers. This co-worker education, component is important as it can increase understanding and explain why certain interventions and workplace modifications are necessary and more actively involve co-workers in mutual support. For the most part, co-worker training is considered as an optional extra, rather than an essential element of disability employment support. Farris and Standcliffe (2001) report the outcome of a pilot which used trained co-workers as supports for employees with disabilities as a substitute for the established practice of using disability specialist job coaches and conclude that use of co-workers is a viable, cost effective alternative to the traditional place and train model. However, this substitution of trained business employees would not assuage the type of concerns reported by Paetzold et al (2008) as the co-worker trainer model does not provide disability awareness
education for the wider workforce which we consider is an essential element to be built in to supported employment model design.

Mor Barak (2000) maintains that while affirmative action programs have made it easier for minority groups (including people with disabilities) to gain accesses to entry level jobs, minorities are still under represented in the supervisory and managerial positions. Mor Barak maintains that the full benefit to both employer and employee will only be achieved when American business moves beyond tokenism and fully embraces the skills, talents and abilities of their diverse workforce. This is an important message. In a small scale Australian study into inclusion for people with disabilities in the Arts, Sport, Recreation and Tourism sectors, many of the business operators were focused on the difficulties associated with either employing or servicing people with disabilities. However, in one excellent example of good practice, in a regional setting a ‘whole of community’ approach was taken to access and inclusion for people with disabilities. The town of Warrnambool stages an annual arts and cultural festival, featuring Australian and international artists and attracting visitors from across Australia and from overseas. The festival organisers, the Chamber of Commerce and Local Government recognised that there is an untapped market in disability tourism and to effectively market their festival and region to tourists with disabilities, local business needed to embrace a wider definition of disability that went way beyond ramps, wheelchairs and accessible bathrooms. Tourism, business and events managers understood that drawing a broad audience to one service was interdependent with meeting the consumers’ wider needs. The local tourism and hospitality industry worked in tandem with the festival organisers to ensure that their premises and staff were equipped to satisfy the special needs of tourists with disabilities. Many businesses employed people with disabilities and considered that this had a powerful demonstrator effect on their customers (Rentschler, Edwards, Osborne, Morgan, Fujimoto, Shilbury, Crosbie, Le and Hede, 2008). Particular efforts were made to communicate to all employees why special accommodations were necessary in providing disability friendly businesses and workplaces. The particular communications regarding the need for disability support obviated the types of situations reported by Paerzold et al. (2008).

Also, in contrast to Paetzold et al. (2008), Murfitt (2006) found that in workplaces employing professionals with disabilities that organisational moral and productivity improved and that the experience of working with a colleague with a disability was overwhelmingly positive. Murfitt examined an Australia wide work placement and mentoring scheme for university graduates with disabilities. He found that employers had positive shifts in their attitudes towards employing a person with a disability and that their organisation’s participation in the graduate program had enhanced workplace culture. Murfitt concluded that the key to this attitudinal change toward future employment of people with disabilities was directly attributable to the positive experiential contact of working alongside a colleague with a disability. This graduate employment program also included a comprehensive co-worker education element which followed a human relations approach. This is manifestly important as none of the negativity reported by Paetzold et al (2008) was evident in any of the workplaces examined by Murfitt (2006). Recently, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (IBEC-ICTU, 2009) collaborated to develop the ‘Workplace Training Pack’, a cost free, comprehensive training package to facilitate disability awareness training for employers and employees. The materiel in Workplace Training Pack provides the basis for effective co-worker training and should obviate the difficulties reported by
Paetzold et al. (2008) and provide Irish business with the tools to create positive experiences similar to those reported by Murfitt (2006) and Rentschler et al. (2008)

Myths and Stereotyping

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) reports that the barriers to employment faced by jobseekers with disabilities are plentiful (HREOC, 2005) and these barriers are external to any individual impairment. This sentiment is supported by many writers (such as Cook & Burke, 2002; Ziguras & Kleidon, 2005; and Edwards, O’Callaghan and Crosbie, 2007), who found that accessibility continues to be a major impediment to employment for people with disabilities. Importantly however, physical inaccessibility can often be readily and relatively cheaply redressed. Unfortunately, attitudinal barriers to employment for people with disabilities, such as prejudice and stereotyping are prevalent and misguided (Murfitt, 2006). Attitudes are often formulated by myths about costs of workplace adjustments, higher levels of absenteeism, and Occupational Health and Safety costs.

However, research shows that employment of people with disabilities can result in higher levels of employer satisfaction with employee performance and productivity, lower absentee rates, accident rates than for co-workers without disabilities (Lunt & Thornton, 1994; Barnes, 1999; Graffam, Smith, Shinkfield & Polzin, 1999, ASCC, 2007). Myth identifying studies have also been conducted in the USA (Department of Labor, 2006) (Human Resources and Skills Development, Canada, 2008), New Zealand (Equal Opportunity Employment Trust, 2005) and in the European Union (European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2008) but the misinformation and misunderstanding continues.

Disability Advocacy and Social Justice

Disability advocacy may be delivered at several levels; the focus of this paper will be on systemic advocacy. Systemic advocacy seeks to influence long term changes that remove discriminatory barriers and to ensure that the rights and interests of groups of people with disabilities are upheld (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Internationally, the impact of disability systemic advocacy may be seen in the establishment disability discrimination legislation; accessible building codes; accessible public transport; universal design in education programs; establishment of specialist disability employment programs and so forth. Manifestly, disability advocacy has had a positive impact on government policies and various social, educational and health care program designs. However, the impact on disability employment levels have been minimal, as around the world, people with disabilities continue to be under represented in the paid workforce (World Bank, 2006; Colella & Stone, 2005; and Gartrell et al, 2005).

In both the business world and in the wider community context diversity and inclusion issues are often discussed against a backdrop of ‘social justice’. Internationally, progressive social policies are aimed at creating a fairer, more equitable and just society. Fair minded people could not dispute these values but the reality is that notwithstanding such inclusive policies, the employment situation for workers and jobseekers with disabilities has not changed. Socially marginalised people tend to view incidents of prejudice and discrimination as affronts to their citizens’ rights to just and fair treatment. In such circumstances, individuals
are often obliged to take court action. Thus we have a situation in which systemic advocacy is used to influence policy formulation but individual action is required to enforce rights. There is no proactive disability rights movement on the scale of other successful civil rights movements such as ‘Women’s Rights’, ‘Gay and Lesbian Rights’ or ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Rights’. These socially marginalised groups of people did not wait for benevolent social planners to give them their rights; they demanded them. More importantly, their civil rights movements were able to gain widespread, popular support, by winning the hearts and minds of the wider community.

Clement (2006) discusses the gap between policy development at Government level and its application at the broader community level and makes a number of provocative points about the challenges of implementing social inclusion policy. Government inclusion policies tend to appeal to peoples’ sense of fairness and invite them to change the way they think about disability. Clement believes that in the context of disability, many people refuse the invitation. He argues that it may be the case that disability may never be the type of diversity that is embraced by society. Although the rhetoric of ‘celebrating diversity’ is intended to be attractive so that it leaves favourable impressions on peoples’ hearts and minds, the everyday experiences encountered by family members and disability support staff means that for many, it is devoid of the qualities policy writers hope it posses (Clement, 2006: 6-7).

Moreover, Clement (2006) makes the following point that disability inclusion policies have not been a response to popular demand. There have not been mass demonstrations of non-disabled people demanding that disabled people have access to cinemas, cafés, supermarkets or employment. There has been no crossover from the disaffected marginalised group gaining popular support as we have seen in other civil rights movements. People with disabilities, their families and carers, friends and direct support groups are concerned with their social and economic citizenship rights, but largely the wider community is not. Slavery was not abolished just because slaves thought it was a good idea; Indigenous peoples did not gain land rights just because they thought it was a good idea; and the same concepts apply to women’s rights, gay rights etc. The disenfranchised groups were able to cojoin with supporters from the mainstream community. Further research is needed to identify why disability continues to be viewed unfavourably, when other socially marginalising conditions have been able to create more widely accepted positive messages.

**Going Forward**

Currently, the world is experiencing an economic crisis. For some nations the pathway to recovery will be slow; however, for others, particularly the resource rich exporters such as Australia, Canada and the OPEC nations and for the emerging economies of India and China the recovery has been much quicker. From our experiences of the boom time of 1990-2005, we can see that growing economies do not equate to employment opportunities for people with disabilities. For the employment prospects of people with disabilities to improve markedly, a revised manifold approach is necessary. The approach should encompass invigorating government social inclusion policies; enhancing supported employment models; intensive social marketing; and proactive disability advocacy. Let us examine those several points.
Government social policies have had limited impact; thus more of the same will not fix the problem. Even rights based legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has not improved the employability of people with disabilities in the USA. To be more impactful, government social policies ought to contain both carrots and sticks and must be enforced. Governments must find a way to enable persons with disabilities, who find their human rights violated to achieve justice without personal legal action. Mary Johnson (2003), writing about the adversarial system in the USA, deconstructs the arguments against disability rights and constructs powerful reasons why we all benefit from inclusion. Johnson also provides a blueprint for disability rights activists committed to the ideals of equity, integration and self determination. Given the nexus between disability and poverty, it is imperative that employment opportunities for people with disabilities to be improved. Government policies and concomitant legislation ought to include both incentives and penalties and the laws must be enforced. Moreover, disability legislations should be revised to include simple mechanisms so that when people with disabilities consider that their rights have been violated that they do not have to engage in drawn out, costly court battles and in that regard, governments may consider the establishment of special appeals tribunals.

Models of employment support assisting people with disabilities to obtain and retain paid mainstream employment must include a co-worker education element. Paetzold et al (2008) reported on the friction that can arise when co-workers do not understand why accommodations are necessary to assist a colleague with a disability. Murfitt (2006) recognised that co-worker education was one of the key success factors in the employment program for graduates that he evaluated. Co-worker education is important as it can increase understanding and explain why certain interventions and workplace modifications are necessary and more actively involve co-workers in mutual support. Co-worker education is not an optional extra; it is an integral component of effective disability employment support programs. Progressive models, such as Ireland’s Workplace Training Pack recognise this and provide a positive example of what is needed in all supported employment packages. Supported employment models should be reviewed and if necessary amended to include co-worker education as an essential element of the program.

Notwithstanding numerous studies around the world identifying and deconstructing the myths surrounding employment for people with disabilities, (for example, Australia: Graffam, Smith, Shinkfield & Polzin, 1999; HREOC, 2005; and Edwards, O’Callaghan & Crosbie, 2007; USA: Department of Labor, 2006, Human Resources and Skills Development, 2001; New Zealand: Equal Opportunity Employment Trust, 2005 and the European Union European Commission, Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2008), the misinformation and misunderstanding continues. Stereotypes and urban myths surrounding absenteeism, productivity rates, learning ability, workplace injury rates and the added costs of employing someone with a disability create false barriers to employment. The data has been collected and the message should be clear but it has not been effectively communicated. A fresh approach, based on the principles of social marketing are required to better communicate the justice and fairness message and to ameliorate the impact of the myths surrounding disability employment. Wide public acceptance of social inclusion policies takes time and considerable resources before cognitive and behavioural change is achieved. Successful Australian examples of effective social change include the long campaigns to alter driver behaviour regarding the wearing of seat belts and drink driving required sustained education, social marketing and regulatory enforcement. Similar successful campaigns to inform the public...
about, cancer and tobacco; drug usage and violence; sun and skin cancer to name a few have all required consistent, front-of-mind marketing, using multi-media to achieve results. To change the public’s perception about disability employment major social marketing campaigns are required.

Despite significant shifts in government policy approaches to inclusion, negative public attitudes in contemporary Western society still present barriers to the social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities. Currently, most Western governments have adopted a politico-social model of disability to inform their social inclusion policies. Swain and French (2000) have termed this socio-politico approach the Affirmative Model. The Affirmative Model sees peoples’ experience of disability as an advantage which affords them insights, experiences and understandings not available to ‘abled’ people (Swain & French 2000: 575). In this model, full inclusion of people with disabilities into mainstream society presents benefits for all members of society, not solely for people with disabilities; society is enhanced by a better understanding of the value of difference (Swain and French 2000: 578). This approach may be seen in the current disability policies within the European Union (EU). The current EU policy recognises that earlier concepts of relationships between disability and normality were artificial social constructs and that human differences should be embraced as phenomena which are natural and beneficial to society. The EU’s rights based approach to disability is articulated in the Amsterdam Treaty and Agenda 2000. The Treaty clearly indicates the broad acceptance among the EU nations of the need to protect the rights of people with disabilities and secure their inclusion within society and provide equality of opportunity. The EU Commission has also developed an action plan to implement and operationalize their social inclusion and employment equal opportunity philosophy across the EU (EU Commission, 2003).

However, notwithstanding the new human rights and social citizenship approaches to disability across the world, the statistics tell us that discriminatory practices in organisations are still a significant problem in the workforce (EEOC, 2006; Shima, Zólyomi & Zaidi, 2008). In respect of the EU, Shima et al report that although there are positive signs across the Community, the improvements are not uniform and employment for people with disabilities remains sub-optimal. While the lived experiences of people with disabilities have been used by their various advocacy agents to influence government policy makers, the needs of people with disabilities are largely ignored by the general population. As Clement (2006) has reported, the lofty rhetoric of government policies inviting us to embrace difference and enjoy diversity just has not worked. The need to recognise the rights and ambitions of citizens with disabilities has not captured the hearts and minds of wider communities. More of the same governmental approaches and actions by individuals to enforce their rights won’t do so either. If people with disabilities really want to enjoy all the rights of social citizenship, then they need to become more involved, more radical and to learn from other successful civil rights movements, particularly about harvesting wider public support to their cause.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed that people with disabilities are still significantly disadvantaged regardless of nations’ economic upturn or downturn. Based upon literature review of people with disabilities, diverse workforce and social inclusion/exclusion, the current government legislation, disability employment support and affirmative action programs seem to fall short
of establishing a sustainable social inclusion process for people with disabilities. Nevertheless, there is small amount of research that confirms the importance of community-based social integration, working alongside with people with disabilities along with co-worker education as a naturalistic approach to social inclusion, which changes people’s attitude about people with disabilities over time. Thus, we propose a call for greater systematic action that business, community, government and people power collaboratively work together toward changes in the hearts and minds of wider communities about people with disabilities.

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