

## Sri Lankan companies opening up to the disabled

By Dilehani Samaraweera

Sri Lankan companies are trying to overcome mental barriers against disability and are opening their doors to the disabled, says the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC).

In fact, the demand is exceeding the supply right now. "Employers are willing to provide employment for disabled people but they are facing difficulties finding disabled people," said Meghamali Aluwihare, the Coordinator of the EFC's Disability Network, at the network's Annual General Meeting on Wednesday.

The EFC says the willingness to hire disabled persons is more to do with good business sense than charity. Disabled people, if found work that suits them, tend to show a single minded dedication to their work that employers often don't get from normal employees. Companies that have made the mental and physical adjustments to accommodate disabled persons at their workplaces have found this out. The good results are also prompting others and 7 more companies joined the EFC's Disability Network between July and September this year.

Currently 21 companies in total have joined the Network to open their workplaces to the disabled. This is actually not very much given that the EFC has a membership of 500 companies, but the EFC says the reaction so far is encouraging, given traditional attitudes.

### No rejects

Sri Lanka's garment factories for example are learning to expand their mind space to accommodate people with disabilities - this despite the huge production pressures the industry is facing.

"In our factory we have 12 disabled people, mostly people who can't hear or can't talk. They work mainly in the finishing department doing packing and fixing buttons," says Factory Manager of Favourite Garments Ratmalana, Kanishka Perera.

The garment factory says it is willing to recruit another 10 - 15 disabled persons for identified jobs and considers it a solid investment in human resource.

"Garment sector work is a rash job, always having production targets. So there are limits to what a disabled person can do. But when they are given something they can do, they do it better, because they are not distracted so much like normal people. So we have to first find the types of work suitable

Companies like Polytex Garments and Shadowline, a company in the MAS Group, have also started hiring disabled people.

"We hired three people who are deaf. Initially we were a bit scared whether the other workers will accept them. But we selected a very concerned technical officer to put them under.

Now all the other workers also look after them. In fact, although we hired all three to iron, we found that two were fantastic sewing machine operators and they are now sewing," says Sunil Meewewa, Assistant Manager, Human Resources, Shadowline. Shadowline is looking to make room for two more disabled people in their factory. Polytex Garments of Ekala has also hired three disabled persons with hearing and walking disabilities.

Other garment producers like Hirdaramani are looking to hire the disabled. These companies say they do not discriminate the disabled in anyway and that disabled workers are paid the same salaries and incentives as normal workers.

All the companies say absenteeism and employee turnover is lower among disabled employees.

## Becoming visible

Sri Lanka's disabled are generally treated as an invisible population and even national statistics are sketchy. Officially, 1.8% of the population is supposed to be disabled but the actual number is estimated at much higher.

"The National Census data says 1.8% of the total population is disabled but we in the field think this is a gross under statement. Through our programmes we estimate that 4% to 5% of the population is disabled," says Dr Padmini Mendis, an advisor in disability issues.

Unemployment among the disabled is an extremely high 84% - also reflecting Sri Lankan society's attitudes towards the disabled.

However, the Disability Network's formula of training and placement seems to be working. The Network provides training for the disabled and organises job fairs. It also provides training for companies on how to deal with disabled people that are often highly sensitive because of bad social experiences. A voluntary code that sets down guidelines for companies - including non-discriminatory salaries for the disabled - was launched in July this year.

The Network has found jobs for around 175 disabled persons and is trying to expand its services by linking up with JobsNet, the national body set up to link job seekers with companies.

"We did a radio campaign last month with JobsNet, asking disabled people looking for jobs, to register with JobsNet. Very soon we will devise a system where companies will let us know the vacancies they have and what types of disabled persons they can absorb," said Ms Aluwihare.

The Disability Network says it is open to any company interested in joining it and not just members of the EFC.

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