

Partnering with Employers – Improving the Skills and Job Opportunities for Workers with Disabilities in Cambodia

The Challenge

In Cambodia as throughout the Asia and Pacific region, vocational training programmes – whether targeting people with disabilities or the general population – face the challenge of responding to labour market needs. To prepare people in high-demand skills, training programmes must use current and updated equipment and state-of-the-art training techniques. For example, in computer training programmes, trainees must learn keyboard and computer basics as well as how to operate software packages currently used by most offices. Even when people with disabilities demonstrate good skills, they may still face obstacles to entering the workforce. Owing to years of isolation and exclusion, they may lack the social skills or confidence essential to on-the-job success. For their part, employers often share the same negative perceptions about people with disabilities as held by the general population, such as doubting that disabled people can make productive contributions to the workplace.

In Cambodia, the problems are particularly acute because of the large number of people whose disabilities are the result of poverty, landmine accidents and years of internal conflict. These same factors mean that the Government lacks the resources required to address the needs of disabled people. How can people with disabilities overcome these obstacles? Who can best help?

Meeting the Challenge

A natural partner in helping people with disabilities achieve hiring success is the people who control the jobs – the employers. In Cambodia, the ILO provided technical assistance to an international NGO, the World Rehabilitation Fund (WRF) to develop a partnership between employers and organizations providing vocational services to people with disabilities. At the heart of the partnership is the Business Advisory Council (BAC).

The BAC, formed in 2001, consists of volunteers from leading businesses who have banded together to address the obstacles faced by disabled persons seeking to enter the economic mainstream. The BAC works in partnership with existing job training and employment programmes to help people achieve a better life through employment.

The Good Practice: Volunteer leaders from business and industry who work with NGOs, government and employers to develop decent work opportunities for people with disabilities.



• Background •

The Business Advisory Council model is based on a United States programme called Projects With Industry, which also proved effective in ILO field tests in Kenya and Tanzania in the 1990s. BAC members serve as advisors or even co-managers of employment and training programmes. The members link those programmes, their staff and their clients with disabilities to the workplace or to economic opportunities. Like any partnership, the BAC model is based on mutual or complementary needs – people with disabilities need training and jobs while employers need trained, skilled workers at reduced training and recruitment costs.

From a Remote Village to Office Data Entry Clerk

Before attending the computer technology training programme at Wat Than Skills Training Centre, Eng Naleak lived in a distant Cambodian village. Typical of many remote areas, the village lacked computers and the electricity and telephone lines to operate them. Disabled from birth, Eng Naleak is missing several fingers and has impaired mobility. Although she managed to finish secondary school, she had few job prospects. She helped with chores at home – cooking, sweeping and sewing – but she seldom went beyond her village or its immediate surroundings.

Today, Eng Naleak works as a data entry clerk for Digital Divide Data (DDD), a data outsourcing company in Phnom Penh. “I love my job and never dreamed my life would be like this,” she says. Eng Naleak earns a good living and is able to send money home to help her family. She is considered one of the best workers at DDD. “Although she only has three fingers on each hand, her speed is as good as that of her co-workers,” says her employer.

Eng Naleak’s success is due to the foresight of her family, her hard work, the Wat Than Skills Training Centre and the group of business volunteers, collectively referred to as the Business Advisory Council, which works behind the scenes to open employment and training opportunities for people with disabilities.

• How the BAC Started in Cambodia •

In Cambodia, the BAC was established as part of a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Mine Action Services-funded effort called the Socio-economic Reintegration of Landmine Survivors Programme. With technical assistance from the ILO, the World Rehabilitation Fund served as the project's executing partner and organized the BAC in the following process:

- Established a working group. In late 2000, several collaborating partners created a working group that formulated a plan of action to develop what would become the BAC. The partners represented the National Centre of Disabled Persons (NCDP), which operates a job placement programme for people with disabilities, Cambodia's Disability Action Council (the country's main coordinating body for disability issues), the Wat Than Skills Training Centre, the WRF, the ILO and the UNDP.
- Recruited members. The working group approached individual employers and business associations in Phnom Penh to explain the BAC concept and then invited them to attend an introductory meeting. Many of the employers who were first approached by the group had already hired people with disabilities from the NCDP programme. They were optimistic about the abilities of disabled workers. Once a few employers agreed to attend the meeting, the working group found it easier to ask other employers to attend the initial gathering.
- Conducted an introductory meeting. The working group used the inaugural meeting to discuss the challenges faced by people with disabilities in Cambodia. The group also discussed the purpose of the BAC and how employers could contribute to and benefit from participation. Everyone who attended the first meeting signed on and the BAC was formed.
- Developed the BAC structure. The BAC started meeting monthly and adopted by-laws. It held elections for major council posts, such as chairperson, vice chair and treasurer. With technical assistance from the ILO, the BAC developed vision and mission statements and a strategic plan. These organizational activities spanned several meetings but paid off in terms of building a bond among council members and defining a direction for their activities.
- Initiated action. BAC members invited other companies to join the council and began to take action on the strategic plan. Some of the BAC's initial activities called for starting on-the-job training and assisting people with disabilities in employment.

• The BAC in Action •

Secretariat and membership. An important component of effective BAC functioning is a strong secretariat. In the case of Cambodia, the WRF serves as the secretariat and maintains all documents, prepares the monthly meeting agenda, manages the development of promotional materials and supports the BAC in implementing its plans. The WRF stays in regular contact with BAC members, especially the chairperson. A businessperson, usually the elected chairperson, oversees all meetings. The majority of members must come from the business community. (The participation of too many NGOs or nonbusiness members, even as observers or beneficiaries, upsets the group's balance and dynamics.)

Meetings. Currently, the BAC meets monthly on a formal basis. Informal meetings are sometimes arranged in between the regular meetings to discuss specific issues, such as plans for a special event or how to influence government policies to stimulate the hiring of workers with disabilities.

Job placement. The BAC serves as a permanent advisory group to Cambodia's National Centre of Disabled Persons, the primary organization involved in providing vocational guidance and job placement services for people with disabilities. The NCDP maintains a database of more than 2,200 job seekers with disabilities. The BAC assists the NCDP in making job placements. Sometimes members work individually with disabled persons by providing career advice and guidance, assisting with resume preparation or practising job interviews.

Awareness building. The BAC reaches beyond its membership to find job opportunities. It refers NCDP employment specialists to other companies and its members promote awareness by writing articles in business publications. It engages in a variety of other awareness-building activities, such as sponsoring workshops, maintaining a Web site and distributing brochures related to hiring workers with disabilities and joining the BAC. It participated with the ILO to produce a video entitled *AbilityAsia*, which targets an employer audience to foster favourable attitudes about hiring workers with disabilities. BAC representatives also make presentations at regional forums on issues related to people with disabilities and their rights and employment needs.

Vocational training. The BAC provides technical assistance to job training programmes. Since its inception, the BAC has worked with the Wat Than Skills Training Centre and, more recently, with the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR-Japan). As an example of the BAC's partnering activities, members in the information technology (IT) field reviewed the curriculum and offered advice for upgrading Wat Than's services to make them more responsive to industry needs. In addition, BAC members invited trainees from the IT and sewing programmes at Wat Than to participate in worksite visits to their companies or

factories. Given that many trainees have never before worked, the site visits are an important step toward employment. BAC members also encourage employers to provide on-the-job training and internships for people with disabilities.

The BAC also assists Wat Than in obtaining sewing contracts for its training workshop so that trainees can earn while they learn. According to Wat Than former director Kim Mom, "It really has improved the morale of our students to know that important people in the community, people who have jobs and influence, take time out to help them."

Accomplishments

No doubt, many employers are fearful of hiring workers with disabilities. They are concerned that disabled employees cannot work effectively or will present problems in the workplace. Even though many examples exist to the contrary, these ideas persist. One of the most valuable contributions the BAC is making in Cambodia is to dispel negative attitudes among employers about hiring workers with disabilities. While that is a long process, signs suggest that attitudes are changing. The BAC is also helping to break down the barriers to finding jobs.

The following are some of the concrete achievements of the BAC in its short life cycle:

- **Placement.** From its inception in January 2001 until August 2002, the NCDP, working in collaboration with the BAC, placed more than 140 individuals with disabilities in private sector jobs. The period of January to June 2003 alone yielded 58 placements.
- **On-the-job training.** Using a fund allocated to the BAC for on-the-job training and operational expenses (US\$25,000), half of those placed – 70 people – received training and a salary partially supplemented from the BAC fund.
- **Reaching employers.** More than 30 new employers started to hire workers with disabilities. An employers' seminar reached many more. One employer in the garment industry established a policy to hire five workers with disabilities each month during 2002. At the Cambodia De-mining Workshop, which operates highly successful mechanical engineering and sewing departments and meets international specifications for de-mining equipment and gear, six out of ten workers are people with disabilities.
- **Employer-to-employer awareness raising.** A June 2002 employer seminar sponsored by the BAC and entitled Promoting Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities reached more than 70 employers directly and many more through substantial local and international media coverage. At the Employer

Awards ceremony, which is expected to become an annual event, employers recognized those employers who were successful in advancing equal opportunities. The BAC uses the publications of member organizations and other business groups to promote its vision, mission and agenda. In addition, the BAC maintains its own Web site where employers can post job openings and search for qualified job seekers with disabilities. The various types of employer-to-employer awareness-raising activities are highly effective.

- Research. To guide its work, the BAC commissioned a survey of employers, both private and government, to determine attitudes and practices related to hiring workers with disabilities in Phnom Penh. Results indicate that, at present, NGOs are more likely than private for-profit companies to hire disabled workers. However, most employers who hire disabled workers are pleased with their employees' performance. Negative attitudes persist, though.
- Contracts and job creation. Through the work of the BAC, the Wat Than Skills Training Centre received several contracts from BAC members and companies, such as Coca-Cola, to manufacture uniforms and other products. While the initial intention of the BAC is to move people into employment in the formal sector, the securing of contracts is an unexpected by-product. In fact, the contracts exceeded the capacity of the centre's training workshop. As a result, six workshop graduates formed a sewing and handicrafts cooperative.

Benefits of Hiring People with Disabilities and of BAC Participation

- Improved skill development programmes
- Access to workers matched to labour force needs
- Reduced training and recruitment costs
- Lower job turnover
- Reduced taxes (in some countries)
- High-performing employees
- Improved employee morale
- A more diverse, creative workforce
- Follow-up services to facilitate satisfactory adjustment
- Access to disability experts
- Enhancement of the company's or organization's image
- Satisfaction of creating opportunities and contributing to social development

Lessons Learned

While the Business Advisory Council is successful and continues to attract considerable attention as a model worthy of study, its organizers and members have learned a great deal. Some of their insights include:

Many employers are willing to become involved in BAC-type groups and are willing to hire people with disabilities. Often, rehabilitation practitioners assume that employers have negative attitudes toward, and do not care to become involved, with disability issues. When presented with an idea in a business-like manner, many employers are willing to participate.

Job placement and NGO personnel must learn about the language, values and attitudes of business. Not only must job placement and NGO personnel become familiar with the ways of the business world, but they also need to educate businesspeople and employers about people with disabilities and associated rehabilitation issues.

Time is needed to organize and maintain a BAC. Organizers must be ready to make the time commitment and allocate the human and other resources. A strong secretariat is critical to success.

Employer-to-employer communication is critical. One of the most effective ways of promoting positive attitude change is through employers' sharing of successful experiences in hiring disabled workers.

Service providers must be ready to respond to employers' requests in a timely way. Timeliness is important in the business world. Job placement personnel must have rapid-response systems in place. They should also be honest with employers if they do not have access to appropriate candidates for specific job orders.

The BAC may go through a slump or slow period. Slow periods are natural in the life of an organization or group and should be recognized and addressed. Sometimes a new activity, variations in meeting style or the addition of new members can revitalize the group.

Recognize the contributions of member companies. Different factors motivate BAC members to participate, but most companies appreciate favourable public relations. The secretariat and partnering organizations need to promote publicly members' participation and contributions (see box on Starting a BAC).

Two Key Lessons

1. Employers can contribute more than money. Sometimes, rehabilitation and employment service staff assume that employers are not interested in people with disabilities. The BAC experience in Cambodia provides a strong lesson in just the opposite. When approached to play a role in improving options for disabled people, many employers responded with enthusiasm. “Employers told us they appreciated being included as partners and problem solvers and not just seen as sources of donations,” says Debra Perry, ILO senior specialist in vocational rehabilitation for Asia and the Pacific. “It is important to remember that companies and businesspeople have a lot to offer in terms of technical advice and that they can also benefit from participating in groups like the BAC.”
2. The leader is important to any group. Starting a BAC is not easy, and maintaining one is challenging as well. There was a point in Cambodia when the turnover of BAC members and the loss of a dynamic chairperson threatened the success of the council. With so many of the major companies in Cambodia being multinationals, managing directors may come and go frequently. Just one year following the BAC’s inception, the council’s dynamic leader, the managing director from Nestle, was slated to leave. He was insightful enough to suggest a successor whom the BAC recognized as an innovator and then voted as its chairperson. What could have been a difficult transition was averted thanks to good management and planning. Since turnover continues to be problem, the BAC is looking to secure letters of commitment from companies that will outlive the tenure of a particular managing director. To ensure continuity and representation, the BAC includes business associations and local business representatives who are less likely to be replaced over the short term. By-laws, a strategic plan and a strong secretariat also provide stability and continuity even when members must move on.

Looking Forward

Although the BAC is currently active only in Phnom Penh, the council hopes, with new funding, to expand to the northern city of Siem Reap. Home to Angkor Wat and other world-famous temples, Siem Reap is also an area where many individuals have been injured by landmines. As Cambodia becomes more politically stable, however, it is seeing an increase in tourism in Siem Reap. Jobs and tourism are closely linked, and the WRF, with continued ILO technical assistance, plans to capture some of the tourism-related jobs for qualified workers with disabilities.

Each year, the BAC plans to partner with a different vocational training centre or programme. It will examine a centre’s curriculum and try to foster increased positive

outcomes among its graduates. The BAC is also working to influence government policy to create employer incentives and other policies to promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

In addition, the BAC is exploring another approach to securing jobs – the creation of a for-profit business that will train and hire workers with disabilities. The council plans to reinvest the profits into activities that will further its mission. Several ideas are currently under study.

The BAC is becoming a stable force in Cambodia's rehabilitation sector, but long-term sustainability is an issue. While current WRF funding is secure, the BAC needs a permanent institutional home with funding for its secretariat. The partnership is now focusing on the development of such a plan.

Replication

The BAC model could be replicated in other countries or communities that offer employment opportunities in the formal sector. The model usually works best in urban areas where both large and small employers and business associations can participate. What is most crucial is an organization committed to supporting a BAC. Such an organization must have a clear vision about how the BAC can contribute to increasing decent work opportunities for people with disabilities. Funding is not a prerequisite for organizing a BAC, but human resources committed over a significant period of time are critical. Organizing a BAC is a time- and labour-intensive process, and those interested in replication must be ready to make the needed commitment.

Several conditions make it easier to mobilize a successful BAC. For example, existing job placement or training programmes can provide the focus for a BAC's attention, advice and activities. Employers who have had successful experiences in hiring workers with disabilities can discuss those experiences with other employers and provide valuable inspiration to those considering involvement with a BAC. Resources for operating costs and organizing seminars are critical. Staff need to be knowledgeable about the workings of business.

Steps for Starting a BAC

- Learn about business in general and the model in particular. Visit the Web sites listed here for more information.
- Identify partners or a working group. Clearly specify the BAC's purpose, member benefits and initial strategies for development.
- Locate a few businesspeople or interested business associations, even three or four employers who have hired people with disabilities or businesspeople who are enthusiastic about the BAC concept.

- Do not solicit funds; ask businesspeople to share their advice and expertise. These contributions are much more valuable. If financial resources are needed, seek them elsewhere. Often BAC members make contributions at a later date when they see the value of the partnership.
- Organize an inaugural meeting and name a temporary chairperson from the business community. At the initial meeting, introduce the employment and training challenges faced by people with disabilities, the BAC concept, the organizations sponsoring the BAC and the benefits of membership. Ask people to sign on as members at the end of the meeting. All meetings, but especially the first, should be informative, dynamic, focused and business-like.
- Encourage BAC members to solicit additional members from among their personal and business networks.
- Identify the types of challenges faced by people with disabilities seeking employment and generate ideas about how the BAC can help. Solicit the group's ideas as well.
- Work with the temporary chairperson to develop BAC by-laws or operations procedures and elect permanent leaders.
- Develop and implement a strategic plan of activities.
- Ensure that BAC members receive benefits, such as first access to trained workers and favourable publicity.

Current BAC Members

Business Intelligence Consulting Group
Caltex Cambodia
CAM GSM Mobitel
Cambodia Air Catering Services
China Hong Kong Macao Business Association
Digital Divide Data
Federal Express
Garment Manufacturers' Association in Cambodia
Hotel Inter-Continental
International Institute of Cambodia
Invotech Company Limited (Cambodia De-mining Workshop)
Nestle (Dairy) Cambodia Limited
PC World Magazine
Phnom Penh Chamber of Commerce
PriceWaterhouseCoopers (Cambodia) Limited
Rattana & Associate Companies
Regent School of Business
Siemens AG Representative
Total Cambodia Limited
Wearwel Cambodia

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Web sites

BAC Cambodia: www.bac.org.kh
 Projects With Industry, US: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/rsapwi/index.html?exp=0>
 Employers' Forum on Disability, UK: www.employers-forum.co.uk