

## Commitment to Community Service – A Trade Union Helps Open the Employment Field to People with Disabilities in Japan

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### The Challenge

In the 1970s, members of the Kanagawa Regional Council of the Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Union did not know where to turn for assistance in raising their intellectually disabled and autistic children. So they went to their trade union. At that time, Japan offered few programmes and services for children with disabilities. In response to the members' needs, the union started a foundation. It raised money by selling matches and tissues to fund a counselling service and telephone hotline. It also lobbied the local government to address public accessibility issues and provide education and other services for disabled students.

As the members' children grew, new frustrations arose. Questions that once focused on education and recreation needs changed to employment and skills training issues. As with the lack of services for children, few programmes were in place to help young adults with severe disabilities find employment. But it would take more than a hotline to offer solutions.

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### Meeting the Challenge

The Kanagawa trade union again rose to the challenge. In 1997, it used links with its many branches in different electric, electronic and information companies to find work experience opportunities for high school students with disabilities. Serving as volunteers, union members initially provided training and follow-up services. As the programme developed and students graduated, more systematic support was needed. The union then provided the land and a building for an Employment Support Centre; today, there are three such centres in the prefecture (province). The centres provide job placement, supported employment and training and employment opportunities through community-based contracts and production workshops.

According to Toshikazu Shiga, associate director of the three centres, “Most of our participants are referred to us by public welfare agencies serving people with disabilities and the Public Employment Security Office. We no longer have to rely on the sale of tissues to support the services, either,” he adds. “We now get funding from the city administrations of Yokohama and Kawasaki, Kanagawa prefecture.”

The Government is not the union’s only partner in this endeavour. The union works with the local employers’ organization to encourage businesses to hire workers with disabilities and assists corporations in establishing special subsidiary companies for people with disabilities under Japan’s quota legislation. The union has also discovered another natural partnership through the involvement of retired employees who have the energy and interest in continuing to work. The retirees have become job coaches for people training on the job and follow up with those who find employment.

**The Good Practice:** A trade union helps people with disabilities find employment and uses retirees with energy and expertise to serve as job coaches.



### • Background •

The Kanagawa Regional Council is composed of 84 unions and about 60,000 members, or about 10 per cent of the membership of the Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Union (JEIU). The JEIU has 37 regional councils, 233 unions and 600,000 members.

In 1992 when it became evident that a more structured programme was needed to help young people with substantial intellectual disabilities prepare for meaningful employment, the council set up a working group. It studied the situation and made recommendations for a proposed employment centre. It recognized the need to address the shortcomings in the existing employment system for people with intellectual disabilities. For example, the management techniques developed for workers with minor physical disabilities were not appropriate to the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. The council members thought that, even though sheltered workshops could be good places for training, they often did not provide high-level employment

opportunities. Skills taught at special schools and vocational rehabilitation facilities were often outdated as compared with what companies required. And when people with intellectual disabilities did find employment, they often lacked the social and work adjustment skills needed to maintain their jobs and live independently.

The working group recommendations called for establishing a support centre that provided a range of services, including a transitional workshop intended to operate as a midpoint between a traditional sheltered workshop and open employment. Such a workshop should offer many types of work tasks similar to those found in factories and companies. It should incorporate standard production management techniques, including quality control and wage systems linked to work performance and comprehensible to people with intellectual impairments. Concerned that hiring only professionals with a social services background (education, social work and psychology) might lead to a daycare service rather than the intended employment-focused centre, the working group recommended the appointment of people with many years of private sector production experience.

Also in 1992, the JEIU set up the Earth and Love Foundation with a broad mission of social action and international cooperation programmes to address several social issues, including environmental protection and support for people with disabilities. The foundation collects donations and raises funds through the sale of specially priced consumer items. Along with government funds, its resources helped start the employment support centres.

The Yokohama South Employment Support Centre began operations in 1992. It promotes the employment of people with intellectual disabilities through vocational assessment, guidance and counselling, skills training, supported employment and job placement and follow-up services. With the 1996 addition of Poco-A-Poco (which means step by step) as a transition and training facility, the centre expanded its services. Building on its successes, the foundation then added the Shonan Area Employment Support Centre in 1997 and the Kawasaki North Employment Support Centre in 1999. In 2001, the programme expanded further with the addition of the Kawasaki City Works Daishi, which was modelled after Poco-A-Poco, and established collaboratively with the Kawasaki city government. The Poco-A-Poco and Kawasaki City Works Daishi offer intermediate vocational training and work programmes that assist participants in the transition from a sheltered workshop to company employment. They also provide permanent employment for a limited number of employees.

The centres and their workshops, along with the union's other social programmes, such as the daycare service for the elderly and a volunteer training programme, are operated collectively by the overarching social welfare corporation called the Denki Kanagawa Centre for Community Welfare.

## • Employment Support Centre Services •

Following an initial assessment, trainees participate in centre services. Periodic assessments and case conferences then determine trainees' progress, wages and readiness to advance to the next level of training.

**Assessment.** During the initial two-week to one-month assessment, trainees participate in simulated work tasks to determine their capabilities, speed, habits, attitudes, interaction skills and tolerance (such as whether or not they can work an eight-hour day). The training process addresses any difficulties identified during the work simulations.

After the assessment, an Individual Nurture Plan is developed. Trainees can choose between participation in the workshop or employment-oriented programmes. The workshop programme fosters development through social participation and work activities. The employment-oriented programme gradually develops skills through the application of increasingly complex work tasks and experiences, such as simulated tasks in the workshop, an internship, part-time and full-time employment with job coaching and follow-up after job coaching is phased out. As the training proceeds, trainees undergo regular assessment to determine their progress. Assessment, vocational training and work adjustment are thus linked in one system.

**Counselling and guidance.** The objective of the service is to assist trainees in developing a work ethic, motivation and the habits and attitudes needed to earn a living. Training techniques include video presentations, lectures, role playing and other methods. Counselling and guidance activities include awareness programmes for family members. The counsellors are available for trouble-shooting or to provide assistance to former trainees.

**Social skills training.** Social skills training includes a variety of job-searching and independent living skills. For example, trainees may learn about appropriate work behaviours, practise job interviews and learn how to complete a job seeker's registration form. The curriculum also includes classes and instruction in communication, cooking, personal computer use, budgeting and money management, use of leisure time and other independent living skills.

The social skills training programme differs from the social skills training provided through the workshop and employment-oriented programmes. In the former, training activities are offered during the day and include a variety of social events, whereas social activities for those in the employment-oriented programmes are offered after working hours.

**Workshop programme.** Poco-A-Poco and Kawasaki City Works Daishi offer workshop programmes designed to stimulate development through participation in work activities. The programmes are interspersed with social events and training and generally run for three years but may be extended if needed. The participants' work activity assignments are flexible and determined according to their interests, abilities and skills. Annual conferences take place to review individual progress and develop plans.

**Employment-oriented programme.** The employment-oriented programme consists of three levels of graduated work experiences that slowly introduce trainees to increasing levels of skills, work demands and responsibility. The three levels are simulated work, internships (of which there are three phases, each demanding more of the trainee in terms of independence) and open employment in various settings and with different levels of job coaching and follow-up. Each level uses real work tasks as the basis of training and learning, such as contract production work (in the simulated work level in workshop settings), janitorial and other work tasks at the facilities of the Denki Kanagawa Centre for Community Welfare or at other community-based contract sites (first-phase internships) and a variety of actual work on the job at special subsidiary or regular businesses (advanced internships and employment). Both the workshop and centre staffs are continually challenged to find contracts with economic and instructional value.

*Simulated work.* The objective of the simulated work level is to develop an individual's work performance and social skills within a protected environment. By performing real work tasks in a workshop setting, trainees learn new skills under the supervision of a professional instructor (responsible for production) and alongside other workers with intellectual disabilities. The simulated work experience is a 30-hour, one-week programme (six hours daily), although shorter work periods are arranged depending on the trainee's work tolerance. Unlike participants in the workshop programme who are matched to tasks according to their characteristics, trainees in the simulated work level of the employment-oriented programme are encouraged to try different tasks to challenge themselves and learn to cope with a variety of demands. Some of the simulated work tasks include disassembling PC parts such as hard disk and floppy disk units, keyboards and other parts for recycling; attaching protection material to refrigerator hinges; packing copy machine parts with specification forms; assembling electronic connectors; printing; janitorial work and packaging gift items.

Wages in the simulated work level are not tied to performance, although participants are encouraged to move forward to the internship stage when they are ready. Comprehensive conferences to assess the individual's progress take place three times a year.

*Internships.* Advancing from the simulated work level, trainees enter internships to increase their hours, learn new work tasks, take responsibility for their output and work independently. As the following descriptions indicate, each internship phase demands more and more of trainees:

*Work crew internships.* In the work crew internship, several trainees work together at the union-operated Denki Kanagawa Centre complex or at public facilities that have contracts with the centre for the performance of janitorial, horticultural, dishwashing and other services. A job coach escorts the trainees to the worksites and, initially, directs the daily work and teaches the trainees how to proceed with the work tasks and operate machines or use work tools. (Often, training is initiated at the workshop.) As trainees master their tasks, the job coach gradually withdraws from the worksite but continues to direct the daily work, although he or she does not remain at the worksite for the entire day. Trainees are expected to carry out their assigned tasks independently according to the work procedures they learned and the directions provided by the coach. Trainees alternate working on weekends with other trainees.

*Work experience internships.* Work experience internships take place away from the Denki Kanagawa Centre or some distance from trainees' homes, requiring participants to use public transportation to commute. Worksites are facilities under contract to the Denki Kanagawa Centre or a special subsidiary company (see box). Job coaches provide transportation training and initial instruction in the required work tasks. Thereafter, the trainee must work under the direction of the facility or company supervisor. However, the supervisors are experienced in working with people with intellectual impairments, and the job coach continues to visit weekly after the initial training. Trainees are unlikely to work with others with disabilities, and no employment contract is implied in the internship agreement.

*Employment preparation internships.* Employment preparation internships imply that a host company will hire a trainee after a period of on-the-job training. The internship provides the trainee with a learning opportunity and offers some comfort to the trainee's family members, who may be concerned about losing the slot at the centre for their son or daughter if employment does not succeed. Parents are also often cautious as their children move out from secure and protected work environments to a competitive business organization. The internship provides the company with an opportunity to determine if the trainee is appropriate for the position. For their part, trainees have the opportunity to assess whether a setting is appropriate for them, develop relationships with co-workers and prepare for real employment. An employment preparation internship also gives employees a chance to build confidence. Finally, during the internship period, the company can make necessary adaptations, such as a change in production procedures or the reassignment of co-workers to facilitate successful employment and adjustment for all concerned.

**Allowance and wages.** A workshop participant starts with an allowance of 9,000 yen (US\$77) per month, which is augmented by a point system that corresponds to weekly performance assessments. Strictly speaking, workshop participants are under social welfare legislation and the minimum wage standard is not applied. Once a trainee's skills advance to a certain standard and he or she is earning approximately 30,000 yen per month, he or she is recommended to work outside the facility. The participant then receives a minimum wage of 1,000 yen (US\$8.57) per workday, paid by the outside facility/company in addition to the regular allowance paid by the workshop. The higher income for such trainees provides an incentive to workshop participants to move into this internship programme. Total income can increase as high as 52,000 yen (US\$446) per month, in addition to the disability pension (more than 67,000 yen or US\$574 per month) made to people with intellectual impairments.

Once a trainee acquires an employment contract from a company or legal trainee status with a company, the programme stops payment of wages. Instead, the company starts payment according to the minimum wage standard.

### • Placement and Follow-Up Services •

Given that the Denki Kanagawa Centre for Community Service operates under the Kanagawa Regional Council of JEIU, all staff assigned to the Employment Support Centres are experts in personnel management and production. In addition, job coaches are selected from the ranks of retired union members. Job coaches and other staff members at the Employment Support Centres select candidates for available positions, help them prepare for interviews and provide support and training as they adjust to their new jobs.

Job coaches also work with employers who plan to hire the candidates to oversee any necessary adjustments or workplace modifications.

Follow-up by the job coaches occurs on a case-by-case basis. Some people with intellectual impairments need intensive monitoring and assistance while others require only short-term support or one-time counselling. When long-term support is required, job coaches generally follow a process called "fading-out", which involves spending less and less time with the trainee until he or she is able to manage the job independently.

## Retired Employees Make Great Job Coaches

Traditionally, workers in Japan exhibit strong family-like ties. Companies do not want outsiders, including job coaches, at their worksites. The Kanagawa trade union developed an ingenious method to break down this barrier so that job coaches could assist people with intellectual impairments on the job. The approach also takes advantage of the respect afforded an employee who has worked until official retirement age and has displayed loyalty to the company. It uses retired employees from a certain company to serve as a job coaches in that same company.

The retiree's working experience with that company combined with some training regarding workers with disabilities puts him in a good position to address concerns in production and management with respect to the hiring of workers with disabilities. In addition, his familiarity with his company's way of working and corporate culture contributes to a trainee's comfortable adjustment. Job coaches also have good connections in the company, which can yield useful information about job prospects. Coaches are major assets in identifying placement opportunities within a company or company group as well as in helping people with disabilities succeed in their newfound jobs.

Currently, the coaches are all male because the retirement pool happens to be a generation of male-only workers, a reflection of Japanese culture decades ago when most women stayed at home.

### • Working with Employers to Expand Job Opportunities •

The Kanagawa trade union and the local employers' association work as partners to develop job opportunities in a company that has no experience in hiring people with disabilities. The trade union representative speaks with the company's union to encourage it to support the hiring of people from the Employment Support Centres. The employers' representative speaks with the management of the company about the same matter. This simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach is effective in resolving the concerns of management and would-be co-workers.

The Denki Kanagawa Centre for Community Services offers consulting to companies that want to set up a special subsidiary company (see box) to expand the vocational options available to their trainees and others with disabilities. The centre staff have also provided guidance services to the Japanese Business Federation – with a membership of 1,540 large corporations – to encourage the hiring of disabled workers.

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**Accomplishments**

The work of the Denki Kanagawa Centre for Community Services is influencing the broader Japanese trade union movement with regard to disability and employment. The national headquarters of the Japanese Electrical, Electronic and Information Union and other trade unions introduced an “employ people with disabilities” campaign. As part of the initiative, union members persuade companies to employ people with intellectual disabilities. While many companies are experienced in hiring people with physical disabilities, they are not as experienced in hiring and managing workers with intellectual disabilities. During their assemblies and deliberations with employers, trade union chapters are also starting to exchange opinions and ideas related to promoting the employment of people with disabilities.

Many other unions have visited the Employment Support Centres to learn about their operations. The Japanese Trade Union Confederation, Osaka Chapter, for example, is replicating the approach initiated by JEIU’s Kanagawa’s Regional Council.

Internationally, there are few examples of a trade union sponsoring vocational programmes for workers with disabilities; there are fewer still in Asia and the Pacific, making the Kanagawa programme a unique model. Within its partnership approach, it has leveraged the resources of the union and various levels of government and tapped the expertise of retirees and employers’ organizations to further its goals.

In addition to its significant activities, the Employment Support Centres have, since 1997 (after establishment of the first two centres, the third opened in 1998), assisted approximately 300 persons with intellectual disabilities each year. By the close of the 2001 fiscal year, the union’s programmes enabled 169 people with disabilities in finding open employment. Examples of placement outcomes include janitorial and cleaning work; production, assembly and parts packaging; direct mail; gardening; reprocessing of waste products; mail delivery within companies; automotive parts production and work in laundry facilities.

During the 2000 and 2001 fiscal years, the Employment Support Centres worked with corporations to create 11 new subsidiary companies that hired 130 persons with intellectual disabilities. The centres provided expert planning and organizational advice and job coaches during the first month of subsidiary operation.

## Lessons Learned

The Kanagawa Regional Council demonstrated that a trade union can create flexible vocational rehabilitation programmes that benefit people with disabilities. In the process, it learned two significant lessons:

**It is possible to develop flexible programmes in spite of governmental bureaucratic barriers.** Many programme operators face administrative barriers in working with government funding and benefit programmes. The Kanagawa chapter of unionists faced such barriers and had to find ways to surmount them, especially those related to the administrative requirements of various government departments. For example, an agency supervised by the Department of Social Service was reluctant to involve itself in labour-related service areas, even though problems of people with disabilities need to be solved through job coaching, which is a labour-related service. As an entity financially and politically independent of the Government, the Kanagawa Regional Council of the JEIU was able to work with different programmes and coordinate administratively separate government services.

**Retired workers can make considerable contributions as job coaches.** Retired workers experienced in private business are a valuable human resource for social service activities. Their accumulated expertise in production, workplace communication and general work experience is beneficial to people with disabilities as they learn and adjust to a new job. The opportunity for job coaching also provides retirees with purpose and fulfilment.

### Special Subsidiary Companies

To meet its requirements under the employment quota system for hiring people with disabilities, the Japanese law allows companies to set up what are called special subsidiary companies. The subsidiary companies provide work environments and make necessary adjustments to accommodate people with disabilities. To operate a subsidiary company, parent companies must maintain close affiliation to the special subsidiary by controlling decision making and assigning an executive officer and other personnel to the subsidiary company. Among other requirements, the special subsidiary company must demonstrate the appropriate management abilities and appoint full-time instructional staff to address the training and employment needs of its disabled workers. More than 20 per cent of the subsidiary's total employees (or more than five) must be people with disabilities. More than 30 per cent of the total number of workers with disabilities must have severe disabilities. Applications to acquire special subsidiary status are made at the Public Employment Security Office.

## Looking Forward

The Kanagawa Regional Council is approaching other trade unions to encourage the hiring of people with disabilities. It plans to extend its influence to increase training and employment options for people with disabilities in other prefectures. It is also looking to develop partnerships and support activities so that employed workers with intellectual disabilities can live more independently. Specifically, the Denki Kanagawa Centre for Community Services is pursuing linkages with group homes and related independent living programmes.

### Former Trainees Provide Mutual Support on the Job

Kiyomi had many work experiences before finding the Employment Support Centre. A high school graduate, she attended a sheltered workshop and interned at several different companies. However, six months after registering at the centre, she found a permanent job much to her liking – washing dishes at a company's employee kitchen.

Hiromi, now 25, ended a five-year contract at a coffee shop before registering at the centre for help in finding another job. Her work experience had its joyful moments and hard times. Like Kiyomi, she found a job six months after she went to the Employment Service Centre. It was the food service job she hoped for, with the same employer as Kiyomi. They work together in a hot and busy kitchen that requires their constant attention, but they enjoy their work and their friendly co-workers, including each other.

## Replication

Considering that trade unions advocate for worker rights, it seems natural that they should offer services to and advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Programmes such as those started by the Kanagawa Regional Council take full advantage of the trade union's knowledge of the workplace and connections with various companies and community agencies.

To replicate the Kanagawa model, a trade union must begin by looking for interest and support among its members. Certainly, injured workers, members with disabilities or those with family members who are disabled will demonstrate such interest. However, because of the nature of trade union solidarity, others are likely to be interested if the issue of disability is brought to the attention of the leadership and membership at labour union congresses and meetings. Building awareness and interest

is a first step. The next steps will depend on community needs, membership interest and the resources and partnerships at the union's disposal or that the union is willing to generate.

While solid funding is needed to establish a centre similar to the Denki model, certain aspects of the approach have stand-alone value. For example, supported employment programmes might consider recruiting retirees as job coaches in the manner of the Kanagawa programme. Workshops could replicate the system of graded internships to assist people with disabilities in making the transition from protected settings to internships to open employment.

Trade unions can influence training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities in many ways. Their vast linkages with governments, training programmes, workers, and employers' organizations and individual companies offer immediate opportunities for positive awareness building, and these linkages enable trade unions to influence and negotiate workplace changes with regard to the needs of workers with disabilities. With their expertise in advocacy and experience with legislative change, trade unions can work toward rights-based policies that foster equal treatment and opportunity for people with disabilities. And trade unions can make sure that people with disabilities are treated equitably and have a forum for expressing their collective voice.

### For More Information

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