

## Cleaning Up and Creating Work – How Trash Bags Raise the Self-Esteem and Incomes of People with Multiple and Severe Disabilities in the Republic of Korea

### The Challenge

In the Republic of Korea during the 1980s, people with disabilities resulting from cerebral palsy, autism, seizure disorders or intellectual impairments had few work options. They could not even dream of entering a work rehabilitation programme that promised productive activity, good wages and security. Such workplaces did not exist. Korea's typical approach to helping people with disabilities was a sheltered workshop that kept people "protected" or engaged in leisure activities. Employers who did offer jobs regarded disabled workers as charity cases in need of constant supervision rather than as capable and independent individuals.

Then, in 1983, a former judo player paralyzed from the neck down had a different vision – a workplace for people with multiple and/or intellectual disabilities. However, he quickly learned that creativity and innovation were essential if others were to see the employment potential of people with disabilities.

### Meeting the Challenge

With five other people, also with disabilities, Jung Duk-Whan (see box, The Man Behind the Idea) created what he described as a "community workplace". It was called Eden Welfare Centre and was the country's first vocational rehabilitation centre that prepared people with severe disabilities for jobs that paid real wages for real work. While the existing welfare system provided protection, the Eden Welfare Centre focused on empowerment through employment. The centre produced electronic parts but also provided vocational counselling and on-the-job training. Then, when the Government started discussing the need for environmental protection policies, Eden's president discarded the electronics business and positioned the Eden Welfare Centre to become a major producer of environmentally friendly trash bags.

Today, the workshop, now called Eden House, produces 1,800 tons of environmentally safe trash bags a year, which amounts to 10 per cent of the entire Korean market. It employs an integrated workforce of 96 employees, 86 of whom are people with multiple and/or intellectual disabilities. The employees have a high sense of self-esteem

because they feel that they are contributing to a cleaner society by producing a useful product. And the work provides a variety of stimulating tasks rather than the more routine work of the electronics parts business.

**The Good Practice:** An innovative work centre that pioneered social integration and independence through meaningful employment and decent wages for individuals with substantial physical and mental challenges.



### • Background •

Eden Welfare Centre opened in 1983 in Paju Kyonunggi province as a workplace for people with multiple and/or severe intellectual disabilities. It became Eden House in 1987 and is now both a residential and work facility. Along with its vocational programmes, Eden House provides social, educational and medical rehabilitation. A residential facility is located on the centre's grounds, but some workers live independently. Eden House is planning to institute a group home programme away from its current complex, but it is the Eden House production workshop that is the focus of this profile.

The production component of Eden House has gone through many changes and growth spurts since 1983. One of the more significant changes was Eden House's 1989 transformation from an electronics parts production centre to a manufacturer of plastic bags. When it became evident that electronics parts production would continue to yield low profit margins, Eden's management set out to achieve competitive power – the capacity to compete with private industry – and thus maintain a long-term workplace for its employees. Eden House had to find a niche. After completing a market analysis study, the management switched its primary business to plastic bag production.

When Eden House first applied to the government for financial support to change its manufacturing focus, government officials voiced doubt that people with severe disabilities could succeed in handling the complex processes involved in plastic bag production. Tasks included processing raw plastic, printing, packaging, supply management and marketing. Eventually, however, the Government provided the requested assistance. Eden's administrators then developed a methodical training programme and began producing simple plastic shopping bags. A year later, the facility graduated to the production of trash bags. In a strategy aimed at securing government contracts for trash bags, Eden House invited officials to tour its facility.

In 1992, Eden House upgraded once again to accommodate the more complex process of producing environmentally friendly (biodegradable) trash bags. The strategy positioned Eden House to compete for government contracts when the new environmental legislation scheduled to take effect in 1995 would require nationwide garbage recycling. Under the new law, all citizens and businesses would have to use special bags for recycling. Eden House won a contract to supply local districts across the country. To maintain that contract each year, Eden's bags compete with products made by other companies, and the Government tests the products to ensure that they meet specifications.

Each change in Eden's business required new equipment and new skills. Funding for the changes came largely from the Government in 1989 and 1990. In 1992, the Government, Eden House and private donors jointly contributed the US\$385,000 needed to upgrade the production system. With each change, workers underwent retraining for quality enhancement of their skills.

In response to the lobbying efforts of disability rights advocates, new legislation took effect in January 2000 requiring the Government to award contracts for certain products to organizations working with people with disabilities. One of these products is plastic bags. Producers have to maintain the same quality standards that apply to the private sector. Eden House has become one of the largest suppliers of plastic bags to government agencies.

Despite the 1995 and 2000 legislative changes that created markets for Eden House's plastic bag products, customers remained wary. To tackle people's biases, Mr. Jung developed high-profile awareness campaigns and opened the workshop facilities to the public to showcase the smooth-running operation. In addition, he pursued important international business credentials such as ISO 9001 certification for quality management and ISO 14001 certification for environmental management.

Environmentally friendly plastic bags are Eden's signature product. The workshop also manufactures other products, such as vinyl cloth, and operates a printing unit. More than 80 per cent of the entire production process is completed by people with severe or substantial disabilities.



## • How Eden House Trains and Employs Workers in Trash Bag Manufacturing •

Eden House's capacity to absorb workers is limited. The facility provides assessment and counselling for many more people than it can hire in its production workshop. Those not accepted must be referred to other agencies and facilities. Eden House follows these steps in its hiring process:

**Initial assessment.** Vocational rehabilitation counsellors evaluate a person interested in joining Eden House. The counsellors assess the applicant's vocational abilities, including physical, daily living, language development, judgement and level of understanding. They also assess psychosocial traits, such as motivation, job-search capacities and family background. Counsellors take a complete vocational history and interview the applicant and his or her parents.

**On-the-job assessment.** After the initial screening, a prospective trainee is assigned to a production task for a month-long assessment of on-the-job performance. During that period, the vocational counsellors and worksite managers further assess the person's abilities and work with him or her on work habits and performance and help the prospective trainee determine his or her interests.

**On-the-job training.** After completion of the one-month assessment period, the official on-the-job training programme begins. It runs for approximately three months and includes a four-stage process that helps the trainee analyse work tasks, learn specific subtasks, develop appropriate work methods and set a schedule. Gradually, the training team, which consists of a vocational counsellor, engineers and worksite managers, provides more technical training, monitors performance and helps the trainee increase his or her level of output, which is tied to wages. When needed, the staff adjust tasks or devise adapted technical tools. People who experience difficulty in adjusting to a task continue in the training programme and rotate from one type of work to another until they find an appropriate task match.

**Employment in the production unit.** Once a person has completed the on-the-job training, the counsellors reduce their involvement in favour of a site manager who monitors workers. When a worker no longer needs the support of a counsellor and thus has achieved a measure of independence, he or she signs an employment contract.

**Wages.** Salary ranges from the minimum wage of 534,000 won (US\$410) to more than 1,650,000 won (US\$1,270) per month, depending on the task. Further, salary is based on productivity and is re-evaluated every quarter to ensure a compensation scheme that progresses with skills and output. In addition, workers receive a benefits package that includes medical, employment and industry disaster insurance as well as contributions to the national pension plan. The dormitory charges a fee and is available only to people who cannot commute.

## Reaching Productivity Through Patience and Support

Yong-Jae Lee is 42 years of age and has Down's syndrome and autism. After completing primary school, he spent almost two years in an institution for people with severe disabilities. He came to Eden House six years ago with few skills and no employment experience. According to an initial assessment, Mr. Lee's judgment, understanding and ability to socialize were limited. Mr. Lee would not interact with anyone except family members. His physical abilities and health were good, and he could care for himself in terms of eating, dressing and managing his belongings. Even though he could not count and barely spoke, he could write.

During his period of on-the-job training at Eden House, Mr. Lee worked in the processing and packaging unit. Because he is unable to count, he packed bags but required considerable assistance in completing his work and was reluctant to ask for help when he needed it. When the on-the-job training ended after three months, Mr. Lee was assigned to the same unit and received the minimum wage, even though his performance was not up to the unit's standards. According to the staff, he continued to require guidance and support. But the staff's patience and support paid off. Gradually, Mr. Lee's performance, ability to work independently and social skills improved. Once "given up for hopeless" by his family, according to Eden House staff, Mr. Lee now works regularly and has shown marked changes in all areas of his life. He spends much of his leisure time surfing the Internet. Mr. Lee lives and works at Eden House where he hopes to remain.

## Accomplishments

As vocational rehabilitation programmes in the Republic of Korea strive to become more competitive, the success of Eden House has made its training and production programme a model for other institutions. Eden's success has also contributed generally to the growth of vocational rehabilitation in the country. In addition, by giving workers with multiple disabilities and/or intellectual impairments a chance to prove themselves, the programme has changed public attitudes, with the proof in the popularity of the products produced by Eden House. In the words of one Eden House official, "At first, because of prejudice, we could hardly find a way to sell our products. Even local government officers distrusted us. However, after seeing what we could do, we gained their confidence."

On an individual level and over the years, Eden House has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of people. In 2001, 257 people received vocational counselling, with 20 accepted as trainees in the production unit. Last year, Eden House employed 86 people with disabilities, 27 of whom were women.

Since 1998, 42 people with disabilities from Eden House have been hired in the open market in businesses as diverse as an electronics factory, gas stations and various offices. Four people have started their own businesses.

---

## Lessons Learned

The most significant lesson associated with Eden House comes from Mr. Jung's early belief that has been proven through years of experience: People with substantial disabilities are productive workers. With adequate training and job matching, people with substantial disabilities and intellectual impairments can succeed in both sheltered settings and open employment. In addition, Eden House has demonstrated that the following issues are important for creating the conditions that permit people with substantial disabilities to perform successfully:

**Seeing is believing.** An open-door policy and ongoing contact with government officers, politicians and others who influence public opinion or make purchasing decisions can mean the difference between a negative impression and no sales or a positive impression and a contract.

**It is vital to lobby for legislation that provides or protects work.** In the case of Eden House, support for legislation mandating a purchasing policy that requires a percentage of government funds to be spent on products made by people with disabilities led to guaranteed contracts.

**People running a vocational production centre need to understand how to run a business.** If the managers of a vocational production centre are not experienced in business, they should hire a management consultant to turn the business into an efficient operation. A vocational rehabilitation facility has to guarantee quality if it is to survive. A management consultant can advise about and develop systematic strategies for proper marketing, budgetary and production systems.

**Quality improvement can strengthen competitiveness.** The garbage bags produced by the vocational rehabilitation centre satisfy all government and commercial requirements. Unfortunately, the fulfilment of production requirements does not prevent prejudice in the form of product distrust, stigma and biased opinions that might limit the purchase of Eden House's products. To overcome these obstacles, Eden House aims to produce products of the highest quality. The ISO certification, which requires Eden House to meet international standards, helps break down many biases.

## The Man Behind the Idea

A disability advocate and pioneer in the Republic of Korea's vocational rehabilitation and independent living movements, former judo sportsman Jung Duk-Whan is the founder of and driving force behind Eden House. In 1972, Mr. Jung suffered a training injury that crushed his neck and left him paralyzed. At that time, even people with mild disabilities were barred from entering universities or becoming judges. No laws existed to protect their rights, and they had few opportunities for vocational training or employment. The only facilities available to people with disabilities were welfare-oriented centres offering leisure-time and occupation therapy activities. Mr. Jung found that state of affairs unacceptable. He eventually took matters into his own hands.

"Our aim was to overcome the prejudice and discrimination that we had experienced from society," he says. The "we" refers to a small group of people with disabilities who helped establish Eden House in 1983. With them, Mr. Jung began his years-long mission of trying to change government systems and cultural attitudes that isolated people with disabilities from mainstream society.

The initial funds for Eden House came from personal savings and donations solicited by Mr. Jung's group. According to the Eden House philosophy, "The most important element in rehabilitating people with disabilities is to provide them with an opportunity for meaningful employment. Through the vocational rehabilitation programme, people with disabilities can become self-supporting and live independent lives. This gives them a sense of self-worth and validity within the community." At the outset, Eden House differed from other welfare centres of the time by turning its back on the "welfare" approach. Instead, it was the first vocational rehabilitation centre that offered real work and real wages.

Whether it was his severe disability, government constraints or financial setbacks, Mr. Jung was undaunted. As the Eden House profile illustrates, Mr. Jung put into practice his beliefs about people with intellectual and multiple disabilities. He developed a production centre where people work with pride and satisfaction. Eden House's environmentally safe trash bags not only provide workers with an income but also contribute to the overall social good.

As an ardent activist and advocate, Mr. Jung works tirelessly for amendments to laws and policies related to disability issues. In addition, over the years, Eden House has lobbied for major reforms to the Republic of Korea's disability policies. Successes include a revision to the Welfare of Disabled Persons Act that now requires both the national and local governments to give priority to products made by people with disabilities. A revision to the Contract Law with the State as a Party now grants the heads or contractual officers of the Government the right to sign

contracts. This revision allows private contracts to replace competitive bidding for the purchase of products manufactured by corporations established through the Social Welfare Corporation Act, such as Eden House.

Along with helping reform laws and regulations, Eden House has revolutionized the way society views people with disabilities. Mr. Jung himself is a case in point. In 2000 at age 55, he graduated from the Human Rehabilitation Department of Korea Nazarene University. Republic of Korea President Kim Dae-Jung awarded him a National Medal, and the university where Mr. Jung once competed in judo presented him with its Yonsei Social Welfare Prize.

### Looking Forward

For the future, Eden House wants to promote a higher level of independent living among its workers. It plans to purchase land and organize group homes at a location separate from the Eden House complex. The new living arrangement will require new skills and increased community integration for the many Eden House workers who currently reside in Eden House facilities.

Eden House is also planning to operate a vocational rehabilitation research centre for the study of business management as related to training people with and without disabilities who want to manage a similar production centre.

To remain viable, Eden House is committed to following a long-term management plan that allows it to adapt to the changing market by developing and producing value-added products. In regard to ecological concerns, for instance, Eden House intends to research and develop an environmentally friendly vinyl product. The existing rehabilitation facility will be expanded to facilitate new training programmes that will create more employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

To accommodate its elderly disabled employees who are no longer able to work, Eden House plans to develop a facility that will permit the elderly to live with dignity in retirement. In addition, Eden House has plans for a Wheelchair Delivery Movement, an effort to aid people with disabilities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

## Replication

Among Eden House's 86 employees, most are classified as having severe intellectual disabilities. They require a set of work tasks suited to their abilities while trainers must provide them with the appropriate training skills. An innovative work centre or production workshop starts with a good idea followed by a sound market analysis that identifies "niches" or areas with considerable room for entrepreneurship or pioneering development. Eden House began with and maintains a clear vision and specific goals. Its professional staff and sound management practices have made that vision a reality.

Within the Korean setting, Eden House founders seized on the potential market demand for environmentally friendly trash bags and took advantage of government policies related to the purchase of products made by people with disabilities. While Eden House's market position was helpful, such a position is not critical if a high-quality product is backed by solid market analysis and an aggressive marketing strategy.

In selecting products and services that form the basis of work and production centres, programme operators need to consider workers' needs and capabilities along with the product itself. Given that plastic bag production requires a range of abilities, it has particular value for workers with mild to substantial intellectual disabilities.

## For More Information

Jung-Won Jo  
Planning Department  
Eden House  
345 Shinchon-ri Kyoha-eup  
Paju-shi Kyonggi-do, Republic of Korea  
Tel: 8231-946-7031  
Fax: 8231-946-7035  
E-mail: eden0007@chol.com  
Web site: www.edenwelfare.org

