

Support Doesn't Always Mean Welfare – A Unique Community Service in Singapore Promotes Independence of Citizens with Disabilities

The Challenge

Over the past decades, Singapore's rapid development has underscored the importance of education, science, technology and high achievement. It has also resulted in a low tolerance for government "welfarism" targeted to members of society perceived as failing to keep pace with others. However, when the Ministry of Community Development and Sports discovered from a survey of 4,385 people with disabilities that more than 50 per cent of such individuals were unemployed, it recognized that some people require assistance before they can contribute to society. But the Ministry wanted to find a system that would support rather than undermine the independence of people with disabilities.

Meeting the Challenge

In 1986, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports and the then-Singapore Council of Social Service jointly set up the Bizlink Centre. Bizlink relied on shared inputs from government, corporate and private sources to offer employment projects and services to people with disabilities. Today, the Ministry funds 50 per cent of Bizlink's programmes. Private and commercial parties, including the (renamed) National Council of Social Service and the Community Chest (a donor agency that solicits funds from corporate and private citizens) underwrite the other half.

Bizlink is a social service-based organization providing training, employment, job placement and other job-related services to people with disabilities. It has also developed an innovative marketing strategy for products crafted by disabled persons and, as its name implies, links an overlooked workforce with business needs. It helps people find jobs in the open market but also offers jobs through its production workshop, which competes for contracts in the formal sector. As a major resource for people with disabilities in Singapore, Bizlink registered 367 clients for vocational assessment in 2002-2003.

The Good Practice: Linking government, corporate and private needs and contributions to create opportunities that allow people with disabilities to participate in the workforce.



• Background •

The Government of Singapore does not believe that it should function as the sole provider of support for individuals. In fact, Singapore lacks legislative protections such as equal opportunity and minimum wage laws for the least-advantaged members of society, although a compulsory workers' compensation law requires financial input from all employers. Nonetheless, the Government is willing to share responsibility for creating opportunities for people with disabilities. It willingly supported the creation of the Bizlink employment programme. In addition to funding, it provided temporary government offices until the Bizlink Centre moved to its own premises, two years after its establishment. As noted, even today, the Government continues to supply 50 per cent of Bizlink's funding with the other half still coming from the Community Chest.

In 1995, Bizlink incorporated as a limited company. All assets, staff and functions were transferred to the new body, and a board of directors took over management of the organization. In January 2001, Bizlink joined other self-help groups in Singapore to become part of an initiative launched by the Ministry of Manpower called Careerlink, a central database of all job banks within the Ministry.

• How Bizlink is Structured •

Bizlink's comprehensive services include assessment, counselling, training and employment in its production workshops, marketing of products made by people with disabilities, job placement and follow-up. Five divisions deliver Bizlink's services:

Vocational assessment. New clients first meet with one of the Vocational Assessment Division's placement counsellors to discuss their employment goals and needs. Voluntary organizations account for 20 per cent of referrals and government ministries for another 10 per cent of clients seeking Bizlink's services. Otherwise, family and friends of disabled people recommend Bizlink to people they know. A third of the people who now turn to Bizlink are recently disabled. Some clients hear of the service while in hospital.

The service operates with several aims: to determine people's needs and goals; to provide basic skills training; to make referrals to training institutes outside Bizlink when needed; and to provide assistance to and connect with people with disabilities and/or their families. Not everyone requires a formal vocational assessment, which involves psychological tests and selected VALPAR (commercial term) work samples. In any event, the regular assessment is a one-day process. Other people may need more in-depth services, such as a situational assessment in the Bizlink workshop, which typically lasts for up to two weeks. During that time, participants can also learn management of time and money, and communication and presentation skills as needed. Another service provided during the assessment phase is "work hardening", a process of gradually increasing work demands until an individual can manage the regular workday. Bizlink also offers simple job skills training in clerical, cleaning and data processing tasks during the assessment period. After assessment, clients may be referred to other training centres, Bizlink programmes or open employment.

The Vocational Assessment Division also evaluates students who apply for admission to the Certificate in Vocational Training Course of the Vocational Training School for the Handicapped.

Information and referral. Through the Information and Referral Division, Bizlink's two community resource officers provide information to people with disabilities, their caregivers and family members as well as to the public on matters relating to disabilities and resources available in a given community. In addition, staff of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, other voluntary organizations and even Parliament members use the service to make referrals. During their "meet-the-people sessions", Parliament members field questions about services for people with disabilities. The questions and needed referrals relate to an array of issues such as residential care, hostels, respite care, day-activity centres, nursing homes, sheltered or production workshops, mobility training for the blind, specialized vocational training outside Bizlink and financial assistance.

The community resource officers also provide assistance and counselling to people and/or their families on issues relating specifically to their disabilities or work matters. Finally, to increase positive perceptions, the officers visit schools and talk to young people about disability issues and the ability of disabled persons to function as integral members of society. The officers teach disability etiquette, that is, how to respond and provide help to people with disabilities.

Employment promotion. The Employment Promotion Division offers assistance to people with disabilities in job finding, both in the open labour market and in Bizlink's production workshop or its housekeeping/cleaning service teams.

Depending on the individual and the job market, job placement can take just a few hours or a few days. After discussing employment options with a placement counsellor, clients seeking jobs review the hiring notices sent to Bizlink by potential employers. Bizlink staff also actively solicit job offers from the business community and perform selective job matching. Bizlink can also access Careerlink to identify opportunities for people with disabilities searching for placements. Bizlink not only provides assistance to its own clients but also serves students of the Vocational School for the Handicapped. A unique avenue to permanent job placement is the on-the-job training internships Bizlink arranges for students still enrolled in training courses. "It is for a temporary period but, of course, we hope the students get absorbed into the workforce of the company they have been training with. And this often happens," explains General Manager Justin Tan.

Bizlink provides regular follow-up services to both clients and employers, usually for three months after placement but for longer if needed. During work site visits, staff consult with employers and employees about performance, the need for worksite modifications and aids, transportation issues and so forth and intervene with training or counselling with as needed. Often, Bizlink staff obtain assistive devices from other NGOs, such as speech synthesizer software for computers made available by the Singapore Association for the Visually Impaired. A Bizlink job coach can provide worksite training to ensure that a newly placed employee has sufficient experience and training to meet the requirements of the job.

Designing Workplaces for Workers with Disabilities

More than half of the employees of the Trusted Hub, a computer imaging and processing company, have disabilities. Some use wheelchairs. With the help of Bizlink, which worked with the Trusted Hub "from the ground up," according to Bizlink General Manager Justin Tan, the workplace was designed to accommodate workers' needs. "We designed the work processes and physical layout with everyone in mind," says Mr. Tan. "As a result, the cost of accommodating anyone with special needs was minimal."

Business development. The Business Development Division operates a production workshop that provides employment opportunities for people with disabilities who, for various reasons, are not ready for open employment. Except for short-term employees, Bizlink pays wages and benefits, including the contribution to the Provident (retirement) Fund. The compensation package includes bonuses and raises. The production workshop also serves as a trial work area for people with disabilities undergoing assessment, open-market job preparation and training. A workshop instructor provides training in new tasks and for those who need to upgrade their skills.

The work tasks at the production centre vary and respond to an ever-changing marketplace. Given that many jobs are moving from Singapore to nearby countries with lower labour costs, the Singapore economy is shifting to higher value-added work, including finance, genetics and information technology. These high-tech fields offer some service work contracts for Bizlink's workshop employees. However, Bizlink staff must study the marketplace and keep in constant contact with the business community to generate new contracts for the different sections of the Business Development Division. For example, using equipment donated by the customer, the workshop produces precision-made machine parts on a subcontract basis. To meet the demands of another contract, 15 people digitally archive documents by scanning images for conversion to digital files. Bizlink is also setting up telemarketing and call centres with the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped. Call centres can be operated from a person's home, allowing the employee to avoid the high cost of transportation to and from work.

Bizlink is working with several employers to create new work opportunities for its clients by encouraging the employers to use Bizlink services rather than depending on the imported labour typically hired for lower-skill jobs. To that end, Bizlink launched a pilot cleaning and housekeeping service in January 2001. With high demand for the service, workers earn decent wages. Bizlink now hires clients to fill positions on its many (currently five) housekeeping teams. In its effort to provide more services for people with intellectual impairments, Bizlink works with the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS) to identify and train people with intellectual disabilities for employment with the domestic cleaning service. Training courses take place at the MINDS Employment Development Centre. Volunteer job coaches and less disabled individuals work alongside a person with an intellectual disability to provide needed guidance and support.

Within the production workshop, Bizlink is starting to hire nondisabled individuals. According to Mr. Tan, the result is a type of reverse mainstreaming in which a workshop for people with disabilities is undergoing transformation into a conventional place of business. For example, a nondisabled employee handles quality control in the precision machine parts workshop, and the housekeeping service employs nondisabled cleaners to cover for any absent workers.

Centralized marketing. The Centralized Marketing Division operates with funding from the National Council of Social Service. It works to reduce marketing costs for participating agencies and to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities. It helps three sheltered workshops and work centres in Singapore explore and develop new markets and secure subcontracts by promoting their products and services. The Goodwill Centre of Singapore operates under the Spastic Children's Association of Singapore and employs 66 people who produce and package candles and bookmarks. The Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped employs 29 individuals who produce furniture and cane baskets; their signature product is a Braille bookmark. With 118 employees, the Society for the Physically Disabled operates a bookbinding and restoration business, manufactures notepads and copper wire bookmarks and provides printing and letter

shopping services. Sometimes the three groups share contracts. Together, the agencies serve people with all types of disabilities.

Bizlink's marketing staff uses two approaches to promote goods and services. First, it makes personal marketing contacts with retailers, distributors and other companies and publishes and distributes a full-colour, glossy catalogue under the brand name of "These Aabled People". The annual catalogue promotes products that were formerly available only in bazaars or at exhibitions. Each centre contributes to the cost of the publication, thereby reducing an individual agency's promotional expenses.

Second, three Bizlink marketers identify corporate customers that require large volumes of gifts and cards. They also try to identify businesses interested in a good work partner for services and seek out subcontracting tasks appropriate for the three agencies noted earlier. They actively market products and services, such as plaques, wooden furniture for children, handcrafted items – cards, candles, potpourri, photograph frames, glassware, T-shirts – and telemarketing, silkscreen printing and offset printing of office supplies.

Accomplishments

Part of Bizlink's success, according to Mr. Tan, stems from its creativity and perseverance. "You must look at the employment situation and imagine what you think will happen next. With the changing economy, we had to create jobs for people with disabilities. If we just kept checking for job vacancies, we'd just watch them disappear," he says. The housekeeping and cleaning crews, high-tech jobs in the production workshop and alliances with companies such as Trusted Hub (see box) are a testament to Bizlink's proactive stance. The following figures are indicative of the numbers of people who now enjoy greater access to decent work as a result of Bizlink:

- In 2002, Bizlink placed 190 people with disabilities (47 per cent of those served) in open employment. (The number exceeded 250 before the economic downturn.) More people with hearing disabilities (35 per cent of the total) were placed than individuals in any other group. The range of disabilities of those persons placed in positions covered physical (23 per cent), hearing (35 per cent), intellectual (15 per cent), visual (4 per cent), other (14 per cent) and multiple (9 per cent) disabilities. More than half of those placed in employment had received six years or less of education; about one-third had completed secondary school. Most of those placed in employment took production jobs (76), service industry jobs (56), clerical jobs (36), sales positions (16) and professional or administrative posts (four).
- Business development continues to provide employment to 80 individuals. Salaries depend on skill and seniority but range from S\$150 (US\$85) a month to S\$1,000 (US\$567) and above. Workers rotate jobs often in accordance with the type and number of contracts in place at any one time.

Making Opportunities Work

John (not his real name) was in his late teens when he first came to Bizlink. His mother had read of Bizlink's services in the newspaper. Intellectually disabled with an IQ below 50, John attended a special school that had already recommended a job for him in a local factory, but his mother was displeased with the work environment and the peers who spoke only Mandarin. Since John spoke only English, his chances for social interaction would be limited. His mother believed that John was capable of more than what the job offered him.

At Bizlink, John participated in the assessment process. An evaluator then arranged a two-week job trial to assess his work abilities further. John showed good stamina and work skills. His interpersonal and communication skills were limited but showed potential for development. His mother preferred a fast-food restaurant with a clean and genteel environment as a possible workplace for John, as long as the establishment was not far from home and did not present transportation challenges. The placement officer working with John and his family found him a fast-food position at a restaurant two bus stops from John's apartment. Meanwhile, the placement officer had to counsel both mother and son and prepare them for the training phase. John's mother had a strong tendency to be overprotective and had unrealistic expectations of her son. It did not help that John was largely uncommunicative; when he did respond, he spoke only one-word answers.

The first phase of the training involved mobility orientation. Again, difficulties arose with John's mother, as she questioned the training method. The training officer was patient but firm in handling her. As John's confidence grew, so did the mother's trust in Bizlink. John's work involves clearing trays, wiping tables and mopping the floor. At first, John had a problem with visual scanning. He often missed trays while moving along the aisle; thus began painstaking training whereby he had to stop along the aisle and scan tables on the left and right without fail before moving on to the next row of tables. While the scanning slowed his work considerably, it was necessary and eventually became a habit. Over time, John was able to pick up speed while attending to all the dirty tables.

John was also unable to tell time. He either missed his breaks or did not know when to return from a break. As a result, co-workers often had to search for John. The training officer suggested a small investment in a digital watch with an alarm timed for breaks and off-duty periods. It worked. Throughout the process, the placement officer provided counselling support and negotiated with the employer for assistance while the trainer prepared John to be as independent as possible. While there are days when John misses his bus stop on his way home and sometimes forgets to tell his family he is working late, he is performing well on the job. And he now speaks in short sentences of three words or more.

Operating for more than 15 years in changing economic times, Bizlink's corporate knowledge base and list of lessons learned is significant. Some of the most important lessons include:

New ideas can work! Bizlink shows that new ideas can be great ideas and that no service, programme or production facility can function on outmoded thinking. Several Bizlink employees constantly search for new contracts that lend themselves to effective adaptation to the skills of Bizlink's workers. Bizlink strives to respond to a changing economy and marketplace, even when such responsiveness means a change in approaches and the mindsets of its own employers.

Change must be incremental. Although segregated work facilities are no longer considered optimal work places for persons with disabilities, marketplace realities do not always allow for decent work opportunities in an open environment. One alternative approach is the slow integration of the workplace in reverse by encouraging some nondisabled persons to work with employed people with disabilities.

Cooperation with other organizations can save money and expand opportunities. From the start, Bizlink was built on a collaborative effort between the Government and other donors. Today, Bizlink constantly interacts with other disability organizations to enhance its programmes, to assist others or to share costs or contracts. Most organizations representing disabled people are working toward the same goals. Collaboration leads to success for all.

Service means meeting the needs of the entire disability population. Bizlink meets the needs of any person with a disability who walks through the door. Some individuals may need just the service of the employment placement division and may be in and out in a matter of hours or days. Others may work at Bizlink or require multiple and long-term services to ensure a successful outcome (see box).

Paying decent wages often requires subsidies to fill gaps. In an institution that accommodates people with disabilities of all working abilities, wage equity can be an issue. Bizlink tries to ensure that people are paid fairly for the work produced and takes care not to underpay anyone. Bizlink also strives to make each component of its production workshop self-sustaining; instructor and management salaries, however, require subsidies. The production workshop operates on an annual deficit of S\$300,000 (US\$170,355), which donor contributions cover. "Of course, it is our dream to one day get such high-value jobs that we can actually break even, but that is rare, even in developed countries," says Mr. Tan.

Helping with transportation can make the difference between work and no work. High transportation costs, inaccessible mass transit and generally high living costs, coupled

with a lack of income supports, make employment and independent living difficult for many people with disabilities. To address these barriers, Bizlink hires a fleet of five buses (another expense covered by subsidies) to ensure that its employees can reach the workshop. As part of its placement service, Bizlink helps newly placed individuals identify transportation options. However, for many people, transportation remains a major obstacle – and can be the difference between earning an income or not.

Looking Forward

With regard to its production workshops, Bizlink is constantly looking for high value-added contracts to diversify work tasks, increase profitability and remain on the cutting-edge of business needs. In particular, Bizlink is working to develop more meaningful and better-paying work for people with intellectual impairments. To that end, it is expanding its cleaning and housekeeping services and increasing the use of job coaches and supported employment. Bizlink is also seeking funds to enable clients with intellectual impairments and those with substantial physical or multiple disabilities to move into the open workplace with the necessary supports.

Bizlink is also actively lobbying the Ministry of Manpower to push through salary-substitution incentives to encourage employers to hire people who may require extended learning periods.

Replication

The Bizlink model developed in response to Singapore's socio-economic and political environment. In a strong and developed market economy challenged by downturns and limited government income supports, Bizlink has learned to compete, survive, develop market niches and secure resources from a variety of sources. It seeks private as well as government funding, strives to make its employment components self-sufficient and collaborates with related organizations to maximize resources. Any of these actions could be copied by other organizations.

To professionals in organizations interested in replicating the Bizlink model, Mr. Tan insists, "Come and see us!" He also stresses the need to analyse socio-economic conditions and the marketplace and to develop employment services accordingly. Part of Bizlink's success results from its constant assessment of the marketplace. The business development staff frequently speak on the telephone to and regularly visits companies to see if Bizlink can meet the companies' business and employment needs. Receptivity to new and different demands and maintaining contact with the business community are crucial to creating employment opportunities.

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